



Aethiopica 14 (2011)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Article

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Aethiopica 14 (2011), 136–144

ISSN: 1430–1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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A Marginal Note to “Four Sistine Ethiopians?”

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In his contribution to the present volume, Marco Bonechi argues that the four Ethiopians likely to have been portrayed in the surviving scenes of the 1481–82 frescoes on the southern wall of the Sistine Chapel are members of the six-person Ethiopian embassy to Pope Sixtus IV, which was guided by Giovan Battista (De) Brocchi da Imola and reached Rome in early November 1481.¹ In particular, Bonechi wonders whether “Antonius”, chaplain of Nəguś ʾĒskändər and head of such an embassy, could be one of them. If so, “the best candidate, given his religious attitude, would be the man kneeling in the *Crossing of the Red Sea*” most plausibly by Biagio d’Antonio, “not the man with the intense stare in the *Temptation of Moses*” by Sandro Botticelli.²

No matter the number of its members, which varies from one to six (or seven) in the different sources, this “embassy” was not really sent by Nəguś ʾĒskändər, as is apparent from the well-known contemporary evidence offered by the Venetian Minorite Francesco Suriano, a member of the friary of Mount Sion in Jerusalem since 1481;³ by his Württemberg fellow brother Paul Walther of Guglingen, who summarizes the text of a fairly informed anonymous Italian letter to the pope (“Beatissime Pater etc.”) that he happened to see at Venice, just before embarking for the Holy Land, in 1482;⁴ and, last but not least, by the official representatives (*oratores*) of the duke of Milan to the papal court, whose report of 16 November 1481 to their master – Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza, but actually Ludovico il Moro – on the arrival of “an ambassador of Lord Prester John” (“*uno ambasciatore del Sig.^{re} Prete Janni*”) in Rome is quite clear.⁵ According to these three eye-witnesses, the Ethiopian mission to Sixtus IV hailed instead from Jerusalem, where it originated at the initiative of the ambassador(s) dispatched to Cairo from Ethiopia – not by ʾĒskändər himself, then still a minor, but by his regents and churchmen – to seek a new metropolitan (*abunä*) in 1481.⁶

¹ BONECHI 2011: 124 and n. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 126 and n. 18, with reference to ESCHE-RAMSHORN 2010: 126f.

³ SURIANO 1900: 70–83 (chs. XXXIII–XXXIV); ID. 1949: 92–96.

⁴ WALTHERIUS 1892: 37.19–41.2.

⁵ See GHINZONI 1889: 151ff.

⁶ See DE WITTE 1956: 203f. and n. 1, and FIACCADORI 2004: 680f. and n. 12, with lit., and now MUNRO-HAY 2005: 41–52. Metropolitan Yeshāq, however, cannot be the author of the *Gädlä Pāntälewon* (BHO 838 = KRZ 124), already attested in the MS Daga

At Cairo, in March of the same year, the Ethiopian ambassador paid a visit to Sultan Qā’itbāy; as a result, a few months later, the Coptic patriarch (John XII) had Metropolitan Yəṣṣḥaq and possibly Bishop Marqos (who was to be metropolitan in his own right ca. 1520–30) leave for Ethiopia.⁷ It is worth noting that, while still in Egypt, Yəṣṣḥaq met the Ethiopian monk ʿĒzra of Gundä Gunde – a follower of the notorious ʿĒṣifanos (d. 1444) – on his way to or from Jerusalem: according to the 16th-century *Gädl* (‘Life’) of ʿĒzra, the saint’s journey started in the year of Mercy 128 = 1475/76 A.D.;⁸ and we know from the Däbrä Bərhan version of the “short chronicles” that it ended in the year of the World 6472, sc. 6972 = 1479/80,⁹ i.e. long before Yəṣṣḥaq was sent to Ethiopia, where he arrived in 1481/82.¹⁰ So, despite the rather generic hint at Nəguś Naʿod (1494–1508) in the parallel text from the *Täʾammərä Maryam* (‘Miracles of Mary’) that was published and translated by Enrico Cerulli (“... in the land of Egypt, at the time of Naʿod, king of Ethiopia”),¹¹ there is no reason to change the year of Mercy 128 of the *Gädl* to 148 = 1495/96, when the metropolitan was already in his seat for three lusters, and to date ʿĒzra’s travel to Egypt and the Holy Land accordingly.¹²

Provided with letters from the sultan, the Ethiopian ambassador and his retinue – the early 16th-century *Gädl* of Märḥa Krəstos, abbot of Däbrä Libanos of Šəwa (1463–97), names the delegation’s prominent members as Šäggä Zä-Ab and Gäbrä Bərhan¹³ – travelled from Cairo to Jerusalem, on pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre. Once they reached their destination on 18 April 1481 (as confirmed by the Arabic sources), the exciting news spread that representatives of Prester John were in the Holy Land on their way “to Greece” (*ad Graeciam*), to look for “a Christian (Orthodox) prelate” (*Christianum prelatum*) there to crown their young emperor. The Neapolitan Minorite Giovanni Tomacelli (*Thomazello*), then “guardian” (*custos*) of the Holy Land (1478–81), suggested that the Ethiopian envoys go to Rome and

ʿĒṣifanos 66 (= EMMML 7602), dating to 1379/80–1413: BRITA 2010: 111*b*, with lit. The Arabic sources: WIET 1938: 130 and nn. 2–3.

⁷ See FIACCADORI 2004: 682 and 690 and n. 69, and MUNRO-HAY 2005: 42. Cp. also BAUM 1999: 267*f.* and nn. 828–830 (p. 338); ID. 2001: 197*f.*

⁸ Ed. and tr. in CAQUOT 1961: 74.29 and 96.34 (cp. 100 n. 4).

⁹ Ed. and tr. in FOTI 1941: 119.1–3 and 92.19–93.2 (*Däqqä ʿĒṣifa*, the ‘Son of ʿĒṣifa[nos]’, i.e. ʿĒzra, returns from *hagara Šərʿ*, the ‘country of the Greeks’, i.e. Egypt). Cp. CAQUOT 1961: 104 n. 1, and BEYLOT – RED. 2005: 482*a.*

¹⁰ See FIACCADORI 2004: 682.

¹¹ CERULLI 1970: 244.5–6 and 246.5–6 (= 1971: 562–571.18–19 and 564.30–31).

¹² *Ibid.* 248 and nn. 10–11 (= 567 and nn. 12–13).

¹³ Ed. and tr. KUR 1972: 88.9–13 and 80.20–24. Cp. FIACCADORI 2004: 681 and n. 12; MUNRO-HAY 2005: 42; KUR 2007: 782*b*–783*a.*

discuss the matter first with Pope Sixtus IV, “the true vicar of Christ and head of the whole Church and prelate of all Christians” (*verus vicarius Christi et caput totius Ecclesiae et praelatus omnium Christianorum*);¹⁴ but Tomacelli’s advice was clearly beyond the ambassador’s brief.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the ambassador himself saw to it that two Ethiopian monks from Jerusalem, one of them called “Anthonio”, set out to Rome.¹⁶ This delegation, with Giovan Battista Brocchi as an interpreter (“Interprete del dicto oratore” in the authoritative Milanese diplomatic report),¹⁷ was indeed the “embassy” received by Pope Sixtus IV in November 1481.

Only in the section *De oratoribus a prete Jano ad papam missis* (‘On the ambassadors sent to the Pope by the Prester John’) of the still unpublished *Tractatus de oratoribus Romanae curiae* (‘Treatise on the ambassadors to the Roman Curia’) by the pontifical master of ceremonies Paride de Grassi (d. 1528), cod. Vat. Lat. 12270, fols. 88^r [stamped, 78^r penned], 21–89^v [79^v].3, do we read that “six ambassadors” (*oratores sex*) were sent to Sixtus IV from Ethiopia directly by Æskəndər, who would have appointed as their “guide” (*ductorem*) Giovan Battista [Brocchi], “an expert in their language” (*in lingua eorum expertum*).¹⁸ Yet, de Grassi’s account, unduly favoured by its editor Renato Lefevre, who never vindicated his preference against the three unanimous eye-witnesses above,¹⁹ is avowedly based on Brocchi’s personal recollections some forty years after the events, with an understandable bias towards both blurring their sequence and/or enhancing his own role and the importance of the persons involved: thus Anthony (*Antonius*), a simple monk from Jerusalem, and yet a priest, becomes “chaplain and familiar” (*capellanus et familiaris*) of Nəguś Æskəndər.²⁰ According to the more reliable report of the Milanese ambassadors, in Rome Anthony – on account of a similar, yet different boast – was reputed to be a “cousin” (*cousino*) of his emperor.²¹ Nor do we need to labour points as difficult to overcome as the minority of Æskəndər, previously noted,²² or the serious chronological discrepancy ensu-

¹⁴ WALTHERIUS 1892: 39.16–40.121 [reprod. in SOMIGLI 1928: LXVif.]; cp. SURIANO 1900: 81.31–39 (ch. XXXIV); ID. 1949: 95.6–12, mistaken for Walther’s text by MUNRO-HAY 2005: 43. On the Arabic sources, see WIET 1938: 130 and n. 3.

¹⁵ MUNRO-HAY 2005: 43.

¹⁶ SURIANO 1900: 82.9–11 and 18 (ch. XXXIV); ID. 1949: 95.20–22 and 26–27.

¹⁷ GHINZONI 1889: 153.11–12 [reprod. in LEFEVRE 1958: 111.16].

¹⁸ LEFEVRE 1958: 107ff., 108.3–7; see already ID. 1940: 366.

¹⁹ ID. 1940: 366, and ID. 1958: 75f., 87ff.

²⁰ ID. 1958:108.3–4. Cp. below, p. 139f. and n. 31, and DE WITTE 1956: 293 n. 1, with different interpretation of the same evidence.

²¹ GHINZONI 1889: 151.27 and 153.7 [reprod. in LEFEVRE 1958: 110.8 and 111.12].

²² See above, p. 136f. and n. 6.

ing from Brocchi’s narrative, for he could hardly have already been in Ethiopia before November 1481.²³ As to the fact that Brocchi acted as an interpreter, he might well have learned Amharic or even Arabic in Jerusalem,²⁴ where an Ethiopian community was long since in residence at the Holy Sepulchre.²⁵

These points clarified, I should like to call attention to a further, albeit lost, possible portrait of Anthony (Eth. **An-/Ἐντων(σ)γος* or **An-/Ἐντωνας*), who features not only in the aforesaid *Tractatus* by de Grassi, fol. 89^r [79^r].21–23,²⁶ but also in a remarkable series of texts, among them three letters by Sixtus IV, dated 13 May 1482.²⁷ In the first letter, to “the Prester John, the great king of India”, i.e. to Nəguś Ḥskəndər, the latter’s “ambassador Anthony” (*Antonius orator*) is styled at the beginning as “a man prudent, austere and full of piety” (*vir prudens et gravis et magnae religionis*); at the end, rather unconventionally, he becomes “your and our ambassador” (*tuo et nostro oratore*).²⁸ The two other letters, to “M(affeo) [Gherardi], patriarch of Venice”, and to “the abbot of the monastery of St. George [in Alga] of Venice” respectively, are very short and convey provisions for the return of “Anthony, ambassador of the king of India” (*Antonius, orator regis Indiae*), to his own parts: the pope had him escorted to Venice by Martino (Segono), bishop of Dulcigno (Ulcinj, in today’s Montenegro).²⁹ Incidentally, this hitherto neglected circumstance, if connected to Martino’s 1475/82 (?) pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where he could have been in touch with the Jerusalem Ethiopian community, may well account for his lost treatise *De Abyssinis, seu Aethiopicibus* (‘On the Abyssinians, or Ethiopians’), thus rendering it not so “strange” as it used to sound before.³⁰

Equally neglected is a reference to “Sir Anthony, a priest of their own rite” (*dominus Anthonius, prespiter secundum ritum eorum*), i.e. of the Ethiopians, that is afforded by Walther: on his way back to Ethiopia, the

²³ Pace LEFEVRE 1940: 366, and ID. 1958: 75f.

²⁴ ID. 1945: 424f.

²⁵ See, e.g., STOFFREGEN PEDERSEN 2007: 274b–275a, with lit.

²⁶ LEFEVRE 1958: 108.3–4 and 18, unknown to LOWE 2007: 125 and n. 88, with reference only to LEFEVRE 1940: 366ff.; cp. also ID. 1945: 429.

²⁷ See LEFEVRE 1958: 118 (*Post scriptum*).

²⁸ Ed. in POU Y MARTÍ 1945: 85f. [reprod. (with tr.) in RAINERI 2005: 42–45, no. 8: 43.4 and 44f. (44.6–7 and 45.17)].

²⁹ Ed. in POU Y MARTÍ 1945: 85f.

³⁰ See PERTUSI 1981: 20, 30 and n. 6, 34, 67, 142, no. VII, and 339: “... Il secondo trattatello, in cui erano descritte le popolazioni dell’Etiopia, appare ancora più strano, perché non si vede quale interesse abbia potuto avere il vesc. Martino per gli Abissini. C’è da chiedersi se in esso l’autore abbia trattato di tali popolazioni in modo letterario, ispirandosi alle testimonianze dei geografi antichi (Mela, Strabone, Tolomeo, etc.)”.

“ambassador of the king of India” (*legatus regis Indie*) arrived in Venice “with his fellows from the Roman Curia” (*cum suis sociis de curia Romana*), i.e. with Bishop Martino and his other companions, some time after 19 May (*post dominicam Exaudi*) 1482.³¹ While waiting there to sail to the Holy Land (*et mansit usque ad exitum galearum*), Anthony was received and treated as an important person by the then doge Giovanni Mocenigo (1478–85), with whom he took part in the Corpus Domini procession at the side of the patriarch of Venice (... *Et idem legatus ivit in processione in uno latere et dux Venetorum in altero latere*).³²

Further information, adding to the previous one, on the ambassador “called Anthony” (*chiamato Antonio*) can be found in the letter of 18 January 1484 by the newly appointed guardian of the Holy Land, the Mantuan Paolo (Arrivabene) da Canneto, to Nəguś Ĕskəndər that is transmitted within Francesco Suriano’s work: after returning from Rome two years before, Anthony was still staying in Jerusalem, keeping in his possession the papal letters and gifts for the nəguś and spending there, because of alleged travel difficulties, the money given to him by the Holy See for his return journey to Ethiopia.³³

According to Francesco Maria Torrigio (1639), whose passage is almost literally quoted by Francesco Cancellieri (1786), a “Fra Antonio Abissino”, designated by an Ethiopic inscription, was portrayed as a kneeling “Dominican friar”, next to the Holy Trinity and Saint Stephen, on the *tramezzo* (‘rood’ or ‘choir screen’) ordered to be built by Sixtus IV in 1475 within the small church of “Santo Stefano degl’Indiani”, i.e. Santo Stefano dei Mori (or degli Abissini), behind the apse of St Peter’s in the Vatican.³⁴ Also, we know from Giorgio Vasari (1568) that a painter called Schizzone left “a few praised works” (*alcune cose lodate*) in Santo Stefano.³⁵ He was a comrade and friend of the better-known Vincenzo Tamagni of San Gimignano, and had his career likewise cut short by the troubles of 1527, for he appears to have abandoned art following the sack of Rome and have died shortly after.³⁶ A careful reading of Torrigio’s text shows that the *tramezzo* decora-

³¹ WALTERIUS 1892: 60.30–32. Cp. DE WITTE 1956: 293 n. 1, and above, p. 136 and n. 20.

³² *Ibid.* 60.32–61.4.

³³ SURIANO 1900: 82.22–24 (ch. XXXIV), cp. 80.19–34 (ch. XXXIII); ID. 1949: 95.30–32, cp. 94.4–8. See SOMIGLI 1928: LXV and nn. 9–10; LEFEVRE 1940: 368f.; ID. 1945: 432.

³⁴ TORRIGIO 1639: 327; cp. CANCELLIERI 1786, III: 1526. See KRAUTHEIMER – CORBETT – FRANKL 1970: 171–190, here 173 (where the “tramezzo” is mistaken for an “iconostasis [?]”); [PROVERBIO] 2009: 388, no. 1; and now ID. 2011: 51f.

³⁵ VASARI 1568: 112 = ed. BAROCCHI – BETTARINI 1976: 265.; cp. [PROVERBIO] 2009: 388, and ID. 2011: 52 and n. 5.

³⁶ See, e.g., WILLIAMSON 1904: 41a.

tion must not necessarily be traced to Sixtus IV (d. 1484).³⁷ Moreover, this decoration included an Ethiopian subject, whereas the church was in the full possession of its rightful owner, the Chapter of St Peter’s, at least until 1497, when the place was first “violated” by “Indians”, i.e. Ethiopians.³⁸ As a result, Schizzone should be held responsible for the *tramezzo* painting.³⁹

On these grounds, “Fra Antonio Abissino” has been tentatively identified with his namesake brother said to be “of the city of Urvuar [Wärwär], in Bugna [Bəgʷəna]”, and also described as a Dominican friar (“very black with a long beard and long hair and a long and beautiful face”) by Alessandro Zorzi, who collected information from him, as well as from his “companion” Brother Thomas of Ganget, in 1523.⁴⁰ Yet, even admitting that Brother Antonio, as is natural, went to Rome, there is no proof that he ever became so important as to be portrayed on Santo Stefano’s choir screen – an architectural feature usually destroyed after the Council of Trent, here probably in the massive works carried out under Pope Clement XI in 1703–06 and 1716.⁴¹

Thus, the possibility should not be excluded that “Fra Antonio Abissino” portrayed by Schizzone is one and the same as the head of the 1481 Ethiopian embassy, a more apt figure to be depicted there. (No wonder he too looked liked a Dominican, for Ethiopian monks often introduced themselves and/or were just perceived in Europe as Dominicans or Franciscans or even Augustinians, that is to say, as belonging to the great western monastic orders they first made acquaintance with in the Holy Land.⁴²)

This possibility was indicated a long time ago by Renato Lefevre, with reference only to Torrigio’s testimony (as reproduced, though, by Cancellieri) and to Sixtus IV, in a postscript to his major paper on Brocchi;⁴³ and it was recently advanced, albeit ignoring Lefevre’s proposal, by Christiane Esche-Ramshorn in a rather confused and uninformed (mostly second-hand) essay on the Ethiopian presence in 15th-century art and history at

³⁷ PROVERBIO 2011: 52.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 54ff. Cp. ESCHE-RAMSHORN 2010: 127 and nn. 63–64, with the erroneous *Indie* (for *in die*) of Mauro da Leonessa, who is also credited with the correct reading *violaverant* (instead of his *inolaverunt*), actually found in LEFEVRE 1946: 27 (and n. 1), nr. XXXI (after PECCHIAI 1945: 2), and then in ID. 1958: 69 and n. 22, and ID. 1967: 23 and n. 14.

³⁹ PROVERBIO 2011: 52.

⁴⁰ CRAWFORD (ed., tr.) 1958: 95–99, 172f.; cp. FIACCADORI 2010: 529*b*.

⁴¹ Cp. KRAUTHEIMER – CORBETT – FRANKL 1970: 173ff., 189; FIACCADORI 2010: 529*a*; [PROVERBIO] 2009: 388.

⁴² FIACCADORI 2010: 529*b*. Inconclusive remarks, on this point, in ESCHE-RAMSHORN 2010: 126ff.

⁴³ LEFEVRE 1958: 118; cp. above, pp. 139 n. 27 and 140f. nn. 34–37.

Rome and Florence.⁴⁴ Therefore, it seems to be worth resuming, however briefly, the issue of the *tramezzo* portrait.

In keeping with the painter's chronology, such an important visual reminder of the Ethiopian emperor's "chief envoy" (*principalis orator* in de Grassi's own words, cod. Vat. Lat. 12270, fols. 89^r [79^r].21–22 e 89^v [79^v].20–21)⁴⁵ to Sixtus IV might better fall within the first regnal years of Pope Clement VII (1523–34) who, like his successor Paul III (1534–49),⁴⁶ showed special consideration for the "Indian" pilgrims of Santo Stefano long before their community was more formally acknowledged, with its rule, by Pope Julius III (1550–55).⁴⁷

If this is the case, the pictorial evocation of "Fra Antonio Abissino" – whose personality had deeply impressed Sixtus IV, as reflected in his letter to the Prester John⁴⁸ – could have been rather inspired by his Sistine portrait, in the same kneeling attitude; and would definitely confirm both the instrumental role of the 1481 "embassy" in the Ethiopian settlement at Santo Stefano and the actual awareness of it still more than forty years afterwards.

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⁴⁴ ESCHE-RAMSHORN 2010: 126ff.

⁴⁵ LEFEVRE 1958: 108.3 and 18.

⁴⁶ CONTI ROSSINI 1922–23: 460f. (§ 19: "Sul convento di Santo Stefano dei Mori"); cp. PROVERBIO 2011: 61 and n. 35.

⁴⁷ FIACCADORI 2010: 530a, but see now also PROVERBIO 2011: 63 and n. 37.

⁴⁸ See above, p. 139 and n. 28.

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Summary

With reference to Marco Bonechi's article in this issue of *Aethiopica*, the present paper briefly surveys the evidence for the 1481 Ethiopian "embassy" to Pope Sixtus IV and then explores the possibility of identifying Anthony, head of that embassy, with "Fra Antonio Abissino" portrayed, most likely before 1527 by a painter called Schizzone, on the now lost *tramezzo* ('choir screen') of the Vatican church of Santo Stefano dei Mori.