

Some Aspects of Medieval Historic Town Management Tradition in the Book of Aksum

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The significance of medieval historic town management traditions

Historical practices and traditional wisdoms of historic town management are vital elements of the contemporary landscape-based heritage management practice. For example, the 2011 UNESCO Recommendation adopted a Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach which emphasizes the importance of traditional knowledge for the conservation of historic landscapes (World Heritage Centre, 2011). The integrity of the authentic fabrics (tangible and intangible) of a historic landscape is inseparable to its traditional institutions. Thus several authors have claimed the significance of understanding such traditions with regard to framing operational definitions required for the management, financing and protection of heritages in the context of rapid urbanization, tourism impacts, and economic development pressure (Echter, 2020; ICOMOS, 2011; Martínez, 2017; Nelson & Shelling, 2018; Orbasli, 2000; 2017; Plieninger & Bieling, 2012; Sykes & Ludwig, 2015).

Traditional wisdoms, and the theoretical/intellectual bases on which they are founded (ICOMOS, 2011; Turner, 1994), can be conceptualized by understanding specific cultural contexts and distinct historical roots. Much is not

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known about the historic town management traditions of medieval Ethiopia though there are several sources on the aspects of the then urbanization and land use management traditions (Ahmed, Bahiru, & Et.al, 1987; Garretson, 2000; Kropp, 1988; Lagopoulos and Stylianoudi, 2001). In this regard, the medieval Book of Aksum (*Māṣḥafä Aksum*⁵) contains information on the formal protection of the historic cathedral and the sacred landscape of Aksum⁶. The Book of Aksum (Conti Rossini, 1954) has considerably drawn the attention of international scholarship (Aethiopica 2003a) for different kinds of reasons. For example, Munro-Hay (1991: 98-114; 2005: 100) significantly relied on the book's information to discuss Aksumite history and the coaction to the Ark of the Covenant. The book's detailed description of the vanished cathedral was used as a basis of the reconstruction drawings by Mathew and Buxton (1974, cited in Phillipson, 2012, p. 129).

The objective of this short communication is to remark on some aspects of medieval heritage management traditions for the historic town of Aksum⁷. The interpretation is based on a preliminary textual analysis⁸ of some relevant themes and topics from Conti Rossini (1954). Textual familiarization began with understanding of some relevant sections of the English translations by Amsalu (2011) and Beckingham and Huntingford (appendix in Munro-Hay, 2005). Additional translation and modification was made for the purpose of developing certain topical summaries when necessary. The attempt was limited to making reflections through inferences from the broader medieval context of Ethiopia⁹.

⁵ Where transliteration is necessary, the system adopted is the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*.

⁶ The ancient town of Aksum, located in Northern Ethiopia, is regarded by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as the abode of the Tablet of Moses; its Cathedral is recognized as principal since the introduction of Christianity in the 4th century. The town is famous for its ancient stelae site listed as a world heritage site.

⁷ The focus is only on the medieval urban traditions. See Munro-hay, 1991: 104-134; Phillipson, 2000; 2012: 119-137 to understand the ancient urbanization and archaeology of the town in late antiquity.

⁸ This justifies the significance for further research on the topic based on multiple sources and multiple methods.

⁹ Such kind of remarking and interpretation on past European heritage protection traditions or movements (Glendinning, 2013: 9-34; Jokilehto, 1999: 1-7) was made based on certain medieval texts and documents.

The book of Aksum and the medieval concepts of historic town management

After the restoration of the ‘Solomonic’ dynasty in 1270, the Church and the state shared power on a legal basis for land use and administration. This exercise of power was manifested in different kinds of charters in a time which was a custom for the emperors and local noblemen to protect religious sites and charter land grants as an expression of legitimacy and for the continuation of legacies. The clergy was responsible for the record and promotion of such deeds, most often through the preparation of chronicles, but books were also written purposefully for certain cathedrals, and copies were distributed across for authoritative and administrative purpose (Baye, 2016; Levine, 1974; Tamrat 1972). The Book of Aksum was probably intended for such purpose and functioned for most of the medieval period. It is sectioned into three main parts; the first section, *The Country and Cathedral of Aksum* (ዘገገር፡ ወገገዝ፡ አካሱ-ጭ), written between the 15th and 16th century (Aethiopica, 2003a), begins with narrating the history of the foundation of the town of Aksum and the Cathedral, the monuments, and their protection.¹⁰ The second part, under the heading *(About) The Fiefs* (ዘ ጉልጉል), is devoted to appreciating the concerned kings and governors that had taken part in the protection of the heritage through land grants and ownership renewals; more importantly narrated are the stories of the emperors Zara Yakob/ Zärä’a-Ya’əqob (1434-38) Sarsa Dangil/ Šärsä-Dəngəl (1563-97), who had reestablished the customs of protecting the site¹¹. Table 1 presents some themes of the book comparable to the contemporary practice of historic town management.

¹⁰ i.e., probably based on some texts of the 4th or 5th century as several texts appear to claim the establishment of the tradition in the 4th century.

¹¹ Probably, these emperors declared the newly gathered land charters as a book and called it the Book of Rules. Presumably, they added the introductory texts for the value of the historic cathedral and its site. Thus, the titling of the book as of Aksum could be written around the end of the 17th century, probably by Iyasu I / ሃይሁዳሥ I (1682-1706).

Table 1: Relevant themes of the book and their comparable in contemporary heritage management

Select ed pages	Topical summary/relevant themes	Comparable concepts in contemporary heritage management
3 - 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -history of the formation of the town in ancient times; -religious significance of the place as related to miraculous event; -the status of monuments and landscape features; -status description of a statue; -locational description of the cathedral and listing of monuments; -the restoration intervention by the emperor Zara Yakob; -the decree of the same emperor concerning site entry prevention of horses and lions; -the implementation of the decree by subsequent emperors, as the ‘Book of Rules (of protection)’; - the preservation of the old customs that began with the 4th century kings including land grant/fiefs ownership renewal and site preservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Heritage Valuing; -Historical, Religious and Cultural Values; -Intangible Values; -Sacred Landscape; -Physical Status of Monuments; -Heritage Inventory; - Formal Restoration; -Landscape Preservation; -Heritage Legislation; -Heritage Financing; -Historic Landscape; -Architectural Style; -Architectural Documentation; - Building Complex; -Historic Quarter;
6 - 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -association of the town with historic figures and a legendary relic; -description of an underground architectural structure and its treasure including the tomb of <i>Itiyopis</i> the great father of Ethiopians; -architectural, physical and dimensional description of the 	

	vanished cathedral (complex) of Aksum; -the date of the completion of the construction	
7 - 10	-list of items and land grants and tributaries to the Cathedral by several nobilities	
10-11	-list of architects/builders, artists, sculpts and skilled workmen that made great contributions;	
12-17	-a new text about financial grants supposed to have been written in 1824	-Fund Raising; -Land Chartering; -Legal Provision;
18-26	-a new section under a heading: (About) <i>The Fiefs</i> begins (p.18)	
38-43	-entry prevention of horses and lions; -the Emperor Geladewos calls the book as <i>Book of the Kingdom</i>	
50-54	-land grant activities involving the nobilities	
60-62	-general land grant activities	
67-70	-chronological description of the reign of emperors and other events such as solar eclipse in 1533/4; - the restoration and reconstruction of the vanished cathedral by the emperor Sarsa Dangil in 1586; and his statements on the Aksumite origins of kingdom ('Aksumite Throne') ¹² and religion in Ethiopia	

¹² This is referred as the 'restoration of the Solomonic dynasty' in Western literature.

Heritage valuing as a rationale for institutional protection of heritage

The concept of heritage valuing was probably well known and practiced as a rationale for institutional protection of heritage in medieval Ethiopia; several texts mention the historical, architectural, legendary, antique, and religious significance of the site of the historic cathedral. For instance, the introductory paragraph begins with narrating the historical background of the historic town:

This is the (ancient) history of the establishment of the Cathedral of Aksum, Our Mother Zion. In the beginning, it was founded at a place of ancient ruins around where the tomb of Itiyopis, the son of Kush and grandson of Kham, is found, and (the Cathedral) had stayed there for many years. Later, Makeda relocated 'her' (the cathedral) to the area of Asba, for which she was called the queen of Saba (Sheba), and built a cathedral there....

The significance of the place and its historical context is narrated from a seemingly modern heritage valuing point of view. The significance of the ancient ancestral roots and sacredness of the landscape as a place of continually inhabited was given a considerable value. This valuing also appears to have been extended to a tradition of heritage inventorying and description of status of monuments; the book frequently mentions the list of valuable monuments and landscape features. It looks as if; the tradition was not only intended for preserving the historic cathedral but also for protecting the surrounding landscape. The subheading: *The (Town) Country and the Cathedral of Aksum* and the diction of the phrase for the compound of the cathedral (*Gebeze Aksum*) may be an indication for a bigger spatial scale. The purpose of such valuing was unmistakably to justify and promote a continual protection tradition as was claimed to have already been instituted in the 4th century: the emperors Abreha and Atsbeha are frequently cited for the pioneering practice of restoring the cathedral built by the queen. The reestablishment of institutional values with rules of land grant and protection many centuries later by the emperors Zara Yakob and Sarsa Dangil is frequently narrated with appreciation.

Monument documentation and inventory as a significant element of heritage protection

A detailed description of landscape features, a list of monuments, locations, and the physical status of several artifacts is often revealed in addition to how the style, form, and elements of the vanished cathedral resembled. The depiction of the style

comprises quantitative information such as the number and dimensions of architectural components. Below is a modified version of the English translation by Beckingham and Huntingford (appendix in Munro-Hay, 2005) based on Conti Rossini (1954, p. 6).

This was the (ancient building) style of the Cathedral of Aksum, Our Mother Zion. The depth of her foundations could not be found to (the extent of) 15 cubits. Its stone platform was raised 9 cubits above the ground to the gate of Zion. The walls were 7 cubits thick, and 125 cubits long from east to west, and 92 cubits from north to south. Its width was 53 cubits; its height, from the ground to the top of the roof was 32 cubits. There were 30 columns in brick and 32 in stone: in all, 62. There were large shutters of wood, at the doors, four outside, to the west, and four inside; there is one at the tserh (chamber), one to the north, one to the south, one at Beta Giyorgis (Church of George), one at Beta Yohannes (Church of John), two at the treasury, two at Beta Gabre'el (Church of Gabriel), one at the Beta Makhbar (community house), one at Beta Maryam Magdalawit (Church of Marry of Magdalene,: in all, 20 shutters [Probably the one at the west not enumerated]. There were 461 ma'eso zaqedros (ornamental doors). There were 168 windows. The mankuarakuer (chariots or wheeled ornaments) number 780. The qasta damana (arched entrances) were 10 in number; the re'esa hebay (monkey-headed façade ornaments) 3815; the masraba may (ornamented spouts) 91.

The purpose of such an account was probably to provide a basis for regulating future reconstructions and restorations; but what was reconstructed later by the Emperor Fasil in the 17th century appears to be more of Gondarine architectural style (Aethiopica, 2003b).

Land chartering¹³ as legal and technical frameworks of landscape preservation

Several texts are devoted to acknowledging the successive kings and nobilities who granted or renewed lands (*gult*/fiefs)¹⁴ and gave donations intended for the

¹³ The section, (*About*) *The Fiefs* which begins at p.18, is composed of 103 official letters of Land grants and some such.

¹⁴ Land chartering by the emperors to the churches was a crucial component of the Ethiopian model of feudalism (Baye, 2016). Probably, the situation was a fertile ground for the development of some kind of sacred landscape preservation.

broader management of the Cathedral through the financing of the local enforcing body or the clergy. This tradition had continually been recorded¹⁵ till the end of the 19th century¹⁶. A successive provision of the charters by successive authorities may suggest a continually expanding cultural landscape of the cathedral that should have been legally protected from various forms of threats. To quote one of the charters by the emperor Zara Yakob:

... I, Zara Yakob, the son of Dawit, have granted the lands/areas of ... to the cathedral.... (I) also declared that such animals (beast of burdens and carriages) as horses... are forbidden to enter (the historic quarter)....

An element of Zara Yakob's charter that prohibited animal entry to the historic quarter may suggest a form of regulation for landscape preservation perhaps as related to the transportation of several horses and lions linked to the medieval mobile courts, which could have otherwise been damaging to the site.¹⁷ Furthermore, the reference to the great contribution of Zara Yakob¹⁸ can be safely accepted because another legend has the same emperor to have protected as a national treasure the Suba Forest, near to Addis Ababa.

The institutional framework of medieval heritage protection in fact existed in the broader multi-level administration of the cathedrals, the vicinities and

¹⁵ Probably, the clergy of the same cathedral kept the original manuscript and all of the additional editions (see p.38, 41, and 43, for example). At p. 30, the compiled charters are said to have been kept by one Abraham, who probably was in the time of the emperor Geladewos.

¹⁶ The Emperor Yohannes (1871-1889) was the last emperor to renew the fiefs, as of the texts.

¹⁷ There could have been no sound justification for preventing the entry of horses and the lions (symbolic as cherubs that supports the throne of God) with regard to their sacredness. In fact, the chronicle of Iyasu I (1682-1706) (cited in Amsalu (2010:84, 85, 87) mentions that the emperor and his followers travelled with horses in the vicinity of the cathedral. But other texts may suggest animal entry restriction was to prevent the local nobilities from indirectly claiming the increasingly expanded fiefs of cathedrals in such provinces.

¹⁸ The association of the emperor with the protection of natural and cultural heritage may thus imply the political motive of medieval Ethiopia.

granted lands. As noted earlier, the clergy and the appointed nobilities were responsible, and the local communities (peasants and soldiers)¹⁹ of the *Attbiya*²⁰ were the direct participants. The clergy kept the records and other resources; and the *Dabtaras*²¹ seemed to report to the emperors when violations happened by superiors. An example is found in the second section (Rossini, 1954, p. 42):

...I, Libna Dangil/ Ləbnä Dəngəl, granted fiefs when I was in Shire at Lake Bur (in remembrance of saint fathers)while with (the *Dabtaras*: [*the cathedral master, the compound master, the house master, the left master, the right master, etc.*]....

Closing remarks

The Book of Aksum provides certain evidences on the protection of the historical cathedral, its sacred landscape and the institutional frameworks. An indigenous approach of formal sacred landscape protection was probably known in medieval Ethiopia which entailed the justification of the religious, historical and architectural values for protection. Formal site protection techniques seemed to be implemented through the strategic frameworks of land chartering and its careful record by the clergy.

The medieval tradition can be appreciated with regard to some technical aspects comparable to the contemporary practice. First, the tradition of protection was based on justification and through legal, technical and financial means. Second, the framework of concepts entailed heritage valuing, a form of architectural documentation, and basic inventorying of landscape features, all implementable by the local community and the clergy.

Most of the heritage valuing conceptual framework consisted of the religious significances of the landscape and its historical monuments. The heritage financing mechanism was largely related to land chartering to the cathedrals; and

¹⁹ Minilik II/ Mənilək II of the late 18th century, for example, decreed that peasants and soldiers residing in the early Addis Ababa had to lend hands for such activities (Garretson, 2000).

²⁰ The term *Attbiya* is equivalent to parish.

²¹ Part of the clergy in close connection to secular and political matters; see the following quotation.

seemed to include restriction of animal entry as landscape preservation techniques. In general, a sacred landscape approach of historic town management appears to have been a significant strategy; and in today's terms, it meant basically an operational definition set out for management purposes with an objective of maintaining the integrity of diverse values of a historic landscape.

Additional study on such historical practices through diverse sources and methods will be valuable to not only sustainably conserve the historic landscape of Aksum but also to extend the literature on the management traditions of medieval urban Ethiopia. For example, maintaining the integrity of the landscape of Aksum necessitates the enhancing of indigenous institutions and the identification of additional values; new relevant sites need to be delineated. As noted earlier, this is what contemporary recommendations for the urban conservation promote in the international area.

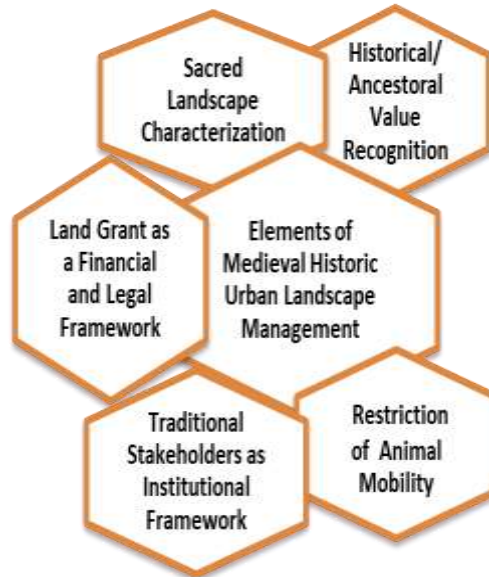


Figure 1: Elements of medieval urban heritage management

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