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Article

The Campaign of the Solomonic Monarch Yəsḥaq (*r.1414–1429/30*) *as a Turning Point in Betä Ǝsraʾel History: Its Commemoration in Solomonic and Betä Ǝsraʾel Sources and Holy Sites*

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The Campaign of the Solomonic Monarch Yəsḥaq (r.1414–1429/30) as a Turning Point in Betä Ǝsraʾel History: Its Commemoration in Solomonic and Betä Ǝsraʾel Sources and Holy Sites

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Introduction

Prior to their twentieth-century immigration to Israel, the Betä Ǝsraʾel (Ethiopian Jews) resided in hundreds of villages, in an area extending from Q^{w}ara in the west to Lasta in the east, and from western Təgray in the north to the northern shores of Lake Ṭana in the south (Fig. 1).[1] Following initial Solomonic expansion into the north-western Ethiopian highlands and with the gradual consolidation of Solomonic rule in the region, a series of military conflicts (fourteenth–seventeenth century) broke out between autonomous factions of the Betä Ǝsraʾel and Solomonic monarchs.[2] These conflicts (termed here the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars) are described in a variety of sources, including Ethiopian royal chronicles,[3] accounts written by the Portuguese and Jesuits who were active in Ethiopia,[4] letters written by members of the Jewish communities of Egypt and Jerusalem,[5] and the Arabic chronicle *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*.[6] Accounts associated with these wars were

1 The *Aethiopica* transliteration system will be employed throughout the article, with one exception: If the way a person prefers to spell their name in English is known, this spelling, rather than a transcription of the Amharic or Təgrəññña spelling, will be used.

2 For a detailed overview of these conflicts, with references to relevant sources, see Kaplan 1992, 79–96; Quirin 1992, 40–88.

3 While brief mentions of such conflicts appear in several chronicles, the chronicles of Śärṣä Dəngəl (r.1563–1597, Conti Rossini 1907) and Susənyos (r.1607–1632, Pereira 1892–1900) are renowned for their detailed descriptions of campaigns against the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel. For a discussion on the location and characteristics of the sites mentioned in the latter chronicle in association with these campaigns, see Kribus forthcoming.

4 See, for example, Almeida 1907, 442–444; Whiteway 1902, 56–59.

5 For a discussion on the encounter between members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community (some of them taken captive and brought to Egypt as slaves) and Jews in Egypt and Jerusalem at the time of the military struggle between the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Solomonic Kingdom, see Corinaldi 2005, 102–134; *Rabbi* Waldman 1989, 35–91.

6 Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad bin ʿAbd al-Qāder bin Sālem bin ʿUṯmān 2003, 377–379.

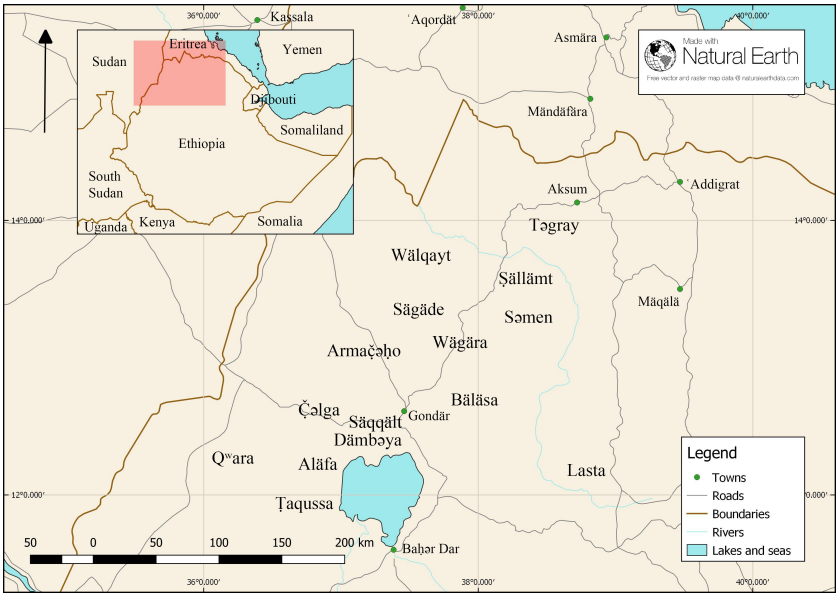

Fig. 1 The main regions inhabited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel prior to their Aliyah (immigration to Israel).

transmitted orally among the Betä Ǝsraʾel and their Christian neighbors in Ethiopia. In recent years, some of the Betä Ǝsraʾel traditions dealing with these conflicts have been committed to writing by members of the community.[7]

The Betä Ǝsraʾel community remembers the campaign of the Solomonic monarch Yəsḥaq (r.1414–1429/30) as one of the most devastating events in their history, and their most significant defeat in the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars.[8] This campaign features so dominantly in their oral tradition, that it is often portrayed as bringing to an end their political autonomy, even though this autonomy was

[7] See, for example, *Qes* Asres Yayeh 1995, 123–134; *Qes* Ḥadanä Təkuyä 2011, 71–83. Betä Ǝsraʾel historiography was, until recent decades, mainly transmitted orally.

[8] *Aṣe* (King) Yəsḥaq is renowned for his confrontational policies. Rather than seek accommodation with the Ewosṭatean monastic movement, as was the policy of his father, Dawit II (r.1379/80–1413), he resumed the persecution of the Ewosṭateans and sided with the *abun*'s theological position. He also won a series of military victories against neighboring Islamic polities, the most notable of which is the conquest of extensive territories from the sultanate of Ifat. This, together with the death of the *sulṭān* at the hands of Yəsḥaq, caused the ruling Walašma dynasty to temporarily seek refuge in Yemen. *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq is also the first Ethiopian monarch known to have sent an official delegation to Europe. See 'Yəsḥaq', *EAe*, V (2014), 59a–60a (S. Kaplan).

only definitively ended by the Solomonic emperor Susənyos circa 1626.[9] A striking example of how the Betä Ǝsraʾel community remembers this campaign—as involving forced conversion to Christianity and endangering the continued existence of their religious tradition—is found in a description written by *Abba* Yəsḥaq Iyasu, the high priest of the Betä Ǝsraʾel in the region of Təgray. This description is included in his memoirs (which contain a brief account of Betä Ǝsraʾel history):

> There was a king of Israel whose name was Gideon.[10] He fought against the emperor Yəsḥaq and was killed. His burial place is in the Səmen, in a place called Däräsge Zutarya. The emperor Yəsḥaq took control of the places where King Gideon had ruled, and from there began to spread Christianity, up to the place which is called Yəsḥaq Däbr. He managed to convince the people to accept Christianity. At that time, the Israelites did not want to accept the Christian religion. They escaped to the forests and ravines. Some were devoured by lions, leopards and hyenas. Those who survived were saved by the *mälokse Abba* Ṣəbra.[11] God sent *Abba*

[9] Pereira 1892–1900, I, 283.

[10] Gedewon (Gideon) was the regnal name of Betä Ǝsraʾel monarchs. According to Betä Ǝsraʾel tradition, they were ruled by a dynasty of seven or nine kings, all named Gedewon. See 'Gedewon', *EAe*, II (2005), 730a–730b (J. Quirin). Accordingly, Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy is known, among the Betä Ǝsraʾel, as the Kingdom of the Gideonites. And indeed, a Betä Ǝsraʾel leader by that name plays a central role in accounts of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars which took place during the reign of Śärṣä Dəngəl (Conti Rossini 1907, 123, 170–171) and Susənyos (Pereira 1892–1900, II, 116–118, 136, 209, 215–218, 387, 437, 441, 464, 553). A few Hebrew letters written in Jerusalem seem to allude to a Betä Ǝsraʾel ruler by the name of Gedewon: *Rabbi* Abraham ha-Levi writes in 1525 that near Abyssinia there was a Jewish kingdom, ruled by a king by the name of Gad. In 1528, he writes that Falasa (i.e. Fälaša), a kingdom of Jews, is called the 'Land of Gad and Dan' after two brothers who rule it—Gad and Dan (Waldman 1989, 58-64). It is likely that 'Gad and Dan' is a rendering of the name 'Gedon', which is used by the Betä Ǝsraʾel to this day to refer to Gedewon (Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus, forthcoming). The Betä Ǝsraʾel tradition of a dynasty of kings bearing the name Gedewon is mentioned in several accounts written by Westerners who came in contact with members of this community, including James Bruce (1790, I, 486, 526; II, 165, 289-293; III, 252, 286) following his 1769–1771 journey to Ethiopia.

[11] *Abba* Ṣəbra is, according to Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition, the first Betä Ǝsraʾel *mälokse*. The Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* served as the community's high priesthood, the supreme religious leadership, and were charged with training and consecrating the lay priesthood (*qesočč*). They, unlike the lay priesthood (the *qesočč*) observed severe purity laws that necessitated physical separation not only from Gentiles, but also from the lay community. In scholarly and popular literature, the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* have been referred to as monks. But since, in this case, we are dealing with a Betä Ǝsraʾel institution with unique features, which

> Ṣəbra to us so that the religion of Moses and the laws of the Torah would not disappear.[12]

This description, similar to other accounts of this campaign, mentions specific localities in association with it (in this case, Däräsge Zutarya and Yəsḥaq Däbr). Such mentions appear in written, as well as in oral accounts, and in both narrations provided by members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community and by Ethiopian Orthodox inhabitants of the regions which were, in the past, the focal point of Betä Ǝsraʾel autonomy—Səmen and Wägära.[13] The geographical aspects of this campaign and its commemoration in specific sites have never before been examined in detail.

This article will examine the different narrations of this campaign, with a focus on the geographical information they contain and the sites which are mentioned in them. It will thus shed light on the manner in which the campaign was remembered and commemorated by the Betä Ǝsraʾel and their Ethiopian Orthodox neighbors in the geography of the Səmen Mountains and the Wägära Plateau in general, and their sacred geography in particular. Based on the written, oral and cartographical sources at hand, it will also endeavour to trace the geography of the campaign and associated events.

The Geographical Context

The sources at hand mention three regions in association with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign: Səmen, Wägära and Dämbəya. The characteristics of these regions provide a necessary context for understanding events associated with this campaign in particular, and with the military struggle between Solomonic monarchs and the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel in general.

played a key role in safeguarding the Betä Ǝsraʾel religious tradition and combating Christian missionary efforts, the Betä Ǝsraʾel community prefers the usage of the term *mäloksewočč*, which is why I am employing it here. According to several narrations of the Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition, *Abba* Ṣəbra dedicated his life to the worship of God and the religious leadership of the community in order to help the community overcome the crisis caused by Emperor Yəsḥaq's campaign and its aftermath. He and his students are credited with ensuring the survival of the Betä Ǝsraʾel religious tradition (Ben-Dor 1985; Kribus 2022).

12 *Rabbi* Waldman 2018, 289.

13 The individuals we interviewed in Səmen and Wägära regarding traditions associated with the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic war all happen to be Christian. The interviews were conducted in the course of our research on the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* and their material culture, and informants were selected based on their familiarity with sites inhabited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel in the past. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that Muslims in the region are also familiar with such traditions, and expanding the research to encompass relevant traditions of all religious denominations in the area remains a desideratum.

Both the plains of Dämbəya and the Wägära Plateau are renowned for their fertility and traversed by international trade routes. As such, they are of considerable importance in the economy of the north-western Ethiopian Highlands. The main route from the Red Sea coast and Təgray to the present-day Gondär area[14] traverses the Wägära Plateau from the north to the south. From the Gondär area, routes lead south, along the shores of Lake Ṭana to Goğğam, west, across Dämbəya to Qʷara and the Nile Valley, and north-west, through Armačəho to the Kassala region. It is therefore not surprising that Solomonic monarchs would invest considerable effort in obtaining and maintaining control over these regions. This inclination would intensify as part of a process beginning during the reign of the Solomonic monarch Minas (r.1559–1563), in which the regions of Dämbəya and Bäläsa gradually became the seat of the Solomonic monarchy.[15]

In contrast, the rugged Səmen Mountains, the highest mountains in the Horn of Africa,[16] with their harsh, cold climate, were of considerably lesser economic value. Branches of the Red Sea–Təgray–Lake Ṭana road traverse the north-western edge of these mountains,[17] but the central part of the mountain range is crisscrossed mainly by routes of secondary importance, connecting the surrounding regions of Wägära in the west, Ṣällämt in the north, Tämben in the east and Bäläsa in the south. The difficulty of access to the Səmen and their relatively more peripheral location with regards to the main routes traversing the north-western Ethiopian highlands contributed to their remaining under Betä Ǝsraʾel political control centuries after Dämbəya and Wägära had come under direct Solomonic rule.

With the expansion of the Solomonic Kingdom into the north-western Ethiopian Highlands, the earliest Ethiopian texts mentioning groups which can be, with a high degree of certainty, associated with the Betä Ǝsraʾel, were compiled.[18]

[14] It should be remembered that the town of Gondär was founded circa two centuries after *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's reign, by the Solomonic monarch Fasilädäs (r.1632–1667). Nevertheless, the international trade routes, and the economic importance of the region, predated the establishment of this town.

[15] Kaplan 1992, 84–85.

[16] The highest peak of these mountains, Ras Däğän (popularly known as Ras Dašän), reaches an elevation of 4533 m.

[17] See, for example, the map which accompanies Gobat's (Gobat 1850) book on his missionary activities in Ethiopia (1830–1832, 1835–1836). In this map, various localities in the High Səmen appear as located on the main route from Təgray to Gondär.

[18] For an overview on these sources and the groups described in them, see Kaplan 1992, 53–65; Quirin 1992, 40–52. These groups are referred to as *Ayhud*, i.e. Jews. In Ethiopian literature, this term could refer to actual groups adhering to Jewish or Judaic traditions, to Christian groups perceived as heretics and as a symbolic reference to enemies of Christianity. Despite the diverse usage of the term, in cases where the reference is to groups which

These sources provide insight on the geographical scope of such groups at the time:

In the Chronicle of the Solomonic monarch ʿAmdä Ṣəyon (r.1314–1344), it is stated that the king 'sent others in his army, those which are called Damot and Säqqält and Gondär[19] and Ḥadəya, cavalry and foot soldiers […] to the land of the apostates […] those who were like crucifying Jews, who are Səmen and Wägära and Ṣällämt and Ṣägäde'.[20] It should be noted that the historicity of this specific chronicle has recently been questioned, and this issue is subject to ongoing scholarly debate.[21] Nevertheless, if we accept this description at face value, it would indicate that Solomonic troops were stationed in the Gondär–Säqqält area, and thus imply that this area was under direct Solomonic control, while populations associated with the Betä Ǝsraʾel in the regions of Səmen, Wägära, Ṣällämt and Ṣägäde still maintained a degree of political autonomy.

The hagiography (*gädl*) of the fourteenth century Ewosṭatean monk *Abba* Gäbrä Iyäsus describes his missionary activities among the Jews of Ǝnfraz, near the north-eastern shore of Lake Ṭana.[22] This composition states that the Jews had

are clearly not Christian, and reside in areas which are known, in later times, as being inhabited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel, they are likely affiliated with the latter. For a discussion on the polemical usage of the term, see Dege-Müller 2018.

19 While the town of Gondär was only founded in the seventeenth century, the name Gondär, in reference to the locality, preceded its foundation.

20 Kropp 1994, I, 11; Kropp 1994, II, 15; Perruchon 1889, 293.

21 Hirsch (2020) argues, based on discrepancies between information in the chronicle and that appearing in other sources, the short time in which campaigns reportedly took place, as well as the prominence of literary *topoi* in the narrative, that ʿAmdä Ṣəyon's chronicle is a partially fictional epic. He suggests that it was composed circa the reign of the Solomonic monarch Zärʾa Yaʿəqob (r.1434–1468) and alludes to events which took place over an extended period of time. Solomon Gebreyes Beyene (2022) argues that different references in the text, the abundance of toponyms and references to military units and titles which have no precise parallels in other texts, and mention in the text that it was written during the reign of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon all point to a composition date circa that time. He also stresses that past, philological-oriented studies of the text (for example, Kropp 1994; Marrassini 1993) did not dispute it dating back to this time. A detailed discussion of the degree of historicity of the accounts contained in ʿAmdä Ṣəyon's chronicle is beyond the scope of this paper. In the context of the topic at hand, it should be noted that the specific account mentioned above is in line with information contained in other Early Solomonic sources, as will be demonstrated below.

22 For an overview on this monastic leader, see 'Gäbrä Iyäsus', *EAe*, II (2005), 614a–614b (O. Raineri).

come to Ethiopia from Jerusalem, and that in Ethiopia, they had multiplied and inherited the land of ʾInfraz.[23]

And finally, the hagiography of the fourteenth-century monk *Abba* Yafqərännä ʾEgziʾ contains an account of Qozmos, a monk who observed severe ascetic practices, which his abbot intended to force him to forego. Having heard of the abbot's intention, Qozmos fled to Səmen and Ṣällämt, whose inhabitants 'were of the Jewish religion'. He joined them, and they defeated the governor of Dämbəya, destroyed several churches, and killed several ecclesiastics in the town of ʾInfraz. Finally, the Solomonic monarch Dawit II (r.1379/80–1413) sent troops from Təgray, who defeated them in a place by the name of Gənaza[24] and killed Qozmos.[25]

These accounts seem to indicate that in the initial stages of Solomonic presence in the north-western Ethiopian Highlands, there was a Betä ʾIsraʾel-affiliated population both in the vicinity of the northern shore of Lake Ṭana and in the regions of Səmen, Wägära, Ṣällämt and Ṣägädе.[26] And that the former area was brought under effective Solomonic control significantly earlier than the latter regions, through evangelization and military presence, while the latter (most notably Səmen and Ṣällämt) occasionally offered military resistance.[27] This political dynamic is a starting point for examining *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign, and for understanding why it was remembered as such a significant turning point.

The Written Accounts

Unlike other Solomonic monarchs, *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's acts are not described in detail in a chronicle dedicated exclusively to him. Two brief accounts of the campaign in question appear in compilations dedicated to the history of Ethiopian kings, and subsequently known under the collective name *Tarikä Nägäśt* (*History of Kings*).[28]

[23] Conti Rossini 1938.

[24] A *qäbäle* (municipality) by the name of Gənaza is part of the Libo Kämkäm *wäräda* (administrative region) and may be the locality referred to in this source. The town of Libo Kämkäm is located 9.3 km north-east of ʾInfraz.

[25] Conti Rossini 1919-1920, 567–577; 'Qozmos', *EAe*, IV (2010), 303a–303b (S. Kaplan).

[26] It is more than likely that there were, at the time, also Betä ʾIsraʾel-affiliated groups in other regions known to have been inhabited by the community in later times, and that these are simply not mentioned in the Early Solomonic sources referring to this time period presently at hand.

[27] The Lake Ṭana region was indeed a focal point of Ethiopian Orthodox monastic activity and subsequently, of evangelization, in the Early Solomonic period. See Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 189–201; 'Ṭana', *EAe*, IV (2010), 855b–857b (M. Lachal and A. Gascon).

[28] The earliest version of a *Tarikä Nägäśt* compilation currently known was composed in the sixteenth century, as an introduction to Śärṣä Dəngəl's royal chronicle (Solomon Gebreyes

The first account appears in a yet-unpublished paper manuscript, originally from Däbrä Ṣəge Maryam monastery in Šäwa. A digital version (EMML 7334) is available at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library.[29] The account relates:

> In his (*Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's) days there was a wicked Jew by the name of Bet Ağər […] who had previously been appointed by *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq as the governor of the Lands of Səmen and Dämbəya, from the border of Rəb to Beta Žär. And below him (subordinate to him) he appointed Bädägoš, the son of his sister.[30]

According to the account, Bädägoš was appointed as liaison to the royal court, charged with ensuring that taxes were paid properly. When he tried to obtain the required taxes from his uncle, he was beaten and left wounded in the wilderness. He was then rescued by his friends and concealed. Two sorceresses are then mentioned, a mother and daughter. The mother favored Bet Ağər and the daughter favored Bädägoš. When the sorceress who favored Bädägoš heard what had transpired, she came to him and offered him advice: 'Rise and go to *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq and take refuge with him, and you shall inherit the appointment (of Bet Ağər). And as for me, take me with you, lest (Bet Ağər) hear of my advice and kill me'.[31]

Bädägoš heeded her advice and told *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq what had transpired. *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq, enraged, commanded Bet Ağər to appear before him, but the latter declined, under the pretext of being ill. *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq, upon hearing this, set out to wage war on Bet Ağər. 'And the sorceress told Bädägoš to tell the king to take earth from Šäwa and place a seat on the earth. And when they shall be on the road, the king's seat shall be placed on earth (land) from Šäwa'. In that way, the king would be able to surprise Bet Ağər and defeat him. Bädägoš related the sorceress' plan to the king, and it was implemented.

Beyene 2016, 64–65). The composition and chronology of individual *Tarikä Nägäśt* compilations vary considerably, and often, local and regional considerations had an impact on their content. The eclectic nature of such works, and the uncertain provenance of much of their source material has posed a challenge to dating specific accounts contained within them. For published examples of *Tarikä Nägäśt* compilations, see, for example, Béguinot 1901; Dombrowski 1983; Foti 1941.

29 While the date of composition of the account is unknown, it is clear that the manuscript itself significantly post-dates the events it describes (Dege-Müller 2020, 57). A summary of this account is provided by Taddesse Tamrat (Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 200–201) and mentioned by Kaplan (Kaplan 1992, 57–58) and Quirin (Quirin 1992, 52–56).

30 EMML_7334_031, translated by the present author. The manuscript is not foliated. Hence, I will refer here to the EMML file numbers in which the text appears.

31 EMML_7334_031, translated by the present author.

> And the king set forth in order to wage war on Bet Ağər. And the second sorceress, who was with Bet Ağər, said to him—the king has departed from the Land of Šäwa. And Bet Ağər said to her—has he arrived? And she said—he did not leave the land (earth) of Šäwa. And he said to her—good that he did not leave the land of Šäwa. And she told him again, a third time—the king has arrived with many soldiers, but did not leave the land of Šäwa. And he said to her—did the king not leave his land? And afterwards he did not force her (to report on this again). And one day she said to him—the king is ready, he has arrived and is close by.[32]

The king, who came via Bambəlo, 'struck his tent in Wägära, and Bet Ağər did not know he had come. And they waged a great war […] and afterwards Bet Ağər fled, and the king's soldiers pursued him, captured him and beheaded him'.[33]

Following the victory, *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq distributed land (*rəst*)[34] to his soldiers, and fiefs in Wägära to some of his supporters, including Bädägoš.[35] This implies a wide-scale confiscation of land from the vanquished, previous owners and governors. And indeed, according to the account, the king decreed: 'He who is baptized in the Christian baptism will inherit the land (*rəst*) of his forefathers. Otherwise, he will be stripped of the land of his forefathers and be a *fälase*'. This is followed by the following statement: 'And afterwards the Betä Ǝsraʾel were known as Fälašočč'.[36] Finally, the account states: 'And the king built many churches in the land of Dänbəya and Wägära'.[37]

The geographical scope of the region governed by Bet Ağər prior to the campaign—extending from Səmen to Dämbəya and encompassing Wägära—is in

[32] EMML_7334_031–EMML_7334_032, translated by the present author.

[33] EMML_7334_032, translated by the present author.

[34] This term is used to denote privately-owned land. Ownership of such land was typically hereditary. This is in contrast to other types of land grants in Solomonic Ethiopia, most notably *gʷəlt* (the right to tax and administer land, bestowed by a ruler) which were not of a permanent nature and had to be, at times, reaffirmed. See 'Land Tenure', *EAe*, III (2007), 496a–499a (D. Crummey).

[35] The text relates that the king gave them the land of Wägära, without elaborating on the nature of the grant.

[36] EMML_7334_032, translated by the present author. The term Fälaša was widely used to refer to the Betä Ǝsraʾel prior to the second half of the twentieth century, and probably no earlier than the fifteenth century. At present, it is considered derogatory and is rarely used. For an overview of the different terms used to refer to the Betä Ǝsraʾel, see Salamon 1999, 21–23. For a discussion on the different meanings attributed to the term Fälaša, see Kaplan 1992, 65–73. In the context of the account described above, the term is used in reference to their landless status.

[37] EMML_7334_032, translated by the present author.

stark contrast to later accounts of the scope of the Betä Ǝsraʾel autonomous area. These indicate that in later times, it was confined primarily to the Səmen Mountains.[38] It seems likely that this contributed significantly to the Betä Ǝsraʾel's remembering this campaign as an important turning point—due to this campaign, they had lost political control of the fertile lands of Wägära and Dämbəya, and though they retained autonomous rule in the Səmen, a large part of the community (likely the vast majority) was now living under direct Solomonic control. The steps taken by *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq to consolidate Solomonic rule in the area both practically and symbolically—the re-distribution of land, the foundation of churches (probably accompanied by further ecclesiastic activities) and economic sanctions against those among the defeated population who would not convert—would have all served as a significant challenge to the Betä Ǝsraʾel community.

The second written account is significantly shorter than the first. It is contained in manuscript BnF, Éth. 142 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, which was published by René Basset.[39] It relates: 'Yəsḥaq, Dawit's other son […] came to Wägära. And he fought against Betä Ašur, a Fälaša from Märäba […] and in his days many churches were built in the land of Dämbəya and Wägära. In Kossoge there is the one called Yəsḥaq Däbr'.

The Church of Yəsḥaq Däbr and the Geography of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's Campaign

Both the second written account and *Abba* Yəsḥaq Iyasu's above-mentioned description allude to the role of the church of Yəsḥaq Däbr, as a symbol of Solomonic victory over the Betä Ǝsraʾel. This role is clearly stated in the description of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign against the Betä Ǝsraʾel written by James Bruce. The famous Scottish traveler, who travelled to Ethiopia in the years 1769–1771 and wrote extensively about the country's history, based on texts and traditions he encountered, relates: 'The king, coming upon the army of the Falasha in Woggora (Wägära), entirely defeated them at Kossogué, and, in memory thereof, built a church on the place, and called it Debra Isaac, which remains there to this day'.[40]

The church of Yəsḥaq Däbr, despite its commemorative role, has never been the subject of research or documentation. It appears in several historical and modern maps of the north-western Ethiopian Highlands,[41] and its precise location, as

[38] For a discussion on the scope of Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy in later times, see Kribus, forthcoming.

[39] Basset 1881, 95; Basset 1882, 11–12. Since the account ends with the death of the Solomonic monarch Bäkaffa (r.1721–1730), Basset (1882, 5–6) suggests that it was compiled in the days of his son and successor Iyasu II (r.1730–1755).

[40] Bruce 1790, 65–66.

[41] Examples include the Gondär map produced by the British War Office (1947), where it

depicted in the Ambo Ber topographic map produced by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority (1998), has been verified by the present author, first on Google Earth, and recently (January 2023), during a brief visit to the church (Fig. 2–3).[42] Its proximity to the village of Kossoge, also mentioned in the sources quoted above, is notable. As is its proximity to a ridge which, according to this map, bears the name 'Banbilo', i.e. the locality of Bambəlo, through which, according to the first written account, *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq travelled in order to engage in battle with Bet Ağər.

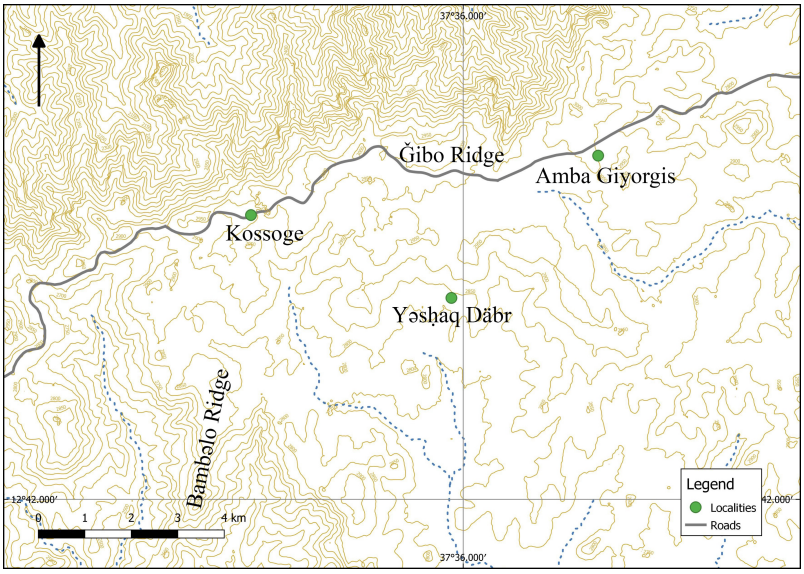

Fig. 2 The probable focal point of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign.

Thus, if taken at face value, the geographical information in the written accounts is sufficient to suggest a location for the battle between *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq and Bet Ağər: Bambəlo Ridge is located at the south-western end of the Wägära Plateu, at the place where the road begins its descent southwards towards the Gondär region and the Lake Ṭana area beyond it. If *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's army travelled

appears as 'Isac Dever', the Ambo Ber topographic map produced by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority (1998), where it appears as 'Sak Debr Giyorgis'. The dedication of this church to Giyorgis (St George) may be significant. Sisay Sahile Beyene related that such a dedication is common in churches attributed to *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq (via personal communication with Sophia Dege-Müller).

42 A detailed description of the church compound is beyond the scope of the present article and will be provided in future publications.

Fig. 3 The Church of Yəsḥaq Däbr, according to local tradition built by *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq and renovated three times.

from these regions towards Wägära, this would be their likely path. It stands to reason that the location of the main church commemorating Solomonic victory would be of significance—it would likely be erected at or near the site of a major battle, or in the heart of the conquered territory. The proximity of Yəsḥaq Däbr to Bambəlo and to the main road leading from the latter locality into Wägära seems to point to it being erected in the area where the decisive battle described in the above-mentioned sources was held. An additional account, provided by a member of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community, seems to support this identification:

The French scholar Antoine d'Abbadie, who travelled in Ethiopia and surrounding areas together with his brother Arnauld in the years 1837–1848, relates:

> I left Gondar on the 7th of May 1848 to return to France, and I stopped at Aksum […] I then received, at my brother's residence, a Falasha from Dafacha, near Gondar […] He wrote well, passed for very learned, and was called Ya Aynë Misa, which means 'lunch of my eye'. […] According to Ya Aynë Misa, Gideon commanded or reigned in Simën, and his daughter, Bëtajir predicted to him that he would be defeated by a man from the south. Indeed, his son Zanacina went to Shawa to show King Yəshaq […] wheat from Wagara [Fig. 4], a cereal then unknown south of the Bashilo River. Ishaq then marched to Wagara and defeated the Falasha at the Plain of Anjiba.[43]

[43] Abbadie 1851–1852, 267–268 (my translation and original spelling of place names).

This oral tradition depicts the battle as taking place at the 'Plain of Anjiba'. A ridge bearing the name 'Jibo' (a similar-sounding name) appears in the Amba Giyorgis topographic map produced by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority (1998), adjacent to Bambəlo, Yəsḥaq Däbr and Kossoge (Fig. 2). During my recent visit to Yəsḥaq Däbr, I inquired whether there is a locality by the name of 'Anjiba' in the area and was told that this is the name of the plain just north of the church.

Fig. 4 Wheat growing in the village of Č̣ärbita in Wägära. To this day, Wägära is renowned for its fertility.

Sites and Traditions Linked to the Campaign in the Oral Tradition of Present-Day, Non-Betä Ǝsraʾel Inhabitants of Səmen and Wägära

In the course of the archaeological survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*, which I led together with Sophia Dege-Müller and Verena Krebs,[44] several interviews were conducted with present-day inhabitants of Səmen and Wägära. The primary aim of these interviews was to shed light on the location, characteristics and history of sites associated with the *mäloksewočč*, and on their way of life. As a secondary aim, in preparation for future research on the

[44] This archaeological survey was carried out under the auspices of the ERC project 'Jews and Christians in the East: Strategies of Interaction between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean' (JewsEast) at the Center for Religious Studies of the Ruhr University, Bochum, and the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and in collaboration with the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH). For a detailed overview of the results of the survey, see Kribus 2019; Kribus 2022.

Fig. 5 Sites mentioned in the account of the advance of Kəflo and Daba's army.

topic, we enquired regarding sites and traditions associated with Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars.[45] Since 'Gedewon' is the name which features most prominently in the Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition as a name for this community's monarchs (it seems to have been a regnal name),[46] we surmised that it would also be known among former neighbors of the Betä Ǝsraʾel. Thus, as a matter of course, we asked our informants if they had heard of rulers by the name of Gedewon.

We were surprised to discover that traditions relating to a leader by the name of Gedewon are well-known in these regions and documented several narrations. Our guide during the 2017 field season, Tadele Molla Tagegne, originally from the Səmen Mountains, was familiar with the general outline of many of these narrations, and related that these stories are commonly told in the region, and he had

[45] I had long hoped to conduct research on this topic and decided to test the feasibility of such research in the course of our fieldwork. The results were very promising, as will be further elaborated below. Past publications on our survey have focused primarily on discoveries related to the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*. Here, the sites traditionally associated with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign which we encountered will be discussed for the first time (with the exception of Wəsta Ṣäggay which, due to its association with the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*, was also discussed in past publications).

[46] See 'Gedewon', *EAe*, II (2005), 730a–730b (J. Quirin).

heard them growing up.[47] We were no less surprised to learn that the religious affinity of Gedewon is not mentioned in these traditions (non-Betä Ǝsraʾel informants were unaware of a link between Gedewon and the Betä Ǝsraʾel).[48] The general outline of the most common narrative, however, leaves little room for doubt that this is a version of the same account which is alluded to in the written sources described above. The centrality of this narrative within the region is reflected in it providing an explanation for the formation of several placenames in Səmen and Wägära, including those of some of these regions' most important landmarks.

It should be noted that here, in discussing these narrations and traditions, we are not primarily concerned with the degree to which they reflect historical events.[49] Rather, we will focus on understanding how the societies involved remembered this campaign and expressed its memory through landmarks and holy sites.

The March of the Army Confronting Gedewon

The most detailed narration of this tradition, which will be outlined here, was provided to us by an elder in the village of Č̣əlf Wänz in Wägära, during the 2017 survey season.[50] The elder related that there were once four rulers—Gedewon, Kəflo, Daba and Gälawdewos. Kəflo and Daba were based in Šäwa.[51] They marched in order to wage war against Gedewon. There were two sorceresses who could foretell the future, a mother and a daughter. The mother supported Kəflo and Daba, and the daughter supported Gedewon.

[47] Tadele remarked, for example, that it is well known in the region that Gedewon was a big person, and that people occasionally say 'oh, you are Gedewon' to refer to someone's large size.

[48] This is true for all narrations recorded during the 2017 and 2019 field seasons. During my recent visit to Yəsḥaq Däbr, I was accompanied by a local historian who was well acquainted with this link.

[49] Usage of oral traditions in historical research presents a series of methodological challenges, since the date of their initial formation often cannot be determined, and they tend to evolve to fit changing ideals or needs. Nevertheless, in several parts of the world, including the northern Ethiopian Highlands, information about the past was commonly transmitted orally, and oral traditions serve as a rich and vital source for understanding topics and societies not, or but sparingly represented in written accounts. For a discussion on the potential of the usage of oral traditions in Ethiopian Studies, methodological issues involved, and several test-cases, see Meckelburg et al. 2018.

[50] Interviewed by Bar Kribus, Sophia Dege-Müller and Tadele Molla Tagegne, 2 October 2017. In accordance with the norms of ethnographic research, I will maintain the anonymity of informants here.

[51] Compare with the above-mentioned written account relating that *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq took with him to the campaign earth from Šäwa, thus indicating that he was based there.

The attacking army brought soil from Šäwa (they believed it would help them win the war). The daughter told Gedewon that Kəflo and Daba are coming to fight against him, but they are still with the soil from Šäwa (i.e. they are still far away, in Šäwa). The attacking army arrived in the Gondär area, and at a certain place, the horses which were with the army caused a lot of dust to rise from the ground. That place was subsequently called Awara ('dust' in Amharic),[52] and is where the church of Awara (Ab^{w}ara) Giyorgis would be erected[53] (Fig. 5). The army then travelled to a place near Amba Giyorgis where it camped for the night, and that place was subsequently called Argəf (literally, 'take down one's things', i.e. 'unload, unpack').[54]

The army then continued, and reached a place where Kəflo remarked '*śaq śaq aläññ*', i.e. 'I am smiling', to express his happiness (*śaqä* means 'to laugh' in Amharic).[55] Hence the church that was built there was named Yəsḥaq Däbr.[56] Then they continued to a place where one of the horses broke (its legs?). Hence, the name given to the place—Färäs Säbbär, i.e. the horse has broken. Later, a church was built there—Däbrä Färäs Säbbär Giyorgis.

Finally, they reached Č̣änäq (Fig. 6). There, Kəflo and Gedewon met each other, but Gedewon was unaware of whom he was meeting. At that point in time, Gedewon's troops were retreating and concerned, he turned to the person beside him to tell him of his distress (the Amharic word *č̣ənq* refers to distress, anxiety, trouble, or hardship).[57] At which point he realized he was actually speaking to Kəflo, alas too late—Kəflo killed him, and because Gedewon was so big, he bent in half.

Another, albeit similar ending to this account was narrated by Tadele Molla Tagegne: A man by the name of Särśä Səllus was promised that if he could defeat

[52] Kane 1990, II, 1267.

[53] This seems to be a reference to the church of Ab^{w}ara Giyorgis in Gondär, since the word Ab^{w}ara also means dust, and sounds similar to Awara.

[54] I have not yet been able to identify the precise location of this locality.

[55] Kane 1990, I, 503–504. Shula Mola (pers. com.) related that this phrase refers to an uncontrollable urge to laugh.

[56] Compare with the name of the church in the Ambo Ber topographic map produced by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority (1998), Sak Debr Giyorgis. It should be noted that the name Isaac (Yəsḥaq in Ethiopic languages, Yiẓḥaq in Hebrew) is derived from the verb 'to laugh' (in Hebrew *ẓḥq*, in Gəʿəz *śḥq*, Genesis 17:17–19; 18:10–15). Hence, the connection between Isaac and laughter is intuitive in Semitic languages.

[57] Kane 1990, II, 2230. One would expect that the placename would be Č̣ənq, in accordance with the Amharic word for distress. Nevertheless, the spelling of the placename as Č̣änäq was provided to us by Tadele Molla Tagegne. The pronunciation of this name in accordance with this spelling was confirmed by several individuals from the Səmen Mountains, one of whom is originally from this locality.

Fig. 6 Č̣änäq, vantage point towards the cliffs descending from the northern ridge of the Səmen Mountains.

Gedewon, he could have Kəflo's daughter's hand in marriage. Śärṣä Śəllus was very small, and Gedewon very big. When the armies engaged each other, Śärṣä Śəllus asked Gedewon if he would agree to the two of them fighting each other man to man, rather than have the troops do battle.[58] Gedewon laughed and, certain of victory, agreed. Both had been searched for concealed weapons before the fight, as they had agreed on hand-to-hand combat. Nothing had been found, but Śärṣä Śəllus had indeed managed to conceal a knife under his clothes. When Gedewon approached his opponent, Śärṣä Śəllus stabbed him in the stomach with his knife. Gedewon subsequently became short of breath and uttered: 'I am distressed (*č̣ənq*)'.

Tadele Molla Tagegne also remarked that different areas in the region are associated with the different rulers—Gedewon, Kəflo, Daba and Gälawdewos, and people trace their lineage back to them. In some cases, when disputes over land ownership take place, a lineage affiliated with one of them and the attribution of the land under dispute to the same one serves as a factor in the arbitration process.

It should be noted that a march into the Səmen Mountains and a confrontation with Gedewon there, while not attested in the description of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign in the *Tarikä Nägäśt*, is attested in the descriptions of Śärṣä Dəngəl and

[58] This version alludes to the biblical narrative of David's battle with Goliath (1 Samuel 17).

Fig. 7 Č̣änäq, feature identified as Gedewon's burial site, viewed to the north-east.

Susənyos' campaigns in their respective chronicles.[59] Thus, the tradition of a march into the Səmen may allude to one of these later campaigns, attributing it to *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's time and possibly linking it with the (originally separate?) tradition regarding the two sorceresses and the earth from Šäwa outlined above. A possible, albeit far from conclusive, indication of this is the name of Gedewon's opponent – Śärṣä Śəllus, which bears some similarity to the name Śärṣä Dəngəl. In contrast, the accounts of a battle in Wägära which this article discusses have no parallel in the campaigns these two monarchs waged against the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel and are thus not likely to have been directly based on them.

Č̣änäq as the Burial Place of Gedewon

During the October 2019 season, we surveyed a site by the name of Wärq Amba, in order to determine if it is the site of the Betä Ǝsraʾel stronghold by that name mentioned in the chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl (r.1563–1597).[60] When there, one of the local people we spoke to told us that the tomb of Gedewon was located nearby. Our scout, also from the Səmen Mountains, asserted that Gedewon's tomb was located at Č̣änäq and offered to take us there. Thus we proceeded to Č̣änäq to examine the site.

[59] Conti Rossini 1907, 87–85; Pereira 1892–1900, I, 152

[60] Conti Rossini 1907, 103–104. Our finds at Wärq Amba and the issue of the location of the Betä Ǝsraʾel stronghold by that name will be discussed in future publications.

The feature identified by our scout as the monument built over Gedewon's burial site (Fig. 7–8) is located across from the Č̣änäq campsite, 10 m south of the road crossing the High Səmen. Covered as it is by dense overgrowth we could only partially trace its outline. From what we could discern, it is a stone circle, currently surrounding the trunk of a large tree. The maximum width of the row of stones comprising the circle is 0.8 m. It has been preserved to a height of 0.4 m, and delimits an area measuring 6.6 m north-south and 6.6 m east-west.

Our scout related how his forefathers told him this is the burial site of Gedewon, who was killed at Č̣änäq, and outlined a brief account comparable to those described above:[61] Gedewon died fighting an opponent, who killed him with a knife concealed in his shoe. When Gedewon was stabbed, he cried out: 'I am terrified (*č̣ənq*)'.

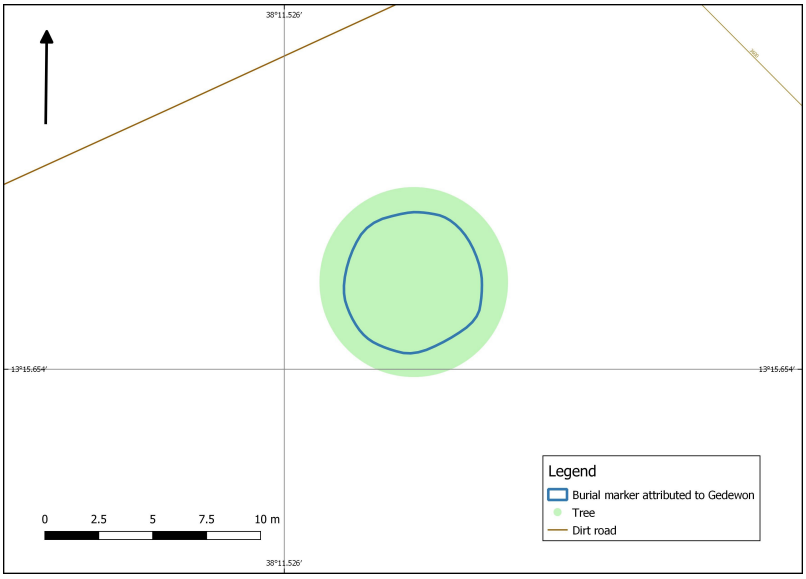

Fig. 8 Č̣änäq, feature identified as marking Gedewon's burial site.

It should be noted that according to *Abba* Yəsḥaq Iyasu's above-mentioned account, the burial place of Gedewon who fought against *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq is in a place called Däräsge Zutarya in the Səmen. This may indicate that Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition differs from the tradition regarding Č̣änäq outlined here, which was related by non-Betä Ǝsraʾel informants. The location of Däräsge Zutarya is not

[61] Interviewed by Bar Kribus and Henok, 13 October 2019.

known to me, but it stands to reason that it would be located in the vicinity of the renowned church of Däräsge Maryam (Fig. 9).[62]

Sites Linked to the Campaign in the Betä Ǝsraʾel Oral Tradition

Three additional sites were mentioned, in accounts provided by members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community in the course of our research, as associated with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign—the plains surrounding Amädge in Wägära, and the springs of Wəsta Ṣäggay and Abisäw in the Səmen Mountains.

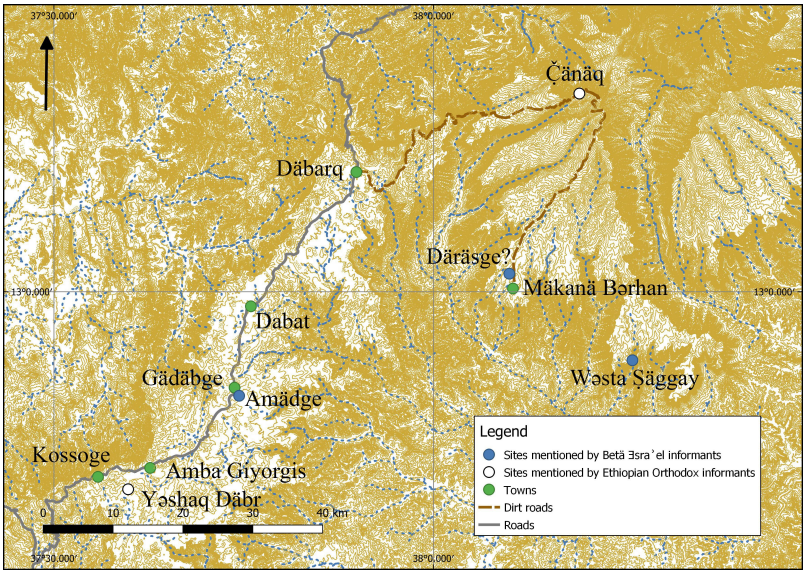

Fig. 9 Sites associated with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign in the Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition, and those associated with it in traditions related by Ethiopian Orthodox informants.

The Plains Surrounding Amädge

An elder from the Betä Ǝsraʾel community,[63] originally from the village of Doro Wəḫa in Wägära, whom we interviewed in Israel, gave the following account: Both the mother and the sister of Gedewon VII were prophetesses. Gedewon's

[62] For a detailed study of this church, see McEwan 2013. In the Ethiopian Highlands, placenames often refer to an extended area, sub-divided into smaller units, each bearing a different name. Hence, it may very well be that a place by the name of Zutarya is located somewhere within the area known as Däräsge. Establishing this, however, calls for further research.

[63] Interviewed by Bar Kribus and Tadela Takele, 14 March 2017.

Fig. 10 The plains of Wägära, as seen from the top of the hill of Amädge, viewed to the south.

sister had a son, and Gedewon's mother prophesized that this son would take the throne from him. Once, when the son was still a baby, the sister went out to work, and left him at home. Gedewon ordered his soldiers to kill the baby, but they took pity on him, and when his mother returned, they said to her 'run, otherwise Gedewon will kill your son!'

Gedewon's sister fled with her son to *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq, the Christian king of Šäwa, and told him of Gedewon. *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq asked: 'what should we do?', and she answered, 'prepare soldiers'. They set out (to wage war on Gedewon), and he said to her: 'what should I do to them? What do you ask of me?' She answered: 'Wägära is a good place. There is nowhere like it in Ethiopia. Give it to my son—make him governor of Wägära'. *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq promised to do this. He defeated Gedewon, and, when the baby had come of age, kept his word and appointed him governor of Wägära (hence, he is known as YäWägära Šum, i.e. Governor of Wägära). YäWägära Šum married and had a son whose name was Bet Ağər.

The elder added that to this day, there is a mountain in Wägära named Bet Ağər. He showed us video footage of him standing on the hilltop of Amädge (Fig. 10), near Doro Wəḫa, and pointing to various features in the landscape. 'I am showing them (the people accompanying him when the footage was taken) where the battle between *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq and Gedewon took place', he added. We asked:

'was Gedewon not based in Səmen?' He replied: 'his *betä mängəśt* (headquarters, palace) was in Səmen, but he knew that *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq was coming, so he came to meet him, and the battle was in Wägära'.[64]

Establishing the location of the mountain which the elder said bore the name of Bet Ağər, as well as the features in the landscape traditionally associated with the battle, would require further fieldwork.[65] Amädge, the hilltop from which such features were pointed out in the footage, is one of the sites we surveyed during the October 2019 season.[66] Hence, its location can serve as a starting point for further exploration of traditions associated with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaigns and linked with features in the landscape.

Wəsta Ṣäggay

The holy springs of Wəsta Ṣäggay are, undoubtedly, the most renowned Betä Ǝsraʾel holy site associated with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign. They are located within the gorge of the Gərzəman River, in the Səmen Mountains, upriver of the valley of Səmen Mənaṭa, which served as the most important religious site of the Betä Ǝsraʾel in recent generations and the last major center of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*, the community's supreme religious leadership. As we have discussed this holy site and the traditions associated with it extensively in past publications,[67] the description here will be limited to a brief overview:

Several narrations of the events which traditionally led to the sanctification of the site have been recorded. Most of these situate the event in the context of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign, but a few situate it in other contexts: the wars between the Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl (r.1563–1597),[68] or a raid

64 The elder told of another tradition regarding Gedewon. It is not clear from the narration if it is linked with *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign. Nevertheless, I will briefly outline it here, for the sake of comprehensiveness: Before going to war, Gedewon would instruct his soldiers to pick up one rock each and place the rocks in a pile. When returning from battle, each soldier would take one rock from the pile. That way, they would know how many had been killed—it would be equal to the number of remaining stones.

65 I was unable to identify a locality bearing the name Bet Ağər or a similar name on available maps. It is hoped that in future visits to the region, it will be possible to locate these features with the help of local people familiar with them.

66 The hill of Amädge is located immediately to the south-east of the town of Gädäbge, and towering 50 m above its surroundings. On its western foot is a Christian monastery with two churches, one dedicated to Mäṭməqo Yoḥannəs, and one to Arsima. The hill itself served as a Betä Ǝsraʾel holy site and place of pilgrimage (Leslau 1974, 636–637).

67 Kribus 2022, 95–99; Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming.

68 Kahana 1977, 164.

of Sudanese Mahdists.[69] According to the latter version, the religion which was being forcefully imposed was Islam rather than Christianity.

According to this tradition, *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq ordered a forced conversion of the Betä Ǝsraʾel to Christianity and declared that they would have to demonstrate their conversion by eating the meat of cats and dogs (an act which would have been a transgression of their religion). Should they refuse, they would be killed. Many of the Betä Ǝsraʾel subsequently fled to the wilderness. Two groups of seventy-five people gathered on two mountaintops. They agreed between themselves that should one group see the Solomonic army approaching, it would warn the other.

The Solomonic army arrived and headed towards one of the groups. The other group cried out a warning, but it was too late. The first group could not escape. They decided to die rather than be forced to convert and gathered in a large crate which hung by a rope above the cliff, cut the rope, and fell to their deaths. One woman, who was pregnant, landed on a rock shelf and survived. There, she gave birth to a son. According to different narrations, she named him Ṭäggay or Ṣäggay, or his father's name was Ṣäggay, and this is the origin of the name of the holy site. In the place where the bodies of the Betä Ǝsraʾel who had fallen to their deaths landed, water springs began to flow. They became a site of pilgrimage for the community with the belief the water had medicinal properties.

The Spring of Abisäw

Above the valley of Səmen Mənaṭa, on the path leading northward to the village of Sälamge, is a spring by the name of Abisäw, commemorating, according to Betä Ǝsraʾel tradition, a Betä Ǝsraʾel leader by that name. This tradition relates that Abisäw was captured by Solomonic forces during *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign and told that if he did not convert to Christianity, he would be killed. He refused to convert, and in the place his blood was spilled, a spring began to flow.[70]

Conclusions

Despite not being described in detail in a chronicle dedicated to this monarch, the campaign of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq is commemorated on an unprecedented scale compared to other campaigns of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars. In addition to brief men-

[69] Rosen 2018. Such raids took place in the northern Ethiopian highlands from 1885 to 1889. See 'Mahdists', *EAe*, III (2007), 657b–659a (H. Erlich).

[70] The account was narrated by three members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community, interviewed by the present author and Wovite Worku Mengisto (Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming). Two of the interviewees described the location of the spring. During our archaeological survey of Səmen Mənaṭa in 2017 we were unaware of the existence of this site, and hence did not attempt to pinpoint its precise location.

tions in textual sources, it occupies a central place both in Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition and in the oral tradition of Wägära and the Səmen more broadly. Its association with several landmarks throughout these regions, and with both Betä Ǝsraʾel and Ethiopian Orthodox religious sites, makes this campaign ever visually present, so to speak.[71]

The importance of historiographical texts and oral traditions as media for memory in the Ethiopian highlands has been widely acknowledged and addressed. This test-case demonstrates the central role of the landscape and features within it, sacred geography and religious sites, as anchors for specific oral traditions. As such, they function as important media for commemoration of the past.

The nature of all the sources commemorating the campaign renders their chronology uncertain. This presents a considerable challenge in the attempt to shed light on the actual campaign (as opposed to its commemoration). Nevertheless, I would maintain that the sources at hand are sufficiently numerous and varied to enable a few tentative conclusions:

First, as already demonstrated by Steven Kaplan and James Quirin,[72] the traditions regarding the campaign reflect a dynamic that is in line with accounts in other sources, most notably those shedding light on later years of Betä Ǝsraʾel autonomous rule. The picture that emerges is one of a complex relationship between the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Solomonic Kingdom, ranging from accommodation and a tributary relationship (with Solomonic political supremacy and official incorporation of the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel in the Solomonic administrative system) to resistance and military strife. Allegiances were not necessarily based on religious affiliation, but sanctions of a religious nature could be imposed following Solomonic victory.

Second, the accounts are surprisingly consistent regarding some of the geographical aspects of the campaign—most notably, in describing *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's march north from Šäwa through the Gondär region to Wägära. Some of the accounts (significantly, but not exclusively, the written ones) situate the battle between *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq and Bet Ağər on the plain at the south-western tip of the Wägära Plateau, in the vicinity of Kossoge. This is further substantiated by the location of Yəsḥaq Däbr, the main church commemorating the campaign. Other,

[71] It should be noted in this context that the chronicle of Śärśä Dəngəl, when recalling past struggles involving Jews, mentions a massacre of members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community conducted by Marqos, the governor of Bägemdər during the reign of the Solomonic monarch Bäʾədä Maryam (r.1468–1478), after fighting them for seven years (Conti Rossini 1907, 96–97), but does not mention the war in the days of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq. This could be coincidental, but it does raise the question of when the campaign of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq achieved its centrality in historical-geographical commemoration and in the oral tradition.

[72] Kaplan 1992, 54–96; Quirin 1992, 40–88.

oral accounts depict an advance into the Səmen Mountains, and portray Gedewon as *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's opponent. Taking into account that the Betä Ǝsraʾel retained their political autonomy in the Səmen Mountains following this campaign, unlike the situation in Wägära and Dämbəya, but that there are indications that this region was impacted by its aftermath,[73] the situation within the Səmen at the time of the campaign is not sufficiently clear and deserves further research. The possibility that some of the traditions linked with sites in the Səmen Mountains are in dialogue with later Solomonic campaigns (which focused on this region) should also be addressed. It is hoped that future archaeological research in relevant sites in the Səmen and Wägära will contribute to elucidating this issue.

Third, in addition to wide-scale confiscation of land and its re-distribution among *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's supporters (an issue which has received considerable scholarly attention), the written accounts also mention the wide-scale construction of churches in the newly annexed territories. Though the purpose of this construction is not (with the exception of Bruce's account) clearly stated, it is clear from the context that these served to commemorate and express victory and consolidate Christianity in the region. The existence of churches (none of which have been documented by scholars or researched) erected to commemorate Solomonic victory in the context of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars could potentially open new avenues for research on these wars and their commemoration: Was *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign commemorated in the art or architecture of such churches or in items associated with them? Was it expressed in traditions relating to these churches and transmitted orally in their vicinity? Would there be mention in manuscripts kept in such churches of land grants made following the campaign? Can the geographical distribution of such churches shed more light on geographical aspects of Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars?

[73] In the hagiography of the fifteenth-century Ethiopian Orthodox saint *Abba* Täklä Ḥawaryat (d. 1455), it is related that the saint embarked on missionary activity in Ṣällämt. Upon his arrival, he heard that the (Jewish) governor of the region was preparing to wage war on the Christians. When the saint dissuaded the governor from doing so, the Christians in the governor's army rejoiced. Afterwards, the saint preached Christianity to the people in the governor's domain, and among them were people who had outwardly become Christian due to the (Solomonic) king's decree but had secretly continued to observe the religion of their forefathers. They related that now they were embracing Christianity out of conviction. After proselytizing in Ṣällämt, the saint travelled to Səmen, to proselytize among the Jews there (Kaplan 1983). If taken at face value, this account would indicate that at the time, Ṣällämt was governed by a Betä Ǝsraʾel governor, and inhabited by both Betä Ǝsraʾel and Christians, and that at least some of these Christians were formerly Betä Ǝsraʾel, and had converted not out of religious conviction, but do to acts or decrees by Solomonic monarchs.

And finally, a question which is central to the topic at hand—why, out of a prolonged period of time in which Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy existed and out of numerous wars with Solomonic monarchs, many of them with dire consequences for the Betä Ǝsraʾel community, is *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign remembered and commemorated above all others? The geographical aspects of this campaign and its aftermath offer at least a partial answer—the loss of political autonomy in the fertile and economically important plains of Wägära and Dämbəya and the wide-scale consolidation of Christianity in these regions would have an unprecedented impact on the Betä Ǝsraʾel. Following the campaign, only a small segment of the regions known to have been inhabited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel were under Betä Ǝsraʾel political rule. Thus, even though Betä Ǝsraʾel political autonomy would outlive *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's reign by two centuries, for a large part of the community, a new reality of direct Solomonic rule began in his days.

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Summary

Following the rise to power of the Christian Solomonic dynasty (1270–1974) in Ethiopia, Christian rule expanded to encompass the regions inhabited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel (Ethiopian Jews). This process was accompanied by military campaigns (fourteenth–seventeenth century), during which the Betä Ǝsraʾel gradually lost their political autonomy. The Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition remembers the campaign waged by the Solomonic monarch Yəsḥaq against them as the most decisive in their history—because of it, their political power was greatly reduced, and their continued existence was jeopardized. This campaign is also commemorated in Solomonic texts, and both Christian and Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites are associated with it. This article will examine the ways in which this campaign and its aftermath are depicted by the two respective communities and reflected their religious sites and in landmarks in Wägära and the Səmen Mountains. Based on the sources at hand, it will attempt to trace the geographical aspects of the campaign.