



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO

# LALIBELA

# LALIBELA

A historical guide to the eighth wonder of the world, the beautiful churches of Lalibela. Here they are described in details and illustrated in the accurate etchings of Lino Bianchi Barriviera.

Lalibela continues hiding secrets and scholars are still divided on whether the churches were designed to represent the powerful monarch's reign, reproduce the holy site of Jerusalem, or communicate religious beliefs.

However, they are so exquisitely carved in the red stone of Lasta - a remote area in Ethiopia protected by inaccessible walls of mountains - that visitors can believe as real the legend that they were hewn out of the rock by angels



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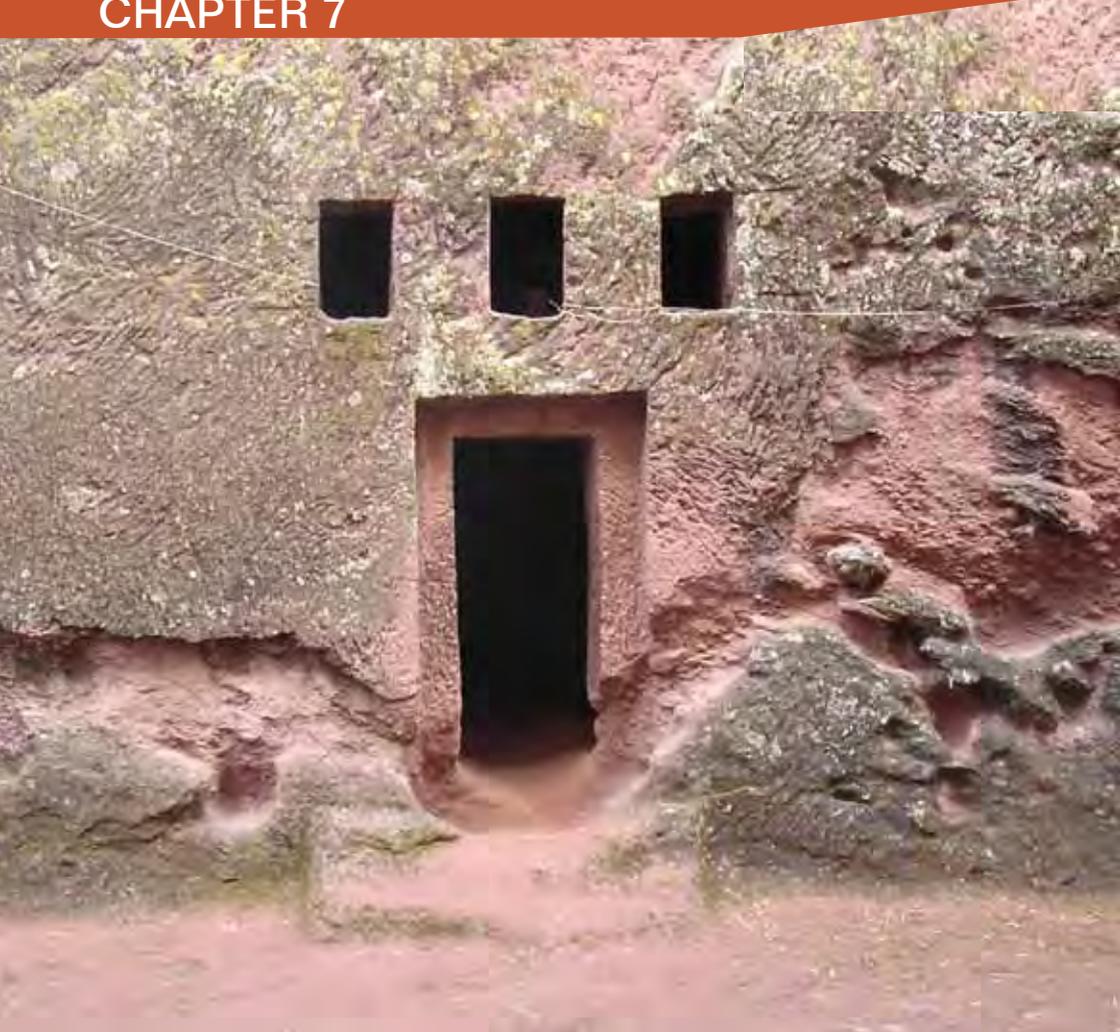
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# SECOND GROUP

## CHAPTER 7



The complex includes Biet Abba Libanos; Biet Emmanuel; Biet Mercurios; Biet Lehem; and Biet Gabriel Raphael.

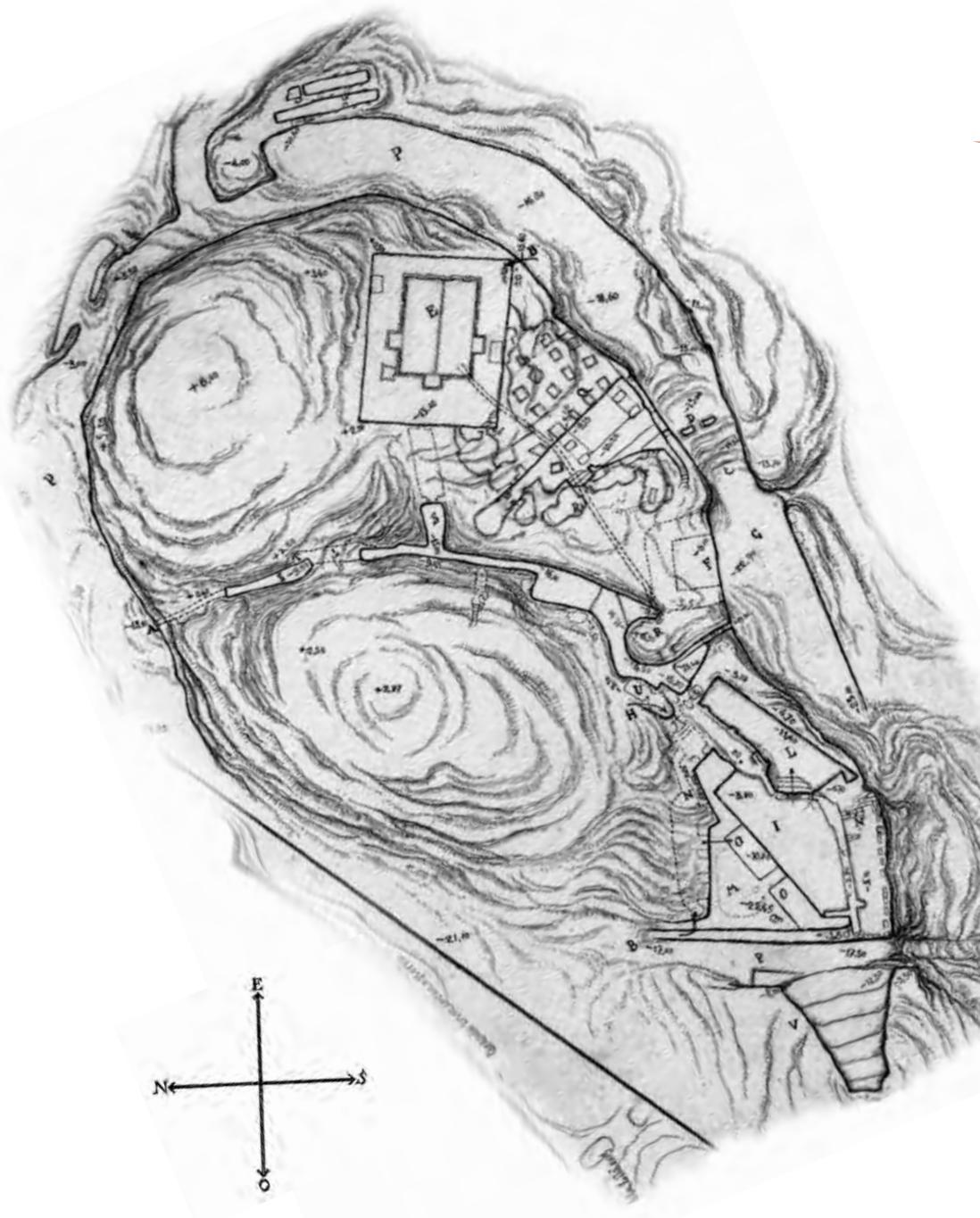
The second group of churches lies in a big trench that seems to be part of a stronghold. Bianchi Barriviera says: 'From a distance one can see only a crowd of large trees scattered upon a rounded hill that almost appears to be the continuation, to the north, of the main slope of the mountain. (...) Of the monuments which we are about to describe one can catch sight through the trees of only a bare cut rock wall, an arch, a slope of the terrain, nothing more'.<sup>1</sup> The trench surrounding the whole group is high and narrow in some parts, while in others it is wide enough to resemble a natural valley. It provides four access points to the complex (7.1). One is on the right hand side of the main path coming from the south-west (7.1: A). This access starts with an underground passage and continues with a trench. Here, after several metres, a short staircase on the left leads through a wooden door, now closed, to Biet Emmanuel (7.1: S). On the right, other steps lead to the upper rock, and from there to Biet Gabriel Raphael. The trench encounters Biet Lehem, accessible after crossing a short wooden bridge. Beyond the bridge, a narrow passage leads southwards, where a crack in the rock opens high onto the lower courtyard of Biet Abba Libanos. For those who are afraid to walk the long subterranean tunnel to Biet Lehem, this is a good alternative. It is a passage rarely shown to tourists by the local guides. Its access is often partly hidden by vegetation. We advise visitors to explore it at the beginning of their tour and then come back to restart the visit at a new entrance.

A second entrance to the second group also provides access to Biet Gabriel Raphael through a recently built bridge to the south-west (7.1: B).

A third entrance is located in the trench surrounding Biet Libanos to the south (7.1: G). The fourth and last entrance is through a short and narrow gallery hollowed out of the high wall at the south-east corner of Biet Emmanuel (7.1: B), probably for water drainage. This wide, imposing trench can be accessed through an extremely deep and narrow passage, which starts beside Biet Abba Libanos and runs along the southern outer trench.

A variety of inner passages and tunnels connects the second group of churches. The most remarkable is the long, completely dark underground passageway that links Biet Emmanuel with Biet Lehem.

It is controversial whether the complex was really conceived to be a holy place. On the one hand, some of the buildings do not resemble churches, but civil buildings, in that they do not display the east-west orientation and other religious architectural features found in the first group. Furthermore, the site



[L. B. Barriviera, Tab. 24 (detail), 1947, etching]

## 6. 1 Second Group, Planimetry

- A Entrance
- B Other entrances
- C Ancient entrance steps
- D Remains of pillars
- E Biet Emmanuel
- F Biet Abba Libanos
- G Courtyard in front of Abba Libanos
- H Access to Gabriel-Raphael
- I Biet Gabriel-Raphael
- L Gabriel-Raphael back courtyard
- M Gabriel-Raphael inferior courtyard
- N Remains of buildings
- O Platforms
- P Great external trench
- Q Biet Mercurios
- R Biet Lehem
- R' Underground gallery
- S Corridor
- T Excavation
- U Remains of stair
- V Excavation

appears to be more variously articulated and disordered than would be a carefully planned holy site. On the other hand, this group is said to have theological meanings representing hell, purgatory and heaven.<sup>2</sup> Or, as we have explained in the introduction to the first group of churches, the complex could represent the heavenly Jerusalem while the first group represents the earthly one.

The complex is of great interest to visitors, and requires time and patience to understand the intricate tangle of tunnels, galleries, and trenches that form the passages between the churches. It also represents a challenging and outstanding experience by offering the chance to descend into the “womb of the earth” and climb high toward the “roof of heaven”.

Having no certainty about which of the different theories is the proper one, we have chosen to describe this complex according to the most peculiar theory, the theological sequence. So we advise visitors to bypass the easier entrance, at the bridge that leads to Biet Gabriel Raphael, to turn around at west and then south and start the visit at Biet Abba Libanos (7.1: G). They will have the chance to follow all the secret passageways and tunnels until they reach the “roof of heaven”. Thus, our itinerary starts at Biet Abba Libanos.

### ; Biet Abba Libanos :

Church (external/internal)	
Length	9.5 m/7.8 m
Width	7.5 m/5.4 m
Height	7-7.5 m/6 m (central nave)

### **The Courtyard**

After reaching G (7.1: G), visitors can access the spacious courtyard through a short passage in the rock wall at south. The courtyard is a peaceful and cosy place among groves of trees that face an area outside the complex of churches. Since this church is partly hypogeal, three sides are connected to the rock bank, and a rock-hewn tunnel surrounds the church to the north, west and east (7.12; 7.13). High on the rock wall above the church on the left side, note the fissure that is the end of the gallery previously explored (7.1: A).

### **The Church**

This church offers a pleasant contrast to Biet Emmanuel, for its southern façade has a vertical decoration of pilaster-strips forming five long vertical niches. In

the second niche to the left – facing the façade – stands the Aksumite south door, at the top of four steps. Inside the other niches, Aksumite windows with cross decorations have been opened at door level. Three ogival arched windows are located in the upper part of the three central niches, while five square openings decorate the topmost level. The roof is not separated from the rock, but the other three hypogeal sides are detached by a tunnel. The main entrance of the church is located in the west tract of the tunnel.

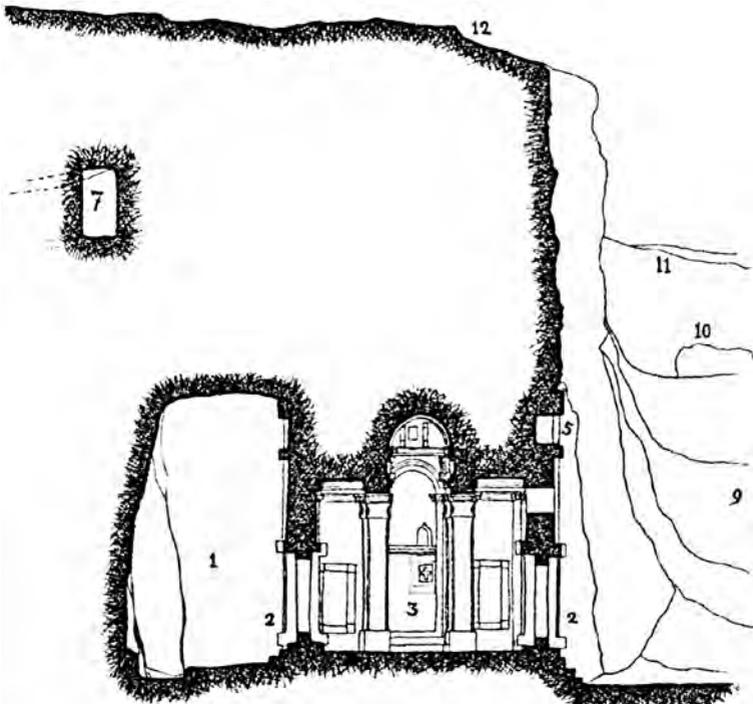
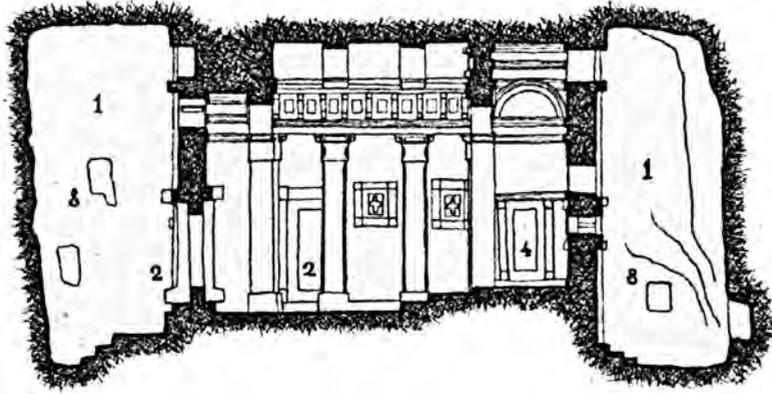
The interior is rectangular in plan with two lines of pillars forming three naves (7.4). The church is small and could seem unfinished: the front cell in the left nave is not excavated and the platform that supports the church is found only on three sides, the north, the east and the west, but not on the south side, which is now used as the main façade. This part of the platform could have been damaged and the stairs built later for an entry to the church.

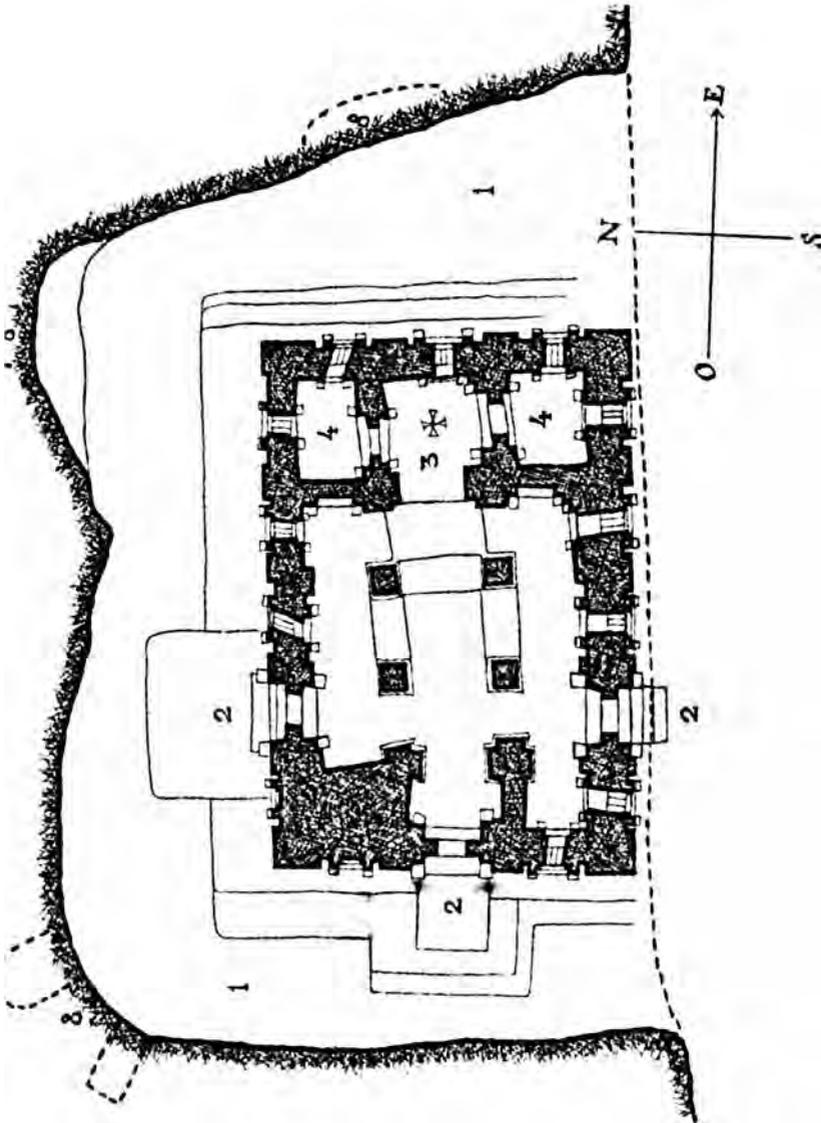
The central pillars in the interior have rounded-off corners and the cubic capitals are cut in an “almond” shape. They support architraves surmounted by a frieze, and vertical band friezes follow the vaults of the barrel vaulted ceiling in the central nave. The same band friezes also underline the space between the flat panels of the side naves’ ceiling. At the east end of each side nave there are blind Aksumite doors (7.2, 7.3). The central apse is more elevated, separated by a triumphal arch and round side arches, and covered by a round cupola. Altogether, the interior is finely and precisely sculpted with a harmonious appearance.

Exiting Biet Libanos, on the left-hand side one finds a few steps that descend to a trench that divides into two: at right it narrows and channels waters downhill; at left a double framed rectangular entrance admits to the trench that flanks Biet Abba Libanos. After a few metres, an astonishingly high and narrow rectangular gallery leads to the trench surrounding Biet Emmanuel (7.1: D).

### › Biet Emmanuel :

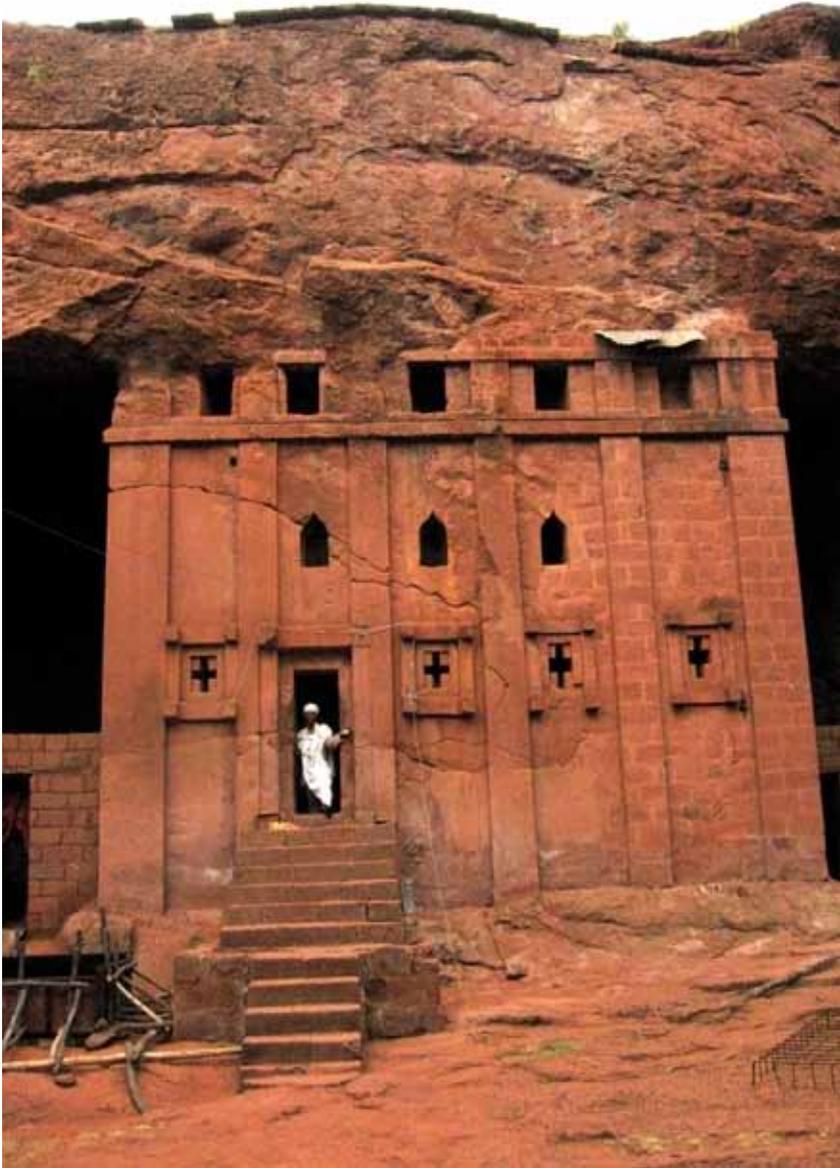
Courtyard		Church (external)	
Length	30 m	Length	17.5 m
Width	24 m	Width	11.5 m
Height	15.7 m max	Height	11 m



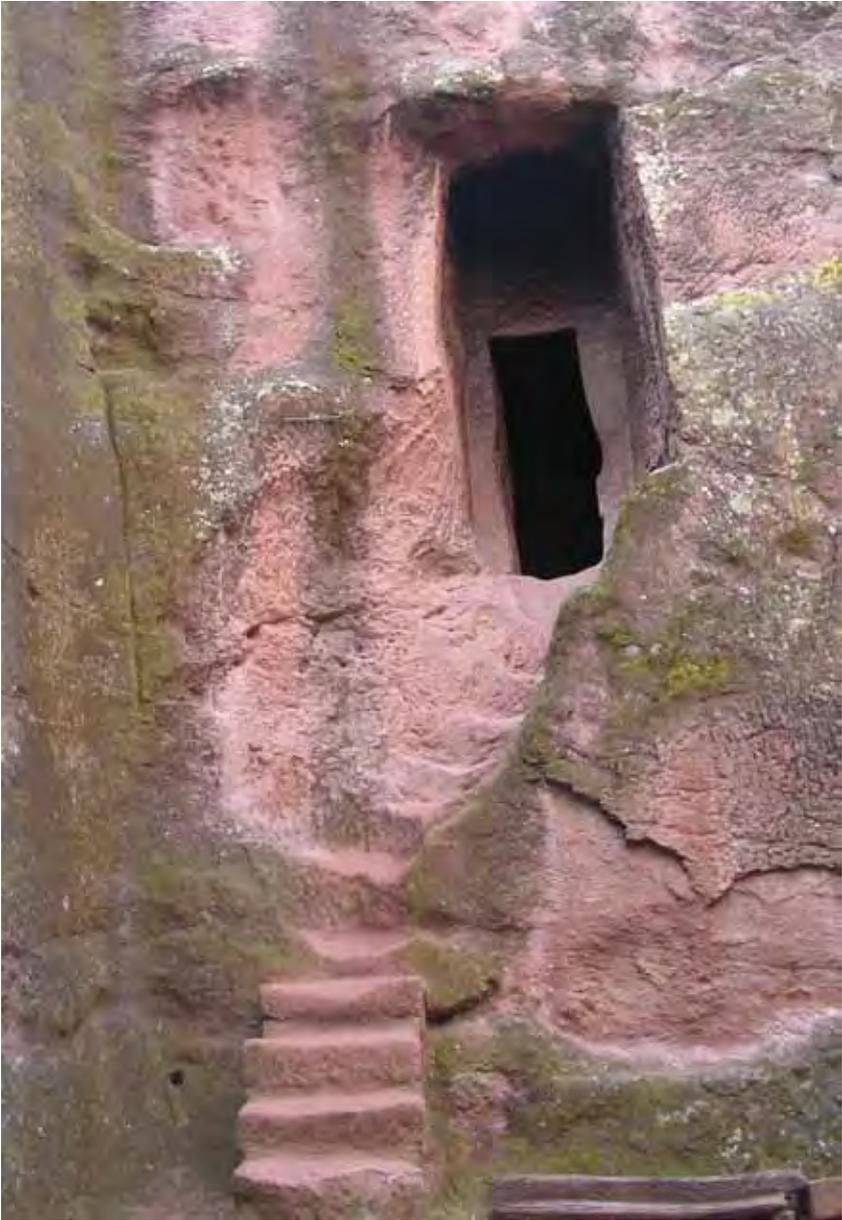


### 7.2, 7.3, 7.4 BIÊT ABBA LIBANOS, SECTIONS AND PLAN

1 Gallery; 2 entrances; 3 *tabot* cell; 4 side cells; 5 line of false windows; 6 gutter; 7 tunnel connecting Biêt Emmanuel, Biêt Mercurios and Biêt Lehem; 8 tombs; 9 ramp in the trench; 10 protruding rock; 11 wall of the perimetric trench; 12 superior edge of the rock. [L. B. Barriviera, Tab. 37 (detail), 1948, etching]



7.5 Façade of Biet Abba Libanos.



7.6 Passageway between Biet Emmanuel and Biet Mercurios.