
Hiob Ludolf and Johann Michael Wansleben. *Oriental Studies, Politics, and History between Gotha and Africa, 1650-1700*, edited by Asaph Ben-Tov, Jan Loop, and Martin Mulsow Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2024 (The History of Oriental Studies 15), pp. 587.

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The work under review promises to contribute to our understanding of two individuals who were of great importance for early modern European interest in Ethiopia: Hiob Ludolf (1624-1704) and Johann Michael Wansleben (1635-1679). The former is known as an “armchair scholar” who meticulously collected knowledge about a wide range of matters relating to Ethiopia, while the latter is known as a travelling “manuscript hunter”² who never actually visited the country. However, only three of the total twenty-two chapters focus on Wansleben. From the perspective of Ethiopian studies, this is regrettable, as the significance of Wansleben for Ethiopic studies has been highlighted, for example, by Alessandro Bausi.³ Nevertheless, this does not diminish the overall high quality of the individual contributions or the volume as a whole – after all, editors of academic conference proceedings are dependent on the range of topics submitted by the scholarly community.

The volume originates from an international conference held in 2015 in Gotha, a small town in the middle of Germany, organised within the framework of the project “Encounters with the Orient in Early Modern European Scholarship,” funded by the “Humanities in the European Research Area” (HERA) network of scientific research programmes.⁴ For many years, Gotha was also the place where Ludolf lived and worked. The editors, Asaph Ben-Tov, Jan Loop, and Martin Mulsow, are recognised experts in the fields of the history of Oriental

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²See the website “Manuscript Hunters,” edited by Nathan Gibson and Ronny Vollandt: <https://www.manuscripthunters.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/index.php/vansleb/> (accessed 5/12/2025).

³ See e.g. Bausi, Alessandro. 2015. Johann Michael Wansleben’s Manuscripts and Texts. An Update. In *Essays in Ethiopian Manuscript Studies. Proceedings of the International Conference Manuscripts and Texts, Languages and Contexts: The Transmission of Knowledge in the Horn of Africa, Hamburg, 17–19 July 2014*, edited by Alessandro Bausi, Alessandro Gori and Denis Nosnitsin, 197-243. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

⁴See the conference report by Stefan Hanß: <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-124671> (published 3 July 2015, accessed 5 December 2025).

studies as well as the history of knowledge and ideas. Half of the contributions in the volume are in English and the other half are in German.

Approached from the standpoint of a historian specialising in the early modern period, with a focus on the connections between Protestant Europe and the Christian East, this review does not discuss all contributions comprehensively. Instead, emphasis is placed on some aspects that are particularly relevant to Ethiopian studies, based on this specific scholarly framework.

In their detailed introduction, Jan Loop and Asaph Ben-Tov situate Ludolf and Wansleben within the history of early modern Oriental studies and of European encounters with Ethiopia and Ethiopians. Ludolf had already begun to study Oriental languages as a student. During a trip to Rome in 1649, he met the Ethiopian *abba* Gorgoryos at the Ethiopian Catholic hospice of Santo Stefano dei Mori (also known as: dei Abissini), and subsequently succeeded in inviting him to Gotha in the summer of 1652, by which time Ludolf had entered the service of the Protestant Duke Ernst of Saxe-Gotha (known as "the Pious"). From 1659, Wansleben assisted Ludolf with Ethiopian publication projects and was selected to travel to Ethiopia on behalf of Duke Ernst. Wansleben set out in 1663, but only made it as far as Egypt and returned to Europe already in 1665. In Italy, he came into contact with influential Catholics and joined the Dominican Order himself. His ties to Gotha were severed, and Ludolf never forgave his former protégé. In 1671, Wansleben undertook another journey to the Levant, this time under commission from the French crown, yet once again did not reach Egypt. Ludolf relocated to Frankfurt in 1678, where, although he continued to hold political and diplomatic roles, he devoted himself above all to Ethiopian studies. Among Ludolf's most significant publications are lexica and dictionaries of Ge'ez and Amharic, together with his *Historia Aethiopica*.

Several of the contributions collected in the volume address Ludolf in his various capacities: as an official in the service of the Dukes of Saxe-Gotha (Holger Kürbis), as president of the *Collegium Historicum Imperiale* (Jacob Schilling), and as editor of the *Allgemeine Schau-Bühne der Welt* (Markus Meumann). In his chapter, Holger Kürbis makes it clear that during Ludolf's time in Gotha, his principal concerns were not his Ethiopianist or other scholarly interests, but rather his duties at court, which he fulfilled in a range of positions, including tutor to the princes, court councillor, and chamber director. Alexander Schunka's analysis is particularly helpful for understanding the broader dynamics at the court of Ernst the Pious in Gotha. He argues that Gotha's global and Ethiopian initiatives, in which Hiob Ludolf

was involved, stemmed from an interplay of absolutist economic policy, anti-Ottoman alliance-building, and intra-Protestant confessional politics directed against the Catholic party.

A number of further contributions explore Ludolf's various interests and research in biblical studies (Scott Mandelbrote, Ulrich Groetsch, Benjamin Wallura), the history of language and writing (Jan Loop, Toon Van Hal, Martin Mulsow), natural history and alchemy (Bernd Roling, Asaph Ben-Tov, Vera Keller), and, finally, chronology (again Martin Mulsow, who has authored three of the twenty-two contributions in the volume). Many of the chapters engage, to varying degrees, with Ludolf's Ethiopianist interests and with Ethiopia and the Ethiopians – matters which cannot, however, be explored here in depth. The same applies to the three chapters on Wansleben – as archaeologist, as reader of James Harrington, and on his interest in international politics – by Alastair Hamilton, Gaby Mahlberg, and Thérèse-Marie Jallais.

One of the chapters most relevant for readers interested in Ethiopian studies is that by Wolbert G. C. Smidt, which focuses on Ludolf's Ethiopian teacher, *abba* Gorgoryos. In his highly detailed text, Smidt provides what is probably the most comprehensive account to date of the life and achievements of the scholar Gorgoryos, demonstrating, on the one hand, deep familiarity with European sources, and on the other, a thorough understanding of the historical cultural and political contexts in Ethiopia. He challenges the still widespread narrative that casts Gorgoryos merely as an informant of Ludolf, who has long been regarded as the founder of European Ethiopian studies. For Smidt, Gorgoryos – as indicated in the subtitle of the chapter – should be recognised as a “co-founder of Ethiopian studies as scientific ethnography” (“Mitbegründer der Äthiopistik als wissenschaftliche Ethnographie”), but until now has received little attention, even in Ethiopian research.

At first glance, Jürgen Tubach's chapter on Peter Heyling as an Ethiopianist appears to stand somewhat apart, as neither Ludolf nor Wansleben are its main focus. Heyling is said to have been the first Protestant to reach Ethiopia, around 1635, where he quickly became popular at the court and, reportedly, even married a daughter of the emperor. In fact, however, this chapter fits very well within the volume. On the one hand, Heyling set a precedent for Ludolf and other Protestants with an interest in Ethiopia; on the other, Ludolf's research on Heyling remains the most important source concerning Heyling's life as Tubach points out. The instructions for Wansleben's unsuccessful

Ethiopian journey, commissioned by the Duke of Gotha, also included a request to make enquiries about Heyling.

The rich bibliographical information and source references included in the volume demonstrate just how extensive the available material on Ludolf, Wansleben, and Gotha's Ethiopian endeavours is, making the book a valuable resource for scholars seeking orientation on Ludolf and his Ethiopian interests. Holger Kürbis even includes, as an appendix to his chapter, the text of a previously unknown draft by Ludolf for the proposed Gotha Ethiopian expedition held by the Thuringian State Archives/Gotha State Archive. Martin Mulsow discusses Ludolf as a “cosmopolitan”, focusing on his *album amicorum* (friendship book, *Stammbuch*) containing entries in Ethiopian script by Johann Ernst Gerhard, Samuel Bochart, and Gorgoryos, as well as his “Reysebüchlein” (“Travel booklet”). Stefan Weninger concludes the volume with a contribution on the contemporary portraits of Ludolf.

Overall, the volume under review is highly recommended. It convinces both conceptually and through the consistently high quality of its richly detailed and vivid studies. The disciplinary diversity of perspectives from which Ludolf is examined allows for multiple approaches to this scholar and his illustrious life and work. Indirectly, however, the volume also leaves certain gaps especially for those interested in Ludolf's engagement with Ethiopia – or more positively phrased avenues for future research. As noted at the outset, Ludolf's assistant Wansleben, receives only limited attention. Another lacuna concerns Ludolf's collaboration with his other assistants, such as the Orientalists Johann Heinrich and Christian Benedikt Michaelis, uncle and nephew, who continued Ethiopian studies well into the eighteenth century in Halle. The impact of Ludolf's Ethiopian endeavours on later Protestant initiatives – for example, attempts to establish contact with Ethiopian Christians in Pietist Halle⁵ or in the Moravian Church⁶ – remains unexplored. Finally, a current Ethiopian perspective on Ludolf and Wansleben is also lacking. Wolbert Smidt's valuable chapter is included in the volume only in German. An English translation of this comprehensive text would be highly desirable for an international audience.

⁵ Bochinger, Christoph. 1996. *Abenteuer Islam. Zur Wahrnehmung fremder Religion im Hallenser Pietismus des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Habilitation thesis. Munich; Saracino, Stefano. 2024. *Griechen im Heiligen Römischen Reich. Migration und ihre wissenschaftliche Bedeutung*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 173-189.

⁶ Manukyan, Arthur. 2010. *Konstantinopel und Kairo. Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine im Kontakt zum Ökumenischen Patriarchat und zur Koptischen Kirche. Interkonfessionelle und interkulturelle Begegnungen im 18. Jahrhundert*. Würzburg: Ergon Verlag.