Environmental Descriptions of European Travelers in Ethiopia (16th-19th c.)

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A number of publications are available on the environmental history of Ethiopia. James C. McCann and Richard Pankhurst are pioneers in this area of study (Pankhurst, 1972; Pankhurst, 1995; McCann, 1997). Dessalegn Rahmato has also contributed several papers on contemporary issues on the history of the environment (Dessalegn, 1998). Recently, a few studies have been also conducted on the ancient environmental history of Aksumite civilization and the regions of Tegray and Wällo (Bard, 2000; Bahru Zewde, 2008). They shed light on the impact of environmental degradation on social unrest and on changes of regime both in the ancient and modern periods of Ethiopia. Medieval environmental history is rarely studied in Ethiopia. The objective of this paper is to reassess the historical background of the environmental situation of medieval and post-medieval Ethiopia. This paper will deal with the environmental situation along northern and northeastern routes of Ethiopia.

The accounts of European travelers in Ethiopia describe various aspects of the country from different perspectives. They entered the country motivated by missionary concerns, colonialist interests and a few from scientific motives. All travelers to Ethiopia had a culture of gathering published information before their arrival into the country, but their descriptions of Ethiopia usually originate from their encounters with the people or the environment. With regard to the environment, they collected information regarding their physical difficulties or their disastrous impressions during their journeys to reach the royal court or regional lords. The attempts of environmental descriptions of these travelers can be observed from the narration of the physical geography of the country like the watersheds, topography, the seasonal rainfall and vegetation or the description of forest and the wildlife during their short stay in the country. It is clear that most of the environmental descriptions of the European travelers during the period under discussion were not a systematic collection but rather reflected descriptions of the curiosity of...
explorers. However, some travelers presented a systematic record of the climatic annual variations in the 1840s in Shäwa (Beke, 1844: 67-68; Rochet d’Héricourt, 1841: 33, 123, 177 – see Annex 1).

In the beginning of the 16th century the European explorers traveled to Ethiopia in search of the famous rich, powerful Christian king, Prester John. The European explorers sought to ally with this legendary king (Sergew Hable Selassie, 1974) to counter the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman domination over the Red Sea trade (Abir, 1980: 109-132). Individual adventurers recorded their sojourn in Ethiopia and went back to Europe with ample information on the environmental situation of the country.

**Early 16th-century descriptions**

The early 16th-century travel accounts fall into two categories. The first is the collection of the Italian compiler Alessandro Zorzi, who collected data on Ethiopia from two important classes of informants. Ethiopian pilgrims to Jerusalem later came to Italy and informed him about their country. The other informants of Zorzi were European travelers or adventurers who were in search of the legendary Prester John on the coast of the Indian Ocean.

The second category involves the official diplomatic relations between Portugal and Ethiopia in the 16th century. The Portuguese dream of finding a Christian alliance on the Red Sea coast was finally achieved when the first Ethiopian delegate came to the court of the Portuguese King Emmanuel with an official letter from King Na’od under the advisory of Queen Eleni (Sergew Hable Selassie, 1972: 157-182). In turn, King Emmanuel sent a delegate to Ethiopia who reached the court of King Lebnä Dengel in 1520. The Portuguese delegation stayed six years. The account of the embassy was written by Francisco Alvares, the chaplain of the embassy, who provides ample information on the environment and seasonal situation of their stay in the country. Both Zorzi’s collection and the account of Alvares have important common narratives of the environment they encountered during their journeys. Particularly, the Portuguese embassy followed almost the same trajectory as Zorzi’s informants to reach the royal court of the kings. These European travelers’ descriptions of environmental situations were narrated just before the rise of Imam Ahmad in 1527 and the overwhelming expansion of pastoralists towards the north, particularly the Oromo people.

The collection of Zorzi and the account of Alvares mostly agree on environmental observations. Zorzi describes a large part of the kingdom extending from Hamassen (Eritrea) as far as the present day Ifat or Gedem in North Shoa. He mentions the existence of wild animals, particularly elephants and lions. Besides, he refers to a number of large forests throughout the geographical distribution of these animals:

- **Elephants** are found in large numbers in the land of the Presta, and most where there are large woods [boschi] and hills in damp woody places where there is water and mud, as in the region and province called Geden and Gen and Angout and Geda and Tegre and Messoa, where there are large woods (Crawford, 1958: 176-177).

Alvares with his embassy to the court of King Lebnä Dengel in 1520 repeatedly mentions observing of wild animals like elephants, lions and leopards approaching the villages in Angot and Amhara. He describes on his way south (from Massawa, Tegray, Angot, and Amhara and to Shiwa) the presence of dense forests:
It is a great peril traversing this evil pass, because it is a two days' journey, all through level ground and very large woods, and very high and dense thickets of thorn bushes; and in these two marches, besides that the road is flat and very long, and that they frequently cut them, that is, the thorn bushes near the road, and set fire to them, yet they do not burn, except those that are cut and dried, and some that have withered at the roots, because the thorn bushes which are standing remain in their strength. It is about two leagues from this road to the district of the Dobas, at the commencement of the mountain range, and the ground is flat throughout these thorn thickets. There are in these lands or mountains an infinite number of elephants and other animals, as in the other mountains (Alvares, 1881: 111).

8 He notes that on his route many villages were visible not far from woodland areas (Alvares, 1881: 111). He was struck by the continual struggle of the people with the wild animals that attacked the villages in search of food (Alvares, 1881: 115). He narrates that one night their pack animals were snatched from their camps by wild animals and that some members of the embassy observed elephants not far from the villages in the vicinity (Alvares, 1881: 114). This may have been the last elephant population in these regions because elephants were no longer mentioned in later travel accounts.

9 Any visitor to Ethiopia today knows that the heavy rainy season (kremt) is from June to September. The early 16th-century accounts report the same thing:

In this land of the Presta it rains in June, July and August, and mid-September, and at no season does it ever snow or freeze, northere storms (Crawford, 1958: 170-171).

10 But both Zorzi and Alvares reported unseasonal floods. Zorzi refers to his informant Brother Thomas in 1519, one year before the arrival of Alvarez, who narrated remaining one month at the frontiers of Amhara and Shäwa at a place called Ahya Fäj. The rainfall was so heavy that they could not cross the Wonchit River (Crawford, 1958: 44, 139). The embassy of Portugal escaped a flash-flood near Ango t that carried away much of the baggage of the delegates (Alvares, 1881: 113).

11 Alvares also recounts seeing people burning the woodland for the clearance of the caravan routes and also for the extension of farmlands (Alvares, 1881: 111). Descending farther to the south in Angot (the land of Bugna and Lasta) the vegetation was reduced and the mountains and hills were dry (Alvares, 1881: 134-135).

12 Though the collections of Zorzi remain silent, the Portuguese embassy witnessed a swarm of locusts over a large area of the northern provinces that include Hamassen, Tegray, Lasta, and Angot through the Amhara provinces. The swarms of locusts devoured all green vegetation. Many agricultural lands were devastated and the people were obliged to quit their homes and go to other places:

In these parts and in all the dominions of Prester John there is a very great plague of locusts which destroy the fresh crops in a fearful manner. Their multitude, which covers the earth and fills the air, is not to be believed; they darken the light of the sun. I say again that it is not a thing to be believed by anyone who has not seen them. They are not general in all the kingdoms every year, for if they were so, the country would be a desert in consequence of the destruction they cause: but one year they are in one part, and another year in another. [...] Another time we saw the locusts in another country called Abrigima, whence the Prester ordered provisions to be given us, in the kingdom of Angote. This country is distant from Barua, from which place we were thirty days in travelling the journey. While we were in this country I went with the ambassador who came from Portugal, and five Genoese with us, towards a country named Aagao. We travelled five days through country
entirely depopulated, and through maize canes [sic] as thick as canes for propping vines, it cannot be told how they were all cut and bitten, as if bitten by asses, all done by the locusts. The wheat, barley, and tef [teff], as though they had never been sown there, the trees without any leaves, and the tender twigs all eaten, there was no memory of grass of any sort, and if we had not been prepared with mules laden with barley and provisions for ourselves, we and the mules would have perished. This country was entirely covered with locusts without wings, and they said these were the seed of those which had been there and destroyed the country, and they said that as soon as they had wings they would at once go and seek their country. I am silent as to the multitude of these without wings, because it is not to be believed, and it is right that I should relate what more I saw in this country (Alvares, 1881: 67-69).

He narrates the massive flux of people migrating to other places:

The people were going away from this country, and we found the roads full of men, women, and children, on foot, and some in their arm with their little bundles on their heads, removing to a country where they might find provisions (it was a pitiful sight to see them) (Alvares, 1881: 71-72).

A hundred years later, the Jesuit missionary Manoel de Almeida agrees with Alvares on the plague of locusts that destroyed the harvest particularly in northern regions like Tegray. Almeida comments that the recurrent invasions of locusts were one of the sources of the poverty of the country:

The plague of locusts [...] does not leave a grain of food (Beckingham & Huntingford, 1954: 46)

Post 16th-century Ethiopia

We have learned that in the northern part of early 16th-century Ethiopia there was extensive woodland that sheltered elephants. The wars of Imam Ahmad mark a new historical period in Ethiopia (the “post-medieval” or early modern period); the immediately ensuing Oromo expansion changed deeply the demographic picture of Ethiopia. In the middle of the 16th century, the Christian kingdom was forced to retreat to Gondar and Gojjam. Inevitably, all this warfare and large geographical displacements in the troubled kingdom would probably must have caused huge environmental degradation.

The 17th-century and 18th-century European travelers reported the absence of wood and that the people had developed the use of animal dung for their fires. The member of the Jesuit mission Manoel de Almeida criticizes Alvares for his wrong information on the woods and wealth of Ethiopia. He doubted whether the Portuguese embassy in 1520-26 visited this country or some other (Beckingham & Huntingford, 1954: 46). However, his criticism of Alvares’s descriptions came a hundred years later (he arrived in Ethiopia in 1624). He remarks that “generally speaking there is not much woodland in Ethiopia”. According to him, the royal court moved from place to place due to lack of firewood.

James Bruce during his stay collected and sketched different types of plants and expressed interest in their use in traditional medicine. He published this information in the 5th volume of his travel account (Bruce, 1790). His third volume also gives interesting information regarding the ecology of the northwest. Bruce describes here his journey from Arkiko to Gonder passing through the woods and bush of the Serawe-Adwa-Shire-Lemalemo-Weggera-Gonder route. Clearly, he followed the caravan trade routes. He mentions different types of birds and wild animals he saw on the way. He notes that his
best mule was carried off by hyenas. He reports hearing the roaring of lions during his journeys. In Weggera he reports that along with the bandits in this northwestern area, its fertile lands were threatened by insects, mice and rats (Bruce, 1790: vol. 3, 196). The environmental descriptions of Bruce focus mostly on the northwest except for some information he collected on the south of Ethiopia.

In the first half of the 19th century, several European travel accounts on Ethiopia including detailed environmental descriptions have been published. Ethiopian diplomatic relations with European countries revived in the 19th century. Particularly, the kingdom of Shäwa appears to have dominated the international relations of the zemene mesafent period (1769-1855). Independent Shäwa enjoyed diplomatic relations with European countries because the kingdom was an island of relative peace and order in central Ethiopia. The common entry route to Shäwa was now redirected towards the east, principally via the Zeyla-Harar-Alyu Amba-Ankober route (Ankober was the capital of the kingdom of Shäwa). Among the many travelers, the German missionary envoy Johann Ludwig Krapf is of special interest to our topic because of his return journey via a northern route that lays probably not far from the early 16th-century route. His reports and descriptions indicate that major environmental changes had occurred.

The area of Amhara and the Angot-Lasta-Tegray route were travelled by Krapf and he primarily deals with these regions, particularly telling how the Wällo (Amhara and Angot) area had been overrun by the Oromo clans. According to his account, in 1842 he traveled through the eastern escarpment of the district of Tehuledere (south of Kombolcha), where he was informed that the country had been depopulated six years earlier due to outbreak of cholera, famine and the ravages of war. He compares the fertility of the land with southern Shäwan region:

The nature of the territory of Tehooladere is most conspicuous and excellent, and gave me the appearance of those Galla countries which I have traversed in the south of Shoa. The soil of Tehooladere is excellent for cultivation, if there were only hands enough to cultivate the black fallow ground. I was told that the population of this tribe was very considerable six years ago; but that it was considerably thinned, first, by the cholera, which raged six years ago almost over the whole of Abyssinia and the countries beyond; secondly, by a famine which laid waste so many tracts of Abyssinian provinces; and finally, by a war, in which Ali Marie, the former Chieftain of this tribe, was engaged with the Chiefs of Worra-Kallo, Lagga Gliora, and Worra-Himano, who assisted the present Chief of Tehooladere against Ali Marie, his relation, who was entitled to the government by right (Isenberg & Krapf, 1968: 398).

During his travels northeastward towards the sea outlet of Massawa, Krapf remarks that the country was arable until he reached the lands of Tegray, where the rainfall decreased and the country became arid. In Lasta and Wag, he reports that he found fresh water, beautiful scenery and even juniper trees and acacia in abundance. But he was amazed at the absence of life in this rich area. He narrates: “We saw no inhabitants; we met no travelers; nor did we see any wild beasts, but beautiful birds of the finest plumage (Isenberg & Krapf, 1968: 459).” He describes the difficult situation in Lasta that originated from war and natural disaster:

The present population of Lasta seems to be almost nothing, having been destroyed by famine, war, and sickness, as I was told by the natives whom I asked about this subject. Ras Ali was blamed for having ravaged the country several years ago in the most barbarous manner (Isenberg & Krapf, 1968: 459).

Krapf tells of the degradation of the environment around the regions of Angot and Lasta up to the region of Tegray. The absence of wildlife is remarked along this route. Natural
disaster and regional conflicts probably led to both human and wildlife migration. The lack of encounters with elephants could indicate that they were exterminated for the sake of their lucrative ivory.

**Conclusion**

Travelers' accounts show that the 16th-century traumas fundamentally disturbed the environmental (and demographic) situation of the northeastern part of the country. The ecology was degraded and people were forced to migrate. Travelers remarked that in spite of the fertility of the country poverty was extremely high due to recurrent environmental disasters (drought, floods, locusts, etc.). The absence of descriptions of woodlands and wild animals (like elephants) along the main travel route of northeastern Ethiopia in post-16th-century travel accounts bears witness to obvious environmental changes. The Oromo pastoralist expansion from the south and southeast may have aggravated the situation in terms of demographic and economic pressure. European travelers described that the people adapted to environmental changes in different ways. For example, people could migrate en masse to other areas; regarding the scarcity of wood, it is narrated that people made use of animal dung as fuel. Demographic and economic pressure on the environment of the northeastern highlands may have led to the recurrent famine and social unrest in the contemporary history of these regions (Lanz, 1996; Rubenson, 1991).

In the future, we will continue our investigation by focusing on internal sources, particularly Ethiopian chronicles and gedlat, which will further augment the environmental history studies in Ethiopia.
Annex 1. Temperature registration of Rochet d’Héricourt for weather conditions in Ankober in 1840.

Source: Rochet d’Héricourt, 1841. Editor’s note: To convert Réaumur temperatures to Celsius, multiply by 5/4.

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NOTES

1. Environmental history in Ethiopia is offered at the master level only in Baher Dar University where good MA theses have been produced.

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**Mots-clés**: végétation, faune, récits de voyage, paysages, déforestation

**Keywords**: vegetation, fauna, travel accounts, landscapes, deforestation
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