

Press release
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Lalibela, exceptional Ethiopian Christian site at last mapped out



The Ethiopian authority of research and conservation of heritage (ARCCH), the French centre of Ethiopian studies (CFEE) and the French National Institute of Preventive Archaeology (Inrap) have just executed, during an exceptional mission, the topographic and archaeological map of the site of Lalibela, classified by UNESCO in 1978 as part of the world heritage of humanity.



Centre français
des études éthiopiennes

Monolithic churches hewn out of basalt

The site of Lalibela, an ensemble of twelve rock churches each one entirely hewn out, in one block, of the basalt of the high plains of Ethiopia, has been a subject of study for archaeologists, historians and architects for many years. This exceptional ensemble nevertheless is largely unknown to us. According to legend, God ordered King Lalibela (1220 ? – 1225) to build a new Jerusalem. Miraculously, with the help of angels, he managed to do this in less than 25 years.

Several important questions are at present under discussion among specialists : Were these churches built at the same period? Were these monuments originally built as churches? Was this site King Lalibela's capital and that of the Zagwe dynasty (XIe – XIIe century)? What was the chronology of the successive excavations which caused these buildings to « emerge »?

For 50 years these churches have intrigued searchers, but it is the first time that a multidisciplinary team has been able to study these problems on the spot, thanks to the understanding and kindness of the Ethiopian ecclesiastical authorities.

Understanding the creation of the site

The team has studied the ensemble of the site and, among other things, has mapped out the excavated material linked with the cutting out of these monolithic churches. These zones, until now unstudied, are potentially important as they are the only areas that can present a complete stratigraphy of the site, enabling the tracing of the history of Lalibela. The most recent discoveries have revealed an unexpected pre-Christian occupation. Three great periods seem to follow one another: a first phase of troglodytic dwellings preceding the construction of a fortress before the transformation of the site into a religious complex still being used, such as we now know it.

These researches will help to understand the creation of this exceptional site and to aid, in the making of decisions, those responsible for Ethiopian heritage, the running of the site and its touristic development.

Inrap

With more than 2 000 collaborators and researchers Inrap is the largest French archaeological organization and one of the foremost in Europe. A public research establishment, it carries out most of the archaeological evaluations and excavations in France, in partnership with private and public developers: i.e. more than 2,000 sites a year in mainland France and in the overseas departments.

Its assignments extend to the scientific exploitation of the results and the spread of archaeological knowledge among the general public.

Partners: Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH-Ethiopia), Cultural Office of Lalibela, Unesco, World Monument Fund, French centre of Ethiopian studies (CFEE), Inrap, CNRS.

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