

Call for Papers

Negotiating African Christian Pasts in Renaissance Europe: Transcontinental Knowledge Production, Representation, and Power

This international conference will take place from 10-11 June 2027 at the Leibniz Institute for European History (IEG), Mainz (Germany).

Renaissance Europe witnessed an unprecedented intensification of global connectivity. New maritime routes, diplomatic contacts, and expanding circuits of trade and communication drew European polities and intellectual communities into a wider world. This “widening of the world” was not only economic or geographical but entailed a profound transformation of cultural and religious knowledge. The ensuing religious and intellectual debate was further accelerated by the rise of the printing press which also allowed for an unprecedented level of circulation across Europe of travel accounts, maps, and pamphlets about Africa and Asia. The very media infrastructures that reshaped European publics thus helped make transcontinental encounters visible, albeit often heavily transformed, repurposed, and even distorted by those involved in the circulation of these news and knowledge.

Within this context, African Christianities emerged as a decisive reference point to discuss and query European intellectual traditions as well as scholarly practices. Travel accounts, diplomatic correspondence, and compilations rapidly expanded and deepened the awareness of Christian Ethiopia, which continued to be entwined with the long-lived imaginary of Prester John. At the same time, Coptic and Nubian Christianities were considered heirs of antiquity under Muslim rule, and the Kingdom of Kongo entered into sustained exchange with Portugal and Rome following its late-fifteenth-century Christianization. Knowledge about these Christianities circulated in Europe through Latin, Portuguese, Italian, and German texts, as well as through cartographic, artistic, and visual representations, meeting an increasing demand for information about African religious pasts and presents.

This conference invites papers that investigate how African Christian pasts were negotiated, mobilized, translated, contested, and re-situated within early modern European intellectual landscapes. While Christian Ethiopia remains a central anchor – because it offers particularly rich evidence for the dynamics of diplomacy, negotiation, and representation – we explicitly welcome contributions that extend the analysis to other African Christian contexts (Coptic/Egyptian, Nubian, Congolese, and beyond), and that explore their entanglements with European scholarship, imperial projects, confessional politics, and the history of knowledge.

A guiding premise of the conference is that the knowledge produced about African Christianities was rarely a unilateral European construction. It emerged from negotiations across asymmetrical power relations, shaped by the presence and agency of African actors – envoys, monks, clerics, translators, and intellectuals – who strategically positioned texts and objects related to African religious and cultural traditions within European centres of learning, patronage, and print. Yet European writings often enacted a double movement: incorporating African Christian pasts into familiar genealogies of ancient and “authentic” Christianity, while simultaneously distancing them through narratives of cultural otherness, spatial peripherality, or exoticization. This tension is particularly visible in the space–time constructions through which African Christian histories were located, periodized, and made usable for European

arguments about antiquity, purity, universality, and authority. Moreover, African Christian actors articulated not only their perceived sameness or difference from European Christianity, but also their awareness of shared traditions, parallel histories, and points of affinity with other African Christian communities, thus generating forms of Christian self-understanding that were internally connected as well as outward-facing.

We seek contributions that illuminate these processes of transcontinental knowledge production and representation: the making and unmaking of credibility; translation as transformation; the politics of reception, censorship, and omission; and the ways in which African Christianities were used to redraw boundaries within European historical consciousness – often while affirming Africa’s difference.

Possible topics include (but are not limited to):

- 1) Africa in Renaissance historiography and the history of knowledge
- 2) Translation, mediation, and the politics of textuality
- 3) Censorship, confession, and confessional uses of African pasts
- 4) Networks, diplomacy, and imperial entanglements
- 5) Space–time constructions and historical imagination
- 6) Connected African Christianities
- 7) Representations of African Christianities in visual and material sources

*The conference organisers are Nicole Reinhardt (IEG Mainz), Stanislau Paulau (Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg), and Eduardo Fernández Guerrero (Warburg Institute, London). We invite abstracts of no more than 500 words by **31 July 2026** at **africanpasts@ieg-mainz.de**. The abstract should outline the proposed paper’s focus, methodology, and relevance to the conference theme. Please include your name, institutional affiliation, and contact information with the abstract. Travel and accommodation costs of the successful applicants will be covered by the organisers.*