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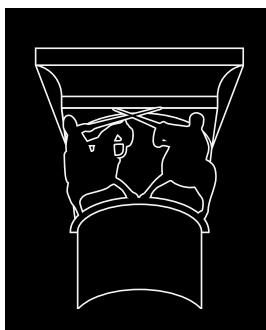
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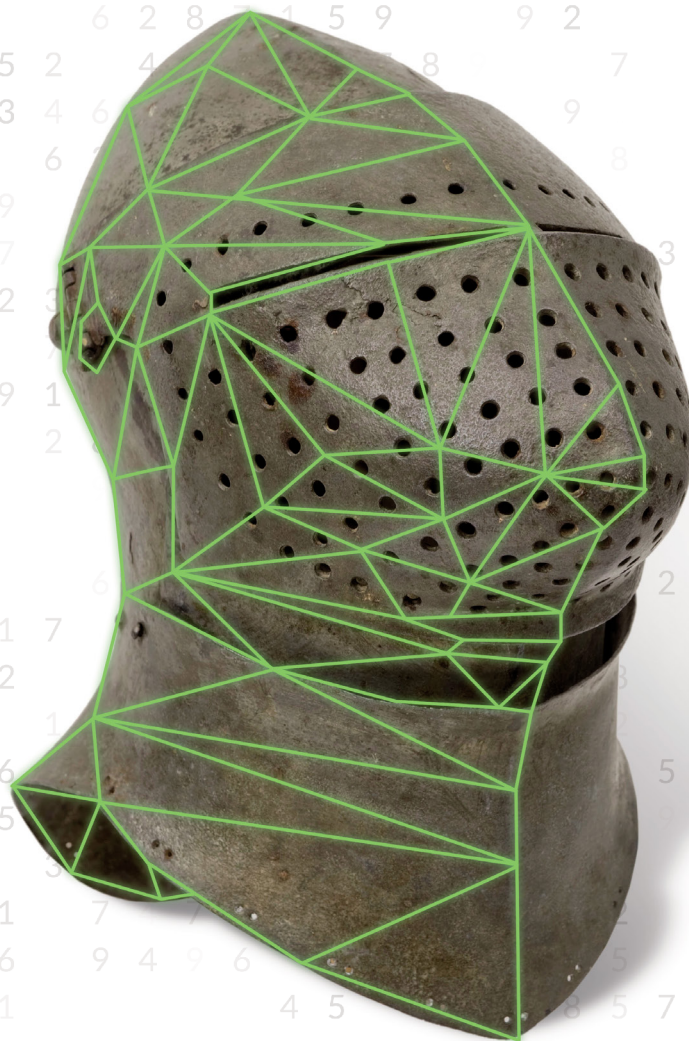
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Desafíos globales,
nuevas vías,
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Estella-Lizarra
16/19 de julio de 2024

L Erdi Aroko Ikerlanen
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«So, Who Killed the Elephant?» Tracing African-European Entanglements in the ‘Global Middle Ages’

Verena Krebs

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It has been well over a decade since Neil MacGregor’s *A History of the World in 100 Objects* introduced a greater public, namely millions of BBC listeners, to the importance of material sources in shaping the stories we tell about the past¹. Drawing solely from the collection of the British Museum, the project reframed the museum’s objects into a seemingly universal narrative of history that reached across time and space – but remained firmly centered in London. Yet, soon after the series began broadcasting, in her acceptance of the prestigious 2010 Ludwig Holberg Prize, American historian Natalie Zemon Davis cautioned against monolithic perspectives². Instead, she advocated for histories that are diverse, decentered, and rooted in the voices of marginalized and non-Western communities while still addressing global perspectives to foster a more nuanced understanding of interconnected pasts. Similar utterances followed³, all boiling down to a simple but essential question: could a *single* object possibly represent a *multitude* of worlds and histories?

Here, I propose to explore one such instance – or rather, two: a painted enamel commissioned by an Ethiopian queen in Western Europe (fig. 1) and an ivory carving fashioned for a man named Eberhard in what is now Germany (fig. 2). Two objects, I will argue, that touch on multiple layers of history, simul-

* Adapted from a keynote of the same title first delivered at the 2023 International Medieval Congress at Leeds and the 2024 Semana Internacional de Estudios Medievales de Estella.

¹ Podcasts of the radio series are still available on the BBC website: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00nrttd2/episodes/downloads>>. See also N. MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, London, Penguin Books, 2012.

² N. Zemon Davis, «Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World», *History and Theory*, 50, n.º 2 (May 1, 2011), pp. 188-202.

³ See M. Brusius, S. Das and A. Stevenson, *100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object*, launched in 2019 at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, to explicitly challenge the «view from nowhere» put forth in the BBC series: <<https://100histories100worlds.org>>.



Figure 1. *Royal Enamel of Dima Giyorgis*, ca. 1500, Dima Giyorgis Monastery, Goğğam, Ethiopia.

taneously representing diverse medieval worlds. The stories of these objects offer glimpses into the distinct cultures and societies that helped bring them into being between the 12th and 16th centuries, depending on the questions we *choose* to raise towards them.

In the following, I will argue that, despite apparent differences in style and artistic value, the Ethiopian enamel and German ivory are bound by a deeper, shared connection: both objects, created at different places and points in time, reached their current locations through breathtakingly long journeys that spanned continents. As we approach these two objects, I invite us to consider them as lenses through which to glimpse multiple medieval pasts. Do they not suggest a history of African-European connections and entanglements that have



Figure 2. *Majestas Domini* tablet of Eberhard, 1100-1150 CE, Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Inv.-Nr. Kg 54:220.

long been known – and just as long overlooked? After all, an elephant had to be hunted and killed for Eberhard's ivory to exist. More likely than not, that elephant lived on the vast continent we now refer to as Africa, as did its hunter. Similarly, the enamel inscribed with Gəʼəz characters did not arrive in Ethiopia by some stroke of divine intervention. Instead, it was commissioned and made in Western Europe, paid for, and transported across half the known world to the highlands of the Horn of Africa for a specific purpose.

Should we not, then, strive to ask: who hunted the elephant whose tusk forms the basis of Eberhard's ivory? Who took part in transporting this tusk across, as we shall see, half of Afro-Eurasia to a peripheral region in what is now Germany? Who profited from this trade, and what did its sale mean for

the people through whose hands it passed along the way? Similarly, how and why was the Ethiopian queen's enamel created not in a local workshop but one thousands of miles away, in a region far beyond the Horn of Africa? Why adorn it with this inscription, in a language unfamiliar to the artisan, yet conveying a particular message? Shall we not ask what purpose it served once brought back to early sixteenth-century Solomonic Ethiopia? Yes, we shall.

1. THE QUEEN'S ENAMEL

In early 1963, French archaeologists were shown three painted enamels while visiting the now relatively remote monastery of Dima Giyorgis in the Goğgam region of the Ethiopian highlands (compare Map 1)⁴. The French were stunned: two objects were based on woodcuts by the German painter Albrecht Dürer⁵.

A third enamel showed two kings seated proudly on ornate thrones. Above their heads, surrounded by a starry sky of deep blue and gold, is an inscription in the ancient local liturgical and literary language of Gə'əz. Painted with an awkward hand that indicates the artisan struggled to form the letters, it names the men – a white-haired elder and a blond young king – as King Na'od and King Ləbnä Dəngəl. Both men are well-attested in the historical record. They were father and son, rulers of the Christian kingdom of Solomonic Ethiopia between 1494 and 1540 CE⁶.

The French archaeologists, however, did not know what to make of these works. They declined to speculate about their origins, eventually publishing only a single photograph of one of the enamels – the one with the Gə'əz writing⁷. The enameled Dürers were deemed too strange, their presence too disconnected from what was then known about Ethiopian or art history. They appeared to have no place within either.

Until, that is, British researcher Ruth Plant stumbled upon another painted enamel in a church in Dəngəlat, hundreds of miles north of Dima, a few years later. This time, the piece was a triptych of rather considerable size, with a central Crucifixion framed by two wings depicting the Annunciation

⁴ Compare the account in F. Anfray, G. Annequin and R. Schneider, «Chronique archéologique, 1960-1964», *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 6, 1965, pp. 16-17.

⁵ These pieces were described, but never published; compare G. Annequin, «Au temps de l'empereur Lebna-Denguel», *Tarik*, 2, 1963, pp. 47-51.

⁶ M.-L. Derat, «Na'od», in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, ed. S. Uhlig, vol. 3, He-N, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2007, pp. 1134-1136; M. Kleiner, «Ləbnä Dəngəl», in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, ed. S. Uhlig, vol. 3, He-N, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2007, pp. 535-537.

⁷ Annequin, «Au temps de l'empereur Lebna-Denguel», *op. cit.*



Map 1. Royal churches and monasteries in Solomonian Ethiopia, ca. 1400–1530.

(fig. 3)⁸. Above the cross – once again – we find an inscription in the ancient Ethiopian language of Gə‘əz. Despite two spelling mistakes and clumsy handwriting, it reads: «Jesus of Nazareth, our King of the Jews».

⁸ An account of her findings was ultimately published as R. Plant, *Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia*, Worcester, Ravens Educational and Development Services, 1985, p. 170. The object had previously also been described in Gigar Tesfaye, «Reconnaissance de Trois Églises Antérieures à 1314», *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 12, n.º 2, 1974, pp. 57-76.



Figure 3. Triptych of the Crucifixion, with Annunciation on lateral wings, ca. 1525, Maryam Dengelat, Tegray.

A stylistic analysis allows us to trace this piece to a specific French workshop in the mid-1520s: that of Jean Pénicaut I in Limoges⁹. Back in the 1970s, Ruth Plant also struggled to make sense of this object. Eventually, she simply published a photo captioning it as a «Renaissance object» in a subsequent book on medieval church architecture in the Ethiopian highlands¹⁰ – even though painted enamels from Ethiopia had, in fact, long been attested in European museums. In 1868, British troops took a small diptych from the corpse of an Ethiopian dignitary fallen in the Battle of Mäqdäla, the seat of Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868), that was quickly sold to the British Museum and brought to London. Set into an ornate case that allowed it to be worn around the neck, one wing depicts Christ taking leave of his mother, rendered meticulously in painted enamel¹¹. Like the enamels of Dima Giyorgis, the work was unmistakably based on a 1509 woodcut by Dürer. It, too, may ultimately be traced to a workshop in

⁹ V. Krebs, «Windows onto the World: Culture Contacts and Western Christian Art in Ethiopia, 1402-1543», PhD thesis, Universität Konstanz/Mekelle University, 2014, p. 406.

¹⁰ See Plant, *Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ British Museum, London, Museum number: Af1868,1001.7: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1868-1001-7>.

Limoges, France. How did objects of such a remote make and model find their way to the highlands of the Horn of Africa?

Beyond their material – painted enamel – and their distant place of origin in Western Europe, these artifacts shared another common trait: they posed a seemingly inexplicable enigma to the men and women who first documented them, as well as to the generations of researchers who subsequently encountered them in the historiographical record. The pieces did not seem to fit into the concept of «Ethiopian art» – let alone Ethiopian history. Given that their Gəʼəz inscriptions were part of the works' original design, the Dima and Dəngəlat enamels especially defied commonly held scholarly ideas about both their place of manufacture in France and their eventual home in Ethiopia.

And so, for the better part of seventy years, scholars dealt with these works in one way: they didn't. At best, it was offhandedly suggested that the enamels were gifts from a largely unspecified European entity to the Ethiopian kings¹². Today, however, these works need no longer remain enigmatic or inexplicable. Framed against the backdrop of new research, they even have the potential to shed new light on the cultural and political history of the Solomonic Kingdom of Christian Ethiopia at the turn of the 16th century.

The hypothesis I propose for these intriguing enamels situates their creation within the broader sphere of Ethiopian-Christian power dynamics in the Horn of Africa between the 13th and 16th centuries. In 1270, Yəkunno Amlak, the founder of the Solomonic dynasty, staged a coup against his Christian predecessor, the last Zagʷe king¹³. Within fifty years, Yəkunno Amlak's descendants had greatly expanded their territory into a vast geopolitical entity. By the 15th century, the Solomonids had consolidated their power; at the very least, they claimed to rule most of the central Ethiopian-Eritrean highland plateau¹⁴.

¹² Compare e.g., S. Higgott, *Catalogue of Glass and Limoges Painted Enamels*, London, Trustees of the Wallace Collection, 2011, p. 346, n. 81. Higgott's case is based on a short note in C. Bosc-Tiessé, «The Use of Occidental Engravings in Ethiopian Painting in the 17th and 18th Centuries», in *The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Ethiopian Art: On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16th-17th Centuries. Papers from the Fifth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art (Arrábida, 26-30 November 1999)*, Ashgate, 2004, p. 100, n. 36. Gigar Tesfaye declined to speculate as to the origins of the enamel but proposed that it had been donated by a Solomonic king to the church of Maryam Dəngəlat in the 16th century: G. Tesfaye, «Reconnaissance de Trois Églises Antérieures à 1314», *op. cit.*, p. 64. This practice is explored in detail in V. Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*, Chur, Palgrave, 2021, chap. 5.

¹³ Compare Y. Binyam and V. Krebs, *Ethiopia and the World, 330-1500 CE*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 9-60.

¹⁴ D. Ayenachew, «Territorial Expansion and Administrative Evolution under the “Solomonic” Dynasty», in *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. S. Kelly, Leiden, Brill, 2020, pp. 57-85.

Despite their upstart beginnings, these kings quickly began to portray themselves as the true spiritual and genealogical heirs of the Biblical Kings David and Solomon¹⁵. Basing this claim on their dynastic epic, the *Kəbrä nāgäšt*, Yəkunno Amlak's heirs portrayed themselves as uniquely distinguished in lineage and spirit, the first of all Christian kings, to their own subjects and eventually to the rulers of the Latin Christian world¹⁶.

In a recent monograph, I detailed how Ethiopian kings dispatched close to a dozen embassies to Latin European courts throughout the 15th century¹⁷. More than anything, Solomonic diplomacy was aimed at reinforcing local power. It focused mainly on the acquisition of relics, religious objects, liturgical equipment, precious fabrics, and skilled artisans – painters, stonemasons, carpenters, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. Such items and craftsmanship were in high demand in the northeastern African highlands of the 1400s, as Solomonic kings were concurrently implementing an ambitious building campaign, endowing and constructing some three dozen royal churches and monasteries over a 120-year period (Map 1)¹⁸. Archaeological and written sources from Ethiopia, Egypt, and Europe indicate that these royal centers were inspired by biblical descriptions of the First Temple in Jerusalem, with churches built from large ashlar stones, their wooden interiors and doors painted and plated in gold, and adorned with jewels and pearls¹⁹.

Through their diplomatic outreach to Latin Europe, Solomonic kings thus fulfilled a dual purpose: they pragmatically sought to acquire precious, rare, and foreign wares and manpower from a distant Christian sphere to increase their local power, while simultaneously reinforcing their claims of biblical Israelite descent by mirroring the diplomatic missions of King Solomon to Hiram of Tyre that had preceded the building of the first Temple in Jerusalem²⁰.

Royal churches and monasteries were established not only in the heartlands of the dynasty but also in recently conquered territories and on the fringes of Solomonic dominion. There, alongside numerous military garrisons, they

¹⁵ J. Gnisci, «Constructing Kingship in Early Solomonic Ethiopia: The David and Solomon Portraits in the Juel-Jensen Psalter», *The Art Bulletin*, 102, n.º 4, 2020, pp. 7-36.

¹⁶ E. A. Thompson Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (Kəbrä Nāgäšt)*, repr., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship*, op. cit.

¹⁸ M.-L. Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens, 1270-1527: espace, pouvoir et monarchisme, Histoire ancienne et médiévale*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003, chap. 6.

¹⁹ Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship*, op. cit., pp. 197-201, 216-17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-20.

strategically reinforced the authority of the Ethiopian *nəguśä nəgäšt*, or «King of Kings», over the domain²¹. In a realm ruled from an itinerant royal court that moved through the highlands like clockwork and was documented as comprising some 30,000 to 40,000 people, these sites provided essential infrastructure for the Solomonic elite. More than anything else, however, these royal foundations – filled with ecclesiastical and worldly treasures – served as permanent religio-political centres of Christian power in a religiously heterogeneous and geographically challenging territory. Contemporary descriptions and the ruins still dotting the central plateau evoke them as sites brimming with local and foreign religious material culture, hinting at the role of these treasures in contemporary late medieval Solomonic society²².

In the latter decades of the 15th century, however, we witness what at first glance appears to have been a crisis of Solomonic rule. From the 1470s onwards, a series of child kings were elevated to the throne. The *nəguśä nəgäšt* – understood as Solomon's true heir – was often only a young boy of six or eight years. Existing historiography has commonly painted these fifty years in a negative light, possibly because it was royal women who now held power over the realm²³. Together with ecclesiastical leaders, generals, and local governors, the young kings' mothers, grandmothers, and sisters governed the kingdom. Still, written and material sources indicate that the realm continued to thrive²⁴. The construction of royal churches and monasteries continued – in fact, royal women began to build and endow monasteries of their own. The material record indicates these queen mothers and princesses followed the example set by Solomonic kings of the earlier 15th century, importing large quantities of ready-made religious objects from the Eastern Mediterranean to furnish royal centers²⁵. Flemish and even German panel paintings were also brought to the highlands, where they were placed in royal monasteries that continued to uphold local Solomonic claims to power. Worshipping before painted panels «made by the *färäng*» – the Franks, an indistinct catchall term for Western Christendom

²¹ D. Ayenachew, «Evolution and Organisation of the Čäwa Military Regiments in Medieval Ethiopia», *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 29, 2014, pp. 83-95.

²² Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship*, *op. cit.*, chap. 5.

²³ The period is described as «Fifty Years of Decline» in Taddesse Tamrat's landmark study. See T. Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, pp. 268-296.

²⁴ For references, compare Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship*, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-55.

²⁵ Krebs, «Windows onto the World...», *op. cit.*, chap. 6-7; V. Krebs, «A Catalogue of Post-Byzantine Icons Present in Solomonic Ethiopia Prior to 1530», in *Orbis Aethiopicus* XVII, A.-W. Asserate and W. Rauni, Dettelbach (eds.), H. J. Röhl Verlag, 2020, pp. 189-227.



Figure 4. Diptych of Joachim, Hanna and the infant Mary as well as the Virgin and the Child, ca. 1500, Yohannes IV Museum, Mäqälä, Inventory Number I-04.

from the perspective of Ethiopian Christianity – became a veritable fashion of the queens²⁶.

Ethiopian icons and manuscript illuminations of the time attest to an unprecedented level of stylistic and iconographic diversity, reflecting the very real spiritual and worldly power that religious donations held in late 15th- and early 16th-century Solomonic Ethiopia. Icons had only been introduced into the Ethiopian liturgy in the 1440s CE, during the rule of Zär’a Ya’eqob (r. 1434-1468)²⁷. For decades, their style and iconography were tied mainly to specific Marian holidays and saints’ days, giving precedence to depictions of the Virgin and key saints such as St. George. Yet by the time of the «Child Kings», their style and iconography had begun to range far and wide²⁸.

Both written and material records indicate that local painters from the highlands and foreign «Franks» held captive at the royal court were commissioned to create religious works that blended «foreign» elements with local

²⁶ Krebs, «Windows onto the World...», *op. cit.*, p. 367.

²⁷ M. E. Heldman, «Painting on Wood», in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, S. Uhlig and A. Bausi (eds.), vol. 4, O-X, Wiesbaden, Harassowitz, 2010, pp. 99-101.

²⁸ V. Krebs, «Space, Time, and Power in an Ethiopian Icon, ca. 1500», in *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art*, S. J. Campbell and S. Porras (eds.), New York, 2024, pp. 466-67.



Figure 5. Diptych of a Pietà and Crucifixion, tempera on panel, ca. 1510, Betā Maryam church, Lalibāla.

iconographic tastes and stylistic conventions²⁹. Among these, we find a striking blond Madonna tending to an equally blond and blue-eyed Christ Child, and a Pietà painted in an almost Flemish style, its weeping Virgin clad in a white veil and wimple, a blue tunic, and black leather shoes (figs. 4-5). Other examples adopted and transformed post-Byzantine models that could even feature pseudo-Latin writing – one notable piece, for instance, had «INRU» instead of the customary «INRI» inscribed above the Cross (fig. 6). Additional works depict a clergyman whose attire would not be out of place in a French book of hours alongside a St. George whose hairstyle reflected the height of fashion among elite Ethiopian men around the year 1500³⁰.

So, how do the exquisitely made enamels of European origin, with their Gə'əz inscriptions, fit within this larger political, religious, and cultural backdrop? As we have seen, powerful Solomonic kings had already sent embassies to Europe by the early 15th century to obtain precious, rare, and «foreign»

²⁹ M. E. Heldman, «Creating Religious Art: The Status of Artisans in Highland Christian Ethiopia», *Aethiopia*, 1, 1998, pp. 131-147; J. Mercier, *Art of Ethiopia: From the Origins to the Golden Century (330-1527)*, Paris, Édition Place des Victoires, 2021, chap. 6.

³⁰ Compare the in-depth study of this piece in Krebs, «Space, Time, and Power in an Ethiopian Icon, ca. 1500».



Figure 6. Diptych of the Crucifixion and St. Mary with her Son, early 16th century, tempera on panel, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, Inventory Number 4325.

Christian objects that could display their spiritual and earthly power, geographic reach, and wealth to the local populace. The material and written record now indicates that in the years following the rule of King Zār'a Ya'eqob, and thus the half-century of «Child King» rule, the reigning queen-mothers and local elites adopted similar strategies, showcasing a kind of «pious worldliness»³¹.

Within such a context, the Ethiopian queen's enamel appears far less surprising – doesn't it? Indeed, it is just one particularly stunning manifestation of a cultural environment in which foreign religious objects from startlingly faraway places and distant lands had long been common, and where such wares were routinely used to uphold local claims to power.

A note in a chronicle from the region of Goğgām, where the monastery of Dima Giyorgis is located, explicitly states that Na'od Mogassä, young

³¹ I will explore this in my forthcoming book, V. Krebs, *Africa collecting Europe: Patronage and Power in Christian Ethiopia, 1470-1530*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2027.

King Ləbnä Dəngəl's mother, Na'od's wife – and thus the woman connected to both men named in our enamel of the two kings (fig. 1) – had the object made «by the Franks» before gifting it to Dima, then a monastic centre at the height of its power, whose monks «showed it with great respect» to visiting nobles and dignitaries³². By the early 16th century, this Ethiopian queen appeared well aware of the power of objects that proclaimed rightful kingship. Her husband had been elevated to the throne as a child after a bitter fight for succession. A generation later, their young son, just eight years of age, faced similarly fierce competition from several contenders³³. Na'od's wife, Ləbnä Dəngəl's mother, seemingly went so far as to commission a painted enamel whose inscription proclaimed her young son's rightful kingship in relation to his father – «King Na'od and King Ləbnä Dəngəl». Local scribes struggled to find adequate words to describe the piece, eventually deeming it made from «a miraculous paint that never fades»³⁴. Made from a material as strange, foreign, and wondrous as painted enamel, it seems, such an object could strengthen the queen's claim to the throne for her 8-year-old son against a slew of rivals.

At its heart, this enamel (and the icons produced for the pious Solomonic patrons) then appears as a vibrant reflection of the Ethiopian elite's taste and evolving power structures. It is a testament to the rich history of contact and entanglement between Solomonic Ethiopia and late medieval Latin Europe during the 15th and early 16th centuries – even if the enamel's inscription might have proved quite the headache for our unknown French artisan, who was clearly unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Gə'əz writing system³⁵.

For now, let us simply conclude that, well before the Portuguese first set sail in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea at the turn of the 16th century, centuries-old networks tying Christian Ethiopia to the Mediterranean and Europe were already robust and established enough to permit the commissioning of artisanal works from a French workshop. The «land of the Franks» might have been halfway across the known world but seen from the perspective of the kings and regents of Solomonic Ethiopia, it *was* part of a shared medieval world – a place from which things could be extracted for local purposes.

³² G. Getahun, *Yä-Goṣṣām tewled bā-mulu kǝ-Abbāy eskä Abbay. Aläqā Tāklä Hyäsus Waqqera endä-safut* (in Amharic), Addis Ababa, 2010, pp. 35-36.

³³ Krebs, «Windows onto the World...», *op. cit.*, pp. 412-17.

³⁴ G. Getahun, *Yä-Goṣṣām tewled bā-mulu kǝ-Abbāy eskä Abbay, op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

³⁵ The letters are written in a very awkward hand and feature mistakes owed to unfamiliarity with the Gə'əz writing system; the name of king Ləbnä Dəngəl is even misspelled (ጠግ instead of the correct ለጠግ).

2. EBERHARD'S IVORY

Let us now examine our second object. Since 1805, a small ivory tablet (fig. 2) has been kept in the Hessian State Museum in Darmstadt. Of moderate size (approximately 8 x 8.6 cm) and notably thick, its deep carving depicts Christ enthroned with his right hand extended in blessing. Encircling him are the symbols of the four Evangelists, emerging from swirling clouds. A Latin inscription surrounds the scene, imploring the viewer to pray for the heavenly joy of a man named Eberhard. Based on its style and iconography, art historians have traced the tablet's origin to southwestern Germany, possibly the city of Trier, in the first half of the twelfth century³⁶.

The original function of Eberhard's *Majestas* remains uncertain: was it a book cover? If so, the lack of fastening holes in the corners makes it unclear how it might have been attached to a manuscript. A superimposed metal frame, meanwhile, would have obscured the inscription. Here, we shall not focus on these issues further.

As someone who identifies foremost as a medievalist but is often considered an Africanist, it is, quite naturally, the material of this piece that draws my attention: precious ivory from an elephant's tusk, imported from distant lands. Apart from Charlemagne's Abū al-'Abbās and the occasional elephant owned by various kings and popes, elephants were exceedingly rare in medieval Europe³⁷. So, where did the ivory come from? Curiously, this question has long been neglected in both historical and art historical studies. After all, ivory shaped European cultural production in ways few other materials did during the medieval period: workshops from England to Sicily, and from the Iberian Peninsula to Byzantium, produced countless works over the centuries. Today, these objects are still prominently featured in exhibitions on European medieval (art) history in museums worldwide.

Ivory also holds a significant place in medieval European literature across several languages. In my native German, I recall Roland's *Olfant* in the *Song of Roland*, Enite's saddle in *Erec*, and Gregorius's tablet in *Hartmann von Aue*³⁸.

³⁶ T. Jülich, *Die mittelalterlichen Elfenbeinarbeiten des Hessischen Landesmuseums Darmstadt*, Regensburg, Schnell & Steiner GmbH, 2007, pp. 118-119.

³⁷ For a recent history of Muslim-Christian diplomacy, including the famous elephant, in the age of Charlemagne, see S. Ottewill-Soulsby, *The Emperor and the Elephant: Christians and Muslims in the Age of Charlemagne*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023.

³⁸ See D. Kartschoke, *Das Rolandslied des Pfaffen Konrad*, Stuttgart, Philipp Reclam Jun., 1993, pp. 270-275, 410-17; A. Leitzmann (ed.), *Erec von Hartmann von Aue*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006, p. 428; F. Neumann (ed.), *Gregorius der gute Sünder von Hartmann von Aue*, Stuttgart, Philipp Reclam Jun., 1963, pp. 44-45.

As a material, it is a classic example of what might be termed ‘charismatic matter’³⁹. Despite its morbid origins – each piece of ivory being, after all, part of a deceased animal – a longstanding tradition in antique and medieval literature ascribes it spiritual purity, making it particularly suitable for crafting sacred Christian objects⁴⁰. As a rare and valuable material that required importation from faraway places, ivory also held considerable economic value.

So, how did the raw material for Eberhard’s tablet – the ivory – reach Trier, or what is now southwestern Germany, in the twelfth century? Examining such a question, as we shall see, requires a fundamental reassessment of the conventional frameworks within which medieval studies have traditionally been conceived. Medieval contemporaries, meanwhile, had their own answers. Already in thirteenth-century England and Germany, ivory and elephants were imagined in precisely the places where current archaeological and historical research also situates their origin. On the famous Hereford Map, for instance, elephants appear at the edge of the known world, between the earthly paradise and the Red Sea – and thus, the Horn of Africa⁴¹. Meanwhile, the creator of the equally renowned Ebstorf Map placed elephants in «India» and «West Africa», just beyond the Atlas Mountains⁴². Yet, the extensive exhibition catalogue of the museum in Darmstadt, home to one of the world’s largest collections of medieval ivories, offers no insight into the origin of Eberhard’s ivory⁴³.

This is hardly unusual: countless exhibition catalogues and comprehensive art-historical analyses avoid addressing the question of the raw material’s origins, and until recently, medievalists appeared to have little concrete information to rely on. If anything, several hypotheses had long been proposed: one suggested that medieval ivory might have come from walruses. However, many existing medieval ivories were carved from a single piece whose diameter far exceeds that of marine mammals, which rarely reached more than 5 to 7 cm⁴⁴. Eberhard’s piece, for instance, is physically too large to have been crafted from a walrus tusk.

³⁹ Compare P. Brown, «“Charismatic” Goods: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Cultural Contacts along the Silk Road in Late Antiquity», in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe*, ca. 250-750, N. Di Cosmo and M. Maas (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 96-107.

⁴⁰ S. M. Guérin, *French Gothic Ivories: Material Theologies and the Sculptor’s Craft*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 74-80.

⁴¹ See S. D. Westrem, *The Hereford Map: A Transcription and Translation of the Legends with Commentary*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2001.

⁴² See H. Kugler, *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte. Kommentierte Neuausgabe in zwei Bänden*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2007.

⁴³ Jülich, *Die mittelalterlichen Elfenbeinarbeiten...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ A. S. Dyke *et al.*, «The Late Wisconsinan and Holocene Record of Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) from North America: A Review with New Data from Arctic and Atlantic Canada», *Arctic*, 52, n.º 2, 1999, pp. 160-81.

Another hypothesis posited that mammoth ivory was used, particularly for objects found in northern and northwestern Europe. Yet, mammoths became extinct in western Europe after the last Ice Age, around thirteen thousand years ago. Although small populations survived on a far East Siberian island until about 2000 BCE, this would mean that more than 3,000-year-old material from the remote Arctic would have been worked in Trier. New bioarchaeological methods have allowed for the analysis of an increasing number of medieval ivories, revealing that few, if any, of the pieces tested so far were made from mammoth ivory⁴⁵.

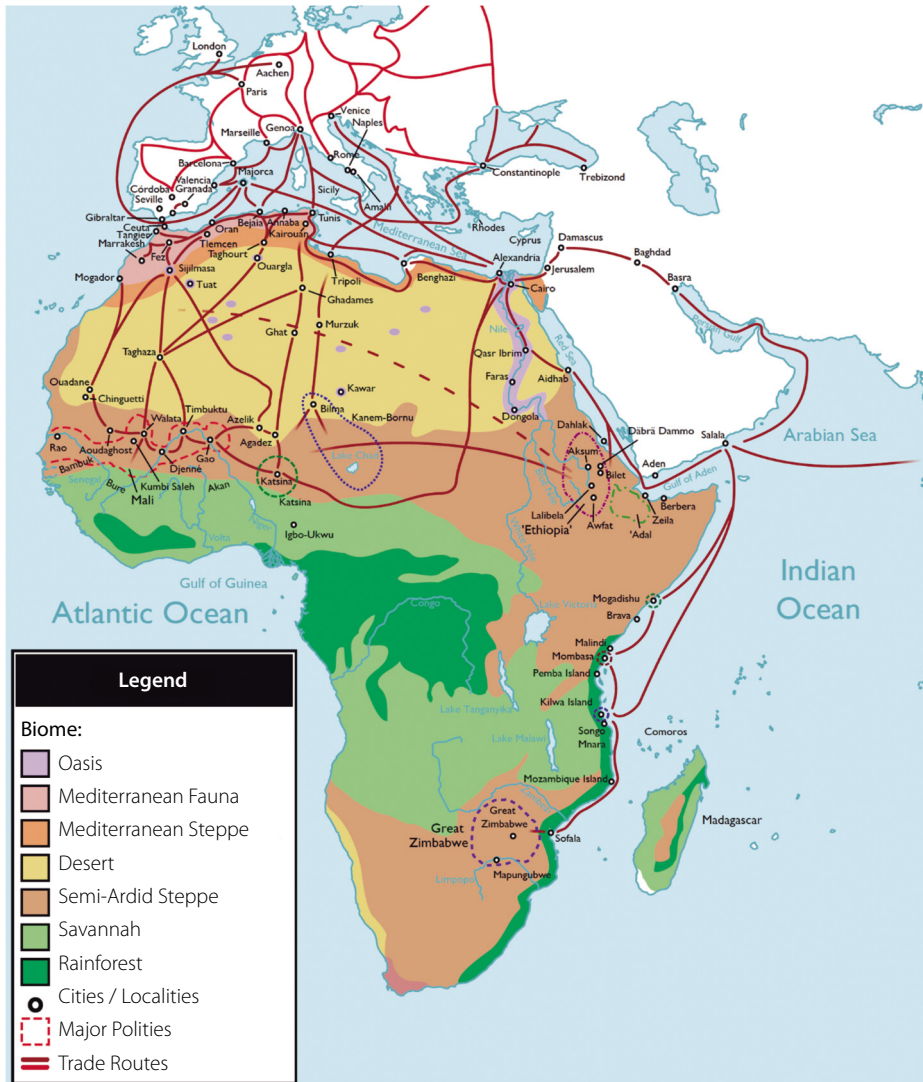
A third hypothesis proposed that ivory originated from Asia. However, out of the three extant elephant species, only the males of the Asian elephant have tusks. They are comparatively small, rarely exceeding 10 cm in diameter at the tusk's widest section – such tusks would have offered limited material for the kind of large-scale carvings common in high and late medieval Europe. Moreover, sources from India and China have long attested that ivory shipped from the East African coast was the primary source of the material used in Asia for the past two millennia. Male and female African elephants are well documented as having produced large tusks of solid ivory, often exceeding 11 cm in diameter, with some reaching as wide as 16 cm. A tusk could easily be over 2 meters long, providing ample material for large-scale works⁴⁶.

Increasing evidence also points to an African origin for ivories worked at the western end of the Eurasian continent. By the 10th century, three or four major trade routes led from various regions of the African interior to the Mediterranean, with some dating back much earlier (compare Map 2). In a series of genuinely paradigm-changing articles published over the past decade, Canadian art historian Sarah Guérin has revolutionized our understanding of how and why large elephant tusks travelled from African regions to the port cities of northern France and Flanders, where increasingly massive works were being carved in the 13th and 14th centuries⁴⁷. One of Guérin's detailed analyses, of

⁴⁵ K. A. Hemer *et al.*, «Ivory from Early Anglo-Saxon Burials in Lincolnshire – A Biomolecular Study», *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 49, June 1, 2023, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Compare S. M. Guérin, «Avorio d'ogni ragione: The Supply of Elephant Ivory to Northern Europe in the Gothic Era», *Journal of Medieval History*, 36, n.º 2, 2010, p. 158.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; S. M. Guérin, «Forgotten Routes? Italy, Ifrīqiya and the Trans-Saharan Ivory Trade», *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean*, 25, n.º 1, 2013, pp. 70-91; *idem*, «The Tusk: Origins of the Raw Material for the Salerno Ivories», in *The Salerno Ivories: Objects, Histories, Contexts*, 2016, pp. 21-30; *idem*, «Exchange of Sacrifices: West Africa in the Medieval World of Goods», *The Medieval Globe*, 3, n.º 2, January, 2017; *idem*, «Ivory and the Ties That Bind», in *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, 2019, pp. 121-30; *idem*, «Gold, Ivory, and Copper: Materials and Arts of Trans-Saharan Trade», in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, 2019, pp. 175-202.



Map 2. Major trade routes connecting Africa to Eurasia, 10th–15th centuries.

Genoese trade contacts in the Western Mediterranean, reveals that ivory tusks were available in the same ports as alum – a mineral also of African provenance, shipped as a bulk commodity of critical importance from North African ports to supply the textile industries of northwestern Europe⁴⁸. As Guérin notes in a

⁴⁸ Guérin, «Avorio d'ogni ragione...», *op. cit.*

recent book, Flanders, northern France, and England practically *ran* on African alum, essential for wool production to the extent that French textile guilds in the 13th century forbade any alum that was not African⁴⁹.

From Sijilmasa in Morocco, Bejaia in Algeria, Tunis in Tunisia, and Alexandria in Egypt, and thus the African coast of the Mediterranean, the tusks of the African savannah or forest elephants, therefore, travelled along the same routes carrying tons of alum from the mines of the Sahara to Bruges, London, Paris, and Cologne. Drawing on Guérin's research as well as written sources from the Islamic world and archaeological evidence, we may reconstruct a hypothetical route an elephant tusk might have taken in the late 13th century: from the savannahs of modern-day Senegal, where Mande communities specialized in hunting elephants, a tusk would have travelled via the Empire of Mali into the hands of Imazighen or Berber traders in what is now Mauritania. These traders moved large-scale, meticulously organized caravans through the Sahel and Sahara, transforming the desert from what we now imagine as a geographic divider into a connector. Passing through cities such as Sijilmasa and over the Atlas Mountains to the Mediterranean coast, tusks were shipped by Italian merchants across the Strait of Gibraltar, maximizing profits by routing them to Rouen and, from there, by river barge or cart to Paris⁵⁰.

In exchange, European and Middle Eastern textiles, ceramics, timber, and copper travelled along the reverse route. Today, archaeological sites and isotope analyses of fourteenth-century West African copper alloy objects reveal the distinctive signatures of French and German copper, attesting to trade connections described in contemporary Arabic sources⁵¹.

Eberhard's ivory, however, dates from the twelfth century and thus predates the far-flung networks of Mali and the Mande by several centuries. Still, one wonders: who hunted his elephant? Again, written and material sources from present-day Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, as well as from England, Hungary, and Jordan, indicate the presence of several interconnected eastern trade routes. These routes not only reached across the Eastern

⁴⁹ Guérin, *French Gothic Ivories*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ For descriptions of premodern Trans-Saharan trade, see Guérin, «Exchange of Sacrifices...», *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101; G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, chap. 2; N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (eds.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, trans. J. F. P. Hopkins, repr., Princeton, Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2000, pp. 52-53.

⁵¹ F. B. Flood and B. Fricke, *Tales Things Tell: Material Histories of Early Globalisms*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2023, p. 13.

Sahara but spanned from the highlands of the Horn of Africa to present-day Zimbabwe⁵².

Recent archaeological research on early medieval sites in Lincolnshire has traced the origin of ivory bag rings found in fifth- and sixth-century English graves to the contemporaneous kingdom of Aksum in the Ethiopian highlands. There, the crafting of large-scale tusks into luxury goods has long been documented in the archaeological record. Yet, it took now-available bioarchaeological methods – radiocarbon dating, DNA analysis, mass spectrometry, and stable isotope analysis – to connect these two places definitively⁵³. This new study is one of several challenging long-held assumptions about medieval European ivories as products of walrus, mammoth, or Asian elephant tusks⁵⁴. Time and again, the evidence overwhelmingly points to Africa as the primary source of the material. If anything, it is striking how long it has taken to acknowledge the extensive, deep-reaching networks that connected the African continent to Eurasia between the 5th and 16th centuries.

So, where does this leave us? I cannot, at this point, present the story of Eberhard's ivory in a neat package. Research on the object is ongoing. What is certain, however, is that the story of this ivory tablet, once owned by a man named Eberhard, began long before it was carved into a religious image in southwestern Germany. It started in a place that, for long, was not even considered part of his medieval world. What is also certain is that our scientific tools have evolved to the point where it is now possible to make educated inferences about the geographic origins of the elephant that provided the basis for Eberhard's ivory. This, in turn, opens up new views not just on the ivory in what is now Germany, but also on the local African cultures whose agents first hunted and traded it, feeding it into established networks that stretched from the Niger to Northumberland and the Nile to Limoges. What impact did this trade in ivory have on *those* societies – on these medieval worlds come down to us embodied in a single object?

⁵² Compare e.g. Guérin, «Avorio d'ogni ragione...», *op. cit.*, pp. 159-61; E. A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2014; S. Wynne-Jones and A. LaViolette, *The Swahili World*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017; Binyam and Krebs, *Ethiopia and the World*, *op. cit.*, chap. 5.

⁵³ Hemer *et al.*, «Ivory from Early Anglo-Saxon...», *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ A. Coutu and K. Damgaard, «From Tusk to Town: Ivory Trade and Craftsmanship along the Red Sea», *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 3, n.º 4, December 1, 2019, pp. 508-546; A. Bollok and I. Koncz, «Sixth- and Seventh-Century Elephant Ivory Finds from the Carpathian Basin: The Sources, Circulation and Value of Ivory in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages», *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, 145, 2020, pp. 39-68; A. de Flamingh *et al.*, «Sourcing Elephant Ivory from a Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Shipwreck», *Current Biology*, 31, n.º 3, February 8, 2021, pp. 621-628.e4.

3. FOUR CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

What, then, are the ties that bind on one hand a French enamel painting adorned with Gə‘əz inscriptions now found in a remote Ethiopian monastery to the tusk of an African elephant, worked into a devotional object for a man named Eberhard in southwestern Germany?

The answer lies in a larger and more complex historical map of the medieval period than we typically envision – one that recognizes the entanglements and networks of interconnectedness often obscured by traditional historiographical approaches. Such a view should not be born from a gratuitous application of global historical theories to the Middle Ages but understood as an intellectual imperative: an expanded and decentralized map that helps illuminate a historiographical blind spot persisting for too long in medieval studies. Only with this perspective can we make sense of the layered histories behind widely travelled, scattered objects such as the two discussed above – the relics of the past so instrumental to how we conceive of, and write, history.

This, in conclusion, brings me to four considerations that have evolved into the foundation of my work, which I believe are essential to our discipline as we explore these topics further and expand our field’s boundaries.

Firstly, the goal of ‘Global Medieval History’ should not be seen as a passing trend but as an essential future methodology for understanding history as a rich tapestry of interconnected narratives. Evidence of interaction between Latin and Ethiopian royal houses, along with the transcontinental trajectories of the ivory trade, underscores the necessity of this approach. Such an approach not only has the potential to offer new perspectives on integrating African realms, agents, and networks into the emerging field of the ‘Global Middle Ages’; it also, I argue, considerably enriches our view of medieval Europe. To accomplish this, however, we must re-evaluate commonly held tenets of how we write history – or rather, histories.

Secondly, it has become indispensable in my research to develop a willingness to reassess what is considered «known» and «secure» knowledge. My own work has uncovered biases rooted in racist and colonialist thinking that have long skewed interpretations of what has been considered established, even encyclopedic, knowledge. This re-evaluation allows us to view Ethiopian enamels not as historical oddities or mysteries but as products of autonomous political action by the ruling elite of the Solomonic royal court. A «Renaissance-style» enamel dismissed as a European gift or as simply appearing «out of place» in an Ethiopian monastery exemplifies this tendency to overlook local African agency.

Thirdly, we must question which sources we privilege for specific reasons, whether due to language, geography, or the divide between written and visual, material, or archaeological evidence. Arabic ecclesiastical histories, Gə'əz royal chronicles, Ethiopian icons and manuscripts, and Portuguese and Latin sources from around 1500 tell contrasting stories. An ivory carving, interpreted as a material source, may lead us far beyond Trier.

Lastly, we must challenge artificial boundaries between academic disciplines that inadvertently narrow our view of the medieval world. How else can we explain the longstanding disconnect between extensive art historical research on ivory and the study of the material's historical origins? As Africanists and medievalists continue to pen opposing narratives of cultural contact between Ethiopia and Europe, it is clear that dissolving disciplinary boundaries and incorporating questions and methods from adjacent fields may greatly enrich our historical understanding. Or, to put it in simpler terms, perhaps the next time we encounter an ivory carved in high or late medieval Paris or Cologne, we ought to be asking ourselves – «So, who killed the elephant?».