

# Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies

*Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*

*Edited by*

Frédéric Bauden  
Malika Dekkiche



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# Contents

Preface	IX
Abbreviations	XIV
Charts, Figures, and Tables	XVI
Notes on Contributors	XX

1	Mamluk Diplomatics: the Present State of Research	1
	<i>Frédéric Bauden</i>	
2	Mamluk Diplomacy: the Present State of Research	105
	<i>Malika Dekkiche</i>	

## PART 1

### *Diplomatic Conventions*

3	Diplomatics, or Another Way to See the World	185
	<i>Malika Dekkiche</i>	
4	Strong Letters at the Mamluk Court	214
	<i>Lucian Reinfandt</i>	
5	Embassies and Ambassadors in Mamluk Cairo	238
	<i>Yehoshua Frenkel</i>	

## PART 2

### *The Mongols and Their Successors*

6	Careers in Diplomacy among Mamluks and Mongols, 658–741/1260–1341	263
	<i>Anne F. Broadbridge</i>	
7	The Golden Horde and the Mamluks: the Birth of a Diplomatic Set-Up (660–5/1261–7)	302
	<i>Marie Favereau</i>	

- 8 Mamluk-Ilkhanid Diplomatic Contacts: Negotiations or Posturing? 327  
*Reuven Amitai*
- 9 Baghdad between Cairo and Tabriz: Emissaries to the Mamluks as Expressions of Local Political Ambition and Ideology during the Seventh/Thirteenth and Eighth/Fourteenth Centuries 340  
*Hend Gilli-Elewy*
- 10 Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Sulṭān Aḥmad Jalāyir's Time as a Refugee in the Mamluk Sultanate 363  
*Patrick Wing*

### PART 3

#### *The Timurids, the Turkmens, and the Ottomans*

- 11 Niẓām al-Dīn Shāmī's Description of the Syrian Campaign of Tīmūr 381  
*Michele Bernardini*
- 12 Diplomatic Entanglements between Tabriz, Cairo, and Herat: a Reconstructed Qara Qoyunlu Letter Datable to 818/1415 410  
*Frédéric Bauden*
- 13 Fixed Rules to a Changing Game? Sultan Meḥmed II's Realignment of Ottoman-Mamluk Diplomatic Conventions 484  
*Kristof D'hulster*

### PART 4

#### *The Western Islamic Lands*

- 14 Diplomatic Correspondence between Nasrid Granada and Mamluk Cairo: the Last Hope for al-Andalus 511  
*Bárbara Boloix Gallardo*
- 15 Entre Ifrīqiya hafside et Égypte mamelouke: Des relations anciennes, continues et consolidées 529  
*Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi*

- 16 Tracking Down the Hafsid Diplomatic Missions All the Way to the  
Turco-Mamluk Borders (892–6/1487–91) 566  
*Lotfi Ben Miled*

**PART 5**

***Arabia, India, and Africa***

- 17 Diplomatic Networks of Rasulid Yemen in Egypt (Seventh/Thirteenth to  
Early Ninth/Fifteenth Centuries) 581  
*Éric Vallet*
- 18 “Aggression in the Best of Lands”: Mecca in Egyptian-Indian Diplomacy  
in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century 604  
*John L. Meloy*
- 19 Some Remarks on the Diplomatic Relations between Cairo,  
Delhi/Dawlatābād, and Aḥmadābād during the Eighth/Fourteenth and  
Ninth/Fifteenth Centuries 621  
*Stephan Conermann and Anna Kollatz*
- 20 The *Ḥaṭī* and the Sultan: Letters and Embassies from Abyssinia to the  
Mamluk Court 638  
*Julien Loiseau*
- 21 “Peace Be upon Those Who Follow the Right Way”: Diplomatic Practices  
between Mamluk Cairo and the Borno Sultanate at the End of the  
Eighth/Fourteenth Century 658  
*Rémi Dewièrè*

**PART 6**

***The Latin West***

- 22 The European Embassies to the Court of the Mamluk Sultans in  
Cairo 685  
*Pierre Moukarzel*

- 23 In the Name of the Minorities: Lisbon's Muslims as Emissaries from the King of Portugal to the Sultan of Egypt 711  
*Maria Filomena Lopes de Barros*
- 24 Envoys between Lusignan Cyprus and Mamluk Egypt, 838–78/1435–73: the Accounts of Pero Tafur, George Boustronios and Ibn Taghrī Birdī 725  
*Nicholas Coureas*
- 25 Negotiating the Last Mamluk-Venetian Commercial Decree (922–3/1516–7): Commercial Liability from the Sixth/Twelfth to the Early Tenth/Sixteenth Century 741  
*Gladys Frantz-Murphy*
- 26 Three Mamluk Letters Concerning the Florentine Trade in Egypt and Syria: a New Interpretation 782  
*Alessandro Rizzo*

#### PART 7

#### *Material Culture*

- 27 Écritoires: objets fonctionnels et symboliques indissociables des cérémonies officielles à l'époque mamelouke 801  
*Ludvik Kalus*
- 28 Precious Objects for Eminent Guests: the Use of Chinese Ceramics in Mamluk Cairo: the Fustat Ceramic Collection from The Royal Museums of Art and History (Brussels) 823  
*Valentina Vezzoli*
- Index 843

## The *Ḥaṭī* and the Sultan: Letters and Embassies from Abyssinia to the Mamluk Court

*Julien Loiseau*

Mamluk Cairo may well have been a major diplomatic crossroads, highly frequented by foreign embassies, but streets were nonetheless crowded on that day of Muḥarram 922/February 1516, especially by Coptic Christians, who went out to look at the display of a delegation that had just arrived from Abyssinia. Almost six hundred people pitched their tents near the Lions' Bridges (Qanāṭir al-sibāʿ) as the embassy traveled down the main street of the Ṣalība up to the citadel. The Jacobite patriarch came with the procession, which was escorted by the *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 (r. 872–901/1468–96) in 886/1481. Two 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 la-hum shughl fī Miṣr*)." With respect to the distance, one can only agree with his statement: the journey of the 922/1516 embassy was supposed to last nine months from Abyssinia to Egypt. But it is incorrect to assert that the Abyssinians lacked diplomatic interest in their relations with the Mamluks and it is not surprising that Ibn Iyās's claim was refuted by the details of his own narrative.<sup>1</sup>

Diplomatic relations between the king of the Abyssinians and the sultan of Cairo were indeed far older than the two *dawlas* they embodied. The dynasty which reigned at that time over the highlands of Ethiopia was established in 1270 by the lord of Shāwa, Yekuno Amlāk (r. 1270–85), who overthrew the Zagwe kings just ten years after al-Ẓāhir Baybars (r. 658–76/1260–77) ascended to the throne. But the first embassy dispatched by Yekuno Amlāk, which actually suc-

1 Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr* v, 10–2. The issue of the diplomatic relations between kings of the Abyssinians and Mamluk sultans was studied as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. See Quatremère, *Mémoire*. Yet, since the survey published in 1938 by Gaston Wiet, it has not received the attention it deserves, with the exception of the recent work of Qāsim ʿAbduh Qāsim. Wiet, *Les Relations*; Qāsim, *ʿAlāqāt Miṣr*. The following remarks are a first reassessment of the issue based on a work in progress.

ceeded in reaching Cairo in 673/1274, carried on relationships that dated to the introduction of Christianity in Abyssinia during the fourth century CE. It is therefore necessary to return to an examination of the motives of the regular dispatch of letters and even embassies by the king of the Abyssinians. This Christian king was indeed well known in Mamluk sources, in which he was called *malik al-Ḥabasha*, sometimes *ṣāhib bilād Amḥara* or *al-Amḥarī*, and more often the *ḥaṭī*, i.e., the Arabic transcription of a Ge'ez title that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir (d. 692/1293), the private secretary of sultans Baybars and Qalāwūn (r. 678–89/1279–90), explained as follows: "*ḥaṭī, ya'nī l-khalīfa*."<sup>2</sup>

### 1 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. This subordination has prevailed from the fourth century up to 1951, even if the metropolitan was not always able to reach his bishopric.<sup>3</sup> The Mamluk chancery was well aware of the situation in the 730s/1330s, as it appears in the *Ta'rīf* of Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī (d. 749/1349):

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 for the appointment of metropolitans one after the other. Such a correspondence is offensive for him, but he is compelled to make the request. What the patriarch commands him, he accepts with the same respect that [he has for] his own law (*sharī'atihī*).<sup>4</sup>

The king of the Abyssinians thus used to dispatch letters and embassies to Cairo, where the patriarch was settled, 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

2 Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir* 431; Gori, Sugli Incipit delle missive.

3 Taklahaymanot, The Egyptian metropolitan.

4 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *al-Ta'rīf* 49.

own correspondence, which the sultan could not control except by means of intimidation; and he was sometimes eager to exploit this in his relations with Abyssinia.<sup>5</sup>

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 had been settling in Jerusalem from at least 634–5/1237 when evidence of their presence was first provided.<sup>6</sup> From 659/1261 onward, the holy city had been under the sovereignty of the sultan of Cairo; this only ceased to be the case in Dhū l-Qa'da 922/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 permission to (re)build places of burial and worship, or to grant the provision for entering the Holy Sepulchre without paying taxes.<sup>7</sup> Most of the Abyssinian embassies dispatched to Cairo might have continued on their way to Jerusalem before coming back home. This was indeed the first intent of the embassy of 689/1290, which was carrying various items (carpets, candels, lamps, sacerdotal garments) for the Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> However, we have evidence about the embassies of 847/1443, 886/1481, and 922/1516, the arrival of which was well noticed in the holy city.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue was the king's claim to protect places of worship and the community interests of the Coptic Christians in Egypt, and the sultan's pretension to safeguard the Muslims in Abyssinia. Indeed, conversions of Coptic Christians to Islam and the Islamization of the Egyptian landscape and society increased at the end of the eighth/thirteenth century. In the early 720s/1320s, anti-Christian riots led to the destruction of numerous churches and monasteries in Cairo and around the country. Hence these dramatic events were the main issue of the Abyssinian embassy dispatched to Cairo in 726/1325:

On Monday, the sixteenth of the month of Muḥarram [23 December], the envoys of the king of the Abyssinians arrived with a letter in which he requested, with respect and reverence, the restoration of the churches

5 In 852/1448, the patriarch was prohibited by al-Zāhir Jaqmaq (r. 842–57/1438–53) from sending either a letter or an emissary to Abyssinia without his permission. Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* ii, 81.

6 Van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 94.

7 Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* i, 76–409; Van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 95–9; O'Mahony, *Between Islam and Christendom* 148–53.

8 Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrif al-ayyām* 170–3; Van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 95.

9 Plante, *The Ethiopian embassy* 139–40; al-'Ulaymī, *al-Uns al-jalīl* ii, 326; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī' al-zuhūr* v, 12.



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 from flowing through Egypt. The sultan scorned [the king's claim] and his envoys went back.<sup>10</sup>

However, the *ḥaṭī* would not have positioned himself as a champion of the Coptic community and threatened in turn to target Muslim places of worship in Abyssinia, if Islamization had not critically increased at the same period in the Horn of Africa. It is well known that Islam was introduced in the area even before the *hijra* to Medina, when some of the Prophet's companions took temporary exile at the court of the "Najāshī," the Christian king of Aksum, in 615.<sup>11</sup> It is less known that there is epigraphic evidence of Muslim communities in the highlands of Abyssinia and in the Tigray (in northeast Ethiopia) from the fourth/tenth century onward.<sup>12</sup> According to a late *ta'rikh*, the first Islamic polity came into being in the area south of the Christian kingdom, in the province of Shāwa, perhaps as early as the fourth/tenth century under the Makhzumid dynasty. In the late 670s/1270s, the conquest of the sultanate of Shāwa by the Walasma' gave rise to a new polity based in Īfāt, in the eastern escarpment of the highlands; this was a vassal of, and a serious threat to, the Christian kingdom until the 820s/1420s.<sup>13</sup> In 856/1452, the diplomatic game between Abyssinia and Egypt was complicated by the arrival in Cairo of an embassy dispatched by the *malik muslimī l-Ḥabasha*, also called the *ṣāhib Jabartī* (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 in the area of Harar.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 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 correspondents. Royal chronicles in Ge'ez preserved

10 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk* ii/1, 270. The legend of the Abyssinians' ability to block or dry the Nile spread from Arabic sources to both Ge'ez and Latin texts during the thirteenth century. The issue is currently being studied in France by B. Weber, together with M.-L. Derat, J. Loiseau, and R. Seignobos.

11 Al-Ṭayyib, *Hijrat al-Ḥabasha*.

12 Fauvelle and Hirsch, Muslim historical spaces 30–31; Bauden, *Inscriptions arabes* 297–9; Loiseau, Two unpublished Arabic inscriptions.

13 Cerulli, *La storia della dinastia*; Cerulli, *Il sultanato*.

14 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* xv, 441; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* iv, 15; Ullendorff, *Djabart*.

some pieces of evidence related to the arrival of envoys dispatched by the patriarch of Alexandria, and also works on military retaliation against the Mamluks, as for instance the raids of Sayfa Ar'ad's (r. 1344–72) army in Upper Egypt after the arrest of the patriarch Marcos IV (r. 1348–63) in 1352.<sup>15</sup> In annals compiled later in Abyssinia one finds brief mentions of the departure and return of royal envoys to Jerusalem, who might have been first dispatched to Cairo.<sup>16</sup> But not a single Ge'ez text explicitly records embassies or letters sent by the *ḥaṭī* to the Mamluk court. In 851/1447, King Zar'a Yā'eqob (r. 1434–68) sent a letter to the Abyssinian monks of Jerusalem, enclosed with 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 far.<sup>17</sup> 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 689/1290 carried two Ge'ez letters to Cairo, one for the patriarch and the other for the Abyssinian monks of Jerusalem, the substance of which was recorded in Arabic by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, who was at that time the sultan's private secretary.<sup>18</sup> But as yet no original document of this parallel diplomacy has been 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 a 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 to Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> Later, the pilgrim Georges Lengherand (fl. 15th c.) inserted in his travel relation an account of the Abyssinian embassy to Sultan Qāyṭbāy, based on the testimony of a Venetian who attended the event in Cairo.<sup>20</sup> Despite several exaggerations, these testimonies confirm the core of the account provided by the Cairene chroniclers for the embassies of 847/1443 and 886/1481. But these reports are not enough to mitigate the effects of the disparity in the evidence available. The views of

15 Perruchon, *Récit* 177–8, 181; Cuoq, *L'Islam* 179–80.

16 Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* i, 241, 391–3.

17 Euringer, *Ein angeblicher Brief*; Mekouria, *Le Roi*; O'Mahony, *Between Islam and Christendom* 150.

18 Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrif al-ayyām* 172–3; Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* i, 88–90.

19 The document was first published by Wadding, *Annales minorum* xi, 53–4. An amended version, based on a new manuscript, has been published by Plante, *The Ethiopian embassy*.

20 Lengherand, *Voyage* 185–8.

our sources are mainly that of the Mamluk court or Muslim chroniclers who used to move in Mamluk households. The relative decline of the Coptic-Arabic historiography after the middle of the seventh/fourteenth century makes the disparity even more significant.<sup>21</sup>

However, this 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 before the sultan in the name of the *ḥaṭī* (see references in the table below). The text of a fifth letter, sent in 788/1387 by King Dāwīt (r. 1382–1413) to Sultan Barqūq (r. 784–91/1382–89; 792–801/1390–9), was likely lost from the end of the eleventh/seventeenth century, provided that Père Vansleb (d. 1679) was truthful in claiming to have come across a copy of the letter while collecting Arabic manuscripts in Egypt for the Royal Library of Louis XIV.<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 20.1 Abyssinian letters and embassies to Mamluk Cairo: a survey

Date	Event	Primary sources
Between 669/1270 and 673/1274	embassy sent by Yekuno Amlāk to the Mamluk sultan, stopped and plundered on its way by the malik of Saḥart	Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, <i>al-Najh al-sadīd</i> xiv/3, 387
673/1274	letter (partly preserved) sent by Yekuno Amlāk to al-Zāhir Baybars through the Rasulid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf, announcing the delay of the awaited embassy because of dynastic changes and military campaigns	Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, <i>al-Rawḍ al-zāhir</i> 430–1; Baybars al-Manṣūrī, <i>Zubdat al-fikra</i> 144; al-Nuwayrī, <i>Nihāyat al-arab</i> xxx, 211–3; Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, <i>al-Najh al-sadīd</i> xiv/3, 384–6; al-Qalqashandī, <i>Ṣubḥ al-a'shā</i> viii, 119–20
689/1290	letter (partly preserved) sent by Yagbe'a Ṣeyon to al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn announcing an embassy that was delayed because of its leader's death in 'Aydhāb; arrival in Cairo of the envoys with letters for the sultan (one of two partly preserved), the patriarch (partly preserved), and Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem (partly preserved)	Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, <i>Tashrif al-ayyām</i> 170–3

21 den Heijer, *Coptic Historiography* 88–98.

22 Vansleb, *Nouvelle Relation* 60, quoted by Wiet, *Les Relations* 134.

TABLE 20.1 Abyssinian letters and embassies to Mamluk Cairo: a survey (*cont.*)

Date	Event	Primary sources
712/1312–3	(alleged?) embassy sent to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad with a present worth over 100,000 dinars	Ibn Iyās, <i>Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr</i> v, 12
726/1325	embassy sent by ʿAmda Ṣeyon to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad with a letter	al-Maqrīzī, <i>al-Sulūk</i> ii/1, 270
737/1336	embassy sent by ʿAmda Ṣeyon to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad; ʿAbdallāh al-Zaylaʿī, who was the source of Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī's knowledge about Abyssinia, likely belonged to the delegation	al-Maqrīzī, <i>al-Sulūk</i> ii/2, 410; Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī, <i>Masālik al-abṣār</i> iv, 37, 39, 49
753/1352	letter sent by Sayfa Arʿad to al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ	Ibn Nāẓir al-Jaysh, <i>Tathqīf al-taʾrīf</i> 31
788/1387	embassy sent by Dāwit to al-Zāhir Barqūq with a letter; Vansleb claimed to have found a copy of the letter	al-Maqrīzī, <i>al-Sulūk</i> iii/2, 555; Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, <i>Nuzhat al-nufūs</i> i, 145; Vansleb, <i>Nouvelle Relation</i> 60
Between 801/1399 and 815/1412	letter sent by Dāwit to al-Nāṣir Faraj? Good relationships between the two kings are noted in the letter of Zarʿa Yāʿeqob in 847/1443	Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, <i>Nuzhat al-nufūs</i> iv, 285; al-Sakhāwī, <i>al-Tibr al-masbūk</i> i, 167
841/1437	embassy and letter sent by Zarʿa Yāʿeqob to al-Ashraf Barsbāy	al-Maqrīzī, <i>al-Sulūk</i> iv/2, 1024; Ibn Ḥajar, <i>Inbāʿ al-ghumr</i> iv, 69
847/1443	embassy and letter (partly preserved) sent by Zarʿa Yāʿeqob to al-Zāhir Jaqmaq; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, <i>Nuzhat al-nufūs</i> iv, 281–8; al-Sakhāwī, <i>al-Tibr al-masbūk</i> i, 164–73; Plante, <i>The Ethiopian embassy 133–40</i>
857/1453	embassy sent by Zarʿa Yāʿeqob to al-Zāhir Jaqmaq; envoys arrived in Cairo eighteen days after the death of the sultan	Ibn Taghrī Birdī, <i>al-Nujūm al-zāhira</i> xvi, 33; al-Sakhāwī, <i>al-Tibr al-masbūk</i> iv, 87

TABLE 20.1 Abyssinian letters and embassies to Mamluk Cairo: a survey (*cont.*)

Date	Event	Primary sources
886/1481	embassy sent by Eskender to al-Ashraf Qāyṭ-bāy; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn Iyās, <i>Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr</i> iii, 179–80; al-ʿUlaymī, <i>al-Uns al-jalīl</i> ii, 326; Lengherand, <i>Voyage</i> 185–8
922/1516	embassy sent by Dāwit II to al-Ashraf Qān-ṣawh al-Ghawrī with a letter; the envoys continued on their way to Jerusalem	Ibn Iyās, <i>Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr</i> v, 10–2

Over a period of almost 250 years, Abyssinian kings dispatched eleven embassies to the Mamluk court, among which the first never succeeded in reaching 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 for certain, and perhaps a third one, were sent by the *ḥaṭī* without envoys. However, two of these fourteen diplomatic events are questionable, as the evidence for them relies on later references: first, the embassy of 712/1312–3 was only mentioned in 922/1516—it was famous until that time for the splendid present that was delivered to the munificent Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (r. 693–4/1293–4, 698–708/1299–1309, 709–41/1310–41); second, the precise nature of the relationships between the *ḥaṭī* and the sultan (an exchange of letters?) during the reign of al-Nāṣir Faraj (r. 801–8/1399–1405, 808–15/1405–12), whose friendship was noted in the letter of Zarʿa Yāʿeqob in 847/1443, is not clear.

Abyssinian kings used to dispatch letters and embassies to Cairo with a high degree of regularity throughout the Mamluk period. The longest term without contact was perhaps fifty years, between the embassies of 788/1387 and 841/1437, provided that no letter actually arrived in Cairo under the reign of al-Nāṣir Faraj. That time coincided with unrest in the Abyssinian kingdom that ensued from the perilous succession of King Dāwit and King Yeṣḥāq's (r. 1414–29) fight against the Muslim kinglets of Īfāt.

Conversely, three peaks of diplomatic activity can be identified. The first one took place under the long and simultaneous reigns of ʿAmda Ṣeyon (1314–42) and (the third reign of) al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (709–41/1310–41). Two Abyssinian embassies were dispatched to Cairo over an eleven-year period, in 726/1325 and 737/1336, 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 780s/1380s, after rumors of Abyssinian incursions in Upper Egypt. In 783/1381, the great amir Barqūq, acting in the name of the young Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ḥājījī (r. 783–4/1381–2), 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. At the same time Barqūq decided to send his own emissary, a certain Ibrāhīm al-Dimyāṭī, who only returned in 787/1384. The latter was among the sources of al-Maqrīzī's short treatise on Abyssinia, the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*.<sup>23</sup> Three years later, Abyssinian envoys arrived in Cairo to restore confidence between King Dāwit and (the new) Sultan Barqūq. The 788/1387 embassy was important in the long-term history of diplomatic relations between Abyssinia and Egypt. Half a century later, it was noted 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 was again worthy of the title of *ṣadīq al-mulūk wa-l-salāṭīn*, which was customarily given to the Abyssinian king by the Mamluk chancery.<sup>24</sup>

The third peak in diplomatic activity occurred under the reign of Zar'a Yā'eqob, who dispatched three embassies to Cairo: in 841/1437 to al-Ashraf Barsbāy (r. 825–41/1422–38), in 847/1443 and 857/1453 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 1441.<sup>25</sup> The embassy of 841/1437 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 between King Dāwit, his father, and Sultan Barqūq until their deaths.<sup>26</sup> But the embassy seemed to have been mainly justified by the recent death of the metropolitan: according to the usual procedure the king's letter requested permission from the sultan for the patriarch to send a new deputy.<sup>27</sup> Does this mean that no metropolitan had been dispatched to Abyssinia since

23 Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-ghumr* i, 232–3; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk* iii/2, 445, 447, 515; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* v, 333; Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Manhal al-ṣāfi* ii, 359; al-Maqrīzī, *al-Ilmām*. A critical edition of al-Maqrīzī's *Kitāb al-Ilmām bi-akḥbār man bi-arḍ al-Ḥubsh min mulūk al-islām* is to be published by Manfred Kropp in the Bibliotheca Maqriziana.

24 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umārī, *al-Ta'rīf* 49; Ibn Nāzīr al-Jaysh, *Tathqīf al-ta'rīf* 30; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* viii, 40; al-Saḥmāwī, *al-Thaḡhr al-bāsīm* ii, 828; Gori, Sugli incipit delle missive. 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, *Tashrif al-ayyām* 171.

25 Lefevre, *Presenze*; Weber, *La Bulle*.

26 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 168.

27 Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-ghumr* iv, 69.

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 in the letter of 841/1437, must have prompted the two other embassies. The letter presented to Sultan Jaqmaq in 847/1443 officially protested against the destruction of a Coptic monastery in the Delta, Dayr al-Magħṭīs or Dayr al-Ghaṭṣ, that had been ordered in 841/1438 by his predecessor al-Ashraf Barsbāy; he therefore requested permission to rebuild it.<sup>28</sup> The king also requested that Abyssinian monks 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 from doing so. In this respect, Zar'a Yā'eqob complained about the unequal treatment of the Christian communities in Jerusalem, and claimed that Latins and Georgians were recently granted the right to build anew in the holy city.<sup>29</sup> Six years later, in 857/1453, 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; this was certainly the reason Cairene chroniclers did not pay attention to its claims. But this embassy might have been prompted by recent events in Jerusalem that reflected a change in policy toward the Christians that might have affected the Abyssinians, i.e., the destruction of some Franciscans' buildings and tombs on Mount Sion eight months earlier in Jumādā 1 856/June 1452.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, a few years later evidence was provided that the Abyssinians had taken possession of the shrine of the Cave of David, the place where the Biblical king was supposed to have composed the Penitential Psalms, also located on Mount Sion.<sup>31</sup> Zar'a Yā'eqob may have wished to secure Abyssinian holdings on Mount Sion by dispatching an embassy to Cairo in 857/1453. After that date, and after an interval of three decades, only two embassies sent by the ḥaṭī were mentioned, one in 886/1481 and the second in 922/1516 on the eve of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt.

Our knowledge of these diplomatic events is very uneven. The embassy of 726/1325 is only known thanks to al-Maqrīzī, who later described it in a few words; yet the embassy of 847/1443 is documented by three contemporary wit-

28 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 169; Coquin, Dayr al-Magħṭīs.

29 Indeed, between 1430 and 1435, a chapel was built inside the round church of the Holy Sepulchre for the use of the Franciscan friars. Suriano, *Il trattato* 31–2, quoted by van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 103, note 17. During the same period, we know that the Georgians controlled, among many other shrines in the city and its vicinity, the place inside the Holy Sepulchre where Christ was supposed to have been wrapped in linen for burial. Van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 97; Abu-Manneh, *The Georgians* 106–7.

30 Al-'Ulaymī, *al-Uns al-jalīl* ii, 97–8.

31 Van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 98–9.

nesses. Despite the disparity in the evidence, one can clarify to some extent the way in which Abyssinian embassies were dispatched to Cairo.

### 3 The Journey to Egypt

It is hardly surprising that, as far as we know, the embassies' journey to Egypt was lengthy and uncertain. In 847/1443, the embassy arrived in Cairo four months after its departure. In 922/1516, the journey was said to have lasted nine months.<sup>32</sup> 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 months long on average. That year, the caravan was attacked by Bedouins, and only fifteen pilgrims succeeded in escaping.<sup>33</sup> In the early 670s/1270s, the first embassy of Yekuno Amlāk never reached its destination.<sup>34</sup> These journey times are somehow confirmed by the account of Mamluk embassies in Abyssinia. The emissary of Sultan Jaqmaq came back four years after he was dispatched; he had been detained by his host while fighting a Muslim kinglest in eastern Ethiopia.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the emissary of Sultan Barqūq, who spent three years journeying to Abyssinia and back, did not experience similar misfortunes.<sup>36</sup>

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 seventh/thirteenth century, "The route toward Amḥarā goes through the city of 'Awān, which is the anchorage (*sāhil*) of the country of the Abyssinians."<sup>37</sup> This harbor, 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 seventh/thirteenth century as a result of the decline of the Dahlak archipelago.<sup>38</sup> Until the end of the eighth/fourteenth century, Abyssinian embassies probably sailed 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 harbors and to cross the sea again at the Egyptian port of

32 Plante, The Ethiopian embassy 138; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr* v, 12.

33 Van Donzel, The Ethiopian presence 100.

34 Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, *al-Najh al-sadi'd* xiv/3, 387.

35 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 170–1.

36 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk* iii/2, 515.

37 Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir* 431.

38 Vallet, *L'Arabie marchande* 401–2.



‘Aydhāb. In both cases, they reached the Nile Valley at Qūṣ and went down the river to Cairo.<sup>39</sup> The Yemeni route seems to have predominated during the second half of the seventh/thirteenth century. In 673/1274, 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 Rasulid sultan al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf (r. 647–94/1250–95). In 689/1290, 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 Rasulid 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 ‘Aydhāb, 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 envoys.<sup>40</sup>

Evidence is missing, however, on the routes of ninth-/fifteenth-century Abyssinian embassies. We only know that in 847/1443 before reaching his destination, the leader of the envoys “left fifty of [his men] in Upper Egypt with the supplies for the journey.”<sup>41</sup> However, all the itineraries from Abyssinia to Cairo or Jerusalem, collected in Venice by Alessandro Zorzi thanks to native informants (ca. 1520), went by land through Suwākin and the eastern desert before going down the Nile. In 1520, the pilgrim caravan reported by Alvares followed the same route.<sup>42</sup> The southern itinerary to Cairo survived the “mediterraneization” of the Mamluk sultanate, at least for conveying Abyssinian embassies.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4 The Ḥaṭī’s Two Emissaries

Cairene chroniclers are more talkative about the composition of Abyssinian delegations. According to Ibn Iyās (d. 930/1524), the 922/1516 embassy included about six hundred people, among which only seven were received in the courtyard (*al-ḥawsh*) of the citadel: the head of the envoys (*al-qāṣid al-kabīr*), five chief officers (*min aṣyān umarā’ al-Ḥabasha*) and “a noble person” (*wa-dhakarū*

39 Garcin, *Un centre musulman* 220–2.

40 *Ethiopian itineraries* 28–39 (where “Adam” is located inland); Garcin, *Un centre musulman* 222.

41 Plante, The Ethiopian embassy 138.

42 *Ethiopian itineraries* 124–31 (Iter 1, from Axum to Cairo), 132–7 (Iter 11, from Barara to Jerusalem).

43 Garcin, La ‘Méditerranéisation.’

*anna fihim shakhṣan sharīfan*), maybe a member of the royal family. This high number may be better explained by the final destination of the embassy, i.e., the pilgrimage in Jerusalem, than by an exaggeration of the chronicler. This compared with the 847/1443 embassy, the leader of which entered Cairo with one hundred and 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 pilgrims.<sup>44</sup>

As one might expect, embassies were most often led by a dignitary chosen from among the Abyssinian nobility. In 922/1516, people in Cairo said 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-Ashraf 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 [1514–5], 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 (1478–94) and might have been the royal envoy dispatched to Cairo in 1481.<sup>45</sup>

According to the same source, “in the year 94 of God’s mercy [1441–2], Ato Anbasā went to Jerusalem; in the year 96 of God’s mercy [1443–4], 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 847/1443.<sup>46</sup> We know however, thanks to Gandulph of Sicily, that the *ḥaṭī*’s envoy delivered his message to the sultan before asking “a certain Saracen from the tribe of the infamous Mahomet, whom he had brought with him for this purpose” to testify in Arabic “all that he had said.”<sup>47</sup> 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-Ṣayrafi (d. 900/1495): “And now We have sent envoys to Your Mightiness the Sultan. They are *al-ḥājj al-jalīl* ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the amir ‘Īsā and others.”<sup>48</sup> It is likely that this “amir ‘Īsā” was an Abyssinian dignitary whose Ge’ez name (Iyasu?) was transcribed into Arabic for the purpose of the letter. As for the deputy who gave his message in Arabic, he was not only a Muslim (as his name suggests), but was elsewhere described as a “trader” (*tājir*), and bore the nisba “*al-Kārimī*” as did merchants

44 Plante, *The Ethiopian embassy* 138; van Donzel, *The Ethiopian presence* 100.

45 Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’ al-zuhūr* v, 11; Kolmodin, *Traditions* 32, quoted by Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* i, 393.

46 Kolmodin, *Traditions* 31, quoted by Cerulli *Etiopi in Palestina* i, 241.

47 Plante, *The Ethiopian embassy* 139.

48 Ibn al-Ṣayrafi, *Nuzhat al-nufūs* iv, 287.

involved in the Red Sea trade between Egypt and Yemen.<sup>49</sup> According to the letter of 847/1443, the embassy of 788/1387 was led in the same way by two emissaries: “My father Dāwūd had sent envoys to the Sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir Barqūq. They were al-Qāḍī ʿĪsā, Zaraʿ Hamnānūn, and others.”<sup>50</sup> The former was an Arabic-speaking Muslim, probably not a judicial officer, given 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 of an Arabic-speaking Muslim in the delegation alongside the Abyssinian dignitary who led the embassy, could be explained at first sight by the requirement of mutual understanding. The two parties needed the words of the diplomatic agreement to be accurate. The role of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kārimī in the diplomatic protocol of 847/1443 was precisely to corroborate in Arabic the contents of the message delivered in Geʿez by his Abyssinian counterpart.

By contrast, the Mamluk court did not lack officers able to understand and speak the “language of the Abyssinians” (*luḡhat al-Ḥabasha*). Eunuchs of Abyssinian origin (*ḥabashī l-jins*) were particularly numerous and powerful in the citadel of Cairo; they lived either in the barracks or in the private palaces of the sultan.<sup>51</sup> In the late 840s/1440s, the emissary of Sultan Jaqmaq to the Muslim kinglet of eastern Ethiopia, Badlāy b. Saʿd al-Dīn (r. 1433–45), was the sultan’s eunuch Mithqāl al-Ḥabashī.<sup>52</sup> Besides eunuchs, some Egyptian-born officers were also conversant in Geʿez, as for instance Yahyā b. Aḥmad b. Shādī Bak, a *walad al-nās* who spoke fluently the “language of the Abyssinians” and was sent as an envoy to Abyssinia in 847/1443. It is unclear, however, if he was chosen by Sultan Jaqmaq on account of his linguistic ability, or if he acquired that skill during the four-year journey during which he earned the nickname “messenger of Abyssinia” (*qāṣid al-Ḥabasha*).<sup>53</sup>

But the attendance of Arabic-speaking emissaries was not only a technical requirement. The best evidence of this is that, according to the Venetian source of Georges Lengherand, the leader of the envoy of the 886/1481 embassy addressed the sultan without interpreter (“*sans trucheman*”) because he spoke Arabic (“*pour ce qu’il parloit morisque*”).<sup>54</sup> Should it be assumed that he was

49 Vallet, *L’Arabie marchande* 471–82.

50 Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-nufūs* iv, 287.

51 Petry, *From slaves*; Loiseau, *Reconstruire* i, 203–5.

52 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ* vi, 239 (n. 839); al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 171.

53 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ* x, 216 (no. 939); al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 170; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr* ii, 239–40; iii, 206.

54 Lengherand, *Voyage* 187.

himself an Arabic-speaking Muslim? The report of Georges Lengherand suggests the opposite. Nevertheless, according to the letter received in Cairo in 689/1290, the envoy of the *ḥaṭī*, who traveled through Yemen before meeting his death in ‘Aydḥāb, was a certain Yūsuf b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharīfī, i.e., an Arabic-speaking Muslim. It seemed perhaps appropriate for the Abyssinians to emphasize 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 an Abyssinian (*ḥabashī l-jīns*).<sup>55</sup> 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 to 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-Zandī.<sup>56</sup> The skills of an Arabic-speaking Muslim were always needed, even to reach the very heart of Christendom.

This quite systematic option suggests two other observations. First, it appears 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 that Cairene chroniclers recorded in Arabic part of the text of four letters received from Abyssinia. Indeed, the Mamluk chancery had the capacity to translate the Ge’ez correspondence of the *ḥaṭī* into Arabic. For example, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, who was at that time the sultan’s private secretary, preserved the Arabic translation (*ta’rīb*) of two letters brought by the 689/1290 embassy, one that had been sent to the Jacobite patriarch, the other to the Abyssinian monks in Jerusalem. But we know that two other letters, brought to the sultan on the same occasion, were written and recorded directly in Arabic.

Second, it also appears 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 merchant ships than to charter their own vessels. In any event, emissaries, like traders or pilgrims, had to clear Egyptian customs. In 689/1290 for instance, on their way to Egypt, Abyssinian envoys complained about the “tithe collector” (*ṣāḥib zakāt*) of ‘Aydḥāb.<sup>57</sup> Moreover,

55 Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrif al-ayyām* 170–2.

56 de Witte, Une ambassade éthiopienne.

57 Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrif al-ayyām* 172. The *zakāt*, which is the obligatory payment by Muslims of a fixed portion of their property, including merchandise, probably has the

it was imperative for the *ḥaṭī* to hire the services of merchants, considering that the customary gifts expected by the sultan used to include “eunuchs and female servants, gold and shirts.”<sup>58</sup> The high number of slaves presented to the sultan required the expertise of slave traders, who took the opportunity offered by the embassy to conduct their own business. In 847/1443, the trader (*al-tājir*) ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kārimī, who led the envoys of the *ḥaṭī* with the amir ‘Īsā, imported two hundred slaves, among whom seventy died on the road. Seventy others, only female servants (*jawāri*), were presented to the sultan along with “plates, a golden ewer, golden spurs, a sword gilded in gold leaf, a golden ceremonial belt and other golden artifacts.”<sup>59</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān then had 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.

## 5 Diplomacy between Gifts and Memory

Diplomatic gifts were 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 the most precious items (*tuḥaf*) and rarest things (*ṭarāʿif*), among which usually included gold, in the form of artifacts or beads that would please the sultan.<sup>60</sup> But in 922/1516 the inexpensive nature of the presents, estimated at only five thousand dinars, aroused the indignation of Sultan al-Ashraf Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī. He inquired 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 (*tawārīkh*) and registers (*qawāʿim*), 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 gifts presented two centuries earlier to Sultan

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technical meaning of tithe (*ʿushr*) in this case. On the payment of the *ʿushr* in the port of ‘Aydhāb, see Vallet, *L’Arabie marchande* 492–3.

58 “Wa-l-ladhī jarat al-‘āda bi-hi ‘inda infādḥ al-maṭrān min al-khuddām wa-l-jawārī wa-l-dhahab wa-l-ʿuṣad wa-yaṣil ma’a rasūlihi.” Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrīf al-ayyām* 170.

59 Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-nufūs* iv, 281. The number of seventy slaves actually presented to the sultan is confirmed by both al-Sakhāwī and Gandulph of Sicily. However, the latter mainly mentioned golden weaponry (sword, lance, helmet, breastplate, shield, bow, quiver, arrows), along with “a small golden horse,” as being among the artifacts presented to the sultan. Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr al-masbūk* i, 164; Plante, *The Ethiopian embassy* 138.

60 In 788/1387, the *ḥaṭī*’s envoys presented cauldrons full of golden beads shaped like chickpeas (“*ṣuni’a ‘alā hay’at al-ḥummuṣ*”). Ibn al-Sayrafī, *Nuzhat al-nufūs* i, 145.

al-Nāṣir Muḥammad were worth 100,000 dinars.<sup>61</sup> The registers 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 as far back as they did. In 922/1516, according to the report of Ibn Iyās, the memory of the chancery's archives went back less than a century, i.e., to the reception of an Abyssinian embassy by Sultan Barsbāy in 841/1437.

Diplomacy was indeed a matter of memory, in which requests and grievances of the past had to be remembered. Diplomacy involved living memory, as that of the Abyssinian envoy of 922/1516, who was supposed to be the son of the emissary who arrived thirty-five years earlier at the court of Sultan Qāyṭbāy. But diplomacy required mainly written memory, as evidenced by the chancery's registers dispatched in 922/1516 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 689/1290, the envelope of the letter (*ṭayy al-kitāb*) sent by King Yagbe'a Ṣeyon (r. 1285–94) to Sultan Qalāwūn also contained a note (*warāqa*) 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 was then faced with an odd situation in which he had to copy from the Abyssinian file the text of a letter he himself had composed sixteen years earlier.<sup>62</sup> In the meantime, the Mamluk letter had been treasured in the court of the *ḥaṭī*.

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61 Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ir al-zuhūr* v, 12. Unfortunately, the titles of these *tawārīkh* were not mentioned. The report of Ibn Iyās is the only evidence I know of an Abyssinian embassy to Cairo in 712/1312–3.

62 Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Tashrīf al-ayyām* 170–1.

- Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, *al-Najh al-sadīd wa-l-durr al-farīd fī-mā ba'd Ta'rīkh Ibn al-'Amīd*, ed. and trans. E. Blochet, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks*, in *PO* 14/3, 19/3, 20 (1919–29).
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