

The Anglo-Ethiopian Society

News File

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Cheleqot Selassie Church (Tigray)

Blair Friday

Invited to assist with plans for furnishing a museum at Cheleqot Selassie near Mekelle, I, along with supporters of the Ethiopia Heritage Fund (EHF), visited the church in December 2016 to see how we could help. Since then the EHF has drawn up plans to enhance the museum, and is now looking for donations, and information about the church's collection of artefacts.

Cheleqot Selassie, some 15 km from Mekelle, has a fine collection of late 18th century/early 19th century artefacts. These include magnificent Egyptian made crowns, chalices, patens, and a diversity of crosses and manuscripts that show a changing style from the 15th to the 20th centuries. The church is decorated with extensive and beautifully executed paintings on cloth by the well known late 18th century painter, *Aleqa* Hailu. These were done in the second Gondarine style, between 1793 and 1800, and are on the outer wall of the *maqdas* (inner sanctuary) and the *qeddest* surrounding it. Henry Salt and Nathaniel Pearce visited in 1804, and by way of these British travellers there are also artefacts donated by King George III. The church's treasures are not only important, but also the church is placed in a beautiful and peaceful area that would be very attractive to tourists.

Unlike the rock hewn churches further north in Tigray, Cheleqot Selassie is a traditional round building, similar to those around Lake Tana. Its foundations were laid in 1793 as the result of a dream had by *Ras Wolde Selassie* (1745-1816), the local ruler who reputedly controlled an area that stretched from the Tecazze River to the Red Sea, with Cheleqot at its centre. The doors, windows and other woodwork were fashioned from the qot tree (*Ekebergia capensis*) from which the community derives its name. The Cheleqot community has constructed a building for a museum, but little else. *Merigeta* Asfaw, a local cleric and historian, has led the initiative for this project.

On our visit we took the tarmac road, which gives way to a dirt road that winds through low hills to the village nestling by the river. We walked to the church past a magnificent tree, which stands outside the gatehouse of the church grounds. The river runs nearby, and the air was cool. Monks greeted us at the church with chanting, drumming and sistra. Within the grounds, the church treasures had been brought out and were on display. It was a magnificent sight.

William Simpson, who in 1868 visited Cheleqot, while covering Napier's Expedition for the *Illustrated London News*, wrote in his diary:

As the church at Chelicut is celebrated as one of the best in this part of the world, a party was formed to visit it on the march this morning. The houses have nice gardens and trees about them. There is a mixture of houses, some built square others round. At the east end in the midst of a grove of very fine large trees stands the church. From the sacristy they produced a large number of rich vestments, including 2 priestly crowns. They were like the dome of a church surmounted by a cross.

The church is little changed from this description to our visit. The churchyard still benefits from the shade of magnificent evergreen trees, and it is very peaceful.

History connected with the church is also of interest to British and Ethiopian visitors alike.

Ras Wolde Selassie began his career as protector of the salt caravans in the Danakil



The exterior of Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund



Welcoming party at Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund



Some of the crowns and crosses of Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund

Depression and made his fortune from extracting duty on loads transported into Tigray. Although small and very delicate looking, he was skilled with spear and on horseback. His reputation as a great and fearful warrior was known throughout Abyssinia. He defeated the then reigning ruler in Tigray in several battles, after which he rose to become governor of all the provinces east of the River Tecazze. The Emperor Egwale Seyon, whom he helped remain on the throne, then appointed him *Ras*.

According to Paul Henze, *Ras Wolde Selassie* was the first regional ruler to have close contact with Europeans. Henry Salt's initial visit to Cheleqot was brief. When he left the *Ras* gave him a letter in the name of Emperor Egwale Seyon for King George III. It was decided that Pearce would stay behind in the *Ras*' service to establish a friendly relationship with the Abyssinians. Pearce subsequently proved himself in battle against powerful Galla enemies and was given a house in Cheleqot close to the *Ras*; he married the daughter of a local Greek craftsman named Sidee Paulus.

Salt returned in 1810, bringing with him the gifts from King George III, and the visit culminated in a treaty of friendship, with *Ras Wolde Selassie* representing Abyssinia and Salt representing Great Britain. Salt, who was impressed with the horsemanship of the Abyssinians, purchased the best mare in the country from the *Ras* as a gift to George III. The mare survived the long journey back to England and was very much appreciated by the King, who let her roam free at Hampton Court Park.

Some fifty years later, when Napier's forces left Maqdala in 1868, the Empress Tiruwork Wube, widow of Tewodros II, and her son Prince Alemayehu went with them to travel via the coast to India. The Empress died unexpectedly near Cheleqot, and was buried with full honours. Her grave can be seen in the churchyard alongside that of her ancestor *Ras*



One of the illustrated manuscripts from Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund



Interior paintings at Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund



Wolde Sellassie.

Many of the superb church treasures were donated by the *Ras*, and some of the manuscripts may have been donated by Napier after the Maqdala expedition, when he and his army returned to the coast. William Simpson wrote:

Sir Robert Napier thought it would be wrong, particularly in a land where books were so scarce, to take so many copies of the Scriptures away. Hence, after copies had been selected for different libraries of India and England, as well as the principal libraries of Europe, he determined to distribute the remainder among the various churches on the line of the march.....Chelicot being an important place, a good number of books were presented to the church.

The church's collection of treasures is not currently on display, although some items can be seen on request and at local festivals. Thanks to the efforts of *Merigeta* Asfaw the community has constructed a museum building, but it cannot afford to fit it out appropriately nor ensure its security. It has little natural light and no display cabinets. As it remains unused, the villagers approached the EHF for funding a security wall, as well as for showcases, labels and promotional materials. The village had also asked for our expertise and advice to complete this project to an appropriate standard, and for basic training in museum management.

This would be a new departure for the EHF, which hitherto has focused on manuscript conservation, in particular the 6th century Garima Gospels. The charity has also undertaken work on icons and metalwork. In 2013 it began a wall painting conservation programme in Tigray spanning several years. Although the charity continues this work, we believe this project at Cheleqot fits with the aims of the charity to conserve church treasures and, through tourism, improve the lives of the local people.

Having visited the building and toured the interior, we think the space would work well, and that the most suitable way to display the treasures would be in one large secure display case that could be accessed by the clergy through doors on the far side. The building is wired for electricity, which would enable us to install some display lighting. Back in the UK, we have, with the help of a museum expert who travelled with us to the church, made a plan with working drawings for the museum. As this is a new venture for us, there is much to learn. We were fortunate to be able to visit the new museum in Wukro set up with the assistance of the Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia, based in Berlin. The Wukro museum is simple and stylish, with glass showcases displaying archaeological finds from the Tigray area. The artefacts are well displayed and there is a reception area selling pamphlets and information about Ethiopia, the area and the museum. So, we have designed an entrance desk that could hold publicity material and be used to sell tickets and a range of locally made items. Local people would staff this and would also be encouraged to set up stalls nearby to sell crafts and food.

Our tour of Cheleqot Selassie ended with a delicious meal, supplied by the clergy, of bread and local honey. We then left the magical valley with its trees and gently flowing river, and returned to the dust and bustle of Mekelle.

But our optimism for our plans was somewhat dented when we found that we had no idea where to source the materials required for our museum plan. Glass was the main issue. After abortive attempts to contact glass suppliers in Addis Ababa, we managed to make contact with the Ethiopian architect involved in designing and building the Wukro museum. We now realise that it is imperative that we have someone in Ethiopia who can oversee the project and provide information on costs. Once we have suitable personnel, have accurate



The museum building at Cheleqot Selassie Church

Photo © Ethiopian Heritage Fund

costings and we have raised the necessary funds, we will move forward on this wonderful project.

We recognize that for the museum to be viable it needs to attract visitors. It would make a lovely day out from Mekelle and unlike many of the churches in the Geraalta, the church is in the centre of the village, only a short walk from the road. Other sites nearby include Hintalo, Wolde-Selassie's capital, the church of Eyesus Hintsa and the Chele Anka waterfall.

Donations towards this project are welcomed and we would like to hear from anyone who can assist with more information on the collections. For further details:
Website: www.ethiopianheritagefund.org Email: info@ethiopianheritagefund.org