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Territorial Expansion and Administrative Evolution under the “Solomonic” Dynasty

Deresse Ayenachew

The so-called “Solomonic” dynasty, founded by Yəkunno Amlak (1270-1285) in 1270, ruled the Christian kingdom through the mid-sixteenth century, and indeed much longer. The longevity of the dynasty is notable, and thanks in large part to the greater survival of sources from the later thirteenth century on, we are much better informed about it than about any other ancient or medieval Ethiopian ruling house, Christian or otherwise. It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars have explored a number of questions that shed light, directly or indirectly, on the factors that contributed to the dynasty’s ability to maintain itself.

One feature that has garnered attention in this respect is the dynasty’s succession practices. The kings of this lineage practiced polygamy, and all their sons, whether by official wives or concubines, were eligible to succeed to the royal office.¹ The usual practice seems to have been for the eldest son to succeed the deceased king. If that son died without heirs, then the crown passed to his brothers in turn, but if he ruled for some time and left sons of his own, then the crown passed to his sons, not his brothers. Ratification by the royal council rendered the succession official. In a system apparently in place since the onset of the Solomonic dynasty, the “extra” sons/brothers were kept in seclusion on one of the flat-topped mountains of Amhara, Amba Gəšän, called in contemporary documents the *Däbrä nägäšt* or “Mountain of kings”. Though they could receive an education there, work the land, even marry, they could not leave unless called down to rule.² This system, doubtless intended to maintain a supply of capable male heirs but prevent them from undertaking rebellions and coups, facilitated a number of smooth successions. But it was not foolproof. If a king’s reign were long, as was the case with Dawit II (1378/9-1412), he might be pressured to abdicate in favor of an eldest son already grown to adulthood; rivalries might develop even within his lifetime between his several sons, or perhaps better between their often different mothers, kin, and other officials allied with them, who were not secluded at Amba Gəšän.³ Such jockeying for succession and even possible ouster are well attested for another long reign, that of Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434-68), who executed several sons, and their mothers, for plots (real or perceived) against his throne. But the most volatile situations arose when a king left a very young son as heir. As Tadesse Tamrat has observed, those officials who had made their careers under the young heir’s deceased father were intent upon maintaining that specific lineage, and thus the succession of the young (even infant) heir, whereas the brothers of the deceased king, viewing the kingdom as effectively in the hands of officials rather than a true member of the lineage, considered their own rights to have been abrogated. Such occurred at least three times between the late thirteenth and fifteenth century, and serious struggles for the throne amounting to civil war were

1 On royal polygamy see the essay of Margaux Herman in this volume.

2 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford, 1972), 279-290; idem, “Problems of royal succession in fifteenth century Ethiopia: a presentation of the documents,” in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma, 2-4 April, 1972)*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, 2 vols. (Rome, 1974), 1: 501-535, at 533-534; Haile Gabriel Dagne, “Amba Gəšän,” in *E Ae* 1 (2003): 220-221.

3 In addition to the works in note 2 above, see Marie-Laure Derat, ““Do Not Search for Another King, One Whom God Has Not Given You”: Questions on the Elevation of Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434-68),” *Journal of Early Modern History* 8, 3-4 (2004): 210-228.

the result.⁴ Perhaps in response to the dangers of this eventuality, a three-person council was instituted, successfully, for the young ʿĪskəndər in the late fifteenth century, and again for the underage Ləbna Dəngəl in the early sixteenth.⁵

Such challenges from within the extended royal family and its allied elites could spur kings to reassert their God-given right to rule. As Zār’a Ya’əqob declared, “O people of Ethiopia, do not search for another (king) that God has not given you, but obey the one whom He makes king for you at different times... [and] follow him in good conduct.”⁶ A more perennial impetus to legitimization was the need to attract the first loyalty of subjects and unite them in a common cause against the kingdom’s enemies. For the Solomonids, as for most ruling dynasties, this engendered a royal ideology articulated through texts and enacted in ceremonies. Like succession practices, this too has attracted scholarly attention in recent decades. The classic expression of the dynasty’s royal ideology is that enshrined in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* (“Glory [or Nobility] of the Kings”). This work reinforced the authority of the ruling dynasty by asserting its descent from the biblical kings David and Solomon. The biblical story of the visit to Solomon’s court of the Queen of Sheba, here called Makedda and identified as the queen of Ethiopia, results in the birth of a son, Mənilək. Raised in Ethiopia, he returns to Israel where he is recognized by Solomon, anointed (with the throne name David, Gə’əz *Dawit*), and invited to rule the Israelites, but chooses to rule in Ethiopia instead. From him springs the lineage uniquely chosen by God to rule Ethiopia in perpetuity, and by extension his kingdom becomes the second Promised Land.⁷ According to its colophon, the *Kəbrä nägäšt* was translated from Arabic into Gə’əz by an official who can be securely dated to the reign of King ʿAmdä Şəyon (1314-44), and though its translation may have originally been sponsored to fuel the pretensions of a rival ruling house (as we shall discuss below), the kings of this dynasty promoted its claims in relation to themselves.

This can be seen in other works, of a more legal or ceremonial nature, that reflect ideas in the *Kəbrä nägäšt*. Many are found in a collection known as the “Order of the Kingdom” (*Şər’atä mängəšt*), which compiles works related to the royal court’s rituals and dignitaries and often circulated in manuscripts with the *Kəbrä nägäšt* or with royal chronicles. The first work in the collection, also called the “Order of the Kingdom,” traces the origin of the royal administration, its offices and office holders to legends of Mənilək and his companions. The oldest manuscript copy of this work, from the seventeenth century, asserts that the work was written during the reign of ʿAmdä Şəyon, suggesting that this reign was an important moment in crystallizing the ideology

4 Tadesse Tamrat, “Problems of Royal Succession,” who notes especially the five-year period after the death of Yagba Şəyon (1285-1294), the four years after the death of Yəşhaq (1430-1434), and the roughly six-month reign of ʿĪskəndər’s infant son ʿAmdä Şəyon II (1494).

5 ʿĪskəndər’s regent council consisted of the queen mother and the highest-ranking ecclesiastical and military officers of the administration, the *ʿuqqabe sä’at* and the *bəhtwäddäd*, to be discussed below. On ʿĪleni’s career and the growing role of the queen mother generally see Margaux Herman, “Les reines en Éthiopie du XV^e au XVII^e siècle. Épouses, mères de roi, ‘mère du royaume’” (Ph.D diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2012), and her essay in this volume.

6 Getatchew Haile, ed. and trans., *The Epistle of Humanity of Emperor Zār’a Ya’əqob (Ṭomarä təsbə’i)*, 2 vols., CSCO 522-523, SAe 95-96 (Louvain, 1991), at vol. 1 (text), 62-63.

7 The work has been translated by Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek...* (London, 1922; repr. 2007) and Gérard Colin, *La Gloire des rois (Kebra Nagast): Épopée nationale d’Éthiopie* (Geneva, 2002). For recent studies and further references see Paolo Marrassini, “*Kəbrä nägäšt*,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 364-368; Pierluigi Piovanelli, “The Apocryphal Legitimation of a ‘Solomonic’ Dynasty in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* – a Reappraisal,” *Aethiopica* 16 (2013): 7-44; idem, “‘Orthodox’ Faith and Political Legitimation of a ‘Solomonic’ Dynasty of Rulers in the *Kebra Nagast*,” in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Kevork B. Bardakjian and Sergio La Porta (Leiden, 2014), 688-705.

and ruling mechanisms of the dynasty (though the collection, being in continuous use, was updated and expanded after that time).⁸

Another important work is that for the ceremony of royal coronation, called the *Šar'atä q'arhät* (lit. "Order for tonsure"). The ceremony reflected the ideology of Solomonic descent and the rulers' biblical priest-king status in the tonsuring and anointing of kings at their coronation.⁹ Royal chronicles inform us that King Zär'a Ya'eqob celebrated his coronation at Aksum, the most prestigious and symbolically resonant site, in 1436, but the location could vary: his successor Bä'ädä Maryam (1468-78) held his at Atronsä Maryam in Amhara, and Āskändär (1478-94) at Yäläbäsa/Təḷq in Fätägar.¹⁰ Zär'a Ya'eqob in particular underscored his divine election by having his own dream about his coronation recorded in a book of homilies about the Virgin Mary: in it, the Virgin herself crowned him, saying, "This mountain is the throne of the kingdom of Zär'a Ya'eqob. No one can shake it, because he is the executor of the will of my Son."¹¹ The king also enacted with particular emphasis his status as priest-king, issuing a number of theological works that went under his name and deciding upon important doctrinal questions; his royal authority over church and state was remembered, in the years after his death, in the *Acts of Märḥa Krəstos*, abbot of Däbrä Libanos of Šäwa from 1463 to 1497.¹² His reign, like that of 'Amdä Šəyon, thus appears as another important moment in the elaboration of Solomonic royal ideology.

Finally, the "Order of the Banquet" (*Šar'atä gəbr*) has been mined to understand the mechanism of the royal court and the ceremonial enactment of its hierarchies and relationships.¹³ Though written down during the reign of Bä'ädä Maryam, it reflects practices that were certainly in use earlier. Those practices center on the great banquet that was held at the beginning of the Ethiopian new year, in September, when the royal court, reduced in size during the rainy season, now regained its full dimensions: in the later fifteenth and sixteenth century, some 30,000 to 40,000 people participated. One thing the text illuminates therefore is the size of the *kätäma*, the royal court or "camp," which generally stayed in one place during the rainy season, when travel was more difficult, but moved through the kingdom during the long dry season (September-June). The roving *kätäma* was itself an important feature of the Solomonic dynasty's mode of rule, allowing the king to manifest his presence, dispense justice, and quell disturbances in various parts of his kingdom, while also spreading over different areas the burden of supplying the court with food. The *Šar'atä gəbr* also describes the arrangement of the tents within the *kätäma*, which reflected spatially the hierarchy of the court and kingdom. The king's lodgings were located at the center;

8 Bairu Tafla and Heinrich Scholler, *Ser'ata Mangest: An Early Ethiopian Constitution* (Addis Ababa, 1974; repr. in *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee* 4 [1976]: 487-99); Denis Nonsitsin, "Šar'atä mängəst," in *EAE* 4 (2010), 632-634, with references further literature.

9 Jean-François Sciarrino, "Le Ser'atä Qwerhät: recherches sur le cérémonial éthiopien du sacre des rois avant le XVI^e siècle" (master's thesis, Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1994).

10 Jules Perruchon, *Les chroniques de Zar'a Yä'eqob et de Ba'eda Märyäm, rois d'Éthiopie de 1434 à 1478 (texte éthiopien et traduction)* (Paris, 1893), 48-51; idem, "Histoire d'Eskinder, d'Amda Seyon II et de Naod, rois d'Éthiopie," *Journal Asiatique*, 9th ser., 3 (1894), 26 (Gə'əz text).

11 Getatchew Haile, ed. and trans., *The Mariology of Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia: Texts and Translations* (Rome, 1992), 163.

12 Stanisław Kur, ed. and trans., *Actes de Marḥa Krestos*, 2 vols., CSCO 330-331, SAe 62-63 (Louvain, 1972), vol. 1 (text), 44-45.

13 Manfred Kropp, "The *Ser'ata Gəbr*: A Mirror View of Daily Life at the Ethiopian Royal Court in the Middle Ages," *Northeast African Studies* 10, 2-3 (1988): 51-87; Marie-Laure Derat, "Le banquet à la cour du roi d'Éthiopie au XV^e siècle: Dons forcés et contreparties," *Hypothèses* 5, 1 (2002), 267-274; idem, "Le banquet royal en Éthiopie au XV^e siècle: fiscalité et festivités," in *Cuisine et société en Afrique: histoire, saveurs, savoir-faire*, ed. M. Chastenet, François-Xavier Fauvelle and D. Juhé-Beaulaton (Paris, 2002), 41-52.

closest to his were those of the royal queens and the highest-ranking officials, in a central enclosure accessed by two guarded gates that could be entered only at the king's will.¹⁴ The ceremony of the banquet, in its turn, enacted such hierarchies in various ways: the amount of foodstuffs to be offered for the banquet by different ranks of personnel, the sequence in which they were served, and the quality of the plate on which they ate.¹⁵ One fundamental principle undergirding the ceremony was that all offices and titles, and the lands attached to them, were a gift of the king: the offerings made for the banquet were therefore a form of tribute, which the king then symbolically redistributed to his people.

The banquet thus indirectly reflected ideas about the king's relationship to the land he governed. The systems by which land was worked and held in pre-modern Ethiopia have been studied since the 1960s, with a new wave of scholarship appearing in the last two decades.¹⁶ For present purposes a few comments specifically regarding the position of the royal power may suffice. In ideal terms, the king was the protector and provider of prosperity for his subjects, and land was certainly their main source of wealth. Subjects owned the land, through a right known as *räst*. *Räst* was heritable and normally inalienable, and Christian Ethiopians of all social ranks, including elites and members of the royal family, held lands by it. A second form of land-right, overlaid upon the first, was *g^wəlt*. It was provisional, granted by the king in exchange for service, and permitted the *g^wəlt* holder to extract products from the granted land. The word *g^wəlt* comes from *g^wällätä*, translated as "to assign a fief;" *g^wəlt* is therefore often understood as equivalent to "fief."¹⁷ By extension, the *g^wəlt* holder may be understood as a "lord." It should be underlined, however, that the common term for *g^wəlt* holder used in the sources is *mäk^wanənt*, "judges" or "governors;" the more inclusive term is *śəyyuman*, "elected ones" or "appointed ones." (*G^wəlt* rights were also, however, bestowed liberally on churches and monasteries as a means of sustaining them, and perhaps also of maintaining those institutions' allegiance to the royal power.) The emphasis was therefore clearly placed on the provisional nature of the grant as a reward for service – a "salary" in kind – that involved no implication of land ownership and that was completely dependent on the king's goodwill. This was abundantly clear to Francisco Alvares during his sojourn in Ethiopia in the 1520s: "When [a lord] sets out from the land of which he is the lord [to go to the royal court], he does not leave in it either wife or children or any property, because he goes away with the expectation of never returning, since, as has been said before, the Prester [i.e. king] gives when he pleases, and takes away."¹⁸ The overall impression left by the sources is of the king's close control over *g^wəlt* rights and, at least as regards secular *g^wəlt* holders, their function as a reward for administrative and military service.

Perhaps the most dramatic feature of the Solomonic dynasty in the medieval era, and one without which the others cannot be fully understood, is its territorial expansion. The regions under the Christian kings' control grew enormously in the Solomonic period, particularly during the reign of 'Amdä Šəyon, and included both Christian or newly Christianized territories subject to

14 On the royal camp's arrangement see Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *Kätäma*. La cour et le camp en Éthiopie (XIV^e - XVI^e siècle): Espace et pouvoir" (Ph.D diss., University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2009), 36-39.

15 Ibid., 36-39.

16 See, among others, Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 98-103; Merid Wolde Aregay, *Land and agricultural productivity in Ethiopia to 1800*; Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 2000); idem, "Abyssinian Feudalism," *Past and Present* 89 (1980): 115-138; the discussion in Anaïs Wion's essay in this volume.

17 Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic): Ge'ez -English/English- Ge'ez* (Wiesbaden, 2006), 619; Crummey, *Land and Society*, 10, 287.

18 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, Vol.2:445.

direct rule, and non-Christian tributary states. The path and process of this expansion was traced by Tadesse Tamrat in a chapter of his seminal survey of the medieval Christian kingdom, and throughout Marie-Laure Derat's more recent monograph.¹⁹ It brought renown to the Solomonic rulers, as well as wealth—that is, land—that was doubtless one source of the dynasty's strength. But it also brought challenges. How to control and manage such a vastly enlarged realm, which included, even in its Christian territories, diverse peoples speaking a variety of languages?

One way to approach this question, exemplified in Derat's analysis, is to examine the relations between the royal power and the monasteries, whose evangelizing efforts on the frontiers of the Christian kingdom and great influence over local populations made them an indispensable partner in royal control over territory. Another way is by investigating the royal administration. It was the royal power's direct response to the challenge of maintaining the territories it had acquired, encompassing not only its Christian lands but the tributary, non-Christian states as well. What is more, the administration was clearly incorporated in the dynasty's royal ideology. On one level, all subjects were incorporated in that royal ideology: with Mənilək's return to Ethiopia, the whole kingdom had become the second Israel, and all its people the chosen of God. But a particular emphasis was placed upon those subjects who served the king in his administration. In the *Kəbrä nägästä*, Mənilək's descent from Solomon is mirrored by his councillors' descent from those of ancient Israel. King Solomon, having tried and failed to convince Mənilək to remain in Israel, addresses his councillors and officers:

Come, let us make him king of the country of Ethiopia, together with your children; ye sit on my right hand and on my left hand, and in like manner the eldest of your children shall sit on his right hand and his left hand. Come, o ye councillors and officers, let us give [him] your firstborn children, and we shall have two kingdoms; I will rule here with you, and our children shall reign there.²⁰

The Solomonic origin of Ethiopia's administrators—specifically its judges—and of its laws themselves is repeated in the *Šər'atä mängəstä*: “The laws and regulations came forth from Jerusalem with the son of Solomon whose name was Menilek. With him came twelve students of the law... whom the kings chose to be judges. They were made judges during the time of Amde Tsion.”²¹

I call this feature of Solomonic royal ideology its aspect of Shebanization. If on the one hand the dynasty was set apart as a lineage uniquely destined to rule, on the other its exalted heritage could be extended to create a shared identity. What is notable is that service to the king through administrative office was highlighted as a privileged way to acquire this shared heritage and identity. As we shall see, royal service came to include people of diverse regional, linguistic, and even religious backgrounds. Shebanization was therefore both ideology and practice, and the administration seems to have been, and to have been understood as, a key institution in this process.

A brief account of the territorial acquisitions of the medieval Solomonic kings, particularly during the reign of 'Amdä Šəyon, is necessary to establish the context of the administration. The following sections of the essay will then focus on two key moments in the era's administrative history: the reign of 'Amdä Šəyon himself, which established the parameters of the administration

19 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 119-155; Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270-1527) : espace, pouvoir, et monachisme* (Paris, 2003).

20 Budge, trans., *Kebra Nagast*, 152; in the French translation of Colin, *Gloire des rois*, at 36.

21 Bairu Tafla and Scholler, *Ser'ata Mangest*, 10.

after his major conquests, and that of Zär'a Ya'eqob, in which a number of administrative reforms were made. One purpose of this arrangement is to highlight the element of change and adaptation. Scholarly accounts of individual administrative offices, which often begin from and focus on the modern period, tend to telescope the medieval history of the positions and overlook their evolution within that period.²² In terms of the potential causes of the dynasty's longevity, however, its adaptability in administrative matters deserves attention as much as the basic structure of the administration itself. For both eras, the organization of the central court and the provincial administration are treated. While Taddesse Tamrat and Mordechai Abir offered brief accounts of the Solomonids' central and regional administration, respectively, neither devoted sustained attention to their interrelation or to such key aspects as the Solomonic kings' involvement in the oversight of newly annexed territories and in the deployment of military regiments.²³ Much of what follows is therefore drawn from this author's full-length study of the medieval Solomonic administration as a whole.²⁴

Territorial Expansion under the Solomonic Kings

Yəkunno Amlak's focus was naturally upon securing the territories previously under Zag^we control. Oral tradition in Lasta narrates that he garrisoned his soldiers in the region of Lasta/Bugna for more than seven years.²⁵ Taddesse Tamrat suggests that there was also strong resistance to him in the far northern region of Šəmāzana, in present-day Eritrea, and his pacification of this region is attested by his land grants to the church of Däbrä Libanos of Ham in this region.²⁶ His successor Yagba Šəyon also went to Aksum to establish control over the local dynasties of Āndārta in Təgray. Meanwhile, to the south of the Solomonic dynasty's stronghold in Amhara lay the Muslim sultanate(s) of Šawah. Christian penetration into this region had already begun well before Yəkunno Amlak's seizure of the royal title, and in 1285 the sultanate, under the control of the Walasma' dynasty, collapsed.²⁷ Muslim resistance certainly did not end here, and the Christian province of Šāwa required much future defense, but the region became an integral part of the Christian kingdom.

The most spectacular expansion of the realm, however, took place under 'Amdä Šəyon. In a land grant to the monastery of Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥstīfanos in Amhara, 'Amdä Šəyon chronicled the territories he had subjugated in 1316/17 CE:

God gave me all the people of Damot into my hands; its king, its princes, its rulers,
and its people, men and women without number, whom I exiled into another area.

22 For instance, the articles relative to individual offices in the *EAE*, which must cover the entire history of these positions.

23 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 94-98; Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty and Muslim-European Rivalry in the Region* (London, 1980), 51-56.

24 Deresse Ayanachew, "Le kätäma."

25 For evidence of his foundation and patronage of churches in this region to consolidate and affirm his power, see Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, "The Wall-Paintings of Mädhane Aläm near Lalibäla," *Africana Bulletin* 52 (2004): 9-29, and Denis Nonsitsin and Marie-Laure Derat, "Yəkunno Amlak," in *EAE* 5 (2014), 43-46, at 44.

26 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 68; Carlo Conti Rossini, "L'evangelo d'oro di Dabra Libānos," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 5th ser., 10 (1901): 177-219, at 193.

27 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 131; Enrico Cerulli, "Il sultanato dello Scioa nel secolo XIII secondo un nuovo documento storico," *RSE* 1 (1941): 5-42, at 10, n. 4.

And after that God gave me all the people of Hadya, men and women without number, whom I exiled into another area. And after that God gave me the king of Gojjam into my hands, with all his troops, his princes, and his rulers, and all men and women without number. And after that God gave me into my hands the ruler of Āntārta [Āndārta] with all his army, his people, his relatives, and all his country as far as the cathedral of Aksum. And I, King Amdä-Siyon went to the sea of Eritrea. When I reached there I mounted on an elephant and entered the sea. And I took up my arrow and spears and killed my enemy, and I saved my people.²⁸

The first three regions mentioned here, Damot, Hadiyya, and Goğğam, lay to the west and south of what was then the Christian heartland, and had a strong economic allure. A land grant ‘Amdä Şəyon made in Goğğam attests to its value as a source for minerals and agricultural products.²⁹ Damot, and especially Hadiyya to the south, were crucial for control of long-distance trade, which by the fourteenth century passed primarily through these regions to the port of Zayla‘. Hadiyya was also an economically important as a mule-breeding region, and was already exploited as such by ‘Amdä Şəyon’s successor Säyfä Ar‘ad (1334-1371).³⁰

‘Amdä Şəyon’s next major victory was in the east. After the collapse of the Walaşma‘ dynasty’s control of Şawah, Umar Walasma‘ moved eastward to found the sultanate of Ifat (‘Awfāt in Arabic). Technically tributary to the Christian king, it remained a powerful antagonist, and in 1332 its sultan, Şabr al-Dīn I, rebelled against ‘Amdä Şəyon’s suzerainty. The resulting war and Christian victory, recounted in the *Glorious Victories of ‘Amdä Şəyon* (an important source on the king’s reign and administration), established Ifat more firmly as vassal state of the Christian kingdom.³¹ The Egyptian writer al-‘Umarī, who was contemporary with ‘Amdä Şəyon and based his account on the testimony of a Muslim Ethiopian informant, adds to this list the sultanate of Bali (Bāli), the most southerly of those mentioned, beyond the Wabi Şābälle River.³²

A song in honor of the medieval kings, probably written in stages and compiled in the middle of the sixteenth century, mentions the extension of the tributary regions of north and south during the reign of ‘Amdä Şəyon.³³ In addition to long-established Christian provinces —the “Sea of Eritrea,” Təgray, Angot – it mentions Goğğam, Damot, and Hadiyya, as well as intermediate provinces or sub-provinces between them (Gafat, Gänz, Wağ); Gədm in the Ifat region to the east; Agāw in the west; and a series of southerly provinces, Fätāgar, Dāwaro, and Bali.³⁴

Sources from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries indicate that the major territorial acquisition in this period was the easterly Muslim sultanate of the Barr Sa‘d al-Dīn or ‘Adal (Adāl in Gə‘əz), sporadically under Christian control in the fifteenth century.³⁵ The rapid transformation

28 Tadesse Tamrat, “The Abbots of Däbrä Hayq, 1248-1535,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8, 1 (1970): 87-117, at 95-96.

29 Ignazio Guidi, “Le canzoni geez-amariña in onore di re abissini,” *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 5, 2 (1889): 53-66, at 62-63.

30 Kropp, “*Ser ģata Gebr*,” 85.

31 George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, trans., *The Glorious Victories of ‘Amdä Şəyon, King of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 1965).

32 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-abşār fi mamālik al-amşār*. I, *L’Afrique moins de l’Egypte*, trans. Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes (Paris, 1927), 19.

33 Guidi, “Le canzoni.” It includes Kings ‘Amdä Şəyon I, Yəşəq, Zār’a Ya‘əqob, and Ləbnä Dəngəl.

34 *Ibid.*, 62-63.

35 See, for instance, the fifteenth-century map produced in Europe with the help of Ethiopian informants, in O.G. S. Crawford, *Ethiopian Itineraries* (Cambridge, 1958), 19, and Alvares’s data on the territories under Ləbnä Dəngəl,

of the Christian kingdom during ‘Amdä Şəyon’s reign appears all the more staggering in comparison. The administrative mechanisms employed by the Zag^we for a much smaller territory would clearly be insufficient to maintain control over this much larger realm, whose populations were also religiously and cultural diverse. New methods had to be implemented, and to these, in the the time of ‘Amdä Şəyon, we now turn.

Administration in the Fourteenth Century (reign of ‘Amdä Şəyon)

In general, the Christian kingdom in the fourteenth century (and beyond) can be described as divided administratively into provinces, each with its own appointed governor. However, ‘Amdä Şəyon and his successors did not seek to impose a uniform system upon all these provinces, but rather varied the administrative apparatus and its implementation depending on the particular conditions of each.

In Amhara, the cradle of the Solomonic dynasty, the governor was called the *şāḥafä lam*; in Angot just to its north, and in the neighboring province of Bugna/Lasta, he was called *ras*, a general title, often used as a prefix to denote more specialized duties, that simply meant “head” or “chief.” We may infer that Bugna, an important center of Zag^we power, was by now firmly integrated into the Solomonic kingdom, for the Bugna army (*sarawit*) sent by ‘Amdä Şəyon to fight a certain rebellion Nädhna.³⁶ In general the sources offer little information about the governors of these regions, suggesting that control of these heartland territories was relatively unproblematic.

The more northerly provinces were a different matter. As we saw in ‘Amdä Şəyon’s land grant, in 1316/17 he had been compelled to combat “the ruler of Əndärta [in eastern Təgray] with all his army... as far as the cathedral of Aksum.” The “rulers” of Əndärta were also governors, and thus technically royal officers, but they came from a powerful local dynasty, and one that may indeed have aspired to the royal throne itself.³⁷ This aspiration is suggested by the well-known colophon of the *Kəbrä Nägäşt*, which states that the work was translated from Arabic into Gə‘əz by the *nəburä əd* of Aksum, Yəşəhaq, with the approval of the local governor, Ya‘əbiqä Əgzi’. The colophon explicitly situates the *Kəbrä Nägäşt* as an anti-Zag^we work: the Zag^we did not belong to the legitimate line, descended from King Solomon, that was uniquely authorized to rule over Ethiopia. The work’s promotion by Ya‘əbiqä Əgzi’ may have reflected a claim that his lineage, well established in the capital of the ancient kingdom, did belong to this line. Certainly Ya‘əbiqä Əgzi’ rebelled against ‘Amdä Şəyon’s royal authority, as we know not only from the king’s land grant but from a later source (of the sixteenth or seventeenth century) known as the *Liber Aksumae*:

When Ya’ibiqä Igzi and Ingida-Igzi rebelled, King Amdä Şəyon decreed and deposed them, and destroyed these rebels. Moreover to eliminate the pride of their hearts and to efface their [traditional] honours, [the king] appointed over their

analyzed in Merid Wolde Aregay, “The Political Geography of Ethiopia at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century,” in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etopici*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, 2 vols. (Rome, 1974), 1: 613-633.

³⁶ Huntingford, trans., *Glorious Victories*, 90.

³⁷ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 72.

country men who were not born from Adam and Eve that were called *halästiyotat* [men of low origin].³⁸

Taddesse Tamrat has hypothesized that *halästiyotat* refers to a military regiment that ‘Amdä Şəyon stationed in Təgray, which Merid Wolde Aregay has identified as the *Žan amora* (lit. “the eagle of the king”).³⁹ There is, however, no evidence that allows us to confirm this hypothesis.⁴⁰ Nor does the *Liber Aksumae*’s (much later) claim that men of low status were appointed to rule the area match more contemporary evidence. The king certainly desired close control over Əndārta, which he obtained by appointing his queen Bəlen Saba, apparently a native of the region, as its new governor in 1323.⁴¹

To the north of Təgray, tradition seems to describe a certain province of Ma’əkälä bahər (literally “land between the sea”), including the districts of Ḥamasen, Säraye, Bäläw and other small chiefdoms. It is reported that the Bäläw chiefs were already tributary to the Zag^we kings,⁴² and certainly King ‘Amdä Şəyon sought to assert control over the area. He is reported to have gone on the back of elephants as far as the Red Sea, where he said, ‘I killed my enemies, and I saved my people.’⁴³ The tradition in Eritrea relates that he travelled all over the Rea Sea coast to undermine Muslim expansion in the region.⁴⁴ King Yəşəhaq settled a military regiment at Massawa in 1417.⁴⁵ Until the time of Zär’a Ya’əqob, however, it appears that the Ma’əkälä bahər was not an administrative unit but a descriptive term for the region between the two waters of the Mārāb River and the Red Sea, ruled by local chiefs recognized by the Solomonic kings.

In the newly acquired Muslim sultanates, ‘Amdä Şəyon generally left the existing ruling dynasties in power, asserting a suzerain status over them. Al-‘Umarī describes the situation as it applied, in ‘Amdä Şəyon’s time, to Ifat, Hadiyya, and Dəwaro:

The power belongs to the royal families who are maintained on the throne.... Although all the rulers of these kingdoms transmit power hereditarily, none of them has authority unless he is invested with it by the king of Amḥara [i.e. of Christian Ethiopia]. When one of these [Muslim] rulers dies, if there are males in his family, they all present themselves before the king of Amḥara and use all methods possible to gain his favor, for it is he who will choose among them the one upon whom he will confer power.... It is he who has supreme authority over them, and they are

38 Cited in *ibid.*, 74.

39 Merid Wolde Aregay, “Military elites in medieval Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 30, (1997): 31-73.

40 The *Žan amora* was a regiment in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, but nothing ties this term to a regiment in the fourteenth, when it appears as a toponym. The songs in honor of Ethiopian kings mention it as a personal name: see Guidi, “Le canzoni,” 62.

41 Conti Rossini, “L’evangelo d’oro,” 204, 206. Taddesse Tamrat’s assertion (*Church and State*, 74), also based on this source, that Bəlen Saba and then ‘Amdä Şəyon’s son were governors of Təgray is not supported. Təgray is not mentioned as an administrative region in this document, rather governors of smaller regions are identified. Bəlen Saba was specifically governor of Əndārta. ‘Amdä Şəyon’s son is identified in the document with the title Aqansan, which cannot be confidently associated with Təgray as a whole or any part of it: it was, for instance, the title of the governor of Gedm in Šäwa, and here has no geographical identifier.

42 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 79-80.

43 Taddesse Tamrat, “Abbots of Dabra Hayq,” 96.

44 *Idem*, *Church and State*, 77.

45 Deresse Ayenachew, “The Evolution and Organization of the Čäwa Military Regiments in Medieval Ethiopia,” *Annals d’Éthiopie* 29 (2014): 83-95, at 86.

but his lieutenants. Still, the rulers of these kingdoms respect the high rank of the ruler of ‘Awfāt, and in certain circumstances give him aid and serve him.⁴⁶

The situation in the sultanate of Bali was a bit different. There, according to al-‘Umarī, “[power] has passed today to a man who is not at all of royal stock: he insinuated himself into the good graces of the king of Amhara and received the investiture of the kingdom of Bāli, where he has made himself independent. There is no member of the ancient royal family of Bāli who is capable of ruling.”⁴⁷ It is interesting to learn from this text that Bali had had a hereditary dynasty, but as it was apparently weakened, ‘Amdä Şəyon took the opportunity to appoint a “new man” as governor of the region in his name. He was evidently a native of Bali and not an official from the Christian heartland, for having secured his position through the Christian king’s imprimatur, he promptly made himself “independent” of Christian suzerainty. In all these sultanates, subjection to the Christian state required not only obedience to Christian authority but the payment of annual tribute, which al-‘Umarī describes as consisting of silk and linen cloth imported from Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq.⁴⁸ In return, the governors and the Muslim populations were left unmolested in the practice of their faith. As seen already in the case of Bali, this ideal relationship was not always observed in practice. Hadiyya led a long resistance to the Christian state, starting in ‘Amdä Şəyon’s time: its chief, Amano, allied with Şabr al-Dīn I of Ifat in 1329, requiring ‘Amdä Şəyon to return to the region in person to defeat him.⁴⁹

Şawah and another region to its south, Fätāgar, are not included in al-‘Umarī’s survey of Ethiopian Muslim polities. For Şawah this is not surprising. As noted above, Muslim political control over the region had collapsed decades before ‘Amdä Şəyon’s reign, and Christian settlement and proselytization in the region had begun even earlier. What became the Christian province of Şäwa was therefore a formerly Muslim territory earmarked for full integration in the Christian state both religiously and administratively. The integrative process nonetheless doubtless took time, as well as royal initiative. ‘Amdä Şəyon’s successors in the later fourteenth century, Säyfa Ar‘ad and Həzbä Nañ, helped to transform it by building royal churches and camps in the province.⁵⁰ For Fätāgar, the process of its incorporation in the Christian kingdom in the fourteenth century is difficult to trace. It likely followed upon that of Şäwa, through which access to it was afforded, and certainly al-‘Umarī’s neglect of it suggests that Christian settlement and direct political control were already present here in the 1330s. By the turn of the fifteenth century the region becomes more prominent in the documentation, as we will discuss below.

The last territories to be surveyed are Goğgam and Damot, principally inhabited by adherents of local religions and subjugated by ‘Amdä Şəyon in his campaign of 1316/17. Both were important for their natural resources, as mentioned above, but also for their human ones. Already in 1332, they provided three major regiments of cavalry and infantry for ‘Amdä Şəyon’s war against Ifat,⁵¹ and the Christian king’s victory brought Damot as a strong ally.⁵² The title given to the governor of Goğgam, *nägaš*, would seem to reflect the importance of the region. He was

46 al-‘Umarī, *Masālik*, 19.

47 Ibid., 19.

48 Ibid., 2.

49 Huntingford, trans., *Glorious Victories*, p.58-59.

50 Deresse Ayenachew, “Medieval Gə‘əz Land Grants of Aşe Waşa Maryam Church in Wägdä (Ethiopia) (1344-1432),” in preparation.

51 Idem, “*Čäwa* Military Regiments,” 85-93.

52 Idem, “*Le kätäma*,” 114-115.

assisted by a second officer of considerable importance, the *gədm* or head of the Goğgam cavalry. In both Goğgam and Damot, ‘Amdä Şəyon seems to have entrusted the governorship to existing leaders. In the song celebrating ‘Amdä Şəyon, the name of the governor of Goğgam is *zan kəməṛ*; in Damot, the traditional royal title, *motälämi*, continued to be used into the fifteenth century, suggesting that its holders too came from the existing Damot royal line. The religious practices of these peoples, however, remained a source of tension and sometimes armed resistance.

The unifying link among these diverse provincial administrations was of course the central administration, the royal court or *kätäma*, to which we now turn. One of its most salient features throughout the Solomonic period (with an important exception, as we will discuss) was its itinerant character. The periodic displacements of the royal court facilitated the suppression of resistance from regional leaders and helped ensure the security of the trade routes. Punitive military expeditions were most rapid and successful when undertaken by royal armies led personally by the king. The king’s physical presence in any military combat was considered a guarantee of victory, and all decisive battles were planned to include him. Issues of security were therefore one reason for the mobility of the king and his army, and by extension of the court. The massive population of the court itself, which numbered above 30,000 during the “mobile” or dry season in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was another. The local resources for provisioning it would have been quickly depleted in any one location; hygiene may have been an important consideration as well.

In this court, the inner council of the king may be said to have consisted of the *bəhtwäddädočč* as well as the highest ecclesiastical figures in the kingdom (the metropolitan and the *‘aqqabe sä‘at*), and sometimes the queens. The *bəhtwäddädočč* (sing. *bəhtwäddäd*, lit. “only beloved one”) were considered the highest officers in the administration. There were two, the *gərra behtwäddäd* (of the left) and *qäññ behtwäddäd* (of the right). Täklä Tsadik Mekuria, the famous popular historian, even portrayed them as the archangels to the left and right of the divine King, making a parallel with the celestial order of the heavenly angels around God. These offices are not mentioned in chronicle of ‘Amdä Şəyon’s wars of 1332, and are better known from texts of the time of Zär’a Ya‘əqob (1434-68) and his successors, which has led some scholars to hypothesize that they were established during Zär’a Ya‘əqob’s reign.⁵³ However, two important sources for information on administrative officers, the *Şər‘atä Gəbr* and the *Şər‘atä Mängəst*, both attribute the creation of the *bəhtwäddädočč* to ‘Amdä Şəyon. The latter text explains their duties in this way:

Previously there were two Bitwodedeotch, of the *Gerra* and the *Kegne [Qäññ]*.... One was responsible for war, the other for government, to keep law and order, camping outside the town in collaboration with Azzajotch who would sit and judge in a tent. On Wednesdays and Fridays, they would bring the cases to the king.⁵⁴

The *gərra bəhtwäddäd* thus presided over the supreme court of justice in the royal camp during peacetime, while the *qäññ behtwäddäd* was the chief of the army (after the king) both in the central and provincial governments.

53 George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1965), 10. Sevir Chernetsov, “Bitwäddäd,” in *EAE* 1 (2003), 593-595, is brief and oriented to the modern period, but does note that the “twinning” of the office suggests an older origin.

54 Bairu Tafla and Scholler, *Şər‘atä Mängəst*, 15, 35-36.

Under the direction of the *qāññ behtwäddäd* was the army, called the *sārawit*, a term that dates back to the Aksumite era. In the fourteenth century it was comprised of units mustered from the various provinces, including newly annexed ones like Goğgam and Damot. In the *Glorious Victories of Amdä Šayon*, most units are indeed identified by their region of origin. But we also learn from this work about the beginning of established garrisons, for instance of the *Žan tākäl*, *Koräm*, *Hadari*, *Adül hadari*, *Žan amora* etc., which were to have a bright future.

Under the principal direction of the *gərri behtwäddäd* was the judiciary. As mentioned above, the *gərri behtwäddäd* presided over the supreme court of justice twice a week, with the assistance of another official, the *azzaž*, when the case required the king's involvement. The king did not participate directly in the proceedings; rather, he remained secluded in his royal tent and the judgment was communicated through the intermediary of the *azzaž* and/or the royal pages, to whom we will turn in a moment.⁵⁵ The *azzaž* is sometimes mentioned as presiding over legal cases himself, as are other figures: the *šasargé*, *žan-masäre*, *šəraj-masäre*, and *mälkäna*. All together, the judges (*wänbäročč*) were forty-four, identified with the forty-four men of law who had come from Israel with the legendary King Mənilək I. Twelve higher-level judges occupied as many chairs, with a thirteenth, in the center, left perpetually empty, in an evocation of Christ and his twelve disciples sitting in judgment at the Last Judgment. The remaining judges presided over lower-level cases, still within the context of the royal *kätäma*.⁵⁶

The *äqqabe sä'ät* was by contrast a representative of the Ethiopian Church, usually the abbot of an important monastery. The office predates the Solomonic dynasty and was certainly part of the administration already in the reign of Yəkunno Amlak, who indeed appointed more than one in order secure ecclesiastical alliances in different regions. Given the literal meaning of the title (“guardian of the hours”), the original nucleus of the office was presumably ensuring the proper observance of the liturgical hours at the royal court. It was evidently highly prestigious, as Yəkunno Amlak's strategic bestowals of the title suggest, and doubtless offered that intimate access to the king that made it, by the fifteenth century if not earlier, among the most influential positions at court. The office was held by the abbots of Ḥayq Əstifanos from the 1290s, and by them uniquely from the later fourteenth century, giving that monastery and its abbot a privileged status in the kingdom.⁵⁷

Extremely important to the workings of the royal court were the *blattenočč* or pages, whose head, the *blatten geta*, was the highest-ranking official after the *äqqabe sä'ät* and the *bəhtwäddädočč*. The pages were part of the inner corps of civil servants. They followed the king everywhere. They mediated access to him in judicial proceedings, as noted above, and in general presided over the thresholds between the exterior and the interior within the royal compound. They were not allowed to quit the royal camp without the king's knowledge, upon pain of death. When the king left or entered the camp, he informed the military regiments of the central court via the pages. According to Francisco Alvares in the 1520s, “the pages used to be the sons of the great gentlemen and lords.”⁵⁸ It is safe to assume, then, that the pages served in an early period as a link between the royal court and the provincial aristocracy, which would send its sons to serve the king. At once an honor, providing intimate and privileged access to the king, it might also have served the king in providing a guarantee of the fathers' good conduct in the provinces.

55 Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” 206-207.

56 Ibid., 216-225.

57 Steven Kaplan, “‘Aqqabe sä'at,” in *EAE* 1 (2003), 292-293, and esp. Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 92-96, for details on the early period.

58 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 463.

Another important link between the central court and the provinces was the *qalä-ḥaše*, the royal spokesman (literally, “the word of the king”). He took the king’s messages all over the kingdom, and his message was considered the orders of the king. Many verdicts of the king were communicated through the *qalä-ḥaše*. The office is mentioned in many medieval land grants as a witness of donation or restoration. Equivalent regional offices of the speaker were very significant in medieval times. These regional or district offices can be easily remarked in the land grant document as the witness of the charters.⁵⁹ Similar spokesmen were also attached to other ranking officers, usually with the title *afä* (“mouth”): there was an *afä-‘aqqabe sä‘at*, an *afä- šähafä lam*, and an *afä-qaš* under King Säyfä Ar‘ad.⁶⁰

Finally, a number of officers oversaw matters related to the royal household and the complicated matters of its movement and provisioning. These are generally prefixed with the term *aras* or *ras* (“head,” pl. *rasočč*): thus there was an *aras-mäčane* (head of house affairs), an *aras-däbänab* (head of tents affairs), the *aqet žär rasočč* (heads of transport affairs), a *bä‘älä har ras* (head of the wool); there were others in charge of the royal musicians, the guard of the royal treasury, the tent installers, and so on. The *rasočč* also had duties as guardians of the royal gates of the medieval central court. They were identified as the left and the right side offices. The *Šär‘atä Gäbr* mentions a *ḥadug-ras* who had the duty of raising pack animals during the reign of Säyfä Ar‘ad. Two other officials, both called the *raq-masäre*, were in charge of the royal banquets. The queens had their own *raq-masäre*, and similar offices could be found within the church; at least some northern provincial governors also had a *kantiba* with these duties, for instance in Sömen, Gondär, and Ḥamasen (in present-day Eritrea).⁶¹

Administrative Evolution (Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century)

In medieval Ethiopia, the evolution of the administrative system related to the political, religious, and economic importance of the regions. Systematic administrative organization had continued since the fourteenth century, but the following two centuries had a deep impact on the formation of a permanent political administrative system for the kingdom of medieval Ethiopia.

Šäwa and Fätägar, already incorporated into the Christian kingdom in the fourteenth century, received much royal attention in the fifteenth century. Šäwa, indeed, was transformed into the heartland of the Solomonic dynasty.⁶² It was home to the famous monastery of Däbrä Libanos, which came to rival Ḥayq Ḍstifanos as the preeminent “royal” monastery of the kingdom. The province’s administrative size was enlarged to include most of the independent districts to the north like Wägda, Tägulät, Mänz, and Märḥabete, as well as the Muger region in the west. Previously ruled by a Muslim sultan, it was now entrusted to a Christian governor with the title of *šähafä lam* (“counter of cows”) just as in the founding region of the Solomonic dynasty, Amhara. Many royal churches of ‘Amdä Seyon, Säyfä Ar‘ad, Dawit II, and Həzbä Nañ were built in Šäwa. The most definitive sign of the region’s ascendancy is Zär’a Ya‘əqob’s decision to establish his capital at Däbrä Bərhan, in the heart of Šäwa, in 1449.⁶³ This decision to abandon the traditional itinerant royal court was connected to other major administrative changes, as we shall see, which perdured even when the itinerant *kätäma* was resumed by Zär’a Ya‘əqob’s successors.

59 Ibid., 1: 225.

60 Deresse Ayenachew, “Medieval Gə‘əz Land Grants of Aše Waša Maryam Church.”

61 Idem, “Le *kätäma*,” 210.

62 Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 35-45.

63 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar’a Yä‘əqob*, 67.

Fifteenth-century kings established themselves more firmly in Fätägar, too. According to the chronicle of Zär'a Ya'əqob's reign, his father Dawit II founded here the royal camp of Təlq (later called Yäläbäša). Zär'a Ya'əqob was born here, and after a major military victory in 1445 built two churches here to commemorate it, dedicated to the archangel Michael.⁶⁴ Zär'a Ya'əqob's son and successor Bä'ədä Maryam also grew up here; Bä'ədä Maryam's son Āskändər was born in Təlq and held his *Šər'atä Q'ərḥat* here. Təlq was thus the royal semi-capital of the southern medieval territories. As for the province more generally, Zär'a Ya'əqob entrusted its administration to his daughter Ših Mängäs until she was imprisoned for a plot against his throne with her husband, the *qäññ behtwäddäd* Isayyayas.⁶⁵ Zär'a Ya'əqob then appointed another governor, a certain *mälkäña* 'Amdä Mika'el, who took the office of *gerra behtwäddäd* after the death of King Āskändər.⁶⁶ His successors built royal churches in Fätägar and often resided there. In the early sixteenth century, King Ləbnä Dəngəl, too, passed a long time in this region until he was defeated at the battle of Šəmbərə K'wərə by Imam Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm in 1529.

The sultanate of Ifat was also more firmly integrated into the Christian kingdom, albeit in a different manner. As noted above, Ifat was conquered in 1332, and al-'Umarī described it in his contemporary account as tributary to the Christian state. Several decades later, its sultan, Ḥaqq al-Dīn II (1363/4-1373/4), abandoned Ifat in order to escape Christian suzerainty and establish a basis of power further east.⁶⁷ The remaining members of the Walašma' dynasty in Ifat were amenable to Christian suzerainty and were at times allowed to govern Ifat, although without their former autonomy. Dawit II established a semi-permanent camp in a place called Ṭobyā to ensure firm control over them.⁶⁸ Zär'a Ya'əqob instead appointed a Christian, Amätä Giyorgis, as governor. The Ifat governorship was again restored to the Walašma' dynasty during the reign of Bä'ədä Maryam, but this king reportedly installed his court at Ṭobyā, ensuring oversight as Dawit II had done.⁶⁹ Ləbnä Dəngəl switched policies again, appointing his *qäññ behtwäddäd*, Āslam Sägäd (literally "to whom the Muslim bows down") to preside over the province.⁷⁰ Unlike Fätägar and Šäwa, Ifat remained a Muslim-inhabited region that retained some degree of local hereditary rule, though with close Christian oversight and sometimes Christian governors.

The easterly Islamic polity established by Ḥaqq al-Dīn II's successors replaced Ifat as the major rival and antagonist of the Christian kingdom in the fifteenth century. Ḥaqq al-Dīn II himself died in battle against Säyfä Ar'ad in 1373/4. Armed conflict continued under his brother Sa'd al-Dīn, whom Dawit II pursued as far as the port of Zayla', where Sa'd al-Dīn in turn was captured and killed in 1402/03.⁷¹ Sa'd al-Dīn's descendants fled to Yemen to seek refuge. Twenty years later, however, as the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizī relates, Sa'd al-Dīn's son Šabr al-Dīn returned to Ethiopia and re-established an Islamic state named, after his father, the Barr ("Land of") Sa'd al-Dīn, also known as 'Adal.⁷² Šabr al-Dīn and his brothers who succeeded him continued a policy of aggressive antagonism to the Christian kingdom. One of them, Aḥmad Badlāy, occupied the two major provinces of Däwaro and Bali in the 1440s and moved toward the neighboring region

64 Ibid., 67.

65 Getatchew Haile, *Epistles of humanity*, 1: 62-63.

66 Perruchon, "Histoire d'Eskinder," 25.

67 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 148.

68 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar'a Yä'eqob*, 59, 67, 91-2, 155.

69 Ibid., 147.

70 Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *kätäma*," 145.

71 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 145-153.

72 Amélie Chekroun, "Le *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*: écriture de l'histoire, guerre et société dans le Bar Sa'ad ad-dīn (Ethiopie, XVI^e siècle)" (Ph.D diss., Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013), 151-152.

of Fäṭāgar. In response, Zär'a Ya'əqob met Badlāy in battle in 1445 at Gomit (in the Däwaro region), defeated his army, and killed the sultan himself. The succeeding sultan, Muḥammad, was reduced to vassal status and paid an annual tribute to the Christian kingdom. This arrangement was discontinued when Muḥammad's son 'Uṭmān refused to pay the annual tribute around 1477, and even led a raid against Däwaro and Bali.⁷³ The king left Təgray for Fäṭāgar where he assembled his army under the leadership of the two *bəhtwäddädočč*, who were eventually defeated and killed by 'Uṭmān.⁷⁴ This ended Christian suzerainty over 'Adal. Raids on Christian-controlled territories continued, particularly in Ifat, despite the efforts of Kings Īskəndər and Na'od to restore their power. Ləbnä Dəngəl was able to stop the Muslim raids of Imam Maḥfūz in 1517,⁷⁵ but could not again subjugate 'Adal to vassal status.

The Christian kingdom was engaged in similar, if less spectacular, conflicts in its northwestern and southern territories throughout the first half of the fifteenth century. In the northwest regions of Səmən and Šällämt, royal armies fought against the Betä Īsra'el and their supporters, who were reportedly dispossessed by King Yəšḥaq for their refusal to convert to Christianity.⁷⁶ In Hadiyya, an important region for long-distance trade and the gateway to the southwestern chiefdoms of Wälaytta, Gamo, Gäda and Abäzo, Zär'a Ya'əqob went so far as to form a marriage alliance with the local ruling dynasty, taking the daughter of *gärad* Muḥammad as his queen. However, Muḥammad's son and successor as provincial governor, *gärad* Mahiko, refused to pay the required tribute and mobilized a large number of regions against Zär'a Ya'əqob after 1454. In the ensuing conflict Mahiko himself was brutally killed and governance of Hadiyya passed to his uncle, Bamo, who had remained loyal to the Christian king. With the rise of the power of Zär'a Ya'əqob's Hadiyya queen, the province was not reported as rebelling against the Christian kingdom until her death. Though a Muslim by birth, she converted to Christianity upon her marriage to the king and took the name Īleni. She was exalted in King Bä'edä Maryam's chronicle as the most prominent woman of medieval Ethiopia.⁷⁷

One of the most significant administrative innovations of the early fifteenth century, which must be seen in relation to such conflicts in multiple regions, was the increasing and evolving use of mobile military regiments deployed by the central government (and not mustered from the provinces), known first as *šewa* and later as *čäwa*. The *Liber Aksumae* mentions one during the reign of King Yəšḥaq, stating that “in the Year of Mercy 69 [1417 CE] the *šewa bädälwağč* descended [to Təgray].”⁷⁸ Yəšḥaq was also praised for establishing a regiment known as *taräsmba* in Massawa.⁷⁹ Their deployment was at first clearly targeted to controlling rebellions in particular regions on behalf of the royal administration. The early composition of the regiments, meanwhile, can be deduced by the term *šewa* itself, which means “captive.”

In the time of Zär'a Ya'əqob, and through his initiative, these regiments were transformed. For one, they were now termed *čäwa*, and defined as free men, with a corresponding rise in their prestige. By now (if not earlier), they were under the command of a chief called either *ras* or *azmač*.⁸⁰ The *azmač* (or *ras*) commanded small military regiments of some 15,000 soldiers; the

73 Ibid., 150.

74 Ibid.

75 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2:410-115.

76 Steven Kaplan, “Betä Īsra'el,” in *EAE* 1 (2003), 552-559, at 553.

77 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar'a Yä'əqob*, 59, 125.

78 Conti Rossini, “L'evangelo d'oro,” 68.

79 Deresse Ayenachew, “*Čäwa* Military Regiments,” 86.

80 Ibid.

title eventually bifurcated into two, the *azmač* of the left and of the right.⁸¹ Secondly, the regiments were no longer used as an *ad hoc* force against occasional uprisings, but adopted as a permanent feature of the administration, representing the royal power in the provinces. Indeed, starting immediately after his victory over Aḥmad Badlāy in 1445, Zār'a Ya'əqob deployed the *čäwa* regiments in massive numbers in virtually every district of the kingdom, with the exception of the new vassal state of 'Adal. This transformation must be seen in relation not only to the evident threat 'Adal had posed and to the unrest in other areas of the kingdom, but also and perhaps especially in relation to the king's decision to settle his court in a permanent place. The roving *kätäma* was in a sense replaced by the garrisons of *čäwa* regiments as an expression of royal power and presence, which could now be manifested everywhere at once.

The first major deployment of regiments seems to have been in Däwaro, the region bordering the sultanate of 'Adal, where Zār'a Ya'əqob established nine.⁸² In addition to offering protection against a possible 'Adali incursion, they served as a threat: if the 'Adali sultan refused to pay the required annual tribute, the *čäwa* regiments would be sent in for punitive military measures. This is clear from a passage recorded in the chronicle of Bä'ədä Maryam's reign concerning Aḥmad Badlāy's successor, Muḥammad: "Our King Mohammed, son of Arwe [Aḥmäd] Bädlay, sends us to you, O Lord, with the mission to say to you: Let us make peace, I will bring you every year my tribute; but, on your side, give orders to your *šewa* not to make war against me and to cease their incursions in my country."⁸³ Zār'a Ya'əqob established others in Bali, where the two regiments were called the *šäwa Hadari* and the *čäwa* of Bali, and were used again by Bä'ədä Maryam to fight the rebellion of Doba'a in southern Təgray around 1475.⁸⁴ Regiments were garrisoned in Hadiyya, to reinforce the administration of *gärad* Bamo after the rebellion of Mahiko.⁸⁵ They eventually extended southward from Hadiyya all the way to Gamo. But they were not deployed only in border regions: *čäwa* garrisons were stationed throughout the kingdom (see figure 1). Even when Zār'a Ya'əqob's successors resumed the tradition of the roving royal court, the network of royal *čäwa* regiments was maintained: for the rest of the Middle Ages this network remained a major centralizing feature of the Christian state.

81 Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *kätäma*," 195.

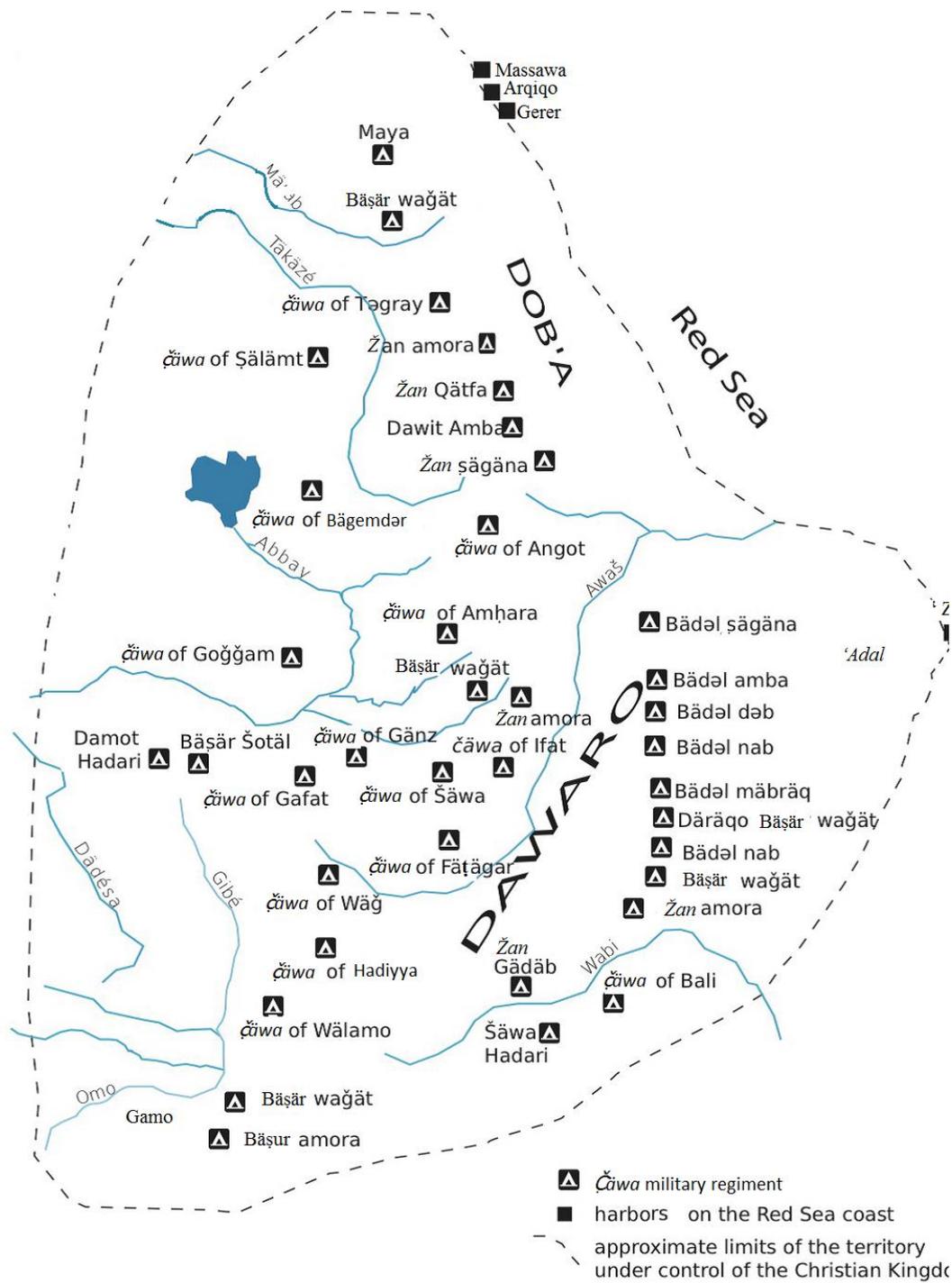
82 Deresse Ayenachew, "Čäwa Military Regiments," 83-93.

83 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar'a Ya'əqob*, 130.

84 Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *kätäma*," 85-93.

85 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar'a Ya'əqob*, 16-22.

Čawa military regiments in medieval Ethiopia (15th-16th C.)



Map realized by Deresse Ayenachew

Other strategies were aimed specifically at integrating formerly semi-independent states more fully into the central administration. We have seen this already in Ifat, in the wake of Ḥaqq al-Dīn’s departure and the establishment of ‘Adal, but it was not confined to this case. In Goḡgam, Zār’a Ya‘əqob not only installed a *čäwa* garrison but appointed a new governor, his daughter Asnaf Sämra.⁸⁶ Under Bā’ädä Maryam the governor or *nägaš* of Goḡgam was named Dawit Anbäsa, and was on such intimate terms with the king that Bā’ädä Maryam entrusted the care of his young son Ḥskändər to him.⁸⁷

The direct appointment of Goḡgam would have already begun during King Zār’a Ya‘əqob. But his son Bā’ädä Maryam reported that as he took power, he reinstated the local regional chiefs in his kingdom.⁸⁸ The Solomonic dynasty also patronized and left their mark on the region. In the late fifteenth century, King Na’od transferred Zār’a Ya‘əqob’s remains to a site called Däga Ḥstīfanos in Goḡgam.⁸⁹ In the early sixteenth century, Queen Ḥleni possessed a large fief here upon which she built the royal church of Märtulä Maryam. In Damot, the *čäwa* regiments (called *hadari* and *bäšär šotäl*) were deployed against the local people for their non-Christian beliefs, in particular their attachment to a deity named Däsk, which was considered essentially the “religion of state” of Damot.⁹⁰ Here too, Zār’a Ya‘əqob installed a provincial governor from the Christian heartland—in fact, one of his daughters—as did Bā’ädä Maryam after him. Thus the traditional title of *motälämi* disappeared in the mid-fifteenth century, replaced by that used in Šäwa, *šähafä lam*.

While the Christian kings of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century shifted the kingdom’s political center of gravity southward into Šäwa and devoted much attention to consolidating their hold on the surrounding southern provinces, this does not mean by any stretch that they neglected the provinces of the north. Təgray was celebrated as the ancient seat of both the kingdom and the Solomonic dynasty, with almost the status of an Ethiopian Zion. Already in the later fourteenth century, King Säyfä Ar‘ad represented Təgray as an especially holy place. In a land charter for the region he proclaimed, “I have given all this, at the time when I went into the country [*madr*] of Təgre, that it may be a conductor to the kingdom of heaven.”⁹¹ But it was again Zār’a Ya‘əqob who underscored most dramatically the sacred and symbolic importance of Təgray, and particularly of Aksum, by holding his coronation ceremony here circa 1438. The *Liber Aksumae* praised this event as the renaissance of Aksum’s glory.⁹² The chronicles, for their part, remark on the fundamental orientation of the Təgray region in favor of the sacred power of the Solomonic dynasty, since during the *Šər utä q’ərhat*, the governor of Təgray (called the *Təgre-mäk’ännən*) and the head of the church of Aksum-Šəyon, the *nəburä əd*, accompanied the king to take him with joy to sacralize his power.⁹³ The royal lineage and the institutions of Təgray thus enjoyed a symbiotic relationship that, according to the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, stretched back thousands of years.

More specific historical circumstances were also involved in this particular event. In his *Epistle of Humanity*, Zār’a Ya‘əqob accused the *Təgre-mäk’ännən* Isayyayas of obstructing his

86 Ibid., 95, 98.

87 Ibid., 95, 130.

88 Ibid., 111.

89 Perruchon, “Histoire d’Eskinder,” p. 15.

90 Ayda Bouanga, “Le Damot dans l’histoire de l’Éthiopie (XIII^e-XX^e siècles): recompositions religieuses, politiques et historiographiques” (Ph.D diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013), 150-154.

91 Huntingford, *Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, 33.

92 Carlo Conti Rossini, ed. and trans., *Documenta ad illustrandam historiam. I: Liber Axumae*, 2 vols., CSCO 54, 58, SAe 24, 27 (Louvain, 1961-2; orig. Paris, 1909-10), at vol. 1 (text), 4.

93 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar’a Yä’əqob*, 49-50.

succession to the royal title in June 1434.⁹⁴ The coronation ceremony thus enacted Isayyayas's acceptance of Zär'a Ya'əqob as the rightful king, while Zär'a Ya'əqob, by holding his ceremony in Aksum, affirmed the symbolic importance of the city and region. Isayyayas himself was appointed to one of the highest offices in the kingdom, *qäññ behtwäddäd*. The relationship between Isayyayas and the king remained fraught, as we shall see. Nonetheless, in general, Təgrayan officials often held important positions at the royal court. The *nəburä əd* had a privileged position there, and many of the inner *däbtära* (learned clerics) of the royal court came from the church of Aksum-Şəyon too.

While exalting Təgray symbolically as a sort of spiritual-historical capital and rewarding many of its officials, Zär'a Ya'əqob also undertook a reform that reduced its actual territorial limits and power. It seems that the territories north of Təgray, in present-day Eritrea, were under the authority of Təgray before Zär'a Ya'əqob's reign. In a reform that probably occurred between 1436 and 1439, he changed this. According to the chronicle of his reign,

“He increased the power of the *bahər nägäś* and elevated him above all governors, he gave him the authority over Sire and Särawe and over the two Ḥamasen and over the chief of Bur. He established him a prince over them. Our King Zär'a Ya'əqob reorganized conveniently the administration of Ethiopia [...].⁹⁵

The *bahər nägäś* thus became a provincial governor in his own right, very powerful and influential, but also fully under the authority of the king. It was a new office, and not hereditary. Francisco Alvares, for instance, during his six years in Ethiopia in the 1520s, witnessed the king replace the *bahər nägäś* three times. (They were accused of plotting against the king and exiled to unknown places).⁹⁶ At the same time, if loyal, the *bahər nägäś* could not only enjoy the great influence of his position in the north, but rise to the highest offices of the realm: the *bahər nägäś* Ros Näbyat was appointed to the office of the *qäññ behtwäddäd* by Ləbnä Dəngəl in 1522. The reorganization of these two northern regions was in the interests of the Solomonic dynasty in creating a strong regional Christian power. The appointment of northerners to the high offices of the central court amplified to harmonize the ideology of Shebanization of the northern regions that united to defend the Promised Land of Ethiopia, the second Israel.

Offices of the central administration also underwent changes in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Among the most important changes concerns the *qäññ behtwäddäd*, the “general” in charge of both royal and provincial armies. By the reign of Zär'a Ya'əqob at the latest, he had been entrusted with responsibilities over particular provinces as well. After Isayyayas had acquired the position of *qäññ behtwäddäd*, the king accused him of plotting against him as chief of the royal army and as “king” or governor of the province of Gäñ.⁹⁷ “Isayyayas said, am I not the *behtwäddäd* and the *negus* of Gäni! The whole army of the king and the army of Gäni are under my control.”⁹⁸ Zär'a Ya'əqob then appointed his daughter, Mädhən Zämäda, as *qäññ behtwäddäd*; she was given particular responsibility over the province of Damot. King Bä'edä Maryam's *qäññ behtwäddäd*, Gäbrä Iyäsus, was assigned to look after the most southerly province, Bali.⁹⁹ The

94 Getatchew Haile, *Epistle of humanity*, vol. 1 (text), 62-63.

95 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar'a Yä'əqob*, 47-48.

96 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 114.

97 Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” 35-36.

98 Getatchew Haile, *Epistle of humanity*, vol. 1 (text), 56.

99 Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” 114-155.

qäññ behtwäddäd during the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl, Āslamo, had administrative authority in Ifat. Francisco Alvares mentions, still in the time of Ləbnä Dəngəl, that a *bəhtwäddäd* presented tribute on behalf of the chief of Goğgam, suggesting a particular relationship with this province.¹⁰⁰ This reminds us that Zär'a Ya'əqob accused his *qäññ bəhtwäddäd* Isayyayas of claiming the governorship of Goğgam in addition to that of Gäñ.¹⁰¹ The sources do not clearly indicate in what way the *qäññ behtwäddäd* presided over their assigned province while remaining at the royal court. Perhaps they oversaw matters of peace and order by deploying the *čäwa* regiments in the province, through the intermediary of the governor or the regiments' *azmač*. In any case, the regular "assignment" of a particular province to the *qäññ behtwäddäd* blurred the distinction between the central and the provincial branches of government, and might be viewed as another method of tying the provinces more closely to the central administration. It also gave the *bəhtwäddädočč* enormous power, as we have seen already in the case of Isayyayas, and when the king was a minor, they were able to exert great influence on royal affairs. After the death of Bä'edä Maryam in 1478, the *bəhtwäddädočč* played a central role in the making of kings like Āskəndər, Na'od and Ləbnä Dəngəl.¹⁰² Certainly the *bəhtwäddädočč* were remembered, just after the end of our period, as a crucial stabilizing and protective force in the kingdom. When the *Sər'ätä Mängəst* was rewritten during the reign of Säršä Dəngəl (1563-1597), the redactors observed, "after the *bitwodedotch* perished, the country was sacked and robbed at the hands of the Oromo."¹⁰³

A second perceptible evolution in court offices concerns a certain blurring between the military and civil functions, or more precisely the acquisition, by civil officers, of military responsibilities. We have encountered the *azzaž* as a judicial official who assisted the *gərra bəhtwäddäd* in the supreme judicial court. They were also members of regional juries, at least in the *baher nägaš*. In the early sixteenth century we hear of military duties attached to the offices of the *gerra azzaž* and *qäññ azzaž* (that is, the *azzaž* of the left and of the right). The famous chief of Bali, the *gərra azzaž* Dägälhan and the *qäññ azzaž* Yəshäq are all mentioned in a land grant of King Ləbnä Dəngəl to the cathedral of Aksum. They served as army leaders and regional governors. The complexity the office of *azzaž* is its involvement in the jurisdiction of the medieval Ethiopian church. They would direct land tenure disputes along with the metropolitan.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the *hadug-ras*, whose duties in the fourteenth century concerned raising pack animals for the royal court, also acquired military duties by the early sixteenth century. Alvares recounts that the *hadug-ras* led an army of *čäwa* regiments from Təgray and the Bahər Nägaš region to confront a rebellion by the brother of the *gärad* of Hadiyya. The *hadug-ras* also had legal responsibilities along with the *bəhtwäddäd*, and like the *bəhtwäddäd*, his responsibilities probably evolved to strengthen royal representation in, an oversight of, the provinces.

Thirdly, certain offices seem to have risen in importance, though it may be that the sources, being fuller from the mid-fifteenth century, simply document their importance more amply in this period. The *äqqabe sä'ät* was clearly a distinguished personage from the beginning, being the only representative of the powerful monasteries at the royal court and (since the metropolitan was of course an Egyptian Copt) the highest-ranking Ethiopian religious in the administration. The *äqqabe sä'ät* seems to have become a particularly close advisor of the king during the reign of Zär'a Ya'əqob, perhaps due to the king's difficulties with his *bəhtwäddäd*. At Zär'a Ya'əqob's

100 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2:445.

101 Bouanga, "Le Damot," 189-190.

102 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, 286-296.

103 Bairu Tafla and Scholler, *Sər'ätä Mängəst*, 39.

104 Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *kätäma*," 188-192, 226.

death in 1468, it was the *‘aqqabe sä‘at* who declared which of his sons would succeed him, having been entrusted with knowledge of the king’s choice in secret before the king’s death:

When King Ba’eda Maryam, son of Zär’a Ya’eqob, ascended the throne, the *‘aqqabe sä‘at* Amha Şayon, standing before the August siege, addressed the people of Ethiopia with the words of Zär’a Ya’eqob: “‘People of Ethiopia, it is not by my own will, but by the command of God, that I give you for king Bā’eda Maryam.’ My lord Zär’a Ya’eqob said these words before his death; I testify it before angels and men, and if I lie, my judge will be the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁵

In subsequent times, the *‘aqqabe sä‘at* was a member of the regent council for King Āskändər during his minority, and also for his six-month-old son. Alvares documented that the *‘aqqabe sä‘at* was the highest royal counsellor regarding civil affairs until the office disappeared in the early sixteenth century.¹⁰⁶

The *şasärge*, who were among judges of the Supreme Court, also emerge in the sources as prominent officers from the mid-fifteenth century. The chronicles of Zär’a Ya’eqob and Bā’eda Maryam present them as intimates of the inner royal court. The office seems to have been hereditary until Zär’a Ya’eqob punished those who held it in his administration: they were accused of plotting the transfer of the remains of his father, King Dawit II, to the newly created royal necropolis in Däbrä Näg^wädg^wad in Amhara. If nothing else, the plan does suggest the *şasärge*’s involvement in royal affairs outside the sphere of purely judicial matters. King Bā’eda Maryam, for his part, delegated *şasärge* Marqos to achieve a reconciliation with the rebellious governors of Şällämt, which Marqos successfully accomplished.¹⁰⁷ This diplomatic function again involved an officer of the royal court being deployed to intervene in the provinces, following a pattern we have perceived with other officers in this period.

Finally, the pages were reorganized, and their personnel altered, by the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl. They were divided into four groups. The inner pages attended personally to the king, and had the most privileged access to him. The outer pages served as intermediaries between the king and the judges during legal proceedings, while the pages of the king’s table and the travel pages oversaw the duties that their titles indicate. Alvares explains the major change in personnel that had occurred by his time, and its reasons:

The pages... used to be the sons of the great gentlemen and lords, and now they are not so. And as has been said, when the Prester sends to summon the great men, he does not send to tell them why: and when the sons of the great men served as pages, they used to reveal his secrets, and for this he turned them out, and slaves who are sons Moorish or pagan Kings whom they take [daily] in raids [made by the Prester’s people] serve as inner pages. If they see they are suitable they send them to be taught without their coming inside, and if they turn out discreet and good, they put them inside, and they serve as pages. And the sons of the great lords serve as outer pages, and also as pages of the halter when they travel, and as pages of the kitchen, and they do not enter inside (as they say), and we saw them.¹⁰⁸

105 Perruchon, *Chroniques de Zar’a Yâ’eqôb*, 60; Tadesse Tamrat, “Abbots of Däbrä Hayq,” 117.

106 Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 270.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid., 2: 463.

Whereas previously all pages had been recruited from aristocratic families, their abuse of the privileged information their access to the king provided—or we might say their divided loyalty between the king and their own aristocratic lineages—led to their ouster from the most intimate positions. The outer, travel, and kitchen pages remained the children of great lords, but the inner pages – and this distinction in role may have accompanied the change in personnel—were now recruited from non-Christian peoples taken in raids from neighboring regions, whose dependence on the king would be absolute.

The inner pages are a striking example of Muslims and adherents of local religions being recruited into the royal administration, and at the most intimate level. But they are not the only example. The *čäwa* too, conceived as royal regiments unattached to any specific provincial identity, were also drawn from captives of diverse origin. We might also recall Zär'a Ya'eqob's marriage to Əleni, member of the ruling lineage of Hadiyya, which raised a Muslim-born woman to the highest possible position open to a woman in the kingdom, and who as regent for the young Ləbnä Dəngəl in later years was not only an administrator but the effective head of the Christian state. We thus see, in various ways, a process of integration of the multi-ethnic peoples of Ethiopia in the Solomonic administration, a result of the pragmatic realization of the political development of the medieval kingdom of Ethiopia.

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