

The Churches Carved Downwards

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 22 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about seven minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

Almost every building you have ever seen was made by adding. Stones go on top of stones, beams across walls, tiles over beams. In the Ethiopian highlands, at a town two and a half thousand metres above the sea, eleven churches were made the opposite way. Nothing was added to them at all. They were made by taking rock away.

The town is Lalibela, and the churches are usually dated to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when a king of the Zagwe dynasty gave the place his name. The ground there is a soft red volcanic rock called tuff — firm enough to hold a shape, soft enough to cut with iron tools. The builders began on the open surface. They carved a deep trench in a square or rectangle, leaving an island of untouched rock standing in the middle. Then they worked inwards and downwards into that island, hollowing out a nave, aisles, pillars, windows, doorways and a roof, until a church stood free inside its pit.

This gives the place an upside-down feel that photographs never quite explain. You do not walk up steps to a door. You walk across a dusty plateau, come to the edge of a trench, look down, and there is a roof below your feet. Bete Medhane Alem, the largest of them, is cut from a single block and ringed by rows of square columns; it is generally described as the biggest monolithic church in the world.

The most photographed is Bete Giyorgis, the church of Saint George. It sits alone in a deep square shaft, and its plan is a cross with four equal arms, so that from the cliff above you look straight down onto a carved cross lying in the rock. Its windows, its mouldings and its stepped roof were all cut, never built.

The eleven churches fall into two main clusters, with a channelled watercourse running between them that is called the Yordanos — the Jordan. Tunnels, bridges and narrow trench-corridors connect one building to the next, and some of them are dark enough that visitors shuffle along with one hand on the wall. Drainage channels were cut into the rock as well, because a pit in the ground in a country with a heavy summer rainy season is a pit that fills with water.

An old local tradition holds that human workers cut by day and angels carried on through the night. The claim is easy to smile at, but it is worth asking what produced it. Carving a full church out of solid rock is slow, blind work. There is no scaffolding to see progress on, no stack of finished stone to measure, and above all no way to correct a mistake: every cut is final, and a pillar removed cannot be put back. A column standing in exactly the right place, several metres below the level of the surrounding fields, does begin to look like something other than ordinary labour.

Lalibela was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1978, and parts of the site now shelter under large protective canopies while conservators argue about erosion. But it has never become a ruin or an exhibit. The churches are still parish churches. Priests keep them, pilgrims come in their thousands at Genna, the Ethiopian Christmas on the seventh of January, and the trenches that visitors photograph by day fill at night with the sound of chanting from rooms carved out of a hillside eight hundred years ago.

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about the churches of Lalibela — how they were made, what they look like, and how they are used now. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- 1 How many churches are there at Lalibela, and in which year was the site added to the UNESCO World Heritage list?

- ② Why did the builders have to cut drainage channels into the rock?

- ### 3 Why is carving a church riskier work than building one from blocks?

- 4 Bete Medhane Alem is called a monolithic church. Judging from the passage, what does monolithic mean here?

- 5 How does the writer treat the tradition that angels worked through the night, and what does that treatment tell you about the writer's attitude?

- 6 Lalibela is both a World Heritage site and a set of working parish churches. Weigh up how well those two roles sit together, using what the passage tells you.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • There are eleven churches. The site was added to the list in 1978.
- ☐ 2 • Because each church stands at the bottom of a pit or trench below ground level, and the region has a heavy summer rainy season. Without channels to carry water away, the trenches would simply fill up.
- ☐ 3 • Because nothing can be undone. A builder who sets a block badly can lift it out and lay it again, but rock that has been cut away cannot be put back, so every mistake in a carved church is permanent and the whole plan has to be right before the first cut.
- ☐ 4 • It means made from one single piece of stone. The church was cut out of a single block of rock rather than assembled from separate stones, so its walls, pillars and roof are all part of the same mass.
- ☐ 5 • The writer neither accepts the story nor dismisses it, admitting it is easy to smile at and then asking seriously what produced it. The attitude is respectful curiosity: by listing how slow, blind and unforgiving the carving was, the writer suggests the legend is a fair reaction to work that genuinely looks impossible.
- ☐ 6 • They support each other in some ways and pull against each other in others. Heritage status brings conservators, funding and protective canopies, which may be the only thing holding back erosion in soft tuff. It also brings crowds of visitors and arguments about how to treat the buildings. Being a living church is what has kept the site whole and cared for rather than abandoned as a ruin, but it also means the churches cannot simply be sealed off and preserved, because priests and pilgrims need to use them. The passage seems to think the living use is the more important of the two, since it is what has carried the buildings through eight centuries.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Interleaving

When you have several similar things to learn — eleven churches, a set of dates, a list of formulas — do not work through them one at a time until each is perfect. Shuffle them. Test yourself on Bete Giyorgis, then a date, then the drainage, then back to a church. Mixing feels messier and slower than blocking, and that is exactly why it works: you are practising the thing you actually need, which is telling similar items apart.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already mix your practice rather than repeating one thing over and over — in a sport, an instrument, a game? How does it feel different from drilling a single move?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.