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Review

CLAIRE BOSCH-TIESSÉ and MARIE-LAURE DERAT,

Lalibela: site rupestre chrétien d'Éthiopie

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allowing these Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahaḍo theological reflections to be critically appraised by scholars from outside the tradition for the first time in such a comprehensive way.

The short introduction gives only a very brief introduction to the author *Abba* Giyorgis. For the wider audience to which this book will be of interest a rather more extensive introduction to this important theologian and his contribution to Ethiopian Orthodox thought would have been a welcome addition.

Ralph Lee, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

CLAIRE BOSC-TIESSÉ and MARIE-LAURE DERAT, eds, *Lalibela: site rupestre chrétien d'Éthiopie*, Sites et cités d'Afrique (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Midi, 2019). 210 pp. Price: €35.00, ISBN: 978-2-8107-0663-1.

This compact and well-illustrated volume focuses on a well-known group of Ethiopian monuments: the rock-hewn complex of Lalibäla. Its introduction—presumably written by the editors even if this is not explicitly stated—provides a helpful overview of earlier work on this site and illustrates the editor's role as co-directors of the project Sustainable Lalibela that has been focusing on Lalibäla's monuments and its environs since 2008. After a brief review of current scholarship, Bosc-Tiessé and Derat outline the project's disciplinary framework and its key objectives. They underscore that their research has not focused exclusively on establishing a chronology for Lalibäla's early development, but also on understanding the role it played in subsequent centuries as a place of pilgrimage, a political arena, and a centre of literary and artistic production. Bosc-Tiessé and Derat tell us that their objective has been to investigate the *longue durée* and regional significance of Lalibäla by examining its archives and those of nearby sites; other textual data (such as inscriptions); imagery; and archaeological data. In their own words, this volume offers 'a synthesis of studies' and publications produced by the team working on this project between 2005 and 2014 (p. 17).

The volume is divided into three main chapters that include several unnumbered subchapters and subsections authored by different contributors. Chapter 1 focuses principally on the hewn structures of Lalibäla and on its material vestiges and surroundings. Its first subchapter introduces the reader to the site and its principal features. The authors note that the identification of some sites, such as Betä Marqorewos and the monument known as Betä Ləhem, are problematic, but at this stage no hypothesis are put forward about their chronology and possible function. The second summarizes the team's cartographic work. After a brief review of the pre-existing data, it highlights some of the complexities involved in mapping a site which is crisscrossed by a network of tunnels and trenches and where the monuments are located at different levels.

Next is a short analysis that aims to further our understanding of Lalibäla's wider geological context. Notably, Laurent Bruxelles and Romain Mensan argue that previous scholarship had misidentified the rocks out of which the churches are carved and suggest that these were actually mostly hewn out of basaltic scoria, though they have also identify the presence of harder basalt rocks across the site.

The fourth subchapter is devoted to the stratigraphy of the site by François-Xavier Fauvelle and Romain Mensan. Here, the authors set out to establish a chronology for the churches and trenches by considering such evidence as the sedimentation or the debris produced during the hewing process. The analysis of the rubble seems especially promising, given the possibility of retrieving discarded materials within a stratigraphic sequence. From what I was able to gather, this research is ongoing. The research group has also set out to identify what they describe as 'anomalies' in the architectural features of the complex, such as a door which leads to a void, since they believe these can be read as the result of successive interventions (p. 51). I think this is a solid argument, but I would like to venture that we might also consider whether the site once presented structures built with perishable materials that would have altered our perception of these seemingly idiosyncratic features.

Fauvelle and Mensan hypothetically divide the early history of the complex into four phases: a 'troglodyte' phase with small caves hewn inside the rock; a hypogean phase characterized by the creation of larger complexes in an Aksumite style; a first monumental phase which saw the creation of free standing churches and the expansion of churches within the rock; and a second monumental phase, during which new openings and trenches were created and the ground level of some structures was lowered. It is beneficial that the authors clarify where they agree or disagree with previous scholarship—David Phillipson's book on the *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*¹ being the most cited piece—and even with their own earlier conclusions. For the authors, sites like Betä Maryam date to the first monumental phase, while they argue that most of the structures found in the southern complex might have originally functioned as fortifications.

I found the multiauthored subchapter devoted to the landscape around Lalibäla particularly interesting for its effort to explore the site's possible connections with the region. The authors tackle the reasons that may have led to the local interpretation of natural features as Zag'we 'sites', discuss the existence of other rock-hewn churches in the region, and review the scant archaeological evidence for the existence of large settlements or pre-Christian structures carved out of basaltic

¹ D. W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth–Fourteenth Centuries* (New Haven, CT–London: Yale University Press, 2009).

scoria. Here one might have expected to see an attempt to date these other churches, but this topic is not explored.

The subsequent section focuses on a pair of bevelled pillars located at the foot of Mount Ǝṣätän. Here Emmanuel Fritsch challenges the characterization of these remains as ‘Aksumite’ and argues, by means of comparison with other sites such as Zärema Giyorgis, that they could have functioned as the two central pillars of a small church. This section could have been strengthened by a review of the archaeological data from the survey of the site discussed in the section that follows and by an attempt, hypothetical as it may have been, to provide a time frame for their production and an analysis of their current significance for the local population. As for his discussion of the term ‘Aksumite’, one might take on board his point that authors could specify whether they are employing the term with a chronological, stylistic, or geographical meaning. However, I personally find that the meaning is usually implicit in the context of an argument, and I do not see any particular benefit in doing away with the term altogether.

Romain Mensan, François-Xavier Fauvelle, and Antoine Garric inform us that some test pits were dug near these twin pillars as part of the study of this site (pp. 74–77). As the authors rightly point out, any evidence of Christian sites predating the development of Lalibäla as a major religious centre would provide us with vital clues about the history of the region. The archaeological survey revealed that the pillars do not have foundations and the nearby presence of paving and a rubble wall. However, according to the team these remains ‘sont tous remployés dans une ou plusieurs structures successives récente’, but they may still be taken as evidence that an older building might have once stood near this site (p. 76).

The final section of Chapter 1, entitled ‘Fouilles archéologiques dans les déblais et dans les cimetières’, provides a useful review of some of the archaeological research that has been undertaken on some mounds of rubble carried out of the churches during the hewing process and on the remains of walls constructed with large dressed-stone blocks. While their exact function remains to be established, this ongoing research may shed some light on the possible presence of secular structures in Lalibäla.

Chapter 2 turns its attention to the written and visual documentary material that is available for understanding the history of Lalibäla, with a particular focus on its regional links and connections to the imperial court. Like the introduction, the first two sections of this chapter are penned by unknown authors (again, one must presume, the editors). The chapter kicks off with an insightful review of the spatial and political use of the terms Bugna, Bəg^wəna, Wag, and Lasta across time. This is followed by a short section devoted to the project’s use of regional archives. Once this research project is finalised, this area could perhaps be expanded and theoretically enriched by engaging with recent scholarship on collec-

tions, cataloguing, and manuscript terminology; to give just two examples, some of the essays included in *Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia*² could provide some basis for cross-regional comparison.

Next is a subchapter authored by Derat and entitled ‘Les églises de Lalibela dans le royaume éthiopien au XIII^e siècle’, which provides a useful summary of her significant research on the reign of Emperor Lalibäla and where the author examines three land grants attributed to this ruler. These are used as evidence to improve our limited understanding of the territories controlled by the Zag^wes and the functioning of the Ethiopian polity at this point in time.

The subchapter ‘Le Beg^wenā après la chute des Zāg^wē’, again written by Derat, is one of the longest in the volume. It examines the political trajectory of the Bəg^wəna region (at times referred to as Bugna throughout the essay) after the Solomonic rise to power. First, the involvement of Yəkunno Amlak and his entourage in churches such as Gännäta Maryam, Waša Mika’el, and Ḥmäkina Mādḥane ‘Aläm is presented as evidence, together with some other data, of Solomonic activity in the region. Then, some selected data—i.e. the testimony of Francisco Alvares, chronicles, and notes in manuscripts—are presented to understand how the region was administered between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries and to examine the region’s political fortunes. The available documentation for this research, which is not presented in chronological order, is undoubtedly valuable but admittedly patchy, as is the picture that emerges from it; this is especially true for the fourteenth century.

Next is an extensive essay on manuscript and art making in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Bosc-Tiessé that focuses in particular on a style of painting that was first singled out by Bent Juel-Jensen. The author sets out to investigate instances of cultural and political autonomy within the region by considering documentation about socio-religious activities found in manuscripts and the creation of artworks that differ in terms of style and content from those attributed to Gondar. Particularly valuable is an appendix with a descriptive list of manuscripts that feature decorations in this style that the author has identified in collections in Ethiopia and Euro-American museums. The list, which provides information about the content and notes found in these manuscripts, is a revised and expanded version of a similar work published by Bosc-Tiessé in 2009.

² D. Nosnitsin, ed. *Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Proceedings of the International Workshop Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: History, Change and Cultural Heritage, Hamburg, July 15–16, 2011*, Supplement to *Aethiopia*, 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013).

Chapter 3 is the shortest of the volume and features two essays. The first, by Thomas Osmond, provides a very interesting analysis of the emergence of competing claims over Lalibäla after the 1950s against the backdrop of pan-Ethiopian nationalist and ethnocentric political discourses. This chapter could have been stronger if it had been more explicit about its sources and informants. When talking about the views of the clergy of Lalibäla, for instance, it would have been valuable to be more explicit about who provided these opinions and the context in which they were discussed. On this point, one hopes that in the future the project members will document, translate, and publish the interviews with the clergy of Lalibäla about their own ties with, and views of, the site as this would provide the field with important data. Finally, the second essay, co-authored by the editors with the current project manager of Sustainable Lalibela, Kidanemariam Woldegiorgis Ayalew, briefly reviews the history of Lalibäla's museums with a focus on some of the underlying political complexities that were associated with their construction and functioning.

Overall, I found the volume informative and enjoyable. Some of its methodological and terminological decisions deserve comment. Firstly, because the volume aims to present a synthesis, as the editors put it, of ongoing research, the essays are often based on existing or forthcoming publications, cited at their beginning. The contributions are not always explicit about their sources and the footnoting is not always exhaustive. Likewise, manuscript folios are not always provided. At times, the above makes it hard to review some of the arguments or to follow the scholarly trail of the authors without referring back to their other works. Secondly, the book clearly presents ongoing research, which means that readers will have to await another publication for a more in-depth presentation of the project's findings.

Among the most noteworthy decisions is that to alternate between the use of different place names (Bugna, Bəgʷəna, and Lasta) to refer to region and ensure consistency with the sources, which adopt different terms at different points in time, rather than across the volume. This is an interesting approach, but it might create problems when indexing. Other evident features of the volume are that it does not have an index and that it singles out certain time periods over others. Considerable attention is devoted to the twelfth, thirteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, whereas the documentation for the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and nineteenth centuries is investigated in less depth. The authors note that this is partly due to the available documentation, but given the scale of the project, one hopes that future publications might be able to fill in these gaps.

These limitations notwithstanding, the volume will provide people from outside the field of Ethiopian studies with an excellent introduction to the site of Lalibäla and its historiography. The book is superbly illustrated and will also be

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beneficial for Ethiopianists as an easy way to keep track of all the different research areas that are being pursued by the project members. This is clearly intended chiefly as a summary of an ambitious and multidisciplinary project that will no doubt significantly contribute to our knowledge of the site, so one looks forward to reading the final report.

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BRIAN J. YATES, *The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1913*, Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora, 85 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020). ix, 236 pp. Price: \$110.00 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-5804-6980-7.

A picture of emperor Mənilək II (r.1889–1913) and his first heir to the throne, the boy Wäsänsäggäd who died young, as well as a group of barefooted military men around them, glosses the cover page of this book. Loaned from the Massillon Museum, the image was taken in 1903, it says, about a decade before the monarch's death, with which the book also ends. Brian Yates' *The Other Abyssinians* attempts to study the complexity of identity in Ethiopian politics in this period, i.e., the second half of the nineteenth century. From the outset, the author states, '[i]n Ethiopia, it is not that ethnicity does not exist, it is just that religion, territory, and culture supersede ethnic categories in lived experiences and interactions' (p. 3). And from the beginning, this ambition is commendable; Yates is concerned with the interpretation of Ethiopian history in academia and how it has *actually* unfolded, contending that they are quite different. In addition, he is concerned with the place that the region of Wällo (in central and northern Ethiopia) held in the country's complicated past.

Yates suggests that there have been two main ways of understanding Ethiopian history: the Semitic view and the Oromo-centric view. In contrast, what he tries to do is present an alternative approach that bridges these two. While the Semitists suggest Ethiopian history is mostly the story of the Amhara and Təgre (he uses Təgrəñña to mean this), and at times the Agäw as attached to the Aksumite dynasty (p. 6), the Oromo-centric view suggests a special place of an Oromo unit which was repeatedly pushed out of power, marginalized, and even colonized (p. 8). Developed out of a PhD thesis and based on a large corpus of primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews, *The Other Abyssinians* is written to show that the Oromo were as much a part of Ethiopian politics and history, and this is done with two effects: Yates demonstrates how 'northern' Ethiopia had developed an inclusionary political system, while also crediting the northern Oromo (those from current day Wällo) for their contribution to Ethiopian politics and cultures.