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Review

JOHN JEREMY HESPELER-BOULTBEE, *A Story in Stones: Portugal’s Influence on Culture and Architecture in the Highlands of Ethiopia 1493–1634*

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Gondärine architecture and Ethiopian architectural vestiges at large amaze visitors as much as puzzle, still today, many a scholar. Although the first complete survey on Gondärine architecture dates to 1938,¹ the problems posed by Ethiopia’s architectural heritage have been far from resolved. In the

present book (a re-edition of a book initially published in Portuguese in 1999), mason and architecture historian Hespeler-Boultbee tries to fill a gap in the study of early modern Ethiopian architecture. The author’s chief aim is to substantiate a deeply rooted theory (both in Ethiopia and elsewhere) on the Portuguese origin of much of local stone architecture. The appearance of the book coincides with a moment of intensified research on the Portuguese and Jesuit presence in Ethiopia, as exemplified in two recent monographs and in a collective work published on Portuguese influences in art and architecture.²

At the outset of the volume, the author defines the central premise of his study: much of the stone architecture found in the areas of Goždžam, Gondâr and Tagray owes its existence to the Portuguese who lived there since the arrival of Pero da Covilhã. Whilst he acknowledges that most of these structures might have been built by Ethiopians, he insists that they underscore, nonetheless, the implementation of Portuguese-building patterns.

Portuguese-building patterns would have been assimilated into Ethiopian societies through a process of mixing Portuguese nationals with Ethiopians: “the Portuguese ... left their considerable skills behind them to the benefit of their children and grandchildren, and this to such an extent that, even today, certain undeniable Portuguese structural and decorative traits can be detected in the modern folk building of the region” (p. 21).

In the next two parts Hespeler-Boultbee tries to connect, “as accurately and as intelligently as possible”, the “story” of the Portuguese presence with the “architectural remains” he was able to visit in Ethiopia (p. 25). Part I gives an historical summary of the Portuguese and Jesuit presence in Ethiopia. Part II, dedicated to providing empirical evidence, constitutes the main section of the book. It is important to note that this section is conceived more as an impressionistic narrative of the author’s “explorations” and findings in Ethiopia than as a well-ordained exposition and analysis of the evidence. It is throughout these explorations that the author will establish hypothetical claims of Portuguese influence on local architecture.

The first halt in the promenade leads us to the area of Ankobâr (Šawa), where Hespeler-Boultbee draws attention to the similarities between local and Portuguese wall structures (p. 71ff.). The description of the “Portuguese” bridge on the Gur river and the famous Alata bridge over the Abbay follows suit (p. 94). In Gožgâm, the author surveys Jesuit-related buildings: Mârulâ Maryam, where he acknowledges that the decorated ashlar used throughout the building could be of Indian-Armenian origin, but stresses the “Portuguese-

ness” of the church on the base of such evidence as the “look of the building, its proportions and the manner in which it sits into its landscape” (p. 88); Gamb Killale Mḥrāt; Qʷällāla (Qollela); Yḥaba; Gamb Giyorgis; and Gamb Maryam. Following that he compares residential structures in the Lake Ṭanā area (Bābār Dar, Dābrā Tabor) and northern Portugāl (p. 106f.). Drawing on an earlier suggestion by Fernanda Duρān Ferreira in a little known study on Gondārīne style,3 he also points to the similarities between the corner towers of the famous castle at Guzara attributed to Šārṣā Dōŋgal and those at the Priorado do Rosario in Old Goa (p. 114). By far the most amply surveyed areas in the book are Gondār and the neighbouring areas; the author stresses the Portuguēness of such motives as the arched structures, door hinges, locking systems, support beams in Azāzo (p. 119), the pigmented whitewashing widely used on the facades of private houses in Gondār (p. 124) and even the simple round stone houses, which could have been inspired from such Portuguēse structures as the abrigos (i.e. shelters) in the Alentejo (p. 127). Next, he briefly surveys architectures in Dānboya/Bānegdār: Dāqūq, Defeč Kilełe Mḥrāt, the island of Desite Giyorgis, Maryam Gamb/Gorgora and Wāhni Amba; and Gōq̄q̄: Abba Gōs Fasil. The last complex to be visited is that in Foṛmona, being also the only architecture of Tgräy contained in the book.

Once the reader has gone through the whole section, a question is on order: is the evidence provided by Hespeler-Boultbee enough to sustain his theory on a strong Portuguēse genesis of most of stone architecture in Ethiopiā? Before attempting an answer, however, a couple of points must be made. Firstly, the empirical part of the book deserves praise because it focuses for the first time in discussing specific building techniques and constructing patterns. The masonry skills of the author – who holds a considerable experience in restoring old buildings in Portugāl, which let him absorb “the local secrets of traditional indigenous construction and stonemasonry” (internet presentation of the book) – have given the book a practical underpinning that is absent from the previous literature dedicated to the subject. Secondly, the survey of Portuguēse or Jesuit-related ruins is quite exhaustive and has even the merit of showing, to my knowledge for the first time, pictures of interesting and lesser known sites, such as Abba Gōs Fasil in Agāw land (probably a former Jesuit residence) and the superb building on the island of Desite Giyorgis, Gorgora.

That said, I seriously doubt that Hespeler-Boultbee has succeeded in connecting in a convincing way the Portuguēse presence with the development of Ethiopian stone architecture. To be sure, a few pieces of evidence are appealing: e.g., the similar staircase structures shown in p. 106f. or an almost identical ceiling at Iyasu I’s castle in Gondār and at the Moinho do Gato in Portugāl (p. 134). However, the overall impression is that comparisons are made in an arbitrary way and that the examples displayed from Portuguēse architecture (mostly from central and northern regions of the country) even contradict the author’s own assertion that the models spreading into Ethiopia came

mostly from southern Portugal (p. 64). The assumption itself that Portuguese building techniques and models took roots in Ethiopia, indeed a critical element for the overall “Portuguese” hypothesis, is only sketched and not very strongly. Thus, the author maintains that Portuguese-building patterns entered the Ethiopian “unconscious” through a process of human mixing, and that these patterns would have lived up to the present; yet, the very fact that a few Portuguese soldiers managed to transmit to their brethren, and with such an enduring effect into local cultures, a skill that no sources attest they ever possessed or developed seems rather implausible. What is more, when facing the evidence of Indian intervention in Ethiopian architecture Hespeler-Boultbee proposes an even more complicated theory according to which Portuguese patterns were first imported into India, assimilated into local cultures and hereafter taken to Ethiopia by Indian craftsmen (e.g., p. 87, 133). The author is right in stressing that cultural patterns move across continents, but the sheer evidence of mere contacts, human migrations or even of formal similarities should not be enough to validate cultural transmission. In this sense, the avid quest for “Portuguese” remains seems to have blurred him from taking into consideration more prosaic (and local) origins to some of the stone constructions explored (especially in the case of domestic architecture). In Tigray and Eritrea, for instance, there is a rich tradition of stone architecture (domestic and monumental), that can be traced back at least to the Aksumite period and, whilst not accounting for all the architecture reviewed in the book, must be taken into consideration before embarking into a quest for foreign influences. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the origins of simple domestic architecture, accounting to half of the examples in the book, are a very elusive topic of research, for rural societies often tend to produce similar structures independently and with no proper diffusion of mutual patterns.

More importantly, although in the introduction Hespeler-Boultbee insists that he shall be working on a factual historical base (p. 25), the truth is that he is far from achieving that. Hence, his claims on Portuguese architectural influence are not buttressed in written evidence: none of the numerous Jesuit letters and treatises and Ethiopian chronicles (most of them today found in accessible printed editions) seems to have been consulted, nor does the work take into account previous historical discussion. The initial summary, for

4 Which was already pointed at as the likeliest hypothesis in CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, “I castelli di Gondar”, Bollettino della Reale Società Geografica Italiana ser. 7, 4, 1939, 165–68, here 165.

5 A seminal study of this is RUTH PLANT, Architecture of the Tegray, Ethiopia, Bristol 1985.

6 The interesting studies by Anfray are thus not mentioned: FRANCIS ANFRAY, “Vestiges gondariens”, Rassegna di Studi Etiopici 28, 1980–81, 5–22 and Id., “Les monuments gondariens des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Une vue d’ensemble”, in: TADDESE BEYENE (ed.), Pro-
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instance, is riddled with factual blunders that could have easily been avoided: the author states that Lōbnā Dōngal appointed João Bermudez as patriarch of Ethiopia (p. 48), an information that only appears in Bermudez’s own self-congratulatory account; further on (p. 51), he says that the Portuguese Diogo Dias (who in 1555 accompanied Gonçalo Rodriguez to Ethiopia) was a monk, which he was not. Last but not least, although the abundant visual material makes the reading more pleasant, the narrative that accompanies it is often tedious, with frequent unrelevant comments. A less impressionistic and more elaborate text would certainly have forced the author to provide a more coherent elucidation of the Portuguese hypothesis.

To sum up, this is an interesting though uneven book. The effort of Hespeler-Boultbee to put together a large array of evidence and the passion with which he has studied it is commendable. One would have wished, however, a more upfront confrontation with the historical evidence and a more structured exposition of “Portuguese”-related techniques and architectural patterns. Still, the book may well serve its purpose of being a “jump-off point for additional future research” (p. 25), thus stimulating a more accomplished integration of comparatism, historical evidence and logic analysis.

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Seit geraumer Zeit¹ sind die italienischen Kollegen mit der, wie sie es spielersch nennen: “caccia ai testi aksumiti” befasst. Der vorliegenden Band stellt erneut ihre Ernsthaftigkeit und fundierte wissenschaftliche Arbeitsweise unter Beweis.

Der Bericht über die Märtyrer von Nağrān ist ein aufschlussreicher Beitrag zur frühen Geschichte des Christentums in der Region am Horn von Afrika. Die Stadt Nağrān war ein wirtschaftlich bedeutender Standort und Schnittstelle auf dem Handelsweg in den Mittelmeerraum nach Byzanz und
