

Pedro Paez 1564[-]1622

Spanish Jesuit missionary and writer

Pedro Paez was born in 1564, in the Spanish village of Olmeda (near Alcalà de Henares, Toledo). In 1582, aged 18, he joined the Society of Jesus. This was after serving two years as a novice, studying philosophy in the School of Belmonte for three years with Thomas of Ituren, with whom he would keep in contact in the coming years as a missionary in the Orient.

On 8 May 1587, Paez formally asked to be made a missionary, in a letter (*indipeta*) addressed to the general of the Society of Jesus, Claudio Aquaviva (1581[-]1615). His request was quickly accepted, and in March 1588 he sailed to the capital of the Portuguese colony in India, the city of Goa. He arrived there in September of the same year, and joined a course in theology at the School of Saint Paul of Goa. His education was soon interrupted as in January 1589 he was chosen by the Provincial of the Society in Goa, Pedro Martinez, to accompany Father Antonio de Monserrate on a mission destined for Ethiopia, and, for the occasion, he was ordained as a priest in the same month.

This was not the first time Jesuit missionaries had been sent to that African kingdom. A first contingent had entered the country in 1557, on a mission that bore little fruit. The decision to send new missionaries to Ethiopia came from Philip II, emperor of Spain and king of Portugal. As with the first Luso-Ethiopian contacts in the first half of the 16th century, Philip's motives were both strategic and diplomatic. By renewing official contacts with Christian Ethiopia, he hoped to block or at least to reduce Ottoman influence in the Red Sea. Another reason was religious: the missionaries sent in 1557 were presumably either dead or very old, and the

descendants of the Portuguese community in Ethiopia were believed to be lacking spiritual guidance.

[]An Indian secular priest (Melchior da Silva) had in fact arrived in Ethiopia in 1598, soon after the death of Francisco Lopes, the last Jesuit of the 1557 mission. The decision to send him was the result of various difficulties in sending members of the Society from Goa. When da Silva reached Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, he sent a report mentioning the “deplorable” material and spiritual state of the Luso-Ethiopian community and insisting that they were on the brink of losing their Catholic identity and becoming Ethiopian Orthodox.

[]Philip entrusted Viceroy Manuel de Sousa Coutinho, his representative in the *Estado da India*, with the Ethiopian mission project. The viceroy personally addressed the Provincial of the Jesuits of Goa, asking him to organize the details of the mission. The latter’s choice of Antonio de Monserrate and Pedro Paez -- the first an experienced but not highly educated priest of 52 years old, the second a young and inexperienced 25-year-old priest who had precociously interrupted his theology studies -- suggests that, while complying with the royal decision originating from Madrid, he preferred not to risk sending high-grade missionaries to Ethiopia, by now a relatively marginal priority for the Society. Neither of the chosen two were in fact professed priests (the highest educational grade in the Society, given at the end of a four-year course in theology), truly equipped to confront the Ethiopian Orthodox theologians.

[]For the head of the Society in Goa, the idea of giving spiritual help to this small Portuguese Catholic community (about 800 to 1200 people), set in an essentially Orthodox country, and of administering to them the Catholic sacraments, was the main reason behind the revitalization of the mission in Ethiopia; the ambitious plans

for the conversion of the kingdom of Prester John, laid down half a century before by the founder of the Society, Ignatius of Loyola, had been virtually abandoned.

[]The two priests left Goa on 2 February 1589 and set sail to Ethiopia. But their ship sank in view of Dhofar, in southern Arabia and they were captured by a Turkish vessel and taken as prisoners to the Arabian peninsula. They were kept in Sana, in Yemen, and later served as rowers in a Turkish galley. Almost seven years later, Goa agreed to pay a large ransom to liberate them. They returned to Portuguese India in December 1596 and Pedro Paez went back to the study of theology. Two months later, he became seriously ill and remained in bed for a full eight months. When his health was restored, he was sent to the island of Salsete and took charge of four Christian villages there. In early 1601, he sailed for Diu, waiting for an occasion to travel to Ethiopia again.

[]In 1603, Pedro Paez finally managed to reach Ethiopia. He arrived alone at the Red Sea port of Massawa disguised as an Armenian merchant. In May, he was welcomed by the members of the Luso-Ethiopian community at the Jesuit residence of Maygwagwa, in Tigray.

[]His arrival in Ethiopia is the starting point of the second phase of the Jesuit mission in Ethiopia. In the next two years, four other missionaries joined him (António Fernandes, Francisco Angelis, Luis de Azevedo, and Laurenço Romano). From 1603 to 1621[-]22, the priests offered teaching in Catholic doctrine to the Luso-Ethiopian children and tried to guarantee that the adults keep their Catholic faith and identity. From 1603 onwards, they were involved in a programme of religious translation. Paez translated a *cartilha* (a catechism destined to children) into Amharic (the common official language) with the help of the *capitan* of the Portuguese, João Gabriel. After 1612, the group began translating a series of biblical commentaries into Ge'ez (the

Ethiopian Church's language) to be analysed in the "disputes" between Catholic and Orthodox theologians, which took place at the royal court and elsewhere.

[[Pedro Paez also took charge of establishing diplomatic contacts with the Ethiopian royal court. To Za-Dengel and to the two sovereigns that succeeded him (Yaeqob and Susneyos), he offered an alliance with the Iberian crown in exchange for their adherence to the Catholic faith and obedience to Rome.

[[From 1607, when Susneyos acceded to the throne, Paez stayed for long periods at the royal camp. Having won the emperor's confidence, he acted as his special councillor and followed him in his frequent journeys. Largely as a result of the missionary's influence, Susneyos finally converted to the Catholic faith in 1621.

[[After about 1613/14, Pedro Paez also began a vast piece of sociological and historic research. He collected oral testimonies from Ethiopian courtiers and ecclesiastics, he consulted Ethiopian manuscripts on political and religious history, he travelled throughout the highlands visiting important religious sites. Paez used this extensive documentation to write his *History of Ethiopia*, an immense *fresco* originally destined to refute the extravagant books of a Dominican monk, Luis de Urreta, who in 1610 and 1611 reaffirmed the legendary features of the "kingdom of Prester John". To refute Urreta's legendary description of Ethiopia and establish the "truth" about the country, Paez offered his readers a highly original ethnographical description of Ethiopian society of the early 17th century. He drew from his experience of nearly 20 years in the country, offering a perspective that goes far beyond the negative vision of a community in need of urgent conversion to the "true faith". His book is a decisive step in the development of scientific knowledge about that African region.

[[Pedro Paez died in Gorgora (a Jesuit residence on the northern shore of Lake Tana), on 20 May 1622, as a result of violent fevers. Days before, he had heard Emperor

Susneyos publicly converting to Catholicism and was on the point of finishing his *History of Ethiopia*.

Hervé Pennec and Manuel João Ramos

Biography

Born Pedro Paez Xaramillo in Olmedo, near Toledo, Spain, 1564. Studied philosophy with Thomas of Ituren in the School of Belmonte, c.1579[-]82. Entered the Society of Jesus, 1582. Sailed as a Jesuit missionary to Goa, 1588. Studied at the School of St. Paul of Goa. Ordained priest and travelled to Ethiopia with Father Antonio de Monserrate, 1589. After being shipwrecked in Southern Arabia, captured by Turkish pirates, 1589; imprisoned in Sana, Yemen, later serving in a Turkish galley, until 1596. Returned to Goa: studied theology and later travelled to the island of Salsete, taking charge of a number of Christian villages there. Sailed to Diu, 1601, and reached Ethiopia disguised as an Armenian merchant, 1603. Settled at the Jesuit residence of Maygwagwa, Tigray; compiled a catechism and translated Biblical commentaries into local language. Established diplomatic contact with the Ethiopian royal court, converting the Ethiopian king, Za-Dengel, and eventually his successors, to Catholicism. From 1607, acted as King Susneyos' special counsellor, travelling with him frequently. Compiled his *History of Ethiopia*, from 1613/14. Became first European to visit Lake Tana, 1622, shortly after Susneyos' conversion to Catholicism. Died violent fever in Gorgora, Ethiopia, 20 May 1622.

Travel Writing

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*frayles, del Alleluya con siete mil, y de Bedenagli de cinco mil monjas, con otras
grandezas de la religion del Padre Santo Domingo, Valencia: Juan Chrysostomo
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