

**Spaces of Wonder and Devotion:  
The Thirteenth Century Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia**

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Abstract

Eleven rock-hewn churches stand beneath the earth at Lalibela in northeastern Ethiopia bearing symbols of the cross. Built under King Lalibela in the thirteenth century, these subterranean churches were carved from monoliths attached to the earth's base.<sup>1</sup> Cruciform motifs decorate the churches, which are home to bronze crosses that devotees process throughout the rock-cut spaces. Crosses, as architectural forms and performative objects, preserve and provoke memories of Ethiopian histories, traditions, and aesthetic practices for Lalibela devotees.

First, I explore the emergence of the cross in Ethiopia with the arrival of Christianity in the fourth century during the Aksumite kingdom. Next, I examine the cross motif that is repeatedly carved into the medieval architectural forms of the Lalibela churches, and how devotees' experiences of descending into the earth and exploring the hollowed spaces echoes the motif's multi-directionality. I consider how processional crosses of the "Lalibela type" and those found at these churches mirror the architectural forms through the positive and negative spaces of their designs and their reflection of light. By comparing the formal and performative qualities of the cross in both architectural and three-dimensional form, I call attention to the similarities in their production and reception. I aim to understand how Ethiopians adapted the cross motif to preserve memories and provide healing and protection for the present and future. This paper seeks to expand our study of the medieval to include African art and architectural developments, and engage with the topic of the "global" by pointing to how the artistic choices of medieval Ethiopians exemplify the dynamic interaction between local and global traditions that prevailed throughout the premodern world.

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