*The Archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in Ethiopia (1557-1632).*

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What is conventionally known as historical archaeology (15th century to the present), has had scarce fortune in Northeast Africa, where the study of human evolution and the brilliant civilizations of Antiquity and the Middle Ages have captured all attention. The present book is a very important step in redressing this situation. *The Archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in Ethiopia* studies a unique phenomenon: a missionary project gone wrong in an African country which had been Christian (but not Catholic) for over a millennium already. It was a very short-lived experience, but had a deep influence in the material representation of power in the country and in the collective memory of its inhabitants. The archaeological record is no less intriguing: a plethora of forgotten ruins that this book examines in detail.

The volume is divided into five chapter plus appendixes, bibliography and notes. The introductory chapter, by Víctor M. Fernández, offers much more than the typical overview: it provides a vivid account of the context of fieldwork, a sort of microhistory cum ethnography, which, although usually absent in this kind of literature, should be essential in archaeological monographs. Indeed, ethnographic detail is present throughout the book and, put together, would make an outstanding piece of reflective archaeological ethnography. The second chapter, by Andreu Martínez d’Alòs-Moner, an expert in the Jesuit mission to Ethiopia and author of an outstanding anthropological history on the topic[[1]](#footnote-1), offers much more than it suggests in the title (“Convents, Palaces, and Temples”). It is in fact a perceptive reading of Jesuit architecture in Ethiopia—a fine example of interpretive archaeology. According to the author, the message of “power, renewal and prestige” was conveyed through the shape, texture, colors and visibility of Jesuit architecture, which sharply contrasted with vernacular tradition.

The longest chapter, which occupies over 400 pages and 70% of the total length of the volume, is devoted to the description of ten missionary sites where the authors have conducted archaeological fieldwork (eight others could not be located). From a formal point of view, it would have helped the reader to have each of the sites in a separate chapter. In any case, the book is much more readable than the average fieldwork monograph and is very well illustrated with a myriad of excellent photographs and maps. Due to a diversity of practical constraints, open area excavations were conducted only in Azäzo and Gorgora and test pits in Särka. The rest of the sites were surveyed and the structures and topography mapped in detail. Both horizontal and vertical mapping, which is of the highest quality, was carried out using cutting-edge technology (including 3D scanners).

There are some common features that the authors have found through the different sites and that are duly emphasized. Thus for example the importance of hydraulic systems (drains, latrines, gardens), perhaps one of the major discoveries of the project, which evince a specific concept of hygiene deployed at the service of an idea of superior civilization. Also evident is the cosmopolitan character of Jesuit architecture and the outstanding relevance of India, downplayed, however, by the missionaries in their writings to enhance the European character of their works. The authors also insist in *chunambo*, the building mortar that was to have an important role in the development of Gondarine architecture and that archaeology now shows it was introduced by the Jesuits. Yet their influence was certainly not restricted to this technique: the very concept of the royal complex can be traced back to the Jesuit sites, where we find most of the elements that would later characterize the compounds of Gondar.

As an archaeologist, I find particularly attractive both the pre-Jesuit history of the sites and their afterlives. Unlike historians, archaeologists have to dealwith the long term, whether they like it or not: Fernández and his team had sometimes to dig through the post-Jesuit levels to reach the Jesuit contexts. The sites’ afterlives are in fact quite fascinating: there seems to have been attempts at desecrating and re-consecrating the buildings by erecting churches, setting up cemeteries or recycling part of the stones in new structures (e.g. Gorgora). In other cases, the Jesuit compounds continued their existence as elite sites (e.g. Gännätä Iyäsus), which is, in fact, what they have been from the beginning. The later life of the sites is equally interesting, with the increasing fortification of the compounds which manifests clearly the climate of fear and insecurity characteristic of the last years of the mission. The only problem that I find in relation to this topic is the absence of stratigraphic profiles, which might have helped understand (or at least visualize) post-Jesuit occupations and their relationship with the Jesuit structures.

As for the pre-missionary period, less information is provided, either because it was not found or was left unexplored due to budgetary and time constraints, as the authors admit. The most interesting example here is Gorgora: a group of Ethio-Portuguese was already established in 1574 and an earlier site was found not far from the Jesuit center. In some cases, the missionaries were aware of the previous history of the place: Fǝremona, Däbsan and Märṭulä Maryam were all important centers in local Christianity that the Jesuits sought to appropriate. Unfortunately, none of these sites could be the object of excavation that could have elucidated their pre-Jesuit past.

The study of the materials found in the excavations is excellent and will be essential reference for scholars working on the archaeology of Ethiopia during the second millennium AD. The authors propose both a very useful typology and a social interpretation of the materials, suggesting, among other things, the appearance of individual consumption based on the abundance of dishes. While this might be a possibility, it is also possible that they are related to the emergence of an Ethiopian cuisine: after all, Ethiopian banquets are still characterized by a variety of meat and vegetable dishes served in different plates. It would still be an issue of class, however, since cuisine is directly related to social stratification, as famously argued by Jack Goody[[2]](#footnote-2). Individual consumption would still be present in the many high-quality drinking cups for beer or honey wine that have been found at the excavated sites and that are proof of their elite character.

The total dominance of local products is remarkable. The reuse of the premises immediately after the missionaries’ departure has seriously compromised the possibility of finding artefacts from the Jesuit period proper, yet the lack of non-Ethiopian materials in post-Jesuit levels—apart from a few beads from Gorgora and a Chinese porcelain from Särka—is nonetheless surprising considering the elite character of the sites. There might be at least two reasons for that: a conscious rejection of (or disinterest in) foreign objects, which would tally well with the closing upon itself of Ethiopia after the Jesuit experience; or the collapse of the Indian Ocean trade after the Portuguese intervention, which is evident throughout the Red Sea in a marked diminution of imported materials in the archaeological record. It is in fact a quite unique case of reversed globalization: at a time generally characterized by European expansion and intense connectivity, the Horn became more isolated.

Chapter four, by Carlos Cañete and Jorge de Torres, offer a postcolonial reading of the Jesuit missionary project, which helps clarify the material record described in the previous chapter, such as the strong association between secular power and mission and the central role played by the regulation of manners in the Jesuit undertaking (through hygiene, divided spaces, eating habits and the arts). Particular important is the idea that beyond cultural difference, which is where most stress has been usually put, Jesuits and Ethiopian elites were joined by a common interest in consolidating a unified structure of power, something which was achieved, among other things, through certain (material) cultural elements. In the end, while the Jesuits failed, Cañete and Torres surmise that “the system they helped to implement was largely successful”. Chapter 5 by Víctor Fernández offers some concluding remarks that underscore some of the main findings of the project, contextualize them in the wider Jesuit world and examine the lasting (and often troubling) impact of the missions in Ethiopia.

I have collaborated with the authors in other projects, so the amount of work that they have been able to accomplish do not completely surprise me, but is still outstanding, the more so if we consider that it was completed in less than ten years and without the help of a huge grant. Information about Ethiopia in terms of missionary archaeology is now comparable with some thoroughly-researched areas in the Americas, where this field enjoys the longest tradition. The authors show a remarkable knowledge of Jesuit mission history and art and comparisons abound throughout the book; it is thus a pity that they did not attempt to bring their finds into conversation with missionary archaeology elsewhere, and particularly in the United States, where anthropologically-minded historical archaeologists have done much to prove the relevance of the discipline to explore the sociocultural and political implications of the missions, as part of the global European expansion[[3]](#footnote-3). I understand, however, that this was beyond the authors’ concern for the present volume, which is already hefty enough and only expect that the material is further explored in other publications.

To conclude, this is an outstanding archaeological monograph about a region that has been virtually unexplored from the point of view of historical archaeology. One of the problems with archaeological reports is that too much detail and an unclear structure end up by making them unreadable and information extremely difficult to retrieve. This is certainly not the case here and, in fact, the book should become a standard reference for the publishing of empirical results in African historical archaeology. At the same time, this is more than a field report. Through a combination of archaeological, historical, art historical and ethnographic sources the authors have managed to produce an original account of the Jesuit experience in Ethiopia. They had indeed “enlivened the dying ruins”[[4]](#footnote-4).

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1. A. Martínez d'Alós-Moner, *Envoys of a Human God: The Jesuit Mission to Christian Ethiopia, 1557-1632*. (Amsterdam: Brill, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Goody, J., *Cooking, cuisine and class: a study in comparative sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E. Graham, E., “Mission archaeology”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27(1998), 25-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. V.M. Fernández, “Enlivening the dying ruins: history and archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in Ethiopia, 1557–1632”, *Culture & History Digital Journal* 2(2013): e24. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)