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Ethiopian Dynastic Marriage and the Bétä Esraʾél

RICHARD PANKHURST

Dynastic marriage for at least the half millennium, for which relatively good documentation is available, played a major, and well-attested, role in Ethiopian political life. Imperial rulers effected a number of important dynastic and other unions which transcended divisions of religion, ethnicity and class.¹

The early sixteenth century Portuguese traveller Francisco Alvares, generally a reliable informant, writing of the Šäwa-based Christian monarchs prior to the reign of Emperor Naʾod (1494–1506), claimed that they “always had five or six wives”. These were chosen, he says, from among “the daughters of the neighbouring Moorish [i.e. Muslim] kings”.²

One of the most important inter-religious and inter-ethnic marriages of this period took place during the reign of Emperor Bäʾedä Maryam (1468–1478), who effected a dynastic union with Ité Jan Zela, the daughter of Gärad Mehmäd, a Muslim ruler of Hadeya.³ Converted to Christianity she later became better known as Empress Eléni, the author of two Geʿez works on theology, the Regent for her grandson Emperor Lebnä Dengel, and a stateswoman, who, fearing the advance of the Ottoman Turks, took the imaginative and historic step of opening up relations with the Portuguese.⁴

The Ethiopian state’s involvement in inter-religious and inter-ethnic unions found no less important expression some two and a half centuries later when another great woman Regent, Empress Mentewwäb, of Gondär, arranged for her

¹ BAIRU TAFLA, “Marriage as a Political Device: an Appraisal of a Socio-Political Aspect of the Menilek Period 1889–1916”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1972), X, No. 1, pp. 13–21.

² C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *The Prester John of the Indies* (Cambridge, 1961), I, 193.

³ J. PERRUCHON, *Les chroniques de Zarʾa Yaʿeqôb et de Baʾeda Mâryâm, rois d’Ethiopie de 1434 à 1478* (Paris, 1893), pp. 16, 59, 176–7.

⁴ C.F. REY, *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia* (London, 1929), p. 313.

son, Emperor Iyasu II (1730–1755), to marry Wobit, the daughter of Amizo, an Oromo (or Galla) leader from Yäjju.⁵ The Scottish traveller James Bruce, who visited the country only a generation or so later, claims that their half-Oromo son Emperor Iyoʾas (1755–1769) brought many of his mother's Oromo kinsmen to his court, with the result that “in an instant nothing was heard in the palace but Galla”, i.e. Afan Oromo, and Emperor Iyoʾas himself “affected to speak nothing else”.⁶

It would seem not unreasonable to suppose that beside such important, and well documented, dynastic unions connected with the ruling house there were many other inter-religious and inter-ethnic marriages among the lesser nobility and peasantry which were also politically significant, but passed unrecorded.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine how far the Bétä Esraʾél, or Fälaša, fitted into the prevailing Ethiopian pattern of inter-religious royal marriage.

Emperor Säršä Dengel and Emäbét Ḥarägo of Sämén

Contacts between the Ethiopian State, which was based on Šäwa in the centre of the empire, and the Bétä Esraʾél, who lived for the most part in the far north-west of it, were for geographical reasons fairly restricted until the late sixteenth century. It was then, during the reign of Emperor Minas (1559–1563) that the move of the imperial capital from Šäwa to the Lake Ṭana area, brought the imperial rulers into more direct contact with some of the more important areas of Fälaša settlement in and around the high and rugged Sämén mountains. The Bétä Esraʾél country, despite its proximity, was, however, far from easy of access, or conquest.

The first Ethiopian ruler to establish himself firmly in the north-west of the country was Minas' brother, the great Emperor Säršä Dengel, also known as Mäläk Sägäd (1563–1597), who, it is interesting to recall, had a Fälaša, or probably more correctly ex-Fälaša wife from Sämén. The scholarly Jesuit PERO PAES, who was in Ethiopia at the time, expressly states in his History that she

⁵ I. GUIDI, *Annales Regum ʾIyäsü II et ʾIyoʾas. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Vol. 66 (Louvain, 1912), p. 180.

⁶ J. BRUCE, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1790), II, 662.

was a “newly converted Christian” of a Judaic background.⁷ Believed to have been a sister of Gedéwon, the notable Bétä Esraʾél ruler of Sämén, she is referred to in the royal chronicles of the time by the title Emäbét or Tegäzañi⁸ (honorific titles perhaps the equivalent to Princess), and is variously called Ḥarägo or Ḥarägwé, perhaps an abbreviation of Ḥarägä Wayn, i.e. Creeper, or Vine [of God].⁹ The union of Säršä Dengel and Ḥarägo, which we must now consider, was on the face of things scarcely less important than the above-mentioned marriages of Bäʾedä Maryam and Jan Zela or of Iyasu and Wobit.

Whether the Säršä Dengel–Ḥarägo union was a dynastic union in the normal sense of the word may be a matter of debate. The Jesuits, with their implicit and explicit preoccupation with monogamy, regarded Ḥarägo merely as the Emperor’s “concubine”. Several later scholars have therefore tended to dismiss her as a person of little consequence. Her assumed position as sister to the Sämén Bétä Esraʾél leader Gedéwon would, on the other hand, suggest that she was a person of some significance, at least locally, in her own right, as was the case of the consorts, official or unofficial, of more than one other Ethiopian

⁷ BECCARI, *Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentali Inediti* (Roma, 1903C17), II, 207-8.

⁸ On these titles see A. D’ABBADIE, *Dictionnaire de la langue amariñña* (Paris, 1881), cols. 470, 870.

⁹ F. BÉGUINOT, *La cronaca abbreviata d’Abbyssinia* (Roma, 1901), p. 41. On the history of Ḥarägo and her family see also C. CONTI ROSSINI, “Due squarci inediti di cronica etiopica”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche* (1894), II, 809–11; W. WRIGHT, *Catalogue of the Ethiopian Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1877), p. 317; F.M. ESTEVES PEREIRA, *Chronica de Susneyos, rei de Ethiopia* (Lisbon, 1900), II, 79, 217, 376-7; C. BECCARI, *op. cit.* (Roma, 1903-17), III, 207–8, 327–8; BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 236-7; GIRMA BASHAH and MERID WOLDE AREGAY, *The Question of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations (1500C1632)* (Lisbon, 1964), pp. 70-5; MERID WOLDE AREGAY, “Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508–1708, with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences” (University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1971), pp. 355–9; J. QUIRIN, “The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopian History: Caste Formation and Culture Change 1270C1868” (University of Minnesota Ph.D. thesis, 1977), p. 92; *idem*, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews. A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 82-3; S. KAPLAN, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1992), p. 88–9, 192–3.

ruler.¹⁰ Ḥarägo's role as mother to several of the Emperor's sons would moreover have given her prominence, and would by itself have justified her being accorded the above-mentioned titles of Emäbét and Tegäzañi, if not that of Etegé, or Queen.

Emäbét Ḥarägo, like the Hadeya, Jan Zela, and the Oromo, Wobit, was not the first or principal wife of Säršä Dengel. His official consort was Maryam Sena, a woman of Orthodox Christian descent. Ḥarägo, it should be reiterated, was nevertheless a woman of by no means negligible status: in part because of her believed descent from the ruling Fälaša dynasty, and in part because of her apparently long-standing relationship with the Emperor, which caused her to bear him at least four sons. (Whether there were, as is probable, also one or more daughters, is not recorded).

The tie between Säršä Dengel and Gedéwon's alleged sister Ḥarägo, like several dynastic arrangements in Ethiopian history, did not produce peace between the parties concerned, in this case the Ethiopian Christian empire and the Bétä Esraʾél leadership. The Emperor in fact fought a major, and later well-documented, war against Ḥarägo's Fälaša kinsmen.¹¹ His ties with Ḥarägo may, however, have led him to afford Gedéwon some personal protection, as STEVEN KAPLAN has suggested.¹² Suspicion of this arises from a curious passage in the royal chronicle, which records that the Bétä Esraʾél leader, at the close of a disastrous battle, escaped with fifteen armed men, and passed, supposedly unobserved, through the armies of two of the Emperor's principal commanders. The chronicler protests, at perhaps more than reasonable length, that if anyone asserted that Gedéwon and his party had been recognized, and knowingly allowed to escape, such allegation was totally false.¹³

Be that as it may, Ḥarägo was the mother, as we have seen, of four sons by Säršä Dengel, and this was a later matter of considerable political importance in that Maryam Sena reportedly had given birth only to daughters. This was of

¹⁰ A parallel can perhaps be drawn with Emperor Téwodros II's Oromo "concubine" Yätämañnu, an apparently significant woman of Wällo, whom he addressed as *Etegé*, or Queen. D.L. APPEYARD and A.K. IRVINE, *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers (Early and Mid-Nineteenth Century)* (London, 1985), pp. XV, 161–83.

¹¹ J. HALÉVY, *La guerre de Sarša Dëngël contre les Falachas* (Paris, 1907).

¹² S. KAPLAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 193.

¹³ C. CONTI ROSSINI, *Historia Regis Sarša Dengel (Malak Sagad). Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Vol. 21 (Louvain, 1907), pp. 122–3.

great moment towards the end of the reign when the question of the royal succession came to be considered.

The fact that Ḥarägo was not Säršä Dengel's official consort – but only, as the Jesuits assert, a “concubine” – was, it should be emphasised, entirely irrelevant to the succession issue. This was later clearly, and correctly, stated by JAMES BRUCE, who, rebutting any suggestion that “illegitimate sons” had “no right to succeed to the crown”, observes that any such idea was “absolutely contrary to truth”, for in matters of royal succession “no sort of difference” was ever made in Ethiopia between legitimate and illegitimate sons.¹⁴ Ḥarägo's sons were thus fully entitled to be considered for the throne, which, as we shall see, one of them duly attained.

We may conclude that Ḥarägo, though mentioned only in passing in our records,¹⁵ and, like so many of her community an apparent convert to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, deserves a significant place in Bétä Esra'el biography and history. Thanks to her, Ethiopia was soon to have an Emperor of half-Fälaša descent.¹⁶

Zä-Maryam

Towards the end of his life Säršä Dengel, having, as we have seen, no male heir by Maryam Sena, is said to have contemplated giving the royal inheritance to his nephew Zä-Dengel. The latter was the son of the Emperor's brother Abétahun Lesanä Krestos. Shortly before his death, however, Säršä Dengel, if we can believe PERO PAES, was brought his son by Ḥarägo, a child called Zä-Krestos, whom he had never previously seen. Moved by his sudden love for the infant the ageing monarch reportedly started to show less honour to his nephew Zä-Dengel, whom he made to stand, and, no longer sit, as formerly, in his presence. He also began to criticise his nephew behind his back, saying that he lacked the strong personality which Ethiopia then required of its ruler.

¹⁴ J. BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 236.

¹⁵ Precious little is in fact known of the life of Ḥarägo. Quirin has suggested that she might have been captured by Säršä Dengel in the course of an expedition to Sämén, but this, like so much about her, cannot be more than speculation.

¹⁶ J. BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 236.

The chief courtiers of the realm, according to PAES, quickly understood their master's new way of thinking. To gain his pleasure it had long been their custom to agree with whatever he said. They therefore now began to praise the young half-Fälaša Zä-Maryam, and showed the Emperor that they wished to have his son as heir to the kingdom. Zä-Dengel was in this way soon almost entirely excluded from court activities.

This state of affairs lasted, however, for only about six months, at the end of which Zä-Maryam suddenly died. Säršä Dengel, PAES tells us, was much shocked by his son's death, and regarded it as a Divine punishment for what he had done to poor Zä-Dengel, whom he thereupon once again befriended.¹⁷

Emperor Ya'qob

After Zä-Maryam's death, Säršä Dengel, according to PAES who claims to have been informed by the monarch's son-in-law Ras Atenatéwos, informed the great lords that he had once more resolved to give the empire to his nephew Zä-Dengel.

The courtiers, however, preferred Ḥarägo's younger son Ya'qob, who was then but seven years old. They favoured the latter, PAES argues, because they wanted a young emperor, whom they would be able to manipulate. (This consideration often played an important role in Ethiopian politics). The nobles accordingly told Säršä Dengel that Zä-Dengel was too rigid in his views, and criticised him in various other unspecified ways. The Emperor, nearing his end, and doubtless wearied by continued discussion of the succession issue, finally declared that they should settle the matter as they thought best.

After Säršä Dengel's death in 1597, the lords and members of the royal family duly assembled, and agreed among themselves to make Ya'qob emperor. To forestall any opposition from Zä-Dengel, thus once again ousted from the succession, they seized him before he heard of his uncle's demise. They took him as a prisoner to the island of Deq on Lake Ṭana, whence he was later transferred to a place of detention on one of the mountains of Gojjam, which was impossible of access without a rope.¹⁸

¹⁷ C. BECCARI, *op. cit.*, III, 207-8.

¹⁸ *ibid*, III, 208.

It was in the above manner, according to PAES, that the half-Fālaša prince Ya^cqob was brought to the throne, and his rival Zä-Dengel banished to remote areas from which he could not threaten this political arrangement.

A different story of these events was provided almost two centuries later by BRUCE, who, very characteristically, fails to cite any source for his statements, which, as far as we can tell, are not based on any known written source.¹⁹ The Scotsman ignores Säršä Dengel's reported earlier choice of Ḥarāgo's first son Zä-Maryam as his heir, and begins the succession story with her second son Ya^cqob. He claims, contrary to PAES, that it was Ya^cqob whom the old Emperor originally favoured, and that the latter accordingly began treating him as the "heir-apparent", which "everybody" in Ethiopia thought was "but natural and pardonable from the affection of a father".

BRUCE goes on to claim that Säršä Dengel realising that his death was approaching, then changed his mind over the succession, for his "interest and love of his country seemed to overcome even ties of blood": He accordingly began to favour his nephew Zä-Dengel. The Emperor, according to the Scotsman, therefore called his state council around his bed, and, in his last words, supposedly declared:

"As I am sensible that I am at the point of death, next to the care of my soul, I am anxious for the welfare of my kingdom. My first idea was to appoint Jacob my son to be successor; and I had done so unless for his youth, and it is probable neither you nor I could have cause to repent it. Considering, however, the state of my kingdom, I prefer its interest to the private affection I bear my son; and do, therefore, hereby appoint Za Denghel my nephew to succeed me, and be your king; and recommend him to you as fit for war, ripe in years, exemplary in the practice of every virtue, and as deserving of the crown by his good qualities, as he is by his near relation to the royal family".

BRUCE concludes his account by claiming that, as soon as Säršä Dengel was dead, the royal family reversed the succession. "The very reasons the dying king had given them, why Za Denghel was fitted to reign, were those", he claims,

¹⁹ BRUCE produced his *Travels*, it should be recalled, almost twenty years after his visit to Ethiopia, and perhaps for that reason his writings, as is well known, contain many inaccuracies great and small.

“for which they were determined to reject him: as they, after so long a reign ... were perfectly weary of being kept in their duty, and desired nothing more than an infant king and a long minority: this they found in Jacob”.²⁰

BRUCE’s version, which, we would insist, was not based on any identified source, has tended to be generally accepted, and is for example uncritically reproduced by the early twentieth century British historian of Ethiopia, SIR WALLIS BUDGE.²¹

The Scotsman’s account has, however, implicitly been rejected by two modern Ethiopian scholars, GIRMA BESHAH and MERID WOLDE AREGAY, both fully conversant with Portuguese sources. Following PAES, they declare that the dying Emperor Säršä Dengel was “persuaded” by the courtiers to leave the throne to his seven year old son Yaʿqob. This, they show, was therefore not a unilateral decision made by the nobles after his death, as BRUCE had suggested.²²

Whatever the actual details of the succession struggle the main point was that, with the enthronement of Yaʿqob, kingship, as so often in Ethiopian history, was once more vested in an infant, whom the nobles, because of his tender age, hoped to be able to control, and manipulate, for many years to come.

Yaʿqob, whose capital was at Qoga, east of Lake Ṭana, reigned, according to the royal chronicle, for seven years. Not long after his accession, Ras Atenatéwos, the husband of one of Säršä Dengel’s daughters by Maryam Sena, and governor of Bägémder province, came to the capital, and established himself as the young Emperor’s “tutor”, or in effect his master.

In the sixth year of his reign Yaʿqob, however, succeeded in freeing himself from this tutorage. He fought an armed battle with Atenatéwos, defeated him, and later replaced him as his political mentor by another lord, a Guragé chief called Ras Zä-Šellásé. Yaʿqob’s relations with the latter, however, soon deteriorated. The young Emperor then lost the support of the army, which rebelled. The soldiers, condemning him as a foolish child, interested only in his games, joined Zä-Šellásé in deposing him.

Yaʿqob at around this time was accused of various other crimes. These included adultery, betraying the Christian religion, breaking a cross on the church of Bétä Iyäsus, and consulting cow’s fat, like the Gallas (or Oromos), for

²⁰ J. BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 236-7.

²¹ E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, *A History of Ethiopia* (London, 1928), II, 374-5.

²² GIRMA BESHAH and MERID WOLDE AREGAY, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

purposes of prophecy. In view of his mother's Fälaša background the three latter charges, unsubstantiated and probably false as they were, are not without interest.²³

After his overthrow the young Emperor was taken to Enarya province in the south-west of the empire where he was kept as a prisoner. He was replaced as Emperor by Säršä Dengel's nephew Zä-Dengel, who was at last given the throne which his uncle had, as we have seen, apparently earlier wished to grant him.²⁴

The reign of Zä-Dengel was, however, but a short one. In the course of a rebellion not long after his accession he died, or was killed, in October 1606, reportedly on account of a horse accident, for, the chronicle says, "he did not know the art of riding, but only poetry and hymns".

The death of Zä-Dengel, like that of so many other Ethiopian rulers, was followed by much political confusion, in the course of which the Guragé chief Zä-Šellasé is said by the chronicle to have "held the realm in his hands". Realising the need for the speedy appointment of a new Emperor, however, he decided on restoring Ya'qob to the throne.

The young half-Fälaša ex-Emperor, by then about fifteen years' old, was accordingly recalled from Enarya, and again placed on the throne. To consolidate his power he effected a dynastic marriage with the daughter of the ruler of Hadeya, long an important source of gold, but, according to Almeida, had no time to carry out the wedding ceremony.²⁵

Ya'qob's second reign was even shorter than the first, for his power was soon afterwards challenged by Abéto Susneyos, the notable future Emperor of that name (1607–1632), who defeated and killed him in battle, in February or March 1607.²⁶

The two reigns of Emperor Ya'qob, though short, were not unimportant. On the one hand he continued the imperial policy, dating back to Empress Eléni's time, of seeking a dynastic alliance with the gold-producing country Hadeya. On the other, he conceived a diplomatic opening to the Jesuits and to the Portuguese, which in fact was later developed by his successors Zä-Dengel and

²³ F.M. ESTEVES PEREIRA, *op. cit.*, II, 39.

²⁴ F. BÉGUINOT, *op. cit.*, p. 41; J. BRUCE, *op. cit.*, II, 238.

²⁵ C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (London, 1954), p. 69.

²⁶ F. BÉGUINOT, *op. cit.*, p. 42; F.M. ESTEVES PEREIRA, *op. cit.*, II, 42.

Susneyos. Yaʿqob seems also to have won some popular recognition in that an impostor claiming to be him was soon to appear on the scene. The real Yaʿqob’s historical reputation has on the other hand suffered from the fact that no chronicle of his reign was ever written.

Keflä Maryam and Mätäko

Emäbét Ḥarägo, Yaʿqob’s ex-Bétä Esraʾél mother, had at least two other politically important sons: Keflä Maryam and Mätäko. They were apparently both her children by Emperor Säršä Dengel.²⁷

Keflä Maryam, the more important of the two, is mentioned by both PERO PAES and Emperor Susneyos’ chronicle. The latter states, without giving any details, that Keflä Maryam was one of three “rebels” whom Gedéwon, the Bétä Esraʾél ruler of Sämén, nominated as a “king”, but was shortly afterwards captured by Susneyos’s men, after which he was convicted and “killed by the sword”.

Gedéwon’s support for Keflä Maryam, supposedly his nephew, is revealing. It shows that the imperial and Bétä Esraʾél ruling dynasties were in one way or other more closely connected with each other than might at first sight be supposed. Keflä Maryam, though reputedly Säršä Dengel’s son, also had, it would seem, some political relationship with the Fälaša, from whom his mother, the late Emperor’s “concubine” had sprung.

Keflä Maryam’s rebellion probably occurred in the first year of Susneyos’s reign, or a little earlier, during the time of Yaʿqob, for the chronicle states that he and Mätäko were accused, apparently in 1608, of certain unspecified “idle and vile acts”, for which they were sentenced to death. The chronicler, who naturally presents the story from Susneyos’s standpoint, states that one of the brothers (whom PAES identifies as Keflä Maryam) “claimed to be the son of Mäläk Sägäd”, i.e. Säršä Dengel, and therefore entitled to the throne, while the other brother (Mätäko, according to PAES) declared that should his brother become king he for his part wanted to be *wazir*, or in effect Prime Minister.

The plot originated, the chronicler would have us believe, in the two brothers’ personal ambition (a common charge in Ethiopian political history),

²⁷ F.M. ESTEVES PEREIRA, *op. cit.*, II, 79.

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and resulted in a considerable amount of fighting. The rebels reportedly “destroyed many districts” of “lower Sämén”, i.e. territory near that inhabited by the two brothers’ Fälaša kinsmen, who, we may assume, were probably involved in the struggle.

Keflä Maryam and Mätäko were duly captured, and, according to the chronicle, “fell into the hands of the righteous king”, i.e. Susneyos, who then interrogated them. In response to his questions they declared that they had been “led astray”, by whom it is not specified, into doing “evil” things. The Emperor, having obtained this confession of guilt, handed them over to his judges, who, not surprisingly, found them guilty, and sentenced them to death. Susneyos then commanded that they should be killed by the sword, and, the chronicle sardonically states, they were thus both killed.²⁸ This account was probably substantially correct, for it is fully corroborated by PAES.²⁹

Ras Yämanä Krestos

Despite the cruel fate meted out by Susneyos to Ḥarägo’s three sons, Ya^çqob, Keflä Maryam, and Mätäko, all three apparently Säršä Dengel’s children, the idea of a dynastic union with the Bétä Esra’él rulers of Sämén was not dead. It was revived, remarkably enough, by none other than Susneyos’ brother, Yämanä Krestos, an ambitious prince who was strongly opposed to his imperial sibling’s attempt to convert Orthodox Christian Ethiopia to Roman Catholicism.³⁰

Yämanä Krestos rebelled against his brother Emperor Susneyos, in or around 1617. To strengthen his position he is reported to have planned a dynastic alliance with the Bétä Esra’él leader Gedéwon. This plan, for which he was later accused and condemned by Susneyos, is mentioned both in the chronicle and in PERO PAES’ History. The alliance was to be effected by Yämanä Krestos giving his daughter, i.e. Emperor Susneyos’ niece, to Gedéwon’s son Walay.³¹ The fact that Yämanä Krestos’ daughter was to become the young Fälaša leader’s wife, and thus the subordinate partner in the proposed dynastic marriage, would

²⁸ *ibid.*, II, 217.

²⁹ *ibid.*, II, 79; C. BECCARI, *op. cit.*, III, 327-8.

³⁰ F.M. ESTEVES PEREIRA, *op. cit.*, II, 131-7, 138, 215, 233-4.

³¹ *ibid.*, II, 136; C. BECCARI, *op. cit.*, III, 362.

seem an indication of the importance Yämanä Krestos attached to a Bétä Esraʾél alliance.

The rebellion against Susneyos was, however, soon crushed, and Yämanä Krestos was obliged to surrender. He was charged with seven crimes, two of which are of direct relevance to our story:

5. Failing, during Susneyos' campaign against Gedéwon, properly to guard a certain passage-way, and thereby allowing the Fälaša leader to escape.
6. Hating persons whom Susneyos loved, and loving those whom he hated; befriending the brothers and sisters of persons whom Susneyos had executed on account of their iniquity; giving his sisters and nieces in marriage to such persons; and "deciding to become related with the Fälaša leader Gedéwon by giving his daughter to the latter's son Walay".³²

Yämanä Krestos was duly tried, and found guilty of treason, but, doubtless because he was the Emperor's brother, was, unlike Säršä Dengel's unfortunate sons, subsequently pardoned. He was nevertheless exiled to Gojjam, and, according to both PAES and the chronicle, expressly forbidden to carry out the proposed dynastic alliance with Gedéwon.³³

Susneyos' triumph, we may conclude, put an end to any further royal dynastic alliances with the Bétä Esraʾél. This was scarcely surprising. The Emperor, unlike his brother Yämanä Krestos, had no need of the Fälaša, for he hoped, as a result of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, to obtain much more valuable military help, including fire-arms, from the Portuguese. Encouraged by PERO PAES' Jesuit successor, the rigid and fanatical Alfonso Mendes,³⁴ he was moreover actively engaged in a struggle to suppress such "Judaic practices" as the Ethiopian Orthodox Saturday Sabbath, and was therefore ideologically unfavourable to any dealings with the Bétä Esraʾél, whose religion was even more "Judaic" than Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

By the time of the establishment of Gondär as the imperial capital in 1636 the Bétä Esraʾél royal house was a thing of the past. The Gondarine emperors

³² P. PAES, *História da Etiópia* (Porto, 1945), III, 312.

³³ C. BECCARI, *op. cit.*, II, 131–3.

³⁴ P. CARAMAN, *The Lost Empire. The Story of the Jesuits in Ethiopia* (London, 1985), pp. 148–51.

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continued to conduct dynastic unions with various ruling houses, including those of far-off Tegray,³⁵ Ḥamasén,³⁶ and Yejju³⁷ but no longer with the Fālaša. A Bētā Esraʾél-Christian union, like that of Sāršā Dengel and Ḥarāgo, was not repeated as Yāmanā Krestos had wished. If marriages between members of the two communities occurred it was only at a much lower social level, which deserves a separate study.

Conclusion

Significant contacts between the Ethiopian State and the Bētā Esraʾél began in the late sixteenth century with the move of the imperial capital to the Lake Tana area, which was relatively near to Fālaša settlements in or around the Sāmén mountains.

At about this time Ḥarāgo, an apparently high-born Fālaša woman, supposedly the sister of Gedéwon, the Bētā Esraʾél ruler of Sāmén, and reportedly a recent convert to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, became the consort, or as the Jesuits preferred to say a “concubine” of the redoubtable Emperor Sāršā Dengel. She bore him four sons. One, Zā-Maryam, was chosen as heir to the throne, but died before he could succeed. The second, Yaʿqob, actually ascended the imperial throne, but was too young to make any significant achievement. Two others, Keflä Maryam, and Mätäko, threw in their lot with their kinsman Gedéwon, and thus played a notable role in imperial and/or Fālaša local politics.

There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Ethiopian Christians regarded Ḥarāgo, or her children, as in any way different from the rest of the royal family, or that they were in any way discriminated against on account of their non-Christian, or Bētā Esraʾél, origin.

The idea of a dynastic alliance with the Bētā Esraʾél was subsequently revived by Emperor Susneyos’s rebel brother Ras Yāmanā Krestos. He proposed giving his daughter, the Emperor’s niece, to the Sāmén ruler Gedéwon’s son and heir Walay. Ras Yāmanā Krestos’ rebellion was, however, crushed, after which

³⁵ R. PANKHURST, “An Eighteenth-Century Ethiopian Dynastic Marriage Contract between Empress Mentewwab of Gondar and Ras Mikaʾel Sehul of Tegré”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (1978), XLII, 547–66.

³⁶ I. GUIDI, *Annales Iohannes I, 'Iyāsu I et Bakāffā* (CSCO, 1903), pp. 179, 222.

³⁷ The Wobit connection referred to above.

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Susneyos exiled his brother to Gojjam, and forbade the proposed Bétä Esraʾél dynastic alliance. As a Roman Catholic, seeking military support from the Portuguese, and an adherent of the Jesuits, who wished to cleanse Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity of “Judaic” elements, he would moreover have been predisposed against playing the Fälaša card.

The subsequent decline of Bétä Esraʾél power, the disappearance of the Fälaša ruling dynasty, and the growing importance of fire-arms, which the Fälaša lacked, created a new strategic and political climate in which dynastic alliances between the Ethiopian monarchy and the Bétä Esraʾél no longer had any place.