



Original Article

Treasures of the Lake Zway Churches and Monastery, South-Central Ethiopia

Buruk Wolde-Michael

Department of History and Heritage Management, Jimma University, Jimma.

E-mail: buruk.woldemichael@ju.edu.et, burukmichael@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Harboring the invaluable religious treasures of the mainland churches and monasteries of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) during those periods of persecution in the 10th and 16th centuries AD, the island churches and monastery of Lake Zway possess a large number of the priceless sacred treasures ranging from holy arks through manuscripts and crosses to the various religious paraphernalia pertaining to the ancient and early medieval times. The Lake Churches and monastery house at present about 48 holy arks sharing the many other holy arks for the foundation of the numerous churches stretching from the Holy Savior church of Adama (formerly Nazret) in the north to the St Michael church of Shashemene in the south; from the St George church of Golja, Arsi, in the east to the St Michael church of Éla¹, near the town of Meki, in the west. It is also to the same lake churches and monastery that the popular Qulebbi Gebre'él church of Harar attributes its origin. In terms of manuscripts, the Lake sacred sites are the cradle of the two Ge'ez letters of Queen Eleni and Emperor Libne Dingil sent to the kings of Portugal during their time of difficulty as a result of the increasing pressure of the Adal forces. There also discovered in the same sites the important book used by Emperor Menilik II to resolve the religious controversy among the Sost Ledät, Qebat and Hulät Ledät believers in favor of the Hulät Ledät / Tewahido doctrine. Currently, the Lake churches and monastery are seat of about 45 oldest manuscripts the most important of which are Gädlä Qedusan (Book of Saints), Mäṣehafä Hénok (Book of Enoch) and Gädlä Kaléb (the Hagiography of Kaléb). The seven oldest crosses of the Latin Patée type, the two oldest Awds (Big dishes used to present the Holy Communion to the receivers), the Atronus (Book Stand) endowed by Empress Zewditu and the Mäqwamiya (Staff) endowed by the late Abunä Péṭros the martyred are some of the other treasures making the same Lake churches and monastery their home.

Received 22.10.2014

Revised 10.12.2014

Accepted 12.01.2015

¹For small local names as well as Amharic and Ge'ez words in the present paper, the following transliteration system has been used:

A. The seven sounds of the Ethiopic alphabet are represented as follows:

| | | |
|-----------------------|----|----|
| 1 st order | u | Bä |
| 2 nd order | u< | Bu |
| 3 rd order | u= | Bi |
| 4 th order | v | Ba |
| 5 th order | u? | Bé |
| 6 th order | w | Be |
| 7 th order | o | Bo |

B. Palatalized sounds are represented as follows:

| | |
|---|-----|
| g | Šä |
| † | Čä |
| - | Ňä |
| Ě | Jä |
| ¶ | Zhä |

C. Glottalized sounds are represented as follows:

| | |
|-----|----|
| k | Qä |
| Ö | Ṭä |
| Ú | Čä |
| ç/i | Šä |
| â | Pä |

D. For words having the sound of the sixth alphabet at the end, it is not necessary to add the representing letter of the sound

Example: GÑ` Hagär
SUI` Mämeher

E. Consecutive vowels are usually separated by apostrophe.

Example: u`M Bä'al

F. Stressed Sounds are usually represented by doubling the consonant.

Example: la u= Qulebbi

How to cite this article: Buruk Wolde-Michael. Treasures of the Lake Zway Churches and Monastery, South-Central Ethiopia. *Inter. J. Edu. Res. Technol.* 6[1] March 2015;49-60.DOI: 10.15515/ijert.0976-4089.6.1.4960

INTRODUCTION

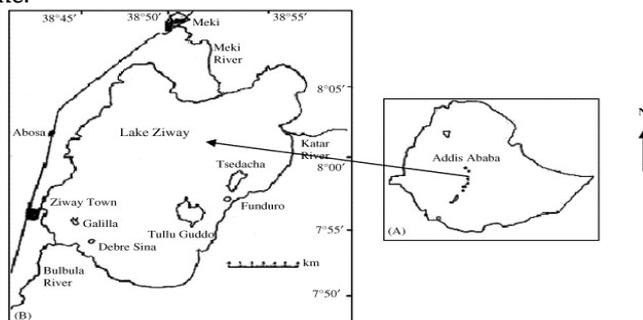
Lake Zway: An Overview

Lakes' region.² It is located at a distance of about 160km, south of Addis Ababa on the main road to the town of Shashamane.³ More specifically, it lies to the east of Zway town, west of Asella town, south of Mount Bora and north of Mount Alutto.⁴

The Lake is roughly heart-shaped⁵ covering an area of 434km².⁶ Its average depth is 4m and is the most shallowest Lake among the seven. In terms of its altitude, however, it is found at the highest elevation in this Rift Valley region measuring a height of about 1846m above sea level.⁷

The Lake is fed by two major rivers: Mäqi and Kätar. The Mäqi river arises from the Guragé highlands to the northwest and drains into the Lake at its northern edge. While the Kätar river arises from the Arsi plateau to the east and drains into the Lake at its northeastern edge. This inflow is balanced by the outflow of the Bulbula river at the southwestern edge draining into the other Rift Valley Lake, Abiyata.⁸

The water surface of the Lake is marked by five volcanic islands which are commonly called Gällila, Däbrä Sina, Ṭädéča, Fundurro and Tullu Guddo.⁹ The names of the first two islands are of Biblical in origin: Galilee and Mount Sinai respectively. While those of the last three are of Oromo: Ṭädéča to mean "acacia island," Fundurro to mean "near to the mainland" and Tullu Guddo to mean "big mountain."¹⁰ Their original names are, however, Aysut, Famat (Gétésémani) and Däbrä Şeyon respectively,¹¹ and unlike the first two original names, the last original name of Däbrä Şeyon is widely used particularly in the religious history of the Lake islands,¹² and as its Oromo name proves, the island of Däbrä Şeyon is the biggest of all the five islands in the Lake.¹³



Map of Lake Zway

² Paul B. Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern Christian Outpost and Repository of Medieval Ethiopian Art," *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art* (London: Pinder Press, 1989), p.30; Mesfin Wolde-Mareyam, *An Introductory Geography of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1972), p.48.

³TumaNadamo, "A History of the Zay in the 19th and early 20th centuries," (Addis Ababa University (AAU): BA History Thesis, 1982),p.iv; Tesfaye Edetto, "Socio-economic life of the Zay with special emphasis on the fishing industry," (AAU: BA History Thesis, 1988), p.1; Paul B.Henze, "Lake Zway and its islands: An Ethiopian Lake where a unique Christian culture has survived since Medieval times," *Ethiopian Observer*, vol. 16, no.2 (1973), p.76.

⁴Tesfaye, p.1; Tuma, p. iv.

⁵Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern...", p.32; Paul B. Henze, *Ethiopian Journeys: Travels in Ethiopia, 1969-1972* (Addis Ababa: A Division of Shama P.L.C., 2001), p.111; Tuma, p.iv.

⁶Mesfin, p.48.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Henze, "LakeZway and its..." p.76; Henze, "LakeZway: Southern ..." p.30; Tuma, pp. iv- v; Tesfaye, p.1.

⁹Von Eike Haberland, *GALLA Sud Ethiopiens* (Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH Stuttgart, 1963), p.787; Wolf Leslau, *Zway Ethiopic Documents* (Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1999), p.xvi; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern..." pp.30-33; Henze, *Ethiopian...*p.111; Tuma, p.v; Henze, "Lake Zway and its..."p.76; Paul B.Henze, "Notes on Lake Zway and its islands, their people, their culture and their history: An illustrated lecture at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies(IES)," *Anthropology Miscellanea I* (1972), p.1.

¹⁰Henze, "Lake Zway and its..." p.76; Tuma, p.v.

¹¹Leslau, *Zway Ethiopic...* p.xvi; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern ..." p.31; *Yä Zway Däbrä Şeyon Gädam tarikawi amätaṣ ena amäsärarät* (Addis Ababa: Bole Printing Press, 1986 E.C.), p.22; *Informants: Banté Wäldä-Mareyam, Wäldä-Amanu'él (W/Amanu'él) Mačiñño, Semé Gäbrä-Kidan (G/Kidan), Abunä Natna'él, Mälaku Gäbrä-Mareyam(G/ Mareyam), Gäbrä-Mäsqäl (G/Mäsqäl) Hirpa and Täsfayé Édatto.*

¹²*Informants: Ibid.*; Sergew Hable-Sellassie, "Preservation of the Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Ethiopian Church," *Papers Prepared for the Seminar of Ethiopian Studies* (1965), pp.3-4;Sergew Hable-Sellassie, "The Problem of Gudit," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol.x, no.1 (1972), p.117.

¹³Tuma, p.v; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern...", p.31; Henze, "Lake Zway and its...", p.76; *Yä Zway...*p.23; *Spectrum Guide to Ethiopia* (Nairobi: Camerapix Publishers International, 1995), p.159.

Each of the five islands of the Lake is dedicated to a single church. The church on Gälila is dedicated to Kahenatä Sämay (Priests of the Heaven),¹⁴ while that on Däbrä Sina to Dengel Mareyam (Virgin Mary). The church on Ƨädéča is dedicated to Father Abreham and that on Fundurro to Arba'etu Ensesa (Four Beasts of the Apocalypse). The pioneering church at Däbrä Şeyon is dedicated to Şeyon Mareyam (St. Mary of Zion), and it is a site of monastery unlike the rest four churches.¹⁵

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Even though the Lake Zway churches and monastery are repeatedly mentioned in most literatures for harboring the invaluable religious treasures of the EOC during those periods of intense persecution in the 10th and 16th centuries by Yodit (nicknamed Gudit or Esato) and *Imam* Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al Ghazi (nicknamed Grañ) respectively, the type and quantities of these treasures harbored in the lake sacred sites are the overlooked issues in most of these literatures. Even King Sahile-Sellassie (1813-47) of Shewa is said to have had a plan of recovering these religious treasures deposited in the Lake Churches and Monastery, though his plan remained unsuccessful because of his fear of the Lake hippopotamus. The basic questions upon which the present research was conducted were, therefore, the following:

1. What were these treasures harbored in the Lake churches and monastery (if possible, their list and quantity)?
2. Which of these treasures are still in existence in the Lake sacred sites? Which of them also made their way to other places?

Objectives of the study

The major objectives of the present study were the following:

General:

❖ Exploring and providing adequate data on treasures of the Lake Zway churches and monastery thereby mitigating the controversy on the historical ownership of some of the treasures.

Specific:

❖ Enumerating and describing the treasures of the Lake Zway churches and Monastery thereby distinguishing those making their way to other places from those which are still in existence in the Lake churches and monastery.

Significance of the study

The present study was intended to benefit in the following ways:

- ❖ To provide clear and adequate information on treasures of the Lake Zway churches and monastery thereby filling the gap in the available historical records regarding the type and quantities of the treasures harbored in these Lake churches and monastery during the early times.
- ❖ To help the tourism industry of the EOC in general and the lake sacred places in particular thereby facilitating the conservation efforts of the treasures.
- ❖ To lay the foundation for the further study of the Lake treasures.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

In addition to the critical analysis of both archival and literary sources, interviews were conducted individually with 25 selected informants who were thought as knowledgeable of the issue using standardized open ended questions. Attempts were also made to make the interviews informal and longitudinal so as to give time and freedom to the informants to thoroughly think over the questions. Every information gathered was, therefore, crosschecked carefully both by interviewing similar people, referring the archival sources and reviewing the literatures. For controversial issues, informants were interviewed in group. The same method was also used for issues which were not well remembered.

THE TREASURES

Holy Arks

Even though no source providing their actual number is there, a large number of the nearby mainland churches, particularly those stretching from the town of Adama to that of Shashemene and also those

¹⁴ Most people usually confuse this name of the holy ark with name of the other holy ark - St. Täklä-Haymanot because of the celebration of the two holy arks on the same date of each month, i.e. on the 24th day of every month according to the Ethiopian calendar.

¹⁵ *Informants: Ibid.*, Bädané Tebbéssa, Täsfayé Näbi, Kidanä-Mareyam (K/Mareyam) Dägaga, *Aba* Asrat Mäkuriya, Bärressa Ago, G/Mäsqäl, Wäldä-Mädhen (W/Mädhen) Läta, Zärihun Täklä-Mareyam, Tälafinos Miččo, *Aba* Läkun Tägäñ, Zäwgä Bädané and W/Amanu'él; "Bä Iteyopeya yämigäñu abyatäkrestiyānat ena kahenat quṭer," (A Registration book found in the library of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) patriarch office in Addis Ababa); Henze, "Lake Zway and its...", pp. 78-81; Tuma, p.vii; Tesfaye, p.2; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern...", pp. 31-33; Leslau, *Zway*... p.xvi; Henze, "Notes on ...", p.1.

around the town of Asella, are believed to be sacred with the holy arks brought from the Lake Zway churches and monastery.¹⁶ The widely known of these mainland churches include the two Mädhani'alām churches each at Adama and Alemtena,¹⁷ *Qedus* Mika'él and *Qedus* Giyorgis churches at Mekii, *Qedus* Gäbre'él church at Wäyyo, *Abunä* Täklä-Haymanot church at Abosa,¹⁸ *Qedest* Mareyam and *Qedus* Mika'él churches at Shashemene,¹⁹ *Qedus* Giyorgis church at Golja²⁰ and the two aforementioned churches of *Qedest* Mareyam and *Qedus* Mika'él at Adami-Tullu and Bočésa respectively. It is, nevertheless, too difficult to distinguish from which of the five Lake churches were these holy arks of the mainland churches taken except the *Qedus* Giyorgis holy ark of Meki, *Qedest* Mareyam holy ark of Adami-Tullu and *Qedus* Mika'él holy ark of Bočésa each of which was taken from the Şeyon Mareyam church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon,²¹ Dengel Mareyam church of Däbrä Sina and Kahenatä Sämay church of Gälila respectively.

Who is well remembered in bringing out much of the above holy arks of the mainland churches from the Lake sacred sites is an outside monk by the name - *Aba* Isayeyas.²² He had been living in the first half of the twentieth century and he used to make frequent voyages to the island churches in order to deliver church services.²³

Apart from the above holy arks of the nearby mainland churches, the most prominent holy ark of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Qulebbi *Qedus* Gäbre'él, also traces its discovery to the Lake Zway churches, specifically to the former - Tabotä Iyäsus church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon.²⁴ The holy ark was brought to the island together with the Holy Ark of the Covenant during the destructive years of Yodit.²⁵ When the Holy Ark of the Covenant was returned to Aksum, however, this holy ark of Gäbre'él, which was believed to be engraved by St. Mark of the Gospel,²⁶ was left in the island church unconsciously.²⁷ Later, a hermit by the name - *Aba* Léwi was sent from Aksum to bring back this holy ark from the island church.²⁸ The hermit, nevertheless, did not go back to Aksum carrying the holy ark. He, instead, went to Qulebbi of Harär being led by the divine power of the holy ark. He stayed at Qulebbi until his death keeping the holy ark with due respect in a certain cave in the region. On the eve of his death, therefore, he left a note on a flat stone around the cave remarking the existence of this holy ark of Gäbre'él in hidden place of the area and the later prominence of the place due to the great miracles the holy ark would do to the religious people.²⁹

The engraved note left by the hermit, *Aba* Léwi, was discovered by a small group of clergymen who had been migrating crossing the area of Qulebbi due to their persecution by the Adal forces during the 16th century conflict. They copied the script on one of the manuscripts they carried for safekeeping, *Mäşehafä Qäläméntos*. They finally placed this manuscript in the Lake Zway monastery of Däbrä Şeyon from which, as they read from the engraved script, the aforementioned holy ark of Gäbre'él was taken.³⁰ When *Ras* Mäkonen Wäldä-Mika'él, founder of the later church, read this manuscript bringing it from the island monastery, therefore, he found the note.³¹ Consequently, he built the abode at Qulebbi and dedicated it with this holy ark of Gäbre'él on 25th July 1893.³² The holy ark was by then discovered at the Kahenatä Sämay church of Azhägugu in Bulga being taken from its early placement at the cave in Qulebbi.³³

¹⁶*Informants*: Banté, Semé G/Kidan, Mälaku, G/Mäsqał, Täsfayé Näbi, Täsfayé Édätto, Zäwgä, Bädané, Barréssa, Fäyiso Félo, Hinséné Waqé, W/Mika'él Jima, *Aba* Asrat, H/Giyorgis Asé, K/Mareyam Dägaga, Tadässä ASé, Zärihun and Tälafinos; Ergätä-Qal, p.8.

¹⁷*Informants*: *Ibid.*, except W/Mika'él, H/Giyorgis, K/Mareyam and Tadässä.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, W/Mika'él, H/Giyorgis, K/Mareyam and Tadässä.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, except Täsfayé Édätto, Fäyiso, Hinséné, H/Giyorgis, K/Mareyam and Tadässä.

²⁰*Ibid.*, Täsfayé Édätto, Fäyiso, Hinséné, H/Giyorgis, K/Mareyam, Tadässä but W/Mika'él.

²¹"Mäşehafä Genzät," At the same island monastery of Däbrä Şeyon. The church was established in 1932/33.

²²*Informants*: *Ibid.*, W/Mika'él.

²³*Ibid.* It was the same monk, *Aba* Isayeyas, who took the above *Qedus* Giyorgis holy ark of Meki from the Şeyon Mareyam church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon in 1932/33. See "Mäşehafä Genzät" of the same island monastery.

²⁴*Informants*: *Ibid.* *Abunä* Natna'él. Initially, the church at the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon was dedicated to the holy ark of Tabotä Iyäsus. It was Emperor Menilik II, who later changed and dedicated the church to the holy ark of St Mary of Zion in the 1890s.

²⁵Ergätä-Qal, p.8; Dane'él Kebrät, *Yä Bétäkrestiyān Mārājawoč* (Addis Abāba: Mahebärä Qedusan, 1999 E.C.) pp. 203 and 402.

²⁶Ergätä-Qal, p.8; *Yä Zway*. . . p.31.

²⁷Dane'él, p.203; Ergätä-Qal, p.8.

²⁸*Ibid.* (Both sources); *Yä Zway*. . . p.31.

²⁹Dane'él, pp. 203-204; Ergätä-Qal, p.8; *Yä Zway*. . . p.31.

³⁰Dane'él, p.204.

³¹*Ibid.*; Ergätä-Qal, p.8.

³²Ergätä-Qal, p.8; "Bä Iteyopeya Yämigāñu. . ." Seeming typing error, the year in the compiled work of Dane'él is stated as 1892. The month is, however, the same. Dane'él, p.205. The time stated in the published material of the history of the Lake monastery is, on the other hand, confused with the inauguration time of the present building which is on 29 December 1895. *Yä Zway*. . . p.31.

³³Dane'él, p. 204; Ergätä-Qal, p.8.

Even though they lost much of their deposit ensuring the foundation of the numerous mainland churches as discussed above, the Lake Zway churches still possess a significant number of holy arks. Below is presented the number of holy arks each of these island sacred places owns:

| Name of the island church | Number of holy arks possessed |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Gälila Kahenatä Sämay | 4 ³⁴ |
| Däbrä Sina Dengel Mareyam | 14 ³⁵ |
| Däbrä Şeyon Qedest Mareyam | 18 ³⁶ |
| Fundurro Arba'etu Ensesa | 2 ³⁷ |
| Ṭädéča Abreham | 10 ³⁸ |
| Total | 48 |

From the eighteen holy arks found at the main repository of the Şeyon Mareyam church of Däbrä Şeyon, two of them are new. They are endowed by the present Archbishop, *Abunä Natna'él*.³⁹

MANUSCRIPTS

Like the numerous holy arks, a number of the rare manuscripts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church also trace their discoveries to the Lake Zway churches and monastery. On his investigation of the treasures of these island churches of Lake Zway in the late 19th century, Emperor Menilik II found an important book proving the unity of the two natures: divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ, the principle of *Tāwahedo* ("Union").⁴⁰ As the chronicler, Gäbrä-Sellassé, remarks, therefore, the news of the discovery of this book was heard to the four horizons of the country thereby forcing a large number of the *Sost Ledät /Yä Şäga Lej* ("Three Births"/"Son of Grace")⁴¹ believers and those of *Qebat* ("Unction")⁴² to get re-baptized in their original faith of *Hulät Ledät* ("Two Births"),⁴³ more commonly, *Tāwahedo*.⁴⁴

As Gäbrä-Sellassé further describes in the other chapter of his chronicle, it was the small *Kebrä Nägäst* (Book of Glory of Kings) of Emperor Lebnä Dengel, which a certain monk brought from the island church of Lake Zway (it seems the Şeyon Mareyam church of Däbrä Şeyon because of its acquisition of a great number of the Lake manuscripts), that caused the then King Menilik of Şäwa to found his royal camp of Enṭoṭo in 1881. This was because the book enshrined the prophesied information about Menilik's rule of the country together with Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872- 1889) and his establishment of his capital at Enṭoṭo.⁴⁵

As remarked in the discussion above, *Maşehafä Qälämēntos*, whose attached short note became the ground to *Ras Mäkonen* for his establishment of the Qulebbi *Qedus Gäbre'él* church, also made its discovery in the same Lake Zway churches, specifically in the Şeyon Mareyam church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon.

The more recently discovered rare manuscripts of the Lake Zway churches are the two Ge'ez letters of Queen Eléni and Emperor Lebnä Dengel.⁴⁶ The letter of Eléni was sent to King Dom Manoel I of Portugal⁴⁷

³⁴Informants: Täsfayé Näbi and Zäwga.

³⁵*Ibid.*, Abreham Gäbrä-Sellassé.

³⁶Informants: Banté, Mälaku, G/Mäsqäl, Zärihun and Tälafinos; "Yä Zway Däbrä-Şeyon Qedest Mareyam Gädam tarikawi qersaqers ena yäqu'ami nebrät zerzer," (A letter by which the treasures and fixed assets of the island monastery have been transferred to the present *Qesä-Gäbäz, Mämeré Mälaku G/Mareyam*, and is also found in the hand of the same head of priests).

³⁷Informants: *Aba Asrat* and H/Giyorgis.

³⁸Informants: K/Mareyam, Käfäni Ijaro and Tadässä.

³⁹Informants: *Abunä Natna'él*, Mälaku, Banté, G/Mäsqäl, Zärihun and Tälafinos.

⁴⁰*Şähafé TezazGäbrä-Sellassé, Tarikä Zämän zä Dagmawi Menilik Negusä Nägäst zä Iteyopeya* (Addis Ababa: Artistik Printing Press, 1959 E.C.), pp.202-203.

⁴¹ This was the religious principle arguing that the birth of Jesus Christ was thrice as its name indicates: eternal birth from the Father, genetic birth from the Virgin Mary and birth from the Holy Ghost while getting baptized in the River Jordan. It is because it believed that Jesus Christ became the son of Grace when he got birth from the Holy Ghost in the River Jordan that the religious principle was alternatively called *Yä Şäga Lej. Aba Gorgoreyos*, pp. 90-91; Sergew, "The Period.....", p.32.

⁴² This was the other religions principle which argued that Jesus Christ became God the Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary by "Unction". *Aba Gorgoreyos*, p. 91; Sergew, "The Period... ", p.32.

⁴³ This is the governing creed of the EOC underlining that the birth of Jesus Christ is twice: eternal birth from the Father without having mother before the creation of the World and genetic birth from the Virgin Mary without having father after the creation of the World. *Aba Gorgoreyos*, pp. 87-92; Sergew, "The Period..." p.32; V.C. Samuel, "The Faith of the Church," *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Enterprise, 1997), pp.43-51.

⁴⁴Gäbrä-Sellassé, p.203.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* pp. 96-97. For Pankhurst's review of this issue, see Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia: 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sillassie I University Press, 1968), pp.697-698.

⁴⁶*Yä Zway ...* p. 33; Ergätä-Qal, p.22; Sergew, "The Ge'ez letters ...", p.565.

in 1509, following the increasing pressure of the lowland Muslim forces, under an ambassador named Mathew.⁴⁸ While the letter of Lebnä Dengel was sent to King Dom John III of the same European country, Portugal, in 1534/35, following the large scale war of the Adal leader, *Imam* Ahmäd ibn Ibrahim, under an ambassador named John Bermudes.⁴⁹ The central theme of both letters was, therefore, requesting military support against these expanding lowland Muslim forces.

These two Ge'ez letters were presented by Sergew at the Fourth International Conference of the Ethiopian Studies held in Rome from 10 to 15 April 1972⁵⁰ and as Sergew notes, he found these letters from the *Qésä-Gäbäz* (Head of Priests) of the Aksum Şeyon church, Täklä-Haymanot Wäldä-Kidan, from whom he similarly collected those Ge'ez manuscripts dealing with the exile of the Holy Ark of the Covenant in the same Lake islands. The *Qésä-Gäbäz* acquired the two Ge'ez letters from the Şeyon Mareyam church of the Lake Zway monastery of Däbrä Şeyon under the permission of the then Archbishop, *Abunä* Luqas II.⁵¹

Fragments of one or more old gospel manuscripts brought from the same Lake Zway churches (from the Kahenatä Sämay church of Gälila as Henze argues) were also deposited in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa in the 1950s.⁵²

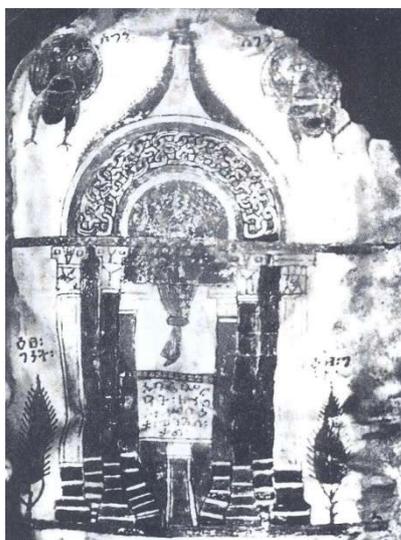


Fig. 6.1. Illumination from one of the Lake Zway gospel fragments deposited in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies with the identification number of MS IES 2475

Remaining from the enormous takings a very few of which are discussed above, the Lake Zway churches currently possess about 45 bound manuscripts 42 of which are found at the Şeyon Mareyam church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon. Two of the rest three bound manuscripts are found at the Däbrä Sina Dengel Mareyam church and they are, like the above fragmented manuscripts, *Wängéls* (Gospels).⁵³ While the last one manuscript is found at Ṭädéča Abreham church and it is *Māşehafä Genzät* (Book for the Dead's Prayer).⁵⁴

The list of those 42 manuscripts found at the Şeyon Mareyam church of Däbrä Şeyon is the following:⁵⁵

| Name of the manuscript | Quantity |
|------------------------|----------|
| GädläQedusan | 1 |
| Māşehafä Orit | 1 |
| Arba'etuWängél | 4 |

⁴⁷Sergew Hable-Sellassie, "The Ge'ez letters of Queen Eleni and Libne Dingil to John, king of Portugal," *Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei: IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Ethiopici* (1974), p.566; Pankhurst, *An Introduction to...*, p.74.

⁴⁸Pankhurst, *An Introduction to...*, p.74.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p.77; Yelma Däreśsa, *Yä Iteyopeya Tarik bä Asrasedestāñaw Keflä Zāmān* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1959 E.C.), p.119.

⁵⁰Sergew, "The Ge'ez ..." pp. 547-566; *YäZway...* p.33; Ergätä-Qal, p.22.

⁵¹Sergew, "The Ge'ez ..." p.565.

⁵²Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern ..." p.37.

⁵³*Informants: Tāşfayé Näbi and Zāwgä.*

⁵⁴*Informants: K/Mareyam and Käfäni.*

⁵⁵"Yä Zway Däbrä Şeyon Qedest Mareyam Gädam tarikawi qersa qersena..." (Archive in the hand of the present *Qésä -Gäbäz, Māmeré Mälaku*).

Buruk Wolde-Michael

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Maşehafä Qedasé | 2 |
| Yä Luqasena Yä Yohannes Wängél | 1 |
| Dersan Zäkämä Täräkbä Eşä-Mäsqäl | 1 |
| Maşehafä Nägäst | 1 |
| Şälotä Eţan | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Arganon | 1 |
| Gädlä Kaléb | 1 |
| Astäwaşə'otä Qalä Pawulos | 1 |
| Wudasé Amlak | 1 |
| Säyfa Sellassé | 1 |
| Tä'amerzä Mahelétä Egzi'abhér | 1 |
| Yä Zäwäter Şälot | 1 |
| Ra'eyä Yohannes | 1 |
| A'emadä Meştir | 2 |
| Mäşehafä Sä'atat | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Iyobwä Matusala | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Dawit | 3 |
| Mäşehafä Me'eraf | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Mänäkosat | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Retu'a Haymanot | 1 |
| Menbab Zäwärrha Şom | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Genzät | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Krestena | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Tä'amerä Mareyam | 1 |
| Gädlä Hawareyat | 1 |
| Gädlä Abunä Gärima | 1 |
| Gädlä Samu'él | 1 |
| Gebrä Hemamat | 1 |
| Golegota | 1 |
| Yä Amätu Senkesar | 1 |
| Şomä Degwa | 1 |
| Mäşehafä Qédär | 1 |
| Total | 42 |

Source: "Yä Zway Däbrä-Şeyon Qedest Mareyam Gädam tarikawi qersa qers ena yäqu'ami nebrät zerzer" (List of the Treasures and Assets of the Monastery of Däbrä-Şeyon Qedest Mareyam).

Gädlä Qedusan (Hagiographies of Saints) is the most important of all the manuscripts listed above. It is the largest of all measuring 63.5 centimeter in its length and 45.7 centimeter in its width.⁵⁶ It is one of the most rare manuscripts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church discovered in this Däbrä Şeyon monastery of Lake Zway.⁵⁷

The manuscript was written during the reign of Emperor Dawit (r. 1382-1412)⁵⁸ and it enshrines the hagiographies of nineteen saints.⁵⁹

Each hagiography in the manuscript begins with the well painted portrait of the saint who is the subject of discussion. The heading at each section is also highly ornamented.⁶⁰ Because of such and such qualities of the manuscript, those scholars who could access it due to the cooperation of *Abunä* Luqas, the Archbishop, consider it as the invaluable source for the study of medieval Ethiopian iconography and paleography.⁶¹

The manuscript was taken to Addis Ababa to be exhibited to Queen Elizabeth II of England on the occasion of her visit of Ethiopia in 1965.⁶² It was also taken to Lagos, Nigeria, in 1979/80 to be displayed

⁵⁶Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern ...", p.38. Let 1 inch equates 2.54 centimeter.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 37; Sergew, "Preservation ...", p.7.

⁵⁸ "Gädlä Qedusan," (Lake Zway Däbrä Şeyon Mareyam monastery); Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern..." pp. 37-38; Sergew, "Preservation..." p.7.

⁵⁹ "Gädlä Qedusan," (Lake Zway Däbrä Şeyon monastery), Explore the entire pages; *Yä Zway*.... p.32; Ergätä-Qal, p.22; Henze, "Lake Zway and its islands ..." p.80.

⁶⁰ See Fig. 4.2.

⁶¹Sergew, "Preservation ..." p.7; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern ..", p.38.

⁶²Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern ...", p.38.

on the festival of African art and ranking first in the art contest due to its best quality and long age of existence, it won golden cup for its owning country, Ethiopia.⁶³ It was taken thirdly in 1984 to be shown at the National Library in Addis Ababa during the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Ethiopian Revolution.⁶⁴

The other important manuscript to be noticed from the above list is *Gädlä Kaléb* (Hagiography of Kaléb). It is the hagiography of King Kaléb of Aksum,⁶⁵ who spent the last twelve years of his age leading the ascetic life in the monastery of *Aba Pänčäléwon* to the northeast of Aksum.⁶⁶ The manuscript enshrines the mighty naval expedition of this devoted Christian king to South Arabia when the Christian people of the country suffered persecution from their Jew government. The manuscript is, in general, in the category of the most rare ones like the *Gädlä Qedusan*.⁶⁷

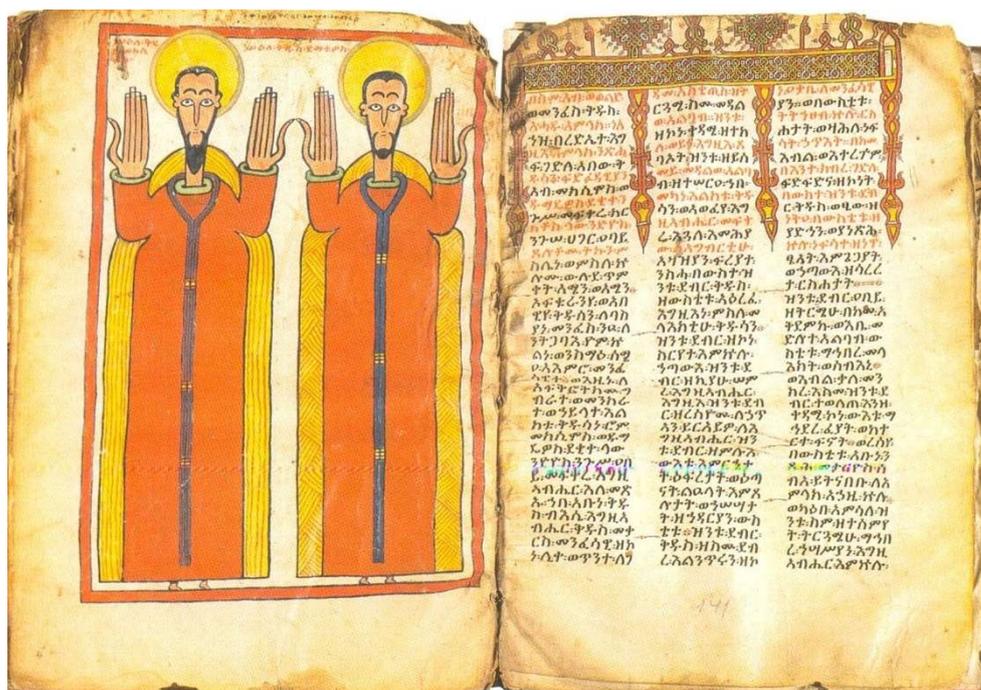


Fig. 6.2. The beginning section of each hagiography in *Gädlä Qedusan*

No matter how it is not mentioned in the above list because of its existence with a few of its original pages, *Mäṣehafä Hénoq* (Book of Enoch) is the other invaluable manuscript which is peculiar to this Şeyon Mareyam church of Lake Zway.⁶⁸ It was at this island monastery that the surviving Ge'ez version of this manuscript was discovered for the first time after centuries of its disappearance in the World.⁶⁹

The Aksumite version of some of the listed manuscripts, particularly the above *Gädlä Kaléb* and *Mäṣehafä Hénoq*,⁷⁰ may further testify the validity of the people's tradition of the transfer of the Holy Ark of the Covenant and other invaluable religious treasures from Aksum to this island church of Lake Zway during the destructive years of Yodit.

Mäṣehafä Genzät of the above list was endowed by Empress Zäwditu on her official consecration of the island church as monastery. It is in this manuscript that the Empress enshrined the type and size of the *restä-gult* wealth she declared to the officially consecrated island monastery.

The other endowed manuscript in the same list is one of the two *Mäṣehafä Qedasés* (Book of Mass). It was endowed by *Mämher* Haylä Mareyam, the late *Abunä Pétros* the martyred, during his service in the island monastery as *Mämher* (Administrator).⁷¹

⁶³ *YäZway...* p.32; *Ergätä-Qal*, p.22; *Informants*: Banté, Mälaku, G/Mäsqäl, Zärihun and Tälafinos.

⁶⁴ Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern..." pp. 39-40.

⁶⁵ "Gädlä Kaléb," (Lake Zway Däbrä Şeyon Mareyam monastery).

⁶⁶ *Sergew, Ancient and ...* p. 143; *Aba Gorgoreyos*, p.27.

⁶⁷ *YäZway ...* p.32; *Ergätä-Qal*, p.22; *Informants: Ibid., Abunä Natna'él*.

⁶⁸ *Informants: Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Dane'él*, p. 402.

⁷⁰ See the two manuscripts at the island monastery.

⁷¹ The attached note on the same manuscript.

Almost all of the manuscripts listed got their current binding of the wooden chests by the strong effort of *Abunä Luqas*. While the metal made standing box in which they are kept safely now was donated by the present Archbishop, *Abunä Natna'él*.

CROSSES

Seven oldest crosses of the Latin Patée type⁷² are found in the two of the Lake churches: *Däbrä Şeyon Qedest Mareyam* and *Ṭädéča Abreham*. Five of the crosses are found in the former island monastery, while the remaining two are found in the latter island church.⁷³

All of the seven crosses are with long handles: five of them having rectangular ring and two of them being flat of the rectangular shape at their bases. All of them are also with two major cross shapes under the general Patée cross type division: four of them being with flared arms, while the remaining three being in lozenge shapes.⁷⁴

Two of the flared arm Patée crosses found at the monastery of *Däbrä Şeyon*, nevertheless, seem Patée crosses of the early period, probably the Aksumite time. This is because their flared arms are too thin unlike the wide flared arms of the rest two similar crosses each found at the two island sacred places and this widening of the formerly thin flared arms was the new modification introduced in this Patée cross production since the late 14th century.⁷⁵



Fig. 6.3. The five Patée crosses at the monastery of *Däbrä Şeyon*

The close similarity of the shape as well as constituting raw material of the two Patée crosses (one flared arm and the other lozenge shape) at *Ṭädéča Abreham* with the rest three Patée crosses (one flared arm and the remaining two lozenge shape) at the monastery of *Däbrä Şeyon* may also be the other proof for the preceding existence of the above two thin flared arm Patée crosses of this island monastery.⁷⁶ It may be because they were brought by those Amhara Christian emigrants of the 16th century, who took short term exile at the island of *Ṭädéča* and hence, possibly shared some of the treasures they carried for safekeeping to this island's church before their departure to *Däbrä Şeyon*, that the two Patée crosses of *Ṭädéča Abreham* have become closely similar with those three Patée crosses of the monastery of *Däbrä Şeyon* both in their shape and raw material of which they were made up. This conclusion may, in turn, make the two slightly different flared arm Patée crosses of the island monastery remnants of those early religious treasures brought to the island together with the Holy ark of the Covenant thereby substantiating this tradition further.



Fig. 6.4. The two Patée crosses at the church of *Ṭädéča Abreham*

⁷² These are crosses whose arms expand outwards getting widened and extended from the arms' intersection. Mario Di Salvo, *Crosses of Ethiopia: The Sign of Faith, Evolution and Form* (Milan: Skira editore S.P.A. 2006), p.23.

⁷³Informants: Mälaku and G/Mäsqäl, also K/Mareyam and Käfäni.

⁷⁴ See Fig. 1.3 and 1.4.

⁷⁵Salvo, p.53.

⁷⁶ The two similar flared arm Patée crosses of the two island churches are made up of iron, while the lozenge shape crosses are made up of silver. The two thin flared arm Patée crosses of *Däbrä Şeyon* are, however, made up of only iron.

Two staff mounted crosses of a relatively long age are also found at the large treasury of the Şeyon Mareyam church of Däbrä Şeyon. Both of them are endowments, and one of them was endowed by a person named Şäga-Sellassé in 1920/21,⁷⁷ while the other by Empress Zäwditu in 1921/22,⁷⁸ after her official consecration of the island church as monastery. The first cross is, furthermore, made up of bronze, while the second is of silver.⁷⁹



(1)



(2)

Fig. 6.5. The two staff mounted crosses each of which was endowed by Şäga Sellassé (No.1) and Empress Zäwditu (No.2) to the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon

OTHERS

Apart from the above classified holy ark, manuscript and cross treasures, there are also treasures of various types at the great repository of the Şeyon Mareyam church of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon. The two oldest *Awds* (Big dishes used to present the Holy Communion to the receivers) made up of the same raw material seeming silver are one of these treasures to be noted.⁸⁰ They are believed to be among those early treasures brought to the island church by the Christian emigrants.⁸¹ It is, nevertheless, too difficult to distinguish which of these Christian emigrants - the early Aksumites of the 10th century or the latter Amhara of the 16th century - brought them to the island church because of the absence of sources throwing light on the issue.



Fig. 6.6. The two oldest *Awds* at the treasury of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon

The other important treasures to be noted under this various type category are endowed religious goods and these include the *Atronus* (Book stand), *Mäqwamiya* (Staff) and *Arwé-Bert* (staff mounted cross of bishops) each of which was endowed by Empress Zäwditu,⁸² *Mämher* Haylä-Mareyam (the late *Abunä Pétros* the martyred)⁸³ and *Abunä Natna'él* (the present Archbishop) respectively.⁸⁴ The Empress endowed the *Atronus* in 1918/19,⁸⁵ some two years before her official consecration of the church as monastery.

⁷⁷The engraved script on the cross.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹*Informants*: Mälaku and G/Mäsqäl; "Yä Zway Däbrä Şeyon Qedest Mareyam Gädam tarikawi qersa qersa ena..."

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* (Both sources).

⁸¹*Informants*: *Ibid.*

⁸²*Ibid.*, Banté, Zärühun and Tälafinos; The engraved script on the iron leg of the Book Stand.

⁸³*Informants*: *Ibid.*

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, *Abunä Natna'él*.

⁸⁵The engraved script on the iron leg of the Book Stand.



Fig. 6.7. The Atronus endowed by Empress Zäwditu



Fig. 6.8. The Mäqwamiya endowed by Mämher Haylä-Mareyam (the late AbunäPéṭros the martyred)



Fig. 6.9. The Arwé-Bert endowed by AbunäNatna'él

The Conservation Effort and the General Problems

A few decades ago, much of the invaluable religious treasures discussed above had been in a very bad condition because of their deposition in the old thatched hut church for long time. Particularly, most of the rare manuscripts were damaged by the rain dropped through the thatched roof. While others lost their important pages due to their disarrangement.⁸⁶ But thanks to the important conservation measures taken by the two archbishops: *Abunä Luqas* and *Abunä Natna'él* that the treasures could be saved from further demolition. *Abunä Luqas*, through his communication of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) conservation unit, got most of the rare manuscripts bound with wooden chests, and he, thereafter, placed all the treasures in a newly built house.⁸⁷ While his successor, *Abunä Natna'él*, constructed the current new building of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon with a museum room at the ground. He then transferred all the treasures to this museum room placing them in a metal made standing box for better conservation and exhibition.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Informants*: Banté, Mälaku, Semé G/Kidan, W/Mädhen and G/Mäsqäl; Sergew, "Preservation...."pp.4 and 9.

⁸⁷ *Informants*: *Ibid.*; Sergew, "Preservation...."p.4; Henze, "Lake Zway: Southern..." pp.36 and 40.

⁸⁸ *Yä Zway*. . . . p.19; *Informants*: Mälaku , G/Mäsqäl and *Abunä Natna'él*.



Fig. 7.1. The manuscripts at the treasury of the monastery of Däbrä Şeyon Mareyam with their wooden chests inside the metal made standing box

Nevertheless, there are still limitations in the overall conservation effort and general management of the Lake treasures:

1. The curators of the treasures are not trained professionals. They are rather the clergymen of the churches. Hence, the conservation works are very traditional. No rule of “Dos” and “Don’ts” is there for the visitors. As a result, some of the illuminations and even the scripts in the great manuscripts are being faded up due to the high flashlight of the visitors’ cameras apart from the great threat created on the copyright of the treasures. No fixed entrance fee is also there for both the foreign and domestic tourists. As a result, the income of the Lake Churches and Monastery from the tourism industry is very minimal.
2. The promotion works of the treasures are very insufficient. Hence, the number of tourists flocking to the lake sacred sites is not as high as one expects.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Being made up of largely holy arks and manuscripts, the treasures of the Lake Zway churches and monastery are significant in their number and mostly rare in their types, and their preservation in the island sacred places has helped the national church for its maintenance and expansion apart from ensuring its notable stand in the acquisition of the rare historical documents of even the continent.

The conservation and the overall management works of the treasures are, however, very inadequate calling for the following possible way outs:

1. Either training on how to conserve treasures should be arranged for the lake clergymen who are now acting as curators, or a trained curator has to be employed for the better management of the overall aspect. In line with this, the rule for the visitors has to be posted and communicated well. A regular entrance fee should also be assigned for both the foreign and domestic tourists using legal receipts.
2. Promotion works of the treasures should be conducted very extensively. Awareness creating seminars and workshops have to be arranged for both the church administrators (ranging from the Patriarchate office down to the parish community) and concerned governmental and non-governmental institutions (including offices of the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritages, Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, and the various tour operating organizations). Researchers should also be encouraged to conduct an in-depth study on the treasures, and their published research reports should also be communicated well to the general public using even the mass media (both regional, national and international TV and radio programs, newspapers and magazines) and heritage promoting websites.