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CHAPTER

Christian History, World History, and the Ethiopian Literary Tradition (4th–17th Centuries)

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Abstract

The religious literature in Gəʿəz (ancient Ethiopic) tell us much about the ideas of the first Christians of Ethiopia. By critically investigating texts written during the Middle Ages, after 1270, fragments of the older cultural phase (fourth–seventh centuries) can be brought to light, together with the more ancient Ethiopian historiographical traditions, showing the true position of Aksum among the Christian kingdoms of Late Antiquity. Among the Ethiopians, the interest for the universal history is a later development, starting with authors like Giyorgis of Sägla (d. 1425). The golden age of this literary genre seems to be the time frame between Kings Ləbnä Dəngəl (*r*. 1508–40) and Susənyos (*r*. 1607–32), when external challenges brought Abyssinian intellectual circles to look outside, in search for support to the Monophysite cause.

Keywords: kingdom of Aksum, Eritrea, Ethiopia, ecclesiastical historiography, universal history, Giyorgis of Sägla, ∃nbaqom

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I Overview

Not unlike other Eastern Christian cultures, in Ethiopia the various national histories are placed in a logical and chronological pattern ultimately dating back to the Old Testament, particularly drawing from chapter 2 of the Book of Daniel.[1] Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the Prophet's explanation, and the traditional identification of the four empires that would succeed each other in world domination (those of the Babylonians, the Medes and Achaemenids, Alexander the Great, and the Romans) provide an indispensable framework for a general conception of universal history. This idea is dominated by a providential notion whereby particular histories are embedded in a unified story as different manifestations of the divine will, as the succession of the four universal empires, announced in Daniel's prophecy, attests and demonstrates.

However, there are also clear signs that, within this framework, Ethiopian learned men have demonstrated a specific sensitivity to the role their Christian nation has played within universal history. For clergymen trained in monastic schools, guardians of a religious tradition that began in the early 4th century and is still alive today, the turnover of political institutions revolved around a *translatio imperii*, understood both as a paradigm for understanding the history of the entire human race and as a peculiar version pertaining specifically to the Ethiopian nation. Behind this reflection lies Ethiopian ecclesiastical historiography and its constant and problematic confrontation with Jewish heritage, and more specifically with Ethiopia's self-understanding as the *Verus Israel*. The 'chosen people' by virtue of a covenant with God, enshrined in the delivery of the Tablets of the Law, according to the account in *Exodus* 19–20, would have lost their original status in favour of a 'New Israel'. This 'theology of replacement' has led to new historical myth-making, such as one can read in the *Kəbrä nägäśt* (The Glory of Kings),[2] and consequently to a rewriting of universal history itself.

II Christian historiography in Ethiopic (Gəʿəz): characteristics of a tradition

In medieval Ethiopia, at least from the last quarter of the 13th century onwards, the interest in historiography is very much present and is embodied in a literary genre, that of royal chronicles, which has left rich and varied testimonies.[3] It has been generally acknowledged that this genre can be dated back to the Aksumite age (1st–7th centuries), because the inscriptions of King 'Ezana (born about 325, *r. c.* 330–65/70), a precious testimony of ancient Ethiopian epigraphy,[4] show a marked and profound interest in the *res gestae* of the sovereign. This circumstance has led modern scholars to suspect the existence of a submerged literature, of which nothing is known at present. Indeed, the Near Eastern annalistic tradition, first Mesopotamian, then South Arabic, resurfaces in these inscriptions, whose importance also lies in the fact they are the last example of that unadorned and distant historiographic tradition.

At the same time, the literary landscape of Late Antique Ethiopia includes a text such as the Greek inscription of the throne of Adulis (*Adulitana II*), acephalous and unsigned, which Cosmas Indicopleustes, around 525, copied and reported in his *Topographia Christiana* (*Top. Chr.* II, 60–3 = *RIÉ* 277), written between 547 and 549.[5] Such narrative belongs to a completely different historical framework. In fact, there is no continuity between the two forms of chronicles, which are far apart as only two independent cultural phases, one considerably earlier, can be. The narrative complexity and literary ambitions of *Adulitana II* suggest a different tradition, much closer to Greek models, such as that represented by *Adulitana I*, the inscription of Ptolemy III Euergetes (b. 284/81 BCE, r. 246–222 BCE) engraved on the stela behind the throne (*Top. Chr.* II, 58–9 = *RIÉ* 276),[6] seen again by Cosmas, who transcribed both texts one after the other. Therefore, it seems plausible to attribute the throne inscription to an authority that at the end of the first century BCE, after the definitive cancellation of Egypt's political autonomy, in the years of Rome's two wars against Saba (24 BCE) and Meroe (24–22/21 BCE),[7] created the *Monumentum Adulitanum*. This operation aimed at indicating the handover that had taken place

between the ancient dynasty founded 300 years earlier by Ptolemy son of Lagus, and recently crushed by the advent of Rome, and a new political entity, established in Adulis, which for at least a century maintained its independence and exerted its influence over Aksum itself.

It is a well-known fact that post-1270 Ethiopian literature [8] is largely dependent on Arabic models, and therefore has produced translations of important fragments of the Coptic-Egyptian historiography.[9] These are significant episodes of the cultural interaction of the 13th–16th centuries, whose dimensions and dynamics have long obscured the understanding of a whole series of older passages,[10] covered by the mass of more recent texts imported from Egypt into Ethiopia.[11] A crucial and frustrating difficulty remains for those interested in in the historiography of Late Antique, i.e. Aksumite, Ethiopia,[12] namely its fragmentary preservation, which prevents us from appreciating the full extent of its significance. Therefore, in the past the suspicion was raised of a certain lack of interest by the Christians of Aksum in historiography, despite the importance of the genre for its obvious theological repercussions.[13]

This pessimist view has been recently corrected in light of the discovery of a manuscript known as the *Aksumite Collection*, transmitted from a 13th-century codex discovered in 1999 in ʻUra Mäsqäl, in northern Təgray (initial Σ).[14] Of particular importance was the publication of the Gəʻəz version of the *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae*, whose dependence on the same Greek model followed for the Latin translation transmitted by the *Codex Veronensis* LX (58), oncial from the 7th–8th century (initial *V*), has been ascertained, allowing new hypotheses of great significance to be advanced concerning the origins and development of ecclesiastical historiography in the Alexandrian and Aksumite context. Σ and *V*, therefore, guarantee that the genre was practised also by the Christians of Alexandria and Aksum, provided that in the Aksumite milieu, from the time of Frumentius and Athanasius, speaking and writing about the history of the Alexandrian episcopate must have meant in all respects reporting on events concerning the Christian community of Ethiopia itself.[15]

The matter of the depletion and gradual fading of Christian literary traditions of the Aksumite age has always attracted scholarly attention, and several scholars have endeavoured to demonstrate—sometimes successfully—that a number of works of Gəʻəz literature (Bible and apocrypha, hagiographies and liturgies, homiletic and patristic texts) date back to ancient Christian Greek models.[16] These efforts have consisted in a careful philological analysis of the errors and misunderstandings of translators. This allowed to demonstrate the late antique origin of these works, and in some occasion one can speak of a 'double track', whereby the same text was translated twice: from Greek in the Aksumite period, and from Arabic after 1270.[17] Elements of continuity with the Aksumite past emerge from the surface of the medieval literary tradition well beyond 1270, at least until the time of King Zär'a Yaʻqob (*r.* 1434–68) and his great liturgical and dogmatic 'restoration' aimed at definitive closure of the dispute, which had characterized the previous two centuries, between the Crown and a part of the clergy, supported by regional aristocracies.[18] If this is the case, the traces of a persistence of the Aksumite tradition in a completely different cultural context, such as that of post-1270 Ethiopia, at the end of a 500-year phase of documentary silence, impose pushing further down the chronological limit from which things radically and irreversibly changed.[19]

Recently, the hagiographic dossier of Frumentius of Tyre (*fl.* 330/340, died after 356), 'apostle' and first bishop of Ethiopia, has been critically re-examined, in particular the homily *De Frumentio* transmitted by the two large textual collectors designated as EMML 1763 and 8509.[20] It has been persuasively argued that in some details of the Gəʻəz account one can recognize characteristic elements of the narrative transmitted by the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates Scholasticus (b. 380/90, d. 439/50), and this is a fact with remarkable consequences. Firstly, it implies that a work of Greek ecclesiastical historiography, linked to Constantinopolitan models, was directly translated into Ethiopic, a sign of an even wider circulation of texts in Aksum than hitherto imagined. Secondly, it is assumed with good reason that, through an unspecified number of passages, the historiographical work was used to write a homiletic text, so that it cannot be ruled out that, by digging through the works of liturgical literature in Gəʻəz, one might identify more traces of knowledge stemming from Late Antique Ethiopia, in texts not yet recognized as belonging to the heritage of Aksumite literature.[21]

Attention to these phenomena of textual transmission allows research to be refined, leading to the recognition of a Late Antique core within works that, in their present form, are certainly later creations.

We can refer, for instance, to the study of the collections of legal documents attesting the right of churches and convents to profit from the exploitation of land, such as the *Book of Aksum* (*Mäṣḥafä Aksum*)[22] and the documentary section of the so-called *Golden Gospel* (*Wängelä wärq*) of the Eritrean convent of Däbrä Libanos.[23] The record of ancient grants of benefices by sixth-century rulers, primarily Gäbrä Mäsqäl, son of Kaleb and king of Aksum from 534 to 548, identifiable with the W'ZB who dictated the inscription *RIÉ* 192 and with the ruler mentioned in the concluding chapter of the *Kəbrä nägäśt*, has often been viewed with suspicion and judged to be the product of pure literary invention. This is a consequence of a prejudice concerning a supposed break in civilization that would have marked the transition from the ancient to the medieval age, whereby in Ethiopian minds the presence of Antiquity would have dissolved and, in its place, a patchwork of fantasies that we call traditions made its way.

III Ethiopian reflection on universal history up to the 15th century

On the contrary, the idea of a persistence of ancient thought into the medieval period is increasingly convincing, and the signs that support a 'continuity' approach seem to be multiplying. This is the case with the *Kəbrä nägäśt*, a crucial work of Ethiopian literary history, written in its final form between 1318 and 1322 (probably in 1321), reusing Arabic materials.[24] The frequent references to motifs and characters from Late Antiquity, particularly in the chapters that open (1–18) and close the work (113–17)[25] have allowed Irfan Shahîd to develop the hypothesis that they are based on sources contemporary to the triumph of Kaleb over Ḥimyar, around 525.[26] In the current debate, his arguments have gained strength.

Two examples are the opening words with which Gregory the Illuminator, 'apostle' of Armenia (here confused with the Thaumaturge), addresses the assembly of bishops gathered at the Council of Nicaea, and the information that Dəmatəyos, archbishop of Constantinople (*liqä ṗaṗasat zärome*), would have found a manuscript in the church of St Sophia (*betä sofya*)—perhaps a reference to Methodius of Patara and his *Apocalypse*. It seems unlikely to imagine that these narratives were created in a post-1270 cultural context.[27] Equally evocative is the closing chapter of the work (117), an element of a narrative framework that links directly to the opening pages.[28] It includes a prophetic image of the meeting of sovereigns in Jerusalem at the end of time, to renew the military and religious alliance that in the first half of the sixth century had allowed Ḥimyar and his Judaic dynasty, supported by the Sasanids, to be eliminated from the political scene. This contains elements of Aksumite context strongly suggestive of a lost Gə'əz historiographical source, contemporary with or shortly later than the Christian success of 525. As illustrated by this example, there are sufficient elements to recognize the authority of historical sources transmitting information that monks and churchmen have jealously preserved for centuries—even those relating to the remotest past, and even when they seem to contradict established acquisitions.

Concerning the early history of the Christian mission in Aksum, the tradition is uncertain and unreliable. Apart from the account of the story of Frumentius, the story of the *Acts of the Apostles* (8:26–39) is worthless because the episode in which Philip baptizes the eunuch of Queen Candace contains a reference to Meroe rather than Aksum. Alternatively, other sources mention as the first Christian rulers of Ethiopia the brothers Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa, behind whom lies a mythical transposition of the figures of Kaleb Ǝllä/-e Aṣbəḥa and Abrəha, king of Ḥimyar, governor of Ethiopian origin and Christian religion, who ruled in South Arabia from about 530. As we have said, the figure of 'Ezana, whose role in the opening of Ethiopia to Christianity was crucial, is neglected by local traditions, and has been somewhat forgotten by all ecclesiastical historians, because not even Rufinus of Aquileia (*c.*345–411), the earliest known author recounting the story, informed by eyewitnesses, mentions the name of the first Christian king of Aksum.[29]

An attempt to bring order to this plurality of disparate accounts, from a perspective of authentic historical theology and universal history, was made in the first quarter of the 15th century by the outstanding figure of Giyorgis of Sägla, one of the most prominent and creative figures in the entire Ethiopian tradition. Born around 1365 into an aristocratic family, he was educated in the prestigious monastery of Ḥayq Ǝsṭifanos and later held high positions in the Ethiopian ecclesiastical hierarchy: first as a member of the royal priestly college (the *kahənatä däbtära*), a role his father had already held, then as abbot of the ancient monastery of Däbrä Dammo, in Təgray. For taking part in a dispute that had caused deep dissension between the Crown and a section of monasticism, advocating the observance of the 'double Sabbath', he also experienced imprisonment, but was released when his position regained credibility at court. His fame as a religious man and theologian earned him the title of 'saint' and the composition of a hagiographic account or *gädl*.[30] Abbot of a small community in the Amḥara, not far from his birthplace, he fully devoted himself to religious literature; the year before his death (1424), he completed his *Lebenswerk*, the *Mäṣḥafä Məsṭir* or 'Book of Mystery', organized in 30 sections, in the form of homilies, in each of which a theological position he considered contrary to orthodox doctrine is refuted.[31]

Chapter 5 is dedicated to Photinus of Sirmium (b. *c*.325, d. 376) and his Christological conceptions.[32] Here we are particularly interested in the long central digression, whose subject is precisely the reconstruction and harmonization of the various accounts that circulated around the stages of the spread and establishment of Christianity in Ethiopia. Thus, Giyorgis accepts the tradition according to which the Ethiopian nation, originally devoted to pagan cults, switched to Judaism following the events related to Queen Azeb (i.e. Makədda), as in the *Kəbrä nägäśt*. The second moment is the conversion to Christianity, according to the narration of Acts 8:26–39, the episode in which Philip gives the first religious instruction and gives baptism to the eunuch of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, an expression that betrays the misunderstanding of a title of the queens of Meroe. To him, therefore, would be attributed the Christianization of the country. The third moment is when Frumentius and Sidracus (i.e. Edesius, Rufinus' informant) arrive in Ethiopia and find a land that, although not having been subject to apostolic preaching, is already Christian. There is, however, a lack of ecclesiastical organization, which is remedied by the appointment of Frumentius as bishop by the Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius. His pastoral work would have taken place while Ethiopia was ruled by the first Christian sovereigns, the brothers Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa. Later, during the reign of Al'ameda, son of Sal'adoba, Giyorgis places the arrival of the 'Roman Saints', i.e. the 'Nine Saints', whose activity spans the reign of Kaleb, son of Tazeba.[33]

It does not seem that this remarkable example of historical reconstruction, in which events are ordered in a providential perspective, can be dismissed as a scholastic task, or a flat illustration of facts known to all Ethiopian churchmen in the first quarter of the 15th century. More likely, it is a creation of Giyorgis, who even in this field must have dictated an official line, rearranging disparate and contradictory traditions. In doing so, he must once again have drawn on a wider literature than is known to us, including the 'Life' of *Arägawi*, the founder of the monastery of Däbrä Dammo, in Təgray, of which Giyorgis had been abbot. Therefore, the composition of this hagiographic text, so far assigned to the 16th century, must also be significantly backdated.[34] Giyorgis' reconstruction has the merit of being based on a fundamentally correct relative chronology, i.e. a respectful presentation of the succession of facts and events.[35] The weakest point in the line of thinking of the major theologian of medieval Ethiopia is the lack of an absolute chronology. And yet, the need to link the narratives to absolute dates is not foreign to the tradition, for this sensitive problem was dealt with by anonymous churchmen who at different times devoted themselves to the para-literary genre of chronography.

We can realize this by rereading the opening lines of a precious document such as the one published in 2015 and kept at the Forteguerriana Library in Pistoia.[36] Here the pivotal events of the Christian history are synchronized, assuming that from the creation of the world to the birth of Jesus 5,500 years have passed. Then, the document keeps repeating 'from the birth of Christ to the conversion of Ethiopia 245 years, from the

conversion of Ethiopia to the year of the Martyrs 31 years, from the era of the Martyrs until the council of Nicaea 41 years, from the Council of Nicaea until Constantinople 57 years, from Constantinople until Ephesus 50 years, from Ephesus until Chalcedon 24 years, from Chalcedon to the Muslims 170 years, from the Muslims until Yəkunno Amlak 640 years'.[37]

Apparently, the traditional Ethiopian chronography[38] fixes the date of the 'conversion' of Ethiopia at around 253, in contrast to the reconstruction of the facts which can be inferred from historical documents, which unanimously attribute to 'Ezana the merit of having welcomed Christianity at court around 340, at the instigation of Frumentius. Apart from the silence on 'Constantine of Ethiopia', mentioned above, it must again be considered that we know little about the beginnings of Christianity in Aksum. Yet, accepting that the religious framework prior to 'Ezana was articulated and plural, as recently reaffirmed by Pierluigi Piovanelli,[39] and included the presence of Christian communities that were already a few generations old, we would only reaffirm the veracity of Rufinus' account, which emphasizes the fact that Frumentius' pastoral activity began by providing support to Christians already living in the territories of the kingdom. Traces of this could be in the memory of traditional clerics and scholars, who date the 'conversion' of Ethiopia to 253.[40]

The correspondence between the year 5576 since the creation of the world and 284 CE remains another landmark in traditional Ethiopian chronography, but, as Philippe Luisier has recently illustrated, until the first half of the 6th century the Diocletian era retained its original characterization as an authentically Egyptian calendar, without the confessional connotation that would be sanctioned by its renaming as the era of the Martyrs.[41] If the 'conversion' of Ethiopia is consciously placed 31 years before the beginning of the era that also in the Ethiopian tradition will be named after the Martyrs of the Diocletian persecution, this seems to indicate an ancient chronographic landmark, predating the adoption of the 284-centred system of computation. The origins of this 'high' chronology for the 'conversion' of Ethiopia are unknown, but we can speculate that it expresses the desire to synchronize the event (253 AD) with the season of anti-Christian persecutions in the third century (at the time of the emperors Decius and Valerian), and in particular with the beginning of the cult of the martyrs of Egypt, for whom Ethiopian Christianity and Gəʿəz literature developed a special veneration.[42]

Nor would it be surprising if, with the progress of studies, scholars were able to redefine the time and manner of the Christian mission in Ethiopia, backdating it before the conversion of 'Ezana and definitively ascribing it to an Egyptian-based preaching, which can be presumably placed in the years of the patriarchate of Dionysius the Great (247/8–265) and Maximus, his successor until 282. This temporal window, i.e. the 80 years or so that separate the datum of the chronographic tradition from the documented events of 'Ezana's time, would provide the necessary space to situate the diffusion in the Aksumite context of liturgical features traceable to the preaching of Melitius of Lycopolis and his 'church of the martyrs'. The question was raised cursorily years ago,[43] but the publication and study of the *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae* points to the possibility that Ethiopia indeed had some familiarity with Melitian preaching.[44] The dissemination of a religious thought that, starting with Peter of Alexandria, would be considered contrary to orthodoxy could explain both the presence of Melitian traits in Ethiopian Christianity and the fiercely anti-Melitian tradition, of which the same Giyorgis ultimately became the interpreter in his *magnum opus*.

IV New trends in universal history after the 16th century

Returning to Giyorgis of Sägla, he can be considered the first Ethiopian intellectual who attempted to compose a universal history, if we admit that for every Abyssinian clergyman writing the events occurring in his blessed land after the Creation is a recapitulation of the world history. At the time when Giyorgis composed the celebrated chapter 5 of his *Mäṣḥafä Məsṭir*, the expression of Ethiopian interest in the past was confined to books relating the *res gestae* of individual kings, conventionally called royal chronicles. The focus was on the sovereign as defender of the faith and on the eschatological role he would play, in the wake of the narrative at the end of *Kəbrä nägäśt*. Significantly, the first book belonging to this genre is the half-hagiographic report of the campaign led by king ʿAmdä Ṣəyon (*r*. 1313–44) against the Islamic sultanate of Ifat (1332),[45] in the same time-frame during which the royal myth was developed in the final form of the *Kəbrä nägäśt*.

Things rapidly change in the first half of the 16th century, during the reign of King Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508–40)—a dramatic turning point of Ethiopian history, when the Christian kingdom faced a deadly challenge from a coalition of Islamic forces. Starting from 1523, an outstanding cultural personality was elevated to the dignity of abbot of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos, and according to a long-standing rule became de facto leader of the Ethiopian monasticism. He was born probably around 1470 in Yemen, where he received from his parents the name of Abū l-Fath and an Islamic education. Still young, around 1489, he converted to Christianity, left his country and went to Ethiopia, where he was well received in both the religious and the secular milieu, included the royal court. He was baptized in Ethiopia, changing his name in Ǝnbaqom (Habakkuk), and dedicated himself to the monastic life and to religious study,[46] becoming a reference point for 16th-century Ethiopian scholars. Like Giyorgis, after his death he was elevated to the status of saint, and a hagiographic account or *gädl* was composed about his life.[47]

Ǝnbaqom composed theological treatises, and signed a good number of translations from Arabic to Gəʿəz, among which is the 13th-century *Kitāb at-tawārīḫ* (literally 'the book of the eras'), a world history and chronology composed about 1257 by the Christian Egyptian Abū Šākir b. Abī l-Karam Buṭrus b. al-Muhaḍḍib, better known as Ibn ar-Rāhib (around 1200/10–1295). From his name the Ethiopic title of the work *Abušakər* (or *Ḥassabä Abušakər*, 'Chronology of Abū Šākir') derives.[48] This impressive collection of astronomic, chronographic, and calendarial data taken from the Islamic traditional sciences had a huge success in Ethiopia too, and brought about a change of sensitivity in Abyssinian circles, where a fresh interest was directed towards the historical ties between the Ethiopian Church and the rest of the Monophysite world. It must be recalled that Ǝnbaqom's translation, dated around 1529/30, immediately follows the beginning of military operations against Ethiopia led by the *ʿamīr* of Harär, Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, called in Ethiopic (Aḥmad) Grañ ('Left-handed').[49] The attention to universal history seems a reaction to the strong concern provoked by the victories of Grañ, for the purpose of reassuringly underlining the perpetuity of the Christian nations and of reaffirming the strong ties between the Coptic and the Ethiopian Churches.

We can date back to this period the Ethiopian attention to another 13th-century Christian Arabic work, written between 1262 and 1268, which was translated into Ethiopic and incorporated in the Abyssinian literary tradition. I refer to the demanding book *al-Maǧmaʿ al-mubarāk* (literally 'the blessed Collection') by the Egyptian historian Ǧirǧis al-Makīn b. al-ʿAmīd (1206–73), known also as Ibn al-ʿAmīd, or Al-Makīn, and Giyorgis Wäldä ʿAmid in the Ethiopian tradition.[50] The Arabic text of this *Universal History* (properly *Tarikä Wäldä ʿAmid*, 'History of Wäldä ʿAmid' in the Gəʿəz translation) is divided into two main parts, having the mid-seventh-century Byzantium and the rise of Islam as a watershed.[51] The translation was integrated with chronological information and events related to Ethiopian history, in order to reinforce the association between Coptic and Abyssinian traditions.[52] Even though we do not have evidence to assign the translation to Ǝnbaqom, this remarkable literary operation follows in the same direction as the *Ḥassabä Abušakər*, being an expression of the will of Ethiopian intellectual circles to look outside, in search of support for the Monophysite cause, during a period characterized by external pressure.

This is not the case for the *Kitāb al-Maǧāmiʿ*, 'Book of Councils', a complex historiographical work inspired, around 950, by Sāwīrus b. al-Muqaffaʿ, bishop of al-Ušmūnayn, and materially compiled by Mawhūb b. Manṣūr b. Mufarriǧ, whose Gəʿəz version provides a review that can be profitably compared to the surviving Arabic original text.[53] This work, whose Ethiopic translation is commonly dated to the first half of the 17th century, almost 700 years after the original Arabic text was composed,[54] deals only with Coptic–Egyptian theological controversies. Moreover, like most of the writings of Sāwīrus b. al-Muqaffaʿ, the book was intended solely to defend the Jacobite faith against the Chalcedonian creed, so that the true historical significance of such a text is strongly limited by the apologetic mood of its author.

A separate case is that of the *Universal History* of Yoḥannəs called Mädäbbär, i.e. *mudabbir*, 'administrator' or 'supervisor' of the monasteries, also known as John, bishop of Nikiu, in the second half of the seventh century.[55] This text exists only in a Gəʿəz translation, and substantially contributes to the knowledge of facts relating to the history of Egypt in the decisive transition from Byzantine to Caliphate domination. In its inspiration, this work is a good representative of a literary sensitivity for the world history, from the time of Adam up to the writer's day (approximately, the last quarter of the seventh century). Nevertheless, the composition of the original Coptic (or Greek–Coptic) text is affected by the author's cultural sensitivity, developed in an environment characterized by serious political and religious tensions that existentially threatened Egyptian identity, between the end of Byzantine rule and the beginning of the Arab dominion (640–42). Here too, the Ethiopic translation from the Arabic model (of unknown date, but evidently deriving from the Coptic text) is rather late, dating back to the very beginning of the 17th century, around 1601.[56]

As to their dating, the information provided by the last two translations points to the troubled period of the warring kings Yaʿqob and Zädəngəl (who took turns in power between 1597 and 1607), and the succeeding ruler, Susənyos (*r*. 1607–32), a period when interest in universal history was consolidated among Ethiopian intellectuals. The hagiographic inspiration of Sāwīrus b. al-Muqaffaʿ and the apologetic writings of John of Nikiu (Yoḥannəs Mädäbbär) gave Ethiopian literary circles the tools to interpret world history as the history of the implementation of Monophysite theology, against both the traditional enemies (Jews and Muslims) and new religious competitors, such as the Catholic missionaries of the Company of Jesus.

King Susənyos' decision to accept the faith of Rome (1622), meaning papal primacy, had the aim of maintaining the support of European powers, particularly Portugal, and of placing Ethiopia in a strategic position, within the circuit of international relations between India and the Mediterranean Sea. For their part, the Abyssinian clergy strenuously opposed every attempt to introduce changes in the tradition. Once again universal history became a testing ground to demonstrate the traditional and immutable connection between Ethiopia and the rest of the Monophysite world, particularly Coptic Egypt, cradle of the Abyssinian faith. When Susenyos' brother, Fasilädäs (*r*. 1632–67), forced him to abdicate, and took his place on the throne, he repealed his decisions, expelled the Catholic missionaries, and restored the Orthodox faith. Presumably also because of these events, the interest of Abyssinian intellectual circles in universal history decreased and eventually faded out.

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Abbreviations

RIÉ = Bernand, Drewes, Schneider 1991 and Bernand 2000.

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Notes

1 On the topic, Momigliano 1980; repr. in 1982: 293–301 and Momigliano 1987: 39–46; see also 1985.

2 See Lusini 2001a: 49–52.

3 General summaries can be found in Dombrowski 1983 (the ‘Short Chronicle’), Chernetsov 1988; 2007; Yaqob Beyene 1994; Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2019. On the relationship between annals and other documentary and literary testimonies, see Marrassini 2005, Derat 2019.

4 The Italian-speaking reader will be able to make use of the translations (with extensive philological and historical notes) collected in Marrassini 2014.

5 Edition and translation in Wolska-Conus 1968: 372–9; cf. Bernand, Drewes, Schneider 1991: 378–82 and Bernand 2000: 32–45.

6 Edition and translation in Wolska-Conus 1968: 370–2; cf. Bernand, Drewes, Schneider 1991: 26–32.

7 Lusini 2009: 71; Fauvelle-Aymar 2009.

8 The Italian-speaking reader will find an instrument of unaltered validity in Cerulli 1968. After a quarter of a century, bibliographical updates were included in Beylot 1993. More comprehensive illustrations of themes and topics concerning the history of medieval Christian Ethiopia are now in Kelly 2020.

9 Lusini 2001b.

10 A selection of contributions, written by leading scholars throughout the last century, on the topics of the ‘Ethiopian Christian millennium’, between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (4th–16th centuries), can be found in Bausi 2012. Anthologies of translations of Gəʿəz literary texts are available in Raineri 1994 and Colin 2017. A translation into English of the royal chronicles can be found in Pankhurst 1967; cf. the still valid synthesis provided by Taddesse Tamrat 1972.

11 For a general view of the literary issues, see Sidarus 2016. Of a different slant, and noteworthy for its originality, is De Lorenzi 2015; cf. Bausi 2019: 91–6.

12 For an overview of the literary issues following the introduction of Christianity in the kingdom of Aksum, starting in the first half of the 4th century, one can make use of Brakmann 1994: 117–85.

13 As in Lusini 2001b: 544; cf. Lusini 2024.

14 For a detailed exposition of the acquisitions on the subject, with related bibliography, see Bausi 2024: 245–65, a contribution licensed 20 years after the discovery of the codex of ʿUra Mäsqäl, first announced in Bausi 2002: 146–51.

15 Dombrowski 1984, Schneider 1987. From the very beginning, the Christian community of Ethiopia was recognized on both sides as constituting a diocese subject to the authority of Alexandria. This was a consequence of the 4th-century events, but also the effect of an ideological reconstruction, according to which Egypt, together with Palestine, were the cradle of Christian civilization, and Ethiopia was the true successor of both, through Mark the apostle and Solomon the king.

16 With consequent and relevant interference phenomena between Greek and Gəʿəz, particularly in the lexicon, see Voigt 1991, Weninger 2004, and Zaborski 2014.

17 For translation techniques, reference should be made to Russiano Miles 1985 and Knibb 1999: 55–86. For an in-depth retake of the issue, with extensive reference to the earlier scientific debate, see Villa 2019: 187–221.

18 Wendt 1960, Getachew Haile 1981, Piovanelli 1995; see also Lusini 1993: 16–27 and 2003: 1178.

19 On the same direction point the elements of political history that emerge from the in-depth study of Derat 2018: 87–145.

20 Villa 2017; text in Getachew Haile 1979.

21 As in the case of the relationship between the *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae* and the *Acts* of Peter of Alexandria; see Bausi 2019: 99–101; text in Getachew Haile 1980. Of later tradition is the text published by Raineri 2010.

22 Conti Rossini 1909–10 = 1961–2; cf. Bausi 2006.

23 Conti Rossini 1901; cf. Bausi 2007a.

24 An extensive and rich illustration of the relevant philological and historical problems is available in Marrassini 2007: 364a–8b.

25 See Bezold 1905: 1–11 (text) = 1–9 (translation); 167–72 (text) = 133–7 (translation).

26 Shahîd 1976: 133–78. After the publication of this momentous article, we can notice the enrichment of arguments in support of a Late Antique *Kəbrä nägäśt*; see Debié 2010 and the critical re-examination of the hypothesis in Piovanelli 2013: 20–32.

27 Caquot 1977; 1994: 331–5, Krivov 1988.

28 See Bezold 1905: 170a, l. 18–170b, l. 6 (text) = 136, ll. 13–19 (translation).

29 For the study of the historical implications of Rufinus' account, with confirmations from epigraphic and numismatic data, a valid starting point remains Thélamon 1981: 31–83.

30 Colin 1987; cf. Derat 1999.

31 Edited and translated in Yaqob Beyene 1990 and 1993; see Yaqob Beyene 1989 and Bausi 2007b.

32 Yaqob Beyene 1990: 105–43 (text); 1993: 63–86 (translation); cf. Conti Rossini 1948: 19–38.

33 Brita 2010.

34 Text in Guidi 1894.

35 Bausi 2019: 102, 'una presentazione comprensiva e coerente della storia religiosa dell'Etiopia dalla sua età pagana fino alla sua cristianizzazione per diverse tappe'.

36 Lusini 2015.

37 Lusini 2015: 57 (text), 60–1 (translation).

38 A complicated matter that owes much to the research of a versatile scholar such as Otto Neugebauer (1899–1990); see Neugebauer 1979; 1989.

39 Piovanelli 2014: 350–1.

40 About this genre of literature in the Ethiopian context, see Witakowski 2006: 285–301; Nosnitsin 2022.

41 Luisier 2015.

42 Lusini 2015: 60, footnote 19.

43 Lusini 2005: 251–2.

44 Bausi, Camplani 2016: 252–4 and 293.

45 See the editions and translations by Marrassini 1993 and Kropp 1994; cf. Ducati 1939: 1–96 and Huntingford 1965.

46 Van Donzel 1969: 1–164; Ricci 1969–70; cf. Kelly 2024: 193–5.

47 Ricci 1954; 1955–8; 1966; 1967–8.

48 Sidarus 1975; 2014; Neugebauer 1988.

49 A valid presentation of the events is now in Chekroun 2023: 237–74.

50 Hoffmann 2021.

51 Cahen 1955–7; Eddé, Micheau 1994; Diez 2024.

52 Kropp 1986; 2016.

53 On his literary personality, with prevalent reference to the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, see Den Heijer 1989.

54 Beylot 1993: 251–2; see Leroy, Grébaut 1911.

55 Zotenberg 1883; Charles 1916; Elagina 2017; 2019.

56 Rodinson 1974.