

ANOINTING OF THE ETHIOPIAN EMPEROR

The most powerful prince succeeded to the Ethiopian throne immediately upon the death or removal of a sovereign, but his enthronement had to be legitimized sooner or later by the solemn anointment at the hands of the metropolitan. The time, the place, and to some extent the manner of the coronation varied throughout Ethiopian history. The question of whether the empress should be crowned at the same time was also left to the discretion of the new sovereign.

Traditionally, the [cathedral](#) of Zion in Axum was the venue, although several other churches have increasingly played a role in the coronation practice since around 1500. The investiture was conducted in three phases—the prelude, the anointment, and the sequel. The site and the occasion were announced at least a month earlier to the public, who were encouraged to attend. An immense banquet was prepared, and the royal articles were brought to the altar to be prayed upon for about fourteen days. Throughout the night preceding the anointment, prayers were held in the church in which the emperor also took part.

He left in the morning for a particular place where he then nominated officials to key posts, decorated the grandees of the empire, and led them all in a procession that had to pass a few hurdles before entering the church. He was intercepted by a group of “virgins of Zion” who stretched a silk thread across his path and posed questions pertaining to his person and intentions. His response that he was the King of Kings of Ethiopia being twice rejected, the questions were reiterated for the third time, and he cut the thread with his sword and continued on his way, thereby symbolizing the obstacles he might encounter in his reign and his determination to surmount them.

A group of clergymen then led him singing to the accompaniment of the drum, sistrum, and sticks. The procession again halted, as the church gate was shut and as the singing clergy from within posed questions. The

singing clergy from outside replied, and the gate opened. The sovereign spread gold pieces, thereby symbolizing that the [kingdom](#) of heaven would not be gained by force but by the giving of alms. The convocation culminated with the process of anointment.

When the emperor sat on his throne, the metropolitan administered to him a solemn oath to remain loyal to the Orthodox faith, to rule with justice, and to defend the state and the religion. The metropolitan confirmed the oath by an anathema against all opponents to his rule and urged the people to rally behind their sovereign. A special mass was then celebrated with a great deal of readings from the Holy Scriptures and the works of the fathers, in the course of which the ABUN dipped his thumb in the ointment and anointed the emperor on the forehead, the chest, and the shoulders.

Then he blessed the regal articles consisting of the crown, a robe, a golden sword, two golden spears, an orb, and a diamond ring, which were handed to the emperor one by one, pronouncing the idea each represented. An official announced to the huge crowd waiting outside that the elect of [God](#) was now anointed King of Kings of Ethiopia. The army responded with thundering rifle volleys and 101 gun salutes, the [women](#) with ululations, and the men with songs and dances. Finally, the emperor went to a specified place where he sat on his throne with the *abun* to his right and the ECCAGE to his left. He declared himself the shepherd of his people by reading aloud to his subjects from the [Psalms](#) and had the basic principles of his rule spelled out through a herald. The ceremony was concluded by a series of rich feasts that lasted for a minimum of seven days.

[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

- Guèbrè Sellasié. *Chronique du règne de Ménélik II, roi des rois d'Ethiopie*, trans. Tèsfa Sellassié, pp. 264-78. Paris, 1930-1931.
- Ludolphus, J. A New [History](#) of Ethiopia. Being a Full and Accurate

Description of the [Kingdom](#) of Abessinia, Vulgarly Though Erroneously Called the Empire of Prester John, pp. 207-209. London, 1682.

- Mahtama-Sellase Walda-Masqal. *Zekra Nagar*, pp. 727-42. Addis Ababa, 1962; 2nd ed., 1969-1970.
- Rossini, C., ed. *Historia Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad)*. In [CSCO](#) 20, *Scriptores Aetiopici* 3, pp. 78-80.
- Tafla, B., ed. "A Chronicle of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-89)." In *Äthiopistische Forschungen* 1, ed. Ernst Hammerschmidt. Wiesbaden, 1977.
- Varenbergh, J. "Studien zur abessinischen Reichsordnung (Ser'ata Mangest)." *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 30 (1915-1916):1-45.

BAYRU TAFLA

Tags: [History](#)