Paride de Grassi's Account of the 1481 Ethiopian Delegation to Rome

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1 Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the insights that a recently edited source, the *Tractatus de Oratoribus* written by the papal master of ceremony Paride de Grassi in 1508,¹ can hold for an examination of a thoroughly *Roman* image of Ethiopia towards the end of the European medieval period. In his *Tractatus*, de Grassi tried to compile the ceremonial knowledge about how to properly receive any delegation that could possibly arrive at the papal courts, and for this he described in detail a precedent delegation for any power that had once been represented in Rome. What makes it even more interesting, is the fact that he did not stop with accounts of the delegations of European Christian princes but chose to also include non-Christian rulers and sovereigns of those Christian communities outside of Europe.

It is a chapter regarding the latter case that has struck our attention.² In fact, the chapter in question is the only chapter that deals with the possibility of contact between the pope³ and any non-European Christians, and it labels them all under the name of the mythical figure of Prester John. This somewhat indiscriminate treatment of all non-European Christians may seem to challenge some well-established suppositions on what Western Europe had grown to be in the early 16th century and how the other regions of the world were related to it. The early 16th century Western Europe is widely viewed as intellectually awakened, sophisticated and progressive towards the goal of a *modern* soci-

- 1 The *Tractatus* was edited and commentated by Dr. Philipp Stenzig in 2013, and it is this edition that will be used throughout this paper. Philipp Stenzig, *Botschafterzeremoniell am Papsthof der Renaissance. Der Tractatus de Oratoribus des Paris de Grassi—Edition und Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang-Ed, 2013).
- 2 Paride de Grassi, “De oratoribus a prete Jano ad papam missis,” in *Botschafterzeremoniell am Papsthof der Renaissance. Der Tractatus de Oratoribus des Paris de Grassi—Edition und Kommentar*. Vol. 2, ed. Philipp Stenzig (Frankfurt am Main: Lang-Ed, 2013), 236–239.
- 3 The term “pope” will refer to the then patriarch of the West and bishop of Rome throughout the article; the patriarch of Alexandria will be denoted as such.

ety, based on an empirical and realistic world view as opposed to the religious and often allegorical interpretation of one's surroundings in medieval times. It is associated with the formation of world empires, mainly the Castilian conquest of the Americas and the Portuguese control over the Indian spice trade whose traditional trade routes had collapsed after the Ottoman capture of Constantinople.⁴

With that in mind it may strike us as odd how the papal master of ceremony Paride de Grassi, a man holding one of the most esteemed positions within this highly educated community, apparently was not able to differentiate between the various Christian communities outside of Europe, as the St. Thomas Christians in India, the Orthodox church in Ethiopia or the multitude of Central Asian tribes converted to Christianity over time. Had not the late 15th century seen a rapid evolution of European cartography? It was fifty years prior to the publication of the *Tractatus* that the Camaldulense monk Frater Mauro designed a world map devoid of any religious representations: he drew Africa as a distinct continent that could be circumnavigated, added Japan in the far East and the geographical centre was not located in Jerusalem anymore, but in modern day Iraq.⁵ As Tajoli describes him, Mauro was clearly "critical of the sources and would rather follow empirical findings in case of doubt."⁶

Nevertheless, the fact that de Grassi describes a delegation coming from the Ethiopian Empire as precedent for any delegation sent by Prester John, gives rise to two key questions: how did de Grassi as a representative for the papal court and Western Europe in general gather and combine the specific information he got about Ethiopia? And what can his account tell us about how Latin Europe related to them as non-European Christians in general? For this, we will examine (I) the use of Prester John in its historical context and (II) the ethnological and religious information de Grassi was able to gather about Ethiopia. We will combine this with (III) the Ethiopian delegates own intentions unknown to de Grassi and (IV) de Grassi's detailed account of the exact reception.

4 The trope of the dawn of modernity in the beginning of the 16th century can be traced back as early as the late 17th century and has influenced European historiography far into the 20th century. Cf. Jakob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, ed. Horst Günther (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 137; Jacques Le Goff, *Das Hochmittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1965), 294–295; Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Schurkamp, 1997), 555–556.

5 Cf. world map of Fra Mauro (ca. 1457–1459).

6 Luciano Tajoli, "Die zwei Planisphären des Fra Mauro (um 1460)," *Geographica Helvetica* 9 (1994): 15.

2 The Title: The Ambassadors That Were Sent by Prester John

The title of the respective chapter is *De oratoribus a prete Jano ad papam missis*.⁷ This title is already holding a clue about the European view on Ethiopia. The Ethiopian monarch is assumed to be Prester John, a legendary Priest King, who for the last 400 years was the symbol for every Christian ally that could potentially be anywhere beyond the lines of the seemingly inexhaustible Muslim threat. This figure embodied the hope of Latin Christianity that they did not stand alone against the Islamic Sultanates, even though no one really seemed to know where exactly his realm was located. It was an urban legend that Prester John ruled a Christian community on the other end of the world, but this could be—and therefore has been—applied to a variety of Christian communities across the known world.

The popularity of his myth arose in the 12th century when some nomadic tribes of the Kara Khitai utterly annihilated the great Seljuk army at Samarkand in modern-day Uzbekistan what must have been an incredible achievement in the eyes of the Europeans because the Christian monarchies themselves had lost nearly all their encounters with the Seljuks. They had taken Anatolia from the Byzantines earlier and at this moment they were just about to topple the Latin crusader states in the Middle East. Of course, the Kara Khitai were no Indians either, but at least both were located reasonably close to each other in the East from a European point of view. And India was the only place beyond the Islamic Persia Western Europe certainly knew of, anyway, because they knew that Saint Thomas had gone there as a missionary in the first century. And that was good enough to believe—or at least hope—that this far away community had grown large enough to challenge the Muslims.⁸

So, how did Prester John get from India in the far East to Ethiopia in the far South? When the Turkic and Persian Muslim realms were destroyed by the Mongols in the early 13th century, there were some Europeans who believed that Genghis Khan was in fact Prester John. This possibility was quickly ruled out when the Mongols started to slaughter not only the Russian Orthodox believers in Kyiv or Novgorod, but also many Catholic Christians in Hungary and Poland.⁹ After the Mongols finally started to create a stable empire, many

⁷ De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 236.

⁸ Cf. Bernard Hamilton, "Continental Drift. Prester John's Progress through the Indies," in *Medieval Ethnographies. European Perceptions of the World Beyond*, ed. Joan-Pau Rubiés (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 121–125.

⁹ Cf. Gian Bezzola, *Die Mongolen in abendländischer Sicht (1220–1270). Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Völkerbegegnungen* (Bern: Francke, 1974), 28–63.

European monarchs sent ambassadors east to explore the unknown territory and maybe even find Prester John on their journey. But returning travelers all brought the same news: no such Prester John could be found and locals had not even heard of him.¹⁰ So simultaneously, the illusion of a powerful Christian kingdom in India lost credibility and at least for the moment the Mongols did not turn out to be religious allies either. They also left quite a power vacuum in the Middle East which the Mamluk Sultanate based in Cairo took advantage of. When the Mamluks even halted the Mongol expansion at the battle of Ain Jalut in 1260, this finally cemented the move of the European main threat from the Middle East to Egypt, from Baghdad and Damascus to Cairo. But when this perception of the villain changed, Prester John changed with it. He was no longer needed in the East, so the collective mind of the Latins just moved him to another Christian community they certainly knew of: and that was Ethiopia. And this migration did not even have to be inconsistent at this time because Medieval European geography somewhat consistently holds onto the belief that Africa and India were connected through a small strip of land in the South.¹¹

The pattern behind the location of Prester John is the following: he is supposed to be in a space where he is needed. Pragmatically, an ally in the far East would not be of much use against an opponent in North Africa. But it is also important in an ideological sense because it is no coincidence that Prester John always lies beyond the enemy. His function is to create the image that Islam is encompassed by a larger Christian world. If Islam is located in the middle of an otherwise purely Christian world, it can be treated as a foreign particle, as a virus of some sort. If both Christianity and Islam were independent entities that just existed alongside each other, how could anyone then tell with credibility which one was the normality and which one the disturbance? But at the same time, because so little was known of India or Ethiopia, this gave rise to some ridiculous exaggerations of the religious ally: the Ethiopian emperor

10 The first eyewitness to detailedly write down his insights won on his journey is John de Plano Carpini. For a description of the history and structure of the Empire, cf. John de Plano Carpini, "Libellus historicus Ioannis de Plano Carpini, qui missus est Legatus ad Tartaros anno domini 1246 ab Innocentio quarto Pontifice maximo," in *The texts and versions of John de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis as printed for the first time by Hakluyt in 1598 together with some shorter pieces*, ed. Charles Beazley (London: Hakluyt Society, 1903), 53–61. For a compilation of every people the Mongols had conquered: *ibid.*, 66–69.

11 The transition between India and Ethiopia lays within the white spot at the one-o'clock-position. Cf. Ebstorf world map (early 14th century).

would have one million soldiers ready to fight. At least. And more gold than anyone could count.¹²

We can see that the title of the chapter alone expressed the high expectations that the Latins had passed on from generation to generation and which de Grassi cites here.

3 Looking for Information: What Latin Europe Knew about Ethiopia

The first thing de Grassi mentions is the fact that he does not really remember the delegation of 1481 himself because it is 1508 now and he is only 38 years of age.¹³ In general, since the Council of Florence in 1441 there had been only three documented encounters between the Papacy and Ethiopian delegates, the last one as mentioned in 1481,¹⁴ but only three visits within 65 years could not possibly be enough to leave any significant marks in the Roman collective memory. It is interesting to note that for virtually every Latin-Ethiopian encounter pre-

12 Adam Knobler proposes a distance-power-paradigm: the farther away one's distant ally is believed to be located, the stronger his powers are supposed to be. Knobler compares the myth of Prester John to other tropes of distant allies around the globe, notably the lost ten tribes and the Raja Rum. Cf. Adam Knobler, "Prester John, the Ten Tribes and the Raja Rum. Representing the Distant Ally in Three Pre-modern Societies," in *Locating religions. Contact, Diversity and Translocality*, ed. Reinhold Gleis and Nikolas Jaspert (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 151–172. The idea of a Christian enclosure ideology is not new either, as it was the key theory of Eric Taylor, who conceived this idea within his master thesis. Eric Taylor, *Waiting for Prester John. The Legend, the Fifth Crusade, and Medieval Christian Holy War* (Master Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2011).

13 "De oratoribus indianis et caldeis ab ipsorum imperatore qui a nobis vulgo presbiter Janus dicitur ad Sixtum papam quartum missis aliqua recorder me eo tempore quo pene puer eram vidisse; et cum plura quasi per nubilum notabilia viderim, que non notavi tanquam ab ea professione, que tunc temporis mea non erat." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 236.

14 A delegation representing Africa nominated by the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria that was basically consisting of only Egyptians and Ethiopians, made their way to the Union Council of Florence in 1441 where they likely received their own Union Bull. "[...] imbasciatori dell'ill'mo prete Janni [...] vennono a papa Eugenio per fare l'unione della fede loro con la nostra." Cf. Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, Magliabechiano 11, I, 313 fol. 65^r, cited as: Eugenio Cerulli, "Eugenio IV e gli Etiopi al Concilio di Firenze," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 9 (1933): 349. However, the document seems to have had no impact at all on the Ethiopian church. Another delegation stopped in Rome in 1450 while actually being on a mission to king Alfonso V of Aragón motivated by Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob's desire to establish permanent contact with Latin Europe, both economically and militarily. Cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270–1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 264–266.

served in our sources Ethiopian delegates travelled to Rome. There had indeed been journeys of European clergymen into Africa, but unlike the Ethiopian delegates most of them did not seem to survive their way back; or at least added to that rumor by either staying indefinitely within Africa, dying on their way, or simply vanishing inside a peaceful monastery along the way which obviously was not helpful at all in lifting the veil surrounding the mysterious Prester John.¹⁵

In his search to find more information, it would have been an obvious choice for de Grassi to turn to the diaries of his late predecessor, the former papal Master of Ceremony, Johannes Burckard; it seems that even Burckard had not seen any Ethiopians during his tenure because de Grassi does not mention him once. After some meticulous research de Grassi finds out that an interpreter and papal secretary, Giovanni Battista Brocchi da Imola, who escorted the delegation on their way, is still well and alive. In fact, this old man had once travelled to Ethiopia himself and returned. Unfortunately, he did not bother documenting the details of his journey; or at least did not preserve its records.¹⁶ But regardless, this had to be an opportunity for the Roman community to shed some light on Prester John and especially for de Grassi to become a pioneer in their intercultural relations. And thus, the papal Master of Ceremony leads an interview with the retired secretary.

15 A letter sent by Alfonso v in 1450 is preserved in which he complains that all 13 Catalan artisans he had sent earlier had died on their way East: "[...] those thirteen men, masters of the different arts, who were requested from us many years ago by you great brother. We sent them, and they died on the way being unable to pass." Cited as: Francesco Cerone, "La politica orientale di Alfonso di Aragona," *Archivio storico per le Province Napoletane* 27 (1902): 40. Italian merchants and artisans did not seem to fare any better, as guardian Soriano of the Franciscan abbey in Jerusalem noted in the second half of the 15th century. "In la qual corte troviamo dieci Taliani, homini de bona reputatione [...]. Adimandai io questi homini, che vi erano andati a fare in quel stranio paese? Dissero che loro intento era de trovar zoye et pietre preciose. Ma poi che quel re no li lassava ritornar, stavano tutti malcontenti, per ben che da lo re fossero tuti, secundo el grado di ziascuno, ben premiati e provisionati." Cited as: Renato Lefèvre, "Riflessi etiopici sulla cultura europea del medioevo e del rinascimento," *Annali Lateranensi* 9 (1945): 398–399. See also: Samantha Kelly, "The Curious Case of Ethiopic Chaldean: Fraud, Philology, and Cultural (Mis)Understanding in European Conceptions of Ethiopia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2015): 1227–1264; and Samantha Kelly, "Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas," in *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Samantha Kelly (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 425–453.

16 This may be the case because of an unfortunate mix-up as there may have been two Brocchis bearing the same name: one who actually travelled to Ethiopia, and one who de Grassi interviewed in the end. This possibility was pointed out to us by Professor Verena Krebs from the University of Bochum whose publication regarding this question was not available yet as of the time of this paper's conception.

The ethnological background de Grassi is trying to present is a direct quotation of what Brocchi recalls to him, and it is the following: Ethiopia consists of a few small kingdoms which are ruled by a *naguś*, the Ethiopian term for 'king.' Those vassal kings all answer to an emperor, the *naguśä nägäšt*, or *king of kings* who rules over a vast empire.¹⁷ Obviously, the trope of Prester John has already been incorporated into Brocchi's account, but we also have to remember that Africa and India were not that far apart in Medieval European thought. The Ethiopian emperor could have ruled as a supranational monarch over the Indians, but that did not necessarily have to refer to the geographical region of India that we know today because the Medieval European region of India began just east of the Nile.¹⁸

When describing the liturgical conducts of the Ethiopian people, Brocchi notes that they're not that different from the Western European traditions, contrary to many rumors. They did not even baptize their newborns with fire, but used ordinary water for that sacrament, too. Since the reign of Zär'a Ya'eqob who took the throne in 1434, Christian newborns received a branding on their forehead which symbolized their privilege of being able to inherit land. Ethiopians of other religions did not receive such a branding and therefore could not inherit any land themselves. Brocchi does not know the meaning of the branding and muses it could be some magical heat-protection; maybe because he was not that familiar with the subtropical climate and deemed it somewhat inhospitable when he himself travelled to Ethiopia twenty years ago.¹⁹

A practice that Brocchi finds highly suspicious is the Ethiopian use of leavened bread in their liturgy. De Grassi attributes this practice to the bad influence of the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. But his accusations of heresy con-

17 "Hic dominus in lingua eorum id est Indorum vocatus nagus, quod est idem quod [...] in lingua nostra dicitur imperator; populi sub hoc nago dicuntur a nobis et Iherosolimitanis Abbassim, quod est commune provinciarum nomen, ut nos Itali alii Galli item partim vocantur, Indi et partim Ethiopes, nam imperium sive dominium huius nagi sive preti Jani in utramque partem extenditur, in Asiam videlicet et Affricam, sicut eam Nilus disternat, circa quem Nilum imperat libere ipse nagus." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 237.

18 Cf. Lefèvre, "Riflessi," 428.

19 "Hic nagus sive prete Janus fidem Christi et Christum ingenue confitetur, nam et ipse ac sui populi indigene baptizantur et etiam circumciduntur, quoniam ipsi dicunt Christum et discipulos Christi sic fuisse circumcisos et similiter baptizatos. [...] Character autem, qui impressus in facie eorum apparet, ideo infantibus imprimitur propter nimios calores evitandos, aciemque integram oculorem et dentium ut ipsi dicunt observandam." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 237. For the branding and Zär'a Ya'eqob's religious policy, cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 201–239.

tain a highly important twist because he calls the Ethiopian Church Nestorian, a christological position regarding the exact nature of Christ.²⁰

What seems problematic of Brocchi's attribution is the fact that the Ethiopian Church did not follow the Nestorian creed, but rather its opposite. They were Miaphysites. Did not Brocchi know that? Perhaps he did not, but it was not uncommon to label all the Eastern churches that did not follow Rome or Constantinople as Nestorians.²¹

4 The Ethiopian Delegation of 1481: Their Initial Mission

Within the next passages, de Grassi will turn to the delegation itself, and this is the first time that the Ethiopians appear as acting persons. So far, we only have looked at the perspective of Latin Europe on the delegation; but what about its very own intentions? The delegation was initially sent by Emperor Bă'ädä Maryam in 1478 when the Ethiopian Church was facing a huge problem because its clergy as a whole had grown old over time. New priests needed to be consecrated in order to combat the shortage of educated churchmen. Usually, this was the responsibility of a bishop, called *Abunä*, who was responsible for the sacrament of ordination, but even he had died at least twenty years ago. So, for more than twenty years not a single priest had been consecrated in Ethiopia. This situation alone may already seem grave, but there was even more to it because according to the concept of apostolic succession the king could not simply appoint anyone as *Abunä*. Traditionally, it had to be an Egyptian and he had to be appointed and consecrated by the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria himself.²²

The delegation set out to Egypt visited also Jerusalem where they came in contact with the local Franciscan monastery. After talking for a while, the Ethiopians told the Catholics of their conflict: how could it be possible to

20 "Ceterum Missas et sacrificia partim eorum proprio ritu, scilicet redolente ritum primitive Ecclesie peragunt, partim quasi nostro, nam quasi totam Missam absolvunt sub oratione dominica, consecrantque in pane fermentato, ita enim ruditer instructi fuerunt a patriarchis eorum Alexandrino, Antiocheno et Jerosolimitano qui etiam potius declinaverunt ad heresim, sunt ibi quoque populi christiani qui Nestorite dicuntur." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 237.

21 A world map drawn by Martin Waldseemüller in 1507, thus conceived contemporaneously to de Grassi's *Tractatus*, still associates the uttermost north-eastern part of the world with the notion that *hic sunt christiani nestorini*, while not mentioning any other christological heresy. Cf. World map of Martin Waldseemüller (1507).

22 Cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 245–246.

adhere to the rule of apostolic succession without being dependent on the unpopular patriarch of Alexandria? The Franciscans started to promote their own pope as the apostolic successor.²³ It appears that now the delegation came to believe that they were able to solve this dilemma on their own: it was certainly not possible to change one's patriarch, but he could be bypassed, by turning directly to the one that stood above the patriarch. They had superficial knowledge about the papacy at best, leading to the false hope that the pope would listen to them open-mindedly. Incredibly, the delegates decided to follow the Franciscan friars to Rome where they presented Pope Sixtus IV with the gifts that they should actually have presented to their patriarch in Alexandria. Some of them, however, went to Alexandria after all in order to distract the Mamluk Sultan.

5 De Grassi's Account of the Delegation: The Pseudo-agreement of 1481

The low number of delegates that eventually arrived in Rome is actually the first thing de Grassi notes about the delegation;²⁴ but neither de Grassi himself nor Pope Sixtus IV seemed to be surprised about that. But why was it even necessary for the Ethiopians to act in such discretion? To make sense of that, we must understand that the relations between Ethiopia and the Mamluks had always been difficult, but at least the Sultan granted them the right to visit the Holy Land whenever they wanted without an entry fee.²⁵ And the only thing that the Mamluk Sultan knew about the delegation's intent was to visit Jerusalem,

23 The surviving accounts of the conversation between Franciscans and Ethiopians may differ in their descriptions of the delegate's goals. The Franciscan friar Paul Walther for example states that their initial goal was Greece in order to find a prelate who was able to crown their king: *Itinerarium fratris Pauli Waltheri*, "Et magnam familiaritatem habuit cum fratribus conversando, comedendo et bibendo, et tandem reseravit eis negotium suum, scilicet quod vellet ire ad Graeciam et afferre christianum prelatum, qui coronaret dominum suum. Respondit guardianus Montis Sion dicens: 'Domine, quare vultis a Graecis regem vestrum coronari, cum non sint veri catholici, sed haeretici et scismatici et a vera Ecclesia excommunicati?' Respondit legatus: 'Nescio alios christianos,'" cited from Teodosio Somigli, *Etiopia francescana nei documenti dei secoli XVII e XVIII preceduti da cenni storici sulle relazioni con l'Etiopia durante i secoli XIV e XV* (Florence: Collegio di S. Bonaventura, 1928), 66–67.

24 "Itaque missi sunt oratores sex quorum principalis fuit Antonius cappellanus et familiaris ipsius nagi, vir quidem partibus illis magne auctoritatis et ingenii sicut a nobis cardinalis in honore habetur [...]." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 237.

25 "Hunc prete Janum soldanus Babilonie apud Charas etiam veretur et veneratur, nam per

go to Alexandria, and get back home. The Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem was virtually their only connection to the rest of the world—as we have seen before—and if the Sultan would find out that a delegation had used it to make contact with Europe—let alone the pope himself—he would completely shut down any travel from Ethiopia. It is not uncommon that a monarch tries to prevent two enemies to join forces, especially when he is outflanked by them; but the Mamluk Sultanate of the 15th century was especially dangerous and unpredictable. From the outside the Mamluks were still a powerhouse and in the first half of the 15th century both Ethiopia and Europe saw them as a main Muslim threat in the Mediterranean region, but domestically they suffered from severe political instability and were faced with a series of internal power struggles. And that made them feel vulnerable on the outside, so the tiniest irritation could trigger some sort of overreaction in Cairo.

Both Latin Europe and Ethiopia had to experience that in a similar way. A good example are the trading relations between the Republic of Venice and the Mamluks. The slightest *misbehavior* of one Venetian merchant could lead to heavy consequences for all traders as well as the Venetian ambassador, reaching from physical abuse to the expulsion of every Venetian from the Sultanate.²⁶ Now, the Ethiopians did not have any merchants in Egypt, so the Sultan had to look for other subjects he could threaten if he felt that Ethiopia violated his rights. Usually, he was content that the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria was always in his range while the Ethiopians only had some of his ordinary ambassadors who were disposable in comparison. He knew that the Ethiopian Church needed the patriarch to invest and consecrate new clergy, but at times he exacted his revenge not only on him, but on the Coptic monasteries within his territory. Sometimes a Sultan even exacted revenge on all the Christians in his territory, regardless of who had violated his rights in the first place. There is an important example of this which we will come back to later, but it is out of this reason that only six delegates did not want to attract too much attention and that Pope Sixtus IV received them only in his secret consistory. The ambassadors went on to present the Romans with an astonishing offer.

imperii sui loca et populos, homines qui sub hoc nago sunt liberi sunt neque solvunt vectigalia neque introitum Sepulchri dominici sicut alii ceteri Christiani." Ibid., 237.

26 Cf. Kate Fleet, "Turks, Mamluks, and Latin Merchants. Commerce, Conflict, and Cooperation," in *Byzantines, Latins, and Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean World after 150*, ed. Jonathan Harris, Catherine Holmes and Eugenia Russel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 335–336.

They pretended to act on behalf of their emperor who is willing to offer submission to papal authority.²⁷ What does this offer include altogether? First of all, it includes the yearly payment of a traditional tribute to the Latin church, the Peter's Pence. Secondly, the delegates promise on behalf of the Ethiopian Church to cut ties with Alexandria and to let their clergy be educated by Roman authorities. And thirdly, there finally seems to arise a foundation for a military alliance between Western Europe and the legendary Prester John. The delegates actually encourage Latin Europe to attack the Mamluks on their northern frontier; the Ethiopian emperor would support the European strike force by simply letting the Nile run dry.²⁸

Rome was now the only one of the ancient Patriarchates left in Christian hands. And Latin Europe had not exactly been of much use in the protection of the East, so they comforted themselves by dreaming of a great crusade that they would launch against the Ottomans; and in a second step maybe against the Mamluks, but primarily against the Ottomans. At first, they seemingly succeeded when a Christian coalition army annihilated an Ottoman army at Belgrade in 1456. But in hindsight, that was it. Later popes and clergymen could preach all they wanted, but practically no one wanted to take part in any other crusade.²⁹ This Ethiopian delegation came as a welcome surprise because

27 "Propositio ipsa fuit hec, tria continens capitula, videlicet: Primum qualiter venissent ad Ecclesiam Romanam, ut si ibi invenirent unum esse Christi vicarium et successorem Petri, prout ab aliquibus apud ipsos dicitur, quod ipsum Christi vicarium nomine prefati nagi adorarent, duo ipsi pape vicario Christi pollicentes." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 238.

28 "Primum, quod omni anno per oratorem ipsius nagi apud Christi vicarium manentem tributum darent Ecclesie Romane et ipsi vicario ipsumque dominum superiorem et reverentem haberent, prestarentque eidem ac suis successoribus obedientiam per alios principes et imperatores christianos prestari solitam. Secundum petierunt per papam destinari aliquos sive episcopos sive sacerdotes seculares aut regulares bene instructos in fide Christi tanquam magistros qui ipsos populos et nationem tanquam rudes et ignaros discipulos instruerent in fide Christi. Tertio obtulerunt ipsum nagum paratum esse dum vicarius Christi mandaret cum armis in exercitum ac expeditionem ire contra soldanum Babilonie et Mauros ad recuperationem Sepulchri dominici, et turbare crescentiam illi de quo Mauri plurimum timent." Ibid., 238.

29 The outrage over the sacking of Constantinople is testified in various accounts, many of those written by Greek refugees. Kritoboulos even compares the atrocities to the sackings of Troy, Babylon, Carthage, Rome and Jerusalem. Cf. Kritoboulos of Imbros, *The history of Mehmed the Conqueror*, trans. and ed. Charles Riggs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 76–78. Subsequently, the papacy desperately reached out to every potential ally that they had envoys to send for. Sometimes an envoy was sent to a list of places mindbogglingly random. "In civitatibus Caffee et Pere et in terris Sarracenorum, Paganorum, Gregorum, Bulgarorum, Cumanorum, Ethiopium, Iberorum, Alanorum, Basarorum, Bot-torum, Zizorum, Brutenorum, Sitorum, Iacobitarum, Nubianorum, Nestorianorum, Beor-

it could be used as evidence that a crusade could be a possible and rewarding undertaking. Prester John had finally shown himself and he had declared allegiance to their cause! And not only that, but the fact that he had come to Rome—and not the other way around—seemed to make it evident that Latin Europe had the high ground, both ideologically and morally; because the pope claims to be the vicar of Christ, after all, he has *qua definitionem* no other choice than to be right.

It is not clear, if the ambassadors actually presented such an elaborate three-point-offer to the pope. Maybe Brocchi and Pope Sixtus IV just wanted to hear it that way. But if the ambassadors had really made these offers, they did not even have to be that far-fetched to them. The plan of a crusade in cooperation with Europe had been pursued by Emperors Zār'a Ya'eqob and Bā'ädä Maryam, anyway, but had never borne fruit.³⁰ And even the imperial submission under the pope was likely seen as equivalent to the former dependency on Alexandria. But ultimately, the plan was ill-conceived, and the delegates likely started to notice that the pope would have never accepted their Jewish influenced rites either.³¹ We can trace these growing insecurities in the last few comments that

gianorum, Armenorum, Indorum, Molescitorum, Tartharorum, Kardorum, Hungarorum maioris Hungarie et aliorum qui nondum sacramenta fidei perceperunt." cf. Rome, ASV, Reg. Vat. 519, fol. 117^r, cited as: Benjamin Weber, "Toward a Global Crusade? The Papacy and the Non-Latin World in the Fifteenth Century," in *Reconfiguring the Fifteenth-century Crusade*, ed. Norman Housley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 36. Even more striking than this vast line-up of potential allies is the fact that none of these seemed to have any interest in partaking or at least failed in coordination. As Pope Pius II put it in a state of frustration towards the end of his life: "We longed to declare war against the Turks and to put forth every effort in defense of religion, but when we measure our strength against that of the enemy, it is clear that the Church of Rome cannot defeat the Turks with its own resources. [...] We are far inferior to the Turks unless Christian kings should unite their forces. We are seeking to effect this; we are searching out ways; none practicable presents itself, [...] no one believes what we say. Like insolvent tradesmen we are without credit. Everything we do is interpreted in the worst way, and since all princes are very avaricious and all prelates of the Church are slaves to money, they measure our disposition by their own." Pius II, *Commentarius*, cited as: Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204–1571)*. Vol. 2, *The Fifteenth Century* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978), 235.

30 Cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 256–267.

31 Cf. Kenneth Stow, "Papal Mendicants or Mendicant Popes. Continuity and Change in Papal Policies toward the Jews at the End of the Fifteenth Century," in *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Michael and Susan Myers (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 255–271. The 1470s had seen Jewish communities across Latin Europe exceptionally threatened compared to the centuries before. Vigilante justice by locals against their Jewish neighbours was openly tolerated by the papal court, as the case of the blood libel of Trent in 1475 makes evident. Pope Sixtus IV seems to have yielded to his zeitgeist, too, as is shown

Brocchi reports to de Grassi. There he mentions an argument between some nameless Catholic clergymen and the delegates who were asked if it was true that they have a large and autonomous Jewish community back home and that they themselves even incorporate Jewish elements into their rites. Apparently, rumors of the schism had reached Rome, but could not really be put into context there. The delegates strongly rejected these claims and even stressed their immense animosity against any Jewish community they would encounter.³² There was no reason for Brocchi to report this to de Grassi if he did not remember it to be a very emotional episode during their reception. It seems as if the delegates feared that the pope would condemn them for the same reasons as the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria had done earlier, so they stressed that their way of life was in fact perfectly compatible with the Christian doctrine. Their caution is further exposed as de Grassi notes their strict observation of the Roman Catholic customs and their refusal to celebrate the Mass in their own rites.³³

In the aftermath of de Grassi's account, the pope accepted the terms of the Ethiopian offer, but the delegates did not dare to return home. Three years later, two of the delegates could be found in the monasteries of Jerusalem, one had even converted to Islam.³⁴ In the meantime, Emperor Bā'ädä Maryam had died

by the language employed in his comments regarding Jewish life. Not only did he accuse Jews of "ora sua spurcissima aperire, ac prava et obscena quedam diabolica figmenta, suis falsissimis dogmatibus confingere." No. 972, in: Shlomo Simonsohn, ed., *The Apostolic See and the Jews*. Vol. 3, *Documents: 1464–1521* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 1213. But he even employed the trope of an imminent Judaizing threat himself: "[...] contagione Iudaica [...] ut Christicolae a veritate seducere, et se voluptatum suarum compotes facere valeant." No. 1002, *ibid.*, 1250–1251.

32 "[...] sed neque sabbatum ut Iudei sanctificabant et omnia edulia comedebant non sicut Iudei abstinentes ab aliquibus, et inimici erant Iudeorum, quos ipse natus prete Janus et predecessores eius destruxerunt penitus, instanter negantes quod Iudei mentiuntur se videlicet habere dominium in partibus eorum id est Ethiopie, quod falsum est." De Grassi, *De oratoribus*, 239.

33 "Nunquam fecerunt aliqua sua sacrificia particularia sicut alii aliarum nationum infidelium facere solent, sed voluerunt habere modum nostrum dicendi Missam, quia sic ipsi in suis regionibus volebant facere et reducere omnia ad eorum modum et facere secundum quod nos facimus." *Ibid.*, 239.

34 "De li quali l' uno, in grande confusione del nome cristiano e de la sua nazione, ha renegato la fede. L'altro chiamato Antonio già doi anni da poi el suo giungere qui, ritiene le paterne et amicabile littere, li presenti in segno d'amore, la ymagine da esso summo pontefice, lo anelo del proprio dito, in segno de fidele dispositione ad tua excellentia da quello dirizzate. Et allegando la difficoltà del venire, consuma la pecunia a lui donata per lo viaggio, defrauda la dicta Sede dal suo intento e tua serenità, che senza lachrime non proferisco." Francesco Suriano, *Il trattato di Terra Santa e dell'Oriente*, trans. and ed. Girolamo Golubovich (Milan: Artigianelli, 1900), 82.

and his successor Q'wästäntinos II was just six years of age. His regent council had sent another delegation to Alexandria who accomplished their task this time without any diversion. So, the Ethiopian Church had got its much needed *Abunä* and therefore it did not have to think about its relation with Alexandria for the moment. A Roman expedition sent by the pope that actually arrived in Ethiopia had to learn that when the imperial council bluntly rejected them. There was no reason for them to allow yet another foreign force to interfere in their domestic affairs.³⁵ For a time, Rome was confused. Some even felt betrayed and called the former delegates impostors.³⁶ But this impression did not hold for long. First of all, this was not the first time that communications with a territory far away had failed due to misunderstandings and the sheer distance, and secondly, only six years after de Grassi published his manual, the Ethiopian emperor acknowledged the pope as head of church—and this time for real, as the pope made the concession to accept the Miaphysite patriarch of Alexandria as legitimate.

6 Conclusion

The *Tractatus de Oratoribus* and its development can really be seen as exemplary for the waning days of Ethiopia's mythical status in Western Europe. What can be concluded regarding the image Western Europe had about this far-away country of Ethiopia at the end of the Middle Ages? Let's draw four conclusions. First of all, the Latin European image of Ethiopia was always a construction that struggled between their own collective desires, diffuse knowledge and the sheer distance that made reliable information very hard or sometimes impossible to get. The expectations that they had of the African empire highly overestimated their capacities because they elevated the emperor not as an ordi-

35 Cf. Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 289–291.

36 “Hos ego non ab eorum rege destinatos audio, sed ab ipsius secretario [Ioanni Baptista Brochi Imolensi], viro primario regni illius, cui desiderium est fedus et amicitiam inire cum pontifice et ritibus latinorum christianorum vivere. Christiani tamen sunt, quibus rex ille imperitata, quem nos Presto Ioannem vulgo dicimus, sed eorum ritus a nostris admodum differunt. Id fuit precipuum petitionum suarum: Ut cum eis latine legis et lingue episcopus mitteretur, qui et sacra nostra illis ostenderet et christianam doctrinam in eorum terris seminare. Non inventus est qui se illis voluerit credere, tamen religiose admoniti sunt pontificis liberalitate sunt aliti et donati muneribus quibusdam, actis quoque publicis honorati. Pluries etiam per interpretem ab eodem pie et amanter auditi.” Cf. Giacomo Gherardi, *Il diario romano di Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra dal 7 settembre 1479 al 12 agosto 1484*, ed. Enrico Carusi (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1904), 79.

nary monarch, but as the mythical figure of Prester John. That the Ethiopian emperor himself declared to possess control over the Nile just fit perfectly to this web of legends and superficial knowledge. Secondly, the Mamluk Sultanate affected both Latin Europe and Ethiopia and was unanimously seen as a large threat. Its political instability made its behaviour impossible to predict. Both Europeans and Ethiopians had to experience that through brutal collective punishments sometimes exerted on all Christians in Mamluk territory. This led to total secrecy regarding the delegation and contributed to a quick agreement on the proposal of a joint crusade. This secrecy combined with the complete failure of the delegation contributed to make this reception fall into oblivion for a long time. Thirdly, even if it was the legendary Priest King, Latin Europe still knew that his people had wandered off into heresy. Even if Brocchi did not label them the right way as Miaphysites, but instead as Nestorians, Rome was aware that their Christological position was not compatible with the Roman Catholic position and had to be corrected in case of a successful pact. And finally, not only the ancient schisms were still a huge obstacle in the relation between different Christian denominations, but there were also recent ones that affected the course of events. After all, the Ethiopian delegation got to Rome by chance, and it did only because the Ethiopian way of Christianity forced them to constantly reconsider their religious connections. The delegates did not know that for sure when they traveled to Rome, but they soon came to realize that their plan was ill-conceived from the start. It was never going to work. So, we see that it were political reasons and expectations that brought both sides together, mainly the fear of the Mamluk Sultanate and Islam in general, but it were religious and cultural differences that ultimately kept them apart, when both realms, Latin Europe and Ethiopia, for once managed to overcome the huge distance between them and get in contact with each other.

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