

Exercising restraint: Conserving wall paintings within a living religious tradition in Tigray, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The rock-hewn and constructed churches of Tigray preserve an ancient, unique, and little known wall painting heritage. While environmental and structural problems, neglect, and occasionally, damaging renewal, have had adverse effects, most wall paintings survive with their essential integrity undisturbed. Traditional guardianship has been a major reason for this, but increasing tourism and misguided conservation efforts now risk upsetting this equilibrium. To address this situation, the Ethiopian Heritage Fund, a UK-based charity, carried out a groundbreaking technical and condition survey of Tigray's painted churches in 2013, and has since embarked on a carefully considered conservation programme. This paper describes the challenges of implementing conservation within the context of a living religious heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Since the official adoption of Christianity by the Aksumite state around 340 (Phillipson 2009, 30), the northern region of Tigray has been the guardian of Ethiopia's most venerable Christian traditions, embodied in the region's many painted rock-cut and constructed churches (Figure 1). Widely scattered across mountainous terrain and typically hidden in remote locations, these sites only began to be recorded by scholars in the 1960s: to date, about 150 churches are documented, around 20 of which are painted, though still no complete survey has been made (Pearce 1968, Teweldemedhin 1970, Buxton 1971, Jäger 1974, Juel-Jensen 1975, Plant 1985, Lepage 2005, Batistoni 2015, Friedlander 2015) (Figure 2). Additionally, lacking the status accorded to other cultural monuments in Ethiopia – such as the World Heritage sites of Aksum and Lalibela – they survive at the margins of administrative oversight, which is divided – and sometimes contested – between religious and state authorities, and local communities. Preservation issues are diverse and complex, and are also now rapidly shifting in the face of increasing tourism to the area and the growing interest of the international conservation profession.



Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia indicating the location of Tigray: reproduced with the permission of Tarn Phillip

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Figure 2. The mountain-top location of Debra Maryam Qorqor is typical for Tigray's remote painted churches



Figure 3. Chronic moisture- and salt-related deterioration affects the 13th-century paintings in the rock-cut church of Debra Maryam Qorqor



Figure 4. Failures of the constructed church of Petros Tefetsame Samaet, Melehayzenghi, have severely damaged its 17th-century paintings

Since 2013, the Ethiopian Heritage Fund (EHF), a UK-based charity founded to promote the preservation of Ethiopia's cultural heritage, has been at the forefront of efforts to conserve these painted churches, working in collaboration with the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB) and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. This paper reflects on the stages and outcomes of this endeavour, in the context of a challenging and changing conservation environment.

THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Damage and deterioration

Long-term threats to the survival of Tigray's wall painting heritage are numerous. Inherent geological and environmental issues present largely intractable problems at many rock-cut churches, which are all excavated from friable sandstone (Asrat 2002). Rock fracturing and collapse have occurred at some sites, and are a risk at others. Painted interiors are exposed to highly fluctuating external environmental conditions as a result of rock failure or other causes, leading to chronic moisture- and salt-related deterioration. This includes stone disintegration, which is particularly problematic where paintings are executed directly onto the rock (Figure 3).

The built churches are mainly composite structures of stone and timber, and their paintings – usually executed on earthen plasters – are also prone to structural failure and environmental deterioration. Paintings are typically altered by a wide variety of other factors, such as fire damage and smoke blackening; macro-biology, including infestations of bats, beetles and termites; and inherent failure of plasters and paint materials (Figure 4).

Usage and recognition

Newer threats relate to changing aspects of usage and recognition. Local communities have traditionally guarded churches and their paintings vigilantly against outside interference. This is still prevalent when several circumstances are combined: where churches are very remote and hardly accessible; where their paintings are found in the *maqdas*, or sanctuary, to which laity are denied access (Phillipson 2009, 25–27, 208); and where local reverence for paintings engenders an aversion to change. While mostly beneficial, such autonomy and control also have adverse consequences: serious deterioration may remain unrecognised and unaddressed, and unilateral attempts at renovation and renewal can result in damage and loss.

Examples of the latter are numerous: dimly lit rock-cut interiors are redecorated in bright colours, sometimes obliterating earlier, fragmentary painting (Figure 5); paintings may be concealed or damaged by the installation of new barriers or curtains to divide the *maqdas* from the public parts of church interiors (Figure 6); modern paintings on canvas are glued over ancient paintings (Figure 7). Such initiatives are often stimulated by locals who, having left their rural origins and prospered in nearby towns, wish to contribute something to their birthplace in the form of a gift to the church. Their acts of charity are difficult to control, as local priests can rarely turn them down, and implementation usually occurs without the knowledge of overseeing authorities.

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Figure 5. Modern decoration in the church of Gebriel Tsilal Meo illustrates one of the risks to these ancient rock-cut interiors



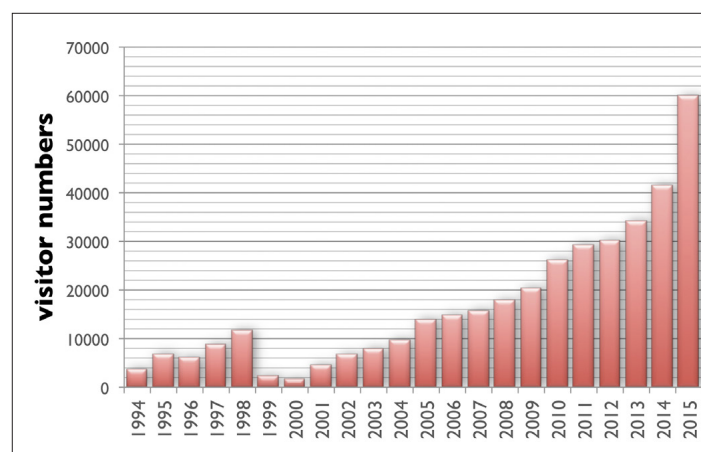
Figure 6. An example of harmful religious practice at Maryam Bahra: placement and use of the sanctuary curtains were damaging vulnerable medieval wall painting

A more pervasive issue is probably that of neglect. Ancient churches are often small, survive in poor condition, are typically located far from populated areas, and are not easily accessible. These provide motivations for building new, bigger churches closer to growing rural communities. Lack of resources, poor maintenance, and unregulated usage of the older building can result in damage to wall paintings. Worse still, an ancient church may be deliberately abandoned, and its building materials plundered for reuse in constructing a new church, leaving vulnerable wall paintings exposed to deterioration and loss (Figure 8).

Conversely, neglect can also be benign. Very remote churches can be left in an undisturbed condition, leaving their ancient wall paintings in a state of authenticity that is almost unrivalled in the modern world.

Effects of tourism

Into this state of affairs, tourism is exerting a growing influence. In 2015, Ethiopia was voted ‘world’s best tourist destination’ by the European Council on Tourism and Trade, and, boosted by governmental promotion and a generally stable political climate, the country has been attracting an average 12% visitor increase year on year over the past decade.¹ Tigray’s slightly higher figure of 13.2% for the same period reflects growing awareness of the region’s attractions, with 70% of Ethiopia’s 910,000 tourists travelling there in 2015 (Graph 1). Its popularity has been encouraged by several factors. While the more famous rock-cut site of Lalibela remains a must-see destination, steep hikes in entrance fees in 2013 are reportedly leaving many visitors disillusioned.² The painted churches of Tigray offer instead an extraordinary alternative experience, combining a sense of adventure and contact with a remote spiritual world. These are powerful attractions for travellers motivated by a desire for new and different experiences, untainted by overt commercialism. Embodying these qualities, the rock-cut churches of Tigray are becoming better known. Travel companies offer comprehensive packages for the discerning and daring tourist, in which the painted churches are a highlight. Ethiopian Airways, the expanding national airline, promotes the painted churches on its in-flight videos. Luxury lodges and eco-lodges are being developed, offering a range of accommodation in proximity to the churches. New roads improve access while still allowing intrepid visitors the challenges of mountain climbing to reach remote and beautiful sites.



Graph 1. International tourist arrivals in Tigray: figures supplied by the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau

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Figure 7. Arbaetu Inessa Towlehe: early-18th-century wall paintings partly obliterated by modern cloth paintings glued over them



Figure 8. The 17th-century paintings at Abuna Tekla Haymanot, Ara Ero, dangerously exposed by the plundering of its roof to build a new church

At present, effects of increasing tourism are finely balanced. One example provides an interesting case study. The rock-cut church of Debra Maryam Qorqor, which preserves an extensive cycle of 13th-century wall painting, and the nearby rock-cut meditational cell of Abuna Daniel, with paintings of the late 14th/early 15th century, are located on a mountaintop plateau in the Gheralta region, which has a particularly high concentration of medieval and later churches (Lepage 2005, 112–126, 138–139; Tribe 1997) (Figure 2). Notions of accessibility/inaccessibility are central to both the decline of religious attendance and the rise of tourism at these sites. Both churches remain in use, but their difficult location is a disincentive for full regular attendance, and new churches have been built at the bottom of the mountain to serve most local religious needs. But for tourists, the steep and difficult climb to reach the churches only adds to their attraction.

Tourist data collected at Qorqor for a two-week period in 2016 are shown in Table 1. From these, figures can be extrapolated for the entire high season, which extends from September to February. Although visitor numbers might be considered low compared with other major tourist destinations, they are substantial in Tigray's tourism environment; revenues are also large in the context of its cash-poor, agrarian economy, and impacts are significant. The local community retains approximately 70% of collected fees, the remainder going to the regional church authority. This represents a substantial local income. There are additional economic effects too, such as the employment of local guides. Importantly, awareness that the painted churches are appreciated by visitors in their existing condition is a disincentive for redecoration or other potentially damaging interventions.

In these ways tourism benefits the conservation of Qorqor's painted churches, and boosts the local economy. But problems are also emerging. A majority of tourists visit in small groups of two to three people at a time, who are respectful of the churches' religious significance. Cumulatively, however, increasing visitor numbers and larger group sizes inevitably unsettle a place of spiritual retreat and solitude. As an essentially unmanaged tourist destination – a feature that is part of Qorqor's current appeal – other potential risks are numerous. The protection of the paintings in their vulnerable environments is a concern. Abuna Daniel cannot comfortably accommodate more than ten individuals, so group sizes in excess of this present issues of site protection and visitor safety, particularly as visitors enter with day sacks, camera equipment and walking poles, and already some tour groups exceed 20 people. Serious concerns about the safety of visitors are also raised by the location of Abuna Daniel, which is reached by a narrow path at the edge of a 400-metre-high precipice. The wider environment is also susceptible to visitor-related harm, with, for example, graffiti increasing on exposed rock surfaces at the site. Visitor increases, and recent instances of unregulated camping, also threaten a rich and previously undisturbed ecology.

The arrival of conservation

Increasing interest in the painted churches of Tigray is prompting corresponding attention from the international conservation profession. This now ranges from regional cultural initiatives sponsored by supranational

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Table 1. Qorqor visitor numbers and revenues over a two-week period during high season in 2016

date	no. visitors/ group	visitor nationality	no. visitors/ day	ETB/ day	€/day
20 Sept.	2	?	7	1050	42.66
	2	German/Italian			
	3	Belgian			
21 Sept.	2	?	2	300	12.19
22 Sept.	2	French	11	1650	67.04
	6	Swiss/German/Dutch			
	1	?			
	2	Chilean/Ethiopian			
23 Sept.	1	Swiss	9	1350	54.85
	4	French			
	2	German			
	2	?			
24 Sept.	3	Italian/Finnish	12	1800	73.13
	3	German (based in Addis)			
	1	Swiss			
	2	English (based in Addis)			
	2	Ethiopia			
	1	?			
25 Sept.	2	Austrian (based in Addis)	11	1650	67.04
	9	Canadian/American/ Spanish/ Irish (based in Addis)			
26 Sept.	2	?	6	900	36.57
	4	?			
27 Sept.	-	-	-	-	-
28 Sept.	-	-	-	-	-
29 Sept.	2	?	4	600	24.38
	2	German			
30 Sept.	2	Italian	3	450	18.24
	1	French			
01 Oct.	1	French-Peruvian	8	1200	48.75
	7	Russian			
02 Oct.	2	English/French	7	1050	42.66
	5	Spanish			
03 Oct.	6	French	29	4350	176.73
	4	French			
	17	French			
	2	French			
04 Oct.	15	French	22	3300	134.07
	1	English			
	1	Norwegian			
	2	?			
	3	Italian			
TOTAL			131	19650	798.35

• based on exchange rate 1 ETB = €0.0406284

organisations, to privately funded conservation projects carried out by nongovernmental bodies. Like tourism, these developments could have both good and bad outcomes.

A major current initiative sponsored by the European Development Fund involves the nomination of the Gheralta area of Tigray as a cultural

landscape for inclusion on UNESCO's World Heritage List. This firmly promotes the preservation of cultural heritage in the wider context of regional development, which is both necessary and welcome. Economic diversification is particularly urgently required in Tigray, which is among the most arid regions of Ethiopia, with decreasing precipitation threatening subsistence farming in many areas. Certainly, the preservation of Tigray's churches requires a wide-ranging and sensitive approach that acknowledges their vulnerable environment, and recognition by UNESCO would be a major step in this direction.

To date, though, conservation has made few inroads in Tigray, and the remarkable survival of its painted churches owes more to traditional guardianship and indigenous caution. Generally, both state and religious authorities have been circumspect in their protective oversight, and access to churches by foreign missions has been very limited. Tigray's wall paintings have consequently not fallen victim to the mistakes often made by foreign conservation missions in other parts of the world, resulting from the import of inappropriate attitudes and assumptions into poorly understood environments. With more conservation proposals being submitted, however, this fragile status quo is now under threat. There are risks that unwarranted interventions, such as damaging cleaning and restoration, could be promoted on the basis of unsubstantiated claims, a situation which could be further fuelled by tourism pressure.

REDEFINING CONSERVATION APPROACHES

This is not to suggest that conservation is not required. A priority of the EHF's project, in collaboration with its Ethiopian partners, and with expertise from the Courtauld Institute of Art, was to establish conservation needs and constraints by undertaking a wide-ranging technical and condition survey. In 2013, a representative selection of Tigray's painted churches was made, seven rock-cut and two constructed, from different locations, ranging in date, style, and technology. The survey concentrated on establishing the principal types of damage and deterioration at these sites, and on gaining an understanding of original structural materials and painting technology through in-situ examination and scientific analysis.

As a result of the survey, the first of its kind to be carried out in the region, wall paintings at risk were identified for further investigation and conservation, in a programme begun in 2014. Although these face the range of problems already described, their authenticity had never been compromised by the introduction of treatment materials or aesthetic adjustment. In approaching their conservation, retaining this integrity is of paramount importance.

Local considerations limit conservation decision making in various ways. For example, deterioration at the rock-hewn church of Debra Maryam Qorqor originates in, but is indivisible from, its geological context, and is activated by uncontrollable environmental factors, circumstances which inhibit most conservation options (Figure 3). Recognising and accepting this is difficult, but it is necessary if damaging cycles of mistreatment and retreatment are to be avoided. A risk assessment initiated during the

survey, which focused on the interrogation of archival images, provided evidence of an extremely slow rate of deterioration and change. This knowledge demands a conservation emphasis on regular monitoring and condition assessment so that risks are better understood over the long term.

Sensitivities relating to religious use shape other aspects of the programme. Reverence within local communities for paintings is often accompanied by a highly developed protective sense, and a reluctance to allow any form of physical interference: for example, dirt and damages accumulated through acts of worship may have significance, and it cannot be assumed that cleaning of paintings is always a desired outcome. In such instances, even remedial efforts directed at essential stabilisation – such as new repairs – require careful consideration of their potential impact. However, other damages inflicted through religious use are just as likely to be the result of impoverished guardianship and neglect. Conservation in this context requires not just a sensitive treatment approach, but also stakeholder awareness raising and involvement.

This last issue is well illustrated by another case study. Maryam Bahra is a rock-cut church with important paintings of the late 14th/early 15th century on its walls and pillars, including a rare dedicatory inscription detailing the patronage of a local landowner (Lepage 2005, 140–45). Reflecting this status, the painting technology is distinguished by extravagant use of the expensive yellow pigment, orpiment, applied in medium-rich glazes (Shekede 2014, 39–40, 113). This technology is vulnerable to both damage and environmental deterioration.

A rail supporting curtains in front of the sanctuary had been crudely embedded into fire-damaged and flaking painting, causing further paint damage and loss (Figure 6). A priority was to engage the local community in preventive conservation efforts: the rail was removed and safely repositioned, and the old curtains were replaced with new custom-made ones. A newly made wooden barrier not only protects vulnerable low-level paintings, including the dedicatory inscription, but also provides a required liturgical division of the internal space. Additional preventive measures of glazing windows and repairing fallen walls were implemented to reduce air-exchange with the exterior, a contributory factor in paint deterioration identified during a programme of environmental monitoring.

Crucially, these measures rely on local agreement and inclusion, which is achieved by combining wider elements of church rehabilitation and satisfying liturgical needs that are collectively more effective than treatment of the paintings alone; implementing many of the improvements also provides local employment. This model of inclusive and broad-based conservation gains the trust and cooperation of local priests and villagers, on which the success of all these efforts ultimately depends.

EDUCATION AND PROMOTION

Complementary efforts need to be made in promotion and education. The church at Bahra is remote and difficult to find, and is therefore little visited. It misses out on the status and economic benefits bestowed by tourism on the Gheralta churches, and has few incentives to promote the

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preservation of its paintings. Putting Maryam Bahra on the tourism circuit is as important to its preservation as ongoing conservation efforts. To this end, a publicity brochure is being produced, providing information on its location and access, historical and technical significance, and its conservation, to be left at tourist lodges in the area. Contacts have also been made with the local tour guide association and community tourism initiatives to encourage the church's inclusion on travel itineraries.

Outreach to local tour guides is important in other ways, too. For now, the advantages of increasing tourism outweigh its drawbacks, but this is a critical moment for beginning to manage both its opportunities and inherent threats. Information that the guides provide is crucial in this process, although currently this is often partial and inaccurate, and does not touch on wider conservation and safety concerns. At Qorqor, for example, as well as conveying correct art historical and technical information, guides could also usefully limit visitor-group sizes and control visitor behaviour. Educational efforts are planned to address these issues in the ongoing conservation programme.

One other area of education has been highlighted as a priority. The TCTB is under-resourced and lacks the expertise to evaluate the growing influx of conservation proposals, and there is a pressing need to improve safeguards against potentially damaging submissions. As part of the EHF's continuing efforts, a workshop is planned in 2017 with local conservation agencies and professionals to define principles of conservation and establish protective protocols. This is intended to target one of the most worrying aspects of Tigray's shifting conservation landscape.

CONCLUSION

Tigray's rich legacy of ancient painted churches, for so long unknown to the outside world, is today being confronted by new issues which threaten its survival and integrity, and undermine the effectiveness of traditional guardianship. Alongside local protection, modern conservation practice has a judicious role in preserving this fragile heritage. Imaginative and inclusive community-based initiatives are part of this process, as are education and promotion. Mindful that misguided preservation efforts have too often caused irreparable harm to cultural sites elsewhere in the world, it is hoped that conservation approaches in Tigray will continue to be characterised by restraint and caution, allowing its vivid painted heritage to remain an authentic and inspiring reflection of the faith of the past, and a beacon of hope for the future.

NOTES

¹ See www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-3160651/Forget-sunny-Spain-enchanting-Thailand-romance-France-Ethiopia-named-World-s-Best-Tourism-Destination.html (accessed 14 November 2016).

² See <http://addisfortune.net/articles/lalibela-price-hike-angers-some-visitors/> (accessed 14 November 2016).

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