

Mysteries Of Maryam Nazre

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1. Introduction

There are few records of visits to Maryam Nazre.¹ The site attracted no recent attention from travelers or archaeologists until the Tigray Culture and Tourism Commission asked Federal Ministry of Culture officials to examine it at the beginning of the present century. They found it of interest and concluded that an archeological survey and exploratory excavation would be justified, but no action has followed to date. Meanwhile the Tigray Cultural and Tourism Commission rated Maryam Nazre among sites deserving protection and stabilization and arranged for a contractor to build a protective roof over the large building at the site in 2003. It was completed at the end of 2005. The building is one of the largest free-standing ancient (i.e., non-rock-cut) structures in Ethiopia. In Tigray only the great temple at Yeha exceeds it in bulk. Protective work was completed in 2005 and a sign has been erected at the point along the main highway through southern Enderta where the track to this intriguing site turns east.

The huge building at this site is located in the middle of a substantial farming village called Adi Abona ("Village of the Fathers") 12 kilometers southwest of May Nebri. The rough field track that leads to it turns off east 1-1/2 km. south of May Nebri. The first few kilometers of this track are roughly surfaced with field stone, work said to have been done during the Italian occupation as a connecting route to the Wejjerat region. Beyond, the track winds over rough terrain. Before it reaches the village, it crosses a stream over a ford that needs to be repaired after each rainy season. Thus 'Adi Abona is visited by few travelers. This article is based on several visits during the past eight years by the first-named author and visits in 2005 and 2006 by the second during which the great building and its immediate surroundings were examined and everything of interest was photographed and measured.

1 Here are only two brief scholarly notices: by Antonio Mordini in "Informazioni preliminari sui risultati delle mie ricerche in Etiopia dal 1939 al 1944" in *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* #5, 1946, p. 150; and Francis Anfray, "Notes Archeologiques" in *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 1970, p. 36-39. Both contain useful photographs.

2. Aksumite Beginnings

It is apparent that the site was significant in Aksumite times. Evidence of Aksumite occupation is visible everywhere. The immediate surroundings of the great stone building, which is termed a church by the villagers and long used by them for this purpose², are littered with Aksumite columns and other cut and shaped stones of Aksumite type. Several Aksumite columns have been incorporated into various parts of the building. More than a dozen columns and other cut stones can be seen outside the building; inside another ten can be identified, some apparently incorporated into the structure in the course of rebuilding. Others may lie buried in the surroundings.

The most impressive evidence of Aksumite beginnings is in the building's foundations, especially on the east side, where carefully fitted cut limestone blocks form the lowest visible portion of the foundations. A few of the lowest foundation stones reach 1.7 meters in length and 20 centimeters in thickness. These foundations resemble those of the great temple at Yeha and in places such as the church of Maryam T'aqot (T'ehot) south of 'Edaga Ḥamus.³ On the east side of the building, soil has fallen away from the foundations, though not so much as to expose the lowest layer of foundation stones. On other sides of the structure the lower layers of the foundations are not visible at all. We assume, nevertheless, that the walls of the building are underlain by well constructed foundations on all sides. There are no indications of sinking of the foundations. Excavation on all sides would be desirable to determine the foundations' depth. Test excavations by Tekle Hagos, an archaeologist from the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritages (ARCCCH), revealed that a structure similar to the one on the eastern side is still intact and extends some 20 meters east-west.

The basic plan of the building is rectangular with its greatest length approximately approx. 29 meters on a north-south axis. At its northern end walls appear to have collapsed and been rebuilt in a way that obscures the original layout of the foundations and walls built on them. A thick interior wall (82-85 cm.) divides the building into two not-quite-equal halves--a long hall on the west side and several square rooms on the east side. Exterior walls average 60-70 cm in thickness. The interior of the building averages six 6 meters in width--the long western hall a bit over 2 meters and the almost square chambers on the east side averaging 3.8 x 3.8 meters, though no two are exactly identical in shape.

2 Very old buildings throughout Ethiopia are almost always regarded as churches by local people and often used for this purpose. This does not mean that they were originally erected as churches. Many may have been residences or administrative structures.

3 Henze, "Unexplored Aksumite Sites in Tigray" in *Afrikas Horn, Akten der Ersten Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2005, p. 67-78; as well as "Unexplored Aksumite Sites in Tigray - II", presented at the Second Littmann Conference in Aksum, January 2006.

These square chambers are the most unusual feature of the building. There appear to have originally been five of them, though the northernmost one has been dismantled or has collapsed. Each of the four that remain intact has a door that opens from the main hall. Interior doors connect each chamber to the next. All these doors average 1.8 meters in height. Each chamber is topped by a cupola. Their unusual characteristics will be discussed further below. The north end of the building gives evidence of repeated rebuilding and perhaps removal of stones for other building purposes. The layout of the building when it was used by villagers as a church is difficult to determine from its present condition. In recent years villagers built a new round church a short distance beyond the north end of the ruin but do not seem to have reused a great deal of stone from the old building.

Exterior walls rise as high as 5-6 meters on both the east and west sides but how they were originally topped and how the roof was sealed and joined to the domed cupolas is not entirely clear. There is evidence of a cornice at the north end. Along the full length of the exterior wall on the west side, at a height of approx. 1-1.5 meters, are holes that were apparently made to receive roof beams of a side structure that may have been added after the original construction. These are approx. 1.4 meters apart. Construction of all walls, both original and perhaps later reconstruction, resembles classic Aksumite technique with wooden beams inserted to reinforce and stabilize the layers of stone at intervals of about half a meter. Wood has also been used as lintels and to form ceilings for doorways and window openings. Much of it appears well preserved but needs to be examined by specialists to determine its origin and approximate age.

The entire structure thus gives evidence of Aksumite beginnings extending back as far as two millennia. It is not possible to envision what the original Aksumite building might have been: temple? administrative structure with storage areas? palatial residence? The building then went through various stages of rebuilding and re-use over, perhaps a millennium and a half. Local traditions seem to offer clues about this.

Few obvious small Aksumite remains have come to light in the village itself or in the surrounding area, though no systematic walking surveys have been made and there has been no recent digging.⁴ Mordini reported finding a few coins of Hatz and Gersem (rulers from the late 6th and early 7th centuries) in a trench he dug near the building in the early 1940s.⁵ When Anfray visited the site in 1969 he was told by the local people that it had been a palace of Emperor Amde-Tseyon.

⁴ Villagers reported finding a burial when digging foundations for their new church which had included a metal cross which they considered ancient. It appeared to be of medieval type, but needs to be examined in greater detail.

⁵ Mordini, op.cit; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria*, Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica, Warsaw/Wiesbaden, 1997, p. 43.

3. Local Traditions

During our June 2005 visit a large group of local people gathered as we examined the site. They were eager to call our attention to everything they thought significant. A highly articulate *shimagile* (elder) gave a lengthy account of the history of the site. According to him the great building had originally been an Aksumite palace which had been turned into a Christian church. King Lalibela had taken refuge here with his wife, Mesqel Kibra, he said, when his brother Harbe was persecuting him. He left Mesqel Kibra here in the care of nuns when he traveled to Jerusalem. When he returned, Harbe had been killed and the way was clear for the royal couple to return to Roha where Lalibela took possession of the throne. Lalibela had brought back a *tsebel* (source of holy water) from Jerusalem and placed it here. It still flows near the churchyard with what is called "Jerusalem Water". After Lalibela departed, the building continued to be used as a church. Emperor Amde-Tseyon, out of respect for Lalibela and because of the importance of the site, decided to rebuild the large structure as a palace and had other structures built as well.

Though aspects of this account may be fanciful, especially those relating to Lalibela's travels to Jerusalem, it fits to a surprising degree with information that has been gathered from records both of the early patriarchs of the Ethiopian church and historical chronicles. Fragmentary information gathered by Munro-Hay in his study of the early patriarchs, all of whom were of course Egyptian monks, indicates that Nazre may have served as their primary residence during the late Aksumite period before the rise of the Zagwe, though they often accompanied emperors in their campaigns and moves around the country. As many as six patriarchs from this period are believed to have been buried at Nazre. The name which the village still retains would itself substantiate this theory: 'Adi Abona [Abuna]. Mordini believed that Nazre might also have served as patriarchal residence during the reign of Lalibela.⁶

Amde-Tseyon (throne name, Gebre Mesqel), whose 30-year reign extended from 1314 to 1344 has long been considered to be one of the most outstanding Ethiopian emperors.⁷ A grandson of Emperor Yekuno Amlak, Amde-Tseyon's reputation rests on his energetic campaigning to bring the country fully under the authority of the restored Solomonic Dynasty. He was determined to secure the highlands against the chain of Muslim states which had arisen in the preceding three centuries in the area from Zeila on the coast inland to Shoa and northward through the region below the escarpment.⁸ Having been successful in campaigns against Hadiya, Damot and Gojjam, Amde-Tseyon then turned his attention to the north where his authority was challenged by a local dynasty in Tigray centered in Enderta.⁹ If

6 Mordini, *loc.cit.*; Munro-Hay, *op. cit.*, p. 41-44.

7 *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* I, p. 227ff.

8 G.W.B. Huntingford (ed.), *The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon*, Oxford, 1965.

9 "Consolidation of the dynasty in the north" in Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, 1971, p. 72-77.

Nazre had long been established as a center of ecclesiastical authority, it seems logical that he would have chosen it as a site for a residence and campaigning headquarters and decided to rehabilitate the ancient building. The rebuilding would presumably be datable to the second or third decade of the 14th century, for once he became involved in the affairs of the north there is little evidence that Amde-Tseyon returned long to the southern part of the country.

4. Islamic Architectural Influence?

Perhaps the most mysterious feature of the building as it now stands are the five rooms on the east side which display distinct Islamic-type architectural features. These rooms are all basically square and similar in form and style. Their walls rise to the full height of the building. They are roofed by well-built cupolas formed of carefully fitted stones set in mortar. The cupolas rest on a square framework of wooden beams firmly set into the walls. The east wall of each room has a niche in its center 40-70 cm. above the present floor level, measuring 1.78 to 1.98 meters in height, 69 to 89 cm in width and 64 to 66 cm in depth. The floors of most of these niches are made of wooden planks. The floors of these rooms appear to be original and not to have been repaved. Starting at the northeast corner of the building the rooms are as follows:

Room #1, 3.8 x 3.8 meters, through which the building can be entered, is in semi ruined condition. Its cupola seems long ago to have collapsed.

Room #2 likewise measures 3.8 x 3.8 meters. It opens into the main hall by way of a door, 1.8 meters in height, topped by a solid wooden lintel.

Room #3 is somewhat larger, 4.2 x 4.1 meters. It connects to the main hall by way of an Islamic-type pointed arch which has been neatly plastered, as is a large section of the wall through which it opens.

Room #4 is smaller, 3.2 x 3.39 meters, and is connected with the main hall by a lintel-topped door.

Room #5 is similar but a bit larger, 3.43 x 3.62; it also connects to the main hall by a lintel-topped door. The doors of these last two rooms have arched interior windows above them which have been plastered and resemble in style the shape of the Islamic-arch door which opens from Room #3 into the main hall.

Each of these rooms has two tiers of arched niches, one above the other, built of carefully fitted stones set in mortar with evidence of extensive original plastering. A good deal of wood has been used with long beams placed between the upper and lower levels. Most of the niches are deep, up to 64 centimeters, and would thus offer room for objects that could have been displayed. There is no evidence

of cult statues or objects of any kind, however, the presence of which would be contrary to both Islamic and Orthodox practice. What then was the purpose of these niches? Local people offer no explanation.

There are few features to these rooms which would indicate use for Islamic worship. There is no tradition of Islamic presence in the immediate area of Maryam Nazre. When newly built, all five rooms must have been impressive, with their plastered walls and niches, rising to domed ceilings 6-7 meters above floors paved with stone. Could they have been living and sleeping rooms of a palace? Might Amde-Tseyon, though continually campaigning against Muslim lowlanders, have chosen Muslim architects to design and reconstruct his palace? There is some resemblance with medieval structures in Yemen and Egypt. Might Yemenis or Egyptian architects have been engaged to oversee the construction? There are no obvious answers.¹⁰

5. Interior Aksumite Remains

The long hall which forms the western side of the Maryam Nazre building has several Aksumite-type columns, at least two of which are free standing and others which have been incorporated into the walls. The large columns which rise to support the roof give the impression of having been built at a later date of small cut stones, some of which at the top of the columns resemble bricks set in mortar. At several points thin, square slabs lie on the floor or lean against walls. These look like Aksumite altar components. Against the wall outside Room #4 what appears to be a baptismal font rests on one of these slabs. It is round, with a radius of 15 cm. and has an edge, cracked on one side. Below it is an inscription, "*ma - qe - ??*". The floor of the western side of the building consists of flat stone slabs and appears to have been laid at a late date, perhaps over an earlier floor. There is no evidence of crypts or cellars.

10 There is some similarity between this building and the ancient church at Sawne, far to the north, in lowland 'Agame, recently made easily accessible by the construction of a major highway leading from the plateau south of 'Edaga Hamus to the Afar lowlands. Sawne Maryam, which has been rehabilitated at various times, is claimed by its local clergy to have been founded in EC445 by a son of Emperor Gebre Mesqel. They say that it was then rebuilt by Yekuno Amlak's son, Widim Ar'ad (possibly the father of Amde-Tseyon), at the beginning of the 14th century. It then took its final form during the reign of Zer'a Ya'ikob (1434-1468). This church has Islamic-type pointed arches and in its central section an elaborate wooden ceiling of the type found at Debre Damo and Debre Selam. There is no evidence at Maryam Nazre of the Aksumite type of carved, fitted woodwork.

6. Amde-Tseyon's Tomb?

In 1954 villagers at the small settlement of 'Adi Qelebes, 4 km. east of May Nebri, began to rebuild a dilapidated church dedicated to *abba* Nob¹¹. Clearing the southern section of the *qenē mabelēt*, they uncovered a stone coffin made of a carved block covered by a stone slab. Inside they found the bones of a man but no clothing, weapons or other objects. Something led them to conclude that these were the remains of Emperor Amde-Tseyon, who, according to local tradition, had been killed fighting against the Adal in the nearby region of Zoboul. Near the coffin they found a stone plaque with the word *Atse*. French archaeologist Francis Anfray visited 'Adi Qelebes in February 1969. The villagers explained to him that it was not surprising for Amde-Tseyon to have been buried at this site, for he had his palace nearby at Maryam Nazre (approximately 7 km away). Anfray measured the coffin: 2.05 meters in length, varying in width between 59 and 68 centimeters.¹² Recent investigation has revealed that the coffin remains at the church. Villagers now report that in addition to the corpse, which was reburied nearby, the coffin contained artifacts of gold which were taken to May Ch'ew for examination but never returned. In the 1960s a local noble was buried in the coffin. This brought complaints from the villagers who protested that a king's coffin should not be reused for another burial.

Villagers say the name 'Adi Qelebes is said to be derived from 'Adi *qey libs*, "place of the people with red clothing", a reference to vassals of Amde-Tseyon who were traditionally dressed in red.

7. Additional Observations

During the time when the building was used by the local villagers as their church, the four rooms on the east were used as sanctuaries for *tabots*. The principal *tabot* is Maryam; the others are Iyesus, Kidane Mehret, Tekle Haymanot and Mika'el. The long hall on the west side served as the *qiddist* and the *qenē mabelēt*. It had at one point collapsed and was rebuilt somewhat diminished in size. The door through which the congregation entered was at the north end of the building.

During an early 2006 visit Italian archaeologist Andrea Manzo examined pottery fragments found in the area surrounding the building. He concluded some were Aksumite and some pre-Aksumite. He concluded that the whole area around the building is undisturbed and could real a great deal of information if excavated.

11 This name is peculiar. It may be an alternate name for Gaber.

12 Francis Anfray, "Notes Archeologiques" in *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 1970, p. 36ff.

8. Conclusions

Maryam Nazre is an important site. The Tigray Cultural and Tourism Commission is to be commended for taking measures to protect it.

Serious archaeological investigation is needed of the site itself as well as the surrounding region, which should include:

- A systematic walking survey of the region around 'Adi Abona for evidence of pottery, worked stone, coins and other metal objects. The entire region between 'Adi Abona and 'Adi Qelebes should be surveyed if possible.
- Exploratory digging at several points along the edge of the foundations should be undertaken to determine their depth and the base on which they rest.
- Exploratory digging should also be done at other foundations that appear to date from Aksumite times (or from the medieval period).
- Samples of wood used in the building should be obtained analyzed to determine the kind, age, and possible origin.
- Professional architectural examination of the method of construction of the cupolas would be desirable to determine possible similarities with construction of the same type elsewhere.
- In places where Aksumite carved stones may be lying buried in the ground, they should be dug out and examined for possible inscriptions.
- Eventually, when personnel and funds are available, major archaeological examination of the entire site should be undertaken. Association of this site in chronicles with both the early patriarch and especially with Emperor Amde-Tseyon, make it a priority for fuller understanding of late-Aksumite and medieval Ethiopian history.



Fig. 1: The Maryam Nazre church, new building on the left, old on the right.



Fig. 2: Aksumite pillars outside the Maryam Nazre church.



Fig. 3: Aksumite pillars outside the Maryam Nazre church.



Fig. 4: Side entrance of the old Maryam Nazre church.



Fig. 5: Aksumite remnants, back-wall of the old Maryam Nazre church.



Fig. 6: Niches in one of the three inner chambers.



Fig. 7: The inner hall of the old church.



Fig. 8: One of the inner doors in "Islamic" style leading to an inner chamber.



Fig. 9: Ancient walls outside the old church.



Fig. 10: Ancient structures outside the old church.



Fig. 11: Stone plate from an ancient building.



Fig. 12: Remnants of an Aksumite building nearby the church.