

Ethiopia/Abyssinia

When Father Francisco Álvares published his famed account of the first visit by a Portuguese, and indeed European, embassy to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (between 1520 and 1526), he gave it the curious title of *True Information of the Kingdom of Prester John of the Indies*. Only once or twice in the account does he refer to the lands he visits as “Ethiopia”, and “Abyssinia” is never used. He, like many European writers of that period, speaks of that regional and political entity as the “kingdoms of Prester John”. By “Ethiopia”, travel writers and cosmographers generally meant the African continent, whereas “Africa” (in Arabic *Ifryqia*) was used to identify the coastal areas of North Africa, in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Since ancient Greek times, “Aethiops” has generally designated the “land of the [people with] burned faces”. So, when used in a more strict sense, the word required some specification: the eastern African region was called High Ethiopia, also known as Third India.

[]As to the term “Abyssinia”, it is derived from the Arab *habesh* (“people of mixed breed”), a word that is of common use in modern Ethiopia to designate the semiticized populations of the northern high plateaus. The term appears in medieval maps and texts: for instance, Marco Polo says that “Abash” is a “very large province in Middle India”. But its use in European travel literature became more widely adopted after publication of the writings of the Jesuits (Fathers Manuel Almeida and Jerónimo Lobo, among others) who, in the early 17th century, gained some influence at the Christian Orthodox emperors’ court. They would distinguish between *Abassia* (Abyssinia) -- the Christian areas of the country they referred to as the High Ethiopia

of Prester John -- and the southern and western surroundings populated by pagans and Muslims.

[]To better understand the ambiguities and confusions arising from the superimposition of these different geographical qualifiers, one has to bear in mind the ideological weight of the medieval crusading myth of the eastern Christian potentate Prester John. According to the 12th-century *Letter of Prester John of the Indies*, this “king of kings”, who proposed an alliance to Western rulers for a joint conquest of the Holy Land, lived in the neighbourhood of the Earthly Paradise. In medieval European visions of the world, the Earthly Paradise lay in the Far East, and was thus represented at the top of the T in O maps. The eastern regions of the Ecumene bore the mark of the proximity of God. So, if India, or rather the “three Indies”, were this legendary emperor’s original home, the later identification of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom with the Indian Prester John, in the 14th century, was facilitated by the fact that medieval maps accentuated the eastern location of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa -- the Nile River acting as a separator between Hesperian (or western) Ethiopia -- a land of monsters and evil -- and High (or eastern) Ethiopia -- a rich and beneficial land. Also the Horn of Africa was frequently drawn to the southeast of the Indian sub-continent, thus stressing the conception of High Ethiopia as the “third India”.

[]The “oriental” characteristics that European travel writers and cosmographers attributed to Ethiopia, and more specifically to the Abyssinian plateaus, became an important framework for the descriptions and images produced by travellers to that country, well into the 20th century. The stereotypical distinction between Christian Ethiopia and the rest of Africa was so strong throughout the centuries that it was even reflected in the more or less benign attitude of European imperial powers towards emperor Menelik II, in the late 19th century, and in the general acceptance of

Ethiopia's exceptional independent status -- Menelik aptly manipulated mutual rivalry between the Western powers and expanded southward, thus effectively carving an African "empire".

[] In a region that compounded Western prejudices about oriental sophistication and African barbarism, Ethiopians were described accordingly by travellers from a large number of European countries in a spiral of clichéd visions that were only partially abandoned with the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie, in 1974. The source of the River Nile, the Red Sea, the mountainous landscape, as well as the ancient presence of Christianity and the physical characteristics of the Abyssinians have been the usual background for a relatively large number of travel accounts about Ethiopia. From very early on, these accounts have swayed between the traveller's mythical and fantastical expectations -- dependent on the images about Prester John -- and the confrontation with a frustratingly different reality. Some elements are thus recurrent in European travel literature about Ethiopia since the 16th century, which enunciates a sometimes very negative stanza: the treachery of the people, the tyrannical character of the imperial rulers, the heretical character of Ethiopian Christianity, the harshness of natural disasters.

[] Tales of Ethiopian inaccessibility have spawned from the earliest times in European travel literature. And yet, visitors to the country haven't failed to notice the continuous cultural interpenetration of that region with Egypt, Sudan, the Arabian peninsula, and, to the East, with India. Already, in his *Christian Topography*, Cosmas Indicopleustes refers to how Aksum showed evidence of Egyptian and Middle Eastern influence. The 1st-century itinerary *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is further proof of how the Ethiopian highlands were part of an international merchant circuit. Later, the expansion of Islam effectively created the conditions for developing the European

vision of an inaccessible Christian kingdom perched near the mountainous sources of the River Nile, far behind enemy lines. The 14th-century travellers Pietro Rombulo and Pero Tafur (whose travels are mentioned in Nicolò de Conti's account of his own travels in the Orient) reflect this perspective. Marco Polo, Jordano Catalani of Séverac, self-styled bishop of India, and friar Simon Simeonis stressed the idea of the interchangeability between India and Ethiopia. It was at this period that Catalan and Genoan cartography began placing Prester John in eastern Africa, on the right bank of the river Nile.

[]Meanwhile, a rich travel literature in Arabic also developed, in the wake of Ibn Hisham's accounts of Arab migrations to Abyssinia. Ibn Hawqal, Ibn Khaldun (1332[-]1406), Al-Idrisi (c.1099[-]1154) and Ibn Battuta (1304[-]68(?)) are some of the writers who recorded Islam's vision of that country -- the ideas of inaccessibility being much more mitigated.

[]While most travellers reporting on Ethiopia in the 15th century were Italian, the 16th and early 17th centuries were the golden age of Portuguese literature on the country. A string of Jesuit writers produced report after report not only on their missionary labour in the country, but also their extensive travels around it. Their expulsion by Emperor Fasiladas, in 1634, resulted in a partial closing of the country to Western travellers. Even so, the Italian traveller Giacomo Baratti, the Czech Franciscan Remedius Prutky and the French doctor Charles-Jacques Poncet forwarded precious information on the rising Gondarine civilization, in the 17th century. Sparse Turkish and Yemenite reports, as well as indigenous literature in Ge'ez and in Amharic languages, gave further details of northern Ethiopia. While in Germany Job Ludolf developed a long collaboration with the Ethiopian monk Abba Gregorius and became the father of modern Ethiopian studies, in Great Britain Samuel Johnson (1709[-]84) translated

Father Jerónimo Lobo's *Itinerary* (from the French version of Joachin Legrand), and wrote his influential novel *Rasselas, Prince of Ethiopia*, which stressed the vision of a country almost totally cut off from the rest of the world. Around the same time, the Scottish traveller James Bruce published his *Travels To Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790). Dr Johnson scorned Bruce's claims to be the discoverer of the mythical river's source, reminding the public that the Jesuits had been there more than one century before. Even so, his book still became a model for later European travellers in Ethiopia, the descriptions of the Nile and its source pervading most accounts.

During the 19th century, a growing number of foreigners began visiting the region, the Abyssinian plateaus and Eritrea featuring high in most travelogues. Travellers, merchants, and missionaries romanticized the country. The British explorer Richard Burton (1821[-]90) and the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854[-]91) greatly contributed to the mystique of Harar. Samuel Gobat, Henry Salt, Antonio Cecchi and Jules Borelli wandered through Gondar, Gojjam and Shewa. The German missionaries C.W. Isenberg, J.L. Krapf and Henry Stern, the Italian priest Guglielmo Massaia, the explorers Samuel Backer and F.J. Bieber, and journalists C. Mondon-Vidhaillet and Achile Bizzoni, among others, further pictured Ethiopia as a lost, feudal and oriental empire.

Diplomatic missions were sent from diverse countries: from Great Britain (Cornwallis Harris in 1841[-]43, Walter Plowden in 1843[-]47, Hormuzd Rassam in 1864[-]66, and James Rennell in 1896), from France (Ferret and Galinier in 1840, Rochet d'Héricourt in 1839[-]48, and Anton Klobokowski in 1908), from Italy (Marchese Antinori in 1876, and Pietro Antonelli in 1887[-]89), from Germany (Gerhard Rohlfs in 1881, and Friedrich Rosen in 1905[-]06), from Austria (T. von Heuglin with the Swiss Werner Munzinger, in 1857, Ludwig von Höhnel in 1905),

from Russia (Nicholas Ashinov and Vladimir Mashkov in 1888[-]89, and Nicholas Leontev in 1895), from the United States (Skinner, in 1903[-]04), and from Greece (Demosthenes Mitzakis' in 1879).

[]There was also a good portion of scientific exploration of the region. Geographical knowledge of the country progressed in the wake of Antoine and Arnauld d'Abadie's intensive explorations, soon followed by surveys in such areas as archaeology, ethnography, zoology, etc. Scientific expeditions were led by Eduard Rüppel (1831[-]33), Théophile Lefebvre (1839[-]43), W.T. Blandford and C.R. Markham (1867[-]68), Philipp Paulitschke (1885), Enno Littmann (1905[-]10), and a profusion of others. Lalibela, Gondar and Aksum formed the favourite triangle for foreign visitors who could thus blend evocations of late antiquity, Orientalist traits and rude native interpretations of Christianity, while in the southeast Harar's status as a Muslim closed city further fed the Orientalist curiosity of European readers. Attention paid to the southeastern flatlands (particularly by anthropologists) became more evident from the early 20th century onwards.

[]Emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie strongly stimulated European and American presence in the country since that favoured the assertion of their own imperial authority in a multi-national and fractioned state. For more than a century now, scientific expeditions, Protestant missions (in the southern marches), adventurers and explorers have been criss-crossing the country, and producing an extensive international bibliography that, until very recently, still echoed the old vision of Ethiopia as an oriental, "non-African", country.

Manuel João Ramos

Travel Writing

- Abbadie, Arnauld d', *Douze Ans dans la Haute-Éthiopie*, 1868
- ‘Abd al-Qadir, Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn (Arab-Faqih), *Histoire de la conquête de l’Abyssinie*, edited and translated by René Basset, 2 vols, 1897[-]1909
- Abu al-Fida, *Kitab Taqwim al-buldan*, edited by J.T. Reinaud and Baron MacGuckin de Slane, 1840
- Almeida, Manuel de, *Historia de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia. Imperio do Abexim cujo Rey vulgarmente he chamado Preste Joam*, 3 vols, in *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptorum Occidentales inediti a sæculo XVI ad XIX*, edited by Camillo Beccari, vols 5[-]7, 1907[-]08; extracts in *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593[-]1646*, translated by C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, 1954
- Álvares, Francisco, *Verdadera Informaçam das Terras do Preste João, segundo vio e escreueu ho Padre Francisco Aluares capellam del rey nosso senhor*, 1540; as *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*, translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley (1881), revised and edited with additional material by C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, 2 vols, 1961
- Antinori, Orazio, *Viaggio nel Bogos*, 1887
- Antonelli, Pietro, *Rapporti sullo Scioa ... dal 22 maggio 1883 al 19 giugno 1888*, 1890
- Bahrey, *History of the Galla (17th century) in Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593[-]1646*, edited and translated by C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, 1954
- Baratti, Giacomo, *The Late Travels of S. Giacomo Baratti, an Italian Gentleman, into the Remote Countries of the Abissins, or of Ethiopia Interior*, translated by G.D., 1670

- Bieber, F.J., "Reise durch Äthiopien und den Sudan", *Mitteilungen der Kaiserlich-Königlichen Geographischen Gesellschaft*, 53, 1910
- Blandford, William Thomas, *Observations on the Geology and Zoology of Abyssinia, made During the Progress of the British Expedition to that Country in 1867[-]68*, 1870
- Borelli, Jules, *Ethiopie méridionale: Journal de mon voyage aux pays Amhara, Oromo et Sidama, septembre 1885 à novembre 1888*, 1890
- Bruce, James, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773*, 5 vols, 1790
- Burton, Sir Richard F., *First Footsteps in East Africa, or an Exploration of Harar*, 1856
- Cecchi, Antonio, *Da Zeila alle frontiere del Caffa*, 3 vols, 1886[-]87
- Combes, Edmond and Maurice Tamisier, *Voyage en Abyssinie, dans le pays des Galla, de Choa et d'Ifat*, 4 vols, 1838
- Cosmas, Indicopleustes, *Ellas topografia in Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Graecae*, vol. 88, 1860; as *The Christian Topography of Cosmas*, translated by J.W. McCrindle, 1897
- Crawford, O.G.S. (editor), *Ethiopian Itineraries, circa 1400[-]24, Including those Collected by Alessandro Zorzi at Venice in the Years 1519[-]24*, 1958
- Ferret, P.V.A. and J.G. Galinier, *Voyage en Abyssinie, dans les provinces du Tigré, du Samen, et de l'Amhara*, 3 vols, 1847[-]48
- Frobenius, Leo, *Unter den unsträflichen Aethiopen*, 1913
- Gobat, Samuel, *Journal of Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia*, preceded by an introduction, geographical and historical, on *Abyssinia*, translated by Sereno D. Clark, revised edition, 1850; reprint, 1969

- Griaule, Marcel, *Les flambeurs d'hommes*, 1934; as *Abyssinian Journey*, translated by E.G. Rich, 1935
- Harris, W. Cornwallis, *The Highlands of Aethiopia*, 3 vols, 1844; reprint, 1968
- Heuglin, M.T. von, *Reise nach Abessinien, den Gala-Ländern, Ost-Sudan und Chartum in den Jahren 1861 und 1862*, 1868
- Höhnel, Ludwig, Ritter von, "In Mission bei Kaiser Menelik, 1905" in his *Mein Leben zur See, auf Forschungsreisen und bei Hofe*, 1926
- Holland, Trevenen J. and Henry M. Hozier, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia*, 2 vols, 1870
- Huntingford, G.W.B. (translator and editor), *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, by an unknown Author, With some Extracts from Agatharkhides 'On the Erythraean Sea'*, 1980
- Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325[-]1354*, 3 vols, translated by H.A.R. Gibb, 1958[-]71
- Ibn Hawqal, *Kitab Surat al-ard*, 2 vols, edited by J.H. Kramers, 1938[-]39; as *Configuration de la terre*, translated by Kramers and G. Wiet, 1964
- Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirah al-nabawiyah*, edited by Mustafa al-Saqqa *et al.*, 4 vols 1936[-]37; as *The Life of Muhammad*, translated by Alfred Guillaume, 1955
- Ibn Khaldun, *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, 7 vols, 1867[-]68; as *Tarikh al-'allamah Ibn Khaldun*, edited by Y.A. Dagher, 1956[-]61
- Isenberg, C.W. and J.L. Krapf, *The Journals of the Rev. Messrs. Isenberg and Krapf, Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, detailing their proceedings in the Kingdom of Shoa, and Journeys in Other Parts of Abyssinia, in the Years 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1842*, 1843

- Krapf, J.L., *Travels, Researches and missionary Labours during an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa*, 1860; reprinted with introduction by R.C. Bridges, 1968
- Lefebvre, Théophile *et al.*, *Voyage en Abyssinie exécuté pendant les années 1839[-]43*, 6 vols, 1845[-]51
- Littmann, Enno, *Publications of the Princeton Expedition to Abyssinia*, 4 vols, 1910[-]15
- Lobo, Jerónimo, *Itinerario, e Outros Escritos Inéditos*, edited by M. Gonçalves da Costa, with Charles F. Beckingham and Donald M. Lockhart, 1971; as *The Itinerário of Jerónimo Lobo*, translated by D.M. Lockhart, edited by M.G. da Costa, introduction and notes by C.F. Beckingham, 1983
- Longhena, Mario (editor), *Viaggi in Persia, India e Giava di Nicolò de' Conti, Girolamo Adorno e Girolamo da Santo Stefano*, 1929
- Ludolf, Hiob, *Historia Aethiopica, sive brevis et succinta descriptio Regni Habessinorum quod vulgo male Presbyteri Iohannis vocatur*, 1681
- Massaia, Guglielmo, *I miei trentacinque anni di missione nell'Alta Etiopia*, 12 vols, 1885[-]95; reprint, 1921[-]30
- Mitzakis, Demosthenes, *Journey to Abyssinia* (in Greek), 1889
- Mondon-Vidhaillet, François M.C., "Lettres d'Abyssinie", series, *Le Temps*, 1892[-]98
- Monfreid, Henri, *Vers les terres hostiles de l'Éthiopie*, 1933
- Munzinger, Werner, *Ostafrikanische Studien, von Werner Munzinger. Mit einer Karte von Nord-Abyssinien und den Ländern am Mareb, Barka und Anseba*, 1864
- Murphy, Dervla, *In Ethiopia with a mule*, 1968

- Paez, Pero, *Historia Aethiopiae*, 2 vols, in *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales inediti a sæculo XVI ad XIX*, edited by Camillo Beccari, vols 2[-]3, 1905[-]06
- Paulitschke, Philipp, *Harar-Forschungsreise nach den Somâl- und Galla-Ländern Ost-Afrikas*, 1888
- Plowden, Walter Chicele, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country*, edited by Trevor Chicele Plowden, 1868
- Polo, Marco, *La Description du monde* [ca. 1395] edited by Pierre-Yves Badel, 1988; as *The Book of Marco Polo*, edited and translated by Henry Yule, 3rd edition revised by Henri Cordier, 1903
- Prester, John, *The Letter and the Legend*, edited and translated by Vsevolod Slessarev, 1959
- Prutky, Remedius, *Prutky's Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries*, translated and edited by J.H. Arrowsmith-Brown, annotated by Richard Pankhurst, 1991
- Ranzano, Pietro, *Annales omnium temporum* [ca. 1450] in Carmelo Trasselli, "Un Italiano in Etiopia", *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 1/2 (1941): 173[-]202
- Rassam, Hormuzd, *Narrative of the British Mission to Theodore, King of Abyssinia*, 2 vols, 1869
- Rimbaud, Arthur, *Voyage en Abyssinie et au Harrar*, 1928
- Rohlf's, Gerhard, *Meine Mission nach Abessinien*, 1883; reprint, 1983
- Rüppell, Eduard, *Reise in Abyssinien*, 2 vols, 1838[-]40
- Salt, Henry, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, 1814; reprint, 1967
- Jordanus Catalani (Jordan of Severac), *Mirabilia descripta: The Wonders of the East*, translated by Henry Yule, 1863

Stern, Henry A., *The Captive Missionary, being an Account of the Country and People of Abyssinia, embracing a Narrative of King Theodore's Life, and his Treatment of Political and Religious Missions*, 1869

Thesiger, Wilfrid, *The Danakil Diary: Journeys through Abyssinia*, 1930[-]34

Waugh, Evelyn, *Remote People*, 1931; as *They Were Still Dancing*, 1932

Further Reading

Aleme, Eshete, "European Political Adventurers in Ethiopia at the Turn of the 20th Century", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 12/1 (1974)

Beccari, Camillo (editor), *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales inediti a sæculo XVI ad XIX*, 15 vols, Rome: Casa Editrice Italiana, 1903[-]17

Bossolasco, Gérard, *Éléments et Dynamique de l'Image de l'Éthiopie dans les Récits de Voyage Publiés en Français de 1553 à 1990*, doctoral thesis, Université de Rennes 2, Haute Bretagne, 1993

Caraman, Philip, *The Lost Empire: The Story of the Jesuits in Ethiopia, 1555[-]1634*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, and Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985

Coulbeaux, Jean Baptiste, *Histoire politique et religieuse d'Abyssinie*, 3 vols, Paris: Geuthner, 1929

La Roncière, Charles de, *La découverte de l'Afrique au moyen âge*, 3 vols, Cairo: Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte, 1924[-]27

Donzel, E. Van, *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia 1642-1700: Documents Relating to the Journeys of Khodja Murad*, Leiden: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1979

Doresse, Jean, *L'empire du Prêtre-Jean*, 2 vols, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1957

- Ficalho, Francisco Manuel de Melo, Conde de, *Viagens de Pedro da Covilhan*,
Lisbon: Pereira, 1898
- Fouyas, P.G., “James Bruce of Kinnaird and the Greeks in Ethiopia”, *Abba Salama*, 2
(1971)
- Huntingford, G.W.B., *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century
AD to 1704*, edited by Richard Pankhurst, London, Oxford and New York: Oxford
University Press, for the British Academy, 1989
- James, Wendy, “Kings, Commoners and the Ethnographic Imagination in Sudan and
Ethiopia” in *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*,
edited by Richard Fardon, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, and Washington:
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990
- Kammerer, Albert, *La mer rouge, l’Abyssinie et l’Arabie depuis l’Antiquité: essai
d’histoire et de géographie historique*, 3 vols, Cairo: société royale de géographie
d’Egypte, 1929[-]49
- Knefelkamp, Ulrich, *Die Suche nach dem Reich des Priesterkönigs Johannes*,
Gelsenkirchen: Müller, 1986
- Levine, Donald N., *Greater Ethiopia: Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society*. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1974
- Malécot, Georges, *Les Voyageurs français et les relations entre la France et
l’Abyssinie de 1835 à 1870*, Paris: société française d’histoire d’outre-mer, 1972
- Marcus, Harold G., *The Modern History of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: A Select
and Annotated Bibliography*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972
- Medeiros, Françoise de, *L’Occident et l’afrique, XIIIe - Xve: images et
representations*, Karthala: centre de recherches africaines, Paris: 1985
- Pankhurst, Richard, *Travellers in Ethiopia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965

- Pankhurst, Richard and Leila Ingrams, *Ethiopia Engraved: An Illustrated Catalogue of Engravings by Foreign Travelers from 1681 to 1900*, London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1988
- Pennec, H., “La mission jésuite en Éthiopie au temps de Pedro Paez (1583[-]1622) et ses rapports avec le pouvoir éthiopien” in *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 36 (1992): 77[-]115; 37 (1993): 135[-]65; 38 (1994): 139[-]81
- Phillipson, David, *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum, Its Antecedents and Successors*, London: British Museum Press, 1998
- Prouty, Chris and Eugene Rosenfeld, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia*, Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981; as *Hist. Dict. of Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 2nd edition, 1993
- Trimingham, J. Spencer, *Islam in Ethiopia*, London: F. Cass, 1952
- Zarncke, Friedrich, *Der Priester Johannes*, 2 vols, Leipzig: Hirzel, 1876[-]79; reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1980