

BOOK REVIEW

Verena Krebs. *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 308 pp. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$99.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-3-030-64933-3.

Why did Ethiopian kings seek diplomatic contact with Latin Europe? Verena Krebs's *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* challenges the established narratives concerning African-European encounters. Krebs argues that the desire for religious treasures and foreign artisans was linked to the political agenda of Ethiopian rulers. Like the biblical kings, they built monumental examples of religious architecture endowed with royal treasures from abroad. Krebs argues that the primary goal of the Ethiopian missions was not to gain access to European technology to strengthen the country's military capabilities. Most reviews of this volume discuss how effectively Krebs proves her thesis. This review focuses on the author's evaluation of varied sources for content about religious material culture. I consider the potential of the research in relation to art history and visual culture studies in Africa. Any exploration of the power attributed to objects made by skilled artisans from afar owes a debt to anthropologist Mary W. Helms's influential study, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (University of Texas Press, 1993).

In the introduction, Krebs discusses the resources analyzed in Ge'ez, Arabic, Catalan, Latin, German, French, Italian, and Portuguese. Krebs's skilled comparative scrutiny is showcased in Chapter Two ("All the King's Treasures"), Chapter Three ("The Sons of Dawit"), and Chapter Four ("The Rule of the Regents"). A fascinating narrative emphasizing Ethiopian agency is exemplified in the description of the mission that was sent to Venice by Dawit II in 1402. Dawit II instructed his envoys to visit holy sites, seek religious treasures, and enlist skilled artists and craftsmen to assist in the construction and decoration of religious monuments in Ethiopia. Later delegations followed precedent, as observed in the Arabic, Catalan, and Italian sources regarding missions to King Alfonso V of Aragon in the 1420s. Ethiopian rulers desired relics, valuable religious objects, and skilled craftsmen, as opposed to participating in crusades.

Chapter Five (“King Solomon’s Heirs”) focuses on local sources and the historical context of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Central to Krebs’s thesis is the role of founding mythologies. The Aksumite kingdom, established in the fourth century CE, was linked to the biblical narrative about Solomonic rule and the Temple of Jerusalem. Expanding southward by conquests, the Christian Aksumite rulers absorbed regions and peoples who were forced to submit to their authority. They built an extensive religious infrastructure in the Horn of Africa by expanding partnerships with existing monasteries. Krebs’s inspection of the archaeological remains of royal infrastructure described in Ge’ez chronicles and Arabic and Portuguese texts shows that approximately thirty-four monasteries and churches were established in Ethiopia between 1270 and 1559. The “builder kings” Krebs describes used diplomatic missions to acquire craftsmen and religious treasures from abroad, an important means of expressing their identity as Solomonic rulers and their authority as Christian kings.

Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe is a masterful evaluation of varied sources detailing Ethiopian diplomatic relations with the Latin West. It likewise demonstrates the significant role expressive culture played in the political agenda of the Solomonic rulers. However, there is an important issue of concern. Krebs claims that her study “radically reframes previous ideas about pre-modern African agency—and challenges conventional historical narratives of African European-encounters on the ‘eve of the so-called Age of Exploration’” (7). How does Krebs’s study relate not only to current scholarship examining Christianity in Africa, but also to the way the continent is studied as part of the global medieval world?


This study is devoid of any discussion about “race.” Yet, the author references “colonialist” viewpoints about Africa. Phrases such as “holdovers of colonialist belief” or “coloured by colonialism” are used to critique the work of Italian scholars such as Enrico Cerulli, who attributes innovations in sixteenth-century Ethiopian architecture to foreign artisans. However, it is unclear whether the author recognizes a relationship between race and the external colonization of Africa. The field of Ethiopian Studies generally reflects Italy’s unwillingness to confront its colonial past, in stark contrast to extensive contemporary studies on the subject.

Krebs’s study would benefit from comparison to the history of Christianity in the Kongo. The Portuguese landed on Kongo shores in 1483, initiating a flow of ideas, objects, and people, with Europeans exchanging merchants, clerics, and craftsmen with the African nation. King Afonso I (reign/1509–1543) wrote letters in Portuguese to the Vatican and the kings of Portugal. Kongo-European contact affected traditional art forms, as artisans commissioned by Europeans created objects such as the Afro-Portuguese ivories.

Portraits of Kongo ambassadors were painted by Renaissance artists, such as the paintings, sculptures, and prints of Antonio Emanuel ne Vunda (d.1608) which were sent by Alfonso II to Pope Paul V in 1604–1608. His portrait in the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome, where the pope received diplomats from sovereign states, is next to a portrait of the 1615 delegation

of Hasekura Tsunenaga from Japan. The image of another African visitor depicted in the room's frescoes is reportedly that of an envoy from Ethiopia. Both portraits were inspired by diplomatic missions from Christian Africa. Does the visual scheme of the frescoes parallel what scholars argue was an important papal objective? Might Kongo rulers have been encouraged to send envoys to Ethiopia to create the long-desired alliance of Christian states in Africa?

Krebs's forthcoming companion volume, *Africa Collecting Europe: Patronage and Power in Ethiopia, 1468–1530*, will also focus on the links between art, material culture, and power in a “pre-colonial African kingdom.” Readers may look forward to another manuscript that engages visual resources as primary source material, along with extensive written records. The book is certain to illuminate a fascinating history of the politics of aesthetics and collecting valued objects among the privileged and the elite of medieval Ethiopia.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.50