



## Aethiopia 14 (2011)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

---

MARCO BONECHI, ICEVO (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche), Roma

Article

*Four Sistine Ethiopians? The 1481 Ethiopian Embassy and the Frescoes of  
the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican*

Aethiopia 14 (2011), 121–135

ISSN: 1430–1938

---

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

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,  
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

## Four Sistine Ethiopians? The 1481 Ethiopian Embassy and the Frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican\*

MARCO BONECHI, ICEVO (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche), Roma

The frescoed decoration on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, completed under Francesco Della Rovere, Pope Sixtus IV, in 1481–82, includes an extraordinary number of portraits of the pope's contemporaries.

In his monumental study on the Sistine decoration, Ernst Steinmann suggested that portraits of diplomats and foreign emissaries are to be found in some of the narrative scenes of the Vatican *Magna Cappella*.<sup>1</sup> According to him, the Portuguese ambassador Fernando de Almeida is portrayed by Cosimo Rosselli in the left part of the *Sermon on the Mount*, together with his brother Don Jaime, a Malta knight known at that time for his recent victory over the pirates.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the right part of the *Calling of the First Apostles*, painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio and his assistants, the many contemporary on-lookers significantly portrayed near the two kneeling Apostles should be members of the Florentine colony of Rome and some fellow citizens belonging to the delegation sent by Lorenzo the Magnificent to Rome in November 1480.<sup>3</sup> If so, the members of the Florentine colony are the figures in the background, while in the foreground the delegates are the three men in profile, clearly strutting toward the centre of the scene. In Steinmann's view, therefore, some time after the arrival of the Florentine delegation, in order to show his recent political victory, Sixtus IV decided to include some of its members into one of the scenes painted in the *Magna Cappella*.<sup>4</sup>

\* I wish to thank Alessandro Bausi and Gianfranco Fiaccadori for their most valuable help during the preparation of this work; s. also the following article (FIACCADORI 2011: 136–144).

<sup>1</sup> STEINMANN 1901, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> GABRIELLI 2007: 172f. and BERNARDINI 2008: 210 still accept this identification.

<sup>3</sup> These emissaries were supposed to ask for the end of the tough measures taken by Sixtus IV in June 1478 against Lorenzo and Florence on account of the Medici reaction to the Pazzi conspiracy of 26 April, while their ultimate aim was to put an end to the devastating war between Francesco Della Rovere and Lorenzo de' Medici. On 3 December 1480, the Florentine delegation, of twelve people, obtained forgiveness from the pope.

<sup>4</sup> For this see HEGARTY 1996: 273 and nn. 83–86, with literature and further remarks. Such an identification was accepted by KECKS 1998: 108f., with literature, where its political meaning is underlined. After PFEIFFER 2007: 37 and 337 nn. 82–83, the Florentine delegation could be portrayed instead in the scene with the *Temptation of Christ*, painted by Sandro Botticelli.

The aim of the present paper is to suggest that in the decoration of the walls of the *Magna Cappella* a further such episode is recorded: the Ethiopian embassy that reached Sixtus IV at Rome in 1481.<sup>5</sup>

In the Sistine Chapel almost all the contemporaries of the pope portrayed under his supervision are Europeans, therefore white-skinned. Exceptional is indeed the presence, to my knowledge never explained, of four dark-skinned men. Dressed in blue turbans, they are not black-skinned, even if they are certainly Africans. Furthermore, they are contemporary on-lookers. Two of them are portrayed in Sandro Botticelli's *Temptation of Moses* ('giornata' 16)<sup>6</sup> (figs. 1, 3a), two in Biagio d'Antonio Tucci's *Crossing of the Red Sea* ('giornate' 46, 47 e 57) (figs. 2, 3b-c).

All these four men are depicted near Moses and near soldiers. Escorted by a young contemporary of the pope armed with a sword, in the *Temptation of Moses* the two dark-skinned men belong to Moses' group in the flight from Egypt (on this see below). The two other dark-skinned men – one of them praying on his knees – belong to the group of ten contemporary on-lookers surrounding, in the *Crossing of the Red Sea*, Moses and Miriam who, from the Asiatic shore, are singing their hymns of thanks after the death by drowning of the Egyptian army coming from the African shore (*Ex.* 15: 1; 20–21).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In Rome, as is well known, a representation of a previous Ethiopian embassy is to be found in a double bronze panel of the central door of St Peter's Basilica, completed by Filarete (Antonio Averlino) in 1445. It depicts *Pope Eugenius IV Consigning the Decree of Union to Abbot Andrea, the Head of the Coptic Delegation at the Council of Florence* and *The Departure of the Coptic and Ethiopian Delegates from the Council of Florence*. See LOWE 2007: 109–11, with literature ("Ethiopian delegates (who turned out to be unofficial) headed by Pietro the deacon attended the Council of Florence called by Eugenius IV, as did Andrea the abbot, the head of the Coptic delegation (which signed an agreement of union with the Catholic church). [...] The first part of the panel records Eugenius IV consigning the decree of union to Abbot Andrea in Florence ... and the second records the departure of the delegates ... (but the scenes are generic rather than specific in terms of location, with the location being flagged by the word 'Florentine' underneath). Although only the Copts were involved in signing the decree of union, some of the same figures reappear in both scenes (including probably Pietro the deacon). Notice the stripes (stripes were the most frequently represented textile pattern in Ethiopian painting) and the hand cross (a feature of Ethiopian and Coptic Christianity)").

<sup>6</sup> The 'giornate' of the narrative scenes of the walls of the Sistine Chapel may be seen in MEJÍA *et alii* 2003: 238–249.

<sup>7</sup> As for the possibility that, in this scene, the city on the sea depicted by Tucci is Constantinople see a further paper of mine, "Costantinopoli mai vista. La città dell'Attraversamento del Mar Rosso di Biagio d'Antonio nella Cappella Sistina in Vaticano", to be published elsewhere.

### Four Sistine Ethiopians?



Fig. 1: Sandro Botticelli, *Temptation of Moses*, detail, Città del Vaticano, Cappella Sistina (Foto Servizio Fotografico dei Musei Vaticani copyright Musei Vaticani)

It seems reasonable that the four men portrayed in the *Magna Cappella* by Sandro and Biagio are members of the 1481 Ethiopian delegation. This suggested depiction of Ethiopians is part of a broader dossier concerning the (political) meaning of the representation of (Christian) Africans in Renaissance visual art.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In this vein, see for instance ARASSE 2005: 39f. about the African king among the three Magi from around 1460 onwards (Rogier van der Weyden, Andrea Mantegna). See also below n. 22.

The importance of the 1481 Ethiopian embassy, escorted by Giovanni Battista Brocchi da Imola, is well known.<sup>9</sup> Brocchi and the Ethiopians arrived in Rome in the first half of November 1481,<sup>10</sup> certainly before November 16.<sup>11</sup> The stay of the Ethiopians lasted around three months,<sup>12</sup> just during the period in which several painters were decorating the *Magna Cappella*.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, “the momentous embassy of *aše* ʼEskändər, headed by fra Giovanni Battista Brocchi da Imola, was received in Rome by Pope Sixtus IV [...], and became instrumental in the foundation of Santo Stefano dei Mori and, thereby, in the development of Ethiopian Studies in Europe. One year earlier, the Pope had sent a diplomatic mission to the *negus* via Jerusalem and the Holy Land: led by Fra Giovanni di Calabria, it included the Venetian painter Niccolò Brancalone, whom Francisco Alvares was to meet in 1520–26 at the court of *aše* Ləbnä Dəngəl” (FIACCADORI 2007: 237, and see also FIACCADORI 2009: 33, “da Gerusalemme dovevano [...] spingersi in Italia e specialmente a Roma, pellegrini *ad limina apostolorum*, i religiosi ‘indiani’ dai quali, dopo l’ambasceria del *negus* ʼEskender a Sisto IV nel novembre 1481, ebbe impulso lo stabilimento di Santo Stefano dei Mori o degl’Indiani”, and 39, “l’arrivo a Roma d’alcuni membri dell’ambasceria di ʼEskender, guidati da Giovan Battista Brocchi, doveva costituire un evento per più aspetti cruciale nella storia delle relazioni fra Europa ed Etiopia nel Rinascimento”). See also LOWE 2007: 118, with literature (“in Renaissance Rome there was a constant presence of resident Ethiopians supported by the popes, who lived in a hospice near the church of Santo Stefano degli Abissini (or dei Mori), just to the north-west of the basilica of St Peter’s in the Vatican, and provided a base for pilgrims from their homeland to stay while in Rome, and in Ethiopia a small colony of Italians was recorded as having been resident at the emperor’s court in Barata for twenty-five years when Giovanni Battista Brocchi from Imola arrived in Ethiopia probably sometime in 1480”). On the delegation see GHINZONI 1889, DE LA RONCIÈRE 1927: 80ff., LEFEVRE 1958: 56ff. and nn. 3–4, with further literature, and MONFASANI 1984: 803. As for Santo Stefano degli Abissini and Sixtus IV see BENZI 1990: 200 and 272 n. 4, FIACCADORI 2010: 529 and PROVERBIO 2011: 51f. and 61 with n. 34.

<sup>10</sup> See LEFEVRE 1958: 59 (“intorno alla metà di novembre del 1481”) and MONFASANI 1984: 803 (“Sixtus received the delegation in early Nov. 1481”).

<sup>11</sup> When the Milanese ambassadors wrote a letter to the Duke of Milan mentioning “*uno ambasciatore del Sig.<sup>te</sup> Prete Janni*” (LEFEVRE 1958: 109–111; MONFASANI 1984: 893).

<sup>12</sup> According to Paride de Grassi (see below) “gli ambasciatori abissini furono ospitati, in un primo tempo, in Castel Sant’Angelo, e poi, in Santo Spirito, sempre in appartamenti da nobili, e a spese del papa, per circa tre mesi. Mangiarono qualche volta alla mensa di Sisto IV ed ebbero animate conversazioni, certo in materia di fede, con alcuni frati e soprattutto con fra Roberto, allora stimato sommo dottore e principe di tutti i predicatori (è il francescano Roberto Caraccioli di Lecce, morto vescovo d’Aquino nel 1495). Quando poi il papa montava a cavallo o andava in cappella, sempre essi lo seguivano, insieme agli altri ambasciatori cristiani; tenevano, anzi, sempre il posto di maggior riguardo, come ambasciatori imperiali. In cappella, alla destra del papa si poneva il loro capo Antonio, e alla sinistra il De Brocchi, che faceva loro da interprete, mentre gli altri abissini stavano con gli altri ambasciatori cristiani. ‘Et missas parvas in Camera cum papa audiebant, et in Capella papali incensabantur et habebant pacem ut alii oratores.

#### Four Sistine Ethiopians?

While still a youth, Paride de Grassi – a papal master of ceremonies from 1504 to 1528 – was a witness to this embassy, on which he later had more detailed information from Brocchi himself, by then a scriptor in the Roman curia. According to Brocchi, whose account was included by de Grassi in his *Treatise on the ambassadors to the Roman curia*, the embassy had a threefold aim:<sup>13</sup>

... Il Negus aveva infatti loro dato l'incarico di recarsi a Roma per sincerarsi se effettivamente lì risiedeva, come alcuni affermavano in Abissinia, il vero vicario di Cristo e successore di Pietro; nel qual caso avrebbero dovuto adorarlo a nome del Negus stesso, promettendo di prestargli, ogni anno, tributo per mezzo di un ambasciatore residente presso la corte papale, e di riconoscerlo a proprio signore e rendergli obbedienza, analogamente a quanto fatto dagli altri re e principi cristiani. In secondo luogo, gli ambasciatori chiedevano l'invio in Abissinia di vescovi o di sacerdoti secolari e regolari che istruissero i rozzi e ignari abissini nelle verità della fede cristiana. Infine, affermavano che il Negus era pronto, ad un comando del papa, a muovere guerra contro il sultano di Egitto, per ricuperare il sepolcro di Cristo, nonché a impedire quello di cui i mori tanto temevano, cioè la regolare piena del Nilo. Nello stesso tempo, offrivano al papa dei doni che, se pur di poco valore (appena 300 ducati), erano pregevoli per la novità: nove margherite, cioè perle, non comuni; alcuni diaspri di bell'aspetto, e un pezzo d'oro non monetato, cioè senza effigie e senza dichiarazione di valore.

We learn from de Grassi that the Ethiopian delegation, headed by the emperor of Ethiopia's chaplain called Antonio,<sup>14</sup> was composed of six

Et primus eorum dedit aquam manibus pape celebranti ut oratores Imperatoris christiani, et baldachinum et caudam tenuit. Vennero trattati, quindi, nella loro permanenza a Roma, con tutti gli onori dovuti, non solo ad un re cristiano non eretico, ma ad un imperatore. E Paride de Grassi riferisce ancora che [...] tutti, prelati e laici, li trattavano onorevolmente 'ut oratores'; che essi molto avevano piacere delle cerimonie romane, di cui si facevano dare una precisa spiegazione, che annotavano in un libretto scritto nella loro lingua. Giunge, infine, il giorno della loro partenza: e il papa consegna loro in dono la spada del rito svolto nella notte di Natale, una veste di broccato e una berretta (ugualmente della stessa cerimonia), mille ducati d'oro, molti 'agnus dei' e una preziosa catena d'oro" (LEFEVRE 1958: 76f.).

<sup>13</sup> See LEFEVRE 1958: 76 (paraphrase) and 108 (de Grassi's text); and also LOWE 2007: 118.

<sup>14</sup> As for Antonio see LEFEVRE 1958: 75f. and 118.



members<sup>15</sup> – neither two, as indicated in other sources,<sup>16</sup> not four, as the aforementioned dark-skinned men depicted in the Sistine Chapel. However, if these four men, wearing a turban,<sup>17</sup> belong to the Ethiopian embassy and if all the members of the delegation were portrayed on the walls, it might well be that two further members were portrayed together in one of the four now lost narrative scenes of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Sistine decoration, which were two on the altar wall and two on the entrance wall. If so, like the other four, these two Ethiopians could have been included in one of the two Mosaic lost scenes, the *Finding of Moses* in the altar wall being probably a better candidate, given its African setting.

Antonio is likely to be one of the four Ethiopians portrayed in the Sistine Chapel. Should this be the case, the best candidate, given his religious attitude would be the man kneeling in the *Crossing of the Red Sea*, not the man with the intense stare in the *Temptation of Moses* – as recently assumed, instead, by Christiane Esche-Ramshorn.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that the man kneeling in the *Crossing of the Red Sea*, whose high rank is suggested by the full-length portrait, is the only contemporary of the pope depicted in such a posture in the twelve 15<sup>th</sup>-century narrative scenes of the *Magna Cappella*'s walls. In one

<sup>15</sup> “Itaque missi sunt oratores sex, quorum principalis fuit Antonius Cappellanus et familiaris ipsius Nagi, vir quidem in partibus illis magne auctoritatis et ingenij, sicut a nobis Cardinalis in honore habetur; quorum ductorem destinavit dominum Johannem Baptistam Brochum imolensem, in lingua eorum expertum”, Paride de Grassi, *De oratoribus a prete Jano ad papam missis*, in *De oratoribus Romane curie*, MS Vat. lat. 12270, fols. 88–91, quoted after LEFEVRE 1958: 108 (see *ibid.*: 74ff.).

<sup>16</sup> See LEFEVRE 1958: 75.

<sup>17</sup> In the *Temptation of Moses* and in the *Crossing of the Red Sea* there are other turbans. In the *Temptation of Moses* ('giornata' 18) the old bearded man in profile with the blue turban, depicted just on the right of the two men of dark complexion, is not a portrait of a contemporary of the pope. In the *Crossing of the Red Sea* ('giornata' 43), there are instead two further modern on-lookers wearing a turban, but both look to be Europeans. One is the mature man with the white beard and the blue turban who is looking toward us behind the old man identified in STEINMANN 1901: 441–48 as Cardinal Bessarion, the other is the young man, wearing a showy orange turban, with his eyes looking down towards the man praying on his knees. It is unclear to me, whether they might have something to do with the Ethiopian delegation and how, but this is possible. However, neither of these two men wearing a turban is likely to be Giovanni Battista Brocchi, since in 1481–1482 he probably was 30 or 35 years old (and according to LEFEVRE 1958: 104, in 1510 Brocchi “deve essere per lo meno sulla sessantina”; on Brocchi see also CERULLI 1972).

<sup>18</sup> See ESCHERAMSHORN 2010: 126f.

#### Four Sistine Ethiopians?



Fig. 2: Biagio di Antonio Tucci, *Crossing of the Red Sea*, detail, Città del Vaticano, Cappella Sistina (Foto Servizio Fotografico dei Musei Vaticani copyright Musei Vaticani)

of the lost paintings by Pietro Perugino on the altar wall Sixtus IV was also depicted kneeling near Saint Peter in a full-length portrait.<sup>19</sup>

The ritual performed by the Ethiopians during their first papal audience, threefold genuflection included, is described in detail by de Grassi:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>This is shown by the drawing now in the Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Wien, probably by an assistant of Pintoricchio or of Perugino (on this topic see MARCELLI 2004, PFEIFFER 2007: 18 and 336 n. 37, and 71, and LA MALFA 2008).

<sup>20</sup>See LEFEVRE 1958: 108 and, paraphrasing de Grassi, 76 (“la piccola comitiva guidata dal Brocchi [...] sbarca a Brindisi e [...] si dirige [...] alla volta di Roma. Sisto IV, avvisato del loro prossimo arrivo, dà le disposizioni opportune, perché siano ricevuti con tutti gli onori dovuti al loro rango. Tutta la famiglia pontificia e quelle dei cardinali e una quantità di prelati si fanno loro incontro, in solenne corteo. Il papa li riceve in concistoro segreto ([...] perché dello scopo della loro venuta non fossero informati i musulmani) e, dopo essersi tre volte genuflesso e aver baciato il piede, la mano e il volto del papa, l’ambasciatore Antonio espone nella loro lingua, detta caldea, quanto era stato loro commesso dall’imperatore. E Giovanni Battista Brocchi [...] ne fa subito la traduzione latina, mentre gli altri restano genuflessi”).



... propositio autem istorum oratorum nomine preti Jani fuit recitata per ipsum principalem Antonium oratorem in lingua eorum quam Caldeam vocant [...] et propriam eam esse dicunt: cuius lingue de verbo ad verbum interpres fuit ipse dominus Johannes Baptista Brochus imolensis. Et cum recitarent omnes erant genuflexi ut moris est christianorum. Item ingredientes ad papam ter genuflexerunt et osculati sunt pedem, manum et os pape.

However, de Grassi also reports that “Sacramentum adorabant omnes ipsi oratores genuflexi”.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, if the kneeling man is Antonio, his posture may refer to his adoration of the host kept in the pyx, covered by a veil, held in his hands by another Oriental, i.e. Cardinal Bessarion, depicted – posthumously, as he died in 1472 – behind him<sup>22</sup> (nearby, the young soldier portrayed in the ‘giornate’ 47, 53 and 55 holds a thurible in his left hand).

Much in the same way as the writing by Paride de Grassi is useful for making the connection with the Ethiopian emissaries and the genuflexion, a text by a secretary of Sixtus IV, Andreas Trapezuntius, puts into context the meaning of the Ethiopian embassy and seems to vindicate the suggested recording of its members within the decoration of the Sistine Chapel.

John Monfasani has convincingly emphasised the importance of the description of the *Magna Cappella* by Trapezuntius. The latter was the son of George, who had translated, and commented upon, Ptolemy’s *Almagest* in 1451. As a secretary to Sixtus IV, in a prefatory address to him prefixed to George’s commentary,<sup>23</sup> Andreas praised the pope also by referring to his great achievement – the *Magna Cappella*. Monfasani dates Andreas’ writing “to sometime between April and mid-May 1482”<sup>24</sup> and “certainly between November 1481 and mid-August 1482”.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See LEFEVRE 1958:109 and 77.

<sup>22</sup> Note that at Urbino, around 1472, in the *Sermon of St. John the Baptist* of the *Stendardo di San Giovanni Battista* now in the Galleria Nazionale delle Marche (VASTANO 2005) an unknown painter portrayed Cardinal Bessarion among other contemporary on-lookers (on this see Silvia Ronchey in <http://www.silviaronchey.it/contatto/guestbook/files/archive-jul-2006.html>). In front of him, the painter also portrayed three Orientals of dark complexion, dressed in rich and showy garments; two of them, almost certainly Africans, wear a dark beard and a coloured turban, one blue and one yellow. Two further men wearing yellow turbans are visible in the background, but their skin is white.

<sup>23</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 11ff. and 1984: 786ff.

<sup>24</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 14.

<sup>25</sup> MONFASANI 1984: 788. Monfasani’s date of the end of the decoration is accepted for instance by GABRIELLI 2000: 207 and 217 n. 32, with further literature. Noting that the chronicler Jacopo Gherardi from Volterra reported that the decoration of the chapel was

### Four Sistine Ethiopians?



Fig. 3 a–c: Details of the previous frescoes (Foto Servizio Fotografico dei Musei Vaticani copyright Musei Vaticani)

Interestingly, Monfasani establishes two *termini post quem* for Andreas' script. One is "the failure of the Latin fleet to sail to Vallona after helping in the recapture of Otranto. This brings us to late October 1481", the other "the 'Indian' ambassadors' arrival in Rome, an event of early November 1481".<sup>26</sup> About an eventual *terminus ante quem*, Monfasani observes that "in listing Sixtus's successes Andreas did not fail, nor could he fail, to record the pope's martial triumphs. Thus, Sixtus' 'victories' over the Florentine and the Turks are duly illustrated in the preface. Yet, Sixtus' greatest victo-

not yet completed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 1481, Monfasani provides evidence instead of how Andreas wrote when the *Magna Cappella* had been already completed, including the last part, the flooring. Furthermore, Monfasani deduces from Andreas' text that the pope was determined "in late 1481 to see the Chapel finished as soon as possible" and that there was a general "sense of urgency". Clearly Andreas connected the artistic works sponsored by Sixtus IV to the war against Florence, which lasted from June 1478 to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1480. On these grounds, Monfasani argues not only that the architectural works did not start before 1477, but also that there is an intimate correlation between the decoration of the *Magna Cappella* and that war: "for Andreas the Sistine Chapel was an accomplishment of the period of the Florentine war, give or take a year or so at either end, i.e. ca. 1477 to 1481/early 1482".

<sup>26</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 14, and see also 1984: 787.

ry, and the one with which he was most personally connected, the battle of Campo Morto against Neapolitan troops on 21 August 1482 is never mentioned. Indeed, in the preface Andreas shows no knowledge of events after mid-May 1482. [...] if Andrea was writing in 1483–84, it is odd that he would think to mention the arrival of the Ethiopian ambassadors in Rome in 1481 but omit the defeat of the conciliarist Andreas Zamometič in 1482. [...] So [...] we are left with late May 1482 as the *terminus ante quem* of Andreas' preface".<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, it becomes very meaningful that between April and May 1482 the text of the papal secretary Andreas Trapezuntius – a man more and better acquainted than us – “reflects exclusively emotional attitudes in Rome in late 1481 – early 1482”,<sup>28</sup> that is just the period in which the frescoes of the walls of the *Magna Cappella* were accomplished. More precisely, after Monfasani Andreas made reference to the following four emotional attitudes: “disappointment at the return of the papal fleet from Otranto, joy at the visit of the Ethiopian emissaries, rancor towards the Florentines for the recent war, satisfaction for the reign of tranquillity in Rome”<sup>29</sup> [emphasis mine].

<sup>27</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 14f. Furthermore, Monfasani remarks that “the most telling corroborative evidence comes from putting the preface of Andreas in relation with his earlier one to the translation of the *Almagest*. Since Andreas himself tells us that it was written the year before the preface to the commentary, this prior preface cannot be earlier than 1480 in as much as its sequel speaks of events at the end of 1481. But if the prior preface is no earlier than 1480, why apropos Sixtus' political achievements does it only mention the reign of tranquility found in Sistine Rome? What happened to the Florentine War (1478–1480)? One may contend that Andreas did not mention the war out of prudence because it was going on at the time, i.e. in 1480. But then one has to say that the second preface, where Andreas describes the Sistine Chapel as completed, was written at the end of 1481, i.e. at a time when the four painters of the contract of October 1481 were frescoing the walls and the mosaicists had not yet finished installing the pavement. It makes far better sense to place the prior preface in the first half of 1481 when the Turkish seizure of Otranto compelled Sixtus to try to unify the Italian states against the common danger. Only in that period would Andreas not have been free to attack the Florentines nor have been able to sing of Sixtus' triumphs over the Turks. Once Otranto was recovered on 10 September 1481 and all hope of further concerted action against the Turk given up, Andreas could have still chosen to remain silent about the Florentines, but he certainly would not have ignored the great victory over the Turks, least of all when Sixtus played a major role in that triumph. But if the prior preface is most plausibly dated to the first half of 1481, then the second preface is of 1482 and specifically the first third of 1482” (MONFASANI 1983: 15). See also MONFASANI 1984: 787ff.

<sup>28</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 16.

<sup>29</sup> MONFASANI 1983: 16. In his 1482 preface to his father's commentary on Tolomeus' *Almagest* Andreas wrote: “Huius tue divine scientie atque religionis fama Indi permoti

#### Four Sistine Ethiopians?

If these feelings were visually represented in the Sistine frescoes, then the joy gave reasons for the depiction of the Ethiopians, while the disappointment was indicated by the two abandoned ships in the background of the left part of the scene with the *Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram* by Sandro Botticelli (furthermore, the rancor could be displayed in the foreground of this same scene and the satisfaction in the majestic urban scene with *Christ's Charge to St. Peter* by Pietro Perugino, Bartolomeo della Gatta, Luca Signorelli and others).

It remains to be evaluated whether the identification of the four men of dark complexion as four of the six members of the 1481 Ethiopian delegation here suggested has some impact on the debated question of the chronology of the frescoed decoration of the *Magna Cappella* under pope Sixtus IV.

After Arnold Nesselrath, the decoration of the walls started during the Fall of 1481, while the two surviving documents concerning the works (the contract of 27 October 1481 and the estimate of 17 January 1482) only deal with the first ten of the sixteen narrative scenes depicted, the two of the altar wall and the eight towards the entrance wall on both the sides of the chapel.<sup>30</sup>

ad te, in terris deum, oratores ex ultimo orbe miserunt ut et te Christi vicarium viderent et a te fidei mandata in sempiternam facti memoriam scripto susciperent, tenerent, cognoscerent. Quod si dignitatis et auctoritatis pontificie defensionem spectabimus, quis te aut animo nobilior aut victoria preclarior?" (see MONFASANI 1984: 799).

<sup>30</sup> NESSELRATH 2004: 107–110 and 112f. ("quattro affreschi, insieme ai sottostanti tendaggi e ai papi accanto alle finestre nel registro superiore, eseguiti dagli stessi quattro pittori firmatari, erano già terminati" on January 17, 1482, since "i lavori non furono interrotti durante l'inverno, stagione ottimale per dipingere affreschi e non per fare pausa. I quattro dipinti vengono chiamati 'quatuor primis istoriis factis'. Sarebbe più logico se queste parole indicassero i primi quattro dei dieci dipinti commissionati in ottobre. Se possiamo credere ad Andrea Trapezuntio, un segretario privato di papa Sisto IV, i pittori avevano terminato il loro lavoro entro aprile o maggio del 1482." Thus, balancing the possibilities, "non vi è motivo per credere che il contratto dell'ottobre del 1481 non debba riguardare i primi dieci affreschi di tutto il ciclo e che la stima del gennaio del 1482 non debba riferirsi a quattro di questi stessi dieci affreschi già terminati. Rimane aperta la questione del perché non furono commissionate tutte e sedici le pitture; ma questo resta comunque un problema, indipendentemente da come si interpretino i due documenti". In sum, "i primi dieci affreschi nella Cappella Sistina, ai quali si riferisce il contratto del 27 ottobre 1481, sono quelli che si trovano nella zona dell'altare e che vanno fino alla transenna marmorea nella sua posizione odierna"). See also BERNARDINI 2008: 211–213, "i due documenti hanno dato adito a più ipotesi per la sequenza delle scene, perché il contratto parla solo di dieci episodi, quando in realtà furono sedici e inoltre vi era la pala d'altare con l'*Assunta* del Perugino. Secondo la ricostruzione di Ettliger, ripresa da Shearman, i lavori si svolsero in tre fasi successive. In una prima fase, sarebbe stato chiamato, come unico artista, Pie-

Since the Ethiopian delegation reached Rome during the first half of November 1481 its members cannot have been portrayed in Rome by the painters before that date. Therefore, (the beginning of) November 1481 could become a *terminus ante quem non* for the frescoing of these two contiguous scenes, which are, on the Mosaic wall, the second (*Temptation of Moses*) and the third (*Crossing of the Red Sea*) from the altar wall.

Lastly, if Antonio and the other Ethiopians were portrayed on the walls of the *Magna Cappella*, this could have some importance also for an old problem concerning the left part of the *Temptation of Moses*, that is whether an arrival in or a departure from Egypt is depicted.

After Leopold Ettlinger “the last scene of this fresco seems to emphasize the meaning of the whole. Moses appears at the head of his people, leading them forward. It is not absolutely clear which particular passage from Exodus is illustrated here, and two different interpretations are possible. The scene may represent Moses with his family and chattels returning to Egypt from

tro Perugino, che dipinse la parete d’altare con le due scene iniziali della vita di Cristo e di quella di Mosè, con i due primi pontefici, e con la pala dell’Assunta. [...]. A una seconda fase, risalirebbero i primi quattro affreschi, realizzati da Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio e Cosimo Rosselli. In una terza fase, alla quale si riferirebbe il contratto del 1481, gli artisti avrebbero eseguito gli ultimi dieci riquadri, avvalendosi di numerosi aiuti. Ultimamente Nesselrath, a seguito degli studi e delle analisi effettuati durante l’ultima campagna di restauri, e a una nuova e più attenta lettura dei documenti, ha proposto una nuova cronologia dei lavori. Secondo lo studioso, la parete d’altare non fu eseguita in un primo momento e separatamente dal resto del ciclo, perché, altrimenti non avrebbe avuto senso il documento del gennaio 1482, in cui, in base alla realizzazione dei primi quattro episodi, veniva stabilito il prezzo per ogni fascia di decorazione, che comprendeva i tre registri, con due papi, una scena e il tendaggio sottostante: il prototipo in base al quale stabilire il compenso esisteva già! Il contratto dunque del 1481 riguarda i primi dieci affreschi; resta un interrogativo perché il contratto riporti la committenza di dieci e non di sedici affreschi. Lo studioso individua dunque due fasi sostanziali nell’esecuzione degli affreschi: in una prima fase furono realizzati i primi dieci affreschi, a cui fa riferimento il contratto dell’ottobre 1481, situati tra la parete d’altare e la cancellata. Partendo dalla parete d’altare i quattro artisti firmatari del contratto iniziano a lavorare in autunno, dipingendo parallelamente su entrambe le pareti. Perugino esegue le prime due storie: *Battesimo di Cristo* e *Circoncisione del figlio di Mosè*; Botticelli le successive: *Tentazioni di Cristo* e *Tentazioni di Mosè*; i terzi riquadri vengono dipinti dal Ghirlandaio (*Vocazione dei primi apostoli*) e da Biagio d’Antonio (*Passaggio del Mar Rosso*); i successivi entrambi da Cosimo Rosselli: *Discorso della montagna*, *Adorazione del vitello d’oro* (o *Consegna delle tavole della Legge*). Queste otto scene, insieme alle due della parete d’altare andate distrutte, costituiscono i dieci affreschi”, with references to ETLINGER 1965, SHEARMAN 1986: 22–87, NESSELRATH 2003 e 2004, SCARPELLINI – SILVESTRELLI 2003 and FERINO PAGDEN 1989: 58–66.



#### Four Sistine Ethiopians?

Madian – an incident very rarely illustrated – or the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. But it seems that no significant meaning was ever attached to the return to Egypt (*Ex.* 4: 20), while the departure from Egypt was, of course, an event of the greatest importance. In the Bible commentaries it stood traditionally for Christ leading mankind to Salvation”, and thus “it is therefore most likely, on iconographic grounds, that the group on the left of this fresco in the Sistine Chapel is meant to show the Israelites *leaving Egypt*”.<sup>31</sup>

The Ethiopian delegation reached Rome from the Near East after a journey in which certainly Egypt had been crossed and then left. It seems thus reasonable that, as preferred by Ettlinger, in the *Temptation of Moses*, Sixtus IV ordered Botticelli to depict Moses, when, with his followers, he left Egypt.

#### Bibliography

- ARASSE, D. 2005, *Non si vede niente. Descrizioni*, con una nota introduttiva e un testo in appendice di CLAUDIA CIERI VIA, Roma: Artemide Edizioni.
- BENZI, F. 1990, *Sisto IV Renovator Urbis. Architettura a Roma 1471–1484*, Roma: Officina Edizioni.
- BERNARDINI, M.G. 2008, “Sisto IV e il ciclo quattrocentesco della cappella Sistina. La decorazione ad affresco con *Storie di Mosè* e *Storie di Cristo*”, in: M.G. BERNARDINI – M. BUSSAGLI (a c.), *Il '400 a Roma. La rinascita delle arti da Donatello a Perugino*, Milano: Skira, pp. 209–215.
- CERULLI, E. 1972, “Brocchi, Giovanni Battista (Battista da Imola)”, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 14, pp. 395–396.
- ESCHE-RAMSHORN, Ch. 2010, “‘Instruire ne la catholica fede’. Äthioper in der Kunst des 15. Jahrhunderts in Rom und Florenz, die äthiopische Pilgerkirche an Alt St. Peter und Äthiopiens Verhältnis zum Vatikan”, in: W. RAUNIG – Prinz ASFA WOSSEN ASSERATE (Hrsg.), *In memoriam Peter Roenpage: Juden, Christen und Muslime in Äthiopien – ein Beispiel für Abrahamische Ökumene (Beiträge der Jahrestagung 2008 in Pinneberg)* = *Orbis Æthiopicus ውርሰ ኢትዮጵያ*. Beiträge zur Geschichte, Religion und Kunst Äthiopiens XIII, Dettelbach: Verl. J.H. Roll, pp. 113–133.
- ETTLINGER, L.D. 1965, *The Sistine Chapel Before Michelangelo*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- FERINO PAGDEN, S. 1989, “Perugino al servizio dei Della Rovere: Sisto IV e il cardinale Giuliano (appunti per l’attività di Perugino a Roma)”, in S. BOTTAIO – A. DAGNINO – G. ROTONDI TERMINIELLO (a c.), *Sisto IV e Giulio II mecenati e promotori di cultura*, Savona: Coop. Tip., pp. 53–72.

<sup>31</sup> ETTLINGER 1965: 63 and n. 2. Also after MEJÍA 2003: 14 the episode “can only be that of the sons and daughters of Israel leaving Egypt, showing perhaps some of the vessels and raiment which the Israelites took from the Egyptians as a kind of booty (*Ex.* 11:2–3; 12: 15–16). Some of the people carry bundles and a (golden) vessel on their shoulders, and Moses leads them towards what can only be the scene represented in the next fresco”, that is the *Crossing of the Red Sea*. Cf. ZAGNOLI 2009: 112 (“Mosè con la moglie e i figli, accompagnato da un numeroso gruppo di persone, si incammina verso la terra d’Egitto”).

- FIACCADORI, G. 2007, "Italy, relations with. Relations during the 12<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century", in: *EAE* 3, pp. 236a–239a.
- 2009, "L'Etiopia, Venezia e l'Europa", in G. BARBIERI – G. FIACCADORI (a c.), *Nigra sum sed formosa. Sacro e bellezza dell'Etiopia cristiana. Ca' Foscari Esposizioni 13 marzo–10 maggio 2009*, Vicenza: Terra Ferma, pp. 27–48.
- 2010, "Santo Stefano dei Mori", in: *EAE* 4, pp. 528b–532b.
- 2011, "A Marginal Note to 'Four Sistine Ethiopians?'" *Aethiopica* 14, [2012], pp. 136–144.
- GABRIELLI, E. 2007, *Cosimo Rosselli. Catalogo ragionato*, Torino, Umberto Allemandi.
- GHINZONI, P. 1889, "Un'ambasciata del Prete Gianni a Roma nel 1481", *Archivio storico lombardo*, ser. 2<sup>a</sup>, 6 [16], pp. 145–154.
- HEGARTY, M. 1996, "Laurentian Patronage in the Palazzo Vecchio: The Frescoes of the Sala dei Gigli", *The Art Bulletin* 78, pp. 264–285.
- KECKS, R.G. 1998, *Domenico Ghirlandaio*, Firenze: Octavo.
- LA MALFA, C. 2008, "Assunzione della Vergine", in V. GARIBALDI – F.F. MANCINI (a c.), *Pintoricchio*, Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, pp. 374–375.
- LEFEVRE, R. 1958, "Ricerche sull'imolese G. B. De Brocchi, viaggiatore in Etiopia e curiale pontificio (sec. XV–XVI)", *Archivio della Società romana di Storia patria* 81, 3<sup>a</sup> s., 12, pp. 55–118.
- LOWE, K. 2007, "'Representing' Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402–1608", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17, pp. 101–128.
- MARCELLI, F. 2004, "Assunzione della Vergine", in: V. GARIBALDI – F.F. MANCINI (a c.), *Perugino il divin pittore*, Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, p. 213.
- MEJÍA, J.M. Cardinal 2003, "Biblical Reading of the Frescoes on the Walls of the Sistine Chapel", in: MEJÍA *et alii*, pp. 9–37.
- *et alii* 2003, *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Recent Restorations*, Città del Vaticano: Edizione Musei Vaticani.
- MONFASANI, J. 1983, "A Description of the Sistine Chapel under Pope Sixtus IV", *Artibus et Historiae* 7, 1983, pp. 9–18.
- 1984, *Collectanea Trapezuntiana. Texts, Documents, and Bibliographies of George of Trebizond*, Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America.
- NESSELRATH, A. 2003, "The Painters of Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Chapel of Pope Sixtus IV in Rome", in: MEJÍA *et alii*, pp. 39–75.
- 2004, "Perugino tra i pittori della Cappella Sistina", in: V. GARIBALDI – F.F. MANCINI (a c.), *Perugino il divin pittore*, Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, pp. 105–113.
- PFEIFFER, H.W. 2007, *La Sistina svelata. Iconografia di un capolavoro*, Milano: Jaca Book.
- PROVERBIO, D.V. 2011 "Santo Stefano degli Abissini. Una breve rivisitazione", *La Parola del Passato* 66, 2011, pp. 50–68.
- DE LA RONCIERE, CH. 1927, *La découverte de l'Afrique au Moyen-Age*, III, Le Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.
- SCARPELLINI, P. – M.R. SILVESTRELLI 2003, *Pintoricchio*, Milano: Federico Motta.

#### Four Sistine Ethiopians?

- SHEARMAN, J. 1986, “La costruzione della Cappella e la prima decorazione al tempo di Sisto IV”, in: M. BOROLI (a c.), *La Cappella Sistina. I primi restauri: la scoperta del colore*, Novara: De Agostini, pp. 22–87.
- STEINMANN, E. 1901, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle, I: Bau und Schmuck der Kapelle unter Sixtus IV*, München: Bruckman.
- VASTANO, A. 2005, “Il Battesimo di Cristo – La predica del Battista”, in: A. MARCHI – M.R. VALAZZI (a c.), *Il Rinascimento a Urbino. Fra’ Carnevale e gli artisti del Palazzo di Federico*, Milano: Skira, pp. 185–189.
- ZAGNOLI, R. 2009, *La Parola Dipinta. La Bibbia nella Cappella Sistina, 2/1: I pittori Quattrocentisti*, Città del Vaticano: Edizione Musei Vaticani, edizione speciale per Il Sole 24 Ore.

#### Summary

As proposed by several scholars, among the many contemporary on-lookers depicted on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, foreign diplomats are also portrayed: e.g., the Portuguese ambassador and the Florentine emissaries. In the present paper it is suggested that portraits of four of the six members of the momentous Ethiopian delegation – which was headed by Antonio, chaplain of *aṣe* ʾĪskāndār, and arrived at Rome in the first half of November 1481 – may be identified in two scenes, i.e. the *Temptation of Moses* by Sandro Botticelli and the *Crossing of the Red Sea* by Biagio d’Antonio Tucci. The paper focuses on the relationship between the visual representation of these four men – Antonio being most probably included – and two contemporary literary works: the treatise by Paride de Grassi on the ambassadors to the Roman curia and the writing by Andreas Trapezuntius on the Roman political situation at the end of 1481 respectively. Such topics as the genuflexion of the Ethiopians and the content of Sixtus’ IV discussions with the Ethiopian embassy are dealt with. The importance of the suggested identifications for the problematic chronology of the frescoes is also discussed, and so a few other aspects of the two narrative scenes.