Characters

**Aksumite Empire**

The churches of Lalibela were preceded by the Kedemit Mikael, believed by local tradition to be the first Christian church built in the area. It was commissioned by Aksumite King Kaleb sometime after he founded the city of Roha in the 6th century AD

**Zagwe Dynasty**

According to local tradition, the churches are said to have been built during the [Zagwe Dynasty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zagwe_Dynasty) and under the rule of King [Gebre Mesqel Lalibela](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gebre_Mesqel_Lalibela)[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:1-4) (r. ca. 1189-1227AD), although it is more likely that they evolved into their current form over the course of several phases of construction and alteration of pre-existing structures

**20th century**[

The site of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela was first included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1978.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-7)

Religious significance and function [

The Churches of Lalibela hold important religious significance for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as together they form a pilgrimage site with particular spiritual and symbolic value with a layout representing the holy city of Jerusalem. The site continues to be used for daily worship and prayer, the celebration of religious festivals like Genna,[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:1-4)[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:2-2) as a home to clergy,[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:1-4) and as a place which increasingly brings together religious adherents and leaders every year.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:2-2)

Architecture

The churches are each unique, giving the site an architectural diversity that is evident by the human figures of bas-reliefs inside Bet Golgotha; and the colourful paintings of geometrical designs and biblical scenes in Bet Mariam.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:1-4)

Mouldings and string courses divide larger structural shapes into smaller sections in many of the churches.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:1-4)

**Construction**

The construction of the churches are thought to have taken place in 3 phases.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:4-5)

All 11 churches were the result of a process using the basic tools of hammers and chisels to excavate trenches surrounding the monolithic and semi-monolithic structures as well as a system of tunnels which connected two separate groups of the churches with each other out of the scoriaceous basalt.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-:0-1)[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock-Hewn_Churches,_Lalibela#cite_note-8) The "construction" was done from [top to down](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Top-down_construction&action=edit&redlink=1).

Conservation

**Difficulties with conservation from 2000s-onward**[

Several recent conservation and restoration projects have been implemented at the site, but have been flawed in execution. A project in which the American Embassy is funding the restoration of Bet Gabriel-Rafael and subsequently Bet Golgotha-Mikael has seen issues emerge between the various parties involved in the project regarding understanding of its full scope. There has been a lack of adequate communication and sharing of information regarding project plans between the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) and the local committee and church.