

LALIBELA

Ethiopia, Africa

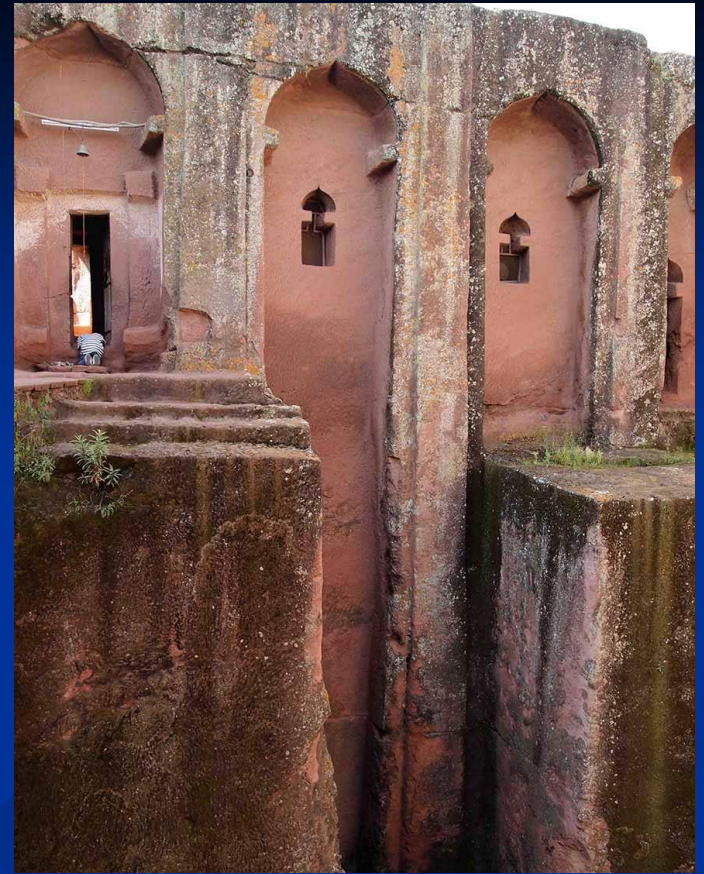
Unesco World Heritage Site in 1978



According to oral tradition, Ethiopia was founded by Ethiopicus, the great-great-grandson of Noah. His son, named Axumai, founded the capital of Axum and a dynasty that reigned for 97 generations. His last queen, named Makeda (Queen of Sheba). She visited King Solomon in Jerusalem and returned pregnant. Her son Menelik I was the first of the Solomonic dynasty which ruled almost uninterruptedly until 1974 when Haile Selassie was deposed. Within the latter dynasty the best known king was Lalibela (1133-1173) and according to tradition, he travelled to Jerusalem just before the city fell into Muslim hands and then decided to create a new Jerusalem in Ethiopia, giving his name to this city of churches.



The churches of Lalibela were built between the 7th and 13th centuries. They are carved from single blocks of red basaltic rock, without bricks, wood or mortar. Chisels, axes and shovels were used to carve into the porous volcanic surface. There are 4 free-standing churches and the others are attached to the rock.



The churches were linked by passages and over time a multitude of hollows and caves were cut into the rock around the temples. These cavities were used as tombs (bones can still be seen) and as dwellings for hermits.

Why were the churches built "underground"?

- Where Lalibela is, there is no stone or wood to build with, there is only the rock where the churches were excavated.
- The temples were hidden from the eyes of the Arabs, who were harassing Ethiopia at the time. This is also supported by the fact that all the churches are connected by tunnels.

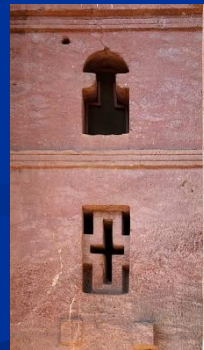
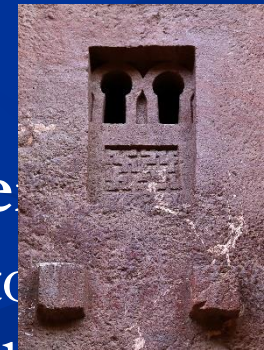


With the churches, Lalibela wanted to win:

- **the favour of the clergy and the population:**
- **legitimise the power of his dynasty as the heir of the previous Axumite dynasty.**

Some of the new churches are reminiscent of those of the Aksum Empire: the stepped podiums, horizontal bands of different volumes on the façade, the windows decorated like the Aksumite obelisks (built in the 12th century).

Some of the churches correspond to older buildings, probably civilian buildings dating to the end of the Aksum kingdom (7th-10th century). They would have been part of fortifications and ancient palaces.



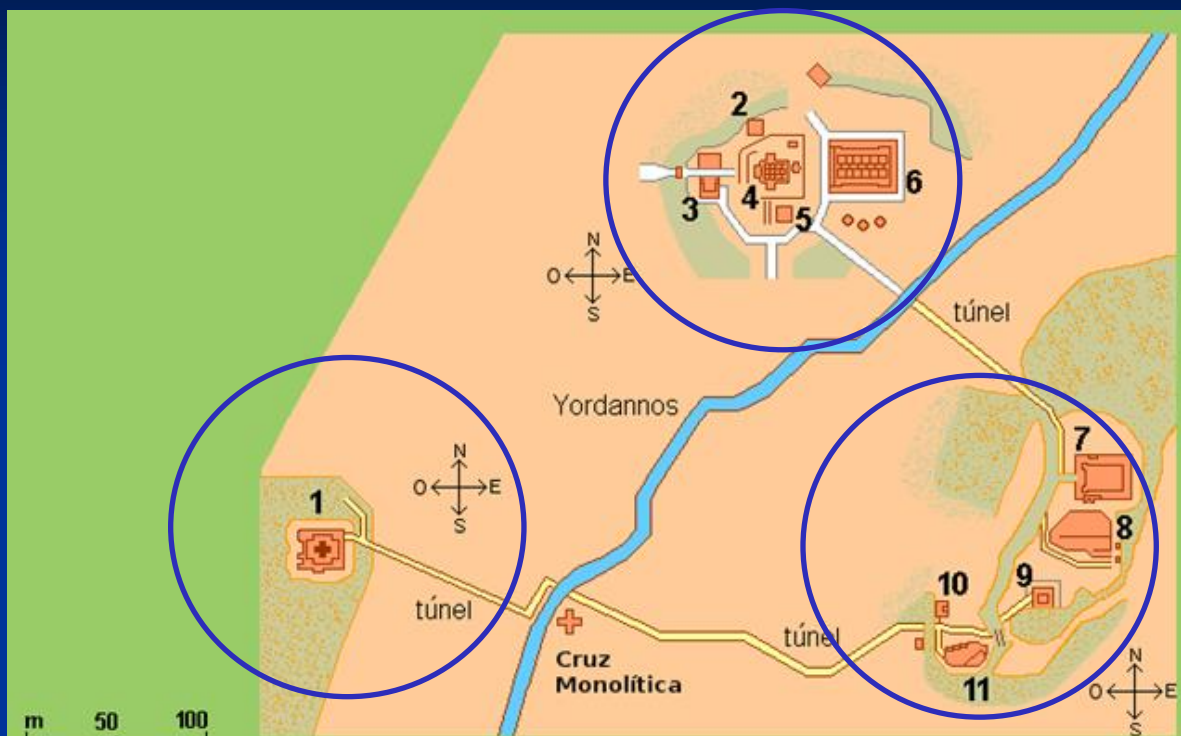
The churches of Lalibela are divided into two groups, northwest and southeast, separated by the Jordan River (a river whose course is artificial, as it was dug out of the rocks at the same time as the churches were carved), **which is said to have received its name after King Lalibela returned from Jerusalem.**

The northwest group consists of eight churches (Bete Medhani Alem, Bete Maryam, Bete Meskel, Bete Danaghel, Bete Debre Sina, Bete Golgotha, Biet Urael, Selas Chapel).

The southeastern group consists of five churches (Bete Merkorios, Bete Emanuel, Bete Abba Lebanos, and Bete Gebriel-Raphael, plus the sacristy of Bethlehem).

Separated from the two groups is the Bete Giyorgis church.





m 50 100

1 Biete Ghiorgis	2 Biete Maskal	7 Biete Amanuel
	3 Biete Golgotha Mikael	8 Biete Qeddus Mercoreus
	4 Biete Mariam	9 Biete Abba Libanos
	5 Biete Denagel	10 Biete Lehem
	6 Biete Medhani Alem	11 Biete Gabriel-Raphael

Iglesias North-West

New churches

12th century

East-west oriented

South-East Churches

Ancient buildings

from the 5th to the 10th c

Not oriented

Iglesia Oeste

Last built XII

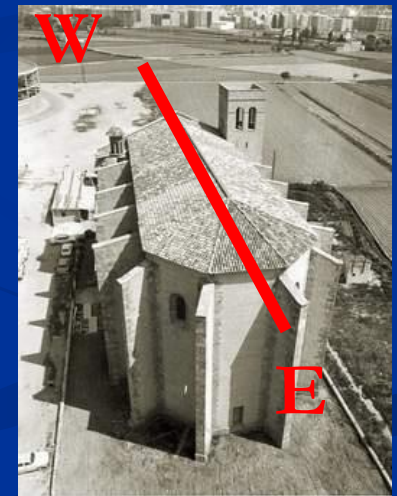
Oriented





Those in the northwest group were built below ground level, surrounded by ditches, pits and passages, either completely detached or with one face set into the rock. Built in the 12th century

According to the orthodox custom of orienting their churches to the east in order to pray towards the rising of the sun (Christ represents the light), they placed three doors: one to the north (for men), one to the south (for women) and a third to the west (for the clergy).



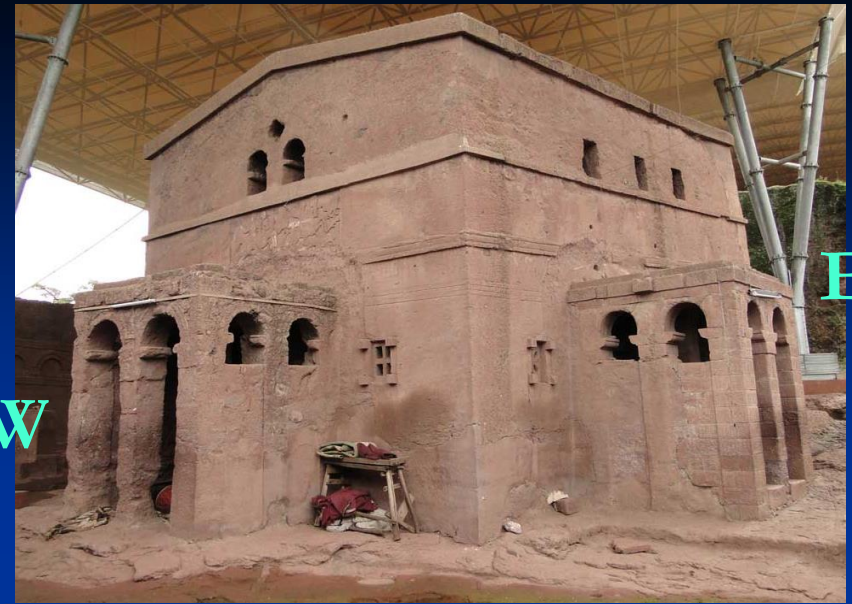
NORTH-WEST

The church of **Bete Medhani Alem** (Saviour of the World) is the largest excavated monolithic church in the world, this one oriented. The building is simple, massive in appearance, surrounded by 30 rectangular pillars and four square pillars at each corner. It stands on a pedestal, higher on the north, which is entered by a staircase. The walls are smooth with windows. On the south side there is a keyhole entrance, while on the west side the entrance is of axumite type topped with two keyhole openings. The main entrance is on the north side, in axumite style, with a keyhole-shaped arch.



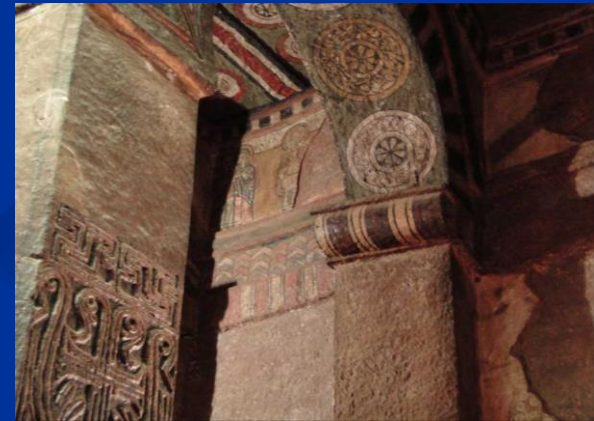
NORTH-WEST

The **Bete Maryam (Mary) Church** is well oriented and has rows of windows. Its three doors are framed with porches that have been restored. Above the main entrance, on the west side, are bas-reliefs. The capitals, corbels and arches are profusely carved and painted. The three shallow apses are carved into the wall, located at a higher level and separated from the rest of the church by an arcade. There is a women's gallery accessed through an axumite door on the left side of the atrium.



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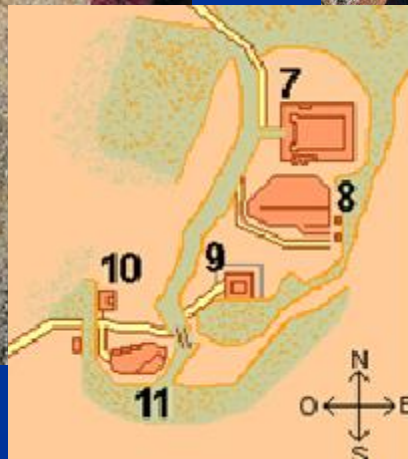
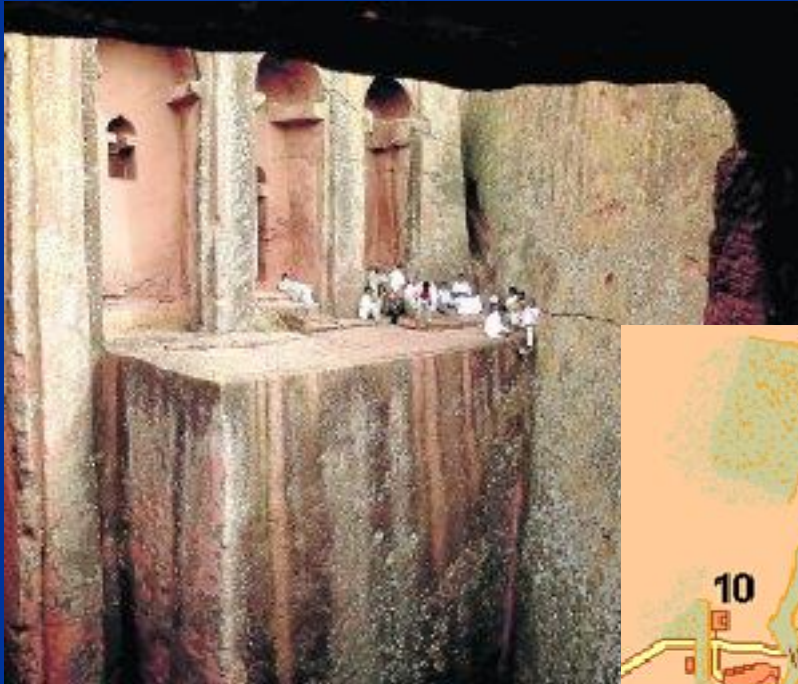


E



SOUTHEAST

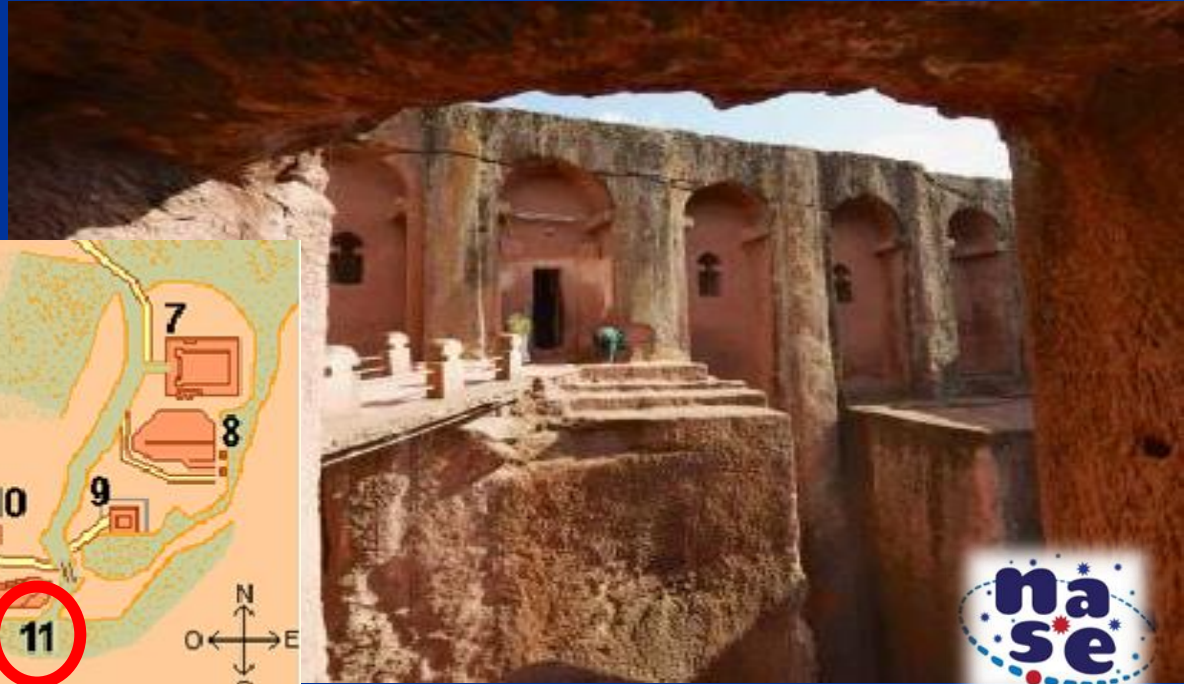
Those of the southeast group were excavated in a vertical rock face, taking advantage of hollows and canopies in the rock. They usually have a roof or walls that are not separated and **are not oriented** in a vertical direction.



SOUTHEAST

Bete Gebriel-Raphael (Archangels Gabriel and Raphael) has the appearance of an imposing fortress. It is thought to have been excavated as the centre of a fortified palace complex in the 7th-8th centuries at the end of the Axumite Empire. On the façade are seven pointed niches. **It is not oriented**

On the short northeast side there is a niche and three beautiful keyhole windows. The other two sides are attached to the rock.



SOUTHEAST

Bete Abba Libanos is in a fairly good state of preservation. The interior still preserves some interesting frescoes. The exterior is carved in the form of a prismatic block. The roof is not separated from the bedrock, but its side walls are. **It is not oriented.**

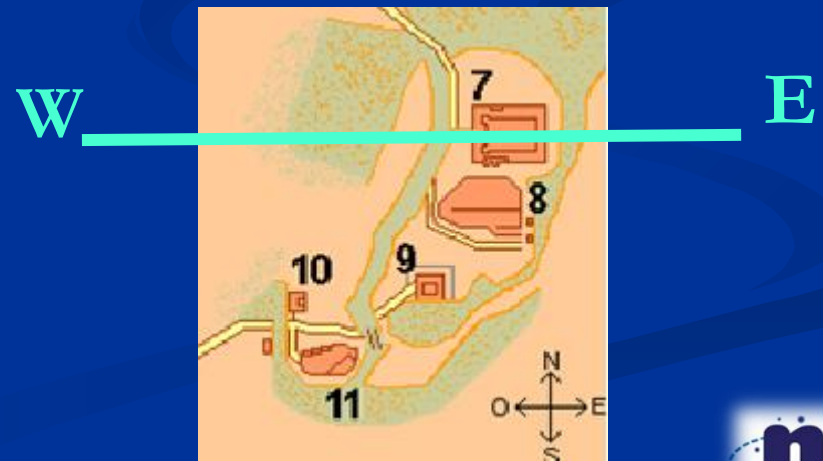


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SOUTHEAST

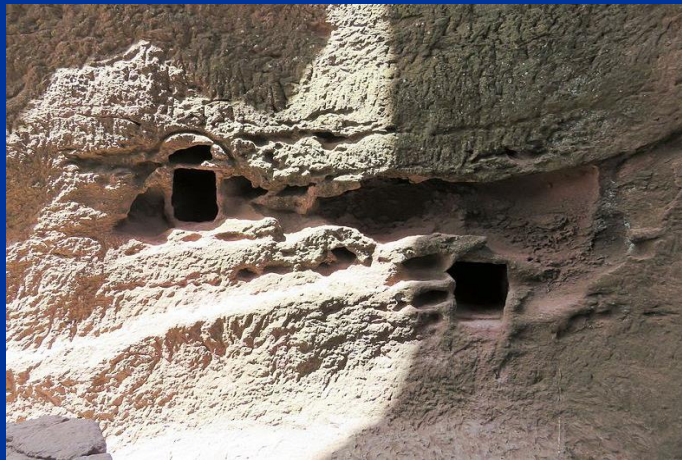
Biet Amanuel (Emmanuel) It has a basilica-shaped ground plan, three storeys high with a gabled roof, and is accessed through a small doorway dug halfway up one wall of the courtyard. According to the latest research, **this church was originally a chapel of the royal palace for the private use of the king and his family.**

It is oriented



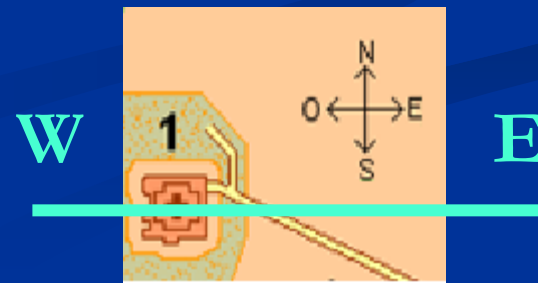
WEST

Bete Giyorgis (St. George) is isolated and excavated below ground level. It has a symmetrical cruciform shape. It was the last church to be built. On the walls of the courtyard are several tombs and catacombs, some with human bones inside. The building is a three-dimensional Greek cross with twelve faces.



WEST

A triple cross is carved on the roof to facilitate the drainage of rainwater. It has three doors, located on the west side. The one in the centre is also highlighted by a frame covered with a semi-circular dome decorated with a Maltese cross. It is well oriented.



**Many Thanks
for your attention !**

