



## **Rock art at Bete Mariam, Lalibela: Biblical and Archaeological Interpretation Getachew Meressa\***

### **I. Introduction**

In this paper, an attempt has been made to give an interpretation of selected animal engravings at Bete Mariam (the House of St. Mary), in Lalibela from Biblical and Archaeological perspectives. Lalibela is a monastic medieval settlement in Ethiopia; located at about 700 Kilometers to the north of the capital, Addis Ababa. Lalibela is one of the most popular historical and tourist attraction sites in Ethiopia and usually identified by its rock-hewn churches. The 11 rock-hewn are inscribed into a World Heritage List made by UNESCO in September 1978.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela has its own style and beauty. The church of Bete Mariam, whose wall motifs are the focus of this paper, is highly decorated with several beautiful engravings and paintings that symbolize biblical and traditional religious scenes. It is the only monolithic church in Lalibela that has been ornamented in color.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are animal figures, wild and domestic, depicted in various ways. The following animal engravings and paintings on the church of Bete Mariam are selected to be treated in this paper.

- The fish and the bread
- The two fighting oxen depicted in black and red colors
- The bas-relief figures of two riders on horseback killing the dragon with a spear



Fig. 1 The highly decorated Bête Mariam Church, Lalibela

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<sup>1</sup>Mengistu Gobezie, *Lalibela and Yimrehane Kirstos: The Living Witnesses of the Zagwe Dynasty* (Addis Ababa: Alpha Printers, 2004), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> I. Bidder, *Lalibela: The Monolithic Churches of Ethiopia* (Cologne: M. DuMont Schaubrg, 1958), p.122; B. Playne, *St. George for Ethiopia* (London: Constable, 1954), p. 129.

## II. Animals from the Rock art Sites of Ethiopia

Rock art consists of paintings and engravings made on rock surfaces such as caves and rock shelters. It is an important source of information about the cultural practices of ancient people. The art has a considerable significance in filling gaps in the absence of other archaeological findings. Rock art also reflects ancient human consciousness, which can inform us how they understood their surrounding environment, what part of nature they valued most, what types of religious ideas they followed and the distinguished roles played by both genders.<sup>3</sup>

The Ethiopian rock art is mainly a depiction of domestic and wild animals. There are also limited numbers of paintings of humans that appear to be herdsman. Long and short horned humpless cattle, fat tailed sheep and camels are the most popular animals depicted in naturalistic representations.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis given to animals in the earliest rock art of Ethiopia seems to be an indication of domestication.<sup>5</sup>

## III. Depiction of Animal Motifs at Bete Mariam

We have rock art figures of both domestic and wild animals in many areas of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido churches. The paintings and engravings made on the rock-hewn church of Bete Mariam at Lalibela are the best example. The rock art of Bete Mariam appears to have a naturalistic representation.

According to local traditions, the engravings and paintings of the Lalibela churches are supposed to have been originated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Emperor Zere Yaekob (r. 1434 – 1468).<sup>6</sup> However, some scholars point out that though some of the paintings, particularly the tempera<sup>7</sup> are attributed to the period of this Emperor, the painted frieze<sup>8</sup> may be as old as the church itself.<sup>9</sup>

It is also stated that most of the Ethiopian ancient paintings have reflected the characteristics of religious culture and dominantly they are preoccupied with the symbolic importance.

### 1. Fish

The fish painting that is displayed on the ceiling of the rock-hewn church of Bete Mariam appears along with Jesus Christ blessing the loaves of bread. The inscription 'Jesus blesses the two fish and five loaves' represents the biblical miracle performed by Jesus Christ when He fed the five thousand as written in the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup>D.S. Whitley, *Introduction to Rock Art Research* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2005), pp.3-5, 79-107.

<sup>4</sup>J.D. Clark, *The Prehistoric Cultures of the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), pp. 311-315; N. Carder, "Modeling the Evolution of Pastoral Rock Art in the Horn of Africa," M.A. Thesis, University of Florida, 1988.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>G. Gerster, *Churches in Rock: Early Christian Art of Ethiopia* (London: Phaidon, 1970), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup>Tempra paintings are paintings with mixed color.

<sup>8</sup>Engravings on the walls

<sup>9</sup>Gerster, p. 97; S. Chojnacki, "The Iconography of St. George in Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1973, Vol. XI, 2), pp. 51-92; S. Chojnacki, *Major Themes in Ethiopian painting, Indigenous Development : The Influence of Foreign Models and Their Adaptation from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), pp. 15-37.

<sup>10</sup>Chojnacki 1973, pp. 51-92; 1983, pp. 15-37.

<sup>11</sup>Gerster, p.64, 98.

“..... And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke them and began to give them to the disciples to set before the crowd. They took up what was left over, twelve baskets of fragments,” (Luke 9:16-17).



Fig. 2 Christ blessing the fish and loaves of bread (after Gerster)

In the Bible, there are about 61 references to fish: 35 in the Old and 26 in the New Testaments.<sup>12</sup> Fish is mentioned in the Bible as a source of food and is also used as a metaphorical expression. Fish is among the aquatic animals in the Bible allowed for food. In the Mosaic law of the Old Testament, the clean and unclean aquatic animals are described. Those who have fins and scales are permitted as food. The fish fulfill such criteria and thus are allowed to be eaten (Deuteronomy 14: 9-10). There are also many other references both in the Old and New Testaments mentioning fish as a source of food (Mathew 14:17, Mathew 15:34, Mark. 6:38; Mark.8:7; John 6:9).

The figurative use of fish and their catching method (net) are written many times in the Bible in various parts of the Old and New Testaments. For instance, in a parable stated by Jesus Christ, a comparison was made between the kingdom of heaven and the fishing net. It says:

*Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind, when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good in to vessels but threw away the bad ....(Mathew 13:47-48).*

<sup>12</sup> G. Cansdale, *Animals of Bible Lands* (Cape Town: the Paternoster Press, 1970), p.212.

Here the parable is apparently intended to show the decisions that will be made at the Last Judgment to separate the righteous from the unrighteous as the fisherman sorted the good from the bad. Another good example for the metaphorical use of the fish are the words of Christ to the two Apostles, Simon Peter and Andrew, “follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mathew 4:19). A symbolic analogy is also made in the Bible between two major events written in the Old and New Testament respectively. The great fish that swallows the prophet Jonah and then vomits him out is related metaphor to the buried and then resurrected Lord Jesus Christ (Jonah 1:17; Mathew 12:40).

In addition to Biblical references, the symbolic significance of fish is very prevalent in many religious customs. Some Christian theologians have tried to make a figurative comparison between the fish which were not affected by God’s curse in the flood of Noah’s time and the baptized Christians. The fish were also common symbols in early Christian art of the Roman Catacombs to represent the Holy Communion. It is also used as a secret sign by the early persecuted Christians to designate themselves as believers of Jesus Christ. The Greek letters of the word “fish” correspond to the initials of the words: “Jesus Christ the son of God, our Savior.” The earliest fish paintings with Greek scripts have also been used to represent Jesus Christ and Christians.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 3 The fish of Christ and the anchor of faith, on an early funeral stele in Vatican, Rome  
(after Newton and Neil p. 31)

<sup>13</sup> E. Newton and W. Neil, *2000 Years of Christian Art* (New York: Happier and Row, 1996), p. 31, 73; T.Y. Malaty, *Dictionary of Church Terms* (1992).

On the other hand, according to archaeological sources, an intensive utilization of fish in the Nile Valley around 6000 BP was a precondition for adaptation of cultivation of plants. It is also described as a preliminary event that enhanced a sedentary lifestyle.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Oxen

A pair of fighting bulls is depicted on the ceiling of the rock-hewn church of Bete Mariam in Lalibela. The oxen are depicted almost as proportional to real life - size with red and black colors.

According to the local church scholars, each of the red and the black oxen symbolically represents the good and the evil respectively. They also associate the black ox with the Old Testament and the red one with the New Testament. Moreover, the fighting black and red oxen are symbolically related with the ever-struggling nature of the flesh and the spirit in one's life.<sup>15</sup>

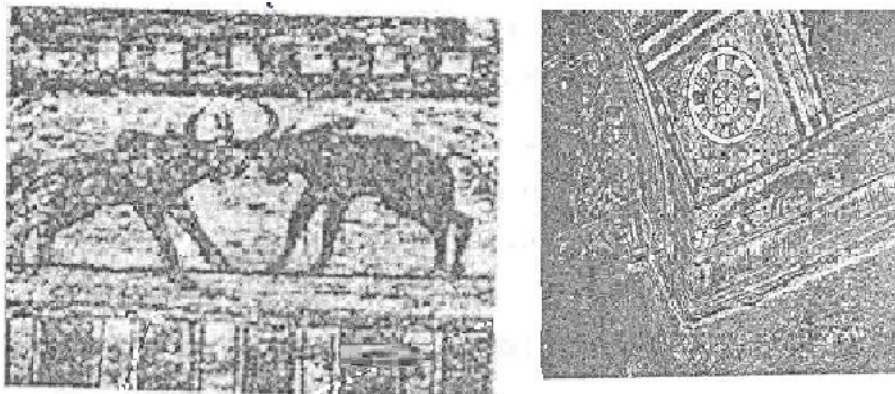


Fig.4. Fighting oxen painting, Lalibela (after Gerster p. 73 and Bidder p. 74)

Like the fish, the ox is mentioned many times in both parts of the Bible, New and Old Testaments, for different purposes. Most importantly the Biblical reference of the ox is related with rituals (sacrifices), ploughing, and cart-pulling. There are also very few uses of oxen for figurative expressions. In the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament period, the ox was sacrificed for symbolic rites next only to sheep. For instance, King Solomon sacrificed about 22,000 oxen as peace offerings after the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:63). The Biblical record also clearly indicates the use of oxen for pulling the plough. The best reference in the Old Testament is when Elisha was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen before the prophet Elijah called him to follow him (1 Kings 19:19).

<sup>14</sup>R. Haaland, "Fish, pots and grain: Early and Mid - Holocene adaptations in the Central Sudan," *The African Archaeological Review*, 10, 1992, pp. 44-53.

<sup>15</sup>Informant: Deacon Mengistu Gobezie.

It was, however, forbidden in the Old Testament to use oxen and donkeys together for ploughing (Deuteronomy 22:10). Biblical references also indicate the use of oxen to draw a cart. For instance, it is mentioned that the Ark of the Covenant was transported using a cart pulled by a pair of oxen (1 Samuel. 6; 2 Samuel 6).

In a metaphorical expression, the good relationship between the ox and his master is recorded in the Bible. It says: “the ox knows its owner and the ass its master’s crib but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isaiah1:3). It is clearly a kind of reproof made to the people of Israel who did not know the will of God. There is also another Important symbolic expression made in relation to the preacher and an ox. It says: “you shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,” and, “the laborer deserves his wages” (I Corinthians 9:9).

For the people of ancient times, the ox provided food, clothing and labor together with its considerable ritual importance. As part of domestication, the meat was the primary objective of the prehistoric society to bring this wild species under their control. Their hides were apparently used before and after domestication. Later, oxen have begun to be used as traction animals to pull the plough and the cart.<sup>16</sup>

In many rituals of ancient people, the ox appears to have played a significant role; such rituals are mainly related to the efforts of the prehistoric humans to domesticate cattle. For instance, the ox was used in artistic leaping dances in which people sought to show their superiority by jumping over it. A cattle jumping is also a major cultural element of the peoples of southern Ethiopia mainly in the traditions of Mursi and Hammer.<sup>17</sup>



Fig.5. A plough being pulled by a pair of long horned humpless cattle (in the upper right hand corner) from Amba Fekada rock art site in Tigray (after Mordini p.58)

<sup>16</sup> A. Sherratt, “Secondary Product Revolution” in B.M. Fagan, *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.632.

<sup>17</sup> Mengistu Gobezie, *Heritage Tourism in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: B.S.P.E., 2008), pp. 221- 222.

### 3. Horse

A bas-relief figure of a rider on horseback who appears to be spearing a dragon is depicted at Bete Mariam. According to local tradition, the rider represents St. George, the most popular saint in Ethiopia, and the dragon is a symbol of evil, and sometimes the devil himself.<sup>18</sup>



Fig. 6 A bas-relief figure of riders killing a beast, Lalibela (after Gerster p.65)



Fig.7 Bas-relief figure of riders killing a beast, on the entrance of Bete Mariam  
(after Bidder p.66)

<sup>18</sup> Gerster, p. 97; Bidder, p. 123; Chojnacki, p.51.



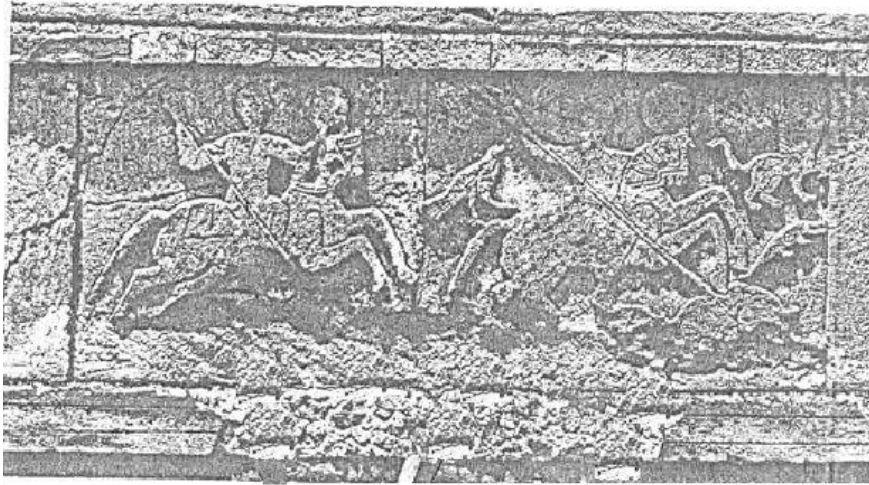


Fig. 8 A bas-relief figure of riders killing a beast, Bete Mariam (after Bidder p.67)

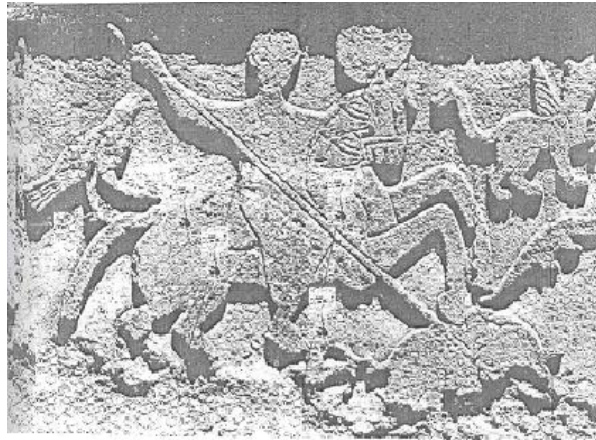


Fig. 9 A bas-relief figure of riders killing a beast, Bete Mariam (after Gerster p.64)

Like the fish and the ox, the horse is mentioned many times in the Holy Bible. From about the 140 Biblical references, 90 are figurative or symbolic. Throughout the Old Testament, it is indicated that horses were a monopoly of kings and nobles, representing or symbolizing of human power.<sup>19</sup> Biblical evidence also shows that horses were mainly used as war chariots and regarded as an integral part of the armed forces (1Kings 10:25; Genesis. 50:9). Unlike the fish and the ox, the horse was a forbidden type of meat for the Hebrews (Deuteronomy 14:9).

According to archaeological evidence, domestication of the horse postdated that of cattle. It was between the late 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C at Dereivka in Ukraine, which is regarded as the site with the earliest evidence of horses.<sup>20</sup> The analysis of the bones and material remains has also shown that horses were first domesticated by sedentary cattle keepers for their meat and riding. It was later that horses have been used as traction and pack animals.<sup>21</sup>

In Ethiopia today, horses are the principal riding animals. In previous times, they played also a vital role in times of war. For instance, fighting on horseback was the major factor that helped the Oromo people to be successful during their 16<sup>th</sup> century movement and expansion.<sup>22</sup> Some of the former rulers and warriors in Ethiopia have been better known by the names of their horses. Currently, in rural areas, horses<sup>23</sup> are prestige animals kept mainly by wealthy men.

Scholars have offered various assumptions regarding the bas-relief located over the main entrance of Bete Mariam. The bas-relief represents two riders in the act of spearing an unknown creature. They are surrounded by several animals: a bird, a lizard, or a crocodile, and a winged griffin. Moreover, discs are visible over the horses' heads. Even though there is no inscription on the bas-relief, the local people believe that one of the riders represents St. George.<sup>24</sup>

Some scholars, however, argue that the bas-relief is "wrongly called St. George the Dragon Killer" by the local people. They instead explain that the bas-relief "originally represented the 'bringers of light' like the Greek or Mesopotamian Dioscuri or the Indian Aswini, who, spear shafts in hand, or one with a bird of light on his horse's crupper, hunt animals that are considered as symbols of darkness: the lioness, the crocodile, and the wild boar. Solar discs are shown above the horses' heads".<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Cansdale, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup>A. Sherratt, "Plough and Pastoralism: Aspects of the Second Products Revolution," in Ian Hodder et al (eds.) *Pattern of the Past: Studies in Honor of David Clarke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 170.

<sup>21</sup>Sherratt 1996, p. 632. It is also important to note here that wild horses were the most important subjects in many rock art sites of the prehistoric painters.

<sup>22</sup>F. J. Simoons, *Northwest Ethiopia: peoples and economy* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1960), p. 18.

<sup>23</sup>Mahteme Selassie Wolde Meskel, "YeItyopia Bahl Tinat (Ché Belew), *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1969, Vol.VII(2), pp.195-303.

<sup>24</sup>Gerster, p.97; Chojnacki 1973, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup>Bidder, p. 123.

Others describe the bas-relief but did not associate it with any saint. They try to make some association of the motif of the discs over the horses' heads with that of a bas-relief found in Egypt.<sup>26</sup> There are still others that forwarded different opinions. They state that although the discs look suns or haloes above the horses' heads, they are the riders' shields. This proposal is based on the resemblance with wood-carvings in the old Aksumite Church in Asmara in which the riders are portrayed in somewhat the same style, and the discs look as if they are representing shields.<sup>27</sup>

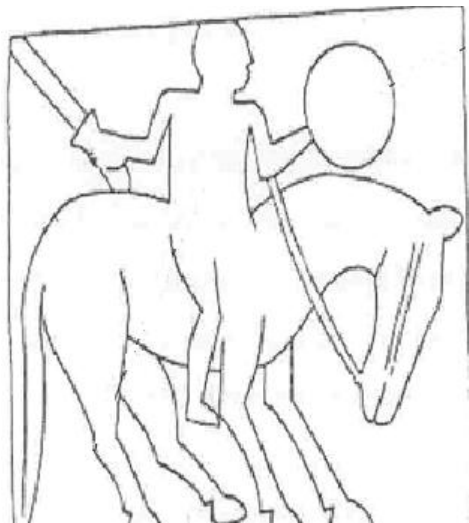


Fig. 10 A rider with a shield, from a wood-carving in the old Aksumite church in Asmara  
(after Gerster p. 97)

It is also stated that the reptile and the griffin with serpent headed tail are symbols of devilish power. It is added that despite lack of haloes, the riders represent equestrian saints, possibly Demetrius and George.<sup>28</sup>

There is a disagreement about the explanation on the local belief about the bas-relief. It is argued that there is no clear reference that the bas-relief is a representation of St. George. In addition, the group of symbolic creatures makes the identification more intricate. The tendency of associating the bas-relief as representing St. George comes from the widespread popularity of the saint in Ethiopia and there is a natural tendency of linking any picture of a rider fighting a snake or another beast as a depiction of St. George.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> M. Corte, *Lalibela: le chiese ipogee monolitiche e gli altri Monumenti Medieva lide Lasta* (Rome: 1940.), p.57.

<sup>27</sup> Gerster, p.97.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Chojnacki 1973, p.51.

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But one should take into account that St. George is not the only saint associated with a dragon, snake, or other creature. The illuminated manuscripts of Debre Mariam Church in Tigray contain a picture of St. Theodore killing a snake. The martyr holds a spear in his poised right hand.<sup>30</sup> We also find a similar depiction in the mural of Abba Hor in Genete Mariam Church in Lasta. On this mural, Abba Hor is portrayed slaying a snake while it attempts to swallow the head of a ram. By taking this into account, scholars emphasize that saints other than St. George are depicted as attacking the symbol of evil.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Ethiopia in general and the Ethiopian Orthodox **Tewahido** Church in particular are enriched with a number of rock art sites. However, most of them are unknown and adequate research has not yet been conducted. Therefore, both the country and the church have not benefited so far from this valuable heritage. Had these resources been utilized sufficiently, they could be used as major sources of information to understand the culture, religion, and history of the then society who produced them. They can also be used as a site of tourist attraction.

As mentioned above, rock art is a realm of archaeological investigation. To properly understand, identify and interpret these artifacts, archaeological work is very essential. This shows how archaeological research is important to the church. Therefore, the Church has to give great attention to the discipline and collaborate with stakeholders in the area.

The state of rock art conservation in Ethiopia as a whole and the Ethiopian Church in particular is in a critical condition. Rock art is a fragile repository of information. Weathering is the major agent of destruction observed in the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. Some of the paintings and engravings are deteriorating at an alarming rate. Thus, the work of documentation and inventory should be taken as the best strategy for saving information from the site. In addition, work of promotion and awareness creation has to be taken into consideration.

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<sup>30</sup>Playne, pp. 194-195.

<sup>31</sup>Chojnacki 1973, p. 52.