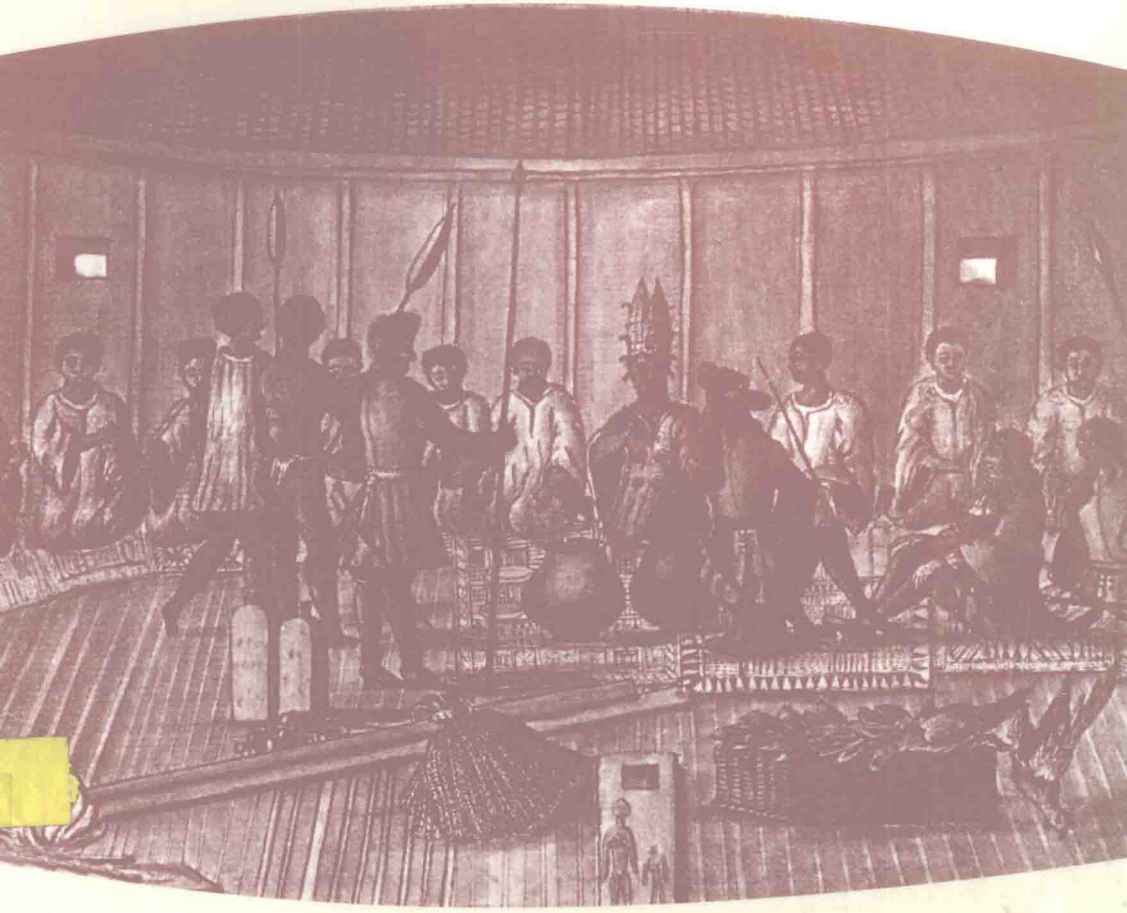
AFRICA'S DISCOVERY OF EUROPE

1450-1850



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1450 – 1850

David Northrup
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PREFACE

This volume examines cultural and economic encounters of Africans with Europeans that took place in Africa, in Europe, and on the Atlantic during the four centuries before 1850. Its conclusions challenge many widespread misunderstandings of these encounters, but its concern is more with presenting contemporary *Africans'* perceptions of what took place than engaging in academic debates. Despite the obvious fact that all encounters have two sides, the European side has long received greater attention, not just by historians of Europe but at times even from African-studies specialists.[1] While many scholars have worked to uncover the African side of these encounters, most of this work consists of specialized case studies confined to encounters in a single part of Africa or of Europe.[2] *Africa's Discovery of Europe* draws heavily on this modern scholarship, but it also makes extensive use of first-person African narratives to introduce this scholarly understanding to nonspecialists in an engaging way.

The use of the word "discovery" does not represent a claim that Africans found things unknown to others or organized exploring expeditions comparable to those departing from Europe during these centuries. Rather, Africans were discoverers in a subjective sense—finding out things previously unknown to themselves. The word "discovery" also emphasizes that Africans played active roles in their encounters with Europeans and thus counters commonplace notions that Africans were passive victims in these encounters and incapable of shaping them. During more than four centuries of encounters before 1850 Africans observed Europeans' physical and cultural differences; adopted or rejected ideas and material goods; worked out complex commercial, political, and cultural relations; and grew increasingly sophisticated in their appreciation and estimation of Europe. Not all African encounters were voluntary, and some were brutal, but there is more complexity in Africa's discovery of Europe than Eurocentric accounts credit.

Although *Africa's Discovery of Europe* surveys a large and complex topic, it has two intentional limitations. The first is geographical. Because North Africa's proximity to Europe made its relations so different, the "Africans" in this book are the people of sub-Saharan regions, whether at home or abroad. However, its coverage does not extend to the generations born in

the diaspora. The second intentional limitation is temporal. By concluding in the middle of the nineteenth century, this study omits the period of extensive and intensive interaction that began with the late-nineteenth-century European imperial conquest of Africa and continues to this day. That exclusion requires some explanation.

Robert July's pioneering survey of West Africans' cultural encounters with Europeans in the nineteenth century dismissed the importance of earlier encounters because, he believed, the Atlantic slave trade precluded meaningful cultural interaction. West African society gained "nothing of consequence from Europe's vast store of scientific and humanistic knowledge . . . but some acquaintance with guns and other war-making implements and an appetite for European products."[3] July was right to fault the slave trade, but the scholarly investigations that came later suggest that the importance of contacts with Europe during these centuries was greater than he thought. Despite its prominence and horrors, the Atlantic slave trade was not the sum total of Africa's expanding Atlantic exchanges, nor did it affect all parts of the continent. Other commercial exchanges preceded the massive sale of slaves, continued throughout its existence, and rose to new levels of intensity as the slave trade declined. It is the nature of history that early stages of an encounter contain great meaning in explaining later outcomes. Those who seek to tie modern Africa's problems to the Atlantic slave trade are applying this maxim, even if they greatly oversimplify this historical dynamic by leaving out other aspects of the commercial and cultural encounters with Europe that were even more persistent. The slave trade had lasting effects, but the patterns of cultural and commercial relations detailed in this work were equally significant and arguably of greater long-term impact. The study shows that 1800 did not constitute a watershed as July believes, but only a quickened pace of interactions that had long been underway. Similarly, the further acceleration of African-European interactions since 1850 exhibits far more continuities with the past than departures—but that fact would take an additional volume to document.

Besides these intended geographical and temporal limits (and other limitations because of unintended lapses in the author's knowledge and understanding), the historical records impose their own constraints. Because only a few Africans recorded their own impressions of Europeans before the late nineteenth century, this study makes use of many additional African perspectives that were recorded by Europeans. A seventeenth-century scholar from Ethiopia, Abba Gregoryos, was probably the first person to address the problem of error and bias that such European accounts might contain. During his long stay in Europe, he became annoyed with the distortions and inaccuracies he found in the various European accounts of Ethiopian life. He declared that Europeans "were sick of a certain itch of writing, and did both write and publish whatsoever they heard, whether true or false." Gregoryos disliked the rush to print, but recognized that it was precisely this itch to write things down that had preserved so much information (and misinformation). He was also fair minded enough to crit-

icize his own countrymen, who wrote little themselves and gave inquisitive Europeans imprecise or misleading answers that then found their way into print. In any event, working with the German Ethiopianist Job Ludolf, Gregoryos helped produce an important new work on Ethiopia.[4] Ethiopia had a written language and other Africans were literate in Arabic, but it is revealing of the importance of their encounter with Europe that nearly all the Africans who recorded details of their lives and thoughts in this era did so in European languages. Like Gregoryos, we may complain about the sources that exist and bemoan the absence of alternative perspectives that were never written down, but we need to make the best of what does exist.

Modern scholars studying Africa have shown the value of the collaborative approach of Ludolf and Gregoryos. With care and imagination it is possible to use new information about Africa to correct inaccuracies and distortions in older European sources and thus recover much valuable information, including statements by Africans and even summaries of whole speeches. Some Africans narrated their life stories to Europeans who wrote them down. Inevitably something may have been lost, added, or misunderstood in the retelling, but few historical records are flawless. Critical scholarship has shown that even Africans who penned their own stories sometimes had faulty memories, padded their own lives with details borrowed or adapted from other Africans, or distorted their narratives in ways intended to appeal to European readers. All historical documents must be used critically, but in the many cases where no other record of an event or statement exists, one can only rely on internal consistency and plausibility. Plausibility can itself be a very difficult criterion to apply, for it references both the document and the document's critic. Too often modern cultural standards and prejudices have been used to declare unlikely what was thought quite plausible to readers closer to the time the document was written. For example, as Chapter 2 points out, modern critics have often questioned the sincerity of African interest in and adoption of Christian religious practices and beliefs. Modern secularism may find African credence implausible, but how credible would a continent so rich in spirituality have found modern secular ideas?

Given the limited number of African witnesses and the need to break down Eurocentric perspectives on African-European encounters, this study has preferred to err on the side of credulity rather than incredulity. Rather than silence an African voice because it might be distorted, let it be heard; a larger reality lies in the chorus of voices than in any soloist. Demonstrable fabrications are ignored unless they shed light on the mood of a period. Possible untruths and exaggerations are noted, but all that sounds strange to modern ears is not, for that reason, to be excluded. History is an inexact science, an approximation, hopefully close, of the truth about fellow humans, who are diverse and notoriously inconsistent. It is inevitable that some details of the past are altered when they are recounted, retold, or translated. More important than the purest authenticity is the pattern; the melody can be heard despite a few false notes.

The chapters of this volume examine different aspects of Africa's discovery of Europe in a loosely chronological order. The first two chapters deal with events beginning in the fifteenth century, the first pursuing its theme of African impressions of Europeans to the mid-nineteenth century, and Chapter 2 examining African political leaders' interest in Christianity and firearms until about 1650. The remaining chapters are largely concerned with the period from 1650 to 1850, during which the intensity of encounters grew and richer evidence makes possible a more probing analysis. Commercial relations are explored in three chapters: Chapter 3 looks at how coastal African traders and rulers participated in the Atlantic economy, Chapter 4 examines inland Africans' involvement with overseas trade and goods, and the perspectives of Africans sold into the Atlantic slave trade are the subject of Chapter 5. Taking up themes introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 6 examines Africans' cultural encounters in Europe between 1650 and 1850.

The individual chapters contribute to three larger themes that run throughout the book. First, Africans encountered Europe with their eyes open, sometimes in amazement, usually in keen awareness of their own self-interest. Second, Africans chose to acquire much from Europe both in the form of material goods and cultural traditions, of which language, religion, and education are the most prominent. Third, in discovering Europe, Africans were discovering and redefining themselves. Those who at a young age went to Europe (or to the Americas—a subject deserving fuller treatment elsewhere) might embrace European culture completely, but their nostalgia for the motherland and their own inextinguishable physical differences from native Europeans also gave them a strong sense of themselves as Africans, an identity then rare on the continent itself. Many in Africa chose to incorporate European ways into African cultural matrixes. All three themes continued to shape relations with Europe during the period of colonial rule and are still important today.

Pulling aside the veil of assumed European superiority permits Africans to tell their own stories. However, the voices in *Africa's Discovery of Europe* challenge many prevailing stereotypes of Africans both as victims and as heroes. To be sure, African victims are abundant and African heroes not rare, but the main story lies somewhere in between. The stories that African sources tell are more about surviving than about suffering. The reasons are not hard to find. One is that those who survive and achieve are much more likely to tell their story than those who are destroyed and beaten down. Allowance must be made for voices muted by tragedy, but it is also true that Africans legitimately experienced much that they found positive and uplifting during these centuries of contact. Africans may often have been less powerful, but they were not thereby powerless, even when enslaved. Many Africans considered here steadfastly refuse to strike the heroic poses modern ideas expect, believing it in their self-interest to participate in the slave trade rather than oppose it, gladly remaking themselves in the European model rather than defending sacred cultural traditions. However

unexpected the words and actions of ordinary and extraordinary Africans engaged in being themselves may be, we welcome the fascinating story they have to tell.

This study could not have been completed without the support of Boston College, which granted me periods of leave to devote to research and writing, and to the staffs of its libraries, who were tireless in helping me locate the many sources used in writing this volume. I also want to thank my assistants in my Africa's World classes who commented on earlier drafts of these chapters: John Cashman, John Russell, and Edward Rugemer. George Brooks, David Chappell, Vera Lind, and Ben Lindfors also supplied valued help and encouragement.

Notes

1. For example, Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1964), and V. Y. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

2. The two widest ranging surveys are Hans Werner Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe: A History of Africans in Europe before 1918* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 1979), and John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992; 2d ed. 1998).

3. Robert W. July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1967), quote pp. 459–60. The subject was continued and extended forward in time in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa and the West: Intellectual Responses to European Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972). Two anthropologists ably survey the colonial era: Melville J. Herskovits, *The Human Factor in Changing Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), and P. C. Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change* (London: Penguin Books, 1967).

4. Job Ludolf, *A New History of Ethiopia: Being a Full and Accurate Description of Abessinia*, trans. J. P. Gent (London: Samuel Smith, 1684).

CONTENTS

MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

ONE

First Sights—Lasting Impressions

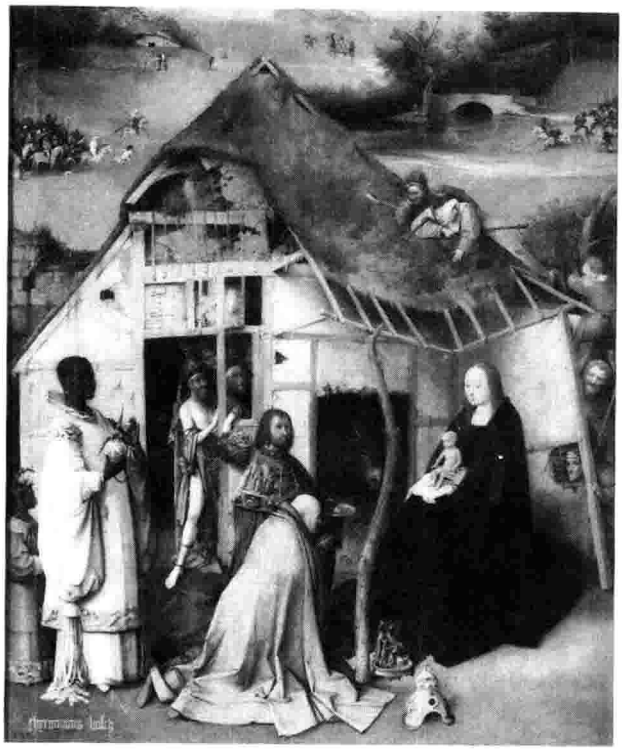
In September 1895, three dignified rulers from the Tswana people of southern Africa (modern Botswana) arrived in London, the first official visitors to Europe from that nation. Over the next three months they made an extensive tour of England, Scotland, and Wales, seeking and receiving British support for protecting their homeland from the encroachment of European settlement. They secured the support of the British Colonial Secretary and received an audience with Queen Victoria. From the extensive coverage their visit received in the press and other records a recent book is able to recount the Tswana chiefs' impressions of this land and people so distant from their homes. Among other reactions, they experienced trepidation at the height of an iron suspension bridge, were delighted by the riches and beauty of Windsor Castle, and found its royal occupant kind and charming, although remarkably short and stout.[1]

For all the sensation the three Tswana kings created, such African visitors in Europe were not a phenomenon that began in the era of global imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. African princes, kings, and dignitaries from below the Sahara had made their way to European capitals and courts for several centuries. A few black Africans had been present in the Mediterranean world since antiquity, but Western Europe's knowledge of black Africa broadened when Crusaders brought back word of kingdoms of black Christians who dwelt beyond the boundaries of the Islamic world. This unexpected news manifested itself in the reportrayal of Saint Maurice as a black African knight, in the presence of Africans in the statuary of the north porch of the thirteenth-century Chartres cathedral, and in the legend that first appeared after 1150 of "Prester John," a powerful Christian ruler somewhere on the Indian Ocean rim. The number of Africans in Europe grew after 1300, as delegations traveled from African kingdoms and as slaves brought from sub-Saharan Africa began to outnumber slaves of eastern European origins. The fifteenth-century Portuguese voyages along the Atlantic coast of Africa greatly increased the movement of both elite and

enslaved Africans to Europe and led to a second arena of encounter between Africans and Europeans in coastal Africa. Thus the middle of the fifteenth century marks the beginning of an era of continuous and increasing interaction between the two continents and their cultures.

As commercial and cultural interactions grew both Africans and Europeans made many adjustments in their ideas of each other. This study is concerned with presenting the long-neglected African side of these meetings, but it is useful to begin with a few words about the changes in European perspectives about Africans. In antiquity and during most of the Middle Ages, European images of Africans had been fairly rigid and dominated by abstract symbolism. Thus, European artists and thinkers before 1400 usually depicted Africans as the opposite of themselves; they were the "other" in current academic usage. Some ancient drinking cups, for example, depicted a dark African face on one side and a light European one on the other. This physical duality became overlain with an ideological one after Islam displaced Christianity as the dominant religion of North Africa. Although Europeans were well aware that North Africans looked little different from southern Europeans, Muslims were frequently depicted with black faces. Verbal usage was often no clearer. Dark-skinned "Blackamoors" from below the Sahara might be distinguished from the lighter "Moors" of North Africa, but often the two terms were used so interchangeably that it is difficult to sort out the meanings. The imprecision was a product of the fact that in European minds the symbolism of the terms was more important than the reality of individual pigmentation. Africans were tokens, not persons.

However, as Africans became more common in Europe, reality began to triumph over imagery in Western art—or at least the reality began to temper the images. The arrival of Ethiopian delegations confirmed the long-rumored existence of black Christians, breaking down the Islamic stereotype of Africans. A parade of African princes produced a striking change in paintings of the three Magi who came to worship the Christ child. Whereas earlier all three had been of light complexion, by the end of the fifteenth century the convention of portraying one of them as dark skinned became firmly established in Western art. In these and other Renaissance paintings and drawings the generic black faces of earlier centuries were replaced by portraits that are not only personal, but distinguishable today as people from Ethiopia, from West Africa, or from West Central Africa. The artists' recognition of Africans' physical diversity was accompanied by a clear recognition of their social diversity as well, for paintings also show both the African kings and the African servants of wealthy southern European households. Thus, even as the first Portuguese explorers contacted the people of sub-Saharan Africa, the image of Africa in European minds was already changing.[2]



Detail of a nativity scene painted by Hieronymous Bosch in 1500 depicting an elegantly attired African king and his attendant bringing a rich gift to the infant Jesus. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

ELITE AFRICANS IN EUROPE TO 1650

Africans were also expanding their knowledge and understanding of Europe. The first persistent effort to build ties to Europe came from the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia in the mountainous highlands of the upper Blue Nile. The kingdom's rulers had adopted Christianity in the fourth century, and the dynasty in power in the fourteenth century claimed descent from King Solomon of ancient Israel. For at least a century the Negus Nagast (king of kings or emperor) of Ethiopia had maintained a permanent listening post in the eastern Mediterranean through the Ethiopian monks who served as protectors of some of Jerusalem's Christian holy places. Perhaps prompted by the declining fortunes of the Christian communities in Egypt and Nubia, King Wedem Ar'ad of Ethiopia sent a delegation of thirty persons to Europe in 1306, seeking to forge a pan-Christian alliance against the Muslims who were worrying his neighbors. It appears that the delegation called on rulers in Spain and visited Pope Clement V at his palace in Avignon in southern

France. On the pope's recommendation they journeyed on to Rome to visit the churches of Saints Peter and Paul. Then, from Genoa, they secured passage back home via the Red Sea.[3]

No alliance emerged from this embassy, but it probably accounts for the papal letters that were sent out to the ruler of Ethiopia in 1329 and the dispatch of an Italian Dominican bishop to the kingdom the next year. From such European visitors Ethiopian rulers gathered news of the changing political geography of Mediterranean Europe. Such contacts were also at the root of Europeans' identification of the mythical Prester John, a Christian prince of the Indian Ocean region, with the Ethiopian dynasty.

Later emperors directed new embassies to Europe when the occasion warranted it. In 1402 Ethiopian ambassadors presented gifts of leopards and aromatic spices to the Doge of Venice. In 1428 Emperor Yishak (r. 1413–1430) proposed an alliance between Ethiopia and the kingdom of Aragon that was to be sealed by a double marriage of King Alfonso V's daughter to the emperor and the king's son to Yishak's daughter. This proposal was not completed, but Yishak's successor, Emperor Zera-Yakob (r. 1434–1468), the author of several works of political theology and an ardent and tyrannical promoter of ecclesiastical reform and royal centralization, in 1450 dispatched four Ethiopians to Alfonso, who by then was also ruling the kingdom of Naples. One object of this mission was to hire European artisans, whose technical skills an earlier Ethiopian appeal had enumerated: miniaturists for manuscript illumination, goldsmiths and silversmiths, architects, carpenters, organ-makers, glassmakers, trumpeters, and makers of all sorts of arms. In 1452, an Ethiopian ambassador named George went to Lisbon, while in 1459, another Ethiopian went to the Duke of Milan, who wrote the Ethiopian emperor a letter inquiring whether he possessed the magic books written "by his ancestor Solomon"—a likely reference to the remarkable *Kebra Nagast*, the Ethiopian *Book of the Glory of Kings*.[4]

Meanwhile, the Muslim armies of the Ottoman Turks were assaulting the last outposts of Byzantine Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean. When the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, leaders in the Latin West knew for themselves the fear of Muslim power that had been worrying Ethiopia's rulers for a century and a half. To meet the Muslim threat, the Patriarch of Rome (the pope) called a church council, which met at Ferrara and Florence from 1437 to 1445, in hopes of forging a united Christian front by healing the long-standing breach between Rome and the Eastern Churches. The council was attended by the exiled Byzantine emperor and Patriarch of Constantinople, by the head of the Russian church, and by delegates from the Patriarch of Alexandria (to whose jurisdiction the Ethiopian church belonged), along with two monks sent from Jerusalem to represent the Ethiopians. One of the Ethiopian monks, who bore the name of Peter, the first of the apostles and the patron of the Latin Church, made a powerful impression when he told the pope at Florence in 1441 that the Ethiopian emperor was eager "to be united with the Roman Church and to

cast himself at your most holy feet." Perhaps Peter was carried away by the fervor for Christian unity, for it is very doubtful if Emperor Zera-Yakob would have endorsed such views, if he even knew of them. In any event, the Ethiopian church was not part of the short-lived Christian union that resulted from the council. Still, the Ethiopian delegates had made an impression. Their images were subsequently cast into the bronze doors made for the new Basilica of Saint Peter (1445), and an African prince also appeared in the *Journey of the Magi* painted by Bennozzo Gozzoli for Medici Palace in Florence (1459).[5]

We do not know precisely how news of the council was received and interpreted in Ethiopia, but between 1481 and 1490 three more Ethiopian delegations came to Europe to discuss Christian unity. To accommodate the first, which included a cousin of the emperor, Pope Sixtus IV repaired the church of Saint Stephen the Great and an adjoining house in the Vatican. Known thereafter as Saint Stephen of the Ethiopians, this facility functioned as a hospice for Ethiopian visitors and pilgrims during the next two centuries, as well as a center for Ethiopian studies in Europe. There between 1537 and 1552 the remarkable Ethiopian scholar Tasfa Seyon (known to Europeans as Peter the Ethiopian) edited and published a New Testament and a Missal in Ge'ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language, with the aid of two Italian Dominicans. In explanation of his presence and purpose, he wrote, "I am an Ethiopian pilgrim . . . from the land of the infidels to the land of the faithful, through sea and land. At Rome I found rest for my soul through the right faith." These were diplomatic words that did not mean Tasfa thought Ethiopian Christians were any less a part of the true Christian faith.[6]

By the late fifteenth century, other royal and diplomatic delegations from Atlantic Africa were arriving in southern Europe by means of Portuguese ships. Surviving accounts of these visits tell more of European reactions to the Africans than they do of African reactions to Europe, but African agendas are implicit in the sending of such delegations to Europe and in the subsequent course of their relations. As subsequent chapters examine in detail, these parties from Africa's Atlantic coast were often as concerned as the Ethiopians were with establishing religious ties with the Latin West, but they were likewise interested in obtaining technical assistance (largely military) and in expanding the commercial exchanges that the Portuguese voyages had opened up. Although the Portuguese ships had been bringing captives back from Atlantic Africa since the 1440s, a regular parade of official delegations from that coast reached Portugal from the 1480s on. The first, in 1484, came from the kingdom of Kongo on the lower Congo River. The king of Benin sent an embassy to Portugal in 1486. Delegations from the Jolof kingdom on the lower Senegal River came to Portugal in 1487 and 1488. A new Kongolese embassy in 1488–1490 helped make the monastery of Saint Eloy in Lisbon a second center of African studies in Europe, where Kongolese learned European religious and secular knowledge and where

Portuguese missionaries were trained in Kongolese culture. The details and larger context of these Atlantic African visits are explored in Chapters 2 and 3.

ENSLAVED AFRICANS IN EUROPE

Kings and ambassadors were not the only Africans whose numbers were rising in Renaissance Europe. From the fifteenth century European artists regularly depicted Africans in dignified but humbler roles as servants, musicians, laborers, and artisans. Padua artist Andrea Mantegne depicted an African woman servant in his portrait *Judith* in 1491, while a black gondolier glides along a Venetian canal in Vittore Carpaccio's *Miracle of the True Cross* (1494). A combo of African musicians adds contemporary detail to the Portuguese painting of *Saint Ursula and Prince Conan* of 1520. Much better known are the German artist Albrecht Dürer's striking engravings of a black man (1508) and of an African woman named Katharina.[7] This second group of Africans in Europe were the product of the African slave trades via the Sahara and the Atlantic.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as Charles Verlinden has documented, the number of "blacks" was rising among the mostly Slavic and North African slave populations of Mediterranean Europe. In Sicily in the late thirteenth century, for example, white slaves still were more common than those identified as "black" or "olive" (a category that might include mulattoes), and female slaves were two or three times as numerous as males. In the notarial records on which Verlinden relies most blacks (and some white, brown, and olive-hued persons) were termed "Saracens," that is, Muslims, a fact that is also evident from the names of black slaves: Fatima, Said, Arrashte, Museyd. This suggests that most blacks in Europe before the fifteenth century had not been born below the Sahara, but were from the slave populations born in North Africa whose ancestors had been brought across the desert.[8]

However, as the supply of slaves coming into Mediterranean Europe from the southern Slavic regions was interrupted during the fifteenth century by Ottoman conquests, European merchants increased their purchases in the slave markets of North Africa to such a degree that dark-skinned slaves became the majority in Europe. By the end of the fifteenth century one estate in southeastern Sicily had twenty adult slaves, eight female, twelve male, all of whom were blacks except for two of the women. The African slaves were employed in agriculture. In the neighboring kingdom of Naples, which Ethiopian delegates visited in the second half of the fifteenth century, imported Africans constituted 83 percent of the slaves, who labored in sugar cane fields, vineyards, and other forms of agriculture.[9] Given the high demand, it is likely that most such slaves originated in sub-Saharan Africa and had been brought across the desert to North Africa and then sold to Italy.

By the second half of the fifteenth century Portuguese ships were also