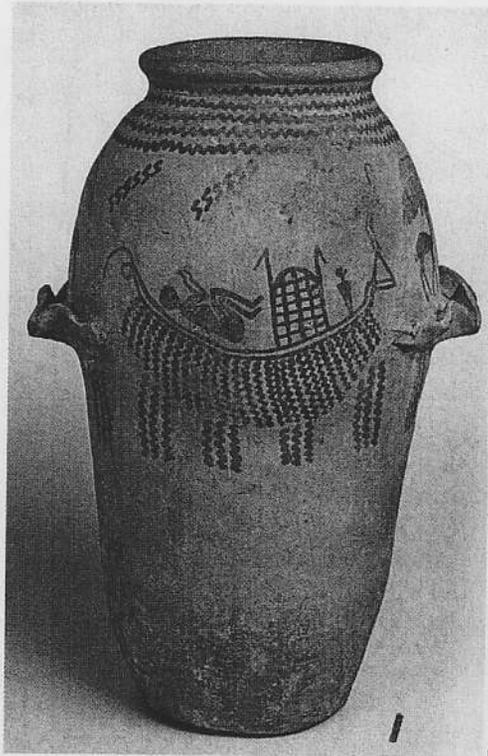


## Harrogate's Hidden Treasures

**A**n Egyptian vase dismissed as a fake and relegated to storage for 30 years is actually an important Predynastic artifact, according to curators at the Royal Pump Room Museum in Harrogate, England. The 5,000-year-old vase depicts what may be a burial scene, with a person curled up in a fetal position in a boat and surrounded by palm trees, an ibex, and birds. The vase dates to a time when the Egyptians had just begun mummifying their dead, making it a potentially significant discovery.

Curators at the museum, which primarily showcases Harrogate's past as a spa town for nineteenth-century aristocrats, discovered the vase while preparing an exhibition of supposed Egyptian fakes from a collection of artifacts bequeathed to the museum in 1969 by a wealthy local farmer. Having considered the vase "too good to be true," they were surprised to learn that it was genuine—as were all but one of the farmer's objects.



Courtesy Harrogate Museums & Arts, Harrogate Borough Council



EPA/Horst Ossinger/Landow

**A third-century Roman rest stop was discovered during construction of a bus station in the German city of Neuss, near Düsseldorf. The 4,000-square-foot building on the busy Xanten-Cologne road featured baths as well as a remarkably efficient heating system (wood in the area had become scarce after centuries of Roman occupation). Archaeologists observed that the rest stop also provided weary travelers with a lovely view of the Rhine.**

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**JOHN DOMINIC  
CROSSAN**  
and renowned archaeologist  
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# NEWS

## Medieval Houses of God, or Ancient Fortresses?

**I**nvestigations in Lalibela, Ethiopia, are revealing that Africa's most important historical Christian site is much older than previously thought. Up until now, scholars have regarded the spectacular complex of 11 rock-cut churches as dating from around A.D. 1200, but new survey work carried out by a British archaeologist suggests that three of the churches may have originally been "built" half a millennium earlier as fortifications or other structures in the waning days of the Axumite Empire.

"The discovery will completely change the way historians perceive the origins of Africa's most famous indigenous Christian site," says David Phillipson, professor of African archaeology at Cambridge University. His research, due to be fully published next year, suggests that two of the churches, those of Merkurios (a local Ethiopian saint) and the archangel Gabriel, were initially carved out of the rock as some sort of elite palace or fortress complex. A third structure created in that same early period later became the church of Dangel (the Virgin Martyrs). The Merkurios and Gabriel structures were built in highly defensible positions and may well have been the core of a fortified



Courtesy Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, Cambridge

complex created during the politically unstable period that saw the disintegration of the Axumite Empire in the mid-seventh century A.D. At its peak in the third to sixth centuries A.D., that empire controlled much of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, and at times Yemen and even part of the Nile Valley.

Phillipson bases his new chronology of Lalibela on the monuments' archi-

**A Cambridge archaeologist has redated the church of the archangel Gabriel, previously believed to have been carved from the rock at Lalibela, Ethiopia, around A.D. 1200, to between A.D. 600 and 800. The church may originally have been built as a fortress.**

tectural styles, their complex structural interrelationships, and comparisons with other monuments in Ethiopia. He believes that at least four of the site's 11 churches were constructed specifically as places of worship in the tenth or eleventh century, with a further three or four built by the mid-thirteenth century. According to Phillipson, it now seems that that late period was simply the time when the complex attained its greatest religious importance, and not when it was begun.

This new research also demonstrates a substantial continuity between the Axumite civilization, which adopted Christianity in the fourth century, and that of medieval Ethiopia. In fact, a number of architectural features found in Axumite churches were employed in the design of Lalibela's tenth- and eleventh-century rock-cut churches.

—DAVID KEYS



**Archaeologists excavate the remains of Martin Luther's cellar kitchen at his house in Wittenberg, eastern Germany. The remains of the kitchen were discovered when the garden of the reformer's home was redesigned. Martin Luther lived in the house from 1521 until his death in 1546.**

Walterraud GmbH/Archiv/EPA/Arndt

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