

BOOK REVIEW

Verena Krebs. *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 308 pp. \$109.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-3030649333.

Verena Krebs's book *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* offers a fresh take on power relationships in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The author contends that, contrary to the widely accepted narrative, the Ethiopian rulers of that time did not increase their embassies to the Western powers (Rome, Venice, Aragon, Naples, and Portugal) because they were seeking alliances and/or military support against the Muslim powers. This idea of a desire for military alliances actually reflects the expectations of the Western powers. The Ethiopian kings, according to Krebs, were exclusively interested in acquiring luxurious objects, holy relics, and craftsmen capable of producing items such as paintings, golds jewelry and other items, and monumental buildings. Indeed, these acquisitions of precious goods and skills were perceived as enabling them to consolidate and magnify their status as "builder kings" and to make the religious foundations they erected in the heart of the royal domain ostentatious places of prestige. They were thus fully in line with the Davidic and Solomonic biblical tradition of building the Holy temple.

The first three chapters chronologically and methodically elucidate the sources testifying to these diplomatic activities as to the fortuitous encounters between Ethiopians and Westerners during the long fifteenth century. Most of these sources, located in archives and libraries in Europe, Egypt, and Ethiopia, have been progressively published and analyzed since the nineteenth century. The first contribution of this book is its exhaustive gathering and presentation of the documentation, which makes it possible to untangle intricate events that have remained misunderstood until now (such as the two distinct encounters of the 1480s, until then concatenated by the historiography because of a homonymy). One can also measure the diversity of cases in these contacts between Ethiopia and the West, which involved official or fortuitous embassies, journeys led by religious brotherhoods, expeditions of a commercial nature, and the fluidity that existed between these categories. The vivid picture painted by these situations of encounters and exchanges

shows the progressive modification of the respective expectations of the Catholic and Eastern Christian powers.

Krebs argues that the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, waging wars against the Muslim powers in the Horn of Africa and engaged in ongoing negotiations with the Egyptian Mamluk power, did not feel in any way weakened as a Christian state, and particularly not in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the fall of Constantinople alarmed the West. To the contrary, Ethiopia considered itself a land of refuge for Christians, until the rise of the Ottoman Empire and more specifically the war of conquest of the Sultanate of Adal, which almost destroyed the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia from 1530 onward and profoundly modified international geo-political relations.

The fifth chapter proposes a change of focus, and the sending of embassies or the situations of meetings are read according to the Ethiopian political situation. The cases of regencies, among others, are interestingly analyzed, revealing how sending an embassy was, for a regent, a way of consolidating his or her position, and thus the position of his/her protégé. Above all, this chapter offers a political and symbolic reading of this quest of the Ethiopian rulers for luxury manufactured goods and relics, situating it within the framework of their Davidic and Solomonic genealogy. The biblical quotation from 2 Chronicles 2, 7 and the discovery of a pattern according to which a royal church was to be initiated by a father and completed by his son, in the image of Solomon completing the temple begun by David, adds two elements to this mental and cultural framework which is often evoked but still too little understood.

There is therefore a thesis here, repeated perhaps too many times, and above all an ability to synthesize and depict complex and moving situations that will allow readers who are not specialists in Ethiopian history to understand the Ethiopian past within a broader history. It provides a basis for thinking about a diplomatic history that takes full account of Ethiopia, its agency, and its very diverse and active foreign policy.

Although we must acknowledge the skill required to deal with so many sources, in so many languages, one cannot help but notice the relative lack of treatment of the context of production and preservation of the documents. Such a deep analysis of each piece of this puzzle probably would not change the final result, but many sources deserve to be examined in more detail in order to refine the perspectives of chronology and intentionality. To add a second desiderata, the bibliography at the end of the book could have contained a list of the primary sources, the references to which are scattered within the many pages of endnotes.

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