

UNIT NINE

THE ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIAN HIGHLAND KINGDOM (1543 - 1855)

Introduction

The period between 1543 and 1855 was dominated by chaos and disorder. After the wars of Imam Ahmad, the Christian kingdom was no longer at ease in the following decades. The end of the wars of Imam Ahmad was followed by the rapid Oromo population movement, which lasted roughly up to the end of the seventeenth century. Both events had seriously weakened the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia.

No sooner had the Oromo population movement subsided than the kingdom fell into chaos and disorder as a result of the intervention of the Jesuit missionaries, who attempted to convert the country to Catholicism. In the long run, the Jesuit interlude also led to the outbreak of doctrinal controversies in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. During the same period, the Christian kingdom had also to face the encroachment of the Ottoman Turks, who controlled the port of Massawa in 1557 and tried to expand to the hinterland of northern Ethiopia.

The long years of political instability resulted in the decline of the power and authority of the Christian kings, while the provincial governors and the warlords became more powerful. This led to the emergence of the Zemene Mesafint, which brought back, at its wake, another period of violence and political disorder. The only lasting achievement of the period was the establishment of Gondar which became the political,

economic and cultural centre of the kingdom during the period. In this unit, the major themes outlined above will be discussed in brief.

Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- analyze the attempt to Catholicize the Christian highland kingdom;
- discuss the origins as well as socio economic and political developments of the Gondarine period;
- examine the socio-economic and political developments in the Christian highland kingdom during the Zemene Mesafint.

Terms to Know

- Abdicate	- Encumber	- Mobile
- Adversary	- Expulsion	- Court
- Circumcision	- <i>Fitha</i>	- Ordain
	- <i>Negest</i>	- <i>Pasha</i>
- Dignitary	- Heresy	- Regiment
- Depleted	- Hit-and-	- Sparkling
treasury	run	- War
- Encroachment	- Jesuits	- trophy

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Discuss in group the long term consequences of the Christian - Muslim conflict and the Oromo population movement.

What are the causes of political instability?

How does political instability affect various aspects of life in a nation?

Is there any *solution for political instability*?

9.1. Attempts to Consolidate and Shift the Political Centre of the Highland Christian Kingdom

After the death of Imam Ahmad at the Battle of Weyna Dega in 1543, the raids from Adal did not cease immediately. Moreover, the Oromo population movement, which started in the 1520's, began to affect the frontiers of the kingdom. Furthermore, the encroachment of the Ottoman Turks on the territories along the Red Sea coast became an additional threat to the sovereignty of the kingdom. As a result, the three Christian kings, who ruled in the second half of the sixteenth century, completed their reigns in a continuous struggle to tackle these problems.

Among the three kings, Gelawdewos (r. 1540 - 1559) was the first to confront the raids of Adal and the Oromo incursions. Before he set out to meet his adversaries, Gelawdewos had to consolidate his power in the northern provinces of the kingdom i.e., Dembiya, Gojjam, Begemdir, Lasta, Simen and Tigray. Then, he moved south of the Abbay river and established his centre in the province of Waj (around the present town of Debre Ze'it). From this centre, Gelawdewos intended to launch a sustained military campaigns against Adal in the east and the Oromo in the south.

Unlike the war with the Oromos, Gelawdewos was more successful in his campaigns against Adal. In a number of punitive expeditions, the Christian army crushed the Muslim forces of Adal. There were some reasons for the success of the Christian army. The Muslim army fought a conventional war, in which the Christians had superiority in manpower and firearms. Moreover, the Muslims were a settled community who could be pursued and punished if necessary.

On the contrary, the tactics of the warfare of the Oromos were quite different. It was a hit-and-run type often launched at night fall when the Christian army was eager to have rest, because of the exhaustion from the days march. Furthermore, the strategy of the Oromo's warfare was suitable for the rapid movement of the army, in that it was not encumbered by camp

followers like the Christian army. In this kind of warfare, the superiority of the Christian army in manpower and firearms had little effect on the outcome of the wars. The Oromo warriors usually struck the enemy hard and quickly retreated to safe base areas. By employing this type of attack, the Oromos harassed and demoralized the Christian army and made it unable to hinder the forward move of the Oromo warriors.

Meanwhile, in 1559 Gelawdewos led his army in a fatal campaign against Adal. In the heat of the battle that followed, the army of Adal which was led by Emir Nur Ibn Mujahid, scored a sparkling victory over the Christian army. Gelawdewos himself was killed and beheaded, and his head was taken to Harar as a war trophy. After the death of Gelawdewos, the Muslim forces of Nur Mujahid did not pursue their victory over the Christian forces and reconquer the kingdom. Rather they returned to Harar in order to defend the sultanate from falling to the Oromo forces. However, the forces of Emir Nur were defeated by the Oromo forces on their way back to Harar and they were not able to save the sultanate from the Oromo attack. With that the Sultanate was reduced to the Walled city of Harar, which was built by Emir Nur to check the Oromo assault.

In the meantime, the Oromo got a free hand to fall upon the powerful Christian army called *Jan Amora*, which was defeated and driven out of Fatagar. Subsequently, Fatagar became a new base from where the Oromo launched their next attacks on the Christian kingdom and the neighboring provinces.

Gelawdewos was succeeded by his brother Minas (r. 1559 - 1563). This Christian king decided to shift the centre of the kingdom from its former center in Shewa to the north of the Abbay river. His decision was influenced by the fear that the army of Nur would follow up its victory and takeover the Christian kingdom like Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. On the basis of this calculation, Minas hastily moved his centre across the Abbay to eastern Gojjam, to a place called Mengiste Semayat. After a

short while, the highest **dignitaries** of the kingdom met in Mengiste Semayat and decided on a further shift of the centre to Dembiya, where the court was established near Lake Tana, at a place called Guba'e in Enfranz.

Minas' fear was groundless, because Emir Nur did not pursue the Christian army. On the contrary, the Adal army evacuated Waj and Fatagar and quickly returned to Harar to protect the city from the Oromo expanding forces. The evacuation of both the Christians and the Muslims had brought two consequences. On the one hand, the territory to the south of the Abbay was left open for the Oromos who moved into the region and settled without any hindrance. On the other hand, the event abruptly changed the political geography of the Christian kingdom, which was now restricted to the old province of Dembiya, Gojjam, Begemdir, Lasta, Simen and Tigray. Furthermore, Minas decided not to make any attempt to regain the Christian provinces to the south of the Abbay river. From the new centre, the monarchy began to maintain itself and its army by looting and harassing the peasantry. This began to create a social disorder and anarchy in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. The provincial warlords began to reject the authority of the monarchy, which led to a strong rivalry between the two.

The successor of Minas was his son Sarsa Dingil (r. 1563-1597), who came to power at the age of thirteen. The first years of his reign were marked by political instability that was caused by the rebellion of old generals against the young king. One of the rebellious old generals was Hamalmal who defied the authority of the king and settled with his large army in western Shewa. However, Hamalmal had soon reconciled with Sarsa Dingil. In 1566 another lesser general called Fasilo rebelled against the king. Fasilo even attacked Sarsa Dingil who narrowly escaped the death.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Describe the major factors for political instability in the Christian kingdom after the wars of Ahmad Ibrahim.

Gelawdewos was more successful in his wars against the Sultanate of Adal than against the Oromos. Why?

Explain the Oromo tactics of warfare.

As soon as his power was consolidated, Sarsa Dingil marched across the Abbay to the south to stop the Oromo advance and regain the former provinces of the kingdom. In the campaign of 1568, Sarsa Dingil got the submission of Enarya whose ruler pleased the king by generous tribute in gold. The tribute filled Sarsa Dingil's depleted treasury and bolstered his power. But Sarsa Dingil did not succeed in his campaigns against the Oromo. He led the Christian army in a number of campaigns against the advancing Oromo. However, he was successful in only one battle in which the Christian army scored an important victory over the Oromo warriors in 1572.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

How did the Ottoman Turkish occupation of the port of Massawa affect Ethiopia?

Describe the relationship between Suseniyos and the Oromos.

In the late 1570's, the attention of Sarsa Dingil shifted towards another problem. This was the encroachment of the Ottoman Turks on the northern territory of the kingdom. Since 1557, the Ottoman Turks had occupied the port of Massawa and established posts in the coastal territories of the northern most province. From these bases they advanced into the interior and occupied the highland village of Debarwa, the capital of the coastal areas. The coastal areas were then ruled by Yeshaq, who had the title of Bahr Negash. Yeshaq was a rebellious chief. The rebellion of Yeshaq began towards the end of the reign of Minas and continued during the reign of Sarsa Dingil. For a short

while, Yeshaq submitted to Sarsa Dingil, who reinstated him to his old post. However, the Ottoman Turks won him to their side and incited him to rebel against the king. Thus, Yeshaq rebelled in 1578. In the campaign of 1579, Sarsa Dingil successfully crushed the rebellion of Yeshaq, although he did not dislodge the Ottoman Turks from the coastal territories. Subsequently, Massawa and the surrounding coastal regions were to remain under the Turkish control for about three centuries.

The victorious king marched south to face the Oromos once again. But it was too late to hold back the advance of the Oromos. Their attack was launched from different areas which they had already controlled. At the time, Sarsa Dingil's brother, Fasil, was stationed with his large army in Waj. From this centre, Fasil campaigned against the Oromo since the early 1580's. Unfortunately, Fasil and his army perished in a devastating attack of the Jawi Oromos in 1588. Sarsa Dingil swore to avenge the death of Fasil and the destruction of his army. As a matter of fact, after their victory, the Jawi warriors had taken a hasty retreat as usual. Therefore, Sarsa Dingil had two options: either to await until the Jawi made their come-back for another attack or to pursue and punish them in their base area. The king chose the second option which proved fatal. The Jawi retreated through a barren territory which had little effect on the Oromo warriors because they depended for their supply on cattle products. But for the pursuing Christian army, the venture was fatal, because it was unable to get provisions in the territories through which it marched. Consequently, many of the Christian troops perished from hunger and disease. After this disastrous campaign, Sarsa Dingil retreated back to the old centre established by Minas in the east of Lake Tana, at Guba'e, and decided not to venture again across the Abbay to regain the former provinces of the kingdom.

However, Sarsa Dingil reversed his decision and marched southward across the Abbay in 1595. He was forced to do so

because of appeals from Enarya, which was made tributary to the Christian kingdom, for military assistance against the Oromo. Sarsa Dingil also made another campaign to Enarya in 1597, but he fell ill and died in the district of Shat, near the Gibe river.

Upon the death of Sarsa Dingil, the Christian kingdom once again fell into political disorder and bloody civil wars, because the old generals wanted to put their own candidates on the throne. From 1597 to 1601, Ya'iqob, Za Dingil and Suseniyos were enthroned and dethroned one after another. Finally, Suseniyos succeeded in securing the throne with the assistance of the Oromo warriors, among whom he had stayed during his exile for more than two decades. Eventhough the rise of Suseniyos solved the problem caused by power struggle, the Christian kingdom was not lucky to enjoy a period of political stability. This was because with the coming of Suseniyos another period of disorder started which was the result of religious controversy between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism.

9.2. Catholicization and Civil Wars

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Discuss why the Portuguese soldiers came to Ethiopia in 1541.

How did the Jesuits come to Ethiopia?

In unit eight we discussed the development of early contacts between the Christian kingdom and Portugal. On the basis of this contact, Libne Dingil sent a letter to Portugal in which he requested military assistance for the war against Imam Ahmad Ibrahim. As stated earlier, that military help came in 1541 and played a decisive role in ending the Muslim hegemony in the Christian kingdom. The Portuguese soldiers killed Imam Ahmad and forced the Muslim army to retreat to Adal. However, once they accomplished their task, the Portuguese soldiers did

not withdraw from Ethiopia. Rather they stayed in the country and invited the Catholic missionaries, known as the **Jesuits**, who sought to convert the Orthodox Christian of Ethiopia to Catholicism.

Although we do not know what was discussed between the king and his Portuguese messenger, Bermudez, Libne Dingil's letter of 1535 did not mention anything about his intension to be converted to Catholicism. However, Bermudez later claimed that in return for military assistance, Libne Dingil had promised to give a third of his kingdom to the king of Portugal and to be converted, together with his subjects, to Catholicism. This claim gave the Portuguese government and the Pope of Rome a ground for their steady effort to convert the Orthodox Christians of the kingdom to Roman Catholicism.

The attempt at conversion began as soon as the Portuguese soldiers entered the Christian kingdom in 1541. At the time, Gelawdewos had already succeeded his father, who died in 1540. Bermudez heard of the death of the king while he was still in Goa. The ambitious Portuguese soon made himself **patriarch** of the Christian kingdom. In fact, he was not **ordained** by the Pope of Rome. However, he claimed that Libne Dingil had nominated him patriarch of the kingdom, provided that his nomination was approved by the Pope of Rome. On the basis of this claim, Bermudez began to try to force Gelawdewos to fulfill the alleged promises of his father. He required the Emperor to convert to Catholicism and recognize his position as a patriarch of the kingdom. He also insisted him to assist in converting the subjects of the kingdom to Catholicism. Bermudez knew how much Gelawdewos depended on the Portuguese army he brought from India. Therefore, he used this situation as a leverage to force Gelawdewos into fulfilling his demands.

But Gelawdewos who was with his father until the Emperor's death, knew that Libne Dingil did not make the alleged promise. Therefore, he rejected the request of

Bermudez. Bermudez then, tried to induce the Portuguese soldiers not to fight for Gelawdewos. However, the Portuguese soldiers who knew about the story rejected Bermudez's attempt to stop them from fighting on the side of Gelawdewos. The king of Portugal, John III, also refused to recognize Bermudez as the patriarch of the kingdom. Finally, the frustrated Bermudez retired to Debarwa in 1553.

The official appointment of patriarchs and bishops for the Christian kingdom began after the retirement of Bermudez. The appointees were selected from the **Society of Jesus** or the Jesuits.

Focus

The society of Jesus was the outcome of the reaction of the Catholic Church against Protestant Reformation. It was founded in 1540 by a Spaniard named Ignatius Loyola. The mission of the Society was to purify and reorganize the Catholic Church and to stop the expansion of the Protestant Church. It was the members of this society who took the responsibility of converting the

Nevertheless, the first attempt at appointment of a patriarch and bishops for the Christian kingdom was the result of a misunderstanding of the letter of Gelawdewos. After the war with Ahmad Ibrahim was over, some of the Portuguese soldiers who fought in the army of Gelawdewos accepted the request of the king to live permanently in the kingdom. So, the grateful king wrote a letter to the king of Portugal to send Catholic priests who could render religious services for the Portuguese soldiers. But King John III of Portugal thought that Gelawdewos wanted to be converted to Catholicism. Therefore, the king and the pope, decided to send one patriarch and two bishops who were selected and ordained from among the Jesuits.

When Gelawdewos heard about the arrangements made in Europe for his conversion, he wrote a letter of objection to the Portuguese governor of India. The governor sent a young Jesuit priest called Rodriguez to convince the king to accept the patriarch and become a Catholic. On his way to the court, Rodriguez met Bermudez who advised him to use threat in forcing Gelawdewos to accept his request. Soon after he arrived, the young Jesuit priest openly criticized the Orthodox Christian practices such as circumcision, food taboos, fasting and the observance of Saturdays as heresies. Gelawdewos tolerated the priest, because he needed the Portuguese army, as the military conflict with Adal had not yet abated. However, Geladewos rejected the demand for his conversion and Rodriguez returned to Goa.

The recruited patriarch and the bishops decided to go to the Christian kingdom and asked the governor of Goa for an armed escort. But the governor opposed the idea of using force and instead sent again a bishop called Andre de Oviedo to try to convince Gelawdewos. The bishop arrived at the court of Gelawdewos in 1557 and followed the king from one campaign to another trying to convince him. But Oviedo failed to convince the king. Indeed, the king wrote a book called *Confessions of Gelawdewos*, in which he defended the practices of the Orthodox faith of his kingdom against the criticisms of the Catholic priests. As a result, Oviedo retaliated by isolating the Portuguese army from Gelawdewos. It was at this time that Gelawdewos, who was abandoned by the Portuguese army, faced the army of Adal who defeated and killed him in 1559.

After the death of Gelawdewos, Oviedo moved with the Portuguese army to the province of Tigray, where he joined Bahr Negash Yeshaq, the leader of opposition forces against King Minas. Oviedo assured Yeshaq that Portuguese military assistance would come soon to depose Minas and appoint a puppet king of their own choice. Yeshaq and his followers

agreed to be converted when the said military assistance arrive. But, Oviedo's promise was not fulfilled and he himself died in 1597 without any success in his mission. After the death of Oviedo, two other bishops, Pedro Paez and Alfonso Mendez were successively ordained for the Christian kingdom. Paez came in 1603 and died in 1622, while Mendez arrived in 1622 and stayed until all Portuguese and Jesuits were expelled from the kingdom in 1632. Paez was particularly successful in converting many influential dignitaries of the kingdom, including King Suseniyos (1607 - 1632). Let us see how he succeeded and the consequences of his success.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

How does religion serve a State?

Why was Suseniyos converted to Catholicism?

Upon the death of Sarsa Dingil in 1597, the Christian kingdom faced political disorder as a result of an acute power struggle. Since the wars of Imam Ahmad, there has been a gradual erosion of the power of the kings. The weakness of the kings led the Orthodox Church leaders to ally with the more powerful provincial governors. Besides, the kings could not depend on the loyalty of the army. Therefore, they began to consider the advantage of converting to Catholicism, i.e getting military assistance, etc, from Portugal.

All Jesuit bishops who came to the Christian kingdom knew about the situation in which the kings reigned. But some bishops, particularly the first arrivals, did not succeed in their mission, mainly because they were not wise in their dealings with the kings. Among them, Paez was the most successful. When Paez arrived at Massawa in 1603, the reigning king was the fourteen-year-old Ya'iqob. Paez was informed that the young king knew Arabic and was fond of the language. The bishop who also knew Arabic hoped to use the language to get along with

the king smoothly. But, before he reached the Christian court, Ya'iqob was deposed and replaced by Za Dingil.

Za Dingil was fully aware of the political problem faced by his predecessors. Therefore, he was determined to get rid of the disloyal soldiers and their commanders as well as the clergy, whom he thought were the sources of the weaknesses of the monarchy. When Paez understood this attitude of the king, he directly told Za Dingil that if he agreed to be converted to Catholicism, he could get Portuguese military assistance with which he could deal with his enemies and consolidate his political power. Even before the agreement could get acceptance in Portugal, the impatient king intended to take measures like banning the observance of Saturdays to satisfy the demand of Paez. However, Paez advised the king to be cautious and not to take hasty measures that might lead to failure. Whatever the case, Za Dingil had already been suspected of being secretly converted, and consequently, he faced strong opposition from the Orthodox Church which accused him of being converted to Catholicism. In the civil war that followed, Za Dingil was killed in 1604. After the death of the king, Ya'iqob was again put on the throne. Paez continued the same dealing with Ya'iqob, who agreed to accept Catholicism. But, before the agreement was implemented, Ya'iqob was killed in battle in 1607.

Ya'iqob was succeeded by Suseniyos. The reign of Suseniyos saw the success of the long effort of the Jesuit bishops. Just like his immediate predecessors, Suseniyos leaned towards Catholicism in order to get Portuguese military assistance to maintain a strong and peaceful monarchy. So, the Jesuits got freedom to preach and recruit converts even in the court itself. Suseniyos did not take the lead in being converted to Catholicism. The first important convert was his brother, the old powerful general, Si'ile Kristos, who was rebaptized publicly

in 1611. The palace clergy and other influential cousins of the king followed the example of Si'ile Kristos.

Beginning from 1612 a series of public debates on Catholic principles were held in the court. The debate was chaired by Suseniyos himself. In the debate, the Catholics were represented by Si'ile Kristos. In the meantime, the Orthodox Church practices such as circumcision, fasting on Fridays and Wednesdays and the observance of Saturdays were condemned as heresies. The Orthodox clergymen who stood against Catholicism also faced mistreatment in the court. All these measures brought about the rebellion of the peasants headed by the clergy and the nobility. Suseniyos, himself, was officially converted to Catholicism in public and made Catholicism the official state religion in 1622. The first peasant rebellion against Suseniyos and Catholicism broke out in 1617 and from 1626 to 1632 Suseniyos fought many battles. This was mainly because of the hasty imposition of the new religion on the peasants of the kingdom. Besides many of the long established Ethiopian Christian practices were also banned. So, both the peasantry and the clergy joined in rebellion to defend their religion from falling to Catholicism and the period witnessed one of the large scale peasant uprising in Ethiopian history.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Identify and explain the immediate as well as the long-term consequences of the religious controversy between the Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism.

Explain why the Christian kings who came to power after Sarsa Dingil welcomed the Catholic missionaries.

Discuss in group why the Ethiopian Christian kingdom followed a closed-door policy with Christian Europeans after the intervention of Jesuits in Ethiopia?

Eventually, Suseniyos came to understand that he could not suppress the staunch opposition of the Church and peasants militarily. In the meantime, the Portuguese soldiers and firearms which he had hoped to obtain from Portugal failed to arrive. Therefore, he realised that he had simply incurred the enmity of his people and the clergy in vain. He understood that in an attempt to build a strong and peaceful government using Catholicism, he was leading the country to a bloody civil war. So, after his last battle, the Battle of Dengez in 1632, he decided to withdraw from the experiment with Catholicism. In the same year he abdicated in favor of his son, Fasiledes, whose first measure was the restoration of the Orthodox Church to its traditional position.

In the reaction that followed, many Catholic converts were killed. The first victim was Si'ile Kristos, who was publicly hanged. On the other hand, the Catholic missionaries were not harmed, because Fasiledes feared Portuguese interference. Instead, Fasiledes ordered the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries from the country.

The theological controversies that shook the foundation of the Orthodox Church in the subsequent centuries were the consequence of the religious conflict between Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. The religious controversy had also a long-term consequence for the foreign relations of the Christian kingdom. It was believed that the bloody civil war was caused by the interference of alien forces. Thereafter, all European Christians were suspected as Catholics. Therefore, to avoid similar problems in the future, Fasiledes made an alliance with the hitherto traditionally hostile Muslim neighbors. He signed treaties with the Imams of Yemen and the **Pashas** of Swakin and Massawa, who agreed to prevent or report the coming of any European to the Christian kingdom. Thus, the Christian kingdom adopted a closed-door policy which isolated the kingdom from the Christian Europeans for about two

centuries i.e., from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. During this long period of isolation, only two Europeans succeeded in reaching the Christian court. They were a French physician named Jaques Poncet and the Scottish traveler, James Bruce, who came to discover the source of the Blue Nile.

9.3. The Gondar Period (1636- 1769)

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

What were the natures of the capital cities of the Aksumite kingdom and Zagwe dynasty?

What is the importance of a capital city?

Do you know what a mobile court is?

What are the advantages and/or the disadvantages of the mobile and fixed capital?

Compare and contrast the roles of Queen Elleni and Etege Mentewab.

As we have already pointed out, during the reign of Minas, the political centre of the Christian kingdom shifted to the north of the river Abbay. Consequently, the kingdom lost its former provinces in the south and east of the river to the Oromo settlers. Since then, there was little change in the political geography of the kingdom. For a short while, from the end of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, Shewa was one of the provinces of the kingdom. However, Shewa became independent of the Gonderine kings towards the end of the seventeenth century. Therefore, the core provinces of the kingdom were Gojjam, Begemdir, Simen and Tigrai.

As stated earlier, after 1270 A.D the Christian kings ruled the provinces from a mobile court. They did not have permanent capitals. But during the reign of Fasiledes (1632-1667) the kingdom regained a permanent capital city at Gondar in 1636.

Since then, Gondar became the political, economic and cultural centre of the kingdom for almost two centuries. Because of this, the period between 1636 and 1769 is commonly known as the Gondarine period.

The establishment of a permanent capital city promoted cultural revival in the Christian Kingdom. This was because, the Christian kings began to stay long in the city during which they embarked on various construction projects. One of such projects was the construction of a large imperial quarter in the center of Gondar.

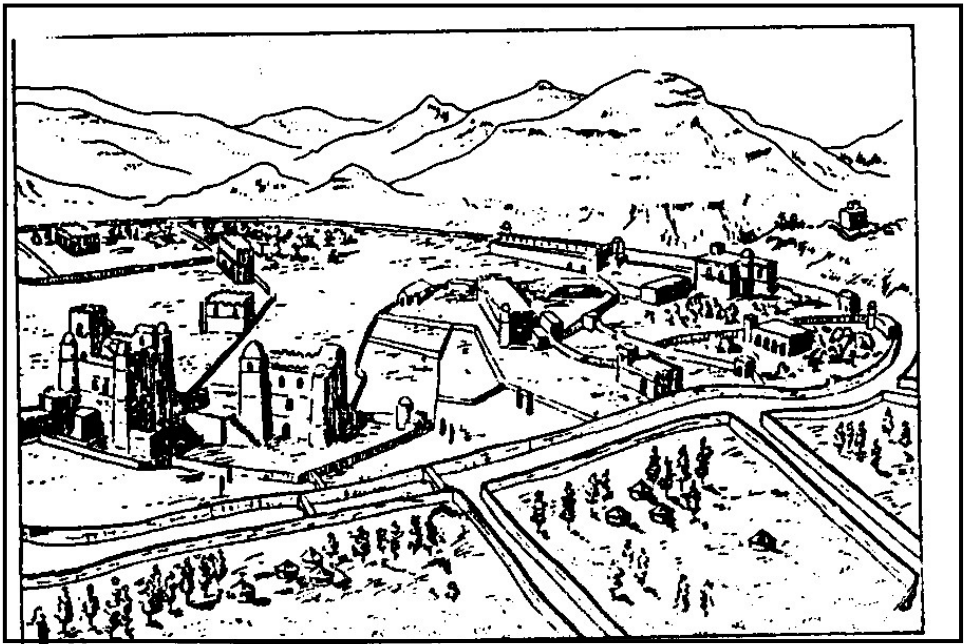


fig. 9.1 the imperial quarter in Gondar.

Inside the quarter, magnificent castles and palaces for kings, residences for the **Abun** and **Echegge** as well as churches were built. The architectural style of the buildings contain many elements from the Aksumite and the Zagwe periods. A number of churches were also built outside the imperial quarter. These churches became the main centers of education, music and poetry for which Gondar became famous. It attracted capable scholars of poetry, theology, law and other

religious subjects from all over the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. In addition, church paintings, cross making, calligraphy and other types of art flourished in the city. In short, Gondar became a center of excellency.

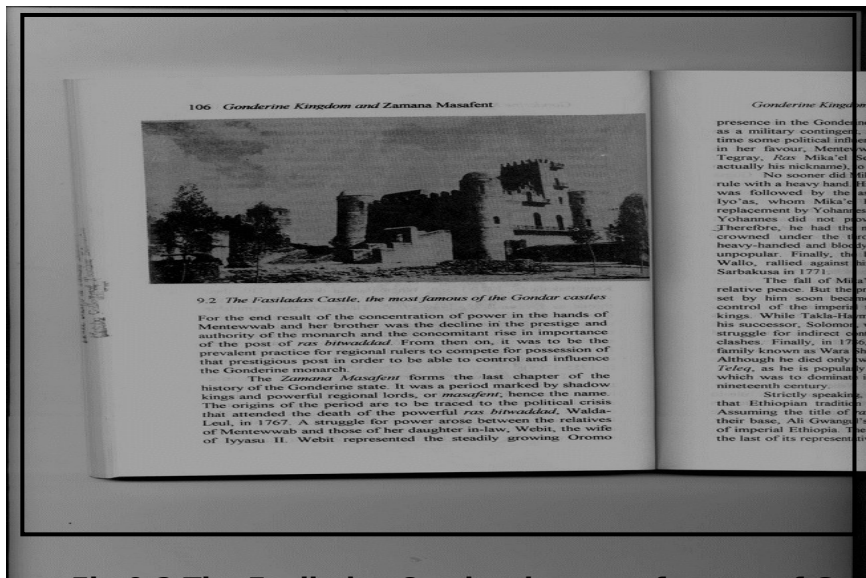


Fig 9.2 The Fasiladas Castle, the most famous of Gondar

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Who were the different religious groups of the town of Gondar?

What are the advantages of controlling the market of Gondar and its trade routes?

Gondar also became the center of an active trade. Even long before its selection as a royal capital Gondar had existed as a famous market place. Fasiledes shifted to this town probably to control the trade route and collect revenues. One major trade route from the southwestern part of the Ethiopian region entered the city of Gondar. After entering Gondar, the route further branched into two: one of the routes continued to reach Massawa on the Red Sea coast of the northern part of the region, while the other proceeded westward to Metemma on the Sudan border. In addition to the weekly market which was then famous, daily markets began to flourish in the town after its foundation as a permanent capital city. The Gondar market became a meeting point for people from the surrounding regions. They traded their cattle, honey, butter and grain for the urban products of the weavers, blacksmiths and goldsmiths.

The trade was mainly dominated by the Muslims, who also took part in weaving. Items of various crafts were provided by the Falashas who were mainly engaged in masonry, pottery, basketry and metal works. Thus, in the daily market of Gondar, foreign merchants, the dwellers of the city and the rural population exchanged their various products. With that we begin to see the dichotomy between the urban and rural, the growth of town- country relationship, which had been a necessary precondition for social development.

But the different communities at Gondar tended to live apart from each other. For instance the Muslim communities, the Falashas and other expatriates such as Armenian, Indian and Persian merchants were not allowed to live in the city. For such communities a separate quarter was provided in the outskirts of the city. This helped the town to expand. By the late eighteenth century, Gondar had about 70,000 inhabitants who belonged to different religious and cultural groups.

The prosperity of Gondar mainly benefited the ruling class who led a luxurious life in the splendid palaces and castles. Unfortunately, the prosperity and glory of Gondar did not last long. Right from the beginning, the shift of the Christian court to the lands north of Abbay began to indicate the withdrawal of the monarchy from the center of the Ethiopian region. Even though it was far removed from the Muslim Adali threat, Gondar was also equally far from the center of the Christian kingdom. From the time of the foundation of Gondar, the kingdom began to lose control over the central and outlying territories of the Christian state. This paved the way for the steady growth of regionalism and the increasing independence of the great regional lords.

Gondar experienced a period of glory and splendour only during the reign of its first three kings. These were Fasiledes (r.1632 - 67), Yohannis I (r.1667-82) and Iyasu I (r.1682-1706). Among the kings of the Gonderine period, the most powerful king was the successor of Yohannis I, Iyassu I, also nick-named Iyasu the Great. The nick-name was given to him because he was the last powerful Christian king before the kingdom fell into

a period of political disorder. Since the establishment of Gondar, no Christian king ventured southward across the Abbay to regain the former provinces of the kingdom. But Iyasu campaigned to Shewa, where he collected annual tribute. However, he recognized the power of the rulers of Shewa. The reign of Iyasu was also important in many other respects. During his reign, a traditional **civil code**, the **Fitha Negest**, was revised. Land laws were amended. Taxes and customs were also reorganized. The reforms promoted the development of trade through which the king strengthened his relations with Egypt.

The closed-door policy which was introduced during the reign of Fasiledes was also violated by Iyasu I. As the king suffered from a skin disease, he invited a French physician, Jaques Poncet, who cured him. This was followed by the visit of two Jesuit and one Franciscan missionaries. The king also sent a delegation of seven young Christians to the Pope of Rome. This attempt to convert the Orthodox Christians aroused suspicion among the clergy. The alarm was further aggravated by the earthquake of 1704, which was considered by the clergy as God's expression of anger against the Jesuits' presence. In the face of a mounting opposition, Iyasu had no alternative but fled to an island in Lake Tana where he was pursued by assassins who murdered him. Up on his death his son, Tekle Haymanot, took the throne.

The death of Iyasu I ushered in a period of political upheaval when power struggle was severely intensified. Murder and assassination of the kings became common. Consequently, the Christian kings could not survive long on the throne. They were either murdered or poisoned to death by their political rivals. This was the fate of five kings who reigned between the murder of Iyasu I, in 1706, and the beginning of the reign of king Bakkafa, in 1721. The kings became too weak even to defend their own capital city, Gondar, which was occasionally plundered by bands of robbers and bandits.

Meanwhile, the clergy and members of rival ruling families were engaged in an endless religious controversy. The controversy was the heritage of religious conflict between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

The reign of Bakkafa (1721-1730) was relatively peaceful than those of his predecessors. During his reign, the kingdom enjoyed a short period of political stability. Bakkafa was admired for his efficient administration. But his reign witnessed the beginning of the autonomous development of Shewa which continued to be ruled by an independent line of rulers for more than a century.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Describe the economic and social conditions in Gondar during the Gonderine period.

Outline the major architectural features of the imperial quarter of Gondar.

Explain the origin and the extent of the Yejju Oromo involvement in the politics of the Christian kingdom during the Gonderine period.

Bakkafa was succeeded by his young son, Iyasu II “Iyasu the Little” (r. 1730-1755). He was made king under the regency of his mother, Etege Mintiwwab, who came from Quara and became another prominent woman in the politics of the Christian Kingdom, after Queen Elleni. At the time, growing power of the regional lords had already become a threat to the power of the Christian kings. But Mintiwwab succeeded in securing the power of her son by the support she got from the lords and chiefs of Quara, who were her kinsmen. Particularly, in 1732 she brought her brother Welde Leul to the court of Gondar and appointed him as **ras bitweded**. Using his support and her kinsmen, she concentrated full power in her own hands and exercised a strong political power. After a short while however, the influential position held by the lords and chiefs of Quara in

the court incited strong opposition from the lords of other provinces. Iyasu himself was tired of the growing power of his mother's kinsmen. So, he decided to get rid of them and be replaced by allies from Oromo lords, particularly the Wallo Oromo chiefs. Iyasu's father, Bakkafa, had earlier spent some years of exile with the Wallo Oromo chief called Amizo. The name Bakkafa itself (an Oromo term meaning a person who sprawls when he walks) was a nick-name he got during his stay with the Oromos. Subsequently, Bakkafa maintained good relations with this Oromo family, some of whom he had invited to his court. Iyasu extended his relations with the Oromos further by marrying the daughter of Amizo called Wabi who was baptized as Bersabeh. This event marked the active involvement of the Wallo Oromos in the politics of the Christian kingdom.

The successor of Iyasu II was his son Iyoas (r.1755-1769), who was born from Bersabeh. During the reign of Iyoas, the influence of the Oromos further increased. And the Amhara chiefs who felt dominated by the Oromos began to challenge the rule of Iyoas. The growing threat from the Amhara chiefs to his power forced the young king to depend more and more on the support of his maternal kinsmen. Accordingly, he invited his Oromo cousins, two powerful brothers of Bersabeh, i.e. Luba

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Fig 9.3 Ras Micha'el receiving James Bruce

and to maintain her position through his help, Mintiwwab invited the powerful Tigrean lord, *Ras Michael Sehul*, to become the guardian of the king. *Ras Michael* arrived in Gondar in 1768 with large Tigrean forces and suppressed the opposition with a heavy hand. Consequently, he became *ras bitweded* and the guardian of the Gonderine king, Iyoas. Unfortunately, in the intrigue that followed, *Ras Micha'el* got Iyoas murdered in 1769 and put on the throne a seventy year old man, Yohannis II. This event marked the advent of the *Zemene Mesafint* (the Era of the Princes) in the history of the Christian kingdom.

9.4. The Zemene Mesafint (The Era of the Lords)

Question for Discussion and Practical Work

Do you know what a *Mesafint* is?

What is meant by *Zemene Mesafint*?

The *Zemene Mesafint* is a period in the history of Ethiopian which roughly started with the death of Iyoas in 1769 and lasted until 1855. It was a period characterized by the collapse of central authority of monarchy and the growth of the power of the regional lords or *mesafints*. It was a period when Ethiopia was divided within itself into several regions with no effective central authority. In other words, *Zemene Mesafint* was a period of feudal political disintegration. It was a period of intense power struggle between the monarchy and the nobility for political supremacy. In this struggle the former wanted to exercise an absolute power, while the latter contended to be autonomous by undermining the court. Eventually, they were the nobility who succeeded to convert their regions into more or less independent petty states.

The conditions that led to *Zemene Mesafint* developed through a long period of time. The erosion of the traditional power and authority of the Christian monarchy led to the

Zemene Mesafint. The factors that led to the erosion of the power and authority of the monarchy had their origins in the wars of Imam Ahmad Ibrahim. Before the wars of Ahmad, the Christian kings, such as Amde Siyon and Zara Ya'iqob were renowned for their military and political exploits. In most of their campaigns, they emerged victorious and were able to extend their hegemony over a vast empire. Consequently, the exploits of such kings had left in the minds of the people the image of invincible Christian kings.

However, this image of the Christian kings was fatally dismantled eventually. The first victim was Libne Dingil who lived a fugitive life for more than a decade and died as a result of the wars of Ahmad. His successor, Gelawdewos, suffered a number of humiliating defeats in the hands of the Oromo. Even worse, he lost his life fighting against the Muslims led by Emir Nur in 1559. Many other Christian kings faced similar humiliation in the hands of the Oromo warriors. As a result, the traditional esteem with which the Christian kings were held collapsed.

The establishment of Gondar as a capital city was another factor for the erosion of the traditional power and authority of the monarchy. Before its establishment, the kings lived in mobile capitals and moved along with their army and retinue constantly from one district to another. In the absence of effective administrative structure and garrisoned army, this ensured the loyalty of the regional lords. But, after the establishment of Gondar, the kings remained in the city for an indefinite period of time and neglected the provinces. In the meantime, the regional lords built up their power which threatened the traditional authority of the monarchy. Some of the powerful lords such as Welde Sillassie of Tigray and the rulers of Shewa, even ignored the very existence of the highest authority and made their regional power hereditary. Such regional lords began to defy the authority of the kings who tried

to assert their power, in certain cases unsuccessfully. In general, the Zemene mesafint was a period marked by shadow kings and powerful regional lords or mesafints.

During the Zemene Mesafint, the Christian king virtually lost their traditional power and authority. The last king, with some semblance of power was Tekle Giyorgis. But he was enthroned and dethroned six times in eleven years (1789-1800). Because of this, the Christian tradition has nicknamed him *Fissame-mengist*, i.e., the end of the kingdom. The successors of Tekle Giyorgis fared even worse. They became mere puppets in the hands of regional governors and warlords. The life of the kings was secluded in the castles of Gondar and they did not have military force. Their income consisted of customs duties and fines collected from part of the city of Gondar only and the charity of some pious peoples of the city. To cite one example, in 1832 the annual income of the Gonderine king was 300 Maria Theresa Thalers (MTT). In contrast, in 1816 the annual income of the Tigrian lord, Ras Walde Sillassie was 75,000 MTT, while in 1840 King Sahle Sillassie of Shewa had an annual income of 85,000 MTT. In short, the Gonderine kings lived in poverty without any power and authority.

The actual rulers of the kingdom were regional governors, the *rases* and *dejjazmaches* of the various provinces. They maintained their own army and kept the tribute and revenues of their provinces. Nevertheless, even the regional lords were not secure and did not retain power for long. The decisive factor in securing regional power for long and contend for more power was popularity with their troops and their connection with other powerful families who might come to their assistance in times of political difficulty.

The *ras bitwededes* of the kingdom, because of their military might, were appointing and demoting the kings. They were king makers. Therefore, the main aim of the struggle among the leading regional lords was to secure the title of *ras*

bitweded or *ras* of the kingdom. But, before assuming this position, one had to increase his domains and become powerful in order to contend for the supreme position. Because of this, the struggle was conducted at various levels and the country turned out to be a hotbed of civil wars. Moreover, the struggle was further aggravated by religious doctrinal disputes within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in which various regional lords were involved by supporting rival sides. Therefore, the Church was unable to play its traditional role of unifying diverse groups under one central government.

Several regional lords were involved in the struggle for the title of *ras bitweded*. But only few were successful. The first regional lord who held this position after the death of *Ras Welde Leul* was *Ras Micha'el Sehul* of Tigray. However, after his downfall in the early 1770s, the position was totally monopolized by the Yejju Oromo who established the Yejju or *Wara Sheh* dynasty in 1786. The first Yejju Oromo lord who became *Ras bitweded* and founded the dynasty was Ali Gwangul, also known as Ali the Great (Ali I). After him, six members of his family held the title one after another. Among these Oromo lords, the leading representatives of the family were *Ras Gugsu* and *Ras Ali Alula* (*Ras Ali II*). In this manner, the hegemony of Yejju Oromo was established over the central regions of the kingdom, including the city of Gondar, which they ruled from their residence at Debre Tabor.

Regarding the political geography of the kingdom, there was further political disintegration which gave rise to additional political units during the Zemene Mesafint. The major political units of the period were Tigray in the north; Simen, Dembia, Begemdir, Lasta, Amhara, Yejju and Wallo in the center; and Gojjam and Shewa in the south. All political units did not have equal status. Based on their resources and the power of their regional lords, their status was different.

The political disintegration of the Zemene Mesafint had its own impact on foreign relations of the period. The most powerful regions conducted their own foreign affairs independently of Gondar. One such region was Tigray, which made use of the port of Massawa. The Tigrian lords did not allow foreign envoys to proceed beyond their domain. Such envoys often departed with a conviction that the Tigrian lords were the kings of the Christian kingdom. Just like Tigray, Shewa also conducted its own foreign relations via Awsa and Tajura independently.

On the other hand, the Zemene Mesafint was characterized by a foreign threat to the Christian kingdom that mainly came from its western frontiers. This threat came from Egypt after the rise of Muhammad Ali, who extended Egypt's rule over the Sudan in 1821. From the Sudan, the Egyptians began to encroach on the western frontiers of the Christian kingdom. Nevertheless, serious threat from the Egyptian government was to come only after the end of the Zemene Mesafint.

Questions for Discussion and Practical Work

Discuss in group the basic characteristics of the Zemene Mesafint.

Justify how the Civil wars of the Zemene Mesafint negatively affected the development of Ethiopia.

Besides this, the violence of the Zemene Mesafint had a far-reaching consequences in the country. The immediate consequences mainly affected the life of the peasantry. The peasantry was forced to fight the endless wars of the provincial lords. What the peasants produced was also plundered by the feudal army. At times, their farms became battlefields. As a result, many people abandoned their normal profession and became *shiftas* or bandits. Such groups were also relying mainly on the peasantry for their supply. The merchants were also

unable to conduct trade peacefully. Such groups were either robbed by bandits or forced to pay taxes at several gates (*kelas*) of the regional lords. Consequently, trade was at a standstill. The traditional handicrafts were also disrupted. On the whole, the wars of the Zemene Mesafint caused decline in agricultural production, stagnation of trade and the collapse of handicrafts, which impoverished the people of the region. This also seriously undermined nationalism and, in fact, the Zemene Mesafint was the period of a weak national power. All this were responsible for the subsequent backwardness of the country.

The Zemene Mesafint came to an end in 1855. The man who initiated the process of restoring the power and authority of the monarchy was Tewodros. Tewodros began his career as a bandit in Quara, Dembiya. At the time, his name was Kasa Haylu. *Dejjach* Kasa got rid of the powerful regional lords in four major battles. At the battle of Gur Amba in November 1852, he defeated *Dejjach* Goshu Zewde of Gojjam, and in April 1853, four vassals of Ras Ali II fell at the battle of Gorgora Bichen. The next victim was Ras Ali II himself, the then *ras bitwaded* who was defeated at the battle of Ayshal in June 1853. The last powerful regional lord, *Dajjach* Wube of Tigray and Simen, was defeated at the battle of Deresge in 1855. Kasa was later crowned as king of kings Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) and began the process of bringing the provinces of the Christian kingdom under the control of monarchy. Thus, his rise to power marked the end of the Zemene Mesafint.

Summary

The period covered in this unit was characterized by chaos and political disorder. Several factors were responsible for this. After the wars of Imam Ahmad, military raids from Adal continued. To this was added the Oromo population movement, the encroachment of the Ottoman Turks and the religious controversies between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. The violence and disorder of the period eroded the power of the kings and this resulted in the onset of the Zemene

Mesafint. On the whole, civil wars, violence and social unrest became the rule of the day.

The consequences were many and far-reaching. The country faced acute political instability and disintegration. There was severe reduction in the population of the kingdom. The kingdom was isolated from foreign contacts. Trade, agricultural production and handicrafts stagnated, which was partly responsible for the backwardness of the country at present.

The long period of disorder was finally brought to an end by the rise of Tewodros in 1855. With Tewodros the process of building centralized monarchy began. And after him the Christian kings gradually succeeded in reasserting their traditional power and authority.

Review Questions

I. Choose the correct answer

1. The Christian forces of Gelawdewos were defeated in 1559.
 - a) at Shimbira Qure
 - b) by Imam Ahmad Ibrahim
 - c) by the Adali forces of Emir Nur Mujahid
 - d) by the Portuguese soldiers
2. One of the following was not an event of the sixteenth century Ethiopia
 - a) the Christian-Muslim conflict
 - b) the Oromo population movement
 - c) the establishment of a permanent capital
 - d) the Ottoman Turkish occupation of Massawa
3. The king who declared catholicism as the official religion of Ethiopia was
 - a) Gelawdewos
 - b) Minas
 - c) Fasil
 - d) Suseniyos
4. Gondar was established as a permanent seat of power by
 - a) Suseniyos
 - b) Minas
 - c) Fasiledes
 - d) None

5. Which of the following did not characterize the Zemene Mesafint?

- a) a period of social and political instability
- b) a strong union between church and state
- c) a period of intense civil war
- d) None

II. Match items of column 'A' with their appropriates under 'B'

A		B	
___ 1. Emir Nur Mujahid		a)	took a letter of Lebne Dengel to Portugal.
___ 2. Ras Bitweded		b)	founded by <i>Ras</i> Ali I.
___ 3. John Bermudez		c)	expelled the Jesuits.
___ 4. Wara Sheh dynasty		d)	built a wall around Harar city.
___ 5. Fasiledes		e)	a supreme title during Zemene Mesafint.

III. Write short note on:

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Minas | 4. Confessions of Gelawdewos |
| 2. Suseniyos | 5. Battle of Denqez |
| 3. Society of Jesus | 6. Mintiwwab |

IV. Discuss the consequences of the violence of the Zemene Mesafint.