

An Introduction to
the
ECONOMIC HISTORY
of
ETHIOPIA



RICHARD PANKHURST

with a foreword by

K. M. PANIKKAR

www.ethiopianorthodox.org

ary in his adopted country, but despite criticism by the clergy he received the encouragement and protection of the Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–1468) and of his son Baeda Maryam (1468–1478), and was frequently seen at court.

Francesco Suriano, an Italian, who visited Ethiopia around 1482 during the reign of Eskender (1478–1494) relates that he and his companions met there a number of Europeans, or Franks, who had been in the country for twenty-five years. They included ten Italians 'of good repute', among them Neapolitans, Venetians and Genoese, a Catalan, and a Levantine from Beirut. He mentions by name one 'Cola di Rose, romano' – who had changed his name to Zorzi⁴ – Matteo of Piedmont, Nicolo of Mantua and the Venetian painter Nicolo Branchalione (Brancaleone).⁵ Suriano relates that he asked the foreigners why they had come to so strange a land; they replied that 'their intention was to seek jewels and precious stones', but 'since the king did not allow them to return they were all ill content, although they were well rewarded and provided for by the king, each in accordance with his rank. And they were all pleased with the polite and civil intercourse'.⁶

Zorzi of the *Itineraries* also learnt something about these Europeans in his discussions with the Ethiopian ecclesiastics in Italy. The Franciscan Brother Thomas suggested that the most important among them was another Venetian painter, Bicini, to whom the Emperor had given the 'city' of Sogra in the province of Fatajar, it being, he said, the Prester's policy to settle skilled persons in his country. Bicini's land, which Crawford believes to have been near what is now Mount Meghezez, enjoyed 'the best, freshest, most temperate and perfect air that is in all the provinces of the Presta, and it is to be seen from every point in the boundless plains. . . . In the east are just visible in the distance high mountains, and there is ever present a perfect air and gentle breezes'. According to Crawford this wonderful estate 'must have stood on the edge of the Ethiopian plateau, commanding a view over the Hawash valley and across it to the distant mountains of Arussi'.⁷ Zorzi, who visited the painter's daughter, Maria, in Venice, notes that her father had left that city in 1482 with

4. Not of course the same as the Zorzi of the *Itineraries*.

5. *Vide* Lavoix, p. 68.

6. *Ethiopian Itineraries*, pp. 20–1, 24.

7. *ibid.*, pp. 91, 161–3.

merchandise for Alexandria. According to Brother Thomas he had married again having several children by his Ethiopian wife, and rode with seventy horse. He was said to act as a kind of secretary to the King with whom he often resided, painting 'many things' for him, hunting and frequently playing chess and cards with him night and day. One or other of the two Venetian artists, Brancaleone or Bicini, was probably responsible for the erection of the 'large and ornate organ', the presence of which in the Emperor's church caused great amazement to the Italian Suriano.⁸

One of the earliest of these foreigners to achieve prominence outside the country was, as we have seen, the Armenian trader and friar(?) Matthew, who was sent by the Empress Regent Eleni to King Manoel I of Portugal in 1509. The *Carta* records that he traded for Eleni at Massawa, Decamin and Dahlak, while Bruce states that Matthew had been 'long accustomed to go to the several kingdoms of the East upon mercantile commissions for the king and his nobles', and had visited Cairo, Jerusalem, Ormuz, Isfahan in Persia, and the Malabar coast of India.⁹

Alvares who, it will be recalled, visited the country at about the time when Zorzi was compiling his *Itineraries*, confirms that a number of Franks were resident in Ethiopia and had indeed been forbidden to return home. These included two Portuguese, João Gomes and a priest also called João, as well as Tommaso Gradani, presumably an Italian, who had been in the country for fifteen years, not having been permitted to leave. A more prominent 'detainee' was Pero de Covilhão who had left his native Portugal some forty years earlier to 'learn about Prester John and to discover where cinnamon is found'. After thirty years' forced residence in Ethiopia he understood its language and was able to act as interpreter. The artist, Brancaleone, who was locally known as Macoreo or Marc coreos, had also been there for over three decades and spoke the language well. Alvares describes him as 'a very honourable person and a great gentleman, though a painter'.¹⁰

8. *ibid.*, p. 40.

9. Alvarez, pp. 264, 391, *et passim*; Bruce, Vol. II, pp. 130–1. *Vide also* *Historical Description of Ethiopia*, p. 5; *The Discovery of Abyssinia* (1) *Pelegat in 1520*, p. 70.

10. Alvarez, pp. 177–8, 210, 228, 264, 265, 270, 391; Bruce, Vol. II, p. 87.