

Karin Pallaver, Gian Luca Podestà (eds.), *Una moneta per l'impero. Pratiche monetarie, economia e società nell'Africa Orientale Italiana*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2021, pp. 225.

The volume edited by Karin Pallaver and Gian Luca Podestà is the result of a research conducted within the PRIN project (2015), funded by the Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research): this work represents the first study that reconstructs the process of introducing currencies in the Italian colonies of East Africa. This analysis enhances new sources, while indicating unprecedented research perspectives, for a field of the economic and financial history of European and, in particular, Italian colonialism that has been too often overlooked. The volume, characterized by a multidisciplinary approach, boasts the collaboration between Africanist historians, economic historians and historians of Italian colonialism, who have given their contribution through the eight essays making up the volume.

The eight case studies in the volume draw inspiration from the numerous analyses of African monetary systems, extensively investigated by historians and anthropologists interested in studying African economic structures and institutions, providing an overall look at the history of Italian monetary policies in Africa: these, in fact, were characterized by "several failures, which shed light on the limits of the colonial state's ability to control African economies and monetary systems" (p. 12).

The volume tries to explain that the adoption of a new monetary system in the African colonies was not only an essential element for the functioning of the colonial economy, but also had an important symbolic value in the context of that "civilization process of African societies, which was a fundamental component of the European colonial project", and which constituted one of the main justifications of the colonial project (p. 9). The export and imposition of a monetary system, modelled on that of the mother country, was a process characterized by numerous failures, often caused by the inadequacy of the Italian colonial administration and by the inability to understand the complexity of the monetary practices of African societies. The volume highlights, in the case of the Italian dominions in East Africa, the "strategic and operational differences between the central and the colonial government", trying to make comparisons, relationships and parallels "with monetary practices and policies of other historical and geographical contexts" (p. 14).

In contrast to West Africa, the monetary history of East Africa, apart from some analyses focused on British East Africa, has been little

studied: for this reason, the historiography is lacking in insights into the Italian colonies. Through the analysis of African monetary systems, however, it is possible to study the economic and social history of Africa during the Italian colonial period and understand the ways in which the European colonial powers tried to impose their hegemony and the responses of the local populations to these practices: in fact, “European attempts to standardize and rationalize African monetary systems” were constantly opposed, often leading to open protests by the African society (p. 12). The attitudes of the African populations, as stated by the editors of the volume, can be interpreted “both as a contestation of the prerogatives of the colonial power, and as the result of the articulation and superimposition of various pre-existing monetary and economic circuits which were in contradiction with an idea of coincidence between the colonial state, space and political control” (p. 12). Despite the fact that the Europeans had delineated clear borders between the various African possessions, these remained, however, “porous throughout the colonial period and therefore continued to be crossed by African merchants who exchanged their goods by continuing to use the pre-colonial currencies in addition to the European ones” (pp. 12-13).

During the first years in Eritrea, the Italians had concentrated their colonial interests in the control of commercial exchanges, which involved above all the port of Massawa: this, in the centuries preceding the landing of the Italians, had been and would continue to be crossed by important caravan routes.¹ The poverty of the possessions, induced by the lack of natural resources of the conquered territories, was one of the most problematic factors of the Italian colonial experience, therefore the “enhancement” of the territories was mainly oriented towards the commercial sector and, in particular, towards agriculture. In this way the Italian ruling class was convinced that it had favoured the valorisation and insertion of the colonial territories in the international market. However, the lands facing the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula, according to different methods and measures, were already included in the networks of international trade even before the arrival of the Italians.² In fact, not counting internal and infra-African traffic, in the

¹ N. Labanca, *Oltremare, Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2002, p. 274.

² The most important publications: Y. Mesghenna, *Italian colonialism: a case of study of Eritrea, 1869-1934. Motive, praxis and result*, studentlitteratur, Lund, 1988; R. Pankhurst, “Some notes on the historical and economic geography of the Meşewa area (1520-1885)”, in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 13, 1, 1975, pp. 89-116; G.B. Beccari, *Guida descrittiva economica e commerciale dei porti più rag-*

centuries preceding the arrival of the Italians, products directed to Arabia and India or to the internal regions of Africa passed through the Eritrean coasts; livestock and related products were sent from the ports of Somalia to the Arabian Peninsula; finally, products from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were destined to the East, West and Europe.³

In Eritrea, historically considered as a territory of transit, there were numerous international communities, mostly dedicated to commercial activities. The group of Europeans consisted above all of professionals involved in the export of products coming from the interior or fished in the Red Sea. Among the products they dealt with, the following stood out: hides, mother of pearl, coffee, eraser, ivory, which was, however, handled in smaller quantities because it was monopolized by the Indians, and plant products used in the chemical industry.⁴ Exports were then joined by the importation of European products,

guardevoli del Mar Rosso. Il pellegrinaggio mussulmano ed il canale di Suez, Tip. Galassi, Montevarchi 1880; E. Kurimoto, "Trade relations between western Ethiopia and the Nile valley during the nineteenth century", in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, v. 28, n. 1, 1995, pp. 53-68; R. Pankhurst, "The history of Ethiopia's relations with India prior to the nineteenth century", in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (Pices) 4*, v. 1, 1974, pp. 205-311; R. Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia, from Early Times to 1800*, Lalibela House, London 1961; R. Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935*, Haile Sellassie I University Press, Addis Ababa 1968; A.H. Abdussamad, "Trade Relations of the Northern Ethiopia with Italian Eritrea 1903-19352", in *Africa*, 52 (3), 1997, pp. 416-430.

³ On this topic see, for instance: R. Pankhurst, "The 'banyan', or Indian, presence at Massawa, the Dahlak islands and the Horn of Africa", in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 12, 1974, pp. 185-212; J. Miran, *Facing the land, facing the sea. Commercial transformation and urban dynamics in the Red Sea port of Massawa, 1840s-1900s*, Ph.D. (History), Michigan State University, 2003; R. Pankhurst, "Indian Trade with Ethiopia, the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", in *Cahiers d'études africaines*, v. 14, n. 55, 1974, pp. 453-497; J. Miran, "Endowing Property and Edifying Power in a Red Sea Port: Waqf, Arab Migrant Entrepreneurs, and Urban Authority in Massawa, 1860s-1880s", in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, v. 42, n. 2, 2009, pp.151-178; J. Miran, "Red Sea Translocals: Hadrami Migration, Entrepreneurship, and Strategies of Integration in Eritrea, 1840s-1970s", in *Northeast African Studies*, 2012, vol. 12, n. 1, pp. 129-167.

⁴ E.Q.M. Alamanni, *La Colonia Eritrea e i suoi commerci: esame analitico del movimento generale d'importazione ed esportazione dei possessi e protettorati italiani*, F.lli Bocca, Torino 1891, p. 284. See also: M. Zaccaria, "Italian Approaches to Economic resources in the Red Sea region", in *Eritrean Studies review*, 5, 1, 2007, pp. 113-155.

such as silk fabrics, yarns and glass beads. Within the group of Europeans, then, the Greeks stood out as they practiced petty trade. The “Bania”,⁵ on the other hand, a rich community who had been living in Eritrea and the archipelagos facing the coasts of the Colony since the end of the 16th century, practiced above all the export of ivory to be sent to Bombay, as well as of gold and pearls, which escaped any customs inspection. Imports from India mainly concerned special fabrics, gauzes, muslins, with the addition of ordinary raw cotton, which were sold at a lower price than the Swiss ones, even though the latter were the cheapest ever. Finally, the peoples of Arab origin, who were the most committed community in the Horn of Africa, had been involved for centuries in the trade between the two shores of the Red Sea and in exchanges with Syria and Egypt.⁶

With regard to the currencies used in the context of the exchanges carried out in the Horn of Africa, one of the exemplary cases that have been explored in the volume is that of the Thaler of Maria Theresa. This coin, minted in Vienna since the eighteenth century, but now out of circulation and without legal value, circulated already in the area of the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean well before the beginning of Italian colonialism. Despite several attempts, the Italian administration never managed to replace it: this failure was “certainly due to the roots, even symbolic, of this currency and to the specific uses made of it by the African populations” (p. 13). In fact, the Thaler was used in numerous transactions, such as in the case of interregional trade as a means of exchange, accounting currency and store of value: this function is explained in the second essay written by Alessandro De Cola, in which the author analyses the various theories of colonial literature for the construction of a colonial monetary system and the replacement of the Thaler (p. 71).

The ruinous monetary management in Eritrea and Ethiopia from the settlement on the Eritrean coast at the end of the 19th century to the loss of East Africa and the uses that the local population could make of the coins – such as in the production of jewellery and in the context of monetary practices apparently similar to those of Europe under the old regime – is treated in the essay by Gian Luca Podestà, in which the author describes the “clash” between two conceptions of money: “the Western/Italian one which tries to impose a national and generalist

⁵ The “Bania” were important Indian traders well integrated into the trade networks between the East and the West. On their presence and their activities in the Horn of Africa see: R. Pankhurst, *The “banyan”, or Indian, presence at Massawa*, pp. 185-212.

⁶ E.Q.M. Alamanni, *La Colonia Eritrea e i suoi commerci*, p. 285.

currency (multipurpose) to integrate the economy of the colony into that of the motherland and assert its domination, and the local one linked to a practical/conjunctural vision of the medium of exchange and more concentrated on the different possible functions (also, but not only monetary) that an object can cover" (p. 37).

The study of Claudio Sessa presents a further ruinous case of Italian monetary policies, namely that of the Italian silver rupee, introduced in Somalia in 1910, which definitively disappeared in 1925, when the lira was introduced. The project, which was marred by inadequate planning, had the ambition of "placing the colony within an international context of commercial and financial exchanges" and the "precise objective of protecting the internal balance from fluctuations in the thaler", transformed over time into a political-economic disaster "which brought the colony to the brink of bankruptcy" (p. 95).

In the fourth essay, edited by Silvia Bruzzi, the author deals with the monetary question by observing it from a gender perspective: the research, in fact, "analyses the monetary uses and the impact of the introduction of colonial currencies in the context of economic payments and social issues arising from marriage relationships and the payment of bride wealth, concubinage relationships and prostitution in the context of Libya and Eritrea" (p. 13).

Alessio Gagliardi, in his essay, delves into one of the most interesting topics regarding the question of Italian colonialism, namely the confusion and complexity of the administrative action in the empire, with the aim of explaining how the monetary policies of the state were implemented within this contradictory context. In fact, as the author states, the overlapping of different institutions and powers and the personal rivalries between the officials who worked in the motherland and those who worked in the colony "were part of the ordinary functioning of the administrative machine in charge of governing the imperial economy" (p. 136). The "administrative disorder", therefore, was reflected in the monetary system, "already characterized by a significant endogenous disorder, due to the coexistence that in fact was created between the lira introduced by the Italian authorities and Thaler of Maria Theresa" (p. 136).

Karin Pallaver, by reconstructing the events of the withdrawal of nickel coins during the Second World War, explains, from a further perspective, the contradictory and confused actions practiced by the central government and the colonial administrations, noting that, despite the withdrawal program, Italy failed to accumulate the amount of material necessary to deal with the conflict, and the essay recounts the inconsistencies and the "tensions of the empire", i.e. "between those who decided and therefore conceived the colonial project in the

motherland, and those who instead were in the colony to implement this project and who had a greater knowledge of local monetary systems and the preferences of those who used these currencies on a daily basis" (p. 162).

The seventh essay, written by Luca Puddu, intends to explain the formation of the "network of interests that moved the articulations of the British bureaucratic-military apparatus during the occupation regime" through the analysis of the monetary policy adopted by the British administration in Eritrea (p. 189). In fact, the latter did not hesitate to "exploit its government prerogatives to carry forward their respective particular agendas, favouring the integration of the territory into specific regional exchange networks or using the lira issue to reformulate the relations with the social body" (p. 189).

The concluding essay, written by Donatella Strangio, concerns Italy's postcolonial policies to expand its influence and indirect control over newly independent African countries, i.e. through the exploitation of economic, commercial and monetary practices (p. 212). The essay therefore analyses the preliminary acts of the decolonization process in Somalia which led to the creation of the Italian Trusteeship, focusing its attention on the Italian monetary policy, on the creation of economic institutes involved in the development of Somalia, as in the case of the "Cassa per la circolazione monetaria della Somalia", and the Italian-Somali clearing function.