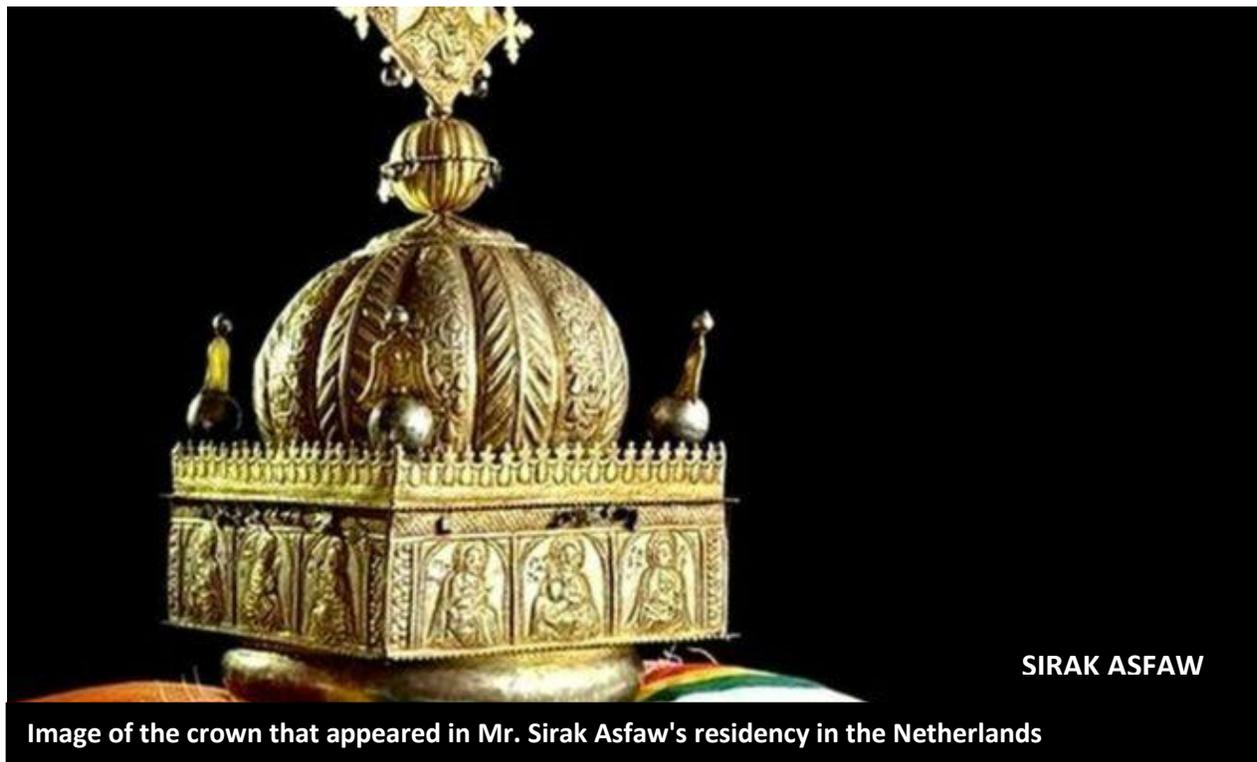


Selassaie [Holy Trinity] Church in Cheleqot Requests the Return of its Stolen Crown

translation provided by Tsehaye Zemenfes, PharmD, MPH

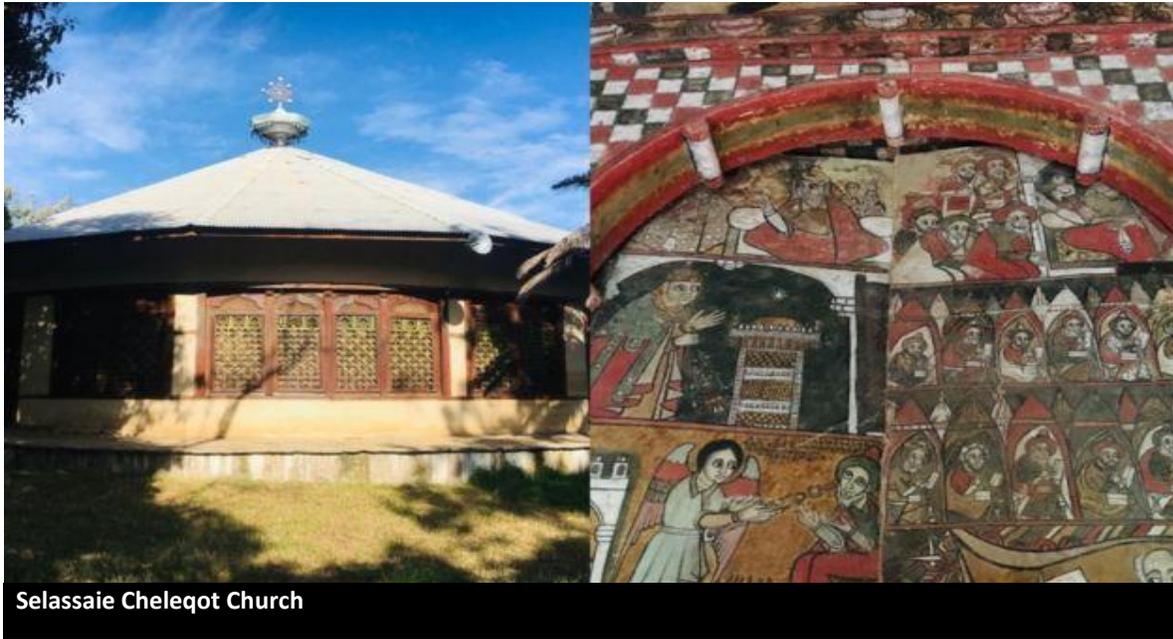
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A crown that has been hidden for 21 years in the Netherlands has stirred up a controversy.

A former refugee from Ethiopia, Mr. Sirak Asfaw has lived in the Netherlands for the past forty-one years. He recounts a story of how a golden crown appeared in his resident in the city of Rotterdam by accident. Mr. Sirak Asfaw used to host refugees from Ethiopia in his residency while their cases for asylum was being processed. At that time, many of the refugees kept their files and belongings behind in Mr. Sirak Asfaw's residence for safekeeping. In 1998, an Ethiopian crown artifact that is believed to be older than 400 years old was left behind in Mr. Sirak Asfaw's residency by one of the refugees.



Selassaie Cheleqot Church

To whom does the crown belong? Which era of Ethiopian history did the crown come from? These are some of the questions that are being raised currently. Some believe that the crown was from the era of *Lalibela* (King) and *Fasiledesh* (King). However, according to the New York Times, which interviewed Professor Jacopo Gnisci, who has conducted extensive research in the Ethiopian artifact, the crown was stolen from Selassaie Cheleqot [Tigray] in the 1990s.

Professor Jacopo Gnisci, a research associate at Oxford University tracked down a photograph in which a priest is wearing the crown in 1993, a few years before it disappeared. According to the professor, the crown was most likely commissioned by the powerful Rasi Woldeselassaie and he donated the crown to the church of Selassaie Cheleqot. The crown, which is a rare object, is estimated to have a value of \$55,000.

Located 15 kilometer South-East of Mekelle, Selassaie Cheleqot Church is a historical landmark that houses much valuable church treasure. According to the local elders, Rasi Woldeselssaie, the powerful governor, is believed to have gifted the church numerous priceless artifacts including crowns.



Eighty two years old monk, *Abba* Gebreselassie residents of Selassaie Cheleqot Church

It has been more than sixteen years since eighty-two years old *Abba* Gebreselassaie became a monk at Selassaie Cheleqot. *Abba* Gebreselassaie recounted to BBC that Rasi Woldeselassaie gifted the church three crowns. The powerful governor who administered over an administration area known as Enderta from 1745-1865 built four palaces in *Cheleqot Hintalo, Feleg Daero, and Mekelle*. At one point, he had made Cheleqot, where the church Selassaie is located, his administration's capital city.

According to *Abba* Gebreselassaie, from the three crowns that Rasi Woldeselassaie gifted the church, the recently discovered crown in the Netherlands belongs to the set. He stated that the disappearance of the crown from the church twenty-four years ago was well known.

Abba Gebreselassaie recounts that the person that was suspected of stealing the crown at the time, guardian of the church's artifacts, was imprisoned for five years and was later freed after the missing crown was never discovered. He blames the regional government for not doing enough to find the stolen crown at the time.

Although delighted to hear that the crown has been recently found, *Abba* Gebreselassaie, has many questions including, "How was the crown taken?" "How is it being returned?"

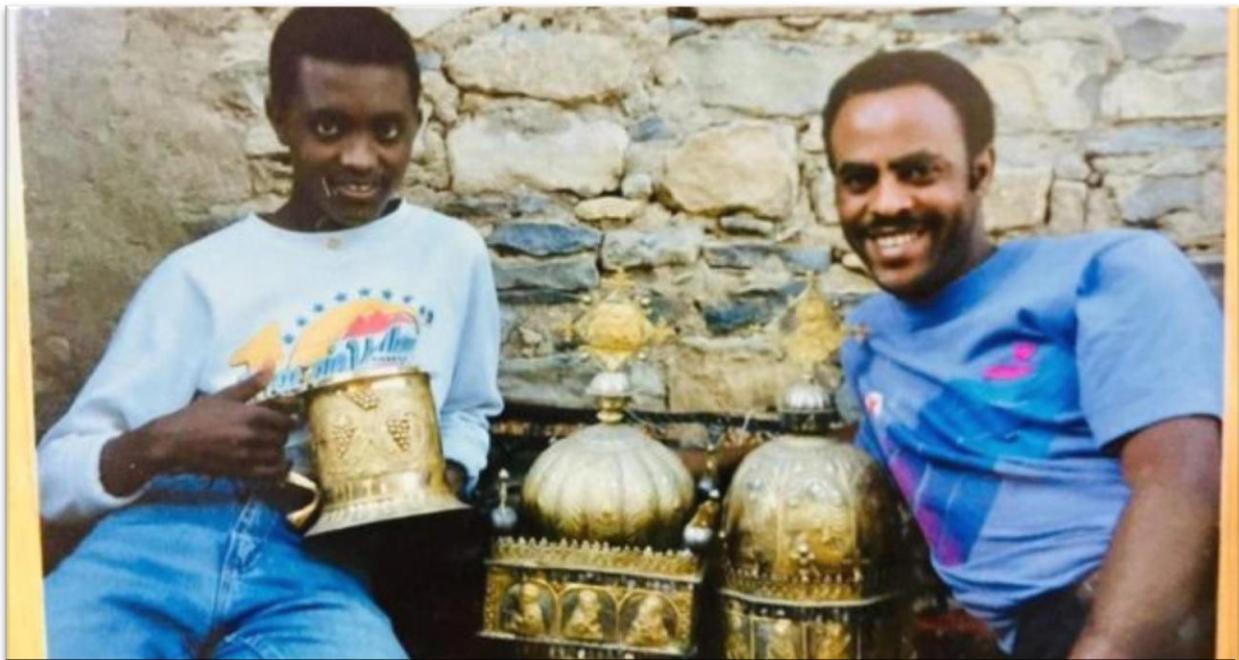
Local residents of Cheleqot who have learned the news that the stolen crown has surfaced in the Netherlands and would be returned to Ethiopia soon, have no doubt that the crown belongs to Selassaie Cheleqot Church.



Mr. Sirak Asfaw, a resident of the Netherlands for the past 41 years

Priest Negusse H/Georgis has served as the guardian for the artifacts in Selassaie Cheleqot for the past three years. He stated, "There were three crowns in Selassaie Cheleqot. One was stolen. Instead of being gold plated, the three crowns were made from pure gold. To verify that the stolen crown was made of gold, one can examine the remaining crowns and know."

Another individual who attests to the story of the stolen crown is Mr. Bisrat Mesfin. Twenty-four years ago, Mr. Bisrat Mesfin met then a Red Cross worker Englishman by the name David Stables.



Mr. Bisrat Mesfin and the late Mr. Kindaie Tefera

Mr. David Stables took Mr. Bisrat Mesfin on tour of Selassaie Cheleqot. During the tour, he remembers taking several pictures with the gold crown as well as other church artifacts. The pictures were taken by Mr. David Stables himself.

"I remember hearing about the disappearance of the crown", Mr. Bisrat Mesfin recounts. "When I heard this week that the crown has resurfaced, I spent the entire night searching for the picture. In the end, I found the picture that I was looking for." He presented the picture as evidence during the interview.

Mr. Bisrat Mesfin currently is the Manager and Chairman of EYES (Ethiopian Youth Education Support a partner non-profit organization that is funded through A-CET (an organization founded by David G Stables).

Upon hearing the news that the crown has been found, Mr. Bisrat has been corresponding with Mr. David Stables via e-mail.