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# DÄBRÄ ARON: A ROCK- -CUT MONASTIC CHURCH, MÄQET DISTRICT OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The use of caves for different purposes such as dwelling, cemetery and ritual practices was common throughout human history. Rock caves were found to be “impregnable form of shelter,” symbol of property ownership and home of architectural creativities of ancient humans (Bent 1896, p. 147; Rewerski 1995, p. 12). With a special character, these places continued to be used in the Christian era as main centres of dwelling and spiritual devotion that was developed with a wilderness-based solitary life or monasticism that was practiced either individually in a form of extreme eremitic life (hermitage) or in group form as a coenobitic life; entailing strong self denial (Goswami 2005–2006, pp. 1329–1330; Finneran 2012, p. 247). In the history of Christianity, as biblical references show, an eremitic or hermitic life was started by reclusion into wild areas as it was practiced by John the

<sup>1</sup> This study has incorporated comments and suggestion of participants when it was presented at *The 6<sup>th</sup> National Research Conference*, Arba Minch University, Ethiopia, April 9-20/ 2019.

Baptist who was grown and came upon preaching the eve of Christianity from the wilderness (Mark 1, 2-4). Jesus Christ made spiritual devotion in isolated rock caves and mounts. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was retreated solitarily into rocky wilderness for some days. Rock was used as symbolical expression of the words of Jesus (Matthew 4, 1; 16, 18; Mark 9, 2). The beginning and end of Christ's life was associated with caves at Bethlehem and Golgotha, respectively (Lübke 1958, p. 56; Mengistu 2004, p. 35). The grave of Christ is recorded by Matthew (27, 60) as it was excavated out of rock. The idea of solitude life also was witnessed during the Apostles (Goswami 2005–2006, p. 1331).

Before Constantine the Great (r. 313-337), underground caves and catacombs were main places of Christians who were frequently suffering from persecution of Roman rulers (Browne 1912, p. 5; Edmundson 1913, p. 98; White 1990, p. 12; Goswami 2005–2006, p. 1331; Humphries 2006, p. 93). The Cappadocia caves are examples of Christian dwellings during persecution (Rodley 1989, pp. 425-426; Cooper & Decker 2012, pp. 148-149). The Constantine's Edict of Milan (313) was turning point in the history of Christianity for it has brought two main developments. First, the Byzantine Empire was extensively Christianized accompanying with development of ecclesiastical building architecture, basilica and dome, which remained canonized and sacred icons of Christian architecture (Browne 1912, p. 3; White 2000, p. 693; Hoi-Yan 2003, p. 1). Second, the relatively stable situation of the period inspired Christians to revive the early monastic life as another form of martyrdom and way of devotion in Christianity (White 1998, p. xiii; Stewart 2000, p. 353).

Religious devotion in isolated caves was preferable to secure spiritual devotion. Reclusive life in small caves biblically attributes to the narrow and the challenging way of Christianity (Mengistu, 2012, pp. 36-37). As Binns (1994, p. 62) and Harmless (2004, p. 426) state, the monks denounce the world; flee in to the desert; live with the wilds and chained themselves in a rock. Christians who engaged in this devotion are honored as bloodless martyrs (Błażewicz 1999, p. 34). Coenobitic form of monastic activity was increasingly expanded towards the end of the fourth century as Christians began to flow to the solitarians (Regnault 1999, p. 4; Cunningham 2005, p.22; Goswami 2005-2006, p. 1333). According to Harmless (2004, p. 425), the knowledge about the area where the early well organized monastic life established is argumentative. However, it is plausible to note here that in the late third and fourth centuries A.D., a well organized form of monastic life (coenobitic) was largely flourished in Egyptian and Syrian deserts (Iwasaki 2012, p. 139; Finneran 2012, p. 256). The monastic communities of these areas played an important role for the expansion of monastic life in East Africa, including Ethiopia. In the Egyptian Desert Fathers' monastic life, St. Anthony (also known as the Father of

the Monks) and St. Paul belong to the early hermits and St. Pachomius to the first coenobites. Hermitic and coenobitic monastic ways also were expanded in Palestine and Syria (Goswami 2005–2006, pp. 1331-1332; Finneran 2012, p. 256). This monastic life has contributed much for the development of ecclesiastical church buildings throughout the Byzantine Empire.

In the case of Ethiopia, the adoption of Christianity as a state religion was followed by construction of churches and transformation of materials in to Christianized elements. Byzantine monasticism, being daunted by the persecution of Roman rulers, was practicing mainly in natural caves, whereas, the Ethiopian monastic activity was safely practicing accompanied by the excavation of rock chapels and churches (Finneran 2012, pp. 249 & 257). This rock-cut based monasticism is evidenced with various rock-cut chapels, churches and monasteries that are still flourished in and around rocky escarpments and mountains of the country (Weyer 1973, p. 10).

Though it is rarely known, the excavation of rock churches intimating the beginning of monasticism in Ethiopia was practicing since the late fourth or early fifth centuries A.D. Examples of this culture are traditionally attributed to the second bishop of Aksum, *abba*<sup>2</sup> Minas (also called Muse or Sälama II) who adopted his monastic life from the Monastery of Macarius (Balicka-Witakowska 2010, p. 1150; Fiaccadori 2007, p. 1081; Tsegaye 2018, pp. 8-10; 2019a, 104-121). In the late fifth century A.D, a well developed form of asceticism was established by the Nine Saints who have been expelled from Byzantine following the Chalcedon Council in 451 A.D (Sergew 1972, p. 120; Henze 2000, p. 38; Finneran 2012, pp. 259-260). Some of them excavated rock-cut churches in Northern Ethiopia. *Abba* Yimata, for instance, went to Guh (Gära'alta) and excavated rock churches there. Others such as *abba* Arägawi and *abba* Pentelewon went to mountains to establish their monastic abode (Sergew 1972, pp. 118-119; Finneran 2007, p. 196; Finneran 2012, pp. 258-264).

Following the decline of Aksumite Empire, the centre of the state began to shift southward to Roha (Lasta) that later on became the main project centre of rock hewn churches of Lalibela under the period of Zagwe Dynasty. After the mid of 13<sup>th</sup> century, following the restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty, monasticism began to revive and spread out to the central part of the country (Taddesse 1972, p. 109). It also began to be well established during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The monastic life during this period was well established, for instance, at Däbrä<sup>3</sup> Haiq Estifanos (the abode

2 *abba* is a Geez word which means father.

3 *Däbrä* is a Geez term which means *mount of...* that can be interchangeably used with *gädäm* (monastery). The name is given both for monastery and non-monastery churches that have well historical and spiritual roles. Currently churches that have large Christian participants (particularly in towns) and host dioceses of bishops are given this name.

of *abba* Eyäsus Mo'a in South Wollo), Däbrä Gol (the abode of Bäšälotä Michael in South Wollo) and Däbrä Libanos (the abode of *abba* Täklä Haimanot in Shäwa) (Taddesse 1972, p. 112; Finneran 2007, p. 252). These monastic centres were guided and shaped by the Desert Fathers' monastic lives and rules which have already been translated from Greek into Geez during the Aksumite period (Taddesse 1972, p. 108).

However, unlike literature, the tradition of excavating churches from rock was declining during Solomonic period. The activity of monasticism was more concentrated on strongly establishing the monastic life that attracted various Christians for dedicated spiritual devotion. Moreover, unlike its predecessors, Aksum and Zagwe, this period was characterized by mobile capital and territorial expansion and ruled by politically prerogative rulers that can partly be taken as reasons for the decline of the rock-cut tradition since this period (Mengistu 2012, pp. 93-94). Therefore, for the last six hundred years, church construction incorporated increasingly more of conventional buildings which mainly have circular shape, conical and thatched roof structures (Phillipson 2009, p. 25). However, the tradition is not totally forgotten (Mengistu 2012, p. 94). Gännätä Maryam (near Lalibela) which is well described under Phillipson (2009, pp. 112-118) can be immediate example of rock-cut churches constructed in this period. The continuity of a cave-based monastic life is also evidenced in South Wollo, the caves at the monastery of *abba* Giyorgis of Gasča which is established in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Wright 1957, pp. 12-13). Another worth example of rock-cut monasteries of this period is Däbrä Aron (in Mäqet District between Wollo and Gondar) which is the concern of this study. It is one of the great monasteries established by one of the disciplines of Däbrä Gol, *abba* Aron (see Figure 1). However, it is one of the very least known cultural testimonies of Christianity of this period. This study aims to explore the physical, historical and architectural aspects of this cave church. The study does not cover the movable treasures except with some mentions that have direct links with the early historical narration of the monastery. Other churches that have affinities to *abba* Aron also are not included in this study by one or another reason.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Different traveler accounts and scholarly research works explore the wealth of the living rock-cut heritage of Ethiopia. The accounts beginning from the witness of Francisco Alvarez in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Alvarez 1888) to the comprehensive works of researchers (such as Phillipson 2009) show these rock-cut churches have significant manifestations in terms of art, architecture and history. The rock-church tradition of Ethiopia can be seen from two important contexts: distribution and

architectural styles and/or types. If one takes its spatial coverage, the rock-church tradition of Ethiopia decreases as one comes to the central and southern parts of the country, having the concentration in its northern part. By taking its time coverage in to account, the practice and distribution of the tradition also decreases since the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Mengistu 2004, p. 37).

The excavation of Ethiopian churches from rock was primarily for liturgical purpose as it can be inferred from their functional and symbolical attributes. Architecturally, the rock-cut churches have incorporated prowess styles indigenously developed and elements introduced from the Byzantine Christian world (Phillipson 2009, pp. 192, 195-96). Based on their styles and material behaviors, the ancient Ethiopian church buildings can be categorized into built-up and rock-cut churches; both worthily shared Aksumite architectural elements. However, all these types have dominantly similarly eastward orientation of liturgical arrangements: chanting room, holy and holy of holies. Churches built under the protection of natural caves (such as Yəmṛəhannä Kərstos) or on mountains (such as Däbrä Damo) are generally categorized under the built-up type. Architecturally, Yəmṛəhannä Kərstos elaborately resembles Däbrä Damo and it is an instance of finest built-up features and light for Lalibela churches (Buxton 1947, pp. 8, 18-19) and hence a bridge between Aksum and Lalibela civilizations (Mengistu 2011).

Rock-cut (hypogeum) churches can be grouped in to wholly monolithic, semi-monolithic and cave. This division is based on the degree of detachment of the churches from their parent rock (Finneran 2007, p. 215), the style and system of excavation. The first two categories are termed as rock-hewn and are appropriate to the local term *wuqər*. Churches that have been excavated fully from rock in all rounds are monolithic (Phillipson 2009, p. 206; Finneran 2009, p. 425). These features are wholly detached from their parent rock and take a peculiarity of architectural and engineering skills. Most of them have rectangular plan, and some other take cruciform and round shapes. Gännätä Maryam, Betä Giyorgis and Adadi Maryam are examples of rectangular, cruciform and round churches, respectively. Monolithic churches exhibit fine architectural elements internally and externally. The apogee of monolithic tradition is recorded at Lalibela (Mengistu 2012, p. 91).

Cave churches are features mainly carved within rocks. A cave is appropriate to the local term, *washa* (Phillipson 2009, p. 87). These features in the case of Ethiopia are not karstified caves rather they are caves of workmanship. Most cave churches are excavated around escarpments or mountains where excavation of monolithic churches is not convenience due to the position and nature of rocks. Various evidences of these features are evidenced across the country. The cave churches established along the escarping chain of Ččäho that extends from South



As far as it is concerned, the rock-cut church sites across the Čäčäho chain are not only least studied but also most of them are endangered cultural monuments (Tsegaye 2019b, pp. 88-99). Stephen Wright made a tour to Lasta, Mäqet and Dawunt districts between 1947 & 1950. Though he was not a specialist, he remains probably the only person who has left a significant tour account about Däbrä Aron (Wright 1957, pp. 7-9). He was informed about this cave church when he was at Wogältena, the town of Dälanta district, South Wollo. However, his account does not give a general picture of this great cave monastery. Apart this, *abba* Aron of Mäqet, the abbot of the monastery, is mentioned in his description confused with homonymic monks of Syria and Däbrä Gälila (Tigray) who are mentioned in the Ethiopian Sinaxarium on Gənbət 21 (May 29) and Mäskäräm 30 (October 10), respectively. Däbrä Qätin,<sup>4</sup> the first chapel of Aron, also is not evidenced in this record. This study aims to provide a general picture of Däbrä Aron, one of the least studied monastic legacies in Mäqet District, Northern Ethiopia (see its location on Map 1).

## SOURCES AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

This paper has been completed out of my research diaries gathered in different times through data collection methods including field work, interview and analysis of text based evidences and local oral traditions. The research follows the trend of historical-archaeological research perspective, employing physical (material culture) evidences and text-aided and orally storied sources. Fieldwork of this research was partly conducted in 2013 when I was conducting my MA thesis that surveyed about nineteen rock-cut churches, including Däbrä Aron, in Mäqet District. I also conducted further field works at Däbrä Aron and other various hidden rock-cut churches found in the adjoining districts in South Gondar and North Wollo between 2015 and 2017. In the field works, observation accompanied by ground photographic recording with carefully selected viewing point was employed to enormously take material data (physical landscape, architectural and structural features of the monastery as well as the cultural treasures associated with *abba* Aron, the founder of the monastery) of the study. Field instruments such as GPS, digital camera, notebooks, and etc were used.

4 Däbrä Qätin is a toponym combined from two Geez words which means *mount of thin* or the *thinly mount* to express the shape of the hill where Aron excavated his first cave chapel (see figure 4). After Aron left it, Däbrä Qätin was not further served as a church probably until an expansion work is made by local initiation in 2004. It is now dedicated to St. Marry which is called Däbrä Qätin Maryam (Tsegaye 2014, p. 27).

In addition to the field works conducted, written sources related to the area were rigorously consulted in the latter data collection periods from which a relatively deep understanding about the historical background of the monastery is taken. I deeply consulted published sources that were not accessible and not reviewed deeply while I was working with my MA thesis. My consultation made its emphasis on literatures related to monastic cultural landscape relevant to the contextual and conceptual frameworks of this study. I also consulted a copy of *Gädlä Abunä Aron* (Life of Our Father Aron), a Geez version manuscript that I could access in the monastery. I also have tried to crosscheck the Geez version edition of Turaiev (1908) and the Amharic versions of the manuscript translated by Daniel (2006) with interesting footnotes and Minase (2010). These texts were only important to understand the early historical aspect of the monastery. I also have tried to reexamine the note of Wright (1957, pp. 7-9) probably the only oversea visitor who had left a record of this rock church. Passing remarks of Taddesse (1972) and Tesfaye (2013) and short notes given by Samuel (2003) also were seen. Sources related to the historical aspect of the monastery were collected through interview made with experienced local elders. The data are analyzed qualitatively through descriptive and explanatory approaches.

## DÄBRÄ ARON

### **Landscape and Its Vicinity (Why it was preferred as monastic centre?)**

Däbrä Aron is one of the hidden rock-cut churches found in Mäqet district of North Wollo, Amhara Region. It lies 19km west of Filaqit, the main town of Mäqet that locates 660kms north of Addis Ababa and 90km west of Lalibela. Physically, impressive and rugged topographical setting-elongated escarpments, mountains, hills and gorges, characterize Mäqet that has altitude ranging from 1479m level to 3589m above sea level. A chain of landscape, Čäčäho Pass, as Shiferaw (1999, p. 158) mentions it, runs from South Gondar across Mäqet as far as Wadla and Dawunt to the head of Žəṭa River, a tributary of Bäšəlo River. Čäčäho was the main political centre between Beggemdir and Wollo. It is a bridge between these areas (Crummey 1975, p. 2). The escarpments that flanked from Čäčäho run east wards to the right and left hands of the main highway from Woldia to Bahr Dar. One of the escarping flanks faces the upper course of Täkäzzé River and the other lies facing Žəṭa and Bäshilo Rivers. As mentioned previously, there are 19 rock-cut churches that are located in this part of the rugged physical landscape of Mäqet. Most of the rock-churches are established along the escarpment that asides Täkäzzé River.

The cave church of Däbrä Aron is established along the Čäčäho chain on a mountain named Däbrä Daret<sup>5</sup> that has an altitude of 2713m above sea level with 0465180 E & 1309086 N UTM Coordination. The monastery can be best reached along the main Woldia-Däbrä Tabor highway by descending north ward via a village called Agrit Abbo. It is established on top of the mountain that independently rises immediately north of Däbrä Qäṭin (see Figure 2).

The mountain is characterized by a white volcanic tuff. It has an increasing ensconce establishment at its base and a chain of narrower ridgelines at the top. It overlooks the upper course of Täckäzze River to the west of Lalibela. The mountain, with a massive and commanding view, is one of the most important hosts of vegetation coverage in Mäqet District. The monastery's cave church is found along the northern side of the mountain (see Figure 3). Before the cave church of Däbrä Aron are villages of nuns and the built-up church of Holly Trinity. This church was originally built for spiritual practices of nuns. Due to the increasing flow of pilgrims to Däbrä Aron, a new church is recently constructed and ritual practices are given there both for females and males (see Figure 4). The cave church of Aron, treasury houses, dormitory of monks and ecclesiastical male students, teaching centres, and guest houses are located separately on a crag hill that can be accessed through a stairway that has a porch at the top.

Däbrä Daret is preferred as a monastic abode of Aron for some reasons. Firstly, it was far from human habitation and not easily accessible which suit the monastic nature of the period. Secondly, the mountain has easily excavating rock that sponsored Aron to build his new cave church from it. Finally, according to his act, when he was at Lalibela, Aron was informed by a righteous man among the communities of Lalibela about the place that would be his last abode (Turaiev 1908, p. 135). The place is also honored under his act to have been preferred by God in the likeness of Heavenly Jerusalem. It is also mentioned in the act as Däbrä Faran to mean the mount of God to show it to be preferred and blessed by God (Gädlä Abunä Aron, p. 84; Turaiev 1908, p. 152).

## Historical background and Monastic Activities

Däbrä Aron is a mountain based monastery established by Aron of Mäqet. This can be known from material, archival and oral evidences that have attribution to *abba* Aron. The local gaze adheres that Däbrä Aron was the abbey of *abba* Aron

5 Däbrä Daret (Däharit) is a Geez term to mean *mount of the latter*. It is a toponym given to distinguish it from Däbrä Qäṭin, the first small mount that lies on the southern side.

who was one of the leading of monastic life in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>6</sup> We already have the detail life of Aron in his act, Gädlä Aron (Turaiev 1908; Daniel 2006; Minase 2010). Moreover, there are some fragmented scholarly records about his life. A short description on the life of Aron is given by Samuel (2003, pp. 350-351) and passing remarks also have been forwarded by Taddesse (1972, pp. 187, 194) and Kinefe-Rigb (1975, p. 65) However, these literatures rarely describe the cultural legacies, including the rock-cut church, of *abba* Aron.

According to Taddesse (1972, p. 187), Däbrä Aron was a major “launching-pad” for the evangelization activity of Aron as far as Lake Ṭana. *Abba* Aron, the builder and founder of the monastery, was one of the figurative monks of Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D (Taddesse 1972, p.194; Samuel 2003, p. 351). He was born in Gämbəya (also Dämbəya) in South Gondar Zone (Minase 2010, p. 22). His father, Gäbrä Mäsqäl, was the uncle of King Lalibela and this relationship associated the kinship of Aron with the royal family of Zagwe Dynasty (Mengistu 2003, p. 247; Daniel 2006, p. 377). He attended his church education in different areas, and later on he became the disciple of Bäṣälotä Michael at Däbrä Gol. There he became resolutely devotional servant that availed him to monkhood (Minase 2010, pp. 34-37). During this time, the relationship between the church and the state was relatively shrunk due to non-Christian practices such as concubinage and polygamy performed among the royal classes such as King Amdä Şəyon (1314–44) King Säyfä Ar’ed. This, Däbrä Gol was centre not only for coenobitic monastic life but also for opposition against the unethical Solomoni rulers (Henze 2000, p. 64).

Aron was a senior disciple at Däbrä Gol and he was cooperative with Bäṣälotä Michael and *abba* Ya’eqob, the then Egyptian bishop of Ethiopia, in their struggle against King Amdä Şəyon. At this movement, together with these two prominent religious leaders, Aron was exiled into Tigray where he excavated the church of Endä Abba Yohani in Tämben (Taddesse 1972, pp. 178, 187; Kinefe-Rigb 1975, p. 65). After spending some times in Tigray and Lalibela, Aron and his disciples went to Däbrä Qäṭin where he established a temporary cave church of his own centre of coenobitic life that attracted many Christians including the families of King Säyfä Ar’ed (1344–71), named Sara and Barbara who have been dedicated with a plotting land around the monastery (Mengistu, 2003, p. 23).

Like Däbrä Gol, Däbrä Qäṭin (later on Däbrä Daret) also became the other centre of communal monastic life and nucleus of opposition against King Amdä Şəyon’s son and successor, King Säyfä Ar’ed who followed matrimonial practices of his father. Aron’s conflict with the king continued due to his refusal to leave the

6 Informant: *abba* Gäbrä Egziabher, interviewed on September 11/2014.

king's families. A local monk, Täklä Haimanot who was a friend to the king, also exacerbated the irritation by informing the king as Aron remains his enemy. This became one of the causes for the deportation of Aron to the south of Awash River for seven years, the second period of exile (Turaiev 1908, pp. 136-137; Samuel 2003, p. 351; Derat 2010, p. 568). However, the king was later on convinced by the humbleness of Aron and regretted by his own mistake to end the deportation of the monk and his disciples. According to local tradition, Aron returned back with victory and miraculous deeds. He is most remembered for he had anathematized the sun not to be set before his arrival at his abode. The place where Aron did this activity is still locally called Anchim (Tsegaye 2014, pp. 18-19).

After he returned to Däbrä Qäṭin, Aron became a prominent and reputable religious figure among the people of Wollo and Bäggedmər. He preached Christianity and built churches in his native land, Gämbəya, South Gondar (Samuel 2003, p. 351). He left Däbrä Qäṭin to the near by mountain, Däbrä Daret. Until his death, he permanently settled there that became a strategic center of his evangelization and monastic activities. The excavation of the new church took three years and Aron dedicated it to St. Mary (Gädlä Abunä Aron, p. 86; Turaiev 1908, p. 152; Taddesse 1972, p. 194). During *abba* Aron's death,<sup>7</sup> his monastic communities came to be gathered on the funerary and they buried his body within his cave church which is now dedicated as Aron's sanctuary (Turaiev 1908, p. 155).

The monastery was established as villages of monks and nuns separately and these settlements are visible on the mountain. Däbrä Aron is still a reputable monastery among many Ethiopian Christians. It is one of the main pilgrimage centres to the west of Lalibela. It is also a museum for precious cultural treasures some of which (for instance votive crown (see Figure 5)<sup>8</sup> and staff cross (see Figure 6)) are attributed to Aron. For many Ethiopian Christians, the monastery is a sign of long-suffering and spiritual stalwartness of Aron and his disciples. It is also a teaching centre both for theological and ethical discourses. The host Christians and the surroundings have a close attachment with the monastery where they conduct

7 The death of *abba* Aron is colorfully celebrated annually on Mäskäräm 5 (September 15).

8 This processional crown is not clear by whom it was gifted to *abba* Aron. Of course, as it is recorded in his act, Aron was provided with gifts from King Säyfa Ar'ed during their reconciliation for the persecution made by the king. However, Aron did not have interest to receive gifts of the king. On contrary, though it is not clearly stated, his disciplines had shown interest to the gifts of the king (Turaiev 1908, p. 152). The crown might have been brought by his disciplines.

spiritual practices, social gatherings such as *sānbāte*<sup>9</sup> and arbitration activities with the guide of the churchmen.

### Art and architecture

The cave church of Däbrä Aron is excavated within a soft rock. The first doorway (see Figure 7) leads into an extended vestibule (anteroom) that has partially an opened roof, the first *səqurät* (a Geez term to mean an aperture or opening) of the cave church (see Figure 8). This aperture allows the entrance of both light and rain droplets in to the anteroom. The water droplets from the upper head of the church collectively enter and infiltrate into the southeastern ground of the church which has an impact on the rock cut church. At the end of the narthex, there are doubled wooden doorways framed by timber jambs and give access to the internal parts of the cave.

It has complex interior layout compartmented by pillars into chanting room, nave (holy) and sanctuary. There are also different tunnel like chapels and holes excavated to put fragmented bones of saints. To the northern end of the chanting room, there is a closed room which is grave of saints who died because of epidemic diseases occurred sometime after the establishment of the monastery. The chanting place hosts the second *səqurät* which is opened in to the sky (see Figure 9). It passes sunlight in to the church but it does not enter rain droplets. This feature avails Däbrä Aron to have a distinguished style in the tradition of Ethiopian rock-cut churches. The act of Aron describes the first and the second apertures as:

ወእም ኔ ስቁረት አንተ አፍክ ደወርጵ ዝናም ውስጥ... ወጎሰ አንተ ውስጥ ስቁረት መቅደስ አልቦ ዘይወርጵ ነጥብ ዝናም ምንተኒ ዘአንበላ አገረ ምዕዛረ ፀሐይ ባሕተቲ ወእስከ ማላላቅታ ለዓለም ወንሕነኒ ደደልወነ ነበል ዝነገር መንከር ወመጽምም [From outside, rain enters inside of the first aperture ... but with the exception of sun light, no rain droplet enters inside of the aperture of the sanctuary (the second aperture) unto the end of this world and we shall to say this prodigy amazing and marvelous] (Gädlä Abunä Aron, p. 86).

The *səqurät* is the most attractive elements of the cave that commands the view of church observers. It is still the major source of reputation and icon in terms of architectural and religious significance of Däbrä Aron. The epithet of Aron (also Däbrä Aron), *mānkərawi* (miraculous) has been given partly by the marvelous conception given to this *səqurät* and his other champion deeds made during his deporta-

9 *Sānbāte* (which refers to the gathering of Christians on Christian Sabbath, Sunday) is one of the social gatherings of Ethiopian Christians. It creates strong social bonds among themselves and with the church servants. It is conducted weekly on Sunday usually after ritual practices of the church have been finished. Each *sānbāte* of Christians has members being headed by a priest who provides blessing to the member and the meal of the *sānbāte*.

tions. This *səqurāt* has received appreciation from different church scholars through their poems of Geez, the liturgical language of EOC. The most interesting poem was versed by *aläqa* Lemma Hailu who was one of the famous scholars of EOC in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Aläqa* Lemma stayed at Däbrä Aron in his early age but could not able to again visit the church after once he left it to Shäwa. He delivered a poem about the inconvenience he faced to visit the church in comparison with the rain that allowed not enter into the church as poem of *aläqa* Lemma indicated (Mengistu 2003, p. 247):

አነ ወዝናም፤  
 እንዘ ንጹሐን አምነውር ወእንዘ በቀል አልብነ፤  
 አሮን አምበዊኦ ቤቱ በከንቱ ከልክነ፤  
 እስመ እመ ዐረግነ ላዕለ ወእመ ታሐተ ወረጽነ፤  
 ዘምስለ አቡነ አሮን ያስተሳልመነ፤  
 አረጋዊ ኢተረክበ ለነ።

[Though me and rain are cleaned from indecent and no revenge, Aron prohibited us getting into his home; we wander up and down but we cannot find an elder who reconciles us with our father Aron].

About fourteen rectangular pillars are roughly sculpted from the rock. They have slightly framed arcades and capitals affiliating with the surrounding styles than with Lasta architectural styles. They are wide at their base and their erection seems simply to support the roof and to serve as partition of the nave in to different rooms. The columns in the southern end of the cave are huge. The widest part of the cave is the chanting place where the choirs chant together. The central part of the nave is the holy that has two parts separated by columns. Beyond the holy, in the northeastern side of the cave, lies a tripartite sanctuary. The first section, on the right southern side, is the sanctuary dedicated to *abba* Aron. It has a domed feature that has a similar style with different rock-hewn churches in Mäqet and Lay Gaynt districts. The middle one is the sanctuary of St. Marry that has no distinct roof architecture. The last one on the northern side is the sanctuary of the Apostles that has a large engraved cross situated immediately above the altar. Some sections of chapels exist southeast of the holy and the sanctuary. To the southeastern end of the cave lie two passages running southward from the recess leaving the holy and the sanctuary on the left hand. Very huge columns separate them. At the end of these passages there is temporarily closed doorway where the excavation of the church is believed to have been started in this side, as the local tradition indicates. It is plausible to accept this tradition because that the cliff in this side is very nearest to this side in order to dump the *tufa* spoil in to the cliff.

A staff cross like feature is engraved on the rock wall near to the doorway. According to the local oral tradition, it is engraved by Aron to deliver his supplication to his God.<sup>10</sup> This engraved cross has long shaft, roughly bifid armed flanks and rings at the top and below its arms. Its head is surrounded by arched and chained trifoliate decorative motifs (see Figure 10). Overall, it shows a good artistic performance representing a processional or staff cross characterized by decorative bosses that seem to have been adapted from staff cross styles of Lalibela that are described by Mercier and Lepage (2012, pp. 143-144). Aron might have experienced this style while he was at Lalibela.

Another section of the cave with its blind pilasters situated east of the sanctuary. It has a passageway to access it and possesses a concavity domed roof which indicates this section was probably used as a sanctuary before the completion of the in use tripartite sanctuary. It is now a chapel of believers. There is a collection of bones of saints put in small caves along this passage. The cornice of the cave overall evidences marks of chiseling that show the utilization of local instruments during the excavation of the church. It is interesting that the church has preserved at least one of its excavation materials, *gudəb*, which is *abba* Aron's ax-like tool (see Figure 11). It is traditionally believed to be given from an angel of God to Aron.<sup>11</sup> It is one of the sacred treasures openly visited during ceremonial practices of the church. It is good evidence for researchers to understand the technological instruments used to excavate Ethiopian rock-cut churches. Of course, the continuity of applying local technological tradition to this day is evidenced in some areas such as the case of the new groups of rock churches, what the local people call as "Dagmawi Lalibela (The Second Lalibela)," recently excavated around Gashena, a town along the way to Lalibela. One of these structures is symbolized with the map of Ethiopia and Afro Aygäba, a precious cross type of Lalibela (see Figure 12).

## CONCLUSION

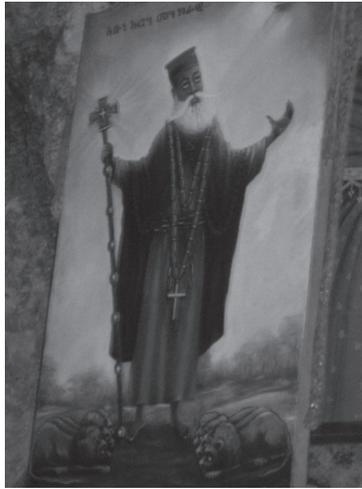
This paper has explored one of the ecclesiastical cultural heritages of Ethiopia, Däbrä Aron, the abbot of *abba* Aron who was one of the figures of Ethiopian monks in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The church is one of the great built heritages of Solomonid period when excavation of churches from rock was declining. As the highest architectural and engineering skills have been recorded at Lalibela, the highest tradition of *səqurät* has been recorded at Däbrä Aron. The hewer made devotion

10 Informant: *abba* Gäbrä Egziabher.

11 Informant: Bitäw Wolde (priest); interviewed on September 11/2014.

not to imitate experiences from the Aksumite or Zagwe architectural styles rather to magnify his own creative legacy on the cave. This feature distinguishes Däbrä Aron from the cave churches found in Ethiopia. The *gudab*, the excavation tool of *abba* Aron, which is still preserved in the church, is an important element for future research works. One of the conundrum aspects through the scholarly study of Ethiopian rock-hewn churches is the issue of technology. As Finneran (2009, p. 425) indicates, iron tools were used to excavate Lalibela and the surrounding rock-cut churches as signs of “tooling marks” have been evidenced at Gännätä Maryam church. Of course, chiseling marks are much evidenced on the rock walls and roofs of the cave churches in Mäqet such as Däbrä Aron, Nazugn Maryam, Addis Amba Mädhane Aläm and Däbrä Sina Maryam. The *gudab* of Aron provides an important insight for the utilization of local technological materials in the architectural and artistic fabrication of Ethiopian rock-cut churches.

In addition to its architectural heritage, Däbrä Aron was one of the celebrated monasteries of the medieval period that served as centre of theological and ethical discourses. The monastery also has preserved different movable properties that are not fully described here. Documentation and management of its treasures is significant that has to be made by heritage experts. History of the monastery also needs a deep inquiry for that Aron had a close relationship with few the Solomonic rulers. This will add a scholarly literature to the historical discourse of the 14<sup>th</sup> century of Ethiopia. Since the tourism industry is quickly growing at national or global levels (despite of the challenges it has now facing as a result of the eruption of corona virus pandemic or covid-19), concerned stakeholders in the field of heritage management and tourism industry shall to provide sundry alternatives of tourism destinations. In this regard, sites like Däbrä Aron become important alternatives for future tourist destinations both in its cultural and natural touristic attraction resources. However, it should be noted that tourism operation could be unwieldy without conducting continuous recording, understanding, valorizing and promotion of such hidden cultural resources. As a result, adhering on these activities is significant to develop tourism sustainably in the area.



*Figure 1. Abba Aron, a picture taken from Däbrä Aron*



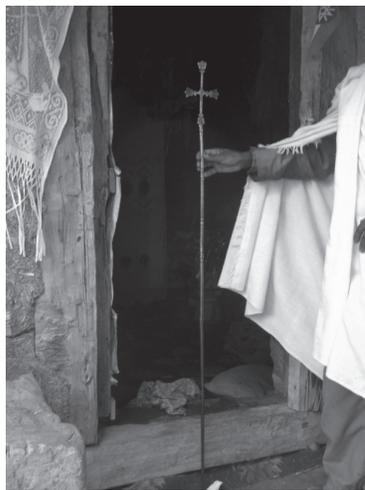
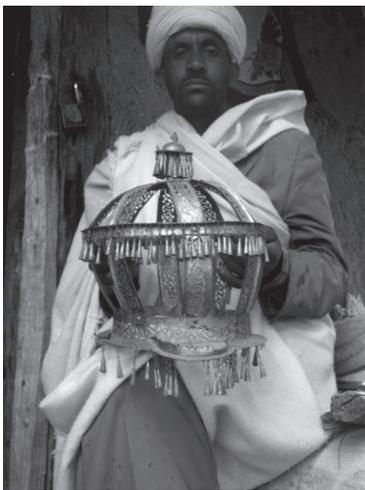
*Figure 2. Däbrä Daret (the risen mountain) and Däbrä Qäṭin (the thinly hill),  
a view from south*



*Figure 3. The northeastern flank of Däbrä Daret*



*Figure 4. Pilgrims (both males and females) gathered at the church of Holy Trinity of Däbrä Aron*



*Figure 5. The votive crown of abba Aron    Figure 6. The staff cross of abba Aron*



*Figure 7. Entrance in to the Cave Church*



*Figure 8. The first səqurät of Däbrä Aron*



*Figure 9. (left) The second səqurät of Däbrä Aron*

*Figure 10. (right) Engraved cross of processional style in the church*



*Figure 11. The gudab of abba Aron on the shoulder of a priest on annual festivity of Aron*



*Figure 12. One of the newly excavated rock-hewn Churches of “Dagmawi Lalibela”*

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# DÄBRÄ ARON: A ROCK-CUT MONASTIC CHURCH, MÄQET DISTRICT OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

## SUMMARY

This study aims to explore Däbrä Aron, a least known monastic rock-cut church of the 14<sup>th</sup> century of Christian Ethiopia. Däbrä Aron is named after *abba* Aron, a famous Ethiopian monk, the founder and hewer of the monastery, which is established at Däbrä Daret, a mountain situated along the upper course of Täk-käzze River. It is a monastery that integrates troglodytic and mountainous monastic landscapes. Like Däbrä Gol, where Aron experienced his monastic life, Däbrä Daret was centre for coenobitic monastic life and opposition against immoral practices of Solomonic kings who in different times exiled Aron and other monastic men. The church is excavated in to a white soft tuff rock and it is one of the few instances for the declining rock-church tradition of the Solomonic period. Expansion works are made internally by using *gudab*, *abba* Aron's ax-like excavation tool which is still preserved in the church. It has a complex layout constituting different parts – elongated anteroom, aisles, nave, tripartite sanctuary and compartmented chapels – separated by unevenly shaped columns with rough capitals and arches. This cave is unique largely by its *səqurät*, aperture of the cave's roof opened into the sky. The nave's *səqurät*, rectangular in shape, allows, except rainfall droplets, entrance of sunlight into the church. The reputation of Däbrä Aron is partly associated with the acceptance of this feature as icon of the architectural excellence and spiritual devotion of *abba* Aron by whom many Christians were attracted into his monastic life. The cave also has an engraved processional cross decorated with symbolical trifoliate motifs.

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