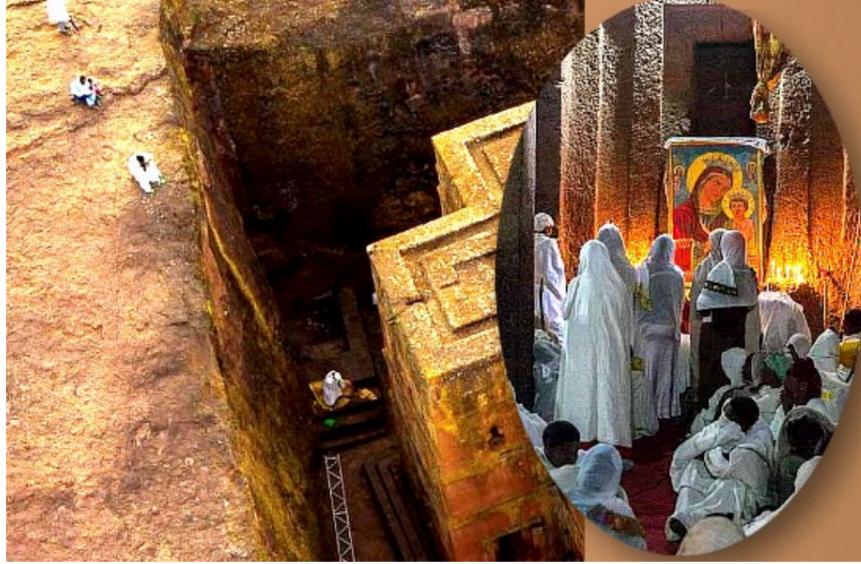


STUNNING LALIBELA !!

by Nora Kanatsouli



Hidden for centuries in the midst of the Lasta mountains, in the eastern highlands of Ethiopia's Amhara region, is a traditional village of circular-shaped dwellings and 11 rock-hewn monolithic churches that date from the 7th to the 13th century. This small rural town, 800 kilometers north of Addis Ababa, is one of Ethiopia's holiest places and a Christian center of pilgrimage. Once called Roha, it was a political centre of the Zagwe dynasty for about 300 years, but was renamed Lalibela in the late-12th and early-13th century after King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela (r. ca. 1181–1221).

Ethiopians felt deprived from making their traditional pilgrimage across the Red Sea to the Holy Land after Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem ceased with the conquest of the Holy Lands by Muslims in the 12th century. Therefore, King Lalibela, who is said to have travelled to Jerusalem and had claims of Solomonic royal descent, wished to recreate a symbolic substitute of 'New Jerusalem', and gave the place its present complexity and form, and renamed places and natural features that had been visited by pilgrims in Jerusalem – like Yordanos (Jordan), for the river which flows through the site, and a nearby hill as Debra Zeit (Mount of Olives).

The first Europeans to see this group of eleven monolithic churches chiselled from pink volcanic rock, now known as the 'eighth wonder of the world', were two Portuguese in the 1400s. It took more than 300 years (around the mid 1800s), for the next European to visit Lalibela.

Located at 2,630 meters above sea level, at the base of Mount Abuna Yosef, the eleven churches were chiseled out entirely below ground level, each from a single piece of solid rock. Not only the craftsmanship, but also the sheer size of the churches is stunning. To build this unique engineering and artistic feat, workers first traced the perimeter of the structure by carving a massive rectangular trench around a solid granite block and then started carving it out from the top down, rather than from the ground up, using chisels, axes, and other blades. The exterior was sculpted first and then the inner mass, forming doors, windows, columns, various floors, roofs etc., and ornamented with intricately carved reliefs, while many of the interiors are decorated with fabulous icon paintings. Bracketed pillars support flat ceilings, barrel vaults, and domes. To avoid flooding from underground rivers and water tables, an extensive system of drainage ditches were created. Passing through this trench and tunnel system is an underground maze of tunnels and passages linking the churches. Steps and steep pedestals lead visitors upward into the churches, lifting them from the carved trenches and pathways in their spiritual journey between churches.

Lalibela is a high place of Ethiopian Christianity, and a place of pilgrimage and devotion. You must take your shoes off before entering the churches and walk barefoot between the churches as many pilgrims do... The rock between churches in each cluster, although uneven, has been worn smooth over the centuries, Rugs cover these roughly hewn floors which rise or fall in height to delineate different sacred zones.

Since the time spent to carve some of the oldest of these structures from the living rock must have taken longer than the few decades of King Lalibela's reign, it is believed that they were initially carved out of the rock about 500 years earlier than the traditional dating. These first monuments were not built as churches but as fortifications or other palace structures in the days of the Kingdom of Aksum, and perhaps later extended – the finest and most sophisticated churches were added in a different architectural style and converted to ecclesiastical use around the 12th or 11th century with Lalibela's name with them after his death.

There are two main groups of churches – and a single church divided by the river Yordanos (Jordan).

TO THE NORTH OF THE RIVER JORDAN: Biete Medhani Alem (House of the Saviour of the World), Biete Mariam (House of Mary), Biete Maskal (House of the Cross), Biete Denagel (House of Virgins), Biete Golgotha Mikael (House of Golgotha Mikael);

AND TO THE SOUTH OF THE RIVER, Biete Amanuel (House of Emmanuel), Biete Qeddus Mercoreus (House of St. Mercoreos), Biete Abba Libanos (House of Abbot Libanos), Biete Gabriel Raphael (House of Gabriel Raphael), and Biete Lehem (House of Holy Bread). The eleventh church, dwellings

Biete Ghiorgis (House of St. George), is isolated from the others, but connected by a system of dwellings



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