

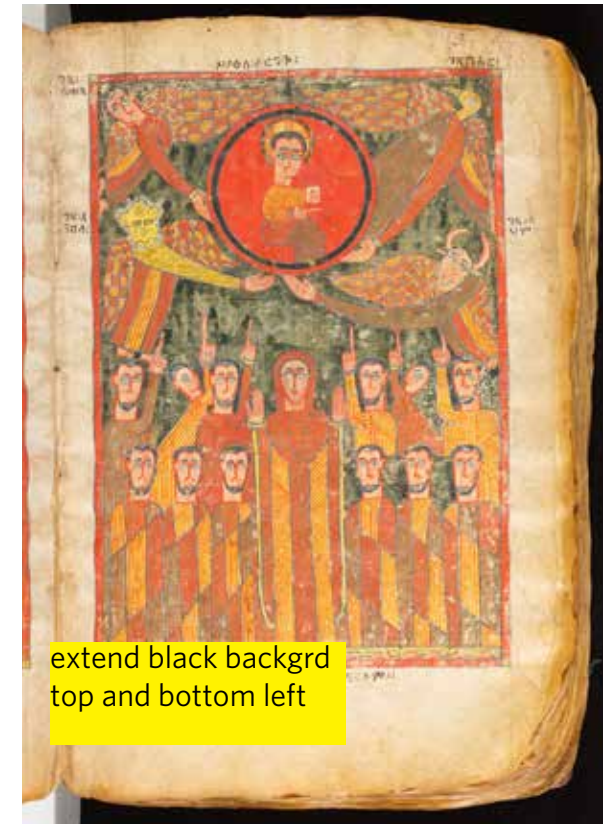
Where Is Medieval Ethiopia? Mapping Ethiopic Studies within Medieval Studies

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Where or how does the study of Ethiopian literature, history, and culture fit within the framework of the discipline of medieval studies? In this essay, I attempt to locate Ethiopia, first in terms of medieval representations—that is, how it was seen through Western eyes—and second in terms of how the study of medieval Ethiopia might contribute meaningfully to the discipline of medieval studies, which is often represented as being concerned primarily with Latin Christian Europe. The place of medieval Ethiopia might be conceived within the overarching framework of a “global” Middle Ages, or it might be conceived in a way that draws upon the methodologies of Mediterranean Studies, with a focus on connectivity and regional identities.¹ Either approach must be situated in the context of the long history of Western representations of Ethiopia, which drew upon religious and racial constructions of identity to imagine a people who were at once remote and monstrous, deformed by the heat of the sun, and yet situated at the very heart of an alluring fantasy of Judeo-Christian identity.²

Addressing the role of medieval Ethiopia unsettles the very paradigm that underlies the conception of the “medieval period” as the time between the fall of Rome in the West in the fifth century, and the fall of Constantinople in the East in the fifteenth century. While this genealogy follows imperial history centered on the Roman Empire, it also lines up geographical concepts with religious identities, identifying the Middle Ages as the period lying between the advent of Christian Rome in the age of Saint Augustine (354–430 CE), and the fall of Christian Constantinople (the eastern capital of the Roman Empire) in 1453 in the age of the Ottomans. Through this periodization, West is opposed to East, Christendom to the world of Islam, Europe to Asia. This set of assumptions lies invisibly behind the discipline of medieval studies.

Incorporating medieval Ethiopia into the story problematizes this easy genealogy of the field, not only in geographical terms but also with regard to confessional, that is religious, identities. If Ethiopia was a Christian nation long before



4.1. *The Ascension* in a Gospel book, Amhara Region, Ethiopia, late fourteenth–early fifteenth century. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1998.66, fol. 16

Rome, and if its manuscript culture—from the Amhara and Tigray regions and beyond (fig. 4.1)—continued far beyond the Middle Ages to the present day, what does this do to our accepted norms of periodization? And what does it offer to those of us who seek to rethink the unspoken assumptions of our discipline of medieval studies? How does the history of repeated contact between Rome and Ethiopia, first in antiquity with the Kingdom of Aksum (founded in 100 CE), and then in the course of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century monastic missions from Ethiopia to Rome, inflect our sense of the field? Are these Ethiopians part of the story of the medieval past,

or are they outsiders? And how might their status affect our sense of what kind of people are (or should be) attracted to the discipline of medieval studies?³ In the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (founded in 1099 after the First Crusade and lasting until 1291), what did the presence of Ethiopian monks signify to the Frankish settlers who laid claim to the Holy City in both spiritual and political terms? The following pages begin to address these questions, first focusing on medieval European Christian representations of Ethiopia, and then turning briefly to the role of medieval Ethiopia within the discipline of medieval studies.

Locating Ethiopia: The View from Europe

For medieval readers, Ethiopia was at once an exotic, distant location and a place at the crux of salvation history. Ethiopian identity was associated with such figures as the Queen of Sheba, beloved by Solomon and thought to be the sensuous focus of the *Song of Songs*; the Magi, one of whom was thought to come from that southeastern region; the convert described in Acts 8:26–40, who was a court official in the service of Queen Candace of Ethiopia; and the enigmatic Prester John, whose homeland was at first identified as India, but who by the end of the Middle Ages was placed by mapmakers in East Africa.⁴ These various figures situate Ethiopia not only as a key reference point within salvation history, but as a repeated point of reference, whose essential identity remains the same throughout time.

In order to begin to unpack this view of an essential Ethiopia, it is helpful to begin by examining the medieval Western view of Ethiopia in space—that is, on medieval world maps. Medieval world maps are often highly schematic or diagrammatic, as in the simple T-O map found in an eleventh-century manuscript included in a copy of the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville (560–636, see fig. 6.1), which is oriented toward the East and shows the three known continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. Other medieval world maps retain this basic T-O structure while flowering into an expanded symbolic geography, as seen on the world map included in Lambert of Saint Omer’s early twelfth-century *Liber Floridus* (Book of Flowers,



silio

4.2. Zonal world map, *Liber Floridus* (Book of Flowers) of Lambert of Saint Omer, northern France or Flanders (Hainaut), twelfth century. Wolfenbüttel, Germany, Herzog August Bibliothek, Ms. Cod. Guelf. I, Gud. Lat. I, fols. 69v-70

fig. 4.2), which survives in a later twelfth-century copy. The T-O form persists, but it is energized by the elaborate water courses that permeate the territory arising from the four rivers flowing out of Paradise (the Garden of Eden) and augmented by islands that surround the main landmass. In addition, Lambert includes a fourth continent to the south, which according to the map rubric is “unknown to the sons of Adam due to the great heat.” This enigmatic space is juxtaposed with Ethiopia, immediately across the equator that runs from top to bottom, in the gutter separating the pages. Ethiopia is thus proximate to the unknown fourth continent, and yet utterly cut off from it.

The location of Ethiopia on medieval maps—like that of India—is both variable and multiple.⁵ There are several Indias and several Ethiopias; there is an Ethiopian India, sometimes located in Asia, sometimes in Eastern Africa. Encyclopaedists such as Isidore of Seville and Bartholomaeus Anglicus (before 1203-1272) similarly describe two or even three territories of Ethiopia, one located at the very limit of habitable land in the hot south. In doing this, they are repeating and elaborating accounts of the region from antiquity, most importantly the *Historia naturalis* (Natural History) of Pliny the Elder (first century CE), but also earlier Greek accounts (including Homer and Herodotus) that allude to the burning climate of Ethiopia. At the bottom, or extreme southwest, of the world map in the *Liber Floridus*, we find the “terra ethiopia”; above it, to the south, is the “deserta ethiopia”; and farther up (in the area that, on the T-O map, would be Asia) “saba ethiopia.” Finally, separating the “desert Ethiopia” from “Saba Ethiopia” is the “locus draconii,” the place of dragons.

We can contextualize the labels on Lambert’s map by referring to what the encyclopaedists say. Isidore of Seville, writing in the seventh century, states in one chapter of his *Etymologies* that there are two Ethiopias, one to the west and one (he says) “around the rising place of the sun [circa ortum solis]” (14.5.16).⁶ Elsewhere Isidore says that there are three races of Ethiopians, one of which (the “Indi”) lives in the east (9.2.128). Moreover, says Isidore, beyond the two parts of Ethiopia lies a fourth part of the world that “is unknown to

us due to the heat of the sun [solis ardore incognita nobis est]” (14.5.17). This, says Isidore, is where the Antipodes can be found. This description is in keeping with Lambert’s map, which cuts off the mysterious fourth continent that is located beyond the equator, but also provides for a fourth landmass extending out from the basic T-O form in the north—above the equator—which is where the stretched-out regions of “the land of Ethiopia” and “desert Ethiopia” appear. The third “race” of Ethiopians described by Isidore, whom he calls the “Indi,” corresponds to the land that Lambert identifies as “Saba Ethiopia,” situated among the lands of India and, by the name “Saba,” associated with the legendary biblical Queen of Sheba. Isidore’s encyclopedic account is similar to those of later writers, such as the thirteenth-century Vincent of Beauvais (1184-1264) and Bartholomaeus Anglicus (d. 1272); Vincent, like Isidore, says that there are two Ethiopias but three “races” of Ethiopians; Bartholomaeus says that there are actually three lands of Ethiopia.

Other maps include similarly variable and multiple images of Ethiopia, such as a map from the late eighth or early ninth century that appears with Isidore’s *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vat. Lat. MS 6018, fols. 63v-64r). This south-oriented map includes two labels for Ethiopia, “libya Ethiopia” and “deserta ethiopia,” with the latter appearing where we would expect to find Asia in the T-O map framework. The map included in a tenth-century manuscript of the *Apocalypse* by Beatus of Liébana (ca. 730-ca. 800) (fig. 4.3), like the Wolfenbüttel *Liber Floridus* map described above, includes a mysterious fourth continent labeled with a rubric that identifies it as inaccessible to the biblical sons of Noah and, just above the equator, in large letters, the rubric “ETIOPIA.” This early world map from the popular Beatus manuscript tradition is highly schematic, participating in a symbolic geography that is significantly different from that of the early twelfth century, when Lambert worked. The maps share, however, an apocalyptic vision that makes space for an enigmatic fourth continent that is cut off from the present world but remains a perpetually immanent site of transformation and renewal.

Later maps from Northern and Central Europe treat Ethiopia differently depending upon the specific aims of the mapmaker. For example, the map of the world printed at Magdeburg in 1597 in the *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (Itinerary of Sacred Scripture) by Heinrich Bünting (1545–1606) draws upon the tripartite structure of the T-O map but recasts those three parts as the three leaves of a clover, with a fourth landmass—America—in the corner, just emerging into view (Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 44-2). Here, the apocalyptic fourth continent featured by Beatus in the tenth century, and by Lambert in the twelfth, is replaced by a different geographical horizon, one that is not cut off but rather the desirable object of conquest and exploration. Ethiopia does appear, however, on a late fifteenth-century T-O world map from Lübeck (ca. 1486–88; San Marino, Huntington Library HM 83, fols. 6v–7), in two places: horizontally, along and just above the line of the Nile that separates Asia from Africa, and vertically, up above in Asia, labeled as “Ethiopia superior.”⁷ The multiple Ethiopias of Pliny and the medieval world maps persist here, as they do in the Fra Mauro map (1457–59; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana). South-oriented, it depicts Africa as a large continent at the upper right, featuring “Ethiopia Australis” and “Ethiopia Occidentalis,” that is, Southern Ethiopia and Western Ethiopia, as well as more discursive rubrics that refer to a wide range of political and geographical features of the region. These late medieval examples are similar to the earlier ones in that they include multiple Ethiopias, but different in that they replace qualitative distinctions such as “desert Ethiopia” and “Saba Ethiopia” with distinctions that identify the different Ethiopias primarily in terms of the cardinal directions.

World maps such as the Hereford world map (ca. 1300) also label the location of Ethiopia, but they do so in conjunction with another feature of the torrid south—that is, the monstrous races, which are depicted along the southern region on the Hereford map very similarly to the way they are on the earlier Psalter map (after 1262; London, The British Library Additional MS 28681, fol. 9r). Each of the monstrous races appears enclosed in its own individual little box of

monstrosity, signaling diversity and multiplicity. A close-up view of these boxed-in monstrous forms can be found in a Bestiary from 1277 or after, which includes a four-eyed Ethiopian archer along with other marvels of humanity produced by the torrid climate of the extreme south (Antipode; Scinopode; Coastal Ethiopian; Psalmilarus) and additional monstrous forms on the facing page (Trococite; A Headless Man with Eyes on His Shoulders; A Headless Man with a Face on His Chest; A Man with a Large Under Lip) (Los Angeles, Getty MS. Ludwig XV 4, fol. 118v–119; see also fig. III.3). For people living in Western Christian Europe, Ethiopia was a crucial concept for thinking with, not just in theological or eschatological terms but also in scientific and medical terms. Natural philosophers such as Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200–1280) used the figure of the Ethiopian—burned black, they thought, by the rays of the sun—as a kind of test case or limit case for climate theory. The dry heat of the region produced certain physiological qualities, so that (Albertus posited) within a few generations, a white northerner living in Ethiopia would have black descendants. This construct (with many variations) was key to the climate theory that underlay most medieval conceptions of racial difference and bodily diversity, and which continued to inform early conceptions of racial difference in the New World well into the early modern period.⁸ The monstrous races are thus intelligible in both scientific and theological terms: they are not only a manifestation of the natural laws that govern climate and physiology, but also a visible witness to the power of God to create what he wills, when he wills, and to produce marvels.

In theological terms, Ethiopia was understood as a place of special grace and apocalyptic expectation. In the Hebrew Bible, the story of Solomon and Sheba was interpreted in terms of a mystical union that brought the earthly Jerusalem into contact with the southern riches of Ethiopia; in the Acts of the Apostles, the queen of Ethiopia, named Candace, is identified as the ruler of the Ethiopian eunuch who converts to Christianity. Apocryphal stories of the Magi, seen in a twelfth-century Beatus manuscript from San Pedro de Cardeña (1175–85; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of



4.3. Beatus map in an *Apocalypse*, San Salvador de Taibara, Spain, 945. New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MS M. 644, fols. 33v–34

Art, 1991.232.1), also associate one of the three wise men with Ethiopia, in a reassertion of the fundamentally tripartite division of the world found in the medieval world maps and medieval encyclopaedias.⁹ These texts divide the world into three parts—Asia, Africa, and Europe—to correspond to the three sons of Noah: Shem is associated with Asia, the biggest part; Ham, the outcast, with Africa; and Japheth, the youngest, with Europe. The three Magi recapitulate the sons of Noah, but while the sons of Noah are scattered outward into the wide world after the Flood, their descendants populating each of the three continents, the three Magi come inward toward the sacred center of the nativity. On this Beatus manuscript page, a depiction of the Virgin and Child with the Magi,

to the right, is integrated within a larger genealogy laid out in a series of linked circles, plus the familiar form of the T-O world map at the top left. Note that the T-O map includes not just the names of the three continents, but also the three sons of Noah, as a visible reminder of the Old Testament prefiguration of the three Magi, seen at right. The economy of type and antitype is expressed in terms of word and image, with the names of the sons of Noah foreshadowing the vivid human forms of the three Magi.

Depictions of the Magi vary in how they present the ethnic origins of each of the three kings. Some, such as the Beatus image mentioned above and as in a book of hours from Naples (1460s; Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig



4.4. *The Adoration of the Magi* and border with *The Queen of Sheba before King Solomon* in the Prayer Book of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, Simon Bening, Bruges, Belgium, 1525–30. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig IX 19 (83.ML.115), fols. 36v–37

IX 12), show exotic dress but only moderate differences of physiognomy, while others, as in the Prayer Book of Albrecht of Brandenburg illuminated by Simon Bening (ca. 1483–1561), show bodily diversity more vividly, with black skin (fig. 4.4). Like the Ethiopian magus, depictions of the Queen of Sheba also vary in how they portray ethnicity. While there was a rich medieval commentary tradition on the Song of Songs that interpreted the allegory of the beautiful and black bride in historical terms, as the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, pictorial

depictions of the encounter of Solomon and Sheba often show the queen as fair-skinned, as in the page by Simon Bening that faces his image of the Magi.¹⁰ The queen is attended by two other women, her attendance on Solomon and offering of gifts appearing as a counterpart to the offerings of the three Magi. To put it another way, a chain of typological prefigurations links various moments in salvation history, with each one of them rooted in an essential notion of Ethiopian identity. In one typological relationship, the sons of Noah prefigure, and are

fulfilled in, the three Magi. In a second typological relationship, the encounter of Solomon and Sheba, and the tribute offered by the Ethiopian queen to the king of Israel, is fulfilled in the tribute offered by the Ethiopian magus to the newborn king of the new Israel.

The presence of Ethiopian identity as a key point of reference in salvation history was not limited to explicit citations from the Bible and apocrypha, such as Solomon and Sheba, the three Magi, and the Ethiopian convert described in the Acts of the Apostles. It also appears in what we might call the “secular” strands within salvation history, where typological relationships continue to be central. These include the legend of Alexander the Great, which for medieval Europeans (especially in the twelfth century) was central to crusading ideologies, and the fantasy of Prester John, the mythical king of a remote region who would, one day, come to the rescue of the crusader armies in the Holy Land. As on the medieval maps we have seen, the Alexander romances also use Ethiopia as a way to name the geographical limit case, the remote place of extremes. The pillars of Hercules, marking the borders of the known world, are said to be located in this region, and the exotic queen of the Ethiopians, Candace, has an encounter with Alexander the Great. In some versions, but not all, their relation is an amorous one. The erotic encounter of Alexander and Candace found in the twelfth-century *Roman de toute chevalerie* (Romance of All Chivalry) by Thomas of Kent bears a startling resemblance to the Ethiopian narrative of the early fourteenth-century *Kebra Nagast* (The Glory of Kings), which centers on the relationship of Solomon and the queen of Ethiopia.¹¹

Several Alexander narratives explicitly associate Candace with the Queen of Sheba, following an account by Josephus (37–ca. 100 CE) that identifies her as the ruler of Ethiopia; moreover, the name appears in the Acts of the Apostles (8:27) to refer to the ruler of the Ethiopian eunuch who converts to Christianity. This intertwined lineage of encounters with Ethiopians—first, in the biblical account of Solomon, also recounted in Josephus’s history; second, in the Acts of the Apostles and commentaries on it; and, finally, in the many

versions of the Alexander romance—served to provide an image of Ethiopia that was paradoxically ancient and novel, with each encounter repeating a narrative of spiritual and material exchange. The legend of Prester John, popular from the mid-twelfth century, lent additional force to this view of Ethiopia. By the late fourteenth century, maps stopped labeling Prester John’s Land in the region of India, and instead began to place it in East Africa, drawing upon the legends of Candace and the so-called “white Ethiopians” under her rule to develop a new locus of abundant wealth and apocalyptic expectation. For example, the Catalan atlas composed by Abraham Cresques before 1380 (see fig. II.1) places “the land of Prester John” (“la terra de preste iohana”) between “the city of Nubia” (“civitatem nubia”) and the equatorial meridian of Meroe (“meroem”).

The Meaning of “Medieval Ethiopia”

Having provided an overview of medieval European representations of Ethiopia, I now turn to the subject of “medieval Ethiopia.” What does the term “medieval” mean when applied to this region of the world as the subject of study in itself, as opposed to when we consider it as the object of the medieval Western gaze? Ethiopia has long served as a fixed, unchanging, essentialized point of reference within salvation history, refracted across a wide range of textual and visual witnesses. In the effort to conceive of a more global medieval studies, it is crucial that scholarship focusing on Ethiopian literature, history, and culture not fall prey to the same essentializing tendency. To use the phrase “medieval Ethiopia” is to make a number of assumptions, not just about place but also about temporality or periodization. In what sense can we speak of “medieval Ethiopia”? Or, to ask the same question in more general terms, can we talk about a period called “the Middle Ages” when we talk about other regions of the world? Is there a “medieval India”? A “medieval Japan”? Or is “the medieval” by definition a Eurocentric construct? These questions require us to think about periodization, and the implicit assumptions that inform such efforts at periodization. For example, is the “Islamic world” fundamentally “medieval,” as the media

sometimes suggest, awaiting its own “Reformation”? The term “medieval” carries with it a whole range of assumptions, some of which unthinkingly inform our disciplinary perspectives. Focusing on “medieval Ethiopia” provides an opportunity to think about a second challenge presented by the field we call medieval studies—that is, *where* is the Middle Ages? In other words, there is undoubtedly a temporal dimension to our thinking about “the medieval,” but there is also a geographical dimension intricately intertwined with that spatial logic. Is the domain of the discipline of medieval studies fundamentally rooted in Latin Christian Europe, or does it have a wider remit? If we try to expand our view of the Middle Ages as being more than just Latin Christian Europe, how can we do so in a rational and fruitful way?

In order to approach this question, it is necessary to have some sense of what we mean by “Europe.” The construct of Europe as a geopolitical entity did not exist during the Middle Ages, though the term “Europe” does appear on medieval world maps, marking one of the three known continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, taking up one quarter of the T-O map. Beyond this almost geometrical awareness of Europe, the concept is largely invisible. Instead, the organizational principles were the empire—especially the Holy Roman Empire, patterned on the glories of Rome, and echoed in the succession of national powers that explicitly defined themselves relative both to Rome and to its successor empire under Charlemagne.

We might be forgiven for assuming that the discipline of medieval studies has always been rooted in the study of Latin Christian Europe, but in fact there has long been a focus on adjacent regions. For example, the foundation of the University of Toronto’s Centre for Medieval Studies, announced in the pages of *Speculum* in 1963, listed faculty members in Arabic and Persian history and literature as well as in Latin and Western vernacular languages.¹² The focus on “cross currents and variations” highlighted here was an explicit part of the Toronto mandate from the outset, perhaps distinguishing it from the Latin Christian European heritage that grounded, equally explicitly, the mandate of Toronto’s Pontifical Institute

of Mediaeval Studies and the undergraduate program in Mediaeval Studies at the University of Saint Michael’s College—all three of these located on the same campus. The broader mandate of Toronto’s Centre was in this respect different from that of other centers for medieval studies such as those founded at Catholic University, the University of Notre Dame, and Fordham University, where the confessional affiliation inflected the ways in which the discipline of medieval studies was formulated. This brief look at these North American institutional histories suggests that, while an attentiveness to ethnic, racial, and confessional diversity is in part driven by the political and social concerns of our own time, the definition of the discipline a half century ago was already more capacious than we might expect.

Recent work in the field of medieval studies has sought to conceive of our research and teaching in broader, more inclusive terms. Some have tried to redefine the discipline in expansive ways, as a “global” medieval studies; others talk about “worlding” medieval studies—that is, reconceiving the discipline in ways that are consistent with the fields of world history or world literature.¹³ These approaches share a tendency to elide local and regional differences in the service of a bigger picture of the global Middle Ages—the inevitable problem that arises when an effort to see the whole forest makes it impossible to see the trees. Another difficulty arises with regard to periodization: If we want to talk about “medieval Japan” or “medieval India,” what period are we talking about? These chronologies vary widely, depending upon whether we simply choose a chronological frame of reference (that is, comparing the events and phenomena of the year 1150 in England to those in India or in Japan), or whether we choose our points of comparison based on related phenomena. Do the Middle Ages happen at the same time in every place? And if not, what assumptions govern our identification of “the medieval”? For the study of “medieval Japan,” for example, an understanding of samurai culture in terms of “feudalism” or even “chivalry” has often driven the comparison.

In this context, the place—both temporal and spatial—of “medieval Ethiopia” is a vexed one. Some valuable work on

the material culture of Ethiopia is explicitly couched as a privileged window into the “medieval” past, not just of that particular region, but more generally. It is undoubtedly true that certain practices, including scribal manuscript culture and the skilled craftsmanship of the stone churches found in highland Ethiopia, have continued uninterrupted over a long period of time. For a scholar who wants to learn about medieval manuscript practices as they were conducted in France, England, or Germany during the Middle Ages, their only recourse—other than looking at surviving manuscripts and analyzing the economic records of those who worked as scribes—is to go to a place where there is a living manuscript culture, such as Ethiopia, and observe those communities in action.¹⁴ This is good and valuable work, and yet it cannot be right to see a culture as though it is frozen in time, ignoring the legacy of repeated waves of colonialism (Portuguese, Italian, English) that have washed through the region. We must not imagine that, by looking at Ethiopia, we can catch a glimpse of “our” own medieval past, and by “our,” I mean not only the normative Western subject (as a default, raced as “white”), but also the various communities that might identify in different ways with the region—in terms of religious, racial, or ethnic identities.

To raise these concerns is not to suggest that we should not study medieval Ethiopia. On the contrary, the region has a rich and dynamic history, with the Aksumite kingdom serving in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages as a crucial trading hub that linked the Roman-controlled trade in the Mediterranean with India and the wider South Asian region.¹⁵ The kingdom became Christian in the fourth century, coining the very earliest currency that survives with a cross on it. Ethiopia was a center of early monasticism, and the earliest illuminated gospels that we have today are two manuscripts—the Garima Gospels (see fig. introduction.2)—that were written in the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia. One has been carbon dated to the late fourth to mid-sixth century (390–570, Garima 2), and one from the mid-sixth to mid-seventh century (530–660, Garima 1).¹⁶ With the rise of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula, the power of the Christian Aksumite kingdom became

increasingly curtailed; it remained, however, a dynamic crossroads in confessional, cultural, and social terms.¹⁷

Over the last few years, cultural heritage archives such as museums and libraries have begun to highlight their holdings of Ethiopian manuscripts. In the United Kingdom, these efforts have taken place in the context of the 150th anniversary of the so-called Abyssinian Expedition of 1868: at that time, the British army set out to rescue hostages held by the Ethiopian emperor Tewodros II (ca. 1818–1868), a campaign that ended with the capture, looting, and burning of the fortified capital of Maqdala. Many objects—manuscripts, liturgical items, icons—were sold at auction and are now held by cultural institutions, including the British Museum (and the British Library), Oxford’s Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library, Kensington Museum (now the Victoria & Albert Museum), and several others. In some cases, these exhibitions have drawn sharp criticism and calls for reparations, as in the case of the Victoria & Albert exhibition *Maqdala 1868*, which explicitly considered the circumstances under which these items came into the collection. In other cases, the exhibitions have set aside the history of the acquisitions, focusing instead on the scribal cultures that produced the manuscripts (in the case of the British Library) or on the contemporary connections of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in England to the cultural patrimony now held in British institutions (in the case of the Bodleian). Other exhibitions have sought to place Ethiopian manuscripts in their comparative context, as in the Getty’s 2016 presentation *Traversing the Globe through Illuminated Manuscripts*, and the Art Gallery of Ontario’s 2018 display of Ethiopian manuscripts and art objects in the context of the Thomson Collection of boxwood and ivories. These shows contrast with the British examples not only in the very different political history (and circumstances of acquisition) that underlies their presentation, but also in the way they seek to place Ethiopian manuscripts and art in conversation with objects associated with the European Middle Ages. The successful efforts to maximize public outreach in concert with the scholarly study of Ethiopian manuscripts and art objects, especially evident in the Bodleian show, is highly promising

and suggests new ways to link our study of the interconnected premodern past to our contemporary societies.¹⁸

This short essay provides an extremely brief overview of medieval Ethiopia—a relatively brief overview of the history of medieval Western representations of Ethiopia, and an even briefer view of the actual medieval history of Ethiopia, with a host of caveats regarding what we might mean by the phrase “medieval Ethiopia.” Yet the region is of vital importance to the field of medieval studies, in three ways: first, in terms of our paradigm of the premodern past; second, in terms of how Western fantasies of Ethiopia, Africa, and blackness itself have shaped modern assumptions, both popular and scholarly; and third, in terms of how those assumptions have given out signals, often subtle, concerning who belongs in the field and who might not. By considering more fully the place of medieval Ethiopia in the history of early Christian societies, in terms of economic and cultural history, and in the context of manuscript studies, we can significantly widen our sense of the premodern past, bringing to light new histories of connectivity, regional circulation, and exchange. This aspect is closely related to work that has been done over the last decade or so in medieval Mediterranean studies, expanding that work outward toward the Silk Road and the Red Sea region. The second reason we should turn to “medieval Ethiopia” is in order to come to grips with the way this Western fantasy has shaped our own point of view. By looking at how medieval Westerners imagined Ethiopia—on maps, in images, in texts—we might cast some light on the preconceptions and assumptions that inform our own imaginings of Ethiopia in the twenty-first century. Finally, by centering Ethiopia in our account of the medieval past, we allow ourselves, if only for a moment, to put the margins at the center, and the center at the margins, and explore how the world looks from this reconfigured vantage point. If this effort opens up the doors to a renewal of our discipline by making it easier for other voices to enter, we will all be enriched.

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- 1 On the potential and the limitations of situating medieval studies relative to both Mediterranean studies and global studies approaches, including world literature, see Akbari 2017, 2–17.
- 2 On “the extent to which our own disciplinary structures [in medieval studies] participate in the building of conceptual boundaries that limit and exclude participation by those who bring ethnic, racial, and other diversity to the table,” see Akbari et al. 2017, 1501–53.
- 3 For a moving personal reflection on these boundaries see Otaño Gracia 2018.
- 4 For a detailed overview of references to Ethiopia and Ethiopians in medieval Latin texts see von den Brincken 1973, 262–87; on Prester John, see also 382–412.
- 5 For a more detailed account of Ethiopia on medieval maps and in encyclopedias, see Akbari 2009, 68–72, and in the context of medieval climate theory, 40–46.
- 6 Citations of Isidore of Seville, Etymologies, are parenthetical, by book and chapter number, taken from Lindsay 1989.
- 7 For images from this manuscript see the Digital Scriptorium Database: http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsheh/heh_brif?Description=&CallNumber=HM+83.
- 8 On premodern conceptions of race, especially with regard to the effect of climate on bodily diversity, see Akbari 2009, 140–54, 159–63. On blackness in medieval iconography see the foundational study of Devise 1979; G. Heng 2018, 181–256.
- 9 Other folios from this manuscript can be found in the following institutions: Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional; Madrid, Francisco de Zabálburu y Basabe Library; and Gerona, Museu Diocesà.
- 10 On the exegesis of blackness in the Song of Songs see Holsinger 1998, 156–85.
- 11 On the representation of Ethiopia in the *Roman de toute chevalerie* (Romance of All Chivalry) see Akbari 2009, 95–102. The erotic encounter of Alexander and Candace, queen of Ethiopia, emphasizes the queen’s wealth and ingenuity in terms that are startlingly similar to the encounter of Solomon and Makeda, queen of Ethiopia, in the Ge’ez-language national origin epic *Kebrā Nagast* (The Glory of Kings), which survives in an early fourteenth-century version of the text, but undoubtedly reflects earlier versions of the narrative. On the *Kebrā Nagast* and its relation to other versions of the Solomon and Sheba account see Belcher 2009, 441–59; on the modern reception of the *Kebrā Nagast* see Belcher 2010, 239–57. See also Kotar 2011, 157–76.
- 12 “The intention of the Centre is to make available to students various approaches to the Middle Ages in programs of studies not available in existing departments. The purpose of the Center is the training of scholars who know the Middle Ages in depth as well as in breadth. The courses of study will freely cross limits of traditional disciplines and departments, but they will be limited to the Middle Ages. By concentrating on a single period, the student will be able to acquire in some depth the basic linguistic and technical skills necessary for teaching and research in mediaeval studies; these include palaeography, diplomatics, and vernacular languages, in which the Center is strong. He will also be able to read widely in the period. His research will follow the material of his subject in order to gain a better understanding of the cross currents and variations in the cultures, interests, and beliefs of the Middle Ages.” See “Graduate Center for Mediaeval Studies: University of Toronto” 1963, 678–81.
- 13 For example see G. Heng 2013, 413–29; Kinoshita 2008, 371–85.
- 14 Winslow 2015.
- 15 See Eyob Derillo’s case study in this volume.
- 16 McKenzie and Watson 2016.
- 17 See Michelle H. Craig’s case study in this volume.
- 18 On the dispersal of the objects looted at Magdala, see Shinn and Ofcansky 2013, 48. On the Victoria & Albert show, *Maqdala 1868*, see <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/03/looted-ethiopian-treasures-in-uk-return-loan-victoria-albert-museum>. On the British Library show, *African Scribes: Manuscript Culture of Ethiopia*, see <http://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2018/02/african-scribes-manuscript-culture-of-ethiopia.html>. On the Bodleian event, which included both an academic study day, “Introducing Manuscripts from Ethiopia and Eritrea,” and a “family-friendly” event, “Ethiopian and Eritrean Ge’ez Manuscripts Discovery Day,” see <https://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/event/introducing-manuscripts-from-ethiopia-and-eritrea>; <https://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/event/ethiopian-and-eritrean-geez-manuscripts-discovery-day>. On the Getty show, *Traversing the Globe through Illuminated Manuscripts*, see <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/globe/>.