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Periodization of Ethiopian History: Reflections, Questions, and some Modest Suggestions*

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'We need periodization in order to do without it […] periodization is most valuable when we are aware of its limited validity.'[1]

Introduction

My focus in this paper is a subject which most historians view with a decided ambivalence. On the one hand, periodization is a necessary evil. Events much be situated in a context of time (and place and culture, for that matter), and continuity must be distinguished from change. Not only is this necessary for the writer, but also given the abundance of courses, academic programs, books, and journals, it is necessary for the student, reader, referee, and publisher.

We can certainly ask, as the noted historian Jacques Le Goff did in his final book, 'Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches?'[2] Or argue as David Phillipson has done so articulately that 'Many accounts of Ethiopian history during the last three thousand years are strangely episodic and contrast markedly with evidence for long term continuity'.[3]

Nevertheless Goitien, whom I quote above, felt that the periodization of Islamic history was worth the risk to avoid two dangers: '*the danger of abstracting a general picture of Islam which never was a historical reality* and vice versa depriving the various Islamic cultures of their specific merits and contributions. Indeed, it is precisely because of the tremendous continuity within Islamic history, that periodization helps us to remember that continuity does not imply uniformity'.[4]

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1 Goitein 1968, 224.

2 Le Goff 2014.

3 Phillipson 2007, 1. Cf. Phillipson 2012, 246.

4 Goitein 1968, 224. Emphasis in the original.

This essay seeks to explore some issues in the periodization of Ethiopian history. By this I mean, not only the way we divide Ethiopian history writ large into different units, but also how we treat the history of various other sub-topics: political change, the history of the Church, literature, even the writing of history itself. I shall consider some existing attempts at periodization, review some recent revisions and suggest some new directions.

Some Broader Issues

Since the middle of the twentieth century a copious literature on periodization has emerged. It is impossible within the limits of this essay to reference more than a fraction of this output. However, I shall have call throughout my text and notes to refer to some of the more relevant insights from historians of disparate and varied civilizations.[5]

Periodization is one of the ways in which we shape our historical narratives. Once we assign or locate an event or institution in a specific period, we tend to highlight those aspects of its characters which strengthen our periodization and ignore or downplay those features which continued relatively unchanged. Moreover, 'A period is defined in terms of its own coherence *and in terms of its contrast with other periods beyond historical boundaries at either end*. Such periodization tends to overlook continuities by emphasizing differences and changes from one "period" to the next'.[6]

The kind of periodization that is produced depends on the criteria that are used. However, we must be cautious. As many insightful historians have warned over the years, the articulation of historical periods may indeed be arbitrary and artificial but rarely is it a neutral, unambiguous, and value free enterprise. 'One group of [Tibetan] historians', as Cuevas explains,

> might identify a span of time as the time when so-and-so was in control or doing such-and-such, while another group of scholars might classify a stretch of time when some social, religious, or political movement prevailed, or when an artistic style or literary work was introduced, or when a certain translation significant event took place. Problems arise when

[5] For a useful survey of Western attempts at periodization, see Green 1992. Debates about periodization in European studies began in earnest in the nineteenth century. For reflections on several key approaches to dividing up and interpreting the past from the point of view of European and American historiography, see Jordanova 2000, 145–167.

[6] Morony 1981, 249, emphasis added. Cf. Dassow 2012, 114: 'Every such periodization scheme captures some aspect of ancient reality while misrepresenting everything else, and they all reflect the growth of the disciplines in which they are employed as much as they do the past to which they are applied'.

> historians require commitment to a particular period scheme as reflecting some sort of metaphysics or ontology, which by definition would invalidate all alternative schemes. The reality, of course, is that organizing the past is necessarily an exercise in interpretation and there is always room for other interpretations.[7]

With this background in mind, we can turn to some previous attempts at the periodization of Ethiopian history.

Joseph Tubiana's Turning Points

One of the few, and perhaps the earliest attempt to explicitly address the issue of periodization in Ethiopian history writ large was made by the French scholar, Joseph Tubiana, who in 1965 considered the issue of '"Turning Points" in Ethiopian History'.[8] Tubiana began by wisely noting that periodization is broadly speaking more important for the *teaching* of history, than for research. Moreover, although he employs the broad rubrics of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, he is at pain to stress that these categories, 'do not cover the same lapse of time, neither the same historical reality, as in European history'.[9] Similarly, Tubiana's choice of the term 'Turning Points' serves as a useful reminder that most debates about periodization revolve around the cut-off dates and transitions from one period to another.[10] The periodization he proposes is as follows:

1) Ancient period, including ʿEzana's conversion until the fall of Aksum (tenth century)
2) Agäw period (Zag^{w}e dynasty of Lasta, 'Fälaša' [Betä Ǝsraʾel] uprising), formerly known as the Dark Ages, end of tenth century until 1270.
3) Period of the Amhara kingdom; from 1270 until the death of Emperor Tewodros II (d.1868); marked by the defeat of Grañ (d.1543) which concluded the Šäwa kingdom and led to the Gondär kingdom ([1632]–1769), after which the Government of the *Rases* began.[11]
4) Modern period, starts with Emperor Yoḥannəs IV (1868–)

Several points are immediately obvious regarding Tubiana's scheme. His suggested division is a vivid reminder that all attempts at periodization are by their very nature conditional and representative of a certain state of knowledge. While

[7] Cuevas 2006, 45–46.
[8] Tubiana 1965, 162–166.
[9] Tubiana 1965, 163.
[10] Cuevas 2006, 45: 'The debates over periodization tend always to flare up around where one chooses to locate the transition points rather than how one describes the continuities'.
[11] Cf. Abir 1968. Today, this period is referred to as the period of the 'Princes', more properly 'judges', but is usually referenced by its Amharic name: *Zämänä mäsafənt*.

historians put great emphasis on the theories and categories which lay behind any given periodization, we can never ignore the importance of new discoveries or reinterpretations of historical events.

For example, scholars throughout the twentieth century posited a 'second evangelization' of Aksumite Ethiopia under the leadership of foreign monks who reached Ethiopia from Syria or Rome, perhaps as Miaphysite refugees.[12] However, recent studies have cast considerable doubt as to how much information can be drawn from texts which were written centuries after the events they claim to record.[13] Scholars increasingly view their hagiographies as providing 'much later interpretations of the facts, transmitted through a medieval cultural background'.[14]

Returning to Tubiana, above I noted he considered the Betä Ǝsraʾel uprising of Queen Ǝsato (also known as Gudit, Judith, Yodit) to be one of the signature events of the Zagʷe period. However, today, while scholars may still accept the narrative of a female ruler's involvement in the decline of Aksum, the claim that she was a Betä Ǝsraʾel ruler is widely rejected.[15] Firstly, on purely formal grounds, a growing number of scholars believe that the designation of an ethnic group as the Betä Ǝsraʾel (indeed even the ethnogenesis of the group itself) dates to a much later period, probably sometime between the fourteenth and sixteenth century.[16] Moreover, most scholars believe that the female ruler of this time credited with the death of the Aksumite ruler was not a Christian, neither was she a Jewess or Muslim.

Regarding the second of Tubiana's signature events, the reign of the Zagʷe dynasty, the situation is even more complex. As I previously noted, David Phillipson has argued that there is much more continuity between the material culture of the Zagʷe and their Aksumite predecessors than has previously been recognized.[17]

More recently, in a series of articles and chapters, which have culminated in a groundbreaking book, Marie-Laure Derat, has gone even further in upending the

[12] Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 113–119; Conti Rossini 1928, 156–165.

[13] 'Nine Saints', *EAe*, III (2007), 1188b–1191a (A. Brita); Brita 2010.

[14] 'Nine Saints' *EAe*, III (2007), 1188b (A. Brita). Cf. Marrassini 2011, 8. For yet another example of an 'early' saint, whose historical period needs to be repositioned, see Heldman and Shelemay 2017.

[15] Derat 2020, 36–41.

[16] Shelemay 1989, 197–228; Quirin 1992; Abbink 1990; Kaplan 1992. From this perspective it must be noted that these scholars would largely dismiss most or all of what has been written regarding the earliest periods in 'Falasha' history. Cf. Hess 1969. And much later: Kessler 1996.

[17] Phillipson 2007, 1–19.

Zagʷe.[18] Noting first that none of the contemporary sources refer to them by this name, she challenges much of the commonly accepted wisdom on this period and its dynasty. The Zagʷe (or whatever they were called), she suggests, were not necessarily rivals of the Aksumites, nor did they present themselves as markedly different regarding language and style. 'King Lalibala presented himself in the manner of an Aksumite king, thus seeking to emphasize his links to this ancient kingdom'.[19] Moreover, the Zagʷe, she suggests, were not (as is commonly claimed) either limited to or originally from the Lasta region.[20] 'There is no concrete evidence whatever that the Zagʷe spoke the Agaw language',[21] and 'the Agaw identity of the dynasty is far from settled'.[22] Finally, she challenges the commonly accepted view that the Zagʷe were, in their own day, viewed as non-Solomonic usurpers, and in a dramatic reversal of conventional wisdom suggests that the later early Solomonic kings may have challenged the legitimacy of their predecessors to strengthen their own bona fides.[23]

Thus, both scholars, one an archaeologist focusing on material remains and the other an historian working primarily but not exclusively on texts, suggest that the dynastic shift from Aksum to the Zagʷe was far less dramatic architecturally, culturally, geographically, and ethnically then was previously assumed.[24] What then are we to make of the conventional periodization which depends so strongly on the facts of dynastic change and a shift to the South?

Periodization and Power: The Challenges of a Dynastic Model

Almost without exception Tubiana's 'turning points' are dependent on the rise and fall of rulers. Above I noted the heuristic purpose behind any periodization. On this basis, the use of a dynastic model can be seen to have a crucial weakness. If the purpose of periodization is to assist scholars in highlighting the distinctive features of a given era, a dynastic approach can be seen to frequently beg the question.[25] That is to say, if the change in dynasties or rulers is assumed to mark a dramatic change or changes in history, what remains to be done is fill in details

[18] Derat 2018. For the purposes of this article, I have quoted Derat 2020.

[19] Derat 2020, 50.

[20] More recently, see Derat et al. 2020, for an important discussion of a major monastic site near Meqelle (Təgray) from the Zagʷe period.

[21] Derat 2020, 50.

[22] Derat, 2020 51.

[23] Derat, 2020, 55–56.

[24] For an even more recent re-thinking of the Zagʷe undertaken by Derat in partnership with numerous colleagues, see Derat et al. 2021. This article stresses the architectural technological continuity of the churches of Lalibäla with earlier 'trogloditic' culture.

[25] 'Begging the question' has often been (mis)interpreted to mean 'invite or demand a particular question'. Its original meaning, however, which I use here, is assume a conclusion.

to illustrate the point. However, analytically, it would seem that the question at hand is whether the change in ruler(s) produced other important changes. By assuming that political change is proof of transformations in other realms, scholars risk missing the complexity of the relations between politics and culture, economics, etc. Certainly, it is equally plausible that changes in the economy such as new modes of production, the initiation of new trade contacts, or the arrival of new faiths and ideologies could themselves result in political upheavals and thus be the cause rather than the product of dynastic change.[26]

Moreover, the imposition of political or dynastic history on cultural history is fraught with difficulties. Although the rise to power of a specific ruler or dynasty is often a convenient marker because it provides a clear before/after point, it also carries with it some rather unnecessary baggage. All too often such periodizations result in the designation of periods not based on internal artistic criteria or watershed moments in cultural production, but on a proposed identification with political figures. A periodization of cultural history borrowed from political history tends to equate the two and leads to dynastic labels for works of artistic expression. Moreover, the application of a political framework implicitly favours a center to periphery, court to hinterland, metropolitan to rural areas model of cultural transmission. Thus, different disciplines may offer different suggestions as to how to divide the history of a specific region. In fact, 'multiple schemes may be necessary for the periodization of political, intellectual, social and economic history, and we should be prepared to admit the existence of contradictions and inconsistencies among these schemes and that they might proceed at different paces'.[27]

One interesting example of the application (imposition) of political periodization on Ethiopian cultural history concerns the period of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon I (r.1314–1344), who is celebrated for his military campaigns against Ifat and other Muslim principalities. Indeed, the 'chronicle' of these encounters is often considered to be one of the earliest works of local historiography and has been published in numerous editions.[28]

While there is little question that ʿAmdä Ṣəyon deserves to be remembered as 'one of the most outstanding Ethiopian emperors',[29] his importance for the study of Ethiopic literature deserves a critical reexamination. Getatchew Haile explains that, 'Traditionally, a survey of G[əʿəz] l[iterature] is presented in chronological

[26] While there is little question that the rise to power of Yəkunno Amlak ca. 1270 was a major turning point in Ethiopian history, it should be noted that the establishment of important monastic centers in the southern parts of the country, pre-dated the change in dynasty by decades.

[27] Morony 1981, 249.

[28] Strictly speaking the work is not a chronicle as much as an account of a series of dramatic battles. Kropp 1994; Marrassini 1993; Huntingford 1965; Perruchon 1889.

[29] ʿAmdä Ṣəyon I', *EAe*, I (2003), 227a–229b (J. Mantel-Niećko and D. Nosnitsin), 227a.

sequence according to the periods associated with the ruling dynasties'.[30] Since the time of the great Italian scholar Enrico Cerulli, almost 60 years ago, scholars have spoken of the 'ʿAmdä Ṣəyon period' (*L'età di Amda Seyon*) in Gəʿəz literature and cited a significant group of works attributed to his time.[31] However, several of these attributions do not withstand serious scrutiny. Let us begin by considering the summary of Cerulli as presented in the relevant entry in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*:

> It is generally accepted that ʿA[mdä] Ṣ[əyon]'s reign resulted among other things, in a revival of spiritual culture and the growth of Gəʿəz literature, constituting the so-called ʿA[mdä] Ṣ[əyon] period […]. A number of important works appeared in that time, such as the *Kəbrä nägäśt,* which established the ideology of the Ethiopian Empire, the *Mäṣḥafä məśṭirä sämay wämədr,* the *Zena Ǝskəndər* […], the Life of Hanna, St. Mary's mother, and a collection of monastic rules attributed to St. Anthony (*Śərʿatä mənkʷəsənna*). The account of ʿA[mdä] Ṣ[əyon]'s wars against Ifat, which is the beginning of Ethiopian historiography, is thought to have been written by a contemporary of these events [some place it later] […]. A rapid growth of secular and religious writing as well as translation activities […] marked also the time after ʿA[mdä] Ṣ[əyon].[32]

Pride of place should certainly be given to the aforementioned account of his wars. This work may well date to his period or shortly thereafter.[33] Recently, however, Bertrand Hirsch has dated the work to the fifteenth century and suggested that it is not the testimony of a contemporary of the events but a work of 'epic fiction'.[34] Moreover several important scholars, while believing that the work contains earlier material, date it as an organized document as late as the sixteenth century.[35]

The *Kəbrä Nägäst*, which served as a charter legend for the 'Solomonic' rulers of Ethiopia, is one of the best known Ethiopian literary works. While there have been some attempts of scholars to date the *Kəbrä Nägäst* as early as the sixth century, recent research has strongly supported an early fourteenth century date

[30] 'Gəʿəz literature', *EAe*, II (2005), 736a–741b (Getatchew Haile), 736a.

[31] Cerulli 1961, 35–70.

[32] ʿAmdä Ṣəyon I', *EAe*, I (2003), 227a–229b (J. Mantel-Niećko and D. Nosnitsin), 229a. This passage in the entry on ʿAmdä Ṣəyon appears to be a summary of Cerulli's chapter with some recent publications added. I would like to highlight the word 'resulted' because it implies not merely that a literary flowering occurred during the reign of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon, but rather that his reign had some sort of causal effect on the literature of the time!

[33] Kropp 1994; Tedeschi 1978–1979, 132, fn. 22.

[34] Hirsch 2020. See also Seignobos 2020.

[35] Marrassini 1993, 39–40.

for the work.[36] However, it surely must be noted that the work appears to have emerged (re-emerged) not in the court of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon or among his monastic allies but rather under the auspices of a rival ruler in the province of Təgray.[37]

This region may also be the provenance of *Zena Ǝskendər*, an early part of the sizeable Ethiopian corpus concerned with the royal model of Alexander the Great. According to Gianfrancesco Lusini, who has undertaken a painstaking study of the work, not only does it show clear links to the *Kəbrä Nägäst*, but it quite probably also originated in a Təgrayan monastery.[38]

The *Mäṣḥafä məśṭirä sämay wämədr* ('Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth'), which is often cited as a work of this 'period', is presently dated by many scholars to the period of Zärʾa Yaʿqob (1434–1468) almost a full century after ʿAmdä Ṣəyon.[39] To be sure, there is some confusion here because of its association with the monk Bäṣälotä Mikaʾel who did indeed live in the time of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon. But here too the association with ʿAmdä Ṣəyon is questionable on several levels: the reference may be to a different Bäṣälotä Mikaʾel, who in any event seems to be associated with only one part of the treatise. If it is the same Bäṣälotä Mikaʾel, it must be noted that he clashed with ʿAmdä Ṣəyon and thus this king can scarcely be assumed to be a patron of this work. This text also seems not to have originated in the royal court but in the North. Once again, linguistic evidence suggests the author was a Təgrayan.[40]

Finally, while the *Śərʿata mənkʷəsənna* ('Order of the Monastic Profession') may date from this period, some form of it may go back to the origins of monasticism in Ethiopia.

Based on the above, one can only wonder if the ''ʿAmdä Ṣəyon period' in the history of Ethiopic literature is merely a creation for the sake of convenience, rather than a meaningful concept. Thus, the date of the account of his wars is still disputed, the *Kəbrä Nägäst*, *Zena Ǝskendər*, and *Mäṣḥafä məśṭirä sämay wämədr* do not appear to have originated in his circles. The last of these may not even be from his time.

[36] Shahîd 1976. But cf. Munro-Hay 2001, 43–58; 'Kəbrä nägäśt', *EAe*, III (2007), 364a–368a (P. Marrassini).

[37] Frantsouzoff 2016.

[38] Lusini 1994.

[39] See, e.g., 'Məśṭirä sämay wämədr: Mäṣḥafä məśṭirä sämay wämədr', *EAe*, III (2007), 945a–946b (G. Lusini and G. Fiaccadori), who also reference 'the literary activity of the age of *aṣe* ʿAmdä Ṣəyon I'. For the text, see Perruchon 1903.

[40] 'Məśṭirä sämay wämədr: Mäṣḥafä məśṭirä sämay wämədr', EAe, III (2007), 945a–946b (G. Lusini and G. Fiaccadori), 945b.

Double Vision

The wider interest of historians in periodization has gone hand in hand with the transition to multiple perspectives on history focusing on social history, gender, economic history, subjugated peoples, the environment, etc. Such multiple perspectives have implicitly or explicitly posed a challenge to the sort of dynastic-driven periodizations cited above.[41] An excellent example of this can be seen in the impact of the rise of gender studies on traditional androcentric periodizations.

More than four decades have passed since Joan Kelly-Gadol in her essay 'Did Women have a Renaissance?' noted that 'One of the tasks of women's history is to call into question accepted schemas of periodization'.[42] To be sure, Kelly-Gadol's essay seems more concerned with the status of women during the Renaissance, than offering a revised or alternative periodization. As she pithily notes, 'These developments reorganized Italian society along modern lines and opened the possibilities for the social and cultural expression for which the age is known. Yet precisely these developments affected women adversely, so much, so that there was no "renaissance" for women, at least not during the Renaissance'.[43] Moreover, elsewhere she notes more generally a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called progressive change.[44] This she argues produces a sort of 'double vision' in which periods largely known for social 'advances' are seen quite differently through the eye(s) of women.

To put this in terms closer to those discussed immediately above, the values and criteria for a periodization of society for men are often not those which yield a similar division for women. When we seek the crucial differentials in such areas as reproductive technology, economic change, or elsewhere, we must always be sensitive to this distinction.

Of course, a focus of gender does not in and of itself challenge existing periodizations. Thus, much of the recent literature on the history of women in the Horn of Africa focuses narrowly on a small group of elite women: rulers, spouses, mothers of rulers, and in a few cases nuns.[45] For the most part these have been Christian women, with a few cases of Muslims and other female leaders. In some cases, legendary figures like Queen Makədda (also known as the Queen of Sheba) and her previously mentioned 'evil twin' Queen ʾIsato are included. It may well be that given the nature of our sources, it will never be possible to undertake a

41 Hirschler and Bowen Savant 2014, 13–16.
42 Kelly-Gadol 1977.
43 For a similar critique with respect to an earlier period, see Culham 1997.
44 Kelly-Gadol 1976, 810–812.
45 Belete Bizuneh 2001; Crummey 1981; Herman 2012; Herman 2015; Herman 2020; Belcher and Kleiner 2015; Belcher 2013.

dramatic re-evaluation based on gender. However, this does not release us from the obligation to challenge existing periodizations.

Elites and Masses

Just how important social differentiation can be for the issue of periodization is illustrated by the differences between elite and non-elite culture(s) in Ethiopia at the turn of the Common Era. Here it must be noted that in contrast to historians who deal with later periods, scholars of early Ethiopian civilization have displayed a strong interest in issues of periodization. As I noted above, David Phillipson has challenged accounts of Ethiopian history which neglect what he views as strong evidence for long term continuity.[46] In particular, he has challenged several assumptions regarding the division within 'Pre-Aksumite' times and between the 'Pre-Aksumite' and 'Aksumite' periods. Beyond questioning the 'illogicity of naming something retrospectively in terms of what it subsequently became or by what it was succeeded',[47] he also faults this periodization for its lack of geographical specificity and an over dependence on epigraphic data. (This is, of course, one of many cases in which the dependence on different sources produces different perspectives on historical change.) Indeed, Phillipson suggests that in contrast to shifts and receptivity to external influence found in the elite culture of the region of Ethiopia-Eritrea there was considerable unity and continuity at the non-elite peasant level. Moreover, contacts with foreign influences were of significance almost exclusively for a small elite.

When Phillipson's views are compared to those of Rudolfo Fattovich, it appears that there are differences both in emphasis and in kind.[48] Fattovich rejected earlier attempts by scholars such as Francis Anfray to divide pre-Aksumite times into two periods:

1) 500 BCE to 300 BCE: South Arabian (Ethio-Sabaean) characterized by a South Arabian influence and
2) 300 BCE to 100 BCE: Intermediate characterized by the emergence of local cultural traditions

Instead, Fattovich divided the Pre-Axumite era into three phases:

1) Early Pre-Aksumite Phase, the formation of the polity (1000/900 BCE to 800/700 BCE)

[46] Phillipson 2007, 1; Phillipson 2004, 77–89. And note the scope of his book, from 1000 BCE to 1300 CE.

[47] Phillipson 2011, 258; Phillipson 2007, 1–19. Consider in this light the frequent references in American history to the 'Antebellum South'.

[48] Contenson 1981 is heavily dependent on Fattovich.

2) Middle Pre-Aksumite Phase, the consolidation (700/600 BCE to 400 BCE)
3) Late Pre-Aksumite Phase, the decline (400/300 BCE).[49]

These are followed by what he calls 'Proto-Aksumite culture', the earliest phase of development of the Kingdom of Aksum in the late first millennium BCE. While Fattovich offers a different periodization from Anfray, he still accepts (*pace* Phillipson) the idea of a pre-Aksumite period. However, he largely seems to accept the key social distinction championed by Phillipson.

> The archaeological evidence, finally, points to a distinction between the elite who used South Arabian (mainly Sabean) symbols of power, and ordinary people maintaining their local traditions […][50]

It would seem then that, at least in part, the disagreement between Fattovich and Philippson is based less on their readings of the finds and more on their sense of what constitutes a period. Both acknowledge that clear distinctions exist between elite and non-elite culture. Both accept that each of these groups is best represented in a different group of sources. The question that remains is whether the changes in elite culture justify a division into periods if it is not supported by the long term continuity of non-elite culture.

Centralization and Dispersion

Perhaps the most important attempt in recent years to offer a periodization for Ethiopian history is found in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, where Donald Crummey offered a scheme that is not remarkably different from Tubiana's:

> The following periodization sees the history of 'E[thiopia]' and north-east Africa […] in terms of oscillations between periods of dispersed political authority, on the one hand, and the assertion of centralizing authority on the other.[51]

In the following, Crummey lists the following periods:

- Foundational
- Dispersed Political Authority: Period I (mid-first millennium BC to the turn of the common era)
- Imperial Authority: Period I (Aksum, first to seventh century)
- Dispersed Political Authority: Period II (eighth century to 1270)
- Imperial Authority: Period II (1270–1527)
- Dispersed Political Authority: Period III (sixteenth to nineteenth century)

[49] Fattovich 1990.
[50] Fattovich 2010, 164.
[51] 'Ethiopia—History and periodization', *EAe*, II (2005), 397b–401a (D. Crummey), 397b.

– The Modern Period: Imperial vs Dispersed Authority (mid-1870s onwards)
– The Neo-Solomonic State: Stage I (1870s to *c*.1910)
– Indigenous Authority Contested (1910s–1940s)
– The Neo-Solomonic State: Stage II (1940s to 1974)[52]

The consolidation and dissolution of the Ethiopian Christian state forms the basis for Crummey's periodization.

Once again, the framework used to trace the history of Ethiopia is familiar to scholars like Morony, engaged in the discussion of other powerful states: 'The internal history of the [Islamic] empire ought to be divided into periods in terms of administrative centralization and decentralization'.[53]

Ancient Egypt also appears to have been understood similarly with periods of united 'Kingdoms' interrupted by 'Intermediate' periods of multiple groups in power. However, as one critic has noted:

> The presupposition underlying these designations is that Egypt took paradigmatic shape as a single state encompassing a certain stretch of territory and that the coexistence of more states than one within that territory was a violation of the paradigm; the model thus depends on a preconceived idea of Egypt as a perennial entity having a particular geographic and political form. What if one did not take this paradigm for granted but instead considered it normal for a multitude of states to occupy the Nile Valley from the First Cataract to the Mediterranean (the traditional bounds of ancient Egypt) while viewing the imposition of a single monarchy over this entire territory as an aberration (albeit one that eventually became permanent)? [54]

In fact, in his essay 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', Christopher Clapham offers similar critiques of conventional histories of Ethiopia, which in his view: (1) focused almost exclusively on the history of the Amhara and Təgrayans; (2) based their geographical coverage on the expansion and contraction of the Ethiopian empire; (3) legitimated and even glorified the 'state' (monarchy); (4) emphasized certain periods, people, and places, particularly of strong central government, while at the same time excluding or marginalizing others.[55]

It must be stressed that Crummey's proposed periodization is not the product of naivete or a lack of awareness of the challenges of such an approach. Few if any historians in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century did as much as

[52] 'Ethiopia—History and periodization', *EAe*, II (2005), 397b–401a (D. Crummey), 398a–400b.
[53] Morony 1981, 251.
[54] Dassow 2012, 116.
[55] Clapham 2002, 40–41.

Crummey to expand the scope of and reflect on the development of Ethiopian history. In fact, at approximately the same time as Clapham wrote his essay, Crummey himself raised similar issues in 'The Horn of Africa: Between History and Politics'.[56] In an essay remarkable for its self-reflection and candor, Crummey readily acknowledged the shortcomings of just the sort of approach he was to employ in his contribution to *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*. It is also interesting to note that like Clapham, Crummey saw at least part of the solution to the problems in a regional approach to the history of the Horn of Africa.

Periodization cannot be separated from yet another historical challenge: the need to define geographical borders.[57] Much ink has been spilled (to use an anachronistic turn of phrase) regarding the challenges of applying terms like 'Ancient', 'Medieval', and 'Modern' outside of Europe. Closer to our concerns here, the concept of 'Late Antiquity' has been applied recently to both the kingdom of Aksum and the Red Sea basin.[58]

In the case of Ethiopia there are several different spatial contexts each of which may have different impacts of our periodization. On a fairly circumscribed level, it is clear, as I noted above, that the chronological developments described by archaeologists of pre- and Aksumite culture, vary according to location.[59] Indeed, the suggested chronology for Adulis, Aksum, and situated above the latter, Betä Giyorgis are significantly different.[60]

More broadly, there is the question of whether in a larger area and regional studies context Ethiopia belongs primarily in the Christian Orient or Africa.[61] Haggai Erlich, among others, has long championed an approach which emphasized the significance of the Nile valley.[62] But there is a growing body of work, much of it published in *Northeast African Studies*, which has highlighted the importance of the Red Sea basin.[63]

Both Clapham and Crummey champion the usefulness of placing the Ethiopian state in the broader context of the Horn of Africa. Crummey stresses the importance of expanding our understanding of such crucial groups as the Oromo,

56 Crummey 2003. Yet another important essay dealing with many of the same issues and at the same time as Clapham and Crummey was Triulzi 2002.

57 Hirschler and Bowen Savant 2014, 8: 'Time exists only within space; each calls the other into existence. Some measures of time are literally inconceivable, if only for lack of a space that would render them meaningful'.

58 Munro-Hay 1991; Bowersock 2013; Power 2012.

59 Benoist et al. 2020.

60 Zazzaro et al. 2014.

61 Kaplan 2019.

62 Erlich and Gershoni 2000; Erlich 2002; Gershoni and Hatina 2008.

63 Miran 2009; Miran 2012; Um 2012; Agius 2017.

Somalis, and Eritreans.[64] Clapham suggests a more eco-regional and perhaps less ethnic format focusing on the ox-plow regions, the more southerly locals defined by *ənsät* cultivation, lowland peripheries inhabited by pastoralists, and finally the diverse locals and modes of production of the Oromo.[65]

Clapham also notes the difficulties of writing a regional history for the periods prior to the sixteenth century.[66] Moreover, he agrees with Crummey's description of the period from the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth as a period of 'fragmentation, rather than statebuilding'.[67] However, given the success that some scholars have enjoyed in their reconstructions of the histories of groups in other parts of the continent, the possibility of greater depth in the histories of the Oromo and others, cannot be ruled out.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Mohammed Hassan's groundbreaking work on the Oromo, *The Oromo of Ethiopia, A History 1570–1860*, is constructed around dates which do not conform to the periodizations of either Tubiana or Crummey. His starting date appears connected to the rise to power and migration of the Boorana Robale *gadaa* (roughly 'age group') for an eight-year period which commenced in 1570. His concluding point seems associated with the reign of the important Oromo ruler Abbaa Bagiboo I (r.1825-1861).[68]

Similarly, in the introduction to their important volume on Islam in the Horn during the 'Moyen Age', the editors François Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch suggest a division between a first Middle Age (*premier Moyen Âge*), from the seventeenth to the end of the thirteenth century, and a second Middle Age, from the end of the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. While some of these dates are roughly similar to those suggested by Tubiana and Crummey, it should be noted that their division is derived from changing geographies of Islam in the Horn and not from relations with the Christian kingdom. Thus, the first of these periods is marked by the entry of Islam and Muslims through the north with the Dahlak islands playing a major role. The second is marked by the rise of Zaylaʿ as the major port along the Red Sea and the rise of the sultanate of Ifat in the early and middle thirteenth century, respectively.[69]

64 Both authors are critical of the attempts to write nationalist histories of the Oromo and Eritreans.

65 Clapham 2002, 47–49.

66 All too often the study of these people use the dominant dynastic frameworks. Taddesse Tamrat 1988a; Taddesse Tamrat 1988b; Kaplan 1992.

67 Clapham 2002, 51.

68 Mohammed Hassen 1990.

69 Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011. In this context it must be noted that the History Department of Addis Ababa University appears to have sidestepped some of these issues of ethnic, regional, and religious diversity by organizing courses around dates in the Common Era such as 'Ethiopia and the Horn to *c.*1500 [CE]'; 'Ethiopia and the Horn from *c.*1500–1800

Conclusions

As I noted at the beginning of this essay, periodization is something of a necessary evil in the writing of history. As I have attempted to show above, even the attempt to define a division into periods can provide valuable insight into the way we write history. Whether it is the challenges posed by new information, interpretations, or the limits we must impose on political framing, all periodizations must be viewed as conditional and judged by how they improve our understanding of history. Moreover, given the complexity of Ethiopia, or for that matter, any other society, we probably need to be guided by the assumption that we must think in terms of different periodizations which may be applied in different spheres and for different segments of the population. As Morony reminds us, 'A continuously changing, kaleidoscopic model [of periodization] would be closer to reality but would be more difficult to describe or to comprehend'.[70]

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[CE]'; 'History of Ethiopia and the Horn 1800–1900 [CE]'. Cf. Addis Ababa University, College of Social Sciences, https://www.aau.edu.et/css/history-courses-detail/.

[70] Morony 1981, 249.

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Summary

Historians have for many decades struggled with issues of periodization. In comparison to many other regions, scholars of Ethiopian history, particularly after the Aksumite period, have written comparatively little on this subject. This article considers some of the weaknesses of periodizations based on dynastic change or periods of a strong central state. It also suggests that attention to gender, class, geography, and ethnicity may assist in formulating, but also complicate periodizations.