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Conference report

12–14 September 2003 in Cambridge:
8th Orbis Aethiopicus Conference

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Conferences

At the end of the conference, a two-day workshop was held: "Historical and Anthropological Insights into the Missionary Activities in Ethiopia." Themes presented ranged from Western Christian contact and conflict with Ethiopia's ur-Christianity, to activities of missionaries in the country, to the cultural loci of practices such as circumcision. Largely absent was the fundamental anthropological insight that any missionary proselytizing is a broad ethnocentrism.

On a personal note, I was especially pleased to be invited to write the above conference notes because at the 14th ICES, a moment of silence was held in memory of my death.

Frederick C. Gamst, Cheyenne, WY

12–14 September 2003 in Cambridge: 8th Orbis Aethiopicus Conference

The 8th Orbis Aethiopicus Conference was held at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, on 12–14 September 2003, with the theme of "continuity and innovation in Ethiopian culture". Across the three days, ten papers were presented within this broad theme from the viewpoint of various disciplines: archaeology, cultural history, art history, ethnohistory, and sociolinguistics. Each speaker was allotted an hour for presentation and discussion, and each day also allowed ample time for both formal and informal discussion. An audience of over 60 observers, coming from a range of backgrounds, academic and non-academic, ensured that discussion was lively and profitable.

After the opening introduction and welcome by Asfa-Wossen Asserate, the conference proper opened with a couple of archaeological papers, one from Laurel Phillipson on the "evidence of cultural diversity in Aksumite origins", which traced the evidence for human habitation in the region from earliest times, focusing on the less disturbed and thus more profitable areas of Betä Giyorgis Hill. A second presentation, given by Rodolfo Fattovich, went on to look at "continuity and change in the region of Aksum" from pre-Aksumite times through to the beginning of the 16th century from an archaeological perspective. A later presentation in the archaeological field was given by David Phillipson, specifically on architectural and related evidence for continuity between Aksumite times and the medieval period. The first two presentations in particular amply demonstrated the developing trend in Ethiopian archaeology towards the study of local economic networks and the lives of ordinary communities, whilst the third paper suggested how little the disruption was in cultural terms between the Aksumite and Early Medieval Ethiopian worlds. There were two papers on the subject of art history, the first given by Marilyn Heldman on "tradition and innovation in Ethiopian manuscript illumination", and the second by Ian Campbell on "continuity and adaptation of canonical forms in Christian Ethiopia". Through copious and detailed illustration, both papers examined the formal conservatism of Ethiopian manuscript painting up to the

end of the 15th century. An interesting and highly stimulating paper was given by Stuart Munro-Hay in the area of cultural history on the topic of “retrospective continuity: Judaism in Aksum and mediaeval Ethiopia”, in which he demonstrated what many scholars are now coming to believe, that Christian Ethiopia’s great epic story of the Queen of Sheba and, here in particular, the Judaic and Jewish connections are most likely created traditions with “retrospective” histories, traditions of decidedly medieval creation.

On the subject of ethnohistory, Tadesse Tamrat gave a substantial paper tracing “ethnic diversity and processes of interaction and integration in medieval Ethiopia”, following the evidence for the history of recognizable ethnic groups, from the Beja and the Agāw to the Tigrā and the Soho/Afar from Aksumite times through to the medieval period. The origins and earliest attestations of peoples of the centre and the “south”, including the Amhara and various Gurage peoples were also discussed. Linguistic history was represented by the paper given by David Appleyard, which looked at “language use and literacy in vernaculars of pre-modern Ethiopia”, examining attestations of spoken languages, most notably Amharic, before the middle to late 19th century. A second paper on the theme of language was to have been given by Manfred Kropp on the development of style in Gəʿəz as a literary “dead” language as exemplified in different versions of the Life of Iyāsus Moʿa. Unfortunately, however, Kropp was not able to attend, though an abstract of his paper was available at the conference.

The remaining two papers were presented on the final morning of the conference, one by Ahmed Zekaria on “Islamic culture in Ethiopia: the mosques of Harar”, and the other by Bairu Tafla on “progress and retrogress in Ethiopian history”, which looked at 18th and 19th century cultural developments in Ethiopian history and offered a reassessment of the status of cultural institutions during a period traditionally thought to have been one of loose and deteriorating political structure.

The conference provided participants with an opportunity to air a wide range of issues revolving around this interesting theme of continuity and change, further illustrating, if illustration were needed, the rich source of archaeological, historical and cultural material and topics that have relevance far beyond the region that is Ethiopia, into the discipline of cultural history in general. In his closing remarks, David Phillipson, to whom all the participants were grateful for his having led much of the organization and hosting of the conference in Cambridge, expressed the intention that the papers should be published in a volume on the subject of continuity and innovation in Ethiopian culture. Without doubt the world of ethiopianist scholarship will look eagerly forward to such a publication.¹

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¹ Unfortunately, since writing this report, contributors have learned that it is not now possible to publish a volume dedicated to the conference.