

Anglo-Ethiopian Society Summer Conference

Saturday 18th September 2010

10:30am to 4:10pm, Room G3 (Main Building), SOAS

10:30 Registration - Coffee / Tea

11:00 Welcome, Introduction, etc.

11:10 1st session: Contemporary Use of Natural Resources by Painters in the Aksum area, Central Tigray. Anne Parsons

11:50 2nd session: An Evaluation of Georg Wilhelm Schimper's Botanical, Topographical and Mineralogical Research Papers of Tigre. Dr Dorothea McEwan - Warburg Institute, London

12:30 Break

13:40 3rd session: An initial typology of Mediaeval Ethiopian ceramic and other vessels, as represented in paintings and other sources. Jacke Phillips - School of Oriental and African Studies, London
Unfortunately Jacke Phillips is no longer able to attend so Tania Tribe will be presenting this paper.

14:20 4th session: A Brief History of Illustrated Children's Literature for Ethiopian Children. Helen Papworth

15:00 Tea

15:20 5th session: Kingship Building and Narrative Strategies in Ethiopian Art. Tania Tribe - School of Oriental and African Studies, London

16:00 Closing Remarks

16:10 End

Abstracts:

Anne Parsons

Contemporary Use of Natural Resources by Painters in the Aksum area, Central Tigray

In 2007 a study was made of the methods and techniques in use by a community of church and tourist painters in Adet, a small area in Naeder Adet woreda, south of Aksum.

Glossy house paints have now almost entirely superseded the water based natural colours and commercial powder paints that were used for church paintings until the 1990s.

Water based colours produced using local mineral sources (such as iron-containing earth pigments) and botanical sources (usually plants but occasionally fungi) are still employed, however, for illustrating manuscripts and for making paintings and icons for the tourist industry.

This presentation will focus primarily on the botanical sources and show some of the finished products incorporating these colours.

Dorothea McEwan

An Evaluation of Georg Wilhelm Schimper's Botanical, Topographical and Mineralogical Research Papers of Tigre.

The eminent German botanist, geologist and mineralogist Georg Wilhelm Schimper lived in Ethiopia from 1837 until his death there in 1878. He was a plant collector and shipped botanical specimens to collections in Europe: to Eßlingen, Paris and London. He worked closely with another German, the painter Eduard Zander, who lived in Ethiopia from 1847 until his death in 1868.

Schimper was given lands around Antitsho in Tigre by Wébe, but lost his estates, offices, houses, goods and collections after Wébe was defeated in his final battle with the future king, Tewodros II, in 1855. He, like other Europeans, became imprisoned by Tewodros and was kept in Mäqdäla until a British military expedition under General Napier freed the hostages in April 1868. In gratitude for his liberation by the British, Schimper sent his third plant collection to the Herbarium, Kew Gardens, in London. He also deposited his research papers in London.

Schimper is known for his botanical research in Ethiopia and for his correspondence with famous botanists in Europe. He commented on political, economic and social conditions in his adopted country in a large manuscript book of over 400 pages, Dr. Schimper's Manuscripts and Maps of Abyssinia, which is kept in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Library in London. Written in German, it provides a fascinating record of life in Tigre. What is more, he also drew a large, 2m by 1.5m, map of Tigre and entered place names, with cross references to a detailed alphabetical list of topographical information.

Together with a team of researchers, I wish to research this map for its topographical information, place names, botanical names and observations by Schimper. I am also transcribing the text from the handwritten German into a typed version and am producing an English translation to facilitate further use by the research community. In the course of my research I have also been able to locate the rock samples which he sent to museums in Berlin and London. These are still extant, with their original labels.

In my talk I will discuss my progress on this large project, which will include the publication of the manuscript book and the map with the supporting mountain profiles and drawings.

Jacke Phillips

An initial typology of Mediaeval Ethiopian ceramic and other vessels, as represented in paintings and other sources

Little is known about the ceramic repertoire of 'mediaeval' Ethiopia, after the fall of the Aksumite empire in the 7th century AD. No developmental typology has been proposed, no shape or decoration analysed, indeed extremely little of it has even been published and this almost entirely as sherds. Undoubtedly this has in large measure been due to four main factors: the general academic focus on art historical study of the period, the general lack of archaeological excavation, the relative crudity of the ceramics themselves, and the overwhelming problem of dating. When one has marvellous paintings, why study crude pottery?

This paper is the result of an initial experimental foray into one possible means of assigning dates or date ranges to certain types of 'mediaeval' Ethiopian ceramic (and other) vessels. Concentrated art historical research by many scholars have enabled us to assign some date ranges and occasionally even dates, not to mention stylistic and topographical provenances, for many Ethiopian paintings. Occasionally, these paintings include ceramic and other vessels within the scenes and images depicted, which then can be related to the dates of the paintings themselves. It may be possible to at least provisionally assign dating parameters to certain vessel forms and theoretically suggest some developments over the past eight centuries, a period for which no developmental ceramic typology exists.

Helen Papworth

A Brief History of Illustrated Children's Literature for Ethiopian Children

In Ethiopia, the earliest examples of illustrated books produced for children go back over fifty years but the proliferation has not been as rapid as in other parts of the world. This study focuses on the relatively short history and background to the limited production of illustrated books for Ethiopian children.

The methodology has included gathering oral responses from people of different ages talking about their earliest memories of illustrated books and the stories that they heard as children. Although Ethiopia does not have a vast range of printed children's books, its oral storytelling tradition is huge and diverse across the different nations, nationalities and peoples. Some of these stories have now been put in print, sometimes produced for an audience outside Ethiopia. There have been a number of books and articles written specifically on children's literature in Ethiopia which have also been used, as well as a variety of actual Ethiopian children's books dating back to the first Amharic translation of Pinocchio in the 1950s.

This paper intends to trace the history and the impact of children's illustrated literature on Ethiopian children, to describe the current situation and, hopefully, to indicate the future potential. It will describe the development, from the oral storytelling traditions that still survive today, to the access to printed materials from other countries, with the later development of illustrated literature for school children's texts and the current situation, where a growing number of authors and illustrators from both Ethiopia and elsewhere are producing illustrated children's literature in a range of Ethiopian languages, as well as English, specifically for Ethiopian children both here and in the Diaspora.

The research developed out of a study into the influences on children's book illustration in Ethiopia. It now forms part of a larger study of research and creative writing towards a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Wales Bangor, UK, on the subject of Illustrated Children's Books for Ethiopian Children.

Tania Tribe

Kingship Building and Narrative Strategies in Ethiopian Art

This paper focuses primarily on cycles of wall-paintings as forms of visual discourse, assessing the rhetorical nature of their verbal-visual devices against the background of the widespread political conflict and theological debates associated with the emergence of the Amhara Solomonic dynasty, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. It considers how these images relate to contemporary extra-visual sources, such as hagiographical narratives and theological texts, and how the visual motifs and the words accompanying them interact to enable the paintings' rhetorical processes to communicate meaning. It also examines how such meanings might have functioned within the wider role played by Christianity in the politics of the time, and seeks to determine whether the theological differences that were rife at the time might be reflected in the representational modes employed in the wall-paintings.

There are many difficulties in tackling this work, not least the still provisional nature of formal and chronological classifications of these wall-paintings. There have been some successful attempts at establishing a firm, coherent chronology for church buildings, notably by David Phillipson, yet many problems remain with the dating of both buildings and paintings. Recently, for instance, Ewa Balicka-Witakowska placed a question mark over one of the most securely dated cycles of Solomonic wall paintings, in Gännätä Maryam, near Lalibäla, arguing that, despite the inscription attributing the building of that church to King Yäkunno Amlak (c. 1270), different paintings in the church may, on iconographical and palaeographical grounds, have been produced at different dates. Nevertheless, it may well be possible, I suggest, to group certain cycles of paintings according to their relationship to particular political and regional situations.

This work is part of an ongoing multidisciplinary project combining art historical, archaeological and ethno-historical research, designed to establish a firmer context for these cycles of paintings. It examines, in particular, the local conditions of reception and reinterpretation of this art and its role in the construction of Amhara rulership in the region of Lasta around Lalibäla – particularly in Gännätä Maryam – and in the Wadla area, both of which are associated with the emergence of the new dynasty. The aim has been to obtain additional visual and oral evidence, as well as hard data – particularly dates of pottery and any available organic remains associated with the paintings, landscape data, pigment composition, and so on – with a view to placing the paintings within their wider social-economic context, so as to understand who the painters, their patrons and their audience were, and how they lived at the time of the Amhara takeover. This in turn may help us interpret the iconography of the paintings, the better to assess their meaning and significance.