

Books

Ancient Churches of Ethiopia. By David Phillipson. 230 pp. incl. 41 col. + 241 b. & w. ill. (Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2009), £40. ISBN 978-0-300-14156-6.

Reviewed by THOMAS PAKENHAM

'I WEARY OF writing more about these buildings', wrote Francisco Alvarez in 1540, 'because it seems to me I shall not be believed if I write more [...] though I swear by God [...] all I have written is the truth'. Alvarez was the chaplain to the official Portuguese mission to the so-called 'Prester John of the Indies' – in fact the Ethiopian emperor, Lebna Dengel – and he was describing the eleven Christian churches of Lalibela, all cut from the living rock in a dazzling variety of shapes and sizes.

Tall story or wonder of the world? Strangely, it was a further 340 years before Alvarez's account was confirmed by the next European traveller to pass that way. This was Gerhard Rohlfs, a German explorer who had attached himself to the British Abyssinian Expedition of 1867–68. After Rohlfs came a string of enthusiasts, mainly amateurs, who examined the rock churches and produced startling theories about their origins and symbolism. But it was not until the late twentieth century that Lalibela was honoured with its own airport, a place in the travel brochures and the status of a world heritage site. And it is only now that David Phillipson has cast the cold eye of a professional archaeologist on Lalibela and come up with a new set of theories.

Indeed Phillipson has done very much more. His account is by far the fullest and most persuasive yet devoted to the ancient churches of Ethiopia. It spans the two thousand years between 700 BC and the end of the Middle Ages, and traces the birth and development of an Ethiopian national style of Christian architecture, the style that reached its apogee at Lalibela.

Phillipson begins by peering back into the fog of the first millennium BC. We don't know when the first Semitic settlers from South Arabia crossed the Red Sea to grab the rich and fertile highlands that straddle the border between what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, but we know they brought remarkable gifts. They could plough, they could write (in Sabean) and they could build temples and palaces in stone. Soon the colonists intermarried with the local Cushitic-speaking Africans. By 700 BC they had built the great temple at Yeha enriched with ibex sculptures.

Skip a thousand years and the king of Axum, a few miles west of Yeha, is the most powerful ruler in Africa south of the Sahara. From his imperial capital at Axum, King Ousanas dominated the world's ivory trade. His coinage in gold carried his strident image as far as Rome, Byzantium and India. He and

his successors stretched greedy hands to east and west – to south Arabia and to Nubia in the Nile Valley. If one doubted the power of the Axumite kings, one had only to look at their tombs. They were topped by granite monoliths, up to one-hundred-feet high, crowned with the symbol of the war-god and carved with windows and doors to represent a royal palace. The tallest, Phillipson tells us, weighed 520 tons and was 'probably the largest single block of stone that people anywhere at any time have attempted to stand on end'. (But the war-god failed them and the great column snapped during erection.)

In 330, the next king of Axum, Ezana, was converted to Christianity and Axum's pagan style of architecture was born again as a national Christian style. Of course churches had different needs from temples. From the Near East the Ethiopians borrowed aisles and naves, sanctuary domes and the oblong basilican plan. But the country cousins of the Early Christian churches of Syria and Armenia still bore unmistakable marks of their African and secular origins: carved wooden friezes in their clerestories, recessed plans and half-timbering with 'monkey-heads' (ornamental bosses) – all dominant features of the Axumite palaces and the great pagan monoliths. Hundreds of Ethiopian churches were to be built in this style during the next ten centuries, of which, sad to say, only a handful still survive. (In 1956 I myself had the good fortune to stumble on one unrecorded medieval church at Bethlehem, seventy miles south-west of Lalibela.) By contrast, several hundred rock churches survived, many of great antiquity, as they have proved almost indestructible (Fig. 65).

This brings us back to Alvarez and those eleven churches of Lalibela. Were they really excavated, miraculously, in the lifetime of one king, as Alvarez was assured: Lalibela, the king who ruled at the beginning of the twelfth century and gave his name to the churches? And why the dazzling cornucopia of shapes and sizes? Modern historians have tended to accept the traditional dating given by Alvarez and repeated in various Ethiopian manuscripts. But there has been no consensus about the reason for the cornucopia of shapes. One scholar, the late David Buxton, came up with the exotic theory that King Lalibela had created a kind of underground museum of Ethiopian architecture – many-aisled, many-domed, cruciform, miniature and so on – representing the full repertory available to church builders. But Phillipson pours cold water on all this – and I am afraid he is right. Sceptical of the traditional dating, he follows his nose as an archaeologist and argues that the rock churches at Lalibela, far from being excavated in a single reign, must have spanned six hundred years. Phillipson attributes the differences in the architectural types to nothing more exotic than their dates. He proposes four main phases for the churches, culminating in the reign of Lalibela, the last great king of the Zagwe dynasty, who was motivated by a wish to see the churches as symbolic of his links with the Holy Land; he was creating a new Jerusalem in the wilds of Ethiopia. But he was also laying claim to the



65. Church of Beta Abba Libanos, Lalibela, Ethiopia, viewed from the south. Photograph, c.1970. (Photograph: David W. Phillipson)

imperial legacy of Axum, hence the extraordinary continuity of the Axumite style.

Shall we learn more from scholars about the origins and meaning of the rock churches? Unfortunately Alvarez was one of the last Europeans to witness the great days of the medieval Christian empire in Ethiopia. He had hardly gone before his host, Lebna Dengel, had become a fugitive on a mountain-top. The world of Prester John was now turned upside down by Moslem invaders from Somaliland. Most of the built-up churches in the country were reduced to ashes. Only the rock churches were too solid to burn. But their priceless manuscripts vanished in the flames.

The Arts of Intimacy. Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture. By Jerrilynn D. Dodds, María Rosa Menocal and Abigail Krasner Balbale. 395 pp. incl. 196 col. ill. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008), £25. ISBN 978-0-300-10609-1.

Reviewed by ROSE WALKER

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY story tells how Alfonso VI of León and Castile reconquered Toledo with El Cid at his side. Entering through the Aguileña gate, the Cid's horse, Babieca, stopped the procession and knelt before the tiny mosque of Bab al-Mardum. Breaking down the walls, they discovered within it a divine image of Christ of the Light that the Visigoths had hidden from the invading Muslims. History spoils one element of this tale, as the Cid was not at the conquest of Toledo in 1085, but in exile at the court of the Banu Hud in Zaragoza, where he was fighting for them against the Christians of Aragón and Lérida. The mosque still stands, with an inscription that records that it was built in 999 by Ahmad ibn al-Hadidi. The brick structure was open on three sides like a pavilion, and divided inside by four columns. The columns are Roman and Visigothic *spolia*, like those of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, the building which may also have inspired the interlacing arches and nine miniature domes. In 1183 Domingo Pérez and his wife, Juliana,

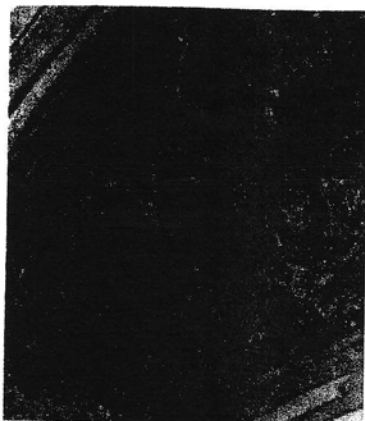
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gave the building, by then a house, to the Knights of St John, so that they could turn it into a chapel and oratory. The Order broke down a wall destroying the *mihrab*, and attached an enormous apse, which was also built of brick and ornamented with a twelfth-century version of the decorative vocabulary of the old mosque. This kind of hybridity is the subject of this book.

The Arts of Intimacy performs an extremely useful task by bringing together the results of wide research on the convergence of Christian, Jewish and Islamic art and literature in medieval Spain, and presenting it in English. Its declared aim is to recover the 'memory of a tangled, vibrant, hybrid world', above all that of Toledo, and to recount how the 'written, verbal, and artistic languages that were shared by Muslims and Christians [...] became the cultural bedrock of the Castilians, and of the Spanish nation-state that followed'. The authors set out their position in an introductory chapter, entitled *Palos*, after Palos de la Frontera, the port at which Columbus embarked in 1492. The view of Spain that they aim to demolish, is 'a single distilled entity' seen through the lens of the departing Christopher Columbus. In this sense, the book is another bout in the long-running debate on Spain's unique national identity versus its hybrid identities (*convivencia*), famously fought between Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz and Américo Castro in the 1950s and never resolved. Dodds's book aims to bring work on *convivencia* to a broader audience.

Six chapters, with one-word titles, follow in roughly chronological order. 'Frontiers' skims the early history of Toledo and the story of El Cid; 'Dowry' deals with the conquest of Toledo in 1085; and 'Union' looks at the effects of the conquest over the next hundred years or so. The late twelfth and thirteenth centuries are covered in 'Babel', which also summarises a recent reinterpretation of the rebuilding of the church of S. Roman and its remarkable painting cycle. 'Adab' (an Arabic term for *belles-lettres* encompassing philology, poetry and sport) considers the thirteenth-century translation movement and the development of the Castilian language. 'Brothers' turns to the Toledan synagogue of Samuel Halevi as well as to the close diplomatic relationship between Pedro I of Castile and Muhammad V of Granada, who built part of the Alhambra in the fourteenth century. A short postscript, 'Intimacy Betrayed', completes the story with the fall of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews and the building of the church within the Great Mosque of Córdoba in 1523.

As befits a textbook format, some of the key concepts and themes are highlighted in boxes, from background on the Almohads to the use of alternating voussiors and extracts from texts including the *Libro de Alexandre*. The book has few footnotes and a short index but a very generous and useful bibliographic essay. Although the illustrations are plentiful, the quality is not always high, and inconveniently they are often not on the relevant page. The authors openly acknowledge that this text is a synthesis and, perhaps intention-



66. Stucco decoration on the entrance arch of the palace of al-Mamun, Toledo. Eleventh century.

ally, have produced something close to a canon of credited authorities, only rarely mentioning divergent views.

As this is a book about hybridity, it is appropriate that the text merges three authorial voices. No section is attributed to any one of the three authors, but the reader is conscious of shifts in language and tone from straightforward analysis to hyperbolic passages. Most valuably, the book presents some discoveries otherwise published only in Spanish, for example, Clara Delgado Valero's work on stucco from an eleventh-century gateway to the palace of al-Mamun (Fig. 66). The fragmentary hunting scenes, set against grounds of gold- and lapis-coloured glass, are particularly evocative of the lost world that the authors wish to reveal beneath the national consciousness of modern Spain.

A Story in Stones. Portugal's Influences on Culture and Architecture in the Highlands of Ethiopia 1493-1634. By John Jeremy Hespeler-Boulbee, with a foreword by Richard Pankhurst. 198 pp. incl. 61 col. + 32 b. & w. ill. (CCB Publishing, British Columbia, 2006), \$49.95. ISBN 10 0-9781162-1-6.

Reviewed by MICHAEL GERVERS

READERS WHO SEEK to find the crumbling stone remains that, according to 'tradition' (i.e. oral reporting), may have been built by royalty, the nobility or the 'Portuguese' in Ethiopia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries will find this volume a very useful guide. The book has two distinct parts, the first being a history of the recorded presence of the Portuguese in Ethiopia from the arrival of the 'soldier-explorer-diplomat' Pêro da Covilhã in or about 1463, to the expulsion or killing of members of the Jesuit mission in 1634. Based on secondary evidence and popular interpreta-

tions, it offers a general introduction to the subject for those unfamiliar with the history of the period. Part two, 'The Stones', is a compendium of Hespeler-Boulbee's notes about what he argues is evidence of Portuguese builders and buildings, or their influence, in Ethiopia, and the trials and tribulations he often encountered while accessing the sites. Most of these are to be found in the region around Lake Tana (Gojjam, and North and South Gondar) where Portuguese Jesuits were particularly active and where, he suggests, up to six thousand Portuguese settled following the defeat in 1543 of the Muslim invader, Ahmad Grag'n. The term 'Portuguese', he points out, could refer locally 'to any foreigner in the Highlands' (p.91). In the context of buildings, he also allows 'Portuguese' to be equated with 'Gondarine' (p.108). The attribution is further expanded by the possibility that Goan and/or Gujarati artisans worked in Gondar during the period when Portuguese influence was at its height.

The author's underlying argument is that mimesis, 'the unconscious imitation of form', was the means by which a wide range of building methods, styles and traditions were carried from the Iberian peninsula, particularly southern Portugal, by merchants or missionaries, not to mention Pêro da Covilhã himself, to the Highlands of Ethiopia via Portuguese settlements on the west coast of the Indian Subcontinent. It is not a difficult argument, but it does rather beg the question as to whether what is often referred to as 'Gondarine' architectural style comes from Portugal or Goa (etc.) or whether, as the Ethiopians themselves tend to believe, it is indigenous and has nothing to do with foreign influence. This is a long-standing controversy that is by no means resolved in the present volume. However, the reader is left in no doubt as to where the author's sympathies lie: 'By the time the Roman Catholics and Portuguese were expelled from the Highlands in 1634, the strongest cultural trait left behind was the utility of Portuguese prototypes in stone construction' (p.166). He includes numerous visual comparisons with stone constructions found predominantly in Portugal's Alentejo province, reminds us that eggs are used as a bonding material for mortar in rural Portugal and that the custom is also known in Ethiopia, and calls repeatedly for researchers to investigate the evidence in order 'to further prove the validity of these findings' (p.64). This comparative approach is not without its merits, but much is left out of the equation, including any consideration of Ethiopian buildings and construction methods outside the areas of 'Portuguese' influence, and before the late fifteenth-century arrival of European visitors. The wall constructions sketched on pp.71-72 are not unknown at earlier periods, particularly the 'Flat stone files - usually mortared, rendered' which one also finds below the plastered surface of the twelfth-century church of Yemrehannā Krestos in Lasta, and elsewhere. The subject needs to be seen through a wide-angle lens; one that would also include the phenomenon of the 'traditional' round church, itself an architectural novelty of the very period under discussion. Why the form appeared when it