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Article

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Notes Towards a History of Aṣe Dawit I (1382–1413)

STEVEN KAPLAN

Anyone conversant with the history of Ethiopia during the golden period of Church and State between 1270 and 1527 is familiar with the deeds and exploits of the two outstanding rulers of the period ‘Amda Śayon I (1314–1344) and Zăr’a Ya’aqob (1434–1468).1 Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that compared to these two rulers, the other kings of the period have been confined to the shadows with their deeds largely neglected by researchers. While this is to some extent a reflection of their achievements and the length of their reigns, it is more than a coincidence that these are also the first two emperors whose deeds are recorded in chronicles or other unified historical records of their rule.2 It is only natural that we as historians have tended to accept the testimony of the most readily available primary sources in producing our evaluations of the past. However, we would be remiss, if we were to allow the composition or survival of primary sources to be the sole criteria by which we evaluated rulers and reconstructed the past.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to reconstruct and explore the consequences of the main events in the reign of Aṣe Dawit I. Although his reign extended over three decades, he left behind no chronicle of his deeds. Thus, he has received far less attention than either his grandfather, ‘Amda Śayon or his son, Zăr’a Ya’aqob3. Indeed, even the years in which he held

3 Of course, it can be argued that Dawit’s father Sâyfa Ar’ad who reigned for 28 years has suffered from even greater neglect!
power and the precise way he is to be designated remain uncertain. His accomplishments can only be known and understood through the piecing together of evidence scattered throughout the literature of the period. It is to this task that this article is devoted. In the first section, we shall attempt to clarify the vexed issue of the precise years of Dawit’s reign. The remainder of the paper will then be devoted to an evaluation of his achievements particularly in the religious sphere.

Names and Chronology

We begin our examination of the reign of Dawit, with the troublesome issue of how he is best to be designated. His throne name, Qwâstânînòs, is well known, but rarely used. Moreover, although it appears likely that this fourteenth century ruler was the first Ethiopian king to bear the name Dawit, it is not uncommon to find him described as “Dawit dagamawi”, Dawit II. This designation appears to be in deference to David, the father of Solomon, who was, of course, the legendary founder of the dynasty which ruled Ethiopia for most of its known history. However, some traditions indicate that David, was also one of the names of the 6th century Ethiopian Emperor Kaleb, and this may have also influenced the writers of the period. This terminology has at times confused scholars. No less a figure than the French Ethiopianist Jules Perruchon believed a document he published and edited to be concerned with the reign of Loînà Dôngèl, whose throne name was Dawit II, when it in fact probably refers to Asë Dawit I.

4 Two previous attempts to wrestle with some of the issues concerning Dawit’s reign include, Getatchew Haile, “Documents on the History of Asë Dawit (1382–1413)”, Journal of Ethiopian Studies 16, 1983, 25–35; Roger Schneider, “Notes éthiopiennes”, Journal of Ethiopian Studies 16, 1983, esp. 106–110, Sur la chronologie de règnes de Dawit, Tèwodros et Yeshaq. Moreover, as the notes below demonstrate, several scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of specific features of Dawit’s reign. This is, however, to the best of my knowledge, the first attempt to consolidate this material and summarize his achievements.

5 Carlo Conti Rossini, Vitae Sanctorum Indigenarum I: Acta Marqorëwos = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 33, Scriptores Aethiopici 16 (Louvain, 1962) 35, 47; Taddese, Church and State, 255, n. 3; Veronika Six, Die Vita des Abuna Tàdëwos von Dabra Mâryàm im Tànàsee (Wiesbaden, 1975), 31–32; Stanislas Kur, Actes de Samuel de Dabra Wagag = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 287, Scriptores Aethiopici 57 (Louvain, 1968) 12; Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) 1601, no. 564, f. 13r.

6 Sergew Hable Sellasse, Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270 (Addis Ababa, 1972) 125.

7 Jules Perruchon, “Légendes relatives à Dawit II (Lebna-Dengel, roi d’Ethiopie”, Recue sémitique 6 (1898) 157–171. Cf. Taddese Tamrat, Church and State, 255, n. 3;
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The chronology of Dawit is a matter of even greater confusion. At least six different periods have been suggested for his reign: 1380–1409; 1380–1412; 1381–1410; 1379/80–1413; 1382–1411; and 1382–1413. While some degree of disagreement regarding the exact period of a king’s rule is not unusual, this is certainly an exceptional situation.

Of course, the confusion regarding the dates of Dawit’s reign is at least in part connected to uncertainty regarding his immediate predecessor and successors. In particular, crucial dates in the life of Dawit and his sons Tewodros and YJosh have been misunderstood because of mis-readings of numbers in texts. In recent years, Getatchew Haile and Roger Schneider have made major contributions to the clarification of this issue by correcting some of these readings. For example, a note in the Liber Axumae records that “In the 66th Year of Mercy, Dawit died, Tewodros and YJosh ascended the throne.” If this is, in fact the case, and the tradition which dates his death to the 9th of Ḥqmt reliable, then Dawit’s death would have occurred...

Taddesse who gives the wrong title for the article does not explain his certainty that Perruchon misidentified the king in question. It should be noted that the story of Dawit halting the waters of the Nile also appears in some later versions of the Miracles of Mary, Veronika Six, “Water – the Nile – And the Tə’ämā Maryam. Miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Ethiopian Version”, Aethiopica 2 (1999) 53–68 and in other traditions, Stuart Munro-Hay, Ethiopia and Alexandria = Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica 5 (Warsaw 1997) 159.

9 Taddeese, 279 n. 3; Six, Gâdla Tâdèwos, 31.
11 Schneider, “Dawit”, 110.
14 Getatchew, “Nâgĩ” 70. Carlo Conti Rossini, Documenta Ad Illustrandam Historiam: I. Liber Axumae = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 54, Scriptores Aethiopici 24 (Louvain, 1962) 67. Maurice Chaine, “La date de la mort du métropolite Abba Salama”, Aethiops 1, 3 (1922) 35. Getatchew’s revised reading is based on EMML 50, f. 134v. Previous readings which dated these events to the 67th Year of Mercy = 1407 E.C. = 1414/1415 CE. were largely ignored, since 1414/1415 was clearly too late a date for the end of Dawit’s reign.
on 9 Taqomt, 66th year of Mercy = 1406 Ethiopian Calendar = October 6, 1413 A.D. What other evidence exists to support this date?

A further clue is found in Ms. Kôbran 1 catalogued by Ernst Hammerschmidt. Although there is some disagreement concerning the exact reading of the text, the most reliable translation would appear to be as follows:

I, Dawit, whose regnal name is Qwästantinos, scion of Israel and from the house of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Judah, son of David and Solomon have had this record written. [And] I have had this matter written in this Gospel of the grace of our Lord in the 65th year of Mercy and in the 31st year of my reign. [When] I gave the order that they observe the täzkar of my father, Säyfa Arad on the 15th of Gänbot and the täzkar of my mother, Lâzzâb Warqa, on the 12 of Sâne …

Given that both this source and the Liber Axumae claim that Dawit was still alive in the 65th Year of Mercy = 1405 E.C. = 1412/1413 A.D. it would appear that we can safely eliminate the possibility that his reign ended between 1409–1411. Moreover, it is rather unlikely based on the Kôbran 1 that Dawit died on the 9th of Taqomt 1412. If Dawit died in Taqomt, the second month of 1405 E.C., this document would have to have been written only a few weeks before his demise. While this is certainly not impossible, logic would seem to dictate that Dawit would dedicate days to his parents’ memory close to the dates in question in the 9th (Gänbot) and 10th (Sâne) months respectively and not many months before. Thus while the Kôbran document does not decisively exclude an earlier date, once again, the 9th of Taqomt 1406 E.C. = 6 October 1413 A.D. would appear to be the most likely date of Dawit’s death.

Although further evidence can be produced in support of this dating, it need not detain us further here. We turn instead to the question of the

17 This is further confirmed by another land grant of Dawit dating to July 29 1412 = 5 Nâhâse. HAMMERSCHMIDT, Tänaäsee 1, 87–88.
18 Thus, TADDÉSE TAMRAT, “Succession”, 508.
19 This can, however, not be completely ruled out, cf. Note 17 above.
20 GETATCHEW, “Nâqû” 65–70; SCHNEIDER, “Dawit”, 111, both discuss the impact of this dating of Dawit for the history of his sons and successors.
beginning of his reign. As we have already seen dates ranging from 1379–1382 have been suggested. On face value this question appears comparatively simple to resolve. If 1405 E.C. = 1412/1413 A.D. was the 31st year of his reign, he must have assumed the throne in 1374 E.C. = 1381/82 C.E. This accords well with the widespread tradition that he reigned for 32 years, as well as with other chronological evidence.

Although Dawit’s father Säyfa Arעד is commonly said to have ruled until 1372, there is some evidence that he may have died as early as 1371. If we accept the tradition that his immediate successor (Dawit’s brother) Nǝwayà Maryam ruled for ten years, this too would place also Dawit’s accession to the throne around 1381/82. A tradition found in the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria offers even further evidence for this date. According to this account, the Egyptian Sultan Barquq ordered the Egyptian Patriarch Matewos to send a letter to the king of Ethiopia. Matewos, inspired by a divine revelation addressed the letter not to the ruling monarch Wǝddǝm Asfare (Nǝwayà Maryam), but to Dawit. By the time the letter arrived, Nǝwayà Maryam had been deposed and Dawit was on the throne. Since Barquq only came to power in 1382, this is yet further confirmation that this, and no earlier date, was the year of Dawit’s accession.

Having considered at some detail the controversy concerning the dates of Dawit’s rule, and found a preponderance of evidence in favor of the period from 1382–1413, we would be remiss if we did not offer at least a few addi-

21 Taddesse, Hammerschmidt, and Schneider all read the relevant document as having been written in the 34th year of Dawit’s reign and made their calculations accordingly. Although I have not personally examined the text, I have chosen to accept Getatchew’s reading which is suggested as a correction of the former two. Taddesse was well aware that this date was problematic and contradicted other traditions concerning the duration of Dawit’s reign. See n. 20 below.

22 TADDESSE, “Succession”, 508, GETATCHEW, “Nägi” 68. It should be noted, however, that Lǝbnǝ Dǝngǝl, who, as we have already noted, was also called Dawit II is said to have reigned for 32 years. The possibility of some confusion here can not be ruled out. There are also traditions which claim that Dawit’s reign lasted only 29 years (CONTI ROSSINI, Gàdlà Màrgorewos, 47; BASSET, Études, 11), but in light of the evidence that he ruled for at least 31 years (see above), these must be discounted.


24 This was his throne name. He was also known as Wǝddǝm Asfare. ANDRE CAQUOT, “Aperçu préliminaire sur le Mašḥāfa Tǝfut de Gechen Amba”, Annales d’Ethiopie 1 (1955) 99.


26 SCHNEIDER, “Dawit”, who has been forced by his reading of the 34th year (see note 19 above) to date David’s rise to power several years earlier, is unable to successfully resolve this problem.
tional comments regarding the manner in which he reached the throne. As we have already seen the History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria offers evidence that his rise to power was not uneventful. This confirms, an earlier suggestion made by Taddesse Tamrat, who cited a tradition in the Sankassar that the Egyptian Patriarch Matewos “had a revelation before the death of Nawayá Maryam that Dawit would become king of Ethiopia in his place”.27 Although he did not consider it in the context of the chronology of Dawit’s reign, he interpreted this reference as an indication of a power struggle between the two brothers. This insight was further confirmed and strengthened by evidence in the unpublished Gādlā Abreham of Dābrā Ṣayon. According to this text, Dawit reproached the saint for building a marvelous church without royal assistance and questioned whether this was a sign of the holy man’s disapproval:

“King Dawit, when he learned that Abreham had constructed a church that was admired by all, he sent him a message which reproached him for not having appealed to him in the construction, … ‘Does it seem to you that I occupied the throne through my own will, rather than through the will of the Lord?’”28

Having dealt with the question of when Dawit ruled, we now turn our attention to how he ruled. The reign of Dawit should perhaps be best remembered for its numerous religious accomplishments. We shall devote the bulk of this article to understanding his achievements in this and other areas.

The Cross and the Virgin: Seeing and Believing

Among his many achievements, Dawit is credited with bringing a relic of the true cross to Ethiopia. According to this tradition, which is recorded in several sources, Dawit received a fragment of the True Cross from the Coptic Patriarch as a reward for securing his freedom when he was arrested by the “King of Egypt”.29 Dawit marched his troops down the Nile until the terrified Muslim surrendered. The grateful Patriarch offered him a reward of 120,000 dinars, but Dawit rejected the gold saying, “God did not save us with gold and silver, but through the blood of the Cross.” This incident, which is already recounted in detail in the days of his son, Zār’a

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Ya₉qɔb, in Ma₅πba₉ Taʃat is also vividly invoked in several of his (Z₉r’ₐ Ya₉qɔb ) N₉gₐ’hymns:

Hail to the Cross of the Lord, which was steeped in the blood of divinity
Today it paid our house a visit from Ser’
during the days of Dawit, the anointed,
the lamb who, because of Mary, was not lost,
blessed in his faith, (and) his trust steadfast.

Hail to the Cross of the Son which the Jews buried.
Behold, it is now planted in the garden (of) Ethiopia
The Son of Mary deserves a bow (of gratitude)
Dread possessed our enemies
The infidel tribes [=Moslems] were terrified by the
arrival of the Cross.⁴⁰

The arrival of the cross is said to have led to the inauguration of a new holy-
day, M₉sqₐl, commemorating the finding of the True Cross on the ¹⁰ʰ M₉skₐram.３¹ Ma₅πba₅ Taʃat records that the piece of the Cross was accompanied by seven icons of St. Mary painted by Luke the Evangelist and the image of Jesus known as K₉rₐ’tₐ ṛₐ’su.³² Other sources indicate that an icon St. Ura’el painted by John the Evangelist also came to Ethiopia during his reign.³³ Given the fact, that most authorities date the arrival of the K₉rₐ’tₐ ṛₐ’su icon to the ¹⁷ᵗʰ century, the tradition regarding this particular object must be treated with caution.³⁴ However, there appears to be a deeper truth behind these traditions. Although there is evidence that icons existed in Ethiopia prior to Dawit’s reign, their use appears to have intensified during his reign, hand in hand with the growth of devotion to the cult

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³¹ CAQUOT, “M₉πba₅ Taʃat », ₁₀₀. Cf. The entry in the S₉nkₐssₐr: “Greetings! The tree of the redemption of the Cross which was planted in Ethiopia on this day; Dawit and his people were reunited after acquiring what their heart desired; They raised a hymn of joy and celebrated a festival.”
³³ EMML ₁₉₄₂, ₇₆₆. This same source also speaks of only one Marian icon.
of Mary. Several miracles document Dawit’s devotion to Mary and to an image of Mary made especially for him. One of these reports that one of Dawit’s generals deserted him and joined forces with his Muslim enemies. Dawit prostrated himself before an icon of Mary and prayed for revenge. “At once she answered him from the icon saying, ‘Rejoice, O my beloved one; I have done for you what you have asked of me. As for the one who rebelled against you, I have had his head cut off where he went.’ Having said this, she showed him the rebel with his head cut off.”

Yet, another miracle tells of how the technique for using gold paint or gold leaf was discovered in Ethiopia in his time. According to this story, which is partially confirmed in one of the Nágí hymns, a youth, a translator from Arabic tried to mix a batch of gold paint to adorn the name and garb of Mary. He failed on his first attempt, but then a foreigner (Romawi) revealed the technique to him in a dream. Although the tradition of depicting Mary under a canopy of wings can not be decisively dated to Dawit’s reign, this appears likely. Two of the earliest drawings of this kind are found in a manuscript of the Miracles of Mary (Tá’ammárá Maryam) found today at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Ms. 777) and in a Sankossar preserved in the Sháyon Maryam Church at Lake Zway.

37 Getatchew, “Nágí”, 48, “Documents”, 30 (tx.) = 32 (tr.), Note that Getatchew suggests this may have been a statue rather than a painting. Cf. Ibid. 28, “When his retainer denied the son of Mary, his creator, Dawit wept ... Mary showed him ... that the head of the servant who had defected was cut off.”
38 Getatchew, “Documents”, 28: “When he had (the image of) the Virgin Mary adorned with gilt, the artist thoughtlessly adulterated its gold. When he prayed, however, (God) revealed to him the material”.
40 Chojnacki, Major Themes, 180–181.
Indeed a distinctive and uniform style of manuscript illumination is associated with a palace scriptorium founded by Dawit early in his reign. Among the works under its influence which have survived to our time are manuscripts of the Miracles of Mary and the Octateuch, Four Gospels and Sankassa both found today at Gašan Maryam, another Sankassa and Gâdîâ Sâmâ‘at at Kidanâ Mehrât near Ankobâr, a collection of Marian homilies found near Däbrâ Tabor, and an illuminated Epistle of St. Paul, now in the National Library, Addis Abâba. From an artistic point of view, Marilyn Heldman has noted that “The painters of Dawit’s scriptorium had access to fairly recent Byzantine models or to Coptic paintings dependant upon Byzantine models … Nevertheless, although the borrowing from Byzantine iconography is obvious, the over-all effect of Dawit court style does not suggest Byzantine influence.”

**Literary Achievements**

The religious achievements of Dawit’s time were not limited to the realm of iconography. His was also a time of considerable accomplishments in the areas of both original literature and translation. It should be remembered that the first years of Dawit’s reign overlapped with that of Abunâ Sâlâmâ (1348–1388) popularly known as “The Translator” because of the many works translated from Arabic at his initiative. Once again the cult of Mary figures prominently among his attainments, with the beginning of the translation of the Miracles of Mary (Tâ‘ammârib Maryam). Although this was the most famous work translated during Dawit’s reign, tradition claims that numerous other works were rendered into Gâzâ at this time.

Special mention must be made in this context of the Sankassa. Although there is substantial evidence that this translation dates to ca. 1400, i.e. within the reign of Dawit, it is not clear if the translator, Simon, was an Egyptian in con-

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43 Thus, Dawit clearly inherited a situation in which many translations were underway. See A. van Lantschoot, “Abba Salama, métropolite d’Éthiopie (1348–1388) et son rôle de traducteur”, Atti di Cosegno internazionale di studi etiopi (Rome 1–4 aprile 1959), Roma 1960, 397–401.

44 Cerulli, Il Libro. Cf. also above the story of a youth translating and illuminating the Miracles of Mary.
tact with Ethiopians or an Ethiopian resident in Egypt. In either case, it is hard to imagine so grand an undertaking being accomplished without royal knowledge or patronage. The translation, editing and introduction of such a massive work must have been an event of considerable importance. Moreover, in the process of compilation, original material concerning local Ethiopian saints was added. Decisions would have had to have been made as to which saints to include. “This immense work could not have been done without active interaction between the translator(s), the royal authorities, and monastic leaders.”

According to a list contained in EMML 1942, f. 76a works translated during Dawit’s reign included: Ḡabrà Ḥomamât, Ḥaymanot Ahbâw, Dorsanà Zenaba ... la Maryam, Mâshâfà Ḥl’atqârfa (the Miracles of Jesus), Mâshâfà Kidan, Mâshâfà Som’ on za Amd, Ėfrem b’a’enta haymanot retêt, Mâshâfà Waddaseba la Ėfrem, Mâshâfà (Dorsanâ?) Sawiros, and homilies attributed to Baslyos of Caesarea, Ya’aqob of Sarug, Ya’aqob of Denbin (Nesbin?), Zâkaryas of Antioch, Abba Gîyorgis (Gerleyos?) of Alexandria and two homilies on the Sabbath. It is not certain that all of these works were, in fact, translated at this time, and other works not listed may also date from this period. Verena Böll has indicated, for example, that the translation of the Anaphora of Mary by Cyriacus of Behnesa, may be dated to Dawit’s reign.

The production of original church literature in Ethiopic seems to have been a far less centralized process than its translation. While there is considerable evidence that texts were brought at the initiative of the Abunà and translated at court or at monasteries the court supported, local works were part of a different system of patronage. Gâdlät, for example, were typically produced at individual monasteries at the initiative of the abbot. Accord-

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45 GERARD COLIN, “Le Synaxaire Éthiopien: État actuel de la question”, *Analecta Bollandiana* 106 (1988) 286. I am grateful to Denis Nosnitzyn for drawing my attention to this reference and for his comments on the topic (Personal communication, 22.01.01 which is summarized below).

46 Nosnitzyn, personal communication.

47 It is difficult to determine if this is a reference to Mâshâfà zenaba lãqaddast Maryam or Dorsanâ Maryam.


49 There are in fact two collections with this title both translated from Arabic and attributed to Severos, Bishop of Ašmunayn.


ingly, it is difficult to give a comprehensive list of works composed during Dawit’s reign, nor should we attach too much significance to the fact that works such as *Gâdla Qawstos* and *Gâdla Tadewos* date to this period.

The situation is, however, somewhat different with regard to another work which can be dated to Dawit’s reign: *Arganonà Maryam* (Wôddase) by Giyorgis of Săgla, (Gasaçça). According to *Gadlà Giyorgis*, the king was so pleased with the work that he had it copied with a special gold ink. *Arganonà Maryam* is, of course, only one of the many works attributed to Giyorgis, one of the churches most prolific authors. It is impossible to know which of Giyorgis’s other works can definitively be dated to Dawit’s reign. However, there is every reason to associate much of Giyorgis’s creativity with this king’s period. Giyorgis’s father served, after all, as one of the clergy in the royal court and the king must have known Giyorgis throughout most of his early life when he was educated at court. Even the saint’s period at Dâbrà Hayq Ɨššîfanos would not have completely separated him from the king, given the latter’s close ties to that monastery. Moreover, Giyorgis and Dawit shared a deep devotion to the Virgin Mary through both literature and art. Not only did Giyorgis compose several works in her honor, but he also showed his devotion to her image.

A further indication that Giyorgis had already achieved a lofty status during the reign of Dawit, is found in yet another episode from his *gâdлl*. According to this text, Giyorgis is said to have required the queen to rise from her

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52 C.f. EMML 1513.
53 *Six, Gâdla Tăděwos*, 31. It is, in any event, problematic to speak of the “date of composition” of a gâdлl, since such texts were constantly being revised, edited and renewed. Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* = Studien zur Kulturkunde 73 (Wiesbaden, 1984) 2–4.
54 This is even truer with regard to works composed by dissident groups which may have been writing in opposition to the views favored by the king. Cf. Getatchew Haile, “Religious Controversies and the Growth of Ethiopic Literature in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries”, *Oriens Christianus* 65 (1981) 106–107.
55 Colin, *Gadła Giyorgis*, 21–22. Although the gâdлl indicates that this work is also known as Hoḥa Barhan and Ɨńźîrą Šabhar, this does not appear to be the case. Getatchew Haile, “On the Writings of Abba Giyorgis Săgławî from Two Unedited Miracles of Mary”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 48 (1982) 65–69.
57 If we assume that his gâdłl presents the correct chronological sequence then *Fâkkaře Haymanot* was composed after Dawit’s death but Wôddase Hawrayat, and Šābḥa Fâttatî before. Cf. Colin, *Gâdla Giyorgis*, 25, 30, 32–33.
throne to receive the Eucharist like the rest of the people.\textsuperscript{58} Dawit supported him on this occasion and shortly after appointed Giyorgis nāburā 'ad of Dābrā Damo, one of Ethiopia’s most venerated monasteries.\textsuperscript{59} There is, therefore, every reason to believe that many of Giyorgis’s writings and much of his ensuing reputation were established during the reign of Dawit.

Their relations were not, however, without difficulty. Giyorgis did not fare well when he clashed with Bitu, one of the King’s favorites over Christological issues. Dawit sought to refer the matter to the Abunā, but Bitu succeeded in turning the tide by producing a forged letter which made it appear that Giyorgis had condemned the king as a heretic. The enraged Dawit, cast Giyorgis into prison where he remained, even after Bitu’s death. Giyorgis was still in prison when Dawit died in 1413.

The Ewosatătians

Dawit’s clash with Giyorgis was a comparatively minor incident compared with some of his larger concerns. During his reign the most important issue facing the Church and the King was the challenge posed by the pro-Sabbath Ewosatătian movement. Throughout the 14\textsuperscript{th} century Ewosatătians opposed the position of the abunā and the emperor and championed the traditional Ethiopian practice of observing Saturday as a holy day of Sabbath rest.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the, at times violent, opposition of kings, bishops and other Church leaders, the Ewosatătian movement flourished in the frontier areas of the north where the Ewosatătians enjoyed local support.\textsuperscript{61} Their home monastery of Dābrā Bizān was one of the most powerful not only in the region, but in the country.

Abunā Sālama, whose crucial role in the translation of literature from Arabic was mentioned above, was not replaced until 1398/9 with the arrival of Abuna Bārtalomewos in Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{62} Shortly after his arrival in Ethiopia, Bārtalomewos working in cooperation with Sārāqā Barhan, the abbot of Dābrā Hayq Ǝtişifanos and a close ally of Dawit sought to bring the rebellious monks to heel\textsuperscript{63}. In 1400, the king convened a council intended to re-

\textsuperscript{58} For a further discussion of this episode see Steven Kaplan, “The Social and Religious Function of the Eucharist in Medieval Ethiopia”, (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{59} Colin, Gàddà Giyorgis, 22. The precise significance remains unclear. It may have meant he was to administer the monastery or perhaps the entire region. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that it is a sign of respect and of close relations between the saint and the king.

\textsuperscript{60} Gianfrancesco Lusini, Studi sul Monachesimo Eustaziano (secoli XIV–XV) = Studi Africanistici, Serie Etiopica 3 (Napoli, 1993).

\textsuperscript{61} Kaplan, Holy Man, 38–39; Taddese, Church and State, 209–220.

\textsuperscript{62} Kolmodin, Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega, Archives d’études orientales, A 23 and A 30, n. 9; Taddese, “Dabra Hayq”, 105, n. 92.

\textsuperscript{63} On Sārāqā Barhan, see Taddese, “Dabra Hayq”, 103–104;
solve the controversy over the Sabbath.64 The King avoided any direct involvement in the discussions, but gave the abunā a free hand to act as he wished. His allies, who controlled the proceedings wasted little time in bringing the council to its preordained outcome. When the Ewosţatians refused to obey the bishop and cease their observance of the Sabbath, their leader Filēppos was imprisoned at Dabra Hayq ḃštifanos.

He was to remain there for four years, whereupon he was released following the death of Sărāqā Bṛhan. However, Dawit did not merely release Filēppos. He and his queen ḃgzī Kābra sent messages and asked to be remembered in his prayers. Their son remembered this vividly in Māḥafā ḃBarban where he wrote:

“My father Dawit king of Ethiopia … sent messengers so that they might bring back the disciples of Ma kapıqəbà ḃgzī’s [Ewosţatewos] from the areas where they had dispersed, and so that they enable them to re-enter their churches … The king further commanded the disciples of Ma kapıqəbà ḃgzī’s to observe both Sabbaths as the Apostles had prescribed in the Senodos” 65

In light of this dramatic reversal of policy in a relatively short period, it is interesting to speculate as to what factors precipitated Dawit’s decision and how they changed in such a short space of time. It is, to say the least, rather unlikely that his personal position regarding the Sabbath changed quite so dramatically in so short a period. With regard to his initial support for anti-Ewosţatian measures, the arrival of a new abunā must have been an important catalyst. Over a decade elapsed between the death of Abunā Sālama and the arrival of his successor. The power vacuum could not have been beneficial to either the cause of church unity or the stability of the monarchy.

Dawit’s initiative may, moreover, have been motivated by immediate political considerations. According to a story contained in Tā’mmorā Maryam some religious leaders received a revelation that Dawit had ruled too long and should abdicate in favor of one of his sons. Only Mary’s intervention and the support of two crucial allies kept him in power. If as both Cerulli and Taddesse have conjectured Dawit was confronted by a serious challenge to his rule around 1400, his decision to act in accordance with the wishes of both the abunā and the ‘aqqabē sāt at around that time may have been a bid to consolidate his support among the religious leadership66. We

65 CONTI ROSSINI, Māḥafā ḃBarban II, 82. Cf. TADDESSE, Church and State, 216.
66 CERULLI, Il Libro, 79–86, TADDESSE, Church and State, 283. See also SYLVAIN GRÉBAUT, “Littérature éthiopienne pseudo-Clementine”, Revue de l’Orient chrétien 16 (1911) 77. For yet another text which hints at problems during Dawit’s reign see EMML 1882, 112a–116a.

83 Aethiopica 5 (2002)
have already seen that Dawit’s initial rise to power may have been assisted by Egyptian intervention as well. At the least, his vulnerability may have made it difficult if not impossible for him to resist the demands for repression of the Ewostatians from two of his country’s most powerful clerics.

By 1404 his circumstances were markedly improved.67 His stunning victory against the Muslim kingdom of Adal in 1402/3 including the capture and execution of its king added immensely to his prestige and authority.68 The death of Sārāqā Barhan and the continued survival of Filæpos and his movement may well have been another consideration. According to Gâdlâ Filæpos military leaders from the north sympathetic to his cause were present at Dawit’s court. Whatever the reasons behind his decision, Dawit moved to heal the rift within the Church. While the royal court and the abunà continued to follow the Alexandrian practice, the Ewostatians were not only tolerated but honored. In 1406/7 he granted land to Dâbrà Bizân.

Church and State

The Ewostatians were not the only clergy whom Dawit sought to cultivate. Taken as a whole, Dawit’s reign would certainly seem to justify Getatchew Haile’s remark that “Dawit may be considered the monarch who established church-state relations in Ethiopia on a firm basis.”69 A short notice in the Zena Dâbrà Libanos offers considerable support for this view. According to this text, Dawit and his sister Dâl Sefa offered land to the monastery of Dâbrà Libanos during the period of the abbot Tewodros. He, however, refused to accept it. His successor, Yoḥannas Kāma, had similar reservations. However, after receiving a divine revelation he accepted the gift.70 Consider, moreover, Dawit’s relations with two of the best known saints of his period, Samu’el of Dâbrà Wâgâg, and Samu’el of Wâldôbba.71 Samu’el

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67 For what follows cf. TADDSESE, Church and State, 215–217.
68 Maqrizi, 26–7, quoted by TADDSESE, BORIS TURAIJEV, Vita Samuelis Valdebanim (Petropoli, 1902) 14–15; CONTO ROSSINI, Gâdlâ Mârgorewos, 40–41. For a more detailed discussion of these wars see below.
71 According to a note in Mâshafa Têfût the most illustrious clerics of Dawit’s reign were Abunà Sâlama, Samu’el of Wâldôbba, Samu’el of Wâgâg, and Giyorgis of Sâgla. Cf. CAQUOT, Mâshafa Têfût, 101. Cf. also EMML 1942 f. 76b.
of Dābrā Wāgīg, whose father is said to have been associated with the rebel clerics of the first half of the 14th century, was himself a loyal ally of Dawit. The king is said to have given Samu’el the region of ūndāgābātān and to have sent him there as a royal official.72 Samu’el of Wālūbba, another of the outstanding clerics of his reign joined Dawit on the battlefield and predicted his victory over a Muslim foe.73

According to a miracle from the life of Samu’el of Dābrā Halleluya, it was during the reign of Dawit, that his renowned monastery abandoned its previous independence and began to accept gifts of religious objects and lands from the king74. Gādlā Mārqorewos, which goes to great pains to stress the close relationship which existed between its hero and the King, offers a particularly detailed listing of the lands Dawit granted to the holy man75. Dābrā Ḫāmlo, near Aksum was also honored by both Dawit and Abunā Sālama.76 Other churches to have benefited from his beneficence included the Tāgrean monasteries of Abunā Aron and Abuna Samu’el of Qoyāṣa and Dābrā Kā-bran Gābrā’el, which as we saw in our discussion of chronology, received support for the commemoration of Dawit’s parents.77 His daughter Dūl Mogāsā, also “made a generous grant of gult to the church of Betā Lēḥem in the Amhara district of Gaynt, in which she invoked her father’s authority.”78

Mention should also be made at this time to a land grant from July 1412 which makes mention of Mā’ata Gone as the king of Gozam (Goğğam)79. This text is one of several indications that it was during the reign of Dawit there was an intensive movement of Christian families from Amhara and Bāgāmehr into the Goğğam region80. In addition several important monastic leaders including Tākāstā Bāḥān of Dābrā Dīma, Sinoda of Dābrā Šimmona and Sārṣā Petros of Dābrā Wārq were active in the region during this period.

72 KUR, Gādlā Samu’el, 13–16, cf. KAPLAN, Monastic Holy Man, 55.
73 TURIAEV, Gādlā Samu’el, 14.
75 CONTI ROSSINI, Gādlā Mārqorewos, 44–46.
76 EMML 2514 f. 234b.
77 HAMMERSCHMIDT, Tānāsee, 87; CRUMMEY, Land and Society, 29, 46; CONTI ROSSINI, Liber Axumae, 22–23; Cf. Note 17 above.
78 CRUMMEY, Land and Society, 29.
79 HAMMERSCHMIDT, Tānāsee, 87.
80 For what follows see TADDESSE, Church and State 201–203 which is based on a series of, as yet, unpublished sources.
War and Peace

Gādlā Yāfqrānnā Ḥgzī’s is a particularly interesting source for the situation of Christians in this region just prior to and during Dawit’s reign. It also serves as a reminder, that although our primary focus in this article is upon Dawit’s religious achievements, we would be remiss if we did not make mention of his political-military successes. Our record of these is almost certainly incomplete, since they are based not on a chronicle or other internal royal document, but rather on a combination of hagiographical sources and external Arabic reports.

According to Gādlā Yāfqrānnā Ḥgzī’s\(^{81}\) during the first years of Dawit’s reign, there was a serious uprising of the aybud in the regions of Sūm and Šallāmt. Led by a rebel Christian monk named Qozmos, they defeated the Kantiba of Dāmbiya, who was forced to join them. They destroyed numerous churches and killed many monks until Dawit was able to subdue them by sending fresh troops from Tagray.

As dramatic as this episode may have been, it was only a comparatively minor skirmish in the wider context of Dawit’s reign. Like his predecessors, his most important battles were fought against the local Muslims, particularly those of the kingdom of Adal. During the first half of Dawit’s reign the forces on the battlefield were quite evenly matched, and the leaders of Adal, particularly Šā’ad ad-Dīn enjoyed some remarkable successes. Gādlā Märqorewos reports that he easily destroyed the Ethiopian army, a claim echoed by a contemporary Egyptian author\(^{82}\). However, as the threat posed by the Muslim incursions grew, so did the resolve of the Christian kingdom. Dawit spent much of his time in the regions of Ifat and Fāṭāgar, which were strategically important for the defense of the kingdom.\(^{83}\) Moreover, he personally led at least two campaigns into Adal, the last of which ended in a stunning victory and the capture and death of Šā’ad ad-Dīn.\(^{84}\) Perhaps in recognition of his successes, we find a reference, a few years later, to “Dawit’s Adal” as the place where his son, Tewodros I, died.\(^{85}\)

Finally, we should remember, that Dawit is also credited with coming to the defense of the Coptic Patriarch early in his reign, and having sent troops

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\(^{81}\) CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, “Appunti di storia e letteratura falascia”, *Rivista degli studi orientali* 8, 1920, 571–573. Although this text, like many other hagiographic works may date much later than the events it describes the picture it presents of Dawit’s reign and the situation of the aybud is consistent with other sources.


\(^{83}\) PERRUCHON, *Les Chroniques*, 67, 152.


\(^{85}\) GIUSEPPE SAPETO, *Viaggio e Missione Cattolica tra i Mensa* (Roma 1857) 437–438.
to threaten the ruler of Egypt.\textsuperscript{86} Even if these reports are somewhat exaggerated and acquired an almost mythical status in later years, they are yet further testimony to Dawit’s activist military policy.\textsuperscript{87}

It is apparently in this context that we should also understand the circumstances of Dawit’s death. In the fall of 1413, on his way back from a successful military campaign, he was kicked in the head by a horse and died. As his son, Zä’a Ya’aqob wrote so plaintively, “Dawit was victorious, (but) he never came back from the campaign against the enemy. I personally looked for him; the sun was missing.”\textsuperscript{88} He was buried at Däbrä Daga Ṣṭ_STSanos.

The Legacy of Dawit

Dawit’s death, untimely as it may have been for his people and as personally wrenching as it may have been for his son(s)\textsuperscript{89}, was not a national disaster. During the more than three decades during which he reigned, he had gone a long way to strengthening the religious and political fabric of Ethiopia. By promoting devotion to both the Cross and the Virgin Mary, he provided the Church with two pan-Christian symbols which transcended local rivalries and regional loyalties. These were, moreover, symbols particularly suited to visual representation and hence comparatively easy to propagate among Ethiopia’s largely illiterate population. He did not, however, neglect the role of religious texts. His reign is remembered both for the important translations initiated, most notably \textit{Tä’ammorä Maryam}, and for original works composed by his close associate Giyorgis of Sägla. Dawit also made great strides in solidifying Church-State relations, particularly through his generous land grants, and although he did not succeed in resolving the Ewostatian controversy, in the last decade of his rule, he moved towards a pragmatic accommodation. All this would by itself, qualify Dawit as one of the outstanding leaders in Ethiopian history. His military successes, particularly against the Muslims of Adal, can only further cement his reputation.

\textsuperscript{86} Cf. n. 29 above.

\textsuperscript{87} An unpublished tradition records that Dawit intended to march to Jerusalem. \textit{TADDESSE, Church and State}, 255 n. 3.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{GETATCHEW, “Nägs”}, 46; On the specific circumstances see \textit{BASSET, Études}, 11.

\textsuperscript{89} Dawit had many queens, three of whom Ḣzi’ Kbrä, Ṣyôn Moğsa, and Ḍngl Ṣawänä are known by name. \textit{TADDESSE, Church and State}, 222, n. 2. Four of his sons, Tewodros, Yshaq, Ḣzbbä Nañ, Zä’a Ya’aqob became emperors. \textit{GETATCHEW, “Religious Controversies”}, 107 has also speculated that a son named Iyyosas may have sought to depose his father. Zä’a Ya’aqob, who was about 14 years old when his father died, may have felt the loss particularly deeply.
As we noted at the outset of this article, Dawit I has received far less attention than either his predecessor ‘Amda Šayon I or his son Zär’a Ya’aqob. This comparatively brief article has succeeded in only partially redressing the balance. However, by bringing together a series of widely scattered sources, we hope to have begun the process of restoring Aše Dawit I, to his rightful place in Ethiopian history.90

Appendix: Tentative Chronology of Aše Dawit I

1382 Dawit becomes King
1388 The death of Abunä Sälama
1397/8 Wars against Adal
1398/9 The arrival of Abunä Bärțalomewos
ca. 1400 Attempted overthrow
1402 Arrival of embassy in Venice
1402/3 Defeat of Šä’ad ad-Din
ca. 1403 Death of Säräqà Bärhan of Däbrä _INTERFACE_anos
1404 Release of Filôppos of Däbrä Bizän
1407/8 Land grant to Däbrä Bizän
Oct. 6, 1413 Death

Summary

Dawit I has received far less attention than either his grandfather ‘Amda Šayon I or his son Zär’a Ya’aqob. This comparatively brief article attempts to partially redress the balance. During the more than three decades during which he reigned, Dawit strengthened the religious and political fabric of Ethiopia. By promoting devotion to both the Cross and the Virgin Mary, he provided the Church with two pan-Christian symbols which transcended local rivalries and regional loyalties. These were, moreover, symbols particularly suited to visual representation and hence comparatively easy to propagate among Ethiopia’s largely illiterate population. He did not, however, neglect the role of religious texts. His reign is remembered both for the important translations initiated, most notably Tâ’ammárà Maryam and for original works composed by his close associate Giyorgis of Sägla. Dawit also made great strides in solidifying Church state relations, particularly through his generous land grants, and although he did not succeed in resolving the Ewostatian controversy, in the last decade of his rule, he moved towards a pragmatic accommodation. All this would by itself, qualify Dawit as one of the outstanding leaders in Ethiopian history. His military successes, particularly against the Muslims of Adal, can only further cement his reputation.

90 I am grateful to Leonardo Cohen, Meley Muluggete, and particularly Denis Nosnitzyn for their comments on an earlier draft.