



Yemrehanna Kristos

Amhara Region, Ethiopia

The church of Yemrehanna Kristos is one of Ethiopia's best-preserved late Axumite churches, and is named for a twelfth-century Zagwe priest-king and saint. The church is located inside a large natural cavern on a hill in northern Ethiopia, set in a spectacular landscape of juniper trees, predating the famous nearby rock-hewn churches of Lalibela by almost a century. The walls of the building were constructed with alternating layers of recessed timber beams and projecting plastered stone, with windows covered by carved cruciform lattices. The interior is divided by masonry pillars and arches into a nave and two side aisles, with a domed sanctuary on the east end. All interior wood surfaces, including the paneled ceilings, are elaborately decorated with carved geometric designs and polychrome.

Priests and hermits still live at Yemrehanna Kristos, and the church is a place of pilgrimage. Over the centuries, many pilgrims came to Yemrehanna Kristos to die, and their remains lie behind the structure. Currently the location is remote, but a new road will soon lead to Yemrehanna Kristos from the popular destination of Lalibela, increasing visitation numbers and creating a management challenge. In addition, a modern wall constructed across the opening of the cave for security reasons in the 1980s detracts from the site's integrity and visitation potential. The building is well-preserved, but recent evidence of some structural failure compels a timely assessment. An effort to address these issues should involve all stakeholders, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Ethiopia's Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage.