

Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier, *Lalibela: Wonder of Ethiopia: The Monolithic Churches and Their Treasures*, (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2012), pp. 344, 290 colour illustrations.

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With its eleven unique rock-hewn churches, Lalibela, some 645 km north of Addis Ababa, is one of the most fascinating sites in the world. As such, it has been the subject of a number of studies. Nevertheless, many aspects of the history of Lalibela remain obscure. For instance, there is still disagreement over the date of foundation of its churches. There is also controversy over the hagiographical tradition which attributes the foundation of all the churches to the Ethiopian King Lalibela. In this context, the work by Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier, who have collaborated on several other studies of Ethiopian churches over the past decades, is an addition to a literature which is still deficient.

Prior investigations of Lalibela (reviewed in Chapter 1) have often been restricted to one disciplinary area. Although this book is pre-eminently an art-historical study, it has the merit of providing a variety of perspectives: historical, documentary, architectural, and cultural. Furthermore, the authors are to be commended for drawing on a wide range of Ethiopian sources, such as hagiographies and land grants, to substantiate their arguments. The book also makes an important contribution towards an understanding of the history of the site in relation to the history of the Zagwe dynasty, of which King Lalibela was a member, and its surroundings (Chapter 2). Indeed, it will be difficult to offer a more detailed picture of Lalibela's artistic history until further archaeological investigations are carried out.

According to Lepage and Mercier, two of Lalibela's churches, the Church of the Cross and the Church of Mary, were founded at the beginning of the twelfth century by King Lalibela under the patronage, or 'matronage' as the authors describe it, of Debre Libanos, a monastery located some 500 km north of the town (pp. 25-26). In their view, this also explains why one of Lalibela's churches is dedicated to Saint Libanos. Their conclusion is based mainly on two deeds, in which land from the environs of the Libanos monastery is granted to two churches dedicated to the Cross and to Mary, which they identify as the two homonymous churches found at Lalibela. According to the authors this was done to consolidate the ties between the two areas. Clearly, as Lepage and Mercier recognize, it would have been difficult for the two Lalibelan churches to benefit from the donation of lands so distant. Unfortunately, an explanation of how this might have been achieved, which would have strengthened their argument, is not offered. However, to support their view they draw a parallel with the foundation of the Church of Bethlehem, which was founded under the patronage of the Saviour of the World Church in Lalibela, and was given lands from the environs of this latter church despite being at a distance of roughly 100 km from it.

After an overview of the main features of the churches of Lalibela (Chapter 3), Lepage and Mercier focus on their relation to Aksumite and post-Aksumite architecture (Chapter 4). More specifically, they see in certain semi-monolithic structures, such as that of Degum in Tigray, a link between early Aksumite funerary architecture and the architecture of the Lalibela churches. In light of these considerations, the two scholars rule out the possibility that foreign craftsmen were employed in the construction of Lalibela, as has sometimes been suggested in the past.

Chapter 5 opens with a discussion of the architectural features of the churches and of the decorations that are carved on their surfaces. It then examines the mural paintings, figurative sculptures, and crosses of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries that are still preserved in

Lalibela. Particularly worthy of mention is the section devoted to the arks: wooden chests that replicate the Ark of the Covenant. These are generally guarded jealously by the Ethiopian clergy, and laymen are not allowed in their proximity, let alone granted permission to photograph them. Thus, until now, scholars have only had a limited number of reproductions of arks at their disposal to work on. A significant value of this publication is that it offers nineteen reproductions of thirteenth century arks, several of which previously unpublished, discussing them in considerable detail. Chapter 5 also exemplifies the authors' profound understanding of Ethiopian art. It is one of the most compelling parts of the study, and possibly one of the most knowledgeable accounts of thirteenth century art in Ethiopia. Mercier and Lepage illustrate a number of suggestive correlations between the decorative and iconographic motifs found in different artistic mediums: carved rock, manuscript illumination, engraved crosses, and wall painting. However, although they set out with the intention of defining a 'Lalibelan style,' they ultimately do not provide the criteria to identify such a style. This is possibly because of the considerable losses suffered by the artistic heritage of Ethiopia. In fact, because a classification such as this one has a spatial as well as a cultural dimension to it, it would have been necessary to compare the style and iconography of Lalibelan art with that of other regions.

Mercier and Lepage believe that the artists employed in the constructions and decoration of the churches in Lalibela were influenced by foreign models, but they tend to rule out the possibility that foreign craftsmen were employed in the project (pp. 106-9). Yet a number of considerations suggest caution on this matter. Firstly, one wonders if the presence of Kufic and Greek inscriptions on some of the thirteenth century artworks which are kept in Lalibela, for instance on some of the arcs and crosses, and which the authors associate with the architecture and decoration of the Lalibela churches, might be more easily explained by accepting the hypothesis that foreign artists were present in the city at the time of their making. Secondly, although the style of the mural paintings of the Church of Mary in Lalibela

is reminiscent of that of the nearby and slightly earlier Church of Yemrehanna Krestos, as the authors note, this does not necessarily mean that Ethiopian artists were employed in their decoration. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the style of painting found in these two churches finds no other parallels in fourteenth century Ethiopian art, whereas a similar style can be seen in several Coptic monasteries, such as the White Monastery and the Monastery of Saint Anthony. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Ethiopian rulers are known to have employed foreign artists during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even if it is true that the murals of the Church of Mary present distinguishably Ethiopian features, and that Ethiopian artists have always been receptive to foreign models, as Mercier and Lepage point out, it is also true that when foreign artists worked in Ethiopia they quickly learned the local artistic idiom. Examples of this adaptability are found in the more recent history of Ethiopian art. Let it suffice to recall the late fourteenth century manuscripts produced for King Dawit, who employed Coptic artists, and the fifteenth century paintings of the Venetian artist Brancalione. In these examples foreign artists working in Ethiopia achieve a synthesis between Ethiopian art and their own artistic heritage. So it is perfectly possible that foreign artists, Coptic for example, were employed in the decoration of the Church of Mary, and that they adapted their style to suit Ethiopian taste. Thus, also considering how little we know of thirteenth century Ethiopian art, the question of whether or not foreign artists were involved in the construction and decoration of the churches of Lalibela should remain open to debate.

Throughout the following chapters, Lepage and Mercier reach the conclusion that King Lalibela was the patron of all the Lalibela churches, and that these were funded during his reign. Some may disagree with their view. Phillipson, for instance, has recently suggested that the churches' creation spanned over a long period of time (*Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum & The Northern Horn, 1000 BC-AD 1300*, Oxford: James Currey, 2011: 227-44). Regardless, the authors make a strong case for their position, and future attempts

to establish a chronology of the Lalibela churches will have to take this book into consideration.

There are some aspects of the book which call for criticism. For example, the rationale for the ordering of the chapters and sections is sometimes unclear, and the translation is not always smooth. Moreover, the book could have been more helpful had the authors covered more of the related literature and incorporated it in their arguments, though had they done so it would have perhaps been less accessible to the general reader. Nevertheless, this lavishly illustrated publication is a must for anyone interested in Lalibela or in Ethiopian art. It is rich in insight and erudition, and these minor points of criticism should not deter readers from appreciating its many qualities.