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Review

CHRISTIANITY AND ARCHITECTURE IN ETHIOPIA:

MONUMENTS CARVED OUT OF ROCK

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African architecture is usually associated with temporality. Building methods are based on earth and water. Yet Ethiopia is endowed with grand religious architecture made out of rock, dating as far back as the 10th century. One of the most famous religious monuments in Ethiopia is the town of Lalibela. Lying calmly in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, Lalibela boasts one of the world's greatest remaining rock-carved pieces of religious architecture. Eleven churches made sometime around the 12th century stand proudly below foot level. All of them are rare examples of intricate, rock-carved architecture, as they are free-standing, meaning that they do not lean or support their bodies on any other rockface. Each church is different in its layout and design and connected to another church by underground tunnels, thus forming a masterful, grand-scale architectural complex, named by UNESCO a World Heritage Site.

Today, Lalibela is one of the most important Christian pilgrimage sites in Ethiopia, even though the access to the site is a few days' road travel away from Addis Ababa. The town is believed to be the site of the medieval city of Roha, which was built by the Zagwe ruler Gebre Mesqel Lalibela in the 12th century. The name Lalibela is thus not the original name given to the town. History teaches us that king Lalibela, having being awed by his visit to Jerusalem as a child, wanted to recreate Jerusalem in his new capital, symbolically naming parts of the town after landmarks of Jerusalem, as well as the churches after churches found in Jerusalem. This may – although still under historical scrutiny– have happened right after the capture of Jerusalem by the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, Saladin, in 1187, after his success over the Crusaders.

The churches are generally attributed to Lalibela's reign, but there have been disputes as to their exact chronology, and it is said that some clusters may date far before the tenth century. Dr. Phillipson, Professor of African Archaeology at Cambridge University, has proposed that some churches from the southern cluster could have been initially carved five centuries earlier from the presupposed date, as fortifications of the earlier Axum Kingdom.

Lalibela, or Roha, is said to have been established as the 'New Jerusalem' by the

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Zagwe king, but the historical periods are disputed by historians. Generally speaking, the Zagwe kings were distinguished from the Aksumite kings in their ethnic and linguistic roots and were therefore described in many historical documents as illegitimate rulers. As a result, the Zagwe period is the most obscure, lacking the support of previously more centralized and 'legitimate' kingdoms. The rock-hewn churches at Lalibela were constructed during the Dark Ages in Ethiopian history, are only briefly cited as monuments constructed by foreign (Egyptian or Syrian) Christian exiles in Ethiopian documents.

Although Lalibela is considered the pinnacle of the art of rock carving in Ethiopia, it is not the only site boasting examples of the technique. Many more specimens, and much earlier ones, dot the landscape of the mountainous Tigray region. Often atop hills and quite hard to reach, Tigray's churches are less elegant and less densely built but seem to be the predecessors of Lalibela's wonders.

Stylistically different, much more inaccessible and usually placed atop cliffs and steep mountaintops, the caves and churches of Tigray possess unique religious rock paintings, heavily influenced by Egyptian Coptic Christian painting styles. Although most date to the 10th century, it is very obvious that they have had additions upon earlier carvings into the rock faces.

The rock carving tradition in perspective

Apart from the fact that these churches (both Lalibela's and Tigrayan churches) are still in use and very much part of ceremonial life for Christians in Ethiopia, there is another remarkable importance to these monolithic specimens: their historical links to a larger ancient, and then medieval architectural world. The monolithic building tradition, as it also called, is a continuation of an ancient tradition found inside and outside the Horn of Africa. The ancient rock carved Israeli tombs, dating from different periods and stretching well into the Byzantine period, trace their first examples around 3,000 BC. Also, Egyptian pharaonic monuments were often monolithic, such as the temple of Abu Simbel, dating to 1,250 BC. Rock carved monuments such as the grand red-sandstone Al Khazneh in Jordan's Petra, as well as the freestanding granite Mamallapuram temples in Tamil Nadu, India, all testify to an enduring ancient and medieval global presence of the technique, with varied results in decoration, scale and complexity.

The importance, and problems, of the rock-carved churches today

Increasingly falling under the lustful eye of tourism, Tigrayan and especially Lalibela's churches are entering a period where heavy pilgrimage and visitor numbers might start to pose a threat to these monuments. Ethiopia's tourist facilities are not very well-equipped and the local population, in the prospect of receiving tourist interest in the area, is sometimes sloppy in handling the precious site. Moreover, the rare fact that such "medieval marvels" are still in use by the local population renders their condition fragile. The danger of erosion is starting to lurk around the corner. Tourist and infrastructural development which has been going on recently may make access easier for visitors to one of the least visited wonders in the world, but orientating such 'living' monuments towards accommodating tourists hides, in this case, a double standard: it is both a necessary step, and at the same time a dangerous one, as legitimizing the tourist development will only bring more tourists; and, perhaps, decline in their religious and spiritual importance.

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