



Interior da nave, Igreja de Maryam Gemb, c. 1930. Foto: Center for Ethiopian Studies, Univ. de Addis-Abeba

RESUMO

A Pedra e a Cruz. Arquitectura Jesuíta Indo-Portuguesa na Etiópia, 1603-33

A fundação de uma missão jesuíta no Norte da Etiópia em 1603, na província do Tigré, pelo enérgico Pe. Pero Pais, S. J. teólogo, construtor e historiador vindo de

Goa, tomou um forte impulso com a aliança pretendida com os Portugueses pelo imperador Susénios (1619-20) para o apoio militar contra os muçulmanos; e, sobretudo, após a sua conversão oficial à Igreja Católica Romana, em 1626.

Uma dúzia de inovadores edifícios foram então construídos pelos Jesuítas na região paradisíaca em torno do Lago Tana: basílicas, igrejas, palácios e jardins, complexos palatinos e eclesiásticos, colégios, etc. A tipologia em cruz latina e ornatos incisivos é deliberadamente diferente das igrejas ortodoxas etíopes, circulares e em madeira. A técnica de construção em pedra e cal, ignorada na Etiópia, significou uma revolução.

No presente texto procura-se determinar a quem deve ser atribuído este inédito surto construtivo, deixando de lado as teorias tradicionais de pedreiros vindos de Portugal ou de construtores locais. Com base na evidência estilística e em referências de textos da época, atribui-se a inovação a padres e "irmãos" jesuítas com experiência de arquitectos na Índia portuguesa e a construtores de Goa e de Diu, definindo a arte portuguesa na Etiópia como uma província da arquitectura indo-portuguesa na Índia, prosseguida após a expulsão dos Jesuítas (1633) com os "castelos portugueses", ou paços acastelados da nova capital, Gondar.

THE STONE AND THE CROSS

Indo-Portuguese Jesuit Architecture in Ethiopia. 1603-33

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The recent reflowering of Ethiopian studies in Europe has led to a refreshed vision of old problems, seen in a wider historical context and based on a close scrutiny of sources, written, material and oral alike. These questions still form a complex process of world interactions concerning the phenomenon of "civilizational missions" from the West – such as the one opened precisely 400 years ago in the Tigray by energetic Father Pero Pais, S. J. (1564-1622), master in Theology, natural scientist, builder, historian and a writer as well.

Never in the time-span of one generation did the number of Jesuits simultaneously present in the ground surpass that of only seven or eight, always travelling from place to place to supervise the works of construction, which must have begun around the year 1620. But they left behind them, when forced to leave in 1633 by the anti-Latin decree of emperor Fasilides, an impressive amount of residences, churches, gardens and religious houses, with 13 – the symbolic number representing Christ and the Apostles – residences and palace-basilicas. These were days of glory for the order, with the official proclamation in the Vatican in 1622 of the first two jesuit saints: Ignatius of Loyola, the founder, and Francis Xavier, the "Apostle of the Orient".

The new face of Latinization of orthodox Ethiopia, the Jesuits' aim, was a different geographical space (around Lake Tana) and a different built landscape. A new Church obeying to Rome meant the imposition of new rules and another territory, a "hard" culture both in principles as in stone, opposed to the "soft" methods of inculturation (*via suave*) that many defended in Goa.

We can easily imagine the problems it posed to these few missionaries more used to work with the voice than with the hands: lack of architectural instruction; shortage of specialised workmanship; terrible difficulties in the communications inside Ethiopia; total dependence on the Emperor and nobles for the grounds, license to build and financial means to carry-on constructions; crucial decisions on site, types, scale and decoration, to be taken on the spot. In

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a dozen months or so, this community isolated from Lisbon or Rome had to improvise and create a style, to “invent an art”... But based on what?

The visual criteria of divine Truth were visibility and a need for the monumental, the most convincing proofs of a superior faith and civilisation. It was an option taken somewhere in Goa around 1620 – if Gorgora (1619) and Ganata Jesus (1621) were, in fact, Lake Tana's first permanent royal sites. Old churches and residences, built in wood and straw, had to be replaced by imposing, attractive, well-lighted, solid, rational “modern” structures. We can only compare them in majesty and theological sophistication to the great Jesuit colleges of India (or their extension to Macao, started around 1602-1620) and one century later the celebrated *misiones* of Paraguay and Brazil.

In an incredibly short term of five to ten years, they erected 13 houses which included not only religious residences and churches for the priests as also palatial “compounds” with lakes and gardens: the gigantic challenge of a new system of architectural principles. This building policy adopted in Goa could only have been the fruit of an enormous self-confidence and an overoptimistic sense of time: world history and God favoured their deeds. The amount of work it involved, the logistical problems to face, the versatile solutions, the effort of these men, are a prodigy perhaps unmatched in early modern days, albeit now crumbling in ruins.

It is not our intention here to discuss dates, places or names, geopolitical strategies, building programs or ideological issues. We simply want to marvel at this simultaneous capacity of mass-production in a period of alleged decay of the Portuguese empire all over India, and to ask some simple questions from the point of view of architectural history. How was it possible? Where did such talented master-masons and workers come from? What were their techniques and the “models” or places of reference?

It is my belief that both architectural form and the concept of ornament, the proportions and technological sources, do not point to an erudite migration of a “Jesuit style” as practiced in Europe – from Portugal to Italy – but indeed to the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. Here, European most cultivated forms had taken deep roots since the beginnings of 16th century. More precisely: to the peculiar ways of cross-cultural or hybrid forms had developed, as the capital moved in 1530 from southern Cochim to Goa, around the political centers and main religious settlements where a situation of social and cultural symbiosis, a complicity of interests, had created that wonderful language

of shapes, colours and iconography called since 1881¹ the “Indo-Portuguese style”.

Goa was a cosmopolitan metropolis of over 2 hundred thousand people. Her schools imparted the best education in Asia – as Jesuits' St-Paul's College, which had more than 600 students after the mid-century: local princes, nobles from Persia, the Caucasus, Malaysia, Japan. In the shops of Rua Direita anyone could buy the most precious luxuries from Venice to Arabia, jewels of Ceylon, stones from Burma and Brazil, bengali or siamese tissues, Chinese porcelain. Any craft could be learnt in the streets of this New York of Asia.

Small wonders that some Ethiopians found their way to these workshops as clients, pupils and practitioners. For some reason, the arts of drawing and colouring – probably, the secrets of Western perspective and anatomy – had a special attraction for them: a clear parallel with Japan, where an Academy of painting and engraving had been founded in 1612 by an Italian Jesuit.

As early as 1526, so tells us Father Francisco Álvares², the ambassador Saga Zaab brought four slaves to Goa as apprentices of painting and trumpet, which the captain took at his charge, “e mandou que os ensinassem”. A curious document from July 1532, the “*Book of Receipts of The Three Blind Kings Abexins [Abyssinian]*”³, informs that these three poor royals (if they were the same) received from the Goan treasurer a monthly grant, Pero *abyxi* to study as a painter and Antônio and Mateus as trumpet-players – at least for the whole year of 1533⁴. It is a good sign of how Goa appeared to Ethiopians these days: a land where anything was possible, even a blind painter.

Religious orders used to concentrate around their convents or in their properties a sufficient number of good local artisans in order to furnish or repair them: stonemasons, carpenters, kilns for brick and pottery, wall-painting, furniture, woodcarving for altarpieces and images, embroideries, oil and miniature works, etc. Jesuits, for sure, were superlative in these matters of labor organization and instruction for the needs of the house. In 1630 they had officially

1 The term was created for an exhibition on ornamental arts at the South Kensington Museum (now Victoria and Albert) by its director, M. C. Robinson, and currently accepted by F. de Sousa Viterbo, Ramalho Ortigão and other Portuguese scholars.

2 Padre Francisco Álvares, *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João* [1540], 2^a ed., Lisboa, Agência Geral das Colónias, 1943, Parte III, cap. 3, p. 390.

3 Lisboa, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Corpo cronológico, II, 176, 122.

4 Ibid., II, 178, 34.



Friso e caixotão da abóbada da capela-mor. Maryam Gemb. Foto: Ian Campbell, 1960.

in the State of India 18 residences and colleges with 40 churches controlling a huge mass of workmanship and materials of all kinds, coming from their own lands⁵. The missionary machine had attained the level of an industry and was ready to start moving..

For more specialised labor they managed to get into their ranks as not ordained priests, or “lay brothers” (*irmãos*), the most talented artists in town: architects, designers, engineers, map-makers, painters, etc., who received the best formal education in mathematics, literature and iconography.

That is the reason why jesuit masterpieces were normally done all by themselves, in stone-cutting as in interior decoration: good examples are the Bom Jesus basilica in Goa (where Saint Francis Xavier is buried) attributed to Domingos Fernandes, S. J. (1594-1605); the College of Rachol, attributed to a Gaspar Soares, S. J. (1606-20); and St. Paul’s church in Macao, by Carlo Spínola, S. J. (1602). In fact, the number of cultivated jesuit builders active in India at the turn of the century is not known; but they controlled a large bunch of master-masons and huge number of less specialised workers – an army which they could recruit in a matter of days. We can simply ask who else could have undertaken Operation Ethiopia so quickly and so well.

Of course, these conditions are potential possibilities, and possibilities are not facts. We must look directly at the available data in order to obtain a global and more convincing view of how things did happen in the realm of emperor Susenios (1605-32) around the key-date of 1620, the supposed year of his conversion to Catholicism.

A closer look into what seems to have been the first catholic church founded personally by Susenios, that of Ganata lasus (*Jesus’ Paradise*) on the brink of Lake Tana, started at November 1621 and finished two years later under the direction of “Padri Pay” (undoubtedly Father Pero Pais, S. J.)⁶ – a study beeing done now by the archaeologist Ian Campbell – shows signs of a rectangular “enclosure” measuring at least 150 X 40 meters built in stone and mud, with round towers and posts with flags all made of copper or gilded brass. Inside, the church was 16 metres long in the proportion 1:3 and had a foreign-

5 António Bocarro. *O Livro das Plantas de Todas as Fortalezas. Cidades e Povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental*, 3 vols., tracr. de Isabel Cid, Lisboa, IN/CM, 1992, vol. 2.

6 F. M. Esteves Pereira, *Crónica de Susenyos, Rei de Etiópia*, texto e trad., 2 vols., Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional, 1892-1900, p. 282.

-looking (i. e., Catholic) portal of 12 Doric columns, arches, a terrace and a parapet, in carved stone brought from abroad. Next to it, king Susenios' monumental palace occupied the hilltop, surrounded by gardens.

It was quite an exotic complex adapted to Ethiopian traditions and liturgy, like a large tank in the slopes facing the lake with a pavilion in the middle, all "built for him by workmen from India"⁷. Some façade details - such as the Doric fluted columns, entablatures with jars and roses allusive to a triumphant Virgin or the escorialesque motif of pyramids and balls high above – should look like a Catholic dress over a local design. If it was used as an imperial pantheon by Susenios himself, as the chronicle states, it seems more the sign of a weakness in front of his clergy than of a strong desire of change, as little there points to a typological dynastic mausoleum in the Renaissance sense. On his masterpiece, Pero Pais said he was trying to emulate the fabulous palace of the mythic king Gundafor of India, built – according to the medieval *Legenda Aurea* – by St. Thomas, Christ's first apostle-architect, as a token of the Indian king's conversion to Roman Christianity. One millenium later, the situations repeated – as the paintings of the Virgin and Child (the "Madonna del Popolo") allegedly painted by St. Luke, whose copies were installed in every mission house for common's salute.

Technological innovations there were the "invention" of Manuel Magro, a mason brought from Goa in 1624 by the patriarch Afonso Mendes: but it was simply the making of *chunambo*, the lime mortar usual in India by burning oyster shells or calcarious stone. To Ethiopians it meant a revolution in building, with quicker builds and the possibility of several construction yards working under one master at the same time, new daring building types, classical coffered barrel vaults and so on. Despite the mannerisms of ornament they were new architectural values in the country that amazed everyone.

The range of possibilities opened by these structures *alla romana* and the kind of classicist decoration they involved is best seen in later buildings, such as the religious-palatine complexes of Gorgora and Mertule Maryam, both built in 1626 by the jesuit lay brother João Martins. Gorgora was the first church made "without any trees", as marvels the *Chronicle of Susenios*. It had a well-proportioned inner court two or three storeys high, roofed by a vault which

⁷ Pe. Jerónimo Lobo, *The Itinerário of Jerónimo Lobo*, ed. Hakluyt Society, Londres, p. 248: cfr. Ian Campbell, "The Royal Fortress of Azazo" in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies*, I, 1994.



Mertule Maryam, interior da capela-mor. Foto do autor.



Mertule Maryam, arco cruzeiro. Foto do autor.



Mertule Maryam, decoreção do portal da sacristia. Foto do autor.

must have been painted, creating with the stone-carved Doric frieze of the church an effect of rare solemnity which recalls Santa Mónica's cloister in Goa (1606-7), so praised by its magnificence and symbolism. Unfortunately, the last decorated fragment of Maryam Gemb totally collapsed in 1995 and is now a mound of ruins.

That concern with christologic and marianic simbologies endured in "hard" materials was more explicit to the end of the period – probably as an answer to the growing criticisms of local clergy – as in Susenios camp at Danqaz, where he lived his last ten years and died, in 1632. Little after 1625 he asked the *Franks* (i. e., the Indo-Portuguese master-masons just arrived with Afonso Mendes, or Manuel Magro himself) to build him a palace "in lime and stones", to which a church was added in 1628 with the title of Cathedral. Nowhere are architectural symbols more visible, both as legitimation and an announcement of the king's religious and political intentions. The church, built on the spot where he gave to Afonso Mendes his allegiance to the Pope of Rome (1626), has a Latin-cross plan, with a coffered apse no longer used in Early Baroque Rome but still common in Goa.

Curiously enough, many of these building practices survived the Jesuits. When emperor Fasilides replaced his father in 1632, abjured his conversion and founded at the city of Gondar the first permanent capital in Ethiopia, its palaces – the famous "Portuguese castles" – followed the same inspiration.

The architectural models chosen by the priests were a response to the local uses as eclectic as the complex situation they encountered. Priority went to the most suitable and previous experienced forms, not to the learned sources, such as the Italian treatises of Sebastiano Serlio: less to aesthetics than to haste. An idea of *déjà vu* emerges from each case still recognizable.

Some fragments of decoration which remain visible in Mertule Maryam, as stone lintels, coffers of the vaults, doors or windows, repeat the same motifs (roses, jars, lilly flowers, acanthic scrolls, the jesuit anagram IHS) that we may find at Danqaz or Azazo (Ganata Jesus), and in many other places, treated in a way which is almost unidentifiable from one another. The idea it gives is that they were worked separately, in an almost industrial way, and only then applied to the built structures.

But who were these master-masons, who in less than twenty years redesigned the map of a millenarian civilization just as the missionaries tried to overturn its old form of Christian religion by making real the myth of the



Mertule Maryam, portal da sacristia. Foto do autor.



Mertule Maryam, pormenor do friso oriental da nave. Foto do autor.

Prester John? What I want to suggest here is that the answer is to be found in the buildings themselves, the “language” they speak, their technical devices, stone-carved themes and decorative choices. And they all point to Portuguese India: Goa, naturally; but also some important jesuit clusters near the ports of the Highlands of Ethiopia – the so-called *Northern Province* (Diu in the Gujarat, as also Bassein near Bombay) in special, where Jesuits were a major force.

The province’s capital Bassein was the ancestor of Mumbai and an active building-yard of quality, its noble population favouring jesuit enterprises as their own (they were so many that the city was nicknamed “Dom Baçaim”...) Given by the Gujerati sultan in 1534 as a strip of inhospitable coastal land, it quickly rised to more than 4 thousand residents and was then being totally rebuilt after its destruction by a hurricane in 1618. The Jesuits had the largest college, 5 churches, 6 rural residences and controlled the Misericórdia, the most select house-of-mercy in town. Manpower and skilled artists were not a problem within its 200 miles long territory.

To the North, Daman (conquered in 1559 as a rich port with the Red Sea) was a small Renaissance city but it had 3 jesuit houses, the first from 1603.

The most northward Portuguese colony, the fortress of Diu, at the tip of the peninsula of Cambay, was the closest, geographically and artistically, to Ethiopia. It was a huge fortification with a garrison and a few traders, but it commanded a muslim-hindu town 2 yards inside the island, famous for the high standards of its stone-masons of the “baneane” caste and century-old tradition. They can still be seen at work today at the Gulf emirates or in Lisbon. Strong links ,of dependance (they are in majority catholics even now) were established with Portugal and the Jesuits, who had there their most “indianised” church, called the Cathedral, built in the territory in-between, expressing its cultural double-bind. If the plan attributed to Gaspar Soares, S. J. is common at its date of 1601, a Latin cross without towers, deep presbitery and round niches in the nave altars – a feature rare in India but which appears in Gorgora – the façade is a delirium of Asian motifs in classical frame. Sometimes we have the impression that the hands that carved the Hindu roses in the coffers and panels at Diu were the same that made them in Ethiopian vaults and windows. And perhaps they were.

Written documents never pay attention to the multitude of workers: presumably they were locals engaged for small labor and unskilled tasks. But every evidence points to the fact that there were indo-portuguese from Diu,

as Father Jerónimo Lobo states, as regards to special techniques, measurements, statics, stereotomy of the stones and sculpting the ornaments.

Architecture is essentially a mental activity. If we pick from the texts, some names appear as the very plausible authors. João Martins, arrived in 1625 with two master-masons, is credited with Gorgora and Mertule Maryam. Manuel Magro came “from the lands of Cambay”, that is Diu. Gaspar Pais, S. J., was active in Ligenegus (1626) and Danqaz (1628). As early as 1618 we hear of a muslim mason from Diu bringing stone to Gorgora on orders of Pero Pais.⁸

Father Pais celebrity as a builder was probably made at the cost of this team of experienced and learned men, called from Goa and Diu, he had helped to establish and start drawing in Ethiopia. He did not create a style, but an extension of jesuit tradition in the Portuguese towns of India.

By all means Ethiopia was a province of “indo-portuguese” art, adapted to the specific conditions and needs of the recent mission. And its main result, when the end came, besides some picturesque ruins, was the basis on which evolved the Gondarine style, one of Ethiopia’s most original voices.

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⁸ Cfr. Hervé Pennec, *Des Jésuites au Royaume du Prêtre Jean*, Paris, 2003, pp.175-9 e 212-4.