

Aksum and Lalibela

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about several ancient and medieval sites in Africa, Aksum and Lalibela. These sites represent impressive achievements, both artistically and architecturally, by ancient African cultures that are often minimally covered in history and art history courses due to factors stemming from colonialism, destruction of archeological evidence, and looting, to name a few. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

- 1. Aksum
 - 1a. Obelisks of Axum
 - 1b. Christianity in Ethiopia and the Garima Gospels
- 2. Lalibela
 - 2a. Church of St. George
 - 3. Reflecting on African Art

1. Aksum

The kingdom of Aksum (also spelled Axum) existed in the present-day countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Yemen, and was at its height of power from the 2nd through 11th centuries CE. Its location in the middle of trade routes between Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Mediterranean was highly advantageous, and because of this position, the people of Aksum adopted different aspects of Byzantine culture, including using Greek as their administrative language and adopting Orthodox Christianity in the 4th century CE. There was also a population of Ethiopian Jews, who have since moved to Israel.

Ge'ez script, which was originally the liturgical language of Ethiopian Christianity, developed in the kingdom of Aksum. Today it is used to write the languages of Amharic and Tigrinya. All of the kings of Aksum are said to have been descended from the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Menelik I, including the last king of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie.

1a. Obelisks of Axum



Aksum obelisks

Although Aksum had its own written language, there is little recorded information that we would consider history. As a result, we still do not know very much about this kingdom. The people of Aksum left behind some beautiful and impressive works of art and architecture. A series of stelae, or obelisks, were carved out of solid stone during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. They are of varying heights, probably related to the status of the people for whom they were carved. Some of the tallest obelisks, which were close to 100 feet in height, fell and collapsed, probably while they were being carved. The obelisks were made to resemble tall, thin, multistory houses, almost like ancient skyscrapers, although there is no evidence that any building like this was actually built at this time. Once the kingdom of Aksum converted to Christianity, the production of these stelae ceased.

1b. Christianity in Ethiopia and the Garima Gospels



The Garima Gospel

According to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Christianity has existed in Ethiopia since the 1st century CE. King Ezana of Aksum played an instrumental role in popularizing Christianity when he made it the official state religion in 331 CE. The Garima Gospels, which come from Ethiopia, are the two oldest surviving illuminated manuscripts in the world. They are also the two oldest books still attached to their bindings and the oldest manuscripts written in Ge'ez script. Analysis from radiocarbon dating has established that Garima 2 was produced sometime between 390–570 CE, while Garima 1 dates to 530 to 660 CE. As far as we know, they have never left the Garima Monastery where they are located and may have survived for so long because they were lost and knowledge of their existence outside of the monastery was limited.



Eusebian canon from Garima 1

A two-page spread from Garima 2 depicts an apostle standing against a blue background, surrounded by a stylized border of shapes that look like rows of leaves. On the facing page is a passage from the Bible written in Ge'ez. The artistic style of this image is very similar to Byzantine and Coptic (Egyptian) manuscripts and icons, with a solemn facial expression and highly stylized approach to depicting the human form. Another page from Garima 1 consists of a Eusebian canon, which is an index to the gospels that uses numbers to indicate where they discuss the same topics. The numbers are framed by a decorative architectural border.

② DID YOU KNOW

In 2006, Lester Capon, a bookbinder and conservationist, traveled to Ethiopia to do conservation work on the Garima Gospels. They had been bound together with a third book produced in the 14th century. Capon's work involved separating the three volumes and rebinding them.

2. Lalibela

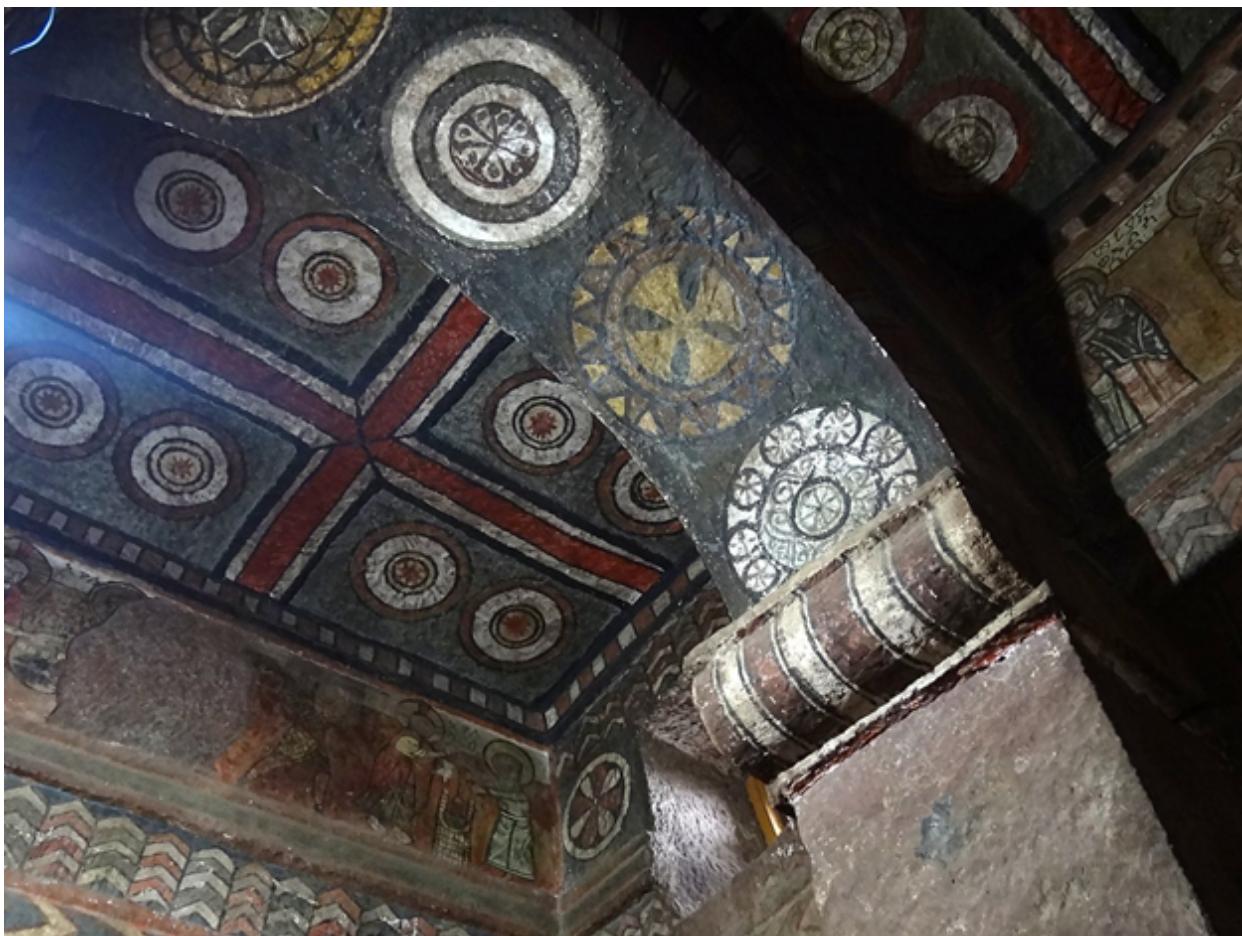
In the town of Lalibela, in northern Ethiopia, are a series of eleven churches all hewn from the soft volcanic stone located in the area. This site is named after King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela, who reigned from 1181 to 1221. The story is that after finding out that Jerusalem had been closed to Christians, he ordered these churches to be made as replicas that Ethiopians could easily visit. A legend also exists that angels built the churches. A more likely possibility is that the churches were built much more slowly between the 7th and 13th centuries.

2a. Church of St. George



The Church of St. George

Lalibela, Ethiopia



Interior of Bet Maryam church, showing decorative, geometric murals
Lalibela, Ethiopia

Some of the churches are freestanding, and some are still attached to a mountain by a single wall. The layout of the churches also varies. The most famous, the Church of St. George, is shaped like a cross. Other churches are in the shape of a basilica. The interior spaces of the churches have been carved out so that they are fully functional. Some are painted with murals in geometric shapes, and others have religious paintings on canvas hanging from the walls. St. George fighting the dragon is a common theme, since he is the patron saint of Ethiopia. Many of the churches are linked by a series of tunnels used by monks and nuns. Although the churches are generally in a poor state of conservation, they are still used on a daily basis and visited by thousands of tourists each year. They also remain important pilgrimage sites for members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.



St. George Slaying the Dragon, Church of Debre Sina, Ethiopia, painting on canvas, exact date unknown. This image is in much better condition than most of the murals inside Lalibela, so it is probably more recent; however, it is an accurate depiction of this subject, which is common throughout Ethiopia.

3. Reflecting on African Art

In this challenge, you learned about several ancient and medieval sites in Africa. There are dozens of civilizations located throughout the African continent, and we generally spend very little time learning about them in history and art history courses. There are major problems associated with the study of ancient Africa. One is that colonialism has created major obstacles. British colonists refused to admit that the ancestors of the Shona, the people who live in that region today, had built Great Zimbabwe, proposing Vikings, Arabs, or Egyptians as alternatives. The center of Nok culture also happened to be a center of tin mining, which has destroyed a great deal of archaeological evidence. Looting has had a similar effect. As you have seen throughout this tutorial, many different factors have contributed to making the history of ancient and medieval Africa less detailed than the histories of other locations. Hopefully, this will change as more people learn about these cultures and appreciate their impressive achievements.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about several ancient and medieval sites in Africa, beginning with **Aksum** (also spelled Axum), which existed in the present-day countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Yemen. You examined several impressive works of art and architecture from the kingdom of Aksum, including the **obelisks of Axum** (pre-conversion to Christianity) and the **Garima Gospels**, the two oldest surviving illuminated manuscripts in the world—and exemplifying Christianity in Ethiopia as the official state religion at the time of their production.

Next, you learned about the town of **Lalibela**, in northern Ethiopia, with its series of eleven churches, the most famous of which is the **Church of St. George**.

Lastly, you wrapped up the tutorial by reflecting on African art, understanding the factors that contributed to making the history of ancient and medieval African less detailed and accessible than the histories of other locations.