

*Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth–Fourteenth Centuries*, by David W. Phillipson, 2009. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press. ISBN 978-0-300-14156-6 hardback £40 & US\$65; 288 pp., 224 b&w ills., 50 col. ills.

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*Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, a richly illustrated book by one of Africa's foremost archaeologists, is an important contribution towards the understanding of the long and illustrious ecclesiastical history of Africa. The early history of three of the world's major religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, cannot be fully understood without understanding Africa's contributions to these world religions. In Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, Christianity was established in the first centuries of the first millennium AD. For years, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia have marked a major historical landmark in the history of Christianity in Africa and elsewhere even as only several hundred miles south in what is today Kenya, Christian missions were not established until the nineteenth century. The conversion of the so-called Ethiopian Eunuch who was head of the treasury in the court of Queen Candace by Apostle Philip in Gaza, provides one of the first written evidences of conversion of gentiles to Christianity. That an Ethiopian court official had visited Jerusalem for purposes of worship points to an even earlier contact between Northeast Africa and the early Christian movement (Acts 8, 26–40). Early Christians used this story as a metaphor for the universality of Christianity and its openness to people at every level of society.

*Ancient Churches* is dedicated to David Roden Buxton (1910–2003), whose pioneering research (and that of Ruth Plant (1985)) into the then little-known history of Christianity in Ethiopia introduced the splendours of this region, its deep-time interactions with Eurasia and the long tradition of literacy, scholarship and innovation to Western English-speaking audiences (e.g. Buxton 1946; 1949; 1964; 1971). Indeed Ethiopia still inhabits an unusual and, at times, uncomfortable place in its relationship with the rest of Africa. As contemporary Ethiopians and Eritreans debate identity and national politics, historians and archaeologists are at pains to show how greater Ethiopia's historical traditions, memories and memorials relate to those of the rest of Africa. Its cultures were based on unique local domesticated plants, and in terms of foodways the region's cultures were at a crossroads between the ancient Near East and Africa (Haaland 2006). In terms of complex societies, Ethiopia has a distinctive history related to its own uniqueness as well as its relationship with the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen. As a consequence, its unique history is part of the diversity of Africa.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one provides a summary of the Aksumite foundations for the Christianity in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The author traces the Aksumite civilization, often with little firm archaeological evidence, to South Arabia and to Semitic speakers. Played down are the role of Cushitic speakers who make up more than 80 per cent of the historic and modern Ethiopian and

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Eritrean citizenry in the early developments, which may have laid the foundation for the later interregional interactions with Arabia and Egypt. This tendency to dichotomize his evidence *a priori* is unfortunate. Perhaps one example will suffice:

The technology of the ancient Aksumites was extraordinarily diverse. They continued to use flaked-stone artefacts in an essentially Late Stone Age tradition. On the other hand they employed quarrying, heavy transport, stelae-erection and building techniques of great sophistication and achievement. The closest known affinities for the latter practices are in Roman Egypt; the former were firmly rooted in local tradition of the Ethiopian highlands (p. 19).

Chapter two is a detailed survey of Aksumite Christianity in which the author attributes the universal adoption and conversion to Christianity in Ethiopia to events following the conversion of King Ezana in the fourth century AD. Early Christianity was confined to the capital city and environs. The expansion of the church, however, is credited to the nine saints from Rome and/or Syria who expanded the church into the countryside. A detailed review of the church history then follows.

Chapter three discusses Late Aksumite and Post-Aksumite built Churches in Tigray, Amhara and Eritrea. The chapter delves into the sophistication of the church architecture, commitment and skill with which the churches were erected. The reader is given tremendous detail about numerous architectural styles and lineages, including rock-hewn as well as masonry built churches. Some of the churches were built inside caves and rock shelters. The surviving art delves into the origins of monasticism and the almost secretive nature and exclusivity of the early Ethiopian Christianity.

Chapter four discusses Ethiopia's rock-hewn or hypogean churches. The rock churches, centered on Lalibela in the Amhara region, which have received much media coverage, are described. The author thoroughly and in great detail describes the processes in which these churches may have been constructed. He also attempts to establish a provisional sequence of the region's hypogean architectural tradition in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Chapters five and six focus on the eastern and northern complexes and provides one of the most detailed archaeological exegesis of the ecclesiastical tradition of Christianity in Sub Saharan Africa — including the sequences, chronology, symbolism and history.

The final chapter of the book delves into the chronology and affinities of the ancient Ethiopian churches. At issue in the rendering of church architecture in Ethiopia has been its chronological context. The problem has been compounded with the destruction, relocation and subsequent reconstruction of churches incurred during the reign of Ahmad Gragn's jihad in the fifteenth century. The author's tentative five-phase chronology dating from the seventh/eighth century to the thirteenth century is the first comprehensive attempt to develop an archaeological sequence for the development of church architecture in Ethiopia. Although the sequence leaves out the first three centuries of the establishment of Christianity, it sets the baseline upon which future work will hinge.

*Ancient Churches* is a very important, highly informative and readable book. In a very descriptive fashion it addresses

the typology and chronology of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. The quality of photographs, illustrations and prose is high. Kudos to Professor Phillipson for taking on such an ambitious project. Although he does not state so directly, *Ancient Churches* shows the critical contributions that the Ethiopians, and by extension Africans, have made to global history. However, the author betrays an ambivalence that characterizes much of present scholarship which is still unsure of how to fit northeast Africa into the general historiography of Africa. One issue of concern throughout the book is that the author's over-reliance on classical literature, almost to the exclusion of local historiography, minimizes the evidence of how homegrown ecclesiastical traditions contributed to the expression of Ethiopian Christianity. The author's failure to integrate local accounts, including those of the clergy, who have carefully maintained the social, ecclesiastical and political memories and, alas, claim to possess the Ark of the Covenant is disappointing. The tolerance and accommodation of gentiles, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, transformed Christianity from a local anticolonial movement based in Israel and Palestine, into the global religion it is today. Ethiopia holds one of the great traditions of Christianity. Such a tradition should be seen on its own terms and not always along this tired dichotomy of foreign versus indigenous.

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