Imprints of the Time : a Study of the hundred Ethiopian Seals of the Boucoiran collection

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At the XVth ICES in Hamburg Serge Tornay made a first evaluation of the Boucoiran collection of seal-imprints and organized its donation to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. Since then, Serge Tornay and Estelle Sohier joined their efforts in identifying the owners of the seals, searching for their contribution to Ethiopian political, military and religious history and disclosing the numerous enigmas encoded in the legends, decorations and iconographies³.

The existence of the Boucoiran collection of seal-imprints and its interest for Ethiopian modern History is known since the XVth ICES, 2003. In Hamburg Serge Tornay made a first appraisal of the collection and organized its donation to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, then represented by its Director, Professor Baye Yimam. Participants urged Serge Tornay to prepare for the next ICES a more detailed, if possible exhaustive study of the collection. The challenge was met in the course of the last three years through an active cooperation between Serge Tornay, an anthropologist, and the historian Estelle Sohier, PhD candidate writing a dissertation on “Politics of Images and Royal Power in Ethiopia from Menilik II until Haylā Sallāsē (1880-1936)”. The cooperation between the anthropologist and the historian proved particularly interesting and, we hope, productive. As a result we present to the international community of Ethiopianists a fresh publication of the Boucoiran collection. We hope that our book, Empreintes du temps (Addis Ababa 2007), will be welcomed by our international scholarly community.

Origin of the collection

Let us briefly recall a few landmarks on the history of the collection⁴. The owner of the collection was Maurice-Louis Boucoiran (1880-1953). He entered the diplomatic career in 1906. Chancellor of the French Legation in Addis Ababa from 1912 to 1914, he was recalled to France at the beginning of the First World War, but came back to Ethiopia in 1917 and resided there till 1925 in charge of the French Consulate. The ownership of an extensive collection of seal imprints of royal, noble, military and religious dignitaries is only one sign of the Consul’s friendship and interest for the country and its inhabitants.

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³  The book is entitled Empreintes du temps : Les sceaux des dignitaires éthiopiens du règne de Tewodros à la régence de Tafari Makonnen, published by the Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Addis Abeba 2007, and diffused through secretariat-cfee@ethionet.et
⁴  For a more detailed account see TORNAY (2006).
After the death of the Consul his daughter, Mrs Anita Bruneton living in Nîmes, piously kept the collection among other « souvenirs d’Éthiopie » and, in 2002, she wisely decided to donate the collection to a Museum. At that time, Serge Tornay was keeper of the African collections of the Musée de l’Homme. The transfer of the ethnographic collections to the Musée du quai Branly had entered its executive phase. There were no instructions concerning donations made after 2001. Tornay thought that the best destination for the Boucoiran collection should be the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. Mrs Bruneton agreed and Tornay took the opportunity of the Hamburg Conference 2003 for handing over the collection to the Director of the Institute, at the time Professor Baye Yimam. Professor Baye and many participants urged S. Tornay to write a detailed study of the collection: it was a difficult challenge which he couldn’t accept without the cooperation, expertise and enthusiasm of the young historian Estelle Sohier.

Nature of the collection

In fact, the collection doesn’t consist of original imprints of seals, but of pictures of such originals: homogeneous in quality (black and white printings), in size (9 X 13 cm) and workmanship, the full collection probably originates from a unique, possibly Armenian, photographic workshop. Was it a gift to the Consul, did he buy it? We don’t know. But it is almost certain that he used it as a « Who is who? » of the Ethiopian Upper Society of the time. Of course some seal owners, like the kings of kings having preceded Manilak II, were already dead when Boucoiran first came to Ethiopia (1912), but their descendants, families, allies and enemies were the actors of Ethiopian political and cultural life during the first two or three decades of the XXth Century.

On the number of items. I titled my Hamburg Communication « A Hundred-and-One Pictures of Ethiopian Royal and Noblemen’s Seals…” How is it that we have only “one hundred” left for our book? Pictures were numbered from 1 to 102, but number 48 was lacking and one of the imprints was reduplicated. Hence the renumbering from 1 to 100 in our 2007 publication. On the back of the pictures there are lead pencil handwritten inscriptions: the original number of the picture, a French transliteration of the name and title of the seal holder. Although the spelling is approximate, we thought those legends should be reproduced in our book as a historical element of the collection. The identification of the owner of the seal is in most cases correct, which means the captions were the work of a qualified Ge’ez-Amharic reader of the time.

Content: chronological order versus hierarchical ranking

The ordering of the imprints is chronological, at least in the beginning: Kings of kings Tewodros, Täklä Giyorgis, Kasa-Yohannas IV (3 imprints), Manilak II (6 imp.), followed by Täklä Haymanot, Ras and Nëgus Mika’el (2 imp.), Abeto and Log Iyasu (2 imp.). Wäyzäro & Queen of kings Zäwditu (2 imp.) comes before Wäyzäro & Êtege Täytu (3 imp.), which demonstrates that the reigning empress had precedence over the celebrated wife of Manilak. Immediately following Täytu we find Abunä Peetros, Abunä Matewos and Eččäge Gäbrä Sallase: this underlines the importance of the Church as support of the Ethiopian monarchy. After the seal of the Monastery of Abräha and Asbäha - the only institutional example-, we find Mämhr Akälä Wäld, the famous erudite of the Ethiopian Church during the reigns of Tewodros, Yohannas IV and Manilak II. Then comes Aläqa and Näburä’xl Gäbrä Sallase, the celebrated Šuhafe tæ’æaz, created Minister of the Pen by Manilak. Then come the numerous Ras of the
heroic and contemporary times: Gobäna Dači, Darge Sahlā Sålłase, Mika’el, Māngaša Yohannas, Wale (2 imp.), Mākonnan (2 imp.), Māngaša Atikām Bitārfu, Sābhat, Tāsāmmma, Gugsa Wale. Hero of Adwa, the Fitāwrrari Habtā Giyorgis Dinagde is placed before other famous Ras: Haylu, Dāmasāw Nāsibu, Sayyum Māngāša Yohannas (2 imp., the second selected for the cover of the book); only then we come to Ras Tāfāri (2 imp.), to Ras Kasa, grandson of Ras Darge, followed by the Wag Sayyum Gwangul and the Afā nāgus Nāsibu and Ḥistifanos. So far for the first half of the seal collection. It is not possible to enumerate here the fifty noblemen of the second half: no less than 24 dāġġazmač, followed by three nāggadrass, three azzāč three qāññazmač, back to two (difficult to identify) fitāwrrari, after whom come, last but not least wāyzāro Mānān, and another illustrious wāyzāro: Morning star, Golden sun. The last holders, whose seals are less known, but for this reason worth scrutinizing, wear various military, civil or religious titles. The last ten seals are among the twenty-six which we didn’t find in the six references against which we checked the collection. It is quite clear that more research on the subject will disclose the publication of most of those twenty-six imprints. We hope that our book will stimulate efforts towards that, and other, directions.

On the manufacture of the matrixes

The question is poorly documented. We didn’t see, either in Addis nor in France, a single specimen of an original seal (a matrix), the tool which is used to seal a document. With the permission of Richard Pankhurst, we reproduced (Tornay & Sohier 2007 : 15), the image of one such seal, made of silver and manifestly engraved. The absence of such precious artefacts in public collections might be due to the fact that seals, not only in Ethiopia, were, on the death of their owner, broken or had the surface of their matrix scored in order to prevent misuse by non authorized persons. In our book, we discuss the question when there are material indications or written informations. It seems clear that some seals were made outside of Ethiopia. One of them (Monilak II, n° 9) is reported by the traveller Jules Borelli (1890 : 180) as « engraved in Italy ». In this case, the term « engraved » is not correct, because the imprints gives the evidence that the matrix was embossed. 77 % of the matrixes, made of silver, copper, brass or other blendings, were engraved, the inscriptions and iconographies being kept white against an inked background – the colour of the ink used being lost in our black and white imprints’ pictures. The remaining 23 matrixes offer an opposite appearance, letters and designs being inked against a white background: they are embossed. It is in that category that the proportion of matrixes made outside of Ethiopia might be higher. Among the most remarkable - in design and quality - of the embossed seals we find those of Wayzāro and Ṣtege Ṭāytu (n° 20 & 21), Ras Mākonnan (n° 35 & 36), Ras Sābhat (n° 38), Ras Sayyum Māngāša Yohannas (n° 45), Ras Kasa (n° 48), the iconography of which being a real puzzle, Dāġġazmač Gābrā Sāllase (n° 75) and others. The chapter remains open for discussion.

6 Published in the Ethiopia Observer. PANKHURST (1972).
Uses and values of seals in early XXth Century Ethiopia

The matrixes of our imprints’ collection seem untraceable today, they might have been broken after the death of their owners. Several reasons justify such gestures. The seal was a very personal object, equivalent to the signature of its owner. Since the development of contacts between Ethiopian leaders and foreign governments, the visits of more and more travellers to the country and, later, the development of an Ethiopian modern administration, seals had several uses, in particular for signing letters send by chiefs and other authorities to their counterparts in the country or abroad; seals were used as an evidence of the authority of the dignitary delivering a pass to a foreign traveller and of course the seal also evidenced the authenticity of the pass. They could be affixed on the top of royal proclamations, read in various places of the territory. A seal could also be a sign of ownership, affixed especially to manuscripts. Then it could be used to take an oath. After the coup d’État of 1916 which led to the dismissal of Iyasu, all the chiefs were required to affix their seal on the deposition form of the Log. Economical transactions were also concluded with the seal, which had in that case a legal, contractual value. In any case, the stamping of a seal was a mark of commitment of its owner.

Therefore the seal was a carefully kept object of value. The royal matrix was under the custody of the Ṣāḥafet ṭo’azzaz. Still diplomatic sources relate several state problems around the royal seal. In 1911 for example two persons close to the Court were accused to have schemed the reproduction and to have used a counterfeit seal of Mənilək made by a French craftsman in Paris. The fake seal would have been used to sign a letter allegedly addressed by Mənilək to the president of United States.

The seals as political discourse

Thus the seal is in many ways the official and personal representative of its owner. It bears his name but also his title(s), sometimes the name of the region or the city of

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7 Except the one of Tewodros, taken away by the English soldiers at Mäqdäla in 1868 and brought to England. PANKHURST (1973 : 189).
8 GÜEBRE SELASSIE (1932 : 309).
which he is the ruler, the origin of the holder or a motto, and always a symbol. Every
element of its tiny surface was carefully chosen: we took this guess as the hypothesis
that led us to scrutinize every imprint under all of its aspects, each detail possibly
bearing significance. Not only the words and symbols selected by the artist, but also
their setting out in the global iconography, define the identity of the holder, but possibly
reveal his rank, his faith, an ideology or a simple belief, a wish or a strong political
claim.

The chronicle of the Queen of the kings Zäwditu is suggesting the power assigned to
the seal. The second chapter enumerates the measures taken by Mënä-nilëk II, father of the
Queen, for the progress of his country. One of the points concerns the royal seal:

He made a seal saying: “the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Mënä-nilëk II,
Emperor of Ethiopia.” And it has a lion on it, and the lion has an Ethiopian flag in
its right hand, and on top it has the sign of the cross. It also wears a crown. It is
baring its teeth and has staring eyes—it is a majestic and fearsome sign for the
enemy. It bares its teeth to bite its enemy and its eyes are formed staring at the
enemy. Its form is known to the world’s governments. And it will be
unforgettable and unchanged for ever.¹⁰

Several ideas are developed in this account. The imprint of the royal seal was known,
more precisely it had to be known and was significant: one of its aim was to
prevent possible enemies to challenge the king’s strength and power. The imprint also
claims for the immutability of the lion of Judah, designed to be handed down to
posterity. It had to evidence and guarantee the everlasting Ethiopian kingship. But since
political symbols are naturally changing, there are created or modified depending on the
context and the intentions of the rulers.

One of the great interests of the Boucoiran collection is to display the steps of the
creation of the symbol of the lion of Judah and its appropriation by the Ethiopian
kingship through the last quarter of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth centuries.
The history and meanings of the symbol have been analysed by Sven Rubenson (1965)
in an important paper of the Journal of Ethiopian Studies. The first seal which bears the
design of a lion along with the Ge’ez motto “moha anbäsa zä’ämäñagädä yahuda” is a
seal of Menilek II created abroad. The model of it seems to have been arms conceived
in Europe for Ethiopia during the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. It refers to the lion of
Judah of the Apocalypse (V : 5) who designates the Christ and is echoing two
traditions: the lion as a widespread symbol of power and the Ethiopian royal ideology
according to which the King of kings is a cousin of the Christ, both being the
descendants and heirs of King David, chief of the tribe of Judah.

King Tewodros was the first to select the leonine symbol for his seal which after his death became the model for the seals of all following Kings of kings and even for the candidates to sovereignty. But the reference to the tribe of Judah wasn’t yet there, as for example in the seals of Yohannas IV which are adorned with lions. What was the meaning of those lions? Were they a mere symbol of strength? In one of his chronicles, King Yohannas IV is explicitly compared to a lion cub\(^\text{11}\). Now the lion cub is used to describe Judah (Genesis XCIX : 8-9), first chief of the tribe which bears his name. The seals of Yohannas should implicitly refer to the glorious biblical character since the ruler claims to be “King of Zion”, the hill of Jerusalem which also designates Ethiopia here. So while Yohannas’s seal implicitly refers to the first chief of the tribe of Judah, Mənilak’s seal explicitly refers to Judah, but calls to mind the last and supreme king of the Bible, the Christ. Thus Mənilak is claiming both to succeed to the royal power of Yohannas but at the same time he is asserting a more absolute sovereignty.

The collection demonstrates that the seals are connected, somehow in interaction to one to another. The symbols are, as the conquest of power itself, objects of competition, as we can see with the lion, used successively by Nəgusə nəgəst Tewodros, Täklä

\(^{11}\) Bairu Tafla (ed.) (1977 : 61).
Giyorgis, Manîlæk, Nàgus Tàklä Haymanot, Nàgus Mika’el, Log Iyasu, Queen of kings Zàwdûtû, in each instance with light but perceptible changes of significance, answering to the various political situations.

The seal of Nàgus Tàklä Haymanot is a copy of one seal of Manîlæk II, but its imprint is white on black (engraved matrix) instead of black on white. The legend of the seal acknowledges not only the higher rank and leadership of Manîlæk but his lordship and suzerainty; the power of Tàklä Haymanot depends entirely on the King of kings, of whom he is a vassal.

Seal n° 12 : Negus Täklä Haymanot

The seals which Ras Mika’el ordered after his elevation to the rank of nàgus also bear lions as claims to royal power. Nevertheless his seals, with their Ge’ez and Arabic legends, also claim for the specificity of his power, grounded both in Christian faith and Muslim origins.

We could deepen the theme of the royal seals, but time and place are missing. Those examples are the expression of a newly centralised political power that is searching for the efficiency of its symbols and definitions, in a context of strong competition for supreme power. The selection and uses of the lion and then of the lion of Judah was necessary insofar as the royal power was not transmitted hereditary. So every new king had to enter his office by fitting with a model, traditionally the model of biblical kings such as David or Judah, but not without adding to that ideological model the assertion of his own specificity.

Swords, angels, eyes and flowers. What are the meanings of the seals?

During the first period covered by our collection – that is the second half of the XIXth century- only kings and dignitaries of high rank allowed themselves to have seals. Later their use became more common in Ethiopian society, till their adoption by lower rank chiefs such as azaq or qaññazmač. Thus the seals got a variety of shapes, sizes, symbols. They display human figures, eyes, hands, feet, animals such as lions of course but also leopards, elephants, birds or snakes, all kind of weapons, religious figures such as angels, stars, several kinds of crosses, chalices, hearts or flowers…Many seals are of course connected to religious and political meanings, but bear also sometimes propitiatory symbols used in other kinds of Ethiopian images. They carry sometimes a simple message, like in the case of a single cross as iconography, but they can also refer to a whole story, to a myth or to express or even to be part of a political struggle of the time. Stressing the point that each image transmits a message from its owner and about
himself, we tried, with more or less ease, and of course more or less success, to analyze and understand their various meanings. The seals displayed in the book give an idea of the many themes and problems faced, but also the wealth of information met throughout the study of the collection.

**Conclusion**

The Boucoiran collection offers a well dated (made before 1925) and homogeneous collection of seal imprints of the Ethiopian « Gotha » at the turn of the XIXth and the beginning of the XXth Centuries. Our work is an exercise in sigillography. We did our best for using the appropriate terminology which we took and adapted from a professional publication\(^\text{12}\). In the hundred accounts dedicated to the individual imprints we checked for the accuracy or made guesses about the identity of the holders and their biographies; we deciphered the inscriptions, transcribed, transliterated and translated them carefully\(^\text{13}\); we made an iconographic analysis of each imprint, searching for its political, religious and other esthetico-cultural sources and meanings; finally we tried to interpret the symbolic bearing and significance of the iconographies in connexion with the inscriptions and the personalities of the seals’ holders. Our hypothesis is that, in the context of the political, cultural and economic modernization of Ethiopia, the use of seals by sovereigns and other prominent or less prominent dignitaries was a political act in itself, inside of the country as well as for its international relations. The seals and their iconographies, we believe, are useful sources for deepening our understanding of the offices and functions of the holders, their claims to political, military, legal, religious or even in some cases economic power, and last but not least for exploring the aesthetic and ludic expressions of personalities. The seals do not pertain to the sole Political and Religious History, they deserve recognition in Art History. We hope that our work will stimulate further research on such, only apparently humble, documents.

\(^{12}\) *Vocabulaire international de la sigillographie* (1990).

\(^{13}\) But of course we have no claim to perfection: we welcome remarks and corrections from the distinguished audience of the Conference and from our future readers.
References


