

The Very Model of a Modern Imperial City: Gondar, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Italian urbanism during the fascist era illustrates the disquieting compatibility between progressive planning practices and authoritarian political regimes. Cities built in Italian-occupied East Africa further demonstrate the extent to which modern urban design could participate in the coercive project of constructing imperial identities, both amongst Italian settlers and among African colonial subjects. As a case study in the design and construction of Ethiopian cities under Italian colonial rule, Gondar displays the themes of identity formation and ideological representation that animated urbanism in Italy's African empire.

Italian architects had long recognized that the modern practice of architecture was inseparable from the "rational" design of cities, and that urban planning was integral to the problem of housing the working class. City planners, whether Sittesque traditionalists from the Roman school of Gustavo Giovannoni or CIAM-affiliated modernists from the *Quadrante* circle, committed themselves to strengthening the city as the site of civic gathering and collective action, and aspired to use urban design to foster a mass identity on the part of the citizenry, in accord with the fascist regime's insistence on obedience and sacrifice. Italian planners and their patrons saw urbanism as one of many tools for reforming the everyday life of the public.

Gondar expanded dramatically in the late 1930s as a colonial administrative center for Italian East Africa.¹ The city bears witness to the ways colonial authorities and their planners used urban design to reconcile the fascist regime's demands for ideo-

logical representation with the practical needs of everyday life. Gondar exhibits a striking sensitivity to topography and historical preservation, yet exploits these insights to reinforce the colonial authorities' policies of racial and class segregation. The city also demonstrates the diversity of Italian architecture in Ethiopia, as state, institutional and private interests separately sought an appropriate formal expression for their facilities, sometimes employing experimental construction techniques in response to the logistical difficulties of building in such a remote location. Altogether, Gondar offers a valuable example for understanding the form and development of many cities throughout Ethiopia and other former Italian colonies in Africa.

Part of the difficulty in understanding Italian urban planning in East Africa stems from the fact that the Italians themselves were never quite sure why they had conquered Ethiopia and declared it the center of their new Empire. Their stated goals ranged from agricultural and demographic colonization to a desire for increased international prestige, all of which impacted the design of Italian colonial cities. And like the new towns built throughout Italy during the fascist period, the settlements of East Africa were constructed with an eye toward their role in state propaganda and an emphasis on their ability to help instill their inhabitants with a uniquely fascist identity.

A PROVINCIAL CAPITAL

Gondar served as the capital of Amhara, one of the six provinces created by the Ministry of Italian Africa to administer Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. The city, which stretches along a ridge in

the northern Ethiopian highlands, functioned as the administrative, legal, military, transportation, communications and distribution center for northern Ethiopia. Gondar is centered on a complex of castles built during the 17th and 18th centuries, when the city was the resplendent imperial capital of Ethiopia with a population of 80,000.

The Italians saw great propaganda value in the city's status as a former imperial capital, and sought to appropriate its symbolic importance as a regional capital in their own empire. Yet they denigrated the contemporary town as "presenting only small and miserable tukuls grouped around the ruins of the castles," thus requiring the new conquerors "to build ex novo a city worthy of the civilization of Rome."² The Italians frequently stressed that the castles could only have been built by Portuguese craftsmen, or under their supervision, as a way of further justifying their "civilizing mission" among the "technologically deprived" Ethiopians.³

Italian troops occupied Gondar on 1 April 1936, and within two years 2,000 Europeans lived in the city.⁴ Most of Gondar's 14,000 Ethiopian inhabitants lived south of the main castle complex – called the Fasil Ghebbi – where the ridge slopes gently down toward the major market at the southern edge of town. The Italians concentrated their building activity north of the Fasil Ghebbi on two level areas adjacent to each other, but separated by a significant change in elevation. The lower area served as a commercial district, with a wide, tree-lined street running north from the castles, past the cinema to the prominently sited post office. The higher area immediately to the east comprised the governmental district, centered on two monumental buildings for the military authorities, whose towers commanded distant views and marked the center of power in the new Gondar.

The Italian authorities recognized that the castle complex, by dividing the ridge in half, served as an effective barrier for separating the city's neighborhoods.⁵ Ethiopian residents were restricted to the existing districts between the Ghebbi and market. Italians lived in the more elevated areas north and west of the Ghebbi, around the commercial and administrative precincts. The colonial authorities justified their race-based zoning policy

in historical terms, noting that Gondar's quarters had been segregated by ethnicity and religion (Muslims, Jews) since at least 1669.⁶

The use of zoning to physically manifest social and political divisions was not restricted to colonial town planning. Throughout Italy, architects developed residential building typologies calibrated to the social class of their inhabitants, and designed neighborhoods and cities with clearly delimited class identities. Italians accepted these divisions as natural, and insisted that urban design give concrete expression to social hierarchies. During the fascist period (1922-1943), Italian architects were particularly concerned with the question of translating political order into built form. Colonial architecture and planning in Ethiopia, like that of earlier Italian settlements in Libya and Eritrea, added race and religion to the register of identities to be regulated by the built environment.

THE CITY PLANS

Gondar has grown largely along the lines of a master plan prepared by Gherardo Bosio in 1938 and implemented that year. The plan was the second of two proposals by the Florentine architect, and incorporated the administrative core of the city laid out to the design of the provincial office of technical services in 1937, as well as a number of streets and buildings that emerged during the city's rapid expansion following its occupation in April 1936. While much of the city was built before the final master plan was approved, Bosio's design provided a blueprint for growth and organization that guides the city's growth to this day.

Bosio began preparing plans for Gondar in the summer of 1936, just months after the town was first occupied, and before he was given a formal contract for the work by General Alessandro Pirzio Biroli, the military governor of Amhara. Bosio was still serving in the army while working for Biroli, and was based in Asmara at the time.

Bosio's first plan unrealistically presupposed a more level site, over which he could impose a grid of streets. To bring order and hierarchy to the city, he sought to define a center and a periphery. Bosio wanted to set the principal government buildings around a great piazza on a leveled area between the Fasil Ghebbi and the Ras Biet.⁷ "The

Governorate building," Bosio explained, "symbol of conquest and power, must architectonically dominate the whole city and surround itself with the most important public buildings... in a zone which architecturally forms an urbanistic hierarchy for the entire city."⁸ Bosio intended the principal streets of the city center to be lined with porticoes and densely planted with trees, much like he was able to achieve later at Gimma. A peripheral road would surround the new city, and offer panoramic views of the valley below and Lake Tana in the distance.⁹

Biroli proved to be an enthusiastic client. In November, he wrote to the Fascist Party Secretary in the northern Italian city of Como to ask for drawings and photographs of the recently completed Casa del Fascio by Giuseppe Terragni to use in guiding the construction of Gondar's fascist party headquarters. Bosio included designs for a Casa del Fascio, inspired by Terragni's building, in the 1936 plan.¹⁰

Curiously, Biroli dismissed Bosio in 1937 because of the architect's failure to perform his duties in a timely manner, and, at the same time, much work in Gondar stopped because of a short-lived plan to relocate the provincial capital to Azozò, twelve kilometers west of Gondar on the road to the airport. However, Viceroy Amedeo di Savoia, Duke of Aosta, intervened in March 1938 to retain Gondar as the provincial capital, both for practical reasons and because the city's historical role as an imperial capital gave it such great symbolic importance. And so in the summer of 1938, the governor commissioned Bosio to design a second master plan, which incorporated the governmental zone that was already under construction according to plans by the provincial technical office.¹¹ The city was now designed to reach an eventual Italian population of 20,000, based on growth observed in other Ethiopian urban centers.¹²

Bosio's design indicates a high level of racial anxiety on the part of the Italian authorities, who – officially, at least – considered it a priority to segregate their colonial towns to guard against interracial fraternization, which had been restricted by the racial laws of 1937 and 1938. The plan employed strict separation, by use of green belts, of areas for Christians and Muslims, along with "the complete isolation, downwind and downstream,

of the indigenous zones from those for Italian residents."¹³ Bosio described the castle complex as a natural screen separating the city along racial lines. He also planned separate major roads for African and European residents, such as the "spine" leading south from the Ghebbi toward the "indigenous market which forms the heart of the black city."¹⁴

Bosio abhorred the seeming "lack of discipline" evident in the area's traditional settlement patterns, and sought to order it with a circular ring of buildings defining the market and linear buildings lining the major street linking the market and the Ghebbi, plus its tributaries. Whereas the 1936 plan proposed using courtyard-centered blocks, in the 1938 plan all of Bosio's buildings had become linear, allowing complete visual surveillance of the city's exterior spaces. In contrast to the earlier plan, the houses for Ethiopians would now be furnished with fresh water and sewerage.¹⁵

Ethiopian Christian neighborhoods in Gondar were distinguished by profession, with artisans given housing and shops closer the Ghebbi. The Italians maintained the existing districts reserved for Muslims and Jews as part of their divide-and-rule policy, and added amenities for these previously second-class communities as a way of presenting colonial governance as benevolent. Gondar's new mosque, one of at least 50 new mosques built in masonry nation-wide, offered a tangible sign of the Italian policy of courting Ethiopian Muslims in order to generate native consent for foreign rule, especially among many non-Amhara ethnic groups.¹⁶

The 1938 plan also codified segregation by social class within the Italian population. Villas for upper class residents were set in the hills above the city, reflecting their ability to afford private transportation.¹⁷ Workers' housing joined industrial and agricultural concerns across the Kaa, in a neighborhood wrapped in verdure and gardens and grouped around a center formed by a market and a school.¹⁸ Midway between the main city and its satellite districts, the sports and recreation zone took shape alongside ruins of the Baths of Fasiladas.¹⁹

CONSTRUCTING IMPERIAL IDENTITIES

For those settlers drawn (or coerced) to Ethiopia by the regime's policy of demographic colonization, Gondar offered two things beyond the promise of a *casa colonica* and a salary. First, the city provided familiar institutions and services for the colonists, including cinemas, shops, cafes, sports facilities, banks and government buildings. Secondly, Gondar established sites for *adunate*, mass rallies where the fascist citizenry collectively participated in the ritual celebration of the fascist state's secular mythology. The large space just north of the Fasil Ghebbi was redefined as the Piazza del Littorio. Here, party and state leaders would address the assembled crowds from one of the castles, renovated for use as the local Fascist Party headquarters.

Sites for mass rallies were a common feature of Italian town planning during the fascist era. What changed in Ethiopia was the development of spaces that instilled a new identity – a specifically imperial identity – in the transplanted Italians colonizing their new African empire. In Gondar, the Piazza del Littorio was set at the juncture between the new, modern colonial city and the old imperial complex of castles. As the masses rallied before the fortified walls erected by the Solomonic dynasty, they symbolically re-enacted the seizure of Ethiopia. Fascism had previously sought to supplant regional identities (such as Genovese, Milanese, Roman, or Neopolitan) with a national one; now, Italians were meant to see themselves as the builders of an empire stretching from the Alps to the Indian Ocean.

The appropriation of Ethiopian imperial symbolism included the renovation of several castles in Gondar for use by the Amhara Governorate. The first master plan for Gondar, prepared by Bosio in 1936, proposed turning the ruins of the Fasil Ghebbi into a public park, and restoring the castle of Ras Biet into "a museum of war, which will signal for centuries the Roman conquest among the traces of the Solomonic dominion of Fasil."²⁰ The following year, the Governor of Amhara decided to renovate the two best preserved castles in the Fasil Ghebbi for use by the regional government, and commissioned architect Orfeo Rossato to handle the renovation.²¹ In response, the Ministry of Colonies (precursor to the Ministry of Italian

Africa) proposed designating one of the castles for use as a hotel.²² The offices of the Governorate were housed in temporary quarters in the castle of Ras Bièt while awaiting transfer to their permanent home in the castle of Fasiladas, the most magnificent of the city's historical structures.²³

The two buildings erected for the military authorities appropriated formal gestures associated with the castle complex to represent the fascist empire's incorporation of the Ethiopian empire. Built on the most prominent location in the administrative district, the *Comando truppe* (military command) was one of the first major buildings completed by the Italians, and it was soon joined by the *Circolo militare e coloniale*, a social services organization for military and civilian colonists. Both structures employed tall corner towers, which were frequently used in Italian fascist architecture as a conventional way of denoting authority and power. In the case of Gondar, the military buildings' towers also made reference to the corner towers on the castles of the Fasil Ghebbi and Ras Biet. Like their Ethiopian predecessors, the new towers rose in stages and presented a stepped profile visible from a great distance. Seen together, Gondar's progression of towers symbolically represented the transfer of power from the heirs of the empire of Fasiladas to the standard-bearers of the empire of Mussolini.

The *Comando truppe* and the *Circolo militare* also framed an axis leading north from the Fasil Ghebbi, past the Ras Biet and terminating at the site of the proposed – but unrealized – Catholic cathedral. A cross axis consisting of a boulevard with a lush park down the center led east from the two military buildings past a series of small palazzi to a piazza in front of the governor's residence. Bosio referred to this area as the "representative" zone, whose governmental buildings "represented" the authority of the fascist state and its African empire. Just below the *Comando truppe*, a broad monumental stair led down to the commercial district.

The most prominent building in the commercial district is the post office, which commands a large piazza at the juncture between the tree-lined avenue leading south to the Fasil Ghebbi and the main road connecting the city with the rest of the Amhara province. The post office served just

as strong an ideological function as the military buildings above it. The postal service represented the extension of Italian imperial authority across East Africa, and its seat in Gondar demonstrated the city's importance as a center for communications and administration. The extension of communications infrastructure across Ethiopia was a tangible way of demonstrating Italian control over the country (an illusion in the case of Amhara) and reflected the equation of technological modernization with the "civilizing" mission of colonization.

The rapid construction of cities like Gondar – like that of the Pontine marsh towns south of Rome – was portrayed widely in the press as evidence of the government's claims that fascism produced a level of progress unknown under Italy's parliamentary democracy. Outside of Italy, the swift seizure and colonization of Ethiopia (and the successful defiance of the League of Nations) bolstered Italian foreign policy and won Mussolini an unprecedented level of international prestige. In each case, architecture and urbanism in Ethiopia provided tangible proof of the state's power and served as valuable elements of a sophisticated propaganda apparatus.

Similarly, the prominence given to tourism in East Africa had less to do with encouraging Italian civilians to spend their holidays in the new empire, and more to do with consolidating fascist power within Italy. The invasion of Ethiopia produced a groundswell of patriotism that Mussolini stoked in order to increase public support for his regime. The presence of a tourist infrastructure (hotels, airlines, cruise ships, guide books and bus service) conveyed the erroneous sense that the military had completely defeated the Ethiopians in battle and that the civilian administration had won the consensual support of the populace.

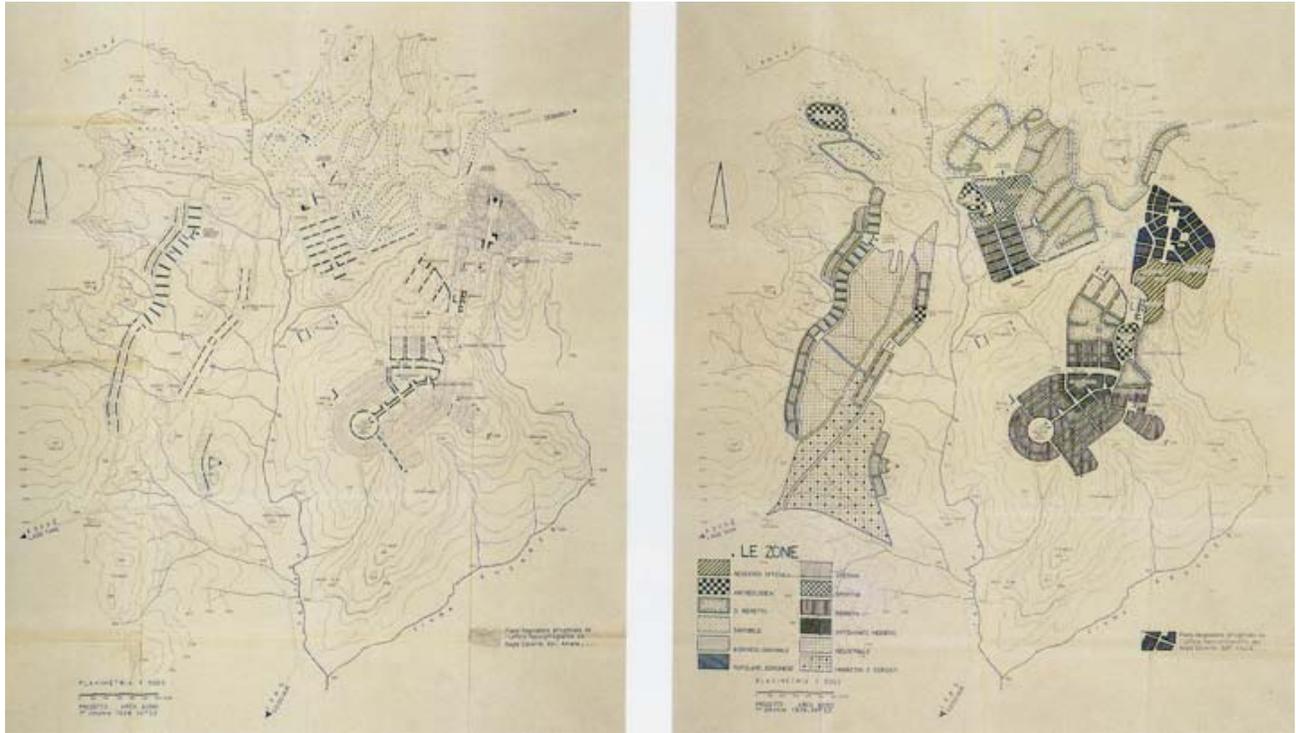
The fascist regime successfully employed cinema as a tool for building domestic consensus around the colonization of Ethiopia, and here, too, architecture and urbanism played a valuable role. Ethiopia provided a setting, both directly and allegorically, for numerous films that supported Italian imperialist policies by reminding the country of the value of collective sacrifice. More specifically, cinema held a mirror up to the Italian colonists in Ethiopia, in which they saw their daily activities portrayed in heroic terms.

Gondar's two movie theaters were among the fifty-five built by various enterprises throughout Italian East Africa.²⁴ Many Italian cinemas were privately owned, like Gondar's Cinema Impero, while numerous others were furnished by the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro for recreational and didactic use by local workers. The Dopolavoro cinema sat on a prominent site mid-way along the boulevard between the Fasil Ghebbi and the post office. Bosio gave the movie theater the most lyrical façade in the city. The building's two corner turrets are ringed with simple stringcourses that evoke the battlements of the nearby castle complex, demonstrating the ideological importance of the film viewing experience. At another scale, the formal relationship between the main door and the rounded turrets on either side suggests the shape of a movie projector's lens and two film reels. Admission to Gondar's two theaters was restricted to white patrons, however;²⁵ Ethiopians watched movies projected outdoors from specially modified trucks, which the Italians provided throughout their African colonies.

QUESTIONS IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

I began this essay by promising to discuss the methodological concerns raised by the study of Italy's colonial city planning in East Africa, which I can only offer as a series of questions that will drive my future studies.

One range of questions deals with the reception of the city's design by both the Italian and Ethiopian populations. Six decades after the end of the Italian occupation, Gondar is a thriving city and many of its principal buildings host the same programmatic functions for which they were originally built. This begs the question: what is the specifically political content of Italian colonial architecture? How, precisely, can a building be imperial? Much like fascist-era architecture in general, the buildings of Gondar require careful analysis to understand how they came to represent specific ideological concepts, and how they continue to function after that political context has been removed. In my archival work and field research to date, I have not yet been able to differentiate how Gondarites "read" the Italian-era buildings and urban spaces, nor have I found evidence of how these places were understood by the average Italian settler. Did Italians and Ethiopians alike understand the



Gherardo Bosio's 1938 plan for Gondar.

lyrical play of the Comando truppe's tower or the cinema's turrets?

The continuities between Italian-era and post-war construction in Gondar raise the question of the regional specificity of architecture in Amhara, or indeed in any region. Given that contemporary construction techniques and forms in Gondar are so much closer to those employed by the Italians than to those employed previously by Gondarite builders, one must ask whether contemporary architecture in the area retains any connection to the region's building and design traditions, and whether the inevitable loss of such traditions affects the ability of architecture to communicate legibly.

On the other hand, certain gestures in the Italian structures (such as the towers on the military buildings and the turrets on the theater) bespoke

a relationship to Gondar's historical architecture. The city plan hews closely to the topography, treats the castle complex with great respect, and retains traditional civic spaces (such as the market) in situ. How have these attempts at site specificity – a common aspect of Italian modernism – been received by Ethiopian architects and builders?

Gondar is not necessarily exemplary of Ethiopian cities, but its study offers us a potential model of how to combine archival and field research to analyze the synthesis of architectural practices evident in the built environment of East Africa. In the architecture and planning of Gondar we can read many of the concerns that animated Italian colonial policy under fascism. Above all, it represents the quest for order in a landscape whose European inhabitants found to be despairingly chaotic.



The castle of Fasiladàs.



Rallies in Gondar in honor of the Viceroy's visit, 1938.



Rally in the administrative district. The Comando truppe (right) and the Circolo militare (left) frame the axis looking toward the castle of Ras Biet in the distance.



The post office anchors the north end of the commercial district.



The cinema of the dopolavoro (left) and a side elevation of the castle of Fasiladàs

ENDNOTES

1. See also Giuliano Gresleri, "1936-40: Programma e strategia delle «città imperiali»," in *Architettura italiana d'oltremare: 1870-1940*, eds. Giuliano Gresleri, Pier Giorgio Massaretti, and Stefano Zagnoni (Venice: Marsilio, 1993), 178-201; and Gresleri, "Architecture for the Towns of the Empire," *Rassegna*, 14 (September 1992): 36-51.
2. "presentava solo pochi e miseri tucul raggruppati attorno ai ruderi dei catelli; si trattava quindi di costruire ex novo una città degna della civiltà di Roma." *Gli annali dell'Africa Italiana*, Anno II, Numero 4 (1939): 401. Identical language can be found in other sources, such as *La rete degli alberghi C.I.A.A.O. in Africa Orientale* (Rome, June 1940 – XVIII), a 36-page booklet advertizing the CIAAO hotel chain in Ethiopia and Eritrea.
3. *Guida all'Africa Italiana Orientale*, 350.
4. Ibid.
5. Gherardo Bosio, *Relazione al Progetto di Massima per il Piano Regolatore della Città di Gondar* (1 October 1938), 8. Archives of the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (ACS-MAI).
6. *Guida all'Africa Italiana Orientale*, 350.
7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid., 1.
9. Ibid., 7.
10. Gen. Alessandro Biroli, letter to Como Fascio (2 November 1936), reprinted in Fabio Mariano, *Terragni, Poesia della Razionalità* (Rome: Istituto Mides, 1983), 39. See also Flavio Mangione, *Le case del fascio: in Italia e nelle terre d'oltremare* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2003), 135.
11. Bosio, *Relazione al Progetto di Massima per il Piano Regolatore della Città di Gondar*, 5.
12. Ibid., 2.
13. Ibid., 5.
14. Ibid., 21.
15. Ibid., 4-5.
16. Alberto Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini* (London: Zed, 1985), 162-163.
17. Bosio, *Relazione al Progetto di Massima per il Piano Regolatore della Città di Gondar*, 12.
18. Ibid., 13.
19. Ibid., 12.
20. "i ruderi del Fasil Ghebbi, ordinato a parco pubblico e il Ras Biet, restaurato a museo della guerra, segnerà nei secoli la conquista romana fra le memorie della dominazione salomonide di Fasil." Bosio, *Piano Regolatore di Gondar* (Asmara, 20 August 1936), 5. ACS-MAI.
21. Governatore di Gondar, Governo dell'Amara, Direzione Affari Civili e Politiche, letter to Ministero delle Colonie, Roma (Gondar, 9 April 1937). ACS-MAI, b.106.
22. Ministro delle Colonie, letter to Direzione R. Governo dell'Amara, Affari Civili e Politiche, Gondar (Rome, 5 May 1937). ACS-MAI, b.106.
23. *Guida all'Africa Italiana Orientale*, 350
24. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "The Italian Colonial Cinema: Agendas and Audiences," *Modern Italy*, v.8, n.1 (2003): 54-55.
25. Solomon Addis Getahun, *A History of the City of Gondar* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006). See also Ben-Ghiat, 56.