

The Zagwe period re-interpreted: post-Aksumite Ethiopian urban culture

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Introduction

The history of Ethiopia from the decline of Aksum until the early sixteenth century is commonly divided into three periods. The first period begins with the Arab occupation of the Aksumite port of Adulis *c.* 640 AD and ends with the establishment of the Zagwe Dynasty in the end of the tenth century or, according to other sources, in the middle of the twelfth century. The Aksumite kingdom, known after the capital city Aksum in northern Ethiopia, was at the height of its power recognized as one of the powerful states of the ancient world. It coined its own currency of gold, copper and silver. Aksum had diplomatic relations with the Roman Empire and could undertake military and colonization expeditions across the Red Sea.

The second period is the history of the Zagwe Dynasty proper. The Zagwe kings had their capital at Adffa, about 200 km southeast of Aksum. The Zagwe kings were further distinguished from the Aksumite kings in that they did not belong to the same ethnic and linguistic group as the Aksumites. These kings were, therefore, described in Ethiopian traditional historical documents as usurpers and their dynasty (the Zagwe Dynasty) as illegitimate.

The third period begins with what is commonly known as the period of the 'Restored Solomonic Dynasty', *i.e.* 1270. According to a well developed myth, few survivors from the violent uprising of the pagan or Jewish queen, locally known by the name of Judith, had migrated to the country of the Amharas from which they continued to challenge the Zagwe usurpers (Bruce 1790; Pankhurst 1961, p. 61; Bairu 1987).

In contrast to the classical Aksumite period and the first three centuries of the 'Restored Solomonic Dynasty', the Zagwe period is by far the least studied. Ethiopian history after the fall of Aksum and until the rise of the Solomonic Dynasty has even been identified by some historians as the 'Dark Ages'. The rock-hewn churches at Lalibela, the main town of the Zagwe kings and the grandeur of which is grudgingly acknowledged, are mentioned briefly as monuments constructed by foreign (Egyptian or Syrian) Christian exiles.

Two different ideological strands appear to have been in play in the reproduction and perpetuation of such manifestly discriminatory historical writing. The first ideological assault certainly originated from the Solomonic rulers and their chroniclers (Amhara and Tigray monks) who discovered the rhetoric of written chronicles to present themselves in a better light than the Zagwes. The second ideological strand was that represented by Conti Rossini, whose writing in the early decades of this century did not hesitate to stress and emphasise the foreign (south Arabian, Syrian, Egyptian) footprints in nearly every dimension of Ethiopian civilization. Whereas Conti Rossini's views on Aksum as the Semitic colony in Africa have been challenged, the few but incisive statements on the Zagwe and their architectural achievements still retain their force as authoritative sources, at least among historians (Conti Rossini 1928; Tamrat 1972; Bahru 1991).

The dearth of archaeological research and the entrenched bias of the historians has fortunately been offset by some of the excellent studies carried out by art historians and practicing architects. The Lalibela rock churches, art historians argue, were a result of a long period of political and social stability (at least over a century), a period that has been hardly surpassed in the country's history since the so-called 'restoration' of the Solomonic Dynasty in the late thirteenth century (Gerster 1969; Buxton 1970).

The main purpose of this paper is to emphasise the need for archaeological research on the post-Aksumite period in general, and on the two centuries preceding the construction of the rock churches at Lalibela in particular. Lasta, the core region of the Zagwe rulers, has so far not been archaeologically mapped. The second purpose is to put forward the argument that the architectural achievements of the Zagwe rulers were a result of a long period of political stability as well as a mature expression of the Aksumite heritage. Though of a very limited nature, the historical and architectural evidence is nonetheless sufficient to put forward such argument. Finally, this paper argues that the post-1270 period needs to be seen as a decline of urbanism and urban culture rather than as a resurgence of Ethiopian society.

Sources

Reconstruction of the post-Aksumite period up to the arrival of the Portuguese diplomatic mission to Ethiopia in 1520 is largely based on Ethiopian, Arabic and Coptic sources. Few archaeological sources exist as very little excavation has taken place. The Ethiopian sources are of two kinds. The first ones are the *Royal Chronicles*, written by monks or priests attached to the court. Most of them were written during the life of the king, but rarely deal with the entire period of the king's rule. They tend to concentrate on particular aspects as well as specific years of the reign. The second type of sources consists of the lives of saints, especially of the Ethiopian missionaries who were closely associated with the expansion and consolidation of the Church from the beginning of the fourteenth century until early sixteenth century. In contrast to the *Royal Chronicles*, these hagiographies were written up to two centuries after the death of the subject they deal with and are only marginally interested in matters outside of the spiritual accomplishments of the saintly hero.

Although historians have made use of the hagiographical sources, it is, however, the *Royal Chronicles* that have been mainly used for the reconstruction of the outline of Ethiopian political history. From the early fourteenth century until the demise of the late emperor Haile Sellasie, there exist more than twenty Royal Chronicles (Pankhurst 1967). The *Royal Chronicles*, to which European scholars have obtained access, are copied versions of the originals thus raising the question as to their value as historical sources. Although the value of each *Royal Chronicle* has to be individually established, there are strong reasons to believe that such historical documents are faithfully copied from the original.

One document that has been of utmost importance for the study of the Ethiopian state and society during the early fourteenth century is the *Chronicle of Emperor Amda Tsion* (ruled 1312–42; Huntingford 1965). The chronicle was written in 1329 and authored by a member of the Church who was very close to the events. The period of Emperor 'Amda Seyon and the events of 1329 are confirmed by contemporary Arab sources, namely Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Omari, whose book *Masalik al absar fi Mamaliki al Amsar* was written between 1342 and 1349 (Gaudfrey-Demombynes 1922). The earliest Ethiopian copy in existence (and therefore the basis for Huntingford's translation) is from 1851. This mid-nineteenth-century copy is in turn based on a 1785 copy. A comparison between the 1851 version of the chronicle and the summary of the same chronicle made by the Portuguese missionary Pedro Paez in 1620

convinced Huntingford that the 1851 copy was by and large a faithfully transmitted version of the original.

Further evidence in support of a tradition of faithful translation is that of the *Book of Enoch* which was first translated from the Greek into the Ethiopic language sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries AD. This manuscript was discovered by the Scottish traveller James Bruce of Kinnard in the late 1770's and translated into English by Professor Edward Ullendorff (Ullendorff 1978). Between the time that the book was first translated into Ethiopic and its discovery in the late eighteenth century, it might have been copied at least half a dozen times. Manuscripts, though written on good parchment, tended to deteriorate quite quickly owing to climate until the Ethiopians began to use leather folders for protection.

From the ninth until the sixteenth centuries we have a number of Arab works of historical and geographical nature with extremely varying degrees of reliability. While none of the Arab writers appear to have visited Ethiopia, some of them, notably Al Yaqubi and Al Masudi, appear to have had highly reliable sources of information. Arab sources have been used to corroborate the chronology handed down to us by the members of the Ethiopian Church.

The Coptic sources consist primarily of the biographies of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church. Ever since the introduction of Christianity to Aksum in the second quarter of the fourth century, the Ethiopian Church had been under the spiritual sphere of the Coptic Church. The head of the Ethiopian Church has always come from Egypt. This dependence created the ground for the development of wide-ranging relations between Egypt, the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo and Ethiopia. The Coptic sources are unfortunately of a general nature but have proved useful in lending credibility to the Ethiopian sources, most of which were compiled after the fourteenth century.

I. The rise of the Zagwe: some questions of relevance to historical archaeology

Abandonment of Aksum and its replacement by Ku'bar

The Arab occupation of the Red Sea coast and the spread of Islam into the northern boundaries of the Aksumite empire were considered as the main factors in the decline of Aksum and its eventual demise as a capital city. As an hypothesis, the Arab factor appears to be very plausible, but it does not explain a great deal. The Dahlak islands, and the ports of Suakim were open to Aksum. The Arabs might have had a different religion, but they were equally interested in trade. Although it could be argued that the spread of Islam and the occupation of the northern territories of the Aksumite state by the Beja tribes from northern Sudan (Paul 1971) might have disrupted trade, the evidence for such argumentation appears to be greatly lacking. The Beja expansion appears to have been largely peaceful and, therefore, may not have been a significant factor in explaining the decline of Aksum.

The interpretation that the decline of Aksum was caused by 'the sudden change in the value of the Red Sea Coast trade with the eastern Mediterranean' (Tamrat 1972, p. 45), rather than by anti-Christian activities of the Arabs, goes a long way in providing an explanation for the role of trade on the destiny of political states. A similar view has also been put forward by Graham Connah in his extremely readable book on African civilizations (Connah 1987, p. 93). However, it should be added that the crucial cause for the decline of Aksum might indeed have been the emergence of a regional power in the proximity of valuable raw materials, and a more secure export outlet via the port of Zayla. The shift of the centre of political gravity appears

therefore to have been motivated by the need to come closer to the sources of the raw materials essential for existence of long-distance trade, such as slaves, gold, and ivory.

Queen Judith: Coptic and Ethiopian sources.

Aksum, according to the Ethiopian sources, ceased to be the capital only from the late ninth century, a few decades before the city was destroyed by the Jewish, or pagan, Queen Judith (*Yodit* in Tigringna). The reign of Judith lasted, according to Ethiopian chronicles, between 850 and 890 AD. This appears to tally quite well with the first account of the Arab sources which mention a capital other than Aksum. Al Ya'qubi (872–891) was the first one to mention Ka'bar, or Ku'bar, as the capital of the kingdom of the Najashi (Munro-Hay 1991, p. 96). Unfortunately, we know very little about the regional base of Queen Judith who subjugated and destroyed Aksum towards the third quarter of the ninth century. The prevailing interpretation is that Judith was from Damot (south of Ethiopia). It has also been argued, on the basis of Ethiopian oral traditions, that Judith was the queen of the Felasha (Ethiopian Jews) who controlled present-day Gojam and Begamedir (Hable-Sellassie 1972, p. 32).

According to the interpretation first proposed by Conti Rossini and later supported by Tadesse Tamrat, Queen Judith probably originated from the region around Lake Hayq which by this period was inhabited by the Sidama people (Conti Rossini 1928). Not only is Zayla much closer to the Sidama region of Queen Judith, but, also, contemporary sources state clearly that the female ruler of Ethiopia had contacts with the states in Yemen through the port of Zayla.

The Coptic and Arab sources first mention the existence of a queen during the second half of the tenth century in connection to a letter from the Nubian king on behalf of the king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Whereas the existence of a powerful queen that overthrew the reigning king of Ethiopia is confirmed both by the Coptic and Ethiopian sources, there remains a wide discrepancy as to chronology. The text which has been the main source for the chronology of Ethiopian history during the ninth and tenth centuries, appears to me to be a condensed text dealing with events that occurred at least a century earlier. It is, therefore, worthwhile to quote the entire passage from the *History of the Patriarchs* to clarify the problem of its usefulness as a reliable sign-post for the ascertainment of the chronology of Ethiopian history.

In his days [Philoteus, 970-1003], the king of Abyssinia sent a letter to the king of Nubia, a youth whose name was George, and made known to him how the Lord had chastened, he and the inhabitants of his land. It was that a woman, a queen of Banin al-Hamwiyah had revolted against him and against his country. She took captive from it many people and burned many cities and destroyed churches and drove him [the king] from place to place. That which befell him was a retribution for what the king who [was] before him had done to the metropolitan in the days of the father Abba Cosmas, [922–35] as we have explained earlier through his falsification and his fraud. He [the Ethiopian king] said to him [George, the Nubian king] in the letter which he sent to him:

'I desire that thou shouldst help me and partake with me in the fatigue, for the sake of God and for the sake of the unity of the Faith, and that thou shouldst write a letter on thy part to the father, the Patriarch in [Egypt] to beg him to absolve us and to absolve our lands and to pray for us, that God may remove from us and from our country this trial, and may grant to us that he [the Patriarch] may consecrate for us a metropolitan, as was the custom of our fathers, and that he may pray for us, that God may remove his wrath from us. I have mentioned this to thee,

O brother, for fear lest the Christian religion pass a way and cease among us, for lo, six patriarchs have sat [on the throne] and have not paid attention to our lands, but they [the lands] are abandoned without a shepherd, and our bishops and our priests are dead, and the churches are ruined, and we have learned that this trial has come down upon us as a just judgement in return for what we did to the metropolitan.’

When the letter reached George, the king of Nubia, and he had learned of their contents, he sent on his part letters and messengers to the Patriarch Philoteus, and he explained to him in them all that the king of Abyssinia had mentioned to him, and he begged him to have compassion on his people. He [Philoteus] acceded and he consecrated for them a monk from the Monastery of Abba Macaruius.

(Sawirus 1948, pp. 171–2)

It is not at all clear from the *History of the Patriarchs* that it was the Ethiopian king who informed the Patriarchate about the revolt of the queen. The reason why the Ethiopian king felt obliged to ask the mediation of the Nubian king was because of the dispute between the Patriarchate in Alexandria and the Ethiopian king which began during the era of Patriarch Cosmas (922–35). The Ethiopian king, who was contemporary of the Egyptian metropolitan Cosmas, had decided to keep an unconsecrated monk from Egypt as the head of the Ethiopian Church to which the Patriarchate responded by excommunication.

In so far as the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* can be relied, we learn that the unconsecrated bishop appear to have had a very long life since he was alive when the Patriarch Philoteus (979–1003) assumed leadership (Sawirus 1948, p. 121). We can also be certain that it was not an Ethiopian king in exile who requested Nubian mediation, but a reigning king who wanted to settle a conflict that began nearly half a century earlier.

History of the Patriarchs was written down in 1692 by Sawirus and the author might have had access to written sources, but we have no way of knowing the nature of such sources. It is most likely that the *History of the Patriarchs* was based both on written and oral sources.

The text quoted above appears to contain two separate events: the rise of the queen and the final resolution of a serious conflict between Ethiopia and the Patriarchate. The information about the rise of the queen doesn’t, however, fit at all with the main motive of the story. It appears as if the chronicler threw in the information to add effect to the spiritual role of the Patriarchate in Ethiopia.

The Arab historian Ibn-Hawqal, active in the 970’s, wrote: ‘as regards Abyssinia, for many years it has had a woman as its ruler ... and continues to this day to dominate her own country and the neighbouring regions of the land of the hadani.’ (quoted in Trimmingham 1952, p. 52). The wide chronological discrepancy that exists between traditional Ethiopian sources and the account written down in the *History of the Patriarchs* has given rise to the opinion that more than one queen may have ruled over the country after the fall of Aksum (Huntingford 1965, p. 6).

The precise dating of the reign of Queen Judith would most probably remain unknown, but the wide chronological discrepancy could indeed be narrowed by more rigorous source criticism. Arab and Coptic sources confirm that the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia was ruled by a pagan or Jewish queen. From the translations that are available, however, it is virtually impossible to build a reliable chronology. Both the Patriarchate and Ibn Hawkal could have been referring to the memorable turn of events in Ethiopia – so important that they might have been recorded in the present tense even more than half a century after the death of the queen. The *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* in fact appears to lend further support to this interpretation.

Ku'bar – Queen Judith's capital?

Between 872 and 891, Al Ya'qubi, one of the earliest Arab geographers to describe Ethiopia, wrote that the kingdom of the Najashi had a capital town called Ku'bar (quoted in Trimmingham 1952, p. 51). Al Ya'qubi's report appears to be trustworthy because he quite correctly locates the Beja kingdoms and the Nubian Christian kingdom which bordered on Abyssinia.

Acceptance of the reliability of Al Ya'qubi is shared by several researchers. Although Ethiopian sources mention that Aksum was abandoned after its destruction by Queen Judith, they do not mention a specific place as the capital of the kingdom. Another author who mentions Ku'bar as the Ethiopian capital is the Arab geographer Al Mas'udi. Writing shortly before his death in 956, Al Mas'udi stated that from Ku'bar, the capital town, the Abyssinian empire extended to the coasts opposite Yemen and possessed such towns as Zayla, Dahlak (Munro-Hay 1991, p. 97).

On the basis of the aforementioned Arab sources, attempts have been made to identify the location of Ku'bar; whereas some authors, notably Conti Rossini, decided to adhere to the view that Ka'bar was an incorrect rendering of Aksum. Tadesse Tamrat suggested that it might be located in southern Tigray or Angot. Munro-Hay also held a view that a capital by that name might have existed (Munro-Hay 1989). The opinion of this writer is that there might indeed have been a capital town called Ku'bar somewhere between Aksum and Roha (Lalibela) and might have been the capital of the queen known to Ethiopian sources by the name of Judith. This would mean that the capital would be located in the region around Lake Hayk, quite close to Zayla in the southeast of Aksum rather than in the southwest.

There is a wide discrepancy as to when Aksum might have been abandoned. According to most recent archaeological research, Aksum might have ceased to function as the capital as early as mid-seventh century. On the other hand, the Ethiopian sources, though written on the basis of oral tradition, state that Aksum remained the capital until its destruction by Judith around 850 AD. Whereas Arab writers of the late ninth century mention a successor capital by the name of Ku'bar, no mention of such capital town is to be found in the Ethiopian sources. There could be an explanation as to why Ku'bar is not mentioned by Ethiopian sources. Established by Queen Judith around 850 AD, Ku'bar might have ceased to exist when the Zagwe took over and began to administer the country from Ad,,fa, their capital, c. 930 AD. Therefore, the close association of Ku'bar with Queen Judith, the memory of the brutality of her reign and the abrupt replacement of Ku'bar by Ad,,fa, the Zagwe capital, might have led to the collective loss of memory. However, it needs to be stressed that such speculative interpretation is based on the assumption that the Zagwe Dynasty came to power in the mid-tenth century, and not in the first half of the twelfth century. Without sustained and systematic archaeological research into the Lasta region, many important aspects of the history of Ethiopian culture will remain unknown.

II. The Zagwe period: zenith of Ethiopian urban culture.

The chronology of the Zagwe Dynasty.

According to Ethiopian sources, most of which were compiled from the late fifteenth century onwards, the Zagwe Dynasty began in the first half of the tenth century, i.e. c. 930 AD. The Zagwe are therefore supposed to have ruled the country for a period of three centuries. The long period of the Zagwe is contested on two important grounds. Firstly, the number of kings, all in all eleven, would each of them had to rule an average of over thirty years. This is

extremely high compared to comparable lists in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Secondly, there are some Ethiopian sources which put the number of kings to five, thereby supporting the argument put forward by Conti Rossini that the Zagwe could not have ruled more than a century and a half. One of the earliest writers to comment on the reign of the Zagwe was the chaplain of the Portuguese Diplomatic Mission, Francisco Alvarez, in the early 1520's. After being shown a short list of five Zagwe kings, Alvarez commented that those who know said that the Zagwe kings were more than those on the list he was shown (Alvarez 1960).

Basing his argument on two types of sources, Conti Rossini wrote that the first Zagwe king came to power between 1135 and 1137. The first, and by far the most decisive, was an account in the *History of Patriarchs of Alexandria*. During the reign of Patriarch John (1147–67), an Ethiopian king wrote a letter to the Alexandrian see asking for a replacement of a metropolitan, since the incumbent had become too old to carry out his duties. The reason for the Ethiopian king's request for a replacement, Conti Rossini argued, was not the old age of the metropolitan but that the metropolitan had refused to recognise the seizure of power by a strong man who did not belong to the royal dynasty (Conti Rossini 1928, p. 303). The second type of sources was the short list of Zagwe kings (made up of five kings) which was made available to the Portuguese Chaplain Francisco Alvarez in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Sergew Hable-Sellassie, partly relying on Ethiopian sources and partly on the fragmented Coptic and Arabic sources, has argued that the Zagwe probably came to power between 1030 and 1050 AD. This would reduce the Zagwe period from the maximum 375 years to slightly over 200 years. As we have pointed out earlier, however, the Coptic and Arabic sources on the rise of Queen Judith (first mentioned in the second half of the tenth century) do not seem reliable enough as indicators for setting the chronology of the Zagwe. *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* by Sawirus which has been the key sources for Conti Rossini's reconstruction of the Zagwe chronology, was composed towards the end of the seventeenth century and most probably on the basis of oral tradition.

According to another Ethiopian historian, the Zagwe came to power in the first half of the tenth century (Tekle Tsadik 1968, p. 350). Adhering strictly to Ethiopian chronicles, Tekle Tsadik refuted the interpretation of Conti Rossini arguing that it was not the first time that the Patriarchate at Cairo had refused to recognize the Zagwe assumption of power. As early as mid-eleventh century, the Patriarchate had, according to Ethiopian hagiographies, refused to send a bishop to Ethiopia ruled by non-Solomonites (Tekel Tsadik 1965, p. 351).

The argument that the Zagwe might indeed have ruled since the first half of the tenth century has most recently been raised in an exhaustive study of chronography in Ethiopian sources. Due to the discovery of the duplication of Ethiopian chronology, involving an amount of 456 years, it has been argued that those sources which assign the Zagwe Dynasty 133 years might have been based on an account which eliminated 456 years from actual history (Neugebauer 1989, 55–6). This cutting down of intervals, writes Neugebauer, must affect the time before 1270, therefore, lending credibility to the argument that the Zagwe period could have been longer than suggested by authors such as Conti Rossini.

Did the Zagwe rule for over three centuries, as some Ethiopian sources claim, or did they only rule slightly over a century? Was Ad,ffa the Zagwe's fixed capital throughout their dynastic rule, or was it one of the precursors of the moving capitals given the mark of permanence because it happened to be the capital when the Arab and Coptic interests were momentarily focused on the country? Many questions of pure interest for the historians would undoubtedly remain obscure, only an archaeological excavation of the Zagwe capital Ad,ffa would greatly enhance our knowledge of the Zagwe period.

Zagwe architecture

Our knowledge as to when the Zagwe Dynasty first came to power will have to wait at least until such time as their capital Ad,ffa is archaeologically studied. However, we know a great deal about the Zagwe's cultural achievements. In terms of architecture, the rock churches constructed during the Zagwe Dynasty were not only a refinement of the Aksumite heritage but also express the zenith of Ethiopian culture (see figs).

The construction of the rock churches at Lalibela have been attributed by Ethiopian chroniclers and hagiographers to Christian exiles from Egypt (Hable-Sellassie 1972; Conti Rossini 1928). Conti Rossini, writing as he did in the late 1920's, was even more categorical: the rock churches were no doubt constructed by foreigners (Conti Rossini 1928).

Although available research is by no means exhaustive, it appears to be overwhelmingly convincing that the rock churches were reproductions of traditional Aksumite style (Buxton 1949, p. 31; Buxton 1970; Pankhurst 1955). Not only have the rock churches few similarities with those in Egypt and India, the Ethiopian churches in Lalibela are only a few of at least two hundred similar rock churches in other parts of Tigrai and Lasta.

The continuity of style, extending from the zenith of the Aksumite period (fourth to fifth centuries), up to the height of the Zagwe period (late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries) as the illustrations amply show, appears to virtually rule out the employment of foreigners in the construction of the rock churches. For David Buxton, who studied in detail the architectural history of both the Aksumite and the Zagwe periods these 'Ethiopian churches belong to an indigenous style of a very marked and unmistakable character' (in Gerster 1969, p. 59). Furthermore, Buxton remarked that the Zagwe kings attained 'a degree of stability and technical advancement seldom equalled in Abyssinian history' (Buxton 1970, p. 45-6). 'Yet', Buxton further stated, 'all objective record of these vast undertakings is lost', - an unintended challenge to African archaeology.

Architecturally, the best of the rock-hewn churches at Lalibela (see illustration) followed, 'with great fidelity of detail, the tradition represented by Dabra Damo (early seventh century)' (Buxton 1972, pp. 108-9). The rock churches followed the style of the 'local built-up prototypes, which themselves retain clear evidence of their basically Aksumite origin' (Buxton 1970, p. 104).

The attention paid to the Lalibela rock churches is partly due to their early discovery by the members of the Portuguese diplomatic mission in the first half of the sixteenth century and partly due to their concentration (eleven churches) in an area not exceeding one square kilometre. Since the 1960's, it has, however, according to Buxton, become clear that 'there is another, perhaps even more important concentration of rock-hewn churches further north in the province of Tigrai' (Buxton 1970, p. 103).

The Zagwe Dynasty had its core in the Lasta region which has been a stronghold of Agew- (Cushitic-) speaking people of Ethiopia. Their main outlet to the sea for purposes of trade appears to have been Zayla rather than the coast near Massawa (Hable Sellassie 1972, p. 263). The Zagwe rulers appear to have either retained their Agew language or used it for purposes of administration. Although the Zagwe rulers were, on the whole, much more religiously inspired than the 'Solomonic' rulers, they appear not to have succeeded to gain ideological legitimacy. They were accused of being usurpers of royal power which belonged to the Tigrinya- (Semitic-) speaking peoples, and 'descendants of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon'.

Ever since the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century, the church has been closely related to the state. The former was dependent on the kings for its material needs, while the ruling elite needed the church to legitimate its rule. This intimate collaboration between state

and church was to a great extent the reason for the evolution and maintenance of the national saga of the 'Solomonic origins' of the Ethiopian ruling house and of the 'Jewish origin of the Ethiopian population'. First developed in the first half of the sixth century (Sahid 1979), the myth of Ethiopia as the country of the legendary Queen of Sheba was well known by the end of the ninth century at the Patriarchate in Cairo, where the country was described as 'the kingdom of Saba from which the queen of the south came to Solomon' (Sawirus 1948, p. 118). This saga was put into writing in the beginning of the fourteenth century (Sahid 1979; Budge 1928).

Aware of their precarious ideological position, the Zagwe rulers had made it known that they were, as well, descendants from Israel but from the house of Moses (Hable-Selassie 1972). It is rather tempting to argue that the commitment of the Zagwe rulers to the construction of churches and their strict adherence to the Orthodox faith were a response to those contesting their legitimacy to rule. Three of the four kingly saints canonized by the Ethiopian Church were from the Zagwe Dynasty. It is probable that the Zagwe were challenged not so much by the Ethiopian Church, but more by the Tigrean ruling elite, who evolved and developed the myth of the Solomonic Dynasty.

From the historian's perspective, the intriguing issue is rather the persistence of the view that the rock churches were not the accomplishments of the Ethiopian society of the period. The motive appears to be ideological as well as the rather drastic decline of urban culture in the country. The victory of the Semitic-speaking Amhara and Tigray over the Agew- (Cushitic-) speaking Zagwe was accompanied by a well-developed ideological campaign with the theme of the 'restoration of the Solomonic Dynasty'. The Solomonic rulers, it appears, were active in presenting themselves in a better light than their Zagwe predecessors, not so much through the patronization of art and architecture, but through the authorization of their royal chronicles: the earliest royal chronicle, that of Emperor Amda Tsion, composed only half a century after the downfall of the Zagwe.

Another reason could well be the negative impact of the 'Solomonic state' on urbanism. The post-Zagwe Ethiopia was ruled by those who, though claiming Solomonic connection, had no fixed capital. By the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese visited Ethiopia, the country was devoid of towns. Although the country maintained its independence as well as cultural and ideological continuity, the centuries following the fall of Zagwe witnessed the decline of urban life. The construction of public buildings, as carried out by Zagwe kings, appeared to have been beyond the means, both materially and technically, of the Solomonic rulers.

The reluctance, especially on the part of the Ethiopian chroniclers, to recognise the construction of the Lalibela churches as a further development of the Aksumite culture has probably distorted the periodization of Ethiopian history. On the basis of few and essentially self-glorifying royal chronicles, the post-Zagwe period (1270–1527) has been described as the era of cultural and literary revival (Hable-Selassie 1972), when in reality this period witnessed the disappearance of a permanent capital and, as a consequence, a decline of urban culture. Job Ludolphus, the seventeenth century German Ethiopianist, was much nearer the truth, when on the basis of the Portuguese Ethiopian travel accounts and his Ethiopian informant (the monk Abba Gregory) wrote: 'After the kings of Habessinia left Axuma they never had any constant mansion, nor Palaces, but contented themselves to live in tents.' Formerly they had practiced the art of architecture as was evident from the ruins of Aksum and the magnificent temples cut out of the live stone rocks of Lalibela (Pankhurst 1961, p. 145).

Economic and political structures of the Zagwe state.

The Ethiopian documents which mainly deal with the allocation of 'gult' (land grants) were written several centuries after the fall of the Zagwe Dynasty. However, there appears to be a consensus of opinion that the economic and political structures of the state were those developed during the Aksumite period. The most salient aspects of the Ethiopian state system were the division of the country into semi-independent regions and the prerogative of the king to dispose of land grants known by the term 'gult' for services rendered in lieu of payments.

The gult, one of the unique features of the Ethiopian political system, was probably developed during the Aksumite period and kept in use until the early 1970's. Bestowed by the emperor, the gult holder enjoyed certain 'rights in relation to the peasants living on the land' (Tamrat 1972, p. 100). These rights were mainly limited to the collection of monthly or annual tributes from the peasants. The gult holder was different from the land owner in that he did not possess the rights to the land, but only to the services of the peasants or a certain amount of the produce from the land. In return, the gult holder undertook to maintain law and order as well as to make himself and his followers available for military duties.

The evidence that the Zagwe kings provided the monasteries with gult lands is of a much later date. Since the practice of granting gult to civilians was widespread by the fourteenth century, it could be argued that the Zagwe kings might as well have resorted to similar praxis. The hagiography of the Zagwe king Lalibela, composed in the fifteenth century, contains a paragraph allegedly written by the king himself where he donated gult to the monastery at Aksum and at Debra Libanos in Schimezana in present-day Eritrea.

Politically, the Ethiopian state was divided into five regions ruled by local leaders with considerable internal autonomy. On the structure of the early post-Zagwe state (early fourteenth century), Tamrat wrote that it was a loose confederation of regional princedoms. Each region represented the basic unit of the whole political and military structure (Tamrat 1972, p. 95) of the Aksumite and later the Zagwe state. Since each region vied for supremacy, the military resources available to the king were essential for keeping the country together.

Long-distance trade and foreign relations

Notwithstanding that Lasta, the core region of the Zagwe kings, has not yet been archaeologically surveyed, it is not likely that more towns other than those mentioned in contemporary literature will be discovered. The impact of the diminishing role of the Red Sea coast trade to the eastern Mediterranean probably led to the decline of urbanism and, as an important consequence, to the shrinking of the upper middle classes. Although the only written description of the capital city of Zagwe, by an Egyptian envoy of the Coptic Church in the twelfth century, does indeed give a strong impression of a lively and impressive town, we can hardly draw any general conclusion in the absence of other corroborating evidence. The contribution of archaeological research in and around the Zagwe capital Adffa would no doubt be of invaluable relevance.

Like its predecessor, the Zagwe state was no doubt engaged in long-distance trade. Its main outlet, was, however, Zayla rather the Red Sea ports. Contemporary Arab sources appear to be clear on this point. For Al-Yaqubi, writing in the middle of the ninth century, Zayla was the main outlet, although the Dahlak islands on the Red Sea remained important as well. By the end of the eleventh century, Ethiopian traders may have joined the Karimi corporation – a trading network involving merchants from Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The evidence derived from the Geniza documents, commercial notes from the eleventh century found in the Geniza (annex) of the synagogue in Cairo, is however of too fragmentary nature (Goitein 1958; Hable-Selassie 1972).

It appears that the Zagwe state did not engage in long-distance trade to the same extent as Aksum. The period between the mid-ninth century and the end of the tenth century appears to have witnessed a series of major social, economic and political dislocations. The destruction unleashed by Queen Judith and the nearly half century of her rule could have affected the established trade links. The rise of the Zagwe Dynasty and the establishment of a new capital town could also have introduced a period of uncertainty in foreign and diplomatic relations.

In sharp contrast to Aksum, the Zagwe state had much closer relations with the Ethiopian Church. Three of the Zagwe kings were canonized saints by the Ethiopian Church. One of the Zagwe kings appeared to have been an ordained priest. This close and intimate relation between church and state could very well have resulted in a more theocratic society where trade and conspicuous consumption of imported goods were of less significance.

Ethiopia's relations with the outside world were limited first to Egypt and later from the end of the twelfth century to Jerusalem. In both cases, the motive behind such a diplomatic drive could well have been religious rather than political or commercial. Without the physical presence of the Egyptian metropolitan the Ethiopian Church could not reproduce itself. For most of the period, relations between Ethiopia and Egypt functioned well. While Egypt made itself an extremely valuable factor for stability in Ethiopia, the Ethiopians lost no opportunity in making it known that they controlled the Nile, the life-line of Egypt.

In contrast to the widely known Aksum, the Zagwe state was virtually unknown to the Mediterranean states. Trading largely with the Gulf states, the Zagwe state appeared oblivious of the world outside Egypt and Jerusalem. The strenuous and continuous efforts on the part of the Zagwe state to establish a foothold in the Holy City of Jerusalem was no doubt based more on the religious climate in Ethiopia than on trade. The sources available on early relations between Ethiopia and the Holy City of Jerusalem seem to indicate, however, that Ethiopia had a considerable presence in Jerusalem. By the end of the twelfth century, the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem succeeded in acquiring proprietorship of certain sites in the Church of Resurrection and in the Church of the Invention of the Holy Cross (Meinardus, 1970, p. 117). The famous king Lalbela, canonized as a saint by the Ethiopian Church, is alleged to have visited the Holy Land before his assumption of power.

III. Decline of urbanism and the growth of the warrior state.

From 1268 until the end of our period, i.e. the beginning of the sixteenth century, Ethiopia was ruled by the so-called 'Restored Solomonic Dynasty', an Amhara- (Semitic-) speaking group from the province of Shewa. The shift of the centre of power from Lalibela to the district of Tegulet in Shewa was different from the earlier shift, i.e. from Aksum to Lalibela. The main distinction was that the victors over the Zagwe rulers had mobile capitals rather than fixed ones. The Solomonic kings were continuously on the move during the most part of dry season and returned to their favourite spots during the rainy seasons. The sixteenth century Portuguese sources state that the king of kings had between 20,000 and 40,000 people following him during the dry seasons.

After the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Ethiopian state had no fixed capital. Its emperors were compelled to move from one region to the other, either defending the borders from infringements by the Islamic states of Ifat and Adal or bringing ambitious and recalcitrant regional chiefs into the fold. The replacement of a permanent capital by the so-called moving capitals can be interpreted as a response to the inherent power rivalry between virtually

independent provinces. It is argued here that in contrast to the Solomonic Dynasty (post-1270 AD), the Zagwe Dynasty was more stable.

Explaining the transition from permanent to mobile (roving) capitals, Hovrath has argued that the transition was primarily in response to military considerations. A series of threats from Islam, from the concerted and vigorous expansion of the Oromos from their base area in the Ethio-Kenyan border and from Europe had forced the Christian Ethiopian state to introduce profound changes in the structure of the state 'where fixed capitals were replaced by the mobile capitals or guerrilla cities' (Hovrath 1969, p. 215). Although Hovrath conceded the relevance of other secondary factors, it is to the military hypothesis that he devotes the major part of his study.

Before we proceed to assess Hovrath's hypothesis on the transition from fixed to mobile (or wandering, or nomadic) capitals, it needs to be stated that the transition meant the decline of urbanism and urban culture. In contrast to the Aksumite and Zagwe rulers, the Amhara kings were in no position to patronize the construction of secular and sacral buildings as well as other arts and crafts.

A notable exception is that of the revival of literature, a development that has more to do with the growth of monasteries and monastic orders. Moreover, with the exception of the writings of the philosopher-king Zaraya Yaqob (1433–68), the bulk of the literature consisted mainly of royal chronicles and hagiographies. It is only towards the end of the sixteenth century that the wandering kings began to replace their tents with stone houses – a practice probably associated with the arrival and settlement of a couple of hundred Portuguese. (A contingent of four hundred soldiers led by the younger brother of the Vasco da Gama had fought beside the Ethiopians against the Ottoman supported army of Idal and Ifat between 1541 and 1543.)

Since the publication of Hovrath's study we know more about the political history of the country between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The military hypothesis, plausible as it might appear, does not really explain the transition. Ethiopian confrontations against Islam from Ifat and Adal were the exception rather than the rule. The main task of the Ethiopian state, as Tadesse Tamrat's work (1972) shows clearly, was the consolidation of royal power within the country's boundaries. For the most part of the fourteenth and the entire fifteenth centuries, Ethiopia had no external enemies. By the time Adal and Ifat armies under the leadership of Ahmed Gran, in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, posed a real Islamic threat, the transition from fixed to mobile capitals was already over two centuries old.

I argue that a factor which Hovrath might have found useful was that the post-Zagwe Ethiopian kingdom was too big to be ruled from a fixed capital. A country extending from the Tigrean highlands in the north up to the edges of river Bashillo in the south, (roughly about 1000 km) and 400 km from east to west could hardly be administered from a fixed capital. The Ethiopian political machinery of the period lacked the technology as well as the bureaucratic basis. Although the Ethiopians, in contrast to their west African counterparts, had access to horses, the rugged terrain and the well articulated regional sentiments appear to have made imperial rule from a fixed centre very difficult. In addition to this structural dimension arising from the problem of scale, the geography and landscape of the country, which Hovrath considered as secondary factors, militated against the tradition of fixed capital. Geographically, the country was divided into five regions with distinct boundaries. Some regions such as Gojjam and Begemdir surrounded by the Blue Nile were virtually isolated from the rest of the country during the rainy seasons. As regionalism has always been very strong, loyalty to the king of kings demanded the presence of the sovereign in the region whose loyalty may be suspected.

The exigency of ensuring loyalty from recalcitrant regional chiefs, who would otherwise lose no opportunity to engage in power struggle, subsequently led to the evolution of a state that can be described both as warrior and military. Military services to the king of kings remained virtually the only means for those aspiring high political office.

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