

Ethiopia and Byzantium

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There are many ways to write about Ethiopia and Byzantium, from culling evidence about the material, religious, and political exchanges between the two empires, to critically comparing the methods and approaches adopted by the scholars working on them.

To start, it is worth noting that the very terms “Ethiopia” and “Byzantium” designate two complex, permeable, and ever-evolving political entities that defy overarching narratives.¹ Moreover, while both choronyms are conventionally used in modern historiography to refer to defunct empires, the term “Ethiopia” is also used to refer to a contemporary sovereign state that, together with modern-day Eritrea, controls a large portion of the territories that formed the heartland of the Ethiopian Empire during the so-called Middle Ages.² And while the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, died in 1453, the last Ethiopian monarch, Emperor Haile Selassie, exerted political power until his deposition in 1974. In other words, the fall of the Ethiopian Empire is a far more recent development than the end of the Byzantine Empire. Accordingly, historical narratives about the former occupy a central place in political discourse in today’s Ethiopia and in the independent neighboring state of Eritrea, while the legacy of Byzantium, contested as it too may be, echoes more faintly through the political life of its former territories.³

The relationship between Ethiopia and Byzantium dates back to late antiquity. Even before the founding of Constantinople, Ethiopia maintained strong commercial ties with the peoples of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea port of Adulis and its inland capital, Aksum, which facilitated a flow of foodstuffs, raw materials, and finished artifacts

across these regions (see “The Aksumite Empire of East Africa: From the Red Sea to Byzantium and Beyond” in this volume).⁴ Scholarship has often presented Aksum as a state whose economy relied heavily on the export of natural resources in exchange for manufactured goods from the Roman Empire. This representation is, to an extent, fictionalized, rooted not in hard evidence but in Eurocentric colonial narratives that sought to characterize Africa as a “primitive” continent devoid of the degree of “civilization” necessary for manufacturing and creating great works of art and architecture, such as the Ife heads or the Great Zimbabwe enclosures.⁵ Archaeological investigations around Aksum in recent decades have challenged this picture by unveiling evidence that media such as metal, glass, and ivory were worked locally.⁶ While it is clear that Aksum also exported unfinished goods, such as gold and incense, these discoveries invite us to review without prejudice long-held assumptions about the sites of production of objects found in circum-Mediterranean contexts, such as those fifth- and sixth-century carved ivories frequently attributed to centers like Alexandria (see “Wood-and-Ivory Boxes from Northeast Africa” in this volume).⁷

There is reason to believe that the spread of Christianity across the Ethiopian and Byzantine empires, aided by the policies of rulers like the Roman emperor Constantine (r. 324–37) and the Aksumite ruler ‘Ezana (r. 330–65?), accelerated and intensified the circulation of goods, people, and visual ideas between their territories (see “Aksumite Coinage” in this volume). One of the most visible consequences of this development was the diffusion of basilica-type churches in urban and rural settings controlled by the rulers of Constantinople and Aksum between the fourth and sixth centuries. Our documentation about these buildings is imperfect at best. What survives indicates that churches in both empires were characterized by a variety of spatial and material configurations that resist generalization. Some early Ethiopian and

Byzantine churches share certain features, such as the division of the interior into a nave and aisles, or the use of chancel screens and arches before the sanctuary, but their building materials and techniques are typically distinct and reflect local practice.⁸

There is limited evidence of exchanges of architectural expertise or materials between Ethiopia and Byzantium. Alabaster and Proconnesian marble fragments, decorated with Byzantine-inspired motifs such as wreathed crosses and six-armed stars, have been recovered among the ruined churches of Adulis and Aksum (fig. 1).⁹ These liturgical furnishings may have been sent to Ethiopia by Justin I (r. 518–27) during the reign of Kaleb (r. ca. 520–530s?). If so, they can be viewed as evidence of the far-reaching politics of Byzantium, but equally as an indication of Aksum's standing in late antiquity, since Justin could have sent them to Ethiopia as part of a strategy to convince his powerful Ethiopian counterpart to invade South Arabia in aid of persecuted Ḥimyarite Christians and, in the process, undermine Sasanian influence in the region.¹⁰

The burgeoning late antique Christian communities of Afro-Eurasia required copies of the Old and New Testament, hagiographies, and liturgical and canonical compositions for their services. By the fourth century these works were disseminated predominantly through books in various languages, and by the beginning of the fifth century the codex had supplanted the roll as the preferred text-carrying technology of the Christian world.¹¹ Authors such as Eusebius of Caesarea took advantage of the physical properties of books to encourage new modes of reading and forms of scholarship, while copyists started to embellish books with precious materials and images that encouraged ruminative activities and stimulated extratextual forms of sensual and intellectual engagement with their content.¹² Eusebius devised a cross-reference system for studying the four Gospels that was so successful, it became authoritative, and was regularly

included among the prefatory matter of Gospel books written in a variety of languages, including Greek (fig. 2) and Ethiopic (fig. 3).¹³ The two lavishly decorated examples shown here, the first now housed in the British Library, London, and the second, in the Monastery of Abba Gärima, ‘Adwa, may have been produced in a scriptorium in Caesarea to be exported to urban centers such as Aksum and Constantinople. It is more likely, however, that they were produced locally, as their images demonstrate an awareness of regional architectural forms: the medallions with apostles in the Canon Tables of the British Library manuscript (fig. 2) may have been inspired by similar portraits in the mausoleum of Constantine in Constantinople, while the Canon Tables in the Gärima manuscript (fig. 3) end with a temple whose elements recall Aksumite buildings, such as Maryam Şəyon.¹⁴ Artists from both empires continued to employ and reinterpret such motifs throughout the medieval period (fig. 4; see also cats. [AFB.090, 408]).¹⁵

Some features of Ethiopia and Byzantium lend themselves to comparison. For instance, both were governed by powerful Christian rulers—the *nəguś* in Ethiopia and the *basileus* in Byzantium—who exerted authority in secular and religious affairs (see “Ethiopian Crosses: Art in Motion” in this volume, especially pp. 00–00). These sovereigns faced external threats and internal opposition from rival claimants or from monastic groups that challenged their authority to legislate on religious matters. They had elaborate court rituals to help assert their imperial status and divinely sanctioned position; they used regalia to manifest their power; and they sponsored building projects and literary and artistic activities.¹⁶ Their courtiers drew aggrandizing parallels between their rulers and illustrious predecessors. A Byzantine and an Ethiopian miniature, each featuring Emperor Constantine the Great (figs. 5, 6; see also cat. [AFB.186]), exemplify the encomiastic nature of courtly art: both illuminations show the fourth-

century emperor dressed in contemporary local regalia to allude, respectively, to the Byzantine emperor Michael VII and the Ethiopian emperor Zār'a Ya'əqob.¹⁷

From the seventh century onward, there is scant evidence of direct interaction between the courts of Ethiopia and Byzantium, but both engaged in frequent diplomatic and material exchanges with the Islamic world that now stood between them (see “Medieval Islamic Inlaid Metalwork in the Churches of Lalibela” in this volume), and pilgrims and other travelers from the two empires continued to meet in centers such as Jerusalem and Mount Sinai (see “Sinai as a Monastic Center and Destination for Pilgrims” in this volume). Moreover, the two empires continued to envision each other throughout their history in art and literature: Roman martyrs or Greek theologians such as John Chrysostom appear in Ethiopia, and Black saints such as Moses the Ethiopian, in Byzantium.¹⁸ The Ethiopians also preserved the memory of their shared history with Byzantium in works such as the *Kəbrä nägäšt* (Glory of the Kings), which tells of a mythical encounter between Justin I and Kaleb in Jerusalem.¹⁹

In many other ways, Ethiopia and Byzantium are quite unlike. For example, the role of Constantinople as the capital of the latter empire remained unchallenged throughout its history—even when its Byzantine rulers were forced into exile by the Fourth Crusade.²⁰ In contrast, for most of Ethiopia’s medieval history, its rulers had a peripatetic court, even though the late antique capital of Aksum maintained its status as the empire’s most sacred religious center because of the presence of the cathedral of Maryam Šəyon, the Ethiopian Orthodox equivalent of Hagia Sophia.²¹ Thus, the population and urban extension of Aksum never reached those of Constantinople. Another consequence of this difference is that the political heartland of medieval Ethiopia shifted southward, first, from central Eritrea and Tigray to the historical region of Lasta following the advent of the Zag^we dynasty, best known for the construction of a splendid

complex of rock-hewn churches commissioned by King Lalibäla (see “The Rock-Hewn Churches of Lalibela” in this volume); and subsequently toward the regions of Amhara and Shewa after the advent of the Solomonic dynasty, which was founded by Yəkunno Amlak (r. 1270–85 CE) and whose sovereigns claimed to descend from the biblical King Solomon (see “Bright as the Sun: Religions, Translations, and Circulation in Post-Byzantine Africa”).²²

Similarly, while the Ethiopian and Byzantine Orthodox Churches share many elements of belief and practice, they also diverge from one another in several respects. Most significantly, in matters of Christology, the former rejected the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), while the latter accepted the council’s dyophysite position on the divine and human natures of Christ.²³ A comparison of two fourteenth-century Crucifixion scenes gives a sense of how these ecclesiastical divisions may have contributed, alongside multiple other factors, to the development of distinct visual cultures. In the first, a Palaiologan icon (fig. 7), Christ is shown dead on the cross with his eyes closed, a sagging body and a lifeless head resting on one shoulder. In the second, a miniature from an Ethiopic Gospel (fig. 8), the cross is empty but surmounted by the Lamb of God—a motif banned in Byzantium after the Council of Quinisextum.²⁴ The two images served different functions and embody strikingly different interpretations of the Crucifixion: the former presents a suffering Christ to evoke a sense of mourning; the latter underscores the salvific value of his sacrifice to frame the episode in triumphal terms.²⁵

When comparing Ethiopia and Byzantium, it is also important to consider the historiography of the two fields and the differences between them. In seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Western Europe, the history and material traditions of the two empires were recurringly, though not always, viewed through an Orientalist lens. Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline*

and Fall of the Roman Empire (1844) epitomizes these attitudes when it presents the Ethiopians as individuals who “slept near a thousand years” until “they were awakened by the Portuguese,” and Byzantine history as “a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery.”²⁶ Such notions formed the bedrock from which the fields of Byzantine and Ethiopian studies emerged as areas of Western academic interest toward the turn of the twentieth century.

However, scholarly attitudes toward these two empires soon began to diverge in problematic ways. For a start, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a positive reappraisal of Byzantine studies, while the colonial agendas of European states contributed to a greater depreciation of the cultural and material achievements of the Ethiopian Empire.²⁷ Admittedly, the European dimension of Byzantium also continued to be challenged, owing to its Orthodox culture and its association with the East and the Ottoman Empire that eventually conquered it.²⁸ Nevertheless, because of a range of factors that included its complex and continuous engagement with classical antiquity and the West, Byzantium still had a more favorable reception than Ethiopia in Western academia.

My point is best illustrated by comparing approaches to the two areas. Early scholars of Byzantine art soon turned their attention to the eastern Christian world and to areas outside of Byzantium to locate evidence of Constantinople’s sway over them—an approach that has more recently been subjected to criticism from both within and outside the field for the disparity with which it considered metropolitan–provincial relations.²⁹ Ethiopianists, meanwhile, set out to do almost the exact opposite, since one of their main goals was to locate evidence of the impact of foreign artistic ideas on Ethiopian artists—an approach that helped validate Eurocentric and imperialist notions of artistic hierarchies between nations and African dependence on outside influence.³⁰ If Byzantium, as successor to the Roman Empire, was presented as a state capable of

impressing its artistic ideas beyond its borders, then Ethiopia, as an African polity, was characterized as an empire in need of foreign intervention to develop its visual practices (see “Nubia and Byzantium” in this volume).

Many Western scholars operating within colonial regimes in the early twentieth century examined Ethiopia through the prejudiced lens of their own values. A perfect case study is offered by an article by Carlo Conti Rossini, a scholar who sustained Italy’s colonial aspirations, where he misrepresents Ethiopia as a country incapable of “civil progress” and its pictorial heritage as a “Copto-Byzantine derivation, set on a declining trajectory.”³¹ He then builds upon these arguments to suggest that Ethiopia thrived only when it was subjected to foreign influences and used this fictitious conclusion to suggest that the country would benefit from external intervention. Similar prejudices show up frequently in the literature. For example, by the 1950s Byzantium was attracting scholarly admiration for its capacity to preserve and reinterpret its classical heritage through a series of “renaissances,” while the antiquarian interests of Ethiopian artists and patrons in their Aksumite heritage were, and sometimes continue to be, branded as evidence of the allegedly “conservative” or even “primitive” nature of their culture (see “The Artistic Renaissance of Early Modern Ethiopia” in this volume).³²

These approaches and attitudes toward Ethiopia and Byzantium continue to have an impact on how their histories are written, in ways that have yet to be fully examined. It is clear, however, that Eurocentric and Orientalist attitudes have affected the field of Ethiopian studies more severely, as evidenced by the fact that Byzantine studies continue to be better represented at Western universities and museums. For instance, to date, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has devoted several exhibitions to Byzantium but none to Ethiopia, an empire that outlived its European counterpart by about five centuries.³³ Likewise, a search on Google Books for the

keywords “Byzantine art” and “Ethiopian art” currently returns about 376,000 results for the former and only about 10,000 for the latter.³⁴ There is clearly a substantial gap between the two fields, a fact that confronts us with a series of unresolved challenges. These disparities also shed light on an ethnocentrism that has led Western scholars and funding bodies to privilege one “culture” over the other.

In “Byzantinists and Others,” her recent contribution to a volume on Byzantium and the Mediterranean world, Averil Cameron laments the fact that Byzantium, in her opinion, remains “a minor and rather exotic niche subject.”³⁵ If this is true, then where does it leave even more marginalized fields such as Ethiopian studies? Arguably, the existence of common and divergent motifs in Byzantine and Ethiopic media, such as those considered in this essay, points to the possibility of deploying comparative perspectives. However, if a degree of commensurability can be achieved, then it can only be done by bridging the research gap between the two fields, decentering Western perspectives on visual culture, and doing away with normative and universalistic notions of art.³⁶ Thus, for example, when comparing an Ethiopian (fig. 9) a Syriac (fig. 10), and a Byzantine representation of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (see also pp. TK–TK in this volume), the differences between them should be understood as entangled and multilayered manifestations of local cultural and artistic choices.³⁷ In this regard, it is important to remember that, for most of their history, Ethiopia and Byzantium shared deeper ties with the Islamicate and eastern Christian worlds—territories at times ruled by Byzantium—than with each other, and that their patterns of connectivity can be understood only if situated within the broader framework of the multidirectional movement of people, ideas, and goods across Afro-Eurasia.

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¹ I use these terms throughout the essay for sake of clarity, but I do not subscribe to the myth of a “national culture”; rather, I find that the *histoire croisée* by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006) offers the kind of reflexive, interdisciplinary, and nonlinear framework needed to analyze complex patterns of connectivity between peoples and states. More recently, Antony Eastmond (2017) offers an excellent look at the transregional movement of people while also showing the limits of national art histories. For a critical discussion of the limits of terms such as “Byzantium,” see Cameron 2006, pp. 1–19.

² The quotation marks here reflect the contested use of this term in non-European contexts; for opposing views on this question, see Davis 2008 and Holmes and Standen 2018; with reference to Ethiopia, see Kelly 2020, pp. 16–19. On periodizing the Middle Ages, see Le Goff 2015.

³ On the legacy of Byzantium, see Herrin 2007. On the significance of Ethiopia’s imperial past in contemporary politics, Yohannes Gedamu 2021, pp. 17–39; on its impact on modernist art, Giorgis 2019, pp. 17–21.

⁴ Phillipson 2012, pp. 195–207. Objects were imported from the Mediterranean, but also from other contexts such as India and Persia; see, for example, Zazzaro 2013, p. 65; Gervers 2017, p. 44.

⁵ On the colonial appropriation of Great Zimbabwe, see Chirikure 2021, pp. 3–20; for Ife, Quartey 2010; for Ethiopia, Phillipson 2012, pp. 3–4; Gnisci 2020b.

⁶ Phillipson 2012, pp. 159–80.

⁷ E.g., the examples discussed in Kollwitz 1963. On Aksumite ivory production, see Phillipson and Phillips 1998, pp. 12–14.

⁸ For Byzantium, see Mango 1985; for Ethiopia, Phillipson 2009. For an overview of early Church architecture, that does not include Ethiopia, see Krautheimer 1992.

⁹ Castiglia 2019, pp. 336–40; Zazzaro 2013, pp. 90–98; Phillipson 2012, p. 199; Heldman 1994. On the Byzantine use of material culture in diplomatic relationships more generally, see, for example, Cutler 2001. We have limited knowledge of the gifts sent by Ethiopia to Byzantium, save for embellished accounts such as those found in the *Chronographia* of John Malalas, translated in Malalas [565]/1986, p. 269.

¹⁰ On the Aksumite invasion of South Arabia, with a particular emphasis on Ethiopic and Arabic sources, see Bausi and Gori 2006 and the essays collected in Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet, and Robin 2010.

¹¹ Roberts and Skeat 1983; Nongbri 2018. On late antique manuscript illumination, see Lowden 1999.]

¹² Grafton and Williams 2006; Elsner 2020.

¹³ Crawford 2019.

¹⁴ For the Canon Tables of the British Library manuscript, see Nordenfalk 1963, and for the Canon Tables in the Gäräma manuscript, McKenzie and Watson 2016. On the wider Christian practice of ending the Eusebian Apparatus with an architectural element that symbolizes the Canon Tables, the codex, and the community it served, see Crawford forthcoming. On its Islamic adoption, Flood 2012.

¹⁵ See, for example, Bernabò 2010 for Byzantium, and Gnisci 2020d for Ethiopia.

¹⁶ On Byzantium, see Dagrón 2003; Maguire 2004; Walker 2012. On Ethiopia, see Caquot 1957; Derat 2003; Krebs 2021.

¹⁷ Spatharakis 1976, pp. 70–74; Gnisci 2020b.

¹⁸ On the former tradition, see Starodubcev 2019; on the latter, Witakowski 2007.

¹⁹ Budge 1922, p. 226. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to analyze them in detail, the Ethiopians also had access to works produced within Byzantium or influenced by its literary tradition; see, for example, Elagina 2019.

²⁰ Magdalino 2010.

²¹ Savage 2019; Gnisci and Zarzeczny 2017.

²² Derat 2003.

²³ Frensdorff 1972; Grillmeier 1987; Tannous 2018.

²⁴ Kalliope-Phaidra Kalafati in Evans 2004, pp. 182–83, no. 103; Balicka-Witakowska 1997.

²⁵ Knowledge of the use of these objects is still limited.

²⁶ Gibbon 1776–88, vol. 4 (1788), p. 617, vol. 5 (1788), p. 2.]

²⁷ On the development of Byzantine studies, see Jeffrey, Haldon, and Cormack 2008. Research on the Orientalist and colonial background of scholarship on Ethiopia remains underdeveloped; see Bausi 2008, pp. 552–57; Demichelis 2012. For a discussion of Italy’s colonial culture, see Palumbo 2003.

²⁸ Cameron 2015.

²⁹ For examples of this approach, see Buchthal 1939; or Demus 1949. Criticisms of this framework have come from scholars focusing on Byzantium, for example, Eastmond 2010, but also on other eastern Christian traditions. See, for example, Hunt 1991; Thierry 1996 or Maranci

2001 (Armenia); Downey 1958 or McKenzie 2007, pp. 329–49 (Egypt); Loosley 2018 (the Syriac world). The dominant Romano-centric approach met with some resistance already in the early 1900s, as evidenced by the controversial works of Josef Strzygowski, discussed in Elsner 2002. Notwithstanding these developments, as recently as Ousterhout 2019, pp. 267, 296, we find Ethiopia discussed as a “marginal” and “increasingly isolated” region at the “edges” of Byzantium.

³⁰ Gnisci 2020b. It is no coincidence that one of the earliest critiques of this trend, Jones 1958, appeared in one of the most prominent journals of Black history and culture in America.

³¹ Translations from Italian into English are by the author and are taken from Conti Rossini 1935, pp. 171, 172.

³² The term “renaissance” in this context, adopted in the 1910s, was popularized by Kurt Weitzmann (1948). It too can be subjected to criticism, as discussed in Adashinskaya 2022, which looks at the contribution of Russian scholars to the field. I am not advocating for the use of this term but simply underscoring that it may carry more positive connotations than “conservatism”; and if the former can be associated with a burst of artistic activity, then the latter has been used, in the case of Ethiopia, to evoke notions of stagnation and adversity toward change, as argued in Gnisci 2020b. For a critique of the term “primitive” to describe Ethiopian art, see Chojnacki 1983, p. 18.

³³ Evans and Wixom 1997; Evans 2004; Evans 2012. All three of these catalogues were innovative in their decision to include references to the material culture of Ethiopia, which has often been left out of surveys of Christian art. However, in the first two volumes in particular, this inclusivity came at the cost of subsuming the concept of Ethiopian art within that of

Byzantine art. The consequences of these decisions are aptly analyzed in Eastmond 2010, though I disagree with the author's conclusion that the term "Byzantine art" should encompass the artistic production of the empire's Latin and non-Chalcedonian neighbors. In this regard, the decision to title the present exhibition and this volume that accompanies it *Africa and Byzantium*, rather than *Byzantium and Africa*, is a welcome subversion of implicitly suggested hierarchies of value, even if doing so inevitably raises other types of questions.

³⁴ Accessed on July 22, 2022.

³⁵ Cameron 2019, p. 17.

³⁶ On the limitations of comparative methods, see Elsner 2017. Specialists in Ethiopian art have generally set out to detect movement from Byzantium to Ethiopia, but not vice versa. See, for example, Heldman 1979.

³⁷ For a Byzantine example of this motif, see Susan A. Boyd in Evans 2004, pp. 224–25, no. 133.