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Review

JOHN JEREMY HESPELER-BOULTBEE, *A Story in Stones: Portugal's Influence
on Culture and Architecture in the Highlands of Ethiopia 1493–1634*

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Reviews

che Situation und geht dann, falls Quellen vorhanden sind, detailliert auf Gebrauch und Funktion der Kreuze ein, so wie sie z.B. Reisende überliefert haben. Im Kapitel über die Kreuze des späten 16. und 17. Jh. finden sich auch Hinweise auf die Werkstätten von Gondär, die den sog. Gondärstil prägten. Repräsentative Kreuze jeder Periode und auf Malereien dargestellte Kreuze als Belegmaterial sind im Buch abgebildet. Dank der akribischen Beschreibung von Kreuzen durch den Autor kann sich der Leser, die Leserin auch nicht reproduzierte Kreuze vorstellen.

Die sorgfältige Datierung Chojnackis zeigt mit Deutlichkeit, dass sich beliebte Formen, wie z.B. das Tatzenkreuz, über Jahrhunderte erhalten haben. Zwar kann Chojnacki bestimmte Subtypen des sogenannten Lalibäla-Kreuzes und des Gondär-Kreuzes identifizieren, doch vor allem bei der Vielfalt der Kreuzformen der jüngeren Zeit, die auch ältere Formen wieder aufgreifen, bleibt die Datierung auf Grund der Form unsicher. Es ist also noch immer schwierig, z.B. Kreuze einer Museumssammlung, von denen oft nur das Eingangsdatum ins Museum bekannt ist, zu datieren. Chojnacki hat diese Schwierigkeiten auch erkannt und betrachtet seinen Beitrag als Grundlage für weitere Forschungen. Ich gehe davon aus, dass sich diese vielleicht vermehrt auf technische Entwicklungen ausrichten müssten, wie dies schon Eine Moore zu Beginn der 1970er Jahre getan hat. Eine ausführliche Bibliographie und ein Index beschließen das Buch, wobei beim Index unerklärlicherweise die Seitenverweise fehlen, so dass man sich mit seiner Hilfe nicht im Text orientieren kann. Trotz dieser Einschränkung ist ein reifes Standardwerk entstanden, das einen grundlegenden Beitrag zum Verständnis der äthiopischen Kreuze leistet.

Elisabeth Biasio, Völkerkundemuseum, Universität Zürich

JOHN JEREMY HESPELER-BOULTBEE, *A Story in Stones: Portugal's Influence on Culture and Architecture in the Highlands of Ethiopia 1493–1634*, British Columbia: CCB Publishing, 2007. Foreword by RICHARD PANKHURST. 200 pp., ills., maps. Price: US-\$ 49.95. ISBN: 0-9781162-1-6

Gondärine architecture and Ethiopian architectural vestiges at large amaze visitors as much as puzzle, still today, many a scholar. Although the first complete survey on Gondärine architecture dates to 1938,¹ the problems posed by Ethiopia's architectural heritage have been far from resolved. In the

¹ ALESSANDRO AUGUSTO MONTI DELLA CORTE, *I castelli di Gondar*, Roma 1938. The book was critically reviewed by Conti Rossini: CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, "I castelli di Gondar", *Bollettino della Reale Società Geografica Italiana* ser. 7, 4, 1939, 165–68.

present book (a re-edition of a book initially published in Portuguese in 1999), mason and architecture historian Hespeler-Boulton tries to fill a gap in the study of early modern Ethiopian architecture. The author's chief aim is to substantiate a deeply rooted theory (both in Ethiopia and elsewhere) on the Portuguese origin of much of local stone architecture. The appearance of the book coincides with a moment of intensified research on the Portuguese and Jesuit presence in Ethiopia, as exemplified in two recent monographs and in a collective work published on Portuguese influences in art and architecture.²

At the outset of the volume, the author defines the central premise of his study: much of the stone architecture found in the areas of Goğgam, Gondär and Təgray owes its existence to the Portuguese who lived there since the arrival of Pero da Covilhã. Whilst he acknowledges that most of these structures might have been built by Ethiopians, he insists that they underscore, nonetheless, the implementation of Portuguese-building patterns.

Portuguese-building patterns would have been assimilated into Ethiopian societies through a process of mixing Portuguese nationals with Ethiopians: "the Portuguese ... left their considerable skills behind them to the benefit of their children and grandchildren, and this to such an extent that, even today, certain undeniable Portuguese structural and decorative traits can be detected in the modern folk building of the region" (p. 21).

In the next two parts Hespeler-Boulton tries to connect, "as accurately and as intelligently as possible", the "story" of the Portuguese presence with the "architectural remains" he was able to visit in Ethiopia (p. 25). Part I gives an historical summary of the Portuguese and Jesuit presence in Ethiopia. Part II, dedicated to providing empirical evidence, constitutes the main section of the book. It is important to note that this section is conceived more as an impressionistic narrative of the author's "explorations" and findings in Ethiopia than as a well-ordained exposition and analysis of the evidence. It is throughout these explorations that the author will establish hypothetical claims of Portuguese influence on local architecture.

The first halt in the promenade leads us to the area of Ankobär (Šäwa), where Hespeler-Boulton draws attention to the similarities between local and Portuguese wall structures (p. 71ff.). The description of the "Portuguese" bridge on the Gur river and the famous Alata bridge over the Abbay follows suit (p. 94). In Goğgam, the author surveys Jesuit-related buildings: Märṭulä Maryam, where he acknowledges that the decorated ashlar used throughout the building could be of Indian-Armenian origin, but stresses the "Portuguese-

² HERVÉ PENNEC, *Des jésuites au royaume du Prêtre Jean (Ethiopie): Stratégies, rencontres et tentatives d'implantation (1495–1633)*, Paris 2003; LEONARDO COHEN SHABOT, *The Jesuits in Ethiopia: Missionary Methods and Local Responses to Catholicism (1555–1632)*, PhD, University of Haifa 2005 (to be published in the series "Aethiopistische Forschungen", Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz); MANUEL JOÃO RAMOS and ISABEL BOAVIDA (eds.), *The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Ethiopian Art: On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16th–17th Centuries*, Burlington 2004.

ness” of the church on the base of such evidence as the “look of the building, its proportions and the manner in which it sits into its landscape” (p. 88); Gəmb Killale Məhrät; Q^wälläla (Qollela); Yəbaba; Gəmb Giyorgis; and Gəmb Maryam. Following that he compares residential structures in the Lake Ṭana area (Baḥər Dar, Däbrä Tabor) and northern Portugal (p. 106f.). Drawing on an earlier suggestion by Fernanda Durão Ferreira in a little known study on Gondarine style,³ he also points to the similarities between the corner towers of the famous castle at Guzara attributed to Šäršä Dəngəl and those at the Priorado do Rosario in Old Goa (p. 114). By far the most amply surveyed areas in the book are Gondär and the neighbouring areas; the author stresses the Portuguese-ness of such motives as the arched structures, door hinges, locking systems, support beams in Azäzo (p. 119), the pigmented whitewashing widely used on the facades of private houses in Gondär (p. 124) and even the simple round stone houses, which could have been inspired from such Portuguese structures as the *abrigos* (i.e. shelters) in the Alentejo (p. 127). Next, he briefly surveys architectures in Dämbəya/Bägemdär: Dänqäz, Defeče Killale Məhrät, the island of Desite Giyorgis, Maryam Gəmb/Gorgora and Wähni Amba; and Goḡgam: Abba Gəš Fasil. The last complex to be visited is that in Fəremona, being also the only architecture of Təgray contained in the book.

Once the reader has gone through the whole section, a question is on order: is the evidence provided by Hespeler-Boulton enough to sustain his theory on a strong Portuguese genesis of most of stone architecture in Ethiopia? Before attempting an answer, however, a couple of points must be made. Firstly, the empirical part of the book deserves praise because it focuses for the first time in discussing specific building techniques and constructing patterns. The masonry skills of the author – who holds a considerable experience restoring old buildings in Portugal, which let him absorb “the local secrets of traditional indigenous construction and stonemasonry” (internet presentation of the book) – have given the book a practical underpinning that is absent from the previous literature dedicated to the subject. Secondly, the survey of Portuguese or Jesuit-related ruins is quite exhaustive and has even the merit of showing, to my knowledge for the first time, pictures of interesting and lesser known sites, such as Abba Gəš Fasil in Agäw land (probably a former Jesuit residence) and the superb building on the island of Desite Giyorgis, Gorgora.

That said, I seriously doubt that Hespeler-Boulton has succeeded in connecting in a convincing way the Portuguese presence with the development of Ethiopian stone architecture. To be sure, a few pieces of evidence are appealing: e.g., the similar staircase structures shown in p. 106f. or an almost identical ceiling at Iyasu I’s castle in Gondär and at the Moinho do Gato in Portugal (p. 134). However, the overall impression is that comparisons are made in an arbitrary way and that the examples displayed from Portuguese architecture (mostly from central and northern regions of the country) even contradict the author’s own assertion that the models spreading into Ethiopia came

³ *O estilo Gondar*, Lisboa 2003.

mostly from southern Portugal (p. 64). The assumption itself that Portuguese building techniques and models took roots in Ethiopia, indeed a critical element for the overall “Portuguese” hypothesis, is only sketched and not very strongly. Thus, the author maintains that Portuguese-building patterns entered the Ethiopian “unconscious” through a process of human mixing, and that these patterns would have lived up to the present; yet, the very fact that a few Portuguese soldiers managed to transmit to their brethren, and with such an enduring effect into local cultures, a skill that no sources attest they ever possessed or developed seems rather implausible. What is more, when facing the evidence of Indian intervention in Ethiopian architecture⁴ Hespeler-Boulton proposes an even more complicated theory according to which Portuguese patterns were first imported into India, assimilated into local cultures and hereafter taken to Ethiopia by Indian craftsmen (e.g., p. 87, 133). The author is right in stressing that cultural patterns move across continents, but the sheer evidence of mere contacts, human migrations or even of formal similarities should not be enough to validate cultural transmission. In this sense, the avid quest for “Portuguese” remains seems to have blurred him from taking into consideration more prosaic (and local) origins to some of the stone constructions explored (especially in the case of domestic architecture). In Təgray and Eritrea, for instance, there is a rich tradition of stone architecture (domestic and monumental), that can be traced back at least to the Aksumite period and, whilst not accounting for all the architecture reviewed in the book, must be taken into consideration before embarking into a quest for foreign influences.⁵ Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the origins of simple domestic architecture, accounting to half of the examples in the book, are a very elusive topic of research, for rural societies often tend to produce similar structures independently and with no proper diffusion of mutual patterns.

More importantly, although in the introduction Hespeler-Boulton insists that he shall be working on a factual historical base (p. 25), the truth is that he is far from achieving that. Hence, his claims on Portuguese architectural influence are not buttressed in written evidence: none of the numerous Jesuit letters and treatises and Ethiopian chronicles (most of them today found in accessible printed editions) seems to have been consulted, nor does the work take into account previous historical discussion.⁶ The initial summary, for

⁴ Which was already pointed at as the likeliest hypothesis in CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, “I castelli di Gondar”, *Bollettino della Reale Società Geografica Italiana* ser. 7, 4, 1939, 165–68, here 165.

⁵ A seminal study of this is RUTH PLANT, *Architecture of the Təgray, Ethiopia*, Bristol 1985.

⁶ The interesting studies by Anfray are thus not mentioned: FRANCIS ANFRAY, “Vestiges gondariens”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 28, 1980–81, 5–22 and ID., “Les monuments gondariens des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Une vue d’ensemble”, in: TADDESE BEYENE (ed.), *Pro-*

instance, is riddled with factual blunders that could have easily been avoided: the author states that Ləbnā Dəngəl appointed João Bermudez as patriarch of Ethiopia (p. 48), an information that only appears in Bermudez's own self-congratulatory account; further on (p. 51), he says that the Portuguese Diogo Dias (who in 1555 accompanied Gonçalo Rodriguez to Ethiopia) was a monk, which he was not. Last but not least, although the abundant visual material makes the reading more pleasant, the narrative that accompanies it is often tedious, with frequent irrelevant comments. A less impressionistic and more elaborate text would certainly have forced the author to provide a more coherent elucidation of the Portuguese hypothesis.

To sum up, this is an interesting though uneven book. The effort of Hespeler-Boulton to put together a large array of evidence and the passion with which he has studied it is commendable. One would have wished, however, a more upfront confrontation with the historical evidence and a more structured exposition of "Portuguese"-related techniques and architectural patterns. Still, the book may well serve its purpose of being a "jump-off point for additional future research" (p. 25), thus stimulating a more accomplished integration of comparatism, historical evidence and logic analysis.

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ALESSANDRO BAUSI – ALESSANDRO GORI, *Tradizioni orientali del «Martirio di Areta»*. *La prima recensione araba e la versione etiopica*. *Edizione critica e traduzione* = Quaderni di Semitistica 27, presentazione di PAOLO MARRASSINI. Firenze, 2006. 306 S. Preis: € 50.–. ISBN: 88-901340-8-9

Seit geraumer Zeit¹ sind die italienischen Kollegen mit der, wie sie es spielerisch nennen: "caccia ai testi aksumiti" befasst. Der vorliegenden Band stellt erneut ihre Ernsthaftigkeit und fundierte wissenschaftliche Arbeitsweise unter Beweis.

Der Bericht über die Märtyrer von Nağrān ist ein aufschlussreicher Beitrag zur frühen Geschichte des Christentums in der Region am Horn von Afrika. Die Stadt Nağrān war ein wirtschaftlich bedeutender Standort und Schnittstelle auf dem Handelsweg in den Mittelmeerraum nach Byzanz und

ceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. University of Addis Ababa [26–30 November 1984], Addis Ababa – Frankfurt am Main 1988–89, vol. 1, 9–43.

¹ Vgl. ALESSANDRO BAUSI, *The Aksumite Background of the "Corpus Canonum"*, in: SIEGBERT UHLIG et al. (Hrsg.), *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, July 20–25, 2003* (Wiesbaden, 2006), S. 532–541.