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Sarah Searight

Early European travel in the Ethiopian/Abyssinian highlands

INTRODUCTION

The Christianity of the Abyssinian highlands had, from the region's conversion around 340 AD by the Syrian Frumentius, always attracted the attention of other Christian powers to the north, a religious link that sustained interest in the remote empire of the Solomonic kings throughout the Islamic conquest of adjoining areas as well as through the European Middle Ages. To this interest was added from the twelfth century the search for the legendary Christian ruler Prester John, a search that was picked up by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century as they extended their hold over the Indian Ocean. Sixteenth century Portuguese embassies, including the military expedition of 1541 that helped the Ethiopians to defeat the Muslim onslaught on the highlands, led to the missionary involvement of the Jesuits. Both secular and religious ventures provided the earliest accounts of the highlands as well as collecting manuscripts for European libraries that would revive academic interest in the nineteenth century. The translation of Portuguese accounts into other European languages became an interesting feature of the European "scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century.

The exploratory mood of the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment led to more disinterested investigations of the country such as by James Bruce. But the 1798 invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte introduced a new political dimension into European relations with the countries of the Near East and the borderlands of the Red Sea. European exploration of "Ethiopia" was increasingly influenced by political considerations, challenging the Ottoman hegemony of the African coast of the Red Sea and activating rivalry among certain European powers for control of the Horn of Africa. The British led the way with their acquisition of

Aden in 1839; the French and later the Italians followed suit with their acquisitions of Tadjura and Massawa – episodes in the so-called "scramble for Africa".

For much of the nearly four centuries here under discussion, modern Ethiopia was effectively divided into four areas: Tigray in the north with its main city at Adwa; Begemder in the centre, with its main city from the early seventeenth century at Gondar; Shewa in the south, with its main city at Ankober; and the coastal belt of 'Afar pastoralists, with the actual seaboard effectively part of the Ottoman Empire from the mid seventeenth century. It is with Tigray and Begemder that this essay is mainly concerned. Upheavals among rival warlords in the highlands encouraged the European "scramble", until the establishment in 1889 of an effective, modernising ruler in Menelik II, wise enough to encourage scholars as well as railway builders in the development of his country. Hence the remarkable *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* of 1906, led by Enno Littmann, which is the subject of these volumes. Aksum itself had been the religious centre of Christian Ethiopia since the fourth century, as well as the capital of the pre-Christian Aksumite kingdom.

I refer throughout to the historic kingdom of the highland plateau as Abyssinia as used by European visitors in the period under review, as opposed to the larger Ethiopia that followed from the conquests of Menelik II in the early twentieth century. The plateau, its rulers and the ruled (referred to as Ethiopians) were the principal interest for most of the travellers we shall be looking at. Place names are a major problem, discussed superbly by Beckingham and Huntingford (1954, app. 4: 220–246), who note that Littmann and his team would most likely have used the maps prepared for the official record of the British Abyssinian Expedition of 1867–68. A useful compendium of maps was

compiled by a British military engineer, Colonel H. C. Cooke, in 1867, presumably inspired by the likely need for such information on the eve of the expedition (Cooke 1867). Such a compilation was called for because of the innumerable variations and their dubious accuracy. Beckingham also compiled a gazetteer of place names, extremely useful to anyone studying the accounts of early travellers. The confusion of place names was due partly, as always, to the native tongue of the traveller, partly to local tribal linguistic variations (Dainelli et al. 1907).

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The two main links with the outside world were Massawa in the north, used by those trekking to the Tigray and Begemder hinterland; and the Tadjura/Obock bay in the south used by those approaching Shewa. Massawa is in fact an island, connected to the mainland since the 1870s by a causeway. A secondary harbour was at Zula in the Bay of Anfila – also known to the British as Annesley Bay, the name given to it somewhat arrogantly by George Annesley in the course of his 1804 voyage (see Annesley 1809, vol. I), used by the British expedition of 1868 to rescue the Emperor Tewodros' captives, imprisoned in the great inland fortress of Magdala. The Tadjura/Obock access was occupied by the French from 1881.

From Massawa the main route crosses a narrow stretch of the dessicated 'Afar desert, then rises sharply up the escarpment to the highlands. While parts of Tigray are savannah country often at risk of drought, much of the highlands is well watered and fertile. The region alternates between precipitous gorges and flat-topped mountains known as *ambas*. The highest peaks are in the Simen range whose exotic flora and fauna were so well described by such scientific travellers as Rüppell (1838–40). The topography undoubtedly contributed to the periodic fragmentation of the country and its dominance by powerful nobles governing "feudal" principalities that were subdued from time to time by strong rulers claiming Solomonic descent. This encouraged a system of roving "capitals" that stabilised from time to time, as Emperor Fasilides succeeded in doing at Gondar in the seventeenth century.

So rivers, natural fortresses, rugged mountains and a frequently distrustful population

discouraged all but the most intrepid travellers; their accounts are the more remarkable when one considers the conditions in which they were travelling, observing, writing, sketching.

EARLY HISTORY

Early pre-Aksumite civilisation in the first millennium BC on the Ethiopian plateau was succeeded by the Aksumite kingdom itself, the subject of Littmann's expedition. That kingdom at least left visible relics of its heyday, Littmann and indeed many of our travellers, including Theodore and Mabel Bent in their *Sacred History of the Ethiopians* (Bent 1893), linked it with the Sabaean civilisation flourishing on the Arabian side of the Red Sea. The advent of Islam partially severed that link in the seventh century, although not perhaps as drastically as Edward Gibbon expressed it in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where he writes: "encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they had been forgotten" (Gibbon 1776–88, ch. 47: 307).

Gibbon was not altogether fair: the Christianity of the Ethiopians, despite its Monophysitism being viewed as heretical by Rome, attracted interest throughout the Middle Ages. Venetian merchants based in Alexandria would have noted the selection process by which the head of the Ethiopian church, the Abun, was nominated by the Coptic hierarchy in Egypt; Ethiopian monks were accommodated in Rome; their presence was noted in Jerusalem; their manuscripts were occasionally collected. Most important of all, by the twelfth century the legend of a powerful Christian monarch named Prester John was galvanising interest in this most remote corner of Christendom.

The Abun, head of a powerful ecclesiastical and monastic hierarchy, often played a major role in the saga of foreign travel in Abyssinia. Many of the visitors came as missionaries, convinced of their destiny to convert Ethiopian Monophysites to Catholic or Protestant versions of Christianity. This was understandably viewed by the Abun as a direct challenge to his authority and one which should not be allowed to undermine it. Jesuits in the seventeenth century, Protestant missions in the nineteenth frequently were to feel the heavy hand of local clerical opposition.

ARRIVAL OF THE PORTUGUESE

Stimulated partly by Prester John but also by rumours of untold riches, in 1493 the first Portuguese visitor, Peros da Covilha, on the instructions of the Portuguese king Joam II, made his way to the highlands to search for the legendary ruler; no record of his experiences remains however. He was still alive when he was found, in 1520, by an official Portuguese embassy whose chaplain, Francisco Alvares, wrote a remarkably full account of Ethiopia prior to the devastating Muslim invasion a few years later¹. It included a description of the principal Ethiopian sanctuary, the Church of St Mary of Zion at Aksum before its destruction by the Muslim invaders.

Twenty-one years later a military expedition under Dom Cristovao da Gama disembarked in the Bay of Anfila to help the Emperor defeat the Muslims led by Ahmad al-Ghazi (known to Ethiopians as the "Grañ" or "left-handed"). Already the lure of European arms, so explicit in European relations with Abyssinia in the nineteenth century, was making itself felt. The expedition, described by Miguel de Castanhoso, ensured that the highlands remained Christian².

Early in the seventeenth century began the Jesuit attempt to convert the Ethiopians to "orthodox" Christianity. The first mission to Abyssinia set out from the Jesuit community in Goa in 1603 led by Pedro Paez. It was warmly welcomed by the current ruler, Emperor Susnijos, and in due course a mission was established at Gorgora on Lake Tana, not far from the imperial capital at Gondar, and also at Fremona, near Adwa. The best description of the venture was by Manuel de Almeida who arrived in Abyssinia in 1624, just two years after the public submission of Emperor Susnijos to Rome³. That submission was withdrawn ten years later when the Emperor realised the extent of the hostility to it of the Abyssinian clergy and his son and successor Fasilides ruthlessly destroyed the mission, hanging the last Jesuits in 1641.

There was one other notable European visitor at the end of the seventeenth century, the French physician Charles Poncet. Poncet had been working as a physician for some years in Cairo, when a messenger arrived from the Emperor Iyasu asking for medical assistance and in due course off he went, leaving Cairo in May 1698, travelling up the Nile to Sennar on the Blue Nile and eventually across to Gondar by May 1699. A year later he descended via Adwa and Aksum

to Massawa and in due course back to Cairo. His account is interesting for its description of the outward journey and also for the portrait of the Emperor but otherwise adds little to the earlier Portuguese accounts⁴.

As a demonstration of sustained interest in the country within European academia and religious circles, the first large-scale history of Ethiopia, *Historia Aethiopica*, was written by a young German linguist, Hiob Ludolf, who had studied with the Ethiopian community in Rome in the 1640s; its rather curious illustrations were produced in collaboration with an Ethiopian priest in Rome, Abba Gregorius (see Whiteway 1902). It was published in Frankfurt in 1681. Although regarded as the founder of Ethiopian studies – his account was translated into English in 1682, into French in 1684 and into Dutch in 1687 – Ludolf himself never went to see the country for himself.

The Portuguese contributed greatly not just to contemporary knowledge of the country, historical or geographical, thereby bringing it into the age of discovery; they also amassed a vast quantity of material, including ecclesiastical documents, of great benefit to later visitors. However, one of the more misleading but also widely circulated descriptions of the country was that of Jeronymo Lobo, translated into English in 1735 by Dr Samuel Johnson (Johnson 1735; Beckingham/Huntingford 1954: xxv), of which Beckingham writes: "if his translators have not done him an injustice he is the least reliable of the Jesuit writers on Abyssinia"⁵. But other accounts, filed away for the time being in royal and ecclesiastical libraries, were used by later visitors when they were translated, published and became widely accessible to the scholarly travellers of the late nineteenth century and thereafter.

¹ Alvares' account was translated into English for the Hakluyt Society in 1881 and into French for the *Journal Asiatique* in 1890.

² Castanhoso's account was translated into Italian in 1880 and into English in 1902.

³ Almeida's account *Historia general de Ethiopia* was translated and edited by Beckingham/Huntingford (1954).

⁴ Poncet's account first appeared in French in 1704, in English in 1709 and was included, in English, in Foster 1949.

⁵ See Niebuhr 1776. Niebuhr was the only one of the original 7-member party to return to Copenhagen.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

For just over a hundred years the Ottoman hold over the Red Sea effectively discouraged European ventures into the African, or indeed Arabian, hinterland either side of that great waterway.

Greater exploratory confidence in the mid-eighteenth century, that great Age of Enlightenment, plus increasing disdain for the authority of the Ottoman Empire encouraged an era of discovery for its own sake, rather than for commercial or political advantage. "Enlightenment" encouraged all sorts of geographical and scientific activity. Academies of Sciences were founded in the various principalities of Germany; the Académie Royale des Sciences was established in Paris; the British Museum was founded in London in 1753; it celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2003. And, to maintain the mythic character of the mystic highlands of Abyssinia, Dr Johnson, having translated the inaccuracies of Jeronymo Lobo, wrote his own spectacularly fictional *Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (Johnson 1759). In 1768 the Danish king despatched an expedition to the Red Sea (Niebuhr 1776), and the same year an inquisitive, prosperous and well educated Scotsman set off to discover the source of the Nile which he calculated – accurately as it turned out – to pour out of Abyssinia.

This was James Bruce, a typical product of this Age of Enlightenment, whose *Travels*, when published in 1790, immediately revived interest in the remote Abyssinian highlands; his account has rightly been described as one of the most fascinating travel books ever written (Bruce 1790). Bruce was a good linguist, thus enabling him to make the most of his opportunities during the two years he spent mainly in Gondar, but also travelling widely in the area of Lake Tana and reaching the source of the Blue Nile, although he wrongly assumed it was the main source of the Nile itself. His account made a major contribution to an understanding of the geography, the society, the history of Abyssinia including a list of the country's kings; he collected manuscripts, plants, minerals, kept a daily meteorological record, all of which – despite the inaccuracies which many of his contemporaries criticised – stood his successors in good stead.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

One successor, Henry Salt, was particularly scathing but Salt's own visits to Abyssinia in 1805 and 1809 were undertaken in a very different atmosphere. In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt, partly with the object of interrupting British communications with India. With the expansion of British interests in India, largely at the expense of the French, those communications had become increasingly important. Salt was hired as the secretary of George Annesley, Viscount Valentia (later Earl of Mountnorris), self-appointed investigator of a Red Sea route to speed these vital messages. Annesley was particularly concerned with the African littoral (less hostile than the Arabian but, as it turned out, less well provisioned) and in the course of his investigations in 1805 despatched Salt into the interior to make contact with the Christian authorities in the highlands and the current ruler of Tigray, Ras Wolde Selassie⁶.

Salt's route to Adwa (capital of Tigray), similar to that taken by Bruce, was one to be followed by most visitors to the north: from Massawa (in Salt's case from nearby Arkiko), steeply up over the Taranta Pass to Digsa and on to Antalo, Adwa, seat of the Ras who was "highly delighted" (Annesley 1809, vol. 3: 37) with the guns which Salt gave him, and finally to Aksum, already known to the outside world, which over two days he carefully surveyed and sketched – the first foreigner so to do. Not only was this an introduction for Salt to the archaeological activities he was later to undertake in Egypt, his work also provided a foundation for all subsequent investigations of this ancient Ethiopian city. Assuring the Ras that "an intercourse with the English, who are uncontrolled masters of the sea, would facilitate his commerce" (Annesley 1809, vol. 3: 39), and leaving his servant Nathaniel Pearce with the Ras – Pearce later produced his own account of his experiences (Pearce 1831) – Salt returned to the coast and to England with letters from the Ras to George III. There he wrote up his experiences which were included in Annesley's massive three-volume *Voyages and Travels* (Annesley 1809, vols. 2–3).

In 1809, partly under the patronage of England's African Association (patron of much

⁶ For the full account of Annesley's voyages see his 3-volume account, 1809.

"enlightened" African travel), Salt returned to Abyssinia⁷. This time his route took him via the Cape of Good Hope and Portuguese settlements on the east African coast. In Tigray he presented the Ras with presents from the British government including two pieces of field artillery, a portrait of the Virgin Mary (highly revered by Ethiopians) and rather less useful bejewelled arms, as well as textiles and glass. A second visit to Aksum was not a success; the local clergy were "extremely insolent and unruly" (*ibid.*: 409) – a sign of things to come – and six weeks later Salt set off once more down to the coast, this time leaving behind another of his attendants, William Coffin, to teach the Ras's men how to work the field guns – another sign of things to come.

It is remarkable how many foreign visitors were attracted to Abyssinia over the next hundred years; it would need a volume to itself to mention them all and they occupy more library shelf space than perhaps any other African region. Not all of them by any means were as interested in aspects of Ethiopia's past as Bruce and Salt. Two factors in particular account for the interest. Predominant was the result of the opening of the Red Sea to European shipping. The coast was in the hands of the Ottomans, governed from Jiddah, and the principal harbours generally occupied by Egyptians under the auspices of the Ottoman viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali and his heirs. The British were particularly concerned that nothing should stand in the way of their communications with India, eyeing with great suspicion any conceivable threat to their navigation of the Red Sea⁸. Ethiopia in the larger sense was seen by many as crucial to British interests, including approaches via the Nile, hence the large number of British travellers. One of the most interesting of these was Samuel Baker whose exploration of the Nile headwaters was triggered by British fears of foreign control of these streams so vital to the security of Egypt⁹. As for the Red Sea itself first France and later Italy were determined to thwart what was perceived as British dominance of the waterway and to ensure their own free navigation. Consuls began to be appointed to keep track of political events in the hinterland¹⁰, some of the British falling victims in the 1860s to the megalomania of Emperor Tewodros, resulting in the Napier expedition of 1868¹¹. The expedition disembarked in Anfila Bay, planning to use the third century BC Ptolemaic routes to the highlands. They just had time to inspect the ruins of Adulis in the Bay of Zula south of Massawa.

The other factor was religious. The nineteenth century was the great period of evangelical enthusiasm, of lighting the darkness in which much of the non-European world was thought to dwell. Trying to convert Muslims was dangerous; but Christians who were seen as having fallen by the wayside were another matter; the German Theophil Waldmeier expressed his own and his colleagues' enthusiasm in his preface "to show forth to the reader how wonderfully our heavenly Father has led me from my early childhood until the present time" to Abyssinia (Waldmeier 1869: vii). The Jewish Falashas were also a potential hunting ground. Here again there was competition – between Protestant enthusiasts, many of them Germans, and Roman Catholics. Occasionally missionaries became party to the political needs of their home governments. More often they fell victim either to the political upheavals of their chosen hunting ground, or to the opposition of the Abun and local clergy (Waldmeier for instance was forced to make canons for Emperor Tewodros).

Through the middle years of the century the country was torn between powerful local rulers, not a happy time to be travelling in any region and most accounts are full of the difficulties and dangers of moving round a world of petty warlords, brigandage and extortion. This was only temporarily eased by the rise of Tewodros, who declared himself Emperor in 1855. Nevertheless enlightened travel continued to play a role, inspired by enthusiasm for the natural sciences (this was after all the age of Darwin) and encouraged by the establishment of geographical societies in London, Paris and Lisbon. Bruce's and Salt's accounts fed this growth of genuine scientific interest, to be galvanised by such scholars as Wilhelm Ruppell who was in Abyssinia in the 1830s (Ruppell 1838–40) and the German naturalist Theodor von Heuglin and his travelling companion Dr. Steudner in the

⁷ Described in Salt's own account, published in 1814.

⁸ See Searight 1991 for the development of 19th century communications in the Red Sea.

⁹ Baker's account published in 1867 is one of the most perspicacious as well as entertaining.

¹⁰ The first was a British consul, Walter Plowden, appointed in 1848 and surviving until his death from an ambush wound in 1860; France's first consul, Guillaume Lejean, was appointed in 1862.

¹¹ The official account of the expedition was by Henry Hozier (1869); a broader picture is provided by Sir Clements Markham the same year.

1850s (Heuglin 1857). Both Rüppell and Georg Schweinfurth in the 1860s (Schweinfurth 1888) were more concerned, however, with regions of central Africa. A notable French scientific expedition was led by Théophile Lefebvre in 1839–43 and produced a massive six-volume publication in the 1840s and 1850s (Lefebvre 1845–54). In the course of his expedition Lefebvre acquired from Ras Wube a potential French base in the Bay of Anfila highly recommended by a later Frenchman Count Stanislaus Russel as “le centre naturel d’un grand mouvement naturel” (Russel 1884) as it had been in the third century BC when used by the Ptolemies as the terminal to the highlands for their trade in elephants, ivory, incense and slaves; Lefebvre’s concession was never in fact taken up and in the 1880s the French acquired the more useful monopoly over the Bay of Tadjura (now the site of Djibouti). Other notable scientists were Rochet d’Hericourt, a thoroughly politically minded traveller but also member of various French scientific societies and a good commentator on navigation, geography and geology (Rochet d’Hericourt 1841; 1846).

Throughout the nineteenth century Aksum drew the scholars, familiar with the classical sources but now also tempted by more recent predecessors who had actually been there. Bruce had described Aksum in detail while Salt’s even more thorough survey and sketches of the ancient city set a high standard of observation and was sufficiently well publicised to attract attention throughout Europe. The fact that it was near Adwa, often the headquarters of Tigrayan rulers, facilitated visits, as long as visitors steered clear of the most revered Church of St Mary of Zion, reputed sanctuary of the Ark of the Covenant. A particularly lively account is by Theodore Bent who visited Aksum in 1893 with his wife Mabel, a proficient photographer. In entitling his book *Sacred City of the Ethiopians* Bent was making it clear that Aksum was the goal of their journey, despite various obstacles en route. “Our object in visiting Abyssinia was primarily archaeological,” Bent states on page one of his account, but he was almost equally interested in “the quaint Christianity of the Abyssinians” (Bent 1893: 1). Meanwhile French, German, Austrian and Italian scholars had also been working on both Portuguese and Ethiopian chronicles, among them the great French scholar René Basset and the Italian Carlo Conti Rossini, as well as on the copies of Aksum inscriptions sent back to Europe by intrepid travellers¹². Once again one

is astonished by the sheer volume of scholarship devoted to Ethiopia.

The opening up of diplomatic and commercial contacts led to a greater understanding of Ethiopian history and civilisation, especially with the revival of imperial fortunes under Menelik II, king of Showa from 1865 and declared Emperor of Ethiopia in 1889, especially with his defeat of the Italians at Adwa in 1896. Thereafter Menelik perceived himself as Emperor of an empire determined to resist the European scramble for African territories that he could see going on around him. Scholars as well as railway developers were alike welcomed in the new capital of Addis Ababa – French (Vignéras 1897), Russian¹³, Belgian (Boulvin 1906), and even American. Thus the German mission that set out for Addis Ababa in 1904 was able to reach Menelik’s capital on the newly completed French railway from Tadjura (begun in 1887). It was led by Dr Friedrich Rosen and included his brother Professor Felix Rosen. Felix travelled extensively in the country, including Aksum of course, describing his experiences in 1904–05. The brothers would have eased permission for the great Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (Rosen 1907).

This essay has not begun to address the contribution of these authors to Ethiopian historiography, which was considerable both in the information gathered on the spot and published as well as their collections of manuscripts and their digestion by scholars all over Europe. Nor have I given due credit to the engravings which illustrate many of their accounts, notably Salt’s¹⁴. The beauty and variety of the countryside encouraged draughtsmanship just as the art of engraving became the art of informative book illustration. Costume, architecture (ecclesiastical, ancient, vernacular), handicrafts all helped to bring home to the reader the sophistication of this region in a way that the sometimes verbose written accounts obscured. These illustrations were of course especially relevant in the case of the natural scientists – Rüppell, Heuglin, Lefebvre’s team. Both Bruce and Lefebvre brought artists with them, Balugnani in Bruce’s case, Vignaud in Lefebvre’s. Good draughtsmanship was an essential attribute for a traveller and brings their accounts alive for us today.

¹² See Whiteway 1902 for details.

¹³ Led by N. N. Kurdmakov.

¹⁴ An extremely interesting survey of illustrations of Ethiopia is Richard Pankhurst/Leila Ingrams’ *Ethiopia Engraved*.

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