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Review

ANAIÃS WION, Paradis pour une reine: Le monastère de Qoma Fasilädäs, Éthiopie, XVIIe siècle

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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

CSCO  =  *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 1903ff.
EFAH  =  Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Abteilung, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, herausgegeben im Auftrag des Instituts von NORBERT NEBES.
EMML  =  *Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library*, Addis Ababa.
JSS  =  *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
OrChrP  =  *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, Roma 1935ff.
PO  =  *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1937ff.
SÄe  =  *Scriptores Aethiopicorum*.

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The 17th century in Ethiopia was filled with events that generated great social and religious transformations, as well as relentless internal struggles for the domination and control of the empire. In its first decades, the kind of Catholicism imported by Jesuit missionaries achieved an unprecedented success as the triumphant religion. Nevertheless, the political instability and unrest that this decision generated among wide sectors of the nobility and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, led to the resignation of the emperor and the consequent expulsion of Catholic missionaries. The work by Anaïs Wion, Paradis pour une reine, contributes to shedding light on the different mechanisms that worked during the transition of the reign of Susánys – defender and promoter of the Catholic faith in Ethiopia – and the reign of his son, Fasiladás, who restored Ethiopia’s national faith.

The focus of the study is on Empress Wâld Sâ’ala and the monastery she founded in 1618: Qoma Fasiladás. Using this example, Wion manages to recover pieces of royal and local history, which intersect within “a small territory erected in a confined world, for a queen athirst for her own independence” (p. 323) Wâld Sâ’ala was the wife of Emperor Susánys and mother of Emperor Fasiladás, and descended from a noble family from Wâlãqa and Mârhabete, regions located south of Amhara and north of Šâwa. The empress founded her own monastery south of Bâgemdår, which finished construction in 1640; she lived there and she was also buried at the monastery upon her death in 1661. Qoma was rich in lands and had a large
parish, within which more than 200 clerics and nobles resided. Although Emperor Fasilädäs never recognized this monastery, the community had the support of his brother and rival, abetobun Gälawdewos.

Indeed, as pointed out by Wion, Wald Sà’ala opposed the pro-Catholic policies of her husband and renounced the court in 1618. However, her son’s decision of reestablishing orthodoxy did not prompt her to return to court or to renounce her independent stance. Wion’s study shows the way in which religious decisions are inextricably linked to political and contextual challenges. During the troubled period that shook Ethiopia in the aftermath of Susànyos’ pro-Catholic defeat, a struggle for the inheritance of power arose between Fasilädäs and his brother Gàlawdewos. The conflict was settled in 1646, when Fasilädäs had his brother arrested and sent into exile, where he apparently died in 1648.

Wion’s research gives an excellent account of the complex circumstances around the foundation of the Qoma monastery; it clearly reveals the tension between the royal power held by Susànyos and his son Fasilädäs on the one hand, and the creation of regional territories on the other. The book sheds light on this ambiguous system of shared power clearly observed in Qoma, in which some traces of the emperor’s antagonism can be perceived. Eventually Gàlawdewos was defeated and his ally abunà Marqos banished; however, the queen managed to maintain her autonomy at Qoma. From 1648 on, the queen renegotiated the status of the monastery with Fasilädäs, after which the church was dedicated to Saint Basilides (Fasilädäs) and obtained the recognition of the emperor.

The work uses many different sources in the reconstruction of this historical period. Its use of iconographic, oral and written sources (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) allows the discernment of different narratives, which provide a rich and complex portrayal of the period that goes beyond the image transmitted by the official discourse of royal chronicles.

Indeed, several studies have appeared in the last decade dealing with the change in the status of noble women in Ethiopia as a consequence of the influence of Catholic missionaries. In his study of Wàlátà Petros’ hagiography, Sevir Chernenetsov comments, “we are much indebted to this epoch for the fact of the transgression of the norms of female behaviour, committed by Wàlátà Petros which was described in her Hagiography, and with sympathy”.

Thus, Wion’s book inserts into a new historiographical current

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which focuses on the development of regional and political history, and
allows us to glimpse into the transformations that acted on gender relation-
ships of this period.

Another field of knowledge which the book seeks to shed light on is that
of the relationships among the different theological and monastic identities
within the Ethiopian Church itself. The rift between unionists (Qbbat) and
Täwabodo followed the Ethiopian Church during part of the 17th and
18th centuries, and was a consequence of the first encounter with the Jesuit
mission. Wion states that “up to now, studies that deal with this subject
stem from a confirmation carried out a posteriori; that is, they consider the
Qbbat and Täwabodo movements to be stable entities. Furthermore, many
studies were carried out by Catholic clerics; they are often biased and focus
mainly on dogmatic interpretation and the analysis of Catholic legacy, and
their frequently contradicting results have muddled historical analysis”
(pp. 323f.).2 I agree with Wion that it is necessary to renew perspectives
relative to this matter; however, in my view, the many studies done on this
subject, whether from a theological or an intellectual historical perspective,
are complementary to historical analysis – social and political – rather than
adverse to it. Wion’s work provides us with new elements for the recon-
struction of the religious identities of this period in the face of greater future
work.

Wion’s book not only provides us with an Index, but also with a series of
annexes, with following standouts: an inventory of the Qoma Fasilädás

2 Some important contributions on this subject are absent from Wion’s work, for exam-
ple: GETATCHEW HAILE, “Materials on the Theology of Qbbat or Uction”, in:
GIDEON GOLDENBERG (ed.), Ethiopian Studies: Proceedings of the Sixth International
Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Tel Aviv, 14–17 April 1980, Rotterdam – Boston, MA:
270a; ANDRZEJ BARTNICKI – JOANNA MANTEL-NIECKO, “The Role and Significance
of the Religious Conflicts and People’s Movements in the Political Life of Ethiopia in
the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”, RSE 24, 1969–1970, pp. 5–39; MERID WOLDE AREGAY, Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508–1708, with Special
Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences, Ph.D. thesis, University
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Library (pp. 329–333), a French-translated text relative to the life of Wäld Sä’āla (pp. 335–346), and a series of Qoma Fasilädäs oral translations collected in September and October, 1999 and completely translated into French (pp. 347–432).

In conclusion, due to its sources and to the historical analysis it provides, Wion’s book is an important contribution to the understanding of the events that shook Ethiopia during the first half of the 17th century.

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This book tells a fascinating life story of a versatile man who was a physician by training as well as practice, a businessman, a diplomat, a progressive and an educator, to mention only a few of the roles he played in various countries during his almost 87 years of life.

Hakim Wärqänäh Ššāte was allegedly born in Gondär (presumably the city) on 22 October 1865. At the age of two and a half he was found on a battlefield in Mäqdālā by a British officer, which is where his parents moved by imperial order and where the British forces fought Emperor Tewodros II. Wärqänäh is said to have had a complex personality, which taunted him for at least two-thirds of his life. As his biographer so eloquently described, Wärqänäh “was effectively caught in the middle of an international conflict at a very tender age; and would remain caught between different cultures for the rest of his life” (cf p. 1).

As a child Wärqänäh was taken to India by an officer, where he was brought up and educated by different families of British origin and thus became an Englishman through and through. His Ethiopian origin always remained present and eventually influenced his permanent settlement. He studied medicine and practised it in India. He also did his postgraduate studies at Edinburgh and Glasgow universities and was subsequently appointed civil surgeon in Burma, where he worked in various parts of the country before returning to Ethiopia after the Battle of ‘Adwa to treat the wounded. He eventually went back to Burma only to return to Ethiopia some years later where he married a woman of high birth.