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Review

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

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MARIO DI SALVO, *The Basilicas of Ethiopia: An Architectural History* (London–New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2016). xiv, 145 pp. Price: £25.99. ISBN: 978-1-78453-725-8.

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 (eight to twelfth century). Part III (pp. 93–137) outlines the architecture of the medieval basilicas of Ethiopia from the Zag^we 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.¹ 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 ʾĒnda Kaleb and Gäbrä Mäsqäl, and of Arbaʿtu ʾĒnsäsa, 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, Mätära, and Agulaʿ ʾĒnda 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 Təgray, eastern Təgray, and the area of Adulis have been attested in the material culture since at least the early first millennium BCE.²

¹ L. Sernicola, *Ancient Settlement Patterns in the Area of Aksum (Tigray, Northern Ethiopia)—Ca. 900 BCE–800/850 CE*, BAR International Series, 2860 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017), esp. p. 78.

² R. Fattovich, 'The northern Horn of Africa in the first millennium BCE: local traditions and external connections', *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Nuova Serie, 4 (2012), 1–60.

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 Däbrä Dammo, found in the indisputably much later basilica of Žämmädu 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 Lalibäla during the Zag^we dynasty. Whether, as suggested by David W. Phillipson,³ the churches with Aksumite traits are chronologically the latest in the Lalibäla 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

³ D. W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth-Fourteenth centuries*, repr. (Addis Ababa: Arada Books, 2010), esp. pp. 177–181.

from recent excavations,⁴ in particular, the basilica exposed at Beta Säma^cti, few kilometres north-east of Yəḥa. 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,⁵ the basilica in Ṣan^cā² 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 Ṣəyon at Aksum before its destruction in 1535 by Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī.⁶ Although in the basilica of Ṣan^cā² 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 Ṣəyon at Aksum, as described by

- ⁴ M. Gaudiello and P. A. Yule, eds, *Mifsas Babri: a Late Aksumite Frontier Community in the Mountains of Southern Tigray, Survey, Excavations and Analysis, 2013–16*, BAR International Series, 2839 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017); M. J. Harrower, I. A. Dumitru, C. Perlingieri, S. Nathan, Kifle Zerue, J. L. Lamont, A. Bausi, J. L. Swerida, J. L. Bongers, Helina S. Woldekiros, L. A. Poolman, C. M. Pohl, S. A. Brandt, and E. A. Peterson, 'Beta Samati: discovery and excavation of an Aksumite town', *Antiquity*, 93/372 (2019), 1534–1552.
- ⁵ R. Lewcock, 'La cathédrale de Sanaa, foyer du christianisme en Arabie au VI^e siècle', *Dossier de l'archéologie*, 33 (1979 = *Au pays fabuleux de la reine de Saba: le Yémen et les grands empires antiques, les terres fertiles de l'Arabie heureuse, la route de l'encens, les trésors légendaires de la reine de Saba, premières religions monothéistes, art chrétien primitif et mosquées*), 80–83; R. Loreto, *L'architettura religiosa sudarabica di epoca pre-islamica (XII sec. a.C.–VI sec. d.C.)*, Series Maior, 14 (Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, 2015), esp. pp. 269–304; C. J. Robin, 'La Grande Église d'Abraha à Ṣan^cā²: Quelques remarques sur son emplacement, ses dimensions et sa date', in V. Christides, ed., *Interrelations between the Peoples of the Near East and Byzantium in Pre-Islamic Times*, *Semitica Antiqua*, 3 (Córdoba: Oriens Academic, 2015), 105–129.
- ⁶ C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, Being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520, Written by Father Francisco Alvares, The translation of Lord Stanley of Alderley (1881) revised and edited with additional material*, I–II, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, 114–115 (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1961), esp. vol. I, pp. 151–153.

Alvarez,⁷ could have served as model, as it also probably served as prototype for the five-nave semi-monolithic basilicas of Abrəha wāʾAšbəḥa, Wəqro Qirqos, and Mikaʾel Əmba in eastern Təgray, and the much later monolithic basilica of Beta Mādḥane ʿAlām in Lalibāla. Whether the ancient basilica of Aksum Şəyon 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 ʿEzana 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 Şəyon is located.⁸

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 ʿEzana 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 Şəyon 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 Sāmaʿti 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,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. Fattovich, A. Manzo, and L. Sernicola, *The Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum (Ethiopia) of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”: Report of the 2008 Field Season (2008)*, http://www.unior.it/userfiles/workarea_231/file/Contributi/Rapporti%20di%20scavo/2008.pdf, esp. pp. 6–7, 24, accessed on 28 October 2020.

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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JAMES C. VANDERKAM, *Jubilees 1: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees, Chapters 1–21; Jubilees 2: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees, Chapters 22–50*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018). I: xlviii, 646 pp.; II: xxxiv, 675 pp. Price: \$89.00. ISBN: 978-0-8006-6035-2; eISBN: 978-1-5064-3848-1.

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 (Tāwāhədo) 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

¹ J. C. VanderKam, *Textual and Historical Studies in the Book of Jubilees*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, 14 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977). See my review in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 25/2 (1980), 272–274.

² See W. Baars and R. Zuurmond, ‘The Project for a New Edition of the Ethiopic Book of Jubilees’, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 9/1 (1964), 67–74.