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An Architectural Survey of the Church of ʿEmäkina Mädhane Aläm (Lasta, Ethiopia)

Abstract

The basilica church of ʿEmäkina Mädhane Aläm, one of four known churches in the massif of Abunä Yosef to be built in a cave, is related through its architecture to the church of Yəmrəhannä Krəstos and through its extensive program of mural paintings to the church of Gännätä Maryam. It bears witness to an early stage in the development of the sanctuary type which occupied the full width of the building in order to accommodate additional altars. Both the expanded sanctuary and the murals point to a date of construction in the late 13th century. The walls imitate in stone the alternating timber and stuccoed split-stone layers of Yəmrəhannä Krəstos. The interior wooden surfaces are painted throughout with geometric motifs. The church may well have been founded by Yəkuno Amlak, who sought legitimacy for his new regime by borrowing from old forms while at the same time supporting the Church in its establishment of new ones.

The church of ʿEmäkina Mädhane Aläm is one of four known free-standing churches in the massif of Abunä Yosef to be built in a cave (Figs. 1–4).¹ All are situated to the NNE of the Zagwe capital of Lalibäla, but there are sufficient architectural differences

¹ The phenomenon is otherwise rare in Ethiopia, although it is also found in such partially built, partially rock-cut churches as Däbrä Sälam, Qirqos, Agobo and Qirqos, Šada Ayna Ašbidära, Tigray; D.R. Buxton, 'Rock-Hewn and Other Medieval Churches of Tigré Province, Ethiopia', *Archaeologia, or Miscellaneous Tracts relating to Antiquity*, London: Society of Antiquaries, 103 (1971), pp. 76–77 and pl. XXXIV; G. Gerster, *Kirchen im Fels*, Stuttgart 1968; English trans. by R. Hosking, *Churches in Rock: Early Christian Art in Ethiopia*, London 1970, pp. 121–124 and Figs. 148–159. See the online database *Mäzgäbä sə'alat* (hereafter: MS) or "Treasury of Ethiopian Images": MS: MG-2000.078–082, 2004.134; 2002.026–028; 2005.019 and 022. The URL for MS is <http://ethiopia.deeds.utoronto.ca> (Username: student; Password: student).

among them to suggest that they are not contemporary with one another. One, the celebrated church of Yəmṛəhannā Krəstos is attributed to the patronage of the Zagwe king of that name who is generally believed to have ruled in the twelfth century.² Žəmmadu Maryam, which is a cruciform church, may be as late as the fifteenth century,³ while the open design of the sanctuary and the style of the mural paintings at ʿĀmakina Mādhane Alām point to a date of construction in the late thirteenth century.⁴ The tiny church of Lədātā Maryam may be dated between the latter two.⁵

While the church of Yəmṛəhannā Krəstos has been known since it was first described by Alvarez in 1520,⁶ ʿĀmakina Mādhane Alām did not enter the literature until Beatrice Playne drew attention to it in 1954.⁷ Further architectural description was provided by A. Miquel in 1959,⁸ and by Georg Gerster in 1968.⁹ Gerster's photographs included details from the murals which adorn the walls of the interior, but it was not until Ewa Balicka-Witakowska published a comprehensive programme of the wall-paintings in 2004 that the art historical importance of the site was fully realized.¹⁰ She has shown that the paintings are by the same painter or workshop responsible for those in the monolithic church of Gännātā Maryam, situated in the valley below, and has dated them to the late 13th century.

Based on this date, architectural evidence seems to confirm that the church of ʿĀmakina Mādhane Alām is contemporary with its paintings. The determining factor here is the absence of *pastophoria*, on the north and south sides of the sanctuary. These chambers are a regular feature of Axumite and Zagwe architecture and trace their origins to the Early Christian basilica.¹¹ Their disappearance seems to coincide with the period dur-

² L.B. Barriviera, 'Le chiese in roccia di Lalibela e di altri luoghi del Lasta', *RSE*, 19 (1963), pp. 5–94 (pp. 81–91 and pl. 55); Gerster, *op. cit.*, 110–114 and Figs. 110–127; E. Balicka-Witakowska and M. Gervers, 'The church of Yəmṛəhannā Krəstos and its wall-paintings: a preliminary report', *AfrBull*, 49 (2001), pp. 9–47.

³ I. Bidder, *Lalibela: The Monolithic Churches of Ethiopia*, Cologne, 1958, pp. 39–40, 132; B. Playne, *St. George for Ethiopia*, London 1954, pp. 171–173; D. Spencer, *The Woman from Tedbab*, Dorking, 2003, pp. 211–214.

⁴ For the date of the mural paintings, see E. Balicka-Witakowska, 'The Wall-Paintings in the Church of Mādhane Alām near Lalibela', *AfrBull*, 52 (2004), pp. 9–30, with 38 figs. (p. 14).

⁵ Gerster, *op. cit.*, p. 110. MS:MG:2002.117 and 119.

⁶ F. Alvarez, *The Prester John of the Indies*, ed. C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, (Hakluyt Society: Works, second series, 114 (1958)), part 1, London: Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 203.

⁷ Playne, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–163.

⁸ A. Miquel, 'Reconnaissance dans le Lasta (Décembre 1955)', *AE*, 3 (1959), pp. 131–155 and plates LXIV–LXXVIII (pp. 146–148, plate LXXVa–c). The caption for pl. LXXVI ascribes the three illustrations on that page to ʿĀmakina Mādhane Alām, but 'a–b' are from Bilbala Qirqos while 'c' is from Yəmṛəhannā Krəstos.

⁹ Gerster, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–110 and plates 100–108.

¹⁰ Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.* The present article reproduces as an appendix photographs of four additional murals which were not available for inclusion in that paper.

¹¹ H. Buchwald, *Form, Style and Meaning in Byzantine Church Architecture*, Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1999, VIII, 13 and pl.13; Buxton, *op. cit.*, pp. 87, 92, 95, 98; M. Capuani, *Egitto Copto*, Milan 1999, Figs. 28, 29, 60, 61, 71, 72, 83 and p. 264; R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, Figs. 45 (p. 113), 46 (p. 114), 77 (p. 194), 78 (p. 197), 88 (p. 219).

ing which Zagwe rule gave way to the Solomonic dynasty under King Yökuno Amlak (1270–85).¹² This church bears witness to an early stage in the development of the sanctuary type which occupied the full width of the building in order to accommodate additional altars.¹³

Other indications of post-Zagwe construction include the absence of a narthex, of a stepped foundation (although this feature may be buried under the subsequent build-up of earth and straw), of “monks hats”¹⁴ as wall binders, and of alternating horizontal courses of stone fill and indented timber wall construction (፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm uses stone ashlar in the place of indented timber courses).

A fundamental characteristic of churches built in caves is flagstone flooring. They are never built directly on the cave floor, because natural stone is uneven and tends to collect water. Consequently, the architect’s first consideration was the construction of a firm foundation upon which the church could be built. This is immediately apparent today in the level cave interior around the church. Opportunities to see below the flooring are rare, but in 2004 a patch of ground on the north side of ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm was excavated, revealing an elaborate and extensive construction of heavy timbers below. Further enquiries elicited the information that the church of Yämṛəhannä Krəstos has a very similar construction. One of the interesting features of Yämṛəhannä Krəstos is the wooden hatch just beyond the north wall which is said to cover a conduit to an underground water supply (Fig. 6). This access, in close proximity to the church, gives meaning to the passages in the 15th-century *gadl* of King Yämṛəhannä Krəstos which describe the building of his eponymous church:

“... they reached the cave which is called Wägrä Səhin and which in ancient times was called Gəṣat. (The Archangel) Raphael instructed the blessed Yemreha and said: “(*This is the place*) where the Lord said: ‘Build a stone sanctuary’, and in it there are many trees and clumps of grass... Clear out and cut the trees... And then Yämṛəha cut all the trees and the grass and burned them in a fire. When he had burned them, he found a large lake inside the cave and said: *How can I build something on this lake?* A voice said to him: ‘Put logs in the middle of the lake, put straw on these logs and on the straw put some mud. Then, put down some soil and build a monastery’. He did everything just as he was told ...”¹⁵

¹² M.-L. Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270–1527): Espace, pouvoir et monachisme*, Paris, 2003, pp. 64–70; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527*, Oxford 1972, pp. 66–68.

¹³ E. Fritsch and M. Gervers, ‘Pastophoria and Altars: Interaction in Ethiopian Liturgy and Church Architecture’, forthcoming in: *A Festschrift for Andrew Watson*, eds. B. Catlos and S. McKee.

¹⁴ Western literature frequently refers to the horizontal wooden binders appearing in the walls of Axumite and Axumite-influenced architecture as “monkey heads”. The expression appears to be a misunderstanding of the more appropriate metaphor, “monks’ hats”, which is used by Ethiopians today.

¹⁵ This is a free interpretation based on the tekst *Il Gadla Yemrehanña Krestos*: introduzione, testo critico, traduzione, Paolo Marrassini, ed. (Supplemento n. 85 agli *Annali* vol. 55 (1995), fasc. 4), Naples 1995, pp. 85–86.

The author of this passage may never have visited the site, but his description of how the cave floor was built up to support the church and also protect its foundations from the water below clearly reflects the actual situation. The need to provide an even flooring must have been similar for all the Lasta churches built in caves.

Exterior

ʿMākina Mādhane Alām is a basilica church with two aisles flanking a central nave (Fig. A). Height is added by a saddle-back roof over the nave, and a cupola over the sanctuary (Figs. 1–2). From the outside, the church appears small compared to that of Yāmraḥannā Krəstos, because the cave in which it stands is much larger. This cave measures approximately 57.36 m deep, 29.6 m wide and 14.33 m high; and the church 8.75 m long, 6.4 m wide and 5.2 m high. The ground on which the church is built is thickly strewn with straw above an earth layer which has seen some build-up over the centuries. The church is constructed of alternating rows of well-cut rectangular ashlar and horizontally split stones combined with a reddish limestone mortar which imitate in stone the alternating timber and stuccoed split-stone layers of Yāmraḥannā Krəstos. In both churches, the split-stone layer is about three times thicker than the timber or cut-stone layer. The first visible row at ʿMākina Mādhane Alām, best seen in the northwest corner, consists of split stones and mortar, and juts out a few centimeters from the rest of the wall (Fig. 4). One might have expected the initial foundation row to be made of relatively large cut stones, but there is no evidence thereof. Each cut stone course is indented by a few centimeters. A narrow string course of cut stone runs around the church, above and slightly jutting out from, the fourth ashlar layer. It supports the aisle ceiling construction throughout the building. Above this course lies a final layer of stone and mortar. The aisle roofs are flat, but built up from the west end of the church to what in the interior would be the sanctuary wall with an additional layer of stone and mortar to a height of about 50 cm. (Fig. 1).

There are three wood-framed portals, one providing access directly to the nave at the west end (Fig. 4) and two to the aisles from the western ends of both the north and south walls. The western portal has square-headed transversals in each of its four corners. The north and south portals only have the upper two and these are fixed within the split-stone course rather than on top of the jambs.¹⁶ The west and north portal frames rise to the bottom of the fourth ashlar row, and the lower south portal to the bottom of the fourth row of split-stones. To enter any of the portals, one steps up and over the frame set on the first ashlar row, and down two steps into the interior.¹⁷

The lower frames of the church's nine principal windows rest on the third split-stone row and rise to about the middle of the fourth (Figs. 1–4). All windows are made of

¹⁶ MS: MG-2004.124:014.

¹⁷ MS: MG-2002.118:028; Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, Fig. 6.

wood. There are three at the east end giving into the sanctuary, and two on each of the other three sides, opening into the nave and aisles. The windows at the east and west ends have transversals in each corner while those on the sides, like the portal frames, have them only at the top. The most decorative window, on the north side of the west end, consists of an interrelated array of crosses. Its southern counterpart, like most of the other windows on the lower level, has been blocked. Of the three eastern windows, that to the south is cruciform with transversals filling the corner spaces. Two small circular openings are all that can be seen of the central window behind the altar; the rest have been filled with daub. A vertical nine-light window, fully daubed, stands to the north. A larger window rises vertically through the final split-stone row into the superstructure which supports the cupola. This window, which has no sill, was blocked with stones in 1993, but by 2002 it had been filled with daub, and a daub cross had been molded in its centre (Fig. 2).

A rectangular superstructure runs the full length of the nave and supports the saddle-back roof, which rises about 2.3 m above the flat aisle roofs (Figs. 1–5). There are three windows in its north and south clerestory walls. The square ends of three ceiling beams are visible on both sides, extending beyond the wall surface, above, but between, the windows (Fig. 5). There is a triangular opening in the gable at the east end of the nave, which may not have been a window originally, and below that is a pair of small vertical windows (Fig. 2). The west end of the gabled roof contains two centrally placed, horizontal windows. Immediately below them, in the supporting wall, is another window, vertically positioned (Figs. 4–5).

Set against the east end of the saddle-back roof is a square foundation faced with split stones and mortar, which supports the cupola (Figs. 1–2). The cupola itself contains two small windows with cross-shaped lights, one of which is now blocked (Fig. 2).¹⁸ From the interior, they are seen to be directly below the image of the *Maiestas Domini*, which they were obviously meant to illuminate (Fig. 7).

Since the church is protected by the cave in which it stands, the architects did not see fit to incorporate any device commonly used for protection against the elements. There is no pitched roof over the entire structure, no cornice, and only a low, single-stepped foundation. This arrangement contrasts with the often substantial tri- or quadruple-stepped foundation common to Sabeen and Axumite architecture.¹⁹ Moisture has nevertheless seeped through the cupola boss; six of its curved wooden ribs have suffered from damp and the image of the *Maiestas Domini* painted on it has been severely damaged (Fig. 7).²⁰

¹⁸ MS: MG-2002.115:019/020.

¹⁹ MS: MG-2000.025:004, 2000.043:019, 2000.050:035, 2000.052:005.

²⁰ Balicka-Witakowska, op. cit. (n. 5), pp. 9–29 (p. 22 and Fig. 16); MS: MG-2002.115:019/020; MG-2004.124:020/022/028-032/036.

Interior

All the supporting elements of the roof are made of stone. These are the four exterior walls, the north/south wall which defines the sanctuary, and the two columns²¹ placed between the west and sanctuary walls on either side of the nave. The superstructure is wooden, with the possible exception of the clerestory, with stone and stucco exterior facing. The wooden surfaces are painted throughout, for the most part with cross and geometric motifs sometimes similar to those found at Yəmrəḥannā Krəstos.²² The interior walls are bare and unstuccoed, up to the height of the west portal lintel.²³ The fourth ashlar course and the narrow stone string course which rests upon it, however, have been lightly plastered. This band has been painted on all four sides of nave and aisles with Old and New Testament scenes, saints and other holy figures, interrupted at string course height, at four points on both north and south walls, with wooden corbels supporting the cross-beams to which the painted aisle ceilings (Fig. 8) are fixed. These cross-beams lie on one or other of the two great beams which run the full length of the church on either side of the nave (Fig. 9).²⁴ A so-called “Axumite” frieze stands above the nave beams, with moldings above and below (Figs. 9–10).²⁵ The frieze consists of ten squares on each side of the nave, set off from each other by what appear to be square-headed transversals in each corner,²⁶ and four at the west end (Fig. 10).²⁷ To the east, the frieze gives way to the sanctuary arch (Fig. 11).²⁸

The remainder of the upper wall area is occupied by the clerestory, which is so heavily stuccoed on the outside, and plastered in the interior that, as yet, it is impossible to determine the composition of the walls (Fig. 5). They may well be of split stone. Another set of murals, more scene from the Old and New Testaments and the figures of saints, monks and archangels, decorates the entire clerestory (Figs. 9–10). The images surround the clerestory windows and occupy the full height of its walls.

Because the interior is so dark, it is difficult to see and appreciate the complex architectural details of the saddle-back roof over the nave. There are four tie beams, one at each end of the nave and two supporting heavy kingposts spaced evenly along it (Figs. 12–13). Wall plates supporting the common rafters run behind the principal rafters.

²¹ Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, p. 9 cites “four pillars”, an oversight which should be corrected to “two pillars” in accordance with the ground plan which appears in her article on p. 12, and here as Fig. A.

²² For the ceilings at Yəmrəḥannā Krəstos, see Bidder, *op. cit.* (n. 4), Figs. 55–62; Gerster, *op. cit.* (n. 1), Figs. 120–128; Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers, *op. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 9–47 (Figs. 3–6); MS: MG-2000.018:029-036; 2000.019:003; 2000.020:023; 2004.120:027-036; 2004.121:001-019.

²³ MS: MG-2002.118:028; Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, Fig. 6.

²⁴ Due to the near absence of light in the interior, it has as yet not been possible to determine whether these great beams are each made from a single tree, or whether there are joints above the sanctuary wall.

²⁵ The upper molding is missing, or absent, from the west wall.

²⁶ These transversals are absent between the third and fourth squares on the south side of the nave (see MS: MG-2004.124:009).

²⁷ MS: MG-2002.118:013.

²⁸ MS: MG-2002.117:001.

Two purlins and a ridge board complete the framework of the roof, which is covered with wooden planks or sheets. No joins are visible in the latter. Wooden planks placed horizontally in the gable walls on the outer side of the kingposts serve as horizontal dividers for the gable windows (Fig. 14). At the east end, two small triangular lights are framed by the principal rafters and by this plank, and divided by the kingpost. The two vertical lights below are set on the tie beam, divided by the kingpost and confined at the top by the horizontal plank. At the west end, the top of the gable has been filled by a triangular piece of wood. The remaining space down to the level of the tie beam has been evenly divided by the horizontal bar into two superimposed rectangular shapes which are again divided vertically by the kingpost.²⁹

The two nave pillars have the sole purpose of holding up the great beams which define the length of the nave (Figs. A, 9). They are made up of two stone sections: a longer base with a slightly wider square upper “capital”.³⁰ Because the beams only partially cover the top surface of the pillars, the latter appear incomplete and unfinished. They are plastered and painted on all but the east side with biblical and saintly figures.³¹

Əmäkina Mädhane Aläm, like Yəmrəhännä Krəstos, has none of the western chambers common to a number of churches in Lasta which predate the Solomonic dynasty.³² There is, however, what appears to be a raised, but disturbed, ashlar-framed burial place in the northwest corner, and a raised platform in the southwest corner which may also mark a burial site.³³

All attention in a basilica church is focused on the sanctuary. At Əmäkina Mädhane Aläm, it is approached through a significant, richly painted wooden triumphal arch (Fig. 11). This arch rises from imposts on the wooden bracket capitals of the engaged piers which stand on either side of the sanctuary wall, and spans much of the nave width.³⁴ The top of the arch extends into the wall at the level of the fourth ashlar course, adorned here by an image of the Transfiguration.³⁵ Images of the Archangels Michael (Fig. 16) and Gabriel (Fig. 17) are painted on the north and south sides of the sanctuary entrance respectively.³⁶ The sanctuary itself consists of a single, undivided space running the full width of the church. However the presence of the altar directly below the cupola,

²⁹ MS: MG-2002.117:002, 2002.118:014, 2004.124:006.

³⁰ MS: MG-2002.115:027/029/031/033/036, and 2002.116:005; Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.* (n. 5), Figs. 17, 38.

³¹ Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, Figs. 11, 13, 17, 18, 22, 23, 31, 36, 38; MS: MG-2002.115:027-036 and 2002.116:004-006.

³² The absence of these chambers at Yəmrəhännä Krəstos may point to a later date for the construction of this edifice than has previously been thought. There are chambers in the northwest and southwest corners of many of the zagwe rock-cut basilica churches in Lasta. Not unusually, the southwest chamber opens into the south aisle while the northwest chamber opens towards the west entrance. At Wuqro Mäsqäl Krəstos near Sokota, these chambers have been used alternatively in recent times for the storage of sarcophagi (M. Gervers, ‘The Monolithic Church of Wuqro Mäsqäl Krəstos’, *AfrBull*, 50 (2002), pp. 99–113 (pp. 100–101).

³³ MS: MG-2002.118:028/029; Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, Fig. 6.

³⁴ MS: MG-2002.117:001, 2004.124:033.

³⁵ MS: MG-2002.116:027. See also Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.*, p. 21 and Fig. 15.

³⁶ For a description of the sanctuary paintings, see the Appendix.

clearly distinguishes the central section. In the cupola there is an image of the *Maiestas Domini* accompanied by three archangels: Uriel Raphael and Azazael (Fig. 7). Behind the altar and on either side of the lower central window are two murals: to the left, the Annunciation (Fig. 18) and to the right the mounted figure of St. Mercurios piercing the figure of Julian the Apostate with his lance (Fig. 19 cf. Appendix). They are linked above the window by a band containing two crosses, one painted green, the other red-dish-brown.³⁷ The paintings are all confined to the limits of the central space, defined to the north and south by those great supporting beams which run the entire length of the church. The remainder of the sanctuary space to the north and south is undecorated and is presently used for storage (Fig. 15).³⁸

The distinction between sacred and storage space is undoubtedly indicative of the nearly contemporary transition from earlier architectural form under the Zagwe when sanctuaries were commonly flanked by *pastophoria*, such as are found at Gännätä Maryam in the valley below,³⁹ in several of the Lalibäla churches,⁴⁰ at Wuqro Mäsqäl Krəstos in Sägota⁴¹ and elsewhere. Under Zagwe and previous dynasties, access to and from these *pastophoria* was provided through doorways in the north and south walls of the sanctuary. The absence of the *pastophoria* in a church whose paintings are contemporary with those at Gännätä Maryam, which are dated to the reign of Yəkuno Amlak, is a clear indicator that ʿMäkina Mādhane Alām was an early construction of the Solomonic dynasty. There is now sufficient evidence to conclude that it was around the time of the transition from Zagwe to Solomonic rule that the liturgy changed, and with it the shape and extent of the sanctuary.⁴² The presence of a portable wooden altar (*mānbära tabat*) in the south section of the sanctuary (Fig. 15)⁴³ points to the use of this area, as in the south *pastophorion* of Gännätä Maryam, for the celebration of the Eucharist.⁴⁴ Despite the expansion of the sanctuary into the full width of the church, however, the central section below the cupola retains its prominence.

The nave frieze continues on the north and south sides of the central sanctuary supporting the lantern ceiling above which the cupola rises (Fig. 7).⁴⁵ There is here no clerestory, only those two small east-facing windows below the painted image of the enthroned Christ. When seen from the exterior, the square on which the cupola stands reflects the size of the central sanctuary and the height of the frieze (Figs. 1–2). The

³⁷ MS: MG-2004.124:024.

³⁸ MS: MG-2004.124:021/035.

³⁹ Barriviera, *op. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 66–71 and pl. 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pl. 13, 39, 40; see also: pl. 46.

⁴¹ Gervers, *op. cit.* (n. 33), pp. 100–101.

⁴² On the changing shape of the sanctuary in the 13th–14th centuries, see the forthcoming article by Fritsch and Gervers, *op. cit.* (n. 13).

⁴³ MS: MG-2004.124:021.

⁴⁴ For the use of the south *pastophorion* at Gännätä Maryam, see E. Balicka-Witakowska, 'The Wall-Paintings in the Sanctuary of the Church of Gännätä Maryam near Lalibäla', to be published in the *Proceedings of the 10th Orbis Aethiopicus conference*, Leipzig 24–26 June 2005.

⁴⁵ MS: MG-2004.124:020/036.

cupola itself is constructed of twelve curved timber ribs converging at the top on a central boss. The ribs alternate in width, the narrower set of six, as we have already noted, are all severely damaged by water seepage. Wooden construction is used throughout, every centimeter of it being painted in zigzag, chevron and cross patterns.

፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm is a rare example of a built thirteenth-century church and owes its impeccable state of preservation to the fact that it was built in a cave where, from the beginning, it has been protected both from the elements and from hostile intent. In this context it is second only in size and lavishness to the church of Yämräḥannä Krəstos, a Zagwe royal foundation which in many aspects it copied. Its architects were clearly aware of the method used at Yämräḥannä Krəstos to prepare a flat, dry surface on which to build. In some ways the church's architectural form is conservative, particularly in the use of heavy beams to support the nave walls rather than the general employment of arches as at Yämräḥannä Krəstos and the neighbouring church of Gännätä Maryam. What ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm does introduce, however, is the highly significant expanded sanctuary. There are no known examples of this phenomenon from the Zagwe period and before, when *pastophoria* flanking the sanctuary were standard form in church architecture. The change was on the way when Yäkuno Amlak founded Gännätä Maryam, where there is evidence that the south *pastophorion* at least was used as an extension of the sanctuary. What ties ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm and Gännätä Maryam so closely together is not only their topographic affinity (a two-hour climb separates them), but more particularly the murals which inhabit their interior walls and which were applied by the same artist or school of painters. The paintings bear witness to a date in the fifteen-year reign of Yäkuno Amlak when the *pastophoria* were being replaced by the full-width sanctuary. At ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm, the east-west beams supporting the sanctuary frieze and cupola reflect the earlier division of space to the north and south, while the portable altar now standing in the southeast section points to the time when multiple altars were introduced for the celebration of the mass. This major architectural change followed a significant change in the liturgy (when the preparation of the *prothesis* was transferred from the *pastophorion* to the sanctuary itself) and provides a clear chronological marker for church building before and after the period of Zagwe rule.⁴⁶ It would appear that ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm is among the first, if not the first example of the new style. The church may well have been foundation of Yäkuno Amlak, who sought legitimacy for his new regime by borrowing from old forms while at the same time supporting the Church in its establishment of new ones.

Appendix

With the exception of the *Maiestas Domini* in the cupola, the paintings in the sanctuary had not been fully recorded at the time Ewa Balicka-Witakowska published her paper on

⁴⁶ For the relationship between changes to the liturgy and Ethiopian church architecture, see Fritsch and Gervers, *op. cit.* (n. 14).

the iconographical program of ʿƏmäkina Mädhane Aläm in 2004.⁴⁷ The brief descriptions below complete the inventory.

Annunciation (Fig. 18)

St. Mary is represented standing before a throne with a spindle in her left hand. The archangel Gabriel approaches her, holding a staff cross. Both figures have their right hands raised in the gesture of allocution. A bird, holding a twig in its beak and symbolizing the Holy Spirit, sits on the back of the Virgin's throne.

The scene generally follows the Protoevangeline of James and the connected apocryphal texts, which relate that at the moment of the Annunciation the Virgin was spinning a veil for the Temple. At the same time, her gesture expresses a specific theological concept, namely her capacity to question the divine message rather than accepting it passively. This iconographical type was applied in early Byzantine representations of the scene.

The presence of the Holy Spirit on the one hand visualizes the canonical text of the gospel "the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee..." (Luke 1:26) and on the other suggests that the Annunciation here may be understood as the *conceptio per aurem*, another Byzantine theological concept.⁴⁸ It was depicted in early Christian iconography and became particularly popular in Ethiopia. The twig in the bird's beak seems to be the invention of a knowledgeable painter. It symbolizes the "Good News" of the Annunciation by association with the twig which the dove brought to Noah announcing the end of the Flood.

St. Mercurios (Fig. 19)

The painting bears the inscription: "St. Mercurios the martyr of Christ". He is shown riding a black horse while piercing Julian the Apostate with a lance topped with a cross. Julian is depicted as an old man armed with a club, unlike the similar scene in Gännätä Maryam where he, symbolizing the Evil One, is represented as a creature, half human and half animal.⁴⁹ The flapping robe of the saint and the decoratively tied tail of his horse suggest Coptic prototypes.⁵⁰

Archangels (Figs. 16 and 17)

These are described in the inscriptions as "Saint Mikael/Gabriel, the chief of the angels". Each holds a staff-cross. They have an apotropaic function, hence their location on both sides of the entrance to the sanctuary as guardians thereof.

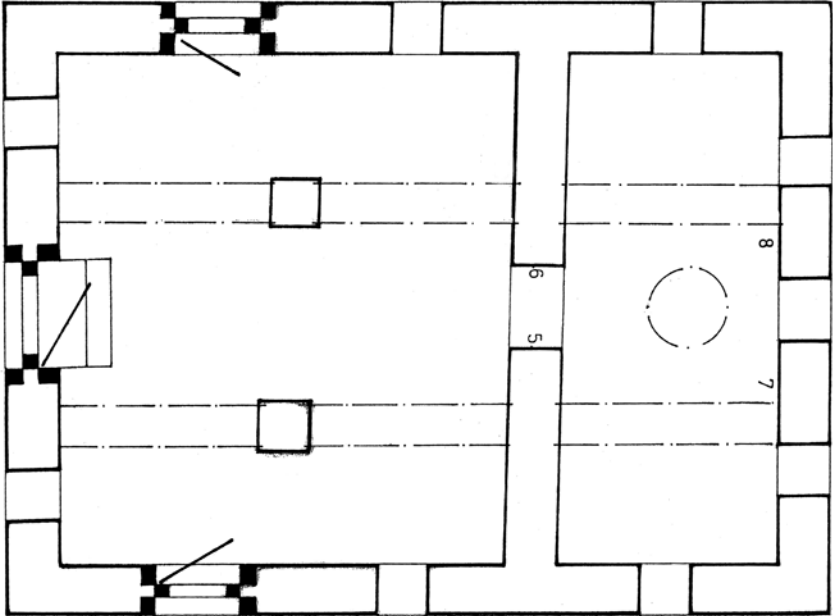
⁴⁷ Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.* (n. 5).

⁴⁸ On this iconographical formula cf. K. Urbaniak-Walczak, *Die "conceptio per aurem": Untersuchungen zum Marienbild in Ägypten unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Malereien in El-Bagawat*, (Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten, 2), Altenberge 1992; E. Balicka-Witakowska, 'Observations sur l'iconographie de l'Annonciation dans la peinture éthiopienne', in: *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Lund, 26-29 April 1982*, ed. S. Rubenson, Addis Abeba – Uppsala – East Lansing, 1984, pp. 149–164.

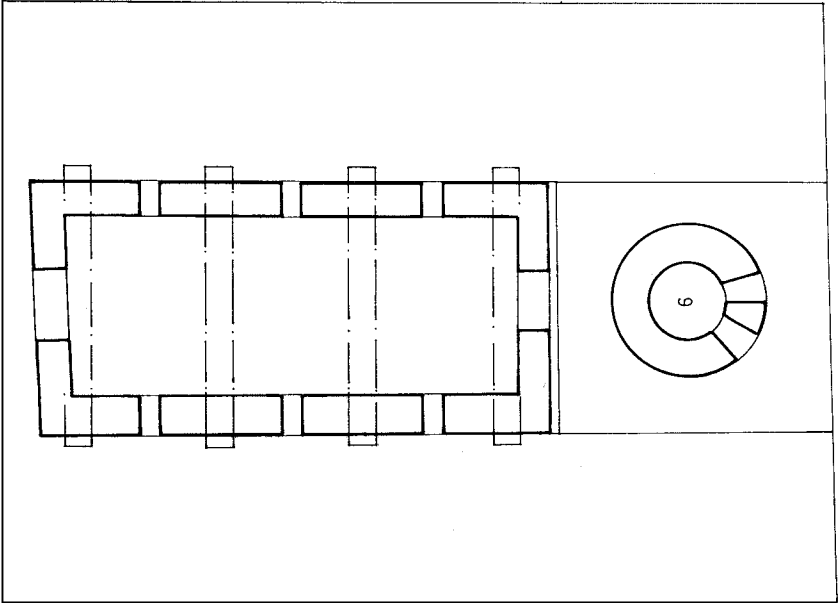
⁴⁹ Balicka-Witakowska, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 25 and n. 82.

⁵⁰ E. Balicka-Witakowska, 'Les peintures murales de l'église rupestre éthiopienne Gännätä Maryam près Lalibäla', *Arte medievale*, 12–13 (1998–1999), pp. 193–209 (pp. 200–201).

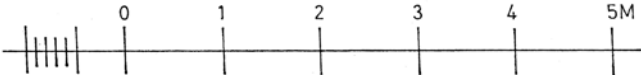
Illustrations



A. Ground plan of the church of ʿƏmäkina Mädhane Aläm

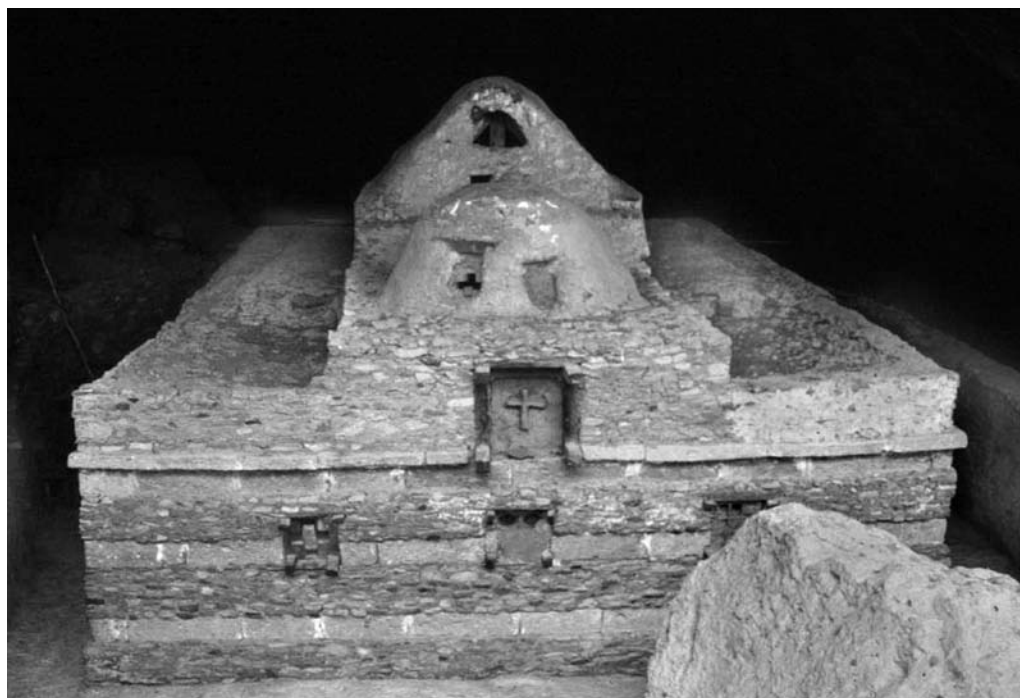


B. Plan of the church of ʿƏmäkina Mädhane Aläm: clerestory and cupola level





1. Զմակինա Մաժիներ Ալամ church, east and north sides



2. Զմակինա Մաժիներ Ալամ church, east end



3. Ēmākina Mādḥane Alām church, west and south sides



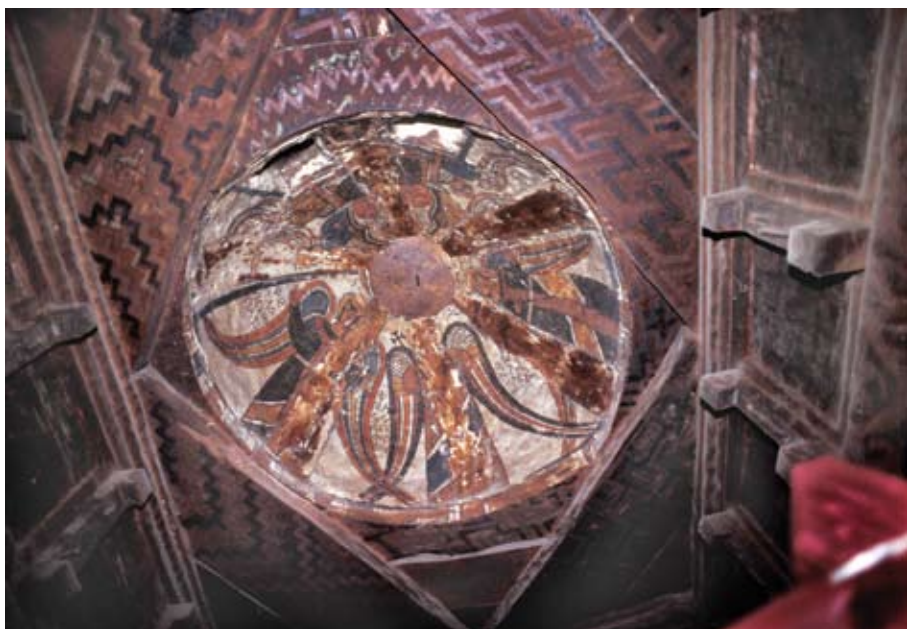
4. Ēmākina Mādḥane Alām church, west end



5. ʿMākina Mādhane Alām church, superstructure, south side



6. Yāmṛəhannā Krəstos, well-head on north side of the church



7. Ēmäkina Mādḥane Alām church, cupola



8. Ēmäkina Mādḥane Alām church, south aisle ceiling



9. Զմակինա Մածինե Ալամ church, northeast corner showing pillar, principal beam, frieze, and clerestory ceiling timbers above the nave



10. Զմակինա Մածինե Ալամ church, west wall of the nave above entrance portal



11. Եմակինա Մաճհանե Ալամ church, sanctuary arch facing west



12. Եմակինա Մաճհանե Ալամ church, saddle-back roof over the nave



13. ፻mäkina Mädhane Aläm church, kingpost, tie beam and principal rafters supporting saddle-back roof



14. Ծմակինա Մաճհանե Ալամ church, gables at east and west ends of the nave



15. ʿMäkina Mädhane Alām church, south east corner of the sanctuary



16. ʿMäkina Mädhane Alām church, figure of the Archangel Michael, north side of sanctuary entrance



17. ʿMäkina Mädhane Alām church, figure of the Archangel Gabriel, south side of the sanctuary entrance



18. Ծմակina Mădhane Alām church, the Annunciation, east sanctuary wall



19. Ծմակina Mădhane Alām church, St. Mercurios and Julian the Apostate, east sanctuary wall