Note to Reader

Transliterations from Ethiopian languages overwhelmingly follow those established by the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, unless terms have entered common English usage; transliterations from Arabic follow the imperfect system of a German native-speaker writing in English who learnt Arabic both late in life and outside of the academy. A glossary provides brief explanations on historical personnel and the most commonly used Gəʿəz and Arabic terms.

Medieval Ethiopian kings could be known to their subjects by several names, some of which were evocative composites (e.g. king Ləbnä Dəngəl's name means 'Incense of the Virgin', but he was also known as Dawit III and Wänag Sägäd). Each king is referred to by the name most commonly employed in scholarship; moreover, to denote a ruler's kingship, his name is preceded by the local honorific term of address of *aṣe* (thus *aṣe* Ləbnä Dəngəl instead of 'king Ləbnä Dəngəl') in this book. I also employ the Gəʿəz terms *nəguś* (meaning 'king') and its plural *nägäśt* ('kings') as a shorthand specifically denoting the Christian rulers of Solomonic Ethiopia (vis-à-vis their counterparts in Europe or elsewhere) throughout this study.

Personal names, particularly those of individuals involved in Ethiopian-European diplomacy, have not been modernised or rendered into an English equivalent unless specifically noted. Instead, they are given as they appear in the primary source material (e.g. 'Petrus' instead of 'Peter', 'Johanne Baptista' instead of 'Giovanni Battista'). The common English form is used for names of Latin Christian popes, and for personages of comparative historical fame that are of secondary importance (e.g. Pope

Sixtus IV and count Girolamo Riario). In bibliographic references, Ethiopian names are given as usual, listing the personal name and the name of the father and grandfather (when customarily used by the author) with no reversal in bibliographic entries.

As has become commonplace in the field, all dates are identified as CE (Common Era) with regard to the modern Western calendar; in a few cases, AH for the Islamic calendar is used. The centuries under investigation here are familiar to Ethiopian Studies specialists as belonging to the latter part of the so-called Early Solomonic Period (1270–1529) of Ethiopian history. The applicability of the terms ‘medieval’ or ‘Middle Ages’ to non-European regions has engaged many discussions within the field of Medieval Studies in recent years. And yet, leading Ethiopian scholars of the twentieth century (from Taddesse Tamrat and Sergew Hable Selassie to Getatchew Haile) have—when writing in English about the time period—long and freely employed both these terms. The use of ‘late medieval’ and ‘late Middle Ages’ in this book is thus a nod to the great Ethiopian historians in whose footsteps I walk. It is also a conscious choice to highlight the deep history of entanglement between the North-East African highlands and the extended Mediterranean, which is at the heart of this study.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In early 1429, a Persian merchant called al-Tabrīzī was condemned to death by one of the four supreme justices of Mamlūk Egypt. The Egyptian authorities carried out the sentence quickly and with great spectacle: as February turned into March, al-Tabrīzī was publicly beheaded under the window of the al-Ṣāliḥiyya *madrasa*, the formal site for public execution in late medieval Cairo. The Persian declared his innocence until his head was struck from his neck. He also quoted passages from the Quran and proclaimed the Islamic profession of faith.

Officially, al-Tabrīzī was accused of 'importing weapons into an enemy country' and 'playing with two religions'.[1] From a Mamlūk standpoint, he was certainly guilty of both: the merchant had previously been reprimanded for his export of arms and horses from Muslim Egypt to Solomonic Ethiopia, a Christian kingdom located in the highlands of the Horn of Africa. Beyond his role as incidental quartermaster supplying a foreign army to the south of Egypt, al-Tabrīzī was also known to acquire 'treasures' such as bejewelled crosses for *aṣe* Yəsḥaq, the ruler of Christian Ethiopia.

The evidence recovered with the Persian upon his arrest together with some Ethiopian monks in 1429 indicates that the group had been sent out to acquire the rare and beautiful things in life. While some weapons were found among their possessions, they were of little interest to the Mamlūk authorities. Primarily recovered were great amounts of 'Frankish'

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clothing, richly embroidered in gold with Christian symbols, as well as two golden church bells and a letter written ‘in the Ethiopian language’. In it, the Ethiopian sovereign supposedly ordered al-Tabrīzī to acquire items of gold-smithery, crosses, bells and a holy Christian relic—one of the nails with which Jesus had been crucified.[2]

Meanwhile, Spanish archival material indicates that the Persian merchant and the Ethiopian monks had visited the kingdom of Aragon before attempting to return to Ethiopia via Egypt. They had arrived in Valencia in late 1427, spending several months in the city and asking the Aragonese king, Alfonso V, to despatch artisans and craftsmen to the court of their master, the *nəguś*—the Ethiopian king.

All this inter-faith contact and collaboration—with an African Christian ruler approaching an Iberian court employing a Persian Muslim in the company of Ethiopian ecclesiastics—provoked the suspicion of generations of Mamlūk Egyptian historians, who subsequently speculated that the *nəguś* must have been calling for a crusade against the Islamic powers of the Mediterranean.[3] There was simply no way an Ethiopian king would have sent out emissaries to travel halfway across the known world to acquire ecclesiastical garments, liturgical objects and a relic as well as artisans and craftsmen. Or was there?

In fact, diplomatic endeavours like the one that took such a fatal turn for the Persian merchant al-Tabrīzī seem to have been rather common at the time. The fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the timeframe under consideration in this book, coincides with an early golden age of Solomonic Ethiopian sovereignty in the Horn of Africa. The origins of Christianity in the region date back to the first half of the fourth century, when the Aksumite king ʿEzana converted to the religion together with his court, and Ethiopia became a bishopric of the Coptic Church.[4] In 1270, the so-called Solomonic dynasty came to power in the central Ethiopian highlands. Throughout the fourteenth century, successive Solomonic *nägäśt*—to use the plural of *nəguś* as shorthand for these kings of Christian Ethiopia—extended and consolidated their realm, seizing and submitting new regions from non-Christian principalities under their suzerainty.[5] At the turn of the fifteenth century, Solomonic Ethiopia was the largest geo-political entity in the late medieval Horn of Africa. The territory the Christian *nägäśt* claimed as their own stretched nearly 700 miles in length and several hundred miles in breadth. It formed a heterogeneous realm that extended over most of the central highland plateau, from the

Eritrean coastal regions to the south of modern-day Addis Ababa (compare Map 1).[6]

Between 1400 and the late 1520s, successive Ethiopian sovereigns are recorded as dispatching at least a dozen diplomatic missions to various princely and ecclesiastical courts in Latin Europe. The vast majority of embassies were sent out within the first 50 years of contacts. In the fifteenth century alone, Solomonic envoys arrived at places as varied as Venice, Rome, Valencia, Naples and Lisbon. Ethiopian pilgrims, sometimes cast into the role of inadvertent ambassadors, are concurrently attested from Lake Constance in modern-day Germany to Santiago de Compostela in the very west of the Iberian Peninsula.

Continuous and lasting contacts between distant medieval royal courts are far from surprising. Often, objects rather than written sources bear lasting witness to remote connections between realms. As art historian Finbarr Flood once put it, 'people and things have been mixed up for a very long time, rarely conforming to the boundaries imposed on them by modern anthropologists and historians.'[7] In this specific case, however, the people and things mixing up between the Christian Horn of Africa and the Latin West traversed thousands of miles. They needed to cross mountain ranges, deserts and two large bodies of water, as well as territories adhering to different faiths. Even at the best of times, a single journey was bound to take at least half a year. And yet, nearly all rulers and regents of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century sent out envoys in some way or other—in the very early 1400s, up to three embassies were dispatched from the North-East African highland court within just five years. Examining late medieval Solomonic Ethiopian missions to the Latin West, this book above all seeks to answer a simple question: why did generations of *nägäśt* initiate diplomatic contacts with different princely and ecclesiastical courts in Europe in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century?

Historiography, Sources and the Spectre of Prester John

Modern historians and philologists working on the history and literature of Europe and Ethiopia alike have studied these diplomatic encounters for more than a century.[8] Dating back to the very early 1900s, researchers working on materials examined in this book have noted an Ethiopian interest in craftsmen, and occasionally relics.[9] The mid-twentieth-century

Italian historian Renato Lefèvre concerned himself with the topic of Ethiopian-European exchanges throughout his long career, unearthing more archival material than any other scholar.[10] In a major 1945 article, he suggested that the *nägäśt* first approached medieval Italy out of a need for its artistically and technologically superior workforce, ostensibly caused by a lack of skilled indigenous African labour.[11] Two decades later, he opined somewhat less bluntly that Solomonic rulers dispatched their missions out of a desire to obtain 'masters of art and industry' to raise the civil and technical level of the Ethiopian kingdom, driven by a need to enhance its military efficiency.[12]

Lefèvre's views were undoubtedly steeped in the colonialist political climate of his time, not unusual amongst Italian scholars writing in the 1930s and 1940s and thus shortly before, during, and after the fascist Italian occupation of the Horn of Africa.[13] His particular conclusions on Ethiopia's supposedly desperate cry for military, political and artistic aid were, however, also influenced by the way the material has been studied. While Ethiopia was often perceived as exceptional within pre-colonial African historiography, its history has often been examined from the perspective of European imagination and exploration, which was often itself steeped in a crusading spirit in the later Middle Ages.[14] Historical mentions of Prester John and his realm, a formidable yet wholly fictitious Christian ruler of extraordinary military power who enjoyed particular popularity in late medieval Europe, have long been examined alongside sources on Solomonic Ethiopia.[15] Until now, the spectre of Prester John—despite its origin as a wholly exogenous, proto-orientalist European fantasy—persists in scholarly writing on the actual geopolitical entity of pre-modern Solomonic Ethiopia.[16] Finally, the rather martial interests of an ostensible early-fourteenth-century 'Ethiopian' embassy—whose historicity and connection to the realm of the *nägäśt* has been under question—have also been projected onto later Solomonic missions. Incidentally, Latin Christian sources narrate this mission as offering a military alliance to a 'king of the Spains'.[17] Over the course of the century, research has thus often read late medieval Ethiopia and its connections to the larger world as cast in a very particular light: we find a largely established scholarship view where the *nägäśt* are understood as primarily looking for craftsmen to 'develop' the Christian highland realm and especially its military, and as hoping to acquire arms and even guns from Europe. Sometimes, these ostensible interests were tied to another rather martial desire—the *nägäśt* were also narrated as primarily looking for military alliances with various courts in Latin Europe.[18]

It is the core idea of this book to argue that the available source material on Solomonic diplomatic outreach to the late medieval Latin West tells quite a different story: while some first-hand expressions of diplomatic interests written by Ethiopian rulers from the early sixteenth century do indeed contain—among many other things—a tangible interest in military matters, alliances and arms, these are utterly absent in sources dating prior to the early 1500s.[19] Yet, Solomonic embassies to Europe date back to the very early 1400s. What drove the *nägäśt* to send their missions throughout the fifteenth century? Research has thus far failed to offer up a compelling explanation for the first 100 years of persistent Solomonic diplomatic outreach.

No first-hand letters written by Ethiopian rulers have come down to us for this lengthy, early phase of contacts. However, a multitude of other texts from Ethiopia, Egypt and Latin Europe have survived. These texts contain a wealth of circumstantial evidence and provide a view on the desires and interests of these African Christian rulers. Most of our sources have been preserved in European archives, ranging from administrative notes and copies of official letters to treasury records, city annals and chronicles, itineraries, diary entries, personal letter collections and even cartouche legends on maps. Many are written in the languages of the Latin West: medieval Latin, of course, but also Italian, Catalan, German, French and Portuguese, with the occasional indistinct local mix of a few of the above thrown in for good measure. Ethiopian texts written in Gəʿəz, the ancient literary and liturgical language of the country, provide an additional perspective. They contain important nuggets of historical information, as do Arabic records from Mamlūk Egypt, Ethiopia's northern neighbour.

Combining all these sources—some of which have been known for more than a century, others having come to light more recently—makes visible several golden threads running through each and every late medieval Solomonic embassy to Latin Europe: as we will see, not a single source relating to the first 100 years of Ethiopian diplomacy portrays a clear Solomonic interest in obtaining military craftsmen-technologists or alliances, arms or guns from the Latin West. Instead, we find an immense desire to acquire foreign religious material culture, especially relics, ecclesiastical fabrics and liturgical objects, but also artisans and craftsmen skilled in trades necessary to construct magnificent architectural monuments—builders, carpenters, stonemasons, metalworkers, painters.

These common themes, these tangible Solomonic desires, fit in rather well into the local history of Ethiopia in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. The consolidation of Solomonic power over most of the central North-East African highlands had ushered in substantial religious reform, as well as the translation and flourishing of local religious literature.[20] This period also witnessed the advent of monumental local building activity: it saw the construction of dozens of prestigious royal churches and monasteries, material testament to the *nägäśt*'s supreme political claim to power, and a physical assertion of each sovereign's rightful and just Christian rulership.[21] These royal religious centres naturally not only had to be built and ornamented, but also had to be endowed and furnished with precious books, ecclesiastical garments, fine fabrics, liturgical utensils, relics and eventually also icons.

Reading the diplomatic sources within the framework of local late medieval Ethiopian history, this book proposes that Ethiopian rulers sent out their missions to acquire rare religious treasures and foreign manpower expedient to their political agenda of building and endowing monumental churches and monasteries in the Ethiopian highlands. Acquiring artisans and ecclesiastical wares from faraway places for religious centres intimately tied to Solomonic dominion would have necessarily increased their prestige within the Christian Horn of Africa, following a mechanism well-attested for numerous societies in the pre-modern world. Such requests from a foreign sovereign sphere were rarely caused by a shortage of indigenous labour or materials—particularly not within fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century Ethiopia. Here, they appear instead to be an intentional emulation of 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 nägäśt*—the 'Glory of Kings'.[22] This very same king Solomon, too, is repeatedly narrated as sending envoys to another sovereign ruler to obtain both precious wares and a master craftsman to construct the first temple in Jerusalem in the Bible.[23] The sending of missions to Latin Christian potentates appears to have been one of the strategies through which the *nägäśt* locally asserted their claim of rightful Solomonic descendence—and actively if somewhat incidentally initiated a particularly noteworthy case of African-European contacts in the late medieval period.

The careful study of the *nägäśt*'s diplomatic relations in the late Middle Ages is moreover not an end unto itself alone. In closely examining the actions, behaviours, diplomatic conduct and self-representation of Ethiopia's ruling elite towards both their late medieval European contemporaries and their populace we also gain rare insight into the workings of a powerful pre-colonial African kingdom encountering the larger world on its own terms. Late medieval Solomonic outreach towards Europe was largely the result of aesthetic and dynastic, and not territorial or militaristic, acquisitiveness. This, at the very least, radically reframes prevalent ideas about pre-modern African agency—and challenges conventional historical narratives of African-European encounters on the eve of the so-called Age of Exploration.

STRUCTURE

A close re-reading of the source material from both North-East Africa and Europe on Solomonic diplomacy towards the Latin West lies at the heart of this study. The book is structured along a chronological investigation of the course of Ethiopian diplomatic outreach in the late Middle Ages. Successive chapters chart three distinct phases of Solomonic missions to the Latin West: Chapter 2 traces diplomacy's onset during the rule of *aṣe* Dawit II shortly after the turn of the fifteenth century. Chapter 3 follows the envoys and agents despatched by *aṣe* Dawit's sons from the 1420s to the 1450s, sent out into an increasingly charged political climate in the Latin Mediterranean. Chapter 4 examines how Ethiopian outreach tapered off and began to change by the latter decades of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, when only three missions are traceable within nearly 80 years. Excepting two short examinations of Latin Christian mercantile scouts in the early 1400s and a missionary venture in the 1480s, our focus will remain firmly on the actions and interests of the *nägäśt* and their ambassadors. After all, these African Christian rulers were the ones who first established long-distance diplomacy with Europe, and it was their interests and desires that maintained—or halted—connections in the late Middle Ages.

Finally, Chap. 5 reads and interprets Solomonic diplomatic requests against the broader backdrop of Ethiopian history in the North-East African highlands. Looking at local historical and archaeological evidence, it asserts that Solomonic diplomatic outreach was caused by the desire to