

ETHIOPIA

THE HON. THOMAS PAKENHAM

Student of African History especially interested in Ethiopia.

“It is inevitable that any work of art to be met with in Ethiopia that has beauty and permanence should be the expression of an alien culture and of techniques not indigenous to the country.” Racism among archaeologists is mercifully rare, but this is a particularly disturbing example. The passage comes from Monti della Corte’s book on the churches of Lalibela which was published during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia and sponsored, as one would guess, by the occupation authorities. On racist grounds he assumed that there could be no specifically Ethiopian culture, a doctrinaire belief that even the evidence of his own work amply refuted. Monti della Corte’s book is now forgotten. But in the sphere of African culture assumptions like his are not unknown today.

Turning to less prejudiced observers we find a very different view of Ethiopian culture. Scholars agree that a remarkable degree of civilization was attained on the fertile tableland of Ethiopia from long before Christian times. But what sort of culture bloomed in this mountain fastness? The feeling is usually expressed that the culture of Ethiopia was not an entity in itself, but that the civilization of Ethiopia lived parasitically on other cultures, drawing elements from many quarters but never fully assimilating them—elements from Byzantium and Coptic Egypt, to which it was linked by its religious faith after the conversion of Ethiopia in the 4th century A.D.; elements from South Arabia and the East, to which it was linked by commerce and emigration from earliest times. It is noted that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the castles of Grondar were built by stone-masons from India and the Hadhramaut in styles alien to the country, though in a special technique of stone and lime-cement construction that was adapted to the climate. It is noted that the art of painting and decoration was never developed beyond an elementary stage; the illuminated manuscripts that survive from the 14th century onwards indicate that Ethiopian artists were seldom more than copyists following Armenian or Byzantine models which filtered into the country. Finally, though the Ethiopians had a written language from the earliest times, it is observed that no Ethiopian writing that has yet been

found can be termed literature in our sense of the word; the manuscripts we possess are with a few exceptions copies of pious (or picaresque) works in Greek and Arabic. Of course it is recognized that the civilization of Ethiopia expressed itself in other fields than the arts: in the sphere of social organization the Ethiopians evolved a remarkable institution, a theocratic kingship, which proved the principal bulwark against attack on the state from within or without for two thousand years. But in the arts, at least, we are asked to conclude that imported ideas did not take root and result in an Ethiopian culture which was an entity in itself. As one eminent scholar has said, himself a most sympathetic observer of Ethiopian affairs, "It was a land in which so many cultural factors were unique and barren."

This view of Ethiopian culture is not, I consider, a complete one. It describes accurately enough what we know of Ethiopian culture since the 16th century, the time when the first European traveller, Francisco Alvarez, reached Ethiopia and returned with an account of the country. But this was nearly 1500 years after the first independent king of Ethiopia known to history set up his throne at Axum; and by the later Middle Ages its civilization had rapidly declined. What of the preceding epoch? In this article I shall argue that the evidence suggests that, in contrast to that of the later period, the culture of the first period can be considered an entity in itself, since in one branch of the arts at least, that is, in architecture, a truly national style had been evolved.

One of our first glimpses of the early Kings of Ethiopia comes from Cosmos' Christian Topography. "On the coast of Ethiopia", he writes, "two miles from the shore is a town called Adulis which forms the port of the Axumites. Here is to be seen a marble chair . . . by the road which leads to Axum." In the *Periplus* there are similar references to the great Kingdom of Axum. Eight days from the port of Adulis, we are told, lies Axum the capital. Today we can still re-trace the route by which the Axumites came down to the coast from a series of caravan towns whose sites still remain. But Axum is the most formidable relic of the Kingdom. Here can still be seen the foundations of various palaces, including one 120 metres by 80 metres in size, with stone wall and terraces and a central structure, according to the reconstructions of archaeologists, many storeys high. Beside them are over a hundred obelisks stuck in the red soil of the highlands like needles in a pin-cushion. The largest now stand-

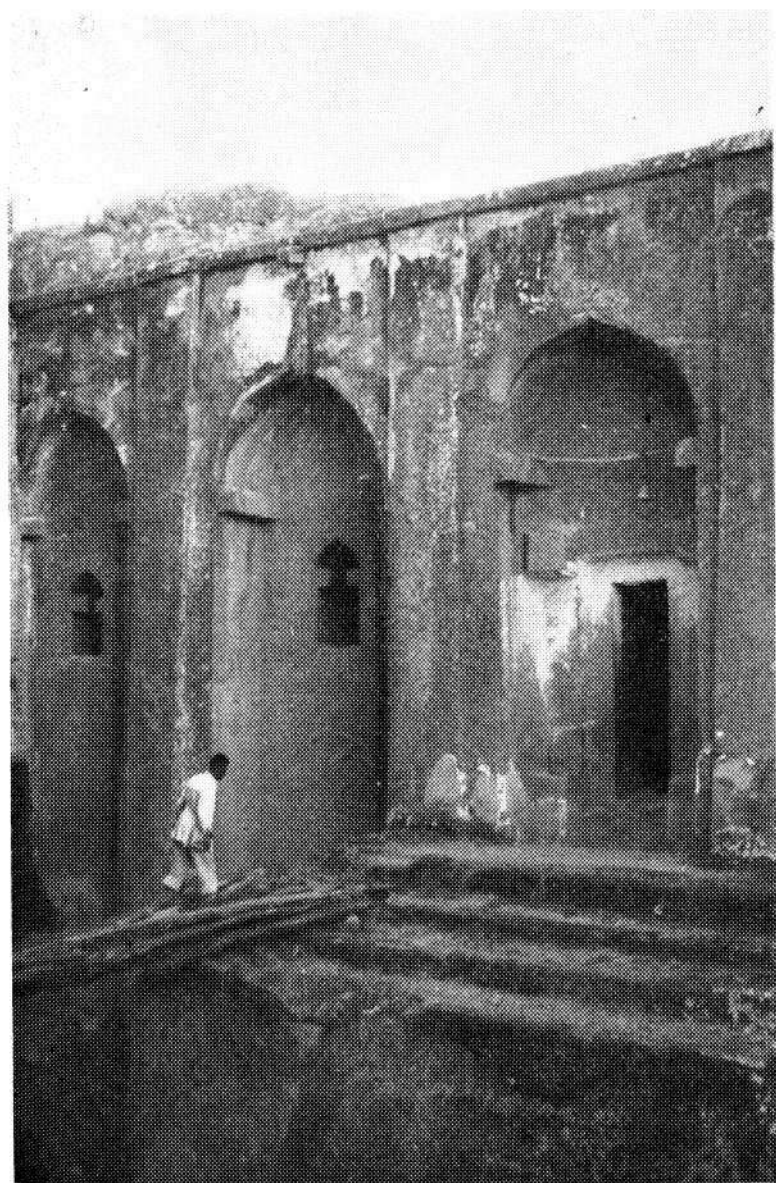
ing measures 23 metres, while the largest of all, shattered by earthquakes, measures over 30 metres—that is one metre taller than the tallest Egyptian obelisk. In shape or design they are nothing like those of Egypt, Greece or Rome. The taller ones record in a formalized pattern the many-storeyed Axumite buildings which once surrounded them; they are carved with doors and windows, are recessed to left and right to indicate corner towers, and each storey is clearly shown. The latest obelisk that still stands represents a nine storey building.

At this point one may well ask what the relationship was between the Axumites and their successors. We now know that at some period during the first millenium B.C., Sabean tribes from South Arabia emigrated to the highlands—one of these was the Habashat from which the name Abyssinia is derived, another the Agaziyan or Ge'ez which gave its name to the classical tongue of the new Kingdom. These Semitic people interbred with the Hamitic population. By the time we reach historical times, it is clear that the Ethiopians were a people distinct from their Sabean ancestors. There is a Sabean inscription at Axum dating from the end of the 3rd century A.D., in which a King, probably Aphilas, boasts of launching an expedition across the Red Sea to subdue the tribes around Aden, adding, "and when I had overthrown their Kings, I commanded them to pay tribute for their country." Even more significant is an inscription dating from a century later. Like his predecessor King Aeizanas boasts of subduing the tribes across the Straits, but the inscription is now written not only in Sabean, the language of his ancestors, and in Greek, which was the *lingua franca* of the region, but in the Ge'ez which is still today the language of the Ethiopian liturgy.

The Axumites were, then, a people distinct from the Sabeans, the ancestors as well as the fore-runners of the modern Ethiopians. But were the great buildings of Axum the work of native or alien craftsmen? The exact debt that Axumite buildings owe to Sabean models remains to be evaluated, but it is clear that though there were certain affinities with the architecture of South Arabia, notably in the height of the buildings and in the formalized window pattern represented on steles, the Axumites had developed an architecture of their own. Dr. Littman, the German archaeologist who excavated Axum, has written: "We are confronted here with a unique self-contained architecture." Blessed with remarkable creative powers, and having attained a degree of wealth and security only possible in a natural

fortress like theirs, the Axumites had evolved a truly national style.

Gradually the early Christian civilization of Axum gave way to the Ethiopian civilization of the Middle Ages. In one way it must be recognized that the fortunes of the country had declined. No longer are we faced with bombastic inscriptions recording raids across the straits; Ethiopia was now virtually isolated from all contact with the world by a ring-fence of Moslem enemies. Nor is there still a highly articulate coinage as before. But it must not be thought that the great achievements of Axum had proved sterile. The evidence for this period is scarce, but there is one all-important clue to the degree of continuity between the two phases and to the richness of the mediaeval culture. The clue lies in the mediaeval architecture of Ethiopia. Though the churches of mediaeval Ethiopia drew on Coptic models for elements in their design (they looked to them for their chancel arches, for instance, and for much of their decoration), they were still built in the great tradition of Axum. The Axumite technique was to use horizontal courses of wood set in stone to build walls, in which doors and window frames were embedded. The technique, which we first see in the formalized obelisks of Axum, survives exactly in the churches of mediaeval Ethiopia. The Church of St. Mary of Zion, for instance, was nearly the size of the great Axumite palace; it had, according to the chronicles of Ethiopia, over 3,000 of the curious projecting stumps that are seen on the obelisks, and became known as 'monkey-heads'. Other churches, smaller in size but equally rich in ideas, were built across a large area of the highlands. Alvarez describes many that still survived in his day. Today we can still see examples of the Xth century style in the monastery of Debra Damo in Tigre, of the XIIIth century style in the church of Imraba in Lasta, and of the XIV century style in the church of Bethlehem in Begemder. And there is spectacular evidence of the many churches that did not survive the Moslem wars of the XIV century in the shape of the colony of rock churches at Lalibela; each is in a different style and together they comprise a sort of architectural museum. In general the archaeological evidence, taken with the literary sources, testify to the virility of a style of national architecture that, adapting itself to the needs of the time, endured for considerably more than a thousand years, surely unmistakable proof of the indigenous culture of the country.



Hewn from solid rock in the 13th century, the ten great churches of ancient Lalibela in the highlands of Ethiopia exhibit a high standard of architectural achievement. The picture above is of the Church of St. Gabriel.

With acknowledgements to Paul Popper Ltd.