

The Curious Case of Ethiopic Chaldean: Fraud, Philology, and Cultural (Mis)Understanding in European Conceptions of Ethiopia

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An intriguing mystery in early modern intellectual history is how and why European scholars came to designate Ethiopic, the sacred language of Ethiopia, as Chaldean. This article locates the designation's origins in a deduction made by Vatican library personnel, partially inspired by a hoax perpetrated a quarter-century earlier. It then traces the influence of this designation on the progress of historical linguistics, where theories defending the appellation of Ethiopic as Chaldean, although often erroneous, nevertheless contributed to the accurate categorization of Ethiopic as a Semitic language, and on attitudes to Ethiopian Christianity that played a role in Catholic-Protestant polemic.

INTRODUCTION

IF THE RENAISSANCE witnessed Europeans' intensified exploration of the past and of the wider world, the study of Oriental languages in the Renaissance was an exploration of both kinds.¹ The effort to master and classify them was fueled in part by Europe's contact with Eastern peoples and the hopes for religious union, commercial exchange, and territorial conquest such contact raised, but also by the desire to access biblical truth more directly, and to reach perhaps even beyond the Bible to humanity's first language and original wisdom. Such heady prospects, applied to often-unfamiliar terrain, inspired feats of insight and imagination. Some of the resulting theories proved to be milestones of European intellectual history; many others marked the way to blind alleys. But the false premises and failed theories that litter Europe's fitful progress in Oriental studies reveal as much about the intellectual milieu that engendered them as the correct discoveries.

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¹This article focuses on the languages eventually classified as Semitic, but so-called Oriental languages in the early modern era could also include Greek, Armenian, Persian, and other idioms.

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One such false premise was the identification of Ethiopic, or Gəʿəz, the classical language of Ethiopia, as Chaldean.² The identification is intimately associated with the German ecclesiastic Johannes Potken (ca. 1470–ca. 1524). Provost of the Church of Saint George in Cologne early in his career, he was appointed papal secretary and apostolic protonotary in 1496.³ In 1511, by his own account, he heard the psalmody of a group of Ethiopian religious in Rome, and became curious about the Ethiopians' language and liturgy.⁴ This encounter doubtless took place in the church of Santo Stefano, located just behind Saint Peter's Basilica. Ethiopian pilgrims had begun utilizing this church for their services by the 1490s, and though Vatican recognition of their rights to it would take several more decades to secure, they must already have been a fairly settled community when Potken met them.⁵ Settled, but apparently not widely known, for, as Potken notes, "when I sought an interpreter through whom I could speak with them at greater length, I found no one in Rome . . . not even among the Jews, who was capable of it, whence I resolved to be taught by the Ethiopians themselves in whatever way might be possible."⁶ His teacher was Tomas Wäldä Samu'el, a monk, probably from northwest Ethiopia, who had belonged to the Ethiopian monastic community in Jerusalem before coming to Rome.⁷ Two years later,

²As the indigenous term Gəʿəz was not used in Europe before the seventeenth century, the language is here referred to as Ethiopic, a standard appellation from the early modern period to the present.

³Dege and Uhlig, 191.

⁴Potken noted in June 1513 that this encounter had occurred "biennio vix elapse" ("two years earlier"): see Potken and Tomas, preface (unfoliated verso of the frontispiece).

⁵The date of Santo Stefano's concession to the Ethiopians has often been placed much earlier. For the most recent and accurate investigations, see Fiaccadori, 2003–14b, 529; Proverbio, 51–56, 61.

⁶Potken and Tomas, unfoliated preface: "Querens itaque interpretem per quem cum eis loqui plenius possem, nec illum in Urbe . . . etiam neque inter Hebreos quidem reperiens idoneum, demum ab ipsis erudiri quoquomodo fieri posset statui." All translations are my own except for quotations from Bacon and Bibliander.

⁷In a colophon at the end of the text of the biblical canticles (fol. 101^r), Potken declared his (sole) editorship of this work. Tomas, however, added beneath it (fol. 101^v) a colophon of his own, in Ethiopic, in which he translated Potken's words and added "and I, Tomas Wäldä Samu'el, pilgrim of Jerusalem, made it with him." What scant biographical information can be gleaned about Tomas comes from this colophon. "Wäldä Samu'el," or "(spiritual) son of Samu'el," indicates that he was a follower of the early fifteenth-century monk and saint Samu'el of Wäldäbba, and thus was likely a native of Wäldäbba or nearby regions in northwest Ethiopia where Samu'el was most active and most venerated. "Pilgrim of Jerusalem" was a common title for the monks of the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem. This Tomas is not to be confused with a later abbot, also named Tomas, of the Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem, for the latter came to Rome only in 1515. See Nosnitsin, 516–18; Fiaccadori, 2003–14b, 529–30; Dege and Uhlig, 191–92.

Potken and Tomas produced together the world's first printed book in Ethiopic — an Ethiopian psalter — printed, using the new Ethiopic type devised by the printer Marcellus Silber, in Rome in June and September 1513.⁸

As the first printed book in Ethiopic, and indeed “the first work to offer to the *litterati* of the Western world a text of substantial length in an exotic alphabet other than Hebrew,” this Ethiopian psalter was a landmark.⁹ Until the Ethiopic grammar produced by Mariano Vittori (1518–72) and his Ethiopian collaborator Täsfa Şəyon in 1552, and thus for some forty years, it “represented the privileged source for the first scholars of Semitic languages who were interested in Ethiopic in order to compare it with the other Semitic languages then known.”¹⁰ For all its pioneering stature and scholarly utility, however, this edition had one glaring peculiarity: it identified the Ethiopians' sacred language not as Ethiopic, or Abyssinian, or even Indian (a term regularly applied to Ethiopians in Renaissance Europe), but as “*ipsa vera lingua chaldaea*” (“the very Chaldean language itself”).¹¹

Potken's appellation rather quickly came under fire from other European students of Oriental languages. Sebastian Münster (1489–1552) claimed the name Chaldean for Aramaic and, in his foundational study of that language, the *Chaldaica Grammatica* (1527), protested Potken's erroneous appropriation of the term. So did Teseo Ambrogio degli Albonesi (1469–1540), for whom Chaldean was instead Syriac, describing in his 1539 *Introductio in Chaldaicam Linguam* his efforts to convince Potken of his mistake.¹²

Potken's critics had tradition on their side. In late antiquity the term Chaldean referred to Aramaic, usually, but not always, distinguished from Syriac (often called *lingua Syra* or *Sirus*).¹³ For later medieval Europeans, whose knowledge of the Aramaic dialects was much more attenuated, the distinctions

⁸The Ethiopian psalter differs from that of Latin Christendom in including not only the psalms (following the numbering of the Septuagint, and adding a 151st accepted only by Eastern Orthodox Christian churches), but also the biblical canticles and the Song of Songs, usually with some additional devotional texts: Heldman, 231. The edition of 1513 lacks a formal title. Modern library catalogues offer varying descriptive titles in square brackets and identify Potken as the sole editor. In the interests of greater accuracy the edition is here Johannes Potken and Tomas Wäldä Samu'el, eds., *Psalterium Aethiopicum* (Rome, 1513). The psalms and biblical canticles were printed in June; in September were added the text of the Song of Songs and several aids for European readers: a table of the Ethiopic syllabary and brief guides to Ethiopic grammar and pronunciation.

⁹Smitskamp, 277.

¹⁰Contini, 89.

¹¹Potken and Tomas, preface, fol. [1^v].

¹²Raineri, 1985, 120–23.

¹³Baasten, 64–65; Tamani, 503.

between them seem to have been lost. In his *Opus Maius* (1267), Roger Bacon used Chaldean to refer to biblical Aramaic, but also mentioned Chaldeans among the “nations of other tongues [that] are subject to the Church of the Latins, with whom the Church has to arrange many matters.”¹⁴ In the latter context, the “Chaldean tongue” in question must be Syriac; conversely (and adding to the confusion), *Sirus* was sometimes used to denote Targumic Aramaic.¹⁵ It seems likely, therefore, that when Pope Clement IV issued his famous order for serious European study of Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean at the Council of Vienne (1311–12), he had no particular version of the language in mind, nor perhaps was even aware that different forms existed.¹⁶ It is nonetheless clear that in medieval Europe Chaldean referred in a general way to Aramaic, and that it had come to be considered, alongside Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, an important language for Europeans to know. Münster, degli Albonesi, and their sixteenth-century peers did much to clarify the distinctions between different forms of Aramaic for a European audience. If they continued to use the term Chaldean for more than one of them, it was a relatively minor source of confusion and one easily explained by European precedent.

To call Ethiopic “Chaldean,” by contrast, was and is considered a mystifying error. Its native region in East Africa had no obvious connection to Chaldea, nor could it easily be confused with the Aramaic languages, being written, as both Münster and degli Albonesi noted, from left to right, not right to left.¹⁷ A statement by Hiob Ludolf (1624–1704), whose study with the learned Ethiopian monk Gorgoryos made him the most authoritative figure in seventeenth-century Ethiopic studies, sums up the modern assessment of both Potken’s achievement and his error: “Johannes Potken, a German of Cologne, first made this language known in Europe, he being then already old and gray; and setting up an elegant Ethiopic printing house in Rome, he there printed the first Ethiopic books, that is to say, the psalter, with the hymns of the Old Testament and the Song of Songs. He was deceived, however, in that he believed certain raving Abyssinians who affirmed that their Ethiopic language and characters were Chaldean. I could not find out the cause of so gross an error, nor has Gorgoryos ever heard of it in his own country. Perhaps it fell out by reason of

¹⁴Bacon, 1:108; the reference to biblical Aramaic as Chaldean appears at 1:81–82.

¹⁵Dahan, 275.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 261–62, observes that Clement IV’s purpose in calling for the establishment of language schools in Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean was not biblical study, where Arabic would not have been necessary, but conversion. Biblical, Targumic, or Talmudic Aramaic might all have been relevant in this context for refuting Jews, and Syriac for the conversion of heretical Eastern Christian communities.

¹⁷Münster, 13; Albonesi, fols. 13^v–14^r.

the likeness of the language, though indeed it agrees with the Chaldean [*sc.* Aramaic] no more than with the Hebrew or Syriac.”¹⁸

Scholars of early modern Oriental studies have long been aware of this curious appellation. Why and how it came into existence, however, are questions that have sparked little investigation. The discussion of the issue has never extended beyond two or three sentences, nor has the subsequent influence of the appellation been systematically traced.¹⁹ The mystery is a minor one in the history of Renaissance thought, but it left its mark on European attitudes toward Ethiopia and on the progress of comparative linguistics. Specifically, the notion that Ethiopic was Chaldean, or was descended from ancient Chaldean, fueled visions of Ethiopian Christianity as pure and apostolic that came to be deployed in the Catholic-Protestant polemics of the Reformation.²⁰ The notion also helped to spur more thorough comparison of Ethiopic with other Oriental languages, and eventually led to its correct inclusion in the Semitic language family. As for the mystery of its origins, this essay proposes that the twin progenitors of Ethiopic Chaldean were a canny fraudster and the scrupulous librarian who followed his trail.

MEDIEVAL ASSOCIATIONS OF ETHIOPIC WITH CHALDEAN

For the few who have concerned themselves with the mystery of Ethiopic Chaldean's origins, the prevailing theory has been that Potken's assertion in 1513 drew upon an established medieval tradition, just as the early modern identification of Aramaic or Syriac as Chaldean did. It will be useful to review the medieval evidence, therefore, before proposing a different origin much closer in time to 1513.

¹⁸Ludolf, book 1, chapter 15 (the book is unpaginated): “Primus Johannes Potken Germanus Coloniensis, jam senex & canus, eam in Europa vulgavit, & typographiam Aethiopicam elegantem Romae conflando, primos Aethiopicos libellos, Psalterium nimirum cum hymnis veteris Testamenti & Cantico Canticorum ibi editit; deceptus in eo, quod crediderit male sanis nonnullis Habessinibus, asserentibus linguam suam Chaldaicam, & characteres Aethiopicos Chaldaicos esse. Causam tam crassi erroris investigare non potui: neque etiam Gregorius in patria sua id unquam audiverat. Forte ob linguae similitudinem id factum; quamvis cum Chaldaica non magis quam Hebraica aut Syriaca conveniat.”

¹⁹The theories of Cerulli, 1:52; Droixhe, 39; and Goshen-Gottstein will be discussed below. That of Goshen-Gottstein, which I discovered (thanks to Riccardo Contini) after the first draft of this article was completed, comes closest to the hypotheses proffered here.

²⁰On early modern Protestant enthusiasm for Eastern churches generally, and the Ethiopian Church in particular, see Belcher, 65–69; Hamilton, 122.

The earliest writer supposed to have identified Ethiopic as Chaldean is Nicephorus, patriarch of Constantinople in the early ninth century and author of a number of historical and theological works. So claimed Daniel Droixhe, who mentioned in passing that Ethiopic, “according to a confusion dating back at least to Saint Nicephorus (758–829), appeared traditionally associated with Chaldean, a notion taken up again in the Renaissance by J.-C. Scaliger and K. Waser.”²¹ It is true that seventeenth-century scholars like Kaspar Waser cited a Nicephorus on this point. But the person they had in mind was Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopulus (ca. 1256–ca. 1335), whose *Historia ecclesiastica* was written a good half-millennium later.²²

This later-medieval Nicephorus did offer comments on Ethiopians, or rather on their ancient counterparts, the Axumites. In a chapter devoted to the Christianizing mission of Theophilus Indus among the “Oriental nations” in the mid-fourth century, Nicephorus discussed Theophilus’s travels in Arabia, and thence turned to the Axumites on the other shore of the Red Sea. The passage treating them is obscure. A possible translation of the Latin version is as follows: “In the further regions of the Red Sea, on the left [bank], are the Axumites, whose capital is Axum. Before reaching the Ocean, [they were] in the east toward the Assyrians, from whom they take their name, Alexander of Macedon having pushed them out of Syria and led them into colonies there. Even today they use the language of their homeland.”²³ Certainly seventeenth-century readers, who were doubtless using the Latin translation done in 1553, understood the passage in this way. As will be seen below, several cited Nicephorus to the effect that Ethiopians had originated in Assyria, had come to Ethiopia as colonists, and had brought their Assyrian language with them. However, the latter half of the passage can also be read as referring to the Assyrians, not the Axumites: it was they who took their name from Syria, having been led by Alexander into colonies (in Assyria) and having brought the language of their homeland with them. Despite the abrupt change of topic from the Axumites to the Assyrians, this reading seems more logical and is clearer in Nicephorus’s original Greek.²⁴ In sum, it appears that Nicephorus made no claim about the Assyrian origins of the ancient Ethiopians or their language,

²¹Droixhe, 39.

²²Callistus Xanthopulus. For the work’s date (shortly before 1327), see the prefatory comments in 145:cols. 549–50.

²³*Ibid.*, vol. 146:cols. 295–99: “In Rubri istius maris partibus exterioribus, ad sinistram Auxumitae sunt, quorum metropolis est Auxumis. Ante hos vero ad extimum pertingentes Oceanum, Orientem versus Assyri: apud quos etiam hanc appellationem habent, quos Alexander Macedo ex Syria pulsos, colonos eo deduxit. Ii ad hoc usque tempus patria utuntur lingua.”

²⁴I thank David Marsh and T. Corey Brennan for their comments on the Latin and original Greek of this passage.

but his text was ambiguous enough to permit such an interpretation for those who wished to find it there. It is unlikely, in any case, that Nicephorus's comment had any role in establishing a medieval tradition linking Ethiopia with Chaldea/Assyria. The sole manuscript of his work, though present in Buda before it was stolen and taken to Constantinople, was all but unknown to European scholars before the manuscript was recovered and the Latin translation published in Basel in 1553.²⁵

More promising is a source first identified by Enrico Cerulli as suggesting a medieval link between Ethiopia and the Chaldean language: the thirteenth-century *Historia Damiatina* of Oliviero of Cologne. As a visitor to the Holy Land, Oliviero had commented on the community of Jacobites (a then-common European term for miaphysite Christians) that he encountered there. One such community was that of the Ethiopians, whom he called Nubians.²⁶ "Ethiopia comprises very wide regions," Oliviero wrote: "here are the Nubians, who are like the Jacobites regarding the Mass and other divine offices, with this exception, that the Nubians alone brand their children with the sign of the cross as well as baptizing them. These and those have Chaldean letters, use leavened bread, make the sign of the cross with one finger; they say that two natures are united in Christ in a single nature."²⁷ Oliviero's "hi et illi" ("these and those") thus refers to the two groups just mentioned: the Nubians of Ethiopia and the Jacobites of the Mediterranean littoral, who shared a script as well as some religious beliefs and practices. As Cerulli noted, Oliviero's comment was doubtless born of his insufficient mastery of the differences between the various miaphysite Christian groups he encountered all together in Jerusalem. Having gleaned that Chaldean was the language of some (the Syrian Christians), he attributed it to them all.²⁸ For present purposes it is worth noting that Oliviero's attribution of

²⁵Callistus Xanthopulus, 145:cols. 549–50.

²⁶The Christian kingdom of Nubia, north of Ethiopia, disappeared in the fourteenth century. Nubia and Ethiopia were often conflated or their names used interchangeably, but as the Nubians are not known to have had representatives in Jerusalem, the Ethiopians were doubtless meant here.

²⁷The relevant passage from Oliviero is offered in Cerulli, 1:58: "Ethiopia regiones habet latissimas. . . . Hic sunt Nubiani, qui in sacramento altaris et aliis divinis officiis Jacobinis sociantur, eo excepto, quod Nubiani soli parvulis suis karacterem crucis ignito ferro trifariam in fronte altrinsecus iuxta oculos imprimunt, nichilominus baptizant. Hi et illi litteram habent caldeam, in fermentato conficiunt, uno digito signaculum crucis faciunt; duas naturas unitas dicunt in una natura Christi."

²⁸Cerulli's comment (1:52) was the origin of the idea that the Middle Ages had a well-established tradition identifying Ethiopic with Chaldean, though his words are prudently circumspect: "Oliviero's assertion . . . is very obscure. Is this still a residue of the common confusion between the various monophysites of Syria, Egypt, and Ethiopia in the single Jacobite community of Jerusalem? The question is not without interest since here we find, already in the thirteenth century, a testament to that confusion between the Chaldean language and the Ethiopic language that the first Ethiopicists of the sixteenth century accepted."

Chaldean to all miaphysite Christians differs significantly from the usage of Potken and other sixteenth-century Europeans, for whom Chaldean was the language of the Ethiopians exclusively.

Though the fact has not previously been noted, some two centuries later a second European denizen of the Holy Land spoke in similar terms of the Chaldean language in use in that region. This was Francesco Suriano (1450–after 1515), who in 1485 wrote a description of Jerusalem and its inhabitants based on his four years in the Franciscan monastery of Mount Zion.²⁹ His brief portraits of the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean are confused and overlapping, a testament to the bewildering variety of sects Suriano encountered in Jerusalem and to his tenuous grasp of their differences and geographical origins. It is not surprising, therefore, that his comments on the Chaldean tongue are ambiguous and contradictory. When discussing the Jacobites, Suriano observed that they “inhabit a large part of Asia, in the eastern parts, [and] . . . in Egypt. And similarly in Ethiopia as far as Greater India, for more than twenty kingdoms.”³⁰ Thus when he added that “they use the Arabic language, and the Chaldean,” he was presumably including the Ethiopians among these Jacobites. In this, Suriano, like Oliviero before him, was mistakenly applying to all miaphysite communities a Chaldean language that applied only to one.³¹ But in a separate passage devoted to the Ethiopians alone, Suriano proved to be better informed than his predecessor, for he stated clearly that “they have their own language and letters.”³²

In sum, there were only two medieval texts available to Latin Christians before the sixteenth century that attributed a Chaldean language to the Ethiopians. The first assumed that Chaldean was the language of all the miaphysite Christians encountered in Jerusalem; the second made a similar blanket statement, but was also aware that the Ethiopians had a unique language and script. Even taken together, Oliviero and Suriano do not constitute an established tradition attributing a Chaldean language to the Ethiopians, much less a tradition identifying Chaldean as uniquely Ethiopian. The authors most likely to pick up these references to a Chaldean language in Ethiopia were other European visitors to the Holy Land, who cribbed generously from the writings of their predecessors, but even they failed to do so. Most did not discuss the

²⁹Cerulli, 1:336–38, does not note Suriano’s references to Chaldean in his discussion of this work.

³⁰Suriano, 78: “Iacobiti occupano gran parte de l’Asia, ne le parte orientale [e] . . . in Hgypto. Et similiter ne la Ethiopia in sino al l’India majore, per più di venti reami.”

³¹Suriano also attributes a “Chaldean language mixed with Hebrew” to a group he calls the “Esei,” who deny the resurrection of the body and believe in reincarnation, and from whom the Assassins derive: *ibid.*, 88.

³²*Ibid.*, 77: “Questi hano ydioma et litere proprie.”

language of the Ethiopians at all; those who did discuss it used the terms “Abyssinian” and “Indian.”³³

It will be noted that if Cerulli’s explanation is correct, Chaldean was at base understood by Oliviero and Suriano as Syriac: it was through the conflation of the Syrian Christians with other miaphysites that the language was occasionally attributed to miaphysites more generally. Chaldean was understood to be Syriac in fifteenth-century papal circles as well. The evidence comes from the Council of Florence, one of whose principal goals was the union of the various Eastern Christian churches with Rome. In 1439, in preparation for the arrival of these churches’ representatives, a Confession of Faith was drafted in Latin and in six Eastern languages: Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Armenian, “Tartaric,” and Chaldean.³⁴ The language here referred to as Chaldean is certainly Syriac, specifically the dialect employed by the east Syrian community.³⁵

These fifteenth-century sources are useful in indicating the persistence of the traditional identification of Chaldean as Aramaic in one or another form.³⁶ They are also useful in indicating that the language of the Ethiopians, for those few who discussed it, was generally understood to be distinct and denoted by different terms. For Chaldean to be identified as Ethiopic at the turn of the sixteenth century, therefore, some new influence must have intruded. Before proposing the source of that influence, it will be helpful to clarify the nature and chronology of the identification itself.

THE ASSERTION OF ETHIOPIC CHALDEAN IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ROME

Despite the fame of Potken and Tomas’s 1513 edition, it was not the first text to identify Ethiopic as Chaldean. Certainly earlier was the entry made in the

³³Three European visitors of the late fifteenth century referred to the Ethiopians and/or their language as “Indian” or “Abyssinian”: Walter, 127, 282, 303; Bernhard Breidenbach (who offered Europe’s first table of the Ethiopic syllabary and was a source for Sebastian Münster’s comparative Aramaic-Ethiopic comments), in Cerulli, 1:305, 318–19; and Brocchi, in his 1487 entry in the Vatican Library’s register of loaned books, *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (BAV), MS Vaticano latino (Vat. lat.) 3966, fol. 43^v (on which, see below).

³⁴*Biblioteca Laurenziana*, Florence, MS Gaddi 108. At the top of the first written folio (2^r) is written in a fifteenth-century hand, “These things were written in the Church council in Florence in the year 1439 under [Pope] Eugenius” (“Hec scripta sunt in concilio ecclesiarum Florentie anno Domini 1439 sub Eugenio”).

³⁵I thank Professor Alessandro Bausi for this identification of the language.

³⁶There is a fifteenth-century Sicilian case of an Arabic inscription being identified as Chaldean, but as the identifier, Pietro Ranzano, sought its translation from Jewish informants who affirmed that the same facts were to be found in “ancient Hebrew books,” it is possible that Ranzano thought the language was Aramaic. See Zeldes, 172–73.

Vatican Library's register of loaned books covering the period 1486–1547 (BAV, MS Vat. lat. 3966). The borrower was Johannes Potken himself, who on 29 October 1511 recorded that he had "received from lord John, custos of the Apostolic Library, a psalter in the Chaldean language, up to the 110th psalm," for which he offered as surety one large ducat.³⁷ This Ethiopian psalter, now bearing the shelfmark Vat. et. (Vaticano etiopico) 20, was the first Ethiopic manuscript ever recorded in the Vatican collection, and its association with Potken and Tomas's printed edition has long been noted.³⁸ Potken stated in the preface to his edition (June 1513) that he had been studying Ethiopic for the previous two years. If Potken was precise about this length of time, then he had some four months of such study behind him when he borrowed the psalter in late October 1511. Whether through his own study of the language or, more likely, with the aid of Tomas Wäldä Samu'el, Potken was certainly able, in his register entry of autumn 1511, to identify the manuscript's contents as psalms.

Fabio Vigile, custos of the Vatican Library, lacked that ability when he prepared an inventory of the Vatican Library's collection, now MSS Vat. lat. 7135 and Vat. lat. 7136. The precise date of the inventory is not known. Giorgio Levi Della Vida cautiously placed it between 1508, when the Medici manuscripts included in the inventory joined the Vatican collection, and 1513, the end of the pontificate of Julius II under whom the inventory was made.³⁹ This inventory recorded for the first time the presence of an Ethiopic manuscript in the collection. Bearing the number 303, the manuscript was identified as "Anonymous, in Chaldean or Ethiopic. A book in the Chaldean or Ethiopic language, and written in Chaldean characters, which seems to concern sacred matters."⁴⁰ The manuscript was certainly the same one borrowed by Potken: no other Ethiopic manuscripts were recorded in the inventory. Vigile's inability to identify its contents strongly suggests, as Renato Lefevre has argued, that the inventory was compiled prior to Potken's identification of the manuscript as a psalter in October 1511.⁴¹

³⁷BAV, MS Vat. lat. 3966, fol. 48^r: "recepi mutuo a domino Iohanne custode bibliothecae apostolice psalterium in lingua chaldaea usque ad psalmum centesimum decimum." Cf. Grébaud and Tisserant, *pars posterior*, 15n. For the dates covered by the register, see Lefevre, 1945, 437.

³⁸Grébaud and Tisserant, *pars posterior*:14–15; Lefevre, 1945, 434; Levi Della Vida, 99; Dege and Uhlig.

³⁹Levi Della Vida, 34–39, 41.

⁴⁰BAV, MS Vat. lat. 7135, fol. 64^v: "Chaldaica sive Ethiopica anonyma. Liber Chaldaica lingua sive Ethiopica: et Chaldeis characteribus qui de sacris videtur rebus." The index offered in the companion volume of the inventory, MS Vat. lat. 7136, repeats this description at fol. 93^v. See also Grébaud and Tisserant, *pars posterior*:14–15.

⁴¹Lefevre, 1945, 434.

Ethiopic was again called Chaldean by Paride Grassi (Paris de Grassis, ca. 1470–1528), master of papal ceremonies under Popes Julius II and Leo X. In his guide to papal etiquette regarding visiting dignitaries, known as the *Tractatus de Oratoribus Romanae Curiae* (Treatise on the speakers at the Roman curia), Grassi recalled the arrival of an Ethiopian delegation in 1481.⁴² Grassi had then been just a boy and remembered the visit only vaguely. He knew, however, that the European who had accompanied the delegation, Giovanni Battista Brocchi, was now in papal service as apostolic scriptor. Grassi thus requested an account of the visit from him. Giovanni Battista Brocchi is rather well known to scholars of early Ethio-European contact for having traveled to Ethiopia — and, unusually, returned — in 1482–83. Just before leaving on that journey, Brocchi had indeed accompanied a group of Ethiopians to the papal court. He had met them in Jerusalem, where they had informed the guardian of the Franciscan monastery at Mount Sion of their mission to Constantinople to request the patriarch's coronation of a new ruler in Ethiopia. The guardian persuaded them to seek such authorization instead from the pope, and Brocchi, who had already been in papal service and was familiar with the court, either volunteered or was requested to accompany them. These Ethiopians were almost certainly not official ambassadors of the Ethiopian ruler, as the pope may have already suspected, but they were given the benefit of the doubt and treated with all the honor due to an imperial embassy.⁴³ The arrival of subjects of the fabled “Prester John” in November 1481 was in any case a newsworthy event, recorded in two contemporary accounts and, of course, remembered over two decades later by Paride Grassi.⁴⁴

In recording Brocchi's recollection of the embassy, Grassi employed all the terms then current for Ethiopia and Ethiopians: “The peoples under this *nago* [*sc. nāguś*, king] are called by us . . . Abyssinians. . . . Some are called Indians and some Ethiopians, for the empire or dominion of the *nago* or Prester John spans Asia and Africa.”⁴⁵ A fourth term he applied to the Ethiopians, and specifically to their language, is Chaldean. Grassi announced his subject at the outset as being “about the Indian and Chaldean ambassadors sent by their emperor, who is vulgarly called Prester John by us, to Pope Sixtus IV.”⁴⁶ He observed later that the principal

⁴²On the *Tractatus* see now the recent edition of Stenzig, which I was not able to consult in time for this article. Comments here are based on the copy of the text in BAV, MS Vat. lat. 12270.

⁴³Ghinzoni; Lefevre, 1945, 410.

⁴⁴The contemporary accounts are those of the papal diarist Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra and of a Milanese ambassador then in Rome, discussed in Ghinzoni.

⁴⁵BAV, MS Vat. lat. 12270, fol. 78^v: “Populi sub hoc nago dicuntur a nobis . . . abbassini. . . . Item parctim vocantur indi et parctim ethiopies, nam imperium sive dominium huius nagi sive preti Jani in utramque partem extenditur, in asiam et affricam.”

⁴⁶Ibid., fol. 78^r: “De oratoribus indianis et caldeis ab ipsorum imperatore, qui a nobis vulgo prester Janes dicitur, ad Sixtum papam quartum missis.”

delegate, an Ethiopian named Anthony (Ἐνθωνᾶς), communicated his mission “in their [the Ethiopians’] language, which they call Chaldean.”⁴⁷

Grassi’s interview with Brocchi must have occurred no earlier than 1504, the year in which Grassi became master of papal ceremonies and in which Brocchi is first recorded as apostolic scriptor.⁴⁸ The *Tractatus de Oratoribus* itself provides the *terminus ante quem*. On folio 128^v, Grassi wrote of three recent popes — Sixtus IV, Alexander VI, and “Julius, to whom, up to this sixth year of his apostolate, no obedience was offered by the emperors except in person.”⁴⁹ The sixth year of Julius II’s pontificate ran from 28 November 1508 to 27 November 1509. Since Grassi wrote on an earlier folio of “this present year 1508,” and the latest date he mentioned was December 1509, the work was probably written in stages between 1508 and late 1509 or 1510.⁵⁰ Grassi’s narrative suggests that he interviewed Brocchi in the service of his text, and thus in the same period.

The final reference deserving attention is that made by Raffaele Maffei (Raphael Volaterranus, 1451–1522). From 1468 until at least 1499, Maffei held the post of apostolic scriptor, as Brocchi would a few years later. He was a close friend of his fellow Volterra native Jacopo Gherardi, the papal diarist who commented on the 1481 Ethiopian delegation to the pope, and in general was “at the center of a large intellectual network” in Rome.⁵¹ That network certainly included Vatican Library personnel, for Maffei borrowed books from the library between 1494 and 1510.⁵² Though he returned to Volterra, apparently definitively, in 1502, the dates of his book loans indicate that he remained in contact with Vatican librarians for several years afterward. It was in this period that he wrote his *Commentarium Urbanorum Octo e Triginta Libri* (Thirty-eight books of commentaries on the cities), an encyclopedic work arranged under the subheadings of geography, anthropology, and philology that was published in Rome in 1506. In the philological section, in a passage devoted to scripts, Maffei makes the following tantalizing observation: “the Ethiopians use Babylonian characters to this very day.”⁵³ Maffei here did not quite identify the Ethiopic language or script as Chaldean, but since Babylon was the capital of ancient

⁴⁷Ibid., fol. 79^v: “in lingua eorum, quam caldeam vocant.”

⁴⁸Lefevre, 1945, 441.

⁴⁹BAV, MS Vat. lat. 12270, fol. 129^v: “videmus preterque tribus, videlicet Sixto, Alexandro, et Julio cui usque ad hunc annum sextum apostolatus eiusdem nulla prestita fuit obedientia nisi quod quotidie personalis promittitur et speratur ac expectatur.”

⁵⁰Ibid., fol. 64^v: “usque in presentem annum 1508”; fol. 62^v: “die VIII mensis decembris 1509.” The very last text in the manuscript concerns an embassy of 1516, but it is written in a different hand and must be a later addition to the codex.

⁵¹Benedetti, 252.

⁵²Bertola, 106.

⁵³Maffei, CCCCLXIII^r.

Chaldea, his statement was certainly roughly equivalent. Indeed, by referring to that capital he went further than the other references so far reviewed in implying the antiquity of Ethiopic's origins.

Multiple, confident identifications of Ethiopic as Chaldean were thus produced in a quite brief span of time. Maffei's, the earliest and most equivocal, was made in 1506. Vigile identified his mysterious Vatican manuscript as written in "Chaldean or Ethiopic" between 1508 and 1511. Grassi, in conversation with Brocchi, identified the Ethiopians' language as Chaldean no later than 1510, and Potken borrowed the manuscript he identified as a "psalter in Chaldean" in October 1511. All five of these men were in papal service. The inspiration for this idea should thus be sought in Vatican circles.

In the preface to the edited Ethiopian psalter Potken claimed that "I learned from [the Ethiopians] that they use Chaldean letters in their sacred rites."⁵⁴ One possibility, then, is to take Potken at his word, as many later European commentators did, and credit the appellation to the Ethiopians resident in Rome. It has already been observed that the Ethiopian emigrés could hardly have brought this appellation with them from Ethiopia. Nor is it plausible they picked up the term in Jerusalem, where the Ethiopians had long maintained a monastery in which many of the Ethiopian monks who came to Rome had previously lived: the evidence coming from Europeans in the Holy Land makes clear that Chaldean was by no means an accepted term for Ethiopic in Jerusalem. If the Ethiopians in Rome subscribed to the notion at all, therefore, it must have been a notion they picked up in Rome itself.

The person from whom they were most likely to have picked it up was Potken. In the conversations surrounding his language lessons, Potken doubtless asked his Ethiopian teachers if the language were Chaldean: very ancient, originally Eastern, indeed the language of the first Hebrews (all claims that Potken asserted in the 1513 edition). Much in this portrait would have conformed to the Ethiopians' own understanding of their heritage. Ethiopic was certainly an ancient language, being attested on Aksumite monuments with which Ethiopians were quite familiar.⁵⁵ Furthermore, according to a centuries-old tradition enshrined in the Ethiopian "national saga," the *Käbrä Nägästä* (Glory of the kings; 1321), the Ethiopian royal dynasty descended from King Solomon: the roots of the royal family at least did, therefore, lie in the East, and among the ancient Hebrews.⁵⁶ This Ethiopian historical knowledge did not fully match Potken's claims for the language, and one cannot know how far Tomas Wäldä Samu'el and his peers at Santo Stefano accepted Potken's further hypotheses:

⁵⁴Potken and Tomas, preface [fol. 1^v]: "ab eis didici ipsos in eorum sacris Chaldeis litteris uti."

⁵⁵Munro-Hay.

⁵⁶Marrassini, 364–67.

that Ethiopic was identical with the ancient language Chaldean, that it hailed from Mesopotamia, and that it was the language of Solomon's own earliest ancestors, Abraham and Heber. Perhaps, like not a few Ethiopian visitors before and after them, the Roman Ethiopians were happy to promote the glories of their culture in terms they understood their European interlocutors would welcome. Perhaps they shrugged off what diverged from their own historical understanding, and considered Chaldean merely an unobjectionable European translation of their own term ገዳሚ. In sum, there was likely some truth to Potken's assertion that the Ethiopians themselves endorsed the appellation, but not to the implication that it originated with them.

A second possible source of the appellation is Paride Grassi's informant, Giovanni Battista Brocchi. He had been to Ethiopia. He was clearly accepted as an authority on things Ethiopian at the papal court, and Grassi may have adopted the appellation from him sometime after 1504. It is certain, first of all, that this was not an idea Brocchi picked up in Ethiopia during his sojourn there in 1482–83. This is confirmed by the fact that Brocchi had still developed no such notion by 1487, for on 10 November of that year Brocchi borrowed from the Vatican Library the same famous psalter borrowed more than two decades later by Potken, and called it “a book in the Indian language.”⁵⁷ If the Chaldean appellation found in Grassi's *Tractatus* did indeed come from Brocchi, it was an idea Brocchi picked up after 1487, during his many subsequent years in Rome.

A third possibility is Raffaele Maffei. Not only was he the earliest member of this group to link the Ethiopian script with the Chaldean region, but his statement seems to echo that of Nicephorus, if one interprets Nicephorus's statement that “even today they use the language of their homeland” as referring to the ancient Ethiopians. The sole manuscript copy of Nicephorus, it will be recalled, was in Buda for some years before being stolen by a Turk. It was certainly acquired by Matthias Corvinus (r. 1458–90), who almost single-handedly built a humanistic library second only, in its time, to the popes'. And Maffei, who was expert in Greek and perfectly capable of reading Nicephorus in the original, visited Buda during Corvinus's reign in 1479.⁵⁸ It is just possible, therefore, that Maffei encountered the unique manuscript of Nicephorus's *Historia ecclesiastica* there, interpreted the passage about the “language of their

⁵⁷BAV, MS Vat. lat. 3966, fol. 43^v: “Ego Joannes Baptista Brocchus Imolensis accepi librum unum in lingua indiana xv quaternionum a domino Joanne Venito bibliotechario die X novembris 1487.”

⁵⁸Theodore Bibliander muddied the waters by associating Maffei with claims (presented as “common opinion”) first made by Potken eight years later: “Regarding the Ethiopians, Maffei says that they use the characters of the Babylonians even today. This he had from ignorant men or from the common opinion that claims that the Ethiopians take their language, script, religion, and origins from Abraham the Chaldean”: Bibliander, 36.

homeland” as referring to the Ethiopians’ continued use of Assyrian, and introduced this new datum to his colleagues in Vatican service.

There are several reasons to doubt this hypothesis, however. For one, Maffei was reading Nicephorus in the original Greek, and is therefore less likely to have assumed that the colonization and importation of language referred to the Ethiopians, as later readers of the Latin translation did. In fact there is reason to doubt whether Maffei read Nicephorus at all. Had he indeed discovered such a rare, indeed unique, Greek historical manuscript, one would expect him to trumpet his discovery of both the text and any information regarding Ethiopia he gleaned from it. Indeed, once recovered from Constantinople and translated into Latin in the mid-sixteenth century, Nicephorus’s work was considered to be of “extraordinary value,” frequently reprinted, and “heaped with great encomia by its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editors and publishers.”⁵⁹ But Maffei offered no source for his comment regarding the Ethiopian script’s Babylonian origins. Moreover, it is not certain that the Corvinian library possessed Nicephorus in 1479. The library’s early Greek acquisitions (to 1472) were few and acquired in Italy by the king’s factor Janus Pannonius, and the *Historia ecclesiastica* could not have remained unknown to humanist scholars if it hailed from Italy. Most of Corvinus’s Greek manuscripts were instead acquired from “the interior parts of Greece then under Turkish occupation” — a much more likely provenance for a Byzantine history unknown in Latin Europe — by Pannonius’s successor, Taddeo Ugoletto, whose direction of the library began in circa 1480 and thus after Maffei’s visit to Buda.⁶⁰

Finally, whereas Nicephorus wrote (or could be interpreted as writing) about the Ethiopians’ language, Maffei wrote about the Ethiopians’ script. And the script he had in mind was hieroglyphic. The full passage Maffei devoted to the subject is as follows: “Diodorus said that the script of the Ethiopians was very ancient and that the Egyptians derived their script from it. . . . The Egyptian and Ethiopian [scripts], although very ancient, nevertheless used figures of animals and other things rather than true letters, which are called hieroglyphs, and are understood today by no one. The Ethiopians use Babylonian characters to this very day.”⁶¹ If Maffei were the source of the Vatican circle’s new information regarding Ethiopic, therefore, he would have been informing them that Ethiopic hailed from ancient Babylon, and was hieroglyphic — an assertion they would obviously have rejected as inconsistent with the genuine Ethiopic script they had

⁵⁹Mormandi, 265–66.

⁶⁰Csapodi, 41–49.

⁶¹Maffei, fol. 463^r: “Diodorus item Aethiopum litteras antiquissimas facit ab hisque dicit Aegyptios suas sumpsisse. . . . Aegyptii vero & Aethiopes quamvis antiquissimi Alteri tamen figuris animalium aliarumque rerum veriusquam litteris quas hieroglyphica vocant: nulli aduc comperta[.] Aethiopes vero Babyloniis litteris sunt usi usque in hodiernum diem.”

before their eyes. Maffei's statement regarding Ethiopic's Babylonian origins almost certainly links him to Vigile and his Vatican colleagues. But the information must have flowed in the other direction. That is, Maffei's friends in the Vatican informed him of their discovery that the sacred script of Ethiopia was Chaldean, and Maffei, unable to see the script of which they spoke, identified it with the hieroglyphs of which he read in his classical sources. These trails thus lead back to the starting point: a genesis at the papal court in Rome, in the years between 1504 and 1511, that still requires explanation.

FLAVIUS MITHRIDATES AND THE ETHIOPIC-CHALDEAN SCRIPT

The explanation proposed here centers on a text produced in this same papal milieu a quarter-century earlier: the *Sermo de Passione Domini* (Sermon on the Passion of the Lord) of the Sicilian Jewish convert Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, alias Flavius Mithridates. Mithridates is well known to scholars of Renaissance humanism as a teacher of Oriental languages and Kabbalistic doctrine, and as a translator of Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek texts. His *Sermo de Passione Domini* was preached at the beginning of the acme of his career, on Good Friday (20 April) 1481, in the presence of Pope Sixtus IV and assembled members of the curia.⁶² Though mainly concerned to prove that ancient Jewish texts foretold the mystery of the Crucifixion, Mithridates displayed the breadth of his erudition by citing, in their original languages, authorities from Greek, Arabic, and other traditions as well. As Chaim Wirszubski has demonstrated, much of this was bluster. His Greek citations were back-translated from Latin or culled from different Latin authors; more notably, his citations of "very ancient oracles of the Hebrews" are often quotations from the *Pugio Fidei* of Raymond Martini, a thirteenth-century anti-Jewish polemic that, naturally enough, expressed the pro-Christian viewpoint Mithridates attributed to the Jews.⁶³

Of most interest here, Mithridates also twice cited an ancient Chaldean authority, identified as Hyonetes, to prove that the Crucifixion had been foretold in multiple ancient traditions. Mithridates first stated, "the very ancient oracle of Hyonetes in the Chaldean language also affirms: 'man will be humbled and omnipotent God made weak.'" In his second reference he averred, "But this [Crucifixion] was necessary, Most Holy Father; the prophecies foretold it. Among the Chaldeans, the very ancient oracle of Hyonetes foretold it in Chaldean thus: 'because of him who first sinned, God was crucified.'" Preceding the Latin translation of the quotations was "Hyonetes" in his original tongue.

⁶²The foundational study of this sermon is Wirszubski. On Mithridates's career, see Piemontese; Grévin, 517–24.

⁶³Wirszubski, 13–24, 30–32.

A strange tongue it turns out to be. Chaim Wirszubski identified the first quotation as coming from the *Targum Onqelos*, and the second from Isaiah 5:15, in the translation of the *Targum Jonathan*.⁶⁴ Hyonetes was thus “the pseudo-classical alias of Jonathan ben Uzziel, the reputed author of the Aramaic version of the Prophets,” and the language of these quotations is Aramaic.⁶⁵ But Mithridates presented these passages in Ethiopic characters:

Antiquissimum Hyonetis oraculum in lingua chaldaea id idem affirmat
 ወደ-መአጎ፣ ኤነሥ፣ ዊደጠሎሥ፣ ተቆጸ፣ ራብጊ። humiliabitur homo & debilitabitur
 deus omnipotens. . . . Sed necessarium hoc erat, Beatissime pater: sic de eo
 vaticinati fuerant fanorum antistites. Apud Chaldaeos, vetustissimum
 Hyonetis oraculum ita chaldaee predixerat አሬ፣ ዐለ፣ ደጠበ፣ ቀደመ፣ ኤላህ፣
 እፀጠለበ። propter illum qui primo peccavit Deus excruciabatur.⁶⁶

As Wirszubski observed, Mithridates was “too good a Hebraist to be unaware of what he was doing . . . [T]hose ‘ancient oracles of Hyonetes’ were deliberately made to look like, and be fit to pass for, genuine Chaldean texts.”⁶⁷

Mithridates’s imposture relates to a second meaning of Chaldean in fifteenth-century Europe. In addition to its association with Aramaic (including Syriac), it was known, among philosophers, as the language of a very ancient Chaldean people, and specifically of Zoroaster, believed to have lived five thousand years before Troy. Ancient authorities had claimed as much, among them Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius; and the only known texts preserving this ancient wisdom, the *Chaldean Oracles*, were duly attributed to Zoroaster, though they had come down to the Renaissance only in Greek.⁶⁸ For Marsilio Ficino, this ancient Zoroastrian wisdom was the ultimate source of his beloved Platonism: it represented the fountainhead of the *prisca theologia* that was thence transmitted to ancient Egypt, Thrace, Pythagorean Italy, and Athens. It provided a common origin for pagan philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, given Abraham’s

⁶⁴Ibid., 35–36.

⁶⁵Ibid., 37.

⁶⁶The Ethiopic characters printed here are based on the shapes Wirszubski carefully handwrote in his edition of the sermon: *ibid.*, 79–127, at 96, 117; cf. a photograph of the manuscript folio containing the first Ethiopic passage in *ibid.*, plate 1 (following page 127). The characters Wirszubski offered alongside his transliteration (36) differ from these in three cases: he offers ሐ (h) where the manuscript suggests ጠ (t) on two occasions, and ፈ (f) where the manuscript suggests ጸ (s). To the extent that ጠ and ጸ are the wrong characters to represent the Aramaic words Mithridates was citing, they merely attest to Mithridates’s imperfect grasp of the Ethiopic syllabary.

⁶⁷Ibid., 36.

⁶⁸Allen, 10, 32.

origins in ancient Chaldea. And it brought its witness to bear on the truth of Christ, for it was Chaldean priests, or magi, who first acknowledged the Christ child.⁶⁹

With this background in mind, the enthusiastic reception of Mithridates's sermon is more fully appreciated. In addition to his appealing argument regarding the Jews' awareness of Christian truth and his dazzling display of linguistic expertise, Mithridates intimated his knowledge of ancient Hebrew and Chaldean oracles hitherto unknown to the Latin West. The papal diarist Jacopo Gherardi recorded that "Guglielmo of Sicily, a man learned in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, referred to every mystery of the passion of Jesus Christ, and proved them through the authority and writings of the Hebrews and the Arabs. . . . Truly, this oration, which lasted more than two hours, was nevertheless pleasing to all, as much for the variety of its subjects as for the sound of the Hebrew and Arabic words, which he spoke as if they were his day-to-day language; the speech was praised by all, and first and foremost by the pope and cardinals."⁷⁰ Konrad Summenhart, who praised Mithridates in 1495 as "learned in Latin, Greek, Chaldaic, and Arabic, and very learned in Hebrew," was particularly taken by the sermon's "ancient Hebrew oracles," which he identified as the mysteries of Kabbala. Antonius Lollius of San Gimignano took note of the ancient Chaldean tradition, cribbing Mithridates's quotation from "the ancient oracle of Hyonetes among the Chaldeans" when preaching a similar *Oratio Passionis Domini* (Oration on the Passion of the Christ) before Pope Innocent VIII.⁷¹ Far from distancing himself from the sermon's impostures, Mithridates trumpeted his newly minted expertise in Chaldean, adding it to the list of his mastered languages and on one occasion even styling himself "Mithridates Chaldeus."⁷²

It is quite possible that Mithridates exploited the ambiguity surrounding the term Chaldean, such that his expertise might be understood as concerning Aramaic rather than the ancient language of Zoroaster.⁷³ But it was certainly his fake ancient Chaldean — that is, Aramaic, or a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew, written in Ethiopic characters — that he taught to his most illustrious student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in 1486. As a proponent of Ficino's *prisca theologia*, Pico was fully aware of the potential revelations awaiting him.

⁶⁹Ibid., 31–38; Bori, 63–4.

⁷⁰Gherardi, 49.

⁷¹Wirzubski, 26, 75–76.

⁷²Three sources of 1484–85, including his official *intitulatio* in the University of Cologne, described him as "professor of arts and of sacred theology, acolyte of the Holy See, and translator of Hebrew, Arabic, Chaldean, Greek, and Latin": *ibid.*, 46. For the epithet "Chaldeus," see *ibid.*, 39–40.

⁷³The name "Mithridates Chaldeus" appears in his translation of Abraham Abulafia, for instance, where it would seem to conjure expertise in Aramaic: *ibid.*, 39–40.

Mithridates promised access to texts of ancient Zoroastrian wisdom that were unknown even to Ficino, and Mithridates's condition — that Pico divulge to no one what he learned — Pico willingly accepted. Writing to Ficino from Fratta, where he was studying with Mithridates, Pico wrote, "I have given myself totally to the study of Arabic and Chaldaean. . . . Certain books in these languages have come into my hands, not randomly or by chance, but by God's counsel and that of the divine power favouring my studies." Regarding the Chaldean books specifically, he continued: "These books are Chaldaean, if they are books and not treasure houses. They include *The Sayings of Ezra* the priest, and of the Magi Zoroaster and Melchior, containing passages which among the Greeks circulate mutilated and full of errors but which can be read whole and complete here. Then there is a *Commentary* on those sayings of the wise men of Chaldaeae, which is certainly short and rough but full of mysteries. There is also a little book on *The Doctrines of Chaldaean Theology*, and one on the doctrines of *The Persians, Greeks and Chaldaeans*, with an inspired and copious exposition. See, Marsilio, what wonderful things have crept into my bosom quite beyond my hopes!"⁷⁴

According to Pier Cesare Bori, this newfound trove of Chaldean texts was a formative influence on the *Oration* with which Pico prefaced his famous *900 Theses*: "Chaldean as the original locus of both the Hebrew tradition and the *theologia prisca*" provided Pico with a new confirmation of his model of spiritual ascent.⁷⁵ And Pico duly cited the Chaldean texts taught to him by Mithridates in the first redaction of his *Oration*. It was Evantes the Persian, in his "exposition of Chaldean theology," who provided the definition of man as a "living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature," and Zoroaster who discovered the secret of the soul's ascent from the body to the "supernal regions." The soul's wings were to be watered with the waters of life, just as "the Paradise of God is watered by four rivers."⁷⁶

Like Mithridates in his *Sermo de Passione Domini*, Pico quoted these ancient Chaldean authorities in their original tongue. That is, Pico offered Evantes's definition of man and the names of the four rivers of Paradise (Truth, Expiation, Light, and Compassion) in an amalgam of Aramaic and Hebrew, but written in the Ethiopic script. This early version of Pico's *Oration* did not circulate. Doubts about Pico's orthodoxy were bruited before the public debate of the *900 Theses* was to take place, prompting Pico to revise his prefatory *Oration* and excise much of his earlier enthusiasm about Zoroaster and ancient Chaldean wisdom. The quotations remained, but in the printed edition later offered by Pico's

⁷⁴Ficino, 7:90–91.

⁷⁵Bori, 64–65.

⁷⁶Wirszubski, 38–39; his plate 6b reproduces the folio containing the second passage from the manuscript of this early redaction of the *Oration*: Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, MS Palatino 885.

nephew, they appeared in Hebrew rather than Ethiopic characters, leaving scholars for many centuries unaware of the strange nature of Pico's Chaldean sources. In terms of the genesis of the Ethiopic Chaldean appellation, therefore, Pico's *Oration* was almost certainly not a contributor. But his belief in the reality of Mithridates's ancient Chaldean and his confidence that its mysterious (Ethiopic) characters were that language's original script constitute a particularly famous proof of the influence of Mithridates's hoax and of the credulity with which his claims were received.

There is no evidence that either Mithridates or Pico ever associated this ancient Chaldean language and wisdom with Ethiopia. Mithridates doubtless chose to represent his Chaldean in Ethiopic characters because the Ethiopic script was all but unknown in learned European circles.⁷⁷ They lent an air of authenticity to his claim to have discovered unknown and original Zoroastrian texts, since ancient Chaldean was expected to be written in mysterious symbols in order to preserve its exalted secrecy.⁷⁸ And of course their obscurity helped to mask his imposture.

It appears, however, that the script Mithridates employed for his ancient Chaldean sources was eventually identified as Ethiopic. The discovery took several decades, as Mithridates no doubt hoped. But evidence suggests that the connection was made by papal librarians, and that Mithridates's sermon was the source whence they came to identify the Ethiopic language as Chaldean. Chaim Wirszubski suggested some connection to Potken's edited psalter already in 1963, noting that "it is of some interest for the history of Oriental studies in Europe that, a quarter of a century before Johannes Potken, Mithridates wrote and taught Ethiopic characters, even if not the Ethiopic language, represented as Chaldean."⁷⁹ M. H. Goshen-Gottstein seems to have proceeded further in finding a connecting thread between the two men, for in 1978 he wrote that "our inquiries show that in the generation preceding Potken only one man was both knowledgeable and interested enough to propagate the mystification that Ethiopic was the ancient, true Chaldean. That man was the notorious Flavius Mithridates. The history of the hoax is studied and it is shown how Potken, a generation later, took Ethiopic quite naturally to be Chaldean."⁸⁰ What data

⁷⁷Where Mithridates learned the shapes and associated sounds of Ethiopic characters is an open question. His native Sicily is a possibility, but more likely he, too, encountered Ethiopian monks in Rome, for Ethiopian pilgrims passed through the city throughout the fifteenth century: see the evidence collected in Lefevre, 1947, 21–25.

⁷⁸Ficino opined in 1469 that Zoroaster had "established letters in the characters of the celestial signs and constellations" in order that his priests might possess "their own secret literature apart from the vulgar": cited in Allen, 35.

⁷⁹Wirszubski, 39.

⁸⁰Goshen-Gottstein, 149.

Goshen-Gottstein collected to connect Mithridates and Potken is, unfortunately, unknown. All that is known of his findings are the sentences just quoted, which he offered in a tantalizing one-page précis of an article that never appeared.

The trail here proposed as linking Mithridates to the sixteenth-century identifications of Ethiopic Chaldean begins in the year he preached his sermon, 1481. The sermon, as noted above, made a strong and positive impression on the papal curia. Among Mithridates's admirers were doubtless the papal librarians, who were at that time in possession of a number of Arabic manuscripts they could not read or identify. Indeed, the librarians were in contact with Mithridates from at least May 1481, when he borrowed from the Vatican Library a Latin translation of the Koran.⁸¹ In a library inventory prepared in the same year, twenty-two Arabic manuscripts were labeled for the first time, and Mithridates, as Giorgio Levi Della Vida proposed, was almost certainly the outside consultant who did the labeling.⁸² The identifications made in the inventory indeed seem to bear his signature. Manuscripts on subjects familiar to Mithridates, such as astronomy, are correctly identified; those requiring knowledge of Christian and Islamic literary traditions in Arabic, which Mithridates does not seem to have possessed, bear identifications that do not correspond in any way to their contents. Levi Della Vida wrote decades before Wirszubski revealed the impostures of Mithridates's Good Friday sermon, but the conclusions he drew from this inventory are very similar: "one cannot escape the impression that Moncada, being unscrupulous and confident that, for the moment at least, his affirmations could not be checked, invented whole cloth such titles as seemed to him likely to attract the most interest."⁸³

Levi Della Vida hypothesized that Ethiopic, Slavic, and Armenian manuscripts in the Vatican collection were not identified by Mithridates, and thus not found in the 1481 inventory, because Mithridates was unfamiliar with those languages.⁸⁴ It is now established that Mithridates could, at least, recognize the Ethiopic script. If he identified no Ethiopic manuscripts in 1481, it is probably because the Vatican as yet possessed none. Levi Della Vida conceded that the presence of Ethiopic manuscripts in the library prior to 1481 was only hypothetical. The earliest record of such a presence dates to November 1487, when, as mentioned above, Giovanni Battista Brocchi borrowed the famous Ethiopian psalter. And there is some reason to believe that Brocchi himself brought the psalter to the Vatican upon his return from Ethiopia, sometime

⁸¹BAV, MS Vat. lat. 3964, fol. 22^f. Cf. Bertola, 23. The shelfmark is incorrectly identified in Levi Della Vida, 95n.

⁸²Levi Della Vida, 92–93.

⁸³Ibid., 97.

⁸⁴Ibid., 95.

between 1483 and 1487. The usual borrowing procedure in the Vatican was to leave a surety, as Potken did in 1511. Brocchi, however, was not required to do so in 1487, perhaps as a reward for having supplied the codex in the first place.⁸⁵ The Ethiopian psalter then remained in Brocchi's possession for more than five years, until 22 January 1493.⁸⁶

Only from 1493, therefore, were papal librarians in continuous possession of a single Ethiopic manuscript whose identity they might investigate more fully. Fabio Vigile, who eventually identified the codex as Chaldean, seems the most likely catalyst of such investigations; his first recorded activity in the papal library dates to 1498. A plausible reconstruction of subsequent events goes as follows. In perusing this manuscript in a strange script, Vigile (or another librarian, or several together) recalled Mithridates's famous sermon in its multiple languages. He had at hand Mithridates's autograph copy, which had been dedicated to Sixtus IV and was in the library's possession from 1481.⁸⁷ Comparing the script of its Chaldean quotations with the script of Brocchi's codex, he recognized them as identical. In the inventory that Vigile prepared between 1508 and 1511, he indeed specified that the mysterious codex was "in Chaldean characters," and on this basis, logically, identified the language too as Chaldean. That the identification was based on the script is also indicated by Vigile's ignorance of the codex's contents: he could not read this Chaldean, but only recognize its characters.

Vigile was, however, able to make another inference, one not suggested by comparison with Mithridates's sermon: he knew that this Chaldean language was Ethiopian. He could have culled this datum from the library's register of loaned books, where the same codex had been identified in 1487 and again in 1493 as being in the Indian language. He could also have consulted the author of the 1487 entry, Brocchi, who was working as apostolic scribe in the period in which Vigile was compiling his book inventory. Brocchi's very rare firsthand experience of Ethiopia was certainly known to other officials of the papal court; he was interviewed about it around this same time by Paride

⁸⁵So Renato Lefevre has opined: Lefevre, 1945, 439. It is also possible that the codex came with the Ethiopian delegation late in 1481 and that Brocchi's involvement with their visit permitted him to borrow the codex without a surety.

⁸⁶The date on which the manuscript was returned is recorded in the margin alongside the original record of the loan: BAV, MS Vat. lat. 3966, fol. 43^v.

⁸⁷The autograph is BAV, MS Barberiano latino (Barb. lat.) 1775. The register of loaned books, MS Vat. lat. 3964, bears on fol. 23^r the record of Mithridates borrowing the Latin Koran in May 1481; the marginal record of its restitution notes that Mithridates "returned the Koran on 13 August and took his own oration on the Passion" ("restituit die 13 augusti et habuit suam orationem de passione"). Mithridates returned the copy of his own oration on 30 October. See also Wirszubski, 44.

Grassi. One can imagine conversations taking place among these several Vatican officials all interested in Ethiopian matters: Vigile setting out the autograph of Mithridates's sermon and the codex Brocchi himself had borrowed for five years, Grassi inquiring about Brocchi's experience with the Ethiopian delegation of 1481, Brocchi relating, with a certain amount of hyperbole, his experiences.⁸⁸

If this reconstruction of events comes close to the mark, the error by which Ethiopic came to be identified as Chaldean was the result of what might be called philological best practices. Faced with a unique and somewhat mysterious codex, the library's first in Ethiopic, Vatican librarians searched their memories, and their collection, to find one with a similar script. The authority of that second codex — Mithridates's *Sermo de Passione Domini* — was not in doubt: it was the autograph of a recognized linguistic expert whose services the librarians had previously solicited. Comparing the characters in the two manuscripts and establishing to their satisfaction that the script of both was the same, they identified the mysterious codex's language. Then investigating earlier records of the codex (the register of loaned books), and/or seeking out a man with knowledge of that codex (Brocchi), they determined its Ethiopian provenance. All this was solid sleuthing. Though its founding premise was based on a fraud, the sleuths cannot be blamed for failing to recognize it. Few were likely to suspect the renowned linguist Mithridates, and fewer still could have been in a position to unmask him. After the *Sermo de Passione Domini* Mithridates never again publicly proffered an "ancient Chaldean" written in Ethiopic script. The one student to whom he taught it privately, Pico, had been sworn to secrecy about these studies, and the single text in which Pico in turn utilized Mithridates's "ancient Chaldean" was quickly superseded and did not circulate.⁸⁹

⁸⁸Grassi described Brocchi as an expert in the Ethiopians' language who served as their simultaneous interpreter in 1481. Contemporary witnesses of the 1481 embassy also described Brocchi as the interpreter, without specifying the language. Renato Lefevre hypothesized that Brocchi had learned Ethiopic via a pre-1481 visit to Ethiopia, but there is no evidence of such an earlier visit and Brocchi's own biography leaves no time for one. Very likely Brocchi used Arabic, a common mediating language in Ethio-European conversations, in 1481; but having perhaps learned some Ethiopic during his Ethiopian sojourn of 1482–83 and via his five-year consultation of the Ethiopian psalter from 1487 to 1493, it seems he vaunted to Grassi an earlier expertise in the language. See Ghinzoni, 153; Lefevre, 1945, 415, 421–22.

⁸⁹Whether Pico eventually recognized the fraud is an open question. He excised his enthusiastic references to Zoroaster in the final redaction of his *Oration*, but perhaps only because he had come to conclude that Zoroaster was not as ancient an authority as he had once believed. See Grafton, 116–17.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ETHIOPIC-CHALDEAN APPELLATION

If this hypothesis is correct, the genesis of Ethiopic Chaldean was the result of a more or less technical investigation of a particular manuscript, BAV MS Vat. et. 20: a desire to identify its script, language, provenance, and, eventually, contents, such as one might expect professional librarians to undertake. Vigile and his colleagues in papal service need not have considered Chaldean anything more than a neutral glottonym. There is evidence, however, that they also reflected on the significance of their discovery: that is, that following Mithridates's lead they identified Ethiopic as a primordial Mesopotamian language and, perhaps influenced by Chaldea's reputation as the fountainhead of *prisca theologia* (and by Ethiopians' own confidence in the apostolic purity of their practice), conceived of Ethiopian Christianity as a vestige of and witness to an ancient and pure religious truth.

There were certainly traditions circulating in fifteenth-century Europe that would have lent plausibility to the Chaldean-Ethiopian connection. One was the famous medieval legend of Prester John. Even the best-informed European authorities identified the ruler of Ethiopia as "Prester John" throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as is well known. Though originally identified as an Asian potentate, the Prester was, by the fourteenth century, located either in India or in Africa south of Egypt.⁹⁰ Indeed, in ancient and medieval European texts the term India was applied to both the subcontinent and Ethiopia, as well as to the eastern shore of the Red Sea (usually with distinguishing modifiers such as lesser and greater, or nearer, middle, and further).⁹¹ The notion that an ancient Mesopotamian knowledge had migrated southward to Middle or Lesser India (Ethiopia) might not therefore have been wholly implausible.

A second suggestive tradition was Ethiopia's association with the magi. Such an association had been tentatively made already by Augustine, for whom the magi represented all the gentile peoples and thus Christianity's destiny to spread to the ends of the earth; Ethiopia, like the magi, was for Augustine another convenient shorthand for both the diversity of the world's peoples and the remotest of regions. Perhaps following this lead, a few medieval authors had indeed identified one of the magi as *fuscus* (dark) and then black.⁹² It was Prester John's fourteenth-century migration from Asia to India/Africa, however, that cemented the notion of one magus as Ethiopian, for the Prester's biography had always featured his descent from the magi.⁹³

⁹⁰Kaplan, 45–54.

⁹¹Fiaccadori, 2003–14a, 145–46.

⁹²Kaplan, 22–23, 28–30.

⁹³Otto of Freising had affirmed the Prester's descent from the magi already in 1145, in the first European account of Prester John: *ibid.*, 59. On the visual representation of a black magus following the literary affirmation of an African Prester, see *ibid.*, 44.

Once the Prester was recognized as a black Indian or African, a black magus began to feature in European art — most notably, with regard to the fifteenth-century Italian context, in Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* of 1460–64. As noted above, Ficino and Pico considered magi (that is, Chaldean or Zoroastrian priests) to be the authors of ancient Chaldean wisdom. That such wisdom was now to be found in Ethiopia, the land of the magi's descendant, might well have seemed logical.

The figures of the magi thus associated Ethiopia with an eminently wise and true pre-Christian tradition and with the origins of Christianity itself. Ballast for such notions, albeit in sometimes contradictory ways, could be found in other sources. The apostolic origins of Ethiopian Christianity were attested in the Bible, via Philip's conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–39; such origins conformed nicely to the Prester's reputation for a particularly exemplary Christian piety. Both biblical Ethiopia and the Prester's land (before and after its migration to India/Ethiopia) were linked geographically to Paradise, suggesting a very ancient land indeed; and *Mandeville's Travels*, a bestseller of later medieval Europe, had placed Ethiopia “on the other side of Chaldea, to the south.”⁹⁴ These scattered hints were evidently insufficient in themselves to forge a link between Ethiopia and ancient Chaldea. The technical investigations pursued by the Vatican officials must have been the key, for they were the first to assert the connection, and did so confidently and repeatedly. Conversely, the Vatican officials were not necessarily aware of all the traditions named above. Their writings do suggest, however, that Chaldean was for them something more than a neutral glottonym, and that they associated it with both great antiquity and pure religious truth.

In his *Tractatus de Oratoribus*, for instance, Paride Grassi recorded Brocchi's description of the Ethiopians' religious practices as reflecting those of the apostles and the primitive church. “He [the *nāgūs*, or Prester John] and his native peoples are baptized and also circumcised, for they say that Christ and His apostles were circumcised and similarly baptized in this way,” Brocchi reported; apart from the tradition of branding with the sign of the cross, the Ethiopians “perform the rest of their Masses and sacrifices partly following their own rite, that is, one redolent of the rite of the primitive Church, partly following one like our own.”⁹⁵ Further on he observed, in a similar vein, that “they fast and hold

⁹⁴Courtès, 10. *Mandeville's Travels* described Prester John's realm as flooded by the rivers of Paradise, and Ethiopia as next to Chaldea (though he did not yet link Prester John to Ethiopia): Seymour, 144, 87.

⁹⁵“Ipse [sc. *nagus* sive Prete Janus] ac sui populi indigene baptizantur et etiam circumciduntur quoniam ipsi dicunt christum et discipulos christi sic fuisse circumcisos et similiter baptizatos. . . . Ceterum missas et sacrificia partim eorum proprio ritu, scilicet redolente ritui primitive ecclesie peragunt, partim quasi nostro”: BAV, MS Vat. lat. 12270, fol. 78^v–79^r.

vigils by night on the eves of our saints and theirs, which the ancient and primitive Church observed.”⁹⁶

The Ethiopians themselves certainly viewed their religious practices, including circumcision, as conforming to those of the apostles and early church, and Brocchi could well have absorbed this characterization during his stay in Ethiopia in 1482–83.⁹⁷ Yet Brocchi does not seem to have described the Ethiopian Church in these terms immediately after his Ethiopian sojourn. Our only witness to his experience is Francesco Suriano, who met Brocchi upon the latter’s return from Ethiopia in 1483 and included Brocchi’s account of the country in his treatise. Brocchi did observe that the Ethiopians were “zealous in the faith and fervent in spirit, more than any other Christians,” but he did not describe their practice as ancient or even orthodox, and his overall portrait was of “an ugly people, uncultivated and lacking in intelligence.”⁹⁸ Admittedly, it was Suriano, and not Brocchi, who described the Ethiopians as “the worst heretics.”⁹⁹ But unless Suriano distorted and even reversed the testimony provided to him by a rare eyewitness, it would seem that in 1483 Brocchi did not yet praise the Ethiopians as models of apostolic Christian practice. By the first decade of the sixteenth century, Brocchi’s portrait of the Ethiopians had undergone two changes. Their language was now not Indian but Chaldean, and their Christian practice was redolent of the primitive church. One suspects that the two changes were related.

Johannes Potken, too, was convinced of the antiquity of Ethiopian religious practice, and particularly of their sacred language. Addressing the protest made by certain contemporary Jews that Chaldean was the language of their ancestors during the Babylonian captivity, Potken first denied that claim: the language used at that time by the Hebrew common people, and by mothers with their children, was not the language of the Chaldean literati.¹⁰⁰ He went on to claim that in that time, “twenty peoples live in Ethiopia, especially around the Nile and Gyon” — both rivers originating in Paradise, according to Genesis, though Potken did not mention this fact — “and though they use different vernacular languages, they all use this Chaldean language for their sacred rites; and they have used it since the time of the birth of the Christian faith, as those [Ethiopians] who have come to us on pilgrimage and out of

⁹⁶Ibid., fol. 81^{r-v}: “Jeunabant et invigilabant de nocte in vigilia nostrorum sanctorum et suorum quos antiqua et primitiva ecclesia observabat.”

⁹⁷In the sixteenth century, the Ethiopians defended circumcision in this manner against Jesuit criticism: see Cohen, 161–86.

⁹⁸Suriano, 86–87.

⁹⁹Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁰Potken and Tomas, preface, fol. [1^v].

devotion affirm.”¹⁰¹ This much Potken’s Ethiopian interlocutors would indeed have affirmed.

At the end of his text of the Psalms and biblical canticles, however, Potken returned to this idea, asserting the even greater antiquity of the Ethiopians’ Chaldean language. His Ethiopian language instructors, he wrote in an afterword, “believe that these letters, to which I have wanted to give you an introduction, are Chaldean, and affirm, with a constancy from which they could not be shaken by me, that Abraham and Heber and their ancestors as far back as their first parents used this Chaldean language.”¹⁰² Ethiopic Chaldean was thus as old as the Hebrew people itself; indeed it was the Hebrews’ own most ancient language. For Potken, then, the term Chaldean was clearly more than a neutral glottonym: it denoted the language’s great antiquity, its status as perhaps mankind’s original language, in a way that recalls both Ficino’s interest in Chaldean and Mithridates’s claims for it. Like Brocchi’s revised vision of Ethiopian Christianity, Potken’s assertions attest that the Vatican officials who first identified Ethiopic with Chaldean had rather grand ideas regarding the implications of that identification.

Though the Ethiopic Chaldean appellation survived into the seventeenth century and the association of Ethiopian Christianity with apostolic purity even longer, it appears that the rise of Protestantism and of Protestant-Catholic polemic channeled the appellation’s heritage into multiple, sometimes overlapping streams. Whereas in the first decades of the sixteenth century men working for the pope himself could trumpet the antiquity of Ethiopic Chaldean and the purity of Ethiopian Christianity, most later Catholics did not: the appellation survived among them, but as a neutral glottonym. Linguists represent a partial exception. A few, both Catholic and Protestant, continued to affirm that Ethiopic was, if not ancient Chaldean itself, certainly a descendant of it, and devised ever more elaborate theories to defend this view against its detractors. Only among Protestants, however, did the corollary notion of Ethiopian Christianity’s apostolic purity survive, serving as a weapon of implicit attack against Catholicism’s deviant novelties.

¹⁰¹Ibid.: “hac tempestate Viginti populi vel circa Ethiopiam, que sub Egipto est, et alia loca australia, presertim ad Nilum et Gion flumina . . . incolentes, et totidem maternis seu vulgaribus inter se differentibus linguis utentes, omnes in eorum sacris hac Chaldea utuntur lingua; et a tempore nascentis fidei christiane, sicut ipsi qui ex eis nos peregrinationis et devotionis causa accedunt, affirmant, usi fuerunt.”

¹⁰²Ibid, fol. 101^r: “Quod autem ipsi litteras has quarum initia vobis dare nixus sum, Chaldeas esse sentiant, quodque Abraham et Heber eorumque maiores ad primos usque parentes lingua hac Chaldea usi sint, constantia quadam, a qua divelli per me non potuerunt affirmant.”

First, the appellation spread before Johannes Potken's detractors could kill it off. As noted above, Potken claimed to have learned the term Chaldean from, but almost certainly introduced it to, his Ethiopian language teachers, who had several good reasons to embrace it. Two sources suggest that Ethiopians coming from Rome did indeed adopt Chaldean as a name for their sacred language and transmitted it to their interlocutors in other cities. Tomas and Yoḥannās, two Ethiopians who had lived in Rome since 1514, left on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella in 1516 and stopped for several weeks at the monastery of Santa Caterina in Pisa on the way. There they recounted the lives of several Ethiopian saints to the monastery's prior. The prior's written account of the lives has not surfaced, but it was consulted later in the century by Serafino Razzi (1531–1613) to fill out his collection of the lives of Dominican saints. He described Tomas as a "priest very learned in the Chaldean language, which is to [the Ethiopians] as Latin is to us," and reported that "his Holiness [the pope] wanted to hear friar Tomas perform the Mass in the Chaldean language."¹⁰³ Razzi's account is, of course, two steps removed from the oral testimony of the Roman Ethiopians in 1516. Just a few years later, however, a similar report came out of Venice. An enthusiast of Ethiopia named Alessandro Zorzi had, by his own account, been compiling information about the country since the 1480s. The data he collected prior to 1523 made no mention of Chaldean. But the records he made of his interviews with two Ethiopians in 1523 and 1524 — one of whom certainly came to Venice from Rome — both included references to their Chaldean language and script.¹⁰⁴ The most direct proof of Roman Ethiopians' acceptance of the term Chaldean comes two decades later. In 1548 the scholar Täsfa Şəyon (fl. 1536–52), who had been living in Rome for over a decade, published an Ethiopic edition of the New Testament in which he asserted that this language, which he himself, in proper Ethiopian fashion, called Gə'əz, "is by common people called Chaldean."¹⁰⁵

In 1532 it was a Portuguese official, Damião de Goes (1502–74), who described the Ethiopians' language as Chaldean, in his translation of the letters

¹⁰³Lefevre, 1966, 19–21, 26.

¹⁰⁴Both Ethiopians were named Tomas. The first, described only as having come to Italy via Jerusalem, reported that "the classical language of this land is different from the common one, and the classical alphabet is Chaldean." The second, who reached Venice from Rome, described the obelisks of the ancient Ethiopian capital of Aksum as "engraved with large Chaldean letters." This second Tomas also reported the presence in Ethiopia of a Florentine who sought "to print Chaldean books in that land." Crawford, 166–67, 190–91.

¹⁰⁵Cited in Raineri, 1985, 125: "et vulgo dicitur Chaldaeae." Several European scholars, including Pietro Galatino and Paolo Giovio, seem to have adopted the term Chaldean through consultation of Potken or Täsfa Şəyon and their editions: *ibid.*, 120, 124.

sent by the Ethiopian royal court to the Portuguese Crown in 1513. The letters, he wrote, had already been translated “word by word from the Chaldean language, which they especially use, into Portuguese,” and were now offered in a Latin translation; he also described one of the ambassadors sent from Ethiopia as a man “learned in the Chaldean language.”¹⁰⁶ The following year the Portuguese priest Francisco Alvares, who had spent six years in Ethiopia and returned to Europe as an emissary of the Ethiopian *nəguś*, was received by Pope Clement VII in Rome; in preparation for his visit, the papal master of ceremonies consulted the work of his predecessor, Paride Grassi, regarding the earlier Ethiopian delegation of 1481, which of course would have confirmed the identification of Ethiopic as Chaldean.¹⁰⁷ The appellation is found again in Rome seven years later, when the newly founded Jesuit order adopted Loyola’s *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (1540). That text, as well as Loyola’s letters regarding missions to Ethiopia, treated Chaldean as the normal term for the Ethiopians’ language, though whether *Gə‘əz* or a vernacular was intended is not always clear.¹⁰⁸ A thorough survey would doubtless uncover more sixteenth-century references to Ethiopic Chaldean. Here it may suffice to note that the appellation was still in use among Jesuit missionaries and Vatican Library personnel in the Seicento.¹⁰⁹

Apart from the oral testimony of Roman Ethiopians, which survives in too indirect a form to judge, the persons named above seem to have treated Chaldean as a neutral glottonym. Täsfa Şəyon, as his brief reference indicates, considered it an alternate term used by uneducated persons — perhaps meaning only Europeans, perhaps including fellow Ethiopians in

¹⁰⁶Goes, fols. A3^v–A4^r: “ad verbum fere ex sermone Chaldaico, quo illi praecipue utuntur, in lusitanicum.” On the ambassador (not the famous Matthew the Armenian, but a subsequent envoy): “He was elderly, noble, by birth Abyssinian, a priest, and learned in sacred matters and in the Chaldean language” (“vir senex, nobilis, patria Ebessinus, sacerdos, sacrorum & Caldaicae linguae peritus”): fol. C1^r.

¹⁰⁷Lefevre, 1945, 426–27.

¹⁰⁸Cohen, 97, 142.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 102, for a 1619 Jesuit usage. *Ethiopic* was the more common term among Vatican librarians in the seventeenth century, but *Chaldean* continued to be used as an alternative. A codex once belonging to Guillaume Postel that joined the Vatican Library in 1623 was described as a “psalterium Abasinum Chaldaicum sive Aethiopicum” (“Abyssinian, Chaldean, or Ethiopian psalter”). An inventory of manuscripts to be transferred to the Vatican from the Ethiopian monastery of Santo Stefano in Rome in 1628 referred in general to “libri etiopici manoscritti” (“handwritten Ethiopian [or Ethiopic] books”; n.b., *etiopico* in Italian can mean either Ethiopic or Ethiopian), but also identified a “missale chaldaicum” (“Chaldean missal”): Grébaut and Tisserant, 15–16, 18. The Coptic language was also twice identified as Chaldean in sixteenth-century European accounts: see Hamilton, 116, 199.

Rome who had by then begun using the term themselves. Among the Europeans, Alessandro Zorzi was interested primarily in Ethiopian geography, and offered no commentary on the antiquity of the Ethiopians' language or the purity of their faith. Damião de Goes described Ethiopian Christianity as conforming with Catholicism — unlike the popes, who by this time considered ritual practices like circumcision an obstacle to the Ethiopians' communion with Rome — but he did not portray it as particularly ancient or apostolic.¹¹⁰ As for the Jesuits, some acknowledged that defenders of Ethiopian practices such as circumcision and observance of the Sabbath might cite the example of Christ and the apostles, but still rejected those practices as deviant.¹¹¹ When the Jesuits used the term *Chaldean*, therefore, it was not to evoke an ancient and pure religious practice: the Ethiopians were not Christian models to be emulated but heretics to be converted.

Among linguists, however, the term *Chaldean* continued to evoke a language of great antiquity, a candidate for, or at least close relation of, the mother language of humanity, and its association with Ethiopic proved durable. The *Chaldaeae seu Aethiopiae Linguae Institutiones* (Features of the Chaldean or Ethiopic language; 1552), written by Mariano Vittori in close collaboration with the Ethiopian scholar Täsfa Şəyon, supplanted the 1513 edition of Potken and Tomas Wäldä Samu'el as the basic reference for students of Ethiopic, and as such played a role in perpetuating this association. On the one hand, Vittori rejected some of Potken's central assertions. Where Potken had identified Chaldean as the language of Heber and Abraham, and thus presumably older than Hebrew, Vittori considered Hebrew the mother of the other languages. Indeed, Vittori did not even consider Chaldean to be Ethiopic, but rather Aramaic. He did, however, assert that "Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic descend from Chaldean, for which reason they too are called Chaldean."¹¹²

By this logic it would be as correct to call Ethiopic "Chaldean" as to call Italian "Latin." But that is exactly what Vittori did. He used Chaldean as an alternate appellation throughout, for instance in offering a chart of the "Chaldean or Ethiopic alphabet or syllabary," or in observing that "there are twenty-six letters among the Chaldaeans or Ethiopians," and of course his title itself presented the two glottonyms as interchangeable. Customary usage thus seems to have been the reason for Vittori's choice. Despite his rejection of most

¹¹⁰Goes, fols. A6^v–B1^v. On papal views see, for instance, Leo X's 1515 letter to the negus Lebna Dengel protesting circumcision in Raineri, 2003, 45–46.

¹¹¹See, for instance, Cohen, 161–86.

¹¹²Vittori, in the dedicatory letter on the unnumbered folio [3^r]: "a Chaldaeae pendet Syriaca, Arabica, & Aethiopia, quamobrem Chaldaeae ipsae quoque ex eo sunt appellatae."

of Potken's claims, he accepted the assertion that Ethiopians themselves used the term *Chaldean*; Vittori's preface referred to "the Ethiopic language, which the Ethiopians call Chaldean (perhaps because it is sprung from Babylonian Chaldean)."¹¹³ As noted above, there is some evidence that Ethiopians in Europe had accepted this appellation after its introduction. By 1552, Potken's claim that Ethiopians themselves employed this glottonym seems to have become self-fulfilling, and the repetition of that claim in 1552 doubtless added to the authority of an association between Ethiopic and Chaldean.

In essence, the *Institutiones* provided ballast both for those who wished to identify Ethiopic with Chaldean (by treating the terms as interchangeable) and for those who did not (by specifying that Chaldean was more properly applied to Aramaic and that Ethiopic was merely descended from it). Thereafter, the main line of comparative linguistic study belonged to the latter. In 1554, just two years after Vittori's and Täsfa Şəyon's work, Angelo Canini (1521–57) published his own *Institutiones Linguae Syriacae, Assyriacae atque Thalmudicae, una cum Aethiopicae atque Arabicae Collatione* (Features of the Syriac, Assyrian, and Talmudic languages, with comparison to the Ethiopic and Arabic), which represented a notable advance in comparative linguistics by offering morphological comparisons of Aramaic with Hebrew, Ethiopic, and Arabic. His principal scholarly reference was Sebastian Münster, who, like Canini himself, focused primarily on the characteristics of Aramaic and who, it will be remembered, was Potken's earliest critic regarding the identification of Ethiopic as Chaldean. It is not surprising, therefore, that Canini followed the line of reasoning in which Münster and Vittori agreed: Chaldean referred to Aramaic, not Ethiopic (for which Canini used "lingua aethiopica"), and the similarities between these two languages and Arabic were a result of their common descent from Hebrew.¹¹⁴

A half-century later, however, the theory that Ethiopic sprang from ancient Chaldea was reinvigorated. In 1610 the Reformed theologian Kaspar Waser (1565–1625) reasserted the Chaldean origin of Ethiopic, having found a historical explanation for the language's migration from Chaldea to Ethiopia: "They [the Abyssinians] truly call themselves Chaldeans, and not without reason. Their most elegant and very ancient language, in which are written their sacred and profane books, derives from Chaldea and Assyria. The old *Historia ecclesiastica*, and from it Nicephorus at book 9, chapter 18, mentions that many colonies were brought from Assyria to Ethiopia, the country of the Abyssinians, and that they used the Chaldean language in the

¹¹³Ibid., fol. [8]: "Aethiopicam linguam, quam Chaldaeam vocant Aethiopes, veluti quae a Chaldaeae babilonica exoriatur."

¹¹⁴Contini, 88, 91, 92n70.

time of Justinian.”¹¹⁵ Waser is, to my knowledge, the first European scholar to cite Nicephorus Callistus in order to explain how Chaldean came to Ethiopia, and it was doubtless this discovery that gave new life to the appellation. It will be remembered that Nicephorus’s work, once translated into Latin in 1553, was widely read and praised by European scholars. Clearly Waser and his contemporaries interpreted the passage in question as asserting the Assyrian origins of the Ethiopians and their language, and seized upon it as a proof of their theories.

In 1636 the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1601–80) proffered an argument similar to that of Waser. Citing, again, Nicephorus on a migration from Assyria to Ethiopia, he opined, “Could it be that colonies emigrating from Syria to Egypt, Ethiopia, and neighboring regions brought with them the Syriac language and its script? Many arguments seem to prove the truth of this conjecture. And firstly, this Ethiopic language, with a few exceptions, is certainly similar to Syriac or Chaldean.”¹¹⁶ In 1657, in the prolegomena to his polyglot Bible, Brian Walton, bishop of Chester (1600–61), repeated the notion again. Though he named Joseph Scaliger as his source, Walton’s quotation is in fact from Kaspar Waser: the Ethiopians “call themselves Chaldaeans, and not without reason, for this most elegant and ancient language in which their sacred and profane books are written derives closely from the Chaldean or Assyrian.”¹¹⁷ And either via Waser or through his own reading of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Walton too cited the authority of Nicephorus Callistus that “colonies once migrated from Assyria into Ethiopia and introduced the Chaldean language.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵Waser, fol. 89^r: “Ipsi vero vocant se Chaldaeos. Neque frustra. Lingua enim elegantissima & vetustissima, qua libros sacros & profanos conscriptos habent, proxime abest a Chaldaea & Assyria. Colonias deinde multas ex Assyria in Aethiopiam, quae Abassenorum est regio, traductas refert vetus Historia Ecclesiastica, & ex eadem Nicephorus libro IX cap. XVIII, & lingua Chaldaica, etiam temporibus Justiniani, eas usas fuisse.” The “ex eadem” here is misleading, for the *Historia ecclesiastica* was Nicephorus’s own work and not one of his sources.

¹¹⁶Kircher, 46: “An illud forsitan, quod e Syria in Aegyptum, & Aethiopiam utpote confines regiones traductae Coloniae, & linguae Syrae, & characterum fuerunt traditricae? Certe argumenta quamplurima coniecturae factae veritatem comprobare videntur. At primo quidem ipsa Aethiopica lingua, quae si pauca exceperis, Syrae, vel Chaldaeae . . . prorsus affinis est.” The direct citation of Nicephorus occurs on 47–48.

¹¹⁷Walton, 1:99 (in the prolegomena): “Scaliger etiam testatur, *quod se appellant Chaldaeos, idque non sine causa, quia lingua elegantissima et vetustissima, qua libros sacros et profanos conscriptos habent, proxime abest a Chaldaea vel Assyriaca.*” Scaliger did describe Ethiopic as very elegant and stated that the Ethiopians themselves called it Chaldean, but in Scaliger’s opinion the language was closer to Hebrew: Scaliger, 680.

¹¹⁸Ibid.: “Multas enim Colonias ex Assyria in Aethiopiam olim transmigrasse, quae et linguam Chaldaicam secum introduxerint, refert Niceph. Lib. 9 cap. 18 ex antiqua Historia ecclesiastica.”

Given that a competing and majoritarian tradition identified Chaldean with Aramaic, those scholars wedded to the notion of Ethiopic's descent from ancient Chaldean concocted ever more complicated explanations to reconcile these views. In 1552, Mariano Vittori had briefly mentioned the existence of three *genera* of Chaldean-Ethiopic: one he called "maternal," one "Babylonian," and the third "sacred or free."¹¹⁹ Eighty years later, Kircher claimed to have learned from Ethiopians in Rome that two scripts were used in Ethiopia: that used by the common people, in other words the vernacular, was called "free" or "Gə'əz," while the other, used in the past only by priests and the learned, was called "sacred" or "Suriano." The latter, for Kircher, was Chaldean (i.e., Syriac) and explained why the language of Ethiopia later came to be called Chaldean.¹²⁰ Presumably Kircher's Ethiopian interlocutors were explaining the difference between Gə'əz and Amharic, Ethiopia's sacred and vernacular languages, which in fact employ the same script. With some borrowings from Vittori's terminology, however, Kircher made Ethiopic (Gə'əz) into the vernacular language, allowing the more exalted, sacred language to be identified with Syriac-Chaldean, and claimed that the two employed distinct scripts, as Ethiopic and Syriac did. Vittori's and Kircher's comments were then repeated by Brian Walton, who seems to have found the notion of multiple dialects a way to reconcile the notion of Aramaic-Chaldean's importation into Ethiopia with Kircher's assertion of Syriac-Chaldean's similar journey.¹²¹

Even this brief survey illustrates how the identification of Ethiopic as Chaldean influenced scholarly investigations of the language into the later seventeenth century. Though scholars after Potken retreated from the notion that Ethiopic was ancient Chaldean itself, several sought to justify the appellation by describing the relationship between the two languages. They took seriously the claim that the term was in use in Ethiopia, observed the similarities between Ethiopic and the other languages also called Chaldean, and adduced authorities that seemed to offer a historical explanation for how Chaldean reached Ethiopia and evolved into Ethiopic. The genealogy of Ethiopic interested them primarily in relation to current debates over the first or mother tongue of humanity, or even simply as a means of identifying more precisely the relationships between Eastern languages.

But their interest could also include, as it did with the Anglican bishop Brian Walton, evaluative judgments on Ethiopian culture. The antiquity of Chaldean was for Walton a proof of its dignity and importance, one reflected in the daughter languages it had spawned. Though he considered Hebrew to

¹¹⁹Vittori, 22^f.

¹²⁰Kircher, 47.

¹²¹Walton, 1:99.

be the older or parent language, Chaldean “is so ancient that it vies with Hebrew in its antiquity. . . . Its dignity is evident in its having been the vernacular language among the Assyrians and in Babylon, since Babylon was the first and most noble city after the Flood . . . wherefore even today the vestiges of this language are to be found in all the Oriental regions, in Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Judea, Armenia, indeed even in Ethiopia among the Abyssinians, all of which contemporary languages echo with Chaldaisms, and thereby declare themselves openly to be descended from it.”¹²²

These ancient origins of the Ethiopic language were matched by the antiquity of Ethiopian religious practice. “To judge by the copies we have edited, their [the Ethiopians’] Old Testament was translated from the Greek Septuagint version,” Walton (correctly) observed, “which, as transmitted by the apostles, was held in the highest honor in the early Church, as everyone knows.” The Ethiopians’ “ancient rituals,” too, proved the apostolic origins of Ethiopian Christianity. Walton gave several proofs of its early origins: observance of the Sabbath as well as Sunday could be found in the “most ancient canons,” but had passed away in other churches by the sixth century; the dipping of the Eucharistic bread in the wine and the avoidance of eating blood were customs that had disappeared by the sixth century from all the other Christian communities of Asia and the West, but they had been upheld in the Canons of the Apostles and were still practiced, uniquely, by the Ethiopians.¹²³ Wendy Belcher has observed that, especially from the 1680s forward, “Roman Catholic dissenters and then the Protestant churches began to use the Habesha [Ethiopian Orthodox] church more and more regularly in polemics against the Roman Catholic Church . . . attacking it as fallen in comparison with the Habesha church.”¹²⁴ Such attitudes were to be found already in Walton’s mid-seventeenth-century work.

CONCLUSION

On one hand, Mithridates’s imposture could be called the false premise upon which two more centuries of false statements were built: that the Ethiopians themselves traditionally called their language Chaldean; that ancient Mesopotamian migrants had brought it to Ethiopia; that the imported language was Aramaic or Syriac or

¹²²Ibid., 1:82: “Antiquitas tanta est, ut cum ipsa Hebraica de antiquitate contendat. . . . Dignitatem etiam hujus linguae ostendit, quod Babylone & Assyriis vernacula fuit, cum illa prima & nobilissima esset post Diluvium urbs . . . & hodie in omnibus fere Orientis Regionibus hujus linguae reliquiae adhuc manent; ut in Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Judaea, Armenia, imo & in Aethiopia apud Abyssinos, quarum omnium linguae hodiernae Chaldaismum redolent, & ex ea se ortum ducere aperte clamant.”

¹²³Ibid., 1:98–99.

¹²⁴Belcher, 66.

both; and that Ethiopic differed from it because Ethiopic was not the country's sacred and learned language, but an indigenous vernacular. Whatever their errors, the authors of these statements contributed to European assessments of Ethiopia, for in claiming the ancient origins of its sacred language and, more fitfully, the apostolic character of its sacred rites, they countered a portrait of Ethiopia as a land of perfidious heretics and rudimentary culture.

More surprising, perhaps, is that this false premise helped to fuel accurate discoveries. The assumption of the Ethiopic language's great antiquity may have inspired Walton to investigate the antiquity of Ethiopia's religious practice too, and he was right about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's early foundation, its use of a Bible based on the Septuagint, and its preservation of practices abandoned by other Christian communities. But the greatest contribution born of Mithridates's fraud was linguistic. Once the Vatican officials had declared Ethiopic to be Chaldean, it fell to interested scholars to refute or modify the claim. In so doing they necessarily compared Ethiopic with Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, and even Arabic, noting the important differences but acknowledging as well the similarities. Only near the end of the eighteenth century would these various languages be classified as belonging to a Semitic language family.¹²⁵ But that an African language was even suspected to be part of this language group, and the early recognition of Ethiopic's Semitic characteristics, owed much to Mithridates's fifteenth-century imposture.

Though it is amusing to trace two centuries' worth of serious scholarly reflection back to a hoax, it must be conceded that Mithridates's imposture was not in itself sufficient to establish Ethiopic Chaldean as a reputable appellation and theory. The midwives of the idea were those Vatican officials of the first decade of the sixteenth century who collated manuscripts, compared scripts, deduced provenance, and, it would seem, discussed the implications of their findings. Through them one can trace how a faulty premise, confirmed through solid methodological practice, corresponded to broader philosophical assumptions of their age: namely, the existence of an ancient Chaldean wisdom that confirmed the truths of Christianity. Finally, at the risk of overextending a metaphor, the Ethiopian monks of Santo Stefano might be called the idea's early nursemaids, for in lending their assent to the appellation they endowed it with the authority of their indigenous knowledge of Ethiopian culture, an imprimatur that many later supporters of the idea would cite. Together these various actors, each with their own motives, left their imprint on lasting debates over mankind's mother language and the relationships among its descendants that proved both quixotic and productive of real intellectual advance.

¹²⁵The term Semitic was first employed in print by A. L. de Schlözer in 1781: see Baasten.

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