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Author(s): G. W. B. Huntingford

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THE CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF ETHIOPIA

By G. W. B. HUNTINGFORD

I

BETWEEN 1959 and 1961 I worked with an Ethiopian research student, Gētāčaw Takla Māryām, on the constitutional history of Ethiopia from the Aksumite period (first to fourth centuries A.D.) to the end of the seventeenth century. So far as could be discovered, no serious attempt has yet been made to deal with this subject by means of strict documentation. The first step therefore has been to collect from printed Ethiopic material (mainly written in Ge'ez) and from Ge'ez manuscripts a body of documents and charters which will ultimately form the basis of a constitutional history. The aim has been to produce something like Stubbs's *Select Charters*, for some such basis is an essential preliminary in a field in which we lack even a tolerably complete personal onomasticon; this, I hope, will be one of the results of our study. For place-names the position is a little better, since Conti Rossini produced many years ago an index to names in material published up to 1894[1]; and not long ago I compiled one for the historical texts published in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (*CSCO*).[2] The work on constitutional history, which is still in progress, has involved the study and translation of four categories of document written in Ge'ez; these are:

(1) The early Ge'ez (and Greek) inscriptions of the Aksumite period.
(2) The *Lives* of the Ethiopian saints (*gadla qedusān*) of the sixth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, including the *Synaxarium* (*senkesār*) or general collection of lives of saints.
(3) The land charters and other documents in the *Book of Aksum*, from the tenth to seventeenth centuries, with a few attributed to kings from the fourth to ninth centuries.
(4) The *Chronicles*, now mostly available in printed form, either in the *CSCO*, or published individually; some are to be found in periodicals.

In addition to these, there is much relevant material in the Portuguese writers, especially Alvares (1540, of whose book Professor Beckingham and I have brought out a new edition); and some of the Jesuits, notably

[1] 'Catalogo dei nomi propri di luogo dell'Etiopia', *Atti del primo Congresso Geografico Italiano* (1894), II, 387–439. (There is a photographed copy of this in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies.)

[2] There is a typed copy of this in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies.

Almeida[3] and Barradas (in Beccari, *Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales inediti*).

There are also certain more general Ethiopic works, not referable to any particular reign, but of constitutional importance, among which are:

(1) The *Kebra Nagaśt* ('Glory of Kings'),[4] written as we now have it in the fourteenth century—a work of fiction, but none the less of great significance, for it is the authority for the descent of the kings of Ethiopia from Menilek son of Solomon and Makedā, Queen of 'Sheba', and acceptance of this descent was laid down in article 2 of the Ethiopian Constitution promulgated by Ḫayla Śellāsē in 1955. It is, as Professor Ullendorff has described it, 'the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings',[5] without which, as King John wrote to the British Government in 1872, 'my people will not obey my orders'.

(2) The *Feṭḥa Nagaśt* ('Legislation of Kings'),[6] a compendium of ecclesiastical and civil law which is ideally the basis of Ethiopian law, though in practice there is considerable deviation from it. This, originally written in Arabic in the thirteenth century, is said not to have been translated into Ge'ez till late in the seventeenth century; but there are indications that a document bearing this title was current at least as early as the sixteenth century, though it is true that the known manuscripts in England, France, and Germany date from 1681 onwards.

II

Bearing in mind the peculiar interrelationship of Church and State in Ethiopia, where kings not only took an active part in promulgating Christianity and in trying to suppress the very tough paganism which even now has hardly disappeared, but were also zealous in matters of theology and Church reform, the historian's *origines* must include a good deal of ecclesiastical matter. The lives of the saints thus form an important source both for clues to early civil administration and for the war on paganism to which the acts and writings of King Zar'a Yā'qob also contributed. The *Chronicles* contain many accounts of theological councils either convened by the king or presided over by him. These records, especially the land charters,[7] which give lists of contemporary officials, show clearly the extent to which civil and ecclesiastical offices were held by the same person: how,

[3] Alvares, *The Prester John of the Indies*, Hakluyt Society (1961); Almeida (Book I), *Some Records of Ethiopia, 1593–1646*, edited by C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, Hakluyt Society (1954).

[4] Translated by E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek* (Cambridge, 1922).

[5] *The Ethiopians* (1960), 144.

[6] *Feṭḥa Nagaśt* (Rome, 1897, 1899), edited by I. Guidi, text and translation, two vols.

[7] The Ge'ez text of the land charters is printed in *Liber Axumae*, edited by Conti Rossini, *CSCO*, LIV. On the charters, see *The Prester John of the Indies*, 17–22.

for example, the senior judges were normally ecclesiastics—and not merely the chief justices but many others. The records also throw light on the history of the office of *behṭwadad* or prime minister, of whom there were normally two, of the right and left, according to Ethiopian custom. They show that this office was not created till the time of Zar'a Yā'qob (1433–68), that the holders eventually became too powerful, and that it gradually decreased in importance till it disappeared, to be recreated in the early nineteenth century as *rās behṭwadad*.

III

One of the problems in Ethiopian history is the break in the dynastic succession which occurred in the Dark Ages, and the nature of its restoration. The Aksumite or 'Solomonian' dynasty was driven out of power in the reign of a king called Delna'ād by a dynasty known as Zāguē, of Agaw origin, whose capital was at Roha in Lāstā. There is much that is obscure about the events which led to the Zāguē usurpation, though the traditional view is that the first action was taken by a queen of the Falāšā Agaw whose name is variously given as Yodit or Guedit (Judith), Esāt ('fire'), and Tarda'e Gobaz. This woman is said to have reigned for three (or forty) years and to have destroyed the churches. The period of destruction for which Yodit was responsible was followed by a line of Zāguē kings, eleven in number, some of whom, to judge from their names, were Christian and very able men, like Yemreḥana Krestos, and Lālibalā who was regarded as a saint and is said to have made the rock-cut churches at Roha (later renamed Lālibalā after him). The Zāguē none the less were regarded as usurpers, not only because they broke the 'Solomonian' succession, but more especially because they were of Hamitic Agaw origin and therefore, as the chroniclers say, 'not Israelites'. The end of the Zāguē Dynasty came in 1268, when Yekuno Amlāk, a descendant of Delna'ād the last 'Solomonian' king before the Zāguē, became the first king of the restored line. That there was a break can hardly be doubted; nor, equally, can the restoration of this line be doubted. The manner of its restoration, however, is not clear, and the available evidence being both conflicting and of late date makes a decision difficult. The earliest document dealing with the period, the *Life of Takla Hāymānot* (Bibliothèque Nationale MS. Eth. 56, written in the fifteenth century), does not mention the Zāguē or the part said to have been played by Takla Hāymānot in their expulsion.

The *Paris Chronicle*, written in the eighteenth century, attributes the restoration of the 'Solomonian' line to Takla Hāymānot. This is the orthodox view, which makes no mention of any action taken by Yekuno Amlāk. The *Be'ela Nagaśt* ('Riches of Kings'), also written in the eighteenth century, says that Yekuno Amlāk made war on the last Zāguē king and killed him, the part played by Takla Hāymānot being of a passive and advisory character. The *Life of Iyasus Mo'a*, taken from a book in the convent of Ḥayq, which is a local version of the *Be'ela Nagaśt*, gives the

same story, but substitutes Iyasus Mo'a for Takla Hāymānot, who is claimed as a disciple of Iyasus Mo'a. The account in the *Be'ela Nagaśt* is probably the most reasonable, when shorn of its legendary features; but the influence of Takla Hāymānot in the affair should not be wholly discounted, for it is not unlikely that he did in fact mediate between the two parties, since this is plainly suggested by the *Be'ela Nagaśt*. The substitution of Iyasus Mo'a in the Ḥayq version is probably due to nothing more than local monastic pride and jealousy.[8]

A curious feature common to the *Be'ela Nagaśt* and the *Life of Iyasus Mo'a* is the story of the eating of a cock's head by Yekuno Amlāk. This is a southern—Sidāmā, i.e. Hamitic—element which occurs for example in the Kafa tradition in which Minjo, the founder of a dynasty, was captured by a local king and made to work as his groom.

> After some years King Matto, leaving his house after killing a chicken, was warned by a mysterious voice that he who had eaten the head of the chicken would be raised to the throne. Alarmed by this strange announcement, Matto returned at once, and ordering the women to bring him the chicken's head, learned that it had been given to Minjo to eat. He then called his council together and told the elders what had happened. They declared unanimously that Minjo must be made king.[9]

In the *Be'ela Nagaśt* version, a cock at the house of the last Zāguē king was heard to crow, 'he who eats my head shall be king and shall inherit the kingdom of David'. The cock was killed and its head was thrown away, to be eaten by the king's groom Yekuno Amlāk, who then after being anointed by St Takla Hāymānot killed the Zāguē king in battle. (In the *Paris Chronicle* Yekuno Amlāk is said to have made a pact with the saint, to whom he gave a third of the kingdom.) The introduction of the story of the cock gives some support to the suggestion that there may have been a Sidāmā element in the events which preceded the coming of the Zāguē Dynasty: that Queen Yodit was in fact a leader of southern peoples who were in revolt against the southern expansion of the Christian empire of Ethiopia.[10] On the other hand, the leader of an Agaw revolt against the Ethiopian kingdom might well have enlisted the help of Sidāmā, some of whom were by then to a certain extent under Ethiopian domination and, as always, ready to resist it.

IV

Another problem of Ethiopian history is the official hierarchy, and the definition of the many titles which occur in the records. One of the

[8] On the Zāguē see Guidi, I., 'Il Be'ela Nagast', in *Oriental Studies presented to Paul Haupt* (Baltimore/Leipzig, 1926); Conti Rossini, 'Gadla Iyasus Mo'a', *Rend. R. Accad. d. Lincei*, 5 ser. (1921), XXX; Basset, R., *Études sur l'histoire d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1881, the *Paris Chronicle*); Conti Rossini, 'Gadla Takla Hāymānot', *Atti R. Accad. d. Lincei*, 5 ser. (1894); Perruchon, J., *Vie de Lalibala* (Paris, 1892); Conti Rossini, 'La caduta della dinastia Zague', *Rend. R. Accad. d. Lincei* (1922).

[9] *Some Records of Ethiopia*, LVI.

[10] See Ullendorff, E., *The Ethiopians*, 61.

documents of importance in this respect is the work included in several manuscripts of the *Chronicles* under the title of *ḫega waśer'āta mangeśt*, 'the laws and institutions of the kingdom'. It was Conti Rossini, I think, who once lamented that we had no Ethiopian equivalent of the Roman *Notitia Dignitatum*. In this document we have something which is perhaps comparable. It consists of three parts, as in Bodleian MS. Bruce 92, the main text on which I have been working: (1) a list of the judges brought from Jerusalem by Menilek son of Solomon, together with the titles of officials instituted as judges after the reign of 'Āmda Ṣeyon (1312–42); (2) a list of titles followed by names of places, not easy to interpret, but probably a list either of provinces and districts in which land was assigned to an official, or of provinces to which an official was attached or in some way connected; (3) the forms of investiture or institution to certain offices.[11] This has not previously been translated into English or annotated; and it forms the basis for a glossary of titles which runs to more than 200 entries. It is possible to present, with the help of this and other sources, a substantial contribution to the history of the Ethiopian official hierarchy.

[11] Other texts of this on which I have worked are Cambridge Oriental 1873 (Ullendorff, *Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Cambridge University Library*, no. lxiii); Bodleian Bruce 88; and Bodleian Bruce 93.