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## Article

*The Historical Geography of Betä ʾĪsraʾel (Ethiopian Jewish) Involvement  
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# **The Historical Geography of Betä ʿĪsraʾel (Ethiopian Jewish) Involvement in the Conflict between the Solomonic Kingdom and the Forces of *Imām Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī***

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## **Introduction: Interreligious Interaction in the Səmen at the Time of the Islamic Conquest of Northern Ethiopia in Geographical Context**

Among the most turbulent and influential events in the history of Ethiopia are the temporary conquest of much of the Christian Solomonic kingdom by the Islamic forces of *Imām Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī* in the years 1529–1543, and the campaigns leading up to it and waged in its course.<sup>1</sup> Though this conflict was primarily one between Christian and Islamic polities and forces, it also had an impact on other religious groups living in the Ethiopian highlands, among them the Betä ʿĪsraʾel (Ethiopian Jews).

One of the regions which played a significant role in the above-mentioned campaigns is the Səmen Mountains, a region with a significant Betä ʿĪsraʾel population, and which served as the core region of Betä ʿĪsraʾel political autonomy. The existence of a Betä ʿĪsraʾel polity (albeit temporarily subdued at the time, as will be discussed below) in a strategically important region which served as a focal point of campaigns between Christian and Islamic forces makes the Səmen Mountains a fascinating test-case for interreligious interaction at the time. As will be outlined below, members of the Betä ʿĪsraʾel community forged alliances at different times with different warring sides in order to achieve the most favourable conditions that the situation could offer and to emerge from this time of turmoil with their autonomy intact. Given the complexity of the dynamics in question, understanding the geographical context of the events attested in the textual sources is an important step in the endeavour to comprehensively understand Betä ʿĪsraʾel–Christian–Muslim interaction in the Səmen.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this conquest, see Abir 1980, 87–92; ‘Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī’, *EAE*, I (2003), 155a–158a (F.-C. Muth); Chekroun 2023; Chekroun and Hirsch 2020.

In 1959, Charles Fraser Beckingham published an article in which he traced the geographical aspects of the campaigns waged in 1542 between the Solomonic Kingdom and its Portuguese allies, and the Islamic forces of *Imām Aḥmad*.<sup>2</sup> A key factor in this examination was the attempt to establish the location of the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ (*serra de judeos*), mentioned in Portuguese sources and later accounts that were based on them. This stronghold, home to a large number of Betä ʿƏsraʾel, was located in a strategic position controlling a route leading into the Səmen Mountains. Controlled by Muslim forces at the time, it was conquered by the Portuguese and their Solomonic allies at the initiative of its former Betä ʿƏsraʾel commander and with his aid, as well as the aid of the Betä ʿƏsraʾel community residing there. The conquest of this stronghold ‘opened the way’ for the Christian forces and Gälawdewos, the Solomonic monarch (r.1540–1559), to find refuge in the Səmen, and from there to continue the campaign to retake the northern Ethiopian Highlands from the Muslims. Thus, the events that transpired in this stronghold and its vicinity had a significant impact on the later history of Ethiopia.

While Beckingham was able, based on written eyewitness accounts of this campaign, to identify the general area in which the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ was located (for an overview on his conclusion and examination of several suggested locations, see below), he did not have access to detailed geographical information on the respective part of the Səmen Mountains and hence could not locate this stronghold with precision. Indeed, in the introduction of his article, he stated: ‘The most difficult problem, the identification of Castanhoso’s *serra dos judeos*, “the Jews’ Mountain”, has still not been solved satisfactorily, and cannot be until we have more precise knowledge of the topography and toponymy of certain parts of Ethiopia’.<sup>3</sup> In the years since, our knowledge of the geography of the regions in question has increased substantially, and it is now possible to solve this long-standing riddle, as well as to pinpoint additional sites mentioned in the context of Betä ʿƏsraʾel involvement in this conflict.

In this article, I will suggest a precise location for the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ and other localities associated with Betä ʿƏsraʾel involvement in the campaigns in question, based on a detailed examination of historical and modern maps, satellite images and material posted on social media. Based on these identifications, I will re-examine the accounts of these campaigns attested in textual sources, focusing on the contribution of the precise geographical context to our understanding of the events described. The aim of this examination is not to revisit the texts themselves, but rather to examine the events they describe in geographical context.

<sup>2</sup> Beckingham 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Beckingham 1959, 364.

## Betä ʾĪsraʾel Political Autonomy: Characteristics, Sources, and Past Research

Prior to their twentieth-century immigration to Israel, the Betä ʾĪsraʾel resided in an area extending from Q<sup>w</sup>ara in the west to Lasta in the east, and from western Təgray in the north to Lake ʾĪṣṣa in the south (fig. 1). Following initial Solomonic expansion into the north-western Ethiopian Highlands and with the gradual consolidation of Solomonic rule in this area, some of the Betä ʾĪsraʾel came under direct Solomonic rule, while others maintained their political autonomy. Betä ʾĪsraʾel political autonomy was periodically tributary to and periodically at war with the Solomonic kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Initially extending from Šällämt to Wägära and Dämbəya, the geographical scope of this autonomy was reduced to Səmen and

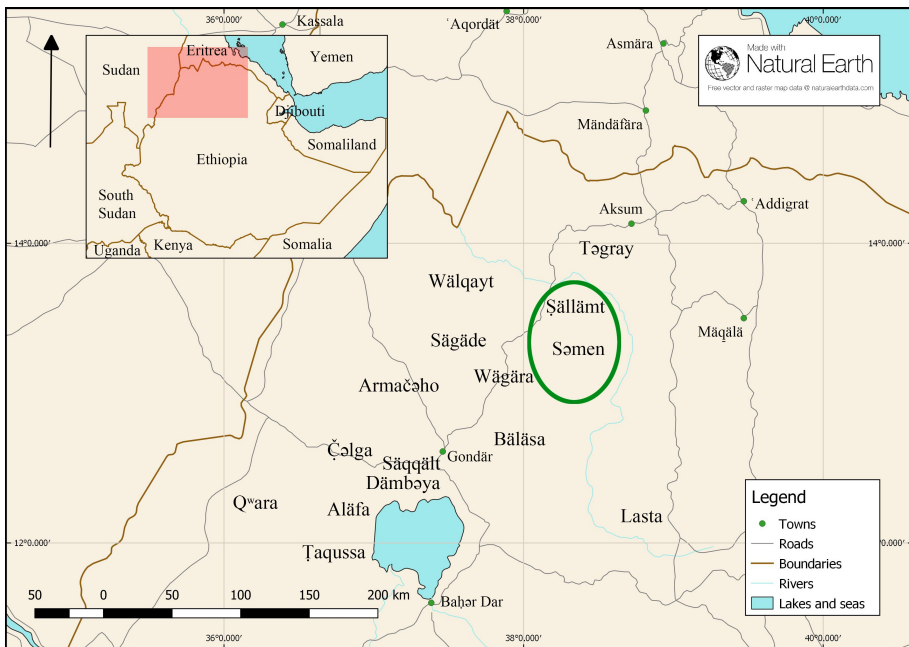


Fig. 1: The main regions inhabited by the Betä ʾĪsraʾel. The Səmen Mountains and the region of Šällämt which constitutes their northern slopes are encircled.

<sup>4</sup> For an examination of Betä ʾĪsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä ʾĪsraʾel–Solomonic wars, see Kaplan 1992, 79–96; Kribus forthcoming a; Quirin 1992, 40–88.



Šällämt following a campaign of the Solomonic monarch Yəśḥaq (r.1414–1429/30).<sup>5</sup> Betä ʿƏsraʾel autonomous rule was definitively ended by the Solomonic monarch Susənyos (r.1607–1632) circa 1626.<sup>6</sup>

Betä ʿƏsraʾel political autonomy and the wars it was involved in are described in a variety of sources, including Ethiopian royal chronicles,<sup>7</sup> accounts written by the Portuguese and Jesuits who were active in Ethiopia,<sup>8</sup> letters written by members of the Jewish communities of Egypt and Jerusalem,<sup>9</sup> and, as will be elaborated upon below, the Arabic chronicle *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*.<sup>10</sup> Accounts associated with these wars were transmitted orally among the Betä ʿƏsraʾel and their Christian neighbors in Ethiopia. In recent years, some of the Betä ʿƏsraʾel traditions dealing with these conflicts have been committed to writing by members of the community.<sup>11</sup>

Though the Betä ʿƏsraʾel are considered one of the most widely-researched communities in Ethiopia, the vast majority of historical studies on this community focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup> The studies of Steven Kaplan and James Quirin, which examine Betä ʿƏsraʾel history from its earliest attestation in the sources to the twentieth century, devote extensive sections to the topic of Betä ʿƏsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä ʿƏsraʾel–Solomonic wars, including the dynamics between the Betä ʿƏsraʾel and the Christian and Islamic forces during the conflict which this article addresses.<sup>13</sup> As historical studies, they focus on analyzing historical processes which the Betä ʿƏsraʾel community underwent at the

<sup>5</sup> Kribus 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Kribus and Wexler forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> While brief mentions of such conflicts appear in several chronicles, the chronicles of Šāršä 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 ʿƏsraʾel.

<sup>8</sup> Several examples are discussed below. See also Almeida 1907, 442–444.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the encounter between members of the Betä ʿƏsraʾel 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 ʿƏsraʾel and the Solomonic Kingdom, see Corinaldi 2005, 102–134; Waldman 1989, 35–91.

<sup>10</sup> Stenhouse 2003, 377–379.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Qes Asres Yayeh* 1995, 123–134; *Qes Ḥadanä Təkuyä* 2011, 71–83. Betä ʿƏsraʾel historiography was, until recent decades, mainly transmitted orally.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview on the research carried out on the Betä ʿƏsraʾel, with references to relevant studies, see ‘Betä ʿƏsraʾel’, *EAE*, I (2003), 552a–558b (S. Kaplan); Kaplan and Ben-Dor 1988; Salamon and Kaplan 1998. Notable among the studies addressing the pre-modern past of the Betä ʿƏsraʾel are the studies of Steven Kaplan (1992), James Quirin (1992), Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1989), and Jon Abbink (1990).

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan 1992, 79–96; Quirin 1992, 40–88.

time. Additional studies have examined specific sources shedding light on the Betä ʾĪsraʾel–Solomonic wars,<sup>14</sup> and in the historiographic literature dealing with the Betä ʾĪsraʾel community there are several mentions of these wars and of their political autonomy.<sup>15</sup> The forthcoming critical edition of the chronicle of Šāršā Dəngəl (r.1563–1597), which is being prepared by Solomon Gebreyes Beyene,<sup>16</sup> will doubtlessly shed valuable light on this monarch’s campaigns against the autonomous Betä ʾĪsraʾel. This is demonstrated by this scholar’s recent publication on the portrayal of these campaigns in the two extant versions of this chronicle.<sup>17</sup>

However, the geographical aspects of the Betä ʾĪsraʾel polity and its wars and specific sites associated with it had not been examined in detail. Indeed, Beckingham’s above-mentioned one is the only study preceding our research to attempt to locate a Betä ʾĪsraʾel stronghold. The Səmen Mountains and surrounding regions are largely unexplored archaeologically—the only archaeological research to have been carried out in them so far is the survey of Betä ʾĪsraʾel monastic sites, which I led together with Sophia Dege-Müller and Verena Krebs.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, art historical research was carried out in the church compound of Dārəsge Maryam in the Səmen by Dorothea McEwan.<sup>19</sup> However, the vast majority of archaeological sites in this region, and among them the sites affiliated with the autonomous Betä ʾĪsraʾel, remain unexplored.

In recent years, I have conducted a study of the historical geography and material culture of Betä ʾĪsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä ʾĪsraʾel–Solomonic wars.<sup>20</sup> Collaborative studies related to this research include a study conducted by Sophia Dege-Müller and myself on the holy sites associated with *Abba Yared* and

<sup>14</sup> Examples include Joseph Halévy’s (1907) annotated translation of sections of the royal chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Šāršā Dəngəl describing this monarch’s campaigns against the autonomous Betä ʾĪsraʾel; translations of relevant sources appearing in Aaron Ze’ev Aešcoly’s (1943, 146–171) study on the Betä ʾĪsraʾel; and letters written by European and Middle Eastern Jews, examined by Menachem Waldman (1989), Michael Corinaldi (2005), and Abraham David (2023).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Daniel Belete 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Solomon Gebreyes Beyene forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2023.

<sup>18</sup> This survey was conducted as part of my doctoral research at the Hebrew University and in the context of the JewsEast ERC project at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCCH). See Dege-Müller and Kribus 2024; Kribus 2022; Kribus and Krebs 2018.

<sup>19</sup> McEwan 2013.

<sup>20</sup> This research was conducted in the context of a post-doctoral fellowship of the Minerva Stiftung at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (2020–2022). See Kribus forthcoming a; Kribus forthcoming b.

the contribution of these sites to understanding dynamics between the Betä ʿĪsraʾel and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in the Səmen;<sup>21</sup> a study conducted by Wovite Worku Mengisto and myself on the impact of the ethos of Betä ʿĪsraʾel political autonomy and the Betä ʿĪsraʾel–Solomonic wars on the life of the Betä ʿĪsraʾel community in the Səmen in later times;<sup>22</sup> and a brief visit to the Səmen Mountains in January 2023, together with Elad Wexler, aimed at reaching Sägännät, the valley which served as the political center of the autonomous Betä ʿĪsraʾel in the early seventeenth century.<sup>23</sup> During this visit, we also traversed the heights of Bäyyäda and viewed the locality of Baḥər Amba from across the Mäsäḥa River Valley. Both localities will be discussed in this article.

### The Səmen Mountains during the Islamic Conquest

A starting point in this examination will be the account of the initial conquest of the Səmen by the *Imām*’s forces, as attested in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* (Conquest of Abyssinia), the Arabic chronicle documenting the Islamic conquest of the Solomonic Kingdom, and written by a contemporary of the events.<sup>24</sup> This account indicates that at the time of the Islamic conquest, a Solomonic foothold existed within the Səmen and the Səmen Betä ʿĪsraʾel were at least partially under direct Solomonic rule. Hence, the Islamic invasion was initially seen as an opportunity for the Betä ʿĪsraʾel in this region to break free from their state of subjugation.

The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* relates that after subduing the region of Təgray (in 1533), the *Imām* travelled through Šire and Mäzäga<sup>25</sup> and faced a Solomonic force at a pass on the road while advancing towards the region of Bägemdər. Among the leaders of the Solomonic force were the governors of Bägemdər, Wägära, and Šällämt. The *Imām*’s forces defeated this force, but one of the Solomonic leaders, Saʾul, managed to flee to the Səmen.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Dege-Müller and Kribus 2021; Kribus and Dege-Müller 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> Kribus and Wexler forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> Basset 1897; Stenhouse 2003. For an overview of this literary work, see Chekroun 2023; ‘*Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 592b–593b (F.-C. Muth). The author of this work, Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad, known also as ‘Arab Faḳīḥ, was of Yemenite origin and accompanied the Islamic army during part of the conquest in question.

<sup>25</sup> Mäzäga is a region within the province of Wälqayt, just south of the Täckkäze River. In the broader sense, the term can refer to the lowlands along this river. See ‘*Mäzäga*’, *E Ae*, III (2007), 891b–892b (G. Lusini).

<sup>26</sup> Basset 1897, 449–456; Stenhouse 2003, 374–377.

A likely (though not certain) location for these events is the Limalimo (Lämä-ləmo, Limaləmo) Pass—it is located on the main road leading from the Šire / Mäzäga area towards Bägemdər. As a steep and narrow section of this road, right before the broad plains of Wägära, it would be a suitable place to try and block an army's advance. From the top of the Limalimo Pass (the Däbarq area), roads branch eastwards towards the nearby Səmen Mountains. Hence, fleeing there to find refuge following defeat would be a practical thing to do.

The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* describes the Səmen as a 'rugged country, dotted with fortified citadels and lofty mountains where there is no access to cavalry. There is no country in Abyssinia [Ethiopia] more impassable than it'.<sup>27</sup> The *Imām* ordered a pursuit, but was counseled not to enter the Səmen, as he would not prevail. He stated in response: 'We will not leave Samēn [Səmen] until we have pacified it. It is the crown of the whole region. If it embraces Islam, then the whole region will do so'.<sup>28</sup>

The *Imām*'s army advanced into the Səmen. The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* relates: 'In Samēn there were inaccessible fortresses and many safe refuges. In it there was also a fortified and precipitate mountain peak. Its summit was a half-day's trek and on it there were cultivated fields and ploughed land. If one man blocked the road, even a mighty army could not climb up because of its narrowness'. The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, which identifies this fortified peak as Baḥər Amba, relates that the *Imām* sent soldiers there, who brought him forty captives from Baḥər Amba, which he then beheaded.<sup>29</sup>

The *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* relates that the Betä ʿĪsraʿel, who had once controlled the Səmen,<sup>30</sup> had been enslaved by the people of Baḥər Amba for forty years, forced to serve them as agricultural workers. After the *Imām*'s army prevailed against the people of Baḥər Amba and Saʿul, the Betä ʿĪsraʿel came out from the deep valleys and caves in the mountains. It further related that for forty years, there had been rivalry between them and the people of Baḥər Amba (thus, we can assume that the people of Baḥər Amba were Solomonic troops). Now, they offered to kill the people who remained there and occupy their strongholds. They, together with some of the *Imām*'s soldiers, ascended the *amba*, captured the people there,

<sup>27</sup> Stenhouse 2003, 377.

<sup>28</sup> Stenhouse 2003, 376–377. See also Basset 1897, 455–456.

<sup>29</sup> Basset 1897, 456; Stenhouse 2003, 378.

<sup>30</sup> The text reads: وكانت بلاد سمين يملكها يهود الحبشة واسمهم بلغتهم فلاشه ('the Land of Səmen was ruled by the Jews of Abyssinia, and their name in their language is Fālaša'). The term Fālaša was widely used to refer to the Betä ʿĪsraʿel 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 (see Kaplan 1992, 65–73).

and brought them to the *Imām*, who had them executed. The *Imām* subsequently continued his conquest of the Səmen, appointed Muslim governors over it, and imposed a poll-tax (*jizya*) on its non-Muslim inhabitants, as dictated by Islamic religious law.<sup>31</sup>

### The Stronghold of Baḥər Amba

The history and nature of the garrison at Baḥər Amba is not sufficiently known, but important insight in this regard can be gleaned from its probable location. In his study on the historical geography of Ethiopia, George Wynn Brereton Huntingford identifies the location of Baḥər Amba near the confluence of the Tākkāze and Atāba rivers, in the region of Šällāmt (fig. 2).<sup>32</sup> An examination of this area on Google Earth reveals several table mountains which could potentially fit the description. Since *baḥər* is a term which can refer to a sea, lake, or large river,<sup>33</sup> and since there were no lakes or seas in the immediate vicinity of the Səmen at the time, Baḥər Amba would literally mean ‘stronghold of the river’ or ‘mountain of the river’.<sup>34</sup> Such a name is fitting for a place at the confluence of two rivers such as the place suggested by Huntingford. However, the location in question is located in Šällāmt, while the Baḥər Amba mentioned in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* is clearly described as being located in the Səmen. And there is indeed a locality in the Səmen bearing the name of Baḥər Amba (fig. 3).<sup>35</sup> It is located on the slope above the western bank of the Māšāḥa River. Thus, its location also accords with the name ‘stronghold of the river’.<sup>36</sup>

The locality of Baḥər Amba in the Səmen occupies a strategic position, being located between the two main plateaus of these mountains, Ġan Amora and Bāyyāda, and just south of the main trails connecting the northern reaches of these plateaus. It also overlooks the north-south routes along the Māšāḥa River Valley. Such a location would have been ideal for exerting control over the heart of the Səmen and the routes traversing it. It stands to reason that it would have contrib-

<sup>31</sup> Basset 1897, 456–459; Stenhouse 2003, 378–379. For an overview on the concept of *Jizya* and its application in the Islamic World, see ‘Djizya’, *EP*, II (1991), 559a–562b (C. Cahen).

<sup>32</sup> Huntingford 1989, 133. Huntingford does not elaborate further regarding his identification of the location of Baḥər Amba.

<sup>33</sup> Kane 1990, I, 855–856.

<sup>34</sup> The term *amba* can refer to a mountain (often a table-mountain) or stronghold, and at times features in names of localities regardless of their topography. See Kane 1990, II, 1127.

<sup>35</sup> This locality appears in the *Simen Mountains* map produced by Hans Hurni et al. (2003). During a trip to Ethiopia in January 2023, this locality was pointed out to us while driving along the adjacent road which traverses the Māšāḥa River Valley.

<sup>36</sup> I have briefly discussed the location of Baḥər Amba in another, forthcoming publication (Kribus forthcoming b), though not in as much detail, and prior to having visited its vicinity.

uted both to Solomonic motivation to establish such a foothold and to the motivation of the Betä ʿƏsra'el to overthrow it.

The description in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, however, describes Baḥər Amba as a mountaintop, and this is contrary to the present-day locality's position on the slope descending from Ġan Amora to the Mäšäḥa. I would therefore suggest that the precise location of the stronghold should be sought out in the vicinity of this locality, rather than in its precise position, with one possibility being the summit in the eastern reaches of Ġan Amora which towers over it to the west.

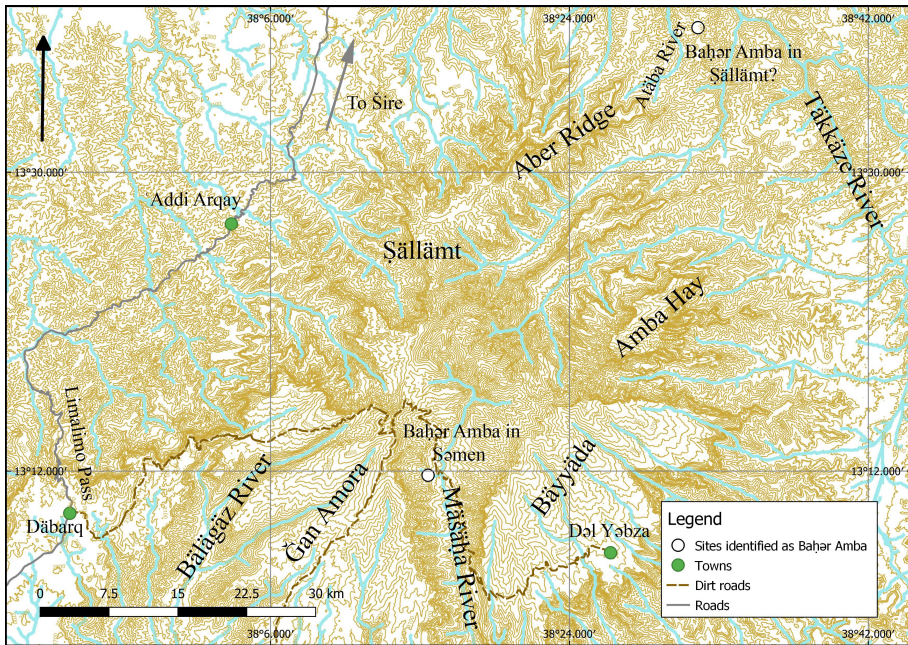


Fig. 2: Possible locations of the stronghold of Baḥər Amba.

### A Betä ʿƏsra'el-Solomonic Alliance Prior to the Arrival of the Portuguese?

As outlined above, initially, at least some of the Səmen Betä ʿƏsra'el forged an alliance with the *Imām* with the probable hope of being able to restore their sovereignty and control over the region. But within a few years, at least some of the Səmen Betä ʿƏsra'el allied with the Solomonic forces and the Portuguese, presumably because, under Islamic rule, they had not achieved the favourable conditions they were hoping for. When did this change of allegiance happen? While Betä ʿƏsra'el support of the Solomonic and Portuguese campaign of 1542 is clearly



Fig. 3: The village of Baḥər Amba in the Səmen, view to the west.

documented in Portuguese sources, as elaborated below, it has been suggested that there may be indications that some Betä ʿƏsraʾel leaders supported the Solomonic Kingdom at an earlier stage of this conflict.

In various *Tarikä Nägäšt* compilations, it is related that in the thirty-first year of the reign of the Solomonic monarch Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508–1540), i.e. 1539 or 1540, ‘Gedewon and Yodit, the *ḥamat*<sup>37</sup> of the king, were taken captive [by Muslim forces], and along with them many of the king’s troops’.<sup>38</sup> While neither Gedewon nor Yodit are identified as Betä ʿƏsraʾel, the appearance of these two names together is striking.

According to an oral tradition widespread among the Betä ʿƏsraʾel, the Betä ʿƏsraʾel polity was ruled by a dynasty of kings named Gedewon, seven or nine in number, hence the present-day popular name for this polity, the ‘Kingdom of the

<sup>37</sup> The Geʿez term *ḥamat* literally means ‘in-law’ and can refer both to a mother-in-law and to a daughter-in-law, see Leslau 1991, 235.

<sup>38</sup> Basset 1882, 15–16; Perruchon 1893, 277, 283, my translation. See also Foti 1941, 98. *Tarikä Nägäšt* (literally ‘History of Kings’) compilations provide a brief overview of the reigns and acts of different Christian Ethiopian monarchs. The earliest version of such a compilation currently known was composed in the sixteenth century, as an introduction to Šäršä Dəngəl’s royal chronicle (Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2016, 64–65). The composition and chronology of individual *Tarikä Nägäšt* texts vary, and often, local and regional considerations had an impact on their content. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of content which different compilations have in common. The eclectic nature of these works and the uncertain provenance of much of their source material has posed a challenge to dating accounts appearing within them.

Gideonites'. Textual sources indicate that while not all Betä ʿĪsra'el rulers were named Gedewon, some indeed were, and it has been suggested that this name served as a Betä ʿĪsra'el regnal name.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, James Quirin suggests, based on traditions stating that several Betä ʿĪsra'el female rulers bore the name of Yodit, that Yodit was a common name for such rulers.<sup>40</sup> These traditions are likely in dialogue with the renowned Ethiopian tradition of a queen by the name of ʿĪsato, Gudit, or Yodit who destroyed the town of Aksum and ruled over Ethiopia. Some versions of this tradition identify her as a Betä ʿĪsra'el queen.<sup>41</sup> The conquest of territory which was formerly part of the Aksumite kingdom by a queen is indeed reflected in tenth-century sources, but these do not identify the religion of the queen, and it is no longer widely accepted in scholarship that she was Jewish.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, it is certainly possible that this tradition influenced or was influenced by the usage of the name 'Yodit' as a Betä ʿĪsra'el regnal name, or by the development of oral traditions identifying it as such.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See 'Gedewon', *EAE*, II (2005), 730a–730b (J. Quirin). A Betä ʿĪsra'el leader by that name plays a prominent role in accounts of the wars between the autonomous Betä ʿĪsra'el and the Solomonic monarchs Šāršā Dəngəl (Conti Rossini 1907, I, 123, 170–171) and Susənyos (Pereira 1892, 116–118, 136, 209, 215–218, 387, 437, 441, 464, 553). A few Hebrew letters written in Jerusalem likely allude to a Betä ʿĪsra'el ruler named 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 seems probable that 'Gad and Dan' is a rendering of the name Gedon, itself a rendering of the name Gedewon. Both the forms Gedon and Gedewon are used to this day by the Betä ʿĪsra'el (Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming).

<sup>40</sup> Quirin 1992, 25–26, 75–76, 108. Quirin does not elaborate regarding the traditions in question, though some such traditions are alluded to in James Bruce's account of his journey to Ethiopia in the years 1769–1771. When describing the history of the Betä ʿĪsra'el, Bruce (1790, I, 486) relates: 'A great overthrow, which they received in the year 1600, brought them to the very brink of ruin. In that battle Gideon and Judith, their king and queen, were slain. They have since adopted a more peaceable and dutiful behaviour, pay taxes, and are suffered to enjoy their own government. Their king and queen's name was again Gideon and Judith, when I was in Abyssinia, and these names seem to be preferred for those of the Royal family'. See also Bruce 1790, II, 165; Bruce 1790, III, 252.

<sup>41</sup> For an overview of these traditions, see 'ʿĪsato', *EAE*, II (2005), 376b–377a (S. Kaplan). For mentions of the tradition identifying this queen as Jewish, see Bruce 1790, I, 526–527; Quirin 1992, 19–20; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 225–232.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Andersen 2000; Levi 1992; Kaplan 1992, 45–47.

<sup>43</sup> Andersen (2000, 41), for example, suggests that the Betä ʿĪsra'el–Solomonic wars and the existence of a Betä ʿĪsra'el leader by the name of Yodit (as possibly implied in the *Tarikä Nəgāšt* and later narrated by Bruce) could have served as a prototype for the Yodit traditions



A probable, later reference to this passage in the *Tarikä Nägäšt* was made by James Bruce, the famous Scottish traveller who visited Ethiopia in the years 1769–1771 and wrote a detailed account on his journey and on the history of the country, based on texts and oral accounts he encountered. Bruce relates, when describing the Islamic conquest of the Solomonic Kingdom: ‘Gideon [Gedewon] and Judith [Yodit], king and queen of the Jews, in the high country of Samen, after having suffered much from Gragné<sup>44</sup> [*Imām Aḥmad*], had at last rebelled and joined him’.<sup>45</sup> Since his account follows elements of the *Tarikä Nägäšt* narrative,<sup>46</sup> it seems that he identified the Gedewon and Yodit mentioned there as Betä ʿĪsraʾel.

The mention of Yodit as the ‘ḥamat of the king’ raises the question of whether there is any indication of a familial relationship between Ləbnä Dəngəl and the Betä ʿĪsraʾel ruling dynasty. While no contemporary source known to the present author indicates this, a tradition of unknown provenance documented centuries later claims that this was the case: the German traveler Eduard Rüppell, in his account of his travels in Ethiopia in the years 1832–1833, describes the reigns of different Ethiopian rulers, largely based on chronicles he reviewed. After mentioning the reign of Yaʿaqob, son of Šāršä Dəngəl (1597–1603, 1605–1607),<sup>47</sup> he states: ‘The emperor Lebena Denghel [Ləbnä Dəngəl] had a second son by the name of Jacob [Yaʿaqob], who married a Falasha by the name of Wesenabi, and with her fathered Fasiladas, the father of the next ruler [Susənyos]’.<sup>48</sup> Susənyos’ father was indeed named Fasilädäs and was the son of Yaʿaqob, son of Ləbnä Dəngəl. However, other sources identify Yaʿaqob’s wife and Fasilädäs’ mother as Nägästä Azeb, a Christian woman from Gondär.<sup>49</sup> Quirin raised the possibility that if Yaʿaqob was indeed married to a Betä ʿĪsraʾel woman named ‘Wesenabi’ (which could refer to the name Wäsäne Abiyy), the above-mentioned reference to Yodit could be a reference to her mother or to her.<sup>50</sup>

portraying the warrior-queen who destroyed Aksum as a member of the Betä ʿĪsraʾel community.

<sup>44</sup> Grañ, literally ‘the left-handed’, is a nickname by which the *Imām* was widely known in the Solomonic Kingdom (see Chekroun and Hirsch 2020, 456).

<sup>45</sup> Bruce 1790, II, 165.

<sup>46</sup> Compare Bruce 1790, II, 164–165 with Perruchon 1893, 277, 283.

<sup>47</sup> The Solomonic monarch Yaʿaqob was the son of Šāršä Dəngəl and Harägo, the sister of the Betä ʿĪsraʾel ruler Gedewon. For an overview on his life and reign, see Kaplan 1992, 88–90; Pankhurst 1997; ‘Yaʿaqob’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 6a–7a (L. Cohen).

<sup>48</sup> Rüppell 1838–1840, II, 359, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Yaʿaqob’, *E Ae*, V (2014), 7b–8a (M. Kleiner).

<sup>50</sup> Quirin 1992, 75–76.

## The Arrival of the Portuguese and the Initial Engagement of the Solomonic-Portuguese Alliance with the *Imām*'s Forces

Inspired by the legends of Prester John, according to which a powerful Christian kingdom existed beyond the Islamic World, and with the aim of forging a Christian alliance against the Muslims, Portugal sought out the Solomonic Kingdom from the onset of its fifteenth-century exploration of Sub-Saharan Africa. Diplomatic ties were forged between the two kingdoms in the early sixteenth century. In 1535, in the wake of *Imām* Aḥmad's invasion, the Solomonic Emperor Ləbnä Dəngəl (r.1508–1540) dispatched the Portuguese surgeon João Bermudez, who was serving in his court at the time, with a plea for help from Western Europe.<sup>51</sup>

Ləbnä Dəngəl, who had suffered defeat at the hands of *Imām* Aḥmad, spent the last years of his reign as a fugitive.<sup>52</sup> The challenging task of re-taking the Ethiopian Highlands fell to his son and heir, Gälawdewos (r.1540–1559). In this endeavor, Gälawdewos was aided by a Portuguese force of 400 soldiers, armed with firearms, which landed at Massawa (Məşəwwa', in modern-day Eritrea) in 1541, upon hearing of the dire state which the Solomonic kingdom was in.<sup>53</sup> This force, led by Christovão da Gama, son of the famous Vasco da Gama, marched from Massawa to Dəbarwa and joined forces with the Solomonic queen mother Säblä Wängel, who was at Däbrä Dammo (fig. 4).<sup>54</sup> The army then marched southwards to various localities in Təgray, where it engaged the *Imām*'s forces. The *Imām* himself departed from his encampment in Dämbəya in order to take part in these battles. The Portuguese and Solomonic force, after having suffered casualties, encamped in Wäfla for the *kəramt* (rainy season), and the *Imām*'s forces encamped nearby in Zəbül (the modern-day locality of Zobil).<sup>55</sup> It is in Wäfla where we will begin our examination of the route taken by this army to reach the 'Mountain of the Jews'.

<sup>51</sup> See Abir 1980, 97–98; Martínez d'Alòs-Moner 2015, 3–30; 'Portugal, relations with', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 180a–181b (L.F. Thomaz).

<sup>52</sup> 'Ləbnä Dəngəl', *E Ae*, III (2007), 535b–537b (M. Kleiner).

<sup>53</sup> See Abir 1980, 98–99; Chekroun and Hirsch 2020, 461–462; Martínez d'Alòs-Moner 2015, 30–38; 'Portugal, relations with', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 180a–181b (L.F. Thomaz); Whiteway 1902, 2–4.

<sup>54</sup> Beckingham 1959, 364; Whiteway 1902, 5–23. Däbrä Dammo is one of the oldest and most prestigious monasteries in Ethiopia. It is naturally fortified, making it an ideal place of refuge. See 'Däbrä Dammo', *E Ae*, II (2005), 17b–20b (Tsegay Berhe G. Libanos).

<sup>55</sup> 'Gama, Christovão da', *E Ae*, II (2005), 663b–664b (A. Martínez d'Alòs-Moner); Whiteway 1902, 23–55. For an overview on the region of Wäfla, see 'Wäfla', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 1068b–1069a (Wudu Tafete Kassu).

## The Battle to Take the ‘Mountain of the Jews’

Miguel de Castanhoso, a soldier who participated, as part of the Portuguese force, in the campaign to re-take the northern Ethiopian Highlands, wrote a detailed account of this campaign.<sup>56</sup> His description, an eyewitness account, is of central importance for examining the geographical aspects of the events associated with the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ (‘serra de judeos’). A second account of the campaign, considered less reliable than the first, was written by the abovementioned João Bermudez, who claimed to have been appointed Patriarch of Ethiopia and accompanied the Portuguese force.<sup>57</sup> Bermudez travelled with the main Portuguese force, but not the force which advanced towards the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ and conquered it.<sup>58</sup> Two additional texts, written by Gaspar Correa<sup>59</sup>

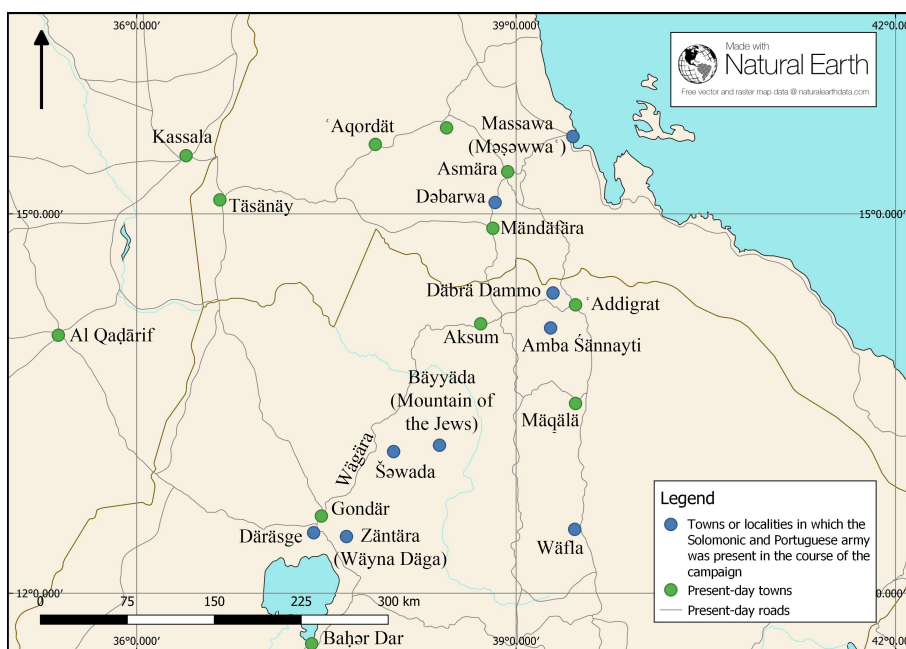


Fig. 4: Localities through which the Portuguese and Solomonic troops passed, or in which they encamped, in the course of the campaign.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Castanhoso, Miguel de’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 694b–695a (L. Cohen).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Bermudez, João’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 540a–541a (A. Martínez d’Alòs-Moner). English translations of both Castanhoso’s and Bermudez’ accounts are provided by Whiteway (1902).

<sup>58</sup> See Whiteway 1902, 162.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Correa, Gaspar’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 804b–805a (M. Kleiner); Correa 1864.

and Diogo do Couto<sup>60</sup> during the mid-sixteenth and late sixteenth/early seventeenth century, respectively, incorporate information provided by individuals who took part in the campaign.

Miguel de Castanhoso related that while the army was encamped in Wäfla:

Dom Christovão learnt that there was near us a hill of the Jews, by which the Preste<sup>61</sup> [Gälawdewos] must of necessity pass as there was no other road; that it had been captured by the Moors; and that the captain of it, who was a Jew, was a fugitive because he obeyed the Preste; he put himself on the defensive when the Moors attacked the hill, and when he found they had captured it he fled [...] The Jew informed Dom Christovão about the hill, and told him that there were but few Moors on it, and that he would guide him to an approach where he would not be discovered until he was at the top [...] that he would find on it many and good horses that were bred on the hill; and that it was quite impossible for the Preste in any manner to pass save over it.<sup>62</sup>

A Portuguese and Solomonian force was dispatched in secret to conquer the mountain, led by Da Gama and guided by the Betä ʾĪsraʾel commander. The remaining Portuguese and Solomonian army remained in Wäfla to safeguard the camp. The advancing army carried several skins, which they used, together with branches they cut, to devise rafts, with which they crossed the Täckäze River.<sup>63</sup>

When they and the mules had all crossed, they began to climb the hill, not being discovered until they were at the top. When the Moors saw them they armed quickly; there were about three thousand foot and four hundred horse.<sup>64</sup> [...] The Captain of the Moors [...] advanced in front of his men and encountered Dom Christovão, in which encounter he died. The other horsemen with Dom Christovão also overcame each his man. By this time the foot had all collected into one body, and did nothing save slay the Moors; who, seeing their Captain dead [...] took to flight, and many died, for the very Jews slew them, and few escaped.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> ‘Couto, Diogo do’, *EAE*, I (2003), 811a–811b (M. Kleiner); Couto 1780.

<sup>61</sup> This is a reference to the term Prester John, about whom see above.

<sup>62</sup> Whiteway 1902, 56.

<sup>63</sup> Whiteway 1902, 57–58.

<sup>64</sup> Correa (1864, 373) mentions 4000 foot-soldiers and 300 horses.

<sup>65</sup> Whiteway 1902, 58.

Bermudez also describes the active part that the Betä ʿĪsraʾel who inhabited the mountain took in the battle:

The Jew inhabitants of the hill followed in pursuit of the Moors and blocked the passes in the hills, with which they were well acquainted, and killed nearly all, including the captain, and captured all the spoil they carried, and their women. They brought all these to D. Christovao, and offered them to him, with the Moor captain's head, which they also brought.<sup>66</sup>

After conquering the mountain, the army collected spoils—slaves, horses, mules, cattle, and goods—and then enabled the Betä ʿĪsraʾel leader to re-assume command of it, charging him with sending a message to Gälawdewos, informing him that the mountains had been taken.<sup>67</sup> Castanhoso related that this leader and twelve other Betä ʿĪsraʾel, commanders of places on the hill, converted to Christianity.<sup>68</sup>

### **The 'Mountain of the Jews' as a Haven for the Solomonic Monarchy**

The army returned to the camp at Wäfla just as the Muslim forces had received Ottoman reinforcements. In August 1542, the Muslims attacked the Portuguese and Solomonic camp, in what would be known as the Battle of Wäfla.<sup>69</sup> In the battle several of the Portuguese soldiers were killed and Da Gama was wounded and later captured by the Islamic forces, brought before the *Imām*, and executed

<sup>66</sup> Whiteway 1902, 162.

<sup>67</sup> Whiteway 1902, 58–59.

<sup>68</sup> Whiteway 1902, 59. Bermudez also mentions this conversion but relates that it was carried out upon his arrival to the mountain (see below), and that it was the Jewish captain, his wife and his sons who converted (Whiteway 1902, 177). It may be that twelve in Castanhoso's account is a typological number rather than a precise one—for the Christian author, a leader and twelve brethren may have been reminiscent of Jesus and the twelve Apostles. It should also be noted that later accounts of Betä ʿĪsraʾel political autonomy indicate that Betä ʿĪsraʾel rule over large parts of the Səmen Mountains persisted until the reign of Šāršä Dəngəl (1563–1597), and over their north-eastern part (including the northern part of the heights of Bäyyäda), until the reign of Susənyos (1607–1632). See Kribus forthcoming a. Hence, regardless of whether the commander of the 'Mountain of the Jews' did indeed convert, it is unlikely that this locality, which, I shall argue below, is the heights of Bäyyäda, was governed by practicing Christians for an extended period of time.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion on the dates given for this battle in various accounts, see Whiteway 1902, 60–61. See also Beckingham 1959, 366.

by him. The *Imām*, certain that with this victory he had quelled the military threat that the Christian forces posed, returned to his headquarters in Dämbəya.<sup>70</sup>

Most of the remaining Portuguese, as well as the Solomonic queen mother and her entourage and forces, regrouped and made their way to the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, where they awaited King Gälawdewos, who arrived shortly after.<sup>71</sup> Castanhoso relates:

We were here [at the ‘Mountain of the Jews’] all December, both because the Preste [Gälawdewos] wished to celebrate Christmas here, and also to collect the men who daily flocked to him. There assembled here eight thousand foot and five hundred horse.<sup>72</sup>

The army and the king remained there also in January, sent word to those among the Portuguese who had fled elsewhere (and had since made their way to Massawa), and retrieved arms which the Portuguese had deposited at Däbrä Dammo.<sup>73</sup> In early February, the army marched towards Dämbəya to engage with the *Imām*’s forces, with the queen mother remaining in the safe haven of the ‘Mountain of the Jews’. The army marched via Šəwada (fig. 5) and engaged with Muslim forces in Wägära. It later advanced to the locality known as Wäyna Däga, as described in the *Tarikä Nägäšt*:

And King Ašnaf Sägäd [Gälawdewos] set forth and met his mother and those who remained from among the Afranğ [Franks, i.e. Portuguese] in the Land of Səmen and took council with them. They made [camp in] Šəwada on the Month of Hədar and on the 13<sup>th</sup> they did battle in Wägära [...] and on the 19<sup>th</sup> he [the king] came down to Dāräsge [the *Imām*’s capital in Dämbəya] and burned their houses with fire and plundered their property. And he returned to Šəwada and remained there for two months.

Grañ [the *Imām*] returned to Dämbəya from Zäbəl [Zəbul] and the king [Gälawdewos] rose up from Šəwada and arrived at Wäyna Däga on the 5<sup>th</sup> of [the Month of] Yäkkatit and remained there. Grañ set forth from Dāräsge and Grañ’s soldiers came near the king.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Whiteway 1902, 59–70, 165–175.

<sup>71</sup> Whiteway 1902, 70–73, 175–178.

<sup>72</sup> Whiteway 1902, 74.

<sup>73</sup> Whiteway 1902, 74–75.

<sup>74</sup> Basset 1882, 19, 111–112, my translation. See also Foti 1941, 102–103.



Fig. 5: The Valley of Šəwada, located between the Səmen Mountains and Wägära, view to the north-east.



Fig. 6: The place within the locality of Zantära where, according to local tradition, the *Imām* was buried after he was killed nearby during the Battle of Wäyna Däga. This locality is just east of the road leading to Dänqāz from the south.

After waiting for reinforcements and engaging in skirmishes with the Islamic army, the Solomonic and Portuguese army engaged the *Imām*'s forces in February or March 1543, a battle which would be known as the Battle of Wäyna Däga.<sup>75</sup> In this battle the *Imām* was killed, as related in the *Tarikä Nägäšt*, 'he [the *Imām*] fell in the Ascent of Zantära and died by the commandment of God' (fig. 6).<sup>76</sup> His death caused the Muslim army to disperse and retreat, and ultimately led the Solomonic re-conquest of the northern Ethiopian Highlands.<sup>77</sup>

### **Suggestions in Past Scholarship Regarding the Location of the 'Mountain of the Jews'**

A few scholars have attempted to identify the location of the 'Mountain of the Jews'. Whiteway identifies it with Ambassäl (Amba Säl, fig. 7).<sup>78</sup> He argues that its location south of Wäfla accords with Castanhoso's account—the Täckäze is nearer in this direction, and no other large rivers are crossed along the way (the crossing of which is absent from the account).<sup>79</sup> Gälawdewos was reportedly travelling from the region of Šäwa, and hence, an approach from the south rather than west would be more likely. Ambassäl's size and natural fortifications accord with this account. Moreover, Whiteway argues that the name Caloa, which Couto states is the name of the 'Mountain of the Jews', may be a rendering of 'Saloa', which is similar to the name Säl.<sup>80</sup>

With regards to the reference to the mountain being inhabited by Jews, Whiteway points to its proximity to Amba Gəšan,<sup>81</sup> which, in the *Tarikä Nägäšt*, is described as being home to Israelites.<sup>82</sup> He does, however, acknowledge Basset's assertion (which is supported by recent scholarship) that this is a reference to members of the Solomonic royal family, which are referred to in Ethiopian literature as Israelites.<sup>83</sup> Whiteway also notes that the name Gimén, which appears in

<sup>75</sup> Chekroun and Hirsch (2020, 463) point to discrepancies between different sources with regards to the date of the battle.

<sup>76</sup> Basset 1882, 20, 112, my translation. See also Foti 1941, 103.

<sup>77</sup> Solomon Gebreyes Beyene 2016, 108–113, 192–195; Whiteway 1902, 75–83, 191–194.

<sup>78</sup> Whiteway 1902, lviii–lxii.

<sup>79</sup> Beckingham (1959, 368) argues that since the Ethiopian Highlands are intersected by numerous rivers and streams, it should not be expected that every crossing of a large waterway would be described.

<sup>80</sup> Couto 1780, 319; Whiteway 1902, lix–lx.

<sup>81</sup> This table-mountain served, in the Early Solomonic period, as a prison for members of the Solomonic royal family, and thus prevented succession struggles—once a king had passed away, only his heir would be taken down from the mountain and succeed the throne. See 'Amba Gəšan', *EAE*, I (2003), 220a–221a (Haile Gabriel Dagne).

<sup>82</sup> Basset 1881, 18, 109.

<sup>83</sup> Basset 1881, 257; see also, for example, Beckingham 1959, 369–370; Dege-Müller 2018.



Pereira's edition of Castanhoso's account as the name of the Hill of the Jews, may be a rendering of Səmen, but suggests that it may also be a rendering of Gəšān or Gedewon.<sup>84</sup> In my opinion, the first option is far more likely, given the evidence for a location in the Səmen Mountains which will be discussed below. This is supported by Beckingham's observation that Gimen is likely a corruption of the spelling Cimen, which is a common spelling in Portuguese sources for Səmen.<sup>85</sup> Finally, Whiteway argues that a mention in Castanhoso's account of the 'Mountain of the Jews' being forty or fifty leagues from the straits (Bab el-Mandeb) indicates that the coastal area could be seen from its summit, a situation which, he suggests, is true of Ambassäl but not of the Səmen.<sup>86</sup>

Beckingham points to a place by the name of Saloa (see above) appearing in the GSGS map, sheet ND-37 (the Asmara map of the British War Office, 1947) in the eastern slopes of 'the mountain mass that rises to a peak in the Ras Dejen', i.e., the heights of Bāyyäda.<sup>87</sup> This locality also appears in the updated, yet unpublished edition of the *Simen Mountains* map produced by Hans Hurni et al. (2003), there bearing the name Selwa (fig. 7).<sup>88</sup> Beckingham further states that 'it must be remembered that much of this region [the Səmen] is very imperfectly known, especially the eastern side on the left bank of the Takazze [i.e. Bāyyäda], which is where the Jews' Mountain is most likely to have been situated'.<sup>89</sup> He adds that since the Səmen was inhabited by the Betä ʿĪsraʾel, whereas the Ambassäl area was not, it is far more likely that a 'Mountain of the Jews' would be located there than in the latter region.<sup>90</sup> Beckingham further argues that had the Solomonic and Portuguese army attacked a Muslim garrison at Ambassäl, it would stand to reason that the *Imām*'s forces, located nearby in Zəbul, would have intervened, and that it would not be likely that the *Imām* would return to Dämbəya following the Battle of Wäfla, knowing that the Ambassäl area was controlled by the Christians, with the Solomonic monarch headed there.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Castanhoso 1898, 95; Whiteway 1902, lix.

<sup>85</sup> Beckingham 1959, 366.

<sup>86</sup> Whiteway 1902, lxi, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Beckingham 1959, 367.

<sup>88</sup> I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Hans Hurni, the former warden of the Səmen Mountains National Park, and his wife Yemisrach Nadew Woreta, for enabling me to consult this map and for their help, advice, and support over the years in our research on the historical geography of the Səmen Mountains.

<sup>89</sup> Beckingham 1959, 367.

<sup>90</sup> Beckingham 1959, 369–370.

<sup>91</sup> Beckingham 1959, 370.

Beckingham argues that Gälawdewos' route from Šäwa was not the eastern route, which would lead through the Ambassäl area, but rather the western route through Goğgam and Bägemdär. This suggestion is partially based on a description written by Pedro Páez (1564–1622), a Jesuit who resided in Ethiopia from 1603 to his death and wrote extensively about the country and its history.<sup>92</sup> Based on an Ethiopian royal chronicle describing the reign of the Solomonic monarch Minas (r.1559–1563), Páez relates that from Šäwa, Gälawdewos travelled to Badla<sup>93</sup> and Bägemdär, later battling a Muslim army that had travelled through Wägära, and joining his mother at Šəwada, departing from there to battle the *Imām* at Wäyna Däga.<sup>94</sup>

It is interesting to note that, according to the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica entry on Wäfla, the name of one of the two highest mountains in this region is Ayhud Amba, i.e. 'mountain/stronghold of the Jews' (the other being Wänbärät).<sup>95</sup> I have not yet been able to confirm this in available cartographical sources, but this is not surprising, since many toponyms in Ethiopia are not represented in available maps. This 'Mountain of the Jews' cannot be the one which was the focal point of the campaign in question, since it is not west of the Täkkäze, nor is it close enough to the area governed by the autonomous Betä ʿĪsraʾel to have been formerly governed by them. Determining, in future research, the reasons for the development of this toponym and documenting associated traditions would be of some interest in the endeavour to better understand expressions of Jewish-Christian dynamics in the geography of Ethiopia.

### The 'Mountain of the Jews' as Bāyyäda

Beckingham's identification of the 'Mountain of the Jews' in 'the eastern side [of the Səmen] on the left bank of the Takazze' is, we will argue, correct. The descriptions of this mountain, when examined vis-à-vis the geography and toponymy of the Səmen, enable us to establish that the heights of Bāyyäda in their entirety were referred to as such, and to tentatively suggest a location for a stronghold in these heights—in the locality of Wati, overlooking the Täkkäze River Valley.

<sup>92</sup> For an overview on Páez and his writings, see 'Páez', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 89a–90b (A. Martínez d'Alòs-Moner). For a recent, critical English translation of his monumental work, the *History of Ethiopia*, see Boavida et al. 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Beckingham (1959, 371) suggests that 'Badla' is a rendering of Wadla, a region south of Lasta and east of Bägemdär. See 'Wadla', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 1067a (E. Sokolinskaia).

<sup>94</sup> Beckingham 1959, 370–371; Boavida et al. 2011, 15–16.

<sup>95</sup> 'Wäfla', *E Ae*, IV (2011), 1068b–1069a (Wudu Tafete Kassu).

Castanhoso describes the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ as being:

twelve leagues long and all very fertile, with many populous places and villages and very strong; there are only two passes to it, all the rest is scarped rock. There are about ten thousand or twelve thousand Jews on it; it is four leagues across; on the summit are very pleasant valleys and streams, and by the skirts of the hill runs a river as large as the Douro, called Tagacem [Täkkäze], the one crossed by Dom Christovão; it runs all round the hill, which is almost made an island by it. It is the most fertile hill that can be, and they may boast that they still enjoy manna, since they are in such luxury that they can get honey from the rifts in the rocks, and there is so much that there is no owner, and whoever likes collects it.<sup>96</sup>

A second description, written by Bermudez, is also indicative of the mountain’s characteristics:

We went to the Jews’ hill [after the defeat at the Battle of Wäfla], where the country is safe and well supplied. It is surrounded by crags and difficult approaches [...] When we reached the skirt of the Jews’ hill, the captain of it came to us with supplies and refreshments, and asked the queen to ascend the hill, because she could not be more secure in any other part of that district than in that hill, for it has but one approach, and that could be easily guarded and defended from the enemy if he came. Further, that that territory belonged to the queen, and that the tribute from it alone was sufficient to maintain the army for five or six months.<sup>97</sup>

From Castanhoso’s description, we can infer that the mountain was a large, fertile plateau surrounded by cliffs or steep slopes, flanked on more than one side by the Täkkäze, and inhabited by a large Betä ʿĪsraʾel population. The dimensions provided are 12 x 4 leagues. Since a Portuguese league is roughly the equivalent of 6 km,<sup>98</sup> this would amount to 72 x 24 km. No single mountain flanking the Täkkäze reaches these dimensions, and it is not likely that Castanhoso would have stated a precise measurement, but his description is a clear indication that the mountain in question was of considerable size.

<sup>96</sup> Whiteway 1902, 59.

<sup>97</sup> Whiteway 1902, 176–177.

<sup>98</sup> Silva Marques 2001, 23.

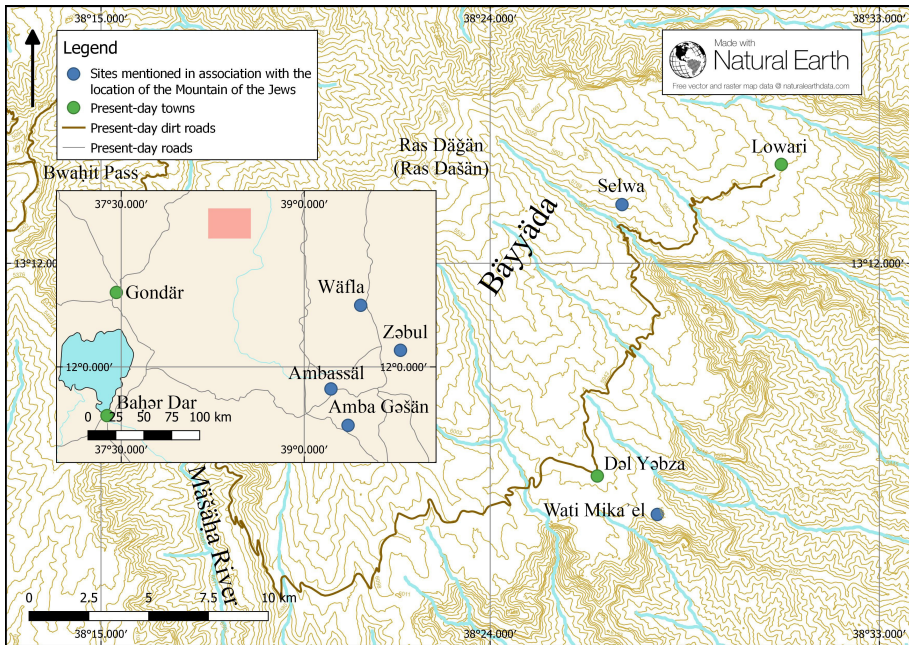


Fig. 7: Localities mentioned with regards to the location of the ‘Mountain of the Jews’.

In the Səmen Mountains there are only two plateaus which seem large enough to have been described in such a way by Castanhoso—Bāyyāda and Ġan Amora (fig. 8). Bāyyāda, comprising the south-eastern part of the Səmen Mountain range, measures 35 km at its widest extent, from the north-east to the south-west, and 18 km from the north-west to the south-east. It is flanked by the Tākkāze in the south and east, by the Māšāḥa River in the west, and by the Sāgännāt valley in the north. Hence, it is surrounded on all sides but the north-west by rivers and fits the above-mentioned description of ‘almost [being] made an island’, though not exclusively by the Tākkāze.

Theoretically, one could argue that the heights of Ġan Amora are also a valid candidate for being the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, since they were also a plateau surrounded by river valleys within the core area of the autonomous Betā Ĥsra’el. They are larger than Bāyyāda, measuring 52 km from the north-north-west to the south-south-east (not including the slopes descending to the river valleys) and 24 km from the east-north-east to the west-south-west. However, only their south-eastern reaches are flanked by the Tākkāze. Hence, it is unlikely that they would be described as surrounded by it.

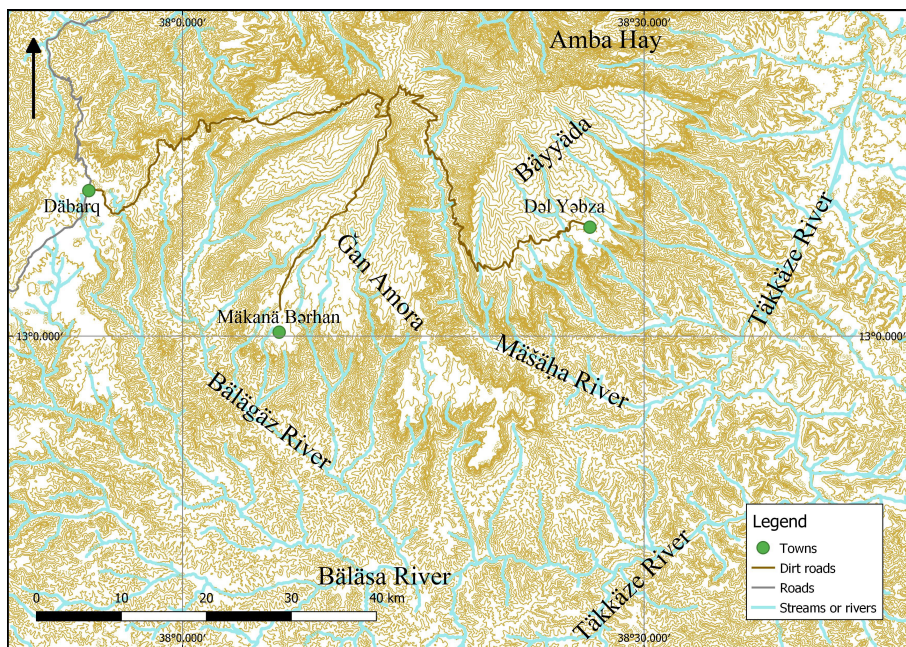


Fig. 8: The heights of Ġan Amora and Bäyyāda in the Səmen Mountains.

A second element pointing to Bäyyāda rather than Ġan Amora as the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ has to do with the locality by the name of Amba Wati. In his writings, Páez provided an account of the Portuguese conquest of the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, in which he refers to this stronghold as ‘a very secure mountain called Oatī, in the province of Cemēn [Səmen]’.<sup>99</sup> Beckingham, following Littmann, noted that this seems to be a reference to the same locality referred to as Amba Wati in the chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Susənyos and mentioned in association with the campaign in which Gedewon, leader of the autonomous Betä ʿĪsraʾel, was killed, shortly before the final conquest of the Betä ʿĪsraʾel autonomous region in 1626:<sup>100</sup> ‘Gedewon destroyed the *amba* of Wati and killed many people and looted their cattle and burned their houses with fire’.<sup>101</sup>

While a locality by the name of Wati does not appear on the historical and modern maps examined in the course of this research, a search for this locality on the internet revealed two posts and a YouTube clip referring to the locality of Wati

<sup>99</sup> Boavida et al. 2011, 285–286.

<sup>100</sup> Beckingham 1959, 366–367.

<sup>101</sup> Pereira 1892–1900, I, 281–282, my translation. For a detailed overview of this campaign and its geography, see Kribus forthcoming a; Kribus and Wexler forthcoming.

in the region of Bāyyāda. Both posts, on the official Facebook page of the Bāyyāda *wārāda* (administrative region), refer to a *qābāle* (sub-unit of the larger administrative region) by the name of Wati in Bāyyāda.<sup>102</sup> One of the posts, as well as the YouTube clip, refer to a church by the name of Wati Mika'el.<sup>103</sup> This post explicitly states that the church is located within Wati *qābāle* and contains photographs of the church.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, a church by the name of Wati Mika'el appears in the Dilbiza map produced by the Ethiopian Mapping Authority (2003), c. 1.5 km south-east of Dəl Yəbza, the capital of Bāyyāda *wārāda*. An examination on Google Earth revealed that while a church is not situated on the precise location marked on the map, there is a church located on a hilltop c. 1.5 km to the east-south-east of this location (fig. 7). A comparison of this church, as seen on Google Earth, and the above-mentioned photographs of Wati Mika'el church reveals that this is indeed the church in question.

Thus, we have established the general location of the locality of Wati: The environs of the Wati Mika'el church. I would argue that the existence in Bāyyāda of localities bearing the two names given in the sources for the 'Mountain of the Jews'—Wati and Saloa (Selwa)—clearly establishes Bāyyāda as the location of this mountain.

While the heights of Bāyyāda as a whole seem to have been considered the 'Mountain of the Jews', the location and characteristics of the locality of Wati raise an intriguing possibility: the hill on which the church of Wati Mika'el is located is situated at the top of a spur which overlooks and descends into the Tākkāze River Valley to the south-east, the general direction leading to Wāfla.

<sup>102</sup> Beyeda [= Bāyyāda] Communications 2014–2024, <https://www.facebook.com/beyeda.woreda/posts/1563555473810336>, 14 June 2020 (Abiyyu Kase) accessed on 7 September 2023; Beyeda Communications 2014–2024, <https://hi-in.facebook.com/beyeda.woreda/photos/በበየዳ-ወረዳ-ዋቲ-ቀበሌ-ኮራይ-ተፍሰስ-በጣም-ያገገሙ-ሲሆን-በውስጡ-ንብ-ማነብ-ዶሮ-እርባታመስፍ-ልማትና-ሌሎች-የስራ-እድል-መፍ/1278857152280171>, 29 July 2019, accessed on 7 September 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Beyeda [= Bāyyāda] Communications 2014–2024, <https://www.facebook.com/beyeda.woreda/posts/1563555473810336>, 14 June 2020 (Abiyyu Kase) accessed on 7 September 2023; Beyeda [= Bāyyāda] Communications 2019–2024, የጥምቀት በዓል ዋቲ ሚካኤል (YäṬəmqāt bā'al wati mika'el, 'Ṭəmqāt celebration Wati Michael'), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpSCUNmI3A>, 20 January 2023, accessed on 7 September 2023.

<sup>104</sup> The post also attributes the initial construction of the church to Aṣe Yəṣḥaq (r.1414–1429/30). While the reign of this monarch predated the events described in this article, such an association might be significant in terms of the dynamics between the autonomous Betä ʾĪsra'el and Christian, Solomonic authorities: Aṣe Yəṣḥaq is attested to have waged a campaign against the Betä ʾĪsra'el, with dire consequences for the latter, and to have founded churches on land conquered from the Betä ʾĪsra'el, some of which officially commemorated his victory. See Kribus 2023.

Could it be that the hill served as an outpost or stronghold guarding the access to Bāyyāda from that direction? And if so, could the battle to take the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ have taken place in its environs? Future archaeological exploration of this locality and detailed mapping of the routes leading from Bāyyāda to the Tākkāze river valley could potentially shed light on this issue.

### **Bāyyāda as Amba Gedewon, Bruce’s ‘Jews Rock’**

James Bruce, who was familiar with at least some of the Portuguese accounts regarding the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, refers to this mountain several times. In his writings, Bruce draws upon information in various textual sources, including Solomonic royal chronicles, as well as his own experiences in Ethiopia and traditions which were narrated to him. His sources of information for specific accounts are not always clear, and hence, some of his accounts should be treated with caution. For instance, writing at a time when the Betä ʿĪsraʾel were no longer politically autonomous, Bruce relates:

After passing the Tacazzè, the boundary between Sire and Samen,<sup>105</sup> we come to that mountainous province called by the last name. A large chain of rugged mountains, where is the Jews Rock, (which I shall often mention as the highest) [...] It is in great part possessed by Jews, and there Gideon and Judith, king and queen of that nation, and, as they say, of the house of Judah, maintain still their ancient sovereignty and religion from very early times.<sup>106</sup>

Bruce did not, as far as is known, travel to the ‘Jews Rock’, but he did pass near the western reaches of the Səmen when ascending the Limalimo Pass on his way to Gondär. When describing the Səmen mountains, Bruce writes:

I take those [mountains] to the S. E. [south-east of the Səmen] to be much higher [than those of the north-west, where Bruce had been], and, above all, that sharp-pointed hill Amba Gideon, the present residence of the governor of Samen, Ayto Tesfos.<sup>107</sup> This is otherwise called the Jews-Rock, famous in the history of this country for the many revolts of the Jews against the Abyssinian kings.

<sup>105</sup> Šire is a region in western Təgray bordering with the Tākkāze, north of Šällāmt. See ‘Šire’, *EAE*, IV (2011), 669a–672a (Denis Nosnitsin). It is thus the last part of Təgray traversed along the road leading to the Limalimo Pass.

<sup>106</sup> Bruce 1790, III, 252.

<sup>107</sup> For further mentions of this governor in Bruce’s account, see Bruce 1790, IV, 63–64, 152, 189–203, 211, 223, 229, 231, 236, 262.



The mountain is everywhere so steep and high, that it is not enough to say against the will, but without the assistance of those above, no one from below can venture to ascend. On the top is a large plain, affording plenty of pasture, as well as room for plowing and sowing for the maintenance of the army; and there is water, at all seasons, in great plenty, and even fish in the streams upon it; so that, although the inhabitants of the mountain had been often besieged for a considerable time together, they suffered little inconvenience from it, nor ever were taken unless by treason; except by Christopher de Gama and his Portuguese, who are said, by their own historians, to have stormed this rock, and put the Mahometan [Muslim] garrison to the sword. No mention of this honourable conquest is made in the annals of Abyssinia, though they give the history of this campaign of Don Christopher in the life of Claudius [Gälawdewos], or Atzenaf Segued.<sup>108</sup>

From this description, it is clear that for Bruce, the ‘Mountain of the Jews’ which the Portuguese took part in conquering, the ‘Jews Rock’ and Amba Gedewon (i.e. the mountain or stronghold of Gedewon) are one and the same.<sup>109</sup> Bruce locates this mountain in the south-east of the Səmen, which is the location of Bäyyäda. He mentions that this mountain is the highest in the Səmen, an assertion which, if he is referring to Bäyyäda, is indeed true: the highest peak in Bäyyäda, Ras Däḡän (popularly known as Ras Dašan), towers to a height of 4533 m above sea level and is the highest mountain in the Horn of Africa. Though it should be noted that Ras Däḡän, while higher than surrounding peaks, does not tower prominently above them. Hence, prior to the twentieth century, it was not always recognized as the highest mountain in the Səmen.<sup>110</sup>

Bruce’s assertion that the ‘Jews Rock’ was the scene of ‘many revolts of the Jews against the Abyssinian kings’ is also true: The chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Šāršä Dəngəl (r.1563–1597) locates the stronghold of the Betä ʾƏsraʾel leader Rādaʾi in the Səmen, in the mountains east of the Mäšäḥa river (the general location of Bäyyäda).<sup>111</sup> The location of the main stronghold of Gedewon, leader of the autonomous Betä ʾƏsraʾel, in the course of his wars with the Solomonic monarch Susənyos, was Sägännät, the valley located between Bäyyäda in the south and Amba Hay in the north.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Bruce 1790, III, 189.

<sup>109</sup> See also Bruce 1790, II, 188.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, the map accompanying Samuel Gobat’s (1850) book on his mission to Ethiopia in the years 1830–1832. In this map, it is written that Amba Hay (just north of Bäyyäda, 4142 m above sea level) is ‘said to be the highest Mts. in Abyssinia’.

<sup>111</sup> Conti Rossini 1907, I, 90–91; Kribus forthcoming a.

<sup>112</sup> Kribus forthcoming a; Kribus and Dege-Müller 2022; Kribus and Wexler forthcoming.



A locality by the name of Amba Gedeon (i.e. Amba Gedewon) appears in the map accompanying the account written by the Protestant missionary Stern regarding his activities in Ethiopia in 1860–1861.<sup>113</sup> There, it is situated just south of the Māna and Bālāgāz Rivers, i.e. near, but outside the southern reaches of the Səmen. A locality by the name of Gedeon appears in the same location in the Asmara map of the British War Office (1918). Beckingham relates that in the maps which he consulted in which Amba Gedewon is marked, its location seems to be derived from the information provided by Bruce,<sup>114</sup> though such a location does not appear in the maps accompanying Bruce’s book with which I am familiar.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, if the location of Amba Gedewon on the above-mentioned maps is based on Bruce’s account, it is noteworthy that this location is not very distant from Bāyyāda, to its south-west. One could speculate that this is due to a cartographical error—that originally it was intended to depict this location in Bāyyāda. But this is only speculation.

The name of the mountain, Amba Gedewon, clearly links it with the Betä ʿĪsraʾel Gideonite dynasty or with a specific member of this dynasty and may be an allusion to its serving in the past as the seat of Betä ʿĪsraʾel leadership. And indeed, Bruce relates a tradition according to which it served such a role. According to his account, after a period of conflict between the Betä ʿĪsraʾel ruling dynasty and the Christian House of Solomon, instigated by Queen Yodit’s above-mentioned attack on the Christian Kingdom,

At last the power of the Falasha was so much weakened, that they were obliged to leave the flat country of Dembea, having no cavalry to maintain themselves there, and to take possession of the rugged, and almost inaccessible rocks, in that high ridge called the Mountains of Samen. One of these, which nature seems to have formed for a fortress, they chose for their metropolis, and it was ever after called the Jews Rock.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, when relating the account of Queen Yodit’s rise to power, Bruce writes: ‘An independent sovereignty, in one family of Jews, had always been preserved on the mountain of Samen, and the royal residence was upon a high-pointed rock, called the Jews Rock’.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Stern 1862.

<sup>114</sup> Beckingham 1959, 366.

<sup>115</sup> Volume 5 of Bruce’s 1790 edition provides three maps—a map of the Red Sea region (including Ethiopia), a map of East Africa, and a map of the Lake Ṭana area. None of these depict an Amba Gedewon.

<sup>116</sup> Bruce 1790, I, 485–486.

<sup>117</sup> Bruce 1790, I, 526.

## Conclusions

Establishing the location of Baḥər Amba and the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, and within the latter, of Wati, and examining their geographical contexts, enables us to shed considerable light on the dynamics at play in the Səmen Mountains during the Islamic conquest and its aftermath: the description in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* likely indicates that Baḥər Amba was a Solomonic stronghold. Its probable location, at the heart of the Səmen mountains, in a strategic position overlooking the routes connecting the northern reaches of Bäyyäda and Ğan Amora and the routes along the Mäšäḥa river valley, makes it an ideal site for overseeing travel in these mountains. Given that the northern Səmen is attested to have been part of Betä Əsra’el political autonomy both before and following the Islamic conquest and that the sources examined here indicate that the nearby heights of Bäyyäda were inhabited by a considerable Betä Əsra’el population at the time, the implications of such a Solomonic foothold for the Betä Əsra’el would have been considerable. It thus stands to reason that for the Səmen Betä Əsra’el, the conquest of this stronghold and other sites of Solomonic military presence within their formerly autonomous region would be a step in reasserting their political autonomy.

Despite the unfavourable conditions in which the (formerly) autonomous Betä Əsra’el were just prior to the Islamic conquest, and despite the initial alliance between at least some of the Betä Əsra’el in the Səmen and the Islamic forces, within a short period of time, Betä Əsra’el leadership is attested to have allied itself with the Solomonic kingdom. This is implied in Castanhoso’s above mentioned statement that ‘the captain of it [the “Mountain of the Jews”], who was a Jew, was a fugitive [when the Muslims took control of it] because he obeyed the Preste’.<sup>118</sup> This may also be implied by the mention, in the *Tarikä Nägäšt*, of individuals by the name of Gedewon and Yodit being taken captive by the Muslims, though it should be noted that their identification as Betä Əsra’el leaders, while reasonable, is not certain.

The identification of the naturally-fortified plateau of Bäyyäda, rather than a specific peak, as the ‘Mountain of the Jews’, and Bruce’s accounts, according to which in his days it was remembered as the former seat of Betä Əsra’el leadership (probably named after the Gideonite Dynasty) and served as the seat of the Christian governor of the Səmen, enable us to suggest a partial outline of the role it played in Betä Əsra’el history.

As stated above, the main stronghold of Rāda’i, leader of the autonomous Betä Əsra’el during Šärša Dəngəl’s reign, was located in Bäyyäda or its immediate vicinity, and that of Gedewon, leader of the autonomous Betä Əsra’el during and immediately prior to Susənyos’ reign, was located in the valley just north of

<sup>118</sup> Whiteway 1902, 56.

Bäyyāda. Šāršā Dəngəl's chronicle indicates that Rāda'i's stronghold had served as such for some time. In the description of the conquest of this stronghold by the Solomonic army, it is related that on its summit,

there were large stones, arranged along the edges of the Amba, to be rolled down at times of war. Regarding each of the stones, some were placed at the time of *Ḥaṣe* [king] Bā'ədä Maryam [r.1468–1478] and some were placed at the time of *Ḥaṣe ʿƏskəndər* [r.1478–1494] and *Ḥaṣe Na'od* [r.1494–1508].<sup>119</sup>

Thus, the usage of Bäyyāda or its vicinity as a place of refuge and political center by the Betä ʿƏsraʾel is not a singular event, but rather a recurring or continuous one. This, together with the sizable Betä ʿƏsraʾel population there attested in the Portuguese sources, would explain the existence of a Betä ʿƏsraʾel governor of the mountain at the time of the 1542 campaign. It would also explain the development of the tradition attested by Bruce that this mountain was chosen, when the initial wars broke out between the Christians and the Betä ʿƏsraʾel, as the 'metropolis' of the latter.

In this context, Bruce's statement that the 'Jews Rock' served as the seat of the Solomonic governor of the Səmen is not surprising. Establishing a governor's headquarters on the site which had served as the political center of a defeated adversary (if indeed this was done immediately following the demise of Betä ʿƏsraʾel autonomy) would have served as a powerful symbol of Solomonic victory and dominance. And establishing the headquarters in an area with a large Betä ʿƏsraʾel population would have been an effective way to 'keep an eye' on this population and prevent or quell uprisings.

Finally, while the heights of Bäyyāda in their entirety seem to have been referred to as the 'Mountain of the Jews', I would argue that the site of Wati, identified by Páez as synonymous with this mountain, may have played a significant role in the 1542 campaign: its position at the top of a spur overlooking the Təkkäze, facing the general direction from which the Solomonic and Portuguese force advanced towards the mountain, may point to it being a stronghold or outpost guarding access to Bäyyāda from the south-east. If so, and if it was manned by Islamic forces at the time, it may have been the site of the battle described in the Portuguese sources. It is my hope that future archaeological exploration will shed light on this question and further illuminate the fascinating history of the heights of Bäyyāda, which have so far received very little scholarly attention.

<sup>119</sup> Conti Rossini 1907, I, 94, my translation.

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## Summary

The Sāmen Mountains, the core region of Betä ʿĪsraʾel political autonomy (fourteenth–seventeenth century), played a key role in the sixteenth-century conflict between the Solomonic Kingdom and the forces of *Imām Aḥmad* b. Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī. While the involvement of the autonomous Betä ʿĪsraʾel in this conflict has been addressed in scholarship, the sites associated with this involvement had not been accurately pinpointed. In 1959, Charles Fraser Beckingham published an article, in which he traced geographical aspects of the campaigns of 1542 waged as part of the above-mentioned conflict. A key site which he addressed was the ‘Mountain of the Jews’. This stronghold played a key role in these campaigns, and within it, the Solomonic monarchy found a safe haven and a base from which to launch the war to re-take the northern Ethiopian Highlands. Beckingham correctly suggested a general location for this stronghold but was unable to locate it with precision

due to lack of detailed geographical information on the eastern Səmen Mountains. Based on a detailed examination of historical and modern maps, satellite images, and information posted on social media, this study suggests an exact location for this stronghold and other sites mentioned in the context of Betä Ɖsra'el involvement in the conflict in question. This enables this involvement to be re-evaluated and better understood in light of the precise geographical context of the events in question.