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PROJECT FOR THE RESEARCH OF GONDARINE HERITAGE

REPORT – MAY, 15TH, 2005

By *Hervé Pennec*
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Introduction:

The 1972 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguard of Cultural and Natural Heritage has led to the expansion of a worldwide preservation programme that, in the case of cultural heritage, favoured the protection of architectural sites. Unfortunately, during the three following decades, the local implementation of such preservation programme has rarely considered the relevance of their organic relation to the historical and anthropological aspects of that heritage.

In various meetings of international experts and in the 1989 Chicago Declaration for the Safekeeping of Cultural Heritage, the UNESCO member states have progressively recognized that the limitations of such perspective hindered the development of a coherent and systematic protection of cultural values. To overcome this situation, the UNESCO General Assembly has approved, in October 26, 2003, the Convention for the Safeguard of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

This new Convention is expected to become an essential legal and programmatic instrument to safeguard the endangered cultural heritage of many local communities and generally to protect cultural diversity as a fundamental means to sustainable world development. Presumably, it will also help redress the perversions that arose from the application of the 1972 Convention, in the case of the classified World Heritage Sites (WHS).

Considering the specific situation of the Gondar region, in Ethiopia, which is home to one WHS - the *Fasil Gemb*, in Gondar town – the preservation projects have focused, almost exclusively, on the preservation and restoration of the buildings situated within the castle compound and of the so-called Fasil's Bath. If the latter has, to this day, an important ceremonial and symbolic function, that was not certainly caused by the preservation programme but by the importance that the local Christian population accords it, during the annual festival of the *Timkat* (Orthodox Epiphany). As to the former, it is an empty, clueless, space, detached from the town's and the region's cultural life, little else than an unkempt tourist attraction.

Present state of the research

The reason for the situation described above lies mainly in the fact that the historical site of *Fasil Gemb*, in Gondar, has been almost exclusively considered as a monumental emblem of Abyssinian royal power, and no integrative view was developed to understand it as part of the complex and dynamic cultural history of the Gondar region. Although the site itself, as well as the Fasil's Bath and the Qwesqwam compound, have been thoroughly surveyed and classified, by the Italian occupiers, by UNESCO experts, and by the local Culture Department, little research has been carried out in a number of important areas, which are essential to understand and give meaning to Gondar's architectural heritage. In particular, a artificial conception was developed in which a radical chronological cleavage served, and serves, to distinguish a supposed pre-Gondarine period (early 16th century to circa 1640's) from the Gondarine times, which ideally start with the foundation of Fasiladas' castle (1634). Oral and written historical sources and archaeological evidence should nevertheless help review this unsubstantiated idea. Analysis of historical documentation and site surveys carried out in the Lake Tana area by archaeologists Francis Anfray and Guy Annequin (1970's to 1980's), and later by the present team of researchers (from 1998 to today – see “research team - surveys”, below), clearly show that this view is unfounded, since the Ethiopian kings have, throughout most of the so-called

Gondarine period, extensively used, as courtly centres, the royal *katamas* built during the 16th and early 17th century. Consequently, it is fundamental to reconsider the notion of “royal site”, within a broader and more dynamic perspective that may extend the scope of research and preservation programmes of Gondarine historical and architectural heritage to include such sites as Qoga, Guzara (and Debsan), Denkaz, Gorgora Nova (Maryam Gemb), as well as a number of Gojjami locations (Sarka, Yebabay Gemb, Giorghis Gemb, Mertula Maryam, etc.). Furthermore, there are other presumably relevant sites, recorded in the historical documentation relative to Gondarine royalty, which are yet to be identified.

Prospective research

For a deeper understanding of the historical foundation and development of Gondar (a step that seems essential for the proper interpretation of the architectural heritage of the *Fasil Gemb* and other sites in and around Gondar), a more cohesive methodology must be implemented, that permits the development of coordinated archaeological, historical and anthropological studies. The present team has been carrying out research in Gondar and in the Lake Tana area to try to understand the complex and insoluble relations between written sources (both indigenous and foreign), oral traditions and artistic expressions that frame Gondarine culture and history.

The oral stories that the team has been collecting, in and around Gondar, have already provided important hints about the history of the foundation of the capital and about the important transformations which occurred there, during the better part of the 17th century. The continuation of this urgent task will undoubtedly help us elucidate many obscure anthropological aspects of the architectural sites and of their symbolical function as centres of the royal institution. The same must be said about the archaeological research. Diggings executed in the royal camp of Baeda Maryam (Menz) in 1999, by the Authority of Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, together with the French Centre of Ethiopian Studies, offer an important window to

understand the organization of the *katamas* of Lake Tana, including that of Gondar. Further research that brings together historical documentation, oral sources and archaeological evidence seems the only way to bring the ancient cultural heritage of Gondar out of the shadows of its neglected history. In this respect, a word must be said about the rich and extensive documentation in Portuguese, Latin and even Ge'ez, authored by Portuguese travellers and Jesuit missionaries, from the early 16th century to the late 17th century. This documentation has been used by historians that have little or no knowledge of Portuguese and Latin, and with general disregard of their literary, ideological and cultural constraints. The present team has been dedicating attention to these sources, in more substantial and global terms, but much of their richness is still to unearh.

The provisional results obtained by the research team confirm the need to expand the traditional view, repeatedly presented in historical publications about Gondar – namely:

- the double question of the continuity and transformation of the Ethiopian royal institution, in its symbolic and functional relation to society and religion, from the late medieval period (Wolo) to the later occupation of the territory surrounding Lake Tana;
- the need to enrich the study of the history of the Gondarine political system by considering the bi-univocal relation between royal central power and the largely autonomic regions of Gojjam, Tigray, Lasta, Shawa, Begemder, Wolo and Simien;
- the reconsideration of the value of oral sources in the understanding of Gondarine civilization - both within and beyond the capital proper -, especially in order to provide a coherent view of the symbolic system that characterized the royal institution, and its relation with religion, magic, the judicial system, etc., and which instilled meaning to the architectonic spaces and the urban divisions (the Christian, Muslim, Kayla and Kemant quarters);

- the reanalysis of the position of the royal compound within the capital, understood as part of a web of politico-religious authority, in which the numerous churches have always played a particularly relevant, and largely misunderstood, role;
- the study of the often-conflicting relation between the Gondarine kingship system, the monastic orders and theological doctrines (*Tehawedo, K'ebat, Karra, Catholicism*);
- a compared analysis with other regional and national contexts, in order to better comprehend the nature of the various institutions that shaped the social, cultural and artistic life of Gondar and the surrounding region – particularly, by drawing attention to other East African kingdoms, to Arabian sultanates and to Indian states. In this respect, a revision of the international relations of the Gondarine royalty with neighbouring countries, with India (and specially with Portuguese possessions and trading places), and with Southern Europe (the Vatican, the Iberian Peninsula, in particular) is of utmost importance.

Problems of Conservation

Detailed survey of the sites executed during the years of 1998, 1999, 2001 and 2005, as well as various discussions with archaeologists, architects and art historians specialized in both Ethiopian and Indo-Portuguese heritage (see “provisional results”, below), have led the research team to suspect that all preservation programmes which do not incorporate previous careful archaeological research, may lead to unrepairable damage to Ethiopian history: regrettably, this may have already happened, in the case of the consolidation of the castle of Guzara, which some popular traditions declare having been built by king Sarsa Dengel (1563-1597) but, according to such specialists as Prof. Merid Wolde Aregay, was probably subjected to a radical reconstruction during the late 17th century – the fact that no systematic

archaeological survey has taken place hampers a correct dating of the building and of the overlaying stages of occupation of the royal site. Other examples where human and/or natural action have also had shattering consequences for the archaeological study of the Gondarine heritage are two precious sites built during the reign of King Susinyos (1607-1632): Gorgora Nova (a church and castle compound of great architectural significance) and Azazo Ganata Iyesus (certainly, the model for the construction of the “Fasil’s Bath”, in Gondar).

The present team has identified strong signs of imminent decay in other surviving sites, the destruction of which will mean the loss of fundamental elements for the comprehension of the genesis and function of the Gondar WHS: this is clearly the case of Denkaz (both Susiunyos castle and the Catholic cathedral are at great risk), of Debsan (the walls of the “Casa do Patriarca”, of great historical and architectural importance, risk collapse), of Mertula Maryam (the Catholic church, with its delicate Indo-Portuguese decorations, is on the verge of collapse), and other sites like Yebabay Gemb, Gemb Giorghis, Gemb Maryam (south of Bahir Dar), Sarka, Qoma Fasiladas and Qwalala. Attention should also be directed to infrastructures like bridges, such as the ones over Garno (Enfraz), over the Abbay (Eastern Gojjam), and over the Angareb (Gondar). The situation of the cistern of the royal palace of Dankaz, the only surviving of the series of arched cisterns built next to the royal compounds (including that of the *Fasil Gemb*, in Gondar) is a disheartening example of the dire need of resolute and coordinated action (at the local, regional and national level, and with the support of other interested parties - national and international organisations, both public and private): the installation of a corrugated iron roof, that would prevent its further erosion in the coming rainy season, would cost little more than one thousand birrs (one hundred euros), but the local community, which has shown obvious interest in the preservation of the site (namely by constructing a surrounding wall and regularly cleaning it of grass and bush), does not have the means or the knowledge to install it adequately.

In respect to the inventory and classification of historical sources, an overwhelming amount of work has yet to be executed. Not only is oral history in great danger by the fact that the holders of that type of information are dying out, without being able to transmit their knowledge to the younger generations, but the continuous plunder of church archives and libraries has led to the disappearance of important documental sources, to the scattering of information and to an attitude of ingrained suspicion and defensiveness on the part of local church authorities. Each church, in each locality of Lake Tana, preserves an original perspective regarding the region's history, which is kept both in writing and in oral stories (*afatarik*).

Still regarding conservation problems, one further word must be said: traditionally in Ethiopia, and clearly in Gondar, the popular idea of conservation has little to do with Western notions; to conserve an icon is to repaint it when its colours fade - its substance as a reproduction of an original image of the divine or of the saint being much more important than its original style, paint and material support. In some way, the same must be said about popular ideas on architectural preservation: a church is considered in its entire history, since the consecration of its *tabot*, irrespective of the fact that the original building might have crumbled and that another one was later re-erected in the same place. This is the case of most churches in Gondar (the noted exception being that of Debra Berhane Selassie). When proceeding to preservation projects, one should be sensitive to the importance of such cultural notions - the Fasil's Bath being one case in point.

Recommendations

- coordination of the research programmes dedicated to the understanding of Gondarine heritage, by promoting continuous dialogue between national and international specialists, who have been dedicating their professional attention to this subject (through seminars, conferences, and linking via the internet);

- creation of a Cultural and Studies Centre (in Ras Mikael Sehul's palace, for instance), with both a physical and a virtual (internet) interface, that may permit raising interest about Gondarine civilization among the local community, among the substantial Gondarine diaspora, among international scholars and among the general public interested in knowing more about Gondar (namely, prospective visitors and tourists);
- establishment of physical and virtual databases, based on extensive and progressive inventories on Gondarine history, ethnography, geography, architecture, archaeology, prosopography (of local figures, of churches, monasteries, etc.) and art history, easily accessible to people interested in Gondarine studies – including manuscript and published material, oral and videographic records, digital reconstruction of architectural monuments, use of Geographic Information Systems, etc.;
- logistical and financial support to research programmes on the above-mentioned areas, with creation of an international scientific commission:
- establishment of an urgent programme of consolidation of architectural sites in imminent danger, and creation of a coordinated effort to proceed to the further study and restoration of architectural and cultural heritage;
- creation of a publishing programme, including Amharic and English versions of local historical sources, studies, facsimile of important yet unpublished documentation (namely that kept in Western archives and libraries);
- support of local associations dedicated to the study and preservation of Gondarine heritage.

Provisional results

Surveys:

- 1998: one month mission by Hervé Pennec in the Gondar and Gojjam regions (photographic survey, measurements and plans of monuments, and interviews to local people)
- 1999: three month mission by Manuel João Ramos and Sérgio Infante in the Gondar and Gojjam regions (photographic survey, measurements and architectural drawings of monuments, filmed and taped interviews to local people, ethnographic observation);
- 1999: three month mission by Anaïs Wion in the Monastery of Qoma Fasiladas – Begemder (historical and ethnographical research, study of manuscripts and religious art);
- 2001: two month mission by Manuel João Ramos, Pedro Caldas and Carmen Castelo-Branco in the Gondar, Gojjam and Tigray regions (documentary film for a Portuguese TV channel);
- 2002: one month mission by Manuel João Ramos in the Gondar and Tigray regions (ethnographical observation, filmed and taped interviews);
- 2004: two month mission by Anaïs Wion and Claire Bosc-Tiessé in the Gojjam region (historical and ethnographical research, study of manuscripts and religious art, cartographic survey);
- 2005: two month mission by Hervé Pennec, Manuel João Ramos and Sisay Sehale in the Gondar and Gojjam regions (systematic photographic survey, geo-referenced cartography, digital design of monuments, and taped interviews to local people.

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A more detailed version of this report will be presented to the following institutions:

Amhara Regional State	ICOMOS
Authority for the Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Ethiopian Ministry of Culture)	ICROM – UNESCO
British Council in Ethiopia	Instituto Camões – Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation – Lisbon	Mayor of Gondar
Crest Fondation – New York	National Geographic Society
Ethiopian Tourist Commission	Orient Foundation - Lisbon
European Union Commissar for Ethiopia	Portuguese Embassy in Ethiopia
French Centre of Ethiopian Studies (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa
French Embassy in Ethiopia	Spanish Embassy in Ethiopia
	United Kingdom Embassy in Ethiopia
	United States Embassy in Ethiopia
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World Monument Fund

Photographs from the 2005 Survey

Denkaz Gomange



Susinyos Palace (southwest view)

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Susinyos Palace (decorated wall)

© Hervé Pennec 2005



Susinyos Palace (arched cistern)

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Catholic Cathedral (general view)

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Catholic Cathedral (interior view)
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Debsan Enfraz



Casa do Patriarca (northern view)
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Casa do Patriarca (arched window)
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Casa do Patriarca (interior view)
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Guzara



Guzara castle (general view)

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Guzara castle (interior view during the consolidation work)

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Guzara castle (view of the northeastern tower)
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Gorgora Nova – Maryam Gemb



Susinyos castle (southwestern tower)
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Susinyos castle and Catholic church (southeastern view)
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Catholic Church (detail of the apse)
© Hervé Pennec 2005

Azazo – Ganata Iyesus



Susinyos castle (southeastern entrance)

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Susinyos castle (southeastern tower)

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Susinyos bath (interior view)

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Susinyos bath (foundations of the pavilion)

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