

Collection « Croisades Tardives », vol. 6

Benjamin WEBER (dir.)

## **Croisades en Afrique**

**Les expéditions occidentales à destination  
du continent africain, XIII<sup>e</sup>-XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles**

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## Crusading Threats? Ethiopian-Egyptian Relations in the 1440s

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On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1456, Pope Callixtus III addressed a letter to a ruler far outside his realm of ecclesiastical influence –*aṣe Zār'a Ya'əqob*, king of Solomonian Christian Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>. The lengthy letter to the «beloved son in Christ, Zarajacob, king of the Ethiopian realms»<sup>2</sup> served a singular purpose: the Pope planned to unite all «rulers of the world who make profession to Jesus the Crucified» in a crusade against the Turks and those who occupied the realms of the faithful in the Holy Land – not just in light of the terrible «calamity brought over the city of Constantinople»<sup>3</sup>, but also to fight the recent advancements of the Ottomans in the Balkans. The Ethiopian *negus* –king– was to play a crucial role in this pan-Christian endeavour. The strategically valuable location of his

<sup>1</sup> King of Ethiopia between 1434-1464; for a biographical overview and bibliography, see Marie-Laure DERAT and Steven KAPLAN, «Zār'a Ya'əqob», in A. Bausi (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 5, Y-Z, Wiesbaden, 2014, pp. 146-50.

<sup>2</sup> «*Charissimo in Christo filio Zarajacob Regni Aethiopiae Regi illustri salutem [...]*», in Osvaldo Raineri (ed.), *Lettere Tra I Pontefici Romani E I Principi Etiopici (Sec. XII-XX). Versioni E Integrazioni*, Città del Vaticano, 2005, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> «*[...] et affecti memoria calamitatis urbis Constantinopolitanae, [...] votum emisimus belli suscipiendi contra Turcum, et omnes terrarum fidelium occupatores. [...] Ex tunc etiam tuae serenitati significamus et amicitiam cum felicitis recordationis Eugenio Papa IV praedecessore nostro initam, nedum continuare, sed in unitate sanctae fidei augere velle polliciti fuimus, existimantes illam esse veram amicitiam [...]*», in *Ibid.*, p. 36. All translations from Latin are my own.



empire, in the eyes of the pope, enabled Zär'a Ya'eqob to deal an unexpected, deathly blow to the «enemies of Christ»:

For under your great command there is not only a great army under God, but also the river of the Nile, whose flood is providing the enemy's food supplies, which out of your own free will you could deny them<sup>4</sup>.

With Constantinople having fallen three years before, the Ottomans had recently advanced as far as Belgrade. They had been beaten back temporarily, but a solution needed to be found to curtail any further advancement towards the Latin Christian heartlands. Haste was necessary, the Pope urged the *negus*. Zär'a Ya'eqob could do his part by supporting the papal plans and contact a certain Ludovico, the former cardinal priest of San Lorenzo in Rome. Now the legate and military strategist for the papal fleet, Ludovico could already be found in the eastern Mediterranean<sup>5</sup> –if only the *negus* were to contact him.

The fact that Pope Callixtus III would so cordially address himself to an Ethiopian *negus* was not unprecedented for Ethiopian-Latin relations in the 15th-century: while this letter of 1456 is indeed Callixtus' first missive to an Ethiopian sovereign, two Ethiopian delegations had visited his predecessor, Pope Nicholas V, in 1450<sup>6</sup>. Nicholas' predecessor Pope Eugenius IV,

<sup>4</sup> «[...] *sub tuo etenim sublimi imperio, non solum Deus magnos exercitus, sed flumen Nili esse voluit, cuius inundatione tellus hostibus alimenta ministrat, quibus pro tuo arbitrio denegare potes* », in *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> «[...] *eos ipsos nuntios dirigere poterit ad dilectum filium nostrum Ludovicum tituli S Laurentii in Damaso presbyterum Cardinalem, nunc classis maritimae legatum in partibus orientalibus jam commorantem* », in *Ibid.*, p. 37. On this episode, see also Matteo SALVADORE, *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402-1555*, Londres-New-York, 2017, pp. 65-66; Benjamin WEBER, «An Incomplete Integration into the *Orbis Christianus*. Relations and Misunderstandings between the Papacy and Ethiopia (1237-1456)», *Medieval Encounters*, 21 (2015), pp. 232-249, here pp. 246-248; Verena KREBS, «Windows onto the World: Culture Contacts and Western Christian Art in Ethiopia, 1402-1543», PhD Thesis, Konstanz and Mekelle, 2014, pp. 82-85.

<sup>6</sup> For an edition of primary sources in regards to these delegations, see Charles-Martial DE WITTE, «Une Ambassade éthiopienne à Rome en 1450», *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 22 (1956), pp. 286-98; see also Tadesse TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 264-265; V. KREBS, *Windows onto the World...*, pp. 73-81.

meanwhile, had hosted several Ethiopian monks from Jerusalem at the Council of Florence<sup>7</sup>. To the Latin mind, the door for rapprochement between the Church of Rome and the Ethiopians had recently become wide open<sup>8</sup>.

The Latin Christian hope to involve Ethiopians in a shared crusade against the Muslims, and Ethiopians helping Latin Christian war efforts by blocking the Nile, was similarly far from new by 1458. In a companion chapter in this volume, Benjamin Weber examines the origin of this idea in European thought. By the mid-15th-century, the notion had migrated from literature to politics, traceable in a series of increasingly anxious letters from Alfonso V of Aragon to *negus* Zär'a Ya'eqob written between September 1450 and July 1453<sup>9</sup>. Alfonso prompted the *negus* to «secure the roads»<sup>10</sup> between his own realm and the Solomonic kingdom –meaning Muslim Egypt– and then proceeded to ask the Ethiopian king to join his fight against the Muslim infidels by blocking the

<sup>7</sup> Bartolomeo NOGARA (ed.), *Scritti Inediti E Rari Di Biondo Flavio*, Rome, 1927, pp. 19-23; O. RAINERI, *Lettere Tra I Pontefici...*, sec. 6; Lucas WADDING, *Annales Minorum Seu Trium Ordinum a S. Francisco Institutorum*, vol. 11, Rome, 1734, pp. 220-222; Julian PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy to Cairo of 1443. A Trier Manuscript of Gandulphus' Report with an English Translation», *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 13 (1975), pp. 133-140, here p. 137; see also B. WEBER, «An Incomplete Integration...»; Samantha KELLY, «Ewostateans at the Council of Florence (1441): Diplomatic Implications between Ethiopia, Europe, Jerusalem and Cairo», *Afriques* (2016), <http://afriques.revues.org/1858>; V. KREBS, *Windows onto the World...*, pp. 211-218.

<sup>8</sup> Also alluded to in the letter itself; see O. RAINERI, *Lettere Tra I Pontefici...*, pp. 35-38. For an evaluation of these contacts, see B. WEBER, «An Incomplete Integration...»; *Id.*, «Gli Etiopi a Roma Nel Quattrocento: Ambasciatori Politici, Negoziatori Religiosi o Pellegrini?», *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Moyen Âge*, 125 (2013), <http://mefrm.revues.org/1036>; Adam KNOBLER, *Mythology and Diplomacy in the Age of Exploration*, Leiden, 2017, pp. 40-41; M. SALVADORE, *The African Prester...*, pp. 58-61.

<sup>9</sup> See Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2661, fol. 20v and Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2658, fol. 57v. For an early transcription and translation of the letters, see Francesco CERONE, «La Politica Orientale Di Alfonso Di Aragona», *Archivio Storico per Le Province Napoletane*, 27 (1902), pp. 3-93.

<sup>10</sup> «[...] *como venne mandariamo assai e tanti quanti voi ne volisseno se lo viaggio fosse sicuro e senza pericolo loquali non esse e chiaro per piu respecti* [...]», Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2658, fol. 57v.

waters of the Nile<sup>11</sup>. By July 1453, Alfonso all but pleaded with the Ethiopian ruler to return his envoy, his confidante and chamberlain Antonio Martinez, *quamprimum* – «as soon as possible». Constantinople had fallen, and time had become of the essence. The letters indicate that Alfonso had received no reply from the Ethiopian ruler over the course of the three years<sup>12</sup>. Yet another three years later, Callixtus III entrusted his rousing letter to Ethiopian monks, presumably to ensure a safe and speedy delivery to Ethiopia. It, too, remained unanswered. On the subject of Latin Christian crusading in the Mediterranean,

<sup>11</sup> The earliest of the letters dates to 18<sup>th</sup> September 1450; here, Alfonso writes: «[...] *ve pregamo vogliare essere sollicito in fare mancare le aqua che corrono al Alcayre e mettere gente al vestre frontere lequalcose como per vestra excellentia serimo* [...] *advisato essere facte e messe in ordine decontamente ne metterimo*», Archivo de la Corona de Aragón, Ms. 2658, fol. 57v. The second letter is dated to 28<sup>th</sup> January 1452, and the third 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1453, mere weeks after the Fall of Constantinople. It remains unclear whether the letters ever reached the Ethiopian highlands; only copies of the letters as well as safe conducts allowing for a rough approximate travel route of the emissaries remain in Aragonese archives.

<sup>12</sup> While it is unclear if the Aragonese messengers reached their destination or died on the way, we know that Ethiopian rulers were in constant contacts with the Ethiopians present in the Holy Land and that missives from the Latin world – amongst them a copy of a Bull of the Union from 1441 – successfully reached the Ethiopian highlands in a timely fashion in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A number of Ethiopian pilgrims are accounted for in Europe and specifically Rome in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century; they were asked by various popes to carry messages back to the *negus*. Callisto III himself had tasked the Ethiopians Paul and Theodore to deliver his letter to the Ethiopian *negus* in December 1456. On Ethiopian pilgrims in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, see Renato LEFÈVRE, «Documenti Pontifici Sui Rapporti Con L'Etiopia Nei Secoli XV e XVI», *Rassegna Di Studi Etiopici*, 5 (1946), pp. 17–41; Renato LEFÈVRE, «Note su alcuni pellegrini Etiopi in Roma al tempo di Leone X», *Rassegna Di Studi Etiopici*, 21 (1965), pp. 16–26; Renato LEFÈVRE, «Presenze Etiopiche in Italia Prima Del Concilio Di Firenze Del 1439», *Rassegna Di Studi Etiopici*, 23 (1967), pp. 5–26; S. KELLY, «Ewostateans at the Council...»; B. WEBER, «Gli Etiopi a Roma...»; B. WEBER, «Vrais et faux Éthiopiens en Occident au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle? Du bon usage des connexions», *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 27 (2012), pp. 107–126; on Ethiopian contacts with the Holy Land, see Enrico CERULLI, *Etiopi in Palestina: Storia Della Comunità Etiopica Di Gerusalemme*, vol. I, Rome, 1943 and for a recent bibliography as well as notes on the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem, see S. KELLY, «The Curious Case of Ethiopic Chaldean: Fraud, Philology and Cultural (Mis)Understandings in European Conceptions of Ethiopia», *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68 (2015), pp. 1227–1264; S. KELLY, «Ewostateans at the Council...».

and enacting European fantasies of a blockage of the Nile to starve Egypt, Zär'a Ya'eqob remained silent.

Curiously enough, by the time Latin sovereigns both worldly and ecclesiastical were urging the *negus* to take action, *aše* Zär'a Ya'eqob himself had just settled a case of Egyptian-Ethiopian diplomacy involving the very same threats Latin rulers wanted him to pursue, threatening to take up a crusade against Mamluk Egypt and its Muslim inhabitants, as well as threatening to interrupt the flow of the Nile<sup>13</sup>. A series of letters from Ethiopia, Egypt and the Latins provide insight into the Ethiopian approach towards crusading in the south-eastern Mediterranean, and serve as testimony to the *belief* on both sides that that the river Nile could potentially be vulnerable to political attacks. The following chapter will examine this episode of Ethiopian-Egyptian sabre-rattling, seeing that it sheds some light onto the Ethiopian-Egyptian *realpolitik* of crusading in North-East Africa during the 1440s. The subsequent pages will show that these exchanges – and the underlying policies – had little to do with Latin Christian crusading hopes in Africa. Yet, they most probably helped to reinforce, and even fuel, these hopes in Western Europe at the same time. This Ethiopian-Mamluk diplomatic dispute took place in the years directly leading up to Alfonso's and Callixtus' above-mentioned letters, making the apparent dismissal of Latin Crusading hopes by the Ethiopian *negus* all the more remarkable.

### Interconnected Realms: Religion, Trade and the Nile between Ethiopia and Egypt

The Solomonic dynasty ruling Ethiopia from the late 13<sup>th</sup>-century to the *jihad* of Imam Ahmed coincided largely with the reign of the Mamluk dynasties of Egypt. From their seat in Cairo, the Mamluk Sultans held sovereignty not only over Egypt, but also over the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem. The

<sup>13</sup> Haggai ERLICH, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile*, Boulder, 2002, pp. 3, 46; Sebastian EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief Des Negus Zara Jakob Vom Jahre 1447 Wegen Der Christenverfolgung In Palästina Und Ägypten», *Das Heilige Land*, 83 (1939), pp. 205–240.

Mamluks governed a religiously diverse swath of the late medieval world –with sizeable *dhimmi* communities of Jews and Christians. Well into the 15th-century, Mamluk Egypt retained a substantial Coptic Christian populace.

During their Christianisation in late antiquity, the Ethiopian monarchs had adopted the miaphysite Christological formula of the Oriental Orthodox churches, linking them with the Copts of Egypt, the Syrian, Armenian and Malankara Orthodox Christians. From its inception in the 4th-century to 1950<sup>14</sup>, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church constituted *de facto* a bishopric of the Coptic Church. Only the Coptic Patriarch in Alexandria could dispatch a new bishop –called the *abun*– to Ethiopia, seeing that the Egyptian *abuns* in Ethiopia were under oath never to consecrate bishops who could have acted as their successors in Ethiopia. Only this Egyptian monk, this *abun*, was able to consecrate clergy in Ethiopia, and only he could lead the rites for any royal coronation<sup>15</sup>. The peculiar make-up of Christianity in Ethiopia thus retained that realm's dependency on the Coptic Church, and required Ethiopian rulers to remain on at least pragmatically friendly terms with the various rulers of Egypt over the span of one and a half thousand years.

Medieval Ethiopia was not only connected to Egypt by this bond of faith, however. Both realms were adjacent to the Red Sea and tapping into its valuable long-distance trade routes, which connected the Mediterranean with

<sup>14</sup> Haggai ERLICH and Gianfranco FIACCADORI, «Egypt, Relations with», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, D-Ha, Wiesbaden, 2005, pp. 240-41, here p. 240.

<sup>15</sup> Seeing that the role of the *abun* included attending and even administering the coronations of kings as well as to provide legitimacy to Ethiopia's rulers through his episcopal authority, Haggai Erlich concluded that the Egyptian *abun* provided the Ethiopian rulers with 'patriarchal' legitimacy; H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, pp. 19-20. Erlich also postulates that the majority of the *abuns* sent to Ethiopia, Arabic-speaking Egyptian Coptic monks, were already of advanced age and hardly prepared to lead a church in a far-off country, particularly in a language they very rarely managed to master sufficiently, and with important ritual differences not compatible with Coptic traditions; cf. *Ibid.* pp. 20-22. Also see Denis NOSNITSIN, «Abunä», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, A-C, Wiesbaden, 2003, p. 56.

the Indian Ocean<sup>16</sup>. The main export goods of Solomonian Ethiopia were first and foremost gold, followed by *wars* –a plant used for yellow dye– and other commodities such as ivory, civet cats –their musk was coveted for perfume production– and slaves<sup>17</sup>. These goods were in demand far beyond its borders, valued especially in the Muslim world. Egypt, too, benefitted much from accessing these networks: an established route serving both traders and pilgrims crossed overland from the Red Sea at Aidhab to the Nubian Desert, and from thence down the Nile to Cairo.

Comparatively much ink has been spilt on the interconnectedness and relations of the North-East African territories traversed by the river Nile<sup>18</sup>. The Blue Nile or *Abbay* joins the White Nile in Khartoum to form the longest river on Earth, flowing through three modern-day states: Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. The course of the Nile had a major impact on the different territories it irrigated; beyond serving as a major transport and trade route in pre-modern times, its annual floods still serve to ensure the very existence of Egyptian agriculture in the Nile Valley. Haggai Erlich posits that Egyptian rulers realised very early that the annual floods of the Nile were a gift from Ethiopia<sup>19</sup>; and

<sup>16</sup> For a first investigation on Ethiopia's relation to Egypt and the Red Sea trade networks, see Mordechai ABIR, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea. The Rise and Decline of the Solomonian Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region*, London, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> As stated by the Arab chronicler of the «Conquest of Abyssinia»; Paul Lester STENHOUSE, and Richard PANKHURST (ed.), *Futūḥ Al-Habaša: The Conquest of Abyssinia*, Hollywood, 2005, p. 42. Research on the economic history of Ethiopia prior to 1800 remains very limited; see the introduction to Richard PANKHURST, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935*, Addis Ababa, 1968 and, for medieval Ethiopia, the first chapters of M. ABIR, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea...*

<sup>18</sup> The historian Haggai Erlich remains at this point the authority on this area, having devoted several monographs to the topic. His studies mainly focus on the time from the 18th-century onwards, studying the inter-faith relations between Ethiopia, Egypt, Somalia and Sudan in particular: Haggai ERLICH, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, Boulder, 1994; Haggai ERLICH and Israel GERSHONI (ed.), *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, Boulder, 1999; for an extensive bibliography on Ethiopian-Egyptian pre-modern relations, see H. ERLICH and G. FIACCADORI, «Egypt, Relations with», p. 241; H. ERLICH, «Mamluks», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, pp. 714-715.

<sup>19</sup> H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, pp. 3-8.

indeed, the idea of Ethiopia cutting of Egypt's water supply for political leverage is far from being a Latin Christian brainchild. A 13th-century Coptic author<sup>20</sup> states that during the reign of the Fatimid caliph Al-Musta'li<sup>21</sup> and especially the year 1089 or 1090<sup>22</sup>, the floodwaters of the Nile had failed to sufficiently irrigate Egypt, and that the 11<sup>th</sup>-century caliph begged the Ethiopian ruler to restore the flow of the Nile<sup>23</sup>. The Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi<sup>24</sup> describes how in the Islamic month of Muharram in the year 726 –equalling December 1325– the Mamluk Sultan Nasir ad-Din Muhammad<sup>25</sup> received a letter from «the king of Ethiopia», who reprimanded Muhammad for the wanton destruction of churches and mistreatment of Christians in Mamluk

<sup>20</sup> By Jirjis al-Makin, Coptic Christian historian, 1205-1273; the source in question only survives in the much later (1625) Latin translation from the Arabic made by Thomas Erpenius for Frederick V of the Palatinate, former King of Bohemia. The passage in question runs: «tempore illius Nilus quam plurimum decrevit, ita ut Mustansirus illum in Aethiopiam mitteret cum muneribus et ornamentis multis; eique obviam venit Rex eius, et cum reverenter eum excepisset, quaesivit, qua de causa eo venisset, et exposuit illi qui Nilo Aegypti aquae penuria laborante magnum terrae eius et incolis damnum impenderet. Itaque diverticulum recludi inssit ut aqua inde ad Aegyptios deflueret, propterea quod eo usque Patriarcha venisset: et accrevit Nilus una nocte ad tria brachia, ita ut eo impleto campi Aegypti irrigati atque consiti fuerint. Magnoque cum honore rediit Patriarcha in Aegyptum et Princeps Mustansirus beneficijs illum et dignitatibus ornavit», Girgis AL-MAKIN, *Historia Saracenica, qua Res Gestae Muslimorum Inde a Muhammede Arabe, Usque Ad Initium Imperii Atabacae ... Explicantur*, Leiden, 1625, pp. 358-59. It should be noted that that Al-Makin lived a hundred years after the event in question; moreover, the much later transmission history has frequently not been taken into account; cf. Richard PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control of the Nile», in H. Erlich and I. Gershoni (ed.), *The Nile. Histories, Cultures, Myths*, Boulder, 2000, pp. 25-37, here p. 26, p. 36; H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Abū'l-Qāsim Aḥmad al-Musta'li bil-Lāh, ninth Fatimid caliph of Egypt, 1074-1101.

<sup>22</sup> Also compare Benjamin Weber's article in this volume on the reception of these events in Latin Christian thought.

<sup>23</sup> R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», p. 26; H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-Qādir ibn Muḥammad al-Maqrīzī, Egyptian historian, 1364-1442.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Malik an-Nasir Nasir ad-Din Muhammad ibn Qalawun, Mamluk sultan of the Bahri dynasty, ruled Egypt for three reigns: 1294, 1299-1309, 1310-1341.

territories. This Ethiopian king –aṣṣe 'Amdä Şəyon<sup>26</sup>– threatened not just to demolish the mosques in his own realms, but also to «intercept the course of the Nile»<sup>27</sup>. According to Al-Maqrizi, the Mamluk Sultan responded with laughter –and a dismissal of the envoys<sup>28</sup>.

Some five years later, in 1332, the military campaigns of *negus* Amdä Şəyon were to bring the territory surrounding Lake Tana under the control of the Solomonic Christian Empire in 1332. This gave 'Amdä Şəyon and his successors indeed control over the region in which the Blue Nile rose, if not necessarily over the river itself<sup>29</sup>. There is no archaeological indication that any medieval Ethiopian sovereign ever possessed –or attempted– to actively reroute or intercept the course of the Nile<sup>30</sup>. There is also no textual evidence of this possibility from Ethiopia at this time; given the fact that all early texts have come down to us from Egypt, it can not be discounted that the idea of Solomonic control over the river was more of an expression of Coptic dreams

<sup>26</sup> King of Ethiopia between 1314-1344; for a biographical overview and bibliography, see Joanna MANTEL-NIECKO and Denis NOSNITSIN, «'Amdä Şəyon I», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, A-C, Wiesbaden, 2003, pp. 227-29.

<sup>27</sup> Étienne QUATREMÈRE (ed.), *Mémoires Géographiques et Historiques Sur l'Égypte et Sur Quelques Contrées Voisines*, Paris, 1811, p. 275.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Manfred KROPP, *Der Siegreiche Feldzug Des Königs Amda-Seyon Gegen Die Muslime in Adal Im Jahre 1332 N. Cbr.*, Leuven, 1994, p. 6 between p. 6 already lists the governorships of the surrounding areas as part of the Ethiopian empire.

<sup>30</sup> The Scottish traveller James Bruce later wrote in his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, conducted between the years 1768-1773, that the Zagwe king Lalibāla had first threatened and then attempted to reroute the Nile to flow south- instead of northwards from the Ethiopian highlands in order to starve Egypt. Bruce gives the year «near about 1200» and a «great persecution in Egypt against the Christians» as reasoning for Lalibāla «undertaking to realize the favourite pretension of the Abyssinians, to the power of turning the Nile out of its course, so that it should no longer be the cause of the fertility of Egypt»; see James BRUCE, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile: In the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, & 1773*, Vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1790, pp. 529-530. Seeing that Bruce's account was written several hundred years after the reign of Lalibāla, and no other Ethiopian source thus far corroborates this claim, it should be treated with extreme caution. For an evaluation of the source, see R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», pp. 26-28.



—or Mamluk fears— rather than testament to geopolitical fact. Moreover, shortfalls of rain in the Ethiopian rainy seasons<sup>31</sup> appear as the far more likely source of explanation for insufficient amounts of water flooding the Nile Valley, causing the droughts attested to for the mid-9th- and first half of the 12th-century in Arab sources<sup>32</sup>. Meanwhile, for the 15th-century, Erlich has stated that Ethiopians and Mamluks both demonstrated some awareness of perceived mutual dependencies, particularly in relation to the river Nile, on both sides —and has argued that these Mamluk-Solomonic entanglements did not allow for too extreme diplomatic upset on both sides<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, no instance of actual warfare or military confrontation between Ethiopia and Mamluk Egypt is demonstrable. A body of primary sources dating to the middle of the 15th-century shows, however, that the ties of trade, religion and water that supposedly connected the two realms occasionally were tested —to their limits.

### From Gold to Iron and Steel: Zār'a Ya'eqob and Sayf-ad-Din Jaqmaq

The wheels for the particular case of sabre-rattling between the Ethiopian *negus* Zār'a Ya'eqob and the Mamluk Sultan Jaqmaq under consideration here were arguably set in motion in the year 1438. In the summer of that year, Sayf-ad-Din Jaqmaq<sup>34</sup> became the tenth Burji Mamluk ruler of Egypt —and ruler over all Mamluk territories in the Levant. Around the year 1440, the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, Yohannes XI, wrote to *aṣe* Zār'a Ya'eqob about the destruction

<sup>31</sup> Today, the long Ethiopian rainy season lasts from June to the end of September; a shorter one occurs in parts of the highlands between March and April. Historical accounts such as that of Pietre of Naples speak of a «winter season» lasting from «mid-May to mid-September»; Bertrandon de La Broquière, *Le Voyage D'outremer de Bertrandon de La Broquière: Premier Conseiller de Philippe Le Bon, Duc de Bourgogne*, ed. by Charles Henri Auguste Schefer, Paris, 1892, p. 145.

<sup>32</sup> Briefly mentioned in H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 41; R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> Erlich's view on «water ties» between Egypt and Ethiopia should be read with some caution, however, as the examination of the very same sources on which Erlich based his studies will show below; see H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, pp. 10-25.

<sup>34</sup> 1373-1453, like most sultans of his dynasty, he was a Circassian by birth, and a former slave.

of the famous church of Mitmaq on the order of the sultan<sup>35</sup>. The patriarch also drew the *negus*' attention to a sharp increase in violence against his flock, the Copts of Egypt —a Christian community still comprising a sizeable proportion of Egypt's population by the mid-15th-century<sup>36</sup>.

Zār'a Ya'eqob had acceded the Ethiopian throne in 1434, four years before Jaqmaq came to power<sup>37</sup>. The Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi relates how in the year 841 AH —(1437/38 CE)— Zār'a Ya'eqob had sent Jaqmaq's predecessor Barsbay<sup>38</sup> an amicable letter expressing his friendship, as well as presents of gold, civets and other precious objects. He also demanded the sultan to continue treating the Christians of his dominion well, and to respect their churches<sup>39</sup>. It stands to reason that the Ethiopian delegation had not just conveyed their emperor's good wishes to Barsbay, as by 1438, the year Jaqmaq was to accede the throne, Zār'a Ya'eqob had received not one, but two *abuns* from Egypt, *abunä* Gabre'el and *abunä* Mika'el<sup>40</sup>. It was the first time that two

<sup>35</sup> T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 261-62; Jules PERRUCHON (ed.), *Les Chroniques de Zar'a Yā'eqōb et de Ba'eda Māryām, rois d'Éthiopie de 1434 à 1478*, Paris, 1893, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Figures are hard to gauge. By the 11th-century, Copts still constituted the majority of the population in Fatimid Egypt; however, bouts of religious persecution in the 14th-century and numerous waves of bubonic plague (which had become endemic in Egypt) in the 15th-century did reduce their numbers. Scholars of religious history estimate that Coptic Christians still represented a sizeable minority of Egypt's population until the first half of the 15th century. For a discussion of problems estimating the Coptic population of Egypt in late medieval times, see Tamer EL-LEITHY, «Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293-1524 A.D.», Phd Thesis, Princeton, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> For a bibliography, see M.-L. DERAT and St. KAPLAN, «Zār'a Ya'eqob».

<sup>38</sup> Jaqmaq only succeeded to the throne on the 7th August 1438, which already falls into the year 842 according to the Islamic calendar.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Maqrizi, transl. in É. QUATREMÈRE (ed.), *Mémoires Géographiques...*, pp. 278-279; also see T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, p. 261.

<sup>40</sup> *Abuns* of Ethiopia from 1438 to most probably 1458, a date attested to for *abunä* Gäbre'el; Sevır CHERNETSOV, «Gäbre'el and Mika'el», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, D-Ha, Wiesbaden, 2005, p. 632. Also see T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 228-231; M.-L. DERAT, *Le Domaine des rois éthiopiens, 1270-1527: Espace, pouvoir et monarchisme*, Paris, 2003, p. 82.

Egyptian bishops had been sent to Ethiopia at once, and established Zär'a Ya'eqob's position as powerful *negus* with considerable ecclesiastical influence.

After 1440, when the Coptic Patriarch's letter reached the *negus* with its call for help, the seemingly quiet pact of understanding between Jaqmaq's predecessor and Zär'a Ya'eqob was no longer considered. With moreover one *abun* to spare, the scales of Ethiopian dependence on Mamluk goodwill had shifted: the survival of Ethiopian Christianity appeared secure for years, even decades, to come<sup>41</sup>. Zär'a Ya'eqob subsequently presented himself as a consummate champion of Coptic security in Mamluk Egypt and Christian welfare in the region, voicing his extreme displeasure with Egypt's treatment of its Christian subjects, and particularly the destruction of the Egyptian church of Mitmaq<sup>42</sup>. An Arabic source relates the *negus*' missive to Mamluk Sultan Jaqmaq, which reached Cairo in November 1443<sup>43</sup>. While courteously worded, Zär'a Ya'eqob condemns the Sultan's treatment of the Copts under his jurisdiction and urges the Sultan to «renew the understandings that existed between our predecessors»<sup>44</sup>. Should Jaqmaq fail to heed this warning, there would be consequences: Was not the Mamluk Sultan aware «of the Muslims under our government», Zär'a Ya'eqob enquired, and that «we are the rulers of their kings and we always treat them well, and their kings live with us wearing golden crowns and riding horses?»<sup>45</sup> All these courtesies could come to a swift end,

<sup>41</sup> As indeed it would be, only during the reign of his grandson in the late 1470s was another *abunä* requested from Cairo.

<sup>42</sup> Zär'a Ya'eqob would subsequently build a new church, named after the demolished Egyptian church; T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 261-262; J. PERRUCHON (ed.), *Les Chroniques...*, p. 56; M.-L. DERAT, *Le domaine des rois...*, pp. 247-250. It is also at least interesting to remark how the *negus* does not seem to care very much about the concurrent ultimate end of neighbouring Christian Nubia in this instance.

<sup>43</sup> T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, p. 262; R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», p. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in H. ERlich, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 46; Zär'a Ya'eqob is referring to Barsbay, ruling from 1422-1438, and his brother Yəshaq, who ruled from 1414-1429. The intervening five years between Yəshaq and Zär'a Ya'eqob saw very short reigns by four of Yəshaq's sons and even grandsons.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

should Jaqmaq not cease his aggressions towards the Copts. Even more, Zär'a Ya'eqob continued:

And are you not aware [...] that the River Nile is flowing to you from our country and that we are capable of preventing the floods that irrigate your country? Nothing keeps us from so doing, only the belief in God and the care for his slaves. We have presented to you what you need to know and you should know what you have to do<sup>46</sup>.

Through a contemporary Latin source, the direct aftermath of this diplomatic gambit has come down to us. In a letter to Pope Eugenius IV the Franciscan Gandulph of Sicily<sup>47</sup> describes the subsequent arrival of this Ethiopian delegation in the Holy Land in January 1444. Gandulph met the Ethiopian ambassadorial party in Jerusalem, and –according to his letter– they gladly related their views on these recent developments to him. What they told Gandulph –and what Gandulph delightedly related to the pope<sup>48</sup>– was the following: the Ethiopian embassy had reached Cairo more than 150 men strong, with the ambassador keeping the sultan waiting three times, and

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Erlich was first to translate this primary source published in an Arabic article on «Ethiopian-Egyptian relations in the Middle Ages» by Egyptian historian Said Ashur; H. ERlich, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 56, p. 229. Also see M. SALVADORE, *The African Prester...*, pp. 44-45; A. KNOBLER, *Mythology and Diplomacy...*, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Gandulph's letter –written in Latin– was copied and distributed all over Europe in the following 40 years; by 1478, for instance, a copy of Gandulph's letter had become incorporated into a compilation of texts written in Trier by a German scribe; J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 134.

<sup>48</sup> Pope Eugene IV would have had considerable interest in any confrontation between a Christian and Muslim power. That same year, in early June 1444, he would issue a bull condemning Jaqmaq's disgraceful deeds against «the holy city of Jerusalem and her venerable places», describing the abuse of Christians and their spaces of worship alike in the Holy Land. Scarcely six years into his rule, Jaqmaq had become a true fiend of Christendom in Latin Christian perception, perceived as bent on destroying the sacred places of the Holy Land. Mere months later, the Latin Christian and papal army would suffer a crushing defeat against a different Muslim opponent –losing to Ottoman troops at the Battle of Varna after more than a year of crusading against the Turks; see S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», pp. 210-11.

insisting that he be received not secretly at night-time but «openly in the light». When the Ethiopian chief ambassador «did go, he had a chair brought with him, in which he could sit with the Sultan while he talked with him»<sup>49</sup>. During the negotiations, the Ethiopian ambassador was «wearing [...] over his costly gown a golden cross, long and wide like that of Prussian soldiers,<sup>50</sup> and [was] mounted on a precious draped horse, decorated with signs of the same sacred cross»<sup>51</sup>.

The gifts presented to the Sultan on behalf of the Ethiopian *negus* consisted mainly of an assortment of weapons, including a sword, a lance, a bow, quiver and arrows, all made of gold. According to what the Ethiopians related to Gandulph, these «gifts» were delivered with the following words of caution by the Ethiopian ambassador:

this, O Sultan, is what the most powerful, excellent, and glorious Emperor Constantine [Zär'a Ya'eqob]<sup>52</sup> says to you. 'I have learned that you have destroyed the churches that stand under your rule and have harshly oppressed the Christians subject to you. Since, as you well know, your Prophet says that evil should be returned for evil, according to him I could now justly retaliate for the things you have done. But since my Lord Jesus Christ teaches that good should be returned for evil, and that one should not proceed to punish another without an accusatory warning, I have decided first to warn you. Accordingly, from now on I adjure and warn you with the peace and charity that are signified by this gold, which has by no means been sent you as a gift, but as a symbol, that you should at once release all

<sup>49</sup> J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 139.

<sup>50</sup> Gandulph most probably attempted to emphasize the considerable size of the cross worn by the Ethiopian ambassador, choosing the wide, bold, square cross featured on the habit of the Teutonic Knights (the «Prussians», or *Deutscher Orden*) as a point of reference.

<sup>51</sup> «Crucem vero auream super praetiosissimum indumentum, latam longamque ad modum Prutenorum militum in praesentia ejus portans, ejusdem Sanctae Crucis insignis decoratum equum [...]», in L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum Sen...*, p. 221; transl. in J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 138. The description of the garments and horse rugs embroidered with wide crosses matches descriptions found already in the 1420s in the writings of al-Maqrizi; Ahmad Ibn Ali AL-MAQRIZI, *Historia Regum Islamiticorum in Abyssinia*, ed. by Friedrich Rink, Leiden, 1790, p. 7; É. QUATREMÈRE (ed.), *Mémoires géographiques...*, p. 278.

<sup>52</sup> «Constantine» was *aše Zär'a Ya'eqob*'s throne name.

the Christians oppressed under your authority, [...] and that you permit and order the razed churches to be rebuilt»<sup>53</sup>.

Should the Sultan fail to heed the warnings and the instruction, the repercussions for Ethiopia's Muslims would be dire –and furthermore, the gold of the weapons be turned «into iron and steel» against Egypt:

I will baptize all the Saracens subject to me –and they are almost innumerable– in their own blood, and their mosques I will utterly destroy. I will seize from you Mecca and the tomb you venerate of that prophet of yours, and I will take from Egypt the floodwaters of the Nile –so that you and your people will perish by the sword, hunger and thirst at the same time»<sup>54</sup>.

These strong-worded, audacious statements and the aggressive stance of the Ethiopian *negus* as presented in Gandulph's letter are presumably based on the account given by the Ethiopians to him, showcasing how this delegation wished to re-narrate their Cairo experiences to a Latin potentate in Jerusalem. However, Gandulph also observed just how the Ethiopian delegation was treated by Mamluk officials upon their arrival in Jerusalem –as witnessed by his own eyes. The Ethiopian delegation had reached Jerusalem under the

<sup>53</sup> «Haec tibi dicit, Soldane, potentissimus & excellentissimus & gloriosissimus Imperator, Dominus meus Constantinus. Intellexi quoniam Ecclesias sub domino tuo consistentes destruxeris, & Christianos tibi subditos valde oppresseris; ait enim, ut melius nosti, Propheta tuus, quod malum reddatur pro malo, unde secundum eum jam possem juste tibi vicem reddere eorum, quae fecisti. Sed quoniam Christus Jesus, Dominus meus, dicit quod reddatur pro malo bonum, & sine admonitione correptionis non procedatur ad punitionem; ego pro malo bonum reddens, te deliberavi prius admonendum; unde ex nunc contestor te & admoneo cum pace & caritate, quae per aurum hoc, nequaquam tibi in minus sed in mysterium missum, designatur, ut Christianos omnes sub te oppressos continuo elevas [...] Ecclesiasque dirutas permittas & jubeas reaedificari», in L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum Sen...*, p. 221; transl. in J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 138.

<sup>54</sup> «Et hoc aurum tibi missum non convertetur in aliam speciem [...] Saracenosque omnes subditos mihi, qui innumerales pene sunt, in eorum sanguine baptizabo, & mosquetas eorum funditus destruam. Auferam tibi Meccam & illius, quod veneraris sepulcrum prophetae tui. Tollam ab Aegypto alluvionem Nili, ut simul & ferro & fame ac siti cum populo tuo pereas [...]», in L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum Sen...*, pp. 221–222; transl. in J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», pp. 138–139.

protection of a Mamluk escort<sup>55</sup> –and to Gandulph, at least, this entrance into Jerusalem appeared little short of a crusader entrance, so very different from what other Christians – particularly his Latin coreligionists –were permitted: the Ethiopians entered the city with

[t]he glorious standard of the Holy Cross, in the sight of numerous and prominent Saracens [...] solemnly raised and carried outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by the Ethiopians living there, waving in procession before their ambassadors with banners, songs and hymns, according to their customs, and none of the infidels disturbed them<sup>56</sup>.

Even more impressively, for Gandulph, these powerful, exotic Christians were exempt from the humiliations laid upon other Christians:

For this Ethiopian, with all his suite [...] the doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were opened without any tribute paid, nor did he permit [the doors of the Holy Sepulchre] to be closed until all the Christian communities entered, he himself entering last. Our ambassadors, on the other hand, pay a great deal of tribute and are hardly allowed to enter, as yesterday, when a certain ambassador of the Genoese was not allowed to enter even though he offered tribute<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> Also corroborated by other contemporaneous Latin Christian accounts, see François-Joseph-Jean LASTIC, *Chronique de la maison de Lastic: d'après les archives du château de Parentignat et quelques autres documents. Des origines à la fin du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Montpellier, 1919, p. 330.

<sup>56</sup> «[...] quoniam gloriosum Sanctae Crucis vexillum, coram plurimis & majoribus Saracenis fuit extra Ecclesiam Sancti Sepulchri per Aethiopes hic residentes, ante suos Ambassiatores processioniter incedentes cum papillonibus, jubilis & cantibus, *justa* eorum mores, solemniter erectum & apportatum, nemine infidelium illos perturbante», in L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum Sen...*, p. 222; transl. in J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 139.

<sup>57</sup> «Huic *etiam* cum tota ejus familia absque ullo tributo fores Ecclesiae sancti Sepulchri fuerunt reseratae, nec illas finebat claudi, quousque omnes nationes Christianorum ingrederentur; ipse vero *ultimus* ingredebatur: nostri autem plusquam tributum solvunt, & vix introire permittuntur; ita ut hesternae die quidam Ambassiator Januensium offerens tributum non fuit intrare permissus. Omnes etiam nationes ex parte sui Principis salutavit, & cunctis, ejus nomine, aut elemosynam aut munera condonavit, ipsamque omnium orationibus in discessu commendavit [...]», in *Ibid.*; transl. in *Ibid.*

The Ethiopian head ambassador is described as going so far as to style himself as a champion of other Christian nations, greeting them on behalf of his sovereign, the *negus*. Moreover, he forced the Mamluk officials to share the preferential treatment awarded to his people with other Christians in turn. The reaction of the other Christians in Jerusalem was predictably ecstatic, as Gandulph writes: «the other Christian communities [were] rejoicing and exulting, [...] glorifying [the Ethiopian] ruler as their own redeemer before God and men»<sup>58</sup>.

All possible hyperbole by the Ethiopians in their retelling of their reception in Cairo aside, it seems clear that the Ethiopian delegation had indeed exacted special prerogatives from the Mamluk Sultan. Both Gandulph's letter and the Arabic source speak of direct threats against the Muslims in Solomonid Ethiopia, and –in different ways– of the possibility of the *negus* wreaking havoc on Mamluk Egypt, potentially through re-routing the Nile. Zār'a Ya'eqob's message of golden weapons which could be turned into arms for actual warfare had apparently been received by Jaqmaq –and resulted, at least initially– in preferential treatment of the Ethiopian delegation.

Although Gandulph excitedly despatched this news to Rome, not all remained well, however<sup>59</sup>. A later Latin source again corroborates parts of Gandulph's narrative, but also hints at subsequent difficulties. On 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1448, Jean de Lastic, the Grand Master of Rhodes, wrote to Charles VII, king of France,<sup>60</sup> to relate «some facts that we considered worthy of being reported to

<sup>58</sup> «Quibus occurrerunt in apparatu simili ceterae nationes Christianorum, jubilantes & exultantes, & eorum Principem veluti suum redemptorem apud Deum & homines gloriose magnificantes», in *Ibid.*; transl. in *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Eugene's bull of June 1444 fails to refer to any of these developments, instead only bemoaning the state of Christianity in the Holy Land. It remains unsure whether Gandulph's letter had already reached him at this point –or whether, with no union of the churches having materialized despite great hopes at the Council of Florence, the Pontiff was simply loathe to raise the subject of Ethiopian championship in the East; cf. S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», pp. 210–211.

<sup>60</sup> Charles VII, 1403–1461, King of France from 1422 to his death in 1461.



your Serenity»<sup>61</sup>. The news had been related to Jean by Ethiopian pilgrims on Rhodes, and concerned their native country –and specifically how the Ethiopian *negus* had sent an ambassador to Cairo offering presents, but also voicing a threat: should the Mamluk Sultan not «cease to plague the Christians», the Ethiopian *negus* would mount nothing less than a crusade against Islam: as Jean had heard from the Ethiopian monks, the *negus* would

attack and ravage the city of Mecca, where, it is said, the tomb of Muhammad is to be found. He will devastate Egypt, Arabia and Syria, all provinces subject to the Sultan. He will embark the Nile which waters Egypt, and without which it would be impossible to live in this country, and he has threatened to give this river a different course. This said ambassador was well seen and received; and he was given an escort to accompany him to the Holy Sepulchre of our Lord; but when he returned to Cairo, the Sultan had him thrown in prison, intending not to give the freedom back to this ambassador until the one that he [the Sultan] himself had sent to India and who was held back there, was not given his freedom back as well<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> «Voilà quelques faits que Nous avons jugé dignes d'être rapportés à votre Sérénité [...]», F.-J.-J. LASTIC, *Chronique de la maison...*, p. 330. In fact, Jean de Lastic related not one, but two different pieces of news on the military prowess and success of Solomonic Ethiopia in exchanges with Muslim sovereigns in North-East Africa in the 1440s: the first one narrated the decisive victory *ase Zär'a Ya'eqob's* troops had won over his Muslim adversary Badlay, the Sultan of Adal, in 1445. This conflict is also attested to in the Royal Ethiopian chronicles of Zär'a Ya'eqob's reign as well as several historical references in additional Miracles of Mary written in Ethiopia in these years; see Getatchew HAILE, *The Mariology of Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia*, Rome, 1992; also see Franz-Christoph MUTH, «Ahmad Badlay», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, A-C, Wiesbaden, 2003, pp. 158-159; M.-L. DERAT and S. KAPLAN, «Zär'a Ya'eqob». For scholarship receiving Jean's letter, see T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 263-264, subsequently borrowed and quoted by Paul B. HENZE, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, New York, 2000, p. 70 as well as many subsequent publications, the latest by Adam KNOBLER, «The Power of Distance: The Transformation of European Perceptions of Self and Other, 1100-1600», *Medieval Encounters*, 19 (2013), pp. 434-480 on p. 456, note 52.

<sup>62</sup> «Ce chef des Indiens a envoyé aussi au Soudan de Babylone un ambassadeur avec des présents, selon la coutume des Orientaux, pour lui déclarer que, s'il ne cesse d'affliger les chrétiens, il attaquera et ravagera la ville de la Mecque, où se trouve, dit-on, le tombeau de Mahomet. Il dévastera l'Égypte, l'Arabie et la Syrie, provinces soumises au Soudan. Il s'embarquera sur le Nil qui arrose l'Égypte et sans lequel on ne pourrait vivre dans ce pays, et il le menaça de donner à ce fleuve un autre cours. Cet ambassadeur d'abord été bien vu et

Again, Jean de Lastic was by no stretch of the imagination a specialist on the intricacies of geopolitics in North-East Africa, and his news were garnered at the very least second-hand from «Indian» –that is to say Ethiopian– priests in Rhodes. Rhodes was one of the main stopover points on the established Ethiopian pilgrimage route from the Holy Land to Western Europe. That the Ethiopian priests on Rhodes had indeed given a «truthful testimony» again is corroborated by several other sources, amongst them a copy of a letter written by *ase Zär'a Ya'eqob* to the Mamluk Sultan dating to 1447<sup>63</sup>.

Upon the return of the Ethiopian delegation from Jerusalem to Cairo in 1444, the Mamluk approach towards the Ethiopian delegation had soured –and ended with the erstwhile imprisonment of the Ethiopian ambassador instead of a triumphant return from the Holy Land to Ethiopia. What had happened? According to historian Tadesse Tamrat, an unsatisfactory reply by Sultan Jaqmaq to Zär'a Ya'eqob had triggered the imprisonment of the Mamluk emissary in Ethiopia. The «detention» of the Egyptian ambassador in Ethiopia was to last nearly four years,<sup>64</sup> causing Sultan Jaqmaq to mistreat and detain the

*bien reçu; on lui a donné une escorte pour l'accompagner au Saint-Sépulchre de Notre-Seigneur; mais, quand il a été de retour aux portes du Caire, le Soudan l'a fait jeter en prison, se proposant de ne le rendre à la liberté que si l'ambassadeur, qu'il avait envoyé lui-même aux Indes et qui s'y trouvait lui-même retenu, n'était rendu à la liberté.* F.-J.-J. LASTIC, *Chronique de la maison...*, pp. 329-330. Lastic refers to Ethiopia as «India» as part of antique geographic conceptions of «India» or the so-called «three Indies». These denoted a realm encompassing most of the Asian continent as well as parts of Eastern sub-Saharan Africa such as Ethiopia in contemporary Latin understanding; Ethiopia is referred to mostly as «Middle India». Similarly, Latin Christian sources of the day frequently referred to Cairo as Babylon, the «Soudan de Babylone» refers to Jaqmaq, Mamluk Sultan in Cairo.

<sup>63</sup> This conflict is also attested to in the Royal Ethiopian chronicles of Zär'a Ya'eqob's reign as well as several historical references in additional Miracles of Mary written in Ethiopia in these years; see G. HAILE, *The Mariology of...*; F.-C. MUTH, «Ahmad Badlay»; M.-L. DERAT and S. KAPLAN, «Zär'a Ya'eqob».

<sup>64</sup> T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 262-263; also see H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 46.

returning Ethiopian ambassador as well as the Coptic patriarch in Cairo in 1444<sup>65</sup>.

The copy of the 1447 letter by Zār'a Ya'eqob is available in full, and sheds further light onto the incident<sup>66</sup>. It originates from a composite manuscript compiling various religious texts dating to the year 1558, and is in the possession of the Maronite Patriarchate in Bkerke in Lebanon<sup>67</sup>. There is very little room for doubt about its authenticity – its base and premise are sound, the names and references to rulers and political entities are correct. It is written in Arabic, and – as the rhymed prose and highly rhetorical nature of the text suggest – was originally composed in this language; orthographical mistakes in the text also suggest that Syriac script had initially been used to write down the Arabic<sup>68</sup>. This is not necessarily unusual; it indicates that Zār'a Ya'eqob drew on the competency of a Christian scribe with native competency in Arabic and familiarity with Syriac script – possibly a Coptic or Syriac-Orthodox cleric. As specific phrases directly quote or allude to various Qur'anic surahs, it has also been suggested that the scribe must have also had familiarity with Qur'anic writing and Islamic jurisprudence<sup>69</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, pp. 262–263; F.-J.-J. LASTIC, *Chronique de la maison...*, p. 330.

<sup>66</sup> The letter currently only exists in an Arabic edition in a note published by the Maronite scholar Paul Carali; in 1939, the German theologian and philologist Sebastian Euringer published a German translation of this edition; Paul CARALI, «Bkerke 15», *La Revue patriarcale, ex-Revue syrienne mensuelle historique et littéraire, Organe du Patriarcat maronite*, 5 (1930), pp. 649–655; S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...». Both have received little attention in scholarship up to this point.

<sup>67</sup> The majority of the texts in this manuscript were written in Garsuni (Arabic written in Syriac script); Zār'a Ya'eqob's letter is one of two texts written in Arabic; S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», p. 212.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214, 216. In fact, it was the in-depth knowledge of Islamic theology and Qur'anic phrases that initially led Sebastian Euringer to question the veracity of the document; in his eyes, it appeared «unfathomable» and «anachronistic» that *ase* Zār'a Ya'eqob – understood by him as a true «fiend of the Muslims» – should be so «tolerant» as to express in-depth knowledge about the religion and customs of his Muslim neighbours to even use them – instead of citing Christian scripture – to admonish the Mamluk sultan for his transgressions

Here, Zār'a Ya'eqob states that he had not really imprisoned the Mamluk emissary, but had sent him instead «around in our country, to take a look at our country and the territories of the Sultans of the Muslims which are living within our realm»<sup>70</sup>. At just this time, Zār'a Ya'eqob had been involved in an aggressive campaign against Ahmad Badlay, the Sultan of Adal – a former Muslim tributary principality to the Christian Empire which had been about to become a huge united kingdom independent from Christian Ethiopia by the early 1440s<sup>71</sup>. Solomonic Ethiopia had little hesitation to crack down hard on various Muslim rebellions and resistances throughout the 15th-century, and Adal was no different. In 1445, Zār'a Ya'eqob defeated and killed Badlay, and Adal was – for the time being – relegated to the status of a noisy Muslim tributary to the Solomonic Empire once more<sup>72</sup>. It stands to reason that the

according to Islamic law; cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 238–39. Eventually, however, even Euringer concedes that there are no tenable objections to doubting the authenticity of the letter; see *Ibid.*, p. 240. Seeing that Solomonic Ethiopia claimed sovereignty over a number of Muslim tributaries particularly during the reign of Zār'a Ya'eqob, that the *negus* himself married a formerly Muslim princess who, once baptized as Eleni, gained immense influence at the court, and that Zār'a Ya'eqob very much understood himself as a scholar on theology, this should actually be of little surprise. The use of Qur'anic writings and Islamic law in the *negus*' favour to reprimand a Muslim sovereign while still being cognizant of correct etiquette appears, to me, less anachronistic and more representative of the complex Solomonic courtly culture that had developed by the mid-15th-century in Ethiopia.

<sup>70</sup> «Wir haben beschlossen, euren eben anwesenden Gesandten (im Lande) herumzuschicken, damit er sich in unserem Lande und in den Gebieten der Sultane der Muslim [sic], welche in unserem Reiche unter der Herrschaft des Herren – Lob sei ihm! – und unserer Herrschaft leben, umsehen mögen», *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>71</sup> The Sultanate of Ifat-Adal had been the most important Sultanate in the Muslim fringe principalities surrounding Ethiopia until the second half of the 15th-century. Stretching from the ports of Aden and Zayla to the Awash River and the northeast plateau of Šāwa, many of the communication and trade routes from the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean converged in Ifat. Like most other Muslim principalities, it had become a tributary to Christian Ethiopia since the wars of *negus* Amdä Šəyon in the early 14th-century for a while, refuting the claim for tributes most of the time; see Ahmed Hassen OMER and Denis NOSNITSIN, «Ifat», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, He-N, Wiesbaden, 2007, pp. 118–120; Ewald WAGNER, «Adal», in *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. F.-C. MUTH, «Ahmad Badlay»; in the second quarter of the 16th-century, under the leadership of *Imam* Ahmed, Adali troops would of course overrun and even intermittently

complimentary tour of Ethiopia the Mamluk emissary had been made to enjoy between 1444 and 1447 was thus not a round trip organised out of the goodness of the *negus*' heart –but instead meant to relate both the geographical dimensions of the Solomonic realm, as well as its military prowess against a Muslim adversary, to this Mamluk dignitary.

In his highly stylised letter<sup>73</sup>, Zär'a Ya'eqob greets Jaqmaq in a most deferential manner, and expresses his hope for a continued peace upon the realms of the Sultan, as would «befit the size of your empire», and dependant upon God's grace<sup>74</sup>. He also expresses his thanks for God's grace in having bequeathed him, Zär'a Ya'eqob, such a tremendously wealthy realm of «sublime majesty»<sup>75</sup>. With the salutations over and done with, the *negus* cuts to the heart of the matter: the reason for despatching his ambassador was, above all, to reinstate the «bond of love» that had existed between his own, and Jaqmaq's most honourable ancestors –particularly between his «victorious» ancestor *aše* 'Amdä Šəyon and the Mamluk Sultan Muhammad<sup>76</sup>, and his «victorious father» *aše* Dawit<sup>77</sup> and Mamluk Sultan Az-Zahir Barquq<sup>78</sup>. He then expresses how overjoyed he had been by the tidings related by the two *abuns* despatched from Egypt in 1438, that a true, fair and righteous friend of

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gain control over Solomonic Ethiopia; see F.-C. MUTH, «Futūḥ Al-Ḥabaša», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, D-Ha, Wiesbaden, 2005, pp. 592-593.

<sup>73</sup> As stated above, the letter is composed in rhymed prose and highly rhetoric, suggesting that it was originally composed in Arabic.

<sup>74</sup> S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», p. 220.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216-219.

<sup>76</sup> Zär'a Ya'eqob clearly alludes to the episode of contention between *aše* 'Amdä Šəyon and Nasir ad-Din Muhammad in December 1325, mentioned above and in the writings of al-Maqrizi, where 'Amdä Šəyon threatened to block the Nile should Muhammad not abstain from his aggression against the Christians in Mamluk territory; É. QUATREMÈRE (ed.), *Mémoires géographiques...*, p. 275.

<sup>77</sup> King of Ethiopia between 1382-1413; for a biographical overview and bibliography, M.-L. DERAT, «Dawit II», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, D-Ha, Wiesbaden, 2005, pp. 112-113.

<sup>78</sup> Al-Malik Az-Zahir Sayf ad-Din Barquq, first Burji Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, ruled 1382-1389 and 1390-1399; S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», p. 220.

Christendom had ascended to power in Egypt<sup>79</sup> –and how subsequently, it had been necessary to despatch a letter<sup>80</sup> to this same friend of Christendom, Jaqmaq, demanding him to give Ethiopian monks sovereignty over the Grave of Mary in Jerusalem, re-build the recently destroyed church and monastery of Mitmaq, and to honour the pact of his ancestors<sup>81</sup>.

Zär'a Ya'eqob's 1447 letter also hints at Jaqmaq's reply to these demands: apparently, Jaqmaq had argued that the Grave of Mary had been in possession of the Muslims for a long time; that no re-building of churches was permitted in the lands of Islam, and that he was only following the laws of Islam in his persecution of the Christians<sup>82</sup>. Zär'a Ya'eqob concedes the first point, but argues that the *Hanafi* School of Islam taught that wantonly destroyed churches and monasteries should be rebuilt<sup>83</sup>, and that the third point similarly could be refuted by drawing on the Maliki school of Islamic law<sup>84</sup>. Moreover, Zär'a Ya'eqob had since learnt through pilgrims and traders crossing from Egypt to Ethiopia that the persecution of Christians had not stopped, and that upon their death, many Christians remained unburied, and their inheritance withheld<sup>85</sup>. At this point, Zär'a Ya'eqob draws Jaqmaq's attention to the Muslim population of his own realm: he claims 36 Muslim rulers and their subjects were tributary to him –but they could be taxed heavily in gold, and their inheritances withheld, too. In stressing that these Muslims were permitted to live their lives under Christian rule in peace, and their mosques and houses of prayer secure<sup>86</sup>, Zär'a Ya'eqob furthermore issues an implicit threat. The first part of the letter ends with a *coup de grâce*: the «blessed river Nile», which

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<sup>79</sup> S. EURINGER, «Ein Angeblicher Brief...», pp. 221-222.

<sup>80</sup> It seems prudent to assume he is alluding to the letter of 1443, quoted above.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>82</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 224-226.

<sup>83</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 225 with a discussion of *Hanafi* opinions on this matter; the *Hanafi* School of Islam –one of the four Sunni schools of law– was one of the predominant schools of Islamic law in Egypt.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

God had decreed to flow from Solomonic Ethiopia to Mamluk Egypt, could be obstructed in its flow towards the Mediterranean –not through an act of active sabotage, but instead through an act of wilful default. The bed of the river, and its course, was constantly cleared of debris, tree roots and driftwood by royal Solomonic order<sup>87</sup>. Thus far, Zär'a Ya'eqob had upheld this custom of his forefathers to please «the Almighty, the creatures of God, the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews, as well as the animals and birds»<sup>88</sup> –and to uphold the aforementioned bond of love that had existed between their predecessors, and which from this point onwards would be tested by Jaqmaq's refusal to fulfil the *negus*' demands<sup>89</sup>.

These ominous closing remarks are followed by what appears to be a later annotation to the letter. Zär'a Ya'eqob remarks that he had been about to submit this letter as it was, together with the long-detained Mamluk emissary<sup>90</sup>, when a message from the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria reached him. The Patriarch related that Mamluk aggression against his flock had ceased, and therefore Zär'a Ya'eqob had the Mamluk emissary called back to him, to amend his missive. Now sending his praise for the «continuity of peace», he also states that he had despatched a present of «a beautiful horse» with tack gilded in the amount of 200 ounces of gold, as well as 200 ounces of civet and 54 eunuchs to be presented to the Sultan<sup>91</sup>. Ending with most fervent praise for the grace of God, the matter was now «closed and finished through the aid of God, the Almighty»<sup>92</sup>.

It appears that the matter was indeed concluded on both sides. No reply of Jaqmaq's exists, but we know that in the late 1440s, he urged his coreligionist, Mohammad bin Bādīlāy, the new Sultan of Adal, finally to make peace with the Ethiopian *negus* Zär'a Ya'eqob. When Mohammad again sent a diplomatic

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 233–234.

<sup>90</sup> Named as the 'Emir Jahjā' in the letter. *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

mission to Egypt in 1452 to ask for Muslim help in his fight against Christian Ethiopia, the Mamluk Sultan went so far as to decline his request –instead, he actively discouraged him, and again urged him to submit to the Ethiopian *negus*<sup>93</sup>.

### Crusading Threats Never Intended to be Realized?

The past few pages have demonstrated that not only the Papacy in Rome fancied itself as the would-be protector of Christendom, and sole defender of the Faithful. Indeed, only a few years before Alfonso and Callixtus strove to protect Christians in the Holy Land against Muslim aggression and beat back the Turks, Zär'a Ya'eqob had engaged in diplomatic sable-rattling with a different Muslim contemporary, the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt. A number of sources show how *aše* Zär'a Ya'eqob understood himself, and strove to style himself, as yet another true champion of the Christians in the East. Similarly to his predecessors, the strong Ethiopian rulers 'Amdä Šəyon and Dawit II, he threatened to balance Christian persecution with persecution of Muslims in his own realm, and to destroy Egypt by force of weapons and an act of wilful default towards the river Nile. Particularly in light of these developments dating to the 1440s, Zär'a Ya'eqob's refusal or active non-participation in any Latin efforts must take on new meaning. It has been stated that the threat of obstructing the flow of the Nile had become a part of the Ethiopian emperors' diplomatic vocabulary with Egypt by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>94</sup>. However, the Mamluk-Solomonic episode of the 1440s and particularly Zär'a Ya'eqob's letter summarised in the above present the first textual source to support any such claim. The detailed explanation given by Zär'a Ya'eqob in his 1447 letter offers insight into Ethiopian and Egyptian approaches to this threat: while it might have been always far outside of the capabilities of any Ethiopian ruler to change the course of the river or block it artificially, an act of sabotage through wilful

<sup>93</sup> See A. H. OMER and D. NOSNITSIN, «Ifab».

<sup>94</sup> H. ERLICH, *The Cross and the River...*, p. 43; R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», pp. 30–31.

default in ceasing to clear the bed of the river from debris seems not impossible. Such an act would not necessarily succeed for any length of time –no river will naturally be blocked completely, after all, by debris alone– but the *negus* clearly believed his clearing of the river was indispensable to ensure its flow. And while Mamluk authorities could have –and sometimes did<sup>95</sup>– simply deride the Ethiopian threat, it should be noted that they shied away from any major confrontation that might put the threat of blocking the Nile –and risking the imminent ruin of Egypt– to the test.

It also seems prudent to assume that, as self-declared champions of Christianity in Mamluk territory, Solomonic rulers were also aware that any attempt to escalate tensions with Egypt would have severe repercussions for the same Christians living in Mamluk territory. Indeed, a blockage of the Nile could hardly be in Ethiopia's interest –drought and famine would affect the very same Copts Zär'a Ya'eqob sought to champion and protect, as well as the various pilgrims and traders navigating their way between Ethiopia, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean on the established route encompassing large parts of the Nile. When the Burgundian pilgrim Bertrandon de Broquiere encountered Pietro of Naples in Pera<sup>96</sup> in 1430, Bertrandon also asked him about the river Nile. Pietro, who had lived for a number of years in Solomonic Ethiopia and was on a scouting mission for *aše* Yəṣṣhaq<sup>97</sup>, replied that yes, the

<sup>95</sup> See É. QUATREMÈRE (ed.), *Mémoires géographiques...*, p. 276.

<sup>96</sup> A town located directly opposite the ancient walled promontory of Constantinople.

<sup>97</sup> Although Pietre is only attested to in Bertrandon de Broquiere's account, there is little reason to doubt his testimony, which instead offers remarkably insightful descriptions of 15th-century Ethiopian practices, and the land and people under Solomonic reign: beyond the circumcision rites of the Ethiopians, Pietre also described to Bertrandon the seasons, and seasonal floods in the highlands, as well as the historically established Ethiopian practice of exiling royal children to the royal mountaintop prison on Mount Geshen in order to secure a peaceable succession; see DE LA BROQUIÈRE, *Le Voyage d'Outremer*, pp. 143–150; *The Voyage d'Outremer by Bertrandon de La Broquiere*, ed. by Galen Kline, New York, 1988, pp. 89–94. *Aše* Yəṣṣhaq had despatched a number of delegations abroad; he had died in 1429 and was succeeded by a number of sons and grandsons in very short order. It stands to reason that Pietre of Naples had been despatched just before the *negus*' death. On Yəṣṣhaq, see

river Nile that flowed to Cairo did indeed come from Ethiopia –and that if the *negus* so chose, he could reroute the Nile. However, «he refrained from it seeing that there were many Christians living on this same river Nile»<sup>98</sup>. The same fear of inadvertent hurt caused to the sizeable Christian population of rural Egypt is traceable in a number of other Ethiopian sources, too<sup>99</sup>.

This consideration, that any direct action against Mamluk Egypt might cause more suffering for local Christians would naturally deadlock Ethiopian championing of Eastern Christianity. It stands to reason that Alfonso V's and Pope Callixtus III's plans detailing an Ethiopian blockage of the Nile did not quite figure in such a conundrum. Little awareness is traceable in these Latin Christian sources for the various groups of Eastern Christians living in the Levant and Egypt proper by the 15th-century. Moreover, it remains important to stress that Latin Christian geopolitics and crusading attempts were not synonymous with Ethiopian *realpolitik* of the age: Solomonic Ethiopia itself encompassed various Muslim tributary states; Ethiopian emperors such as Zär'a Ya'eqob took Muslim princesses as wives<sup>100</sup>. The Ottoman threat to Eastern Europe, and the conquest of Constantinople might have shaken

S. KAPLAN, «Yəṣṣhaq», in A. Bausi (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 5, Y–Z, Wiesbaden, 2014, pp. 59–60.

<sup>98</sup> «Et me dist que on oist bien ledit chant, et que s'il plaisoit au Prest Jehan, qu'il feroit bien aler la reverye autre part. Mais il la laisse pour ce que il y a moult des Crestiens demourans sur ladite reverye du Nil», DE LA BROQUIÈRE, *Le Voyage d'Outremer...*, p. 146. Also see R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», pp. 29–30.

<sup>99</sup> See the testimony given by the Ethiopian Abba Raphael to Alessandro Zorzi in 1522, which expressed the same sentiment –the churches and Christian monks in Jerusalem and in Egypt would be facing the same ruin as the Muslims in those lands; similarly, an Ethiopian miracle in the Miracles of Mary narrates that Zär'a Ya'eqob refrained from causing harm to the Nile in 'consideration for the suffering it would produce' as put in R. PANKHURST, «Ethiopia's Alleged Control...», p. 30.; Osbert G. S. CRAWFORD (ed.), *Ethiopian Itineraries circa 1400–1524: Including Those Collected by Alessandro Zorzi at Venice in the Years 1519–24*, Cambridge, 1958, p. 145; T. TAMRAT, *Church and State...*, p. 263.

<sup>100</sup> See Sevir CHERNETSOV, «Eleni», in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, D–Ha, Wiesbaden, 2005, pp. 253–254.



European Christianity to its core; its reverberations for Ethiopia were arguably minimal, however.

While Solomonic Ethiopia had little hesitation to crack down hard on various Muslim rebellions and resistances in the Muslim trading states bordering its territory in the 14th- and 15th-century<sup>101</sup>, it did steer away from engaging in violent conflicts with Mamluk Egypt throughout the Middle Ages. No accounts for Ethiopian pilgrims crossing through Egypt being harmed exist until 1520, when Egypt had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire<sup>102</sup>. To some extent, the make-up of the Ethiopian church, and the access to wider pilgrimage and trading networks, required at least perfunctory relations with the rulers of Egypt. It did not require, however, any engagement towards the Turkish threat to the Latin Christian world until the Ottoman conquest of

<sup>101</sup> A number of Muslim principalities, located between the Somali coast and the eastern escarpment of the Ethiopian highland plateau, had been aggressively incorporated into the Ethiopian empire by the wars of *negus* Amdä Šəyon in the 1330s with different degrees of success. At the end of the 14th-century, these Muslim principalities encompassed seven trading states of varying size and manpower –Dära, Ifat, Däwaro, Ar'en, Hadiyya, Scharha and Bale. They ranged considerably in size, from just three days' journey in length by three days in breath for Dära to a considerable landmass with own tributary towns in Ifat-Adal. Most of them were located in today's Eastern Ethiopian Afar, Oromia and Somaali regions, Somaliland in Somalia and Djibuti. To the north of the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia existed another tributary Muslim Sultanate, Mäzäga. It was located in modern-day northern Ethiopia, Djibuti, Eritrea and Sudan. The Chronicle «Conquest of Abyssinia», the *Futūḥ al-Habaša*, mentions how many districts inhabited mainly by Muslims were «ruled by the King of Abyssinia [...] who paid the poll-tax to the king»; see P.L. STENHOUSE and R. PANKHURST (ed.), *Futūḥ Al-Habaša*..., p. 38. During the reigns of Dawit II, Yəśhaq and Zär'a Ya'aqob, most of them had been subdued by the Christian Ethiopians; see M. KROPP, *Der Siegreiche Feldzug...*

<sup>102</sup> Francisco Alvares relates how in ca. 1518, shortly after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, the long-established pilgrimage route from Ethiopia down the Red Sea and the Nile was savagely attacked, causing much Ethiopian outrage. «Other Moors» had attacked the 300-man-strong Ethiopian pilgrimage group just beyond the desert stretch towards the Nile, killing the old pilgrims and capturing the young ones as slaves; Francisco ALVARES, *True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John*, ed. by C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford as *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, Being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520*, London, 1961, pp. 450-451.

Egypt and parts of the Red Sea in the 16th-century. By that time, though, Solomonic Ethiopia found itself engaged in a war on a different front, fighting –and for a dozen years losing to– the troops of *Imam* Ahmed of Adal in his conquest of the Ethiopian highlands<sup>103</sup>.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that little of the multi-layered background of the conflict of Solomonic and Mamluk diplomacy in the 1440s is presented in both Gandulph's and Jean de Lastic's narratives –which were carried over Western Europe, where they fuelled Latin crusading hopes projected onto the Ethiopian *negus*. In these writings, Ethiopia is perceived as mighty and audacious, far outweighing any submission or concession to Mamluk Egypt. Gandulph of Sicily, who had so joyfully related the confrontation between the Ethiopian ambassador and the Mamluk Sultan of 1443, had perceived the vast discrepancy between the status of Latin Christians and Ethiopians when it came to interacting with the Mamluks. The grand reception of the Ethiopian ambassador by Mamluk Sultan Jaqmaq in 1443, he wrote to the pope,

brought as much ignominy upon our rulers as they brought glory to [the Ethiopians]. For this [the Ethiopian ambassador] had a chair brought so that he could speak to the Sultan seated; whereas the ambassadors of our rulers are forced to kiss the ground before him. [The Ethiopian ambassador] goes wherever he wants at the expense of the Sultan, giving commands and the Saracens accompany him and respect him because they fear his Emperor and attempt to placate him. Our representatives, on the other hand, when they come among the infidels, do not dare to call themselves lords but rather servants, often indeed pretending to be insane, so that they will not be injured or jailed, because they are neither feared nor esteemed by the Saracens<sup>104</sup>.

<sup>103</sup> F.-C. MUTH, «Futūḥ Al-Habaša»; P. L. STENHOUSE and R. PANKHURST (ed.), *Futūḥ Al-Habaša*...

<sup>104</sup> «[...] quantum cesserunt in Principis sui gloriam, tantum cedunt in Principum nostrorum ignominiam. Hic enim fecit apportari sedem, ut sedens Soldanum alloqueretur: Ambassiatores nostrorum ante ipsum terram deosculari coguntur. Iste ad impensas Soldani vadit quo vult, imperans, & Saraceni ipsum committantur & venerantur, quoniam Imperatorem illius timent, & illi placere conantur. Nostri vero cum veniunt inter infideles, non se dominos, sed famulos nominare audent, immo insanos pluries se esse confingunt, ne ab eis

The notably different treatment of Ethiopian and Western European ambassadors at the court of the Mamluk Sultans in Cairo not only angered Gandulph; he also struggled to see the reason behind this perceived special treatment of the Ethiopian ambassadors –and the leverage the Ethiopian *negus* and his representatives could apparently exert against Cairo. Together with his additional observations on the Ethiopians' arrival in Jerusalem in January 1444, described as a once in a lifetime experience, and a glorious, triumphal display of power by a Christian nation in the holiest city of Christendom –in a year when the Papal army was to suffer a devastating defeat against the Turks– it is of little wonder, then, that by the 1450s, Latin potentates such as Alfonso V and Pope Callixtus should have envisioned possible crusades with Ethiopia. Regrettably, the distorted echoes conveyed back to Europe –and the long-existing mythology projected onto the Ethiopian *negus* and his crusading power over the Nile had little in common with the actual geopolitics Solomonic Emperors found themselves entangled with.

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*offendantur & incarceration, quoniam non timentur ab eis, nec appetiantur*, in L. WADDING, *Annales Minorum Sen...*, p. 221; transl. in J. PLANTE, «The Ethiopian Embassy...», p. 139.

## La croisade africaine des Hospitaliers de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem (1530-1554)

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Si « les frontières ne sont jamais aussi menaçantes et menacées que lorsqu'elles sont enkystées en terres opposées »<sup>1</sup>, elles paraissent également les plus propres à soutenir et à vivifier des idéaux guerriers et religieux de « croisade », à l'exemple des présides espagnols en Afrique du Nord et du combat mené par les Hospitaliers de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem en vue de leur protection ou de leur reconquête, que ce soit au nom des rois d'Espagne ou en leur nom propre. Désignant à l'origine une volonté de libérer et de reconquérir les Lieux saints et la Terre sainte<sup>2</sup>, la croisade recouvre en effet, dès le milieu du Moyen Âge, des luttes plus vastes et conduites en divers territoires, contre tous les périls qui menacent la catholicité de l'extérieur (Infidèles, païens) et de l'intérieur (schismatiques, hérétiques et, plus largement, ceux qui s'opposent aux intérêts politiques de Rome)<sup>3</sup>. La thématique du front, et plus largement de la

<sup>1</sup> Daniel NORDMAN, « Frontières et limites maritimes : la Méditerranée à l'époque moderne (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles) », dans E. Fasano-Guarini et P. Volpini (éd.), *Frontiere di terra, frontiere di mare. La Toscana moderna nello spazio mediterraneo*, Milan, 2008, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques PAVIOT, « L'idée de croisade à la fin du Moyen Âge », dans J. Paviot (éd.), *Les projets de croisade. Géostratégie et diplomatie européenne du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Toulouse, 2014, pp. 17-19.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe JOSSERAND, « *In servitio Dei et domini regis*. Les Ordres Militaires du royaume de Castille et la défense de la Chrétienté latine : frontières et enjeux de pouvoir (XII<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup>