Introduction

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In the Horn of Africa, the movement of tectonic plates that created the Great Rift Valley has produced a landscape of remarkable diversity.¹ From the Red Sea coast in present-day Eritrea, a wide chain of mountains and high plateaus – the Central Plateau – runs southward until it meets a smaller chain, the Eastern Plateau, that stretches eastward toward the coast of present-day Somalia before descending into lowlands. These highlands themselves vary, from the more open plains of eastern Təgray, around 2000m above sea level, where wheat was and is grown, to the steep mountains and flat-topped *amba* of Lasta and Amhara, which can rise to 3000m, and where teff is the principal grain. Throughout these highlands the heat is tempered by altitude and the fertile soil watered by the seasonal rains of July and August, which has made them centers of cereal production for millennia. Within the great eastward-tipping “V” formed by these mountain chains, the land descends toward the sea to arid lowlands suited to a pastoral economy, including, in the northeast, the Danakil Depression, one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. Where the two plateaus meet – the vertex of the “V” – a valley continues southward, punctuated by a series of lakes: Zway, Langano, Šala, with others continuing toward and beyond the modern border with Kenya. West of Lakes Zway, Langano, and Šala the altitude remains high but the rainfall is heavy, creating a tropical ecological zone, heavily forested and known for the cultivation of ensete and coffee. North of this tropical zone, and west of the Central Plateau, the highlands descend toward the modern Sudanese border into midlands, suitable for mixed farming and grazing, and further north still to hotter lowlands in the western areas of present-day Eritrea. The region south of the Eastern Plateau, for its part, is quite variable in itself, but can be briefly described as midlands toward the west, descending to arid lowlands as one approaches the Indian Ocean coast.

This region – from roughly the port of Massawa in the north to Lake Šala in the south, and from the present Ethiopian-Sudanese border in the west to

1 The shape of this essay was informed by the discussions held at La Fondation des Treilles among many of the volume's contributors. François-Xavier Fauvelle and Alessandro Bausi offered precious advice on and corrections to drafts of it, and the anonymous reviewers suggested further refinements, all of whom I thank.

the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coasts in the east – is the zone of activity discussed in his volume (see Map 1). The predominant focus within this region is the temperate highlands, largely for reasons of documentation: it was here that the inhabitants gradually adopted Christianity (from the mid-fourth century) and Islam (from the seventh), and it is the Christian and Islamic societies that have left us all of our indigenous written sources of the period, as well as much, though certainly not all, of the extant visual art and as-yet studied archeological remains. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of scholarship has also concentrated on them. It is nonetheless clear that these highland societies, which were themselves only gradually converted to Christianity and Islam over the course of the Middle Ages, had sustained economic and/or political relationships with the neighboring peoples in the tropical, midland, and lowland regions, who resisted conversion to Christianity or Islam (and who are here called adherents of local religions), and these relationships are part of the history here recounted.² A more comprehensive title for this volume might therefore be “Medieval Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia/Somaliland” – and indeed the city of Zaylaʿ on the Somali coast was a crucial node in the history here recounted, being the major port of inter-regional trade in the later Middle Ages. It would be unwieldy, and have its own inaccuracies. Very little can be told regarding the medieval past of the area now constituting Djibouti, while Somalia, centered on Mogadishu, was a distinct cultural-political entity in the Middle Ages. The territory delineated here is not coterminous with the modern states of Ethiopia and Eritrea, but most of it falls within their borders and represents their medieval heritage, and it seemed appropriate, if not accurate in every detail, to entitle the volume thus. In the essays that follow, where “Ethiopia” or “the historical Ethiopian area” are found, those terms should be understood as a shorthand for this territory, which was generally called “Ethiopia” (*Ityōṗṗya*) or “Abyssinia” (*Ḥabaša*) in medieval sources.

1 Outline of Ethiopian-Eritrean History to ca. 1560

Already in antiquity the northern reaches of this zone hosted a flourishing society, the Kingdom of Aksum (first-seventh century CE), whose fertile land and access to Red Sea trade made it well known to other societies of the ancient world. Its kings minted coins, built monumental stone structures, and left bilingual inscriptions in three scripts recording their great deeds. In the

² For a discussion of terms for non-Christian, non-Muslim peoples, see François-Xavier Fauvelle's essay, “Of Conversion and Conversation,” in this volume.

first century CE, the author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* left an account of his mercantile voyage through its port of Adulis and remarked on the Greek learning of its king. In the fourth, when writings attributed to the third-century Persian writer and prophet Mani had already named it among the four great civilizations of the world, it expanded northward into Nubia – and, in a decision of great historical import, converted to Christianity. In the sixth it extended its territorial conquests into Yemen across the Red Sea. By the seventh century, a constellation of factors, including the spread of Islam and decline of Red Sea trade but perhaps climatic change, internal political causes, and migrations as well, seem to have initiated the Aksumite kingdom's decline. The minting of coins ceased. Sources on the kingdom, both internal and external, virtually disappear.

The mid-fourth to mid-seventh centuries occupy a pivotal position in Ethiopian-Eritrean history, at once the apogee of the ancient Aksumite kingdom and the period in which features fundamental to its later history were established. These include, famously, Christianity and the cultural package that came with it: the codex; the first attested literary texts, virtually all Christian literature in translation; the institutional church and incorporation into its universal hierarchy; monasticism. Islam itself was born in the crucible of these centuries, just across the Red Sea, and tradition places the first migration of Muslims to Ethiopia even before the great hijra to Medina in 622 CE: the origins of Islamic Ethiopia, too, can be sought in this period. The arguments that have long been proffered for viewing late antiquity as period of innovation rather than decline in the social-cultural sphere – part of the ancient world but also the origin of numerous “modern” phenomena – apply to the Aksumite kingdom, which belonged to the same Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural zone.³ A starting date for the subject of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea is thus best left flexible, depending upon the topic. Politically and economically, our concern is with the period following decline of Aksum, from the seventh century (as we shall see, data is so scarce for these first centuries that a precise date is neither possible nor very useful). On cultural topics, it is necessary to review crucial developments of late antiquity, and sometimes indeed of earlier

3 The arguments are particularly associated with the work of Peter Brown: see, for instance, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York, 1971); *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and LA, 1982). For a sense of the international dimensions of the historiography and debates, see, for instance, *The World of Late Antiquity Revisited*, a special issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997) devoted to the topic, and Andrea Giardina, “Esplosione di tardoantico,” *Studi storici* 40, 1 (1999): 157–180. On its application to ancient Aksum see, e.g., Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1991).

ages, as the indispensable foundation and context of later phenomena, but a thorough account of the Aksumite age itself, on which a large literature exists, is not attempted here.

The (roughly) four centuries following the decline of the ancient Aksumite kingdom are generally called “post-Aksumite,” in part due to signs of continuity with Aksumite culture (in architecture, in the persistence of a Christian state or states that however the sources no longer call “Aksum”), and in part due to a paucity of data by which to characterize these centuries on their own terms. The historical picture is indeed quite fragmentary. Several foreign contemporary sources converge in the later tenth century to provide a flash of illumination: a crisis in the Christian community, in the form of a violent conquest by a non-Christian queen. In the later eleventh and especially the twelfth century it becomes possible again to follow a narrative thread based on reliable evidence. A series of rulers known to history as the “Zagwe” dynasty (though never so called in their own time) came to power in the Christian kingdom, and oversaw a renewal of Christian life. The boundaries of their realm extended further south than in Aksumite times, into the region of Bugna (now known as Lasta), where by the thirteenth century the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibäla were carved. As Christian Ethiopian society strengthened and extended from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, so did Islamic Ethiopian society. The timing and manner of its earliest development has been a subject of recent re-investigation, as shall be discussed below, but it has long been known that an Islamic society called Šawah existed toward the southern end of the Central Plateau in the twelfth century; by the thirteenth Muslims had control of the port of Zayla⁴, thus creating an east-west network of settlement and trade distinct from the north-south orientation of Christian society on the Central Plateau. The territorial expansion of both Christian and Islamic society was not, of course, into empty land: the “movements” of this period should rather be envisioned as processes of contact and conversion of previously local-religious peoples, with all the resistance, accommodation, and adaptation that such processes entailed, and that are more visible to us for later periods.

Generally speaking, the Ethiopian-Eritrean Middle Ages are divided into an earlier and later period whose threshold is the takeover of the Christian kingdom by King Yäkunno Amlak in 1270 CE. It has become the norm in modern historiography to refer to this new royal lineage as the “Solomonic” dynasty, though the appellation is a modern one and was not employed as such in the Middle Ages.⁴ This dynasty did elaborate an ideology based upon its

4 The modern origins of the term are briefly noted by Steven Kaplan, “Solomonic dynasty,” in *EAE* 4 (2010), 688–690, at 688. Ethiopian rulers explicitly invoked their descent from Solomon

descent from the biblical king Solomon, through which it linked itself to the ancient Aksumite kings and portrayed Zagʷe rule as a break in this ancient and uniquely legitimate succession.⁵ Texts issuing from the royal court therefore occasionally referred to individual kings or to the lineage as sons of Israel; foreign sources, for their part, generally called them the kings of Ethiopia, of Abyssinia, of Amhara, or simply the Christian kings, among other terms.⁶ The two and a half centuries following Yəkunno Amlak's coup that passed under their aegis are often considered a golden age for the Christian kingdom. They are marked by major territorial expansion; a wave of translations into and original compositions in Gəʿəz, the literary and liturgical language of the Christian kingdom; energetic movements of religious reform; and a consolidation of royal power over both church and state. The Christian kingdom's expansion was in part at the expense of the independence of the neighboring Islamic sultanates, which, according to one contemporary observer, numbered six in the 1330s and had occupied regions from the eastern escarpment of the Central Plateau eastward and southward. Their rulers were now selected by, or required confirmation from, the Christian king as suzerain, and had to pay the suzerain tribute as well. Yet the hereditary ruling lineages in the sultanates were sometimes able to maintain their positions; the inhabitants were permitted to pursue their Muslim faith; and they and their foreign coreligionists controlled

(via the medieval and Aksumite rulers) starting in the mid-nineteenth century: see Donald Crummey, "Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of Neo-Solomonic Ideology in 19th-Century Ethiopia," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 28, cahier 109 (1988): 13–43. The term seems then to have been applied as a descriptor of the dynasty of Yəkunno Amlak and his successors in late nineteenth-century scholarship, for instance by Ignazio Guidi, whose *Storia della letteratura etiopica* (2nd ed. Milan, 1961) includes a section on the "re salomonidi di Abissinia," and Carlo Conti Rossini, whose *Storia d'Etiopia. Parte prima* (Bergamo, 1928) is subtitled "from the origins to the advent of the Solomonic dynasty."

- 5 The most famous articulation of this ideology is in the *Kəbrä nāgāšt* ("Nobility of the Kings"), whose first redaction in Gəʿəz is dated to 1314–22. The origins of this text (said in its colophon to have been translated from Coptic into Arabic in Ethiopia in the thirteenth century, and then into Gəʿəz) and its relation to earlier traditions circulating throughout the eastern Mediterranean are difficult matters, and the political context of its translation into Gəʿəz a subject of some debate. Paolo Marrassini, "Kəbrä Nāgāšt," in *EAE* 3 (2007), 364–368, is a useful introduction, to be complemented by the discussions, with recent bibliography, in the following essays. See also Marie-Laure Derat, *L'énigme d'une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d'Éthiopie du XI^e au XIII^e siècle* (Turnhout, 2018), esp. 157–160, for evidence of a linkage to Solomon and the Aksumite kings proposed already by the Zagʷe.
- 6 For an example of their designation as Israelite see Getatchew Haile, ed. and trans., *The Mariology of Emperor Zār'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia: Texts and Translations* (Rome, 1992), 153–157. Other medieval terms included "Prester John" in Latin Europe and, in Arabic, *ḥaṭī* (= Gəʿəz *aše*) actually a term of reference or address ("Your [or His] Majesty"): see Denis Nonsitsin, "Aše," in *EAE* 1 (2003), 364–365.

most export trade. Available indices suggest that these Islamic societies, too, flourished in the later Middle Ages. The third node in the political and economic networks of this period was the local-religious societies that resisted conversion to monotheistic faiths, the most powerful (or best-documented) of which was, for some time, Damot. They possessed, or acquired from their own neighbors, commodities crucial to long-distance commerce. They were also important military allies and, when they resisted pressure from their monotheistic neighbors, antagonists.

On the one hand, the relative stability and prosperity of Ethiopian-Eritrean societies in this period suggests the establishment of a certain *modus vivendi* among Christian, Islamic, and local-religious powers. At the same time, that *modus vivendi* was constantly challenged and renegotiated, both within any given polity and between the major powers: regional rebellions, attempted coups, border raids, and major battles occurred throughout the Solomonic era. Particularly significant was the defection of one member of the ruling dynasty of the sultanate of Ifat in the later fourteenth century, as that sultanate came under increasing Christian control: he decamped to the Eastern Plateau, where his successors founded a new sultanate, the Barr Sa'd al-Dīn, as a refuge of Islamic independence. It was from the Barr Sa'd al-Dīn that the charismatic religious leader and warrior Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm launched a jihad against the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. Clashes with Christian forces began in the later 1520s and by 1531 focalized into a determined conquest of Christian territory that Aḥmad would undertake for the next twelve years. Until his death in 1543, his armies moved inexorably northward, destroying monasteries, burning libraries, killing and enslaving populations. The material and psychological effect on the Christian kingdom was immense; the toll on its written heritage, incalculable.

Imam Aḥmad's jihad, however, was only one element in a series of developments that transformed Ethiopia and Eritrea in the first half of the sixteenth century. Another was the increasing involvement of foreign powers in the region's affairs. Already during the jihad of Imam Aḥmad, soldiers from Yemen and other parts of the Arabian peninsula (armed, newly, with firearms) joined his army, and were soon balanced on the Christian side by the Portuguese, who were interested in securing the Red Sea to protect their trading interests in the Indian Ocean. These foreign interventions were succeeded, respectively, by the Ottomans, who in 1555 created an Ottoman province of Abyssinia, and by the Jesuits, first dispatched in 1557, whose efforts to convert the Orthodox Christian Ethiopians were largely a failure in the sixteenth century but achieved the (brief) conversion of king and kingdom in the seventeenth. But ultimately most significant for Ethiopian-Eritrean history was another

incursion into formerly Christian and Islamic territories that followed on the heels of the jihad, but from quite another quarter. This was the massive expansion, from the south, of the Oromo. They took control of a majority of the territory formerly ruled by Christian and Islamic powers, and not only radically redrew the political map of the region – the Christian kingdom of the subsequent, Gondärine era was reduced to the area north of Lake Ṭana – but became a powerful element in its social-cultural makeup ever afterward. The history recounted in this volume ends here, in the mid-sixteenth century: with the aftermath of the jihad, and the introduction of the new forces that would shape the region's subsequent chapter.

2 The Scholarly Background

In its broad outlines, if not quite in these terms, this is the story of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea that was last surveyed by Taddesse Tamrat in his magisterial 1972 monograph, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270–1527*. As the dates in his title signal, his principal focus was on the Solomonic era, from Yäkunno Amlak's seizure of power in 1270 to the eve of Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm's jihad, but a first chapter narrated the “back story” from Aksumite through Zagʷe times, and an epilogue recounted the jihad and its effects, such that the whole medieval period covered in this volume (as well as some ancient and even pre-historic background) was included, to some extent, in his narrative. His book remains indispensable reading for anyone interested in medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea. It draws on a wide range of sources, including hagiographical texts and land-grant (*gʷəlt*) documents, which are scrutinized and cross-referenced to yield historical data. A clear line of argumentation connects them, underlining the interplay between ecclesiastical and royal power in the making of the Christian kingdom without ignoring the importance of commerce or the relations with neighboring peoples. It also offers a compelling narrative arc of the Solomonic dynasty, as its chapter titles proclaim: from “expansion” in the reigns of Yäkunno Amlak (1270–85) and ‘Amdä Šəyon (1314–44), through “consolidation,” particularly under Dawit II (1379/80–1412) and Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434–68), to “fifty years of decline” from the accession of the child-king Ṭskändər (1478–94) to the eve of the jihad.

In some respects, indeed, Taddesse Tamrat's work represents a summation of the previous century or so of scholarship in medieval Ethiopian Studies. Certainly the articulation of Ethiopia's medieval past has been going on since the Middle Ages themselves. The Ethiopian authors who wrote the *Lives* of their own earlier saints and the chronicles and king-lists of their rulers

were the first fashioners of this past, alongside the medieval Latin Christian authors and Arabic geographers and historians who were writing about the country, too, from their own perspectives and imaginings. The birth of scholarly study of Ethiopian-Eritrean history is generally traced back to the late seventeenth-century German orientalist Hiob Ludolf, who drew upon earlier European scholarship and eyewitness reports, as well as the expertise of his Ethiopian collaborator and informant Gorgoryos, to produce a lengthy history of the Christian kingdom and a grammar of the Gə'əz language that remained authoritative for a century and a half.⁷ With Ludolf was solidified a European equation of the Christian kingdom with Ethiopia as a whole that was already established in his time and would long outlive him. The work of August Dillmann, the nineteenth-century linguist, theologian, and editor of many Gə'əz biblical books whose grammar replaced Ludolf's (and whose dictionary remains current today) was another important milestone.⁸ But the formation of the modern university and its constituent disciplines at the end of that century, together with European colonization in Eritrea and other parts of the Horn of Africa, provided the context for the first flowering of Ethiopian Studies in the contemporary sense.⁹ It gave form and impetus to philological studies, which, together with history and biblical studies (with which it was intertwined), represent the oldest branches of Ethiopianist scholarship. The noted philologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Ignazio Guidi, Carlo Conti Rossini, Boris Turaiev, René Basset, Fr. M. Esteves Pereira, Jules Perruchon, Enno Littmann, and Ernest A. W. Budge, produced not only textual editions and translations but surveys of Ethiopian

7 Hiob Ludolf, *Historia Aethiopica, sive brevis et succincta description regni Habessinorum ...* (Frankfurt, 1681), translated into English as *A New History of Ethiopia ...* (London: Samuel Smith, 1684), followed by an *Ad suam Historiam Aethiopicam antehac editam Commentarius* (Frankfurt, 1691); *Grammatica Aethiopica*, ed. J. M. Wansleben (London, 1661). He also produced Amharic-Latin and Gə'əz-Latin lexicons.

8 For his works and career see Jürgen Tubach, "August Dillmann (1823–1894)," in *Christlicher Orient im Porträt – Wissenschaftsgeschichte des Christlichen Orients*, ed. P. Bukovec (Hamburg, 2014), 109–150, and M. Güterbock, "August Dillmann und seine Lebenswelt. Vornehmlich aus Berliner Akten" in the same volume at 151–220. His *Lexicon linguae aethiopicae* (Leipzig, 1865) has been reprinted twice: New York, 1955; Osnabrück, 1970.

9 Though the work of several eminent Ethiopianist scholars (Conti Rossini, Cerulli) as colonial administrators in Eritrea or Ethiopia is well known, the relationship between European-authored scholarship of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century and the colonial context has not received the same degree of critical analysis as regards Ethiopia-Eritrea as it has in other regions of Africa or western Asia. See, however, the comments on Cerulli's scholarship and prominent role in the Italian colonial and occupying governments of the 1920s–1930s in Tadesse Tamrat, "Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988), In Appreciation of His Great Ethiopian Scholarship," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23 (1990): 85–92.

history and literature, art-historical analyses, numismatic studies, and more. The first archeological mission also took place at this time, with the Deutsche Aksum Expedition's surveys of ancient Aksum in 1906.

Some quite important work was accomplished in the interwar period, including Carlo Conti Rossini's survey of Ethiopian history, Enrico Cerulli's pioneering studies of medieval Islamic Ethiopia, and François Bernardin Azaïs's archeological exploration of local-religious sites, which helped inspire (and were later under the aegis of) the Ethiopian Institute of Archeology, created by the regent and future emperor Haile Selassie in 1926.¹⁰ But the next major watershed may be located in the late 1950s. Having been forced into exile during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936–41), Haile Selassie, now returned, redoubled his efforts to explore and record Ethiopia's heritage through multiple initiatives: the foundation of the Institute for Ethiopian Studies (as well as, for more general purposes, Haile Selassie I University, now the University of Addis Ababa); the creation of government bodies charged with overseeing heritage sites; the mounting of exhibitions showcasing Ethiopian art; and an open-door policy to foreign researchers and experts who could aid in surveying, cataloging, and studying the country's treasures.¹¹ Textual and art-historical study, which had hitherto been limited to such manuscripts as were already in Europe, could now access an exponentially larger number of materials in Ethiopia. The first archeological excavations focused on the Middle Ages, by Francis Anfray, also took place at this time, as did Richard Pankhurst's first explorations of Ethiopian social history. In Europe, meanwhile, the 1950s and 1960s were the years of Enrico Cerulli's later scholarship, and the period in which his seminal wartime publications became more widely available; of Edward Ullendorff at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London; and of the works of scholars in related fields who contributed to Ethiopian Studies, like Charles Beckingham. Tadesse Tamrat, a graduate of Haile Selassie I University and a doctoral student at SOAS, was a product of both the renaissance of historical inquiry within Ethiopia and the tradition of Ethiopianist scholarship in Europe. One sees it in his easy mastery of all the works of Carlo Conti Rossini, on the one hand, and his access to and citation of

10 Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia*, cit. at n. 3. Enrico Cerulli's numerous works on Islamic Ethiopia are listed, with further references, in Tadesse Tamrat, "Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988)." On Azaïs and the creation of a national institute of archeology, see Amélie Chekroun, "Un archéologue capucin en Éthiopie (1922–1936): François Bernardin Azaïs," *Afriques* (online journal), Varia, 27 January 2011: <http://journals.openedition.org/afriques/785>.

11 For further details see Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Christian Visual Culture in Medieval Ethiopia," in this volume.

unedited manuscripts from Ethiopian churches and monasteries on the other. At the same time, he and others of his generation, including his fellow SOAS students Donald Crummey and Merid Wolde Aregay, brought a more historical turn to premodern Ethiopian Studies, laying out questions and analytic approaches that greatly influenced the field's direction from the early 1970s on.

Tadesse Tamrat's *Church and State* is a landmark not only for its intrinsic qualities but for being, still, the most recent work to which readers can turn for a synthetic account of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Middle Ages. Yet it is now nearing its fiftieth birthday, and the changes in the field since its time have been many. One is the continual expansion of the available source base, and the greater access to it afforded by microfilm and, more recently, digitization. Among the first major efforts, and still the most fundamental, was the massive project, first conceived in 1971, to microfilm and catalog thousands of manuscripts in Ethiopian churches, monasteries, and other collections. A joint venture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture, and St John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, the EMML (Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Collection) of Addis Ababa, a copy of which is housed at the HMML (Hill Monastic Manuscript Library) in Collegeville, was created through the efforts of Sergew Hable Selassie, especially, in Ethiopia, and was catalogued in Minnesota, initially by William Macomber and then, for its majority, by Getatchew Haile. The resulting print catalog, published between 1975 and 1993, runs to ten volumes, offers detailed and learned descriptions of some 5,000 manuscripts, and is now available online. Many other cataloging and digitization projects have followed, for manuscripts and for works of art, as Denis Nosnitsin and Claire Bosc-Tiessé note in their essays in this volume. In the realm of old-fashioned print, numerous editions have appeared since the early 1970s of previously unedited or even unknown texts, and the archeological study of medieval sites, in its infancy in 1972, is now a flourishing field, spanning Christian, Muslim, and local-religious remains, sometimes overlapping each other. Methodologies, too, of course, have advanced since the 1970s. Paolo Marrassini's introduction of Lachmannian principles and new interpretive approaches was an important turning-point in Ethiopic philological studies, and up-to-date tools and principles are now applied in codicology and related areas of Ethiopic manuscript studies.¹² The availability, among other technologies, of radiocarbon analysis and remote sensing imagery in

12 "Ethiopic" as a noun is often used as a synonym for the Gə'əz language; as an adjective it is employed in philological and manuscript studies to describe manuscripts and the texts they contain that were produced in the Christian Ethiopian context, and that may

archeology, and of spectral imaging and chemical analysis of pigments with regard to manuscripts and works of art, has made it possible to ask, and answer, questions unthinkable fifty years ago.

As the source base and the methodologies with which to approach it have expanded, the field of medieval Ethiopian Studies itself, its scope and orientation, have altered too. Established fields like philology and the history of art have not only charted the evolution of textual corpora and artistic forms with greater breadth and precision, but approached them from new angles and with new questions. Areas of inquiry that simply did not exist in the 1970s have emerged, including Ethiopic manuscript studies and medieval Ethiopian women's history. Finally, while research into the non-Christian peoples of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea did not lack before the 1970s, a notable expansion of medieval archeological projects, the increasingly sophisticated use of ethnography, oral history, bioarcheology, and other methodologies to access the past of societies that lacked writing, and the growing number of Arabists who include Islamic Ethiopia among their interests, have together helped focalize attention on these societies in their own terms, and not only through the prism of Christian sources. They have encouraged a history "in equal parts," in which Christians, Muslims, and followers of local religions, speaking a variety of languages, were all actors. The *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, whose five volumes appeared between 2003 and 2014, reflects this capacious vision, encompassing all the peoples and cultures in the areas delimited by the contemporary borders of Ethiopia and Eritrea from prehistory to the present, and its often detailed entries, with extensive bibliography, have made it an indispensable tool for Ethiopianists of all periods.

Needless to say, a host of scholars is to be credited with effecting these advances. If only the most cursory sketch of the earlier phases of Ethiopian Studies could be offered above to gesture at the broad lineaments of the field and the place of the Middle Ages in it, a proper accounting of all the researchers who have enriched and transformed the study of Ethiopia and Eritrea in this period over the last five decades is impossible in the space of this brief introduction. The essays that follow provide extensive references to the scholarship, as well as commentary on the evolution of research, and offer a more articulated vision of the contributions of many colleagues than could be attempted here.

contain words or passages in other, related languages, usually (for the Middle Ages) Amharic, Təgrāñña, and Arabic.

3 Aims and Content

The aim of this volume, then, as for other Brill *Companion* volumes, is to offer an account of “the state of the field” in the study of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea, as far as its format and relatively modest proportions allow. In taking stock of the last five decades of work on this topic, an effort has been made to represent particularly dynamic areas of research, in both established and emerging subfields. Many of these areas, and thus eight of the fifteen essays compiled here, focus on the Christian kingdom and its culture, which has historically been the center of research on this period. In keeping with the broader scope of the contemporary field, however, and to represent the new research in non-Christian subjects, two essays are devoted to the region’s Islamic politics and culture, and one to its local-religious cultures; four more address thematic topics that treat the Christian, Muslim, and local-religious components of Ethiopian-Eritrean society together, if unavoidably to different degrees.

In form, the essays are not reviews of the historiography (though they may contain some explicit historiographical commentary) but rather narratives: a bird’s-eye view of what can be said on the topic in question in light of accumulated research to date. At the same time, many essays draw on their authors’ expertise to not only synthesize recent scholarship, but exemplify its new directions, and in this sense incorporate elements of the research article. In some cases the innovation centers on source material. In her examination of the post-Aksumite and Zag^we eras, Marie-Laure Derat brackets the accounts of the Zag^we kings written under the aegis of the succeeding dynasty – which, in addition to being removed in time from their subject, were colored by the legitimating needs of the successor dynasty itself – and focuses solely on sources contemporary to the Zag^we themselves. In the process she forces us to rethink assumptions about their ethnic identity, territorial anchorage, and “usurper” status that have guided interpretation of the dynasty for over a century, while also enriching our picture of their ruling practices and institutions and revising our chronology of their rise. Emmanuel Fritsch and Habtemichael Kidane use the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy as a vehicle to trace the history of the Ethiopian church, deploying an innovative combination of architectural and textual evidence, deeply informed by a comparative perspective, that allows them to pierce previously obscure periods in the church’s historical development and to highlight the importance of space and ritual time in the lived experience of institutional religion.

In other essays the innovations concern the questions asked of the sources. Deresse Ayenachew throws fresh light on the Solomonic dynasty’s territorial expansion through a focus on administration, concretely illustrating the

challenges of maintaining control over diverse territories and peoples and the adaptive strategies by which the dynasty sought to do so. Alessandro Bausi, documenting the processes whereby foreign literatures were translated in Ethiopia and Eritrea to form the foundation of the Christian Ethiopian written heritage, not only condenses a deep body of scholarship (and explains its philological methods), but offers a case study of one of its new directions, the “reception history” of translated texts in their medieval Ethiopian context. Antonella Brita surveys this Christian literary heritage with greater emphasis on original Gə‘əz compositions, before focusing on hagiography as a case study in the complexity of one literary genre and the ways in which the approaches of different disciplines (philology, history, anthropology, manuscript studies) have come together to diversify and enrich the insights to be drawn from it. Claire Bosc-Tiessé, who takes into her purview the vast subject of medieval Christian art and architecture, simultaneously exemplifies the historical and contextual approach to made objects that constitutes one of the new directions in Ethiopian art-historical analysis.

The innovation represented in Amélie Chekroun's and Bertrand Hirsch's essay on medieval Islamic polities might be said to rest on its new source base, in the sense that archeological investigations have been key to the field's new findings and have helped stimulate a reassessment of available written sources as well. But in a broader sense, one might say that the pioneering and largely single-handed work of Enrico Cerulli on medieval Ethiopian Islam up to the 1970s has only blossomed into a research field – a dedicated topic of investigation pursued from a variety of angles by multiple researchers – in the decades since. The history of the sultanates need no longer be appended to a narrative focused on the Christian kingdom and written primarily from the perspective of Christian sources; the descriptions of foreign writers can now be tested against material data and assessed in a more critical light. The result is not only a more precise understanding of the trajectory and locations of Muslim settlement and the internal features of their society, but a more capacious vision of medieval Ethiopian history as a whole. Similar comments can be made, *mutatis mutandis*, of the study of medieval local-religious societies. Christian Ethiopian references to them have long been known, and surveys of earlier (ancient and prehistoric) local-religious sites date back to the 1920s. But focused study of medieval local-religious culture from the vantage of its own contemporary evidence, necessarily material and not documentary, is a twenty-first century enterprise. Like the more intensive study of the Islamic sultanates, it has occasioned a shift in perspective in which the continued presence and agency of the local-religious inhabitants of Ethiopia comes to the fore, whose implications François-Xavier Fauvelle lays out in his essay. But

medieval Christian culture, too, has seen new areas of inquiry develop in recent decades, notably manuscript studies. Though not confined to the medieval period – indeed, this historical periodization does not well fit scribal and bookmaking practices that were established in late antiquity and have lasted in some respects to the present – the study of manuscript production in its material aspects has much to tell us about medieval Ethiopian-Eritrean Christian culture, and is a particularly rich and important area of comparative inquiry, as Denis Nosnitsin demonstrates in his contribution to this volume.

For some topics, little scholarship yet exists to survey: here the authors have mined the primary sources to provide a first overview of the topic and venture answers to fundamental questions. One such topic is medieval Ethiopian women's history. Apart from the history of Christian queens – the major subject of Margaux Herman's own research – much remains unexplored. To fill the gap, Herman has provided a blueprint to future studies, identifying major topics and interpretive approaches and delving into the sources to offer a sketch of women in relation to work, marriage, religious life, politics, war, and symbolic discourse. Similarly, the intellectual-religious traditions of the Muslim communities of medieval Ethiopia have yet to be subject to a scholarly synthesis, in part due to the paucity and heterogeneity of the source material, and in part to the varied interests of the Arabic literary specialists best equipped to address them. Study of the relevant materials has nonetheless grown as part of the general invigoration of Ethiopian Islamic studies, building on the pioneering work of Ewald Wagner in particular. Drawing upon these and upon recent archaeological findings while delving deeply, like Herman, into the primary written sources themselves, Alessandro Gori offers a portrait of medieval Islamic intellectual culture, anchored in its institutional settings, that establishes the state of the art.

The particular characteristics of medieval Ethiopia-Eritrea, its source materials, and its scholarly traditions have posed specific challenges for the treatment of certain topics. Monasticism, for instance, can well be considered the heart of medieval Christian Ethiopian studies, in the sense that the overwhelming majority of surviving written documentation, as well as art, was produced in a monastic milieu. For philologists, literary scholars, historians, and specialists of manuscript studies, art, and architecture, what can be known of the medieval Christian kingdom is, to a large extent, what the monks have left us. This is a bias in the documentation, of course. At the same time, there is no doubt that monasteries played an extremely influential role in medieval Christian Ethiopian society. In the absence of a developed urbanism, they were primary nodes of economic organization and, from a political perspective, of territorial control. Their members had a virtual monopoly on literacy, with

all the influence that that entailed, but literacy was not necessarily required for the social influence they exerted, evident among other things in the general apprehension of monks – all monks – as *qəddusan*, “holy” or “sainted.” Gianfrancesco Lusini’s lapidary essay manages to encompass the many facets of the phenomenon, and at the same time clearly mark chronological change, on a topic that could easily expand into a narrative of Christian Ethiopia as a whole.

The medieval Ethiopian economy is another challenging subject to treat, for different reasons. Ethiopian economic history is not a new subject: Richard Pankhurst pioneered such work in the 1950s, with a focus on modern Ethiopia, and Donald Crummey did groundbreaking work, for the early modern period, in the 1980s and 1990s. But economic research specifically on the medieval period has developed very little. Anaïs Wion’s essay for this volume is therefore a first, albeit in what would seem to be a “traditional” field. Drawing methodologically and for relevant data on studies dealing with earlier and later periods, highlighting the economic aspects of scholarship on the medieval period, and mining primary sources where studies lack, she provides a masterfully synthetic picture of agriculture and animal husbandry as well as trade that encompasses, to the extent possible, Christian, Muslim, and local-religious societies in the variety of their ecological settings.

Finally, two essays delineate topics that are not established research foci in the field, but that bring together different strands in a way that reflects the growing interest in a multi-confessional approach to the study of the Ethiopian-Eritrean past. My own delineates the topic of medieval Ethiopian diasporas, bringing together existing scholarship on three different strands – Christian and Muslim Ethiopian communities established abroad, and enslaved Ethiopians displaced to locations outside Ethiopia – in a way intended to bring out the specificities of each but also the parallels and conjunctures among them. Where the volume’s general emphasis, as regards Ethiopia and Eritrea’s imbrication in larger regional networks, is upon neighboring cultures’ influence upon Ethiopia (quite naturally, given the volume’s focus on developments within our region), this essay is intended to highlight one manifestation of Ethiopians’ movement to and influence upon its neighbors, and thus to pick out a thread that can be found as well in other contributions.

The second is the closing essay of the volume by Amélie Chekroun and Bertrand Hirsch, which outlines events of the first half of the sixteenth century that affected all the regions of the medieval Ethiopian-Eritrean area and radically reconfigured them. As Chekroun and Hirsch observe, this half-century, and particularly the period from the 1520s to the 1550s, tends to fall between two stools in broader treatments of premodern Ethiopia and Eritrea:

a postscript to the Solomonic “golden age” and a prelude to the Jesuits’ establishment in Ethiopia and the quite different conditions of the Gondärine era. As they observe, the marginal position of these decades is partly due to a notion, current at least since Taddesse Tamrat’s classic survey, of 1527 as the end of the Middle Ages,¹³ and partly to an analytic perspective aligned with that of the Christian kingdom: the jihad of Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm, understood to be the signal event of the later 1520s to 1540s, is at once accepted as a cataclysmic watershed and passed over in relative silence. From the Muslim Ethiopian perspective, the historical arc looks rather different, and these decades – which boast a major, contemporary Arabic historical source – are not so easily overlooked. Furthermore, when the arcs of Muslim and Christian Ethiopia are paired, and the crucial impact of local-religious Ethiopians – specifically, the Oromo – is given its due, the consequences for the region as a whole come into clearer focus. Chekroun and Hirsch’s aim is to shed light on a critical “transitional” period that has received rather less scholarly attention, and to do so from a multiconfessional perspective, not to argue for a particular end date to the Ethiopian-Eritrean Middle Ages. Nonetheless, their essay, and particularly its conclusion, does point to some salient reasons for viewing “circa 1560” as the opening of a different historical era, at least in a political perspective: the installation of foreign powers or their proxies (Ottomans, Jesuits) in Ethiopian territory, with the geographically broader and more intensive global entanglements this entailed; the shrinkage of both Christian and Islamic states in the face of Oromo expansion, which would continue for decades but was already decisive by this time; and the establishment of the Oromo themselves at center stage of Ethiopian-Eritrean history, territorially, politically, and socially, where they were to remain in subsequent centuries.

4 Why “Medieval”?

As observed above, there are chronological terms specific to the Ethiopian-Eritrean context for the period covered by this volume (post-Aksumite, Zagʷe-era, Solomonic) and they will frequently be employed in the following essays. As concerns the volume as a whole, they have certain drawbacks. First, none describes the period from the seventh to the mid-sixteenth century as a whole, and it is sometimes useful to have such a term at hand. Second, all

13 This is the more surprising in that, though the date 1527 appears in the work’s title, the narrative essentially ends with the accession of Na’od in 1494, and the whole first half of the sixteenth century is treated briefly in the book’s epilogue.

are generated from and reflect the perspective of the Christian kingdom, and are therefore less suitable in relation to non-Christian topics. The term “medieval” has therefore been chosen for the volume’s title, and is employed in some (but not all) of the following essays as well. Certainly it has drawbacks of its own. As a European product, its application to non-European regions has been critiqued not only for its imposition of a foreign chronological template onto societies to which it might ill apply, but for its colonial legacy, whereby “medieval” acquired its connotations of backwardness and superstition precisely in relation to non-European societies, deemed less advanced on the linear path to modernity than coeval societies of Europe (or more generally of “the West.”)¹⁴

With regard to the first issue, the general conceptual framework and time frame suggested by “medieval” can be considered not wholly inappropriate to the Ethiopian-Eritrean context, nor even perhaps entirely imposed from without. It is generally acknowledged that Ethiopia-Eritrea had an “ancient” and particularly a crucial “late antique” period – that of the Aksumite kingdom – which belonged to the same cultural matrix as that of Greco-Roman antiquity, and this classical past was remembered and celebrated as politically and culturally foundational to Ethiopia-Eritrea’s Christian kingdom in later centuries, just as it was in Byzantium and western Europe. It has thus seemed not inappropriate to some scholars, including Ethiopian ones, to refer to the post-antique centuries of Christian Ethiopia-Eritrea as “medieval.”¹⁵ Nor is the term “medieval” viewed as locally appropriate only in a Christian context. Scholars of the central and Mediterranean Islamic lands have increasingly adopted it to denote the centuries from the seventh, and for similar reasons (that is, an acknowledgment of late antiquity as the prelude to and crucial context for the rise of Islam);¹⁶ it has thus been employed, and periodized, by scholars of Islamic Ethiopia-Eritrea as well.¹⁷ Doubtless for both reasons, a period of

14 The latter critique is associated especially with postcolonial scholars. See, among others, Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26; Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008).

15 E.g., Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopia to 1270* (Addis Ababa, 1972); Habtamu M. Tegegne, “The Edict of King Gälawdéwos Against the Illegal Slave Trade in Christians: Ethiopia, 1548 – Featured Source,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, 2 (2016): 72–114, where “medieval” is frequently used in the body of the essay.

16 Konrad Hirschler and Sarah Bowen Savant, “Introduction: What is in a Period? Arabic Historiography and Periodization,” *Der Islam* 91, 1 (2014): 6–19. For a somewhat earlier, contrary opinion (first formulated in 1999) see Daniel Martin Varisco, “Making ‘Medieval’ Islam Meaningful,” *Medieval Encounters* 13 (2007): 385–412.

17 François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch, “En guise d’introduction. Sur les traces de l’Islam ancien en Éthiopie et dans la Corne de l’Afrique,” in *Espaces musulmans*

history called “medieval” is taught in Ethiopian universities, albeit with variable termini.¹⁸ Undeniably, the term “medieval” still has its flaws, including a more dubious relevance to local-religious societies that did not look to the ancient Mediterranean for their heritage, and contestable terminal dates, especially for phenomena (such as agriculture) that defy this periodization altogether. These, of course, are true of the term’s application to Europe as well. If, as Alan Strathern has opined of “early modern” and its adoption by scholars of Asia, the crucial issue is less the origin of a term than its utility for scholars (and citizens) of the region in question, then “medieval” certainly has a foothold in the study of Ethiopia-Eritrea, although it is by no means always and everywhere applicable or adopted.¹⁹

The colonial legacy of the term’s application to non-European regions remains an important consideration: not only the disparaging connotations attached to the term but the asynchronous and evolutionary model, far from eradicated in academic or popular discourse today, that permits a non-European society to be classed as “still medieval” while Europe of the same period is “already modern.” Proponents of a global approach to the Middle Ages continue to grapple with this legacy, advocating that we approach the medieval as a value-neutral and – with some flexibility, as required by local context – chronologically uniform time window in and beyond Europe, precisely in order to stimulate attention to dynamics that invite comparison, cross regional borders, or indeed involve Europe only peripherally.²⁰ As Kathleen Davis has observed, the application of the term “medieval” outside Europe can “run the risk of re-confirming the colonial, Orientalist history from which it emerged,” but it also has the potential to do the reverse: to “push against many of the major claims of colonial and nationalist history ..., make all cultures coeval, and insist upon

de la Corne de l’Afrique au moyen âge. Études d’archéologie et d’histoire, ed. François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch (Paris – Addis Ababa, 2011), 11–26, which deploys a “conservative” classification of the region’s pre-eighteenth-century Islamic history as “ancient” (16) before proposing a new periodization of “medieval Islam” in the Horn of Africa, in two phases (23–25).

18 End dates for the medieval period as taught in Ethiopian universities can range from the onset of the sixteenth-century jihad to the traditional beginning of the Gondärine period (1632) to the eighteenth-century “Age of the Princes.” I thank Alessandro Bausi and Solomon Gebreyes for this information.

19 Alan Strathern, “Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before,” *Past and Present* 238, Supplement 13 (2018): 317–344. As noted above, the periodization does not apply to manuscript production, and the term “medieval” is not employed by Denis Nossnitsin in his essay in this volume.

20 For a recent example, see Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, “Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages,” *Past and Present* 238, Supplement 13 (2018): 1–44, e.g. at 19.

a broad, non-Eurocentric study of the time called the Middle Ages.”²¹ Including Ethiopia-Eritrea among these coeval “medieval” societies might contribute to these latter aims.

To describe the scholars who work on this period of Ethiopian-Eritrean history as “medievalists,” however, is another matter. Ethiopianists tend not to classify themselves by chronological period, nor indeed are there any Ethiopianist associations or conferences devoted specifically to these centuries or any part of them. Thus while all the contributors to this volume work deeply and extensively with materials from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries, they may do so with an equal or primary interest in what those documents reveal about antiquity, and/or work just as comfortably on phenomena of the seventeenth or nineteenth or twentieth centuries. If I have described this volume as offering an account of the state of the field in the study of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea, therefore, it is not meant to imply that “medieval Ethiopian Studies” is a recognized field of chronological specialization, but simply to denote the work that philologists, archeologists, historians, and other specialists, who often work in many time periods, have done to illuminate this particular span of time.

5 Further Topics

The foregoing comments may have already alerted the reader that a second aim of the volume, alongside highlighting particularly vibrant areas of research, has been to provide a fairly broad view of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Middle Ages, such that it might serve as an introduction to the topic for readers less familiar with it. It is doubtful that any collection of essays could achieve the kind of synthesis one would hope of a true survey, and certainly fifteen contributions is far too few to be in any way comprehensive. Which omissions seem most glaring will depend upon the reader, but I would like to say a word about two that, though mentioned in the pages to follow, do not receive extended treatment there. One is the Betä ʾĪsraʾel (“House of Israel”). This Jewish community has existed in Ethiopia for centuries, and from the later sixteenth century forward our sources about it are relatively plentiful. For prior times, however, only a handful of brief references survive, all from non-Betä ʾĪsraʾel sources, which scholars have filled out through philological study of modern Betä ʾĪsraʾel texts and through ethnographic analysis of modern communities

21 Kathleen Davis and Michael Puett, “Periodization and ‘The Medieval Globe’: A Conversation,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, 1 (2015): 1–16, at 1–2.

and their oral traditions. One finding, around which a scholarly consensus has coalesced since the 1970s, is that the community developed not from an ancient Jewish migration to Ethiopia-Eritrea but from within the indigenous population, probably between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, in response to Ethiopian Christianity. Betä ʾĪsraʾel oral traditions trace their liturgy and practice of monasticism to Christian sources; a handful of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century references to “former Christians who have denied Christ, like the Jews,” or simply to “Jews,” for their part, suggest a genesis in reaction to Christian orthodoxy, though the precise valence attached to the term “Jew” (*ayhud*) at the time is elusive.²² It remains difficult to ascertain when these people, generally identified in locations north or east of Lake Ṭana, constituted a single community; their legal standing and occupations, too – landlessness, concentration in craft professions – are better known for the later period but, in the absence of sources, less evident for the Middle Ages. What can be plausibly hypothesized about this most obscure period in the community’s history has been sensitively laid out by Steven Kaplan and Kay Kaufman Shelemay, among others, to whose works readers are referred.²³

A second topic that is only touched upon in following essays is the Christian kingdom’s diplomatic contact with Latin Europe in the later Middle Ages. Despite numerous Latin European attempts to send envoys and missionaries to Ethiopia from the thirteenth century forward, with the stated hopes of achieving a union of their Christian churches and a military alliance against Islam, it was the Ethiopian Christian kings who first made official diplomatic contact. The Genoese priest Giovanni da Carignano, in his now-lost *Tractatus*, claimed to have met a royal Ethiopian embassy directed to a “king of the Spains” in the early fourteenth century, and a recently-discovered work now offers hitherto unattested details of Carignano’s text that suggest he had access to Ethiopian informants (ambassadorial or otherwise).²⁴ About a century later, certainly, Ethiopian royal embassies became rather regular. Those best

22 It has been observed that *ayhud*, as employed by Christian authors, could refer to any “heretic” or dissenter, and that the contexts of these references suggest the groups in question were political antagonists as well.

23 For a recent historiographical overview see Steven Kaplan, “Betä ʾĪsraʾel,” in *EAe* 1 (2003), 552–559, with references, including Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History* (East Lansing, MI, 1986), esp. chapter 1 and 199–203; Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia* (New York, 1992), esp. 51–78.

24 Paolo Chiesa, “Galvano Fiamma e Giovanni da Carignano. Una nuova fonte sull’ambasceria etiopica a Clemente V e sulla spedizione dei fratelli Vivaldi,” *Itineraria* 17 (2018): 63–108; further analysis of the Ethiopian information in Alessandro Bausi and Paolo Chiesa, “The *Ystoria Etyhpie* in the *Cronica Universalis* of Galvaneus de la Flamma (d. c. 1345),” *Aethiopica* 22 (2019), forthcoming.

attested in European archives are one sent by Dawit II that reached Venice in 1402, another from Yəshaq to King Alfonso of Aragon in Valencia in 1427, and a third from Zär'a Ya'eqob that visited Alfonso in Naples and the pope in 1450. An unofficial Ethiopian delegation (fetched from the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem) also attended the ecumenical Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1441, at the pope's request, and another, almost certainly unauthorized, visited the court of Pope Sixtus IV in 1481. The first official Latin European embassies known to have successfully reached Ethiopia were Portuguese, at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, and it was also a Portuguese embassy that returned with the first surviving written correspondence from an Ethiopian ruler. This was the 1509 letter of the queen regent Eleni (which reached Lisbon in 1514), expressing interest in the Portuguese proposition of a joint military venture against Muslim enemies. The next Portuguese embassy – the famous delegation that remained in Ethiopia from 1520 to 1526 – occasioned further correspondence from Ləbnä Dəngəl, and more followed from his successor Gəlawdewos, with varying responses to Latin propositions regarding military alliance and a union of the churches depending on current conditions in Ethiopia.²⁵

Thanks to the existence of the sixteenth-century Ethiopian letters, we can trace with some precision the vicissitudes of Ethiopian strategy toward European propositions, and, as Chekroun and Hirsch note in their concluding essay, we know some of the diplomacy's effects. For earlier times, where no royal Ethiopian correspondence to Europe exists, the situation is more obscure. Tadesse Tamrat opined that the Ethiopian rulers were intrigued from the beginning of these contacts in a pan-Christian alliance against Muslim

25 The scholarship on these contacts is very considerable. Several recent works may provide an introduction as well as references to further and earlier literature: Matteo Salvatore, *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402–1555* (London, 2017); Benjamin Weber, "An Incomplete Integration in the *Orbis Christianus*: Relations and Misunderstandings between the Papacy and Ethiopia (1237–1456)," *Medieval Encounters* 21 (2015): 232–249; Samantha Kelly, "Heretics, Allies, Exemplary Christians: Latin Views of Ethiopian Orthodox in the Late Middle Ages," in *Late Medieval Heresy: New Perspectives*, ed. Michael D. Bailey and Sean L. Field (Woodbridge, 2018), 195–214; and for the later phase, Andreu Martínez d'Alòs-Moner, "The Jesuit Patriarchate to the Prete: Between Religious Reform, Political Expansion and Colonial Adventure," *Aethiopica* 6 (2003): 54–69; idem, *Envoys of a Human God: The Jesuit Mission to Christian Ethiopia, 1557–1632* (Leiden, 2015). See also the references in Chiesa, "Galvano Fiamma." The unofficial Ethiopian delegation to the Council of Florence is attested by a number of sources and has therefore generated a sizeable literature of its own, references to which can be found in Samantha Kelly, "Ewostateans at the Council of Florence (1441): Diplomatic Implications between Ethiopia, Europe, Jerusalem and Cairo," *Afriques* (online journal), Varia (2016): <http://journals.openedition.org/afriques/1858>.

foes, in addition to seeking Latin Christian artisans and artifacts; the latter aim is well attested in the European records of diplomatic contacts, and reflections of it are noted as well in several of the following essays.²⁶ To pursue such questions in any depth, however, would require a deep immersion in the European (and occasionally Egyptian) texts that are our only sources for this diplomacy prior to 1509. They are replete with their authors' own biases and expectations, and with the broader matrices of received ideas about Ethiopia in their cultures – notably, in Europe, the legend of Prester John, ideal Christian king of fabulous wealth and inveterate hostility to Muslims, which colored European notions of Ethiopia for at least two centuries.²⁷ Moreover, it would be somewhat one-sided to treat Christian Ethiopian diplomacy with Europe and ignore the diplomatic contacts of both Christian and Islamic Ethiopia with Egypt, for instance, and with Yemen.²⁸ Here too the local cultural contexts in which the missions were received and recorded would require exploration, including stories that circulated concerning the Christian king's ability to destroy Egypt by stopping the flow of the Nile, or his role in apocalyptic literature as the "last emperor" destined to destroy Mecca.²⁹ The authors and cultural contexts of these neighboring societies, in short, virtually demand center stage for the subject to be treated with due critical assessment of the sources, which perhaps exceeds the boundaries of what a single volume focused on the medieval past of Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples can properly provide. At the same time,

26 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 265, and chapter 7 more generally. The Christian Ethiopian interest in Latin Christian artifacts is a central topic in Verena Krebs' *Solomon's Heirs* (Philadelphia, forthcoming).

27 The literature on Prester John is vast, but for an excellent overview (with bibliography), especially as regards his association with Ethiopia, see Gianfranco Fiaccadori, "Prester John," in *EAe* 4 (2007), 209–216.

28 No systematic treatment of this diplomacy in its various aspects has yet been undertaken, but see Julien Loiseau, "The *Ḥaṭī* and the Sultan. Letters and embassies from Abyssinia to the Mamluk court," in *Mamlūk Cairo. A Crossroad for Embassies*, ed. Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (Leiden, 2019), 638–657; on diplomacy with Yemen, Éric Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande: état et commerce sous les sultans rasūlides du Yémen* (626–858/1229–1454) (Paris, 2010), 416–420; and on general contacts across the region and datable Christian Ethiopian embassies to Egypt, Marie-Laure Derat, "Du lexique aux talismans: occurrences de la peste dans la Corne de l'Afrique du XIII^e au XVe siècle," *Afriques* (online journal) 9 (2018): <http://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2090>, at nn. 73–84.

29 See, for instance, Richard Pankhurst, "Ethiopia's Alleged Control of the Nile," in *The Nile. Histories, Cultures, Myths*, ed. Haggai Erlich and Israel Gershoni (Boulder, CO, 2000), 25–37; Lutz Greisiger, *Messias Endkaiser Antichrist. Politische Apokalypitk unter Juden und Christen des Nahen Ostens am Vorabend der arabischen Eroberung* (Wiesbaden, 2014); Mordechai Lewy, *Der Apokalyptische Abessinier und die Kreuzzüge: Wandel eines frühislamischen Motivs in der Literatur und Kartografie des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 2018).

these contacts, and the received ideas about Ethiopia that circulated around and were stimulated by them, are important witnesses to the “outward” influence of medieval Ethiopia-Eritrea, of which these few words can, it is hoped, at least give some idea.

6 Red Threads

Each essay, of course, articulates the revised conclusions that recent research has effected on a particular topic or in a given research area. Reading across the essays, one may note certain themes through which these contributions reinforce each other. One is the repeated invocation of the central role of Egypt as a contact point for the Christian kingdom, and of both Egypt and Yemen as concerns Islamic Ethiopia. These links were religious, diplomatic, intellectual, commercial, and (certainly for Egypt) artistic and institutional as well; they were durable over time and went in both directions. Edward Gibbon’s romantic image of medieval Ethiopians as “sleep[ing] near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten” has proven surprisingly resilient, but is quite unfounded.³⁰ In coming years, indeed, the networks across this whole region can be expected to come into even clearer focus. Two large-scale collaborative projects are examining links across the Horn of Africa and between it and the Middle East, while more focused workshops are investigating the ties between Ethiopia-Eritrea and the Christian kingdom of Nubia.³¹ Looking in the other direction, recent studies of the local-religious kingdom of Damot to the south of the Christian kingdom, and of the societies on the Ethiopian-Sudanese border on the west, promise to further illuminate Ethiopia’s imbrication in networks stretching into the interior.³²

30 Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 47; cited in Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to the Country and People*, 2nd ed. (London, 1965), 57–58.

31 See the European Research Council Projects “HornEast” under the direction of Julien Loiseau (<https://horneast.hypotheses.org>) and “IslHornAfr: Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach,” under the direction of Alessandro Gori (<http://www.islhornafr.eu>); and the international workshops “Christianization processes along the Nile: Texts, monasticism and ecclesiastic structures in Egypt, Ethiopia and Nubia” (Paris, 20 June 2017) and “Bishops and Bishoprics (Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia, 4th–13th c)” (Paris, 2 July 2019).

32 See, e.g., Alfredo González-Ruibal and Álvaro Falquina, “In Sudan’s Eastern Borderland: Frontier Societies of the Qwara Region (ca. AD 600–1850),” *Journal of African Archeology* 15 (2017): 173–201; Ayda Bouanga, “Le royaume du Damot: Enquête sur une puissance politique et économique de la Corne de l’Afrique (XIII^e siècle).” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 29 (2014):

A second reflection concerns the ways in which recent findings revise our geographical mapping of the region's societies. Several essays stress the importance of eastern Təgray, alongside Bugna (Lasta), as a crucial region of Christian activity under the Zagwe kings: rather than a southward "movement" of the Christian kingdom we are given a sense of significant continuity with the Aksumite and post-Aksumite periods, of territorial extension but not necessarily of a wholesale transfer of the political and religious center of gravity. In this same region of Təgray, as Derat observes, Christian society was "pushing back" against Muslim settlement, and indeed Chekroun and Hirsch's essay on the Islamic sultanates articulates a new and more precise trajectory of Muslim settlement in the early Middle Ages, from eastern Təgray (where Bilet in present-day Kwiḥa is currently the best-known site) and moving southward along the escarpment of the Central Plateau to Šäwa. The archeological excavations in Islamic Ifat, for their part, indicate a dense settlement precisely on the eastern escarpment of the Central Plateau in the fourteenth century. In sum, rather than a "Christian highlands" and an Islamic Ethiopia perceived as spreading generally over the lowlands toward the sea (and an internet search of medieval Ethiopian maps provides plenty of examples of this geographical conception), recent findings urge us to conceive of Christian and Islamic Ethiopia as developing in close proximity, on adjacent (sometimes identical and contested) lands. The later-medieval Islamic settlement on the Eastern Plateau was similarly focused on highlands and their escarpments, but now of course further removed from the centers of Christian power. The political significance of this remove has long been recognized. In ecological terms, it is of a piece with new findings on Islamic settlement along the Central Plateau, indicating an agricultural environment rather similar to that of Christian society and characterized by the cultivation of grains and other shared crops. Finally, Fauvelle's reflections on local-religious archeological remains remind us not to assume that those who refused to convert to Christianity or Islam were always or immediately pushed to the geographical periphery: the prized areas contested by Christian and Muslim converts were first controlled by these peoples, and they did not always or easily give them up.

Thirdly, while scholars are unlikely to abandon the rich sources of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries anytime soon, the energy at the chronological margins of the Middle Ages is noteworthy. Several essays call attention to the late eleventh century as a turning-point: a moment of renewal for the Christian church, of the resumption of regular contacts with Alexandria, and, in Derat's

27–58; Ayda Bouanga, "Southern Blue Nile (Abbay) Societies: Production and Slave Trade (Ethiopia 13th–16th centuries)," *Northeast African Studies* 17, 2 (2017): 31–60.

proposition, the beginning of Zag'we political control, traditionally dated some half-century later. While datable Gə'əz manuscripts between the sixth and thirteenth centuries are extremely rare, as Bausi and Brita remind us, those authors also point to evidence suggesting an evolution from earlier, short homilies to longer hagiographical texts: both the relative dating of these texts, and the palimpsests and fragments now being studied that suggest quite early dates, may bring valuable textual evidence to bear on this period as well. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, the first half of the sixteenth century may not long remain between two stools. A rising generation of researchers is focusing its attention on this era's texts: Chekroun's analysis of the *Futūḥ al-Habaša*, Solomon Gebreyes's new edition and translation of the chronicle of Gälawdewos, and Herman's work on the evolution of the *ətege* to the time of Šärša Dəngəl all place this era front and center.³³

7 Background Information

For readers already acquainted with medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea, the comments above may suffice by way of introduction. For those new to the subject, some background information may prove useful in orienting through the following essays.

As noted above, Gə'əz was the literary and liturgical language of medieval Christian Ethiopia, and to the mid-sixteenth century virtually all documents in the Christian kingdom were written in it. It is a member of the Semitic language family, and like other such languages was, in its earliest form, written in unvocalized characters, to which markers representing seven vocal "orders" were added by the fourth century CE at the latest. Its script is unique – that is, shared only with other languages of Ethiopia that were rendered in this script when they were consigned to writing, in or after the Middle Ages. Unlike most Semitic languages, it is written and read from left to right. Arabic, sporadically attested also in Christian Ethiopian documents of the period, was the language of record in the Islamic sultanates of Ethiopia-Eritrea, and all the medieval documents produced in those societies were written in that language. Both are represented in Roman type following specific transliteration norms outlined

33 Amélie Chekroun, *Les djihâds de l'imam Aḥmad (Éthiopie, 16^e siècle). Lectures du Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* (Paris, forthcoming), based on her dissertation of 2013; Solomon Gebreyes, ed. and trans., *Chronicle of King Gälawdewos (1540–1559)*, 2 vols. CSCO 667–668, SAE 116–117 (Louvain, 2019); Margaux Herman, "Les reines en Éthiopie du xv^e au xvii^e siècle. Épouses, mères de roi, 'mère du royaume'" (Ph.D diss., Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2012).

in the following charts. The use of diacritical marks can be heavy going for those unaccustomed to it, but it is essential for specialists and necessary even for the non-specialist reader who wishes to follow up on references to pursue further reading.

If the written languages of medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea were essentially two, however, the spoken languages were many. Gəʿəz, the “language of state” of the ancient Aksumite kingdom, probably ceased to be a spoken language sometime in the post-Aksumite period, replaced principally by related Ethiopian Semitic languages (Təgre, Təgrəñña, and, further south, Amharic). Scattered words or phrases in Təgrəñña and Amharic can be found in some medieval Christian texts. But a host of other languages were certainly spoken as well. The earliest inhabitants of the highlands were probably speakers of Omotic and Cushitic languages, both of the Afro-Asiatic macrofamily, who likely adopted Gəʿəz and/or related Ethiopian Semitic languages when they adopted Christianity; linguistic interference of Agäw, in the Cushitic language family, is apparent in both Təgrəñña and Amharic. But Agäw languages remained current spoken languages in medieval Ethiopia-Eritrea as well, especially in the northwest, as did Beḡa, another Cushitic language, in the far north. Omotic languages probably continued to be spoken in, and certainly just beyond, the southern and southwestern areas of the medieval Christian kingdom, where still today Gamo, Wälāytta, and other languages of this family are predominantly spoken. Cushitic languages were spoken in this southern area too, including Sidaama, Hadiyya, and Oromiffaa, the last being the language of the Oromo who expanded in the sixteenth century into a large part of the territory formerly controlled by Christian and Islamic powers. Other, East-Cushitic languages were spoken in the lowlands nearer the Red Sea coast, including ʿAfar and Somali, alongside Semitic languages (Argobba, Harari), while west of Lake Ṭana were spoken languages belonging to a different macrofamily than all of the above, Nilo-Saharan.³⁴

As many of the following essays will have occasion to mention, the ancient Aksumite king ʿEzana (and thus, at least formally, his kingdom) converted to Christianity in the mid-fourth century. This new Christian community needed to be incorporated into the structure of the universal church. Emmanuel Fritsch and Habtemichael Kidane explain the specifics of this process in their essay on the Ethiopian church, but some basic points may be mentioned here. First, from ʿEzana’s time onward, the Ethiopian church was under the spiritual

34 For an overview of the contemporary linguistic picture in Ethiopia and Eritrea, with discussion of its historical evolution, see Jon Abbink, “Languages and peoples in Ethiopia and Eritrea,” in *EAE* 5 (2014), 381–388, as well as the entries on specific languages.

authority of the patriarch of Alexandria, and thus of what would later become known as the Coptic (Egyptian) church. The head of the Ethiopian church, technically called *pāppas* (“father,” from which “pope” derives) was virtually always an Egyptian Copt selected by the Alexandrian patriarch and sent to Ethiopia to oversee its flock. Because he lacked certain powers held by other *pāppasat*, however, he is generally denoted in scholarship as the “metropolitan” of the Ethiopian church, and in Gəʿəz was often referred to as *abun/abunä* (“our father,” though this honorific could be used for other religious leaders as well). The Ethiopian church was thus a daughter church of the Egyptian one, headed by an Egyptian – but conducting all its services in Gəʿəz, and following practices that, as shall be seen, were sometimes at variance with then-current Coptic norms, on the one hand reminiscent of ancient Christian traditions and on the other hand subject to much influence from kings, monastic reformers, and other influential Ethiopian actors.

In addition to its personnel, a second important feature of the Ethiopian church’s relationship with Egypt was its calendar. The months of the Ethiopian Christian calendar were and are thirteen: twelve of thirty days each, plus an intercalary month of five days (or six, in a leap year) that falls at the end of the year, in August. I give them in order, along with the Western date that, in the Middle Ages, corresponded to the first of each month. It will be noted that due to the addition of a day when necessary in August in the Ethiopian system, and in February in the Western system, the correspondence varies between these months. *Mäskäräm* (starts 29 or 30 August); *Ṭəqəmt* (28 or 29 September); *Ḥədar* (28 or 29 October); *Taḥsas* (27 or 28 November); *Ṭərr* (27 or 28 December); *Yäkkatit* (26 or 27 January); *Mäggabit* (25 or 26 February); *Miyazya* (27 March); *Gənbət* (26 April); *Säne* (26 May); *Ḥamle* (25 June); *Nəḥase* (25 July); *Ṣagʿəmən* (24 August). A slightly different set of corresponding dates applies after 1582 CE, when the Western calendar was reformed.³⁵

The systems for reckoning the year were also based on those of Egypt, and were founded upon a 532-year cycle. The most common dating system in the medieval Christian kingdom was the so-called “Era of Diocletian” (*ʿamätä sāmaʿtat*, “Year of the Martyrs”), starting in 284 CE. Another was the “Era of Grace” (*ʿamätä məhrüt*, “Year of Mercy”) which started 76 years later; in practice, however, the “Era of Diocletian” was also, often, called the “Year of Mercy” in medieval Christian Ethiopian documents, such that care must be taken in identifying which system was employed. Other systems included

35 For the post-1582 CE correspondences and a fuller discussion of the calendar’s origins, see Emmanuel Fritsch and Ugo Zanetti, “Calendar: Christian calendar,” in *EAE* 1 (2003), 668–672, at 668–669.

reckoning from Creation (*‘amätä ‘aläm*, “Year of the World”), identified as 5500 years before Christ (=5493 BCE, according to the modern, post-1582 Western calendar), and reckoning from the Incarnation (*‘amätä šəggawē*, “Year of the Incarnation”), which of course begins 5500 years after Creation (=7/8 CE, according to the modern Western calendar).³⁶ The Year of the Incarnation is the system employed for the civil calendar in Ethiopia today: in relevant contexts, for instance with regard to modern scholarly publication dates, it is here designated as EC (Ethiopian Calendar).

Though each essay explains the principal Gə‘əz and Arabic terms it employs, a few very basic Gə‘əz terms may be usefully introduced here for ease of navigation by non-Gə‘əz readers. *Abun/Abunä* for the metropolitan has been noted above. *Abba*, “father,” frequently prefaces the names of revered church personnel. The most common word for king, from the thirteenth century, was *nəguś* (pl. *nəgäšt*); the cognate term for queen is *nəgəšt* (pl. *nəgəstat*), though a variety of terms for royal women were employed, as Margaux Herman explains in her essay. Of the many administrative titles employed in the Middle Ages, discussed especially in the essays of Marie-Laure Derat and Deresse Ayenachew, it may suffice here to mention two. *Gärad* (in Arabic, *garād*), frequently found in the following essays, was one of several terms for a provincial governor. *Liq* (“chief, senior,” pl. *liqawənt*) prefaced many titles, such as *liqä kahənat* (“chief priest, head of the priests”); *liq* also denoted a scholar. Of (other) ecclesiastical titles, those most frequently mentioned here are *nəburä əd*, literally “he on whom hands have been placed,” an important ecclesiastical office associated especially with Aksum, and *‘aqqabe sä‘at*, “guardian of the hours,” a title granted by the royal administration and usually held by an abbot. An *amba* is a flat-topped mountain, and the word is often attached to place-names, for instance the church of Mika‘el Amba, or Amba Gəšän, the famous “royal prison.” *Däbr* means “mountain,” and of course is used in this sense – another term for the Amba Gəšän was *Däbrä nəgäšt*, “Mountain of kings” – but was also used to denote monasteries, and will more often be found in following essays in this sense: *Däbrä Maryam*, e.g., indicates a monastery dedicated to St Mary. Similarly, *bet* not only means “house” but has a specific meaning as a church, and any church can be described as the *bet* of its titular saint: *Betä Giyorgis* means “the church of St George.” The custom in scholarly literature, however, is to use this term only in certain cases; as explained in “Conventions,”

36 These by no means exhaust the medieval Christian reckoning systems in use. For an overview see Siegbert Uhlig, “Chronography,” in *EAe* 1 (2003), 733–737, and for a thorough discussion, Otto Neugebauer, *Ethiopic Astronomy and Computus* (Vienna, 1979).

in this volume the term *Betä* prefaces the names of the churches of Lalibäla only. Finally, as the above examples illustrate, when a root word acquires the ending – *ä* it means “of,” a useful fact to know in many circumstances: if a *gädl* is a hagiographical work (a *Life*), the *Gädlä Samu’el* is the *Life of Samu’el*.

Each essay will discuss the sources relevant to its topic, but it is well to introduce two of them here, to avoid the necessity of repeating, in following essays, the circumstances of their composition and the reasons for the historical value they are accorded despite their foreign authorship. The first is the *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*. Its genesis is usually attributed to the tenth-century Egyptian bishop Sāwirus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, who compiled earlier biographical sources to create a history of the patriarchate of Alexandria from its origins and added to them his own contemporary knowledge. The work was continued by multiple authors who covered periods of varying length, each similarly drawing on records close to the events described and on their own knowledge. Because of the ecclesiastical relationship between Alexandria and the Ethiopian church, these authors, and the sources they drew upon, took note of events in medieval Ethiopia-Eritrea, and their general contemporaneity with the events described makes the *History of the Patriarchs* a valuable historical source, especially in periods where the Ethiopian documentation is scarce, though of course their apprehension of Ethiopian events was filtered by their geographic, cultural, and linguistic distance from the Ethiopian context.

The second work, frequently cited in following essays, is that of Francisco Alvares, a chaplain with the Portuguese embassy that spent six years in Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526. Apparently drawing on notes he took during his Ethiopian sojourn, Alvares wrote a lengthy account of his stay, in Portuguese, upon his return to Europe in 1527. The original scope of his work, and its fate, remain obscure: contemporary sources refer to a work in five books, some parts of which are lost. The Portuguese text as we have it was printed in Lisbon in 1540 under the title *Ho Preste Joam das indias. Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste Joam* (*The Prester John of the Indies: A True Narration about the Lands of Prester John*), with somewhat variant versions informing the Italian translations done just before and after this date; all these major versions are taken into account in the modern translation by Charles Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, which is therefore the most usual reference for this work.³⁷ The

37 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*. The variants and their relationships are briefly discussed in the translation's front matter (1: 5–9) and more extensively in Charles Beckingham, “Notes on an Unpublished Manuscript of Francisco Alvares,” *Annales d'Éthiopie* 4 (1961): 139–154.

surviving account, though representing only parts of Alvares's original composition (and not necessarily ones chosen by Alvares himself), still fills two volumes. Its degree of detail, particularly its attention to mundane aspects of life that did not merit mention by Ethiopian authors, have made it a valuable resource, particularly for social-historical phenomena, though the author's European background and incomplete immersion in Ethiopian culture must here too be taken into consideration.