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# An Ethiopian Fugitive Allied with a Nubian King? Ēwostātēwos and Sāb`a Nol at Nobā through Hagiographical Narrative

Olivia Adankpo-Labadie

## Introduction

Around the year 1337, the Ethiopian monk Ēwostātēwos left his kingdom.<sup>1</sup> If his *vita* depicts his journey as a pilgrimage, one must admit that it was actually an exile. As a staunch advocate of the double Sabbath as well as an opponent of lay authorities, the monk held highly controversial views. At the beginning of the 14th century, he created a powerful, yet dissenting, movement in northern Ethiopia with his disciples, called the Eustatheans.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this success led him into trouble. The newly appointed Metropolitan Yā`eqob, head of the Ethiopian Church, deprived him from all support. Moreover, king Amda Şeyon (1314–1344) banished the rebellious monk, and Warāsina `Egzi, a local governor, cast him out.

Then, Ēwostātēwos and some of his fellows began a long journey, which led them from the Ethiopian highlands to Armenia, passing through Nubia, Egypt, Palestine, and Cyprus along the way. Thanks to Gianfranco Fiaccadori, who highlighted the circumstances of their travel to Cyprus and Armenia,<sup>3</sup> we now understand much better the last stages of their tour. However, other parts of the itinerary are less known. The account of Ēwostātēwos's stay at Nobā is a

- 1 LUSINI, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, pp. 62–63. See also ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwostātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*, p. 45.
- 2 For an introduction to this movement and his founder, see LUSINI, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*; DERAT, "Le développement à l'époque médiévale," pp. lvi–lxxxiv. For a historical analysis, see now ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwostātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*.
- 3 FIACCADORI, "Etiopia, Cipro e Armenia," pp. 73–78.

unique testimony to an Ethiopian vision of Medieval Nubia, abundantly referred to by historians.<sup>4</sup> After leaving the land of Māryā, corresponding today to northwest Eritrea,<sup>5</sup> the monk met the Christian king of Nobā called Sābʾa Nol who faced a violent uprising led by rebels. The king vividly urged the saint to give him victory through his intercession, in which Ēwoṣṭātēwos performed an outstanding miracle that led to the king's triumph. Despite its major interest and its problematic interpretation, an analysis of this interaction is still lacking. Numerous questions stand without answers concerning its fictional character. Who is Sabʾa Nol, king of Nobā? Did he ever exist? To what extent does this hagiographical reconstruction shed light on Medieval Nubia? This paper aims at providing a new translation based on the oldest manuscript of the *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*, joined by an in-depth commentary dealing with the geographical, historical, and literary dimensions of the passage.

### The *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*, the spiritual biography of a fugitive monk

The *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*, which means in Geʿez, *Contending of Ēwoṣṭātēwos*,<sup>6</sup> relates the spiritual biography of Ēwoṣṭātēwos, from his miraculous birth in Tegrāy to his death, as an outcast monk persecuted for his faithfulness to the Law of God, in Armenia.<sup>7</sup> This text belongs to the *gadl* literary genre, namely a narrative aiming at emphasizing the virtues of a holy man or woman chosen by God. Such biographies contain a stereotypical frame, with multiple similarities with Byzantine or Western hagiographies.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of a *gadl* is clear: to promote the figure of a saint by evoking and remembering his or her uncommon fate. These narratives also have distinctive features because each has been elaborated in a specific context.

The *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos* unveils indeed a very complex manuscript tradition. Based on a comparison of all known manuscripts, Gianfrancesco Lusini has identified three different traditions of the text named α, β, and γ, which differ in their length, voluntary

4 For a quick overview, see MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Storia della Nubia cristiana*, pp. 220–221; SEIGNOBOS, “Nobā,” pp. 1193–1194; and recently ŁAJTAR & OCHAŁA, “An Unexpected Guest in the Church of Sonqī Tino,” pp. 264–265.

5 MIRAN, “Māryā,” pp. 824–826.

6 Geʿez belongs to the Ethio-Semitic group. It is the classical language of Ethiopia used both in literature and in the liturgy of Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

7 All that follows refers to the fundamental work of Gianfranco Lusini and my own recent research: LUSINI, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*; ADANKPO, “Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques du *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*”; and ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwoṣṭātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*.

8 See MARRASSINI, *Gadla Yohannes Mesraqawi*. For comparisons with Byzantine and Western hagiography: NOSNITSIN, “Hagiography,” pp. 969–972, and ADANKPO, “Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques du *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*,” pp. 407–420.

omission or inclusion of some episodes, and their literary style.<sup>9</sup> I have recently specified the circumstances of their making and their characteristics thanks to a wider investigation.<sup>10</sup> The  $\alpha$  version is the most ancient one and corresponds to the oldest manuscripts. In this *recensio vetusta*, the hagiographer underlines the dispute between the monk and lay authorities. Ēwoṣṭātēwos is portrayed as a virtuous and innocent monk facing royal brutality. On the contrary, the  $\beta$  version conveys a radically diverging image: in that version, he is described as a highly consensual saint, who performs numerous miracles and who has tight relations with king Amda Ṣeyon. The last tradition, called  $\gamma$ , is a condensed variant of the previous one, which indicates the success and the spread of the *Vita* in all Ethiopia.

The Eustathean monks of Dabra Māryām drafted the first version of the *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos* in the late 14th century at a time of persecution.<sup>11</sup> After the Dabra Meṭmāq council held in 1450, which reconciled the Eustathean dissent with royal power, the disciples of Ēwoṣṭātēwos have modified the contentious image of their patron. At that time, they were no longer the king's enemies but his powerful allies. Thus, the  $\beta$  variant must have been designed after the 15th century. Specialists of Ethiopian studies have used for a long time the sole edition and translation made by the Russian orientalist Boris Turaiev, which dates back to the early 20th century and is exclusively based on manuscripts belonging to the  $\beta$  tradition.<sup>12</sup> For example, Gérard Colin, who has recently delivered a new translation of the *gadl* in French, still uses Turaiev's edition.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the manuscripts belonging to the  $\alpha$  family have the advantage of presenting a text that can be dated and whose drafting conditions are precisely known. Among the available manuscripts, the most ancient one is vat. aeth. 46. The volume, which dates from the mid 15th century, consists of the spiritual biography itself (fol. 2r-119r), the *Miracles* or *Ta' ammera Ēwoṣṭātēwos* (fol. 119r-127v) and various documents, that is to say notes, colophons, and hymns (fol. 128r-134r).<sup>14</sup> The various texts of this manuscript can therefore be

9 LUSINI, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, pp. 35-67.

10 See the results in ADANKPO, "Ecriture et réécriture hagiographiques du *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*" and ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwoṣṭātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*.

11 LUSINI, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*; ADANKPO, "Ecriture et réécriture hagiographiques du *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*." Absādi, disciple of Ēwoṣṭātēwos, founded the monastery in 1374. Dabra Māryām, which lies today in the Eritrean highlands, soon became a major center of the monastic movement. Concerning this monastery see BAUSI & LUSINI, "Appunti in margine a una nuova ricerca sui conventi eritrei," pp. 20-21. For further demonstration, see ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwoṣṭātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*, pp. 305-307.

12 TURAIEV, *Vita et Miracula Eustathii*, and *Acta s. Eustathii*.

13 COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, pp. 75-215.

14 See the manuscript's description in GRÉBAUT & TISSERANT, *Codices Aethiopici Vaticani et Borgiani*, pp. 194-199. For a historical analysis see ADANKPO, "Ecriture hagiographique

used as reliable historical sources. Despite its unquestionable qualities, Boris Turaiev’s edition can hardly be considered as a medieval testimony because it is the result of many rewritings that took place from the 15th to the 18th century. For all these reasons, I will use the vat. aeth. 46 to edit and translate the passage concerning Nobā. I will also draw comparisons with the new translation proposed by Gérard Colin to better understand the specific features of the ancient variant.<sup>15</sup> This last version clearly testifies a hagiographical rewriting of the earliest one: It displays an amplification of the encounter and has a more emphatic tone.<sup>16</sup>

**Ēwostātēwos and king Sāb`a Nol according to Vat. aeth. 46 fol. 82v-85r<sup>17</sup>**

The translated excerpt lies at a crucial narrative sequence. After his conflicts with king Amda Šeyon, Metropolitan Yā`eqob, and governor Warāsina `Egzi`, Ēwostātēwos is forced to exile. He started his journey in Bogos where he met two local governors, Merārā and Ganzāya Egzi, who kindly received him. Thereafter, the hagiographer amply recounts how Ēwostātēwos gave his last blessing to his favorite disciple, Absādi, in Māryā before entering the land of Nobā.

ወበጽሑ፡ውስተ፡ምድረ፡ኖብ፡ወሰምዐ፡ነገሠ፡ኖብ፡ከመ፡ይመጽኦ፡አ፡አበ፡  
 አምስጣቴምስ፡ወመጽኦ፡ከመ፡ይትቀበሎ፡ወእነበለ፡ይብ፡ከሕ፡ኅብ፡አበ፡  
 ኤምስጣቴምስ፡ሰምዐ፡ነገሥ፡ከመ፡መጽኦ፡ዓለዊያነ፡ከመ፡ይጽብአም፡  
 ለነገሥ፡ከመ፡ላህም፡{አነዘ፡ይፍሐሎ}፡በውስተ፡ምቅማሒሁ፡ወለአከ፡  
 ንገስ፡ሳብአ፡ኖል፡አስመ፡ከማሁ፡ሰሙ፡በዓረቢ፡ወበግዕዝሰ፡ውሉ፡  
 ኢትዮጵያ፡ብሂል፡አስመ፡ትትወ\*

ከፎሙ፡ለመነኮሳት፡አለ፡ይነግዱ፡ኅብ፡መቃብረ፡አግዚአነ፡ወተነ፡  
 አገሪሆሙ፡ወትሰቲ፡ፀበሎሙ፡በተአምኖ፡ወበአገዝ፡ሰመያ፡ሰብአ፡  
 ኖለ፡ወለአከ፡ነገሥ፡ኅብ፡አምስጣቴምስ፡ወዓሊሁ፡አነዘ፡ይብል፡ለአመ፡  
 ለነከ፡ጸብአ፡ለነከ፡አግዚአብሔር፡በጸሎትከከ፡አሎነተ፡ዓለዊያነከ፡ወሰበ፡  
 አገብአከ፡ዘኩከ፡ገብገብአ፡ክብርኖአ፡አሁበከ፡በዘ፡ቡቴአ፡ይዜሀረከ፡ዘቦቴአ፡  
 ትትሐፀብአ፡አደዊከአ፡ወሐረ፡ነገሥ|\*

et commémoration des saints dans les monastères eustathéens du nord de l’Ethiopie,” pp. 321-334.

15 COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, pp. 132-134.  
 16 Monique Goulet theorized the hagiographical rewriting process by analyzing the work of the literary critic Gérard Genette and by studying a vast corpus of Latin hagiographical texts from the early Middle Ages. “Mais il me semble qu’un des phénomènes les plus intéressants du discours hagiographique, pour qui veut l’appréhender dans sa double dimension historique et littéraire, réside dans l’usage de la réécriture, qui instaure un système de renvois entre les textes consacrés à un même saint. On peut donc y observer les infléchissements de l’écriture, et s’interroger sur leurs rapports avec les circonstances historiques, autrement dit sur les effets du contexte sur le texte.” GOULLET, *Écriture et réécriture hagiographiques*, p. 10.

17 Editorial sigla: \* - new folio; | - no punctuation mark.

ወተቀበሎሙ፡ምስለ፡ሰራዊቶቻቸው፡ተዕይንቶሙ፡ለዓለዊኖን፡  
 ወይከውን፡ኖልቆሙ፡ለዓለዋያን፡፵፪፡ወገትምሙ፡ለክርቲኖን፡ወበክ፡  
 ምስለ፡ጌ፡አፍራስ፡መክከሎሙ፡ወ፬፡ዘይጸውር፡መስቀል፡ምስሌሆሙ፡  
 ወዐገትምሙ፡ለክርስቲያን፡በፍጽም፡ወበ፡ኳለ፡መአበ፡ኤምስጣቴምስ፡  
 ተጽዓኖ፡በሰረገለ፡መንፈሳዊ፡ያንበለብል፡ከመ፡አሳት፡በመልዕልተ፡ሰረገለ፡  
 መንፈሳዊተ፡፡ወረጅኦ፡ለሰብክ፡ኖል፡ንጉሥ፡ለዘ፡ተ\*

አመነ፡በጸሎ፡አበ፡ኤምስጣቴምስ፡ወሰበ፡ይቤ፡ይተነሠክ፡አግዚአብሔር፡  
 ወይዘረወ፡ፀረ፡ነትዑ፡አለ፡መንገለ፡ጽብሐ፡ዓለዊያን፡፡ወከዕበ፡ይቤ፡  
 ግፍዖሙ፡ለአለ፡ይገፍዑ፡ነ፡ተዘርወ፡አላ፡ዓረብ፡፡ወከዕበ፡ይቤ፡አጅሳነኒ፡  
 አምፀርያ፡፡ወወጅ፡አለ፡መንገለ፡ጸብሐ፡፡ወከዕበ፡ይቤ፡አግዚአብሔር፡  
 ከሚከ፡ወተሰብረ፡አለ፡መንገለ፡ሰሚን፡፡ወቀተልምሙ፡አምኃሐ፡ጽብሐ፡  
 አስከ፡ዕርበተ፡ፀሐይ፡ወዳወደ፡\*

ሰብኦሙ፡መአሰሳሆሙ፡መሀረኩ፡በጸሎቱ፡ለአቡነ|ኤምስጣቴምስ፡  
 ሞክ፡ፀሮ፡፡ወበአንተዘ፡አአምረ፡ንጉሥ፡ክብሮ፡ለዝንቱ፡ቀዱስ፡ሰበ፡  
 አንበልበለ፡በመልዕልተ፡ሰረገለ፡በማአከለ፡ሰማይ፡ወምጅር፡፡ኦጅንግል፡፡  
 አንተ፡አንበለ፡ጥልቀት፡ዘአቢነ፡ኤምስጣቴምስ፡ወፍቅረ፡አግዚአብሔር፡  
 አንተ፡አልባቲ፡ጽርዓት፡፡ወሃይማኖት፡አንበለ፡ጽነት፡፡ንግበኤኩ፡ኅበ፡ጥንተ፡  
 ነገር፡ዘቀጸሚ፡፡ወአምዝ፡አምፀኦ፡ንጉሥ፡ሰብ\*

ኦ፡ኖል፡ሰቢሮ፡ወአተ፡ገበግበ፡ኅበ፡አበ፡ኤምስጣቴምስ፡፡ወይቤሎ፡ንሣክ፡  
 ኦአበ፡ከመ፡ትትሐፀብ፡በቲ፡አዴከ፡አስመ፡ርኪነ፡ጸሎተከ፡ጽንዕተ፡፡ወአምዝ፡  
 ተንሥኦ፡አቡነ፡ኤምስጣቴምስ፡ወሐረ፡ፍኖቶ፡

Translation

They [Ēwostātēwos and his fellows] arrived in Nobā land (*medra Nobā*). When the king of Nobā heard that ‘abbā Ēwostātēwos had arrived, he came to meet him. Before approaching ‘abbā Ēwostātēwos, the king heard that some rebels (‘*ālawayān*)<sup>18</sup> had started to wage war against him like a bull being on heat in meadows. Sāb’ a Nol sent [...] because his name in Arabic thus means “sons of Ethiopia” (*Weluda ’Itiopyā*) in Ge’ez. Indeed, she welcomed the monks who were accomplishing the pilgrimage close to Our Lord’s Sepulchre.<sup>20</sup> She would wash their feet and drank [the water blended with] their dust faithfully, that’s why she called him Sāb’ a Nol.

Afterwards, the king sent a servant to Ēwostātēwos telling him: “If the Lord fights with us against those infidels (‘*ālawayān*) thanks to your prayers, when I come back, I will give you this glorious

18 May be translated as “rebels, heretics, outlaw.” See LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge’ez*, p. 61.  
 19 There is obviously a hiatus in the text. The manuscripts of the β tradition do not indicate what Sāb’ a Nol sent. The hagiographer instead praises the king’s faith: “Ce roi de Nobā était juste et de foi droite et croyait au bois de la croix du Christ [...]” COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, p. 132.  
 20 The pronoun “she” refers to Sāb’ a Nol’s mother. In the β variant, this woman is clearly introduced as his mother, see TURAIEV, *Acta s. Eustathii*, p. 43 and COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, pp. 132-133.

*gabgeb*<sup>21</sup> of mine, which people are proud of, and you will wash your hands in it.” The king met the infidels in their camps with his troops. The infidels numbered four thousand and they surrounded the Christians. He [the king] came in the battle with four horsemen and amidst them was a man who held a cross. The troops completely surrounded the Christians.

Then, *’abbā* Ēwoṣṭātēwos, riding a spiritual chariot (*saragallā manfasāwi*), was blazing like a fire above this spiritual chariot (*saragallā manfasāwi*).<sup>22</sup> He helped king Sāb’a Nol who trusted the prayer of *’abbā* Ēwoṣṭātēwos. When he said: “Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered,”<sup>23</sup> the infidels who were on the eastern side beat the retreat. Again, when he shouted: “Fight against them that fight against me,”<sup>24</sup> those of the western side scattered. When he said again: “Deliver me from mine enemies,”<sup>25</sup> those who stood on the north side collapsed. Once again when he proclaimed, “Who can be compared unto the Lord?”<sup>26</sup> those who were on the southern side were cut into pieces. Thus, the king killed them all from the crack of dawn to twilight. They [the king and his horsemen] took captive their people (*sab’omu*) and seized their livestock. Thanks to *’abuna* Ēwoṣṭātēwos’s prayers, he vanquished his enemies. Moreover, because of that, the king recognized the saint’s glory when he started blazing above a chariot [flying] between sky and earth.

O of *’abuna* Ēwoṣṭātēwos’s unblemished virginity!

O unceasing love for God!

O unchanging faith!

Let us turn back to our main story. Then, the victorious king Sāb’a Nol took out the *gabgeb* [and gave it] to *’abuna* Ēwoṣṭātēwos. He told him: “Take this *’abbā* to wash your hands, because we have seen your mighty prayer.”

Thereafter *’abuna* Ēwoṣṭātēwos left and went his way.

21 It may refer to a basin or a bowl in which the guest of honor should wash his hands. It seems close to the Arabic *ḡubb*, which means “well, basin, hollow.” LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, p. 371. The β variant emphasizes the king’s pledge: “Quand je serai revenu sain et sauf avec le signe de la victoire, les cors de métal battu et les trompettes de bronze qui (sont) enveloppées dans une peau de bœuf – dont s’enorgueillissent ces infidèles –, *’abbā*, (les) ayant brisés, je te (les) donnerai pour laver tes mains et tes pieds.” COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, p. 133. Gérard Colin considers that *gabāgebāt*, a word he found impossible to translate, may refer to the horns and trumpets mentioned above, see *ibid.*, p. 134n226.

22 Cf. 2 Ki 2:11. All biblical translations are quoted from the King James Version.

23 Ps 68:1.

24 Ps 35:1.

25 Ps 59:1.

26 Ps 89:6.



## Encountering Sāb'a Nol, the mysterious Christian king of Nobā

In which circumstances did Ēwoṣṭātēwos's travel in Nobā take place? This question raises indeed two decisive issues. The first one deals with the literary dimension of this text: Is this account reliable or not? The second one relates to the context of the monk's arrival in this land. What kind of historical information can this extract exactly provide?

The Ethiopian hagiographical texts, together with royal chronicles, are our main sources for the history of Medieval Ethiopia. The *gadlāt* contain information dealing with political, social, economic, or cultural patterns that highlight many aspects of Ethiopian society. Historians are cautious when analyzing these documents and are aware of their specific motives and their social aims.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos* is a fiction that reinvents the origins of the Ewoṣṭatean movement.<sup>28</sup> Yet, most of the characters or the places identified in the *vita* really existed and fit with historical events. For instance, the hagiographer gives an accurate view of Ethiopian politics in the 1330s. He mentions King Amda Ṣeyon and his conflicts with monks, as well as the attempts of emancipation from northern rulers such as Warāsina 'Egzi' or Nagada Krestos.<sup>29</sup>

In such a case, can this excerpt provide any valuable piece of information? One can wonder if this text strips away the ambiguity related to Nobā. Ēwoṣṭātēwos started his exile around 1337 fleeing from Sarā'ē. Māryā and Nobā represent intermediate stages before his long journey to Egypt in Alexandria and the Scetis desert. Nobā would thus correspond to the geographical location of medieval Nubia. The first mention of Nobā dates back to the 3rd century BCE when Strabo, quoting Eratosthenes, described the Nubai as nomads living in the western shores of the Nile.<sup>30</sup> However, it seems quite difficult to identify exactly where Nobā extended in Antiquity. The name Nobā is an ancient one and is known through Aksumite inscriptions and may refer to both a toponym and an ethnonym; Nobā alluding to Nubian speakers. Two stelae dating from the mid 4th century mention a military campaign against Nobā led by the Aksumite king 'Ezānā.<sup>31</sup> The Ge'ez inscription indicates that the Nobā

27 HIRSCH & KROPP, *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa*; DERAT, "Une nouvelle étape de l'élaboration de la légende hagiographique de Takla Hāymānot," pp. 71–90; BRITA, *I racconti tradizionali sulla "Seconda Cristianizzazione" dell'Etiopia*.

28 ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d'Ēwoṣṭātēwos à la formation d'un mouvement monastique puissant*, pp. 269–414.

29 Vat. aeth. 46 fol. 39r; 42r; 54r–55v. See also *ibid.*, pp. 73–90.

30 See EIDE et al, *Fontes historiae Nubiorum*, n° 109, pp. 557–561.

31 One is in Greek and the other is in Ge'ez. For the Greek one: *Ibid.*, n°299 = BERNAND, DREWES & SCHNEIDER, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, n°271. For the Ge'ez one: *Ibid.*, n°189 = LITTMANN & VON LÜPKE, *Deutsche Aksum Expedition*, pp. 32–42. For a discussion about the meaning of these two inscriptions, see

lived around the Nile and the Atbārā river: this may explain the ancient Ethiopian traditions which claimed that the Nobā inhabited the western grasslands of the Atbārā up to the White Nile.<sup>32</sup> Yet, the precise location of Nobā land is unknown, even for the Middle Ages: no place bears this name in the Nubian kingdoms.<sup>33</sup> It seems more likely that this noun actually coincides with a people's name and has been used by some Ethiopian scholars to designate a political entity of medieval Nubia.

Since the 13th century, the Nubian geopolitical position was very precarious. Nubia was under Mamluk power with various degrees of autonomy since Baybars's reign (1260–1277).<sup>34</sup> Christianity had progressively lost its predominance in the Nubian states due to Islamic expansion. According to the Arab geographer al-'Umari, in the 1320s the ruler of Makuria, the former prosperous Nubian state, Kanz al-Dawla was a Muslim and the vassal of Egypt.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it was not the end of Christian Nubia. Numerous documents shed light on a Christian king named Siti who reigned in Makuria at least from 1331 or 1333, probably after throwing Kanz al-Dawla off the throne.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the situation remains unclear after 1333 as Robin Seignobos has recently pointed out.<sup>37</sup> Despite having been set aside, Kanz al-Dawla persisted in pretending that he was "king of Dongola," the capital city in 1333.<sup>38</sup> This claim clearly sheds light on continuous rivalry between Christian and Muslim dynasties in Makuria in the 14th century. Thus, conflicts were most likely to break during the 1330s between Siti and Kanz al-Dawla.

Who, then, is Sāb 'a Nol? Are Sāb 'a Nol and Siti the same character? The exile of Ēwostātēwos took place around year 1337. At that time, no source clearly asserts that Siti was still ruling over Makuria but it remains plausible. What can we learn about the mysterious Nubian king? The *gād*l asserts that Sāb 'a Nol is a pious Christian king eager to meet the monk: "The king of Nobā heard that 'abbā Ēwostātēwos came in and he went before him to welcome him." His real identity is more confused. The hagiographer introduces a strange gloss about his name: his name in Arabic means in Ge'ez

DINKLER, "König Ezana von Aksum und das Christentum," pp. 121–132, and SEIGNOBOS, "Nobā," pp. 1193–1194.

32 The Atbārā is "the most important river of the eastern Sudan and the last major tributary of the Nile to the north, cf. SMIDT, *Atbārā*, pp. 389–390. See BAIRU TAFLA, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, p. 257.

33 No place or ecclesiastical province bears this name. Yet, for an attempt of reconstruction of this site southwards the 5th cataract, see the map in SEIGNOBOS, "Nobā," p. 1194.

34 I would like to thank Robin Seignobos for sharing some results of his PhD thesis: SEIGNOBOS, *L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale*, pp. 346–391.

35 AL-'UMARI, *Masālik al-absār*, vol. 4, p. 48.

36 MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Storia della Nubia cristiana*, pp. 220–221. For a broader and recent synthesis, see SEIGNOBOS, *L'Égypte et la Nubie à l'époque médiévale*, pp. 360–363.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 346–391.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 360–361.

Weluda ʾItyopyā “sons of Ethiopia,” making the Arabic Sābʾa Nol an equivalent of the Ethiopic Weluda ʾItyopyā. This etymology seems highly dubious as previously noticed,<sup>39</sup> because the locution “Sābʾa Nol” is not entirely Arabic and does not mean “sons of Ethiopia” anyway.<sup>40</sup> It might be a copyist’s mistake, who experienced difficulties in transcribing a term he did not understand, or an attempt on his part to attribute a meaning to an unknown proper name. Nor can we reject the idea that this curious etymology comes from an oral tradition that had been somewhat lost.

Anyway, the β version of the text significantly clears up the ambiguity about his ancestry. It clearly introduces the woman as his mother while in the ancient version her identity is not revealed. She is described as a devout and righteous woman who helped pilgrims. No doubt, this allusion emphasizes the king’s devotion. Sābʾa Nol is facing an uprising, but its causes remain unknown. The substantive ʿālawiyān which is used can be translated as either rebels, infidels, or outlaw.<sup>41</sup> In this text, those ʿālawiyān are both political and religious dissidents who refuse submission to divine and royal law. The hagiographer does not specify if they are Muslim or not: above all, they represent the pagan enemies. Sābʾa Nol might represent a reminiscence of Siti’s fights. Anyway, this hagiographical account is more a recollection of the geopolitical reconfiguration at Makuria, than an accurate description of the historical events opposing Christians and Muslims in the 1330s.

### Reinterpreting political and military tensions in Nobā through hagiography

This misunderstanding concerning Nubia and its ruler raises the issue about the way Ethiopian monks knew and perceived this land in the Middle Ages. Although Nubia is not far from Ethiopia, it seems that Ethiopians had loose ties with the inhabitants of Makuria. The first written version of the *gadla Ēwoṣtātēwos* is completed in the last quarter of the 14th century, though his disciples must have spread oral stories about their master since his death. Ethiopian Christian culture is indeed both oral and written. The saints’ stories are told, commented and read as well as being written, copied and rewritten.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the author – a collective term that actually includes the

39 MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Storia della Nubia cristiana*, p. 221; COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, p. 133n220.

40 Josef Marquart supposes that Sābʾa Nol is an Ethio-Arabic hybrid: *sābʾa* could be translated in Geʿez as “man” or “people” of, and *Nol* as the Arabic “gift,” MARQUART, *Die Benin-Sammlung des Reichsmuseums für Völkerkunde in Leiden*, p. ccliv. Gérard Colin follows this hypothesis: COLIN, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien* 2017, p. 133n220.

41 See LESLAU, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez*, p. 61.

42 COWLEY, *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation*. See also WION, *Paradis pour une reine*, pp. 73–99.

whole monastic community of Dabra Māryām – has transcribed this event according to oral traditions. Nubia is a place of major interest for monks because it is one of the stages of the pilgrimage towards Egypt and the Holy Land, as the *gatl* recalls: “Indeed, she welcomed the monks who had accomplished the pilgrimage close to Our Lord’s Sepulchre.” If Ēwoṣṭātēwos probably met a Nubian ruler during his exile, Ethiopian pilgrims might have also conveyed a vague account of their journey throughout Nubia. Pilgrims were the unique source of information concerning Nubia for Ethiopian monks.<sup>43</sup> From all these pieces (oral tradition, information of pilgrims), the hagiographer reconstructed his narrative halfway between fiction and history.

The encounter between the monk and the king is obviously based on biblical models. This account is a rewriting of the famous Old Testament scheme uniting a prophet and a king.<sup>44</sup> Sāb’ a Nol challenges Ewoṣṭātēwos to help him as he fights the infidels, and he promises to honor the monk after the victory by letting him wash his hands with the glorious *gabgeb*. This passage seems obscure even if compared to the latter version. The king is probably referring to a prestige item, a symbol of his power, which he wishes to offer to the saint as a sign of his hospitality. The account points definitely out his military skills. Surrounded by countless enemies, Sāb’ a Nol and his four horsemen are seriously threatened. Suddenly, Ewoṣṭātēwos appears on a spiritual chariot (*saragallā manfasāwi*) and recites psalms of war. Thanks to this miracle, he leads Sāb’ a Nol to victory. The monk is explicitly compared to the prophet Elijah who rose to heaven on a fiery chariot in front of his disciple Elisha.<sup>45</sup> The blazing chariot represents the power of God and his miraculous intervention during a war. The monk fights also with the word of God by singing military-themed psalms. Thus, Ewoṣṭātēwos is a mighty mediator like Moses praying on a hill while Joshua was fighting the Amalekites.<sup>46</sup> This account is a plea to boast Ewoṣṭātēwos’s virtues. On one hand, this narrative portrays Ewoṣṭātēwos as an outstanding monk with various charismas. On the other hand, Sāb’ a Nol seems to be the archetype of the good king who fears God and his law. He is clearly opposed to the Ethiopian king Amda, who is depicted as

43 For a first overview about Ethiopian pilgrims in Egypt and Palestine in the late Middle Ages see CERULLI, *Etiopi in Palestina*; MEINARDUS, “Ethiopian Monks in Egypt,” pp. 243–245; STÖRK, “Dayr al-Muḥarraḡ,” pp. 116–117; and STÖRK, “Dayr as-Suryān,” pp. 119–120.

44 David and Nathan are the archetypes of this biblical *topos*. See, for instance, 2 SA 7.

45 “And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” 2 Ki 2:11. We find another allusion to the same miracle in the *gatl*, vat. aeth. 46 fol. 106v–108v. For a comment, see ADANKPO, *De la prédication hétérodoxe d’Ewoṣṭātēwos à la formation d’un mouvement monastique puissant*, pp. 361–364.

46 Ex 17:9–13. For other biblical examples, see Jos 6:20.

unholy and violent. The Nubian ruler, who is still vaguely known, becomes the figure of the perfect king.

In the oldest version of the *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos*, the hagiographer builds an ideal vision of Nubia identified as a Christian land ruled by a devout, good king. Yet, this image seems far from the actual situation in Nubia in the 1330s. If the political tensions between Muslim and Christian rulers are real in Makuria at that time, the account we have is a hagiographical reinterpretation of these rivalries. Sābʾa Nol, king of Nobā, did never really exist. He is the portrayal of an Old Testament monarch, the ally of a prophet, and a pious man. Such a representation is both the result of a lack of accurate information about Makuria and of the writing of hagiographical fiction. Above all, the *gadla Ēwoṣṭātēwos* shapes a distinctive image of Nobā. Nobā becomes a major route to Holy Land, a land for pilgrims.<sup>47</sup> The geopolitical changes which occurred in the Nile region in the 14th had certainly aroused fear amongst Ethiopian monks. The hagiography is the expression of monastic fears and ideal concerning Nubia, still perceived as a major stage on the route to Egypt and Palestine.<sup>48</sup>

47 To compare with the very few traces of Nubian kingdoms in medieval and early modern Ethiopian itineraries, see CRAWFORD, *Ethiopian itineraries*, c. 1400–1524.

48 For a new evidence of the importance of Nubia for the religious relations between Ethiopians and Egyptians see ŁAJTAR & OCHALEA, “An Unexpected Guest in the Church of Sonqi Tino,” pp. 257–268.

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