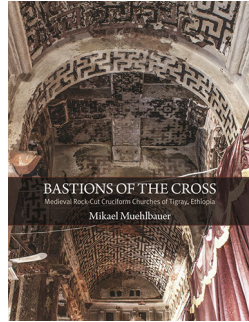



# MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, *BASTIONS OF THE CROSS. MEDIEVAL ROCK-CUT CRUCIFORM CHURCHES OF TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA*

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Reviewed by  
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This book by Mikael Muehlbauer has a total of 254 pages, 239 of which constitute the main sections, including bibliography and indexes. It has 159 figures, encompassing maps, pictures, and illustrations. It is indicated that the book is an advanced version of the author's PhD thesis. The cover displays the eye-catching features of the transept-vaults of Abreha wa-Atsbeha, with the facade of Wuqro Cherqos on pages ii–iii. In terms of organization, the book comprises a preface, a note on translation and editing, and an introduction followed by four chapters with a conclusion, bibliography, list of abbreviations, and general indexes. The preface highlights the situation in the author's research area, the Tigray Region of Ethiopia, in particular during and after his fieldwork, accompanied by an exhaustive acknowledgment of the scholars and institutions in Ethiopia, the US, and Europe who provided him with the technical, financial, material, and administrative support.

Five issues are raised in the introduction (pp. 1–26), which begins by paralleling San Marco in Venice, Italy, and rock-hewn churches in Tigray, Ethiopia. In the discussion, Muehlbauer singles

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out Abrha wa-Atsbeha for comparison with San Marco, which he considers to be synonymous with each other, not only in their cruciform aisles plan, but also in their elite patronage and their mosaics of exotic cloth patterns. Here, it seems the author wants to showcase the value of long-forgotten but world-class rock-hewn churches present in northern Ethiopia, alongside Venice's most well-known and touristic church, San Marco. To this end, he expresses his aspiration that "by opening up the remarkable churches of Tigray to wider audiences, and in a comparative perspective, I hope to model new possibilities for a more inclusive study of the Eastern Christian world" (p. 4).

In the introduction, Muehlbauer also discusses his four consecutive years (2016–2019) of fieldwork in Ethiopia and Egypt, as well as archival research held in the US and Italy. He explains the data collection tools he employed, including a handheld laser. He also clearly explains why there is a lack of C-14 dating, which is because living religious practices continue on the sites and excavation is an impossibility. In closing this subsection of the introduction, the author outlines the three major themes with which he tries to test the hypotheses in his work. These are dating, Byzantium connection, and patronage. He further argues that the 11th century saw a local reinvention of aisled cruciform churches commissioned by Christian elites.

In the subsequent parts of the introduction, the author details the geographic and topographic features of Tigray, followed by a summary of the history of Ethiopian civilization and Christianity. The last three topics describe the state of the field, the question of exchanges between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Byzantium, and how the book is structured. In the first of these cases, he assesses the state of Ethiopian studies from the 19th century to date. Taking a bird's-eye view of Ethiopian studies, he places a general broader emphasis on the genesis of the study of Ethiopian rock-cut architecture and art across time and space. While the author dedicates paragraphs to the discussion of the three worlds mentioned above – Ethiopia, Egypt, Byzantium – he pays attention to the need to maintain a balance between the debates that consider the churches as derivatives of the world outside, specifically the Byzantine world, and the idea of considering these churches as forming part of the local history of architectural development in Ethiopia. Moreover, taking three churches as case studies, he clearly shows his intention to correct the neglect that global medieval art studies has displayed toward the world-class rock-hewn churches of northern Ethiopia. In the final part of the introduction, he deals with the structure of the book, highlighting the content and scope of the four chapters and the conclusion.

The first and main chapter of the book deals with the genesis of rock-cut churches from the Aksumite (c. 300 AD) to the present, presented in chronological order under five major topics. It begins with the early Christian architecture characterized by the recasting of local architectural forms for ecclesiastical use. In addition, an

overview of the half-timbering technique, which the author considers to be a common building technique across the Red Sea basin, is included. The impacts of contact with the Mediterranean world on art and architectural forms of the period are also emphasized. A further interesting component of this section is the comparative observation that the author and, of course, previous researchers, such as Michael Gerves, have made between the appearance of the art and architecture of the period with reference to the miniature paintings found in the gospel of Abba Gerima (fig. 29, p. 41; fig. 33, p. 45), which is also taken as a case study for the subsequent discussions on the post-Aksumite phase (700 to 1100 AD, p. 12).

The next section of the first chapter discusses the post-Aksumite phase, with the author taking Degum Selassie as an example of this transition period and an indicator of societal contraction and the privatization of worship (p. 43). The two-century period from 950 to 1150, regarded by Marie-Laure Derat (2018) as the period of the “Second Christianization”, is defined by the author as the most notable period of architectural dynamism since the Aksumite Era. The period – that is, the 11th century – is further considered an era of tremendous change in the political and economic spheres as well as in the architectural history of the region. Networks with Fatimid Egypt through the Coptic church and involvement in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trades were seen as the factors contributing to the advances in the economic, religious, and political lives of the people.

The period from 1100 to 1300 is divided by the author into two parts, namely the Early Zagwe and the Zagwe proper, and signals the rise and advancement of the first centralized state structure in northern Ethiopia since the Aksumite period. In this section, the 12th century, in particular, is taken as a period that generated a multiplication of altars and the introduction of mural paintings in Ethiopian church architecture. Churches like Maryam Nazret are said to have been built during this period; it is seen by the author as an exemplary product of the campaigns to reconsecrate the Aksumite monuments. For Muehlbauer, the geographic proximity of the major salt trading hub to some of these churches had a role to play in their development.

Although there are parallel developments in today’s Tigray Region, the 13th-century period of architectural dynamism is best exemplified in the Lasta-Lalibela area. In the following centuries (1300–1500), under the “restored Solomonic” dynasty, kings commissioned the establishment of monasteries. Thus, connections to and communications with the contemporary Mamluk Egyptian leaders are considered contributing factors to the art and architectural development of this period.

The author concludes the first chapter with a discussion on the intention to present an assessment of the genesis in the production, use, and research of the rock architecture in northern Ethiopia as a stepping stone providing the readers with a detailed background, before heading to his main research subjects, viz. Abrha wa-Ats-beha, Mikael Amba, and Wuqro Cherqos rock-hewn churches.

The second chapter is the heart of the book, which focuses on the author's main research subject – that is, the three rock-cut churches. The discussion begins with Abrha wa-Atsbeha, followed by Mikael Amba and Wuqro Chergos. In all three cases, the discussion begins with background information about the geographical landscape and geological features in which these churches were created. The author provides a detailed description of the main architectural elements in the interior and exterior of the churches, such as the facade, narthex, and aisles of individual churches. The descriptions are accompanied by pictures and drawings, with special attention paid to the features on the ceilings that elaborate the cruciform elements.

The next section discusses the building phases of the churches, as chronology (pp. 124–134) is an important factor here. Muehlbauer discusses the reach of the previous research and his findings on the topic. Although he refers readers to the concluding chapter for the details of his findings, he takes into account synonymy in geology, metrology, and other architectural elements that enabled him to reach the conclusion that these three churches were produced by the efforts of masons in communication (directly or indirectly) with and commissioned by the same politico-religious figures in the proximate period.

In his argument for delineating the phases of church building, Muehlbauer regards Mikael Amba as the outcome of the second building campaign. This conclusion is based on references made to textual evidence (pp. 128–129). The text is one of the rarest pieces of literary evidence we have from this period. Moreover, its authorship by a Coptic metropolitan, Michael, and its figurative details about churches consecrated, priests, and monks ordained, with direct reference to his consecration of the church of Mikael Amba, adds weight to the author's argument. The connection between the Coptic and Ethiopian churches goes back to the early 4th century, since when, metropolitans have been assigned by the patriarchate of Alexandria and with the will of the sultans since the predomination of Islam in Egypt. This continued to the mid-20th century, when Ethiopia started to enthrone its patriarch and, hence, metropolitan. Furthermore, this specific case can be taken as one of the most important sources of evidence for the role that the metropolitans played in the church-building projects beyond their commonly known role of consecrating the buildings. Recent research, such as at Maryam Nazret, will provide more insights about the topic.

Given that these churches underwent a series of periods of structural dynamism that resulted in restorations and adaptations across time, it was not easy for the author to make precise observations of their cruciform plans and appearance. However, his scrutiny and efforts at every corner to examine the potential cruciform plans led him to clearly illustrate the similarities and differences between the three churches under study. Furthermore, his detailed investigation also permitted him to compare these churches in Tigray with those further south in the Wag and Lasta areas. Apart

from the main architectural investigations, Muehlbauer also made use of the changes and continuities in liturgical spaces as a case in point.

Chapter 2 also includes a tabulated summary of the relative chronology (p. 133) of the hewing, restoration, and rework of the churches from 1000 AD to 1939 – i.e., from the hewing of the churches to the restoration of Abreha wa-Atsbeha during the Italian occupation. The chapter culminates with a very good summary of the major internal developments (political centralization and re-Christianization under the emerging Zagwe Dynasty) and the external relations with the Fatimid mercantile networks that permitted the introduction of contemporary Justinian monumental fashions to the region. Ethiopian pilgrims and trading networks all along the Red Sea were taken as bases for these exchanges.

Chapter 3 assesses the medieval rock-cut churches of Ethiopia in the context of the political developments in the Mediterranean world during the 11th century. According to the various pieces of literary evidence consulted by Muehlbauer, central to these developments was a shift in interest on the part of the Fatimid dynasty under Badr al-Jamali from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean due to the presence of the Seljuk, and Turkey's preoccupation with the former. The already established Coptic network had been used to approach the Christian kings aside from pocket Muslim foundations in the region.

In a section that discusses vaults and domed cubes, the author suggests the adoption of late antique Mediterranean fashion rather than the pre-existing Aksumite features. The appearance of the symbol of the cross in different forms and positions also receives considerable attention in the chapter with a series of comparisons with counterparts elsewhere. Apart from images from the area of study, most of the pictures used for comparative assessment in this chapter are of churches, or parts of churches, from different architectural productions in Egypt, Turkey, Italy, and France.

In the chapter's concluding section, titled "Global Year 1000", Muehlbauer tries to challenge the pre-existing view of the "Dark Ages" attributed to the post-Aksumite Ethiopia, an idea shared by previous archaeologists such as Phillipson and Finneran who are mentioned in the preceding section where Muehlbauer discusses Aksumite pre-Christian and Christian architectural traces on the medieval churches under study. Although these scholars have shared concerns regarding justifying the change and continuity from the Aksumite further south, the application of this idea to the churches of the present research proves a worthwhile undertaking.

The fourth chapter of the book emphasizes the traces of connections between medieval Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean world that are found manifested on the churches mainly in the use of textiles and textile motifs. This is particularly the case with the churches of Abreha wa-Atsbeha and Wuqro Cherqos and how textile and architecture are found intertwined. Mikael Amba was thought to have been left unfinished during the adornment of the

other two rock-hewn churches in the 11th century. In this section, the author makes use of the reflections of travelers such as Alvarez from the 16th century. Moreover, parallels from contemporary Egyptian architectural features and textile evidence are employed extensively for elaboration. By drawing on museum collections, such as those of the Ashmolean in Oxford and other museums in North America, as well as ethnographic data, the discussion in this chapter becomes more practical and lively.

The chapter discusses knowledge and material (fabric) exchanges with a detailed look at the major maritime routes of the Red Sea, Silk Road, and the Indian Ocean, and their respective trading networks. Fatimid Egypt continued to be taken as the major agent in the movement of textile commodities to northern Ethiopia. The detailed investigation looks as far as the Far East (China), and an assessment of commercial links to the Horn of Africa in those days is presented. The chapter also illustrates the specific architectural elements, such as windows, chancels, screens, and latices, that display textile and textile-driven motifs (p. 189).

The temporal focus of the book, the 11th century, with its multifaceted and global trading patterns, is well depicted. The intermediaries and otherwise contemporaries of the period, including countries other than Egypt, such as Armenia, Yemen, and Gujarat (India), and their influence are taken into account. As the main textile element, silk, and its socio-aesthetic function within the church, receives a special place in the description. The author also argues that ornament is the hallmark of visual culture studies. Other local examples from the subsequent centuries, including Zarema Giorgis and churches from Lalibela, such as Bete Maryam, are considered for comparative assessment. Furthermore, the central topic of the subject, which is the cross motif and plan in different forms, has a particular take on both textile and architectural analysis.

The book's conclusion contains a synthesis of the discussions in the preceding four chapters and their implications. It begins with a proposal on the need to count these three rock-hewn churches as signals of the great architectural movement of the Middle Ages. Chronologically, Muehlbauer took the late 11th century (1089–1094) to be the foundation of these rock-cut structures as monasteries. These religious establishments were taken as reflections of the pre-existing advance of Aksumite architecture and a strong alliance with the Byzantine world.

Muehlbauer further proposes that development in the production of rock-cut churches over subsequent centuries was a continuation and elaboration of the 11th-century churches from Tigray, which were probably built by the Hatanis, dynastic predecessors of the Zagwe (Lalibela). In this respect, the author takes Bete Giorgis in Lalibela to be more directly linked with Tigrayan cruciform churches. At the same time, elements such as blind windows, chamfered pillars, and tour moldings are considered to be adoptions from Aksumite architecture. Churches from Tigray, such as Maryam

Qorqor, and Zamaddo Maryam and Bethlehem, further south in the Amhara region, are considered for comparative observation.

The section concludes with the last four paragraphs coming back to the title of the book, "Bastions of the Cross", with a humble presentation of the author's work, the motive that brought him to this work, and the outcome. This deductive approach in describing the what and why of the book, as well as the title as part of the conclusion, is a more plausible approach than placing it in the introduction as this may help readers to correlate their understanding of the content of the book with the title given to it.

The central argument that Muehlbauer makes about the need to maintain the balance between the issue of locally rooted inspirations and counterparts from elsewhere is interesting. Nevertheless, discussions on the typology of cross motifs, such as identifications as Greek and Maltese, could have benefited from further elaboration. In addition to the mere identification of cross motifs on the churches, clarification as to whether these cross types are locally rooted or are part of the eastern Mediterranean world is needed. It should be emphasized that the diverse materiality and typology of crosses in Ethiopia have not yet been well investigated. Although this thesis requires more precision, it might open a new route of investigation in Muehlbauer's further research. The multiplicity of rock-cut churches in Ethiopia, which represent an ongoing tradition in some areas, and the presence of diverse built churches across time and space require further comparative investigations in order to identify with better precision what is local, imported, or shared.

In general, Muehlbauer's book, with its both outward and inward-oriented observations of the world of rock-cut ecclesiastical architecture in northern Ethiopia, is an excellent contribution. Although the author could not conduct in-depth archaeological investigations for the reasons indicated elsewhere, he has made use of wide-ranging literary, architectural, and archaeological resources to address the basic questions of his research. The extensive fieldwork that the author conducted and the attempts he made as a participant observer of the culture and church tradition in his research area are very inspiring. Additionally, the book has exhaustive footnotes and bibliographical information. Moreover, the monograph is informed in many ways by about ten papers on the related topics that Muehlbauer published before the book.

The book can serve as a comprehensive guide and reference for students of higher education and researchers in the fields of art and architectural history, archaeology, and economic and religious history, among others.