



English Academy Review

A Journal of English Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/racr20>

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To cite this article: Matteo Baraldo (2023) Mapping Ethiopia's Ancient Spirituality and Amba Gishen: From Sacralisation to Desacralisation, English Academy Review, 40:1, 83-98, DOI: 10.1080/10131752.2023.2188668

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2023.2188668>



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Published online: 04 Apr 2023.



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Mapping Ethiopia's Ancient Spirituality and Amba Gishen: From Sacralisation to Desacralisation

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Abstract

Amba Gishen, a cross-shaped mountainous place in the Southern Wollo Zone of Ethiopia, has for centuries been the site of a royal medieval prison thanks to its geographical isolation on the top of an *amba* (flat-top mountain). The first African narrative source of the deposition of a relic at Amba Gishen is cited in one of the most sacred Christian manuscripts of Ethiopia, the *Māshafä Tefut* (fifteenth century). The presence of a holy relic, the fragment of the True Cross brought here by emperor Zara Yacoq in 1446, changed the meaning of that space for the Ethiopian people. The shifting topographies, from Mountain of the Royal Family to Mount of Myrrh, metaphorically referring to the myrrh associated with the Passion of Christ, have given way to a devotional focus and function, making Amba Gishen one of the holiest places in the land. As a place and site of confinement, however, the space inspired distorted imagery of Abyssinia, as conveyed by Anglophone travel narratives. The scope of the present research is to illustrate the dynamics in determining the sacralisation of spaces by their topographical morphology. This is achieved through the (re-)appropriation of natural spaces from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and through resisting the desacralisation featured in Western narratives.

Keywords: sense of place; (de)sacralisation of space; travel writing; Amba Gishen; Ethiopian mysticism; sacred mountains



English Academy Review
www.tandfonline.com/racr
 Volume 40 | Number 1 | 2023 | pp. 83–98

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2023.2188668>
 ISSN 1753-5360 (Online), ISSN 1013-1752 (Print)
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Introduction: Making Sense and Sense-Making of Sacred Places

Refocusing attention on the sacred, as in Mircea Eliade's (1959) pioneering and influential study, and on the links and ties with space mediated by religion (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1993; Sheldrake 2001; Tuan 1974), is a way to elaborate on the connections between sacred spaces and place attachment. From this perspective, our study focuses on the conceptualisation of sacred places as spaces where the nature of people's emotional relationships to place is predominant.¹ Although the transition from an intuitive awareness of the existence of affective bonds with places to a scientific knowledge of the phenomenon is perceived to be an ongoing process (Giuliano 2003, 138), we can operationally refer to attachment to sacred place as a behavioural, cognitive, and emotional embeddedness experienced by individuals in their interactions with socio-physical environments (Brown and Perkins 1992). Moreover, a sense of place is not only about affective bonds and emotional connections to a geographic area, as it also includes an ensemble of symbolic processes and meaning-making activities in which the embodied space is evoked primarily by place attachment. Consequently, an individual experience of the environment is a fundamental prerequisite, but place meaning can also prescind from a sensorial appraisal of the space, while narratives of "travelled spaces" can contribute to shaping place meaning and enable transcultural appropriation.

In *Spaces for the Sacred*, Philip Sheldrake (2001, 15) observes:

Although place is a human construct, it is equally vital not to lose sight of the fact that the natural features are part of the interrelationships that go to make up place. The physical landscape is a partner, and an active rather than a purely passive partner, in the conversation that creates the nature of a place. It is paradoxical that so much radical contemporary writing on the politics of space fails to mention the non-human element at all. This is simply to substitute a new anthropocentrism for old.

This may further the concept of landscape and memory expressed by Simon Schama (1995) and the interplay between physical geographies and geographies for/of the mind and the spirit. Moreover, the stories narrated by travellers and by the travelled upon, or "travellees", as in colonial travel writing—brilliantly explored in Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992)—may differ in interpretation and diverge in functional appropriation, as well as where colonisation,

1 Influential studies on American sacred space have been published since the 1990s (Carmichael et al. 1994; Chidester and Linenthal 1995); more recent studies have focused on African sacred spaces (Ogundayo and Adekunle 2019). In the early 2000s, Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley co-edited *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures* (2001). However, Ethiopia is not present in any of these works. The collection *Sacred Waters*, edited by Celeste Ray, includes a study titled "Divine Waters in Ethiopia: The Source from Heaven and Indigenous Water-Worlds in the Lake Tana Region" (Oestigaard and Firew 2020). Mountains and the sources of water they generate are often identified as integrated sacred spaces.

imperial expansion, and cultural appropriation are concerned. The case of East Africa may well epitomise this different interpretation, particularly as regards Ethiopia (Abyssinia) and Euro-centred narratives.

Amba Gishen, in northern Ethiopia in the Wollo Zone of the Amhara Region, is emblematic. The present study, following a comparative semiotic approach, is paradigmatic of the influences of literary processes in the progressive (de)sacralisation of space. On the one hand, as in Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* ([1759] 1999) and, well before that, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), representations in narratives, travelogues, guidebooks, and maps focused on the *topos* of the earthly paradise based on indirect information and, often, on imagined meaning and imagery. On the other hand, local narratives and (pseudo-)histories enshrine the sacredness of Amba Gishen, together with its tangible and intangible values, enhancing place attachment and making it a revered site of religious pilgrimage for many devotees of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC).

Amba Gishen: Storifying the Space

In 1540 Fra' Mauro, a Camaldolese monk, produced *Mappa Mundi*, a slightly elliptical planisphere measuring approximately two metres, featuring the known places of the time.² In the central part of the section of the map devoted to Abyssinia/Ethiopia, the name "Amba Gishen", or rather "Amba Negast"³—another name by which the place was known in the past—appears for the first time in history (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. "Amba Gêšän"). It is a high mountain in what is now the South Wollo area of Ethiopia, a destination for pilgrimages and the site of important annual celebrations during the Meskel Festival of the True Cross.

The EOTC is especially devoted to Amba Gishen and reveres the holy relics kept at the Gishen shrines. Among these, the most sacred is certainly a fragment of the right arm of the True Cross, allegedly brought to the remote mountain monasteries of the Gishen Mariam, as the location is commonly known today (Tadesse 2010, 55). The story of the deposition of the fragment, and of the sanctification of the place with sand brought directly from the Holy Land, rightfully makes it a Second Jerusalem (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. "Amba Gêšän"). These events are narrated in one of Ethiopia's holiest manuscripts, the *Māshafä Tefut*.

2 This is housed in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice.

3 Thomas Pakenham believes that Amba Gishen "is probably the Amba Negast marked on the centre of Fra' Mauro's Mappamundi of 1460" ([1959] 1999, 127–28). The *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* describes it as being "on the top of a massive mountain (3249 a.s.l.) surrounded by gorges" (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. "Amba Gêšän"). The description of the topographical elements seems to be consistent with the visual rendering in Fra' Mauro's world map, where it is represented as a castle perched on a steep mountainside.

But Fra' Mauro's map is not the only document from the past wherein the Amba Gishen is mentioned; from this perspective, the place represents an extremely interesting case of transcultural intertextuality. In the Western world, the first verbal description of Amba Gishen is provided by Francisco Álvarez (c. 1465 to c. 1541), the chaplain-priest and almoner to King Manuel I of Portugal, and ambassador to Ethiopia. Álvarez did not personally visit the place, but he published an account of it in 1520.⁴

After Álvarez's early account, the toponym Amba Gishen was featured in travelogue upon travelogue, up to the work of Jeronimo Lobo in 1639, in a recurrent flow of rewriting derived from indirect, non-authoritative, and non-authentic sources. These pseudo-historical narratives, based on rewriting and second-hand translations, would then go on to influence Western narratives—for example by becoming the narrative setting of Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* ([1759] 1999). They likewise influenced European imagery and representations of the East in the seventeenth century, as in the narratives of Peter Heylin's *Microcosmos* (1633), John Stradling's *Divine Poems* (1625), Thomas Bancroft's "Two Bookes of Epigrammes and Epitaphs" ([1639] 1860), Vincent Le Blanc's *Voyages* (Le Blanc and Brooke 1660), and James Thomson's *Seasons* (1730) (Belcher 2012, 215).

In the late 1950s, Thomas Pakenham referred to Amba Gishen as the mountain "that had haunted my dreams for nearly half a century" ([1959] 1999, 6). Pakenham wrote an account of his field experiences in Ethiopia, thus once again returning the name of Amba Gishen to his narrative of discovery. He meant to prove that in 1816 Samuel Taylor Coleridge had envisioned Kubla Khan's "stately dome" based on this mountainous area, which Pakenham set out to climb and explore. Coleridge (1997, 249) describes this holy and enchanted *savage place*:

So twice five miles of fertile ground
 With walls and towers were girdled round;
 And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery
 [...]
 A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
 Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
 Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
 And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
 It flung up momentarily the sacred river.
 [...]

4 He travelled to Ethiopia in 1515 as an ambassador on behalf of the King of Portugal. In fact, Emperor Lebna Dengel had asked for papal help against the Muslim invasions.

A damsel with a dulcimer
 In a vision once I saw:
 It was an Abyssinian maid
 And on her dulcimer she played,
 Singing of Mount Abora.⁵

These spectacular places on the Ethiopian plateau provided a perfect setting for the depiction of paradise. In those years the metaphorical quest to find paradise was linked to the exploration of the source of the Nile, which in the Bible is called Ghion and which would delineate one of the natural boundaries of Eden. In the late seventeenth century, the “diluvianist” philosopher Thomas Burnet, in *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* ([1719] 1752), describes Amhara cosmology, citing evidence of an “Aethiopian philosopher” which echoes the vision of the Happy Valley: “[The Ethiopians] say the first earth ... was smooth and regular in its surface, without mounteins or Vallies, but hollow within: and was spontaneously fruitful, without plowing or sowing” (Burnet [1719] 1752, 386). The excerpt is from the second book, which Burnet titled “The General State of the Primeval Earth and of Paradise”. No foreigner would be allowed at the time to verify the source of Burnet’s diluvian theory (that the earth had an abyss at its centre filled with water). Most of the ancient libraries were either forbidden to foreigners or had been destroyed. Almost one hundred years earlier, in 1613, Samuel Purchas, in *His Pilgrimages* (1625), had described the volumes of a great library on a mountain in Ethiopia, where all the ancient wisdom was stored, even the works of the Jews exiled from Spain, and where there was gold as the sands of the sea and stars in the sky. All of this could be found on the Ethiopian mountaintop of the Holy Cross, on Mount Amara. Purchas (1625, 80) identifies this mountain as Amba Gishen, to the south of Lalibela:

A marvellous and artificial Palace of Marble and other stones ... He included sixteen miles within the circuit of the wall ... In this inclosure or Parke are goodly Meadowes, springs, rivers, red and fallow Deere, Fawnes carried thither for the Hawkes ... In the midst in a faire Wood hee hath built a royall House on pillars gilded and varnished, on every of which is a Dragon all gilt, which windeth his tayle about the pillar, with his head bearing up the loft, as also with his wings displayed on both sides; the cov’ser also is of Reeds gilt and varnished ... The house itself may be sundred, and taken downe like a Tent and erected again. For it is sustained, when it is set up, with two hundred silken cords.

5 Upon consulting the original manuscript of Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* in the British Museum, Philip Marsden (2005, 70) discovered that the poet had written Mount Amara and not Abora, as reported in the printed editions. Coleridge had read about Mount Amara in the travels of Samuel Purchas and Pliny (Cooper 1906). At the bottom of the original manuscript of the poem, Coleridge had also made a note stating that he composed the verses in a kind of reverie brought on by two grains of opium, which facilitated the mysticism of the images evoked in the poem. Coleridge recounts falling asleep while reading *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (Purchas 1625).

As we can see, in this extract there are parallels and similarities which take us to the first lines of Samuel Johnson’s iconography of the Happy Valley of Rasselas and his mountain. These sources represent an imagined country, with writers such as Purchas, who never himself travelled beyond his country’s borders, fantasising about the existence of a lost paradise in a valley or on a mountain in Ethiopia. However, Ethiopian accounts and the Ethiopian religious tradition shift the perspective.

The *Māshafä Tefut*—literally “the book of the grain of teff”⁶—probably owes its name to a particular calligraphic style in which the letters are minute: the size a grain of teff, a cereal endemic to Ethiopia. The *Māshafä Tefut* is a collection of illuminated manuscripts. One of the oldest copies (dating from around the fourteenth to the fifteenth century) is an early remnant of an Octateuch (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, s.v. “Octateuch”). In addition to the Octateuch, the collection contains the Gospels, the Senodos, and historical texts relating to the reigns of the emperors Dawit II (1496–1540) and Zara Yaqob (1399–1468). The collection of manuscripts is one of the most sacred volumes in Ethiopia and is preserved in the Church of God the Father at Amba Gishen, one of the four churches currently found in the area, along with Debre Kerbe Gishen Mariam (Mount of Myrrh), St Gabriel, and St Michael, all located at the tops of different mountain ridges arranged in a cross (Tadesse 2010, 57; *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, s.v. “Tefut: Māshafä tefut”).⁷ The churches’ names provide evidence of the shift in topographies and toponyms: from Mountain of the Royal Family, based on the previous use of the site as a place of confinement of princes, to the Mount of Myrrh, metaphorically referring to the myrrh associated with the Passion of Christ. The naming of the place therefore gave way to a devotional focus, rendering Amba Gishen one of the holiest places in the country and a site of devotional pilgrimages.

The historical part of the *Māshafä Tefut* narrates the story of the relic obtained by Dawit II (a part of the True Cross) and the vision according to which Zara Yacob was prompted by God to choose Amba Gishen, whose peculiar cruciform topography was a sign of the divine will to see the relic deposited there. The Ethiopian historian Tadesse Tamrat reports the text of the message with which Zara Yacob is said to have commanded the local clergy to safeguard the relics: “[The king of the Franks] sent us a piece of the True Cross. Enclosed within a golden box, it is placed inside another cross of gold of marvelous workmanship, which can stand erect on a golden stand, provided for it by the wise men of the Franks” (Tadesse 1972, 267).

According to the tradition of the EOTC church, other relics are also preserved at Amba Gishen, such as the dismembered body parts of St Anne and children massacred by Herod (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, s.v. “Relics”), and the tunic and sponge impregnated with the blood of Christ (Cantamessa 2010, 183). Emperor Zara Yacob’s

6 The scientific name for teff is *Eragrostis tef*.

7 It can be seen very clearly on Google Earth. By searching for “Gishen Mariam”, one can also see the main churches surrounded by circular enclosures of trees.

special attachment to the place is not surprising, since he lived in exile with other princes at Amba Gishen before being freed and crowned (see also Dombrowski 1988.) He further established commemorative festivals with appropriate rituals. Subsequently, over the course of time, Amba Gishen would become a site of devotional pilgrimage, and it was decided by “the king, bishops, and archbishops that its indulgences⁸ were of the same importance as those received in the Holy Land” (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, s.v. “Relics of the True Cross in Ethiopia”). Today, it is the most important site of pilgrimage during the celebration of the Ethiopian holiday of Meskel, which has been certified as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. It is celebrated by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians on the 17th of Meskerem (September), the beginning of the Ethiopian New Year, and it commemorates the unearthing of the True Holy Cross of Christ and marks symbolic rebirth through a cathartic fire (Dāmāra) and the beginning of a new vegetative cycle in nature (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, s.v. “Masqal”).

The story told in *Māshafā Tefut* provides further support for the sacralisation of this site and its relevance to Ethiopian spirituality. According to this text, Emperor Zara Yaqob brought an amount of soil from the Holy Land, loading it on 100 mules and 88 camels, and spread the soil on the Amba. The purpose was to sanctify Amba Gishen as another New Jerusalem (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. “Amba Gésān”), and through this action to also pay tribute to what King Lalibela, also known as Dawit I, Lebna Dengel, and “Prester John”, had done centuries before, after the Islamic siege and reconquest of Jerusalem in 1187. In terms of the religious symbolism of the churches built in the area, Amba Gishen was perceived and glorified as a space that could heal the body, protect the people, and save the soul. It was a place for pilgrims and refugees, seen as a paradise surrounded by fire (Baraldo 2018, 75).

From a historical perspective, however, it was also a political act of redemption and cultural rebirth, showing the indissoluble interdependence of the church and state in connection with the places invaded by the Gragn⁹ during the Muslim invasions. Amba Gishen resisted the first two assaults, in 1531 and 1533, only to capitulate in 1540. According to *Futuh al-Habaša*,¹⁰ the soldiers burnt and pulled down many churches and monasteries, plundered their riches, burnt the holy books to ashes, and massacred the monks and priests (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. “Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Gazi”). In 1622, Pedro Páez still recounted how many books were burnt and destroyed along

8 In the Roman Catholic Church, indulgences refer to the remission of temporal punishment in purgatory after absolution.

9 Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Gazi (c. 1506–1543), known also as Grañ or Gragn, was of Somali origin and the leader of the Muslim conquest of southern, central, and northern Ethiopia in the first half of the sixteenth century. He was therefore called *sahib al-fath* (“the lord of the conquest”), whilst the Amhara nicknamed him Grañ or “left-handed” (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, s.v. “Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Gazi”).

10 *Futuh al-Habaša*, or “The Conquests of Ethiopia” is the chronicle of the Muslim conquests made in Ethiopia. Besides the Ethiopian chronicles it represents the only Arabic source of Gragn’s campaigns (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, s.v. “Futuh al-Habaša”).

with the main church of God the Father, while other volumes were hoarded in an attempt to subsequently resell them among Orthodox believers (Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 129).

It is not surprising that most of the volumes were lost: objects of worship, such as illuminated manuscripts, were easily damaged since they were written on parchment, which, for a millennium, was the main writing medium in Ethiopia. Apart from the parchment manuscripts, the houses themselves were built of perishable materials. Páez defines the “palaces” inhabited at the time by the reclusive royal descendants as “miserable one-storey houses roofed with straw” (in Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 120). He also describes two straw-roofed churches: “one is called Egziabeher Ab, scilicet ‘God the Father’, and it is made of timber; the other is dedicated to Our Lady and made of very good stone and is to the south, the other almost to the north” (in Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 119).

Today, there is a growing number of examples of tangible world heritage based on architectural achievements in organic materials which need to be protected as potentially endangered places.¹¹ The main significance of Amba Gishen lies, however, in its intangible values of belief, spirituality, and Christian identity. Traditional and spiritual practices associated with the site define one of the most vivid representations of Ethiopian culture, which has since its creation had a profound impact on European minds. Pakenham ([1959] 1999), for instance, as we shall see later, lamented the absence of material aspects and focused his gaze away from the intangible values of Christian spirituality, leaning towards values linked to the natural environment and the inaccessibility of an imagined Eden. The mid-twentieth-century reconstruction, in fact, followed a style which was probably of Italian derivation, with an octagonal rather than a circular plan. This reconstruction disregarded aesthetic values (Pakenham [1959] 1999, 140–41) and was decorated with contemporary wall paintings, as I could personally verify during a visit to the site in September 2018. Marsden (2005, 70) also spent a night at the monastery of Amba Gishen and, very concisely, described it as “a very extraordinary flat-top peak, shaped like a cross, no princes, many monks, no sign of a great library”.

Mapping Amba Gishen in European Literature: The Making and Unmaking of a Sacred Place

As previously noted, the first mention of Amba Gishen in Europe is found in the writings of the Portuguese religious ambassador Francisco Álvarez ([1881] 1961), who visited the country in 1520, five years after his departure from Portugal in 1515. The missionary’s expedition failed to reach the mountains where the heirs to the throne were

11 See, for instance, the Buganda kings’ places at Kasubi in Uganda, at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1022> (accessed September 11, 2022).

imprisoned, because the expedition was dispersed following a stoning they suffered in a village when the group was a short distance away from the crossroads to Amba Gishen. This represents a constant in the description of the place in European literature: the Amba is not reached until the middle of the twentieth century and, up to that point, the information given is not based on direct knowledge and experience of the place, but rather results from an intertextual circuit.

In Chapter 63 of his narrative, Álvarez ([1881] 1961, 238–39) dwells on the topographical features relating to inaccessibility, describing

a rock cut like a wall, straight from the top to the bottom [...] And they say that there is a valley there between two very steep mountains, and that it is by no means possible to get out of it, because it is closed by two gates, and that in this valley they place those who are nearest to the king, that is to say, those who are still of his own blood, and who have been there a short time, because they keep them with more precaution.

In the 1881 Lord Stanley English translation from the Portuguese, we observe how with the help of interpreters, Álvarez is convinced also that this is the land of Prester John: “They showed me the mountain where the princes were [...] And the mountain was so high that that of the princes seemed to be commanded by it. Here they described to me more fully the numerous guards and restrictions over these princes, and the great abundance they had of provisions and clothes [which the Prester had given them]” (Álvarez [1881] 1961, 252). More than being interested in the features of the sacred space, the religious Portuguese is focused on the figure of Prester John, as in this passage, which echoes the Marquis of Carabas of the fables of the Grimm Brothers (“Puss in Boots”) (Álvarez [1881] 1961, 252):

And because from here there was a very extensive view as far as the eye could see towards the west, I asked what countries were in that direction, and if they all belonged to the Prester John. They told me that for a month’s journey in that directions were the dominions of the Prester; after that, one entered mountains and deserts, and after them very vile people, very black and very bad.

This propensity to enhance natural fortifications, such as by providing narrow passages between gorges opening into remote valleys with massive gates, is also found in the descriptions of the outer areas of Menelik II’s royal residence at Ankober, in southern Shewa.¹²

Álvarez’s description, although plausible, is rejected by the Portuguese Jesuit Pedro Páez in his *History of Ethiopia* (1622; see Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011). He believes that he was misled by the fact that he sighted two high mountains that restricted the view of Amba Gishen. Thus, not having reached it, and not knowing, according to

12 Massaja (1897, 63) recounts that to reach the king’s palace he had to cross a narrow gorge between two mountain ridges artificially closed by a large wall.

Páez, the Amharic language, a misunderstanding arose (Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 122). It should be added that Páez himself never visited Amba Gishen, owing to the general insecurity of the area. He based his descriptions on accounts obtained from supposed nobles who had resided and still resided in Amba Gishen, with whom he would have come into contact thanks to his own dealings with the Abyssinian court. Although we still lack a *sense of place*, Páez's account has the merit of circumstantially refuting the marvellous and fabulous information that Brother Luís de Urreta had circulated about Amba Gishen. He too, in his *Historia*, published in 1610 in Latin and largely fictional, had described Amba Gishen, erroneously calling it Mount Amara (see Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011). There he had placed fine palaces, stairways carved into the rock for ascending, and a colossal library that would rival that of Alexandria, containing no less than three thousand volumes. All this was set against the backdrop of abundant natural resources, a perennial spring, a wondrous tree echoing the tree of life, fertile fields, and a great profusion of biodiversity: a setting that certainly provided the basis for the paradisiacal interpretation of Amba Gishen that we will see propagated in fiction and poetry in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, as noted.

Páez himself later used the term “paradise of Amba Gishen” to refer to de Urreta's fanciful descriptions. And he disavowed the magnificence of the sumptuous castles by factually describing them as “miserable one-storey houses roofed with straw” (in Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 120). The same fate befell the library; there should have been at least some visible remains of buildings capable of containing such a number of volumes, since, as Páez claims, only about twenty volumes are to be found in the local churches (in Boavida, Pennec, and Ramos 2011, 129). Álvarez also gives an accurate description of the inaccessible natural fortress of Amba Gishen, a feature that seems to be a constant in Western descriptions. For the first time, the topographical datum of the cruciform conformation of the ambas appears.

This series of intersecting descriptions between different authors and centuries culminates in a work of fiction, deeply influenced by the travel accounts that circulated in Europe during the 1600s and 1700s, such as *Rasselas* by Johnson. The English scholar had been directly exposed to the tradition of confining male heirs to impregnable mountains through his translation of LeGrand/Lobo's itinerary in Ethiopia, in which Amba Gishen is mentioned. In addition to this main influence, there are many others, including travelogues, scholarly histories, pseudo-histories, and romances, whose topographical, biological, cultural, historical, and linguistic details can be found in the main texts related to Abyssinia that circulated in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Lockhart 1963). On this basis, which Laura Wendy Belcher (2012) did not hesitate to call a veritable “discursive possession”, *Rasselas* represents the definitive transformation of a (real) topographical space into an imaginary, paradisiacal story world. Nevertheless, Johnson straddles the line between (pseudo-)historical and orientalist positions, imagining a kind of dystopia—a potentially utopian and idyllic place which is polluted by the fallacies and weaknesses of human experience. The result is that Johnson “has neither abandoned historical fact nor fully embraced orientalist

fancy—his princely prison is neither quite the confinement of history nor the gymnasium of the fabulists” (Belcher 2012, 240). This is partly due to the fact that Johnson himself was an armchair traveller who never visited Ethiopia; he therefore did not see the country through an English gaze, but rather through the words of clerics from other nations and cultures, favouring the possibility of questioning the narrator’s point of view (Belcher 2012, 228). These were therefore the premises for the numerous translations (13 in Italian, 18 in German, 56 in French), sequels (Knight 1811; Whately 1835), and spin-offs, such as H. Rider Haggard’s *Queen Sheba’s Ring* (1910), that allowed the myth of Amba Gishen to proliferate, multiplying and intersecting with a sophisticated system of broadcasting the exceptional nature and uniqueness of Ethiopian culture, according to Belcher (2012, 16–17). This was the basis of the Ethiopian myth that underpinned the creation of imagery of a Christian kingdom of Solomonic descent and the very identification, for a long time, of Africa with Ethiopia.

The above travelogues and oblique rewriting contrast with the optical descriptive experience of the climbing of the mountain adopted by Pakenham, who was determined to give evidence of the existence and discover the true mountain of Johnson’s *Rasselas*, as narrated in *The Mountains of Rasselas* (Pakenham [1959] 1999). The travel account of this English historian is characterised by being in a liminal condition between, on the one hand, descriptions of physical places, interweaved with the physical and sensorial experience of the narrating subject in the first-person diary, with an exact chronology, and on the other hand an imaginary story world evoking the splendours of Amba Gishen. In fact, in his preface to the volume, the author notes that it was the tradition of confinement on the Amba that captured his and Europe’s imagination, so much so that it prompted him to organise a helicopter visit to the places where he had tried in vain, like many travellers of the past, to reach the summit by mule 42 years earlier (Pakenham [1959] 1999, 6).

What is missing in all this, fundamentally, is Amba Gishen itself as a physical place. This visit was, in fact, made to Wähni Amba, also a royal prison, but relating to the later Gondarine period (c. 1600–1700) and active more than 400 years after the Amba Gishen prison was finally abandoned. Pakenham himself claims that it was de Urreta’s fabulous and unrealistic descriptions of Amba Gishen that prompted Milton to place the description of this African paradise in Mesopotamia in his *Paradise Lost* (1667). And, although it was evident that Johnson and the paradise discourse as a whole were inspired by texts describing Amba Gishen, in his text Pakenham dismisses his adventurous journey to Amba Gishen as useful because of *associations*, “even if nothing of historical interest remained” ([1959] 1999, 127). He thus focuses the whole book on the enterprise of ascending Wähni Amba. Only in passing, while recounting the difficulties of the mule journey during a period of fasting to which Pakenham himself wished to submit, does he consider that “after all it was a pilgrimage” ([1959] 1999, 130), highlighting the absence of the religious and spiritual dimension in the entire arc of Western discourse on and influenced by Amba Gishen.

This is not surprising: Wähni Amba appears as an inaccessible place, a volcanic cap, the lava rock core that remains after the erosion of the volcano cone itself. There is a steep staircase that recalls de Urreta's imaginative descriptions. On the summit, at the time of the second visit in 1998 by an elderly Pakenham, cubicles were still visible—remnants of the settlements of the reclusive princes. That scene was in fact the very metaphor of the inaccessibility of the Ethiopian acrocorus. Conversely, as noted, Amba Gishen, which had been featured in Ethiopian narratives and cultural traditions as a sacred site, had by 1956 lost its identity of being a royal prison; instead, it became a highly accessible place where there was no sign of the past tradition of confinement. In using the plural form “mountains” in his book title (*The Mountains of Rasselas*), Pakenham refers to Amba Gishen as the “second mountain of Rasselas”, at the same time revealing a contradiction in pointing out that the place “played a large part in European literary history which would make my visit an act of literary piety” ([1959] 1999, 129). This so-called “literary piety” shows to what extent the author considered Amba Gishen to be a place devoid of interest. Nevertheless, at times, Pakenham also “slips” into the heavenly analogy, for instance when describing the challenging ascent to the Amba ([1959] 1999, 139):

... the mountain had assumed the cruciform shape it was supposed to have; from each arm of the cross the ground fell in flaking terraces of rock and grass and shale; at the eastern arm of the cross which sprang directly from our plateau, a broad staircase was cut in the rock up which I could see, like spirits ascending to Paradise, a caravan of mules and donkeys lightly ascending.

In 1958, the Pakenham expedition reached what should have been the gateway to paradise in Milton's verses. Instead, the doors were of corrugated iron, supported by adobe pillars. Once the climb was over, the dizzying view presented nothing “romantic”, but instead a “medley of huts sprawled across the summit of the amba among a grove of blue gum trees” (Pakenham [1959] 1999, 140). The very architecture of the churches of God the Father and Mariam, rebuilt after the destruction of the invading army of Gragn, had no elements of interest, being merely shabby, tin-roofed buildings. The unkempt modernity of the church dedicated to Mary, in particular, equipped with “a heavy stone plinth surmounted by an outside umbrella cast in bronze and illuminated by fairy lights lit by a small generator beside it, as a kind of ceremonial stand for the Timqat festivities”, was such as to recall a loss of supposed authenticity (Pakenham [1959] 1999, 141). The only ancient element that attracted Pakenham's attention at the time was a stone column that had the appearance of Axumite design features in its capital. The column, he was told, was sacred and was left by St Helena to mark the place where she had buried the cross on which Christ had sacrificed himself.

The account of Pakenham's visit to Amba Gishen ends peremptorily, with the author saying that “the situation of Geshen was more melancholy than words can describe. How ironical that Milton should have chosen Geshen to be his Earthly Paradise” (Pakenham [1959] 1999, 142). What seems to be lacking in the English author's documentation is the visibility of a physical and spiritual heritage that is able to further

adhere to and recreate those literary impressions that had so much weight in the stimulation of European imagination in the search for a story world in which to place its own paradise on earth.

Conclusion

Is paradise a sacred place? Arguably not, according to what we have claimed at the beginning to be our notion of a sacred place: a topographic space provided with a spiritual sense by a certain community, enhancing attachment. For this reason, European poets and writers created a void image of paradise, deprived of any possible spiritual phenomenological tension. This void image does not acknowledge the values and beliefs embedded in and originating from a defined place. This is another example of how we storify reality while allocating diverging meanings to material objects and spaces, according to our own cultural sensitivities. It is not unexpected, then, that something will be lost in this process, because sacred places can only exist when there is a human relationship with the environment.

If we define paradise as a “non-space” and an unproven milieu and non-present territory, sacred places will obviously appear as always situated in a context, bearing both tangible and intangible values connected to the sphere of human spirituality. A sense of place as sacred is embodied in the phenomenological experience, forged by narratives embedded in local and popular cultures, and mixed up with the presence of material elements. Most of the travelogues focused either on the magnification of Amba Gishen as the real Eden or on disputing the geographical localisation and existence of Paradise. Two examples are the literary diatribe between the Portuguese Jesuit Pedro Páez and the Spanish Dominican Luís de Urreta. However, these views are similar in that they represent two extremities of the same argument (paradise vs non-paradise).

These dynamics have profoundly influenced and informed the poetic discourse in Europe concerning Africa and its spaces. To delve deeper into such self- and hetero-representation of Africa and African places, ethnographic data would need to be incorporated into the present discussion. This would serve to broaden the argument favouring the (re)sacralisation of African spaces, in contrast to their depletion and discursive possession by former European colonisers and occupiers, often animated by inter-confessional disputes and religious conflicts.

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