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## Yohannes II (r. May 10, 1769 – October 15, 1769)\*

SHIFERAW BEKELE

Yohannes II was one of those Ethiopian kings who sat on the throne for a very brief period – only five months and a few days. Mika’el, the warlord who had just defeated a coalition of lords allied to Iyo’as (1755–1769), the reigning king at the time, put Yohannes II on the throne on May 10, 1769 and then killed the incumbent for collaborating with his enemies. In so doing, he became a kingmaker. Only five months later, on October 15, 1769, Yohannes died. Mika’el placed on the throne the son of the deceased king who took the regnal name of Tekle Haimanot II (1769–1777).

The most important honour that historians could bestow on rulers, events or dates – the status of a turning point – falls on the year 1769. This year is elevated to the rarefied heights of a major watershed not for the achievements of Yohannes (of which he had none anyway), but rather for the measures taken by Mika’el Sihul. Ethiopia veered towards a new and irreversible direction in its political history. Even then, Yohannes deserves a full-blown treatment in his own right because he was one of the protagonists in the tragic drama of that year.

This paper does not promise to reconstruct the full biography of the man or to offer a complete narrative of the complicated events of those crucial months between May and November 1769. What is attempted here is a brief sketch of the life of Yohannes with a particular focus on his short reign. The paper poses the question of how he died. The statement of Bruce that Mika’el poisoned him to death is re-examined. His assertion that his brother Bekfa (r. 1721–1730) had amputated the hand of Yohannes is also assessed.

\* I am grateful to Harald Aspen and Svein Ege of the University of Trondheim (Norway) for the fellowship, which I obtained from the University to spend one month in August 2000 in Trondheim where I was able to write up this article. They were the ideal hosts. An earlier draft was first read on the 14<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies held in Addis Ababa, November 2000.

## 1. The Account of Bruce and its Reception by Commentators and Historians

James Bruce was a Scottish traveller who, we are told, arrived at Massawa in 1769 by sea with the objective of discovering the source of the Nile. He stayed in the country up to the end of 1771 and went back to his country by way of the present-day Sudan and Egypt. Long after his return to his country, he wrote an account of his travels that went into several volumes. In this book, he gives a chapter to the reign of Yohannes.

Bruce starts his account by giving brief background information on Yohannes:

Hannes, a man past seventy years of age, made his entry into Gondar, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1769. He was the brother to Bacuffa, and having in his time escaped from the mountain [Mt. Wehni, the royal prison at the time], and been afterwards taken, his hand was cut off by order of the king, his brother, and he was sent back to the place of his confinement.

It is a law of Abyssinia ... derived from that of Moses, that no man can be capable either of the throne, or priesthood, unless he be perfect in all his limbs; the want of a hand, therefore, certainly disqualified Hannes, and it was with that intent it had been cut off. When this was objected to him in council, Michael laughed violently, and turned it into ridicule: "What is it that a king has to do with his hands? Are you afraid he shall not be able to saddle his own mule, or load his own baggage? Never fear that; when he is under any such difficulty, he has only to call upon me and I will help him."<sup>1</sup>

Yohannes was the younger brother of Bekfa both being the sons of Iyasu I (r. 1682–1706). Mika'el, the most powerful warlord in 1769 brought him

<sup>1</sup> J. BRUCE, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol. IV (Edinburgh, 1813), pp. 190–191. I have used the third edition because the editor, A. Murray had consulted the author's notes and diaries and edited the book accordingly, not hesitating from correcting Bruce himself whenever the information found in the notes conflicted with the version given in the book. In my opinion, Murray was correct when he thought that the notes taken in Ethiopia were more reliable than the published account. In the case of Yohannes II, however, there is no correction by Murray, only annotations, that leads me to think that Bruce did not collect information seriously about his reign and the circumstances of his death. This again explains the thinness of the story that Bruce eventually gives us in the chapter under discussion. Whenever I quote from Bruce, I have kept his spelling of Ethiopian names.

from the royal prison. Bruce then proceeds to give a brief description of the man and of his character:

Hannes, besides his age, was very feeble in strength; and having had no conversation but with monks and priests, this had debilitated his mind as much as age had done his body. He could not be persuaded to take any share in government. The whole day was spent in psalms and prayers, but Ras Michael had brought from the mountain with him two sons, Tecla Haimanout the eldest, a prince of fifteen years of age, and the younger, called George, about thirteen.<sup>2</sup>

This physical condition did not deter Mika'el from fixing a marriage arrangement for the new king after his coronation. He decided, for obvious political reasons, that his grand daughter ("young and beautiful", in the words of Bruce), Welete Selassie, should be sacrificed on the altar of marriage. The traveller then comments that

A kind of marriage, I believe, was therefore made, but never consummated. She lived with Hannes some months in the palace, but never took any state upon her. She was a wife and a queen merely in name and idea. Love had, in that frozen composition, as little share as ambition; and those two great temptations, a crown and a beautiful mistress, could not animate Hatze Hannes to take the field to defend them. Every possible method was taken by Michael to overcome his reluctance and to do away his fears. All was in vain; he wept, hid himself, turned monk, demanded to be sent again to Wechne, but absolutely refused marching with the army.

Michael, who had already seen the danger of leaving a king behind him while he was in the field, finding Hannes inexorable, had recourse to poison, which was given him in his breakfast, and the Ras, by this means, in less than six months became the deliberate murderer of his two sovereigns.<sup>3</sup>

The campaign, which was the cause of the king's death, was aimed at the coalition of lords led by *Ras* Fasil of Damot. This was the coalition that had fought against Mika'el earlier in April of the same year and that had lost. Iyo'as who did not take part in it and who remained in the palace was secretly in league with them. According to Bruce, his household troops took part in the battle on the side of Fasil. Discovering this fact from prisoners at

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 191–192.

the end of the fighting, Mika'el deposed Iyo'as and enthroned Yohannes. Bruce was referring to this experience. The fear that a similar conspiracy could be hatched in his rear led him to murder the old man.

Though Bruce's predilection to mix fact with fiction rather freely was noted as early as the appearance of the first edition of his book in 1790 and though several statements in Bruce's narratives were corrected over the last two centuries, commentators and historians have seen no reason to question this version of the story of Yohannes – with the exception of only one traveller, Henry Salt. We will come to him later.

The earliest scholar to grapple with the authenticity of our traveller was Alexander Murray who took his time to examine painstakingly Bruce's notes and diaries written during his journey in order to bring out an annotated edition of the book. He came up with some startling discoveries some of which he seems to have decided unfortunately not to publish for the sake of the honour of the Scottish man.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he made some very useful annotations. The part that deals with Yohannes he did not revise, however, even if he had access to the chronicles that Bruce had taken to England. He in fact accepts in toto and repeats them in his biographical sketch of the Scotsman.<sup>5</sup> Since then the story had been relayed to us unchanged through the two centuries.

When we come to the present age, we see that historians tend to apply the methodology of source criticism on Bruce. Yet, they have seen no reason to question the version about Yohannes whenever they come to deal with this period. In fact, in the eyes of the senior historian Sven Rubenson, much more than even in those of Bruce, Mika'el's consecutive murder of two kings acquires a decisive significance for Ethiopian history because it set in motion a major process:

Although the decay of the monarchy and the disintegration of the state started gradually, the year 1769 can be regarded as the opening year of the *Zemene Mesafint*, for that was the year when Ras Mika'el

<sup>4</sup> This is what I infer in any case from his letter to Henry Salt: "As I was appointed by his family and my friends to examine his papers, it could not be expected that I should write a commentary of the most disagreeable kind on the work ..." Quoted in J.M REID, *Traveller Extraordinary: The Life of James Bruce of Kinnaird* (London, 1968), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> BRUCE, Vol. I, p. l xxxix.

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Sihul of Tigre acted as king-maker at Gonder and “in less than six months became the deliberate murder of two kings.”<sup>6</sup>

The other senior and highly respected historian of the period, Donald Crummey follows the same tradition:

On May 10, 1769, he [Mika’el] fetched from Amba Wehni a son of Iyasu I, called Yohannes, and crowned him king. Four days later he had Iyo’as strangled ... Unhappy with Emperor Yohannes, in the middle of October Mika’el deposed him, poisoned him, and seated Yohannes’s eldest son, Takla Hammanot, on the throne.<sup>7</sup>

Crummey is normally very cautious whenever he has to draw upon Bruce. In the footnote to the above quotation, he warns us “Bruce was not in Ethiopia during these events, and where his account varies from that in the chronicle, it should be read very skeptically.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he finds no problems with the story of the murder of Yohannes as presented by the Scottish traveller as the quotation cited above shows.

Of the traditional Ethiopian historians, Tekle Tsadik Mekuria deserves mention here. He devotes a chapter to the reign of Yohannes. His account is considerably similar to that of Bruce with some additions from Ethiopian oral tradition. His text suggests, however, that he did not take the story directly from Bruce. It was rather from a now-forgotten Italian historian, Luca dei Sabelli, who published his history in 1938.<sup>9</sup> Sabelli in turn took it directly from Bruce reproducing the latter’s account faithfully using similar sentences and equivalent expressions in Italian. But the Italian historian added two facts into his narrative that are not found in the chapter of Bruce – during the reign of Yohannes, Mika’el appointed his son as the governor of Gojjam (an inaccurate fact)<sup>10</sup>; and that Bruce arrived in Ethiopia in the same

<sup>6</sup> S. RUBENSON, *King of Kings Tewodros of Ethiopia*, p. 17. Rubenson cites from pp. 706ff. of Volume II of the first edition of Bruce’s book (1790). Curiously, however, in his quotation, he replaces Bruce’s “his two sovereigns” with “two kings”.

<sup>7</sup> D. CRUMMEY, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*, Urbana and Chicago and Addis Ababa: University of Illinois Press and Addis Ababa University Press, 2000, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. note 91 on p. 292. In a number of his writings, Crummey compares Bruce with the chronicle and then pushes aside the traveller in favour of the chronicler. See for instance his “Society and Ethnicity in the Politics of Christian Ethiopia during the Zamana Masafint”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* VIII, 2 (1975).

<sup>9</sup> LUCA DEI SABELLI, *Storia di abissinia* in four volumes (Roma: Edizioni Roma, 1938). The part that interests us is in Vol. III, pp. 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Walde Kidan was appointed to be “*dejzmach* of Gojjam” – meaning governor of Gojjam proper (what is today Eastern Gojjam) – with the title of *dejzmach* in April

year (an accurate fact). Tekle Tsadik almost literally reproduced dei Sabelli including the statement about the coming of Bruce. He however wrongly placed during the reign of Yohannes, the arrival of the Scotsman at Gondar rather than at Massawa.<sup>11</sup> The style and the manner of writing of Tekle Tsadik give, however, the impression that he had drawn upon indigenous Ethiopian sources rather than on a foreign source.

Finally, attention needs to be drawn to some Amharic sources that actually seem to corroborate Bruce. I have found three Amharic manuscript histories dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of these is found in the Mondon Vidailhet collection in Paris.<sup>12</sup> It was Taitu who gave it to him when he requested a manuscript on the history of Ethiopia some time before he left the country in 1897. I have not established the date of its redaction. But the most probable is that same century. In this manuscript there is a tiny little entry on Yohannes II. We are informed that Yohannes was a man “who had one hand”. And that he reigned for five months and six days. The account contents itself, however, with the laconic “he died” regarding the circumstances of his death.<sup>13</sup>

Even more interesting is the other manuscript, which could possibly date to the early twentieth century because the history goes to the reign of Zewditu (1916–1930).<sup>14</sup> But it is also likely that earlier sections might have been copied from older manuscripts. So there is no way we could be sure about the dating of that part of the manuscript in which we are interested. In any case, it gives short accounts of the reigns of the kings of the country very much in the manner and format of the Short Chronicles of the Gondarine period edited by Basset and Beguinot. When he comes to Yohannes, the writer tells us that he was the son of Adyam Seged Iyasu (Iyasu I). He is rather cautious about his hand, “they say that one of his hands had been amputated”. The use of the expression “it is said” for the information that it was Bekfa who got it cut to prevent him from aspiring to the throne, shows that the chronicler was not sure of his facts. Finally, we are informed that Yohannes reigned for five months and five days.<sup>15</sup> What vitiates from the

1768. See I. GUIDI (trans.) *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as* Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, vol. 6 (Paris, 1912), p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> TEKLE TSEDIK MEKURIA, *Ye-Etiyopia Tarik: Ka-Atse Libne Dengel eske Atse Tewodros* (Addis Ababa, 4<sup>th</sup> reprint of 1961 EC re-edition), pp. 281–283.

<sup>12</sup> *Tarique Negest*. Code: *Ethiopian* 260, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, f. 49v. However, it is evident that the sentence that talks about his death is not complete.

<sup>14</sup> *Tarique Negest*. IES/361. This manuscript is available in the collection of the IES library.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 45–46.

value of this chronicle is the numerous mistakes it contains regarding the kings who succeeded Yohannes.<sup>16</sup> We are told that Solomon succeeded him who in turn was succeeded by Tekle Haimanot, the son of Yohannes. The chronicler has thus reversed the order. In spite of this, however, it is remarkable that the amputation and the reasons for the amputation are told very much in the way Bruce told it even if the chronicler obtained these pieces of information from hearsay rather than from written sources.

Our last source is only a list of Ethiopian kings from Susenyos (1607–1632) to *Fetsame Mengist* Tekle Giyorgis (to use the manner in which the chronicler lists this king) (r. 1779–1784; and then several times he was on the throne and deposed) who had built the churches of Gondar. Yohannes is listed as “*Qoreta [Qorataw]*” Yohannes. This can be rendered into English as Yohannes the Amputee – a very interesting adjective.<sup>17</sup> Getatchew Haile who has published this text has not regrettably dated it. It could very well be either a nineteenth or an early twentieth century document. Nevertheless, it is significant that it qualifies our king as the Amputee thus apparently supporting the information Bruce gives us.

In conclusion, therefore, there is a considerable body of sources and scholarly authority behind the account of Bruce.<sup>18</sup> None of these sources is, strictly speaking, a contemporary production, a fact that significantly reduces their value. We have to ask if there are contemporary or near contemporary sources that would enable us to countercheck Bruce and the other documents cited above. Fortunately, there are the published and unpublished chronicles that throw some light on these obscure events. Now we proceed to examine them one by one.

## 2. The Early Life of Yohannes (c. 1696–1721):

There are a few pieces of information in the chronicles of the early eighteenth century on the early life of Yohannes up to 1721. When and where he

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> This document, which is a text extracted from EMMML 1706, ff. 50a–51a, is published by GETATCHEW HAILE in his article, “Builders of Churches and Authors of Hymns. Makers of History in the Ethiopian Church”, *Études Éthiopiennes* Vol. I (Paris: 1994), pp. 369–375. The reference to Yohannes is on p. 371.

<sup>18</sup> The scholar who has expressed reservations – though he did not fully articulate them – regarding the murder of Yohannes is MANFRED KROPP. See his, “La théologie au service de la rébellion. Chroniques inédites du ras Mika’el,” *Études Éthiopiennes: Actes de la X<sup>e</sup> conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes*, Volume I (Paris, 1994) pp. 231, 233.



was born are not written but they can be figured out with a fair degree of accuracy.

When Dawit, his immediate elder brother, was crowned in 1716, the chronicler tells us that the new king was twenty-one years old.<sup>19</sup> And this places Dawit's date of birth sometime in 1695. Both the so-called Short Chronicles and the long chronicle of Iyasu I inform us that when his mother Qeddeste died in 1705, she had five children, Yohannes being her second son and Dawit, the first.<sup>20</sup> If she could have five children all born as of 1695 but before 1705, then they were born in a space of one to two years. Therefore, as the second son, Yohannes must have been born sometime between 1696 and 1697. This makes his age 72/73 when he came to the throne. Hence, Bruce was very close to accuracy (as much as one could be in these things) when he estimated his age at the time of enthronement to be "past seventy years".

The so-called Short Chronicles also provide information regarding Yohannes's ethnic background. We are told that he was Agaw.<sup>21</sup> One suspects that this ethnic identity was given to him for his connection with the Agaw through his mother because she comes from Agaw country to the west of Lake Tana. Most probably he was born in a village called Barkanta in this same area but not far from its adjoining province of Qwara because that is where Qeddeste had lived and where she died in 1705. Most probably she was buried in a church not far from there.<sup>22</sup> We also have an idea of his looks thanks to an eyewitness testimony – he was a fair coloured man and he was described as handsome looking.<sup>23</sup> His mother, Qeddeste or Qeddeste Kirstos seems to have been much loved by Iyasu. She was most probably his young-

<sup>19</sup> FRANCESCO BEGUINOT, *La Cronaca Abbreviata d'Abbisinia: Nuova Versione dall'Etiopico e Commento*, (Roma, 1901), p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> I. GUIDI (trans.), *Annales Iohannes I, Iyasu I, et Bakaffa*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 5 (Paris, 1903), p. 244; BEGUINOT (trans.), *La Cronaca abbreviata*, p. 80; RENÉ BASSET (trans.), *Études sur l'histoire d'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1882), pp. 166–7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 194; BEGUINOT, p. 106. In this source, he is simply referred to as "Yohannes Agaw".

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 79–80; BASSET, p. 165, 166–167; GUIDI, *Annales Iohannes, Iyasu I ...*, pp. 244, 247, 249.

<sup>23</sup> This observation comes to us from Ras Wolde Selassie, the Tigrean lord at the turn of the nineteenth century, who had been present in Gondar in 1769 as an officer in the army of Mika'el when the dramatic events of that year unfolded. Wolde Selassie, who claims to have seen Yohannes, told it to Pearce in 1815 who, in turn, wrote it down in his diary. N. PEARCE, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce Written by Himself during a Residence in Abyssinia from the Years 1810 to 1819* (London, 1831), p. 273.

est and favourite concubine. This comes out from the account of her sickness and her death sometime in early 1705. Both the Short Chronicles and the long chronicle of Iyasu recount the deep effect it had on the king.

The Short Chronicles give us a list of his four siblings born from his mother and father when they recount Iyasu's visit to Barkanta sometime between the month of May and July of 1705 to pay his respects to Qeddeste who had died in the month of *Megabit* (March/April), 1705.<sup>24</sup> They were Dawit, Yohannes, Walata Feqr, Sabla Wangel and Walda Sahla. The manner in which Iyasu expressed his mourning shows that Qeddeste was his favourite concubine.<sup>25</sup>

The next reference to Yohannes is found at the very beginning of the reign of Bekfa.<sup>26</sup> This king is crowned in the month of *Genbot* (May/June, 1921) and not long afterwards – in the months of June and July – he fell seriously sick. He must have feared that he would die because he ordered one of his officials to fetch Yohannes from Amba Wehni whom the chronicler describes as “his favourite” to make him his successor in case he died. Yohannes passed the rainy season at the side of the new king “in friendship” as the chronicler put it. When the king recovered, Yohannes was sent back to his mountain confinement at the end of August. This incident is very interesting because it shows, much more than the dry words of the chronicler, that Yohannes was indeed loved by Bekfa. After this event, Yohannes disappears from the official records completely until he re-emerges fully forty-eight years later – in 1769 – in very dramatic circumstances.

### 3. Yohannes in the fateful months of mid-1769

As was pointed out above, Bruce has remained the sole source for the months of May to October. Nevertheless, there is the chronicle written at the time the events took place.<sup>27</sup> This source has not been utilised by scholars as much as it deserves perhaps because it was not published until recently due to an accident of decision by Guidi and Weld Blundell, the two respective translators of the earlier (the pre-Yohannes) and the latter (the post-Yohannes) chronicles.

<sup>24</sup> BEGUINOT, p. 79; BASSET, pp. 166–7.

<sup>25</sup> BEGUINOT, p. 80; BASSET, pp. 166–7. Bruce might have exaggerated his story when he wrote that Iyasu “fell into the most violent transport of wild despair ...” because of deep mourning. BRUCE, Vol. III, pp. 524–5. Otherwise, the chronicle's account supports him.

<sup>26</sup> BEGUINOT, pp. 106–107; BASSET, p. 194.

<sup>27</sup> BL Orient 821. The chronicle does not of course make clear this; but it can be demonstrated effectively by internal textual evidence as I will try to show below.

Guidi decided to translate and publish the chronicles of Iyasu II (l. 1730–1755) and of his son, Iyo’as (r. 1755–1769). He chose May 14, 1769 or *Genbot* 8, 1761 EC (according to his chronicle they strangled to death Iyo’as in the night of 14 to 15 May) as a convenient stopping date for his translation. In fact, the chronicler also winds up his story exactly at that point. Weld Blundell, who translated the chronicles of the last three decades of the eighteenth century, decided to start with the reign of Tekle Haimanot II (1769–1777), the son of Yohannes who succeeded his father. Therefore, the chronicle in the middle period, namely the one that covers the months of May through October, or, in other words, the one that recounts the reign of Yohannes II, was left in a limbo until Manfred Kropp published its variant some years ago with a German translation.<sup>28</sup>

It is very much a contemporary account because the writer tells us in so many words. He writes, “We stayed in rest and pleasure” in the two months following the coronation of Yohannes showing by the use of the pronoun “we” that he was a participant observer. There is also internal consistency in the manuscript that strengthens its authenticity. For example, the dates of the months and the days on which they fall – all of them – are accurate. Secondly, he gives us the exact place where Yohannes fell sick (inside St. Yohannes church) and a remarkably accurate time (while he was taking the Holy Communion). He also mentions the church where the king was buried. Moreover, he is at pains to recount the poignant mourning of Mika’el upon the loss of his son – the description had a touch of the direct observer in it. There are instances like this which show the presence of the narrator when the events he describes unfold. It is therefore a piece of document we can take as a reliable source for those months. A scanned copy of the Ge’ez text (from BL, Orient 821) and an annotated translation are attached to this article as an appendix. Now I proceed to present its contents in my own words. Then I will try to draw the appropriate conclusions.

Our protagonist is mentioned for the first time when Mika’el chose him to replace Iyo’as. He sent his lieutenants to fetch *Abeto* Yohannes from Amba Wehni on May 6 (*Miyazia* 30). On Tuesday May 9 (*Genbot* 3), Yohannes arrived at Gondar.<sup>29</sup> Before he entered the palace,

<sup>28</sup> It is actually a short chronicle going from ff. 431a to 432a (no more than three manuscript pages) in BL Orient 821. Then follows the chronicle of Tekle Haimanot. For the published text see M. KROPP, *Die Äthiopischen Königschroniken in der Sammlung des Daggazmac Haylu* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp. 62–64.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce makes this event take place on May 3 – a very understandable error when one tries to transfer dates from one calendar and language to another calendar and language.

however, they separated Mentwab from her grandson and expelled her from the palace. The chronicler does not refrain from bringing out the poignancy of the situation when he writes that Iyo'as broke down in tears when he was separated from his grandmother. Then they put him in chains<sup>30</sup>. After the palace was thus cleared of its occupants, *Abeto* Yohannes entered. The chronicler is careful to use the title due to a prince even if, by then, his coronation was something to be taken for granted. This, to me, is another internal evidence to demonstrate the redaction of the text at that time.

The coronation took place on May 10 (*Genbot* 4) in the big hall of the palace with colour and style in the presence of the clergy, the army, the nobility, the princesses. The *Tserag-Masere* officiated and enthroned him. After the ceremonies were over, Mika'el returned to his residence. But in the night of the same day – i.e. between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> of May – King Yohannes and *Ras* Mika'el killed Iyo'as and buried him in the same night secretly<sup>31</sup>. It is significant to note here that the chronicler directly mentions the two of them as the murderers<sup>32</sup>.

The narrator gives one more detail – they murdered the king with his hands in chains. If one is allowed to read between the lines, the sentences show that the narrator did not have much love lost for the kingmaker. It can be suspected that his sympathies lay with the victim to the extent that one can use an under text as an evidence for historical reconstruction.

They passed the following two months in rest and in pleasure, we are informed. In fact, the writer is very specific – the pleasures continued until the 28<sup>th</sup> of *Hamle* (the third of August). On the following day, Thursday, *Dejasmach* Wolda Kidan, the son of Mika'el died. The

<sup>30</sup> There are differences between this account and the account that the Guidi chronicle (p. 260) gives. In the case of the latter, the handcuffs are not mentioned; nor the poignant scene of the expulsion of Mentwabb. There are also considerable differences in the dates given. Guidi's chronicle (*Ibid.*) makes the murder take place in the night of 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> May. When one carefully counterchecks the two against each other and against the other sources, it turns out that the Guidi chronicle is wrong. This suggests different authorship. The author of the chronicle under review must have been very close to the court and to the events he describes.

<sup>31</sup> Kropp singles out the sentence in which the chronicler mentions Mika'el and Yohannes as the murderers to deduce from it that the chronicler was critical of Mika'el. This is a valid point. In general, however, he argues that the chronicler was the partisan of the warlord. See KROPP, pp. 62–64.

<sup>32</sup> The chronicle of Iyo'as that Guidi has published (p. 260) gives an interesting detail when it states that the sons of Necho actually murdered the king on orders, of course, from Yohannes and Mika'el.

old warrior was crushed. He mourned the death of his beloved son, his right hand man for days and days. The people around him even tried to persuade him to stop his mourning. He refused. The narrator is at pains to describe the agony of the old father who said he would mourn his son till the end of his days.

For a reader who happens to come to the chronicle from Bruce, this description gives him/her an unexpected view of the general whom the Scottish traveller had painted as a hard, inhuman, cruel man devoid of all human emotions. Making allowances for exaggerations and hyperbole, the established trait of chroniclers, one can nevertheless see Mika'el as a frail, even pathetic, old man rather than as a veteran warrior, as a man who feels pains and as a sensitive man rather than as a man of steel who quietly plays chess when thousands butcher each other in a nearby battlefield.

The month of August was uneventful except for the death of the daughter of *Ras Wald Le'ul* and the marriage of Yohannes to Walata Selassie. However, the chronicler simply tells us that she was enthroned and that she was given the throne name of Sedq Mogasa without specifically mentioning marriage. And on the eve of the Ethiopian New Year (September 8), the king reconfirmed the title and office of Mika'el.

The chronicler's description of the way Yohannes celebrated New Year gives us an insight into his past life. He attended mass at St. John Church by standing right in the Holy of Holies. He listened very attentively to the chants of the clergy (*mablet*) because he himself was a *mabletawi*. This confirms Bruce's information about the piety of the man and his knowledge of church matters. Then the next event that the narrator records takes place over two weeks later.

On Tuesday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of *Meskerem* (the 26<sup>th</sup> of September), the king went to attend service at the Church of *Abune Ewostatewos*<sup>33</sup>. Upon his return to the palace, he fell sick. So we can say that he fell sick in the morning of that day. Nineteen days later, on Sunday, the 7<sup>th</sup> of *Tekmt* (the 15<sup>th</sup> of October), he died. The chronicler is precise about the time of his death to the extent that that was possible in Gondar of the day – he used the expression “gize sark” for the time in which he

<sup>33</sup>The chronicler actually suggests that this visit of the king was the only one he made after his new year visit to the Church of St. John. Either we have to doubt the authenticity of the chronicler for which I do not see any reason or we have to ask whether something was wrong with the health of the king for him to stay closed in the palace for so many days.

Yohannes II

passed away. This should fall somewhere between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM. He was buried in the Church of St. Tekle Haimanot.

This brings us to the end of our story. We see here that the chronicler tells the story somewhat differently from Bruce. We will draw out some of the strands and comment on them. To begin with, the document fills, to a certain extent, the gap in our knowledge of the time between May 10 and October 15. We have so far a surprisingly rich amount of facts in the published sources alone for the two years that lead up to the death of Iyo'as. Then it is like the curtain falling all of a sudden because the following five months become dark except for a couple of flickers of light that Bruce throws out. Then it starts to get better after October even if not as much as for the earlier months. Now with the help of this document, the darkness brightens up considerably.

The reign of Yohannes was not by any means eventful at least as far as the royal court at Gondar is concerned. Now we can speak with considerable certainty that these intervening months were indeed a lull between two storms. The chronicler tells us, with a surprising degree of precision, when and at what time the king fell sick (using the expression "he fell sick") and when and at what time he died. Could it have been poison that killed him in such circumstances? It would indeed be a very strange kind of poisoning if it takes nineteen days to send the victim away. And, in any case, if one accepts the poison theory, then one has to explain why Mika'el bothered so much when he was a man, as Bruce assures us, who did not have the slightest compunction about killing a person and who had the full power and varied and multiple means of knocking an undesirable person away.

Moreover, there are two more pieces of evidence to support the thesis that Yohannes died a natural death – the first one, internal to the text and the second, an outside and independent testimony. Upon the death of the old monarch, Mika'el called a council and informed them that he would like to put on the throne Tekle Haimanot, one of the two sons of the deceased king.<sup>34</sup> The members raised an interesting question – why did he choose the elder? They also asked him whether it was the father who wanted the elder to succeed him implying that the old king had passed on his wishes to the kingmaker on his deathbed. Mika'el denied that he had gotten anything from the father and stated angrily that it was his own decision. Be that as it may, this kind of discussion would not have taken place if it was Mika'el who had murdered the man by poison or otherwise. It is also curious to place the son of the man one had killed on the throne when there were so many candidates

<sup>34</sup> BL Orient 821, f. 432b.

waiting to be picked for the office. Bruce's description of Tekle Haimanot's love for the old warrior and his assurance that the young monarch treated the kingmaker as a father does not dovetail with the fact that the young king's father had been murdered by the same man. Either we have to write off Tekle Haimanot as an extremely callous man (in which case we have to dismiss Bruce's description of Tekle Haimanot's personality) or we have to cast doubt on the veracity of the murder story.

The second and independent testimony is very explicit. It comes to us from Henry Salt, the English traveller who first came into the country in 1805. Salt was not able to reach Gondar due to the disturbed condition of the country at that time. He could only go as far as the court of *Ras* Wolde Selassie, the governor of the northern provinces at that time. He made it a point to reconstruct, among other things, the history of the country since the departure of Bruce in December 1771. He requested the *Ras* to provide him with very good informants and the lord obliged,

Ligantur Metcha [sic!], a priest of some rank, having married Ozoro [sic!] Brelhe [sic!], daughter of Sultan Hannes [sic!], and who was sent to me by the Ras [Walda Selassie], as being well acquainted with recent changes in Abyssinia.<sup>35</sup>

These efforts of Salt were not very successful because he ended up writing an account so full of inaccuracies that it is not of much use to historians. Nevertheless, it makes him the first writer to attempt a reconstruction of the history of those very confusing years. With regard to the theme under discussion, however, he comes up with a startling testimony from this son-in-law of Yohannes, "... To Joas [sic!] succeeded Hannes, who after a reign of only five months died of disease, and not of poison, as stated by Bruce."<sup>36</sup> This is clear as clear could be. And it comes from a member of the family of Yohannes himself who, into the bargain, had no reason to hide the facts because Mika'el had been dead long ago. Finally, this is an independent witness. Unless we doubt the capacity of Salt to jot down accurately what he heard or the ability of the translator, we can draw upon this testimony to strengthen the conclusion derived from the chronicle. In any case, we use the information to corroborate a fact obtained from the contemporaneous chronicle.

Nevertheless, we have to take account of a disturbing tone in the chronicle with regard to the manner of the burial of Yohannes before we wind up

<sup>35</sup> GEORGE, VISCOUNT VALENTIA, *Voyages and Travels to India* Vol. III (London, 1809), p. 163.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

our discussion of this issue. He was buried in the night. Secondly, and even more importantly, the chronicler was saddened deeply when he observed that on the morrow there was no official mourning. He observes that it did not look like a soldier had died let alone a king. The big Gondar market was held as usual, he comments wryly.<sup>37</sup>

We have already referred to a council Mika'el held to announce his choice of Tekle Haimanot following the death of his father. When the councillors wondered whether the choice was the wish of the father, Mika'el's tone was rather hostile. He does not sound like he had much love lost for the late king. Could it be that the relationship between the kingmaker and the king was sour before the latter's death? This and the circumstances of his burial and the absence of mourning might have given rise to rumours of poison in the town that somehow found its way into the ears of Bruce several months later and ultimately into the book.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. How about the amputation?

We do not have any clear-cut evidence about the amputation. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring at some length. We have already seen that Bekfa had shown a big love for Yohannes immediately after he came to the throne when he selected Yohannes to be his successor. Yohannes stayed in Gondar for several weeks in the rainy season of 1721 in warm friendship with the king. Later, when Bekfa got better, the young prince was sent back. To our great surprise, Yohannes also displays a deep love and loyalty to Bekfa – at the very end of his life. He was buried in the grave of Bekfa in the Church of St. Tekle Haimanot!<sup>39</sup> This choice of final resting place must have been in fulfilment of the wishes of the deceased or of the members of his own family

<sup>37</sup> It would be helpful to pose here and reflect on the reaction of the chronicler. One can argue that he believed that the king had died a natural death; otherwise, his complaints and deep frustration would not make sense. If he suspected that the man had been poisoned to death, then he should have taken it for granted that the death of Yohannes was treated so shabbily. It would be very difficult to expect murderous rulers to organise official and colourful burial ceremonies for their victims.

<sup>38</sup> In a round about way, Bruce gives precious information that supports the natural death theory of Yohannes. When he arrived in Massawa in the middle of September “there was a rumour only of Hatze Hanness illness.” *Travels*, Vol. IV, p. 194. This piece of information must also be carefully examined. If the rumour had reached Massawa by the time our traveller arrived, making allowances for the time it takes to travel from Gondar to Massawa at least a month and a half, we should wonder whether Yohannes was not already sick in the rainy season.

<sup>39</sup> BL Orient 821 f. 432a. The Short Chronicles confirm that Bekfa was buried in the Church of Tekle Haimanot. Beguinot, p. 122.



who knew the relationship between the two kings. I cannot envisage another explanation.

The chronicle of Bekfa is not bashful about the people the king mercilessly slaughtered let alone those he amputated. In 1722, it records the amputation of the hand of *Abeto Na'od*, the son of Tekle Haimanot I. The victim died of it. Two years later, the same fate befalls another pretender to the throne who claimed to be the son of Emperor Ya'eqob (1603–4). And he too expired. A few days later his followers were punished by execution on the main square in Gondar and, according to the chronicler, on that day blood flowed like water on the square.<sup>40</sup> In the seventh year of his reign, Bekfa was faced with rebellion in which he suspected that the princes at Wehni Amba were somehow implicated. The rebels were hideously punished while the princes were spared. The last prince to be amputated in 1729 was one Tekle, his own half brother. This time the man survived the punishment. These are all the amputations the chronicle thought worth recording. One sees no reason why Yohannes would not be included in the chronicle if he had been a victim of the same punishment. And this suspicion is confirmed by the fact mentioned above – there is no rational human reason that would have led Yohannes to be buried in the same place if Bekfa had been cruel to him. In fact, the choice of burial site dovetails neatly with the story of the summoning of Yohannes by Bekfa to succeed him if in case he died at the very beginning of his reign.

How then do we explain the coupling of his name with the adjective “amputee” that we find in the Amharic manuscripts cited above? It is not very easy to give a conclusive answer to this question until a thorough textual study is done and until the way they were written and when they were written and their authorship are established. We will content ourselves with a hypothesis. It is possible that the information that Bruce gives could have found its way (through travellers who lived in the country or through Ethiopians who had the benefit of European education) into the ears of scribes who in their turn make it indigenous by putting it within a traditional framework of explanation. This helps us make sense of the unusual manner the adjective is linked up to his name – varying adjectives of the same verb are used unlike in other cases where kings had only one variant of a nickname.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> BASSET, pp. 199–200.

<sup>41</sup> Yohannes I (1667–1682) was called *Tsadiku* Yohannes and Tekle Haimanot I (1706–1708) is known as *Rigum* Tekle Haimanot. Tekle Haimanot II (1769–1777) became *Menane Mengist* Tekle Haimanot because he went to a monastery when he was deposed. His brother Tekle Giyorgis (1779–1784; and was later deposed and enthroned several times) was given the famous nickname, *Fetsame Mengist*. But Yohannes II does not have such a consistently popular nickname referring to his amputation.

## 5. Conclusion

Bruce writes that he arrived at Massawa in the middle of September 1769. He also tells us he reached Gondar, the scene of our story, in the middle of February 1770. Upon his arrival, not only had Yohannes been dead for over three months but also the new king (Tekle Haimanot II) and Mika'el were away on that fateful campaign that had allegedly caused the death of the old man. So Bruce's information was second hand. If Bruce had been careful, however, he could have written a more reliable account even on second hand information because the event did not take place all that far away (it must have been fresh in people's minds upon his arrival).

On the basis of a careful examination of the chronicle and the other fragmentary information we obtain from Salt, we conclude in this paper that firstly Yohannes was not poisoned to death (he rather died a natural death) and secondly the story of the amputation of his arm by Bekfa should at best be treated with caution because there is evidence that throws doubt on its veracity.

Bruce's account of Yohannes also proves once more the Scotsman's irrepressible capacity to mix fact with fiction.

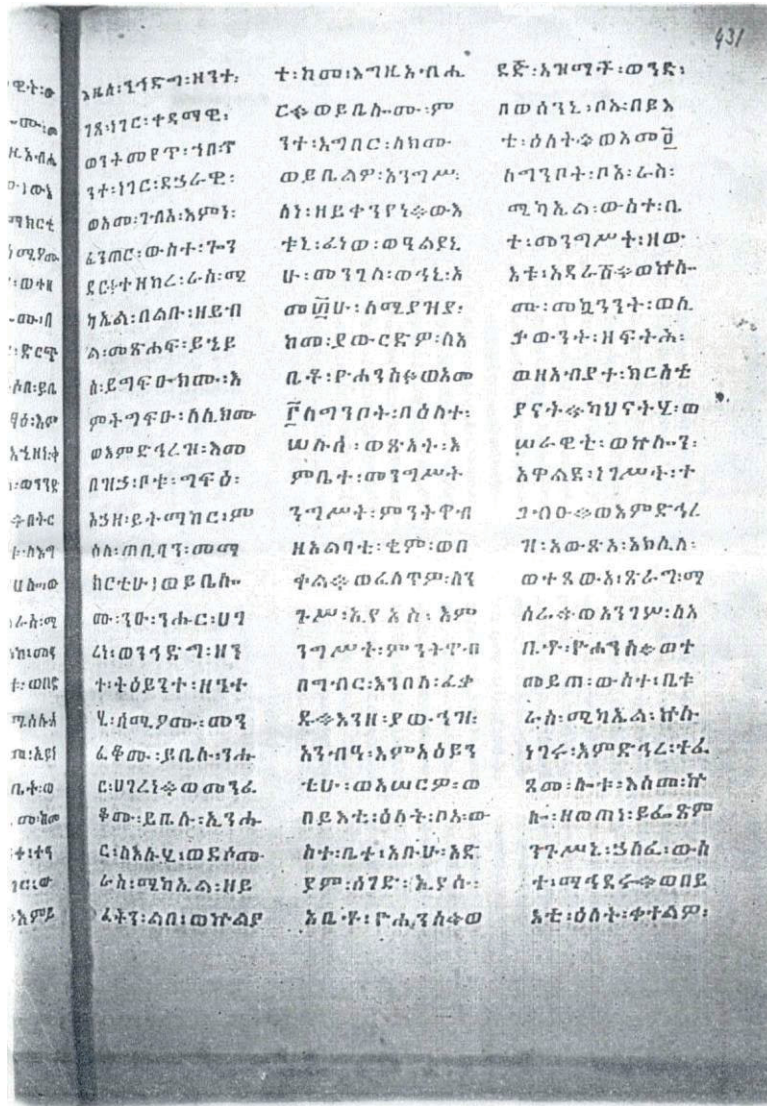
## Summary

The knowledge of the reign of Yohannes II (r. May 10, 1769–October 15, 1769) is so far based on a brief account in Bruce's book. This account, however, contains errors (that Yohannes II was poisoned to death). This paper brings to light an Ethiopian document (a brief contemporary chronicle) on the short-lived reign of this man. It is published with a translation and annotation.

On the basis of a careful examination of the chronicle and the other fragmentary information we obtain from Salt, we conclude in this paper that firstly Yohannes was not poisoned to death (he rather died a natural death) and secondly the story of the amputation of his arm by Bekfa should at best be treated with caution because there is evidence that throws doubt on its veracity.

Appendix: The Chronicle of Yohannes II\*\*

Folio 431a: The Ge'ez Text



\*\* I use only the version that Weld Blundell uses (i.e. the one available in the British Museum as BL Orient 821). There are other versions in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) and the Frankfurt University Library (Rüppell Collection), which I have not been able to study because of lack of funding.

## Folio 431a: Translation

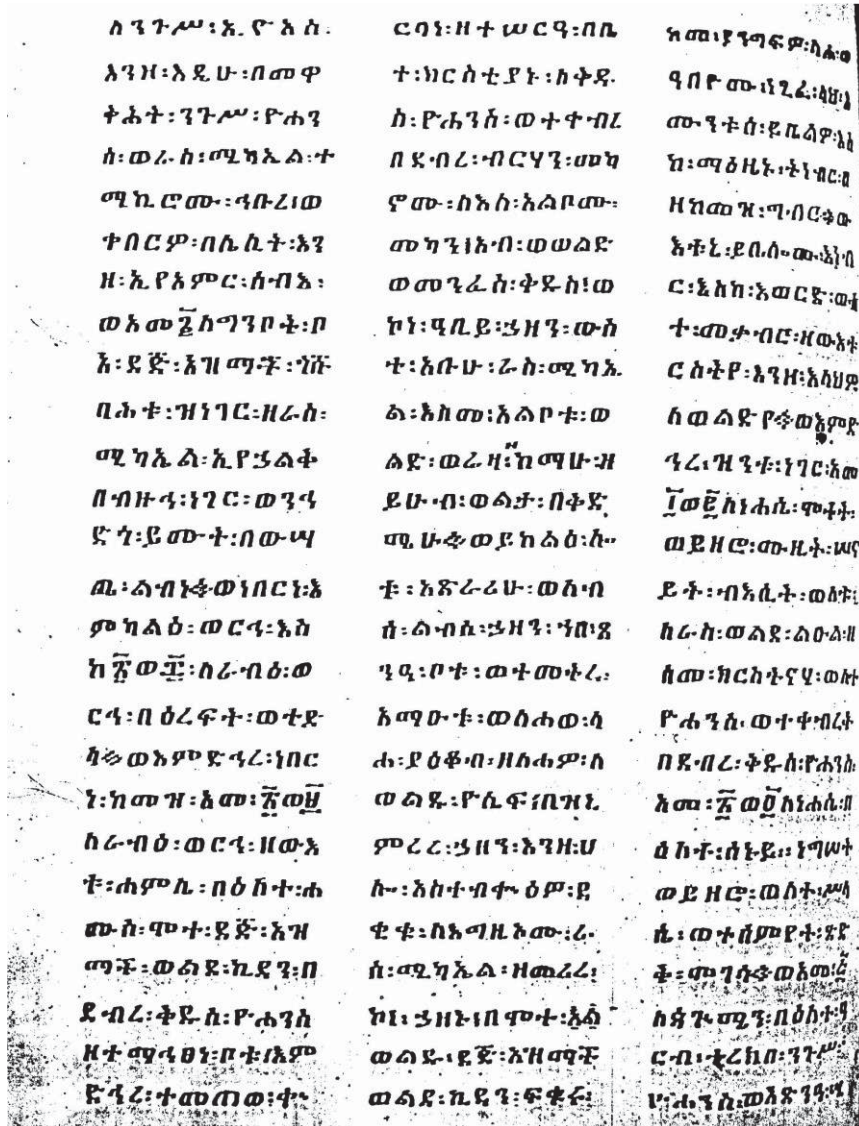
Let us leave the old story and go back to the earlier one. Upon the return from Fenter<sup>42</sup>, *Ras Mika'el* recalled what the Bible said, "it is better if others commit wrongs on you rather than you on others". Then [?] he started to deliberate with the wise and with his councillors. He told them, "Let us leave this city and go to our native province." Upon hearing this, some of them said, "let us go to our native province", while the others said, "no, we should not go". *Ras Mika'el* who, like God, [has the power to] examines the heart and the kidney thanked the latter and asked them, "What do you like me to do?" And they said to him, "enthroned the one who can rule us". And he sent his retainers to Wehni on Miyazia 30 in order to bring down *Abeto Yohannes*.<sup>43</sup> On Tuesday *Genbot 3*, Queen Mentwabb who is free from revenge and vengeance, went out of the palace. With tears flowing from his eyes, they separated against his will [and] by force King Iyo'as from Queen Mentwabb. And they chained and (handcuffed) him.<sup>44</sup> On this day, *Abeto Yohannes* entered into the house of his father Adyam Sagad Iyasu. And *Dajamac Wand Bawasan* entered [Gondar] on the same day. On *Genbot 4*, *Ras Mika'el* entered the palace, that is to say, the hall. The dignitaries, the *liqawent* of the Church and of justice, all the clergy and the army, all the princesses were gathered. After this, the crown was brought out; the *Serag Masare* was summoned. He [the *Tserag Masere*] crowned *Abeto Yohannes*. After all his wishes were fulfilled, *Ras Mika'el* returned to his house. He is [a person] who completes what he has started. And the king went to his chamber. On that day

<sup>42</sup>The battle of Fenter took place in the environs of Gondar on May 1, 1769 (Guidi, p. 257). It was fought between a coalition of lords (of which the leading figures were Lobo and Fasil) and Mika'el. This was the first major challenge to the ascendance of the warlord. He was attacked from several directions. At one point, he came under severe pressure; and it was with difficulty that he was able to push them back. It was clear that Iyo'as was a partisan of the coalition.

<sup>43</sup>This is the equivalent of May 6.

<sup>44</sup>Guidi's chronicle does not record this event and the date. *Gunboat 3* is the same as May 9.

Folio 431b: The Ge'ez text



## Folio 431b: Translation

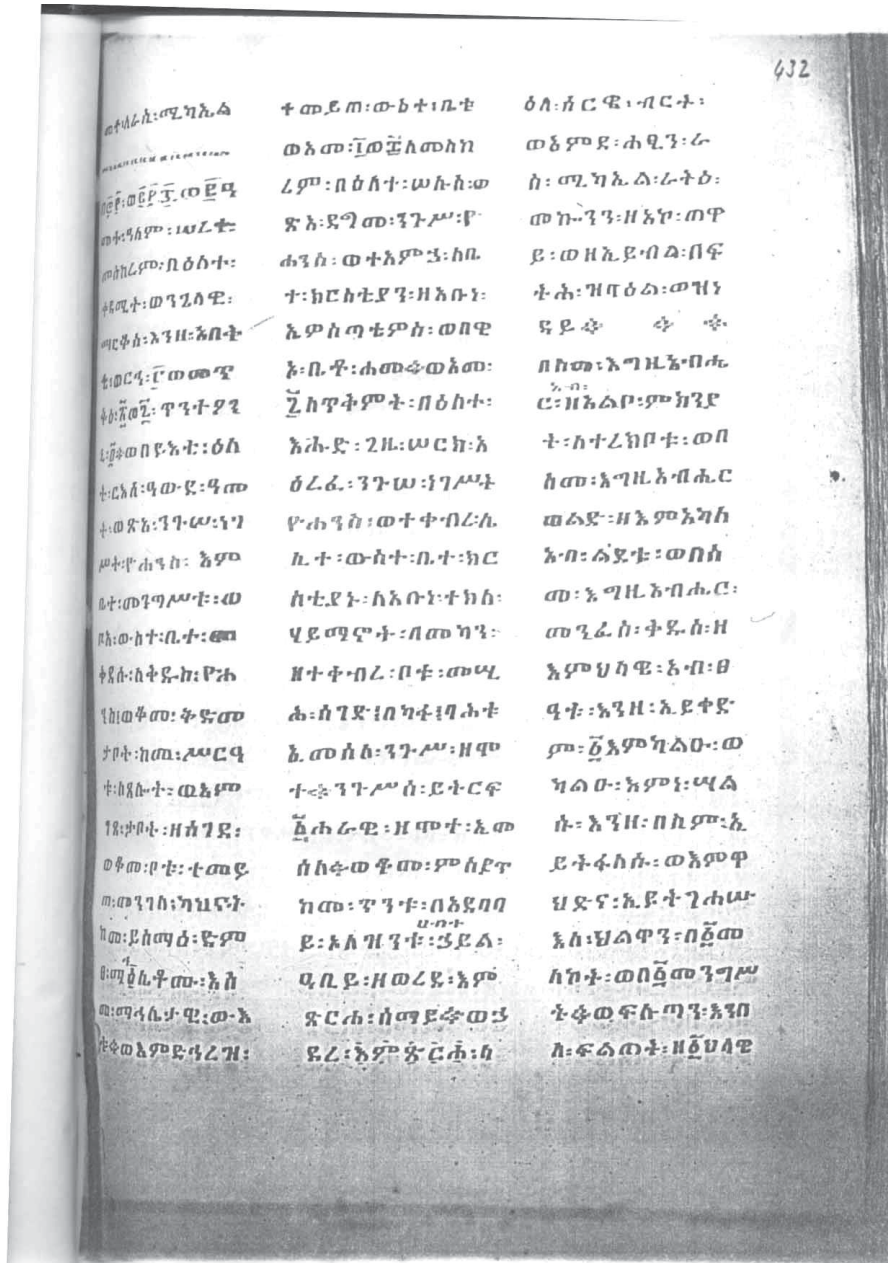
King Yohannes and *Ras* Mika'el deliberated and killed King Iyo'as while he was in his handcuffs.<sup>45</sup> They buried him in the night secretly. On *Genbot* 6 *Dejazmach* Goshu entered [Gondar]. But the story of *Ras* Mika'el cannot be exhausted. We have to leave [many things] buried in our heart. From the second month to the 28<sup>th</sup> of the fourth month<sup>46</sup>, we lived in rest and in pleasure. After passing the period like this, *Dejazmach* Welde Kidan died on Thursday, *Hamle* 29 in St. John monastery where he had been praying [?]. He died after taking the Holy Communion in the Church of St. John. He was buried in Dabra Berhan, the Church of the Infinite Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His father *Ras* Mika'el was very sad because he does not have a strong son like him who would stand guard before him [and] who would repulse all his enemies. He put on mourning dress because he felt very deeply the mourning. His heart was broken. He wailed as Jacob wailed for his son, Joseph. Seeing that he was in bitter sadness [and] to make him stop it, his children entreated him in the name of his son [and] his friend, *Dejazmach* Welde Kidan. But he said no to them. And they said, "how long would you continue in this state?" And he said to them, "I will wail for my son until [the day] I go down to my grave which is my *rest*". After this, on *Nehassie* 12, the daughter of *Ras* Welde Le'ul, lady Muzit, the kind woman, whose baptismal name is Welete Yohannes, died<sup>47</sup>. On Tuesday *Nehassie* 24, Lady Walata Selassie was enthroned. She was called Tsedeq Mogessa<sup>48</sup>. On Friday *Pagume* 5, King Yohannes was present

<sup>45</sup> The Guidi chronicle does not give this detail. Moreover, it makes the assassination take place four days after the coronation [p. 260]. It informs us however that the sons of Naco were the ones who actually carried out the murder.

<sup>46</sup> This means *Hamle* 28.

<sup>47</sup> The chronicle of Iyasu and Iyo'as mention this aristocratic woman in the list of genealogy of the grand family of Mentwab. Nothing more is known about this woman from the sources so far available.

<sup>48</sup> This is her regnal name. Bruce's statement that she was the grand daughter of Mika'el is not confirmed by the chronicler.



Folio 432a: Translation

and he confirmed the *shumat* (the office and title) of *Ras Mika'el*.

In the year of creation 7, 262<sup>49</sup>, in the first day of the Evangelist Marc, *Abaqte 3, metq'e 27, Tention 4, Meskerem* started [new year was ushered in]. On that day which is the chief of all holidays king of kings Yohannes left his palace and entered (went into) the church of St. John. As it was the time of mass, he stood before the *tabot* [in the Holy of Holies]. Then he turned towards the *kahnat* from facing the *tabot* to which had [segede, “to which he had bowed”] in order to hear their *mablet* since he himself was a *mabletawi*. After this he returned to his house. On Tuesday *Meskerem 18*, King Yohannes came out again to pray in the Church of St. Ewostatewos. Upon his return home, he fell sick. On Sunday *Tikmt 7*, King Yohannes died late in the afternoon. He was buried in the night in the Church of *Abune Tekle Hai-manot* in the place where *Masih Sagad Bäkafa* was buried. But, it does not look like a king is dead. It does not look like a soldier had died let alone a king. The market was held in the public square as usual.

<sup>49</sup>This is the equivalent of 1762 EC and 1769 GC.