Gold and Silver at the Crossroads in Highland Ethiopia
Author(s): RAYMOND A. SILVERMAN and NEAL W. SOBANIA
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Tsehai Publishers
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27828840
Accessed: 08/01/2012 08:55

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

*Tsehai Publishers is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to International Journal of Ethiopian Studies.*
Gold and Silver at the Crossroads in Highland Ethiopia

RAYMOND A. SILVERMAN AND NEAL W. SOBANIA

Using the archaeological record, European travelers’ accounts, ethnographies and the authors’ recent historical and ethnoarchaeological research, this article examines the production and uses of objects made from gold and silver by both elites and common folk. Drawing on evidence from both the Christian societies of the central and northern highlands with northeast Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, and the Muslim societies of the eastern highlands with the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, the authors demonstrate how these two spheres of exchange have stood for thousands of years at a crossroads of intense cultural exchange.

The Horn of Africa, in particular the area currently situated within the modern borders of Ethiopia has long been a region of intense cultural exchange. Indeed, this is one of the world’s great crossroads where the peoples and cultures of Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean have been meeting for thousands of years. Here the visual culture of the peoples living in this region stand as testimony to the movement of peoples and the exchange of ideas over several thousand years. This paper examines one particular tradition that offers considerable evidence for this historical situation—the production and use of objects made from gold and silver associated with ruling and religious elites as well as common folk. Information about the working of these precious metals is found in the archaeological record, geographies of the ancient world, European travelers accounts from the 16th through the early 20th centuries, ethnographies, and our own recent historical and ethnoarchaeological research undertaken in the town of Aksum.

For the purposes of this paper we have identified “spheres of activity,” basically geographic regions in which intercultural exchange occurs. It is important to point out that the boundaries separating these arenas have been permeable and constantly shifting. Prior to the middle of the first millennium
CE a single sphere of activity may be identified, centered in the northern highlands around the ancient state of Aksum and its precursors. With the decline of Aksum in the second half of the first millennium, boundaries begin to shift and two spheres of cultural exchange activity emerge, differentiated, in part, by religious ideology.

One area is situated in the northern and central highlands, a region historically referred to as Abyssinia. Here Christianity has been a major unifying force since its introduction at Aksum in the 4th century, and since the 7th century, a fundamental cultural element differentiating the peoples of this region from their non-Christian neighbors. There is considerable material and documentary evidence of interaction with the Orthodox Christian world of Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean littoral, and Europe. The second area is located in the eastern highlands, especially in and around the ancient city of Harar, where there is abundant evidence of cultural intercourse with the Muslim peoples of the Horn of Africa and Arabian peninsula.

The Central and Northern Highlands

The earliest evidence of work in precious metals comes from two archaeological sites that precede the founding of the state of Aksum, and date from the last few centuries of the first millennium BCE. The pre-Aksumite sites of Yeha and Hawelti have yielded a few finger rings, earrings, and beads. These sites as well as sites associated with the ancient state of Aksum have produced abundant evidence of close ties with southern Arabia. One may assume that there were also ties with Nubia and Egypt, but at present, little evidence exists of such relations.

Archaeological research has yielded a limited number of artifacts of silver and gold, primarily items of personal adornment like beads, earrings, pins, and finger rings. Many of the objects are nondescript, the few that are distinctive seem to conform to styles found in the Mediterranean world of the Late Antique and Byzantine periods. The corpus of excavated Aksumite metalwork, dating from the first half of the first millennium CE, reveals that a number of metalworking technologies were known, including, hammering, gilding, casting, wire-pulling, riveting, and soldering/welding.

There have been a few exceptional archaeological discoveries. Perhaps the most important find is a cache of gold jewelry dating from the 6th century discovered in a bronze vase at the Aksumite site of Matara. Among the objects is an anklet made of distinctive cast gold beads that is identical to an anklet-type that is still made, but usually using silver, in Tigray today, called zororo. (fig. 1) In addition, the vase's contents included three necklaces in styles still

Fig. 1

current in Tigray, two pendant crosses, and a number of Roman coins that had been fitted with small loops so that they might be used as pendants. Again, this is a tradition that is still popular in many parts of Ethiopia.⁹ (fig. 2)

Among the finds discovered by the Italian archaeologist R. Paribeni (1907: 483-86), at Adulis, ancient Aksum’s port on the Red Sea coast, are a number of gold artifacts including two gold earrings, two gold pendant crosses, as well as the remains of what he believed to be a goldsmiths workshop.¹⁰

Aksumite gold and silver coins have been discovered in various contexts, and represent the only precious metal objects that have been systematically studied.¹¹ Aside from coins, scholarship dealing with the social, historical, or technological aspects of working non-ferrous metals in Ethiopia is quite limited.¹²

There is a break in the material record between the 7th and 12th centuries.¹³ The earliest extant examples of metalwork from the second millennium CE are liturgical artifacts, specifically processional crosses. Indeed, the best studied objects made from gold and silver are associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox church and include items such as processional crosses, hand crosses, pendant crosses, sistra, the finials of prayer sticks, chalices, and crowns. Among these, crosses have received the most attention. A number of authors have written on this subject, but it is Eine Moore (1969, 1973, 1989) who has looked most closely at processional and hand crosses that were made and used by Christian peoples living in the central and northern highlands.¹⁴ Her publications focus on the metals, technologies, and formal characteristics employed in fabricating crosses and she offers a chronology for the various types of crosses, especially
processional crosses. Moore (1989: 110-11) dates the earliest extant crosses to the 12th and 13th centuries based on formal affinities with Coptic, Armenian and Byzantine crosses.

Until the 20th century, gold, the metal of choice for the paraphernalia and symbols of church and state, was the exclusive privilege of royalty. In contrast, silver objects, while certainly used and worn by priests and royalty, was the metal more commonly available to, and used in the production of jewelry for the non-elite. Virtually any design can be produced in either gold or silver and the specialists working these precious metals, therefore, are both goldsmiths and silversmiths. In this paper we refer to these artisans as goldsmiths, with the understanding they also work in silver. Today, goldwork is commonly encountered in towns and cities where there is a greater concentration of wealth; as one moves to the rural areas, silver is the metal of choice. In both settings, silver and/or gold jewelry function as financial assets that can be easily liquefied in times of need—a practice encountered in many cultures around the world.

One of the better known early references to precious metals is found in the *Periplus of Erythraen Sea*, dating from the first part of the first millennium CE. The author of this early geography, in his discussion of ancient Aksum’s role in the Red Sea trade, mentions importing, “For the king silverware and goldware fashioned in the local manner . . .” (Casson 1989: 53) Though it appears that fabricated objects may have been imported, there is a good deal of documentary evidence that there were gold mines located either within or near ancient Aksum’s borders. The 6th-century geographer Cosmas Indicopleustes
mentions the exploitation of gold mines in the Beja region (northern lowland Ethiopia) and in the country of Sasu located southwest of Aksum.\textsuperscript{21} Accounts dating from the 16th to the 19th century, usually site the source of the gold in "the interior".\textsuperscript{22} Where in the interior the gold actually originated, however, is difficult to pinpoint since it was generally only noted as being from the west or southwest. There are however a few references to specific regions, like Gojam or Damot.\textsuperscript{23}

While gold was locally produced and cited as an export commodity, silver was essentially an import that arrived in the form of silver coins. Local sources of silver are mentioned in the travel literature, but as Richard Pankhurst (1961a: 228) points out, these appear not to have been exploited to any significant extent.\textsuperscript{24} From at least the second quarter of the 18th century, the principal source of silver in Ethiopia seems to have been Maria Theresa thalers. The thaler was first minted in Austria in 1751 and re-struck many times thereafter—as recently as 1941 in India—to satisfy the demand for silver currency, particularly in those countries involved in trade along the Red Sea.\textsuperscript{25} In the first half of the 18th century and possibly earlier, other coins were in circulation in different parts of the country.\textsuperscript{26} During the 19th century and well into the 20th, neither gold nor silver was in general use as currency.\textsuperscript{27} Charles Johnston (1844: II, 335), who visited Abyssinia in the middle of the 19th century, informs us that thalers were "only valued as the means of thus enabling the possessors to adorn themselves or their women, for all the coin of this sort which enters Shoa ultimately finds its way into the crucible, except such as falls into the hands of the King, and which are destined for a less useful end, these being securely packed in jars, and deposited in caves."\textsuperscript{28} Though most thalers that entered the country did end up in the crucible, many were used in their original form as pendants or pieces in necklaces, like the pendants from Matara, mentioned earlier, that incorporated Roman coins.

The traveler accounts offer considerable insight into the manufacture and use of gold and silver regalia and jewelry over the last five hundred years. Since we have presented a detailed account of these references elsewhere, a few examples may suffice.\textsuperscript{29} The earliest references to the working of fine metals comes from the journals of Father Francisco Alvarens, who visited Ethiopia in 1520-1. He mentions seeing silver, gold, and copper chalices and spoons being used in churches and monasteries. (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: I, 80, 81) Alvarens also offers a description of the regalia carried by the then King of Abyssinia, Lebna Dengel (r. 1508-40), which included a "high crown of gold and silver" and an engraved silver hand cross. (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: I, 303-4)

Roughly 100 years later the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel de Almeida spent a good deal of time at the court of Emperor Susneyos (r. 1607-32). He observed
that “... nobles put on their necks their gold chains which are like what we call skeins with many turns of yarn wound round them. On their arms they put bracelets of the same and their swords which are very large, have scabbards covered with silver. They wear girdles or sashes of very big pieces of gold and so the court, when it is in festival, is brilliant and sumptuous enough.” (Almeida 1954: 62)

Jumping to the 19th century, Mansfield Parkyns (1856: II, 25), offers a description of the “profusion of silver, in the shape of chains, bracelets, &c.” worn by “a well-dressed lady... Three pair of massive silver and gilt bracelets are on her wrists, and a similar number of 'bangles' on her ankles; while over her insteps and to her heels are a quantity of little silver ornaments, strung like beads on a silk cord.” (fig. 3) The famous British explorer Richard Burton (1987: II, 17) also noted that in Harar, “Silver ornaments are worn only by persons of rank.” He observed that Harari women wore silver earrings and “the kind of necklace called Jilbah or Kardas...” which consisted of “a string of little silver bells and other ornaments made by the Arabs at Berberah.” (Burton 1987: I, 181) Similarly, Henry Stern (1968: 315), a British missionary who visited Ethiopia in 1859, noted that, “Ornaments are the rage of rich and
poor. Those who possess the means carry their love for all kinds of trinkets to such an excess, that they often have more than three pounds weight of silver bells, chains and little scent boxes dangling down over their bosom . . . ."

Charles Johnston makes another important distinction between the adornment worn by Christian and Muslim women. Specifically, he records, Muslim women wore silver bracelets "consisting of two or three thick silver wires, twisted upon each other, and finished at each extremity by a beaten square head . . ." and the jewelry worn by Christian women, like their anklets, were plain and made from pewter. He also noted that in Shoa large silver earrings were worn, "sometimes weighing as much as two or three dollars each." These consisted of a front and back part each of which was made up of "three large beads, surmounted by a fourth . . . [that looked] not unlike small bunches of grapes projecting before and behind." (Johnston 1844: II, 335-37)

Silver necklaces came in a variety of types and forms. These ranged from a single neck pendant suspended from a chain, such as Johnston (1844: II, 336) describes in Shoa, to the fine filigree work recorded by the French explorer Duchesne-Fournet (1909: II, Plate XVI). The wearing of silver pendants as adornment may be associated with the use of amulets to ward off disease and ill fortune. As mentioned earlier, in the discussion of the thaler, a coin sometimes had a loop soldered on to it so that it could be worn as a pendant. Not only did this maintain the value of the coin for future economic transactions, but it might have served as an amulet to protect against the wide-spread belief in buda (the evil-eye).

There are numerous references in the 19th-century travel literature to the techniques employed by goldsmiths. Perhaps the most significant are the observations of Mansfield Parkyns who was employed as a goldsmith in Adwa for "a considerable time." He observed that the life of a goldsmith was a good one, although it did involve "appropriating a large portion of both the gold and the silver entrusted to them for work. The silver they receive is in Maria Theresa dollars: what they return is, I should think, scarcely so good as a Turkish piastre, and in fact contains scarcely one-third of silver, if so much." The goldsmiths of Adwa skillfully fabricated objects using a range of techniques, including filigree, gilding and stamping. Parkyns also includes in his commentary, references to goldsmiths who he identified as Greek and Armenian.

As we move closer to the present, there is a good deal of documentary evidence for connections between the Christian highlands of Ethiopia and other parts of the Eastern Orthodox world, especially Greece and Armenia. It is likely that the goldsmiths at Adwa and other Greek and Armenian
metalworkers played a significant role in introducing new styles and techniques for jewelry production during the 18th and 19th centuries. There is considerable documentary evidence that Greek and Armenian metalworkers arrived in Ethiopia in the middle of the 18th century, fleeing persecution in their homelands under the Ottomans. The Scottish adventurer, James Bruce (1790: II, 633-34) reports that a number of Greek refugees from Smyrna arrived in Gondar during the reign of Iyasu II (r. 1730-55). Among their number were twelve silversmiths, especially known for their fine filigree work, who Iyasu II put to work decorating his palace and producing regalia for his court. Pearce (1831, I: 163-4, 257) reported on the impressive work of Apostoli, a Greek smith. Apostoli lived for a time in Gondar but spent most of his life in Adwa during the late 18th and first years of the 19th century, where he is said to have produced the ornaments, crowns, and crosses for many of the town’s churches. His reputation as a great goldsmith survives to this day (Johannes 1997: 82). In the middle part of the 19th century, the French explorers Ferret and Galinier (1847: I, 439) mention being impressed with the skill of a Greek named Yohannes, a jeweler, gunsmith and blacksmith, who they met during their visit to Adwa. As late as the 1880s, Gerhard Rohlfs (1883: 266) noted that most of the goldsmiths in Gondar were Greeks and Muslims.

The Armenian community in Abyssinia appears to have been considerably smaller than the Greek. Nevertheless many of the travelers who refer to the Greek presence also note similar roles played by Armenians in 18th- and 19th-century-Abyssinian society. Pankhurst (1961a: 304-5) cites a number of accounts that attest to the Armenian presence at the court of Emperor Iyasu II at Gondar. Dufton (1867: 157), who was in Abyssinia in the early 1860s, mentions that the Emperor at that time, Tewodros, ordered the Armenian goldsmiths of Adwa to manufacture a number of gifts that he intended to send to Queen Victoria.

Pankhurst (1966: 210) suggests that the Armenians who arrived in Abyssinia during the latter part of the 19th century slid into the same niches as the Greeks, “but tended to concentrate somewhat more on handicrafts and a little less on trade.” He reports that there were two prominent Armenian silversmiths living in Adwa during Menelik II’s reign at the turn of the 20th century, Garabet Warqe and Dicran Ebeyan. The latter arrived in Tigray in 1881 before moving south to Ankober in Shoa. He is said to have made crowns for Emperor Menelik II and his consort, Taitu, and also to have produced various commissions for King Takla Haymanot of Gojjam. Even in the late 1920s, it was an Armenian who produced the “gold table-service” used at the Emperor’s palace, as well as Haile Sellassie I’s coronation crown (Norden 1930: 41).
These Greek and Armenian smiths certainly played a key role in the evolution of the Abyssinian tradition since the middle of the 18th century. Indeed, Natsoulas (1977: 79, 1985: 71) suggests that the filigree technique was introduced to Abyssinia by the Smyrna smiths mentioned earlier. This may very well have been the case since there is no evidence that this technique, especially in the style characteristic of highlands, existed in Ethiopia prior to this time. There are many examples of this exquisite filigree work maintained in museums in Ethiopia, Europe and the United States. For example, an ornament called bitoa that men wore over the lower part of their right arm (fig. 4) Parkyns (1856: II, 16-17) informs us that the fabrication of these distinctive armlets involved placing “gilt fil-et-grain work” over polished silver so as to add “lustre and lightness” to the overall piece. Natsoulas (1985: 71-72) observes that in “Ethiopian shops today, one can purchase gold and silver rings, crosses, bracelets, earrings, and the like, designed in the very delicate Greek-filigree style.”

At the moment, it is difficult to pursue a comparative study of jewelry and ecclesiastical paraphernalia produced in Greece and Armenia during the last few centuries since so little of it has been published. The few items that have been published suggest that there are significant affinities with the filigree jewelry of the Christian highlands.
The Eastern Highlands

A similar situation exists in the eastern highlands of Ethiopia where one encounters another sphere of cultural interaction, this one involving Muslim peoples of the Horn of Africa, such as the Afar, Argobba, Somali, and Harari, and peoples of the Arabian peninsula. As indicated above, in the absence of any archaeological material, comparative analyses must be restricted to examples of silver jewelry from the recent past. Strong affinities in the forms of jewelry produced and used in Harar, other Muslim societies of the Horn of Africa, and the Arabaian peninsula, offer poignant testimony to the shared histories of the peoples of the Red Sea region. Indeed, in the absence of solid provenance, it is often impossible to distinguish between Afar, Argobba, Somali, and Harari objects and those produced by the Jewish and Bedouin smiths of Arabia. Additional evidence of the movement of these traditions is seen in comparing the silver jewelry of the eastern Ethiopian highlands, with jewelry produced on the Swahili Coast. Hecht (1987: 4), in her comparison of Harar and Lamu, writes: “I found striking similarities between the Harari/Somali type jewellery of the Harar region and the one called ‘local Lamu’ in the Lamu Museum.”

These parallels are not surprising considering the close ties that this area has had with its Red Sea neighbors, especially those living at the southern end of the Arabian peninsula. Walter Raunig (1988: 417) writing about the ties between Yemen and Ethiopia observes that, “Many traces of a common cultural heritage remain ... in folk tales, ideas and concepts, music, etc., and even more, in native artifacts ...” There is evidence that not only objects but the people who make them moved around the region, back and forth across the Red Sea. For instance, Hecht (1987: 4) spoke with a silversmith in Harar who had learned his trade in Dire Dawa (a city situated near Harar) in the 1920s “from a ‘Jewish silversmith’ (who very probably came from Yemen), who was the master teacher of many other silversmiths in the region.”

There are several monographs that deal with the metalworking traditions of the Arabian peninsula. For example, Heather Ross (1978, 1981) has produced two well-illustrated studies of Bedouin jewelry that offer information about object types, regional styles, vernacular (i.e., Arabic) names for objects and techniques, fabrication processes, and the various contexts in which jewelry is made and used. She also grapples, though rather superficially, with the complex issue of the foreign and local factors that have influenced the evolution of the tradition. There are striking similarities between much of the jewelry produced by Bedouin smiths and that found in many of the Muslim societies of the Horn of Africa. One can easily see this when comparing Arabian work with that produced by Harari silversmiths.
A detailed comparison of jewelry forms is beyond the scope of this paper. The table below lists various types of Harari jewelry and their Arabian counterparts—in every instance the form, and at times even the vernacular name given the type of jewelry, is virtually identical. The comparison of terminology is problematic, since the names given jewelry types may vary from place to place throughout the Red Sea region.

At this time, it is impossible to do much more than draw formal parallels among the jewelry traditions of the Red Sea region and cite general historical references that surely point to cultural exchanges of past and present. Not until there are studies of Ethiopian silverworking comparable to those that have been undertaken for the Arabian peninsula can we engage in more thorough comparative analyses that may yield insights into the histories of these traditions.46

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harari Examples</th>
<th>Arabian Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wakari (rectangular pendant box)</td>
<td>iqd hirz48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wakari (cylindrical pendant box)</td>
<td>iqd hirz, khiyarah49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wakar50 (crescent-shaped necklace)</td>
<td>iqd hirz51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murriyya (gold hollow-cast bead necklace)</td>
<td>iqd52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lazim or duka (neck collar)</td>
<td>lazam53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kafat karma (forehead decoration)</td>
<td>kaffat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zargaf (“mesh” necklace)</td>
<td>kirdan54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shawaliya55 (solid cast bracelet)</td>
<td>siwar, bangar56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shawaliya (hollow bracelet)</td>
<td>siwar, bangar, fadi zend57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Values Concerning the Working of Precious Metals

Throughout the highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea metalworkers, both blacksmiths and goldsmiths occupy a special social niche in society. Until recently, all metalworkers belonged to endogamous groups of ostracized specialists who were and still are to a large extent perceived as possessing special spiritual powers. We are unable in this short paper to deal in any depth with this important social phenomenon.58 We, however, will offer a few observations that must suffice in the current context.

Many who have commented on the social dynamics of Ethiopian society have observed that the manual labors of artisans and craftsmen are looked
down upon by the majority population who are farmers. There is a marked division of labor in the highlands that distinguishes between the farmer, clergyman, artisan, and slave. Pankhurst (1961b: 22) notes that the division between farming and the manual arts often assumes “a cultural and at times religious basis.” Often an ethnic or other label is used to designate the group’s occupation. He explains that these groups were (and to a certain extent, still are) “considered inferior either because they deviated from the customs of the majority or on account of their practice of engaging in manual crafts, such as those of the blacksmith and other metal workers, the weaver, the leatherworker or the potter, which, though necessary, were considered degrading.”

One of the earliest references concerning the status of this group of artisans is found in Francisco Alvares’s account of his visit to Aksum, in the early 16th century, in which he refers to a village located near the ancient city that was completely occupied by blacksmiths, an indication of their endogamous status. (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: I, 149) One hundred years later, Manoel de Almeida (1954: 55 n. 1) related the popular tradition that the 15th-century emperor, Zara Ya‘qob (r. 1434-68), had all of the goldsmiths and blacksmiths in his domain put to death as sorcerers—an allusion to their alleged supernatural powers, specifically their identification with buda, the evil eye. There are numerous references to the status of metalworkers in the Christian highlands of Ethiopia found in subsequent travel accounts—all emphasize deep-seated beliefs that set these specialists at the social margins of Abyssinian society.

Relative to the Christian highlands, there is very little information on the social status of metalworkers in the Muslim societies of the eastern highlands. The little information that exists for Harar suggests that blacksmiths definitely occupy a special lower class in Harari society, a condition similar to but not as severe as that encountered in the Christian highlands. Yusuf Ahmed (1960: 14n), in his translation of an Arabic manuscript describing mid-19th-century Harar, informs us that “Black-smithing and pottery-making were practiced only by a special class of people known as sānī. They dug out ores and smelted iron from which various agricultural and war implements were made. However, these people were looked down upon. Their profession has been dying out since the last century.” Sidney Waldron (1974: 80), who studied the social organization of Harar in the early 1960s, talking about the inhabitants of the city’s quarter known as Suqutatberi, notes that “both blacksmithing and leatherwork are considered defiling occupations by the Harari. These tasks are carried out by separate groups of endogamous Somali specialists.” No mention is made of jewelers, that is, workers in precious metals occupying this same social niche, but inquiries made during a brief sojourn by Silverman in
Harar in 1993, suggest that jewelers did, in fact, occupy a depressed position, but it was not clear if it was the same station occupied by blacksmiths.

It would be useful to examine these social attitudes in a broader regional context. Having conducted a cursory survey of the historical and ethnographic literature for the Arabian peninsula, we found little information dealing with the social conditions of the smiths who work gold and silver. Several authors however did indicate that in most Arab societies, such work is despised, and is usually left to ethnic minorities.61 Historically, in many parts of the peninsula, especially in the south, Jewish smiths are most often identified with the working of gold and silver. This is, in fact, the case in many parts of the Arab world. Indeed, based on the close historical ties between the Muslim peoples of the Horn of Africa and southern Arabia, it is likely that similar attitudes are shared on both sides of the Red Sea.

In highland Christian and Muslim communities, it seems that blacksmiths and silversmiths occupy a depressed social station in society, however, because of the nature of the materials each wields, the economic status of the goldsmith may be considerably better. Hermann Norden (1930: 164), who visited Tessema Worada Hei, a prominent goldsmith in Gondar, in the 1920s, commented on this ambiguous state. Tessema had "every outward sign of importance in the community. He lived in a house, not a tukul, and his walls were somewhat higher than those of his neighbours. He was ... an officer in the army in time of war with the title of Kenezmatch, which means 'Commander of the Right Wing of the army.' But notwithstanding his honours, Tessema and his family, and even his slaves, suffer from the hatred which is directed against all members of the goldsmiths' guild."

Johannes Kinfu (1997: 77) has recently commented that the "social and psychological suffering" of the hereditary goldsmith was offset to a certain extent by the economic benefits associated with the working of precious metals, especially for smiths attached to the court of a king or provincial ruler.

The status of foreign goldsmiths is not entirely clear. Observations offered in various travelers accounts suggest that in Abyssinia they often were well-integrated, some having married into the local community, in some cases for a number of generations.62 Greek and Armenian smiths, at least those attached to royal courts, seem to have lived privileged lives and often became quite wealthy. Bruce (1790: II, 634), for instance, informs us that the Greeks attached to Iyasu II's court at Gondar in the 18th century were rewarded generously with land as well as gifts.

It is interesting that some scholars have suggested that it is the metalworkers "otherness," that affords them special powers to engage in the production of gold and silver jewelry. For instance, Muchawsky-Schnapper (1991: 152),
writing about the Jewish smiths of Yemen, notes that it is "the foreigner's barakah, a blessing by holy powers" that they use to produce objects that may have special protective or healing powers. In this context, it perhaps is significant to recall Waldron's observation, cited above, that in the city of Harar, blacksmiths come from one of the city's ethnic minorities, an endogamous group of Somali specialists.

Shifting Boundaries

Our discussion has considered two spheres of exchange, one that includes the Christian societies of the northern and central highlands of Ethiopia, northeast Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, and the other that encompasses the Muslim societies of the eastern highlands of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Unraveling the various modes of interaction within these spheres is complicated enough, but the situation is even more complex. The boundaries of these spheres have been, and still are, permeable. Indeed, as mentioned in our introduction, a thousand years ago, the boundaries took on a very different configuration. From at least as early as the middle of the first millennium BCE until the later part of the first millennium CE, a single sphere of activity existed that included the northern highlands of Ethiopia and South Arabia, later with the rise of Aksum, the sphere was expanded to include the societies of Late Antique Nubia, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Roman world of the Eastern Mediterranean.
Over the last thousand years there have been many occasions when the two spheres have intersected, allowing for cultural exchange between Muslim and Christian societies—further evidence of the permeability of boundaries. Though there are many examples, we will cite only two—situations we have encountered in the course of conducting research in the northern highlands.

In 1993, we visited the town of Aleyu Amba located on the eastern edge of the Abyssinian highlands. Here, the Muslim Afar and Argobba come from the east and the Christian Amhara arrive from the west to attend the weekly Sunday market that has been held for at least the last several hundred years. Walking through the market one cannot help but notice the stunning silver necklaces, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and rings worn by women. (fig. 5) The jewelry clearly differentiates the two groups who frequent the market. Indeed, there are two groups of goldsmiths working in the town, one that caters to Muslim patrons from the east, the other that deals Christian clients. (fig. 6) This kind of interaction is nothing new to the highlands of Ethiopia, Muslims have been living in minority communities in the Christian (central and northern) highlands, and Christians have lived in the eastern highlands, since the introduction of the two religions over 1500 years ago. Though there are noticeable differences in the styles of jewelry that reflect the aesthetic preferences of the two groups. One wonders what has been exchanged over the centuries.
Roughly 150 years ago, large numbers of Bedouin Rashaida migrated from the Arabian peninsula to Eritrea, northern Ethiopia and Sudan. Like other Bedouin peoples, the Rashaida possess a rich tradition of personal adornment that has close affinities with the silver jewelry of eastern Ethiopia. It is interesting that today one finds examples of Rashaida silverwork in the goldsmiths' shops of Aksum, often displayed next to locally produced gold and silver jewelry. Its presence is the result of economic hardships the Rashaida have faced in recent years that have forced many families to sell their jewelry. The smiths of Aksum explain that they purchase the Rashaida jewelry to sell to tourists, and that those pieces that are damaged usually are recycled, finding their way into the crucible. Though we were told that the local Tigrean community is not interested in these objects, we cannot help but wonder if certain Rashaida forms might occasionally be purchased by the town's residents and eventually work their way into Aksum's collective aesthetic of personal adornment.65

Still another significant dimension of exchange occurring in the later part of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century is the use of other, less
expensive metals, in the fabrication of jewelry that "traditionally" has been fabricated in gold or silver. A stunning example from Harar is the large crescent *wakari* produced in 1993 in the workshop of Abdul Wahid in Harar made of nickel (rather than silver). (fig. 7) We found yet another example in Aksum in 1997, facsimiles of Maria Theresa *thalers* pendants cast in aluminum. Certainly there other examples may be cited.

We have attempted to demonstrate that the study of gold and silverworking offers a compelling body of evidence to support the notion of Ethiopia as a crossroads of people, objects and ideas. At this stage of our analysis we have managed to identify some of the vehicles for the exchange of technologies and styles of jewelry. But there is still much work to be done. A systematic survey of museum collections and private collections of gold and silver jewelry produced in Ethiopia, Armenia, Greece, the Eastern Mediterranean littoral, Sudan, Egypt, the Horn of Africa, and the Arabian peninsula, would surely yield valuable insights into the range of objects produced over the last few hundred years. In addition, a complete interpretation of these traditions will require the study of not only technology, the formal analysis of objects, and the contexts of use, but also the examination of the social status and the role of the goldsmith in society. Ultimately, a rigorous program of comparative analysis must be pursued to develop an understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that have driven this exchange over the millennia.

Notes

1 One of the recurring themes that appears in writings about the history of highland Ethiopia is its cultural isolation—the construction of an image of Abyssinia as a Christian island in a vast Muslim sea. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Evidence found in the visual cultures of Ethiopia, both past and present, attest to Ethiopia's interaction with peoples from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and of course, the rest of Africa.

2 There is abundant visual evidence attesting to interaction between Ethiopia and the Arabian Peninsula prior to the middle of the first millennium CE. Indeed, until roughly 10,000 years ago the two areas were connected by a land bridge crossing what is today the Straits of Bab al-Mandeb, the small stretch of water that separates Yemen from East Africa. The antiquity of contacts is manifest in many cultural institutions. Grover Hudson (1977), for instance, has posited a theory, based on geolinguistic and lexicostatistical evidence, that the Semitic language family originated in Ethiopia around 2000 BCE, moved across the Red Sea to the Arabian Peninsula, from where Semitic writing was introduced to the northern highlands in the middle of the first millennium BCE. The pre-Aksumite culture of the northern highlands, known from
inscriptions as D’MT (perhaps, Daamat), was believed to have been founded, or at least influenced by peoples from South Arabia in the middle of first millennium BCE. During the 4th through 6th centuries CE, the state of Aksum held political sway over portions of South Arabia.

3 It is important to point out that there is a disparity between the data available for these two areas—considerably more information exists for the Christian highlands of central and northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. We are fortunate to have the archaeological record associated with the ancient state of Aksum in the northern highlands that gives us a temporal frame of over two thousand years. Nothing comparable exists for the eastern highlands (Harar). Similarly, Abyssinia has received many more visitors over the last five centuries who have left written accounts of their travels that carry a good deal of information about metalworking traditions. Though there are a few 19th descriptions, little comparable information exists for Harar. Recent ethnographic data for both areas is rather limited. Basically, the comparisons that can be drawn, must, at least for the time being, be restricted to looking at formal/stylistic affinities.

4 See Contenson (1963: 48, pl. XLIXb), and Anfray (1963: 176, 181, 186, pl. CLVIa).


6 See Munro-Hay (1991: 52-54) for a brief discussion of the limited evidence of contacts with Egypt and Nubia.

7 It is likely that the inherent value of these precious metals and the thoroughness of tomb-robbers is the primary reason why examples of precious metal articles are so scarce. There are many more objects made from copper and its alloys, ranging from small figurative sculpture, to jewelry, to decorative furniture ornaments, and we may assume that many of these forms also were fabricated in gold and silver. For a description of the metal artifacts found at Aksum see Phillipson 2000: 1, 86-87, 200-202, Phillipson 1998: 77-78, Munro-Hay 1989: 210-34, Munro-Hay 1991: 177, 240-41. Other Aksumite sites have yielded important finds of gold and silver, for example, Adulis (Paribeni 1907: 483-87) and Matara (Anfray and Annequin 1965: 68-71).

8 See Anfray and Annequin 1965: 70, fig. 13.

9 See Anfray and Annequin 1965: 69, fig. 12; pl. LXIX, figs. 3 and 4.

10 See Paribeni 1907: figs. 20 and 21 for illustrations of the two gold crosses. Another related find, a crucible used for melting gold discovered in an ancient (Aksumite?) mine near Asmara, was collected by Conti Rossini (1928: III, pl. LIX, no. 191) at the beginning of the 20th century.

11 The studies, for example, Munro-Hay 1999 and Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995, have concentrated on establishing a numismatic chronology based on the analysis of the imagery found on the coins.

12 See Moore (1969, 1973, 1975), McKay (1974). Even studies of iron working and the role of blacksmiths in society are limited, though there are a few good sources, such as Amborn 1990 and Todd 1985.

13 As Phillipson (1998: 138) points out, this is largely because there has been no archaeological investigation of sites dating from the period between the decline of Aksum as a political capital and the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in AD 1270.
Other significant studies of Ethiopian crosses are Korabiewicz 1973; Hecht, Benzing and Girma 1990; and Juel-Jensen 1993.

The method of dating that she employs draws on four sources, incised inscriptions that identify known historical donors, paleographic analysis of incised inscriptions, depiction of specific types/styles of crosses in dated paintings, formal affinities between incised figurative imagery on crosses and images depicted in dated paintings. (Moore 1973: 68)


Today, gold costs roughly twelve times more than silver.

Using jewelry as a financial investment is a practice found in societies all over the world. Jereb (1995: 79) offers a description of such a practice among the Berber of Morocco, and Hawley (1978: [9]), commenting on Omani traditions, points out that "... jewellery constitutes the bank-account with the man attaching his wealth to the wrists, ankles, and neck of his wife: for her it is also a sign of an appreciative husband."

The Periplus of Erythraen Sea was written in Greek at the turn of the first century CE by an unknown author. It is particularly important for it is only one of a few contemporary documents that offers information about ancient Aksum. Other metal objects mentioned in the Periplus include “copper honey pans for cooking and for cutting into armlets and anklets for certain of the women; iron which is expended on spears ... axes, adzes, knives; large round copper drinking vessels ...” and “Indian iron and steel.” (Casson 1989: 53, 55)

See Kobishchanov (1979: 134-35) for an overview of the evidence from the first millennium CE. Munro-Hay (1991: 174) suggests that Susa may have been the “gold-bearing Fazugli region some 200km. south-southwest of Lake Tsana, in modern Sudan.”

See Pankhurst (1961a: 224-27) for an overview of evidence for the sources of gold found in the travelers accounts.

Gold came in a variety of forms. Observations made by the British adventurer Mansfield Parkyns (1856: I, 338) at Massawa (located on the Red Sea coast in northern Eritrea) in 1848, suggest that gold was found in Ethiopia in three distinct forms. Sennar gold, which he labels as being first quality, found its way to market in rings or links. The second and third quality, which are distinguished as being Abyssinian gold, were available in grains or beads, and in ingots respectively. Without further elaboration on what was meant by quality, Parkyns recorded that Sennar gold cost between seventeen and twenty “German crowns (Maria Theresa)” per ounce, second quality thirteen to fifteen dollars per ounce, and third quality nine to eleven dollars per ounce. See also Johnston 1844: II, 434; Harris 1844: 249, 254; Pearce 1820: 57-58; Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: I, 455-57.
24 Merid (1984: 140) drawing upon the observations of the Spaniard Pedro Paez who visited Abyssinia in the early 17th century, states, “There were several mines scattered throughout the country. Little was taken out because, it is said, the emperors could not find skilled men to extract the metal and to purify it. As silver was the metal from which the ornaments of the less elevated members of the ruling classes were made it was expensively imported from Arabia. According to Paez it was acquired by giving gold at the rate of one to five in weight.”

25 It was the re-struck 1780-thaler that became the principal coin of choice. 1780 was the year Maria Theresa died and all subsequent thalers carried this date.

26 In Harar, for instance, the mahaluk, small copper coins resembling a diwnai from Jiddah, were common as was the riyal from the Arabian peninsula and the rupee from India. Harris (1844: 119) also recorded the existence of a coin of unknown material called an ashrafi, said to be equivalent to twenty-two mahaluk. Harris, who passed through Harar in the 1840s, recorded 40 ashrafi being equivalent to a German crown; Richard Burton (1887: II, 167n), who was in Harar in 1855 noted three were equal to a dollar.

27 Instead, bars of salt and pieces of cloth were the standard measurement of value. See Lobo 1887: 83; Harris 1844: 220; Johnston 1844: II, 77, 234-36.

28 For more on this notion of Maria Theresa thaler being buried by emperors and individuals, each one being their own banker, see Schaefer 1990.


30 This second observation, in fact, is problematic because the jewelry worn by the Christian women of Abyssinia was usually made of silver (or gold) and was often quite ornate.

31 The three beads surmounted by a fourth, is a commonly encountered configuration in Tigray and other parts of the central and northern highlands. See, for example, the distinctive beads used for the zororo, (figure 1) mentioned above.

32 Reflective objects, like coins, could avert the gaze of a stranger. It is possible that the popularity of wearing a pendant or neck cross was, and still is, related to such a practice. However, it is interesting to note the paucity of references to pendant crosses in the traveler accounts. With the exception of Nathaniel Pearce (1831: I, 336), an early 19th-century British visitor to Gojjam, who comments on a priest wearing a pendant cross, and Duchesne-Fournet’s illustration that documents five women’s pendant crosses, including three of filigree, there is little mention of pendant crosses being worn in Abyssinia. There are many more references to the wearing of a matteb, “a blue silken cord, which every Abyssinian Christian man and woman wears suspended round the neck, as the distinctive mark of his creed.” (Stern 1862: 257n) Nevertheless, as indicated earlier in our discussion of the archaeological record, there is evidence that pendant crosses have been worn in the Christian highlands since the middle of the first millennium CE.

33 He makes a similar observation with respect to the use of gold coins: “I have known a man to receive thirty Venetian sequins for a job, on which he employed only seven and a half.” (Parkyns 1856: II, 17)

34 See Parkyns 1856: II, 16-17 for his description of the working of gold and silver at Adwa.
Silverman and Sobania's (2004) survey of European travel accounts has yielded a wealth of evidence for foreign smiths working in Abyssinia.

Theodore Natsoulas (1977: 85-86), a historian who has examined the Greek presence in Ethiopia, articulates three reasons why Greek immigrants successfully found a niche in Abyssinian society: "First, Greeks engaged in activities which, except for Armenians, other foreigners and Ethiopians generally avoided. Second, the quasi-European, quasi-Oriental characteristics of the Greeks enabled them to accept more readily Ethiopian customs and traditions and to become assimilated into their surrounding culture. Third, the Greeks and Ethiopians, both a deeply religious people, shared a common faith." Natsoulas (1977: 55) offers three related reasons: "(1) they were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, and their status as Europeans was doubtful; (2) they had been continuously present in the Middle East for a considerable time; and (3) they were Orthodox Christians." The same might be said, to a greater or lesser extent, of the Armenians.

An account of the visit to Abyssinia by the Armenian jeweler, Yovhannes Tovmacean, has been published by Nersessian and Pankhurst (1986) and Pankhurst (1982). Tovmacean was a merchant in jewels, not a smith who produced jewelry. There is little information in the account that offers any significant insight into the subject of this paper.


Natsoulas (1996: 16-18) discusses Yohannes' work in Adwa, as well as the presence of another Greek smith named Michael. During their visit to the Tigrean town in May 1835, the French travelers, Combes and Tamisier (1838: I, 195-6), met an Armenian gunsmith named Yohannes, whose work they admired. It is possible that this is the same man who Ferret and Galinier met, but identified as Greek.


Merid (1984: 128) has argued that most of these smiths as well as other foreign artisans mentioned in these accounts were likely to have been inferior craftsmen. This is a provocative observation, but the basis for his assessment is unclear.

Extending from the wrist to near the elbow, the bitoa opened with a hinge and closed with a bolt-pin and could in addition be further embellished with a fringe of small silver "bell-pieces" suspended on tiny chains. For additional information about the bitoa see Pearce 1820: 48; Duchesne-Fournet 1909: II, Plate XV).

We have been able to identify only a few publications that offer illustrations of Greek and Armenian jewelry for comparison with the Ethiopian traditions we have been studying. For instance, a number of the Armenian bracelets and necklaces illustrated in Abrahamian 1983 display stylistic affinities with the filigree-work of Ethiopia.

Hawley (1978: [11]) for instance states, "It is difficult, therefore, to trace the origins and the inspirations of Omani jewellery, as so many of the styles and motifs are found all over the Middle East and India, probably with a common origin in the ancient civilizations of Sumer, Egypt, Western Asia, Somalia, and Ethiopia."

Other studies include the work of Hawley (1978) and Rajab (1997).

These similarities may be seen throughout the "Arab-ized" world. This is demonstrated in images of silver jewelry from across the world of Islam reproduced
in al-Jadir 1981. Jereb (1995: 72-95) has recently pointed to these affinities in jewelry traditions of Morocco, especially in the country’s cities.

There is a problem because the names given jewelry types may vary from place to place throughout the Red Sea region. Hawley (1978: [5]) comments on this problem in her study of Omani silverwork.

Most of the Arabian terms presented in the table are taken from the work of Heather Ross (1978 and 1980). We would like to thank Peri Klem for providing the Harari names for a number of the objects presented in the table.

See Hawley 1978: [37] for an example of a rectangular hirz from Nizwa in Oman.

Iqd is the Arabic word for necklace and hirz the name generally given to “charm cases” that take various forms. (Ross 1978: 23) For examples of the cylindrical see Ross 1981: 108-09 and Hawley 1978: [37]. See Bachinger and Schienerl 1984: fig. 51 for comparative examples from Cairo.

This crescent-shaped wakari, according to Klem (personal communication), is worn only by Somali women, but it is made by Harari smiths.


Ross 1981: 52 illustrates examples of the hollow silver beads that comprise these necklaces. See also Hawley 1978: [38] for an example of silver bead necklace, probably from Batinah in Oman.

Ross (1981: 47) offers a brief discussion of the Bedouin lazam. However the closest formal parallel we could identify in the published literature is the kaffat (forehead ornament) — illustrated in Ross 1981: 84 and 85. It is possible that this “mesh” band is used in different contexts, i.e., as a neck collar, a forehead ornament, or a bracelet, in different cultural settings. Muchawsky-Schnapper (2000: 132-33) in a recent exhibition catalog dealing with the Jews of Yemen illustrates a ornate lazam with three cylindrical hirz.


Klem (personal communication) recorded shawaliya as a general term used to describe any decorated bracelet but she suggests that there are probably other terms that are used for specific types of bracelets.

See Bachinger and Schienerl 1984: fig. 21 for comparative examples from Upper Egypt (i.e., Nubia).

See Ross 1981: 101 for an example of a pair of hollow bracelets. See Rodionov 1997: fig. 4, no. 6 for a comparative example of fadi zend from al-‘Arsama in Yemen.

Freeman and Pankhurst (2001) have recently published a collection of essays that examines these issues in societies situated in southern Ethiopian. Though the area is outside the geographic purview of our study, many of the issues that the essays address are relevant to the peoples of the central, northern and eastern highlands.

The origins of these attitudes are unknown, however, several scholars have posited theories. For a discussion of marginalization and stratification in Ethiopian societies see Pankhurst 1999, 2001 and Hoben 1970.

In his discussion of Bedroberi, another of Harar’s quarters, Waldron (1974: 81) notes that some of its inhabitants are Harari who are “said to possess the ‘evil eye’
These Harari, who inherit the attribution of the evil eye, number about twenty households and form an endogamous group although they are said to be pure ge usu [people of the city or Harari]." He continues to explain that, "Aside from the marriage restrictions and a certain amount of deference paid to them by the superstitious, these people belong to friendship groups, neighborhood groups, and the other institutions of the city's social organization side-by-side with other Harari." (Waldron 1974: 82-83)

For instance, Rodionov (1997: 123) in a recent essay on the silversmiths of Hadramawt (southern Yemen), notes that according "to the traditional social stratification of Southern Arabia, silversmiths belong, so to speak, to the elite of the underprivileged strata, i.e. to the upper layer of the masakin." Gold and silver maintain a rather ambiguous status in many Muslim societies. Traditions associated with the early period of Islam proscribe against the use of these precious metals, especially gold. Since then, attitudes concerning the use of gold and silver have changed in various times and places. See Ghabin (1991) and al-Jadir (1981: 31) for a discussion of these shifting attitudes towards the production and use of objects made from gold and silver.

See Salt (1814: 403).

There is evidence coming from Egypt of contacts between Egypt and Ethiopia (i.e., Punt) that predate the first millennium BCE, but to date, little evidence of these cultural exchanges has been found in Ethiopia. See n. 6 above.


During a recent sojourn in Aksum, we asked a number of goldsmiths to name the various types of jewelry displayed in their shops. Their inability to offer names for most types of Rashaaida jewelry signals that these are "foreign" objects.

Work Cited


GOLD AND SILVER AT THE CROSSROADS IN HIGHLAND ETHIOPIA


Bruce, James. 1790 Travels to discover the source of the Nile in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773. 5 volumes. Edinburgh: Printed by J. Ruthven for G. G. J. and J. Robinson London, 1790.


Rodionov, Mikhail A. 1997 “Silversmiths in Modern Hadramawt.” Mare Erythraeum. 1: 123-44.


