

LAND TENURE AND AGRARIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN ETHIOPIA, 1636-1900

BY

HABTAMU MENGISTIE TEGEGNE

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Emeritus Donald Crummey, Chair
Associate Professor Carol Symes
Professor Emeritus Charles Stewart
Assistant Professor James Brennan
Associate Professor Kenneth Cuno

Abstract

Most scholars have viewed property in pre-modern Ethiopia in “feudal” terms analogous to medieval Europe. According to them, Ethiopia’s past property arrangement had been in every respect archaic implying less than complete property rights, for, unlike in modern liberal societies, it vested no ownership or “absolute” rights in a single individual over a material object. By draining any notions of ownership right, historians therefore characterized the forms of property through which the Ethiopian elites supported themselves as “fief-holding” or rights of lordship, which merely entitled them to collect tribute from the subject peasantry. By using land registers, surveys, charters, and private property transactions, which I collected from Ethiopian churches and monasteries, this dissertation challenges this conception of property in premodern Ethiopia by arguing that Ethiopian elites did exercise ownership rights over the land, thus providing them a means by which to control the peasantry. Through the concepts of *rim* (a form of private property in land exclusively held by social elites) and *zéga* (a hitherto unrecognized serf-like laborers), I explore the economic and social relationship between rulers and ruled that defined political culture in premodern Ethiopia. As a norm *rim* derived from confiscated peasant property and it mediated or exposed the social dependence of the *zéga* class on the ruling class. *Rim* together with *zéga* emphasize that the peasants were far less independent and secure in their property rights than conventional portrayals, while indicating the ability of rulers to create a sharply defined social distance for the maintenance of a land tenure system that supported harsh exploitation and domination.

Preface

The basis for my dissertation was laid down in my earlier work on property and its myriad intersection with issues of power, labor, exploitation and social structure in eighteenth and nineteenth century East Gojjam, a northwestern province of Ethiopia. By utilizing property documents and manuscripts housed in Ethiopian churches and monasteries, I investigated how the idea of power and privilege projected onto the land system generated local customs that foreclosed rural cultivators from their ancestral property and reduced them into farmhands. The search for methodological support of a hypothesis which I discerned in my work on East Gojjam turned me toward the study of Gondärine Ethiopia. My doctoral field work extended the geographical range of my previous study and yielded a prodigious amount of unseen materials—which is discussed in the introduction. Most valuably, my dissertation brought back to life a whole category of people overlooked by scholars called *zéga* or serfs. As the result, my concern in this dissertation has been to highlight the *zéga* class as crucial social element in premodern Ethiopia and to identify its central features. By bringing the neglected *zéga* to the limelight, my research opens new ways of thinking about Ethiopian history and cuts through the assumptions of deeply ingrained theories and analytical trends and revamps these to resonate more closely with lived experiences.

In the course of my graduate study, I have owed gratitude and debts to many institutions and individuals. My fieldwork in Ethiopia was covered by a Department of History Dissertation Research Fellowship and the Graduate College Dissertation Research Travel grants at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. In addition, I have received financial assistance for my field research from the School of Graduate Studies at Addis Ababa University and Centre National de Recherche Scientifique at the Centre d'Études des mondes africains at the University of Paris in France. The Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes at Addis Ababa also allowed me

to use its office facilities and equipment during my field work. I record my sincere gratitude to these institutions for the support they extended to me. A predoctoral fellowship from the Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies at the University Rochester enabled me to finish the writing of the dissertation. I thank the Institute's welcoming and helpful staff and faculty. My special thank is to Elias Mandala, Ghislaine Radegonde-Eison and Jesse Moore for their much willing help and warmth during my fellowship tenure.

I also want to use this opportunity to express my appreciation to the inspiring, highly educated and unusually intelligent faculty at the History Department at Urbana-Champaign. The History Department is truly a center of excellence and its faculty members are the model of university professors. I owe special gratitude to my dissertation committee for their support, encouragement and insights. Donald Crummey extended me his unreserved support and guidance in all stages of my graduate study. He patiently and carefully read and reread the chapter revisions. My dissertation builds on his magisterial and pioneering work of *Land and Society*, which has broken new conceptual ground in Ethiopian studies. No one suspected the existence of the kind of society in historic Ethiopia before Crummey exposed it. My heartfelt thank to Crummey for his guidance. His respected and enduring contribution to Ethiopian studies inspired me.

Carol Symes, Kenneth Cuno and Charles Stewart enriched my dissertation through their unstinting support, insights and sustained interest in my research project design since my arrival at Urbana-Champaign in 2004. My sincere thank to them for supporting my research. The reading and graduate seminar courses I took with Symes and Cuno were eye opening experiences and exposed me to the literature in their respective fields I knew little about. I also would like to thank James Brennan for serving on my dissertation committee and sharpening my

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While working as teaching assistant, I learned a lot from the enjoyable global history and western civilization courses taught by Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi and Dana Rabin and Clare Crowston and Carol Symes respectively. Also I am deeply grateful to Dana for her consistent interest in my work and career, rich conversation and invaluable advice in many respects. I am grateful to the hardworking staff members of the History Department at the University of Illinois, who walked me through the many paper works and application forms with patience and understanding throughout my graduate study. The late Judy Patterson, Elaine Sampson, Jan Langendorf and Thom Bedwell offered me help beyond their normal duty on many occasions. I thank them for their generosity and assistance. Thank you to Brian Yates and Cynthia Exum for making my transition to Urbana easier. I am deeply indebted to Cynthia for her friendship and the assistance offered me especially during my first year in Urbana. Also I have had the good fortune to have a bright and pleasant friend, Jeffery Ahlman, who read my papers and gave me useful feedback. I express my sincere gratitude to Jeffrey. Thank you also to my Ethiopian friends at Illinois for the games, dances, outings and laughter, making graduate study pleasant and memorable. My special thank is to Bezza Tesfaw. I always turned to Bezza for help and advice when I stumbled into computer problems and spent holidays together with his joyous and beautiful family. I owe Bezza deep gratitude for his friendship, computer skill, hospitality, good food and pool games.

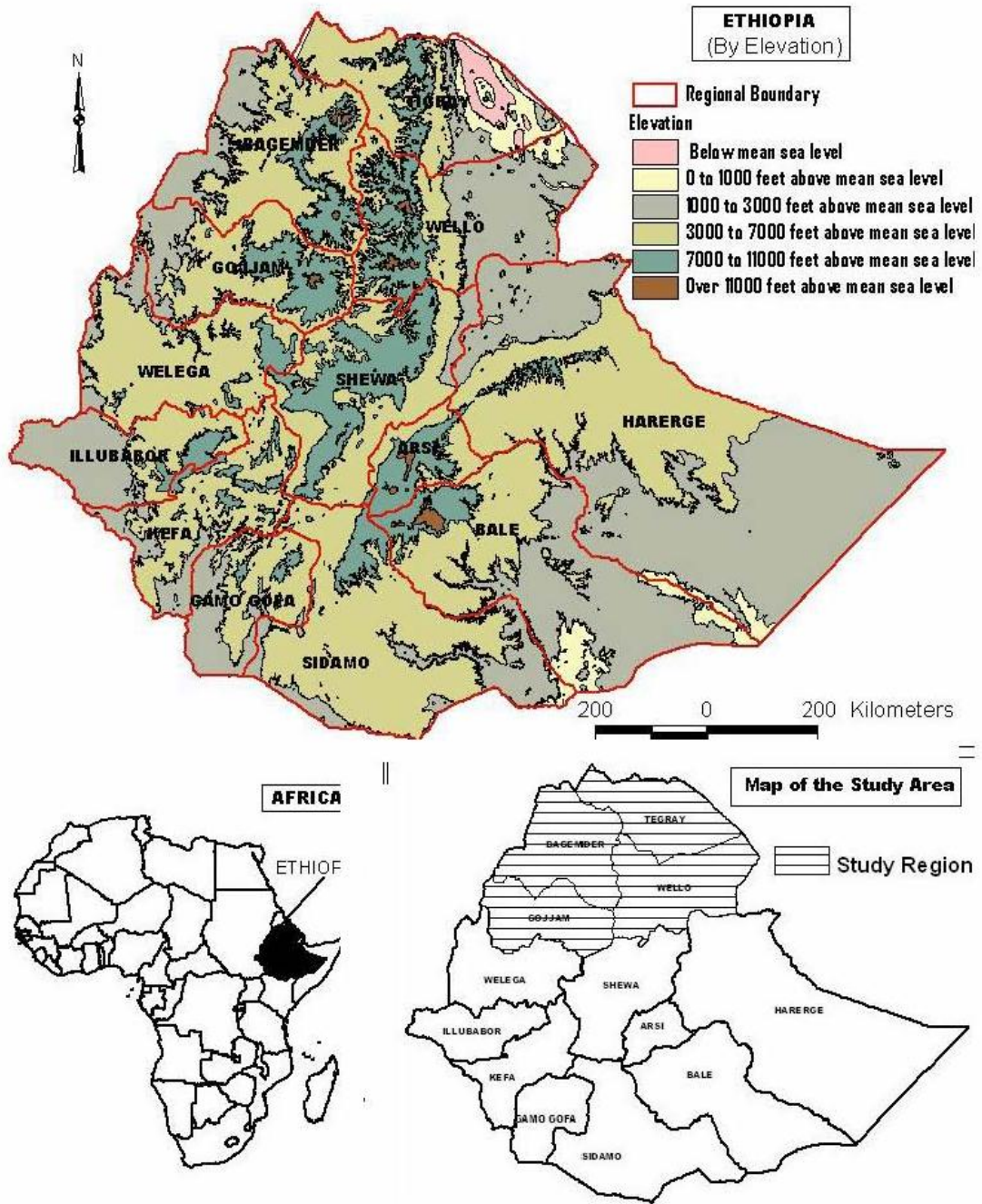
I also contracted debts of gratitude during my fieldwork in Ethiopia. I visited several churches in Gojjam and Gondär with Laury Belrose and Margaux Herman from the University of

Sorbonne, Anaïs Wion from the Centre d'Etude des Mondes Africains, Claire Bosc-Tiessé from Centre Français des d'Études Ethiopiennes (CFEE), and Emmanuel Fritsch, a liturgist and associate researcher at CFEE. I thank all of them for their assistance, wonderful conversation and humor which helped me to carry through the difficult fieldwork in Ethiopia. I owe Kindeneh Endeg, a fine young man and a very good friend since my days at Addis Ababa University, for friendship and enlightening me about the intricate Christological debates of the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. I also would like to thank Daniel Dejene, Malkamu Tamrie, Sisay Sahle and Ayele Tarekegn for hosting me at various times during the field work and for helping identify informants. Tesema Bekele prepared the maps in this dissertation. Finally, I want to record my gratitude to all my informants and the countless good people I met in northern Ethiopia.

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Map 1. Map of the Study Area



Chapter One: Introduction

This study is about the interrelations between land, labor and social structure in Ethiopia between 1636 and 1900. Two categories are at the center of the study. One pertains to rights associated with landed property called *rim* held by the ruling class (lay and clerical), the other to a social group known in Amhāric as *zéga* (pl. *zegnoch*), landless agricultural laborers. The holders of *rim* lands exercised rights on *zéga* similar to landlords in countries such as Russia over serfs, but the two systems are hardly carbon copies of each other. The bulk of the primary sources examined are property documents stored in church archives of northern Ethiopia.

Ethiopian history as a field of study has gained inspiration from and become a subject of wider interest since the second half of the twentieth century. One reason is the opening and growth during the 1960s of the History Department at the then Häylä-Sellasé I University, later renamed Addis Ababa University.¹ Another reason is a change in focus from historically oriented Semitic philology to an in-depth reading and analysis by scholars of translations of texts of antiquity such as chronicles and hagiographies from earlier centuries pertaining to Ethiopian civilization. Indeed, numerous scholarly studies since 1960 treat Ethiopia's political system, its class structure, and religious institutions. The now classic work of Taddesse Tamrat on the development of church and state during Ethiopian medieval history covering the crucial period between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries owes a great deal to historically oriented Semitic philology and a corpus of unseen hagiographies alike. The late Merid Wolde-Aregay continued where Taddesse left off, writing the period between 1508 and 1706. He, too, exploited chronicles and Portuguese sources for his analysis of the military, political and administrative transformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We owe so much of our knowledge

¹ Donald Crummey, "Society, State, and Ethnicity in the Recent Historiography of Ethiopia," *Journal of African History* 31, no.1 (1990): 103-19.

of Ethiopian political and religious history before the eighteenth century to edited chronicles and hagiographies and the analytical works based on these texts by Merid, Tadesse and others.²

Historical inquiry into economic issues also helped to broaden the historiographical agenda. Economic history of the period preceding the twentieth century focused on the role of trade in the maintenance of state power. Throughout history, Ethiopian rulers have had a keen interest in trade. The ancient Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, for example, derived its power from commerce in the Red Sea region along with the exploitation of local agricultural production. From King Yekuno-Amlak (r.1270-1285) to Menilek II (r.1889-1913) many rulers tapped into regional and local markets and some actively traded in their own right. Aksumite Ethiopia, which flourished during the first six centuries of the Common Era, minted coins showing the importance of commerce for the state.³ The expansion of the Ethiopian kingdom into new territories later in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was repeatedly impelled by the desire to control trade. Yet after the fall of the kingdom of Aksum in the eighth century, the country lacked its own medium of exchange. For much of its history Ethiopia primarily used bullion and salt bars as medium of exchange. From the late eighteenth onward into the twentieth century, the country relied on a foreign currency, the Austrian silver coin, the Maria Theresa thalers.⁴ The Ethiopian state became progressively dependent on local agricultural production and landownership in the period after the fall of Aksum.

The historiography of the eighteenth and that of the first half of nineteenth centuries is sparse, to put it mildly. Strangely, the sources that survived from this period are dense, varied

² Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); and Merid Wolde-Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508-1708, With Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences" (Ph.D. diss., University of London).

³ Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from early times to 1800* (London: Lalibela House, 1961), pp.16-41; *idem*, *Economic History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile-Selassie I University Press, 1968); and Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp.13-18 and 21-22.

⁴ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 200), p.5.

and complex. In addition, for the late nineteenth century, what research there is focused on diplomatic and political history of Ethiopia. The picture changes for the twentieth century however. Peasant land tenure in the twentieth century has elicited much scholarly interest and considerable research.⁵ So has a social science literature, however modest it is, which treats the rural society of twentieth century Ethiopia.⁶ What was not being studied and has not attracted the attention of historians for so long is the social experiences of rural people and their interaction with rulers prior to the twentieth century.

A shift of emphasis from political and religious elite history to social history has steered few scholars to develop an interest in studying ordinary farmers and their relations with rulers prior to the twentieth century. Leading the way has been Donald Crummey's pioneering work on pre-twentieth century Ethiopian society. He was aided by a critical reading of charters, land sale documents and register, to name but a few of his sources. His writing has raised new questions, such as "How did the rulers of Ethiopia extract from their subjects the wealth which sustained them?" His answer to this and other significant questions are the result of an analysis of class and property. From Crummey's pioneering social history we now know that class and property were powerful in Ethiopian history.⁷ As whole, Crummey's work breaks new grounds, conceptually and methodologically, in bringing the notions of property and class into our understanding of Ethiopian history.

⁵ Shiferaw Bekele calculated that about 400 works on land tenure exist. See Shiferaw Bekele, "A Historical Outline of Land Tenure Studies," A. Bausi *et al* (eds), *Anthropological and Historical Documents on "Rim"* (Torino: Editrice L'Harmattan Italia, 2001), p.27.

⁶ Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Allan Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia: the Dynamics of Cognatic Descent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); and Dan Franz Bauer, *Household and society in Ethiopia: An Economic and Social Analysis of Tigray Social Principles and Household Organization* (East Lansing, Mich: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1977).

⁷ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.1.

Yet there remains a vigorous probing to be made into how property defined political culture and the lived experiences of Ethiopian farmers and their rulers. A continuing common point of understanding among historians is that the Ethiopian ruling classes derived their power from control over offices and from taxes and tribute collected from land owned by peasant cultivators. This dissertation challenges this view through exploring grants of land to churches, recognized by the term *rim*, which entitled their holders to ownership rights directly over the land by extinguishing the rights of the previous peasant holders. Further, historians generally assume that peasant landholders and a ruling class, lay and clerical, constituted the social structure of Ethiopian society. This study recognizes the existence of a third social group of *zéga*, landless agricultural laborers, *de facto* serfs, controlled by the holders of *rim* land. The discovery of *zéga* opens a window on a critical, yet overlooked, dimension of Ethiopian society in the past and suggests the need to push the field forward and to extend the boundaries of accepted knowledge.⁸

How did *rim* originate and how was it diffused throughout Ethiopia prior to the twentieth century? To what extent did *rim* tenure become a focal point for class interaction between landlords and the *zéga* class? What were the implications of the spread and development of *rim* property on the social status and economic conditions of rural cultivators? This study explores answers to these questions.

Scope of the study

The year 1636 marked the establishment of the capital Gondär, inaugurating the Gondärine era that lasted down to 1769, during which *rim* developed as an institution of land

⁸ I identified *zéga* first in my master's study published as Habtamu Mengistie, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant: A Study of Property and Agrarian Relations in Rural Eastern Gojjam* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 2004). The sources on *rim* will be cited in this and subsequent chapters.

tenure that promoted social hierarchy and power.⁹ Gondärine Ethiopia comprised most of the districts in contemporary Gojjam, Bägémdar (renamed Gondär as of 1974), Tegray and western and northern part of Wällo (see map # 1 above). During the reign of King Iyasu I (r.1682-1706) *rim* property appears to have taken hold in the Gondärine kingdom, although *zéga* predates it. A variety of sources indicate that *rim* and *zéga* came into frequent use during the early eighteenth century. At the time of Iyasu I, *rim* was apparently restricted to the area in and around the capital. In the following four decades it became the dominant form of ecclesiastical landholding in Bägémdar. It then spread to the Gojjam and Tegray in the 1750s and 60s; already by the end of the eighteenth century, *rim* can be shown to have had general authority in Gojjam, Gondär and Tegray.¹⁰ *Rim* land was instituted in Wällo, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Together, *rim* property and the social status of *zéga* define in large measure Ethiopian agrarian history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹

The Ethiopian kingdom during our period formed a coherent social and cultural unit. Most people lived within the framework of the central institutions of church and state and practiced sedentary plow agriculture.¹² From 1636 to 1900, the monarchy and the church remained closely tied to each other and the forms of government remained largely unchanged.

⁹ Richard Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982), p.115-139.

¹⁰ In the case of Tegray the first reference to *rim* is contained in a charter to the church of Adwa Mika'el granted by the influential nobleman, Ras Mika'el Sehul in the early 1750s (see Gospel, MS., Adwa Mika'el catalogued as Illinois/IES, 92, II, 14-15 and 16-19). *Rim* may have been introduced to Gojjam around 1740 from Gondär and the first grant in *rim* in Gojjam was to the church of Narga Sellasé in Lake Tana; for this, see Ignazio Guidi, "IL Racconta di Narga," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademie dei Lincei*, series 5, 14 (1905), pp.233-67. ; and Sebastian Euringer, "Die Geschichte von Nârgâ: Ein Kapitel aus der abessinischen Kulturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete* 9 (1933-35): 281-311, and 10 (1933-35), pp.105-162.

¹¹ So far as the sources on *zéga* in Bägémeder are concerned, the Qwesqam register—which records the survey and distribution of *rim* to clerical lords—remains the largest single document. For this see Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne, "Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia," in *African Studies Review* Vol. 53 no.3 (2009), pp.89-106. I have discussed the application of *zéga* in Gojjam in my *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, chap. 2 and 3.

¹² Donald Crummey, "Ethiopian Plow Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 16 (1983):1-23; and James McCann, *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

The land tenure system was what gave the Ethiopian kingdom its coherence. Everywhere in Gojjam, Bägémder, Tegray and Wällo the rights and obligations of *rim* property shared common characteristics. The arrangement of *rim* land tenure and the resulting social hierarchy that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained largely unchanged as long as the church's influence held steady.

Gojjam, Bägémder, Tegray and the northern and western part of Wällo constituted the main center of power for the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia from 1636 to 1900. I choose to end my study in 1900 when the political boundaries of modern Ethiopia took shape and the center of power shifted from the north to Shäwa south of the study area. However, twentieth century Ethiopia's legal precepts date back to the Gondärine era. For instance, although *rim* was a peculiar form of property of Gondärine Ethiopia, it took hold in territories outside of the traditional jurisdiction of Gondärine kings. The social arrangement of *zéga* was also applied in twentieth century southern Ethiopia.¹³ An analysis of the background to 'modern' Ethiopia can, therefore, deepen our ability to understand the underlying processes of legal and social development during twentieth century Ethiopia.

The Historiography of Feudalism: New Visions and Revisions

While the Ethiopian land system is distinctive in a number of respects, a fuller understanding can be gained by examining it within the context of the larger premodern land tenure historiography. The "feudalism" model underpins Ethiopian agrarian historiography. This inevitably relates the subject of my study to current analytical trends and discussions of "feudalism" by European medievalists. In this regard, two interrelated debates have direct

¹³ See, for instance, Tekalign Wolde-Mariam, "A City and its Hinterlands: The Political Economy of Land Tenure, Agriculture and Food Supply for Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1887-1974 (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1995), 113-115; and Shiferaw Bekele, "Some Notes on Secular *rim* from the Liberation to the Revolution," A. Bausi *et al* (eds.), *Anthropological and Historical Documents on "Rim" in Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Torino: Editrice L'Harmattan Italia, 2001); pp. 83-92.

analytical implication for the study of Ethiopian land systems and their associated practices. One debate surrounds the shift that occurred in medieval society around the year 1000, “the feudal revolution.” The works of George Duby and Pierre Bonassie on, respectively, Moccains and Catalonia set the parameters of the model of “feudal revolution.” They note that the denouement of the Carolingian order towards the end of the tenth century was attended by sudden and radical changes in the eleventh century. One change was the end of slavery. Another was the repression of the once free peasants into a servile status, the rise of repressive lordship, the end of private property, the rise of private armed groups supported by ‘private fiefs’, and the privatization of public authority.¹⁴ Thomas Bisson and others added to the account by Duby and Bonassie of the changes of the tenth-and eleventh-century, while modifying the chronology of the sweeping changes in traditional society. Bisson reinforces the model of radical and sudden change in Europe by stating that the traditional public courts were obliterated and replaced by feeble and “affective” lordship and rampant violence.¹⁵

Historians such as Adam Kosto, Dominique Barthélemy, Jeffrey Bowman and Stephen White question Duby and those agreeing with his analysis of the “feudal revolution.” They critiqued the model of the “feudal revolution” for decontextualizing the changes by ignoring the equally important fact of the continuity of many elements of the traditional Carolingian political, economic and social institutions into the eleventh century.¹⁶ Barthélemy criticizes Bisson’s

¹⁴ Pierre Bonassie, *From Slavery to Feudalism in South-western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press needs a date), translated by Jean Birrell, pp.104-31; Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), translated by Arthur Goldhammer, pp. 147-66.

¹⁵ Thomas Bisson, “The 'Feudal Revolution,’” *Past and Present*, no. 142 (Feb. 1994), pp. 6-42; *idem*, “Feudal Revolution, Reply,” *Past and Present* 115 (1997), pp.208-225. Chris Wickham, “Debate: The Feudal Revolution,” *Past & Present* 155 (1997), pp. 196-208. Wickham acknowledges the existence of a significant transformation in society, but he deemphasizes its suddenness and drastic nature.

¹⁶ Stephen D. White, “Debate: Feudal Revolution,” *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 205-23; Dominique Barthélemy “Debate: Feudal Revolution,” *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 196-205; Jeffrey Bowman, *Shifting Landmarks: Property, Proof, and Dispute in Catalonia around the year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 214-216; Adam Kosto, *Making Agreements in Medieval Catalonia: Power, Order, and the Written Word, 1000-1200*

interpretations of medieval lordship, arguing that it is constructed on the misreading of the changes in the language of documents as a signpost to changes in the content of institutions.¹⁷ White takes issue with accepted interpretations of changes in the patterns of medieval lordship on the ground that “so much of it involves changes in the way in which some of the surviving sources represent power.”¹⁸ Bowman reexamines evidence regarding the procedure of dispute settlement, concluding that medieval order did not go from “better to worse.”¹⁹ In other words, documents from around the year 1000 do not mean what they say and there is a discrepancy between documentary prescriptions and the reality on the ground. A more nuanced position is that of Adam Kosto, who sees worth in both arguments by acknowledging the persistence of Carolingian institutions and the creeping change occurring at different decades and places in tenth- and eleventh century Europe. He critiques the “feudal revolution” as reductive and inadequate to cover the many ‘uneven transformations,’ change, and continuities occurring in the immediate post Carolingian period in more than one society.²⁰

At the heart of the controversy concerning the “feudal revolution” is the causal relationship between words and deeds and whether or not the sweeping changes in the language of documents and record-keeping reflect corresponding changes in lordship, the status of the peasants and the patterns of land tenure. As for me, I would argue that ideas expressed in documents do not have a life of their own. They do not come into existence from nothing. Rather they are expression of the material world from which they stem. If the Ethiopian experience has anything to add to the feudal revolution debate it is this: change in documentation and the shift in

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 112; and Timothy Reuter, “Debate: The Feudal Revolution,” *Past & Present* 155 (1997), pp. 177-195.

¹⁷ Barthélemy, “Debate: Feudal Revolution,” p.200.

¹⁸ White, “Debate: Feudal Revolution,” p. 222.

¹⁹ Bowman, *Shifting Landmarks*, p. 222.

²⁰ Kosto, *Making Agreements*, p.12.

the status of a sector of the peasants towards servility and new patterns of landholding were concomitant phenomena, each fueling the other tangentially. As of the seventeenth century, a new genre of documents emerged and the language, structure and content of familiar legal sources began to be marked by new internal complexities. This new redaction of texts reflects and connected to the broader social, political, legal and economic developments occurring in Gondärine society. The point of departure is that the scribes behind the production of documents should be taken at their word when they implied a new attitude towards property and new patterns of landholding and the deterioration in the status of peasants.

The second topic has to do with the concept of feudalism itself. Historians use this word in two senses. In its restricted sense the term refers to the institutions of ‘fief’ and ‘vassalage’ linking lords and men pertaining specifically to medieval Europe. In its more general sense feudalism describes to the totality of the social, political and economic order.²¹ The most trenchant critics of the model, Elizabeth Brown and Susan Reynolds, seriously question the relevance of “feudalism” as an analytical tool, not to mention its very existence. They argue that many of the concepts that dominate studies of premodern land tenure—feudal, fief, and vassalage—are not only inappropriate analytical categories in historical studies of non-European societies, but also are incongruent with the medieval European setting itself.²² Reynolds argues that the modern ideas about fief and vassalage are products of academic law and are not based on the foundation of the preceding medieval customs they seek to explain.²³ The predominant and generally accepted thesis is that “feudalism” is basically an artificial intellectual construct.

In the Ethiopian context, historians and social scientists generally concur that the

²¹ M. Bloch, *Feudal Society* 2nd ed. 2vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

²² Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), pp.1063-88”; and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1994), pp.1-13.

²³ Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, p.53.

Ethiopian land regime and the allied political, legal and social institutions can be interpreted on the analogy of medieval European feudalism.²⁴ Most of the elements seen as typical of feudal institutions, such as fief and vassalage, are assumed to hold to scrutiny in the Ethiopian case. The basis of argument behind the existence of feudalism in Ethiopia is analysis of *gult* and *rest*, two important institutions of land ownership. The term *gult* derived from the root [ገ-ለተ] *gwallätä*, “to grant...a fief.”²⁵ Social anthropologist Allan Hoben was influential in establishing the conventional view of *gult* as a “fief-holding right” and he was the first to apply the concept of feudalism to Ethiopian society. Hoben and those who followed him assume that the political relation between kings and members of the ruling class was structured on *gult*, which was constituted from grants by rulers to the nobility. Scholars posit the social role of *gult* holders, like medieval European vassals, as providing military and administrative services to the king.²⁶ In addition, *gult* is interpreted to be a fundamentally important institution articulating economic and social relations between the ruling class and the rural cultivators. Scholars point to one significant way in which the Ethiopian ‘fief’ departs from its European model: Ethiopian lords lacked direct control over the land within their ‘fiefs’. Rather the ‘fief-holding rights’ of lords extended over and were limited by the *rest* rights of the peasants.

The root of *rest* is *wäräsä* [ወረሰ], a verb meaning “he inherited.”²⁷ Hoben defines *rest* as “the right a person has to a share of the land first held by any of his or her ancestors in any line

²⁴ Donald Crummey, “Abyssinian Feudalism,” *Past & Present* 89 (1980), pp. 115-138. The idea of feudalism has not been, however, accepted by all scholars. Gene Ellis and Donald Donham represent the minority dissenting opinion against the concept of feudalism for Ethiopia: Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History,” in Donald Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* (Cambridge/London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.3-49; and Gene Ellis, “The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia”, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14 (1976), pp.275-295.

²⁵ Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary* (Wiesbaden, 1990), p.1893.

²⁶ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp.100-101.

²⁷ Käsaté Berhan Täsäma, *YüAmarreñña Mäzgäbä Qalat* (Addis Ababa, 1951 Eth. Cal.), pp.220 and 927. J. Baetman, *Dictionnaire Amarigna-Français* (Dire-Daoua: Imprimerie Saint Lazare, 1929), p. P. 858; Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, pp.1502-1503.

of descent”, whereas in its restricted sense the term applies to “a specific field held by virtue of such recognized right.”²⁸ Historians generally agree that *rest* right of the farmers in their land were unassailable and their autonomy in production decisions was complete. Thus *gult* grants entitled lords only the right to collect tribute and tax from the farming people under their administration.²⁹

Some scholars of Ethiopia viewed the Ethiopian property system through the lens of the Western European absolutist states that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bahru Zewde concluded that the transition from “feudalism” to the absolutist state in Europe brought in an allied process of absolutization of tenure and individual property rights. To quote Bahru, “...what the nobility lost in political power it recoups in greater guarantee of property rights. For the absolutization of state power was paralleled by the absolutization of property.”³⁰ Absolutization of power and property was assisted by the rediscovery of Roman property law replacing the precarious and incomplete feudal property system. Bahru asserts that the same processes which were at play in the transition from feudalism to absolutism in Europe occurred also in Ethiopia between 1916 and 1930 in one form or another. The nobility lost their power because of the absolutization and centralization of state power. They were compensated for these losses with security of property rights, that is, the conditional and precarious *gult* rights of the nobility were replaced by secure and complete property rights which now extended to include the land.³¹

The modern understanding of “feudal property” inherited from the liberal tradition poorly correlates with the primary material from the past. Wendy Davis and colleagues have argued that

²⁸ Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia*, p. 13.

²⁹ *Ibdi.*, pp.5-6.

³⁰ Bahru Zewde, “Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia (1916-1930)”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 17 (1984), p.7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

the distinction between possession and ownership and the ‘origins of power’ are academic questions in the premodern and medieval context. Unlike their modern successors, people in medieval period “thought of power in terms of morality and social convention, that is, according to how it was used.”³² In a similar fashion, “ownership was generally of less interest to medieval people than the issue of possession and use of property.”³³ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries property and power came to be delineated in new ways by lawyers. These new ways of looking at property stemmed from the “concern to redefine property ownership in order to stress individual rights of disposal.” In due course, a sharp distinction between “modern and earlier forms of property holding” developed, with the “medieval form now being seen as comparatively precarious, or incomplete.”³⁴

For rethinking the conceptualization of property, I rely on the revisionist works of C.M. Hann, Alan Carter, Peter Hollwell, and Stephen Muzner.³⁵ The key point here is that for revisionist scholars the idea of property rights, be it in capitalist or pre-capitalist settings, is best understood as relational and less exclusive than usually thought. “In all societies,” writes Hann, “the property rights of individuals are subject to political as well as legal regulations” and the idea of ‘private property’ generally conceived by the liberal paradigm as complete “is largely a myth.”³⁶ Assessed against the background of revised concepts of property, the contrasting notions of pre-capitalist property as restricted and capitalist property as absolute is subjective and

³² Wendy Davies *et al*, “Conclusion,” *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.245-246.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alan Carter, *Philosophical Foundations of Property Rights* (London/New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp.4-7 and 126-140; Peter Hollwell, “Introduction: The Nature of Property”, Peter Hollwell, ed., *Property and Social Relations* (London: Heinemann, 1982), pp. 2 and 6; Brian Elliott and David McCrone, “The Social World of Petty Property,” Peter Hollwell, ed., *Property and Social Relations* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 110; and Stephen R. Muzner, *A Theory of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.16-19; and Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp.1-13.

³⁶ C.M. Hann, “Introduction: the Embeddedness of Property,” C. M. Hann, ed., *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.2.

inadequate. The definition appropriate for this study is: “property as a social institution implies a system of relations between individuals..., it involves rights, duties, powers, privileges, forbearance, etc., of certain kinds.”³⁷

Rim and Zéga: Concepts and Problems

My reason for using the concept of property stems from the sources I use. Donald Crummey’s scholarly publications are largely responsible for revisionist scholarship pertaining to the concept of property and power. In particular, his recent magisterial work plotting the development of *gult* from the thirteenth to the twentieth century bears out his contention which is that little evidence supports the customary generalizations of *gult* as characteristically a governmental right and one carrying essentially military obligations. His view is that authority was fundamentally personal and administration in Ethiopian history for the most part was not mediated through and did not depend on the land-nexus. Crummey also argues that the administrative aspect of *gult* does not strip it of its property character, for the *gult* holders exercised all rights of property, including disposal of their right through straight sales.³⁸ His conclusion is based on the following three factors. First, property rights “were held individually” and the rights entailed are not merely ‘abstract’ but were explicit and “extended to specific” plots of land. It must be added also that for all practical purposes, property rights carried unrestricted rights in terms of use. Second, *gult* holders had unrestricted right of disposal, including alienation through gift and sell. That is, property rights were thoroughly commercialized and were actively bought and sold by individuals. Third, “the rights were individually accumulated” by various mechanisms. Rights accumulated were subsequently passed from “generation to generation” through testamentary

³⁷ A. Irving Hallowell, "The Nature and Function of Property as a Social Institution", *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology* 1 (1943), p.119.

³⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 9-11.

acts as well as marriage agreements. These points are germane to this study.³⁹ While acknowledging the conclusion of Crummey, Hoben, Bahru and others, I depart from them at critical junctures. The historiography universally recognizes *gult* and *rest* as the foundations of Ethiopian society. Yet the terms under which land was held were more varied than this reductionist view suggests. In considering *gult* and *rest* as the two vital tenures of the past, historians have lost sight of other categories.

For the period covered in this study, *rim* was the most important form of property for rulers, both clerical and secular. It was important enough to expose significant number of rural cultivators to the status of *zéga*, a hitherto unknown class of laborers. The study of the entirely unaccounted for *zéga* class and its intersection with issues of property and power yields insights into not only the ways in which the Ethiopian rulers used land tenure as a mechanism of social, economic and political control, but also more importantly, the different dimensions of Ethiopian society in the past.

Explorations into the lexical meaning of the term *rim* proved inadequate. The term's origin needs further study and analysis. *Rim* had many levels of meaning. The definition given to the term by J. Kane is "land around a church deeded to it by the founder and assigned by the church to those who serve it for their upkeep (in lieu of pay)."⁴⁰ In this study *rim* means ecclesiastical landed property derived from grants by rulers to religious institutions and individually held by the clergy. These grants were made to institutions unconditionally. *Rim* land derived mainly from the confiscation of a portion of the hereditary lands of farming people. Land confiscation spanned from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. It was found from Tegray to Gojjam through Bägémdar and in Wällo as well. Indeed, although land held under

³⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, p. 372.

military title was also involved in *rim* grants, Gondärine Ethiopia represented one of the first documented widespread cases of the conversion of the hereditary property of farmers into another tenure, in this case ecclesiastical.⁴¹ The introduction of *rim* property around the year 1700 entailed a shift in the peasantry's relationship to the land and the rise of the power of *rim* holders.

Meanwhile, for the *rim* holders, *rim* normally carried with it clerical obligations even though many holders were lay men and women, including kings and queens. The growing importance of *rim* as a basis of economic support for the ruling classes had also social consequences in terms of the organization of agricultural labor and the status of the peasants. In the seventeenth century and thereafter *rim* holders came to depend more and more on the labor of the *zéga* for the cultivation of their land.

The term *zéga* is derived from the root [ዜገ] *zégä*, meaning “he becomes poor, lacked status, humiliated, subjected.”⁴² And [ዜግነት] *zegenät* or the *zégoch*'s condition of servitude means “subjection and poverty.” Our linguistic sources clearly impose the notion of subject and poor as its essence. Legal sources such as charters also distinguish the *zégoch* from other rural groups and the use of different terminology is justified by the need to describe the distinct type of their relation to the lords. This should be borne firmly in the reader's mind. Alongside independent peasants and *rim* holding social elites, scribes and drawers of charters and land registers included the *zégoch*. Specific legal conditions determined their distinctive juridical status. A pertinent passage from the charter of the church of Abazaj Giyorgis in Gojjam issued

⁴¹ See, for instance, Donald Crummey, Daniel Ayana, and Shumet Sishagne, “A Gondärine Land Grant in Gojjam: The Case of Qäranyo Mädhäné Aläm”, *Proceeding of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, eds., Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst, and Taddesse Beyene, vol.1 (Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University, 1991), pp. 241-58. For examples of charters from Tegray and Wällo containing the formula of one-third and two-thirds guiding land division, see Illinois/IES.92.I.13-15; and Illinois/IES.92. I, 21-27.

⁴² Dästa Täklä-Wäld, *YäAmarerñña Müzgäbä Qalat* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing press, 1962 Eth. Cal.), p.479: “ደኸየ ማዕርጉን ዐጣ ተዋረደ ተገዛ።” See also Kane, Amharic-English Dictionary, p.1675.

by King Täklä-Häymanot (r.1874-1901) defines the juridical relations between lords and *zégoch* as follows: “The subordinate officials of the *mämher*, the *liqäräd*, the *mägabi* and the *afä-mämher* shall not intervene in the relations between the *däbtära* (clerical landlords) and their *zégoch* settled in their residential sites and *rim* [land], except in the cases of homicide, marital infidelity and theft.”⁴³ The evidence indicates that relations between the landlords and *zégoch* were not purely economic. Each side had reciprocal (if hierarchical) ties to the other. Property rights and jurisdictional power were considered indivisible during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *zégoch* produced subsistence goods, while the *rim* holders administered the land and the people on it and dispensed justice in case of disputes. Church officials and their subordinates were not to interfere in the relations between landlords and *zégoch* except in criminal offenses.⁴⁴

What and how did landlords and *zégoch* think of and view their relations? This is hard to uncover and can only be ascertained indirectly from legal records. The term *zéga* could take on a plainly pejorative and degrading tone. Persons arbitrarily called *zéga* took offence at the use of the term to describe their status, and sued for justice. For instance, a document describing a court settlement that occurred in the 1890s in Däbrä-Marqos notes that one *Balambaras* Engeda sued *Grazmach* Märsha for calling him “my *zéga*.”⁴⁵ Engeda took pains to initiate a case and seek justice against Märsha’s insult because it was slighting to call someone “my *zéga*”. Records regarding *zégoch* from eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Bägémeder indicate a more degraded status than those of other territories. However, there was also a consistent application of uniform rules in the treatment of *zégoch*. The *zégoch* were personally free and their link with lords was

⁴³ Mäzgab, Abazaj Giyorgis, picture # 3281: “ደብተራውም በሪሙ በቦታው ያሰፈረውን ዜጋ የመምህሩ የሊቀረዱ የገበዙ የመጋቢው የአፈ መምህሩ ሹም አይድረስበት ከደም ከይናፋ ከሌባ በቀር።”

⁴⁴ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, pp.45-49, 54-62, 88-100.

⁴⁵ UNESCO, *Manual of the Däbrä-Marqos Clergy*, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Däbrä-Marqos.

land. This territorial link between lord and *zéga* underpinned private lordship and the development of a measure of personal bond between the two. Jurisdictional rights of lords over their *zégoch*, together with the continuous occupation of land by *zégoch*, tended to tie the latter to their residence and landlords. In the final analysis, the *zégoch* lacked a number of social rights.⁴⁶ For the sake of clarity *zéga* will be used in this dissertation as the rough equivalent of ‘serf.’ Gondärine rural society was therefore comprised of landlords, the landless *zégoch*, and independent peasants who lived on land they held by rights of inheritance.

Rim together with *zéga* raises substantial historical issues and provides a useful framework to reinterpret property and social relations in Ethiopian society. *Zégenät* as system of domination and labor exploitation outlasted the Gondärine period. Charters and court settlements continued to identify *zégoch* and independent peasants until the early twentieth century. In fact, a palpable expansion in the scope of *zégenät* occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a time when Gondärine legal traditions were exported to new areas south of the Blue Nile.⁴⁷ The historiography of the era tends to emphasize the difference in the land regime that existed in southern Ethiopia from that found in the northern half of the country. Inherent in the assumption of the historiography is that in northern Ethiopia a communal land tenure regime predominates, whereas Ethiopia of the south was marked by private landownership and landless servile peasants. Proceeding from this perceived difference scholars argue that in the south the relations of domination mediated by land compounded at once ethnic and class domination. This is because, they argue, the lords who settled in and operated in the south came from the north, practiced Christianity and spoke Amharic, whereas those they

⁴⁶ See Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p. 80; *idem*, “Rethinking Property and Society,” pp.101-103. The sources on the *zéga* are cited and discussed under chapter five.

⁴⁷ Tekalign, “A City and its Hinterlands”, pp.112-115; Allesandro Triulzi and Tesema Ta’a, eds., *YäWälläga YäTarik Sänadoč: Documents for Wälläga History, 1880s and 1920s* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1996 Eth. Cal.), pp. 94-95.

exploited were either Muslims or followers of other forms of religion and spoke diverse languages distinct from their superiors.⁴⁸ Edmond J. Keller summarizes this prevalent view on the contrast that existed between the northern and southern system of exploitations: “In the south...the influx of Abyssinian conquerors immediately contributed to the formation of clear and rigid class distinction between the conquerors and the conquered: those who “owned” land, and those who cultivated it, and Amharas and non-Amharas.”⁴⁹ This assertion ignores the evidence of *zégoch*, where neither cultural nor ethnic difference served as justification for subordinating the peasants and maintaining social distinctions.

Shiferaw Bekele was the first to cast doubt on the old account of the supposed difference in the land regimes of the northern and southern regions of the country. He did so by reinterpreting *gult* grants in northern Ethiopia as land conveyances. Shiferaw’s suspicion of the old assumption is deepened by another historian, Tekalign Wolde-Mariam, who argues without deviating from the old textbook views of the institutions of *gult* and *rest*, that the land regime of southern Ethiopia was established on the model of the northern traditions.⁵⁰ Rulers in northern Ethiopia throughout history could force peasants into forfeiting their inheritances with intimidation and force as they did in Ethiopia of the south in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. The Gondärine ruling class was deeply familiar with the act of subjugating people and did in fact practice a form of serfdom for hundreds of years. It was no accident that a highly unequal system of power relation and labor exploitation was established by northern military

⁴⁸ Bahru Zewde, *A Modern History of Ethiopia* (London: James Currey, 1990), pp.191-192; Donham, “Old Abyssinia,” pp.3-49.

⁴⁹ Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People’s Republic* (Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1988), p.59.

⁵⁰ Shiferaw Bekele, “The Evolution of Land Tenure System in the Imperial Era, 1941-74”, Shiferaw Bekele (ed), *An Economic History of Ethiopia: The Imperial Era, 1941-1974*, vol. I (CODESRIA: 1995), pp.72-143; and Tekalign, “A City and its Hinterlands,” p.61.

lords in southern Ethiopia.⁵¹ Undoubtedly the Gondärine period was a crucial stage leading to the subjugation of the southern peasantry in modern Ethiopia.

Themes in African Historiography of Land Tenure

The literature on precolonial African history generally ignores or rejects the importance of agricultural production and the existence of class society based on land tenure. Further, those who occasionally raise the issue of land control in precolonial Africa usually present the Ethiopian land system as the exception to the wider African norms. For instance, Jack Goody dismissed the importance of the control of land in precolonial Africa but conceded that “It is highly significant that only in Ethiopia, which had the plough, was there any landlordism in Africa; here in true medieval fashion, estates in land supported a nobility that filled the important offices of state, both in the staff and line organization, a nobility at the same time a leisure class in Veblein’s sense.”⁵² The dominant assumption is that precolonial Africa was marked by low population density and access to land use rights was open to virtually everyone.⁵³ Therefore, far from being excluded, people, including outsiders, are not only welcome into the local groups or households, but are also actively enticed by various means, notably through the manipulation of marriage. Proceeding from this assumption many argue that in so much of precolonial Africa authority rested largely on trade, the exploitation of slaves, and ‘ownership-of-people’ or ‘wealth-in-people.’⁵⁴ However, there is more to basis of political power in African history than

⁵¹ Tekalign, “A City and its Hinterlands,” p.61.

⁵² Jack Goody, *Technology and Tradition in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 30.

⁵³ Ibid., pp.30-31; *idem*, “Economy and Feudalism in Africa,” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1969), pp. 393-405;

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Jane I. Guyer and Samuel M. Eno Belinga, “Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa,” *The Journal of African History*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1995), pp. 91-120; and Jane I. Guyer, “Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa,” *Man*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1993), pp. 243-265. For most scholars, the study of precolonial African states and societies has been limited to an analysis of long distance trade and slavery. The ruling class were assumed to have distinctively lacked property ownership, as they were supposedly sustained by the tribute and taxes extracted from long distance trade and the exploitation of slaves.

trade based on the exploitation of slaves. Land was important in understanding the social structure and political development of precolonial Sudanic Africa in particular.

Some Africanists have started to question this sweeping conclusion and integrate the Ethiopian land system into their discussion of African land tenure. There is a growing appreciation among historians that the economic and social processes that shaped the development of property rights in Sudanic Africa may be very similar to those underlying eighteenth and nineteenth century Ethiopia. Crummey has argued that the Ethiopian case appears iconic of the patterns of social relations and political culture characteristic of most parts of pre-colonial Sudanic Africa.⁵⁵ Together with Crummey, other historians have argued that while trade is useful for understanding how state power was sustained in pre-colonial Africa, they must also take into account local agricultural production. Examples of such studies include George Michael La Rue, L. Kapteijns and J. Spaulding, Janet Ewald and R.O'Fahey and M. Abū Salīm on the African states of pre-colonial Sudan.⁵⁶ Through these works, we have gained a deeper insight into both the methodological relevance of the empirical material related to land from pre-colonial Africa and the fact that Ethiopia's elaborate land system and political culture was an example of a wider African reality. Yet we still have more to learn about how land tenure and property worked as an instrument of exploitation, social and political control in pre-colonial Sudanic Africa and the literature should now be thoroughly reexamined in the light of *rim* and *zēga*.

⁵⁵ Donald Crummey, "Introduction: Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa," Donald Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 2005), pp.6-7.

⁵⁶ Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, "The Conceptualization of Land Tenure in Precolonial Sudan: Evidence and Interpretation," Donald Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 2005), pp.21-45; George Michael La Rue, "Mud on the Belly of the Bull: land, Power and State Formation in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Dar Fur," Donald Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 2005), pp.127-141; and R. S. O'Fahey and M.I. Abū Salīm, *Land in Dar Fur: Charters and Related Documents from the Dar Fur Sultanate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.1-21.

Kapteijns and Spaulding's work on the precolonial lowland kingdom of Sinnar highlights the existence of a similar arrangement of land tenure and labor exploitation to eighteenth and nineteenth century Ethiopia. High-ranking state officials and rulers in Sinnar derived their social, economic and political power from the control of land and people. Often they staked-out a demesne from their holding which they directly and personally controlled called *kursi* or "seat." These demesnes were cultivated partly by using slave labor and partly by the labor of the "free subject commoners."⁵⁷ The contemporary Sudanese counterpart for *zéga* is *masakin*, who, in theory, were free but they were treated as servile laborers. The *masakin* were "subject to sumptuary laws" that highlights their lowly status. For example, "legally excessive opulence, be it merely a clean cloth garment, was an offence." Kapteijns and Spaulding add that "[o]nly through his lord could a subject seek justice."⁵⁸

The social conditions of the rural cultivators in Sinnar were akin to the status of the *zéga*. To begin with, the term *zéga* shared the same meaning as *masakin* (transcribed as *meskin* in Amharic). The Amharic *meskin* designates destitute persons occupying the lowest social and economic positions, while *zéga* is equivalent to poor, subject, and tenant. Like the Sudanese *masakin*, the *zéga* were subject to the private jurisdiction of their lords; and at least on paper, artisan *zégoch* were subject to sumptuary laws that echo the situation of the Sudanese *masakin*. A late nineteenth century source states that "whenever he (the artisan *zéga*) offers a *šamma* to the master and his wife, he is not supposed to wear one [like them], considering himself [equally] respectable."⁵⁹ Documentary prescriptions such as this are rare and might not always reflect the reality on the ground, but there should be no doubt that they point to a wider reality. The similarity between the conditions of labor and landholding in Sinnar and Gondärine Ethiopia

⁵⁷ Kapteijns and Spaulding, "The Conceptualization of Land Tenure in Precolonial Sudan", p. 30.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.31.

⁵⁹ Girma Getahun, "Ancient Customary Law of the Gafat", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 30, no.2 (1997), p.55.

may not be coincidental. The agrarian societies in Sudanic Africa along the savannah belt stretching from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia in the east shared similar patterns of social and political development. The precolonial African kingdom of Dar Fur, for instance, supported a similar set of land tenure arrangement to those found in Sinnar and Ethiopia.

The land documents from Dar Fur published and translated by R.O’Fahey and M. Abū Salīm are revelatory of parallel developments in Gondärine Ethiopia and deserve to be discussed briefly. These documents were issued at various times in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the sultans of Dar Fur and their subordinate officials to judges, Muslim holy men, friends and merchants. Two aspects of the transactions—the rights involved in the grant and the legal procedure of giving—are worthy of special attention. O’Fahey and Abū Salīm understand the grants entailed in the transactions to be rights over “[p]eople and land, and land that was carefully delimited.” A typical charter fully describes the rights of a beneficiary, “...as an allodial estate, with full rights of possession and his confirmed property...(namely rights of) cultivation, causing to be cultivated, sale, donation, purchase, demolition and clearance.”⁶⁰ The beneficiary held unfettered right not only to use or lease the land, but also more importantly, alienate it by sale, gift, and other means. One important feature of giving land in Dar Fur that needs to be mentioned is boundary marking and survey conducted by public officials and beneficiaries. Boundary marking was such an entrenched legal custom that it was performed “even when an established ...estate was granted anew.”⁶¹

It is also relevant to note that the sultans of Dar Fur gave beneficiaries rights of social control over people thereby establishing “intermediate serf-like status” different from slavery. Occasionally, dispute over the control of people whose status was distinguished from slaves

⁶⁰ O’Fahey and Abū Salim, *Land in Dar Fur*, p.19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

broke out. For instance, in an undated document Sultan ‘Abd al-Rahman settled a quarrel over the service of three individuals and he then gave to one Hafiz control over the three unnamed men, who were instructed “to serve him (Hafiz) in everything he needs service, service in sowing, service in his households or guardianship over his property. Thus, they together with his slaves are equally in his service; and their descendants are to serve the descendants of Hafiz after him as an inheritance for them.”⁶² This grant intends to create hereditary ties of dependency between the two groups in question.

The land regime and the conditions of the *zéga* class in Gondärine Ethiopia are very similar to those of Dar Fur. The similarity goes down to the point of details. As will be presented in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, grants of land often involved grants of the labor of the people living on the land and occasionally lords quarrel over the control of the *zéga*. Although the act of boundary marking usually did not generate a written record, like in Dar Fur, surveys and land demarcation were normal accompaniments of grants in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Ethiopia.⁶³

The charter evidence presented above is emblematic of the importance of land and labor for the Sudanese elites in the pre-colonial era. As in the precolonial period, in twentieth century Africa, land was an issue of central concern to colonial officials, farmers, scholars, anthropologists, and nationalists alike.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, however, the anthropological and colonial studies on African land tenure were largely a myth-making project. Further, Africanists took the issue of land tenure in Africa as framed by colonialism and post-colonial developmentalism. Many of the assumptions that run through the literature on African land

⁶² Ibid., p 20.

⁶³ The reference on land measurement and the *zéga* class are given in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

⁶⁴ See, for instance, C. k. Meek, *Land Law and Custom in the Colonies*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p.v.

tenure systems were articulated by colonial officials and scholars in law and development.⁶⁵ The dominant discourse on land tenure systems of African has impacted the Ethiopian historiography in some ways. Hence it needs to be presented to contextualize my study, although this study is concerned with actual practice. Seeking to understand colonial definitions of African land tenure requires contextualizing official discussions with a host of imperial objectives, legal, security and economic concerns and the cultural ideology which informed them. Martin Chanock states that the British proceeded to define and redefine indigenous land systems with a distinct attitude of mind. Inherent in nineteenth century British social and economic thought was the idea that individual property was the basis of political democracy and civilized society, whereas “the possession enjoyed by savages was miserable and precarious.” This attitude formed the point of departure in how colonial officials and anthropologists alike understood African land tenure systems as well as “what rights over land would secure legal protection.”⁶⁶

Typically, for the British colonial officials Africans did not have a land tenure system that recognized individual rights. C. L. Temple, a British official who had spent time in Nigeria, for instance, writes in a rather pithy language that “In no case before our advent would any native had laid a personal claim to the area he farmed” and “[i]n no case had the land acquired a transfer value between individuals.”⁶⁷ Ironically, although it was widely disparaged as inferior in contrast to private property, the British adopted land laws which vested ownership rights in the state throughout their African colonies. Scholars have provided various explanations for the British support of communal rights to land. Mahmud Mamdani sees it primarily as the outcome of British concern for security and order. The colonial state regarded land tenure as an integral

⁶⁵ Martin Chanock, “Paradigm, Policies and Property: A Review of the Customary law of land Tenure,” K. Mann and R. Roberts, eds., *Laws in Colonial Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), p.62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.61-62.

⁶⁷ C. L. Temple, *Native Races and Their Rulers* (London: Frank Cass & Co.LTD), p.139.

part of “customary law” or “native administration.” Outside of the areas where European commercial farmers were established, African communities were governed by these native authorities upon whom ownership of the land was vested as trustees of the people. Native authorities controlled the terms of access to ‘tribal land’ and exercised ownership right short of alienating the land. The concern of the colonial governments therefore was that individual property would disrupt local administration and undercut the ability of native authorities to ensure public order.⁶⁸ The British anthropologist C. K. Meek is very explicit about this, “The grant, therefore, to individuals of absolute rights of ownership would tend to disrupt the native polity, and so, too, would the indiscriminate sale of private lands by chiefs. The control of alienation of land has been in consequence one of the main planks of the British systems of ‘Indirect Rule.’”⁶⁹

Colonial support for state ownership of land was also borne out of the practical need to legitimize both previous and future dispossession of land by the colonial governments. Policy discussion about land tenure was preceded by significant alienation of land in Rhodesia, Kenya, South Africa and Malawi from indigenous people. These alienations were justified on the argument that African communities in these lands had not developed individual rights before the arrival of European colonists that could be recognized by British law.⁷⁰ Chanock writes that “...to treat Africans as people who had not “evolved” the institutions of private property in land not only gave vastly greater scope for the state, but it also functioned as a powerful ideological criticism of African societies.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London/New Jersey: James Curry, 1996), pp.2-22; Chanock, “Paradigm, Policies and Property,” p.64.

⁶⁹ Meek, *Land law and Custom in the Colonies*, p.10.

⁷⁰ Chanock, “Agricultural Change and Continuity in Malawi,” *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Southern Africa*, ed., Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (London: Heinemann, 1977a), pp.233-4.

⁷¹ Chanock, “Paradigm, Policies and Property”, p.66.

With regard to Ethiopia, ethno-nationalists and some historians have argued that the ideology that informed Ethiopian government policy toward landholding in the southern half of the country conquered in late nineteenth century was closely similar to that of the British in colonial Africa. Donald Donham speaks of the existence of some racist undertones in the treatment of southern Ethiopians by northern Ethiopian colonists. Like the British attitude towards Africans, northern Christian colonists are said to have viewed southerners as barbaric and uncivilized to justify their exploitation and subjugation. To complete the analogy, the Ethiopian government used a “*rationale* similar to the one used by European settlers in, for example, South Africa and Kenya” in order to put vacant land “to better use.”⁷² I, for one, would repeat once again that in reshaping the land tenure system in twentieth century southern Ethiopia, Ethiopian rulers actually used a specific concept of property which had already played a powerful role for centuries. Further, unlike the European powers, the expansion of the Ethiopian state into new areas in the late nineteenth century is best understood as a reaction to changes in the modern world system rather than one impelled by imperialist ambitions.

Needless to say, colonial definitions of “customary law” of land as communal stand out more for their tendency to privilege one version of tenure traditions over another. Elizabeth Colson, Sara Berry, and T. Ranger have amply documented that the colonial definition of customary law was dynamic rather than a rejuvenation of a precolonial tenure system.⁷³ After the Second World War, the policy discussions by colonial officials shifted from what rights the indigenous African tenure system recognized to the concerns of development and modernization.

⁷² Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire,” p.41. See also, Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

⁷³ Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1985), p.4.; Elizabeth Colson, “The Impact of the Colonial Period on the Definition of Land Rights,” Victor Turner, ed., *Colonialism in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp.193-215; and Terence O. Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 211-262.

Land tenure and agriculture was discussed in the context of the broader issue of development. By radically changing their early policy of colonial self-sufficiency, in the postwar period the British extended financial support to its colonies in Africa and elsewhere and encouraged a more activist role for the state in the planning and execution of economic development. In the final colonial years and in the early years of independence, developmentalism became the dominant discourse at the world plane.⁷⁴ The main thrust of postwar developmentalism was to extricate the third world countries from poverty with the help of western technical and financial assistance and through systematic planning of the economy.

The primary purpose of research in 1950s and 60s was not to define new terms of access to property or confirm supposedly preexisting tenurial arrangements, but rather to find out the implications of property rights on agricultural productivity. A common theme in the literature is that property rights systems have direct impact on incentives and the returns of farming. The solutions suggested range from complete collectivization of agriculture and state ownership of land based on the Soviet model to private rights of the western type. The dominant view was that rural poverty and agricultural decline in Africa was the baneful effect of the communal land tenure system and backward agricultural practice. That is, it was the lack of clearly defined, ‘complete,’ transferable, and enforced property rights that blocked credit market and constricted individuals from developing their land through long-term investment.⁷⁵

The arguments made in favor of communal holding of property during the early twentieth century made no sense under the conditions of the postwar and postcolonial period. Daniel W. Bromley summarizes this: “The history of development assistance has been one of concentrated

⁷⁴ D. J. Morgan, *The Origins of British Aid Policy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. xiv-xxi.

⁷⁵ Montague Yudelman, *Africans on the Land: Economic Problems of African Agricultural Development in Southern, Central, and East Africa, with Special Reference to Southern Rhodesia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp.11-16; and Gershon Feder and David Feeny, “Land Tenure and Property Rights: Theory and Implications for Development Policy,” *The World Bank Economic Review* Vol. 5, No. 1 (1991), pp. 135-153.

efforts to stimulate the sort of agricultural plant that exists in the donor countries—private-land based, intensive cultivation, some emphasis on the social infrastructure necessary to support that system.”⁷⁶ The long-term objective of development programs was to create the condition in which free enterprise and civic liberty could thrive.

The Ethiopian literature also contains arguments made about property and economic efficiency. Among others, Merid Wolde-Argeay argued that “Because hard work had no lasting reward and communal ownership of land allowed little latitude for individualism the energies of people, particularly of the more enterprising ones, channeled into socially approved activities which brought more respect than wealth.”⁷⁷ Although it is very suggestive, this conclusion hardly tallies with the historical record. Ultimately, the argument favoring individualizing resource decisions was forwarded in the context of the post enlightenment thinking about modernity that took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The attainment of modernity, civic liberty and free enterprise is thought to require private property. In this modernist paradigm achievement and self-reliance is celebrated and the economic welfare of society was viewed to be contingent upon the sum of individual actions. The individual is, or ought to be, an aspiring or desirous person free from the shackles of social obligations. Since each person is driven by self-interest in making decisions about the exploitation of resource, the autonomous individual is expected to act in economically expedient way.⁷⁸

In the last two decades, historians and social scientists have significantly challenged the assumptions of the liberal paradigm and of colonial and postcolonial modernity about African

⁷⁶ Daniel W. Bromley, “Property Relations and Economic Development: The Other land Reform,” *World Development* vol. 17, no.6 (1989), pp.687-877.

⁷⁷ Merid Wolde-Argeay, “Land Tenure and Agricultural Productivity, 1500-1850,” *Proceedings of the Third Annual Seminar of the Department of History* (Addis Ababa, 1986), p. 123.

⁷⁸ Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know their Boundary: Essays on Property, Power, and the past in Asante, 1896-1996* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), p. xxv.

land tenure systems and the causes of agricultural decline. John W. Bruce and Shem Migot-Adholla *et al* and other observers have remarked that there was no direct correlation between individualization of land rights and higher productivity. The indigenous tenure system was dynamic and efficient rather than a static bottle-neck to agricultural development.⁷⁹ Political economists who follow underdevelopment theory have also challenged the theory of modernization. It is now accepted that modernity and development are neither inevitable nor unidirectional. Immanuel Wallerstein, Walter Rodney and Lionel Cliffe argue that the decline of African agriculture was a function of the incorporation of the ‘peripheries of rural Africa’ into the world capitalist economy through colonial state capitalism. The colonial state involved African farmers in the capitalist world economy by coercing them to produce cash crop oriented towards export and work in the plantation and mines to meet the needs of foreign industrial capital. However, cash crops production failed to stimulate African agriculture along capitalist lines of development because it blocked capital formation within the continent.⁸⁰ While the market model and the theory of underdevelopment have stimulated studies on agriculture and land tenure in twentieth century Africa, for the precolonial period the focus of many scholars is limited to showing the impact of the slave trade on African societies.

One of the evident changes which the establishment of Gondär directly provoked was the development of a vibrant land market in the eighteenth century on a scale wholly unknown in the

⁷⁹ John Bruce, “Do Indigenous Tenure Systems Contain Agricultural Development?”, Thomas J. Basset and Donald Crummey, eds., *Land in African Agrarian Systems* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), pp. 35-51; Shem Migot-Adholla, Peter Hazell, Benoît Blarel, Frank Place, “Indigenous Land Rights Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Constraint on Productivity?”, *The World Bank Economic Review* vol. 5, no. 1 (1991), pp. 155-75.

⁸⁰ Samir Amin, “The Agricultural Revolution and Industrialization,” Hamid Ait Amara and Bernard Founou-Tchuigoua, eds., *African Agriculture: The Critical Choices* (London/New Jersey: United Nations University Press, 1990), pp.2-3; Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Three Stages of African Involvement in the World Economy,” Peter C.W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), pp.32-50; Lionel Cliffe, “Rural Political Economy of Africa,” Peter C.W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), pp.112-115; and 125; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D., Howard University Press, 1982), pp.20-28, 95-97, 103-105, 154-155.

history of Ethiopia, as will be discussed under chapter seven. Indeed the largest proportion of the legal documents from Ethiopian history relates to land sale rather than to any other topic. This trade went on from about the 1720s to 1975, when it came to an end abruptly as the result of the Ethiopian revolution. Although the Ethiopian economy was pre-capitalist, business dealings in land operated in an efficient and rational manner. Among other things, new quantification of the value and size of physical space and the distinctive attitude of agricultural land as a commodity occurred during this period.⁸¹ Adequate understanding of the origin of the land market requires us to place the records on land market in the more general context of the agrarian historiography of other similar premodern settings. The Middle East land tenure literature can give context for the discussion of the Ethiopian land market in this regard. In the context of the Middle East, the literature ties discussion of land tenure to themes in political economy and to markets. The temporal focus of some of the key works also coincides with mine and can give us good insight into the role of markets in agriculture and land tenure.

Landholding, Markets, and Commercial Agriculture

Immanuel Wallerstein's modern world system theory is employed both logically and empirically to conceptualize the socioeconomic changes that underlay the making of the modern Middle East as they related to land tenure. Wallerstein sees the modern world capitalist economy based on an international division of labor originating in the sixteenth century. In the course of the sixteenth century the regions and societies brought together by the international capitalist system coalesced into one or other of the following groupings: core, semi-periphery and periphery. The core region, northwestern Europe, traded its manufactured goods for raw material and agricultural commodities from the periphery and semiperiphery, comprised of countries in

⁸¹ I have discussed the land market in chapter seven. Large quantities of documents recording the property dealings of private individuals deposited in church archives were generated beginning the 1720s. The land market continued uninterrupted right down to the 1974 when it abruptly ended.

Eastern Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The demand for raw material and foodstuffs in the core regions stimulated in the periphery the formation of big commercial farms operated by servile labor, a growing dependence on a single crop, and a regressive process of underdevelopment in the periphery. In the context of Eastern Europe, the growth of international grain market is believed to be behind the development the ‘second serfdom’. Conversely, in the core region the expansion of the world capitalist economy into new areas increased prosperity and industrial development.⁸²

Bruce McGowan and T. Stoianovich believe that world system theory sheds light on the historical development of the Balkan territories of the Ottoman Empire. In the Balkans, the rising western European demand for grain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries pressed agriculture towards commercial farming, the formation of big estates from dispossessed peasant holding and the reorganization of labor.⁸³

Others such as Çağlar Keyder, Haim Gerber, and Huri İslamoğlu-İnan conclude that the reasons for the development of commercial agriculture should be sought elsewhere than in just the external trade structure of the region. The most common arguments can be summarized as follows. First, the Ottoman state found it in its interest to prevent the development of socially and economically significant big estates by its support and protection of smallholder agriculturalists and taxpayers. When and if big estates developed they were remarkably ephemeral and did not become heritable as a whole. Second, the “estate owners” participated in commercial agriculture largely through the mechanisms of usury, tax farming, and similar extra-economic operations

⁸² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* vol. I (New York/London: Academic Press, 1974), pp.15-18, 99-108 100-132.

⁸³ T. Stoianovich, “Land Tenure and Related Sectors of the Balkan Economy, 1600-1800,” *Journal of Economic History* 13 (1953), pp. 398-411; B. McGowan, *Economic Life in Ottoman Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 69ff; and Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987), p.45.

rather than direct involvement in production. Third, it was the existence of markets that spurred commercial agricultural production not just by the various elite elements— clerical, military, and administrative—but also by smallholder peasant cultivators. Therefore, the most important argument of the historiography is that the impetus for commercial agriculture originated within the region.⁸⁴

As noted by Kenneth Cuno, the real importance of grand theories such as Wallerstein's world system theory is their theoretical breadth which encourages "research of the kind that looks beyond the limits of national boundaries and conventionally defined periods."⁸⁵ Cuno's *The Pasha's Peasants* is particularly revealing of the importance of the market in driving the changes that occurred in the landholding and rural society of Egypt in the century preceding the cotton boom of the 1860s. The fact that Cuno deals with the same period I am concerned with in this study makes his work even more relevant. It is useful to state his main findings here to show their implication for possible parallel developments in Ethiopia. Cuno states that the cotton boom that occurred in the 1860s was a measure of the monetization of the Egyptian economy and the commercialization of its agricultural sector in the previous one hundred years. Far from being insular, Egyptian villages were intertwined with each other "by urban-rural commerce in a countrywide marketing system, and through the market towns and ports to export markets."⁸⁶ Villages produced agricultural products, including cotton, for sale in towns which held periodic markets and some villages also held markets. Cuno has also documented the prevalence of

⁸⁴ Çağlar Keyder, "Introduction: Large-Scale Commercial Agriculture in the Ottoman Empire?", Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak, eds., *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp.8-9 and 11-13; Huri İslamoğlu-İnan, "Peasants, Commercialization, and Legitimation of State Power in Sixteenth-Century Anatolia ," Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak, eds., *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 72-74; and Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East*, pp.33 and 43ff.

⁸⁵ Kenneth Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy, 1740-1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49

moneylending in the countryside, urban investment in agricultural production and market transactions in land dating at least from the 1740s.⁸⁷ He concludes that the automatic contrasting of property in pre-capitalist economies with modern views of property in commercial economies is misleading. He found that in the transition from the “premodern” to “modern” Egyptian history there was no significant shift in the use, ownership, and conceptualization of landed property consistent with the sharpness of the temporal division that the contrasting images of modern and premodern evoke.⁸⁸

Some of the themes discussed in the historiography of the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire landholding correspond very much to twentieth century Ethiopian experience when landlords started a bold venture into mechanized commercial farms by displacing and dispossessing rural cultivators. These commercial farms were fueled by the international market, as in the Balkans for instance.⁸⁹ The Ethiopian material shows the existence of a distinctively commercial system of transaction in agricultural land around towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is also a credit market in which land served as collateral and the seizure of land for default is also evident in the records, as presented under chapter seven. Further in most areas the land market coincided with the arrival of the Maria Theresa thaler. Surely there are indications that there was articulation with Mediterranean and Nile Valley commerce. For the Gondärine period, however, export trade in agricultural products is practically an irrelevant variable. The development of the land market occurred in a peculiarly Ethiopian context. We have no evidence of *rim* land being used for commodity production, at

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.55-59.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Cuno, “The Origins of Private Ownership of Land in Egypt: A Reappraisal”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 12, no. 3 (1980), pp. 245-247.

⁸⁹ Desalegn Rahmato, “Moral Crusaders and Incipient Capitalists: Mechanized Agriculture and Its Critics in Ethiopia,” *Proceedings of the Third Annual Seminar of the Department of History* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1986), pp.69-90.

least throughout the 18th century. Crummey has forwarded the argument that *rim* land was used by Gondär notables to maintain their large court retinues.⁹⁰ This seems to be the purpose of *rim* land in general. The only exception to the general rule is commercial coffee-growing on Zägé peninsula on the northwestern shore of Lake Tana which stimulated one of the most vibrant land markets.⁹¹ The instance of Zägé clearly suggests the connection between commercial agriculture and the land market in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Ethiopia. For other areas this hypothesis lacks a strong methodological support for now. Although the evidence is negative, it points to future areas of research. The useful insights to be drawn from the Middle East literature on land tenure are that the absence or existence of an international trade in agricultural products does not necessarily exclude the development of commercial agriculture and credit markets. As a whole, the primary material from Ethiopia is and the social and economic institutions expressed in it are amenable for comparison with similar premodern settings.

Sources and methodology

This study began in 1999 while I was enrolled in a master's degree program at the School of Graduate Studies in Addis Ababa University (AAU). Most of the primary materials related to land on which my study draws are church-related. Existing largely as marginal notes of manuscripts, these documents are held by Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Due mainly to the efforts of many scholars and organizations, a large volume of these manuscripts containing property records of all kinds gathered from northern Ethiopia is now available in several collections. Of several collections, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at AAU has the largest collection of microfilms on primary property documents and manuscripts held by Ethiopian churches and monasteries. This microfilm collection was made possible by both UNESCO

⁹⁰ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.166.

⁹¹ See Abdussamad H. Ahmad, "Priest Planters and Slavers of Zägé (Ethiopia), 1900-1935", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1997), pp. 543-556.

funded fieldwork carried out in the 1960s and 1970s as well as a research project sponsored by Hill Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library at St. John's University, Collegeville.⁹² Between 1984 and 1993, other documentary sources pertinent to my study were microfilmed from Gojjam, Bägémeder, Tegray and Wällo by a team of researchers headed by Donald Crummey. This material—deposited at the IES, AAU and at the Center for African Studies at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign—pertains specifically to landed property and forms a useful basis for this study.⁹³

My research also draws on Ethiopian manuscripts in foreign collections, most notably those deposited in the British Library in London, made available to me by Crummey and Claire Bosc-Tiessé. They were carried to Britain as war trophy by a British army that entered Ethiopia in 1868. Most, if not all, of them, came from the churches of the town of Gondär (see map # 5 page 94) and they were looted by King Téwodros II (1855-1868) before they eventually fell into the hands of the British expeditionary force. Crummey calculated that the Ethiopian manuscripts at British Library and Cambridge contain approximately two thousand land transaction documents from the period between the years 1740s and 1840s. One manuscript catalogued as Orient 777 in particular proved indispensable for this study.⁹⁴

I also gathered a large volume of new documents found in the “libraries” of churches in Ethiopia in 1999, 2002 and 2007-2008. In early 1999, I and the philologist Alessandro Bausi

⁹² *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville*, vols.1-3, ed., William Macomber; vols. 4-9 ed., Getachew Haile (Collegeville, Minn.: Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, St. John's Abbey ad University, 1975-87).

⁹³ Daniel Ayana, “A Catalogue of Land Tenure Related Microfilm from Gojjam Churches and Monasteries Recorded between January and July, 1989; and Shumet Sishagne, “A Catalogue of Land Tenure Related Microfilm from Churches and Monasteries of Gondär Province, January-July, 1988.” Microfilm copies of this these documents are deposited in two institutions: Illinois/IES, Department of History, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, and Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University.

⁹⁴ William Wright, *Catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1877); Edward Ullendorf and Stephen G. Wright, *Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Cambridge University Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

from the Italian University of Naples went on a research visit to Märtulä-Maryam, a church in Gojjam. Märtulä-Maryam turned up a manuscript containing uninterrupted records of land transactions from *circa* 1780s to 1974 and other documents.⁹⁵ I furthered my Märtulä-Maryam research by conducting three months of fieldwork in Gojjam in the summer of 2002 during which I copied, photographed, and reproduced land documents in the province's churches and monasteries. The church of Däbrä-Marqos yielded a manuscript containing a complex series of grant documents from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, while in Mota Giyorgis the most important find was a rich record of land documents beginning from the 1770s down to 1974 (see map # 7 page 139 for the location of these churches). My dissertation research in 2007 and 2008 enriched and extended the documentary data I had already gathered in 1999 and 2002.

From mid-October 2007 to mid-June 2008 I conducted extended research work in Gojjam and Bägémder. My field work was part of a research project funded by the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique at the Centre d'Études des mondes africains at the University of Paris in which I participate as a member.⁹⁶ I received support from this project for my fieldwork during which I collaborated with team members. In October 2007 I joined Anaïs Wion from the Centre d'Etude des mondes africains (CNRS) in Paris and *Qäsis* Alämenäw Azänäh from the Central Patriarchate Office of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Addis Ababa in a research trip to the churches of Aringo Abbo, Mahdärä- Maryam, and Gälawdéwos. We made photographs of manuscripts and documents in these churches and interviewed the clergy about the documents. From mid-October 2007 to mid-January 2008 I visited several churches and monasteries in Bägémder and in the Lake Tana area and uncovered land registers, charters and land sale documents at Qorata Wälätä-Péteros, Kota Maryam, Kebran Gäbrél and Meslé Fasilädäs, to

⁹⁵ Däqiqä Näbeyat, MS. f194r-264v, Märtulä-Maryam.

⁹⁶ The Programme ANR CornAfrique is an international collaborative research project—in which I was also drafted as member—which aims to create database archives of the sources of Horn of Africa history (13th-21st c.).

name but a few of the churches and monasteries.⁹⁷ Most of these churches are shown on maps in the subsequent chapters.

The town of Gondär has the largest single concentration of churches in Bägemededer. Land documents from these churches are now well known. Some valuable manuscripts are still held by the churches of Gondär. However, a large number of them are now housed in European collections. In March 2008 I photographed the two volume land register of the church of Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwan and some manuscripts in the holding of the church of Mädhäné-Aläm. I also visited the agricultural lands mentioned in the land documents of the churches of Gondär town and interviewed elders before traveling to West Gojjam at the end of March 2008.⁹⁸ Apart from the church of Däbrä-Mäwi near the town of Bahir Dar, Crummey and other previous researchers made few contacts in western part of Gojjam. Thus, from April 2008 to mid-May 2008, I consulted the collections of churches in west Gojjam and in Däbrä-Marqos town in the eastern part of the province. As it turned out, some of the churches in west Gojjam proved fertile repositories of land documents. The churches of Zägé in the southwestern shore of Lake Tana in particular preserve an array of manuscripts exclusively dealing with land transactions. The churches of Ura Kidanä-Meherät and Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis house the largest number of land documents.⁹⁹ Dengera Maryam, again in west Gojjam, turned up quite valuable material. A visit to the church of Däbrä-Marqos yielded the surprise discovery of a previously unseen manuscript solely dealing with landholding and manumission of slaves.¹⁰⁰ I wrapped up my field work in Gojjam in June 2008 with a visit to the several churches in the eastern part of the province in

⁹⁷ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Qorata Wälätä-Péteros, pictures # 014-099 and 100-186.

⁹⁸ Crummey and Shumet have already microfilmed these two land registers. The first volume is catalogued as III/IES, 88.I-IV.30, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwan, *Mäzgäb*. The second volume of the Qwesqwan register has not been catalogued by Crummey and Shumet. Hereafter the second volume will be cited as Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwan, pictures # 019-201.

⁹⁹ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis; pictures # 033-578-; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Ura Kidanä-Meherät, pictures # 598-1272.

¹⁰⁰ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 258-360.

search of new records. New manuscripts exclusively concerned with land were photographed in the churches of Abazaj Giyorgis, Däbrä-Wärq and Mota Giyorgis.¹⁰¹ On the whole, the Gojjam material is richer and more complete than that found Bägémeder.

The microfilm materials deposited at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies come mainly from an area geographically limited to Gojjam and Bägémeder and a few churches in Wällo. The churches of Tegray and Wällo were almost wholly neglected in previous research. I spent a good part of summer and fall 2008 in Tegray and Wällo. Within south Wällo, I visited during July and August 2008 the little known but important churches of Tädbabä-Maryam, Tänta-Mika'el, and Dässé Mädhäné-Aläm where I gathered a lively series of land documents and surveys and interviewed the clergy. Then, between September 2008 and November 2008 I focused on the churches of Tegray and parts of north Wällo. Much like those in Gojjam, Bägémeder and Wällo, the churches in of Tegray such as Abunä Gärima, Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm, Chäläqot Sellasé, Däbrä-Bänkwäl, and Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm to name but a few contain major documents.¹⁰²

What actually makes up these documents? The oldest and most common type of material in church records is charters. The oldest of them date from the thirteenth century. Primarily charters conveyed rights to land largely for pious causes such as the support of churches. Charters, especially those from the earlier centuries, are vague and formulaic. What most interests us did not interest medieval scribes and grantors. But they remain our only and the best source of information available about landholding. The wealth of charter sources becomes richer, denser, more complex, and varied in tandem with the passage of time.

During the Gondärine period and thereafter, the quantity of charters increased substantially. For instance, in the case of Gojjam, there are upwards of fifteen charters from the

¹⁰¹ Mäzgäb, MS. Abazaj Giyorgis, picture # 3273-3302; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Wärq, picture # 6205-6294; and Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4089-6516.

¹⁰² The land registers and documents from Tegray and Wällo will be cited under chapter six.

central decade of the reign of King Täklä-Häymanot of Gojjam (r. 1874-1901). The main drawback of many of these charters is that they are formulaic. The charters of the great churches in the capital Gondär issued in the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries became paradigmatic by being copied as models for similar grants elsewhere.¹⁰³ Some charters are highly descriptive and concern themselves often only with the fundamentals of grants leaving out the details. Despite their drawbacks on some issues, information in charters from the Gondärine period and after on the nature of rights granted and their impact on rural society is full. There are also many others that do not adhere strictly to formulae. Moreover we do see clear indication of significant improvement in the ability of drafters in describing the rights involved in grants during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Charters from Gojjam tended to be lengthier, more elaborate, clearer and more carefully drafted than those of Bägémeder.¹⁰⁴

Charters dating from the Gondärine period are often accompanied by an inventory of the fields involved in a grant. These inventories concretize the charters spatially by defining the size and, in some instances, the boundaries and the location of the lands of the specific agricultural fields involved in the transaction. The names of the holders are routinely included and in some exceptional cases the rural cultivators subject to them are given.¹⁰⁵ Recording specific fields, which started in the mid-seventeenth century with the founding of the church of Mädhäné-Aläm in Gondär town, gave rise to a distinctive class of administrative documents widely known as *mäzgäb* or “record or register.” Mostly these registers are found either as insertions to

¹⁰³ For the spread of Gondärine legal traditions into Gojjam see, for instance, Donald Crummey *et al*, “A Gondärine land Grant in Gojjam,” pp.241-58.

¹⁰⁴ The 1766 charter of Mota Giyorgis church is typical example of an elaborate and clear document (III/IES. 89. XVI. 23-25, Yägwära Qwesqwam, Gebrä-Häwaryat).

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, Donald Crummey and Shumet Sishagne, “Land Tenure and the Social Accumulation of Wealth in the Eighteenth Century Ethiopia: Evidence from the Qwesqwam Land Register”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 24 no. 2 (1991), pp. 241-258; *idem*, “The Lands of the Church of Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Gondär,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* vol. 26 no. 2 (1993), pp. 53-62; Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.108-109; and Habtamu “Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia,” pp. 89-106.

manuscripts or noted in fly leaves and guardian leaves of manuscripts. There are however many notable exceptions in which registers exist as independent parchment and paper manuscripts. Some of these sources have the character of both a cartulary and a register. For instance, the register of Däbrä-Marqos was originally used to record the charters and lands belonging to the clergy of the church. Subsequently, copies of the charters and registers of several other institutions were transcribed into the Däbrä-Marqos register.¹⁰⁶

Another class of primary sources should be noted. There are records similar to land registers which go by the name *yärest mäzgäb* or “register of inheritance.” They specifically are records of private deeds between individuals and concern primarily land sale documents, wills, manumissions, adoption, gifts, to name but a few, from the period between *circa* 1720 and 1975, the year the Ethiopian revolution broke out bringing an end to private property. Land sale documents represent the largest single category of documents from the past. In most churches these private land transactions are routinely noted in the margins of manuscripts. *Yärest mäzgäb*, however, refers to separate manuscripts found in several institutions.¹⁰⁷ I will use the term *yärest mäzgäb* to distinguish a manuscript from the land registers that usually accompany charters. Generally, our documents from the Gondärine period and thereafter could, therefore, divide into two genres. One class of documents is charters similar to those of the medieval period, while the second and novel type is the administrative *mäzgäb*. For the most part the *mäzgäb* are descriptive and leave many legal and social terms used undefined. Private transactions are even more formulaic, terse, and laconic than charters and *mäzgäb*.

¹⁰⁶ Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 191-275. In the case of Gojjam, *mäzgäb* had largely replaced charters in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹⁰⁷ The most noteworthy of these kinds of manuscripts include Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Wärq, pictures # 6205-6294; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4089-6516. Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis; pictures # 033-578-; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Ura Kidanä-Meherät, pictures # 598-1272; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm, pictures # 302-558.

Reconstructing social history from legal documents is the serious challenge these sources present. The sources I gathered are not straightforward to use. First, most of the material I draw on deal primarily with clerical people. In the past, and to a degree still today, the Ethiopian Orthodox churches were the major and, often, the sole depositories of documents and manuscripts. This is less a problem than other limitations of the sources. The distinction between ecclesiastical and lay records is a misleading anachronism. Ecclesiastical documents shed light on lay society as well, not to mention the fact that many lay elements held land from churches and recorded their property dealings in church archives. Second, legal sources do not tell us a complete story of what was happening. Some of the sources show how cultivators tried to contest or negotiate their exclusion from their property. On the whole, however, sources are silent on this vital topic. I found these sources highly problematic especially when they relate to transactions involving the social dependents of landlords. For instance, lords behaved as if they possessed their dependents and drew up wills in which they disposed of them to their heirs. However, there is no means to know how the lords' dependents felt about their relations with the lords.¹⁰⁸ This does not detract from the importance of these sources. They are our only source of information on certain issues such as property and ordinary farmers and they are closest to actual practice. Land documents help to counter the bias of narrative sources. Narrative accounts commonly discuss the founding of churches but they practically ignore the existence of *rim* property and the *zéga* class.¹⁰⁹ Thus, land-related documents help to broaden the evidentiary basis of Ethiopian history which until recently rested primarily on narrative sources. For instance, the two volumes of *māzgäb* belonging to the church of Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam stand apart from any other

¹⁰⁸ The sources recording the transfer of social control over the *zéga* class along with land through sale, gift and will are extensively discussed under chapter five.

¹⁰⁹ Only the chronicler of King Bäkäfa (r.1721-1730) mentions *rim* once: I. Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyäsü II et Iyo'as*, 2vols (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Series Altera, VI, repr. 61 and 66, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, 28-29; 1912, repr. Louvain: Peeters, 1954-62), text 283-284, transl. 303-304.

source in richness and precision. The breadth of the social, geographical and legal data these records furnish is rare. They contribute to a deeper understanding of the social implications of the grants of the eighteenth century by including information on the farming people working under the clerical landlords. The study would have been impossible without the support of these kinds of source.

Church archives are also reliable and I did not find any forged charters. Only four cases of forgeries of land transaction documents are reported from nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Gojjam.¹¹⁰ Forgery was less a problem than deletion and mutilation of documents. In Bägémeder in particular many manuscripts contain some partially or completely deleted documents. Several churches have elaborate rules about the authentication and registration of legal documents which helped to prevent the entry of fraudulent documents into their central registries. Manuscripts, documents, and other sacred objects and, in rare cases, the remains of church founders are kept together in the *eqabét* (treasury store), or in church buildings. The *eqabét* functioned as writing offices and the center of administrative archives. The service of writing offices was open to anyone and churches collected registration and writing fees. As a norm, a property transaction document entered into the registry of a church would not have validity without the presence of witnesses. The churches in the Lake Tana areas also adopted the more formal practice of requiring transacting parties and witnesses to validate documents with their signature and seals. This rule was adopted to avoid the recording of a fraudulent document into the registry. The development of writing offices and the accumulation of archival materials in church archives is discussed in chapter seven. Suffice it here to say that documents from church archives are authentic and reliable.

¹¹⁰ See Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4291 and 4303; and Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 237-238.

Besides documents in church archives, the information in twentieth century court petitions is used whenever it has some bearing on the subject to complement charters and registers. Likewise, oral data provides useful supplement to legal sources and helped to fill critical gaps left by the charters. I use the interviews primarily to facilitate a thorough scrutiny of the documents. Hence I carried to the field copies of documents in various collections after I read them to the churches where they originated to clarify and amplify certain terms and points on the issue of land and land tenure with the help of informants. In those cases where I uncovered new documents and manuscripts I interviewed church officials shortly after the photographing was done. The oral data allowed for a deeper understanding of the social relations expressed in documents. In particular, informants' information about the documents proved valuable in clarifying the meaning of local terms which could not be understood in areas outside of where the documents originate. Thus, combining the oral data with written sources enriches the dissertation and allows a more intense scrutiny of the documents themselves.

Quantitatively, the historical data collected have some weaknesses. I was not able to implement my original research plan to adequately cover the western part of Gojjam and northern Wällo because of some important problems. Manuscripts and documents in most monasteries and churches are not yet catalogued and are not readily accessible for consultation. Church officials are very idiosyncratic regarding access to manuscripts. Access was limited to a few hours and was possible only during the morning Mass services and on major festive occasions. Small parish church manuscripts are often kept in the custody of private individuals who can be very difficult to get hold of. Formal requests for access were ineffective and the official letters introducing me did not carry much weight before local church authorities. Access to archives was preceded by the time-honored, time wasting, *däjeṭenat* which required constant

supplication and the intervention of persons of influence. The photographing took place at churches drawing much unwanted attention from church goers. Church authorities are hesitant to give permission for fear of criticism and plead that the work be done in the shortest possible time. There is also the chronic problem of suspicion arising out of the burgeoning illicit trade in Ethiopian manuscripts and relics. Church officials often suspect that the research was only a disguise for a sinister scheme to smuggle the manuscripts and other sacred objects. For this, among other reasons, churches jealously guard manuscripts in their possession. In Bägemder in particular many churches proved simply impenetrable. In east Gojjam, the process of conducting interviews and gathering documents in churches was eased due, at least in part, to my background from the area. The west part of Gojjam was not adequately covered by previous research and I was not able to rectify this adequately. For instance, in the church of Dämbächa Mika'el in west Gojjam, where I suspect there is critical information on land in its archives, my request for access was rejected. I was singularly successful in Zägé churches where I uncovered extensive paper land registers most of which date from the twentieth century. Yet even in Zägé churches access to the parchment manuscripts is excluded. The archives of Zägé must contain vital information about land tenure which might answer questions about the origins of *rim* and the associated practice of land measurement. The tantalizing details which some of the Zägé documents I gathered give about the early practice involving *rim* makes the access prohibition the more disappointing.

The Tegray churches proved far more open than those of other provinces. Within Tegray only the archives of the church of Aksum which served as a central depository of documents for the province in the past are still closed to research. The charters from the pre-Gondärine period

in its archives are available in published form.¹¹¹ Yet there is no doubt that there is still a huge amount of material related to land in the archives of Aksum. I am less embarrassed by my failure in Aksum because practically everyone who has gone there had trouble. Many of the central and southern districts of Tegray are well represented in the sources. In Wällo the serious difficulty has to do more with the lack of documentation in churches rather than access prohibition. Because of the comparative isolation of much of Wällo from the Gondärine kingdom in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, many of its districts were beyond the reach of charters and other sources. These deficiencies mean that generalizations and assertive statements on some specific issues are not possible. Despite these weaknesses, I believe that the evidentiary basis of this study is sufficiently solid and its findings are of potentially lasting significance.

Crummey has established a standard system for identifying and referencing the documents he gathered, which I will follow. Many documents and manuscripts that I use in this dissertation are previously unknown. They are, therefore, not yet catalogued. Data collection was carried out with a digital camera, which gives the pictures which it takes an instant identity number. I have found it convenient to use this number to identify the specific documents referred to in the dissertation. For instance, the citation of the charter of King Täklä-Häymanot (r.1874-1901) to Däbrä-Marqos church incorporated in the register of the church is as follows: “Mäzgäb”, title of the manuscript; “Däbrä-Marqos”, the name of the church; and then the photograph exposure number (205) follows.¹¹² This system of identification is my own. The evidence gathered in this way is the principal basis of the historical analysis in the main body of the dissertation. In the case of the oral data, the date and place where the interview was

¹¹¹ Carlo Conti Rossini, *Documenta ad illustrandam historiam. Vol.I: Liber Axumae*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum, vol. 27 (Paris, 1909).

¹¹² Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 205.

conducted is given under each chapter. Informants will not be listed in the bibliography.

A Preview of the Dissertation

Chapter two of my dissertation traces the early precedents out of which *rim* and *zéga* evolved in eighteenth century. The chapter argues that the obligations and rights entailed in *rim* developed from the customary practices of gifts or grants of land to saints and individuals for the support of their commemorative feasts in the centuries preceding the establishment of Gondär in 1636. In doing so it discusses the social and economic impact of death and its interplay with issues of memory, property, gifts, and spirituality in Christian Ethiopia. This chapter also reinterprets the grants from the pre-Gondärine era and draws similarity with those of subsequent centuries. Also, chapter two acknowledges that the institution of *zégenät* was inherited from the pre-Gondärine period and discusses the sources referring to *zéga*, including the use of the term in religious texts to describe the condition of Christ. It looks in some detail at how the clerical landlords may have used the image of Christ as *zéga* to justify the exploitation or repression of the peasants by analyzing the Christological debate of the seventeenth century.

Chapters three and four of my dissertation explore the creation of *rim* around 1700 and its gradual institutionalization in subsequent centuries in Gojjam and Bägémeder. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries I assert that *rim* had largely replaced other forms of property as the basis of social power for the ruling class. Critical to this argument is the close examination of extensive new sources containing evidence on *rim*. Chapter three focuses on the spread of *rim* property in Bägémeder during the period between 1636 and 1769. The reign of Iyasu I (r.1682-1706) is a turning point for the beginning of massive grants of *rim* property in the Gondärine kingdom. *Rim* grants picked up pace and intensity in the 1740s and 50s. Chapter three closes with a detailed analysis of the grants of Queen Mentewwab (r.1730-1769). Chapter four

investigates how *rim* grants played out in Gojjam between 1766 and 1900. The lords of Gojjam started to give land to churches in *rim* in their territory in the 1750s and 60s; by the end of the nineteenth century, *rim* was found everywhere in Gojjam.

Chapter five of my dissertation probes the issue of the social outcome of the entrenchment of *rim* property in Bägémeder and Gojjam. As a norm *rim* derived from confiscated peasant property and it mediated or exposed the social dependence of the *zéga* class on the ruling class. It argues that *rim* property entailed a shift in the peasantry's relationship to the land and that Ethiopia's rulers created a serf-like system of land tenure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chapter then carries the discussion to the twentieth century by investigating the relations between military lords and their servile laborers in southern Ethiopia. It concludes by arguing that the property and social relations that prevailed in twentieth century southern Ethiopia were based on Gondärine legal traditions.

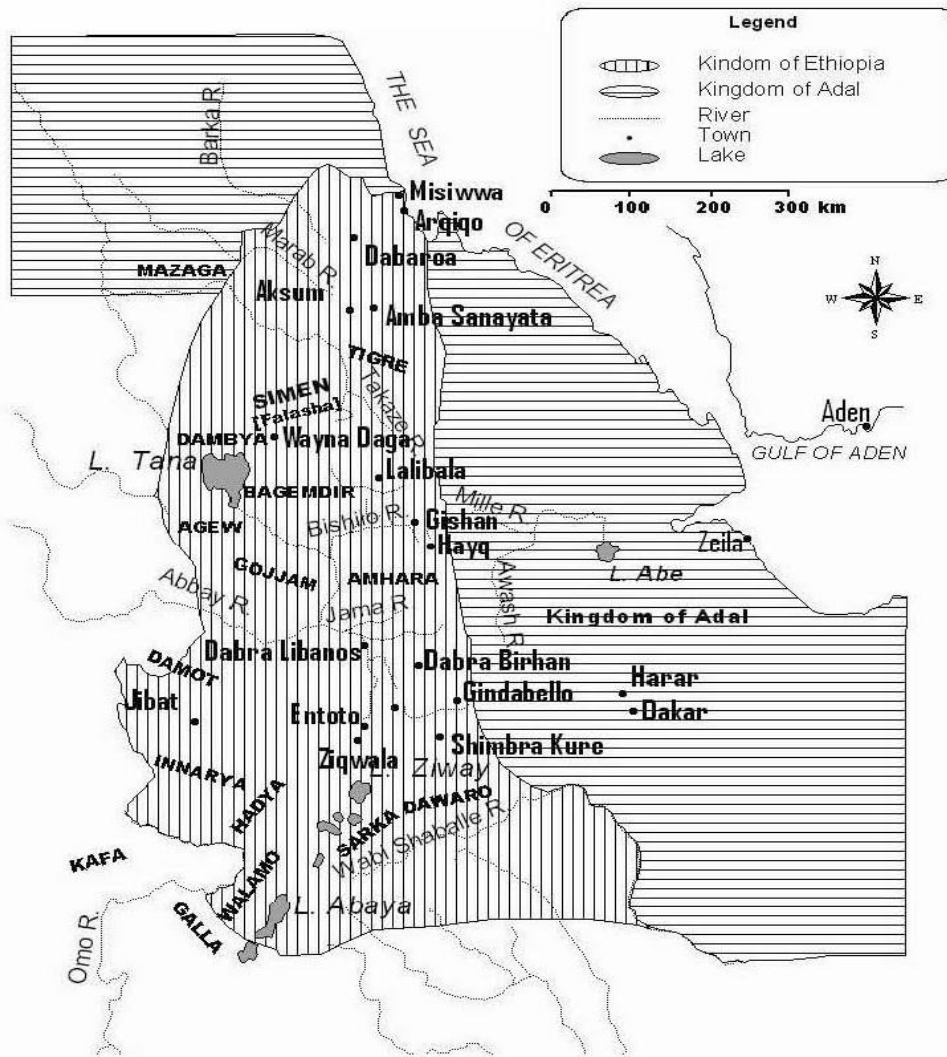
Chapter six explores how *rim* grants played out in Tegray and Wällo. The argument in this chapter reinforces the preceding chapters. *Rim* property was created in processes like the one seen under chapters three and four. *Rim* grants were made to Tegray churches as early as 1750s. Modeled on the churches of Bägémeder, the grants of Tegray appropriated much of the Gondärine terminology down to specific details. Wällo was marked by the diversity of its land tenure system and terminology which was frequently transformed due to ethnic movements, religious conflict and political events in the period between 1600 and 1930s. I have therefore to consider the interplay between ethnicity, religion and political forces in the shaping of the land tenure system in Wällo. Many of the forms of the land tenure system in Wällo were absorbed into *rim* tenure in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, just like those in Gojjam and Bägémeder, many rural communities in Tegray and Wällo met the harsh

reality of losing their inheritance.

Chapter seven interrogates the commoditization of land and the production and authentication of legal documents, the development of writing offices and the accumulation of administrative archives in churches. In the course of time, different methods of property acquisition and alienations such as wills, gifts, manumission, adoption, mortgage and sales evolved. In dealing with commercial transaction of land, chapter seven focuses on the analysis of the background of sales and property accumulations. I have argued in this chapter that the land market was the function of the introduction of *rim* property and the individualization of holding that attended it. The prominent role played by *rim* in the transactions reinforces this assertion. I also isolate the myriad of other factors that induced people to alienate or acquire property through sale and other means. Economic distress, bright land market, political crises and violence all served as the background to land transactions.

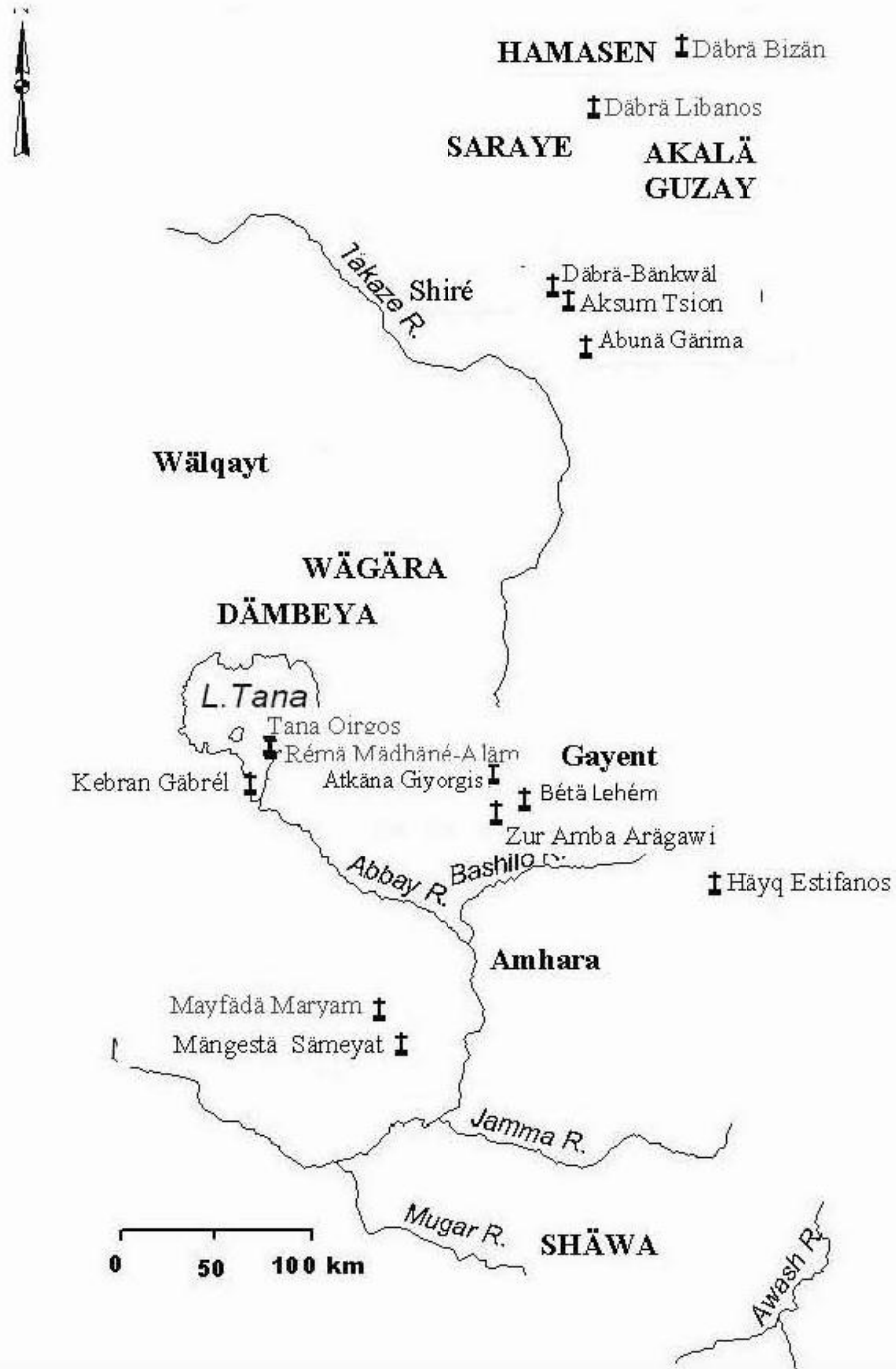
In sum, while major strides have been made in the study of Ethiopian systems of land ownership, there remains a vigorous probing to be made into how property was negotiated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ethiopia. This study seeks to expand our understanding of rural premodern Ethiopia in its complexity by foregrounding the neglected *zéga* and the undervalued *rim*.

Map 2. The Ethiopian Kingdom at the turn of the 16th Century



Source: Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, p.298.

Map 3- Foundations and Grants 1200-1600



Chapter Two: Rim and Zéga: Antecedents and Early Developments

Introduction

To a very large extent *rim* property and the institution of *zégenät* were shaped much more by developments subsequent to the establishment of Gondär than by circumstances before. However, *rim* and *zégenät* did not develop in a void. Church landholding prior to the Gondärine period bore some similarity to that of the later period. This chapter will highlight that the development of rights of *rim* was influenced by the analogous customary practices of gifts to saints and individuals for the support of their commemorative feasts. The second objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that the system of labor exploitation in *zégenät* during the Gondärine period had many centuries of development behind it and grew out of old patterns of social domination. The medieval charters issued during the period running from 1200 to 1527 provide a background against which to set discussions of early precedents of *rim*. Below an outline of the political and cultural developments will be presented briefly in order to place discussion of the foundations and grants of pre-Gondarine Ethiopia in perspective.

After several centuries in the shadows, the Ethiopian kingdom dramatically reemerged into the limelight in the thirteenth century. One crucial episode was the advent of the Solomonids in 1270, who claimed direct descent from the biblical King Solomon and the putative Queen Sheba of Ethiopia. The Solomonids also claimed the legacy of Aksumite Ethiopia. Combined with the powerful myth of Sälomonic descent, the legacy of Aksum gave the new kings a charter for political leadership and they dominated Ethiopia until the third quarter of the twentieth century.¹ This charter to rulership was sanctioned by a literary text, the *Kebrä-Nägäst* (Glory of

¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*. See also, Crummey, *Land and Society*, 17-44; Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and Christianization of Early Sälomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984); and Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270-1527): Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

Kings) written in the Ge'ez language in 1320. Crummey defines the text as “essentially a statement of Christian Zionism, which gains particular purchase in Ethiopia from the fact that the historic state and society have, since antiquity, been dominated by Semitic-speakers, and, since the fourth century, by an Orthodox Christianity doctrinally affiliated to the patriarchal churches of Alexandria and Damascus.”² The new dynasty set in motion new social, political and cultural forces that proved of great significance for the subsequent history of the Ethiopian region.

Attendant developments of the dynastic change were the twin processes of territorial expansion and the spread of Christianity in the Ethiopian region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. When the Solomonids took over in 1270, the Ethiopian kingdom stretched from the highlands of Eritrea in the north to the plateau area of northern Shäwa, through Tegray and Amhara, in the south. By the turn of the sixteenth century the territorial extent of the Ethiopian kingdom hardly resembled the situation of 1270 (see map # 2 above). The Ethiopian kings found themselves ruling over heterogeneous communities and a much expanded geographical terrain. This rich territorial gain was made primarily in the south and west of the country.³

Ever since the decline of the Aksumite Empire in the eighth century, the Ethiopian kingdom increasingly became oriented towards the south. Aksum derived its power from control over the regional trade in the Red Sea region. With the rise of Arab power Aksum lost control over the Red Sea and the kingdom became firmly oriented towards the south. As a result, Amhara and Shäwa, which had been the southern outposts of the kingdom suddenly attained new significance in the thirteenth century and afterwards. The founder of the new dynasty, Yekuno-Amlak (r.1270-1285), arose from the Amharic-speaking Christian population in Amhara. It was from Amhara and Shäwa that military campaigns were launched.

² Donald Crummey, “Ethiopia in the Early Modern Period: Sälomonic Monarchy and Christianity,” *Journal of Early Modern History* vol.8, no. 3-4 (2004), P.193.

³ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp.64 and 298-299; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.17-20.

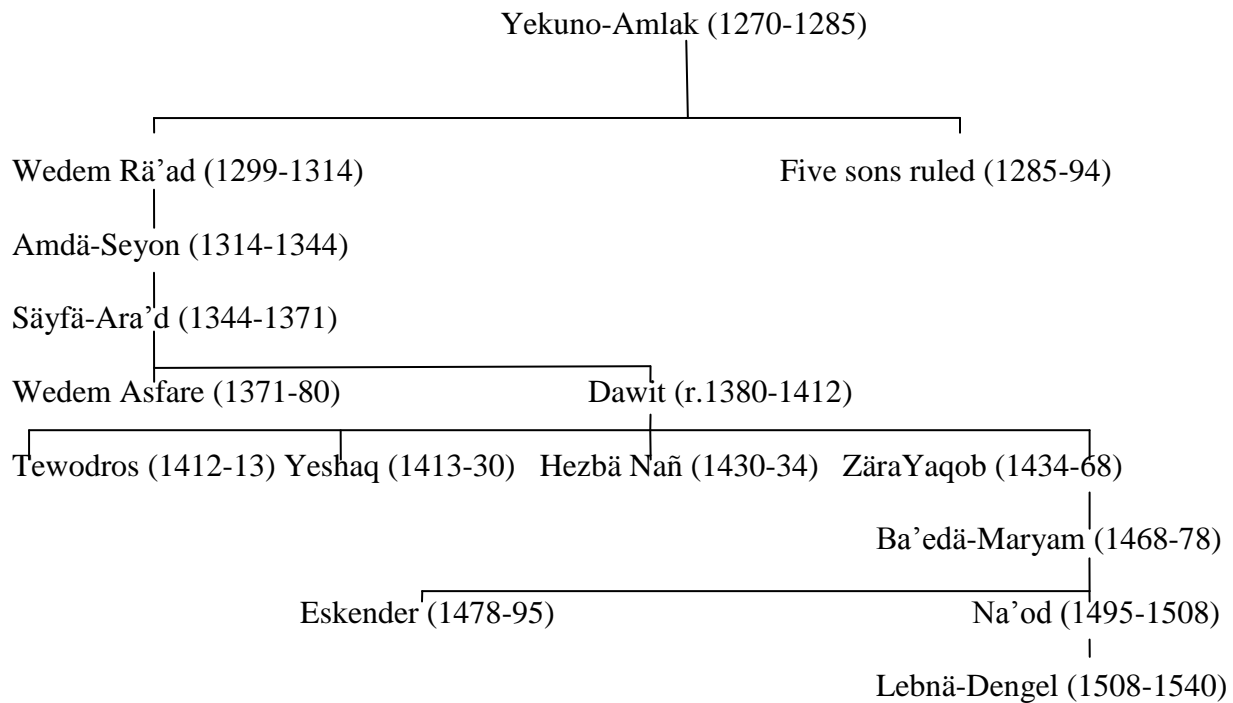


Chart 1. The Sälomonic Dynasty. Source: Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.26.

Much of the expansion was directed by King Amdä-Seyon (r.1314-1344), who conquered the kingdom of Gojjam—the fertile agricultural country within the eastern and southeastern bend of the Blue Nile— Bägémeder east of Lake Tana, and the mountain country of Semén. Numerous other sheikdoms and principalities to the east, south and west of Shäwa were conquered and a direct access to the Red Sea was opened.⁴

The new territorial expansion opened rich avenues for the expansion of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. The immediate context within which the Solomonids arose was internal cultural regeneration which expressed itself through the founding of monasteries and churches. The foundation of monastic culture was laid down by Syrian monks, who came to Aksumite Ethiopia in the late fifth century. More monasteries were established in later centuries, of which the most notable was the monastery of Saint Stephen at Däbrä-Häyq founded in 1248 and located a little north of the modern town of Dässé. It was founded by Iyäsus-Mo’a (“Jesus has prevailed”

⁴ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp.119-155.

or “has been victorious”). The Zagwé dynasty (r.1150-1270) had also left behind a cluster of rock-hewn churches of exquisite workmanship at the town of Lalibäla, named after one of its well known members.⁵ Yet the early Sälomonic era overshadowed the brilliant Zagwé achievement of the rock-hewn churches and the early monastic movement attributed to Syrian monks.⁶ Monastic efflorescence which Ethiopia had never experienced before nor after best characterizes the medieval time. Charismatic monks spearheaded this movement. The conquest of new lands was sometimes preceded by; other times coincided with, and generally was followed by Christian evangelization. As a result, Gojjam, Bägémeder and Semén underwent significant cultural transformation. These regions had been predominantly inhabited by various groups of Agäw people, who resisted the imposition of the new religion, but were defeated. In the case of Gojjam, swift Christianization occurred and monasteries established in the second half of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Evangelization was assisted by the settlement of monks, soldiers and Christian families into Gojjam from Shäwa and Amhara. These new groups brought with them the Amhäric language and the land tenure systems common to the old provinces. All this transformed Bägémeder, Gojjam, and Semén into the Christian heartland of Ethiopia, which proved vital to the survival of church and state when they met new challenges in later centuries.⁷

In the first century of Sälomonic rule the relations between kings and monks were stormy. A number of monasteries started as solitary retreats for monks. In keeping with the ascetic ideals of their founders, religious communities tended to be independent, avoiding contact with the secular world. Moreover, unlike the period before or after, medieval monks not only worked for their own spiritual wellbeing, but also sought to regulate morals and correct

⁵ Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp.108-110, 158-205

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp.198-205.

some social customs practiced by kings, sometimes clashing violently with them. Kings manipulated land grants to tame recalcitrant religious communities and discourage the tendency towards the development of independent monasteries. This process led to an abortive blending of church and state during the reign of the talented King Zär'a-Yaqob (r.1434-1468). Although not exactly according to the model Zär'a-Yaqob had sought, following his reign church and state remained inextricably enmeshed.⁸

Zär'a-Yaqob is also remembered for his policy to create uniformity of practice within the church, centralize administration and rid Christianity of 'pagan' practices. Yet this bred resentment and the king's policy of centralization was ignored by his successors.⁹ In general, the Christian kings demanded little from their new subjects and the population of the kingdom remained diverse, both ethnically and culturally. The strategically important eastern and south eastern frontiers of medieval Ethiopia were dominated by Islam and remained outside of the effective reach of the Christian kings. Christian military colonies stationed at the frontier posts known as *chäwa* protected the trade routes passing through the Muslim dominated lands along the eastern and southern boundaries of the kingdom. This defense system became increasingly ineffectual as the Ethiopian kingdom entered a period of decline from 1480s to 1527.¹⁰ Ethiopian rulers had wrested land from Muslim states in the past two centuries and continued to compete against the neighboring Muslim kingdom of Adal over trade. In 1529, brewing resentment at Ethiopian aggression elicited a military reaction from Adal, when a capable young man, Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim (popularly known as Graññ, the left-handed) turned the tables. Graññ decisively

⁸ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp.156-205, 231-241; and Crummey, *Land Society*, pp.24-35.

⁹ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp. 231-248.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-106 and chap.8

defeated a large Ethiopian army led by King Lebnä-Dengel (r.1508-1540).¹¹ Graññ's army was enormously destructive to the Ethiopian kingdom. The splendor and riches of the churches were a powerful attraction for the Muslim army. Churches were decimated and their property looted. In 1543 a Portuguese-Ethiopian army defeated Graññ.¹² Yet Ethiopia was weakened by the conflict so much that it was unable to keep at bay the northward thrust of new migratory waves from the southern border of the country by the Oromo (called Galla in contemporary sources). By the end of the sixteenth century, the Oromo had permanently settled in central and southern Ethiopia, and monasticism and the allied tradition of intellectual life largely disappeared from Amhara and Shäwa.¹³ It was under this relentless Oromo pressure that the royal court and its entourage rolled back to the Lake Tana area and the eastern bend of the Blue Nile reversing nearly two centuries of southward expansion.

Meanwhile, in the early seventeenth century the kingdom met new challenges from Jesuit missionaries who came to convert the Ethiopian people to Catholicism. The first group of Jesuit missionaries, one of whom was Bishop Andre de Oviedo, arrived in Ethiopia in 1557. To their disappointment, in this first phase of their activity the Jesuits found Ethiopians unprepared to abandon the ancient Orthodox Church and their mission came to nothing. In the early seventeenth century, however, Jesuit missionaries found much willing support from King Susenyos (r.1607-1632), who took the lead in converting Ethiopians to Catholicism. In 1622, in the face of country-wide resistance he formally declared Catholicism as the official state religion

¹¹ A contemporary Arabic account of Graññ's campaign is written by Chihab ed-Din Ahmed Ben Abd el Qader , *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Abyssinie (XVIe siècle)*, translated by René Basset (Paris, 1897).

¹² William E. Conzelman, *Chronique de Galäwdewos (Claudius) Roi d'Éthiopie*, Ethiopian text trans. and annotated (Paris, 1895), pp.136-137

¹³ For a contemporary account of the Oromo, see Aba Bahrey "History of the Galla," C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (eds), *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646, Being Extracts from The History of High Ethiopia or Abyssinia by Manuel de Almeida together with Bahrey's History of the Galla* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), pp.111-129. The standard reference work on the Oromo is Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570 to-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

of Ethiopia. A civil war ensued which eventually forced Susenyos to abdicate power in 1632 to his son Fasilädäs (1632-1667), who restored the Ethiopian church and expelled the Catholics.¹⁴

Land Grants of the early Solomonids, 1200-1540

Crummey has collected and discussed a large number of charters from the pre-Gondärine period and indicated where they are found. He lists 135 charters issued between 1200 and 1540 from 10 different sources. Based on his tabulation, a grant was made every 2.5 years over a period of 340 years. 50.3 percent of these charters originated from the churches of Aksum (in Tegray), Däbrä-Häyq (in Wällo), and Däbrä-Libanos of Shemäzana (in Eritrea).¹⁵ As Crummey noted, there are many unseen charters pending discovery. For example, excluding the grant purportedly made by an unidentifiable king Armeha, the church of Abunä Gärima near the town of Adwa (in Tegray) turned up ten charters from the period between 1300 and 1540.¹⁶ Perhaps thousands of charters were issued in the centuries preceding the Gondärine kingdom, although only a few hundred actually survived. The earliest grant is found in the Eritrean monastery of Däbrä-Libanos of Shemäzana and was given by King Lalibäla (c.1205-1225). Only a handful of charters survive from the Zagwé period (1150-1270), while the wealth of charter sources becomes reasonably plentiful after 1270. Most of the charters come from Amhäric and Tegreñña speaking areas. For this period both private and public acts are written almost entirely in Ge'ez, one of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia which is still used in the liturgical service of the Ethiopian Orthodox church.¹⁷ The distribution of churches and grants of the period are summarized by map # 3 above).

¹⁴ Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde Aregay, *The Question of the Union of the Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations 1500-1632* (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar and Centro de Estudios Historicos Ultramarinos, 1964), p. chapt. 7.

¹⁵ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.23-24, 35-39 and 44-49.

¹⁶ Wängél, MS. Abunä Gärima, pictures # 024-030.

¹⁷ Alessandro Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunita monastiche dell'Eritrea", *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXXVIII (1994 [1996], pp. 13-69 [I part]; XXXIX (1995 [1997]), pp. 25-48 [IIpart]; XLI (1997 [1998]), pp. 13-56

Crummey has analyzed charters from four different angles: “their literary form, the social and political context within which they were given, their ostensible purpose, and... their substance—the rights of exclusion and the right to collect tribute which they convey.”¹⁸ He has colorfully presented all the four different dimensions of charters. Yet two aspects of the charters require further consideration: the purpose for which the grants are made and their content. Most charters bestowed on beneficiaries legal rights commonly known as *gult* and *rest*. They predominantly concern church property and generally take the form of pious gifts for God, saints and for churches dedicated to them.¹⁹ Grants for the purpose of supporting commemorative feasts are widely attested in charter sources. The term used in the documents for commemorative feasts is *täzkar*, which will be defined and elaborated at length below. According to Crummey, *täzkar* is mentioned as the purpose of grants in nearly half of the total documents from the thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries.²⁰ The practice continued during the Gondärine period in all its forms. The custom of *täzkar* remains an essential element of Christian life to this day.²¹

Medieval memorial feasts, their accompanying prayer and social, economic and spiritual dimensions, is an unexplored subject in modern historical works. The custom of gifts of land for the support of commemorative feasts provided an easily transferable model, and possibly set a precedent for later Gondärine grants of *rim*. This, with the sheer volume of charters and other sources which contain references to *täzkar*, is sufficient to warrant detailed investigation.

[III part]; Carlo Conti Rossini, *Documenta ad illustrandam historiam. I. Liber Axumae*, 2 vols. (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum, Series altera, VIII, repr. 54 and 58, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, 24 and 27; 1909-1910, repr. Louvain: Peeters, 1961-1962); *idem*, “L’Evangelo d’oro di Däbrä Libānos”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, s.v.vol. x (1901), pp. 177-219.; G.W.b. Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies and Faculty of Law, 1965), pp.29-79; and Tadesse Tamrat, “The Abbots of Däbrä-Häyq,1248-1535”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 8, 1 (1970), pp.96-97.

¹⁸ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.35.

¹⁹ See for instance, Conti Rossini, “L’Evangelo d’oro di Däbrä Libanos”, p.200 #16; p. 216#32.

²⁰ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.37.

²¹ *Ibid.* All kinds of donations ranging from the most trifling sheath of ripe grains to expensive property were donated to saints or their earthly representatives. This kind of land transfer grew more prevalent between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular.

Feasting in Memory of the Dead: Property and Gifts to Saints and Ancestors

Memorial feasts were a type of penitential practice to which the clergy expected Christians to adhere. The root of *täzkar* is [፲፩ረ] *zäkärä*, a verb meaning “to commemorate a saint’s day with a feast, to hold a commemorative feast for a dead person...to give alms to a beggar (in the name of a saint or the like), to feed the needy at a commemorative feast (*täzkar*).”²² Its characteristic trait was commemoration of a dead person with prayer and feasting. Individuals could attain the salvation of their souls through commemorative rituals and prayers and through arranging for the distribution of food and drinks on the anniversary of their death. The feasts and the commemorative rituals were seen as placating God’s anger against the sinner and eventually as winning eternal reward in heaven through the assistance of the prayers of saints or their earthly representatives, friends, and relatives. The manual of Däbrä-Wärq monastery in Gojjam established in the fifteenth century states that “the living shall pray for the dead; the dead shall pray for the living.”²³ *Täzkar* feasts were also held before death and individuals made the necessary arrangements for their own *täzkar*.

The immediate origin of *täzkar* appears to have been the ancient cult of the dead. Erecting mortuary stelae for kings who claimed divine attributes and for persons of status was an important element of burial rites in ancient Ethiopia. The largest concentration of funerary stelae is found in Aksum, although these monuments are found scattered across Tegray and Eritrea. Mortuary monuments served the dual purposes of commemorating the dead and marking the

²² Kane, *Amhāric-English Dictionary*, pp.1661-1662.

²³ See Manual of Däbrä-Wärq, MS., Däbrä-Wärq: “ህያዋን ደሰለሉ ለምውታን፣ምውትን ደሰለሉ ለህያዋን:” Daniel Ayana catalogued the manual as *Tarikä Nägäst Zä-Ityopya*, MS., Däbrä-Wärq, 89, II, 11-33, II, 3-18.. Elaborate rules about *täzkar*, the type and frequency of the prayers and the dues owed for these services are all discussed in this administrative manual for the monastery of Däbrä-Wärq.

burial ground.²⁴ The monolithic stone stelae bearing inscriptions discovered in Anza and Mätara, in Tegray are important in this regard. In the case of Mätara the person who erected the stela, AGZ, specified its function as offering “for his fathers or ancestors”, whereas the person behind the stela of Anza, BZT, dedicated it “for himself.”²⁵

The arrival of Christianity to Aksumite Ethiopia in the fourth century did not bring essential changes in the custom of commemoration. Jacques Le Goff writes, “Judaism and Christianity, both firmly anchored historically and theologically in history, have been described as ‘religions of remembrance.’”²⁶ To further quote Le Goff, “...Christian memory manifests itself chiefly in the commemoration of Jesus—annually in the commemorative liturgy from Advent to Pentecost, by way of the essential stages of Christmas, Lent, and the Ascension, and daily in the celebration of the Eucharist,” whereas “at a more popular level it focuses particularly on the saints and on the dead.”²⁷ In the Ethiopian context, the only discernible development in the transition from the pagan cult of the dead to Christian memory is the change in the means of commemorating the dead. For the medieval period and thereafter, funeral monuments were replaced by land grants to support commemoration services.

The custom of *täzkar* was an evolving and dynamic one and involved varied worldly concerns. *Täzkar* was the normal religious duty of a Christian, including the king himself. The same as ordinary people, kings also made arrangements for their own *täzkar* before they died and for their ancestors as well. The purpose of *täzkar* for the Sälomonic kings was to memorialize and glorify their status within the wider dynastic context, and endorse their political agenda.

²⁴ J. Doresse, *Ethiopia: Ancient Cities and Temples*, trans. from the French into English by Elsa Coult (London, 1959); Carlo Conti Rossini, C. 1942, “Un’iscrizione su obelisco di Anza”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* vol. 2: 21-28; Enno Littmann, “L’iscrizione di Anza”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* vol. 11: 5-8 (1952).

²⁵ A. J. Drewes, *Inscriptions de l’Étiopie antique* (Leiden, 1962), pp. 62-68.

²⁶ Jacques Le Goff, *Memory and History* (Columbia University Press, 1977), p.68.

²⁷ Le Goff, *Memory and History*, p. 71.

They routinely donated land for religious institutions and instructed the benefiting communities to keep their *täzkar* during their life time and after they died. For example, King Amdä-Seyon (r.1314-1344) made grants of land to Däbrä-Häyq and instructed that its abbot observe his *täzkar*. “Whoever is appointed *Aqqabé-sä’at* of the monastery of [St.] Stephen,” he entreats, “may he commemorate the anniversary of my death, for me Amdä-Seyon.”²⁸ It is particularly important to refer to the charters issued for the purpose of *täzkar* by kings Dawit (r.1380-1412) and Yeshaq (r.1413-1430) in this regard.

The charters issued by Dawit I and Yeshaq appear to have followed closely each other and were written by the same scribe. Dawit’s charter was issued in the 34th (1412) year of his reign, while Yeshaq’s grant was made seven months after he ascended the throne (*circa* 1413). In terms of content and phraseology the charters are almost identical. Dawit and Yeshaq announce that they are Israelis “from the house of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, and Solomon.” They then proceeded to describe in great detail the purpose of the grant. Dawit instructs “the people of Fogära” which is located close to Lake Tana to provide for the *täzkar* of his father Säyfä-Are’ad (r.1344-1371) and his mother Läzäb-Wärqa to be held, respectively, on May 20 and on June 19 every year at the churches of Kebran Gäbrél and Tana Qirqos in Lake Tana.²⁹ The charter of Yeshaq was issued to provide his own *täzkar*,

[...] አጽሐፍኩ ዘንተ መጽሐሀፈ አነ ይስሐቅ ወስመ መንግስትየ ገብረ መስቀል ሰርጸ እስራኤል እምቤተ ኦብርሃም ይስሐቅ ወያዕቆብ ወልደ ዳዊት ወሰሎሞን አዕሎኩ ዘንተ መጽሐፈ ወንጌለ ፀጋሁ ለእግዚእነ በጁወጌ ዓመተ ምሕረት ወበጌ አውርኅ እመ ዋዕለ መንግስትየ ወሀብኩ ምድረ እንተ ስማ ሀንዳቤት እምጽንፉ እስከ ጽንፉ ከመትኩን ለተዝካረ ዚእየ ወዐቃቤ ተዝካርስ አባ ኖብ ወልደ ያስይ ዘገሊላ። እንዘሀሎ በሕይወቱ ወእምድኅረ አዕረፈ ደቂቁ ወደቂቁ ደቂቁ ይግበሩ ተዝካርየ በይእቲ ምድር እንተ ስማ ሀንዳቤት። ወሀብኩም ከመይኩኖ ርስተ ሎቱ ወለደቂቁ እስከ አመ ምጽአቱ ለእግዚእነ ወኢይሠይም እምባዕድ ትውልድ ውሰተ ይዕቲ ምድር እንተ ስማ ሀንዳ ቤት ዘእ[ባ]ንለ ውልዱ ለአባ ኖብ። [...]እመቦ ዘሄደ ወዘተአገላ እመሂ መስፍን ወእመሂ መኩንን እመሂ መጌምድር ወእመሂ አፈ መጌምድር ወእመሂ ሹብሕር። ወእመሂ ደቀ ስርጓ ምስለ አንበሳ ወእ[መ]ሂ ሰብአ አፍራስ ወእመሂ ንዋየ

²⁸ Taddesse, “The Abbots of Däbrä-Häyq,” p, 97.

²⁹ Wängél, Kebran Gäbrél, picture #476. For rulers, *täzkar* was designed to establish good reputation during their lifetime and perpetuate their memory after death.

አብቅሊሁ ለንጉሥ [...] አሉ ኩሎም አለ ዘክርነ ስሞም ወአለ ኢዘክርነ ስሞም ለእመ ተአዲው ቃለ ዘዕልምት ውስተ ዛቲ መጽሐፍ። ይኩኑ ተዓዳውያን በቃለ እግዚአብሔር ወበቃለ ንጉሥ።

I, Yeshaq, whose throne-name is Gäbrä-Mäsqäl, son of Israel from the house of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, son of David and Solomon, ordered the writing of this book (charter) in this Gospel book, the grace of our Lord in the 27th Year of Mercy [?] in the 7th month of my reign. I gave the land known as Hända-Bét from end to end so that it may be for my *täzkar*. The keeper of the *täzkar* is *Abba Nob*, son of Yasiy of Gälila. During his life time and after his death his children and his children's children shall observe my *täzkar* with this land named Hända-Bét. I gave [the land of Hända-Bét] so that it may be *rest* for him and for his children until the return of our Lord. Strangers shall not be appointed over this land called Hända-Bét except the children of *Abba Nob*. [...] Whoever violates this be it a prince, or a noble, or *mägémdar* [governor of Bägémeder], or *afä-mägémdar* [deputy governor of Bägémeder], or *shebher*, or *däqä-särgwa* with the lion, or the horsemen, or the king's mules [...] all these whose name we mentioned in this book and those we do not mention shall be (cursed?) by the word of the king and God.³⁰

Crummey has observed that the geographical distribution of Yeshaq's grants "reflects his interest in the broad strategic regions around the Semén mountains," where the king spent time fighting the Fälasha people of Ethiopia, who refused to give in to Christianity. This gave the Lake Tana region, located close to the homeland of the Fälasha, particular importance in the strategic thinking of Yeshaq. The Lake Tana monasteries of Kebran Gäbrél, Réma Mädhäné-Aläm and Däbrä-Sina received grants from Yeshaq (see map 3 page 51).³¹ The monk *Abba Nob*, who was designated by Yeshaq as warden of his *täzkar* and the land of Hända-Bét, was the founder of Réma Mädhäné-Aläm. Hända-Bét is readily identifiable with today's Andabét in the district of Esté, Bägémeder and its relation to Fogära and to Kebran and Qirqos. These places are close geographically to each other.

The importance of Yeshaq's charter is that it bears witness to the purpose of the property transaction derived from the practice of *täzkar* for not only building one's spiritual power but also for glorifying and perpetuating the memory of individuals. *Nob* had to arrange

³⁰ Wängél, Kerban Gäbrél, picture # 477.

³¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.29-30.

commemorative feasts on Yeshaq's behalf. One important quality of the grant is especially worthy of note. These feasts were expected to last for generations as the condition of the grant demands. Like a number of similar grants, Yeshaq's grant covered the yet unborn heirs of Nob to carry through the supposedly interminable relationship between Yeshaq and Nob until the second coming of Christ. The charter right excluded anyone who might want to control the land except the descendants of Nob. The governor and deputy governors of Bägémeder, horsemen, the king's royal officials and even the king's mules were barred from entering the land. In sum, the charter brought permanent benefits to Nob and his descendants after his death.

In certain ways, the original function of *rim* land was similar to *täzkar* land. *Rim* property was granted as a memorial to deceased individuals, more appropriately, to their representatives from the endowment of churches. King Täklä-Häymanot of Gojjam (r.1874-1900), for instance, routinely granted *rim* property to his ancestors with the purpose of perpetuating their memory and to reap spiritual benefits. In one instance, the beneficiary of these nineteenth century *rim* grants is Queen Säblä-Wängél, wife of King Lebnä-Dengel (r. 1508-1540).³²

Yeshaq's successor and brother, Zär'a-Yaqob (r.1434-1468), also manipulated *täzkar* to glorify the Sälomonic dynasty. At the monastery of Abunä Gärima in Tegray he issued a charter establishing rules for the commemoration of "Kings of Ethiopia" and the means to support it. Of these, three were Aksumite and the remaining six Sälomonic kings, including Amdä-Seyon, Dawit and Yeshaq. The Zagwé kings of Ethiopia are, however, omitted from the list of kings honored. This is undoubtedly intentional. Detail in the charter reveals that Zär'a-Yaqob prohibited local officials and the monks of Gärima from commemorating the Zagwé kings at Gärima. The charter ends with "Zära-Ya'qob, king of faith, established that they (local officials

³² Illinois/IES.89.IX.30-34, Mängesto Kidanä-Meherät, Nägärä-Maryam.

and the church of Gärima) should not [commemorate] rebel kings.”³³ The exact meaning of this line can be debated, but it is plausible that “the rebel kings” is a pointed reference to the Zagwé who were considered as usurpers by the Solomonids. In short, *täzkar* was an instrument of political power.

Other purposes of *täzkar* undoubtedly existed as well. The records of the church of St. Stephen at Däbrä-Häyq shed light on the nature of property conveyance for the support of memorial feasts. Däbrä-Häyq was founded in the 1248 by the monk Iyäsus-Mo’a and it grew quickly to become very influential in the course of the thirteenth century. Its abbots were closely linked to the royal court from the very beginning and received generous grants of land from many kings. The immediate context for the early grants of land for the support of *täzkar* at Däbrä-Häyq was provided by a pact entered into between the abbot Iyäsus-Mo’a and King Yikuno-Amlak (r.1270-1285). It stated that the provision for *täzkar* feasts was a religious duty which every monk joining the monastery should carry out and discharge.³⁴ In addition to the spiritual benefits received after death, *täzkar* land was granted and received as an assurance for the wherewithal to live off of, especially to secure one’s protection in old age. The land grant made in 1431/2 to a priest, Téwodros, by the abbot *Aqqabé-Sä’at* Binyam bears this out. Acting on the unanimous consent of the community of Däbrä-Häyq, Binyam gave Téwodros land in six named localities “for his maintenance in his life time, for the celebration of his *täzkar* after his death. And (his heirs) shall give nine Kora (of wine) and thirty (pieces) of bread on the day of his *täzkar*. His sons Länginos and Luqiyos, and after them their descendants, shall make (the

³³ Wängél, MS., Abunä Gärima, picture #026

³⁴ M. Kropp, “Land for Service or *rim* ante litteram. The Case of Church Land at Däbrä Estifanos (Häyq),” *Anthropological and Historical Documents on “rim” in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Alessandro Bausi et al (Torino: L’Harmattan Italia, 2001), pp.119-120.

preparations for) his *täzkar*.”³⁵ The grant was made in permanent inheritance from the endowment of the monastery as a reward for the service of Téwodros as a priest. After the death of Téwodros, the land passed to his heirs, Länginos and Luqiyos. Länginos and Luqiyos did not owe special obligation towards the church save the preparation of commemorative feasts.

Rules and regulations governing property transaction in support of *täzkar* evolved over time into conditions identical to *rim* holding in the Gondärine period. Land given for the support of *täzkar* was heritable, individually held and fought over. As we will in subsequent chapters, disputes over *rim* property among individuals abound in later centuries. Although very rare and the data they contain is incomplete, the existence of records on dispute over *täzkar* land excites interest. This kind of record enables us to gain insights into the system of landholding that existed in medieval Ethiopia which may have inspired the development of *rim* property. One such argument over the control of church land is reported in the records of Däbrä-Häyq.

I, *Aqqabé-Sä'at* Täklä-Iyäsus-Mo'a (c.1486), have confirmed and put on record the land (set aside for the preparation of the annual feasts on the day of our Lord's Circumcision) which is found at Zegita and which my fathers *Aqqabé-Sä'atats* Zä-Iyäsus (1292-1297) and Zä-Krestos (1297-1299) had previously granted to their daughter, so that the land could pass to her children and to her grandchildren.³⁶ (The land) had been taken by another (person), and my father Binyam (?-1431-?) restituted it. And after him, it was taken again. The descendants of the daughter of Zä-Iyäsus told me saying, 'we have been deprived of our rights'. I investigated (the matter) and knew that they were wronged and I restored their land to Bā'Häylä-Mäsqäl, Täklä-Gäbrél, and Matyas so that they may (prepare feasts) on the day of the Circumcision of Our Lord already established before.³⁷

The case involved the descendants of Zä-Iyäsus, who was abbot of the monastery in the late thirteenth century and the nephew of Däbrä-Häyq's founder, Iyäsus-Moa.³⁸ Zä-Iyäsus gave the

³⁵ Quoted in Kropp, "Land for Service or *rim* ante litteram," p. 121. See also Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) 1832, f343rb. The terms of the grant strike a balance between the mundane demands of Téwodros during his lifetime and spiritual needs after death.

³⁶ The first reference of daughter was used in the spiritual sense (Taddesse, "Abbot of Däbrä-Häyq," p. 111 note no. 136).

³⁷ Taddesse, "The Abbots of Däbrä-Häyq," p.111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.91.

land from the endowment of the monastery for his daughter. Written in the transaction document was a statement noting that the grant was made for the maintenance of the memorial of the circumcision of our Lord. The daughter of Zä-Iyäsus and later her descendants held the land exclusively and her obligation was providing food and drink for the feast commemorating the circumcision of Christ. Nearly a century and half after the original grant this same land was challenged by rivals and the Abbot of the monastery, Binyam, intervened to restore it to the descendants of Zä-Iyäsus. The identity and argument of the second party is not mentioned, but it seems that the dispute affected several generations. Binyam's ruling did not resolve the conflicting claims permanently and the case resurfaced again *circa* 1480s during the abbacy of Täklä-Iyäsus-Mo'a. The abbot again evaluated the case and decided in favor of the descendants of Zä-Iyäsus: Bä'Häylä Mäsqäl, Täklä-Gabrel, and Matyas.

The record is obviously incomplete and permits only a brief glimpse into a dispute. Yet it can support a number of observations. The rights entailed in land given for the support of *täzkar* are explicit and are unlimited in terms of use and inheritance. It involved the land in the first instance. Since most of the gifts for *täzkar* were considered irrevocable, it seems that the intention of the grants was to be permanent. The land assigned to support the *täzkar* of Christ's circumcision remained in the hands of Zä-Iyäsus's descendants for two centuries. In short, the function of *täzkar* increasingly became an excuse for raising funds for church communities as distinct from the encouragement of intercession and to support the service of individuals.

The terms of the grants of *täzkar* land in Däbrä-Häyq also precluded interference from any party in the rights of holders. Even abbots, who could make a valid transfer of land from the endowment of the monastery into the control of individuals, were excluded from interfering in the rights of grantees. This is made explicit in a charter issued by the abbot *Aqabé'sä'at* Bäkimos

in 1339/40 to a cleric Krestos-Mekhenä. The charter's anathema clause is directed towards *gäbbar* (peasants) under the jurisdiction of the monastery and monastic officials, "whoever usurped or violates the land be it the *aqabé'sä'at*, or the *aqansan*, or the governor of the land, or the *gäbbar*, let him be cursed."³⁹ Throughout the Gondärine era, peasants, *rim* holders and church officials were prevented from interfering in each other's property.

The handful of cases cited above show that the medieval period foreshadowed the terms under which later Gondärine *rim* was held. *Rim* and *täzkar* land had essentially similar social and economic functions. Concern over the fate of one's soul after death lies behind gifts of land for *täzkar*, but it was also an important means of material support for many individuals. Like *rim* land, the right of individuals over *täzkar* land was unlimited as far as use and inheritance were concerned. Like *rim*, however, the church exercised superior rights over the *täzkar* lands granted to individuals. The outward purpose of *rim* holding by individuals, especially by the ruling class, was to support the church and enable it to perform its spiritual function. The *rim* holding laity relied on proxies to discharge their obligation just like the holders of *täzkar* land did for those who said the commemorative prayers and rituals. All this highlights the social and economic underpinnings of gifts and grants of land for *täzkar*.

Charters recording *gult* grants to religious institutions show nothing distinctive about the grants of land for purposes other than *täzkar*. Grantors viewed the transfer as for the salvation of their souls. Nevertheless, like grants for *täzkar*, the patent religious purpose of grants for other purposes did not dispose of their secular underpinnings. Kings in particular sought to derive from their grants the support of the church to consolidate the royal power itself. The communities of influential monasteries, such as Däbrä-Libanos of Shemäzana, in particular caught the attention of rulers for this reason. Däbrä-Libanos had apparently a strong connection with the local ruling

³⁹ Wängél, MS., Häyq, f.5b.

elites and the powerful members of the Zagwé dynasty (c.1150-1270) as well as the “Sälomonic” kings who replaced them in 1270. The early Solomonids, including the founder of the dynasty, Yikuno-Amlak, granted a series of charters for Däbrä-Libanos to legitimize their rule and to completely supersede any possible influence the former dynasty left behind them.⁴⁰

The Rights and Obligation of Medieval Ethiopian *Gult*

Medieval charters on the whole provide scant information on the legal rights transferred to institutions and individuals in the form of *gult*. Modern commentaries suggest that medieval charters conveyed primarily rights of tribute collection and local government over dependent peasants to institutions.⁴¹ However, church archives reveal that tribute and administrative rights was not the only right implied in *gult*, but that it also entailed direct control over land.

Gaining an understanding of these rights requires reliance on incidental insights and inferential evidence supplied by the records of much later disputes. Archives of twentieth century courts enable one to pierce the mysteries shrouding medieval charters and remedy their prevalent silence on many vital issues of property. Disputes occasionally provoked lively arguments over the terms of original grants. They erupted throughout northern Ethiopia during the twentieth century when institutions were called on to defend their property. The dispute involving the monastery of Däbrä-Bänkwäl and its secular neighbors illustrates this fact.

Däbrä-Bänkwäl was founded in the thirteenth century by a monk Mädhäninä-Egzi. Its estates came originally from the grant made by King Säyfä-Ar’ad (r.1344-1371) to Däbrä-Bänkwäl. The meaning of Säyfä-Ar’ad’s charter was at the heart of the court dispute between the

⁴⁰ Conti Rossini, ‘L’Evangelo d’oro di Däbrä Libanos’, pp. 186-187, 189-190, 194, 202-209, 212, 216-217.

⁴¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.37-42 and Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp.98-103. What historians have said of charters can be regarded as largely speculative. Tribute is regarded as the essence of medieval *gult*. However, some, perhaps many, grants seem to have indeed established the rights of landownership, although it is hidden from view because the legal instruments used to express such rights are not explicit. Or the most we can say is that there is no conclusive proof either way.

monastery and its rivals. Churches everywhere kept records of their grants within their respective premises in addition to copies deposited in more famous and prestigious sanctuaries. The charter of Säyfä-Ar'ad to Däbrä-Bänkwäl presented by the monks as their main evidence to refute the claims of secular officials was found in the archives of Aksum, the most important repository of charters in Tegray. This charter was translated and published by Huntingford in *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*. I have quoted its relevant part to contextualize the discussion that follows. I have changed Huntingford's transcription and the translation of some terms used in the charter:⁴²

I, King Säyfä-Ar'ad, have granted by charter (to the convent of) my father Mädhäninä-Egzi: Eddä Araga (with a revenue of) 44 *gänta*; and the land of Bärkwa; and *Mädäbay*; Ankaré; Degana (with a revenue of) 44 *gänta*; of the land of Gualgualo: Eddä Fälasi with all its territory.[...] I have given all this, at the time when I went down into the land of Tegré, that it may be for me conductor to the kingdom of heaven. If anyone violates or infringes (this), may he be cursed by the power of Peter and Paul; and by the mouth of the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The estates of Däbrä-Bänkwäl were found scattered across the various districts of Tegray such as Sheré and Tämbén. The land under dispute in the twentieth century was Bärkwa, located close to the monastery itself. Although the secular officials had long been exercising authority in the lands of the monastery, it was only in 1916 that the monks of Däbrä-Bänkwäl decided to act seeking to end the activities of their rivals from Bärkwa by lodging their complaint with *Ras* Seyum Mängäsha, the hereditary ruler of Tegray. Seyum made known his willingness to bar the activities of secular officials, but advised the monks to appeal to the central government directly. Many letters were exchanged over the issue of Bärkwa between the monks and *Ras* Täfäri Mäkonän (later Emperor Häylä-Sellasé, 1930-1974), Seyum and the local secular officials.⁴³

The case was closed and reopened several times between 1916 and 1943, but the grounds

⁴² Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, pp.32-33.

⁴³ Däbrä-Bänkwäl, pictures # 171-178 and 191-197.

of the rival claims remained the same. The argument of the secular officials was stated by *Qaññazmach* Gäbrä-Krestos during the 1943 revived case. He made a number of claims, among them that the function of local administration was to be shared between the “*sälatin* and *mäsqäl*”, respectively, spear and cross, a customary phrase for the joint administration of monastic land by secular and ecclesiastical officials. Gäbrä-Krestos argued that according to the formula of *mäsqäl* and *sälatin*, he had rights of government, including the rights of holding courts and trying cases in the land of the monastery. He added that Bärkwa had been equally split into twenty-two localities held as *rest* lands and another twenty-two local lands held as *gult*, each administered by its own *cheqa-shum* or local level official. The rent from the lands of the twenty-two localities held as *rest* went to the hereditary owners (seculars), while the income from the *gult* land went to the monastery. In his understanding this arrangement had been in force since the time of *Ras* Mika’el Sehul, the governor of Tegray (c.1730s-1770s).⁴⁴

The interpretation of Gäbrä-Krestos and his predecessors was vigorously rejected by the monks of Däbrä-Bänkwäl, who persisted in their struggle against their rivals. In 1943 the monks, represented by the head of the monastery, Täklä-Gärima, disputed the rivals’ claims citing king Säyfa-Ar’ad charter to the monastery. The deed, they claimed, entitled them to direct property rights together with the rights of administration over Bärkwa, an argument already made by Täklä-Gärima’s predecessors at an earlier stage of the case.

Ras Seyum’s January 1930 letter addressed to *Qaññazmach* Dästa and *Qaññazmach* Lämläm, rivals to the monks, sought to ascertain the monks’ legal rights of over Bärkwa. The letter asserts that no one could have a valid and recognizable claim of inheritance rights within the *gult* of Däbrä-Bänkwäl. The monks had total rights to grant or evict tenants and to enjoy

⁴⁴ Gäbrä-Krestos Lāwetu to *Dājazmach* Gäbrä-Hiwät Mäshäsha, Däbrä-Bänkwäl, picture #193. The letter does not bear any date but appears to have been written in 1935 (Eth.Cal.).

complete rights of government over Bärkwa. The resident tenants had the obligation of paying rent as a condition of their holding as well as the payment of *amisho* or one-fifth of the harvest.⁴⁵

The commission set up to investigate the case and review the evidence brought forth by both sides confirmed in June of 1943 that the claims of the secular authorities over Bärkwa were an innovation dating to the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889). They concluded that Säyfa-Ar'ad's charter gave the monks property rights in Bärkwa completely immune from the intervention of secular officials. The government recognized the power of the monastery to do what it pleased with its *restä-gult*, including the legal rights to rent out the land to tenants of its liking and evict them at will.⁴⁶ The secular officials did not produce any compelling proof, documentary or otherwise, to back their claim and they were barred from intervening in the land of the monastery. The court cases presented above and those not discussed here establish that in the twentieth century, it was commonly believed that the medieval charters granted full property rights over the granted lands and that we need to take this belief seriously. If the monks' well documented claim reflects the truth, both landlord and governor present themselves as equally useful descriptors of the medieval *gult* holders.

On the surface all assertions of *gult* as essentially the power to dominate and collect tribute is well-grounded and supportive evidence can be gleaned from charters. Often the land transferred to the control of churches had cultivators already settled on it, as the result of which *gult* rights usually involved government powers. Churches performed governmental functions, including and up to the rights of presiding over courts and trying all manner of cases be they civil or criminal, keeping law and order and taking disciplinary measures against crime. These rights were held free from the intervention of secular powers. A typical charter by Lebnä-Dengel

⁴⁵ *Ras Seyoum Qäññazmach* Dästa and *Qaññazmach* Lämläm, dated 5/7/ 1922 (Ethio. Cal), Däbrä-Bäñkwäl, picture #183.

⁴⁶ Däbrä-Bäñkwäl, picture # 191-200.

(r.1508-1540) to the church of Bétä Sebhu Amlak in Tegray granted sweeping immunities from the intervention of the following secular officials “...[i]n Embā Śanayt, the *hedug* and those under him; the *seyum* of Salsit; the *shum* of Agāmē and those under him; the *shum* of Endarta and those under him; and the *seyum* of Sahrt and those under him: these we have forbidden to enter.”⁴⁷ By the early decades of the sixteenth century many monasteries and churches throughout Ethiopia appear to have enjoyed similar immunities from government officials.

An immunity clause was not mere words. It would seem, however, that the specific contents of the immunity clause were diverse. In some instance, institutions were not granted rights to play the role of government over their property and people on it, while they were exempted from the taxes and tributes and the physical entry of secular officials. Two interrelated charters issued by Lebnä-Dengel restoring the rights of immunities of seven monasteries, all in Tegray, spell out what specific rights immunities gave to monasteries. Judicial officials are singled out in Lebnä-Dengel’s charters, to underscore the point that the immunity granted to these monasteries is directed against officials who might enter the land of the church to investigate crime: “and for all the convents the names of which are written, and those of which the names are not written, (we have forbidden) the entry of the *Tegrē makuannen* and his subordinates the *seyumān*, for whatever reason.” In the same passage, an exception is noted: “Except only in the case of the death of a man at the hands of men, they may make enquiry, remaining on the boundary of their own district, but not entering (the land of the convents) even in the case of those who die by water, by (falling from a) precipice, by the animals of the desert, by lightning, or from famine.”⁴⁸ What does it mean that the officials could make their investigation from the boundary of the church’s property? Lebnä-Dengel granted to those

⁴⁷ Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, p.52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.52.

receiving property an unbridled right, putting them beyond the control of prominent lords and their local agents. Yet the banning of government officials from exercising authority over church property did not exclude the rights of secular officials to hold courts to try criminal offences involving people on the lands of these institutions. The conclusion must therefore be that monasteries were not granted full legal and juridical privileges to hold court themselves.

“Violation” of the restraint clause is a common theme in charters. Practically no institution was spared from this problem of secular “encroachment”. The allegation of “violation” of charters which is commonly reported in sources cannot be taken at face value. While the original grants might not necessarily completely exclude judicial officials from exercising some disciplinary measures against institutional subjects, immunity from the physical entry of secular officials in their property was held in high esteem by ecclesiastical communities.⁴⁹ Perhaps bringing the offenders on church land to justice often required the physical entry of secular officials leading to the resentment and accusation by churches that their rights have been violated.

In some royal grants to individuals, reference to conditions of holding and sometimes the motive of the grant are nowhere to be found. A case in point is a sixteenth century land grant from Gojjam issued by King Lebnä-Dengel (r.1508-1540). The grant was issued at the monastery of Dima Giyorgis in Gojjam, where the king was spending “the Easter Holy day”, but the charter is preserved in the Gospel book of the church of Kebran Gäbrél in Lake Tana. Three of the four beneficiaries were the king’s wife Queen Säblä-Wängél (d.1568) and their daughter, Wälätä-Qedusan, and the king’s sister Amätä-Giyorgis. The identity of the fourth beneficiary, Särsä-Maryam, is unknown. The lands transferred into the control of the grantees are Abibar, Bäwetehi, Enarji and Enawga. The last two can still be identified; currently, Enarji-Enawga is a

⁴⁹ Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, pp. 49-53.

district in east Gojjam, whence, according to local traditions, Säblä-Wängél hailed. Säblä-Wängél was granted Bewetehi “so that it may for her resting place.” Abibar, Enarji and Enawga were split into two equal parts with one half going to “the two *wäyzazer or ladies*”, Amätä-Giyorgis and Wälätä-Qedusan, and the other half going to Särsä-Maryam “in permanent inheritance.”⁵⁰ The document used the term *gult* to describe the resulting transaction. What rights the three ladies and Särsä-Maryam had in their holdings is ambiguous.

Säblä-Wängél had a strong connection to the area. It was in this same area that she founded the church of Mängestä-Sämeyat later in the 1550s (the church is shown on map 3). Tradition attests that the districts of Enämay, Enarji and Enawga were owned by the female descendants of kings. Originally eleven such ladies are said to have been settled in these districts. A partial confirmation of these traditions comes from a sixteenth century document in the archives of the monastery of Zur-Amba in which Segé-Dengel (alias Segé-Roman), the daughter of King Na’od (r.1496-1508)⁵¹, bequeathed forty of her *gult* lands to King Särsä-Dengel (r. 1563-1596). Some of the lands appearing in the document can be identified with place names in Enämay and Enarji-Enawga. If this is correct, Segé-Roman was perhaps one of the eleven ladies who shared the lands in the above localities in Gojjam.⁵² According to traditions, the lands often called *yäwäyzäro agär*, meaning “land of ladies”, found in various districts of Gojjam, including Damot, were free from obligations.⁵³ This seems to be confirmed by the charter under consideration. Absent in the charter of Lebnä-Dengel is any mention of the obligation and service the four beneficiaries owed to the king. From the lack of any suggestion that Säblä-

⁵⁰ Wängél, Kebran Gäbrél, picture # 464. This document is listed in an appendix, table 2, in Crummey’s *Land and Society*. Säblä-Wängél is not listed as one of the recipients of this grant by Crummey. The chronicler of Särsä-Dengel referred to Amätä-Giyorgis as the sister of the kings’ father, Minas. This is a reference, no doubt, to Amätä-Giyorgis. For this see René Basset, *Études sur l’histoire d’Éthiopie* (Paris, 1882), p. 82.

⁵¹ Basset, *Études sur l’histoire d’Éthiopie*, p.23.

⁵² Senkesar, Zur-Amba Arägawi, picture # 653.

⁵³ For the lands held by the female royalty in another district of East Gojjam, Damot, see Fantahun Birhane, “Gojjam 1800-1855” (BA thesis, Department of History, BA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1973), p. 25.

Wängél and other beneficiaries owed service to Lebnä-Dengel, it seems that they were given their *gult* land in freehold tenure. Thus, *gult* rights might not necessarily always involve services and obligations.

In other cases also, different from the motivation of salvation, royal grants to individuals were initiated on the basis of affection and as a reward for services and fidelity with no conditions attached to the grant. In 1531 Lebnä-Dengel made one such unconditional grant of land for one Saf-Sägäd out of affection for the latter's father, *Ras Wäsän-Sägäd*. The king reasoned that he gave the land of Zebgaz "as hereditary property to Saf-Sägäd, and memorial of his father Wäsän-Sägäd because of his death, like Téwodros and Gälawdéwos, at the hands of Graññ), the [spoiler] of the faith."⁵⁴ The king granted Saf-Sägäd as a reward for services previously made to him by Wäsän-Sägäd who was killed while loyally serving Lebnä-Dengel in 1530s by the Muslim army under Ahmed Graññ (r.1529-1543). In the century which followed the Muslim occupation in 1529, Ethiopian society underwent significant changes.⁵⁵

Gult in a Period of Transformation: 1540-1630s

The reign of Lebnä-Dengel marked the end of an era. Since the advent of the Sälomonic dynasty in 1270, the Ethiopian region had undergone a remarkable political and cultural transformation. The period was marked by internal regeneration and the "flowering of Christian high culture." The fine manuscripts and churches that survive from this period indicate the energy and creativity of the early Sälomonic era. The army led by tough warrior kings was an effective fighting machine and expanded the boundary of the kingdom. It protected the territorial gains made in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and guaranteed internal peace until 1529,

⁵⁴ Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, p.43. Lebnä-Dengel made the grant in response to past service rather than in consideration of the future performance of services.

⁵⁵ Chihab ed-Din Ahmed Ben 'Abd el-Qader, *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Abyssinie*.

when it received its crushing defeat from the army of Ahmad Graññ at the Battle of Shembra Kuré a little south of modern Addis Ababa.

Unlike the traditional border incursions by Muslims, Graññ (1529-1543) viewed his campaign as a jihad (holy war) and sought to supplant Christianity. Contemporary sources reveal swift decimation of churches and mass conversions of the Christian population into Islam at sword's point during Graññ's occupation of the highlands of Ethiopia. Graññ's defeat in 1543 by King Gälawdéwos (r.1540-1559), son and successor of Lebnä-Dengel, with the assistance of a tiny contingent of Portuguese soldiers, soon rendered these massive conversions short-lived. Large numbers of Ethiopians forced to accept Islam reclaimed their Christian faith. Graññ died at the battle and his followers fled to their homeland of Adal. However, the destruction wrought by Graññ was enormous. Taddesse Tamrat summarizes it as follows:

The Muslim occupation of the Christian highlands under Ahmad Gragh lasted for little more than ten years... But the amount of destruction brought about in these years can only be estimated in terms of centuries. Ahmad Gragh and his followers were dazzled at the extent of the riches of the Church, and at the splendor of Ethiopian Christian culture at that time. And, as the most important repository of the cultural heritage of Christian Ethiopia, the church was a special target of the destructive furies of the Imam (Ahmad).⁵⁶

One of the tragic consequences of the Muslim occupation was the destruction of manuscripts and church objects with the burning of churches and monasteries. Only some manuscripts survived in disappointingly few numbers from this fraught period in Ethiopian history.

Graññ established his camp near Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia from where he ruled his empire. This left the southern boundaries of the former Ethiopian kingdom unattended to, allowing the largely pastoralist Oromo a free rein. He was a bold and promising young monarch. Further, after the defeat of Graññ, King Gälawdéwos's security priority was defending the kingdom from attack by the Muslim rulers of Adal. He was a bold and promising young

⁵⁶ Taddesse, *Church and State*, p.301.

monarch, but ignored the more serious threats to the kingdom from the Oromo. His sudden death in 1559 while trying to repulse a Muslim invasion left the kingdom in dire straits. Gälawdéwos's successors, Minas (r.1559-1563) and Särsä-Dengel (r.1563-1596) lacked his capabilities and plunged the kingdom into further chaos. The Oromo, who followed on the heels of the Muslim forces, attacked the kingdom from southern directions in the 1540s. Their attack was sudden in its onset and lasted longer than the Muslim occupation. Writing the history of the Oromo migrations in the 1590s, the monk Abba Bahrey noted that the Oromo were neither Christian nor Muslims and lacked organized government of state structure. The male members of the Oromo society were organized by a generation and age-set system called the *gada*. Each generation and age-set succeeds each other every eight year. Each generation and age-set had the obligation to attack new lands untouched by the preceding set of Oromo war leaders. No area of Ethiopia was spared their attack by the end of the sixteenth century, the apex of their migratory drive deep into Ethiopian territories.⁵⁷ The land tenure system of the Ethiopian kingdom is likely to have undergone change under the impact of the sixteenth century migratory waves.

For all of the destruction and disorders of the sixteenth century, new churches were built and old institutions continued to flourish during this period. Upon defeating Ahmad Graññ in 1543, Gälawdéwos resumed the task of restoring the churches burned in the previous fifteen years and reconstructing the kingdom. Crummey has discussed the foundations and grants of the sixteenth century and they need not be repeated here. Instead, I will briefly recapitulate the church records of Mayfädä-Maryam in Gojjam and those of Mahdärä-Maryam in Bägemed. Mayfädä-Maryam was founded in 1578 by Queen Selus-Häyla, widow of King Minas (1559-1563) and mother of Särsä-Dengel (r.1563-1597), while Särsä-Dengel's wife, Maryam-Sena, founded and patronized Mahdärä-Maryam. The records of the above churches contain examples

⁵⁷ Bahrey, "History of the Galla", pp. 111-129; and Muhammad, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 1990.

of practices which fully developed in later centuries. The foundation charter of Mayfädä-Maryam represents the only source known to me which dates *rim* grants to the sixteenth century. The charter is incorporated into a narrative account written in the early eighteenth century. A quote from this document is as follows:

ሰርፀ ድንግል ነግሠ ሷ ወ፬ አመተ። በ፲ ወ፬ አመተ መንግሥቱ ሕንፃሐ ለማሕፈድ ማርያም ውእምዝ በ፳ አመት በእደ እሙ ንግሥት ሥሉስ ሃይላ ወስመ መንግስታሂ ኢድማስ ሞገሳ በዘመነ እሉ መዋዕል ሰርአት ደባትሪሀ ፹ ወ፩ በኑልቁ መጻሕፍት እምጥምጥ እስከ ጽብጻብ በማእከለ እሉ ማያት ጨሞጋ ወሽገዛ በዘመነ አሜሃ ሊቀ ጳጳስ ግብፅ ማቴዎስ ወኤጲስ ቆጶስ ኢትዮጵያ አቡነ ጴጥሮስ ወእጨጌኒ አባ ዮሐንስ ወሊቀ ሊቃውንት አባ ሐብተ ድንግል ወሊቀ ገበዝ አባ ዘቁርባን[...] ፳ ወ፮ አብያን ወህፋያን መነኮሳት ለእሙንቱ መነኮሳት ውሂቦሙ እሪመ ወአሰርጊሙ ግምጃ ወአብቅልተ ወግብርተ ወአእማተ ምለ ኩሉ ንብረተ ዝንቱ አለም አንበርዖሙ በክብር ወበጥኢና ፵ አመተ።⁵⁸

Särsä-Dengel reigned for 34 years. Mayfädä-Maryam was built in his 14th year of power by the hands of his mother, whose throne name is Admas Mogäsa in the 20th year [of her power]. In this year she established 81 *däbtära* corresponding to the number of books of the [scripture] over the land extending from Metemet to S’äbes’äb enclosed between the rivers Chämoga and Šegäza during the tenure of office of archbishop Matéwos the Egyptian, episcopos *Abunä Péteros* the Ethiopian, *Echägé Abba Yohannis*, the *Liqäliqawent Abba Häbtä-Dengel*, [and] *Liqägäbüz Abba Zäqurban* [...]. For the 25 senior and chosen monks she gave them *rim*, carpets, mules, and all her worldly possessions accumulated over 40 years.

The foundation was inaugurated with 81 staff. The river Chämoga mentioned in the charter is one of the tributaries of the Blue Nile, but I have not been able to identify the other rivers. There is nothing in the formulation that suggests a later fabrication in the charter. It strictly follows the standard formulations typical of charters drawn up during this period and stands the tests of credibility in terms of chronology, witness list and in the language used in the text. Thus I view the text as a copy of the 1578 charter. The only recognizable anachronism is *rim*. According to the evidence in the charter, Selus-Häyla bequeathed *rim* land to some of the *däbtära*, the meaning of which will be given further down. While all indications seem that the source under analysis is genuine, there is no additional evidence to support the belief that *rim* dates to the

⁵⁸ The quotation is drawn from a brief history of Mayfädä-Maryam and a summary of the *gult* grants by Selus-Häyla contained in Gebrä-Hemam, MS., Mayfädä-Maryam, picture #108.

sixteenth century. However, the terms of the sixteenth century grant were very much like those of the Gondärine period. Additional information about the original endowment of Mayfädä-Maryam comes from a mid-nineteenth century document. The document in question is not strictly a charter, but an inventory of the lands of the church and their respective holders, and it is permeated with historical sense. It not only refers to the earlier grants made to the church by Selus-Häyla in the sixteenth century, but also names the 81 individuals the founder gathered around her church and their specific clerical responsibilities. The list of the grantees is organized according to the localities where she granted them “*rim*” lands in 1578.⁵⁹

Two of this grant’s foci should be singled out for special emphasis. One is the fact that the community of Mayfädä-Maryam held land from the endowment of the church individually, a normative custom in the Gondärine era. The second point as stressed in the Mayfädä-Maryam grants is the entrance of the laity into the service of churches. The names of laymen and women appear in the list of the 81 *däbtära*. For example, two women, Mélat and Amätä-Mika’el, are among the first *däbtära* members of the community. They also are among the names of the clergy of the church of Mahdärä-Maryam, built at about the same time as Mayfädä-Maryam by Queen Maryam Sena. Up to that time there is little evidence to suggest that the laity, including women, held church land and discharged their obligation through a proxy.⁶⁰

During the Gondärine period the clerical personnel under churches and holding *rim* lands are generally referred to as *däbtära*, an indefinite term which, in fact, included the religious and the laity, both men and women. It is encountered in the earliest medieval charter sources from the time, but it gained a new social significance in later era. The Mahdärä-Maryam document simply used the term deacons and priests to describe the staff, including women, with whom the

⁵⁹ Gebrä-Hemam Mayfädä-Maryam, picture #097.

⁶⁰ Illinois/IES, 88.XIII.18, Mahdärä-Maryam, *Orit*.

foundation was inaugurated, while the Gondärine charters and registers would have referred to them as *däbtära*. During the peak of the development of Gondärine society the role of the laity would become so entrenched that even the kings and queens would enter the nominal service of ecclesiastical institutions as deacons, priests, etc., through a proxy.

In sum, it goes without saying that the Ethiopian ruling classes were deeply involved in land matters. The land tenure system prevalent prior to the Gondärine period contributed to the development of *rim* property. Already by the thirteenth century, individuals were accustomed to freely transfer or alienate property to God and saints, institutions and friends, relatives and ancestors for a variety of purposes. The deep involvement of the ruling class in land matters meant that they were also interested in agricultural production. Hence *zégenät* also became vital as a means of labor exploitation for the ruling class in eighteenth century. The fact is reflected in the growing frequency of the mention of *zéga* throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet the ideas and norms of the social institution of *zégenät* does seem to have evolved and took shape prior to the eighteenth century.

Evolving Zégenät Prior to the Eighteenth Century

The earliest attested appearance of the word “*zéga*” is part of a place name, Mederä Zéga (lit. “land of *zéga*”) in Shäwa in a chronicle source dating back to the 14th century. One of the several important provinces in the time of Amdä-Seyon (r.1314-1344), it is referred to by the king’s royal chronicler.⁶¹ It is also mentioned in the charter of King Dawit (1382-1411), issued to one Wälätä-Hesan, granting her *gult* located in “ጠገታ ራሪ ዜጋ (Mederä Zéga).”⁶² Mederä Zéga in all likelihood derived its name from *zéga* residents, which suggests the existence of *zégenät* in

⁶¹ See Paolo Marrassini, ed., *Lo Scettro e la Croce: La campagna di Amda Seyon I contro l’Ifat (1332)* translated with introduction by Paolo Marrassini (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orinetale, 1993), pp.52, 56 and 66. See Conti Rossini, ed., *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad) accredit Historia Gentis Galla, curante I. Guidi*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, Series Altera, vol 3 (Paris, 1907), pp. 30 and 83-84.

⁶² Wängél, MS., 33cmX23cm, Endäfäré Maryam, EMMML, 3879.

Shäwa over a long period of time. The first explicit use of *zégoch* to refer to people is in the chronicle of King Särsä-Dengel during the second half of the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, the context is obscure.⁶³

Our next source on the *zégoch* is the chronicle of King Susenyos (r.1607-1632). It appears in connection with the famous decree of Zä-Dengel (r.1603-1604), “*säbe hära wämeder gäbbar*” which Crummey translates as “man is free, land is tributary,” and with the rebellion of military regiments against the king.⁶⁴ A contemporary document describes the *zégoch* as having been intimately involved in these dramatic events,

“The soldiers called *Querban* and *Mizan* and *Ras Zä-Sellasé* revolted against Emperor Zä-Dengel because of the decree he issued that says “Man is free, land is tributary.” Their [the soldiers’] *zégoch* rebelled [in consequence]. [Therefore] they (the soldiers) killed him (Zä-Dengel) with a sword at Barcha, in the middle of Dämbeya.”⁶⁵

Zä-Dengel was dealing with a particular crisis in the country. The sixteenth century had seen large changes in Ethiopian society directly arising out of the wars of Ahmed Graññ and Oromo migrations. The Oromo had permanently occupied most of the territories of the kingdom, thereby constraining the economic and military resources of the monarchs. By the end of the sixteenth century, the medieval defense system of stationing military colonies called *chäwa* at frontier posts had completely collapsed, causing monarchs to station soldiers within a more limited geographical area still subject to the jurisdiction of the central government. Large numbers of elite military regiments were found in Dämbeya and held *gult* land granted to them by king

⁶³ Conti Rossini, ed., *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad)*, pp.30 and 83-84.

⁶⁴ F.M. Esteves Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos, Rei de Ethiopia*, tom 1(Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional), pp.52-53. Zä-Dengel’s decree has excited so much historical interest. The decree is discussed in the following works: Jules Perruchon, “Notes pour l’Histoire d’Ethiopie: Regnes de Yaqob et Za-Dengel (1597-1607)”, *Revue Semitique* 4 (1896): pp.359 and 361; Conti Rossini, “Due Squarci Inediti di Cronica Etopica”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, series 5, 2 (1893), pp.807 and 811; I.Guidi, “Di Due Frammenti Relativi alla Storia di Abissinia”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, series 6, 2 (1926), 357-421; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.63-66.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.28. The original text is found in Jules Perruchon, “Notes pour l’Histoire d’Éthiopie,” pp. 359-360.

Särsä-Dengel during late sixteenth century. These *gult* grants transformed cultivators into permanently dependent peasants whom the chronicle seems to refer as *zégoch*. Thus, the relation to which members of the military class settled in Dämbeya stood to the *zégoch* was that of landlords and as economic and social masters of the disenfranchised *zégoch*.⁶⁶

What then is the implication of the slogan “man is free, land is tributary” for the word *zéga*? To what kind of people in early seventeenth century society was it normally applied? The social implication of the decree had not been given sufficient attention until Crummey’s recent thorough discussion of the subject. According to Crummey, the decree attempted to resolve fundamental and longstanding social problems of peasant servitude in the kingdom, which had aggravated its military weakness in the face of the Oromo onslaught. “In his edict,” writes Crummey, “Zä-Dengel liberated famers from social and, specifically, from labor obligations to their masters, and gave them the same social status as their masters.”⁶⁷ Zä-Dengel’s priority was to settle the military troubles of the kingdom by raising more soldiers from among peasants to serve in his army. As such, the decree was directed against the military landlords since the land grants of Särsä-Dengel to soldiers in Dämbeya had provided them with the means to control the peasants. The slogan “man is free, land is tributary” was, therefore, primarily concerned with freeing the *zégoch* working on the land of the military from the fetters of their servitude in order to make them eligible for service in the king’s army. Conversely, the decree threatened to deprive the military of their privileged status. In the end, however, Zä-Dengel’s decree did not achieve its purpose, thanks to his death shortly after its proclamation at Barcha in Dämbeya at the hands of the military on October 14, 200.⁶⁸ The frustration of the decree meant that the legacy of peasant servitude continued and passed on to the Gondärine period. There is no doubt

⁶⁶ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.63-66.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* ; Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, p.53; Perruchon, “Notes pour l’Histoire d’Ethiopie”, p.359 and 362.

that the social and legal function of the term *zéga* at this time was serf. The *zégoch* in the early seventeenth century presumably had broadly similar social positions to the eighteenth and nineteenth century bearers of the term, although the power of lords over their dependents had increased in later periods.

The chronicle sources on *zéga* for the seventeenth century are very sparse. Our next source from the seventeenth century concerning the *zégoch* involves the monastery of Qirqos in Lake Tana. Like the secular elites, ecclesiastical landlords relied on the labor of *zégoch* to work their land and maintain their lifestyle. The social term *zéga* appears in a document which is, in part, the history of Tana Qirqos and, in part, a record of the property of the monastery and the obligations of its dependent peasants around the Lake Tana area. Most of the property of the monastery originated from the grants of Kings Na'od (r.11494-1508) and Särsä-Dengel (r.1563-1596).⁶⁹ Besides the payments of tribute, tax and rent, peasants were also liable to perform specific tasks, including erecting and repairing buildings. According to the Qirqos document, the building of the house of the *mahbär-bét* is the responsibility of the “*tentä-mahbär-bét zégoch*” which means the “former *zégoch* of the *mahbär-bét*.”⁷⁰ The author of the document had undoubtedly the descendants of the old *zégoch*, who were required to do works for their clerical lords, in the foreground of his mind. Yet there is little to make out from this laconic document.

This scant evidence prevents one from ascertaining a full account of the process that led to *zéga*'s emergence as a significant social element during the Gondärine period. Doctrinal texts and other materials are of value in uncovering the obscure development of *zégenät*. The term *zéga* is used extensively in religious controversy involving two sects within the Ethiopian church during the Gondärine period. Let us turn to religious discourse.

⁶⁹ Claire Bosc-Tiesse, *Les îles de la mémoire Fabrique des et écriture de l'histoire dans les églises du lac Tana Ethiopie, XVII-XVIII siècle* (Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008), pp.412-418.

⁷⁰ Wängél, MS., Tana Qirqos, f.1r and f.2r; EMMML, 8436, f. 2r.

Zéga in Religious Discourse

The concept of *zéga* came to be used in religious discourse between these two groups around the middle of the seventeenth century. My intention is restricted to deriving the implications from the religious use of the term for the social functions of *zéga*. The Gondärine period was marked by Christological controversies inspired by Jesuit Catholic missionaries who arrived in Ethiopia in 1550s. Later, in the seventeenth century, the Jesuits won King Susenyos to the Catholic Church. The king banned the teaching of the Orthodox Church and declared Catholicism the official state religion in 1622 resulting in a civil war that lasted until 1632. Faced by determined resistance to his religious policy, Susenyos became convinced that the only real option to restoring the ancient Orthodox Church was chaos and bloodshed. He chose the former course and gracefully abdicated his power to his son and successor Fasilädäs (r.1632-1667). The Jesuits were expelled ultimately, yet the sectarian divisions which they inspired could not disappear easily. The Orthodox clergy were divided in their response to the doctrinal questions raised by the Jesuit missionaries. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, these different understandings on doctrinal matters developed into full-fledged sects, one of which was *Qebat*, or Unction, which according to Crummey, “emphasized the role of the unction of the Holy Spirit in effecting the union of the divine and the human in Christ.”⁷¹ Challenging the *Qebat* sect were those who held the view that “Jesus had become Son of God through the Grace (*Säga*) of the Holy Spirit.”⁷²

At the debate’s outset, the social term *zéga*, alongside the almost identical terms of *meskin* and *näday*, came to have a remarkable vitality and significance. In the Ge’ez language

⁷¹ Donald Crummey, “Church and Nation: The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahdo Church (from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century)”, Michael Angold, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 464.

⁷² Guidi, “Di Due Frammenti Relativi alla Storia di Abissinia”, p.23.

the terms *meskin* and *näday* mean “destitute” and “humble” and *zéga* was their Amhàric rendering.⁷³ These terms denoted certain qualities of the human aspect of Christ and His metaphorical descent. The consistent employment of *zéga* in particular transformed it into a technical term in religious discourse. The religious scholar Dästa Täklä-Wäld considers *zéga* as a central term of the *Qebat* sect.⁷⁴ However, it was apparently their rivals the *Sägoch* who introduced the term into religious debate.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the usage of the term in doctrinal texts, a word is necessary on the Ge’ez term *be’al* and its Amharic equivalent *keber* which are also the technical terms of the religious controversy. In fact, “*bätawahdo kábära*” meaning “(Christ) became honored at the union (of divinity and humanity)” is used as shorthand for the position of the *Säga* on incarnation. The terms *näday*, *meskin* and *zéga* are constantly contrasted with the concepts of *be’al*, *gétenät* and *baläsagenät* meaning “resplendent,” “lordship” and “prosperity” by the protagonists of the religious debate. These contrasting terms are used to express the two extreme poles of the conditions, authority and status occupied by Christ before His divine descent and after the moment of the fusion of divinity and humanity. Dästa gives the following comprehensive definitions to a *kebur* person as one “who is honorable, appointed and prized, titled, big man, lord, prosperous, one who is far removed from humiliation and poverty.”⁷⁵ In short, in the social context the term *keber* is “associated with an elite” and “embraces respect and

⁷³ Antoine D’Abbadie, *Dictionnaire de la langue amariñña*. Actes de la Société philologique, 10 (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1881), pp.722 and 726; Dästa, *YäAmarerñña Mäzgäbä Qalat*, p. 471; A. Ernest Gutt, *Silte-Amharic- English Dictionary with Concise Grammar* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University 1997), pp.704-705 ; Yohannes Gäbrä-Egziabher, *Mäzgäbä-Qalat Tigeregna Amharegna : Ethiopian Dictionary Tigrigna- Amharic* (Asmara: Artgraphic Eriterea, 1948/49), p.667 ; and Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Gurage (Ethiopic)*, vol. III (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), pp.703 and 708.

⁷⁴ Dästa Täklä-Wäld, *YäAmarerñña Mäzgäbä Qalat*, p.479.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.636. See also Kidanä-Wäld, *Sewasäwä wäges wämäzgäbä qalat Häddis Nebabu Bäge’ez Fechew Bamaräñña: A book of Grammar and verb, and New Dictionary . Geez Entries with Amharic Definitions* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1948/49), p.519.

glory.”⁷⁶ All instances of the term *keber* can be interpreted against the concept of *zéga per se*.

The main issue leading to divergent interpretations between the *Qebat* and the *Säga* was the purpose of the unction of Jesus by the Holy Spirit at the moment of incarnation and its implication for the divinity and humanity of Christ. The first open confrontation between the *Säga* and *Qebat* sects took place during the reign of King Fasilädäs (r.1632-1667). The king called a religious council to resolve the problem in which the *Qebatoch* were represented by one Zä-Iyäsus. In nutshell, Zä-Iyäsus stated the position of his sect on Christology in the following terms, “when Word united with flesh He lost His honor and became *näday*; when he received the Unction of the Holy Spirit He became honored and natural Son.”⁷⁷ This position is elaborated in one of the most authoritative *Qebat* texts which the controversy produced, “Zekri Wä Pawli” meaning “Zekri and Pawli.” Written in the Ge’ez language by an anonymous author this manuscript is named in honor of two senior ecclesiastics, Zekrä-Maryam and Pawlos, who lived in the sixteenth century. The text was written in the late seventeenth century at the height of the religious controversy.⁷⁸

This manuscript’s author posits that Christ did not become *zéga* as the consequence of Unction. He further argues that at no moment in the process of incarnation, even for the duration of the twinkle of the eyes, was flesh found in conditions of *zégenät*. This means that flesh never knew any instance of separate existence from divinity to require an act of ennoblement and sanctity. The possibility for Christ to acquire the conditions of *zégenät* is rendered impossible by the fact of His already being the natural Son of the Father.⁷⁹

According to Dästa, the doctrine of the *Qebat* on Christology has evolved in three distinct

⁷⁶ John Iliffe, *Honor in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.57.

⁷⁷ Guidi, “Di Due Frammenti Relativi alla Storia di Abissinia”, p.23: “አመ፡ ተዋሐደ፡ ቃል፡ ምስለ፡ ስጋ፡ ኮነ፡ ነዳዩ፡ ወጋጥአ ብሰሎ፡ ወአመ፡ ተቀብዓ፡ መንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ከብረ፡ ወኮነ፡ ወልደ፡ ባህሪ።”

⁷⁸ Zekri Wä Pawli, MS., Abunä Asrat, pictures # 180-315.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

stages. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, the commonly held view among the *Qebatoch* was that the blending of Word with flesh involved the diminution of the supreme majesty of the former, viz., divine Word which is reduced to the condition of *zégenät* upon His descent to the terrestrial world. Only upon His anointment by the Holy Spirit was Word restored to His preincarnate royal dignity by stripping away his conditions of *zégenät*. During the reign of Yohannes I (1667-1682), the *Qebatoch* reviewed their previous positions on incarnation further. They reinterpreted incarnation arguing that neither was the divine Word disposed of the pre-incarnate attributes of divine majesty nor was flesh stripped of its inherited destitution and corruption. Therefore, the sanctification and elevation of the human aspect of Christ by an act of the Unction of the Holy Spirit from its conditions of *zégenät* was an imperative need to prepare flesh for the honor of unity with Word. The unity of Word and flesh occurred without any prejudice to the former's divine attributes. According to this interpretation, the notion of *zégenät* is limited to the human aspects of Christ.⁸⁰

A further shift in the *Qebatoch*'s interpretations occurred during the mid-nineteenth century, thanks to a *Qebat* scholar popularly known as Arat-Ayna (four-eyed) Goshu, who argues that neither the Unction, which Word received from the Holy Spirit nor the union of the flesh with divine Word was enough by itself to extinguish the two contrasting distinctions of Christ for Him to be the natural Son of God in his human aspect. Instead, He could do so only by both acts of Unction and union of His two attributes.⁸¹ In summary, it seems apparent that the *Qebat* did not accept the idea that incarnation involved the humiliation and impoverishment of the divine aspect of Christ as the result of His assumption of human nature. What is important is that the followers of *Qebat* sect used *zéga* to convey the idea of humiliation, subjection, and

⁸⁰ Dästa, *YäAmarerñña Mäzgübä Qalat*, p.780.

⁸¹ Ibid; and Kindeneh Endeg, "History of the Qebatoč in Gojjam" (Addis Ababa University, MA thesis in History, 2004)

impoverishment in general in their refutation of the teachings of *Sägoch* which we now turn to.

In the first religious council called by King Fasilädäs, the *Sägoch* were represented by one Adam. The gist of the *Sägoch*'s argument is articulated by Adam as “we believe and say when Word unionized with flesh He became *näday*; He is glorious in His divinity and we say He became *näday* in his humanity...”⁸² This position is further elaborated in an undated doctrinal text by an anonymous author now in the possession of the National Library in Addis Ababa. In question and answer form, this text is of use in discussing *Sägoch*'s use of the term *zéga*.⁸³

Q. Was flesh honored upon becoming divine?

Ans. Yes, [flesh] was honored.

Q. [In being divine], was he exorcized of his *zégenät* or not?

Ans. No, without exorcizing of [his *zégenät*].

Q. When divine [Word] became flesh, did He become *zéga* as well?

Ans. Yes, He became *zéga*.

Q. [In being *zéga*], was He exorcized of His honor or not?

Ans. No, He was not exorcized of His honor.

Q. How can one say that the *zéga* became honored while keeping his *zégenät* and the honored became *zéga* while keeping his honor?

Ans. To begin with, we do not say divinity and flesh became united without the flesh eliminating the omnipotent divine, and the divinity assuming physical attributes. Hence flesh became honored without eliminating his *zégenät* and the divine Word became *zéga* without eliminating his honor. Since they did not have *täwelat* in their unity they became united in such a manner.

Q. That flesh became honored when united with divinity is provable, what proof you have that divinity became *zéga* when united with flesh?

Ans. What does Saint Paul say? He says “Jesus Christ became *zéga* for your honor so that you can see His grace.”

Q. Did he become *zéga* permanently?

Ans. No, He became honored.

Q. By what means did He become honored?

Ans. By unction.

Q. Who anointed Him?

Ans. Father.

Q. Who was the ointment?

Ans. The Holy Spirit.

⁸² Guidi, “Di Due Frammenti Relativi alla Storia di Abissinia”, p.23-24: “ንሕነሰ ናአምን ከመዝ ወንብል አመ ተዋሐደ ቃል ምስለ ስጋ ኮነ ነዳየ እንዘ ባእል ውሉቱ በመለኮቱ ንብል ነደየ በሰጋ...”

⁸³ Nägärä Häymanot, MS., National Library, 10X9.5, pp.34-36.

Here the text representing the position of the *Säga* sect explains what the incarnation means to the human and divine aspects of Christ. This text is packed with information. I summarize it as follows. The author argues that when the divine Word blended with flesh at the moment of incarnation, Christ assumed all the inferior qualities of human nature. Christ chose the kind of union that involved an act of honor on the part of humanity and *zéga* on the part of divinity so that people could appreciate His benevolence and grace. In doing so, the divine Word willingly renounced His liberty and majesty. Losing His state of magnificence, Christ reduced himself to the condition of *zégenät* because of His benign disposition towards fallen mankind. With His *zégenät* Christ raised mankind to magnificence. What was the meaning of the Unction of the Holy Spirit at incarnation? The Unction that flesh received from the Holy Spirit cleansed and extinguished its corruption and meekness, for which humanity acquired divine properties. However, why did the divine Word need to receive the unction of the Holy Spirit? According to the doctrine of the *Sägoch*, divine Word would not have needed to receive the Unction of the Holy Spirit at the moment of fusion of divinity and humanity so as to be glorified, for He was already in the state of glory and divine majesty. However, He still received the Unction of the Holy Spirit out of humility. Hence incarnation compounded at once the diminution of the majesty and authority of the divine Word and the elevation, glorification and sanctification of flesh.

Nevertheless, although the divine Word appropriated all the negative qualities of human nature, He did so while preserving His ineffably pre-incarnate divine attributes. Likewise, the elevation and glorification of flesh through its unity and identity with the divine Word did not, however, completely dispose of its *zégenät*. The relevant point to note is that for the *Qebatoch* it was the divine Word that was reduced to the degrading status of *zégenät* and the function of the

Holy Spirit in their formula being restorer of the lost dignity of Word. For the *Sägoch*, however, the divine Word carried His *zégenät* permanently and willingly but remained ineffable God at the same time after the act of the Unction of the Holy Spirit. As a whole, the concepts of *zéga* and *be'al* were very central to the protagonists of the religious debate. These terms remained entrenched in the religious discourse until the controversy ended officially, if partially, in 1878.

What then is the positive implication of the religious discourse on the values behind the social term *zéga*? The concept of *zéga* employed in seventeenth century religious discourse did not develop in a void. The semantic origin of *zéga* is purely sociological and predated its usage in the religious discourse by many centuries. Succinctly put, the secular and religious meanings of *zéga* complement and strengthen one another. The concepts associated with the term *zéga* could be used objectively in reference to the people who appear in contemporary legal sources under the term *zéga*. Subordination and humiliation encapsulates one of the most fundamental concepts that lie behind the term *zéga*. The degree of Christ's metaphorical descent implied by the use of *zégenät* closely parallels the social depth of the people described as *zégoch* in real life. Indeed, the legal texts concerned with actual practice suggest that *zégoch* could be viewed in the sense of possession rather than simply social dependents. The primary meaning of *zéga* must therefore be poor and subject, denoting always the inferior in any given unequal socioeconomic and political relationship.

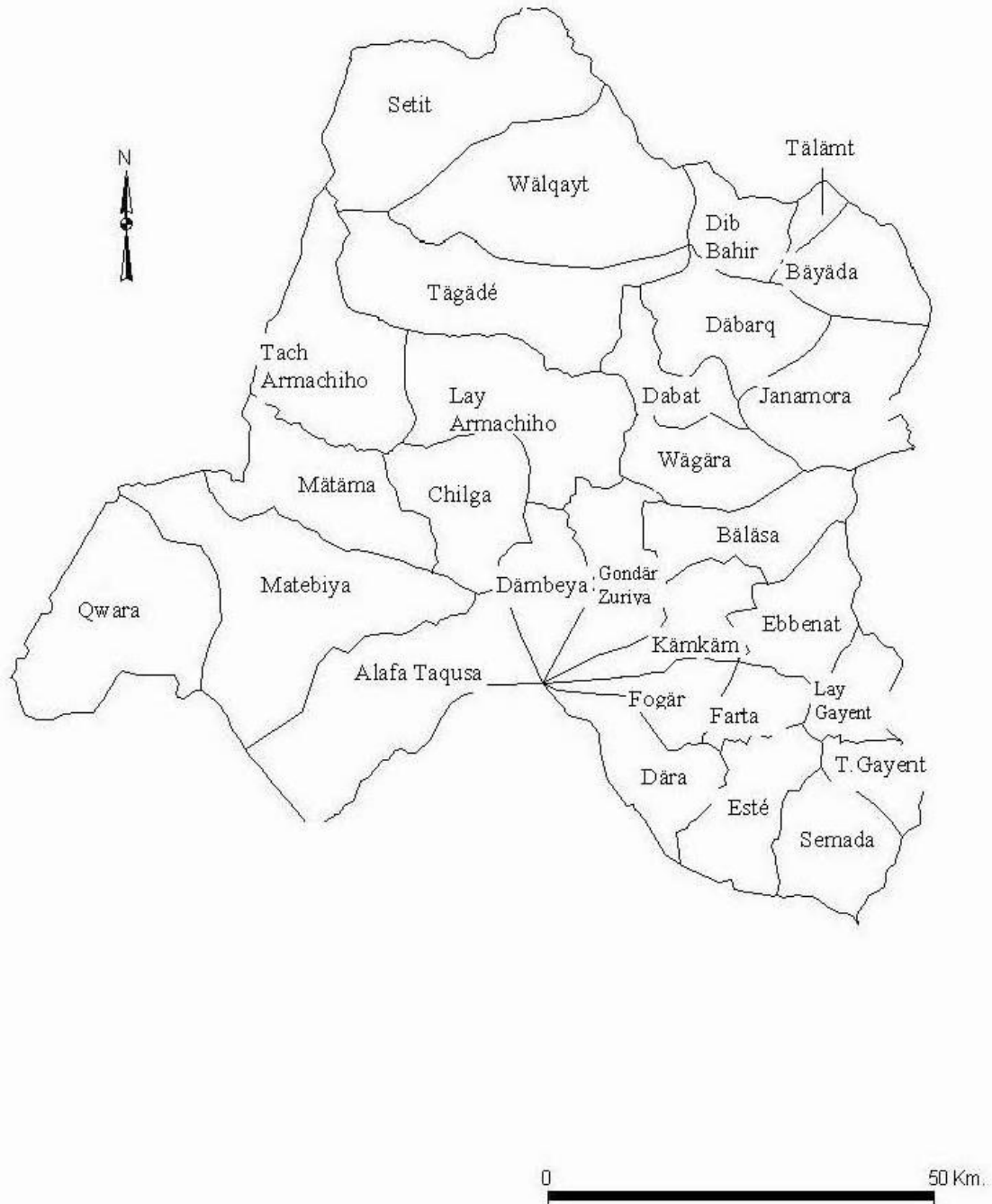
Conclusion

That *rim* existed in the medieval time lacks conclusive evidence. Certainly it had not been called *rim*, although churches undoubtedly had lands of this kind. The idea of *rim* was perhaps influenced by the custom of *täzkar* and the system of property arrangement employed to support it. The distinct practice of *täzkar* vividly reflects the forms of piety and sentiments

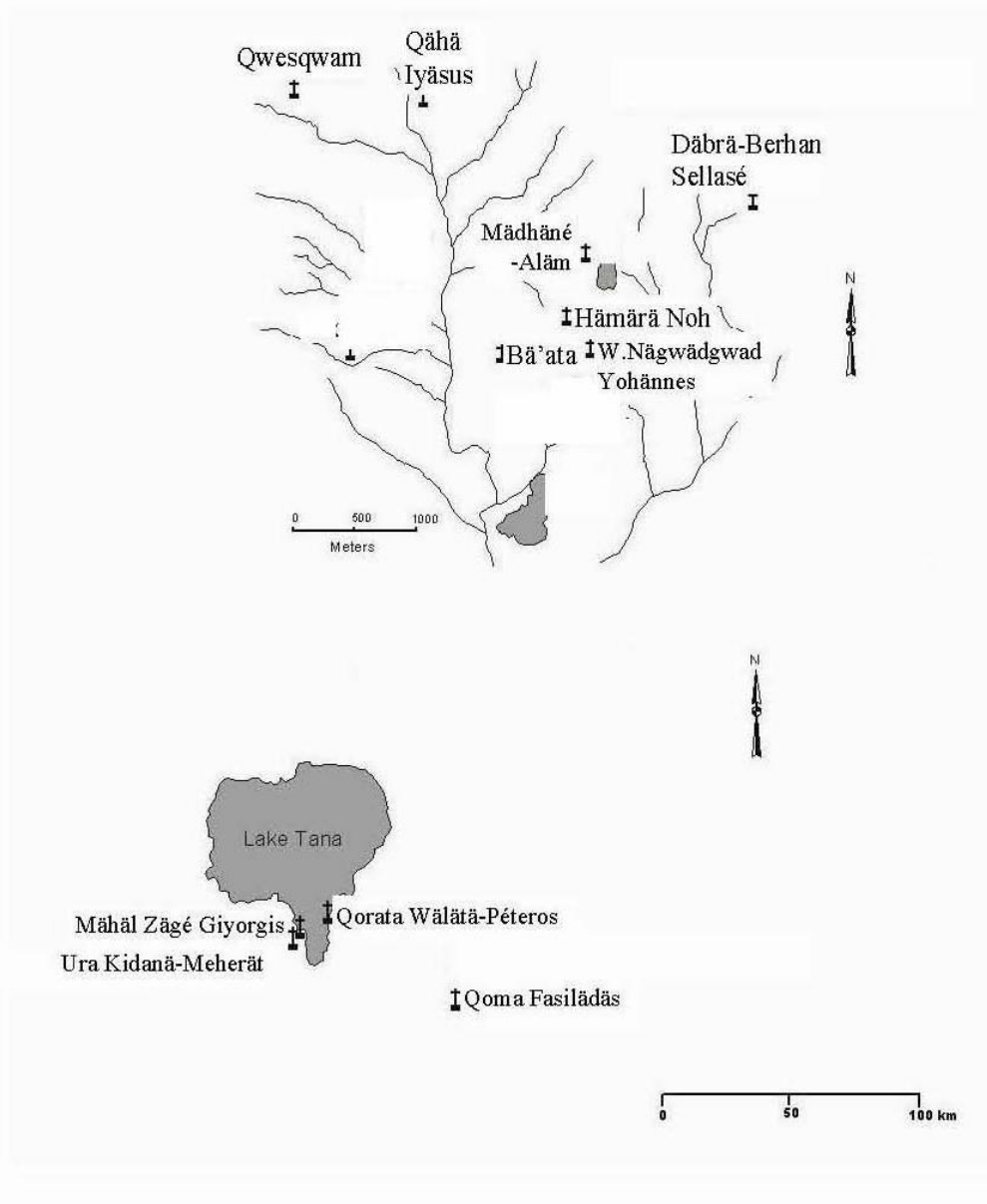
towards afterlife; originally its rationale was to provide for the future of the soul of a dead or dying person by the distribution of food and drinks from the property of the deceased in alms to the poor. Yet economic and social motives underpin grants to support *täzkar*. Like *rim* property in later centuries, land allocated for the support of *täzkar* during the early and later medieval period was held and exploited individually, fought over and passed to heirs.

Likewise, the social status of *zéga* existed prior to the seventeenth century, although the institution of *zégenät* underwent significant changes during the Gondärine era. The employment of the concept of *zéga* in religious discourse is clearly imitative of and derived from already well-established social and legal terminology in everyday use to designate persons occupying a particularly low social space. Whether in the religious or secular sense, *zégenät* brings forth an image of poverty and subordination to a superior in the context of unequal social and economic relations. The frequency of the term *zéga* together with *rim* in the Gondärine era bespeaks the importance of these institutions. The next chapter detail the spread of *rim* in Bägémeder the changes in the condition of labor that attended it.

Map 4. Bägémeder: Administrative Districts



Map 5. The churches of Gondär Town and Lake Tana area



Map 6. The Lands of Gondar Churches in Dambeya



Chapter Three: Rim as Ecclesiastical Property: the Formative Period, c. 1630s-1769

Introduction

In the late 1630s Ethiopian society slowly emerged from the unstable social and political situations of the preceding century. The second half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marked by a new mood of creativity and renewal in the whole region of social, cultural and political life. Yet Ethiopian history in these centuries unfolded within a geographical nexus much smaller in size than the earlier era. The southern and eastern territories were abandoned to the Oromo. As far as the Ethiopian rulers were concerned, the reconquest of the former provinces of the medieval state was a closed chapter. Traces of several earlier ethnic groups in the area south of the Blue Nile were pushed aside by the Oromo. Others such as the ancient Semitic-speaking people of Gafat retreated northwards to Gojjam in response to the Oromo pressure and subsequently became assimilated into the Amharic-speaking people.¹ The Oromo occupied large areas of Shäwa, leaving only remnants of small Christian communities in its mountainous and inaccessible part. The Christian enclaves in northern Shäwa were cut off from mainstream Ethiopian life and they were left to fend for themselves. During the late seventeenth century local leaders, who sprang from these communities, started a long process of southward expansion. Their nineteenth century descendants completed the reconquest of the land occupied by the Oromo and brought Shäwa back to the center stage of national life.² In contrast, Amhara, especially its eastern half, was slowly transformed into Oromo country in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and renamed Wällo after the dominant clan that settled in

¹ Tadesse Tamrat, "Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Gafat," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 21 (1988), pp. 121-154.

² Bairu Tafla, ed., *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Shäwa* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987).

there. A branch of the Oromo that established power in Wällo would dominate the Ethiopian state in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.³

In the meantime, within the smaller reconstituted Ethiopian kingdom centered on the Lake Tana region, peace and order was reestablished. The expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries from Ethiopia in the 1630s removed one complicating political factor. The military class that proved difficult to control in the post-Graññ era disappeared into the peasantry through a slow process of adjustment. Further the violence and conflict of the sixteenth century between the highland Ethiopians and the Oromo had given way to peaceful adjustment and absorption during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This usually involved the recruitment of the Oromo into the royal and regional armies and the settlement in various territories of Gojjam and Bägémeder of friendly Oromo clans. In Gojjam they left a legacy that endures in the place names such as Mécha, Baso, and Libän named after Oromo clans settled in there.⁴

The central pivot of social, cultural and political life during seventeenth-and eighteenth-century Ethiopia was the town of Gondär, the second fixed capital of the country after Aksum. Founded by King Fasilädäs (r. 1632-1667) in 1636, Gondär continued to serve as Ethiopia's political center until 1786 and as the royal residence until the 1850s.⁵ The early Solomonids lacked a fixed center of administration and power. Political imperatives led them to keep what Ronald Horvath has labeled 'roving capitals' in which the royal court and its entourage frequently moved from one province to another to ensure peace and assert central power.⁶ During the Gondärine kingdom, shifting the royal residence at the succession of each new king

³ Shiferaw Bekele, "Reflections on the Power Elite of the Wära Seh Mäsafenate," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 15 (1990): pp.155-79.

⁴ Merid Wolde-Aregay, "Military Elites in Medieval Ethiopia," Donald Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Trenton, New Jersey, 2005), pp.159-186.

⁵ Richard Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982), pp.115-139.

⁶ Ronald Horvath, "The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia," *Journal of African History*, vol.10 no.2 (1969), pp.205-19.

ceased to exist. Gondär ushered in a new artistic period in Ethiopia history. In terms of architecture Gondärine art expressed itself in the construction of successive royal castles and churches using mortars and stone (see illustration 1). Beginning in the late 1630s and continuing into the middle of the eighteenth century palaces and churches were built in Gondär. This building activity resulted in an extraordinary “concentration of stone structure” per a single unit of area without parallel in Ethiopian history “for well over a thousand years.”⁷ In the field of art, historians have long recognized a distinctively Gondärine style of painting.⁸

The forces that generated the new sensibilities and taste for art and architecture primarily originated within the country, although contact with the outside world was also maintained. In the field of building, the Ethiopians imitated in an innovative way various elements of Islamic architecture from India and Istanbul. Formal relations between Ethiopia and European countries were absent, although nationals of various European countries continued to visit Ethiopia from time to time. The country was connected to the Red Sea region and beyond by a network of regional trade and Gondär was one of the foci of commercial exchange.⁹

In the last two decades Crummey has documented the vigor and creativity of the Gondärine era. However, as noted by Crummey, later generations of Ethiopians and even some historians tend to look at the Gondärine period through the lens of the events that occurred towards the closing years of the era. In the 1770s, the central institutions of church and state collapsed and monarchical power was replaced by rampant violence. These events did occur, but they overshadowed the achievements of the Gondärine period.¹⁰ Others looked at the era from the perspective of the sectarianism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For the historian

⁷ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.74.

⁸ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, *Les îles de la mémoire Fabrique des images et écriture de l'histoire dans les églises du lac Tānā Éthiopie*, pp.11-23.

⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.74.

Asma Giyorgis, for instance, Gondär represented desolation and clerical corruption.¹¹ The Gondärine period deserves far closer attention than has been given so far.

Most importantly, the Gondärine period marked the beginning of a new era in the regime of landholding in the history of Ethiopia. At the heart of this transformation was the introduction and growth of *rim* property. *Rim* brought new ways of rendering material transactions and redaction of texts. Land documents from the second half of the seventeenth century show increasing concern with written description of the physical dimension of land and land measurement. A distinguishing feature of sources from this period not found in their predecessors is the routine inclusion of the principle guiding land division between the clerical beneficiaries and the hereditary peasants following a grant. The property registers found in volumes from Gondärine Ethiopia were the result of land surveys and measurement. Most of these surveys are summary descriptions of land, while a few of them are very detailed written description of the size, physical features, location and boundaries, the names of holders, and the rents and taxes derived from property. The system of linear measurement and the unit used to rate the size of measured space that were extensively applied during the late nineteenth and twentieth century Ethiopia took shape during our period. Thus *rim* and the transformation in the practice of record-making reflect a dramatic change in attitudes towards property. In the next section I will examine the early Gondärine grants to trace the changes in the landholding system and the associated changes in presentation of texts, and land measurement.

The reign of Fasilädäs and his successors and sons, 1632-1707

In the wake of his ascent to the throne, Fasilädäs, founder of Gondär during the 1630s, was faced with pressing political and religious problems. Politically, Fasilädäs had to deal with pretenders to the throne, who arose from time to time wreaking havoc in the country and a

¹¹ Bairu Tafla, ed., *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*.

rebellion by his brother Gälawdéwos.¹² With respect to religion, he had to rehabilitate the ruined relationship between the Ethiopian Church and the monarchy that resulted from the experiment with Catholicism by his father and predecessor, King Susenyos (r.1607-1632). On both fronts, Fasilädäs was successful and established a measure of political stability that enabled him to concentrate his energy on building his trendsetting palace (reproduced as illustration 1) in his new capital and endowing both new and already existing institutions.



Illustration 1. The Palace of Fasilädäs.

As part of his policy to pacify the Ethiopian clergy and appease their resentment towards Catholics, Fasilädäs expelled the Jesuit missionaries from the country, and purged their Ethiopian converts who refused to return to the ancient Alexandrian faith.¹³ The practice associated with *rim* property can be traced to the reign of Fasilädäs. And it was in Bägëmdër, especially in the districts around Gondär town that significant grants in *rim* were made.

¹² Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.79-81; and Anaïs Woin, “Why King Fasilädäs Killed his Brother? Sharing Power in the Royal Family in Mid-Seventeenth Century Ethiopia,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, 8, no 3-4 (2004), pp.259-293.

¹³ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.67-72 and 77-81.

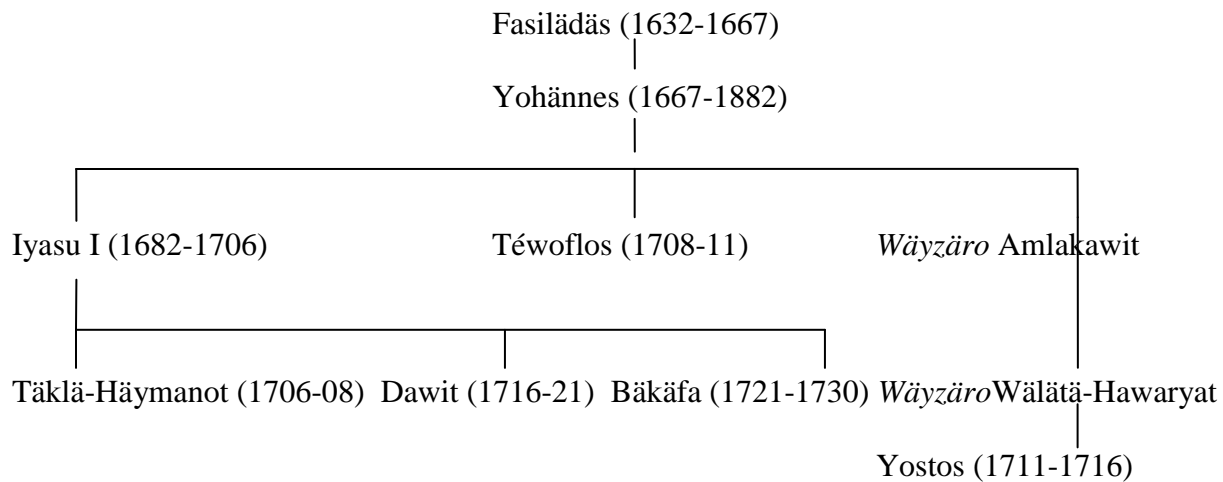


Chart 2. Gondarine Kings. Source: Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.90.

It is neither practical nor relevant to discuss all the grants and foundations of Fasilädäs's reign. My discussion is restricted to the grants to the churches of Qoma Fasilädäs and Gondär Mädhäné-Aläm founded, respectively, by Wäld-Sä'ala, the wife of King Susenyos's (1607-1632) and her son King Fasilädäs. The records of these churches shed light on the creeping change in the landholding system which I am trying to document here. Anaïs Wion, who has done research on the history of Qoma Fasilädäs, states that Wäld-Sä'ala did not share her husband's pro-Catholic policy. In 1618 she dissociated herself from Susenyos by moving from the royal residence at Dänqäz to Qoma, where she started the process of building her church. Consecrated a year before Susenyos declared Catholicism as the state religion of his kingdom in 1622 Qoma Fasilädäs was an affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy and a measure of Wäld-Sä'ala's commitment to it.¹⁴ The foundation charter(s) was issued in the 1630s. Of particular interest is the Arabic version of the charter issued by Bishop Mika'el (1649-1664) on behalf of King Fasilädäs and the accompanying administrative document listing the clerical staff recruited to serve the new church. The relevant part of the charter as translated by Wion is quoted below:

¹⁴ Anaïs Woin, "Why King Fasilädäs Killed his Brother?", pp.259-260.

Eternal and everlasting *waqf* given to the monastery of Saint Fasilädäs, this is the *khaftar* of Qoma. And [the monastery] has boundaries: the oriental boundary is Semada; the western boundary is Andabit; to the north Aqas (*sic*); to the south Abbay (Blue Nile). It is forbidden to whomever to make use of it, to sell it, to buy it, to hire it, to exchange it, nobody can have authority over it except its superior, otherwise he will suffer the fate of Judas Iscariot and Simon the magician.¹⁵

What makes this charter interesting is that it clearly attempts to delimit and map out the boundary of the church's property in words. It provides us with a first glimpse of a nascent attempt to firmly delimit territorial jurisdiction. It was in the nature of medieval charters that the territorial jurisdiction of churches was left undefined. In contrast, the charter of Qoma Fasilädäs demonstrates a changing attitude towards property by its concern with defining the physical limits of its jurisdiction using the four cardinal directions. The western boundary of Qoma lay on Andabét, whereas the district of Semada defines its eastern limit. In south the Blue Nile River articulates its boundary, while in the north the territorial jurisdiction of Qoma extended to the locality called Agas.

In other respects, too, the arrangement put in place to support Qoma followed the system of foundations typical of the following Gondärine period. The administrative document that accompanied the charter shows that the foundation was inaugurated for 318 personnel and they are listed by name. The number 318 symbolically represented the church fathers who, according to tradition, gathered at the Council of Nicaea and established Orthodox Christianity. This indicates Wäld-Sä'ala's strong identification with Christian Orthodoxy. More than one hundred of the 318 recruits of Qoma's Fasilädäs church were laymen and women, including the founder, Wäld-Sä'ala. Two noblemen appear in the list. One of these was *Däjazmach* (later *ras*) Asgader, governor of Gojjam under King Fasilädäs. While ordinary laymen and women might have been involved in providing clerical functions in the preceding centuries, Wäld-Sä'ala's foundation

¹⁵ Anaïs, "Why King Fasilädäs Killed his Brother?", p.275.

supplies the first definitive evidence of the entry of the high-ranking laity, often described as *däbtära*, into the service of churches alongside ecclesiastics.¹⁶ In the Gondärine period and afterwards, the two were practically indistinguishable in the grants.¹⁷ The Qoma charter is obscure with respect to what rights the clergy were given. Records of private land transactions from Qoma from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are also very rare. It seems apparent that land was held and exploited individually by the clergy. The absence of private land sale documents may be explained by the restriction the charter imposed on transactions.

Changes in the structure and language used to describe the rights conveyed by charters become visible in grants of Fasilädäs. Fasilädäs's foundation dedicated to the Savior of the World or Mädhäné-Aläm in his young capital of Gondär bears out this. Mädhäné-Aläm was a foundation of modest size. Fasilädäs recruited a total of twenty-four clergy for his foundation. A formal foundation charter was not apparently drawn up for the new church. Instead, the transaction, which exists in two copies, is recorded in the margins of manuscripts in the form of an inventory consisting of the list of the 24 clergy and the agricultural fields they were granted in the subdistrict of Gubiya in Dämbeya.¹⁸ (The Gazetteer of Ethiopia lists Gubiya at 12 26' N and 37 24 E, not very far from Qolla Deba (administrative capital of Dämbeya), according to Google Earth).

¹⁶ Illinois/IES, 88.XX.20, Qoma Fasilädäs, Miracles of Mary and Illinois/IES, 88.XIX.20-24, Qoma Fasilädäs, Mäshäfa Liq. Documents of this type mentioning the beneficiaries under churches by name and recording of schedule of their service obligation as a whole do not form part of the medieval traditions.

¹⁷ Illinois/IES, 88.XX.20 and 23, Qoma Fasilädäs, Tamrä-Maryam.

¹⁸ BL, Orient, 518, f171v-172v.

Table 1. Inventory of Mädhäné-Aläm Church.

Tenants	Local officials	<i>meder</i>	<i>bota</i>	Rent in Grain	Tax in Salt bars
Qurban Täklo	Täklay	90	18	9 <i>chan</i>	30
<i>Wäyzäro</i>	-	42	9	4.2 <i>chan</i>	15
Gurened					
Biyalefo	-	42	9	4.2 <i>chan</i>	15
Galla Wäldé	-	6	1	7 <i>chan</i>	
Wäldä-Amlak	-	100	27	10 <i>chan</i>	30
Abäba Wäläté	Demeyanos	50	14	5 <i>chan</i>	
<i>Qureban</i> Täklo	Gäbrä-Dengel	80	20	8 <i>chan</i>	30
Zä-Sellasé	-	30	6	3 <i>chan</i>	10
Enjelesh	Arqadiwos	15	3	1.5 <i>chan</i>	5
Total		455	107	c.11, 480 litres.	

Source: Illinois/IES, 84.I.7-8

The inventory of Mädhäné-Aläm offers us the first example of what would become a common genre of documentation in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These records indicate that agricultural land was conveyed to the original clergy of Mädhäné-Aläm, describe the size of the specific agricultural plots along with the *bota* or residential sites they held and the dues and rents collected from tenants.¹⁹ A total of 455 *meder* (plots) and 107 *bota* nearby the plots were given to the clergy of Mädhäné-Aläm. One *meder* was roughly equivalent to the spatial extent of land that could be ploughed by a team of oxen in a day. The *bota* was usually the location of the farm house or the living space for the dependent laborer working the land of the clerical landlords.²⁰ In the case of Mädhäné-Aläm clergy eight individuals—including two women, Abäba Wäläté and Gurened—who formerly owned the lands were allowed to retain their inheritance and paid rent and tax for it. Rents were paid in part in kind and in part in cash and the

¹⁹ Illinois/IES, 84.I.7-8, Gondär Mädhäné-Aläm, Gebrä Hemamat and also BL, Or. 518, fol.172r.

²⁰ The land of the clergy was scattered across small administrative units run by four named local level officials: Täklay, Gäbrä-Dengel, Demeyanos, and Arqadiwos. A woman, Abalä-Maryam, held jurisdiction over some of these lands.

assessment from tenants was based on the size of the land each held. Abäba Wäläté held 50 *meder* and 14 *bota*, for which she paid “with the measure of the king” five *chan* (c.1400 litres of grain). Gurened held 42 plots and nine residential sites and paid 9 *chan* (2520 litres) and 30 salt bars.²¹ The rental “agreement” between tenants and landlords dictated that one-third of the payment in kind from each tenant must be in *téff* grain. *Téff* consumption was associated with the rich and elite, while wheat, beans, and barley were considered cheap and coarse.²²

The tenancy arrangement between the clergy and the peasants remained operational for over a century. Sometime during the 1770s and 80s the peasants of Gubiya “defaulted on their payment of rents for five years,” leading their clerical landlords to sue. King Täklä-Häymanot (r. 1769-1779) resolved the dispute. The two sides struck an agreement in which the “peasants will live on their one-third land and the *däbtära* will live on their two-thirds share of the land.”²³

The inventory of Mädhäné-Aläm establishes quite clearly the shift from the vague redactions of the previous centuries to exact and itemized rights and relations between landlords and tenants. Of course previously drafted charters listed the lands involved in the transaction, but none to my knowledge refer to the plots cultivated by tenants, the name of their cultivators, and the rents and taxes due to the clergy from each tenant. This evident trend to disaggregate the many elements comprising property relations would be conventionalized in subsequent decades. Gondärine donors and founders were no longer contented with summarized charters dealing only with the fundamentals of the grant. The new documentary practices also departed from the norms of the previous centuries with respect to the language employed to record transactions. Prior to the mid-seventeenth century inventories employ the classical Ge’ez language. During the

²¹ I converted the Ethiopian units into the approximate amount into litre based on Richard Pankhurst’s, “A Preliminary History of Ethiopian measures, Weights and Values, Part 2”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* vol 7, no.2 (1989), pp.99-184.

²² Donald Crummey, “Ethiopian Plow Agriculture”, pp. 1-23.

²³ BL, Or. 518, f 171.

Gondärine period, the vernacular Amhäríc largely supplanted Ge'ez as the language of documentation. The inventory of Mädhäné-Aläm and all other foundations that followed it in subsequent decades are written in Amhäríc and this can be taken as an indication of the changes taking place with regard to property.²⁴

The Mädhäné-Aläm record does not use any of the known property distinctions, such as *rim*. The absence of this word does not necessarily imply that contemporaries were unfamiliar with it. All indications are that Fasilädäs granted to the clergy under his church the rights associated with *rim* property. Chronologically, it can be asserted that land surveys and writing of property registers started not later than the reign of Fasilädäs, decades before documentary testimony to *rim*. The trend of recording specific fields developed into the distinctive class of administrative documents called *mäzgäb* or register in the seventeenth century. The two-volume register of the church of Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam land, compiled in the 1730s and 40, is the best example of a *mäzgäb* based on surveys done in Gondärine Ethiopia.²⁵ Documents from the Gondärine period therefore are of two genres. One class of documents is charters similar to the medieval period while the second and novel type is the administrative *mäzgäb*.²⁶

The desire to clearly map out property rights through the means of inventories and registers increased in tandem with the passage of time. In the late seventeenth century technical advances in land measuring units and new definitions of property rights became clear. This change coincided with the reign of King Iyäsus I (r.1682-1707). Documentary evidence and tradition is consistent that the practice of land measurement and boundary demarcation was widely applied during Iyäsus I's reign. The foundation charter of the church of Wänchät Mika'el,

²⁴ The use of Amharic in business dealings with land and wills was established especially after 1700. The registers and property transaction documents written in Amharic are extensively discussed and cited in chapters 3-7.

²⁵ III/IES, 88.I-IV.30, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Mäzgäb.

²⁶ Crummey, *Land Society*, p.167. In the case of Gojjam, *mäzgäb* largely replaced charters in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

located in the district of Dära close to Lake Tana, furnishes crucial information in this regard.

The charter tells that Iyasu I “endowed Wānchät Mika’el [with land he bought] for fifty ounces of gold and marked the boundary (literally established) with “four mortars and stones.”²⁷

The most significant development in the movement for greater precision in defining the principles guiding the grants of the seventeenth century was the foundation of the church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé by Iyasu I. The church was founded and endowed in 1694.²⁸ Iyasu left a deep mark on the land tenure system through the establishment of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. The church was a model for similar foundations in subsequent centuries. Furthermore, as Crummey has noted, the foundation of Däbrä-Berhan in particular and the grants of Iyasu in general were socially significant. It directly and immediately resulted in the poverty of those affected by it. The records of this church also contain rare evidence about the reaction of people to the tenorial changes of the late seventeenth century, as we will see below. The primary sources on the church are the royal chronicle, a contemporary land register document and the consolidated texts of separate land grant documents issued over three centuries. Compiled in the early twentieth century, the latter has the character of a cartulary.²⁹ The royal chronicler presents a streamlined version of the foundation charter in his narrative of the events of the dedication ceremony. The crucial clause in the charter pertains to the principle of land division between the clergy and the hereditary land owners. While retaining one-third portion of their inheritance, the peasants surrendered the remaining two-thirds to the clergy of Däbrä-Berhan. This clause was used more

²⁷ Senkesar, MS., Wānchät Mika’el, picture # 046: “በአዳም ሰገድ ኢየሱ በ፲ ወቄት በ ዓራት ፍራ የተደበረ [I don’t recall seeing this verb used in quite this way] ነው።” The clergy of the church relate that the four boundary markers installed in the time of Iyasu did last into the twentieth century.

²⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.88; BL, Or. 777r, BL, Or.481, f 4r; Ignazio Guidi, *Annales Iohannis I, Iyyasu I, et Bakaffa*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orinetalium, Scriptores Aethiopici, Series Altera, vol 5. (1903), p.177.

²⁹ See BL, Or., 481, f4r; BL, Or., 777. 4r; and Illinois/IES, 88.V 22-29, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, Gondär, *Tarikä Nägäst*.

often frequently in charter of formulations the Gondärine period.³⁰ I have tabulated the number of fields and the associated residential sites given in each locality to the *däbtära*.

Table 2. The Lands of Däbrä-Berhan in Dämbeya.

Place	<i>Meder</i> /plots	<i>Bota</i> /residential site
Boch	600	200
Qobla	600	220
Jägol	200	100
Wawa	350	130
Sufanqära	200	100
Wäyina	150	100
Bowa	60	21
Säqälet	60	15
Dablo	600	200
Säraba	600	190
Gorgora	490	210
Walawaj	1000	700
Enqash	11.5 <i>gasha</i>	
Janahoy	60	21
Kokäbash	5.5 <i>gasha</i>	
Total	3970 <i>meder</i> +17 <i>gasha</i>	2186

Source: BL, Orient 481 fol. 4r.

A total of 3970 *meder* and 2186 *bota* found scattered in no fewer than fifteen localities were given to 170 *däbtära* of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. The inventory listed the *däbtära* by name in relation to the land they held. Nine of the 170 *däbtära* were children of Iyasu I, including two future kings, namely, Dawit (r.1716-1721) and Bäkafa (r. 1721-1730).³¹ In most cases the peasants farmed the land and the *däbtära* simply drew rent. The proportion of the harvest and the rent for the residential sites were fixed. The rent from the *rim* lands was “one-fifth of the harvest and twelve chickens annually from the occupants of the countryside residential sites.”³²

The grants of Iyasu brought several novel institutions in terms of land measurement, land administration and the general purpose for which endowments were used. Apportioning the land

³⁰ Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, pp.62-63.

³¹ Illinois/IES, 88.v.25, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*.

³² Illinois/IES, 88.v.25, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*: የቦታ ግብሩ 12 ደሮ ነው። የምድሩ አምሸ ከ 5ት 1 ነው።”

among the *däbtära* required a survey and establishing boundary marks in the field. Besides *meder*, one linear measuring device and one method of rating the size of land are attested to in the documentation of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. These are *gasha* and *qerana*.³³ Primarily used to measure cloth, *qerana*, a leather strap was used in combination with the measure used for space. References to *qerana* in land sale documents pertaining to the lands of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé abound. The register states that “in Dablo Maryam the share for each *däbtära* is six *meder* and *qerana* and three residential sites.”³⁴ Clearly *qerana* represented a fraction of a larger unit of land. According to Baetman one *qerana* equaled ten cubits, with one cubit being about fifty centimeters.³⁵ This is an extremely tiny plot. The register seems to have used *qerana* to refer to a physical space less than one day’s plowing.

A foreign source sheds additional light on the size of a “standard” *rim* land. Antoine d’Abbadie, a nineteenth century French traveler and scholar who spent more than a decade in northern Ethiopia, wrote about the dimensions of *rim*. Drawing on d’Abaddie, Joseph Tubiana comes to the following conclusion: “The complete *rim* consists of four *qufaf* and one *bota*. The *bota* [size unspecified] is “the living place” of the tenant. This implies that a house is built on it. The *qufaf* are for cultivation. One *qufaf* usually measures 70 by 50 cubits... an area of approximately 80.64 [sic] hectares according to d’Abbadie’s calculation.”³⁶ This makes one *rim* over 320 hectares, which is obviously too much to be true. Depending on context, *qefaf* has several layers of meaning. The full elaboration of the term will be given when discussing the grants of the early eighteenth century. Here suffice to say that d’Abbadie used the term *qefaf* to

³³ Baeteman, *Dictionnaire Amarigna-Français* (Dire-Daoua, Imprimerie Lazare, 1929), p. 374. According to Baeteman, one *qerana* was equivalent to 10 cubits in length. However, we have no means of knowing the size of *qerana* as it applied in Gondärine sources.

³⁴ Illinois/IES, 88.V.4., Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, Gondär, *Tarikä Nägäst*: “በዳብሎ ማርያም ለአንዱ ደብተራ ፯ ምድር ተቅራና ፫ ቦታ ነው።”

³⁵ Baeteman, *Dictionnaire Amarigna-Français*, p.374.

³⁶ Tubiana, “Nature and function of the Ethiopian *rim*”, *Anthropological and Historical documents on “rim” in Ethiopian and Eritrea*, ed. Alessandro Bausi et al (Torino, l’Harmattan Italia), p.59.

refer to *meder*. D'Abbadie was an acute and reliable observer. He derived his information about *rim* directly from the field and possibly interviewed the tenants. His assertion that a complete *rim* was formed by plotting out four 70 by 50 cubits area of land may well be rooted in fact, although the size seems very exaggerated.

Gasha was the most common term in land documents in eighteenth century. In the two localities of Kokäbash and Enqash the sizes of land given to the clergy were, respectively, 5.5 and 11.5 *gasha*. Originally *gasha* meant a shield used by soldiers. It also referred to land held in military tenure. In the course of time *gasha* came to be the name for a unit of measured space. Tradition credits Iyasu I for introducing the *gasha* as a unit of rating physical size and a linear land measuring system called *asé-gämäd*, or “the emperor’s rope.”³⁷ In later centuries the commonly used land measurement device was *qäläd* (thong), which was 66 meters long. It became fashionable to use it during the redistribution of land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Plots measured in *qäläd* were expressed in terms of *gasha*. Historians commonly claim direct continuity between the Gondärine practice of land measurement and the *qäläd*. In its modern calculations one *gasha* is rated at 40 hectares.³⁸ The documentary evidence on the precise size of *qäläd* and *gasha* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is so far between and so meager as to be meaningless. Together, the variation of the size in their recent use and lack of contemporary definitions makes the interpretation of the sources rather complicated. It seems clear enough that standardized units of measurement were more than two centuries in the future. Despite the weakness of our sources, the use of *gasha* and the *qerana* in

³⁷ For the discussion of the terminology of land measurement, see Mahtämä-Sellasé Wäldä-Mäsqäl, *Zekrä-Nägär* (Addis Ababa: Näsanät Printing Press, 1942 EC.), pp.1110-1113; Tekalign, “A City and its Hinterlands,” pp. 107-125; Joanna Mantel-Niećko, *The Role of Land Tenure*, p.94. Gäbrä-Wäld Engeda-Wärq, *Yäältyopya märétenna geber sem* (Addis Ababa, 1944 EC.), pp.9-11. The latter is subsequently translated into English by Mengesha Gessesse as “Ethiopia’s Traditional System of Land Tenure and Taxation”, *Ethiopia Observer* 5 (1962): 302-39.

³⁸ Joanna Mantel-Niećko, *The Role of Land Tenure*, p.94..

late seventeenth century indicate a growing precision in defining property rights.

Rural cultivators, noblemen, and soldiers were affected by the sweeping redistribution that followed the grants of Däbrä-Berhan. The impact of the grant on the local people varied from place to place. In Janaho, Säqälet, Chägän, and Bäwa ten *däbtära* were established in each and the grant did not seem to have brought significant tenurial change. In Walewaj soldiers of Oromo background called Edo forfeited 1000 plots. Socially significant alienation also occurred in Qobla and Boch (see map # 6 above for some of the lands). The six hundred plots in Dablo derived entirely from the former holding of one *Abéto* Esdros. Of these six hundred plots, four hundred plots and 202 residential sites were divided up among fifty-five *däbtära*. The remaining 200 plots were given for the [ጊጊ] *dehä*, “the poor.” Those referred to as “the poor” seem to have been the tenants formerly under Esdros. It is apparent, therefore, that Esdros lost both his land and his tenants at one stroke. Perhaps as compensation, Iyasu transferred three hundred plots of his personal holding at Säraba into the control of Esdros, for which he paid “*asé qolo*,” which Crummey has translated as “royal tithe.”³⁹ In effect, Esdros was simply a tenant of Iyasu. Obviously, this did not allay his resentment and Esdros was implicated in the killing of the clergy of Däbrä-Berhan, to be disused shortly.

Iyasu paid particular attention to the needs of the officials of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. He gave his personal property of 600 plots at Säraba to the head of Däbrä-Berhan, *Mälakä Berhanat* Qäwestos, and the officials under him. These lands were permanently attached to the offices and are referred to in several formulations with the lumbering name of “*aläqa amesteya agär*” or “the leader’s one-fifth land.”⁴⁰ The specific details in the use and status of such lands differ from

³⁹ BL, Or., 481, f4r.

⁴⁰ Illinois/IES, 88.v.22 and 24, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*. The clause on the assignment one-fifth portion of the endowment for church leaders in charters wasn’t strictly applied and seems to have been a figurative way of talking.

one institution to another; nevertheless, the church of Däbrä-Berhan appears to have been at the center of developments establishing a norm. To summarize, the foundation of Däbrä-Berhan was a significant development in the evolution of the land tenure system of Gondärine Ethiopia. As Crummey has noted Däbrä-Berhan “served as a model of church establishment for two centuries.”⁴¹

The grants of Iyasu I brought significant tenurial change and social dislocation in Dämbeya. *Rim* brought on the peasants and the rusticated soldiers new obligations and altered their relationship to the land. The Ittu soldiers in Kämkaba and Säraqo and *Abéto* Esdros in particular were affected foremost and directly. Both reacted violently to the changes brought on them by *rim* property. Esdros and the Ittu soldiers took their revenge by killing the clergy of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. The cartulary of the church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé describes the event as follows: “When the *däbtäroch* of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé established by ... Iyasu I went to collect their *amisho*, the right *däbtära* was killed by the *restäñña* (hereditary owners) of Boch, Atakelt Giyorgis, the Basha of the Ittu, and the left *däbtäroch* was killed by Esdros, the *restäñña* of Dablo Maryam.”⁴² The violence seems to have occurred in the immediate aftermath of the grant. The full details of the reaction of the peasants and soldiers to the loss of land in Dämbeya are hard to know. The event is still remembered in Boch, but the details are forgotten. Oral informants at Boch singled out one Damtäw Esayas as one of the offenders. They also refer to a court petition between the descendants of the offenders and the clergy of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé later in the twentieth century over land in Boch.⁴³ Contrary to information by informants, however, Damtäw Esayas is listed as the *däbtära* of Däbrä-Berhan church and he may have been

⁴¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.89.

⁴² Illinois/IES, 88.V.23 and 24, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*.

⁴³ I rely on oral information provided by the elders in Boch. Sharäw Ambaw, one of my informants (interviewed at Qola Deba in February 2008). He had also served as *cheqa shum* under the church of Däbrä-Berhan prior to the 1974 Ethiopian revolution.

among those who died during the violence. Whatever their motivation and its exact cause, Esdros and others paid a heavy price for their crime.

Iyasu I received the news of the death of the clergy with shock and surprise and took stern measures against the perpetrators. The latter lost everything by reason of their crime: their home, their property and exile to a remote and inhospitable area.⁴⁴ The violence at Dämbeya by the peasants is an early expression of dissatisfaction at the change taking place. Certainly, however, it was not the last and the only one. Although the sources obscure the details, the struggle between peasants and the clergy was a constant theme in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reaction of the peasants of Boch and Dablo serves as a vivid example of the impact of tenurial changes on peasants, change which would intensify in the eighteenth century.

Sectarianism, Disorder and Church Foundations, 1706-1720s

The end of Iyasu's reign was followed by what amounted to a lawless interregnum of nearly two decades marked by a quick succession of four feeble kings: Täklä-Häymanot (r.1706-1708), Téwoflos (r. 1708-1711), Yostos (r. 1711-1716) and Dawit (r.1716-1721). Iyasu's rule came to an end in 1706 upon his strangulation by the order of his son Täklä-Häymanot. Pretenders claiming to be King Yaqob (d.1607) arose from time to time during the troubled early eighteenth century.⁴⁵ The political instability in the kingdom was aggravated by the religious sectarianism of the time which had worsened at the end of Iyasu's rule. Iyasu called religious councils more than once to end sectarianism, but he utterly failed to bring a solution to this intractable problem. Each synod over which Iyasu presided condemned *Qebat* as heresy, but the

⁴⁴ Illinois/IES, 88.v. 24, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*.

⁴⁵ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.90-92; and LaVerle Bennette Berry, "The Sälomonic Monarchy at Gondär, 1630-1755: An Institutional Analysis of Kingship in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia" (PH.D dissertation, Boston University, African Studies Center, 1976), pp. 32-43.

king was powerless to enforce the decision of the councils.⁴⁶ Neither the followers of *Qebat* nor the *Säga* doctrine were ready to give in. Iyasu's successors proved to be more incompetent to deal with sectarianism and took disastrous courses of action. Alternatively influenced at one time by the *Qebat* and at another time by the *Säga*, early eighteenth century rulers failed to identify with one religious sect and enforce uniformity.

By the early eighteenth century, the orthodox clergy actively dabbled in politics and the rival followers of *Qebat* and *Säga* vied for the control of the court. Täklä-Häymanot soon fell out with the *Qebat* dashing their expectations for royal support after decades of marginalization under his predecessor. He was assassinated in 1708 apparently by *Qebat* partisans while on hunting expeditions in Agäwmeder.⁴⁷ His successor and uncle, Téwoflos (r.1708-11), was a *Qebat* sympathizer who had declared the sect as the official line of the Church shortly after his ascent to the throne. Political motives doubtless played a role in his *Qebat* policy. Téwoflos embraced *Qebat* for no better reason than gaining the support of the Gojjamé. The followers of the *Säga* doctrine were exiled, whereas the *Qebat* partisans controlled the court. Téwoflos successors, Yostos and Dawit also bent to the will of the *Qebat* followers. Indeed acquiescence to the *Qebat* partisans had become a requirement for preserving one's political position.⁴⁸

By the late 1710s, the antagonism between the *Qebat* and the *Säga* escalated to new heights. This was indicated by the massacre of over one hundred clergy who followed the *Säga* sect, including their leader, Niqolawas, in 1721 in Gondär town by soldiers presumably acting on the order of king Dawit.⁴⁹ This massacre went well beyond the traditional sectarian intolerance of the Gondärine period. For the populace as a whole, the difference between the *Qebat* and *Säga*

⁴⁶Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.85; LaVerle Bennette Berry, "The Sälomonic Monarchy at Gondär," pp. 32-43.

⁴⁷ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp.90-91; and LaVerle Bennette Berry, "The Sälomonic Monarchy at Gondär," pp. 32-43.

⁴⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.92.

followers amounted to nothing more than participation in Christian ritual on different calendars. However, sectarian agitations together with the problem of pretenders had a paralyzing effect on the kingdom. The kingdom was set on a disastrous course. Only the ascent of King Bäkafa (r. 1721-1730) reversed the downward slide. Religious unity was still a century and half in the future; however Bäkafa managed to restore order and peace which lasted until 1769.

Despite the general confusion and disorder, grants of *rim* property were expanding and churches were founded in the early eighteenth century. In a will drawn toward the close of the Gondärine era by the nobleman *Däjazmach* YäMaryam Barya, he listed his *rim* property scattered across diverse churches. Two of the churches under which he held *rim* property as *däbtära* date from the early eighteenth century. Each king during the early decades of the eighteenth century, except Täklä-Häymanot, continued to found churches in Gondär. Founding and endowing new institutions rather than make additional grants to already existing institutions seems to have been the trend of the time.⁵⁰ Two of the first churches to be founded in this anarchic time were Hämärä-Noh [= Naoh's Ark] in 1709 in the name of the 318 Christian Fathers, who convened at Nicaea in the early history of Christianity, and the church of Yohannes Wäldä-Nägwädgwad. Both were founded by King Téwoflos. The foundation charter for Hämärä-Noh is brief. It lists nine places where the lands of the clergy were located and little else. Its land register did not survive the destruction of the church in nineteenth century.⁵¹ His successors founded two churches in quick succession. In 1714 King Yostos founded the church of Ledäta and in 1716 Dawit founded a church dedicated to Saint Mika'el both in the capital Gondär.⁵²

⁵⁰ Berry, "The Sälomonic Monarchy at Gondär," pp.197-198.

⁵¹ BL, Or., 508, f278r; Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.92.

⁵² BL., Or., 778, 2r; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.92.

The Reign of Bäkaffa (r.1721-1730)

Bäkafa brought peace and order to the country. The royal chronicler and later sources highlight that Bäkafa was a forceful and decisive personality. During the 1720s, political imperative dictated stern measures against imposters and dissident soldiers. Bäkafa severely punished rebels and others who refused to conform to his policy. Two events epitomize the king's political policy. Bäkafa owed his ascent to the throne to the intervention of palace guards. Yet his fury did not spare them. Palace guards with slave backgrounds called *wellaj* were unpopular in Gondär and their meddling in politics was partly responsible for the disorder of the preceding decade. In 1723 the king ordered the *wellaj* to leave Gondär town and subsequently massacred them and dissolved the survivors. A pretender called Hezqeyas had his upper limbs cut off by Bäkafa's order. Hezqeyas died from the wounds shortly afterwards.⁵³ Tradition remembers Bäkafa for his tyrannous punishments. But it was one that ultimately bore fruit and proved extremely rewarding.

The political stability and peace which Bäkafa reestablished in 1720s signaled another turning point in Gondärine history. Nearly four decades of prosperity, creativity and building followed the death of Bäkafa in 1730. The key development was the rise of Bäkafa's consort, Mentewwab (r.1730-1769), to power. Church foundations and *rim* grants in Gondär reached their climax during the time of Mentewwab, which will be discussed in far greater detail further down. The reign of Bäkafa was also remarkable for the building of churches and the granting of *rim*. Before we turn to the discussion of institutional developments of the later decades, I will briefly present some of the grants of Bäkafa for the light they shed on the landholding system.

⁵³ Ignazio Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Aethiopicum, versio, Series Altera, vol. 6 (Rome 1912), pp. 283-84, 307-09.

The patterns of Bäkafa's grants and foundations were largely determined by his personal dedication to Saint Mary as well his sectarian affiliation. Bäkafa built the churches of Däfächa Kidanä-Meherät on the north side of Gondär, Wäybla Maryam in Bäläsa, the island church of Qälämuḵ Kidanä-Meherät in Lake Tana and a palace chapel in Gondär, all dedicated to Saint Mary. Within Gondär he built yet another church dedicated to Saint Rufa'el.⁵⁴ In contrast to his predecessors and successors, Bäkafa supported and promoted the followers of the *Säga* sect by funneling land grants to them. For example, he founded and endowed the church of Abäza Giyorgis (whose location is yet to be determined) to the followers of Niqolawas, the leader of the *Säga* sect killed in 1721.⁵⁵

In a word, Bäkafa's grants entailed *rim* property. More importantly for our purpose, however, the grants of Qälämuḵ Kidanä-Meherät and the inventory of Rufa'el church provide fresh information on the way transactions were rendered and property was exploited. The charter of Qälämuḵ reveals information on a new administrative office charged with the task of measuring and witnessing the conveyances of land to grantees that accompanied the advance in land measuring practices. The charter includes information about this office by stating "he (Bäkafa) established 52 *däbtäroch* over the two-thirds of the lands of Guleqaba, Asbo, and Faris Qämäs as their *rim*. [...] The *aqafafi* is *Azaji Tädäsiwäs*."⁵⁶ Tädäsiwäs was assigned by Bäkafa with the task of dividing the land between the clergy of Qälämuḵ and the rural cultivators. The term used to describe his duties was *aqafafi*. *Aqafafi* is derived from the root "*qäffäfi*" or "he

⁵⁴ For the grants of Bäkafa, see Crummeḵ, *Land and Society*, p. 102. For Qälämuḵ Kidanä-Meherät, see BL., Or., 481., 208v; and Illinois/IES, 88. X. 19-21, Mändäba, Wängél Zäwärq. For the charter and register of Däfächa Kidanä-Meherät, see BL., Or. 481, 4r; Illinois/IES., II.3-14; Illinois/IES, 88. XLI.19-21, Fit Mika'el, Wängél.

⁵⁵ Crummeḵ, *Land and Society*, p.100; BL., Or., 481., 208v.; and Illinois/IES, 88, X, 16. Mändäba, Mäshäfä Häwi.

⁵⁶ BL., Or., 481., 208v; and Illinois/IES, 88. X. 19-21, Mändäba, Wängél Zäwärq: "ጉልቋባን አስቦ ፋሪስ ቀመስን ለ፶፪ ደብተሮች ፪ እጁን እሪም ሰርተዋል።...አቃፋፊው አዛጅ ተደሲዎስ ነዎ።"

divides or cuts into pieces.” In some instances, the term was used interchangeably with *rim*.⁵⁷ This usage was borne out by the term *qefaf* as the equivalent of *rim* in many registers and charters.⁵⁸ The point to derive from this is that the office of *aqafafi* was the consequence of the introduction of *rim* property. Land registers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicate that the office of *aqafafi* was not permanent and expired once the allocation and division of land was executed. Further, judges or other public officials carried out this task and usually special land was staked-out and given to the *aqafafi* in remuneration for his service during land redistribution. Thereafter *aqafafi* is mentioned in several land registers of churches in both Gojjam and Bägemed. Wherever the term *aqafafi* made its appearance it carried the same duties and rights as its use in the records of the churches founded by Bäkafa.⁵⁹

Azaji Tädäsiwäs had also a strong stake in the grants of Rufa’el church and perhaps served as *aqafafi* as well. He appears in an inventory of the church listing its *däbtära* and their dependent *zégä* laborers. The list is organized in reference to an unidentifiable locality called Janaho under the jurisdiction of Rufa’el.⁶⁰ The social relation expressed in this document is the subject of chapter five. Suffice here to state that by the end of Bäkafa’s reign *rim* was increasingly becoming the most important form of property in which individuals held their land. It was about this time that *rim* also acquired monetary value. The extensive grants and systematic documentation of *rim* property that occurred during the 1730s and 40s was a culmination of the process that started nearly a century before.

⁵⁷ Baeteman, *Dictionnaire Amarnigna-Français*, p.362. Clear statements on the specific details of the functions of the *aqafafi* are not laid out in the register. The lack of documentation on the *aqafafi* partly stems from the transitory nature of the office which expired after the survey was conducted and recorded.

⁵⁸ King Täklä-Häymanot’s (r.1874-1900) , ruler of Gojjam, charter to Däbrä-Marqos used the term *qefaf* to describe the *rim* lands to the clergy (Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 200).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 251.

⁶⁰ BL., Or. 799, f218a.

The Founding of Qwseqwam: Rim in the Mentewwab Era, 1730 to 1769

Crummey has given a considerable and deserved attention to Mentewwab and her most influential foundation of Qwesqwam. The documentation that has survived from the time of Mentewwab is comparatively dense and deserves an even closer attention from historians than has been given so far. Between 1730 and 1769 Mentewwab was at the center of the major political and cultural developments in the country and the three decades of her reign are aptly dubbed by Crummey as “the Era of Mentewwab.”⁶¹ Mentewwab influenced the development of legal practice in northern Ethiopia. She consolidated her power through the support of a powerful faction, the Qwarāñña. Called after the name of the home province they sprang from (Qwara) members of the Qwarāñña in general were mediocre and of obscure origin. They soon rose to national prominence and wealth through Mentewwab’s influence and by entering service in the royal court.⁶²

The Qwarāñña inserted into the royal court in the 1720s and the entry point was Mentewwab. The decisive moment in this regard came in 1723 when the young Mentewwab was sent to King Bākafa’s court “at his request” by Yolyana, her grandmother from Qwara. Although he did not formally marry her, Bākafa soon had a son by Mentewwab, Iyasu II. Afterwards, the influence of the Qwarāñña in the court grew rapidly. In the late 1720s Yolyana’s brother, Niqolawas and her son, Arkälädis, received appointments at court and joined Mentewwab. When Bākafa died in 1730 Niqolawas and Mentewwab’s relatives acted swiftly and declared Iyasu II (r.1730-1755) successor and crowned him king at the age of seven. The minority of Iyasu II gave the Qwarāñña the opportunity to shape developments for their own benefit. Mentewwab had herself crowned in the same year as Iyasu II, thereby consummating the meteoric rise of the

⁶¹ The best account on the closely knit Qwarāñña and their property dealings is crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.94-113. See also Ignazio Guidi, *Annales Regum IYasu II et Iyo 'as*, pp.10, 12, 97, and 203.

⁶² Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 94-99.

Qwaräñña. Real power during the reign of Iyasu II (1730-1755) and his son and successor, Iyo'as (r.1755-1769) rested in the hand of Mentewwab and her relatives.⁶³

Crummey's treatment of Mentewwab shows how vigorous, adroit and creative she was. She successfully weathered many political storms that broke out in the 1730s. The most threatening of these occurred in 1732, when noblemen who resented the Qwaräñña's monopoly of power laid siege to the royal residence itself. The confident Mentewwab, however, did not panic and reassured her councilors that her wisdom would win the day. Based on a contemporary source, Crummey quoted her as saying "If I am a woman by the manner of my creation," she announced to her councilors, "my gifts, which I have received from God, from below [on earth] and from above [heaven], are those of a man amongst men."⁶⁴ The 1732 rebellion and several others were defeated and the Qwaräñña were firmly established in power. The royal chronicler provides unusually detailed information on the members. Most of them were Mentewwab's close kindred. Of these, the most significant was Mentewwab's brother, Wäldä-Le'ul, who held the key office of *behtwäddäd* or guardian of the king for over three decades, from 1733 to 1767.⁶⁵

Mentewwab further tightened her grip on power through strategic marriage alliances with the lords of northern Ethiopia, including Gojjam, Tegray and Wällo. She had three daughters—Aletash, Astér and Wälätä-Isra'el—by her lover, *Grazmach* Iyasu, grandson of King Iyasu I (1682-1706).⁶⁶ Astér was married to *Däjazmach* YäMaryam Barya, a prominent Qwaräñña himself. Discussion of YäMaryam Barya's will closes this chapter. For the second of her daughters, Wälätä-Isra'el, Mentewwab chose a husband from Gojjam, *Däjazmach* Yosédéq,

⁶³ Ibid; and Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, pp.9,-10, 14, 37, 54, 91, 184-94.

⁶⁴ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.95; and Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, p.54.

⁶⁵ Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, pp. 57-58, 60, 77, 79-80, 105-108.

⁶⁶ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.97-98.

whose descendants ruled Gojjam into the twentieth century.⁶⁷ The church Wälätä-Israel founded in Gojjam is a central theme of chapter four. The third daughter, Aletash, was married to Wäldä Häwaryat, who was born into the ruling house of Tegray. The political networks Mentewwab skillfully interwove were remarkably successful. The Qwaräñña did not face any serious challenge from regional rulers until the late 1760s.⁶⁸

Firmly entrenched as ruler, Mentewwab embarked on a program of construction of churches and palaces that left a visible architectural legacy on the landscape of Gondär. Mentewwab also patronized churches which already existed in Bägémeder, Tegray, Gojjam and Saraye in Eritrea. Her well known foundations are Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam in Gondär and Narga Sellasé in Lake Tana. Crummey has written about Mentewwab's motives in founding Qwesqwam and Narga Sellasé. He pointed out that the new foundations, especially Qwesqwam, were to serve as centers of *Qebat* teaching to counter the rival church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé in Gondär. Like many members of the Qwaräñña faction, Mentewwab was a *Qebat* partisan. During the whole period of her reign, *Qebat* won prominence in the royal court at Gondär. Qwesqwam and Narga displayed Mentewwab's commitment to this sect. A closer look at the administrative document that was issued as part of the foundation process of Narga called "Zéna Narga" bears out a premeditated plan as well as the involved story of its founder. One of the most remarkable features of "Zéna Narga" is that it contains identifying information about the institutional background of the new church's recruits. All of the clerics listed in "Zéna Narga", without exception, came from churches and monasteries long known to be *Qebat* strongholds.

⁶⁷ Fantahun, "Gojjam", p.2.

⁶⁸ Richard Pankhurst, "An Eighteenth Century Ethiopian Dynastic Marriage," Contract between Empress Mentewwab of Gondär and *Ras* Mika'el Sehul of Tigre," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42, no. 3 (1979), pp.456-466.

Not unnaturally, the largest contingent of the clerics came from Gojjam, particularly from the monastery of Däbrä-Wärq, which stands fast to its *Qebat* commitment to this day.⁶⁹

Mentewwab's foundations were also memorials and displays of status and power. With respect to Qwesqwam, from the beginning, she intended the church to be her mausoleum and final resting place. This conclusion is buttressed by the villa she built adjacent to the church and her burial at Qwesqwam in 1768. The construction of the church and the villa were most likely started at the same time.⁷⁰ Further founding churches were also used to meet practical needs and as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Mentewwab routinely used her grants as an excuse to reward her kindred and servants. The newly risen regional noblemen of Qwara such as Wäldä-Le'ul and Arkälädīs and Mentewwab's children—Wälätä-Isra'el, Astér, Aletash and Iyasu II—were the recipients and beneficiaries of grants during the Mentewwab era, as will be discussed shortly.

In brief, Narga and Qwesqwam's origin are the result of Mentewwab's goal of glorifying and promoting the teachings of *Qebat*, erecting a permanent memorial by establishing highly privileged and richly endowed institutions, and the benefits she and her kindred could obtain from these churches.

The foundation and endowment period of Qwesqwam is very well documented. The construction phase of Qwesqwam was from 1733 to 1743. It was consecrated in 1733 before the building was completed.⁷¹ Qwesqwam was a large foundation and 260 personnel were recruited to serve the new church. Its grants were made twice, in 1735 and 1744.⁷² The core of its

⁶⁹ Guidi, "IL Racconta di Narga," pp.233-67; and Euringer, "Die Geshichte von Nârgâ," vol.9, pp. 281-311, and vol.10, pp. 105-162.

⁷⁰ Berry, "The Sälomonic Monarchy at Gondär," pp.191-198.

⁷¹ Bosc-Tiesse, *Îles de la Mémoire*, pp. 206-7.

⁷² For a detailed discussion of the endowment and foundation of Qwesqwam, see Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.107-109 and 166-176. See also Guidi, *Annales Regum IYasu II et Iyo'as*, pp.89-105; BL, Or., 508, f1v; BL, Or., 511, f3r; BL, Or., 636, f5r; BL; 799, f3r and Illinois/IES, 88-.I.0-IV.30, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Gondär, Mäzgäb.

endowment was made up of lands in Bajäna, Bäläsa and Ebennat districts. The final charter jointly issued by Iyasu II and Mentewwab specifies the way the endowment was acquired and how it was to be used. The relevant part of it deserves to be quoted to contextualize the discussion that follows. The charter is translated and published by Crummey.

Behold, we, King of Kings Iyasu, whose regnal name is Berhan Säggäd, and our mother, our Queen Wälättä Giyorgis [alias Mentewwab], Berhan Mogäsa, gave to Qwesqwam Church, which was built in the land of upper Gondär, [and] which is called Däbrä S'ähay, silk vestments, carpets, censers, gold and silver crowns, a silver paten and chalice, New and Old [Testament] books. To its priests we gave the land called Bajäna, which previously had Galla in it, and in which subsequently Zäwé had been established. For the Eucharist we gave the land called Gwenter which had been in the hands of *Wäyzäro* Meslä Enteya. The dwelling place [for the clergy] we exchanged with the dwelling place which is called Qoffaroč. And afterwards we gave the land of Ebennat and the land of Bäläsa. For the king's commemoration we gave the land of Gweramba. We gave the land of Čela that it may be for the farmers who clear the water course which irrigates the plants of the church and so that it may be [a source] of charcoal for the service of the Eucharist. It is a right [established] in front of *Abunä* Krestodolu and again in front of *Abunä* Yohannes, bishops of Ethiopia, and in front of *Abunä* Täklä-Häymanot, abbot of Däbrä-Libanos, and in front of the *aqabé-sä'at* and the learned men of the churches, and the teachers, and the learned men of the law.[...] ⁷³

The Qwesqwam charter was the archetypical foundation charter for the Gondärine period. It is direct and simple about the constitution of the endowment and the general purpose to which it was put to use. Only the anathema clause which is not included in the quotation above has religious language. The charter includes information about the previous owners of the lands. The land in Bajäna was given to clergy of Qwesqwam by removing the former soldiers established there at several times in the previous century. The charter itemized the purpose for which the grant was made. The bulk of the endowment of the church was committed to the support of the clergy. The lands in Bajäna, Bäläsa and Ebennat were divided among the clergy. The charter dedicated the lands in Gweramba to pay for the memorial service of Iyasu II and the land of Čela provided the material for the Eucharist. The formula of the medieval charters that start with the

⁷³ See Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, pp.89-105; BL, Or., 508, f1v; BL, Or., 511, f3r; BL, Or., 636, f5r, BL; 799, f3r and Illinois/IES, 88-.I.0-IV.30.

invocation of the Holy Trinity was shunned. With the exception of the most solemn foundation charters, religious language in the charters and legal sources became a less marked feature than had been previously. The ceremony that accompanied the grant of the charter was traditional. Among others, two bishops and the abbot of the Däbrä-Libanos monastery witnessed the grant. Yet the contemporary chronicler notes that three officials different from those listed in the charter witnessed the actual conveyance and allotment of the *rim* lands to the individual clergy. He states that “Then *Mälakä Sähay* Hezqeyas, *Bäzher Wänd Zéna Gäbrél* and *Liqé* Giyorgis went down to the land of Bajäna as witnesses. They wrote down all the land of Bajäna and returned quickly after a short time. Then the queen and king held an assembly in the Trellis Chamber and called the priests with their leader [*liq*] and gave to each of them a portion of land.”⁷⁴

The distribution of the specific lands to the clergy and the production of charters and registers represented different stages of the process of the grant. The drawing up of the charter appears to have followed on the heels of the survey and actual conveyance of the land to the clergy. If at all, it was only the drawing up of the charter that the ecclesiastical and secular officials that Mentewwab called to witness the grant saw. The most remarkable of the documents associated with the Qwesqwam foundation is the 120 folios long, two volumes, land register recording the title-deeds of the clerical holders under the church.⁷⁵ The registers were compiled in the wake of a survey and measurement of the lands granted for Qwesqwam.

Land Survey

From the very beginning, Mentewwab may have planned the survey. The scribes of the

⁷⁴ Quoted and translated by Crummey, *Land and Society*, p. 170.

⁷⁵ III/IES, 88.I-IV.30, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Mäzgäb. The second volume of the register has not been catalogued by Crummey and his assistant Shumet Sishagne, who mistakenly assumed that it was a copy of the first volume. Hereafter the second volume will be cited as Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, pictures # 019-200.

1735 and 1744 charters, however, ignore its existence. These registers were bound after their compilation and not covered with the usual protective wooden boards. As the result, the registers' beginning and ending folios are damaged and lost forever. The testimony of the three commissioners established the rights of the 260 *rim* holders and the register put those rights on perpetual record. The survey was most likely done more than once and in different years with the Bajäna section of the register being the first to be compiled. The lands of the clergy in Bäläsa and Ebennat were registered on separate sheets of quires before being eventually collated into the two final volumes.⁷⁶

The Qwesqwam register's organization reveals that it was not primarily a fiscal record. It deals in the first instance with the lands of the clergy. Issues of services and charges of rents associated with *rim* lands are either completely omitted or touched upon only incidentally for some entries.⁷⁷ The register is organized individually and a horizontal line is used to separate one document or entry from another and the items within each entry are separated by the paragraph signs and the use of punctuation marks. A folio from the register is reproduced as illustration 2.

⁷⁶ The number of leaves that are missing from the registers cannot be known. The existing first and last series of folios of the registers are shredded and contain fading documents arising out of exposure.

⁷⁷ Habtamu, "Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia," pp.89-106.



Illustration 2. A folio from the Qwesqwam register. Note the lines separating each entry.

Table 3. The Land of Qwesqwam. Bajäna appears in this table as both a particular locality and, later, as one of three major districts.

Place	Size in <i>Gasha</i>
Bajäna	83
Berläbeho	48
Dazbihon	187
Dehun Mäkära	60
Derkwa	23
Enchänako	32
Endibina	27
Gänbära	48
Januh	89
Käch	7
Käräwa	21
Krilämb	127
Kiräma	70
Mähin	91
Safigé	12
Tämätäna	29
Bajäna Total	945
Bäläsa	601
Ebennat	353
Ebennat+Bäläsa+Bajäna	1899

Table 4. Selected Qwseqwam *rim* holders

Name of <i>rim</i> Holder	Size in <i>Gasha</i>
<u>Ase Iyasu*</u>	7
<u>Däjach Arkälädis*</u>	11
<u>Däjach Dawit*</u>	8
<u>Däjach Géta*</u>	10
<u>Däjach Mänbär*</u>	2
<u>Ras Wäldä-Le'ul*</u>	5
<u>Wäyzäro Astér*</u>	14
<u>Wäyzäro Elléni*</u>	12
<u>Wäyzäro Enkoyä*</u>	11
<u>Wäyzäro Wälätä-Isra'el*</u>	14
<u>Etégé Mentewwab*</u>	11
<i>Däjach Adäru</i>	7
<i>Däjach Ayo</i>	8
<i>Däjach Mamo</i>	6
<i>Däjach Wäräñña</i>	10
<i>Ras Wädajä</i>	9
Total	145

The asterisk symbol * indicates the relations of Mentewwab.

For the majority of cases, the size of land a cleric held in any single locality is almost always one *gasha*. Further one *gasha* of land did not exist as one continuous block of land. In entry after entry we read that every *gasha* field is broken up into scattered plots or *meder* lying here and there. A total of 1899 *gasha* of land were granted to the clergy of Qwesqwam in the three districts (see table above) and divided among 260 individuals. Hence each clergy, on average, would get 7.79 *gasha* of land.⁷⁸ Some of the *rim* holders were men of some standing to begin with. For instance, individuals such as *Däjazmach Wäräñña*—a loyal supporter of the Qwaräñña group—was the ruler of Damot while other prominent persons in the register, *Ras Wädajä* and *Däjazmach Ayo*, were governors of Amhara and Bägémeder, respectively.⁷⁹ In total the three noblemen held 27 *gasha* of land. To this must be added *Däjazmach Adäru*, another high-ranking

⁷⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.94-99 and 110-113.

⁷⁹ Guidi, *Annales Regum IYasu II et Iyo'as*, p.48.

rim holder of Qwesqwam. He received 7 *gasha* of land. Adäru's relation to Mentewwab and her faction is not clear from the register. An early eighteenth century document in the archive of the monastery of Däbrä-Wärq shows that Wädajä and Adäru had familial ties through the marriage of their children.⁸⁰ The relations of these men with the Qwaräñña appear to have been excellent throughout their careers.

The Qwaräñña were the single most important beneficiaries of the grants to Qwesqwam. Mentewwab held 11 *gasha* for herself while her parents, *Däjazmach* Mänbär and *Wäyzäro* Enkoyä, together had 13 *gasha*. Her children, such as Iyasu II, had 9 *gasha*, whereas her daughters, *Wäyzäro* Wälätä-Isra'el and *Wäyzäro* Astér, had 14 *gasha* each. *Wäyzäro* Elléni (alias Aletash), another daughter of Mentewwab had 12 *gasha* of land. Mentewwab's brother, *Ras* Wäldä-Le'ul and her uncles, *Däjazmach* Arkälädis and *Däjazmach* Géta, had 26 *gasha* in total. All in all Mentewwab, along with her well known relatives and their families, held around 97 *gasha* of land accounting for nearly 10 percent of the total lands distributed. This highlights with graphic clarity just how important *rim* had become for the elite. The survey that Mentewwab commissioned not only records the size and location of the lands of the clergy, but also rich social and geographical data in relations to each *rim* lands. In doing this the Qwesqwam *mäzgeb* created a clear map, albeit imaginary, of the social and physical landscape of the lands of Qwesqwam. This is novel practice and deserves further discussion.

Mapping the Social and Physical Landscape of Qwesqwam Lands

The register of the Qwesqwam reveals the complex tenurial arrangements and bewildering variety of social relationships among diverse groups of people. The three commissioners conducting the survey recorded social and legal statistical information, and

⁸⁰ The marriage of *Ras* Wädajä's son and *Däjach* Adäru's daughter is recorded in Dersanä-Mika'el, MS., Däbrä-Wärq, picture # 3807.

physical and topographical details in reference to each plot of *rim* property. The most detailed entries are about the lands of Bajäna.

One of the standard questions asked during the survey was “who is the former owner of the land” and who are the residents of the land. The majority of the entries give the names of thousands of *zégoch* and resident tenants described as *tis* (tenants) in the localities where the *rim* property was found. Usually the *zégoch* are enumerated first and the *tis* afterwards. Finally, individuals, usually a mix of the *zégoch* and the *tis*, appear at the end of each entry under the descriptive term of *mädäb*. The social relations embodied by these terms will be discussed under chapter five. Suffice it to say that each *tis* and *zéga* occurring in the survey held scattered strips of *rim* lands of one or more *däbtära* as dependent laborers.

To judge from the way the register is organized, the surveyors employed a single system during the process of the survey. The usual method they used was to go down in the plots, measure the lands and put that on record. This usually involved the description of the size of the plot in terms of *gasha* and the constituent plots along with their location and a summary of the number of plots.⁸¹ Surveyors used various reference points such as the houses of individuals, rivers, trees, hills, roads, burial grounds and churches in locating and describing the physical boundaries of plots. Most of the plots described as *badema* or former homesteads making part of the measured lands were found in and around residential areas. Some of the *badema* appear to have extended to the very compound of residents. One entry relating to the *däbtära* Abba Kenfu records the lands converted into *rim* extending as close as “the front yard of the house of Muslims.”⁸² Further details of the content of the physical space available in each plot at the time

⁸¹ Few entries in the registers display slight formal differences from the others. Taken as a whole the format in which the legal, social and the topographical information is presented in a consistent pattern. One of the registers' many drawbacks is the many abbreviations used by the scribes.

⁸² Illinois/IES., 88.II.25., Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Mäzgäb.

of the transaction, such as trees, corrals, gardens and pastures, are also listed. It is apparent that it was not just the land that was transferred into the ownership of the Qwesqwam clergy, but also the physical objects on it. For instance, in an entry involving the *däbtära* Wäldu we read that in a locality called Endibina in Bajäna he received one *gasha* divided into fourteen plots, including “the former homestead of Anoré along with the *warka* [fictus vasta] tree on it.”⁸³ In other instances the *däbtära* received pasture lands along with agricultural fields while we also read that even the crops on the field were granted to them. As an example, the entry for a cleric Arku and another joint owner whose name is illegible shows that they received many lands including “the *badema* of Qäy-Aya together with the sorghum crop on it.”⁸⁴ This reference and other list the crops on plots transferred to the *däbtära* at the time of the transaction. There is much that is difficult to interpret in the evidence concerning crops. The chronicler does not record the exact time of the year when the survey was executed.

In the case of Bäläsa, some *däbtära* also received irrigated fields referred to as *shena* in local parlance. The lands of one *Mämher* Arkä-Le’ul were entirely of lands of this kind.⁸⁵ Thus, garden, trees, corrals, pastures, and residential sites were added to the holding of the clergy as appurtenances to the agricultural plots.

Mentewwab’s grant undoubtedly affected thousands of people in significant ways. As evident in hundreds of entries in the registers of Qwesqwam the inheritance of the peasants were broken into smaller parcels of plots and redistributed among the clergy. There does not seem to be any other comparable general expropriation of land from hereditary owners’ in such a short time on the scale of the reign of Mentewwab prior to the eighteenth century. I have selected three

⁸³ Illinois/IES., 88.I.16., Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, Mäzgäb.

⁸⁴ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, pictures # 225-226: “የቀይ አያ ባድማ ከማሽላ ጋር።”

⁸⁵ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, pictures # 281: “የመምህር አርከ ልዑል በአውሴ ጁ ጋ። ጁም ቢኮበር ሽና ጁም የአባ ፍሣ ጌርጊስ ሽና ጁም የኤላውትሮስ ሽና ጁም የውልደ አቢብ ሽና።”

entries, that of Mentewwab's daughter, *Wäyzäro Wälätä-Isra'el*, *Fiqtor*, an Egyptian, and one *Räbehä-Kesos* for an intimate look at the legal rights and social relations entailed in

Mentewwab's grant:⁸⁶

Document 1

የወይዘሮ ወለተ እስራኤል ብርሉብሆ ፩ ጋ የአላ። መሥዋቱ ያረሰው ብርሉብሆ ፈረኃ ጽንጁት ጋላ ባድማ አግዳሚት የዓምዴ ባድማ ውሀ መቅጃ የአላ ሁዳድ ወርቅ ምድር ዶቅማ ቢነኩራ የፈላሻ መቃብር አጋም መልኬ ያረሰው ሆሀይ አጋሙ ባለርስቱ ዓምዴ። ፩ ጋ የራሌ ሸሻሁ መስክ የመሥዋቱ ሸጎ ጥምቀተ ባር ቃሎ ያረሰው እስላምኔ ያቶይ ባድማ ድንኩል ድባ ያራሌ ቦታ መገጭ አሀያ መንከባለያ ፳፪ ም። ጸ ዜ ፍሣ ጢ እልፍዮስ ጸጌ ባለርስቱ መሥዋቱ የአላ ዜጎች መልኬ ዓምዴ ጢስ ወልዱ አትኔ ገብርኤል መደብ ዓምዴ።

[The listed lands of] *Wälätä-Isra'el*:

1 *gasha* in *Berläbeho*, [The former owner] was *Ala*, what *Mäswaté* ploughed, *Färäweha Senjut* in *Berläbeho*, the former homestead of the *Galla*, *Agedamit*, the former homestead of *Amdé*, *Wehä Mäqeja*, the *hudad* of *Ala*, *Wärq Meder*, *Doqma*, *Binäkura*, *Fälasha Mäqabir*, *Agam*, what *Mälké* ploughed, and *Hohey Agamu*, the inheritance of *Amdé*. 1 *gasha*; *Ralé's* [land], *Shäshahu Mäsk*, *Mäswaté's* [land], *Shägo*, *Temqätä Baher*, what *Qallo* ploughed, in *Islamgé* the former homestead *Yatoy*, in *Denkul Deba Ralé's* residential site, *Mägäch*, and *Aheya Mänkäbalya*. The total is 22 *meder*. The *sä[mad] zé[ga]* is *Fesa*. The *tis* are *Elfiyos*, *Sagé*, the *balärest* *Mäswaté*, *Ala's* former *zégoch*, *Mälké* and *Amdé* [...] *Wäldu*, *Atné* and *Gabriel*. The *mädäb* is *Amdé*.

Document 2

የግብጽ ፊቅጦር ኪረማ ፩ ጋ የንጻ ከሶስ ደማቱ ያደርዩ ጤፍ ከወልደ አምላክ ድንበር ላይኒ ያራሰው ኑግ ዳንጊን ያረሰው ጤፍ ከእስላሙ ድንበር ቅላጅ ያረሰው ማሽላ የሻለቃ ምዝሬ ኩዳድ ከአምባ ቦታች ጽጉ ጀምድር ያደርዩ ቦታ አስተሪ ባምባ ከመርቆሬዎስ ዳር ያለ ማሽላ አብየ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ የቀይ አያ ባድማ ከማሽላው ጋራ ጎሽና ቀይ አያ ያረሱት ኑግ አብዬ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ ከወልዴ ጻፍጣ ድምበር የወልደ አብ ማሽላ ጥቁር አያ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ ወዳጅ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ የጎሽ ባድማ የኩላና የጥቁር አያ ባድማ የይለኒ ባድማ ፳ ም። ጸ ዜ ጎሽ ወልዴ ጢ ወልደ አብ ደሞ አምንካውዚ። መደብ አደርዩ።

[The listed lands of] *Fiqtor* the Egyptian:

1 *gasha* in *Kiräma*, [the former land of] *Nesa- Kesos Dämaté*, the *téff* [field] of *Adäreyä*, the *nug* oil field ploughed by *Layené* bordering *Wäldä-Amlak's* land, the *téff* [field] ploughed by *Dangin* bordering the land of the *Muslim*, the sorghum [field] ploughed by the *Qelaj*, the *kudad* of *Shaläqa Mezré*, two plots below the hill, the residential site of *Adäreyä*, in *Astäri Bamba* the [land] and the sorghum on it bounded by the holding of *Märqoréwos*, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by *Abeyä*, the former homestead of *Qäy Aya* together with the sorghum on it, the *nug* oil [field] jointly ploughed by *Goshä* and *Qäy Aya*, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by *Abeyä* bounded by *Wäldé Safeta's* holding; the

⁸⁶ For the entry involving *Fiqtor* and *Räbehä Kesos* see *Illinois/IEs.*, 88.III. 11-12, *Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqam*, *Mäzgäb* and for *Wäyzäro Wälätä-Isra'el* see *Illinois/IEs.*, I.31 *Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqam*, *Mäzgäb*.

sorghum [field] of Wäldä-Ab, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by Tequr Aya, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by Wädajä, the former homestead of Goshä, the former homestead of Kola and Tequr Aya, the former homestead of Yeleni. [Total] 20 meder. The *sä[mad]* *z[éga]* are Goshä and Wäldé. The *tis* are Wäldä-Ab, Dämo and Amenkawezi. The *mädäb* is Adäreyä.

Document 3

የረብሐ ክሶስ ኪረማ ፩ ጋ የንጻ ክሶስ ደማቱ አስተሪ ባምባ ባጸገብ ያለ በዳ አሪዮን ያረሰው ማሽላ ሀሊቡ ያረሰው ማሽላ የኩላ ዳጉሳ ገላውዴዎስ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ አሰንዳቦ ዋስዲ ያረሰው ማሽላ ወክሶስ ያረሰው ጤፍ አሪዮን ያረሰው ኑግ ዳንጊን ያረሰው ማሽላ የሉክዮስ እስከ ከሞሰላብ ድምበር የዘላኖች ባድማ ሉክዮስ ያረሰው ማሽላ ስነውት ያረሰችው ማሽላ የባሻ ባድማ የጥቁር አያ ጥጥ መዘጋ ጥቁር አያ ያረሰው ዳጉሳ ፳ ም ጸ ዜ ዳንጊን ቀይ አያ ጢ ኩላ ጥቁር አያ ወዳጄ መደብ አደርዬ ለይኒ።

[The listed lands of] Räbehä-Kesos:

1 *gasha* in Kiräma, the former lands of Neša Kesos Dämaté, the Bäda close to Astäri Bamba, the sorghum [field] ploughed by Oriyon, the sorghum [field] ploughed by Hälibu, the *dagusa* [field] of Kola, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by Gälawdéwos, in Asändabo the sorghum [field] ploughed by Wasdi, the *téff* [field] ploughed by Wäkesos, the *nug* oil [field] ploughed by Oriyon, the sorghum [field] ploughed by Dangan, Lukiyos's [land] reaching upto the boundary of Mosälab's holding, the former homestead of the nomads, the sorghum [field] ploughed by Lukiyos, the sorghum [field] ploughed by Senä-[Hi]wät, the former homestead of Basha, the cotton [field] of Tequr Aya in Mäzäga, the *dagusa* [field] ploughed by Tequr Aya. [Total] 20 meder. The *sä[mad]* *zé[ga]* are Dangan, Qäy Aya. The *tis* are Kola, Tequr Aya [and] Wädajä. The *mädäb* [are] Adäreyä [and] Layeni.

These entries, typical of hundreds of others, disclose the richness of the register and the complexity involved in the *rim* system of tenure. In the first document, Wälätä-Isra'el received two *gasha* made of twenty plots scattered among the former lands of some ten individuals. A considerable part of the first *gasha*, given to Wälätä-Isra'el as her *rim*, was perhaps derived from Ala. Among other things, Ala forfeited his *hudad* lands, usually land held by state officials and worked by corvee labor. Wälätä-Isra'el also received two *badema* as part of her first *gasha* land. One of the *badema* appeared to have belonged to the Jawi, soldiers of Oromo background who held the land formerly, as the term Galla *badema* seems to suggest, while the other belonged to Amdé, who is mentioned as hereditary owner. The scribes located these plots in reference to well-known land marks in the hamlet of Berläbeho in Bajäna, including the burial grounds of the

local Fälasha (Bétä-Isra'el) people. The second *gasha* Wälätä-Isra'el received in *rim* was also taken from more than one person, a considerable part of it seems to have come from one Ralé, whose *bota* is also transferred into her holding. The *badema* of the person identified as Atoye and the land ploughed by one Qallo were also included in the *rim* lands of Wälätä-Isra'el. All in all she gained control over twenty plots of land as *rim*. The cultivation of these plots was entrusted to Fesa who is described as *sämad zéga* or plowman. It seems apparent that Fesa had no relation to these plots before the transaction for he appeared neither as hereditary owner nor as *tis*. Fesa was the only *zéga* that Wälätä-Isra'el had in Berläbeho, where she had a disproportionately high number of *tis* in her land. Those described as *tis* included the former hereditary owners Mäswaté and the former *zégoch* of Ala, namely, Amdé and Mälké. It seems very clear therefore that like Amdé, Mälké was cultivating the land which had once been his own inheritance as *zéga* for Ala. Therefore, one way or the other Amdé, Mälké and Mäswaté had some kind of relations to the *rim* lands of Wälätä-Isra'el either as *zégoch* or hereditary owners. Hence it was not just property which Ala lost to Wälätä-Isra'el but also his former *zégoch*. The status of Amdé and Mälké was thus changed from being *zégoch* of Ala to *tis* of Wälätä-Isra'el.

The second document concerns a foreign national, Fiqtor, one of four Egyptians serving Qwesqwam as *däbtära* as mentioned in the register.⁸⁷ Documents 2 and 3 involving Fiqtor and Räbehä-Kesos appear to have been interrelated to each other in several ways. To begin with the lands one *gasha*, or the equivalent of twenty dispersed fields for each, were in the same locality, viz., Kiräma, and seem to have shared borders, if not extended over the same field. For instance, the specific locale called Astäri Bamba is mentioned in both entries. Moreover, a considerable part of the *rim* lands of Fiqtor and Räbehä-Kesos seems to have derived more or less from the

⁸⁷ Nothing beyond the evidence of the register is known about the background of the four Egyptians. They may have been members of the entourage of the Egyptian archbishop of Ethiopia.

same persons, including Nesa-Kesos Dämaté. The persons appearing as *mädäb*, *tis* and *zégoch* in both entries appear to have been the same persons as well. The persons described as *mädäb* for Räbehä-Kesos are Adäreyä and Layené. Both individuals' names are found in the second document. Adäreyä is also whom Fiqtör had as his *mädäb*, while Layeni's *nug* oil plot was transferred as part of the *rim* for the former. Furthermore, Adäreyä's *teff* plot and his residential site are also mentioned making part of the *rim* plots of Fiqtör. Other individuals mentioned in both documents include Dangin, Kula, Tequr Aya and Qäye Aya whose *badema* and agricultural plots together with the crops on them were apparently divided among Fiqtör and Räbehä-Kesos.

Other than the common ground mentioned above, Fiqtör and Räbehä-Kesos dealt separately with different individuals. In the second document, Fiqtör received as part of his *rim* the *hudad* lands of *Shaläqa* Mezré, as well as the *badema* and plots of Qelaj, Abeyä, Wäldä-Ab, Wädajä, and Yeleni together with the crops on them. The boundaries of these lands are defined in reference to the neighboring plots of named individuals. Fiqtör had also two *sämad zégoch* (whose names were Goshä and Wäldé) and three resident *tis* (Wäldä-Ab, Dämo and Amenkawzi). The information we have about Räbehä-Kesos is similar to that of Fiqtör. In the case of Räbehä-Kesos, besides the lands of the individuals who also involved Fiqtör, he received the *bademas* and agricultural fields of Oriyon, Hälibu, Wäkesos, Wäsdä, Lukiwos, Senä-Hiwät and Basha. His *sämad zégoch* and resident *tis* included Dangin and Qäye Aya and Kula, Tiqur Aya and Wädajä. Both entries well illustrate the number of people affected by the redistribution; a total of sixteen individuals were involved in the transaction in various capacities.

The conclusion based on these is that a significant proportion of the rural population in the hinterland of Gondär was affected by the sweeping redistribution of land. These three entries from the register are good examples of the complexity of the social and legal relations the

Qwesqwam register discloses. It is sufficiently clear that *rim* had become established as the most important form of property during this period. The Mentewwab era marked the climax of institutional foundations in Bägémeder. The importance which *rim* attained in Gondär is revealed most clearly in a will drawn up by an influential nobleman, *Däjazmach* YäMaryam Barya, in 1768. The will of YäMaryam Barya serves an apt conclusion to a discussion of the introduction and growing prevalence of *rim* property in Gondär. The text is brief but revealing and deserves to be quoted:⁸⁸

ደጃዝምቶ የማርያም ባርያ ቤትውን ሲሰሩ ለልጆቻቸው የቅሀ ኢየሱስን እሪም የቀሰቋምን እሪም ቦታውንም የወልደነጎድጓድ የሃኒስን እሪም ፳፻ ጨው አብናግብ ለወይዘሮ ስሀርቱ ሰጥቼ አለሁ አሉ። የልደታን እሪም ቦታውንም የበዓታን እሪም ፪ለት የፋፋኤልን እሪም የኖርጋን እሪም ፲፻ ጨው ግቢላ ድርማራን የጎንደርን ቦታየን ለወይዘሮ የወርቅ ውሀ ሰጥቼ አለሁ። ቋራን ለሁለት ያድርጉ። ይህንን ያፈረሰ የፋቀ ውጉዝ ይኩን።

When *Däjazmach* YäMaryam Barya passed his property to his children, he said “I have given to *Wäyzäro* Sehertu my *rim* under Qehä Iyäsus, the residential site and *rim* under Qwesqwam, the *rim* under Wäldä-Nägodgwad Yohännes, and the 500 salt bars derived from Abnagäb. [Furthermore], he said “I have given for *Wäyzäro* Yäwäraq-Wehä my *rim* together with the residential site under Ledäta, the *rim* under Bä’ata, the *rim* under Rufa’el, the *rim* under Narga, 110 salt bars derived from Gebila and Dermara and my residential site in Gondär.”

Like many other members of the Qwaräñña, YäMaryam Barya rose to a high rank through the patronage of Mentewwab and by being married to her daughter, Astér. He also served as governor of Bägémeder in the late 1760s until his execution by his enemies on January 6, 1769.⁸⁹ *Däjazmach* Ayo, YäMaryam Barya’s father, was the governor of Bägémeder in the 1740s. His power was based in Gwa Giyorgis at very close proximity to the church of Bétä-Lehém (see map 3). He owned *rim* land as *däbtära* of seven churches: Bä’ata, Ledäta, Narga, Qehä Iyäsus, Qwesqwam, Rufa’el, and Yohännes Wäldä-Nägodgwad. YäMaryam Barya dismembered these lands between his two daughters: *Wäyzäro* Sehertu and *Wäyzäro* Yäwäraq-Wehä. Sehertu got the *rim* lands her father held under the churches of Qehä-Iyäsus, Qwesqwam and Yohännes as well

⁸⁸ BL, Or., 604, f1a.
⁸⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.111-112.

as five hundred salt bars, whereas Yäwärq-Wehä got the *rim* lands and his residential sites held under the churches of Ledäta, Bä'ata, Rufa'el and Narga Sellasé, 110 ten salt bars he extracted from his property in such places as Gebila and Dermara and his residential site in Gondär. His property in his native province of Qwara was to be divided equally between Sehertu and Yäwärq-Wehä.

Several significant features of *rim* are revealed in this will. The will shows that *rim* had attained high importance in this period. Besides their ecclesiastical estates, noblemen and women held secular property. However, YäMaryam Barya had no significant form of property to dispose to his heirs other than his *rim* land. Beginning with its introduction as an important form of ecclesiastical property a considerable amount of *rim* passed to the laity in this way. Purely secular motivations should not be discounted as the primary intention of noblemen and women in holding *rim*. Many Gondärine noblemen and women were rentier landlords.⁹⁰ YäMaryam Barya's testament offers further insight into the geographical spread of *rim* property. Compact estates perhaps did exist; however, the evidence in the will of YäMaryam Barya infers that the lands of many landlords were located in many areas. YäMaryam Barya lived in Gondär, but held land in areas scattered about the various districts of Bägemedder, where the lands of the named churches were found. The distribution of *rim* was particularly dense in Dämbeya, where a good part of the district had been given to the churches of Gondär. By the late eighteenth century there must have been very little land for the kings in Gondär to give away. Because of this fact, later grants involved the same lands held by already existing institutions. The last of the royal foundations in Gondär, Bä'ata, by King Täklä-Häymanot in the 1770s is a case in point.⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Rim* was desirable because of the lighter obligations it carried and the protection it enjoyed. Pious motive, if at all, played only secondary role in accounting the interest of landlords in *rim*.

⁹¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.145-146. For the land register of Bä'ata, see Illinois/IES, 88.VI 27-VIII.1.

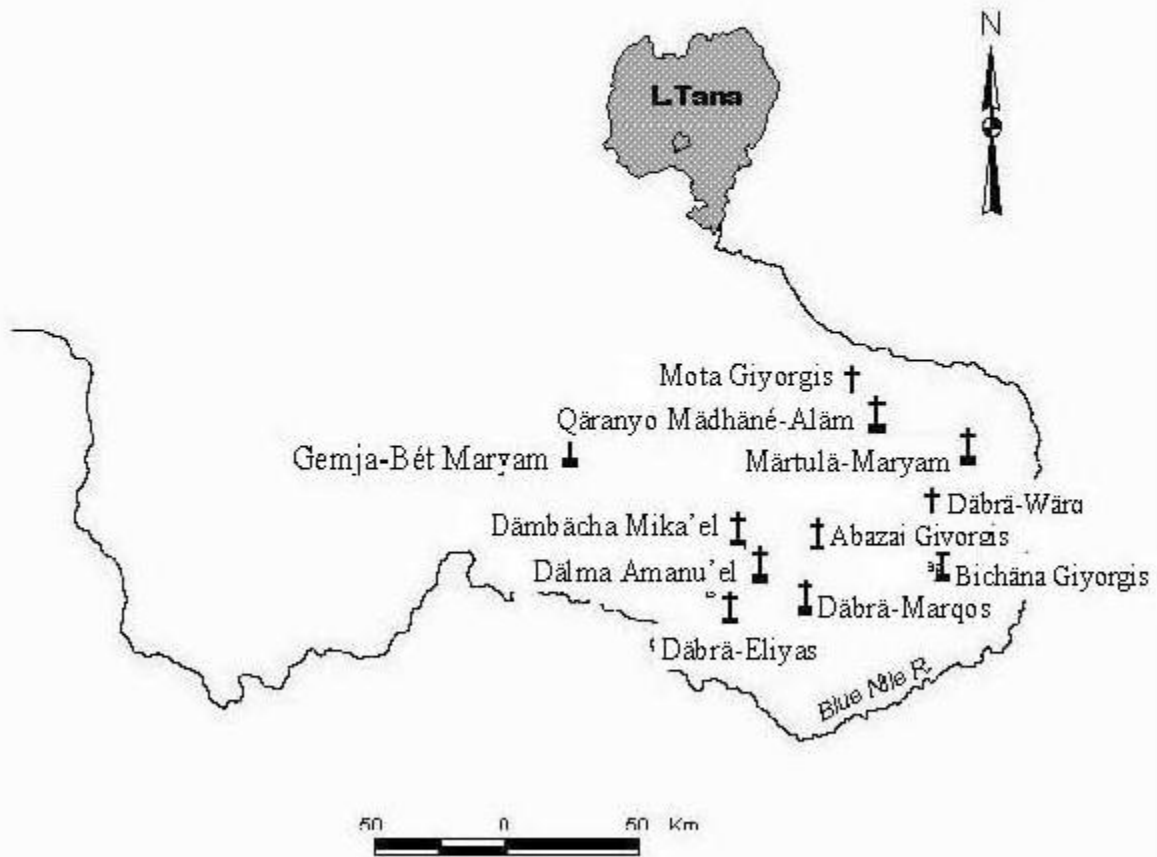
Conclusion

The establishment of Gondär affected all aspects of social, cultural and economic life in Ethiopian society. The growth of *rim* property was at the heart of the changes in society. *Rim* brought changes in the way documents were composed and transactions were rendered. With the introduction of *rim* property in the second half of the seventeenth century, land measurement became an essential aspect of the procedure of material transaction. These new documentary forms depart from those of the preceding centuries in their objective, language and structure. In contrast to the previous period, during the Gondärine period people started to keep careful track of their property by defining its size, location, the rents and taxes they derived from it and putting that on permanent record. The onset of the practice of land measurement gave rise to new form of documentation. The new trend to itemize the size of *rim* property, its occupants, rents derived from it and other similar information began during the reign of King Fasilädäs and took definite shape during the time of Iyasu I (1682-1706). It culminated in the two volume land register of Mentewwab, arguably one of Ethiopia's most remarkable female leaders. The period also brought broad shifts in the peasants relations to the land. The ruling class took control of a considerable amount of land in the name of churches by expropriating rural cultivators. Thus *rim* brought a broad shift in the status of the peasants towards subjection and a corresponding rise in the power of the ruling class.

The era of the Qwaräñña closed with the collapse of the central institutions of church and state in 1769. Despite the decline of the central government, however, *rim* gained in importance during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapter four discusses how *rim* grants played out in Gojjam. Indeed, for the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the most solid evidence about *rim* property comes from Gojjam. The spread of *rim* into Gojjam was

remarkably swift. *Rim* was introduced in the middle of the eighteenth in that province and steadily expanded afterwards, reaching its climax in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Map 7. Grants and Foundations in Gojjam, 1766-1900



Chapter Four: Rim Grants in Gojjam: Articulation and Consolidation, c. 1760s-1900

The quiet during Qwarāñña domination was deceptive and their rule ended with the violent collapse of the monarchy and the Gondärine kingdom. Much of the work Mentewwab and her Qwarāñña faction did was undone by a later generation. In the immediate context, it was Mentewwab herself who precipitated the catastrophe. By the late 1760s most of the Qwarāñña who had played a leading role as founders and patrons of churches during the Mentewwab era had largely died, or were dying out. Mentewwab's brother, Wäldä-Le'ul, died in 1767. He was instrumental in keeping the rebellious nobles in check. As time went by the loyalty of the lords of northern Ethiopia to the Qwarāñña evaporated. In 1768 the rebellion by *Däjazmach* Fasil of Damot, son and successor of *Däjazmach* Wärāñña, cost the Qwarāñña one of its key members, *Däjazmach* Eshäté. The family connections that Mentewwab established in Tegray and Wällo gained the Qwarāñña few, if any, long-term benefits to reinforce their position in the country. Indeed, her familial ties were eventually the undoing of the Qwarāñña. In 1755 Mentewwab's daughter Aletash was wedded to Wäldä-Häwaryat, son of the powerful governor of Tegray, *Däjazmach* Mika'el Schul. This marriage union between the two families served the Qwarāñña to buy the loyalty of Mika'el until the late 1760s. Seeking to secure political advantage for her faction, Mentewwab had also arranged a marriage alliance with the Oromo of Wällo. Her son King Iyasu II (r.1730-1755) was married to Wabi, the daughter of an Oromo lord from Wällo. Iyasu and Wabi's son, Iyo'as (r.1755-1769) ascended to the throne in 1755 at the age of seven and Mentewwab and her faction ruled on his behalf until 1768.¹ She hoped that this dynastic alliance would offer her faction help to stay in power in times of difficulty. Mentewwab

¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.110-113; James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* vol. II (Edinburgh, 1790), pp. 674-678, and Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia & Abyssinia* vol. I (Oosterhout NB: The Netherlands, Anthropological Publications, 1970), pp.459-463.

miscalculated, as we will see.

When he came of age Iyo'as threw off his domination by Mentewwab and her close associates and instead came to rely on his maternal relatives from Wällo. The political tide increasingly shifted to the family of Wabi. At this point Mentewwab counted on Mika'el's support for the continued Qwaräñña rule. In September 1767 she promoted Mika'el to the rank of *ras*, a civil and military title below the king, and her uncle *Däjazmach* Géta to the position of *bitwädäd*, guardian of the king. Mika'el was summoned to Gondär from Tegray. Then things took unexpected turns. He exploited this position to become a major player in Ethiopian politics. Soon after his arrival at Gondär in January 1768, Mika'el kicked out Géta from his 'official residence' and took the title of *bitwädäd* for himself. A series of coups and conspiracies and assassinations followed between 1768 and 1771. In 1769 Iyo'as was killed in the palace in Gondär for treachery towards Mika'el. In the same year as the death of Iyo'as, Mika'el put on the throne a puppet king Yohannes II only to replace him soon by yet another titular king Täklä-Häymanot (r.1769-1777).² Indeed Mika'el had successfully outmaneuvered Mentewwab's attempt to ensure the continuity of the Qwaräñña rule.

The tyranny of Mika'el eventually elicited military reaction from the lords of northern Ethiopia and he was defeated in 1771.³ Despite this defeat, however, Mika'el's action was an ominous harbinger of a new political order. The balance of power had decisively tipped away from the monarchy in favor of lords. The death of Iyo'as in 1769 marked a new chapter in the political history of Ethiopia which came to be known as the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* (lit. Era of the

² Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, pp.459-465; Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.110-113; *Idem*, "Society and Ethnicity in the Politics of Christian Ethiopia During the Zämänä-Mäsafent," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 8, no. 2 (1975), pp.266-278.

³ Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, pp.459-465; Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.110-113; *Idem*, "Society and Ethnicity," p.273.

Princes), which lasted between 1769 and 1855.⁴ Although the institution of the monarchy was preserved, the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* was marked by the collapse of royal authority. As of 1769 Ethiopia descended into a spate of political disorder, rebellion, and strife that continued down to the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵ As royal authority slowly declined, only to collapse completely during the 1780s, local ruling houses virtually independent from central control evolved throughout northern Ethiopia. Rivalries for dominance were commonplace, and those from the province of Yäjju with Muslim and Oromo background prevailed most often. The Yäjju domination which is traditionally associated with the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* lasted from 1780s to 1853. Members of this group ruled northern Ethiopia from their capital at Däbrä-Tabor in the province of Bägemedder in the name of the puppet kings residing in the royal capital.⁶

Contemporaries and modern scholars alike have provided different insights about the causes leading to the collapse of royal power and the consequences on society. The standard account on the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* is that of Abir Mordechai, who traces the origins of the decline of central authority to the intrusion of an “alien” ethnic element into Ethiopian society, namely, the Oromo. For him, the integration of the Oromo into the royal court as soldiers, “whose daughters the emperors married,” was an aberration and resulted in the dilution of Ethiopian society. Mordechai adds that the Oromo rulers from the province of Yäjju were “superficially” Christians and Muslims at heart.⁷ He draws for this interpretation on contemporary sources such as the Scottish traveler, James Bruce, who was in Gondär during

⁴ The standard account of the period is Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes: The Challenge of Islam and the Re-Unification of the Christian Empire, 1769-1855* (London: Longmans Green, 1968).

⁵ Sectarianism had also crippled the Ethiopian Orthodox church, while royal power was eroded: Donald Crummey, “Theology and Political Conflict during the Zämänä-Mäsafent: The Case of Este in Bägemedder,” Gromyko *et al.*, eds., *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies* (Moscow, 1986), pp. 201-211; *idem*, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830-1868* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); and Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, pp.39-40.

⁶ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*;30-34; Crummey, “Society and Ethnicity,” p. 278

⁷ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, pp.xxii-xxiii.

Mika'el's rule, and the royal chronicles.⁸ Writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the royal chronicler sums up the contemporary views about the roots of the political problems:

How is it that the kingdom has become contemptible to striplings and slaves? How is it that the kingdom is a laughing stock to the uncircumcised ...? How is it that the kingdom is the image of a worthless flower that the children pluck in the autumn rains? I lament as I ponder over the kingdom, for I was present in its trial and tribulation. And I weep always without ceasing, as Rachel wept because of her children, and as Israel wept in bondage of old in the hands of Phareon (Pharaoh). Alas! And woe to me! My inwards are wrung, and my bowls are torn on account of those atrocious deeds. ... Why was the kingdom snatched away to other families, of which it cannot be said, "They are of such and such a race?" I mourn and weep without ceasing."⁹

The chronicler grappled to make sense of the collapse of the kingdom. He blamed the "ruin" of the kingdom on illegitimate upstarts or the regional lords of this era, who sprang mainly from new families whose basis of authority was largely military prowess rather than birth. The "uncircumcised" and "the other families" which the chronicler speaks about seems specifically a reference to the Yäjju Oromo lords, who were considered either as "pagan" or "Muslims". Both the Amhara and Tegrean regional lords and ordinary people shared the same outlook that the Yäjju were "intruders" and "Muslims" spreading Islam under the veneer of Christianity.¹⁰ However, no great weight can be given to this view. There is no contemporary evidence to support this view.

Together, Brian Yates, Donald Crummey and Shiferaw Bekele have emphasized that there was as much continuity as there was change and the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* did not bring the decay of society. For Shiferaw, the Yäjju domination did not represent an abnegation of

⁸ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* vol. II, pp. 674-678,

⁹ H. Weld Blundell, *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia* (London, 1922), pp.471-2 quoted in Richard Pankhurst *Economic History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile-Selassie I University Press, 1968), p.1.

¹⁰ See Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, pp.xxiv and 38.

Ethiopian tradition and public order continued during *Zämänä-Mäsafent*.¹¹ Crummey in his part writes that “the Sälomonic monarchy had always been delicately balanced” and decentralizing force was a powerful undercurrent in Ethiopian history. The structural tensions between royal power and decentralizing forces remain dormant during a strong monarch and then broke open under the influence of catalysts such as the death of a king or feeble monarch. During the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* lords did not become more violent than they had been before, and the era was different from the earlier periods only in its longevity.¹² Very recently Yates has written in his dissertation that “the *Zämänä Mäsafent* was not a period of the destruction of Ethiopia, just a structurally different increasingly religiously and ethnically diverse polity.”¹³

I follow the view that the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* did not bring decline and decay of Ethiopian society. In this and subsequent chapters I argue that Gondärine legal traditions outlasted the collapse of the monarchy and continued to shape and reshape social and property relations throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries northern Ethiopia. The role of church founder and patron largely transferred from kings to lords as political power did. Multiple rulers meant multiple churches which developed into centers of wealth and political influence. Thus, far from declining the number and variety of church foundations also increased during this period.

The record from Gojjam shows concrete examples of how the broader political shifts wrought by the collapse of royal power rekindled a sustained energy of building, painting, grants and the pursuit of wealth and luxury during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The

¹¹ Shiferaw Bekele, “Reflection on the Power elite of the Wäräseh Mäsfenate,” *Annales D’Éthiopie* 15 (1990), pp. 155-179.

¹² Crummey, “Society and Ethnicity,” p. 266-278; *idem*, *Land and Society*, pp.65, 90-93, 100 and 112. As Crummey has observed, the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* harkens back to the events of the early seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries during which the kingdom was plagued by political crisis. Although it failed to materialize, in the seventeenth century overpowering noblemen openly deliberated to abolish the monarchy altogether. In the early eighteenth century the kingdom was on a course of collision which only the capable king Bäkafa reversed.

¹³ Brian Yates, “Invisible Actors: The Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1913 (PH. diss., Department of History, University of Illinois, U-C, 2009), p.27.

chronological focus of this chapter is the period between 1766 and 1900. Church foundations and the granting of *rim* property spanning the entire period are on record. The year 1766 marks the beginning of large-scale *rim* grants in Gojjam. The year 1900 marks a suitable end. Grants of *rim* property reached a climax in the time of *Ras Adal* (later king Täklä-Häymanot, 1874-1901) of Gojjam, who assumed unprecedented level of involvement in church and land matters. Map 7 (page 139) summarizes the foundations and distribution of churches in Gojjam.

Wälätä-Isra'el and her successors and descendants, 1750s-1800

For more than two centuries Gojjam was ruled by a dynasty of lords who descended from regional notables and the family of Empress Mentewwab. The foundation of the ruling dynasty of Gojjam was laid down by the marriage union between Wälätä-Isra'el, daughter of Mentewwab, and *Abéto Yosédéq* (later *däjazmach*), governor of Gojjam in the 1750s. Wälätä-Isra'el and Yosédéq bore the illustrious *Abéto Häylä-Iyäsus* (later *Ras Häylu*), who ruled Gojjam in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Like her mother, Mentewwab, Wälätä-Isra'el cultivated ties with churches and patronized painters who adorned the walls of churches.

The descendants of Wälätä-Israel remained prominent within the province for the next two hundred years. By the end of the eighteenth century, the position of the princes of Gojjam had become hereditary. This dynastic continuity provided a measure of political stability to Gojjam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴

Since the middle of the eighteenth century the culture and politics of Gojjam became more firmly oriented towards Bägémeder than before.¹⁵ Wälätä-Israel introduced many elements of Gondärine land tenure traditions and art into Gojjam. Wall painting and the production of art objects in Gojjam witnessed significant period of revitalization under Wälätä-Isra'el and her

¹⁴ Fantahun, "Gojjam," pp.1-2

¹⁵ Fantahun, "Gojjam", p 1ff.; Guidi, *Annales Regnum Iyasu II et Iyo'as*, pp. 12, 74 and 154; and Täklä Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," p.72.

descendants that had never been experienced before.¹⁶ She acted pretty much on her own in founding and granting churches because Yosédéq had predeceased her in 1758, leaving her widow with a minor son Häylu-Iyäsus. Her most significant and precedent setting foundation was the church of Mota, dedicated in 1766 to Saint George.¹⁷ Because of the extent of its wealth and the sheer length of its existence as well as influence, the foundation of Mota Giyorgis had great significance in landholding system of Gojjam. It deserves a closer look.

The Founding and Granting of Mota Giyorgis

The circumstances surrounding the founding of Mota are obscure. There is reason to believe that Wälätä-Isra'el was attracted by the already significant settlement at the site, and possibly by an older church. Administrative documents issued by Wälätä-Isra'el used the term *kätäma* or “town” to describe the site where she may already have had a residence.¹⁸ One very significant feature of Mota, which drew Wälätä-Isra'el's attention, was its strategic location on the regional, through Gojjam and Bägémeder, trade route between the Gibe region south of the Blue Nile and the Red Sea in the north. From Mota, this trade route branched into two, one proceeding in a northwesterly direction through Adét (near Lake Tana) to Gondär. The other continued northward across the Blue Nile in the direction of the monastery of Qoma Fasilädäs. Half way between Mota and Qoma a bridge across the Blue Nile was built. Regularly, followed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this route served to ferry goods and merchants in this regional trade. It is apparent that the site of the church was chosen with this regional market in mind. As one of the destination points for this long trade route, Mota's strategic location was a great advantage since the market taxes it collected from the town was a vital source of income

¹⁶ Abebaw Ayalew, “A History of Painting in East Gojjam in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Study of the Second Gondärine Style of Painting” (Addis Ababa University, MA in History, 2002), p.45ff.

¹⁷ III/IES., 89. VIII.36, Mota Giyorgis, Wängél. The foundation charter was given during the reign of Iyo'as (r.1755-1769), and with his permission.

¹⁸ See III/IES. 89. XVI. 23-25., Yägwära Qwesqwam, Gebrä-Häwaryat.

for the church. Market fees were levied in the market themselves on all items brought for sale such as grains and livestock.¹⁹ With these background advantages, Mota acquired further significance with the foundation of the church of Giyorgis by Wälätä-Isra'el.

Wälätä-Isra'el started new patterns of charter formulation that would shape the tone of future legal records. The foundation charter for Mota Giyorgis, and its accompanying administrative documents, marked a definitive turning point in the transition from vague and undefined rights in *rim* to precise formulations and description of rights. The range of issues covered in these documents is remarkable. It would be unnecessary to explore the multifarious issues contained in the grants of Mota in depth. Only three principal issues are important here. The first relates to the substance of the grant. The charter was primarily concerned with *rim* property. A total of one thousand *gasha* of peasant inheritance were conveyed to the 150 recruits as *rim* in direct holding.²⁰ The clergy held their *rim* lands individually with full right in the manner of their exploitation, as the document reads “If the *däbtära* own oxen they shall cultivate their lands [by themselves]; short of this, they shall rent [out their lands to others] and exploit their land.”²¹ This is one of the most remarkable among the eighteenth century charters in terms of its full expression of the rights of the *rim* holder. Spelled out in detail were also the clear provisions regarding the *rim* holders’ full rights of dispositions. This allowed for *rim* to be bought, sold, given away as gift, left by will and divided or accumulated.

Other significant innovative features are also incorporated into the Mota documents. The clergy are given the right of discipline over their *zégoch*. The charter stipulates that with the

¹⁹ Arba'etu Wängél, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4456; and Richard Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1982), p.275.

²⁰ See Illinois/IES., 89.IX.4-6, Mota Giyorgis, Wängél; Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.43 ff. In *Lord, Zéga and Peasant* (p.43) the figure I gave to the number of Mota Giyorgis’s staff is 350. I have come to understand that the number of recruits Wälätä-Israel’s church was 150 rather than 350. For this information I rely on my informant Abäbä Jänbäré interviewed at Mota Giyorgis in June 2008.

²¹ Quoted in Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.47.

exception of criminal justice “the noblemen, the ladies, the monks, the *däbtära* as well as the *chäwa* (laity) shall be judge over their respective *zégoch*.”²² The charter of Mota makes general assumptions about the relations of dependency between landlords and their *zégoch*, but actual occurrence is rarely recorded.

Are the documentary prescriptions regulating the relations between landlords and *zégoch* and the division of land between the clergy and the rural cultivators imaginary or wishful thinking? Neither the land register nor the foundation charter is helpful to answer this fundamental question regarding the social experience of the *zégoch* and their relations with landlords. I am aware that there is always gap between law and actual practice. In the absence of the records on the actual working of the relations between lords and *zégoch*, we must rely on private transactions and dispute settlements. Twentieth century court petitions are very helpful in this regard. Sometime in the 1920s dispute between the clergy of Mota Giyorgis and *Bäjerond Bälay*, the local agent of *Ras Häylu II* (r.1910-1932), descendant of *Wälätä-Isra’el* and governor of Gojjam, erupted over a whole range of jurisdictional and economic rights. The document recording the court ruling itemized fifteen complaints of the clergy. One of the substantive issues provoking conflict between the two was that “they (*Ras Häylu’s* agents) forced us (the clergy) to pay tax for the weaver *zéga* we settled on [our land].”²³ Another source in the archive of the church indicates that the weaver *zégoch* under the clergy were Muslims. *Häylu*, one of the most engrossing lords of Gojjam, was prevented by the central court in Addis Ababa from taxing the private *zégoch* of the clergy.²⁴ Although the reference is incidental, the court petition decisively reveals the practice of settling *zégoch*. It is likely enough that the large Muslim inhabitants of

²² Illinois/IES., 89. VIII.36., Mota Giyorgis, Wängél: “መኳንትም ወይዘዘርም መነኩሴም ደብተራም ጨዋም ቢሆን ዜጋውን ዳኝን ማጋቢያ ከአለቃ ከሊቀጠብብት ሊሆን ነው።”

²³ Mota Giyorgis, Picture #4466: “የሸማኔ ዜጋ ብናሰፍር የጉድጓድ ብር ተቀበሉን።”

²⁴ Yärest Mäzgäb, Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4291.

Mota reported in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were settled by the clergy as tenants. There should not be any doubt about this.²⁵ Leaving for the next chapter the matter of the power of lords over their *zégoch*, here I will briefly recapitulate if the division of land between the clergy and the peasants was real and had meaning to contemporaries.

Wälätä-Isra'el's grant seems to have instigated a sense of grievance among the hereditary owners. Later in the mid-1780s local officials or the *cheqoch* and the clergy of Mota quarreled over land and the rights of administration. Ras Häylu I evaluated the competing claims of the clergy and the officials and issued his decisions. The dispute allowed for further elaborations of the foundation charter. It is apparent that Wälätä-Isra'el made different arrangements regarding the division of the land between the clergy and rural cultivators in the lowland and upland areas of Mota. The area immediately to the north and east of the town of Mota is lower ground, part of the Blue Nile valley, whereas the land in and around the town of Mota is high plateau. The clergy held the land in the plateau free from the intervention and physical entry of the *cheqoch*. The edge of the plateau marked the immune lands of the clergy off from the lowlands where the *cheqoch* had the rights of administration. Häylu renewed and confirmed that the rights of the rural cultivators over the lands above the escarpment was abrogated and granted to the clergy in full. The *cheqoch*'s only legitimate right from the lands of the clergy was the collection of a periodic "holiday chicken." Häylu tried to contain any further violation by the *cheqoch* by imposing a fine determined at fifty ounces of gold in advance against violators.²⁶ Yet the struggle between the clergy and the peasants over land seemed never ending. Even after the prolonged period of undisputed holding *rim* could be challenged and the loss of land was neither forgotten nor considered as final by the rural cultivators.

²⁵ Mäsehäfa-Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4492.

²⁶ Dersanä-Mika'el, MS., Däbrä-Wärq, picture # 3892; Yarest Mäzgäb, Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6459; and Mäsehäfa Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4489.

Some of the descendants of the peasants continued their struggle against the clergy as late as the 1940s, nearly two hundred years after the original grant. Court petitions of the 1930s and early 40s involving the plaintiff Abäbä Yaläw and the defendant Web-Emäbét shed additional light on the details of the rights of the clergy. Web-Emäbét's distant ancestor was a priest called Anzo. He is entered in the 1766 land register of Mota Giyorgis and he received the inheritances of three individuals as his *rim*: “1*gasha* from Géto, 1*gasha* from Zä-Gäbrél and 1*gasha* from Mänbäro Wänz.”²⁷ Zä-Gäbrél was the ancestor of Abäbä and he surrendered a *gasha* of his land to Anzo during the distributions at the time of Wälätä-Isra’el.²⁸ The details of the evidence brought forward by the defendant and his rival to support their respective claims are unimportant for me, but the highlights of their case need mentioning. Both Abäbä and Web-Emäbét appealed to the authority of the foundation charter to support their respective property claims. Abäbä argued that the defendant “took control of Zä-Gäbrél’s land in the uplands of Mota in violation of the rules of the *däber* (the church of Mota Giyorgis)” without leaving one-third portions for his ancestors. He thus demanded Web-Emäbét share his part according to the system established by the foundation charter. However, Web-Emäbét, on her part, defended her rights by arguing the one-third and two-third formula applied only in the areas below the escarpment. Since the land contested was found in the uplands very close to Mota, the grant had expropriated the hereditary owners completely. Web-Emäbét testified that “she and her ancestors held the land for seven generation without interruption” since the establishment of the church. The case was opened and dropped thrice and on all occasions the verdict went against the descendants of Zä-Gäbrél. It began in the church’s court at Mota, but moved to a higher court on the appeal of

²⁷ Yärest Mäzgäb, Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 6468 and 6452.

²⁸ Gojjam *Awraja* Court to Bichäna and Mota *Wäräda* Court, letter dated 6/30/1941 (Eth. Cal.), Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4463-4464. Enclosed in this letter are the court decision and the review of the evidence put forward by the defendant and the plaintiff. This court record is found in the archive of the church of Mota Giyorgis.

Abäbä. Citing from the charter and the register, the church officials ruled that Wälätä-Isra'el abrogated the rights of the hereditary owners in the upland areas and resolved the case in Web-Emäbét's favor. The appeal judges in the provincial court of Gojjam at Däbrä-Marqos confirmed the decision of the church officials.²⁹

The case manifests several relevant processes. The first point to pinpoint is that charters must be seen as primarily records of practice. The use of the formula of land divisions between the clergy and rural people carried meaning for contemporaries. Second, the retention of one-third of the land by rural cultivators protected them from immediate impoverishment and might be expected to ease their immediate grievances at land expropriation. Yet the dictates of charters were not always respected and church endowment remained vulnerable to challenge, for the loss of hereditary land by peasants was never forgotten. Third, in the final analysis it is the clergy that tended to prevail in the struggle for control over land, as happened over and over again.

The foundation of Mota was a harbinger of developments to come. Its charter ushered in a new trend in the production of elaborate legal documents describing the contents of the rights and obligations of *rim* property fully and clearly. Thereafter many elements of the Mota system became commonplace, for its foundation charter was the favorite model upon which similar grants were drawn elsewhere in Gojjam. *Rim and zéga* would become part of the usual phrasing of legal records in subsequent decades.

Wälätä-Isra'el's successors: Ras Häylu I and Ras Märed, 1777-1799

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Häylu and his son and successor, Märed, were engaged in a bitter struggle against the rival lords of northern Ethiopia for political dominance. Häylu managed to put King Sälomon I (r.1777-1779) on the throne in Gondär and rule in his name. Although Sälomon would be unseated by rival lords soon, Häylu managed to

²⁹ Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4463-4464.

secure the political title of *ras* and the governorship of Gojjam. Likewise, Märed briefly dominated the court in Gondär and he was bestowed with the title of *ras* in 1796 by the then king Sälomon II (r.1796-1799). Märed’s last military campaign into Gondär would eventually cost his life in 1799. Despite their fluctuating political fortunes and constant challenge by political rivals, the princes of Gojjam consolidated their position within Gojjam and they were virtually independent from the control of either the central government or the Yäjju lords.³⁰

It clear enough that whatever limitations were imposed on the legal capacity of these lords to make significant intervention in the landholding system was lifted during this period. The self-trained Gojjamé historian Täklä-Iyäsus Waqjira records the increasingly arbitrary demands imposed by soldiers on the peasants during the reign of Häylu I. Täklä-Iyäsus speaks that Häylu exploited his increased power vis-à-vis the king for his own advantage. Häylu is said to have owned big personal estates which he accumulated throughout Gojjam. This land was primarily requisitioned from local peasants and notables under many guises. A passage from Täklä-Iyäsus’s manuscript illuminates how Häylu exploited his land using Muslim *zégoch*, “[d]uring his reign *Ras* Häylu had 500 plough teams. Because of his avarice for property he requisitioned the *rest* (ancestral lands) of individuals on the excuse of protection from the Galla (Oromo) and *leman*. He settled Muslim *zéga* (sic) on it and appointed soldiers as [agrarian overseers].”³¹ Täklä-Iyäsus’s description of Häylu’s involvement in agriculture closely corresponds with the details provided by contemporary records such as that involving Bäkürä-Seyon. Sometime in the late eighteenth century *Mämher* Bäkürä-Seyon, one of the clergy of Mota Giyorgis, bequeathed his *rim* property along with the dependent laborers settled on it to Häylu. The document reads that Bäkürä-Seyon “gave to *Ras* Häylu his *rim* in Mäqäs, near (the

³⁰ Fantahun, “Gojjam,” pp.1-5.

³¹ Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik”, pp. 72-73: “ያንጊዜ ራስ ኃይሉ በዘመኑ በጎጃም ፳፻ ጥማድ ጠምዶ ነበር። ርስት ወዳጅ ነበርና የጋላ ታዳጊ የልምን እያለ ብዙርስት ከየባላባቱ እየወሰደ ወታደር ሾመና በመሬቱ ሠራባት እስላም ዜጋ አሰፈረበት።”

place called) Tālasās—on which the Muslims have settled.”³² Following the grant Bākūrā-Seyon had settled Muslims as his dependent laborers. These unnamed tenants paid thirty-four salt bars in rent for Bākūrā-Seyon and later for Häylu. The case seems to be significant as an example of the way that rich clergy exploited their *rim* land. Settling willing landless Muslims as *zēga* appeared to have been common in Gojjam. Muslims seem to have been more readily available to work as *zēgoch* for landlords than other groups since they were prohibited from owning property in Gojjam.

As a whole, however, there does not appear to have occurred large changes in the landholding system that attended the decline of royal power. Regional lords drew on familiar patterns of rural organization and the preexisting Sälomonic political and cultural heritage. It is particularly relevant to cite Crummey’s judicious statement in this regard, who concludes that “[t]he royal court ceased to have power in these years, but its style, its forms or organization, and its social function were all reborn in the courts of the *mäsafent* who, warlike as they were, still saw themselves as reproducing the culture and civilization which they had received from the Solomonids.”³³ Häylu I, like his peers elsewhere, seems to have felt heir to the tradition of the Sälomonic dynasty as indicated by the traditional political symbols and cultural motifs he used in paintings he sponsored. Täklä-Iyäsus writes that four painters were largely responsible for the wall paintings of the late eighteenth century, including Häylu’s palace located in his capital Bichäna. Their names are *Aläqa Asädu*, *Aläqa Qäsäla*, *Aläqa Täklä-Häymanot* and *Aläqa Gäbrä Mäsqäl*.³⁴ The palace has not survived and we do not know about it. Täklä-Iyäsus, who was trained to be a painter of religious scenes in late nineteenth century, had access to a living oral

³² Mäsehäfa-Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4492: “መምህር በኩረ ጽዮን መቀስን ሪምምን ከተላሰስ አጠገብ ያለውን እስላም የሰፈረበትን ለራስ ኃይሉ ሲሰጡ...”

³³ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.152.

³⁴ Täklä Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik,” p. 73. See also Abebaw, “A History of Painting in East Gojjam,” pp.72 and 127.

tradition and gathered information about the paintings on the wall of Häylu's palace. He writes that the walls of Häylu's palace were graced with the images of biblical figures, including "Gideon and Samson from the nobility, and Dawit and Sälomon from the kings."³⁵ The reason for the portraits of the biblical kings, David and Solomon, is patently clear. It glorified Häylu's self-image as member of the Sälomonic dynasty through his mother Wälätä-Isra'el, who, in turn, was daughter of Empress Mentewwab and through her father, granddaughter of King Iyasu I (r.1682-1706). The building of well adorned palace was also a mode of projecting power and served as visible signs of wealth as well.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was defined by church building, painting and grants. Täklä-Iyäsus refers to twelve foundations and endowment during this period. I have tabulated the grants and foundations of this period (see table # 5). The same factors contributing to the establishment of Mota Giyorgis were at work in the foundations of other churches during the reign of Häylu and his son and successor, *Ras Märed*.³⁶ Without exceptions the new foundations were located across the various districts of the eastern part of the province of Gojjam. Generally churches were founded next to the seat of the secular power of rulers and on sites which served a transit point for the north-south and south-north bound trade routes connecting the Red Sea region and the area south of the Blue Nile. The churches of Yägwära Qwesqwam and Bichäna Giyorgis are good illustrations of this. *Däjazmach Wälta*, a minor nobleman under Häylu, was the founder Yägwära Qwesqwam, dedicated to Saint Mary, and formally consecrated in 1778/9. The church was located in the district of Libän, in southern part of Gojjam, and a gate way to the highly commercialized Gibe region south of the Blue Nile. The

³⁵ Täklä Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," p. 73; and Abebaw Ayalew, "A History of Painting in East Gojjam," p. 71. The British Charles Beke, who toured throughout Gojjam in 1841 and 1842, also remarks that Häylu's palace could be seen "a little way out of the town" of Bichäna, but did not give details. Charles Beke, *A Diary Written during a Journey in Abessinia in the years 1840, 1841, 1842, and 1843* (London, 1848), p. 401.

³⁶ Täklä-Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," pp.72-73.

towns of Basso and Yäjjubé in Libän were major commercial entrépôts of Gojjam for much of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wälta was likely attracted to the area by this strategic advantage of Libän in building Yägwära Qwesqwam.³⁷

The largest of Häylu's foundation was the church located at his political seat Bichäna in the district of Enämay dedicated to Saint George. The town was one of the nodes of the regional trade route across Gojjam. Häylu founded Bichäna *circa* in 1770s as Gojjam's capital, and the church of Giyorgis came into existence around the same time.³⁸ Täklä-Iyäsus records the intimate involvement of Häylu in directing artists who adorned the walls of Bichäna Giyorgis with images of saints and the founder and his entourage. Clad in his ceremonial dress, Häylu is said to have mounted his horse to demonstrate to the painters how his image as a knight should look on the sacred wall painting.³⁹ Well endowed and embellished churches won respect and social prestige for their founders and helped preserve their permanent remembrances as well.

Märed proved far more vigorous and enthusiastic in his building activities. He founded and endowed three churches and began a fourth one shortly before his death in 1800 at the age of 27: Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm near Mota Giyorgis, Agamna Giyorgis (in Wedmit), Yäwiš Mika'el (in Libän), and Taba Nolawi (in Anädäd). Given the brevity of Märed's rule, the work of foundation and endowment was made at tremendous rate. Märed's work at Qäranyo seems to have stemmed from his desire to revive a vanished religious house. The foundation charter and later Täklä Iyäsus confirm that Qäranyo was the site of a former church. Ahmääd Graññ's Muslim

³⁷ Illinois/IES., 89.VIII.29. Mota Giyorgis, Mäsehäfä-Mänäkosat; and Abdussamad H. Ahmed, "Baso: A Commercial Entréport of Gojjam, 1841-1889," *Proceeding of the Fourth Seminar of the Department of History* (Addis Ababa, 1987), pp. 1-14.

³⁸ Täklä-Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik", pp. 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.73. The portraits of founders and their close associates and family members, along with the familiar patron saints of churches and angels, commonly appear in many surviving Gondärine wall paintings.

army destroyed the original church during the sixteenth century.⁴⁰

Häylu and Märed (r. 1796-1800) also made generous grants to Mota Giyorgis. As the result of these grants, the church gained control over numerous lands and churches.⁴¹ By the end of the eighteenth century, Mota Giyorgis was at the height of its influence and power and formed one of the richest churches in Gojjam. According to an official report compiled during the 1950s, Mota Giyorgis had 44 dependent churches under its lordship most of which had been acquired through grants of the 18th century.⁴² In terms of substance of the grants of Häylu, Märed and Wälta involved *rim* property and jurisdictional rights. Wälta granted Yägwära Qwesqwam a total of 127 *gasha* of land to the *däbtära* in direct holding, and each received at least one *gasha*.⁴³ In the case of Märed, Mentewwab's foundation, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam, served both as an inspiration and model for his foundation, Qäranyo-Mädhäné-Aläm and recruited 135 staff. The foundation charter states that Qäranyo-Mädhäné-Aläm's "grant was based on Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam."⁴⁴ In many other respects the terms of Märed's grants to all his foundations, including Yäwish Mika'el founded for 86 staff and dedicated in 1796/7, bear a striking similarity to the grants of Mota. The church enjoyed rights of land, free labor service, tax, tributes, meals, and jurisdiction over its endowment. As was the case in Mota Giyorgis, the *däbtära* had rights of private jurisdiction over the *zégoch* settled in their residential sites and *rim* lands except in cases considered matters of high justices—fornication, homicide, and theft.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ See Täklä-Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," p.74; and for Märed's foundation of Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm, see Crummey *et al*, "A Gondärine Land Grant in Gojjam," pp. 103-116; Illinois/IES, 89.VIII.7, Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm, Eskender, and Giyorgis Wäldä-Hämüd, MS., Mota Giyorgis, # 6531.; and on Yäwish Mika'el see Illinois/IES, 89, XVI. 9, Yäwish Mika'el, Fikaré Iyäsus.

⁴¹ Mäsehäfä Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4489 and 4493; Wängél, MS. Mota Giyorgis, f.4v; Mäsehäfä Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4495; and Yarest Mäzgäb, Mota Giyorgis, picture #4184.

⁴² See Mota Giyorgis church to Gojjam Governorate General, Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4184.

⁴³ Mäsehäfä Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, # 4497.

⁴⁴ Crummey *et al*, "A Gondärine Land Grant in Gojjam," pp. 103-116.

⁴⁵ Illinois/IES, 89. XVI. 9, Yäwish Mika'el, *Fikaré Iyäsus*.

Table 5. Land Grants and Foundations in Gojjam, c.1710s-1800 in chronological order.

Church	Grantor	Source
Muga Däbrä-Iyäsus	<i>Däjazmach</i> Amonyos	89. III.29
Dasha Maryam	<i>Däjazmach</i> Amonyos	Yärest Mäzgäb, Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6439
Zewa Giyorgis	<i>Däjazmach</i> Amonyos	89. XIV.8.
Muga Däbrä-Iyäsus	<i>Wäyzäro</i> Wälätä-Isra'el	89. III. 33-34
Mota Giyorgis	<i>Wäyzäro</i> Wälätä-Isra'el	89. VIII.36
Yägwära Qwesqwan	<i>Däjazmach</i> Wälta	89. XVI. 23-25
Jebé Amba	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," p.74
Tede Maryam	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," p.74
Yädäräna Mika'el	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," p.74
Mankusa	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," p.74
Bichäna Giyorgis	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," p.74
Zewa Giyorgis	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	89.XIV.8-9
Mota Giyorgis	<i>Ras</i> Häylu	89.VIII.28
Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm	<i>Ras</i> Märed	89.VIII.7
Yäwish Mika'el	<i>Ras</i> Märed	89. XVI. 9
Agamna Giyorgis	<i>Ras</i> Märed	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," 74.
Taba Nolawi	<i>Ras</i> Märed	Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," 74.
Mota Giyorgis	<i>Ras</i> Märed	Mäsehäfa Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4495; Wängél, MS. Mota Giyorgis, f.4v

The foundations of the eighteenth centuries changed the cultural, economic and political geography of Gojjam. Churches often developed into centers of power and influence. The development of towns was closely linked and depended on the existences of churches. The clerics and their dependents connected to churches served as nuclei of settlements and nascent urban life. The towns that grew around churches were tied to the countryside, had markets and served as administrative centers and brought new wealth to their residents. Bichäna, Yägwära, Mota, and Qäranyo are examples. The importance of the foundations of the eighteenth century will grow in the nineteenth century in particular and the towns that developed around them have survived into the modern time. Nineteenth century European travelers who visited some of these towns were impressed by their vibrant commercial exchange and prosperity. Mota in particular received considerable attention from these foreign visitors. For instance, the French explorers,

Edmond Combes and Maurice Tamsier write that Mota was the “prettiest” commercial town in Gojjam, where cloth, horses, and cattle cotton were sold and bought. The British traveler Charles Beke, who toured throughout Gojjam in 1841, describes Mota as “a large commercial town.” Thus, contrary to the view of the royal chroniclers and some modern historians, an atmosphere of prosperity, reconstruction and building is evident during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*.⁴⁶

Politics and *rim* Grants in the Latter *Zämänä-Mäsafent* , 1800-1855

The death of Märed in 1799 in a battle in Wägära to the north of the town of Gondär signaled bitter division within the ruling house of Gojjam. The internal division of its rulers altered the ties that had given the province of Gojjam some unity. Indeed after the death of Märed, peace within Gojjam would not be possible again until 1874. Märed was succeeded by his son *Däjazmach* Gwalu (r. 1800-1805, 1810-1820s). However, he was deprived of his power by *Däjazmach* Zäwdé, a capable soldier and the governor of the subprovince of Damot. Zäwdé was married to *Wäyzäro* Denqenash, Märed’s half-sister.⁴⁷ Yet the marital, social and political ties that bound lords in this period did not result in mutual respect and political stability. Leadership of the political scene alternated between the descendants of Märed and Denqenash until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Instability in Gojjam presented the Yäjju lords with the opportunity to interfere and project their power into the region.⁴⁸ Gwalu had made his escape and fled to Bägémeder to take refuge under the contemporary Yäjju lord, *Ras* Gugsä (1803-1825) at Däbrä-Tabor,

⁴⁶ Charles Beke, “Abyssinia—being a Continuation of Routes in that Country,” Royal Geographical Society 14 (1844), p.28; and Edmond Combes and Maurice Tamsier, *Voyage en Abyssinie, dans le pays des Galla, de Choa et d’Ifat I-IV* (Paris, 1838), p. 288 quoted in Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p.275.

⁴⁷ Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik,” p.73; and Fantahun, “Gojjam,” p.8.

⁴⁸ See Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik”, pp. 73-74. Täklä-Iyäsus apparently drew on documentary evidence available in the church for his account on Taba Nolawi. He was appointed to be the head of the church in the early twentieth century. He notes that Gwalu had endowed Taba Nolawi on the model of Yäwish Mika’el.

Bägémeder.⁴⁹ In 1810 Gugsä defeated Zäwdé and appointed his brother Alula as governor of Damot and reinstated Gwalu over the eastern part of Gojjam.⁵⁰ This political arrangement lasted until the early 1820s, when Alula died and Zäwdé's son by Denqenash, *Däjach* Goshu (r.1820s-1852), defeated Gwalu and assumed power over Gojjam. Afterwards, we do not hear about Gwalu and his descendants until the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ In the years between 1839 and 1853 Goshu ruled Damot, whereas his son *Däjazmach* Berru ruled the eastern part of Gojjam.⁵² Nevertheless, Goshu and Berru did not get along with each other and the simmering struggle for power between the two occasionally resulted in war as happened in 1841. It was during this time that rampant violence fell on Gojjam. Insecurity characterized daily life in Gojjam during the last years of *Zämänä-Mäsafent*. Writing to the French travelers and scholars who had once lived in Gojjam in early 1840s—Michel and Antoine d'Abbadie—Berru states the toll which the political instability took on him, “[w]e are growing old. We have become like an old horse and a worn-out rifle. Worry has consumed us.” Then Berru informs the two French men how he preserved his autonomy from Yäjjü domination, “[w]e held on to the country of our father by being stubborn.”⁵³ Added to the internal political fragmentation was the constant Yäjjü raid from outside. Berru refused to recognize *Ras* Ali II (1832-1853), the last of the Yäjjü lords, as his overlord and the latter regularly led raiding armies into Gojjam virtually every year between 1840 and 1853.⁵⁴ In stating that he preserved his autonomy by being ‘stubborn’, Berru

⁴⁹ Fantahun, “Gojjam,” pp. 12-13.

⁵⁰ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, p.33; and Fantahun, “Gojjam,” pp. 12-13.

⁵¹ Fantahun, “Gojjam,” pp.13-14.

⁵² Fantahun, “Gojjam,” p.16; Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.199. Berru also led his own raids into Ali II's territories, although the primary focus of his military activity was defensive and aimed at preserving his autonomy from the Yäjjü domination.

⁵³ Rubenson, *Correspondence and Treaties 1800-1854*, Acta Aethiopica vol. 1 (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1987), p.109.

⁵⁴ Fantahun, “Gojjam,” p.16; Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.199. Berru also led his own raids into Ali II's territories, although the primary focus of his military activity was defensive and aimed at preserving his autonomy from the Yäjjü domination.

exaggerated little. He was violent and arrogant in character and eventually fell a victim to his arrogance. Between 1854 and 1869, Berru spent his time in prison and was eventually executed in 1869.⁵⁵

It is a well known fact that none of the churches and monasteries in Gojjam had a stable endowment throughout the era of the Yäjju. It was the churches in and around the town of Mota in particular that were affected seriously by the violence of the nineteenth century. The losses which Mota Giyorgis sustained included lands and rights. Two of its estates, Web-Maryam and Lay Maryam, granted by Märed, were lost during this period. The church also lost the right to collect tolls from the traffic through the town of Mota. A new official, the *liqämäkwas*, instituted by the Yäjju lords, profited from the tolls.⁵⁶ Beside the usurpations of the lands and rights of churches, other properties taken by force included ecclesiastical vessels, and religious paintings. Mota Giyorgis suffered losses of its treasuries several times. While some of the offenders came from the ranks of noblemen, ordinary soldiers were mostly responsible for the looting. Ali II's Muslim soldiers reportedly engaged in various acts of abuse on the churches of Mota Giyorgis and Koso Zera which they despoiled and stripped of considerable portions of their wall paintings.⁵⁷ All in all Mota Giyorgis reportedly sustained as many as eleven major acts of looting between its establishment in 1765 and 1941.⁵⁸

From another angle the actions of the rulers of the last two decades of *Zämänä-Mäsafent* projects a completely different character. The violence of the nineteenth century should by no means conceal enduring internal trends of the late eighteenth century. Throughout this historical

⁵⁵ Fantahun, "Gojjam," pp.74 and Appendix no.1, p.18.

⁵⁶ Arba'etu Wängél, MS. Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4446; and Illinois/IES, 89 IV.24, Märtulä-Maryam, Gebrä-Häwaryat.

⁵⁷ Abebaw Ayalew, "A History of Painting in East Gojjam", pp. 46-47.

⁵⁸ Wängél, MS. Mota Giyorgis, picture #4433 and From Mota Giyorgis Church to Emperor Häylä-Sellásé I, picture # 4470-71.

ebbs and flows, church foundations and grants of *rim* property by rulers remained steady. Foundations and grants were a focal point of interactions where family, friends, foes, patrons, the clergy and society in general came together. Gwalu finished the construction and endowment of the church of Taba Nolawi which his father Märed started. Täklä Iyäsus, who was appointed as the head of Taba Nolawi in the early twentieth century, notes that the grant was in *rim* tenure and the names of several members of the Yäjju lords are entered in the church's land inventory. Zäwdé's major foundation was the church dedicated to Saint Michael located at the seat of his power, Dämbächa in Damot. The importance of Dämbächa would grow in the course of the nineteenth century resulting in the development of vibrant market town around the church.⁵⁹ Berru is responsible for the first significant grants to the church of Däbrä-Eliyas, 18 kilometers south of Dälma Amanu'el, in 1840/1⁶⁰, whereas Goshu granted *rim* land to Dämbächa Mika'el and sponsored the repainting of the church. Goshu, his court, and a full procession of his army cover the eastern wall of the church. According to Abebaw Ayalew, who studied the paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "the first completely secular painting on the wall of a church" belongs to Dämbächa.⁶¹ Goshu's other significant grant on record was made in 1842 to the old church of Dengera Maryam in the district of Jabi Tehenan. He combined various elements of the Mota Giyorgis tradition with that of Ura Kidanä-Meherät, a monastery near Lake Tana, founded in the fourteenth century. Suffice it to mention that the grant involved measured space, viz., a total of 81 *kumälé* of land and divided among the 110 clergy. Ras Ali II, Goshu and his children, including Berru, are among the *däbtära* listed in the charter of Dengera. Goshu and his children shared between themselves 15 *kumälé*, nearly 20% of the total *rim* land.⁶² *Kumälé*

⁵⁹ Täklä Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," p.73; and Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p. 274.

⁶⁰ Illinois/IES, 89. XX. 2. Däbrä-Eliyas, *Wänna Mäzgab*.

⁶¹ Abebaw, "History of Painting in East Gojjam", p. 125.

⁶² Häymanotä Abäw, MS., Dengera Maryam, picture # 086.

was a generally accepted technique of reckoning measured space recorded in documents originating from Damot areas of Gojjam. According to a twentieth century source, a *kumälé* is a strip that is 7 *gämäd* wide and 12 *gämäd* long. One *gämäd* measured fifty meters long. Thus if one plots measurement of 350 meters by 600 meters area of land, the resultant 950 square meters or 21 hectares would be one *kumälé*.⁶³

In sum, in spite of frequent and open warfare, founding institutions and endowing land to already existing religious houses by powerful benefactors with or without formal approval from the titular kings at Gondär continued unabated. Eighteenth century expansions of churches and *rim* property were therefore sustained into the middle of the nineteenth century. A new and second wave of grants, painting and foundations started with the reign of *Ras* Adal (later king Täklä-Häymanot, 1874-1900). This was made possible by the relative quiet of the period and the resurgence of monarchical power in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Resurgence of Royal Power and Christian Revival

In the early 1850s winds of change blew warm in northern Ethiopia. Once again the balance tipped towards the monarchy and against the lord's power. Lords in northern Ethiopia were swept aside by a political revolution unleashed by *Däjazmach* Kassa Häyлу, the governor of the northwestern districts of Qwara and Dämbeya. By the 1855 practically all the major players of *Zämänä-Mäsafent*, including Berru and Goshu, were either killed or in prison. Kassa consummated his military triumph by crowning himself as Emperor Téwodros II (r.1855-1868) in 1855, thereby bringing an end to the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*.⁶⁴ Téwodros capitalized on long-held messianic expectations by the population about a just king. Fekaré Iyäsus, an apocalyptic text written in the post-Graññ era, expresses that a king by the name Téwodros will rise and restore

⁶³ Däbrä-Marqos court files, Däbrä-Marqos picture # 1008. When and where the equation was established for the first time cannot be known from the available record.

⁶⁴ Sven Rubenson, *King of Kings Tewodros Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile-Selassie I University, 1966).

peace and social harmony and the rule of law in Ethiopia will prevail once again. In choosing the name Téwodros II, the new king believed that his reign would fulfill the age-old yearning for peace and public order.⁶⁵

There was a reformist element in Téwodros's reign, and his intentions included restoring the authority and dignity of the archbishop and the monarchy, ending sectarianism, and reforming morals.⁶⁶ The demand for reform and royal power manifested itself with clarity in a debate in September 1856 between Téwodros and the clergy led by the Egyptian archbishop of the Ethiopian church, *Abunä Sälama*. At the heart of the matter was a conflict between the king and the clergy over his land policy. Initially, the antagonism centered on differing views and concerns over principle and discipline. Téwodros II demanded that the clergy pay due respect to him by taking off their turban before him as they did before the altar when serving at the mass. The clergy defended their position by arguing that they take off their turban before the altar because God resides in it. Téwodros reasoned that "God resides in him and rules by His will."⁶⁷ Both sides reached an amicable agreement. The conflict between Téwodros and the clergy over discipline and respect was a sign of shifting ideas from the decentralized politics of *Zämänä-Mäsafent* during which the Sälomonic monarchy was treated with contempt to divine monarchy.

The 1856 debate also unravel Téwodros policy regarding land. A debate that started over the issue of respect and discipline snowballed into a rancorous confrontation on the most sensitive issues of juridical right and *rim* property held by churches. The long standing practice of granting *rim* lands had diverted considerable land into the control of the church and its clergy.

⁶⁵ Donald Crummey, "Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of Neo-Sälomonic Ideology in 19th-Century Ethiopia," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, vol. 28, Cahier 109, Mémoires, Histoires, Identités 2(1988), pp.17-18; and Rubenson, *King of Kings*, pp. 49-51.

⁶⁶ Donald Crummey, "Tewdors as Reformer and Modernizer," *Journal of African History* vol. 10, no.3 (1969), pp.457-69.

⁶⁷ See *Däbtära Zänäb, Yä Ityopya Tarik, Amharic Chronicle of Téwodros II* published as *The Chronicle of King Theodore of Abyssinia*, ed., Enno Littmann (Princeton, 1902), pp. 27-29.

Although it was not his intention to undermine the church, Téwodros II was jealous of the rights and privileges of the clergy and the enormous amount of *rim* property they controlled, some of which he wanted to divert for the support of his army. This brought an inevitable collision between the king and the church. The clergy had vested interest to keep the status quo in land matters and entered a spirited defense of the church's right to property. They proposed as a solution quartering soldiers in the various districts of the country in rotation. The king was unmoved and would listen to none of this advice. Partly because of the poor political sense Téwodros displayed during the debate, he failed to reach any *satisfactory* agreement with the clergy on the land issue.⁶⁸ In the end, Téwodros's ecclesiastical policy failed to achieve its goal and the land issue was not resolved until the end of his reign.

It was only a matter before Téwodros's reformist tendencies lost momentum and his gesture of friendship to the church and the clergy ended. Like the clergy, the vigorous new initiatives of Téwodros failed to inspire support from the secular ruling class. In Gojjam the successor of Berru and Goshu, *Däjazmach* Tädla (r.1855-1865), rejected Téwodros's policy. Thanks to Tädla's support, not only did *rim* property increase, but also churches asserted claims to long lost endowments. Tädla revived the old endowment of Mayfädä-Maryam and gave fresh grants of land to Yäwish—the foundation of his grandfather, Märed—and sponsored the repainting of its wall.⁶⁹

As the various districts and provinces slipped out of his control, Téwodros's behavior correspondingly grew unrestrained and his relations with the clergy degenerated into deep animosity and took on a more savage, personal, and irrational tone. The churches and monasteries of Gojjam bore the brunt of the suffering. In one of his major campaigns to Gojjam

⁶⁸ For discussion of the debate between the clergy and Téwodros II, see Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 204-205.

⁶⁹ Gebrä-Hemam, MS. Mayfädä-Maryam, picture # 109-110.

during the 1860s, he set loose his soldiers who killed hundreds of clergy in Mota and Qäranyo and seized their treasures. His massacre of the clergy of Mota Giyorgis and Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm in Gojjam and his looting of the treasures of the churches of Gondär highlights the king's supreme gesture of frustration with and resentment towards the clergy.⁷⁰

The call for reform grew louder in the post Téwodros period and the new politics and ecclesiastical policy he presaged gained support from his successors. Téwodros inspired his successor Yohännes IV (1872-1889) in particular, who was singularly successful in his ecclesiastical policy. The Ethiopian Orthodox church underwent an important period of reform and revitalization. Chief among his achievement was the end of sectarian division within the Ethiopian church. In 1878 he brought the full weight of his royal authority to bear on the Orthodox clergy at the council of Boru Méda in Wällo, which he convened to address sectarianism. The council accepted only one line of doctrinal interpretation and banned others, including *Qebat* in Gojjam. His vassals Menilek II and Adal also bent to his will and ratified the decisions of the council to suppress sectarian tendencies in their respective provinces. The doctrinal unity of the Ethiopian church had eluded the Gondärine rulers forever and was indeed among Yohännes IV's noted legacies. In 1881, he consummated the success of his ecclesiastical policy by arranging to bring an unusually four Egyptian bishops to Ethiopia, one of which, Luqas, was assigned to head the diocese of Gojjam.⁷¹ What followed was a Christian revival. Religious reform and revival, a new era of cooperation between the monarchy and the church, and national unity were the important features of the second half of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁰ Donald Crummey, "The Violence of Téwodros," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 9, no.2 (1971): pp. 107-25 and Täklä-Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," pp. 85-86.

⁷¹ Donald Crummey, "Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction in Ethiopia, 1854-1878," *Journal of Theological Studies* 29, no.2 (1978): 427-42; *idem*, "Imperial Legitimacy," pp. 13-43; and Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 48.

Direct royal grants and confirmation charters to churches resumed after nearly a century of interruption. The church would come to wield great wealth and power as the result of the renewal of royal power. Yohannes's policy towards regional power sharply contrasts to those of his predecessor. He pursued a fairly *laissez faire* and innovative attitude to the hereditary rulers of Shäwa and Gojjam in particular. Yohannes confirmed Adal as the legitimate ruler of Gojjam. Although the two had a checkered relationship and their friendship did not come about easily, Adal and Yohannes were able to cooperate the exception being a flare-up of hostilities in 1888/9. In 1881 Yohannes IV rewarded Adal for his loyalty, crowning him king Täklä-Häymanot.⁷²

Täklä-Häymanot brought back to Gojjam the message of the religious council of Boru Méda. Of significance is the fact that he abandoned *Qebat* and embraced *Täwahdo*, the sect favored by Yohannes IV. There is also a report of the conversions of Muslims residing in Gojjam to Christianity in the wake of Boru Méda council. For instance, a document in the archives of Mota Giyorgis church records that as many as 700 Muslims willingly converted to Christianity in 1880 in Mota area alone.⁷³ However, it seems apparent that Täklä-Häymanot had little inclination to observe rules imposed by the Boru Méda council and did not seem to have called for religious uniformity. His policy towards Muslims was characterized by tolerance and protection. The conversion that occurred in Mota, if it occurred at all, did not bring lasting changes in the demography of the Muslim population of that town. Further, unlike Yohannes, Täklä-Häymanot showed more finesse in his treatment of the *Qebat* followers. Despite the official abandonment of *Qebat* by the Gojjamé ruler, the sect remained far from dead.

The Reign of Täklä-Häymanot: Reconstruction, Building and Painting

The internal quiet and the end of raid into Gojjam from outside in the late nineteenth

⁷² Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 40, 42 and 44.

⁷³ Illinois/IES, 89.IX.3. Mota Giyorgis, Wängél.

century allowed Täklä-Häymanot to concentrate on rebuilding, painting and granting of land. We are singularly well informed about the minute detail of the organization and ceremony of Täklä-Häymanot's court and the building and painting activity he sponsored by Täklä Iyäsus, who also served as painter. The king mobilized scribes and registrars, painters, local artisans specializing in embroidery and weaving, carpentry, and jewelry for the production of luxurious crafted objects of religious and secular functions.⁷⁴ The fortune of churches dramatically changed. In less than a quarter of a century Täklä-Häymanot made at least thirteen big donations to churches. This flood of grants followed his coronation in 1881 and in the central decade of his reign, suggesting the tremendous speed at which grants were made. Table # 6 summarizes Täklä-Häymanot's significant grants. The churches of Bichäna Giyorgis, Mota Giyorgis and Mängestä-Sämeyat were among institutions requiring refoundation and recovery of lost property. He was bound to these churches by the great sentiment he had toward his ancestors.

Täklä-Häymanot did not introduce change in terms of landholding. The trails left behind by the previous centuries regarding landholding provided the general guidance for the reconstruction of the countryside. Wälätä-Israel's charter was copied and flourished by being used extensively as the model for some of the most significant public acts by the king. The appeal to traditions was particularly strong in Mängestä-Sämeyat. Founded originally in the sixteenth century by Queen Säblä-Wängél (d.1568), Mängestä-Sämeyat was pushed aside in the late seventeenth century, and since then it was left in ruins and subsequently deprived of its property before its restoration by Täklä-Häymanot in 1888.⁷⁵ The scribe writes that prompting Täklä-Häymanot to restore Mängestä-Sämeyat was local clergy. They presented a request to the king calling for the restoration of the church and the revival of the "ancient rule for them and for

⁷⁴ Täklä-Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," pp.101, 104-106; and Abebaw, "History of painting in East Gojjam," pp. 98ff.

⁷⁵ Nägärä-Maryam, MS. Mängesto Kidanä-Meherät, #3648.

their children.” If the scribe is to be believed, the king reassured the clergy that that “he will not write new rule” and “will restore the rule that once existed in the time of their (the clergy’s) fathers as established by his (Täklä-Häymanot’s) mother, the chosen and glorious queen of the world, Säblä-Wängél.”⁷⁶

In the case of the churches of Mota and Bichäna, the act of restitution was made easy by the existence of the original grant documents in their records showing the way things once had been, including the obligations of the peasants. Mota had sustained the loss of incomes from toll taxes and three estates had slipped out of its control into lay ownership during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*. The church’s market rights and lands were restored. Peasants were “to give their dues to the church to pay for the performance of the daily Mass as in the past.”⁷⁷ Founded by *Ras Häylu* in 1770s, the church of Giyorgis also reclaimed both its toll rights over the transit trade and the local market at Bichäna, and land lost during the previous decades. Täklä-Häymanot and his courtiers were substantial landholders in each of these churches. His wife, Laqäch Gäbrä Mädhen, received “the deserted *gasha* in Bichäna, the forest in Finnala and Delu.”⁷⁸ The fundamental elements of the grants of Täklä-Häymanot are identical to the preceding period extensively discussed elsewhere in this chapter.⁷⁹ The grants entailed *rim* property and jurisdictional rights over *zéga* class. For instance, Bichäna’s grant states that “the *däbtära* shall judge their *zéga* they have settled on their half portion of the land.”⁸⁰ This judiciary clause is most common among the charters issued by Täklä-Häymanot. Taken together they indicate the

⁷⁶ Nägärä-Maryam, MS. Mängesto Kidanä-Meherät, pictures #3649 and 3651. “ወሀበነ ጥንታዊ ሥርዓተ ዘድልው ለነ ወለውሉድኑ... እኮ ዘእጽሕፍ ለከሙ ትእዛዘ ሀዲስ። ወእንተ ሥርዓት ለከሙ እምዩ ንግስተ ዓለም ስብለ ውንጌል ኅሪት ውክብርት።”

⁷⁷ Illinois/IES, 89.IX.7-8, Mota Giyorgis, Wängél: “ጥንት የቀዳሽ የታቦቲቱ ይሰጥ የነበረውን ሊሰጥ ነው።”; and Wängél, MS. Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4440.

⁷⁸ III/IES., 89.II.3. Bichäna Giyorgis, Wängél: “በብቸና በጠፉ ጋሻ የተሰሩ በፊኛላ ዱርና በድሉ እመይቱ ወይዘሮ ላቀኙ።”

⁷⁹ The grants to these churches are copied in the Däbrä-Marqos register. In order of their registration: for Dälma Amanu’el see Mäzgäb, picture 229-231, for Abema Maryam see Mäzgäb, picture # 232-234; for Gemja-Bét Maryam see Mäzgäb, picture #245-247

⁸⁰ III/IES., 89.II. 7 Bichäna Giyorgis, Wängél: “ድብተራው በእኩል ምድሩ ያሰፈረውን ዜጋ ይዳኝ።”

continuing vitality of Gondärine legal traditions in shaping social and property relations and rural organization in modern Gojjam.

Table 6. Grants of Täklä-Häymanot in Chronological Order.

Church	Source
Yägwära Qwesqwam	89.XVI.21-22.
Muga Däbrä-Iyäsus	89.III.26-27 and 37.
Däbrä-Eliyas	XVIII.8-31; 89.XX-5-10 and 13-24.
Yälämläm Kidanä-Meherät	89.XV.16-28.
Mota Giyorgis	89.IX.7-19.
Bichäna Giyorgis	89.II.3-8.
Gemja-Bét Maryam	89.I.4-8; 89.I. 13-32.
Däbrä-Marqos	89.XXI.5-19.
Mängesto Kidanä-Meherät	89.IX.29-34.
Abazaj Giyorgis	89.XXI.21-25.
Däbrä-Gälila	89.XXI.20.
Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm	89.XXI.27.
Abema Maryam	89.XXI.35-36
Dälma Amanu'el	89.XXI.30-34.
Agäw Gemja-Bét Maryam	89.XXII.9-10.

Täklä-Häymanot's biggest foundation was the church of Däbrä-Marqos dedicated to the Evangelist Mark, patron saint of the king. It was an index of the full extent of his involvement as patron and the intention of his grants and deserves to be discussed briefly.

The Founding of the Church of Däbrä-Marqos

The town of Däbrä-Marqos and its surrounding were originally known as Mänqorär, named after an important local founding father. Mänqorär was the seat of the provincial government of Gojjam at least since the 1850s and 1860s. The site probably served as local market town for the surrounding area. Under Täklä-Häymanot Mänqorär developed into the center of administration. His court officials, soldiers and the clergy who gathered from Gojjam and Gondär alike were also given residential sites.⁸¹ Täklä-Häymanot most likely decided on founding Däbrä-Marqos soon after his coronation in 1881 and consecrated sometime in 1886. It

⁸¹ Täklä-Iyäsus, "YäGojjam Tarik," pp.79 and 100 ff.

was a large foundation. A note in the register indicates that the church was founded for 212 *däbtära*.⁸²



Illustration 3. King Täklä-Häymanot general charter of confirmation. On the right side is the charter of confirmation issued in the name of archbishop Péteros and bishop Luqas.

Mänqorär was renamed Däbrä-Marqos in honor of Saint Mark, and Täklä-Häymanot imagined the town to be Alexandria II or the See of Saint Mark. The final charter reproduced as illustration 8 sought to establish Däbrä-Marqos as the preeminent church of Gojjam.

ንጉሥነ ተክለ ሃይማኖት ዘሥርዓ ለደብረ ማርቆስ ሥርዓቱም እንዲህ ነው ማህበሩ ቢጣላ ባለርስቱም እርስ በርስ ቢጣላ ወደሌላ ሥርዓተ ደብር አይሒድ ከዚህ በተጻፈው ሥርዓት ጸንቶ ይኑር። ሌላው ደብር ከዚህ እየመጣ ይመሳከር። በሃይማኖትም ምክንያት በንጃም ፀብ ክርክር ቢሆን አፈ ጉባኤነት ለደብረ ማርቆስ ይሁን። ጳጳስ የቀደሰባት ንጉስ የነገሰባት ወልድ ዋህድ ማለት የጸናባት ዳግማት እስክንድሪያ ናትና።

This is the rule King Täklä-Häymanot established for Däbrä-Marqos. If the community and the *restäñña* quarrel against one another, let them not go to another *däber* [and refer the case] for settlement. Let them live according to the rule established here for [Däbrä-Marqos]. Let other *däber* come here to settle their dispute. If dispute and quarrel over religious matters occur in Gojjam the *afäguba 'e* (sodality) shall be for Däbrä-Marqos which has become Alexandria II, for it is here where a bishop has said mass, a king is crowned, and monophysitism is affirmed.⁸³

⁸² Mäzgeb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 215.

⁸³ Mäzgeb, Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 202 and 205. The church was built next to the palace. The palace would have been integral with the present church. From the very beginning, Täklä-Häymanot saw Däbrä-Marqos as a mausoleum. A burial chamber below the floor of the inner circle of the church, the Holy of Holies, was prepared for his tomb and for bishop of Gojjam, Luqas's. Upon death, his body and that Luqas were interned in the church

The charter is written in Amhāric. Characteristic of the legal documents issued by Täklä-Häymanot, there is practically no religious language in the charter. Side by side with it, a second version of the charter, written in Arabic exists. Having little material importance, the version of the charter in Arabic was largely symbolic. The general charter finalized Täklä-Häymanot's ambitions and wishes. Täklä-Häymanot wished a unified ecclesiastical administration for the province of Gojjam with Däbrä-Marqos serving as the center. Däbrä-Marqos was vested with all ecclesiastical power that a regional king could grant. The church was given the rights to hold religious synod to settle matters regarding doctrine and serve as *afäguba'e* or the spokesman of that synod. This privilege stems from the importance which Däbrä-Marqos acquired. Together, the installation of the bishopric of Gojjam and the crowning of the king at the site sealed the status of Däbrä-Marqos as an important ecclesiastical and administrative center.

Täklä-Häymanot's foundation induced a novel practice in the production and authentication of legal documents. A magnificent seal on the final charter document authenticates the founder's approval of it. The need for devising a special seal was linked to the foundation of Däbrä-Marqos. Täklä-Häymanot used a religious symbol from the Book of Revelation on the seal. The Lion of Judah carrying the cross represents Jesus Christ and was used as a means of projecting power. This unique seal, together with the composition of an Arabic version in the text, indicates the solemnity of Täklä-Häymanot's general charter.⁸⁴

Däbrä-Marqos is also impressive in the sheer number of confirmations and anathemas it received from ecclesiastical and secular persons of national significance. Three ecclesiastics—Archbishop Péteros, Bishop Luqas, and *Echägé* Téwoflos—and Emperor Yohānes IV confirmed the privileges and rights of Däbrä-Marqos thereby adding additional legal weight to

according to the original plan.

⁸⁴Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, # 205. The use of royal seals as method of authenticating charters is novel for nineteenth century.

the grant.⁸⁵ Yohannes’s charter was issued primarily to protect the church from the jurisdiction of secular authorities and specifically directed at the future rulers of Gojjam. The charter is shorter; however, a magnificent seal impressed on top of the document gives it an impressive look. In terms of design and the royal symbol of the Lion of Judah carrying a cross it contains, it is very similar to Täklä-Häymanot’s. All indications are that the seal impressed on Yohannes IV’s charter was cast in Gojjam and presumably kept in the church of Däbrä-Marqos.⁸⁶

Echägé Téwoflos’s charter addressed to “my fathers, brothers, my children, the *qomosats*, priests, deacons, and all senior noblemen”⁸⁷ specifically affirmed the sanctuary rights of Däbrä-Marqos and its preeminent status among the churches of Gojjam. The public ceremony that attended the formal charter of confirmations and anathemas from Yohannes IV and others is not recorded. Only indirect information about the specific ceremony involved during demarcation of the perimeters of the sanctuary exists. A note in the register states that “janhoy (Yohannes IV) sent his flagpole, the bishops, in turn, sent cross, their prayer stick and a chair” for use during the ceremony.⁸⁸ The second consecration of the church following its rebuilding after its destruction by fire perhaps repeated the earlier ceremony of dedication which is not recorded for us. Täklä-Iyäsus notes that the second dedication, which took place in 1900, was a solemn occasion attended by the king in full regalia and carrying a gun together with his officers and soldiers and the bishop and the priests chanting praise songs to Täklä-Häymanot.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, # 202 and 205.

⁸⁶ Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, # 202.

⁸⁷ Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, # 202.

⁸⁸ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 202: “ከልሉንም ሰንደቅ አላማ ጃንሆይ ሰደው ጳጳሳቱም መስቀል መቆሚያ ውምበር ሰደው አስከልለውታል የግንቦት አምቧ ለት።”

⁸⁹ Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik,” p.102.

Survey and Register

The church of Däbrä-Marqos is one of the institutions which have a well preserved *mäzgäb* or land register. Covered with wooden boards and comprising fifty-five folios 40cm x 40cm each, the register records the rights and privileges of the new foundation, the holding of the individual *däbtära* and their respective liturgical duties, the obligations of the peasants under the jurisdiction of the various officials of the church, and several other administrative affairs of Däbrä-Marqos.⁹⁰

The lands of the church were located in 54 localities spread across eight districts. The core of its endowment comprised the entire district of what was then Gozamen over which the church of Däbrä-Marqos was given jurisdictional right. The rule established by Täklä-Häymanot seeks to exclude secular officials from intervening in administration of Gozamen. It specifically prevented *léba-adem* or thief-catcher and the *mesläné* or representative of the ruler, *buta* and *koré*. The latter two were charged with the task of keeping the local peace and serving as policemen and watchdogs for the safety of merchants and travelers.⁹¹

The charter and accompanying register of Däbrä-Marqos inevitably presents us with the major problem of the way in which the individual *däbtära* exploited their land. The charter Täklä-Häymanot issued at the early stage of the endowment and foundation process states that the *däbtära* received two-thirds of the land in each locality under the jurisdiction of the church, leaving one-third for the cultivators. Then it repeats the familiar judiciary clause regulating the relations between the *rim* holders and their dependents by stating that “the *däbtära* shall have authority over the *zéga* whom they settled both on their-thirds share of the land and on their

⁹⁰ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 195-210 and 251-253.

⁹¹ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 195 and 201.

residential sites [in Däbrä-Marqos].”⁹² As has been mentioned earlier, sources from Gojjam are practically silent about the *zégoch* living on the land of the *rim* holders. In seeking an answer to this problem we need to refer to other complementary documents. Here it is necessary to mention two pieces of evidence from the archives of Däbrä-Marqos regarding *zégoch*. One of these documents is a dispute settlement recorded in the church’s *yärest mäzgäb*. It involved Azaj Negusé and *Bäjerond* Ayné, both *däbtära* of Däbrä-Marqos. The disputed land is located in Sändema, which is listed as one the fifty-four estates of Däbrä-Marqos in the land register.⁹³ Negusé was claiming land held by Ayné through a descent line which traces back to a common ancestor called Täklä-Wäld through Amäté, one of the children of Täklä-Wäld. Ayné denied the claim by arguing that Amäté was unrelated to Täklä-Wäld. When Negusé started to call witnesses, Ayné abandoned his claim and agreed to share his land with Negusé. The scribe states that the section of the land that was given to Negusé included “the site over which Däräso Kulalit has built house and settled his *zégoch*.”⁹⁴ The dispute seems to have affected several people such as Däräso whose relations to Ayné and Negusé is not clear from the record. In any case, what is important to me is the attestation of the landless *zéga* in Sändema where the *däbtära* of Däbrä-Marqos, including King Täklä-Häymanot, were given *rim* property. This document partially removes the veil shrouding the formulaic charters and registers. It is very likely that *the däbtära* did settle *zégoch* in their *rim* lands and residential sites at Sändema as envisaged by the charter.

The second evidence about the settlement of dependents in the property of the *rim* holders concerned Täklä-Häymanot. Like other grantors and patrons, Täklä-Häymanot shared the *rim* plots and residential sites as one among the *däbtära* of Däbrä-Marqos. In addition to

⁹² Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 200: “በሁለት እጁም በቦታውም ያሰፈረውን ዜጋ ደብተራ ይዳኝ እንጅ አለቃ ሊቀጠብብት አይደረስበት ከደም ከይናፋ ከሌባ [ዳኝነት] በቀር።”

⁹³ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 195.

⁹⁴ Yärest Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 288: “ደረሰ ኩላሊት የሰሩበትን ዜጋም ያሰፈሩበትን... አዛጅ ንጌሴን ሊመስል ነው።”

agricultural plots in Sändema and elsewhere, other strips of land are registered in Täklä-Häymanot's name in Däbrä-Marqos alone. The total town plots he and his wife received could have reached 100 *gämäd* or thong. Täklä-Häymanot's town plots were used for building houses for himself and for the settlement of his dependent Muslim laborers or *zégoch*. The scribe notes "the three *gämäd* strips would be for the settlement of Muslims."⁹⁵ Fifty *gämäd* of the plots he received was used as his garden, which he irrigated with water from the nearby stream "carried by a canal." The king seems to have settled willing Muslim peasant workers as *zégoch* to cultivate his land. This reference to dependent Muslims settling on the land of Täklä-Häymanot provides us with additional evidence about the continuing reliance of the ruling class on the labor of the *zégoch*.

The skimpy information on *zégoch* settling on the land of the *däbtära* does not enable us to make an assertive statement. The evidence is however a valuable pointer that that the ruling class was not engaged in agriculture labor and they needed workers to cultivate their land. We may add to our understanding of the grants by investigating the evidence of the land measurement and survey conducted at Wänqa Giyorgis, in the outskirts of Däbrä-Marqos.

Survey: the Example of Wänqa

A total of thirty-five *däbtära*, including Emperor Yohannes IV and King Täklä-Häymanot, are listed regarding Wänqa.⁹⁶ The context for the recording of the land survey at Wänqa was the resistance by local peasants to the loss of their two-thirds inheritance to the *däbtära*, which provoked a protracted litigation between the two sides. According to an informant, Aräya Gäbrä Mädhen, a resident of Wänqa, the peasants refused to surrender their property, arguing that their land had been given as an endowment to the church of Wänqa

⁹⁵ Mäzgab, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture #221: "ሰብቱ ገመድ የገገሱ ተከለገይማኖት የእስላምጌ ማስፈሪያ።"

⁹⁶ Mäzgab, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, Picture # 201 and 251-253.

Giyorgis, and they had local autonomy under an older charter. The peasants lacked documentary evidence to back their claim and eventually they had to renounce two-thirds of their hereditary land like peasants elsewhere. The peasants of Wänqa refused to abandon their claim and proved to be persistent litigants. Despite a previous judicial settlement of the case, they laid in wait for the right moment and reopened the case in 1940s long after the transfer of the land had been carried out in 1887. Araya was one of those who fought the legal battles on behalf of the peasants. Peasants lost the legal battle once again and forever.⁹⁷

Agafari Nätäru, a judge, was charged with the task of dividing the land between the two parties. Nätäru specified the borders separating the land of the *däbtära* from that of the hereditary peasants in terms of who held the land falling to the right and left of landmarks rather than of using the four cardinal directions. He cited streams, roads, and trees as landmarks to demarcate the lands belonging to the two sides. Obviously, this is very primitive means of locating a place. One entry reads:

አፃፅፃ ወደቀኝ የደብተራ ወደ ግራ የጨዋ፤ሱብላን ወደ ቀኝ ፫ሽመል ጨምሮ የደብተራ ወደ ገራ የጨዋ። ከቦረንቅ በላይ ያለው የርከን መሬት ወደቀኝ የደብተራ ወደ ግራ የጨዋ።

In Asasema to the right belongs to the *däbtära* and to the left it belongs to the *chäwa* (lay peasants). In Sobela to the right, plus 3 rods, belongs to the *däbtära* and to the left belongs to the *chäwa*. The land of Arkin, located beyond Boränq, to the right belongs to the *däbtära* and to the left belongs to the *chäwa*.⁹⁸

The boundary separating the land of the *däbtära* and the local peasants was clearly demarcated. After dividing the land into the holding of the *däbtära* and the hereditary owners, then, Nätäru left the remaining part of the redivision for the *däbtära* to work out. The document reads “let the 20 *däbtära* divide up the lands of Boränq and Jinasefét.”⁹⁹ Nätäru used a supposedly standard

⁹⁷ I rely for this information on my informant Araya Gäbrä-Mädhen interviewed at Wänqa on April 20, 2008.

⁹⁸ Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 251.

⁹⁹ Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture #253: “፳ው ደብተራ ቦረንቅንና ጁናጽፌትን ደብልቆ ይካፈላል።” Arkin, Boränq and Janasefét mentioned in the quote above are the specific locales within Wänqa where the division of the land was carried.

size stick when measuring the land, but the size of the land converted into *rim* is not given in terms of *gasha*.

Land measurement and survey did take place in other localities under the supervision of individuals assigned to perform this job. For most of the entries in the register of Däbrä-Marqos, the extent of the lands each *däbtära* received is unspecified, while, for others, the size is expressed in largely the vague unit of *cheqa mägaräfyä*. The term appears as an alternative for one complete *rim*. What it exactly meant in terms of the more familiar unit of measurement, *gasha*, is a more complicated problem.¹⁰⁰ *Cheqa mägaräfyä* is also found in many Gondärine legal records. However, this term's meaning is not provided. It is clear that *cheqa mägaräfyä* refers to land staked-out for the service of the local official, the *cheqa*, during land measurement and to support their service as administrators as well. A brief incidental note in the register of Däbrä-Marqos sheds light on this term's meaning: "the *restännä* holding the land assigned as *yächeqa mägaräfyä* shall pay ten salt-salt bars. What we call *yächeqa mägaräfyä* is equivalent to one *däbtära rim*."¹⁰¹ The note involved the peasants in the locality called Nefasa in Gozamen. The evidence does not give any *satisfactory* answer to the problem of the size of land each *däbtära* received. However, it seems apparent that each *däbtära* held land sufficient to support his service.

In sum, Täklä-Häymanot's actions were munificent towards churches and monasteries. It was the relative quiet of the last quarter of the nineteenth century that enabled him to donate land to churches and renovate old churches and found new ones. The charter and the land register of

¹⁰⁰ Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture #198. For example, such lands in the localities of Lay Shät and Mänta Shola were given for the *Mälakä-Sähay* Mäshäsha, the first *aläqa* of Däbrä-Marqos, and one *Aläqa* Ešäté as a reward for their service of *aqafafi*. In another locality, called Abba Jäba, in the district of Libän the local official, the *cheqa*, received land as his reward for the service of *aqafafi*.

¹⁰¹ Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture #201: "ባለርስቱ የጭቃውን መጋረፊያ መሬት ይዞ ፲፲ ጩው ይክፈል። ይኸውም የጭቃ መጋረፊያ ያልነው ያንድ ደብተራ ሪም ያህል ነው።" Instead of direct holding by the *cheqa*, here, the local peasants would cultivate the land and pay ten salt-bars for the official.

the church of Däbrä-Marqos and several other churches demonstrate the degree to which the king took it upon himself to build the church's and monasteries' material basis. The death of Täklä-Häymanot closed an era in every sense of the term in Gojjam. Far from sharing the generosity of Täklä-Häymanot, his powerful son and successor, *Ras Häylu II* (c.1910-1932), did every bit the exact opposite of his father towards churches. Häylu was engrossing and he was pitted against many churches in the early twentieth century, as discussed in chapter seven.¹⁰²

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that there was as much continuity as there was change during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*, which ushered in a new upsurge of a variety of foundations and grants in Gojjam. The process of grants and foundations continued throughout the nineteenth century reaching their climax during the reign of Täklä-Häymanot. In general sense the evidence attests to the energy and prosperity of society during the eighteenth and nineteenth century rather than decline and decay and the longevity and vitality of many salient features of Gondärine traditions and cultural ideals. This is indicated by the use of traditional Gondärine property and social vocabulary in legal texts. The fundamental aspects of these grants are that they convey similar rights and are concerned essentially with *rim* property and private jurisdictional power over the *zéga* class. The foundation of Mota Giyorgis in 1760s was very important in shaping the landholding system around *rim*. Thanks to this common tradition set by the Mota charter for subsequent patrons, many details of the rights and obligations of property are homogenous and standardized. Besides promoting a standardized and homogenous formulation, the use of a single model charter insured the continuity of practice relating to the rights and obligations of property.

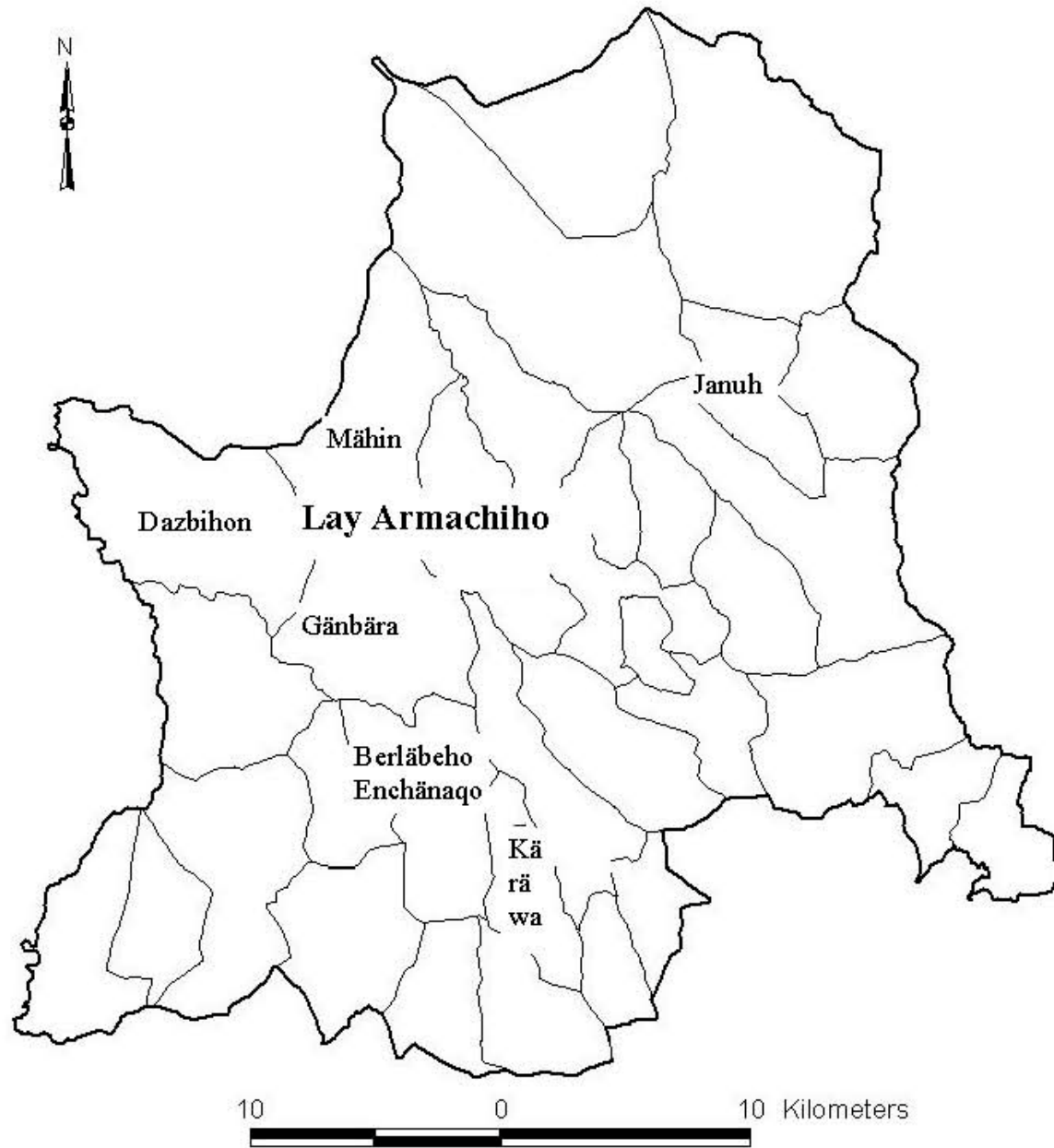
¹⁰² Märtulä-Maryam received from *Ras Häylu* the valuable grant of rights to assume the clerical power of *liqäkahnat* over the clergy in the district of Ennäbsé Sarmeder. This is the solitary grant ever made by *Ras Häylu*.

Much of the literature portrays Gojjam as the prototype of *rest* land tenure dominated by independent peasant smallholders whose rights could not be violated, and the conspicuous absence of a landlord class.¹⁰³ This assumption needs to be changed in light of the discussion in this chapter. All told, *rim* property which derived from confiscated peasant inheritances was the basis of social and economic power of the ruling class in the Gojjam province.

Chapters three and four have largely concerned themselves with *rim* grants that accompanied the foundations of churches. Little was said about the relations between *zégoch* and lords. The social outcomes in the wake of the widespread use of the term *rim* during the Gondärine period in the Bägémeder and Gojjam provinces are worthy of additional analysis and discussion if for no other reason than their impact on the status and physical conditions of the Ethiopian peasants. Now the stage has been set, it is time to turn from the general institutional development and grants to the actual life experience of the *zégoch* and their relations with the landlords.

¹⁰³ This view was established by Hoben in his *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia*, pp. 8-9.

Map 8. The Lands of Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam in Bajäna (Lay Armachiho)



Chapter Five: Lords and Zégoch: The Ethiopian Serfdom, c.1700-1900

The introduction of *rim* property had brought significant shifts in the status of the peasants and in their relationship to the land. In more ways than one, *rim* property had a negative effect on the rural population of Bägémeder and Gojjam. Chief among them was a loss of peasants' inheritance, as untold numbers were striped of ancestral landholding that was transferred to the ruling class. *rim* property also altered the social status of the rural cultivators—indeed so a greater percentage than before were absorbed into the *zéga* class, thereby further expanding the scope of *zégenät*. The word *zéga* is used only three times before 1700 in the sociological context.¹ After 1700, it is found upon an examination of a variety of transactions. Finally, *rim* property made possible the withdrawal of legal protection from peasants, and for the onset of new patterns of social domination that benefited the landlord class.

The situation of the *zégoch* can be compared to the patterns of landholding, statuses, and lordship in other premodern settings. In some respects, *zégenät* closely corresponds at many points with classical serfdom such as the one described for European countries by historians of medieval society. Here in exploring the social relations between lords and *zégoch* recorded in the sources, I will draw on insights drawn from the historiography of medieval European serfdom. More generally, in the early twentieth century historians regarded serfdom “an oppressive form of peasant land tenure” with a general authority throughout Europe.² Information in legal treatises and laws provided historians useful insights into social organization and the lived experiences of rural people. In the case of England, Paul Vinogradoff, for example, studied how

¹ Perruchon, “Notes pour l’Histoire d’Éthiopie,” pp. 359-360; Rossini, *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel (Malak Sagad)*, pp.30 and 83-84; and Wängél, MS., Tana Qirqos, f.1v-2v (For a digitized copy of this document see; EMMML, 8436, f. 1v-2v; see also Bosc-Tiesse, *Les îles de la memoire Fabrique des et ecriture*, pp.412-418.

² Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin, “Introduction,” Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin, eds., *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe: Decline, Resistance, and Expansion* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p.2.

ancient slavery gave way to serfdom in medieval England primarily based on analysis of legal sources. Later in the 1970s Rodney Hilton reestablished the importance of serfdom in medieval England through his studies of the 1381 peasant rising, which was provoked by the imposition of servitude on rural people.³

In the last half of the twentieth century, however, because of the distrust of legal sources, historians of medieval France and England in large measure shelved the topic of serfdom and downplayed its importance. They viewed legal niceties between free and unfree peasants as immaterial, for medieval lordship in general was considered oppressive across the board. In France, Marc Bloch and those who followed him, such as George Duby, focused on analyses of the everyday life of rural people and the impact of lordship on their lived experience rather than on the legal status of peasants.⁴ In contrast to France and England, scholarly interest in the study of medieval serfdom in the Eastern and central European countries was consistent and vigorous and legal prescriptions are considered as real and an important guide for the reconstruction of the social experience of rural people.⁵

In the last two decades there has been a growing interest in servitude and in the formal institutions of serfdom. Paul Freedman, who has done respected work on medieval Catalonian serfdom, has correctly pointed out that to ignore legal sources as irrelevant is a misleading strategy. He argues that although there is a discrepancy between legal prescriptions and the reality on the ground, institutional forms along with economic variables were likely to affect the

³ Rodney Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973); and Paul Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England: Essays in English Medieval History* (Oxford, 1892).

⁴ M. Bloch, *Mélanges Historiques*, vol.1 (Paris, 1963); and Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953); and Freedman and Bourin, "Introduction," pp.3-4.

⁵ Freedman and Bourin, "Introduction," p.9; and Richard Hoffmann, *Land, Liberties, and Lordship in Late Medieval Countryside: Agrarian Structures and Change in the Duchy of Wrocław* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

lived experience of peasants. He further states that in medieval Catalonia how one said things mattered and shaped attitudes,

The recent hermeneutic turn in various disciplines has directed attention to the way in which texts reflect and propose social agendas and affect social reality. Forms of discourse such as law are now seen as neither impersonal accounts of contemporary values, nor irrelevant fictions. Statements about status, like other forms of categorization, actually influence the power of the objects and subjects of such taxonomy within society. Saying that all tenants of certain regions are serfs may not be sociologically true, but it can sanction a body of future law and, more important, socio-political action that can encourage the enserfment of those inaccurately labeled.⁶

An important point here is that despite the fact that documentary norms may mismatch objective reality, they could also serve as the basis for subsequent practice. Furthermore, far from being mere abstractions, documentary prescriptions are set within a wider social context. One can certainly apply this stance to the Ethiopian documents. I agree with Freedman that discourse can shape reality and it can serve as justification to reshape social, political and property relations. Contemporaries were therefore concerned with the application of social definitions, because of its direct implication on their material conditions and legal status. Although very slight at best, sources contain evidence of the legal battle over the issue of social definition. To be more concrete, some individuals in late nineteenth century Gojjam arbitrarily called *zéga* took offence at the use of the term to describe their status and sued for justice.⁷ Used in the sources examined, the term *zéga* generally conformed to its legal definition and pointed to a concrete reality.

Exploiting the Land: Zégoch and Tenants

Analysis of the way landlords made use of their land enables us to better understand the social transformation that took place in the Gondärine era. The ruling class relied on the labor of others to work their land. Hence the rights of social control over the inhabitants already

⁶Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), P.13

⁷ See UNESCO, *Manual of the Däbrä-Marqos Clergy*, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Däbrä-Marqos.

occupying the land was as much to be desired as grants of *rim* property. Charters routinely granted lords land along with the labor of dependent peasants. *Zégenät* was the most common method of utilizing the labor of others in land under the jurisdiction of churches. Direct evidence on the actual exploitation of the labor of the *zéga* class is thinly scattered across time and places. I will closely analyze these sources and extensively quote the utterances of contemporaries, tenants and *zégoch* and lords. In closely analyzing these sources my purpose is to illustrate a general discussion and will try to keep guard not to lose the forest for the trees.

The first example of extensive use of dependent labor by clerical landlords to work their land is the register of Qwesqwam. The register conveys a significant amount of social, legal and tenorial information about Gondärine Ethiopia. Landless tenants with various degrees of ties to the land and the landlords constituted the single largest category of people in Bajäna, one of the districts where the lands of Qwesqwam clergy were located. It should be recalled that the Qwesqwam register classifies the occupants of the land into *tis* and *zégoch*. In entry after entry dependent laborers described as *tis* and *zégoch* are listed side by side. The meaning of the terms should be understood in light of the purpose of the survey. Landlords considered the residents as an appurtenance of the land. Both groups are listed alongside of land, pastures, houses and gardens. Although the *rim* lands were located in the same localities with shared boundaries, each of the 260 Qwesqwam *däbtära* had his/her own dependents and exploited the land individually. Table 7 summarizes the number of *tis* and *zéga* and the size of *gasha* by locality in Bajäna.

Table 7. Summary of the Bajäna Lands and the Residents by Locality based on Qwesqwam's Registers.

Locality	Size in <i>Gasha</i>	No. of <i>Sämad</i> <i>Zégoch</i>	No. of <i>Tis</i>
Bajäna (here Bajäna refers to a specific locality)	83	128	177
Berläbeho	48	98	89
Dazbihon	187	390	246
Dehun Mäkära	60	128	149
Derkwa	23	53	59
Enchänako	32	87	84
Endibina	27	61	76
Gänbära	48	80	112
Januh	89	55	22
Käch	7	4	7
Käräwa	21	79	88
Krilämb	127	342	346
Kiräma	70	80	94
Mähin	91	101	77
Safigé	12	12	12
Tämätäna	29	100	88
Total	945	1798	1726

The concentration of the *tis* and the *zégoch* varied from one locality to another. All the peasants in Dazbihon in particular seem to have fallen under the provisions of the grants. Dazbihon had the highest number of *tis* and *zégoch*, 246 and 390, respectively, while Käch had the lowest number of cultivators, respectively, 7 *tis* and 4 *zégoch*. The unequal distribution of the *tis* and the *zéga* was influenced by the difference in the size of the lands granted to the *däbtära* in each place. In Dazbihon a total of 187 *gasha* of land, the largest within Bajäna, was held by the *däbtära*, while in Käch only 7 *gasha* of *rim* land was given. As a whole, within the district of Bajäna a total of 1798 individuals are listed as *zégoch*, while those described as *tis* numbered

1726. On the average each of the 260 *däbtära* of Qwesqwam had 13.6 individuals living and working in his/her estates.

Mädäb is another term found in most entries in addition to *tis* and *zégoch*. The number of *mädäb* for each entry is consistently one. Thus the Qwesqwam grant compounded at once the *däbtära*, the *zégoch*, the *tis* and the *mädäb*. In all cases the terms are undefined and the tenurial obligations unarticulated. The surveyors spell out neither the specialization nor the level and nature of the obligations of the two groups. The use of different terms implies nuances in the status and obligations of the residents. What distinction did exist between the two groups of residents? The *tis* and the *zégoch* were not interchangeable. Each term conveyed a different idea. Depending on context the term [ጠ.ሰ] *tis* has several layers of meaning. In its general sense *tis* is “smoke” and had the sense of hearth, habitation or domicile. It refers to peasant households tied to a hearth. The term can also be interpreted as the initial for *tisäñña* or tenant. In its restricted sense *tis* means “tenant farmer.”⁸ Hence the term stood for a type of tenure. Its application in the register of Qwesqwam seems in both contexts.⁹

There was a crucial difference in the legal status of the *tis* and the *zéga* and the relations they had with their lords. For every entry those individuals listed as *tis* are different from the *zéga*, an acknowledgement of the distinction between the two groups. The *zégoch*'s main job was essentially agricultural. The term *sämad* meaning “one who yokes or harnesses a pair of oxen” preceding *zéga* attests to this fact. *Sämad* in combination with *zéga* means “farmer *zéga*” or simply “plowman.”¹⁰ This is unique to *zégoch*. The status of those described as *tis* primarily derives from the land they occupy, whereas the term *zéga* had the inherent concept of social dependence. The contrast between *zégoch* and *tis* is clearly indicated by the record of the

⁸ Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, pp.2173-274.

⁹ Habtamu, “Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia,” p. 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.100-102.

exchange of land for *zéga*. For instance, the cleric *Mälakä-Sähay* Abésolom received the former homestead of Anzzätam “in an exchange for *zéga*”, while Empress Mentewwab took control of Wäradé’s “cotton [field] in an exchange for *zéga*.”¹¹

The *tis* and *zégoch* also shared common elements in their relations to the land. Whatever the term *tis* meant, it is clear that the groups in this category lacked property rights in the land. Like the *zégoch*, the *tis* also owed rents and services to the owners of *rim* property. Both typically lived in peasant households in small and dispersed hamlets occupying land close to the agricultural plots they worked that belonged to the landlords. Entries in the register help to illuminate the relations of the *tis* and the *zégoch* to the land and to their lords. One entry involved a cleric called *Abba Sawiros*. His one *gasha* of land split into 20 plots, located in Dehun Mäkära, derived from the former lands of *Abba Suré*. Three *zégoch*—*Abbat*, *Alif Nur*, and *Ahmäd* and four *tis*—*Nuré*, *Täsfä*, *Abderhman* and *Jebril*—occupied *Sawiros*’s land. Of these dependents, *Abbat* served as *mädäb*.¹² Five of the seven men have recognizable Muslim names. Both groups had no previous connections to the land and were settled from elsewhere.

The relations between *Sawiros* and his *tis* and *zégoch* may have grown out of a mutual agreement of the contracting parties. In most other cases, it was largely the state that decided the status of rural cultivators. In numerous instances the residents were reduced to their new status of *zéga* or *tis* on the land they formerly held by inheritance. The entry involving the cleric *Mämher Amhä* is a case in point. In *Mähin Amhä* received one *gasha* made up of ten plots, of which five derived from the former owner *Agusté*. *Agusté* played so many roles in his one person. *Agusté*

¹¹ For Abésolom see Illinois/IES, 88.II.12, Qwseqwam, *Mäzgäb*; and for Mentewwab see Illinois/IES, 88.III.13, Qwseqwam, *Mäzgäb*.

¹² *Mäzgäb*, *Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqwam*, picture # 37: “ያባ ሳዊሮስ ድኑር መከራ ጌጋ ያባሱሬ ጸግድ ዜጋ አባት አሊፍኑር አህመድ ጢስ ኑሬ ተስፋ አብድርሀማን ጅብሪል ጁም። አባት መደብ።”

was the former owner of the five plots which he now worked as *zéga* and also served as *mädäb*.¹³ Derived from the root *mädäbä* meaning “he assigns”, *mädäb* refers to individuals assigned for special duty.¹⁴ Landlords such as Amhä lived in Gondär far from the lands. They had little contact with the farming people in rural areas and spent little time on agricultural matters. The *mädäb* could have played the role of the supervisor of the *zégoch* and the *tis*. The instances of Amhä and Sawiros presented here form an important element of the total picture of the arrangements between lords and dependents farmers at Bajäna. The register implies significant transformation which the grants of the eighteenth century brought in term of the organization of labor and the status of the rural cultivators.

The experience of the rural cultivators in Bajäna serves as an example of a larger movement of peasant subjugation and impositions of new obligations during the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Details of the impact of the practice of land confiscation on the peasants’ economic standing are difficult to specify. None the less the general atmosphere of peasant conditions can be gathered from records of court decisions and complaints lodged by rural people about their economic burdens. Four such instances of peasant complaints occurred in the period between *circa* 1740s and 1780s. In the first instance, the peasants of Géra Deba in Dämbeya under the clergy of Mädhäné-Aläm church in Gondär pleaded to Iyaus II (1730-1755) that “they were unable to pay” their rent. The king ordered the division of the land granting “two-thirds of the land among sixty-four *däbtära*, leaving the one-third portion for the poor.”¹⁶ What the peasants objected to was apparently their rent obligations rather than the loss of their hereditary lands.

¹³ Illinois/IES, 88. I. 13, Däbrä-Sähay Qwesqyam, Mäzgäb: “ማኒን ጅ ጋ የአገሰጡ። ዜ[ጋ]ውም እርሱ ነው። ጅ ም ከአገሰጡ ጅም ከሹታርዳ። መደብ አገሰጡ።”

¹⁴ Kane, *Amharic English Dictionary*, pp.326-327.

¹⁵ The Qwesqyam register shows the situations at the moment when the survey was compiled and the labor of the residents were assigned to individual landlords.

¹⁶ Illinois/IES, 84. I. 9, Gebrä-Hemam; and BL., Or. 518, f16.

The second and third instances records similar concerns of the peasants. Both took place during the reign of Täklä-Häymanot (r.1769-1779) and involved the tenants of Gubiya (see map eight) under the clergy of the church of Mädhäné-Aläm. The scribe tells us that the peasants were forced to terminate their tenancies because of their inability to meet their rent obligations.¹⁷ Likewise, two women, *Wäyzäro* Lehekut and *Wäyzäro* Esétu, lodged their complaint about their crushing obligation to King Täklä-Giyorgis informing him that “your poor [subjects] are finished.”¹⁸ Lehekut and Esétu were apparently tenants under the church of Bä’ata, Täklä-Giyorgis’s foundation. By the instruction of the king the two women made themselves dependent on and placed themselves under the protection of the contemporary bishop Yosab. Lehekut and Esétu in turn gave Yosab fifteen plots and three residential sites.¹⁹

Appeal to revision of obligations and terminations of tenancies were not the only reaction of the peasants to the tenurial changes of the period. It should be recalled that, although futile, tenants under the clergy of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé church tried to throw off their domination by the clerical landlords by violent means in the late seventeenth century.²⁰ Still other peasants tried to negotiate their exclusion from their ancestral property through formal court proceedings and peaceful means. A document recording a court ruling ending a legal battle between three defendants—Adäru, Arku, and Yä’abbo-Barya—and a plaintiff *Serag-Masäre* Tersit, a cleric under the church of Hämärä-Noh, established by King Téwoflos (r.1711-1716) in the town of Gondär is a case in point. The case occurred during the reign of King Täklä-Giyorgis. This case is revealing about the impact of *rim* property on rural farming people and needs to be looked at closely. The court document referred to the three defendants as “Tersit’s *zégoch*.” Adäru, Arku,

¹⁷ BL., Or. 518, f171b.

¹⁸ BL., Or. 518, f16: “ድሆችዎ አለቅነ።”

¹⁹ BL., Or. 518, f16.

²⁰ Illinois/IES, 88.v.23 and 24, Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Tarikä Nägäst*.

and Yä'abbo-Barya were in possession of their inherited land before being forced to surrender two-thirds of it. It seems that the three individuals failed to transfer three plots to Tersit's control and defaulted on their rent, and a lawsuit followed. Tersit sued his *zégoch* saying that "I have been granted three plots against you."²¹ Adäru, Arku, and Yä'abbo-Barya insisted that Tersit did not hold rights in the plots he claimed but failed to produce convincing evidence to support their claim and lost the case. On the contrary, Tersit's argument was backed by the evidence of the church's property register. The judicial assembly comprising one *Azaji* Häylu, along with the head of the church, *Aläqa* Wasé, and lower level church officials affirmed the rights of Tersit. Arku and colleagues were also ordered to pay Tersit the rent from the land which they had avoided paying.

Having lost the legal battle in court they opted for a negotiated settlement hoping for favorable consideration from the elderly arbiters. Yet unnamed arbiters let the verdict stay, showing no empathy for the lot of the *zégoch*. In the end, the three *zégoch* had no choice but to accept the reality of losing land and accept the treatment accorded a *zéga*. In the case of Yä'abbo-Barya, two-thirds of his landed property was taken from him for a residential site for Tersit. Yä'abbo-Barya was recognized as *zéga* of Tersit, but he was not legally bound to stay put in his residence. The terms of the agreement states that "[i]f he wishes he (Yä'abbo-Barya) can live, if he dislikes he can leave his one-third share."²² Arku, Yä'abbo-Barya and Adäru "swore in the name of the emperor" agreeing to respect the terms of the dispute settlement.²³

This case's significance is that it clarified the ways in which legal practice affected the social experience of the peasants during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is very easy to see a similar fate for large number of other rural households where *rim* property was granted. In

²¹ Or. 508, f.282v: "በፍጹምድር ተሰርቶባችኋለሁ ብለው ከሰሱአቸው።"

²² Or. 508, f.282v: "በሰታዮ ካበባርያ ጋራ ፪ እጅና ሲሶ ይሳፈራሉ። ቢወድ ይኖራል ቢጸላም ጥሎት ይሄዳል ሲሰውን።"

²³ Or. 508, f.282v.

effect, what we are dealing when we encounter the *zégoch* in the sources is largely with people who at one time or another were independent peasants occupying land they held by rights of inheritance. Peasants accommodated to the tenurial changes by receiving back their lands in tenancy terms and by accepting their status as *zégoch* to landlords. This seems a generally accepted response by peasants to land confiscation. Furthermore, no constraint on the *zégoch's* freedom of movement is implied in this case which appears to have been a widely accepted norm. The evidence from Gojjam shows that the key element of the legal freedom for the *zégoch* was their ability to leave their landlords of their own free will. While the right for departure was recognized, there were conditions the *zégoch* needed to fulfill before they could up and move. A typical clause in legal documents dealing with severance of relations between the lords and *zégoch* and the conditions the latter were to meet reads:

If the *zéga* of the *däbtära* departs he shall offer big jar, millstone, mortar and pestle, and bed. He cannot depart demolishing his dwellings. [...] If the house of the *zéga* is destroyed by fire or if the house in which he dwells is demolished he shall build another before departing.²⁴

The wording of the severance clause suggests that the relationship between lord and *zéga* was not intended from the very beginning to be permanent. If a *zéga* did not wish to continue to live under his current landlord, he was free to leave. By law the *zégoch* were required to leave behind the best part of their moveable properties which included bed, big jar, mortar and pestle, and stone mills. In the context of Gojjam, private jurisdiction of the lords over them together with the severance obligations they had to meet before leaving can be pointed out as the identifying markers of the status of *zégoch*.²⁵

Yet we are far from reaching a conclusion about the nature of relations between lord and

²⁴ Illinois/IES, 89.XVI.23-28, Yägwära Qwesqyam, Gebrä-Hemam: “የደብተራውም ዜጋ ኖሮ ሲሄድ ጋን አልጋ ወፍጭ መቀጫ ሰጥቶ ይሄዳል። ቤት አፍርሶ አይሄድም። ... ዜጋም ቤቱን አሳት ቢፈጀው በተሰራቤትም ገብቶ ያቢፈርስ ሲሄድ ሰርቶ ይሄዳል።”

²⁵ For additional information on the severance of relations between lord and *zéga* on Gojjam, see Girma, ed., “The Ancient Customary Law of the Gafat”, pp.54-55; and Illinois/IES, 89.II.30, Däbrä-Wärq, Manual.

zéga. The determination of the exact relations between lords and *zégoch* requires the consideration of more cases. There is a strong body of evidence that lords held legal power over their *zégoch* apart from the consequence of their tenancy relationships. In law the *zégoch* were free, but in practice their condition was akin to servitude. Property relations often tended to create the setting for not only the private jurisdiction of lords over the occupants of their land, but also for the development of hereditary bonds between the two interacting groups. The hereditary dimension of the relations merits further discussion.

Between serfs and slaves

In twenty documents from the period between 1719 to the 1840s, the *zégoch* are seen being disposed and divided through will, gift and sale. I will present first a few instances in order to get across an impression of the nature of the sources pertaining to the *zégoch*. Two famous documents, both from the eighteenth century, record the disposal of *zégoch* along with land by lords to their heirs by acts of will. Significantly, in each of these documents the *zégoch* are depicted as appurtenances of the land. They are listed alongside of land, pastures, houses and gardens. In the first of these documents written in 1719, the term *zéga* is used in the will of one *Abéto Tädäsiwäs* housed in the church of Betälehém in Gayenet (see map 3).²⁶ Thirty *zégoch* are mentioned by name in a detailed inventory of the stock of the estates of Tädäsiwäs and divided between his two heirs, presumably his children, a daughter *Wäyzäro* Sesoneya and a son *Abéto* Yonatan. The document is very explicit about what was involved in the transaction. For example, concerning Yonatan we find the following detail, “*Abéto* Yonatan’s share from *zéga* are Wäldä-Mika’el, Häylé, Wäldä-Kesos, Mäqedäsé, Zärufé, Temeherté, Sätächeññ, Amsalé, Adära, Nächo,

²⁶ Illinois/IES, 88. XXIV.14., Betälehém, *Gospels*. We know nothing about *Abéto* Tädäsiwäs and his heirs besides the evidence of the will. Informants I talked to at the church of Betälehém could not give further detail about Tädäsiwäs other than acknowledging him as the direct descendant of Del-Mogäsa, the daughter King Dawit (r. 1380-1412).

Keflé, Shanqo, Arbäy [and] Momin.”²⁷

The second will, drawn up in 1777 in the town of Gondär, implies a practice similar to those recorded in Tädäsiwäs’s act. A lord named Täklu disposed of his property to his two heirs, who may have been his children. The heirs were a woman, Wälätä-Hiwät, and a man, Kenfu, and the inheritance took the form of agricultural and residential lands, house, and *zégoch*. Täklu “settled his estate and gave the land of Gula along with the *bota* for Wälätä-Hiwät, two-thirds of his land in Gemanataho for Wälätä-Hiwät and one-third for Kenfu, from *zégoch* in Aqobegé two-thirds for Wälätä-Hiwät and one-third for Kenfu; Wälätä-Hiwät’s former dower for Kenfu, 2 *walka* (black soil land) for Wälätä-Hiwät, the land in Azäzo along with the *bota* for Wälätä-Hiwät; and Estifanos’ land along with the house [for Kenfu].”²⁸ The lands referred to in this document appear to have located in Dämbeya and within a convenient distance from the capital Gondär. Azäzo mentioned in the document is located within a walking distance from Gondär where Täklu apparently also lived.

The significant point that emerges from the evidence in these transactions is the fact that *zégoch* could be inherited by children from parents. For how long the relations between Tädäsiwäs and Täklu and their *zégoch* lasted cannot be known but long associations between the two is a real possibility. The transactions demonstrate the attitude of landlords towards their *zégoch*, who were increasingly regarded as their possessions. When contrasted with independent peasants working their own land or tenants, the *zégoch* had a low status because standard types of tenants could not be disposed of by will. The *zégoch* are not depicted as having a say over who should be their next lord from among the heirs of Tädäsiwäs and Täklu after their

²⁷ Illinois/IES, 88. XXIV.14., Betälehém, *Gospels*: “የአቤቶ የወናታን ከዜጋ የደረሰዎ ወልደ ሚካኤል ኅይሌ ወልደክሶስ መቅደሴ ዘሩፊ ትምህርቱ ሰጠችኝ አምሳሌ አደራ ነጭ ክፍሌ ሻንቆ አርበይ ሞሚን።”

²⁸ BL., Or. 745, f 223b: “የኔታዩ ተክሉ ቤተዎን ሲሰሩ የጉላን ምድር ከለቦታው ለወለተ ሕይወት የግማናጣሆን ምድር ፪እጅ ለወለተ ሕይወት ሲሰ ለክንፉ በአቆብጌ ካሉ ዜጎች ሁለት እጅ ለወለተ ሕይወት ሲሰ ለክንፉ። የወለተ ሕይወትን ጥንተ ማጫ ለክንፉ ፪ቱን ዋልኮች ለወለተ ሕይወት ያዘዘን ምድር ከለቦታው ለወለተሕይወት የእስጢፋኖስን ምድር ከለቦታው ከለቤቱ ለመኑ(?)።”

retirement. In this sense therefore *zégoch* could be considered lacking freedom.

A similar possessory attitude toward *zégoch* is expressed in several private transactions dating from the 1740s and 1770s. Among the documents that mention *zégoch* are one marriage settlement, five land sale documents, five documents that record gifts and dispute settlement.²⁹ In a brief marriage contract written sometime during the 1750s the bridegroom, Wäldä-Le’ul, gave to his fiancé, Wälätä-Rufa’el, two ounces of gold as gift. The bride on her part brought a dowry of two agricultural fields, two *zégoch* and pledged a house pending the death of the current occupant and owner, *Mämheré Matéwos*.³⁰ Occasionally arguments broke out among lords over *zégoch*. This fact is underscored in a document drawn in 1758 to settle the dispute between *Balambaras Eshäté* (d.1768), who was cousin of Mentewwab (r.1730-1769), and his brother-in-law, *Abéto Bätru*, over the control of three *zégoch*—Asayo, Atné, and Yämano—office, and land. The *zégoch* were subsequently divided between Bätru and Häylu by casting lot.³¹ Among the land sale documents that mention *zégoch* is a document drawn up in 1763 in Gondär. Two women, *Esétä-Rufa’el* and *Wälätä-Maryam*, sold *rim* land and residential sites along with the *zégoch* who occupied the land to a cleric of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé church, *Tegré Wäldä-Mika’el*.³²

The context in the private transactions above signifies a status similar to slaves for the *zégoch*, who are represented as the men or women of Bätru, Eshäté, Esétä-Rufa’el, Wälätä-Maryam and later Wäldä-Mika’el by rights of inheritance and purchase. On the purely technical level the transaction which the document purports to record is straightforward. They all behaved as if they possessed their *zégoch*. However, the real difficulty lies in understanding the social

²⁹ See, for instance, BL., Or. 777.f2. BL., Or., 777, f11b; and BL., 777, f 287; BL., Or. 745, f 223b; Illinois/IEs, 88.XIV.29, Mahdärä-Maryam, Senkesar.

³⁰ BL., Or. 777.f2.

³¹ See Habtamu, “Rethinking Property and Society in Gondärine Ethiopia,” pp.96-97.

³² BL, Or. 777, f 287.

relations implied by the transactions. To view the *zégoch* as possessions even when the sources imply it is a far stretch, pure and simple. The difference between human chattel and *zégoch* is straightforward and clear. Slaves are recognized by the term [ᠠᠴᠢ] *barya* and contemporaries knew the distinction between a *zéga* and *barya*. There is no single evidence in church documentation to show the sale and donations of *zégoch* apart from land. The fundamental difference that distinguished a *zéga* from a slave is therefore that the former, but not the latter, could not be sold on the open market and not linked to land. The *zégoch*'s peculiar association with land indicates that their chief function was the performance of agricultural labor. What these transactions come down to is therefore transfer of control over land and the services of the *zégoch* and the jurisdictional rights held over them by the former lords.

The term serf seems an appropriate descriptor of the social conditions of the *zégoch*. Jerome Blum, a specialist on pre-revolutionary Russian serfdom, states that there was no uniformity of practice in the treatment of serfs by masters. The rights and obligations of the servile peasants varied from time to time and place to place. For instance, Blum found out that the customary assumption that bondage to the soil or the person of the lord was not always marker of servility. Accord to Blum, “[f]or the deepest and most complete form of serfdom was precisely when the lord was able (as he often was) to move his peasants about as he wished, transferring them from one holding to another, converting them into landless field hands or into household servants, or even selling, giving, or gambling them away without land.”³³ The incidence of this type of serfdom giving little short of ownership rights to lords over their serfs was said to be marginal. There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that the defining element of serfdom that applied in several European countries at one time or another was private

³³ Jerome Blum, “The Rise of Serfdom in Eastern Europe,” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 62, No. 4 (1957), p.808.

jurisdictional rights of lords over their servile dependents. Unlike other rural groups, serfs were subject to the immediate and exclusive or near exclusive jurisdictional right of landlords.

Paul Freedman defines serfs as peasants and “family farmers on individual holdings providing for themselves and furnishing rent (in labor, kind or money) to a landlord who held a species of jurisdictional power.”³⁴ In the Ethiopian context, the overwhelming weight of evidence suggests that ties to the land and lords were the salient feature of *zégenät*. This was the sense in which the *zégoch* were represented generally in the contexts of eighteenth and nineteenth century Gojjam and Bägémeder. One significant departure in *zégenät* from the situation of classical serfdom is that the bond between lord and *zéga* was unlikely to result from any peculiar constraint on the physical movement of the latter imposed by law or by the arbitrary power of the lords. Instead, *zégoch* developed strong ties to their residence and lords largely as the consequence of continuous occupation of their residence. The last group of documents pointing towards this conclusion must be briefly discussed even at the risk of redundancy.³⁵

Most of the sources about *zégoch* come from churches of recent foundation and involved a newly risen group of lords. They are also used in a series of documents connected with the old church of Atkäna-Giyorgis founded in the late sixteenth century by *Ras Wäldä-Krestos*, courtier of king Särsä-Dengel (r.1563-1597). The church developed on Wäldä-Krestos’s personal property³⁶ and his descendants continued to be involved in its administration at least until the end of the eighteenth century. Our earliest evidence on the *zéga* class at Atkäna Giyorgis is found in documents drawn in 1740s following division of property among seven landlords, including

³⁴ Freedman, *Origins of Peasant Servitude*, p.6.

³⁵ Property rights and jurisdictional power of lords over their *zégoch* were considered to be indissoluble. If legal traditions enabled the landlords to dispose their *zégoch* through gift and other means, hardly anything could have prevented them from compelling their *zégoch* to continue to work their land as long as they wanted. This is common sense. Yet lords are not seen using their jurisdictional power to coerce their dependents to stay put in their residence.

³⁶ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI. 21, Atkäna, Wängél

Wäyzäro Asäqäqesheñ and Wäyzäro Wälätä-Egzi’abhér, whom we will met below.³⁷ Twenty-two *zégoch* are listed “as the share of Asäqäqesheñ.”³⁸ Presumably the *zégoch* were part of the original assets of the estates of Wäldä-Krestos from the sixteenth century. Later in the 1770s, a time when most of the generation active in the 1740s had died, dispute erupted between the descendants of Wäldä-Krestos. A detailed document recording the dispute settlement and the arrangements of property was subsequently produced under the influence of *Ras* Aydür, a prominent nobleman who adjudicated the case. Details in the transaction document indicate that control over the *zégoch* and land was one of the causes of the dispute. We find this in the statement that “[i]n Amuswänz from both land and zéga; 2 lots *Abéto* Wäldä-Giyorgis’s children, 1 lot Wälätä-Egzi’abhér’s, 1 lot *Abéto* Yonatan’s, 1 lot *Abéto* Ayemotehuno’s children, [and] 2 lots *Wäyzäro* Amätu’s children.”³⁹

Afterwards, the family of Wäldä-Krestos appeared to have been content with their respective share and there seems not to have been any breach of the terms of the settlement in the records of Atkäna Giyorgis. The term *zégoch* however continued to surface in the private transactions of the influential men and women of Atkäna Giyorgis down to the end of the eighteenth century. For example, later in the 1790s when Wälätä-Egzi’abhér was retiring from active life she passed her inheritance to a woman called Wälätä-Sellasé’, including her “land and *zéga*.”⁴⁰ What immediately and clearly emerges from the evidence is the hereditary character of the relationship between the *zégoch* and their landlords. As already noted, most of the lands that Wälätä-Egzi’abhér and her kith and kin dealt with and the *zégoch* working under them could have been directly inherited from the founding ancestor, Wäldä-Krestos.

³⁷ See Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI.15 and 17-20, Atkäna, Wängél.

³⁸ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI. 19-20, Atkäna, Wängél.

³⁹ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI. 13, Atkäna, Wängél: “በአሙሰንዝ ምድርም ዜጋም ጄአጻ ያክቤቶ ወልደጊዮርጊስ ልጆች የወይዘሮ ወለተ ግዜር ጄ አጻ ያክቤቶ የናታን ጄ አጻ ያክቤቶ አይሞት ሁኖ ልጆች ጄ አጻ የወይዘሮ አሙቱ ልጆች ጄአጻ።”

⁴⁰ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI. 28, Atkäna, Wängél: “አኩሌታ ምድርም ዜጋም ዕፃየን ሰጥቻለሁ።”

The last but not the least important of the evidence relates to the charter drafted during the reign of King Sahlä-Dengel (r. 1832-1840, 1842-1855) to Empress Mänän, mother of the Yäjju lord, *Ras Ali II* (r. 1832-1853). This case will carry us into the nineteenth century. The charter granted Mänän full rights of jurisdiction over seven estates in Dämbeya and the *zégoch* residing on them. Mänän’s power over these estates and the *zégoch* came about through the “concession of all the *wäyzazer* (ladies) in Gondär.”⁴¹ The *zégoch* in these lands are said to be personally attached to the former ladies and permanent inhabitants of the estates listed. The document adds, “[t]he *wäyzazer*, who are children of Emperor Na’od (r.1494-1508), have sworn and given all the *zégoch* before the *awaj* (the declaration of the law establishing Mänän’s right) in Walwaj, Gändawa, Dawa, Chonchoq, Fuchäna, Mederä Bara [and] Dira to *Itégé Mänän*.”⁴² In the local sphere the ladies still held the office of *cheqa*. Both the ladies and the *zégoch* on these lands were subject to Mänän’s exclusive justice. What is of note is the scribe’s description of Mänän’s rights of jurisdiction: they were unquestionable and automatic. The scribe recorded: “With respect to judgment, in the lands covered by her *gäntenät* (jurisdiction) they (the *wäyzazer*) have sworn and given her (Mänän) the right to be judge over the *wäyzazer*, not to mention her jurisdictional right over the *zégoch*.”⁴³

What justified the inclusion of the clause that states that the ladies had completely given up all their *zégoch* before the *awaj* is a question worth pursuing. Surely it implies that the *zégoch* were released from the personal attachment of these women when the latter lost independence

⁴¹ Or. 784, f209a: “ወይዘተሩ ሁሉ መክረው ተፈጥመው ተገዝተው... ሰጥተዋል።” The scribe states that Mänän held legitimate rights in these estates, although the ground of her claim is not stated. The church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé had had superior rights over these lands and Mänän was obligated to pay one *chan* wheat grain and ten salt bars to the church. The property Mänän accumulated during the last three decades of the Yäjju rule was extensive. Crummey has summarized her style of life and the inspiration she drew from Empress Mentewab a century earlier in *Land and Society*, pp.158 and 161 and 300 note no. 63.

⁴² BL., Or. 784, f209a: “ዋልዋጅ ገንደዋ ዳዋ ጨንጮቅ ፉጨና ምድረ ባራ ዲራ በዚህ ሁሉ ካዋጅ በፊት የነበረውን ዜጋውን ወይዘተሩ የአፄ ናዳድ ልጆች ተፈጥመው ተገዝተው ለእቴጌ መነን ሰጥተዋል።”

⁴³ BL., Or. 784, f209a: “ዳኝነትም በገንትነትዎ ስንኳ ዜጋውን ወይዘተሩን ሊዳኙ ተፈጥመው ተገዝተው ሰጥተዋል።”

following the grant to Mänän. The clause was therefore inserted in the charter to perpetuate the status of the *zégoch*. Even if their personal attachment with their former lords were broken, all individuals in a condition of *zégenät* before the *awaj* remained so after the grant to Mänän.⁴⁴ It is likely that these lands were occupied by successive generations of *zégoch* beginning during the sixteenth century, and continuing during the nineteenth century. In sum, a common understanding at the time seems to have been that the *zégoch* did not have a right to dispute the transfer by their lords of their service and the land they inhabited to a third party. It is not a matter of dispute that the *zégoch* had progressed in the direction of servitude.

Transactions of various kinds occurred across time and were comparatively restricted to a few areas. Most of them stemmed from the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century and were located in the southern, western and northwestern parts of the province of Bägémeder. Furthermore, the most important evidence we have about *zégoch* relates to land under the jurisdiction of churches. For the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth century the Bägémeder sources do not mention *zégoch*. However, this silence seems to have very little to do with the disappearance of the status in *zégenät*, but rather with the tragic history of late eighteenth and nineteenth century Bägémeder. The accumulating archival records in the capital Gondär were destroyed by the violence of the *Zämänä-Mäsaferent* (1769-1855). Later in 1860s Téwodros II looted a number of churches in the capital and in other locations in Bägémeder, and deposited their books and other sacred objects in his royal camp at Mäqdäla. Téwodros's diplomatic row with the British in the 1860s led to a military confrontation in 1868 leading to the death of the king and the storming of Mäqdäla. In the ensuing confusion, precious records and manuscripts which Téwodros II had deposited at his Mäqdäla library were lost. The agent of the British Museum in London who accompanied the army took control of many of the surviving

⁴⁴ The implication is that if the lords wished, status in *zégenät* could not be shed easily.

manuscripts. What was left of the looting by the British and Téwodros was pillaged or scorched by the Sudanese Mahdist forces in 1888 when they burned Gondär, including its churches. For these and other reasons, the surviving libraries of many churches in the capital Gondär have few or no records on their landholding and contain no information on *zégoch*.⁴⁵

In the case of Gojjam the sources continue to identify the *zégoch* until the end of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, whatever reference to *zégoch* in Gojjam is usually inadvertent and cryptic. However, it seems that the instances we have seen for Gojjam, including the evidence of the cleric Bäkürä-Seyon and *Ras Häylu I* settling Muslim *zégoch* in late eighteenth century and the dispute between *Ras Häylu II* and the clergy of Mota over the taxation of the Muslim weaver *zégoch* in the early twentieth century, leave no doubt that they represented an element of a larger picture.⁴⁶ In short, the *zéga* were very important social element in rural Gojjam. There were very clear rules of status in Gojjam regarding the *zégoch*, the ruling class and the independent peasants. Beginning during the middle of the eighteenth and continuing well into the nineteenth century, the privileges of lords and their power over their *zégoch* were uniformly and persistently defined in many legal sources. The charter distinguishes the *zégoch* under the individual landlords from the hereditary land owning rural cultivators within the jurisdiction of the church. Different social status and rank meant other requirements on *zégoch*. From the very beginning, *rim* holding in Gojjam was linked to rights of private jurisdiction. With the exceptions of the three cases of justice —theft, adultery, and homicide—in all other cases the

⁴⁵ On the Mäqdäla collection shipped to England, see Rita Pankhurst, “The Legacy of the Mäqdäla Collection: The Impact on Western Scholarship of Ethiopian Manuscripts from Mäqdäla Acquired by the British Museum,” *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of the Ethiopian Studies* (University of Addis Ababa, 1984), ed., Taddese Beyene, vol. 2, pp. 111-128; *idem.*, “The Library of Emperor Tewodros II at Mäqdäla (Magdala),” *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* 26 (1973), pp. 15-42. Excluding those that were lost on the way, some five hundred manuscripts got to London, representing one of the biggest migration of books from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe.

⁴⁶ Yarest Mäzgäb, Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 288; Mota Giyorgis, Picture #4466; Mäsehäfä-Mänäkosat, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4492; and Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik”, pp. 72-73.

law gave the landlords virtually a free hand over their *zégoch*, as we have seen. It is time to recapitulate the arguments of this chapter and the generalizations that emerge from the instances presented above.

The sources we have about *zégoch* are thinly spread in time and space. In the absence of adequate records, there is no way of measuring the prevalence and the number of *zégoch* in Ethiopian society. However, there is little doubt that the stories recorded in various instances are examples of a wider reality. Taken as a whole, these sources convey a picture of significant social transformations underway in Gondärine society. We can imagine a rural landscape strongly marked by the presence of the social element of dependent laborers such as *zégoch*. The system of social dependence and labor exploitation in *zégenät* was already rooted in the period preceding the Gondärine kingdom. It can be argued that during the Gondärine period fundamental changes occurred both in the scope of *zégenät* and in the patterns of subordination. Lords wielded stronger and more effective social and legal power over their dependent workforce than earlier. The Gondärine rural structure was therefore comprised of landlords, the landless *zégoch*, and independent peasants who lived on land they held by rights of inheritance.

Records from Bägémeder indicate a more degraded status of the *zégoch* than that in Gojjam. The variation in the rights and obligations of *zégoch* arose from the lack of clear cut legal definitions by the state to set the relations between lord and *zéga*. The cumulative image created by the various instances is that *zéga* denoted a subjugated class of people occupying the middle position between slaves and free peasants. Lords did conceptualize their *zégoch* as indivisible from land and the transfer of rights over *zégoch* as gifts to a third party was a normative practice. The typical feature of *zégenät* was economic and social subordination. The *zégoch* were personally free and their link with lords was land. This territorial link between lord

and *zéga* created the setting for private lordship and the development of a measure of a personal bond between the two. More specifically, the property right of landlords often translated into power over the occupants of their land. Jurisdictional rights of lords over their *zégoch*, together with continuous occupation of land by *zégoch*, tended to bind the latter to their residence and landlords. The introduction of *rim* therefore expanded not only the scope of private lordship that was strongly related to tenurial arrangements, but also relations of domination that were personal. In the final analysis, the *zégoch* lacked social rights.

Zégenät as a system of labor exploitation outlasted the Gondärine period. Indeed, Gondärine legal institutions rapidly spread across southern Ethiopia in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The story will be incomplete without a brief discussion of the application of the term *zéga* in the territories outside of Gondärine Ethiopia. An examination of the events associated with *zéga* helps one to understand the status and usage of the term in secular tenure in these areas and the change in the value of the term.

Change and Continuity in *Zégenät*

The death of the energetic Iyasu I in 1707 marked the last time that the Ethiopian kings held any effective authority over the former territories of the Ethiopian kingdom south of the Blue Nile until central power was reimposed in late nineteenth century. Historians have already documented the territorial expansion of the Ethiopian kingdom during the late nineteenth century and there is no need for it here. Discussion is limited to showing the continuing relevance of Gondärine legal traditions in modern Ethiopia. Much of the expansionist zeal came from the rulers of Shäwa and, briefly though, Gojjam as well.⁴⁷ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century King Menilek II of the province of Shäwa (emperor of Ethiopia, 1889-1913) brought

⁴⁷ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*; Richard Caulk, "Territorial Competition and the Battle of Embabo" in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* XIII, 1 (1975), pp. 65-88; and Harold Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilik II of Ethiopia, 1844-1913* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

under his control the southern Ethiopia of today. The peasants in these areas experienced substantial changes in their status and property. As the kingdom expanded into what is now southern Ethiopia, the inhabitants were transformed into *gäbbar*, tributary peasants, and became subordinate to military lords, the *naftäñña*, of primarily northern background. In the course of the twentieth century peasants often forfeited to military lords and local notables two-thirds of their inheritance through a land measurement system called *qälad*. Through time the *gäbbar-naftäñña* tributary relations developed into a landlord-tenant system analogous to the Gondärine land regime.⁴⁸

The land tenure literature portrays the land regime in twentieth century southern Ethiopia as sharply different from that found in the northern half of the country. Several scholars underline the independence of peasants in northern Ethiopia. They argue that lords who settled in and gained control over the south came largely from the Amharic speaking territories of northern Ethiopia and shared no ethnic and cultural affinities with those whom they dominated.⁴⁹ This supposed ethnic distinctions between lord and *gäbbar* is believed to have led to a different outcome in the social conditions of the peasants in the south and north parts of the country. To be precise, in the north lords were not apt to maintain a land regime similar to the south and to practice a harsh system of labor exploitation for reasons of common cultural and ethnic identity with the peasants they ruled. Of course, this conclusion flies in the face of the evidence of *zégoch*, where neither cultural nor ethnic difference served as justification for subordinating the peasants and maintaining a social distinction between lords and *zégoch*. The Gondärine ruling class had no qualms about the fortune of the rural cultivators in Gojjam and Bägémeder

⁴⁸ Bahru, "Economic Origins of the Absolutist", 1-29; Tekalign Wolde-Mariam, "A City and its Hinterlands," pp.67-92, 155-169; and Guluma Gameda, "Land, Agriculture and Society in the Gibe Region: Southern Ethiopia, c. 1850-1974 (PH.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1996), pp. 138-177.

⁴⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.225.

provinces and stripped considerable proportion of the peasants' inheritance to benefit themselves. The full details of the relations of domination between the military lords and their subjects in southern Ethiopia are certainly not exactly the same as those which existed between lords and *zégoch* in Gondärine Ethiopia. However, landlords in the south drew from the earlier period to impose on the rural people a system domination in the new areas.

As the Gondärine model of land regime was adopted and put into practice in new areas, *rim* and *zéga* came to be used frequently. In terms of *rim*, some significant distortions did exist however. Traditionally the primary means through which the system of *zégenät* expanded was the foundation of churches. It was also peculiarly linked to *rim* property. In the territories south of the Blue Nile, *zéga* and *rim* property were unrelated. Later in the twentieth century in Shäwa and other areas, however, the lands of lords carrying secular obligations, including military services, also came to be called *rim*.⁵⁰ *Zéga* appears side by side with the equally classical social term *gäbbar* in many sources. The context within which *zéga* was applied was unique in some respects and the term attained new features as it traveled into new areas. However, the use of *zéga* as a social definition seems to have retained elements of its old meaning. Thus the instance of *zégoch* from late nineteenth and early twentieth-century southern Ethiopia can be interpreted on the basis of a Gondärine analogy.⁵¹

The first use of the term *zéga* to people outside of the traditional Gondärine territories is a charter issued by King Täklä-Häymanot in 1880s, which affected people in what is now northern Wälläga. Täklä-Häymanot transferred a large amount of property to one of his men, *Däjazmach*

⁵⁰ For a discussion of *rim* as military tenure, see Shiferaw Bekele, "Some Notes on secular *rim* from the liberation to the revolution," pp.83-92.

⁵¹ The application of the term *zéga* is attested in the following sources: *Aläqa Gäbrä-Sellasé, Tarik Zämän ZäDagmawi Menilek Negusä-Nägäst ZäItyopyya* (Addis Ababa: Berhänena Sälam Printing Press, 1959 Eth. Cal); Triulzi and Tesema, eds., *YäWälläga YäTarik Sänadoč: Documents for Wälläga History*, pp. 94-95. For a brief discussion of the application of the term *zéga* in legal documents originating from the province of Shäwa, see Tekalign, "A City and its Hinterlands," pp.112-15.

Wärqé (later *ras*). The charter describing the transfer is brief but conclusive, “The Lémat Galla (Oromo), having destroyed the Christian army under Wärqé, their hereditary land has been transferred as blood price [into the control of Wärqé]. If they choose to continue to reside [in the land], they shall become the *zéga* (sic) of *Däjach Wärqé*.”⁵² Later Täklä-Häymanot reaffirmed Wärqé’s property in Lémat and granted him market rights over several other places. Bestowed on Wärqé also was the highest form of immunity from government officials in his property.⁵³

Characteristically Täklä-Häymanot’s charter used the term *zéga* in reference to the subject population under Wärqé. The charter affected the formerly independent peasants both socially and economically by altering their status to the conditions of *zégenät*. The text strongly reflects the traditional norms in the relation between lord and *zéga*. As discussed earlier, the *zéga* class had the rights to leave their lords, a right given them by law. In the early stage of the conquest, this traditional right of the subjugated segment of the peasants in Wälläga was respected. The peasants of Lémat were given the choice of either leaving the land for elsewhere or continuing to reside under their new lord by being his *zégoch*.

The instance involving Wärqé and his dependents is part of the larger movement of peasant subjugation and a reordering of rural life that took place in nineteenth and early twentieth-century southern Ethiopia. This can be elaborated by referring to more cases involving *gäbbars* and *zégoch* in the province of Wälläga in the early twentieth century where echoes of the traditional norms are recorded. A full narrative is possible regarding the social conditions of the peasants in Wälläga thanks to the efforts of Allesandro Triulzi and Tesema Ta’a, who have

⁵² Cited in Habtamu, *Lord, Zèga and Peasant*, p. 55.

⁵³ The transaction is recorded in triplicate documents: Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, f15r and 38v, Häymanotä-Abäw, MS., Dengera Maryam, picture #083.

made available through publications and editions of a large corpus of primary material from the early twentieth century.⁵⁴

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, in the south, including Wälläga, the personal rights of the *gäbbars* subject to military lords was further eroded and they became involuntarily bonded to their lords. The servile character of the rural population in Wälläga is brought forth with clarity in a series of letters exchanged between military commanders and governors and the central government in Addis Ababa in 1910s and 1920s. Quarrels over *gäbbars* broke out among the lords operating in the various districts of Wälläga in the early decades of the twentieth century. In one instance, *gäbbars* deserted their holdings *en mass* to escape from the oppressive lordship of *Ras Dämesäw*, governor of Säyo in southern Wälläga. They took refuge in the neighboring lands of Näqämet under the lordship of *Däjach Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér*. Lords of the fugitive peasants of Säyo were soldiers with Gondäre background under the command of Dämesäw. The first evidence of the flight of these peasants is contained in a letter Dämesäw wrote to Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér dated July 1911.⁵⁵ The case of these fugitive peasants was not closed until the 1920s. These *gäbbars* held their land by rights of inheritance but they were divided among soldiers to whom they owed various services and dues. Finding their obligations insurmountable, the *gäbbars* fled to the “freer” lordship of Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér. Yet the soldiers wanted to insure their continuous residence in the land under their private lordship and appealed to their commander, Dämesäw, to help repatriate the *gäbbars*.

In his 1911 letter to Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér, Dämesäw refers to the existence of an earlier agreement between the two lords about fugitive peasants. The terms of this agreement dictated

⁵⁴See Triulzi and Ta'a, *Documents for Wälläga History*.

⁵⁵ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, p.32. Triulzi and Tesema dated Dämesäw's letter to Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér to July 1912. However, the letter must have been written earlier than 1912. This becomes clear from the letter Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér wrote to the central government which bears the date of February 1912 as reply to Dämesäw's letter. Most probably the letter was written in July 1911.

that if peasants migrated from the lordship of Dämesäw to take up refuge in the lands controlled by Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér, the latter would have to return them forcefully to their former place of residence. Likewise, Dämesäw would have to oblige Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér in the repatriation of his peasants if and when they took refuge in his lordship.⁵⁶ In the subsequent negotiation, Dämesäw and later his successor, *Däjach* Achamyäläh, abandoned his claim to repatriate the peasants and received money in an exchange. However, Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér failed to live up to the terms of this agreement causing Achamyäläh to sue. Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér denied the charge, explaining what happened in a letter written in February 1912 to *Lej* Iyasu (r.1910-1916), the crown prince and grandson of emperor Menilek II:

...እግዚአብሔር ያሳይዎ። [...] ጌታዬ በክፉቀን የራስ ደምሰው ዜጋ ገባር ተሰዶ ወደኔ አገር የገባ አለ እሱን ይዘው ሰድ ብለው እራስ ደምሰው ለደጃች አቻምየለህ ሰጡት። በዚህ ደጃች አቻምየለህ ገባሩን እጅ እጁን እየያዘ ልውሰድ ሲል ጊዜ ድሐው እያለቀሰ ቢአስቸግረኝ ገባሩን እኔ ተውልኝና ላንተ ባመት ባመቱ ዘጠን ዘጠኝ መቶ ብር ልስጥ ብዬ በዚህ ተዋውዬ ነበር። አሁን ደግሞ እኩሌታው የደጃዝማች ገብረ እግዚአብሔር አገር ቀላድ ሆነ። ለባለ ቀላዱ ገብረን ደግሞ ለደጃች አቻምየለህ ገብሩ አሉን እያለ ለአፈ ንጉስ ጮሆ ከሁለት ስፍራ አታስገብራቸው የሚል ወረቀት አመጣብኝ። እኩሌታውም ደግሞ እኩሌ እኩሌ አገራችን እንግባ ብለዋልና አትከልክላቸው የሚል ወረቀት እያመጣ። እኩሌታውም ደግሞ ፊት ከአገራችን ክፉቀን ቢሆን ተሰደን መጥተን ነበረ አሁን ቀን ከወጣልን አገራችን እንግባ እያለ ከኔ እዩኮበለለ ወዳከገሩ ገባ ። ደግሞ ትንሽ ገባር ከዚህ የቀረ እንዳለም እጅ እጁን ይዘው ሰድ ብዬ ብለው ከአገርህም ውስጥ ገባርም ባይኖር ለኔ ብሩን ስጡኝ ብሎ ነው የከሰሰኝ። ባገር ከሌለ ሰው እንደምን አድርጌ ብር እስጣለሁኝ። እግዚአብሔር ያሳይዎ መድሃኔ አለም ጤና ይስጥልኝ ፲፲ ጊዜ እጅ እነሳሁኝ ይላል አሸከርዎ ባርያዎ ደጃዝማች ገብረ እግዚአብሔር የካቲት ፲፩፻፲፱ ቀን ፲፱፻፲፮ ዓ.ም።⁵⁷

May God show you. [...] There were the *gäbbars* of *Ras* Dämesäw's *zéga* who immigrated into my land during the *Kefu Qän*; when I informed him to repatriate them *ras* Dämesäw gave the order to *Däjach* Achamyäläh [to insure their return]. When *Däjach* Achamyäläh tried to take them back one by one, the poor [*gäbbars*] beseeched me [to live in my land] because of which I entered into agreement with [Achamyäläh] to pay him nine hundred *berr* per annum in return for abandoning his claim to the *gäbbars*. Meanwhile, half of the land under *Däjach* Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér was redefined as *qälad* and [placed under his direct holding]. They (*gäbbars*) appealed to the *afänegus* (literally “mouth of the king” or representative of the king) that they were subject to double payment of tax for the *baläqälad* and for *Däjach* Achamyäläh; [in consequence] they brought a paper [from *afänegus* in Addis Ababa] instructing me not to force them to pay twice. The other half presented me with paper [from *afänegus*] authorizing their departure which states “so and so want to return to their home and do not compel them to stay.” Another half fled my land saying “we left our homeland because of the *Kefu Qän*

⁵⁶ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, p.32.
⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

and now the good day has come back let us return to our home.” When I informed him to repatriate some *gäbbars* who may have remained here, he said “give me the money even if there are none of [my] *gäbbars* in your land.” This is the reason for his charge against me. How can I pay money [for] persons who are not resident in my land?

The humble status of the *gäbbars* comes through clearly in this letter. At issue was the persons and service of *gäbbars*, not who owned the land. Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér dated the mass flight of the peasants to the *Kefu Qän* or the great famine of 1888-1892. He insisted that the peasants pledged lordship to him on their own free will and because of the economic hardship they faced during the famine. Yet the soldiers claimed the dues and services from their subjects despite the passage of time. Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér allowed Dämesäw to repatriate the peasants. The latter then instructed his man, *Däjach Achamyäläh*, to insure the return of the peasants. When Achamyäläh tried to carry out the order, the peasants protested. By his account, the *gäbbars*, claims Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér, pleaded with him to show compassion causing him to favor their wishes to live under his lordship. Then the peasants agreed to pay their military lords the sum of \$900 Ethiopian dollars annually in compensation if their former lords dropped plans to attempt to repatriate them. Achamyäläh and his men agreed to receive the money and to abandon their claim of lordship over the peasants. This arrangement remained operative only briefly however causing Achamyäläh to sue Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér once again for failing to pay the agreed upon sum and illegally holding his men.

Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér’s denied the charge on the ground that the *gäbbars* had already returned to their former home and therefore there were no illegal *gäbbars* whom he sheltered. He also recognized the rights of Achamyäläh to take his *gäbbars*, if any, residing in his land. In any case the issue was not resolved and it was reopened in 1922 for the third time when the successor of Achamyäläh, *Däjach Mäkonän Täwänd-Bälay*, charged Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér with keeping his

rightful *gäbbars* for his advantage.⁵⁸ The final outcome of the case cannot be determined from the records but the evidence supports a number of conclusions. Although the government had relations with *gäbbars* of all social conditions, it had relegated a large segment of the rural population to the jurisdiction of military commanders and the soldiers under them. The peasants directly under government agents were not completely free of lordship, but not the type exercised by military lords. They could be said to be bound to their tenure by residing in the land; yet they remained personally free.⁵⁹ The legal implication of the tenure of the *gäbbars* under soldiers is clear enough to argue that they were held in servile conditions.

In some respects, the dealings of the military lords with their subject population were indistinguishable from the relation between landlords and *zégoch*. In Bägemeder, *zégoch* were transferred, very much like slaves, by the instrument of will. One crucial difference between the *zégoch* and the *gäbbar* of twentieth century Ethiopia was that the former lived on the land of their lords. The lordship of the soldiery in Wälläga, however, did not overlap with property relations. Moreover, the application of *zéga* in Wälläga sources indicates the transformation in the meaning of the term. Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér referred to the soldiers as "Dämesäw's *zéga*."⁶⁰ In another case, Gäbrä-Egzi'abhér's used the term *zéga* in a letter addressed to *Lej Iyasu* in January 1914 to refer to one of his subjects. The text has intrinsic value for understanding the transition in the meaning of *zéga*. A part of the text reads: "This is the issue. My *zéga*, Aga Shuba, accused me of a crime I did not commit and brought a paper signed by *Qaññazmach Kefäläw* which states 'since he has appealed against the eviction from his land and the expropriation of his

⁵⁸ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, pp. 146-147.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁰ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, pp. 94-95.

slaves by *Däjach* Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér, let someone come to defend [your case]’.⁶¹ Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér wrote the letter in reply to a court petition against him by Aga Shuba whom he referred to as “his *zéga*.” The use of the term *zéga* to describe soldiers and Aga Shuba who had property and slaves is puzzling. Obviously the occupation of soldiers was unrelated to agricultural work. The word had always carried the concept of dependency and poverty and formerly used to distinguish a segment of the peasantry (and also *artisans*) tied to the landlords in some measure from peasants occupying their own land. The context here is that the soldiers were treated as the subjects or followers of Dämesäw. Presumably, this use of the term *zéga* is how Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér used it to describe his relations with Aga Shuba as well.⁶²

The case of the *gäbbars* of Säyo helps to explain peasants’ reaction to their social conditions and to oppressive lordship. What becomes clear is that although it was not always easy to escape from the private authority of powerful lords, flight was not futile. The peasants saw flight as a practical choice to living under oppressive lordship. Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér and later his son and successor, *Däjach* Häbtä-Maryam, sent several letters to the central government about the problem of peasant flight throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. In one such letter addressed to Empress Zäwditu (r.1916-1930) Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér acknowledged the mass of *gäbbars* from the district of Sibü taking refuge in his lordship. Wary of complaints by the lords of the fugitive *gäbbars*, he asked for instruction what to do with them from Zäwditu. In this same letter Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér refers to the flight of his own *gäbbars* to Sibü under the

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 99: “ይኸውና አጋ ሹባ የሚባል የኔ ዜጋ ሰው አለጋጠኦት ዳጃዝማች ገብረ እግዚአብሔር መሬቴንም ነቅሎኝ ባሮቸንም ወረሱኝ ብሎ ጮኸልና መጥቶ የሚነጋገር ሰው ይምጣ የሚል የቀኛዝማች ክፈለውን ወረቀት አመጣብኝ።” Aga’s specific argument is not recorded. Details in Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér’s letter to *Lej* Iyasu show that the case was opened to settle an old score involving the family of the defendant and the plaintiff. According to Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér his father died in a war seventy years before the case was opened while fighting against the ancestors of Aga. Aga’s family lost the war and subsequently their property to the victors, including their slaves and land. The implication is that Aga’s ancestors and their descendants also became subordinate to the victors. Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér argued that the event could not have any legal effect on him.

⁶² *Zégenät* evolved in peculiar way to refer to subject, while retaining some of its old concepts. Its application to soldiers highlights that status, wealth, and life style were murky situations.

lordship of a soldier, *Basha Ezenäh*, and adds that the later refused their repatriation.⁶³

The fugitive peasants' favorite destination was Assosa, the land controlled by a lord *Sheikh Hojälé*, located to the west of Wälläga bordering the Sudan. It was the intense competition among lords for the labor of peasants which helped make flight a real choice for the peasants. Since the region under his lordship was sparsely populated, Hojälé may have also offered them better treatment and tenancy terms.⁶⁴ Behind the intense subordination of the *gäbbars* was therefore an abundance of land and the scarcity of labor. Was this the case with *zégoch* in Gondärine Ethiopia? Perhaps so. Perhaps not. There is no doubt but that labor was as much valued as land by the Gondärine ruling class. Häbtä-Maryam brought to the attention of Häylä-Sellasé that the root of peasant subordination and oppression lay in the virtually free hand the state gave to lords. He therefore suggested that it was in the best interest of the state to lift the private lordship of soldiers over peasants and place them under direct central government control.⁶⁵ Häbtä-Maryam was not alone in this regard. In general, intellectuals in early twentieth century Ethiopia also critiqued private lordship and advocated change.

The representation in some literary sources of the social relations between lords and *gäbbars* and *zégoch* by contemporary observers in the early twentieth century makes for an interesting discussion. The most powerful expressions of the lords' habit of mind toward their *gäbbars* and *zégoch* in a literary source is penned by one of the early twentieth century intellectuals, Afäwärq Gäbrä-Iyäsus. Afäwärq pointedly states that the lords viewed their *zégoch* and *gäbbars* as less than human beings, writing, "It was as if the *zégoch*, and the *gäbbars* were

⁶³ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, p.80.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.180. Häbtä-Maryam blamed Sheikh Hojälé for provoking the flight of so many peasants. To illustrate his point Häbtä-Maryam cited an incident in which twelve peasants fled the lordship of one *Fitawrari Biftu* to pledge themselves to Hojälé. These twelve peasants, states Häbtä-Maryam, were enticed by one *Balambaras Chali* into migrating to the lands under Hojälé and accepting their subordinations. The wording Häbtä-Maryam used to describe the incident suggests that Chali stole the peasants from Biftu.

⁶⁵ Triulzi and Tesema, *Documents for Wälläga History*, pp.180-181. We do not know if Häbtä-Maryam's suggestions had any effect on the emperor's policy.

their own creation, and not, like them, God's creatures, as they shaped them into being out of mud, giving them eyes, ears, neck, and finally breathing life into them."⁶⁶ The larger work from which the quotation is drawn is a satire which he titled in Italian, "Medio Ebo", the "Middle Age". Written in 1920s, Afäwärq, like other observers, was a social activist. Afäwärq in particular was given to hyperbole. The purpose of "Medio Ebo" was to convince the government to reform the land system and alleviate the conditions of the peasants. The view expressed by Afäwärq conforms to both traditional norms and contemporary practice. He articulates and encapsulates the attitude of lords towards their *zégoch* expressed in many Gondärine sources. His characterization of the relationship between the landlords and peasants aptly describes practice in twentieth century Ethiopia.

A land regime similar to that of the Gondärine period was impossible to perpetuate for long in Wälläga and elsewhere in southern Ethiopia. Although the Ethiopian government did not turn over completely the *gäbbars* and *zégoch* to their military lords, the Italian occupation of Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941 served as a turning point in the gradual decline of the power of the lords over the *gäbbars*. The Italian colonial government eliminated the military and landlord class in southern Ethiopia. In the post liberation era the restored Ethiopian government severely curtailed the power of lords over the rural population by placing them under central control.⁶⁷

As the twentieth century progressed, there occurred changes both in the scope and meaning of the term *zéga*. The social organization which *zégénät* had once represented gradually became archaic and fell into disuse. The term *tisänña* displaced almost all other classical social

⁶⁶ Afäwärq Gäbrä-Iyäsus, "Mädiwä Ébo," *Berhänena Sälam*, 1, 8, 29, cited and translated by Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), p. 121. Afäwärq contrasts the *zégoch* with the tribute paying peasants, the *gäbbars*. From the context his usage of the term *zégoch* is in the sense of social organization and to refer to servile people.

⁶⁷ For Italian land policy, see Haile M. Larebo, *The Building of an Empire: Italian Land Policy and Practice in Ethiopia 1935-1941* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994).

terms, while the *zégoch* became less and less visible in the records of these decades. However, it should be noted that the use of the term *zéga* expanded both in legal and literary sources. What was changing was the term's meaning. It should be noted that its traditional meaning was far from being obsolete even on the eve of the 1974 tumultuous revolution which brought radical change in society and a paradoxical twist of meaning to *zéga*. *Zéga* does not appear in the 1931 Ethiopian constitution, while in the 1955 revised constitution the term was used and its connotation was "subject".⁶⁸

The new political conditions created by the 1974 revolution brought an end to the old social order inherited from ancient times and gave the term *zéga* a radically new meaning. In the post-revolutionary period the term *zéga*, once reserved for destitute and subject, shed all its negative qualities and was redefined as citizen or national. *Zégenät*, the *zégoch*'s condition of servitude, now meant citizenship or nationality. It entered into the legal vocabulary of the constitution written in 1995, the highest law of the land, with the new meaning of citizen/national or nationality/citizenship. Linguists followed suit and in the 1996 (Eth. Cal) the Amharic dictionary redefined *zéga* as citizen or national.⁶⁹ The shift in meaning was indeed sudden and revolutionary. Ironically though, the most significant Amharic dictionary published in 1970, only four years before the revolution, defined the term *zéga* as subject, degraded and poor person.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Government of Ethiopia, *The Revised Constitution of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, Berhänena Sälam Printing Press, 1955), pp. 17-18.

⁶⁹ See Government of Ethiopia, *The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1995), pp. 8-9; and YäItyoppya Qwanqawäč Tenatena Mermer Täqwam, *Amareñña Mäzgäbä Qalat* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1993 Eth. Cal.), p. 445. *Zéga* was a mutable and dynamic social term. Currently, only the elderly people understand the old contexts in which the term *zéga* had once been used. In the Guragé language, however, the term *zéga* remained rigid. It is understood as before to refer to poor and subject.

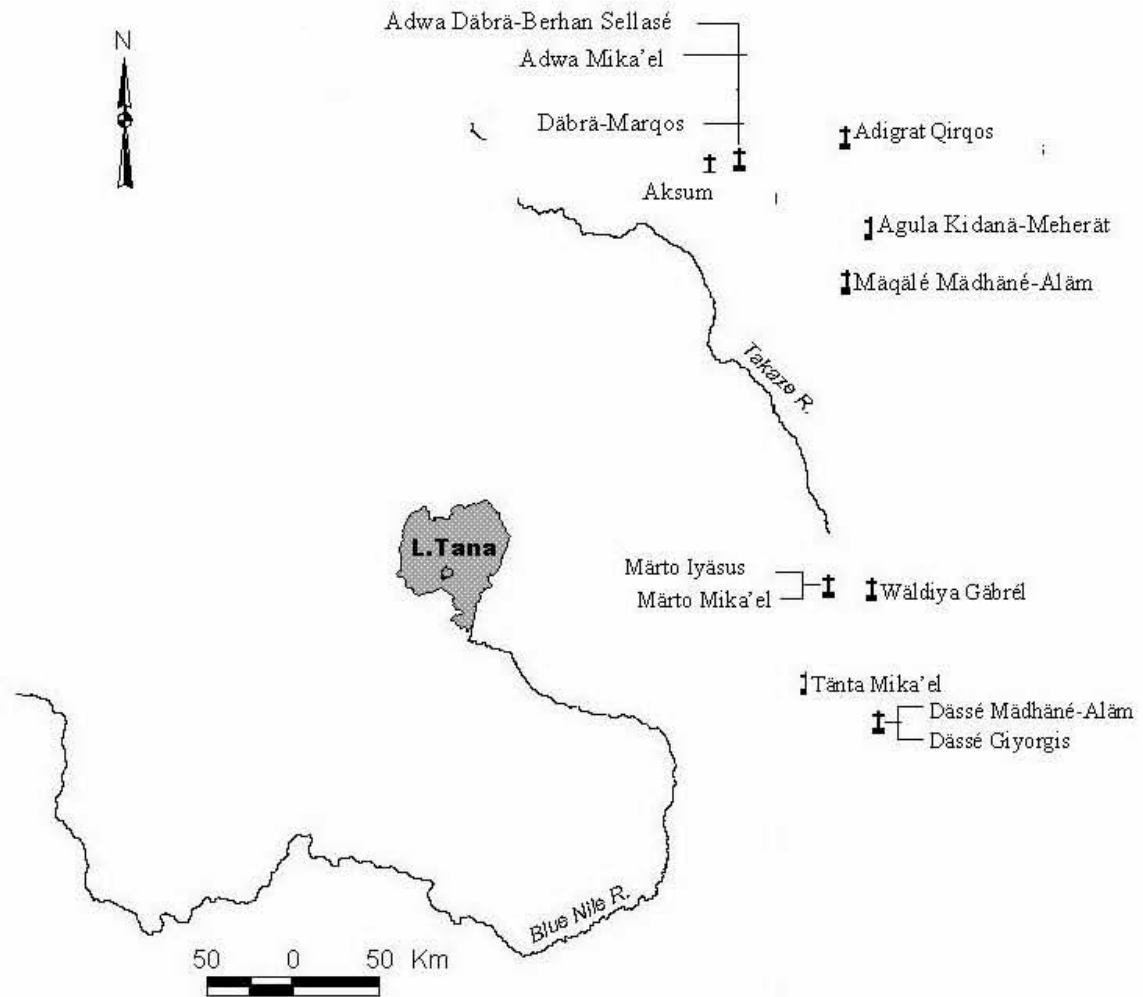
⁷⁰ *Dasta, YäAmareñña Mäzgäbä Qalat*, p. 479.

Conclusion

The historiography of Ethiopian land tenure homogenized rural society by emphasizing that independent smallholder peasants were the central feature of the land regime in northern Ethiopia.⁷¹ This usual assertion should now be changed. The presence of the *zégoch* was almost wholly unknown until now partly because historians generally neglect the eighteenth and nineteenth century and partly because the sources from this period were not made available to research until recently. Land ownership by the ruling class and the exploitation of serf-like labor was an important feature of the land regime in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Gojjam and Bägémeder provinces of Ethiopia. The Gondärine land system lasted in its essentials from long after the era had ended. Once again the time-tested Gondärine patterns of landholding and legal traditions were found to be apt to reorganize rural southern Ethiopia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The introduction of Gondärine legal traditions into southern Ethiopia brought a dramatic change in the status of the rural people, who were reduced to the subordinate status of *gäbbars* and landless laborers by lords. Just like the clerical landlords in earlier centuries, officials and soldiers expropriated the inheritance of rural farming people and supported themselves by the service of their dependents. The social position of the people described as *zéga* in Gojjam and Bägémeder closely corresponds to the *gäbbars* described in the sources from twentieth century southern Ethiopia. It is time now to see how *rim* property played out in the provinces of Tegray and Wällo during the Gondärine period and afterwards.

⁷¹ See for example Bahru, *A Modern History of Ethiopia*, pp.191-192; Donham, "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire," pp.3-49; and Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia*.

Map 9. Grants and Foundations in Tegray and Wällo, 1750s-1930s



Chapter Six: Rim Grants in Tegray and Wällo, c.1750s-1930s

So far the system of ownership in *rim* and the labor supply of the lords in Bägémeder and Gojjam have been treated without regard to the conditions that applied in the provinces of Tegray and Wällo. Compared to the documentation from Gojjam and Gondär, the volume of property sources from Tegray and Wällo remain sparse throughout the period under study. However, there survive sufficient references in extant sources from these provinces in the years between 1770s and 1920s to reconstruct the ways in which the spread of *rim* into the two provinces affected the rural populations. Map 9 above gives a summary of the distribution of grants and foundations among the provinces of Tegray and Wällo. My argument in this chapter reinforces the findings of previous chapters. That is, the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* was an era of development, luxury and building and the system of landholding that prevailed in Tegray and Wällo between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries did not differ materially from those in Gojjam and Bägémeder. Many charters of Tegray were drawn on the basis of the traditions of the Gondär churches of Qwesqwam or Däbrä-Berhan. Archival sources from the churches of Wällo indicate that they, too, drew on Gondärine traditions.¹

In Tegray *rim* grants started to percolate in the second half of the eighteenth and became a flood in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the case of Wällo, the charters from the nineteenth century are comparatively few.² Substantial transfers of *rim* property into the control of institutions occurred in the early twentieth century. As the result, many rural communities in the two provinces met the reality of losing their inheritance. The introduction of *rim* property played a crucial role in the development of legal custom in the two provinces. These sources included surveys of the estates granted to ecclesiastical lords. Survey and boundary marking was

¹ See Illinois/IES. 92.II.16-19, Adwa Mikael, *Four Gospels*; and Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 018.

² See Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.150 and 203 ff. The sources from Tegray and Wällo are cited below.

an important feature of giving land in Tegray and Wällo. This will be discussed in some detail when we come to examine the grants to the churches of Wällo in particular.³ It makes sense to start with a discussion of the Tegray material first for it was to this area that *rim* spread earlier than to Wällo.

Mika’el and his Successors, c. 1750s-1855

Ras Mika’el (r.1740s-1780), one of the well-known rulers of eighteenth century Tegray, together with his famous successor, *Ras* Wäldä-Sellasé (r.1790-1816), was responsible for introducing many of the Gondärine practices into Tegray. Mika’el came from local notable families based in the Adwa area. His early career before he emerged into the limelight in the 1740s is obscure. Irrespective of his family background, Mika’el gained his position through political cunning, marriage, and military prowess. He was also integrated into the royal court at Gondär. Dynastic marriage alliance was a significant cement in the relations between Mika’el and the royal court at Gondär. It should be recalled that in 1755, the eldest of Mika’el’s sons, Wäldä-Häwaryat, was married to the daughter of Mentewwab, Aletash. Although Wäldä-Häwaryat met an untimely death in 1760, leaving Aletash a widow with a minor daughter, Yäwebdar⁴, the marriage had offered Mika’el access to the inner circle around Mentewwab and her Qwaräñña faction in Gondär. By the 1760s he was by far the single most powerful lord in the Ethiopian kingdom. It was Mika’el who changed the course of national politics in the eighteenth century by setting the precedence as a king maker to subsequent lords in the country.⁵

Despite his turbulent career and significant contribution to the new politics of the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*, Mikael was church founder and patron. Like in Gojjam and Bägémdar,

³ In the case of Wällo, the most extensive and detailed survey belongs to the church of Tänta Mika’el built by *Ras* Mika’el in 1900s (Tänta Mika’el, Yärest Mäzgäb, pictures # 6992- 7319.

⁴ Pankhurst, “An Eighteenth Century Ethiopian Dynastic Marriage,” pp.459-461.

⁵ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.124.

church foundations, residence, trade, and town development had a close parallel in Tegray. Mika'el built his residence and capital in Adwa, from where he administered Tegray. He also held a substantial amount of property in Adwa area.⁶ Sometime in the 1750s he founded the church of Mika'el dedicated to the patron saint of his name in Adwa and endowed the church of Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot located a little distance south of Adwa. The urban growth of Adwa preceded the foundation of the church of Saint Mika'el, but it was Mika'el who transformed Adwa into a dynamic locality and focal point of political and administrative activity in Tegray. The town gained in further importance as a center of traffic. Commodities passed through the town northward to the Red Sea coast and southward to Gondär. The size of the population serviced by the market may have been considerably larger. Adwa would remain a major commercial center of Tegray and the second largest urban center in the whole of northern Ethiopia between Gondär in the south and Massawa in the Red Sea coast until the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷

Mika'el must have been deeply familiar with the institutions of *rim* and *zégenät* and he seems to have much to do with establishing Gondärine legal custom in Tegray first. For instance, in what appears to be his last act dated to the reign of Asé Sälonon I (r.1779-1780) we read that Mika'el granted his daughter Wälätä-Täklä-Häymanot exclusive right over his *rim* land which he held under the church of Qwesqwam in Gondär and properties in other unidentifiable places.⁸ Mika'el's foundation of Adwa Mika'el was modeled on the Gondär churches of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé and Qwesqwam.⁹ Although the documents obscure it, one important Gondärine norm Mika'el imported was presumably *rim*. This is also how the local clergy understood the grant

⁶ Häymanotä-Abäw, Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot, pictures # 129-130.

⁷ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.163-164; and Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, pp. 192-198.

⁸ BL., Or. 777, f5.

⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, 108; and Illinois/IES., 92. II.16-19, Adwa Mika'el, *Four Gospels*.

later in 1878 when King Yohannes IV followed up, revived and articulated the same provisions and rights created by Mika'el to Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot more than a century before. According to the nineteenth century charter, the number of *rim* holders which Mika'el had established at the new church was thirty.¹⁰

Mika'el's successors had the same life experiences as their predecessors. They were entangled in national politics and continued constructing churches. Beginning in the 1780s through to the end of the nineteenth century, all the rulers of Tegray founded at least one church and made rich donations to already existing institutions. Mika'el's son, *Ras Wäldä Gäbrél* (c.1780-1788), inherited his father's power and built Adwa's church of Gäbrél. But he fell in a battle in 1788 and did not leave a lasting legacy.¹¹ The most illustrious successor of Mika'el in the eighteenth century was *Ras Wäldä-Sellasé* (c.1780s-1815). The grants and foundations of Wäldä-Sellasé began a new epoch in terminology by their explicit use of *rim*.

Wäldä-Sellasé's first occurrence in the Gondär sources is an undated document which refers to a contract his father *Däjazmach* Keflä-Iyäsus entered into with one Wälätä-Maryam. Keflä-Iyäsus bought a house from Wälätä-Maryam in Gondär town for ten ounces of gold. Later after the death of Keflä-Iyäsus this agreement broke down because Wäldä-Sellasé stated that "he had no need for the property" and received back the ten ounces gold from Wälätä-Maryam.¹² Wäldä-Sellasé secured a position of power and influence through his ability and inheritance of the office of his father, Keflä-Iyäsus. At first Keflä-Iyäsus based his power upon his service to Mika'el before he asserted his independence and established a power base centered on Endärta in southern Tegray later in the 1780s. On his death Keflä-Iyäsus was succeeded by his son Wäldä-

¹⁰ Dersanä Qérellos, MS., Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot, picture #124.

¹¹ Mordechai, *Ethiopia Era of the Princes*, p.31; and Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p.198.

¹² Or 777, f.13.

Sellasé as governor of Tegray.¹³

Chäläqot Sellasé was the only church he actually founded, but Wäldä-Sellasé bought many plots of land and donated to what was an old and vital monastery of Aksum and maintained close relationship with its community.¹⁴ The rise of Wäldä-Sellasé shifted the center of power and economic activity from the Aksum-Adwa area to Endärta in southern Tegray in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Located fifty miles south of the modern town of Mäqälé, Keflä-Iyäsus and later Wäldä-Sellasé used the town of Hintalo as their administrative capital. Early nineteenth century Europeans visitors to Hintalo underscore that the market at Hintalo was a useful nexus of local and regional exchange. Taxes on trade collected in gold and salt were vital for the support of Wäldä-Sellasé's regional government. Nathaniel Pearce, a British citizen who came to Tegray accompanying his superior Henry Salt on a commercial mission in 1805, writes that "[t]he duty on salt...is distributed among the favourites of the household; the governor's or *ras*'s wives have certain quantity, and others of his favourites and relatives have a proportionate allowance. I had myself from the later end of the year 1805 till 1808, six pieces of salt allowed me every Wednesday."¹⁵

Wäldä-Sellasé also founded and patronized a new ruling site at Chäläqot, where he built the most famous foundations of the eighteenth century dedicated to the Holy Trinity in the 1790s. Presumably, he was attracted to the area by the presence of a perennial river which allowed the development of irrigation agriculture in the past and still today. Wäldä-Sellasé's residence was located near to the church and he held property in the area. In the early nineteenth century the settlement of Chäläqot itself became a hub of economic activity and the second

¹³ Mordechai, *Era of the Princes*, p.31; and Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p.201.

¹⁴ Mäsehäfa Häsäbo, MS., Chäläqot Sellasé, picture #. 091-098,

¹⁵ Quoted in Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p.205 from Nathaniel Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce, Written by himself, during a Residence in Abyssinia, from the years 1810 to 1819*, edited by J.J. Halls. Esq. 2 vols. (London, 1831), p.14

capital of Wäldä-Sellasé from where he conducted his foreign relations, and received envoys from abroad. Clements Markham, a nineteenth century British officer and visitor of Chäläqot, regarded the town to be “far and away the most pleasant and picturesque little town.”¹⁶ Among the residents of the new town included Nathaniel Pearce and his fellow Briton, Coffin, an Armenian leather-worker called Nazaret, bishop Qérelós, and an Egyptian smith called Abustäli.¹⁷

Abustäbi and Nazaret may have been employed in the production of the church’s furnishings and iconography for which Chäläqot was famous. The church is a repository of remarkable icons, one of which is a life size cock of perfect workmanship symbolizing vigilance. Chäläqot is a fine building and some elements of its architecture indicate the involvement of an Indian or someone familiar with Indian art. Chäläqot was a visible symbol of Wäldä-Sellasé’s wealth and power. He acted closely with King Täklä-Giyorgis in the granting of the church. The king’s daughter, Sahlitu, was married to Wäldä-Sellasé.¹⁸ Chäläqot’s grant represents the archetypical foundation charter for churches. In drawing the grant charter to his foundation Wäldä-Sellasé drew from familiar Gondärine traditions specifically “modeled on Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé,”¹⁹ a reference, no doubt, to the church founded by king Iyasu I (r. 1682-1707) in Gondär. The rights of the church were quite diverse, which included *rim* land, taxes and tributes, jurisdiction, and market rights. The peasants in its seven estates based in Endärta were subject to the exclusive legal jurisdiction of the church. The obligations of the peasants under the jurisdiction of Chäläqot included the payments of rents, tributes and taxes in grain, in livestock,

¹⁶ Clements Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expeditions* (London, 1869), pp.48 and 238.

¹⁷ Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p. 2007.

¹⁸ Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Town*, p.206; and Pearce, *The Life and Adventure of Nathaniel Pearce*, pp. 97 and 100; and Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, pp.64-65.

¹⁹ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 018: “የዚህም ደብር ሥርዓቱ እንደ ደብረ ብርሃን ነው።”

in honey, coin (the Austrian MT Thalers), salt bar, and in gold.²⁰

The inhabitants of the estate of Salamo paid rent assessed in *amisho* or one-fifth of the harvest, while those of Sandud, together with Habas, paid 35 ounces of gold, 10 beef cattle, 30 sheep, and 12 *chan* of grain a year. The rights of lordship and landed property were complemented by rights of custom tolls and market fees. The most lucrative source of revenue for the church was the custom tolls of the Arho salt traffic. The siting of the church close to an area of intense traffic presumably aimed at exploiting the tolls and markets. Chäläqot collected custom tolls in Sandud and Hintalo, Sänafé and Wäsäma.²¹ Wäsäma was Chäläqot's custom post of the Arho salt traffic. Salt was mined in the Afar inhabited land between East Tegray and the Red Sea coast. Salt played a useful role in the economy of nineteenth century Ethiopia both as currency and as consumer good. Chäläqot's charter and informants identify Arho as a site of salt distribution and production.²² The Sellasé church enjoyed the right of custom tolls at Wäsäma until the 1890s, when *Ras Mängäsha* (1889-1898), ruler of Tegray, gave it to the church of Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm.²³

The tributes and taxes collected from various sources seem to have been shared largely among church officials, whereas the individual clergy lived on their *rim* land. References to *rim* property in the archives of the church of Chäläqot abound. Hence *rim* must be viewed as the fundamental elements of the grant. The allocation of land to each cleric appears to have been conducted in a process similar to the churches of Bägämder and Gojjam. For instance, the legal tradition of boundary marking and land measurement practiced during the Gondärine period was

²⁰ Source: Wängél, MS. Chäläqot, picture # 034; and Tsegaye Tegenu, *Evolution of Ethiopian Absolutism: The Genesis and the Making of the Fiscal Military State, 1696-1913* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1996), p.106.

²¹ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, pictures # #033. All of these were vibrant centers of local and regional exchange in the nineteenth century. For the contemporary account of Sänafé and Hintalo, see Nathaniel Pearce, *The Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce*.

²² Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture #033.

²³ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 041.

performed at Chäläqot as well. This becomes apparent in the record of settlement of a dispute between the clergy of Chäläqot and the peasants in the estate of Hägärä-Maryam in the later decades of the nineteenth century after the death of Wäldä-Sellasé:

When the clergy of Chäläqot and the *chäwa* (lay peasants) of Hägärä-Maryam become reconciled, the clergy of Chäläqot abandoned their rights to [receive] three beef cattle [from the peasants], [and] the peasants in turn gave two guarantors after agreeing to abandon any claim over the land of Fäläg Hazi in Hägärä-Maryam, the land formerly held by *Ras* Wäldä-Sellasé as well as the *chäwa* as previously demarcated by *Abéto* Maqäb.²⁴

The name of *Abéto* Maqäb, who originally laid down the boundaries of the disputed land in Hägärä-Maryam at the time of the grant, is entered as one of the clergy of Chäläqot.²⁵ The importance of the evidence is that although the details of the process have for the most part been lost to us, grants must have invariably been preceded or accompanied by a formal demarcation of the boundary. The privileges enjoyed by Chäläqot under the protection of its founder largely continued after the death of Wäldä-Sellasé and it remained a preeminent religious institution in Tegräy throughout the nineteenth century.

The relative peace which Wäldä-Sellasé established in his province crumbled in the wake of his death in 1816. The internal quiet was replaced by a power struggle led, on the one hand, by the descendants of Wäldä-Sellasé and, on the other hand, *Ras* Mika’el that continued until 1822 which saw the emergence of a new ruling house, albeit short-lived, *Däjazmach* Säbagadis (r.1822-1831). Säbagadis played a major role in national politics in the 1820s and worked to bring to an end to Yäjjü domination. To this end, he built a secret alliance system that extended to Gojjam. But Säbagadis was outmaneuvered by his rivals and died in battle in 1831. His removal constituted a major shift in the balance of political power in Ethiopia. *Däjazmach* Webé

²⁴ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 033. “የሀገረ ማርያም ጨዎችዕና የጨለቆት ካህናት ሲታረቁ 3 ፊራዳ ተወ. ካህናቱ ጨዎችም የሀገረ ማርያምን ምድር ፈለግ ሀዘ በራስ ወልደ ሥላሴ እጅ የነበረውን ከጭዎችም የነበረውን በፊትም አቤቶ ማቀብ የከለሉት ምድራችን እንዳይሉ 2 ዋስ ሰጡ።”

²⁵ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 017.

(1832-1855), whose base was in Semén province, seized Tegray and became a leading political figure in Ethiopia until the 1850s.²⁶

Church foundations and grants were unaffected by political disorganization and instability. Building and patronizing churches was an integral field of political activities for Säbagadis. He established his worth as patron and builder by founding four churches, one of which was the church of Mädhäné-Aläm in Adwa, and made grants for Chäläqot. Säbagadis showed a considerable zeal in his building plan when he sent a letter to king George of England asking for "...a Doctor, Painter, and Carpenter or any other Tradesmen, some paints, Saws, Carpenters Tools, and some lead to finish the churches I have built."²⁷ Säbagadis founding of the Mädhäné-Aläm church at Adwa was "a political outreach" aimed at gaining influence and firmly establishing his authority in what was an important area of Tegray.²⁸ He also paid special attention to his power base and ancestral district of Agamé. Throughout the nineteenth century authority remained profoundly personal and the constant shift in power and leadership resulted in the development of numerous urban focal nodes. The reign of Säbagadis brought the emergence of yet another town in Tegray, that is, Addigrat in Agamé, where he built the church of Qirqos and his palace. Serving a transit point for the circulation of goods brought from the Red coast and salt from the Afar country, Addigrat grew into important market towns that endured into the twentieth century.²⁹

The growth of churches was matched by the increasing importance of *rim* property among patrons and founders to support the service of followers and clergy in the nineteenth

²⁶ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: Era of the Princes*, pp.36-37.

²⁷ Quoted in Rubenson, *The Survival of the Ethiopian Independence*, p.59. For Säbagadis foundations and grants, see Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.158; Wängél, MS., Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm, pictures # 112-114; Illinois/IES, 92.II.33-34, Addigrat Qirqos, Gold Gospel.; Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 036; and Huntingford, *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia*, pp.71-75.

²⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.158.

²⁹ Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, pp. 210-213.

Tegray. *Rim* was not subject to regional variations and its spread into Tegray resulted in the diminution of the rights of peasants. In particular, the rural cultivators in Adwa-Aksum area, where there was large concentration of churches, seem to have been significantly impacted by the distributions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is particularly helpful to briefly recapitulate the grants made to the church of Däbrä-Marqos in the town of Adwa by Bishop Sälama (c.1841-1860s) as an exemplary case of the general atmosphere of church land tenure in the mid-nineteenth century Tegray.³⁰

Bishops in the nineteenth century were based in the northern section of Adwa called Adi Abun, “the bishop’s quarter,” and attached to the church of Däbrä-Marqos. They held many personal estates in Adwa area: Ad *Abéto*, Salém, Mamas, Barya Shagené, Maharsem and Maye Ayné, and collected rents from peasants on their domains. The obligations and rights of *rim* property defined and articulated by Sälama follow common formulaic patterns of Gondärine grants. Sälama stripped two-thirds of the lands of the cultivators in the first four estates and distributed it among the clergy of the Däbrä-Marqos church. At Maye Ayné he granted “twelve plots without leaving one-third” for the cultivators, whereas he set up the following choices for the peasants in Maharsem, “If they so wish, let them transfer land based on the three way divisions, failing this let the ancient custom be preserved.”³¹ Sälama granted the clergy of Däbrä-Marqos full rights of property and added the following rider “if any priest, *däbtära* and deacon established at Däbrä-Marqos fails to build a house and maintain a permanent residence, I have not given *rim* and he is excommunicated.”³²

³⁰ Wängél, MS., Adwa Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 026.

³¹ Wängél, MS., Adwa Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 026.

³² Illinois/IES. 92. II. 21, Adwa Mika’el, *Afäwäraq*: “ከማርቆስ የተሰራ ቁስ ዲያቆን ደብተራ ጨዋ ቤት ስርቶ እሪሙን ይዞ ያልተቀመጠ ውጥዝ ነው እሪም አልሰጠሁም።”

Table 8. Foundations and Grants in Tegray, 1750s-1850s.

Church	Founder/Grantor	Source
Adwa Mika'el	<i>Ras</i> Mika'el	Illinois/IES. 92.II.16-19
Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot	<i>Ras</i> Mika'el	Häymanotä-Abäw, # 129-130
Adwa Gäbrél	<i>Ras</i> Wäldä Gäbrél	Pankhurst, p.198
Adwa Gäbrél	Emperor Täklä-Giyorgis	Huntingford, p.64
Abunä Gärima	<i>Däjazmach</i> Keflä Iyäsus	Wängél, #031
Chäläqot Sellasé	<i>Ras</i> Wäldä-Sellásé/ Emperor Täklä-Giyorgis	Huntingford, p.64-65; Wängél, #033-034
Aksum	<i>Ras</i> Wäldä-Sellásé	Huntingford, pp.64-68
Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm	<i>Däjazmach</i> Säbagadis	Huntingford, p.74
Addigrat Qirqos	<i>Däjazmach</i> Säbagadis	Huntingford, p.75
Adwa Mika'el	<i>Däjazmach</i> Säbagadis	Huntingford, p.73
Chäläqot Sellasé	<i>Däjazmach</i> Säbagadis	Wängél, # 036
Däbrä-Marqos	<i>Abunä</i> Sälama	92. II. 21; Wängél, # 026
Aksum	<i>Däjazmach</i> Webé	Huntingford, p.77

If we take a broad view of the grants and institutional developments of the hundred years between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, we can see a significant transformation in the social and cultural landscape of Tegray taking place. Clearly the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* in Tegray was a time of development, grants and prosperity. Several self-governing religious communities developed into centers of political influence and economic activity changing the appearance of the province. The settlements around the churches in Chäläqot, Hintalo, Adwa, and Addigrat, to name but a few, turned into enduring urban centers which survive to this day. In the second half of the nineteenth century, during which the monarchy was refashioned and the politics of the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* came to end, grants and foundations become routine in Tegray.

Yohannes IV (1872-1889)

The rise in the power and property of ecclesiastical institutions in Tegray corresponded with the new political preeminence of the province in national politics. A brief outline of the major developments is important for a broader understanding of the grants of the period. After a brief interlude by Emperor Täklä-Giyorgis (r.1868-1871) following the death of Téwodros II, political power shifted to Tegray. The ruler of Tegray, *Däjach* Kassa Märcha, easily defeated Täklä-Giyorgis in 1871. Kassa was crowned Emperor Yohannes IV (r.1872-1889) in the Cathedral of Aksum. He was appointed as governor of Tegray by Téwodros II in 1860s, but little is known about his early career prior to this date. Yohannes was related to the Gondärine kings, most likely through the female line, although his claim to royal descent was tenuous. He secured his position of power and prominence through his ability as a warrior rather than of blood and birth. Yohannes had made an enormous contribution to the ecclesiastical and political developments of the nineteenth century and left deep marks on modern Ethiopia.³³

As Crummey has noted Yohannes was an adept manipulator of “political and religious symbols.” He took the title of “*negusä seyon*, king of Zion” which repeatedly appears in his official correspondence. The symbol of Zion was an important marker of religious political identity. According to Crummey, “Zion referred to Ethiopia in general, but also referred to Aksum, whose Cathedral church was believed to hold the original tablets of the law, which Menilek I, son of Sälomon and Sheba, had purloined from the temple in Jerusalem.”³⁴ In using the rich symbolism of Zion, Yohannes successfully secured dynastic legitimacy and an idea of political continuity.

³³ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 42-59; Zewde Gabre-Sellassie, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia: A Political Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and Rubenson, *The Survival of the Ethiopian Independence*, p. 288ff.

³⁴ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.212; *idem*, Crummey, “Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of Neo-Sälomonic Ideology,” pp.24-33.

Yohannes was undoubtedly a courageous and energetic ruler and a devout Christian with wide ranging interests. He began the difficult task of both reconstructing the kingdom and uniting the church which was still bitterly divided when he came to power. In the early 1870s Yohannes had brought under his control the provinces of Lasta and Bägémeder. King Menilek II of Shäwa and *Ras* Adal-Täklä-Häymanot submitted to Yohannes later in the 1870s. Yohannes was preoccupied with external threats and his reign was given in war against foreign armies. The external challenge came first from Egypt and towards the end of Yohannes's rule from an aggressive Islamic revivalist state of Sudan and from Italy. His fight against the Sudan would eventually cost his life in 1889, by which time he was at the weakest point of his power and influence. Yohannes was at the apex of his power between 1878 and 1881.³⁵

When the monarchy was resurgent, the church also underwent a significant period of transformation in Tegray and elsewhere. Yohannes exercised an enormous ecclesiastical influence. In the matter of religious policy, Yohannes worked in a direction similar to Téwodros. The dignity of the office of the bishop was restored. His policy towards sectarianism was straightforward and clear from the beginning. He had no tolerance to sectarianism and purged *Qebat* sympathies in Tegray even before he assumed supreme authority and later expelled European Christian missionaries from the country. In 1878 he decisively dealt with the issue of sectarianism at the Council of Boru Méda in Wällo. The council, it should be recalled, decided to convert the Muslims of Wällo to Christianity.³⁶ Yohannes's grants to churches must be viewed within the nexus of his ecclesiastical policy of promoting unity of faith and affirming Christian orthodoxy. Leaving for the next section the matter of his ecclesiastical policy in Wällo, here

³⁵ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 42-59; Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 208; and Zewde, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, pp.59-83 and 180-202.

³⁶ Crummey, "Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction in Ethiopia", pp.427-42; Zewde, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, pp.94-100.

Yohannes's grants in Tegray must be presented.

Yohannes made grants to the church of Däbrä-Bizän in Eritrea and several scholars underscore the innovation that he attempted to introduce regarding the land system of Eritrea.³⁷ However, it seems apparent that to a large measure the primary interest of Yohannes lay in the churches in Tegray. I have tabulated the grants of Yohannes's reign under table 15. The grants of the period have discernable patterns. In the early years of his reign, Yohannes's patronage focused on the churches in the Aksum-Adwa area, a pattern which is best explained on the presumption that a political presence in this part of Tegray was strategically important for legitimacy and support. Practically all the major lords of Tegray either built new churches or endowed old establishments in the Adwa-Aksum area. Yohannes confirmed the property of Aksum and made fresh grants of land "which he had purchased for one thousand MT thalers."³⁸ Further he expanded, renewed and refined the grants of Säbagadis to Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm and Mika'el's foundation of Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot near Adwa. Finally, Yohannes founded Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé in Adwa which was endowed and dedicated in 1873 shortly after his coronation as emperor.³⁹

In the central decade of his rule Yohannes shifted his attention to the churches in his power base of Endärta district, where he founded Mäqälé as his political capital and built a showpiece palace and the churches of Mädhäné-Aläm and Kidanä-Meherät Kidanä-Meherät in Keltä Awlalo. Yohannes was also benefactor of the churches Chäläqot Sellasé, where his mother,

³⁷ Irma Taddia, "The Politics of the Northern Border: State Control and the Land Tenure System in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia", in Donald Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 2005), pp. 187-213; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, p. 209.

³⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.212.

³⁹ Illinois/IES. 92. II.5-6. Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm, Wängél; Illinois/IES. 92. I.1-9. Adwa Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Mäzgäb*; and Dersanä Qérelós, Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot, picture #124.

Emäyete Sellas, was living and held property and.⁴⁰ There is no doubt that other grants existed and the period saw an extensive transfer of property to churches in Tegray bringing them tremendous power and privilege.

The sources from this period leave no doubt that the Gondärine legal custom in land matters continued to play a vital role. Crummey has already made the point that “Gondärine grants...formed one of Yohannes’s principal points of reference in Tegray” and adds that the grants of this period granted the “clergy strong overrights.”⁴¹ I emphasize that the conveyances entailed direct landownership to the clergy. The rights involved in the grants to churches consisted of a wide variety of revenues derived from several sources such as rights of lordship and market fees. Yohannes granted the market of Adwa, the most important market between Massawa and Gondär, with all uses to Däbrä-Berhan.⁴² The church of Mädhäné-Aläm, Mäqälé, enjoyed the right to taxes and the custom tolls at Berahéla salt traffic as recorded in the church’s tax registers.⁴³

In most instances, the primary source of revenue for the clergy was *rim* land; and agricultural products were their most vital needs collected through taxes and rents from tenants. Yohannes, like his predecessors, respected the subsistence rights of the rural cultivators’ by leaving to them one-third portions of their ancestral land. This was the case in the grants of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, the churches of Mädhäné-Aläm in Mäqälé and Adwa and Kidanä-Meherät in Keltä Awlalo. Nevertheless, some details in the grant document lead to the surprising conclusion that the rural cultivators could in fact be expropriated completely and turned into

⁴⁰ Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 036. For Yohannes’s grant to Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm, see Tsegaye, *Evolution of Ethiopian Absolutism*, p.108.

⁴¹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.213 and 214.

⁴² Illinois/IES.92. I.13., Adwa Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, Wängél.

⁴³ Mäshäfa Delal, Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm, pictures # 559-863; Tsegaye, *Evolution of Ethiopian Absolutism*, p.108; and Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 041.

landless tenants. In the estates of Dämbäla under Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm church, for instance, the clergy received the land “*albo-restäñña*” or by completely ignoring the rights of the cultivators.⁴⁴

Broadly speaking, the grants of Yohannes presumably transformed a significant number of peasants into the status of tenants. The clergy commonly exploited their *rim* property by allowing the former cultivators to retain the land in tenancy terms. The amount due was assessed on the basis of the actual produce that is the definite share of the crop. *Amisho*, a Gondärine norm, was the usual level of rent from the tenants as was the case in the estates of Adigegago and Adeqesamero under the church of Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm.⁴⁵ The assessment of rent in one-fifth was presumably the dominant custom in lands under church tenure, but it was by no means the only one. In land under secular tenure, assessment of taxes and rents based on the wealth of the peasants is occasionally found in the records. For instance, in the latter part of the century one *Däjach* Abreha classified the inhabitants of his estate, for the purpose of assessing the level of rent and tax he collected from them, into those who had one or more team of oxen, those with an ox, and diggers or those with no animals.⁴⁶

The power of the landlords in Tegray over their tenants does not significantly differ from the power of lords over their *zégoch* in Gojjam and Gondär. Churches held jurisdictional rights over their tenants and their estates and enjoyed broad immunity from secular officials. In particular, Yohannes depicted the authority of the Sellasé church at Adwa over all the landed property and the inhabitants in very broad language since the charter provides that the clergy “shall have the power to evict” tenants from their land or “assign it” to tenants at their discretion.⁴⁷ Individuals living in the land under the jurisdiction of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé could

⁴⁴ Illinois/IES. 92. II.15., Adwa Däbrä-Berhan, *Wängél*.

⁴⁵ Illinois/IES. 92. I.13-14., Adwa Däbrä-Berhan, *Wängél*

⁴⁶ *Wängél*, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 036.

⁴⁷ Illinois/IES. 92.I.10-11 and 15 Adwa Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, *Müzgüb*.

not be tried by anyone besides the head of the church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé.⁴⁸ These immunities were personal. The inhabitants' additional privileges of trial in their own courts were made more to collect revenue from justice than from any sense of honor and personal freedom. In sum, churches were bestowed with considerable power over their lands and the inhabitants under their jurisdiction.

Boundary Marking

Boundary marking and land measurement was a regular feature of land grants in Tegray, although the evidence remains slim. Particularly, the basic territorial unit of the endowment and the satellite settlement found around churches called *etan zoré* in so many institutions of Tegray was demarcated by a distinct ceremony.⁴⁹ Sometimes the referent could include the agricultural fields farther away from the church rather than simply of the precincts. Charters such as those that record Yohannes IV's donations to the church of Kidanä-Meherät in the district of Keltä Awlalo issued in 1881 support this assertion. It involved grants of land and the pasture associated with it to Kidanä-Meherät. The grant was in *rim* tenure and divided among eighty clerical holders. As part of the ceremony of giving, the land transferred into the control of the church was demarcated in the presence of one *Däjach* Gäbrä-Sellasé.⁵⁰

Besides boundary marking mandated by rulers, demarcations sanctioned by the church community of Kidanä-Meherät did exist as well. In a document drawn up in February 1949 recording a grant of land to *Däjach* Häylä-Sellasé, grandson of Yohannes IV, we read that all the community of the church of Kidanä-Meherät “walked off and demarcated” the field they granted to Häylä-Sellasé. The size of the land given to Häylä-Sellasé was equivalent to “the amount of

⁴⁸ Illinois/IES. 92.. I.15, Adwa Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, Wängél: “ደግሞ የደብረብርሀን የገዳሙ የጉልቱ ሰው ከሌላ አገር ወጥቶ ከሳሺ ቢከሰው በዳኛዩ ብሎ ከመልአክ ብርሃናቱ ይድረስ እንጂ ከሌላ አይዳኝ አዋጅ ውግዘት አለው። ለመሬቱም ማህበር ይተክላል ይነቅላል።” The scope and nature of the immunity was indeed the highest type and very unusual.

⁴⁹ For the discussion of *etan zoré*, see Bausi, “Documents Collected during Fieldwork in Eritrea,” p.150-151.

⁵⁰ Wängél, Agula’e Kidanä-Meherät, picture #1531.

land four pair of oxen could plow in a planting season” and originated from a grant by Yohannes to Kidanä-Meherät in *rim* tenure.⁵¹

This information on land demarcation in Kidanä-Meherät is supplemented by the evidence in a grant to Mäqälé in 1892/3. In this particular case, the demarcation was conducted in response to the request by the descendants of two founding fathers, named Azman and Estifanos, who donated their land voluntarily to Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm. According to the charter, through their representative, the donors requested the then ruler of Tegray, *Ras* Mängäsha (r.1889-1898) and the church to send officials to view and demarcate the land they donated. The ceremony attended the carrying of a cross and divan taken from the benefiting church of Mäqälé and a formal walking around the boundary of the land in question.⁵²

Table 9. Foundations and Grants in Tegray, 1860s-1850s

Church	Founder/Grantor	Source
Chäläqot Sellasé	Yohannes IV	Wängél, # 036
Aksum	Yohannes IV	Crummey, p.212
Adwa Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé	Yohannes IV	92. I.13
Adwa Mädhäné-Aläm	Yohannes IV	92.I.21-27
Aqbäsa Täklä-Häymanot	Yohannes IV	Dersanä Qérellos, #124
Agula Kidanä-Meherät	Yohannes IV	Wängél, #1531
Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm	Yohannes IV	Tsegaye, p.108
Gurä Gäbrä-Mänfäs Qedus	Abunä Péteros	Wängél, #038-040
Shamana Mädhäné-Aläm	<i>Ras</i> Mängäsha	Wängél, Chäläqot, #038

The evidence presented above barely scratches the surface of what must have been a widespread and well developed custom of boundary marking. The grants to other church would definitely involve the marking of property boundaries and land measurement prior to the delivery of the *rim* land to the clergy, although the ceremony was not recorded. The overall impression

⁵¹ Mäshäfä Qérellos and Afäwäraq, Agula’e Kidanä-Meherät, picture #1550.

⁵² Wängél, Chäläqot Sellasé, picture # 043.

left is that in the last quarter of nineteenth century Tegray *rim* grants became routine and charters conveyed measured space and the accompanying boundary marking was a normal feature of giving in the province. Cases could be multiplied many times over, but enough is said about the grants of this period. The aim in the next section is to examine how *rim* property played out in Wällo during the period under investigation.

Rim in Wällo: Land, Politics and Population Movement, c.1700-1930s

Since the beginning of the seventeenth through to the early twentieth century in most areas of Wällo ethnicity, political leadership, religion and the landholding system were changing relatively frequently. Insofar as the landholding system is concerned, one of the significant innovations that accompanied the demographic and ethnic change was *galla märét*. *Galla märét* is the term of common occurrence in late nineteenth and early twentieth century land documents. *Gäbbar märét* is another designation which is conspicuous in the archives of churches in Wällo.⁵³ The classical property categories of *gult* and *rest* have largely disappeared from the lexicon of land tenure documents. The word *galla märét* does not occur outside of Wällo province. Together, *gäbbar* and *galla märét* are the most numerous categories of land in several territories of Wällo and represented a distinctively local landholding custom.

Rim was introduced into some parts of Wällo as early as the second half of the eighteenth century. As we will see further down, in the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries *gäbbar* and *galla märét* were increasingly assimilated into *rim* property because the property of the clergy under churches derived from both kinds of lands. However, despite the growing

⁵³ See Gäbrä-Wäld Engeda Wärq, *Yälyopya maretenna gebr sem*, pp.47-50; Mantel-Niećko, *The Role of Land Tenure Modern Ethiopia*, p.64; and Abebe Fiseha, "Land Tenure in Tähulädäré Wäräda from c. 1799-1974" (BA thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1987), pp. 10-20; Mengistu Abebe, "Land and Peasantry in Ambassal Awrajja (Wällo): 1941-1985" (BA thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1997), pp.38-46; and Fekadu Begna, "Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo, 1941-1974: Yäjju and Raya and Qobbo Awrajas (MA thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1990), pp.70-73.

prevalence of *rim* property, both *gäbbar* and *galla märét* remained the essentially local core of land tenure practice.

Documents make a clear distinction between *galla* and *gäbbar märét*. *Gäbbar* is a classic term commonly found in legal sources from all over northern Ethiopia, including in some of the oldest charters. The term *gäbbar* refers to any tax or tribute payer in general; more specifically it refers to peasant subjects who hold their own land and owed tax or tribute to the government directly or to the persons it mandated. Its fundamental contrast with *galla märét* was the fact that the holder of *gäbbar märét* enjoyed rights of disposition.⁵⁴

The meaning and evolution of *galla märét* is more complicated and difficult to account for. The precise lexical meaning of *galla märét* is uncertain. But it is clear enough that the etymology of *galla märét* points primarily to the Oromo settlement in Amhara (later renamed Wällo) beginning in the late sixteenth century. In the past the term Galla stood for the Oromo speaking people of Ethiopia. Originally, *galla märét* therefore seems to be a reference to land belonging to the Oromo. This meaning of the term *galla märét* is plain from the historical context. The Oromo transformed the medieval Amhara into their homeland through conquest and by displacing the indigenous people. The land abandoned by the previous inhabitants and conquered by the Oromo belonged to the conquerors. The historian Hussein Ahmed surmised that during the process of the Oromo settlement into Amhara and thereafter “[t]here must have been extensive alienation of land belonging to the previous inhabitants by the different ruling families.”⁵⁵ Briefly, the underlying conception of *galla märét* originally appears to have been that at the conquest and afterwards land became the property of the Oromo conquerors and the previous inhabitants were reduced to the status of tenants.

⁵⁴ Gäbrä-Wäld, *YäItyopya maretenna gebr sem*, P. 47.

⁵⁵ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, p.23.

In the second half of the eighteenth century a shift in the meaning of *galla märét* occurred. For the eighteenth century and thereafter *galla märét*, which derived from *gäbbar märét*, wasteland and dead land, was simply inalienable land which could be acquired through royal grant. This type of land primarily carried military tenure and it was allotted to state officials as well. *Galla märét* did not imply proprietary rights over the soil because the land belonging to the government. The revenue from it went to meet the expenses of the soldiers or state officials.⁵⁶ The term *galla märét* carries the same meaning of government land in documents of late nineteenth and twentieth century Wällo. However, during this period *galla märét* has quite lost its military sense because it was also being given to the clergy in *rim* tenure. It is curious that in consequence land carrying military tenure was referred to as *galla märét*.

The name *galla märét* used to designate land held by soldiers may be explained by the strong association of the Oromo with this military tenure during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period coincided with the growing domination of northern Ethiopia by the Yäjjju Oromo lords. Although they had Christian soldiers from other territories, the Yäjjju army was primarily comprised of Oromo cavalry soldiers from Wällo.⁵⁷ In all cases, the origin of *galla märét* undoubtedly goes back to the Oromo settlement of Wällo. Thus, it is very important to briefly discuss the migration of the Oromo into Wällo from the point of view of the land system for a better understanding of the context within which *rim* was applied in that province in later periods.

Amhara, it should be recalled, was one of those provinces which had been the center of the medieval Ethiopian kingdom. It was in Amhara where many royal foundations developed in

⁵⁶ Gäbrä-Wäld, *Yälyopya märétenna geber sem*, p.50.

⁵⁷ Merid Wolde-Aregay, "A Reappraisal of the Impact of Firearms in the History of Warfare in Ethiopia (c. 1500-1800)," *Journal of Ethiopian studies*, XIV (1976-79), pp.120-121; and Richard Caulk, "Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the nineteenth century," *Journal of African History*, XIII, 4 (1972), p.609. The distinction of *galla märét* will be discussed in great detail below.

the three centuries that followed the rise of the Sälomonic dynasty. The inhabitants of the province were largely Christian and Amharic speaking.⁵⁸ During the later Gondärine period the ethnic map of the province hardly resembled its medieval Amhara and Christian character. The massive Oromo migrations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduced a new ethnic element in to the population of northern Ethiopia, including Amhara. The occupation of the province by the Muslim army in the sixteenth century and the destruction of the churches and monasteries in the province had severely weakened Christian communities there. With the retreat of the royal court from Shäwa into the Lake Tana area beginning with last quarter of the sixteenth century, the territories south of the Blue Nile and Amhara lay wide open to invasion by the various Oromo clans.⁵⁹

Already considerably reduced in size, the Ethiopian kingdom gradually but steadily lost many districts of Amhara in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Small scale Oromo penetration into Amhara had begun by the 1580s with the earliest Oromo clan to establish a permanent settlement being the Wällo. By the seventeenth century the Wällo Oromo clans had become established in a good part of Amhara from where they launched their attack further into Bägémeder. In 1662 the important Wällo Oromo clan, Wärrä Himäno, swept into Bägémeder through western Amhara causing King Fasilädäs (r.1632-1667) to make a forced march in its defense.⁶⁰ The relentless Oromo pressure continued unabated in the subsequent decades. In 1683, King Iyasu I made the last serious campaign against the Wällo Oromo to establish central control in there.⁶¹ Neither Iyasu nor his successors were able to prevent the further incursions of the Oromo into western Amhara lands. The occupiers were converted to

⁵⁸ Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp.69ff.

⁵⁹ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.2-14.

⁶⁰ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.15 and 17; and J. Perruchon, "Notes pour l'Histoire d'Ethiopie: Le Règne de Fasiladas (Alam Sagad), de 1632 à 1667," RS, V/VI (1897/8), p.91 (trans).

⁶¹ Guidi, *Analles Iohannis I, Iyyasu I, et Bakaffa*, pp.70-78.

Islam, which had a very long history in the province of Amhara going back to the late Aksumite period. With the advent of the Oromo Islam progressed further and took deep root in the soils of the province. The Oromo destroyed Christian manuscripts and monasteries which had preserved them and subsequently Islamized their new home.⁶² The eighteenth century marked the high point of Oromo movement into Amhara. In the anarchy following the death of Iyasu I in the 1700s-1720s and the collapse of royal power in Gondär in the 1770s, the Oromo were practically unopposed by the central government in Wällo and also came to dominate northern Ethiopia politically.⁶³

As the area of Oromo settlement expanded northwards into Amhara, the former inhabitants had been killed, exiled, or absorbed into the Oromo population by the eighteenth century. A large number of refugees retreated into the mountainous districts of Wadla-Delanta and Sayent. These areas preserved in certain measure their old institutions and the Christian religion after the Oromo conquest. The eastern half of the province in particular was thoroughly Islamized. Christianity virtually disappeared in much of what had once constituted Amhara.⁶⁴ Only the monastery of Geshän, located on a well-fortified and rocky mountain, and the monastery of Saint Stephen near Häyq remained secure against the Oromo incursions down to the nineteenth century in this part of Wällo. Lacking patrons and losing their former property to the Oromo, these institutions must have been impoverished. In the western part of the province, the church of Tädbabä-Maryam remained a bastion of Christianity.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the Oromo started to appropriate some elements of the highland Ethiopian

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, pp.27-31.

⁶⁴ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.27-29. See also Zergaw Asefa, "Some Aspects of the Historical Developments in Amhara/Wällo (BA thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1973).

⁶⁵ Gondärine kings such as Täklä-Giyorgis exercised power and held property in Sayent where Tädbabä-Maryam was located (Wängél, MS. Tädbabä-Maryam, picture # 6609).

culture, including the land tenure system and state structure. When they began their phenomenal migration in the sixteenth century, the Oromo were remarkable for the lack of social stratification. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they founded a patchwork of many small and some large states. Wärrä Himäno was one of the larger states whose political significance was enhanced by the active role its rulers played in the court politics of Gondär.⁶⁶ A notable means of the dissemination of Gondärine legal practice was the royal court. Citing a nineteenth century foreign observer, Hussein adds the following regarding the influence of Gondär on developments in Wällo:

D'Abbadie made the interesting observation that the Oromo assimilated whatever survived of the ancient hereditary land tenure system which had been undermined by the warlords of the eighteenth century—ostensibly for the purpose of administrative centralization. He stated that the experience which some of the Wällo notables had acquired in the Gondärine court, where they had received and bestowed positions of power, titles and decorations, had stimulated the process towards the concentration of authority in Wällo in the hands of a certain families, leading to a social structure he described as “feudalism” and tempered by a “patriarchal” system that suited “military and free” tenure.⁶⁷

Wällo's partial incorporation into the kingdom and the spread of Gondärine land system was achieved through dynastic marriage alliances and the acceptance by the Oromo nobles of Christianity at the initiative of local Christian rulers and the royal court at Gondär. Mentewwab arranged one such relation between her son Iyasu II and a Muslim Oromo princess from Wällo, Wabi, upon her timely baptism.⁶⁸ The marriage of Iyasu II to Wabi indicates a strategic shift in geographical orientation of Mentewwab. Her choice of a marriage alliance with a Muslim and Oromo family with no claim to the throne of the Sälomonic kings undoubtedly resulted from political expediency. The importance of this dynastic marriage alliance was that the Oromo lords

⁶⁶ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.115ff.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23. Although very few people may have retained their lands, it should be noted that far from a virgin land Amhara was densely settled at the time of the Oromo immigration and the latter may have appropriated the preexisting land tenure practice.

⁶⁸ Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* vol. II, 674-678; Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, pp.459-463; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.110-113.

of Wällo gained access to the royal court and became drawn into the politics of Gondärine Ethiopia that culminated in the Yäjju domination of the kingdom in the 1780s.

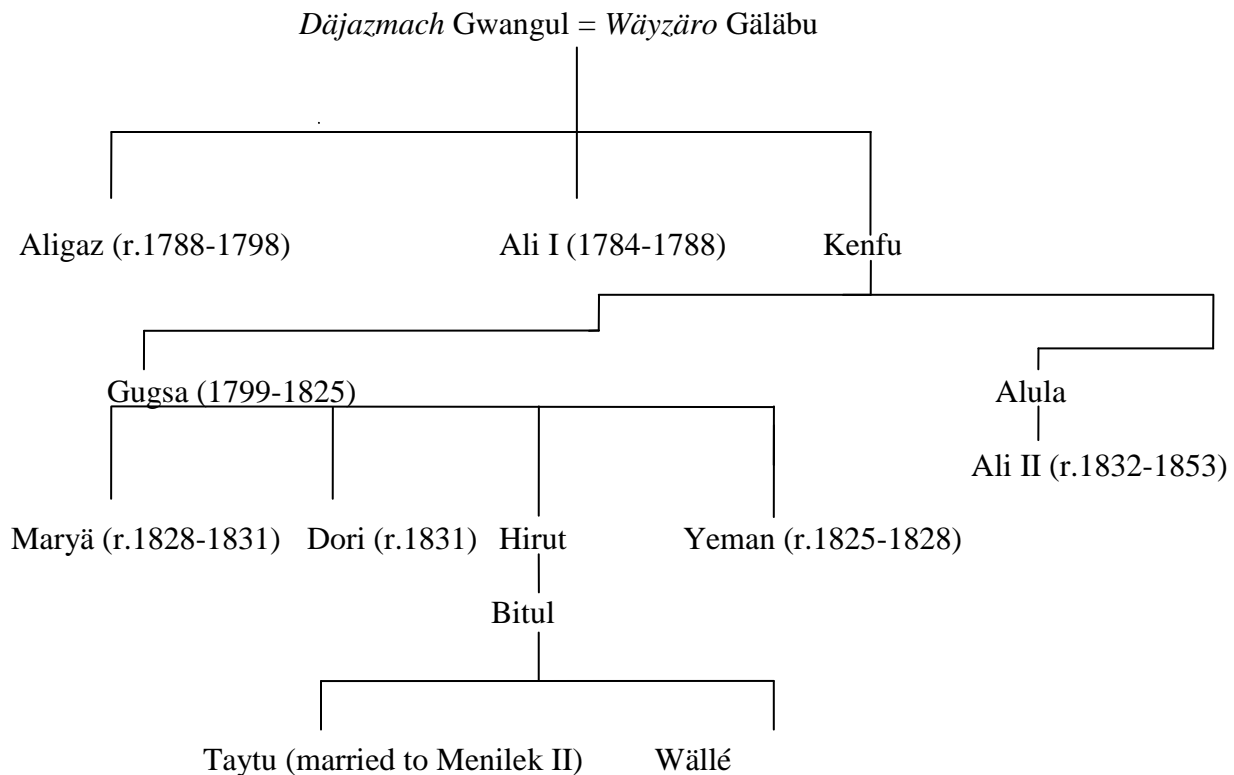


Chart 3. Gwangul and his descendants. Source: Brian, “Invisible Actors”, p.124.

Originally called El-Ijju, at first the Yäjju were Muslims from Shäwa who settled in the northeastern part of the Amhara in the sixteenth century. They gave their name to the area they settled in and became absorbed into the Oromo in subsequent centuries thereby losing their ethnic distinction. The Wärrä Sek dynasty which dominated northern Ethiopia during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* derived from the Yäjju ruling family. Gwangul, the founder of the dynasty, was married in c. 1760 to Gäläbu, a daughter of a well-established and socially prominent Christian family of *Ras* Faris from Lasta with roots going back to the sixteenth century king Gälawdéwos (r.1540-1559). Gwangul succeeded in establishing a line of lords that extended to Ali II (r.1832-1853). The marriage produced the illustrious Ali I who established Wärrä Sek’s overlordship over other regions in the 1780s thereby transforming Yäjju from an insignificant

outlier to an influential province.⁶⁹

The growth of Wärrä Sek's political power was matched "by an increase in their enthusiasm to Christianity."⁷⁰ Like others princes, the Wärrä Sek were aware of the importance of church patronage for dynastic legitimacy. Although we do not have comparable evidence for the Yäjju, like the lords of other regions they used conventional methods to extend their influence and gain approval such as grants.

Hence Gwangul was converted to Christianity sometime in 1770s. Undoubtedly, in his case the initiative for the conversion evidently came from Gwangul himself perhaps long after his marriage with Gäläbu. In an interesting and very important document drawn up in the 1780s, Gäläbu identified herself as mother of Ali I and descendant of the sixteenth century King Gälawdéwos (1540-1559). In this document Gäläbu inadvertently included information which shows that she was converted to Islam and lost 700 plots in Bäläsa in Bägémeder confiscated "for reason of apostasy" before its restoration to her by king Täklä-Giyorgis.⁷¹

It was during the time of Ali I that *rim* tenure was introduced into Wällo. Ali I is credited with the establishment of seven churches, including Wälidiya Gäbrél in Yäjju.⁷² Of these, we have a contemporary document recording his grant for Wälidiya Gäbrél issued in 1786/7. Among the *däbtära* of the church were Ali I's mother, Wäyzäro Gäläbu. In Wälidiya Gäbrél, as in many other churches in northern Ethiopia, *rim* property was evidently one mechanism for supporting the service of the clergy. For instance, the document gives the following detail for one of the *däbtära*: "Aläqa Bätru's *rim* [is] the former land of Bärénto, Gälemo and Seyoum."⁷³ Although

⁶⁹ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, p.18; Merid, "History of Southern Ethiopia," p.138; Rubenson, *Survival of the Ethiopian Independence*, p.35; Fekadu, *Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo*, pp.18-19 and 23.

⁷⁰ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.158.

⁷¹ Wängél, MS., Wälidiya Gäbrél, picture # 887.

⁷² Wängél, MS., Wälidiya Gäbrél, picture # 887; and Fekadu, "Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo, pp.18 and 24-25.

⁷³ Wängél, MS., Wälidiya Gäbrél, picture # 887.

the document is laconic, it bears witness to the conveyance of *rim* property to the *däbtära* of the new church.

The thin record up to the second half of the nineteenth century from the province of Wällo does not allow for clear statements on the institutional developments and the spread of *rim* property. As a whole, the Yäjju lords were not the principals acting in foundation and endowment of churches and monasteries. Neither Ali I nor his successors promoted Christian missionary activity in Wällo. By the end of the Yäjju domination in 1853 Wällo was still largely Islamic and only a few of the local Oromo rulers of the various territories of that province had accepted baptism. The picture dramatically changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. As of the mid-nineteenth century, a new turn had been given towards unification and centralization. The end of the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* created strong pressure in favor of Christianity in Wällo. The monarchy aggressively asserted central control over Wällo and new churches were built and old ones endowed with property confiscated predominantly from Muslim populations. As the result, by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a significant reduction in the power of Muslims and reduction in their landed property in Wällo.⁷⁴

Political Eclipse of Islam in Wällo

The incorporation of Wällo into the main stream political life was the central agenda of national politics during the second half of nineteenth century. The way in which contemporary Ethiopian rulers tried to achieve this goal varied. Strengthening the Ethiopian church remained common to all of them, including to Téwodros II (r. 1855-1868), who was consumed by Wällo.⁷⁵ His policy towards Islam is far less clear. According to Hussein, Téwodros' Wällo policy

⁷⁴ Zewde, *Yohannis IV*, p.94-100; and Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.161-187.

⁷⁵ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth Century Wällo*, pp. 161-167. On the religious policy of Téwodros, see Crummey, "Orthodoxy and Imperial Reconstruction", pp. 427-42; *idem*, "Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of a Neo-Sälomonic Ideology in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia", pp. 13-43.

included more than political incorporation. Hussein makes the following assertion regarding Téwodros's activity in Wällo, "it can also be argued that it was an indication of the degree of Téwodros's commitment to an essentially negative and destructive policy towards the Wällo question because the rulers there happened to be identified as Oromo, Muslim and unwilling to submit to his authority. There is a strong suggestion in some local oral traditions that Téwodros was alarmed by the progress of Islam in the region."⁷⁶ No contemporary written evidence confirms that the king entertained such notions. The motives of Téwodros's campaigns into Wällo are more easily explainable by his policy of territorial unification than from any desire to convert people to Christianity. In all cases, Téwodros's reign was too much taken up with war and campaign for his Wällo policy to take effect. His agenda of territorial unification endured after his death. Aggressive campaigns into Wällo began to intensify in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The Wällo Muslims became subject to increased royal pressure in the reign of Yohannes whose attitude towards Islam was strikingly different from his predecessor's. The king saw his campaign in Wällo as more than a means of bringing the province under central control because he used conversion as the primary justification for his campaign. Following his coronation as Emperor in 1872, Yohannes came to exercise exceptional power over ecclesiastical policy most notably at the council of Boru Méda in 1878 in Wällo which addressed sectarianism. The council concluded by deciding to convert the Wällo Muslims to Christianity.⁷⁷

Yohannes found further vindication for his activity in Wällo in Ethiopian history. Islam in Wällo had developed on land which had been Ethiopian Christian territory ever since the late Aksumite period. Ethiopian rulers and noblemen never regarded the Islamization of Wällo and

⁷⁶ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth Century Wällo*, p.165.

⁷⁷ Crummey, "Imperial Legitimacy and the Creation of a Neo-Sälomonic Ideology", 13-43; Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp.167-178; and Zewde, *Yohannes IV*, pp. 94-100.

the loss of territory to the Oromo as final. The royal chronicler quotes him as having said the following during his early campaign into the Oromo territories of Raya and Azébo long before the Boru Méda council, “[Raya] was formerly a holy country for a long time and many churches were erected in it. After a very long time the Galla prevailed... Thus, after the extermination of the children of Baptism, they burned down churches and set up idol temples in which they offered frank-incense for their demons. Anyone who does not kill one of these rebels is not a strong man.”⁷⁸ Perhaps the emperor saw other salient reasons for converting the Wällo Muslims. To begin with Wällo was so close to his home province of Tegray. It also held strategic value because of its positions at the entrance to Shäwa. The Wällo Muslims were a formidable force in nineteenth century Ethiopia and as long as they remain Muslim and independent they were an obstacle to his drive to Shäwa. For all these reasons, Yohännes IV insisted upon the total extermination of Islam in Wällo by all means, including force.⁷⁹ At the outset, only the rulers of Wällo took the step of conversion to Christianity shortly after the Boru Méda council of 1878. Muhammad Ali, one of the rulers of Wällo, received baptism and became Mika’el. The timely conversion of Mika’el to Christianity had helped him to preserve his position and won respect from both Yohännes IV and later Menilek II (r. 1889-1913). To closely tie him to his court, Menilek married his daughter Shäwaräga to Mika’el. Later in 1909 their son *Lej* Iyasu was declared as the crown prince and Mika’el was crowned as king of northern Ethiopia raising the national prestige of Wällo.⁸⁰

Perhaps impelled by the conversion of *Ras* Mika’el, some ordinary people also received

⁷⁸ Quoted in Fekadu, “Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo” p.28. See also Seven Rubenson (ed.), *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats 18689-1879* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 200), p.116.

⁷⁹ Richard Caulk, “Religion and the State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia,” in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 1(1972), p.31; R. H. Kofi Darkwah, *Shewa, Menilek and the Ethiopian Empire 1813-1889* (London, 1975), pp. 87-88; and Rubenson, *Internal Rivalries and Foreign Threats*, p.116 and Zewde, *Yohannes IV*, pp.95-97).

⁸⁰ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp. 174; Zewde, *Yohannes IV*, p.96; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.220.

baptism. Most people did not accept *baptism* willingly except by force or under the threat of violence. Yohannes decided that if the Muslims of Wällo wanted to retain their property they needed to adhere to Christianity. If they chose to remain Muslim they were free to move to new areas outside the jurisdiction of the king, leaving behind their home and property. Some responded by moving southwards to settle in the Muslim provinces of Arsi and Härär, while a few might have fled to Sudan. Other militant Muslims, such as Talhä, battled against the Christian army for nearly two decades and sought to restore Islam.⁸¹ The pressure on the Muslims of Wällo relaxed after the death of Yohannes in 1889. By the end of the nineteenth century, the political importance of Islam in Wällo was virtually at an end and a partially Christianized population had developed.⁸²

Grants and Land Survey, 1880s-1930s

As regards to land tenure, the importance of Yohannes's religious policy lies in setting the trend towards the significant transfer of *rim* property into the control of churches and monasteries in Wällo. Wällo was the last region to which *rim* property spread widely. In the twentieth century more grants of land were made to Wällo churches than in other areas of northern Ethiopia (see table 10). Yohannes used grants to church foundations as a means of reinforcing Christianity in Wällo. He issued charters to a number of old churches and founded a few in Wällo. Boru- Méda Sellasé was one of the churches he established and he made rich donations of treasure for the monastery of Häyq Estifanos.⁸³ The chief founders and patrons of churches in Wällo were members the local ruling houses. Mika'el founded the churches of Gemja-Bét Maryam and Giyorgis in Dässé town and a church dedicated to the saint of his name

⁸¹ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wällo*, pp 181-182; and *idem*, "The Life and Career of Shaykh Talha b. Jafar (c.1853-1936)", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* xxii (1989), pp.13-30.

⁸² Zewde, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, p.101.

⁸³ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.213, Fekadu, "Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo," pp. 28 and 30.

at Tanta. *Itégé* Taytu, the wife of Menilek II (r.1889-1913) and a member of the ruling house of Yäjju founded Dässé's Mädhäné-Aläm church.⁸⁴ Her brother and governor of Yäjju, *Ras Wällé* founded and endowed the churches of Iyäsus and Mika'el at Märto, the seat of his authority and an important settlement.⁸⁵

Dässé served as the principal seat of power for Mika'el. The site grew fast into a commercial and administrative capital of Wällo and the churches founded at Dässé were a response to the religious needs of the town's growing population. Mika'el exhibited more grandiose building schemes and took extraordinary interest in Tänta Mika'el, the most preeminent and closely documented of his foundations. His initiative to build the church at Tanta stemmed from his close ancestral link to the area: Wärrä Himäno where Tanta is located was the home of Mika'el's ancestors.⁸⁶ The foundation had been conceived as Mika'el's final resting place and he would be buried at a mausoleum built in the compound of the church (see illustrations # 4 and 5 above). The foundation of the new church was carefully planned. Mika'el signed a contract with an Austrian engineer (Monsieur Bukowich) to build the church and he spent an estimated at 25, 000 MT thalers on it. Started in 1903 the construction of the church was completed in February 1911.

⁸⁴ Wängél, Dässé Mädhäné-Aläm, picture # 6570.

⁸⁵ EMMML 3376, Märto Iyäsus, Gubalafto in Yäjju, Senkesar.

⁸⁶ Hussein, *Islam in Nineteenth Century Wällo*, pp.116-125



Illustration 4. Tänta Mika'el.



Illustration 5. Tomb of Ras Mika'el.

Table 10. Major Foundations and Grants in Wällo, 1770s-1920s

Church	Founder/Grantor	Source
Wäldiya Gäbrél	Ras Ali I	Wängél, # 887
Galla Giyorgis	Ras Ali I	Fekadu, p.18 and 24-25
Tädbabä-Maryam	Täklä-Giyorgis	Wängél, # 66-9
Wäldiya Gäbrél	<i>Däjazmach</i> Zägäyä	Wängél, #880-882
Märto Iyäsus	Ras Wällé	EMML 3376, Senkesar
Märto Mika'el	Ras Wällé	EMML 3376, Senkesar
Wäldiya Gäbrél	Ras Wällé	Wängél, #869-870
Tänta Mika'el	Ras Mika'el	Wängél, # 6978-6991
Gemja-Bét Maryam	Ras Mika'el	EMML 4785, Senkesar
Dässé Mädhäné-Aläm	Empress Taytu	Wängél, # 6570

In February 1915, shortly after Mika'el's coronation as king of northern Ethiopia in 1914, bishop Péteros formally dedicated the new church and celebrated mass.⁸⁷ The grants of Mika'el and Wällé reflect fundamental elements of Gondärine legal traditions discussed in chapters 3, 4 and 5. The grant brought significant diminution in the property and status of the Muslim population in the area. Information in the charters issued by Wällé provides a useful starting point from which to investigate the impact of *rim* on the rural population of Wällo. The grant document to Märto Iyäsus and Märto Mika'el belongs to a genre quite common in northern Ethiopia from the mid-seventeenth century onward. Land was confiscated at the expense of Muslims using the common principle of division based on two-thirds for the *däbtära* and one-third for the cultivators: "The lands belonging to the *abägar*, *shaikhs*, *yenaye* and *yemuzin* and *wado* all in Yäjju was granted to [the churches of] Iyäsus and Mika'el. The Muslims were to retain one-third of their land and pay taxes for it."⁸⁸ The former Muslim officials in the area lost not only their property, but also their privileged status. The scribe gives varied array of terms used to describe the former judicial, religious and administrative functions of Muslim officials. Justice and

⁸⁷ Association for the Preservation and Protection of the Cultural Heritage in Wärrä Himäno and its Surrounding, Weres (heritage), vol. 1, no. 1 (undated), pp.10-11 and Tänta Mika'el, picture # 7326

⁸⁸ EMML 3376, Märto Iyäsus, Gubalafto in Yäjju, Senkesar.

administration was the function of the *yenaye* and *abägar* while the *shaikhs* were spiritual leaders.⁸⁹ The *shaikhs* may have retained their role as spiritual leaders of the community after the grant, while the *yenaye* and the *abägars* were no longer the temporal leaders of the Muslim.⁹⁰

Grants of land involved grants of the labor of the peasants on the land bringing an automatic repression in their status from independent holders to dependent laborers. For instance, Mika’el gave to the clergy of the church of Gemja-Bét in Dässé not only the listed lands but also the labor of the *gäbbar* or cultivators on it, turning them into farmhands. The grant describes the rights and authority of the church in its estate and the people living in there in very broad language, “fourteen *gäbbar* [and] eight *galla* lands... along with the labor of the *gäbbars* on it.”⁹¹

The need for conventions or old norms is very clear in Mika’el’s grant to Tanta Mika’el, by far the best documented institution in Wällo.⁹² The archives of this church comprised letters, charters, inventory and a full-blown survey of its property, which will be presented below. The rights and property of the church took the form of rents, taxes, market fees, tithes and jurisdiction over the dependent population. Tanta Mika’el’s lands were geographically scattered. Several hundred places, along with the names of thousands of holders, are registered ranging from far-flung locations, such as Qallu and Wärrä Babu, to holdings in nearby Wärrä Himäno. Most of the lands of the church were located in relatively compact places of Ali Bet, Abbäy Bét and in Wärrä Himäno. For a better understanding of the content of the surveys, a brief discussion of the traditions from which Mika’el drew for his grant to Tanta Mika’el and the nature of the lordship

⁸⁹ Fekadu, “Land and the Peasantry in Northern Wällo,” pp.225 and 236.

⁹⁰ EMMML 3376, Märto Iyäsus, Gubalafto in Yäjju, Senkesar.

⁹¹ EMMML 4785, Senkesar, 40.5.X33.5: “ለግምጃ ቤት ማርያም ካህናት ... ለስራ-ወራት ገባር ስምንት ጋላ ... እስከ አስራቱ እስከ ገባርቹ ጉልበት ሰጥቶ አለሁ።”

⁹² Wängél, Tanta Mika’el, picture # 6978-6991; Yärest Mäzgäb, Tanta Mika’el, pictures # 6992-7319; and Tanta Mika’el, picture # 7321-7331.

that developed subsequently would be in order.

In 1911 Mika’el instructed Berhanä Mäsqaäl, the head of the church, to reorganize the service of the church of Tänta Mika’el “in the same ways as the church of Däbrä-Marqos in Gojjam.”⁹³ In looking for the appropriate model for the jurisdictional rights and administration for his foundation, he turned to the arrangement instituted for the churches of Addis Ababa by Emperor Menilek II. In February 1912 Mika’el requested the palace official, *Afä-Negus* Estifanos, and one *Mälakä-Gänät* Admasu to send him a copy of Menilek’s charter to the Addis Ababa churches. Subsequently Mika’el copied the relevant clauses of the charter and sent it as a letter addressed to Berhanä-Mäsqaäl. The latter was instructed by Mika’el to be guided by its precepts in the administration of the endowment of the church and distribution of the income among various officials. The pattern of ecclesiastical lordship which the charter envisaged was broadly similar to those discussed for Gojjam and Bägémdar. The charter spells out, for example, the following jurisdictional rights of the individual clergy in their land and over their tenants, “with the exception of cases of theft and homicide, the clergy shall be judges in all other cases, including inheritances, originating in their *qälad* and hereditary property.”⁹⁴ This legal principle had been practiced in Gondärine Ethiopia for over two centuries. In particular, judicial clauses such as this are commonly met in foundation charters and administrative manuals for the churches and monasteries of Gojjam. The impression left is that the relations between clerical landlords and tenants in twentieth century Wällo may have operated along similar line as which existed between lords and *zégoch* in Gojjam and Bägémeder.⁹⁵ Mika’el instructed his men and

⁹³ Mika’el to Berhanä Mäsqaäl, dated June 19, 1911, Tänta Mika’el, picture # 7327.

⁹⁴ *Ras* Mika’el to *Mälakä-Berhanä* Berhanä Mäsqaäl, dated Yäkatit 7, 1904 (Eth. Cal.), Tänta Mika’el, picture #7322: “ከህናቱ ለተተከሉበት ቀላድ ከርስታቸው ውስጥ ከደም ዳኝነትና ከሌባ ዳኝነት በስተቀር ውርስም ዳኝነትም ቢገኝ የከህናቱ ነው።”

⁹⁵ The only change was that the legal privilege of the clergy was circumscribed in twentieth century Wällo. That is, unlike Gondärine Ethiopia, for twentieth century Ethiopia if the *däbtära* quarreled against one another, they were subject to the general payment of judgment fees.

secular governors, such as *Däjach* Qasim and *Däjach* Bäsher, to refrain from intervening in the property of Tanta Mika'el and the clergy under it.⁹⁶ Therefore, the church of Tanta was granted ownership of and full rights of lordship or the function of local government over its tenants.

By the time Mika'el fell from power after he lost the Battle of Sägalé to the central government in 1916 while trying to restore his deposed son, *Lej* Iyasu, to power,⁹⁷ Tänta Mika'el had already developed into an influential and well respected church. Mika'el died in 1918 and was buried in Mänagäsha in Shäwa. His body was exhumed in 1929 and subsequently buried in his church of Tänta Mika'el.⁹⁸ Although the right of Tänta Mika'el to the tithes from its estate of Ali Bét was occasionally infringed by secular officials, the endowment of the church was protected by the provincial governors of Wällo. In 1917 and later 1921, the head of the church, Berhanä Mäsqäl, elicited two charters from the crown prince *Ras* Täfäri Mäkonän (the future Emperor Häylä-Sellasé, 1930-1974), who was also son-in-law of Mika'el, restoring and securing the rights and endowments of the church.⁹⁹ During their occupation of Ethiopia in 1935-1941, the Italians in turn confirmed the endowment and the legal status of the church and its broad jurisdiction. It was also under Italian rule that the most comprehensive survey of the property of the church was recorded in 1939 to which we now turn our attention.

Land Surveys and measurement

The first extended list of the properties of the church of Tänta Mika'el exists as a land register compiled between 1911 and 20s.¹⁰⁰ Finally, the most detailed and consolidated survey

⁹⁶See Tänta Mika'el, pictures # 7323, 7328 and 7330.

⁹⁷ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 128.

⁹⁸ The note on the transfer of Mika'el's body from Mänagäsha to Tänta Mika'el exists as insertion in copy of the *Weres* deposited at Tänta Mika'el, picture # 6925.

⁹⁹ *Ras* Täfäri Mäkonän to *Mälakä-Berhän* Berhanä Mäsqäl, Mägabit 10, 1909 (Eth. Cal.), Tänta Mika'el picture # 7321 and *Ras* Täfäri Mäkonän to the Church of Tänta Mika'el, dated Sane 14, 1913 (Eth. Cal.) found as insertion in the *Wängél*, Tänta Mika'el, picture # 6990.

¹⁰⁰ *Wängél*, MS., Tänta Mika'el, pictures # 6978-6990

recording the endowments of the church was prepared by the then head of the church *Liqäkahnat* Tsäga in 1939 under the direction of the Italian colonial government. The 1939 survey contains the list of names of individuals, lands, taxes, rents and services identical to those in the previous registers. The names of owners listed in the previous registers who had died by the time of the 1939 survey are listed along with the names of their inheritors or children.¹⁰¹ Together, the 1939 survey, the charters and land registers allow an intimate look at the functioning of the land tenure system.

The inventories and survey of Tänta Mika'el share many similarities with the broad elements of Gondärine registers in terms of their purpose and the legal and economic information they yield and the method used to organize information. The Qwesqwam register is the closest to the 1939 survey of Tänta Mika'el in this regard. Like the Qwesqwam register, the survey is organized according to individual holdings and their corresponding geographical location. Moreover, the questionnaire of the Tänta survey records the size of the farm under each individual holding. In certain respects, the 1911 inventories and 1939 surveys of Tänta Mika'el stand out from the familiar Gondärine registers. To begin with, the method by which the size of land was rated and rents and taxes assessed was peculiar to Wällo. Furthermore, the 1939 survey and the inventories are more systematic and considerable in its detail than conventional Gondärine registers. For instance, the Tänta records include information on the types and variety of tenures and units of space, the nature and quantity of the services and rent the individual clergy and the rural cultivators owed to the church.

Two categories of land from which the *rim* lands of each *däbtära* derived are *gäbbar* and *galla*. The size of the lands which a *däbtära* held in each category is given separately. The amount of rents and taxes due to the church was calculated based on the extent of the land each

¹⁰¹ See Yärest Mäzgäb, Tänta Mika'el, pictures # 6992-7319.

individual held. Apparently land was measured by royal precept using the *qäläd* during the time of the grant in the 1910s. In his 1921 charter of confirmation to the church, Emperor Häylä-Sellasé (then *ras* Täfäri) refers to the term *qäläd* in describing the rights of the clergy. Certainly, therefore, the procedure of the survey involved land measurement by the *qäläd* system.¹⁰² Spatial size is expressed in the familiar unit of *gasha* in the registers compiled in the 1910s and 1920s. However, besides the familiar *gasha*, plots are commonly rated into a host of other local standards such as *bideru*, *qämbär*, *manäqo*, *cheqa* and *yebeqa*. The 1939 survey drops most of these units, including *gasha*, and gives a different array of terms used to reckon the size of space. These included in a descending order *ne'us*, *rube*, *mahläq*, *bésa* and *masa*. The surveyors kept the distinction *galla märét* and *gäbbar märét* under each individual holding and rated them into the aforementioned units. For instance, in the 1911 inventory one *Aläqa Gété* identified as a Gondäré held 2 and half *gasha* of land in the estate of Ali Bét. His obligation for the church was service as a *däbtära*. Gété had died by the time of the 1939 survey and his eight children and his wife appear as his successors. The surveyors have converted the two and half *gasha* into *rube galla* and one *gäbbar*.¹⁰³ The way in which the size of the *gasha* was converted into *rube galla* and one *gäbbar* is not stated.

Indeed, the types of tenure and the units of size are numerous and quite bewildering. These units do not occur in the sources from other areas, indicating their distinctively local quality. Clearly these units had meaning for the contemporaries and carry importance in the assessment of rent or taxes, although contemporary and later evidence on the meaning of these terms is lacking. Gäbrä-Wäld and Mahtämä-Sellasé refer to some of these tenures and units and

¹⁰² See *Ras Täfäri Mäkonän* to the Church of Tänta Mika'el, dated Sane 14, 1913 (Eth. Cal.) found as insertion in the Wängél, Tänta Mika'el, picture # 6990.

¹⁰³ See Wängél, Tänta Mika'el, picture # 6983 and Yärest Mäzgäb, Tänta Mika'el, picture # 7308. The collection of rents from the population was based not on wealth but the size of land.

provide some guidance to their meaning. The latter included in his *Zekrä Nägär*, a summary of the 1935 land survey conducted in Wällo which contains information on the size of land, the type of tenure and the dues assessed. The initials for the units of *ne'us* and *rube* appear in the list. Strangely enough though, Mahtämä-Sellasé neither defined the terms nor did he expand on them.¹⁰⁴ He gives only the meaning of *yebeqa*, one of the units mentioned in the 1915 Tänta inventory, to be the size of land which was equivalent to two *gasha* of land.¹⁰⁵ Most individuals in the 1939 survey held at least one *galla* or one *gäbbar*, while many held only a part of the *gäbbar* or *galla*. It is apparent that one *galla* or *gäbbar märét* was considered as the normal holding of a cleric. Gäbrä-Wäld understood the expression one *galla* or *gäbbar märét* to mean an area of land whose size could be more than one *gasha*, one *gasha* and one *masa*.¹⁰⁶ This is obviously an inconclusive definition; neither Gäbrä-Wäld nor Mahtämä-Sellasé provides sufficient guidance on the size of these units.

Exploration into the lexical meanings of the different units proves inadequate because most of these terms do not suggest size. *Qänbär*, for instance, is a common term for the agricultural tool of yoke, while *bésa* and *mahläq* refer to coins representing the smaller fractions of one Ethiopian dollar at that time. The surveyors must have imitated the conceptual framework of the currency fractions introduced in 1909 by Menilek II and later during the reign of his daughter Empress Zäwditu (r. 1916-1930) to organize space. For instance, one Ethiopian dollar was equivalent to, respectively, 16 *mahläq* silver coins and 32 *bésa* copper coins.¹⁰⁷ It seems to me that statements such as one *galla* or *gäbbar* land may have simply meant one *gasha* land. The other units listed were therefore fractions of one *gasha* of *gäbbar* or *galla* land. *Ne'us* was half

¹⁰⁴ Mahtämä-Sellasé, *Zekrä Nägär*, p.161.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁰⁶ Gäbrä-Wäld, *Yältyopya maretenna gebr sem*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Mahtämä-Sellasé, *Zekrä Nägär*, 200.

the size of one *galla märét*, while *rube* meaning quarter evidently represents the fourth of a *gasha*. *Mahläq* was the eighth part of a *gasha*, while *bésa* was one-sixteenth of the size of a complete *gäbbar* or *galla* land. Lastly, *masa* meaning “plot” was used to refer to the smallest unit of holding in the open fields. *Masa* was therefore one-thirty-second the size of one *galla* land. The service and rents due from *masa* are very small further confirming its smallest size. According to informants, *masa* refers to the spatial extent of land that could be plowed by a team of oxen in a day.¹⁰⁸ In all cases, the clergy of Tänta Mika’el appeared to have a considerable amount of land under their holding. The survey is discussed in detail to emphasize the central argument in this study that grants involved measured space and introduction of *rim* impelled significant changes in the way in which people organized space. The arrangement of land tenure described lasted till 1974, which marked the end of the old land tenure system and the fall of the Sälomonic monarchy.

Conclusion

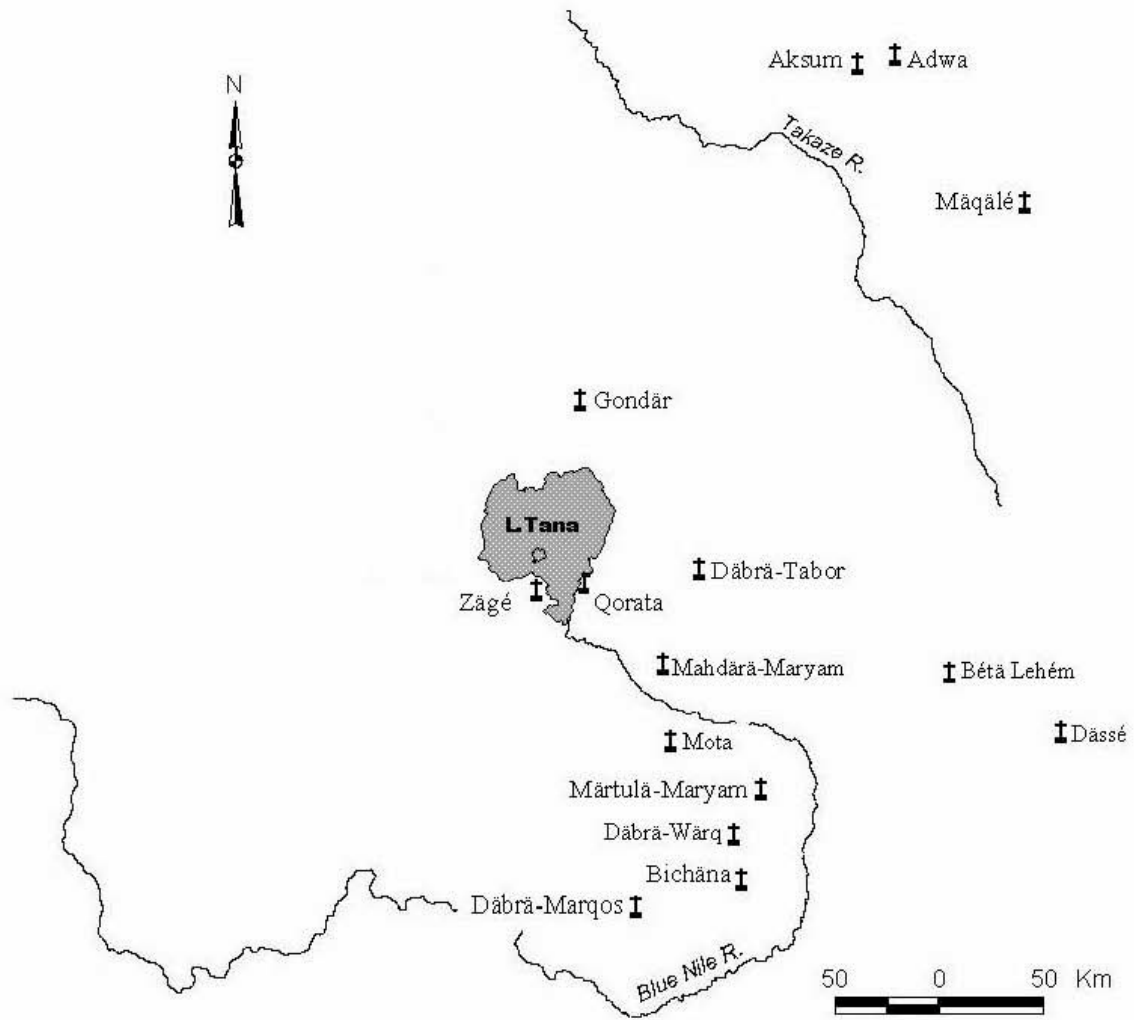
I wish to conclude this chapter with some reflections on a point raised in the beginning. The period between 1750 and the 1920s brought many changes in the field of land tenure and rural organization in Tegräy and Wällo. Certain core elements that constitute the Gondärine landholding system remained the same and survived into the twentieth century, despite frequent changes. Despite some local varieties, the Gondärine period was very significant in shaping the landholding system of Wällo and Tegräy similar to the situation that applied in Gojjam and Bägémeder. Beginning with the mid-eighteenth century and intensifying in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the rulers of Tegräy and Wällo issued detailed charters defining the tenures, rent, tax and tithe obligations of the rural cultivators under the lordship of various institutions.

¹⁰⁸ Informants interviewed at Tänta Mika’el in July 2008.

Indeed, really massive transfer of property into the control of churches and monasteries in Tegräy occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Tegräy and Wällo. In describing the resulting property conveyed by the charters to the clergy under churches and monasteries, the word used is *rim*. Ecclesiastical institutions not only enjoyed proprietary rights in land, but also were granted these lands with full secular jurisdiction.

Charters issued during the period under study conveyed measured space. Although the use of maps was totally unknown even during the modern period, surveys were important Gondärine legacies that accompanied the introduction of *rim* into Tegräy and Wällo. Therefore, the spread of *rim* strongly influenced the development of legal custom in the two provinces as it did in Gojjam and Bägémder. Furthermore, one of the changes that the introduction and spread of *rim* property induced was the development of a land market which was to be found virtually everywhere in northern Ethiopia. The next chapter is devoted to the discussion of how the land market came about, with an emphasis on its connection to *rim* property. I will also analyze how *rim* increased the production and consumption of documents in Gondärine Ethiopia and thereafter.

Map 10. Location of Land Market, 1720s-1974



Chapter Seven: Rim and the Commercialization of Land

A full sense of the changes brought in the land tenure system demands a consideration of the evidence on private transaction in land. One of the significant developments of the era is the commodification of land. This rich and complex body of evidence provides information about the different types of property transfers and the ceremonies that accompanied them. Surviving as originals, the private transactions in church archives contain primarily records of land sale, dispute, mortgage, will, and gift.¹ Map 10 above shows the location of land markets. Land transaction documents provide evidence closest to actual landholding practices and shed light on broad questions of landholding behavior. The specific details in the land transaction varied in content, although sales, gifts and wills are very formulaic in their form and structure. Before investigating the various ways of transfer and content of transaction documents, it is necessary to describe their structure and their making and preservation. On the technical level, analysis of the evolution of the forms of documents can be helpful to situate the discussion of the social relations expressed in them.

The development of archives was an equally important dimension of the land transaction. Transaction involving land demanded a writing office. In consequence, many churches developed a system of writing office. This section traces the making of documents and their accumulation in church archives. Guiding my analysis are the following questions: What tools did individuals possess to convey and stabilize property? How was land alienation carried out? How might one interpret this upsurge of private property transaction?

Documents as Tenure Stabilizers

The sources on private transfer are unevenly distributed both in time and space across

¹ Crumme, *Land and Society*, pp.180-197; *idem*; "Gondärine rim Land Sales", pp. 469-479; Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, pp. 130-173.

northern Ethiopia. In general, records are concentrated in towns with churches and monasteries in them. The first place where bodies of documents arose was in the churches of the capital Gondär in the eighteenth century. Then, private transactions spread into other areas of Bägemeder such as Maḥdärä-Maryam and Qorata Wälätä-Péteros.² Within Tegray private transactions in land developed in the towns of Aksum, Chäläqot Sellasé, Adwa, and Mäqälé. In the case of Mädhäné-Aläm church in the town of Mäqälé, private transactions in livestock at the local market were also recorded besides the familiar transactions in land and town houses.³

In Gojjam, the growing prevalence of churches and monasteries was attended by widening in the scope of the production of legal documents and changes in scribal practice. The monasteries of the Zägé peninsula on the southwestern shore of Lake Tana, Märtulä-Maryam, and Däbrä-Wärq contain several thousands of property documents. The churches of Mota Giyorgis and Däbrä-Marqos also contain rich bodies of evidence.⁴

The development of writing offices and archives is closely documented in the churches of Mota Giyorgis and Däbrä-Marqos and can help us understand similar processes in other places where records are sparse. In Mota, as in many other areas, a sudden upsurge of transaction documents occurred soon after the establishment of the church. The writing office was instituted soon after the establishment of the church. Wälätä-Isra'el laid down in the foundation charter a broad principle about the buying and selling of property and the registration of documents. She granted immunity to the *däbtära* of the church “from the payment of market taxes for buying and

² Crummey, *Land and Society*; *idem*; “Gondärine rim Land Sales”, pp. 469-479; and Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Qorata Wälätä-Péteros, pictures # 014-099 and 100-186.

³ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm, pictures # 302-558; and Mäshäfa Delal, Mäqälé Mädhäné-Aläm, pictures # 559-863; and Wängél, MS., Chäläqot Sellasé, pictures # 043-090.

⁴ See, for instance, Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis; pictures # 033-578-; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Ura Kidanä-Meherät, pictures # 598-1272; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 258-360; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Däbrä-Wärq, pictures # 6205-6294; Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4089-6516; and Däqiqä Näbeyat, MS. Märtulä-Maryam folios 194r-264v.

selling residential sites, *rim*, cow, ox, [donkey], [horse] and mule.”⁵ The payment of a registration fee for entering transaction documents involving *rim* land and residential sites into the central registry of the church was generally required from everyone, including the *däbtära*. Part of the fees collected from the registration service went to pay the official subordinate to the *gäbäz*, who was in charge of the internal administration of the church and its treasury.⁶ In so doing Wälätä-Israel inaugurated what would become the most enduring writing office which produced by far the largest and continuous series of property documents in Gojjam. The record keeping and writing offices became efficient and well organized in the nineteenth and twentieth century in response to the increased demands for documents.

In Däbrä-Marqos at least two writing offices were created by King Täklä-Häymanot (r.1874-1901). Täklä-Iyäsus, who wrote extensively about the organization of Täklä-Häymanot’s court, provides the clearest evidence available on the existence of a well-organized chancery at Däbrä-Marqos. He notes that three individuals—*Aläqa* Dästa, *Aläqa* Sebhät-Lä’ab, and *Aläqa* Asrat—headed by one *Aläqa* Eshäté were specifically assigned to write “*däbdabé* or registers, or charter.”⁷ This exemplifies the beginning of well-organized record keeping. For the first time since the sixteenth century, charters issued by the rulers of Gojjam also came to be authenticated by seals during this time. Perhaps so many of the charters granted to churches and monasteries of Gojjam by Täklä-Häymanot, including the register of Däbrä-Marqos, were issued from this single centralized office. One indication of this is that copies of the several grants of this period are frequently transcribed into the register of Däbrä-Marqos. In fact, the Däbrä-Marqos register is more a cartulary than a register. Only fifteen folios of the register are concerned with the

⁵ Illinois/IES, 89.VIII. 24., Mota Giyorgis, *Giyorgis Wäldä Hämid*: “ ቦታ አሪም ላም ቦሬ በቅሎ ቢገዛ ቢሸጥ ድላል የለበትም.”

⁶ Illinois/IES, 89. XX.11-12, Däbrä-Eliyas, *Mäzgäb*.

⁷ Täklä-Iyäsus, “Yä Gojjam Tarik,” p. 104. The term *däbdabé* has more than one meaning. In its current meaning, *däbdabé* means letter. In the past, it was understood primarily as register and land transaction document. Täklä-Iyäsus used it in the context of charter or property register.

endowment of Däbrä-Marqos. The rest of the register is occupied by copies of property documents and court petitions involving one individual or institution with others originating from all over Gojjam and unrelated to Däbrä-Marqos.⁸ The cartulary-register of Däbrä-Marqos was meant to be used for administrative purposes. This is confirmed by the stipulation regulating its use contained in the register. The rule permits that the register could be consulted for any evidence. “If the testimony of the register is required for any reason,” states the rule regulating its use, “it should be consulted inside the church compound and should not be taken outside the premises of the church.”⁹ Thus documents were deliberately created and preserved for real and immediate use.

The second writing office created during this time was under the church of Däbrä-Marqos soon after its foundation. This office was inaugurated for the sole purpose of the registration of land transactions in Däbrä-Marqos for archival purposes. A clerk, *Aläqa* Tägäññ, was designated to write the transactions. Tägäññ was granted *rim* lands to support his service. The office was originally intended to put the property dealings of the community under the church of Däbrä-Marqos on permanent record and to inventory the church’s properties in its treasury store. Then the scope of the activity of the office expanded.¹⁰ Starting from the 1890s down to 1975, which marked the Ethiopian revolution, private acts originating from all over Gojjam province were entered into the registry of the church by Tägäññ and his successors.¹¹ All this suggests that in the second half of the nineteenth century and thereafter Däbrä-Marqos became center for document production.

⁸ See Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 195-253.

⁹ Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 215: “በግጥናቸውም ነገር ለምስክርነት መዘገቡ ቢፈለግ ከዚህኛው ይታያል እንጅ ከ[ቅ]ጽረ ቤተ ክርስቲያኑ አይውጣ።” The archives of this office were destroyed in the violence of subsequent decades.

¹⁰ Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 205.

¹¹ See Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 262-359. Tägäññ proved a capable and creative clerk. Perhaps for the purpose of easy reference, Tägäññ gave marginal headings to each document he recorded. These documents are headed by the location from where the transaction originated. But the clerk who succeeded *aläqa* Tägäññ departed from this system.

In his classic work on the use and the making and preservation of records in England between 1066 and 1307, Michael Clanchy argues that the development of literacy in medieval England was the outcome of the proliferation of documents. The context in which records came to be carefully kept and produced in volumes was the increasing bureaucratization of royal administration. Hence the growth of bureaucracy and the growth of literacy were concomitant phenomena in medieval England. As a norm, at the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 legal and administrative business was carried out chiefly through oral media. In the meantime, with the growth of the bureaucracy in the thirteenth century individuals found it a necessity to be familiar with writing for conducting material and social transactions.¹² Clanchy has documented that writing was employed by individuals, including the ruling class and serfs and other ordinary men and women, for practical purposes. It was used primarily to keep track of one's property and financial and service agreements individuals entered to with one another. During the thirteenth century charters, wills, debts, certificates, and writs proliferated and accumulated in public archives in this way. Written evidence was used to defend property rights and thwart opponents.¹³ However, Clanchy found that even long after written records had become commonplace in the fourteenth century oral testimony was recognized as valid in the eyes of the law and many people still mistrust writing.¹⁴

The instance of medieval England is illuminating of developments in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ethiopia. The evidence of the Mota and Däbrä-Marqos archives shows that from the very beginning transaction documents in churches were part of an administrative archives. With the growth of property transaction, what individuals saw as proof of property

¹² M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. chapt. 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.85-91, 149-154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 76ff.

holding also changed. Records played a crucial role in enforcing property rights and served as proof to defend property claims and thwart opponents. Documents played a fundamental role in many cases of dispute settlement in eighteenth and nineteenth century northern Ethiopia. One of these, which we have already seen, involved Tersit and his three *zégoch*.¹⁵ What evidence the three *zégoch* presented is not known. We know however that Tersit's claim was supported by the register of the church of Hämärä-Noh. The evidence in the register made the case straightforward and the court decided in favor of Tersit. The second case involved *Fitawrari* Endri, courtier of King Täklä-Häymanot, and *Däjach* Engeda. Endri challenged Engeda's control over 22 *gasha* of *gult* land in a place called Yebesana near the monastery of Märtulä-Maryam in the district of Ennäbsé and won the case. The outcome of the case was written sometime in the 1880s. The evidence presented by Engeda cannot be known. According to the scribe, Endri presented both "human [testimonies] and written evidence [literally "book"]."¹⁶ These disputes are typical of others in the period. The security and protection of property rights was afforded by documents.

The above cases show that written evidence affords one with more favorable outcomes in court than oral testimonies. This is far from stating that documents became a substitute for government power to enforce property law. Written evidence did not always thwart opponents from challenging holding. Orality still played a strong role side by side with written documents in social and material transactions. The case that occurred in the reign of Iyo'as (r.1755-1769) illustrates this point. One of the disputants was *Abéto* Wäldä-Estifanos and his rival was Koké. Wäldä-Estifanos bought land in a place named Jarjar in Dämbeya from Koké for three ounces of gold. Despite the record of the act, subsequently Koké twice challenged the holding of Wäldä-

¹⁵ BL, Or. 508, f.282v.

¹⁶ Dersanä Mika'el, MS. Däbrä-Wärq, picture # 3885: "ሰው ተመጽሐፍ ረተው መተው አመጡት በ15 ወቅት ግየድ።". A copy of the original charter deposited at Yebesana was written in Märtulä-Maryam, Däbrä-Wärq, Gemja-Bét and in the central register of Däbrä-Marqos. The property originated from a grant by King Iyasu I (r. 1682-1706) to a woman called Hälibä-Dengel and her son *Azaj* Zogé.

Estifanos. Why Wäldä-Estifanos’s rival, Koké, would have made the claim in the first place is obscure. But the record simply tells us that Koké was brought to recognize that his claim was unjust before the clergy of the church.¹⁷ The second legal victory and the registration of the transaction did not fully dispel the anxiety of Wäldä-Estifanos about the future of his property. The scribe tells us that Wäldä-Estifanos did the following: “on the day of the writing of the transaction, he brought one hundred lemons and spread it in the church yard to serve as remembrance (literally indicator) of the act. All the *däqämäzmur* (students) scrambled it (the lemons).”¹⁸ Why did Wäldä-Estifanos spread the lemons in the churchyard? The motive was a very simple one. Wäldä-Estifanos was concerned about the longevity and permanence of the agreement. The purpose of the symbolic act was dual. First, he wanted to achieve publicity for the transaction. Second, he wanted to ensure the longevity of the transaction by impressing the act of the transfer on the memory of the witnesses because oral testimony was legally acceptable and equally important as written proof in the eyes of the law.

Ultimately, Wäldä-Estifanos’s act of spreading lemons resulted from an appreciation of the inadequacy of documentary proof. After all, he was challenged twice despite the written evidence. This is not to mention the fact that written records might be deleted and lost. Individuals were no more simply content with the writing of the transaction on a permanent record. Unlike the case of medieval England as studied by Clanchy, in the Ethiopian context the steady growth of documents corresponded with periods of weak public power and declining national institutions of church and state. Therefore, a paradox emerges because written records increased not only in a time of weak central institutions of church and state, but also in times of marked political violence.

¹⁷British Library, Or 604, f2.

¹⁸ British Library, Or 604, f2: “በተፈጸመው ዕለት ለምልክት ይሆነኝ ብሎ መቶ ይሆን ሎሚ ለቤተ ክርስቲያን አፈሰሱ። ደቀመዝሙሩ ሁሉ ተናጠቀው።”

Property holders could also employ other tactics such as ritual and emotional appeal along with written documents to stabilize tenure. A marvelous illustration of the use of ritual along with writing for security and protection of property is that of *Dājach Zäwdé*. Zäwdé lived much of his active life in late eighteenth century and briefly became the ruler of Gojjam in between 1800 and 1810. During this time he received a gift of 400 *kumälé* of land from the Jawi Oromo soldiers settled in his ancestral district of Damot. Surviving in three copies, the document records the dramatic ceremony that attended the act,

ይህን ሲሰጡ እውር አስቀምጠው እግርጅ የሌለውን ባህያ አስቀምጠው ግራኝ አስረግመው ሰጥተዋል። ይህን ያፈረሰ እውር ቆማጣ አንካሳ ይውለድ ብለዋል። አጼም ሰጥተዋል አቡንም ገዝተዋል በስልጣነ ጴጥሮስ ወጳውሉስ ውጉዝ ለይኩን ብለው።

...When they give [the 400 *kumälé* land to Zäwdé] the [the Jawi] brought a blind person with no limbs and sat him on the back of a donkey and had a left-handed person pronounce the curses [against violators of Zäwdé’ s right]. They declared who ever violates this let him beget a leper, someone blind and lame. The emperor has confirmed the grant and the bishop has anathematized by the authority of Peter and Paul.¹⁹

Zäwdé received four hundred *kumälé* of land from the Jawi. He was determined to ensure that the gift was permanent and protected and he relied on writing, law and ritual to stabilize his tenure. Perhaps instigated by Zäwdé, the Jawi went to the trouble of finding a hideous person afflicted by leprosy and who had lost both his sight and his limbs. The incumbent violator was warned of the dire consequence of the violation of the property of Zäwdé; that is, should anyone violate the property right of Zäwdé a child born into his/her household would be afflicted with leprosy and lose his/her sight, hearing and limbs. To ensure that the curse was effective a left-handed person was brought to pronounce it. This ritual was unusual in the way it was used to stabilize tenure. Its purpose was to play on and manipulate the emotions of people. Curses could have the force of the law and to a large measure social sanction against the violation of one’s

¹⁹ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6477 and British Library, Or. 777, f10.

property right was very effective.

Crummey has characterized the legal documents as essentially oral acts.²⁰ The oral character of these documents structured the ways in which property could be rendered and validated. One of the elements constituting land transactions is the witness list and witnesses gave validity to a land transaction. The rules of churches and monasteries require that designated witnesses validate transactions. Virtually every form of private transaction was made before assembled witnesses. For instance, the manual of Däbrä-Wärq monastery requires that the officials of the church be in attendant in cases of inheritance and land transactions through sale. Also, boundary demarcation was an integral part of the validation of property sales and required the participation of specially designated individuals. Land demarcation was an integral part of the transaction formality for which solid evidence exists from Gojjam in particular. In Däbrä-Wärq the *anbäras* and the *mägabi* were specially designated to measure land, demarcate boundary divisions, and erect landmarks between properties:

የአንባ እራሱ የመጋቢው መሬት ቢሸጥ ቢወረስ ሊቀአበው እየመራ የሚለኩ የሚረግጡ ድንበር የሚወስኑ እነሱ ናቸው። የረጋጭ የሚቀበሉ አንድ ጨው ነው። እሊህ ያረገጡት ርስት አይረጋም ቢገዛም ቢወርስም መዝገብ ካልገባ በገዳም አባቱ ፊት ሹማምንቱ ተቀምጠው የሚገባውን ቀረጥ ተቀብለው ካልተጻፈ በቀር አይረጋም።²¹

When land is sold and bequeathed the *liqābaw* shall lead and the *anbäras* and the *mägabi* shall march around and demarcate the boundary. They receive one salt bar for the service of marking. Any inheritance which is not marked by these is invalid. Any bequeathal and purchase is invalid unless it is entered into the register in the presence of the abbot and the officials and the receipt by them of the required fee.

According to informants, in Gondär even children were invited to witness ceremonies of transactions. Young witnesses in particular could help a lot to insure the longevity of the agreement because they could be called on to offer testimony about transactions when they grew

²⁰ See Donald Crumney, "Literacy in an Oral Society: The Case of Ethiopian Land Records", *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2006), pp. 9-22.

²¹ Illinois/IES. 89. II.27. As elsewhere, in Qorata witnesses play important role in validating documents where its rule required the transactions to be recorded in the presence one of the fifteen designated individuals: Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Qorata, picture #274.

up.²² The formality involved in the land sales became visible to us as documents came to be more clearly and systematically drafted later in the twentieth century. In particular, the Zägé documents record the authentication, the demarcation, and the registration of the transfer more fully and more systematically than others. At Zägé witnesses to a transaction could include all the people of the peninsula: men, women, and children. For instance, in a document dated 1913 recording the settlement of a dispute between *mägabi* Chäkol Zäläqä and his rivals Tälaynäh Mäshäsha and Azänäga Mäshäsha, the scribe states that “since it concerns *rest* the witnesses to the transactions are the [church] community and [all the people] of Zägé (literally the country).”²³ Boundary demarcation accompanying private transactions is also seen in operation in many instances. One typical example of land transaction showing this process is quoted below:

ታህሳስ 25 1921 ዓመተ ምሕረት በመምሕረ ተክለ ጊዮርጊስ በምስለኔ ወርቅነህ በሊቀ ረድ ገድሉ በሊቀአባው ዘሪሁን በሹም አስረስ በነዚህ ዳኝነት ዘርትሁን አንግዳ በ450 ብር ሲሸጡ ልጅ ዓለማየሁ ና ወይዘሮ ስመኝ 450 ብር ሲገዙ አማኞች [ስም ዝርዝር]። ድንበር በተተከለበት 3ቱ ሽማግሌዎች በረገጡት ሽጩአለሁ ኃይለ ስላሴ ይሙት ብለው ቤቴ ያለበቱ ርስት መድን ይሁን ሲሉ ተፈጥመው ፈርመዋል። ልጅ ዓለማየሁና ወይዘሮ ስመኝ ገዝተናል ድንበር በተተከለበት 3ቱ ሽማግሌዎች በረገጡት ኃይለ ስላሴ ይሙት ብለው ተፈጥመዋል።²⁴

January 2, 1929 during the tenure of office of *Mämher* Täklä-Giyorgis, *Mesläné* Wärqenäh, *Liqäräd* Gädelu, *Liqä’abäw* Zäreyehun, and *Shum* Aseräs in the *daññinenät* of these, Zäretehun Engeda sold [land] for 450 *berr* and *Lej* Alämayähu and *Wäyzäro* Semäññ bought for 450 *berr*. The witnesses are [list of many individuals]. She confirmed selling the land marked by the *shemagellé* and demarcated by boundary marks by her signature and by swearing in the name of [Emperor] Häylä-Sellasé (literally by the death of Häylä-Sellasé) and pledged the *rest* land her house stood on as guarantee. *Lej* Alämayähu and *Wäyzäro* Semäññ have confirmed their purchase of the land walked off by the three *shemagellé* and demarcated by boundary marks by swearing.

²² I am grateful for this information to *Qés* Feréhiwät, and Sahlé Bāyānā interviewed at Gondär town in February 2008.
²³ Yärest Mäzgab, MS., Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis, picture # 045: “አማኙ ግን የርስት ነገር ነው ተብሎ አገር ማህበር ነው።”
²⁴ Yärest Mäzgab, MS., Mähäl Zägé Giyorgis, picture # 051.

In this transaction *Lej Alämayähu* and *Wäyzäro Semänn* bought land from *Zäretehun Engeda* for 450 *berr*. Three elders demarcated the boundaries of the land purchased by walking around its limits and erecting boundary marks. Walking around the limits of the property and the boundary demarcation concretized the transfer. Transfers through sale were normally accompanied by land measurement and boundary demarcation although the scribes ignore the ceremony. It is possible that we only get a description of this practice in the twentieth century because it was a late development. Most were content with writing only the basics of the sale and the ceremony attending it. The *Zägé* records are therefore rich sources for the details they provide about many issues the sources from other places left blank.

Records of sale in particular show the existence of a distinctively commercial system of transaction during the period under study. Purchasers were safeguarded by three types of business custom. First, the vendor bore the responsibility of stopping any possible claimants to the property so transferred through sale. For instance, in the dispute settlement presented above *Tälaynä Mäshäsha* agreed to “prevent his mother” from disturbing the new owner, *Chäkol Zäläqä*. It is only natural that siblings took interest in each other’s property dealings, but as whole they lacked the legal rights to prevent alienation of land. In 1941 a vendor named *Taytu Mäshäsha* sold land to *Aläqa Bälay Märsha* and pledged to stop her daughter, *Emäwa Täräfä*, from disturbing the new owner. In this and other cases, vendors promised to stop any claimant from challenging the purchaser.²⁵ As a whole, transacting parties rarely found it necessary to insert this contingency clause.

The second pragmatic way through which holding was stabilized was the institution of guarantors. Records of sale, exchange, will, and donations commonly contain guarantors. Since witnesses could not always prevent conflict or the loss of property and, transacting parties

²⁵ *Yärest Mäzgäb*, MS., *Ura Kidanä-Meherät*, picture # 641.

needed to receive guarantors, who would scrutinize the obligation of the transacting party represented. In case the transacting parties dishonored the agreement, the guarantors would be held accountable for any damage the violation may cause. The system of guarantor was marked by diversity. Sometime the vendor himself served as guarantor. To cite one example, sometime in 1770s Wälätä-Kidan and her husband Yägezér Käbet jointly sold the *rim* to Qolañña Amhä and both acted as guarantors and vendors.²⁶ Other times land was pledged as a guarantor. In a transaction dated to Asé Gwalu (r.1801-1818), Bätru sold two *meder* and *qerana* for *wäqét* and *alad* to one Abéto Asqu. The guarantor was “all [of his] land in Wawa”.²⁷ Along with guarantors, documents from eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Gondär also refer to an institution of security called *täläfa*. The systems of *täläfa* and guarantor operated similarly to one another. Transacting parties included a clause in which a vendor would pledge land or house which the purchaser would seize in the eventuality of dispossession because of an adverse claim. The technical term used to describe the property pledged as security was *täläfa*. This acquired a precise meaning in the following transaction.

በአጼ ኢዮአስ መንግስት [...] የአባ አየሌ ልጅ ወለተ ሚካኤል የሪም እኩሌታ የቆብላን 7 ወቆት ሸጣለች ለብላቱን ጌታ የኪሮስ ባርያ መድኑ ሰዲቅያ ወንበሩ ሊቄ ኢሳይያስ መሳከርቱ ደብተሮች ሁሉ። ጠለፋው በጅም ያለው ምድር።

During the reign of Asé Iyo’as [1755-1769] ... the daughter of *Aba Ayälé*, Wälätä-Mika’el, sold half of a *rim* in Qobla to *Belaténgéta Yäkiros Barya* for 7 *wäqét*. The guarantor is *Sädiqeya*, the judge *Liqé Esayeyas*. The witnesses are all the *däbtäroch*. The *täläfa* is the land in her holding.²⁸

Wälätä-Mika’el sold half of a complete *rim* in Qobla for 7 *wäqét* to *Belaténgéta Yäkiros Barya*. The guarantor of this transaction was *Sädiqeya*. Then the vendor gave her holding as her *täläfa*.

²⁶ British Library, Or 777, f 288

²⁷ British Library, Or 777, f16: “መድኑ የዋዋ ምድር ሁሉ ነው።” The transaction occurred during the reign of Gwalu. This procedure was in operation in Gojjam as well.

²⁸ British Library, Or 777, f5.

In the likely case that the land so purchased was challenged by a third party, then the land Wälätä-Mika’el promised as *täläfa* would be transferred to the control of Yäkiros Barya.²⁹

Third, purchasers took sensible precautions by inserting clauses about the repayment of the capital and the interest when and if the vendor or some claimant challenged the holding at a later time. This contingency was a common element of the local legal custom of Zägé. The interest was rated at one dollar for every ten dollars per month. In a typical document written in 1941/2 a vendor Liyäw Aynéhun sold his land to *Emuhay* Etagäññ for 250 *berr*. He then made the following vendor’s pledge, “if a situation arises leading to the dispossession of the property [literally gold or land acquired through purchase], I will repay the 250 *berr* and the interest at the rate of ten percent.”³⁰ This was the most confident way to protect the property of the purchaser and insure the longevity of an agreement. Several transaction documents contain this same prudent remainder about the full repayment of the interest and the capital to the purchaser.

All these remain the central elements of documents down to the 1974 when private transactions in land abruptly ended. Thus, witnesses, guarantors, and mortgage were all effective strategies to safeguard the property rights of individuals. Only a combination of these proofs could achieve greater stability and thwart opponents during disputes. Disputes over property became rampant particularly during the nineteenth century which was marked by violence and instability. The common cause of disputes was conflicting interpretations of property rights and sometimes fraud. Civil disturbance resulting from land litigation was an especially serious problem in the Mota area requiring King Täklä-Häymanot to intervene. There must have been a wide scope for many disputes following the Great Famine (1888-1892) caused by a cattle

²⁹ Many transactions from eighteenth and nineteenth century Gondär contain clauses referring to the *täläfa* and the guarantor. The conceptual distinction between *täläfa* and guarantor is obscure..

³⁰ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Ura Kidanä-Meherät, picture # 639: “ወርቅ የሚአስነቅል ቢመጣ የሁለቱ መቶ አምስት ብር አራጣ ባስሩ አስራሆንድ አየተሳለሁ አክፍላለሁ”.

epidemic in Mota such that Täklä-Häymanot wrote a strong letter rebuking church officials for encouraging land litigation. Täklä-Häymanot regarded the central register of the church as the foundation of civic peace and order in the area and ordered that every land transaction must be recorded in the *baher däbdabé* or “central register” to stabilize tenure.³¹

Disputes over property and privilege among churches and monasteries also became more frequent in the nineteenth century, during which many churches also started to rewrite their history often claiming (putative) ancient origins. One well known dispute involved the monasteries of Märtulä-Maryam and Dima Giyorgis in Gojjam. The dispute between the two monasteries was long-drawn out and resolved only with the intervention of Emperor Menilek II in the late 1890s. The roots of the conflicts between the two monasteries were the conflicting interpretation of the rights of precedence, privilege and status.³² According to actual events, Dima Giyorgis was founded in the early fifteenth century and had precedence over Märtulä-Maryam which was established by Queen Elléni (d.1520) in the 1480s and 90s.³³ The monks of Märtulä-Maryam argued that their monastery originated in the 4th century AD and had precedence over Dima Giyorgis. This historical “precedence” entitled them, they argued, to deferential treatment at the royal court and spiritual power. According to the monks of Märtulä-Maryam, these privileges and rights were illegally held by the monastery of Dima Giyorgis causing the monks to sue for justice.

They presented the hagiography of the 4th century legendary Kings Abreha and Asbeha who allegedly found Märtulä-Maryam as proof to substantiate their claims. The monks of Dima

³¹ Illinois/IES, 89.VIII.22-24, Mota Giyorgis, *Giyorgis Wäldä Hamid*; 89.VIII. 25-27, Mota Giyorgis, *Mäsehäfä Mänäkosat*. Perhaps litigation in Mota proliferated not because the courts lacked effective coercive power but because church officials wanted to make money from judgment fees.

³² Emperor Menilek II to King Täklä-Häymanot dated July 6, 1897, Tarikä-Nägäst, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 387-390.

³³ Tadesse, *Church and State*, p.202 note no. 3; and for Märtulä-Maryam, see Habtamu Mengistie, “A Short History of the Monastery of Märtulä-Maryam, 1500-1974” (BA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University, 1998).

Giyorgis argued that their monastery had held the privileges unchallenged for long creating the right for their continued possession. The monks of Dima Giyorgis were confirmed in their old rights and privileges, but they abandoned their claim of seniority over Märtulä-Maryam. Although rejected by the monks of Dima Giyorgis as a fabrication, Menilek and his noblemen evaluated the evidence presented by Märtulä-Maryam and determined the hagiography of Abrehä and Asbeha to be credible. One suspects that this hagiography never really existed before this time. Anxious to avoid any future challenge against their claim of seniority, the monks of Märtulä-Maryam did everything to spread the new version of their history and eliminate unfavorable information contradicting their claim. At the behest of the monks of Märtulä-Maryam, Menilek included in the letter instructions to Täklä-Häymanot to see to it that all records in churches and monasteries that contradicted the monastery's foundation by Kings Abrehä and Asbeha were destroyed.³⁴ This case typifies, in many ways, a cause for deletion of property documents which was commonplace in Ethiopia.

Property owners prepared their property transactions in duplicate and sometime triplicate and placed them in several institutions when anticipating future challenge. A good illustration of this is the property records of Sämeru. Sämeru and his father *Balambaras Asägehänn* had acquired lots of property through various means at Märtulä-Maryam which records a total of thirty documents in its register. Concerned about the safety of the property records, he appealed to King Täklä-Häymanot for permission to transcribe the “the däbdabé in Märtulä-Maryam” into the archive of Däbrä-Marqos. This was duly done, indicating Sämeru's intense concern for the future of his property and his strong faith in the written word to stabilize and protect property.³⁵

³⁴ Tarikä-Nägäst, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 387-390.

³⁵ Giyorgis Wäldä-Hamid, MS., Däbrä-Marqos picture # 361: “መርጡለግርያም ያለውን ደብዳቤ።”

While Sämeru's aim was to prevent challenges to all his purchased property, unscrupulous persons also used fraudulent writings as a strategy to acquire new property. In Mota Giyorgis, where there was considerable land litigation, many fraudulent documents were detected in the register in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, one *Geragéta* Ayachäh and *Qäññéeta* Kassa recorded a forged document in the register of Mota Giyorgis. They claimed that they bought the land from the Giyorgis church. The church rebuked their claim as fabrication and the document was deleted. Again, in the Mota Giyorgis area in Yenach and in Däwaro one Mäshäsha Gäbrä-Hiwät and colleagues registered a fraudulent claim leading the owner of the land, *Grazmach* Märsha, to sue them in 1900 in the court of King Täklä-Häymanot. The defendants were found guilty and forfeited their property.³⁶ Indeed the scope for forgery and litigations seems to have widened in Gojjam unusually during this period. Shortly after the death of King Täklä-Häymanot, his son *Däjazmach* Häylu (later *ras*) was engaged in one of many political scandals. Häylu forged Emperor Menilek's seal and used it in an arrest warrant against his enemies in Gojjam.³⁷

In the early twentieth century significant changes in the means of authenticating and registering documents emerged to prevent the registration of dubious documents. Documents were accepted and entered into the registry after being carefully scrutinized for their credibility. The elements that took shape earlier were retained, but new forms and additions such as signature and seals were made to sales, and other documents. For the first time in the documentation signatures and seals are used to validate transfers. The monasteries of Zägé and Qorata required transacting parties and witnesses to validate documents by their signature and

³⁶ See Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4291 and 4303; and Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, pictures # 237-238.

³⁷ The original seal was searched by Menilek II for discrepancy and Häylu was brought to admit his crime. For this see Täklä Iyäsus, "Yä Gojjam Tarik," p.108.

seals. The terms of the agreement were read for the officials, the transacting parties and the witnesses. Then the transacting parties signed the document testifying that they had heard the written account and the terms of the agreements were correct. After all was done, the clerk in charge of the writing office also authenticated the document with the seal of the monastery. Any act was invalid without the signature of the transacting parties and the witnesses and the seal of the monastery. In this way, the monasteries of Zägé and Qorata used seals and signatures as a safeguard against fraudulent documents (see illustration #6 below).

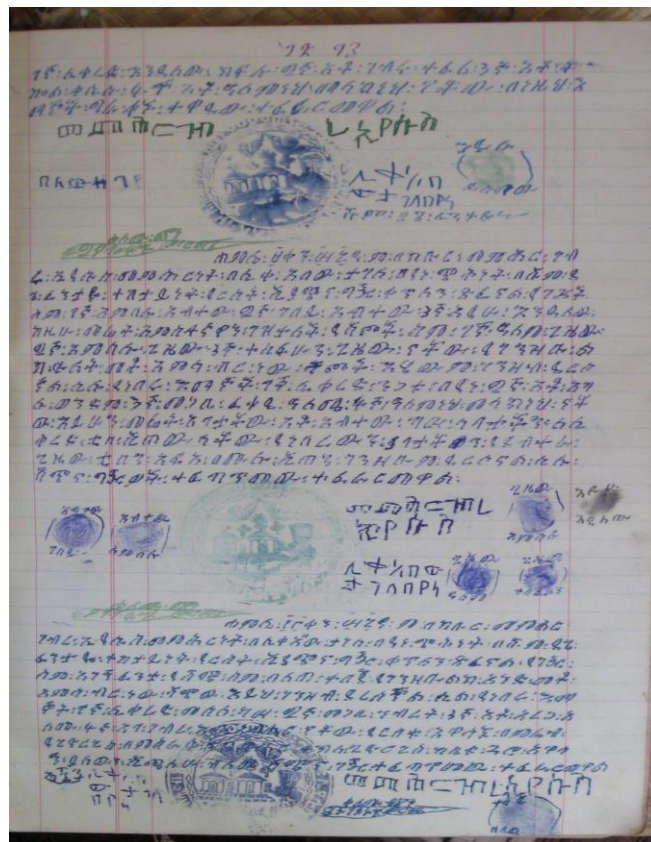


Illustration 6. A folio from the land register of Mähal Zägé Giyorgis.

As whole, the Gondärine period was marked by great creativity in the means of authenticating and preserving documents. The developments of all these business techniques and legal customs discussed above had to do with protecting the interest of property holders, especially stabilizing property acquired through purchase. Such was the effectiveness of the

system of stabilizing tenure that purchased property was rarely challenged. It remains to proceed to the analysis of the contents of the documents. I shall concentrate my investigation on the various means of property transfer that developed during this period. Here I will investigate three types of alienations: will and *aläqenät*, sales and mortgages, and gifts. The background to private transactions will be particularly significant for my subject. Moreover, the relations between the changes in the means of property transfer and larger socioeconomic developments will be investigated. The first type of private transfers that appear in Gondärine Ethiopia are will and *aläqenät*.

Aläqenät, Will and Disinheritance

The system of inheritance through *aläqenät* has received the most brilliant and animated discussion from Crummey. My purpose here is not to add anything new to what Crummey has done; the new sources I have gathered from northern Ethiopia reinforce the conclusions arrived at by Crummey about the institution of *aläqenät*. Yet our knowledge of the system is still new and its further discussion will show its importance as a mechanism of property transfer in the past. Moreover, sources emphasize the existence of a diversity in the practice of *aläqenät* which suggests the need to expand the conclusions made by Crummey. What purposes did *aläqenät* serve? Here a brief presentation of Crummey's findings is in order to contextualize my discussion of the documents. Crummey's close examination of the property dealings of noble families and their manipulation of *aläqenät* has exposed the existence of a different kind of class society in Gondärine Ethiopia. He defines *aläqenät* as "the abstraction of *aläqa* ... and might strictly be translated as 'seniority' or 'leadership'."³⁸ *Aläqenät* is contrasted with '*dehenät*' meaning 'poverty'. The latter refers to both the lesser share of the family legacy and the *dehoch*

³⁸ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p. 123.

or ‘the poor’ or ‘disenfranchised children’ who were excluded from the major portion of the inheritance. Thus, *aläqenät* meant, simultaneously, inheritance and disinheritance.³⁹

According to Crummey the institution of *aläqenät* was required to maintain the wealth and status of the *aläqa* or the leader by excluding a determined part of the inheritance from equal division among children. Unlike the traditional canon of descent which encouraged partible inheritance and equality, *aläqenät* favored a single principal heir. The right of *aläqenät* was given to any child whom parents favored to the detriment of the other children. Furthermore, *aläqenät* was also a social transaction because parents passed their social roles to the *aläqa*.⁴⁰ The discussion below will expand and complement the conclusion made by Crummey about *aläqenät*. The sources to be discussed here referring to *aläqenät* are considerable and a few examples of transactions involving *aläqenät* must serve as representative. Each instance is presented separately and followed by a discussion of their implication for family and class in Ethiopian history.

Aläqenät seems to have pre-Gondärine precedents, although documentation is lacking. Its growing popularity among the ruling class becomes discernible in the better records of the Gondärine era. One of the important sources on *aläqenät* involved *Däjazmach* Mahdärä-Krestos, governor of Bägémeder under King Fasilädäs (1632-1667). He built the church of Eshätam Gäbrä-Mänfäs Qedus in the district of Gayent and his well-preserved body can still be seen in the church. Information about *aläqenät* is contained in his undated will which appears to have been written shortly before his death. He disposed of his property among his five daughters and five sons and one granddaughter. Mahdärä-Krestos made his son, Mäzraytä-Krestos (later *däjazmach*), *aläqa* and gave him a unilateral advantage over two-thirds of the inheritance,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

leaving a one-third portion at the disposition of the other ten siblings. The *dehoch* shared equally the remaining one-third. More importantly, Mahdärä-Krestos also devolved his social role to the *aläqa*. As the advantaged heir, Mäzraytä-Krestos solely bore the burden of military service. Mahdärä-Krestos, then, instructed Mäzraytä-Krestos and his other children without exception to share equal responsibility for the maintenance and service of the church of Gäbrä-Mänfäs Qedus. The eleven children were jointly charged with providing wheat for the preparation of mass for the church. Mahdärä-Krestos demanded that his children remain quiet and content with their respective share and obey one another and serve his church equally. He concludes with an adage that states that “what a father establishes is beneficial to a child.”⁴¹

It seems that an automatic conveyance of the property and office reserved to the *aläqa* occurred afterwards. Mäzraytä-Krestos had eleven children. In a document written in 1670 he defined the obligation to the church of his daughters, who shared the responsibility for the payment of wheat for liturgical mass.⁴² Complete documentation of the property dealings of Mäzraytä-Krestos and his descendants is lacking. There are three wills issued by Arsé, Tebelät and Kenfä-Mäsqäl distributing land and *aläqenät* to their respective children in Eshätam Gäbrä-Mänfäs Qedus.⁴³ The relation of the three individuals to Mahdärä-Krestos is impossible to establish and the information contain in the documents they issued is too commonplace to detain us here.

Aläqenät became a more commonly used means of conveyance in the eighteenth century. Some of the documents issued during this period contain information which gives a new

⁴¹ Wängél, MS., Eshätam Gäbrä -Mänfäs Qedus, pictures #240 and 245: “አባት ያበጀው ለልጅ ይበጀው።”. Informants I talked to in the church in early January 2008 told me that the treasury house of Eshätam Gäbrä-Mänfäs Qedus in Gayenet district was consumed by fire in 2004 destroying many manuscripts. Mahdärä-Krestos’s act shows that *aläqenät* was a standard practice for the conveyance of property by this time. The document begins with the statement “our lord Mahdärä-Krestos says.” Then he is made to speak in the first person singular.

⁴² Wängél, MS., Eshätam Gäbrä -Mänfäs Qedus, picture #249.

⁴³ Ibid., pictures #242 and 245.

dimension to *aläqenät*. The *aläqa* was expected to be one and favored over the *dehoch*. However, this was sometimes ignored. One of the instances of shared *aläqenät* relates to the will of *Abéto Tädäsiwäs* whom we have already met in chapter five. Written in 1719/20, the inheritance was very rich and involved the division of *zégoch* among Tädäsiwäs’s two heirs, namely *Wäyzäro Sesoneya* and *Abéto Yonatan*. In contrast to other instances in which the family leader had exclusive rights to a predetermined part of the legacy, in this case Sesoneya and Yonatan divided the legacy and the *aläqenät* equally. Tädäsiwäs bequeathed “both his two-thirds *aläqenät* and all his property to be shared equally between [his daughter] Sesoneya, the wife of *Abéto Kenfä-Gäbrél*, and [his son] *Abéto Yonatan*. If anyone violated theses stipulations the violator would pay a fine of fifty ounces of gold and his/her estates would pass into the other party.”⁴⁴ It is very clear that property holders often had their own idiosyncratic ideas about the number of heirs to be appointed as leader and be the principal heir of the family.

In the 1730s and 40s the instances of shared *aläqenät* increased. In a disappointingly brief will one *Däjazmach Gasiyos* gave his *aläqenät* to his two daughters, *Wäyzäro Adäy* and *Yäbergwal*, and instructed them to divide it equally.⁴⁵ Our next instance of shared *aläqenät* given by *Däjazmach Mamo* was much more detailed and formal. Mamo and one of his heirs mentioned in the will, *Däjazmach Wädajä* (later *ras*) held *rim* land from the church of *Qwesqwam* in *Gondär*. The will of Mamo is found in the archive of the monastery of *Tädbabä-Maryam* and concerned with land in the district of *Sayent* in western *Amhara*. Mamo carefully plans the distribution of his property among his heirs. The will opens with “This is the rule made by

⁴⁴ Illinois/IES, 88. XXIV.13. Betälehém, *Gospels*: “አቤቱ ተደሲዎስ ላደልዋቸው ለአቤቱ ክንፈ ገብርኤ ምሽት ለስስኖንያ ለአቤቱ ዮናታን ሁለት አጅን አለቅነትን ከሀገርዎ ሁሉ ተከክላችሁ ብሎ ዓሉ ይህን ያፈረሰ ምድሩን መልሶ ሻወቁት ይሰጣል።”

⁴⁵ BL., Or.777/, f3.

Däjazmach Mamo in the fashion of rules of fathers for their children.”⁴⁶ In total he divided his land and plough oxen among 20 named and unnamed individuals. The only identifiable place mentioned in the will is Atronsä-Maryam in Sayent. Mamo declared that “I gave the *aläqenät* to Wäldä-Yohannes and the daughter of Mentewwab, [Wälätä-Negest].⁴⁷ The rest, including Wädajä, were relegated to the status of *dehoch*.

There are three instances of dispute over *aläqenät* recorded in subsequent decades in Tädbabä-Maryam. Their relations to Mamo are obscured by lack of evidence. *Ras* Wädajä and later his son and successor, *Däjazmach* Goshu, adjudicated in two of the cases suggesting that they may have involved the descendants of the *aläqoch* appointed by Mamo.⁴⁸ However, the most relevant for my purpose is the case involving one *Abéto* Asahél and *Wäyzäro* Tädla:

እኩል ምድር ካቤቶ እንባቆም ከየልሶ እጻ በቀር ከ1ዋልካ በቀር አቤቶ አሳሄል ሰጥቻለሁ አሉ። ኔንሆይ ሉሊትም ሰጥቻለሁ አሉ ድሆችም ቢመጹ ከጆ እስጣለሁ አሉ። ወይዘሮ ተድላ በያዙት አላስደርስም አሉ በኩል ምድር ጨረድ አዘጓ የጎድ የሸቸ። ከዚህ ቢፈርስ አጼ ይሙቱ ግይድ 10 ወቄት። አቤቶ አሳሄል ቢያፈርሱ ለወይዘሮ ተድላ ይሰጣሉ። ካጋም ውሃም ዳኝነት ከኩሌታ ቢያልፉ ዘመቻም ባይዘምቱ 10 ወቄት ለአቤቶ አሳሄል ይሰጣሉ ወይዘሮ ተድላ።⁴⁹

Abéto Asahél said he has given half of the land except one *walka* [land] from *Abéto* Enbaqom’s lot. Génhoy Lulit, in turn, said “I have given and if the *dehoch* demand a share (literally if they come) I shall give them from my personal holding.” She [added] “I shall not allow interference in *Wäyzäro* Tädla’s share of half of the land in Chäräd, Azgwa, Yägod and Yäshach.” If the terms of the [settlement] are violated the penalty is 10 *wäqét* and it is sworn in the name of the emperor. If *Abéto* Asahél breaches the agreement a payment of 10 ounces [of gold] to *Wäyzäro* Tädla is incumbent upon him. If she demands rights of jurisdiction beyond half of the land in Agam Wehä and default on military campaign a payment of ten ounces of gold to *Abéto* Asahél is incumbent on *Wäyzäro* Tädla.

⁴⁶ Wängél, MS., Tädbabä-Maryam, picture # 6608: “ሥርዓተ ህግ ዘተሠርአ እም ሀብደኛዝማች ማሞ በከመ ሠርዑ አበው ለውልደሙ ዝንቱ ውእቱ።”

⁴⁷ Wängél, MS., Tädbabä-Maryam, picture # 6608 :“ አለቅነትን ለወልደ ዮሐንስና ለምንትዋብ ልጅ ሰጠሁ።”

⁴⁸ Ibid., picture # 6647

⁴⁹ Wängél, MS., Tädbabä-Maryam, picture # 6608. In Tädbabä-Maryam, as was the case elsewhere, the *dehoch* and the *aläqoch* competed over the control of the *aläqenät* and inheritance. The system of inheritance in *aläqenät* allowed for one-thirds portions to be given to the *dehoch*. The principle of one-third and two-thirds was a compromise between total exclusion and equal division or fragmentation. However, almost practically all the known *aläqenät* are contested. Although the exclusion of other siblings was never complete, *aläqenät* usually bred resentment. Threats to ensure that the will was enforced did not prove effective all the time. The *dehoch* demands a share from part of the land designated to the *aläqoch* or wanted to control the *aläqenät* itself.

The text records the settlement of a dispute, although the detailed argumentation leading up to the agreement are unrecorded. Based on the terms of the agreement *Abéto* Asahél and one Génhoy Lulit gave land to *Wäyzäro* Tädla. Lulit also took the additional responsibility of preventing the *dehoch* from disturbing Tädla in the future. The lands of Asahél and Tädla were separate, while they jointly held the *aläqenät* and shared its rights and obligations equally. Both agreed to share the social role of military service. If Tädla were to encroach on the holding of Asahél and defaulted on her military service, a payment of ten ounces of gold to Asahél was incumbent upon her. The conditions, the rights and the obligations of the *aläqenät* are self-explanatory and require no further elaboration.

The remaining two instances from the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century articulate and elaborate the issues and themes that have emerged from the cases presented above. One of the instances occurred at the church of Atkäna Giyorgis in the district of Farta in Bägémeder province in the 1740s and 1750s and later in the 1770s, as briefly discussed in chapter five. It involved the descendants of *Ras Wäldä-Krestos*, the founder of the church in 1596.⁵⁰ A document drawn sometime in the late 1740s and early 1750s following the distribution of property shows that the *aläqa* of the family of Wäldä-Krestos in the 1740s and 50s was one Wäldä-Giyorgis. Then Wäldä-Giyorgis passed the *aläqenät* to his children. As the document drawn in the 1770s shows, Wäldä-Giyorgis passed the *aläqenät* to his children collectively. In Atkäna the system of *aläqenät* bred the envy and the indignation of the *dehoch* leading to the eruption of the dispute between the two. The document recording the settlement of the dispute defines the privileges and rights, obligations, and contingencies of the *aläqoch* and the *dehoch* as follows, “The right to appoint the *cheqa*, the *gäbäz*, and water official is vested in the *aläqoch*, who are the children of Wäldä-Giyorgis. [Afterwards] the *dehoch* (Wäldä-

⁵⁰ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI.13, 15, 17-20, Atkäna Giyorgis, *Wängél*.

Giyorgis's siblings) shall not ask for more than their lots. The fine to be paid by the *aläqoch* and the *dehoch* upon infringement of the settlement is ten ounces of gold.”⁵¹

It was around the same time as the instance in Atkäna Giyorgis that the *aläqenät* and property of *Ras Wäldä-Giyorgis*, governor of Bägémeder province under King Iyasu I (1682-1706), started to be hotly contested among his descendants. Crummey has ably dealt with the records of this family for five generations covering the period between 1706 and 1810s.⁵² Indeed the record of *aläqenät* involving the family of Wäldä-Giyorgis is spectacular and untypical in terms of the documentation they left behind and the longevity of the period covered by the records. I have found two fresh documents and duplicates of same documents long known to historians about this family at four different churches in Bägémeder and Gojjam.⁵³ Here one aspect of the story involving the descendants of Wäldä-Giyorgis will be presented below to provide context for the argument that I will make below. One of the common themes that emerge from documents concerning this family is the struggle over the control of the inheritance among the descendants of Wäldä-Giyorgis. In fact, from the very beginning of the story, Wäldä-Giyorgis himself had stormy relations with his son *Abéto Gälawdéwos* whom he named *aläqa* later in 1706 and passed to him two-thirds of his property. For instance, one document from the church of Wäyenyä Maryam in Semada district in Bägémeder province relates that Wäldä-Giyorgis had his son, Gälawdéwos, in chains.⁵⁴

The story of the property dealings of this family kicks off after Wäldä-Giyorgis's land and *aläqenät* eventually came to rest with *Balambaras Eshäté*, cousin of Queen Mentewwab

⁵¹ Illinois/IES, 88. XXXVI. 13, Atkäna Giyorgis, *Wängél*.

⁵² Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.114-143, *idem*, “Three Amharic Documents of Marriage and Inheritance from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, pp. 315-27.

⁵³ See Häymanotä-Abäw, MS., Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4479-80; Dawit, MS., Wäyenyä Maryam, picture # 096; Senkesar, MS., Engudadär, picture # 159; and Gädlä Täklä-Häymanot, Gafat Täklä-Häymanot (in Esté), pictures # 013 and 045 and 047.

⁵⁴ Dawit, MS., Wäyenyä Maryam, picture # 096.

(r.1730-1769) in 1757. Eshäté was married to Wälätä-Rufa’el II, the granddaughter and daughter, respectively, of *Abéto* Gälawdéwos and Wäldä-Giyorgis II and he was recognized as *aläqa* of the family. From this point on the relations between the members of the family became one of constant struggle over the control of the property and *aläqenät*.⁵⁵ A direct challenge to Eshäté’s rights came from his son-in-law *Abéto* Bätru. The tension between the two flared up into violent actions in which Bätru caused a lot of damage to Eshäté’s property forcefully taking, among other things, “fifty-five ounces of gold.” After Eshäté’s death in 1768 the office of *aläqenät* passed to his son *Däjazmach* Häylu, one of the most sophisticated Gondärine noblemen. Häylu held this office until he died sometime in the early years of the nineteenth century. He appointed his daughter Mersit to be *aläqa* of his family. Mersit’s enjoyment of the rights of *aläqenät* did not come to pass unchallenged. Her brothers, *Abéto* Engeda and *Abéto* Wäldä-Täklé were thorns in her side and once more we find this family embroiled in bitter struggle over the control of inheritance c.1810. In the first case involving Engeda and Mersit, a fair settlement of the dispute was arrived at as Mersit bent to the will of her brother.⁵⁶

Mersit’s struggle with her brother Wäldä-Täklé was more complicated and violent than the first. The records of settling the dispute between Mersit and Wäldä-Täklé yield a vivid picture of the emotion, anger, and anxiety that exclusion from inheritance could involve. The document records in detail the nature of conflicting property claims between Mersit and Wäldä-Täklé, which were settled through concession, negotiation, and trial. First a judicial assembly of four men comprising *Liqé* Häylu, and three others investigated the case. Wäldä-Täklé demanded

⁵⁵ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp.118-119, *idem*, “Three Amharic Documents of Marriage and Inheritance from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, pp.315-27

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, *Land and Society*, pp. 119-120. For *Däjazmach* Häylu Eshäté’s death bed will and the subsequent quarrel, see Häymanotä-Abäw, MS., Mota Giyorgis, pictures # /4479-80. The quarrels between Mersit and her brothers seem to have come in close succession to each other because the dispute settlements are written as one continuous document and written by one hand.

a share from the family inheritance. Mersit’s argument was that Wäldä-Täklé’s claim was unjustified because Häylu had disowned and deprived him of any share from the inheritance. She called upon five witnesses—including Häylu’s father confessor, *Mämeré* Täklä-Häymanot—who were present when Häylu made the bequest while he was lying ill and dying. The witnesses presented by Mersit affirmed her claims and Wäldä-Täklé was brought to recognize that he had, indeed, been disowned by his father and lost the case to his sister. The testimony given by Häylu’s father confessor—Täklä-Häymanot—who was present to witness and hear the will of Häylu is graphic:

ሲሞቱም 4 ቀን ቤትዎን ሲሰሩ አለቅነት ለወይዘሮ ምርጺት ሰጥቶአለሁ ባወቀች ታሳድሮ ብለው አሉ። ወልደ ጊዮርጊስን አደራ አሉ ያቤቶ ወልደተክሌን ነገር ቢሆን ቢጠይቁ ዝም አሉ ያድጋን ነገር ቢጠይቁ ትዳር አሉ። ይማሩኝ ብሎ ቢወድቅም እንቢ አሉ ብለው የንስሐ አባት መሰከሩ።⁵⁷

When he (Häylu) was dying and arranging the affairs of his house in 4 [consecutive days] he said “I have given the *aläqenät* to *Wäyzäro* Mersit and she shall manage according to her wishes.” He said “please, look after Wäldä-Giyorgis.” When he was asked what should become of Wäldä-Täklé, he kept silent. When asked about what should become of Adga, he said “let her be married.” When he [Wäldä Täklé] fell on the ground and asked for pardon, he (Häylu) refused. This was testified by the father confessor.

Häylu settled the affairs of his house before many witnesses, relatives and children in the last four days of his life when he prepared for his impending death. These lines articulate the ritual of dying, what it feels to be deprived of property and the desperate attempt of a child to reverse the harsh verdict of his dying and unforgiving father. Wäldä-Täklé was completely excluded even from the customary one-third share of the *dehoch* and asked his father for forgiveness and a portion of the inheritance. Häylu was unmoved by his son’s gesture and refused to forgive Wäldä-Täklé dashing the latter’s hope. He did not feel particularly bound by familial ties to give even the requirement of subsistence to his son.

⁵⁷ Häymanotä-Abäw, MS., Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 4479-80; and Illinois/IES.89.XIV.10. Dima Giyorgis, *Häymanotä-Abäw*. Häylu and others like him bitterly frustrated the hopeful Wäldä-Täklé by excluding him from the inheritance altogether. The reason why he denied him of his subsistence requirements totally is far from clear.

Subsequently Wäldä-Täklé referred the case to relatives and entered lengthy negotiations. Nine individuals gathered to reconcile Mersit and Wäldä-Täklé. Revising her father's original act, Mersit conceded to Wäldä-Täklé and admitted him into the family in return for which Wäldä-Täklé would have to restore the livestock he forcefully had taken from his sister. Then Mersit was to share her land and cattle in Bägemeder and Gojjam and with Wäldä-Täklé according to her discretion. Wäldä-Täklé received his share on pain of losing it to Mersit and irreversible rejection from the family of Häylu if he mistreated Mersit again. The terms of the agreement were to be written in four copies and deposited in the monasteries of Däbrä-Wärq, Däbrä-Iyäsus, Dima and Mota, all in Gojjam.⁵⁸ Mersit's conciliatory gesture seems to have worked because there are no later reports of dispute. The story of unrest and struggle among the descendants of *Ras* Wäldä-Giyorgis epitomizes the difficulty of projecting parental wishes into the future. The dispute between Mersit and her brother was typical of similar conflicts in the period. This and other cases raise important questions about gender and family.

Aläqenät and Family

Most of the records afford only a glimpse of the activity of Ethiopian noblemen and women. However, the cases presented above and other instances not discussed here support a number of conclusions. Crummey argues that *aläqenät* should be understood primarily as a class institution. He draws attention to the centrality of *aläqenät* as way of preserving social status and wealth used by the noble men and women of Ethiopia. The system essentially promoted inequality by giving advantage to one child over and against other children. Viewed as a whole, this is true. The transfer of *aläqenät* from the senior to the junior generation involved social transaction. For instance, *Däjazmach* Häylu and *Däjazmach* Mahdärä-Krestos devolved to their

⁵⁸ Häymanotä-Abäw, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 80.

respective successors both the role of family leadership and the vocational specialization of a soldier.⁵⁹

Aläqenät provided Ethiopian noblemen and women the means to manipulate their property to mitigate the effects of partible inheritance to reward some of their children and to exclude others from the inheritance. Although slight, there is evidence that the distribution of property was not made randomly because parents transferred selective and predetermined lands to the leaders. The *dehoch*, those excluded from part of the inheritance, were to take comfort from the fact that they were divested of obligations such as military service and other social roles. Therefore, by distributing resources unequally among their children, the Ethiopian ruling class attempted to keep their name, tradition and social standing. However, contrary to Crummey's conclusion there is no strong evidence that noblemen and women consciously pursued this as an objective in employing the institution of *aläqenät*.

The background of the grant of *aläqenät* seems to me parental affection and gratitude more than any deliberate aim to preserve family tradition. The operation of *aläqenät* was inconsistent and governed by unwritten rules. Whether the family inheritance and the social role should be devolved to one or more heirs depended on the idiosyncrasy of each family. In some instances, *aläqenät* did not completely limit the inheritance to one child and the social role could be passed to more than one heir. This is exemplified by the instances involving *Däjazmach Mamo*, *Däjazmach Gasiyos* and *Abéto Tädäsiwäs* who equally shared the right of *aläqenät* among two heirs each. Likewise, as *aläqoch Wäyzäro Tädla* and *Abéto Asahél* inherited the social role of a soldier and jointly assumed the responsibility of military service.⁶⁰ Therefore, if more than one were to serve in the military, then, *aläqenät* could have been granted to two or

⁵⁹ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.126.

⁶⁰ Wängél, MS., Tädbabä-Maryam, picture # 6608.

more heirs. In many other instances not discussed above, *aläqenät* is shared between two heirs. This means that securing the continuity of the status and wealth of a family may not always be the reason at work in the exclusion of children from the inheritance to the advantage of the *aläqa*.

The generally shared idea seems that the rights of *aläqenät* remained to one's natural children. Yet this, too, was not a rule of law and the transmission of *aläqenät* was not expected to strictly follow the bloodline because the right of *aläqenät* could be given to strangers. Some individuals could choose their siblings to become *aläqa* in disregard to their children. It was within the power of the parents to give full rights of property including *aläqenät* to outsiders. Several examples illustrate such inconsistency in the use of *aläqenät*. In a late nineteenth century case in Mota, one Eshäté Bitäw adopted children of Sheté Kassa and his step-child, Yezängaw, and passed half his *rest* and *gult* land to them. Then, he passed half of his inheritance and the *aläqenät* to his other adopted children *Fitawrari* Tamrat and *Re'isä-Däber* Säw-Agännähu. In the first three decades of the twentieth century *Ras* Häylu Täklä-Häymanot was adopted and given the right of *aläqenät* by many individuals in the same way as Tamrat and Agännähu. Property that formed part of the rights of the *aläqenät* could also be alienated through sale. To cite one example, during the reign of Iyasu II (r.1730-1750, *Abéto* Adära Mika'el's daughter, *Wäyzäro* Wärqit, sold both the *aläqenät* and *dehenät* parts of her inheritance to *Liqé* Häylu for one ounce of gold.⁶¹

The prerogatives and office of *aläqenät* could descend through the succession of both male and female heirs. Crummey has pointed out that although *aläqenät* passed between members of both sexes, in those cases when women were appointed as leaders required

⁶¹ BL., Or 777, f14.

additional “security to protect their rights.”⁶² The right of subsistence of the *dehoch* or the disfavored children was respected by reserving one-third of the legacy for them. Yet the transfer of a significant portion of the family legacy to the *aläqoch* often caused the envy and the indignation of the disfavored children. The stormy relations between Mersit and her brothers lays bare the special difficulty women run into as family leaders and managers of property. It is the power of her brothers which eventually prevailed showing that women were more likely to lose in these struggles over property than men. Mersit graciously agreed to share some property with her brothers although it was within her power to deny them any share of the family patrimony by custom.

The weight of evidence is that prevention of excessive partition was scarcely achieved by the system of *aläqenät*. Usually the wishes of parents were sidelined by heirs and the *aläqoch* and the *dehoch* were embroiled in quarrel. In short, the modes of operation of *aläqenät* bred chronic confrontations and disorder among family members as evidenced by the instances presented above and those that are not discussed here.⁶³ In effect *aläqenät* worked toward the opposite direction of family disappearance instead of preserving it. The Ethiopian noble families were very fluid and tended to quickly melt down to the lower class despite *aläqenät*. This explains why so many of the Gondärine nobility, including those discussed above, steadily and inexorably disappeared into the peasantry in the nineteenth century. The case of the family of *Ras Wäldä-Giyorgis* appears to be the exception than the rule. His descendants had his land for over a century (until the 1820s) and then the family silently disappeared from the records afterwards.

⁶² Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 125-126.

⁶³ BL., Or. 777, f2.

Will and Disinheritance

Besides *aläqenät* the primary legal instruments through which individuals, both ordinary and upper class men and women transferred control over property to heirs was a will. The background of wills is marked by diversity. In his study of peasant land tenure in Gojjam, Hoben has convincingly shown that egalitarian division was hardly ever found in the *rest* system of tenure. His study focused on the conditions of the 1960s⁶⁴, but his conclusion can apply to the preceding centuries as well, as will we see shortly. Wills tended to work against the principle of equal inheritance. A will excluding children from inheritance was not uncommon. One common cause for the writing of wills was affection. Existing in three copies deposited in the churches of Mota Giyorgis, Qäranyo Mädhäné-Aläm and Märtulä-Maryam, a particularly vivid example comes from the will given by *Wäyzäro* Sehin to her daughter Hirut. Sehin identified herself as daughter of *Däjazmach* Ayo, a governor of Bägémeder under Iyasu II (r.1730-1755) and holder of *rim* land from Qwesqwam. The location of the inheritance with which Sehin's will concerned itself appears Gojjam, although the document simply states that the legacy included “*gult* and *rest*.” Hirut should have complete rights to the property, including evicting and settling anyone on it. Sehin had children born out of wedlock or *diqaloch* (bastards) but she disinherited them completely and gave her property to Hirut alone. She proceeded to explain her reasons for treating her children unequally. Sehin writes it was natural “for inheritance to descend lineally from parents to children.” However, Sehin reversed this supposed natural transmission of property from mother to child because she took considerable money from her daughter, Hirut, which included ten mules and a staggering 500 ounces of gold at various times. Sehin acknowledges that Hirut had been very generous and kind to her and supported her for a very

⁶⁴ Hoben, *Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia*, p. 11ff.

long time, “from a tender age till the time she became old.”⁶⁵ The gift was therefore to make up for her expenses.

Sehin instructed her children born out of wedlock or to respect the rights of Hirut and to set up legal contingencies for disputes among her children. If the illegitimate children could not get along with their sister and sue her, then, they were to repay Hirut 500 ounces of gold and other property Sehin had taken away from Hirut at various times.⁶⁶ The total or near total exclusion of some children from inheritance and the practice of favoring one heir by Sehin were not untypical.

Gratitude and familial affection is also shown to work in several wills written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of these involves a cleric, *Qésä-Gäbäz* Yätämäññu who lived in early twentieth century Mota. Yätämäññu wrote two wills passing property to his favorite heir *Geragéta* Feqadu. In the first document drawn about the late 1930s he donated his land to Feqadu and explicitly excluded his biological children from the inheritance. The justification for the gift was “because my son *Geragéta* Feqadu took care of me well and provided me with food and bed and board [literally milk for my mouth and mattress for my side] and toiled and suffered trouble.”⁶⁷ In the second and expanded deathbed will Yätämäññu restated how he had been well cared for by Feqadu and how he caused his heir to incur and suffer the expenses of 253 *berr*. Yätämäññu passed three *gasha* of land for Feqadu besides the earlier gift and expressly disinherited his children stating that “my children refused to repay the debt” which he had contracted. He says he gave his children a prior option to clear off his debt and retain the

⁶⁵ Yärest Mäzgab, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6429. See also, Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, pp.150-151. Sehin argues that the norm was for property to lineally descend from parent to child.

⁶⁶ Yärest Mäzgab, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6429. Sehin instructed her children to respect the freedom of Hirut to do whatever she wanted with the inheritance and warned, “If they [Hirut’s siblings] litigate against her I have cursed them.”

⁶⁷ Yärest Mäzgab, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4220: “ለብቻው ለፍቶ ማስኖ ለአፌ. ወተት ለጎኔ ነት ብሎ ደስ አሰኝቶ ስለጦረኝ ለልጅ ለግራጌታ ፈቃዱ.”

land, “when I requested my children to redeem the land they refused.”⁶⁸ Yätämäññu seems to have had stormy relations with his natal children and the reason for his disinheritance was because of their failure to help him in time of his need.

Whether children could qualify to inherit or not depended on their good conduct and behavior. One Mängesté Gäbru gave his daughter named Terusäw a small land which he says was inherited from his grandmother, Asäbu Yätämäññu. Mängesté discriminated his daughter from the major part of his inheritance which he gave to his other children “as special favor.” Mängesté thought Terusäw was unworthy to share his inheritance with his other children equally “because she is disagreeable to me and has gone out of my control.”⁶⁹

Parents also wrote wills before they died to prevent conflicts among children that so often followed after death. A testator called Muné Akalu writes that the motivation for his writing the will “was to prevent quarrel among his children” over the division of his property following his death. However, Muné had also another unstated agenda as well, namely to discriminate against one of his heirs, Admas Muné. He gave Admas a share of the inheritance and instructed him to be quiet and content. Muné threatened to disown and disinherit him totally if Admas “demanded apart from that which I have given him”⁷⁰ and “interfered in the inheritance of my other children.” He does not give an explanation for discriminating against Admas, but surely the two had strained relations.

Wills were also written to prevent the alienation of land through sale. The best illustration of this exists in the will given by *Wäyzäro* Yätämäññu Engeda in Mota in the 1920s. Yätämäññu distributed all her ancestral *rest* and *gult* land to children of *Fitawrari* Gäbrä-Egzi’abhér, who appears from the context to have been her brother. She gave this before witnesses who included

⁶⁸ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4236: “ለጆቻ ከፈሉ ብል አንክፍልም ብለው።”

⁶⁹ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.162.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.162.

her father confessor and a judge. Then Yätämäññu stated that the land shall by no means be alienated; “whoever sells or gives away in exchange,” she warned, “shall be cursed.”⁷¹ This is one of the peculiar wills that prohibits children from alienating property to outsiders.

Whether the terms of testaments were respected or not after the death of the testators is impossible to know. It is very likely that in most cases the terms of the original wills were subsequently revised through informal negotiations. Respected or not the larger point to draw is that property owners exercised considerable freedom to make permanent alienation. This right of alienation extended to include disinheriting children partially or completely,

So far we have seen inheritance was one means of acquiring property necessary to maintain wealth and status. Money was also one important instrument for securing control over property so as to maintain wealth and status. The land market permits a deeper appreciation of the process by which land entered the market and how people’s attitudes towards property changed during the Gondärine period. The next section will be devoted to the discussion of the background of land sales and of successful land accumulations.

Sales, Mortgage and Permanent Alienations

In a paper published in 1979 Crummey made a plea for historians to pay attention to the documents on land markets. His appeal went unheeded. The land market has never been explored in the literature until Crummey took up the topic.⁷² Documents on the land market indicate that the Gondärine period is an era crucial for the development of legal customs regarding property. Land was not treated as a commodity prior to the eighteenth century.⁷³ The land market that

⁷¹ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4234: “የሽጠ የለወጠ እርጉም ይሁን።” Clauses prohibiting the alienations of landed property are almost nonexistent. The will of Yätämäññu is an exception.

⁷² Crummey, “Gondärine *rim* Land Sales”, pp. 469-479; *idem*, “Women, Property, and Litigation among the Bägémeder Amhara, 1750-1850s”, Margaret Jean Hay and Marcia Wright, eds., *African Women and the Law: Historical Perspectives*, vol. 7 (Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University, 1982), pp.19-32.

⁷³ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.183.

suddenly burst into existence in the eighteenth century exemplifies the changes in mentality towards property. It developed in a way no one would have probably imagined. At first it was clerical people in towns who began to buy and sell *rim* land. Then market expanded to include *gult*, *rest* and houses and subsequently the practice spread through the social hierarchy of the ruling class and peasants. People of all classes are encountered in these records as buyers and vendors of land. Sometimes even servants appear in transaction documents.⁷⁴

It is remarkable that property transactions through sale was going on for two centuries and half without interruption, starting from 1720s, although some decades saw a much greater volume of transactions than others.⁷⁵ The land market spread to a good many areas of northern Ethiopia pretty quickly and in some areas the expansion of the land market was more rapid than in others. In Bägémeder the land market started to trickle in the 1720s and reached its peak in the 1780s and 90s. In Gojjam the land market started soon after the introduction of *rim* in the 1760s and steadily expanded afterwards. In Tegray the land market started in the late eighteenth century and went on down to the third quarter of the twentieth century. In due course, land sale was also adopted in twentieth century Wällo, although we have relatively little evidence of sales from that province.⁷⁶ Just as it started suddenly, the land market came to a dramatic end. The 1974 Ethiopian revolution put an abrupt end to the land market that had been going on for over two centuries.

The subject of the land market is enormous but I will limit myself to the background of sales that is of special interest here and accumulation. What purposes did people buy land for? It

⁷⁴ BL., Or. 777, f14. In a transaction that occurred during the reign of Asé Iyasu II (1730-1755), one Wäldä-Gäbrél, who is recognized as the servant of a woman named *Wäyzäro* Wälätä -Täklé is recorded as buying land from joint vendors, Mersit and Eyobéde, for *wäqét* gold.

⁷⁵ BL., Or. 777, f5. One transaction that occurred during the reign of Asé Bäkafa (r.1721-1730) involved Dägwash Agene who sold his *rim* land in Dablo to *Abéto* Eraqelis for 10 ounces of gold and it contains all the elements of later transaction documents.

⁷⁶ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p.183.

is clear enough that those on the receiving end of the transaction bought land for purposes of either establishing farms, or building residential and rental houses in towns, or for making profit. Town houses were usually rented for weavers and merchants.⁷⁷ Below I will present a few cases of successful accumulators.

Concentration and Disintegration of Landholding

The land market opened opportunities for individuals to acquire and establish farms. Buyers and vendors came from both humbler and higher social positions. Some were more active as buyers than others. We know little about most of the men who bought, sold, and donated land. Some individuals are encountered in the records only once, while others appear again and again and succeed in putting together a large holding and, then, dismember their holding and disappear from the records. Two persons who succeeded to accumulate land in the third and fourth quarter of the eighteenth century must be mentioned. One was *Mälakä-Berhan Wäldä-Sellasé*, the head of the church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé. Wäldä-Sellasé's purchases were primarily agricultural land. He bought *rim* land from six vendors with a price ranging from one *derim* to 7 ounces of gold. In total Wäldä-Sellasé invested *circa* 18 ounces of gold.⁷⁸

Most of the vendors from whom Wäldä-Sellasé bought the land had, in turn, acquired it from others. One of the lands that was sold and resold several times originally belonged to one *Qés Asé Matéwos*. Matéwos himself probably received his land from Däbrä-Berhan during the reign of Iyasu I in 1694 when the endowment was given to the church. Matéwos's half *rim* in Boch was sold by his children to one Adäru in the reign of King Iyasu II (r.1730-55) for three

⁷⁷ For example, in the 1840s *Däjazmach* Goshu passed his inherited *bota* in Mota Giyorgis to one Gäbrä-Mädhen who is identified as his son. The *bota* was formerly occupied by a weaver, Gäbrä-Maryam (see Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, pictures # 6438 and 6439). In an early twentieth century record of court decision, one *Bäjerond* Bälay is recorded losing litigation to the Muslim weavers of Mota and their priest masters. Bälay demanded that the Muslim weavers in Mota had the obligation of paying *yägdgwad* chaw or ground rent for the land they occupied (Yärest Mäzgäb, MS. Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4291).

⁷⁸ BL., Or. 777, f12.

ounces of gold. Soon Adäru, in turn, sold it for 3 ounces of gold to *Qés Asrat* in the reign of Iyasu II. Finally, Asrat sold the same land for three ounces and an *alad* of gold to Wäldä-Sellasé sometime in the 1770s.⁷⁹

In subsequent years, the land which Wäldä-Sellasé was able to put together was dispersed and alienated to various purchasers by his children in the 1780s and 1790s. In a document dated to the reign of Iyasu III (1784-1788), Zäwäldu, one of the three children of Wäldä-Sellasé, sold a quarter of *Qés Asé Matéwos*'s *rim* land for 2 *wäqét*, *derim* and *aqämät* of gold to Yähulugéta. Soon we read that the land changed hand twice after Yähulugéta acquired it through sale in the 1780s.⁸⁰ Wäldä-Sellasé's record shows the speed with which land was changing hands in eighteenth century Gondär. *Qés Asé Matéwos*'s land changed hands eight times in less than three decades. The same plots of lands were sold and resold in succession, sometimes in quick succession. Wäldä-Sellasé's other children, Mersit and Neway, were more dispensers than accumulators.⁸¹

There are, however, scores of other successful accumulators in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Crummey has identified one *Nägadras Kassäññ* as a successful accumulator in the second and third quarter of the nineteenth century. *Kassäññ* was a renowned merchant in the commercial town of Qorata and served as a customs official. He made the money he invested on land first in commerce. *Kassäññ*'s portfolio of purchases in Qorata and Mähal Zägé Giyorgis adds up to 40 known plots. In Qorata alone he put together an impressive amount of land through purchase from 21 vendors. In Mähal Zägé Giyorgis, *Kassäññ* originated nineteen transactions with prices ranging from 2 *berr* to 130 *berr*, for a total of 307 *berr*.⁸²

⁷⁹ BL., Or. 777, f3 and f12.

⁸⁰ BL., Or 777, f6 and 11

⁸¹ BL., Or 777, f11.

⁸² Gädlä Bäterä-Maryam, MS., Mähal Zägé Giyorgis, pictures # 027-029; and Crummey, *Land and Society*, 194.

The most engrossing land accumulator in early twentieth century northern Ethiopia was *Ras Häylu II*, the hereditary ruler of Gojjam. Many historians concur that *Ras Häylu* was overly acquisitive, which led him into bitter conflict with churches in Gojjam. Häylu had an enormous influence in the land market and other forms of transaction. He bought land voraciously all over Gojjam and perhaps the price of land increased because of his activity. He also coerced people to adopt him into their household. Häylu initiated these transactions so as to gain control of the property of the adopters in the future. More will be said on this in the next section.⁸³ In the end, however, Häylu, like many others, lost it. In 1932 he was convicted for treason and sentenced to life imprisonment and confiscation of his enormous property.

Although the general trend was that land concentration was hard to achieve beyond the first generation, some individuals displayed a remarkable desire to retain land accumulated through purchase by prohibiting their heirs from alienating it. One example of this involves a person from Zägé, Dästa Wässän. He put together a remarkable amount of land from 20 different vendors. Dästa displayed an unusual desire to preserve intact the land he had accumulated by instructing his heirs to refrain from alienating land in the will he wrote on June 17, 1940. He divided the land among his 12 children and grandchildren whom he instructs that “his inheritance shall not pass to strangers.”⁸⁴ Ironically though, so much of the property he dismembered among his children was acquired through purchase. He included specific conditions and qualifications to each of his beneficiaries. Some of his heirs were given shares from the inheritance in such a way that he/she would use it and restore it to his other named children, although he did not set a

⁸³ In 1920/21, Häylu also restored the land his great grandfather, *Däjach Goshu*, once held in Qorata until the mid-nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century this land was held by one *Qésä-Gäbäz Yälebé* and the latter received a 130 *berr* from Häylu as compensation for bringing the land under cultivation (Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Qorata, picture # 047).

⁸⁴ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 080: “ርስቴ ከባድ፣ አይውጣ።” The understanding was that land was saleable and instructions preventing alienating of properties are almost practically nonexistent.

specific timeline for it to take effect. Nothing is said of any penalty if they alienated the land.

We may expect the existence of other successful accumulators like Dästa who consciously tried to mitigate the fragmentation and alienation of holding through sale. The general sense we have, however, is that consolidation was hard to achieve for more than one generation. The land market involved the dismemberment and the reverse process of concentration of holding at the same time. The frequency with which land was bought and sold is quite remarkable. Only very few lands must have remained in the holding of the same family for a long period of time.

So far we have seen the issues of land concentration and the reverse process of disintegration and the motivation for buying land. Here it is time to consider why people sale their land. To a very large extent people's livelihood rested on land during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Also, land was the foundation of power and wealth. The land market raises several questions. Why would people sell the source of their material subsistence and power? Why wouldn't they lease land and collect rent from it instead of selling it? It need hardly be said that people would be motivated to sell property only for compelling reasons. The timing of its development seems to have been determined by an interlocking set of factors and trends. Most of these sales share a common background. Crummey saw the land market originating from the development of urbanization and commercialization.⁸⁵ Land in towns containing churches with sanctuary rights was judged more valuable because of the safety they afforded from the violence of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸⁶ Town plots seem to have been desirable for other reasons. Population growth must account for the increase in the value of land in the towns. The population of Gondär by 1740s may have more than doubled since the first hundred and fifty

⁸⁵ Crummey, *Land and Society*, pp. 164-166.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

years of its establishment. Crummey estimated that at the height of its development in the 1750s, Gondär hosted permanent residents of between 12, 000 to 14, 000 people.⁸⁷ Most transactions were induced by the good price in the market. Several individuals bought land and resold it for a better price. The following instances exemplify thousands of others. One of the active buyers and vendors was *Wäyzäro Wälätu*, who is constantly identified as daughter of *Abéto Qosté*. In 1741 she bought the *rim* land of *Abba Ayälé* in Dablo from his son Abetu for five ounces and *alad* of gold. Subsequently *Wälätu* sold the same piece of land for ten ounces of gold to the head of the church of *Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé, Mälakä-Berhan Esayeyas*. This brought *Wälätu* a profit of 4.5 ounces of gold. To add one further example, in the early twentieth *Däbrä-Marqos* one *Bäjerond Bäqehäññ* bought residential land from *Mämher Keflé* for ten *berr*. Then he sold the land for 20 *berr* for *Qäññgéta Ewenätu* bringing him a net profit of ten *berr*.⁸⁸

The land market may have developed for additional reasons, not the least of which was the development of commerce. Regional commerce also supplied a silver coin which was widely employed in the land market. Beginning with the early nineteenth century the unit of exchange most often used in sales was the silver coin, the Austrian Maria Theresa thalers. In particular, the MT thalers, referred to in the sources as *berr*, increasingly poured into Ethiopia from Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸⁹ During the eighteenth and nineteenth century Ethiopia was a deeply agrarian society and the obligations of the peasants were paid primarily in kind (agricultural products). However, there was a limited supply of cash in bullion. In the eighteenth century un-minted bullion was the most common medium of exchange mentioned in land sale documents. The main highway of the long-distance trade between the Gibe region and

⁸⁷ Crummey, *Land and Society*, p. 109.

⁸⁸ For *Wäyzäro Wälätu*, see BL., Or 777, f2 and for *Bäjerond Bäqehäññ*, see *Yärest Mäzgäb*, MS., *Däbrä-Marqos*, picture # 293.

⁸⁹ Mordechai, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes*, pp. 44-47. Other primitive forms of money such as salt bar were also occasionally used for the business dealings in land.

the Red Sea passed through most of the towns where there was a vibrant land market such as Adwa, Chäläqot, Mota, and Qorata. Zägé, located on the western side of Lake Tana, opposite to Qorata, was also a lively commercial town. In Zägé there are far more numerous transactions involving agricultural land than residential sites. The peninsula produced spice, fruits, *géshe*, vegetables, and fish. Coffee was produced both for home consumption and for the market and it was the most important source of wealth in Zägé.⁹⁰ Commercial activity in towns may have rendered land in and around them desirable.

Nevertheless, the developments of the land market could not have been the result of random events and mere coincidence. Even when the revival of commerce and the urban growth of towns were taken into account, they could not have been the main reason. Urbanization and commercialization might obscure a fundamental change occurring in the mentality of people towards property and rules regulating land transfers. The land market developed in quite Ethiopian contexts.⁹¹ The sudden rupture in the land market indicates real and radical change in local legal custom. In general, the larger and longer process through which the land market developed can be related to the growing individualization of property that followed the introduction of *rim*. The land market would have been impossible without the existence of the rights of alienation and individual holding. Hence the first precondition for a land market to develop is the freedom of disposition and individual holding. Since *rim* property was the first to enter into circulation, the land market was largely the result of a wave of land grants in *rim* property that began in earnest during the reign of Iyasu I. Due to the fact that *rim* was regarded as an expendable commodity from the very beginning, the land market must have been

⁹⁰ Abdussamad, "Priest Planters and Slavers of Zägé", pp. 543-556.

⁹¹ Donald Crummey, "Some Precursors of Addis Ababa: Towns in Christian Ethiopia in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Ahmed Zekaria, Barhu Zewde and Tadesse Beyene, eds., *Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Centenary of Addis Ababa* (Addis Ababa: 1987).

developing ever since the first grant in *rim* property.⁹² The introduction of *rim* had significant implications for the landholding system, especially relating to the norms of inheritance and transfer. One noticeable changes *rim* brought was that it increased the options available to individual landholders.

Rim holding was also an eminently malleable form of holding, through which sale might occur. Freely disposable and private holding though it was, *rim* formed part of an endowment of a church. The churches retained rights over the *rim* land of individual under their jurisdiction. When a transfer took place generally the new holder acquired both the rights and the services owed. The general principle that the new owner also inherited the obligation of the land was not always rigidly applied and determined by the specific agreements of the contracting parties. Some of the transactions could assist in investigation of these issues. In a transaction dated to the reign of Täklä-Häymanot (1770-1777) one Wäldä-Mika’el bought two plots in Wawa under the jurisdiction of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé in Gondär from *Käntiba* Niqodimos for one ounce of gold. Here the vendor retained the services and obligations, while alienating his property permanently. The contract made the original owner, Niqodimos, liable for the service attached to the land.⁹³ To add one further example, in a late nineteenth century transaction, one *Blata* Märsha purchased a plot of land from two joint vendors, *Mägabi* Engeda and Wäläté, to clear off the debt they inherited. The land was under the jurisdiction of the monastery of Märtulä-Maryam in Gojjam and carried the obligation of paying fuel wood. Engeda and Wäläté acquitted Märsha of the special services attached to the land in question. Based on their contract, “the vendors were to be

⁹² The legal context in which such transfers were made also changed. The concentration of the royal foundations in Gondär and in the areas at close geographical proximity to Gondär had created a rural and social landscape dominated by churches and the clerical landlords. Most of the transactions are initiated by people connected to churches. The urban growth of many towns also has increased the value of the surrounding agricultural land.

⁹³ BL., Or. 777, f12:

liable for the payment of charcoal [which the land owed to the church].”⁹⁴ In these and similar contexts, the transaction totally separated the land from its social function. All this made church land easy to alienate by sale.

The above explanation does not fully answer the question of the birth of the land market. Two reasons must be pointed out in this regard. First, people were selling “excess” land in small parcels without compromising their subsistence requirements. Only a few instances of transactions in the first half of the eighteenth century Gondär involved alienation of large holdings. For example, in a sale that occurred during the reign of Iyasu II one *Wäyzäro* Wälätä-Gäbrél bought 10 *bota* and 20 *meder* from Keflä-Maryam for 30 ounces of gold. Around the same time, one *Azaji* Gälawdéwos bought all the *rim* lands of *Gétayä Péteros* for 20 ounces.⁹⁵

In the large majority of cases, the trade was in smaller units of land. Usually, a *rim* land was sold in units of half, *kurman* (a quarter) and *qerana*. There are several examples of this. During the reign of Hezqeyas one Wälätä-Minas sold “1 *meder* and *qerana* and 1 *bota*” for Gwalu for *wäqét* and *derim*.” At the same time, “she sold *qerana meder* for 2 *aqämät*” for another vendor.⁹⁶ A typical transaction tells that one Yä-Sellasé Barya sold “*kurman* of *rim* which is one *meder* and *qerana*” for *Mämheré* Sädalü for *alad* gold.⁹⁷ Two *meder* is the common size of land met with in the transactions. The currency units of *alad*, *aqämät*, *derim* and *wäqét* are commonly employed in transactions documents. The meaning of these terms is really difficult to decipher. We know, however, that *wäqét* meant ounce and *alad* is used in the sense of half *wäqét*. *Aqämät* and *derim* were fractions of *alad*.

The second common reason for the sale of land that emerges from the record is urgent

⁹⁴ Däqiqä Näbeyat, MS., Märtulä-Maryam, f.201v: “የሰዓዊትን እንጨት ሻጮች ሊችሉ ነው።”

⁹⁵ For Wälätä Gäbrél, see BL, Or 777, f13; for *Azaji* Gälawdéwos, see BL., Or 777, f288.

⁹⁶ BL., Or 777, f9.

⁹⁷ BL., Or 777, f6.

need or economic distress. That pressing condition was indeed behind the most important sale from the beginning of the land market can be shown by citing some examples. The type of situation that could have fostered land sale is revealed us in two wills. One was written by *Liqämäzämeran* Tälafinos, one of the officials of the church of Däbrä-Berhan Sellasé in Gondär during the reign of Iyasu II and Iyo’as. The second was given by one Fasil Héla, who was active in the land market in 1770s and 1780s, while he was lying ill and dying.

ለወይዘሮ አደይ ሊቀመዘምራን ተላፊኛስ የዋዋን እሪም ከለቤቱ የደብረብርሃኑን ከቤተ ንጉሡ ምላሽ የወይና በሬ የቤት እቃ የተባለን ሰጥቻለሁ ቢርባትም ሽግ ትብላ ። ለብቻሽ የልደታን እሪም ከደብረብርሃኑ ቤተ ንጉሥ ጋራ ሰጥቻ አለሁ የወይናን ምድር ለምናሴ ሰጥቻለሁ ። ርስትግን የተባለን ለሁለቱ ሰጥቻለሁ ተዝካር ባንድ ያውጹ።⁹⁸

Liqämäzämeran Tälafinos [says] “I have given to *Wäyzäro* Adäy the *rim* in Wawa along with the house, my Däbrä-Berhan *bota* near the house of the King, my oxen in Wäyena and all household objects. She can sell and eat if she is hungry. For Bechash I have given my *rim* held under Ledäta along with my Däbrä-Berhan *bota* behind the house of the King. I have given the land in Wäyena for Menasé. However, I have given all my inheritance to the two. They shall prepare [my] anniversary commemoration jointly.

ፋሲል ሄላ ታመው ቤትዎን በሰሩ ጊዜ ለወይዘሮ ወርቁት የሙራድን እሪም ዳብሎ ከጌታ ሳህሉ ፈንታዎን ከጅጅቱ ካለቸው ቦታ ጋራ ሰጥተዋል። ከልፍኙ ቦታ ከማጅቱ ደጅ በላይ ያለውን አታክልት አገልግላኝ አለችና እስክሞት ትብላ ብለው። እሪሙንና ቦታውን ትሸጥ ትለውጥ ብለዋል። [...]⁹⁹

When Fasil Héla was ill and arranged the affairs of his house, he gave Murad’s *rim* in Dablo, the *bota* in Jijitu along with his share from Géta Sahlu’s [inheritance] to *Wäyzäro* Wärqitu. Since she has served me well, let her use (literally eat) the garden above the kitchen. He said “she can sell and exchange the *rim* and the *bota*.” [...].

Tälafinos and Fasil had already enough inherited land, *rest*. Compared to *rest*, some individuals took little interest in their *rim* property. Tälafinos passed houses and household objects in both Gondär and in his farms in rural areas, plow oxen, *rim* land he held under two churches—Däbrä-Berhan and Ledäta—and his *rest* land to his three children, *Wäyzäro* Adäy, Bechash and Menasé. Likewise, Fasil Héla passed his *rim* land, *bota* and garden to *Wäyzäro* Wärqitu. The rights of alienation for Wärqitu and Adäy are stated quite fully and clearly. Both licensed their

⁹⁸ BL., Or 777, f287.
⁹⁹ BL., Or 777, f17.

heirs to do whatever they wished with their *rim* lands, including alienation through sale. In the case of Tälafinos, he explicitly states that Adäy was free to sell her share of the inheritance in time of some urgent need such as hunger. This makes all the more illuminating the connection between a land market and distress. Fasil is less explicit, but he may have been referring to the same situation of pressing needs as Tälafinos during which Wärqitu should alienate her *rim* and *bota* through sale or exchange. We could see sale of property as a standard response during times of economic hardship in particular.

Distressed-induced sales were much more likely to occur in the nineteenth century which was punctuated by famine and violence than before. In so far as the land market increased in the late 1880s and 1890s, it was largely because of the distress of many holders during that time. The late 1880s was an especially difficult time in northern Ethiopia. Between the end of June 1888 and January 1889 Yohannes IV's army devastated Gojjam. The despair brought by Yohannes's looting was heightened by the worst famine in recorded history known in tradition as the *Kefu Qän* or the Evil Time which struck between 1888 and 1892. The famine was preceded by a Rinderpest epidemic that wiped out the cattle population of Ethiopia. Many were faced by crises.¹⁰⁰ In the Mota area many people sold their land because of their need to survive the famine. After the restoration of normalcy those who had sold their land to survive the famine made desperate attempts to regain it resulting in a proliferation of litigation in Mota Giyorgis. King Täklä-Häymanot, it should be remembered, intervened by sending a letter to the officials of the church instructing them to regulate litigation. He rebuked church officials for encouraging litigation, "[w]hy do you adjudicate over cases when a person sells in times of hardship and

¹⁰⁰ For Yohannes IV punitive campaign against Gojjam and the famine that followed, see Abdussamad H Ahmed, "Peasant Conditions in Gojjam During the Great Famine, 1888-1921", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 20 (1987), pp. 1-18; and *idem*, "Emperor Yohannis' Campaign in Gojjam, August, 1888 to February, 1889," *Northeast African Studies* vol. 13 no.1 (1991), pp. 1-7.

reclaims it in better times? Why do you claim [what you have sold in times of hardship]? As of now let such stop. Do not allow litigation to proceed in such cases.”¹⁰¹ Täklä-Häymanot’s letter to the officials of Mota Giyorgis church lays bare the strong connection between the land market and economic distress. In a time of upheaval and famine the price of land could have been indeed very low spurring those with money to act. Economic hardship was therefore a boon to some individuals, although this is difficult to detect from most transaction documents.

Debt and Mortgage

Besides pressing circumstances, many individuals were also forced to forfeit their land due to debt and mortgage. Many documents contain additional clauses on mortgage. In an extraordinary case written in January 1920, one Ayälä Yemär laid a pledge on his female servant, Asebalähu, to his creditor *Mämher* Alämenäh for failing to repay ninety *berr* and interest.¹⁰² It certainly means that the servant whom Ayälä promised as debt peonage was being treated as a slave. More frequently, property holders mortgaged their land and house to get access to credit. In one undated eighteenth century document we read that one *Abéto* Wäldä-Kidan pawned his *rim* land in Wäyena and borrowed *alad* gold from *Abéto* Asqu.¹⁰³ Variants of the experience of Wäldä-Kidan were common. While Wäldä-Kidan appeared to have repaid his debt many others did not. Houses and lands seized for nonpayment of debt are reported from the beginning of the land market in the early eighteenth century until its sudden end in 1974. A few examples must suffice to show the general patterns of these kinds of transactions:

Document 1

በዘመነ ማርቆስ በአጼ ጋሉ መንግስት [...] እመቤቴ ወለተ ኤዎስጣጦስ ከወይዘሮ ወርቁት አላድ ወርቅ ተበድረው ብዙ ወራት እኑረው መክፈል ቢያስቸግረዎ የቦችን እሪሜን ይዘህ ክፈል በለው የሰጡዎን ፋሲል ሄላ ለወይዘሮ

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Crummey, “Rim in Ethiopian Land Documents of the 18th and 19th Centuries,” p.80

¹⁰² Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 302

¹⁰³ BL, Or 777, f13.

ወርቁት ባይነታውና በ30 አመት አራጣው ሸጠዋል። መድኑ አለቃ ጓሌ መሳከርቱ ደብተሮች ሊቄ ወልደ ድንግል ናቸው።¹⁰⁴

In the year of [Saint] Mark during the reign of *Asé Gwalu* [1801-1818] ... Unable to repay the debt of *alad* gold which *Emäyete Wälätä-Ewostatéwos* owed to *Wäyzäro Wärqit* for many months, she gave her *rim* land in Boch to Fasil Héla and ordered him to repay her debt. He sold the [land] to *Wäyzäro Wärqit* for the capital and the thirty years interest.

Document 2

ባዔ ህዝቅያስ መንግስት [...] ካቤቶ ቆሰጤ ሪም ከምሉው 3 ምድር ላቤቶ አብቱ ሲነሳለት የቀረውን የወይዘሮ ወለቱ ልጆች ከ ሶስት አድረገዋል። ወይዘሮ ሳህሉ ግን ዕፃቸውን ላቤቶ የሰጠና ላቤቶ ዘወልዱ ባ5 ወቅት ከ2አቀመት አስይዘውት የነበረውን ውይዘሮ ልሕኩትና ወይዘሮ ወለተ ሚካኤል ወርቁን ከፍለው ምድሩን አስቀሩት። [...]።¹⁰⁵

During the reign of *Asé Hezqeyas* [1789-1794] ... What was left of the *rim* land of *Abéto Qosté* after the deduction of three lands as share for *Abéto Abetu* was subdivided into three among the children of *Wäyzäro Wälätu*. Then *Wäyzäro Lehekut* and *Wäyzäro Wälätä-Mika’el* paid the money and redeemed *Wäyzäro Sahlu’s* lot which had been surrendered to *Abéto Yostos* and *Abéto Zäwäldu* for a debt of 5 *wäqét* and 2 *aqämät*.

Document 3

በዘመነ ዮሃንስ በመንግስተ ቴዎድሮስ [...] አለቃ ወልደ ተክሌ ስራ ሲሰሩ ያደዩ ወርቁት 10 ምድር 3 ቦታ ስለ 15 ብር ይዠው ነበር የዋላጅን ብሩን ተቀብሮ ዕጻውን ለብላታ ጌታሁን ለቅቄ አለሁ[...]።¹⁰⁶

During the reign of *Téwodros II* [1855-1869] ... when *Aläqa Wäldä Täklé* arranged [the affairs of his house] after receiving the money I have restored *Adäy Wärqit’s* 10 lands and 3 *bota* which I seized for a debt of 15 *berr* to *Belaténgéta Gétahun*.

These kinds of transactions induced by debt include a clause on the repayment of the debt if anyone wants to redeem the land. In document 1, the debtor, *Wälätä-Ewostatéwos*, had a debt of thirty years of interest behind her which she owed to *Wäyzäro Wärqit*. The reversionary rights of *Wälätä-Ewostatéwos* were acknowledged upon the full payment of the capital and the interest. Unable to repay her debt herself, *Wälätä-Ewostatéwos* transferred her *rim* land in Boch into the control of *Fasil Héla* to enable him to clear off her debt. Instead, *Fasil* surrendered the land to *Wärqit*. The value of the land was assessed at *alad* gold plus thirty years interest.

¹⁰⁴ BL., Or 777, picture # 017

¹⁰⁵ BL., Or 777, f16.

¹⁰⁶BL., Or 777, f20.

The second and third instances show the reversion of land seized for debt to the relations of the creditors. Document two involved the grandchildren of *Abéto* Qosté and children of *Wäyzäro* Wälätu. We have already seen above that Wälätu bought land in 1741 from Abetu for 5 ounces and *alad* of gold and then sold it at nearly twice the original purchase price to *Mälakä-Berhan* Esayeyas.¹⁰⁷ Under document 2 we read that her three children—Lehekut, Sahlu and Wälätä-Mika’el—divided Wälätu’s inheritance. Sahlu’s lot was mortgaged and subsequently seized by *Abéto* Zäwäldu and *Abéto* Yostos for a debt of 5 *wäqét* and 2 *aqämät* gold. Subsequently Lehekut and Wälätä-Mika’el paid Sahlu’s debt and redeemed the land. Document three records that *Aläqa* Wäldä Täklé seized 10 *meder* and 3 *bota* from Adäy Wärqit for non-payment of a debt of 15 *berr*. Then the land was redeemed by *Blata* Gétahun, whose relations with the debtor are not indicated, upon the full repayment of the money owed to Wäldä-Täklé.

As a whole, the available sources suggest the existence of an effective system of credit. Why Wälätä-Ewostatéwos, and others like her, borrowed money is hard to know because we learn about the background of the sale only at the moment of the change in ownership. The contract of the borrowing is usually oral. Forced sale of inherited property due to debt did not arouse recorded objections. Once property was lost through debt, it was lost permanently and mortgage was one means of accumulating material resources for rich people.

The background of the transactions further changed during the early twentieth century. This system of inheritance involving adoption played a vital role in regulating social interaction and property transfer. Scattered evidence on adoption-related transfers exists as early as the eighteenth century and became a common feature of legal documents in the early twentieth century in particular. It is well-documented in Gojjam. Together, land sale and adoption-related

¹⁰⁷ For *Wäyzäro* Wälätu, see BL., Or 777, f2.

gifts formed the dominant means of property transfer. This topic is a totally neglected field in the historiography. It remains to consider this last form of transaction involving inheritance and adoption. The discussion below highlights its importance.

Adoption and Inheritance: Gift as Exchange and Old Age Insurance

Adoption-related inheritance was a complex social and property transaction. It worked in peculiar ways. It fused gift, adoption, and inheritance at once. The term used to describe the process is *wälädä*, “begot”, while the property transaction it involved is called *awäräsä*, “inherited”. One formality of adoption was the adoptee’s symbolic sucking of the thumb dipped into honey. This act established social ties between the adopter and the adoptee. Typically the adopter gave property, usually land, to the adopted child or children in return for receiving material assistance from the latter. The relationship was long-lasting and the complete transfer of inheritance was intended to take effect after the death of the donor, which could take many years to happen. Thus an adoption-related bequest is to be distinguished from outright inheritance, because the former was contingent on fulfilling certain obligations.¹⁰⁸ Very few of the inheritances involving adoption are unconditional gifts. It is appropriate to describe them as gift exchanges.

The purpose and background of the transaction varied. The insights from a few examples can supply a sense of how the system of adoption and inheritance worked. Adoption appears in a brief document from the late eighteenth century Mota Giyorgis. In this transaction, a woman called *Wäyzäro Qäsäro* introduced one *Gälämo Fanu’el* to her household allowing him to “share from my inheritance as one among other children if he cares for me well.”¹⁰⁹ This was not an unrequited gift because *Qäsäro* was to live comfortably and provided for by *Gälämo*. This means

¹⁰⁸ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, pp. 150-155.

¹⁰⁹ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 6428: “አስመችተህ ካጸባኸኝ ካገራ ሁሉ ያንድ ልጅ ያህል ተካፈል።”

Qäsäro would be clothed as well as fed and Gälämo had to tend and protect her wellbeing during her life time. Property holders used this kind of transaction to secure their own protection in life, especially to secure their insurance in own old age. In the mid-nineteenth century a woman called Wärq-Wehä Wälätä-Hér adopted *Fitawrari* Asfa and bequeathed to him all the land she had inherited from her mother. Here the alienation was not to be consummated immediately. Wärq-Wehä “shall be pleased in her lifetime” and Asfa was obligated to provide his donor-mother the material necessities to live happily in return for the inheritance.¹¹⁰

The significance of adoption went beyond securing old age insurance. In most instances, death did not terminate the obligation of the adopted child. Besides securing the material needs during old age, adoption related bequests were commonly used to make provisions for souls after death. Wärq-Wehä added other demands and qualifications to the grant. Asfa was required to cover the expenses for her funeral mass and anniversary commemorations following her death.¹¹¹ The contract also carefully protected the interest of Asfa. Lest Wärq-Wehä withdrew the inheritance and disown him, Asfa received many guarantors who would scrutinize her to ensure that she respected the agreement. Should the adopter withdraw the gift, the guarantor would be held accountable.¹¹² It is the contractual quality of this form of transaction that structures the relationship between the adopted child and the adopter.

Adoptive decisions were made for several other reasons. The persons who expected to adopt children were primarily childless and heirless parents. In most cases adoptive parents and adopted children were biologically unrelated to each other. Yet this custom provided a handy

¹¹⁰ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.152.

¹¹¹ Ibid. Securing old age insurance is the overarching purpose underlying this kind of transactions when it involves childless persons. Transactions of this kind also give sufficient consideration for the spiritual needs. The responsibilities of the inheritances included providing anniversary commemoration feasts for the departed adopted parent. This obligation usually did not go beyond the first anniversary commemoration.

¹¹² Ibid.

tool for those who had direct descendants and collateral heirs to meet various social and political goals and it could also take place among biological kin. Affection, friendship and gratitude were behind many transactions of this kind. In one instance, a woman named Terengo Kassa adopted her brother Embi'alä Kassa and passed her inheritance to him. The adoption and inheritance was due to the 100 *berr* she owed to her brother. She excluded her other siblings and children from the inheritance.¹¹³

Others adopted children and passed their inheritance to them because of the necessities of recruiting agricultural labor. Based on this in an early twentieth century transaction from Märtulä-Maryam Gäbré Yegezew adopted Gétahun Wändé because his natal children were too young to take care for him.¹¹⁴ Yet as adoption and inheritance became routine the practice completely lost its cultural meaning. Strangely, adoption also occurred not only among close relatives, but also among the conjugal pair. For example, in 1927/8, a couple, *Fitawrari* Imeru and his wife, *Wäyzäro* Bezunäsh, wrote their will before they died and adopted each other. Their wills appear on the same parchment as a continuous document separated by a line and their contents are almost identical, but they are presented as two separate acts. By his act, Imeru transferred the ownership of his property, including land, to Bezunäsh, who, in turn, adopted her husband over her property. This is a confusing statement of inheritance and adoption because the husband and the wife are involved. In this case the purpose of the adoption was to solidify existing familial ties or marriage unions.¹¹⁵

Property holders also used adoption and inheritance for establishing relations of friendship with powerful people. This form of transaction enjoyed a burst of popularity in the

¹¹³ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, p.155. Adoption between unrelated individuals occurred perhaps because the rules of kinship required that inheritance passes from parents to children.

¹¹⁴ Däqiqä Nābeyat, MS., Märtulä-Maryam, f 222v.

¹¹⁵ Wängél, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4457

time of *Ras* Häylu II (1910-1932). Large numbers of people adopted Häylu and placed themselves and their children under his protection throughout Gojjam. Undoubtedly Häylu had coerced people to adopt him, although the transactions are portrayed as voluntary. Two such adopters in Märtulä-Maryam were *Fitawrari* Rädé and Ejigu Asfayä. Rädé passed his inheritance to Häylu and included a clause in the contract regarding his natal children, who, he dictated, “are to be cared for by *Ras* [Häylu], according to his direction.”¹¹⁶ Rädé’s natal children became automatically the siblings of one the most powerful and wealthy person in Ethiopia. In the second instance, Häylu, more precisely his delegate, became property manager and leader of the family into which he was adopted because Asfayä excluded his natal children from the main part of his inheritance and gave the *aläqenät* to his adopted child.¹¹⁷ The desire to be associated with a powerful person such as Häylu was aimed at benefitting the adopters such as Asfayä and Rädé and particularly their natal children. In adopting him into their household, Asfayä and Rädé wanted Häylu to be a patron of their children.

Adoption occurred in anticipation that the transaction would be mutually beneficial to the parties. If this is did not happen, both the adopter and the adoptee held the right to terminate the social relationship. If the adopter initiated the termination of relations the biological metaphor *chengäfa* or abortion is used to describe the act. This is made explicit in many charters of adoption and inheritance. One example of this is cited below to illustrate the general pattern that this kind of transaction takes:

በ፩፱፻፳፯ ዓመተ ምሕረት ወይዘሮ ካሳየ አሊ አለቃ መንግስቱንና ውቤ ጌታሁንን ጨንገራው በርስታቸው በቦታቸው በጉልታ[ቸ]ው ሁሉ ሲጠላኝ ለአፌ ወተት ለጎኔ ነት ብለው ስለተመቹኝ ወልጃቸዋለሁ። ዳኞቻ [...]።¹¹⁸

In 1932 (Eth. Cal) *Wäyzäro* Kasayä Ali, after disowning *Aläqa* Mängestu and Webé Gétahun, adopted Sitälalñ over her *rest*, *bota* and *gult* saying that “he satisfied me and

¹¹⁶ Däqiqä Näbeyat, MS., Märtulä-Maryam, f 226r: “ልጆቻን ራስ ባወቁ ሊያሳድሯቸው ነው።”

¹¹⁷ Däqiqä Näbeyat, MS., Märtulä-Maryam, f226r.

¹¹⁸ Wängél, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4255.

provided milk for my mouth and mattress for my side.” The judges are [list of many people].

Kasayä who initiated this transaction withdrew the inheritance and disowned her adopted children, *Aläqa Mängestu* and *Webé Gétahun* and adopted a new child, *Sitälänñ*, in gratitude for his proper conduct and the tender care he gave her. This is the most precise statement extant concerning the nature of adoption related inheritance. The implication is that if the conditions were not fulfilled the adopted child would be disowned and forced to relinquish the property. In another instance, one *Zägäyä Wäldä-Giyorgis* disowned his adopted children, *Ras Häylu II* and *Meteku Engeda* and withdrew the inheritance and sold it. *Zägäyä* justified his decision by stating that because “I am hungry and they (*Häylu* and *Meteku*) live far from me.”¹¹⁹ As whole, inheritance was not given for free but commended on condition.

During the life time of the adopter, the adopted child held the power to use the land as she/he saw fit short of disposing it. The adopted child did not benefit from the grant during the life time of the adopter. Far from being owner of the property, the adopted heir and child became a tenant for life. For example, in an early twentieth century transaction one *Aläqa Häylä-Iyäsus* renounced the property and terminated the adoption of *Kassa Häylu*, the adopter, on account of his inability to meet the contractual agreement.¹²⁰ Other things being equal, adoptions and inheritance contracts were binding and friction between the adopter and the adopted is rarely reported in the records. Moreover, the system of transfer through adoption allowed some people such as slaves who lacked inherited land to acquire property. Below I will briefly discuss their salient feature.

¹¹⁹ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Mota Giyorgis, picture # 4256: “ስለራቁኝና ስለራብኝ.”

¹²⁰ Habtamu, *Lord, Zéga and Peasant*, pp.157-158.

Slaves and Masters and Inheritance and Manumission

Charters of manumission also grew more prevalent during this period. The body of evidence relating to manumission forms a separate category of property and attests to both change and continuity in the conception of property and social relations. The terms of manumission worked in a fashion similar to adoption related inheritance. Manumission seems to have been a longstanding feature of legal practice prior to the twentieth century, although the period has not left records.¹²¹ Several explicit charters concerning this topic are found in the archives of the churches of Märtulä-Maryam, Mota Giyorgis, Däbrä-Wärq and Däbrä-Marqos.

On July 15, 1906 one *Aläqa* Kenfä-Mika’el, who was holder of *rim* land in Däbrä-Marqos and Mota Giyorgis, publicly freed his slaves “before the assembled witnesses of the community” of Däbrä-Marqos church.¹²² Kenfä-Mika’el and others like him used the vocabulary *arenät* or freedom to describe the process of freeing slaves. The term *hur* is also employed by several documents to describe the freeing of slaves. Further, many masters also donated their property to their slaves after freeing and adopting them. The following are two typical cases of this kind of transactions:

Document 1

ቀጠሮ ወልድያ የሚባሉ ሴትዮ አጼ ምንይልክ የሰጧቸውን ባርያቸውን [...] ወልደዋታል። ሲወልዷትም በከብታቸውም በርስታቸውም ጠቅልለው ወልደዋታል።¹²³

A woman called Qätäro Wäldeya adopted her slave which Emperor Menilek gave her [...]. The adoption is over all her livestock and *rest*.

¹²¹ The practice of manumission was not an entire innovation. Only the writing of charters of manumission seems new. By the time when sources became available the procedure and language of manumission was well developed. However, the scarcity of documents of this kind prior to the twentieth century suggests that its scope was limited.

¹²² Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 269.

¹²³ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 290.

Document 2

ወይዘሮ ትብለጥ ድሉ የአህታቸውን ልጅ አሰይነሽንና ባሪያቸውን አመተ ማርያምን በማር ወልደዋል። ለቅናውን ለአሰይነሽ ሰጥተዋል። ለዚህ እማኞች [የሌሎችም አለ]። አመተ ማርያምን ባሪያቸውን ከአህታቸው ልጅ ከአሰይነሽ ጋራ ሁለትያዋን ብርስታቸውም በከብታቸውም ወልደዋታል።¹²⁴

Wäyzäro Tebelät Delu adopted her niece, Esäyenäsh, and her slave, Amätä-Maryam. She has given the *leqena* [= *aläqenät*] to Esäyenäsh. The witnesses for this are [list of many individuals]. She has adopted her slave Amätä-Maryam together with her niece, Esäyenäsh, over rest and livestock.

In both cases the masters were women and did not seem to have their own natal children. In the first case, Qätäro Wäldeya freed and adopted the slave originally given to her by emperor Menilek II. Then Qätäro gave her former slave control over her *rest* land and livestock in its entirety. In the second case, Tebelät Delu adopted her former slave Amätä-Maryam and her niece, Esäyenäsh. Tebelät named Esäyenäsh *aläqa* and Amätä-Maryam was to share from the inheritance which included land and livestock. Former slaves were to enjoy the lands peacefully and freely since there was obligation attached to the grant. In other instances, however, the freeing of slaves was not made outright. Some masters reserved the right to the service of their slaves until they died. In what appears to be one of the biggest disposals of property and manumission, written in August 26, 1906, a master, *Wäyzäro* Tajetu adopted her sister Ayähu Berhan and her 13 slaves over her property. Tajetu freed the 13 slaves without retaining an interest in them. At the same time she freed her remaining unnamed slaves and placed the following conditions on them, “all the remaining slaves and Galloch (Oromos) shall serve me while I am alive; however, I have freed them in the name of God [subsequent to my death].”¹²⁵ Several other masters freed their slaves in a way that did not infringe upon their right of control over slaves in the masters’ lifetime.

¹²⁴Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 270.

¹²⁵ Yärest Mäzgäb, MS., Däbrä-Marqos, picture # 270: “የቀሩትን ባሮች ጋሎች ሁሉ እስከአለሁ ያገልግሉኝ እንጂ በእንተ እግዚአብሔር አርነት አውጥቻለሁ።”

The act of manumission was presumably much older than the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Yet a significant modification occurred in the legal and political context in which manumission was observed in the last quarter of the nineteenth and in the three decades of the twentieth centuries. The period saw a widening scope of charters of manumission for several reasons. The Ethiopian government turned against slavery in general and the slave trade in particular.¹²⁶ Many acts of manumission were perhaps in response to government pressure. Yet manumitting slaves was not adopted by all slave owners. Most acts of manumissions were made willingly without compulsion. Religion provided the motive for *Wäyzäro Täjetu* for the freeing of her slaves, as discussed above. Some acts of manumission were motivated by sentiments other than religion. Affection and gratitude seems to be the background for acts of manumission and adoption by *Qätäro Wäldeya* and *Tebelät Delu*. Adoption and manumission of slaves was more likely to occur among childless masters and those with higher social standing such as *Mämher Kenfä-Mika'el*, *Wäldä-Giyorgis* and *Wäyzäro Täjetu*. Given that adoption of wealthy and influential persons and collateral heirs was preferred, the adoption and freeing of the slaves is remarkable. The charters of manumission reflect a new consciousness and a new ideology that percolated among upper class Ethiopians. Taken as a whole these charters signify changes in shared ideas about slavery and a growing appreciation of the immorality of the institution.

Conclusion

Property documents open a window onto a new social world of Ethiopian society in the past. The real strength of these sources is their social depth and their closeness to the lived experiences of the various layers of Ethiopian society. Through these sources we gain a deeper insight into the social experiences of not only the rich and the privileged class, but also ordinary

¹²⁶ Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University Press, 1968), pp. 112-120.

people and slaves. Unlike chronicle sources, which privilege top elites in the first instance, property documents offer information on lower level landholders and actors. This rich documentation comes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during which the central institutions of church and state in Ethiopia were at their lowest ebb. However, contrary to the prevalent assumption, property documents create a general impression of creativity, prosperity and liveliness rather than decline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Furthermore, it is not a matter for debate that the legal systems of the preceding centuries continued to shape social relations in the twentieth century. In particular, *rim* property was one of the most enduring elements of Gondärine traditions. The land market and associated transactions was closely related to the introduction of *rim* property and the individualization of holding that attended its introduction. There were a myriad of factors other than simply individual rights and freedom of alienation for the development of market in land. Economic hardship, debt, bright land market, and security concerns all served as the background for land transactions. The evidence on property transaction contradicts the conventional interpretation that land was more than an economic resource, which people were less inclined to alienate through sale or other means. The vibrant market in land suggests the need to radically change the traditional ideas of *rest* as inalienable property.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion: *Rim and Zéga*

The central argument of this dissertation is that the Ethiopian land tenure system institutionalized and supported an extreme form of economic and social domination, and that the study of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries archival sources related to land highlights a social hierarchy different from prevailing views of land tenure studies. While the predominant land tenure literature emphasizes the production autonomy of rural cultivators, this study has established the existence of serf-like laborers—the *zéga*—who lacked social, economic, and political rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Gondärine kingdom. *Rim* property was what exposed the social dependence of the *zéga* class on the ruling class. For most scholars, however, the forms of property through which the Ethiopian ruling classes supported themselves were rights of lordship, which simply entitled them to extract tax and tribute from landowning rural farming people. Contrary to the assumption of many scholars, the Ethiopian rulers did acquire full control over the land and labor of the people living on it by using various legal means, alongside the threat of force and violence. Indeed thousands of formerly autonomous peasants were stripped of a considerable proportion of their ancestral land, which was then given by rulers to the ruling class and religious institutions in *rim* tenure.

My study has departed from the views of the literature which portrays the land tenure system in twentieth century Ethiopia of the south as materially different from the one which prevailed in the northern part of the country. In this view, because of the ethnic and cultural difference between the two interacting groups, the rural cultivators in the south were more harshly exploited by the landlord class than their counterparts in the north. The vortex of ethnic movements that the 1974 Ethiopian revolution ripped open fully embraces and perpetuates this interpretation. The Gondärine land regime and that of its twentieth century southern Ethiopia

successors differ only in their outward forms. My view is that the rural reorganization that accompanied the conquest of southern Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century by Emperor Menilek II (1889-1913) were based on Gondärine precepts with roots going back to the seventeenth century. Contrary to the traditional view, this study has demonstrated that the social position of the *zéga* during the Gondärine period closely corresponded to the tenants of southern Ethiopia and ethnic and cultural distinction was an entirely irrelevant variable for maintaining a sharp social distance between landlords and tenants.

Analysis of *zéga* in tandem with *rim* property deepens our understanding of the social and political developments that underlay modern Ethiopian society. Indeed *rim* was such an indelible part of the material construction of Ethiopian society that it is to be found virtually throughout Bägémeder, Gojjam, Tegray and Wällo provinces stretching over a period of three centuries. Beginning with the second half of the seventeenth century, land grant documents conveyed property rights in *rim*. In some areas the expansion of *rim* was more rapid than in others. In Bägémeder province, notably so, *rim* grants started to trickle in the 1650s and reached their peak a century later. The scale of institutional grants and foundation was noteworthy particularly during the *Zämänä-Mäsafent*. Contrary to the widely held assumption, the *Zämänä-Mäsafent* was marked by urbanization and commercial interchange, creativity, church building, painting, and a new pursuit of luxury. By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century *rim* had become the dominant form of property for both clerical and secular elites throughout northern Ethiopia.

My dissertation took as its starting point an interest in how the invention of *rim* property in the seventeenth century and its growing prevalence in subsequent centuries transformed the social landscape of rural Ethiopia, primarily through the employment of legal documents. *rim*

property affected the whole spectrum of social, economic and cultural life. Exploration into private property transfer, dispute, the practice of land measurement and boundary marking has demonstrated that the Gondärine period brought in the ascendancy of landlords on one hand and significant shift in the conditions of parts of the peasants described as *zégoch* towards serfdom on the other. Peasants surrendered their property to the ruling class and more and more of them were submerged into the status of dependent tenants or *zégoch*. The many instances of the *zéga* class in all variety of sources speak to the importance of this labor for the ruling class in the past. The *zégoch* could be distinguished from other rural groups and their distinctive status had an impact on their lived experience. This is evident from the appearance of the term as a separate classificatory term to describe a certain group of people occupying distinct social space.

Zégenät was an acquired marker of subordination; it was essentially the consequence of some tenurial arrangement. Yet the *zégoch*'s tenure condition was dissimilar from those of the conventional tenants. Specific legal conditions also determined the distinctive juridical status of *zégoch*. As has been detailed, as a norm the *zégoch*, unlike other rural groups, were placed under the private jurisdiction of the *rim* holders on whose land they lived and resided. Moreover, the *zéga* class tended to develop ties to their landlords and the land they occupied as the result of successive occupation of the land. In the context of Tegray and Wällo, the *zéga* class is not attested to in the sources. However, we have observed that the lords in Tegray and Wällo stood in exactly the same social and power relations to their tenants as that in which landlords in Bägémeder and Gojjam stood to their *zégoch*. The tenants in Tegray and Wällo, like the *zéga* class in Bägémeder and Gojjam, were subject to the private jurisdiction of their landlords and they worked the land, owed rents and services to their landlords. Gondärine rural society was therefore highly unequal and broadly divided into the ruling classes and rural farming subjects,

who included peasant small holders, landless tenants and serf-like *zégoch*.

The real achievement of my research is the depth of evidence. The Ethiopian primary material provides a fresh window not just on property, social and political relations in Gondärine Ethiopia but on land and politics in precolonial Africa more widely. In fact, what has made land documents the center of my research in the past twelve years has been the growing appreciation that land tenure arrangements illustrate and articulate crucial features of social hierarchy and political power. This study adds to the literature which acknowledges that in at least some areas of Africa, land tenure was important for the sustenance of elite power. Although Africanists still ignore land in their discussion of precolonial African states and societies, land has played a key role in relation to state formation, and sustaining state power particularly in Sudanic Africa. The story of the development of *rim* along with *zéga* is only beginning to unfold. The concept of *zéga* presents opportunities for further development from several angles. The Ethiopian material presents opportunities for comparison with development in other premodern settings both inside and outside of Africa.

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