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Miscellaneous

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to “Etege” Yätämäññu*

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Tewodros Bomba Discovery of an Unpublished Letter from Aṣe Tewodros to “Ḥtege” Yätämäññu

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Tewodros's Letters

Aṣe Tewodros was a more prolific letter-writer than any of his predecessors. This was recognized as early as June 1855 by British Consul Walter Plowden, who noted that the newly enthroned monarch had “begun to substitute letters for verbal messages”.¹

Tewodros's letters mark a point of departure also in that they were written in Amharic, no longer in the classical language Gəʿəz, used by most previous Ethiopian rulers. Besides addressing frequent letters to prominent officials,² – and foreign rulers,³ Tewodros dispatched many to Queen Victoria's envoy Hormuzd Rassam,⁴ and – of particular relevance to the present article – to the

¹ UNITED KINGDOM, *Correspondence Respecting Abyssinia 1846–1868* (London 1868), p. 151.

² SVEN RUBENSON, *Tewodros and his Contemporaries 1855–1868* (Addis Ababa 1994); RICHARD PANKHURST, “An Unpublished Order of the King of Kings, Tewodros II, at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies”, *Ethiopian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. V, no. 1 (1988), pp. 1–7; IDEM, “A ‘missing’ letter from Emperor Tewodros II to Queen Victoria's Special Envoy Hormuzd Rassam”, in: WALTER RAUNIG – STEFFEN WENIG, *Afrikas Horn, Akten der Ersten Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz* (Wiesbaden 2005), pp. 107–11; IDEM, “Imperial Orders in a Command or Pre-Market Economy: An Unpublished Letter from Emperor Tewodros II”, in: SIEGBERT UHLIG et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg 21–25 July 2003* = *Aethiopistische Forschungen* 65 (Hamburg 2006), pp. 321–327; IDEM, “Two Unpublished 19th Century Ethiopian Letters: from Emperor Tewodros to Sir Robert Napier, and from Däggazmač Nəguše to Naib Hasān Bey”, *Aethiopica* 11 (2008), pp. 61–67.

³ EDWARD ULLENDORFF, “A letter from the Emperor Theodore to Queen Victoria”. *Neue Afrikanische Studien* (1966), pp. 251–255; RITA PANKHURST, “An unpublished Letter of King of Kings Téwodros II to the Egyptian Governor of the Sudan”, ANATOLY ANDREEVICH GROMYKO (ed.), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow, 26–29 August 1986*, vol. 4 (Moscow 1988), pp. 167–76; DAVID L. APPELYARD – RICHARD PANKHURST, “The Last Two Letters of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia (April 11 and 12 1868)”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1987) no. 1, pp. 23–42.

⁴ GIRMA-SELLASSIE ASFAW – DAVID L. APPELYARD, *The Amharic Letters of Emperor Theodore of Ethiopia to Queen Victoria and her Special Envoy* (London 1979).

mysterious woman Yätämäññu whom foreign observers refer to as his “concubine”, but whom he invariably addresses as *Etege*, i.e. Queen.

Tewodros attached considerable importance to his correspondence as evident from the fact, noted by Rassam, that he appointed one of his courtiers, *Aläqa Zännäb*, as “Keeper of the Royal Archives”, while a paper in the National Army Museum at Chatham refers to the existence at Mäqdäla of a “Record Hut”.⁵ It was situated near Mädhane ‘Aläm church, and, according to Clements Marham, comprised “a number of small huts surrounded by a wall”.⁶ Henry Blanc states that they were thatched like other Ethiopian buildings, but rendered watertight by a cover of thickly woven black woolen cloth called *mak* in Amharic. The chiefs, he adds, met “once or twice a week to assure themselves that the ‘treasures’ entrusted to their care were in perfect order and in safe keeping”.⁷

Aše Tewodros and Etege Yätämäññu

Yätämäññu, the recipient of a number of Tewodros’s letters, undoubtedly played a significant role in the monarch’s life. Rassam asserts that she had formerly been the wife of a Muslim Oromo from Yağğu, but that Tewodros, hearing of her beauty, “ordered her to be brought to his Court, and prevailed on her to adopt Christianity”, after which she “became very assiduous in the performance of her religious duties, and spent much time in reciting prayers”.⁸ There was, he says, “no doubt” that, were Tewodros’s official consort Queen Təru Wärq not still alive he would have “ratified his union with Itamanyo [*sic.*] by wedding her according to the ritual of the Church”.⁹ This opinion is supported by Pauline Flad who noted, on 16 January 1867, that Tewodros had “sent away his concubines” with the significant exception of his “favourite Yatamegni [*sic.*]”.¹⁰ She was likewise referred to by Rassam as the monarch’s “favourite Queen”.¹¹

Tewodros sought to encourage Rassam to recognize Yätämäññu in that position. To that end he sent the envoy a gift of cotton clothing from

⁵ NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM, 5912–71–2: Annotation to English translation of Tewodros’s letter to Ras Bisewwir, March 1868. See also RUBENSON, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

⁶ CLEMENTS ROBERT MARKHAM, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London 1869), p. 368.

⁷ HENRY JULES BLANC, *A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia, with Some Account of the Late Emperor Theodore, his Country and People* (London 1868), p. 210.

⁸ RASSAM, *op. cit.*, II, p. 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 219.

¹⁰ JOACHIM M. FLAD, *Zwölf Jahre in Abessinien* (Leipzig 1887) II, p. 14.

¹¹ RASSAM, *op. cit.*, II, p. 106.

Yätämäññu, with the message: “If you do not wear it for my sake, I hope you will do so for the sake of the Itêgê [*sic.*], from whom I have taken it to send to you”.¹² Rassam for his part displayed his friendship for the lady. On being asked to help her procure a rosary, he “directed a native craftsman to make a string of silver beads, with a large cross of the same metal appended, and had it presented to her”.¹³

Tewodros’s Letters to Yätämäññu

The first foreign observer to see Tewodros’s letters to Yätämäññu was apparently Richard (later Sir Richard) Holmes, the British Museum (later British Library)’s representative with the Napier expedition. He was present at the looting of Mäqdäla, on the evening of 13 April 1868, when he acquired six such letters for the Museum. He later reported to its Trustees, that, fearing “looting or destruction” by the British soldiery, he “made it his duty” to enter the fortress “as soon as possible”, and did so within “not more than ten minutes” of its capture. As for the letters, he states that he found them “under the bed of a chief in a hut in the enclosure of the palace at Magdala about half-an-hour after its capture”.¹⁴

One wonders how far Holmes, in the crisis of the moment – and in a rush to forestall the looters, was able to ascertain the precise ownership of the bed. This leads to the suspicion that it might in fact have belonged, not to an unspecified “chief”, but to Yätämäññu – who reportedly resided at the fort.

Be this as it may Tewodros’s letters, six in number, were duly deposited in the British Museum, as BM Additional MS 828, folios 27 to 32. Their existence led Sir Wallis Budge to observe, half a century or so later, that Yätämäññu “received letters almost daily from her lord”.¹⁵

Meanwhile a seventh letter from Tewodros to Yätämäññu turned up, on the face of things independently of Holmes. It was found among the memorabilia of the 33rd Foot (now the Duke of Wellington’s) Regiment, currently housed in the Bankfield Museum at Halifax in northern England. This letter

¹² Ibid., II, p. 117.

¹³ Ibid., II, p. 219.

¹⁴ The first scholarly discussion of these letters was by HAILE GABRIEL DAGNE, who published an English translation of them in “The letters of Emperor Tewodros to Itege Yetemegnu”, *Ethiopia Observer*, Vol. VII (1963) pp. 115–17; see also DAVID L. APPLE-YARD – ARTHUR K. IRVINE – RICHARD PANKHURST, *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers (Early and Mid-Nineteenth Century)* (London 1985) pp. 161–84.

¹⁵ ERNEST ALFRED WALLIS BUDGE, *A History of Ethiopia*, II (London 1928), p. 512.

had been acquired by a certain Captain R.H. Fawcett, and bore the annotation: "Taken at Magdala. April 13th 1868, R.H.F."¹⁶

Though the seven above-reported letters fortunately survived,¹⁷ many other documents, as Holmes had anticipated, were dissipated or destroyed. Dr Gerhard Rohlfs, a German observer attached to the Napier mission, reports that, after the looting, the whole area of the citadel, was strewn with "loose leaves and fragments". These may conceivably have included other letters from Tewodros to Yätämäññu.¹⁸

Contents of the Letters

The Tewodros–Yätämäññu letters, like virtually all the Emperor's written communications, are extremely short, varying between five and eleven lines of hand-writing. They are dispatched in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and embody only the briefest of greetings. They are addressed to (1) Yätämäññu herself, (2) her "mother", about whom nothing is known, (3) the "people" – presumably the followers – of a certain *Wäyzäro Šännayt*, whose identity is likewise unknown, and (4) members of Tewodros's own household. Only two letters are dated. That in the Banksfield Museum bears the date 2 Terr 1859, i.e. 9 January 1867, while one in the B.L. is dated 5 Ɔagwäme, i.e. 9 September – without any indication of year, but presumably 1867. With these exceptions there is no indication as to when the letters were written, or where the Emperor and his "Etege" were at the time.

Recent Discovery of an Eighth Letter

Revealing light on Tewodros's seven above-mentioned letters is thrown by the discovery by the scholarly collector Ian Shapiro of an eighth letter. It had been pasted in a 19th century photographic album, compiled by a participant of the Mäqdäla expedition, Captain Ferdinand James Tidmarsh, of the 33rd Regiment.¹⁹ Though brief, it is important in helping establish when, where

¹⁶ RICHARD PANKHURST, "An Unpublished Letter of Emperor Tewodros to Etege, or Queen, Yatamannu", *Ethiopian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. V, no. 2 (1989), pp. 17–21.

¹⁷ An envelope with the National War Museum's collection of Tewodros's letters bears the inscription: "Papers found in Leather Necklace brought from Magdala by my brother Major C.F. James on Lord Napier's staff, and given to him by King Theodore's wife".

¹⁸ GERHARD ROHLFS, *Meine Mission nach Abessinien* (Leipzig 1883), p. 257.

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that another letter from Tewodros, in this case addressed to his officials in Mäqdäla, was pasted in another of the Royal Engineers' photographic albums, now housed in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library; on this see PANKHURST, "An Unpublished Order ...".

and why the Tewodros-Yätämäññu letters were written, and thus constitutes a key to a better understanding of the correspondence as a whole.

English Translation of the Text

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God. King of Kings Tewodros. May it reach Etege Yätämäññu. How have you been?

I, thanks be to God, am well. Tell your mother for me, and *Wäyzäro Šännayt’s* people, and my entire household, that I asked after them. And I, by the power of God, do not worry, I will come for you. I set off at the beginning of [the month of] *Təqəmt* [i.e. early October]. However, having had a large *Bomba* [i.e. mortar or cannon] made, I am having the road cleared [for it]. Tell everyone, great and small, women and men: Do not worry, I am coming for you, by God’s power”.

Commentary

Several questions concerning the letter deserve to be considered.

1. *Historical Relationship between the Letters.* The eight letters under discussion are clearly closely related, not only because they were written from, to and about the same personalities, but also because they conveyed largely similar messages of greeting.

The first of these letters would seem to be that acquired by the Bankfield Museum. Written on 9 January 1867, i.e. two days after Ethiopian Christmas, it was thus dated *before* the rainy season of July to September 1867, at a time when Tewodros, as Rassam says, was still at his old capital, Däbrä Tabor. This was before the monarch’s historic march, with his artillery, to Mäqdäla, whither Yätämäññu had preceded him – for what reason we do not know.²⁰

Most of the other letters, among them the Shapiro letter of 9 September 1867, were written apparently *after* that year’s rains, when Tewodros had left Däbrä Tabor, and was transporting his artillery to Mäqdäla. This arduous journey, which had begun nine months after the dispatch of Tewodros’s apparently first letter, covered a period of over five months from 11 October 1867 to late March 1868.²¹ The Shapiro letter is interesting in that it establishes Tewodros’s whereabouts, and what he was doing: We are thus expressly told that the monarch was transporting his cannon to Mäqdäla, for which reason he was clearing the road to his mountain fortress. Neither of these activities are mentioned in the other letters, in which they seem to

²⁰ RASSAM, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 236–237.

²¹ MARKHAM, *op. cit.*, pp. 292, 298.

have been taken for granted – which may suggest that this letter preceded most of the other missives.

2. *Provenance of the Newly-Discovered Letter.* The similarity of the letters suggests that all were written in more or less identical circumstances, i.e. when Tewodros was proceeding – with the cannon – to Mäqdäla, where Yätämäññu, her mother, *Wäyzäro Šännayt*, and some of the Emperor's men were in residence.

All eight letters, we may note, were acquired at Mäqdäla by members of the British expeditionary force, which would suggest that all these epistles reached their destination. Holmes claims, it may be recalled, that the six he handed to the B.M. were discovered under an unidentified chief's bed. The two remaining letters were reportedly acquired by two British officers, but there is no record as to when, where and in what circumstances this took place. One may speculate that the said two letters may have been housed separately from the six others, and that the two British officers acquired them separately. Alternatively we may suppose that these two letters had earlier been kept with the six under the alleged chief's bed, but were somehow separated as a result of the British intervention. Holmes, we know from his nephew Martin, “was not well off”.²² Finding the icon of the *Kwər^cätä Re^oesu*, or Christ with the Crown of Thorns, at about the same time as he chanced upon Tewodros's letters to Yätämäññu, he appropriated the holy relic for himself, rather than for his employers.²³ One wonders whether he might perhaps have likewise considered the two letters as his treasure – and disposed of them to the two officers?

3. *The Mortar.* Tewodros's statement in the Shapiro letter that he was clearing a road for his “large mortar” testifies to the importance that this weapon played in the last year of his life. Though in his talks with foreigners he named the mortar *Sevastopol* after the Russian fortress which acquired prominence during the Crimean War, the letter shows that in his more intimate correspondence with Yätämäññu, he called it *bomba* – a term of Italian origin. This word was likewise used in *Wäldä Maryam's* chronicle of the reign.²⁴

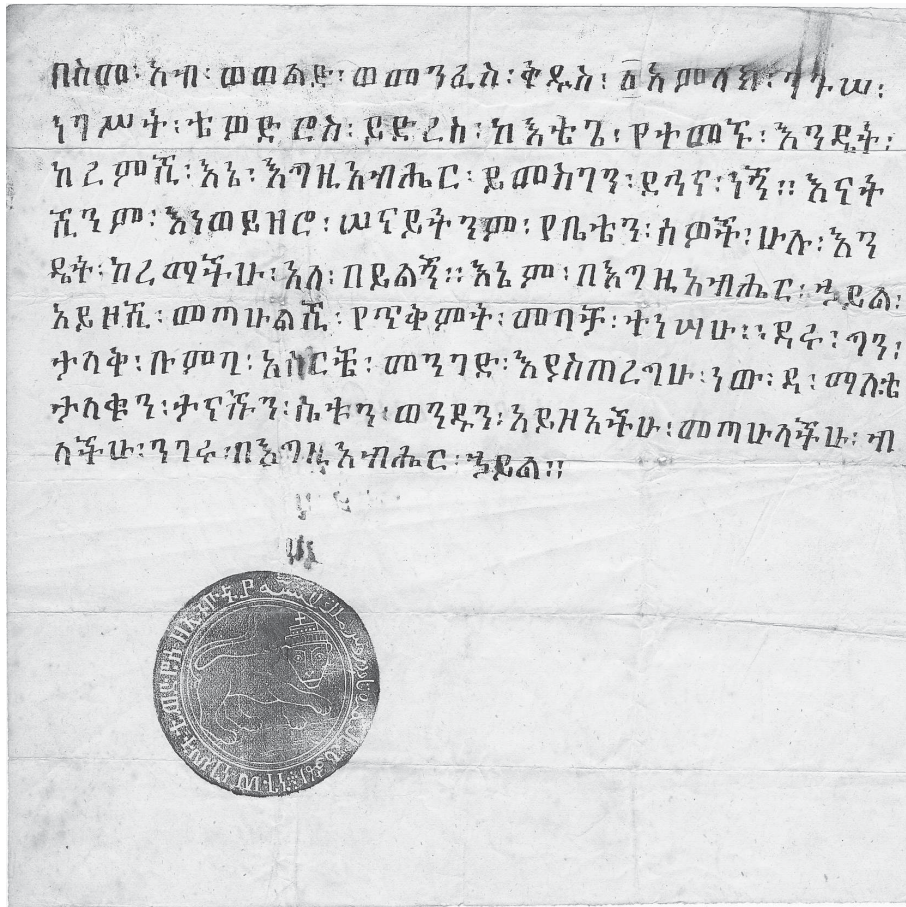
²² From a personal letter to the author: see RICHARD PANKHURST, “The *Kwer^cata Re^oesu*: the History of an Ethiopian Icon”, *Abba Salama*, Vol. X (1979), p. 185.

²³ On the history of the icon see RICHARD PANKHURST, “The *Kwer^cata Re^oesu ...*”, pp. 178–85.

²⁴ FRANÇOIS MARIE CASIMIR MONDON-VIDAILHET, *Chronique de Théodoros II roi des rois* (Paris 1905) text. pp. 45–46, translation, pp. 56–58, notes, p. 94; see also *Yaše Tewodros Tarik*, Roma 1959; LUIGI FUSELLA, “La cronaca dell'Imperatore Teodoro II di Etiopia in un manoscritto amarico”, *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, Vol. VI (1954–56), p. 112.

Miscellaneous

Less than a year later, in his penultimate letter of 11 April 1868 to Robert Napier – housed, through the offices of the present writer, in the National Library of Ethiopia, he was to refer to the by then discredited weapon, by the later more usual Amharic word: *mädḥ*, qualifying it by *balsälla*, i.e. “unsuccessful cannon”.²⁵



Ill. 1: The Shapiro letter

²⁵ APPELYARD – PANKHURST, “The last two letters”, pp. 28, 40.



Ill. 2: The back page of the letter, showing *Ītege* Yätämäññu as addressee

Summary

The article reports the recent discovery of a hitherto unknown letter from *Aše* Tewodros to his wife or concubine Yätämäññu – the eighth such letter thus far known. This message, which, like the others, addresses her as *Ītege*, or Queen, provides further evidence of his attachment to her. It also confirms the great hope he placed in his large mortar Sevastopol, for which he built his famous road between Däbrä Tabor and Mäqdäla, and which he refers to in the intimacy of his letter by the European loan-word *bomba*.