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**NAVAL
POSTGRADUATE
SCHOOL**

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**BELEAGUERED MUSLIM FORTRESSES AND
ETHIOPIAN IMPERIAL EXPANSION FROM THE 13TH TO
THE 16TH CENTURY**

by

Travis J. Owens

June 2008

Thesis Co-Advisors:

Letitia Lawson
Abbas Kadhim

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**BELEAGUERED MUSLIM FORTRESSES AND ETHIOPIAN IMPERIAL
EXPANSION FROM THE 13TH TO THE 16TH CENTURY**

Travis J. Owens

Lieutenant Commander, Judge Advocate General's Corps, United States Navy
B.S., University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 1993
J.D., University of Cincinnati College of Law, 1997

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
June 2008**

Author: Travis J. Owens

Approved by: Letitia Lawson
Thesis Co-Advisor

Abbas Kadhim
Thesis Co-Advisor

Harold Trinkunas
Chairman, Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

J.S. Trimingham has famously described Ethiopia as a “beleaguered fortress in the midst of a sea of Islam,” implying Christians in Ethiopia have consistently been besieged by Muslims, not *vice versa*. This thesis challenges this common conception by demonstrating that throughout Ethiopia’s medieval period (1270-1555), the time of greatest conflict between the Ethiopian Empire and its Muslim neighbors, Muslim forces did not besiege the Ethiopian Empire. On the contrary, the Ethiopians militarily subjugated their neighboring Muslim sultanates, most prominently Ifat and Adal, and politically divided the sultanates’ ruling families to keep them weak. These tactics, designed to wrest control of trade from the sultanates, were resoundingly successful until Muslims unified around military/religious leaders, primary among them being *Imam* Gran, who in 1531 conquered the Ethiopian Empire. Though Imperial forces reversed the conquest by 1543, a historical focus on this event still feeds the misperception that Ethiopia’s history is that of a Christian kingdom ensconced in a fortress to protect itself from a beleaguering “Muslim menace.” This thesis concludes to the contrary that the Ethiopian Empire waded aggressively and purposefully into the sea of Islam to beleaguer its many Muslim neighbors.

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In Ethiopia, a little boy was recently born. Crushing poverty or disease will unfairly demand that the boy's parents give him up for adoption. Within a year, he will be in my house, his new home. My little lost boy inspired me to explore Ethiopia's history. His Ethiopian parents have no idea a caring, intelligent professor, Letitia Lawson, has worked tirelessly to ensure their son's Daddy knows something of the Horn of Africa's history. Nor can they imagine that Abbas Kadhim, a professor who fled the brutality of Saddam Hussein, then migrated to the land of the Prophet Muhammad and ultimately to NPS would pique my interest in Islam in Ethiopia by telling me of the "first *Hijra*" to Ethiopia by the Prophet's followers. How *could* they even imagine such things could happen?

My professors prepared me to teach my little boy his history, but this was only possible because of my selfless and beautiful wife, Lori, who gave me weekends for research while she toiled over countless adoption forms so I could simply "sign here and here and...." My way-too-clever son Michael and his energetic sister Delaney also sacrificed those weekends for the "little brother" Michael always remembered in profound, simple bedtime prayers that made me proud to be his father.

As this thesis shows, my Ethiopian son could come from any religious tradition, not just my religious tradition of Christianity. It is the responsibility I owe his Ethiopian family to recognize that and to tell him, "*Allu Akbar!*" because at NPS I have seen that God is great. I have seen God's greatness not in vain, big things like houses by the beach or graduate degrees but in meaningful, small acts of sacrifice made by my family and my professors during the construction of this thesis, acts that in the case of a little boy from Ethiopia will allow him to learn his history.

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I. INTRODUCTION

If you do even cursory internet research on Ethiopian history, it will not be long before you run across an oft-repeated description of Ethiopia as a place lost “in a sea of Islam.”¹ This popular description of Ethiopia originates from J.S. Trimingham, an Orientalist historian who in 1969 described historic Ethiopia as “a beleaguered fortress in the midst of a sea of Islam.”² Few claims in historical writing so succinctly encapsulate a vision of a centuries-old struggle in a single country. The word picture evokes a heroic vision of a besieged people struggling to avoid drowning in the midst of the rising tide of heretical power. Unfortunately, this powerful vision, as I argue in this thesis, greatly distorts the role Muslims played in Ethiopian history. The distortion occurs because Trimingham’s image suggests a fundamentally flawed conclusion: that the “beleaguered” Ethiopian Empire, comprised of Christian kingdoms in the Ethiopian highlands, was under constant siege by Muslim neighbors. This suggestion, however, is unsupported by the facts. I argue in this thesis that the Muslim neighbors of the Ethiopian Empire were besieged by Christian Ethiopia throughout the medieval period.

My research is limited to Ethiopia’s medieval period (1270-1550).³ If there were ever a time when Trimingham’s word picture ought to hold up it would be in the medieval period, when specific Islamic forces did in fact at various times pose their greatest threat to the Christian Empire. The notion that the Christian Empire was beleaguered by its Muslim neighbors, however, turns out to be fundamentally flawed

¹ See for example, Daniel Rempel, “Island of Christianity in a Sea of Islam,” November 21, 2002 by <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/news/releases/2002/11/11-21ethiopia.php> (accessed May 7, 2008); “Ethiopia Religion,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-37687/Ethiopia> (accessed May 7, 2008).

² J. Spencer Trimingham, “The Expansion of Islam,” In *Islam in Africa*, edited by James Kritzeck, and William H. Lewis, New York: Van Nostrand-Reinhold Company, 1969, 21.

³ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1998, xiv, gives 1632 as the end date of the medieval period. For this thesis, however, it is unnecessary to take the historic review of this time period past the decade just after the defeat and death of the Muslim *Imam* Gran in 1543.

even when applied to the medieval period. Thus, I seek to answer the question: were Ethiopia's Islamic neighbors a threat to the Empire or was the Empire actually a threat to its Islamic neighbors in the medieval period?

A. LITERATURE REVIEW

To answer this question, I must first address in more detail the debate in the literature about the relations of Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia. The “standard work on the subject”⁴ remains Trimingham's 297-page book *Islam in Ethiopia*, published in 1952. In line with Edward Ullendorff's *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* published in 1960, Trimingham's work articulates a view of Ethiopia as a Christian Empire historically facing a constant external threat in the form of the “Muslim menace.”⁵ In *Islam in Ethiopia*, Trimingham posits Ethiopia survived in spite of Islam and due in large part to the Christian people's “national consciousness” rooted in Monophysite Christianity and Semitic tradition.⁶ Ullendorff simply dismisses the importance of Islamic influence in the region's history by writing that “Islam can be disposed of very quickly... partly on account of its merely secondary importance to an understanding of the essential Abyssinia [Ethiopia]....”⁷ Trimingham and Ullendorff, writing in the Orientalist vein, set the stage for a generation of historians to reject Islam as an historically important factor in Ethiopia, other than as a violent menace to it.

In 1992, Ahmed Hussein, published “The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia” in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* challenging the Orientalist view of Islam in Ethiopia. Taking the Orientalists to task, he laid out a basic critique of the earlier literature on Ethiopian history, positing that “positive interactions between Muslim and Christian Ethiopians may well prove to have been of far greater importance than conflicts.”⁸ In

⁴ Hussein Ahmed, “The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 3 (1992): 15.

⁵ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1952, 84; see also Asa J. Davis, “The Sixteenth Century Jihad in Ethiopia and the Impact on its Culture (Part I),” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2 (1963): 567-92.

⁶ Trimingham, 1952: 142-45.

⁷ Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, 113 (emphasis added).

⁸ Ahmed, 1992: 18.

addition, he argued that “Islam cannot be seen as a historical force external to Ethiopia” but that it has been “an integral part of the Ethiopian culture.”⁹ He identified a “historiographical prejudice” that places Christianity at the core of all historical analysis of Ethiopia and Islam on the periphery (recalling Trimingham’s statement that “Islam in the region is not significant in itself but only in relation to the history of the Christian state....”).¹⁰ Ahmad argued that older research on Islam ignores the presence of indigenous Muslims in medieval Ethiopia. Medieval Ethiopia was an empire made up of several Christian kingdoms, each of which sought autonomy. Throughout the medieval period, however, these kingdoms generally recognized the Empire, under the Solomonic Dynasty, as sovereign and consolidated their people under the Solomonic banner when unity was needed. The older research tells only the story of these Christian kingdoms and their efforts at consolidation, leaving out the story of the Muslims who lived and worked in these “Christian kingdoms.” Ahmad also criticizes the monolithic view of Islam in Ethiopia in that historians of Ethiopia have failed to distinguish between “the political, often expansionist, manifestations of external Islam on the one hand, and indigenous Islam which is part of the Ethiopian culture on the other.”¹¹

Finally, Ahmed lays out a series of questions for future research. In 2001, Ahmed himself addressed some of these questions in an in-depth examination of 19th century Wallo, Ethiopia.¹² Subsequent to Ahmed’s writings, others have challenged the views Ahmad criticized.¹³ Haggai Erlich has aided in the corrective effort presenting facts about Islamic powers that interacted with Ethiopia and their efforts at cooperation with Ethiopia. In 1994, 2002 and 2007, Erlich published books on Ethiopia’s relations with the Middle East generally, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt, respectively, addressing relations

⁹ Ahmed, 1992: 18.

¹⁰ Ibid; Trimingham, 1969, 21.

¹¹ Ahmed, 1992: 45-46.

¹² Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001.

¹³ John L. Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia: Updated Ed.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002; Paul Henze B. *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia*, New York: Palgrave, 2000.

between Ethiopian Islamic communities and the Muslim world at large.¹⁴ Some authors have challenged the Orientalist view of Islam as an outside invader. Kapteijns, for example, argues that the sixteenth century ‘Islamic conquest,’ was not an external invasion, but a ‘civil war’ waged by indigenous Muslims.¹⁵ Esposito lays responsibility for the sixteenth century Muslim “invasion” of Ethiopia at the feet of Christian expansionists.¹⁶ These authors, however, have only lightly touched on the topic with no in-depth narrative laying out the facts that would respond to the notion of a perennial Muslim menace to the Ethiopian Empire. Other authors have also begun taking a more open view of Islamic influence in their written general histories of Ethiopia. In *The Ethiopians: A History*, for example, Pankhurst provides a thorough general history across time that presents facts showing the interdependence, as well as conflicts, between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia.¹⁷ While Pankhurst’s book, like other general histories of high quality, presents many facts relevant to this thesis, the book only lays out the facts. Pankhurst’s history and other histories like it do not cull the facts to address head on this misguided notion that Ethiopia’s Islamic neighbors were a constant threat to Ethiopia.

Accordingly, a gap exists in the literature on Ethiopia in that, first, the written histories do not focus their aim at collecting and analyzing evidence of the nature of Muslim-Christian interactions in the medieval period and, second, none of them are written to address the nature of the relationship of Ethiopia and its Christian neighbors. I hope to make a contribution to filling that gap. This thesis seeks to address the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia during the medieval period, at the time of their worst conflicts, as well as their greatest cooperation.

¹⁴ Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Middle East*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994; Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007; Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002.

¹⁵ David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Lidwien Kapteijns, “Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa,” in *The History of Islam in Africa* edited by Nehemia Levtzion, and Randall L. Pouwels, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Pankhurst, 1998.

B. METHODS AND SOURCES

This thesis will primarily consist of a historical narrative constructed by reexamining pre-1990¹⁸ historical literature in light of facts and arguments published since 1990. No primary sources or original evidence will be presented. Instead, the narrative seeks to eliminate bias and assign the appropriate weight to evidence that has long been recognized, but systematically underemphasized, to arrive at a balanced assessment of the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory effects of forces of Islam in medieval Ethiopian history.

C. OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

In this Introductory Chapter I, I have laid out my basic challenge to the “sea of Islam” conception and stated my research question. In Chapter II, I address the pre-medieval period in Ethiopia, sketching the arrival of Christianity and Islam. I provide a brief overview of the pre-medieval period to explain how Muslim and Christian relationships and their spheres of influence took shape just prior to the medieval period. I introduce the reader to the geographic area under consideration to establish the geographic religious make-up of Ethiopia on the eve of the medieval period and most importantly to establish the development of the Muslim-controlled trade routes that were the source of the conflicts between the Ethiopian Empire and its Muslim neighbors throughout the medieval period. This is necessary to show that the conflicts were the result of aggressive, expansionary policies of the Ethiopian Empire, not the result of aggression by the Empire’s Muslim neighbors.

In contrast to Chapter II’s more general background on the pre-medieval period, Chapter III provides an in-depth historical narrative of the medieval period in the form of a time line of Ethiopian history that details the rule of several important Christian rulers of the Solomonic dynasty. To the extent possible based on my secondary sources, I also

¹⁸ Beginning around 1990, the literature began constructively calling for a reexamination of previous conclusions drawn about Islam’s influence in Ethiopia. (See Ahmed, 1992). The point about imbalance in coverage of the Muslim-Christian relation had been made before for example in Braukamper, Ulrich. *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays*. Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2002: 152. (The particular essay was originally published in the 1984.)

detail the rule of Sultans that interacted with the Solomonic dynasty. In this narrative, I directly address the questions posed in this thesis by detailing *cooperation* between Muslims and Christians and the *causes* of conflict. In terms of cooperation, I will show the evolution of interdependence via trade between the Solomonic Empire and its Muslim neighbors. This narrative will correct existing narratives by interweaving relevant facts, previously downplayed, that show that the relationship between Christians and Muslims was often cooperative and interdependent, becoming violent for the most part only at times when the Christian forces of the Solomonic Empire were expanding into Muslim territory and attempting to take control of trade and/or territory from several of the Muslim sultanates south and east of Ethiopia. Overall, this collection of evidence will demonstrate how the paradigm of a “beleaguered [Ethiopian] fortress in a sea of Islam” sinks under a tide of evidence. In Chapter IV, I offer conclusions based on this corrected narrative.

II. ETHIOPIAN RELIGION, GEOGRAPHY AND TRADE ROUTES ON THE EVE OF THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Despite descriptions of Ethiopia as a ‘beleaguered Christian fortress,’ a review of the medieval period will show that in actuality the Christian Emperors in medieval Ethiopia were besieging their Islamic neighbors, infringing upon their territory often resulting in brutal conflicts. The root cause of these conflicts was not religion but the Ethiopian desire to wrest control of trade routes from their Islamic neighbors.¹⁹ In this section of the thesis, I lay out how Ethiopia came to share borders with several Muslim polities in the pre-medieval period so the reader can see how Christian expansion in the medieval period infringed on Muslim territory. Additionally, I discuss how trade developed in the region prior to the medieval period in order to show how trade cemented mutual dependence between Christian and Muslim polities but also became the central cause behind Ethiopian expansion in the medieval period.

A. ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY’S ARRIVAL IN ETHIOPIA

While Islamic contacts with Ethiopia can be traced to the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Islam truly came to Ethiopia to stay around the 8th century C.E when Islamic traders from the Dahlak Islands, located in the Red Sea off the coast of modern-day Eritrea (see Figure 2), began moving into the Ethiopian hinterland.²⁰ Muslim settlers primarily from Yemen and the Hadrawmat, in the southern Arabian Peninsula, also migrated to the Red Sea coast of today’s Eritrea creating an “Islamic strip” along the Horn of Africa’s Red Sea coast.²¹ Sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries, these

¹⁹ Tamrat, 1972: 80; Esposito, 501; see also James Currey, *General History of Africa, Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1992): 281-282 (explaining that “[s]ince the commercial route through the Nile Valley had been closed to Christian Ethiopia and the sea route to India had been reduced to a minimum, because of the consolidation and extension of Muslim control, the Christian kingdom was compelled to seek its expansion southwards, towards the centre of the Ethiopian plateau.”)

²⁰ Kapteijns, 228; Esposito, 501-03; Erlich, 1994: 5-6; Braukamper, 2002: 5; Robinson, 112.

²¹ Ullendorff, 51; Martin, B.G. “Mahdism, Muslim Clerics, and Holy Wars in Ethiopia, 1300-1600,” In *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, edited by H. Marcus, 91-100. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1975: 91 (quoting Alawi bin Tahir al-Haddad, *Al-Madkhal ila ta’rikh al-Islam bi’l-Sharq al-Aqsa* (Cairo: 1391/1971), 23.).

settlers established a sultanate around the Somali port of Mogadishu.²² The Muslim traders spread from there and the Dahlak Islands into the hinterland from about the ninth century C.E.

The Muslim settlement of the Islamic strip was preceded by the arrival of Christianity, which first came to the ancient city-state of Aksum in the fourth century C.E.²³ Aksum (identified as “Aksumite Ethiopia” in Figure 1) contracted over time and in the first half of the twelfth century came to be ruled by the Zagwe dynasty.²⁴ See Figure 1.

²² Esposito, 501.

²³ Trim, 1952: 40; Abraham Demoz, “The Many Worlds of Ethiopia,” *African Affairs* 68 (1969): 49; Erlich, 1994: 3.

²⁴ Tamrat, 1972: 54.

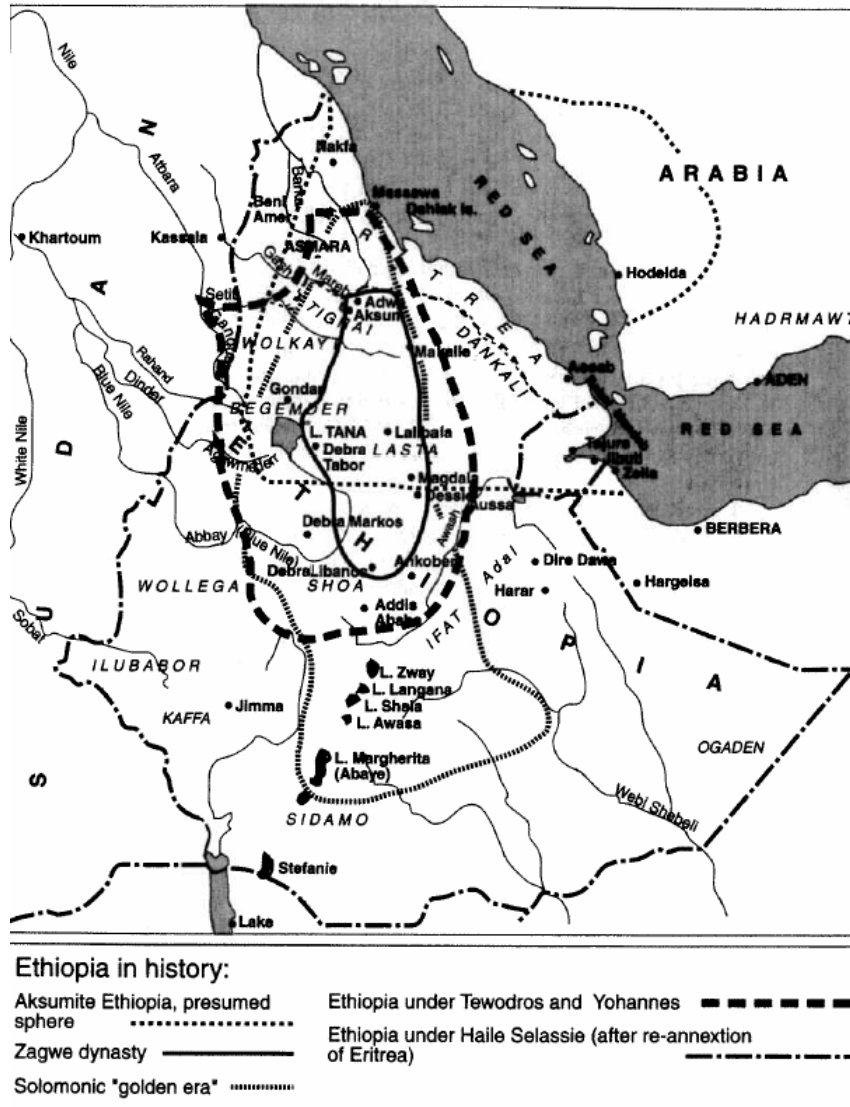


Figure 1. Contraction and Growth of Ethiopia in History²⁵

Around 1270 C.E., Amharan forces led by Emperor Yekuno Amlak (ruled 1270-1285) killed the last Zagwean ruler of Ethiopia. Emperor Amlak declared himself Ethiopia's ruler, revived the Solomonic dynasty, and effectively began Ethiopia's

²⁵ Erlich, 1994: x.

medieval period.²⁶ Figure 2 shows that at the outset of the medieval period, Emperor Amlak's Ethiopia was a conglomeration of Christian kingdoms, principally Amhara, Lasta and Tigray bordered on the east and south by Muslim territories.



Figure 2. Christian Territories in the Ethiopian Highlands up to the Medieval Period²⁷

Emperor Amlak's Empire was Christian, based ultimately on a legendary marriage between Queen Sheba of Ethiopia and the Jewish King Solomon.²⁸ During the early

²⁶ Demoz, 50.

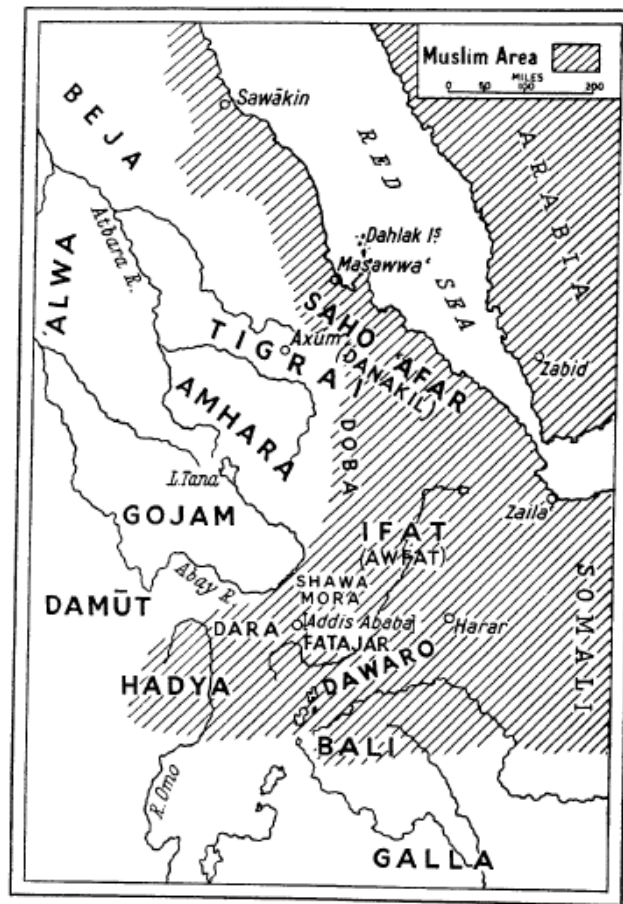
²⁷ Tamrat, 1972: 54.

²⁸ Ibid.

medieval period, under the reign of Emperor Amda Seyon (r. 1314-1344), the Ethiopian Empire expanded to encompass a growing number of non-Christian regions. This expansion into Muslim territory is what led to conflict, not Muslim attacks on the Christian kingdoms. The following section explains in more detail the location of these Islamic sultanates vis-à-vis the Christian kingdoms.

B. GEOGRAPHY OF THE ISLAMIC SULTANATES AND CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS

Figure 3 is a diagram of where the Christian and Muslim areas were primarily located from the outset of the medieval period to the mid-14th century.



MUSLIM STATES IN THE TIME OF 'AMDA SYÖN I
(A.D. 1314-44)

Figure 3. Muslim Areas in Early Medieval Ethiopia²⁹

²⁹ Trimingham, 1952: 64.

Many of these “Muslim areas” were “beleaguered” by the Christian Emperors in the medieval period. These Muslim sultanates are presented in more detail in Figure 4, which also shows how the area of Christian control had shifted south and east between 1270 and 1344 (compare Figure 2).³⁰

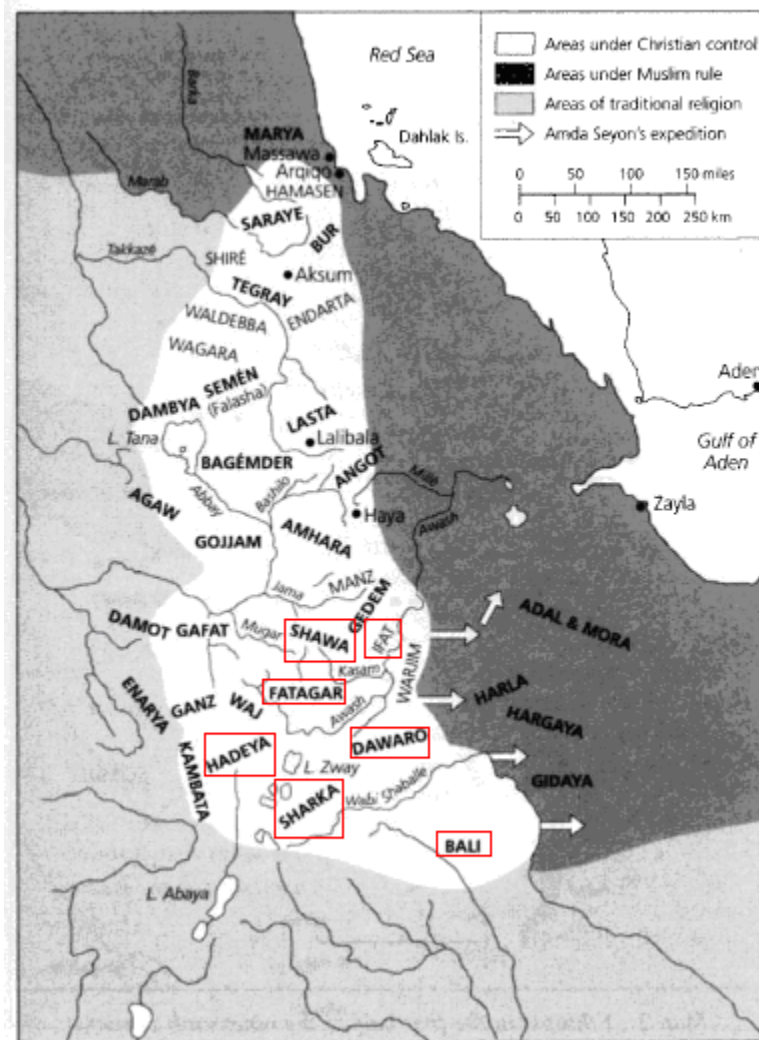


Figure 4. The Ethiopian Empire at the Time of Emperor Amda Seyon (1314-1344)

³⁰ Pankhurst, 1998: Map 1.

In Figure 4, the “Areas under Christian control” marked in white include several previously Muslim controlled principalities in the south: Ifat, Fatagar, Hadeya, Dawaro, Sharka, Bali and southern Shawa.³¹ The religious composition of Ganz, just north of Hadeya, is far from clear but it certainly contained Muslim inhabitants though Christian influence would predominate over Islamic influence in Ganz later in the medieval period.³² As discussed in detail later, the Ethiopian Emperor Amda Seyon took control of these Muslim territories to his south during his reign from 1314-1344. Ethiopian Emperors thereafter continued pressing eastward (see Figure 4) resulting in more conflict with the Muslim sultans. Since Shawa was an important area of Christian control, it is of note that while I have marked Shawa in Figure 4 as a “Muslim area,” the story of Shawa is more complicated. At least part of Shawa had a pre-medieval history of Muslim control. Over time Muslim control faded to the point that during the early medieval period the Ethiopian Empire controlled most of Shawa while the Sultanate of Ifat, adjacent to Shawa, controlled a small portion of eastern Shawa.³³ An understanding of the location of these principalities is important since the history of the medieval period is a long story of Christian efforts to move southward from Shawa and eastward (see Figure 4) in an effort to gain control of trade routes that ran through these Muslim principalities.

C. THE MAJOR TRADE ROUTES

Figure 5 represents the trade routes that ran through Ethiopia at the outset of the medieval period. These routes extended south and west from the coast beginning with the pre-medieval arrival of Islamic traders described earlier. By the beginning of the

³¹ According to G.W.B. Huntingford *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia from the First Century AD to 1704*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989: 86, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, “In addition to the provinces directly under the jurisdiction of the king, a number of other areas were tributary to the king but under his own rulers... Waj, Ganz, Hadeya, Bali, Dawaro, Fatagar, Ifat, Geddem, Angot, Agaw, Gozzam (Gojjam), Gafat, and Damot.”; Braukamper, *Islamic Principalities* 40 (“Although the dominating influence of the territory was undoubtedly Christian, a more or less intensive Muslim infiltration cannot be excluded because of its exposed situation on the frontier of Adal. A general characterization as ‘one of the Muslim states’ [citing Beckingham and Huntingford 1954] cannot, however, be accepted.”).

³² Braukamper, 2002: 47-49.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19-20 (see also 135 for an example of the difficulty in deciphering the geography of the region: “the ancient state of Bali... must not be confused in geographical size with the Ethiopian province of that name.”)

medieval period, the routes had been developed to the point Figure 5 illustrates. The routes in Figure 5 would remain active throughout the medieval period becoming the primary source of conflict.³⁴

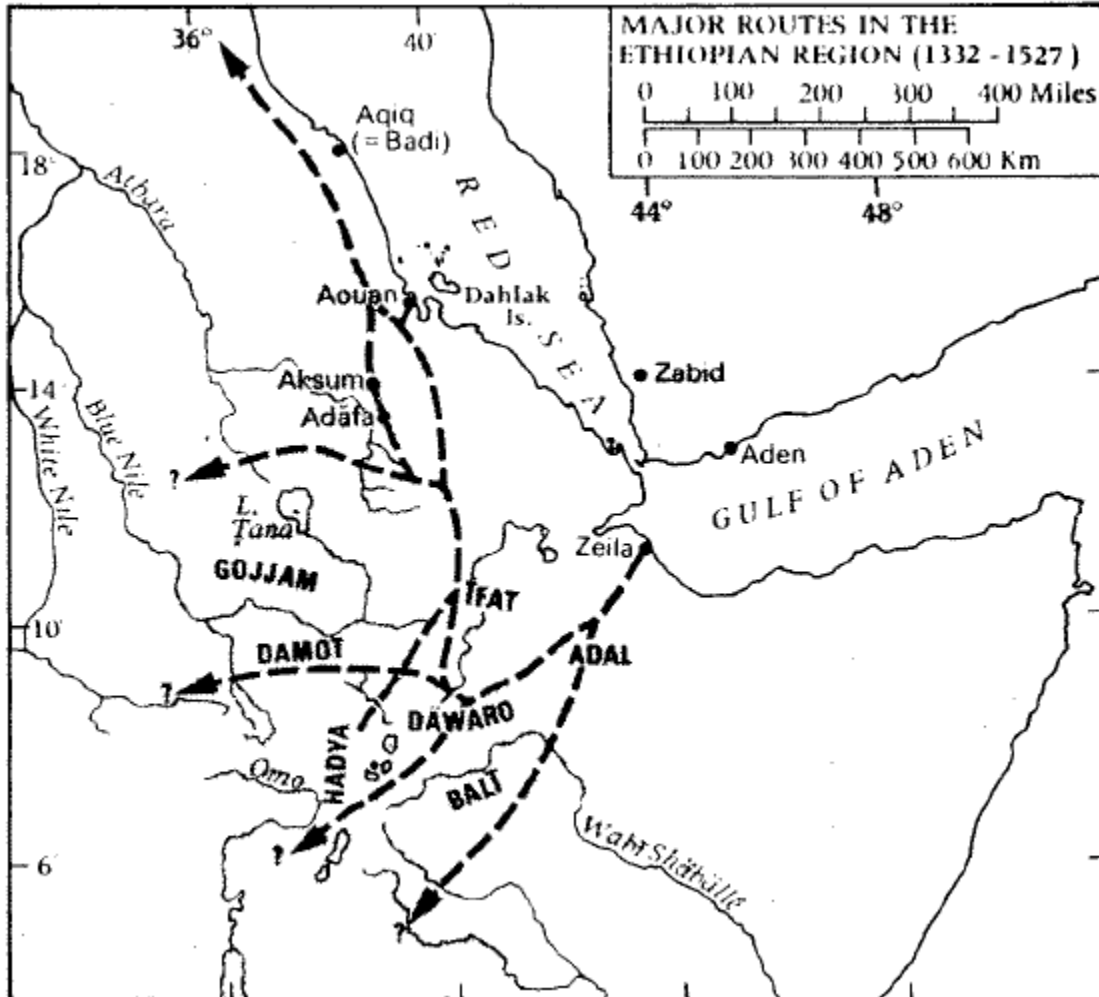


Figure 5. Trade Routes in Medieval Ethiopia (1332-1527)

Trade routes originated around the Dahlak Islands and the Port of Zeila, both of which were areas of Muslim control (see Figure 1). The trade routes then snaked through the heart of the territory the Christians sought to control in the 14th century. Emperor Seyon took control of Bali, Dawaro, Hadeya and Ifat, all Muslim areas that Figure 5 illustrates he clearly needed to control in order to control trade.

³⁴ Tamrat, 1972: 81.

In medieval Ethiopia, Muslims traders controlled several important trade commodities including rock salt, slaves, ivory and cloth.³⁵ Rock salt was a form of primitive money that made exchange of goods easier in an otherwise barter-based economy, and it was highly prized in the Empire as it could only be obtained at some distance in the difficult Afar/Dankali depression region east of Tigray and only with great difficulty due to its weight and relative fragility. Ethiopia often traded slaves, which brought high prices in the Near and Middle East, for rock salt.³⁶ Most slaves came from the pagan/“traditional religion” areas to the west of the Ethiopian Empire seen in Figures 2, 4 and 5.³⁷ After the long transport to these slave-producing regions, two or three blocks of rock salt could sometimes be exchanged for one good slave.³⁸ The Ethiopian Emperors and Muslim merchants and their local partners sold many slaves after taking them captive in their various raids in these frontier areas.³⁹ The trade of slaves and rock salt formed an essential part of Muslim trade in the Ethiopian region.⁴⁰ However, the Ethiopian Emperors also ruled valleys that were rich in wildlife, including elephants. The Emperors’ forces systematically hunted elephants, removed their tusks and exchanged the ivory for luxury items like jewels, gold and other precious metals brought by Muslim traders from India, Egypt, Greece and Rome.⁴¹ Controlling trade so as to tax it became a central goal of the Ethiopian Emperor Amda Seyon at the outset of the medieval period.⁴²

The Ethiopian Empire did not, however, simply seek to take over all aspects of trade. For example, they wanted the Muslims to continue to handle certain elements of

³⁵ Tamrat, 1972: 85; Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*, Ethiopia: The Red Sea Press, 1997: 25.

³⁶ Pankhurst, 1998: 70.

³⁷ Tamrat, 1972: 85.

³⁸ Pankhurst, 1997, 108.

³⁹ Tamrat, 1972: 85.

⁴⁰ Pankhurst, 1998: 70.

⁴¹ Tamrat, 1972: 88.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80.

production for trade.⁴³ Ethiopian society drew a sharp distinction between artisans and crafts workers. Artisans assisted in the building of elaborate churches and were respected. In contrast, crafts workers engaged in occupations such as pottery making, leather tanning, carpentry, and blacksmithing were despised and regarded by Christians as possessing the ‘evil eye.’⁴⁴ Despite this, Christians wanted Muslim craftsmen to make such items as cloth used as wraps, which served as another type of primitive currency. Only the Muslims had both cotton from the hot, arid lowland Islamic strip, and only Muslims were willing to work in the despised occupation of weavers.⁴⁵ The Ethiopian rulers thus bought such weaved commodities from Muslims, as well as silk, linen and carpets from foreign countries via Muslim traders.⁴⁶ Blacksmiths, another despised occupation, worked with thin bars of iron, another form of primitive money because it could be melted and shaped into tools.⁴⁷ Rather than fostering craftwork in the highlands then, leaving the production of these good to Muslims made sense.

Thus on the eve of the medieval period, Muslims principalities were in place to the south and east of the Ethiopian Christian kingdoms. These Muslim principalities controlled substantial trade routes of which the Ethiopians had by this time made long, consistent and substantial use. As we shall see in the next chapter, Emperor Amda Seyon’s efforts to control trade by invading Muslim-controlled areas to his south and east would result in considerable conflict with the neighboring Muslim principalities. Rather than the Christian Emperor hunkering down in some beleaguered fortress, he and his armies would actually lay siege to their multiple Muslim neighbors.

⁴³ Abir, Mordechai. “Trade and Christian-Muslim Relations in Post-Medieval Ethiopia,” In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, edited by R. L. Hess, 411-414, Chicago: Office of Publication Services, 1978: 412.

⁴⁴ M.E. Heldman “Fre Seyon: A Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Painter,” *African Arts* 31 (1998): 48.

⁴⁵ Pankhurst, 1998: 70.

⁴⁶ Abussamad Ahmad, “The Gondar Muslim Minority in Ethiopia,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 9 (1988): 76.

⁴⁷ Pankhurst, 1998: 70.

III. ETHIOPIAN EXPANSION OVER MUSLIM TERRITORY AND TRADE ROUTES (1270-1550)

A. THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE AND THE SULTANATE OF IFAT

In this section, I discuss how in the early decades of the medieval period, the Ethiopian Empire expanded southward and eastward from Shawa over several Islamic principalities including most importantly the Sultanate of Ifat. As we shall see, the geographic area into which the Empire expanded coincided directly with the areas of Muslim-controlled trade routes allowing the Empire to wrest a great deal of control over these routes from Muslim principalities. While expansion over several of these Muslim principalities would be relatively peaceful, Emperor Amda Seyon would encounter stiff resistance from Sultan Haqq ad-Dinn of Ifat. Ultimately, however, Emperor Seyon would violently subjugate Ifat, reducing it from an independent sultanate to a provincial governate by 1411, but not before Emperor Seyon had forced a split in Sultan Haqq ad-Dinn's family, the Walashma, who ruled Ifat. The more militant elements of the Walashma family would flee east from Ifat and set up the Sultanate of Adal, which would serve as the principal counterweight to further Ethiopian expansionary ambitions.

In 1270, the Christian leader Yekuno Amlak removed the Zagwean king, declared himself Emperor and reestablished the Solomonid dynasty in Amhara and Shawa in the Ethiopian highlands (see Figure 4 at the center).⁴⁸ The revival of the Solomonic Empire was aided by a revival of religious fervor, which in turn would aid the Christian Emperor's expansionary goals. Thanks to a legendary history dating back to Jerusalem and Solomon, the Ethiopian Emperor saw Ethiopians as the "chosen people" of God. The power of this Solomonic legend invigorated the Ethiopian state and Christian church by confirming Christianity as integral to the dynasty's success. The spread of these beliefs also gave an impetus to the southward expansion of the Christian kings, as the Christian

⁴⁸ Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa United Printers, 1972: 283; Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1970, 381 (the King "was persuaded... to abdicate" and "a treaty was drawn up.)

Emperor's Chroniclers began comparing Muslim leaders not under control of the Christian Empire with unrighteous and defeated enemies from scripture, for example Goliath, Pharaoh, Judas and Satan.⁴⁹

The essential Ethiopian expansionary conflict in the early fourteenth century was waged between Ethiopian Emperor Amda Seyon (r. 1314-44), the leader of the Solomonic dynasty, and Sultan Haqq ad Din of Ifat located on the Christian Empire's eastern border. Emperor Seyon had worked to consolidate his Empire internally and to gain considerable ground to his east as can be seen by comparing Figures 2 (pre-1270) and 4 (post-1270).⁵⁰ As he consolidated his imperial control, his economy grew, as did his desire for control of the Muslim-dominated trade routes.⁵¹ Without violence, Seyon began bringing Muslim communities to his south under his suzerainty. To avoid Imperial harassment, these Islamic principalities were required to recognize his suzerainty, pay taxes on trade and conform to his administration.⁵² It is not clear from the literature exactly which Muslim provinces peacefully entered into this accommodation of Christian control. What is clear, however, is that Sultan Haqq ad-Din of Ifat, resisted. Like their Christian counterparts, Muslims of Ifat conducted raids on neighboring areas grabbing loot and disappearing back across the desert. Some of these raids occurred in Seyon's areas of control, but because of their ephemeral nature did not pose a serious threat to the Empire. They also harassed some trading caravans again posing no serious threat to the Empire. Nevertheless, Emperor Seyon's chronicles report that in the early 1320's, Seyon complained to Sultan Haqq that a Christian mission he had sent to Cairo via the coast had been seized by one of Sultan Haqq's subjects and tortured.⁵³ Seyon then launched a

⁴⁹ Marcus, 18; John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 61; Pankhurst, 1998: 57.

⁵⁰ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000, 22.

⁵¹ Marcus, 19-20.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Franz A. Dombrowski, *Ethiopia's Access to the Red Sea*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985, 12.

major expedition against Ifat,⁵⁴ sacking the capital and eventually killing Haqq ad-Din.⁵⁵ He then attacked and looted other Muslim principalities including Hadeya in the south and Damot in the west (see Figure 4⁵⁶) breaking ties they had with Ifat. Ifat and these other Islamic principalities accepted Seyon's suzerainty and agreed to pay tribute in return for maintaining their autonomy.⁵⁷ Thereafter, conflict occurred between the forces of Emperor Seyon and Haqq-ad-Din's son, Darader.⁵⁸ Ifat was conquered, Emperor Seyon established garrisons in the region, and thereby gained control of the major trade routes though he did not control the Dahlak Islands to his north or the Port of Zeila (Zayla) and Adal to his east (see Figure 4).⁵⁹ This conquest began a series of battles between the Ethiopian Christian kingdoms and their Muslim neighbors that lasted until the end of the medieval period.

Within ten years of its conquest, Haqq ad-Din's brother, *Amir* Sabr ad-Din ("Sabradin"), assumed power in Ifat, and rallied the Muslim population, which had already grown tired of paying the Emperor's heavy taxes while seeing nothing but neglect in return.⁶⁰ Ifat did not share Ethiopian traditions or the feeling of national unity that many of the non-Muslim states had, and thus the rebellion met little internal resistance.⁶¹ Around 1332, Sabradin's supporters resumed harassing the Emperors caravans making their way to the Red Sea.⁶²

Ifat was not alone in rebelling. Amda Seyon spent considerable war materiel in this period suppressing rebellions in other parts of his empire, including Tigrai, Damot,

⁵⁴ Marcus gives a date of 1316 for this expedition, but several sources do not support this date although they do not give a specific date.

⁵⁵ Dombrowski, 73.

⁵⁶ Damot is located northwest of Hadeya in the westernmost box of Figure 4.

⁵⁷ Marcus, 21; Pankhurst, 1998: 73.

⁵⁸ Pankhurst, 1998: 73.

⁵⁹ Mordechai Abir, "Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa," In *The Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 4*, edited by J.D. Fage and Roland Oliver, 537-577, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1975), 144.

⁶⁰ Henze, 66; Marcus, 21; Kapteijns, 229:

⁶¹ Asa J. Davis, "The Sixteenth Century Jihad in Ethiopia and the Impact on its Culture (Part II): Implicit Factors behind the Movement," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3 (1964): 120.

⁶² Pankhurst, 1998: 73-74.

Dawaro and Hadeya, giving Sabradin time to rebuild his army.⁶³ While the Solomonid chronicles, a clearly biased source,⁶⁴ claim that Sabradin was planning to invade and permanently occupy the Christian highlands, Amda Seyon in fact made the first move.⁶⁵ To prevent Hadeya (See Figure 3) from reestablishing ties with Ifat, he sent troops into Hadeya, leading Sabradin to mount an invasion of Angot, Amhara and Shawa highlands in response (see Figure 4 at the middle of the eastern border of the “Areas under Christian control”).⁶⁶ The rebellious Muslim forces were all routed. Sabradin surrendered along with the Sultans of Dawaro and Hadeya. Despite his victory, Emperor Seyon did not replace the ruler of Ifat with an Ethiopian governor. Instead, he appointed Sabradin’s brother, Jamal ad-Din, to rule Ifat.⁶⁷

Had Emperor Seyon actually been defending himself against an advancing Muslim menace, he might have been expected to stop his advance at this point. Indeed, Jamal ad-Din promised the Muslims of the region would return to peaceful trading relations if Emperor Seyon would end his advance.⁶⁸ Seyon did not stop though. Instead, he pressed further east in Muslim territory, even though many of his troops were dying of disease or deserting.⁶⁹ To forestall Emperor Seyon’s invasion of their territories, the Muslim leaders of Adal and Mora (both located to the east of Ifat), who had stayed out of

⁶³ Marcus, 21.

⁶⁴ As Sellassie, 2, explains regarding the veracity of chronicles (the first Ethiopian chronicle being Amda Seyon’s), Seyon “was deeply concerned that the history of his Empire should be recorded. He appointed special persons to deal generally with the history of the emperors, with emphasis on his own time. [A chronicler’s] main function was to write whatever the principal dictated. After that, they took the written chronicles to the emperor for approval. If there was something displeasing to the emperor, he could order a change; or if there were some points, which the writers had not sufficiently stressed, he would ask for improvement. It is characteristic of the Ethiopian chroniclers to exaggerate the good works of the emperor and to ignore completely the baser aspects.” Sellassie cites an Ethiopian proverb: “God cannot be blamed and the Emperor cannot be accused.”

⁶⁵ Pankhurst, 1998: 73-74.

⁶⁶ Pankhurst reviews some of the Ethiopian writings in relation to this campaign and supposedly low Christian troop levels in Pankhurst, 8, 1 (1986): 18.

⁶⁷ Currey, 283; Dombrowski, 73-74.

⁶⁸ Tamrat, 1972: 144-45; Currey, 283, notes that later Jamal ad-Din “was ousted by a vast movement of Muslim reaction stirred up by a religious agitator, the Kadi Saleh. The latter managed to form a league of Muslim princes, but the *negus* [Emperor Seyon] once again defeated his enemies;” Pankhurst, 1998: 73-74.

⁶⁹ Marcus, 21-22.

the fight until this point, attacked Seyon's forces.⁷⁰ (As we shall see these areas east of Ifat would continue to be the target of Christian expansion as the medieval period wore on.) Amda Seyon marched on to Mora and Adal and the Afar country, the most distant campaign any Ethiopian ruler had yet undertaken.⁷¹ By the end of his assault in 1332, Emperor Seyon had broken the rebellion in Ifat, sacked Ifat's capital, and menaced Adal, a harbinger of battles to come in the medieval period. He had also forcefully brought the Muslim sultanates of Hadeya and Dawaro back under control.⁷²

Figure 4 shows the Muslim areas under Emperor Seyon's control at the end of his reign in 1342. In these areas, the Emperor now had ultimate authority over which heir would rule.⁷³ By maintaining this control over successors, he was able to create competing factions within the Muslim leadership as various leaders sought his blessing over their ascension to power. He thereby divided the Muslim leaders in order to rule them.⁷⁴ Thus it was that Emperor Seyon's son Sayfa Ar'ad (r. 1342-70) inherited Muslim factions on his frontier. On one hand, his weakened Muslim neighbors did continue to rebel including one rebellion that required Ar'ad to send 30,000 troops into Ifat.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Muslim traders and merchants preferred peace to conflict.⁷⁶ Thus, some seventy-five years now into the medieval period, we see a reality of divided, ineffectual Muslim leadership and Muslim traders' inclined to peace, a reality that lends no support to the traditional image of the Christian Empire as a fortress beleaguered by its neighbors.

Like his father, Emperor Ar'ad kept the rulers of Ifat weak. He even sought to incorporate Ifat completely into his administration, which led to a split within Ifat's ruling family between militant elements who wanted independence from the Emperor's rule and those more concerned with improving commerce.⁷⁷ The independence-minded

⁷⁰ Pankhurst, 1998: 73-74.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Henze, 66; Kapteijns, 229; Esposito, 501; Marcus, 19-20; Tamrat, 1972: 138-139.

⁷³ Pankhurst, 1998: 74.

⁷⁴ Tamrat, 1972: 143-144.

⁷⁵ Pankhurst, 1998: 75; Henze, 66.

⁷⁶ Henze, 66.

⁷⁷ Tamrat: 1972: 144-45.

elements moved east and founded the Sultanate of Adal (see Figure 5) in the region of Harar, a region that had been Islamized at least since the thirteenth century.⁷⁸ This removed them from the immediate threat of the Ethiopian Emperor. Thus, Ifat was eventually reduced to a provincial governorate of the Solomonic Empire, diminished by Ethiopian expansion and the internal rivalries fostered by the Ethiopian Emperor.⁷⁹

During the short reign of Sayfa Ar'ad's eldest son Niwaya-Maryam (1371-81), the Emperor's forces killed the rebellious Sultan Haqq-ad-Din II in battle.⁸⁰ His brother Sa'ad-ad-Din then came to rule Adal as the next Ethiopian Emperor, Dawit I (1382-1411), took power. Under Sa'ad-ad-Din's rule, Muslims from Adal conducted raids across the eastern border of Dawit's territory. Like Christian raiders elsewhere, these raiders would steal or recover cattle and slaves and then return across the desert.⁸¹ There is no indication these raids posed any serious threat to the Solomonic Empire, or even that raids into Ethiopian territory were more common than raids from Ethiopian territory. Nevertheless, Dawit I responded in 1403 with a brutal expedition that pursued Sa'ad-ad-Din all the way to Zeila at the coast (see Figure 5), captured him, killed him and then sacked the port town.⁸² This expedition took the Ethiopian leader to the most easterly point ever reached by the Solomonic empire and for the first time put the trade routes of Adal (see Figure 5) and the Muslim Port of Zeila (see Figure 5) at risk of Christian conquest.⁸³ This expedition capped a succession of humiliating defeats for multiple Muslim provinces and brought Muslim power in the region to its lowest ebb.

⁷⁸ Tamrat: 1972: 144-45; Trimmingham, 1969: 22; Braukamper, 2002: 109; Henze, 66-67, 83.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 150; Kapteijns, 229; Trimmingham, 1952, 74.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1972: 149.

⁸¹ Henze, 66-67.

⁸² Pankhurst, 1998: 75; Henze, 66-67; I.M. Lewis, "The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 1 (1960): 222. (The date of 1403 may be 1415. Henze says Dawit killed Sa'ad ad-Din in 1403. Tamrat agrees with Henze. (See Tamrat, Taddesse. "Ethiopia, The Red Sea and the Horn," In *Cambridge History of Africa, Vol. 3*, edited by Roland Oliver, London: Cambridge University Press, 1977: 154). Pankhurst and Lewis, on the other hand, put the date at 1415. 1415, however, was beyond the reign of Dawit. Pankhurst, Henze and Tamrat list the end of Dawit's reign as 1409, 1411 and 1412, respectively. Lewis simply says the killing of Sa'ad took place "in the reign of the Abyssinian *negus* Yeshaq (1414-29)."

⁸³ Pankhurst, 1998: 75.

Thus, by the beginning of the 15th century the Ethiopian Empire had gained control of virtually all the trade routes shown in Figure 5. It had not yet, however, taken the Dahlak Islands or the more important Port of Zeila or the trade routes running through Adal. This expansion had begun with the Emperor's success in splitting the ruling Walashma family of Ifat, thereby facilitating its defeat. However, the splitting of the Walashma family created a new problem for Ethiopia: the development of a new, even more independence-minded Sultanate of Adal.

B. THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE, THE SULTANATE OF ADAL, AND THE MUSLIM PORTS

Sultan Ahmad Badlay, of the Walashma family, took the reins of power in Adal in 1432 (r. 1432-1445), and a year later Emperor Zara Yakob (r. 1433-1468) took the throne of the Ethiopian Empire.⁸⁴ Sultan Badlay's area of control roughly covered the Afar plain (see Figure 3), a large area extending from Sawakin on the coast north of Tigray down to the mountains at Shawa and east across Harar and the port at Zeila into part of Somali-occupied territory.⁸⁵ Since the Muslim defeats a couple decades earlier, Sultan Badlay had successfully recovered significant control of the trade routes between several of the Muslim provinces, namely Ifat, Fatagar, Dawaro, and Bali, and the coast of Zeila (see Figure 4 in the south of the "Areas under Christian control").⁸⁶ The supposedly beleaguered Christians nevertheless continued military campaigns against permanent settlements in these areas and in Adal itself. This ceaseless violence finally drove the mercantile and agricultural communities of these Muslim regions to unify with the militant elements of Adal.⁸⁷ In addition, the name Somali first appears in Ethiopian documents around this time because Adal began to draw on Somali fighting power.⁸⁸ (The mobilization of Somali forces would prove a key to *Imam Gran's* later conquest of

⁸⁴ Pankhurst, 1998: 78; Kapteijns, 229.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁶ Marcus, 26; Braukamper gives the seven members of the Muslim confederation in the fifteenth century as: Ifat, Dawaro, Arababni, Hadiyya, Sarkha, Bali and Dara. See Ulrich Braukamper, "Medieval Muslim Survivals as a Stimulating Factor in the Re-Islamization of Southeastern Ethiopia," *Islamic History and Culture in Southern Ethiopia: Collected Essays*, Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2002: 171.

⁸⁷ Kapteijns, 229.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the Ethiopian Empire.) To weaken the Emperor's hold on Muslim territories, Sultan Badlay's forces would wage intermittent but punishing guerilla warfare, in cooperation with the locals of those territories, against Emperor Yakob's garrisons from 1443-1445.⁸⁹ In 1445 Emperor Yakob responded by sending a force large enough to defeat Badlay into Adal, breaking the will of the Adalite army. Though defeated, Adal was allowed to continue under Muslim leadership, being far too large and inhospitable for the Christians to control. Adal was, however, made to pay a heavy tribute.

After the war the Emperor and the Sultan appeared to go about their business for fear of further disrupting trade.⁹⁰ Emperor Yakob, however, had not given up the historic Ethiopian desire for full seaport access. Instead of focusing on the distant Port of Zeila, as had his predecessors, he turned his attention north to the Dahlak Islands and the adjacent coastal area of Massawa (see Figure 3 on the Red Sea coast). The rulers of the Dahlak Islands had embraced Islam centuries before and by Yakob's time maintained significant relations with Baghdad, the center of the Ottoman Empire.⁹¹ In 1448-1449, Yakob's military invaded and colonized Massawa and the Dahlak Islands. He reorganized the area under one administration, the *bahr negash* or "ruler of the seas,"⁹² reopened a port opposite Massawa and redirected all Imperial trade there.⁹³ By the end of Emperor Yakob's reign, the Sultan of Adal thus found his hold on trade in the region broken.

Emperor Yakob's repeated victories including the occupation of the Dahlak Islands and Massawa captured the attention of several European powers. In 1450, Adal watched as Emperor Yakob sent a mission to Europe that resulted in European technical assistance to Yakob's kingdom, further entrenching its power in the region.⁹⁴ Thus by 1450, the Ethiopian Empire had forced Adal into near subservience and taken control of trade from Muslim principalities south, east and north of the Empire's original

⁸⁹ Marcus, 26.

⁹⁰ Henze, 69, 83; Marcus, 26.

⁹¹ Kapteijns, 228; For a detailed description of the Port at Zeila see Pankhurst, Richard, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century*, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982: 54-64.

⁹² Henze, 71; Marcus 27.

⁹³ Ibid.; Robinson, 114:.

⁹⁴ Marcus, 27-28.

boundaries. Despite the continual defeats of the Muslims at the hands of the Ethiopian Empire and the apparent strength of the Solomonic dynasty at the time of Emperor Yakob's death in 1468, however, only sixty years later a self-declared *imam* would mobilize a broad-based Muslim army effective enough to take control of Ethiopia and hold it for over a decade. Several persons would play a role in the decline of the Ethiopian Empire and the rise of the Adalite Sultanate, particularly the next Emperor and Sultan and Emperor Yakob's widow, Empress Eleni (Helena).

C. EMPRESS HELENA, SULTAN MUHAMMAD AND ACCOMMODATION

Worn down by constant struggle with Ethiopia, conservative elements in the Adalite Sultanate, represented by Sultan Muhammad ibn Badlay (r. 1488-1518), sent a delegation to Emperor Yakob's successor, Baeda Maryam (r. 1468-78), seeking a truce to counter the royal policy of repressing the power of the Muslims along the coast. The Emperor turned to his chief adviser Empress Helena, Emperor Yakob's widow, for advice. Helena, one of the most important women in Ethiopian history, lived from 1430 into the 1520's serving as adviser to three Emperor's after her husband (as "Queen Mother" to Emperor Maryam and later Regent).⁹⁵ She had reason to support the Muslim request. She was the daughter of the ruler of Hadeya (see Figure 4), a Muslim territory under the Emperor's control, so she had grown up Muslim. After marrying the Christian Emperor, she had risen in favor in his eyes and came to be called "Queen of the Right," but she had also lived to see her Muslim brother beheaded for leading a rebellion in Hadeya against her husband.⁹⁶ Through all this she remained aware of the wider Muslim world, including Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula (which will become important later in this story), and she sought to achieve good commercial relations between the Empire and Sultan Muhammad.⁹⁷ This is not to say, however, that she did not support the Empire's goal of controlling trade, as will become clear.

⁹⁵ Trimingham, 1952: 81-84; Henze, 71-75, 81; Marcus, 28.

⁹⁶ Huntingford, 102.

⁹⁷ Henze, 81.

Thus, it was that after consulting with Helena, Emperor Maryam agreed to an accommodation with Muhammad.⁹⁸ This may have been a political mistake for both leaders. First, for Sultan Muhammad the Muslim-Christian accommodation incensed the more militant, independence-minded forces in his sultanate. These forces, now influenced by clerics from the Arabian Peninsula, set out to undermine any accommodation. The accommodation also was dangerous for the Christians. The Solomonic Empire was not a strong state but rather a feudal, conglomerate state consisting of a core community in the northern-central highlands (stretching from Tigray south through Amhara to northern Shawa – see Figure 4) who shared cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities. Around this area were recently conquered provinces of at least superficially Christian people living under administrations much like the core's. Beyond that were tributary states that included the Muslim provinces we have discussed that were culturally, religiously and economically different from the core highland communities. In short the people of Ethiopia remained focused on their local communities, rarely considering the state other than when it called for payment of taxes. Holding the state together thus required strong, and at times authoritarian, rule.⁹⁹

The accommodation signaled weakness to many of the Imperial provinces and to the more radical elements in Adal and encouraged rebellion once again. Despite a long history of proving the unfortunate need for authoritarian rule in such a fractured Empire, Empress Helena, attuned to the Muslim tributary principalities, believed the government of these areas should be small. Baeda Maryam obliged and made government even smaller by neglecting the machinery of his central administration. Instead of using his father's well-known supporters in local leadership positions, for example, he allowed local families, clans, and dynasties to rule. Furthermore, he reinstated the traveling capital in which his court would pursue tribute rather than insisting it be delivered to his central government.¹⁰⁰ This was not completely unusual since medieval Ethiopia lacked permanent cities and large villages and in general the Emperor's capital was not fixed but

⁹⁸ Trimingham, 1952: 81-84.

⁹⁹ Marcus, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Marcus, 28; Iliffe, 61.

consisted of temporary residences at military camps.¹⁰¹ Trade was not extensive enough to allow mercantile towns to grow with the exception of a small number of settlements on the trade routes. Thus, Emperor Maryam's court and armies would travel with him and live off the illiterate, poor peasants.¹⁰² Because Christians were generally subsistence farmers who could trade only the little surplus they did not need to survive, these roving armies were more like pestilence than protectors which surely instilled resentment and further weakened the Emperor's rule.¹⁰³

D. THE SULTANATE OF ADAL AND AMIR MAHFUZ

Sensing the weakening of the Christian Empire, Muslim elements preaching in support of holy war, or *jihad*, began to surface in support of various Muslim military leaders ("*amirs*") in the Sultanate of Adal who refused to settle into a truce with an Empire that had taken their territory and trade routes. While Sultan Muhammad remained nominally in charge of Adal, increasing popular support for the *amirs* initiated a shift in political power away from those who sought moderation in relations with the Christian Empire. A turning point in the political power of the *amirs* was reached when *Amir* Lada'i Uthman, governor of Zeila, is said to have begun preparation for war with Ethiopia in 1471. As in the past, the Christian Emperor took the offensive against Uthman and routed the Adalites yet again. The Emperor's forces rounded up many of the radical *amirs*, but the revolt was still not contained.¹⁰⁴

As revolt continued across the empire, the central administration weakened allowing local leaders and tributary states to retain more of their local revenue. The beleaguered Muslim principalities increasingly avoided paying tribute and a percentage of trading profits to the hated Emperor. The various Muslim states shown in Figure 4

¹⁰¹ Ahmed, 2000: 12; Henze, 79-81; Pankhurst, 1982: 62; Iliffe, 59 (Emperor Zara Yakob as part of his consolidation did create a permanent capital, but Maryam abandoned the practice.).

¹⁰² Pankhurst, 1998: 66.

¹⁰³ Henze, 81; Pankhurst, 1998: 68, noting that the Emperor's traveling camps always contained a "market church" tent that was always located directly in front of the Emperor's tent albeit at some distance. This tent was primarily occupied by Muslim merchants. The physical arrangement of these tents never changed from camp to camp so the Emperor always had Muslims merchants on call.

¹⁰⁴ Trimmingham, 1952, 81-84.

grew stronger as Emperor Maryam's garrisons pulled back or fell into disrepair. In the highlands the Emperor's neglect led to Christian heterodoxy and social strife as the central axis of the state, the alliance between the crown and the clergy, weakened. Under these conditions, Adal's relative military strength grew until the Adalite armies were able to defeat the Emperor's armies when they invaded Adal in 1473/4 C.E.¹⁰⁵ There then followed a period of constant raids by the *amirs* into Ethiopia.¹⁰⁶

Maryam's successor Iskinder continued campaigns in Dawaro and Bali begun by Maryam. In another campaign, he sacked the capital of Adal, but upon his return journey, his troops were overwhelmed by an Adalite army. Iskinder ultimately died in another battle and was succeeded by Emperor Naod (1494-1508). Meanwhile in Adal, Sultan Muhammad ibn Azhar ad-Din (1488-1518) sought peace with Ethiopia. He could not, however, control the *Amir* of Harar, Mahfuz, whose forces ran regular raids into Christian territories during Lent.¹⁰⁷ Although Mahfuz' raids did not lead to devastating consequences, they did create considerable stress for the Christians.¹⁰⁸ Emperor Naod decided to take matters into his own hands by attacking and defeating Mahfuz although he did not kill him. Sultan Muhammad quickly sought a truce. The truce uneasily held for some time despite Mahfuz's less frequent but continued raids.¹⁰⁹

During the time of Naod, Helena continued to advise the Emperor. In the continuing struggle over trade, Emperor Naod, on Helena's advice sought an alliance with the European Christian power Portugal which, having recently discovered the passage to India via the Cape of Good Hope, was now operating nearby in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁰ The Portuguese at this time were seeking to gather allies to fight the Muslim powers controlling the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, as part of their drive to become the

¹⁰⁵ Marcus, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Trimingham, 1952: 81-84.

¹⁰⁷ Trimingham, 1952: 81-84; Pankhurst, 1997: 122.

¹⁰⁸ Pankhurst, 1982: 58.

¹⁰⁹ Trimingham, 1952: 81-84.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Ross, E. Denison, "Early Travelers in Abyssinia: Part II," *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 22 (1922): 6.

principle sea power controlling trade from these waters with Europe.¹¹¹ In 1494, a Portuguese envoy suggested Emperor Naod's interests would best be served by Portugal occupying the commercial centers on the Red Sea coast to cut off the sultanates in the region from the outside Muslim world particularly the Arabian Peninsula.¹¹² Portuguese efforts to affect this strategy, however, were delayed until several years later, a fact of no small consequence as we shall see later.

Thus, by the end of the 15th century, the Empire's expansion north combined with its "divide and rule" tactics against the Walashma family had successfully broken Adal's control on trade and driven Adal to seek peace with the Ethiopian Empire. The resultant accommodation diminished Sultan Muhammad's power and encouraged militancy in Adal and rebellion throughout the Empire. In the coming years, Muslim forces under new leadership in Adal would finally unite, fight back and for a decade not only gain their independence but also take over the highland Christian kingdoms that had held them in subjugation for so long.

E. THE EMPIRE DEFEATS AMIR MAHFUZ OF ADAL

When Emperor Naod died, his eleven year old son Lebna Dengel (r. 1508-1540) took the throne. Due to the Emperor's youth, Empress Helena was named Regent.¹¹³ Considering its continuing internal rot, the Christian Empire was fortunate that the experienced Empress Helena was available to hold the Empire together. In the early days of Lebna Dengel's reign, Empress Helena reached out to Portugal recognizing her uneasy truce with Adal would not hold.¹¹⁴ In the short term, she did maintain peace with Adal and some prosperity followed.¹¹⁵ During this time, Lebna Dengel came of age, and despite Helena's efforts, rejected further accommodations with Adal.

¹¹¹ Henze, 81.

¹¹² Ross, 6; Trimingham, 1952: 81-84.

¹¹³ Jean Doresse, *Ethiopia*, New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1959: 126.

¹¹⁴ Henze, 81.

¹¹⁵ Ross, 6; Trimingham, 1952: 83.

The rebellious *Amir* Mahfuz, who like Lebna Dengel wished to see no accommodations between the Emperor and Adal, had by this time recovered from his defeat at the hands of Emperor Naod's forces and had gained *de facto* rule of Adal. Encouraged by Arabian emissaries preaching *jihad*, he had renewed his raids into Ethiopia.¹¹⁶ Among the leaders of the medieval Muslim principalities we have considered, *Amir* Mahfuz was the first (Gran would be the last) to practice what had been preached to him by Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula whose message of holy war, or *jihad*, was being shaped by important events occurring in the Middle East as they preached.¹¹⁷ In the Middle East, a revival of Islam was aiding in political unification of various Islamic groups. The energies unleashed by this political unification were in some cases directed into external *jihadi* efforts -- the Ottomans fought in Europe, the Persian Safavids in the Caucasus, and the Mamluks in the Red Sea against the Portuguese.¹¹⁸

The awakening of Islamic fervor in Arabia led holy men and members of important Arab families linked by lineage to the Prophet Muhammad to migrate to Harar and other Islamic principalities in the Horn of Africa between 1490 and 1540. These migrants came primarily from the Hadrawmat area and also from Yemen and Hijaz. They had their greatest influence in Harar, by then an established Islamic center of learning and the only urban diffusion point for Islam in Adal during the medieval period. In Harar, this new religious spirit helped marginalize Sultan Muhammad as militant religious leaders took the reins of power. *Amir* Mahfuz (and later his son-in-law, Gran) exemplified this new form of religiously fervent political leadership. *Amir* Mahfuz declared himself an *imam*, flew holy flags, and placed in his camp Arabian tents that signified holy-war.¹¹⁹ Once again a challenger to Imperial domination emboldened the Adalites to rebel. In 1516, *Amir* Mahfuz's forces invaded the highlands, but Mahfuz was killed in an ambush by Emperor Dengel's army. Dengel then proceeded to invade Adal, destroying Sultan

¹¹⁶ Ross, 6; Trimmingham, 1952: 83.

¹¹⁷ Erlich, 1994: 29-30.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.; B.G. Martin, "Arab Migrations to East Africa in Medieval Times," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7 (1974): 375, Pankhurst, 1997: 122.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Muhammad's castle while a Portuguese fleet attacked Zeila, *Amir* Mahfuz's base, and burned it.¹²⁰ Thus by 1520, Lebna Dengel had turned Empress Helena's and Sultan Muhammad's policy of accommodation on its head.

Lebna Dengel returned from his lowland victory to a hero's welcome, feeling emboldened. When the Portuguese arrived in 1520 (in response to Empress Helena's request some years earlier), offering to help fortify the defenses of the Christian empire, Lebna Dengel failed to achieve any agreement with them. Though he engaged in a period of relatively intense diplomatic efforts aimed at encouraging the Portuguese to take over the port at Zeila and thereby control trade in and out of the Muslim territories, Emperor Dengel believed that he had subdued the Muslim challenge to the empire. He ultimately sent the Portuguese home with no concrete results. This was a serious mistake.¹²¹ Even as the Portuguese were withdrawing in 1526, Ahmad Gran, a military commander in Adal, was winning his first battle against an Ethiopian expedition, signaling a turning point.¹²²

F. THE RISE OF *IMAM* GRAN OF ADAL

Emperor Dengel's resounding defeat of the Adalite forces, the death of *Amir* Mahfuz and the burning of Zeila by Portugal of course set the militant *amirs* of Adal at even stronger odds with the conservative elements still calling for peace with the Emperor. In 1518, Sultan Muhammad was murdered, and thereafter five sultans rose and fell in a two-year period.¹²³

During this time of intense turmoil in Adal, *Imam* Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1506-43), nicknamed by the Ethiopians "Gran" ("the left-handed"), rose to prominence in Harar.¹²⁴ Likely established by Meccan immigrants, Harar attracted Islamic scholars, Sufi mystics and *ashraf* (important family members claiming direct descent from

¹²⁰ Henze, 81; Trimmingham, 1952: 83.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 86; Pankhurst, 1982: 61-62; Crummey, 2000: 33-35; Dombrowski, 1985: 18.

¹²² *Ibid.*; Trimmingham, 1952: 83.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 83-86.

¹²⁴ Erlich, 2007: 18-19; Pankhurst, 1982: 62; Martin, 1974: 376; Martin, 1975: 97.

Muhammad).¹²⁵ Like *Amir* Mahfuz before him and like people in and around Harar, Gran was heavily influenced by a wave of scholars beginning to arrive from the Arabian Peninsula in the 1490's. He would later use these scholars as leaders of the peasants and nomads that formed his army. For their part, these scholars hoped to obtain religious and legal leadership posts in a post-conquest Ethiopia.¹²⁶

Gran was supported by Muslim powers outside Adal. The *Amir* of Mecca gave Gran his blessings, signified by the presentation of the green flags of Islamic holy war.¹²⁷ In addition, the Ottomans provided Adal many of the cannons and firearms Gran would use.¹²⁸ The Ottoman occupation of Egypt in 1517, and the Ottomans ongoing drive to unite the Middle East and gain control of the Red Sea coasts and Yemen further emboldened the Adalite militants.¹²⁹

Spiritually, Gran had acquired his *jihadi* beliefs while fighting for Sultan Jared Abun of Adal (r. ca. 1522-1525). Sultan Abun had used a focus on Islamic purity as a means of pulling together the divided people in his charge.¹³⁰ Thus, when the Sultan was assassinated and Gran watched leaders rise and fall in rapid succession in Adal, Gran became repulsed by secular Muslim rule. He traveled out into the countryside and began preaching a powerful, charismatic message. He proclaimed himself an *imam* and began consolidating ethnic Sidama, Afar and Somalis into a military force.¹³¹ Though Somalis

¹²⁵ See Cornell University Library Middle East and Islamic Studies Collection Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/dictiona.htm> (accessed April 27, 2008).

¹²⁶ Martin, 1975: 97-98.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*; Erlich, 2007: 18-19; Pankhurst; 1982: 62; Martin, 1974: 376.

¹²⁸ Erlich, 1994: 31; W.M. Dye, *Muslim Egypt and Christian Abyssinia*, New York: Atkin & Prout, 1880: 112.

¹²⁹ Erlich, 2007: 18-19.

¹³⁰ Marcus, 31.

¹³¹ Marcus, 31; I.M. Lewis, "The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 1 (1960): 223; Erlich, 1994: 30.

have claimed Gran as one of their own, his ethnic origins are unknown. He may have been Arab.¹³² He operated militarily out of an area due south of present-day Djibouti along the southern border of northwest Somalia.¹³³

After building an army, Gran returned to the area of Harar and gained the support of the *jihadi* followers of *Amir* Mahfuz (earlier killed by Lebna Dengel) by marrying Mahfuz's daughter. He killed the secular Sultan Abu Baker, with whom he had shared the region for some time, and installed the Sultan's brother as a puppet thus gaining full control of Adal. His rise occurred at a strategic moment. First, the Ethiopian state was weakened. During the Empire's rapid expansion south, it had over extended itself and efforts to integrate new areas organizationally and ideologically had failed. Second, Muslim sentiment was aroused by Portuguese successes in the Red Sea and Portuguese interest in Ethiopia. Third, the Ottomans, who had taken over Egypt in 1517 and Yemen in 1525, now openly supported *Imam* Gran both morally and militarily.¹³⁴ Fourth, all the people in the Adalite Sultanate, including the Danakils, Afars and Somalis now felt economically deprived compared to their relatively well-off highland neighbors.¹³⁵ Fifth and finally, preaching against the payment of tribute inspired rebellion. In the view of the resident Arabian scholars, paying tribute to a non-Muslim made a Muslim inferior and separated him from the core of the Islamic community. Payment of tribute meant humiliation because it suggested the person, as one part of the entire Muslim community, was held in pledge. Thus, the requirement of tribute was considered dishonorable and debasing not only to the individual but to the Islamic community. The community was therefore compelled to resist thereby making resistance, in principle, the *Amir's* or Sultan's most important function.¹³⁶

¹³² Marcus, 31; I.M. Lewis, "The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa," *The Journal of African History*, 1 (1960): 223; Erlich, 1994: 30.

¹³³ Trimingham, 1952: 85.

¹³⁴ Kapteijns, 229; Esposito, 501.

¹³⁵ Martin, 1975: 97.

¹³⁶ Davis, 1964: 127.

G. **IMAM GRAN CONQUERS THE ETHIOPIAN EMPIRE**

Capitalizing on all these factors and having consolidated his power in Adal, *Imam* Gran openly encouraged war with Ethiopia by refusing tribute.¹³⁷ When the Ethiopian army invaded Adal in 1527, Gran's forces handed the Emperor a defeat. *Imam* Gran's army remained a shaky coalition of tribes under Somali chiefs who were still used to the raider cycle of battle, that is victory, looting and disappearing. Thus, despite his victory, Gran had to return to the Somali territory, restore order and stir up *jihadi* fervor in his troops.¹³⁸

Even during this time in which the strongest *theoretical* argument can be made that the Christians were beleaguered by Muslims, Adalite Muslims resisted a direct assault on Ethiopia. One group counseled Gran:

Neither your fathers, nor your ancestors, nor the *amirs* 'Ali and Mahfuz, your father in law, nor Jarad Ibrahim and the former sultans of the Land of Sa'd ad-Din, dared attack the King of Abyssinia [Ethiopia] in his own homeland, but merely raided over the borders, took booty and returned, and if one of the infidels pursued them they fought to retain what they had taken. Yet you want to attack the King of Abyssinia [Ethiopia] in his own country. Take care you do not bring destruction upon the Muslims.¹³⁹

This is an important comment in relation to the image of the Muslim menace to Ethiopia. The statement reinforces what we have seen: that Muslim forces ran raids into territories administered by the Emperor, but they never posed a threat of overthrowing the Christian kingdoms. Such evidence, in conjunction with the evidence of the Ethiopian's continual military campaigns against its Muslim neighbors, serves to support the notion that Muslim-Christian conflicts in the medieval period were primarily driven by Ethiopian, not Muslim, expansionism.

¹³⁷ Trimingham, 1952: 86-87; see also Martin, 1975: 94, discussing an Arabic tale emphasizing the grave importance of tribute, he quotes "news arrived about a group of people at Zayla, whose custom it was to give an annual tribute [*qati'a*] to the King of Ethiopia, which had lapsed for some years. A pious Muslim... intervened and prevented them from handing over the tribute, condemning their giving *jizya* – as Muslims – to a Christian. The King's messenger returned home. This was unbearable to the King of Ethiopia, so he sent his soldiers to kill every last person in Zayla." The city was miraculously saved by red rain, red sand and huge serpents.)

¹³⁸ Trimingham, 1952: 86-87.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Despite such misgivings about taking on the Emperor and despite Gran's force of Somali pastoral nomads who were unaccustomed to working together in common cause, by 1531 Gran had reconstructed his forces and was able to begin a full invasion of the Christian kingdoms of the Ethiopian Empire.¹⁴⁰ After centuries of Imperial expansion and subjugation, Gran's forces finally set out to truly beleaguer the Christian fortress. They took the peripheral states of Bali, Sidamo, Hadeya, and Kambata (see Figure 4 in the south of the "Areas under Christian control") and moved north to occupy Dawaro and Shawa. Within four years the south and center of the Ethiopian highlands had been conquered. Then, Gran's forces headed further north to Amhara, Lasta and Tigray (see Figure 4) and all the way to what is today the border of Sudan.¹⁴¹ Along the way, Gran constructed a civil administration with his religious leaders at the helm.¹⁴²

H. THE EMPIRE DEFEATS *IMAM* GRAN

Emperor Lebna Dengel's army had hardly been beleaguered at first. It was huge, drawing troops from Tigray, Amhara, Agaw, Bagemder, Gojjam and Shawa (see Figure 4). Defense was complicated, however, by the inefficiencies of such a behemoth army. Logistics were poor and complicated by power struggles between officers, which undermined the development of a common strategy. In contrast, Gran's reconstituted forces were unified in command, mobile because they were smaller in number and had better armaments thanks to their direct access to Red Sea trade.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, despite their weaknesses the Christians had managed to hold the port at Massawa, and in 1535, Emperor Dengel, while on the run, managed to send for help from Portugal.¹⁴⁴ The King of Portugal obliged, but by the time his ships carrying four hundred musketeers arrived at Massawa, six years had passed and Emperor Dengel had been killed by Gran's forces.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Trimingham, 1952: 86-87; Lewis, 1960: 223.

¹⁴¹ Ross, 7-8; Marcus, 32-33; Braukamper, 2002: 135; Trimingham, 1952: 86-87.

¹⁴² Kapteijns, 230; Esposito, 502; Ahmed, 2000: 12-13; Martin, 1974: 376.

¹⁴³ Marcus 32-33.

¹⁴⁴ Robinson, 115; Henze, 87; Ross, 7-8; For a detailed description of the importance of Massawa and a discussion of correspondence and interactions in 1523-1524 involving Dengel's previous attempts to create a Portuguese alliance see Pankhurst, 1982: 80-82.

¹⁴⁵ Henze, 87; Ullendorff, 5.

Nevertheless, the Portuguese arrival was important for around this same time the governor of Tigray was able to rebuild his army and join up with the forces of the new Ethiopian Emperor, Galawdewos (r. 1540-1559). The Portuguese were then able to train these forces in European war-fighting tactics.¹⁴⁶

In 1542, in his first battle against Galawdewos' army, Gran was defeated near Lake Tana between Amhara and Gojjam (Figure 3).¹⁴⁷ Wounded, he pulled back to a refuge in the mountains and sent for Arab, Turkish and Albanian mercenary reinforcements. Turkey, now the leader of the Middle East and a fierce competitor with Portugal in the Indian Ocean, did not want Portugal wading into Ethiopian affairs and therefore provided Gran with cannons and musketeers. Gran turned the tide for a while by killing the Portuguese commander.¹⁴⁸ Believing the Emperor's forces no longer constituted a threat, however, Gran unwisely sent the Turkish forces home and returned to his headquarters at Lake Tana.¹⁴⁹ On 25 February 1543, Galawdewos' forces attacked Gran's forces again at Lake Tana and killed Gran. As soldiers on both sides had done for centuries in this region, Gran's troops fled the battlefield, and his conquest was reversed faster than it had been won.¹⁵⁰ The Ethiopian army paraded Gran's severed head, and by 1555, they had restored the original boundaries of the Empire.

Beaten down by the devastating effects of Gran's conquest, Christians and Muslims remained for some time generally content to remain within their own territories.¹⁵¹ The Ottomans even formed long-lasting relations with Christian Ethiopia.¹⁵² Meanwhile, Gran became a hero to Muslims in the Horn of Africa, having stood up to the powerful Ethiopian Empire.¹⁵³ Gran's capital of Harar was reduced for some time from a central diffusion point of Islam and a strong trading center to a town

¹⁴⁶ Henze, 87; Marcus, 33-34.

¹⁴⁷ Lewis, 1960: 223.

¹⁴⁸ Trimmingham, 1952: 89.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.; Henze, 87; Marcus, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Trimmingham, 1952: 89; Demoz, 51; Henze, 87; Marcus, 34; Abir, (1975): 538; Robinson, 115.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.; Braukamper, 2002: 5.

¹⁵² Robinson, 115:

¹⁵³ Erlich, 1994: 33. Henze, 90.

struggling to avoid extinction.¹⁵⁴ His nephew, Nur ibn Mujahid Nur, fought back against the Christian Emperor but ultimately retreated to Harar surrounding the city with defensive walls. In subsequent years, Harar was besieged by Christian forces and by Oromo tribes from the southwest. Today, Harar remains the only solely Islamic city in Ethiopia. Protected by fortress-like walls, it is a symbol of Islam's place in Ethiopian history, truly a beleaguered Muslim fortress in a sea of historical inaccuracy.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Erlich, 2007: 20-21.

¹⁵⁵ Kapteijns, 230; Esposito, 502; Henze, 87; Erlich, 2007: 19-20; Braukamper, 2002: 109; Abir, 1975: 537-541.

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IV. CONCLUSION

As I noted in Chapter I, J.S. Trimingham has described “the Christian state in northern Ethiopia” as “a beleaguered fortress in the midst of a sea of Islam” suggesting the Ethiopian Christian Empire was under siege by its Muslim neighbors.¹⁵⁶ As we have seen, however, the Ethiopian Empire of the medieval period was hardly beleaguered by its Muslim neighbors. Instead, the Ethiopian Emperors were on the attack almost constantly against their Muslim neighbors. The Muslim-controlled trade routes that ran through the Christian kingdoms of the Empire were the target of Imperial want. The Emperors of Ethiopia, however, wanted more than control of trade in the core Christian kingdoms. They wanted control of the trade routes running through the Muslim sultanates to the Empire’s south. Emperor Seyon took them. They wanted control of the trade routes controlled by Ifat. Emperor Seyon and Emperor Arad took them. They wanted control of the routes in Adal and control of the Port of Zeila. When Adal resisted, Emperor Dawit I invaded Adal and pushed all the way to the Port of Zeila. When the Empire found it could not hold Adal due to its size, Emperor Yakob’s troops invaded the Islamic strip north of Tigray, took over Massawa and the Dahlak Islands and rerouted all highland trade there in an effort to destroy the importance of Adal’s Port of Zeila.

While physically beleaguering their Muslim neighbors, the Emperors also besieged them politically by pursuing a policy of creating internal division with the leadership of the Muslim sultanates, particularly the Walashma family of Ifat and later Adal. As we have seen, this tactic did weaken the Empire’s Muslim neighbors but also sowed the seeds of unified Islamic rebellion.

In the retelling of Ethiopian medieval history, historians have made much of Islamic incursions into the Ethiopian highlands. *Imam* Gran’s conquest of most of the Christian kingdoms in the highlands is the conflict about which historians covering medieval Ethiopia have written the most. An unbalanced focus on this violent, albeit short-lived, Islamic conquest has undoubtedly done more to ingrain this image of the

¹⁵⁶ Trimingham, 1969: 21.

“beleaguered” Christians than anything else. In this thesis, however, I have shown that the *jihads* of *Imam* Gran and *Amir* Mahfuz before him were reactions to the expansionary policies of the Empire that continually subjugated its neighbors. Thus, despite these *ostensibly* offensive Muslim attempts to lay siege to the medieval Empire, the military actions of Muslim forces against the Ethiopian Empire were in reality defensive. Thus, one can safely say that if any group was beleaguered in the medieval period, it was the disparate Muslim principalities that found themselves continually subjugated, often brutalized by Ethiopian forces and forced to watch as the Christians emplaced garrisons throughout the sea of Islam.

This is not to say, however, that the Muslims were never a threat to the Christians. Indeed one would have to ignore *Imam* Gran’s 16th century victory to come to such a far-reaching conclusion. Yet, the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries appear devoid of any period where Muslim powers posed a serious threat of violently taking over the Christian Empire. On the other hand, throughout that time period, the Christian Emperors, particularly Amda Seyon and Zara Yakob, expanded their control over their Muslim neighbors and conflicts grew. It is in these times that historians have suggested Islamic forces posed a violent threat. This is puzzling for if the Muslims posed such a threat when the Christian Empire was effectively consolidated, why did the Muslims fail to conquer the kingdoms *prior to* Imperial consolidation? Would that not have been the time for conquest if they were so disposed? Why in the retelling of Ethiopian history does the purported threat of the Muslim sea seem to rise in intensity precisely when the consolidation of Christian power occurs? The answer is fairly straightforward: the Muslim threat of violence rose as the Empire increasingly subjected the Muslim sultanates to violence, taxes and loss of control of trade. The Muslim sultanates were a threat to the Ethiopians not because they wanted to overthrow Christian territory but because they desired to reclaim their own territory, trade routes and independence. This desire in turn drove the Muslims to finally consolidate their power leading to the temporary victory of *Imam* Gran. In short, the Muslim polities were themselves a collection of beleaguered not-so-well-fortified fortresses.

In fact, the evidence suggests that Muslims were usually the opposite of a threat. Except for scattered rebellions and raids (which were also occurring between Christian states and between Muslim states), the various Muslim neighbors of Ethiopia were an integral part of the success of the highland Empire in the medieval period. This was seen through the presence of Muslims in the Emperor's court and camp, the entrusting of the Emperor's money to them for trade, their development of the trade routes, their relationships in the Middle East which made it possible for the Ethiopians to trade in that area, their presence even in the Emperor's armies, and the list goes on. If one concedes the contributions of Muslims in times of peace, however, what does one make of *Imam Gran's* war? Should one say, "Ah-ha. There is the proof of the violent designs of the Muslims?" The better conclusion is that *Imam Gran's* conquest of the highland territories was an anomaly (and therefore not proof of an overarching medieval threat to the Christians).

The threat Gran posed required the coincidence of at least three factors, which did not occur at any other time during the medieval period. First and most importantly, Gran tapped into a fully-matured resentment among disparate Muslim groups in response to financial exaction of the Empire (*i.e.*, taxes and tribute). Second, he exploited the religious mobilization achieved by individuals from the Arabian Peninsula seeking power in a new highland Sultanate. Third, he gained the support of more opportunistic elements (Somali, Afar, etc.) seeking loot. What is important to note about this confluence of factors, however, is that Gran's threat was never truly actualized until the Muslim's in Adal had grown receptive to the *jihadi* message. When did this occur? It occurred only in the sixteenth century after centuries of Christian expansion. Moreover, it was only fully successful after Gran had repeatedly demonstrated he could win battles against the Christians. Thus, only when he had demonstrated his effectiveness and power and only when he had in place a host of *jihadist* preachers to encourage the subjugated locals to join could Gran actually besiege the Christians in the highlands, and even then only for a short time. Accordingly, this looks less like the culmination of a continual siege upon the Christians than the culmination of a continual siege upon the Muslims.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how Ethiopian history would have been different had the Empire acted differently toward its Muslim neighbors. What if Empress Helena and Sultan Muhammad's accommodation had not been undermined by internal forces on both sides? Perhaps Gran's conquest would never have occurred, the Christians would not have suffered under Gran, the Muslims would not have been decimated in the end and the Muslims and the Christians together could have limited the debilitating Oromo migrations that followed. Perhaps not.

In *Islam in Ethiopia*, Trimingham argued that the "Christian fortress" survived because of its unique national consciousness rooted in the Solomonid traditions and *in spite of* a constant Muslim threat.¹⁵⁷ By controlling trade and the regions through which it flowed, the Emperors built their Christian fortress on a foundation of Muslim subjects. Thus through a combination of subjugating and taxing Muslims and at the same time treating them as an outside threat, the Christian fortress of Ethiopia grew and survived thanks to its beleaguered Muslim neighbors, rather than in spite of them.

¹⁵⁷ Trimingham, 1952: 143-145.

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