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Review

MARIO DI SALVO, The Basilicas of Ethiopia: An Architectural History

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The introduction of Christianity in the Aksumite kingdom during the fourth century is commonly regarded as a crucial turning point in the history of present Ethiopia and Eritrea as it formed the basis on which the Ethiopian Semitic polity laid its foundations and progressive expansion, and still represents an important element of Ethiopian and Eritrean cultural identity. Despite its relevance, many aspects of the progressive Christianization of these regions remain so far poorly known. Among these is certainly the chronology of most of the Ethiopian and Eritrean ancient churches, whose dating is often unsecure, if not obscure, depending as it does on scanty archaeological evidence, disputed historical sources, unreliable local traditions, or the dating of elements (e.g. church paintings) which are not necessarily contemporary to the churches’ construction.

*The Basilicas of Ethiopia* by Mario Di Salvo, in collaboration with Carolyn Gossage, sets out to help fill in the blanks via a discussion on the origins and development of a specific category of Ethiopian and Eritrean churches: the basilicas. By adopting a technical, architectural approach, the author outlines the structural characteristics of Christian Ethiopian and Eritrean basilicas and investigates their permanence and/or evolution through time in order to provide a set of indicators that may serve as markers in establishing a tentative chronology of this complex group of religious monuments.

The book has been organized into three parts featuring a Foreword by Michael Gervers, an author’s Note, and a Preface. In the latter, the foundations of the research are introduced by means of insights into the origins of the basilica and a definition of Ethiopian/Eritrean basilicas as quadrangular halls oriented longitudinally with the main entrance to the west end and the apse to the east; parallel colonnades divide the space into three or five naves and support the impost walls of the raised, central nave (pp. xiii–xiv). These traits, originally established for the constructed basilicas, persist, with some variants and adjustments, in the hypogeal, monolithic, semi-monolithic, and ‘constructed in caves’ basilicas.

Part I (pp. 1–32) presents the remains of the Aksumite basilicas dating from the fourth to the seventh century CE. Part II (pp. 33–92) describes the late and post-Aksumite basilicas of Təgray (eighth to twelfth century). Part III (pp. 93–137) outlines the architecture of the medieval basilicas of Ethiopia from the Zagwe period to the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty (twelfth–thirteenth century). The text is accompanied by extremely good
and detailed photography and an exhaustive set of plans and sections, although in some cases the scale of the plans is not given. The book ends with a helpful glossary of architectural terms and a comprehensive Bibliography.

The difficulties faced in conducting this study and the promising potential of his work emerge clearly at the outset, when, in Part I, Di Salvo deals with the earliest evidence of basilicas attested in Ethiopia and Eritrea, brought to the light from archaeological excavations conducted in this area from the beginning of the twentieth century. Upon examining this evidence, a series of typological elements, including architectural traits, decorative styles and forms, is identified that characterize these buildings which could serve as guide fossils for the analysis of their evolution through time, as well as serving for comparison with the variations attested in the basilicas of the Mediterranean area. This corpus of traits also serves as a basis for investigating subsequent periods.

The thorough analysis of each individual church’s architecture interestingly includes notes on their measurements and perceives the existence of recurrent geometric criteria at the base of their final dimensions. This is significant and worthy of further investigation as a recurrent proportion between the dimensions of the internal building and of the external square or rectangular enclosure of Aksumite monumental, secular ‘palaces’ of the area of Aksum has been noted elsewhere. Of further noteworthy interest is that ‘the ratio between width and length of the halls in the various basilicas of this era varies’ (p. 17). Apparently, the basilicas of Ūnda Kaleb and Gābrā Masqāl, and of Arba’tu Ūnsasa, located in the area of Aksum, seem to follow the ratio of 3:4 between width and length of the hall (following the so-called ‘Pythagorean triangle’), while those attested at Adulis, Mätāra, and Agula’ Ūnda Qirqos (in eastern Eritrea/north-eastern Ethiopia) show a 1:1 ratio. This difference might not necessarily be the result of a diachronic evolution from one type to the other, but might reflect diverse coeval regional traditions; indeed, the existence of different regional cultural traits between central Tugray, eastern Tugray, and the area of Adulis have been attested in the material culture since at least the early first millennium BCE.


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The shift from a quadrangular to a horseshoe plan of the sanctuary appears to be a chronological marker, at least in terms of relative chronology, but, in this case, it cannot be taken for granted, nor should the presence of one type or the other be uncritically used as a *terminus post or ante quem*. Gervers notes in his Foreword, ‘architectural changes and modifications introduced over the centuries did not occur in linear fashion’ (p. xii). Moreover, the adoption of new solutions or styles does not necessarily imply the total abandonment of previous ones, nor can it be said that the evolution from refined and sophisticated examples to more simple choices can serve as the only interpretative model. Additional factors should be also taken into consideration when attempting a chronological classification of these monuments, among which are the revival of past local and imported models under specific ideological or social circumstances, the persistence of regional traditions, and, possibly, the process of filiation of one church from another that might have favoured the persistence of earlier models derived from the ‘mother church’ into the later basilicas realized by the disciples.

Several examples illustrate this habit of resuming past elements in much later basilicas, some of which are emphasized by the author here. One is represented, for instance, by the type of vault attested in a photo taken by David Buxton at the eight-century constructed basilica of Dābrā Dammo, found in the indisputably much later basilica of Ţāmmādū Maryam, in Lasta, dated late thirteenth/early fourteenth century (pp. 37–49 and 129–134). Other examples of this kind are the elements related to the Aksumite architectural tradition constantly repeated through time, with particular emphasis at Lalibāla during the Zagwe dynasty. Whether, as suggested by David W. Phillipson,3 the churches with Aksumite traits are chronologically the latest in the Lalibāla series, or, as assumed by Di Salvo, the earliest, they are evidence of the attempt to recall past structural and architectural models by reproducing them with a sole decorative purpose in the monolithic churches.

Unfortunately, at this moment in the research, the absence of historical sources and precise dating for the earliest Aksumite basilicas makes it impossible to give any of these architectural changes secure chronological dating. All may, by means of their associated materials, be broadly dated to the sixth/seventh century. More precise chronological insights might come

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from recent excavations,\textsuperscript{4} in particular, the basilica exposed at Beta Sämaʿti, few kilometres north-east of Yǝḥa. The most ancient basilica so far attested, dating from the fourth century, was probably built immediately after the introduction of Christianity.

The only historical reference existing is for the five-nave basilica built by the Aksumites in what is now Yemen, after King Kaleb’s invasion between 523–525 CE. According to the descriptions,\textsuperscript{5} the basilica in Ṣanʿāʾ was characterized by the presence of the transept and a domed martyrium. It was surrounded by a large space for processions and constructed using the typical Aksumite architectural features: courses of stones alternated with wooden beams connected by characteristic ‘monkey’s head’ cross-pieces. This description matches, in many respects, the one provided in 1520 by Francisco Alvarez for the basilica of Maryam Șayon at Aksum before its destruction in 1535 by Ahmad ibn Ibrâhîm al-Gâzi.\textsuperscript{6} Although in the basilica of Ṣanʿāʾ workmen and materials were sent by the emperor of Constantinople, the abundance of traits in accordance with the Ethiopian architectural style and ceremonial rites suggests that it was conceived following an Ethiopian model: the ancient basilica of Maryam Șayon at Aksum, as described by


Alvarez, could have served as model, as it also probably served as prototype for the five-nave semi-monolithic basilicas of Abraha wä’Àśbaḥa, Wàqro Qirqos, and Mika’el Ḫmē in eastern Tāgray, and the much later monolithic basilica of Beta Mäḏḥane ‘Ālām in Labālā. Whether the ancient basilica of Aksum Šayon described by Alvarez should be dated to the sixth-century reign of King Kaleb or attributed to the earliest phase of adoption of Christianity by King ‘Ezana around 330, is yet to be established. What is evident, alongside the fact that most of the Aksumite basilicas are dated to the sixth/seventh centuries, is that during the fourth and fifth centuries CE, long after the adoption of Christianity, non-Christian worship was still practised at Aksum as attested, alongside other evidence, by the presence of a non-Christian temple—possibly devoted to the cult of fertility—along the south-western slopes of Beta Giyorgis hill, only a few hundred meters to the west of the area where Maryam Šayon is located.

There is widespread agreement among scholars that the diffusion of Christianity throughout the Aksumite kingdom was not an immediate event, but the result of a long process whose initial motivation was probably political rather than religious. It was formally adopted by King ‘Ezana during or shortly after the fourth decade of the fourth century, as indicated by textual, epigraphic, and numismatic sources, Christianity became widespread among the general population around the late fifth/early sixth century. It is during this period that churches were erected in many Ethiopian and Eritrean sites, burial practices definitely changed in accordance with the new religion, and the cross appears as the predominant decorative motif on pottery. All these elements combined put the construction of the basilica at the site of Maryam Šayon at the sixth century. At any rate, an earlier date and the long co-existence of pre-Christian and Christian practices cannot be excluded, particularly in view of the recent finds at Beta Sāma’ti featuring a fourth-century basilica where, apparently, the pre-Christian practice of bringing votive objects, such as zoomorphic figurines or ceramic miniatures, to temples continued in the initial phase of the church’s use.

In conclusion, the book by Mario Di Salvo is a very useful and stimulating lecture. By analysing, from an architectural point of view, the ancient basilicas of Ethiopia and Eritrea—diverse in time, geographical location,
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and typology—one is provided with a useful set of elements which now have to be taken into consideration, when approaching the study of these types of monuments in attempting a chronological and/or stylistic discourse. It also notes the need for a more systematic and interdisciplinary approach to such investigation, combining archaeology, architecture, art history, history, and the scrutiny of local traditions, not only for analysing the monument in itself but also for including it in the environmental, economic, social, and political context into which it was conceived, realized, and used.

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The Book of Jubilees, a retelling of the story of Genesis and of Exodus 1–24, is a work of considerable interest and importance both in the context of Second Temple Judaism and in the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox (Täwaḥǝdo) Church. The text was composed in Hebrew, and fragments of the Hebrew text were found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Hebrew work was translated into Greek, but this version is lost apart from some quotations, and the Greek was itself translated into Latin (known only from one incomplete copy) and into Ethiopic. The text is also known from some citations in Syriac. However, it is only in Classical Ethiopic that a complete version of the Book of Jubilees survives, and it is on this version that those concerned with the book in any way have primarily to rely.

Professor James VanderKam has devoted a large part of his scholarly career to Jubilees. Following the publication of his Harvard dissertation, Textual and Historical Studies in the Book of Jubilees, in 1977,1 he took over from W. Baars and R. Zuurmond the preparation of a new critical edition and translation of the Ethiopic text,2 and this was published in the Corpus