

Wallie Iyesus: An Aksumite Church in a Zagwe Landscape?

A Preliminary Description

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Thirty kilometres from the beautiful town of Weldia, on the Weldia Woreta road leading to Gondar, is a small village called Weynie. It is considerably a rich village with quite extensive irrigated plots thanks to the small river running all the year round. Weynie is located at the bottom of a triangular mountain chain connecting Lasta from the northwest, Kobbo (Tigray) from the southeast and Yejjju from the south.

Wallie Iyesus is a cave church located in the middle of this triangular mountain chain. Although the church is equally close to Lasta and Tigray – located as it is on the border mountain chain, it is the Yejjju inhabitants who are responsible for its upkeep and maintenance. More specifically, Weynie is the village that takes care of Wallie Iyesus and five other churches in the vicinity.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ In early October 1992, Yeras Work Admassie was informed by the elders of Weynie (a small village in Weldia where he did his field work) that they would show him some old cave churches if he promised to forward request that they would like a road to be constructed, with machinery being contributed by the government and labour by the community. The road thus constructed, they said, would benefit the hinterland of the community by making the churches easily accessible to tourists.

Yeras Work Admassie informed the village elders that he was only a simple researcher with no power to influence the government but he would certainly forward their request to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, the Ministry of Culture and the leadership of the peasant association. The narration of Yeras Work's first visit to Wallie Iyesus is based on his field notes. The following day October 8, 1992 Yeras Work set out on a trip that the villagers said would take 2 hours (round trip) -an underestimation typical of

From the village of Weynie, the only way to reach Wallie Iyesus church is travelling on foot. For Yeras Work and myself, middle aged men from the city, it took us about four hours to reach Wallie Iyesus. The inhabitants of the region finished the travel much faster. This happened in May 1993.

Wallie Iyesus is a rectangular church, eleven meters long and eight meters wide and was built inside a huge cave. According to our estimation (provisional) the mouth of the cave is over ten meters high. The width of the cave is about thirty meters. The cave digs itself so deep that only the parts that can be reached by daylight are made use of. As far as we know, no one has attempted to discover the secrets that might lie hidden beyond the approximately thirty meters of the open cave.

This cave is in the middle of the triangular mountain chain. Water originating from the three mountains pours down in the form of waterfall from the top of the cave into the

Ethiopian farmers. As it turned out, it took 6 hours. After 3 and half hours trek we reached the top of the mountain. We were all exhausted and had to take a short rest. At this point the people accompanying Yeras Work, fired gun shots in order to warn the monks about our arrival. Then, we started to descend to the other side of the mountain, arriving at a site covered with giant junipers and hidden from view and the winds sweeping down the folds of the mountain.

Descending further and penetrating the juniper forest on a footpath, we came to a sort of landing site where we were met first by 3 monks, and then by farmers from nearby farms. A few steps further, the landing site ended in a precipice. Facing the mountain, one observes a footpath and a rather steep-slope to the left of the landing site, and a 90° cliff that stretched up to the top of the mountain (from where we stood) and then continues down at least 50 meters. Then in the middle of the cliff, at the same level as the landing site on which we were standing, one could see the mouth of the cave that was fenced almost up to half of its height with split-wood. A small waterfall formed at the head of the cliff high up and arched down the cliff. In order to enter the cave itself, one has to walk on a narrow path that is cut into the cliff right under the waterfall.

Inside the cave one traversed two wooden enclosures, and then one's eyes met a beautiful sight: A small stone built church in a reddish-brown stone masonry: about 11 x 8 m, two doors, 14 windows, and two antechambers. Yeras Work took pictures of the exterior and the interior of the church, and the magnificent windows. Yeras Work did not venture deeper into the cave, which, according to the inhabitants of Weynie village, leads all the way to Lalibela. In May 1993, Yeras Work invited me (Tekeste) to see the Church of Wallie Iyesus and we agreed to jointly write a small paper in order to spread the knowledge of this hitherto very little known church to the wider public. We apologise to the people of Weynie that it took such a long time for the formal presentation of Wallie Iyesus Church. Yeras Work took all pictures used in this article.

valley below. It is this water that the villagers of Weynie use to irrigate their plots all year round.

According to oral tradition, Wallie Iyesus Church was built many centuries before the construction of Rock Churches by Lalibela or during his period. The church was built, they say, during the reign of king Kaleb in the early 6th century. While we cannot be quite certain that Wallie Iyesus was built before the Rock churches because we need to know more about the spread of Christianity before we can subscribe to the chronology provided oral tradition.

Wallie Iyesus Church has a central nave and two aisles and a dome over the sanctuary. It is a small basilica that resembles very much the Aksumite churches at Adulis, Matara, Agula and that of Wuchate Golo (in the vicinity of Aksum) described by David Phillipson. Moreover, The architectural style of Wallie Iyesus has similarities with the church of Imrahanna Kristos. Both are churches built inside caves. Both are more or less of the same size. Imrahanna Kirstos is 12.7 meters long and 9.2 meters wide whereas Wallie Iyesus is 11 meters long and 8 meters wide. We are almost certain that Wallie Iyesus Church is like Imrahanna Kirstos, one of the very few cases where the present structure and its embellishments are all of a single early period.¹⁹⁸

Wallie Iyesus church is one of the very few churches in the country that is fully protected from the ravages of rain, sun and wind. The door to the main entrance is 2.3 meters high and 1.5 meters wide. But the actual width of the door is only 70 centimetres. The rest is made up of the typical Aksumite wooden rafts on all sides of the door. The south side of the Church: Note the door and the three windows.

¹⁹⁸ Phillipson, David, 2009:85. Our strong assumption is that Phillipson would have drawn similar conclusion had he seen Wallie Iyesus.



The main entrance to the church with the dome over the sanctuary



Each window has an elaborately curved wooden frame with enough space for light and air

David Buxton, whose contribution is generously and quite rightly acknowledged by David Phillipson, did not visit Wallie Iyesus. Buxton was no doubt on the area as he wrote about Avoma Mariam (Buxton, 1949:116). We were told by the inhabitants of Weynie that there is a church called Anova Mariam (most certainly Buxton's Avoma Mariam) and it is a cave church very similar to that of Wallie Iyesus. Although we did not visit Anova Mariam we could clearly see the forest that surrounded it. It belongs to the inhabitants of Weynie.

Like the typical Aksumite churches described in great detail in David phillipson's most recent work, a visitor entering from the main door encounters the vestibule – a room stretching through the length of the church with a lower roof. After this room, there is another Aksumite door leading to the central nave with a higher roof decorated with curved and painted woodwork. The aisles on each side of the central nave have lower roofs.

If Wallie Iyesus is very similar to the Church at Debra Damo and to that of Yemharana Kirstos, could it have been built around the same time, that is some time in the ninth or tenth century? Could there be some credibility to the oral tradition handed down to us that it was in fact built during the reign of Kaleb who ruled in the early decades of 6th century?

The state of knowledge that we possess to day does not permit us to answer this question as to when Wallie Iyesus might have been constructed.



One of the three windows at the backside of the Church



One of the three windows at the backside of the Church

There are some arguments that might be used to argue for an early construction. One of the most important arguments is that Wallie Iyesus is built deep inside a cave – big and wide enough to allow light but fully protected from rain and wind. It is fully possible to argue that

the sturdy wooden door and window beams could have been there over ten centuries. The second argument is the conviction of the care takers of the Wallie Iyesus Church. For them, there is no doubt that their church was constructed well before those of rock churches at Lalibela and even perhaps during the time of King Caleb in the early 6th century. It has to be noted that Wallie Iyesus is only 40 kms south east of Lalibela and people of Weynie were quite knowledgeable on the religious landscape of the region.