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Review

MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, *Bastions of the Cross: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches of Tigray, Ethiopia*

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pischen Kreuzfestes' (pp. 167–202) would have been better integrated into a unified historical chapter to avoid confusion and repetition. In these sections Merten emphasizes the efforts of Zār'a Ya'qob in venerating the cross and bringing a piece of the true cross to Ethiopia. This was done to enhance the symbolism of the cross within the kingdom. Especially later in the face of repeated invasions by *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, also known as 'Aḥmād Graññ (1506–1543). Merten asserts that there were two pieces of the cross—one during Zār'a Ya'qob's reign and the other during the reign of *Aṣe* Dawit II. The latter used it to legitimize his kingdom. Regarding the origin of the celebration involving fire and ashes, Merten hypothesizes that saint *Abunä* Täklä Haymanot (d.1313) or one of his disciples brought this tradition from Jerusalem, motivated by the desire to spread Christianity in the Šäwa region.

Merten's work is excellent and would benefit only from reorganizing the content. I find it to be a valuable guide for anyone interested in tracing the origins of feasts. It relies on historical sources and oral traditions to understand how people practice their rituals and how some popular cultural practices have been transformed into unique and distinguishable religious ceremonies.

Christine G. Ghali, Cairo University

MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, *Bastions of the Cross: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches of Tigray, Ethiopia*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 49 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2023). xv, 239 pp. Price: \$90.00. ISBN: 978-0-88402-497-2.

The author sets as his objective 'to model new possibilities for a more inclusive study of the Eastern Christian world' (p. 4). He does so through a detailed examination of three 'medieval' rock-hewn churches from Ethiopia's Tigray region: *Abreha wäAṣbəḥa*, *Wəqro Čerqos*, and *Mika'el Amba*. He sets them in the context of surviving post-Aksumite architecture, on the one hand, and the revival of Late Antique–Early Byzantine aisled, cruciform churches, on the other. A further and welcome extension carries the subject via trade and traders into the Indian Ocean world.

Ethiopia, like Europe, has its own 'Dark Age', but one that extends over a longer period, from approximately the early seventh century to c.1200. The darkness, of course, reflects the extensive period for which material and especially textual evidence is deeply limited. The result has obliged researchers to evaluate and interpret that evidence broadly and then to focus on narrower points that can be fitted into a more meaningful chronology. To date, the time line of medieval Ethiopian church building, or carving as the case may be, is highly uncertain. Archaeological excavations and a few standing remains (not to mention the mint-

ing of gold coinage) reflect the high point of the Aksumite kingdom to have been in the sixth century. Identifying the gap between them and the next stage is crucial for our understanding of dynastic succession in the region, but the gap has so far proven impossible to discern with any certainty. It has frequently been proposed, for example, that the church of Däbrä Dammo is the oldest standing church in highland Ethiopia, with dates ranging from the sixth to the twelfth century, which is sufficiently imprecise so as not to be helpful. For further consideration, there is a small group of ‘hypogea’, rock-hewn so-called ‘valley’ churches (*églises de vallée*), all located in the Hawzen plain in the Gär‘alta region. Because of their modest size, they have previously been interpreted as the earliest evidence of surviving post-Aksumite architecture. Bearing similar physical features and presumably chronology is the much larger rock-hewn church of Gazen, situated somewhat to the east, and perhaps a bit later come the built churches of Zärema and Agäbo Čerqos. While the dating of these sites continues to float on a sea of uncertainty, Muehlbauer takes on the challenge of attaching the big three mentioned above (Abrəha wäAšbəha, Wəqro Čerqos, and Mika’el Amba) to the period 1089–1094, based on ‘historical plausibility’ in terms of ‘political centralization and re-Christianization vis-à-vis relations with the Fāṭimid caliphate’ (p. 134). He sees Abrəha wäAšbəha as being the prototype for the carving campaign, followed by Wəqro Čerqos and Mika’el Amba as copies, but all made by the same workshop within that five-year period. The author argues that this activity happens under the leadership of the Ḥaṣani dynasty—a ruling elite known from historical records, but more generally described in contemporary literature as the Zag^{we}—who profited from the establishment of Fāṭimid trading colonies on the Red Sea coast to resuscitate ‘their ancient role as broker state in the established Indian Ocean trade network’ (p. 46). A significant part of that trade, he proposes, lay in the importation of textiles, particularly silks that were carried by Seljuk traders overland along the Silk Road from Gujarat, and elsewhere, in India. These, it is argued, served to inspire the decorative relief ceiling arrangements of Abrəha wäAšbəha and Wəqro Čerqos in the same way that they had been used to embellish the exterior of religious architecture in Seljuk Iran. Whatever the route, over land or water, clear and frequent evidence has recently been found by the ‘Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts Project’ (University of Toronto, 2022–2027) for the importation to the highlands of Ethiopia, from at least the fifteenth century, of a wide range of Indian, Persian, Ottoman, and even Chinese luxury textiles. These independent discoveries render the author’s argument highly plausible. His insights concerning the decorative influence of imported textiles on architecture are intriguing and bare careful consideration, the more so when placed in the context of the major rock-hewn churches in question. All three are semi-monolithic; that is, the sanctuary areas are carved into the rock, while the western parts are sculpted out of the rock as free-standing monuments. They are, he notes, the pre-

cursors of the wholly monolithic churches of Lalibela, generally attributed to the thirteenth century. While churches carved into the rock are endemic to the ancient Christian world, it is only in Lalibela that they were carved to be entirely free standing. Why their patrons chose that option may stem from the same source as the textile-inspired decorations of *Abṛəha wäAšbəḥa* and *Wəqro Čerqos*: India, and more particularly such monolithic wonders as the temples of Ellora in Gujarat's neighbouring state of Maharashtra. There are endless ties linking Ethiopia to India, and architectural concepts are almost certainly among them. We know that in the sixteenth century *Ləbnä Dəngəl* sent artists to India for training;¹ one may expect that he was not the first Ethiopian monarch to do so.

This book proposes answers to many questions, while raising numerous others. It is a refreshing reconsideration and reinterpretation of what is currently known about the subject and will be foundational for future research. It is a must read for specialists, while at the same time being so clearly presented and elaborately illustrated as also to attract a far broader audience. In all, it is a most welcome contribution to the growing field of global medieval architectural history.

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SAMANTHA KELLY, *Translating Faith: Ethiopian Pilgrims in Renaissance Rome*, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History, 31 (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2024). 512 pp. Price: €50.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-29417-2.

This book examines the encounter between Ethiopian monks and Catholics in Rome during the first half of the sixteenth century. This was a fruitful period of interactions between the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the European powers, with diplomatic exchanges, military assistance, and the first intellectual cooperation that gave rise to Ethiopian studies in Europe. By exploring a rich corpus of documents, this book sheds light on the Ethiopian intellectuals who laid the foundations for this encounter, giving them full agency, and places this history in a global political and religious context. Thus, it renews an old and fragmented historiography.

Chapter 1 begins with the focal point of these exchanges, the Church of Santo Stefano, an ancient basilica rebuilt many times and located near St Peter's in

¹ 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, ed., tr., I–II, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, 114, 115, (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1961), II, 483–484.