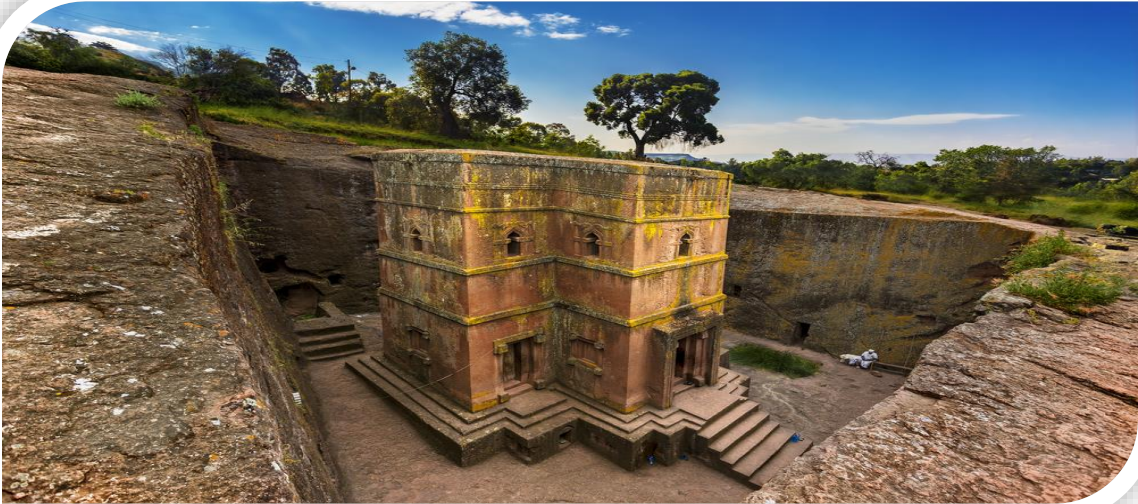


# Lalibela Churches



The eleven Rock-hewn Churches of Lalibela are monolithic churches located in the western Ethiopian Highlands near the town of Lalibela, named after the late-12th and early-13th century King Gebre Meskel Lalibela of the Zagwe dynasty, who commissioned the massive building project of 11 rock-hewn churches to recreate the holy city of Jerusalem in his own kingdom. The site remains in use by the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church to this day, and it remains an important place of pilgrimage for Ethiopian Orthodox worshippers.[1] It took 24 years to build all the 11 rock hewn churches.

## ACCORDING TO LOCAL TRADITION

## History

According to local tradition, Lalibela (traditionally known as Roha) was founded by an Agew family called the Zagwa or Zagwe in 1137 AD.[2] The churches are said to have been built during the Zagwe dynasty, under the rule of King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela[3] (r. ca. 1181–1221 AD),[4] although it is more likely that they evolved into their current form over the course of several phases of construction and alteration of preexisting structures.[5]

The site of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela was first included on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1978.[6]

## Archaeological site

At an altitude of around 2,480 metres (8,140 ft),[2] the archaeological site consists of five churches north of the town's river Jordan, five south of the river, and one independently located. The churches in each grouping are connected by a system of tunnels and trenches. Biete Giorgis, the eleventh church, is connected to the others by trenches. The northern churches are Biete Medhane Alem, Biete Maryam, Biete Golgotha Mikael, Biete Meskel, and Biete Denagel. The southern churches are Biete Amanuel, Biete Qeddus Mercoreus, Biete Abba Libanos, Biete Lehem, and Biete Gabriel-Rufael.[7]

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#### THE ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES AT LALIBELA

## Architecture

The rock-hewn churches at Lalibela are made through a subtractive processes in which space is created by removing material. Out of the 11 churches, 4 are free-standing (monolithic) and 7 share a wall with the mountain out of which they are carved. 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 colorful paintings of geometrical designs and biblical scenes in Bet Mariam.[3]

Moldings and string courses divide larger structural shapes into smaller sections in many of the churches.[3]

The construction of the churches are thought to have taken place in three phases.[4]

#### SEVERAL RECENT CONSERVATION

# Conservation

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.[10]