

## Religion as a Diplomatic Argument in Early Modern Afro-European Correspondence

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### Abstract

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The following essay focuses on letters written by the Christian monarchs Afonso I of Kongo and Dawit II of Ethiopia to Portuguese kings in the early sixteenth century. These letters serve as a foundation for understanding the goals and strategies of the respective African monarchs in relation to their Portuguese allies. As will be shown, both Afonso and Dawit sought to gain various resources from Portugal by using religious argumentation and their allies' expectations while also attempting to keep their realms independent from an expanding Portuguese field of control.

### 1. Introduction – Majestic Pen Pals

“These letters are addressed to the very powerful and most excellent and always victorious king Manuel”<sup>1</sup>, wrote Dawit II, emperor of Ethiopia, to the Portuguese king,

1 This source is a German translation from 1533. The Portuguese original dates from 1521. Whether the original text was used for this translation, we do not know. The English translation above is taken from Matteo Salvatore, *Ethiopian Letters to the Pontiff and the King of Portugal, 1521–4*, in: Martha Frederiks (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. Primary Sources 1500–1700*, vol. 2, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2023 [ISBN 9781350233300], pp. 347–349, here p. 348. The German quote states the following: “Dieser Brieff wirdt geschickt dem mechtigsten und trefflichstem Koenig / allzeit uberwinder / herrn Emanuel”: Johann Presbyter, *Bottschaft des Groszmechtigsten Konigs David / aus dem grossen vnd hohen Morenland / den man gemeinlich nennet Priester Johann / an Babst Clemens den Siebenden / zu Bononia verhort in offnem Consitorio am xxix tag Januarij Anno. M.D.xxxijj*, Dresden 1533 [URN urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00103679-5], [p. 13].

Manuel I in 1521.<sup>2</sup> Around the same time said king of Portugal also began a letter to the king of Kongo, Afonso I, with the words: “Most powerful and excellent king of Kongo, we, Dom Manuel, [...] send you many salutations as someone we dearly love and cherish.”<sup>3</sup> Afonso replied by addressing Dom Manuel in one of his following letters with “Most high and most powerful prince, king, and lord.”<sup>4</sup> Letters like these bear witness to a time when African monarchs still reigned independently – a time when African kingdoms entertained contact with European kingdoms but were not yet suppressed by them. As various European powers had enforced their dominance over most parts of Africa by the end of the nineteenth century, it is especially interesting to focus on the goals and strategies of African rulers at a time when this was not yet the case.

During the so-called “European age of expansion”, specifically during the last decades of the fifteenth century, Portuguese sailors managed to explore and map large stretches of the west coast of Africa.<sup>5</sup> The advance into these regions led to an extension of the Portuguese field of control and their encounter with diverse African cultures, resulting in the emergence of new trade markets and cruel examples of exploitation such as slavery.<sup>6</sup> It should also be mentioned that such encounters between Africans and Europeans in the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century were not necessarily the result of Portuguese explorations. This can be seen in the example of the “Ethiopian age of expansion”, a term introduced by Matteo Salvatore to characterize the period between the early fourteenth century and mid-fifteenth century in Ethiopia. During this process, ambassadors and monks, travelling from Ethiopia to European courts, contributed highly to European understandings of foreign cultures and territories as well as to both the European and Ethiopian self-conception as part of a worldwide Christian community.<sup>7</sup>

Once European and sub-Saharan empires encountered each other, they started to form diplomatic relationships. One sign of this frequent transcontinental correspondence in the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century is letters. It sometimes took years for these letters to arrive at their destinations. As they were the only way for monarchs to directly communicate with each other, these letters are a vital source for analysing the kind of relationship between addressee and addresser and the choices they made in interacting with one another. They also lay an argumentative basis for developing theories about the diplomatic agendas of the respective monarchs.

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2 Salvatore, *Ethiopian Letters*, p. 348.

3 John K. Thornton, *Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga, King of Kongo. His Life and Correspondence*, Cambridge-Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 2023 [ISBN 9781647921415], p. 143.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

5 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400–1668*, London-New York: Routledge 2005 [ISBN 0203324048], p. 53.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–62.

7 Matteo Salvatore, *The Ethiopian Age of Exploration. Prester John's Discovery of Europe, 1306–1458*, in: *Journal of World History* 21 (2010), no. 4 [DOI 10.1353/jwh.2010.a413985], pp. 593–627, here pp. 593–594.

This essay focuses on the correspondences of the King of Kongo, Afonso I (r. 1509–1542), and the emperor of Ethiopia, Dawit II (r. 1508–1540), with the kings of Portugal, Manuel I (r. 1495–1521) and João III (r. 1521–1557). Instead of focusing on the Portuguese perspective, this essay will examine the approaches taken by the two African monarchs in their letters. In what ways do the two approaches differ? Which goals were being pursued, and what strategies were followed to attain these goals? Which recurring tropes or topics can be detected? All proposed assumptions will be further put into perspective based on scientific secondary literature. In this context, the following books frequently serve as references: “Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga, King of Kongo”<sup>8</sup> by John Thornton, “Grundzüge der Außereuropäischen Christentumsgeschichte”<sup>9</sup> by Klaus Koschorke, and various works from Matteo Salvatore regarding Ethiopian history. At the beginning of this paper, the letters will be discussed while also embedding them into their respective historical background. Then a comparison and a consequential analysis will follow. As a last note, the reader must also consider that for this paper the original texts have not been used because they were originally written in Portuguese. Instead, the analysis is based on English translations. The letters of Afonso have been directly translated from Portuguese into English while the letters of Dawit have been translated from Italian, as will be explained later. Among other things, this switch in language comes with a loss of stylistic elements which are only apparent in the original language. As a result, this paper only focuses on the content of the letters and not on the stylistic presentation of said content.

## 2. Historical Context – Different Realities in West and East Africa

The historic Kingdom of Kongo should not be confused with the modern state of Congo. Instead, it was located in the north of modern-day Angola as well as in some parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo. Within the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this kingdom came to be the most powerful political entity in West-Central Africa.<sup>10</sup> The letters from one of its kings, Afonso I, which are to be analysed in this paper, are part of a collection of letters put together by John Thornton. Luis Madureira translated the sources from Portuguese into English. Madureira underlines the stylistic authenticity of these letters and the profound knowledge of Renaissance Portugal they indicate. Thornton traces this sophisticated literacy in Portuguese to João Texeira, Afonso’s long-time secretary. Texeira was one of the first scholars from the Kingdom of Kongo travelling to Portugal and was, hence, proficient in Portuguese.<sup>11</sup> The correspondence between King Afonso and his Portuguese pen pals spans the period from 1512 until 1541, around the time of Afonso’s death. The letters were mostly written in the capital of Kongo, Mbanza Kongo, which lay deep within the kingdom.<sup>12</sup> From there,

8 Thornton, Afonso.

9 Klaus Koschorke, *Grundzüge der Außereuropäischen Christentumsgeschichte. Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika 1450–2000*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022 [ISBN 9783825259341].

10 Thornton, Afonso, pp. 6–8.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the letters were first brought to the coast and then carried either by Portuguese officials and priests or by delegations of Kongolese noblemen on Portuguese ships to Lisbon. Afterwards, they were stowed in Portuguese archives, where they partly survived to this day. Nowadays, these letters are one of the key sources for understanding Kongolese history in the Early Modern Age.

It is not surprising that one of Afonso's epithets is "apostle of Kongo", considering that under his reign Christianity gained a lasting foothold in West-Central Africa.<sup>13</sup> When he assumed the throne, Christianity had only been introduced to the kingdom of Kongo one generation prior by Portuguese missionaries. After the death of his father, King Nzinga a Nkuwu, Afonso was able to gather support for his dynastic claims not only among his fellow countrymen but also among the Portuguese. By gaining a surprising victory, as depicted by himself, in the battle against his half-brother, he managed to seize the throne. He also attributed this victory to the intervention of Saint James the Greater, the military saint venerated by the Portuguese and Spanish, showcasing his devotion to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> In the following decades, Christianity did not only form the basis for Afonso's legitimacy as king of Kongo before his subjects and European foreigners, but it also provided an opportunity for accessing new knowledge and technology via his new Portuguese Christian ally. Despite calling the Portuguese king his brother in various letters, the relationship between the two monarchs was still asymmetrical. Both Manuel I and his son João III, invoking the patronage of the Iberian monarchies over ecclesiastical questions in overseas territory due to a series of papal bulls bestowed upon them by Nicolas V (r. 1447–1455) and Calixt III (r. 1455–1458), saw themselves as supreme leaders of the church in Africa. Henceforth, this ecclesiastical authority was defended vehemently by the Portuguese crown.<sup>15</sup> A striking example of this is Afonso's effort to get his son Henrique appointed as bishop of Kongo by the pope by sending delegations to the Vatican. These journeys were repeatedly sabotaged by Portuguese noblemen, and although Henrique was indeed finally appointed bishop in 1518, he did not receive Kongo but Utica as his diocese. Even though this town in modern-day Tunisia had stayed under Muslim control since the seventh century, it was still used by the Vatican as a titular see to support aspiring bishops. As a result, the struggle between the Portuguese and the Kongolese crown regarding the control over the church within the kingdom remained unsettled. Kongo also remained dependent on Portugal for sending and ordaining priests.<sup>16</sup> Henceforth, it does not strike as surprising that most letters of Afonso related to his people's need for religious assistance.

Meanwhile, not on Africa's west coast but on its east coast, the other Christian kingdom in Africa – the empire of Ethiopia – faced another set of challenges. When talking about Ethiopia, especially during the Early Modern Age, it is crucial to first define this term. This is relevant due to the variety of contexts in which the term Ethiopia was used by writers of the Early Modern Age. In many primary sources, Ethiopia is a collective term

13 Thornton, Afonso, p. 124.

14 Ibid., pp. 24–34, 40.

15 Ibid., pp. 103–104, 107.

16 Ibid., pp. 99–102.

for a variety of regions that could otherwise be characterised as African or sub-Saharan. To name only one such instance, one can look at a historic event already mentioned in the previous paragraph. When Portuguese noblemen pledged obedience to the pope in 1514 in the name of the Kingdom of Kongo due to Afonso's failed attempt to send his own ambassadors, Afonso was described as "the greatest and most powerful king of Ethiopia".<sup>17</sup> In this essay, however, the term Ethiopia describes the empire in East Africa, often referred to as Abyssinia, whose own Christian church dates back to as early as the fourth century.<sup>18</sup> Being separated from Christians in Europe, countless generations of Ethiopian Christians established their own church language, an extended biblical canon, and unique religious traditions.<sup>19</sup> The letters from the emperor of Ethiopia, Dawit II (r. 1507–1540), which form the basis for this paper, are part of a much smaller collection of letters than that of King Afonso. Besides the two letters written to Manuel I in 1521 and João III in 1524, there were also two letters to Pope Clement VII (r. 1523–1534). In 1526, all four letters were brought to Lisbon<sup>20</sup> by an expedition group, which had stayed in the empire of Ethiopia for six years. One member of this group was the Portuguese diplomat and missionary Francisco Álvarez, who wrote his experience down and thus made it accessible to a large audience within Europe.<sup>21</sup> Parts of Álvarez' descriptions and of the four letters were also included in "Delle navigationi et viaggi"<sup>22</sup>, the famous collection of travel reports by the Italian Giovanni Remusio Battista.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of this fast spread of information about the empire of Ethiopia, the fascination with this steeped-in-legend, isolated Christian empire in the east started to fade.<sup>24</sup> However, already before Álvarez and his group arrived at Dawit's court in 1520, Ethiopia was not as isolated as it was in the imagination of European scholars. First encounters between the Ethiopian and Catholic people date back to the period between 1099 and 1189, when Jerusalem was in the hands of Catholic crusaders.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the first expedition from Ethiopia to Europe we know of arrived in Italy as early as 1306<sup>26</sup> and, around 1500, it was already not uncommon to meet Ethiopians in the city of Rome.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, Álvarez described a disappointing reality after encountering signs of European influence and even other Europeans at Dawit's court. Also, the Ethiopian army

17 Sébastien Meno Kikokula, *Autour de l'ambassade de Mbanza Kongo 1514*, in: *Annales Aequatoria* 18 (1997), [ISSN 02544296], pp. 471–488, here p. 480, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25837285>, accessed 28.3.2026.

18 Koschorke, *Christentumsgeschichte*, p. 8.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

20 Salvatore, *Ethiopian Letters*, p. 348.

21 Andrew Kurt, *The Search for Prester John, a Projected Crusade and the Eroding Prestige of Ethiopian Kings*, c. 1200–c. 1540, in: *Journal of Medieval History* 39 (2013), no. 3 [DOI 10.1080/03044181.2013.789978], pp. 297–320, here p. 318.

22 M. Gio. Battista Ramusio, *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, vol. 1, Venetia: Stamperia de Giun 1563, pp. 190–260, [https://archive.org/details/cihm\\_94409/page/n1/mode/2up?ref=ol](https://archive.org/details/cihm_94409/page/n1/mode/2up?ref=ol), accessed 22.3.2026.

23 Massimo Donattini, Giovanni Battista Remusio, in: David Thomas/John Chesworth (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Biographical History* vol. 6: *Western Europe (1500–1600) (History of Christian-Muslim Relations 22)*, Leiden–Boston: Brill 2014 [ISBN 9789004281110], pp. 528–537, here pp. 531–532.

24 Kurt, *Search for Prester John*, pp. 319–320.

25 Salvatore, *Age of Exploration*, p. 599.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 596–604.

27 Koschorke, *Christentumsgeschichte*, p. 7.

was not as powerful to rival Muslim hegemony in the region as they hoped.<sup>28</sup> At the same encounter, even Dawit is described as being disappointed about Portugal being that tiny on a bestowed world map. This attributed stance also explains his plans to forge an alliance against Islam in response to tensions with his Muslim neighbour to the north.<sup>29</sup> The content of Dawit's two letters to Manuel I and João III must be interpreted within this historical context.

### 3. Analysis – As a Common Christian You Should ...

Both the letters of King Afonso and Emperor Dawit contain several requests to the Portuguese kings. The two monarchs seemed to be particularly interested in advanced technology, as illustrated by Dawit's wish for guns<sup>30</sup> and Afonso's request for his own ship.<sup>31</sup> Another common aim was the access to further education and military training. For instance, Dawit wished for his men to be armed and trained by experienced Portuguese men. In the same paragraph of the letter with this request, Dawit also asked João III to send experts in painting, letterpress printing, gold mining, and other professions to Ethiopia.<sup>32</sup> Such requests can also be found in Afonso's letters, with the difference that Afonso was also aiming at religious education.<sup>33</sup> Both monarchs sought to deepen their alliance with Portugal to contain threats – external dangers in the case of Ethiopia and internal tensions in the case of Kongo.

Simultaneously, they both preferred to keep their realms of authority independent from Portuguese interference. The Kongolese strategy for upholding their independence from Portugal relied mostly on their consolidation as a Christian monarchy with its own diocese and a bishop directly answering to the pope and having the right to ordain priests.<sup>34</sup> This, however, challenged the ecclesiastical authority of the Portuguese crown, as already mentioned above. On the other side of the continent, Dawit held no interest in abandoning the ancient religious traditions of Ethiopia and submitting to the pope.<sup>35</sup> However, the emperor still needed foreign support to protect his empire from Muslim invaders such as the Adal Sultanate, which would ultimately ravage his empire a few years later.<sup>36</sup>

In order to attain their goals before the Portuguese king and within this complex web of external and internal influences, Afonso and Dawit fell back on different narrative and argumentative strategies in their letters. Both the Ethiopian and Kongolese letters were expertly adjusted to their audience's expectations. It can therefore be presumed that the authors were not only aware of those expectations, but they also used these ideas

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28 Matteo Salvatore, *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402–1555 (Transculturalisms, 1400–1700)*, London-New York: Routledge 2017 [ISBN 9780367204518], S. 147.

29 Koschorke, *Christentumsgeschichte*, p. 37.

30 Presbyter, *Botschaft*, p. 27.

31 Thornton, *Afonso*, p. 184.

32 Presbyter, *Botschaft*, pp. 26–27.

33 Thornton, *Afonso*, p. 185.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 99–107.

35 Salvatore, *Ethiopian-European Relations*, pp. 155–184.

36 Koschorke, *Christentumsgeschichte*, p. 38.

to attain their goals. All letters are rife with religious tropes and argumentations. Afonso justifies his need for educated men and other resources in most cases with the ongoing Christianisation and the fight against traditional beliefs derogatorily characterised as paganism. This is highlighted by the first argument for justifying his need for doctors and medicine in a letter from 1526: the spread of disease would kill those already believing in Christ and would drive the remaining to the use of traditional herbs and beliefs.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Afonso does not hold back from pointing out to the Portuguese king how much honour and service his generosity would bring to God. He also had a clear understanding of the role João III saw himself in when he wrote: "More than anyone else in this world, Your Highness should clearly be the foundation of the holy Catholic faith in this land [...] since it is under your instruction and influence."<sup>38</sup> This is followed by a request for a large amount of gold for a journey to Rome. Dawit's letters, on the other hand, pursue a different narrative strategy, which is again perfectly meeting the expectations of the Portuguese. They are packed with anti-Muslim sentiment and popular crusading tropes such as the Holy Sepulchre. Dawit especially pushes forward the idea of a great Christian alliance and his brotherhood with the Portuguese king due to their joint belief.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the dominant religious argumentation, there are also instances where both monarchs resorted to a mix of secular and religious argumentation. Dawit, for instance, also assured that he had sufficient men, gold, and provisions for a joint fight against their Muslim enemies and that he is willing to provide all foreign soldiers with land for settlement.<sup>40</sup> Afonso, on the other hand, started one of his letters with the words: "It is needless to point out the reasons why Your Highness should not forget us since they are so obvious. However, in case you have forgotten them, we will still mention some here so you can commit them to memory."<sup>41</sup> This introductory paragraph is then followed by a juxtaposition of the wealth the Portuguese king is gaining from Kongo compared to all African properties of the Portuguese crown. Here, Afonso especially underlines the significance of the inland slave markets called "pumbus" in Kongolese.<sup>42</sup> Despite the significance of such non-religious topics, they were barely used for argumentation in the letters examined for this paper.

#### **4. Conclusion – Different Hopes, Different Tropes**

In summary, during the first quarter of the sixteenth century, both Afonso I and Dawit II found themselves in a position where they chose to request foreign support to achieve their respective goals. These goals, although very much simplified here, revolved around building up a sovereign Christian kingdom in the case of Afonso and defending the empire against a possible invasion from the North in the case of Dawit. Both addressed

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37 Thornton, Afonso, p. 212.

38 Ibid., p. 238.

39 Salvadore, Ethiopian Letters, pp. 348–349.

40 Presbyter, Bottschafft, p. 26.

41 Thornton, Afonso, p. 238.

42 Ibid., pp. 238–239.

the Portuguese crown with their requests for assistance, which was at that point the most powerful European colonial power in the region. At the same time, the Portuguese crown also had ambitions regarding its African pen pals. These included missionary work in Kongo and finding an ally against Islam in the form of Ethiopia while also enlarging the Portuguese sphere of control and ensuring favourable trade opportunities. Therefore, the letters from the two African monarchs carry the complex task of pursuing their respective goals while also remaining in line with Portuguese aspirations.

This results in a recourse to religious argumentation in most of their letters, which focuses mainly on crusading tropes in the case of Ethiopia and on the ongoing Christianisation in Kongo. This argumentation tactic is used for both religious requests, such as the need for missionaries, and for secular concerns highlighted by the requests for doctors, painters, and printers. Although there are also instances where both African monarchs fell back on non-religious argumentation, this remains an exception within the selection of letters examined in this paper.

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