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THE SELLING OF THE *NĒGUŚ*: THE «EMPEROR OF ETHIOPIA» IN PORTUGUESE AND JESUIT IMAGINATION

«... pera a reputação tanto val o que he como o que se imagina e o mundo se governa pello que lhe fazem crer».¹

«Os padres o sairão a receber ao caminho mais de mea legoa, e decendose lhe forão beijar a mão, como he costume, vindo elle na mulla com seus quatro cavallos a destra, vestido de veludo cramesim, coroa de ouro na cabeça e outras duas muito maiores e mais pezadas diante levadas por duos pagens de cavallo; soavão diante as trombetas que não são mal entoadas e oito ataballes em cima de quatro mullas. O que tudo com muita gente de pe e de cavallo, que vinha iunta, fazia hum acompanhamento assas grandioso e realengo».²

European imagination once saw the political leader of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, the *nəguś* (*nəguśä nägäśt*), as the true embodiment of the Prester John. Such an identification gained special intensity during the century-long period when Portugal and Christian Ethiopia were in close contact. The Portuguese sailors, colonial officers and the countless clerics that prowled in the Indian Ocean commonly referred to Christian Ethiopia and to its

¹ Letter of Lourenço Pires de Tavora to el-Rei [D. Sebastião], 19 July 1561, in: JOSÉ DA SILVA MENDES LEAL (ed.), *Corpo Diplomático Português [E-c.]*, IX. *Relações com a Curia Romana, reinado de el-rei O. Sebastião* (continuação), Lisboa, Typographia da Academia Real das Sciencias, 1886, 300–303, here 303 [«... for one's honour, what is believed matters as much as what actually is, and the world is governed through what we are made to believe».]

² P. Emmanuel de Almeida ad Praepositum Generalem So. Iesu, Gorgorra, 16 Jun. 1628, in: CAMILLO BECCARI (ed.), *Rerum Aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX*, vols. I–XV, Roma 1903–1917 [in the following: *RASO*], here XII, 247–289, esp. 269 [«The fathers went to encounter him more than half a *legua* away, and as he stepped down they kissed him, as was the habit, on the hand; he was riding a mule, with four other horses on his right, and dressed in velvet crimson, with a golden crown on his head, and another two crowns, much larger and heavier, carried by two pawns on horses; in the front, trumpets were being played, together with eight atabals on top of four mules. Altogether, along with the train accompanying them by foot and on horses, it made a grandiose and royalish impression».]

ruler as the «Preste». They believed him to be a powerful monarch, lord over dozens of kingdoms and, what was more important for a society still animated by the Crusader spirit, a decisive ally in the war against Islam.³

Such a «love story» between the medieval eschatological myth and the Portuguese explorers was, however, a short lived one. The different Portuguese embassies that visited Ethiopia between 1520 and 1541, and the Jesuit mission that ran between 1556 and 1632, provided Europe with a tamed — and more realistic — image of its ruler. It turned out that the Preste cum *nəguś* was a weak ruler, constantly harassed by both Muslim armies and by internal revolts (local rulers, Fālaša, Galla), and of dubious Christian faith. In short, the Ethiopian Preste proved to be an illusion, the result of a misunderstanding,⁴ of ignorance, or of both.

By the time of the Jesuit mission the image of the Ethiopian ruler had completely changed. The Spaniard Pedro Paez put things with crystal clarity when he suggested to his friend and compatriot Tomás de Ituren, right before embarking upon what was to be a successful career in Ethiopia, that the Preste was to be found in «Catayo» rather than in the Ethiopian highlands.⁵ With the Jesuits the Preste was, thus, displaced from Christian Ethiopia: relegated to other lands or to the status of an outdated myth. This process went hand in hand with an increase in the factual information produced by Europeans on the land and on the institution of the *nəgusä nəgäšt*. Alvares's narrative of 1540 and, to a large extent, the dense annual letters of the Jesuits written mostly between 1603 and 1632, produced profuse ethnographic descriptions of this institution, descriptions which still today represent invaluable sources for the historian. Likewise, the most ambitious Jesuit narratives, written by Paez, Almeida and Mendes, with their quotations of royal chronicles and of works such as the *Fəthä nəgäšt*, hinted for the first time at the rich indigenous literary tradition that upheld the legitimacy, and the government of the Christian state.⁶

³ See LUIS FILIPE THOMAZ, «L'idée impériale manueline», in: JEAN AUBIN et al. (eds.), *La découverte, le Portugal et l'Europe. Actes du colloque. Paris les 26, 27 et 28 mai 1988*, Paris 1990, 35–103.

⁴ A common contemporary interpretation claimed that the name «John» derived from *ǧan*, a word appearing in such composita as, e. g., *ǧan hoy!* (commonly translated as 'Your Majesty!') — the form of address to the Ethiopian monarch.

⁵ By «Catayo» Paez was probably meaning the Tibet of the Dhalai Lama, that his companion Antonio de Montserrat had recently visited; Diu, letter of 4 December 1602, in: *RASO XI*, 32–35, here 35.

⁶ Manoel de Almeida, for instance, translated a chapter from the chronicle of Minas in his *Historia de Ethiopia a alta*; see FRANCISCO MARIA ESTEVES PEREIRA (ed., tr.), **ዜና ፡ ሚናስ ፡ ስ፡** *Historia de Minás Además Sagad, Rei de Ethiopia*, Lisboa 1888 [Extrahido do Boletim dá Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa: n.º 12, 7.ª serie — 1887], 7.

But besides transforming the European perception of Royal Ethiopia, the writings and deeds of the Latin missionaries present many questions still unanswered by historians. One of the most prominent regards the figure who turned out to be such a deceptive embodiment of the Prester John. The Christian ruler of Ethiopia was identified with the highest and the most powerful category that European political ideology could offer at the time. Accordingly, Zä-Ya'əqob and especially Susənyos were repeatedly presented to the wider Portuguese and European public as true «Emperors» over a truly Ethiopian «Empire». With very few exceptions, this was to be the standard way of presenting the Solomonic monarchy in Jesuit texts up to the times of the expulsion.⁷ Now, if we assume, as historical evidence seems to suggest, that categories such as those of Emperor and Empire were misnomers in the Ethiopian reality, the transformation of the Preste into the Emperor of Ethiopia demands a more critical analysis that it normally receives: how did the figure of an Ethiopian Emperor emerge? what role did the Jesuit mission have? and above all, why was the term «emperor» chosen instead of «king», which was widely used in naming the diversity of rulers the Portuguese — Jesuits and non-Jesuits — were encountering in the East?

The Indigenous Evidence

Before attempting to answer to these questions let us first look at the indigenous evidence and at the way local terms have been translated in modern academic European editions. What do these texts tell us about the «real» name of the «Emperor of Ethiopia»? The well-known title *nəguś* and its derivative *nəgusä nəgäśt*, both stemming from the root *nəgśa*, were used by the Aksumite kings at least since the time of 4th-cent. ʿEzana, and, later, by the rulers of the Solomonic dynasty up to the 20th cent.⁸ This title is overwhel-

⁷ It is useless to list the references to the use of «Emperor» and «Empire» in the Jesuit correspondence. Perhaps more interesting is to report those rare occasions when «king» and «kingdom» were used. This was, for instance, the case of an Italian version of an annual letter from 1613 (Archivium Romanum Societatis Iesu, Goa 39 I bis, Annu 1613, fol. 103–110v). Another version in Latin of the same letter goes back to the typical «Imperatoris» and «Imperio» (in: *RASO XI*, 293–312). Ignoring which of the two comes first — though it was probably the Latin, which was after Portuguese a commonly used language in the missions — the Italian version shows that the title «Emperor of Ethiopia», though preminent, was not unique, and that at least on some occasions there were doubts within the Jesuit order as to its propriety.

⁸ «To become king, ruler; to rule», see WOLF LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)*, Wiesbaden 1987, 392f.; on the title, its historical background and possible origin see, e. g., WERNER VYČICHL, «Le titre de “Roi des Rois” ንጉሠ : ንጉሥት. Étude historique et comparative sur la monarchie en Éthiopie», *AE* 2, 1957, 193–203; ANDRÉ CAQUOT, «La royauté sacrée en Éthiopie», *AE* 2, 1957, 205–218.

mingly present in three seminal works of the Solomonic monarchy: the *Kəbrä rā Nägäšt*, from ca. 1321 («The Glory of the Kings»),⁹ where the Queen of Sheba bears the name of *nəgəštä azeb*; the *Fəthā Nägäšt* («The Justice of the Kings»), from the 15th/16th cent.;¹⁰ and the *Šərʿatä Mängəšt* («The Regulation of the Kingdom»), from the time of Šäršä Dəngəl, yet based probably on the earlier original from the time of ʿAmdä Šəyon I (r. 1314–1344).¹¹

For the sake of this enquiry, however, the royal chronicles are more helpful in answering this question, as they portray the rulers in the context of their lives and, hence, unveil more practical uses of the royal titles. If we focus on the period around the Jesuit mission, one of the most prolific in royal chronicles, the pattern is repeated. The Chronicle of King Ləbnä Dəngəl (r. 1508–1540), written probably around 1592–1605,¹² uses, e. g., such expressions *nəguś šadəq*, *nəgəšt Eleni* and *mängəšt*, which Conti Rossini translated as «Re giusto», «regina Eleni» and «regno».¹³ In the chronicles of his successors, produced between 1563 and 1605, his sons Gälawdewos and Minas are identified both with the typical title of *nəguś* and by that of *mar*.¹⁴ A borrowed term, *mar* (or *mari*) was not a proper royal title — as it did not add any «power» or status to that of *nəguś*, — but was meant to stress the bearer’s saintly status and religious piety.¹⁵ In translating the first term here again, philological accuracy *oblige*, the editors opted for the European equivalent of king, whilst *mar* remained untranslated. The same term of *nəguś* appears in the Chronicle of Ləbnä Dəngəl’s grandson, Šäršä Dəngəl,¹⁶ al-

⁹ See CARL BEZOLD (ed., tr.), *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, München 1905; recently, ROBER BEYLOT, «Du Kebra Nagast», *Aethiopica. International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 7, 2004, 74–83.

¹⁰ See IGNAZIO GUIDI, *Il «Fetha Negest» o «Legislazione die Re» codice ecclesiastico e civile di Abissinia*, Napoli 1897 (text), 1899 (tr.); PAULOS TZADUA (tr.) — PETER L. STRAUSS (ed.), *The Fəthā Nägäšt. The Law of the Kings*, Addis Ababa 1968.

¹¹ JOSEPH VARENBERGH, «Studien zur abessinischen Reichsordnung (*Šərʿata Mängəšt*)», *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete* 30, 1915, 1–45, here 1; see also IGNAZIO GUIDI, *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, Roma 1932, 48, 92.

¹² CARLO CONTI ROSSINI (ed., tr.), *Storia di Lebna Dengel, re d’Etiopia, sino alle prime lotte contro Ahmad ben Ibrahim*, Roma 1894, 24 [RRALM ser. v, 5, 3, 1894, 617–640].

¹³ CONTI ROSSINI, *Storia di Lebna Dengel*, 5, 6 [text], 14, 15 [tr.].

¹⁴ On Gälawdewos, see WILLIAM EL. CONZELMAN (ed., tr.), *Chronique de Galāwdê-wôs (Claudius) roi d’Éthiopie*, Paris 1895, 12, 17, 35, 62 [text], 127, 130, 142, 158, [tr.]; and IV for the date of production. On Minas, see ESTEVES PEREIRA, *Historia de Minas, Además Sagad, rei de Ethiopia*, 17 [text], 37, [tr.]; and 6 for the date of production.

¹⁵ LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez*, 356.

¹⁶ CARLO CONTI ROSSINI (ed., tr.), *Historia Regis Sarša Dengel (Malak Sagad). Accedit Historia gentis Galla*, curante [et interprete] I. Guidi, Parisiis — Lipsiae 1907 (CSCO 20, 21 [SAe 3, 4]), 3 [text], 5 [tr.].

though here the much rarer term of *ḥaṣe/aṣe* — untranslated in the Italian text — is also employed.¹⁷ In its turn, the Chronicle of Susənyos, the «Catholic Emperor», written probably during the reign of his son Fasilädäs, refers indistinctly to *nəguśä nəgäšt* and to *nəguś*, which Esteves Pereira agrees with Conti Rossini in translating into Portuguese as «rei dos reis» and «rei».¹⁸

Two elements are also worth mentioning in Susənyos's Chronicle. First, after his famous coronation in Aksum, which took place in 1609, Susənyos did not change his title to a more grandiose one. As a matter of fact, this act, contrary to what the Jesuits would repeatedly sustain, did not add anything to the status of the *nəguś*, even though the coronation in Aksum, rare in the history of the Christian kingship as it was only celebrated on three other occasions,¹⁹ was the honorable restitution of an old tradition and the sacred «law of the Kingdom» rather than a necessary step towards any superior form of kingship.²⁰ Second, the term «*nəguś*» is also used in the Chronicle (as, in fact, also in earlier Ethiopian documents) to name neighbouring rulers who did not belong to the Solomonic breed, and were neither Christians nor vassals of Ethiopian Christian Kings. This is the case, on several occasions, of Rubāt b. Bādī, king of the Muslim state of Sinnār,²¹ with whom Susənyos had important commercial ties. This could indicate, on the one hand, that

¹⁷ CONTI ROSSINI, *Historia Regis Sarša Dengel*, 21 [text], 25 [tr.]; on the meaning of this term see VARENBERGH, «Studien», 3; and DENIS NOSNITSIN, «Aṣe», in: *EÆ* I, 364f.; For more evidence on the preeminence of the title of *nəguś* during the later period, see MANFRED KROPP (ed., tr.), *Die Geschichte des Lebna-Dengel, Claudius und Minās*, Lovanii 1988 (CSCO 503, 504 [SAe 83, 84]), 1, 3 [text], 1, 3 [tr.], and the so-called *Short Chronicle* (second half of the 18th cent.) where the title of *nəguś* shares the space with that of *ḥaṣe*, see, e. g., FRANCESCO BÉGUINOT (ed., tr.), *La cronaca abbreviata d'Abissinia*, Roma 1901.

¹⁸ FRANCISCO MARIA ESTEVES PEREIRA (ed., tr.), *Chronica de Susenyos, rei de Ethiopia*, vols. I–II, Lisboa 1892–1900, I, 2, 5 [text], II, 2, 4 [tr.].

¹⁹ See EIKE HABERLAND, *Untersuchungen zum Äthiopischen Königtum*, Wiesbaden 1965 (Studien zur Kulturkunde 18), 94; cp. also a review of the coronation reports in: STUART MUNRO-HAY, «The 'Coronation' of the Emperors of Ethiopia at Aksum», in: VERENA BÖLL — DENIS NOSNITSIN — THOMAS RAVE — EVGENIA SOKOLINSKAIA (eds.), *Studia Aethiopica. In Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Wiesbaden 2004, 177–201.

²⁰ As his Chronicle reports, Susənyos *nəgsä bähəyə bākämä nəgsu nəgäšt qädamawəyyan əllä əmqədmehu zänəgsu*, which Esteves Pereira translates as «e alli foi feito rei, assim como foram feitos reis os reis antigos, que reinaram antes d'elle», ESTEVES PEREIRA, *Chronica de Susenyos*, I, 123 [text], II, 95 [tr.] (ch. 37); for the coronation ritual, s. VARENBERGH, «Studien zur abessinischen Reichsordnung», 15f. [text], 30ff. [tr.] (III.1.–2.).

²¹ *Nəguśä Sənnar* ^c*Urbaṭ* 'Urbat, rei de Sənnar'; ESTEVES PEREIRA, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 161 [text], 124 [tr.] (ch. 46); cp. VYČICHL, «Le titre de 'Roi des Rois'», 199–201.

nəguś was not a transcendental category, exclusive of the «Imperial» Ethiopian dynasty, but rather a title that could also be used by regional rulers; on the other, it may show that the Solomonic monarchy saw a relative degree of affinity and evenness between its own institutions and those of the neighbouring kingdoms, with which it was culturally much closer related than its claims of foreign descent asserted.

To sum up, by the 16th-cent. Ethiopian Christian tradition, having developed a deep-rooted imperial ideology, did not elaborate on a particular connotation for the term «*nəguś*». Similarly, faithful to the philological and cultural context, modern scholars editing and translating contemporary chronicles avoided the use of the concept of Emperor to render *nəguś*, *mar* and *ḥaṣe*, preferring either the original Gəʿəz terms or the much humbler «king». Scholars agreed at least on what the *nəguś* was not. From where then did the Jesuits take the idea of an «Ethiopian Emperor», an idea that contradicted both indigenous traditions and the empirical accuracy of which their order was so proud?

The Portuguese narratives

16th-cent. Portuguese narratives on Ethiopia contain a number of interesting details for understanding the «Imperial» ideology of the Jesuit missionaries.

A remark is in order here. The Portuguese did not fully renew European imagination on the Prester John. They were the heirs of a tradition started at the dawn of the Renaissance, when mainly Italian merchants and friars first unveiled the kingdom of Ethiopia to an Europe opening to the wider world. From Italy the Portuguese not only received the investors and traders that helped to make possible the Lusitan expansion, but also Italian cosmographical knowledge, including intelligence on «Ethiopia». ²² One of the Renaissance *topos* that reached the Portuguese imagination was that of Prester John, which gained vigour throughout the 15th cent.; but next to it, there were also the perception of the *nəguś* as an «Emperor», ruler over several — the number changes in every account — kingdoms or simply as a «king». ²³

But the Portuguese also renewed the European understanding on Ethiopia in a number of ways. First, at the same time as enforcing the idea of an Ethiopian Prester John, they also excited scepticism towards it. Thus, rather than a

²² See LUÍS DE ALBUQUERQUE, «Diálogo luso-italiano nos séculos XV e XVI (algumas notas)», *Mare Liberum* 2, 1991, 97–105; LUISA D'ARIENZO, «L'influenza culturale italiana alla corte portoghese nell'età delle scoperte», *Mare Liberum* 2, 1991, 107–120.

²³ On Renaissance accounts of Ethiopia see RENATO LEFEVRE, «Riflessi etiopici nella cultura europea del Medioevo e del Rinascimento. Seconda Parte», *Annali Litterari* 9, 1945, 331–444.

monochromatic imagination, a careful reading of Portuguese narratives, including the «administrative» correspondence (letters, briefs, political summaries), reveals a plurality of perceptions on Ethiopia, of which at least two diverging images of the Prester John can be clearly distinguished: one seeing it as a misunderstanding, the other assuming the *nəguś* was the true embodiment of the myth. The first perception was represented largely in the ruling and learned elite: from the admiral Albuquerque to the «intellectuals» Goes and Couto,²⁴ Portuguese intelligentsia was rarely enthusiastic about the idea of an Ethiopian Preste, something they considered a belief of the plebs. Consequently, in their writings they enforced the use of two classical European political concepts that the Italian Renaissance had already used: «emperor» and, in a minor measure, «king».²⁵ Such a praxis, it is to be noted, agreed with that followed by the papal chancellery in the numerous letters exchanged with Portugal and Ethiopia during the same period.²⁶ The second perception, which pervaded up to the second half of the century, was shared by the «lower» class and unlearned priests and adventurers, groups to which, to a certain extent, Alvares, Bermudes, Castanhoso and Correia belonged.²⁷ In it the Preste was the most common term designating both Ethiopia and the *nəguś*.²⁸

²⁴ On Albuquerque see Letter from 4 December 1513, in: R. A. DE BULHAO PATO (ed.), *Cartas de Affonso de Albuquerque seguidas de documentos que as elucidam*, vol. 1, Lisboa 1884, Carta XLI, 230; on Gois, see his *Fides, religio, moresque sub imperio Pretiosi Ioannis (quem vulgo Presbyterum Ioannem vocant) degentium, una cum enarratione confoederationis ac amicitiam inter ipsos a Aethiopum Imperatores, & Reges Lusitaniae initae*, Lovanii 1540; on Couto, see *Da Asia-Decada VII* [1612] Lisboa 1777, *ibid.*, *Decada VII* [1616], 1782.

²⁵ Such a «class» divide has to be taken with caution, though, as members of the learned «classes» also reported marvelous descriptions of Ethiopia, similar to those associated with Prester John. See for instance Paolo Giovio's phantasies on Ethiopia as reported in: RENATO LEFEVRE, «Riflessi etiopici nella cultura europea del Medioevo e del Rinascimento (Parte Prima)», *Annali Lateranensi* 8, 1944, 9–89, here 71f.

²⁶ Most of the Papal letters were published by LEVY MARIA JORDÃO (ed.), *Documenta historiam ecclesiae habessinorum ...* [LEVY MARIA JORDÃO, *Bullarium Patronatus Portugalliae Regum*], Appendix — Tomus I, Olissipone 1872; JOÃO AUGUSTO DA GRAÇA BARRETO (ed.), *Documenta historiam ecclesiae habessinorum...* (*ibid.*), Appendix — Tomus III, Olissipone 1879; some appear also in *RASO X*.

²⁷ On Alvares and Correia's lack of education see MICHAEL KLEINER, «Alvares, Francisco», in: *EÆ I*, 213ff.; *Id.*, «Correa, Gaspar», in: *EÆ I*, 804f. As for Castanhoso, he was a simple lay soldier and veteran of Christovão da Gama's expedition.

²⁸ FRANCISCO ÁLVARES, *Verdadera informação das terras do Preste João das Índias* [1540], ed. by NEVES ÁGUAS, Mem-Martins: Portugal 1989; MIGUEL DE CASTANHOSO, *Dos Feitos de D. Christovam da Gama em Ethiopia* [1565], ed. by FRANCISCO MARIA ESTEVES PEREIRA, Lisboa 1898; GASPAS CORREIA, *Crónicas de D. Manuel e de D. Joao III (até 1533)*, ed. by JOSÉ PEREIRA DA COSTA, Lisboa 1992; *Id.*, *Lendas da India* [ca. 1550], Lenden 1976, vols. II, IV.

A second characteristic of the Portuguese texts was the shaping of narratives with great ethnographic insight but yet with an underlying eurocentrism. Lusitan narratives on Ethiopia proved much more detailed than any European account had been before. They fostered accurate knowledge on the political structure of Christian Ethiopia and, with ethnographic sensibility, referred to particularities such as local lords (*baḥər nūgāš, ras*), royal practices (imprisonment at Amba Guishen), provincial and ethnic composition (Šäwa, Təgre, Amhara), etc. In parallel, however, the sheer ignorance in the texts of some key features of Ethiopia betray an underlying political agenda: this is well epitomized by their use of the title of *nəguś*. To be sure, they did not ignore this title: for instance, in the closing chapter to the widely-read *Verdadera Relaçam*, Alvares argued that «the Prester John is called ‘acegue’, which means ‘emperor’, and is also called negus, which means ‘king’». ²⁹ However, neither he nor the numerous writers who used his text thought it necessary to use the indigenous concept, preferring rather to handle a confusing kaleidoscope of terms, which included Preste, Pretiosi Ioannis, Señor, Rey, Imperador, Rey Emperador and David, sometimes overlapping in one and the same text ³⁰. A rare exception was the French political writer Jean Bodin, a reader of Alvares, who in his work *La République* repeatedly referred to «le Grand Negus d’Ethiopie». ³¹

Thus, the century of the Portuguese-Ethiopian embassies, of the intense diplomatic exchanges, offered a paradox: the Ethiopian *nəguś*, despite progressively unveiling its mysteries to Europe, was still a prisoner of an age-old European imagination. It appeared that the *nəguś* was to be defined externally, namely by way of what the Europeans believed him to be; but at the same time, without the Europeans being able to tell exactly who he was.

²⁹ «O Preste João se chama ‘acague’, que quer dizer ‘imperador’, e se chama ‘negus’, que quer dizer ‘rei’»; ALVARES, *Verdadera informação*, Part II, ch. IX, p. 291.

³⁰ As an example of the Portuguese muddled use of language stands Alvares, who in reference to Ləbnä Dəngəl coined such a term as «rei David Preste João»; ALVARES, *Verdadera informação*, Part I, ch. LX, p. 123; ch. LXII, p. 126. The Portuguese vagueness in naming the *nəguś* was related to the synonymous and alternate use they made of «Preste», «Abassia» and «Ethiopia», as geographic loci of the Christian kingdom. António Vasconcelos de Saldanha, in an interesting article on the role of ideology and law in the Portuguese expansion, shows that Portuguese tradition was as precise and coherent as any other in the use of titles, although some chroniclers could give free hand to imperial exaltations; See ANTÓNIO VASCONCELOS DE SALDANHA, «Conceito de espaço e poder e seus reflexos na titulação regia portuguesa da época da expansão», in: JEAN AUBIN, *La découverte, le Portugal et l’Europe*, 105–129, here 117ff. Saldanha’s study is perhaps a hint that the «problem» with Ethiopia lay less in a lack of ideas in Portugal than in the absence of a clear purpose: what the Portuguese wanted in Ethiopia — a diplomatic exchange, a «colony», a mission, a partnership... — they did not really know.

³¹ JEAN BODIN, *Les six livres de la République* [1576], Paris 1986, 38, 43, 55, 126.

The Birth of a Jesuit Imperial Narrative

The Jesuit mission was a direct heir of this state of affairs. The project of a mission of conversion to Ethiopia was the outcome of a multiple imagination, with mythical, geopolitical and missionary layers; the fascination with the Preste, the pursuit of a powerful Emperor, and the response to a call from a pious king were intermingled in one unique project. It comes then as no surprise that during the early years of the mission, the Jesuits and non-Jesuits — colonial personnel, high clergy — engaged in such a project used *topoi* inherited from previous generations. From the Jesuit general Ignatius of Loyola to the visitor Valignano and the Patriarch Oviedo, from King João III to Pope Julius III and Viceroy Pedro Mascarenhas, the *nəguś* received the whole assortment of titles mentioned above — except that of the *nəguś*.³²

With the unfolding of the mission, however, an interesting evolution takes place. The Jesuits living in Ethiopia and those in direct contact with them at Goa, initially happy with the term «Preste» — much cherished by Loyola himself³³ — progressively came to adopt the term «king». The missionaries remained faithful to this term during the first three decades of the first mission, and also used the term «Sua Alteza» ‘His Highness’, which was the form of address for kings in the 16th-cent. Iberian Peninsula.³⁴

It could be argued that by then the missionaries, well informed of the Ethiopian reality, had realised that the limited power held by the *nəguś* — at the time Minas and later his son Śārṣä Dəngəl — as well as his meagre territorial dominions, were best expressed by the more modest *topoi* the Portuguese had hitherto been using. Be this as it may, such a praxis was an important step in bringing some form of coherence to the muddled European imagination on the Christian Ethiopian ruler. The consistent use of the term «king» and the peerage «Sua Alteza» meant that the once mythical Preste was fully and with no equivoc incorporated into the secular symbolism of Western political categories. Henceforth the *nəguś* would be treated by the missionaries as an European-like king that they could serve and try to reform, in the same way their peers were so successfully doing in a number of European courts.

³² To gather evidence I generally limited the search to *RASO* X–XII; both for practical reasons, since this collection allows a handy and quick use of a large amount of data, and because the documents published there are largely representative of Portuguese and Jesuit ideas on Ethiopia.

³³ «Recuerdos que podrán ayudar para la reducción de los reinos del Preste Juan...», in: S. IGNACIO DE LOYOLA, *Obras*, ed. by CANDIDO DE DALMASES — MANUEL RUIZ JURADO — IGNACIO IPARRAGUIRRE, Madrid 1997, 1042–1050.

³⁴ Father Manoel Fernandes in: *RASO* X, 148f., 211, 307, 330; father Antonio Fernandes, *ibid.*, 347f. Loyola himself addressed to Gälawdewos as «V. A.»; letter of 22 February 1555, Roma, in: LOYOLA, *Obras*, 1035–1042.

At the same time, although the term «Preste» survived well into the 17th cent., especially in the discourse of the Spanish and Portuguese royal chancelleries, the incorporation of the *nəguś* into a secular political imagination — «king», «Sua Alteza» — paved the way for further experiments in political labeling.

These further «experiments» came just before the fall of the first mission. In a letter sent in 1587, the Jesuit missionary Antonio Fernandes, who was to die in Ethiopia in 1593, explained to Pope Sixtus V the state of affairs in the mission: i. e., an abandoned flock of Catholics, a well disposed but hesitating king, etc. But he also pushed forth an idea the missionaries had for some years been maturing: the envoy to the Ethiopian highlands of a Portuguese naval expedition, which by stopping Oromo internal incursions, would strengthen the kingdom and convince the king and his subjects of the benefits of conversion. The interesting point was that, in Fernandes' own words, the success of this project would finally render Śārṣä Dəngəl «a true Emperor and permanent lord both over his own and over other neighbouring peoples he had never ruled upon»; or, as he would also say, «the biggest king and Emperor ever seen in Ethiopia».³⁵

Significantly, after this letter the Imperial *topoi*, slowly but solidly, gained terrain and the use of the term «king» was progressively abandoned. The missionary that was to replace Antonio Fernandes, Pedro Paez, is perhaps the one most clearly epitomizing the evolution in the forms of address. Paez, who due to a seven year-long imprisonment in Yemen could only reach the Ethiopian highlands in 1603, adopted since the beginning of his successful career an Imperial discourse. In the letters he sent to Europe and India, he repeatedly referred to both Zä-Dəngəl and Susənyos as Emperors and coherently swapped the peerage, from Sua Alteza to Sua Majestad.³⁶ Although the peerage Sua Majestad, originally first used by Charles V and later adopted by all the European monarchies, was not exclusive to Emperors, its use by Paez tells of the elevated and well established status the Ethiopian kingship had in European eyes: not more but not less respectful than its European counterparts.

Paez was later followed by other Jesuits in adopting this imperial discourse. With them the Imperial *topoi* took hold. If up to their arrival the imperial terms had been reduced to those of Emperor and Empire, with the second round of missionaries the whole Christian kingdom acquired an imperial aura. As early as 1605 Paez referred to the *wäyzäro* as the Empress, something that

³⁵ «...Com eles a de ser verdadeiro Emperador e fixo senhor dos seus e doutros muitos vezinos, que nunca forão seu»; «o maior rei e Emperador que nunca ouve em Ethiopia...»; Letter of Antonio Fernandes to Sixtus V, 12 July 1587, in: *RASO X*, 339–354, here 343, 348.

³⁶ For instance, Letter to the Jesuit Provincial in Goa, 29 July 1605, Fremona, in: *RASO XI*, 63–74.

later became normal practice.³⁷ Similarly, the important position of *bahər nägaš* was for the first time identified, not as a simple governor, but as Viceroy of the coastal province, an expression, needless to say, which was brand new in the European discourses on Ethiopia and was also opposed to any indigenous tradition. Likewise, the governors of other provinces (Goğ-ğam, Dämbəya) were also to be called viceroys and the provinces themselves turned into internal «reinos», or kingdoms. The empire, albeit yet only in a rhetorical way, was taking shape.

Although here and then the terms «king» and «Preste» appeared — especially in letters from the civil administration, — the imperial discourse was definitely consolidated by the first decade of the 17th cent.³⁸ From then up to the time of the expulsion, this will be the dominant form of representing the *nəguš* and his kingdom in Portuguese India and in Europe.

Rhetoric and Power

What lay the origins of the Jesuit imperial discourse? Although a proper answer to this question would demand a larger and more detailed study than that given here, the evidence presented above does enable the drafting of a hypothesis.

The imperial derive, rather than a pure feature of missionary rhetoric, has to be seen as a sign of something of a concrete reality. It was one aspect of a global political project that emerged within the missionary enterprise and that would only blossom by the third decade of functioning of this mission, as the figures of the late Antonio Fernandes and the early Pedro Paez seem to prove. This project, by no way present in the instructions written by Saint Ignatius or even during the troubled years of Oviedo's «monastic» patriarchate in Fəremona, had as its central element the political empowerment of the *nəguš*. The Jesuits of the second generation, who initially aimed at a simple mission of conversion (be it through a «top to bottom» strategy), seem to have perceived not only the difficulties of a «religious» approach amidst a well rooted and extremely conservative clergy, but also the possibilities that the ambitious but weak Christian Ethiopian rulers opened up to their skills in statesmanship.

It is also important to emphasize that the birth of an «Ethiopian Empire» was linked to a more global phenomena. This came at a time when in Europe, after the failed attempt of Charles V, the old notion of a single universal Empire was being replaced by national «Empires», which, in a scattered form, sponsored the old quest for universal order under one single religion.³⁹ Abroad,

³⁷ See, e. g., *RASO XI*, 71ff.

³⁸ Of which the most pronounced attestation is the famous description of Ethiopian Empire by Manoel d'Almeida (*RASO V*, 9), and, even more, in the map of Ethiopia which accompanies his work: *ibid.*, Tab. I after p. LXIV.

a number of states encountered by the Europeans began also to be perceived under the same light: Japan and China, for instance, where the Jesuit narratives suffered at the turn of the 17th cent. a similar evolution as that seen with Ethiopia.⁴⁰ Christian Ethiopia, then, began to play a role in western geopolitics. The Jesuits tried there to fulfil a modern western wish: that of having an Oriental Emperor as a truthful, friendly ally, perhaps a mirror of the Spanish Philips who, the offspring of a true Emperor, pursued westwards similar dreams where faith and political dominion were equally intermingled.

One shall also see in the Jesuit project the intention of importing to the Ethiopian highlands a formula that was guiding the centralising dynamics within the European monarchies: the «rex imperator in regno suo».⁴¹ The *nəguś* was a full Christian ally, who, some errors in faith apart, was well entitled, under the guidance of the Jesuits, to become a true Emperor.

It still remains to be seen, however, how such an imperial project was put into practice. A further task, thus, would be a historical ethnography of the most intense years of the mission, those guided by intelligent personalities such as Paez, Almeida, Acevedo and Antonio Fernandes junior. A study of some key Jesuit biographies, the fascinating life in the residence of Gorgora, or the transformation endured, under the sway of the group of new «courtesans», by the figure of the *nəguś* — in its symbolic (attire, discourse) and pragmatic dimensions (political decisions) — would provide interesting material to understand how political action and missionary praxis interacted with missionary narratives. Furthermore, the role played by the Ethiopian ruling class in the making of an Ethiopian Empire needs to be analysed: did the two pro-Jesuit *nəguś*, Zä-Dəngəl and Susənyos, know they were «Emperors» in European eyes? What role did this idea play in their sudden welcoming of the Jesuits priests?⁴²

The purpose of this paper was to draw the attention to the shaping during the times of Portuguese engagement in Ethiopia of as pervasive a term as that

³⁹ FRANCIS A. YATES, «Charles Quint et l'idée d'Empire», in: JEAN JACQUOT (ed.), *Les fêtes de la Renaissance*, II: *Fêtes et cérémonies au temps de Charles Quint*, Paris 1960, 57–97, here 87, 96.

⁴⁰ Evidence can be easily gathered in the Jesuit annual letters from these Asiatic missions.

⁴¹ See HANS-JOACHIM KÖNIG, *Monarchia Mundi und Res Publica christiana. Die Bedeutung des mittelalterlichen Imperium Romanum für die politische Ideenwelt Kaiser Karls V. und seiner Zeit*, Hamburg 1969, 14ff.

⁴² In developing further these questions, the late Sevir B. Chernetsov's incisive contributions to the study of Susənyos's reign are still extremely valuable and stimulating; see, e. g., SEVIR CHERNETSOV, «The Role of Catholicism in the History of Ethiopia the First Half of the 17th Century», in: CLAUDE LEPAGE — ÉTIENNE DELAGE (eds.), *Études Éthiopiennes. Actes de la X^e conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes*, Paris, 24–28 août 1988, vol. 1, Paris 1994, 205–212.

of Emperor of Ethiopia. The Jesuits did not invent the term «Emperor of Ethiopia». This title had been applied to the *nəguś* since the early years of the Renaissance. As happened with the terms «king», «Prester John», etc., the missionaries inherited a whole set of diverging imaginations. Their importance lay in the fact that they reduced them into a single notion, consolidating the idea first of an Ethiopian king and, later, of an Ethiopian Emperor. By way of their systematic and coherent use they rendered such a political fiction tenable and persisting: the *nəguś* actually «became» the Emperor of Ethiopia, at least within the European imagination. After them, and the divulgation of their ideas by the «father of Ethiopian studies», Hiob Ludolph, that *topos* would reach much wider and distant fields; one, not unimportant, was that of historiographical discourse, where the image of an emperor proved too appealing to conform to philological accuracy.

SUMMARY

This paper explores the changing perception of the Ethiopian royal institution and of its head in Portuguese and Jesuit narratives during the 16th and 17th cent. It focuses in particular on representations of the «emperor» through a reading of well-known narratives — Alvares, Castanhoso, Paez, Almeida, Tellez — as well as of missionary correspondence, it reconstructs the different representations of the Ethiopian monarch: from the mythical status of the «Prester John», enjoyed in the first half of the 16th cent., the *nəguś* came to gain the secular grandeur of «Emperor of Ethiopia», half a century later. The dynamics of such a process, and its political implications, are here examined.