

Rock Hewn Churches,
Lalibela, Ethiopia
(Original : English)

Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage

World Heritage List

Nomination Form

Under the terms of the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by the General Conference of Unesco in 1972, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, called "the World Heritage Committee" shall establish, under the title of "World Heritage List", a list of properties forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which it considers as having outstanding universal value in terms of such criteria it shall have established.

The purpose of this form is to enable States Parties to submit to the World Heritage Committee nominations of properties situated in their territory and suitable for inclusion in the World Heritage List.

Notes to assist in completing each page of the form are provided opposite the page to be completed. Please type entries in the spaces available. Additional information may be provided on pages attached to the form.

It should be noted that the World Heritage Committee will retain all supporting documentation (maps, plans, photographic material, etc.) submitted with the nomination form.

The form completed in English or French should be sent in three copies to:

The Secretariat
World Heritage Committee
Division of Cultural Heritage
Unesco
7, place de Fontenoy
75700 Paris

1. Specific location

(a) Country

Ethiopia

(b) State, Province or Region

Wollo Region
Lasta District

(c) Name of property

Rock Hewn Churches, Lalibela

(d) Exact location on map and indication of geographical co-ordinates

Attached map
12°02'N
38°49'E

2. Juridical data

(a) Owner

National monuments

General Administration:
Ministry of Culture and Sport Affairs
P.O.Box 1907
Addis Ababa

for the part of the ecclesiastical administration in co-operation with :
Ethiopian Orthodox Church
P.O.Box 1283
Addis Ababa

(b) Legal status

Public

The monuments are listed in the project document for the restoration project ETH/74/014 executed in co-operation with UNESCO/UNDP.

The site and the churches are accessible to the general public, with the exception of the Holy of the Holiest, Priests living quarters, etc.

(c) Responsible administration

as above 2 a)

For the part of safeguarding:

Ministry of Culture and Sport Affairs
"Centre for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage", P.O.B1907.A.A.

in co-operation with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

2. Identification

(a) Description and inventory

The eleven churches congregated in two main groups, with one straggler are together with the surrounding village of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art and ecclesiastical history.

The placing in the landscape, with the extensive system of trenches and tunnels connecting the churches, is of unique aesthetic value.

The first group of churches is comprised of :

Biet Medhani Alem (House of the Saviour of the World)
Biet Mariam (House of Mary)
Biet Mascal (House of the Cross)
Biet Denagel (House of Virgins)
Biet Golgotha Mikael (House of Golgotha Mikael)

The other group consists of :

Biet Amanuel (House of Emmanuel)
Biet Choddus Mercoreos (House of St. Mercoreos)
Biet Abba Libanos (House of Abbot Libanos)
Biet Gabriel Raphael (House of Gabriel Raphael)
Biet Lehem (House of Holy Bread)

The eleventh church is isolated from the others, but connected by the system of trenches - not yet fully explored

Biet Ghiorgis (House of St. George)

The vernacular architecture of Lalibela is of type of a two-storey 'tucul' (round house) constructed with the characteristic red local stone. This traditional architecture is rapidly disappearing, but should be conserved as a proper surrounding to the churches.

(b) Maps and/or plans

General Map of Ethiopia, 1:2,800,000 (XX/002)
Plans of the Churches, 1:200 (IV/ZD)

5. Identification (cont'd)

(c) Photographic and/or
cinematographi documentation

Biete Georghis
Biete Gabriel
Abba Lobanos
Biete Ananuel -exterior/interior
Biete Michael Golgotha
Biete Modhane Alem - exterior/interior
Biete Marian

(d) History

"...so great is my desire to make
known this splendor to the world.."

Francisco Alvarez

1540 AD

No accurate dating exists for the origin of the churches, but they may have been created over a long period of time by successive regimes. Some historians think they may date back to the Queen of Sheba's visit to Jerusalem about 1000 BC. However it is more widely believed that they were dug out to form a new Jerusalem after the Moslem conquests halted the Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

The churches were not constructed in traditional way but were hewn from the living rock in monolithic blocks. These blocks were chiseled out, forming the churches with doors, windows, columns, various floors, roofs, etc. This gigantic work was further completed with an extensive system of drainage ditches, defensive trenches and ceremonial passages. Seismic activities have affected the monuments, since the area is completely surrounded by epicentral locations with magnitude <6

(e) Bibliography

Bekingham, C.F/Huntingford
"The Prester John of the Indies"
Cambridge, 1961
Bianchi Barriviera, L.
"Le Chiese monolitiche di Lalibela
& altre, nel l'Asa-Vagh in Ethiopia"
Rome, 1962
Bidder, I.
"Lalibela" Cologne, 1959
Buxton, D.R.
"Ethiopian Rock-Hewn Churches", in
Archaeologia, vol. 20, 1946; id. The
Christian Antiquities of Northern
Ethiopia, in : Archaeologia, vol. 92, 1947;
id: Travels in Ethiopia, London, 1957;
id: Ethiopian Medieval Architecture
- the Present State of Studies
Journal of Semitic Studies, Manchester,
vol. 9, 1964

3. Identification (cont'd)

(e) Bibliography

- Findlay, L.
"The Monolithic Churches of Lalibela
in Ethiopia",
Cairo, 1944
- Gerster, G.
"Churches in Rock"
Phaidon, London, 1970
- Hammerschmidt, E.
Athiopien
Wiesbaden, 1967
- International Funds for Monuments (ed)
"Lalibela-phase I"
New York 1967
- Monti della Corte, A.A.
"Lalibela"
Rome, 1940

4. State of preservation/conservation

(a) Diagnosis

Some of the churches are in a fair condition, but they all show indications of deterioration, from slightly injured to heavy demolition, or used by the hands of time, weather and man. Uneven settlement of the monolithic masses, over the centuries has caused crevices, cracks and fissures - resulting salt wandering and decomposition of the rock.

During the past a large part of the drainage system has been filled with earth. The result of this has been an accumulation of water around the monuments enabling a vegetation of trees, lichen and microvegetation to attach and penetrate the monuments with their roots.

"Restoration" have been undertaken, mostly in this century, and have in general injured, rather than improved the monuments.

(b) Agent responsible for preservation/conservation

Ministry of Culture and Sport Affairs
Centre for Research and Conservation
of Cultural Heritage
P.O.B. 5580
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

(c) History of preservation/conservation

Extensive surface repairs, some re-excavations of trenches and consolidation works were carried out in the late 1960's. Under the UNDP/UNESCO supported project ETH/74/014 various measures have been undertaken. Awaiting the result of a high-levelled scientific investigation of the various variations of rock and causes of deterioration, a serie of prophylactic works have been and are being carried out. These consist of a re-excavation of the drainage system, eradication of harmful vegetation, record of possible movement of the rock etc. Once the result of the above mentioned studies are available, and the prophylactic measures undertaken have proved themselves, a big-scale operation is necessary. In this connection a complete master plan should be elaborated for the monuments as well as for the surrounding (the village with its characteristic vernacular architecture).

4. State of preservation/conservation
(cont'd)

(d) Means for preservation/
conservation

The Ethiopian law 1958(10) on "Antiquities Administration" and the project of law on inspection, inventory, research and conservation of cultural heritage.

Provided with governmental regular budget and qualifying for external assistance.

(e) Management plans

- 1) see the attached managerial chart
- 2) see project of law
- 3) International campaign requested in 1976, ref. UNESCO resolution 19C 4.126

5. Justification for inclusion in
the World Heritage List

(a) Cultural property

The eleven rock hewn churches in Lalibela and their surrounding is claimed to be of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art and ecclesiastical history, since :

- a. the work was a gigantic accomplishment in engineering and architecture. The result is a unique artistic and aesthetic achievement;
- b. Lalibela's remarkable history as the nucleus of the "New Jerusalem" and being the Centre of the Coptic Christian Churches in Ethiopia it has exerted an enormous influence during centuries;
- c. The rock-hewn churches in Lalibela are extremely rare, since being the only ones of this kind in Africa;
- d. The monuments are associated with the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and its importance for the ecclesiastical history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church makes it of outstanding significance.

5. Justification for inclusion in
the World Heritage List (cont'd)

(b) Natural property

Signed (on behalf of State Party)

Full name _____

Title _____

Date _____