

Blue Nile

The Blue Nile, whose source lies in highland Ethiopia, is known as “Al-Bahr al-Azraq” in Arabic, and as “Abbay” in Amharic. Along with the Atbara, it contributes more than 80 per cent of the Nile’s total water supply, the remainder coming mainly from the White Nile that stretches down to the Great Lakes plateau in Central Africa. That the Nile had two major tributaries (the Blue and the White Nile) was already an accepted idea in late medieval cartography, even though it was recurrently identified with the biblical Ghion (one of the four rivers flowing from Eden). Also, most maps of Africa up to the late 17th century extended the Nile’s double hydrographical basin too far south in the continent (sometimes right down to the Cape region).

Correspondingly, Ethiopia’s dimensions were also too exaggerated until then. For a long time, the Ethiopian plateau was conceived as a metaphorical Eden incrustated in eastern Africa, from where flowed the Nile’s waters.

[]Inspired by the British Royal Geographical Society, European geographers began distinguishing the Blue Nile from the “Nile proper” in The mid-19th century. This fact is interesting for it reflects the strong connection between cultural world view, geographical exploration, and political imperialism. On the one hand, the colonization of Sudan, and, on the other, the maintenance of Ethiopia’s formal independence in the height of the “scramble for Africa” by rival European imperial powers, boosted British interest in the exploration of the White Nile, beyond Khartoum, where both tributaries meet. The view that the White, and not the Blue, was the “Nile proper”, is intimately tied up with this exploratory and imperial impulse. Until then, however, the Blue Nile had been the main focus of European travellers’ and geographers’ attention.

[]From classical times, the persistent search for the sources of the Nile had always been related to the enquiries into the nature of its paradoxical floods -- occurring in the summer and not in winter, contrary to other Mediterranean rivers. Herodotus (5th century BC), who reported Egyptian exploration of the Upper Nile in his *History* (Book II), questioned the credibility of different explanations of the mysterious floods. One, in particular, seemed to him most implausible: in summer, the waters of the ocean would be pushed through subterranean tunnels to emerge from deep abysses at the top of a high mountain. Curiously enough, this was the theory that, for more than one millennium, was preferred by most Western writers.

[]In late antiquity, the Nile was seen as the hydrographic axis of the African continent, its sources supposedly being located to the southwest. Pomponius Mella, who in his *De Situ Orbis* mentions those sources in the antipodes of the known world, establishes a clear distinction between the eastern and the western parts of Africa. Pliny (AD23[-79]) relates that Emperor Nero sent parties in search of the source of the Nile, which was to be found south of the Atlas Mountains, in West Africa. He also notes that, after running to the east, the river's waters seemed to disappear under the desert sands to reappear later in East Africa whence they would then flow north towards Egypt.

[]Orosius, Cosmas Indicopleustes and other ancient Christian cosmographers tried to correlate the classical thesis about the particularities of African hydrography with the idea that the Nile flowed from the Earthly Paradise. For this reason, they tended to favour an eastern origin of the river that, in their opinion, separated Asia from Africa, much like the Danube divided Europe from Asia. It must also be remembered that, in their views, the Far East, and particularly the Earthly Paradise -- represented as a high mountain -- lay nearer the celestial spheres than any other parts of the Earth. In his *Image of the World*, Pierre d'Ailly (late 14th century) underlines "the fact that in

reality the Earthly Paradise is at the East”, and stresses that “there is a greater probability of the Nile originating in the East than in the West”.

[]Frequent efforts were made to reconcile these theological views with travellers’ information that suggested a less schematic hydrographic network in which the Nile had not one but two sources, one located in East Africa and the other to the west. References to rivers disappearing in the desert, to subterranean tunnels, and to lakes and confluences deep in the interior of the African continent multiplied in Vincent of Beauvais’s *Historical Mirror* and in the *Book of Knowledge* (14th century).

[]In the 15th and 16th centuries, Christian Ethiopia, the supposed kingdom of the legendary Prester John, was to be explored and described in close relation to such cosmographic conceptions. New information about Ethiopia further exaggerated its dimension in relation to the rest of the continent. Portuguese seamen exploring West African coasts and rivers in the 15th century recurrently referred to the sovereigns of the different kingdoms they encountered as vassals of the (Ethiopian) Prester John, and saw rivers such as the Senegal, the Niger and the Congo as part of the mythical hydrographical network of the Nile.

[]The existence of an oriental Christian kingdom of unknown and exaggerated dimensions in a mountainous territory geographically distinct from the rest of the African continent adjacent to the source of the (Blue) Nile was a geographic cliché that was still in full vigour in the late 18th century.

[]The information about the upper Nile basin contained in the so-called *Ethiopian Itineraries*, well known to Italian cartographers, conditioned the image of Africa as an inhabited area, in the *Modern Tables* -- the maps and charts included in the 15th-century versions of Ptolemy’s *Geography*. In those *Tables*, as in Fra Mauro’s *World Map*, the place names on the banks of the continent-wide River Nile were the same as

the Ethiopian towns mentioned in the *Itineraries*. Arab geographers and travel writers such as Ibn Hawqal, al-Idrisi (c.1099[-]1154), Abul Fida (1273[-]1331), ibn Battuta (1304[-]68(?)) were also very informative sources about the Upper Nile region.

[]The publication in 1540 of Francisco Álvares's *True Information of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies*, increased this tendency, as can be observed in late 16th-century maps. Such maps, that also showed an oversized Ethiopia, presented a rather less coherent image of the Nile than the *Modern Tables*, but a much more detailed (even if more fantastical) representation of African political divisions, based on the topography brought from Ethiopia by Francisco Álvares. The sources of the Nile and the Mountains of the Moon occupied the centre of the continent, and the Ethiopian territory was covered with important cities and sumptuous palaces and churches.

[]As detailed first-hand information about Ethiopia started to be published in Europe, the inadequacy between the reported Ethiopian reality and the medieval utopia of Prester John became manifest. Even so, the fantastical ideas about a subterranean connection between the ocean and the Ethiopian plateaus had not been abandoned. In his *History of the Great and Remote Kingdoms of Ethiopia* (1610), the Dominican Luis Urreta informed his readers that the waters of Lake Tana, in Ethiopia, were supplied by the Indian Ocean. The Jesuit missionary Pero Paez, the first European to visit and describe the sources of the Blue Nile, explicitly refuted this thesis. In Chapter 26 of the *History of Ethiopia*, Paez narrated his visit to the sources of the river and explained the cause of the floods (namely, the monsoon rains). To better clarify a 1000-year-old enigma, Paez tasted the water to confirm that it was not salty. He also “lowered a spear into one of the sources; after eleven spans [the spear] seemed to touch the roots of trees laying on the border of the cliff”. Paez could thus finally prove that the sources of the Nile were not deep abysses, fed by the Indian Ocean.

[]In their explorations, their measurements and their inquiries, Pero Paez and other Jesuit missionaries were the first to accurately represent Ethiopia in land maps and to dismiss the age-old ideas about the peculiar nature of the River Nile. In one such map, annexed to the manuscript of Manuel Almeida's *History of High Ethiopia* (published by Baltazar Teles in 1660), the region's dimensions and proportions, and the emplacement of the Blue Nile's source and initial course, are already approximately equivalent to their modern cartographic representation.

[]The Jesuit missionaries were the first European writers to reach the source of the Blue Nile by Lake Tana, to demonstrate its accessibility, and to reject the exaggerated dimensions traditionally ascribed to Ethiopia. But most of their writings were left unpublished and European cartographers of the 17th and 18th centuries disregarded their geographical findings. Instead, they propounded the old idea of an African central lake that supplied a unified network of rivers and streams.

[]This vision would definitely change some time after the publication of James Bruce's *Travels To Discover the Source of the Nile*, in 1790. The description of his travels from Cairo to the Upper Nile basin and towards the Blue Nile source was extremely valuable, not only in geographic terms, but to feed European popular imagination about the mixture of African wilderness and the oriental decadence of Cairo, Massawa, Gondar and Sennar. Charles-Jacques Poncet had travelled via Sennar and into Ethiopia in 1699, but he hadn't visited the Blue Nile source. But Bruce, who retraced Poncet's route, wrote an intensely personal report of his perilous travels disguised as a dervish, and of his romantic relations with the Ethiopian princess Ozoro Esther and with Sittina, the woman ruler of Shendi, in Sudan.

[]In the wake of the 1798 French military expedition in Upper Egypt, led by the Napoleonic general Desaix, and described by Dominic Vivant, Baron de Denon,

European travel and exploration of the Nile basin, beyond the cataracts of Aswan, followed the Turkish military push south, led by Mohammed Ali. The travellers Thomas Legh and Reverend Charles Smelt met a strange character in Ibrim, south of Philae. Johannes Burckhardt, a Swiss traveller who dressed after the Turkish fashion, had set out from England with the help of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa. He went as far as Shendi and wrote very extensive and detailed notes of his expedition. The call of the Nile kept drawing “antiquarian visitors”, eager to dress as Turks and to ride upstream towards Sennar and the Blue Nile’s source. In 1821, at Meroë, George Waddington, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, met an obscure American adventurer, George Bethune English. At Shendi, he also made the acquaintance of Frédéric Cailliaud, a French intellectual who had accompanied one of Mohammed Ali’s sons, Ismail, in a slave raiding tour to the Ethiopian border, past Roseires. In the 1850s, travels in the Upper Nile became somewhat fashionable among European travellers. These included George Melly, the writer Gustave Flaubert, Lady Duff Gordon, Bayard Taylor, and Doctor Theodor Bilharz. The big-game hunter Samuel Baker with his wife (1861[-]62), as well as the Dutch travel writer Juan Maria Shuver (1880[-]02), further explored the Atbara and the Blue Nile.

[]Another big-game hunter, the American W.N. Macmillan, tried in vain, in 1902[-]05, to make the journey to Lake Tana from Khartoum but gave up near the Ethiopian border, while his Norwegian companion, the explorer B.H. Jensen, failed to make the descent of the river between Lake Tana and the border. Likewise, the British explorer Arthur Hayes explored Lake Tana, the Blue Nile, and the Atbara valleys, but without managing the complete exploration of the mythical river’s bed. It wasn’t until 1930,

thanks to the British colonel R.E. Cheesman, that the last 300 miles of unmapped territory towards the Blue Nile's source were systematically explored and measured.

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