



Enlivening the dying ruins: history and archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in Ethiopia, 1557–1632

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ABSTRACT: A summary is presented of the recent archaeological research led by the University Complutense of Madrid on the residences and monuments of the Jesuit missions in Ethiopia, most of them built at the end of the Mission period, between 1621 and 1632. The paper examines the known mission sites in turn, concentrating on the most important ones located in the region of Dembya, north of lake Tana. The emphasis has been put on the contrast between the information available from historical sources, mainly from the Jesuits' writings and letters, and that obtained in the field, concluding that the differences are limited to the natural tendency to embellishment and self-praise by the missionaries. Finally, the conclusions expose the cultural problems that still exist in Ethiopia to treat this "dark" historical period of the country.

KEYWORDS: Jesuits; Architecture; Archaeology; Historical sources; Post-colonialism; Ethiopia

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RESUMEN: *Reviviendo las ruinas moribundas: historia y arqueología de las misiones jesuitas en Etiopía, 1557–1632.* Se presenta un resumen de la reciente investigación arqueológica de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid sobre las residencias y monumentos de las misiones jesuitas en Etiopía, en su mayoría construidas al final del período de la misión, entre 1621 y 1632. El artículo examina por turno los sitios misionales conocidos, deteniéndose con más detalle en los más importantes situados en la región de Dembya al norte del lago Tana. Se ha enfocado sobre todo el posible contraste existente entre la información disponible en las fuentes históricas, en su mayoría escritos y cartas de los propios jesuitas, y la obtenida en la prospección y excavaciones arqueológicas sobre el terreno. Se concluye que las diferencias se limitan a la lógica tendencia de los misioneros al adorno y auto-elogio. Finalmente se exponen los problemas culturales que todavía existen en Etiopía para tratar este período "oscuro" de la historia nacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Jesuitas; Arquitectura; Arqueología; Fuentes históricas; Post-colonialismo; Etiopía.

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INTRODUCTION

From 1557 until their expulsion from the country in 1632, a significant group of Jesuit missionaries –mostly of Portuguese, Italian and

Spanish origin– lived and travelled through the rough and exhausting landscapes of the Ethiopian Highlands. Their aim, as in the rest of the recently inaugurated global world, was to convert the Ethiopians to the Roman Catholic faith (their

It was to attend spiritually to the members of that force and their offspring, whom the Portuguese crown considered as their subjects, that the first Jesuits arrived to the Highlands in 1557. At the beginning they were few and their achievements, under the guidance of the first Patriarch, the Spaniard Andrés de Oviedo, were very limited. At the turn of the following century (the "Second Mission" period), with the arrival of the Castilian Pedro Páez (Pero Pais) and the Portuguese Luis de Azevedo, Antônio Fernandes and Manoel de Almeida things begun to improve steadily. The turning point appears to have been the military victory of the Catholic faction over a coalition of Orthodox notables and monks that took place on May 1617. Between 1621, when the king Susenyos formally adhered to Catholicism, and the expulsion in 1633–1634 the Jesuits, under the command of the superior Fernandes and later of the new Patriarch Afonso Mendes, a former professor of Theology in Coimbra and Evora who arrived in 1625, became the leaders of the Ethiopian church. By then around 20 missionaries were active in some 13 missions across

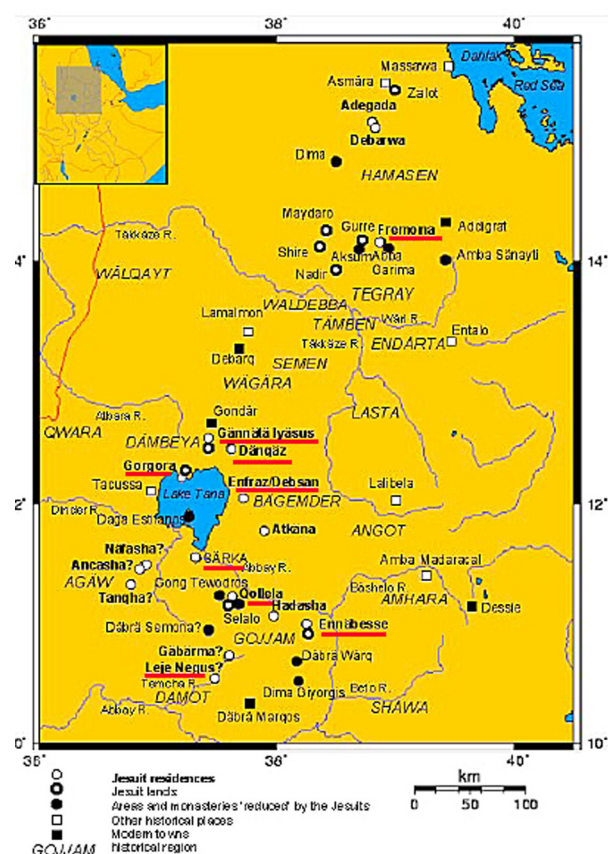


FIGURE 1. Jesuit missions (white circles) and related sites in Central-Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Underlined, sites with preserved architectural remains. Martínez d'Álos-Moner, 2008: 75. Reproduced with permission.

the country, serving to about 150,000 converted Catholics, according to Jesuit sources (Martínez d'Àlos-Moner, 2008: vi–vii) (Fig. 1).

As in other parts of the world, the missionaries were determined to exploit the technical superiority of the European society, i.e. of the “western civilization” and at the same time of the Roman faith, on what they perceived to be the “backward” Africans. Ignatius of Loyola insisted that the Jesuits should bring to Ethiopia doctors, surgeons, experts in law and agriculture, technicians that knew how to make bridges and hospitals, etc. (Loyola in RASO 1: 244–251; Pennec, 2003: 70). Some historians have argued that the fundamental interest of both the Jesuits and the Ethiopian royalty was the realization of a modern absolutist and centralized state after the European model of the time (Chernetsov, 1994; Pennec, 2003: 185–188). Other researchers have stressed that the political ideology of the Jesuits, following the ideas of authors such as Ribadeneyra, Molina, Suarez and Mariana, defended a less autocratic and Machiavellian power (according to the famous motto by father Francisco Suárez: “the

society is by nature the supreme Prince”) (Martínez d’Àlos-Moner, 2008: 169–173).

Notwithstanding, the Jesuits did indeed play a positive role in changing the political drive of the Abyssinian kingdom, triggering a durable movement of cultural renewal and transforming the rites and protocol followed by the kings, which up to that time corresponded roughly to the African models of divine kingship (Martínez d’Àlos-Moner, 2008: 173–176). From the start of the research on the subject, it was realised that technical advances, especially the military, were the main reason for the attraction that the Ethiopians felt since the very beginning toward the Portuguese and Catholic culture in general. As we will see when describing the archaeological data, defensive architecture was one of the main assets that the missionaries offered to the local dominant classes, who were in great need because of the recurrent attacks suffered in the highlands (Muslim Somalis from the east, pagan Oromo from the south, apart from periodic domestic unrest).

The central part of Jesuit architecture in the country, however, was religious and consisted mainly of churches in the European style. Contrary to the *accomodatio* policy followed by Ricci and other missionaries in China and India, trying to synthesize the local philosophical traditions and the Christian theological basis, the Jesuits in Ethiopia strongly rejected the Orthodox practices, which in several occasions they compared with mere superstition (Martínez d’Àlos-Moner, 2008: 161–162). This is the more surprising since the missionaries on other instances expressed their admiration for Ethiopian Christianity (especially for the intense and long fasting periods), which they rightly saw as a survival of the first Christians’ practices. However, as the mission was gaining strength and adepts among the aristocracy and the people, the missionaries’ intolerance towards different traditions, both theological (monophysitism, the *philioque* issue, etc.) and practical (e.g. the circumcision or the *shabat*, which were not seen as “secular” practices but as a truly religious remainder from the Jewish Old Law) also increased (Martínez d’Àlos-Moner, 2004; for the relations of Jesuits and converted Jewish, see Maryks, 2010).

Perhaps nothing was in greater contrast between the two faiths than the respective church layouts. Ethiopian buildings, whether rectangular as they mostly were before the 15th century or circular after that date, all have the typical Oriental Christian organization in three parts, the narthex for the catechumens and where the general public may stand (in Ethiopia this also includes the immediate surroundings of the building), the nave for the congregation and the sanctuary reserved only for the priests. In Ethiopia, the parts are generally of smaller capacity and more strictly separated from each other: *Qenie Mahlet*, *Kiddest* and *Mäqdas*. Contrastingly, only a few decades before their expansion in Ethiopia the

Jesuits had adopted as a cornerstone of their evangelization task the church with a single nave, fully open, precisely so that all the faithful could follow the preaching unhindered and the priest could have full view of the public (Rodríguez G. de Ceballos, 2002: 27). As we could document during our investigation, at least two Jesuit buildings were transformed after the missionaries’ departure, the Mary church at Sarka and the Afonso Mendes residence at Däbsan. Originally, they were open rectangular buildings whose internal space was subsequently divided in three parts by means of new walls perpendicular to the old ones.

Our research on the Ethiopian Jesuit missions begun in the autumn of 2006. During the previous field season, in June 2005, we had finished the archaeological survey project of the Ethio-Sudanese borderlands with a brief exploration of the more difficult areas not previously inspected, including the zone north of the Blue Nile, Metekkel (Fernández, *et al.* 2007; Fernández, 2011). At the end of the fieldwork, we spent three days in the ancient Abyssinian capital, Gondar, to admire the palaces of the Fasil Ghabii compound and make a first approach to the lowlands of the border area near Sudan at Gallabat. One afternoon we made the 60 km travel to the town of Gorgora, on the northern shore of lake Tana. After seeing the extraordinary paintings of the Debre Sina church (17th century), we asked our driver to look for the way leading to the Jesuit ruins of Gorgora Nova. I had just read the book on Pedro Páez by Javier Reverte (2001) and we naturally felt interested in the presence of Spanish priests and explorers in the country.

The track to the ruins was complicated, not only because of the mud caused by the recently begun rainy season, but also because, as usual, there was not any marker or signal for the travellers. The driver was worried about the beginning of the daily rains that could trap us on the way, and asked a few persons passing by about the duration of the trip. We were puzzled to hear very different answers, which only makes sense as coming from people with a much lower concern for time than ours. Eventually we arrived at the ruins, and the impression they caused on our minds (Fig. 2) was so deep that not much later we decided to apply for a new archaeological project in the country, committed to unveiling the remains of that period. The result of this research up to the present day, in which refers to the contrast between historical and archaeological data on the main mission sites, will be presented in the following paragraphs (see also Fernández, *et al.* 2012a and 2012b).

AZÄZO-GÄNNÄTÄ IYÄSUS

Azäzo is a small village about 10 km south of central Gondar; it is near the King Tewodros airport and has a military base in its outskirts. During the



FIGURE 2. The apse of the Catholic church of Gorgora Nova (1627). Photo by V.M. Fernández, June 2005.

Italian occupation in the late thirties, there was also a military post just over the Jesuit ruins, a circumstance that caused us not small pain during the excavations –the bulk of the recovered artefacts coming from to that period.

On November the 1st, 1621, the *negus* of Ethiopia (a land then roughly corresponding to the northern half of the current country), king Susenyos publicly accepted that Jesus Christ had two perfect natures, one divine and one human, becoming officially a part of the Roman Catholic Church. To celebrate the event, on November 9th the foundation stone was laid of a church in Azäzo, at about three leagues (12,5 km) from the royal court in Dänqäz. The king liked the place for its strategic position at the end of the plain leading to the northern shore of lake Tana and for its luxuriant vegetation. The latter was the origin of the name he chose for the church, Gännätä Iyäsus, the “Garden of Jesus”. The information is coincident both in the Jesuit records (Páez in RASO 3: 386) and the Susenyos royal chronicle (Pereira, 1892: 258; 1900: 199). Curiously, the Ethiopian chronicler, whose name is known by Jesuit

references (Täklä Sellase, aka *Tino*), also recorded the name of the constructor, the “frank” *padri Pai*, i.e. Pedro Páez. The church was consecrated on the Pentecost day or Whit Sunday (June, 4th) of 1623, one year and a few days after Páez’s death.

The church was rectangular, of small dimension, according to the different sources, 18,5 × 6,2 m (Páez), 13,2 × 4,8 m (Almeida) or 28 × 8 m (Susenyos chronicle). Since lime mortar was not used by the Jesuits until 1624 (see further on), the building was made with “dry” stone, i.e. mud masonry. The dimensions of the rectangular building we excavated at the upper part of the site, with only the dry ashlars’ foundations and a few masonry lines surviving, had a preserved length of 19 m and a width of 8 m, thus suggesting that the Ethiopian writer was more accurate than the learned European priests. However, the masonry unveiled by the excavation was of stone and lime mortar, so probably what we have discovered is a later refurbishment of the original work.

An amazing coincidence exists between the church decoration described by Páez and the actual

elements preserved near the church. The Spanish Jesuit said that there were “*rosas grandes, flores de lis, jarros muyto bem lavrados com flores e rosas que saem dellas gravadas em fermosa pedra; cosa nunca vista em Ethiopia ...*” (“big roses, lily flowers, very well carved jars with flowers and roses coming out of them carved in beautiful stone; something never seen before in Ethiopia” (Páez in RASO, 3: 388). Not one single decorated stone was found in the excavation, but in the Orthodox monastery of Täklä Haymanot, some 400 m to the southeast of the church, inserted in the internal walls of the church (possibly also in the *māqdas* where we are not allowed to pass) there are several stones with the same decorations described by Páez. This suggests that the church was not destroyed but dismantled instead. The excavation also revealed the foundations of another superimposed building of stone and mud, which probably was a residence of Orthodox monks since after the expulsion the place became the new see of the Täklä Haymanot monastic order, after abandoning their original home in the southerly region of Shāwa (Martínez d’Alos-Moner, 2008: 285).

At the end of the rainy season of 1624, the king ordered the construction in Azäzo of a beautiful residence (*fermosos paços*) next to the church (*junto á igreja*). Earlier, a technician who had come from India with the missionaries, named Manoel Magro (the name does not imply he was Portuguese, since many Indians changed it after conversion) found limestone deposits from where it was possible to make lime for construction. The Jesuits showed the technique to the king, who promptly acknowledged its advantage to make houses “in the European way”. Almeida (in RASO, 6: 390) narrates the event: “no fim do anno de 1624 começou em Ganeta Jesus junto á igreja huns fermosos paços de pedra e cal, de dous sobrados, com seu terrado, duas salas, e coatro camaras nos baixos e outras tantas nos altos, afora dous como cubellos ou baluartes em dous cantos com que ficarao seguros e com alguma semelhança de fortaleza” (at the end of the year 1624 [the emperor] begun in Ganeta Jesus [Azäzo] close to the church a beautiful house of stone and mortar, with two floors, with its terrace, two big rooms, and four small rooms in the lower floor and as many in the upper floor, in the outside two sort of towers or bastions in two corners that will maintain [the occupants] sure and with some resemblance of fortress).

Guided by the presence of the remains of a round tower and a wall still standing at the site (Fig. 3), we made an excavation just beside it, about 11 meters northwest of the church enclosure. A rectangular building was partially uncovered, of 22,6 × 9,7 m in dimension, who was connected to the round tower in its north-western corner and displayed five or six large rooms on the eastern side and what seems to be a wide corridor on the west (Figs. 4 & 5). Though



FIGURE 3. The preserved round bastion of the Azäzo royal residence. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

their features do not exactly match Almeida’s description (one tower and one storey instead of two: no remains of another tower in the other corners neither of the second floor were found), the probability that the building is actually the king Susenyos’ residence at the place is very high.

Almeida wrote his history at around 1644, i.e. 12 years after leaving the country and almost two decades past the described events, and so some slips and mistakes are to be expected. On the other hand, a general trend of overstatement and embellishment of their own accomplishments is easily noticed in many of the Jesuit texts, which for the most part strive to convince their superiors in Goa and elsewhere of their task’s magnitude in the arduous colonial frontiers. The constant employ of hyperbolic adjectives (“moito”, “fermoso”, “grande”, “forte”, etc.) gives also a clue to better understand the writings’ hidden goal: never to lie, but always to adorn a bit the truth.

There are another evidences supporting that this building was the emperor’s house during the periods when he visited Azäzo from his usual residence in the Dänqāz palace. They are the large size of the rooms and walls, the monumental features of the doors between the rooms, the complicated system



FIGURE 4. The residence of Azāzo after the 2008 excavation. In the room below in the photograph the canal of a latrine is visible on the floor. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

of underground water circulation (with a latrine or bath in the northern side connecting through a subterranean channel to the nearby river) (Fig. 6) that was discovered in our subsequent excavations, the circular tower still preserved and the elegant staircases discovered at the northern side entrance of the building. The similarities between the plan of this construction and those of the later important historical palaces in Gondär area provide additional support to the hypothesis (Fernández *et al.*, 2012b: fig. 2).

Before the conclusion of the palace, in 1626 the missionaries began to build another house of stone and lime for themselves, also near the church, with four rooms (cubicles) below and as many on the second floor. The priests lived and entertained there the people coming from other missions for Christmas and the Holy Week, when the king also attended the ceremonies (Almeida in RASO, 6: 390; Azevedo in RASO, 12: 221–222). However, no remains of this house, nor the others also mentioned by Almeida as constructed with stone and lime by members of the aristocracy (Almeida in RASO, 6: 391) were found in the excavations and survey undertaken at the site (which included Ground Penetrating Radar when the absence of vegetation allowed it).

Almeida also said that the king, after making the residence “ordered to make around the church a fence with wall and bastions, with which he made a good fortress for the land” (in RASO 6: 390). This fortified enclosure is still well visible almost in its

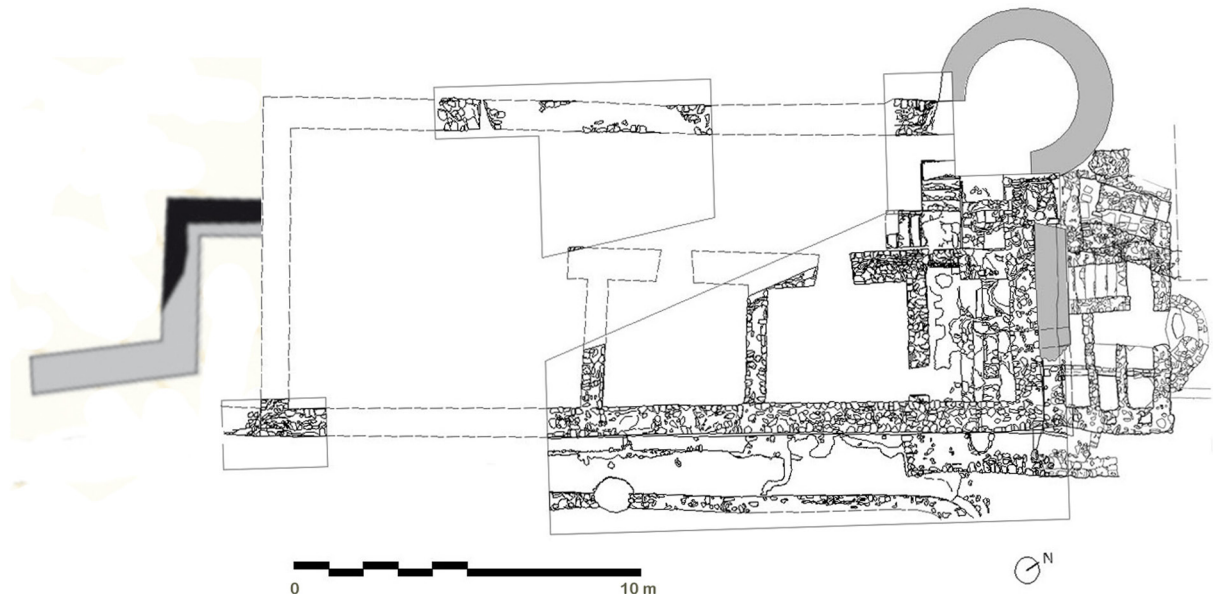


FIGURE 5. Plan of the royal residence of Azāzo. In grey, the extant tower and wall; at left, a wall that connects the residence with the church fortifications, which was only sketched. At right of the extant later wall, the stairs of the entrance and the three cubicles connected to the subterranean water drainage. More than half of the building could not be excavated due to the presence of modern fences and cultivations. Line draw by the Universidad Complutense Ethiopian Jesuit Missions Project.



FIGURE 6. Combined elevation photo of the northern wall of the subterranean water system under the cubicles in the Azäzo residence, with the entrance to the subterranean water tunnel; 2011 excavation. Photo by the Universidad Complutense Ethiopian Jesuit Missions Project.

entire perimeter, including three of the bastions (Fig. 7). During the 2011 excavations, another two towers were uncovered in the eastern side, and a complex entrance system with another tower were cleared in the middle of the northern side. Only the south-western corner inexplicably lacked any tower. The general plan of the church, its fortified enclosure and the nearby palatial residence is shown in figure 8.

In the same text, Almeida finally refers to a water tank made by the emperor, very large and long (*muito largo e comprido*), with a big house “for the pleasure” (*de prazer*) in its middle with pipes on its roof from where the water fell over the windows and the pool. The king and the court sat there to contemplate several activities on the water: fishing, simulated naval wars with vegetal boats (*tamqua*) or simply the people diving from the house into the water (Almeida in RASO, 6: 390).

The remains of the pool are well visible in the lower part of the site, between the hill of the Catholic church and that of the Täklä Haymanot monastery. Its length is of a little more than 33 m (its northernmost end was not visible) and its width is of 22 m. Almeida (in RASO, 12: 266) described it as of 140×80 covados (cubit, an ancient measure of different values; the most common was around 0,42 m), i.e. of around 60×33 m. Here again do we have an example of the typical hype of the Jesuit texts? About the royal house, Almeida (in RASO, 6: 390) said it was of 35–40 *palmos* (span, c. 21 cm) in each side (around 8 m); the remains only allow measuring its width, of approximately 10 m. Here Almeida came up short.

A few years after the missionaries’ expulsion, when the new king Fasilädäs had settled his new capital in Gondar, a period of extraordinary architectural activity begun. The first big building was the palace of the king himself, still the biggest and most attractive of the country, and afterwards the following kings (Iohannes, Iyasu, Dawit, Bakaffa ...) had their own palace built in the enclosed area today known as “Fasil Ghebbi” in Gondar (Figs. 9 & 10). The monuments are the main heritage attraction in the country (together with the Lalibela rock-hewn churches) and the more amazing since they look as medieval English or Castilian castles in the heart of the African continent.

There has been a lot of discussion about the origin of the Gondarine architecture. The usual views before and during the colonial period was that they were of unmistakable European origin (e.g. Monti della Corte, 1938). This viewpoint was coincident with a positive opinion about the Jesuit mission, whose failure was perceived as a missed opportunity for the Ethiopian nation to connect with the modernity emerging at that time in Europe, and one of the causes of its contemporary backwardness (e.g. Caraman, 1985). In the last decades, however,



FIGURE 7. The northern side of the fortified enclosure of the Azäzo Catholic church; sitting at left, an Orthodox priest. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

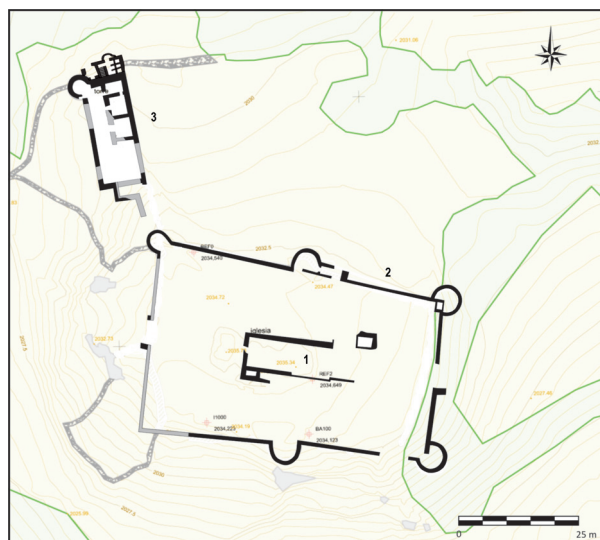


FIGURE 8. The general plan of the Azäzo church and palace compound. 1. Catholic church; 2. Fortified enclosure with rounded bastions; 3. Royal residence. Line draw by the Universidad Complutense Ethiopian Jesuit Missions Project.

a change in direction in historical studies, loosely connected with the theoretical “post-colonial” turn, resulted in a fairly negative view of the Catholic “interlude” in Ethiopia. This was based on the bloody wars that it brought about, the ensuing closing of the country to the external travellers and influences, and especially the rejection that the Orthodox Church and population felt towards Catholicism up to the present day. One of the most prestigious “ethiopianists”, Richard Pankhurst, expressed it openly in one of his last works: The Jesuits ... “disappeared ignominiously from the Ethiopian stage, leaving relatively little in the country, apart from a few palaces and churches, to show for their efforts” (Pankhurst, 1998: 108).

In which respects to the architecture, it has become fashionable in scholarly writings to attribute the origin of the Gondarine style to general oriental influences, from India and especially from the nearby Ottoman empire. A Turkish fortress erected at the end of the 16th century in which is now Eritrea, known only through historical records and whose remains have disappeared, is very often



FIGURE 9. King Fasilädäs (1632–1667) palace, Gondar, front view. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

quoted as the most likely model for the palaces. Indeed, Turkish forts in both Anatolia and their wide domains used to be rectangular with rounded towers or bastions on their corners. But this was also the model of Christian castles, including the Portuguese, since the Middle Ages, and we have just mentioned that the Jesuits fortified their compound in Azäzo in the same way, with the intention of giving “a resemblance of fortress”. Curiously, the Gondar palaces have been considered only seeming military constructions, the symbolic appearance of power being rather their prime function (Ranasinghe, 2001: 107). The Azäzo constructions were still visible when, only around a decade after the expulsion, the first Gondar castle was built; indeed the bastion of the royal residence has endured, albeit half ruined, up to the present day. Why imitate a distant model when there was a recently built prototype only 10 km apart?

It must be acknowledged that until our recent excavations, the features of the Azäzo Jesuit compound were very poorly known (though some of the round constructions and mortar walls in the

church enclosure were very clear before the digging), and even the extant tower was attributed to the following Täklä Haymanot period in the site (Campbell, 2004: 44). Notwithstanding, the intellectual attitude that leads to the total avoidance of mentioning an European influence to explain the origin of the Gondarine architecture, such as in the corresponding entry of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Berry, 2005), a high scholarly work led by the University of Hamburg, is really hard to understand.

Problems of correct identification of historical origins apparently do not exist, however, in the case of another prominent Gondarine building, the Fasilädäs bath, a big water pool with a royal pavilion in its centre, still used today in the Epiphany feast (*Timkat*) when in January every year people dives in the pool to renovate their baptism (Fig. 11). The bath of Fasilädäs father, king Susenyos, in Azäzo was a clear, smaller-scale, model, a garden feature that the missionaries surely copied from the much admired Mughal royal compounds in India (Martínez d’Alos-Moner, 2008: 225).



FIGURE 10. Fasilädäs palace, back view. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

GORGORA

Gorgora is a small town on the northern shore of lake Tana, where the Italian army constructed a naval port for its tiny fleet and later the communist regime (*Derg*, 1974–1991) erected a typical ‘real



FIGURE 11. The Gondar Fasilädäs Bath during the *Timkat* holiday of January, 2008. The central pavilion was topped for the occasion by the national flag. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 12. Paintings of the two most important saints of Christian Ethiopia, Täklä Haymanot (died c. 1313), left, and Ewastatewos (c. 1273–1352) at the Debre Sina Maryam church in Gorgora (late 17th or early 18th century). Photo by V.M. Fernández.

socialist’ hotel and resort that is still the best *pied-à-terre* of the place. All the tourists coming from Gondar in a half-day tour go directly to the humble but splendid Debre Sina Maryam church (Fig. 12), yet another monument near the town that most visitors miss is the big stone monolith, actually a lighthouse whose top glass lamp is lacking, made by the Italian army. Besides the statues of the Capitoline wolf and the lion of Juddah (the later, a symbol of Ethiopia, wounded by the colonist sword) an inscription reads *Roma imperat vsque ad finem*, one of the worst examples of colonial boasting –the Italians only resisted in Ethiopia for five years.

The name of “Gorgorra” appears in the Jesuit writings very early –it was the second residence founded after Fremona in Tigray, Pedro Páez’s main residence for around 15 years and later a major Jesuit centre where annual assemblies of missionaries took place. Yet it can be confidently stated that neither of the two sites mentioned then with that name (the old, *velha*, and the new, *nova*) correspond to the modern town of Gorgora. The “old” one was in a place somewhere inland that has not yet been located, despite several attempts by Andreu Martínez and myself. I walked for a whole day under the bright sun of the Highland dry season on a November day in 2008, following a misleading information, only to arrive to a Gondarine building previously known (Angelini, 2006: 40–44). The effort was not useless since under the Debesi Selassie church we could see the artificial cave left by the stone quarry activities linked to the construction of Gorgora Nova church. Andreu inspected several times the region, locating a few small stone-and-mortar buildings not far from Gorgora Nova that could correspond to the previous Jesuit settlement, yet this remains a hypothesis.



FIGURE 13. The northern shore of lake Tana viewed from the Jesuit mission in Gorgora Nova. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

The reason why the old Gorgora site probably did not leave noticeable remains (on the contrary, the local villagers should know and inform about) is that the only important building erected there, a church projected by Páez and begun in 1617, was made of stone and mud, and it collapsed shortly afterwards (Martínez d'Álos-Moner, 2005: 853). Alas, we will never find the place where Páez composed his *Historia da Etiopia* and Luis de Azevedo and Antonio Fernandes feverishly translated Spanish religious texts into Amharic.

Around 1614, king Susenyos decided to move his residence to the lake Tana shore (to be near the missionaries?) and the priests chose for him a place in the small peninsula that later would be known as Gorgora Nova (Fig. 13). Immediately, the king asked the Jesuits to construct for him a palace in the European way, a building again planned by Páez that had two floors, a total innovation for the country according to the missionaries (though palaces with two storeys had been built during the Aksumite period; cf. Phillipson, 2009: 16). Yet, as Almeida told in detail (in RASO, 6: 293–295), due to the often lamented absence of lime, it was made as well with stone and mud.

A few years later, in 1618 the king changed again his residence to Dänqāz, in a higher and healthier place, probably fleeing from the frequent malaria epidemics near the lake (that in 1621 would cause the death of Páez). The Jesuits continued in the old mission of Gorgora until 1627, when the king

asked them to build a great church of lime and stone on the peninsula, under the guidance of the brother Joao (Juan) Martínez (Almeida in RASO, 6: 494, RASO 7: 7–8). This technician (a “coadiutor temporal”), who had participated actively in the construction of several churches in Portuguese India (see different identifications in Martínez d'Álos-Moner, 2008: 218) was born in the village of Corpa, today in the Spanish province of Madrid, not far from the natal place of Pedro Páez, Olmeda de las Fuentes (cf. Jesuit “Catalog”, in Pennec, 2003: 317).

The construction begun with the sacristy and the annex vaulted chapel, “com varias rosas muito bem lavradas em pedra branca” (with roses very well carved on white stone) (Fig. 2). Very soon the fame of the site reached places far apart and “acudirão muitos á ver a abobada, pore em Ethiopia não haver até então obra semelhante” (many came to see the vault, because in Ethiopia at the time there was not a similar work) (Almeida in RASO, 7: 7). Thereafter when the priests refer to “Gogorra”, it must be the “Nova” since they always talk about the progress of the church construction. As there is no more reference to the Susenyos palace at the site (when the emperor came to see the works, he and his entourage lived in tents, cf. Almeida in RASO, 12: 269), it probably had collapsed before and/or their materials were used in the new lime-and-stone buildings. Anyhow, the place is known locally as “Susenyos” and the annexed residence (see later) is considered



FIGURE 14. Touristic poster with the most important attractions in the Gorgora area, including “the ruined place of emperor Susenyos” and the “stele of Mosoloni”. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

as the king’s palace and so it was described in the old and some new reference texts, including tourist guides and posters (Fig. 14).

At an uncertain moment in the past, the northern wall and the upper part of the main nave vault collapsed, but until 1995, the southern wall and the



FIGURE 15. The apse of Gorgora Nova church after the protection scaffold was installed in 2009. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

beginning of the vault were preserved, as well as the complete apse-chapel vault. In 1995, probably due to the yearly heavy rains, the rest of the extant building collapsed and only a small part of the apse vault remained. People from the area told us in 2012 that many of them heard a big noise at the time and immediately came to see the ruins with a great feeling of loss. The walls and vault were so thick that the rubble is now formed by enormous stone-and-mortar blocks, which would make very hard the possible reconstruction task. Sometime between 2006 and 2008, the western tip of the extant apse wall felt down in its turn; the Amhara Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau (Fig. 15) installed in 2009 a metallic scaffold, projected by our team architect, Federico Wulff, to strengthen the remainder.

Many people made pictures of the ruins before the great collapse of 1995, and comparing those from the Italian occupation period we can check how fast the process was. Here I present a photograph made by the Spanish Combonian missionary Juan González, author of an excellent guide to the Ethiopian country (González Núñez, 2009), taken in the 1980's (Fig. 16).

The church was lavishly adorned and many engraved stones from its walls, mostly with vegetal

motifs, appear scattered over the area. From some of them we can infer their original position, thanks to the preserved parts or to ancient photographs, but many of them come from unknown parts of the building. In an interview made by Andreu Martínez d'Àlos-Moner to elders from the area in 2012, they expressed their appreciation of these stones, which sometimes use in their own huts and fences but do not allow to be stolen by any external visitor. A selection of all the types and the best-preserved stones were packed and transferred by our team to the Gondar City Culture and Tourism Bureau storage rooms in 2011 and 2012. A few examples collected in the later campaign can be seen in figure 17.

The Jesuits were convinced of the importance of this new church's artistic features in deepening the conversion trend of the local people. They referred sometimes to it as "the Rome of Ethiopia" or "the Phoenix of Ethiopia". The fact that so few of the Gorgora motifs were copied thereafter in the Orthodox churches (one of the few examples is the Narga Sellase church on lake Tana, cf. Salvo, 1999: figs. 121–123) is another proof of the illusory component of their missionary expectations.

The plan of the Gorgora church is almost an exact copy of several temples made by the Jesuits



FIGURE 16. The southern wall of the Gorgora Nova main nave. Decorative blind windows (*oculi*) were disposed all along the wall. Photo by J. González Núñez (1986). Reproduced with permission.



FIGURE 17. Engraved stones with a structural function of the Gorgora Nova church. 1–2, capitals, 3, column, 4–5, arch voussoir, 6, possible capital. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 18. The church of St. Paul in Diu, India (1601). Wikimedia Commons.

and other Catholic orders in India (Tavares Chicó, 1954; Azevedo, 1959; Nunes Pereira, 2005; Osswald, 2013). The nearest model is the Jesuit church of St. Paul in Diu, also adorned with an exuberant decoration (Fig. 18). Though there are some doubts, it seems probable that the same master (mason-architect), Juan Martínez, projected both churches (Mendes in RASO, 8, liv. II, cap. V; cf. Martínez d'Àlos-Moner, 2008: 218; Osswald, 2013: 312–313). Since long, the influence of decorated Mughal buildings has been acknowledged in the lavish Indian Portuguese architecture. That eclectic art, called “modo goano” (a version for Goa of the famous Jesuit “modo nostro”, our way) probably had some influence on the origins of European Baroque architecture, in which expansion the Company was so influential (Osswald, 2013).

Annexed to the church there is a wide yard (32 × 22 m), limited in its western and eastern parts by high walls, provided with arched windows and doors. The southern side consists of a line of ten rooms, the two most extreme ones at west and east with a second floor in the form of a square tower (Fig. 19). This is the building that has been very often interpreted as the king Susenyos palace, but its layout is very similar to many other residences made by Catholic priests all over the world (for the Jesuits, see Vallery-Radot, 1960). Comparing the Gorgora and the Bom Jesus church of Goa plans, where St. Francis Xavier is buried (Nunes Pereira, 2005: 404), it is difficult to appreciate any significant differences, except for

the different scale. Gorgora Nova was one of the missions where the Jesuits had a seminary for the formation of students and future priests (Almeida in RASO, 6: 414); probably these rooms were the living or studying rooms of the youngsters, who also learnt music at the place (Almeida in RASO, 6: 415).

During the 2011 and 2012 field seasons, we carried out archaeological excavations in Gorgora Nova. The interior of seven residence rooms were clearer down to the original mortar floor. As it was the case in the excavations around the Azäzo church, almost every free space in the rooms had been occupied by human burials. As it is still the usual custom today, Orthodox cemeteries are located near or around the churches, and in Gorgora Nova the ruins of the *māqdas* of a round church, made with stone and mud, are still in the middle of the yard. According to local informants, the church was consecrated to the Virgin (*Maryam Ghimb*) and active during the 19th century.

During the last field season, the excavation provided us with a pleasant surprise. As it had occurred in the Azäzo digging, the most interesting things of the Mission sites were underground. A deep rectangular pit, whose bottom had a “V” shape covered with big ashlar and mortar, occupied the inner space of the eastern tower, specifically its southern half. The access of a tunnel leading to the nearby lake indicates that the construction was not for storing water (there was a small cistern in the yard) but a water-drainage system. The earthen deposit filling



FIGURE 19. Lateral view of the Gorgora Nova residence with the western tower in the foreground. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

the cavity yielded may squared ashlar blocks, which connected with each other by means of adjoining rectangular rabbets where there were still pieces of wood stuck on. Thus, probably the roof of the deposit or room floor was a block pavement, supported by big wooden beams whose wholes are still visible on the tower walls. One of the blocs, of bigger dimension, had a canal carved in its middle with a circular hole. This evidence suggests that the place could have been a communal bath where water was poured from above and evacuated through that hole down to the underground on its final way to the lake.

During the last excavation campaign so far we spent a lot of time and work in cleaning a part of the church collapsing rubble. Yet the deposit was so thick and the material so intractable that we hardly could reach our goals. Only the lower fraction of the southern wall is still standing, regrettably that without any decorative parts; even the surface flat stone plaques that covered all the building have disappeared. At the main church entrance, opposite to the apse, we could not attain the original floor of the building, this requiring a more extended fieldwork. The only real finding was that in that area there were the foundations of a square building, which because of its position in the north-western corner of the compound we interpreted as a, probably free-standing, tower.

As it was also the case in Azäzo, the bulk of materials recovered in the excavation correspond to local

pottery wares, the absence of imported artefacts indicating that they correspond to the period after the Jesuit departure, when both sites were used by Orthodox monks and/or local population. Only two iron items, a cross and a small tray (paten?), could possibly belong to the Catholic period of the site.

At the end of the 2012 excavations, we offered the Gorgora workers a small feast. This was almost a tradition after every campaign. In Azäzo we reserved a few big tables in a cheap restaurant near our hotel outside Gondar. Here we were in the middle of the countryside, many kilometres distant from any food and drink facilities. We bought some cakes in Gondar, both of the traditional type bearing an Italian name (*bombolino*) and European-style sponge cakes, several coca-cola packs and a big pottery jar with locally made beer (*tel.la*). We put the cakes on a flat tray and offered them in turn to the workers, who were sitting in the shadow besides the residence wall, men and women in different groups. The women were all dressed in the traditional Amhara dress, surely not very different from those of several centuries ago (Fig. 20). At the end, two elders recited some thanksgiving verses, maybe of the renowned “wax-and-gold”, metaphoric church recitations of Abyssinia (Levine, 1965). When we went to the car, a big group followed us singing and clapping (Fig. 21); we were almost sure that coming back for another season was unfeasible, and could not help feeling sad



FIGURE 20. Amhara women drinking coca-cola in the end-of-work banquet in Gorgora Nova, February 2012. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 21. The workers and children of Gorgora Nova, clapping and singing to the *ferenyi* (“whites”) when we left the site at the end of the excavation in February 2012. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

though it was the keenly anticipated conclusion of an exhausting working season.

OTHER MISSIONS

In addition to Azäzo and Gorgora, two other missions are known in the region north of lake Tana (Dembya), namely Däbsan and Dänqäz, four in the region south of the lake (Gojjam), Sarka, Märtulä Maryam, Qollella and Lejjä Negus, and one in the northernmost region of Ethiopia (Tigray), called Fremona by the Jesuits in remembrance of the Syrian monk that converted the country to Christianity in the 4th century AD, Frumentius. Several other missions are known only by name but their locations have not yet been established.

Däbsan was the residence of Patriarch Afonso Mendes until the mission demise, and at the site there is a rectangular house with arched doors and windows relatively well preserved (Figs. 22 & 23). Though there is a fine, plastered water deposit close to the residence, the rest of the buildings, which once occupied most of the hill top, were made with stone and mud and their remains today are not more than scattered or piled stones all over.

Dänqäz was the capital site of the kingdom from 1618 to 1632. The Jesuits built in 1628 a Latin cross plan church with a single nave, which seems not to have been completed before the end of the mission. The transept arches are well preserved, as

well as part of the boxed vault of the apse and the arched windows (Fig. 24), but the building lacks the decoration that distinguishes Gorgora Nova or Märtulä Maryam, even though it was projected to be the central Catholic church of the country (*Patriarchal See*).

At around 250 m to the northeast, there still stand the ruins of the main palace of king Susenyos, begun also around 1628, and whose construction, according to the royal chronicle, was directed by a local architect with the assistant of two technicians, an Indian and an Egyptian, possibly brought to Ethiopia by the Jesuits (Martínez d’Alos-Moner, 2008: 223) (Figs. 25 & 26). The palace walls are preserved until the second floor in several parts, with floral colour paintings of oriental inspiration in some of the upper floor plastered walls (Fig. 27). In the right corner of the entrance room, the outline drawing of two dogs had been painted on the wall (Fig. 28), in a clearly European style that reminds a famous painting by Jacopo Bassano, c. 1550. At this site, the relations with the local people every time we had to visit the ruins (for photographs, drawings, topography and 3D laser-scanner) were rather difficult. It seems that there were problems and claims about land allotments and the farmers believed that we were agricultural technicians or the like. The problems were usually settled down after a lot of discussion between the villagers and the Ethiopian officials –including armed guards in the



FIGURE 22. The eastern side of the Däbsan Jesuit residence. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 23. One of the arched doors of the Däbsan Jesuit residence. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

last visits— that fortunately escorted us, and paying a quite big admission fee to the monuments.

South of Bahir Dar, the nearest mission was Sarka. Jesuit texts state very often that this mission was close to the capital of Gojjam and residence of the region *ras*, and this is the reason why it has come to be identified with the place known as Ghimb Giyorgis, near the village of Adet. On an elongated hill there are the ruins of a rectangular building with a fine arch in red stone, which could correspond to the church consecrated to the Virgin Mary by the Jesuits in 1625 (Fig. 29). Around 270 m to the south-east, there is a big fortified compound (150 × 130 m) with battlemented walls up to 7 m high, rounded bastions and two rectangular defensive buildings in its NE and SE walls (Fig. 30). In the middle of the compound there are the ruins of a rectangular palace, which most probably was the residence of *ras* Se'elä Krestos', brother of the king and head of the Catholic party (who later inspired the 'philosophical' novel *Rasselas* by Samuel Johnson in 1759). The Jesuits' texts refer very often to the *ras* residence (*arrayal*) but never talk about its impressive fortifications, a fact suggesting that those could be of later, Gondarine, chronology.

Under the palace, there is an underground room, with a thick, flat mortar roof supported by



FIGURE 24. The transept of the Dänqāz Jesuit church. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

rectangular masonry pillars (Fig. 31). Its dimensions are of 11×11 m and, among other less feasible functions, has been interpreted as an storage place (Anfray, 1980–1981: 15). The French historian Anaïs Wion recorded an oral tradition in the monastery of Gong Tewodros (an important Catholic centre during the Jesuit period) about the construction of a prison in Sarka by the missionaries, and several written sources of the Gondarine period state that the palace was subsequently used as a place of “exile” for important persons, especially Orthodox patriarchs, fallen from royal grace (Van Donzel, 2007). The room shares all the typical features of medieval prisons (Fernández, 2013: 83–84), yet it possibly changed its function after the missionaries’ departure (there have been no jails in the modern sense in Ethiopia until the 20th century) and was



FIGURE 25. The Dänqāz royal palace of king Susenyos, at the edge of the Ghedam Giyorgis deep gorge. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 26. One of the best preserved walls of the Dänqāz palace, with the plastered wall and an arched window of the residential second floor. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

transformed into an storage room. A short excavation in March 2013 revealed that the original roof traps had been closed down with mortar masonry, and the pottery material recovered from the bottom floor corresponded mainly to big jars.



FIGURE 27. The floral paintings on the second floor wall, Dänqāz palace. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 28. Outline drawing of two dogs, with the lines stressed on the photography, over the wall of Dänqāz palace. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

The place of Märtulä Maryam, called Ennäbesse in the Jesuit's time, was an important religious and royal centre before the arrival of the missionaries. The restoration of the ancient buildings, destroyed during the religion wars of the 16th century, was projected by Juan Martínez and carried out by an Italian missionary, Bruno Bruni (who later remained in Ethiopia after the expulsion and was martyred). Though left unfinished, the plan of the church, with three naves, differed from the usual Jesuit type. The decoration was the most exuberant of all the Ethiopian Jesuit churches, again recalling the Indian prototypes. The preserved walls, up to 10 m high, have impressively decorated arches, connecting doors with scallop and vegetal decoration, and a strange line of women-like metopes/caryatids near the non-existent ceiling (Figs. 32, 33 and 34). A fortified circular enclosure with bastions and a water cistern completed the compound. The place is today an important Orthodox centre, and archaeological excavations –which could be very useful for discovering the previous 16th century church made

by Queen Eleni (1508–1522)– are not allowed. The building has always puzzled travellers and researchers, to such an extent that one of the recent specialists, the American diplomat Paul Henze, goes as far as to suggest the building being more probably a palace than a church (Henze, 2004). Another reason for its fame are the sculpted winged angel-heads (cherubs) beneath some of their decorated windows (Fig. 35), which were later imitated in paintings on the ceiling of the touristic church of Debre Birham Sellase in Gondar (Fig. 36).

From the mission of Qollela, in spite of its importance during the Jesuit period (it had a seminary and a music school), very few remains are extant today, scarcely the rests of a big wall in a place called Ghimb Kidane Mehret beside the road from Bahir Dar to Motta. The location of the other important mission in Gojjam, Lejjä Negus, was dubious even after Francis Anfray suggested that it could be the site of Abba Gish Fasil, near the source of the “Little Abay” which is deemed to be the origin of the Blue Nile river (Anfray, 1988: 21). When



FIGURE 29. The red stone arch of the Jesuit Mary church of Ghimb Giyorgis-Sarka, Gojjam. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

we visited the site for the first time in 2011, we were told by local elders that the son of king Susenyos, Fasilādās, lived there for a while. The Jesuit Mendes wrote that the mission's name ("son of the king") was so because the sons of the king had lived once there (Martínez d'Àlos-Moner, 2008: 127). The evidence, thus, strongly suggests that the place is indeed the Jesuit mission, even though its architectural features are somewhat different to other related places. Three different constructions occupy the top of a narrow hill with a commanding view: the ruins of a residence with two floors (recalling the Dānqāz palace at a smaller scale), a water deposit entirely preserved (a free-standing square building with two parallel vaulted chambers) and the most peculiar, a thick defensive wall with a line of big, rectangular loopholes. The military character of the compound was surely intended to prevent the periodic attacks in southern Gojjam of the Oromo (the *Galla* of the Jesuit and other historical sources).

During our last field season so far, in April 2013 we visited for the first time the northern site

of Fremona, where the first Jesuit mission was installed around 1560–1565. Throughout the whole period, there was the first stop of the priests after the adventurous voyage from India, and from it the Jesuits controlled the strong Catholic community of Tigray. During our hard trip by car from Gondar to Aksum, one whole day, we could remember that to the missionaries it took around 14 days to cross these, the most mountainous areas of Ethiopia. The mission occupied the top of a hill facing the Adwa plain –just where centuries later, in 1896, the Ethiopians defeated the Italian army that came from Eritrea for colonizing the country– an area whose extension is surprisingly small to have held such an important mission. The old Jesuit church was replaced sometime after the expulsion by an Orthodox building that continued its use at the beginning of the 20th century (Lüpke, 1913: 64–66), and was again changed in recent date by a new church. Now another, bigger, church is being finished that has inadvertently (?) covered one of the few remains from the Jesuit church, a big moulded pillar base



FIGURE 30. The north-eastern battlemented walls and building with a round tower in Sarka. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 31. The subterranean room (prison?) under the palace of Sarka. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 32. Transept main arch of the Märtulä Maryam church, Gojjam. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 34. Women figures and metopes decoration at the top of Märtulä Maryam church main nave. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

(A. Martínez d'Àlos-Moner, pers. comm.). A few other decorative stones, piled under a bush near the new church, could be photographed and drawn during our visit (Fig. 37).

Fortunately, the defensive walls and two of their bastions are still standing to bear witness of the



FIGURE 33. Decorated door connecting the Märtulä Maryam church naves. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

missionary military expertise to make a stronghold “inexpugnavel pera as armas da terra” (impregnable with the country’s armoury) (Mendes in RASO, 12: 159) (Fig. 38). Curiously, the high walls and towers were constructed with dry stone, without the “invention” that the Jesuits were more proud of, the lime. Yet, as father Almeida wrote (in RASO 6: 502), they used only mud because there was very little lime in the region, and the Fremona mud “liga quasi tanto como ella” (it binds almost as well as lime). The missionary skilfulness is attested by the conservation of a great part of the work almost four centuries later (Fig. 39).

CONCLUSIONS

Though I am an archaeologist, and thus mainly interested in the past, I have always been very curious



FIGURE 35. Sculpted cherub under the window of the lateral nave of Märtulä Maryam church. Photo by V.M. Fernández.



FIGURE 36. Cherubs painted at the ceiling of Debre Birham Sellasse in Gondar (beginnings of the 19th century). Photo by V.M. Fernández.

about the relations of the ancient times with present people and ideas (Fernández, 2006). In this respect, the Jesuit issue in Ethiopia, as in many other parts



FIGURE 37. The heap with moulding pillar stones from the old Jesuit church of Fremona, Tigray. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

of the world, sometimes seems to be as problematic today as it was centuries ago.

In February 2008, the Spanish embassy in Ethiopia organized a lecture to present our research on the Jesuit monuments at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the University of Addis Ababa, a prestigious centre set up in the ancient palace of the emperor Haile Sellassie. As the two university professors of archaeology, who co-organized and would introduce me to the public, insisted several times, that was a place of great honour where even prime ministers had given important speeches. I did not need those advices to feel somewhat uneasy the days before the lecture. The embassy had extensively advertised the event amidst the Addis diplomat and expatriate community.

I went to the university campus a substantial time before the schedule, only to find that in the publicizing poster someone had changed my title of “Jesuit archaeology” for the old-fashioned but less embarrassing “Castles of lake Tana” ... Worried as I was about the result of the talk, I opened my laptop in the university cafeteria, changing the title of



FIGURE 38. The remains of the defensive walls and bastions of the Jesuit Mission of Fremona, Tigray. At right, the new churches of St. George and St. Abuna Aregawi. The big earthen mound beneath the walls was possibly formed by the many recent graves excavated in this Orthodox holy place. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

the power point presentation, but letting the whole of the lecture intact. Since that occasion, I tend to combine the term “Jesuit” with the expressions “pre-Gondarine” or “Portuguese” in our published texts.

As it was expected, at the end of the lecture someone made the oft-repeated question: why had I talked about the introduction of lime by the Jesuits in Ethiopia, when everybody knew that the technique was locally mastered since antiquity? At that instant of the lecture, I was almost completely relaxed and could answer expressing my deepest wish that some evidence could substantiate that claim but that unfortunately, that was still not the case (*contra* Merid Wolde, 1984).



FIGURE 39. A detail of the dry stone masonry of the Fremona defensive walls and bastion. Photo by V.M. Fernández.

During the lecture, I quoted a terrible phrase from the American historian Donald Crummey (2000: 69) about the Jesuit period (“it added misery to misery”) that made the audience laugh. At the time, I had not yet read and thus could not cite the old but wonderful guide to the country written by Sylvia Pankhurst in 1955, in some respects a compendium of the typically Protestant views about the Catholic world and especially the Jesuits. Sylvia was a prominent suffragist and anti-colonialist activist in England before moving to Ethiopia in 1956 invited by emperor Haile Selassie, and his son Richard has been the symbolic head of Ethiopian Studies until the present day. (He was in the University Ras Mekonnen Room attending my conference, and in spite of his old age, he made the best, and most difficult to answer, questions at the end.) For all the sympathy I felt for Sylvia and her political causes, I experienced an uneasy sensation when reading her description of Afonso Mendes as “narrow-minded and bigoted” or her account about the “dangerous influence” of Pedro Páez on the Ethiopian king. Furthermore, only in Sylvia’s book I remember to have read about a popular Ethiopian song from the time just after the missionaries’ expulsion, expressing the happiness of coming back to the “Faith or the fathers” (*Haymanotä Abäw*) and of being freed from the “wolves of the West” (Pankhurst, 1955: 354–356).

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