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REFLECTIONS ON THE NOTIONS OF “EMPIRE” AND “KINGDOM” IN
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ETHIOPIA: ROYAL POWER AND LOCAL POWER

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Generally, historians of Ethiopia have remained vague about the nature of the Ethiopian state prior to the nineteenth century. In the 1970s, Tadesse Tamrat, in his excellent synthesis on “medieval” Ethiopia, chose “kingdom” over “empire.”¹ Several modern authors, faced with the difficulty of translating the title *negusa nagest* (king of kings), have hesitated between “emperor” and “king.”² In their defense, it is likely that the

¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270-1527)* (Oxford, 1972) which, as the table of contents indicates, uses the terms “kingdom” or “Christian kingdom” (see p. 6, for example).

² Although this list is not exhaustive, the following authors have used the terms “empire” or “kingdom” without actually defining either one: Mordechai Abir, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa,” *Cambridge History of Africa* 4 (1975): 537-77; Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of Salomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region* (London, 1980), 42 et seq., 148, 149, 194; Merid Wolde Aregay, *Dictionary of African Biography*, vol. 1, *Ethiopia-Ghana* (New York, 1977), 129; E. Haberland, “La Corne d’Afrique,” in *Histoire générale de l’Afrique*, vol. 5, ed. B.A. Ogot (Paris, 1999), 815, 817, 820, 821, 826, 838, 846, 847, etc.; Éloi Ficquet, “L’intervention des Oromo-Wällo dans la dynastie éthiopienne Salomonide sous les règnes de Bäkaffa, Iyasu et Iyo’as, 1721 a 1769,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 16 (2000): 135-38; David Vô Vân, “À propos du Gihâd dans le Futuh al-Habasha. De la lecture d’Alfred Morabia à la relecture d’Arab-Faqih,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 17 (2001): 128. Donald

accounts of the Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century have not helped to clarify this question. On the contrary, the histories of Ethiopia written by these religious men, concerned mostly with Ethiopian space and its missionizing, have tended to create a certain confusion. A first reading of these texts is striking, because in them we perceive a radical change in their perceptions of space from previous representations, based as they were on the legend of Prester John and on the discoveries of the Portuguese. The novelty of these accounts is most likely one of the reasons that modern historians have considered them as Ur-texts, whose information could even be employed to fill the “lacunae” in Ethiopian sources.

However, if these texts were novel in their perception of Ethiopian space, what was their comprehension of Ethiopian politics? Were they not tempted to impose the former representation, that of the “empire” of Prester John, on the Ethiopian political situation of the seventeenth century? And would not native representations of Ethiopian power have actually favored confusing “kingdom” and “empire,” thereby creating a gap that historiography has not wished to fill?

In light of European and Ethiopian documentation, which is particularly rich for this period, it is useful to re-interrogate the notions of “empire” and “kingdom,” attentive to the borrowings and models used by the sources. But it is equally through a study of a person close to King Susneyos, the *räs* Se‘lä Krestos, and the relations that he maintained with his sovereign, that we can reformulate these notions of “empire” and “kingdom.”

THE “KINGDOM OF PRESTER JOHN”: AN “EMPIRE”?

The prolonged presence of missionaries in Ethiopia, in contrast with previous visitors, has led historians to give more credence to their descriptions of Ethiopian space and of the configuration of Ethiopian politics. These missionaries did, however, have their own

Crummey, in *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2000), claims (at 1) that “our subject is the kingdom or empire – either term may be used and each has some value.” One might reasonably object that these studies are not specifically concerned with the political system of Christian Ethiopia in this time. We do not wish to claim their lack of precision as a deficiency, but simply to point out that the problem has been with us for some time.

agenda: they were describing a territory that they wanted to evangelize. How, therefore, should we consider the political structure of the “empire” presented in their works?

The genealogy of European representation of Ethiopian space

When Jesuit missionaries offered a geographical description of the kingdom of Prester John, their spatial reading doubtless had little in common with that given in the *Letter of Prester John*. Ever since the Middle Ages, there existed a “clean divergence between Prester John as situated in the real world and the personage of the same as figured in the letter.” When the oriental monarch appeared for the first time in the twelfth-century *Chronicle* of Otto of Freising, he appeared as a Nestorian king governing a land that did not extend past the Tigris to the east. But the protagonist of the *Letter* ruled the entire Orient without any division.³ The Jesuit description, however, proceeds in a particular context: that of the creation of a new mission in Ethiopia after the failures of the late sixteenth century. The needs of the mission drove the fathers, in their description of Ethiopian space, to the complete subordination of ancient representations of the kingdom. For the Jesuits, geography was an instrument of the mission and was not only a means of knowing distant lands.⁴

Jesuit descriptions of Ethiopia spent a lot of time on geography; they were not for the instruction of travelers so much as for long-term residents. They therefore served to train missionaries and to provide the father-general with the information he would need in order to make his decisions. Thus Ignatius of Loyola, in a letter to Father Nobrega in 1553, specified a “book of [geographical] charges” as a means of directing mission work. In their letters, the missionaries must speak “of the region, of the climate, of degrees, of the customs and of the inhabitants, of their clothing, of their habitations... all this, less for

³ István Bejczy, *La lettre du Prêtre Jean. Une utopie médiévale* (Paris, 2001), 27-28 (translation).

⁴ What follows is based largely on the reflections of Bertrand Hirsch, “Connaissances et figures de l’Éthiopie dans la cartographie occidentale du XIV^e au XVI^e siècle” (Doctoral thesis, University of Paris I, 1990), 502-31.

satisfying curiosity, which remains legitimate, than to make decisions in perfect knowledge of the cause.”⁵

This new attitude, much more noticeable in the missionaries of the seventeenth century than in those of the sixteenth, produced a critique of previous descriptions of Ethiopia. A series of high quality books (six appeared between 1615 and 1640) articulated new historical tableaux and geographical descriptions.⁶ The examination of the exact extent of the kingdom and of the different regions that composed it became a new concern.

Pero Paes, superior of the Ethiopian mission, visited the lands of Prester John in 1603. Known principally by his correspondence and his *Historia de Ethiopia*, his representation of Ethiopian space broke with previous ones, including that of Luis de Urreta. The Dominican Urreta was professor of theology at Valencia, Spain. He published two works, the first in 1610 and the second in 1611,⁷ whose titles reveal his ambition: to inscribe on the Ethiopian terrain the priority of the Dominicans. These works, therefore, did not fail to provoke the indignation of the Society of Jesus. Urreta developed the idea that the Ethiopians were Catholic from an early date, thereby depriving the Society of the legitimacy of their missionary efforts, undertaken since the patriarchate of André de Oviedo (1563-1577). The work of Paes was to be a refutation of Urreta's books.⁸

To counter the fables of Urreta, Paes decided to give “truthful” geographic information, provided by the sources he cites. Father Paes, becoming a confidant of King Susneyos (1607-32) and accompanying him on his military campaigns, had established

⁵ Cited by Hirsch, “Connaissances,” 509, after F. de Dainville, *La géographie des humanistes. Les jésuites et l'éducation de la société française* (Paris, 1940), 113 (translation).

⁶ Hirsch, “Connaissances,” 514.

⁷ Luis de Urreta, *Historia ecclesiastica y politica, natural y moral, de los grandes y remotos reynos de la Etiopia, monarchia del Emperador, llamado Preste Juan de las Indias* (Valencia, 1610); Luis de Urreta, *Historia de la sagrada orden de Predicadores en los remotos reynos de la etiopia* (Valencia, 1610).

⁸ See H. Pennec, *Des jésuites au royaume du prêtre Jean (Éthiopie). Stratégies, rencontres et tentatives d'implantation (1495-1633)* (Paris, 2003), 245-47.

valuable ties with the *dabbara*⁹ and the court. He went around with scholars close to the king and notably his historiographer Tino, and he spoke with court dignitaries or members of the royal family. All these became precious sources of information that he profitably used for his work. Thus when he gave the list of kingdoms and provinces which composed the lands that Prester John ruled, he stated that “the chief secretary of the emperor told me all this. Then to confirm, I interrogated in the presence of the same emperor one of his brothers, Eraz [*räs*] Çela Christos [Se‘lä Krestos] and he told me the same thing.”¹⁰

The testimony of these witnesses enriched his own observations, made when traveling throughout Ethiopia, such as in Tigre and in the regions around Lake Tana and Godjam. He also made use of the observations of other fathers following their own mission work. It is to this refutation of the works of Urreta that we owe the quality of Paes’s geographic descriptions, which were always concerned with precision, notably concerning the locale and the history of a certain “mountain of kings,” a place of imprisonment for those of the royal lineage called *amba* Geshen.¹¹

Throughout these pages, Paes attempts to disconnect an *Aethiopia* covering half of the African continent from an historic Ethiopia which he covers himself and which he intends to convert to Roman Catholicism.¹² He constructs a geographic frame sufficient for the realization of the mission. Having done this, he inserts Ethiopian space into a network of historic forces and geographic reference points. In a sense, the relation of (royal) history of Ethiopia before the mission, thanks to the liberal borrowings from ancient Ethiopian chronicles, responds to the description of the space.¹³ His enterprise works well with the classification of information, the inventory of places, of the ordering

⁹ Non-ordained members of the clergy, instructed in the traditional teachings of the Church, charged with chanting and dancing during the Mass. See Bernard Velat, “Chantres, poètes, professeurs, les dabbara éthiopiens,” *Les Cahiers coptes* 5 (1954): 21-29.

¹⁰ *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales Inediti* 2 (1905): 15 (hereafter cited as *RÆSOI*).

¹¹ Cf. *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 111-120, 121-31, 501. On the *amba* Geshen, see Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270-1527). Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris, 2003), 24-31.

¹² Hirsch, “Connaissances,” 522.

¹³ On the place of Ethiopian sources in the *Historia* of Paes, see Pennec, *Jésuites*, 143.

of what it historicizes in well-defined limits. He gives the limits of the kingdom in the north, south, east, and west, estimates the distances in walking-days, and situates the different provinces and waterways.

Manuel de Almeida, whose map of Ethiopia was published in 1660 in the work of Balthazar Telles,¹⁴ presents himself as continuing, and bettering, the work of Paes. Notably, he individualizes Ethiopian regions by the use of pointillist borders. In his map, Almeida definitively reduces the space of *Aethiopia* to one where the historic locales of religious confrontations are inscribed.¹⁵ This historic cartography also integrates the missionary presence of the Jesuits by specifying their residences.¹⁶ By inserting Jesuit missions into these histories, Almeida frees Ethiopia from the undifferentiated spaces of mythic times.

For all that, we must not confuse geographic description with geopolitical analysis. A desire to counter Urreta by attempting to give accurate dimensions of the kingdom did not inspire reflection on the political system. If the missionary descriptions attempted to portray a well-defined, structured, and hierarchized empire, the internal contradictions of these writings call this picture into question.

Descriptions of the Kingdom of Prester John: Luis de Azevedo, Pero Paes, and Manuel Barradas

Prior to the seventeenth century, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia had been the object of external descriptions, European but also Egyptian and Ethiopian Muslim.¹⁷ From the account of the voyage of Francisco Alvares (1540)¹⁸ to the *Futuh al-Habasha* of the Arab

¹⁴ Balthazar Telles, *Historia geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste Joam, e do que nella obraram os padres da companhia de Jesus: composta na mesma Ethiopia, pelo Padre Manoel d'Almeida, natural de Viseu, Provincial e visitador, que foy na India. Abreviada com nova releyçam, e methodo pelo padre Balthazar Tellez, natural de Lisboa, Provincial da Provincia Lusitania, ambos da mesma companhia* (Coimbra, 1660).

¹⁵ Hirsch, "Connaissances," 530-31.

¹⁶ Penneç, *Jésuites*, 143.

¹⁷ The argument that follows is based on Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 19-49.

¹⁸ Cf. Francisco Alvares, *The Prester John of the Indies*, ed. C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, vols. 114-15 (London, 1961).

Faqih¹⁹ (redacted shortly after the wars of the Grañ, which began in 1527), as well as the *mappamundi* of Fra Mauro (1460), constructed partly from the accounts of pilgrims to Jerusalem and of the first European travelers in Ethiopia,²⁰ we can glean the “general impression”²¹ that Amhara and Shoa were the centers of the kingdom.

On the one hand, Amhara was the “heart of empire” and the “cradle of monarchy.”²² Thus in Egypto-Abyssinian correspondence, the Ethiopian *negus* took the title “king of Amhara.” Likewise, among the legends on the *mappamundi* of Fra Mauro, we read that “the king of Amhara has twenty kings under his dominion.”²³ On the other hand, most notably in the account of Alvares, Shoa appeared as a religious and economic center.²⁴ According to information from Ethiopian monks visiting Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and published by the Venetian Alessandro Zorzi in 1527, Shoa was the location of the political capital of the kingdom. The itineraries edited by the Franciscan Francisco Suriano in 1524, after the account of the pilgrim Battista da Imola who was part of an embassy to Ethiopia from Cairo, and had reached the court of the *negus* in 1482, agree.²⁵ This representation of a kingdom, prior to the seventeenth century, with a “bicephalous” center, was transmitted in literature. Thus the Jesuit Manuel de Almeida (d. 1646) wrote: “The kingdom of Amhara was for a number of centuries the center, and as such, the heart of the entire Abyssinian empire.”²⁶ At the end

¹⁹ Cf. René Basset, *Histoire de la conquête de l’Abyssinie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1897).

²⁰ Hirsch, “Connaissances,” 123-25, 248-49; and Charles de La Roncière, *La découverte de l’Afrique au Moyen Âge* (Cairo, 1925), 2:122-39.

²¹ Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 19.

²² Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 23.

²³ Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 34-35.

²⁴ Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 38-42.

²⁵ These itineraries were published by O.G.S. Crawford, *Ethiopian Itineraries circa 1400-1524, Including Those Collected by Alessandro Zorzi at Venice in the Years 1519-1524* (Cambridge, 1954); Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 43.

²⁶ Cited by Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 24 after C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646: Being Extracts from the History of High Ethiopia or Abassia by Manoel de Almeida*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, vol. 107 (London, 1954), 97.

of the eighteenth century, however, the Scottish traveler James Bruce considered Shoa as the heart of the kingdom.²⁷

But the image of a state governed by a king who sits in a capital, the center of the kingdom and of power, seems to be an emanation of an “ideological vision of space where geography serves the political status of these two regions.”²⁸ Europeans did not seek to understand and to define the political system of the kingdom, and were content to apply to Ethiopia their own definition of “kingdom,” after examples to be found in their western political “patrimony.” An examination of seventeenth-century missionary descriptions of Ethiopia illustrates this idea.

Insofar as the underlying strategy was the missionary conquest of a particular space, an exhaustive presentation of the political configuration of this space was essential. At the top, the Jesuits discerned an “emperor” (*emperador*), ruling a collection of “kingdoms” (*reynos*). A viceroy (*vissorey*) ruled each kingdom. Kingdoms were made up of provinces (*provincias*), with a governor (*governador*) in charge of each one. Despite this precision, however, such descriptions often revealed a real difficulty in understanding the original political organization of a space. Thus Pero Paes wrote that the lands of Prester John were divided into “twenty-five kingdoms (*reynos*) and eighteen provinces (*provincias*),” which he listed.²⁹ Are we to understand that these eighteen provinces constitute the subdivisions of twenty-five kingdoms? Surely each kingdom did not have the same extent and did not comprise the same number of provinces. This interpretation does not seem to be able to be sustained and the presentation of the author suggests a juxtaposition of qualitatively different political spaces, rather than of an interweaving of spaces organized according to a hierarchy:

Beginning at the Red Sea, the first kingdom (*reyno*) is called Tigrê, then comes Dancâli, Angôt, Dobâ Seltân, Motâ, Auçâ, Amharâ, Olacâ, Xâoa, Ifât, Guedên,

²⁷ Marie-Laure Derat, *La formation du domaine royal éthiopien sous la dynastie salomonienne (1270-1527). Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Doctoral thesis, University of Paris, 1998), 14, drawing on James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, 1773* (Dublin, 1790), 173.

²⁸ Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 20 (translation).

²⁹ Cf. *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 15-16.

Ganh, Doarô, Fatagâr, Oye, Bâli, Hadeâ, Alamalê, Oxelô, Ganz, Bete ramorâ, Guraguê, Cuerâ, Buzanâ, Sufgamô, Bahargamô, Cambât, Boxâ, Gumâr, Zenyerô, Nareâ, Conch, Damôt, Gojâm, Begmêder, Dambiâ. Thus the kingdoms (*reynos*), even though some of them perhaps do not merit this appellation. The provinces (*provincias*) are: Gandanchô, Arench, Orgâr, Çemen, Çalamt, Borâ, Abargalê, Salaoâ, Çagadê, Oalcaît, Maçagâ.³⁰

After having listed these kingdoms, Paes proceeds to list provinces without establishing any link between the two. First problem: if the kingdoms were not composed of provinces, how were they organized? Second problem: if the province was not a subdivision of a kingdom, what exactly was a province?

This uncertainty is only reinforced by a passage in the correspondence of the Jesuit Luis de Azevedo. When he spoke of the kingdom (*reyno*) of Godjam, he wrote that it was subdivided into 29 provinces (*provincias*). And in the same letter, in the following paragraph, he indicated that the empire (*imperio*) was composed of fourteen provinces (*provincias*).³¹ One must, first of all, discover the extent of these fourteen provinces by comparing the description of Paes. But it is interesting to note that there was not, at base, a conflict between the one description and the other. That the lands of Prester John comprised either eighteen or fourteen “provinces” did not mean that the “kingdom” of Godjam itself did not contain 29. We are, quite simply, not dealing with the same type of “province.” The Jesuits on the ground were not able to ignore that the space where they maneuvered, and the territories where they were permitted to operate were named in a specific fashion and these names revealed a political organization. All the difficulty resides in the translation, for a European “public,” of this complex reality. The term “province” was not always adequate; the missionaries used other labels, notably “mando.” This term had the merit of being the most generic. Having at once the sense of

³⁰ *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 15.

³¹ Cf. *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 132.

commanding, of power or again of authority and of government, it suggested a political organization independent of a territorial anchor.³²

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that if we examine it more closely, the model of an empire subdivided into kingdoms and provinces proposed by missionaries was not that important. The question of the title of king, in the last analysis, could only add to the confusion. Thus Paes gives, as a title for chapter 1 of his first book, “In which is treated of that which are the kingdoms (*reynos*) and provinces (*provincias*) making part of Ethiopia, of their situation, of their number which rules the Emperor (*emperador*) whom they call Prester John.”³³ In Ethiopia there were thus “kingdoms” and “provinces” which an “emperor,” who was called Prester John, ruled. That he was an emperor was the salient political fact. Thus throughout the course of his history, as Almeida did before him, Paes named Susneyos “the emperor Celtan [Seltân] Çaguêd,” (Seltan Sagad being his regnal name).

Thus: king or emperor? On the whole, Jesuits chose the term emperor, which they doubtlessly considered a more fitting translation of the title of “king of kings,” an appellation that they would have known.³⁴ But might this not have been an attempt to simplify nomenclature for the sake of a European audience? Is “emperor” simply a means of avoiding the New Testament connotation of “king of kings,” and the possibility that it might be applied to the Ethiopian sovereign? The “king of kings and lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15), after all, was none other than God himself, who would reveal in time “the magnificent and only sovereign,” the “Lamb [Jesus],” who was in turn “Lord of lords and

³² The confused description of the territories of the kingdom was still apparent when missionaries considered the different tributes paid to the king, and the hierarchy existing between the different territories. See *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 283-84; 4 (1906): 81 (M. Barradas).

³³ *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 13.

³⁴ In a letter from Susneyos to the Pope on 10 June 1610, he presents himself as “king of kings”, conforming to the usual title of the king, cf. *RÆSOI* 1 (1903): 257. The missionaries Pero Paes and Luis de Azevedo knew the exact translation of the Ethiopian title, “O primeiro he Negûz, que quer dicer Rey, e deste so dicem que pode usar em quanto nam se coroa; depois se intitula Negûçaâ Nagâzt za Ethiopia sc. ‘Rey dos Reys de Ethiopia,’ isto he Emperador de Ethiopia,” *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 69; “E por que aquy se vem a ungir e coroar, e quem a quy não he coroadado, não tem o titulo de Negus Nagêsta, idest Rey de Reys ou Imperador, mas so fica com titulo de Negus, idest Rey,” letter to the provincial of Goa, 22 July 1607, *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 107.

King of kings” (Revelation 17:14). Was the *negus*, for Catholics of the seventeenth century, to be compared to Christ? Could the Jesuits risk, *a fortiori* in the context of their apostolic mission, to attribute such a specific religious prerogative to this sovereign? Would not the Jesuits have created instead a “very temporal emperor” lord of a vast and populous “empire,” for whose sake he should become a better Catholic and show the way to his subjects?

The division of the “empire” is the result of the prudence of the “emperor” delegating to men he trusted – particularly members of his family – the government of its constituent “kingdoms.”³⁵ And we have seen how Azevedo, Paes (and Barradas) discovered any number of provinces within them. This vast ensemble, well organized, was to be acquired for the Roman faith: such an immense task! In other words, the missionaries presented the territorial structure of the kingdom in this way, not only to justify their enterprise, but also to suggest the enormity of the political and religious stakes involved in converting such an “empire” to Catholicism. By recourse to a western “schema” of a centralized imperial monarchy, the Jesuits fabricated a weighty argument in favor of their evangelical enterprise. They thus received the confidence of western monarchies (Spanish and pontifical) on which they depended.

But what about the Ethiopian sources? How can an historian describe the space in which the *negus* evolved, and what can one say about its political organization?

The Description of Royal Space in the Chronicle of Susneyos

For a long time, the court of the Christian *negus* was peripatetic. Each year, on the return of the dry season, the king went on campaign. He started from Abbay (on the Blue Nile) to wage war on the Oromo, or he would force the inhabitants of a given country to pay tribute, such as inhabitants of Guman who had refused to pay theirs.³⁶ He waged war, year after year, against various opponents, such as the *räs* Za-Sellase.³⁷ The chronicler, following the king on all his adventures, had to describe them as accurately as possible

³⁵ *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 409.

³⁶ Cf. F.M.E. Pereira, *Chronica de Susneyos, rei de Ethiopia* (Lisbon, 1900), 1:105 (henceforth *CS*).

³⁷ Cf. *CS*, chapters 22-24, 27-28.

and, of course, to glorify the royal person. The long lists of toponyms and the listing of regions far from the king's starting point were intended to impress. But the *Chronicle of Susneyos* does not give any other type of spatial description; its "geography" is only that of the itinerary. The royal court travels from one place to another and the distances it covers cannot be estimated except by the number of stops it makes. The only other possible perception of the passage of one space to another is when the king and his entourage traverse rivers (the Takaze in front of Tigre in the north, the Abbay towards Amhara and Shoa to the east and south). These latter constitute the veritable limits (*wasan*, *-enefa*) , the boundaries between different countries. The territory of the king is the ensemble of these countries where the king, year after year, regularly appeared in order to exercise his power. And the sole means by which we are able to know its extent, before the appearance of missionaries in the seventeenth century, is from these itineraries, and destinations mentioned in them most often.

Indeed, did the kingdom not exist only insofar as the king could traverse it? Was it nothing more than an ephemeral political structure, chronically enfeebled by the return of the rainy season or more simply by the length of the distances to be traversed? The recurrence of itineraries in the *Chronicle*, far from impressing on the reader the image of a powerful and dominating king, suggest instead the constraints, above all natural ones, which checked the power and authority of the *negus*. Nevertheless, let us not shortchange his authority too much, for there also exists a coherence to itinerant power,³⁸ and the *Chronicle* allows us to observe royal nomadism on two temporal levels: that of the entire reign and that of each year. On the level of the reign, the precision of the source allows us to retrace the successive displacements of the center of gravity of royal power from one point to another. After his definitive victory against King Ya'qob (d. March, 1607), King Susneyos laid siege to the sites of power and took possession of the camp of Qoga³⁹ which had been the headquarters of his predecessor. The camp remained there until 1609,

³⁸ A coherence similar to that which Jocelyne Dakhliya observed in the regencies of Tunis and of Algiers between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries. See "Dans la mouvance du prince: la symbolique du pouvoir itinérant au Maghreb," *Annales ESC* 43 (1988): 735-60.

³⁹ *CS*, 73.

when he moved it to Dākana (1609-11).⁴⁰ He subsequently moved to Gorgora (1611-18)⁴¹ and finally to Dānqāz (1618-32),⁴² the location of his camp until the end of his reign (fig. 1).

In fig. 1, we see that the regions that border Lake Tana to the north and to the east appear as the privileged anchor points of royal power. The churches, the camps and even the palace mark out the space: Gännatä Iyäsus in Azäzo⁴³ and Dānqāz in Dāmbya, and also Märtulä Maryam in Godjam, a church rebuilt on the initiative of Susneyos.⁴⁴ As in the preceding periods,⁴⁵ royal space was circumscribed thanks to the building of a plurality of fixed points, places of the manifestation of royal power. In the camps, the king held his assemblies, received his tribute, and so forth. The churches and monasteries that he founded received the king and his court according to the liturgical calendar. As such, must we deduce that we have here, in the Dambya, the heart of a centralized territory? Are we obliged to affirm that the Ethiopian conception of royal territory is in fact one of a hierarchical relationship between a center and a periphery? Such a conception is in any case absent from the *Chronicle of Susneyos*, which insisted that power was mobile, not immobile. The center of this power was the place where the king was for a certain duration. The different designations of the royal camp express this distinction.

*Katama*⁴⁶ is the term the most often employed in the *Chronicle* to designate the long-term royal residence. This term is polysemic enough. It refers to the idea of a

⁴⁰ CS, 102.

⁴¹ CS, 109-10 and *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 233-34. The king abandoned Gorgora on account of a famine.

⁴² CS 157.

⁴³ On this architectural complex (royal church, residence, and retreat), see Penneç, *Jésuites*, 188-203.

⁴⁴ For more, see Marie-Laure Derat and Hervé Penneç, “Les églises et monastères royaux (XV-XVI^e et XVII^e siècles): permanence et rupture d’une stratégie royale,” in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective*, ed. F. Katssuyoshi, S. Eisei, and P. Masayoshi (Kyoto, 1997), 17-34.

⁴⁵ Thus King Zar’a Ya‘eqob (1434-68) constructed a camp close to the church of Dabra Berhan in Shoa where he had already founded several churches and monasteries (Dabra Metmaq, Bata Qirqos). His successors were also continuers of this system associating religious foundation and the royal camp. See Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 272-78.

⁴⁶ Cf. Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez* (Wiesbaden, 1991), 297-98.

precise point, usually on high ground, a salient space fit for the royal camp, which was often set on an *amba* (hill). *Katama* has equally in common the root *hatama*, having the sense of engraving, sealing, or marking with a sign, and the root *mahtam*,⁴⁷ designating the royal seal in the chronicles. The *katama* is thus a sign of the presence of power. When Qoga became the *katama* of Susneyos, the chronicler indicated that it was a *madina*, the place of power of the late King Ya‘qob.⁴⁸

In contrast to *katama*, the word *te‘ynt*⁴⁹ is used to designate the royal camp of medium-term duration, constructed in the course of the itinerary of the dry season. Formed from *‘ayn*, “eye,” or the impression produced by a seal, it suggests an idea of rotundity or a closed circle; thus the term designates a tent, the camp, a tabernacle or an assembly. Equally, it indicates a place of the manifestation and exercise of power. Thus at Haguat Wakha, close to Esté, the king held a council with the “grandees of kingdom.”⁵⁰ In the same way he spent the Sabbath at Zanzanma near the Abbay.⁵¹ The term is not related to *katama*. Used the most often in its verbal form, it designates more specifically the action of camping than a place, properly speaking. We are well at the “heart” of power in movement.

Finally, the words *safara* and *hadara*⁵² both designate stops of the royal court for the duration a night or a day, brief encampments during rapid marches or military expeditions.

Neither the conceptions of missionaries, nor those discernable in the Ethiopian *Chronicle*, permit us to conclude that an “Empire” or a “kingdom of Prester John” ever existed. The Jesuits, in wishing to create an ideal model, were probably the initiators of this terminological confusion which has confused modern historiography. Long-term residents all over Ethiopia, we suppose them (with good reason) to be connoisseurs of Ethiopian reality. The error has too often been to consider their witness as a simple reflection of reality, when their ambitions were elsewhere. If we want to dispense with

⁴⁷ Leslau, *Dictionary*, 267, col. 2.

⁴⁸ CS, 101, 1.2 and 110, 1.255/79 and 85-86.

⁴⁹ Cf. Leslau, *Dictionary*, 79, col. 2 and 80, col. 1.

⁵⁰ CS, 227, 1.294-300/175.

⁵¹ CS, 239, 1.5/184.

⁵² See Leslau, *Dictionary*, 489, col. 1 and 258, col. 2.

generalities and to affirm our knowledge of the political system and of its inscription in space, a case study of the relations between the king and one “grandee of the kingdom” seems promising.

THE ITINERARY OF THE “VICEROY” SE‘LÄ KRESTOS

The first third of the seventeenth century is a period particularly rich from the point of view of sources. Ethiopian documents tend to make the king the central figure around whom everything was organized: he names his “lieutenants” for each region, and dismisses them at his pleasure, etc. Missionary sources complemented Ethiopian ones in imposing the same centralized vision, but they also reveal, perhaps despite themselves, points of disagreement between the two, throwing into question the whole schema.

The *Chronicle of Susneyos* imposes a specific vision of history, centered in a very exclusive fashion on the king and his glorious acts. The reconstitution of the itinerary of Se‘lä Krestos is unceasingly constrained by numerous “lacunae” and deformations. His journey, according to the *Chronicle* and missionary documentation, marked the beginning of his career around 1604-07, and attributes to him a series of functions. It appears nevertheless necessary to ask ourselves about the nature of the “cursus honorum” of Se‘lä Krestos in these documents.

It is also important to examine more specifically the function that he occupied in Godjam, because the essential argument on which both missionary and Ethiopian documentation dwell is the major role that Se‘lä Krestos occupied in the imposition of the Catholic faith in Ethiopia. The *Chronicle of Susneyos* presents him as the principal actor in the “changing of the faith”⁵³ of the Ethiopians, while the Jesuits insisted on his apostolic zeal.⁵⁴ Seduced and converted to the Roman faith well before the king himself, he stood at the vanguard of a new movement into which the region under his control, in this case Godjam, was drawn in his wake.

⁵³ *CS*, 187.

⁵⁴ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 413.

Se‘lä Krestos: A Career in the Service of the King?

From 1604 to 1608/09, Se‘lä Krestos appeared in the *Chronicle* as a warrior waging war on behalf of his brother Susneyos.⁵⁵ Even when the *sahäfé te‘zäz* Tino allowed that there were tensions between Se‘lä Krestos and Susneyos, notably towards to the end of the king’s reign, he naturally did not depart from the principle that the king of kings was all-powerful. It was always he who named and dismissed Se‘lä Krestos to the different offices he occupied over the course of his career,⁵⁶ as he did for all the other dignitaries of the royal camp and territorial chiefs. There was never any question of denying the effectiveness of the royal prerogative to name different dignitaries (*mak^wannt*) of the camp (*katamä*). In return, it is doubtless important to go back over the power he exercised outside the camp, over the different territorial chiefs (*chum*) who formed Se‘lä Krestos’s party. What therefore can we say about the title of *räs* which Se‘lä Krestos bore when he appears in the *Chronicle*? Does it correspond to a precise function exercised alongside Susneyos and in the setting of his camp? Is it a title that he already held, before the investiture of Susneyos? Or has the chronicler attributed it to him retroactively? It is impossible to give a definitive response to any of these questions. Some observations, in the form of hypotheses, may nonetheless be made.

First off, the term *räs*, signifying “head” and by extension “chief,” only had a very general sense and did not correspond to a particular function. Perhaps, therefore, it was more of an honorific title. But why would Se‘lä Krestos have borne it? He was the youngest son of his mother Hamalmal Warq and a certain Muso, whom Manuel de Almeida called a “great lord of Damotes.”⁵⁷ Hamalmal Warq was herself daughter of the *azäjä Kolo*, “a man rich in all the goods of the world”⁵⁸ and of a certain Dengel Mogasa. Almeida wrote “this woman [Hamalmal Warq] was the daughter of a noble fidalgo of the *Xemê* caste, the most esteemed family of this country.”⁵⁹ Descending from a “lord” of

⁵⁵ *CS*, 47, 70-72, 89-90, 101-102. Cf. Pennec, *Jésuites*, 222-27; 234-38 gives a periodization of the itinerary of Se‘lä Krestos.

⁵⁶ Cf. *CS*, 110, 122, 221, 225, 234, 239, 244, 253.

⁵⁷ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 184.

⁵⁸ *CS*, 3.

⁵⁹ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 184.

Dämot, would not Se‘lä Krestos have had the right to inherit certain goods and the right to a title? No information concerning Se‘lä Krestos himself permits a response to this question. However, if we consider his brother Yämanä Krestos, certain things become apparent.

Yämanä Krestos was the uterine brother of Se‘lä Krestos whose father, according to Almeida, was a certain *azäj* “Serca Cristos,” Hamalmal Warq’s first husband.⁶⁰ As with Se‘lä Krestos, the chronicler conferred on Yämanä Krestos the title of *räs* starting with his investiture in 1604,⁶¹ although it is similarly impossible to say what the title corresponded to at this date. But when Susneyos ultimately appealed to his brother Yämanä Krestos to come to his aid against King Ya‘qob, he responded: “It is impossible for me to leave my domain [*hagar-ya*]⁶² and to leave the *rest* of my father [*rest*]⁶³ and to go in your company to other domains.”⁶⁴ He refused to participate in his brother’s war and intended to protect the “heritage” which he held from his father. As he was *räs*, he was the head of an inhabited country (*hagar*), where he had mostly likely the possibility to raise troops. Would this not also have been the case with Se‘lä Krestos? Se‘lä Krestos would have borne this title from before 1604 and if, contrary to Yämanä Krestos he never refused support to Susneyos, there is a strong possibility that he joined for political reasons, making an alliance with his brother *abetähun*⁶⁵ Susneyos.

Thus, despite the *Chronicle*, it is possible that we must understand the career of Se‘lä Krestos and his relations with the king of kings in terms of an alliance, and its

⁶⁰ Cf. *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 184. His brothers were Häfa Krestos and Malke’a Krestos. Susneyos, the fourth son of Hamalmal Warq whom she had by the *abetähun* Fasiladäs (*CS*, p. 3), a son of the *abetähun* Ya‘qob who was a brother of the King Minäs (1559-63) was thus also a uterine brother of Yämanä Krestos, Häfa Krestos, and Malke’a Krestos. One of the more remarkable facts of the reign of Susneyos is how he seems to have shared power with his brothers. Unfortunately, at this late date our knowledge of the history of the “clan” of Susneyos is minimal, and more research is needed.

⁶¹ Cf. *CS*, 47.

⁶² *CS*, 78, 1.15.

⁶³ *CS*, 78, 1.16. *Rest* is derived from the Ge’ez verb *wäräsä*, meaning “to inherit”; Leslau, *Dictionary*, 618, col. 1. Although it might mean different things according to context, “its most basic sense is one of a general right to inherit the patrimony of one’s parents—birthright.” Crummey, *Land and Society*, 9.

⁶⁴ *CS*, 61.

⁶⁵ A title given to members of the royal family.

renewal, over the course of several years. That the king should be presented, in an unequivocal fashion, as the source of all power reveals, to us, a necessary and obligatory glorification of royal power in the eyes of the members of the court, before which the *Chronicle* was read frequently.⁶⁶ This portrayal is also in accord with a conception of providential history in which the anointed king, sent and guided by God, was the principal actor. In the same way, under the missionary gaze, the career of Se‘lä Krestos joins the ideal model of a very hierarchical power, apparently organized according to a centralizing principle. Thus Se‘lä Krestos was successively “viceroys of Begmêder,”⁶⁷ “viceroys of Tigrê,”⁶⁸ and “viceroys of Gojam.”⁶⁹ Each time nominated by the king, Se‘lä Krestos seemed, like the others, to depend directly on him in a subordinate role. A territorially hierarchical “empire” is in accord with a politically centralized and solidly ramified power. A new examination of the sources, however, allows us to revise this very schematic vision.

Se‘lä Krestos: “Viceroy of Begmêder”?

The first position occupied by Se‘lä Krestos, according to missionary documents, was “viceroys” of the “kingdom of Begmêder.”⁷⁰ Luis de Azevedo, Pero Paes and Manuel de Almeida are here our only informants. Almeida wrote:

The first uprising... which was added to those of the Galla, neighbors of the kingdom (*reino*) of Begameder at the time when Cellâ Christôs was the viceroy (*vissorey*), a younger brother of the emperor (*emperador*), who was more or less

⁶⁶ Manfred Kropp, “Un cas de censure politique au XVII^e siècle: la chronique de Sarsa Dengel,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 17 (2001): 266-67. As an illustration of this control, exercised by the king and his court on the *sähäfé te’zäz*, see CS, 160-61.

⁶⁷ *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 412-13 and *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 204.

⁶⁸ *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 333, 409, 412-413; *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 203, 207.

⁶⁹ *RÆSOI* 2 (1905): 486; 3 (1906): 378, 381, 443; 6 (1907): 420, etc.

⁷⁰ Cf. *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 412-13; 6 (1907): 204; *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 165 (letter from Luis de Azevedo to the provincial of Goa, 30 July 1608).

24 years of age, and was [viceroy] in 1607, the same year when the emperor (*emperador*) began to reign.⁷¹

Since no Ethiopian sources allude to this position held by Se‘lä Krestos in Begmêder, it is difficult to say why the Jesuits would attribute it to him. It is true that they habitually called “viceroy” those people who held certain Ethiopian titles (*räs*, *dajäzmätch*, *sahäfé lam*, etc.), and it is possible that the fathers, always looking for intelligibility, may have “invented” this title of “viceroy of Begmêder.” Thus the career of Se‘lä Krestos takes shape: before being “viceroy” of Tigré, he had been “viceroy” of Begmêder.

Se‘lä Krestos: Tegré Makuannen and Bahr Nagash?

According to the *Chronicle*, in the rainy season of 1608, Se‘lä Krestos was *Tegré Makuannen* and *bahr nagash*, “up to the shore of the Eritrean sea.” The missionaries translated this title as “viceroy of Tigrê.”⁷² It seems, once again, that we must not come to too hasty a conclusion and not let terminology surprise us.

At that time, the *ras* Se‘lä Krestos was *Tegré Makuannen* and *bahr nagash* up to the shore of the Eritrean sea. All the inhabitants of Tegré abandoned the *ras* Sé‘elä Krestos and joined the rebel and they did not stay with him, except certain men, such as those from Asbärom, of Gäbrä Maryam, of Aqba Mika’él and others who were with them.⁷³

The “rebel” to whom he refers claimed to be King Ya‘qob (d. 1607). If we follow the *Chronicle*, an important part of the “inhabitants” of Tigré joined together in refusing to recognize the new kingship of Susneyos. The purpose here is less to understand the reasons for this revolt than that of the presence of Se‘lä Krestos in Tigré at this time. According to the wording, Se‘lä Krestos was already in Tigré when the uprising began.

⁷¹ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 204.

⁷² *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 333; 6 (1907): 207.

⁷³ Cf. *CS*, 89.

But since when was he there, and for what reason? It could not have been for more than a year, and doubtlessly for less than a year, since he had waged war against his brother the previous year. It would follow that Susneyos decided to send Se'lä Krestos into Tigré. Victorious against Ya'qob, he needed to know how the Tigreans would position themselves in relation to his power. If King Sarsa Dengel (1563-97), by his victory against the *bahr nagash* Yeshaq,⁷⁴ had succeeded in gaining a certain ascendancy in Tigré, the Salomonic king would still not have reigned there as master, since the local powers (*Tegré Makuannen* and *bahr nagash*) continued to exist.⁷⁵ And it seems that in this region not everyone was prepared to recognize anyone's preeminence, or even to accord legitimacy to Susneyos. When the chronicler wrote that the inhabitants of Tigré "abandoned" Se'lä Krestos, he must have understood that they manifested their refusal to continue to accept the power that he had imposed on them. Among the men who rejoined Se'lä Krestos, the *Chronicle* cites a certain Aqba Mika'él who is most likely the Aquba Mika'él of the *Chronicle* of Sarsa Dengel, a follower of the Salomonic king who had become *bahr nagash* in 1588 at the start of an attack against the Turks who had newly occupied Debarwa, the residence of the *bahr nagash*.⁷⁶ Was Susneyos tempted to replace Aqba Mika'él with Se'lä Krestos, provoking a protest movement? Probably not. First Aqba Mika'él was undoubtedly no longer *bahr nagash* and *Tegré Makuannen* at that time. In fact, the *Chronicle* notes that, a little after Susneyos' victory against Ya'qob, in the month of April 1607:

⁷⁴ On these events, see Carlo Conti-Rossini, "La guerra turco-abissina del 1578," *Oriente moderno* 1 (1921): 634-36, 684-91; 2 (1923): 48-57. Contrary to what the title might suggest, the author does not limit himself to the study of the last campaign against Yeshaq. He proposes an analysis of the relations between the Tigré and the Salomonic king since the beginning of the sixteenth century, although we do not necessarily agree with his conclusions.

⁷⁵ Nevertheless, this king had succeeded in imposing certain *bahr nagash* that came from his movements: thus Sebhat La'ab, Dāharagot, Aquba Mika'él; cf. C. Conti-Rossini, *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel*, CSCO 22/scriptores aethiopici 4 (translation), 87, 113-14, 145, 147-48.

⁷⁶ Cf. Conti-Rossini, *Historia*, (translation), 147-48.

The *dadjazmatch* Keflä Wahed, the governor of Tegré and the king of the sea, arrived and praised the majesty [of Susneyos] and his sovereignty with good horses and beautiful clothes that were a gift for the glory of his kingdom.⁷⁷

But if Keflä Wahed was still *Tegré Makuannen* and *bahr nagash* in 1608, how should we explain his lack of allusion to these titles? Attempting to resolve this problem may carry us too far from our original purpose, but it is nevertheless important to note, once again, how the study of the itinerary of Se‘lä Krestos shows how we must work to overcome the confused and often contradictory evidence before us. Can we say that Se‘lä Krestos was really *bahr nagash* and *Tegré makuannen*? Could it be that there were simultaneously two men exercising the same powers, in the same place?

In the annual letter for 1608, Azevedo recounted that when Se‘lä Krestos came to Tigré, he paid a visit to the missionaries at Frémona. Azevedo judged the age of Se‘lä Krestos to be about 25 years. And in the same letter Azevedo conjured up the presence of a “Barnagaes,” *bahr nagash*, whose age he judged to be about 50 years, and who was probably Keflä Wahed himself.⁷⁸ There should be no doubt, therefore, according to this testimony, that Se‘lä Krestos was not the *bahr nagash*. Was he only *Tegré makuannen*? This is hardly more likely since, as we have noted, Keflä Wahed’s style always comprised the two titles.⁷⁹ Thus if Se‘lä Krestos had neither of these titles, why does the

⁷⁷ CS, 77-78.

⁷⁸ Cf. *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 165, 169.

⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the titles *Tegré makuannen* and *bahr nagash* require several clarifications. Since a certain Däharägot, in 1588, the two titles of *Tegré makuannen* and *bahr nagash* were for the first time united in a single man (Conti-Rossini, *Historia*, [translation], 145). From then, it was considered that the lands of the first were integrated with those of the second and that a hierarchical relationship now existed between the two. The functions could then be exercised by one and the same person. (Thus Fabienne Fasquelle, [1994], 288 and 290, who builds, although in different terms and in an apparently better argued fashion, on Conti-Rossini, *Historia* [translation], 190-91.) Apart from Keflä Wahed and Se‘lä Krestos, several examples of this double title exist: e.g., according to the *Chronicle of Susneyos*, in 1628 a certain Takla Giyorgis and in 1629 Qeb’ä Krestos (CS, 227, 235). But when the two titles were borne by different persons, the hierarchical relation between the two was not always evident. In 1578, a certain Gabra Maryam was *Tegré makuannen*; he held the title again in 1589 when Aquba Mika’el was *bahr nagash* (cf. C. Conti-Rossini, *Historia*, [translation], 78, 147, 148, 152,

Chronicle give them to him, and why do the missionaries describe him as “viceroy” of Tigré? The fathers, remembering what some of them had heard at court, even directly from Se‘lä Krestos or from the historiographer, or again remembering what Paes wrote in the version of the *Chronicle* that he integrated into his *Historia*, joined in the necessary glorification of the king, just as the editor of the *Chronicle of Susneyos* did. Se‘lä Krestos, *Tigré mak^wannen* and *bahr nagash* had probably no reality except textual: the title was ancient and prestigious and placed Se‘lä Krestos on a sort of fictitious pedestal. His title also expressed, doubtlessly, the ambition of Susneyos to dominate Tigré. The *Chronicle* itself suggests that the “Tigrean episode” did not end very well for Se‘lä Krestos. Mauled by the rebels in the course of three battles, Se‘lä Krestos must finally have required the aid of his brother the king to finish the job.⁸⁰ Once the conflict had quieted down, the chronicler noted laconically that “Se‘lä Krestos declined the charge of Tigré and wished to leave with his brother the king.”⁸¹

The itinerary of Se‘lä Krestos manifestly cannot be understood as that of a *cursus honorum* within a structured “imperial administration.” At least it is impossible for us to reconstitute it under this form from the available sources. Until now, we have not discovered Se‘lä Krestos as a faithful “governor” or “vice-roy” for his brother Susneyos, but we do see him as an important person within a political system whom the king seemed to reward (at least in a fictitious or symbolic manner in the history) with honorific titles. These gifts should be understood as the conditions of a perennial alliance between the two men.

Se‘lä Krestos then went to Godjam. From 1612,⁸² he was placed in charge of this region, a post he held until 1627, when he was dismissed.⁸³ He regained the post in 1629,⁸⁴ but lost it again in 1630-31.⁸⁵ The documentation for this period is relatively prolix and offers several keys for understanding the situation.

155); in 1619 Takla Giyorgis was *Tegré makuannen* and Gabra Maryam was *bahr nagash* at the same time (CS, 162, 163).

⁸⁰ CS, 89-90.

⁸¹ CS, 100.

⁸² CS, 110.

⁸³ CS, 225.

⁸⁴ CS, 234.

⁸⁵ CS, 244.

SE‘LÄ KRESTOS, RÄS OF GODJAM

The ascent to power of Se‘lä Krestos in Godjam in 1612 coincided with his decision to favor Catholicism. The length and stability of his tenure there allowed him to practice a certain politico-religious strategy. His favoring of Catholicism, combined with the honorific functions attributed by his brother the king bestowed on the *räs* of Godjam a certain power that the king finally had to face in order to safeguard the mastery of his own royal space.

The Limits of Godjam of Se‘lä Krestos

The *Chronicle of Susneyos* indicates that the king, in naming Se‘lä Krestos *räs* of Godjam, gave the region to him “entirely,” as the *räs* Atnatéwos had held it in his time. According to a donation in *gult* from the land of Ambasamé of the King Sarsa Dengel, to the daughter of the *azaj* Kumo, *wézarö* Bäzenga Ätona, dated to 28 *yakätit* of the year of grace 247 (4 March 1595), Atnatéwos was *Godjam nagash*.⁸⁶ Did the Godjam of Se‘lä Krestos correspond to that of *Godjam nagash* Atnatéwos?

Would it seem, from this information, that the expression employed by the chronicler referred to geography and signified that the whole of what was considered Godjam in the seventeenth century found itself under the authority of the *räs*? Though it may be possible to form a judgment on the nature of the power of Se‘lä Krestos in Godjam, it remains difficult to know what Godjam corresponded to in the seventeenth century, as we lack precise knowledge of it. The region of Godjam in the current configuration of the Ethiopian state, well delimited as it may be, cannot tell us what the Godjam of the

⁸⁶ D. Crummey, *Land and Society*, 61-62, citing MS IES 88.XIX.10, Tana Qirqos. The document was dated but the version of the text includes a misprint and note 237 for 247. The year of the Martyrs 247 corresponds to the year 1587-88 (E.C.)/8 September 1594-8 September 1595 (R.C.), according to Carlo Conti-Rossini, *Tabella comparativa del calendario etiopico col calendario romano* (Rome, 1948), 20-21; 28 *yakätit* 247/1587 corresponds to Saturday, 4 March 1595, according to Joseph Tubiana, *Ethioconcord, correspondance automatique des calendriers éthiopiens et grégoriens* (Rotterdam, 1988), 14.

seventeenth century looked like. We might even note that, in the seventeenth century, Godjam was a region adjacent to the kingdom. The regions in the south and to the east of Abbay were occupied by the Oromo, who frequently attempted to cross the river to make incursions into Godjam. The region of Damot was also to the south of the Abbay. Finally, Agawmeder occupied the west zone of Godjam. However, if the documentation is relatively silent about the geographic configuration of Godjam, it is more prolix about the development of Catholicism there in the first third of the seventeenth century.

Godjam and Religious Politics

Godjam appeared as a laboratory for a possible Catholic conquest, and the role of Se‘lä Krestos in this enterprise, if we are to believe the missionaries, was considerable. It was around 1612 that Se‘lä Krestos decided on a number of measures in favor of the Jesuits. With his authorization, the fathers were able to found a residence at Qwaläla, several leagues from the camp of the *räs* at Sarka. Retrospectively, Manuel de Almeida, in his *History*, proposed the date 1612 for the foundation of this residence:

Then the viceroy [Se‘lä Krestos] gave to Fr. Francisco Antonio [de Angelis] some very good lands before building a church and a base [residence] to welcome the widows and orphans of numerous Portuguese who were scattered about in the kingdom. This was the beginning of the residence called Collelä [Qwaläla], and it was the first that the company had in the kingdom of Godjam, and the third in Ethiopia, the first being Fremonâ in Tigré, and the second Gorgorra in Dambaê.⁸⁷

This history of these Jesuit residences allows us to underline the novel position of Godjam. The land accorded to the Jesuits and to the Portuguese in this region was given to them by Se‘lä Krestos, while Gorgora in Dambya had been given to them by Susneyos, who in reality simply confirmed the donations made by King Ya’eqob.⁸⁸ The residence at

⁸⁷ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 237.

⁸⁸ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 145.

Frémona in Tigré dated from 1566.⁸⁹ Qwalāla thus appears as a new phenomenon in relation to the preceding residences. As *rās* of Godjam, Se‘lā Krestos decided on a political program in favor of the disinherited. This third residence was the result of a decision taken by the local power and became the manifestation of a beachhead for Catholicism in Godjam.

The second measure concerned some controversial literature. In Godjam, and with the encouragement of Se‘lā Krestos, Fr. Francisco Antonio de Angelis engaged in the translation into Ge‘ez of the commentaries on the Gospels of Juan Maldonado.⁹⁰ He accomplished this work with the help of Ethiopian scribes, in particular Fequrā Egzi’e,⁹¹ around the year 1613.

Nowhere else, for this period in any case, were such measures taken in favor of Catholicism, especially in the royal region of Dämbya. Several years later, this religious strategy began to produce certain results that missionary documentation did not forget to record. Thus, in 1619, according to the annual letter that the fathers addressed to their hierarchy, Godjam appeared at the head of the list for conversions, with more than 430, while the number of converted never rose above 30 in Dämbya and 60 in Tigré.⁹²

There are, of course, problems with these figures. We do not know whether they represent forced or superficial conversions, or what percentage of the contemporary population they represent, or the details of who, exactly, was converted (men, women, children, descendants of the Portuguese, etc.), since the Jesuits had an interest in their letters to their superiors in giving total numbers of conversions as the evident sign of their apostolic mission. Nevertheless, the position of Godjam in favor of the new faith was important and did not escape the notice of Ethiopian religious, in particular the head of the regular monks, the *etchägé*. Father Paes wrote:

⁸⁹ *RÆSOI* 10 (1910): 203.

⁹⁰ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 284. Juan de Maldonado (1533-83) was a Jesuit and one of the founders of modern theology and exegesis, of which *Commentarii in quatuor evangelistas* (Pont-à-Mousson, 1596-97) is an example. Obsessed with fighting against Calvinism with the help of the same Holy Scripture that the reformers were always claiming as their own, Maldonado sketched throughout his commentary a number of historio-theological dissertations of great interest. See E. Amman, “Maldonnat, Jean”, in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Paris, 1926), 1772-75.

⁹¹ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 236.

⁹² *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 458.

In March 1620, there arose another tempest on account of the jealousy of a monk, who is like the general [chief religious] of the family of Taquelâ Haimanôt [Täklä Haymanot], who for reasons of his dignity they called Icheguê [*etchägé*] and who possessed a great authority above all. This monk, accompanied by numerous other monks, came to the camp of the emperor.... The emperor was in the process of celebrating his victory [a decisive victory against the Oromo in the Bägemeder] when the monk arrived with the others and they raised up the great and the small against us, declaring that all the kingdom of Godjam had lost their faith and had taken ours, which in the sight of everyone they confessed, leaving their churches and communicating with us...”⁹³

As E. Cerulli remarked, the event is a major one in the history of this period. The *etchägé*, a certain Zä-Wängél,⁹⁴ became the head of a movement of protest and opposition to the Roman faith that included the monastic order of Täklä Haymanot (Däbrä Libanos).⁹⁵ The talk was perhaps exaggerated, but nevertheless the sign of an exasperation on the part of religious power, illustrating clearly that a mobilization in favor of Catholicism was much more intense in Godjam than elsewhere. The commentary of Manuel Barradas, a propos Godjam, backs this up. In his account, written in 1634, after the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia, Barradas draws up a table of different Ethiopian regions and shows that Godjam, by relation to other “kingdoms,” was the one

⁹³ *RÆSOI* 3 (1906): 432. Original: “Em março de 620 levantou outra tormenta por meio de hum frade, que he como geral da familia dos de Taquelâ Haimanôt, a quem por reçam de sua dignidade chamam Icheguê e tem grande autoridade entre todos. Este juntou muytos frades e foi com elles ao arrayal do Emperador.... E estando o Emperador festejando a victoria, chegou o frade com os demais e amotinaram grandes e piquenos contra nos, dicendo que todo o reyno de Gojâm tinha deixado sua fe e tomado a nossa, que ja todos se confessavam e comungavam com nosco e deixaram suas igrejas....”

⁹⁴ Only the list of the abbots of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos edited by Enrico Cerulli (“Gli abbati di Dabra Libanos, capi del monachismo etiopico, secondo la ‘lista rimata’,” *Orientalia* 13 [1944]: 161), gives the name of the *etchägé*, a name completely absent from the *Chronique de Susneyos* and from missionary documents.

⁹⁵ E. Cerulli, “Gli abbati di Dabra Libanos,” *Orientalia* 13 (1944): 161.

in which the Roman faith was most welcomed. He attributed it to the merits of the *räs* Se‘lä Krestos and his dynamism in favor of Catholicism.⁹⁶

Plainly, according to both missionary and Ethiopian documents, the region of Godjam seemed to have been Catholicized more than the other regions, including that of Dämbya, occupied by the king. Another point that allows us to shed light not only on the position of Godjam, but also on the relations between Se‘lä Krestos and the king of kings, is the foundation of new residences and the construction of Catholic churches.

Se‘lä Krestos and the King of kings: Concurrent or Complimentary?

In converting to Catholicism before 1612,⁹⁷ Se‘lä Krestos became for the Jesuits an essential political tool for the introduction of the Roman faith into Ethiopia. In promoting the new faith, he allowed the king to remain in the background, keeping his role as arbiter and continuing to skillfully exploit his opponents. It seemed, however, that from 1618, his favoring Catholicism began to impinge on the prerogatives of Susneyos.

The example of the construction of a Catholic church in Dämbya might serve as an example. At the end of the year 1618,⁹⁸ Susneyos authorized the Jesuits to construct a stone church at Old Gorgora. To do this, he gave them land to build it on and promised to finance the work. The missionaries valued the consent of the king as their first “triumph,” because the building of a stone church in Ethiopian space became the sign of a durable presence, since until that time the Jesuits only used churches of the Ethiopian manner.⁹⁹ However, a potential conflict was avoided, since Se‘lä Krestos supplied the stones for the building and financed the work himself. All this was done in secret for fear of the king. It was at that moment that Susneyos intervened, appropriating the initiative for the

⁹⁶ *RÆSOI* 4 (1906): 15-16.

⁹⁷ Hervé Pennec, “La mission jésuite en Éthiopie au temps de Pedro Paez (1583-1622) et ses rapports avec le pouvoir éthiopien. III. Le temps de la ‘victoire’ (1612-1622),” *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 38 (1996): 139-43.

⁹⁸ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 406.

⁹⁹ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 413. The church was constructed relatively rapidly, since work on it began in January 1619 (*RÆSOI* 11 [1911]: 406), and was finished in March 1620 (*RÆSOI* 2 [1905]: 497). It was a small building, eighteen by seven meters (*RÆSOI* 2 [1905]: 496). The church was consecrated on 16 January 1621 (*RÆSOI* 11 [1911]: 485).

construction of the church.¹⁰⁰ This intervention must be read as an attempt to gain control of initiatives in Dämbya such as the construction of Jesuit churches. In this affair, Susneyos was not motivated by religious zeal so much as the necessity of not letting Se‘lä Krestos monopolize any initiatives in favor of Catholicism, *a fortiori* in Dämbya. While the first Catholic church building was being constructed in Dämbya, in Godjam, Se‘lä Krestos financed a church at Qwaläla in 1624-25¹⁰¹ and another in his camp at Sarka starting in January 1625.¹⁰² In 1625-26, the *räs* of Godjam decided on the foundation of another residence at Hadasha near the Abbay.¹⁰³ A network of Jesuit residences in the northwest of Godjam – an ensemble of measures designed to organize space for the most efficient diffusion of the Roman faith – were thus all founded on the initiative of Se‘lä Krestos. But if, as we have emphasized, Se‘lä Krestos seemed to benefit from an extended autonomy in Godjam, allowing him to decide political and religious strategy, we must nevertheless specify its limits.

The example of the royal church of Märtulä Maryam may help us to better understand the relations between the *räs* Se‘lä Krestos and the king of kings, Susneyos. Began at the end of the fifteenth century or the beginning of the sixteenth,¹⁰⁴ Märtulä Maryam was finished on the death of Queen Elleni in 1522.¹⁰⁵ The fact that it was built in Godjam signaled a change in royal political policy in favor of the regions to the west of the kingdom. The wars of Grañ (first third of the sixteenth century) seemed to have accelerated this new westward movement. Nevertheless, Märtulä Maryam did not escape several different destructions. According to Almeida, in his report for the year 1626-27, reporting on the oral traditions collected in the seventeenth century, the church had been

¹⁰⁰ *RÆSOI* 11 (1911): 413 (letter from Luis de Azevedo to the provincial of Goa, 3 July 1619).

¹⁰¹ Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (henceforth ARSI), *Goa 39 I*, f. 255.

¹⁰² *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 427.

¹⁰³ ARSI, *Goa 39 II*, doc. 52, f. 311v. The location of Adaxâ or Adasciâ (Hadasha) is relatively difficult to pinpoint on a modern map of Ethiopia. The missionary sources indicate that it was eight leagues from Qwalälä and ten from Märtulä Maryam (*RÆSOI* 6 [1907]: 495-96).

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Bell, “The Ruins of Mertola-Maryam,” *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* 1 (1988): 125 has the construction of Märtulä Maryam beginning in 1510, but gives no reason for saying so.

¹⁰⁵ Alvares, *Prester John*, 425, n. 1, 432.

destroyed first by fire by the Muslims of Grañ, then a second time by the Oromo (the Galla).¹⁰⁶ For its part, the *Chronicle* of King Iysau I (1682-1706) attributes the sacking of the church to an army installed by the successors of Lebna Dengel (1508-40) and to the kings themselves, envious of the resources of the church of Elléni:

Queen Elléni died; after her death, the kings who reigned then usurped the property of this church and established there some chawā (corps of troops); they destroyed the *tabot* of gold, which the queen had once built, of the weight of more than 400 pounds of gold; they carried it and placed it in their house; the edifice was destroyed and the enclosure fell into ruin, and since there was no good and pious king who could rebuild it; on the contrary, it was destroyed anew with each new ruler, until the reign of this king, a friend of God and of his mother, the Virgin of body and spirit.¹⁰⁷

As Marie-Laure Derat emphasizes, the resources of the church of Märtulä Maryam provoked jealousy among Ethiopian Muslims as well as Ethiopian Christians.¹⁰⁸ But this extract from the *Chronicle* of Iyasu I has a particular meaning. Almost 150 years after the events, the Muslim armies and the pagan Oromo had disappeared from the story, and those who came to shoulder the responsibility there were Christian kings and their armies. This adroit maneuver avoided denouncing any king in particular by denouncing an ensemble of them, all the sovereigns since Lebnä Degel. But for the readers and the actors of the end of the seventeenth century, a “general” denunciation could designate one king in particular. A king who was neither “good” nor “pious”: was he not Susneyos, the sovereign “without piety,” who had become Catholic? Was not the chronicler treating with silence a king who had traveled far from Orthodoxy?

Around 1626, King Susneyos envisaged the reconstruction of Märtulä Maryam, a decision that clarified his strategy and his utilization of the Jesuits. When Manuel de Almeida reported the circumstances of the foundation of the residence of Enäb’esé

¹⁰⁶ ARSI, *Goa 39 II*, doc. 54d, f. 429v.

¹⁰⁷ Ignacio Guidi, ed., *Annales Iohannis I, Iyasu I et Bakaffa*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1903-05), 2: 70-71.

¹⁰⁸ Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 213.

(Nebessê), he insisted that the royal concern was to rebuild the church constructed by Queen Elléni, the church of Märtulä Maryam. The reasons given for installing the Jesuits at Enäb'esé by Almeida were tied to the memory of the place and of his ancestors:

Almost at the same time [when the emperor gave the site of New Gorgorrâ in 1626] his highness asked the same father superior [Antonio Fernandez] that he would give to him a father to found the residence of Nebessê. It was a place situated in the interior of Gojam, an important district, which in the past belonged to Queen Elena, who had founded there a renowned church, as we have said in book three of this history. And as the emperor was the great-grandson of King David, who was raised by Queen Elena as a son, and on whose behalf she governed the kingdom several years, he greatly desired to restore this church and, for the sake of the memory of the Empress Elena, he granted a good part of the gold of two altar stones, which had escaped the destruction committed first by Granh and then by the Gallas.¹⁰⁹

The priest emphasized the desire of Susneyos to newly occupy a royal space, to give to the church all its former splendor in investing a part of the reserved treasure. In this extract, there is no indication that the king wished that the Catholic faith should implant itself again in this region, and the passage allows other interpretations. First, in reconstructing this church of Queen Elléni, he legitimated his attachment to the Salomonic kings and remained in a line of religious continuity of his predecessors. He did entrust the reconstruction to the Jesuits, but this break with the past is minimal if we consider that Susneyos saw the Jesuits as simply another monastic order. To rebuild this royal church permitted him to be present in Godjam and thus not to completely abandon the region to his brother. Märtulä Maryam became, from this point of view, a strategic church at the heart of the relations between Se'lä Krestos and the king of kings.

The importance accorded by Susneyos to the reconstruction of the church was well illustrated by the oral tradition transcribed by Almeida that conferred on Susneyos the legitimacy of his intervention in Godjam. According to Almeida, the two gold

¹⁰⁹ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 494-95.

*tabot*¹¹⁰ of this church were exceptionally heavy, the first weighing 800 *oqueas* and the second 500,¹¹¹ corresponding to around 28 and 17 kilograms. The weight is perhaps exaggerated, especially if we compare it to the weight of *tabot* accorded for the construction of other Catholic churches,¹¹² but it was no less than the treasures saved from the Moors and the Oromo, according to Almeida,¹¹³ which must have been considerable. Moreover, a great part of this gold was used for the reconstruction of Märtulä Maryam, found again, we do not know by what miracle, in the hands of royal power.

This decision to reconstruct Märtulä Maryam and the position of Susneyos in relation to the residence of Hadasha, founded in 1625-26, allows us to underline the tensions between the king and Se‘lä Krestos. According to Almeida, the king opposed the initiative of his brother, on account of the enmity that was beginning to appear between them, provoked by the enemies of the *räs*, jealous of his success. The Jesuit author, in this account, exonerated Susneyos by blaming the opponents of Se‘lä Krestos.¹¹⁴ Do we not see in this situation a conflict between the two brothers, with Susneyos fearing to see installed in Godjam a more powerful *räs*?

If this reading is correct, then the decision of Susneyos to entrust the reconstruction of Märtulä Maryam to the Jesuits becomes more understandable. It can be interpreted as the will of the king to not abandon Godjam to his brother. And in this case, the ensemble of the measures of Susneyos at Godjam were to link up with an important event in the itinerary of Se‘lä Krestos: the loss of his title of *räs* of Godjam, in 1627. This “firing” permitted Susneyos to enact his strategy for Godjam: the reconstruction of

¹¹⁰ Representation of the tables of the Law, marking the divine presence in the church.

¹¹¹ *RÆSOI* 5 (1907): 251. This term is also found in Alvares (*ouquia*), who estimates that this unit of measurement is equivalent to ten *cruzados* (Alvares, *Prester John*, 123-24). It is related to the Ethiopian word *wäqét*, meaning “unit of weight,” according to Leslau, *Dictionary*, 616.

¹¹² Cf. Pennec, *Jésuites*, 167 (see Table 6: “Dons offerts pour la construction d’églises catholiques”).

¹¹³ *RÆSOI* 5 (1907): 251.

¹¹⁴ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 495.

Märtulä Maryam, when the construction of the church of Hadasha, began in 1626, was deferred.¹¹⁵

We have wished to show at what point it was important to question the illusion created by the phraseology of power articulated both in the royal chronicles and by missionary literature. At the end of this study, we would like to propose several openings, or hypotheses, useful (we hope) for future research. More than an all-powerful king, we would prefer a king in constant negotiation with different local powers. The political space of the kingdom, the royal territory, was organized according to distinctive methods. The different spaces, in relation to the king, each played a specific role at the interior of an organized system. Thus, the kings entered into matrimonial alliances in order to ally themselves politically with certain potentates; the king granted them land, in the same way he granted land to churches and monasteries in order to integrate them into his network of clients and allies; he imposed equally his tribute on those he vanquished; he maintained relations more or less conflicted with the areas he did not rule; he had to reconcile himself to the settlement of the Oromo “in” his kingdom, etc. This list could be extended and we see that the avenues of investigation are numerous. Also, it is important to return to the idea, often implicitly admitted, of the existence of a *limes* of the kingdom, i.e. a fixed “border,” since there exists an Ethiopian vocabulary of boundaries that takes account of the nomadic nature of power. Finally, it appears without doubt profitable to abandon the appellation of Empire and to start again with another one. If we speak of a kingdom, then what type of kingdom are we speaking about? Of a kingdom whose politico-economic foundation would have been payment of tribute to the *negus*? One of whose conditions of existence was royal nomadism? Taking this into account, can we not call into question (or at least nuance) the idea of a territorial system of a kingdom organized according to the principle of center/periphery?

Translated by Jonathan Good

¹¹⁵ *RÆSOI* 6 (1907): 495-96.