

The *Ḥaṭī* and the Sultan
Letters and embassies from Abyssinia to the Mamluk court

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Abstract

Letters and embassies has been dispatched to Cairo by the king of the Abyssinians (the *ḥaṭī* of the Mamluk sources) on a regular basis throughout the Mamluk period. The exchanges with this Christian king were among the longest-standing relations of the Mamluk court with a foreign polity. The present paper therefore goes back to issues adressed to by Abyssinian envoys and makes an inventory of the letters and embassies received in Cairo on behalf of the *ḥaṭī*. Lacking evidence in Ge'ez sources, this survey is based almost exclusively on Arabic texts compiled or written down in Cairo, with the exception of few European testimonies. The evidence gathered enables a reassessment of the diplomatic relations between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan, with respect to the journey of embassies, the identity of emissaries and the language of diplomatic exchanges. One of the findings is that embassies to Cairo were almost always led by two emissaries, an Abyssinian dignitary and an Arabic speaking Muslim, often a merchant involved in the Red sea trade including slaves.

Mamluk Cairo may well have been a major diplomatic crossroad, highly frequented by foreign embassies. But streets were none the less crowded out that day of February 1516, especially by Coptic Christians, to look out the display of a delegation just arrived from Abyssinia. Almost six hundred people had pitched their tents near the Lions' bridges (*Qanāṭir al-sibā'*) and the embassy was then running the main street of the Ṣalība up to the Citadel. The Jacobite patriarch came with the procession, which was escorted by the emir *mihmandār*. According to Ibn Iyās who attended the event, the public's curiosity was easy to explain: "It had been a very long time since Abyssinian emissaries came to Egypt", thirty-five years to be precise, since the embassy received by Sultan Qāyṭbāy in 1481. Two matters of facts explain this lengthy absence in the eyes of the chronicler: "Their country is far away and they do not have any issue to address in Egypt (*mā lahum šuḡl fī Miṣr*)". With respect to the distance, one can only agree with his statement: the journey of the 1516 embassy was supposed to have lasted nine months from Abyssinia to Egypt. But it was bad faith to assert a lack of diplomatic interest of the Abyssinians in Cairo and it is not surprising that Ibn Iyās's claim was refuted by the details of his own narrative¹.

Diplomatic relations between the king of the Abyssinians and the sultan of Cairo were indeed far more older than the two *dawlas* they embodied. The dynasty which reigned at that time over the highlands of Ethiopia had been established in 1270 by the lord of Shoa, Yekuno Amlāk, who overthrew the Zagwe kings ten years only after al-Zāhir Baybars ascended to the throne. But the first embassy dispatched by Yekuno Amlāk, which actually succeeded to reach Cairo in 1274, carried on relationships dating back to the introduction of Christianity in Abyssinia during the 4th Century A.D. It is therefore necessary to go back to the motives of the regular dispatching to Cairo of letters and even embassies by the king of the Abyssinians. This Christian king was indeed well known in Mamluk sources, which used to call him *malik al-Ḥabaša*, sometimes *ṣāhib bilād Amḥara* or *al-Amḥarī*, and more often the *ḥaṭī*, ie. the Arabic transcription of a Ge'ez title that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, the private secretary of sultans Baybars and Qalāwūn, explained as follows: "*ḥaṭī, ya 'nī al-ḥalīfa*"².

¹ Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 10-12. The issue of the diplomatic relations between kings of the Abyssinians and Mamluk sultans has been studied as early as the very beginning of the Nineteenth century. See Quatremère 1811-1812: 267-283. But it has not received the attention it deserves since the survey published in 1938 by Gaston Wiet, with the recent exception of Qāsim 'Abduh Qāsim. Wiet 1938: 115-140. Qāsim 2011: 307-331. The following remarks are a first reassessment of the issue based on a work in progress.

² Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1976: 431.

Abyssinian issues in Mamluk Cairo

The first and foremost motive of diplomatic relations between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan was the subordination of the Abyssinian church to the patriarchal see of Alexandria. It is well known that the metropolitan of Abyssinia (*al-maṭrān*) was normally chosen among the Egyptian monks and appointed by the Jacobite patriarch. Such a subordination has prevailed since the 4th Century up to 1951, even if the metropolitan was not always able to reach his bishopric³. The Mamluk chancery was well aware of the situation in the 1330's, as it appears in the *Ta'rif* of Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī:

“As the doctrine of the Jacobite Christians provides that baptism should not be valid if not implemented by the patriarch and as the patriarch's see is the church of Alexandria, the lord of the Amḥara has to ask him the appointment of metropolitans one after the other. Such a correspondence is offending for him, but he is compelled to make the request. What the patriarch should command him, he would accept with the same respect that his own law (*ṣarī'atihi*).”⁴

The king of the Abyssinians thus used to dispatch letters and embassies to Cairo, where the patriarch was settling, in order to seek from him the appointment of a metropolitan, and also to request from the sultan permission to do so. By definition, the relationships between Abyssinia and Egypt involved three partners. Besides the official diplomacy, the *ḥaṭī* and the patriarch had their own correspondence, which the sultan was not able to control except by means of intimidation, and was sometimes eager to exploit in his relations with Abyssinia⁵.

In addition to the ecclesiological motive, which was ancient and enduring, historical circumstances peculiar to the Mamluk period contributed to enhance diplomatic relations between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan. Abyssinian monks used to settle in Jerusalem, at least since 1237 when evidence of attendance was first provided⁶. From 1261 onwards, the Holy city had been under the sovereignty of the sultan of Cairo and ceased to be so only in December 1516. Jerusalem was therefore among the issues addressed by Abyssinian letters and embassies, either to request the transit of cultural items for the monks settled in the Holy city, to require

³ Taklahaymanot 1988.

⁴ Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī 1988: 49.

⁵ In 1448, the patriarch was prohibited by al-Zāhir Jaqmaq to send either a letter or an emissary to Abyssinia without his permission. Al-Saḥāwī, 2002-2007, vol. 2: 81.

⁶ van Donzel 1983: 94.

permission to (re)built places of burial and worship, or to grant the privilege of entering the Holy Sepulchre without paying taxes⁷. Most of Abyssinian embassies dispatched to Cairo might have continued on their way to Jerusalem before coming back home. It was indeed the first intent of the embassy of 1290, which was carrying various items (carpet, candels, lamp, sacerdotal garments) for the Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem⁸. Evidence is however provided for the embassies of 1443, 1481 and 1516, the arrival of which was well noticed in the Holy city⁹.

Another issue was the king's claim to protect places of worship and community interests of the Coptic Christians in Egypt, and the sultan's pretension to safeguard those of the Muslims in Abyssinia. Indeed, conversions of Coptic Christians to islam and islamisation of the Egyptian landscape and society increased at the end of the 13th century. In the early 1320's, anti-Christian riots led to the destruction of numerous churches and monasteries in Cairo and in the whole country. Hence these dramatic events were the main issue of the Abyssinian embassy dispatched to Cairo in 1325 :

“On Monday, the 16th of the month of Muḥarram [December the 23th], the envoys of the king of the Abyssinians arrived with a letter in which he required with respect and reverence the restoration of the churches and workshops of the Christians that had been ruined. He threatened in turn to ruin the mosques of the Muslims in his vicinity, and to block the Nile in order to prevent it to flow through Egypt. The sultan scorned [the king's claim] and his envoys went back.”¹⁰

However, the *ḥaṭī* would not have set up himself as a champion of the Coptic community and threatened in turn to target Muslim places of worship in Abyssinia, if islamisation did not have critically increased at the same period in the Horn of Africa. It is well known that Islam has been introduced in the area even before the hijra to Medina, with the temporary exile of some of the Prophet's Companions to the court of the “Najāšī”, the Christian king of Aksum, in 615¹¹. It is less known that epigraphy gives evidence of Muslim communities in the

⁷ Cerulli 1943-1947, vol. 1: 76-409. van Donzel 1983: 95-99. O'Mahony 1996: 148-153.

⁸ Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 170-173. van Donzel 1983: 95.

⁹ Plante 1975: 139-140. Mujir al-Din al-'Ulaymi n. d., vol. 2: 326. Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 12.

¹⁰ Al-Maqrīzī 1939-1973, vol. 2.1: 270. The legend of the Abyssinians' ability to block or dry the Nile spread out from Arabic sources to both Ge'ez and Latin texts during the 13th Century. The issue is currently studied in France by B. Weber, together with M.-L. Derat, J. Loiseau and R. Seignobos.

¹¹ Al-Ṭayyib 1989: 95-103.

highlands of Abyssinia from the 11th century onwards in the Tigray (North-East)¹². According to a late *ta'rīḥ*, a first Islamic polity came into being in the very heart of the Christian kingdom, in the province of Shoa, perhaps as soon as the 10th century under the Maḥzūmid dynasty. In the late 1270's, the conquest of the sultanate of Shoa by the Walasma' gave rise to a new polity based in Īfāt, in the Eastern escarpment of the highlands, which has been both a vassal of, and a serious threat to, the Christian kingdom until the 1420's¹³. In 1452, the diplomatic game between Abyssinia and Egypt get complicated with the arrival in Cairo of an embassy dispatched by the *malik muslimī l-Ḥabaša*, also called the *ṣāhib Jabart* (the collective name of the native Muslims of the Horn of Africa) or *al-Jabartī*, who was a descendant of the Walasma' from then on established in the area of Harar¹⁴.

Abyssinian embassies, Arabic sources

Evidence of diplomatic relations between the Mamluks and foreign polities is sometimes much better preserved outside Cairo, in the manuscripts or documents kept by their former partners. Royal chronicles in Ge'ez preserved some pieces of evidence related to the arrival of envoys dispatched by the patriarch of Alexandria, and also to military retaliation against the Mamluks, as for instance the raids of Sayfa Ar'ad's army in Upper Egypt after the arrest of patriarch Marcos IV in 1352¹⁵. One finds also in annals compiled later in Abyssinia brief mentions of the departure and return of royal envoys to Jerusalem, who might have been first dispatched in Cairo¹⁶. But not a single Ge'ez text explicitly records embassies or letters sent by the *ḥaṭī* to the Mamluk court. In 1447, king Zar'a Yā'eqob sent a letter to the Abyssinian monks of Jerusalem, enclosed to the Ge'ez manuscript of the *Synodicon* intended for them and now preserved in the Vatican library (ms. Vat. Borg Aeth. 32): this is the only Ge'ez document related to the Mamluk sultanate discovered so far¹⁷. It is also known that the correspondence between the *ḥaṭī* and the Egyptian patriarch was, at least partly, in Ge'ez at that time. The Abyssinian embassy of 1290 carried in Cairo two Ge'ez letters, one for the patriarch and the other for the Abyssinian monks of Jerusalem, the substance of which was

¹² Fauvelle and Hirsch 2010: 30-31. Bauden 2011 : 297-299.

¹³ Cerulli 1931: 39-52. Cerulli 1941: 5-42.

¹⁴ Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1963-1972, vol. 15: 441. Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 4: 15. Ullendorff, 1991: 355.

¹⁵ Perruchon 1893: 177-178, 181. Cuoq 1981: 179-180.

¹⁶ Cerulli 1943-1947, vol. 1: 241, 391-393.

¹⁷ Euringer 1939: 205-240. Mekouria 1964. O'Mahony 1996: 150.

recorded in Arabic by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, who was at that time the sultan’s private secretary¹⁸. But no original document of this parallel diplomacy has been yet identified.

Therefore, our knowledge of the diplomatic relations between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan comes almost exclusively from Arabic sources (chronicles, eulogies, chancery manuals) compiled in Cairo, with the exception of few European testimonies. In 1444, the Franciscan custos of the Holy Land, Gandulph of Sicily, drafted for the papacy a report on the Abyssinian embassy dispatched to Cairo the previous year; the detailed account was provided to him by the envoys who continued their journey to go on pilgrimage in Jerusalem¹⁹. Later on, the pilgrim Georges Lengherand inserted in his travel relation an account of the Abyssinian embassy to Sultan Qāyṭbāy, based on the testimony of a Venitian who attended the event in Cairo²⁰. Despite several exaggerations, these testimonies confirm the core of the account provided by the Cairene chroniclers for the embassies of 1443 and 1481. But it is not enough to mitigate the effects of disparity in the evidence available. The views of our sources are mainly that of the Mamluk court or of Muslim chroniclers who used to move in Mamluk households. The relative decline of the Coptic-Arabic historiography after the middle of the 14th century makes the disparity even more significant²¹.

However, it does not alter the reliability of Cairene chroniclers who took care to record, more or less accurately, the substance of the words exchanged during the reception of the embassies and even, on four occasions, part of the text of the letter read in front of the sultan in the name of the *ḥaṭī* (see references in the table below). The text of a fifth letter, sent in 1387 by king Dāwit to sultan Barqūq, might have been lost since the end of the 17th century, provided that the Père Vansleb was true in claiming to have come across a copy of the letter, whence collecting Arabic manuscripts in Egypt for the Royal Library of Louis XIV²².

Abyssinian letters and embassies to Mamluk Cairo. A survey

date	event	primary sources
between 669/1270	embassy sent by Yekuno Amlāk to the Mamluk sultan, stopped and plundered on its way by the <i>malik</i> of Saḥart	Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā’il 1919-1929, vol. 14.3: 387

¹⁸ Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, 1961: 172-173. Cerulli 1943-1947, vol. 1: 88-90.

¹⁹ The document was first published by Wadding 1931-1935, vol. 11: 53-54. An amended version, based on a new manuscript, has been published by Plante 1975: 133-140.

²⁰ Georges Lengherand 1861: 185-188.

²¹ den Heijer 1996: 88-98.

²² Vansleb 1677: 60, quoted by Wiet 1938: 134.

and 673/1274		
673/1274	letter (partly preserved) sent by Yekuno Amlāk to al-Zāhir Baybars through the Rasūlid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf, announcing the delay of the embassy awaited because of dynastic changes and military campaigns	Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir 1976: 430-431 Baybars al-Manṣūrī 1998: 144 Nuwayrī 1929-1998, vol. 30: 211-213 Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā’il 1919-1929, vol. 14.3: 384-386 Qalqaṣandī 1963, vol. 8: 119-120
689/1290	letter (partly preserved) sent by Yagbe’a Ṣeyon to al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn announcing an embassy wich was delayed because of its leader’s death in ‘Ayḍab ; arrival in Cairo of the envoys with letters for the sultan (one out of two partly preserved), the patriarch (partly preserved) and Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem (partly preserved)	Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 170-173
712/1312-13	(alleged ?) embassy sent to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad with a present worth over 100 000 dinars	Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 12
726/1325	embassy sent by ‘Amda Ṣeyon to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad with a letter	Maqrīzī 1939-1973, vol. 2.1: 270
737/1336	embassy sent by ‘Amda Ṣeyon to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ; ‘Abd Allāh al-Zayla’ī, who was the source of al-‘Umarī’s knowledge about Abyssinia, likely belonged to the delegation	Maqrīzī 1939-1973, vol. 2.2: 410 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī 2001-2004, vol. 4: 37, 39, 49
753/1352	letter sent by Sayfa Ar’ad to al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ	Ibn Nāẓir al-Jaysh 1987: 31
788/1387	embassy sent by Dāwit to al-Zāhir Barqūq with a letter ; Vansleb claimed to have found a copy of the letter	Maqrīzī 1939-1973, vol. 3.2: 555 Ibn al-Ṣayrafi 1970-1994, vol. 1: 145 Vansleb 1677: 60
between 801/1399 and 815/1412	letter sent by Dāwit to al-Nāṣir Faraj? Good relationships between the two kings are reminded in the letter of Zar’a Yā’eqob in 847/1443	Ibn al-Ṣayrafi 1970-1994, vol. 4: 285 Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 167
841/1437	embassy and letter sent by Zar’a Yā’eqob to al-Aṣraf Barsbāy	Maqrīzī 1939-1973, vol. 4.2: 1024 Ibn Ḥajar 1969-1998, vol. 4: 69
847/1443	embassy and letter (partly preserved) sent by Zar’a Yā’eqob to al-Zāhir Jaqmaq ; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn al-Ṣayrafi 1970-1994, vol. 4: 281-288 Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 164-173 Plante 1975: 133-140
857/1453	embassy sent by Zar’a Yā’eqob to al-Zāhir Jaqmaq ; envoys arrived in Cairo 18 days after the death of the sultan	Ibn Taghrī Birdī 1963-1972, vol. 16: 33 Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 4: 87
886/1481	embassy sent by Eskender to al-Aṣraf Qāyṭbāy ; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 3: 179-180 Mujīr al-Dīn n. d., vol. 2: 326 Georges Lengherand 1861: 185-188
922/1516	embassy sent by Dāwit II to al-Aṣraf Qānṣūh al-Ġawrī with a letter; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 10-12

Over a period of almost 250 years, Abyssinian kings dispatched eleven embassies to the Mamluk court, among which the first never succeeded to reach Cairo but was intercepted on its way by the *malik* of Saḥart (Northern Abyssinia) who had rebelled against the *ḥaṭī*. All embassies likely brought letters to the sultan: evidence is provided in six occasions and the text of four letters is partly preserved by Mamluk chroniclers. In addition, two letters fore sure, and perhaps a third one, were sent by the *ḥaṭī* without dispatching envoys. However, two out of these fourteen diplomatic events are dubious, the evidence of which relies upon later references: first, the embassy of 712/1312-13 only mentionned in 1516 and still famous at that time for having brought a splendid present to the fastuous sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad;

second, the precise nature of the relationships between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan (an exchange of letters ?) during the reign of al-Nāṣir Faraj (1399-1412), whose friendship was reminded in the letter of Zar'a Yā'eqob in 1443.

Abyssinian kings used however to dispatch letters and embassies to Cairo with a high degree of regularity during the whole Mamluk period. The longest term without contact was perhaps fifty years, between the embassies of 1387 and 1437, provided that no letter actually arrived in Cairo under the reign of al-Nāṣir Faraj. That time coincided with the unrest ensuing in the Abyssinian kingdom from the perilous succession of king Dāwit (d. 1413) and the fighting of king Yeshāq (1414-1429) against the Muslim kinglets of Īfāt.

Conversely, three peaks of diplomatic activity could be identified. The first one took place under the long and simultaneous reigns of 'Amda Ṣeyon (1314-1342) and (the third of) al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (1311-1341). Two Abyssinian embassies were dispatched to Cairo over an eleven-year period, in 1325 and 1336, one after anti-Christian riots in Egypt, the other after the king's retaliation against Muslims in Eastern Ethiopia. The second peak of diplomatic activity happened in the 1380's, after rumours of Abyssinian incursions in Upper Egypt. In 1381, the great emir Barqūq, acting in the name of the young sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ḥājjī, urged the Jacobite patriarch to dispatch envoys, then to send a letter to the *ḥaṭī*, to establish what actually happened and to convince the king to stop the raids. Barqūq decided at the same time to send out his own emissary, a certain Ibrāhīm al-Dumyāṭī, who came back in 1384 only. The latter was among the sources of Maqrīzī's little treaty on Abyssinia, the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*²³. Three years later, Abyssinian envoys arrived in Cairo to restore confidence between king Dāwit and (the new) sultan Barqūq. The 1387 embassy was important in long-term history of diplomatic relations between Abyssinia and Egypt. Half a century later, it was reminded in the letter of Zar'a Yā'eqob as an auspicious precedent and the origin of the friendship between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan. The former deserved again the title of *ṣadīq al-mulūk wa l-salāṭīn* which was customary given to the Abyssinian king by the Mamluk chancery²⁴.

²³ Ibn Ḥajar 1969-1998, vol. 1: 232-233. Al-Maqrīzī, 1939-1973, vol. 3.2 : 445, 447, 515. Al-Qalqaṣandī 1963, vol. 5 : 333. Ibn Taḡrī Birdī 1956-2005, vol. 2: 359. Al-Maqrīzī 2006. A critical edition of al-Maqrīzī's *Kitāb al-Ilmām bi-aḥbār man bi-arḍ al-Ḥabaṣa min mulūk al-islām* is to be published by Manfred Kropp & Franz-Christof Muth in the *Bibliotheca Islamica*.

²⁴ Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī 1988: 49. Ibn Nāzīr al-Jaysh, 1987: 30. Al-Qalqaṣandī 1963, vol. 8: 40. *Kitāb al-maqṣad al-raḥī' li-munṣā' al-ḥāwī ilā ṣinā'at al-inṣā'* (BnF, ms ar. 4439), f° 288 r. The formula was actually used in the letter sent in 673/1274 in the name of al-Zāhir Baybars in reply to the previous letter of the *ḥaṭī*. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 171.

The third peak occurred under the reign of Zar'a Yā'eqob (1434-1468), who dispatched three embassies to Cairo: in 1437 to al-Ašraf Barsbāy, in 1443 and 1453 to al-Zāhir Jaqmaq. The diplomatic activity of this ambitious king was not restricted to the Mamluks but extended to Europe and the papacy, as during the Council of Florence to which he commissioned a delegation from Jerusalem in 1441²⁵. The embassy of 1437 took place after probably half a century without any contact with Cairo. According to the letter sent six years later, Zar'a Yā'eqob wished at that time “to renew the agreement (*'ahd*) and the affection (*mawadda*)” that had prevailed until their death between king Dāwit, his father, and sultan Barqūq²⁶. But the embassy seemed to have been mainly justified by the recent death of the metropolitan: the king's letter requested as usual from the sultan permission for the patriarch to send a new deputy²⁷. Does this mean that no metropolitan had been dispatched to Abyssinia since the death of king Dāwit in 1413? On the other hand, the sultan's policies with respect to Christian communities in Egypt and Palestine, referred to in very general terms by the letter of 1437, must have prompted the two other embassies. The letter presented to sultan Jaqmaq in 1443 officially protested against the destruction of a Coptic monastery in the Delta, Dayr al-Mağṭis or Dayr al-Ġaṭṣ, ordered in 1438 by his predecessor al-Ašraf Barsbāy, and requested permission to rebuild it²⁸. The king requested also that Abyssinian monks should be allowed to build (an altar in the church of) Mary's tomb in Gethsemane, and to resume building a place of burial for their dead after the Mamluk governor had prohibited them to do. In this respect, Zar'a Yā'eqob complained about the unequal treatment of the Christian communities in Jerusalem, claiming that Latins and Georgians had been recently granted the right to build anew in the Holy city²⁹. Six years later, in 1453, the third embassy of Zar'a Yā'eqob arrived in Cairo in times of trouble, eighteen days after the death of Sultan al-Zāhir Jaqmaq, the reason why Cairene chroniclers did pay no real attention to its claims. But it might have been prompted by recent events in Jerusalem, reflecting a change in policy towards the Christians that might have affected the Abyssinians, ie. the destruction of some Franciscans's buildings

²⁵ Lefevre 1967-1968: 5-26. Weber 2010: 435-443.

²⁶ Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 168.

²⁷ Ibn Ḥajar 1969-1998, vol. 4: 69.

²⁸ Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 169. Coquin 1991: 818-819.

²⁹ Indeed, between 1430 and 1435, a chapel was built for the use of the Franciscan friars inside the round church of the Holy Sepulchre. Suriano 1900: 31-32, quoted by van Donzel 1983: 103, note 17. At the same period, one knows that the Georgians were holding, among many other shrines in the city and its vicinity, the place inside the Holy Sepulchre where the Christ was supposed to have been wrapped in linen for the burial. van Donzel 1983: 97. Abu-Manneh 1984: 106-107.

and tombs on Mount Sion eight months earlier in June 1452³⁰. Indeed, evidence is provided few years later that the Abyssinians were holding the shrine of the Grotto of David, the place where the Biblical king was supposed to have composed the Penitential Psalms, also located on Mount Sion³¹. Zar'a Yā'eqob might have wished to secure Abyssinian holdings on Mount Sion by dispatching an embassy to Cairo in 1453. After that date, only two embassies sent by the *ḥaṭī* were mentioned after an interval of three decades, one in 1481, the other in 1516 on the eve of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt.

Our knowledge of these diplomatic events is very uneven. The embassy of 1325 is only known thanks to the late Maqrīzī who described it with few words, when that of 1443 is documented by three contemporary witnesses. Despite the evidence's disparity, one can clarify to some extent the way in which Abyssinian embassies were dispatched to Cairo.

The journey to Egypt

It is hardly surprising that, as far as we know, the embassies' journey to Egypt was lengthy and uncertain. In 1443, the embassy arrived in Cairo four months after its departure. In 1516, the journey was supposed to have lasted nine months³². In 1520, Francesco Alvares, the chaplain of the Portuguese detachment to Abyssinia, noted that pilgrims used to leave the country at Epiphany in order to be in Jerusalem during the Holy Week, which means that their journey was about three month-long in average. That year, the caravan was attacked by Bedouins, to whom only fifteen pilgrims succeeded to escape³³. In the early 1270's, the first embassy of Yekuno Amlāk never reached its destination³⁴. These journey times are somehow confirmed by the account of Mamluk embassies in Abyssinia. The emissary of Sultan Jaqmaq came back four years after his dispatching because he was detained by his host whence fighting a Muslim kinglet in Eastern Ethiopia³⁵. On the other hand, the emissary of Sultan Barqūq, who spent three years during his journey to Abyssinia and back, did not experience similar misfortunes³⁶.

³⁰ Mujīr al-Dīn, *Al-Uns al-jalīl*, vol. 2, pp. 97-98.

³¹ van Donzel 1983: 98-99.

³² Plante 1975: 138. Ibn Iyās, 1982-1984, vol. 5: 12.

³³ van Donzel 1983: 100.

³⁴ Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il 1919-1929, vol. 14.3: 387.

³⁵ Al- Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 170-171.

³⁶ Maqrīzī, 1939-1973, vol. 3.2: 515.

The travel route of Abyssinian embassies might have changed during the Mamluk period. According to Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, in the second half of the 13th century:

“the route towards Amḥarā goes through the city of ‘Awān, which is the anchorage (*sāḥil*) of the country of the Abyssinians”³⁷.

This harbour, which might be identified with the modern site of Assab north of the straits of Bāb al-Mandab, on the Red sea coast, acquired increasing importance in the course of the 13th century as a result of the Dahlak archipelago’s decline³⁸. Until the end of the 14th century, Abyssinian embassies used probably to sail from ‘Awān, either to continue up the African coast to Suwākin or to cross the Red sea in order to reach the Hijaz through Yemeni harbours and to cross again the sea to the Egyptian port of ‘Ayḏāb. In both cases, they reached the Nile valley at Qūṣ and went down the river to Cairo³⁹. Yemeni route seems to have been predominant during the second half of the 13th century. In 1274, the *ḥaṭī* claimed in his letter that the customary gifts expected on the occasion of the metropolitan’s appointment would be entrusted to the care of the Rasūlid sultan al-Muzaffar Yūsuf. In 1290, two letters were received at the same time in Cairo: one from the *ḥaṭī*, asking for the appointment of a new metropolitan; the other from the same Rasūlid sultan, indicating the arrival in his kingdom of an Abyssinian embassy on its way to Egypt. Later in the year, the Mamluk court received news of the death of the Abyssinian emissary in ‘Ayḏāb, where he had arrived from Mecca. But one century later, the Latin itinerary from Venice to Abyssinia (*Iter de Venetiis ad Indiam*, circa 1400) illustrated that the land route through ‘Aydhāb and Suwākin to “Adam” (‘Awān ?) was familiar to Abyssinian monks and envoys⁴⁰.

Evidence is missing, however, to determine the routes of 15th century Abyssinian embassies. We only know that in 1443 the leader of the envoys “left fifty of [his men] in Upper Egypt with the supplies for the journey” before reaching his destination⁴¹. However, all the itineraries from Abyssinia to Cairo or Jerusalem, collected in Venice by Alessandro Zorzi thanks to native informants (circa 1520), went by land through Suwākin and the Eastern desert before going the Nile down. In 1520, the pilgrims caravan reported by Alvares

³⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir 1976: 431.

³⁸ Vallet 2010: 401-402.

³⁹ Garcin 1976: 220-222.

⁴⁰ *Ethiopian Itineraries* 1958: 28-39 (where “Adam” is located inland). Garcin 1976: 222.

⁴¹ Plante 1975: 138.

followed the same route⁴². The southern itinerary to Cairo did survive to the “mediterraneisation” of the Mamluk sultanate, at least for conveying Abyssinian embassies⁴³.

The *ḥaṭī*'s two emissaries

Cairene chroniclers are more talkative about the composition of Abyssinian delegations. According to Ibn Iyās, the 1516 embassy included about six hundred people, among which only seven were received in the courtyard (*al-Ḥawṣ*) of the Citadel: the head of the envoys (“*al-qāṣid al-kabūr*”), five chief officers (“*min a’yān umarā’ al-Ḥabaša*”) and “an noble person” (“*wa dakarū anna fīhim šaḥṣ^{an} šarīf^{an}*”), may be a member of the royal family. This high number might be better explained by the final destination of the embassy, ie. the pilgrimage in Jerusalem, than by an exaggeration of the chronicler. This compared with the 1443 embassy, the leader of which entered Cairo with one hundred fifty men “of his household”, after “having left fifty [others] in Upper Egypt”. In 1520, according to Alvares, the caravan to Jerusalem was supposed to include (the symbolic number of) 336 pilgrims⁴⁴.

As one might expect, embassies were most often led by a dignitary chosen among the Abyssinian nobility. In 1516, people said in Cairo that the head of the envoys was “the son of a chief officer of the Abyssinians and that his father was the one who came during the reign of al-Ašraf Qāyṭbāy”. A brief mention of the *Annals of ‘Addi Na’amen*, later compiled in Ge’ez, reported that “in the year 168 of God’s mercy [1514-1515 AD.], the son of ‘Amda Mikā’ēl went to Jerusalem by order of the king”. ‘Amda Mikā’ēl was one of the most important figures of Eskender’s reign (1478-1494) and might have been the royal envoy dispatched to Cairo in 1481⁴⁵.

According to the same source, “in the year 94 of God’s mercy [1441-1442 AD.], Ato Anbasā went to Jerusalem; in the year 96 of God’s mercy [1443-1444 AD.], Ato Anbasā came back”. It would be tempting to assume that this unknown figure was also the king’s emissary received by sultan Jaqmaq in 1443⁴⁶. We know however, thanks to Gandolph of Sicily, that the *ḥaṭī*'s envoy delivered his message to the sultan before asking “to a certain Saracen from the tribe of the infamous Mahomet, whom he had brought with him for this purpose” to testify

⁴² *Ethiopian Itineraries* 1958: 124-131 (*Iter I*, from Axum to Cairo), 132-137 (*Iter II*, from Barara to Jerusalem).

⁴³ Garcin 1973-1974: 109-116.

⁴⁴ Plante 1975: 138. van Donzel 1983: 100.

⁴⁵ Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 11. Kolmodin 1914: 32, quoted by Cerulli 1943-1947, vol. 1: 393.

⁴⁶ Kolmodin 1914: 31, quoted by Cerulli 1943-1947, vol. 1: 241.

in Arabic “all that he had said”⁴⁷. The Franciscan custos did not report the names of the emissary and his spokesman. But they were mentioned in the body of Zar’a Yā’eqob’s letter as it was recorded by the chronicler Ibn al-Şayrafī:

“And now We have sent envoys to your Mightiness the sultan. They are al-ḥājj al-jalīl ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the emir ‘Īsā and others”⁴⁸.

It is likely that this “emir ‘Īsā” was an Abyssinian dignitary whose Ge’ez name (Iyasu ?) had been transcribed in Arabic for the purpose of the letter. As for the deputy who testified his message in Arabic, he was not only a Muslim (as his name suggests), but was elsewhere described as a “trader” (*tājir*), bearing the *nisba* “al-Kārimī” as did merchants involved in the Red sea trade between Egypt and Yemen⁴⁹. According to the letter of 1443, the embassy of 1387 was led in the same way by two emissaries:

“My father Dāwud had sent envoys to the sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir Barqūq. They were al-Qāḍī ‘Īsā , Zara‘ Hamnānūn and others”⁵⁰.

The former was an Arabic speaking Muslim, probably not a judicial officer considering that “*al-qāḍī*” had become at that time a title easily given to any civil officer. The latter was an Abyssinian dignitary as his name suggests.

The attendance in the delegation of an Arabic speaking Muslim, alongside the Abyssinian dignitary who led the embassy, could be at first sight explained by the requirement of mutual understanding. Both parties equally needed accuracy in the words of the diplomatic agreement. The role of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kārimī in the diplomatic protocol of 1443 was precisely to corroborate in Arabic the contents of the message delivered in Ge’ez by his Abyssinian counterpart.

However, the Mamluk court did not lack officers able to understand, and to speak in, the “language of the Abyssinians” (*luġat al-Ḥabaša*). This was particularly true of eunuchs of Abyssinian origin (*ḥabašī al-jins*) who were numerous and powerful in the Citadel of Cairo,

⁴⁷ Plante 1975: 139.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Şayrafī 1970-1994, vol. 4: 287.

⁴⁹ Vallet, 2010: 471-482.

⁵⁰ Ibn al-Şayrafī 1970-1994, vol. 4: 287.

either in the barracks or in the private palaces of the sultan⁵¹. In the late 1440's, the emissary of sultan Jaqmaq to the Muslim kingdom of Eastern Ethiopia, Badlāy b. Sa'd al-Dīn, was his eunuch Miṭqāl al-Ḥabaṣī⁵². Besides eunuchs, some Egyptian-born officers were also conversant in Ge'ez, as for instance Yaḥyā b. Aḥmad b. Šādi Bak, a *walad al-nās* who spoke fluently the "language of the Abyssinians" and was sent as an envoy to Abyssinia in 1443. It is unclear, however, if he had been chosen by sultan Jaqmaq owing to his linguistic ability, or if he got that skill precisely during the four-years journey that it earned him the nickname "Messenger of Abyssinia" (*Qāṣid al-Ḥabaša*)⁵³.

But the attendance of Arabic speaking emissaries was far to be a technical requirement only. The best evidence is that, according to the Venitian source of Georges Lengherand, the leader envoy of the 1481 embassy addressed the sultan without interpreter ("sans trucheman") because he spoke Arabic ("pour ce qu'il parloit morisque")⁵⁴. Should it be assumed that he was himself an Arabic speaking Muslim? The report of Georges Lengherand suggests the opposite. Nevertheless, according to the letter received in Cairo in 1290, the envoy of the *ḥaṭī*, who travelled through Yemen before meeting his death in 'Aydāb, was a certain Yūsuf b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Šarīfī, ie. an Arabic speaking Muslim. It seemed perhaps appropriate for the Abyssinians to emphasise his leadership during the journey in Yemen and Hijaz, as well as in the preliminary correspondence with the Mamluk sultan. But when the delegation finally reached Cairo, the "first envoy" (*al-rasūl al-aṣlī*) was actually an Abyssinian (*ḥabaṣī al-jins*)⁵⁵. Therefore, it can be inferred that the attendance of two emissaries, an Abyssinian dignitary and his Arabic speaking Muslim spokesman, was the rule in the *ḥaṭī*'s embassies. Moreover, the second delegation sent in Europe by Zar'a Yā'eqob, evidenced in Rome in 1450 thanks to a safe-conduct (*littera passus*) preserved in the Vatican archives, included four emissaries: Fire'-Mikā'ēl and Demetrio (both Abyssinian), Pietro Rombulo of Messina (who lived for a long time in Abyssinia) and a certain merchant named... Abū 'Umar al-Zandī⁵⁶. The skills of an Arabic speaking Muslim were always needed, even to reach the very heart of the Christendom.

⁵¹ Petry 1994: 59-68. Loiseau 2010, vol. 1: 203-205.

⁵² Al-Saḥāwī 1934-1936, vol. 6, n° 839: 239. Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 171.

⁵³ Al-Saḥāwī, 1934-1936, vol. 10, n° 939: 216. Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 170. Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 2: 239-240; vol. 3: 206.

⁵⁴ Georges Lengherand 1861: 187.

⁵⁵ Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 170-172.

⁵⁶ de Witte 1956: 286-298.

This quite systematic option suggests two other observations. First, it does appear that Arabic was the only language used in diplomatic exchanges between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan, at least in Cairo. It is not by chance if Cairene chroniclers did record in Arabic part of the text of four letters received from Abyssinia. Indeed, the Mamluk chancery had the capacity to translate in Arabic the Ge'ez correspondence of the *ḥaṭī*. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, who was at that time the sultan's private secretary, preserved for instance the Arabic translation (*ta'rīb*) of two letters brought by the 1290 embassy, one sent to the Jacobite patriarch, the other to the Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem. But we know that two other letters, brought on the same occasion to the sultan, were written and recorded directly in Arabic.

Second, it does also appear that Arabic speaking Muslim emissaries, working on behalf of the *ḥaṭī*, were most often merchants involved in the Red sea trade. It was easier for Abyssinian embassies to sail, from 'Awān or anywhere else on the Red sea coast, on board of merchant ships than to charter their own vessel. In any event, as well as traders or pilgrims, emissaries had to clear Egyptian customs. In 1290 for instance, on their way to Egypt, Abyssinian envoys complained about the "tithe collector" (*ṣāḥib zakāt*) of 'Aydāb⁵⁷. Moreover, it was imperative for the *ḥaṭī* to hire the services of merchants, considering that the customary gift expected by the sultan used to include "eunuchs and female servants, gold and shirts"⁵⁸. The high number of slaves presented to the sultan required the expertise of slave traders, who took also the opportunity offered by the embassy to conduct their own business. In 1443, the trader (*al-tājir*) 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kārimī, who led the envoys of the *ḥaṭī* with the emir 'Īsā, had imported two hundred slaves, among which seventy died on the road. Seventy others, only female servants (*jawārī*), were presented to the sultan along with "plates, golden ewer, golden spurs, sword gilded in gold leaf, golden ceremonial belt and other golden artefacts"⁵⁹. 'Abd al-Raḥmān had then sixty slaves left that he could sell on his own account. The trade costs and risks were thus shared between the sponsor of the embassy and his partner.

Diplomacy between gifts and memory

⁵⁷ Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 172. The *zakāt*, which is the obligatory payment by Muslims of a determinate portion of their property, including merchandise, has probably here the technical meaning of a tithe (*ushr*). On the payment of the *ushr* in the port of 'Aydāb, see Vallet 2010: 492-493.

⁵⁸ "*Wa al-laḍī jarat al-'āda bihi 'and infāḍ al-maṭrān min al-ḥuddām wa l-jawārī wa l-dahab wa l-uṣad wa yaṣīlu ma'a rasūli*". Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 170.

⁵⁹ Ibn al-Ṣayrafī 1970-1994, vol. 4: 281. The number of seventy slaves actually presented to the sultan is confirmed by both al-Saḥāwī and Gandolph of Sicily. However, the latter mentioned mainly golden arms (sword, lance, helmet, breastplate, shield, bow, quiver, arrows), along with "a small golden horse", among the artefacts presented to the sultan. Al-Saḥāwī 2002-2007, vol. 1: 164. Plante 1975: 138.

A diplomatic gift was always expected in Cairo from the Abyssinian embassy, a fortiori if it requested the appointment of a new metropolitan. As other kings, the *ḥaṭī* sought to select precious items (*tuḥaf*) and rarest things (*ṭarā'if*), among which always gold, in the form of artefacts or beads, to please the sultan⁶⁰. But in 1516 the lawness of the present, estimated at only five thousand dinars, aroused the indignation of sultan al-Ašraf Qānšūh al-Ġawrī. He enquired therefore about the value of gifts presented in the past by kings of Abyssinia. Two kinds of evidence were dispatched to satisfy the sultan's curiosity: chronicles (*tawārīḥ*) and registers (*qawā'im*), which were read in front of him. Chronicles reported that Abyssinian kings were by now less powerful than they had been previously and that, as an illustration, the gift presented two centuries earlier to sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was worth than one hundred thousand dinars⁶¹. As for the registers, they preserved evidence of gifts presented by foreign embassies to the Mamluk sultan, arranged by country, and were part of the chancery's archives. The memory preserved in registers was more accurate than the narratives of chroniclers, but it did not go back in the past as far as they did. In 1516, according to the report of Ibn Iyās, the memory of the chancery's archives went back to less than a century, ie. to the reception of an Abyssinian embassy by sultan Barsbāy in 1437.

Diplomacy was indeed a matter of memory, in which requests and grievances of the past had to be reminded. Diplomacy involved living memory, as that of the Abyssinian envoy of 1516, who was supposed to be the son of the emissary come thirty-five years earlier to the court of sultan Qāyṭbāy. But diplomacy required mainly written memory, as evidenced by the chancery's registers dispatched in 1516 to the sultan. With respect to written culture, it is worth pointing out that the Abyssinian court was also familiar with the archiving of documents. In 1290, the envelope of the letter (*ṭayy al-kitāb*) sent by king Yagbe'a Šeyon to sultan Qalāwūn contained also a note (*waraqa*) stating that the letter addressed earlier to king Yekuno Amlāk, his father, by sultan Baybars, was attached herewith. Acting as private secretary of both sultans, Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir then faced with an odd situation in which he had to copy from the Abyssinian file folder the text of a letter he composed himself sixteen years earlier⁶². The Mamluk letter had been meanwhile treasured in the court of the *ḥaṭī*.

⁶⁰ In 1387, the *ḥaṭī*'s envoys presented cauldrons full of golden beads shaped as chickpeas (“*ṣuni'a 'alā hay'at al-ḥumuṣ*”). Ibn al-Sayrafī 1970-1994, vol. 1: 145.

⁶¹ Ibn Iyās 1982-1984, vol. 5: 12. Unfortunately, the titles of these *tawārīḥ* were not mentioned. The report of Ibn Iyās is the only evidence I know of an Abyssinian embassy to Cairo in 712/1312-13.

⁶² Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir 1961: 170-171.

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