



## Aethiopia 23 (2020)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

---

MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, Columbia University

### Dissertation Abstract

*“Bastions of the Cross”: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches  
of Tigray, Ethiopia*

Aethiopia 23 (2020), 317–318

ISSN: 1430 1938

---

Edited in the Asien Afrika Institut  
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik  
der Universität Hamburg  
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Susanne Hummel,  
Alexander Meckelburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

Editorial Team

Susanne Hummel, Francesca Panini

MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, *“Bastions of the Cross”: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches of Tigray, Ethiopia*, PhD Dissertation in Art History and Archaeology, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, defended on 31 January 2020.

Despite numbering in the hundreds, the rock-hewn churches of Təgray, Ethiopia, have not been the subject of full academic study. The few scholars who have worked on the architecture of medieval Ethiopia have chosen overwhelmingly to focus on the Lalibäla complex from the thirteenth century or later, while the earlier churches of the northern Təgray province have only been briefly noted in larger surveys. To date, no scholar has undertaken a formal study of individual churches in this region, despite their importance for the study of the medieval world. My dissertation, limited to those Təgrayan churches that are not basilicas, considers the three cross-shaped churches of Abrəha wäʾAṣṣəḥa, Wəqro Ćärqos, and Mikaʾel Amba as architectural palimpsests, an index of the vibrant cultural exchanges that occurred between Ethiopia, the Islamic world, and India in the early Middle Ages.

The author dates these churches to the mid-eleventh century, and in the process reconstructs a system of patronage from an Ethiopian kingdom or chieftaincy, based in eastern Təgray, which was in close contact with Fatimid Egypt. The dissertation illustrates that, through this innovative building programme, early medieval Ethiopia was placing itself in dialogue with its own late antique past, the ecumenism of the Eastern Roman Empire, and, most importantly, their contemporary benefactor and ally: Fatimid Egypt. By drawing their inspiration from prestigious architecture in Late Antiquity, the churches effectively reinvented aisled cruciform churches through a medieval Ethiopian lens. Moreover, the manner in which the churches were decorated draws upon ornament inspired by precious cloths, imports from India, newly available via Fatimid mercantile channels. In this way, Təgrayan cruciform churches may be understood as an experimental form of prestige architecture from early medieval Ethiopia.

This dissertation, dubbed a ‘comparative study’, has been organized in the manner of a monograph and provides a holistic view of the three monuments. The first chapter is a critical review of the academic literature on Ethiopian art and architecture to date. The second chapter provides an overview of the salient architectural features of the churches, informed by the author’s own mensuration and documentation, along with a brief discussion of related churches. What follows is an investigation of the relative chronology of the three churches, wherein their construction in multiple phases is anchored by an eleventh-century groundbreaking. In the fourth

chapter their unique form and articulation is examined and is placed in dialogue with the architecture of Mediterranean Late Antiquity and Fatimid Egypt. This chapter also discusses their implications in the later history of Ethiopian architecture. The fifth chapter is an analysis of the churches' decorative schemas as drawn from imported textiles and their socio-liturgical implications. The penultimate chapter investigates the later social history of the monuments, including their use in both imperial Ethiopian and Italian propagandistic intrigues. The dissertation concludes with an absolute chronology of churches in Təgray.