AN ETHIOPIAN
HOLY LAND

LJUBICA D. POPOVICH

Elevated heavenward by the central mountain massif of Ethiopia, forever tied to the earth with the vein of rock out of which they were carved, and well hidden below the usual human horizon, lie the churches of Lalibela. These eleven structures are only a few among many found in the Lasta, Tigre, and Waq provinces, yet in all probability they are not only the oldest monuments but also the most magnificent ones. Formally, these distant churches are among the most creative expressions of faith from the Middle Ages. In some aspects, they are unique in the world, while in others they show strong ties with architectural heritage which were distant in space and removed in time.

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Sixteenth century Mosque of Harar.

rock and said to have belonged to the Queen of Sheba; a palace complex which may go back to the middle of the first millennium; buildings of the Roman period; a palace compound which housed the Christian kings of Axum and in whose crypts those kings were buried. Above the tombs of noblemen are majestic granite monoliths carved to represent the stages of the soul's ascent into heaven and ending in an arch symbolizing the firmament.

In the sea of Ethiopian Christianity, the province of Harar is a Moslem island. Its main city, also called Harar, is a sixteenth-century walled town whose whitewashed walls and tiled roofs recall Moorish Spain. The delicately broken arches and the slender minaret of its mosque reveal the skill and architectural elegance of the Moslem builders.

Gondar is the outstanding scenic attraction of central Ethiopia, the capital of a kingdom which flourished between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, leaving as its main relics a royal compound with castles and elegantly illuminated manuscripts, today the prized treasures of the great European museums. Not far from Gondar is the largest body of water in inland Ethiopia, Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile.

These and other Ethiopian landmarks deserve more than casual notice, but the province of Lasta, in the heart of the Ethiopian highlands, is the climax of the journey. There are no roads there, except rude paths, and one must journey by plane. Leaving Bahar-Dar, it is possible to see, though not to hear, the majestic Sississat Falls of the Blue Nile. The highland landscape is almost as barren as that of the moon. Millet crops had been harvested, the dry season had arrived, all greenery had vanished, and the entire world had become a rusty brown relief. Tiny hamlets and small villages could be discerned only by the careful observer. Even the houses were camouflaged: the typical Ethiopian house, called a nabul, a round hut with walls made either of dried mud or of stone, covered with bunches of tied long-bladed grasses, blended into the landscape.

In preparation for the capital of Lasta province, it is appropriate to say a few words about the strange and exotic form of Christianity which thrives in Ethiopia. In 1950, the church of Ethiopia became an independent national church, although it maintains communion with some other eastern churches. Previously it was bound ecclesiastically to the great patriarchate of Alexandria, one of the five “heads” of Christianity.

So far, claims of apostolic origins for the Christianity of Ethiopia have not been historically sustained, although it would seem highly possible that some Christians reached the shores of the Red Sea and, consequently, the hinterlands rather early. It appears, however, to have been the fourth-century king Ezana who accepted Christianity as the state religion, since his last inscription mentions the “Lord of Heaven.” Following the Aryan controversy of the fourth century, the questions debated throughout the church during the first half of the fifth century dealt with an interpretation of the Trinity and a definition of the nature of Christ. At the Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon in 451, the doctrine endorsed by both Rome and Constantinople—that two perfect, indivisible, yet separate natures coexist in Christ, the divine and the human—was declared an article of faith. The See of Alexandria refused to accept the ruling of the Council and was therefore declared heretical. This religious rift encouraged political inclinations toward separation from Byzantine rule. Some scholars feel that the theological disagreements were an important force in the losing of Egypt, one of the wealthiest Byzantine provinces, to the Arabs. The Alexandrian church chose to be ruled by the “fides” rather than by the “heretics” from Constantinople.

The Christian church of Egypt, better known as the Coptic, continued for the next thirteen centuries to administer the church in Ethiopia. An archbishop, called Abun, was a Copt appointed by the Synod in Alexandria to rule the Ethiopian church, but after having assumed responsibility he was never permitted to leave the land.

Although governed by a foreigner, the church buildings in Ethiopia did not show Coptic influence exclusively, but depended on a variety of sources for inspiration. At least two structures (now almost totally destroyed), one near Masawa at the Red Sea, the other in Axum, both predating the end of the seventh century, are usually called Byzantine in style, although this term could be used very broadly. However, it is imperative to remember how much evidence was irreparably lost during the fury of Modern invasion under Grafi during the first half of the sixteenth century. Grafi’s wrath seems to have been directed specifically toward the pillaging and burning of Christian buildings.

The parish churches erected after the sixteenth century, which probably repeated ancient traditions, base their plan on the native design of the tukul, the domestic round hut. A good example is the church of Tekla Haimanot in Gondar, which may go back as far as the eighteenth century. A base made of field stones elevates
the plain rotunda. Mud-packed walls are covered with plaster and then whitewashed. The original grass roof has been replaced by corrugated metal sheets. Three doors and three windows admit light into the ambulatory, where the chosen believers are admitted. A rectangular inner sanctuary is completely separated from the ambulatory by a wall which reaches to the ceiling and is usually decorated with paintings. The Holy of Holies (mordat) is lit by a window, facing east, but only the priests may enter here. It is to this rather plain type of church that the monuments of Lasta province and especially the structures of Lalibela provide such a great contrast as to seem almost incongruous with native tradition.

Many of the churches of the Lasta province are, technically speaking, not buildings at all but free-standing sculptures, carved in the shape of buildings and designated for religious purposes. They are, however, sculpted out of a single gigantic piece of stone. Only one name can be applied to them: they are monoliths. Every element comprising the whole was chiseled out of living rock: the stylobate, the walls, the columns, the capitals, the impostes, transverse arches, ceilings, domes, and even the decorations which embellish some of them. The process must have been much the following. First, a trench was dug separating the block desired for the building from the rest of the rock vein. Then the entire exterior was carved, after which attention was turned to the interior. In view of the date of these works and the state of technological development in Ethiopia, this must have been a staggering undertaking, equaling in effort the construction of a pyramid or the erection of a cathedral. But these churches are more than technically amazing; each is very different in plan, elevation, and theological implication.

The consensus today is that the churches of Lalibela were constructed by the order of an Ethiopian king of the Zagwe dynasty, ruling at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries. This Christian king seems, according to Baudr, to have been the same person who offered his help to Pope Alexander III about 1170 to free the holy city of Jerusalem from the hands of the "infidels." In European annals he is mentioned as Prester John from India. Prester John's ambitions were beyond the scope of political realities, which he himself must have realized; his ideals were not. When it became evident that the Holy Land could not be freed, it was then essential to recreate the holy places in one's own country. This is exactly what the pious king proceeded to do in his own capital of Roha, which was later called Lalibela, after the king himself.

The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles edited by R. Pankhurst, provide an extraordinary account of this pious man and his magnificent undertaking. Preserved in a manuscript which is no later than the fifteenth century, the chronicle contains both embellished holy legends and factual information which passes the test of historical authenticity.

After the decline of the ancient kingdom of Axum, Roha—the center of the Axewa people of Ethiopia—came into prominence under the Zagwe dynasty, the only ruling family which never claimed direct descent from Menelik I, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Like many other great heroes before him, King Lalibela's importance, according to the Royal Chronicles, was recognized at the moment of his birth, when bees gathered around the child and his mother. The future king matured to exceptional beauty, yet another miraculous sign of his proleptic role. Escaping the plots of jealous enemies, as if by divine providence, Lalibela seems to have ruled his highland kingdom from 1182 to 1250.

Whenever one finds a monument which appears to be extraordinary for its own time, one recalls the great architectural miracle of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople; the explanation of its inspiration and construction has long been repeated, with claims of divine assistance in various forms. While angels came down to build and guard the great edifice of Justinian, King Lalibela experienced a translatio into the heavens where he was shown, in the third heaven, by God himself, ten large churches hewn out of living rock. God ordered Lalibela to construct such churches upon his accension to the throne and promised him the help of the angels. Translating legend into historical fact is at best speculative, but it may be that Lalibela did travel somewhere, though his destination still remains unknown. Upon his return he must have usurped the power of his predecessor, Harbay (or

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**Drawing of a stela erected over a tomb at Axum, carved to represent the soul's ascent to heaven.**

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**EXHIBITION**

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**WINTER 1972**
The chronicles inform us that the tools were fashioned first to cut and Hew the stone. The next step was assembling the crew of workmen, masons and excavators alike. All were paid according to their demands, so that there were no complaints or delays in the construction of the churches. The land for the buildings was purchased with gold, although, as king, Lalibela could have confiscated it. The nationality of the skilled masons employed by the king is still something of a mystery. The chronicles simply designate them as “everyone.” Without new documentary evidence, it would be difficult to determine whether they came from Syria or were refugees from Egypt. They may even have come from the ancient Ethiopian capital of Axum. An especially interesting speculation suggests far-off India as their place of origin.

The chronicles continue with an enumeration of the churches, beginning with Beta Maryam. Once again, I feel that the chronicles was accurate, since among all the churches this one seems to be the most ancient, and yet at the same time the most decorated. This to me indicates that there had been time to complete it both inside and outside during Lalibela’s lifetime.

We learn further from the chronicles that King Lalibela could see the angels, while his workers could not. During the day angels helped the laborers, and during the night they continued working alone, thus constructing all ten churches from a single piece of stone.

I have no doubt that the king must have bad for his adviser a very learned theologian who conceived not only an unusual but a theologically complex unit. In it we find reproduced the Holy Land and Palestinian Jerusalem. Perhaps there is even an echo as well of the heavenly and apocalyptic Jerusalem. The gorge which divides the village of Lalibela into two halves and which is filled with water during the rainy season was interpreted as the River Jordan. Even today, during the Feast of the Epiphany, it is a site of important religious ceremonies. In the river bed a monolithic freestanding cross was carved, symbolically marking the location of the Baptism of Christ.

The chronicles name the following churches: Beta Maryam (House of Mary), Dobra Sinai (Mount Sinai), Golgotha, Beta Masqal (House of the Cross), and Beta Danaigel (House of the Virgin) as belonging to the first group, all with the exception of Beta Maryam being small chapels. Adjoining them were two other structures, Beta Gabriel (House of Gabriel) and Beta Abba Matae, united with the same wall. To these another group was joined, comprising Beta Merqerwos (House of Mercurius) and Beta Amnuael (House of Emmanuel). Finally, the chronicles mention Beta Giorgis, the isolated church of St. George.

It seems to me that the systematic design of these churches cannot be understood if they are taken as separate units. All of them were erected in the vicinity of the river and their dedication had a clear theological meaning: the oldest church among them was dedicated to Mary, who for the Byzantines was the God-Bearer (Theotokos), and for the Monophysites was the vehicle of incarnation. The structures which surround it are of lesser theological significance and ought to be understood as additional chapels. The structure which lies theologically with that of the Mary is dedicated to Amanuel (Emmanuel), which means “God with Us.” This dedication is to one of the aspects of Christ as the Incarnate Word. In Byzantine iconography, Christ Emmanuel is always represented as a child. This theological application to the sanctuary is carried further: the structures near the entrances or directly in front of the churches are dedicated to the archangels Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael, considered to be “bodily” heavenly militia. They guard the sanctuaries just as they do in Hagia Sophia, where we find their mosaic images in the lunette above the royal portal and on the vault of the bema. Although a local saint, the much-veiled Abba Libanos was not forgotten, and a very handsome church was dedicated to him.

Further associations with Jerusalem were stressed: a church was dedicated to Golgotha, signifying the Crucifixion, and within it Lalibela himself was buried. Directly in front of this structure rises a curious monolithic cube which is popularly called the Tomb of Adam. From the Bible we know that Golgotha was “the place of the skull,” which in the mind of Christians soon became associated with the skull of Adam. Frequently in Byzantine representations of the Crucifixion we find, in a cave-like recess directly underneath the cross, a skull and some bones. The sacrificial blood of the Saviour was supposed to have washed away the sin of the first man. A theological culmination was reached in the Church of the Redeemer of the World, Medhlame Alem. The complex was completed by a structure which stands apart from the others, dedicated to the warrior from Asia Minor, patron saint of Ethiopia, St. George.

Read as a theological unit, the sanctuaries of Lalibela offer a systematic association with the holy places, from the Tomb of Adam to the River Jordan and from the saint-protector of the country to the Redeemer of the World. However, only the major Lalibela structures will be examined here.

The House of Mary is a small three-nave basilica, its aisles separated from the naves by five rectangular piers on each side, with two more in the sanctuary (15 x 11 meters). The diminishing galleries surround the aisles, but the nave does not project in height above them at the roof level. This simple basilica plans is enriched by three low porches which project to the south, west, and north. Nine supports, free
they do not project into the exterior. Precedents for such an arrangement are to be found in true masonry structures in Egypt and especially in Syria, where the practice was well known by the sixth century A.D. To compensate for the lack of projecting apses, the eastern end was given a greater number of windows than any other façade of the church. It seems that originally there were only seven: three very elaborate ones in the lower zone, three simple rectangles in the upper zone, and the middle zone, originally having only one window with a cross carved within, forming the third along the vertical line. These openings gave light to the main apse and undoubtedly symbolized the Trinity. The side windows lighted the apsidalae. Two other openings were attempted, possibly at a later date, since they cut into the original cornice line.

This relatively plain exterior of the Church of Mary presents a sharp contrast to the elaborate interior, entirely covered with carvings and paintings. No other church of Late Antiquity in the Middle East approaches, in richness and beauty, this one. The piers carry capitals, in the form of rectangular blocks with simplified volutes. All are covered with low reliefs with geometrical designs and crosses. Softness of the arches which connect the piers are also carved, then covered with paint. Reds, yellows, and green tones predominate. Above the arcade of the nave runs a frieze, somewhat reminiscent of the meander design. False " clerestory windows" open from the gallery into the nave, admitting no direct light. The ceiling is flat and painted to imitate coffering. The geometric decoration which so dominates this interior is obviously strongly derivative. There are the Jewish "Star of David," the Greek meander in variations, and the Indian "cloud" motif as well as the cross. The Sun and the Moon represented as faces certainly have Byzantine counterparts, if not Hellenistic ones. Several preserved figurative representations are of great interest. The Annunciation to Zachary of the imminent birth of John the Baptist seems to be the introduction to the New Law. It is followed by the Visitations of Mary to Elizabeth and the Supper at the House of Simon. All the figures are drawn with strong outlines, conceived flatly, showing a great affinity with Coptic and Syriac styles of painting. The piers of the Holy of Holies are covered with images of saints, most probably postdating the original decoration of the House of Mary. One of the sanctuaries is permanently veiled. The popular explanation for this is amusing: while the one pier shows the past history of mankind, the other, which is veiled, shows the future, which is known but to God. This attempt to-

oward a great elaboration of the interior reminds one not of contemporary structures elsewhere in the Eastern Christian world, but of the early Christian basilicas which were decorated with carved and painted stuccoes. The unassuming exterior of the Church of Mary suggests primitive efforts of a newly assembled crew of stonemasons.

To the northeast of the Beta Maryam there is a rectangular water basin carved into living rock, with a raised rim and several steps leading into it. Undoubtedly this served as a baptismal font where the ritual was carried out by immersion.

To the southeast of the Church of Mary, stands the sanctuary of Emmanuel. Once again we find here a basilica structure, but very different in every respect from Mary's sanctuary (18 x 12 x 11 meters). According to the Royal Chronicles it is several churches younger, although still built during King Lalibela's lifetime. Beta Amanuel demonstrates not only a different source of inspiration but a definite progress in the skill and artistic sophistication of its carvers. It is elevated from the ground by a four-step stylobate; it rises three stories high, with its vertical element underlined by prominent pilasters on all four façades. This also adds an element of strength at the corners. Its roof is sloping and has been rain-damaged along with the upper story of the church. Exterior walls are carved in imitation of alternate layers of exposed beams and dried mud. This technique probably came to Lalibela from Axum, but in its origin it is tied to Arabia Felix. The beam is broader and the projecting part, while narrower, was at one time the mud layer. This horizontal, even rhythm is interrupted by the cornices, the second story
being especially prominent. Western, northern, and southern doors give access to the church, and all three, together with the windows of the lower and upper zones, are framed by “mockery heads.” All the perforations of the lower windows are in the form of crosses, while the middle zone openings are arched.

Piers again separate the nave from the aisles, which in this case are very narrow and compressed. The nave however is given emphasis in width as well as in height, especially through its elegant arcade, although it does not have the curved or painted decorations of Mary’s Church. Above the arcade, two zones of blind windows with exposed beams serve to decorate the walls. The tunnel vault of the nave is “supported” by the transverse arches, which rise from the piers as in a true masonry structure although they are not a structural necessity here. The Holy of Holies keeps what the Ethiopians believe to be the Ark of the Covenant, thus once again stressing the original connections with Judaism. It is amusing to notice in the southwest corner of the church a trap door from which a tunnel once led to the Church of St. Mercurios. One can imagine how this and similar passages in the sanctuaries of Lalibela were used during periods of emergency and foreign invasion. Another interesting point is a circle outlined in the rock to the northwest corner of Beta Amanuel. It is here that the priests even today perform their religious and ritualistic dancing accompanied by the beat of drum and cymbrum.

The Royal Chronicles designate Beta Gheorgis as the last church erected by King Lalibela. This sanctury stands alone within its own enclosure, the walls of which rise to a height of 12 meters. Possibly because of its isolated position, this is among the most memorable structures in Lalibela. There is nothing to distract one from concentrating on its rust-colored walls of sandstone, their patina formed by rains and icing. The building is a free-standing Greek cross, surging upward from a tall base (22x23 meters). The influence of Arabic architecture is to be seen in the pointed arch and in the fleuron surmounting it. The flat roof of Beta Gheorgis picks up the cross theme and uses it both symbolically and functionally. The roof, a cross within a cross, provides channels for shedding water, while water spouts projects outward just below the upper cornice. The interior of this church is much simpler than the others, but it shows such a precision of carving that one has the feeling that not only were skilled artists at work here but perhaps also there is already a touch of academicism. This building might well be associated with the thirteenth century. The central part of the cross, strengthened by monumental piers from which arches rise, has a shallow vault, while above the eastern arm of the sanctuary there is a webbed dome, a feature well known in Byzantine architecture. The free cross plan was also well chosen with the specific knowledge of early Christian tradition, which often used this plan for the churches—martyria. Thus we are made to understand that the Ethiopians considered this church not only a dedicatory structure but also a true martyrium of the land’s patron, St. George.

The largest and probably the most majestic...
church not only of Lalibela but of the entire country is that of the Redeemer of the World—
Medhane Alemon (33.5 x 23.5 x 11 meters). It is not mentioned by the Royal Chronicles as
one of the pious king’s accomplishments. However, the Zagwe kings ruled for another forty-
eight years after the death of King Lalibela, and there was no political disturbance or economic
crisis which could have caused discontinuation of the works. The thirteenth century has given
Europe some of its most beautiful cathedrals; creative impulses of that century also existed in
this distant land of Africa, giving it the structure which is known today as the Parthenon of
Ethiopia, so-called because of the thirty-two monolithic rectangular pillars which surround the
building. They are evenly spaced except for the corner piers, which are brought in more
closely together. Today some of the piers and parts of the structure which were damaged by
water erosion have been restored. The part which roughly corresponds to the cornice is dec-
ored with arches, spaced in pairs for each
intercolumniation. The slightly sloping roof is
columned by an arcade, intricately carved to
incorporate the major symbol of Christianity,
the cross. Most scholars are inclined to see in
the arches the elements found in Ethiopian churches
direct connections with stele and indirect
references to the soul’s resurrection. The
pteron
(wing of columns) is close to the walls, which
are plain save for two simple cornices separating
the window zones. The lower zone has rectangu-
lar windows, with perforations to form a variety
of crosses. The windows of the next story are
more elaborate; they form “key-hole” patterns,
with an arch surrounding a rectangle over a
stylized volute. Some of the windows have pre-
served traces of stained glass, the lattice-work
of which is very closely linked to Arabic designs.
In my mind the question whether or not these
were contemporary with the building remains
open.

Three doors lead into the interior which,
though somewhat heavy in appearance and aca-
demic in detail work, impresses the beholder
with its monumentality, much in the manner of
an Egyptian hypostyle hall. Four rows of heavy,
square piers divide this basilica into five naves,
each nave seven bays long. Each pier is topped
with volutes, so stylized that they do not resem-
ble in the least their classical prototypes. Arches
above the piers give additional height to the
building, which has a flat ceiling. A false
narthex is created at the western end by a trans-
verse wall, while the same idea is repeated at the
eastern end, to separate the sanctuary from the
church proper and to subdivide it for liturgi-
cal purposes. The entire interior is devoid of
either carved or painted decoration, impressing
the viewer with its austerity.
The other churches of Lalibela are also
worthy of a longer study, but one can give them
here only brief mention. The church today
called Beta Mercurios seems to have never been
finished; the vein of the rock seems not to have
been sufficiently large. This structure conceived
like a hypostyle hall may have been originally
designed as a meeting place. Among all of the
Lalibela churches, the one dedicated to Abba
Libanos is unique in one respect: although free-
standing on all sides, its roof has never been
separated from the living rock. Even though
no two churches in Lalibela are identical in de-

Beta Gabriel: view showing
the drawbridge and the
deep of the structure.

WINTER 1971
SUGGESTED READING

FATHER FRANCISCO ALVAREZ, Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia during the years 1520-27. Translated by Leed Stanley of Alderley. London. 1881. (The original text appeared in Portuguese. Coimbra. 1540.)


The village of Lalibela with tokate in the background and a priest with a child in the foreground.

Lubberica D. Popovich is a graduate of the University of Belgrade and of Bryn Mawr College, where she received her Ph.D. in Art History in 1963. Coming to the United States in 1957, she worked first as a student assistant in the University Museum, and in the summer of 1961 she participated as a cataloguer on the Museum's expedition to Boehm, Turkey, where a twelfth century Byzantine commercial ship was excavated. From 1963 through 1966, Dr. Popovich taught ancient and medieval art at the University of Georgia. In 1966, she joined the faculty of the Fine Arts Department of Vanderbilt University. During the academic year 1967-68, she was on leave for research on "Byzantine Carvings in Semi-Precious Stones" under a grant from the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. In the winter of 1970, she accompanied as lecturer a group of friends of the University Museum to Ethiopia, Cyprus, and Malta.

16 EXPEDITION