

introduction into the  
architecture of the  
aksumite kingdom and  
of the later  
rock-hewn churches

## the aksumite kingdom

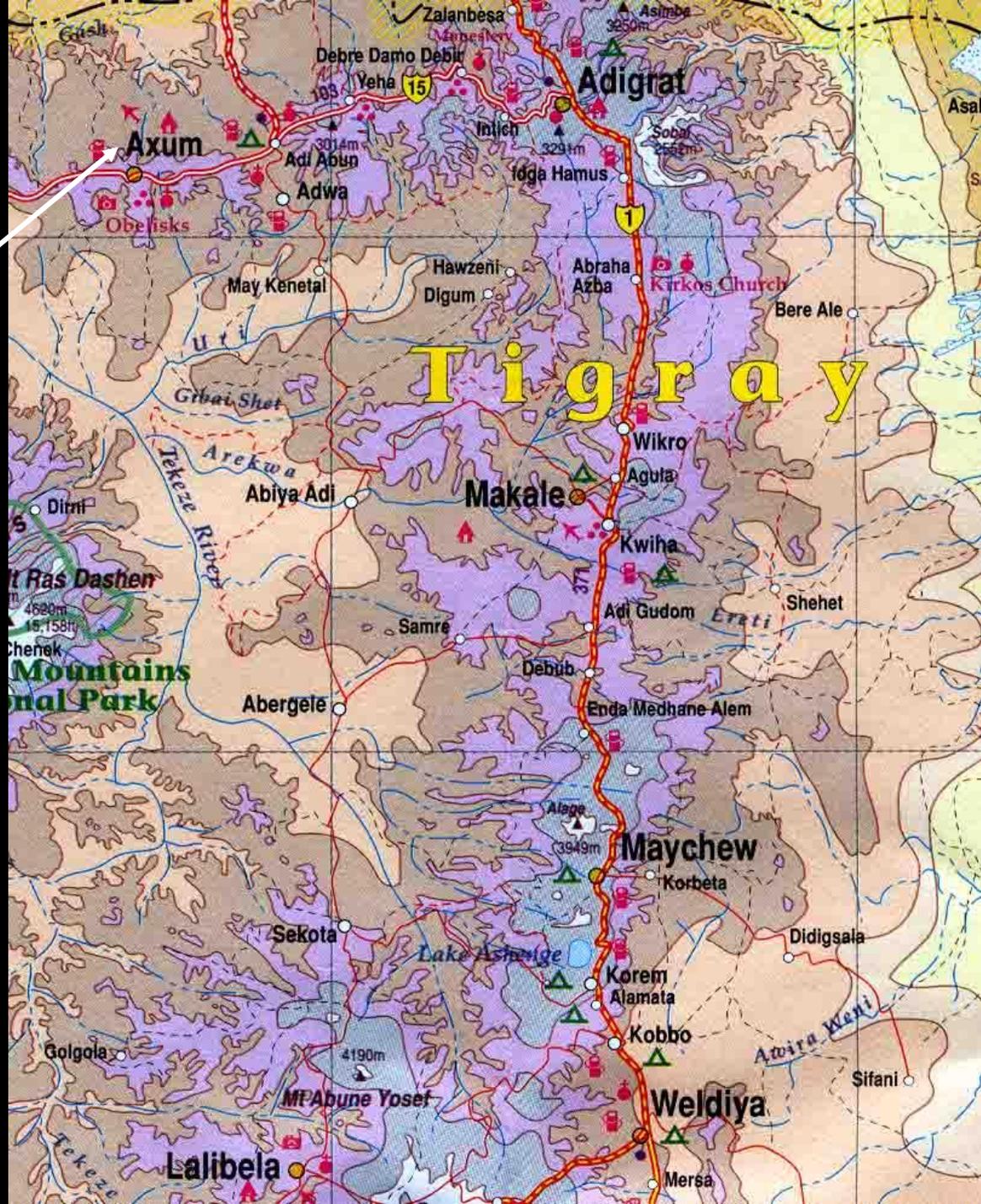
from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century aksum was the capital of a kingdom in the northern part of ethiopia.

It also comprised present eritrea and present yemen, then called saba.

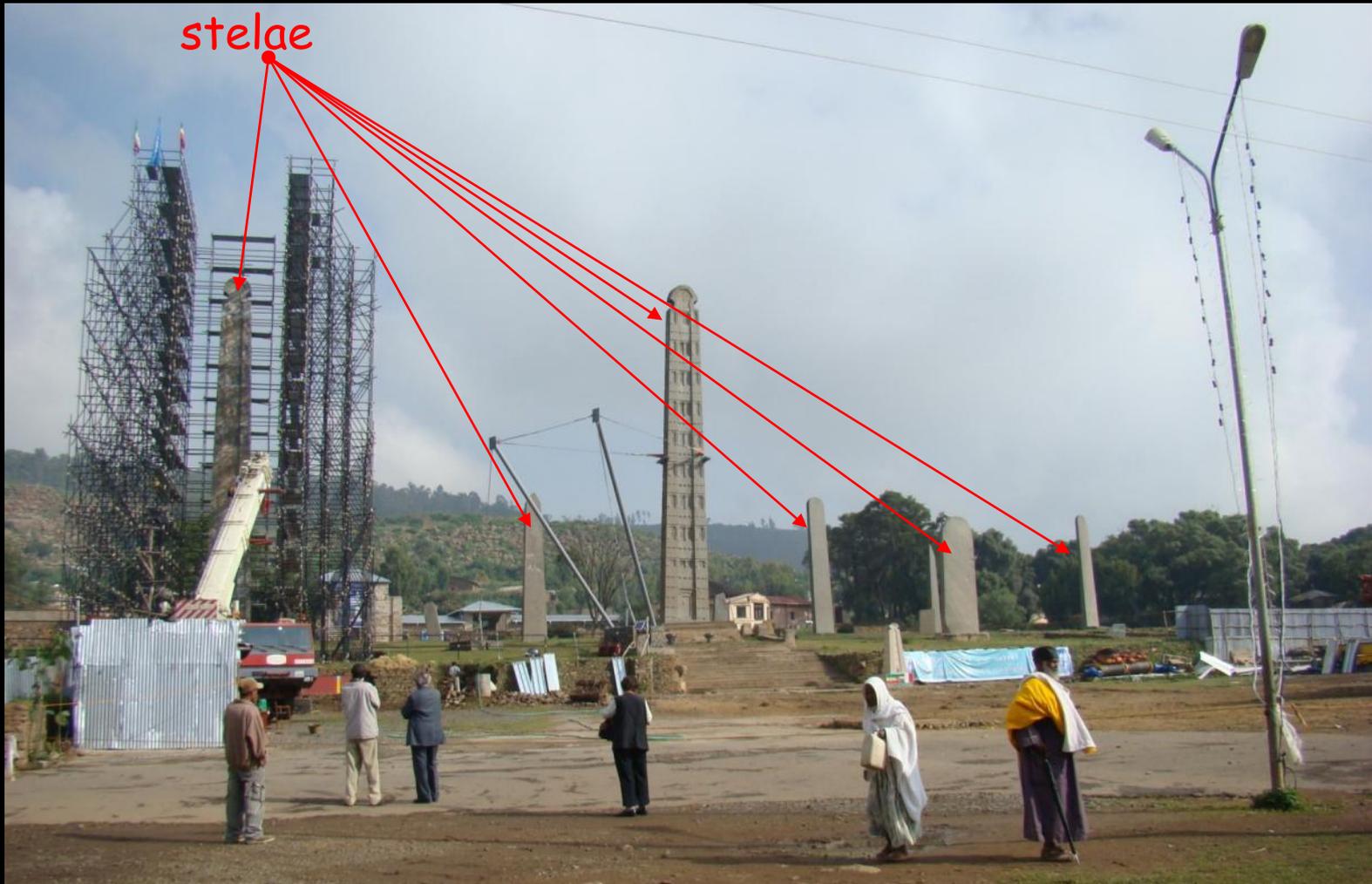


this may have been the circumscription of the aksumite kingdom

aksum is situated in the northern highlands of present ethiopia



the aksumite architecture can be derived from the stelae, i.e. burial monuments for the aksumite kings





this stela was transported  
to rome before the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
world war by the italian  
occupying power.

after 60 years of negotiating the stela  
returned to aksum and in september 2008  
it was re-erected by the italians in close  
cooperation with ethiopian technicians and  
authorities.



three antonov freighters were needed to bring the italian stela back to the airport of aksum.



two of the six giant stelae are now erect.

- the ezana stela is standing up since the 4<sup>th</sup> century [3].
- the 'italian' stela was re-erected in 2008 [2].
- stela nr. 1 probably fell down soon after it's erection.



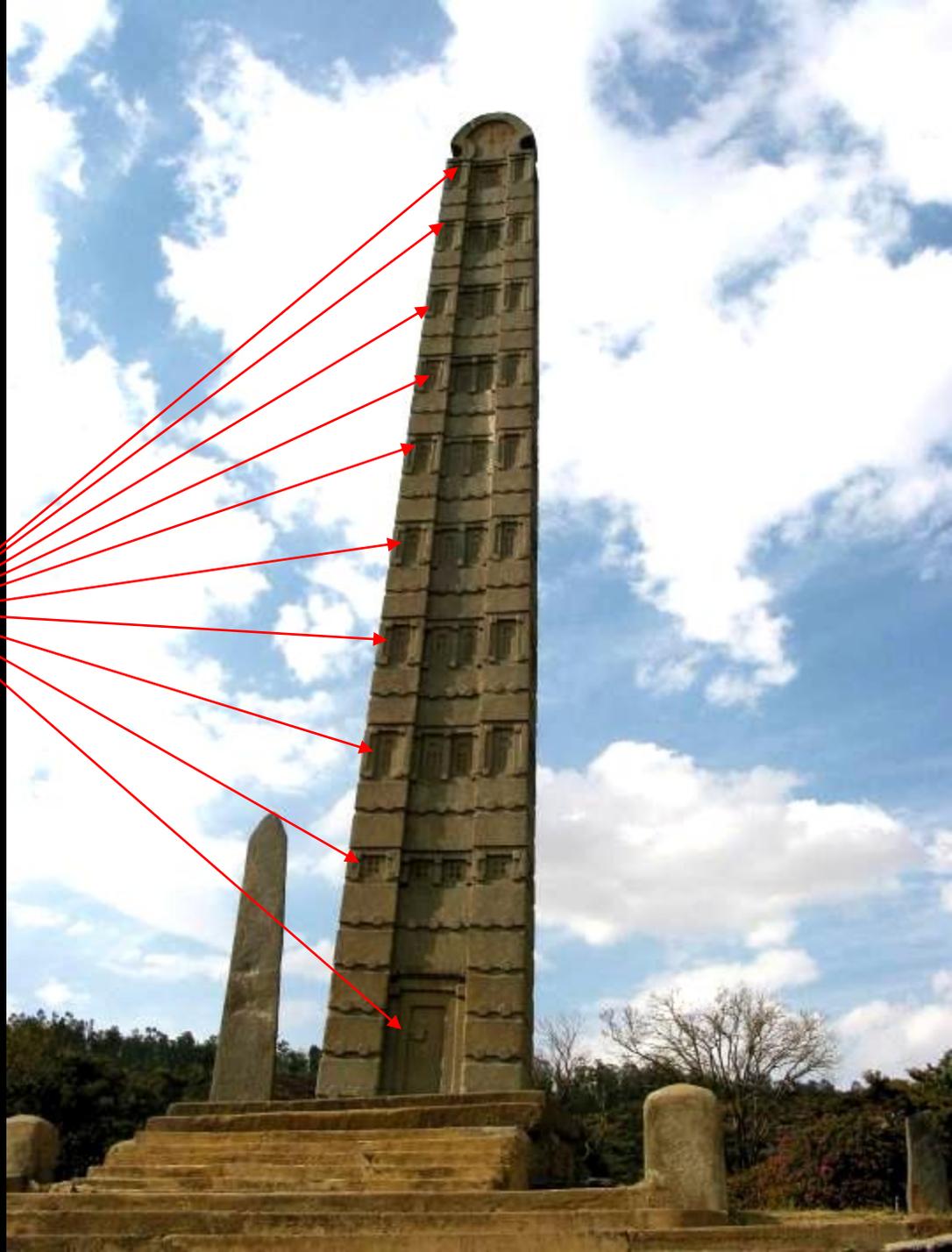
'italian' stela

ezana stela

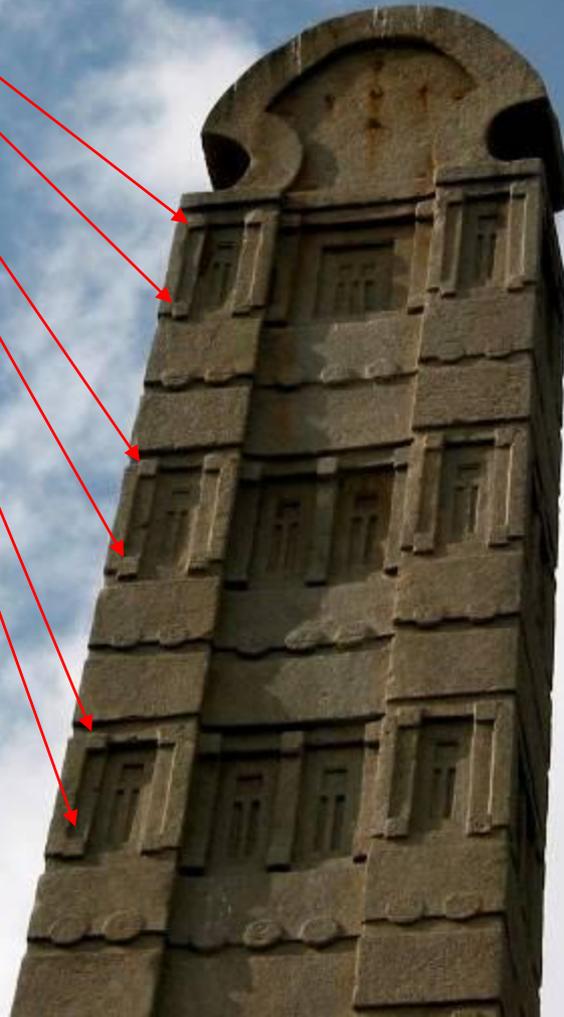
the ezana stela is shaped like a ten storeyed flat building of 24 m high.

it has ten storeys

ezana is a very important king to ethiopians. he ordained christianity the state's religion in the year 324.



the architecture is sculpted in these massive granite stelae. here we see three rows of windows. the square transoms in the corners are partially sticking out. these parts I call **cubic heads**



cubic heads

the horizontal lines represent wooden beams. on top of these are resting circular transoms, partially sticking out of the walls. these are called monkey heads



A large, rectangular granite tombstone stands on a paved surface. The stone is intricately carved with decorative patterns, including a central door-like panel with a small, protruding lock mechanism. The sides of the stone feature a series of rounded, scalloped protrusions. The background shows a dry, grassy area with some trees and a cloudy sky.

the door even has  
a granite lock

the protruding  
sides are called  
ressaults



the fallen stela clearly shows the **cubic heads** and the **monkey heads**

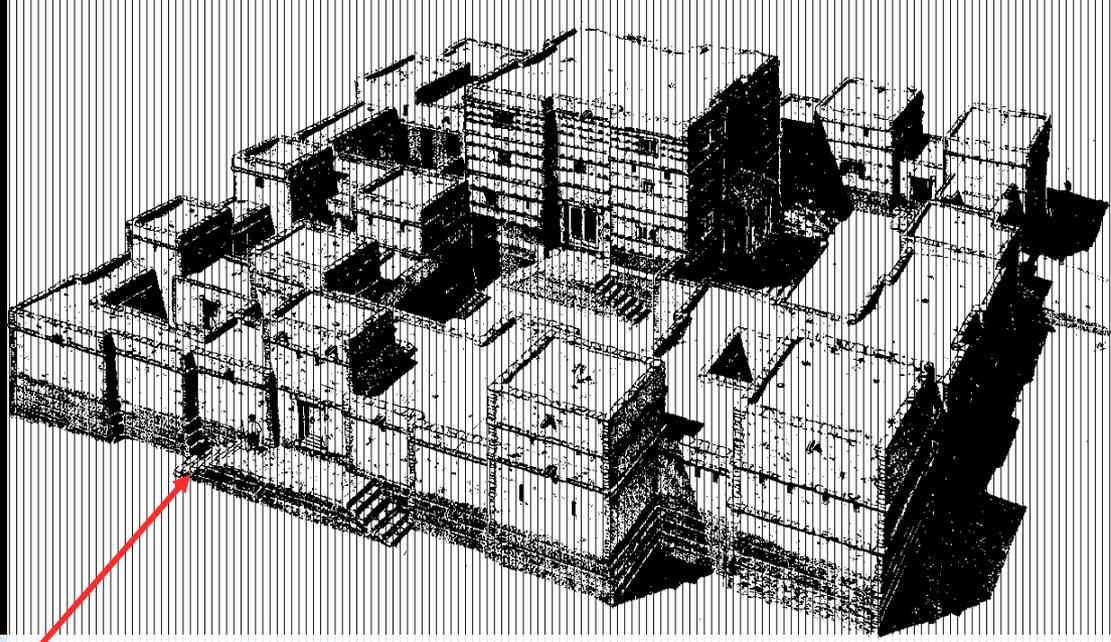


height 33 m, weight 520 ton, 13 storeys, plan 33,3 x 3,84 x 2,35 m,  
660 monkey heads, 764 cubic heads, 264 windows, 2 doors

in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century the fallen stela must have been the biggest monolith in the world. the protruding parts of the 4 walls, the ressaults, are characteristic in aksumite elite architecture.



according to the ethiopians these are the ruins of the legendary palace of the queen of sheba. as it is a sixth century palace, that is impossible. It is situated west of the centre of aksum. the entrance is situated between ressaults.  
official name: dongour complex.



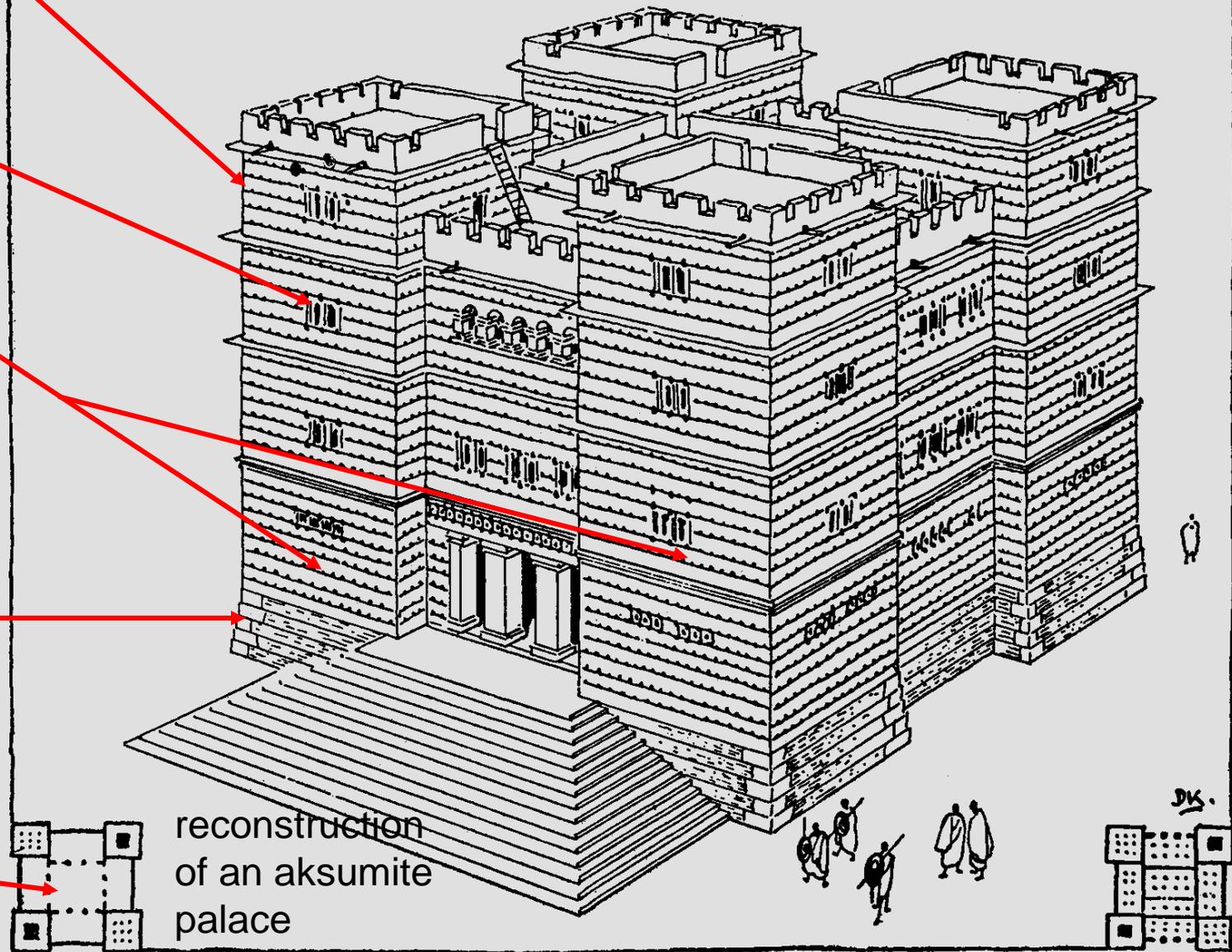
monkey heads  
on wooden  
beams

cubic heads in  
window  
frames

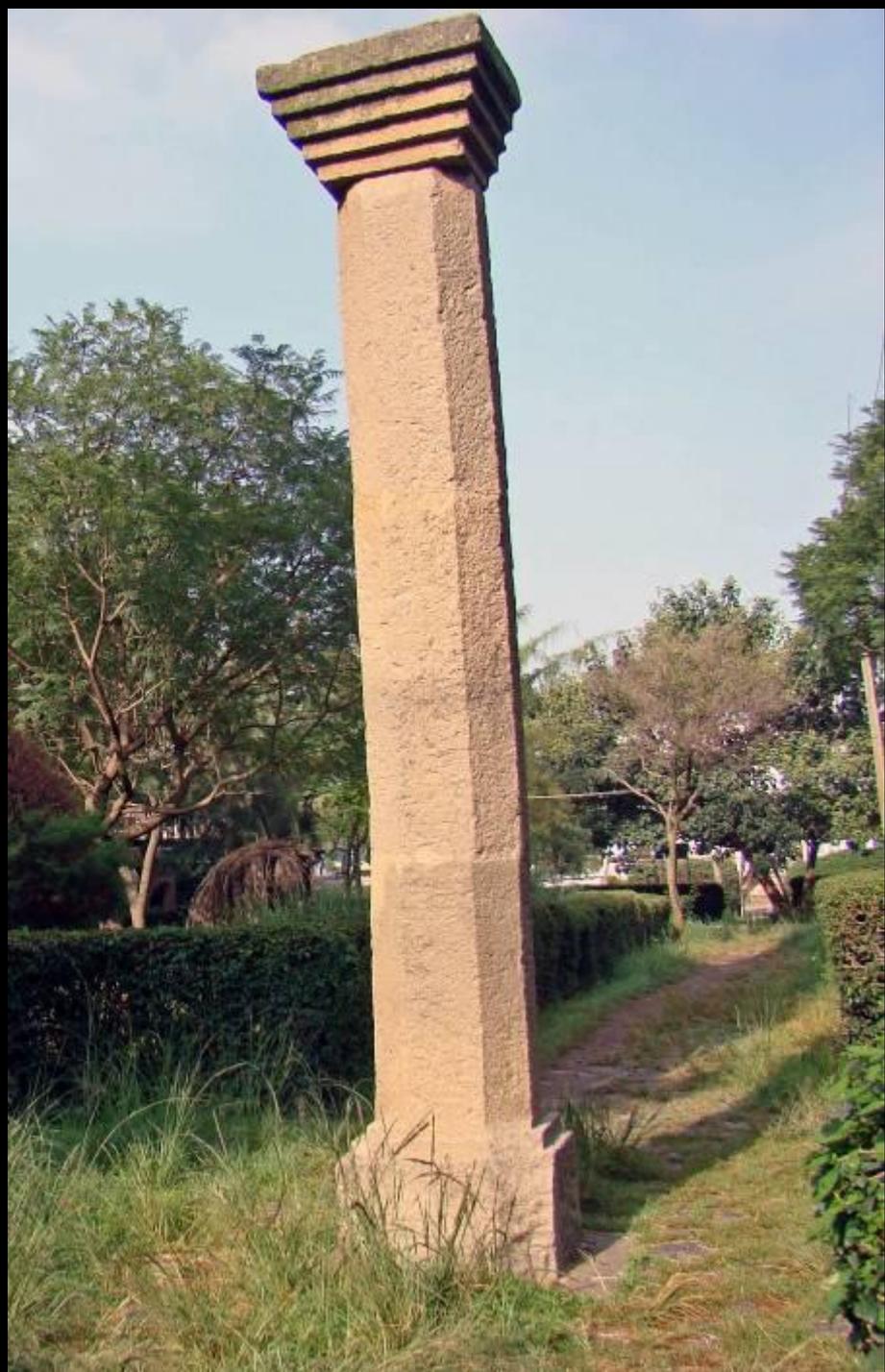
ressaults

stepped plinth

plan identical  
with that of the  
fallen stela



ceilings are supported by columns with chamfered edges, standing on stepped or cubic bases and they had stepped, cubic or bracket capitals

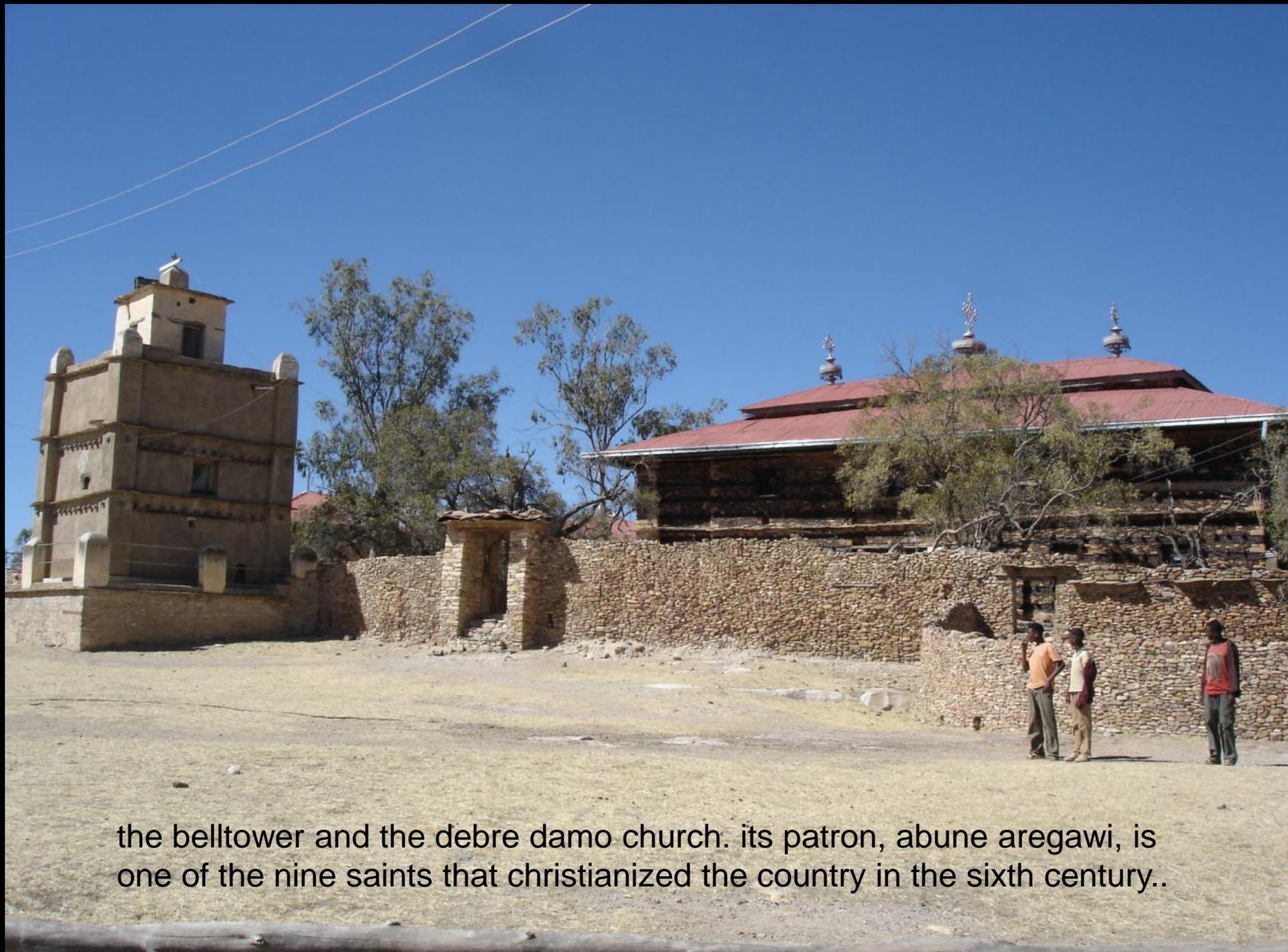




almost all *built* churches in aksumite style have been destroyed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by muslim invaders. the monastery church on the debre damo mountain survived.



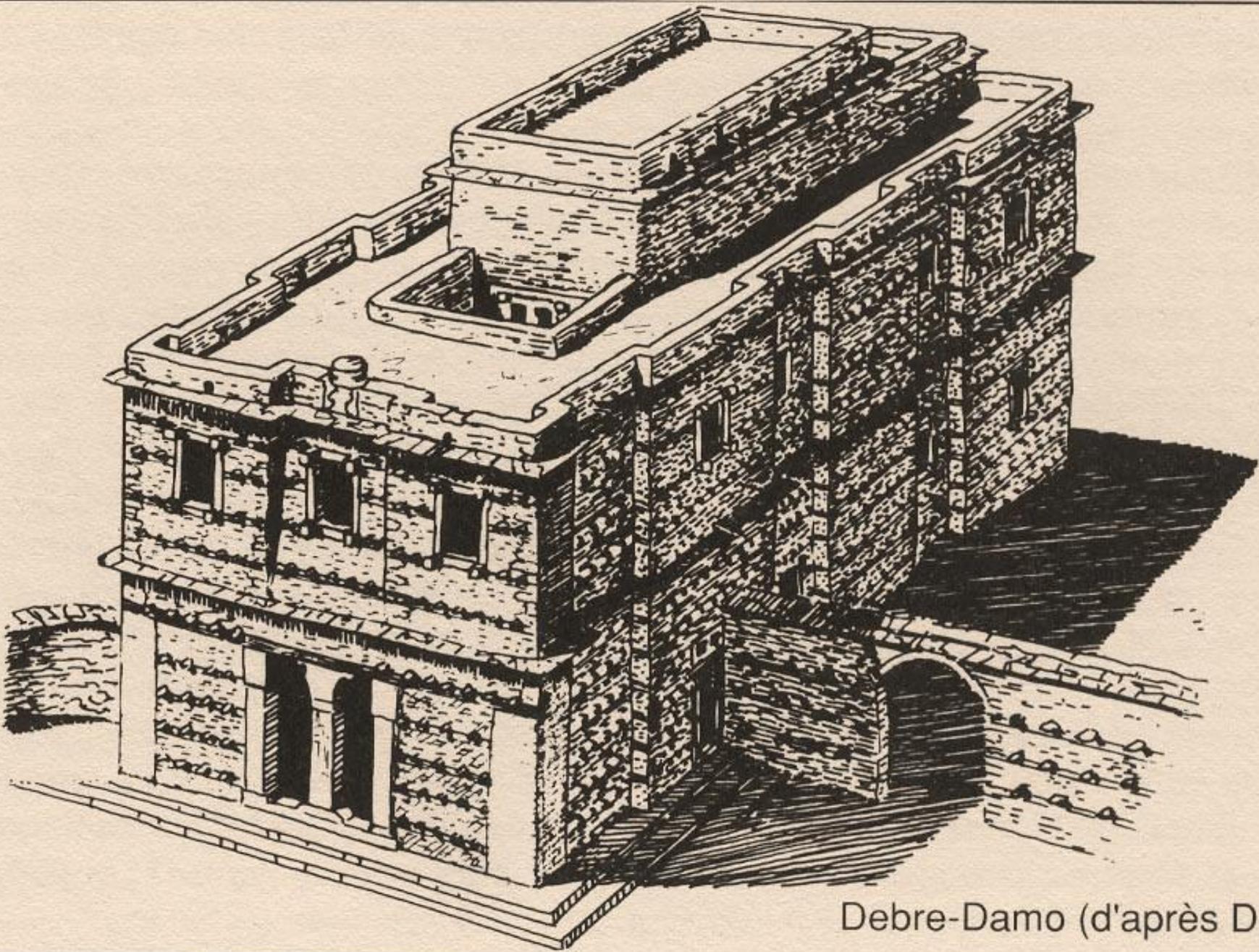
the way up to the debre damo church



the belltower and the debre damo church. its patron, abune aregawi, is one of the nine saints that christianized the country in the sixth century..



view from the belltower. the roof is a modern addition.



Debre-Damo (d'après D.A.E.).

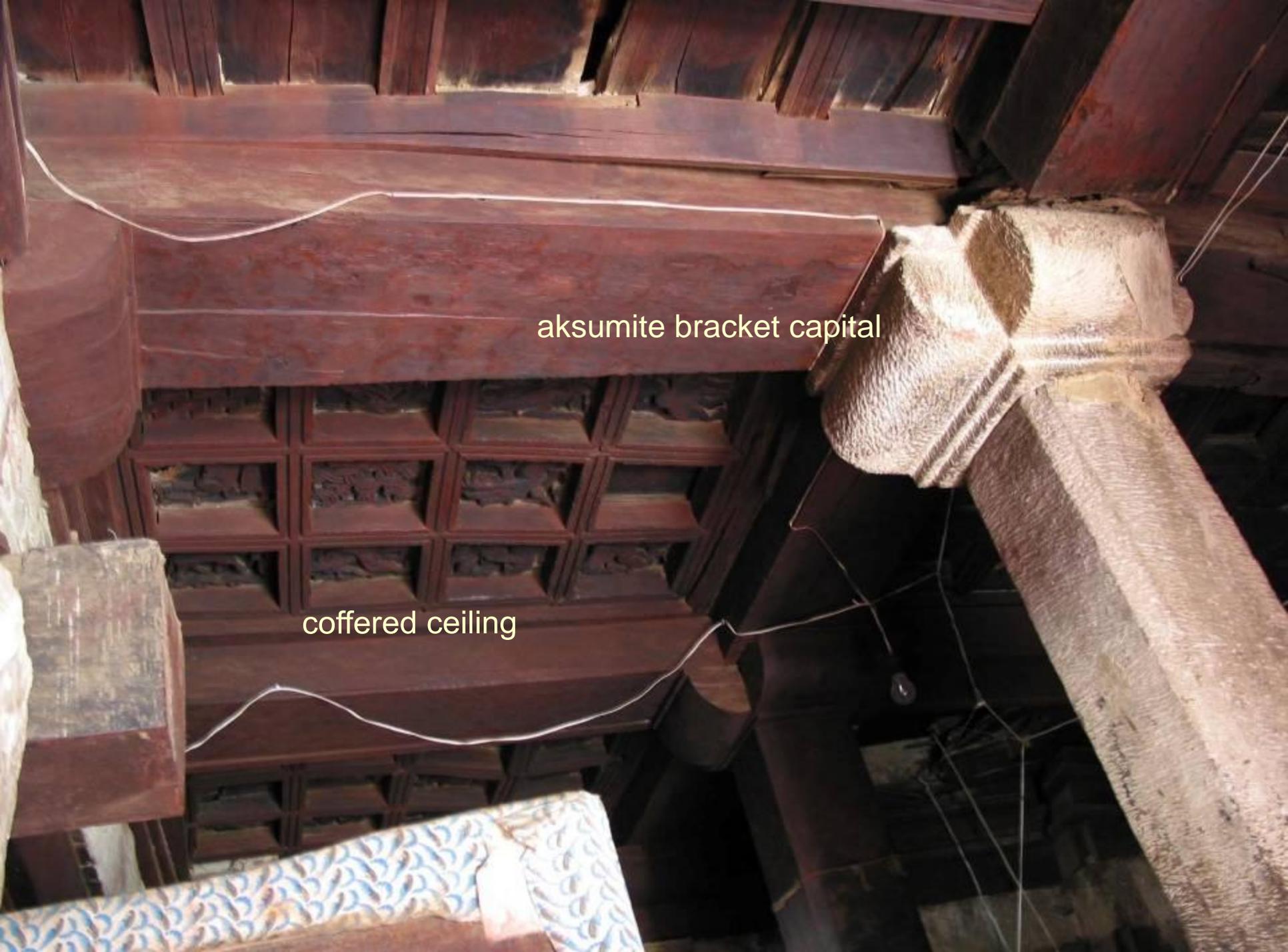
reconstruction drawing without the corrugated iron roofing



main entrance ouest



the vestibule in pure, aksumite style



aksumite bracket capital

coffered ceiling



coffers originating  
from a former  
aksumite palace?  
[7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> entury?]



7 centuries before

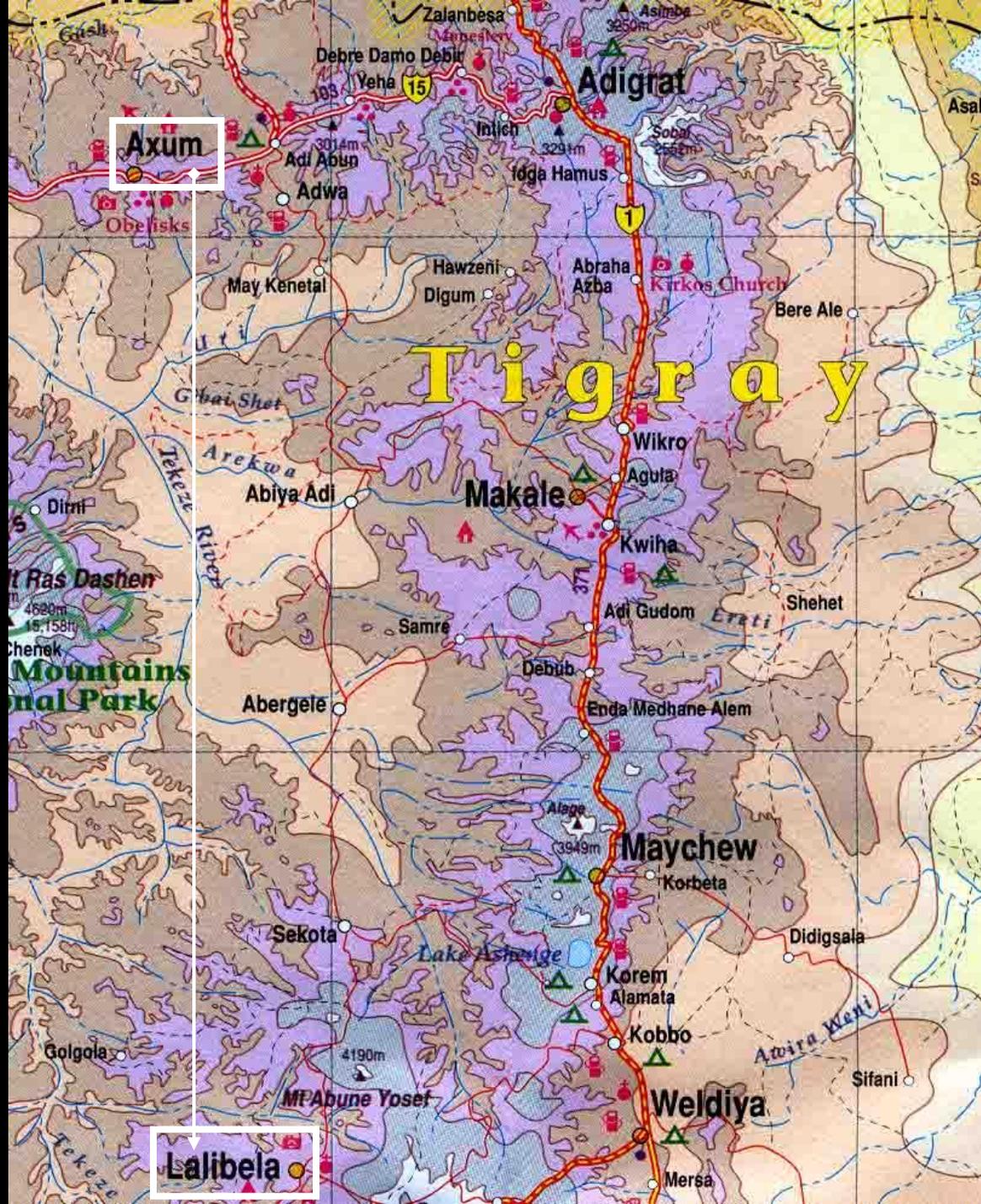
compare the doors



time has left its traces on the wooden monkey heads

500 km south of **aksum** is situated the town of **lalibela**, named after the eponymous king of the 12<sup>th</sup> century

allegedly king lalibela had ten churches hewn from the rocks here, among which 4 monoliths



lalibela





the churches are protected against 'our' acid rains



the emmanuel church in lalibela,  
monolithic, restored..

layer of beams

layer of stone

cubic heads

no monkey heads

ressault

ressault

stepped plinth

wooden elements in *built* churches are rendered in stone here, as in the stelae 800 years before. this is called petrification.

these two churches were, like  
the one before, hewn top  
down form the rock bottom

the redeemer church

the church of mary



the redeemer church

the church of mary



5 more churches are hidden in the rocks under the asterisks



the redeemer church is a monolith  
and has a colonnade on all four  
sides.

masonry restoration is visible in  
many columns



the imposing interior of  
this immense monolith



south-east corner of the  
monolithic church of mary



aksumite window frames in the walls of the church of mary



the church of mary has three porticoes, part of the monolith. the northern entrance is traditionally for men only. praying is done outside against the church walls.



the abundantly decorated interior



wall paintings, polychromy, relief



composite capital: cube and brackets



cruciform stars cover the ceilings

wallpaintings in the church of mary

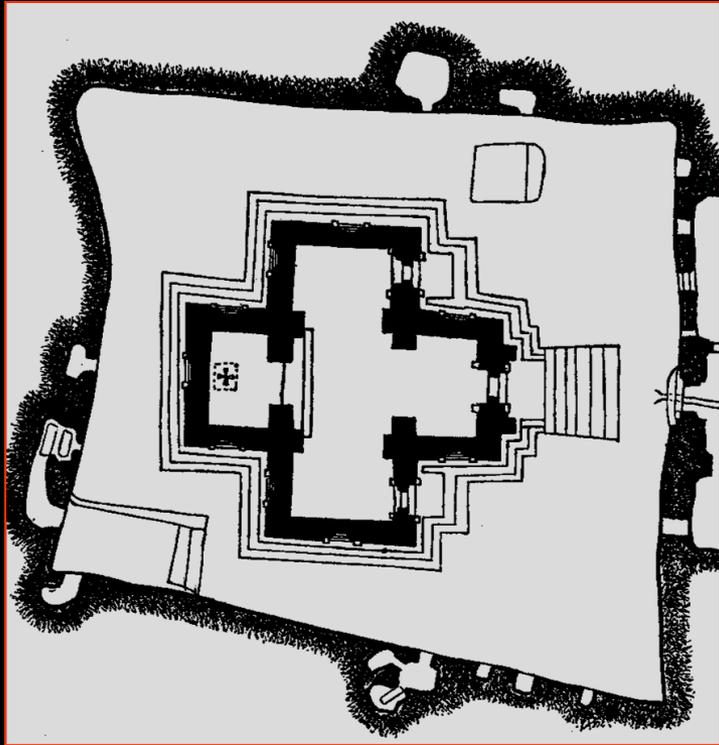


healing of the paralytic

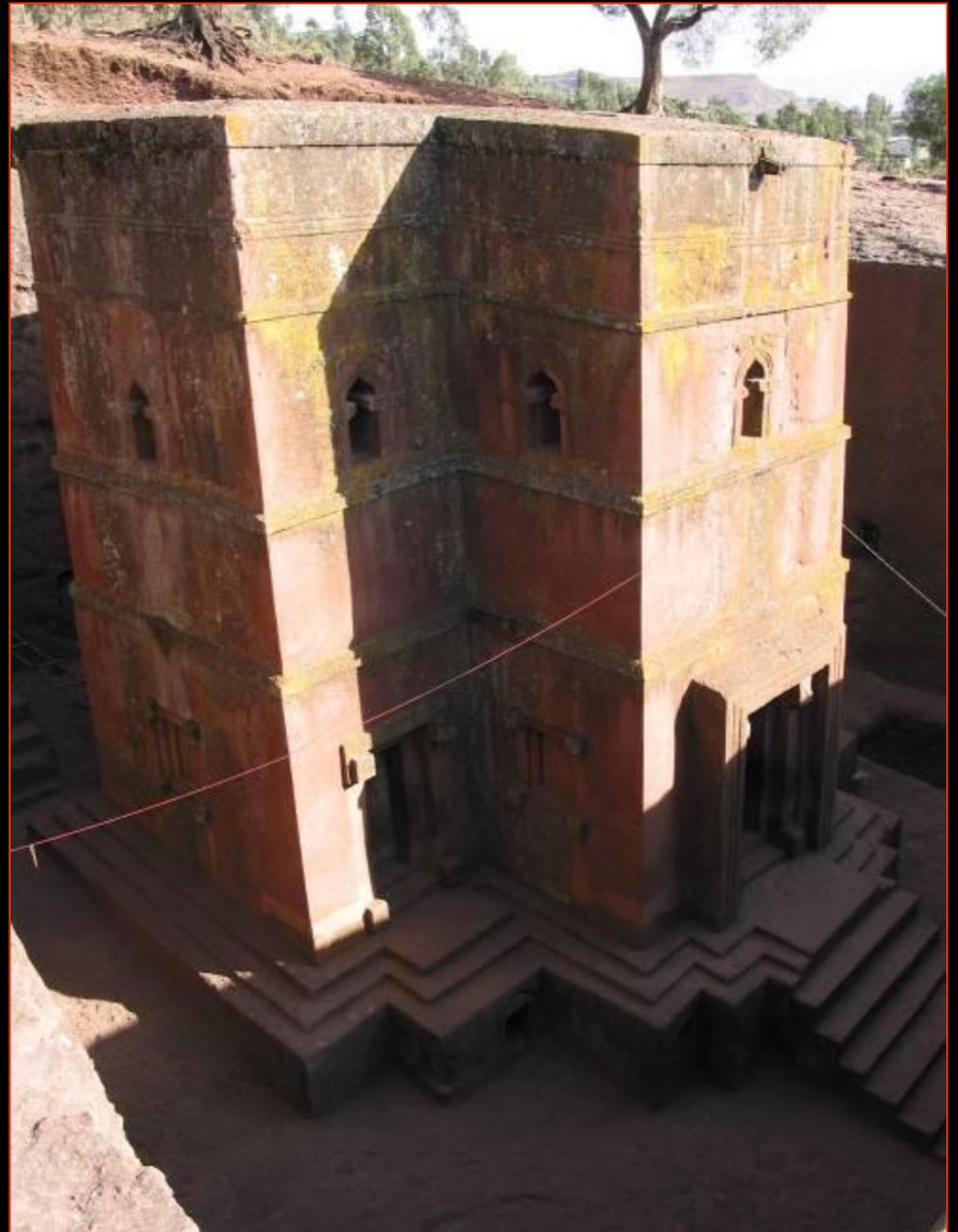
jesus meets the samaritanian woman at the water well



saint george church,  
roof façade



saint george church,  
cruciform plan

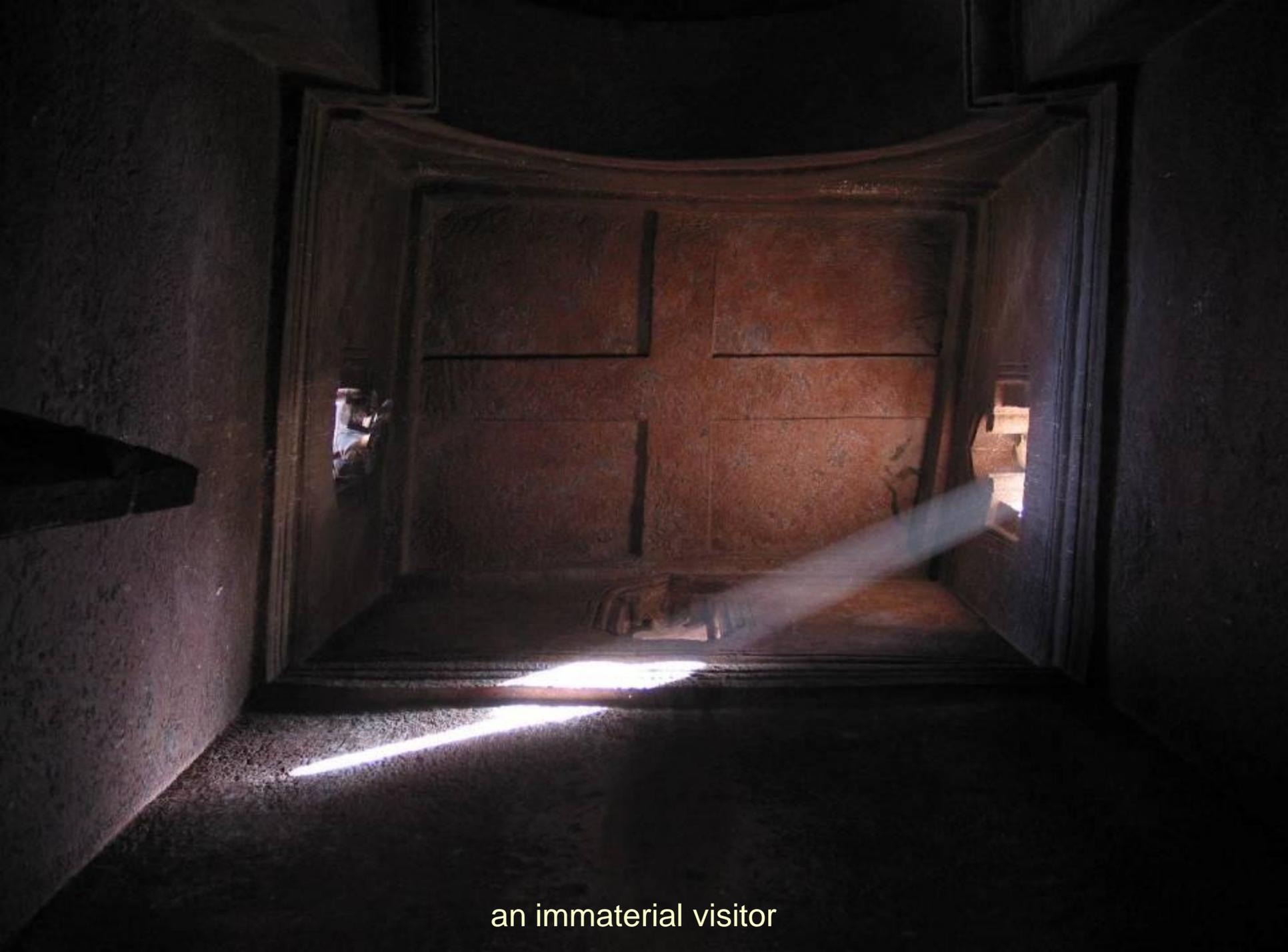




the blind windows and the stepped plinth are aksumite in style



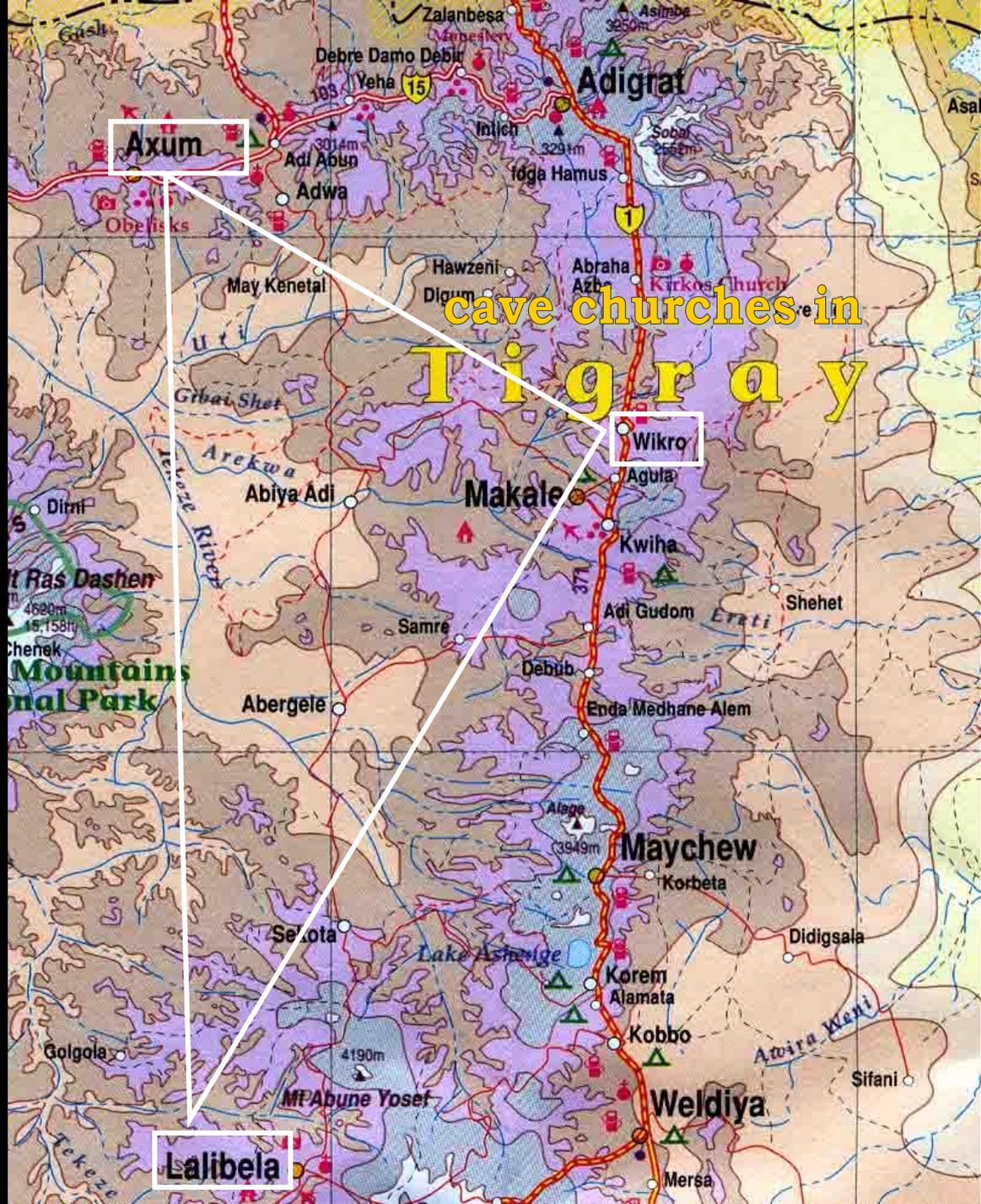
élégance in sobriety



an immaterial visitor

there are six more churches in **lalibela** of which only the interior is hewn into the rock. their walls and roofs are mainly virtual. these I call cave churches. so they are not monoliths.

the north-eastern province of **tigre** has more than one hundred of these cave churches. their accessibility can be very hard sometimes.



cave churches in

# Tigray

Axum

Wikro

Lalibela

cave-church





entrance door of the arbatu insesa



'arbatu insesa' church,  
meaning the four beasts,  
mentioned in the apocalyps.



dome cut into the rock ceiling



on the way to the petros & paulos church, top left



partly built  
partly hewn



2005

2008  
restoration of  
aksumite details





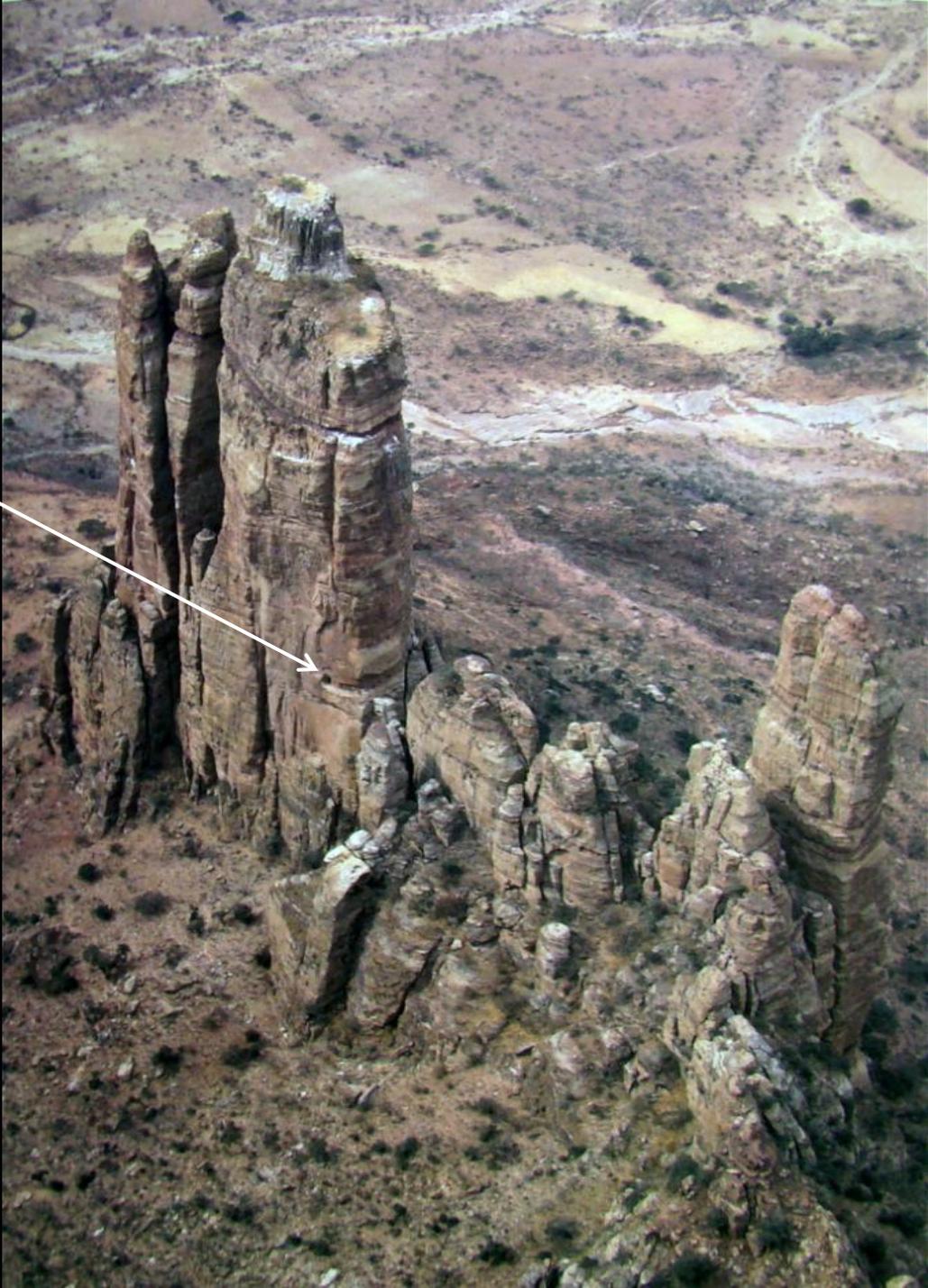
-interior petros & paulos church

-god surrounded by the four  
beasts of the apocalyps

the abune yamata church in guh  
is hewn into one of these  
vulcano pins



entrance of the  
abune yamata  
church





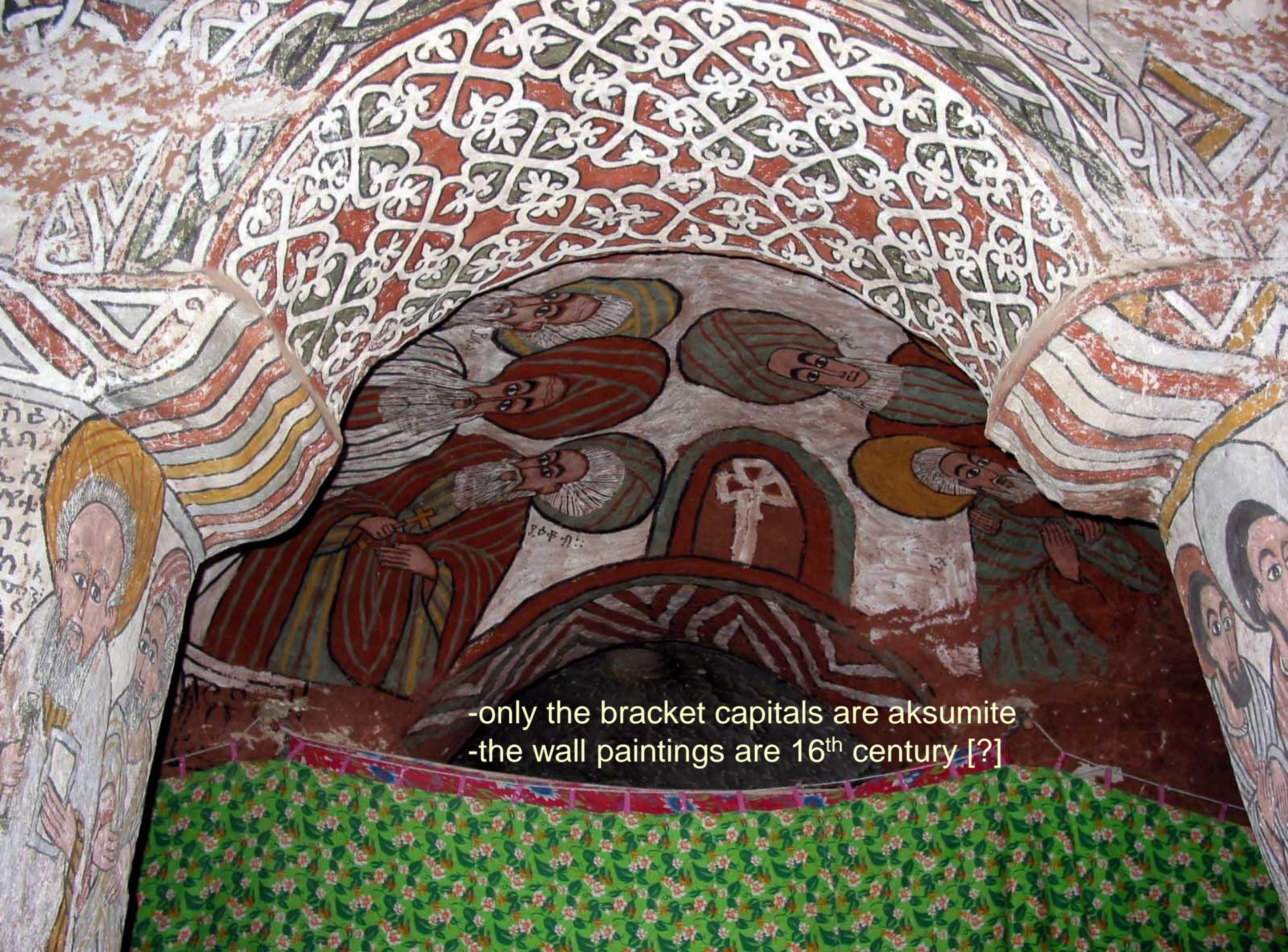
complicated accessibility

A low-angle photograph of a massive, layered rock formation, likely a natural rock shelter or cave entrance. The rock face is composed of distinct horizontal layers of reddish-brown and tan sandstone. At the base of the formation, a small, irregular opening is visible, which is identified as a church entrance. Two men are sitting on a ledge of rock just above this opening. The man on the left is wearing a white turban and a white shawl, while the man on the right is wearing a dark shirt and pants. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The text "church entrance" is overlaid in white at the bottom left of the image.

church entrance



interior decoration: abune yamata as equestrian saint, one of the nine that cristianized the kingdom.



-only the bracket capitals are aksumite  
-the wall paintings are 16<sup>th</sup> century [?]



in the one cupola saints  
with turbans or nimbi?



apostles in the other cupola  
with nimbi or turbans?



down to earth again

end of the introduction  
into  
aksumite architecture

