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Towards a History of Women in Medieval Ethiopia
Margaux Herman

The late Sylvia Pankhurst, as editor of the *Ethiopia Observer*, promoted awareness of Ethiopian women's history in the 1950s and it gained ground as an academic subject, alongside social history, starting in the 1970s.¹ Though much work has focused on the modern period, two recent full-length contributions concern the seventeenth century, with considerably more relevance for the medieval period.² It is nonetheless the case that scholarship on women in the Middle Ages proper remains scarce. Until very recently, the principal points of reference were the few pages devoted to the medieval era in surveys of women's history found in the general social history written by Richard Pankhurst.³ In the last decade or so, however, a few scholars (including this author) have devoted studies exclusively to medieval Ethiopian women and/or undertaken gendered analyses of aspects of medieval Ethiopian society.⁴ Medieval women's and gender history may therefore be said to have "launched," and to be a field with great potential for future growth. The aim of this essay is to introduce the available source materials and existing scholarship that have been or can be deployed to illuminate medieval Ethiopian women's lives, and to suggest some of the categories of analysis through which they can be approached. In keeping with my own expertise and existing studies, the emphasis is on medieval Christian

¹ Sylvia Pankhurst, for instance, penned "Three Notable Ethiopian Women," *Ethiopia Observer* 1, 1 (December 1956): 84-90, and published Mansfield Parkyns and Charles Johnston, "Women's Life and Work in Old-Time Ethiopia," *Ethiopia Observer* 2, 1 (February 1958): 29-32. For a review of the field in general in 2001 see Belete Bizuneh, "Women in Ethiopian History: A Bibliographic Review," *Northeast African Studies* 8, 3 (2001): 7-32.

² Anaïs Wion, *Paradis pour une reine: Le monastère de Qoma Fasilädäs, Éthiopie, XVII^e siècle*, (Paris, 2012); Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner, trans., *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton, 2015).

³ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Woman in Former Times: An Anthology* (Addis Ababa, 1976), 1-22; idem, "The role of women in Ethiopian economic, social and cultural life from the Middle Ages to the time of Tewodros," in *Proceedings of the First National Conference of Ethiopian Studies, April 11-12, 1990*, ed. Tadesse Beyene, Richard Pankhurst, and Ahmed Zekaria (Addis Ababa, 1990), 345-361; idem, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Téwodros II* (Trenton, N.J., 1992), 67-72, 114-18, 248-70.

⁴ Margaux Herman, "Les reines en Éthiopie du XV^e au XVII^e siècle. Épouses, mères de roi, 'mère du royaume'" (Ph.D diss., Université de Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, 2012); eadem, "Figures féminines chrétiennes, exaltation de la dignité de roi et émancipation politique des reines (Éthiopie, XV^e-XVIII^e siècle)," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 30 (2015): 71-118; eadem, "Rethinking the royal matrimonial practices in the 16th century and its consequences on the status of queen," in *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Eloi Ficquet and Ahmed Hassen, 2 vols. (Addis Ababa, 2016), 1: 149-162; eadem, "(Re)writing the history of Goḡgam in ancient and mediaeval times: the prism of the nineteenth-century regional historiography," in *Essays in Ethiopian Manuscript Studies. Proceedings of the International Conference 'Manuscripts and Texts, Languages and Contexts: the Transmission of Knowledge in the Horn of Africa' (Hamburg, 17-19 July 2014)*, ed. Alessandro Bausi, Alessandro Gori, and Denis Nonsitsin (Wiesbaden, 2016), 119-142; Selamawit Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian female saints, with special reference to Gädlä Krestos Sämra and Gädlä Feqertä Krestos," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, 2 (2006): 161-166; Rita Pankhurst, "Taytu's Foremothers, Queen Eleni," Queen Säblä Wängel and Bati Dəl Wämbära," in *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Svein Ege et al. (Trondheim, 2009), 51-63.

Ethiopia, but where possible evidence on Muslim women and female followers of local religions is also included.

While individual sources will be discussed in what follows, a brief overview here can give a sense of their scope. For non-elite women, and on matters that affected all (or virtually all) women regardless of social status, medieval legal and religious-legal precepts and hagiographical texts provide valuable information. So do the accounts of foreign travelers, which mention aspects of daily life too common to merit extensive description in Ethiopian sources. Most important among these foreign accounts is that of Francisco Alvares, a chaplain attached to a Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia who spent six years in Ethiopia (1520-1526).⁵ Also useful are the reports by Casthanoso and Correa of the Portuguese military expedition that aided Christian forces against the attacks of Imam Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm in 1541-53, and, in a more limited, retrospective manner, the seventeenth-century Jesuit reports from Ethiopia.⁶ Elite women appear more frequently in Ethiopian sources themselves, and have therefore garnered more attention from historians. They are mentioned in royal chronicles, Christian and Muslim war accounts, and hagiographical texts – several were saints themselves. As founders of churches, they may appear in the land grant documentation and in local oral traditions about the church's origins and history; archeological surveys of the church structures can yield useful data as well.⁷ All these may be supplemented, again, by foreigners' accounts, which indeed may signal a particular role for elite women as intermediaries with outsiders.

As the scholarship and even much of the source material offer fuller information on elite and famous than on "common" women, this first foray into a survey of the subject – an account of the "state of the field," albeit a field in its preliminary stages—necessarily does the same. Where possible, however, the life conditions and experiences of non-elite women, and the sources and perspectives through which they can be approached, are discussed; they represent a very promising area of future development.

Gendered rules and customs

As in many medieval societies, certain forms of household labor were traditionally undertaken by women. These included, in both Christian and Muslim Ethiopia, grinding grain, preparing food and beverages, and collecting and carrying the firewood necessary for cooking.⁸

⁵ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2 vols; see also Charles Fraser Beckingham, "Notes on an Unpublished Manuscript of Francisco Alvares: Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste Joam das Indias," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 4, 1 (1961): 139-154.

⁶ R. S. Whiteway, trans., *The Portuguese expedition to Abyssinia in 1541-1543, as narrated by Casthanoso, with some contemporary letters, the short account of Bermudez and certain extracts from Correa* (London, 1902); Charles Fraser Beckingham and George Winn Brereton Huntingford, eds., *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (London, 1954); Pedro Páez, *Pedro Páez's History of Ethiopia, 1622*, ed. Isabel Boavida, Hervé Pennec and Manuel João Ramos, trans. Christopher J. Tribe, 2 vols. (London, 2011).

⁷ For some examples of the use of land grant documents, local oral histories and genealogies of church founders and families, see Herman, "(Re)writing," 122-136; Wion, *Paradis pour une reine*; Marilyn Heldman and Getatchew Haile, "Who is Who in Ethiopia's Past, Part III: Founders of Ethiopia's Solomonic Dynasty," *Northeast African Studies* 9, 1 (1987): 1-11.

⁸ For Muslim communities, see Jules Perruchon, trans., *Histoire des guerres d'Amda Šyôn, roi d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1890), 122.

According to Alvares, in southern Təgray (and doubtless elsewhere in the Christian highlands), women also spent a lot of time carrying water and washing clothes.⁹ The role of nurses for infants, a theme in hagiographies, has been pointed out by Steven Kaplan.¹⁰ A specific kind of cultural labor performed by women in medieval Christian Ethiopia was scarification of infants, both boys and girls. As Alvares again relates,

There are here women who are very skilful at making these marks. They make them in this way: they take a clove of garlic, large and moist, and place it on the corner of the eye (or wherever else they want to make the mark); with a sharp knife they cut round the garlic, and then with the fingers widen the cut, and put upon it a little paste of wax, and over the wax another paste of dough, and bandage it for one night with a cloth, and there remains for ever a mark.¹¹

These gendered forms of labor were, of course, not performed by all women: female elites did not perform manual labor at all, and scarification was doubtless a specialized skill reserved for a few.

Other customs that differentiated by gender, however, particularly regarding religion, did apply to (virtually) all women. Boys received the sacrament of baptism on the fortieth day after birth, while girls were baptized after eighty days.¹² Laymen and women were to occupy separate areas of the church during liturgical services, as was the case in all eastern Christian churches. King Zär'a Ya'əqob (1434-1468) emphasized the point in the *Book of the Light (Mäṣḥafä Bərhan)*, a series of homilies written on his order to be read aloud in church every Saturday and Sunday, specifying that “you [clerics] congregate on Saturday and Sunday in the church with the men and women (you who live near the church), and the men should stand on one side and the women on the other, where they should not see nor hear each other.”¹³ Alvares observed on several occasions that laity did not enter the church at all, but rather received communion at the church door or in the “circuit” (courtyard) before it.¹⁴ He considered this a general rule, with emphasis on women’s inability to enter churches, but it was probably simply a matter of some churches’ small size.¹⁵

There were, however, some religious spaces off-limits to women specifically. It is again Alvares who mentioned a church built by the *baḥər nägās* (the governor of the coastal Eritrean

⁹ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 251. Here Muslims and Christians lived together: *Some Records*, 62-64; Pankhurst, *Social History*, 67. (It also concerned the camps and female camp followers).

¹⁰ Steven Kaplan, “Seen but not Heard: Children and Childhood in Medieval Ethiopian Hagiographies,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, 3 (1997): 539-553, at 546.

¹¹ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 110.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1: 109. He wrongly stated that girls were baptized sixty days after birth. He also observed that “(before), the faith of their mother sufficed for them, and the communion which she received while in state of pregnancy.”

¹³ Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Il libro della luce*, I: 150 (text), II: 89 (trans).

¹⁴ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 82, 119, 125, 160-161; Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 405: “the place of the women (which is in the cloister or veranda, if the church has one, or if not then before reaching the first curtain, beyond which lay people cannot pass.)”

¹⁵ Though generally he describes “women and laity” standing at the church door, in one case (at Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 354) he describes male infants being brought into the church by their fathers, “because women cannot enter the church.” But it was an ordination ceremony for deacons, including very young boys: the fathers were certainly priests, entering the sanctuary. The mothers must therefore have been the priests’ wives, who like other laity would be excluded from the sanctuary space.

Herman, Margaux. "Chapter 13 Towards a History of Women in Medieval Ethiopia". In *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 365–394. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004419582_014

region) that was reserved for men, with the exception of his own wife and her accompanying maid, though women had a neighboring church for their exclusive use.¹⁶ Alvares too noted that no woman could reside next to the Church of Mary in the royal camp; the ‘*aqqabe sä‘at*’ being at that time (he reported) a married priest instead of the traditional monk, he could not live beside the church on account of his wife.¹⁷

Regarding education, the training supplied by the church for future priests was of course reserved for boys, usually sons of clerical families.¹⁸ Basic Christian instruction, however, was offered to laymen and laywomen, as the *Book of the Light* again prescribes:

The clerics are to instruct them [the laity (men and women separately)] in the worship of the Lord, His precepts and the observance of His Sabbaths. If their houses are far from the church, the cleric should go to them on Friday, and teach the men apart, in one shelter, while another cleric teaches the women in another shelter, so that they do not see or hear each other. During the rainy season, let it be done in a house.¹⁹

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Páez gave more details on education stating that “[...] each one as he wishes gives his child (boys) to some monk to be taught and pays him very well, and the monk [...] keeps them in his home. [...] (he) teaches them to read and sometimes to write.”²⁰ He also added that great lords chose a monk to teach both their sons and girls and lived at their houses. This monk accompanied them till he died or till they got married.²¹

Finally, circumcision was performed on both male and female children. Female circumcision was apparently common in medieval Ethiopia, for Zär’a Ya‘eqob addressed this issue at length in the *Book of the Light*. He began by noting that neighboring Muslim and “pagan” communities practiced it, and claimed that the Christian people of Təgray may have borrowed the practice from them.²² Rather than proscribe the custom itself as incompatible with Christianity, he condemned the “unlawful” way in which it was performed. Having effectively “Christianized” the ritual, he then offered a series of arguments based on the Bible to demonstrate the application of divine laws, including circumcision, to men and women both, and in general the equality of men and women before God. Linguistically, he argued that when Abraham is said to have circumcised all the “men” of his household (*Gen. 17*), the term “men” (*säb*’) meant “men and women,” and offered a number of other biblical cases in which the terms “men” or “household” must be understood to include

¹⁶ Ibid., 1: 118-119.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2: 444-445.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1: 120: “The sons of the priests are mostly priests, because in this country there are no schools, nor lecture-halls, nor masters to teach, and the clergy teach that little that they know to their sons.” See also Pankhurst, *Social History*, 3; Kaplan, “Seen but not Heard,” 548-549.

¹⁹ Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Il libro della luce*, II: 89; Marie-Laure Derat, “Les homélies du roi Zar’a Ya‘eqob: La communication d’un souverain éthiopien au XV^e siècle,” in *L’écriture publique du pouvoir*, ed. A. Bresson, A.-M. Cocula, and C. Pebarthe (Bordeaux, 2005), 51-52.

²⁰ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 221.

²¹ Ibid., 1: 222.

²² Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Il libro della luce*, I: 151-2 (text), II: 90 (trans); Marie Laure Derat, “La circoncision et l’excision en Éthiopie du XV^e au XVIII^e siècle: lectures d’un rituel,” *Afriques* (online journal) 1 (2010), put online 15 April 2010; <http://journals.openedition.org/afriques/415>.

both sexes. He also argued for the essential equality of the sexes before God: “will not the soul of the sinful woman, if she has been baptized, stand before God and be recompensed in accordance with its deeds?” Thus not only circumcision but “every law and every rule that has been given to men has been given to women” as well.²³

Whether or not female circumcision was indeed limited, among Christians, to those of Təgray in the mid-fifteenth century, it appears to have been widely practiced in the early sixteenth. Alvares observed that “circumcision is done by anybody without any ceremony, only they say that so they find it written in the books, that God commanded circumcision. And let not be the reader of this be amazed – they also circumcise the females as well as the males, which was not in the Old Law.”²⁴ Half a century later, in 1555, King Gälawdewos reversed Zär’a Ya’əqob’s Christianizing interpretation of male and female circumcision in the face of Catholic critiques, justifying it rather as a custom that had no link with religion.²⁵

Scrutinizing Ethiopian hagiographies, Steven Kaplan has noticed that medieval women faced gendered health issues related to pregnancy, miscarriage and death while delivering and emphasized the importance attached to the problem of women’s barrenness.²⁶

Though barred from the priesthood²⁷, women could participate to the religious sphere as nuns. Research on medieval nuns (*mäbällät(at)*, lit. “widows,” or *dānagäl*, “virgins”) is quite limited, but what evidence may be gathered in a preliminary way suggests that, as for women generally, there existed a general principle of gender equality that coexisted with some practices of gender differentiation. Marina Fluche and Joachim Persoon depict, in a timeless way, monasteries as “a mimesis of the Garden of Eden before the Fall,” where “monks and nuns together constitute a ‘holy gender’ in which biological sex is ultimately of little importance.”²⁸ The *Life* of Saint Täklä Haymanot claim that monks and nuns lived together without sin, and only after his death (c. 1313) began to live in separate spaces.²⁹ The testimony of Alvares in the sixteenth century is more nuanced. Speaking of the region of the *Baḥər nägaš*, he wrote that “nuns are not cloistered, nor do they live together in convents, but in villages, and in the monasteries of the monks, as they belong to those houses and to that order. [...] With regards to entering churches and monasteries, the nuns do not enter except as women do.”³⁰ His later, more precise description of a monastery in

²³ Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Libro della luce*, I: 152-163 (text), II: 90-96 (trans).

²⁴ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 109.

²⁵ Derat, “La circoncision,” 6; Edward Ullendorff, ed. and trans., “The *Confessio Fidei* of King Claudius of Ethiopia,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 32, 1 (1987): 159-176, at 173.

²⁶ Steven Kaplan, “The Ethiopian cult of the saints: A preliminary investigation,” *Paideuma* 32 (1986): 1-13, at 7; idem, “Seen but not Heard,” 542-543; idem, “The Social and Religious Function of the Eucharist in Medieval Ethiopia,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 19 (2003): 7-18, at 12. Recently Mersha Alehegne has studied with more details the problem of infertility as part of an interest in the childhood of saints: see Mersha Alehegne, “Regularity and Uniformity in the Ethiopian Hagiographical Tradition: A Particular Focus on Narrating the Childhood of Saints,” *Aethiopica* 18 (2015): 145-162, at 146-150.

²⁷ Today, women are also excluded from the chanting service, which does not require ordination, but they can write and teach *qane*. See Fisseha Tadesse, “The representation of Jesus: reflecting attitudes of masculinity in the Ethiopian theological tradition,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, 1 (June 2002): 67-87, at 82-86; Cressida Marcus, “Preface,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 35, 1 (June 2002): 2-8, at 6-7.

²⁸ Marina Fluche and Joachim Persoon, “Nunneries,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 1206-1209, at 1206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1207.

³⁰ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 126.

Angot suggests what he had in mind. “The monks have their dwelling above the cavern [where the monastery is located], entirely enclosed, and they go down to the monastery by a single path. The nuns have their dwelling below the cavern, they are not enclosed, they live upon the slope of the mountain.”³¹ Monks and nuns worked the land together and presumably shared the monastery space located between their dwellings, but their dwellings were separate. Such may have been the arrangement at the major Ewostatean monasteries, which in the fifteenth century hosted or oversaw female communities totaling over a thousand nuns.³² Däbrä Libanos of Šäwa also had an associated female community from the fourteenth or fifteenth century.³³ Concerning the region of the *Bahār nägaš* above, Alvares mentioned that nuns might also live in villages, like the laywomen, and gives a fuller description of the town of Defarfo.³⁴ Alvares tended to emphasize the absence of female claustration, perhaps because it was surprising to a European, but in fact neither monks nor nuns were strictly cloistered in medieval Ethiopia³⁵ and more research is certainly required on this subject to reach a detailed conclusion. Either sex could follow the *qʷərit* form of monasticism, living in individual dwellings, either in the “wilderness” or in towns. Both sexes could travel freely: nuns, like monks, participated in pilgrimage, and are recorded in the Ethiopian diasporic communities in Cairo and Jerusalem.³⁶

Male and female monastic lifestyles were also very similar. Monks and nuns wore the same habits, “which are full, and reach to the ground [either] yellow habits of coarse cotton stuff [or] habits of tanned goatskins like wide breeches, also yellow,” though monks also wore a cape.³⁷ Monks and nuns worked the land identically, and apparently together, digging and sowing; in towns, both sold merchandise at the market fairs.³⁸ They also observed the same prayers and strict fasts.³⁹ Though the ritual for taking the monastic vow, preserved in a manuscript dated to the late fourteenth to mid-fifteenth century, was different for women (including, for instance, the shaving of the female initiate’s head), it is not clear whether any difference in status was implied by the distinction in rite.⁴⁰ It should also be noted that our knowledge of the social background of nuns is

³¹ Ibid., 1: 201.

³² Däbrä Bizän administered three nunneries, with a total of 1146 nuns: Fluche and Persoon, “Nunneries,” 1207.

³³ Denis Nosnitsin, “Krastos Šämra,” in *EAE* 3 (2007): 443-445, at 443-444.

³⁴ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 188-189.

³⁵ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 221-222.

³⁶ See the essay by Samantha Kelly in this volume.

³⁷ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 126.

³⁸ Ibid., 1: 201 (farming), 1:126 (as merchants).

³⁹ Alvares described Queen Eleni (whose life will be detailed below) as keeping the fasts prescribed for monks and nuns. Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 394-5. Contemporary studies on Ethiopian monasticism showed that there is less emphasis on sexual segregation and gender differentiation than in Western monastic traditions. Monks had to “fulfill some women’s roles and cultivate non-masculine traits and behavior” as well as the “spiritual struggles [that exhibit] all the masculine virtues of a military general.” They still find that “women reject their femininity and must metaphorically become male, in order to approach the holy gender.” See Marta Camilla Wright, “At the limits of sexuality: the femininity of Ethiopian Orthodox nuns,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, 1 (June 2002): 27-42; Joachim Persoon, “The Ethiopian monk: a changing concept of masculinity,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, 1 (June 2002): 43-65, at 45, 51, 52.

⁴⁰ Denis Nosnitsin, “Šər’atä mənkwəsənnä,” in *EAE* 4 (2010), 634-636, at 634-635. Though the female rite seems to lack mention of the bestowal of the tunic and girdle, these may have been understood as implicit from the preceding male rite: Zena Maryam’s female disciple received both from the abbot when she took her vow (Verena Böll, “Zena Maryam,” in *EAE* 5 (2014): 179-180, at 179). The prayers spoken for funeral rites (for all persons) differed by

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almost nil: only a very few, by definition exceptional, are known to us, such as the abbess Zir Ganela (fourteenth or early fifteenth century), (“the mother of many nuns”). Her community was associated with a well-established monastic community and she provided food and shelter to strangers and travellers.⁴¹ As Heldman and Kaplan noticed, she was an abbess from the ruling class, as was the common pattern of male monastic leadership. Her identification with the daughter of King Säyfa Ar‘ad (1363-1371), who took the monastic vow under the name of Barbara in the monastery of Däbrä Daret in Bägemdər, is doubtful. Heldman enhances instead her relations with Dəl Mängəsa, the daughter of King Dawit II.⁴²

When it came to achieving the status of sainthood, however, very few women were so honored. Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke’s survey of 202 extant Ethiopian Christian hagiographies from all periods includes only nine dedicated to women saints.⁴³ Selamawit Mecca, considering this corpus as a whole, has called attention to the gendered features of female saints’ experience and representation.⁴⁴ While male saints usually came from poor backgrounds, female saints generally came from elite or wealthy families and had received some education. Secondly, where male saints usually fled from marriage, women saints had generally been married and borne children before becoming nuns (as did the known abbesses). This highlights that virginity was less valued as a feature of female holiness than achieving God’s will of “multiplication,”⁴⁵ and may relate to the particular attention to female saints’ bodies, especially regarding fertility and menstruation.

It is difficult to assess these general characteristics as they apply specifically to the Middle Ages, for our statistical sample is small and quite heterogeneous. There are only three women saints who lived before 1550: Zena Maryam and Krəstos Šämra⁴⁶ and the Zagwe queen Mäsqał Kəbra,⁴⁷ wife of King Lalibala (late 12th century - after 1225). In terms of social

gender as well as age and religious status, and were therefore also slightly different for nuns compared to monks: see Tedros Abraha, “Gənzät: Mäšhafä Gənzät,” in *E Ae* 2 (2005), 748-749.

⁴¹ Most information is found in the colophon of an illuminated manuscript of the Four Gospels (New York, The Morgan Library [formerly Pierpont Morgan Library], M.828), commissioned for an unnamed monastery where she was abbess. She is also mentioned in the *Gädlä Aron mankrāwi*: Marilyn E. Heldman, “Zir Ganela,” in *E Ae* 5 (2014), 192-194.

⁴² Sylvain Grébaud, “Note sur la princesse Zir-Gānēlā,” *Journal asiatique* 213 (1928): 141-145; Heldman, “Zir Ganela,” 192.

⁴³ Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke, “Bibliography of the Ethiopic Hagiographical Traditions,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, 2 (1975): 57–102. Selamawit Mecca added “Ema Wolete, Ema Shenkor and Mekbite Dəngəl”: see “Women in Ethiopic Hagiographies,” in *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Svein Ege et al. (Trondheim, 2009), 1365-1374, at 1367.

⁴⁴ Selamawit Mecca, “Hagiographies,” 161-166. Mersha Alehegne, looking for regularity and uniformity in the hagiographical traditions concerning the childhood of saints, finds that references to infertility, prophecy/vision and old child patterns applied to both male and female saints. See Alehegne, “Regularity and Uniformity,” 145-162.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

⁴⁶ Nosnitsin, “Krəstos Šämra,” 443-445; Enrico Cerulli, ed. and trans., *Atti di Krestos Samrā* (Louvain, 1956); EMMML ms. 5350, 8517, 8752 not catalogued. Böll, “Zena Maryam,” 179-180.

⁴⁷ For her *Life* see Stanisław Kur, ed., “Édition d’un manuscrit de la Bibliothèque vaticane: Cerulli 178 (Actes de la reine Masqał Kebra),” *Memorie della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 8th ser., 16, 7 (1972): 383–426. Two other unpublished and unstudied manuscripts of her life are preserved, at Gännätä Maryam church near Lalibäla and at ‘Aqäbä Särabt at Aksum: see Zelleke, “Bibliography,” 84. See also her commemoration in the Synaxary: Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, ed. and trans., *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1928; repr. Hildesheim, 1976), at [vol](#): 1075, 1167.

background, Mäsqäl Kəbra was of the highest rank, by birth and marriage, and Krəstos Šämra's family was wealthy, but Zena Maryam's social origins are unknown. Krəstos Šämra fits the template of a wife and mother (of eight) who left her family to become a nun, but Zena Maryam either fled a planned marriage or fled her husband shortly after they were wed, according to two different versions of her *Life*.⁴⁸ Mäsqäl Kəbra is the very rare case of a "lay" saint who never renounced her family to become a nun. She, however, must be understood in the context of the sanctification of the Zag^we dynasty as a whole.⁴⁹ She is therefore depicted in her own and her husband's *Life* as a model wife to her equally saintly husband.⁵⁰

Mäsqäl Kəbra's foundation of and/or patronage to churches was an activity shared by later women saints, but also, as we shall see, by women of elite status, generally: one is tempted to surmise that, were she not a Zag^we queen, it would not have stood out as a mark of sainthood.⁵¹ What distinguished the other two medieval women as saints was the extreme asceticism with which they aspired to match the most venerated male saints. Krəstos Šämra, in a clear emulation of Saint Täklä Haymanot, spent three years standing in a pit surrounded by iron "thorns," and another three years standing in Lake Ṭana being eaten by fishes. Zena Maryam lived for decades in a cave eating only herbs and uncooked grain, and, in an explicit effort to transcend her gender, asked God to stop her menstrual flow. Both had female disciples and followers, though male monks were evidently involved in their training. The miracles performed in their lifetimes, as Selamawit Mecca has noted of female saints generally, were accomplished through their prayers but by male agents, human or angelic.⁵² After death, however, female saints performed miracles (usually the curing of illness) at their burial sites just as male saints did.⁵³

Women and Social Status

A second lens through which to approach medieval Ethiopian women is social status. The *kätäma*, the itinerant royal court or camp, having been described in both Ethiopian and foreign sources, provides a convenient means to survey women's places in them. As Deresse Ayenachew has shown, the study of the royal camp reveals the roles, activities, and social "place" of the people living in it, closely linked to their physical disposition in the compound with its concentric enclosures.⁵⁴ At the very center of the camp was the king, in the first or innermost enclosure. The second enclosure was assigned to members of the royal family and to high officials, with their

⁴⁸MS Gädlä Zena Maryam, Qwäraša Wälättä Pētros, Lake Ṭana; MS BnF d'Abbadie 14 (Enrico Cerulli, trans., "Gli atti di Zēnā Māryām: monaca etiopica del secolo XIV," *RSO* 21 (1946): 122–156.

⁴⁹ On this see especially the works of Marie-Laure Derat: *L'énigme d'une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d'Éthiopie, XI^e-XIII^e siècle* (Turnhout, 2018); her essay in this volume; and with Stanisław Kur, "Mäsqäl Kəbra," in *EAE* 3 (2007), 844–845.

⁵⁰ See note 47 above and, for Lalibala's *Life*, Jules Perruchon, ed. and trans., *Vie de Lalibala, roi d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1892).

⁵¹ She is remembered at Lalibāla as the founder of the church of Abba Libanos, which is corroborated by medieval textual evidence. See the essay of Marie-Laure Derat in this volume.

⁵² Mecca, "Hagiographies," 164–165.

⁵³ Nosnitsin, "Krəstos Šämra;" Böll, "Zena Maryam."

⁵⁴ Deresse Ayenachew, "Le *kätäma*: la cour et le camp royal en Éthiopie (XIV^e-XVI^e siècle). Espace et pouvoir" (Ph.D diss., Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2009).

families and attendants; the third was for the common people, including the “staff” of various offices, the soldiers, cooks, food provisioners, and so on.

It has been hypothesized that the population of the royal camp probably included more women than men.⁵⁵ Most women did the same sorts of household labor described above, especially in relation to food preparation.⁵⁶ Some women lived in the area of the wine sellers and bakers, and may have been such merchants themselves, or their wives.⁵⁷ Yet another group were wealthy courtesans or prostitutes⁵⁸, called *amaritas*, who followed the camp. Alvares described them as living apart from the rest of the camp, near the lodging of strangers who came to “sell, buy and trade with the Prester’s court;” they were very numerous and most (an “immense number”) were “rich and well dressed.”⁵⁹

Below the social level of these (free) women were the enslaved. Non-Christians from neighboring societies acquired by capture or purchase, they could be kept in slavery even if subsequently baptized, as could their children, and were owned at social levels ranging from the richer peasantry upward.⁶⁰ (Muslim Ethiopians, similarly, kept non-Muslims as slaves, generally followers of local religions but also Christians.)⁶¹ Such enslaved people, including and perhaps predominantly women., were doubtless employed to aid in the laborious tasks of hauling, grinding, and washing that were women’s province.

Elite women lived in the second enclosure. The most elite were of course the king’s wives, whose tents were arranged according to a precise hierarchy. Until the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508-1540), virtually all kings (Lalibala seems to have been an exception) practiced polygyny, having up to five official wives (*bə’asitat*) as well as concubines (*əqubat*). Royal wives all bore the title “ite” or “nəgəśt” (“queen”) in medieval sources, and were thus distinguished from the concubines (*əqubat*) who received neither title nor regnal name.⁶² However, the sons of both wives and concubines were eligible to the crown. Each queen also received a specific title, probably during a particular ceremony, as attested in the chronicle of Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434-1468) and in a few

⁵⁵ Pankhurst, *Social History*, 68-70; Minale Adugna, *Women and warfare in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2001), 6.

⁵⁶ Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records*, 78.

⁵⁷ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 445. It is still yet not sure if these women were engaged in this type of activities.

⁵⁸ Richard Pankhurst, “The History of Prostitution in Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 12, 2 (1974): 159-160.

⁵⁹ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 443. In the *Mäṣḥafä Bərhan* the word ስቅብተ (“concubine,” lit.

“guarded”) has been translated as “prostitute,” probably in an improper manner (Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Libro della luce*, I: 91).

⁶⁰ Habtamu Tegegne, “The Edict of King Gälawdewos Against the Illegal Slave Trade in Christians: Ethiopia, 1548 –Featured Source,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, 2 (2016): 73-114; Marie-Laure Derat, “Chrétien et musulmans d’Éthiopie face à la traite et à l’esclavage aux XV^e et XVI^e siècles,” in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l’océan Indien*, ed. Henri Médard et al. (Paris, 2013), 121-148.

⁶¹ After battles or raids, Christian women were enslaved, sometimes married to soldiers or officers and converted to Islam: see Amélie Chekroun, “Le *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*: Écriture de l’histoire, guerre et société dans le Bar Sa’ad ad-Dīn (Éthiopie, XVI^e siècle),” (Ph.D diss., Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013), 364-368.

⁶² Perruchon, *Histoire des guerres*, 61-63, 155-159; English translation in G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Glorious Victories of ‘Āmda Seyōn King of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 1965), here at 55, 83.

juridical texts⁶³: *qäññ bä 'altiḥat*⁶⁴ (“queen of the right”), *gər̥ra bä 'altiḥat* (usually translated as “queen of the left”), *bä 'altä šəḥna* (or *ḥašəḥna*) (to be understood as “the favorite”)⁶⁵, *(yä)gälägäl gäzet*, and *wäšärbat gäzet*.⁶⁶ Each queen had her own tents, whose location depended on her rank.⁶⁷ A text known as the “Order of the Banquet” (*Šər 'atä gəbr*) confirmed this hierarchy. To the right of the king’s tents were the tents of the mother of the king (*aše ənnat*). She took care of his children, which gave her a specific role and reverence at court. The king’s mother, his children and the *'aqqabe sä 'at* were the only persons allowed to settle so close to the king. Next to her, were the two *ite gälägäl gäzet* and *wäšärbat gäzet*. The tents of the queen of the right (*qäññ bä 'altiḥat*), the principal queen at court, were also on the right side of the king’s tent. The quarters of the queen of the left were directly opposite, on the left side of the king’s tents. Finally, the “favorite” (*ite bä 'altä šəḥna*) . lived behind the queen of the right, who “mentored” her.⁶⁸ A specific official guarded the royal women.⁶⁹ All queens participated in the organization of the royal banquets and the food provision of the royal camp.⁷⁰ The rank of each queen determined how much she contributed to the royal banquet, which conversely reflected her position at court. Finally, the two main queens were in charge of the *kätäma*, or of a part of it, when the king was away, alongside the *gər̥ra bəhtwäddäd* as a male guarantor of royal authority.⁷¹ In sum, women’s location within the *kätäma* revealed their position in society and their daily activities: while women of the third enclosure did household duties, queens were given honors and responsibilities according to their rank. A deeper look in medieval hagiographies should also reveal social differences between the lower class and elites regarding their “forced” contributions and donations to churches and monasteries, whatever the gender of the benefactor.⁷²

⁶³In the *Šər 'atä gəbr* and in a legislative text written in 1448/1449 on the food supplies of the clergy of the royal camp's church dedicated to Mary. See Manfred Kropp, “The *Ser 'ata Gebr*: A Mirror View of Daily Life at the Ethiopian Royal Court in the Middle Ages,” *Northeast African Studies* 10 (1988): 51-87; idem, “‘Antiquae restitutio legis.’ Zur Alimentation des Hofklerus und einer Zeugenliste als imago imperii und notitia dignitatum in einer Urkunde des Kaisers Zär'a Ya'qob im Condaghe der Hs. BM Or. 481, fol. 154,” *Scrinium* 1 (2005): 115-147, at 132.

⁶⁴It was probably already used by King Lalibala as his wife was *bä 'altä biḥat*, and during the reign of 'Amdä Šəyon I for queen Bəlen Säba : Kropp, “‘Antiquae restitutio,’” 132. In the *Šər 'atä gəbr*, it is written variously as *bähaliyat*, *bä 'altiyat* and *bä 'altiḥat*: Kropp, “The *Ser 'ata Gebr*,” 58.

⁶⁵These titles probably replaced the “aged” and “young” queen of 'Amdä Šəyon (Perruchon, *Histoire des guerres*, 156), perhaps showing the adaptation of titles from Gə'əz to Amharic. The office of the “aged” queen was also probably doubled to make the queens “of the right” and “of the left,” as happened for the *bəhtwäddäd* during the reign of Zär'ä Ya'əqob: see Herman, “Reines,” 90-95, and Manfred Kropp, “Réédition des chroniques éthiopiennes: perspectives et premiers résultats,” *Abbay* 12 (1983-1984): 57-58.

⁶⁶Herman, “Rethinking,” 166-168; eadem, “Reines,” 86-92.

⁶⁷Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” part. 1, ch. 1; Herman, “Reines,” 108-112; eadem, “Rethinking,” 167.

⁶⁸Perruchon, *Histoire des guerres*, 156-158. Kropp, “The *Ser 'ata Gebr*,” 61.

⁶⁹“Now he [Abba Azerata] is chief guardian of the Prester John’s sisters”: Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 449. Other officers (like *raq massäre*) worked for the queens, but no studies have been undertaken: see Kropp, “The *Ser 'ata Gebr*,” 81-87.

⁷⁰Kropp, “The *Ser 'ata Gebr*,” 51-87; Marie-Laure Derat, “Le banquet à la cour du roi d'Éthiopie au XV^e siècle. Dons forcés et contreparties,” *Hypothèses* 1 (2001): 267-274; “Le banquet royal en Ethiopie au XV^e siècle: fiscalités et festivités,” in *Cuisine et Société en Afrique: histoires, saveurs, savoir-faire*, ed. Monique Chastanet, François-Xavier Fauvelle, and Dominique Juhé-Beaulaton (Paris, 2002), 41-52; Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” 14-21, 34; Herman, “Reines,” 101-114.

⁷¹Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” ch. 5; Perruchon, *Histoire des guerres*, 130.

⁷²Kaplan, “The Ethiopian Cult of the Saints,” 5, 9.

Dress could also distinguish women according to their age, marital status, wealth, and probably region as well. In mid-fifteenth-century Təgray, unmarried young women dressed in such a way that their breasts remained partially exposed, a practice Zär'a Ya'əqob condemned, but that had not been abandoned some seventy years later when Alvares observed it.⁷³ Alvares also noted the use of strips of oxhide to cover the genitals, which Almeida, in the seventeenth century, explained as a recourse of poor women who could not afford woven clothes.⁷⁴ Foreign witnesses of the early seventeenth century identified cotton wraps as the usual clothing of common people, whereas the elites, especially women, wore silk and brocade in bright colors.⁷⁵ This was doubtless true in earlier centuries as well. Casthanoso described Queen Säblä Wängel in 1541 as “covered to the ground with silk, with a large rowing cloak... and a burnoose of black satin, with flowers and fringes of very fine gold, like a cloak, her head dressed in the Portuguese manner, and so muffled in a very fine cloth that only her eyes could be seen.”⁷⁶

The conspicuous display that queens could perform, and the hierarchies that placed status above gender in certain contexts, are well illustrated by Castanhoso's description of this same queen riding out with her entourage on muleback:

After the Queen had descended with her women and servants (of the women there were about thirty, and of the men fifty) she and her ladies mounted the mules which were at the foot of the hill, which the Barnaguais [*baḥər nägaś*] had sent her.... The Barnaguais, lord of that country, walked on foot naked to the waist, with a lion or tiger's skin on his shoulders as a covering, with the right arm exposed, and he led her by the bridle; for it is the custom, whenever the Preste or his Queen makes a state entry, for the lord of the land to lead them by the bridle in the manner I describe, as a sign of submission.... They [two *azzaž*] accompanied the Queen, one on one side and the other on the other, near her, with their hands on the mule; the Queen rode on a saddle with a low pommel... but so covered with her garments that no one could see the manner of her sitting, and her ladies all riding properly on mules muffled in their cloaks.⁷⁷

This manner of riding, with two *azzaž* (military officials) holding the bridle, was the custom for royal women. Both it and typical queenly dress in the fifteenth century are well represented in a miniature of the Zag^we queen Amätä Lə'ul, the wife of King Yəmrəḥannä Əgzi', executed in 1453 (see pl. VI in this volume, p. XXX).⁷⁸

While the foregoing has focused principally on social-economic status, marital status was another important determinant of women's experience. It was certainly closely related to age, for marriages were contracted quite young: the unmarried, therefore, were generally girls or quite

⁷³ Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Libro della luce*, I: 98 (text), II: 165 (trans.); Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 171.

⁷⁴ Cited in Pankhurst, *Ethiopian Women*, 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 1-2; Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records*, 60-61.

⁷⁶ Whiteway, *Casthanoso*, 18. Twenty years before, Alvares produced a similar but shorter description of the queen of Hadiyya: Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 427.

⁷⁷ Whiteway, *Casthanoso*, 17-19.

⁷⁸ Alessandro Bausi, “Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea (I),” *RSE* 38 (1994): 13-69, at 45. It is found in a manuscript of the *Gädlä Säma 'ətat* (MS 2) of the monastery of Däbrä Maryam in Q^wähayn. It differs from Castanhoso's description in revealing her face.

young women.⁷⁹ It is therefore not terribly surprising that in certain court ceremonies, after the dignitaries (male and female, according to rank) had been served, the order of precedence placed lay men before married women, and (young) unmarried women last.⁸⁰ In Christian religious life, too, as we have seen, the value placed on procreation over virginity seems to have privileged married or formerly married women, over the unmarried. Chastity is however emphasized in hagiographies of both men and women.⁸¹ Indeed, only unmarried, women (*mä'aseb*) were forbidden from entering a church while menstruating. Zär'a Ya'eqob extensively cites on this point the *Testament of Our Lord (Mäṣḥäfä Kidan)*, an ancient pseudo-apostolic work that gained great influence in Ethiopia in the later Middle Ages, emphasizing that the proscription was not because menstruation rendered the young women contaminated but rather “out of reverence for the place of sacrifice.” A menstruating virgin should nonetheless fast, wash, and pray at the appropriate times, and during the Mass should stand within sight of the church; “and if she is not separated from love for the church, and [though] being far from it in body, enters it in her soul, it will be as if she entered and took the body and blood of Christ” – in other words, her efforts would be equivalent to receiving communion.⁸²

As for marriage itself, different wedding rituals⁸³ were possible in (or in the vicinity of the church), in an open space or at court. The locations of the ritual changed depending on the status of the bridegroom (a deacon, a layman, a king's kin).⁸⁴ In theory, all these rituals created an indissoluble bond; divorce was impossible, so was remarriage. Alvares described at least two type ceremonies and Páez added details.⁸⁵ The latter noticed that the church ceremony, that includes a commune communion after the mass and the blessing of the clergy, was mainly performed by priests and *däbtäras*. A priest could only get married before his ordination to a virgin (not a widow), which implied early marriages and more respect towards marital law. As he could enter inside the church, he received his deacon's vestments, made his vow to the altars and after his communion, priests “take the communion to her (the bride) at the church door and he (the bridegroom) gives her the blood.” The spouses were then carried by priests till the vicinity of the church and relayed by laymen to their house. He also stated that only a few laymen got married in church, or asked for blessing which they received at “the vicar's house” or “sometimes the vicar also goes to the couple's house.” After both types of ceremony, the bride stayed within her marital home with a black veil over her face for five or six months, or less if she became pregnant.⁸⁶ Páez put into doubt both ceremonies (outside the church and at the door of the church by the *abunä*) observed by Alvares. To him, they might have been “deliberately” orchestrated in such way, or changed, for he was “not able to find anyone to confirm such a custom.”⁸⁷ All told, the main

⁷⁹ Antonella Brita, “Marriage: Early marriage,” in *EAE* 5 (2014), 418-421.

⁸⁰ The sequence for baptism at *Tämqät*, as reported in one manuscript of Alvares's account, was metropolitan, king, queen, priests, deacons, laymen, married women, virgins.; Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 345 and quotation 3.

⁸¹ Steven Kaplan, “Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia,” *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 107-123, at 116; idem, “The Social and Religious Function,” 12.

⁸² Conti Rossini-Ricci, *Libro della luce*, I: 142-145 (text), II: 84-86 (trans).

⁸³ Pankhurst, *Social History*, 45.

⁸⁴ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 405-406.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1: 405; Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 107, 119-120; 2: 354, 511.

⁸⁶ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 405: “after ten or thirty days”; 1: 106.

⁸⁷ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 407 (especially the description of cutting the hair of the bride and bridegroom).

differences seem to be that weddings performed in church implied a shared communion⁸⁸ which might explain why only few people chose it (except peasants, elders and priests), and the seal of a contract⁸⁹ indicating the terms of the union and of the separation, which might be surprising if we consider marriage as an indissoluble bound.

However, the frequent divorces of the elite were a source of scandal to European visitors, and were seen as a common practice.⁹⁰ Páez noticed that marriages could be easily dissolved before the king's judges or even by the *abunä* himself for any kind of complaint (greed, sadness, physical abuse, being dishonored in public...).⁹¹ If the two parties agreed, they shared equally the common properties they had acquired (probably after wed), if they disagreed, the one who wanted to leave took nothing or if there was a contract, a penalty was to be paid by the guilty party (man or woman) according to its terms.⁹² Both parties could then remarry. The bride then left the home, implying that patrilocal living arrangements were observed.⁹³ In cases of adultery, Páez noticed that Ethiopians, interpreting the words of Matt. 5, believed they did not need a judge and could separate and remarry as they wished.⁹⁴

Though few studies have explored women's rights over property and inheritance specifically in the Middle Ages, it seems that women, like men, kept their properties (*g^welt* or *räst*) that they gained or inherited and retained their right over it.⁹⁵ Therefore, undeniably, wives retained their individual social and legal identities in marriage, including their pre-marital names and land rights.⁹⁶ Personal preferences may have played a role in the frequency of elite divorce, but the major stimulus was doubtless the opportunity to play and replay one's cards in the game of marriage alliance.⁹⁷ In fact, Ethiopian elites of all religions used dynastic alliances, both within

Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 106. For Emmanuel Fritsch, the ritual performed by the metropolitan seen by Alvares, corresponds to the Ethiopian ritual in its present form, translated in the seventeenth century from the ceremony described by the fifteenth-century Patriarch Gabriel V of Alexandria. For Fritsch, "the rites are far older than the prayers, which go back to the late medieval period only": see his "Matrimony," in *EAE* 3 (2007), 869-873, at 870.

⁸⁸ It is believed that a married person may not receive Holy Communion unless his or her spouse also receives: Fritsch, "Matrimony," 869.

⁸⁹ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 107.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 106; *Some Records*, 65-66.

⁹¹ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 403-404.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1: 186, 403-404; Pankhurst, *Social history*, 69; Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 107. Gorgoryos, the informant of Hiob Ludolf, stated that the offending party gives his or her goods to the other; if the divorce was by mutual agreement, the goods were divided equally: see Hiob Ludolf, *Ad suam Historiam Aethiopicam antehac editam Commentarius* (Frankfurt, 1691), 440.

⁹³ Pankhurst, *Social history*, 70.

⁹⁴ Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 403-404.

⁹⁵ On the equal share of properties of the mother of Ləbnä Dəngəl between the king and his two uterine sisters, see Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 409. See also Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL, 2000), 23-49; Habtamu M. Tegege, "Land Tenure and agrarian social structure in Ethiopia, 1693-1900" (Ph.D diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), 65-66, 74-76, 78-80; Anaïs Wion, *Paradis*.

⁹⁶ Pankhurst, *Social History*, 69.

⁹⁷ Richard Pankhurst was a pioneer of the subject. See "Ethiopian dynastic marriage and the Béta Esra'él (or Falashas)," *Africa. Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 52, 3 (September 1997): 445-454; idem, "Dynastic Inter-Marriage in Medieval and Post-Medieval Ethiopia," in *Ethiopia*

and outside their own religious group.⁹⁸ (In the case of interfaith marriages, it was usually the woman who took the religion of her husband.)⁹⁹ Wealthy men were allowed to have multiple wives but then forbidden to enter in churches.

Unlike the merely wealthy, who might marry multiple wives but were then barred from the church,¹⁰⁰ medieval Christian kings suffered no penalty for the polygyny through which they created multiple regional alliances simultaneously. Clergy criticized some kings' matrimonial practices, like ʿAmdä Šəyon (1314-1344) and his son,¹⁰¹ but more for marrying within the prohibited degrees than for polygyny. Yet apart from King Lalibala, whose *Life* (written centuries after his death) celebrate his monogamy and performance of the religious wedding ceremony,¹⁰² no evidence has been found to identify any religious royal marriage until King Ləbnä Dəngəl.¹⁰³ He and his successors opted instead for monogamy, performing the wedding ceremony and naming only one queen.¹⁰⁴ This evolution had consequences for the political status of the queens at court during the sixteenth century. There was now only one queen consort, whose title was simply *nəgəšt*. But there was also, still, the king's mother, and possibly also his grandmother – the queens consort of previous reigns – who were also *nəgəšt* (pl. *nəgəštat*). The title of *ətege* was therefore created and a new hierarchy established, to avoid intestine struggles at court.¹⁰⁵ The *ətege* retained her title for life and had the ascendancy over the other queens, notably in being designated regent in case of a royal minority. Säblä Wängel (d. 1567) was the first *ətege*, a title that she received when she was the king's "grandmother" at the end of her career.¹⁰⁶ The rules concerning the royal camp in journeys (*Šər'atä mangəšt*, III- 21, 22) also changed, from now on only including the *ətege* and the princesses.¹⁰⁷

A last mention should be made concerning a marriage custom that affected both men and

in broader perspective: papers of the 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Kyoto, 12-17 December 1997, 3 vols., ed. K. Fukui, E. Kurimoto, and M. Shigeta (Kyoto, 1997), at 1: 206-220.

⁹⁸ Herman, "Reines," 50-67; on the Muslim communities, see Chekroun, "Le *Futūḥ*," 160-161.

⁹⁹ Steven Kaplan "Marriage," in *EAE* 3 (2007): 793-797, at 793.

¹⁰⁰ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 1: 105.

¹⁰¹ Four hagiographies mention critiques of ʿAmdä Šəyon for having married his father's wife: see Huntingford, *Glorious Victories*, introduction, and Joanna Mantel-Niećko and Denis Nosnitsin, "ʿAmdä Šəyon I," in *EAE* 1 (2003), 227-229, at 228.

¹⁰² Perruchon, *La vie*, 96. Written during the fifteenth century, this text is a saintly hagiography.

¹⁰³ The ceremony was called *qəddəst sābsab* or "holy wedding" for Ləbnä Dəngəl: William Eliot Conzelman, ed. and trans., *Chronique de Galāwdəwos (Claudius), roi d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1895), 122-123. His son Minas (r. 1559-1563) married following the religious ritual, here called *šəlotä tāklil* or "prayer of coronation," as it still is today: see Manfred Kropp, ed. and trans., *Die Geschichte des Lebna Dengel, Claudius und Minās*, 2 vols., CSCO 503-504, SAe 83-84 (Louvain, 1988), at vol. 1 (text), 51. From the reign of Iyasu I till today, the *māšḥäfä tāklil* or "Book of the Coronation" is read during the ceremony: see Ignazio Guidi, ed. and trans., *Annales Iohannis I, Iyāsu I, Bakāffā. II*, 2 vols., CSCO, 2nd ser., 5 (Paris, 1905), repr. as CSCO 24-25, SAe 7-8 (Louvain, 1961), at vol 1 (text): 65-66.

¹⁰⁴ Some kings still kept concubines to get an heir to the throne: see Herman, "Rethinking," 149-162, 170-173; eadem, "Reines," 15-40.

¹⁰⁵ Taddesse Tamrat, "Problems of royal succession in fifteenth century Ethiopia: a presentation of the documents," in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma, 10 -15 April 1972)*, 2 vols., ed. Enrico Cerulli (Rome, 1974), 1: 518-526.

¹⁰⁶ Herman, "Rethinking," 172-174.

¹⁰⁷ The women being now only settled on the right side. Joseph Varenbergh, "Studien zur abessinischen Reichsordnung (*Šər'ata Mangešt*)," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Verwandte Gebiete* 30 (1915-16): 1-45, at 22-23 (text), 41-42 (trans.).

Herman, Margaux. "Chapter 13 Towards a History of Women in Medieval Ethiopia". In *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 365–394. doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004419582_014

women, from the lower class to the elite: that of arranged union. As shown above for elites, medieval hagiographies regularly mention that the “future saint” decided to become a monk to avoid a marriage orchestrated by his family. This implies that young men and women both had to follow their kinfolk’s wishes in terms of union.¹⁰⁸

In conclusion, marriage customs affected the lives of women who had to leave their homes to join their husband, whatever their social background. However, properties and goods were not put in common, except for the peasants for apparent practical reasons. Both elite men and women divorced and remarried easily, following their own interests and familial strategy. Finally, the evolution of royal matrimonial practices impacted the status of the queens at court and the choices of the royal wife. The multiple alliances of the Christian kings with regional leaders’ daughters were replaced. The king now chose his wife in his traditional Christian partners’ family, and princesses engaged with his former partners.¹⁰⁹ The transition to royal monogamy also influenced the creation of a new balance of power among the queens at court with the creation of the title of *atege*.

Women and Power: Structuring Archetypes

The women most accessible to us for scholarly study are, of course, those that have been remembered in texts and oral traditions – but those that are best remembered are usually surrounded by legends recounted century after century, which renders their historical analysis more difficult. Their representation in the collective memory is, however, indicative of the models or archetypes for women’s roles that medieval Ethiopian society created and maintained. A brief survey of several such women, all associated with dubious authority and with destructive (but also, implicitly, creative) political/military power, illustrates the point.

The feminine as a figure of arbitrary and destructive power has ancient historical substrates. In medieval Christian Ethiopia, she was incarnated in a tenth-century queen who wrought devastation on the Christian kingdom.¹¹⁰ Several more or less contemporary foreign authors mention her, offering complementary and convergent data: she was queen of the (still mysterious) people called in Arabic the Banī (or Banū) l-Ham(u)wīyā, she killed the Christian Ethiopian king and took over his kingdom, and destroyed the Christian churches.¹¹¹ For Marie-Laure Derat, the matching of sources, both Christian and Muslim, points to a “pagan” or local-religious counterassault against the Christian kingdom in an otherwise very obscure and scantily documented period.¹¹² Though no early-medieval Ethiopian texts are preserved that mention her,

¹⁰⁸ Kaplan, “Hagiographies and the History,” 116; idem, “Seen but not Heard,” 548, 550.

¹⁰⁹ Herman, “Rethinking,” 174-175.

¹¹⁰ Steven Kaplan, “Ḥsato,” in *EAE* 2 (2005), 376-377. Gianfranco Fiaccadori identified Ḥsato as a ruling queen of the Sidaama area of Bali: see his “Bāli,” *La Parola del Passato* 47 (1992): 439-445. See also James Quirin, “Maya,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 887-889.

¹¹¹ Enrico Cerulli, “L’Etiopia medievale in alcuni brani di scrittori arabi,” *RSE* 3 (1943): 272-276; Mohammed el-Chennafi, “Mention d’une ‘nouvelle reine éthiopienne’ au IV^e siècle de l’hégire/X^e siècle ap. JC.,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 10 (1976): 119-121.

¹¹² Marie-Laure Derat, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, and Bertrand Poissonnier, “La culture Shay, chaînon manquant de l’histoire éthiopienne,” in *La Culture Shay d’Éthiopie (X^e-XIV^e siècles). Recherches archéologiques et historiques sur une élite païenne*, ed. François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Poissonnier (Paris, 2012), 27-29, and Derat’s essay in this volume.

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in oral tradition, where she acquired the name Ḥsato or Gudit, her destruction of Christian monuments was associated with the downfall of ancient Aksum, and her reign a symbol of the “dark ages” between the glories of antiquity and the advent of the Zag^we dynasty. The posterity of this negative female figure – illegitimate, non-Christian, and destructive – is thus tremendous in the historiography.

Female figures analogous to Gudit/Ḥsato have been identified in two women held responsible for preventing the Solomonic dynasty’s rise to power for almost three centuries, to the benefit of the Zag^we kings. The first, Tərda’ Gäbäz, appears in some of the Ethiopian kings’ lists as the figure through whom kingship was transferred to the Zag^we dynasty.¹¹³ The second, Mäsobä Wärq, would be the daughter of the last post-Aksumite King, Dəlna’od. She is mentioned in the *Life* of Iyäsus Mo’a.¹¹⁴ In different ways, Ḥsato/Gudit, Tərda’ Gäbäz, and Mäsobä Wärq, all represent disruptions of the dynastic continuity that, according to the so-called Solomonic kings, rightly belonged to their lineage alone since the time of the biblical King Solomon.

Given the recurrence of this theme of destructive female power in Solomonic-era works, one may well ask whether it played a role in the Solomonids’ elaboration of their dynastic origin story itself. As is well known, the foundational text elaborating that story is the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, and the text’s legitimating cornerstone is the relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Bible’s brief mentions of their meeting had inspired a number of elaborations in the Jewish, Muslim, and Coptic traditions already in the earlier Middle Ages, which are drawn upon and added to (in ways still to be fully explored) in this long, complex work, completed in the 1320s. In the Gə’əz text, the queen, named Makədda,¹¹⁵ is of course Ethiopian, and upon returning to her homeland bears a son begotten by Solomon: thus is the Ethiopian monarchy inscribed into biblical history. When grown, the son (later called Mənilək) travels to Jerusalem to meet his father, who offers him rulership of Israel, but he chooses to return home, where his mother abdicates in his favor. (He takes the appropriate throne name David, or Dawit in Gə’əz). Of particular interest here is the passage in which Makədda announces her abdication to the kingdom’s officials:

‘Speak ye now, and swear ye by the heavenly Zion that ye will not make women queens or set them upon the throne of the kingdom of Ethiopia, and that no one except the male seed of David, the son of Solomon the King, shall ever reign over Ethiopia, and that ye will never make women queens.’ And all the nobles of the king’s house swore, and the governors and the councilors, and the administrators.¹¹⁶

After the composition of this work, no woman did take the throne in the Christian kingdom, even if some female regencies or *de facto* exercises of political power did occur. Makədda is thus a “good” queen, indeed a Solomonic archetype of ideal queenship, not least for surrendering power and entrusting it to her son and his male descendants, forever.

¹¹³ Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Tərda’ Gäbäz,” in *EAE* 5 (2014), 529-530.

¹¹⁴ Stuart Munro-Hay, “Dəlna’od,” in *EAE* 2 (2005), 129; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Zag^we,” in *EAE* 5 (2014), 107-114, at 110-111.

¹¹⁵ Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Makədda,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 672-674.

¹¹⁶ Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, trans., *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek...* (London, 1922), 147.

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The Christian kingdom was not the only Ethiopian society to present women as figures of cultural disruption. In Oromo traditions, particularly within the Guḡgi and the Booranaa, the queen Akko Manoye is described as a despotic ruler. She forced men to do domestic tasks; she also tasked her people with impossible duties, until a wise old man helped them to find a solution. Her downfall brought an end to the mythical time in which both men and women could pretend to the throne, to the evident benefit of men only.¹¹⁷ In the Sidaama communities, Queen Furra is described in the same narrative schemes. Therefore, these traditions are used in order to discourage women's aspiration to political empowerment.¹¹⁸

Though I have emphasized the destructive and/or disruptive character of most of these female figures, it is also possible to see some of their most characteristic activities in a constructive light. In many cases, their disruptions resulted in either being, or serving as conduits to, a socially exogenous element. Makadda was the "bridge" linking the people of Ethiopia to the Israelites, thus transforming the former into the new chosen people of God. An Aksumite princess's exogenous marriage to a Zagwe lord gave rise to the Zagwe royal dynasty, which, however usurping and illegitimate in Solomonic discourse, was also revered as holy. Ἀsato/Gudit was quite immune to any positive interpretation from a Christian standpoint, but her memory was doubtless so compelling because the encounter between Christians and followers of local religions was, in fact, one of the central dramas of the Christian kingdom's whole medieval history, and the subtext of its much-glorified territorial expansion. Queen Ἐleni, to whom I shall turn below, might be seen as Gudit's mirror image: the non-Christian royal woman who does not dominate and transform the Christian polity, but rather is absorbed and transformed by it. The marriage alliances in which elite and especially royal women were brokered, and which crossed regional, ethnic, linguistic and even confessional boundaries, were the mundane iterations of what these archetypal women represented: an always potentially threatening contact with the foreign, and in a context wholly about power and who could or should wield it. Indeed, even when marriage was not involved, royal women seem to have had a particular role as intermediaries with foreign rulers and dignitaries. In the fourteenth century, ḶAmdä Səyon's queen played this part between the king and his Muslim counterpart and antagonist, Ṣabr al-Dīn.¹¹⁹ In the sixteenth century, it is suggested by the contacts between Pero da Covilhao and Ἐleni¹²⁰ and between Casthanoso and Säblä Wängel.¹²¹ Women and especially queens were probably easier to access and meet than kings. For instance, they were privileged intermediaries for the people, high officials or enemies with the king.

In fact, women's role in connecting to the outer world is found in all Ethiopian cultures. Muslim and Christian traditions recount that the imam ḶAḡmad had a Christian father: his Muslim mother was therefore the link to the foreign world.¹²² In Muslim as in Christian Ethiopia, when the

¹¹⁷Dejene N. Debsu, "Gender and Culture in Southern Ethiopia, an Ethnographic Analysis of Guji-Oromo Women's Customary Rights," *African Study Monographs* 30, 1 (March 2009): 15-36.

¹¹⁸ Anbessa Teferra, "Furra," in *EAE* 2 (2005), 592.

¹¹⁹ Perruchon, *Histoire des guerres*, 132, 170-171.

¹²⁰ Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 459. He also got married to an Ethiopian, as other foreigners did before him, like Pietro Rambullo.

¹²¹ Whiteway, *Casthanoso*, 12-94.

¹²² For Christian tradition it explained the success of his conquest: see André Caquot, ed. and trans., "Histoire Amharique de Grāñ et des Galla," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 2 (1957): 123-143, at 124, 142; Carlo Conti Rossini, "Note etiopiche," *Giornale della Società asiatica italiana* 10 (1897): 150-153. The alleged Christian origin of the imam is

woman is the outsider who adopts and is absorbed into her new society, that society praises her.¹²³ The best-known example is the Christian Ethiopian slave known as Umm Ayman (Barakah, *rađī Allāhu ‘anhā* “May Allah be pleased with her”), who was the Prophet’s nurse.¹²⁴ She converted to Islam, and Muhammad considered her his second mother. In another register, Umm Ḥabība bint Abī Sufyān and Umm Salmā bint Abī Umayya, though they were from Arabia, are remembered for being members of the first Muslim hijra to Ethiopia. They are considered to be among the first of the Prophet’s disciples. After the deaths of their husbands, they married . the Prophet and returned to Arabia, where they told of the wonders of Aksum. They are viewed among Ġabarti communities as models for Ethiopian women and as their ancestors.¹²⁵

Women and Power: Some Historical Examples

The history of queens is often the first corner of medieval women’s history to be investigated thanks to the relative richness of the source material, and Ethiopia is no exception. Even on this topic, however, a great deal remains to be done. Some brief references in earlier scholarship, for instance, would recommend we take a deeper look at the societies located on southwestern Šāwa. According to the testimony of some Ethiopian monks interviewed by the Venetian Alessandro Zorzi during the sixteenth century, a queen governed the kingdom of Wāğ, in southern Šāwa, in the fifteenth century.¹²⁶ In the same region, Enrico Cerulli pointed out some cases of Islamic sultanates ruled by queens from the tenth to the thirteenth century.¹²⁷ He also underlined the important role of elite women in medieval Islamic Šawah and its links with the social customs of the Sidaama people.¹²⁸ We might assume that the eleventh-century queen (*malika*) Badīt bint Māyā¹²⁹ (“Badīt daughter of Māyā”), mentioned in a thirteenth-century Arabic chronicle of the sultanate of the Maḥzūmī dynasty, was a part of this history. However, it is still unknown if she was a queen of the Maḥzūmī dynasty (in eastern Šāwa) or if she reigned over some other region.¹³⁰ Wagner suggests that she could be identified with Tadīt bint Māyālāmā (“daughter of Māyālāmā”), a female ruler mentioned in two chronological lists of Harāri *amīrs* that seem to provide her full patronymic. Wagner also suggests that Badīt/Tadīt and her mother might have been rulers of a region of Lake Haramāyā.¹³¹ All these elements open a new field of study to be explored.

still vivid in Ethiopia and recounted both in Harar and Lalibāla (Chekroun, “Le *Futūḥ*,” 131-132).

¹²³ For general observations on this in the region, see Silvia Bruzzi, *Islam and Gender in Colonial Northeast Africa: Sittī ‘Alawiyya, the Uncrowned Queen* (Leiden, 2017): 63-64.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 64; Alessandro Gori, “Muḥammad,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 1041-1044, at 1042.

¹²⁵ Joseph Cuoq, *L’Islam en Éthiopie, des origines au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1981) 26-32.

¹²⁶ O. G. S. Crawford, ed., *Ethiopian Itineraries circa 1400-1524; Including those Collected by Alessandro Zorzi in Venice in the Years 1519-24* (Cambridge, 1958), 78.

¹²⁷ Enrico Cerulli, “Il sultanato dello Scioa nel secolo XIII secondo un nuovo documento storico,” *RSE* 1 (1941): 5-42, at 7, 10, 21-22.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Alessandro Gori, “Badīt bint Māyā,” in *EAE* 1 (2003), 431; Enrico Cerulli, *L’Islam di ieri e di oggi* (Rome, 1971), 243, 298.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ewald Wagner, “Die Chronologie der frühen muslimischen Herrscher in Äthiopien nach den Harariner Emirlisten,” in *Wort und Wirklichkeit. Studien zur Afrikanistik und Orientalistik Eugen Ludwig Rapp zum 70.*

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Though one can hardly call it a “new field of study,” it remains the case that even the most famous queen of the best-studied polity of medieval Ethiopia still lacks a scholarly biography of any length. This is Əleni: Muslim princess, converted Christian wife of King Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434-1468) who stayed at court till her regency (1508-1516) of the underage Ləbnā Dəngəl. Her longevity at court is exceptional, whereas she had no children of her own, and therefore no heir for the throne.¹³² She became the model of the queen-*ətege*, a title created only in the later sixteenth century but that was applied by subsequent authors to Əleni too.¹³³ Indeed, all the later *ətege* took the name Əleni: like the ancient Roman personal names Caesar and Augustus, over time it became itself a title.¹³⁴

Əleni arrived at court in 1445 at a very young age and died, probably in her eighties, in 1524.¹³⁵ She was the seal of a dynastic alliance, following the custom of the polygynous king, choosing his wives from among regional leaders’ kin.¹³⁶ Daughter of Mähmad, the Muslim tributary *gärad* of Hadiyya, the alliance was an attempt to improve relations with this region, which at times sided with the king’s Muslim enemies. Baptized at court, she received the name of Əleni.¹³⁷ After her union, she received the regnal name of Žan Zela and the title of *qāññ bā’altihat*, the highest title of the queens’ hierarchy.

Though few are known on her deeds during her husband’s reign, she indirectly participated in his politics while he tried to control religious affairs especially in the implementation of the cult to Mary and promotion of the ancient queen and saint Helena as a Christian symbol.¹³⁸ Zär’a Ya’əqob’s own regnal name was Q’wästāntinos (“Constantine”); the choice of “Əleni” for his highest-ranking wife thus recalled the illustrious Christian figures who discovered the True Cross. Regulating the liturgy dedicated to Mary, his second wife was named Fəre Maryam,¹³⁹ while his mother Əgzi’ Kəbra¹⁴⁰ appeared in the *Miracles of Mary (Tä’ammərə Maryam)* dedicated to his birth. After Zär’a Ya’əqob’s reign, all queens and princesses were depicted having the traits and spiritual values of Helena and Mary, symbols of Christian perfection.¹⁴¹ Zär’a Ya’əqob also decided to depose all his officers, accusing them of conspiracy, and replaced them by his daughters, though only for a short time. Mādḥən Zämāda and Bərhan

Geburtstag, ed. Brigitta Benzing, Otto Böcher, and Günter Mayer (Meisenheim, 1976), 186-204, at 197.

¹³² Sevir Chernetsov, “Əleni,” in *EAE* 2 (2005), 253-254.

¹³³ Herman, “Reines,” part III; eadem, “Rethinking,” 173-174.

¹³⁴ Herman, “Figures féminines,” 89-90.

¹³⁵ On the debate on the year of her death, see Herman, “Reines,” 198.

¹³⁶ Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopian dynastic marriage and the Béta Esra’él;” idem, “Dynastic Inter-marriage in Medieval and Post-Medieval Ethiopia;” Herman, “Rethinking,” 173.

¹³⁷ Her *raq massəre*, named Şabraddīn, was probably a former Muslim who converted to Christianity (Kropp, “Antiquae restitutio legis,” 120). On the conversion of officials at court, see Deresse Ayenachew, “Le *kätäma*,” 110.

¹³⁸ Herman, “Figures féminines,” 84, 105; Enrico Cerulli, “L’Etiopia del secolo XV in nuovo documentici storici,” *Africa Italiana* 5 (1933): 57-112, at 82; idem, *Il libro etiopico dei miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature del Medio Evo latino* (Rome, 1943).

¹³⁹ Ignazio Guidi, ed. and trans., *Le Synaxaire éthiopien. Les mois de Sanê, Hamlê et Nahasê. II, Mois de Hamlê* (Paris, 1910), 695-696; Kropp, “Antiquae restitutio legis,” 132; for an exhaustive identification of the wives of medieval kings, see Herman, “Reines,” 15-20.

¹⁴⁰ Marie-Laure Derat, “Əgzi’ Kəbra,” in *EAE* 2 (2005), 247.

¹⁴¹ Margaux Herman, “Figures féminines.”

Zāmāda were entitled *bəhtwäddäd*¹⁴² before he took these charges himself. This unique case of women holding the office of *bəhtwäddäd* enhances two hypotheses. The first, that women were not supposed to receive charges with military duties, the second that in exceptional instances, the king can do whatever he wants, even nominated women to usually masculine duties.

Zär'a Ya'əqob's son and successor Ba'ədä Maryam (1468-1478), motherless, considered Əleni as such. During the ceremony of coronation (*həgä q'ərḥät*) of his wife, in which she was named of Žan Säyfa and titled *gərṛa bə'altiḥat*,¹⁴³ he also confirmed Əleni in her position, naming her Admas Mōgäsa.¹⁴⁴ Apparently removed for a time from the court of the next king, Əskändər (r. 1478-1494), she regained some influence especially during the reign of Na'od (1494-1508). At his death, she became the most influential of the three-headed regency¹⁴⁵ of the twelve-year old Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508-1540), a monarchic system that was at his premises. The first regency was experienced for the minority of Əskändər and composed of the 'aqqabe sä'at Täsfa Giyorgis (1478-1486), his mother Romna (a concubine) and the *gərṛa bəhtwäddäd* 'Amdä Mika'el,¹⁴⁶ with whom Əleni was not on good terms.¹⁴⁷

For a long time, historians debated on the possibility of there being two successive queens named Əleni. The confusion started from a mention in the *Chronicle of King Ləbnä Dəngəl*:

During that period, the royal authority was exerted through the disposition of his mother, the queen Na'od Mōgäsa, and with the advice of another woman, Queen Əleni. They both knew well the administration of the court, but especially the wise Əleni, who had lived at the court of three glorious kings in which she had gained a wide reputation; she knew the juridical order of the administration of the kingdom.¹⁴⁸

Travellers from the seventeenth century onwards, as well as translators and researchers, assumed that the “three glorious kings” at whose courts she had served were the three immediately previous ones, of Na'od, Əskändər and Ba'ədä Maryam.¹⁴⁹ In that case there would have been two queens, both named Əleni: the wife of King Zär'a Ya'əqob, and another, wife of Ba'ədä Maryam, who remained active in successive reigns.¹⁵⁰ Yet, if we consider that Əleni was not

¹⁴² Jules Perruchon, ed. and trans., *Les chroniques de Zar'a Yä'eqôb et Ba'eda Märyâm, rois d'Éthiopie de 1434 à 1478* (Paris, 1893), 10, 13.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 175-6: “For these qualities, the King greatly loved our Queen Əleni. He considered her like his own mother.”

¹⁴⁵ Kropp, *Geschichte des Lebna Dengel*, 3. Regencies also occurred in Muslim communities: see Basset, *Histoire de la conquête*, 431.

¹⁴⁶ Jules Perruchon, “Histoire d'Eskenđer, d'Amda Syon II et Nâ'od, rois d'Éthiopie,” *Journal Asiatique*, 9th ser., 3 (1894): 319-366, at 339; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford, 1972), 286-287.

¹⁴⁷ Their relationship has to be studied for a better understanding of the period and of their biographies.

¹⁴⁸ Kropp, *Geschichte des Lebna Dengel*, 3.

¹⁴⁹ They all dismissed in the counting the reign of 'Amdä Şəyon II, a child who only reigned few month in 1494.

¹⁵⁰ “Empress Elena was not the wife of Emperor Naôd but of his father Emperor Bedä Mariâm, and she never had children, for Emperor Naôd was illegitimate”: Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 14. Both Kropp and Perruchon also assumed the same idea: Kropp, *Geschichte des Lebna Dengel*, 3 and quotation 9; Perruchon, *Chroniques*. The latter even hypothesized in the introduction of *Chroniques* that the Əleni from the reign of Bā'ədä Maryam could be

involved in King Āskändər’s court, the chronicle’s statement is accurate in mentioning only those reigns in which she participated. The chronicle of Bā’ädä Maryam’s reign supports this theory. The king considered Āleni as “his own mother”, which is an improper relation to a wife. Moreover, on the ceremony of Žan Säyfa the scribe said that it was only performed for her,¹⁵¹ but added that “behind her, (came) the Queen Āleni who was reigning with her on that day.”¹⁵² These two mentions attest that Āleni had already received such a ritual, probably during the reign of her husband, and that Bā’ädä Maryam simply gave her the new regnal name of Admas Mogäsa¹⁵³ to confirm her position at his court.

Later on, during the regency of Ləbnä Dəngəl, the aged queen acted as a ruler in her own right. She instigated, on the advice of Pero da Covilha (a Portuguese married to an Ethiopian woman), the dispatch of a diplomatic mission to the Portuguese king Manuel proposing military co-operation against the Muslims. Mateus eventually reached Portugal, and delivered the letter to the king.¹⁵⁴ He left Portugal in 1517 with the embassy of Rodrigo da Lima (which included Francisco Alvares), and reached the court of Ləbnä Dəngəl around 1520. However, the young king, just victorious in defeating the emir Maḥfūz, declined the alliance.

During the regency, Āleni also got involved in religious affairs. She is alleged to have written two religious works in Gə’əz,¹⁵⁵ which proves that elite women received education.¹⁵⁶ Āleni also instigated with much expenses the foundation of the church of Märtulä Maryam in Goḡgam, where she held large estates.¹⁵⁷ Though not the first queen to achieve such a foundation, it launched the beginning of a common usage. Only a few foundations by women are known before 1468.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, when Āgzi’ Kəbra aspired to erect a church for her burial place, Zär’a Ya’əqob, refused; he wanted to bury her in his dynastic mausoleum of Däbrä Nəg’ädg’ad.¹⁵⁹ For his wife Žan Ḥayla, he himself had the church of Mäkanä Maryam built as her burial place.¹⁶⁰ Before 1516, out of eleven royal foundations, three are credited to women and all were dedicated to Mary.¹⁶¹ After this date, queens regularly founded churches in honor of

assimilated to Romna, the mother of some of the king’s children. However, the death of Romna is found in the *Life of Märhä Krəstos*: see Stanislas [Stanisław] Kur, ed., *Actes de Marḥa Krestos*, 2 vols., CSCO 330-331, SAe 62-63 (Louvain, 1972), at vol. 1 (text), 83, vol. 2 (trans.), 90.

¹⁵¹ Perruchon, *Chroniques*, 173-174.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 173-174.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵⁴ Sergew Hable Sellasie, “The Ge’ez Letters of Queen Eleni and Libne Dingil to John, King of Portugal,” in *IVE Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma, 10-15 Aprile 1972)*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, 2 vols. (Rome, 1974), 1: 547-566.

¹⁵⁵ According to Damião de Góis, who reports the words of Šägga Zä’ab: see Damião de Góis, *Crónica do Felicíssimo Rei D. Manuel* (Coimbra, 1926) part 2, ch. 61.

¹⁵⁶ Also confirmed by Páez: see Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 1: 222.

¹⁵⁷ Alvares did not mention the name of the church, but noted that the two altars were of solid gold: Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 321, 350, 434, 459. On the assertion that it was Märtulä Maryam, see Herman, “(Re)writing,” note 144.

¹⁵⁸ Marie-Laure Derat and Hervé Pennec, “Les églises et monastères royaux (XV^e, XVI^e et XVII^e siècles): permanences et ruptures d’une stratégie royale,” in *Ethiopia in broader perspective* (cit. at note 91), 1: 22, 28-30

¹⁵⁹ Perruchon, *Chroniques*, 86.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 54, 87.

¹⁶¹ Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens: espace, pouvoir, et monachisme* (Paris, 2003), 260.

the Virgin.¹⁶² Some recent research demonstrates that this new privilege was partly due to the success of the religious propaganda enhanced by King Zär'a Ya'əqob devoted to Saint Helena.¹⁶³ Yet, the status of queens' foundations was not equal to those of a king, as is reflected in their construction in geographically peripheral areas;¹⁶⁴ here, in eastern Goğgām, a newly Christianized area.¹⁶⁵ Romna, the mother of Āskəndər (1478–1495), probably founded Mə'rafä Maryam on the shores of Lake Ṭana,¹⁶⁶ Ēleni established Märtulä Maryam in Ānnäbäse, possibly around 1510,¹⁶⁷ while Na'od Mogäsa settled at Getesemane Maryam during the reign of her son, Ləbnä Dəngəl.¹⁶⁸ Whereas Na'od Mogäsa affiliated her foundation with the dominant religious movement headed by Däbrä Libanos,¹⁶⁹ Ēleni, having quarreled with the monks of that monastery and 'Amdä Mika'el, linked hers to the Ewostətan movement.¹⁷⁰ Political and religious internal affairs were also reflected in the queens' foundations and affiliations. During the sixteenth century, queens and princesses continued this policy of settlements and church foundations in eastern Goğgām.¹⁷¹

After 1516, at the end of the regency, the queen's influence seemed to decline, though the king awaited her death to change the government officers. Present, as Alvares reported, in different religious ceremonies, she subsequently retired in Goğgām, where she was buried in Märtulä Maryam in 1524.¹⁷² The grief of the people was reported by Alvares: "They said that since she had died all of them had died, great and small, and that while she lived, all lived and were defended and protected; and she was the father and mother of all."¹⁷³ Even eight months later, her tent in the camp was still on site for the people who were coming to mourn.¹⁷⁴ She and her richly endowed church remain famous today.¹⁷⁵

Finally, the political career of Ēleni and her religious involvement inspired the successive queens after her. Her stand in diplomatic affairs also helped her successors as queen and/or regent to get involved in political matters, even in war. For instance, Queen Säblä Wängel undertook a form of war leadership, after the death of her husband, to accompany and advise the Portuguese military mission from Däbrä Dammo until they succeeded in joining Gälawdewos

¹⁶² Ibid., 280. Kings also dedicated their foundations to the Virgin Mary.

¹⁶³ Herman, "Figures féminines," 85-89.

¹⁶⁴ "Queens' foundations were less prestigious than the kings' ones; therefore their involvement in Goğgām shows its peripheral nature within the kingdom's administration": Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 268.

¹⁶⁵ Herman, "(Re)writing," 135-136; eadem, "Figures féminines," 88-89.

¹⁶⁶ See the seventeenth century's *Zena Däbrä Libanos*, discussed in Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 341.

¹⁶⁷ Herman, "(Re)writing," quotations 144 and 145.

¹⁶⁸ Marie-Laure Derat, "Romna," in *EAE* 4 (2010), 410; Derat and Pennec, "Les églises," 22; See the seventeenth century's *Zena Däbrä Libanos* in Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 341, 343; Herman, "(Re)writing," quotations 144, 145, 146.

¹⁶⁹ See the "History of Däbrä Libanos" (*Zena Däbrä Libanos*) edited and translated in Derat, *Domaine des rois*, 329-345, at 341; Herman, "Reines," 306; eadem, "(Re)writing," quotation 145.

¹⁷⁰ Herman, "Reines," 306-307; eadem, "(Re)writing," 135; Derat and Pennec, "Les églises," 28-30.

¹⁷¹ On the involvement of Queen Säblä Wängel, her daughters and of Queen Šəllus Ḥayla in eastern Goğgām see Herman, "Reines," 307-310, 339-343; eadem, "(Re)writing," 135-136.

¹⁷² Beckingham-Huntingford, *Prester John*, 2: 459.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 434.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 434.

¹⁷⁵ After being burnt by the imam, successive kings restored it: see Derat and Pennec, "Les églises," 28-30.

and his army in the Sömen region in 1543.¹⁷⁶ On the Muslim side, Bati Dəl Wänbära (Dalwanbarah), the first wife of Imam Aḥmad, also participated in war expeditions, despite the protestation of his soldiers.¹⁷⁷ Other Muslim princesses were also involved in some battles.¹⁷⁸ What is more, after the death of the imam in 1543, it was Säblä Wängel and Bati Dəl Wänbära who undertook the diplomatic negotiations to effect the return of their respective sons, captured at different times during the war.¹⁷⁹ Next to them, Queen Ga'əwa who ruled in a northern part of Ethiopia during the sixteenth century, sided with the imam and became famous for her military activities against the Christian kings.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

The field of medieval Ethiopian women's history is on course to build upon its foundation. If some relevant information has been disclosed in this chapter, much more needs to be discovered. And though the society was definitely organized by gender division, some bridges between sex, roles, and attribution were made depending social status and context. In all communities, women had to respect the gendered rules of the liturgy or customary laws. However, social status and age impacted more on their lives, as was also the case for men. Women were involved in all spheres of society: they were farmers and regents, diplomats and war leaders, nuns and merchants. Therefore, women had a role to play in society at the level of the household and of state affairs. Even if, in most communities, women were excluded from legal forms of authority, they were actors in the social and political order, and instrumental to sovereigns' governance. In some cases, they succeeded in acquiring some power of their own. This paper finally shows that women were not invisible if one pays attention to details. It points out the necessity of a careful and systematic rereading of the available sources (especially medieval hagiographies, a potential goldmine for unveiling the daily life of non-elite women), the analysis of unstudied documentation (such as the land grants and wills), and of new archeological surveys.

¹⁷⁶ Herman, "Reines," 290-307.

¹⁷⁷ Pankhurst Rita, "Taytu's Foremothers," 51-63; Sevir Chernetsov, "Bati Dəl Wämbära," in *E Ae* 1 (2003), 505.

¹⁷⁸ Like Hāgīrah and Fardūsah: see Chekroun, "Le *Futūh*," 35, 193, 366.

¹⁷⁹ Amélie Chekroun and Margaux Herman, "Negotiations after War: the Roles of Christian and Muslim Ethiopian Queens in the 16th century," in preparation.

¹⁸⁰ Denis Nosnitsin, "Ga'əwa," in *E Ae* 2 (2005), 646-647.