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The Symbolism of Space in Ethiopia

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Anthropology, semiotics and classification systems

The present study of the Ethiopian military camp addresses a series of anthropological concerns. It focuses on the structure of built space, an often neglected aspect of social structuring, starting from the analysis of a legal text. At the same time, in its search for the indigenous meaning of space, it gives a central position to the concept of classification system, which is examined by means of another concept, that of code, borrowed from and used according to semiotic theory.

The concept of classification system, among the central concepts of anthropology, has been marginalised in the last decade. We believe, however, that classification systems are of crucial importance for the structuring of a culture, since cultures consist of systems of meaning, i.e., semiotic systems, and thus the concept of classification system is essential for their understanding and interpretation. Its centrality for the understanding of the cultural-semiotic sphere has been repeatedly demonstrated by anthropological research, from the classic essay by EMILE DURKHEIM and MARCEL MAUSS, *De quelques formes primitives de classification* to the work of CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS and beyond. Classification systems, it has been amply demonstrated, structure the semiotic systems of both non-capitalist and industrial societies.

The notion that classification systems and their structure are projected onto space to give meaning to the geographical and built environment was pioneered in anthropology by Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss conceives society as being structured according to a series of “levels” or “orders”. There are social, “lived”, “infrastructural” orders, such as the kinship system or social organization, but also orders that are mental, “conceived” and “super-structural”, such as language, myth, or law, which do not exist as tangible, material realities but are indispensable for the understanding of the lived orders, and which are projected on and articulated with different kinds of

space, investing it with meaning.¹ We would like to point out that mental structures in fact structure both the classification system and, through it, the mental levels.

The methodology for the analysis of the classification system is manifestly too important an anthropological problem to be faced empirically. Here, as with other major anthropological issues, semiotics can be of particular help. Semiotically, each of Lévi-Strauss's "orders" can be seen as constituted by an articulation of a series of semantic codes. Each one of these codes establishes, to put it descriptively, a different perspective on the social or natural world, each focusing on one of their possible aspects: we may, for example, have a set of semantic concepts focusing on the social system (social code), or one oriented towards the classification of animals (zoomorphic code). However, no single code constitutes by itself one of the mental levels of society, but the codes circulate between levels, and each level is formed by a complex of codes. Starting from semiotic theory, we argue that the classification system should be seen as a whole consisting of codes, or more specifically of internally structured codes and their structured relations to each other; this whole is the backbone of the world view of a society.²

In this article, we will adopt a semiotic approach to the early Ethiopian system of classification, as the crucial factor for the analysis and understanding of the spatial model governing the arrangement of the military camp. We shall start with the description of the camp in *Śar'atä mängəšt*, a proto-legal document which has been called the first Ethiopian constitution.³ The close analysis of this and other historical texts together with the ethnographic material demonstrates, first, that this model has been characterized by a striking resistance to historical changes for at least six centuries, and second that it is just one aspect of a wider model regulating built space in traditional Ethiopia.

In spite of this remarkable persistence, we do not wish to argue that structures are immune to history. Indeed, our argument will show that this spatial model is marked by the Judeo-Christian prototype of heavenly Jerusalem in synthesis with a local model. This case is not an exception: it is an

¹ CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris 1958) 98, 321–322, 347–348, 366.

² See ALEXANDROS PH. LAGOPOULOS, *Urbanisme et sémiotique, dans les sociétés pré-industrielles* (Paris 1995) 39.

³ BAIRU TAFLA and HEINRICH SCHOLLER, An early Ethiopian constitution = *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 9, 4 (1976) 487.

instance of the universal dialectics between structure and history. However, the study of the relations between structural persistence and historical change is not the same thing as an historical study as such, and the data needed for the analysis of structures are not coextensive with those used in historical accounts. Our study is thus not meant as a history of Ethiopian settlements. We have selected from among the general historical data certain aspects that, systematically analyzed, allow the identification of a system; and we apply a methodology that allows the study, both of the classification system and its structure, and of the correlation between this organization of meaning — identified here mainly through texts, but also through ethnographic data — and the organization of space presented in these texts and data.

The emergence of a structure is undoubtedly historical, but its description is structural-synchronic. In this article, the historical emergence of the traditional Ethiopian spatial model, while an important issue, is not the one on which we mainly focus our interest; our emphasis is on structures and the comparison of structures through history. Thus, the military camp is not approached from the point of view of the history of institutions, but from that of anthropology in close connection with semiotics.

The Amhara and the *Šar'atä mängäšt*

The traditional organization of military camps in Ethiopia follows a specific pattern, which has remained stable over many centuries.⁴ After the first two old permanent capitals of Ethiopia, Aksum and Roha (the Ethiopian equivalent of the Syrian Edessa), in the period from 1270 to about 1550, there was no fixed capital, the kings moving constantly from one place to the other; it is the royal military camp that served as capital. However, the royal camp with the court had the functions of a permanent city, and around it were assembled large crowds of subjects.⁵ A ritual procedure was established for the making and the

⁴ RICHARD PANKHURST, *State and Land in Ethiopian History* (Addis Ababa 1966) 110–113.

⁵ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopian History, 1270–1527* (Oxford 1972) 274. The first fixed capital was established by the emperor Gälawdewos (1540–1559) and his example was followed by Sarša Dəngel (1563–1597), who also built at Guzara, east of Lake Ṭana, a castle which Pankhurst considers as the precursor of the capital of Gondär. The latter was built by Fasilädäs (1632–1667) at the beginning of his reign and is the landmark of the permanent Ethiopian capitals (RICHARD PANKHURST, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from Early Times to 1800* (London 1961) 141–142, 149).

unmaking of the camp. As we shall see, the components of the prescriptions concerning the camp compose a vast semiotic system of classification, which covers all aspects of social life. These prescriptions are preserved in a Gəʿəz text serving as “a real constitution, certainly the oldest Ethiopian one”⁶: the *Śərʿatä mängəšt*, *The Order of the Kingdom*.⁷ The basic elements of *Śərʿatä mängəšt* were already in place in the early fourteenth century “and record a continuous legislative activity” which culminated in the seventeenth century.⁸ As the text itself states in its beginning, “This is a book of the Kings and of the Lords (judges), that is of many things including history, tradition and the list of hierarchy.” The text was rewritten, or at least modified, during the reigns of various emperors. *Śərʿatä mängəšt*, although in its greatest extent a protocol of ceremonies of state and church to be consulted when needed, played an important role in the political life of the royal court and in the administration of justice, an important factor of adult life and male identity in Amhara society.

Under the Solomonic dynasty, especially during the reign of Amdä Şəyon (1314–1344), the Amhara gained control over a large area of the Abyssinian plateau and founded the so-called Kingdom of Şäwa (1270–1543).⁹ By order of the emperor Amdä Şəyon, chronicles were written, and genealogies were revised and constructed or reconstructed, so that the unity of the empire and the power of the dynasty were legitimized. This reconstruction included the rehandling of the myth of origin, namely that of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. *Śərʿatä mängəšt* starts with the invocation of this myth, establishing thus the inviolability of its authority: “These laws and regulations came forth from Jerusalem with the son of Solomon, whose name was Menelik.¹⁰ With him came twelve students of law.” According to this myth, Mənilək, the founding hero of the dynasty and the Ethiopian empire, and mirror-image of Solomon (*Minilik* = to whom he resembles?), accompanied by twelve students of the Law, i.e., twelve judges,

⁶ BAIRU TAFLA and HEINRICH SCHOLLER, *op. cit.* 487.

⁷ For the purpose of this article we use the English translation of *Śərʿatä mängəšt* by BAIRU TAFLA and HEINRICH SCHOLLER, *ibid.*

⁸ JACQUES VANDERLINDEN, *An Introduction to the Sources of Ethiopian Law* (Addis Ababa 1966) 39.

⁹ We follow the periodisation of Ethiopian history proposed by JOSEPH TUBIANA in his study *Turning Points in Ethiopian History* (Rome 1966).

¹⁰ *Minilik*. We use the more familiar English version of the name, also used by the translators of the text. – The editors have standardized the spelling of Ethiopian terms and names in accordance with the journal guidelines. They hope that they have not overseen anything — in the latter case it is in no way the authors’ fault.

firstborn sons of the twelve aristocratic families of the court of Solomon, stole the Ark of the Covenant from Israel and, flying miraculously over land and sea, arrived in Ethiopia and founded the Ethiopian empire. The divinity of the Ethiopian ruler was thus established through his ancestry: by being a descendant of the line of Solomon, the Ethiopian emperor became affiliated to the line of David and hence to Jesus Christ. It is worth noting the correspondence between, on the one hand, the twelve legendary descendants of the noble families surrounding Solomon that came to Ethiopia and became founders of the twelve Ethiopian tribes, and along with Mənilək co-founders of the state, and, on the other, the twelve profane tribes of Israel plus the thirteenth, the tribe of Levi, and Christ with his twelve disciples.¹¹

The era of the Kingdom of Šäwa is a period in which the highland Christian Ethiopians attained power and glory. The economy was based on farming, commerce, and handicraft, these three sectors of the economy being more or less attached respectively to three distinct groups: the Amhara, the Arabs and Persians, and the Fälaša.¹² The main agricultural products were cereals, fruits, and vegetables, and the very rich soil and temperate climate allowed for two harvests every year. European travelers also report great irrigation works.¹³ The social stratification corresponded to the division of labor and ethnicity. The Amhara kept the power and the land, the distribution of which was made by the sovereign according to the military prowess of his men. The Amhara were soldiers, cultivators and administrators, and their titles and offices were granted solely by the emperor and were usually accompanied by great donations of land. There followed the Arabs and Persians, who were mainly merchants and textile workers. The Fälaša did not possess any land rights whatsoever and were metal forgers, making tools and utensils as well as different items of jewelry. This society offers many resemblances with the great empires which flourished in the ancient Near and Middle East, and may be considered as an autocratic society or, in Marxist terms, as a society belonging to the Asiatic mode of pro-

¹¹ TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA, *Les noms propres, les noms de baptême et l'étude généalogique des rois d'Éthiopie, XIII–XX siècles, à travers leurs noms patronymiques* (Belgrade 1966) 12.

¹² M.-G. STYLIANOUDI, *Droit et société en Éthiopie médiévale. Ser'ata Mengest: Analyse sémiotique d'un texte juridique éthiopien*, 2 vols (doctoral dissertation, Paris 1984) 51–60.

¹³ E. WESTPHAL, *Agricultural Systems in Ethiopia* (The Netherlands 1975) 68–73.

duction.¹⁴ The establishment of the permanent capital of Gondär in the first half of the seventeenth century corresponds to a turning point in the history of Ethiopia, as this permanent capital is related to the transformation of the mode of production into feudalism, many elements of which were in place till the days of the last emperor Ḥaylä Ṣälasse.

The royal camp and the spatial model in *Ṣar'atä mängəst*

The royal camp (within national territory; there are minor variations when in foreign territory) is described in a condensed manner in *Ṣar'atä Mängəst* in chapter III, "Traditions and Regulations", where it occupies article 21, "Tradition on the Camping of the King in his Journey", article 22, "The Order of Cam-ping at the Right Side", and article 23, "Tradition and Order of the King's Pa-lace". On the basis of this information, the traditional model of the royal camp can be rendered as in the plan of Figure 1. The major structural elements of the camp according to the text are the following:

- a. A *central* element identified with the royal (the king's) palace (P).
- b. An *opposition* between *front* (the king, 1) and *behind* (the queen, 2), the king being at the same time in the center.
- c. An *opposition* between two halves, the one *left* (*gra*, see a) and the other *right* (*qäñ*, see b).
- d. A *main axis* (XX) separating these two halves. This axis is materialized on the ground as a wide road located *behind* the king.
- e. A *notional axis* (YY) perpendicular to the main axis, suggested by the division between front and rear. This axis would be *secondary* and together with the main axis forms a *cross*.
- f. A *tripartite* concentric organization of the camp, composed by the central royal (king's) compound (I); an inner zone around it (II) delimited on its left by an enclosure *Gra färäs däbrawi* (a), and on its right by the symmetrical *Qäñ färäs däbrawi* (b); and an outer zone (III) ending in front with the enclosure of the camp named *Daräña färäs* (c) and to the rear with the symmetrical *Fit färäs* (d). This concentric form is further emphasized by the narrative sequence of the description of the camp.
- g. One *principal gate* in front of the king and on the limit of his compound (e). Mention is made of two secondary gates at his rear, *Gra qulf* to his left (f) and *Qäñ qulf* to his right (g), which were situated between the inner and the outer zone and were probably symmetrical. The three gates

¹⁴ M.-G. STYLIANOUDI, *op. cit.*, 381–384.

may have formed an almost equilateral triangle and were perhaps located on the *bisectors* of the two perpendicular axes, on which were also stationed dignitaries and troops (behind the king).

There were manifestly also other gates, such as the ones connected to the road on the main axis. There were people assigned to guarding the two secondary gates mentioned (the Keepers, or the Guardians of the Gates or Doors) and special troops camping there: the *Gra azmač* with the *Gra qurban* (7) and the *Qäñ azmač* with the *Qäñ qurban* (13) — military code. The gates of the king's compound, the inner zone, and the outer zone were all in fences made of cloth, or wood in case of a longer period of camping. This is also established by different travelers who have visited Ethiopia in more recent times, as for instance by the Scottish traveler Bruce¹⁵ who describes a barrier which was set up to keep clear the open space around the king's tent.

These elements are shown in the plan of Figure 1, which also shows the location of other dignitaries, as well as that of the queen (2) and the soldiers (T). The queen's compound constitutes a marked place. This queen is the senior queen, the Queen Mother (*Tallaqitu nəgəšt*), who usually is also Queen of the Right.¹⁶ She is not necessarily the king's mother, but may be the previous king's wife, whom the new king would marry according to

¹⁵ In 1813. See also 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* (Cambridge 1961) 262 fn. 2.

¹⁶ There is some controversy on this matter. We follow here TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA, *op. cit.*, and C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.* TADDESSE TAMRAT (*op. cit.*, 271–272), referring to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the first of the sixteenth, does not relate the queen mother with any direction. He correctly mentions two more queens, one of the left, *Gərara baltihat*, and one of the right, *Qäñe baltihat*. The two queens were patrons of the left and the right respectively and kept separate palaces. Taddesse Tamrat adds a junior queen of the right, *Bä'ältä šibna*. TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA (*op. cit.*, 165) mentions that 'Amdä Šəyon had two queens: *Tallaqitu nəgəšt* and *Tanakitu nəgəšt*. Zär'a Ya'əqob had two queens as well, the queen-patron of the left and the queen-patron of the right. TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA also mentions a third queen, *Ras gəzite* or 'Ireš gəzite. Starting from the reign of the emperor Naod (1495–1508) polygamy disappeared, and the titles of the queens of the right and left were abandoned in the 16th century around the time of Fasiladas and the foundation of Gondar as permanent capital. Since then there is only one queen, called 'Ite or 'Itege, "Sister of the Land", a title which seems to be the diminutive of 'Egzətəye or 'Egzätege, "Mistress (Patron) of the Land" (TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA, *op. cit.*, 167, 171).

custom. As seen in Figure 1, she is also spatially related to both the central elements and the right. Both articles 21 and 22 start with the queen as the point of reference of the spatial division into right and left of the camp. We read in article 21: “The Queen would camp *behind* him [the king] opposite the märgäf, a little further from the camp, and on her *left* side lay a wide road [on the main axis]. Then the major and minor [here follow the titles of different dignitaries] ... respectively would camp ...”; and in article 22: “On the *right* side of the Queen up to the Qäñ ... the Ladies and the Mälmäl (princes) [see 12, Fig. 1] would camp” (emphasis added). On the basis of Hiob Ludolf’s description of the royal camp¹⁷, it is clear that the *Fitawrari* plants the royal standard marking the place of the king’s compound in the middle of the camp. We may assume that the standard was erected on the highest point in the vicinity, given that the word *kätäma*, designating the royal camp, in addition to “permanent camp” and “fortification” also means “summit”, from which the former meanings are derived; this point is also corroborated by Father Francisco Alvares, who states that “the Prester’s tents are pitched on the highest ground of the plain, if there is any”.¹⁸

Following the planting of the royal standard, the surveyors take their measurements and locate the sites of the tents. The point of reference for measurements is the king’s standard, a fact emphasizing the centrality of the king (political and more specifically royal code); this centrality is well in accordance with the semiotic structures revolving around his person which we encounter in *Šar’atä mängäšt* (see below). On the other hand, the attribute of centrality is also related to the queen, to the extent that she is used as the point of reference for the left-right division, which however according to the above analysis emanates structurally from the king. We may conclude on the basis of these data that the center defined by the queen is a “shadow” image of that created by the king. That the two of them are of comparable, and sacred (religious code), nature can also be seen from the fact that only the king and queen, together with the churches, were allowed to use white tents,¹⁹ a fact referring to a chromatic code.

In discussing the king’s compound in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the first of the sixteenth, Tadesse Tamrat writes that the Ethiopian texts do not comprise (astronomical) directions. He speculates

¹⁷ HIJOB LUDOLF, *A New History of Ethiopia*, lib. II, cap. 13, 1–7, as cited in C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 267 fn.4.

¹⁸ C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 192 fn.2, 267 fn.4, 437).

¹⁹ C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 272 fn. 1.

that this is due to the lack of any strict rule for orientation, and that the particular topographical features of each site may have dictated the orientation of the compound. He follows, however, “for reasons of clarity”, Alvares (see below) who situates the principal gate to the west.²⁰ It is to be remembered that according to *Šar‘atä māngəšt* the principal gate is located on the line of sight of the king, which also establishes the main direction of the camp. It is possible that the direction given by Alvares may be less arbitrary than it seems. One reason is that, when the camp is on the march, the king is supposed to always move *westwards*. Henry Salt mentions in his *A Voyage to Abyssinia* that south is associated with left and north with right, associations that lead to the coupling of west with front and of east with rear. In this manner the main axis of the camp would be oriented E to W (from rear to front) and the marked direction would be from the center to the west. However, the set of cardinal points does not seem to have had a marked semantic presence, and even in today’s Ethiopia they are rarely used,²¹ although the course of the sun (solar-astral code) seems to have been important in official contexts.

To sum up the main attributes of the king in relation to space: he is the point of reference for the first major semantic pair appearing in article 21 *front vs rear*, a pair belonging both to an anthropomorphic and to a spatial code, since the queen is the first to camp *behind* him; he is in the center (in fact *he is* the center); he defines a dominant visual axis directed from the center outwards; and he is at the summit (he is in heaven, above earth, his feet never touching the ground); but in the last analysis he is beyond space and, as we shall see, beyond left and right. The dualism of *left vs right* (anthropomorphic-spatial code) follows from the king, as we shall see, but it is materialized (according to articles 21 and 22) in the senior queen, who is below, on earth. If we accept that the senior queen is also connected to the right, then we may assume that the left-right dichotomy corresponds to a *male vs female* opposition (anthropomorphic code, more specifically of gender and sex), belonging to a code of gender and sex, and marking the camp as gendered. The status of the queen mother finds its interpretation in the myth of Mənilək and his queen mother, who abdicated her throne (and

²⁰TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op. cit.*, 269.

²¹DONALD N. LEVINE, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago and London 1965) 74.

renounced her virginity) on his behalf, thus marking the transition between and the merging of two dynasties and two kinship systems.²²

The queen mother has the attributes of the Queen of Sheba, who is the Queen of the South (Makeda or Bilkis), thus marking the rear not only as female but as south as well. South belongs to the mythical queen, so north should belong to the mythical king, Mənilək/Solomon.²³ Thus to the opposition *front vs rear*, defined by the king and the queen, corresponds also the opposition *north vs south*. The corresponding spaces are royal spaces, hence divine, untouchable by humans. With this division another structure, *north vs south*, is superimposed on the *west vs east* structure of the camp, both belonging to the solar aspect of an astral code, itself belonging to the cosmic code.

We may make certain complementary observations on the above model of the royal camp. It contains three major central elements. The marked element *par excellence* is the qualitative center defined by the king; this is from an observer's point of view the geometrical center of the camp, a concept probably also shared by the Ethiopians on the denotative level. But the connotation of the center projects the king beyond human, earthly space. As a function of this center, two other marked elements are defined. The first is the visual axis starting from the king. Concerning this line of sight there are three possibilities: a. it did not point anywhere, if the placement of the camp derived from the adjustment to local topography, in which case the line of sight of the king is self-referential; b. it pointed in the direction of the enemy, as Hiob Ludolf observes in his *History*²⁴; and c. it aimed at an astronomical point, west, the point of the setting sun, which is inseparable from a portion of space, that in front of the king. Cases b and c are not exclusive, and case c should represent a ritual requirement.

The second marked element defined by the king, which is also the second major central element, is in the opposite direction and is the location of the queen mother; this is behind the king and inseparable from the remaining portion of space, behind him. The positions of the king and the queen, the persons marking the royal code, seem to replicate the dualism of this couple, since they form two centers with opposed qualities. The center defined by the king is not actually on earth; it is divine and belongs to the heavenly space, but it nevertheless encounters the earth; it is the immobile

²² M.-G. STYLIANOUDI, *op. cit.*, 144.

²³ *Ibid.*, 140, 142.

²⁴ See C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 267–268 fn. 4.

heavenly zero point of cosmic space. In contrast, the center defined by the queen is located on earth. The location of the king and the queen together with the visual axis of the king compose an axis, the main axis of the camp, which is the third major central element comprising two segments: the marked segment is visual, its direction is from the king-center outwards, and it is notional, that is, it is not materialized in actual space; while the unmarked segment uniting the marked center with the unmarked east is located behind the king and materialized as the main road of the camp.

The opposition *left vs right*, having as direct point of reference the queen, is defined according to the same visual axis that relates to the king. Being a structure of space in general, it also characterizes the space on both sides of the central element, the royal palace. The superimposition on this structure of the *front vs rear* structure delivers both the general horizontal model of space and the model of the royal camp. At least when seen metalinguistically, by an outside observer, this model is quadripartite. It is anchored in the human body (and thus the present case would accord with phenomenological views on spatial orientation) but it may be dependent also on a point in the course of the sun, the west. The horizontal model is complemented by a vertical axis passing through its center and connected to the king, given that the king is above the earth and related to a summit. This location of the king connotes the vertical axis of the cosmos. The cosmic axis is defined by the summit and the center-king, an extension of which is the center-queen.

It is difficult to ignore the resemblance of this structuring of space and the royal camp to the Hebrew conception of the world and the earth. According to this conception, there is a center of the earth and the world, where there is a cosmic mountain which is the highest place and identified with the axis of the world. This center is related to four axes linking it to the limits of the earth (world). Two of these axes constitute an E-W axis and the other two the N-S axis; the limits are a circle or a square. This model dictated the form of the heavenly Jerusalem, which became the divine prototype of all Christian settlements. Christianity has been present in northern Ethiopia since the conversion of the Kingdom of Aksum by Saint Frumentius in the fourth century, and as we saw above the Solomonid kings traced their descent from the kings of Israel. Did the *Šər'atä mängəšt* borrow the model for the royal camp from the Judeo-Christian tradition?

The early Christian cosmic spatial model, which goes back to Hebrew traditions, is founded on the cross, itself a function of the cardinal points.²⁵ Contrary to this model, the spatial model in *Šər'atä mängəšt* is primarily founded on the body and related to the course of the sun, an association achieved through the line of sight of the king; the main road of the camp relates the center with the east. It thus seems likely that this model is founded on a local conception, at least in the sense that it was not introduced with Christianity; Judeo-Christian symbolism was apparently superimposed on an indigenous model.

The data concerning the royal camp lead us to think that there was a notion of an E-(center)-W axis. The knowledge of the Christian cosmic model indicates that the division between front and rear was probably conceptualized as a N-S axis. These two axes are connected to a quadripartition of the camp, which, as we shall see, was strongly conceptualized. We should, however, admit that, in spite of the (probable) identification in the royal camp of an oriented cross, this cross represented a conception which was not the dominant one — though it was probably a legitimizing conception with respect to Christianity — and was dependent on a deeper indigenous conception.

The earliest European descriptions of the royal camp

The earliest eyewitness accounts we have of the royal camp confirm that it did indeed follow the prescriptions of the *Šər'atä mängəšt*. In 1520, in Father Francisco Alvares's narrative of the Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia, we find a description of the royal camp which may be directly compared to that of *Šər'atä mängəšt*.²⁶ Alvares relates that the royal camp includes 5,000–6,000 tents. The site for it, selected by the vanguard, is a vast plain and on its highest ground, if there is any, the king's tents are located. Four or five tents for the king are erected and encircled by an enclosure "half a league round" made of cloth "woven like a chess-board, half white and half black"; or, when the camp is more permanent, by a hedge.

The back of the tents is always placed to the east and the doors to the west; ... They say that they make in this enclosure twelve gates [when the king's compound is surrounded by a hedge]; the principal is to the

²⁵ See also WERNER MÜLLER, *Die heilige Stadt: Roma quadrata, himmlisches Jerusalem und die Mythe vom Weltnabel* (Stuttgart 1961) 179–182.

²⁶ See C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 437, 439, 441–444.

west, and behind it, at a good distance are two gates, each on its own side, and one of these serves the church of St. Mary, which is to the north, and the other the church of the Holy Cross, which is to the south. Beyond these gates which serve these churches, almost at a distance equal to that between them and the principal gate, are two other gates, on either side, and that which is to the south serves the tents of the Queen, wife of the Prester, and that which is to the north serves the pages' quarters. [Alvares must be referring to the queen of the left.]

The two churches, of St. Mary and the Holy Cross, are accompanied by two tents, one for the baking of bread and the other containing the liturgical clothes and objects. Behind the churches there are two large tents, the royal treasure-house. On the two sides of the royal compound — presumably the south and the north part — we find the camps of the *Abunä*, *Aqabe sä'at*, and other dignitaries respectively, and following these the tents of the nobility. Behind the king's tents, there are two kitchen tents with an attached church.

To the west, in front of the compound of the king, there is a vast open space with a length equivalent "to two crossbow shots" in which a long tent called *Säqäla* is erected used as a "court of justice or tribunal". No one passes between the king and the court on horse or mule, out of respect for the king and his justice, and no one enters the tent of the court. There are in this tent thirteen simple seats, among which one is very high. They are moved outside every day and placed in two rows of six seats, with which are associated the judges of the left and the right respectively, the highest seat occupying a position on the notional axis of these two rows and at its extremity. The seats remain empty due to the fact that the judges sit on the ground.

In the space in front of the king, at a significant distance from the *caçalla*(?), there are also two tents serving as prisons and a church of justice. Then there is an empty space, where the four lions accompanying the king were chained. Further away, out of sight from the king's compound, the market is located, together with a church. On the confines of the market camp the merchants, the bakers, the smiths and the rest of the people.

About one and a half century later, in 1684, Ludolf gives a similar description of the royal camp:

In the middle of the camp the King's tent, large and white in color, has a prominent place, with a wide space round it ... Then there are two chap-

els, as well as one for the queen ... The camp is divided into four parts, each with its prefect. The front is called *fit* “forehead”, that is, “front part”, and its prefect is the *Fitawrari* [“front” means the side facing the enemy]; the back part is called *huala* [behind]. The *Fitawrari* goes ahead in search of a suitable site ...; he sets up a tall pole bearing the King’s flag, on seeing which the surveyors of the high officials measure the place and pitch the tents of their masters. After them come the rest of the army, and those who for whatever reason accompany it. So, in a few hours there is an ordered camp where a little before there was nothing to be seen. For each man knows how and where to pitch his tent, since the order of the camp is always the same: there are always the same streets and byways, the same open spaces and *insulae*. And when the time comes to leave, all know the precise order in which to pack up and set forth.²⁷

Ludolf’s description thus shows us, among other things, that quadripartition was a structural component of the royal camp.

The pattern which we have identified is also found in the spatial organization of Ethiopian towns. Frequently the nuclei of Ethiopian towns have their origin in military camps.²⁸ This was the case with both Gondär and Addis Abäba (founded in 1636 and 1887 respectively). Gondär was dominated by the famous castle of the emperor Fasilädäs, and most of the houses in the city in the mid-seventeenth century were huts. The city was divided into a left and a right quarter, and had at the end of the seventeenth century, following Poncet²⁹, a circumference of three to four leagues (15–20 km.). Poncet also states that the palace was located in the middle of the city on a rise and was surrounded by a stone wall with towers, the circumference of which was almost a league (about 5 km) long. These numbers give us a diameter for Gondär of about 5–6.5 km and for the king’s compound of about 1.5 km. The royal compound included four imperial chapels and was accessible through twelve gates. This number corresponds to the number of gates of the heavenly Jerusalem. Most of the gates are arranged symmetrically as to the axis on which the main gate lies, and the two symmetrical groups of gates are thus associated with left and right.

²⁷ HIOB LUDOLF, *Historia*, lib. II, cap. 13, 1–7, as cited in C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *op. cit.*, 267 ft. 4.

²⁸ RICHARD PANKHURST, *State and Land*, *op. cit.*, 113.

²⁹ See RICHARD PANKHURST, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 149–153.

The homology between palace and camp

Tadesse Tamrat, referring again to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the first of the sixteenth, gives us a description of the king's palace and compound (Fig. 2). The compound consists of two concentric circular enclosures, the inner one named *Mäggaräḡa* and the outer *Ġägol*; the area between the two enclosures is very vast. The inner enclosure, the palace, comprises thirteen exits. Tadesse Tamrat situates the main gate *Wädnäš däḡ* — which belongs to the main axis of the camp and the compound — to the west, according to him for reasons of convenience only. There are twelve more gates equidistant from each other, six on each side of the main gate; the two front gates on both sides of the main gate were of special importance and were used only by persons invited by the king. This twin arrangement of the gates is related to the organization of the court into left and right. The same holds for the similar arrangement of the thirteen gates of the outer enclosure.³⁰

As shown in Figure 2, the corresponding gates of the two enclosures should have been situated on the same radius, and just less than half of the gates would thus have been situated by groups of four on the same diameter. If this was the case, a radial pattern of spatial organization would be combined with the concentric and dualist structures we have already identified. In fact, an elementary radial pattern can be detected already in the description of the camp in *Šər'atä mängəšt* and, as we shall see, this pattern is clear in later examples of camps. The inner gates of the palace were guarded by high-ranking officials of the royal guard and at the outer gates numerous guards were stationed, as was the case to a lesser degree with the rest of the space around the outer enclosure. It seems clear that each set of gates incorporates a projection of the myth of origin; it may also give an Ethiopian version of the heavenly Jerusalem that has as its center God himself, here represented by the emperor.

The number and spatial organization of these gates is homologous to those of the two rows of six seats headed by a very high thirteenth seat, which, as we shall see below, Jules Leroy tells us were associated with the judges of the left and of the right. We may compare these seats with data from Aksum. There is in *Šər'atä mängəšt* (chapter III, article 2) a summary of the coronation of the king, which took place in Aksum. It is stated that the king sits on a throne made of stone. This throne was located in front of the Aksum cathedral. According to Leroy, in front of the cathedral and

³⁰TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op. cit.*, 269–274.

outside the door giving access to its large court there is a row of twelve thrones, of which one is double in size, facing east. Leroy considers that they are at least two millennia old, attributing them thus to the pre-Christian era. In front of this row, called by the people the “seats of the judges”, there are two thrones similar to them, framed in the corners by four solid pillars intended to support a roof of stone or straw, or even a simple veil, and known as the “Throne of the King” and the “Throne of the Bishop”.³¹

About ten other thrones of a later date are located at the entrance of Aksum on the road connecting it to Adwa, the old port of Adulis, a city situated to the east of Aksum on the coast of the Red Sea. We observe that this second set of thrones are located on an axis very close to the E-W orientation. Leroy mentions that the Byzantine writer Cosmas Indicopleustes describes a throne similar to the above which he saw in the port of Adulis; it was located at the west gate of the city and by the road to Aksum.³² Thus the two cities were connected, not only by the road, but also by the presence of the seats at their entrance.

Leroy believes that these thrones were not meant for statues, but were “empty thrones” — a theme known from Mediterranean and Oriental civilizations — commemorating kings or offered to gods. In Africa we find among the Sudanese Ashanti the same kind of empty throne, “the Throne of Thrones”, connoting the presence of the numinous.³³ There must be a connection between the seats of the judges in the court of the Amhara king and the thrones situated in Aksum, but we have no concrete data allowing us to establish a clear historical relation.

We may understand the internal organization of the palace based on article 23 of the *Šarʿatä mängäšt*, which contains regulations of the royal palace routines. We learn that the palace includes the king’s chamber, and that curtains and carpets are two manifestly important features of it. We are also told that there is a “House of the Lion”. In fact the palace shows a tripartite arrangement. It is composed of an inner square chamber of the king, surrounded by two rings, the outer limits of which are circular. The inner ring is the “House of the Throne” and the outer ring is the “House of the Lion”, the reception hall.

³¹ JULES LEROY, *L’Éthiopie: Archéologie et culture* (Bruges 1973) 35–36.

³² *Ibid.*, 36–39.

³³ M.-G. STYLIANOUDI, *op. cit.*, 300.

Since the palace occupies the center of the camp, its central room, the king's chamber, represents the center of the center. As we see from the text *Canons of the Church*³⁴, there is a homology between the palace and the Ethiopian church. The king's chamber is compared to the sanctuary of the church, a sanctuary that connotes "Jerusalem" and "heaven". The curtains of the king's chamber connote the curtains of the sanctuary hiding the *tabot*, representing the Ark of the Covenant containing the tablets with the Commandments received by Moses and made initially from stone and later from wood, that was placed on the altar. The *tabot* symbolizes the Ark, Christ, his tomb and the Holy Trinity. God is said to have created the sky in order to give the heavenly prototype of the Ark a place to stand.³⁵ As the holy *tabot* must not be seen by a profane eye, so the king must be hidden from any profane sight. Two of the curtains connote the guardian angels of the Lord in Bethlehem who "stretched like muslin cloth". The carpets of the chamber connote those of the sanctuary and the fine carpets, made of high quality wool, which were laid out for Solomon's coronation. These carpets prevent the king's feet from touching the ground, as the king's feet must never touch the ground; he is supposed to stand high, in heaven and between heaven and earth. The king thus is attached to a sacred space opposed to the surrounding profane space ("sacred" and "profane" are qualities belonging to a religious code).³⁶

The homology between palace and church extends further, to the rings surrounding their central space, but we shall come back later to the description of the church. For the moment we want to complete the descrip-

³⁴ See MARCEL GRIAULE, Règles de l'église (documents éthiopiens) = *Journal Asiatique* (juillet-septembre 1932) 31–33.

³⁵ See MARCEL GRIAULE, *ibid.*, 8, 17, and FRIEDRICH HEYER, *Die Kirche Äthiopiens* (Berlin and New York 1971) 27, 39–40, 43.

³⁶ There are close similarities with the Byzantine emperor. For example, in the late Byzantine period, continuing earlier habits and conceptions, the emperor was still living in a sacred palace. During his audiences, he was seated on a throne and hidden by a curtain, which was opened at the last moment in order to intensify the effect of "theophany". In one of the throne rooms, a mechanism raised and lowered the throne while mechanical lions roared and artificial birds sang. The emperor was completely silent and expressed himself in ambiguous signs; see ANDRÉ GRABAR, *Pseudo-Codinos et les cérémonies de la cour byzantine au XIVe siècle* = *Art et société à Byzance sous les Paléologues* (Proceedings of the Colloquium organized by the Association Internationale des Études Byzantines) = Bibliothèque de l'Institut Hellénique d'Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines de Venise 4 (Venice 1971) 207, 210–211.

tion of the model of the camp and for this the palace offers us an important clue. We saw that two of the curtains of the king's chamber are his guardian angels. On the other hand, another threshold, that between the "House of the Throne" and the "House of the Lion", is the responsibility of the *Ġan Təkəl* and the *wädat*, the pages and the servants of the king, who are either young boys who have not reached puberty, or clerics. They, like the angels, are considered beings without sex; and both abstain from sexual relations. Thus, a sexually neutral element marks the thresholds between spaces.

We observe the same conception on the scale of the camp. The *Raq massäre*, the Master of Ceremonies, a priest, and the *Däräbba bet*, the House of the Pages of the King, are located between the inner and the outer zones of the camp (see 6, Fig. 1) and correspond to the above threshold guardians; they are also considered as being without sex (they belong to the category neither-nor). Thus, a first homology is established between the camp and the palace. Another homology is due to the tripartite organization of both. These connections would lead us to the hypothesis that the outer limits of the two zones of the camp were circular in form and the compound of the king was square. This hypothesis does not necessarily contradict Tadesse Tamrat, according to whom the enclosure of the king's compound was circular. The two forms could have been interchangeable, as was the case, as we shall see, many centuries later. It should be noted that a square form would bring the compound closer to the exact form of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The heavenly king and the cosmic camp

Having established the main spatial structures of the model of the royal camp, we shall penetrate further into its semantics. We shall attempt this understanding by using data from the court hierarchy, which, as we shall see, is indissolubly related to the mythical-religious sphere. In fact, the myth penetrates social and state hierarchy, and the whole of this complex offers the guidelines for the organization of official space.

Chapter I of *Šər'atä mängəšt* may serve as point of entry to the subject. The chapter is entitled by the translators "Fides Historica" and gives a condensed historical description of the origins of the text; it relates King Amdä Šeyon, the great leader of the Solomonic dynasty, with Mənilək.³⁷ The se-

³⁷ M.-G. STYLIANOUDI, *op. cit.* 181–195; see also M.-G. LILY STYLIANOUDI, *Anthropology of law and semiotics: Semiotic analysis of a medieval Ethiopian text = Anthropos o Simainon*, vol. 1 (Thessaloniki 1996).

miotic analysis of this chapter shows the existence of a hierarchical *legal* structure centered on the king. He is surrounded by his household, that is, whatever belongs to him, whatever is “of the king”. The *Ṣəraḡ massäre* (the official responsible for the horn containing the sacred unction) is positioned on the threshold between the royal and the legal, and this structure is completed with two judges, one of the left and the other of the right. The center where the king stands and the central space around him, the space classified as “of the king”, are not binary in nature: the first is a kind of zero point bearing no attributes and the second is neutral, being neither right nor left, while the periphery surrounding this central space is distinctly binary. The threshold between central and peripheral space is guarded by the *Raq massäre*, who regulates the movement from inside to outside.

According to the *administrative* variant of this structure — also closely connected to the plan of the palace — which is more complex, there is a space around the royal center which is again neutral, neither left nor right. This space is followed by a space comprising the two judges of clerical status, one of whom is probably head of the eunuchs, who belong at the same time both to the left and to the right. Finally, two groups and two dignitaries, the *Bətwäddädoč*, assistants to the king in administration with the function of “Guards of Order”, are related to the left-right dichotomy (political and more specifically administrative code). These two dignitaries flank the king as the archangels St. Michael and St. Gabriel flank the thrones of the Lord and St. Mary, the one standing to the left and the other to the right.³⁸

This static structure points to a structured dynamic movement: it starts from a zero point which is a unity beyond bipolarity or divisions and at the same time also their origin; next appears a unified neutral space which however foreshadows the dualism to come; then there is a space that presupposes dualism, since it combines its two poles, but also remains unified; and finally a dualist structure is manifested that divides the corresponding space in two opposed, ranked and complementary halves. It is not by chance that the description of the royal camp in articles 21 and 22, chapter III, of *Ṣər'atä mängəst* follows a similar movement: it starts from the king and the queen, the heavenly and the earthly centers; it is strictly divided in two parts, the first describing the arrangement of the left and the second of the right sector of the camp outside the royal compound; and it follows a con-

³⁸ TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA, *op. cit.*, 12.

centric logic according to a movement from the central area towards the periphery.

Only four persons, who had the title of judge before the reign of King Zār'a Ya'əqob (1434–1468), had the right to come into direct contact with the king. They were clerical and as such considered sacred and sexually neutral, and because of their neutrality they did not belong either to the left or to the right. The connotation of the king and these four dignitaries is Christ and his four evangelists or Christ and the four celestial animals of the Apocalypse.³⁹ The king occupies the center of the world, and is surrounded by four priests-judges corresponding presumably to the four cardinal points. The cosmic centrality of the king (cosmic code) is in accordance with the connotation “Jerusalem” of the king’s chamber, since Jerusalem was considered as occupying the center of the world both by the Hebrews and the Christians.⁴⁰ It also suggests that the dynamic movement mentioned above connotes a cosmogony initiated by the god-king, a cosmogony also incorporated into articles 21 and 22 of *Sər'atä māngəst*, and transforming the text into an archetypal force. The four elements around the king relate either the sides or the corners of the king’s chamber to the cardinal points. As to this last point, the answer to the dilemma is given by the orientation of the sanctuary of the church through its sides (see below), an orientation which due to the homology of palace and church should also be valid for the king’s chamber.

The legal and administrative structures help us clarify the Ethiopian conception of the palace. The king’s chamber is the sacrosanctum *par excellence*; it is the inside *par excellence*, and beyond the *left vs right* and *male vs female* oppositions. The two rings around him are connected to a virtual left-right opposition, not yet manifested. They are considered as “outside” compared to the chamber, but together with it constitute an “inside”, the sacred and the royal, in opposition to a profane and non-royal periphery where the right-left opposition is all-embracing. If the movement from the creator-king, preceding and eliminating the cosmic tensions, to the dualism characterizing the cosmos outside the central part is a cosmogony, the static structure corresponding to it is a cosmology, and thus the royal compound is an image of the cosmos. The anthropomorphism of left and right acquires cosmic dimensions. The two *Bət wäddäd* with their affiliated groups on the

³⁹ TEKLE-TSADIK MEKOURIA, *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ WERNER MÜLLER, *op. cit.* 182–185, 189, 195, and MIRCEA ELIADE, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris 1964) 98, 317.

limits of the palace, the *Ṣərağ massäre* standing on the same limits, now the boundaries between the two rings of the legal structure, and the *Ġan təkäl* and the *Wotsat* guarding the threshold between the two palace rings, all have the function of guaranteeing the order of society and the universe (cosmic and social code).

This conclusion on the identification of the royal compound with the cosmos is reinforced by the homology of the palace with the church, which is equally an image of the cosmos. But homologous to both the palace and the church is the royal camp, which is thus also proven to be a *cosmogramme*, revolving around the king as the center of the cosmos, a cosmos in which dualism starts operating outside the royal palace. To the royal palace the state, as opposed to its surrounding environment, is assimilated and in this way the cosmic identification extends beyond the settlement scale to the national one. An indication pointing in the same direction comes from the existence of four provinces: Təgray, Šäwa, Goğğam and Gondär.⁴¹ The number of the provinces and the number of their governors correspond to the four dignitaries allowed direct access to the king. This regional quadripartition, on the one hand shows that the four quarters of the camp were an important component of the model, and on the other further extends the scope of the Ethiopian cosmic-spatial model. If this conclusion concerning the cosmic character of regional organization is accurate, then the regions and the national space should be sacred. In fact, the country, as we shall see, was considered a holy land, and even in recent times there was in Goğğam the belief that Goğğam was the site of the earthly paradise and its two rivers were two of the rivers of paradise.⁴²

Table 1 reminds us that the king is not only connected to the center but also to the summit, which is both a social and a cosmic summit. The royal camp, then, is conceptually and geographically (see “*kätäma*”) not only a surface, but also a pyramid. The symbolic concept of the summit was given a physical expression in the pyramidal arrangement of the consecutive

⁴¹ “Governors of ancient divisions with a tradition of autonomy and Governors from the Royal Family were generally allowed to rule with little interference from the Central Government. These Governors were to be found in Tigre, Gojjam, Gondar, and Shoa”, WILLIAM E.H. HOWARD, *Public Administration in Ethiopia: A Study in Retrospect and Prospect* (Amsterdam 1955) p. 61 and fn. 2. See also for a general historical account on this matter G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1965).

⁴² FRIEDRICH HEYER, *op. cit.*, 211.

spaces of the palace, the internal space occupying the highest level. According to tradition, when Zär'a Ya'eqob intended to build his new palace, he saw a vision of light indicating its location. He crowned the palace with a golden cross, an act which, according to his chronicle, became traditional. The cross on top of the palace shows the sacredness of the latter.⁴³ This typical notion of the sacred cosmic mountain is closely related to that of the cosmic axis, an axis defined by the cosmic center and the cosmic summit, and appropriated by the king. One part of this royal cosmic axis coincides with the vertical geometrical axis of the palace, and the other part corresponds to the extension of this axis to the heavens. Given that the center-outwards visual axis is also directly connected to the king, we may assume that a similarity exists between the two axes.

Actually, such a similarity is indicated by *Šər'atä mängäšt*. The *Šərağ massäre*, who watches during the night over the king's chamber, at dawn cracks a great whip in order to chase away the wild beasts that entered the camp during the night and to announce the rising of the king.⁴⁴ The king rises, like the sun, at the zero moment of time, that is, between night and day (solar-astral code) and thus the zero moment of time and the zero point of space coincide in his person. If we accept that the orientation of the king and his camp is to the west, his visual axis should connote the course of the sun, from its rising to its setting. In this manner this axis acquires a cosmic connotation and becomes comparable to the vertical cosmic axis. Further, if we assume that the latter is connected to the zenith of the sun, then we may conclude that the cosmic visual axis represents the projection on earth of the vertical heavenly axis.⁴⁵

Individuals, groups, social practices, objects, natural realities and notions which do not belong to the central domain follow, according to *Šər'atä mängäšt*, the dualist opposition *left vs right*, which dominates in an all-encompassing system of classification. A part of this system, close to our subject, is shown in Table 1. While usually in Africa right is the positively connoted part, in *Šər'atä mängäšt* the left is the positive side, because

⁴³ TADDESSE TAMRAT, *op. cit.* 269, 271, and FRIEDRICH HEYER, *op. cit.*, 33.

⁴⁴ See JAMES BRUCE, *Voyage en Nubie et Abyssinie, entrepris pour découvrir les sources du Nil, pendant les années 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, et 1773 par M. James Bruce* (trans. M. Castera), vol. III (Paris 1790) 303, 321, who describes and comments on the ceremony of the rising of the king.

⁴⁵ The vertical cosmic axis was related to the zenith of the sun also in ancient Egypt. We find a similar projection of this axis on an E-W cosmic axis in the Theban temple.

woman is associated with the right side and man with the left, as already mentioned. Since in the Christian tradition right is positively connoted, we may assume that the reverse pattern shown in the text derives from the indigenous tradition.⁴⁶

We observe from Table 1 that certain attributes of the central domain, which is the most highly valued, also appear as attributes of the left. This fact indicates a structural transformation and equivalence: at least in certain cases, the oppositional *concentric* structure *center vs periphery* is transformed into the oppositional *diametrical* structure *left vs right*. Similar conceptual structures are thus realized in two different geometries, which are actually combined. It is exactly this structural complex which regulates the model of the royal camp, with the further addition of the duplication of the diametrical structure: the two diametrical structures *left vs right* and *front vs rear* lead to a subordinate quadripartition. The origin of this quadripartition is Ethiopian and not due to the dominant cosmic and spatial quadripartition of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, but being akin to the latter it allowed the superimposition of the two structures.

Table 1 shows that the left and the right are related to the opposition *earth vs sea*, belonging to a code of nature, and to the oppositions *cosmos vs chaos* (cosmic code) and *order vs disorder* (cosmic and social codes). We may hypothesize that these pairs of opposites were also projected on the camp. We may also assume that as an image of the cosmos, the camp is also the image of the earth, because the earth can be seen as coinciding with a horizontal section of the universe passing through its center and thus in a sense coextensive with the cosmos; and, as the earth, the camp might be accordingly divided into land and sea. This opposition would take shape in the camp in a diametrical form, as Table 1 shows, but also in a concentric form: since the central palace and compound are the cosmos, their semantic relationship to the rest of the camp could correspond to the opposition *earth vs surrounding (primeval) waters*. A similar transformation would be valid for the remaining two closely related oppositions.

Finally, the table shows us the association of left and right with male and female respectively. That the *male vs female* opposition takes a spatial form is also shown by the position of men and women in the church (see below).

⁴⁶The most commonly encountered associations in Africa in connection with the right-left dualism are those of bad and female with left (HEINZ A. WIESCHHOFF, Concepts of right and left in African cultures = *Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification* (Chicago and London 1973) 59–64, 70.

Thus, from the royal palace, which does not incorporate any gender division, we pass to a sexually defined compound and camp. We saw that the diametrical semantics of the camp seem to be combined with a dualist concentric structure. The concentric pattern is further accentuated by the multiple concentric organization formed by the palace, the royal compound and the zones of the camp. The concentric pattern is not only created from spatial elements, but also from the nature of the individuals and groups located around the king. We obtain, from the center outwards: the king, the unified creative center beyond human space and classifications, but the origin of human space and classifications; the royal chamber, that foreshadows dualism; the rest of the palace, that combines the opposite poles; then, subject to the classification system, the rest of the royal house (up to *Dəharawi*), with the queen mother relating to the right but also holding a central position — the military (up to *Färäs*) — the religious military (outside the camp) — the military again.

Later descriptions of the military camp

About six centuries after the final composition of *Šər atä mängəšt*, we find the description of a military camp that follows a very similar model to the one derived from that text. It is a camp erected at Adet by the Ras Ḥaylä Yäsus II, called Ḥaylu, the governor of Goğğam in Western Ethiopia. Ras Ḥaylu would move annually within his province in order to assure his political position and the propagation of Ethiopian civilization, and being obliged to have a camp he still followed the traditional model. It is one of these camps, erected during the nineteen-twenties, that is described by Marcel Griaule⁴⁷ on the basis of a sketch drawn for him by an Ethiopian high court functionary in 1929; the sketch was redrawn by Griaule. The description that follows is based on Griaule's description, completed with further observations (see Fig. 3).

The quarters of the governor occupy the center of the camp, delimited by a square enclosure with a side of 100 m. This enclosure has four gates, one in the middle of each side, which are oriented towards the four cardinal points. Thus, in the case of this camp, the twelve-plus-one gates are limited to four and the dualism of the gates recedes before the cross and the quadripartition. The main gate is the one to the east, not to the west; it is in the upper part of the square, and is the point of convergence of all the roads to and from the secondary camps that surround the governor's quarters. The

⁴⁷ MARCEL GRIAULE, Un camp militaire abyssin = *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 4 (1934).

scale of the sketch is not consistent, because a number of these camps are at a significant distance from the governor's quarters. A fair idea of the total extension of this military camp, housing an army of 25,000–30,000 men, is given by the fact that the time needed to walk between the vanguard, with its chief *Fitawrari* (1), and the *Däğan səfra* (35), the rearguard, as well as between the *Gra səfra* (25), the camp of the left, and the *Qäñ səfra* (31), the camp of the right, was about five hours, a time that translates into a walk of approximately 25 km. The secondary camps have a circular form and revolve around a central tent, occupied by the chief of the compound.

Griaule rightly observes that the “general disposition of all the units around the central quarters is circular”, that the outer circular contour, defined by a series of tents for the army without specified functions, is a way for his informant to underline this fact, and that the secondary camps are also circular. Griaule is thus empirically describing a series of circles included the one within the other, that is, a concentric pattern. In fact, the prince's quarters are surrounded by *three* more or less concentric and more or less circular patterns. Outside these three contours and behind the camp there are secondary camps, organized in three clusters and arranged in a more or less straight line. Griaule adds that the author inscribed his sketch within an oriented rectangle and considers as certain that the general plan of the camp is identified for his informant with a square or rectangle. We shall discuss this issue below.

The exact geometrical forms of the above three contours and their divergences should not preoccupy us. They do not conceal the ideal model presiding over the spatial organization of military camps. One of the main characteristics of this model is a multiple circular contour made of concentric circles. Of course, in reality, this model had to be adapted each time to special circumstances, among which are the hazards of the terrain. That this form was patterned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be corroborated by two other examples.

The first is the form of the camp of Däğğaz Gošu, dignitary of Goğgam, described by Arnaud d'Abbadie just before the middle of the nineteenth century. Griaule gives us a plan of this camp based on d'Abbadie's description.⁴⁸ The camp has a simple organization. Its center is occupied by the chief's circular tent, which is surrounded by three circles. The inner circle consists of the animals used by the cavalry, the outer one is formed by the huts or tents of the army, and the middle circle coincides with the hearths

⁴⁸ MARCEL GRIAULE, *ibid.*, 120.

located in front of the army units. The camp has a diameter of 100 m and only one gate, which is shown in the upper part of the drawing. This gate, together with the central tent, defines a major half-axis of the camp, which is extended with the installation of the chief's wife and the kitchen.

The second example is the diagram of the camp of Mənilək II at the battle of Adwa in 1896 (Fig. 4).⁴⁹ The contour of the camp is almost an ellipse, the conceptual main axis of which follows the length of the page. There is a square space, surrounded by another ellipse, just below the geometrical center of the ellipse. This is the palace, which together with the adjoining structures forms a cruciform pattern, with as center probably the main gate of the palace. This group is surrounded by two concentric ellipses having the same center as the contour of the camp, outside of which the guards of the royal compound are stationed. There are two concentric zones to this central area, the outer part of each being composed of segments bearing the names of the dignitaries responsible for them. The segments of the inner and the outer zone correspond by pairs with minor divergences, in such a way that two perpendicular axes are created by the four groups of axial segments; in each of the four quadrants formed by the intersection of these axes run three radii, each related to a pair of segments. The four middle radii of the quadrants compose another set of perpendicular axes, forming an intermediary cross in respect to the above major cross. The whole pattern is thus concentric, cruciform, and radial, composed of four quadrants, and subdivided into sixteen sectors. Sixteen is a multiple of four (4x4) and this is also the case, as we saw, with the twelve gates of the left and the right of the palace and the royal compound (3x4). The radial pattern is attached to the disposition of the dignitaries in each of the two zones, which is symmetrical to the main axis of the camp. This disposition is similar to the traditional one of the royal gates and relates to the division of the camp into left and right.

The eastward orientation of Ras Ḥaylu's camp is attributed by Griaule to the direction of the enemy. But behind and beyond this practical consideration there seems to lie a symbolic reason, if we think of the westward visual axis of the king. The eastern gate of the governor's quarters is not isolated, but belongs to a wider system of four oriented gates. Griaule mentions that the camp is divided into a right part and a left part, an observation which he bases on the nomenclature of certain military functions. In the case of this camp, left is related to north and right to south, connections

⁴⁹ See RICHARD PANKHURST, *State and Land, op. cit.*, 111.

that reverse the ones we found earlier in the analysis of *Šar'atä mängäšt*. Now the back of the E-W axis has become the front. The house of the hydromel (17), the alcoholic beverage of wealthy Ethiopians⁵⁰ is in the right side of the camp (and inside the main quarters), and the same is the case with Däggaz Gošu's camp, in which hydromel is spatially opposed to celery. Thus, we should accept that this latter camp is also divided into left and right parts.

The system of the four cardinal points is further elaborated in the camp of Ras Hāyly. Beyond the four gates of the governor's quarters, the four camps of the left, the right, the vanguard, and the rearguard mark for a second time these four points, and the result is the creation of two major axes crossing perpendicularly and creating an oriented cross. The two axes are further emphasized by various elements of the camp which are located on them.⁵¹

The five elements which are within the governor's quarters (21, 23, 16, 22, 28) form a central cruciform pattern similar to the one in Mənilək II's camp. They are positioned in such a way relative to the four gates that they do not allow the creation of rectilinear roads running between opposite pairs of gates. While thus the form and orientation of the precinct, and the location and number of the gates, remind us strongly of the model of the Roman camp and city, the Ethiopian model in fact is far from having a *cardo* (the Roman N-S main street) and a *decumanus* (E-W main street). Neither does it show the cross of oriented streets of the heavenly Jerusalem. The chapel may be on the N-S axis, but it is the E-W axis that emerges as the principal one, through the scale of its main elements inside the governor's quarters and their marked linear arrangement. This observation is directly related to the spatial manifestation of the founding structure of the Ethiopian system of classification, the structure *left vs right*, since this manifestation is connected to the E-W axis.

⁵⁰ MARCEL GRIAULE, D'un mode aberrant de conservation de l'hydromel au Godjam = *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 4 (1934) 279–280.

⁵¹ The N-S axis passes, inside the governor's quarters, through the *ʾEnğära (bet)* (21, left) and the *tabot*, surrounded by an enclosure (23, right); and outside the quarters through the two groups of guards, the *Gra zäbäña* (19), and the *Qäñ zäbäña* (24). The E-W axis is emphasized by passing in succession, inside the quarters, through the *ʾAddaraš* (16), the immense tent of reception for banquets, the *Maräfiya* (22), the rest house, and the *ʾElfəñ* (28), the governor's tent that is surrounded by an enclosure; and, outside the quarters, through the camp of the *Säyf ġagri* (7), and the camp of the *Gasša ġagri ʾaläqa* (33).

Apart from this fourfold orientation towards the cardinal points, there are in the camp of Ras Ḥaylu four half-axes bisecting the major ones.⁵² The radially of this set of half-axes is part of a wider radial pattern, including the two major oriented axes, and due to the location of the camps and to the road network, the major part of which converges on the main gate of the governor's quarters. The same pattern characterizes Mənilək II's camp, and a similar one Däğgaz Gošu's camp. In all cases, the peripheral units are radially connected to the central element they surround: in the first case, through the general layout and entrances of the secondary camps and a concrete but loose geometrical pattern of roads; in the second, through the arrangement of the segments of the two zones; and in the third, through the hearths and entrances of the army units.⁵³ If the rear part of the camp in *Šər'atä mängəšt* shows, as we consider possible, two bisectors of the main axes, that is, an intermediary half-cross, we should consider that this camp represents the historical prototype of the similar axes of Ras Ḥaylu's and Mənilək II's camps.

The homology between church and camp

These examples of Ethiopian camps over six centuries convey to us a concentric model composed of a central element, circular or square, and two or three circular rings. We find a close analogy to this model in the plan of the circular Ethiopian church. This plan is not the oldest church plan in Ethiopia; it dates, according to Leroy, from the sixteenth century and according to Heyer from

⁵²The diagonal NE-SW axis is constituted, inside the prince's quarters, by the NE corner of the precinct, the *Šəga bet* (15), possibly the *Wät bet* (29), and the SW corner of the precinct; outside the quarters, the axis is constituted by the camp of the *Aläqa wanna täqlay mənister* (2), that is, the general commander of the army under the authority of the *Ras*, the *Bäğerond* (6), a camp without number near the SW corner of the precinct, and the *Qän'azmač säfär* (36), the camp of the chief of the right. The NW-SE axis, perpendicular to the previous one, is formed, inside the quarters, by the SE corner of the precinct, the *Täğ (bet)* with the hydromel (17), the *Ḥäqa bet* (27), and the NW corner of the precinct; outside the quarters, the axis is formed by the camp of the *Gerra* (sic) *färäs zäbäña* (9), the latrines (32), the camp with the *Makada 'aqafi bägra* (37), the servants of the cushions of the left, and the camp of the *Däğgazmač* (34), the general.

⁵³It is possible that the observations made here on the geometrical regularities of the Ethiopian camps offer important clues on the traditional technical procedures of surveyors.

the fourteenth.⁵⁴ Leroy considers that this plan was copied from the circular hut, but given its close resemblance to the royal palace we may consider the latter as the direct prototype, a fact that does not contradict Leroy's view, since manifestly the plan of the palace is derived from the plan of the hut.⁵⁵ The typical plan of the circular church consists, according to Griaule, of a central cube of masonry, the sanctuary (*Mäqdäs*), containing the altar (*Mänbärä tabot*); the sanctuary is surrounded by two circular concentric walls (Fig. 5); the same general plan is given by Friedrich Heyer.⁵⁶ Deribéré present a more extended version, according to which these two walls are in turn surrounded by a third enclosure made of wooden columns on which straw mats are fixed; the distances between the enclosures are almost equal.⁵⁷ We recognize in these plans the model of the camp, consisting of one central element and two or three concentric zones. Given the relatively late appearance of the circular church, it seems probable that the traditional spatial model, as found in *Šər'atä mängəst*, was also extended to churches beginning in the sixteenth century or earlier.

The similarities between the church and the military camp do not end here. According to Griaule and Deribéré, the sanctuary is oriented E-W; given its square plan, it is also oriented N-S. Deribéré endow it with one door in the west, on the central axis on which they also place the church's entrance. But Griaule gives three doors, the Door of Men in the west (though we believe the drawing is in error, this door should be in the north), the Door of Women in the south and the Door of Solomon in the north (we believe it should be in the west), and a window on the east side; the four openings form a non-symmetrical cross. The same number and positions are given for the sanctuary doors by Heyer (though he does not

⁵⁴ The churches of the Ethiopian medieval period (from the middle of the fourth to shortly before the middle of the sixteenth century) are generally rectangular or square in plan, divided into three naves and oriented towards the east. The churches within natural caves and the subterranean churches belong to the same period — they first appear in the tenth century — and their plan does not differ from the other churches. The rectangular plan and other architectural details originate from the Aksum culture. The circular plan later spread throughout the country, and today it is only in the north that one encounters some rectangular or cruciform churches (JULES LEROY, *op. cit.*, 90, 92–159).

⁵⁵ See JULES LEROY, *op. cit.* 90–92, and FRIEDRICH HEYER, *op. cit.*, 34.

⁵⁶ MARCEL GRIAULE, Disposition de l'assistance à l'office abyssin = *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 4 (1934), and FRIEDRICH HEYER, *op. cit.*, 27–28.

⁵⁷ PAULETTE et MAURICE DERIBERE, *L'Ethiopie, berceau de l'humanité* = Collection Connaissance de l'Afrique (Paris 1972) fig. 18.

name them); he adds that they symbolize the Holy Trinity. According to Heyer, entrance to the sanctuary is only permitted to priests and deacons, and to the emperor. While Deribéré give three doors for the inner circular wall — in the west, SE and NE — Griaule mentions eight doors: four main doors at the four cardinal points and four minor at the intermediary points. It is the middle wall in Deribérés' drawing that is interrupted by four doors at the cardinal points. In spite of the differences between the two plans, they are very similar in form and both characterized by an orientation towards the cardinal points, followed by an orientation to the intermediary points; this intermediary orientation is realized both by doors and by the corners of the sanctuary, which give a conceptual cross at a 45-degree angle to the main cross of the cardinal points. In addition, the church outside the sanctuary is divided, according to Griaule, into four parts corresponding to the cardinal points; these parts are separated by elements following the intermediary directions. We found the same intermediary cross in Ras Ḥaylu's and Mənilək II's camps.

Deribéré and Heyer give three external entrances, while Griaule gives four. But for Deribéré and Griaule the main entrance is in the west, which is not the case with Heyer who locates this entrance, used according to him only by the priests and the deacons, in the east (cf. Ras Ḥaylu's camp). However, they all seem to agree that men gather in the right part of the church and women in the left, left and right determined relative to the line of vision of the priest from the sanctuary to the main entrance. This gendered differentiation is typical of the Eastern Orthodox Church. We have already hinted at the above associations and pointed out that they are the reverse of the ones found in *Šər'atä mängəšt*. The eastern part of the church between the branches of the intermediary cross is divided between the chanters of the night and the chanters of the day. Griaule links the chanters of the night with the right and the chanters of the day with the left in respect to an orientation from the position of the singers towards the sanctuary. These directional associations of night and day are the same as in *Šər'atä mängəšt*. The direction from east to west given by Griaule coincides with the traditional orientation towards the west. To this division of the eastern part of the church corresponds another on both sides of the entrance; these two divisions tend to dissolve the quadripartition around the intermediary axes into the left-right division.

The sanctuary of the church is of a square plan, which is also the case, as we saw, with the central quarters of Ras Ḥaylu's camp. Griaule mentions

that the plan of the compound derives from the plan of the secondary palaces that the governor built during his expeditions. Both in the case of the church and of the camp there would seem to be an opposition between a central square element and peripheral circular elements. On the other hand, Däggaz Gošu's tent provides its camp with a circular central element, and no attention was paid to grouping it with its accompanying functions within any kind of square precinct. This example seems to show that a circular center was acceptable, which allows us to conclude that the circle and the square were considered as equivalent alternatives, at least as central elements of spatial organization. We arrived at the same conclusion above, in the discussion of the form of the enclosure of the royal compound in earlier times.

We have already noted Griaule's observation, based on the contour that his informant drew around the camp sketch, that the general plan of Ras Ḥaylu's camp is identified with a square or rectangle. This observation is corroborated by the fact that almost all the camps and camp clusters at the extremities of the axes oriented towards the cardinal and the intermediary points follow the sides of that rectangular contour. The disposition of these camps is remarkably similar to that of the elements located inside the central quarters, that tend to follow their square form. Thus, the circular layout of the camp seems, upon reaching its outer limits, to be transformed into a square; since the latter revolves around the two interwoven crosses of the camp that are also followed by the central quarters, it is homologous to the square of the quarters. Instead, then, of the use of a fourth concentric circle, which was quite possible given the geometry of the rest of the camp, a new square was used as the outer limit of the camp. We may once again conclude that for Ethiopian thought the circle and the square were equivalent alternatives. We saw earlier that the same equivalence is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. But the interchangeability of the two forms in respect to military camps is restricted in practice to the central and the outer element, while the intermediary elements are always circular.

Conclusions: Classification system, cosmic kingship, and power

The focus of this paper has been the study of the Ethiopian military camp. We have approached this subject in connection to its cultural context, which proved crucial for the understanding of both its conceptual geometry and its symbolic universe. We concentrated both on the structures and on their history. We summarize below the main conclusions of our study.

There is a striking historical continuity in the geometrical pattern, internal arrangement and symbolism of the camp during a period of at least six centuries; actually we should also take into account the period during which the pattern was operative before its first written description. The first example analyzed comes from a text, the *Šər'atä mängəšt*, regulating the ceremonies of state and church and the administration of justice, which was already formed in the fourteenth century; while the last example is taken from ethnographic research in 1929.

The study of the military camp is not only interesting *per se*. The camps have frequently been the initial nuclei of later capitals and towns, and thus they are important for the study of the process of urbanization and the history of urban planning in Ethiopia. The strict hierarchy of Ethiopian society was transferred to the organization of the camp and this fact had repercussions on urban organization and shape, as well as on land tenure. In spite, however, of the foundation of permanent towns, the military camp continued to have a parallel life up to the twentieth century.

We found that social and military organization in space, and the geometry of the camp, were governed by a precise model, subject to Judeo-Christian influence but with strong autochthonous roots, a cultural model known to all members of Ethiopian society. As Ludolf writes: "in a few hours there is an ordered camp ... the order of the camp is always the same ... When the Cryer has once proclaimed the day of Removal, they presently know how to pack up their Baggage, and in what order to march without any more ado; who are to march in the Front, who in the Rear, who on the Right, who on the Left".⁵⁸ The prescriptions for the order to be followed during the king's march are included in article 24, chapter III, of *Šər'atä mängəšt*.

This model, with minor synchronic and diachronic variants, remained stable over centuries, expanded to the field of ecclesiastical architecture and survived the transformation of the socio-economic structure from the Asiatic mode of production to feudalism. We learn from descriptions of travelers that the prototype of the royal camp was strictly replicated in the courts of dignitaries. In fact, it presides over the organization and form of all types and scales of military camps, from the royal to the most mediocre. Most strikingly, its scope is extended both below the scale of the camp and above it. Below it, the very same model dictates the organization and form of the

⁵⁸ See RICHARD PANKHURST, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*, 140.

palace and the church: above it, the model applies to the arrangement of regional and national space, and finally the conception of the cosmos. It is this model that Donald N. Levine found in recent times among Amhara peasants as the “dominant configuration in the Amhara’s experience of space”. As Levine describes it, this configuration consists of a “charged center surrounded by circles of decreasing significance”. Levine associates to this concentric and hierarchical structure the peasant home, the church, the military camp, and also spontaneous spatial arrangements during festivals and religious celebrations.⁵⁹

There is another Ethiopian document, *Kəbrä nəgəšt*, also dating from the reign of ʿAmdä Şəyon in the early fourteenth century. The title is usually translated as *The Glory of the Kings*; it is a text legitimizing the Solomonic dynasty by tracing their ancestry back through the kings of Aksum to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In a recent article, Manfred Kropp argues that the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* founds this legitimization on the fact that the kings of Aksum, and thus also their descendants, were the guardians of the Ark of the Covenant which was kept in the cathedral of Aksum. Aksum is the new Sion, the holiest of Ethiopia’s holy cities; indeed, it is the image and earthly embodiment of the heavenly Sion-Jerusalem. In this light Kropp also interprets the many references to Sion in ʿAmdä Şəyon’s Chronicle (*The Victorious Campaigns of King ʿAmdä Şeyon*) as related to the concept of Ethiopia as the new Sion; more particularly, Sion is where the royal presence is.⁶⁰ Roha also was connected to Jerusalem: the chief priest of Lalibāla narrates that Roha was built as a copy of Jerusalem.⁶¹ Kropp’s analysis thus corroborates our findings concerning the projection of the symbolism of the heavenly Jerusalem on the spatial organization of the royal camp, the royal palace, and the chamber of the king.

We argued above that this Judeo-Christian model was in reality superimposed on a deeper indigenous one, and that it functioned essentially as a legitimizing device for the monarchy vis-à-vis the official religion. Such a legitimizing role for the Judeo-Christian model is borne out by the textual context. The semantic identity between the city of Aksum and the whole

⁵⁹ DONALD LEVINE, *op. cit.*, 74–75.

⁶⁰ MANFRED KROPP, Zur Deutung des Titels “Kebrä nəgəšt” = *Oriens Christianus: Hefte für die Kunde des christlichen Orients* 80 (1996) 115. Similar points emerge in the extensive discussion of *Kəbrä nəgəšt* by DONALD N. LEVINE, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago and London 1974) 92–112.

⁶¹ See FRIEDRICH HEYER, *op. cit.*, 214.

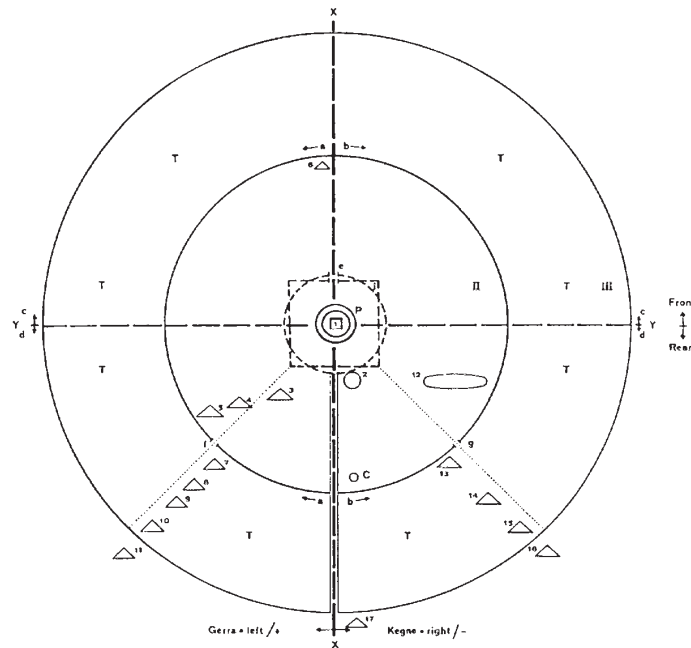
kingdom, in the sense that both are identified with Sion, confirms our conclusion that the same spatial model was operating on all spatial scales.

The codes of *Šər'atä māngəšt* shown in Table 1 are not all of the same importance, but are hierarchically ordered. The religious code constitutes in theory the summit of this hierarchy: it structures the classification system and the whole world view in the text, and guided the functioning of the system, i.e., its use in society. The spatial aspect of the cosmic code, which is a fundamental subcode of the religious code, dictates the spatial model. This aspect is heavily influenced by the human body and thus the anthropomorphic code, another crucial code of the system. Three other codes intervene actively in the construction of the universe and the model: a code of gender and sex, another subcode of the anthropomorphic code; the solar-astral subcode of the cosmic code, mainly revolving around the daily movement of the sun from east to west; and the temporal code, closely related to the latter. These codes, revolving around the religious code, constitute the central ideological part of the *Šər'atä māngəšt* classification system; they are complemented by the social, the legal and the administrative codes. We may assume that the classification system emerging from *Šər'atä māngəšt* marked Ethiopian society and its history. The settlement model was an inseparable part of it and the settlement became the vehicle for it.

There is a final point to be made about the relationship between codes in the model. The religious code may be in theory the most important code, but it seems to be exploited, both in *Šər'atä māngəšt* and throughout Ethiopian history, by the royal code and its most valorized element, the king. The presence of the king, linked to the center, implies the recuperation, by this single element of the royal code, of all the other codes and of the whole of the classification system. This installation in the center is a legitimization strategy, by which the king attempts to secure his actual social power; and power is not only, not even primarily, symbolic. The Ethiopian emperor, and his court, stand higher than any official of the church. They are an image of God and the heavens respectively and mirror the celestial order on earth; the emperor is also associated with the sun. The powerful central position of the king in the classification system is projected into cosmic space as possession of the vertical world axis and the center of the universe, onto earth as the cosmic horizontal visual axis starting from the king-center, and on time as the occupation of the zero moment of time. It is through these strategies that the supposed mediator of the Invisible legitimizes his position as the material Master.

Figures

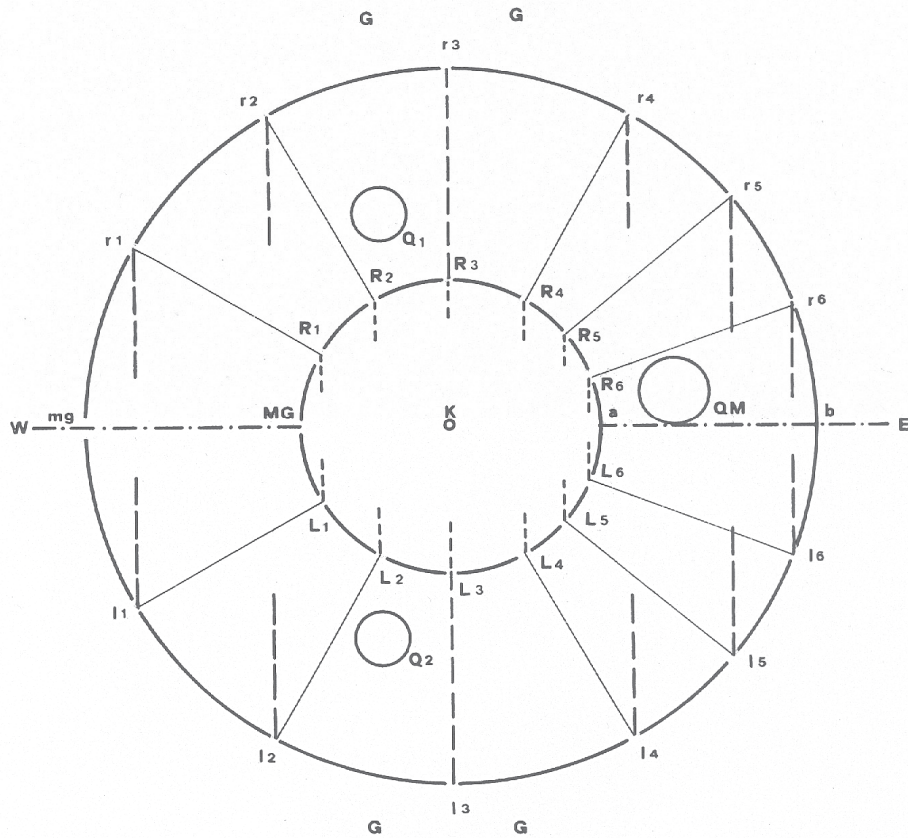
Figure 1. The organization of the military camp on the basis of *Šar'atä Mängašt*.



1. King. 2. Queen. 3. *Blatten geta* (the two Masters of the Pages, both of superior and inferior rank). 4. *Bägəron*d treasurer and chamberlain; there are two, one of the House of the Throne and one of the House of the Lion) and *Teresmba dämsaš* (unknown group of functionaries). 5. Pashas and the Lords. 6. *Raq massäre* (Master of Ceremonies) and *Däräbba bet* (House of the Pages). 7. *Gra azmač* (the military officer in charge of the left wing of the army) and the *Gra qurban* (left branch of the army). 8. *Bətwäddäd* of Bägämder and the people of Bägämder. 9. *Aysänfo dämsaš* (the servants in charge of the stables). 10. *Balambaras* (colonel, the Master of the Horse). 11. *Azažoč* (the Judges of religious rank, assessors) and *Liqawənt* (the Great Judges, measurers) of the left. 12. Ladies and Princesses. 13. *Qäñ azmač* and *Qäñ qurban* (counterpart of 7). 14. *Bətwäddäd* of Goğgam. 15. Children of Abetahun Yona'el of the emperor Mäläk Sägäd. 16. *Azažoč* and *Liqawənt* of the right (counterpart of 11). 17. *Fitawrari* (the general of the vanguard).

P. Palace. I. King's compound. II. Inner zone of the camp. III. Outer zone. XX. Main axis. YY. Secondary notional axis. a. *Gra färäs däbrawi*. b. *Qäñ färäs däbrawi*. c. *Darbinda färäs*. d. *Fit färäs*. e. Central gate. f. *Gra qulf*. g. *Qäñ qulf*. C. Church. T. Tents.

Figure 2. Schematic plan of the king's palace and compound (redrawn on the basis of TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972).



K. King, QM. Queen Mother, Q1. Queen of the Right, Q2. Queen of the Left. a. Enclosure of the palace (*Mäggaraäga*). b. Enclosure of the compound (*Ġägol*). E-W. Main axis. MG. Main gate of the palace *Wädnäš däḡ*. L1-L6. Left gates of the palace. R1-R6. Right gates of the palace. mg. Main gate of the compound. l1-l6. Left gates of the royal compound. r1-r6. Right gates of the royal compound. G. Guards.

Figure 3. Drawing of the military camp of Ras Ḥaylu, 1929 (from MARCEL GRIAULE, *Un camp militaire abyssin, op. cit.*, 118 fig. 1).

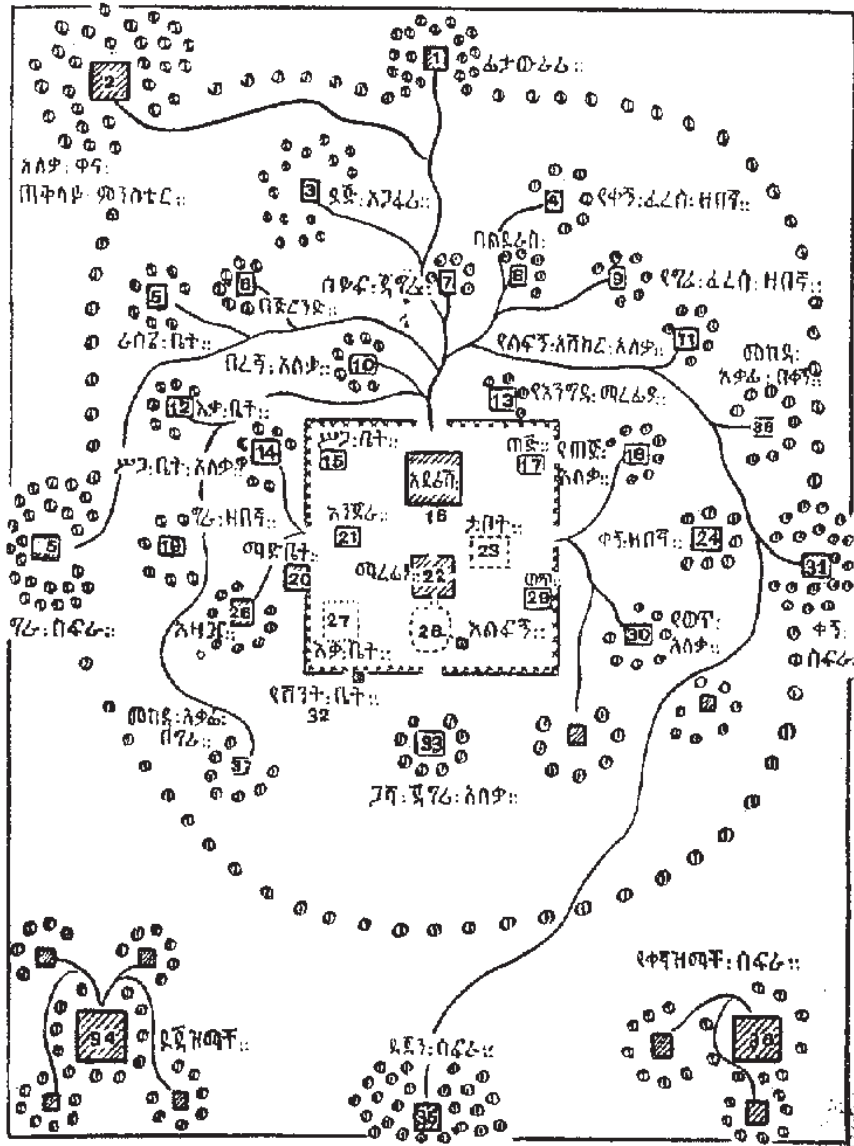
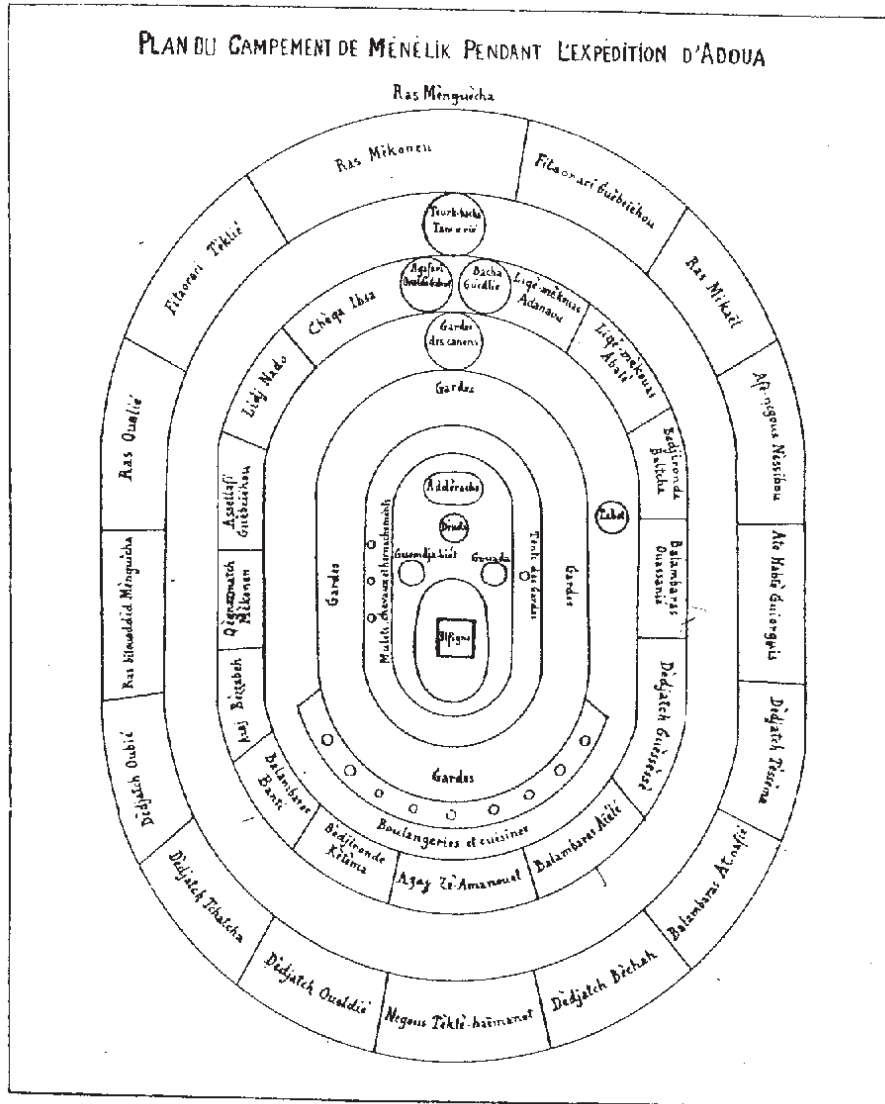


Figure 4. Diagram of the camp of Ménélik II, 1896.



The Symbolism of Space in Ethiopia

Figure 5. Plan of the circular Ethiopian church, according to GRIAULE (Disposition de l'assistance à l'office, *op. cit.*, 274 fig. 8).

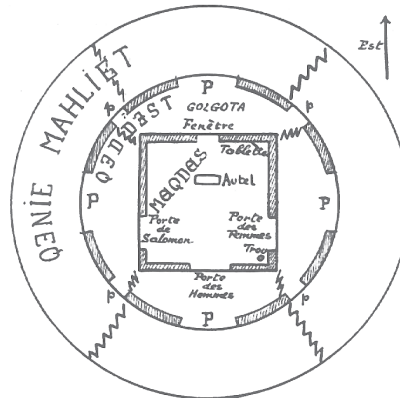


Table 1. An outline of the central part of the classification system in *Šar'atä mängäšt*.

Code	Left (<i>Gra</i>)/+	Center/++	Right (<i>Qän</i>)/-
(political:) royal	king royal, non-royal	king (queen royal)	queen non-royal
(political:) administrative	of the left	king	of the right
legal	judges of the left	king	judges of the right
military	of the left	king	of the right
religious	sacred, profane St. Michael	Sacred Christ (St. Mary) <i>tabot</i>	profane St. Gabriel
religious: cosmic	cosmos	cosmos axis	chaos
cosmic: solar-astral	east north south	sun east	west south north
cosmic or social	heaven order summit	in between order summit	earth disorder
solar-astral and temporal	day	zero moment dawn	night
anthropomorphic: of gender and sex	male	asexual	female
anthropomorphic-spatial (also cosmic)	left front	center center	right rear
spatial (also cosmic)	center, periphery inside, outside up, summit	center inside up, summit	periphery outside down
chromatic	white		black

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Summary

The present study starts from an Amhara text, *Šər'atä māngəšt*, “the first Ethiopian Constitution”, the basic elements of which were already in place in the fourteenth century, and which we analyze using a semiotic methodology. We argue that the concept of classification system is central to an understanding of culture and the semiotic systems constituting it, and we use a specific definition of the semiotic concept of code in order to study the structure of the classification system.

Using an anthropological approach and applying a systematic semiotic methodology of analysis to *Šər'atä māngəšt*, it is possible to penetrate into the Ethiopian world view, articulated around a structured but flexible classification system. This system regulates, mainly through the royal, religious-cosmic and anthropomorphic codes, the organization and form of the royal camp. The spatial model attached to the system remained strikingly constant, in spite of certain modifications, for at least six centuries and was applied to all kinds of military camps; it also influenced the process of urbanization, since these camps were frequently the initial nuclei of later capitals and towns. Historically, this model resulted from the superimposition on an indigenous model of the Christian model of heavenly Jerusalem. The model had a wide scope: it was also applied to palaces, to churches starting in the sixteenth century or earlier, and to the country as a whole. The pivot and actual regulator of the model is the king, a legitimization strategy which reinforces his position of power and authority, both material and symbolic.