

Abba Gorgoryos: An Ethiopian scholar in Germany



The 17th century Ethiopian scholar Abba Gorgoryos is one of the great personae of the earlier history of Ethiopia's higher education system. Just as in medieval Europe, in the Ethiopian empire, too, Christian monasteries and ecclesiastical schools, equipped with comprehensive collections of manuscripts, were the first to give rise to educational institutions for scholars and later to centres of higher learning with a sacerdotal character. Abba Gorgoryos represents an early stage of the ambitious, independent system of higher education of the Christian-Orthodox Ethiopian state. It dedicated itself not only to theology, but also to religious music, poetry, linguistics (of the Church language Ge'ez), history and constitutional law. As a relative of Ethiopian royalty – a status he somehow claimed to possess – he initially enjoyed a privileged standing on his long educational trajectory, which led him through monasteries and churches. He became for some time the abbot of an important island monastery, at a young age. Just like the emperor, an

ally of the Portuguese, he joined the Catholic faith early on, a faith that was entirely new to Ethiopia and which he associated with cosmopolitanism and new knowledge. However, when rebellions among the conservative population and the princes forced the emperor to resign, and the Portuguese fled from Ethiopia, followed even by Ethiopian Catholics, Gorgoryos left the country, too, and went into exile in Goa, India. A pilgrimage led him to Rome via Yemen and Jerusalem, where he encountered the young orientalist Hiob Ludolf from Frankfurt. When Ludolf entered into employment with the Duke of Gotha, a man highly interested in the Christian orient, he managed to also invite Gorgoryos to Gotha in 1652, where the two of them conducted wide-ranging scholarly discussions. The stay sparked relations with members of the court and other scholars, some of which remain documented in letters. Ludolf's first dictionaries and manuscripts on the ethnography and history of Ethiopia also originate here. Hiob Ludolf fleshed them out, turning them into vast tomes, which decidedly stand out from among other works on the region because of their proximity to the region's actual conditions. Abba Gorgoryos thus became a co-founder of Ethiopian Studies, a sub-discipline of Orientalism and Semitic studies. His wish to return to Ethiopia – where he endeavoured to serve the new emperor with his interest in Europe – was never fulfilled: when journeying back, Gorgoryos drowned in a shipwreck.

Text: Wolbert Smidt



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