



# Aethiopica 27 (2024)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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## Review

SAMANTHA KELLY, *Translating Faith: Ethiopian Pilgrims in Renaissance Rome*

Aethiopica 27 (2024), 320–324

ISSN: 1430-1938; eISSN: 2194-4024

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Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut  
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik  
der Universität Hamburg  
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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cursors of the wholly monolithic churches of Lalibela, generally attributed to the thirteenth century. While churches carved into the rock are endemic to the ancient Christian world, it is only in Lalibela that they were carved to be entirely free standing. Why their patrons chose that option may stem from the same source as the textile-inspired decorations of *Abreha wäAšbēha* and *Wəqro Čerqos*: India, and more particularly such monolithic wonders as the temples of Ellora in Gujarat's neighbouring state of Maharashtra. There are endless ties linking Ethiopia to India, and architectural concepts are almost certainly among them. We know that in the sixteenth century *Ləbnä Dəngəl* sent artists to India for training;<sup>1</sup> one may expect that he was not the first Ethiopian monarch to do so.

This book proposes answers to many questions, while raising numerous others. It is a refreshing reconsideration and reinterpretation of what is currently known about the subject and will be foundational for future research. It is a must read for specialists, while at the same time being so clearly presented and elaborately illustrated as also to attract a far broader audience. In all, it is a most welcome contribution to the growing field of global medieval architectural history.

Michael Gervers, University of Toronto

SAMANTHA KELLY, *Translating Faith: Ethiopian Pilgrims in Renaissance Rome*, I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History, 31 (Cambridge, MA–London: Harvard University Press, 2024). 512 pp. Price: €50.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-29417-2.

This book examines the encounter between Ethiopian monks and Catholics in Rome during the first half of the sixteenth century. This was a fruitful period of interactions between the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the European powers, with diplomatic exchanges, military assistance, and the first intellectual cooperation that gave rise to Ethiopian studies in Europe. By exploring a rich corpus of documents, this book sheds light on the Ethiopian intellectuals who laid the foundations for this encounter, giving them full agency, and places this history in a global political and religious context. Thus, it renews an old and fragmented historiography.

Chapter 1 begins with the focal point of these exchanges, the Church of Santo Stefano, an ancient basilica rebuilt many times and located near St Peter's in

<sup>1</sup> C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, Being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520, Written by Father Francisco Alvares*, The translation of Lord Stanley of Alderley (1881) revised and edited with additional material, ed., tr., I–II, Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, Second Series, 114, 115, (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1961), II, 483–484.

Rome. The sources are discreet about the beginning of the occupation of this church by Ethiopians, which cannot be dated with certainty, and about the conditions under which it took place, which were probably those of an occupation and sharing of the building with other communities, both Eastern and Catholic. Kelly synthesizes the state of the art on Ethiopian pilgrimages to the Mediterranean, reviewing the hostels-monasteries of Q<sup>w</sup>əs<sup>w</sup>am, Cairo, Scetis, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. Rome is a stage further west on this ancient route, which continues to Santiago de Compostela. It was probably the sending of Ethiopian ambassadors to Rome in the first half of the fifteenth century that made the papacy aware of the existence of these African Christians. Moreover, the search for an alliance with the mythical Priester John had prepared the Catholic Church since the fourteenth century to reach out to its African Christian brothers—the Council of Florence in 1439 being an important point in the chronology of this relations.

Chapters 2 and 3, supplemented by a useful prosopographical appendix, present the Ethiopians of Rome in a detailed way. Their numbers ranged from almost forty before the sack of Rome in 1527 to less than ten just after. They are all men, which is not necessarily the case in other hostels-monasteries, mainly monks, although there are also priests and deacons. They come from various Ethiopian monastic communities, be it the order of Täklä Haymanot, that of Ewostatewos, or, more rarely, that of Samu'el of Waldəbba. One of their peculiarities is that they do not completely give up their individual possessions for the common good. The many archival documents give a good idea of the consensual way in which this community functioned, appointing an abbot but by no means giving him full power. The status of the Ethiopian community within the constellation of Christian churches established in Rome remains ambiguous. Although they have not signed a submission to the Catholic Church, the Ethiopians are looked after directly by the Vatican. This unclear status allows the Ethiopians to be autonomous, especially legally, and to maintain strong links with other Ethiopian communities in the diaspora, while at the same time being integrated into Roman society, both materially and spiritually. Analysis of the well-documented career of Ya'qob of the Ewostatian monastery of Däbrä Šärabi embodies this life between two worlds. Ya'qob was the *dañña* ('judge') of Däbrä Šärabi and came to Rome in the 1510s, where he became the administrator of Santo Stefano. Although a poor scribe, he copied about ten manuscripts—on paper—for his own use and for the Ewostatian monks at Santo Stefano. He illustrated one of them by pasting in pious engravings made by and for the Catholic Church, distorting them to suit the Ethiopian saints. He probably travelled as far as Köln, perhaps in search of K<sup>w</sup>älonya, the town where Ewostatewos died (and which is in Armenia!). Perhaps in preparation for this journey, he transliterated the Latin Apostles' Creed into the Ethiopian *fidäl* so that he could pronounce this short text, as a sign of recognition of his Christian

identity. This ordinary biography gives a very fine account of the intercultural experience of an Ethiopian in Rome.

Chapter 4 rehabilitates the crucial role of Tomas Wäldä Samu'el in the edition of the Gə'əz Psalter established with Potken between 1511 and 1513, the very first printing of a text in Gə'əz. One of the key pieces in this counter-investigation is the author's colophon, most likely added by Tomas himself a few days before the work was entrusted to the printer, in order to assert his various roles in this major undertaking. This chapter also unravels terms such as Chaldean to designate the Gə'əz language, Prester John for the Ethiopian *Nəguś*, India instead of Ethiopia, and the replacement of Ethiopian monastic orders' names by Catholic ones, such as the Franciscans and Dominicans. These erroneous terms acted as surrogates with positive connotations, building a vocabulary shared by Europeans and Ethiopians in dialogue with each other. The word Ethiopia, in contrast, was associated with captivity, brutality, and slavery and was therefore rarely used. Although the Ethiopians sometimes sought to correct or clarify them, they also accepted the enormous potential of these terms to gain recognition as Christians in their own right and to reduce their foreignness. The abandonment of Ethiopian terminology was the price to be paid for establishing mutual understanding.

Chapter 5 deals with a little-studied source (neither published nor translated), because it has long been suspected of containing 'affabulations' attributed to the Ethiopians, a denial of credibility that this analysis shatters. *La Narrazione d'alcune Vite di frati indiani* is written in Italian in the form of a dialogue between two Ethiopian monks and the Dominican friars of a convent in Pisa, around 1517. The Ethiopians give the Italian friars information about Ethiopian Christianity and recount the lives of seven saints, mainly from the order of Täklä Haymanot, but also of Samu'el of Waldəbba, and a holy woman. A detailed comparison between the Ethiopian hagiographies and the content of these lives in Italian reveals the construction mechanisms of this text and its richness for understanding Ethiopian hagiography, especially in its oral transmission. The knowledge of the Ethiopian pilgrims is revealed, as are the intentions of the Dominicans in writing down this information at a time when Savonarola's trial was weighing heavily on their order. Each actor serves as a mirror for the other, and this is what this study reveals again and again, to the intellectual delight of its readers.

Chapter 6 details the collaboration between the Santo Stefano pilgrims and Ludovico Beccadelli, a young humanist driven by the desire for a calmer Christianity at a time when the Reformation threatened to harden religious identities and stir up hatred. Beccadelli obtained a manuscript of Alvares's account and set about editing it, discussing its contents with the Ethiopians, who made numerous clarifications and corrections. Kelly places this collaboration in its political context, clarifying the nature of the Ethiopians' work and drawing parallels with the simultaneous publication by the Portuguese humanist Damião de Gois of the account

of the Ethiopian ambassador Ṣägga Zä'ab. This overview shows that Ethiopians and Europeans were able to work together as equals and that the voices of the Ethiopians were listened to, valued, and respected.

Chapter 7 analyzes the 'Bermúdez affair', named after a member of the Portuguese embassy who proclaimed himself Catholic Patriarch of the Ethiopian Church after being sent by the Ethiopian King to Rome and Portugal and then returning to Ethiopia. Kelly shows that behind this affair was a long-term strategy on the part of the Ethiopian government to short-circuit the hierarchical dependency that bound the Ethiopian Church to Alexandria by appealing to the pope—seated in Rome in the primatial see of St Peter's—to recognize the legitimacy of Ethiopian bishops and an Ethiopian patriarch over the Ethiopian Church. Kelly traces the long genealogy of the misunderstanding over the identity—Ethiopian or Catholic—of this new patriarch, from the first negotiations in Rome in the 1520s and then 1540s, to recent academic studies. Going back to the sources 'against the Catholic grain' and reading them from the point of view of the Ethiopians admirably reveals a completely different story: it was the Papacy's recognition of the autonomy of the Ethiopian Church vis-à-vis Alexandria that the Ethiopians wanted to obtain!

Chapter 8 covers the period 1546–1549 and Täsfa Ṣəyon's efforts to have the Gə'əz New Testament printed and the ritual of the Ethiopian Mass translated into Latin, during an increasingly tense context (the Council of Trent took place in 1542). The details of the project are presented: the network of Ethiopian and Roman collaborators, the acquisition of manuscripts and their annotations, the production of the printed book, and the writing of the colophons. Täsfa Ṣəyon's aims were at least twofold: first, to produce printed religious books for use in Ethiopia, as the sovereign Ləbnä Dəngəl had already expressed a desire to do so in the 1520s, and the destruction caused by the jihad war made the need for books more urgent than ever; and second, to support the efforts of the humanists and the Roman Curia in their search for arguments proving the antiquity of Ethiopian rites. Indeed, showing the parallels between the Roman Church and the Ethiopian Church, which was recognized as being of very great antiquity, would have been useful in the discussions of the Catholics with and against the Reformed. Indeed, if the Roman Church was proven close to the allegedly very ancient and authentic Ethiopian Church, then it was legitimate to impose its rites against the attacks of the Reformed. The unravelling of these subtle strategies and the rapid changes in the positions of the main players (Cervini, Gualtieri, Täsfa Ṣəyon, Yoḥannəs of Cyprus) reads like a detective story! The final twist in this breathtaking episode is Täsfa Ṣəyon's maneuver to have himself recognized by the pope as the abbot of Däbrä Libanos and to return to Ethiopia with this highly prestigious status!

The ninth chapter shows the hardening of Catholicism and its effects on the Ethiopian community of Santo Stefano. All its members gradually converted. This

period paved the way for the first Catholic Jesuit missions in Ethiopia, which opened a new page in the relations between the Catholic Church and Ethiopia, as well as a new way of life for the now Catholic Ethiopians living in Santo Stefano.

The conclusion opens still a new theme: that of racial differentiation, to counterbalance a reading of an encounter based exclusively on faith. The conclusion brings together all the threads of this magnificent, dense study, which opens up new avenues of study for those with a mastery of erudition worthy of the humanists of the pre-modern era.

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FEDERICO FALOPPA, *Sbiancare un etiope. La costruzione di un immaginario razzista* (Milano: UTET–De Agostini Libri, 2022). 248 pp. Price: €18,00. ISBN: 979-1-22-120270-0.

In *Sbiancare un etiope*, Federico Faloppa delves into the complex history of racial discourse in Western culture. The title translated to ‘Whitening an Ethiopian’—with ‘Ethiopian’ broadly representing stereotypes of Black and People of Colour (BPoC)<sup>1</sup>—sets the stage for examining this expression from its origins in Greco-Roman literature to its influence and infiltration in the contemporary world.

Introducing the book topic, Faloppa starts with the case of a 2017 advertising campaign by a well-known body care company, which faced accusations of racism, and highlights the persistent presence of the ‘whitening’ narrative in Western culture, a legacy that had not been adequately addressed. In eight chapters, the author investigates this inheritance through historical and linguistic lenses, expanding his previous research to a broader European context, and analyzes how verbal and non-verbal language have been powerful tools in shaping and perpetuating racial biases.

In the first chapter, Faloppa identifies distinct features of the expression ‘Whitening an Ethiopian’, from its earliest mentions in Greek tradition where it described a futile and impossible action. He notes the use of hyperonyms to refer to black people, which vary over time and between texts, and the fluctuation between literary idealisation and real interaction with diverse people. Selected passages demonstrate that Greco-Roman culture expressed judgment of the physical characteristics of blackness, reflecting a prevailing aesthetic norm and a discriminatory attitude toward those who did not conform to it. Concerning this historical

<sup>1</sup> Following Sarah Derbew’s analysis in *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge–New York, NY–Melbourne–New Delhi–Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2022), I use lowercase when referring to ‘blackness’ in the context of ancient Greek and Roman literature. Uppercase is employed when discussing sections of the book that pertain to modern contexts.