

Unexplored Aksumite Sites In Tigray - II

Paul B. Henze

1. Introduction

At the First Littmann Conference in Munich in May 2002 I gave a presentation on unexcavated sites in Tigray that had identifiable Aksumite remains. Continued expansion of rural roads is making so many more areas accessible that it is possible to identify more sites with each research trip I make. In both 2004 and 2005 I made extensive surveys of monasteries and churches in the company of Ato Kebede Amare, the Tigray Tourism Commissioner. While my primary purpose was to gain historical information on medieval Christianity and photograph manuscripts and other objects, I again came upon sites with obvious Aksumite remains. I also revisited some of the sites included in my 2002 presentation.¹ I will first report on three of those:

2. May Adrasha

This promising site in Shiré, a short distance east of Inda Silassé, was the scene of excavations in the winter of 2003-04 by Dr. Jacqueline Phillips and a group of colleagues. When I visited it a few weeks after they had completed their work, I was pleased to be greeted by the guard who had been placed at the site at the initiative of the Tigray Cultural Commission. He showed us several places where the archaeologists had dug, exposing walls, some with neatly cut blocks visible. They found pottery and metal objects which were placed in the “mini-museum” of the branch cultural office in Inda Silassé. These include a crude metal cross and coins with crosses which indicate that the site continued to be occupied after the conversion to Christianity. The archaeologists’ belief that the site was a major provincial settlement over a long period of time, from the pre-Aksumite era into post-Aksumite times, has thus been further substantiated.

¹ A follow-up of this article, with some more details, see: Paul B. Henze: Exploring Unexcavated Aksumite and pre-Aksumite Sites.

3. Maryam Taqot (Tehot)

I have stopped at this site every time I have passed on the main highway from Wuqro to ‘Addigrat. In June 2005 we were let into the church, permitted to photograph its paintings and shown a few manuscripts (in poor condition) and crosses. The priests told us that they have recently forbidden further burials in the area around the church, for wherever parishioners dig they disturb ancient burials, exposing bones, pottery and other objects. Subsequently Ato Kebede Amare showed us a completely intact round, flat-bottomed pot and two smaller ones said to have been found at this site.

4. Menebeyti

I visited this fascinating site in a broad valley north of Imba Fatsi again in June 2005 accompanied by Dr. Catherine d’Andrea whose Canadian team has been conducting a walking survey of an area north of ‘Addigrat with rich results. Their area does not include Menebeyti, but Catherine’s observations bolstered the impression I gained when I was first taken to this site by Kebede Amare: The piles of Aksumite cut stone are evidence that major Aksumite structures existed here and there are many other bits of surface evidence in the surrounding area that indicate Aksumite occupation. The cut stones in the ruin pile have been shifted from the way they lay when I first visited the site. Some may have been removed. What struck me most on this visit was similarities with May Adrasha. There is a large area (several hectares) of loose rock to the northwest of the ruin site and the simple country church which appears to have been built of stones from the ruin pile. These loose rocks are all of similar, quite small size. They appear, as at May Adrasha, to be the remains of collapsed structures originally built of rough stones with clay mortar which has washed away. Unlike at May Adrasha, however, there is no evidence of digging by local villagers in search of gold or coins.²

5. Agobo Ch’erqos and Debre Selam

Reviewing extensive photography made at Debre Selam Mika’él in 2001 when I was permitted to photograph freely within the *meqdes*, I concluded that this rock-

2 I find mention of Menebeyti in *Annales d’Ethiopie* of 1959: Jean Leclant et Andre Miquel, “Reconnaissances dans l’Agame: Goulo-Makeda et Sabea (Octobre 1955 et Avril 1956), pp. 108-9. Photographs of the site accompanying this article show many more worked stones than I have observed there in recent years. Several square standing pillars seem to have been incorporated in the church or transported elsewhere.

cut church, located on a ledge in a cliff facing east, and the surrounding site, would repay more careful examination for Aksumite connections. Like Agobo Ch'erqos, the church at Debre Selam has distinct Aksumite construction features, including an intricately carved wooden ceiling comparable to that at Debre Dammo. The *meqdes* is essentially a much larger replica of the interior of Agobo Ch'erqos, the tiny perfectly preserved church I mentioned in my paper for the First Littmann Conference in Munich in May 2002.³

6. Atsbi and the Region to the North

The Atsbi plateau must have been a major area of Aksumite settlement. This is not surprising in view of its proximity to the lowlands from which salt had to be obtained. It may also have served as a route to the seacoast, though the trail down from Qohayto in Eritrea to the north seems likely to have been more important. Atsbi may have been the location of one or more of the pre-Aksumite kingdoms. One of the most fascinating questions connected with Atsbi is that of rock-cut sanctuaries. The region is dotted with rock churches as well as built churches which in many cases show signs of Aksumite beginnings. The question arises: were rock-cut sanctuaries in use in Aksumite times? Did they then become converted to Christian use?

Two churches I visited in 2005 raise this question. Sillasé Gundifro is located at a high elevation 16 km. south of Atsbi town.⁴ The present church is built in front of a small rock church. The surroundings show much evidence of early rock cutting. Time did not permit search of the area for Aksumite cut stones. Welowalo Maryam Tsiyon *Qelaqel* is located on the top of an outcrop about 3 km southeast of Welowalo village.⁵ A modern church has been built directly in front of an extensive rock-cut church which now serves as the *meqdes*. The inside of the modern church has recently been crudely painted in bright red which draws attention away from the distinctly Aksumite features of some of the columns which support its upper structure. On the terrain below the church lie a great many loose stones; some of them show evidence of possible Aksumite workmanship.

On the broad plain below to the northwest, a short distance south of the center of the small village of Welowalo⁶, Welowalo Ch'erqos stands in a compound shaded

3 Claude LePage and Jacques Mercier, in *The Ancient Churches of Tigray*, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Paris, 2005, pp. 94-105, classify both these churches as highly significant post-Aksumite examples dating from the 7th to the 11th centuries. Both display very early Aksumite characteristics.

4 Ruth Plant in *Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia* (Worcester, U.K, 1985) has a brief description of this church on p. 100-01. It is described at greater length in *Rock-Hewn Churches of Eastern Tigray*, Oxford University Exploration Club, 1975, p. 22-23.

5 Mrs. Plant missed this remarkable church. I have not yet found published references to it.

6 Welowalo village is 17 km from Idaga Hamus on a road that leads east and eventually

by a few young cedars that have been recently planted. Stepping inside, one finds oneself in a broad center aisle with two Aksumite square pillars supporting the superstructure on each side. Above the pillars on each side is a frieze formed of cut wooden sections. The whole structure gives the impression of an Aksumite temple converted to use as a church or, alternately, an Aksumite-period church built in the style of a pre-Christian temple incorporating earlier columns. The local priest told us that the present church was built on the site of a much older one. He claimed that the original church was built by a son of Emperor Gebre Mesqel.

7. P'araqleyt'os

This remarkable monastery is located on the edge of a deep, gaunt gorge not far off the old track that led from 'Addigrat to Debre Dammo. At about 7 km north of 'Addigrat this track turns off the main highway and leads westward. We soon found ourselves entering a military encampment with trucks and artillery lined up facing Eritrea. Soldiers were friendly but insisted we return to their headquarters in 'Addigrat to get permission to pass through, which we did. The officer in charge immediately authorized our passage provided we returned the same way and did not stray from the route. The track to P'araqleyt'os led onward through largely treeless uninhabited country, through deep valleys and over barren hills, 14 km to the point where we caught sight of Parakleitos and parked to walk 500 m down a long slope to the monastery. (The road was said still to be travelable to Debre Dammo, 15 km farther on).

Hiking down the slope to the monastery compound, we passed through the gate and were immediately struck by the sight of Aksumite remains—pillars and carved stones—on all sides. The abbot told us the foundation of the monastery is credited to Emperor Ille Amida, who according to tradition was the father of 'Ezana, who accepted Christianity in the 4th century.⁷ This ascription may well be anachronistic, but there can be little doubt that the site has been occupied since Aksumite (perhaps even pre-Aksumite) times. An inscription on a pillar before the church was called to our attention.

The large church, richly painted inside, is recent but there are many other buildings of indeterminate age as well as walls that appear very old. The church incorporates several Aksumite pillars, as do other buildings. We examined stones and other objects in the churchyard before going to the *iqabét*. From there monks brought out a carefully wrapped, excellently preserved Ethio-Sabaeans inscription.⁸

connects with the new road that goes down to Sawne.

7 Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time*, p. 32.

8 Dr. Stefan Weninger of the University of Marburg, who has examined my photographs of this inscription, comments: "It is in boustrophedon and mentions twice the deity Almaqah, the major deity of the Sabaeans, also worshipped in Yeha. From the palaeography I would

We did not have time to walk through areas outside the walls of the monastery, but a survey of the area would be likely to reveal other remains of interest. The area allocated to the Canadian archaeologists does not extend to this region, but Catherine d'Andrea, who accompanied us on this visit, noted the major features of the site.

8. Maryam Nazre

This remarkable site in southern Inderta is the subject of a separate article in these proceedings by Kebede Amare and myself.

9. Sawne Maryam

This site has recently become easily accessible because of a well engineered road which leads down the escarpment into the Afar lowlands. It branches off the main highway south of 'Idaga Hamus and continues to descend through spectacular scenery to below 1,000 meters by the time it reaches the open, cultivated basin of Sawne where two churches, Maryam and Mika'él, occupy the same compound and share a common belfry and treasury.⁹ Sawne Maryam is by far the older. The local clergy maintain that the first church on the site was built in EC445 by a son of Emperor Gebre Mesqel. They say it was partially rebuilt by the son of Yekunno Amlak, Widim Ar'ad (1299-1314) and finally took its present form during the reign of Zer'a Ya'iqob (1434-68). It became a monastery during the reign of Fasilidas in the mid-17th century. From Aksumite times onward this region was known as Sa'sie'. Villages paying tribute to Sawne extended all the way north to Eritrea. Sawne has no religious relationship with Gunda Gundo, located 6-8 hours' walk to the north at approximately the same altitude, but monks from both monasteries now come to each other's celebrations. Sebagadis Woldu, who came into prominence in Tigray in the 1820s following the death of *ras* Wolde Sillasé of Ch'éleqot, was born in Sawne and retained an affection for it. He gave the monastery a cross and a richly illustrated 15th century Gospel which I photographed in 2004. The main purpose of my 2005 visit was to examine the interior of Sawne Maryam which has Islamic-type arches and a wooden ceiling. Its interior walls bear evidence of very early paintings, some of which have recently been repainted. There are no visible

guess that it is from the 6th century BC." He published it in *Aethiopica*. See my article Paul B. Henze: Exploring unexcavated Aksumite and pre-Aksumite Sites.

⁹ Sawne represents the easternmost extension of Christianity in this region as well as Tigrayan settlement. Beyond the population is Muslim Saho.

Aksumite remains in the church compound. I have not examined the surrounding area.

10. Sites Visited in Early 2006

Following the conference in Aksum my wife and I were taken by Kebede Amare to five Aksumite sites we had not visited before. Four of these are in Atsbi; the fifth is in southern Tigray at the south end of Lake Hashängé. I will describe and discuss each site:

11. Seqira

Seqira is located 9 km. north of Dera at the end of a very rough track. The visitor comes through a rocky valley first to a small church in a grove of gnarled old cedars. It was built in 1941 to replace a much older one. The churchyard contains no obvious Aksumite stones but the possibility that some might be found there cannot be excluded. In an open meadow about 500 m below and to the north of the church grove stand three stelae 8-9 m. apart. One is fully vertical, one leans slightly and one leans at almost a 45-degree angle. All of them appear to be deeply anchored in the soil. Several smaller stones - perhaps tops of stelae, project from the ground nearby. At some distance west of the main three a long stela (8 m.) lies in the ground partly covered by soil. All the stelae are rounded rather than square-cut and have no inscriptions or ornamentation. The above-ground portions of the standing stelae measure 3.12 m., 2.97 m., and 4.44 m respectively, the last being the sharply slanting one. To be as firmly anchored in the soil as it is, it must have an extension of at least 2 m underground. The area is pastured by sheep and goats. Numerous pottery fragments, most of which appeared to be pre-Aksumite, according to Italian archaeologist Andrea Manzo, litter the surface. Local people told us they found no coins or metal objects. They reported many other Aksumite remains in the surrounding area and pointed to a stela far up a distant hillside. When a farmstead was recently built on a neighboring hillside, they said that walls and a stairway were uncovered.

The site appears to have been a center of substantial Aksumite or pre-Aksumite occupation, possibly from a very early period. A survey of the surrounding area to chart locations of walls and foundations would be desirable. Experimental excavation on and around the stela field could determine if the stelae were erected in connection with tombs.

12. Yohannes Mit'maq, Gazén

This rock-cut church, one of the largest in Tigray, is located at the northernmost extremity of Atsbi in a cultivated area called Sen'afe, which forms the edge of the plateau directly above the eastern escarpment. Thirty-four kilometers from Atsbi town, it can be reached over a difficult track (17 km) from Atsbi-Dera as well as over a longer route from 'Idaga Hamus to Robwe, a small town a short distance north of Gazén Yohannes. Visited by Claude LePage in 1973, the church was measured and photographed by the Oxford Exploring Club in 1974 and at about the same time by Ruth Plant.¹⁰ It has several features which link it to the late Aksumite/post-Aksumite period: massive, carefully cut octagonal pillars of a very early type; remnants of carved wood used as interior dividers; a network of funerary chambers, some of which can be reached by a shaft which Mercier believes may predate the cutting of the church. There are parallels for such shaft-tombs at Kerneseber Mikael, Aksum 'Arba'itu Insesa, Hawzén Tekle Haymanot and Degum Sillasé.¹¹

The church is cut deep into a sandstone cliff with no significant exterior structure except what may be a fairly recent *Deje-Selam*. There are no obvious foundations or remnants of other structures in its immediate vicinity. It would appear not to have been a site of major settlement, but there has been no surveying or experimental digging in the immediate surroundings, so the possibility remains open. If it had its beginnings as a pre-Christian sanctuary, it must have been chosen for major expansion after the coming of Christianity, for its elaborate interior can be compared only with other major rock-cut churches in Tigray such as Inda Medhané Alem 'Addi Qäsho in Tsa'ida Imba.

13. Zaréma Giyorgis

The remarkably well-preserved early Aksumite church at Zaréma in Atsbi is unique in Ethiopia as an example of very early Christian architecture, a free-standing built church comparable only to Debre Dammo. While Inda Abuna Aregawi on Debre Dammo has been repeatedly repaired and restored through the years, Zaréma Giyorgis is much more intact in its original form, though certain portions were removed and altered when a new church was built over the original one in the late 1990s. The old church has long been known and described¹² but rarely visited

10 Oxford Expedition Report as previously cited, p. 20; Ruth Plant, *op.cit.*, p. 139-140; LePage/Mercier, *op.cit.*, p. 90-93. Mrs. Plant's description includes a detailed ground plan.

11 Henze, "Unexplored Aksumite Sites in Tigray", p. 67-78 in Raunig/Wenig, *Africas Horn, Akten der Ersten Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz*, Wiesbaden, 2005.

12 Plant, *op.cit.*, p. 120-2; LePage/Mercier, *op.cit.*, 62-71.

because of its original inaccessibility and, more recently, because of the unusual circumstances of its preservation. Villagers, to protect the old church, built a large new church over it which was completed in 1997. They preserved the old church as the *meqdes* of the larger one.

It is now comparatively accessible over a track that goes 15 km north/NW from Atsbi town. Visits to it have to be cleared with the church authorities in Atsbi and can be successful only when the *tabot* has been removed at T'imqet or on some other occasion.¹³ If visitors enter the church while the *tabot* is out, a monk from Atsbi must be brought to reconsecrate it. On a previous visit we were unsuccessful in entering Zaréma Giyorgis¹⁴, but able to explore the churchyard. We had the good luck of being in the area in 2006 at T'imqet. Even then, in spite of careful advance arrangements by *ato* Kebede Amare of the Tigray Culture and Tourism Commission, we managed to enter and examine the old church only by diplomatically and patiently overcoming the hostility of local clergy and villagers. We finally achieved our goal at dusk on T'imqet eve.

We immediately noted similarities with the old churches at Agobo and Debre Selam. These include great use of wood carefully cut and often carved, elaborately patterned wooden ceilings, and skillfully constructed Aksumite walls consisting of layers of masonry separated by long wooden beams. Doors and windows are framed in classic Aksumite fashion with cross beams at each of the four corners. The quality of wood carving is unusually fine and parts of it, on capitals, is on separate pieces nailed onto the underlying wood. Elaborately fitted and carved friezes rest on large square columns. A basically intact chancel stands before the sanctuary under a perfectly symmetrical arch. This arrangement, characteristic of early church architecture, as in the Mediterranean world, ceased to be a feature of Ethiopian churches by the 12th century. Mercier judges Zaréma Giyorgis to date from the period between the 6th and 9th centuries.

As at Debre Dammo, the church is free-standing. There are no rock outcroppings nearby. Nor, except for the curious flat rocks with holes, is there obvious evidence of other early structures. The cemetery on the eastern side of the church compound contains a small crude stela about 70 cm in height set solidly in the soil, but there are no other apparent Aksumite remains. Nevertheless, the whole site and its surroundings ought to be surveyed for pottery, artifacts and evidence of early burials.

13 The Tigray Cultural and Tourism Commission arranged for removal of the *tabot* in 2005 so that a group of builders could examine the new church to make a plan for extending it to create a new *meqdes* which would make it possible to remove the *tabot* from the old church and make it accessible to visitors. It is hoped that this work will get under way later in 2006.

14 *Africas Horn*, *loc.cit*, p. 69.

14. The Welowalo Area

Two churches near Welowalo with distinct Aksumite features which I visited in 2005 are described above. One, freestanding on flat terrain, has apparently been rebuilt several times through the centuries but retains distinct ancient Aksumite features; the other, recently, was built in front of a rock sanctuary that appears to date from Aksumite times. Convinced that the Welowalo area would repay more investigation I returned there briefly in 2006. Here I found that villagers were actively digging in search of ancient artifacts. They readily admitted that local authorities were discouraging such activity, but discouragement apparently did not take the form of a prohibition, for they led me to the site of recent digs over terrain that was littered with pottery fragments. They said they never find coins. At a site where digging was under way I saw walls exposed not far beneath the present surface. They were all of a rather simple type, but they had apparently belonged to large buildings. Villagers proudly displayed a large round pot which had just been dug out and a chunk of what could have been slag left from ore-smelting. A young lady said that she had a cross which had been recently discovered and offered to run to her house to bring it. It was of iron with a very eroded, roughly cruciform head on a long stem, but no ornamentation was evident.

I have been unable to find references to previous visits to Welowalo, but in addition to the presence of the two churches with Aksumite architectural features, the great quantity of potsherds which litter the whole area as well as the results of local digging attest to substantial early occupation. The fact that no coins are found could be evidence that the area was occupied at a time before coinage came into use. The region clearly merits further serious investigation.

15. Mifsas Bahri

This fascinating site came to the attention of cultural officials and archaeologists in 2001 when local authorities reported that peasants were carrying away stones from what they thought was a historical site at the southern end of Lake Hashenge. Archaeologist Tekle Hagos decided to make test excavations there in 2002. The site is easily accessible on a track that turns off the newly asphalted main highway 3 km. north of Korem and goes 7.4 km into the hilly country to the west. As it comes over a low rise, a small mound becomes visible about 500 m from the southern shore of the lake. Mifsas Bahri means "Outflow of the Lake" and refers, it seems, to the fact that once the Lake drained southward through the valley which is now a bit too high to permit an open stream to flow through. Since the water of the lake remains fresh and comparatively level, it is assumed that the lake still drains southward underground through the same valley.

The mound, which rises perhaps four meters above the surrounding terrain, strikes the visitor immediately because of the large number of large cut red stones

that lie scattered across its surface. In his excavations Tekle Hagos dug at the center of the mound and found extensive walls. He also found pottery, charcoal, evidence of *dagusa* cultivation and storage, bones of several kinds of domestic animals and a few human bones. None of this material was systematically studied and the charcoal has not yet been carbon-14 dated. Some of the material excavated was taken to Addis Ababa and the rest of it is kept in the office of the cultural bureau in May Ch'ew. The excavation was carefully filled in to leave it for future large-scale excavation.

More than two dozen large cut stones lie scattered over the top of the mound. Most are of a kind of bright red stone that appears volcanic and resembles a form of solid tufa. Among them are a few white stones, but there is no evidence of classic Aksumite-type walls with wooden strips and cross beams. Many of the larger stones appear to have been cut to fit carefully with others. Several have been drilled with central holes, 10 cm across, which may have been for wooden plugs designed to stabilize a structure built of thick squared blocks. Some of the stones have arabesque designs and some have striking crosses. We found no inscriptions. None of the stones has evidence of having been originally held in place with mortar. Scattered among the larger stones are many fragments and a few potsherds. A few unusually long stones lie half-buried on the surface, overgrown by sod. These may have been columns or stelae, but were more likely components of the structure that stood here. Since local people may have carried off stones over a long period of time, it is difficult to get an impression of what sort of building these components would have formed, but the presence of crosses may well indicate a church. The site would appear to be late - 6th or 7th century.

Local villagers who gathered as we were examining the site pointed to other places in the hills nearby where they said there were cut stones and walls. Could the stones on the low mound be the remains of a church (or perhaps a palace) which stood at the center of an area of late Aksumite occupation? Tekle Hagos's work here apparently did not afford time for a systematic survey of the surrounding area.¹⁵ What is most intriguing about Mifsas Bahri is its possible significance as an example of late Aksumite expansion southward into Wag and the area beyond. Only a short distance to the south, at the northern edge of Korem, the track into Wag via the Abba Mat'a pass turns off to the west. A modern road was built over this route all the way to Seqota in the early 1990s. The exploration of Wag and Lasta for Aksumite remains has barely begun.

Significant remains are likely to be discovered there in the years ahead.

15 The annual magazine of the Federal Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH), *Qirs, Sené* 1994 E.C., contains a brief report of a preliminary excavation at this site, p. 9-11 (in Amharic).



Fig. 1 (Left): The Old Church of Zarema Giyorgis inside the new one???

Fig. 2 (Right):



Fig. 3 (Left): Tombs of Yohannes Mitmaq??



Fig. 4 (Right):



Fig. 5 (Left): Meqdes of Debre Selam Giyorgis??
Fig. 6 (Right):



Fig. 7 (Left): The Stele in Hawzen town
Fig. 8 (Right): Interior chamber of Welwalo Maryam Tseyon Kelakel

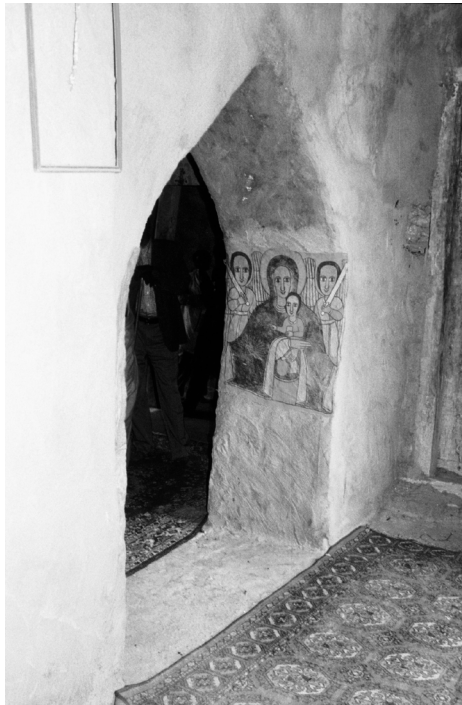


Fig. 9 (Left): Islamic type arch in the church of Sawne Maryam

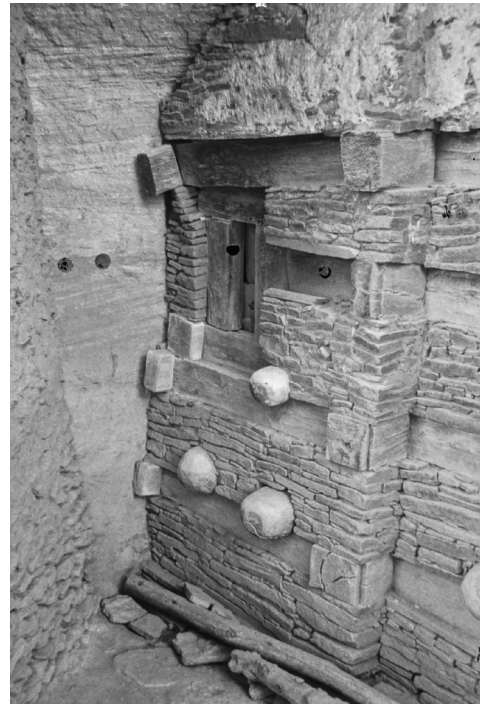


Fig. 10 (Right): Aksumite church of Agobo Ch'erqos