

MARQOS I (d. 1530)

He belonged to a group of Coptic prelates that had come to [Ethiopia](#) in 1481 with Abuna Yeshaq II and was supposed to assume the duties of metropolitan after Yeshaq's [death](#) since he was his principal coadjutor. Thus, when Yeshaq II died near the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was no vacancy in the see, for Marqos I succeeded him immediately. For a long while, historians did not understand this order of succession, mainly because Francisco Alvares, chaplain of the first Portuguese mission in Ethiopia (1520-1526), did not explain this matter clearly in his account, of which one phrase was translated into English as follows: "Whilst we were here the Abuna Ya'qob died, to whom this one who is now living succeeded." Rossini, however, has shown that this phrase should in fact be understood to mean that during Alvares' sojourn in Ethiopia, the Coptic [bishop](#) Ya'qob died, who was coadjutor to Marqos and was supposed to succeed Marqos, but did not do so because he died first.

There is little information about this metropolitan in the Ethiopian documents. According to the Life of Marha Krestos (d. 1497), ninth abbot of Dabra Libanos, Marqos was present at the transference of the relics of Saint Takla Haymanot, founder of this monastery, but this occurred before Marqos acceded to the supreme throne. According to the *Liber Axumae*, Marqos I died in 1522 of the Ethiopian calendar (A.D. 1529-1530). Thus, he lived in [Ethiopia](#) half a century and held the position of metropolitan for approximately three decades, to a very advanced age. In fact, he considered himself to be more than a hundred years old.

There is, however, more information about Marqos I in the account of Alvares, who had many meetings with him. While noting the inconveniences caused by the fact that in all [Ethiopia](#) the metropolitan alone had the right to ordain deacons and priests, Alvares described the ceremony during which Marqos I ordained 2,537 priests all at the same time and in which he was thus obligated to limit himself to a very short

allocution warning the priesthood against the sins of bigamy and concubinage.

Further, Marqos I recounted to Alvares that in 1508 he had contributed to the success of Queen Elleni, widow of Negus Zar'a Ya'qob, in having the eleven-year-old son of Negus Na'od, Lebna Dengel, elected to the royal throne. This she achieved by removing all others who had a claim thereto. On 12 January 1521, Alvares saw Marqos I at the ceremony of the transference of the bones of Na'od. On this occasion the metropolitan seemed to be so old that two men had to sustain him by his arms. Marqos I also told Alvares that before the arrival of Abuna Yeshaq II in 1481, the [church](#) in [Ethiopia](#) had remained without a metropolitan for some twenty-three years. Alvares was acquainted with the ECCAGE, the title reserved for the abbot of Dabra Libanos, head of all the Ethiopian monks, who related that he was a converted Muslim and had been ordained by Abuna Marqos, "who regarded him as his own son." This high prelate was Enbaqom, eleventh abbot of Dabra Libanos, well known in Ethiopian literary history for his translations from Arabic.

Finally, three delicate questions remain concerning this metropolitan. First, in 1509, Queen Elleni, the guardian of Lebna Dengel, had written a letter to Manuel I, king of Portugal, in which she proposed an alliance against the Mamluk power in the Red Sea. The letter stated that this overture had been made with the blessings of Marqos I, and certain authors (e.g., Jean Aubin) find in this statement proof that Marqos I thought that he could resolve the problems besetting the [church](#) in [Ethiopia](#) by joining with the [church](#) of Rome. However, this view seems excessive, for the metropolitan must have known of the doctrinal differences separating the two churches. It is therefore difficult to believe that in 1509, with no concrete threat present, Marqos I was thinking of allying himself with the Catholic church.

Second, in 1535, Joao Bermudez, the physician of the first Portuguese mission to Ethiopia, appeared in Rome. Ten years earlier, when the

mission had returned to Europe, Bermudez had chosen to remain in [Ethiopia](#) at the request of Lebna Dengel. Now Bermudez related that Lebna Dengel had asked Marqos I, who was then on his deathbed, to name Bermudez “patriarch” (i.e., metropolitan of Ethiopia). Marqos I complied with this request and even conferred all the holy orders upon Bermudez, who accepted the investiture, providing that the pope in Rome confirm it. Lebna Dengel then directed Bermudez to go to Rome to make “an act of obedience” to the pope. According to Bermudez, Pope Paul III (1534-1549) then confirmed him as metropolitan of the [church](#) in Ethiopia. The subsequent vicissitudes of Bermudez in Ethiopia concern the bishopric of Yosab I, but nonetheless it must be remembered that the supposed elevation of Bermudez by Marqos I is considered a fabrication.

The third question involves Alvares’ claim that Marqos I, aware of the vagaries of the [church](#) in Ethiopia, admired the faith of the Portuguese mission to the point that he declared that, thanks to the Portuguese, the Ethiopians would not miss “returning to the truth of the Gospel.” From this, certain writers have deduced that Marqos I had at least wished to have his own succession governed by the Roman church. However, as Lanfranco Ricci has observed, while there are Portuguese texts favorable to the Catholic position, such as Alvares’ account, there are also Ethiopian texts opposing it, such as the Life of ‘Enbaqom, according to which this abbot argued with Alvares and “converted him to the orthodox faith of the Jacobites,” which must be read with great care.

Thus, the successor to Marqos I was not Joao Bermudez but rather Yosab I, the Coptic [bishop](#) who arrived in [Ethiopia](#) after the end of the great Islamic invasion led by Grann, “the Left-Handed One.”

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