

EAST AFRICAN INFLUENCES UPON THE EARLY BYZANTINE EMPIRE

During the past two decades the importance of east Africa in world affairs has thrust itself upon the public consciousness with an impact that cannot fail to be recognized.¹ The historian, confronted with this recognition, is obliged to re-evaluate the place of east Africa in the past, and to decide whether it is appropriate to consider the glib omission of that area from most accounts of the western heritage.²

Ethiopia, once able to merit recognition as a diplomatic equal by the powerful rulers of the Byzantine empire; the Nubians of the upper Nile, who were able to turn back an expedition of Roman invaders; the Somali coast, shipping center for valuable cargoes sent to the great cities of the Mediterranean, all deserve a fuller place in a rounded account of a civilization which evolved from the vitality of three adjoining continents. From remoter times archeologists have suggested the probability of links between east African cultures and early European cultures, links which would add weight to the notion that we should include east Africa along with Egypt and the near East in a comprehensive study of western origins. Our attention has been called to the existence of pre-historic remains in Ethiopia, including "dolmens, such as exist in Britain, thousands of lofty phallic and other columns erected on high places sometimes graven with the rays of the sun and the Southern Cross, menhirs resembling those found in France, in the Marne, the Gard, the Aveyron, funerary monuments sculptured with swords, like those found in Spain and Italy."³ Full appreciation of this concept would lead to a considerable extension of the geographic area generally embraced in the teaching of western history.

¹ The writer is indebted to Dr. Donald Davies, linguist and Biblical scholar who served as a missionary to Ethiopia, and to George Kimani, graduate student from Kenya.

² He learned that Shepherd's *Historical Atlas* (W. R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas*, New York, 1956.) did not contain a single map of Africa south of the Nile valley to illustrate any period of history before the European occupations of the nineteenth century; that the index to the two volume Cambridge Medieval History (C. W. Previt -Orton, *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History*, Cambridge, 1952.) contains no reference to Abyssinia, Ethiopia, Axum, or Nubia.

³ S. Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: a Cultural History*, Essex, 1955, 1.

For the purposes of this article our usage of the term "east Africa" shall include the area from the Nubian desert to the sources of the Nile, and from the Nile valley eastward to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, including essentially the modern lands of the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritea, and part of Somaliland. For the most part the scope of the article is concerned with events of the sixth and seventh centuries, although it has been necessary sometimes to use for illustrative purposes examples drawn from times both earlier and later. For instance, Pliny's *Natural History* provides certain information that can properly be used to describe products of a century much later than his own.

During the early part of the Middle Ages, when Constantinople was the great entrepot for goods of this world and ideas concerning the next, when products native to China, India, and Persia found their way into Europe through the Byzantine metropolis, Africans along the Red Sea coast shared in the process of keeping Constantinople an economic and cultural leader of the Mediterranean world. This article proposes to discuss some of the ways in which influences stemming essentially from east Africa affected the life of medieval Constantinople. It is generally recognized now that the Byzantine civilization, far from being the "tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery"⁴ that Gibbon portrayed, was really the most vibrant, prosperous, multi-faceted urban center of all Europe beside which the cities of Charlemagne and Alfred the Great would appear as barbarian villages in the mud.

The first and basic ingredient of Constantinople's economy that enabled her to outlast by a thousand years her western predecessor as capital of the Roman empire was gold. With the decline of the circulation of gold in western Europe, climaxing with its virtual disappearance there as a medium of exchange by 800 A.D., the trickle of goods that moved from Byzantium westward was paid for with silver, often debased. On the other hand the great influx of silk, spices, gems, and the fabulous contents of Asiatic caravans apparently drained from east Europe a considerable amount of gold, despite efforts to find marketable commodities to ship eastward in

⁴ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Millman edition, New York, 1850, IV, 567.

exchange.⁵ How, then, was Constantinople able to retain for centuries the favorable balance of bullion which allowed her to buy security and protection when other means of defense failed? There are various explanations of this dilemma, but one which deserves close examination is the fact that considerable gold from east Africa was imported into Constantinople, with some interruptions, from before the time of Justin I (518-527) at least until the closing years of Heraclius' reign (610-641), and during many of those crucial years the African supply may have accounted for the very survival of Byzantium.⁶

Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek whose travels combined the interests of commerce and theology, visited the shores of east Africa in the early sixth century, and described for us the search for gold in the interior of the continent. Although Cosmos was more concerned with demonstrating that the earth was a rectangular enlargement of Moses' tabernacle than with economic history, he nevertheless has provided a fine clue to the process by which gold was carried to the Ethiopian coast and to caravan terminals. The Abyssinian king, who presumably exercised control over the trade, sent out annually a group of his own agents, accompanied by as many as five hundred merchants. The merchants, upon reaching the mining districts of the interior, bartered their oxen (mostly slaughtered and sold as meat), salt, and iron for nuggets of gold "like peas."⁷ What happened was that the Byzantine traders bought with coin, along the coast, articles which could be bartered effectively in the interior. As a result they were able to bring back with them gold in amounts much greater than the value of the coin they had originally invested. The round trip journey from Adulis, on the Red Sea coast, to the trading posts in the interior took about six months, Although Cosmas was vague in defining the locality to which the merchants went, it must have been somewhere south of Lake Tana.⁸ The nuggets of gold might have been carried a

⁵ J. R. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, London, 1923, II, 317.

⁶ Pliny testifies to the importance of the African gold supply to the Roman empire as early as the first century A.D. Pliny, *Natural History*, VI, xxv.

⁷ J. H. McCrindle, ed., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas*, London, 1897, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

considerable distance from the south and east to the point where they were bartered, possibly from as far as modern Kenya, and from the remote trading posts the merchants carried them back to the civilized safety of Axum in a journey that required both speed and vigilance.⁹

Byzantine traders enjoyed what must have been a privileged status in these quasi-official expeditions, and during the first half of the sixth century Ethiopia retained a cordial relationship with Byzantium that involved dealings both economic and diplomatic.¹⁰ When the gold found its way to Constantinople it helped to make possible a balanced economy in the face of the heavy drain imposed by that city's eastern trade.¹¹ Referring to this problem, Steven Runciman has written: "In exchange, gold, and to a lesser extent silver, had been exported to the East. This gold came mainly from Nubia, to which the Romans had access, and, when the diplomatic situation permitted, from the Caucasus and Urals."¹² He might have added both Abyssinia and lands further to the south as potential sources of gold, judging from the evidence of Cosmas and even Procopius. Runciman adds that African migrations in the time of Justinian (527-565) seriously disturbed the gold supply to the extent that authorities became alarmed.¹³ There was a widespread wandering of peoples, including the Blemmyes, from the Nile basin eastward, just south of Egypt, cutting off direct communications between Egypt and the heart of Nubia, making caravan travel through that area almost impossible. In part as a result of that disruption the financial state of the empire became so precarious that in the time of Justin II (565-578) we read of "the government treasury overburdened with many debts and reduced

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ See Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Loeb edition, I, 179. Certain features of Julian's mission are discussed below. The *Kebra Nagast* (see E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek*), Ethiopic manuscript of the fourteenth century, (see also I. Guidi, *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, 45, for his interpretation and dating) stresses the close relationship that existed between the two lands in the time of Justin I (518-527). On this point see A. A. Vasiliev, "Justin I and Abyssinia," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, XXXIII, 1933, 67-77.

¹¹ *Cambridge Medieval History*, New York, 1913, II, 41-2.

¹² *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Cambridge, 1952, II, 88.

¹³ *Idem.*

to extreme poverty."¹⁴ Various factors contributed to Byzantium's financial troubles—her costly wars, the lack of a far-sighted fiscal policy, an over-extended bureaucracy—but certainly the temporary loss of the African gold supply weakened the structure of the eastern Roman empire for some years.

It is not true, as Gibbon alleged, that after Justinian's time "the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten,"¹⁵ but it is true that the seventh century expansion of the Moslems, which secured for the Arabs control of the Red Sea and the Egyptian coast, severed direct communication between east Africa and Constantinople. Before that happened, however, one other incident should be recalled. When Heraclius succeeded in overthrowing the regime of Phocas (610), his first step was to secure control of Egypt. The African migrations had stabilized sufficiently to allow renewed communication by way of the Nile valley with the lands to the south. This step insured for the new emperor a possible route to the precious gold supply of east Africa. Later, when Alexandria fell to the Persians in 618-9, Heraclius lost access to the African trade, and thereafter his financial stress became so acute that he had to mint coins from such gold and silver as could be extracted from the churches. It is not unlikely that the loss of Egypt, and with it his route to the south, was the blow that forced him to such an extremity.¹⁶ If this conclusion is valid, the loss of east African gold twice in a century affected the breakdown of the Byzantine economy, which it had earlier helped to sustain. Heraclius remained in serious financial trouble, and by the end of his reign in 641 the Arabs had already won control of the Red Sea and the Nile, so that direct intercourse between east Africa and Constantinople became impossible, and trade thereafter depended upon the mediation of the Arabs.¹⁷

¹⁴ From the *Novel* of Justin II, quoted in A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, Madison, 1952, 162.

¹⁵ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, IV, 563.

¹⁶ With reference to Constantinople, Runciman has written: "In A. D. 630 there was about 20% less gold in circulation than there had been two centuries before." *C.E.H.*, II, 90.

¹⁷ See S. Lane-Poole, *Egypt*, London, 1901, 24-6, for evidence of the prosperity

In addition to gold, Abyssinia and the Somali coast offered to Constantinople a number of commodities that for many years were important to the economic life of the east European metropolis. Ivory, ostrich feathers, spices, frankincense, myrrh, slaves constituted some of the important luxury items that were in demand in medieval Constantinople as long as there was money to pay for them. East Africa was an important source of all these items, although India and the Arabian peninsula produced some of them as well. During the sixth century Abyssinian ships on the Red Sea and Nubian caravans on the land were the carriers of most of the African commodities, but subsequently the Arabs dominated the sea routes through the Red Sea.

As early as the first century A.D., when the Axumite kingdom flourished south of Egypt, a vigorous trade emanating from central Africa found its way into the Roman orbit. A fascinating account of this trade is found a first century document called *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*,¹⁸ in which we read of the activity of port towns along the coasts of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. In the Axumite kingdom was located "Adulis, a fair-sized village, from which there is a three days' journey to Colos, an inland town and the first market for ivory. From that place to the city of the people called Auxumites there is a five days' journey more; to that place all the ivory is brought from the country beyond the Nile through the district called Cyenum, and thence to Adulis. Practically the whole number of elephants and rhinoceros that are killed live in the places inland, although at rare intervals they are hunted on the seacoast even near Adulis."¹⁹

The ivory trade continued to be important, and it affected the economy of the eastern Roman empire as the demand for ivory increased.²⁰ From the time when the emperor Constantine gave his name to the eastern capital through the ninth century ivory carvings and ivory decorations developed to

achieved by Arabs as successors of the Egyptian Moslems in the eighth to tenth centuries. See A. R. Lewis, *Naval Power and Trade in the Mediterranean, 500 to 1100 A.D.*, Princeton, 1951, 166; and also M. Lombard, "L'Or Mussulman du VII^e au XI^e siecle," *Annales*, 1947, II, 149.

¹⁸ W. H. Schoff, ed., *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, New York, 1912.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ See, for example, Juvenal, Loeb ed., xi, 124.

an extraordinary extent, and we find themes both sacred and profane represented in the fine patterns of work done by Byzantine craftsmen.²¹ There were various sources of ivory, but in the period with which we are concerned a particularly fine quality was shipped to Constantinople from east Africa.²² Even after gold shipments from Africa were no longer possible, ivory continued to find its way to the great metropolis. The Arabs controlled the Red Sea from 642 on, and they were most reluctant to risk its loss.²³ Since they did not develop the use of ivory to any considerable extent themselves, the Arabs sought it chiefly as a profitable commodity for sale, and they had no reluctance about selling it to others. The port of Adulis received ivory from the interior and re-shipped it in Abyssinian vessels until the seventh century; after that Arabic and other carriers managed to transport it to Constantinople.

Frankincense and myrrh, products of southern Arabia but also of the east African coast, were for centuries imported into Byzantium. Used for medical as well as religious purposes, these products of the Red Sea basin were valued imports, bringing high prices in the metropolitan markets. Pliny is our authority for some of the uses of frankincense,²⁴ and Arrian tells us that the African product was generally considered superior to that of Arabia.²⁵ Demands for frankincense and for unguents generally were so considerable that they became vital parts of the commerce entering the Mediterranean orbit. The late Professor Rostovtzeff has written of these items: "It is obvious . . . that in the conception of the ancient Orientals and Greeks these articles were not strictly luxuries, but almost necessities of life, for which no equiva-

²¹ Excellent descriptions of Byzantine ivories are found in A. Grabar, *La décoration byzantine*, Paris, 1928; and N. Kondakov, *Histoire de l'art byzantin*, Paris, 1886.

²² *C.E.H.*, II, 89.

²³ Even in the time of Harun al-Raschid there was a fear that the Greeks might penetrate the Red Sea area if it were exposed to their attack. S. Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization*, New York, 1933, 167.

²⁴ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xxv, 82.

²⁵ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xii, 35. Pliny denied that frankincense was procured from any source except Arabia ("no country beside Arabia produces frankincense, and not even the whole of Arabia." Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xii, 30.) Article, "Frankincense," *Enc. Britt.*, 1954 ed., IX, 689. See also Cosmas, *Chris. Top.*, 51.

lent substitutes, in spite of every effort to devise such, could be found in the Hellenistic world.²⁶ Constantinople continued to seek perfumes and unguents long after the Byzantine empire developed, and Rostovtzeff's comments may be applied to commerce at least through the seventh century.²⁷ It is interesting to note that Moslem control of the Red Sea brought no decline in the circulation of these various luxury items, which continued to be carried by an international and inter-racial circuit of traders, commencing remotely in central Africa and passing through the great exchange port of Alexandria, ending up in the metropolitan markets of Constantinople.²⁸

Among other commodities of east Africa which figured significantly in the social and economic life of Constantinople were ostrich feathers, tortoise shells, hides, wild animals, ebony, and that most deplorable human product of central Africa, slaves.²⁹ Ostrich feathers were popular in the elaborate ornamentation used in the eastern Mediterranean capital in contrast to the plainer garb earlier worn in Rome; and feathers, jewels, perfumes adorned the well dressed woman of the fifth and sixth centuries.³⁰ Tortoise shells were found in many localities, one of the most important sources being the Somali coast. The polished shells were used in various decorative arts, for highly ornamented boxes, for inlaid design, and for luxurious veneer.

Descriptions of the social life of Constantinople testify to the international complexion of her society, and to the fact that Negro slaves and freedmen were commonplace. Prisoners taken in time of war provided the most common source of

²⁶ M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, New York, 1941, II, 1245.

²⁷ Pliny testifies that the product was of such value that a special guard was placed over the Alexandrian factories where it was prepared for sale, and employees leaving the premises were searched to the skin to prevent theft. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, xii, 32. For its sixth century importance, see Cosmas, *Chris. Top.*, 51.

²⁸ Commercial treaties with Moslem powers facilitated the African trade long after the Moslem expansion across North Africa. See P. Boissonnade, *Life and Work in Medieval Europe*, New York, 1937, 53.

²⁹ For complete lists, see R. Cagnat and M. Besnier, who list such products in a table in the article "Mercatura" in C. Daremberg, E. Saglio, E. Pottier, G. Lafaye, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Paris, 1877-1919, 1778; and R. Peyre, *L'Empire romain*, Paris, 293 ff.

³⁰ M. Davenport, *The Book of Costume*, New York, 1943, I, 81-2.

slaves, but there were intervals of military inactivity when other sources had to be exploited. Arabs and Romans alike profited from the dismal human traffic along the Red Sea, and as a result a considerable number of Negroes lived in and about Constantinople in the sixth and seventh centuries.³¹ The mixture of races in Constantinople was taken for granted, and never produced discriminatory legislation or even any deep concern,³² but the economic importance of slavery is attested both by the legislation and by the taxes of Justinian's age.³³

Before the Arabic conquests, Abyssinia's carrying trade was necessary to the commercial life of Constantinople. At one point Justinian entered into an attempt, unsuccessful but nevertheless serious, to by-pass Persia in the richly important silk trade by employing Abyssinian ships to make the journey from India to the head of the Red Sea. In order to promote this enterprise a high ranking Byzantine agent was sent to persuade the ruler of Abyssinia to undertake this trade in an effort to weaken Persia, who monopolized the caravan routes between India and Europe. The Abyssinian ships and sailors were quite competent to cross the Indian Ocean to India, but the Persians held such firm control of the harbors and port towns in India, from which the oriental silk was exported, that the Africans were unable to buy silk in India.³⁴ This negotiation represented the beginning of a long series of efforts made by European powers to seek Abyssinian aid against non-Christian Asiatic enemies, and the Portuguese were still searching for an ally when they re-discovered the highlands of east Africa late in the fifteenth century.³⁵

³¹ The whole subject of Africans in Europe during the Middle Ages is too extensive to be treated here, but it is a subject which deserves study and exploration comparable to that which has been given to the subject of Africans in classical Europe.

³² Bunciman, *Byz. Civ.*, 182.

³³ J. W. Thompson, *Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York, 1928, 168.

³⁴ Procopius, *Hist. Wars*, II, 22.

³⁵ It is also interesting that the successors of Constantine the Great, among others, entered into diplomatic negotiations with the east African Kingdom: "The letter, which the emperor Constantius in the year 356 directs to Aeizanus, the king of the Axomites at that time, is that of one ruler to another on equal footing." T. Mommsen, *History of the Provinces of Rome*, New York, 1899, II, 308-9.

Even the diseases of east and central Africa seriously affected Constantinople, and there is ample reason for believing that the horrible epidemic (probably a form of the bubonic plague) that ravaged the capital city in 542 was carried from Ethiopia, where merchants of Byzantium had been active. Procopius, who described graphically the penetration of the plague into the empire, wrote that: "it started from the Aegyptians who dwell in Pelusium. Then it divided and moved in one direction toward Alexandria and the rest of Aegypt, and in the other direction it came to Palestine on the borders of Aegypt; and from there it spread over the whole world."³⁶ Hans Zinsser says only that "there was a sort of ancient and traditional suspicion that disease usually came out of Ethiopia,"³⁷ but other evidence suggests that the plague originated somewhere south of Egypt, and spread northward.³⁸

It is indisputable that in the years when Constantinople was the center of trade and culture in the Mediterranean orbit, east African influences upon the metropolis were considerable. There are some interesting interpretations of this influence on the part of those occasional historians who have recognized the fact that east Africa did contribute to the growth of western civilization. In particular there is an almost universal unwillingness to acknowledge the fact that the Negro had any share in this influence. From Gibbon to Toynbee the assumption has persisted that east African culture was imported and not an indigenous article, that it flourished in spite of Negro influence and never because of Negro participation.

It is amusing in this age of enlightenment to read the words penned by Edward Gibbon in the eighteenth century when he discusses the religious developments in Nubia after the decline of direct communication with Christian Europe: "But the Nubians at length executed their threats of returning to the worship of idols; the climate required the indulgence of polygamy, and they have finally preferred the triumph of the Koran to the abasement of the Cross. A meta-

³⁶ Procopius, *Hist. Wars*, II, 22.

³⁷ H. Zinsser, *Eats, Lice, and History*, New York, 1934, 145.

³⁸ See especially Bury, *Hist. Later Rom. Emp.*, II, 62, for an evaluation of these sources.

physical religion may appear too refined for the capacity of the negro (sic) race: yet a black or a parrot might be taught to repeat the *words* [italics are Gibbon's] of the Chalcedonian or Monophysite creed."³⁹ The implication inherent in this reference, and in other of Gibbon's references to east Africa, is that the Negro population passively and unquestioningly accepted what was offered to them, while it was the Arabic influence alone that provided the creative force which produced the active trade and commerce described above.

It is not so amusing when we read the same conclusions reached by some of our most eminent twentieth century historians. One of the great modern scholars in the field of Arabic history, Philip Hitti, has written: "Another notable occurrence in the early part of this period [the period of Himyarite rule in the late first and second centuries] was the establishment of Arabian colonists from al-Yaman and Hadramawt in the 'land of Cush,' where they laid the basis of the Abyssinian kingdom and civilization and ultimately developed a culture which the native negroes (sic) could probably never have achieved."⁴⁰ Arnold Toynbee, in arbitrarily excluding from the civilized orbit everything south of Egypt, has said: "We shall find that in Africa the plateau was no more productive of a 'civilized' society than the tropical forests of the great river valley."⁴¹

These statements, and many others like them, are unfortunate not only in the suggestion of a logic rooted in prejudice, but in a mis-reading of the evidence. While it is undeniable that the greatness of the Axumite kingdom was an outgrowth of Arabic migrations, the scope of activity in east Africa in the sixth and seventh centuries, such as we have described, spread far beyond the limits of the Arabic settlements.⁴² Constantinople profited from the vigorous trading and other activities of the Nubians and of Negroes southward as far as

³⁹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, IV, 562.

⁴⁰ P. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, London, 1937, 56.

⁴¹ A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, New York, 1947 (abridgement by D. C. Somervell), 58.

⁴² M. Vivien de Saint-Martin: "Plusieurs faits bien connus prouvent d'ailleurs l'action directe de l'hellénisme égyptien sur le développement de la civilisation axumite." M. Vivien de Saint-Martin, "Éclaircissements géographiques et historiques sur l'inscription d'Adulis," *Journal Asiatique*, sixth series, II, 1864, 333.

modern Kenya and eastward to the Red Sea. Africans mined and carried the gold, they operated trading posts, they cultivated orchards, searched for and exploited successfully the sources of ivory, built and sailed ships on the Red Sea. The inroads of Egyptians, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs and others made of east Africa a cosmopolitan community wherein the Africans absorbed a great deal from the outside. But the process was by no means one-sided, and the best evidence of this is the fact that the great city of Constantinople for centuries depended so heavily upon east African products and upon east African ingenuity in exporting those products.

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