

A French Physician at the Court of Gondar: Poncet's Ethiopia in the 1690s

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On 21 July 1699, when Dr. Charles Jacques Poncet reached the city of Gondar, he became the first western European to have entered successfully the Coptic Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (still called Abyssinia in many quarters) since 1632. A physician by training and an apothecary by practice, his proximate reason for undertaking the hazardous caravan journey up the Nile River through the Sudanese desert and into the notoriously anti-Catholic country was medical. He was retained by proxy to cure the reigning emperor or *negus*, Iya'su I "the Great" (r. 1682-1706), of an unidentified skin ailment "of a scrofulous character."¹ Yet the underlying purpose of his mission was diplomatic and religious. Acting as the covert agent of Louis XIV's consul at Cairo, Poncet was sent to Ethiopia with a view to initiating official contacts between Gondar and Versailles. At the same time, he was to ascertain the possibility of restoring—under royal French auspices—the Jesuit mission in the country, which had been expelled sixty-five years earlier by a hostile monarchy dedicated to preserving the doctrine and ritual of the

¹ E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia & Abyssinia*, 2 vols. (Oosterhout: Anthropological Publications, 1966), 2: 422. See also Sir William Foster, ed., *The Red Sea and Adjacent Countries at the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1949), xxiv.

orthodox Monophysite Church. Ultimately, the goal was to extend the Bourbon Crown's influence into east Africa and beyond, as part of its ongoing efforts to spread French influence throughout the Indian Ocean basin in pursuit of empire.

Poncet's journey was distinguished not just because he was the first European in over six decades to penetrate the country or to write a first-hand account of the social, political, and economic structures of the Abyssinian state at this juncture in its history, but also because his views of Ethiopian society were refracted through secular, as opposed to missionary, eyes. Hitherto, almost every available account of the African kingdom had been written by Portuguese Jesuits, who had lived and worked in Abyssinia since the mid-sixteenth century prior to their expulsion by the anti-Catholic monarchy in 1632. Highly detailed, these works were naturally colored by their authors' missionary zeal and religious avocation. Poncet's account is also tinted by Catholic bias, but with this difference: he was more concerned to describe what he saw than to contemplate its meaning or implications. In short, his scientific eye was trained to seek out the "facts;" speculation he left for more pensive minds. His limited range of movement in Ethiopia, owing to local circumstances, and his ignorance of the Amharic language (he communicated through interpreters in Arabic) were further handicaps to his range of understanding.²

Thus, Poncet's relation is almost purely descriptive and rarely draws connections between one aspect of Ethiopian society and another that might have shed direct light on prevailing conditions in the realm. Yet in that very objectivity, even simplicity, of approach he shared a

² Foster, xxvii.

commonality of outlook with contemporary travel writers of greater sophistication. His account of Ethiopia exemplifies a period during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when European interest in non-Western, non-Christian peoples was remarkably sensitive to and accepting of cultural difference. Poncet could not escape entirely the baggage of his Occidental heritage, yet his observations were ethnographic in scope as he sought to describe Ethiopia and Ethiopians on native, as opposed to European terms. His relation—however flawed—is the sole first-hand account of Ethiopia penned by a European between 1632 and the arrival of Scottish explorer James Bruce in 1769-71 in his search for the source of the Nile. Herein lies its ultimate value. Following in the Frenchman's footsteps, it was Bruce's judgment that Poncet's description, "incomplete as it is, will not fail to be received as a valuable acquisition to the geography of these unknown countries of which it treats."³

Ethiopia in 1699 was by no means unknown to the West. Already in the later Middle Ages, pilgrims returning from the Holy Land had learned of a small community of devout Christians living in Abyssinia and brought back some information about the country.⁴ Nor did it take long before the *negus* became identified with the mythical Prester John, "the Christian monarch ruling a vast dominion beyond the world of Islam, from whom much help was

³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, xxxiv. Poncet's account of Ethiopia was first published at Paris ca. 1704, but an English translation soon followed in 1709 under the title *A Voyage to Æthiopia Made in the Year [sic] 1698, 1699, and 1700*. A facsimile version edited by Sir William Foster was reprinted by the Hakluyt Society in 1949 (see note 1), from which all quotations have been taken for this article.

⁴ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, ed. C. F. Beckingham (New York: Horizon Press, 1964), 6.

expected against the Moslems."⁵ As they coasted western Africa and rounded the Cape of Good Hope in search of a sea-route to India during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese were especially keen to locate this elusive ruler in the belief that his friendship could be valuable.

At first, the relations between the two peoples established in 1541 were good. But the situation deteriorated after the arrival in 1557 of the first Jesuits, whose objective over the next seventy years was to bring the Monophysite Church of Ethiopia into conformity with Catholic doctrine—or, as the Abyssinian royal chronicles put it, "to criticize the true faith which was brought from . . . Alexandria and openly to proclaim the false belief which issued from Rome."⁶ Over time, this provoked such intense opposition from the people and the orthodox clergy that the missionaries were expelled from the realm in a powerful, anti-Catholic reaction.⁷ Ethiopian animosity toward

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 93; Richard K. P. Pankhurst, ed., *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 76.

⁷ See Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 95-97; Henze, 95-99; Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 101, 103, 105, 107-8; and Budge, 2:378-80 and 2:388-93. The most authoritative works on this turbulent period in Ethiopian history are Merid Wolde Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508-1708" (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1971); Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region* (London: F. Cass, 1961); and Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia* (London: Lalibela House, 1961). For a contemporary Jesuit account of their exile, see Joachim Le Grand, ed.,

Europeans remained so bitter thereafter that treaties were signed with the Ottoman pashas at various Red Sea ports to halt any Westerners from entering the region through their territories.⁸ In the meantime, the few Catholic missionaries who reached Ethiopia were executed by royal command or stoned to death by the hostile populace.⁹ This animosity was still so strong in 1769 that James Bruce confessed at his own entry into Ethiopia, "there was nothing I was so much afraid of as an encounter with fanatical [Ethiopian] priests before I had obtained some protection from government, or the great people in the country."¹⁰

It was this hostile environment that Charles Poncet proposed to enter in 1698-99. Precisely how his mission to Gondar was conceived is murky, but the evidence agrees on a few points. Sent by *Negus Iya'su* to secure medical aid for a skin ailment from which he suffered, the Muslim merchant Hadji Ali arrived at Cairo, where he was well known from his participation in the regular caravan trade between the Egyptian capital and Gondar. As soon as the resident French consul, Benoît de Maillet, learned of Ali's task, he moved quickly to place the whole venture under his direction, in the hope of establishing relations with Ethiopia to facilitate the restoration of the Jesuit mission under the protection of Louis XIV.¹¹ Although de Maillet acted entirely on his own authority without prior reference

Relation historique d'Abissinie du R. P. Jérôme Lobo (Paris: Vve de A.-V. Coustelier et J. Guérin, 1728), 254-308.

⁸ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 108; Budge, 2:403.

⁹ Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 103; Henze, 101-2; and Budge, 2: 407.

¹⁰ Bruce, 45.

¹¹ De Maillet to Louis Pontchartrain, 12 May 1702 in *Rerum Æthiopicarum scriptores occidentals inediti*, ed. C. Beccari, 15 vols. (Rome: 1905-17) 14:30-34. See also Foster, *The Red Sea*, xxiv.

to the Bourbon Crown, his efforts corresponded to official French policy that had aimed for some time at initiating contacts with the *negus*.¹²

De Maillet prevailed upon Ali to retain the medical services of Charles Poncet, who had been serving as physician and apothecary for the European community and the Ottoman authorities since moving to Cairo in 1691. The consul next asked the Jesuits for one of their brethren to participate in the venture. The man chosen was Charles François Xavier de Brèvedent, who would travel incognito as Poncet's valet "Yusuf" in order to conceal his real identity from Ethiopian hostility. Owing to his fluency in Arabic and basic medical knowledge, de Brèvedent could also serve as Poncet's interpreter, assistant, and even replacement if the need arose. His principal duty, however, was to gauge the religious climate in Ethiopia for a Jesuit order keen to return to the African kingdom.¹³

Just before Poncet's departure, de Maillet gave him official instructions to treat the emperor's malady and, after gaining his confidence, to broach the issue of opening formal relations between the two Crowns. To that end, the doctor was supplied with gifts for Iya'su, as well as a letter of credence written in Arabic for the monarch that affirmed Poncet's medical expertise as physician to the Ottoman

¹² Budge, 2:421; Amédée de Caix de Saint-Aymour, *La France en Ethiopie: Histoire des relations de la France avec l'Abyssinie Chrétienne sous les règnes de Louis XIII et de Louis XIV (1634-1706) d'après les documents inédits des archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et cie., 1886), 93.

¹³ De Maillet to Poncet, 25 April 1698, and to Louis Pontchartrain, 12 May 1698, in Beccari, 5:24, 32; Foster, xxv; Poncet, 115, n. 1; Le Grand, 159; De Caix de Saint-Aymour, 98; Salvatore Tedeschi, "Le Voyage de Poncet en Ethiopie (1699-1700)," in *Voyages et Voyageurs*, ed. Joseph Tubiana (Brussels: Fondation Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, 1985), 51.

Pasha at Cairo, an appointment which enhanced his prestige. The letter also asked that the doctor return to Egypt within a year or two, while at the same time proclaiming Louis XIV's amity toward a fellow monarch and asking that Iya'su appoint an ambassador to France.¹⁴ Thus equipped, Charles Poncet and Père de Brèvedent left Cairo on 10 June 1698. Because the easier route by ship down the Red Sea to the port of Massawa, and thence overland to Gondar, was blocked to Catholic Westerners by Ethiopia's long-standing arrangement with local Ottoman governors to prevent their access to Abyssinian territory,¹⁵ Poncet and his companion took the second, more laborious route by caravan up the Nile River via Asyut, Moscho, Dongolo, Korti, Derrera, and Gerri, through the kingdom of Sennar, and then eastward into Ethiopia.¹⁶

At the end of a journey lasting exactly a year and a day since leaving Cairo, the doctor's caravan crossed the Ethiopian frontier on 11 June 1699. Here the topography and physiognomy of the people changed radically from the arid, plague-stricken territories through which he had passed *en route*. The realm Poncet now entered was fertile, green, and "swarming with people."¹⁷ Cotton, aromatic herbs, ebony, cardamom, ginger, multitudes of flowers,

¹⁴ Budge, 2:422; Bruce, 488; de Maillet to Iya'su, 25 April 1698, to Poncet, 25 April 1698, and to Hadji Ali, 25 April 1698 in Beccari, 5: 23-7; Le Grand, 157; De Caix de Saint-Aymour, 99.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Ethio-Muslim relations on the Red Sea, see Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, as well as his article, "Trade and Christian Muslim Relations in Post-Medieval Ethiopia," in *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies, Session B, 1978*, ed. Richard Hess (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1977), 411-14.

¹⁶ In 1697, de Maillet wrote about the difficulties of both routes: "Mémoire sur les veues que l'on a de pénétrer en Ethiopie," in De Caix de Saint-Aymour, 299-301.

¹⁷ Poncet, 144.

citrus and pomegranate trees, jasmine, and Indian cane grew everywhere in abundance. The local inhabitants, Poncet noticed further, were ethnically different from those of Nubia and Sennar further north, having olive complexions instead of black, with small noses, thin lips, good eyes, and very white teeth. Altogether, the lushness of its land, the size and comeliness of its population, and the fecundity of its soil led the Frenchman to proclaim "there is no country whatever better peopled or more fertile than Æthiopia."¹⁸

From the border town of Girana, where the Frenchmen exchanged their camels for horses, they rode next to Barchia, "half a day's journey from the capital of Ethiopia."¹⁹ At this point, the ailing de Brèvedent died on 9 July from exhaustion and severe dysentery. Poncet was also too ill for the moment to continue the journey. Significantly, the dead priest's corpse was treated with due respect by the local Coptic clergy who, "having perform'd the prayers for the dead and the usual ceremonies of incense," interred it in the Church of the Virgin Mary "to whom the Æthiopians have a particular devotion."²⁰ This account suggests that they were less naïve about de Brèvedent's priestly identity than French officialdom gave them credit for. It is equally possible that the late "Yusuf" was treated with such deference because, like his alleged "master," he was both Christian and enjoyed the special protection of Iya'su. Unfortunately for the modern reader, Poncet expressed no opinion on the priests' motives beyond noting their compassion.

Not until 11 July had the doctor recovered sufficiently from his own indisposition to complete the short ride to

¹⁸ Ibid., 111-12, 127-28, 130.

¹⁹ Ibid., 113.

²⁰ Ibid., 114, 115, 117.

Gondar. Established as the Ethiopian capital in 1636, the city was strategically located in the mountains at the intersection of three major caravan routes to Sudan, Egypt, and the Red Sea. It was thus a place of considerable commercial and economic importance. Commerce was brisk, noted Poncet, and pure gold wedges stamped with the emperor's image "as in Europe" and rock salt formed into slender bars called *amola* used for "small money" were the media of exchange.²¹ At the same time, Gondar was an important religious center and the seat of royal government. It contained about a hundred churches, Poncet noted, including the Metropolitan *Tinsa Christos* (Church of the Resurrection), near which the Ethiopian patriarch, or *abun*, lived in a spacious residence.²² Dominating the city was a new imperial palace, commissioned by Iya'su in 1685, with its richly ornamented apartments. The Ethiopian chronicles declared the residence to be "more beautiful than the house of Solomon."²³ Poncet was equally impressed by its size and rich décor. Situated at the center of Gondar on a bluff that overlooked the surrounding countryside, the palace compound was "almost a league in compass." Its high stone outer walls were flanked by towers, each adorned with a great cross. In addition to the royal residence, the compound held four chapels served by one hundred priests and a college "where they teach the officers of the palace to read the Holy Scriptures."²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 121-22. Jerónimo Lobo made similar observations in 1647, noting that "salt especially is the commonest money." (Le Grand, 174.) See also Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia*, 261-65, especially for the use of salt as currency.

²² *Tinsa Christos* literally means "the resurrection of Christ," the word "church" being understood. (Poncet, 118.)

²³ Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 107.

²⁴ Poncet, 120-21.

On the whole, however, the doctor found Gondar wanting. At three or four leagues in circumference, it was big enough, to be sure. It was also architecturally diverse; scattered among the circular native dwellings with their thatched conical roofs were houses "built after the European fashion" by previous Portuguese residents or Jesuit priests. But aesthetically speaking, concluded Poncet, Gondar "has not the beauty of our [cities]; nor can have."²⁵ It nevertheless possessed a distinctive feature in common with other Ethiopian centers. Since 1668, the population of the capital had been segregated according to religious profession. Muslims, Catholics, and Falashas (the so-called Ethiopian or "black Jews") were prohibited from living among orthodox Christians by royal decree.²⁶ This injunction was especially severe on the followers of Islam, whom the Ethiopians despised almost as much as Europeans, according to Poncet, owing to their attempts to conquer the country in the mid-sixteenth century. At least, the doctor added, Muslims were tolerated at Gondar, where Europeans were not.²⁷

This limited indulgence was probably owed to their important place in the kingdom's economy. Trade in Ethiopia lay chiefly in Muslim hands, while most of the caravan routes passed through Islamic territories where the merchants received preferential treatment. Hence, "while

²⁵ Ibid., 121.

²⁶ For the edict, see Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 101-02; Budge, 2: 407; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 117, 119; Henze, 101-02.) In 1699, the population of Gondar was approximately half orthodox Christian, one-quarter Muslim, and one-quarter Falashas. There were also a number of Catholics, mainly half-caste descendents of the Portuguese or Jesuit converts, who practiced their faith in secrecy. (Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 117.)

²⁷ Poncet, 110, 124-25.

Christian Ethiopians monopolized political power, Muslims controlled commerce and much of [the country's] mercantile wealth."²⁸ Even so, they were forbidden by law "from living with the Christians; they had to remain separate and live in different quarters in their own villages [suburbs]; no Christian might enter their employment either as a slave or as a free servant, nor might any Christian live with them either as husband or wife" on pain of excommunication.²⁹ Poncet further discovered that these restrictions applied to even the simplest daily transactions. As a final insult, "when an Æthiopian meets a Mohametan in the streets, he salutes him with his left hand, which is a mark of contempt."³⁰

As for mainstream Ethiopian society, it was organized according to a feudal structure rooted in a tribal past. At its apex reigned the *negus*, whose realm in 1699 consisted of a loose collection of tribal areas—Poncet called them "kingdoms"—formed into provinces that were held together "mainly by a fanatical attachment to the Coptic faith, and a fierce hatred of foreigners."³¹ Some jurisdictions were quite large, such as Tigré, which the doctor compared favorably with Provence in his native France. Another was Gojjam, in which were located the gold mines whose proceeds supported the court and its military forces, which Poncet reckoned at upwards of 500,000 men.³² But the real source

²⁸ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 115.

²⁹ Ibid., 116; Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 102. The Muslim population of Gondar lived in a district or settlement called Eslam Bet, Eslamgé, or Salamgé, located southwest of the capital along the banks of the Qaha River. Inter-marriage was also forbidden between Ethiopian Christians and black Jews.

³⁰ Poncet, 125.

³¹ Foster, xxvii.

³² Poncet, 125-26, 140, 145-46; de Maillet's report, 24 Sept. 1701 in Beccari, 178; and Foster, 132-33.

of imperial riches and power was the *negus'* absolute mastery "of all the wealth of his subjects: He gives and he takes away, as he thinks fit."³³ Not only was the state itself considered Crown property, but when the head of a noble family died, the monarch also claimed the dead man's lands and goods. Two-thirds of his estate was returned eventually to his legal heirs, while the remaining third was dispensed by the ruler to whomever he chose. In exchange, the recipient of *gult* (as this largesse was called) became a vassal of the Crown, required by law to supply soldiers at his own expense in direct proportion to the size of his new or enlarged fief. Owing to this feudal relationship, observed Poncet, the *negus* commanded "almost an infinite number of feudatories" and could "in a short time and at small expense raise powerful armies."³⁴

The Frenchman's assessment of the *gult* structure was incomplete, however. Confined largely to the court because of popular hostility toward Catholic Europeans, he was unable to develop a deeper comprehension of the actual power wielded by the Ethiopian land-holding nobility under the vassalage system or learn of the great tracts of land that the orthodox Church held independently of the Crown. Given, moreover, that he had no personal interaction with the common people, the doctor could not know that many farmers owned the ground they tilled. Called *rest*, this property was hereditary, and although the *negus* could grant *gult* rights to individual vassals over the peasantry, *rest* land could not be alienated even by imperial

³³ Poncet, 126.

³⁴ Poncet, 126. Jerónimo Lobo also noted the *gult* system in his account of Ethiopia. (Le Grand, 198.) Essentially, *gult* was land the taxes of which were granted by the sovereign to a nobleman or other beneficiary. (Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, 95.)

decree.³⁵

On the other hand, Poncet did not fail to grasp the centrality of the orthodox Church to Ethiopian society or its enormous power. Dominating the religious hierarchy was the *abun*, who presided over the numerous priests and *dabtaras* (lay clerics), deacons, monks, and nuns, many of whom were attached to the imperial court.³⁶ Recruited ever since the fourth century from monasteries in Coptic Egypt,³⁷ the *abun* was virtually indispensable, while his authority over the indigenous clergy was absolute and occasionally menacing to the Crown. Only the patriarch could appoint abbots or consecrate new priests, sometimes as many as 10,000 at a time—from which, wrote Poncet, "one may judge of their great number throughout the empire."³⁸ The *abun*'s exclusive authority over this office explained, in part, why the position had to be filled immediately on the death or disgrace of the incumbent, though strained relations with the Metropolitan of Alexandria hampered the appointment at times.

³⁵ For an authoritative study of the relationship between land ownership and power, see Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

³⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 116. For a detailed discussion of the religious hierarchy, see Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 107-18.

³⁷ Poncet, 122; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 116. For a discussion of the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia and the relationship with the Coptic Church of Egypt, see Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 97-113; and Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*, *Bibliotheca Nubica et Aethiopica*, no. 5 (Warsaw: 1997).

³⁸ Poncet, 123.

Beneath the *abun* labored the priesthood, which was "much reverenc'd in Æthiopia."³⁹ Distinguished from laymen only by a yellow or blue cap, they performed religious services and administered sacraments just as in Catholic Europe, though with some notable differences. In hearing confession, for example, the priest sat, while the penitent—lying prostrate before him—blamed himself for sinning against God, but did not mention specific transgressions. When finished, the penitent was absolved, the priest first blessing his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and hands before reciting several prayers, reading from the Gospels, and pronouncing a penance. A good Catholic, Poncet dismissed this confessional practice as "very imperfect."⁴⁰

In general, however, the depth of Ethiopian piety impressed Poncet. He noted, for instance, that the common people held their churches in such veneration that they entered bare-foot, wore clean linen, and remained silent during services, unlike Europeans. When celebrating communion, no one remained in the church but the clergy and the communicants, although Poncet did not know "whether or no they practice this thro' a sense of humility, as believing themselves unworthy to partake of the divine mysteries." Yet he explicitly pointed out that the laity received the Eucharist in both kinds, unlike Catholics. Coptic Christians also made no use of images in worship, save for the crucifix. But they burned incense "almost continually during the Mass," which was performed to instrumental music or singing both "true and agreeable."⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁴¹ Ibid., 138-39. Poncet made a gift of a crucifix and several miniature paintings of the saints to the *negus*, who "kiss'd them with respect and order'd them to be carry'd into his closet."

Otherwise, Poncet observed, Coptic and Catholic Christians read the same scriptures, revered the same saints, received the same sacraments, and believed in the same doctrine of transubstantiation. The orthodox clergy also admonished strongly against polygamy, though the practice was so common among the well-born—including the emperor—that "the lay judges are much more indulgent."⁴² There were, however, a number of major doctrinal differences between the two faiths, which bespoke an ancient blending of traditions in Ethiopia. Most obvious was the belief that there was only one nature in the Incarnate Christ, not two as in Catholic tradition, and that his humanity was absorbed into his divinity.⁴³ This was the core of Monophysitism and represented the Ethiopian Church's adherence to the strict form of Alexandrian Christology.

Simmering beneath the surface, however, were a number of domestic religious controversies that the doctor either failed to perceive or did not understand. For many years, a doctrinal struggle had been brewing between the church leadership which, backed by most of the regular clergy, professed the Monophysite position on Christ's single nature, and a strong faction of unctionists—led by the monasteries of Gojjam province—who believed that through anointment by the Holy Ghost, Jesus' divine and human natures were united.⁴⁴ The result was a divided countryside and a factionalized court, where the monarch himself was suspected of heterodoxy. Whispers of the controversy are evident in Poncet's account, which tended also to confirm popular misgivings about the emperor's personal

⁴² Ibid., 137.

⁴³ Ibid., 132-33.

⁴⁴ For these doctrinal disputes, see Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 20-23.

commitment to Monophysite doctrine. Of particular significance was Iya'su's eagerness to elicit the doctor's views on this sensitive matter in private conversation, which persuaded the Frenchman that the *negus* was "not averse to the sentiments of the Catholick Church upon that point."⁴⁵

This dispute undoubtedly explains Iya'su's care to perform his sacral duties as monarch, thereby confirming his apparent orthodoxy. Probably for the same reason, the *negus* had his French guest pay a formal visit to the current *abun*, by whom he was courteously received and solemnly blessed. This respectful encounter between them was a means of deflecting possible criticism of the emperor by the chief religious authority in the realm for having welcomed a Catholic European at court. That authority was clearly substantial and potentially dangerous if turned against the throne. Otherwise, Iya'su prudently kept the doctor in seclusion most of the time.⁴⁶

While on the surface the *negus*' reign appeared both solid and secure, he nevertheless faced serious challenges to his authority, which required all of his astuteness to sustain. Although personally respected, he had to contend with the growing division within the orthodox Church, while the local chiefs had little regard for the reigning dynasty. Even many of Iya'su's own officials were untrustworthy. That the *negus* welcomed Poncet so warmly at his court suggests that in the prevailing political and religious climate of Ethiopia, the prospect of opening diplomatic relations with a powerful Western ally was very

⁴⁵ Poncet, 132-33.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 116, 122-23; Foster, xxvii. In order "to keep their intercourse as secret as possible," Poncet was lodged in the royal palace where the *negus* could visit him privately by means of a small gallery that communicated with his room.

appealing. Iya'su certainly took advantage of the opportunity to request technical assistance from France in the form of architects, masons, carpenters, locksmiths, engineers, and gun-founders.⁴⁷

During the nine months he stayed at Gondar, Poncet carefully observed the *negus*, by whom he was treated with great consideration and even familiarity. At forty-one years of age, Iya'su possessed numerous excellent qualities, among them "a quick and piercing wit [keen intelligence], a sweet affable humour, and the [physical] stature of a hero." More relaxed in temperament, the emperor dispensed with much of the rigid formality that generally surrounded his throne.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, he carefully preserved the dignity of the Crown and the mystique of royal power by conforming precisely to the ceremonial required on state occasions and feast-days. The ritual observed at his first audience with Poncet on 10 August 1699 was just one example, even if the doctor was excused from prostration before the throne and kissing the royal feet, as required under normal circumstances.⁴⁹ Iya'su's conduct during the subsequent feast of the Virgin Mary and the pageantry associated with his official public appearances were further illustrations. He similarly began every new military campaign with an elaborate ceremonial designed to enhance his prestige and martial image.⁵⁰

Coupled with his concern to uphold the dignity of the

⁴⁷ De Maillet report, 24 Sept. 1701 in Beccari, 178.

⁴⁸ Poncet, 126-27, 130.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁰ Poncet, 129. On official occasions, Iya'su was described as being "as resplendent as the sun" and a "celestial angel" who resembled "a bride groom leaving his nuptial chamber." He was generally accompanied by 2,000 horsemen or more. (Quoted in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 115.)

Crown was the *negus*' dedication to royal justice. In fact, the Ethiopian chronicles maintained that throughout his life Iya'su showed unusual clemency, thus earning a reputation for rare compassion, in addition to courage, military prowess, and skill at successfully managing the intrigues that arose continually at court.⁵¹ The *negus*' application of royal law was so effective, Poncet claimed, that one rarely heard of serious offences such as murder. Even when such crimes occurred, the emperor showed mercy, pronouncing a sentence of death only when the evidence justified the penalty. Poncet was persuaded as a result that, besides religion, "the exact justice which is perform'd in [this] empire, and the great order that is kept there, contribute much to the innocence and integrity of [popular] manners."⁵²

Especially impressive to the doctor was his royal host's intellectual grasp of "the curious arts and sciences," but especially Western medicine. Keen to know the properties and applications of the various "chymical" remedies the Frenchman had brought to Ethiopia, Iya'su asked Poncet not only to demonstrate their preparation and the effects each produced, but also to record this information for future reference. Indeed, Iya'su "seem'd to be extremely pleas'd with the physical [natural or material] reasons I gave him of everything."⁵³ For a European physician accustomed to practicing his craft in lands where the art of healing was a

⁵¹ Ibid., 106, 119; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, 155; Henze, 103; Budge, 2: 409.

⁵² Ibid., 131.

⁵³ Ibid., 131, 132. The two men continued this mode of instruction during a subsequent excursion to the royal residence on the isle of St. Claude in Lake Tana, where for three days Poncet performed similar "chymical experiments with which the Emperour was much pleas'd." (Ibid., 135.)

combination of superstition and magic, the *negus'* intellectual sophistication and eagerness to learn of Western science must have seemed astonishing.

Finally, by spring 1700 Poncet was anxious to return to France. Still not recovered from the illness he had suffered at his arrival nine months before, the doctor told his royal host that his weakened state of health would continue so long as he remained in Ethiopia. The emperor attempted to retain Poncet at court by promising considerable rewards, but in vain. At last, Iya'su relented, and as parting gifts he gave Poncet a gold bracelet and a robe of honor. The emperor also appointed an ambassador to Louis XIV, who was to accompany the doctor on his return trip. The man selected carried gifts for the Sun King that included horses, porcelain, richly worked stuffs, an ancient iron cross, and an elephant that later died *en route*, as well as a sealed letter from Iya'su.⁵⁴ Although the doctor maintained that the emperor desired an alliance with France, the royal missive was largely a confession of faith.

Charles Poncet left Gondar on 2 May 1700, though he did not depart from Ethiopia, and especially from Iya'su, without regret. "I could not leave the Emperour (who show'd me a thousand kindnesses)," he wrote,

without a tender concern; and he himself appear'd to be sensibly touch'd at this separation. I must own that I can never think upon that great prince without the most lively sentiments of gratitude; and had it not been for my indisposition I shou'd have devoted myself to his person and sacrific'd the remainder of my days to his service.⁵⁵

For the return journey, rather than retrace his original steps

⁵⁴ Ibid., 140, 141, 145; Budge, 2: 423.

⁵⁵ Poncet, 142.

down the Nile River to Egypt, Poncet took ship from the port of Massawa, across the Red Sea to Jidda, and thence to Cairo, which he reached on 10 June. No sooner had the doctor arrived than he was debriefed by Benoît de Maillet. He informed the consul that so great was Ethiopian hatred of Westerners that even if Louis XIV received the *negus'* envoy at Versailles, the intensity of Ethiopian xenophobia made it impossible for Iya'su to welcome a French emissary at Gondar in return.⁵⁶ Unconvinced, de Maillet still entertained hopes that diplomatic relations were possible as long as the French had no missionary designs against the orthodox Church, but wished only to establish contacts between two Christian crowns for their mutual advantage.⁵⁷

At this point, a heated dispute broke out among the doctor, the consul, and the Ethiopian ambassador over the disposition of Iya'su's letter and specifically who would deliver it to Louis XIV. It was finally arranged that Poncet would take the royal missive to France, accompanied by the Jesuit superior in Egypt and the head of the French chancellery at Cairo. The *negus'* envoy was to remain behind with the assurance that he would be sent for if Louis XIV were moved to receive him.⁵⁸

Arriving in Paris toward the end of the year, Poncet was greeted with interest and enthusiasm. But doubts soon arose over the authenticity of Iya'su's letter and the veracity of the doctor's account of Ethiopia, as a result of the bitter

⁵⁶ Ibid., 170-71.

⁵⁷ De Maillet to Khodja Mourad, 15 Sept. 1703, in *Foreign Relations of Ethiopia, 1242-1700: Documents Relating to the Journeys of Khodja Mourad*, ed. E. van Donzel, (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1979), 167-68.

⁵⁸ Poncet, 164, 170-72; Foster, xxx-xxxi; Le Grand, 163-64, 364; De Maillet to Pontchartrain, 24 Sept. 1702, in Beccari, 173-75; De Caix de Saint-Aymour, 122ff; and Tedeschi, 54.

criticisms of a resentful de Maillet. Eventually, however, the letter was accepted as genuine and the possibility of an embassy to Gondar discussed. In the event, nothing came of the discussions at court. Within a year of Poncet's return to Paris, France was involved in the War of the Spanish Succession and in no position to divert its energies or resources to exotic schemes. It is doubtful that an embassy would have met with success in any case, owing to Ethiopian hatred of Catholic Europeans and the assassination of *Negus* Iya'su in a succession dispute four years later.⁵⁹ Thus disappointed at home and having no desire to return to Egypt, where his nemesis remained to slander him, the doctor "decided to try his fortune among his compatriots in India."⁶⁰ In 1702, he sailed via the Red Sea to Surat. Ever restless, however, in 1706 Poncet left for Persia, where he died in obscurity within two years.

For a long time the credibility of both the doctor and his account were cast into doubt, while he was disparaged personally by contemporaries as a liar, fool, and vagabond, devoid of honor and religion. Most of this vituperation originated with Benoît de Maillet, who claimed that Poncet had never even been in Abyssinia.⁶¹ But more recent historians have argued instead that the accusations leveled against Poncet by de Maillet were "malicious exaggerations to say the least" and moreover that the narrative the doctor wrote "proves the falsity of the consul's statements, which were prompted by sheer jealousy."⁶² Still, there are those who continued to be critical of Poncet's account, claiming

⁵⁹ For the circumstances of Iya'su's murder on 13 Oct. 1706, see Henze, 103-04; Budge, 2:420-21.

⁶⁰ Foster, xxxiii.

⁶¹ Le Grand, 159-60, 63, 429; De Maillet to Khodji Mourad, 15 Sept. 1703, in Beccari, 344-45; and Budge, 2:424.

⁶² Foster, xxxii; Budge, 2:424.

that given the amount of time he spent in Abyssinia and the special opportunities he enjoyed, it is "at once too meager and too discursive."⁶³

But as one editor of the *Voyage to Æthiopia* remarks, it is worth remembering the circumstances under which the narrative was written: that the doctor's visit to Gondar was made for a specific medical purpose, as opposed to simple adventure; that he claimed no literary proclivities or experience; that because of popular animosity toward Europeans, he was held largely in seclusion and was dependent, therefore, on others for much of his information; and, finally, that in view of the interest generated by his journey, he attempted nothing more than a brief, straightforward rendering of his experiences while his memory was still fresh. To be sure, Poncet's work is flawed, yet it must be said that he accomplished the modest goals of his account "with no small success."⁶⁴ Ultimately, however, his reputation was rehabilitated not by a fellow Frenchman, but by a Scotsman and fellow traveler. Using the 1709 English translation of the doctor's work, James Bruce set out in 1768 to discover the source of the Nile River. Though he, too, found fault with some of his predecessor's assertions and pointed to certain factual errors, Bruce nevertheless maintained the value of the work and defended Poncet's credibility at the same time.⁶⁵ Even if it did no more than provide a lifelike portrait of *Negus Iya'su* "that alone would be a contribution of permanent value to Abyssinian history." But "it contains a great deal more than this, as . . . most readers will agree."⁶⁶

⁶³ Foster, xxxv.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xxxiv; F. Michaud, ed., *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne*, 45 vols. (Paris: Madame O. Desplaces, 1843-65), 34:47.

⁶⁶ Foster, xxxvi.