CHAPTER 4

The Politics of Domination in Missionary and Royal Architecture

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4.1 Introduction

The materiality of the missionary and royal compounds provides valuable insights into the social and historical circumstances of the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia. A closer examination of the architectural features can help overcome a long-standing controversy regarding the socio-historical interpretation of the period in which the Jesuits operated in Ethiopia. Traditional historical accounts tend to polarize the discussion into two antagonistic positions. On the one hand, there are those who claim that the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia was culturally determinative and beneficial, while, on the other, some have viewed the Jesuit presence as having negative consequences for Ethiopia’s historical development. However, such a dichotomy is typical of any situation where two or more cultures come into contact. As such, we should question how insightful these positions actually are, given that the view of the historical period they are trying to conceptualize is mediated by the collective identities that were a result (and not a feature) of the process they are trying to define. In order to arrive at a full understanding of the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia, this erroneous reasoning, resulting from problems in the discourse (conceptualization) articulating that reasoning, must be overcome. In order to do so, we need to move beyond traditional schemes that rely on neat ethno-cultural divisions and instead identify the social relations (especially power relations) that structured the process. This chapter traces those social relations through the materiality of the missionary and royal compounds. It aims to present some elements that can be identified with the Jesuit presence. However, it will be argued that any attempt to define a material culture that can be identified with the Jesuit presence is also challenged by inconsistencies in the material record. Hence, it should be concluded that it is impossible, or at least unproductive, to establish a clear-cut chrono-cultural typology of Jesuit-European material culture. Hence, in this chapter, we will explore the continuities that can be seen when focusing on the social dimension of materiality, rather than on the cultural dimension emphasized by traditional approaches. In order to do so, the chapter
begins by summarizing the main architectural features of the sites discussed in the previous chapters. It will be argued that the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia was not an exceptional case and that the mission developed in the same way as in other non-European and European territories. The material elements associated with the missionary endeavor are those related to technical or aesthetic wonder, hygiene, and education. It will be shown that these elements correspond to a process of social entanglement with local elites. Finally, it will be argued that what was at stake was a social alliance between the elites supporting the emergence of the structures of a modern state, which continued to exist long after the expulsion of the Jesuits.

4.2 Main Traits and Exceptions

As seen in previous chapters, there was a clear pattern to the type of construction techniques the missionaries used. The Jesuit buildings were usually built using medium-size flat stones arranged horizontally. This was a common feature in most of the sites, whereas the use of irregular stones is a common feature in the later Gondärine period. Although these features could be taken as a guide for chronological identification—with flat stones for the Jesuit period and irregular stones for the Gondärine period—this was not always the case, as we found clear examples of Jesuit structures made using irregular stones (e.g., Dänqäz's church). Another basic trait of Jesuit buildings was the use of lime mortar as constructive cement. While some of the sites undoubtedly contained structures that used mud as cement (some of which were documented in Jesuit sources; e.g., Páez’s church in Gorgora Velha), the introduction of mortar and its widespread use in building stands out as the chief distinctive trait of Jesuit constructions. Hence, while mortar was lavishly used in Gondärine architecture, the use of this element marks a terminus post quem limit to the Jesuit period.

The use of plaster has been amply documented. On the one hand, plaster was a basic element in all of the water channeling structures and cisterns that were identified in both the missionary and royal compounds. On the other, it was also used as a surface finish on walls, and sometimes as a base for decorative paintings (e.g., Dänqäz’s palace). However, this technique should not be viewed as a general trait of Jesuit constructions since its absence could have resulted from degradation or because the buildings were never completed, or simply because the walls were never intended to be plastered.

Another idiosyncratic feature of the Jesuit structures is the use of finely squared stone plaques or ashlars, arranged in headers and stretchers, on the