



LECTURE BY
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ECHOES IN STONE

REFRACTING THE HOLY SEPULCHRE FROM ETHIOPIA TO SCOTIA

According to tradition, the Christian king Lalibela of Ethiopia (late 12th–early 13th c.) had a vision of Jerusalem that inspired him to carve the extraordinary complex of rock-hewn churches that still bears his name. Yet what kind of “new” Jerusalem—and more specifically, what kind of “new” Holy Sepulchre—Lalibela was meant to embody remains a perplexing question. The issue of what imitation signified in the medieval

imagination is no less crucial here than in the numerous Holy Sepulchre replicas scattered across Latin Europe. Beginning, however, with an African Holy Sepulchre may allow us to defamiliarize this all-

too-familiar question. Instead of considering only how replicas relate to the “original,” should we not also re-examine the ambiguous history of the Holy Sepulchre itself, from Constantine to the Crusaders, in light of its far-flung “imitations”? Among other things, this perspective invites us to rediscover a dimension of the Jerusalem monument that has long been obscured by successive reconstructions—its rupestrian, rock-hewn character. This is a dimension that early medieval pilgrims sought to convey in different ways, whether they re-enacted it at Lalibela, sculpted it in Narbonne, or narrated it on the Scottish island of Iona.

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