

THE PRESTER JOHN
OF THE INDIES
VOLUME I

C. F. Beckingham and
G. W. B. Huntingford



THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY

The Prester John of the Indies

A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John,
being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to
Ethiopia in 1520, written by Father Francisco Alvares.
Volume I

Edited by
C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD

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Ho Preste Joam das indias.



Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste
Joam segundo vis e escreueo ho padre Francisco Alvarez capellã del Rey nosso
senhor. Agora nouamete impresso por mandado do dito senhor em casa de Luis
Rodriguez liureiro de sua alteza.

- I. Title-page of the Portuguese first edition of Alvares, printed at Lisbon in 1540

THE PRESTER JOHN OF THE INDIES

A TRUE RELATION OF THE LANDS
OF THE PRESTER JOHN
being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy
to Ethiopia in 1520
written by Father Francisco Alvares

The translation of Lord Stanley of Alderley (1881)
revised and edited with additional material by
C. F. BECKINGHAM and G. W. B. HUNTINGFORD

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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C.F.B.
G.W.B.H.

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* * *

Ethiopia, in Giacomo Gastaldi's map of Africa
(Venice, 1564) *in pocket at end of Vol. II*

ABBREVIATIONS

For full titles, see Bibliography (p. 587)

- AII* *Annales 'Iyasu II et 'Iyo'as* (ed. Guidi).
AJIB *Annales Iohannis I, 'Iyasu I, Bakāffā* (ed. Guidi).
Am. Amharic.
Archaeol. *Archaeologia*.
B.M. British Museum.
C Charter(s); numbers from Conti Rossini, *Liber Axumae*.
CA 'Histoire des guerres de 'Amda Şyon' (ed. Perruchon).
CB *Chronique de Ba'eda Mâryâm* (ed. Perruchon).
CGA 'Le canzoni geez-amariña' (ed. Guidi).
CS *Chronica de Susenyos* (ed. Pereira).
CSCO *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*.
CZ *Chronique de Zar'a Yâ'eqob* (ed. Perruchon).
DAE *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*.
Eth. Ethiopic (i.e. Ge'ez).
GJ *Geographical Journal*.
GSGS Geographical Section, General Staff, War Office.
Guida *Guida dell' Africa Orientale Italiana*.
HSD *Historia Regis Sarşa Dengel* (ed. Conti Rossini).
JRGS *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*.
MP The modernized text of Alvares published in 1943.
O Codices Ottoboniani, Vatican Library.
P The Portuguese text of Alvares published in 1540.
PC *Paris Chronicle* (ed. Basset).
R Ramusio's Italian version of Alvares, first published in 1550.
Routes *Routes in Abyssinia*.

ABBREVIATIONS

- RRAL** *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei.*
RSE *Rassegna di studi etiopici.*
S *Stanley's Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy*
(Hakluyt Society, 1881).
SRE *Beckingham and Huntingford, Some Records of*
Ethiopia.
ZN *Zekra Nagar.*

INTRODUCTION

I

THE EMBASSY OF DOM RODRIGO DE LIMA

The work translated in these two volumes is an account of a Portuguese mission which landed at Massawa on the west coast of the Red Sea in April 1520 and re-embarked there six years later, the first embassy from Europe known to have reached the Ethiopian Court and returned in safety. The events which caused it to be sent were as follows.

Ethiopia has always been difficult of access, if only for physical reasons, but even in the Middle Ages there were tenuous links with the Mediterranean world. A small colony of devout Ethiopians lived in Jerusalem, where they were visited and occasionally reinforced by pilgrims from their homeland, and where they sometimes met pilgrims from Europe. The head of the Ethiopian church and the only bishop in Ethiopia, the Abuna, was always an Egyptian monk, designated and consecrated by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria. Ethiopian delegates were present at the Council of Florence in 1441, and from time to time other Ethiopians reached Italy. Some early European travellers in Ethiopia have been discussed in the late Dr O. G. S. Crawford's *Ethiopian Itineraries*, and in the early years of the fourteenth century the realm of the mysterious Prester John was first identified with Ethiopia in the treatise of Giovanni da Carignano, which is now lost. This came to be accepted by other writers, including Bertrandon de La Brocquière, and as the Portuguese gradually explored the coasts of Africa in the fifteenth century they tried to find a monarch whom they hoped to use as an ally against Islam. In West Africa they heard rumours of a certain 'Ogané', who may have been the Oni of Ife, and whom they assumed to be the ruler they were seeking. They hoped that the Congo might provide a navigable waterway to his kingdom. After they had discovered East Africa they sometimes landed *degradados*,

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reprieved criminals who had escaped execution by sailing with the fleet and whose lives were not highly valued, and instructed them to make their way to the Prester John's capital. Two properly accredited envoys had succeeded in penetrating to the Ethiopian Court before the arrival of the embassy with which this volume is concerned. The first was Pêro da Covilhã. He and a companion were sent by King João II of Portugal in 1487 to explore the East, even before Bartolomeu Dias had rounded the Cape of Good Hope. His story is given by Alvares in chapter CIV. The second was João Gomes, a priest who was sent by Tristão da Cunha when the Portuguese seized Socotra in 1507. Covilhã was not allowed to return, Gomes was not willing to run the risk of trying, and it is likely that they both died in Ethiopia, where they were still living when Alvares arrived.

So far as we know, it was not till 1512 that any reply to these missions was received. In that year the Moslem authorities at Chaul in India arrested a merchant who had been denounced to them by his companions as a bad character. He was travelling as a Moslem with two wives and eight servants, but when he was apprehended he claimed that he was a Christian named Matthew and an envoy from the King of Ethiopia to the King of Portugal.¹ The local ruler did not dare to risk incurring the wrath of the redoubtable Albuquerque, then Governor of the Portuguese possessions in the East. He reported what had happened and was instructed to send his prisoner to Goa. Albuquerque was interested in Ethiopia. He hoped that a combination of Ethiopian man-power with Portuguese naval strength might enable him to overthrow Moslem dominion in the Red Sea and destroy the sanctuary of Mecca; he even thought, or pretended to King Manoel to think, that it might be possible to ruin Egypt by diverting the course of the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. He welcomed Matthew and accepted him as genuine. In this he was certainly right, though Matthew had formerly been a Moslem; his two wives, and others whom he had left behind, may have dated from that time, though Ethiopian

¹ The Portuguese authorities do not agree about some of the details of Matthew's story. Our account is based upon Correa who, as Albuquerque's secretary, was well placed to know the facts.

INTRODUCTION

Christians were very promiscuous. Nor was Matthew an Ethiopian. According to some authorities he was an Armenian; Barros says he was lighter in colour than an Ethiopian and was born in Cairo. Albuquerque dispatched him to Portugal with honour, as he refused to give his message except to the King. But the Governor had many enemies and Matthew was a person of very difficult temper. He was denounced as a Turkish spy. The captains who were escorting him to Europe persecuted him and seduced his wives. The King, however, treated him with honour. He left again in 1515 in a fleet which carried Lopo Soares de Albergaria, who was to succeed Albuquerque, Duarte Galvão, who was to go to Ethiopia as Ambassador, Francisco Alvares, who was to accompany Galvão, and presents for the Prester John that had cost 30,000 *cruzados*. Unluckily for Matthew, Lopo Soares was neither friendly to Albuquerque nor a competent commander. He disliked his predecessor's protégé, and when he came to make his own expedition to the Red Sea he accomplished very little. He came no nearer to Massawa than the Dahlak islands, where he invited Matthew to land. The latter reasonably refused to expose himself to the enmity which the local Moslem population would have shown to a renegade. As it was, several of the Portuguese were killed. The Governor became more hostile than ever to Matthew. He made no attempt to reach Massawa but sailed to Kamaran, where he remained while his men suffered from thirst and disease and died in considerable numbers. Among those who died was Duarte Galvão. In July 1517 Lopo Soares left for India, taking Matthew and Alvares with him, and stopping on the way to burn the town of Zeila on the Somali coast. It was the next Governor, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, who, as related in this book, at last took Matthew home and sent to the Prester John, in place of Duarte Galvão, Dom Rodrigo de Lima with thirteen companions, among whom was Alvares.

Dom Rodrigo's embassy encountered many difficulties and achieved less than had been hoped. Historians have not always appreciated how much it was handicapped by misunderstandings and misconceptions. The lack of adequate gifts for the Prester John was a serious breach of etiquette. The

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quarrels between D. Rodrigo and his deputy, Jorge de Abreu, naturally dismayed the Ethiopians. Moreover, the embassy arrived under unfortunate auspices, for Matthew had not been sent by the King Lebna Dengel, but by his step-grandmother, the Regent during his minority, Elēni (Helena). The Portuguese gave offence to the governor of the coast province by going out of their way, to oblige Matthew, to a monastery where Matthew's property had been deposited, and Matthew himself died there within a few days of his arrival. It must be remembered also that the impressive claims made by the Portuguese about their own exploits may not have convinced the Ethiopians. The latter received news from India at frequent intervals, but the news was transmitted by Moslem merchants who are unlikely to have emphasized the successes of the Portuguese or to have missed opportunities of making Lebna Dengel suspicious of their pretensions and their objectives. Again, there were a number of Europeans at Court. Covilhã and Gomes were Portuguese and we know that the former at least was very helpful to his countrymen, but (though we have no evidence whatever for this) it would not be surprising if some of the Italians, with their vested interest in the old trade routes that the Portuguese were disrupting, tried to influence the King against them. We are naturally impressed by the achievements of this small nation in Asia but Lebna Dengel, having regard to what they had done in the area of most interest to him, the Red Sea, may well have doubted their value as allies. It was twenty-two years since Vasco da Gama had reached India, and three Portuguese fleets had passed through the Straits of Bab al-Mandab. Albuquerque's attack on Aden in 1513 had been a costly failure. Both he and Lopo Soares had failed to attack Jidda and had lost many of their men at Kamaran. None of the three Governors had done much more than burn flimsy huts and plunder small craft. On the other hand, if the Portuguese expected to find in Ethiopia a ruler as powerful and as rich as the Prester John of mediaeval legend they were bound to be disappointed. When they left in 1526 they took with them letters from Lebna Dengel to the Governor of India and to the King of Portugal, presents, a declaration of obedience to the Pope, the significance of which

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the Ethiopians certainly did not understand, and the Ambassador Şagā Za Ab, who seems to have been no better a diplomat than Matthew and who bequeathed many errors about Ethiopia to the learned world of Europe.

ALVARES'S DESCRIPTION OF ETHIOPIA: TEXTUAL HISTORY

The account which Alvares wrote of the mission which he accompanied was first printed at Lisbon by Luís Rodrigues in 1540. The title-page is reproduced as a frontispiece to this volume. The title has usually been read *Verdadera Informaçam das terras do Preste Joam das Indias*, that is, 'Truthful Information about the countries of the Prester John of the Indies'. The volume is a folio, printed in Gothic type, and is now a rarity. Misprints are common, the spelling of proper names and the use of the cedilla and of abbreviations are all erratic. Punctuation is rudimentary and often manifestly wrong. The leaves are numbered as follows: 1-8, 18, 18, 11-14, 23-32, 34, 34, 35-87, 80, 99, 90-96, 907, 980, 99-136. This edition was translated into a number of languages, and it was used by the ninth Baron Stanley of Alderley in preparing a translation which the Hakluyt Society published in 1881 with the title *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia*. Lord Stanley also made much use of a Spanish version published at Toledo in 1588 and purporting to be the work of Miguel de Selves. It is in reality a new edition of a translation made by Fray Tomás de Padilla and published at Antwerp in 1557. Stanley made no use of an earlier version which the Italian humanist Giovanni Battista Ramusio had included in his great collection of travel narratives, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, the first volume of which, devoted to Africa, was published at Venice in 1550. Ramusio's version is shorter than the Portuguese text of 1540, but it is not, as was once assumed, merely an abridgement. The true relationship between the two was first explained by Professor Roberto Almagià, who has made important discoveries regarding the early versions of the text. We welcome the opportunity of expressing our great indebtedness to his pamphlet,

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Contributi alla storia della conoscenza dell' Etiopia (Padua, 1941).

It is certain that the Portuguese edition of 1540, which we shall cite as P, is only a part of what Alvares wrote about Ethiopia. This is obvious from what he himself says (see p. 39), from the preliminary remarks of Ramusio (see p. 34) and also from a passage in a manuscript in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice (Cod. Marc. Lat. VI, 186). This last is a brief, anonymous tract on Ethiopia which was first printed in *Hispaniae illustratae scriptores varii*, tom. II (Frankfort, 1603), and again by Beccari in his collection *Rerum aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti*, tom. x. Professor Almagià has printed in his pamphlet the passage relating to Alvares and has corrected a number of errors in Beccari's transcript. According to this authority Alvares wrote a long work about 'the Abyssinian Ethiopians', which he divided into five books. The first gave a precise account of the whole country, its boundaries, the length of the days, and astronomical phenomena of cosmographical significance, and discussed the sources of the Nile and the reasons for its annual rise. In the second the fertility of the soil, the varieties of fruits and other natural resources were described. The third was concerned with animals and birds, with the size of the wild beasts, 'and especially with the elephants, of which very numerous herds are seen in the open country and the forests'. The fourth dealt with the character and customs of the Ethiopians, their literature and learning, the Court and its ceremonies, the monarch himself, the army, the maintenance of order, and with civil institutions and laws. The fifth was devoted to religious matters, the churches and their services, funeral and marriage rites, and the life of the monks, whose numbers were almost infinite. No mention is made, however, of any account of the embassy. But it is not likely that this was a separate work. The Codex Marcianus goes on to say that Dom Martinho, the Portuguese Ambassador to the Holy See, had entrusted the translation of the work to Jovius (Paolo Giovio), and Professor Almagià has quoted a passage in which Damião de Góis refers to the promise of Jovius to translate into Latin 'the volume which Franciscus Alvares wrote about the

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situation, customs and worship of the Ethiopians, in which he also describes his whole journey'. It is also certain that part at least of the work was written before his return to Portugal, possibly during his long sojourn at Debārwā (see p. 381, n. 1). His reference to Calçadilha as Bishop of Viseu (p. 371, n. 1) must have been made during his absence in the East, for Calçadilha died ten years before he came home.

This comprehensive work was the basis for P, but we know nothing of the intervening stages. Alvares had brought from Ethiopia a letter in which Lebna Dengel assured the Pope of his obedience. In 1532 Alvares was allowed to go to Italy with Dom Martinho de Portugal, and he presented the letter to Clement VII at Bologna in the following year. Professor Almagià suggests that he may never have returned to Portugal; he quotes an important note by Ludovico Beccadelli, later Archbishop of Ragusa, which states that Beccadelli himself saw Lebna Dengel's letter presented at the public consistory, and that Alvares afterwards accompanied the Papal Court to Rome, where he ultimately died. Jovius also mentions his death in Rome. All we know of the date is that it must have been between 1533 and November 1542, the date of the manuscript quoted. It is thus not likely that Alvares supervised the printing of his book in 1540, and it is possible that he was already dead. Professor Almagià remarks that the 'Prologue to the King our Lord' implies that Alvares did personally attend to the details of the publication, and he considers it very probable that he did this during the years immediately after his return from the East. We would suggest, however, that this Prologue was written, not by Alvares, but by his printer, Luís Rodrigues (see p. 37, n. 1).

Ramusio's preface to the Italian translation (printed below, pp. 34-5) explains that he compiled a version from two sources: a manuscript copy sent him by the famous Portuguese humanist Damião de Góis, and the printed text of 1540. The manuscript has been lost but it must be the source of the superior readings and additional matter which are sometimes found in the Italian text and which have been included in our translation. In addition to these versions Professor Almagià

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has discovered three others in manuscript, preserved in the Vatican Library. In all, therefore, there must have been at least seven recensions, of which two were printed and two have been lost. The following is a complete list.

1. The original work, describing Ethiopia and the embassy, presumably in Portuguese and now lost.

2. The manuscript version sent by Góis to Ramusio. This is also lost. It was evidently shorter than no. 1.

3. The Lisbon printed text of 1540, which we shall call P. In so far as the author prepared it for the press from no. 1, he almost certainly did so before 1532. The phrase *agora nouamête impresso*, 'now newly printed', on the title-page may refer to this delay.

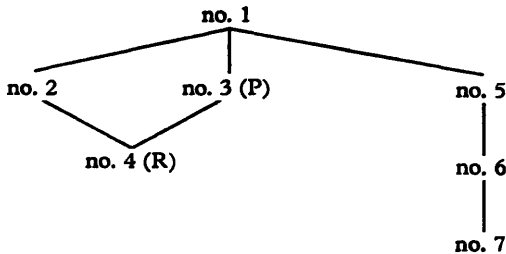
4. Ramusio's version, which we shall call R. This was first printed in 1550 and is based partly on no. 2 and partly on P.

5. Vatican Library, Codex Ottobonianus Lat. 1104. This is described by Professor Almagià as a crude and hurriedly written translation, closer to P than to R. It contains the fullest surviving version of the author's preface and of the first four chapters. Almagià has printed these, and we have included them (see pp. 33 and 39).

6. Vatican Library, Codex Ottobonianus Lat. 2202. This is a first draft for no. 7.

7. Vatican Library, Codex Ottobonianus Lat. 2789. This is a copy of a version made by Beccadelli on the basis of no. 5, which he rearranged and to which he added some notes obtained from Ethiopian priests who were in Rome. We have included these notes in the present work. Beccadelli's version had been completed by November 1542.

The relationship between these versions may be shown diagrammatically. Since 1540 there have been only two editions of the Portuguese text. The first (Lisbon, 1889) reproduces, with



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a few errors, the spelling and punctuation of P. The second (Lisbon, 1943) has modernized spelling and punctuation and was published by the Portuguese Ministry of the Colonies. All translations into other languages that have yet been published have been made either from P or from R. The version now offered to members of the Society is a revision of Stanley's translation, which was based upon P, but we have taken account of additions and variants in R. We have added, at what seemed to us to be the most appropriate places, the notes of corrections suggested by the Ethiopian priests in Rome and given in Cod. Ottob. Lat. 2789. We are much indebted to the authorities of the Vatican Library for supplying us with a photostat of the relevant leaves.

We would emphasize that in our opinion Stanley's errors were few, and few of his errors were important. Considering the difficulties with which he was confronted and the absence of such valuable works of reference as the *Grande Enciclopedia Portuguesa e Brasileira*, his was a creditable attempt to make sense of what is at times an extremely obscure text. We have detected one bad mistake and a few omissions. We believe that we have improved the rendering of certain sentences and we have tried to bring Stanley's Victorian English closer to the homely, confused style of Alvares. There are some passages, however, notably some of those concerned with architectural description, where the confusion of the original reduces translation to guesswork. We do not feel that such alterations as we have made would by themselves have justified us in suggesting to the Hakluyt Society that a new edition should be printed. Stanley's exclusive reliance on P, whether at first hand or through Selves, and his almost complete failure to annotate the text are far more serious.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TEXT TRANSLATED

The differences between P and R are of three kinds. Some passages occur in P but not in R, some occur in R but not in P, and some occur in both but with significant differences.

We have taken little heed of those in the first category. There

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is a tendency for R to omit personal details about the members of the mission and matters of Portuguese rather than Ethiopian interest. The account of the journey from Lisbon to Coimbra and the reception of the embassy by the King has been drastically abridged. But it cannot be said that passages of this type have been omitted systematically. We have not usually mentioned these excisions in R.

Additional matter occurring in R but not in P we have included within square brackets and, except where otherwise stated, this is the only use made of square brackets in our text. Where P and R differ, and the difference seems to us to be greater than can be accounted for by slightly free translation, we have followed P in the text and given R's variant in a note. There are, however, certain variants and even additions in R which we have ignored. R is more lucid and more readable than P, though it lacks the vigour and immediacy of the original. To some extent this is due to the difference between Alvares and Ramusio. The former was a comparatively ignorant man for all his shrewdness. Ramusio was a cultured humanist and he wrote for a public which was steeped in the prose of Cicero. It is demonstrable that the Italian translator has often included explanatory phrases in the text to alleviate the obscurity of the Portuguese. References to Queen Helena are usually followed by such an explanatory phrase. On p. 363 there is an instance of a bad mistake by the translator in making such an addition to the name 'Jorge'. We have nearly always ignored phrases in R which we felt could confidently be ascribed to this practice. In the same way we have not remarked upon R's conversion of leagues into miles. This is done regularly at the rate of three miles to one league where the number concerned is a multiple of three. Half a league may become either one or two miles indiscriminately. Wherever R's figure certainly implies a different distance from P's we have given it in a note.

In preparing the text we have followed the same principles as in our translation of Almeida in *Some Records of Ethiopia* (Hakluyt Society, 1954). We have carefully respected the spellings of oriental and African names found in P and R except in a few isolated instances of gross misprints, such as *Gau* for

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Nau (Nahum) on p. 257; these have been corrected in the text and the reading of P has been given in a note. The treatment of numbers in P is chaotic. Roman numerals are used for chapter headings but numbers mentioned in the text are given in an indiscriminate mixture of words and both arabic and roman figures. We have reduced all dates to the form '1 January 1520'. Numbers below one hundred we have expressed in words, higher numbers in arabic figures. On the very rare occasions when the form in which a number is given by P or R is of importance for considering the accuracy of the text we have included the relevant details in a note. We have again used standard English forms for the names of countries and of well-known Biblical or European persons and places. Whenever the spelling of such a name in P or R appears to have been influenced by an attempt to reproduce the sound of the Ethiopian form of the name we have, of course, preserved it. The system we have adopted for the spelling of Ethiopian names is explained on p. 23.

The annotation of Alvares is a formidable task to which Stanley made almost no contributions. We have relegated the discussion of place-names to a Gazetteer (Appendix VII), and of the precise titles and functions of Ethiopian officials to another Appendix (v), but to help the reader to follow the narrative without referring to another part of the book we have, wherever possible, explained these names very briefly on the pages on which they first occur. We have regretfully felt obliged to provide more and longer notes than are usual in the Society's volumes; this is partly because of the obscurity and intricacy of some of the problems of the text, and partly because we have made much use of material which is either unpublished or has been published only in Ethiopic. In particular, we have referred frequently to the collection of Ethiopian land charters known as the *Liber Axumae*, of which Huntingford's English translation is still in manuscript.

ALVARES'S RELIABILITY

Alvares's book, even in the truncated and inaccurate form in which it has come down to us, is of great interest. It is not only

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incomparably more detailed than any earlier account of Ethiopia that has survived; it is also a very important source for Ethiopian history, for it was written just before the country was devastated by the Moslem Somali and pagan Galla invasions of the second quarter of the sixteenth century. He has often been criticized for exaggeration and credulity. The Jesuits detected mistakes in his allusions to Lebna Dengel as monogamous (see p. 193) and to the vast tribute he received (see p. 425); they did not remark upon what probably appears to the modern reader as his most obvious error, his frequent references to tigers; on the contrary they made this mistake themselves (*SRE*, p. 51). Bruce, in his account of Lebna Dengel's reign, absurdly suggested that many things in the book had been added by the Jesuits 'some years posterior to the time in which Alvarez was in Abyssinia'. He did not explain how these interpolations came to be made in a book that was published seventeen years before any Jesuit reached Ethiopia and almost before the Society of Jesus was in existence. More understandably, Bruce was puzzled by the agreement on religious matters which Alvares represents as having been attained by the Ethiopians and the Portuguese. The unanimity was not to persist for long but it is preposterous to consider it, as Bruce does, as a deliberate lie on the part of Alvares. The explanation is evident and simple. Both Alvares and the Ethiopian clergy were too ignorant to realize how different their beliefs were supposed to be. The former was hopelessly confused about the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon (see p. 291). The latter, if Bruce himself is to be believed (*SRE*, p. xxiv), never understood the theological issues at all. At this time there were reasons why the Ethiopians should have welcomed an opportunity for establishing relations with Rome, and they did not yet regard their Catholic visitors as enemies of their customs and their independence as they later came to do. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of this part of the narrative.

Alvares's ignorance may have been of advantage to him in another way. It is possible that a more learned man would have arrived in Ethiopia with a mind encumbered with erudite nonsense of the kind that was later to be propagated by the

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Spanish Dominican Urreta. We might have encountered Mandeville's sciapods, the Earthly Paradise, the descendants of the Three Kings, and the deaf races living by the cataracts of the Nile. It is pleasant to have escaped from these. He is sometimes wrong, but very rarely silly or incredible. He made a few mistakes; he may well have made others that we cannot detect because he is our sole authority; when he tried to describe buildings his command of language was usually inadequate; he is often confused and obscure, though this may be as much his printer's fault as his own; his prose is frequently difficult to read and painful to translate, but he seems to us to be free from the dishonesty of the traveller who tries to exaggerate his own knowledge, importance or courage. He appears as a kind, tactful, sensible man, doing his best in very difficult circumstances. His plans for settling in Ethiopia when he feared he would have to spend the rest of his life there (see p. 466) recall one of Defoe's self-reliant heroes and make us understand the confidence that other members of the embassy had in him. This, of course, is an estimate derived from his own book, but there is nothing in contemporary sources to suggest that it is not correct.

Some consideration of what is known about the earlier part of Lebna Dengel's reign will show both the importance of Alvares as a source for Ethiopian history and the character of the Ethiopian material available to us in our efforts to elucidate his text.

C.F.B.

II

THE REIGN OF LEBNA DENGEL TO 1526

Though Lebna Dengel succeeded to the throne of Ethiopia in 1508, there is not much information about him till 1527 in the Ethiopian chronicles printed hitherto. Even the great chronicle B.M. Oriental MS 821 (fol. 113b) does not begin the story of his reign till 1527, when the general Degalhan was sent to invade Adal. This, too, is as much as the *Paris Chronicle* has to say, though it adds that the annual invasions of Ethiopia during Lent by the Moslems of Adal began when Lebna

Dengel was king. A little more light is thrown on the subject by the Bodleian MS Bruce 88,¹ by stray allusions in Alvares, and by various fragments of evidence in the Ethiopian land charters.

The reason why the chroniclers are silent is to be found in the personal history and antecedents of the king himself. Lebna Dengel, son of Nā'od, was grandson of Ba'eda Māryām through his first wife Romana Warq. But although this queen was capable of asserting herself when necessary,² she was wholly surpassed by the forceful personality of Elēni. This woman, the daughter of Meḥmad (Muḥammad) the Moslem governor (*garād*) of Ḥadyā, was married—doubtless as a matter of policy—by Zar'a Yā'qob; she was his senior queen (the queen of the right). After his death she became the second wife of his successor Ba'eda Māryām, who made her his queen of the right, in spite of the fact that Romana Warq his first queen, 'the wife of his youth' as the Chronicler calls her, was alive.³ Ba'eda Māryām was very fond of Elēni, but 'regarded her as his mother',⁴ which suggests that she was a wife in name and status only, and confirms the assertion of Telles that she was childless.⁵ Though Lebna Dengel may have regarded her as a mother, she was in fact no more than his step-grandmother. When Lebna Dengel at the age of twelve succeeded his father Nā'od, it was Elēni, as Alvares was told by Abuna Marqos, who with the Abuna's help put him on the throne; for, as

¹ The text of fol. 39r-40r of this MS has been published by Conti Rossini as 'Storia di Lebna Dengel' in *RRAL*, vol. III (1894), pp. 621-30.

² Basset, *Études*, p. 247, n. 113. (See the Bibliography on p. 587 for the full titles of books or manuscripts.)

³ It does not seem to have been recognized that Elēni the wife of Zar'a Yā'qob and Elēni the wife of Ba'eda Māryām were the same person. This would make her not more than a little over eighty at the time of her death, and is to a point confirmed by the statement in MS Bruce 88 that she had been in the palace of three illustrious kings, i.e. Zar'a Yā'qob, Ba'eda Māryām and Nā'od, the palace of Eskender having been apparently dominated by his own mother, and 'Āmda Šeyon having reigned for only seven months (whence *his* name would hardly be illustrious).

⁴ *CB*, p. 176.

⁵ Ludolf, *Historia*, lib. II, cap. 6, 8 note.

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Ludolf says, she was *prudens & magni animi foemina*, adding *durat adhuc in Aethiopiâ prospera ejus fama* (*Historia*, lib. II, cap. 6, 14).

The chronicle contained in Bodleian MS Bruce 88 thus describes the situation (fol. 39r):

He became king when a boy of twelve years; and in those days he passed his time in riding, shooting with the bow, and hunting wild animals, for this was the custom of the sons of kings till they learnt how to govern the kingdom in the right way. And then he was given charge of the kingdom under the control of his mother Queen Nā'od Mogasā, and with the counsel of the other queen Elēni, since she understood the management of the royal household; and in particular she, Elēni, was skilled in the laws of the kingdom, having been in the palace of three illustrious kings whose names were made famous. (He had also) the advice of all the great ones, the learned and the wise, of the royal household; especially had he the advice of the wise and intelligent Wasan Sagad, who held the second office in the kingdom; he was then set to reign on the royal throne.

His real mother Nā'od Mogasā does not appear to have played much part in affairs of state; she is not mentioned by Alvares, who on the other hand has several significant references to Elēni; in one of the charters, however, Lebna Dengel does include in the customary list of contemporary officials 'the mother of the king, Nā'od Mogasā', as a concession to her official status as queen regent (charter 26, dated 8 February 1519). In the extract from Bodleian MS Bruce 88 quoted above, Elēni is obviously meant to be understood as the effective regent; and the singling out of Wasan Sagad, the *behtwadad* of the left, suggests too that he was a protégé of Elēni.

It is therefore to the influence of Elēni that we may probably look for the absence of references to Lebna Dengel before 1527. It is true that Bodleian MS Bruce 88 describes, in a few short sentences, the death of Maḥfūz (Alvares, chapter cxiv), but the name of Gabra Endreyās is not mentioned. Clearly, the imperious Elēni, even if she was getting old, was having no history written in which she did not play a major part, and being a *prudens foemina* perhaps preferred that the chroniclers should be silent. Moreover, on the Abuna's admission to