



# Aethiopica 5 (2002)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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**Review**

PETER P. GARRETSON, *A History of Addis Abäba from its Foundation in 1886 to 1910*

Aethiopica 5 (2002), 252–254

ISSN: 1430–1938

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Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

PETER P. GARRETSON, *A History of Addis Abäba from its Foundation in 1886 to 1910* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 49. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000. xxi + 226 pages; 3 maps; 3 tables. Price: Eur 64,-/sFr 109,-. ISBN: 3-447-04060-2, ISSN: 0170-3196.

There is scarcely a more unifying study of a country's history, culture, politics, social life, etc. than the biography of a city, especially when the location of that particular urban centre is at a juncture as in the case of Addis Abäba. The Ethiopian capital has been established at the southern end of the traditional, Semitic-speaking Christian base of the empire and the northern edge of the lately conquered Cushitic-speaking, predominantly non-Christian societies, usually known as southern Ethiopia. It thus lies almost at the centre of the empire. As such, the traditional east-west and north-south trade routes passed (or were obliged to pass) through, or close by, it. With the enhancement of the political centralization of the empire under Mənilək II and the improvement of communication and means of transport, the city eventually became not only the unrivalled entrepôt of the empire, but it also replaced the famous walled town of Harär as the main distribution centre of goods.

Its importance increased further through the international recognition of Ethiopia's sovereignty and the subsequent establishment of permanent diplomatic missions. From its very inception, Addis Abäba was thus destined to be a melting pot for trade and politics, ethnic groups and languages, cultures and religions, traditions and modernities.

This book successfully assesses the development of the city (particularly in its economic and administrative structures) during the first two dozen years of its existence in the light of archival and oral sources as well as travel literature. The author, who spent a part of his youth in Addis Abäba, sees some uniqueness in the foundation and growth of the city. Though Addis Abäba was chosen as a resort place primarily for its curative geysers and for strategic reasons, and indeed it looked more like a military camp than a city, there were some historical elements which contributed to its permanency:

“Three frontiers intersect at Addis Abäba. From the north and east came the traditions of the Middle Eastern or less correctly, the ‘Islamic city’, cities like Suakin and Məṭəwa (Massawa) along the Red Sea coast and the inland walled town of Harär in eastern Ethiopia. In the south of the Ethiopian empire urbanization was closer to an African model of extended villages with periodic markets and in comparison with the Middle East a lesser prevalence of long distance trade. Finally, of course, the Ethiopian highlands supported an extremely long Christian tradition which led to urban centers concentrated around church foundations (betä krəstiyan) and a

Christian court (*gəbbi*). Nowhere else in Africa or the Middle East over a similar span of centuries has there ever been such a triple conjunction. Addis Abäba, in the center of Ethiopia, was influenced by all three kinds of urbanization but closely followed none of them.” (page xvii.)

In its approach, the study dwells on three components which have been responsible for the growth and development of the city: the institutional or administrative dimension (pp. 27–57), the composition of the city’s population (pp. 58–100), and the economic factor (pp. 101–170).

On the surface, the first element looks more relevant to the political life of the country than to the hustle bustle of the urban centre; but the city’s development would have been bizarre without the control and guidance of those authorities. The institutions were attached to the imperial court and the offices were usually identified by the titles of the officials who filled them. The *Azzaž* who was chief of the palace resources, the *Näggadras* who was chief merchant as well as civil magistrate and head of the local customs, the *Bäğərond* who was chief treasurer of the palace, the *Afä nəguś*, i.e. the chief justice, the *Şāḥafe Tə’əzaz*, chief secretary of the palace, the *Fitawrari* who was in charge of military matters, were the leading officials who played a significant role in the administration and orderly day to day running of the city. They all enjoyed far more prerogatives and temporary assignments related to the capital than their usual functions would require. In part, this had to do with the politically strong and influential personalities (e.g. *Afä nəguś Näsibu*, *Fitawrari Habtä Giyorgis*, *Näggadras Ḥaylä Giyorgis*, etc.) that had successively occupied the positions. This is illustrated by the fact that such high officials as the *Liqä mäkwä*, the *Ligaba* and the *Aggafari* – who were historically highly significant officials – remained in contrast to the others rather modest in their role outside the imperial palace.

The second aspect the book covers is the origin, occupation and economic life of the city’s inhabitants. Almost all ethnic groups of the empire as well as foreigners (especially Indians, Arabs, Armenians and Europeans) were represented in the city as permanent residents. Businessmen and women, craftsmen, soldiers, clergymen and slaves formed distinct and sizable groups among the population. But many residential areas were also dominated by particular ethnic groups, so that groupings on the basis of origin were noticeable as well.

The most important economic element pursued in the early decades of the development of Addis Abäba was trade, particularly export and import of goods, as well as the rendering of services. The statistics and other documents show that the bulk of the profitable trade was in the hands of the Emperor and his magnates as well as the foreign merchants. These were naturally the ones who raised church and residential edifices which contributed toward the city’s permanency.

The book is well organized and is provided with the necessary ancillaries. It is well written and quite readable in spite of the numerous footnotes, most of which are very informative. The description is lucid and accurate, and the interpretation sound.

If there is anything the reader can scoff at, it must be in what has been intentionally or otherwise withheld or omitted, particularly in the area of methodology. The year '1886' being the foundation of the city, its relevance is self-evident. A somewhat perplexing omission is, however, the explanation for the author's choice of the year '1910' as the other limit of the historical period under treatment. There is no obvious reason for taking this date as a turning-point for the history of Addis Abäba. Emperor Mənilək succumbed in this year to a fatal paralysis, an event which indeed precipitated a brief political crisis in the government; but the event seems to have in no way turned out to be beneficial or detrimental to the development of Addis Abäba. Yet, this scholar of high calibre must have had a reason to select it as a marker of his period; a slight hint would of course have sufficed to dispel any suspicion of arbitrariness.

Another important point that would have deserved a subsection in the second chapter is the sanitation and health of the population. It is well-known that most settlements in Ethiopia constituted small villages spread over well-aired high places. The sanitary situation on the slopes of Mount Ənṭotto, to which thousands of people thronged since the mid-1880s, must have been quite different. At least the occasional outbreaks of epidemics have been documented through the letters of the inhabitants and the reports of foreign travellers.

A third vagueness overshadows the research through which the work came into existence. The author sketches out in the preface the dearth of source material for the portrait of Addis Abäba, but he is silent about the studies made by others before and contemporary to his. His bibliography indicates (cf. p. 197) that apart from the numerous contributions of Richard Pankhurst, R.J. Horvath had made the city the subject of his doctoral dissertation eight years earlier and M.E. Johnson likewise submitted his dissertation in UCLA on an aspect of Addis Abäba in the same year as our author. There is even no mention of the fact that the work itself was originally presented as a doctoral dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London a quarter of a century ago. The title was in any case identical, though it is difficult to say whether the text has since then been revised. The relevance of such an information lies in the readers' justifiable interest in up-to-date material and interpretation.

These are but desiderata, and no faults in any respect. The book is a welcome contribution which bridges some gaps in Ethiopian studies.

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