

# Wall Paintings of Tigray, Ethiopia

Training Course for Tour Guides: April 2019

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Ethiopian Heritage Fund  
*and*

The Tigray Bureau for Culture and Tourism

A Report for  
**The Heritage Alliance and British Council Global Travel Grant Scheme**

**Part 1:**

**Organisation:**

**The Ethiopian Heritage Fund (EHF).** The EHF was established as a British charity in 2005 (no. 1110969). Its purpose, working together with the Ethiopian Church and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Ethiopia, is to promote the conservation of early Ethiopian churches and their precious artifacts, and provide advice and education on their maintenance. Its other stated aim is to raise awareness of this unique cultural heritage and encourage manageable tourism to rural areas.

**Recipients of travel grant:**

**Lisa Shekede** and **Stephen Rickerby**, consultant wall painting conservators to the Ethiopian Heritage Fund.

**Job title:**

Wall Paintings of Tigray, Ethiopia/Training Course for Tour Guides

**Country travelled to:**

Ethiopia

**Specific region of cities travelled to:**

Mekelle (regional capital of Tigray); and Gheralta region of Tigray

**Organisation(s) visited:**

Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB), Mekelle, Tigray, Ethiopia

**Dates of visit:**

8–11 April 2019

### Part 2:

#### 1. Original purpose of visit:

Since 2013, the EHF has been working to preserve churches in Tigray, conserving their paintings through a variety of efforts, ranging from remedial treatments to improving the environmental conditions that lead to painting deterioration. Other efforts are focused on encouraging sustainable tourism. Awareness that painted churches are appreciated by tourists encourages their continuing local care.

In the relationship between church protection and economic development, local guides have a crucial but underestimated responsibility. They are the interface between tourists and the churches that they visit, providing key information about their wall paintings. At present, this information can be inadequate, and potential for influencing broader conservation aims is underutilised. Guides can control visitor groups at sites that are vulnerable to physical damage; they can influence visitor behaviour in sensitive religious and ecological environments; they can educate visitors about conservation approaches that emphasise respect for existing conditions. Critically, they can also highlight risks to painted churches before they reach crisis levels.

Recognising these uniquely important roles, the TCTB approached the EHF to organize and deliver a 4-day training course for Tigray guides, to provide them with up-to-date historical information on the paintings, on their techniques of execution, and on relevant conservation issues.

#### 2. People, organisations, projects of relevance to organisation/project encountered during visit

The 4-day training course was attended by more than 20 guides who work in the Gheralta and Adigrat regions of Tigray. The TCTB was responsible for local organisation and publicity, and provided a *per diem* for guides attending the course from Gheralta. In addition, 4 guides also attended from Tesfa Tours, an Ethiopia-based trekking agency, whose walking itineraries now take in one of the painted churches recently rehabilitated by the EHF. Tesfa Tours kindly provided for their

accommodation and *per diems*, and we are grateful to its Director, Mark Chapman, for this support. The course was generously hosted by the Gheralta Lodge, a tourist lodge in Hawzen, Gheralta, which provided a venue for formal seminars, and beverages and lunches for the course participants. Importantly, it also provided an environment in which the participants felt at ease, contributing significantly to the courses' success. We are extremely grateful to Mr Silvio Rizzotti, the proprietor of the Gheralta Lodge, and to his staff, especially Gebremedhin Kidane, the manager.

#### 3. Summary of the visit

The training course focused on the rock-cut and constructed painted churches of Tigray, and was organised around illustrated PowerPoint® presentations, as follows:

##### DAY 1

###### Lecture 1 AM: historical introduction and overview

- history of painted churches
- overview of church architecture

###### Lecture 2 PM: Ethiopian wall paintings

- wall painting iconography and style
- wall painting technology

##### DAY 2

###### Lecture 3 AM: introductory lecture on conservation

- overview of conservation aims, principles and practice

###### Lecture 4 PM: wall painting conservation case studies 1

- case studies of conservation work carried out by the EHF

##### DAY 3

###### Lecture 5 AM: wall painting conservation case studies 2

- case studies of conservation work carried out by the EHF

###### Lecture 6: PM: conservation issues affecting Ethiopian painted churches

- risks and threats to painted churches

### DAY 4

Site visits to painted churches at **Qorqor, Gheralta**.

The tour guides have few opportunities to meet together as a professional body to expand knowledge that is crucial to their development, and to explore some of the urgent issues that are now threatening the preservation of painted churches in the region, particularly in relation to increasing tourism pressures. The course provided a much-needed forum to meet these demands. The participants responded to the course with enthusiasm, engaging with the topics and issues raised. Each session generating lengthy discussion. The course raised a number of challenges for the future, particularly in relation to growing tourism and the inadequacy of local safeguards against potential risks.

#### 4. Experience and knowledge gained

Particularly useful information was gained about current threats to the painted churches, and the role that the tour guides could have in highlighting these issues to regional authorities. With their intimate knowledge of the sites, the guides are keenly aware of emerging risks and threats – such as from quarrying activities in close proximity to some of the churches, and from the unregulated use of drones for filming by tourists at sensitive sites – which local protection agencies may have no knowledge of. The EHF is now in a position to broker meetings between the local guides and protection agencies to address these issues, which to date have been unreported and unresolved.

#### 5. Tips for other heritage professionals

The successful outcome of the training course depended on:

- a track record of demonstrable achievements in the region over a number of years prior to the training course;
- cultivation of good working relations with local agencies and personnel over a long-term period;
- identification of local needs and inclusion of local people;
- provision of relaxed and inclusive setting in which course participants felt at ease;

#### 6. Next steps and resources required

The following future needs were identified, and are currently being planned:

- **additional courses:** to hold other courses, expanding on themes such as original painting technology that were only introduced this time, and including additional topics such as information on the local geology;
- **discussion forum:** to organise a regular forum, allowing the tour guides to meet with representatives of the TCTB, so that issues relating to the preservation of the sites can be discussed and addressed.

To realise these steps, required resources would include:

- **professional fees:** to cover teaching preparation and delivery time for two instructors;
- **travel and accommodation expenses:** international and local travel/accommodation for two instructors.

#### 7. Summary of impact of the visit

The training course focused on a very specific area of need, helping to improve the professional standing of local heritage professionals in a manner that was resource effective for the EHF.

#### 8. Summary of personal impact

With over 30 years' teaching experience in the conservation profession, the enthusiasm and gratitude shown by the course participants was unprecedented, and left a deep impression.

#### 9. Quote from Blair Priday, Director, EHF

"We are delighted at the success of the training course and very much hope to build on this experience to benefit Tigray's rich painted heritage".

#### 10. Likelihood of EHF funding another international visit in next 12 months

Ranking: 1

### 11. Follow up activities

Social media links have been established with key members of the local tour guides, so that contact can be maintained with them. Future teaching activities are planned, to build on and expand the achievements of the recent course, which was carried out as an introductory trial. The Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB) has agreed to help with the organisation of future courses. The EHF has also agreed to supply the tour guides with relevant publications and information on the painted churches, which will be housed at the guides' office in Gheralta. The EHF and TCTB will organise a meeting at which concerns expressed by the local guides can be discussed.