

FLEMMING AALUND

PRESERVING ETHIOPIA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

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EDIZIONI SCIENTIFICHE ITALIANE

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Flemming Aalund

1. Geographical location of the major historic sites in Ethiopia

Architect. Unesco Consultant and author of the Master Plan for the Preservation and Presentation of the Ethiopian Cultural Heritage

Terre millénaire et légendaire, l'Éthiopie a vu se développer sur son sol de très riches civilisations dont les plus fameux témoignages s'illustrent dans son patrimoine architectural qui reste malgré tout encore mal connu aujourd'hui. Parmi les sites de toute première importance citons: Axoum, cité fondée avant l'ère chrétienne est connue pour ses stèles mortuaires sculptées dont la plus haute s'élevait à plus de 33 mètres; Lalibela, ensemble de magnifiques églises rupestres des XII^e et XIII^e siècles qui témoignent de la vitalité de l'église éthiopienne à l'époque médiévale; Fasil Ghebbi, ensemble fortifié créé au XVII^e dont les palais et les châteaux ont servi de résidence aux rois éthiopiens pendant environ 250 ans; enfin dans la région du Lac Tana les églises aux célèbres peintures murales qui comptent parmi leurs trésors les plus anciens manuscrits sur parchemin.

La sécheresse qui sévit dans cette région d'Afrique depuis de nombreuses années et l'instabilité provoquée par la guerre d'Eritrée depuis 1962 ont provoqué de graves difficultés économiques ne permettant pas au gouvernement éthiopien de prendre toutes les mesures propres à la sauvegarde de leur immense patrimoine. C'est pourquoi depuis 1976, à la demande du gouvernement éthiopien, l'Unesco apporte régulièrement son concours technique et financier en vue du lancement d'une campagne internationale. Dans ce cadre l'auteur a été amené à rédiger en 1984 un projet de plan directeur (Master Plan) pour la mise en valeur et la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel de l'Éthiopie.

Les recommandations de l'auteur portent sur la préservation des techniques et des matériaux traditionnels (notamment la chaux), la création de musées régionaux, l'élaboration des mesures administratives et législatives qui constitueront la base d'un programme de sauvegarde intégré dans une politique de développement social et économique du pays et la création de secteurs sauvegardés pour la vieille ville de Harar, et pour l'ensemble archéologique d'Axoum. Toutefois il est bien évident que la priorité sera accordée à la satisfaction des besoins alimentaires vitaux de la population avant que ces recommandations puissent être mises en oeuvre.

Etiópia, tierra milenaria y legendaria, ha tenido importantes civilizaciones cuyos más famosos testigos se encuentran en su patrimonio arquitectónico que a pesar de todo no es aún bien conocido. Entre sus sitios más importantes se puede notar: la ciudad de Axoum, fundada antes de la era cristiana y muy famosa por sus estelas mortuorias esculpidas; la más alta de las cuales alcanzaba más de 33 metros; el conjunto de espléndidas iglesias rupestres de Lalibela de los siglos XII y XIII que testimonian la vitalidad de la Iglesia Etiópica en época medieval; el conjunto fortificado de Fasil Ghebbi, construido en el siglo XVIII, cuyos palacios y castillos fueron durante casi 250 años las residencias de los reyes de Etiópia; finalmente en la región del lago Tana las iglesias con pinturas murales que poseen también los más antiguos manuscritos sobre pergamino.

La sequía que conoce el país desde muchos años y la inestabilidad causada por la guerra de Eritrea desde 1962 provocaron graves dificultades económicas. Estos problemas no permiten al gobierno

AKSUM

In the ancient world, Ethiopia was the legendary land of Punt, which played an important part in the religious myths of pharaonic Egypt. Ethiopia's first known kingdom was founded over two thousand years ago in the northern site of Aksum. At the height of its power (fourth to seventh centuries A.D.) the Aksumite kingdom held sway over a vast region extending from ancient Meroë in present-day Sudan to Mecca on the Arabian peninsula. The ancient port of Adulis on the Red Sea helped to develop the empire's military and maritime power through which it was able to further extend its influence. Aksumite merchants imported commodities from all over the ancient world in exchange for costly gums, incense and myrrh, which were used in pagan cult ceremonies and funeral embalming. In Antiquity, Ethiopia's influence and fame was widespread. Around the first century A.D. an anonymous Greek travel book, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Circumnavigation of the Erythrean Sea) which offered advice on travel and trade around the Indian Sea, refers to Aksum and its commercial relations with contemporary Rome. Another written account attributed to the third-century Iranian religious leader, Mani, describes the Aksumite kingdom as one of the four greatest in the world. The enormous mortuary stela at Aksum, many of which are still standing, bear witness to the artistic achievements of this great civilization (Fig. 2, 3).

The Aksumites converted to Christianity in the centuries following Christ's death thanks to the preaching of two Syrians. One of them, Frumentius, became the first bishop of Ethiopia and his consecration initiated the close link between the Ethiopian and Egyptian (Coptic) churches. The Aksumites' power began to diminish in the seventh century A.D. by which time the influence of the city of Aksum had so declined that the seat of power was transferred farther south. The move may have been provoked by the advance



tomar medidas para salvaguardar su importante patrimonio¹. Las recomendaciones del autor se refieren a diversos puntos, tales como las técnicas y los materiales tradicionales (sobre todo la cal) la creación de museos regionales, la elaboración de medidas administrativas y legislativas que constituirán la base de un programa integrado de salvaguardia dentro de una política de desarrollo social y económico del país y la creación de distritos protegidos en la antigua ciudad de Hara, así como para el conjunto arqueológico de Axoum. Sin embargo es evidente que se acordará la prioridad a las necesidades alimenticias vitales de la población antes de realizar estas recomendaciones.

L'Etiopia, terra millenaria e leggendaria, ha visto svilupparsi sul suo suolo ricchissime civiltà, le cui più famose testimonianze sono illustrate dal suo patrimonio architettonico, che resta, malgrado tutto, ancora poco conosciuto. Tra i siti più importanti citiamo: Axoum, città fondata prima dell'era cristiana, che è conosciuta per le sue stele funerarie scolpite, di cui la più alta si eleva oltre i 33 metri; Lalibela, insieme di magnifiche chiese rupestri del XII e XIII secolo che testimoniano della vitalità della chiesa etiopica in epoca medioevale; Fasil Ghebbi, insieme fortificato, creato nel XVII secolo i cui palazzi e castelli sono serviti come residenza ai re etiopici durante 250 anni circa; infine, nella regione del lago Tana, le chiese dalle celebri pitture murarie, che contano tra i loro tesori i più antichi manoscritti su pergamena.

La siccità che infierisce in questa regione dell'Africa da numerosi anni e l'instabilità prodotta dalla guerra di Eritrea dopo il 1962 hanno provocato gravi difficoltà economiche, che non permettono al governo etiopico di adottare tutte le misure atte alla salvaguardia del suo immenso patrimonio. E per tale ragione che l'Unesco, dal 1976, a seguito di richiesta del governo etiopico, apporta regolarmente il suo concorso tecnico e finanziario in vista del lancio di una campagna internazionale. In questo quadro l'autore è stato portato a redigere nel 1984 un progetto di piano regolatore (Master Plan) per la valorizzazione e la salvaguardia del patrimonio culturale dell'Etiopia.

Le raccomandazioni dell'autore si soffermano sulla conservazione delle tecniche e dei materiali tradizionali (specialmente la calce), la creazione di musei regionali, l'elaborazione di misure amministrative e legislative che costituiranno la base di un programma di salvaguardia integrato in una politica di sviluppo sociale ed economico del paese e la creazione di settori di salvaguardia per l'antica città di Harar e per l'insieme archeologico di Axoum. Tuttavia, è ben evidente che la priorità sarà accordata al soddisfacimento dei bisogni alimentari, vitali per la popolazione; più tardi tali raccomandazioni potranno essere messe in opera.

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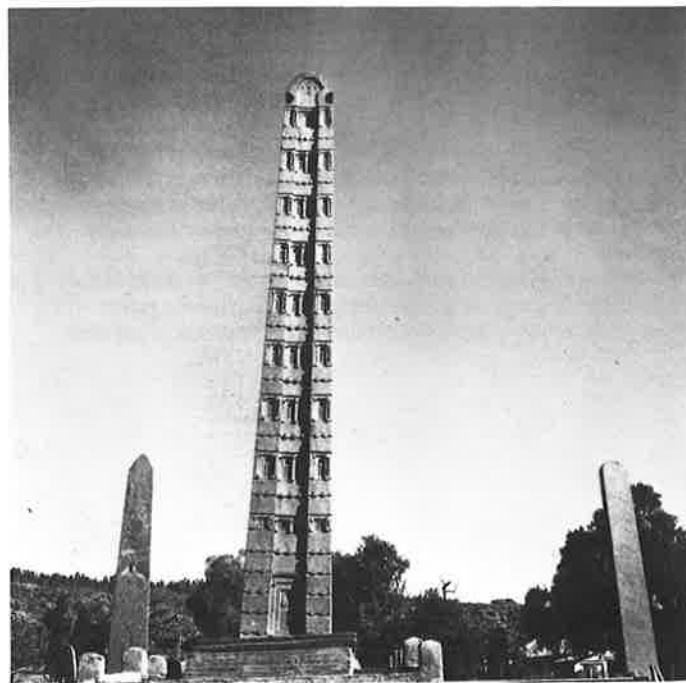
2. Aksum. The last standing carved stele towers over numerous unadorned monoliths in the former necropolis. This monolith, rising 21 meters was carved to imitate a ten-storey building (3d and 4th centuries A.D.).

of Ethiopia's nearby Muslim neighbors during the early years of Islam. The most serious Muslim attacks, which took place around 976 A.D., devastated much of the Christian world and may account for the destruction of many Aksumite monuments. The former splendour has survived only through the great number of mortuary stelae and extensive archaeological remains most of which are still unexcavated.

LALIBELA

Local rulers from the Laste region of the central highlands took advantage of the decline of the Aksumite sovereigns to transfer the seat of the empire to their own region. This period of Ethiopia's history was influenced by the traditions of the great monasteries of Middle Egypt and the art produced there including rock-hewn architecture and distinctive literature. These and other foreign influences account for the creation of an admirable holy city named after Emperor Lalibela (late twelfth-early thirteenth centuries). The impressive complex comprises thirteen truly extraordinary monolithic churches surrounded by trenches and interconnected by a maze of man-made tunnels. The churches are chiselled out in such a way as to imitate the traditional features of buildings: pillars, beams barrel vaults etc. The churches are characterized by a basilican plan reminiscent of early Christian churches. The sophisticated workmanship reflects a great variety of foreign influences, combined with purely Ethiopian features. These structures represent the last and most beautiful artistic expression of the Aksumite stoneworkers (Fig. 4, 5).

The isolation of the Ethiopian empire and the scarce information which reached Europe during the Middle Ages stirred legends and myths of a powerful Ethiopian emperor who was considered the master of the waters of the Nile, which he could divert to the point of starving Egypt. The European crusaders believed they had in Ethiopia a mighty



3. Aksum a. Fragments of the site's biggest
monolith stele (33 meters) after its fall.
b. Fragment of a fallen stele.

and powerful ally in their holy war against the Muslim even though the location of this remote Christian kingdom was not known with any accuracy.

THE LAKE TANA REGION

Great cultural achievements are often produced during periods of prosperity, but such times can easily give way to war and misfortune, as may be witnessed throughout the history of Ethiopia. One of the most serious onslaughts on the region was the invasion during the early sixteenth century under Imam Ahmad Gran, the Muslim ruler of Harar. Most of the early Christian churches and monasteries were sacked and burned during iconoclastic rioting and the survival of the specific Ethiopian culture¹ may only have been possible because of the isolation and the inaccessibility of the settlement in the alpine highlands. The Lake Tana area and the isolated islands remained a last refuge against the successive waves of Muslim invasions. Parts of Ethiopia's early ecclesiastical art and literature were jealously guarded on the islands, whose churches and monasteries still possess a great deal of Ethiopia's religious art including the region's oldest parchment manuscripts (Fig. 6). It is unfortunate that modern-day Ethiopia lacks the means to study and restore this valuable part of its cultural heritage.

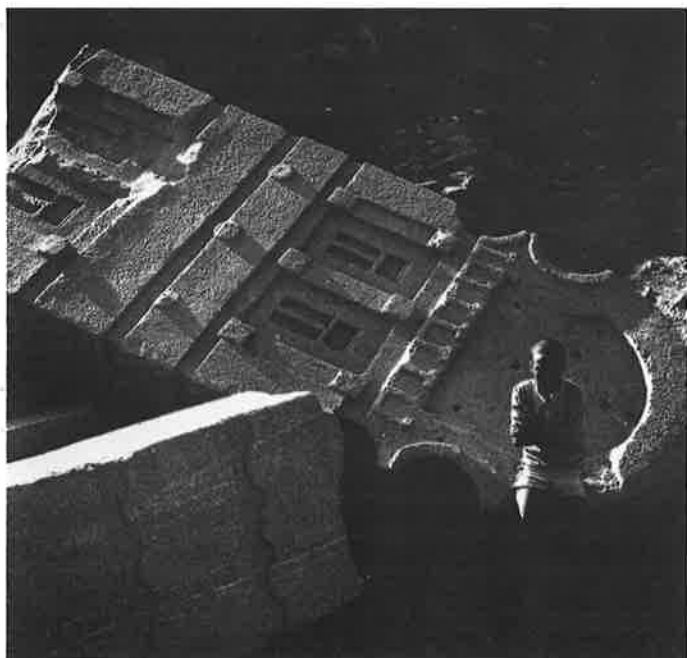
As stated above, Ethiopian church construction was influenced by early Christian architecture. Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, the influence of local building traditions can be noted in church architecture especially in the province of Shoa and most of southern and western Ethiopia. Particularly characteristic is the appearance of the circular floor plan and the conical roof (Fig. 8, 9). The churches are comprised of three parts: the *maqdas* (inner sanctuary), an isolated square masonry structure in the centre of the building, crowned with a round drum to support the central part of the conical roof; the *kiddest* (inner ambulatory) used for communal gatherings or simply as a resting

place. The mural paintings on the outer wall of the *maqdas* constitute a most spectacular adornment of great historical and artistic interest (Fig. 10). They are generally prepared on raw cotton canvas attached to the supporting wall with animal glue. The paintings, mostly inspired from copy books, are closely related to Byzantine models but the execution is peculiar to Ethiopia and quite unlike religious paintings elsewhere in the Christian world.

THE CASTLES OF GONDAR

The ecclesiastical importance of Lake Tana also coincided with the rise of the Solomonid dynasty (so named because its traditional genealogy begins with Menelik I, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba). The Solomonid kings established a new capital in Gondar in the 1630s and patronized the building of many of Lake Tana's churches which were adorned with mural paintings of biblical scenes. The buildings and paintings have survived down to the present day as a unique inheritance from Ethiopia's medieval past. Gondar continued as the seat of the court for about 250 years during which each of the successive kings built castles, palaces and churches and enlarged the royal compound, which developed into a fortified town called Fasil Ghebbi (Fig. 12,13). The city had about 100,000 inhabitants during the flourishing period of the eighteenth century, and it became Africa's second largest capital after Cairo.

Closer contact with Europe, especially Portugal, in the early sixteenth century resulted in the arrival of Jesuit monks, who propagated their beliefs with a view to converting Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism. The attempt was short-lived, but this foreign contact had a marked influence on the development of architectural forms and construction for it introduced the masonry arch and vault and the use of lime mortars. Foreign influence was further strengthened by the arrival of Indian master builders brought from the Portuguese colony of Goa.



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3b

4. Lalibela. Entrance to St. George's Church, one of Lalibela's thirteen medieval rock-hewn churches (12th-13th centuries).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Gondar had lost its status as the capital and its royal castles suffered serious depredations. Especially disastrous was the invasion of the Mahdists of Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century. What remained of the former splendour was described at the beginning of this century as a dead city belonging only to the past. In the course of the twentieth century, Gondar has been resurrected, and today the city is an important regional administrative centre.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Within its present-day boundaries, Ethiopia far exceeds the combined areas of France, Spain and Germany. The Ethiopians constitute a veritable mosaic of races, tribes and linguistic groups speaking more than seventy different languages, each reflecting individual cultural traits. The indigenous building tradition differs throughout the country which is characterized by highly varying geographical features and climatic conditions ranging from alpine highlands to dry desolate desert.

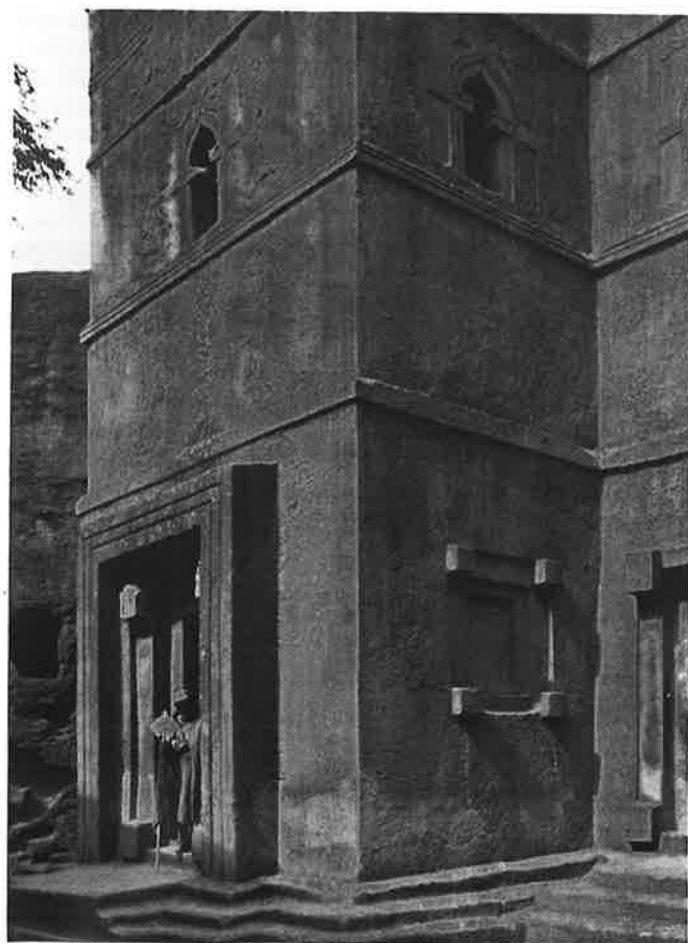
Although no census has been taken, it is estimated that the population of the country now exceeds 31 million of which about 90 percent live in rural areas on subsistence farming. Traditionally, the agriculture-based economy has relied on a strong centralization of land ownership and feudal distribution of power. Under this system, individual rights of farmers were greatly limited. The urgently needed land-reform programmes initiated by the new government after the 1974 revolution does not appear to be bringing about the expected improvement as quickly as planned since most subsistence farmers are forced to sell a large porportion of their meager surpluses to the government-controlled Agricultural Marketing Corporation at prices far below market prices. Farmers often do nothing to improve their land and many of them produce just enough for their own needs.

Despite its reputation as a country of starving people, Ethiopia is endowed with fertile farmland. It is estimated that only 15 percent of the country's arable land is cultivated. Records from the last thirty years show that most of Ethiopia's fertile land regularly receives plenty of rain, but since traditional methods of storing water are not employed, 75 percent of the surface water flows away without being put to use. In addition the soil is continually being eroded by the process of deforestation, which has reduced the forests of the central highland from 40 percent to 2 percent over a period of about one hundred years.²

For more than a decade, Ethiopia has been stricken by successive droughts and resultant food shortages, which

have severely affected large parts of the populations especially in the four northern provinces of Eritrea, Tigray, Wollo and Gondar. Little or no rain in 1984 resulted in about 5.8 million famine victims³ and the situation has been exacerbated by soil erosion on much of the hilly terrain due to a combination of poor cultivation techniques and overgrazing.

In the highlands where there is an excellent potential for agriculture, the government has implemented a large resettlement programme, so-called "villagization," to overcome the tremendous problems of famine. This programme has been extremely controversial because it has been argued that the policy of encouraging the inhabitants of the countryside to abandon their homes for larger urban settlements has been implemented in order to more effectively check the activity of the guerillas fighting in the 25-year-old war in Eritrea—another pressing problem which saps Ethiopia's economy and causes further human suffering. It is generally agreed that the resettlement of some of the famine victims is essential to save lives and allow land in the north to be reclaimed from overuse, deforestation and soil erosion, but the programme has been politicized as so many other issues related to Ethiopia, and, in the end, it is invariably the people who suffer. This resettlement programme, which receives no financial support from western donor nations, is desperately short of funds for seed, plow oxen and medicine. At present about 360,000 Ethiopians have been resettled in the south-



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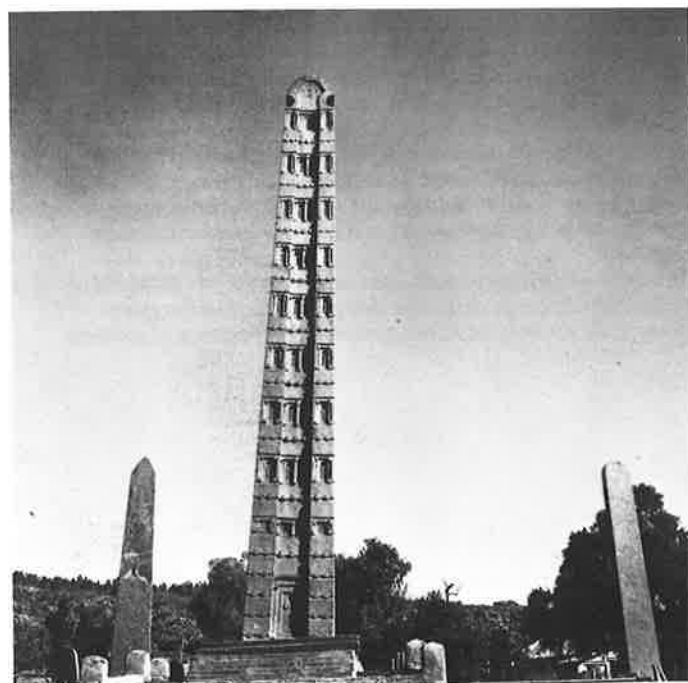
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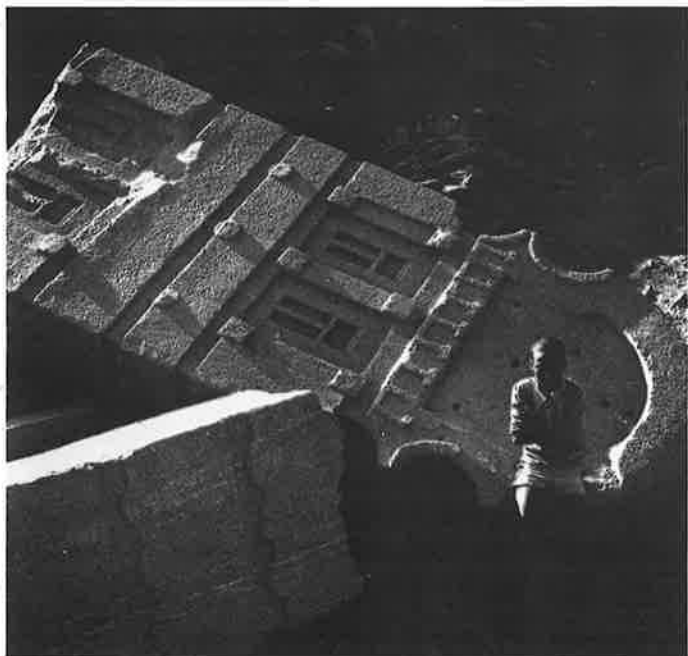
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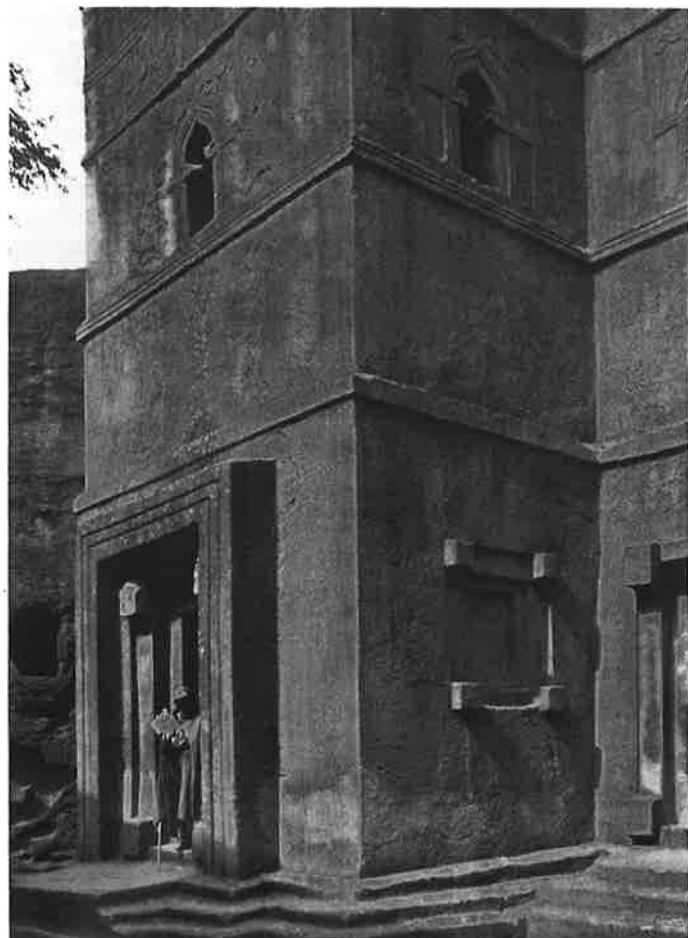
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have severely affected large parts of the populations especially in the four northern provinces of Eritrea, Tigray, Wollo and Gondar. Little or no rain in 1984 resulted in about 5.8 million famine victims³ and the situation has been exacerbated by soil erosion on much of the hilly terrain due to a combination of poor cultivation techniques and overgrazing.

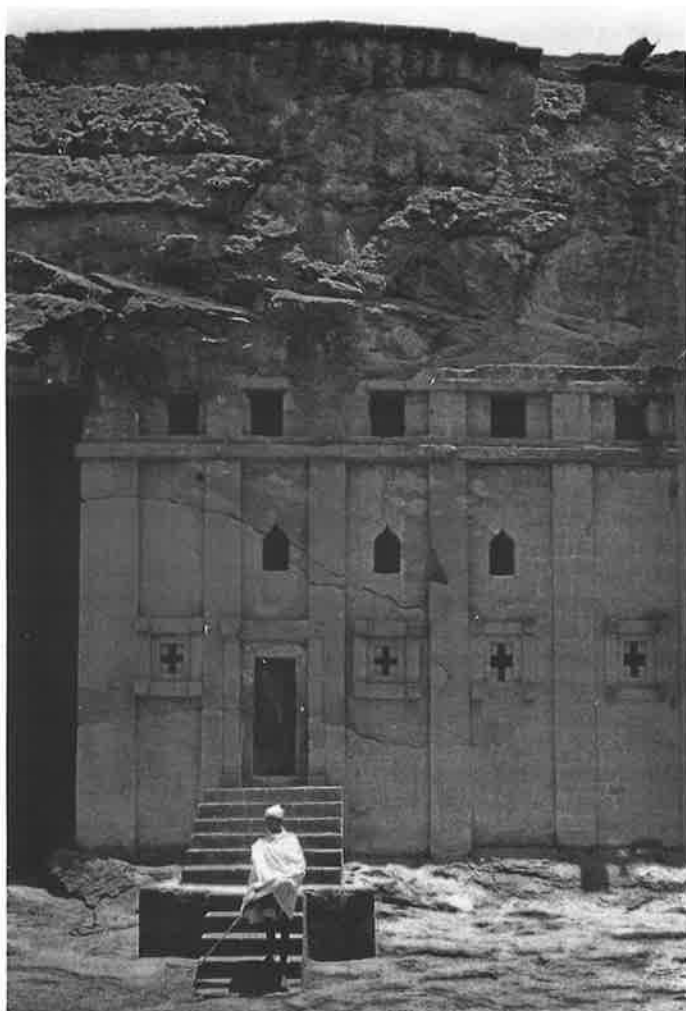
In the highlands where there is an excellent potential for agriculture, the government has implemented a large resettlement programme, so-called "villagization," to overcome the tremendous problems of famine. This programme has been extremely controversial because it has been argued that the policy of encouraging the inhabitants of the countryside to abandon their homes for larger urban settlements has been implemented in order to more effectively check the activity of the guerrillas fighting in the 25-year-old war in Eritrea—another pressing problem which saps Ethiopia's economy and causes further human suffering. It is generally agreed that the resettlement of some of the famine victims is essential to save lives and allow land in the north to be reclaimed from overuse, deforestation and soil erosion, but the programme has been politicized as so many other issues related to Ethiopia, and, in the end, it is invariably the people who suffer. This resettlement programme, which receives no financial support from western donor nations, is desperately short of funds for seed, plow oxen and medicine. At present about 360,000 Ethiopians have been resettled in the south-



5. Lalibela. Church of Abba Libanos (12th-13th centuries). Part of the facade has been reconstructed in masonry during recent times.

6a. A rare 15th-century illuminated "folding book" depicting the Saints conserved in the church of Tana Cherkos, Island of Cherkos, Lake Tana.

6b. Detail of the "folding book" of the Saints.



ern and western highlands,⁴ where land conditions offer hope for a better future.

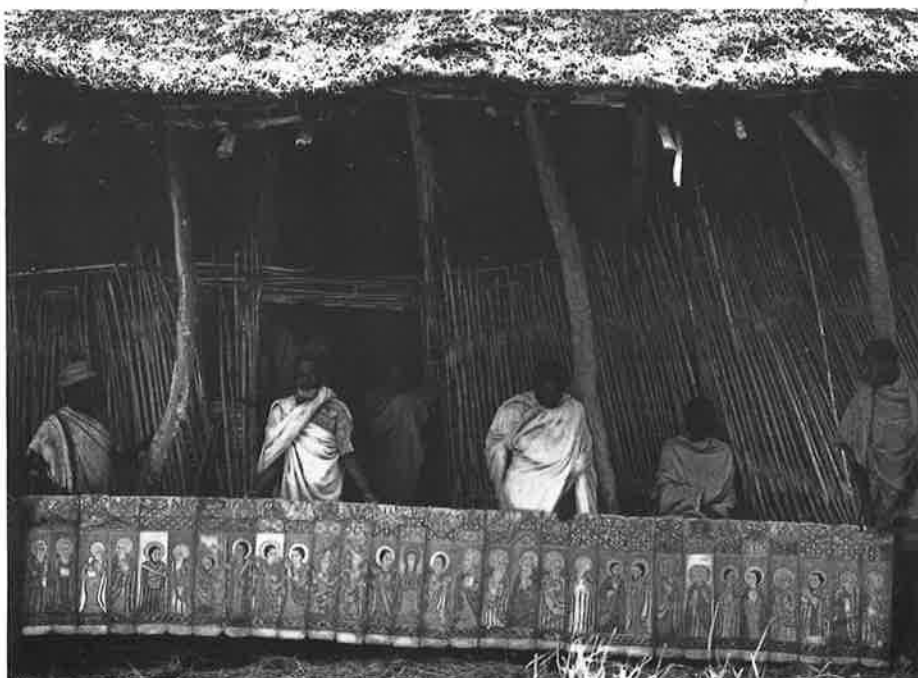
In the wake of the 1974 revolution, much bilateral development aid from western countries was suspended. Foreign aid programmes are still limited in spite of the fact that Ethiopia is listed among the twenty-five least developed countries in the world in terms of technological development. Its foreign debt is staggering and the annual per capita income is only 140 US dollars.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Unesco has been assisting in building up the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration since 1967 including a direct project involvement for the preservation and presentation of Ethiopia's principal monuments and sites from 1974 to 1982. Project activities centered largely on the setting up the operation of the Centre for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Crcch), set up by the Ministry of Culture in early 1976. The most immediate task was to compile basic documentation on the historic sites and monuments and to establish a functional administration system and a training program designed to enable Ethiopians to assume complete professional responsibility for the Centre.

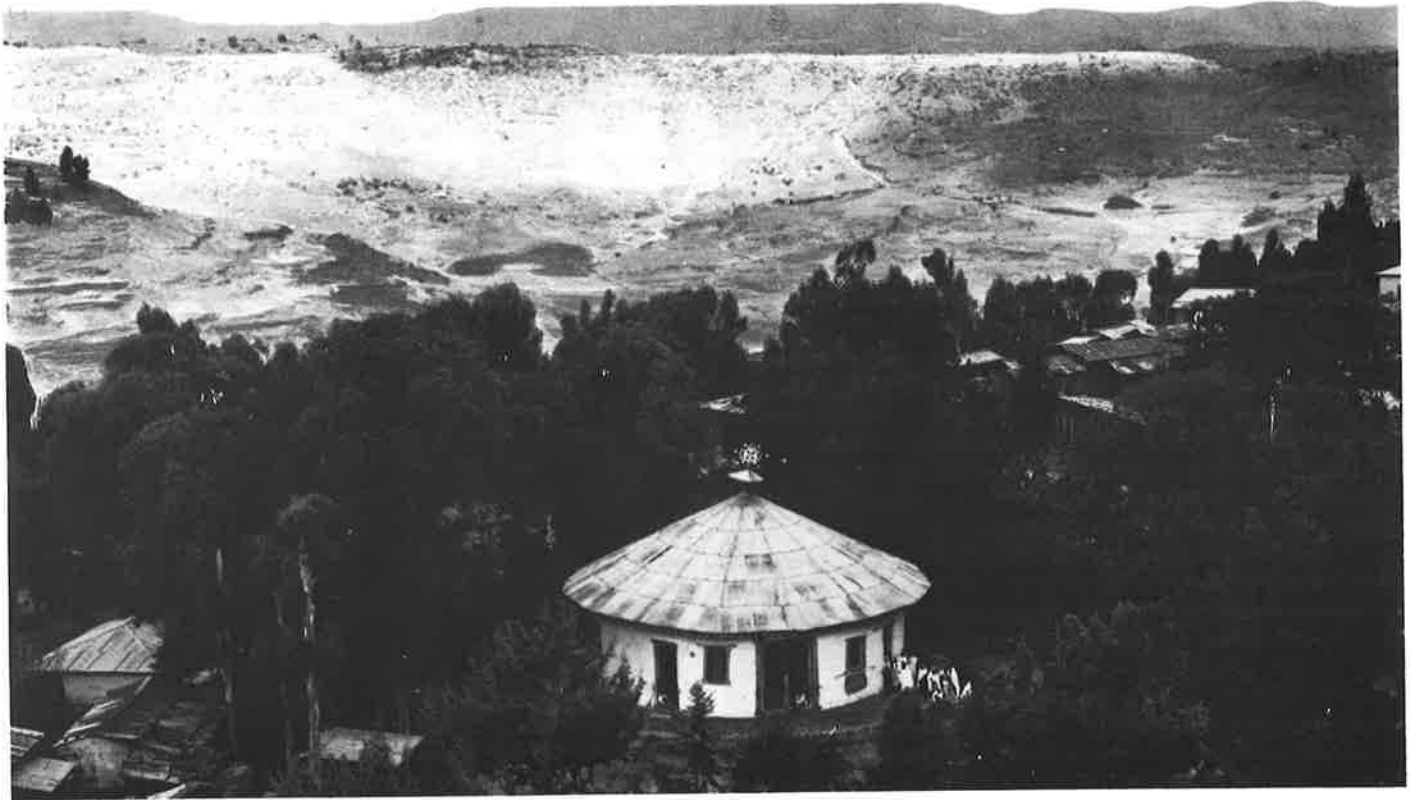
The specific problems involved in the restoration of mural paintings have been studied during several missions of painting restorers from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (Iccrom). One pilot project has been carried out with the aim of providing on-site training for Ethiopian restorers and serving as a model for further conservation efforts. The present number of painting restorers cannot possibly cope with the large number of murals in immediate need of repair.

It was soon realized that the magnitude of the task invol-

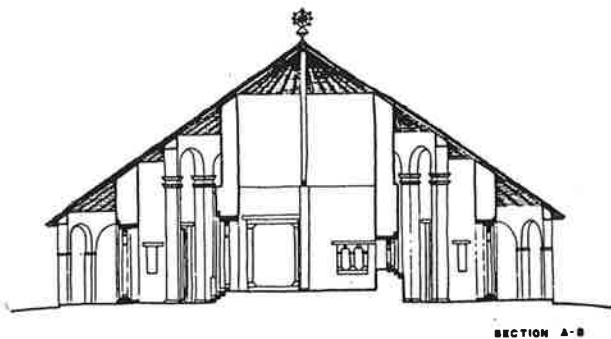


7. A characteristic feature of the Ethiopian highlands: circular church with conical roof

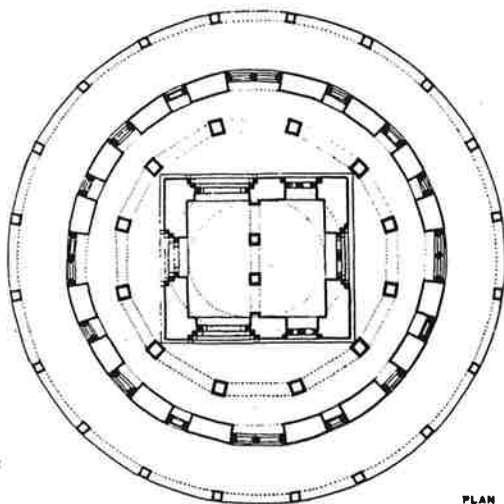
8. Section and plan of Kebran Gabriel Church (17th century), Island of Kebran, Lake Tana. The characteristic central floor plan and the internal structure reflects the influence of early Christian architecture. (Reprinted from S. Angelini, Ethiopia, The Historic Route, A work-plan for the development of the sites and monuments, Paris, Unesco, 1971).



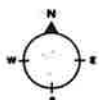
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SECTION A-B



PLAN



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ved in the preservation of the cultural heritage was far too great for the scarce Ethiopian resources. The government therefore made a request to Unesco for continued international assistance, which was positively received at the nineteenth session of the General Conference of Unesco in 1976. At that time, the Director General was authorized to take the necessary steps to prepare a Plan of Action and a Master Plan and to undertake, in collaboration with the Ethiopian government, a campaign to mobilize international solidarity.

The prime objective of the Master Plan for the Preservation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage is to provide the framework for an International Campaign over a period of ten years. It will focus on the major monuments and sites located along the so-called "Historic Route" including the three ancient capitals and centres of Ethiopian civilization: Aksum (tenth century B.C.-seventh century A.D.), Lalibela (tenth-fourteenth centuries), and Gondar (seventeenth-nineteenth centuries). These sites are now included on the World Heritage List,⁵ and accordingly will qualify for multilateral or bilateral assis-

9. Ure Kidane Meret Church Zeghie, Lake Tana.
Circular church built with local materials and
construction techniques. Constructed in the late
17th century, the church was restored in 1902.

tance for their preservation. Moreover the plan suggests the most urgent remedial measures and puts forth a number of recommendations and long-term goals, the most important of which are dealt with in the present paper.

CONSERVATION PRIORITIES

As pointed out in the Master Plan, in view of the present socio-economic situation in Ethiopia, a realistic and functional approach must be adopted towards the conservation of the country's cultural heritage. As long as people are in urgent need of basic necessities, programmes for cultural heritage preservation can not be considered essential. It is absurd to think that people who are starving and struggling for survival can concern themselves with such matters as the protection of archaeological ruins or the restoration of historic monuments. It must be recognized, however, that cultural heritage—whether it be traditional social values, old handicrafts, local building traditions or historic monuments—forms an important part of the quality of life, which cannot be evaluated in terms of modern technology. The cultural and historic identity of a people is just as important as the personal needs of family ties and friendships.

The guiding principle for the development aid programmes implemented from the 1950s onwards has been based mainly on technological transfer from western countries, and less consideration has been given to the cultural and geographical background of the recipient country. This development was often welcomed by senior officials trained in the industrialized countries and accustomed to western standards. However, the many newly independent countries, not least in Africa, have gradually become aware of their own roots and cultural identity. In the late 1970s it became imperative to consider ecological as well as cultural aspects of development. In 1982, Unesco's Director General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow referred to 'the human dimension'⁶ stressing that it is time to recognize that the notion of cultural identity lies at the very heart of development problems; but this message is only gradually being understood.

REVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS AND SKILLS

Under the circumstances preservation of cultural heritage and expansion of museums should be geared to make the maximum contribution to general social and economic development, especially with regard to the agricultural sector,



10. Ure Kidane Meret Church, Zeghie, Lake Tana. Detail of mural paintings decorating the interior. The church contains 325 square meters of mural paintings.

handicrafts and small-scale cottage industries. In the process of social and political change it is of vital importance to ensure continuity with the past that has shaped the national identity. Traditional crafts and cultural expressions in their various forms should be kept alive as a unique source of inspiration for future autonomous development. An excellent example has been set by the "Handicrafts and Small-scale Industries Development Agency (Hasida), whose activity supports the government's policy of mobilizing indigenous skills and capital resources through cooperative work.

Such development can be promoted by research and presentation of cultural heritage in provincial museums. Maximum use should be made of temporary and travelling exhibitions and similar educational activities, which can reach a large portion of the population thereby contributing to social mobilization. For example the display of traditional agriculture and crafts alongside examples of modern farming methods and technical skill are valuable visual aids in the campaign for modernizing agriculture and village technology, which is the basis of Ethiopia's large rural society. Many such initiatives can be taken at the regional level by provincial museums, or they can be arranged in conjunction with other nation-wide campaigns, such as the mass literacy programme launched in 1979 which eradicates illiteracy, while spreading new ideas among the population.

Various influential organizations have set as their principal objective the development of sales outlets for handicraft exports from Third World countries, and some also provide technical and financial assistance to local producer groups.⁷ All parties concerned would stand to benefit if the Ministry of Culture arranged for renovation of suitable historic buildings and make the premises available free of charge to the local handicraft cooperatives, which would then assume full responsibility for running the centre. Such workshops on museum premises should be part of a more widespread movement to promote art crafts and cottage industries. It would be preferable for artisans and craftsmen to continue working in their usual environment and that the centres would function as places of learning, inspiration helping to promote local products. One such centre is to be set up in one of the restored buildings of *Fasil Ghebbi* in Gondar.

RESPECT FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The tremendous diversity of peoples and cultures is surely the most conspicuous feature of Ethiopia's cultural development. Each group or tribe represents a cultural complex of specific traditions, reflected in language, dress, housing, farming methods etc. The provisional Military Administrative Council

has stated that a major element in its policy is the recognition of the various nationalities in the country: "No nationality will dominate another one, since the history, culture, language, and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism".⁸

Tolerance for ethnic differences and the respect between groups with different customs help people to adapt to necessary changes and to accept the idea that a part of their autonomy must be sacrificed in the interests of the nation as a whole.

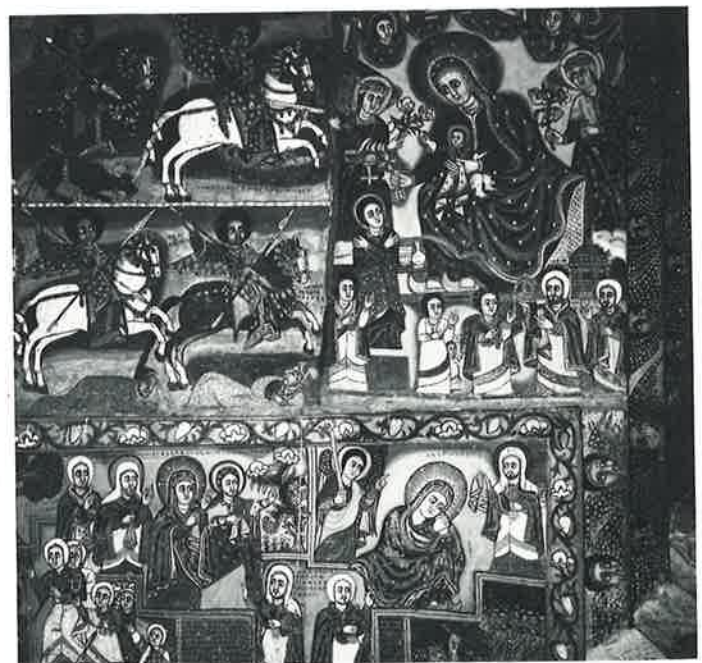
MUSEUMS

Presentation of the cultural heritage calls for the development of regional museums illustrating the cultural and material achievements of each national group in its own right. In order to give a broad pattern of the country's natural and cultural heritage, it is recommended that provincial museums be of general nature, each covering as wide a range of topics as may be practicable. The present emphasis on ethnography and archaeology should be balanced by exhibits on natural history, science and technology.

The museums in Addis Ababa, especially the National Museum of Archaeology and the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies on ethnography and traditional art, are of a specialized nature. Moreover these institutions are the national centres in their particular fields to which the provincial museums can look for assistance. For reasons of economy and staffing, it would be preferable to develop several specialized museums rather to invest scarce resources in a new centralized national museum complex. In this perspective, one solution would be to re-use one of the former Imperial palaces for museum purposes.

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

All regions of Ethiopia have an extremely rich indigenous architectural tradition, reflecting the individual character of



11. *The castles of Fasilides and Yasu (17th century) in the fortified imperial compound, Fasil Ghebbi, situated in the region of Gondar.*

each ethnic group. The preservation of such traditional architecture is recommended not only because it is an integral part of the historic environment in such places where area conservation is of immediate importance, but more importantly because it offers a simple, natural solution to housing needs, using locally available materials and skills. This is considered to be the only realistic way of solving housing needs in a predominantly rural society.

The introduction of new building materials, especially cement and corrugated iron sheeting, has more than any other factor changed the physical appearance of the settlements. The corrugated iron roof is fireproof and easy to install thus making it a popular new building material, but it is almost impossible to roof a circular house with square sheeting. Its introduction changes not only the roofing material but often also the basic shape of the traditional house type, the *tukul*, which is replaced by "modern" rectangular houses. Modern materials may also be favoured because of the high status they confer and be used simply for that reason, though many people find a clay mortar floor with matting and a thatched roof far more comfortable than a concrete floor and a tin roof.

In designated historic areas it will be necessary to impose regulations, which prescribe traditional building materials and house forms. The repair and maintenance of residential houses would still be the responsibility of the owners themselves but incentives may be provided as part of a general housing policy, such as subsidized materials and technical assistance. The initiative for preservation of the environment must come from the Ministry of Culture, whereas the general housing development will largely depend on the policy to be adopted by the local authorities and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

THE PRODUCTION OF LIME

Traditional houses, especially in the mountains, are usually

built of stone and then plastered with a mixture of mud and *t'eff* straw (*chicka*). When hardened, this material provides a weatherproof layer which, with proper maintenance, can last for many years. More prestigious buildings have been constructed with mortar and rendering materials made from local lime. In samples taken from monuments in Gondar, lime often accounts for more than 70 percent of the total weight. The ratio of lime to other constituents, such as sand and crushed lava, being generally as great as 4 to 1. The use of mortar with such a high proportion of lime guarantees the strength and durability of the construction, whereas using cement for repair work does more harm than good since modern cement has properties and working qualities totally incompatible with traditional materials.

Indeed the introduction of Portland cement, used worldwide for the production of concrete, mortars and plasters and very often considered a sign of development, is responsible for the disappearance of local lime production. Consequently, suitable materials are now becoming difficult to obtain on local markets and the practice of construction with lime will soon be lost unless appropriate measures are undertaken.

At present, Portland cement is produced at three modern plants in Ethiopia. Even though production and transportation costs are quite high, this material, which should be reserved for civil engineering, is being used indiscriminately—for floors, brick mortar and walls—in house construction throughout the country. Given the abundance and wide distribution of limestone deposits in Ethiopia, lime production could be carried out with very little capital investment thereby constituting a potential small-scale industrial activity for rural areas. The establishment of a viable lime industry should therefore be given a high priority in the future.⁹



12. Palace of Mentuab (1730-1755), Fasil Ghebbi, Gondar.

13. Traditional "tukul" house near Lalibela. The exterior staircase leads to the living quarters. The ground floor is reserved for livestock.

THE OLD TOWN OF HARAR

The preservation of historic towns has posed specific problems since the 1974 revolution. All urban land and "extra" houses have been nationalized and owners are allowed to retain only one house of their choice. In Harar's old town, for example, only one third of the 5552 houses registered are now privately owned; the remaining two-thirds are administered by the public sector which charges very low rents (20 to 50 percent less than previous owners) in accordance with the policy of providing the widest possible range of social benefits to the people. The return is barely sufficient to cover the cost of regular maintenance and repair. Tenants invest very little in maintenance since they receive no long-term advantage in upgrading their accommodations. The Rent Housing Agency, which is supervised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development has no regular maintenance programme and can hardly cope with emergency repair work.

When regular upkeep fails, the houses are extremely vulnerable to decay from water, either in the form of rising ground moisture or from penetrating rainwater. As a result, about seventy houses have collapsed during heavy rains in 1983 and about 300 dwellings are considered unsuitable for habitation. A total of 1700 inhabitants of the old town were affected. The historical importance of Harar town and the architectural merit of its major historic monuments and its traditional housing would justify its rehabilitation in the framework of Ethiopia's cultural heritage programme. Since the problems are extremely complex, adequate solutions can only be found through a long-term planning scheme for preservation and renewal elaborated through close cooperation between the appropriate governmental bodies.

REHABILITATION OF TOWNS

The idea of preserving selected areas in historic towns is relatively new and, very often, existing legislation is inadequate when dealing with integrated conservation planning. The aim of such an approach is to introduce a system of financial assistance towards renovation and preservation and to offer incentives to small-scale building contractors to assist in the government's rehabilitation programme by the use of appropriate technology and locally available materials. Unfortunately present legislation in Ethiopia concerning the safeguarding of the country's cultural heritage does not provide for such a zonal approach to preservation, nor does it include a system of financial assistance for preservation.

In the case of Aksum, for example, a zonal approach to preservation could be designed to protect archaeological sites and divert new development from specially designated "preservation areas." In recent years there has been very little development and new land-use regulations could be advantageously implemented before the demand for this land increases.

In Harar it is necessary to preserve the character and identity of the important parts of the old town, while at the same time improving general infrastructure and housing conditions. If a zonal approach were to be adopted the entire walled town and its immediate surroundings would be designated as a conservation area with its own special powers and financial provisions for conservation and redevelopment.

LOOKING AHEAD

After almost a decade of preparatory work carried out by experts from Unesco in cooperation with the Ethiopian



14. Jorald House in Harar historic district. An example of early 20th-century wooden domestic architecture.

government, a Master plan for the preservation and the presentation of Ethiopia's cultural heritage has finally be drawn up.¹⁰ Since the current situation in Ethiopia does not favour issues related to cultural heritage preservation, the implementation of the recommended proposals, some of which have been briefly presented above, will prove to be a difficult task.

Since the 1974 revolution, all archaeological excavations have been suspended for various reasons. Further work will have to await new preservation legislation that is now being drafted. Fortunately the archaeological remains are well preserved underground and will stay so for an indefinite period thus leaving ample time for the preparation of long-term plans for excavation and presentation projects as ways and means become available. Traditionally archaeological research has been carried out on a multinational basis. With proper planning, contacts with institutes of foreign universities could be valuable for the training of Ethiopian archaeologists and for the development of museums in the various disciplines related to cultural heritage preservation.

The Nationwide Inventory Programme was initiated in 1978, but there is a long way to go before the register can provide specialists with complete and scholarly documentation on the wealth of important artefacts, buildings and sites in Ethiopia. This important undertaking will constitute the foundation of the comprehensive preservation policy for the country. The subsequent elaboration of such a policy will require close cooperation between the various ministries, and in particular the Ministry of Culture, and other public and private bodies directly or indirectly concerned with cultural heritage preservation, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox church, the Muslim communities, and Addis Ababa University. Clearly the understanding and support of the general public is needed to mobilize the necessary human resources, but the solidarity and support of the international community will greatly help to ensure the success of this great endeavour to preserve the cultural heritage of Ethiopia.

¹ As referred to here the Ethiopian culture is that associated with the dominant Amhara and Tigrean ethnic groups.

² HARDEN, B., "Playing Games with Starvation," *The Guardian Weekly*, Manchester, 16 June 1985.

³ Source: Government Relief Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), Addis Ababa.

⁴ HARDEN, B., *op. cit.*

⁵ At present a total of seven Ethiopian properties are included on the World Heritage List. Natural sites: Simen National Park. Cultural sites: Aksum, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, Fasil Ghebbi, Lower Valley of the Awash, Lower Valley of Omo, and Tiya (the last three are archaeological sites).

⁶ M'Bow, Amadou-Mahtar, "The Human Dimension," *The Unesco Courier*, Paris, July 1982, pp. 4-9.

⁷ For example, the organization *Fedeau* (Fédération pour le développement de l'artisanat utilitaire), which receives financial support from the European Economic Community, promotes art crafts from Third World countries.

⁸ Basic document of the Ethiopian Revolution, Addis Ababa, 1977, pp. 13-14.

⁹ HILL, N.R., "An Investigation into the Possibility of Reestablishing the Production of Lime around Gondar," Technical Report No. 3, Serial No. FMR/CC/CH/79/239 (UNDP), Unesco, Paris, 1979.

¹⁰ Aalund, F., "Ethiopia—Master Plan for the Preservation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage," Series FMR/CLT/CH/85/139, Paris, Unesco, 1985. Distribution forthcoming.



