THE ETHIOPIAN-ADAL WAR 1529-1543

The Conquest of Abyssinia

from RETINUE to REGIMENT 1453-1618

No 8

JEFFREY M. SHAW

From Retinue to Regiment series – Warfare c.1453-1618

https://www.helion.co.uk/series/from-retinue-to-regiment-1453-1618.php

The period 1453 to 1618 connects the High Medieval Period to the Early Modern Era. Commonly known as the Renaissance, it saw technological advances and significant social and cultural change. Catholic dominance was challenged by the rise of the new Protestant religions, and Western Europe was itself challenged by the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The New World was discovered and greater links with the East were created. This period saw the fall of Constantinople to the Turks and the last major battle of the Hundred Years War, both in 1453. The use of gunpowder and artillery played an ever-increasing role in war, and this was coupled with the rise of the professional soldier. The condotierri, landsknecht and janissary were all to march across the battlefields of Europe and beyond. Army organisation also changed. The mid to late 15th century still saw armies based around the '*lance fournie*' or 'retinue' of the High Medieval Era, formations based around a lord and his immediate men-at-arms and other supporters. By the mid 16th century Italian officers were fielding their troops in formations known as '*battagliones*', and by the end of the century the French term '*régiment*' was in common usage. 'From Retinue to Regiment 1453–1618' examines this period in a broad sweep. It examines the wars and battles through narrative, as well as looking at the equipment, clothing and logistics involved.

About the author

Jeffrey M. Shaw is a professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College. He also teaches at Norwich University in the Security Studies program, and at Salve Regina University in the doctoral program in the Humanities. He is the author and editor of numerous books and journal articles on the topics of national security, philosophy of technology, and military history. His three volume *War and Religion: An Encyclopaedia of Faith and Conflict* (ABC CLIO) was chosen by the American Library Association as an Outstanding Reference Source for the year 2018.

Submissions

The publishers would be pleased to receive submissions for this series. Please contact series editor Charles Singleton via email (charlessingleton@helion.co.uk), or in writing to Helion & Company Limited, Unit 8, Amherst Business Centre, Budbrooke Road, Warwick, Warwickshire, CV34 5WE.

The Ethiopian–Adal War 1529–1543

The Conquest of Abyssinia

Jeffrey M. Shaw

Helion & Company

Sources for the Ethiopian–Adal War

Primary source material covering this war is limited. There are only four known accounts written by actual eyewitnesses to the war. Three are from Portuguese participants, and one is from the Adal perspective. There are no known Ethiopian or Ottoman written accounts from participants in the war.

The most useful primary source is the *Futuh Al-Habaša*, Arabic for "the conquest of Abyssinia", written by Šihab ad-Din Ahmad bin Abd al-Qader bin Salem bin Uthman (referred to hereafter as Arab Faqih). Arab Faqih accompanied the Sultan of Adal, Imam Gurey (1506–1543), on his campaign to conquer Ethiopia. Arab Faqih recorded the events that occurred from 1529 to 1537, although the war continued until 1543. He wrote the *Futuh Al-Habaša* in 1559, and copies of the book made their way to India within a few decades. Among the first Europeans to obtain a copy of this book was the British governor of Sudan, Sir Charles Gordon (1833–1885). Italian and French translations of the *Futuh Al-Habaša* were published in the nineteenth century. In 2003, Paul Lester Stenhouse translated the *Futuh* and published it in English for the first time. It is a historical record of invaluable worth for those studying the Ethiopian–Adal War and provides extraordinary insight into sixteenth-century African history. Although the *Futuh Al-Habaša* ends in the year 1537, some Ethiopian scholars claim to have seen a second volume covering the end of the war, "though they were unable to say where it is now kept".[1] It is unlikely that such a volume exists, and it is not even known if Arab Faqih lived beyond 1537. Even if he was still alive in 1537, it would have been a good year to end the story of the conquest since Imam Gurey's campaign against Ethiopia seemed to have been brought to a victorious conclusion. For the last six years of the war, 1537–1543, Portuguese sources of varying reliability are the only first-hand accounts available.

1 Hussein Ahmed, 'The Historiography of Islam in Ethiopia', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1992), p.16, note 39, referencing an interview with Shaykh Muhammad Walē bin Ahmad (interviewed in Addis Ababa, 25 June 1982) and Shaykh Muhammad Jamma (interviewed in Dasē, 4 May 1982). If true, the second volume of the *Futuh al Habasa* would be a historical find of tremendous importance for our understanding of the final years of the Ethiopian–Adal War, and for Muslim–Christian relations in sixteenth-century Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

The three Portuguese accounts include journals written by Miguel de Castanhoso, João Bermudez, and Gaspar Correa, all of whom were present with the Portuguese expeditionary force in Ethiopia from 1541–1543. Scholars and historians have debated which source is more reliable, and the vast majority support Castanhoso's version of events, which were written immediately after the war upon his return to Portugal. The three narratives were first published in English by the Hakluyt Society of London in 1902 with an introduction by R.S. Whiteway. This introduction provides a concise summary of the Portuguese participation in the war, and many of Whiteway's names and dates help clarify some of the Arabic and Ethiopian sources' contradictions, as well as reconcile some of the discrepancies between the three Portuguese accounts.

Among the secondary sources, Francisco Alvarez, a Portuguese missionary, recorded his experience in Ethiopia as a member of a diplomatic mission between the years 1520 and 1526. His observations of the Ethiopian government, customs, and geography are useful in any study of the Ethiopian–Adal War, although Alvarez was not in Ethiopia during the war years. His account was also published in English by the Hakluyt Society in the early twentieth century. The Portuguese captain Dom João de Castro recorded the voyage from India to Suez, which was led by Estêvão da Gama (he referred to him as Stefano da Gama), second son of Vasco da Gama. Castro's account was written between 1545–1548 and was translated into English for the first time in 1664. It is widely available online.

Other Portuguese missionaries and priests travelled to Ethiopia after the war, and many of them recorded their discussions with Ethiopians who shared their memories and recollections of the war. Pedro Paez arrived in Ethiopia in 1618, and his account of the land and its people was also published in English by the Hakluyt Society in the nineteenth century. Paez describes the Ethiopian–Adal War from a second-hand perspective, but like Alvarez, he probably also spoke with many Portuguese and Ethiopian veterans while writing his narrative.

About 80 years after the war ended, Father Jerome Lobo, another Portuguese missionary, visited Ethiopia. He spent the years 1624 to 1634 travelling throughout the country, visiting many of the sites destroyed during Imam Gurey's invasion. It is unlikely that he had read Castanhoso's account of the war, but Lobo may have spoken with Ethiopians who recalled their own versions of the many war stories which even today are freely shared in Ethiopia. Even the youngest veterans of the conflict whom Father Lobo could have met would have been in their upper nineties, their views of the past possibly distorted by the passing of time. However, Lobo provides interesting information about the Ethiopian–Adal War and its impact on Ethiopia, its church, and its people. He wrote, "what I have here related of the death of Don Christopher de Gama I was told by an old man, who was an eye-witness of it: and there is a tradition in the country that in the place where his head fell, a fountain sprung up of wonderful virtue, which cured many diseases otherwise past remedy."[2] Lobo's perspectives on the war and the legends that arose surrounding it are a fascinating addition to the literature.

2 Fr. Jerome Lobo. *A Voyage to Abyssinia*. Translated from French by Samuel Johnson (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd. 1887), n.p.

Author's Note

The various authors of the primary source documents often use different names to refer to the same people and places. The bewildering variety of dates used to identify when the battles and other events took place requires some attempt at standardisation. Of particular interest is the variety of calendars used in the sixteenth century, whether in Europe, Arabia, or Africa. Identifying exact dates for many of the events of the Ethiopian–Adal War is complicated, and in some cases, quite impossible. For example, the author of *The Chronicle of King Gelawdewos*, discussing the Battle of Wayna Dega, gave the following date:

> During that third year in the last Hebrew month, in the sixth month among the Coptic months which is the main fasting month among the fasts of the Church, in the year 7035 of the creation of the world, and in the 28th of the month we mentioned [before], on Wednesday, our lord Mar Gelawdewos fought Imam Ahmad, the son of Abrahim, whose soldiers were numerous like locusts and their number exceeds thousands upon thousands and ten thousand [times] thousands.[1]

Sparing the reader from trying to figure out the actual day to which the author is actually referring, I have decided to go with the accepted Gregorian calendar dates for these events. The most common estimate for when the Battle of Wayna Dega was fought is 21 February 1543. Other such dates from the Gregorian calendar will be used when they are known. In most cases, these dates come from research done by Huntingford and Pankhurst, although some of them are taken from R.S. Whiteway's introduction to Castanhoso's journal.

For simplicity and clarity, the name Ethiopia will be used to refer to the kingdom which appeared in East Africa nearly 2,000 years ago. Although originating as the Kingdom of Da'amat, which became the Kingdom of Aksum, and later Abyssinia, a name deriving from the Arabic word *al-Habasa*, "Ethiopia" will be used along with these names to refer to the political entity situated in the highlands of the Horn of Africa. Also complicating matters is the fact that many different names are used to refer

1 Gebreyes. *Chronicle of King Galawdewos*. p.16.

Introduction

The Ethiopian–Adal War nearly resulted in the destruction of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom at the hands of invading Muslim armies from the Sultanate of Adal, a kingdom located to the south-east of Ethiopia in what is today part of eastern Ethiopia, western Somalia, and Djibouti. The war began in 1529 as a continuation of the ethnic and religious conflict common for centuries in the Horn of Africa. Warfare between the highland Christians and the lowland Muslims was common throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These wars were fought primarily to ensure that the small sultanates and principalities along Ethiopia's southern and eastern border recognised Ethiopian overlordship and ensured Ethiopia's access to the many lucrative trade routes in the region.

During the war, the Portuguese intervened on Ethiopia's behalf, while the Ottoman Empire provided some support to the Adal army. Economic and religious motives propelled both the Portuguese and the Ottomans into the conflict, although it would be inaccurate to portray the conflict as a religious war. Religious considerations were an essential factor in both the Portuguese and the Ottoman decision to intervene in Ethiopia. In a pattern not unique to this war, religion "was important in transforming local conflicts into either general European ones or, at least, into national conflicts".[1] Defending their Ethiopian Christian brethren was an important factor in the Portuguese decision to intervene to protect Ethiopia from further Muslim intrusion. However, economic reasons were also essential factors in the Portuguese decision to enter the conflict in 1541. For the Ottomans, containing Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean and protecting their trade routes through the Red Sea were important factors that led to their support to the Sultanate of Adal. Economic factors were more critical to the Ottomans than religious factors, although the responsibility to protect their fellow Muslims throughout the Islamic world was a factor in the Ottoman decision to lend support to Adal. The Ottoman Empire was in the process of affirming its position as the pre-eminent Islamic political entity, having recently subjugated the Egyptian Mamluks and the Shi'a Safavid Persians. Although the term "Turkish" is often used to describe the Ottoman Empire,

1 Jeremy Black, *Why Wars Happen* (London: Reaktion, 1998), p. 59.

the Ottomans did not refer to themselves as Turks, "which meant rustic peasant or country bumpkin".[2] The Ottomans were rulers of an empire, while Turkey is a modern nation-state. The terms Turkey and Ottoman Empire imply distinctly different political entities and should not be conflated, and throughout this book, the term "Ottoman" will be used.

Condensing thousands of years of historical events into a series of short chapters, the first part of this book presents the historical background information necessary to set the stage for the Ethiopian–Adal War. The story begins with the early Ethiopian kingdoms of Da'amat and Aksum, the adoption of Christianity by the Aksumite king Ezana, and a description of Islam's rise and its impact on Ethiopia, which found itself surrounded by Muslim states in the closing years of the Aksumite kingdom. The constant conflict between Ethiopia and the Muslim sultanates was influential in developing the Ethiopian military organisation and doctrine employed against Adal from 1529–1543. In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese empire's rise coincided with Ethiopia's re-emergence as a regional power in the Horn of Africa. The Ottoman Empire also began to influence events in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa by 1500. The chapters that follow include a brief history of the Portuguese and Ottoman Empires and a historical account of the Sultanate of Adal, which rose to prominence in the early sixteenth century, challenging and nearly vanquishing Christian Ethiopia after the initial invasion in 1529.

The war between Ethiopia and the Sultanate of Adal can be divided into two phases, the first of which lasted from 1529–1541. During this time, the Adal forces, composed mostly of Somali warriors led by Imam Gurey, nearly defeated the Ethiopians. Following their victory at the Battle of Shembra Kure, Imam Gurey's forces maintained the upper hand throughout 12 years of fighting. The second phase of the conflict took place from 1541–1543. During the sixteenth century, the contest between the Ottoman Empire and the Portuguese for control of trade routes, which included the Red Sea, had found an outlet in the Horn of Africa, and both sides entered the conflict, upsetting the balance of power in what was "an entirely internal matter".[3] Ottoman contribution to the Adal war effort did not match the level of support that the Portuguese provided to Ethiopia. The Ethiopians managed to secure the assistance of the great Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's fourth son, Cristóvão, and 400 Portuguese troops. These troops were at the forefront as the Ethiopians stemmed the Muslim advance, and by 1543 the combined Ethiopian/Portuguese force drove the invading Muslim army from Ethiopian territory. This decisive Portuguese expedition ensured that Ethiopia remained a Christian nation, and rarely in history have "results so momentous been attained by means so disproportionate".[4] While the conflict appeared to be a religious war between Christians and Muslims, the religious

2 Jeremy Black, *European Warfare, 1494–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xi.

3 Mesfin Wolde Mariam, 'The Background of the Ethio-Somali Border Dispute', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2 (July 1964), p.196.

4 R.S. Whiteway, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541–1543* (Alpha Editions, 2019), p.xviii.

Chapter 1

History of the Horn of Africa Region

The Horn of Africa is the easternmost tip of the African continent, composed of Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, and is home to some of the earliest traces of human development. Along with Peking Man and Java Man, the earliest evidence of *Homo Erectus*, dating back to over 1.5 million years, was discovered in the Horn of Africa. Stone spear tips found in the region have been dated to around 280,000 years old. Evidence of human civilisation can be found in the Ethiopian savannah, indicating that some 60,000 years ago humans developed tools and weapons in the Awash valley and the Dire Dawa region of modern Ethiopia.[1] The ancient Egyptians interacted with the people of this land, and surviving Egyptian texts indicate that a mysterious "land of Punt" could be reached by "traveling south along the Red Sea after crossing the Eastern Desert".[2] The land of Punt referred to the area south of Egypt along the Red Sea coast, in what is today Somalia and south-eastern Ethiopia. The ancient Egyptians considered the land of Punt, from which the life-giving Nile River emerged, "to be a source of curiosity and mystery", and when the river flooded Egyptian priests concluded that the Gods had been offended.[3] These same Egyptian texts also indicate the importance of sea routes for trade. The sea features prominently throughout Egyptian as well as Ethiopian history. Access to the Red Sea was crucial to Ethiopia's economy from ancient times to the twenty-first century. Menelik I, the first recognised Ethiopian emperor, reigned in the tenth century BC. Legend claims that Menelik was the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and he is thus the first recognised king in the Solomonic line. This line continued to the reign of Haile Selassie (1892–1975), with only a few interruptions. The *Kebra Nagast*, the chronicle of Ethiopia's founding, attests that Menelik I brought

1 Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p.2.

2 Jacke Phillips, 'Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 38, No. 3 (1997), p.425.

3 Henze, *Layers of Time*, p.15.

The Great Rift Valley, about 100 miles north-west of modern-day Addis Ababa. (Author's photo)

ensured that Da'amat, and later the Kingdom of Aksum, had enough food to maintain stability and growth. Despite the best efforts of early kings and later monarchs, Ethiopia's fragmented geography, especially in the highlands, significantly impacted the country's political and cultural unity. Isolated and remote mountainous plateaus "have proven to be almost insurmountable obstacles to political leaders who have sought to unify the country, to the invaders who desired to conquer it, and to those who have sporadically attempted to develop its economic resources".[7] Throughout her long history, the contrast between the north-western highlands and the south-eastern lowlands has contributed to turmoil, tension, and conflict.

The Kingdom of Aksum

As the Ethiopian Kingdom of Da'amat declined in power, the Kingdom of Aksum arose in its place. The city of Aksum, known to both the Greeks and Romans, would rise to prominence shortly after the beginning of the Christian era, in the first century AD. Aksum inherited the advantageous

7 Saheed A. Adejumobi. *The History of Ethiopia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), p.5.

This Egyptian rock stella tells the story of two brothers, Nebsu and Amenhotep, who journeyed to the lands of Punt. (Photo courtesy of L'Orientale/Boston University Investigations at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis, Egypt)

trading location that gathered together the interior's products and exported them in exchange for the luxury items produced in both the Roman Empire and later the Byzantine Empire.[8] Semitic immigrants from the Arabian peninsula, many of them Jewish, helped establish the Aksumite Kingdom and propel it to a level of prosperity far surpassing the earlier Ethiopian kingdom of Da'amat.[9] Aksumites spoke and wrote using Ge'ez, a language that plays a role in Ethiopia similar to that of Latin in the West. The port city of Adulis served as a significant hub for merchants and traders from the Mediterranean sailing from the Byzantine Empire, India, and Persia, and uninterrupted access to Adulis drove Aksumite foreign policy.[10] Ensuring maritime access through the Red Sea was as important 1,500 years ago to the Aksumites as it is to the major world powers in the twenty-first century. What is today the modern state of Ethiopia began as a group of independent and autonomous provinces which paid tribute to the *negusa nagast*, the title given to the King of Aksum.[11] The *neguse* was the term used to designate the ruler of the autonomous regions that proclaimed loyalty to Aksum.

Trade and commerce linked Ethiopia with merchants in India, Egypt, Rome, Persia, and Ceylon. Many goods were traded along these crucial routes, which were responsible for the rise of the great empires of antiquity. The primary trade goods included:

> elephant tusks and tortoise shells, plus rhinoceros horn, hides and skins, various kinds of incense and fragrant gums, dyes, aromatic woods, spices of many kinds, precious stones and pearls, live exotic animals and slaves. In return traders offered cloth and several kinds of clothing, olive oil and wine, axes, adzes and other tools of iron, copper, and bronze, pottery, drinking cups, gold and silver objects (made for the king "in the shapes of the country") and glassware (perhaps beads).[12]

Of all the products and goods to come out of Ethiopia, none is as well known as coffee. While Ethiopians refer to both the bean and the drink as *buna*, the Arabic term is *qahwa*, while the Turkish call it *kahve*, from which the name in various other languages originated.[13] The abundance of coffee beans and other

8 David W. Phillipson, 'Aksum in Africa', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 23 (November 1990), p.55.
9 George A. Lipsky, *Ethiopia* (New Haven, CT: Hraf Press, 1962), p.7.
10 Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, p.9.
11 Huntingford, *Historical Geography*, p.61.
12 Henze, *Layers of Time*, p.12, note 18.
13 Henze, *Layers of Time*, p.12, note 26.

The Ethiopian Kingdom of Aksum in about 500 AD. Aksum encompassed land in Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula by this time. The port city of Adulis lies a few days journey north-east of Aksum on the Red Sea. The land of Punt lies further to the south-east.

well as human. Adhering to Monophysitism would complicate Ethiopia's relations with Rome and with other European powers in the future.

In the sixth century an Ethiopian army, in conjunction with forces from the Byzantine Empire, defeated a Jewish army led by Dhu'Nawas in Arabia. For centuries after that, the Ethiopian Aksumite Kingdom straddled the Red Sea, incorporating territory in both Africa and the Arabian peninsula.[25] Ethiopia went to war against the Jewish kingdom in Arabia to maintain its position of economic superiority in an early example of the interrelationship between religious faith and economic interest. This military expedition to Arabia also represents the first example of the Christian Ethiopians appealing to fellow Christians (in this case, the Byzantines) for help in subduing a foe that threatened Ethiopia's trade and security. Both the Ethiopians and the Byzantines benefitted from this joint military expedition to Arabia. Nearly 1,000 years later, Ethiopia would seek assistance from Christian Portugal when Imam Gurey's army invaded in 1529.

The Kingdom of Aksum dominated the Ethiopian highlands. The nomadic peoples settling in the lowlands to the south-east and south-west suffered through harsher summer seasons, lower rainfall, and more frequent droughts. The competition for arable land and sustainable water supplies would be a recurring theme throughout the centuries as bands of lowland nomads attempted to penetrate the highlands. There was a crucial link between highland and lowland, which would persist through the centuries, and this was salt. The lowlands possessed salt deposits, and the salt was formed into blocks and traded throughout the Horn of Africa, transported by camel, mule and horse over the trade routes throughout the lowlands,

The ruins of Aksum. The once-great empire declined after the Persians gained control of the lucrative Red Sea trade routes. (Photo from the collection of Jones Ofuasia, pictured in the image)

25 Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Africa and the World* (New York: University Press of America, 2000), p.154.

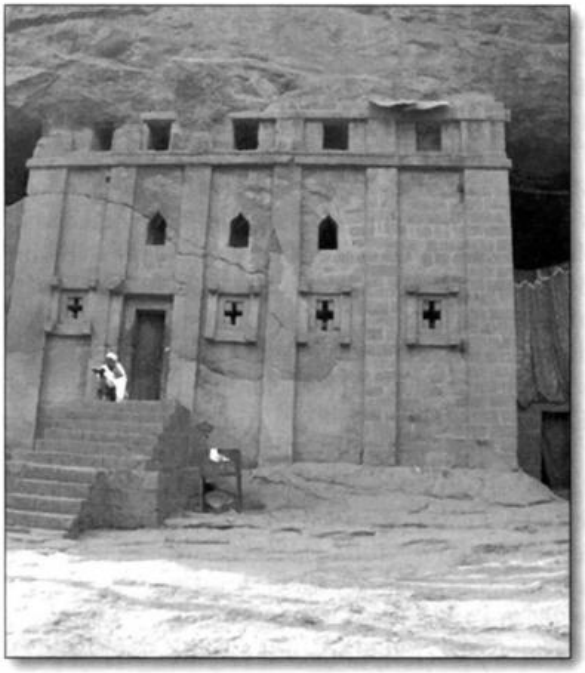
St George tapestry in Aksum. Saint George is the patron saint of Ethiopia. Often pictured in battle or slaying the dragon, George has been Ethiopia's patron since the fourth century. (Photo from the collection of Jones Ofuasia)

> as polygamy, the Church of Alexandria was to struggle in vain throughout the centuries. At the same time the creative reaction of the Abyssinians to Christianity enabled them to assimilate it naturally and cling to it tenaciously, whilst the symbolical status of the Church in the divinely ordained monarchy enabled the State to rise again and again triumphant over the vicissitudes of fortune.[36]

Christianity would be a significant element of the Ethiopian kings' attempt to restore the state's power. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, after recovering from Judith's pagan revival, Ethiopia forged a new path, part of which is exemplified by the magnificent churches hewn from rock in the town of Lalibela. The Ethiopian king Lalibela ordered the construction of churches that were carved from solid rock. He intended to build a new Jerusalem meant to replace the holy city which was captured by Islamic forces in 1187. The Lalibela River was renamed the River Jordan to complete the town's transformation into the new Jerusalem. Construction on these churches began around 1180, and most of the 11 churches were completed within a quarter-century. With the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem, Christians wishing to visit the Holy Land were often turned away. Lalibela offered an alternative to Jerusalem, and pilgrimages to visit the churches have continued from the twelfth century until the present day. Lalibela, along with Aksum, was the holiest site in Ethiopian Christianity.

Much like Christian rulers in Europe, such as Charlemagne, Ethiopian kings spread Christianity by the sword, forcibly converting people who

36 Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, pp.54–55.



The church of Abba Libanos. This is the only one of the churches to have the roof and the ground level still attached to the main rock structure. Legend holds that it was carved on one night by King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela's wife, Meskel Kebra, who was assisted by angels. (Photo from the collection of Mikael Muehlbauer)

The Church of St George (Amharic: Beta Giyorgis). This church, commissioned by King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela, was carved downward into volcanic rock over the course of a quarter-century. As an infant, Gebre Mesqel was surrounded by a swarm of bees but was not harmed. The name "Lalibela" means "the bees recognise his sovereignty". The church of Beta Giyorgis is considered to be the eighth wonder of the world. (Photo from the collection of Mikael Muehlbauer)

had previously held to animist or other beliefs.[37] However, confrontation with Islam would present a more serious challenge than that posed by Ethiopia's more peripheral people's pastoral religions. With a powerful Islamic presence in Egypt, Ethiopia could only hope to expand to the south, in the direction of the much weaker lowland sultanates. As a result, conflict with the small Muslim kingdoms along Ethiopia's southern border intensified. The ethnic and religious tension in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia and the peoples of present-day Somalia has continued ever since. However, the beginnings of this contest were more than merely a religious quarrel between the Christian Ethiopians and the Muslims who inhabited the small coastal states. Access to land and sea trade routes fuelled the fighting; land routes to Egypt, the salt trade, and the lucrative sea routes to the Red Sea and thence to the Indian Ocean. Both the land and sea routes were heavily travelled, and Ethiopian control of these routes would lead to renewed economic prosperity. The struggle to regain access to the trade routes and restore Christianity's place in Ethiopia was of paramount concern throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Ethiopian military would play a vital role in both pursuits.

37 Adejumobi. *The History of Ethiopia*, p.14.

Chapter 2

Christian Ethiopia Restored

Ibn Battuta's visit to the Horn of Africa coincided with a return to stability within Ethiopia. Christianity returned to its former ascendancy, literature flourished, and the Amharic language proliferated throughout Ethiopia, taking its place alongside Ge'ez. Amharic would be the vernacular language of Ethiopia, with Ge'ez continuing in use among the learned classes and the church hierarchy. To keep the people's energy focused on the continuing restoration of the Ethiopian kingdom, the kings led continuous military campaigns against Islamic states such as the Sultanate of Ifat, one of the member states of the Kingdom of Zeila, to the south-east of Ethiopia. The Sultan of Ifat launched what historians consider to be the first major *jihad* against Ethiopia, successfully defeating Ethiopian forces in a series of battles.[1] The Ethiopian king Amda Seyon (r. 1314–1344) resisted the *jihad*, engaging in a conflict that featured savage fighting marked by religious overtones between Muslims and Christians. He faced the dual threat of *jihad* and paganism, as Christianity in Ethiopia during this time still existed side by side with a plethora of animistic and outright pagan beliefs that had continued to thrive in Ethiopia since the time of Queen Judith's rebellion. Ethiopian Christian churches were attacked and destroyed, and monks faced persecution and even death at the hands of other Ethiopians who still adhered to ancient beliefs. Amda Seyon consolidated Christian control in many parts of the kingdom. Together with the Ethiopian church's leading bishop (the *Abuna)*, it linked the provinces' military control with the requirement to protect the churches and clerics.[2] This institutional reform was a significant step in the effort to restore the church's power.

Amda Seyon's 30-year reign began in 1314. *The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon* chronicles his war against the Islamic forces, which had merged into the Kingdom of Zeila and had consolidated political control of most of the lowland territory adjoining the Red Sea. Written almost certainly by a church hierarchy member, as these Ethiopians were the most literate, the *Glorious*

1 I.M. Lewis, 'The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 1 (1960), p.222.

2 Taddesse Tamrat, 'A Short Note on the Traditions of Pagan Resistance to the Ethiopian Church (14th and 15th Centuries)', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 10 (January 1972), p.140.

Victories is a classic of Ethiopian literature. Amda Seyon's military campaign began in 1329. Marching against the forces of Ifat, he faced a Muslim force of approximately 20,000 infantry and 15,000 cavalry.[3] The Ethiopian mindset was one of impending victory as the *Chronicle* recounts:

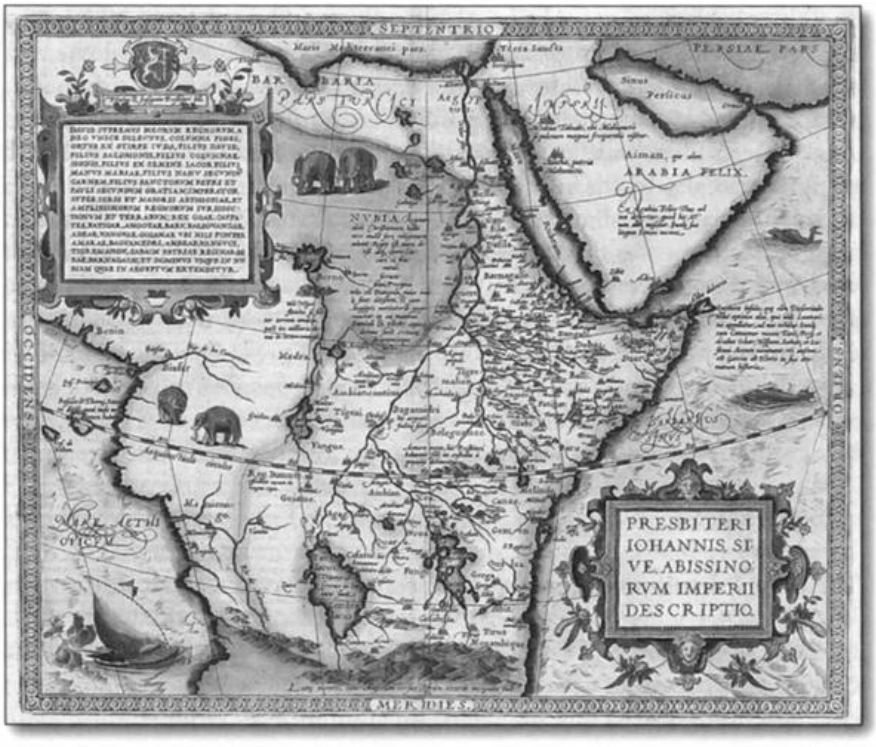
> As for us, we have heard and we know from the Holy Scriptures that the kingdom of the Moslems, established for but seven hundred years, shall cease to be at the proper time. But the kingdom of the Christians shall continue till the second coming of the Son of God, according to the words of the Holy Scripture; and above all (we know) that the kingdom of Ethiopia shall endure till the coming of Christ, of which David prophesied saying "Ethiopia shall stretch her hands unto God."[4]

Amda Seyon's forces joined in battle against the Muslim army under the leadership of Sabradin in February 1329 and defeated them "through the power of God".[5] Throughout the spring and summer of 1329 and for the next three years, Amda Seyon faced a succession of Muslim armies, defeating each one in turn. His reign ended with the Ethiopian highlands mostly back under Christian rule. The nomadic pastoralists of the lowland periphery were firmly kept in their place, and their ability to launch further attacks against Ethiopia was substantially reduced. These pastoralists were by now almost exclusively Muslims. Christian Ethiopia gained undisputed supremacy under Amda Seyon's leadership, and he is considered by many scholars and historians to have been nothing less than a military genius. The powerful striking force that he created revolutionised warfare in the Horn of Africa, introducing a level of efficiency and ferocity that changed the relationship between highland Christian and lowland Muslims. Ethiopia was a centralised state, able to move its forces over interior lines and flexible enough to move against any one of the smaller lowland sultanates individually before reforming in the highlands and replenishing supplies and forces before striking again. The Muslim states, on the other hand, were not centralised but dispersed. These states "were not well organised; mobilisation was difficult, they had little power of resistance, and were liable to sudden collapse".[6] Without a leader able to transcend these challenges, the lowland sultanates had to endure the regular Ethiopian incursions.

Ethiopian Military Organisation

Warriors were the central figures in the Ethiopian Christian kingdom, which was for all practical purposes a warrior society. Two ethnic groups, the Amhara and the Tigray, formed the majority of Ethiopia's population, two groups that embodied a warrior ethos. Military values of loyalty, courage,

3 G.W.B. Huntingford, trans., *The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon, King of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p.20.
4 Huntingford, *Glorious Victories*, p.59.
5 Huntingford, *Glorious Victories*, p.59.
6 Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p.68.



The fabled empire of Prester John. By the sixteenth century, Europeans had come to believe that this Christian king reigned in the Orient. His wealth and his armies offered the potential to tilt the balance of power against the rising tide of Islam. (Public Domain)

unable to visit the Holy City of Jerusalem, so the desire to free Jerusalem was not as intense to Ethiopian kings as it was to the kings of Christian Europe.

Both Ethiopians and Muslims believed God was on their side throughout the conflicts that plagued the Horn of Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Religion and commerce drove the competition between Ethiopia and the Muslim states along her southern and eastern borders. Christianity and Islam competed in a zero-sum game for control over trade routes and commodities. The ideological crux of the struggle between the Muslims and the Christians could be summed up in brief:

> Each wanted to win this lucrative area in the name of their God, for their followers. Each condemned the other as "infidels", and each invoked the help of God for its just cause. The need to maintain commercial links in time established a modus vivendi of ideological co-existence, which did not preclude stepping into the activities of winning supporters from the camp of the other, which in turn was the cause for the drawing of swords in the name of God, spreading the word of God and destroying the force of evil. "... If you have killed ten Christians, then I will kill among your side a thousand Muslims, and if you kill a thousand, then I will kill many thousands."[30]

This mindset was part of the repetitive cycle of conflict and violence which characterised Muslim–Christian relations in the Horn of Africa.

30 Mohammed Hassen, '*The Oromo of Ethiopia, 1500–1850: With Special Emphasis on the Gibe Region*', PhD Diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (1983), p.12.

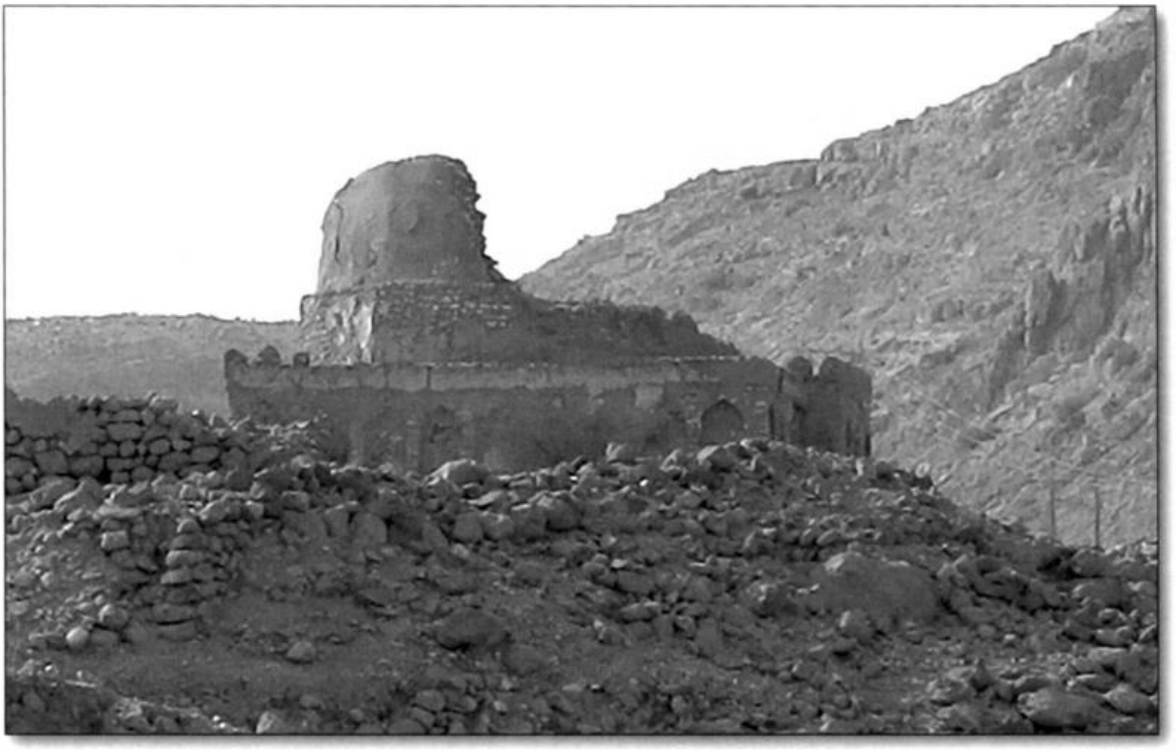
Pero da Covilhão finally convinced Eleni to contact King John II, requesting Portuguese assistance in keeping the Sultanate of Adal and other small Muslim states from encroaching on Ethiopian territory and hampering trade out of Ethiopia. Acting as regent after Eskender's death, Eleni continued to pursue an appeasement policy, not acting aggressively towards the Muslim states as had Ethiopian leaders in past decades, such as Amda Seyon. However, Pero da Covilhão had convinced her that an alliance with Portugal would be in Ethiopia's best interest, and she finally sent an emissary to Lisbon. Not only did Ethiopia stand to benefit from an alliance with Portugal, but Portugal stood to gain a foothold in the Red Sea, a base from which they could harass Ottoman shipping. When Portuguese king Manuel I (r. 1495–1521) received a letter from Queen Eleni of Ethiopia in 1509, Prester John's existence in Africa seemed to have been affirmed.[38] Queen Eleni's letter of 1509 was the first correspondence received in Lisbon from Ethiopia. Surrounded by a resurgent Islam, Christian Ethiopia faced increasing peril. An alliance with the powerful Portuguese might be just what was needed to keep further Islamic incursions into the Christian highlands in check.

Although the Portuguese king received Queen Eleni's letter in 1509, the mission that she requested would not arrive in Ethiopia until April of 1520. There was still a great deal of confusion among average Europeans, and even among many in the ruling classes, as to where places such as "Ethiopia" and "India" actually were. The Italian journeyer Ludovico de Varthema contributed to this confusion when he recorded his travels from Rome to Egypt, Arabia, and India between 1502 and 1509. He visited "Ethiopia" on his return journey back to Europe. He considered all the Portuguese possessions in Africa to be part of Ethiopia, including Mozambique, Malindi, and Mombasa. Varthema wrote that "from what I have seen of India and Ethiopia, it appears to me that the king of Portugal, if it pleases God, and he has been victorious as he has been hitherto, I think that he will be the richest king in the world".[39] De Varthema does not appear to have visited Ethiopia proper. Still, his suggestion that Africa's entire south-east coast was "Ethiopia" indicates that in the early sixteenth-century European mind, Ethiopia encompassed much of the known African continent and even the Indian subcontinent.

The Portuguese mission that finally arrived in Ethiopia in 1520 included Father Francisco Alvarez and Dom Rodrigo da Lima. Father Alvarez's record of the Portuguese mission to Ethiopia, published in 1540, was the first accurate account of Ethiopia available to the few Europeans literate enough to read it. The mission visited the rock-hewn churches at Lalibela and met with the *bahrnagash*, the ruler of the northern Ethiopian

38 Jesse Sargent, 'Following in Jesuit Footsteps: British Expeditions to Ethiopia in the Early Victorian Era', pp.31–58. In *Encounters between Jesuits and Protestants in Africa*, eds. Robert Aleksander Maryks and Festo Mkenda S.J. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p.36.

39 Ludovico de Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico Di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, 1503 to 1508*. Translated by John Winter Jones (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863), p.296.



Qalhat was a great trading post on the Arabian Sea visited by fabled travellers Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and Chinese explorer Zheng He in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, respectively. Ludovico de Varthema almost certainly visited the city in the early sixteenth century. The vibrant city went into decline, probably due to an earthquake as the city sits on the Qalhat fault. By the sixteenth century the centre of trade moved to Muscat, although Alfonso de Albuquerque captured the remains of Qalhat for Portugal in 1507. Qalhat was the second city of the Kingdom of Hormuz ruled by Bibi Maryam during the early fourteenth century. She built a mosque visited by Ibn Battuta, who commented on its beauty. Little is left of Qalhat, with its now silted harbour, except the ruins of Maryam's tomb, which once had a dome. The ruined tomb has become a part of the coast of Oman visually, with its stark beauty of buff-grey stone hills set off by contrasting blues of sea and sky. (Photo and caption by Grant Rhode)

provinces that today compose the nation of Eritrea. The *bahrnagash* was an important political figure; he was effectively the leader of the Ethiopian maritime forces made up primarily of trading vessels, but he also commanded some troops who could be employed as part of the Ethiopian military in times of crisis.

Queen Eleni's son, Lebne Dengel, had ascended the Ethiopian throne in 1507, shortly after Eleni had requested Portugal's assistance. The young king did not believe that an alliance with Portugal served Ethiopia's interests. His pride did not lend itself to entering an alliance with the Portuguese, a faraway people who practiced a much different form of Christianity to the Ethiopian Monophysite variety. To the members of the Portuguese delegation, Lebne Dengel was Prester John, and his Christian kingdom was the long-sought-after ally in the struggle against Islamic expansionism. It appeared that Prester John was less interested in the Portuguese than the Portuguese were in him. Unable to agree to an alliance with Lebne Dengel (Prester John), the Portuguese expedition left Ethiopia and returned home in 1526.

The Portuguese Empire

Like Ethiopia, Portugal has a rich history within which Christianity and Islam have had a lasting influence. Islam spread into Iberia in 711 AD, essentially adding large parts of Spain and most of Portugal to the Umayyad Caliphate. For nearly five centuries *Al-Andalus*, the Arabic name for Portugal and Spain, was Islam's westernmost territory. In 1249, in the Algarve city of Silves known as the "Baghdad of the West", Christian forces defeated the last Muslim stronghold in Portugal, and the few remaining Muslims who were captured were killed. The Portuguese had driven Islam from their soil. A bitter hostility would mark all future encounters between Portuguese troops and Muslim soldiers - the "bitter hereditary enemies of the Cross" - whenever and wherever they would meet.[40] In 1385 the House of Aviz was established as the ruling dynasty of independent Christian Portugal, a small nation hemmed in by the mountains and the sea, with a zeal for spreading the Christian faith.

The Portuguese under the House of Aviz had much in common with the Ethiopians, who had restored Christianity to their nation and had developed a military machine designed to crush the Islamic armies along Ethiopia's borders, which occasionally challenged Ethiopian Christian hegemony.

Even a partial history of the European age of exploration is outside of the scope of this book. However, Portugal's voyages of discovery and search for the kingdom of Prester John are essential elements in the Ethiopian–Adal War's outcome. The Portuguese general, admiral, explorer, and statesman Alfonso de Albuquerque (1453–1515) envisioned a global strategy that

Ruins of a tenth-century Muslim fishing village, Algarve coast, Portugal. Five centuries of Islam left an indelible mark on Portuguese culture, cuisine, and art. The Arabic word *inshallah*, or "God willing", found its way into the Portuguese language as *oxala*, or "I hope". (Photo by Robin Shaw)

40 John Laband, *Bringers of War: The Portuguese in Africa during the Age of Gunpowder and Sail from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Frontline, 2013), p.5.

would allow Portugal to control the spice trade and vanquish global Islam. Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean had been well underway since Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope. Gama departed Portugal on 8 July 1497, a day "chosen by astrologers as auspicious", replete with "parades, pageantry, and intense religious fanfare, similar to earlier Crusades".[41] His expedition arrived in India in May of 1498. The experience of one of the first Portuguese sailors to come ashore in India sums up the entire Portuguese overseas enterprise, illustrating both the religious and economic dimensions. Upon stepping foot in India, this sailor "was accosted by two Spanish-speaking Tunisians ... they asked him: 'What the devil has brought you here?' to which he replied: 'We have come to seek Christians and spices.'"[42] The search for Christians and spices was indeed in full swing, and in order to find both, the Portuguese established trading posts in India at Cochin (1505), Goa (1510), and Hormuz (1515) in the Arabian Sea. Over the next decade they would add Bombay (Mumbai) and Diu (1535) along the Indian coast. The *Estado da India* was established in 1505 with its capital at Cochin, with Francisco de Almeida as its first viceroy. In 1510 the capital moved to Goa, and it was from here that Portugal managed its affairs east of the Cape of Good Hope to include the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Fleets known as the *Armadas da India* maintained communication between India and Lisbon. The main objective of this maritime empire was trade.[43] Spreading the Christian message and fighting Islam wherever it could be found were also priorities, and Albuquerque would dutifully serve in both the economic and religious capacities. While the Portuguese had also sent exploratory voyages to the west, reaching Brazil in 1500, economic opportunities in the east, including India, Japan, China, and Africa, far outweighed the advantages to be gained by competing against the Spanish, who had established themselves as the premier European power in the western hemisphere.

Four primary motives drove Portuguese expansion and exploration: first, a crusading zeal against the Muslims; second, the desire for Guinea gold; third, the quest for Prester John; and fourth, the search for Oriental spices.[44] Summarising these objectives, most scholars and historians would conclude that the desire to replace the Venetians as the primary distributors of Asian trade goods and joining Prester John's Christian Empire in the east in an attack on the Islamic world from the rear were the most important motives for Portuguese eastward expansion at the turn of the sixteenth century.[45] Separating the economic from the religious elements which drove

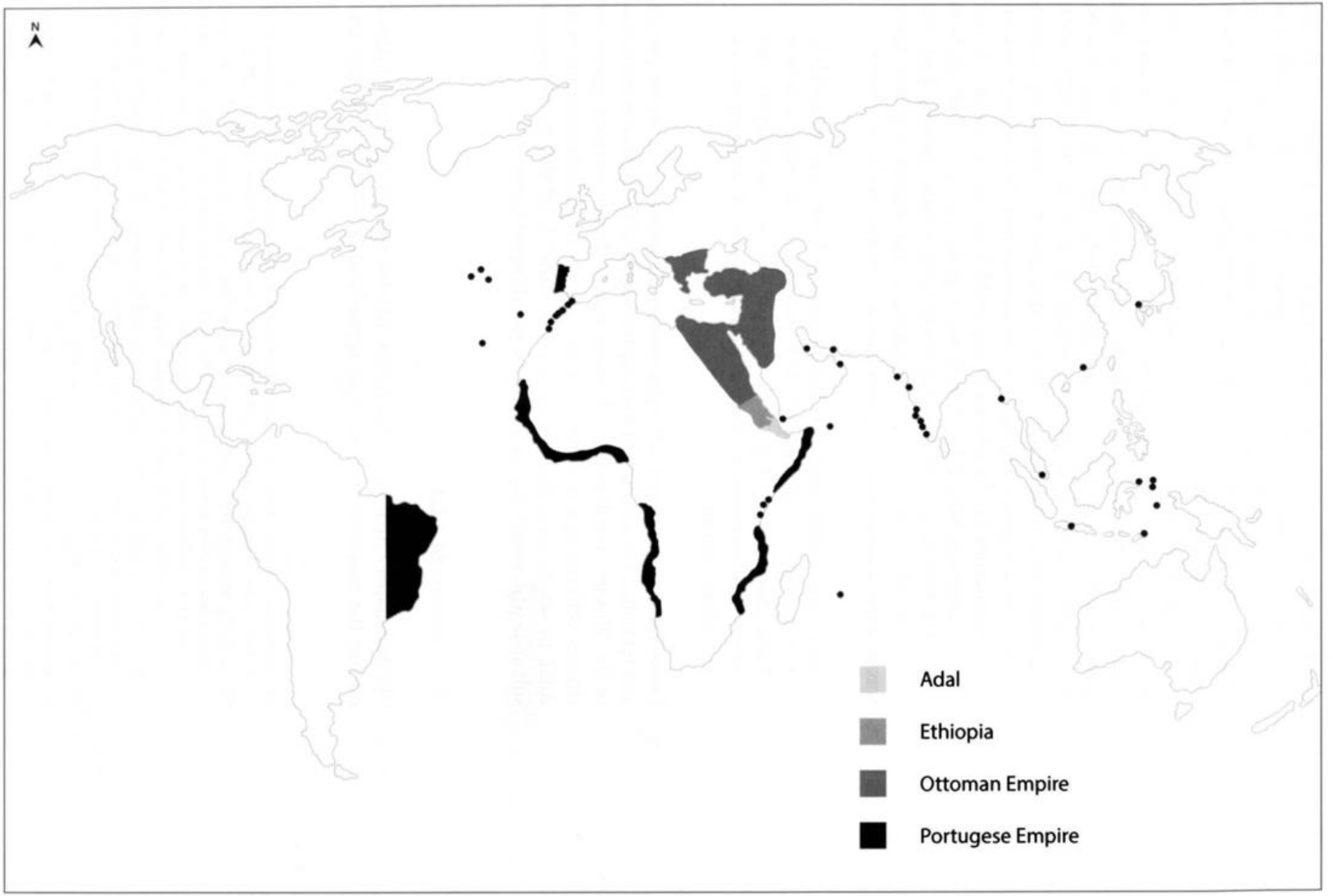
41 S.M. Ghazanfar, 'Vasco da Gama 's Voyages to India: Messianism, Mercantilism, and Sacred Exploits', *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*, (13) 2018, p.21.

42 C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire in Asia, 1415–1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p.37.

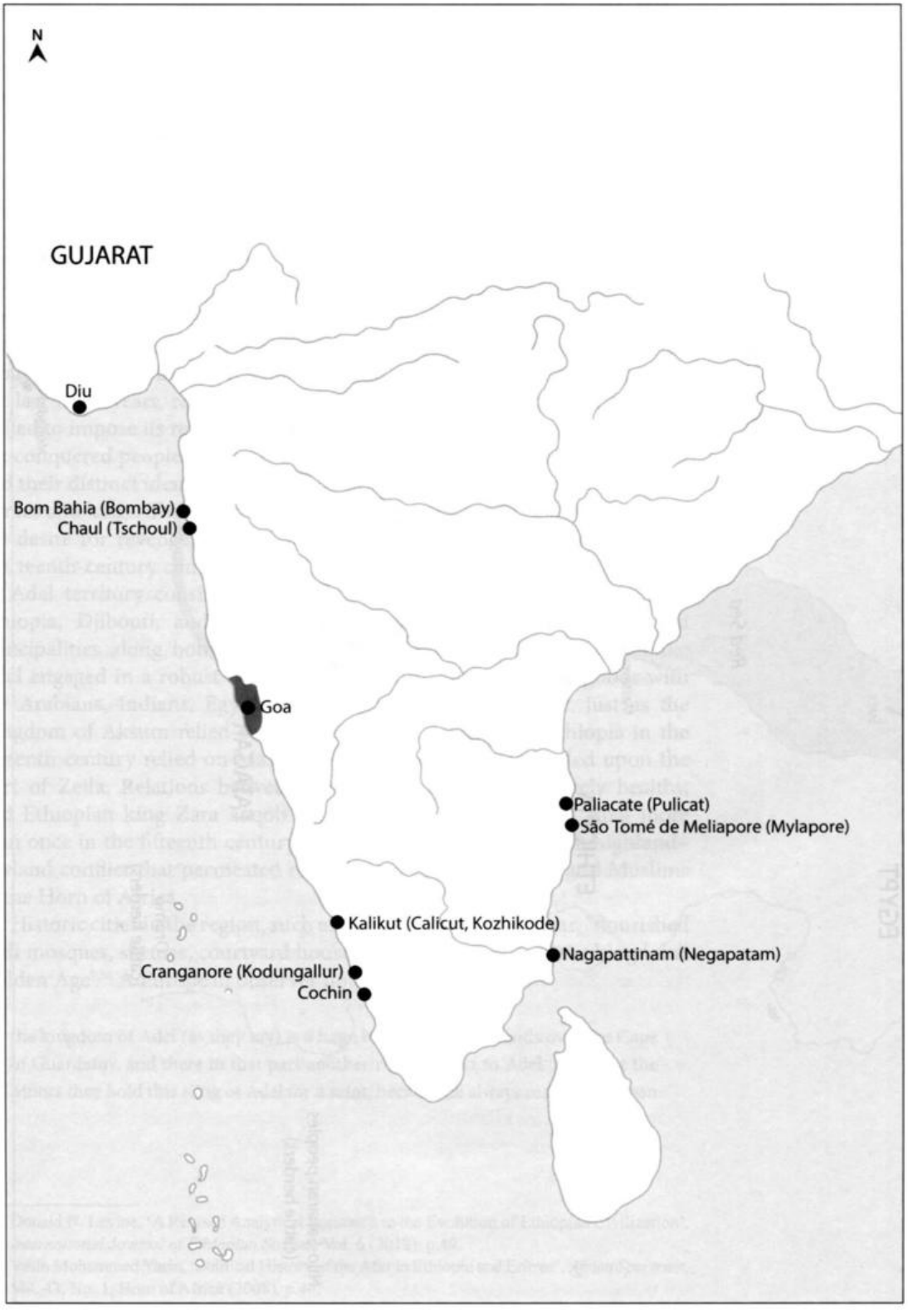
43 Ujjayan Bhattacharyay, 'The Portuguese Maritime Strategies and Options in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region (1515–1526)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 57 (1996), p.263.

44 Boxer, *Portuguese Seaborne Empire in Asia*, p.18.

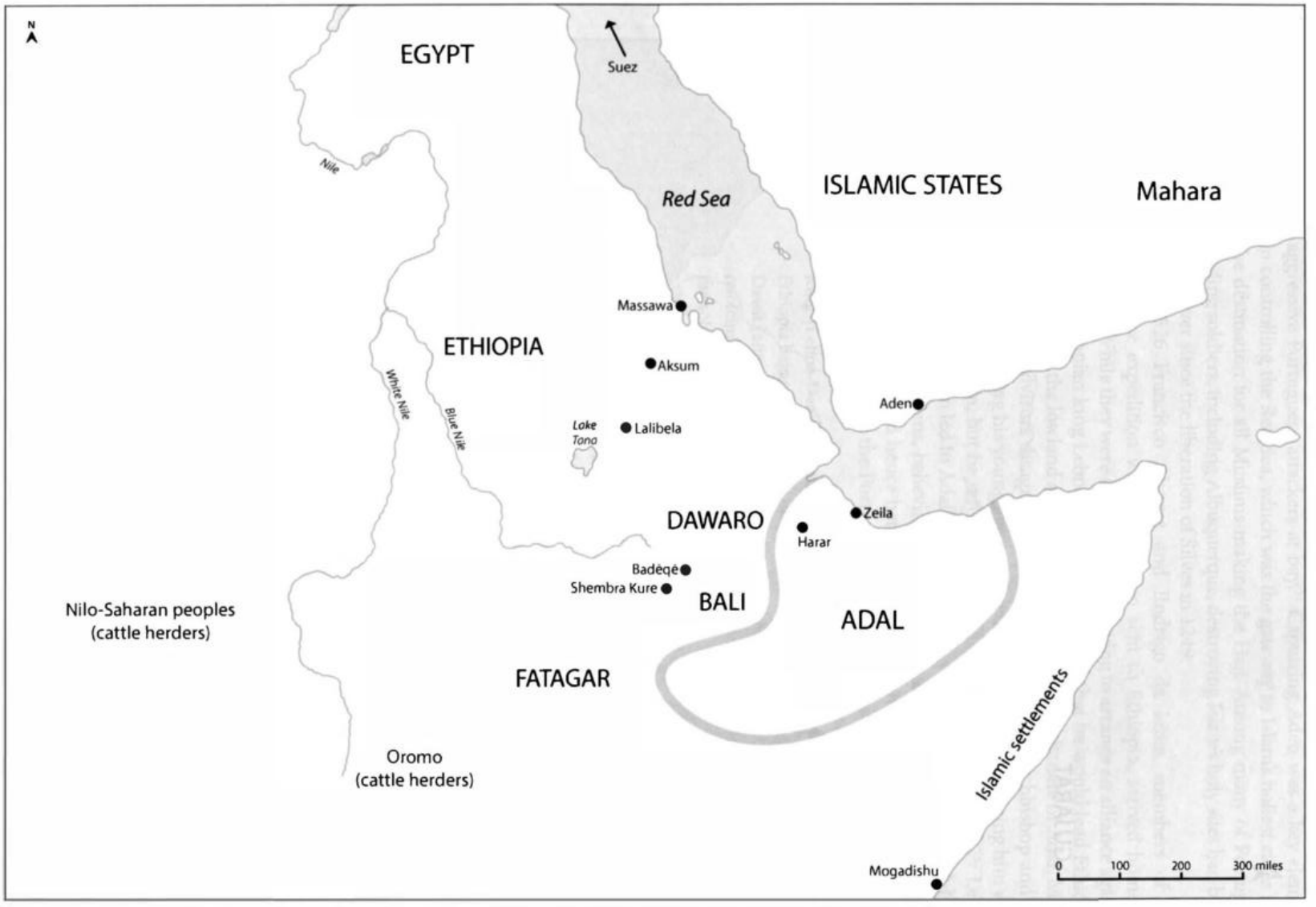
45 Andrew C. Hess, 'The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517) and the Beginning of the Sixteenth-Century World War', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Jan 1973),



The Portuguese Empire, Ottoman Empire, Ethiopia, and the Sultanate of Adal in approximately 1520. Portugal's global reach is evident, but the Ottoman Empire's central location posed a threat to Portuguese maritime interests.



The Portuguese *Estado da India* in the sixteenth century.



The Horn of Africa in the year 1500. Fatagar, Bali, and Dawaro were lowland provinces ruled by Ethiopia. The locations of Shembra Kure and Badèqè are conjectural.

mention of the Sultanate of Adal appears in the chronicles of the Ethiopian king Amda Seyon. Composed primarily of ethnic Somalis and Afaris, they "lived largely as pastoralists and spoke languages belonging to the East Cushitic branch of the Afroasiatic language family".[55] Most of the people living in this region had migrated south from Egypt and across the Red Sea into Africa over the preceding centuries, mostly following the established trade routes. Relations between the Afar and Ethiopia can be traced as far back as the era of Aksumite dominance over the port city of Adulis on the Red Sea coast in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. The Afar people successfully resisted many incursions into their territory, including attacks by the Ethiopian highlands' Tigrayan people.[56] As a result of Amda Seyon's punitive campaigns against the lowland Muslims, Christian control over the territory to the south and south-east of Ethiopia was secure. Unlike many of the ethnic groups which had been forcefully included in the Ethiopian kingdom over the last 1,000 years, repeated Christian victories over the lowland Muslims "failed to impose its religion and language on the overwhelming majority of the conquered peoples".[57] The lowland people maintained their Islamic faith and their distinct identity despite years of suffering at the hands of Ethiopian armies and kings. The Sultanate of Adal became the focal point for satisfying the desire for revenge, which had not been dormant since Amda Seyon's fourteenth-century conquests.

Adal territory consisted of what today covers Somalia, south-eastern Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Just as the kingdoms, sultanates, and principalities along both shores of the Red Sea had done for millennia, Adal engaged in a robust trade in slaves, ivory, salt, and other goods with the Arabians, Indians, Egyptians, and probably the Chinese. Just as the Kingdom of Aksum relied on the port city of Adulis, and Ethiopia in the fifteenth century relied on Massawa, Adal's commerce depended upon the port of Zeila. Relations between Ethiopia and Adal were rarely healthy, and Ethiopian king Zara Yaqob launched expeditions against Adal more than once in the fifteenth century, consistent with the pattern of highland–lowland conflict that permeated relations between Christians and Muslims in the Horn of Africa.

Historic cities in the region, such as Berbera, Zeila, and Harar, "flourished with mosques, shrines, courtyard houses, and cisterns during the kingdom's Golden Age".[58] A European observer noted that:

> the kingdom of Adel (as they say) is a large kingdom, and extends over the Cape of Guardafuy, and there in that part another ruler subject to Adel. Amongst the Moors they hold this King of Adel for a saint, because he always makes war upon

55 Donald N. Levine, 'A Revised Analytical Approach to the Evolution of Ethiopian Civilization', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 6 (2012), p.49.

56 Yasin Mohammed Yasin, 'Political History of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea', *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Horn of Africa (2008), p.44.

57 Hassen, 'Ethiopia and the Red Sea', p.63.

58 Levine, 'Revised Analytical Approach', p.49.

Chapter 3

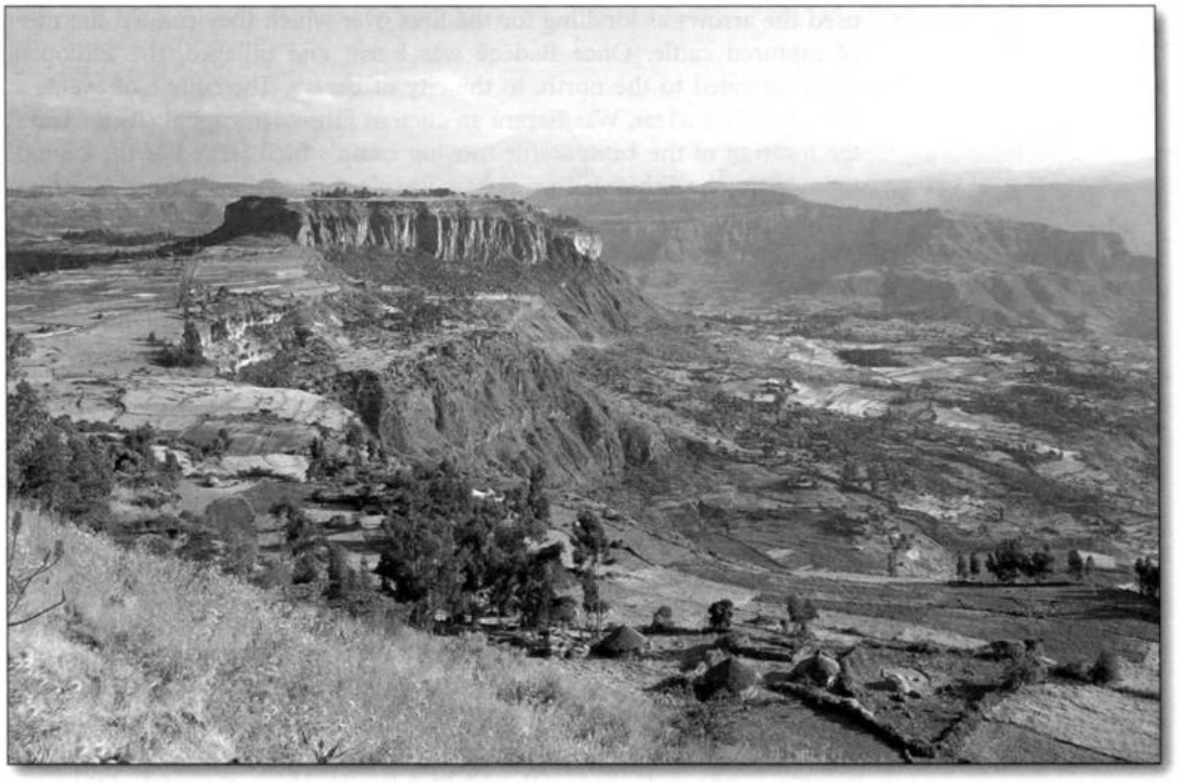
The Ethiopian–Adal War: Imam Gurey Triumphant

The conquest of Ethiopia began as a continuation of the struggle between the Ethiopian Christian kingdom and the small Muslim sultanates and principalities to Ethiopia's south and south-east. Amda Seyon and Zara Yaqob had subdued the sultans of these states in the previous centuries. Occasionally, an uprising of one of the sultanates would lead to further conflict with the powerful Ethiopian kingdom. However, to attribute the *jihad* to nothing more than a desire to spread Islam into Christian Ethiopia would disregard other powerful motives for the war. Political unity was lacking among the Muslim states that lined the Horn of Africa, and Ethiopian military excursions into these small states had become routine. By 1529 Imam Gurey had successfully leveraged centuries of frustration over subservience to the Christian kings of the Ethiopian highlands. Irredentist movements among the lowland pastoralists may have also been a motivating factor behind Gurey's decision to continue his attacks into Ethiopia.[1] If this was a factor, it is unlikely that Muslim pastoralists sought to inhabit the highlands, although many had been forcibly removed from more fertile land over the centuries of Ethiopian punitive raids. Still, the desire to move north into territory under direct Ethiopian control probably motivated many non-Christians to challenge Ethiopian control of the fertile highland provinces. A further motivating factor leading to a desire to launch a military assault into the fertile Ethiopian highlands may have been that famine had plagued the lowlands in the 1520s.[2]

Adal Military Organisation

The lowland provinces shared Islam but little else. Competition for access to the lucrative Red Sea trade routes and dynastic struggles ensured that the small sultanates south and east of Ethiopia remained as opposed to each

1 Lewis, 'The Somali Conquest', p.223.
2 Martin, 'Mahdism and Holy Wars', p.111.

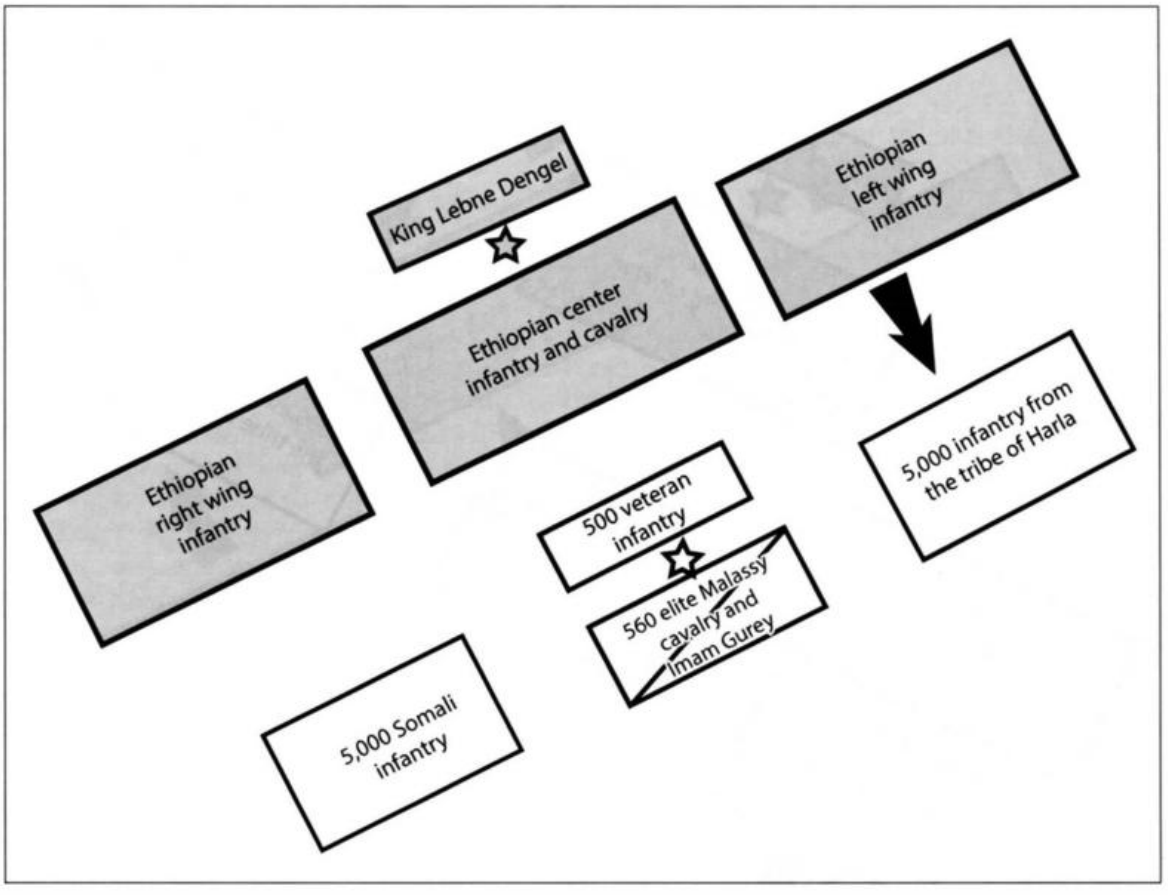


One of the many ambas which cover the Ethiopian landscape. This one is approximately 60 miles east of Lake Tana. (Photo by Jean-Claude Latombe)

then when they were distracted with these tasks, the Ethiopian army would attack. However, the Ethiopian commanders could not coordinate their actions, leading to a half-hearted assault on the Adal troops pillaging in Badēqē. The description of the fighting indicates a violent clash; the ferocity intensified by the motivation to bring *jihad* to Ethiopia. Arab Faqih recounts the Muslim commander Abu Bakr having his right hand shattered in the fighting, but "the Muslims tied it up for him, and it was as good as if nothing ever happened. This was one of the graces of *jihad*."[16] Ethiopian troops also fought bravely, as Arab Faqih also records an Ethiopian commander named Aron had a spear thrust into his mouth, and even though "the shimmering point emerged under his ear, the [Ethiopian] sat firmly in his saddle".[17] These descriptions of violent battlefield encounters recur throughout Arab Faqih's account of the war. Athough the Ethiopian army gave a valiant account of itself at Badēqē, ultimately Imam Gurey rallied his commanders and his troops, driving the Ethiopian force back.

Included in Lebne Dengel's army at Badēqē were archers who used poisoned arrows. Arab Faqih wrote that these archers, the Maya people, unleashed thousands of arrows against the Muslim forces, arrows which Imam Gurey ordered his troops to collect off the ground rather than let the Maya get hold of their previously fired arrows and possibly use them again. After the Ethiopian forces retreated from Badēqē, the Muslim army

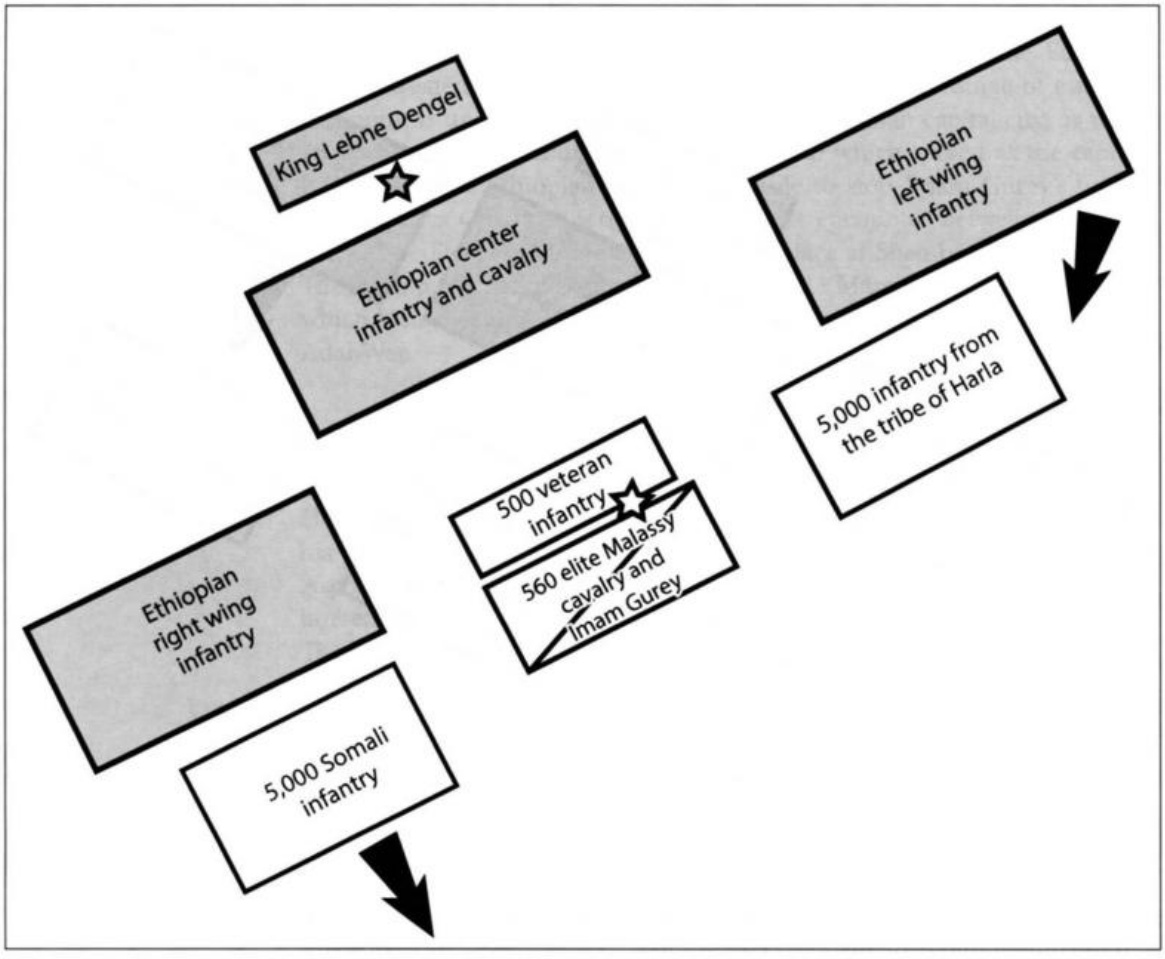
16 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.63.
17 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.63.



The Battle of Shembra Kure. While Imam Gurey led his army from the front rank, King Lebne Dengel remained at the rear of his army.

near the Mojo river in the rolling plains where the lowlands began to rise into the mountainous highlands, Lebne Dengel's Ethiopian infantry initially overwhelmed Imam Gurey's troops. As the Ethiopians advanced, they were sheltered from the sun by a cloud, while Imam Gurey's troops were exposed to the sun's heat. But Arab Faqih claims that in response to the prayers of the Imam, the cloud passed from over the Christians' heads, settling firmly in place above the heads of the Muslim warriors, providing shelter from the heat. Sensing divine intervention on behalf of their foe, the Ethiopians desperately charged forward, pushing the Muslim army's left wing back, nearly causing their entire line to collapse. Throwing their javelin at the run and then closing in hand-to-hand combat with the spear and dagger, the Ethiopians demonstrated the ferocity for which they were known. The Adal troops absorbed the shock of the Ethiopian surge but could not withstand the weight of their numbers.

Falling back, Gurey's forces struggled to maintain their discipline, certain that if they routed from the field in disorder, they would be hunted down and killed. Pursued by the Ethiopians, most of the Somali troops from the left wing were slaughtered. The Ethiopians then drove the right wing of the Muslim army into the centre, where Imam Gurey and his entourage of *Malassy* were fighting bravely against the Ethiopian cavalry. There the fight became desperate, assuming the savage character of the close-quarter

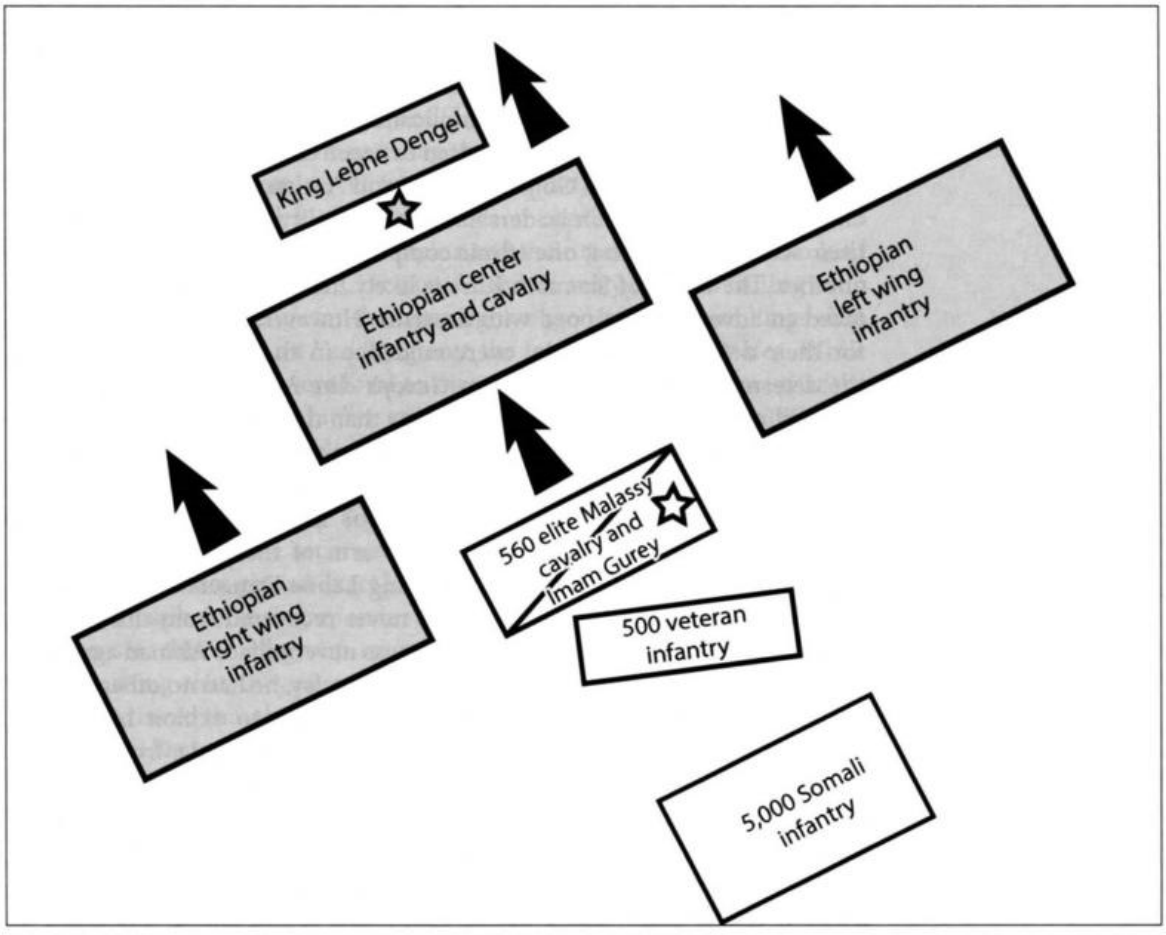


The Ethiopian army has pushed back both wings of the Muslim force. The outcome appears to be reminiscent of the many encounters between Ethiopian and Muslim armies since the era of Zara Yaqob and Amda Seyon. However, Imam Gurey had motivated his troops to stand and fight regardless of the odds. His *Malassy* cavalry would soon overwhelm the elite Ethiopian cavalry, forcing the Ethiopian army to retreat in disarray.

combat for which battles between the highland Christians and lowland Muslims were noted. Once the armies joined in hand-to-hand combat there was no overall battle plan, the crescent-shaped formation having done its job of getting the troops into contact on terms favourable to the Ethiopians. Each Ethiopian warrior hoped to use the engagement as an opportunity to display his martial skills.

From Aksumite times until the sixteenth century (and even into the twentieth century, as would be demonstrated against the Italian invasion), the Ethiopian warrior ethic "took the form of a cult of the hero" in which "personal bravery, not discipline, training, honour, or self-sacrificing loyalty, was the paramount virtue in warfare".[22] The Muslim infantry nearly gave way to what seemed at the time to be the *coup de grâce* delivered by the Ethiopian cavalry, which far outnumbered Imam Gurey's *Malassy* troops. Although heavily outnumbered, the Muslim cavalry resisted bravely, hamstringing the Ethiopian horses and using their swords with great effect against the Ethiopian riders. While firearms were likely present in the Muslim ranks at

22 Levine. 'The Masculinity Ethic', p.169.

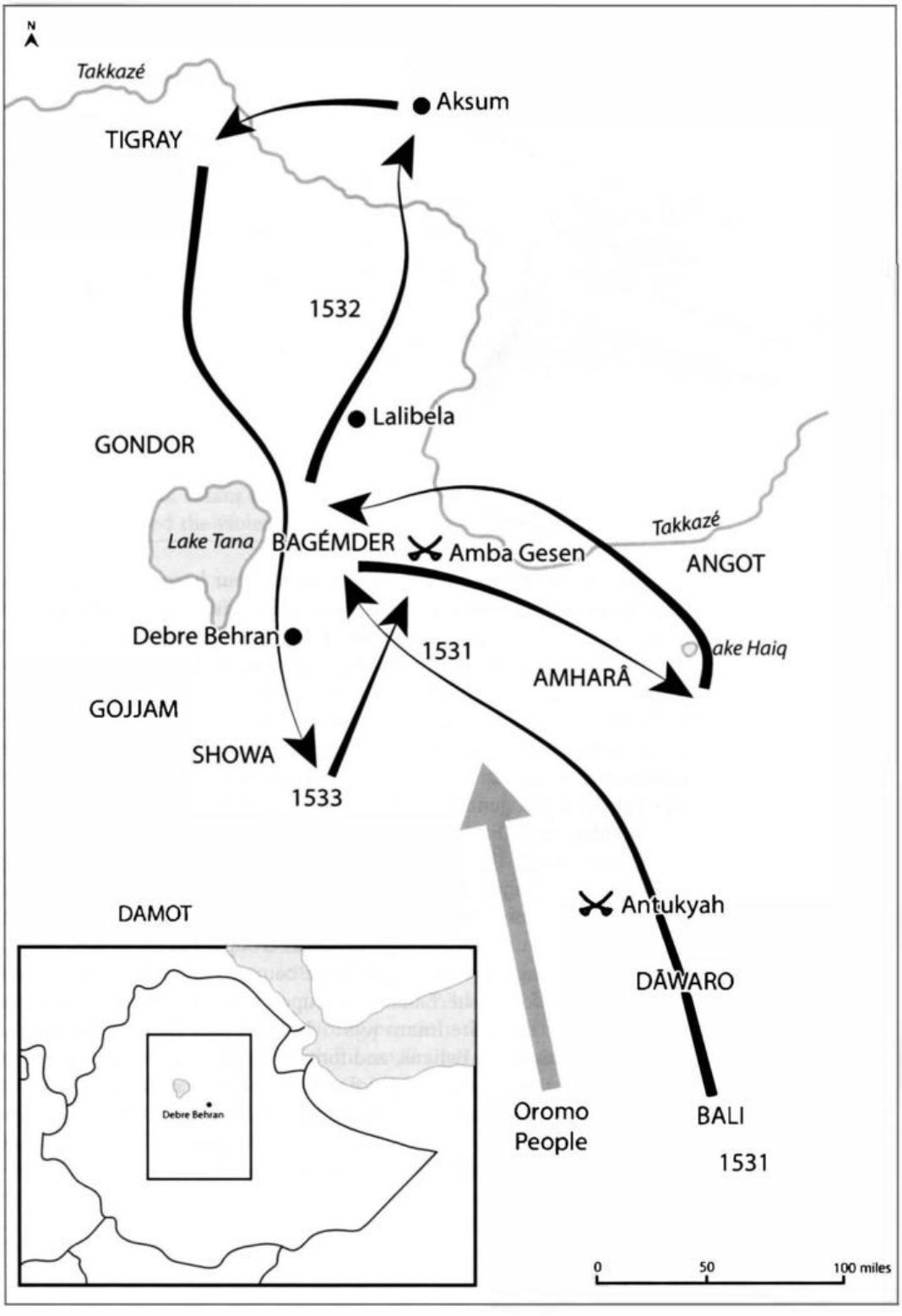


Imam Gurey had been at the forefront of the fighting from the beginning of the battle. The Ethiopian army, however, did not see their king until they fled past him in headlong retreat. The Ethiopians suffered a stunning and unprecedented defeat at Shembra Kure.

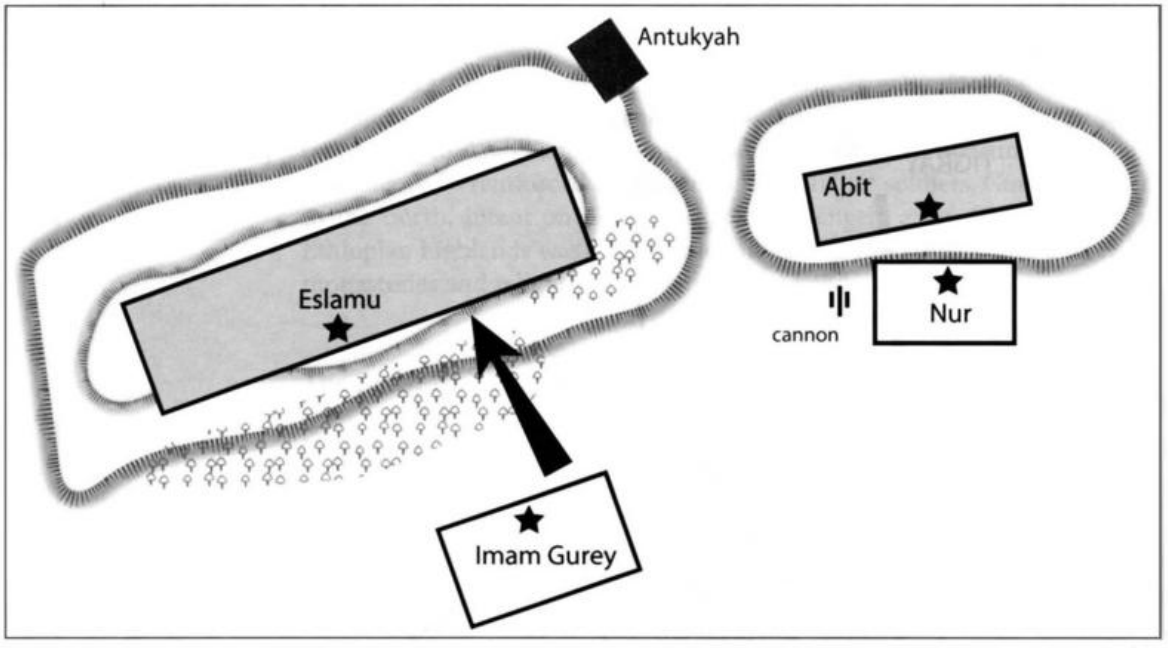
Shembra Kure, it was the *Malassy*, the elite force, which Imam Gurey had created, which swore loyalty to him alone, and which facilitated his rise to power that won the day. The *Malassy* were well disciplined, and it was their bravery and valour, and "not with firearms, that Imam Gurey won the first decisive victories against the Christians".[23] Muslim losses numbered nearly 5,000. At the end of the fateful day, the Ethiopians were thrown back and ultimately fled the field. Thousands of soldiers were dead. More than 10,000 Ethiopian troops from Tigray were killed. Many of their commanders also perished – an irreplaceable loss which prompted Ethiopian king Lebne Dengel to retreat back into the highlands.

Lebne Dengel's poor relationship with his commanders and the low esteem in which he was held by his army, and by the Ethiopian people in general, are other factors that explain the Ethiopian defeat at Shembra Kure. His "cruel temperament, his greed, and the harsh exploitation of his subjects" failed to motivate his troops in the same way that Amda Seyon and Zara Yaqob had inspired previous generations of Ethiopia's warriors.[24]

23 Hassen, 'Ethiopia and the Red Sea', p.64.
24 Aregay, 'A Reappraisal', p.98.



Gurey's campaign to subjugate the Ethiopian highlands between 1531 and 1533. This map was created by Dr Amélie Chekroun, 2013, but is modified to show only the main avenues of advance into the Ethiopian highlands.



The Battle of Antukyah. Ethiopian generals Eslamu and Abit established strong defensive positions in mountainous terrain but could not hold their ground against Imam Gurey's motivated troops, who employed a single cannon to great effect.

Kure when you killed our men and scattered our heroes. Now leave us. Be content with what you have done to us, otherwise God will destroy you as he destroyed the village of Lot. Do not give in to vanity."[35] Imam Gurey may have been amused by Abit's letter, but at Antukyah, it appeared that Abit was prepared to make the Imam pay for his vanity.

In order to avoid falling into Eslamu's trap and allowing Abit's concealed force to threaten his right flank, Imam Gurey sent one of his own sub-commanders named Nur with a force to confront Abit head-on. Battle was joined, and a general engagement lasted throughout the morning and into midday. Arab Faqih recorded that after Imam Gurey pitched his tent, "sometimes it was the Muslims who charged against the idol-worshippers [the Ethiopians] and other times it was the idol-worshippers who charged against the Muslims. And this went on tirelessly until the end of the time for the afternoon prayer."[36] The Ethiopian troops from Bali were noted on that day as having displayed remarkable courage and resilience. Repeatedly charging Nur's force, the Balians "fell upon them from above and pushed them as far as where the Imam was".[37] Imam Gurey ordered his troops not to advance against the Balians, and for a few hours, the fighting died down. Instead of continuing to try to ascend the mountain and engage the troops from Bali directly, Imam Gurey called forth one of his cannons. The cannon was manned by troops from Mahra on the Arabian peninsula who had joined Imam Gurey's army only a few months earlier.[38]

35 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.133.
36 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.135.
37 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.135.
38 Aregay, 'A Reappraisal', p.111.

The terrain gradually rising into the highlands, close to the likely site of the Battle of Antukyah. (Author's photo)

Advancing against the Balian positions, the cannon and a small group of selected cavalrymen, accompanied by some Moroccan archers who also had joined the *jihad*, drove the Balians from the heights. Seeing Abit's flanking force fleeing the field, Imam Gurey's main army advanced against Eslamu. Arab Faqih described the violence and the courage which characterised the fighting:

> As for what happened to Hussain al-Gaturi, who was among those who charged the [Ethiopians]: when he did so they overwhelmed him, and surrounded him. Finding him in their midst, they pelted him with javelins, and threw three javelins at his horse which fell with him, and they hamstrung it. They struck him in the right thigh with a spearhead which emerged from the other side. The spearhead fell out. He returned safely to his companions, and recovered. Darkness separated the two groups and each returned to his own place. The Imam went back to his tent, and [the Muslims] rejoiced at the victory.[39]

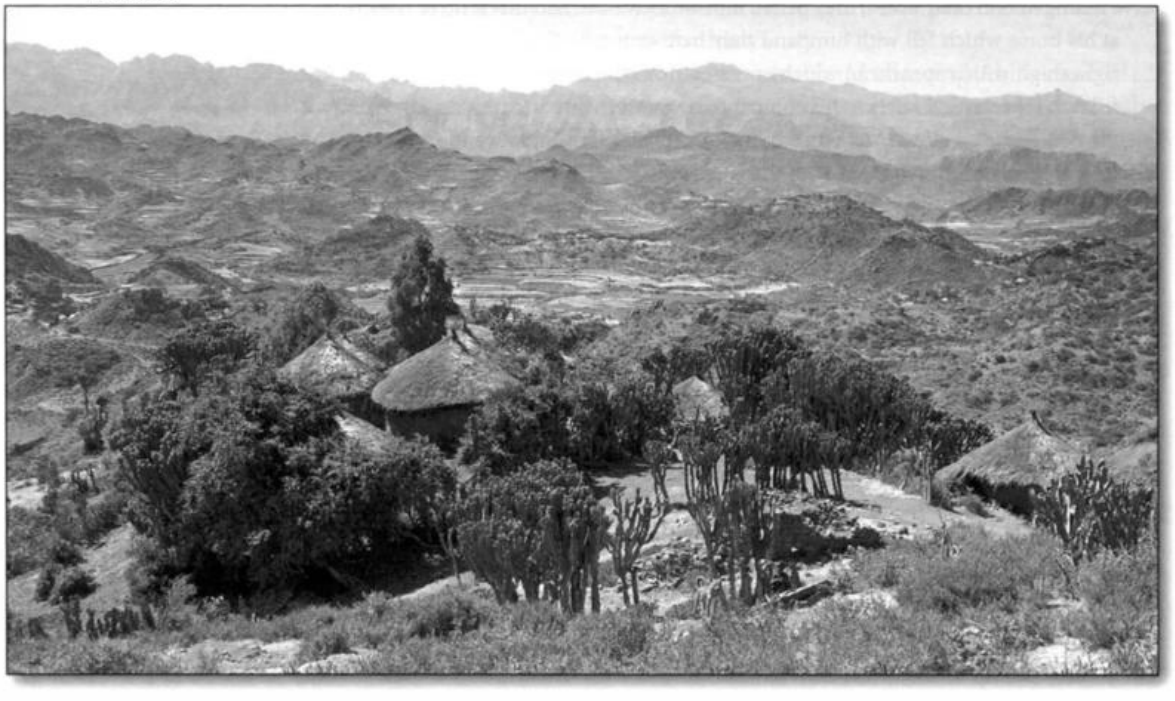
Arab Faqih wrote that the Muslims employed only a single cannon at Antukyah. Was this enough to force nearly 100,000 Ethiopian warriors out of their hilltop positions? Or did Ethiopian morale collapse throughout the day? Perhaps a general strategic paralysis infused the highest levels of command in the Ethiopian army, starting with King Lebne Dengel himself, who was still in hiding during the Battle of Antukyah. Whatever the cause of the Ethiopian retreat from their commanding positions at Antukyah, nothing is known of what Lebne Dengel did with his small arsenal of firearms which he had accumulated since the early 1520s. It is likely that "either from the lack of balls, powder or shooters, they were not used anywhere".[40] Lebne Dengel's reliance upon foreign craftsmen for court luxuries may have come at the expense of bringing trained gunsmiths to Ethiopia in the early years of his reign. Imam Gurey had taken the time to integrate gunpowder weapons into his arsenal. Even a single cannon had an impact at Antukyah. Eslamu's force was dispersed, and Christian casualties during and after their retreat reached

39 Šihab ad-Din, *Futuh Al-Habaša*, p.137.
40 Aregay, 'A Reappraisal', p.111.

nearly the same level as those suffered at Shembra Kure.[41] At Antukyah, gunpowder weapons had proven to be a decisive addition to Gurey's army.

Continuing his pursuit of the Ethiopian king and his army, Imam Gurey moved north-west into the highlands. On 20 April 1531 Adal troops burnt down the city of Debra Berhan, the city in which Ethiopian king Zara Yaqob had built his personal residence over 100 years earlier, in an act of retribution that must have satisfied the lowland warriors whose ancestors had suffered humiliating defeats centuries earlier at the hands of Zara Yaqob and Amda Seyon.[42] In July Gurey sent a force of 300 horsemen to Debra Libanos, one of Ethiopia's holiest sites, and Gurey's mother's destination when she accompanied the tribute delivery party into Ethiopia years earlier, at least according to the Ethiopian account of his youth. The monks and worshippers tried to dissuade the Muslims from burning the church and monastery, but they were unsuccessful. One of their holiest churches in flames, "the monks emulated one another in throwing themselves into the fire, like moths against a lamp".[43] Many other churches, monasteries, and monks would meet a similar fate in the coming months.

Following their defeat at Antukyah, and in the weeks and months that followed as Ethiopian forces continued to retreat throughout the countryside, the Ethiopians abandoned eight small cannons, even though they were not actively pursued by Muslim forces.[44] This inexplicable act further reinforces the idea that either the Ethiopians lacked the supplies or the training to operate the cannons effectively, or perhaps their morale was so low that they



The terrain in the vicinity of Amba Gesen in the province of Begemeder. The small village would have looked the same in 1531 as it does in this picture. It is not surprising that the retreating Ethiopian army would have abandoned its cannons. Carrying heavy artillery pieces and cannonballs would not be an appealing prospect in mountains such as this. (Photo by Jean-Claude Latombe)

41 Edwards, 'Conquest of Abyssinia', p.336.
42 Molvaer, 'The Tragedy of Emperor Libne-Dingil', p.30.
43 Edwards, 'Conquest of Abyssinia', p.339.
44 Aregay, 'A Reappraisal', p.111.

Aerial view of Amba Gesen. The cross-shaped mountain was chosen by King Zara Yaqob as a suitable location to store the True Cross. Its rugged hillsides provided strong defence against attack, and the Ethiopian defenders withstood attacks in 1531 and 1533. Imam Gurey finally captured it in 1537. (Photo by Jean-Claude Latombe)

The Conquest of the Highlands

Throughout 1532, Imam Gurey's forces:

> came again, and on the 7 November, he burnt down [a church] where there were 300 (church) scholars. On the 8 November he burnt down Gennete-Gïyorgïs. On 10 November he burnt down the main church of Abune (Bishop) Gebre-Mariyam. On 11 November, he burnt down Debre-Dimah, the monastery of Abba Anbessa. On 12 November, he burnt down Debre-Gelïla, the main church of the Icchegé, where there were 450. On 15 November he burnt down Mekane-Sillasé, the main church of the King. On 17 November, he burnt down Welde-Negodgwad. On 21 November, he burnt down Debre-Kïrubél. On the 23 November, he burnt down Atronse-Mariyam. On 24 November, he burnt down Gol, the main church of Abba Beselote-Mïkaél, the Icchegé. On 25 November, he burnt down the church of Mariyam at Ênd ros. On 28 November, he burnt down Ta'ika-Mengist, and on 29 November Debre-Sirha-Mariyam. Debre-Sirha-Mariyam had a [monastic] community of 640. Many clergy died. One hundred one monks took the tabot (sacred altarpiece) 45 and the holy vessels and vestments ("holy property" of a church) and ran (or were chased) away.[46]

46 Molvaer, 'The Tragedy of Emperor Libne-Dingil', p.31.

Chapter 4

The Geopolitical Situation in 1540

Ethiopian resistance to the Sultanate of Adal had virtually collapsed over the 11 years since the Battle of Shembra Kure. As Imam Gurey ordered mosques to be built along Lake Tana's shores in the Ethiopian highlands, competition among the great powers for supremacy in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea (including what today would be termed the Middle East), and the Indian Ocean was at fever pitch. The year 1540 is a suitable time to pause and examine the overall geopolitical situation.

It is far too simplistic to assert that religious divides were the primary cause of the many wars in the sixteenth century. Although Christian kingdoms and states fought against Islamic powers, the sixteenth century was not merely a continuation of the Crusades of some three to five centuries earlier. The complexity of the political alignments is bewildering, and economic factors are at the heart of the alliance structures. Just as access to trade routes motivated the Ethiopian campaigns against the lowland Muslim sultanates from the fourteenth century, access to trade routes and the pursuit of economic supremacy motivated the European powers and the Ottoman Empire. One must keep in mind that Europe at the time was a panoply of primarily small kingdoms and principalities, with only a few states resembling what we could consider modern nations. The struggle to survive in this fragmented political environment led to an unprecedented level of technological experimentation and development. In fact:

> Europe's geographic balkanisation resulted in dozens or hundreds of independent, competing statelets and centers of innovation. If one state did not pursue some particular innovation, another did, forcing neighboring states to do likewise or else be conquered or left economically behind. Europe's barriers were sufficient to prevent political unification, but insufficient to halt the spread of technology and ideas.[1]

1 Jared Diamond. *Guns, Germs and Steel* (New York: W.W. Norton & C., 1999), p.416.

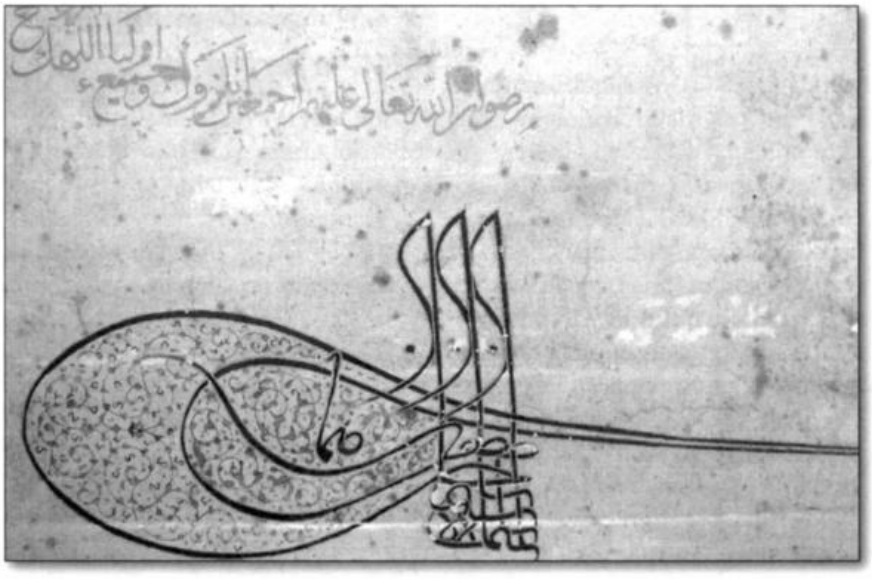
A matchlock musketeer in the sixteenth century. The small wooden flasks contain the powder which would have been used to keep the pan charged. The weapon weighed anywhere from 15 to 20 pounds. It discharged an enormous amount of smoke and could misfire if too much powder was placed in the pan, with potentially fatal consequences for the musketeer. Not enough powder would cause nothing but a flash in the pan. (Photo by the Chattanooga Times Free Press)

> Cairo, of Mecca, of Medina, of Jerusalem, of all Arabia, of Yemen and of many other lands which my noble fore-fathers and my glorious ancestors (may God light up their tombs!) conquered by the force of their arms and which my August Majesty has made subject to my flamboyant sword and my victorious blade, I, Sultan Suleiman Khan, son of Sultan Selim Khan, son of Sultan Bayezid Khan: To thee who art Francesco, king of the province of France ... You have informed me that the enemy has overrun your country and that you are at present in prison and a captive, and you have asked aid and succors for your deliverance. All this your saying having been set forth at the foot of my throne, which controls the world ... Our glorious predecessors and our illustrious ancestors (may God light up their tombs!) have never ceased to make war to repel the foe and conquer his lands. We ourselves have followed in their footsteps, and have at all times conquered provinces and citadels of great strength and difficult of approach ... May the God on High promote righteousness![18]

Such was Süleyman's greeting to Francis I, clearly indicating the perception of prestige and power that Süleyman had not only for himself but for the mighty Ottoman Empire.

European monarchs, whether Catholic or Protestant, received the news of this Christian–Muslim alliance in stunned disbelief. In joining this alliance with France, Süleyman also acted outside the accepted norms and violated the

18 Roger Bigelow Merriman, *Suleiman the Magnificent: 1520–1566* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), p.129.

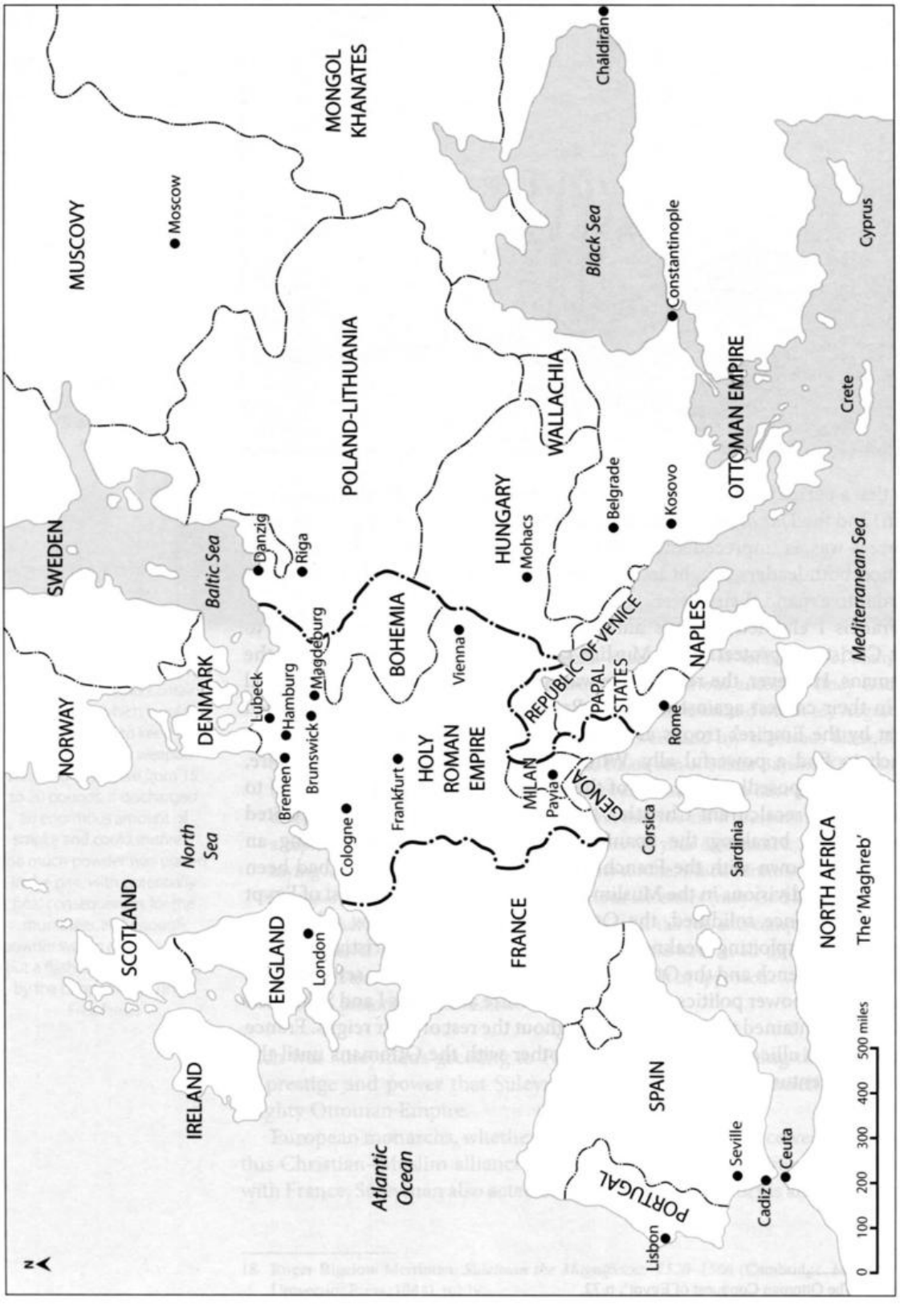


Süleyman's grand signature reveals the glory and pride held by the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire. (Public domain)

idea that a permanent state of war existed between the *Dar al-Islam* (house of Islam) and the *Dar al-Harb* (house of non-believers). Aligning with the non-believers was as unprecedented for Süleyman as for Francis. Through this alliance, both leaders sought to transcend the bounds of religious principle in order to expand their power.

Francis I claimed that his alliance with the Ottomans was meant to offer Christians protection in Muslim lands, especially those ruled by the Ottomans. However, the real motive was to provide France with a powerful ally in their contest against the Holy Roman Empire. The stinging French defeat by the Empire's troops at the Battle of Pavia in 1525 compelled the French to find a powerful ally. While Süleyman ruled a unified empire, Charles V, supposedly the leader of the Christian war against Islam, had to contend with recalcitrant Christian kings and princes. Suleiman exploited these fissures, breaking the Spanish–Venetian alliance and forming an alliance of his own with the French. While Christian Europeans had been able to exploit divisions in the Muslim world, the Ottoman conquest of Egypt ensured that once solidified, the Ottoman Empire could now achieve its objectives by exploiting weakness and rivalry within the Christian world.[19] For both the French and the Ottomans, religious concerns were set aside, and the dictates of power politics were front and centre as Francis I and Süleyman the Great maintained their alliance throughout the rest of their reigns. France would remain allied in some form or another with the Ottomans until the nineteenth century.

19 Hess, 'The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt', p.72.



Europe and Africa in 1520.

Chapter 5

The Ethiopian–Adal War: Enter the Portuguese

In September of 1540, Ethiopian king Lebne Dengel died. Stunned by his defeat at Shembra Kure and unable to rally the Ethiopians to the cause of defending the homeland against Imam Gurey, he had been living as a hermit in a mountain fortress since 1530. It is believed that he had sent an emissary to Portugal to ask for military assistance against Imam Gurey. In a letter written in "late April or early May of 1540, the emperor bitterly laments his fate, saying, 'All of my nobility have rebelled against me in support of the Muslims'".[1] By 1540 most of the major monasteries were destroyed, and the Ethiopian army had been defeated in nearly every major engagement with the exception of their stand at Amba Gesen in November 1531 and again in 1533. Lebne Dengel's son Gelawdewos became the next king. As an infant, Gelawdewos was prophesied to "defeat his enemies and crush the unbelievers like a piece of earthenware".[2] While this may have been the prevailing vision at one time in his youth, in 1541 Gelawdewos was at the head of a very small force and was unlikely to crush Imam Gurey without some stroke of good fortune. *The Chronicle of King Gelawdewos* recounts the years following Imam Gurey's victories over the Ethiopian forces, describing conditions in Ethiopia in the 12 years between the Battle of Shembra Kure and Lebne Dengel's death in 1540:

> Victory was taken into the hands of the Muslims ... and they had dominion over the Church of Ethiopia. They won all fighting in the direction of the east and west, and in the direction of the south and north even so far that they had destroyed shrines of prayer whose walls were built with gold, silver, and precious stones from India. They killed a large number of believers by the sword. They carried off the young men, the maidens, boys and girls even to the extent that they sold them for the task of miserable enslavement.[3]

1 Aregay, 'A Reappraisal', p.111, note 54.
2 Gebreyes, *Chronicle of King Galawdewos*, p.5.
3 Gebreyes, *Chronicle of King Galawdewos*, p.5.

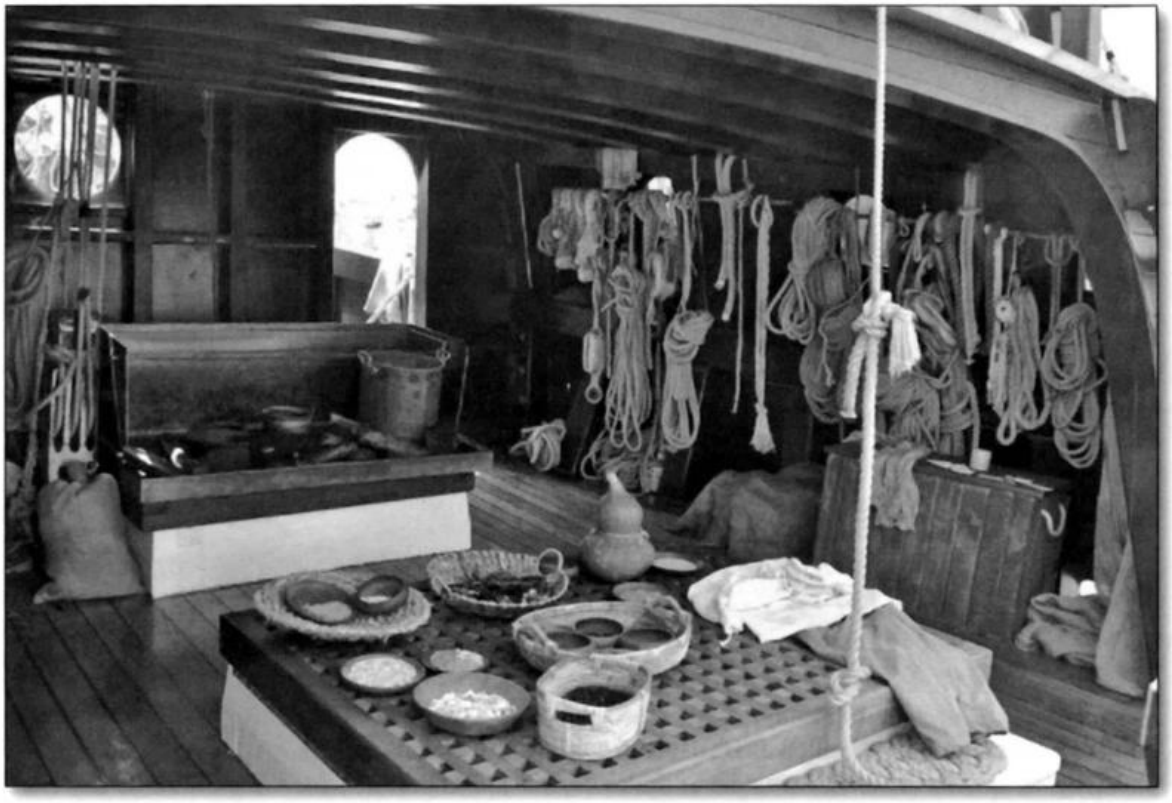
Replica of a sixteenth-century sailing vessel, the *San Salvador*, which in 1542 explored the California coast, making its way from the Pacific coast of El Salvador to San Diego bay on 28 September. The Portuguese fleet which brought Cristóvão da Gama's troops to Ethiopia would have been composed of identical ships. The chronicler Gaspar Correa claims that 77 such ships were part of the fleet, which left India to attack Suez and to disembark troops in Ethiopia. (Photo by Robert Camp @ Maritime Museum of San Diego)

This idea of what might be called a "Christian *Jihad*" against Imam Gurey's invading forces is a recurring theme in *Chronicles of King Gelawdewos*.[4] As enticing as it might have been to Lebne Dengel to rally his people under the banner of Christianity, he was never able to inspire the same religious devotion in his people that Imam Gurey was able to do through the declaration of *jihad* against the non-believers of Christian Ethiopia. However, the Portuguese would bring a crusading zeal to Ethiopia's conflict, helping turn the tide against Imam Gurey's forces.

In 1540, having learned that the Ottomans were assembling another fleet at Suez to attack Diu for a second time, and with news coming from Ethiopia that the war against the Sultanate of Adal was not going well, the newly appointed viceroy of the *Estado da India*, Estêvão da Gama – son of the great Vasco da Gama – decided to send a powerful armada to the Red Sea. According to Gaspar Correa, another of the Portuguese chroniclers of the Ethiopian–Adal War, the armada comprised 77 minor ships, three galiots, and 12 major ships, laden with artillery and more than 2,000 rowers. Estêvão da Gama's younger brother Cristóvão, and João Bermudez sailed aboard one of the flagships. The expedition's main objective was to destroy the Ottoman fleet at Suez. The secondary objective was to land forces on the African mainland to rescue their Ethiopian "ally".[5] Deciding it was time to act decisively, Estêvão da Gama led the Portuguese fleet from India on 10

4 Demoz, 'Moslems and Islam', p.6.

5 Andreu Martínez d'Alòs-Moner, 'Early Portuguese Emigration to the Ethiopian Highlands: Geopolitics, Mission and Métissage', in *Reinterpreting Indian Ocean Worlds: Essays in Honour of Kirti N. Chaudhuri*, ed. Stefan Halikowski Smith, 2–32. Newcastle Upon Tyne: co, 2011, p.7.



The crew and passengers, to include Cristóvão da Gama's troops, would have dined in the cramped spaces of the ships which transported them from India to the Red Sea and ultimately to Ethiopia. (Photo by Julia Lee)

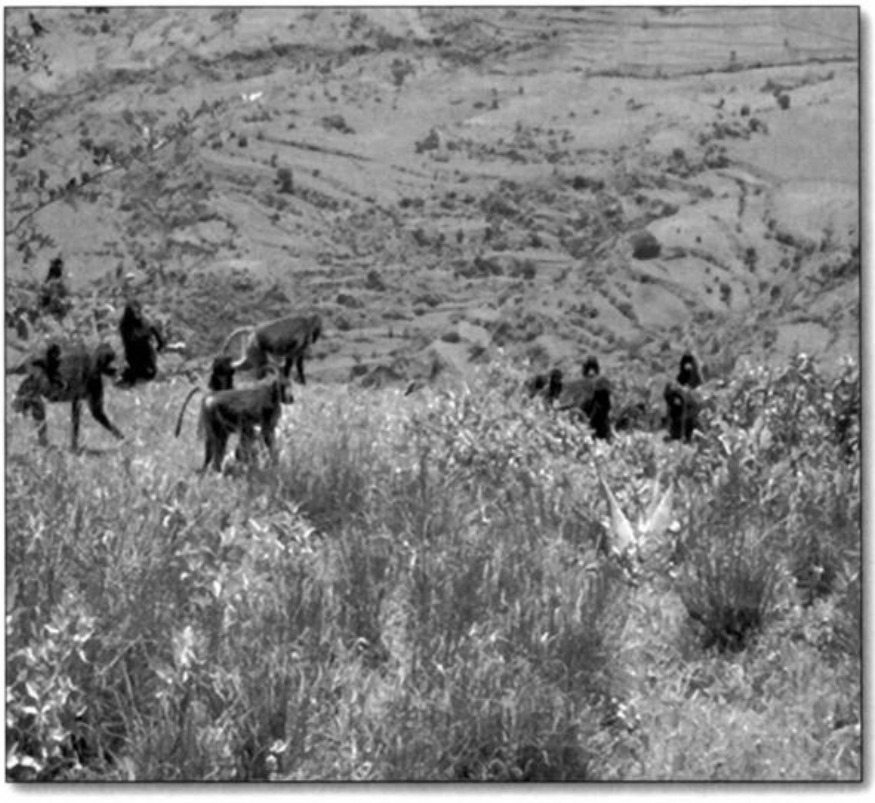
Medical instruments laid out on one of the beds in the *San Salvador*. Cristóvão da Gama would almost certainly have brought a surgeon with his force of 400 soldiers to Ethiopia. In many cases, a quick death would have been preferable to the surgeon's knife and saw. (Photo by Julia Lee)

This drawing of the port of Massawa was done by either João de Castro himself or one of his cartographers. It depicts the Ethiopian coastline and is one of a series of drawings that chronicled the Portuguese maritime expedition from Goa to attack the Ottomans at Suez in 1541. (Public Domain)

February 1541 and sailed into the Ottoman-controlled Red Sea. One of the captains in this fleet was João de Castro, who recorded his observations of the land along the coast of the Red Sea and also provided his observations of the Ethiopian people, indicating that he must have accompanied the landing party ashore in Ethiopia at some point, but then returned with the fleet to India. De Castro maintained a great interest in other cultures, and he co-authored a book on Indian art in his later years. His home in Portugal was decorated with gems and stones from India.

On the way to attack the Ottoman naval base at Suez, the fleet made a brief stop in Massawa on the Ethiopian coast of the Red Sea, where the heaviest ships were left in the harbour to await the return of the strike fleet, which continued on to Suez. Another of the Gama brothers, Manuel, remained with the heaviest Portuguese ships in port at Massawa and a few hundred sailors, with orders not to go ashore or leave the ships until the main fleet returned from Suez.

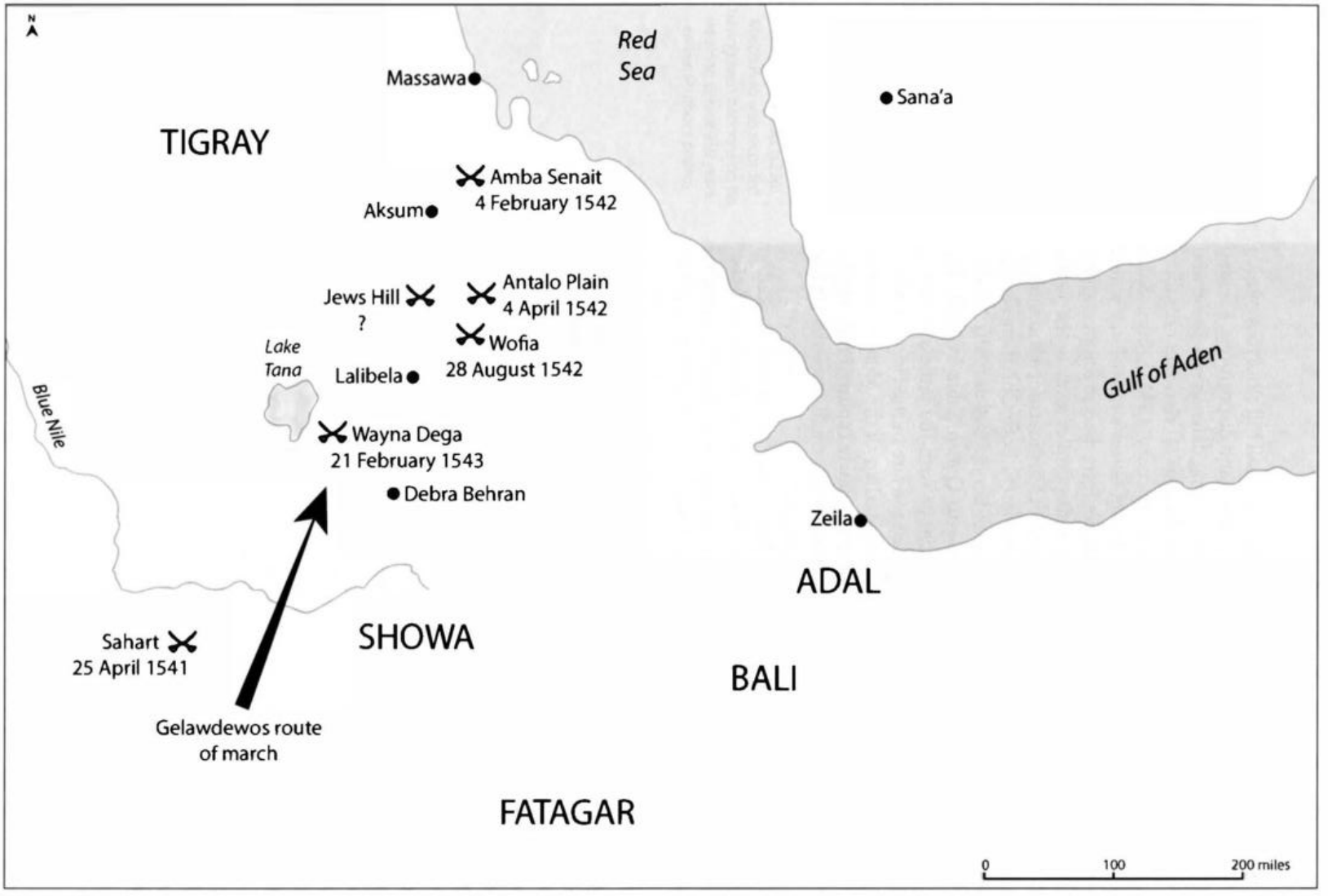
After suffering in the ship's sweltering quarters, about 60 of the sailors disregarded their orders and went ashore. Searching for food and fresh water, they made their way inland for miles, meeting patrols sent out by the Adal army. Promising the sailors food and drink if they would give up their weapons, an Adal captain lured the sailors into a trap. On the verge of starvation and suffering from thirst, the Portuguese complied, and upon disarming themselves they were slain. Two escapees made their way back to the ships, where Manuel da Gama arranged for a force to venture inland and capture those responsible for the deaths of so many Portuguese. The Adal captain who tricked the Portuguese sailors was found and killed, his severed head delivered to Queen Sabla Wengel, the mother of King



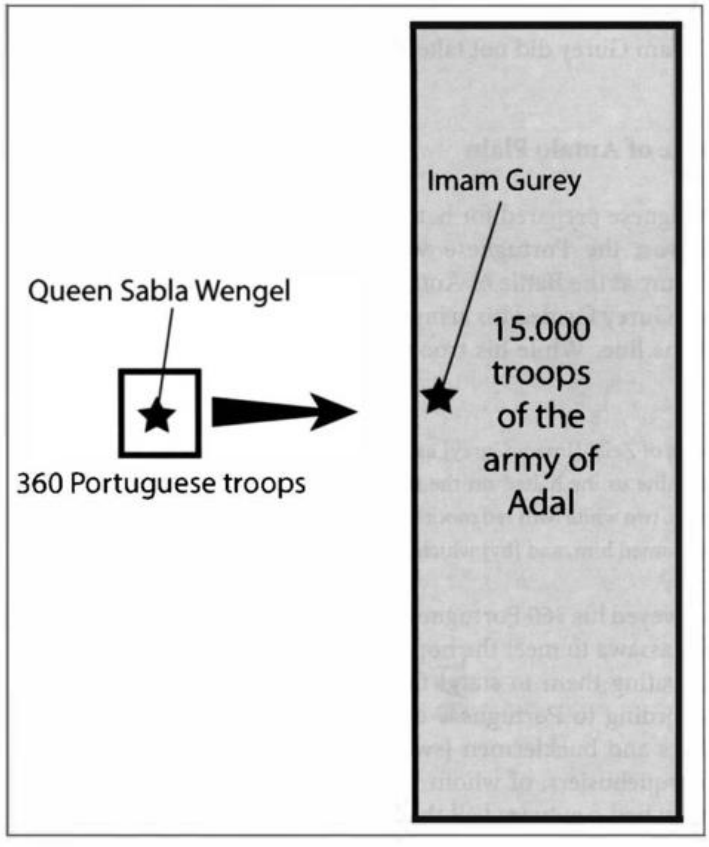
Baboons in the Ethiopian highlands as Miguel de Castanhoso and the Portuguese soldiers would have seen them as they marched inland to join with Prester John's Ethiopian army. Castanhoso wrote that there were "elephants, lions, leopards, and other wild beasts which we do not know here" (Castanhoso, p.236). Marco Polo also recorded having seen baboons on his return to Venice 250 years earlier. (Author's photo)

Christmas was celebrated with a day-long mass, replete with musical instruments. In the evening, Castanhoso remembered that "we all confessed". At the same time, Queen Sabla Wengel looked out upon the Christmas festivities and solemnities with astonishment at the differences between the Ethiopian and Portuguese customs. After celebrating Christmas, the Portuguese force "reached a very high hill", so high in fact that all their carts had to be disassembled and carried by pieces over the precipice. This travel method took a toll not only on the soldiers and porters themselves but on the carts and the artillery carriages, which degraded each time they were taken apart and put back together. The year 1541 ended without any major engagements between the Muslim army and the Ethiopians or their Portuguese allies.

Continuing their westward march to join Prester John, the Portuguese contingent spent over a week during the Epiphany encamped on a plain near the town of Agamé, according to Castanhoso. The time spent in camp seems excessive for a force moving in the vicinity of a much larger enemy army, but the reasons for moving slowly are possibly twofold. First, reassuring the local population that the Portuguese were here to restore the Christian kingdom required that their presence be seen, which would help establish a sense of security. Second, it is likely that Cristóvão da Gama had it in the back of his mind that if he waited long enough, reinforcements that his brother Estêvão promised he would send might reach him.



The major battles between the Portuguese and Imam Gurey from 1541–1543. The location of Jews Hill is an estimate. Sahart is also shown only to illustrate that King Gelawdewos continued to resist Imam Gurey's main army while the Portuguese were marching inland from Massawa. No evidence for Sahart's location exists in any of the literature.



The Battle of Antalo Plain. Demonstrating that they were ready to pay with their lives to save Ethiopia from submission to Islam, the Portuguese attacked against great odds. Protecting Queen Sabla Wengel was also one of their primary objectives.

> fortune gave the soldiers great encouragement; the action grew hot, and they came at length to a general battle; but the Moors, dismayed by the advantages our men had obtained at first, were half defeated before the fight. The great fire of our muskets and artillery broke them immediately.[22]

The small canons that Gama's troops had worked so hard to transport over the rough terrain began to fire, as did the matchlocks, covering the area with smoke and giving Imam Gurey a firm indication that the Portuguese expected to give him no ground, and likely no quarter should any of his soldiers fall into Portuguese captivity. Castanhoso remembered that:

> when the Moors saw us advancing towards them, they raised such a noise of shouting, trumpets, and kettledrums, that it seemed as if the world were dissolving; they showed great joy, thinking they had us already in their net. At this we began to do our duty with matchlocks and artillery, so that we cleared the plain as we advanced.[23]

Imam Gurey again advanced his Ottoman gunners, giving him the best chance at dislodging the Portuguese artillery. The Portuguese force formed a

22 Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, n.p.
23 Castanhoso, *Portuguese Expedition*, p.45.

Chapter 6

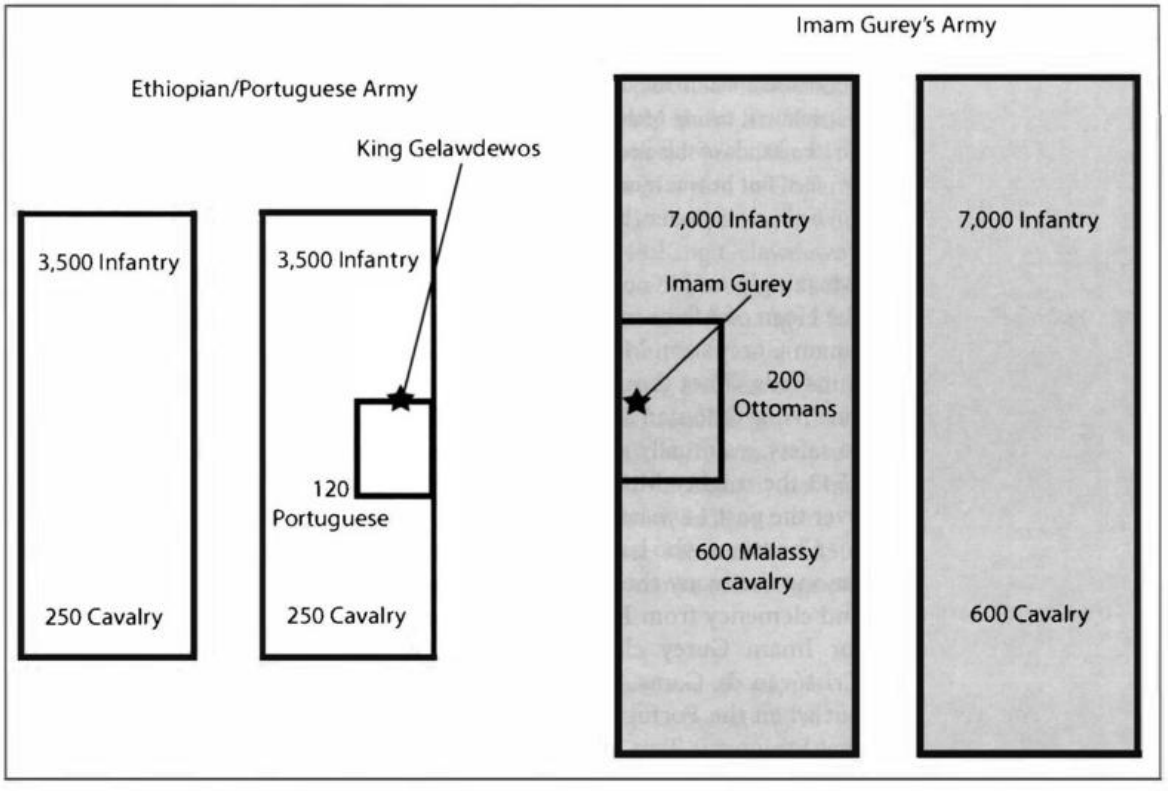
The Ethiopian–Adal War: Into the Valley of Death

In late April, after the battles of Amba Senait and Antalo Plain, the 40 soldiers that Cristóvão da Gama had sent to Massawa to rendezvous with the Portuguese ship returned to camp. They brought the sad news that they could not contact the ship; the Ottoman navy had chased it out of port. Whatever supplies and reinforcements it might have had on board were either captured by the Ottoman fleet or driven out of the Red Sea and back to India. Gama could only hope that another ship, or maybe a small armada, would force its way into Massawa. His force needed supplies, and additional troops would certainly be welcome. Unknown to Gama, control of the Red Sea had slipped away from the Portuguese and the Ottoman navy now sailed unopposed into and out of their main port in Suez. The *Estado do India*'s viceroys and captains were no longer following Albuquerque's grand strategy, and no further attempts would be made to send reinforcements or supplies to Ethiopia.

Furthermore, the Portuguese command authorities in the *Estado do India* did not share the crusading zeal that had led to the deployment of the 400 soldiers to Ethiopia. In fact, Portuguese gunsmiths in Goa worked side by side with their Muslim Indian counterparts as they tried to refine and improve upon firearm technology. Goa was the largest arsenal in the world at the time, manned by Christian Portuguese and Muslim Indian workers and overlords, each seeking to expand their economic domain at the expense of their adversaries.[1] More pressing concerns had arisen elsewhere, leaving Cristóvão da Gama's expedition stranded at the bottom of a long list of more important priorities. The small expedition was on its own, left to its fate.

Despite the bad news that he would not be receiving supplies or reinforcements, at least Gama had his 40 soldiers back. He would need them as Gurey advanced north from his camp to meet the Portuguese in what he hoped would be a final, decisive encounter. Cristóvão da Gama's enthusiasm

1 Rainer Daehnhardt, *The Bewitched Gun: The Introduction of the Firearm in the Far East by the Portuguese: Espingarda Feiticeira: A Introducao Da Arma De Fogo Pelos Portugueses No Extremo-Oriente* (Texto Editoria, 1994), p.42.



The Battle of Wayna Dega. King Gelawdewos is in the front rank with his troops, unlike his father who remained behind the main army at Shembra Kure.

evident at Wayna Dega, for without King Gelawdewos' army, the remaining Portuguese soldiers would have been hunted down and killed. The Ethiopian author of the *Chronicle of King Gelawdewos* gives only cursory mention to the Portuguese military effort. He wrote, "children of Tubal, son of Japheth, strong and brave men, who were thirsty for combat like wolves and hungry for killing like a lion, came up from the sea".[15] These "strong and brave men" were the Portuguese soldiers led by Gama. While the Portuguese are mentioned, the chronicler ultimately gives credit to King Gelawdewos and his Ethiopian army for the final victory over Imam Gurey. This is deserved, since if the Portuguese were on their own in 1543, they would likely not have returned from Massawa to face Imam Gurey again. Also, just as most Europeans had little if any knowledge of the Ethiopians, the Ethiopians, including the author of the *Chronicle of King Gelawdewos*, also knew nothing about these people who came from afar in small numbers.

The *Chronicle of King Gelawdewos* describes Wayna Dega as a violent clash. The chronicler wrote that:

> a fierce battle took place between him [King Gelawdewos] and Imam Gurey, and God, whose name be blessed, decorated as the winner King Gelawdewos, peace be

the University of Hamburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Athiopistik (2016), p.56.

15 Gebreyes, *Chronicle of King Galawdewos*, p.12. Tubal and Japheth are characters from Genesis 10:2.

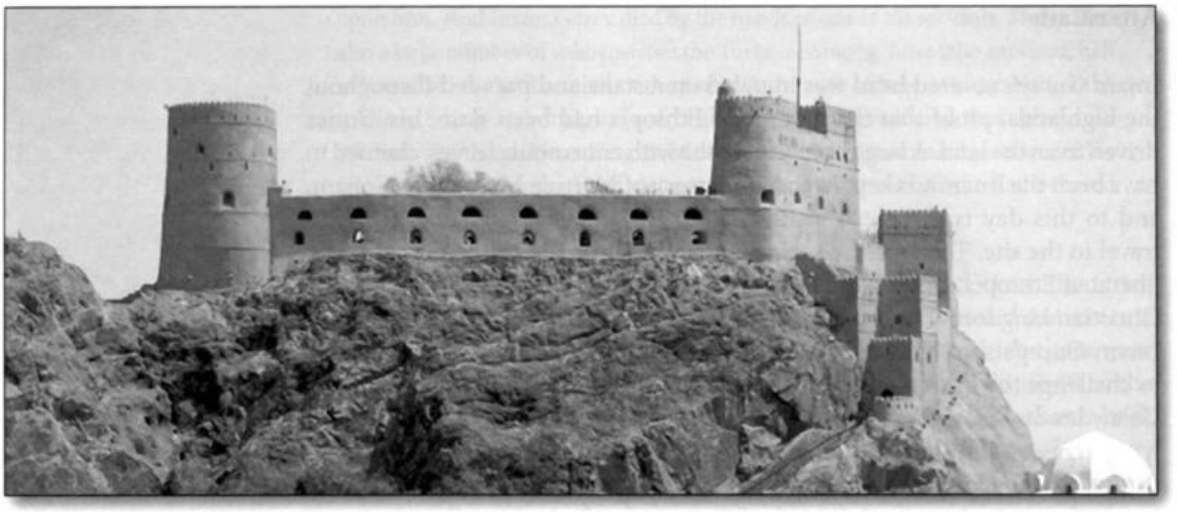
> upon him. And Imam Gurey died by the hands of one of his servants. They killed also a large number of soldiers from the Turks ... Among those who survived, half of them fled in the direction of the sea with the wife of Imam Gurey. Half of the soldiers, taking Mehmad, the son of Imam Gurey, surrendered themselves into the hands of the glorious King Gelawdewos and they became subjects under his feet. But he was merciful and clement; he did not hurt a man who had behaved badly towards him, but he behaved to him as a benefactor.[16]

Amazingly, and in contrast to the savagery of religious conflict that had torn the Horn of Africa asunder for centuries, King Gelawdewos did not execute Imam Gurey's son Mehmad. But the Muslim prisoners, of which there were hundreds, if not thousands, were instantly put to the sword. Some 40 of the surviving Ottoman soldiers carried Gurey's wife, Beti Del Wanbara, back to safety, eventually arriving home in Adal. On that fateful day in February 1543 the mighty Muslim army which had conquered so much of Ethiopia over the past 14 years was gone.

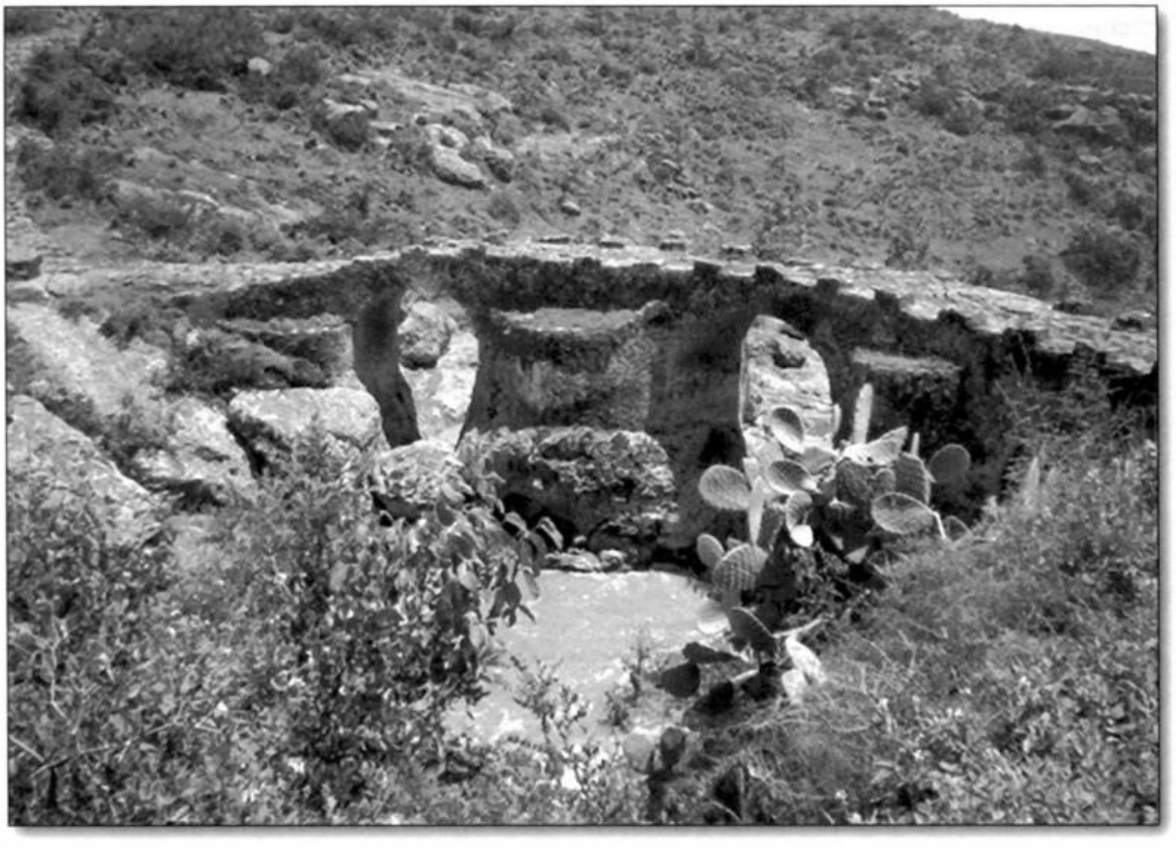
Christians who had converted to Islam and fought with Imam Gurey were among the many thousands of Ethiopians repatriated, receiving absolution and clemency from King Gelawdewos. Two of these Christians who fought for Imam Gurey claimed to have personally participated in torturing Cristóvão da Gama. However, they too received clemency from the king, but when the Portuguese found out about this, "two Portuguese went into that Ethiopians Tent, and stabbed him in many Places with their Daggers".[17] Gelawdewos may have had clemency in mind, but clearly the few surviving Portuguese soldiers did not.

This Ethiopian stamp depicts King Lebne Dengel leading Ethiopian troops to battle. Issued in 1962, it is surprising that the stamp does not commemorate King Gelawdewos instead. It is not known what battle the stamp commemorates.

16 Gebreyes, *Chronicle of King Galawdewos*, p.17.
17 Tellez, *Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia*, p.130.



The Portuguese fort of St John in Muscat. The Portuguese and Ottomans continued their maritime contest for control of the Red Sea after the Ethiopian–Adal War ended. The Ottoman admiral Piri Reis commanded 24 galleys in a successful 18-day siege of Muscat in 1552, but the Portuguese retook the town in 1554. After the Ottomans sacked Muscat for the second time in 1582, the Portuguese built Fort St John (Forte de Sao João), which dominated the harbour, to protect the valuable trading port from the invading Ottoman forces. As Portuguese power in the Indian Ocean began to decline with the competition from Dutch and English traders during the seventeenth century, Omani forces captured the fort in 1650, renaming it Fort al-Jalali. (Photo by Grant Rhode)



The Portuguese Bridge, near the Debra Libanos monastery. Most likely built in the late 1570s by Portuguese soldiers who settled in Ethiopia after the war, it is unlikely that they would have had time to build this bridge while fighting Imam Gurey's forces between 1541–1543. (Author's photo)

Chapter 7

Epilogue

Portugal and the Ottoman Empire suffered little in this war, but both Ethiopia and the Sultanate of Adal were severely weakened. While Ethiopian territory had been restored after 1543, trade routes into the Mediterranean had not been reopened. Since the earliest days of Aksum, these maritime trade routes were Ethiopia's lifeline, yet they were still not firmly under King Gelawdewos' control. The Ottomans also had not secured control of the Red Sea, and within 20 years after the Ethiopian–Adal War the Portuguese once again were supreme in the Red Sea and in the Indian Ocean.[1] The Ethiopian–Adal War was an example of a conflict that was influenced by religion but was not fought primarily to achieve religious objectives. The two sides were drawn along religious lines, and religious passions helped both prolong the war and add to the ferocity of the fighting. Still, economic and geopolitical considerations were the primary motives for the war's expansion from a localised conflict between Ethiopia and the Sultanate of Adal to a more widespread conflict involving the Portuguese and Ottoman empires. The war also served to degrade relations between Muslims and Christians within Ethiopia. For many Christian Ethiopians, their view was "not only related to the perception of Islam as an external threat but also denoted the concern whether Ethiopian Muslims would be loyal to the Ethiopian state or would side with external forces".[2] This issue continues to challenge Ethiopia in the twenty-first century.

Portugal and the Ottoman Empire

The Ethiopian–Adal War occurred at a time of significant change in Europe. The Ottoman threat to the Balkans and the siege of Vienna was of great concern to kings and princes throughout Europe, focusing their attention on south-eastern Europe while diverting attention from their own religious troubles brewing in their kingdoms. The Protestant Reformation was nearly

1 Dames, 'Portuguese and Turks in the Indian Ocean', p.20.

2 Patrick Desplat and Terje Ostebo, *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Muslim Reformism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.6.

> buried, and where they interred one quarter of the Portuguese martyr. We often examined these two men, and always apart; they agreed in every circumstance of their relations and confirmed us in our belief of them by leading us to the place where we took up the uncle and nephew of Mahomet, as they had described. With no small labour we removed the heap of stones which the Moors, according to their custom, had thrown upon the body, and discovered the treasure we came in search of. Not many paces off was the fountain where they had thrown his head, with a dead dog, to raise a greater aversion in the Moors. I gathered the teeth and the lower jaw. No words can express the ecstasies I was transported with at seeing the relics of so great a man, and reflecting that it had pleased God to make me the instrument of their preservation, so that one day, if our holy father the Pope shall be so pleased, they may receive the veneration of the faithful. All burst into tears at the sight.[6]

Lobo recorded many other such observations, which were as fresh in the minds of the people he encountered as if the war had just ended, although it had been nearly 80 years since Imam Gurey's defeat. Unwisely, Portuguese Jesuits like Lobo would attempt to compel the Ethiopian Church to follow Roman Catholicism over the ensuing years. Ethiopia's Orthodox Christian church leaders were "just as adamant in preserving their ancient Monophysite Christianity as in repelling their Muslim opponents" from their homeland.[7] Having helped save Ethiopia from subjugation by Imam Gurey's Muslim army, the Portuguese overplayed their hand. The Jesuits wielded the cross as if it were a sword, and they were banished from Ethiopia in 1633.

Indicative of Portugal's global reach, within a few months of the Portuguese/Ethiopian victory over Imam Gurey's army at Wayna Dega in 1543, a ship carrying Portuguese traders was blown ashore in a storm at Tanegashima, a small Japanese island. Some of these Portuguese were armed with muskets, the same type of firearm that Gama's 400 troops used to fight Imam Gurey's forces in Ethiopia. The arrival of this musket in Japan changed the balance of power not only within Japan but in North East Asia. The "Tanegashima" musket helped facilitate Japanese unification under the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The musket would also arm many of the 150,000 samurai that Hideyoshi sent to Korea in 1592, leading to the brutal and devastating six-year conflict known as the Imjin War.

Süleyman the Magnificent continued his campaigns against Christian Europe. He passed away among his troops in Hungary in September 1566, continuing his *jihad* against Christian Europe until his last day. His successors never proved equal to the task of maintaining the empire. Islam did not put down deep roots in European soil. The Ottoman Empire began its slow decline, and it would linger on as the "sick man of Europe" for another 350 years.

6 Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, n.p.
7 Davis, 'The Sixteenth Century *Jihad*', p.568.

Adal and Ethiopia

The walls surrounding the city of Harar were built after the Ethiopian–Adal War. King Gelawdewos' liberation of Ethiopia after Imam Gurey's defeat brought the Ethiopian army to the city after subjugating the Sultanate of Adal in its entirety. The walls around Harar were a defensive measure, and the walls remain to this day. (Photo by Marco Vigano)

During and immediately after the Ethiopian–Adal War, the Oromo people moved into the Ethiopian Christian highlands. Over time, some of the Oromo adopted Christianity, and some adopted Islam, while others maintained their pastoral religious traditions. These migrations were followed by a period of feudal anarchy known as the Age of the Princes, where figurehead Solomonian monarchs were put on the throne by Oromo generals while the country was, in reality, ruled by independent feudal lords.[8] The Ethiopian military hierarchy put in place during the reigns of Zara Yaqob and Amda Seyon had atrophied to the point where the king no longer maintained firm control over the military, leaving the door wide open for mass migrations into the Ethiopian heartland. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia in the twenty-first century, having displaced the Tigray and Amhara, who make up the second and third largest ethnic groups.

In the years after the Ethiopian–Adal War, the Sultanate of Adal disappeared entirely from the map. Contemporary Somali historians have claimed that Imam Gurey may have been a patrilineal ancestor of Siyad Barre, president of the Somali Republic in 1977. Barre harnessed the twin passions of ethnic conflict and Somali irredentism, which led to The Ogaden War of 1977–1978 between Ethiopia and Somalia. This war was fought over much the same ground as the Ethiopian–Adal War. However, linking Siyad Barre to Imam Gurey is a tenuous argument, especially as it would be impossible "to trace the genealogy of Barre in the twentieth century to the Imam who lived in the sixteenth century through oral sources".[9] While the Ethiopian–Adal

8 Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia, *The Battle of Adwa* (New York: Algora, 2005), p.16.
9 Hinika, 'Genealogy and Ethnic Identity', p.25.

Appendix II

Paean to Imam Gurey before the Battle of Shembra Kure by Arab Faqih

He it is who arranges matters;
who is the regulator of the wars.
audacious in attacking during battle;
He is [like] the blows of a sword.
For the sake of the *jihad*, he is the destroyer
of disunity that stubbornly resists, by subterfuge, the
one who knows the divine secrets.
He is the spearman who bests his strong opponent
with his thrust;
And with his iron sword,
he is a wielder of blows.
The infidels he has left wallowing in the dust:
the tear ducts of any who survive, overflow.
He had launched attacks against them with
a tumultuous din:
He struck them indefatigably
With humiliation and torment
O you who ask me about Ahmad
He is a lover of the just
And hater of a man who lies
He is the respecter of the law of the religion of
His Prophet:
Humble towards his Lord, and also fearful of Him.
He is unceasing in his observance
Of the prescriptions [of the Law];
Preserving in his observance
Of legally binding acts of devotion.
O Lord, guard him by your grace for all to see;
O merciful one, make him last as a strong wind lasts.[1]

1 Šihab ad-Din. *Futuh Al-Habaša*. pp.74–75.

Appendix III

Ethiopian Soldier's Song

Zān, succeeder in victory,
His ancestor was Adal Mabraq.
As a hyena eats poison,
When he surprised Adal,
Their spirit declined-
Vulture of David, vulture.
Follow behind me,
I'll feed you meat in pieces,
I'll give you pure blood to drink,
Follow behind me.
Having pierced with knife,
Having thrust with spear, We swear to you,
May we be given to spear, to be thrown like one.
Should we use (your) wing for shade,
May we be given a strung bow.
Come what may, we will not eat our oath.
If our body looked (red) like a red garment of Fatagar,
If our mouth looked red like the red hand of a woman,
If our finger looked like a fly whisk covered in blood,
Our name is 'Jackals of Zān':
We will not eat our oath.[1]

This song, likely chanted by Ethiopian soldiers in the early battles of the Ethiopian–Adal War, likely was composed during either Amda Seyon's or Zara Yaqob's reign. Both "Adal Mabraq" and "Jackals of Zān" are Ethiopian military regiments, probably of the elite *Ç̣äwa* units that guarded the *katama* camp. "Adal Mabraq" is Amharic for "lightning on Adal", a fitting name for an elite Ethiopian regiment. The red hand of a woman is a reference to the common practice of *henna*, which involved a red dye used as a type of make-up.

1 Huntingford. *Glorious Victories*. pp.131–32.

Other titles in this series:

No 1 *Richard III and the Battle of Bosworth* Mike Ingram

No 2 *Tanaka 1587: Japan's Greatest Unknown Samurai Battle* Stephen Turnbull

No 3 *The Army of the Swabian League 1525* Doug Miller

No 4 *The Italian Wars Volume 1: The Expedition of Charles VIII into Italy and the Battle of Fornovo* Massimo Predonzani & Alberici Vincenzo, translated by Irene Maccolini

No 5 *The Commotion Time: Tudor Rebellion in the West, 1549* E.T. Fox

No 6 *The Italian Wars Volume 2: Agnadello 1509, Ravenna 1512, Marignano 1515* Massimo Predonzani & Alberici Vincenzo, translated by Rachele Tiso

No 7 *The Tudor Arte of Warre 1485-1558 Volume 1: The conduct of war from Henry VII to Mary I* Jonathan Davies

No 8 *The Ethiopian-Adal War 1529-1543: The Conquest of Abyssinia* Jeffrey M. Shaw

No 9 *One Faith, One Law, One King: French Armies of the Wars of Religion 1562 – 1598* T J O'Brien de Clare

In 1529, an army from the Sultanate of Adal in modern-day Somalia invaded neighbouring Ethiopia. For the next fourteen years, the conflict ravaged Ethiopia, planting the seeds of enmity and mistrust in the Horn of Africa that resonate to this day. *The Ethiopian-Adal War: Conquest of Abyssinia* brings sixteenth-century Arab, Portuguese, and Ethiopian primary source material from this conflict to contemporary readers for the first time in the English language in a single volume. Situating the conflict into the wider struggle for maritime supremacy between the Portuguese and Ottoman Empires, readers will have the chance to learn about a little-known conflict which nearly resulted in the subjugation of Christian Ethiopia at the hands of Imam Gurey, the Sultan of Adal. Included are maps of the conflict's major battles, never before seen in any publication. Photographs of the Ethiopian landscape and a range of other illustrations complete the account of this epic conflict.

Front cover illustration by Maksim Borisov

HELION & COMPANY | www.helion.co.uk | helionbooks

ISBN 978-1-914059-68-1