The Ethiopian Age of Exploration: Prester John’s Discovery of Europe, 1306–1458*

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Before the age of European expansion overseas and the Portuguese circumnavigation of Africa, Renaissance Italy became a common destination for scores of Ethiopian monks and dignitaries. These travelers presented themselves on the European scene as active agents of transcontinental discovery: interested in learning more about a region they regarded as the ultimate center of organized Christianity, they became the protagonists of an Ethiopian age of exploration. This article examines the dynamics of interaction between Italian elites and Ethiopian travelers throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The episodes of interaction here considered had lasting consequences for Ethio-European relations: they engendered dynamics of reciprocal understanding based on a common religious identity that ran counter to ideas of African and black inferiority that represented the cultural norm for much of the modern period. Ethiopians became in fact agents

* I would like to express my gratitude to my former colleagues in the History Department of Rowan University for taking the time to read and discuss an early draft of this article and to my good friend and fellow world historian James de Lorenzi for his valuable comments and for supporting my intentions to publish this manuscript. Ethiopian names have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress’s Amharic Romanization Table with the following exceptions: (1) The two Amharic letters with a regular “s” sound have been rendered with “s,” and (2) the three Amharic letters with a vocalized “h” sound have been rendered with a simple “h.”
of discovery and purveyors of geographical knowledge in an era when the dominating paradigm of difference was grounded not in racial but rather in religious identity.

Apart from a few exceptions, the events considered in this paper have been either neglected or relegated to the margins of the debate about the genealogy of the Western understanding of Africa. One could argue that the premodern Ethio-European encounter has been largely ignored because it contradicts the popular idea of a timeless European understanding of Africa as inherently inferior and begs for a more nuanced and complex assessment of Europe’s relation to sub-Saharan Africa. This article shows that far from being understood as inferior others, Ethiopians were in fact regarded as purveyors of knowledge in a European world whose self-identification was grounded on Christian identity and where a religious paradigm of sameness and otherness trumped race and color in the discourse on difference. They should be regarded as key contributors to the creation of what has been aptly called “planetary consciousness,” the process through which Europeans acquired self-awareness of the overseas.

Among the groundbreaking works on Renaissance and early modern interactions between Africans and Europeans that inspired this study are David Northrup’s and Hans Debrunner’s: both texts challenged the idea of a static and isolated Africa, incapable of relating to the rest of the world without European midwifery, and showed the centrality of African agency in the encounter. These works bring to our attention the dignified and at times elite position of Africans who lived away from their own societies and enjoyed a condition antithetical to that endured to the west of the Middle Passage. The lives of free Afri-

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cans in Europe in the era of the slave trade challenge commonsense views on race and racism in the Renaissance and the early modern period and force us to rethink the dynamics of Afro-European interaction. How could Africans be respected courtiers and slaves at the same time? Did color matter? These are questions that produced scores of controversial and, at times, belligerent scholarship and have yet to find definite answers.

The issue has been discussed from a continent-wide perspective by a number of scholars; in particular, Jan Pieterse argued that far from evolving in a linear path leading straight to nineteenth-century scientific racism, the initial discourse on blackness morphed repeatedly, and that the representation of racial and nonracial otherness should be seen as a process. Pieterse made the case for the transformational nature of the phenomenon in very concise and clear terms: “The process character of images of otherness is an indication of shifting social relations and patterns of hegemony. Changes in the representations of otherness according to time and place tend to reflect, not changes in the characteristics of the labeled group but rather, in the circumstance of the labeling group, or in the relationship between the labeling group and the labeled” (emphasis added). 4 Otherness and representation of difference are to be understood relationally and contingently, two dimensions that oftentimes seem to be absent in the scholarship on race and racism seeking static absolutes rather than dynamic processes.

As the history of the premodern Ethio-European encounter will make clear, a key contingency in the development of the relation between Africa and Europe was the latter’s phobic relation with Islam and the identification of Muslims as the ultimate others. We know that ideas of blackness and Africaness in the Middle Ages were quite a mixed bag: a complex summation of fears, wonder, ignorance, and hope. On the one hand we certainly have an association of blackness and remoteness with monstrosity and evil; on the other the Africa-inspired iconography adopted in the arts as well as in literary productions is at times undeniably positive if not deferential: among the most famous are St. Maurice, Gregorious Maurus, King Caspar, Queen Belacane, the Queen of Sheba, and St. Augustine. 5 These characters

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5 Africans were also saints, as conveyed by artistic representations of “Gregorious Maurus” as a martyr in the struggle against Islam. Gregorious was first represented as a European under the name St. Gereon (circa 1240–1250) and later as an African in late medieval reliquaries and stained glasses. For an extensive discussion of these Christian icons see Debrunner, Presence and Prestige, pp. 20–30, and Pieterse, White on Black, pp. 23–29.
seem to suggest that the religious paradigm trumped the racial one and facilitated fascination rather than anxiety toward the exotic. Among these extra-European icons of sanctity was Prester John, a pious Christian sovereign who throughout the Middle Ages had been located in the Far East.\(^6\)

**The First Encounters with Prester John**

In 1122 a foreign visitor to Rome was audacious enough to introduce himself to Pope Callistus II's (1119–1124) entourage as a representative of “Patriarch John of India.” We know that by virtue of his alleged relation with Prester John the visitor was treated with deference throughout his sojourn.\(^7\) This is the first recorded encounter between a European sovereign and a Patriarch—or Prester—John who, together with his supposed representative, had by all means not even a remote connection to the rulers of Ethiopia. Less than fifty years later, in 1165, Byzantine emperor Manuel Komnenos (1143–1180) received a long letter through which a self-declared Prester John sought alliances with his European peers.\(^8\) It is undisputedly a forgery; the circumstances surrounding the drafting of the letter remain rather obscure, and a variety of theories have been advanced. What we know is that the author—most likely European—compiled a compendium of geopolitical knowledge injected with fragments of information about the distant Orient.\(^9\)

In the twelfth century, Prester John is the quintessential representative of a distant and largely unknown Christian might, which by virtue of its faith embodies a very peculiar type of other. Prester John epit-
mizes a remote Christian world, thought superior to a debased Western Christianity that was losing its confrontation with Islam both in Jerusalem and in Southern Europe. It is telling that certain passages of the mentioned letter that meant to shed light on the reality of his kingdom had been inspired by St. Augustine’s *City of God*. In an era of defeat and regression for the Christian powers of Europe, Prester John seems to have been an icon used to exorcise the power of Islam and soothe the anxiety of the European elites.

The popularity of the imaginary sovereign was such that in 1177 Pope Alexander III (1159–1181) addressed a letter to “Prester John, the illustrious and magnificent John King of the Indies.” The letter epitomizes the Catholic Church’s effort to expand its rule over the known and unknown lands of the world as well as an attempt to find allies for the anti-Muslim cause. The idea of Prester John engendered a positive European outlook on the unknown and was instrumental to later efforts to explore and map the wider world during the European age of exploration. It stimulated the interest of European monarchs in overseas exploration, particularly in the quest for allies against Islam. In the second half of the thirteenth century, after the acquisition of a greater—or rather, less confused—understanding of the East, European elites relocated the imaginary sovereign from Asia to Africa. A number of chronicles compiled at the turn of the thirteenth century abounded with references to Prester John, yet his actual location became more and more the object of controversy. As the Mongols reached into Europe in 1237 and displayed traits that did not coincide with the European image of Christian piety, the figure of the pious Christian king from the Far East gave way again to that of the heathen barbarian. In the same years travelers to the Far East returned to Europe with information about the exploits of the Mongol Empire. The Mongols were not Christians and the fabulous Christian kingdom was nowhere to be found, yet the myth of Prester John grew larger.

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10 Letts, “Prester John.”
12 Franciscan missionaries such as Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1180–1252) and William of Rubruck (1120–1293), dispatched respectively by Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) and Louis IX (1226–1270) of France, traveled throughout the Mongol Empire in the 1240s and 1250s and finally dispelled the myth of an almighty Christian king in Asia. Prester John’s displacement from Asia resulted also from the diffusion of works such as the *Book of the Great Khan*, in which information relating to the rise of the Mongol disproved the idea of an Asian Prester John. See Lev Gumilev, *Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom: The Legend of the Kingdom of Prester John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 188–190.
These are some of the contingencies that eventually engendered Prester John’s relocation to Ethiopia, but what is the bigger picture beyond them? The thirteenth century in Europe was a period of unprecedented knowledge production about the Far East. Before the rise of the modern explorer, traders started to gather information from distant lands and carry it through unsafe and discontinuous networks of communication back to Europe. If we look beyond the intricate network of first- and secondhand accounts we see the emergence of a new European awareness of the East: the wave of knowledge production emerged from the cradle of a still-infant capitalist world economy whose expansion facilitated the flow of information between continents and imposed innovative standards of geographic and political knowledge.

The process of knowledge production ultimately shed light on the most remote Asian lands and challenged their association with Prester John, whose mythical kingdom could not coexist with what had become factual knowledge of the Far East. He soon found a new home in Africa, a continent that was still relatively unknown and mysterious to the European elites. His relocation can be best understood in light of what Janet Abu-Lughod has described as the emergence of “a complex and prosperous predecessor [to the modern world economy], a system of world trade and even ‘cultural’ exchange that at its peak toward the end of the thirteenth century, was integrating a very large number of advanced societies stretching between the extremes of northwestern Europe and China.” The period of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was a crucial turning point in world history during which the East and the West were laying the foundations of what would become a global system of trade, “a moment when the balance between East and West could have tipped in either direction. In terms of space, the Middle East heartland that linked the eastern Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean constituted a geographic fulcrum on which East and West were then roughly balanced.”

The rise of the Mongols as a hegemonic power throughout Asia and the expansion of commerce throughout a Euro-Asian world-system progressively melted mythologies still grounded on invented accounts of the Far East dating back to Alexander the Great. The wave of economic change soon allowed for the univocal identification of Prester John with Ethiopia, but before turning to him we need to underline the

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14 Ibid.
other assertion Abu-Lughod makes. East and West were then roughly balanced, and the center of the world economy could have gone either way. For our purposes we should keep in mind that the characters starring in the Ethio-European encounter were living in a world predating European hegemony, whose fulcrum was indeed not Europe but the Middle East. In fact, in the fourteenth century Jerusalem was the crossroads where Europe and Ethiopia initiated the encounter, the locus of the first documented interactions.

In the late Middle Ages Jerusalem was one of three contact zones between Europeans and Africans in general. It is in Jerusalem that Ethiopia encountered Europe, the city being—as Ernesta Cerulli put it—“the clearing house of the Eastern Christian Cultures.” As the crusaders controlled the city—from 1099 to 1189 and later from 1229 to 1244—they were exposed to various expressions of Christianity, including the Ethiopian one. Jerusalem was then a city dotted with a variety of Orthodox monasteries, among which was one run by Jacobites in proximity to the Holy Sepulchre, a place where Ethiopians seem to have been the majority. The first Ethio-European encounter unfolded at a defining moment for European identity and in a city of the utmost significance for it. It has been argued that the crusades represented Europe’s founding experience of its first continent-wide self-consciousness. The centrality of Jerusalem exemplifies an understanding of otherness hinged on religious rather than racial identity and defined the nature of the encounter for the centuries to come. When the crusaders lost Jerusalem (1244), Ethiopia gained center stage as Europe’s elites continued to elaborate anti-Islamic strategies. In 1289 Pope Nicholas IV asked Prester John to reunite under the banner of the Catholic Church, and in 1300 plans were made for a Christian entente involving “the dear black Christians of Nubia and the other countries of Upper Egypt.”

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15 The other two were southern Spain and southern Italy with their preferential access to North Africa. See Debrunner, Presence and Prestige, p. 17.
17 According to J. S. Trimingham, Sultan Saladin had rewarded the resident Ethiopian monks with special rights in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre after obtaining the control of Jerusalem. J. Spencer Trimingham, Islam in Ethiopia (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 56.
19 Debrunner, Presence and Prestige, p. 17.
20 Ibid., p. 24.
21 Quoted in Debrunner, Presence and Prestige, p. 24.
As Rome was struggling to regain Jerusalem in the second half of the thirteenth century, Ethiopia experienced the so-called Solomonic restoration, a dynastic shift that brought about a period of unprecedented state building. At the end of the thirteenth century, Ethiopia emerged from more than a century of Zagwe rule (1137–1270) that abruptly ended when Yekuno ‘Amlak (1270–1285) was anointed Ethiopian emperor in 1270. At first sight, the passage from one dynastic tradition to the other seems to have had a much more political than religious meaning, as both dynasties were Christian. However, the restoration initiated a period of dramatic change both in the religious and secular realms. Taddesse Tamrat offered a compelling overview of the period and referred to the changes triggered in the late 1200s as “outward movements of both Church and States.”

The Ethiopian nobility initiated an intermittent but long-lasting policy of expansion and consolidation across the highlands and laid out the defining elements of one of the most resilient monarchies in world history by giving birth to a military-religious complex—the sword and the cross—that would define the history of Ethiopia throughout the modern era.

The transformation and political consolidation of the Ethiopian highlands that started with Yekuno ‘Amlak was continued by his successor, Yagbe Seyon (1285–1294), crowned emperor as Solomon in 1285. Did the news of the restoration reach Rome and Nicholas IV’s ear, enticing his curia to reach out to a potential ally? There is not enough evidence to know whether the letter addressed to “Imperatori Aethiopiae Illustri” was indeed directed to the Ethiopian emperor, but we do know that by the end of the thirteenth century the activity within the still-undefined boundaries of an embryonic contact zone acquired momentum. In a way we could argue that the emergence of an Ethio-European encounter was the result of parallel expansionist attitudes emerging on both sides of the contact zone.

**The First Ethiopian Expedition to Europe of 1306**

A clear indication that the reorganized Ethiopian Empire was now thinking in regional and possibly in global terms is to be found in the
mission that reached Europe in 1306. The sovereign who ordered the expedition, Wedem Ra’ad (1299–1314), happened to be the emperor who brought back relative stability among Ethiopian elites after a volatile period that saw the crowning of five emperors in five years. At the time of his coronation Ethiopia corresponded to little more than a one-hundred-mile-wide strip of land stretching from the Marāb-Melaš—the territory north of the Marāb River—to the territories north of the Awaš River. Once anointed, Wedem Ra’ad adopted a policy of aggressive confrontation with the Muslim community surrounding his kingdom—in particular he challenged the rule of Sheikh Abu-Abdallah in eastern Šewā—and benefited from the religious support of one of the Ethiopian Church’s fathers, Takla Ḥāymānot (1215–1313). The latter would be remembered as the founder of numerous monasteries and the quintessential Ethiopian proselytizer who ensured that behind Wedem Ra’ad’s sword would follow the Christian cross. The effort toward free as well as forced conversion that went hand in hand with his military expansion targeted Muslims and other non-Christians alike, straining relations with neighboring polities and reinforcing the Christian identity of the country.

Until the end of the thirteenth century, Christian Ethiopia had maintained a good record of collaboration and coexistence with Islam on both the international and domestic fronts. Ethiopian Muslims had long been an integral part of the local economy and had been instrumental to Ethiopia’s contribution to the regional economy of the Red Sea basin. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Church had been receiving its ‘ābuna24 from the patriarch of Alexandria as part of a complex process of mediation between different economic and religious interests competing along the shores of the Nile. One could say that until the rise of a new Ethiopian system in the early fourteenth century, the relation between Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia developed along the line of Muhammad’s plea to “leave the Ethiopians alone,” a plea that had been reciprocated with a partial integration of the Ḡabarti on the highlands.25

24 The term, literally meaning “our fathers” in Ge’ez, is used in Ethiopia to identify leading clerics, heads of monasteries, and the head of the Ethiopian Church, traditionally dispatched by the patriarch of Alexandria. In this article the term is used exclusively in the latter sense.

This is the backdrop against which a little-known group of Ethiopians officially opened the age of Ethiopian exploration in 1306. The first recorded encounter in the Ethio-European contact zone took place in an era when, on both sides, otherness was shaped by similar anxieties at a moment when both sides were redefining their relationship with Muslims. Presumably, Wedem Ra’ad sent a delegation of thirty Ethiopians to Europe, most likely for the purpose of forging an anti-Islam alliance with European coreligionists.\(^{26}\) While there are no known Ethiopian records of the encounter, in Italy the event was recorded by Giovanni da Carignano (circa 1300), erudite cartographer and rector of the S. Marco Church in Genoa, who compiled a map and a commentary. While the commentary was lost, the map can shed some light on the author’s understanding of his Ethiopian visitors. Carignano’s map is the first known document to correctly locate Ethiopia between the White and the Blue Nile, identifying “Terra Abaise” (Abyssinian Land) as a land inhabited by “Christiani Nigri” (Black Christians).\(^{27}\) Furthermore, his was the first map to abandon the copycat style of mapmaking typical of medieval Europe, which simply proposed again and again geographical knowledge that originated in antiquity.\(^{28}\) How could Carignano undertake a paradigm shift of such proportion, one that did not conform to the tenets of antiquity? He had benefited from an encounter with the Ethiopian travelers directed to Avignon, where Pope Clement V (1305–1314) had moved the Papacy. More generally, Carignano had access to the wealth of information that, thanks to both Ethiopian and Italian travelers, was being brought to Europe.

The only other source relevant for this first Ethiopian expedition to Italy is a letter allegedly sent by Prester John to Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316–1378).\(^{29}\) The letter was certainly a European forgery; nevertheless it indirectly confirms that the Ethiopian emperor Wedem Ra’ad, known in Renaissance Europe as the author, signed it

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\(^{26}\) In the fourteenth century there seem to be records of Franciscan proselytizing in Ethiopia and of Ethiopians turned Franciscan monks. In reality, the misconception is to be ascribed to the adoption by Ethiopians of Franciscan attires to which they had been exposed to in Jerusalem. Renato Lefevre, “Presenze Etiopiche in Italia prima del Concilio di Firenze del 1439,” \textit{Rassegna di Studi Etiopici} 23 (1968): 10.


\(^{28}\) Piero Falchetta tells us that mapmaking in the era was more a process of replication than anything else. Piero Falchetta, “Manuscript No. 10057 in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice: a Possible Source for the Catalan Atlas?” \textit{Imago Mundi} 46, no. 19–28 (1994).

\(^{29}\) Leone del Prete, \textit{Lettera inedita del Presto Giovanni all’ Imperatore Carlo IV ed altra di Lentulo ai senatori Romani sopra Gesu Cristo} (Lucca: Tip. dei figli di G. Rocchi, 1857).
as “King Voddomaradeg, son of the most excellent King of Ethiopia.” Voddomaradeg represents quite a syllabic stretch from Wedem Ra’ad, but it confirms that the emperor had made himself known in Europe, most likely through the mission that reached Avignon via Rome and Genoa. What persuaded Wedem Ra’ad to send representatives to Europe? Had he been inspired by the Portuguese *reconquista* that had been completed in 1249 and whose echoes had reached Jerusalem and ultimately the Ethiopian Highlands? The encounter seems to be the first of a series of attempts that Ethiopian rulers made to establish formal contact with European elites on the basis of a common Christian identity. The quest for distant allies was not an Ethiopian fantasy, but rather the consequence of a desire that was reciprocated on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, evidence shows that in the same period a Dominican priest residing in Socotra entertained the thought of involving Christian people “who are now living enclosed by mountains in the direction of Egypt” in an anti-Muslim campaign, a clear sign of the growing awareness of Ethiopia. With ‘Amda Šeyon’s (1314–1444) ascension to the throne, Ethiopia’s anti-Muslim posture radicalized. While his jests were popular in Europe, they antagonized the Mamluk sultanate in Egypt, which became increasingly wary of any interaction between Ethiopians and Europeans. As a result, the interaction of the early fourteenth century was followed by a rather silent period during which Ethiopians and Europeans failed to develop any other substantial encounter for almost a century because of what has been referred to as the “iron curtain” between Ethiopia and the Mediterranean basin.

Nevertheless the forces of merchant capitalism were at work throughout the Mediterranean Sea, as in the fourteenth century both Genovese and Venetian merchants nurtured trade relations with the Mamluk Sultanate and created a more conducive environment for commerce and travel. In 1380 Venice defeated Genoa and claimed her primacy on the Mediterranean Sea. The Serenissima proposed itself as the preferential interlocutor with the lands on the southern shores of the Mediterranean system, which through the Nile and Red Sea basins was ultimately connected with the Horn of Africa. Meanwhile, on the

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32 Taddesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, pp. 253–256.
other side of the “curtain,” with the ascension of Dāwit I (1382–1413) to the imperial throne, Ethiopian rulers proceeded to improve their relationship with the Egyptian sultan and opened the door to a stream of Ethiopian visitors who flooded the major cities of the Renaissance: Florence, Bologna, Rome, and most of all Venice.

The Ethiopian Expeditions in 1402 and 1404

On 16 July 1402, an intriguing group of travelers reached the Serenis-sima; they turned out to be ambassadors of “His Excellency Lord Prestozane.” The group was led by Antonio Bartoli, a Florentine traveler who had reached Ethiopia a few years earlier. Information on Bartoli is scant; according to Venetian sources Dāwit I (1382–1413) dispatched Bartoli back to Italy as an official representative—“nuncio of his highness Prestozane”—with a substantial retinue and strong financial backing.

One of the best-known sources relative to the Ethiopian expedition is the Iter de Venetiis ad Indiam, the oldest itinerary linking Europe with Ethiopia via Jerusalem. While the authorship remains uncertain, we know that it was written during the reign of Dāwit I and that Venice was its originating point; at the very least the Iter should be considered a by-product of the emerging encounter. The document reflects a significant tripartite organization. Beyond the actual itinerary, which reads largely like a list of directions offered to the reader to find his way to the Ethiopian highlands, the document offers a brief but stunning overview of Ethiopia’s political organization that includes references to regional members of the nobility and provides details regarding their jurisdiction over specific Ethiopian territories. Last but not least, the third section presents a list of Amharic common expressions and their Latin translations—the equivalent of a current day phrase book for tourists. If we were to look beyond the brevity of the document and put

35 The Itinerary is conserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze and has been reproduced a number of times. The whole document can be found in N. Jorga, “Cenni sulle relazioni,” pp. 140–150.
it into perspective, what we would see is a nineteenth-century traveler’s account in embryonic form. While this genre became a phenomenon of mass consumption only in the 1800s—to the point of warranting the publication of guides on how to write traveler accounts—we see in the early fifteenth century the emergence of works that are to a certain degree comparable to their nineteenth-century counterparts. Their content seems to suggest the rise of a new type of interest in the exotic as the topical choice of the author—geography, language, and political organization—starts to bear an uncanny resemblance to what we would see in print three hundred years later.

Two specific elements of the Iter need to be mentioned. The itinerary contains a long and exhaustive list of references to Ethiopian regions, such as Šewā, Goḡām, and Walagā, whose reconnaissance speaks to the proximity of either the author or his source to not only the Red Sea coastal territories but also, most important, the southern extremities of the Ethiopian highlands. Second, the author reiterates the idea that the Ethiopian sovereign is Presto Johannes, who “in winter sits in his throne in Chaamera. But who sits in his throne and lives in Sciahua. His proper name is David.” The degree of detail with which the whereabouts of Dāwīt I were described was unprecedented. The passage confirms the identification of Prester John with Ethiopia, and it also displays a basic yet impressive familiarity with the itinerant habits of Dāwīt I, a familiarity that can only be explained by the creation of a contact zone in Venice.

Other archival sources mention the embassy from “Jacobus Prestozane, Lord of the Indies” and list the gifts the party distributed in Venice and among European sovereigns. What were these gifts and what can they tell us about the nature of the encounter? The Ethiopian party donated a number of animals, among which were leopards and hides, gifts that most certainly impressed the Venetian elites. The Maggior Consiglio, one of Venice’s governing bodies, reciprocated by allocating

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36 The manual published by Francis Galton, the famous naturalist, was one of the most popular in the period. Francis Galton, The Art of Travel: Or Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries (London: J. Murray, 1855).
a substantial sum of money for the acquisition of gifts that, we will see, would prove to be very important for future contacts as well as for the history of Ethiopia.

What did the Ethiopians seek in Venice? News of the embassy reached a Dominican archbishop stationed in Persia who recorded the legation’s objectives: it sought to bring back to Ethiopia religious objects such as “priestly vestments, ‘pontificali,’ chalices, crosses, saintly relics.” Furthermore, Däwit I seems to have been interested in luring artisans into Ethiopia.\(^{39}\) Both desires seem to have been abundantly met as the party carried back to Ethiopia an enviable collection of precious objects. Indeed it has been recently argued that the ultimate result of the 1402 mission was the transportation to Ethiopia of the True Cross, a religious relic that would become the icon of the Yata Masqal. The link between the finding of the True Cross and the Ethiopian mission to Venice was first suggested by Salvatore Tedeschi in 1971 and more recently confirmed by Osvaldo Raineri after an attentive study of an Ethiopian manuscript, the *Sermons Composed by the Orthodox Patriarch Abba Kirakos on the Wood of the Holy Cross*.\(^{40}\) The sermon contains specific references to an Ethiopian embassy to “Bandaqeya,” a current Middle Eastern synonym for Venice, sent by Däwit I, and explains how the True Cross was donated by “Michele, the Doge of Venice.”\(^{41}\)

Other gifts also mentioned in the manuscript are vestments, rugs, fabrics, relics, a clock, mirrors, and a silver chalice. This last item was an object of interest among Ethiopianists for decades as a similar description of a silver chalice appeared both in European and Ethiopian sources, providing the best material evidence of the direct communication and exchange between European and Ethiopian elites. In the Venetian archives, the chalice is referred to thus: “A silver calice was donated to the representative of Prester John to reciprocate a twelve carat pearl received in 1402.”\(^{42}\) Similar descriptions can be found in the account of Francisco Álvares—first author of a published firsthand

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41 Ibid.
account of Ethiopia in 1540—as well as in an Ethiopian chronicle: the chalice made it to the highlands.\textsuperscript{43}

The Venetian interlocutors also made sure to satisfy other Ethiopian requests; an early example of Ethiopia’s penchant for Western technology and art—an interest that would later be confirmed by recurrent Ethiopian requests for artisans that continue to this day—was that Dāwit I had requested skilled artisans to be dispatched to his kingdom. Documents in the Venetian archives tell us—with a good degree of detail—that the Ethiopian embassy in fact left Venice with a large group of artisans: Vito, a Florentine painter who had been living in Venice; a Neapolitan armorer who had been living in Padua; Antonio, a Florentine mason; Antonio from Treviso; and another Antonio, a carpenter, also from Florence.\textsuperscript{44} While the discussed records confirm that the gifts made it back to Ethiopia, the fate of the party is unknown, and probably neither the envoys nor the artisans reached the destination.

In fact, concerns for the fate of the mission persuaded the Ethiopian court to send another party to Italy in 1404. It seems this second group visited Rome in the same year; however, the only record available is an epistolary exchange between Italian notables from the Friuli region.\textsuperscript{45}

The source is interesting in itself as it offers insight in the discourse on Ethiopia: it is completely color-blind, a feature even more interesting considering the private nature of the document. The letter contains a reference to the Ethiopians’ appearance, but does not go beyond an objective indication of their skin color, while it stresses their devotion: “There are here three black Ethiopians from India, good Christians, who brought along a young interpreter, they want to visit holy churches and always ask about sacred relics.”\textsuperscript{46} The members of the party happen to be black, but what is stressed, almost complacently, is their devotion as well as their penchant for the loci and sacred objects

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\textsuperscript{43} Compare the description found in Raineri and the cited documents from the Venetian State Archive with the description found in Francisco Alvarez, \textit{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} (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1961).


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of Christianity. The reported reason of their journey was to enquire on the first Ethiopian mission; this second party was unaware of their predecessors' whereabouts and leaves us without any knowledge of the latter's fate. We know that the True Cross and other gifts made it to the Ethiopian court—most likely through the mediation of Patriarch Matheos of Alexandria (1378–1408)—however, there are no known records relating to the specific party that left Venice in 1402.

Both Ethiopian expeditions were direct emanations of Dāwit I’s understanding of the world as divided along the Christian-Muslim axis. How did the missions define the Ethio-European contact zone? What were the overall relation and reciprocal reactions? This exchange between royals—completed in defiance of the difficulties posed by a long and unbeaten path—presents itself as a transaction between peers. It is most likely the first occurrence of a tangible relation between Europe and Prester John, who by the 1430s had transcended the legend and become a real monarch with a reasonably well-defined sovereignty and a rightful access to the formalities of Renaissance diplomacy: gift exchanges, epistolary relations, papal audiences. Evidence shows that the Venetian elites who came into contact with the Ethiopian mission had a reaction of respectful amazement, a reaction after all in line with the image of Prester John: religious creed trumped color and any other proto-racial consideration as a Christian-based transcontinental and transracial solidarity is clearly confirmed by subsequent events taking place in the peninsula.

By the turn of the fifteenth century, Italy progressively stole the stage of the encounter from Jerusalem; in particular, Rome—with the Papacy—became its new primary locus. Ethiopian monks started a tradition of pilgrimage and sojourn in Rome, where Santo Stefano degli Abissini, a religious complex dating back to the early Middle Ages,

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47 In this regard it is difficult to agree with the conclusion of a recent article dedicated to the encounter that describes it as one of Western amusement at the sight of strange-looking oriental guests. See Kate Lowe, “Representing’ Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402–1608,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17 (2007): 101–128. The evidence to substantiate this argument is indeed very thin and primarily hinged on the translation of a specific term in the brief account of the encounter. A nobleman from Padua is reported to have reacted with “hilariter et iocunde” at the sight of the Ethiopian presents, among which were hides as well as live animals. The Latin locution can certainly be translated as “laughter” but also as “joy” or “gaiety.” The few available sources offer too little evidence to substantiate claims of a disrespectful or ethnocentric reaction. The overall context of the encounter, the exchange of gifts, the logistics of the sojourn, and the private correspondence about the encounter all seem to suggest rejoicing rather than laughter, openness and solidarity rather than hegemonic or ethnocentric pretensions on the Venetian’s part.
became a crossroads: devout Ethiopians used it as a center of study, a hostel, and a stepping stone to other loci of Christian pilgrimage scattered throughout the Italian and Iberian peninsulas. The origin of the association of the church with the Ethiopian community in Rome is unclear: different popes have been identified as the tradition’s originators. While many historians have seen Eugene IV (1431–1447) as the one who assigned the structure to the Ethiopian community, it seems that such interpretation derives primarily from his role as the convener of the Council of Florence and his positive reception of the Ethiopian legation. There is reason to believe that Santo Stefano was assigned to the Ethiopian community much earlier, with some historians going as far as suggesting Alexander III (1159–1181) as the one who first agreed to have a contingent of Ethiopian monks sojourning in the structure. This hypothesis seems far-fetched, as we have neither sources to confirm it nor any substantial change in the European knowledge base about Ethiopia until the late fourteenth century.

The sight of Ethiopian monks in Rome, Venice, and other city-states of the Italian Renaissance was not the rarest of events. In particular, the familiarity of Ethiopians with Rome and the hierarchies of the Catholic Church is confirmed by a collection of litterae indulgentiae unearthed by Renato Lefevre in the late 1940s. In fact the papal curia seems to have granted several letters of indulgence in favor of Ethiopian monks, to ease their journeys to the European loci of Christianity.

The format of the documents is quite standardized: the underwriter lists the feats of the Ethiopian carrier to justify the recommendation to extend financial or other kind of support to allow the carrier to reach his destination. It is worth mentioning a couple of these indulgencies and trying to extrapolate the underlying discourse. In 1407 “priest Thomas Mathie, Nicolaus Barnabe and Johannes Georgii from India” were issued a letter of indulgence by Gregorious XII (1406–1415) after visiting the pontiff. In a letter dated 9 August 1431, another Ethiopian pilgrim addressed as “Thomas, priest from Ethiopia” is commended for having traveled to Italy to visit the tombs of the apostles and recommended to the generosity of any good soul interested in receiving forty days of indulgence for the support extended to the devout Ethiopian.

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The documents offer a rare window on the reality of everyday life for Ethiopians in Europe and demonstrate how Ethiopian monks were well integrated into a Christian world where piety—not race—was the currency of election.

In 1407 a few dark-skinned monks are reported celebrating a public mass in one of Bologna’s main squares, most likely Ethiopian monks who had made their way to northern Italy. The event seems to have pleasantly surprised the populace: “They are good Christians, coming from Jerusalem to complete a pilgrimage, i.e. they are going to Sam Jacomo and Santo Antonio and to Rome.”51 These “good Christians” had attracted the interests of the residents who could not understand their language but made sure to attend the celebrated mass. The source is silent on possible donations the monks had received, but it is easy to imagine that together with the letters of indulgence the monks used their liturgical skills to entice donations instrumental to the pilgrimage.

The sources considered so far seem to suggest that Ethiopian pilgrims visited and traveled around Italy out of devotion as well as desire to reconnect with what seems to have been perceived—despite all the theological differences—as the center of the Christian world. In particular, Santo Stefano seems to have been a center of religious learning where Ethiopian monks came to be exposed to teachings and readings available nowhere else. However, the religious encounter, as any other encounter in the Ethio-European contact zone, was not grounded on Ethiopian acquiescence, and the monks certainly did not travel to Italy to renounce their identity. In fact, the underlying dynamics seem to suggest negotiation and independence rather than obedience. The point is well illustrated by the Ethiopian participation in two important councils called in the first half of the fifteenth century. We know that Ethiopian monks partook in the Council of Constance52 called in 1417 by Pope Martin V and aimed at the resolution of the Western schisms. The visit is confirmed by a reference in the correspondence of an Italian participant53 as well as by a safe-conduct issued by the pope himself in favor of “three Ethiopians, Pietro, Bartolomeo

51 Italian original: “Sono boni christiani et venem per Jerusalem per andare in pel- legrinazo, zo’ andano a Sam Jacomo a Santo Antonio e a Roma,” Renato Lefevre, “Docu menti pontifici,” p. 25.
and Antonio who after having commendably staid for many banquets and having received the angel of peace now promise to return to their own things. Considering that the Ethiopian participation was not recorded anywhere else and that the council itself had been called to resolve tensions within Western Christianity, we can assume that the Ethiopian monks had a marginal and most likely unofficial role in Constance. The same cannot be said for another council that took place in Florence less than three decades later, but before moving there we need to go back to Ethiopia, where, after Dāwit’s death and the brief interlude of Tewodros I (1413–1414), Yeshāq was anointed emperor in 1414. The new emperor continued Dāwit’s exploratory tradition, and by sending a new mission to Europe, this time to reach Alfonso V of Aragon (1396–1458), fueled an Aragonese moment in the Ethio-European contact zone.

The Aragonese Moment, 1427–1450

In 1427 Yeshāq dispatched a legation to Valencia for the purpose of establishing relations and seeking the assistance of friendly sovereigns in his project to bring skilled artisans to Ethiopia. The encounter was recorded by Guillaume Fillastre (1344–1428), cardinal of S. Mark in Venice, who happened to be at Pope Martin V’s curia when the latter received news of the visit. An able geographer, Fillastre added information about the encounter to a cosmographical treatise conserved in Nancy. According to his annotations, Alfonso had been visited by representatives of “Christians of Prester John, who is said to reign over seventy-two kings, of which twelve are infidels, the rest Christians yet different in rituals and mores. Little is known of [what is] beyond the equator with the exception of the great region of Agisimba, which is included in this map and drawn in the south end.” The European portrayal of Prester John is still imbued with legend, yet his reign is incontrovertibly identified with Agisimba, a misnomer for Abyssinia,

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54 Latin original: “Tres ethiopes, Pietro, Bartoloemo e Antonio qui in partibus istis per menses plurimos laudabiliter commorati, comitante pacis angelo, nunc ad propria redire proponant,” ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 23.
56 Latin original: “Presbyteri Johannis Christiani, qui dictur regnare super 72 reges, quorum 12 sunt infideles, reliqui christiani, sed diversorum ritum et sectarum. Ultra equinoccialem pauc a est cognicio, nisi quod ibi est amplissima regio Agisimba, que sub ista tabula comprehenditur et signatur in fine ad austrum,” La Roncière, L’Europe au moyen age, p. 116.
about which, Fillastre admits, little is known. The Ethiopian party was a composite one: “The two ambassadors of such Prester John, one Christian and the other infidel, came to Alfonso king of Aragon in the year of our Lord 1427.”

While little is known about the encounter itself, the letter Alfonso of Aragon dispatched to Ethiopia in the hands of the two ambas-siato-

res speaks volumes to the eagerness of Alfonso to find allies for his expansionist quest. In fact the Aragonese king went as far as proposing a marriage to seal a union between his kingdom and Ethiopia. The scheme would have entailed double marriage, one between Infanta Dona Juana and Yeshāq himself and the other between Infante Don Pedro and an unspecified Ethiopian princess. As the proposal never came to fruition, it has been regarded elsewhere as inconsequential and of little relevance and evidence that “differential practices” applied to African rulers when compared to their European counterparts. I shall argue otherwise: for a number of reasons, starting with Alfonso’s standing as one of the most influential European sovereigns of his time, the proposed marriage is key to understanding the disregard for race that defined this Ethio-European contact zone. We should bear in mind that the proposal became a dead letter most likely because it never made it to Yeshāq’s ear. In fact, years later, when a second Ethiopian legation made it to Alfonso’s court, it became evident that neither his letter nor the artisans he had dispatched to Ethiopia had reached past the Egyptian sultanate.

It should also be noted that the death of Yeshāq followed by four throne successions in four years made the Ethiopian monarchy unstable and certainly less receptive to foreign contact. Only with the crowning of Zar’a Yā’eqob (1434–1468) did the country regain stability, and the Aragonese connection was revived. During his rule Ethiopia pushed to expand northward and claim an outlet on the Red Sea. While in line with the tradition of Christian zealotry that had characterized the so-called Solomonic restoration, Zar’a Yā’eqob pushed for an intensifi-


58 La Roncière, L’Europe au moyen âge, p. 116.


cation of the church and state coenobium and made no mystery of his worldview: “whoever kills pagans has committed no sin.”

Zar’a Ya’eqob was determined to solidify his empire and understood the necessity of harnessing faith as a political tool to be deployed in the state-building process. In order to succeed he needed first to solidify Christianity within the boundaries of his empire, and later to use the military-religious machine to expand. While faith had long been a unifying element of the Ethiopian polity vis-à-vis non-Christians, the existence of different factions within the Ethiopian Church had caused significant strife and regionalism. Through a mixture of negotiation and coercion Zar’a Ya’eqob achieved unity within the Orthodox Church and started an aggressive policy of proselytism that entailed the ordaining of an unprecedented number of priests as well as the building of new churches and monasteries. Zar’a Ya’eqob had distaste not only for non-Christians, but also for those among his subjects who blended Christianity with other religious practices: non-Christian rituals were declared illegal and harshly punished. On the international front, Zar’a Ya’eqob’s relations with Egypt went through phases of military confrontation and diplomatic mediation and remained tense for the entirety of his rule, complicated by his confrontation with the ‘Adāl sultanate, which he defeated in 1445. Both Ethiopian and European elites saw Islam as a dangerous foe and felt naturally attracted to each other as ideal Christian allies. While the attempts to form a lasting alliance were inconsequential, they left behind a substantial paper trail that can shed light on the nature of the Ethio-European encounter.

In 1449 Zar’a Ya’eqob dispatched to Naples a legation that reached the city in time to assist Alfonso’s triumphant entrance in the city on 16 July 1450. The party remained there a few months, enough time for Alfonso to redact a letter to Zar’a Ya’eqob and for Pietro Ranzano (1428–1492) to meet the head of the party and write a substantial account; most of what we know about the encounter can be found in these two documents. Alfonso signed a letter addressed to “Zere Jacobo, son of David of the house of Solomon, Ethiopian Emperor, our very dear friend and brother” and dated 18 September 1450. The Aragonese king pledged to meet Zar’a Ya’eqob’s request and to dispatch artisans

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61 Passages such as these are contained in the Mashafa Milad, The Book of the Nativity of the Ethiopian tradition. See Edward Ullendorf, The Ethiopians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 147.
62 For a detailed description, see Taddesse, Church and State, pp. 206–248.
63 Ibid., p. 262.
back to Ethiopia and then added a reference to the 1427 encounter lamenting “the loss of those thirteen men, masters in different arts, whom we dispatched a long time ago after the request of your most serene brother, and who, unable to pass, died on the way.” The statement explains at least in part why for the previous two decades there had been no contact: the party Alfonso had arranged to send to Yeshäq never made it to Ethiopia, and most likely had been killed or disbanded while traversing the land of the Egyptian sultanate. Knowing the fate the Venetian expedition had suffered four decades earlier, we can imagine that neither the Italian artisans nor the Ethiopian ambassadors ever made it back to Ethiopia.

The second source has a much more intriguing origin. Ranzano, a Dominican friar who was in Naples in 1450 for Alfonso’s visit, heard rumors about an ambassador of Prester John having reached the city to pay homage to the king. Ranzano arranged to meet the Ethiopian ambassador and later used the information acquired in the encounter to integrate a treatise he had been working on, the Annales Omnium Temporum. The result of his effort should be seen as the first proto-ethnographic account ever compiled about Ethiopia.

The circumstances of the encounter are themselves worth mentioning. When Ranzano was informed of the Ethiopian ambassador’s presence, he started to envision the nature of his meeting with him: “I would have seen a man of very dark complexion—Ranzano tells us—speaking a barbarous tongue, as I believed he was Ethiopian. I had taken with me an Ethiopian educated in Italy since his adolescence so that he could have been my interpreter. Introduced to the presence of the ambassador, I saw a man whose skin was brownish, like that of Egyptians, but which did not display anything Ethiopian-like.” When Ranzano instructed the interpreter to translate his own greetings, the ambassador spoke to Ranzano in Italian and told him that no interpreter would have been necessary. In fact the ambassador’s name was Rombulo from Messina. Rombulo

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65 Pietro Ranzano (1428–1492) was a prominent Dominican priest from Palermo who first became bishop and later inquisitor in Sicily, and finally papal ambassador to Hungary. Ranzano authored numerous works on history and geography. The material here analyzed comes from his Annales Omnium Temporum and was reproduced in Carmelo Traselli, “Un Italiano in Etiopia,” Rassegna di Studi Etiopici 1–2 (1941): 173–202.
had lived in Ethiopia for thirty-seven years and married an Ethiopian, with whom he had eight children. It seems that before returning to Europe as an Ethiopian envoy he had been dispatched by Zar’a Yā’eqob to India. Ranzano relays that Rombulo had travelled to Asia with a party of two hundred men and had returned four years later to Ethiopia with only fifty. There is no known evidence that can substantiate this claim, which, if it were true, would speak volumes to Zar’a Yā’eqob’s global outlook.

The treatise—in which it is hard to distinguish between Rombulo and Ranzano’s voices—contains both fantastic and historical information, and one could argue that while the latter originated with Rombulo, the former was Ranzano’s attempt to reconcile classical knowledge and medieval legends with the information obtained during the encounter. Ethiopia is described as a kingdom organized according to feudalistic principles and ruled by a benevolent Christian king. Ranzano’s understanding of the intricacies of the Ethiopian political system—including the complex system of Ethiopian kingmaking—is so detailed that it can be explained only as the result of his encounter with someone with direct access to the highest levels of Ethiopian society.

Each king overrules a few lords, each of whom controls his own people. Each people and each king send annual tributes to the sovereign [. . .] if somebody wages war (like Arabs and Egyptians often do) each king supports him with his own military means [. . .] Ethiopians are very able infantrymen. [. . .] Once the king is dead, the high dignitaries of the kingdom, who have this assignment from the people, elect as king one of the sons of the deceased who seems able to manage the state [. . .] if the king leaves no sons, by the time he is buried they choose a man of royal stock who seems capable of managing the state.66

The Ranzano-Rombulo account, which offers a faithful description of Zar’a Yā’eqob’s power structure, is devoid of any sort of racial or derogatory reference. The overall appreciative attitude is confirmed by further claims, such as one relating to Ethiopian educated elites: “there are in Ethiopia many scientists and astrologists, physicians are held

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66 Italian original: “A ciascun re sono sottomessi alcuni signori, ognuno dei quali e’ padrone del suo popolo. Ogni popolo e ogni re mandano annui tributi al sovrano [. . .] se qualcuno gli muove guerra (come fanno spesso gli Arabi e gli Egiziani) ogni re lo soccorre coi suoi mezzi bellici [. . .] gli Etiopi sono fanti abilissimi [. . .] Morto il re, gli alti dignitari del regno, che ne hanno l’incarico dal popolo, eleggono re uno dei figli del morto, che sembrò able ad amministrazione lo stato [. . .] se il re non lascia figli, prima di averlo seppellito scelgono un uomo di schiatta reale che subito salutano re,” ibid.
in high regard.” This kind of description is particularly interesting because it goes beyond a discourse engrained in Christian piety—that of the Ethiopian as the good Christian—and it conveys altogether an image of either equality or Ethiopian superiority in the field of science, a stance that seems all the more impressive when read against the standards of the Italian Renaissance.

Whether from Rombulo’s mouth, Ranzano’s pen, or Alfonso’s letter, Ethiopia emerges as the object of genuine interest. One would have imagined the diplomatic intercourse between Alfonso and Zar’a Yä’eqob to have produced more tangible results, especially in light of the other two missions Alfonso sent to Ethiopia. Had it not been for the death of Alfonso in 1458 and the subsequent sunset of the Aragonese monarchy, the Ethio-European contact zone would have assumed a different shape. Instead the encounter between Ethiopia and Aragon came to a halt, and in the long run its significance was limited when compared to the intercourses taking place in other loci of the contact zone.

**The Council of Florence, 1441**

In 1441 a small party of Ethiopian monks reached Florence to partake in an ecumenical council summoned by Pope Eugene IV. The Council of Florence was aimed at restoring order within the Christian world; in particular the pope sought to reunify Rome with the Eastern Churches. By announcing a Decree of Union with the Greek Church and dispatching letters to the more distant oriental churches, whose existence was in part known and in part still informed by medieval legends, Eugene IV adopted an ecumenical policy that engendered one of the best known Ethio-European encounters of the fifteenth century. The same papal letter was redacted in multiple copies and addressed, separately, to both “Thomas Emperor of Indies” and “Prester John Emperor of Ethiopia.” Eugene IV dispatched the letter through Alberto da Sarteano, the friar to whom he assigned the mission to reach Ethi-

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67 Italian original: “vi sono in Etiopia molti fisici e astrologi; vi son tenuti in gran pregio i medici,” ibid.
68 After the encounter in Naples, the Aragonese moment continued with the dispatch of Michele Desiderio in 1452 and Antonio Martinez in 1453. However, little is known besides the content of the letter they had been instructed to take to the Ethiopian monarch. Alfonso reiterated similar concepts relating to a Christian alliance, his desire to support the Ethiopian monarchy, as well as his expansionist plans for the Middle East. See La Roncière, *L’Europe au moyen âge*, p. 121.
In the text the pope humbly proposes to expand each other’s knowledge of the other, without any pretension of superiority on his part. While the Papacy had sent letters addressed to “Prester John of Ethiopia” before, Eugene IV’s letter was the first one of consequence, as da Sarteano failed to reach Ethiopia but in 1440 delivered the letter to Nicodemus, abbot of the Ethiopian convent in Jerusalem.

The document must have been welcomed, as Nicodemus made arrangements to dispatch representatives to Florence, who, according to the scant sources available, made it to the city on 16 August 1441: “about 40 indians [sic] sent by Prester John [. . . ,] they were black and skinny and quite different from the posture and the type from here.” The passage is interesting because it describes the legation, even in its appearance, but falls short of drawing any moral or cultural connotation from it. The closest we get to a derogatory discourse is with the characterization of Ethiopian as “disforme,” which could be translated as “non-conformant” or “different.” Certainly the Ethiopians in Florence looked very different and exotic to the spectators and interlocutors, but the context of the encounter seems to contradict a derogatory use of the term.

While the participation in the council and the chance to establish more solid relations with the Catholic Church and European powers were certainly in tune with Zar’a Yâ’eqob’s understanding of Ethiopia’s role in the Horn and in the wider world, in all likelihood the legation itself had not been authorized beforehand by the emperor. In fact, Nicodemus showed openness to any initiative leading to a union but stopped short of declaring any authority on the matter, a confirmation that the legation had been authorized by neither the emperor or the ‘abuna. The letter conveys Nicodemus’s embarrassment with regard to the request for unity:

We also desire to be a single thing . . . even the Negus once he will hear this word will rejoice. He also desires the faith to be one. I would have come to you, but I feared the Muslims. Therefore I sent my children to you [. . . ,] they will then go to the Negus of Ethiopia and will relay him .

70 The original Amharic letter can be found in Cerulli, “L’Etiopia,” p. 60.
what you will tell them [. . .] Therefore, honored Father, with regard to the love between us, I then tell you: you must know that our great Negus and we desire it a lot; however without our Negus [approval] we are unable [to formally accept a union]. These children of mine did not come to you to argue about faith, but to listen and accept everything you will explain to them and to meekly obey in the questioning of faith. Because you are the big sun, true light for every creature.72

The letter epitomizes the idea of an encounter engrained in Christianity against the backdrop of an ongoing confrontation with Islam and confirms Jerusalem’s standing as a key Christian outpost—a role it retained until the Portuguese circumvention of Africa. It also conveys Nicodemus’s desire to nourish his country and his church’s relations with potential allies, while at the same time retaining independence. This stance finds a confirmation in another source, the writings of Flavio Biondo, one of Eugene IV’s secretaries, where we can find a rendering of the Ethiopian legation’s declarations at the council.73 The document relays that Pietro—the Ethiopian deacon heading the legation—was interrogated and made declarations concerning his faith as well as the good faith and good intentions of the Ethiopian Church.

It is evident that all the people who departed from you ended up in ruin; but we, of all heresies departed from the Roman chair, are still strong, powerful and free. [. . .] Our strangeness is to be imputed to the long distance and to the perils dividing us and for the negligence of our past pastors. However we do not have recollection of your visits, for the purpose of taking care of our lost flock, we think it is for more than 800 years that the Popes have not dispatched somebody to tell us “may God bless you.”74

72 Italian original: “Anche noi desideravamo essere una sola cosa [. . .] anche il Negus quando avrā' sentito questa parola gioira’. Anche egli desiderava che unica fosse la fede. [. . .] Io poi sarei venuto da te, ma ho avuto dimore dei musulmani che la mia venuta fosse palese. Quindi ho mandato i miei figli da te [. . .] e vadano poi dal Negus di Etiopia e gli riferiscano quel che tu avrai detto. [. . .] Quindi, o Padre onorato, per quanto riguarda l’amore che sara’ tra noi, io ti dico poi: Sappi sicuramente che noi ed il nostro grande Negus lo desideriamo molto. Ma senza il nostro Negus a noi non e’ possibile. Questi miei figli non sono venuti da Te a disputare sulle questioni di fede, ma per sentire aed accettare tutto cio’ che tu spiegherai loro e per ubbidire docilmente nel questionare di fede. Perche’ tu sei il grande sole, luce davvero per ogni creaturea,” ibid.

73 Flavio Biondo, Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum (Italy, 1483).

74 Italian original: “E’ manifesto che ogni gente e popolo paritto da te e’ finito in rovina; ma noi soli fra le heresie partite dalla romana sedia siamo ancora forti, potenti e liberi [. . .] La nostra stranezza detta sia piu’ tosto per lunga distantia e per li pericoli che in mezzo sono e per negligentia de passati pastori circa di noi. Pero’ che a noi non e’ memoria alcuna di vostra visitazione e cura di pecore nostre disperse, ma crediamo che sieno d’anni piu’ di 800 che Papi ci mandass a dire: Dio vi dia il buon di,” ibid.
What emerges here, beyond considerations of political convenience and skillful diplomacy, is a discourse of belonging: we are at the periphery of the Christian world, the deacon seems to suggest, and if our faith is different it is because of your negligence. The declaration continues by citing the Ethiopian tradition concerning King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as a way to legitimize Zar’a Ya’qob’s rule: “[...] we are much stronger than the others [implying other Eastern churches] as our emperor has one hundred kings abiding to our faith and even the glory of the Queen of Sheba who went to Jerusalem attracted by Solomon’s fame; in the same way we were attracted to yours.”

In the end, the council resulted in a letter of union for the Egyptian Church but not for the Ethiopian Church. We can assume that the council’s authorities understood that the legation lacked the authority to negotiate their church’s standing vis-à-vis Rome. The Ethiopian visit had opened an important channel of communication, but the issue of the religious independence of Ethiopia had remained on the sidelines. If we compare this first full-fledged religious encounter to later developments in the Portuguese period—and the eventual expulsion of the Jesuits—it is hard to deny the degree of negotiability the available sources show. On the one hand the Ethiopian legation proudly proclaimed its long Christian tradition and self-reliance; on the other its interlocutors seem to have privileged pragmatism—the possibility to strengthen the relation with a long-lost church—to theological disputes. The latter would later emerge, as subsequent encounters would show, but for now in a post-Crusade and pre-Reformation Christian world Islam seemed to be the greatest of concerns and the definer of otherness.

Beyond its theological consequences, the Council of Florence, as any other council, was an important gathering occasion for religious and lay elites alike, as well as for other interesting characters. Among them were scholars who were seeking answers in the field of geography and merchants looking for information that could grant them a competitive advantage in their trading endeavors. It appears that the Ethiopian legation, being among the most exotic representatives of distant Christianity, soon became very popular with attendees interested

75 “Noi siamo molto maggiori che gli altri. Perche’ etiandio il nostro Imperatore ha cento Re di corona sotto la fede nostra et anco l’anticha gloria della Regina Saba che venne in Jerusalemme alla fama di Salomone come noi a te,” Cerulli, “Eugenio IV,” p. 353. The Ethiopian participation was also recorded on the Bronze doors of St. Peter in Rome by Antonio di Pietro Averlino (1400–1469), known as Filarete; further references are scattered throughout the Italian chronicles of the era.
in cosmography. One of the pope’s secretaries, the above-mentioned Flavio Biondo, seems to have been very interested in any kind of information Pietro and his companion could share with him with respect to the location of their kingdom. Biondo seems to have taken their words very seriously, even when they clashed with the Ptolemaic views held dear by the Catholic establishment. While Pietro could adduce any tangible evidence to substantiate his point about Ethiopia’s location, Biondo did not refrain from believing the deacon and argued that “Ptolemy was ignorant of many things.”76 The opinion of an Ethiopian traveler seems to have penetrated and disqualified with ease centuries of European geographical tradition; the scientific discourse of the time was derived from classical authorities and strongly intertwined with the theological tenets of the Church, yet it took Biondo little to throw in his lot with Pietro the Ethiopian.

Even more astounding is the manner in which the geographical information collected from the Ethiopians moved upstream—after all it was contradicting the tenets of classical geography that were still very dear to the scientific establishment—and made it to the ear of Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (1397–1482), one of the most famous cosmographers of the time, who had been developing ideas about reaching the East. What exactly Toscanelli discussed with the Ethiopian legation is unknown. What we do know is that he was held in very high consideration at the court of King Alfonso, to whose advisor he directed a letter outlining his vision for the circumvention of the globe. The importance of the letter to Columbus’s enterprise has long been an object of controversy.77 Toscanelli certainly met Pietro and his companions as well as other European travelers who either directly or indirectly had been exposed to the geographical reality of Ethiopia. The encounter with the Ethiopian legation aroused so much enthusiasm that it convinced Toscanelli to write to the pope on behalf of the Ethiopian legation, suggesting an ecumenical approach to the issue of unity,78 a further clue as to the degree of approval the Ethiopian elites enjoyed in Italy. In a 1474 letter addressed to Fernam Martins, adviser to King Alfonso V of Portugal, Toscanelli mentioned his encounter

77 A very good summary of the controversy is offered by Larner, Marco Polo, pp. 140–150.
with a representative of Prester John and then laid out his theory about reaching the Indies by sailing west. Eventually the letter was copied by Christopher Columbus himself in his personal diary.79

It is impossible to evince from the scant documents available the impact of the Ethio-European encounter on the geographical knowledge base of the era. What we know is that Ethiopians contributed to a discourse about the geography of the world that transcended continental lines and that was far from being the simple product of European ingenuity. Toscanelli was indeed not the only one to discuss geography with Ethiopian visitors. The information Pietro and other Ethiopian visitors disseminated throughout Italy impacted the geographical paradigm of the time. It was of consequence not just for a better understanding of the whereabouts of Prester John, but for the understanding of the world’s geography.

The Ethiopian Idea of Europe

The letter Nicodemus dispatched to the Council of Florence offered a rare glimpse at his understanding of the Papacy’s role within Christianity and Ethiopia’s place in the broader world of the Ethio-European encounter. Unfortunately, the document appears to be the only source that lets an Ethiopian speak—however indirectly, given the mediation of a European record keeper—for himself. In fact, for the period under consideration no contemporaneous source can shed light on the issue of how Ethiopians perceived Europeans during their explorations. We can, however, attempt to address the issue by inferring from two sets of documents: we can read between the lines of the sources already considered in an attempt to deduce the Ethiopian attitude toward their interlocutors, and we can look for subsequent sources, hoping to find more specific references to the Ethiopian image of Europe in a later period.

The surveyed documents seem to suggest that the Ethiopian image of Europe mirrored to a good extent the European image of Ethiopia. The 1402 embassy to Venice shows that Dāwit I organized a diplomatic mission grounded on the assumption that his representatives would be

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treated with the dignity granted to European dignitaries, regardless of their appearance. The expectation was in fact largely met when the Ethiopian party was welcomed accordingly. Years later Yeshäq and then Zar’a Ya’eqob dispatched representatives to Alfonso’s court in Naples under the same assumption. Once again, Ethiopian expectations were vindicated when Alfonso went as far as proposing a marriage between his and Yeshäq’s heirs, the ultimate proof he considered the Ethiopian ruler a peer. The dedication of substantial resources to their embassies to Europe tells us that fifteenth-century Ethiopian sovereigns had reasonable expectations to see these missions ensue in productive alliance. While the embassies had no immediate consequences, their success in attracting European interest and laying the foundation for more productive relations in the years to come tells us that they were in fact conducted under the correct assumptions. In the following years the Ethio-European encounter saw numerous attempts on the Ethiopian, Portuguese, and Catholic part to establish closer relations. Contacts intensified and reached a climactic moment by the mid sixteenth century, leaving behind an unprecedented array of documents.

In 1508 the Ethiopian regent ‘Eleni (1508–1522) dispatched the first Ethiopian embassy to Portugal offering to Manuel I (1495–1521) support for an anti-Muslim crusade:

That you may cause these Moors to be wiped off the face of the earth—and we by land, brother, and you by sea, for we are powerful on the land—that they may no longer give to be eaten of dogs the offerings and gifts made at the Holy Sepulchre. And now is the time arrived of the promise made by Christ and Saint Mary His mother, Who said that in the last times the King of the parts of the Franks would rise up, and that he would put an end to the Moors.80

Similar proposals for a joint campaign were reiterated years later by the Ethiopian emperor Lebna Dengel (1508–1540), who wrote letters to both Manuel I and João III (1521–1557) suggesting joint operations in the Red Sea basin. Even more relevant for our purpose, all three letters contain references to a prophecy that speaks volumes to the nature of the Ethiopian image of Europe. ‘Eleni and Lebna Dengel’s agency seemed driven by intelligence and geopolitical calculation, but also by myth. According to Lebna Dengel’s letter to Manuel I “[the Portuguese

embassy to Ethiopia] was first prophesied by the prophet in the life and passion of St Victor, in the book of the Holy Fathers [...] that a Frank King should meet with the King of Ethiopia, and that they should give each other peace."81 The chaplain of the 1520 Portuguese mission to Ethiopia, Francisco Álvares, discusses the prophecy in his narrative, stating that he heard it mentioned from both the Ethiopian bāhr negus (king of the sea) and ‘abuna Mārqqos (1481–1530) during his stay in Ethiopia.82

The Abyssinians had a prophecy that there would both be more than a hundred Popes in their country, and that then there would be a new ruler of the Roman Church and that the Abima would complete the hundred; and also they had two prophecies one of St Ficatorio, the other of St Sinoda who was a hermit of Egypt, saying that the Franks from the end of the earth would come by sea and would join with the Abyssinians and would destroy Juda [Jeddah], and Tero [Tor] and Mecâ [Mecca] and that so many people would cross over and would pull down Mecâ, and without moving would hand the stones from one to another and would throw them into the Red Sea, and Mecâ would be left a bare plain, and that also they would take Egypt and the great city of Cairo.83

The prophecy appears to be the mirror image of the myth of Prester John. On both sides of the Ethio-European contact zone the figure of a distant and powerful Christian king became the main character of an inventive ploy meant to resolve the tension between the present and future conditions of Christianity in the face of a Muslim onslaught. Prester John and the Frank king bore witness to the presence of an anti-Muslim psychosis that, on both sides of the contact zone, proved a very fertile milieu for the encounter. In fact, the escalation of the Christian-Muslim confrontation in the early sixteenth century stimulated Europeans and Ethiopians to push the boundaries of geopolitical imagination. In 1541 the Portuguese intervened militarily in the Ethiopian highlands to prevent the fall of Ethiopia at the hands of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1507–1543), imam and general of Adāl. Thanks to their intervention Christian Ethiopia was saved and would

81 In Alvarez, The Prester John, p. 60.
82 The Ethiopian bāhr negus was historically the ruler of Ethiopian maritime province. See “Bahar Nägas” in Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), p. 444.
83 Alvarez, The Prester John, p. 60.
soon become a land of mission for the Society of Jesus, which, after being officially recognized as a religious order in 1540, dispatched the first mission to Ethiopia in 1554 under the leadership of João Nunes Barreto (1510–1562).84

Apart from the understanding of Europeans as military allies, what emerges prominently from Ethiopian sources is an idea of Europeans as purveyors of technical knowledge. We know that one of the objectives of the 1402 mission to Venice was to obtain artisans and craftsmen ready to relocate to Ethiopia and put their skills to the good use of the empire. In the following years the procurement of men skilled in arts and technology remained a priority for the Ethiopian rulers who strived to incorporate them in their entourage; in fact, a penchant for artistic and technical skills enticed emperors to extend court and land privileges to Europeans in exchange for their contributions. Francisco Álvares had multiple conversations with Europeans who were residing at Lebna Dengel's court and recorded that they “go about the Court and they have given them very great possessions and vassals, and they are married and live like lords.”85 The period intervening between the initial Ethiopian missions to Europe and the 1520 mission saw the emergence of a sizable community of foreigners on the highlands; traders, artists, and artisans were welcomed by the Ethiopian elites, given incentives, and at times even coerced to stay and use their skills to the benefit of the monarchy.

According to Álvares, Lebna Dengel appeared very much focused on the issue of importing European technology into Ethiopia and inquired with the Portuguese ambassador to find out how many muskets he had brought along, and then “he asked if any of us could make powder. [. . .] He said that sulfur could be found in his kingdoms, even that there were craftsmen to make saltpeter. All his armies lacked was the use of artillery and someone to teach them to work it, because he could marshal innumerable carabineers with whom he would subdue all the neighboring Moorish kings.”86 These brief passages, like a variety of other sources from the Portuguese moment in the Ethio-European encounter, show that Ethiopian rulers were aware of the growing

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85 Álvares, The Prester John, p. 62.
86 Ibid., p. 288.
importance of technology for the well-being of their empire and identified Europeans as the most likely and willing providers. Time and time again Ethiopian rulers lobbied for technical assistance, reverting to the idea of a common Muslim enemy to justify their request.

The image of Europe that emerges from this brief overview of sixteenth-century sources mirrors by and large the European discourse on Ethiopia with an added Promethean image of Europeans as purveyors of technology. But are sixteenth-century sources a reliable proxy for inexistent fifteenth-century sources on the Ethiopian discourse on Europe? I would argue that sources predating the Portuguese military intervention of 1541 should in fact present a discourse that is in all likelihood similar in nature to its fifteenth-century counterpart, because the period intervening between the first missions to Europe and the first Portuguese period in Ethiopia saw no event that could change the nature of the reciprocal perception. If anything, a certain image of Europe grew stronger along with the unfolding of the encounter, certainly reaching the climax during the Ethiopian-ʿAdālī war and with Portugal’s assistance. Of course, starting in the late 1550s with the landing in Məsəwə of the Jesuits, eager to convert Ethiopians to Counter-Reformation Catholicism, the image of Europe changed. Soon the perception of Europeans as Christian allies would leave the stage to suspicion and fear. European clerics soon started to appear as usurpers of tradition and enemies of Ethiopia. They appeared to the Ethiopian lay and clerical elites as aggressive agents of the Catholic Church who had little in common with the farang they had related to throughout the fifteenth century and for most of the sixteenth century.87

Conclusion

When we put into perspective the various encounters discussed in this article—all of which took place outside Ethiopia and therefore confirm Ethiopia’s proactive role at the dawn of the European age of exploration—it is clear that a shared Christian identity represented the defining element of reciprocal exploration and understanding; its strength determined the marginalization of any other possible idioms of difference. Christian identity was the currency of exchange. Ethiopian monks in Europe seem to have perceived themselves as coming from a

87 Farang is the Ethiopian designation of foreigner of European descent.
periphery to a benevolent and oblivious center. The Western Christianity they were exposed to in Rome and Florence seems to have been very different from the Counter-Reformation Catholicism Ethiopia would have to reckon with in the ensuing centuries.88

The Ethiopian elites sought to establish relations with Western powers in order to find allies against Islam and acquire technological know-how. In other words, they perceived themselves as part of a Christian world-system and used this identity to their own advantage. In this regard it is telling that, despite the importance of Rome and the Papacy, the Ethiopian parties that visited the peninsula on official missions somehow recognized Venice and Naples as important loci of political power and targeted them as key destinations. If on the one hand Deacon Pietro headed to Italy to partake in the Council, on the other we should not forget that his expedition had originated in Jerusalem and it lacked Zar’a Ya’eqob’s seal of approval; as such it proved to be of little consequence for the relationship between churches. By the same token, throughout the fourteenth century papal letters to Ethiopia remained unanswered. The Ethiopian sovereigns who dispatched their representatives to the cities of the Italian Renaissance seem to have perceived Christian identity and any relation with the Papacy more as a means than an end in itself.

The encounters we have looked at suggest dynamics more typical of negotiations between peers than subordination of one group to another. If this is the case, how do we answer the more general question about color and racial difference in the Afro-European contact zone? How do we reconcile the encounters discussed in this chapter and the refined diplomatic relations with accounts of African slavery, servitude, and discrimination in fifteenth-century Europe? How can we square examples of collaboration and transculturation taking place in the Ethio-European encounter with what else we know about Euro-African relations? The episodes of these early encounters seem to suggest that Ethio-European relations were defined by a religious discourse that left very little space to ideas of racial difference.

The evidence brought forward shows that understanding the image or idea of Africa as perennially engrained in race and more in general on a paradigm of difference can be misleading. What the evidence seems to suggest is the inapplicability of a modern racial paradigm to

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the considered early modern encounters. The inconsequential nature of skin color and somatic differences that emerges from the examined accounts is at odds with the argument that in Europe Africans could be accepted only “by conforming to Renaissance norms” and that “it was impossible for black Africans to escape from the negative implications of their skin colour.” 89 One wonders about the viability of Europe and Africa as analytical tools, even more so about the idea of one monolithic European image or idea of Africa. We may be better served by a plurality of paradigms of difference, both space- and timewise.

The fifteenth-century Mediterranean contact zone we have considered was specifically defined by two partially overlapping paradigms: one grounded in religious identity and defined by the Christian vs. non-Christian binomial; the other a secular one, grounded in the Aristotelian distinction between civilization and barbarism.

Both paradigms aligned themselves in a favorable way for the Ethiopian elites and their relations with Europe. Ethiopians appeared both Christian and civilized to the European elites operating in the core of the contact zone; one could argue that Italians in the fifteenth century viewed Ethiopians more through the lenses of sameness than those of otherness. Unlike those Africans who did not qualify as either Christian or civilized and were mistreated as others, Ethiopians enjoyed a status of belonging within the Christian world.

89 Earle and Lowe, Black Africans, p. 20.