

### Friedlander, María-José, and Bob Friedlander

*Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia: A Guide to the Remote Churches of an Ancient Land.*

London: I.B. Tauris, 2015. Pp. 352. Hb, \$39.

Until the end of the last century, Ethiopia was best known for its famines. This negative perception persists today, as new doubts are raised about its current economic progress, and its booming demography. While recent historians, linguists, and archeologists, especially David W. Phillipson's (*Ancient Churches of Ethiopia* [New Haven: Yale University Press: 2009]) have effectively corrected the one-sided image course, it is important to remember that even Christian historiography on Ethiopia tended to credit the worth of Ethiopian art and architecture primarily to foreign influences.

María José and Bob Friedlander's *Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia* claims to be primarily a detailed guide for travelers visiting Ethiopia. Richard Pankhurst, renowned Ethiopianist and author of *Historic Images of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Shama, 2005), wrote the introduction. In the first chapter, the Friedlanders focus on the nature of the architecture of the churches. Their theoretical approach and their chronological framework are similar to Phillipson's three-fold typology (rectangular, round, and rock-hewn churches). Yet the Friedlanders also try to strike a balance between the genuineness and the foreign import of Ethiopian Christian architecture and its paintings. On the one hand, they affirm continuity and the prevalence of foreign influence in Ethiopian architecture and art. Rectangular churches, they argue, were very popular at the beginning of Ethiopian Christianity in the fourth century, and remained so until the end of the Portuguese era in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, round churches seem genuinely Ethiopian, similar in style to the indigenous *tucul* Ethiopian houses. These round churches are the most widely used, and still dominate Christian architecture in Ethiopia. Finally, there are rock-hewn churches, directly derived from local Aksumite building techniques and used uninterruptedly since the time of Frumentius.

The concern for continuity is sustained in the second chapter. Compared to other authors on Ethiopian arts, this chapter is distinctively invested in situating the architecture and paintings in both their historical and theological contexts. It offers a brief historical overview of Ethiopian Christianity beginning with biblical times. Even more interesting are short biographies of nine Syrian, nine Ethiopian, and fifteen "Equestrian saints" (Ethiopian warrior saints artistically depicted on horseback), together with detailed descriptions of the iconography of the Virgin Mary during the first and second Gondarine period (1636–1755). In this chapter, the authors refer to Otto Jäger's *Antiquities of North Ethiopia* (Stuttgart: Antiquarium, 1974) as their main source. However, the

book goes beyond Jäger by adding detailed descriptions of paintings, relevant quotations from the Bible, plans of the locations of the paintings, and summaries of the legends of the many Ethiopian saints portrayed and the many miracles attributed to the Virgin Mary. Missing in these descriptions, as the authors acknowledge, are the churches of Debre Maar and Maryam Bahera, to which they did not succeed in gaining access.

There is a short Jesuit interlude in the third chapter. The main source here is Philip Caraman's *Lost Empire* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press: 1985). In this chapter, detailed accounts are given of important Jesuit figures in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ethiopia, their successes and failures. Talking about Pedro Páez's contribution to Ethiopian modern architecture, the Friedlanders are careful to emphasize his role in the training of the Ethiopian builders, and not to present Páez as the main architect and builder of Susneyos's palace, as early Jesuit writings on Ethiopia have suggested. They also refer to two sixteenth-century books, *Evangelicae historiae imagines* (Antwerp, 1593) and *Evangelicum Arabicum* (Rome, c.1590), both of which highlight its similarities to the paintings of the Ethiopian artist Narga Selassie. The Friedlanders' goal is not to deny external influence on Ethiopian paintings and architecture. Instead, they stress the collaborative effort between the Jesuits, their international network, and the native Ethiopians. Not only were some of the Jesuit paintings made in India, those Indian features are still visible in modern Ethiopian art: "The Jesuits brought with them religious paintings and prints which were disseminated through their missions and at court where they concentrated their proselytizing effort, and it was the Emperor and the nobility who, as patrons, were instrumental in spreading this artistic influence" (58).

While the rest of the book continues to deal with churches, greater attention is paid to paintings. There are two main categories. Up to the seventeenth century, and during much of the nineteenth century, most of the paintings were frescoes. Some of these were produced by the prodigious builder Abuna Abraham, also known as Berhana Maskal (c.1350–1425). Old and the New Testament stories, as well as some equestrian and Ethiopian saints dominated this period. The second category (chapter 5) covers the Gondarine era. The location of the paintings inside the churches becomes more precise. The east of the *maqdas* was reserved for Old Testament scenes; the west and south sides contained scenes from the life of Christ; and the north side was reserved to equestrian saints (179). Paintings were on cloth. Their style is thematically broader, with a special focus on women, the life of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus. In the midst of detailed portraits and descriptions of the saints stands a so-called "unidentified saint." Its commanding presence makes it "one of the

most impressive depictions of a saint that I have seen in any Ethiopian illustration” (75). Also fascinating is the fresco of the creation of Eve and the fall, in which one can observe the equality in dignity, in the blame, and condemnation (115), a feature characteristic to Ethiopian Gondarine Christianity.

José-María and Bob Friedlander claim to give “full records” of the painting of seventeen Ethiopian churches. Of, at least, the eleven churches near Lalibela (Girma Kidane and Elisabeth-D. Hecht. “Ethiopia’s Rock Hewn Churches of Lālibalā,” *Ambio* 12 [1983]: 210–12), they only report three. The criterion for their selection of churches was whether they were able to access them or not. Biblical sources include non-canonical books such as proto-Evangelium of James, and the gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which the authors mix with Ethiopian hilarious legends, following the threefold principles of good rhetoric to move, entertain, and instruct. Moreover, for a total of 322 pages, with twelve pages of index, 294 illustrations made of maps, paintings, and churches, a glossary, and a pretty short bibliography (forty-five entries, most of which journal articles), this book, while looking encyclopedic, does not pretend to be a history bestseller. It is primarily an excellent, and recommended guide for anyone wishing to visit Ethiopia or to have a brief introduction to the art and architecture of Ethiopian Christianity. The authors do not claim expertise in some areas crossing their project like Jesuit historiography. Their use of “Provincial Jesuit General in Goa” (51, 53) would leave those who know about Jesuit history wonder whether such a title ever existed.

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