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AETHIOPICA

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of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies

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by Alessandro Bausi
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Vignette:

Gold coin of King Aphilas, early third century CE, as drawn by A. Luegmeyer after the coin in Rennau collection. Weight 2.48 grams, diameter 17 mm.

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The journal focuses on philology, linguistics, archaeology, history, cultural anthropology, religion, philosophy, literature, and manuscript studies with a regional emphasis on Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and related areas. The editors welcome contributions on relevant academic topics as well as on recent research in the respective field. Each issue of AETHIOPICA contains reviews of books which form a substantial section of the journal.

AETHIOPICA is published mainly in English. Articles in French, German, and Italian are also accepted for publication. An English summary for all articles in any language is provided.

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Editorial

The present issue of AETHIOPICA is the twenty-fifth since the journal's founding in 1998. It is also the thirteenth issue I have worked on as editor-in-chief, one more than that of founder Siegbert Uhlig. The present time, however, does not lend itself to celebrations of any sort. The global political crisis and the situation in the Horn of Africa are having a deep impact on the scholarly community, which appears divided and radicalized on opposite or increasingly diverging positions as never before. The growing influence of diaspora communities is at times marked by waves of resurgent nationalism. The challenge posed by main-stream policy in countries of established scholarly traditions gives less and less space to small fields—as is the case of Ethiopian and Eritrean studies. The consequent lack of resources triggers the fragmentation of the scholarly scene. New balances based on mutual legitimation and acknowledgement of a common scholarly method are not obvious. The consequence of this complex situation, which reflects global changes, is that scholarly and academic freedom can be put at risk. Of all priorities envisaged in the mission of AETHIOPICA, preservation of academic freedom along with scholarly quality has been, is, and will remain the top priority of the journal.

I regret that in the past, and still now, the lack of available qualified authors has prevented AETHIOPICA from duly commemorating distinct colleagues and researchers recently passed away who were more than deserving of an obituary. I would like to remember at least some of them here, by name, as a very modest tribute to their work and memory: Johannes Launhardt (1929–2019), Mesfin Wolde Mariam (1930–2020), Steffen Wenig (1934–2022), Girma Fisseha (1941–2020).

To end on a positive note, three colleagues active in Ethiopian and Eritrean studies have received important awards this year, and we would like to mention them here: Samantha Kelly (Professor of Medieval History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, also on our International Editorial Board), has won the Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2020, and the African Studies Review Prize for the Best Africa-focused Anthology or Edited Collection 2021, for her *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2020); Verena Krebs (Junior-Professorin für Mittelalterliche Kulturräume at Ruhr-Universität Bochum) has received the Dan David Prize for her *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and Massimo Zaccaria (Professore Associato in Storia e Istituzioni dell'Africa at Università degli Studi di Pavia) has received the Giorgio Maria Sangiorgi award of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei 'per la Storia ed Etnologia dell'Africa'. To all of them—the warmest congratulations from AETHIOPICA!

in colonial and metropolitan histories gain a very clear demonstration of how war events impacted on geographically distant locations: military battles taking place on the Karst plateau may well have greatly affected farmers' families' lives in Eritrean land in no less a way than those of the—let's say—Sicilian families whose young sons were recruited to war. Eritrea's role in the imperial political strategy was to be supportive of the Italian struggles and provide it with all it could.

Aimed at demonstrating the significance of local agency and local players' reactions, in terms of methodology, the book's third section gives the book a precious, additional value. Religious profiles and the cultural production of local societies are addressed here, as well as the way in which the Italian community in Tunisia reshaped itself when faced with World War I (Gabriele Montalbano). A sophisticated contribution is given by Uoldelul Chelati Dirar in his chapter on the Great War via the writing of Təgrāñña expatriates. Not only does this offer an invaluable opportunity to read the voices of colonial subjects living in Eritrea (or abroad) and facing war related policies but it also reveals the deep complexity of contemporary political and social circumstances; colonial subjects appear with their multifaced identities faced with the unique circumstances of a war counterposing European states which were also colonial powers.

The research lab on World War I in Africa remains open and will definitively regard this book as an important reference point for investigations merging international and political history with social and cultural history.

Nicola Camilleri, Università degli Studi di Padova

MELAKU GEBOYE DESTA, DEREJE FEYISSA DORI, and MAMO ESMELEALEM MIHRETU, eds, *Ethiopia in the Wake of Political Reforms* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2020). 616 pp. Price: \$60.00. ISBN: 978-1-59907-251-7.

This book appeared at what was in hindsight a particular and short-lived moment in Abiy Ahmed's premiership. Predating the global pandemic, the postponement of the national election and the conflict in Təgray that has drawn in regional actors, it reflects both the optimism and the uncertainty surrounding rapid political change in 2019 to early 2020. A multidisciplinary volume, it represents divergent political viewpoints and contrasting writing styles and formats, from sweeping historical and macroeconomic overviews to tightly delineated accounts of primary research, to policy-focused contributions. The book corrals a great amount of expertise and scholarship and, as such, provides valuable insights into a wide variety of issues across the country and the region. Chapters

that analyse specific situations based on primary research and overviews based on historical analysis are especially useful for understanding the complex dimensions of contemporary political reform.

While acknowledging that writing about contemporary politics always involves aiming at a moving target, the policy-led contributions suffer from being written before dramatic global and national challenges occurring in 2020–2021, meaning that recommendations for what the government ‘should’, ‘must’, and ‘ought to’ do have often been outpaced by events. Another issue is around impartiality. The Introduction informs us that Abiy’s reforms—described as ‘inspiring’ and ‘dazzling’ on the first page—will be dealt with impartially and previous governments’ record of governance judged fairly. However, some of the political issues that were politically prominent during the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front’s (EPRDF) rule but are substantively unaddressed in the book include, *inter alia*, the role of diasporas in domestic politics; the (un)desirability of industrial employment; and economic inequality. A fleeting mention by Lars-Christian Moller that, despite rapid growth, income inequality in Ethiopia between 2000 and 2016 was unchanged and among the lowest in the world left me hoping that this apparently remarkable achievement would be unpacked and analysed in more detail in relation to (proposed) policy reforms under Abiy; it was not. Another surprising lacuna for a book focused on contemporary political challenges is climate change and climate policy, which are not mentioned at all. Perhaps this indicates the lack of clear direction on climate governance by the current government, despite eye-catching initiatives such as the nationwide tree-planting campaign. Nevertheless, in a country whose overwhelmingly rural population faces particular climate-related vulnerabilities, to not directly address one of the thorniest and most pressing political issues of our time seems like a missed opportunity.

The book contains four sections organized around different themes: political reform, economic reform, federalism and nation-building, and foreign and security policy. The first (and longest) section encompasses historical perspectives on Ethiopian statehood through reform and different periods of transition (Christopher Clapham, Semir Yusuf, Keadu Mekonnen Gebremariam), followed by chapters focusing on gender (Sehin Teferra), civil society (Camille Louise Pellerin), media (William Davison), and justice (Solomon Dersso, Charles Schaefer). As the editors acknowledge in the Introduction, this theme is a broad one; however, the chapters contained within give a good sense of the historical antecedents and parameters to current reforms. Chapters by Clapham and Semir Yusuf are a strong start to considering the critical structural issues involved in reform through a wide historical lens, while Pellerin and Schaefer provide fascinating empirical accounts, tracing, respectively, the regulation of civil society

organizations and the potential for indigenous modes of restorative justice to inform reckonings with the past.

Three of the four chapters in the following section on economic reforms (Moller, Berhanu Abegaz, Kenichi Ohno) are written by authors with undoubted expertise and familiarity with the Ethiopian context, who are all strong advocates of a liberalized economy. As such this section reads as the most broadly supportive of the direction of Abiy's proposed reforms—even while the remaining chapter (Tom Lavers) cautions against the privatization of land—and would have benefitted from a more direct and robust counter-response.

The section on federalism and nation-building starts with a reappraisal of narratives about the nation (Shimelis Bonsa Gulema), followed by chapters that deal with intergovernmental relations (Yonatan T. Fessha) and a welcome focus on the political situation in two specific locations, namely West Guḡgi and Gide'o zones (Nigusie Angessa) and Afar National Regional State (Abubeker Yasin). Shimelis Bonsa Gulema's chapter is impressively ambitious and wide-ranging in scope, while Yonatan T. Fessha supplies a clear analysis of the complex recent history of inter-regional cooperation and tension, as well as the relations between regional states and federal authorities.

The final section looks to the wider region, with authors addressing security policy (Ann M. Fitz-Gerald) and relations with the neighbouring states of Eritrea (Senai Woldeab and Awet T. Weldemichael) and Somalia (Abdeta Dribssa Beyene). The theme of foreign and security policy is of course a live one in Ethiopia at the time of writing in May 2021, and both Senai Woldeab and Awet T. Weldemichael provide valuable primers on the background to developments in Ethiopian–Eritrean relations inaugurated under Abiy. They also both supply prescient warnings about the imperative for transparency and institutionalization in the development of the new relationship, in order to avoid the repetition of past mistakes.

There is praise throughout the book for Abiy's achievement of gender parity in the appointment of senior government roles. This is jarring to read in a book where female voices are sorely lacking. Twenty of the twenty-three contributors are men, and, of the three female authors, only one is Ethiopian. Ignoring the breadth and excellence of female scholarship in Ethiopian studies is to my mind a serious editorial mistake, and one that mars the volume as a whole. Aside from this misstep, the book is recommended reading for those who wish to gain insight into the background of some of the myriad challenges facing contemporary Ethiopia.

Sarah Howard, Birkbeck, University of London