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# FERENGE ETHIOPIA



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The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Ethiopia

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## Editor's Letter

Welcome to the September 2013 Projects Abroad Ethiopia newsletter. September 11 is Ethiopian New year – Projects Abroad Ethiopia team would like to say Happy Ethiopian New year.

This newsletter aims to inform all our volunteers with news and information about the latest happenings in Projects Abroad Ethiopia.

Projects Abroad Ethiopia team is working hard to accommodate summer volunteers –which have great experience in Ethiopia. Thank you all the people who have volunteered with us – we really appreciate all for your valuable time and great help you gave at the different placements. And who decided to choose Ethiopia for volunteering through Projects Abroad.

Enjoy reading this issue and I hope that you will find something that you like. **Thanks to our volunteers who have shared their stories and photos with us.** We encourage everyone to join us in making the newsletter interesting and exciting by sending in your own written articles and pictures of your experiences here with us. Your stories and pictures will help others to understand and learn about Ethiopia. If you have anything you'd like to contribute, suggest, or comment on, please contact: [bikesegnhaileleul@projects-abroad.org](mailto:bikesegnhaileleul@projects-abroad.org)

# ANCIENT ETHIOPIA: how legends fares where history can't

By Annelies Van Erp – Journalism in Ethiopia



The heartbeat of ancient history still lays at the northern part of Ethiopia. From the former capitals, Yeha and Axum to Lalibela, the north is still covered with unresolved historical mysteries.

As foreign and Ethiopian archaeologists dig deep to find the truth about old rulers and monasteries, where history fails to declare the architectural wonders, legends take root.

History is not an exact science, like physics or mathematics. The further one goes back in time, the more vague historical

explanations become and the more uncertain historians appear. Words such as 'probably', 'considered to be' and 'according to' appear more frequently when one talks about ancient history; and it is even more so in Ethiopian history. Historians want to reveal the truth, but with a lack of adequate sources, other explanations arise. And like every other aspect of the Ethiopian society, it is hard to avoid the contribution of religious views. Historiography and the origin of Orthodox Christianity as it was written in the bible are strongly interwoven.

Hence, given the historical records, the birthplace of the Ethiopian society is 'considered to be' Yeha, which dates back to the 5th century BC. Yeha is situated between Axum and Adwa. For a long time it stayed unclear who founded the city: was it Yeha and Africa who ruled the Arabia peninsula or was it Arabia who ruled Africa?

In the past archaeologists thought the city was created by Arabian migrants, because the ruins of the temple Grāt Beal Gebri look straight out of Yemen. The monolithic pillars in the temple resemble that of the Temple of the Moon in Yemen. But the beautiful ancient Sabean inscriptions found in the temple plaid for an Ethiopian domination.

Recently, scholars came to the conclusion that it must have been a mixture of the two groups, a mixture of the two civilizations, namely South Arabia and African. Although Yemen and Ethiopia both claimed for a long time that it were their people who were responsible for those art masterpieces, archaeologist discovered that the truth, as it mostly does, lies somewhere in the middle.

## Queen of Sheba

From all over the country pilgrims travel to Axum to behold the holy sites listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. But at the same time local life continues like it did for millennia. Around the ruins and the obelisks farmers go on ploughing their land and woman wash their clothes in what is claimed to be Queen of Sheba's bath.

Like other historical cities, Axum is still shrouded in a lot of fog. For sure there was early civilizations around 400BC.

Most Ethiopians believe that the rise of Axum went together with the existence of the Queen of Sheba. The

Queen of Sheba, as it is told in the Old Testament, traveled from Axum to Jerusalem to meet the famed King Solomon (King of Israel). Many Ethiopians believe that the relationship between Sheba and Solomon resulted to a son (known as Menelik) who founded the Solomonic Dynasty in Axum. The story goes as many years later Menelik traveled to Jerusalem to see his father, who invited him to remain there to rule after his death. But Menelik refused and decided to return home taking with him the most precious relic, the Ark of the Covenant. He took it back to Axum, where it still resides today, in a specially built treasury in the courtyard of St Mary's Church.

The ruin of Queen Sheba's palace is open for visitors, although the more sceptical guides claim that the stones might have been residues of a mansion of a noble man. Through the ages that passed by, visitors need some imagination to see the castle, because only the remains of the lowest level are visible nowadays. Another factor that contributed to the disintegration of the building was the recycling urge from villagers. The local population had no clue of the possible heritage values they were dealing with. Villagers took stones of the castle to build their own houses. They didn't saw the cultural value, but just useful stones of an old house that could be used to build a new house.

A lot of Axum is not yet surveyed, due to a lack of funding. Alike the past, now villagers know that they are dealing with, but that is no guarantee for safeguarding. In 1982 shepherds found a local stone of Rosetta: a big tablet with ancient Greek, Ge'ez and Sabeian inscriptions. The farmers took good care of it and build a little house around it to protect this important finding. "But they didn't receive any support from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism," a guide explains.

"There are more instances of farmers who found artifacts in their garden, but sometimes they choose to ignore the little objects. And you can't blame them," the guide adds. "If they make it public, they fear that they lose their property without compensation. And for farmers their land is their only source of income," he says.

## **Second Jerusalem**

The 13th-century rock-hewn churches of Lalibela as well fire imaginations. The churches aren't exactly built, but carved from the solid rock. So far, historians grope in the dark to know how those incredible artifacts arose. One story narrates how King Lalibela, who was poisoned by his brother and fell into a three-day coma, was taken to Heaven and given a vision of a rock-hewn city. Another legend also says that the king went into exile to Jerusalem and vowed that when he returned he would create a New Jerusalem. Because by that time, Muslims were capturing Jerusalem and they made it difficult for Christian pilgrims to visit the holy city.

After investigating the different churches, archaeologists concluded that the buildings are so different in style, craftsmanship and state of preservation that they were able to standstill for a much longer period past Lalibela's reign. But who built them and how it was done remains totally unclear.

All sources and every guidebook mention eleven churches. But that does not concur too the story in the bible. "Actually there are only ten churches, representing the 10 Commandments," explains a guide. "Yet again, the two churches share one roof. So they could be seen as one," he speculates as he tries to match reality with the religious

# Our volunteer blog – part II

**The following article is taken from the blog by permission of our volunteer Laura – many thanks Laura for sharing her experience with us.**

## A TASTE OF THE SOUTH ETHIOPIA

He makes me laugh 'till I cry and have to beg him to stop. With the precision of a stand-up comedian he recounts the very first day he came to Addis to begin his degree. "A man from the South is not used to the city and does not have much money. I was desperate to go to the toilet but when I walked into bars and restaurants they always asked me whether I was actually having lunch there. With naivete I replied 'No, I ate this morning in *Arba Minch*'." Laughter from his friends around the table. "After three or four failed attempts I caved in to the inevitable. I crouch in the middle of the roundabout in *Piassa*, take off my T-shirt and wrap it well around my face so people don't recognise me, and just shit right there and then." Tears rolling down our faces. "And I thought that was that until some policemen catch up with me. Hei!- they beckon to me. - Are you a man from the southern tribes? We have a reward for you.' And they take me back to the place where I shat and ask me to pick up my goods."



I don't think I've laughed so hard in the last two years. Getachew is a man from Arba Minch, the Omo Valley and one of the most stunning tribal areas of the world. I was walking home from the school one night feeling rather tired and lost as I had got on the wrong taxi home. It's dark and I want to get home. About 500 metres from my house a man approaches me and asks me the way to a butchery/restaurant near Edna Mall. I think it's strange that an Ethiopian asks a *ferenji* for the way and I can already hear alarm bells in the background. But he immediately understands my state of mind and says: 'I'm a *ferenji* too, from the Southern tribes.'

My social life has shot through the roof in the past week as I become friendlier with my Swiss home mate and fellow volunteer and we explore the night life in Bole. On Thursday night we headed to a local pizzeria in Bole Atlas. The locals were dancing to some well-known tunes. Some of them are quite loud and we realise they are celebrating someone's 30th birthday. A couple is dancing in the middle of the bar and suddenly crashes to the floor. It seems like a scene taken straight from a London nightclub.



It's the weekend and it's the Beer Garden again. I have to laugh when I realise the Ethiopian waitresses are actually sporting a Bavarian style uniform.



It's nice to come here and share my experiences with fellow Europeans. The school this week was psychologically hard and I am still trying to recover from the shock of hearing from my students that they believe the world was made 7000 years ago. That's what the Bible says. 'What about Lucy in the museum I retort?' But I have to be careful not to upset them and so I force myself to shut up. I don't feel free to say what I think. Next time I think I will just talk about cooking.

Arba Minch - a city in the South of the country

Piassa - a quarter of Addis from the name Piazza in Italian

Meskel Flower - a quarter of Addis

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