

Ancient Ethiopian Churches in Historical Perspective

Professor David W. Phillipson FBA has published a comprehensive account of Ethiopian Christian civilisation and its churches between the 4th and the 14th centuries, offering a fresh view of the processes that gave rise to this unique African culture. He describes the different styles and affinities of these striking religious structures.

The Aksumite civilisation flourished in the highlands of Africa's northern Horn (modern Eritrea and northern Ethiopia; Figure 1) during the first seven centuries AD, being known through archaeology – including numismatics and epigraphy – as well as from written Greco-Roman and Arabic sources. During the second quarter of the 4th century, the then king of Aksum adopted Christianity as the state religion, making his realm apparently the second country in the world – after Armenia – to take this step. Although Aksum itself declined in economic and political significance after the 7th century, its religious eminence continued, albeit the spread of Islam hindered communication with co-religionists elsewhere.

The first thousand years of Ethiopian Christianity remain difficult to interpret. Much of the written Ethiopian evidence survives only in much later versions that may have been subject to modification during

times long after those to which it ostensibly relates. Archaeology has so far contributed little; indeed sites subsequent to the decline of Aksum itself have received remarkably little attention. Virtually the only known sites are churches, the majority of them still in use and subject to repeated ill-recorded modification. Intrusive investigations or destructive analyses are very rarely permissible, while traditions and – as noted above – written accounts are both open to varying interpretation; the churches themselves are thus prime foci of investigation. These factors have imposed a potentially misleading dichotomy on our understanding, with the result that Aksumite and so-called 'medieval' periods have received attention from different scholars and have often been viewed as distinct.

A detailed study of the principal Ethiopian and Eritrean churches dating between the 4th and the 14th centuries has recently been undertaken, with support from several sources, including the British Academy's Small Research Grant scheme. It attempts to establish the ages of individual churches, to evaluate regional as well as chronological variation, and to interpret these results in the context of broader history – whether political, technological, social, economic or liturgical. It detects strong continuity from ancient Aksum into the 'medieval' period, recognises links between ecclesiastical developments and those in other fields, and concludes that such trends within the

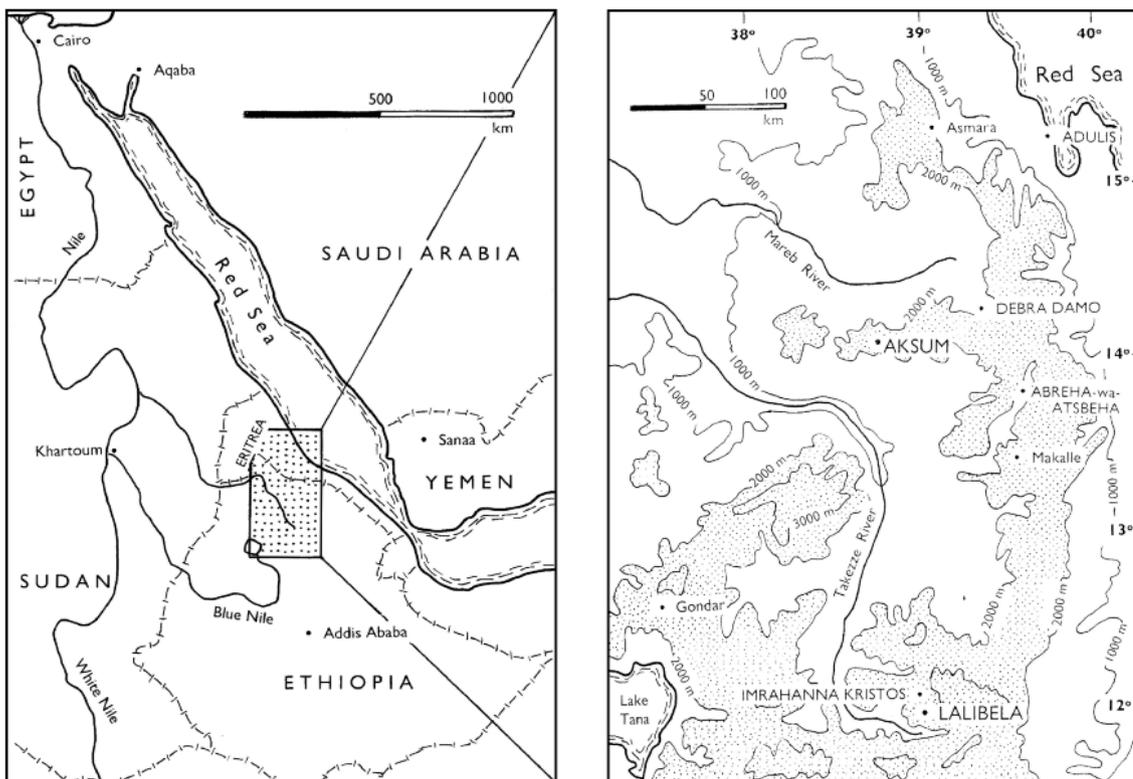


Figure 1. Maps showing general location and sites discussed.

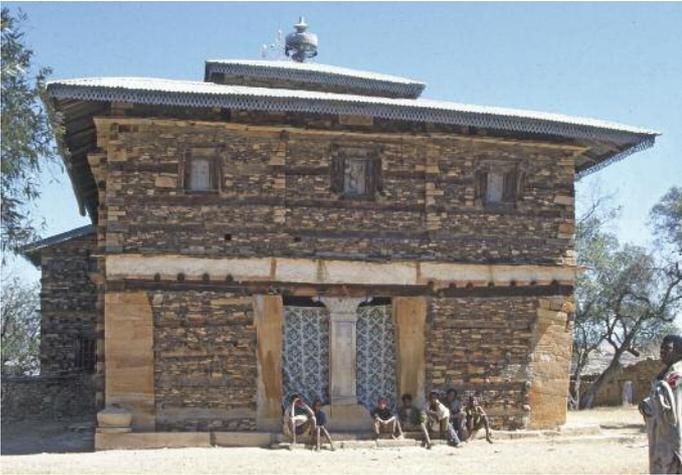


Figure 2. The mountain-top monastery church at Debra Damo in northernmost Tigray. Despite extensive alteration, this building retains a plan and other architectural features from its origin in the Late Aksumite period.

northern Horn formed a strong local tradition which foreign contacts influenced but did not control.

Built and rock-hewn churches

This study incorporates evidence from two types of church that have in the past often been considered separately: conventional buildings, whether erected in the open or in caves, and those – which I designate ‘hypogean’ – that were hewn from solid rock. Although care must be taken to avoid use of inappropriate terminology, it is remarkable how often the architectural forms of the two types are visually identical, the hypogea mimicking features that have structural rationale only in a true building. In local ecclesiastical terminology, built and hypogean churches are not regularly distinguished from each other.



Figure 3. The elaborate rock-hewn funerary church of Abreha-wa-Atsbeha in eastern Tigray, believed to be the burial place of two Aksumite rulers.

Physical remains of churches dating from the Aksumite period – before the mid-7th century – are not numerous, being largely restricted to ruins that are poorly preserved or inadequately recorded, often – as in the case of Aksum’s Maryam TSION cathedral – obscured by subsequent replacement or large-scale modification. One ruin apparently dating from the 6th century, that of twin churches erected at Aksum over elaborate underground tombs, shows a plan remarkably similar in many details to that of the still-used church at Debra Damo monastery (Figure 2) some 70 km to the northeast, providing confirmation that the latter – although repeatedly modified – is, in origin, of similar Late Aksumite age. Although no hypogean churches are attributed to the Aksumite period, other rock-hewn features – notably tombs – show that the techniques required for their creation were already practised. In plan, all the known Aksumite-period churches are basilican; despite implied connections with the paleochristian circum-Mediterranean world, this is a building form that can be traced back a thousand years earlier within northern Ethiopia. At Adulis, on the Red-Sea coast of Eritrea, at least one basilica of 6th- or 7th-century date was adorned with a marble screen imported as pre-fabricated components from quarries in the vicinity of Constantinople.

Eastern Tigray

In the highlands of eastern Tigray, significant numbers of both built and rock-hewn churches survive. The earliest, apparently of Late Aksumite age, include hypogea which were initially funerary monuments. Later developments were marked by dramatic proliferation, in which Aksumite-period styles and features were retained and elaborated (Figure 3). In contrast with the Aksumite heartland further west, it seems that this part of Tigray was less affected by 7th-century decline: although overseas contacts were reduced, what was by then an essentially local tradition showed remarkable development. This conclusion is in accord with statements by Arabic writers – albeit recorded several centuries afterwards – which suggest that, after the decline of Aksum, the area’s political capital was transferred southeastwards to an as-yet unidentified location.

Earlier research had indicated that the eastern Tigray churches fall into two basic groups: the earlier ones were relatively accessible, but their often monastic successors tended to be sited in mountainous locations. The mural paintings, for which Tigray churches are justly famous, are largely restricted to the later group. It is now suggested that the two groups were separated by a hiatus, in about the eleventh century, when creation of churches in Tigray effectively ceased. As will be explained below, this conclusion is of major historical significance.

Amhara Region

To the south, in the area formerly known as Lasta but now subsumed within Amhara Region, further ancient churches are preserved (Figure 4). There is a marked geographical gap between the Tigray churches and those of Amhara Region. Although some churches in the latter may date back to the closing centuries of the 1st millennium, most hypogea of this period seem originally to have served some other function and were only subsequently converted to ecclesiastical use. Significantly, the florescence of church-creation in Amhara Region seems to have coincided with the 11th-century hiatus in that activity in Tigray.

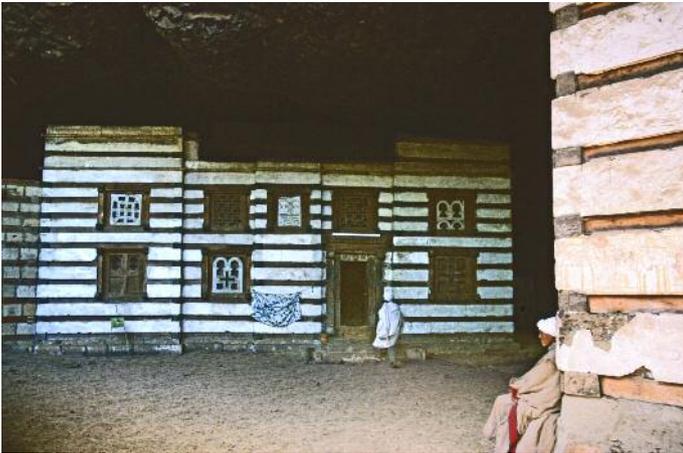


Figure 4. Built in a huge cave not far to the north of Lalibela, in Amhara Region, the well-preserved church of Imrahanna Kristos probably dates from the 11th century, while retaining many architectural features of Aksumite origin. The building in the right foreground is of similar age.

Lalibela

These observations are particularly apparent at the famous hypogean complexes at the place now generally known as Lalibela, after the king to whom their creation is widely attributed. Lalibela remains a major place of pilgrimage whilst attracting ever-increasing numbers of tourists. Many features of the Lalibela landscape, including some of the hypogea, bear names linking them to places at and near Jerusalem that would have been visited by Ethiopian pilgrims. Because the Lalibela hypogea form interconnecting complexes, it is possible to establish their chronological relationships. It is clear that two of them, significantly older than the others, were not originally churches, but served a basically defensive function and were connected by an underground tunnel. Later, the tunnel having been interrupted, these hypogea were converted to ecclesiastical use by the addition of architecturally distinct chambers that served as sanctuaries (Figure 5). These developments may have been somewhat earlier than – or broadly contemporary with – the creation of the great rock-hewn churches including Beta Maryam (St Mary) and Beta Madhane Alem (the Saviour of the World) which are rightly regarded as representing the finest development of Ethiopian hypogean architecture (Figure 6). Later still are churches, some of them hewn – apparently in haste and with less careful planning – at a lower level, including those to which the greatest sanctity is attributed, and one of which is held to be the burial place of King Lalibela himself. The ecclesiastical traditions notwithstanding, it is clear that creation of the Lalibela hypogea extended over a lengthy period, probably lasting several centuries; the last major phase of this process may be attributed to the reign of King Lalibela. Significantly, it is this phase that also includes elements – the Tomb of Adam (Figure 7) and the Church of Golgotha, for example – which bear names indicating correlation with features that would have been familiar to pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. The traditions are thus correct in attributing to King Lalibela the creation of the hypogean complex in its present form and symbolism; they do not, when literally interpreted, take account of the fact that much of the complex had originated in earlier times. This interpretation is strengthened by noting that during Lalibela's reign Jerusalem was conquered by Salah ad-Din, an event which may have given rise to the fear – unjustified, as it actually transpired – that visits by Christian pilgrims would be curtailed, thus prompting the need for an Ethiopian alternative.

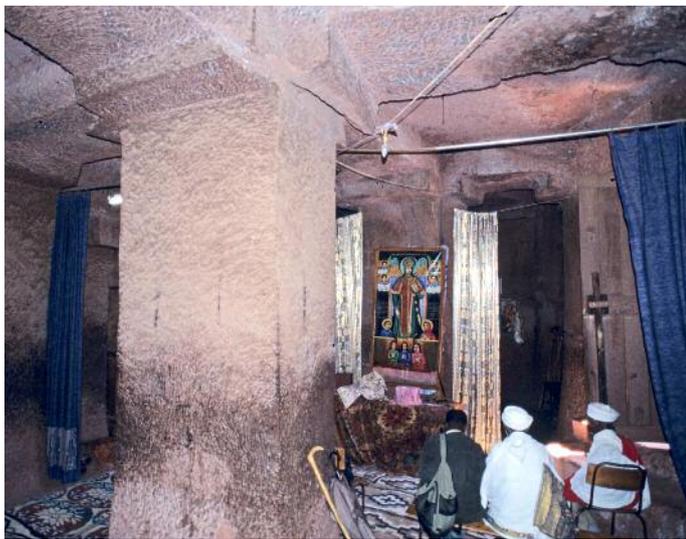
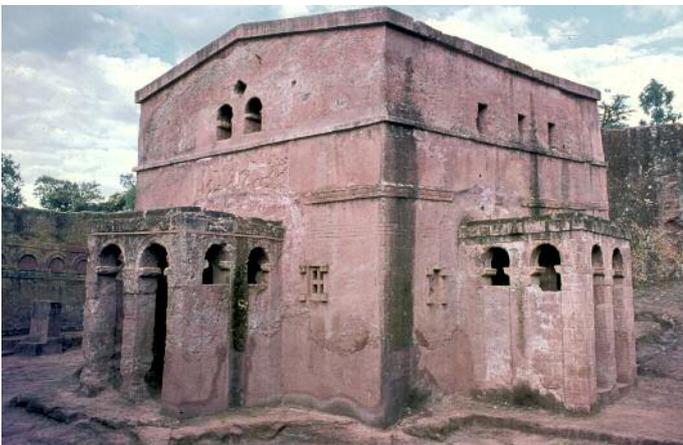


Figure 5. Beta Gabriel (the church of the Archangel Gabriel) is one of the oldest hypogea at Lalibela. Several phases of modification may be recognised. Initially defensive, its subsequent conversion to ecclesiastical use involved the excavation of an additional chamber (reached through the curtained doorway seen behind the priests in this photograph) to serve as the sanctuary. At about the same time the previously flat ceiling was re-carved to represent capitals and beams.

Figure 6. Beta Maryam (the church of St Mary) is one of the most elaborate of the Lalibela hypogea. Carved from bedrock (a volcanic tuff), it rises 10 metres from the floor of a large sub-rectangular court. Internally, it follows a basilican plan and bears fine carved and painted decoration.



Historical context

These observations require interpretation in terms of what is known from other sources about historical developments during this period (Figure 8). The borders of the Aksum kingdom are poorly known and may never have been clearly defined; its hegemony probably did not extend significantly to the south of the modern Tigray. The well-documented decline of Aksum around the mid-7th century severely curtailed overseas contacts and led to an eastward shift of the political and economic centre; such a movement is reflected in the distribution of churches attributable to that period. Later, this southward shift continued, a process that apparently involved the transfer of authority

to a different ethnic group recalled in historical writings and tradition as the Zagwe or Agau dynasty. It is well established that Zagwe rule came to an end c. 1270, but evidence for its start is difficult to interpret. Most historians have retained the view that it began early in the 12th century, thus lasting for about 150 years, but my research leads me to support the alternative of an inception in the 10th century and a 300-year duration. This being the case, it would neatly follow that the shift in church-creation activity from Tigray to what is now Amhara Region coincided with the rise of the Zagwe. The matter is of some relevance to modern politics in Ethiopia, since Lalibela is increasingly seen as a focus for Agau nationalism.

On a broader historic front, the distinction between ancient Aksum and ‘medieval’ Ethiopia is now seen as significantly less fundamental than was previously believed. Continuity, by no means restricted to the isolated architectural idioms that have long been recognised, extended long after the period with which this investigation was primarily concerned; indeed, the creation of hypogean churches continues in the 21st century. This research also serves to emphasise the urgent need



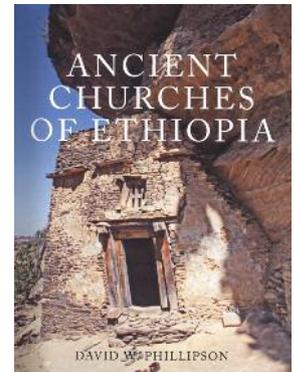
Figure 7. The 5.5-metre-high block of carved rock surrounded here by white-clad worshippers is the ‘Tomb of Adam’, one of the most recent features of the Lalibela hypogean complex. It extends far below the level of the earlier hypogea: the rectangular doorway seen at the top of this photograph, high above the top of the ‘Tomb of Adam’, leads horizontally to the court surrounding Beta Maryam (Fig. 6).

for conservation at Ethiopia’s ancient churches, and for management of the rapidly increasing numbers of visitors, including the need to combine tourist access – with its resultant income-generation – with continuing religious use.

DATE AD	Historical events	Tigray churches	Lalibela phases			
			I-II	III	IV	V
500		*				
600		*				
700	Decline of Aksum	*				
800		*	?			
900		*	*	*		
1000		*		*	*	
1100	+				*	
1200	Zagwe	*			*	*
1300	Dynasty	*				*
1400		*				*

Figure 8. Summary chronological chart of ancient churches in Tigray and of hypogea at Lalibela. During phases I-II at Lalibela, the hypogea were defensive, subsequently converted for use as churches.

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In 2005 Professor Phillipson received a British Academy Small Research Grant and funding from the Neville Chittick Fund to support his research work. Dr Chittick, a former Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, bequeathed to the British Academy one-tenth of the residue of his estate on trust, to apply the income to the provision of grants to individual scholars selected by the Academy for archaeological exploration and study.