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Ethiopia in the geographical representations of Mediaeval and Renaissance Europe

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THE *KEBRA NEGAST* (OR 'GLORY OF KINGS') is one of the literary masterpieces of Ethiopian civilisation.

Written in Ge'ez, the classical language of Ethiopia, the current form of the text was fixed at the end of the 13th century, at the time of the rise of the so-called Solomon Dynasty to the imperial throne, in the Tigre and Amhara highlands. As a commemoration of an ideology of power inspired by biblical literature, the *Kebra Negast* evokes the origin of an imperial dynasty descending from the royal lineage of David and Solomon. Through this dynasty, the Ethiopians became the heirs to the chosen people of the Hebrew God, and the Christian monofisitic church came to guard the Ark of the Covenant (which, according to official tradition, is enclosed in a small chapel next to the church of Holy Mary of Zion, in the old imperial capital of Axum).

Chapters II and III of the *Kebra Negast* narrate the episodes whereby Makeda (the Queen of Sheba) went to Jerusalem in search of Solomon, and acquired his Wisdom, learned the rules and laws of Israelite nobility, and was converted to the Hebrew religion.¹ Makeda, being a virgin Queen descending from a royal lineage in which power was transmitted from mother to daughter, was, at the same time, the priestess of an autochthonous cult of sun worshippers. She succumbed to Solomon's powers of seduction and subsequently bore a son upon returning to her realm. The son of this fleeting union, Menelik (Ethiopian: *Bayna Lehkem*, 'Son of the Wise Man', i.e. 'Son of Solomon'), having been brought up in Ethiopia, decided to travel one day to Israel to meet his father (and be recognised by him). In Jerusalem, despite the population's unanimous acknowledgement of

¹ The account of the origin of Ethiopian sovereignty in the *Kebra Negast* is based on ancient Semitic literary traditions that refer to the "Queen of Sheba" of the Old Testament (*Kings*, Ch. X vs. 1-13), or to Bilkis, in the Koran (*Sura XVIII*: 15-45). About this subject, see Ullendorf (1968: 131 ff.).

his physical resemblance to David (his paternal grandfather), Menelik declined to succeed Solomon to the Judaic throne and returned to Ethiopia, accompanied by the first-born sons of the Judaic tribes, who would become his court, and carrying the Ark of the Covenant, which had been stolen from the Temple under the benevolent guidance of the Archangel Michael.

The duplicity of Ethiopian cultural heritage and its representations in the West

Menelik I, the first *Negusa Negast* or 'King of Kings' of Ethiopia, is the main symbol of a national ideology based on the ecumenical Christian model. Historically, this ideology stressed the specificity of Ethiopian civilisation (or at least, of the political and religious expressions of a "Semitic" central nucleus) in relation to the surrounding regions, i.e. the Arab and Islamic world (mainly Egypt, Yemen, and Somalia), and the Sudanese and East African "lowlands" (Levine 1974: 40 ff.).

As direct descendent of the first-born son of Solomon, the Christian Emperors of Ethiopia considered their status to be equivalent to that of "the King of Rome" (the Byzantine Emperor). From the Christian Ethiopian point of view, Europeans (*Ferenjoch*) were (and are) considered Aryan heretics (duofisite, or believers in a double nature of Christ), while the African cultures on the periphery of the Empire, and of the non-Islamic, Hebrew or Christian regions (the *Shankilla* peoples), were seen as descendants of Cush, cursed by God, and consequently apt to be enslaved and/or converted (Dohnam 1986: 12; Levine 1974: 56).

It is worth pointing out that this exclusivist perception, constantly reaffirmed in Ethiopia throughout the centuries, has strong similarities with the vision held by the Christian West of that civilisation (James 1990: 101-112; Levine 1974: 15 ff). However, the ambiguities present in the categorization of Menelik ('the Sun of Zion') in the *Kebra Negast* must be recalled: the first Israelite King of Ethiopia, born on the return journey to his mother's land, simultaneously claimed to be a Judaic outsider ("Semitic", by paternal right) and an Ethiopian autochtone ("Camitic", by maternal right). In some way, this duplicity paved the way, from the 13th century onwards, for the continuous process of integrating and civilising the social and regional periphery into the "Greater Ethiopia" (namely the cyclic "Amharisation" of the *Shankilla* peoples) (Levine 1974: 69 ff). Simultaneously, there was a recurring "Ethiopianisation" of Semitic and European cultural, religious and literary models.

In the history of contacts and relations between Ethiopia and Western Europe, this fundamental ambiguity had its counterpart in a peculiar perception of that particular region by the West. The representation of Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, was visibly distinct from the African context, as it had been endowed with an "oriental" image since ancient times (James 1990: 102; Levine 1974: 6-9). It was both the land of origin of the most remote populations of the ecumena (see Herodotus, and Aeschylus), and the country where

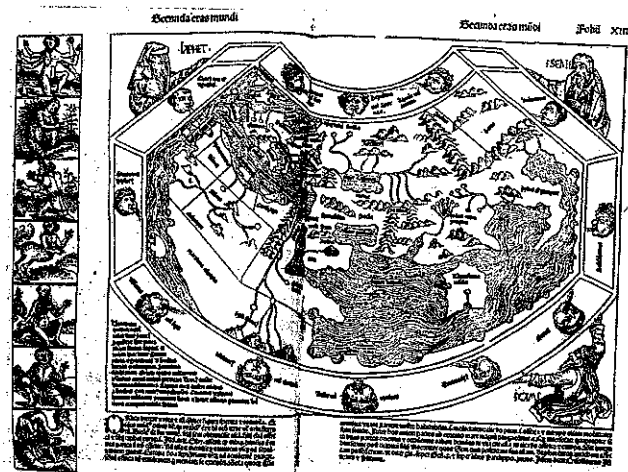


FIG 1. Mapa-mundi in *Secundi Etas Mundi*, Hartmann Schedel, cat. no. 6.

social justice and equality of customs were unparalleled, according to such diverse authors as Diodore Siculus, Lactance, or Heliodore. Ethiopia was also perceived as an ancient and powerful civilisation, and its sovereign was a desirable ally of the Byzantine Emperors (Levine 1974: 2-7). Although it was the "Land of the burnt faces" (Gk *Aethiopia*), it was also described as the "Third India", with a temperate and agreeable climate (cf. Releño 1997: 64-66). These conceptions were further crystallised in the

mediaeval cosmographic texts, as well as in ecumenical cartography - especially from the 14th century onwards - where a group of characteristic elements became particularly relevant: the region of the so-called "Horn of Africa", adjacent to the Red Sea, took on a rather pronounced eastern placement and configuration in the various world maps. It was here that the enigmatic and inaccessible source of the Nile was usually located. This source was indicated by a lake over a high mountain. This river also included a more northerly lake, in the centre of which was represented the "Isle of Meroe". The Horn of Africa was seen as visibly separated from the monstrous populations spread over the cartographic space of Africa.² The excessively eastern mapping of that region (on certain maps, it was drawn further to the east than India), permitted, however, that the geographical information of the routes and itineraries would coincide with Western Christian cosmology (fig. 1). According to the latter, the Nile was to be identified with the biblical Gihon (*Genesis*, Ch. II, v. 13) as one of the four rivers which sprang from the Earthly Paradise, generally indicated to the far east.

This tendency towards a metaphorical assimilation between Ethiopia and the regions adjacent to the Earthly Paradise (as may be seen in the Spanish *Book of Knowledge*, for example) favoured the sociological utopia of Ethiopia, which was named the "Third India".³ Another image was frequently indicated in this region. With its appearance in the iconography of the Italian and Iberian maps and portulans (from the beginning of the 14th to mid 17th century), this image became to a certain degree emblematic of the representations with which it was associated. This was the figure of a sovereign seated "in majesty" holding a globe and a cross as symbols of his imperial power. This monarch, identified in the captions of the maps as *Presbyter Johannes*, or Prester John, epitomised a particular representation of Ethiopia in the imagination of Late Mediaeval Europe.

² Mediaeval cartography and cosmography generally established a logical interdependence between images of monstrosity, ideas and inaccessibility and the inclement weather caused by the proximity to the *zona torrida* (Releño 1997: 45-46).
³ From Jordanus Catalani de Sévérac, in the *Mirabilia descripta* (c. 1330), until the book of the Dominican monk, Luis Urreta, the *Historia ecclesiae, politica, natural y moral de los grandes y remotos Reynos de la Etiopia, Monarchia del Emperador llama Preste Juan de las Indias*, (published in Valencia, in 1610).

During the transition of the kingdom of Prester John from Asia to Africa, the biblical perspective connecting the Nile with Paradise was supported by the classical conceptions of geographers such as Pomponius Mela (*Chorography*), who postulated the existence of two Africas - a negative Hesperian (Atlantic) Africa and an eastern Ethiopia characterised as positive. The confluence of the two rendered possible the conceptualisation of an African kingdom of "Prester John of the Indies" in 16th-century Europe. The geographical ambiguity of Ethiopia in European views - African and Asian, Southern and Eastern - as well as the "heretical" character of the Christian faith of its inhabitants, and the obvious indecision that marked the iconographic representations of the monarch (the colour of his skin ranging from white to black, and either sitting on a throne or in front of a tent) are, in the context of ancient European cartography, some of the many descriptive elements that correspond to important moments of a historical process of identification, and later, of negation of that identification between the Ethiopian 'King of Kings' (the *Negusa Negast*) and the Indian king, Prester John. We propose, therefore, to review here some events in this process that culminated in a century of turbulent Portuguese presence in Ethiopia.

Prester John between Asia and Africa

In the second half of the 12th century, a letter written by an Asian king whose name was Prester John was circulating in the European courts. This letter had supposedly been sent to Basilius Manuel Comeno, Emperor of Byzantium. It referred to a magnificent Christian king, who commanded a vast Empire, and to whom seventy two kings, as well as hundreds of dukes, counts, and archbishops paid homage. His garments were woven by salamanders and purified by fire, and his life was miraculously extended thanks to the power of water from a fountain in the centre of his marvellous palace. In form and decoration, the palace was an anticipation of the apocalyptic New Jerusalem. Coming from a Kingdom located in the "Indies", the Letter proposed an alliance with the Christian West to fight the common enemy, Islam, and conquer the Holy Land. The *Letter of Prester John* further describes the marvels and fabulous riches of his kingdom - pepper, precious stones, and silk - and peripherally, the existence of men who were dumb, horned, or three-legged giants, with the heads of dogs or hooves on their feet, as well as strange and "wonderful" animals. The *Letter* added that his kingdom was crossed by a river which came directly from paradise.⁴

This text conveyed a complex image, not only of Prester John as a Christ-like king, but of a social, natural and supernatural space conditioned by the close proximity of the Earthly Paradise (Albert 1991: 30-31; Ramos 1997: 74, 119)⁵. The medieval European construction of a Christian King, Lord of a fabulous empire (Asian and not African) became less and less coherent, thanks to the voyages by sea and land of the first phase of the Discoveries to the East, and to the subsequent

⁴ The *Epistola Presbyter Johannes* was published by Friedrich Zarncke, in "Der Presbyter Johannes", *Abhandlungen der Königl. Sachs. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Phil. Hist. Klasse*, VII, 1879: 909-924.

⁵ The sociological construction of the *ecumena* outlined in Mediaeval cartographic works, that sought to conciliate the classical conception of the Earth as a Globe, and the biblical view of a flat Earth centred in Jerusalem, is the result of a cosmological structure in which Western humanity existed on a lower plane, and opposed to the oriental Earthly Paradise, situated on a higher plane; Jerusalem, the centre of the World, would stand on an intermediate plane (cf. Randles 1980: 17 ff.).

transformation of European geographical and cosmological charts. In fact, such construction suffered a long but radical transformation that was eventually completed during the 17th century. The evolution of Prester John and his assimilation to the Emperor of Ethiopia finally meant the extinction of the original formula of the *Letter*, which projected the image of an Eastern sovereign with well-defined millenary characteristics - as king and priest, mimesis and prefiguration of Christ the *Cosmocrator* ("Lord of the Cosmos").

During the 13th and 14th centuries, many European travellers and missionaries to Asia sought to associate the Christian monarch, the author of the *Letter*, with the Mongol Khan, or possibly to one of his vassals. In the conceptions valued during the period of the second crusades, Prester John was a potential ally to counter the invasion of the Holy Land by the Muslims. But these conditions were modified in books of travellers, and in the cosmographic descriptions of the period, such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (c. 1350), for example. It should be noted that, since the appearance of the *Letter*, the construction of the image of Prester John followed an explicit theological framework (Ramos 1997: 159-160). The references to a heretical Christian faith (namely the ignorance, in the Asian kingdom of Prester John, of some articles of orthodox Christian doctrine) are particularly significant in such texts.⁶

At the same time that these European travellers' books were doubting the Asian (either Mongol or Nestorian) identity of Prester John, a restructuring of the site of the kingdom was progressively taking shape in the European imagination, moving it from Asia to Africa. This restructuring was made possible by the appearance of information about Nubian or Ethiopian Christian kingdoms. This data was provided by European travellers, and by Ethiopian Christian monks and pilgrims - whose presence in the Holy Land, and also in the Papal Court, was frequently reported.⁷

At the beginning of the 14th century, a certain monk from Cluny, Richard of Poitiers, announced the existence of Christian kings in Africa, one in Nubia, the other in Ethiopia. By the end of the same century, when references were made to the Ethiopian ambassadors to the courts of Afonso IV of Aragon, and to the fact that Afonso VI of Portugal sent gifts to "Prester John" through these ambassadors (Davis 1971: 225), the relocation of the kingdom to East Africa was already confirmed. During a relatively long, undefined period (from the 14th to the end of the 15th century) the search for new co-ordinates continued, in order to further fix the cosmological, geographical and cartographic elements of that space (Ramos 1997: 162).⁸ At the same time, various authors were proposing a somewhat negative vision of Indian Christianity, the heretical followers of the cult of Saint Thomas (Jordano Catalani de Séverac, Giovanni da Marignoli, Pietro Rombulo, Niccolò de Conti, etc.).

⁶ Travellers and writers like Marco Polo, Wilhelm Ruybroeck, Giovanni di Montecorvino, and Odorico da Perdenone, characterised the Christian subjects of Prester John as "Nestorians", and himself as a vassal of the Mongol Khan (Ramos 1997: 159).

⁷ A Dominican who visited Ethiopia (c. 1315) identified the Ethiopian monarch, in a report sent to Pope John of Avignon, as being the "African Emperor that his Holiness called Prester John". In 1402, the Florentine, Antonio Bartoli, was presented in Venice as the ambassador of the *Negus*, Dawit I. In 1443, Ethiopian ecclesiastics, who were sent to the Pontifical court of Eugene IV, in Florence, were interrogated at length on characteristics of their doctrine, their country, and their sovereign (more specifically, about his military strength). Biondo Flavio, in the *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum*, tells us, however, that the Ethiopian monks considered the name, "Prester John", which had been attributed to their monarch, as an "absurd title". Poggio Bracciolini also referred to the presence of Ethiopians in Florence, in the *Historiae de varietate fortunae*.

⁸ Poggio Bracciolini transcribed the information supplied by the Italian traveller Niccolò de Conti about a paradisiacal, and "Indian", kingdom of Ethiopia, and contrasted it with the "actual" Indian Christians, the heretical followers of S. Tomé. At the beginning of the 16th century, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, was still writing, in the *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, that "Upper Ethiopia extends beyond Persia to the Indus river, from which India took its name" (ed. 1905: 80).

The Ethiopian location of "Prester John" detailed in the literary documentation was the result of a long and winding process, in which various other alternatives had been attempted (in Mongolia, Tibet, Armenia, etc.). However, the representation of the Ethiopian Prester John in cartography had been consolidated since the beginning, in a caption on the map by Angelino Dulcert (1339) in the space reserved for East Africa (for example), even though that space was still relatively undefined (Releño 1997: 72). Even though the presence of Prester John was common in the cartography of Africa, the doubts

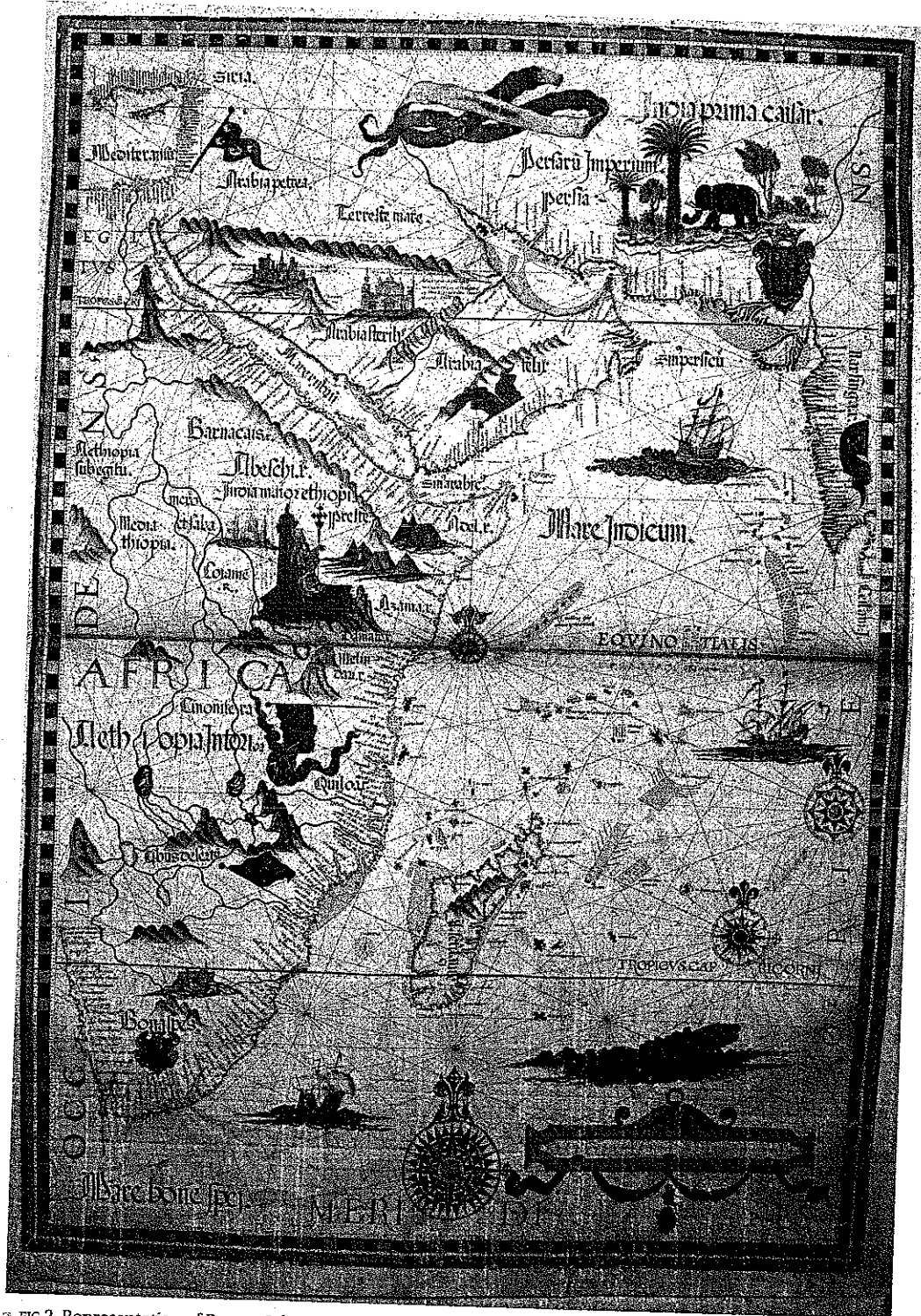


FIG 2. Representation of Prester John in a view of the Western Indian Ocean, *Atlas* by Diogo Homem, 1558. Courtesy of The British Library, London, K 50735.

as to his skin colour increased. The first definition of the Ethiopian king was strongly dependent on the Asian Prester John. A caption on the World Map from Modena reads that Prester John is a Christian king, and is the "Lord of the Indians, who are Negro by nature". On the map of Angelo Dulcert he is simply mentioned as the "Christian Negro Prester John", and on the anonymous map from Florence (1413) or on the Catalan World Map in the Estense Library (c. 1450), he is represented as a Negro king in front of a tent; but on the maps of Mecia de Viladestes (1413) Andrea Bianco (1436) and Juan de la Cosa

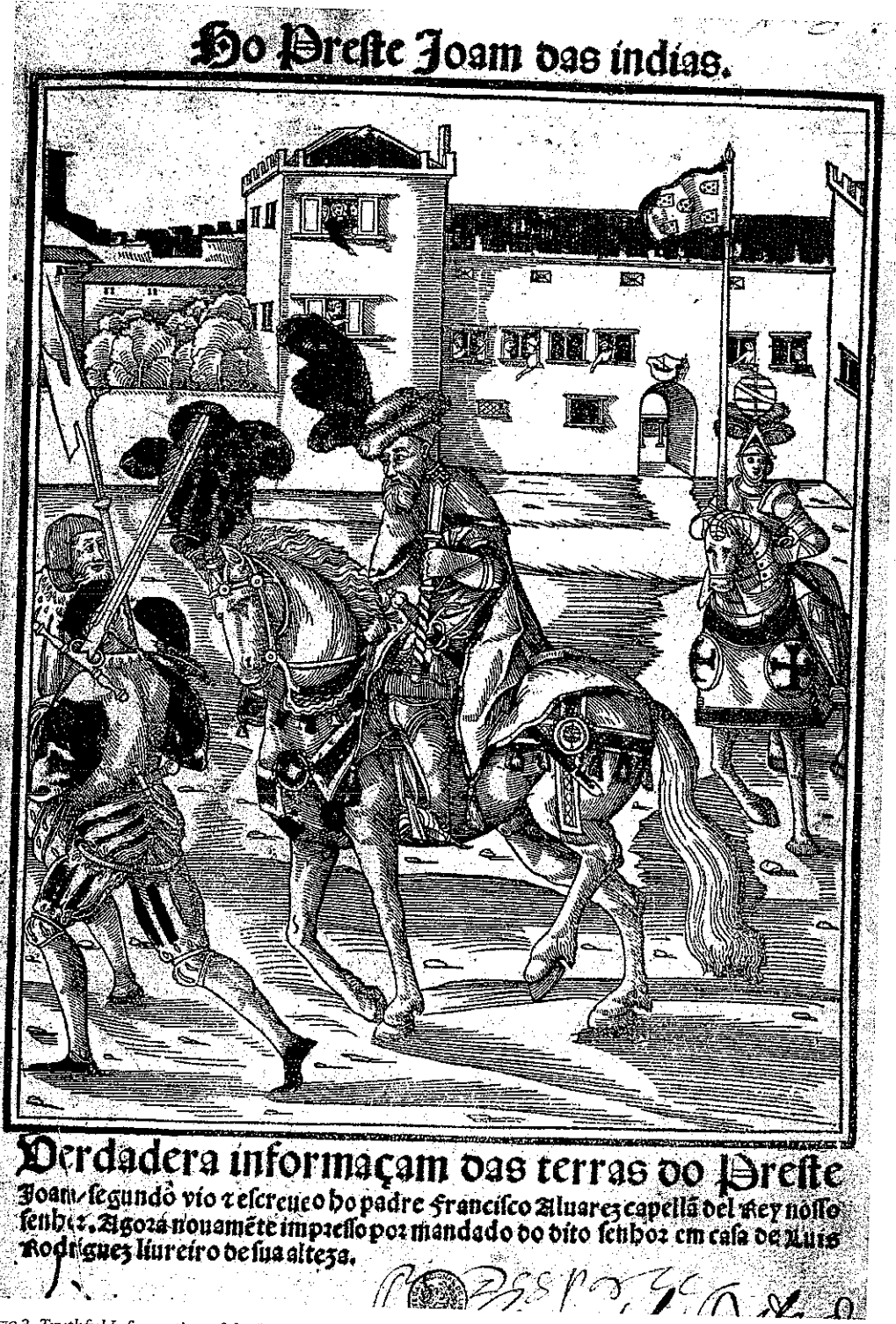


FIG 3. Truthful Information of the Land of Prester John of the Indies, 1540. Biblioteca Nacional, Lisbon.

(1500), he is distinctly represented as a white monarch, seated on a throne or next to a palace (cf. Fall 1982: 183-188; Releño 1997: 71-74). With the passage of time, reference to the skin colour of the sovereign became progressively more problematic and ambiguous (fig. 2). An inscription on the *Kunstman IV* map (1519) states that "The King of Abyssinia is powerful and Christian. With his sceptre, he commands kings and chiefs"; the text adds that "he is an Ethiopian Negro, with frizzy hair, but in a way, almost white". This idea can also be found in the *Truthful Information of the Land of Prester John of the Indies* (1540) by Padre Francisco Álvares (fig. 3), who accompanied the first Portuguese embassy to meet the Negus (from 1520 to 1526). Of the "young" Prester John, he writes: "he was young, and not very black, the tone of his skin being that of the chestnut or rather of the light Bayonne apple and nevertheless a true gentleman".⁹

This indecision in categorising the figure and the skin colour of the monarch was partly due to the fact that, in mediaeval European cosmography, the River Nile was frequently considered to be the frontier of India. Hence, with the Portuguese explorations of the African coast, the Senegal, the Niger and ultimately, the Congo rivers, were thought to be branches of the Nile which flowed into the Atlantic. This conception implied that all the regions to the East of these rivers were considered to be the lands of Prester John. Such reasoning, which can be found in Gomes Eanes de Zurara's *Chronicle of the Conquest of Guinea*, for example, set the ground for the special relations between Portugal and the King of the Congo at the end of the 15th century. Cadamosto, in his *Treaty of the Sphere*, announced that the River Senegal was a subsidiary of the Nile, "which has its source in the Earthly Paradise" (Randles 1960: 20 ff.). Consequently, according to the Portuguese authors of the beginning of the discoveries, the shift of the Kingdom of Prester John from Asia to East Africa meant the double spatial and conceptual separation between the motif of a Christian king, and that of the spice producing region — in other words, the theological code becomes more autonomous. In this way, as is shown in the *Zurara's Chronicle*, the religious identities were preferentially used to define the figure of the "discoverer" in an unknown space in sociological terms: the negative zones of this space were generally associated with the "Moor", and the positive ones with the "Christian" (cf. Silva Horta 1991: 225a ff.). Hence, seen from the estuary of the Niger River, another "subsidiary" of the Nile, the Kingdom of Benin in the "East", since it was not Moorish, was associated with the Kingdom of Prester John; in the Gulf of Guinea, the Kingdom of the Congo underwent an identical process; likewise, the Hindus of Calicut were considered to be Christians in Álvaro Velho's view.

In Majorcan cartography, from the beginning of the 14th century, the images presented of African monarchs also stress this division: the image of a Christian, Eastern king clearly opposed the images of the Muslim kings in North Africa. The "Negro Gentiles", "Idolaters", had a relatively neutral or non-existent function in the portulan cartography -

⁹ Francisco Álvares, *Verdadeira Informação da Terra do Preste João* (I, 73).

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this may also be seen in the first travel reports of the Atlantic coast of Africa (cf. Horta 1991: 273a). However, the relocation of Prester John in Africa caused a transformation, which would eventually have important consequences in the categorisation of his kingdom. As already noted, the placing of Prester John in Ethiopia would make him a Negro king: initially a descendent of Shem, the Ethiopian sovereign was now the descendent of Canaan, and therefore, according to the Bible, of a race cursed by God.¹⁰ Also, the theological criteria used as a principle of sociological and cultural distinction was progressively imposed as direct contacts were intensified: the *Negusa Negast* was now a heretical Christian and, moreover, in the society he governed, Christianity was permeable to Hebrew rites and Muslim practices. At the same time, the geographic information concerning Ethiopia that Father Francisco Álvares supplied in his *Truthful Information of the Land of Prester John of the Indies* (very soon published in various languages) deeply influenced European cartographers' representations of the Nile conceived as a structural element in the hydrographic network of the African continent. Ethiopian space acquired a relatively greater dimension on many maps, sometimes covering almost all of the interior of the continent: in other words, Ethiopia was not simply placed in the interior of Africa, it was itself becoming the interior of Africa.

Ethiopia's African "reality" as viewed from the Portuguese Catholic perspective

At first glance, the figure of Prester John was that of a powerful monarch, reigning over a nation of virtuous subjects, placed in the antipodes of Europe (*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* stressed this view). In a markedly ideological discourse, Prester John and his antipodean kingdom are images of similitude and the utopian projections of Western society. But as the cosmological harmony of mediaeval cartography was shaken, great quantities of new information collected by travellers and missionaries needed to be interpreted. This required a remarkable effort of adaptation of such information to the accepted models of representation: Prester John was not living in India but in Africa, and he was not the one who made contact anymore, but was himself contacted. For Father Francisco Álvares, the *Negusa Negast* was still a "Prester John of the Indies", and his kingdom was replete with great cities, churches, and convents. By then, in diplomatic epistolography, the Ethiopian emperor would call the Portuguese king his "brother", and vice-versa (fig. 4).

By the mid 16th century, the inadequacy of the Ethiopian king in relation to the images of military might expressed in the *Letter*, which had also been frequently referred to up until the beginning of that century¹¹ became evident to the Portuguese authorities. Having fled an attack by the Somali armies and

¹⁰ *Genesis*, Chap. III, vs. 18-25. Duarte Pacheco Pereira, for example, is quite explicit as to the location of the descendants of Noah: "... after the Great Flood, and the total destruction, which the blessed Noah and his children escaped by the grace of God (...), they and their future generations inherited the whole Universe, and for this reason it is said that the first born son should inhabit the Eastern part, Canaan the southern, and Japheth, the Northern part" (*Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, op. cit., 25).

¹¹ The military and strategic power that the Ethiopian sovereign held over the Egyptian Sultan was frequently mentioned. The Sultan was supposed to pay him tribute in order to avoid the diversion of the waters of the Nile to the Red Sea. This is a recurring theme in the 13th-century writings of Jordano Catalani de Sévécac, Giacomo de Verona, and Giovanni da Marignoli; it is also present in the cartography: great iron gates to withstand the waters of the Nile are represented in Fra Mauro's world map (cf. Releño 1997: 71). Afonso de Albuquerque also reproduced this idea in his *Cartas* (ed. 1884: vol. I, 238).

¹² This expedition is reported by Miguel de Castanhoso in the *Tratado dos Feitos de Cristovão da Gama em Etiópia*, Lisbon (1897).

¹³ The expulsion is dealt with in the *Itinerário* by Padre Jerónimo Lobo, the last Catholic Patriarch in Ethiopia (first published by Legrand, *Relation (Voyage) Historique d'Abissinie du R. P. Jerome Lobo de la Compagnie de Jesus*, Paris, 1728).

¹⁴ The *Historia* by Luis Urreta (op. cit.), was systematically criticised by P. Pero Pais, who lived for many years in Ethiopia. In France, the Ethiopian "Prester John", continued to be regularly depicted as a white sovereign until the 17th century: cf. the *Atlas Vallard* (1547), or the frontispiece of the translation of the *Itinerário* of Jerónimo Lobo by Joachim Legrand (published in 1728).

sheltering close to the “source of the Nile”, the Negus Claudius (Galawdewos) was eventually rescued by a Portuguese expeditionary force of four hundred soldiers commanded by Cristovão da Gama.¹² Later, during the Jesuit missionary period, and up until their expulsion in 1634¹³, the social, geographical, historical and religious reality of Ethiopia was recorded in a very systematic way by the missionaries, who were obsessed with reducing Ethiopia to the “true faith”. However, their texts, mainly those written after the failure of their mission to convert the monofisitic Ethiopians to Catholicism (those texts that were published at the time), evoke a very peculiar image of Ethiopia. In this image the “heretical” traces of monofisitism (the “schismatic belief” of the Ethiopians) occupied a central position. The observed reality was described as the negative and sombre mirror of the luminous “fantasy” of the mediaeval Prester John: the “actual” Ethiopian sovereign still depended on the “imagination” of the fabulous emperor. Therefore, instead of totally subduing Ethiopian reality to the ancient image of Prester John, as the Dominican scribes or French engravers did¹⁴, for example, the Jesuits chose to systematically invert the image. Since the Ethiopian emperor would not be converted to



FIG 4. Letter from the Emperor of Ethiopia, Galawdewos, to D. João III, cat. no. 16.



FIG 5. Frontispiece of the *História Geral de Ethiopia a Alta*, 1660. CNCDP, Lisbon.

the true faith, he could not be considered anything more than an almost Gentile sovereign who governed a barbaric society. This society, now seen as similar to all other African nations, could not bear any comparison with western society.

The original theme proposed in the *Letter* was therefore profoundly altered, almost to the point of extinction. Initially, in theorising about a "fabulous" king within the confines of Asia, the Europeans and especially the Portuguese put forward, for more than two centuries, the hypothesis of an "actual" king in a more and more defined region in Africa. When Portuguese chroniclers and Jesuit missionaries came to depict this "real" monarch, and his Ethiopian subjects as degenerate (fig. 5), the European Christian world was being sliced up, the Portuguese maritime empire was decaying, and the monopoly on travelling to the East was disappearing. According to the expressive words of Father Manuel Almeida, who wrote at a time when the Jesuit missionary project was suffering great setbacks, Ethiopia should be described as a "chimera, neither fictitious, nor imaginary, but real, for all the world to know that this nation is the strangest monstrosity that Africa, the mother of all monsters, has created in her remote and savage jungles".¹⁵

Likewise, in the Ethiopian perspective, the *Ferenjoch* (Westerners) who had planned and pursued the submission of the *Negusa Negast*, the direct descendent of the first born son of Solomon, to the "heretical" Roman Pontiff, were seen as the catalysts of tragic religious and social dissensions in the country (Abir 1980: 211 ff.). Even if Ethiopia's supposed closing in on itself coincided with the expulsion of the Jesuits, that did not imply the refusal of all the innovations introduced into the country through Portuguese influence. As had happened in previous times, the so-called Gondarine period (a reference coined from the city of Gondar, which then became the Ethiopian capital) was a time of internal renovation, marked by an effective "Ethiopianisation" of ideas and foreign populations: not only of European and Semitic ideas, in its artistic and architectonic, as well as political expressions (the beginning of a spatial centralisation of Imperial power) (Abir 1980: 231); but also of African ideas and populations - the invasions of the pastoral Oromo (known as Galla) eventually resulted in their absorption into the Amhara social and political fabric (Levine 1974: 80-86; Dohnam 1990: 12-13). As in previous eras, the double heritage of Ethiopia manifested its ambiguous destiny.

¹⁵ Manuel de Almeida, preface to the *Historia de Ethiopia ou Abassia* (ms. S.O.A.S., 11.966).