

Transcript of the Talk “Ethiopian Medieval Diplomacy & Kingship”, given as part of the Institute for Advanced Studies ‘Ethiopian Studies Series’ by Verena Krebs. March 19th, 2021.

Thank you very much, Aaron. I’ll be speaking today about one concrete case study that appears particularly suitable when thinking about the connection between Medieval Studies and Ethiopian Studies: namely the Solomonic Ethiopian diplomatic missions to Latin Europe in the 15th and early 16th century — and what they reveal about Ethiopian kingship of the time.

In fact, the result of my decade-long research of the subject is quite the opposite of what is commonly assumed in both Medieval and Ethiopian Studies. It opens up new perspectives not only on the unique cultural history of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom of the 15th and early 16th century, – but also sheds new, and rather different, light onto African-European encounters in the time still often called the ‘European Age of Exploration’.

But let’s start from the beginning... (SLIDE)

In the latter half of the 14th century, the consolidation of Solomonic Christian power over most of the central North-East African highlands had ushered in substantial religious reform, well as the local translation and flourishing of religious literature. As the research of Marie-Laure Derat has shown, the 15th and early 16th century in particular period witnessed the monumental royal building activity in the central Ethiopian highland plateau. We find the construction of dozens of prestigious royal churches and monasteries, which were material testament to the Solomonic kings’ supreme political claim to power, and a physical assertion of each sovereign’s rightful and just Christian rulership. Such royal religious centres naturally not only had to be built and ornamented. They also had to be endowed, and furnished with precious books, ecclesiastical garments, fine fabrics, liturgical utensils, relics and also icons.

I would argue that we need to read the concurrent diplomatic relations between Solomonic Ethiopia and the Latin West against the backdrop of this this royal agenda of building important religious centres.

(SLIDE TRAVEL MAP) Between 1400 and the late 1520s, Ethiopian kings sent numerous diplomatic missions to different places in Latin Europe. Depending on how we count, their number varies, but at the very least, we find a dozen embassies sent out from Ethiopia. The vast majority of embassies were despatched within the first half of the 15th century. Here, Solomonic envoys arrived at places as varied as Venice, Rome, Valencia, Naples and Lisbon. Ethiopian pilgrims, sometimes acting-as-inadvertant ambassadors, are likewise attested from Lake Constance in modern-day Germany to Santiago de Compostela in the very west of the Iberian Peninsula.

(SLIDE RULERS) Indeed, nearly all rulers and regents of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century sent out envoys to Latin Europe in some way or other. Which leads to the question: Why did Ethiopian rulers send out their emissaries in the 15th and early 16th century?

Historians and philologists of Europe and Ethiopia have studied these diplomatic encounters for more than a century. They noted an Ethiopian interest in craftsmen, and occasionally relics. (SLIDE LEFEVRE & TADDESSE TAMRAT) In 1967, historian Renato Lefèvre suggested that Solomonic rulers dispatched their missions out of a desire to obtain ‘masters of art and

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industry’ to raise the Ethiopian kingdom's civil and technical level, and enhance its military efficiency. In his ground-breaking work on medieval Solomonic history of 1972, historian Tadesse Tamrat largely followed Lefevre’s interpretation – he, too, assumed that the delegations' purpose had been to ask for artisan-technologists, military experts and access to European technology.

Both scholars’ views have significantly impacted the field. Between the 1980s and now, scholarship largely and uniformly asserts that Solomonic missions to Europe were tied to a desire to obtain craftsmen-technologists, a need for ‘European’ technology and arms, and a desire for military alliances with the Christian powers of the Western Mediterranean.

This is quite true for later periods – including the early 16th century, and the 19th century, when *aṣe* Tewodros indeed openly asked for gunsmiths from Europe. It is, however, not true for the 15th century. All of the above – the arms, the craftsmen-technologists, the military matters -- are absent in the available sources for the first 100 years of Solomonic diplomatic outreach.

What we find instead in the sources is largely the following: (SOURCES SLIDE)

In 1402, *aṣe* Dawit’s first embassy arrived in Venice. Latin sources attest that upon the request of the Ethiopian ambassador, a painter, a builder, a tile-brickmaker, a carpenter and a swordsmith were sent out to Ethiopia by the Venetian authorities. Moreover, Arabic and Gə‘əz texts assert that the embassy arrived back in the highland kingdom with two relics – and a whole host of ecclesiastical fabrics and liturgical items: chalices, censers, bowls & pitchers, embroidered vestments, robes, tunics, mitres.

Twenty-five years later, Dawit’s son Yəṣḥaq sent an embassy to Aragon. We know from Aragonese sources that thirteen master-craftsmen ‘in a variety of skills’ were sent out to Ethiopia. Embroidered liturgical vestments were found with the ambassadorial group on their way back.

Also in their possession, according to new, important Arabic source evidence recently uncovered by Julien Loiseau? Two golden church bells, plus a letter by the Ethiopian king ostensibly requesting a specific relic – a Nail of the Passion - as well as items of goldsmithery, crosses and bells.

Yet another twenty-five years later, *aṣe* Zär’a Ya‘əqob sent another embassy to Aragon. Again sent out were ‘masters and artisans’. One Latin source specifies that the craftsmen ‘furnished Ethiopia with the arts they gave’ – indicating, again, builders and ornamenters rather than technologists. Also requested and sent out? A reliquary box, brocade fabrics, finest woolen cloths, vessels of gold and silver.

In the 1520s, Dawit’s great-great-grandson Ləbnä Dəngəl would similarly request the despatch of painters, sculptors, stonemasons, carpenters, gold- and silversmiths, bookmakers, gold-leaf specialists, engravers, metalworkers, roofers, architects, glassblowers, tilemakers from Portugal and the Papacy. He also asked for rugs and large-scale embroidered curtains for churches, and Statues of the Virgin and Saints.

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True, Ləbnä Dəngəl also asked for miners, physicians and gunsmiths, as well as sworts and every sort of weapon of war’. But these were requests within a very long list other demands — and, incidentally, are only found in the Portuguese and Latin version of his letters, not in a Gə‘əz version.

(OVERVIEW SLIDE) So what we find here is an interesting discrepancy between scholarship opinion and source evidence. The currently-available sources show that Arms, ‘European Technology’ and military alliances only really appear in the 16th century. And even then: they are part of a much larger list of Solomonic interests and desires.

Throughout, the sources also show that **European** powers were the ones wishing for military aid from Ethiopia in the face of the Mamlūk and Ottoman threat to Latin Europe, and because Ethiopia was identified with the land of the mythical prester John, a militarily powerful Christian ruler. Mamlūk writers in Egypt viewed the Solomonic embassies through an understandably suspicious lens. But: Latin Hopes and Mamlūk Fears do not make Ethiopian Interests.

In the 15th, and even in the early 16th century, Ethiopian were primarily interested in acquiring building-related labour. We also find an interest in relics and, crucially, foreign religious material culture, fine fabrics, and liturgical objects. Which, again, fits rather well into the local history of Ethiopia in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. (SLIDE MAP).

Acquiring artisans and ecclesiastical wares from faraway places have necessarily increased their local prestige, following a mechanism well-attested for numerous societies in the pre-modern world. But there’s a very interesting, specifically Ethiopian Solomonic aspect to be found here. (SLIDE BIBLE QUOTE) The very process of approaching a foreign court to ask for artisans and builders would have emulated actions ascribed to the biblical king Solomon - propagated by the Solomonic Ethiopian rulers as the dynasty’s genealogical ancestor in their foundational myth of the *Kəbrä nəgäst*. It could well be that the sending of missions to Latin Christian courts would have locally asserted the Solomonic claim of rightful Solomonic descentance.

Centring Ethiopian agency and reading Ethiopian diplomacy with the West as motivated by aesthetic and dynastic rather than militaristic acquisitiveness would moreover give us new framework (SLIDE ART) for understanding the concurrent material culture of the Christian kingdom. Here, imported and even specifically commissioned religious objects from Europe are well-attested in royal hands in the late 15th and early 16th century.

To conclude: including Ethiopia within the field of Medieval Studies enables us to upset its underlying epistemological construct, which – as a product of 19th century Western academe — has long centered Latin Christianity, and Latin Christian agency and ideas. But: Latin Christian Medieval ideas and hopes should not, must not, be copy-pasted onto a non-European realm such as Solomonic Ethiopia. Incorporating Ethiopia in our academic and mental geographical and epistemological map of the Eurasian Middle-Ages, lets us not just

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uncover much about the history of North-East Africa. We might just also be forced to re-assess long-held convictions about Medieval Studies as a whole.

Thank you very much.