

T.aytu's Foremothers Queen Əleni, Queen Säblä Wängel and Bati Dəl Wämbära

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This paper considers three Ethiopian medieval noblewomen who, like Empress T.aytu, were skilled diplomats, strategists, and protagonists of their faith: Queen Əleni, a Hadəyya noblewoman, became an influential Ethiopian queen. The widowed Queen Säblä Wängel conducted state affairs and fought successfully for the Kingdom's survival. Bati Dəl Wämbära, wife of Ah.mäd Grañ, was with him in battle, and, together with Säblä Wängel, obtained the exchange of their captured sons.

Introduction

*Itege*² T.aytu Bət.ul, distinguished wife of Emperor Mənilək II, is admired for the strong part she played in the diplomatic negotiations between her husband and Italian envoys, preceding the Battle of 'Adwa in 1896. Equally she is admired for bringing her own troops to the battlefield and looking after the wounded. She was also considered a pillar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Echoes of these qualities in powerful women go far back in Ethiopian history – and legend. Could we consider the legendary Queen of Sheba as a ruler going on a diplomatic/commercial mission, seeking, not only knowledge, but also an alliance with a powerful neighbour? The dreaded Queen Gudit, alleged destroyer of Aksum, may well have commanded armies larger than T.aytu's. And Mäsqäl Kəbra, wife of King Lalibäla, was so influential that she had her brother, Hirun, ordained bishop. A monastery bearing her name exists in Šəre. When her husband died, she reportedly had Abba Libanos Church excavated in his memory. The Ethiopian Church considered her a saint. Two Gə'əz hagiographies survive.³ Kinefe-Rigb (1975: 84).

In the 18th century there arose yet another powerful woman: Queen Məntəwwab. She exerted great political influence during three reigns; organized the defence of the Gondär palace compound when it was besieged; and was a generous supporter of the Ethiopian Church.

Chronologically the first of the women whose contribution to history is the subject of this paper is the Muslim Princess who became Queen Əleni and influenced state policy during three long reigns – and three shorter ones; of later generations are the brave Queen Säblä Wängel, who, as a widow, conducted affairs of state and took part in the successful struggle for the Christian Kingdom's survival; and her contemporary, Bati⁴ Dəl Wämbära, (or Wänbära), wife of *Imām* Ah.mäd ibn Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī, also known as

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² *Itege* became T.aytu's title at her coronation in 1889. Until then her title was *Wäyzäro*. Guèbrè Sellassié (1930: 274, n. 3). For the title's implications see note 5.

³ In Gännätä Maryam, Lasta, and in Aqäbä Särabt, Aksum.

⁴ *Bati* or *Ba'tya* (from a Cushitic word meaning 'lady') came to be considered an integral part of her name.

Grañ, the left-handed. She was beside him in battle, negotiated with the Queen an exchange of their captured sons, and agreed to re-marry only on condition that her prospective husband avenge her first husband's death.

The primary sources used are: firstly, the Ethiopian chronicles. These, though sometimes unreliable and not unbiased, are an important, and often the only, source. Of particular interest is the chronicle of Ah.mäd Grañ, *Futūh. al-H.abaša*, written by a Yemeni scribe, known as 'Arab Faqīh, the "Arab doctor", who was apparently present at some of the engagements described. No less valuable are the accounts of two Portuguese eye witnesses: Alvares, chaplain of the mission of Rodrigo da Lima, 1520-27, and Castanhoso, a participant in the military mission of Christovão da Gama, 1541-43. Lastly, there are accounts from Jesuit writers of subsequent decades.

Empress Əleni. was married in 1445 and died, probably in her eighties, in 1522. Earlier called *Ite*⁵ Žan Zela, she came from southern Ethiopia and was the daughter of the Muslim tributary King Mähmad, who was *Gärad*⁶ of Hadəyya.⁷ Her brother was Mähmad's rebellious son Mahiko, who later held the same position as his father. She was given in marriage, probably at a very early age⁸, to the Orthodox Christian, but nevertheless polygamous.⁹ King Zär'a Ya'əqob (1434-1468).¹⁰ The marriage was an attempt to improve relations with Hadəyya, whose *gärad* had at times sided with Zär'a Ya'əqob's Muslim enemies. Perruchon (1893: 50, 59). The marriage was perhaps prompted by services rendered to the King by the Hadəyya *gärad* against the Muslim ruler of Adäl, and by the increasing importance of the southern regions. Tadesse (1972: 288, n. 2).¹¹

Ite Žan Zela was baptized and given the name of Əleni. She turned out to be far from simply a chattel in a dynastic arrangement. Zär'a Ya'əqob must have recognized her

⁵ *Ite*, abbreviation of *Itege*, was a title given, in the 15th and early 16th centuries, to those of the King's wives he wished particularly to honour, after a public ceremony comparable to a coronation. Ludolf (1681: Book 2, Ch.1, 66-69); Basset (1881: Aug.-Sept: 152, n. 178); Perruchon (1894: 173-5). *Ite* was also used for noble ladies. Béguinot (1901: 28, n. 2).

⁶ A title given to the rulers of Muslim or animist territories to the south of the Christian Empire. Perruchon (1893:16, n. 2; Trimmingham (1952:84, n. 2).

⁷ It is uncertain which area Mähmad governed. Zär'a Ya'əqob's chronicle refers to Mähmad as *Gärad* of Hadəyya. (Perruchon (1893:16, 69). Ludolf (1682: 15) thought that Hadəyya was the name of the inhabitants of Kāmbata: 'The seventh kingdom is Cambata, the inhabitants thereof are called *Hadja or Hadiens*'. Beckingham and Huntingford name him Governor of Hadəyya on p.14 but of Däwaro on p.525, n.1; however, Cuoq (1981; 171) and Trimmingham (1952:82) believe he was Governor of Däwaro.

⁸ It was not unusual to arrange marriage contracts between ruling families in which the girl was in, or not even in, her early teens. As late as 1882, a betrothal was celebrated between the eight-year old Zäwditu, daughter of the then King Mənilək, and Emperor Yoh.annəs IV's 15-year old son Ar'aya. For dynastic marriages, see Pankhurst.(1990:26). Ending military confrontations by arranging marriages between the male of the stronger party and the young daughter of the weaker one was practised also by Muslims. *Imām* Ah.mäd suggested to Ləbnä Dəngəl that he give his daughter to Ah.mäd in marriage as a sign of friendship. Basset (1881: Aug.-Sept.: 100) but the offer was refused. On another occasion Ah.mäd's soldiers captured the King's niece. He made the girl his concubine and had a child by her, but there were no political consequences. Stonehouse (2003: 347).

⁹ Polygamy was customary among kings until the end of the 15th century. The Church tolerated it, perhaps not daring to challenge the king. Tekle-Tsadik (1966: 165).

¹⁰ King Zär'a Ya'əqob had three queens: 1. Žan -Hayla, (her royal name), better known as *Gra Bā'altih.at* (Queen of the Left), and also as Fəre Maryam, probably her baptismal name. She was his favourite, and mother of his eldest daughters. Tekle-Tsadik (1966: 164-6); Perruchon (1893: 54-5); 2. Žan Zela, or Əleni. Perruchon (1893:16, 59); and 3. S.əyon, also known as Admas-Mogäsa (her royal name). Tekle-Tsadik (1966: 166); Perruchon (1893: 87); Tadesse (1972: 243, n. 2).

¹¹ Tadesse (1972: 288, n. 2) considers it 'probable that less notable princesses may have followed Əleni to the Christian Court'. A complaint of the Hadəyya Muslims to Ah.mäd Grañ was that these marriages were forced on them'. Pankhurst (1997: 206-20).

qualities, as she is mentioned as his senior queen, *Qäññ Bä'altih.at*, (Queen of the Right) in his chronicle. Perruchon (1893: 59). When his son, Bä'edä Maryam (1468-1478), came to the throne, he confirmed her in the title, apparently in deference to his father¹². In a ceremony following Bä'edä Maryam's coronation, his wife Žan Säyfa, received the title of *Gra Bä'altih.at*, (Queen of the Left), reserved for the king's favourite queen. At that ceremony Əleni was given the additional name of Admas Mogäsa, Perruchon (1893:125), though she was usually referred to as *Qäññ Bä'altih.at*. Perruchon (1893:175). Ethiopian Queen Mothers were then held in great respect. The Jesuit Balthazar Tellez affirms: 'As long as the Emperor's mother lives, if she was Empress and wife to the Emperor deceas'd, the wife of the Emperor actually reigning is not called *Ethié*, but that Honour is always given to the Old One; insomuch that not only the wife of the new Emperor, but he himself, tho' he be not her son, calls her Mother, and Honours her as if she were really so'. Tellez (1710:52).

Empress Əleni

Əleni was, by all accounts, exceptionally gifted. Bä'edä Maryam's chronicle, albeit written later, during her ascendancy, devotes many lines to her praise. The scribe observes that the King was deeply fond of her, for 'she was accomplished in everything: in front of God by practising righteousness and having strong faith, by praying and receiving Holy Communion; in worldly terms, she was accomplished in preparing food [for the royal table], in familiarity with the books, in knowledge of the law, and in understanding the affairs of state. For these qualities, the King greatly loved our Queen Eléni. He considered her like his own mother'. Perruchon (1893: 175-6). Əleni was married to Zär'a Ya'əqob some years before Bä'edä Maryam's birth. This, and the fact that he had lost his mother, would account for the chronicle's report that he loved Əleni. like his own mother. Tadesse (1972: 288).

Əleni. became well-versed in Christian theology. She wrote two religious works: one on the Laws of God, and the other on the Holy Trinity and the Purity of St Mary. She also sponsored the translation of Greek and Arabic religious texts into Gə'əz. In daily life she was kind and pious, keeping the fasts prescribed for monks and nuns. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 394-5). During her regency for her step-grandson, Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508-1540), many churches were repaired or built.. The most magnificent was Märt.ulä Maryam in Goğğam, where she held very large estates. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961:425 and n.2). In the late 15th and early 16th centuries this province was being converted to Christianity. Building a church and endowing a monastery in Goğğam were the innovations of two queens vying for power: Əleni., and Na'od Mogäsa, Ləbnä Dəngəl's mother. Whereas Na'od Mogäsa affiliated the monastery she endowed, with the dominant religious movement headed by the Täklä Haymanot Monastery, Əleni, having quarreled with the monks of that monastery, affiliated Märt.ulä Maryam with the Ewostatewos movement, which was more traditional, and observed the Sabbath. Derat (2003: 268-72).

¹² It was traditionally assumed that Əleni had become Bä'edä Maryam's wife. However, Tadesse argues, to my mind conclusively, that Əleni was never married to Bä'edä Maryam, her husband's son, even though she bore the title of Queen of the Right during his (Bä'edä Maryam's) reign. Tadesse considers that this title was purely ceremonial. Tadesse (1972: 288 and n. 5). That she was given an additional name, at the ceremony at which the King's favourite wife, Žan Säyfa, received the title of *Gra Bä'altih.at*, Queen of the Left, (Perruchon (1983: 125) can be considered merely a further ceremonial gesture and would not seem to invalidate Tadesse's argument.

Əleni's edifice was built in great style, in stone and wood, with two *tabotat*, or altar stones, of gold. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 459, n. 2),¹³ Alvares reported that he had heard from Pero da Covilha, a long-time Portuguese resident at court, who, in 1487, had been sent to Asia to investigate trade possibilities in the East, and had arrived in Ethiopia around 1507. 'I quote what he told me and I think he would tell the truth: that he had gone by order of Queen Elena to show how an altar should be made in this kingdom ... and they made this altar of wood and crammed it all full of [solid] gold, and also the altar stone was of solid gold'. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 459). Märt.ulä Maryam was the church where Əleni chose to be buried. Alvares reports: 'there was a big guard at that church, who guarded it on account of the great amount of gold that was in it'. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 459). It was, however, looted shortly after her death, before Ah.mäd's wars. Guidi (1905: 70-1). The French historian Marie-Laure Derat suggests that one reason why Märt.ulä Maryam was soon pillaged was that it was endowed only with *gult* lands (held by lords or monasteries, who received the produce of the land, cultivated by others), which depended on the good-will of later rulers, whereas, had it been endowed with *rest* lands (inheritable, or held by priests themselves cultivating the land) looting would not have arisen so soon. It did not happen when kings endowed monasteries with *rəst* land. Derat (2003: 250-1).

Märt.ulä Maryam was sacked and burnt by *Imām* Ah.mäd's troops in the 1530s, and again during Oromo incursions in the 1560s, so that nothing remained above ground. The Jesuit missionary, Manoel d'Almeida, who arrived a century after Əleni's death, left a detailed description. 'The ornaments were very rich. There were some chalices and patens of gold of great weight, and two altar stones of solid gold... I am a witness of this for they were saved... and came into the hands of Emperor Seltan Cegued [Susnəyos], who kept them in our house, spending them on restoring this church'. Beckingham and Huntingford (1954:103-7). According to Almeida, it was subsequently reconstructed on the same foundations by order of Emperor Susnəyos (1607-1632) in the last years of his reign. The church is mentioned in his chronicle. Esteves Pereira (1900: Vol. 2, 46). Bell (1988: 126), based on Almeida and another Jesuit, Balthazar Tellez, suggests a possible reason why Susnəyos was particularly interested in restoring Märt.ulä Maryam: he was the great-grandson of Ləbnä Dəngəl, whom Əleni had brought up, and may have wished to restore that church to perpetuate her memory.

Əleni had no children of her own, but this seemed not to have reduced her importance. She was so widely respected for her character and intelligence that, far from retiring after her husband's death, she continued to exert political influence and patronage during the ensuing period of political conflict. Tadesse (1972: 289). She was at court during the reign of Bā'edä Maryam's eldest son, Əskəndər (1478-1494). The palace was at first dominated by his own mother, Romna Wärq (one of Bā'edä Maryam's four wives, and the mother of his children). But Əleni began to come into her own as a major influence in state affairs around 1486, and was an important figure during the reign of her husband's youngest son, Na'od (1494-1508). At his death she played a decisive role in choosing twelve-year old Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508-1540) as his successor, and guided the affairs of state as the most influential of the regents, until he came of age. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 243).

Beckingham and Huntingford, who take a less effusive view of Əleni's personality, describe her as 'forceful' and 'imperious', and suggest that she was responsible for the

¹³ For the history of this church see Bell (1988: 125-9).

omission, in the abbreviated chronicle covering Ləbnä Dəngəl's reign, (Bodleian Bruce MS 88) of references to him until 1527, when he would have been well into his majority. They suggest, not altogether convincingly, that 'She was having no history written in which she did not play a major part.' Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 13-16).

During her regency Əleni is best remembered for having foreseen the Christian State's growing difficulties with its strategically important Muslim coastal neighbours to the East, and for trying, unsuccessfully, to maintain peaceful relations with them. The Ottoman Turks were making their appearance, and the chiefs at the coast were acquiring far more fire-arms than those possessed by the rulers of the interior. She therefore sought an alliance with the rivals of the Ottomans, namely Christian Portugal, then a major power in the Indian Ocean. She made enquiries about that country from Pero da Covilha. He claimed to Alvares that it was he who had suggested to Əleni that she should send her own embassy to Portugal. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: Vol. 2, 307). Kleiner (2003: Vol 1, 811-2).

When three Portuguese messengers reached the Ethiopian court in Šəwa in 1508, they found that Emperor Na'od had just died. As the new monarch was only eleven or twelve years old the administration of the country came into the capable hands of the Dowager Queen. The messengers explained the Portuguese difficulties with food supplies at their base on Socotra Island, and the threat they faced from Egyptian fleets. Əleni was well aware of Christian Ethiopia's increasing isolation, and the country's poor relations with neighbouring Muslim states. She dispatched a letter to the Portuguese King Manuel, via Afonso de Albuquerque, the Portuguese commander in India, proposing Ethiopian-Portuguese military co-operation against the Muslims. (Góis (1949-1955: Vol.3, 221, quoted in Girma and Merid 1964: 23); Tellez (1710:113) She sent it with an Armenian trader, Mateus, who, after many vicissitudes, eventually reached Portugal, and delivered the letter to the Portuguese King. Mateus left Portugal in 1517 with the Rodrigo da Lima Embassy to Ləbnä Dəngəl. It offered the Emperor some assistance against the incursions of the Muslim Adäl warriors.

However, in that same year the self-confident young Emperor, barely 16 years old, ignoring Əleni's advice, had gone into battle against the Adäl forces, and had been victorious, defeating Mah.füz., Ahmäd's chief minister. Basset (1881: 142). Continuing to ignore Əleni, Ləbnä Dəngəl showed little interest in obtaining Portuguese help, and distanced himself from da Lima's mission. In the early part of the Emperor's reign help was in fact not needed.

Thereafter, Əleni's influence declined. She is present, Alvares is told, together with Ləbnä Dəngəl's wife, Säblä Wängel, and his mother, Na'od Mogäsa, at a Mass celebrated at Christmas 1520, and at a subsequent questioning of the Portuguese chaplain on religious matters. He reports that the questions came not only from the Emperor, but also from the three Queens. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 327, 330). The following year, by now into her eighties, Əleni is present, described as 'Mother of the Prester' [Ləbnä Dəngəl], together with the other two Queens, at the consecration and re-burial of Emperor Na'od's bones, 'each of them [the Queens] with her black canopy for mourning'. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 361), On January 18, 1521, she takes part in the *T.əmqät* celebrations, under a white canopy. Beckingham

and Huntingford (1961: 366). She subsequently retires to her estates in Goğğam, and dies there in 1522.¹⁴

The news of her death reached Alvares, who was at the Court. He reports: ‘They said that since she had died all of them had died, great and small, and that while she lived, all lived and were defended and protected; and she was the father and mother of all’ Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 434). That she was still honoured after her death is evident from Alvares’s remark that ‘It might be eight or nine months after the death of Queen Elena, who reigned over the greater part of Gojame (Goğğam), that still as many as came to the Court went to weep at her tent, which was still pitched in its place.’ Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 425).

Queen Säblä Wängel

After Əleni's death Emperor Ləbnä Dəngəl's wife, Säblä Wängel, began to assume a significant role in Ethiopian history. The chronicle of Gälawdewos (1540-1559) proclaims that ‘God inspired in him [in his father, Ləbnä Dəngəl] the love of holy marriage, which consists in marrying only one wife, in conformity with the canons of the Christian Church’ Conzelman (1895: 122). This was apparently the case. There is no record of his having Queens of the Right or of the Left.

During the turbulent latter part of Ləbnä Dəngəl's reign, the young military genius, *Imām* Ah.mäd led a revolt against the Emperor from the Adäl lowlands. At times with the help of fire-arms, and of Turkish musketeers, the determined Muslim leader launched a *ğihād*, conquering more and more of the Christian highlands. The royal family had constantly to be on the move. Ləbnä Dəngəl belatedly saw Əleni's wisdom, and attempted to obtain Portuguese military aid, most urgently in 1535, but this was delayed, while the Adäl advance continued.

In 1539 Fiqtor, Säblä Wängel's eldest son was killed in battle, and her fourth and youngest son, Minas, as well as two of his cousins, were taken prisoner by one of Ah.mäd's captains. Basset (1881 Aug.-Sept.:100-1); Girma and Merid (1964: 61).

Säblä Wängel shared in Ləbnä Dəngəl's attempts to stem the Adäl tide until he was forced to find refuge on the impregnable top of Mount Däbrä Damo in Təgray, where he died in September 1540. Säblä Wängel's second son, Gälawdewos, then assumed the throne at a very young age, Basset (1881 Aug.- Sept.: 103), and the war continued..

News of the Muslim ascendancy in Ethiopia had reached Dom João III in Portugal. He instructed his Governor of India to send military aid to Ləbnä Dəngəl as soon as possible. While Gälawdewos was fighting in the south of the country, the long-promised help from Portugal finally arrived. The Portuguese fleet entered Məs.əwwā in February 1541, five months after Ləbnä Dəngəl's death.

The Governor of India, Dom Estevão da Gama, who had arrived in the area, chose four hundred Portuguese soldiers from among readily available volunteers. They were accompanied by 150 male servants and attendants. Their weaponry included 600 muskets, some artillery and several barrels of gun-powder. There was in addition a fife and drum band. Whiteway (1902: xliv-xlv). Dom Estevão gave the expedition's command to his 23-year-old younger brother, Christovão da Gama. Both were sons of the explorer Vasco da Gama. Girma and Merid (1964: 47-48).

¹⁴ Some sources state that she died in 1525 (Girma and Merid (1964: 172). It is, possible that Alvares saw the mourning tents ‘eight or nine months after her death’ on his last court visit, if Ləbnä Dəngəl was in the area early in 1526.

A Portuguese messenger, Aire Dias, who had been in Ethiopia with Rodrigo da Lima's mission, was sent to the interior with the news of the arrival of the Expedition. He reached Däbrä Damo, where the widowed Queen Säblä Wängel had remained with her family and retinue, and with *Bahr nägaš Azmač* Yəsh.aq. Dias took her urgent plea for help back to Məs.əwwā. Her son, Gälawdewos, the new Emperor fighting in Šäwa, had been cut off from her dwindling forces in the north. As the situation worsened she sent two of her own envoys, *Abbethun* Kum and *Bahr nägaš* Yəsh.aq to urge the Portuguese to come quickly to the aid of her kingdom. Girma and Merid (1964: 47). Whether prompted by her, or on their own initiative, they advised *Dom* Christovão to ensure that the Queen joined the expedition. Her presence, they pointed out, would raise the morale of the impoverished and demoralized local people, and would encourage them to provide food and other support. Christovão sent back a warm message inviting the Queen to join the expedition, which, he assured her, was there to serve her and her son. He sent one hundred soldiers to escort her to the camp. Whiteway (1902: 10).

After these negotiations, the Empress, accompanied by some thirty women and fifty male servants, descended from the top of Däbrä Damo. Escorted by the officers *Dom* Christovão had sent to fetch her, she proceeded on mule-back to the Portuguese camp at Dəbarwa, over 100 km nearer the coast, to review the troops and meet him in person. An unadorned, accurate account of this meeting was left to posterity by one of its members, Miguel da Castanhoso.¹⁵

'She was received by him very nobly, for by his order all were in full dress and in ranks, the captains with their soldiers, all matchlockmen, with their banners of blue and white damask with red crosses, and the royal standard of crimson and white damask, with the cross of Christ heading the rest of the troops. The commander [was]...clothed in hose and vest of red satin and gold brocade with many plaits, and a French cape of fine black cloth all quilted with gold, and a black cap with a very rich medal...We saluted her twice with all the artillery and matchlocks.¹⁶ The queen...was all covered to the ground with silk, with a large flowing cloak, and some men bore a silk canopy that covered her and the mule to the ground, with an opening in front of her to see through. She was clothed in very thin white Indian cloth and a burnouse of black satin, with flowers and fringes of very fine gold, her head dressed in the Portuguese manner, and so muffled...that only her eyes could be seen...The queen rode on a saddle with a low pommel, with a stirrup for the left foot, and the right leg doubled over the pommel, but so covered with her garments that no one could see the manner of her sitting, and the ladies all riding properly on mules, muffled in their cloaks'. Whiteway (1902: 17-19).

There followed speeches by the Commander and the Queen, before discussions began in earnest. Säblä Wängel's presence rallied support for the Portuguese whom she advised, encouraging local farmers to supply them with provisions. Perruchon (1894:264). Many joined the Portuguese to drive out the invader, whose soldiers had burnt numerous settlements and churches.

Throughout the campaign, until the Commander's death, *Dom* Christovão and Säblä Wängel worked closely together, the Queen being consulted frequently. Castanhoso describes a discussion on strategy held in 1542: 'When the Queen heard of D. Christovão's intention she sent for him, and told him that he should not think of daring

¹⁵ Descendant of a noble Spanish family, Castanhoso participated in the campaign of 1541-3. His important testimony was first published in Lisbon in 1564. It was translated into English and edited by R. S. Whiteway in 1902. Cohen (2003: 694-5).

¹⁶ For Fusillades in Ethiopia see Pankhurst 1990:292-3

such a great deed with so small an army...that it was less difficult to fight twelve thousand men in a plain than to capture that hill. To this D. Christovão replied that she should fear nothing, as they were Portuguese and they hoped to be able ... to capture it with very little loss...With these words she and hers were somewhat pacified and agreed that D. Christovão should act in the matter as he pleased.' Whiteway (1902: 32). Even when morale was low decisions were made jointly: 'As the grass on this plain was destroyed, D. Christovão and the Queen agreed to advance to camp by a stream that was near, where there was more refreshment for the wounded, of whom there were more than sixty'. Whiteway (1902: 51). She was present during a number of battles, tending the wounded and mourning the dead. Castanhoso reports: 'While we were in pursuit, the Queen had had a tent pitched and placed the wounded in it; she and her women went about binding up the wounded with their own head-gear'. Whiteway (1902: 47).

In 1542, some six months after the beginning of the campaign, *Imām* Ah.mäd, badly in need of reinforcements, received over 500 Turkish musketeers, and ten field guns - military support he had requested earlier, from the Pasha of Zabīd in exchange for Minas, the Emperor's younger brother, who had been taken prisoner by Ah.mäd in 1539. At the battle of Wäfla the Portuguese Commander was captured and killed. Säblä Wängel, *Bahr nägaš* Yəsh.aq and some 120 Portuguese narrowly escaped. Girma and Merid (1964: 51). Her role continued to be important after the Commander's death: 'She with her women felt the greatest grief...The following day she sent for us all, and made a speech consoling us for our great loss... and this in very discreet and virtuous words'. Whiteway (1902: 72-3).

In 1543 the remnants of Christovão's force helped Gälawdewos defeat the Muslim army at the battle of Wäyna Däga, in Bägemder. Esteves Pereira (1888: 61); Tellez (1710: 128-9). Ah.mäd was killed. His widow, Bati Dəl Wämbära, escaped, but her son, Muh.ammäd, was taken prisoner. Esteves Pereira (1888: 10). A remarkable exchange of prisoners then took place. The part played by Dəl Wämbära will be described later. Säblä Wängel¹⁷ was a driving force in the negotiations that led to the exchange of her son Minas, for Dəl Wämbära's son, plus a ransom of 1,000 ounces of gold. Esteves Pereira (1888: 41-3).¹⁸

The exchange succeeded, thanks to the joint efforts of the two women, Säblä Wängel and Dəl Wämbära, despite opposition on both sides. Minas's chronicle describes the subsequent festivities the Queen organized to celebrate Minas's return, and those that were held when his brother, the Emperor, joined them. Esteves Pereira (1888: 42-3).

After a period of consolidation Gälawdewos reigned over a more peaceful kingdom. There was no Muslim attempt to attack the Christians again for seventeen years. Huntingford (1989: 135). However, in an effort to conquer Harär, Gälawdewos invaded Adäl territory and, in 1559, was killed in battle. Minas, who had been living with his mother, came to the throne. He shared her conservative religious outlook, but was of a more severe disposition. During his four-year reign Säblä Wängel continued to be influential in court and religious affairs.

In the controversy engendered by the Jesuits, who had entered the country during Gälawdewos 's reign, and were aiming to bring Ethiopia into the Roman Catholic fold,

¹⁷ Though Minas's chronicle describes how the exchange was arranged by Säblä Wängel and Dəl Wämbära, that of Gälawdewos merely states that it took place, which led the editor, Conzelman, to assume that the initiative was the Emperor's. Conzelman (1895:xxiv, 142 and n.3).

¹⁸ I am indebted to H.E. Mr. Renato Xavier, Ambassador of Brazil to Ethiopia, for very kindly translating passages from Esteves Pereira's Portuguese edition of the Minas chronicle.

Säblä Wängel was a steadfast supporter of the traditionalists who wished Christian Ethiopia to remain Orthodox. This did not prevent her from interceding on behalf of foreign Roman Catholics who had fallen foul of the Emperor. Her intervention saved from execution both the Portuguese adventurer Bermudes, who had angered Gälawdewos by pressing him to give allegiance to the Pope, and the Spanish Jesuit Patriarch Oviedo, who had irritated Emperor Minas by siding with the rebellious Yəsh.aq. Girma and Merid (1964: 62-4).

Säblä Wängel's last achievement was to ensure that her grandson Särs.ä Dəngəl (1563-1597), one of several rival contenders, came to the throne. He was thirteen years old. Her choice was wise, as he succeeded in defending the integrity of the realm throughout his thirty-four year reign. In 1579, about half way through it, Säblä Wängel died. Conti Rossini (1907: 103 n.) She had been an active participant in the state affairs of her husband, Lebnä Dəngəl, of her sons, Gälawdewos and Minas, and of her grandson, Särs.ä Dəngəl. The chronicles mentioning her, extol her piety. Castanhoso reported that, at Christmas: 'There were several [friars] in the Queen's trains, some priests and some friars, for they said Mass wherever she happened to be' Whiteway (1902: 25); and Särs.ä Dəngəl's chronicle refers to her as 'the great Queen who loved fasting and prayer'. Conti Rossini (1907: 103).

Säblä Wängel conformed to the model of wise, deeply religious Ethiopian queens who were involved in state affairs, while retaining the qualities of gentleness and mercy often attributed to women. It fell to her to live in dangerous times, during which she exhibited not only diplomatic talents, but also courage and fortitude in battle and defeat.

Bati Dəl Wämbära

Bati Dəl Wämbära,¹⁹ a contemporary of Säblä Wängel's, was the youngest daughter of the famous *Amīr*, later *Imām*, Mah.fūz. ibn Muh.ammäd, governor of Zäyla. He was also the *de facto* ruler of Adäl. Mah.fūz., a zealous Muslim, who had adopted the title of *Imām* because it carried the connotation of spiritual, as well as temporal leadership, had been conducting raids into the interior that had only temporarily been halted by his losing one battle. Mah.fūz was able to acquire much booty, including gold and slaves. He was encouraged by Arab emissaries who proclaimed a *ġihād* against the Christian empire, and assisted him with arms and trained soldiers. However, in 1518, Ləbnä Dəngəl, as we have seen, successfully defeated Mah.fūz.who was then killed in a man-to-man engagement with a Christian soldier turned monk. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 410-15); Trimmingham (1952: 83-4); Cuoq (1981: 165-7). Dəl Wämbära grew up under the shadow of a passionate Muslim father, who led annual looting expeditions against the Christians.

Probably at an early age she married young Ah.mäd ibn.Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī (ca 1506-43), a captain in the cavalry guards of the Sultan of Adäl. At eighteen or nineteen, Ah.mäd had already shown bravery and intelligence. He had restored order within Adäl, and subdued the Somali nomads. It is not unlikely that Dəl Wämbära saw in him the hope of avenging her father's death. As for Ah.mäd, the marriage ensured him the loyalty of Mah.fūz.'s followers,²⁰ especially as she 'became a symbol of succession in the holy war'. Trimmingham (1952: 85-6); Girma and Merid (1964: 37-8); Muth (2003: 155-158).

¹⁹ The Arabist, René Basset, in his translation of the *Futūh*, states that the name *Dəl Wämbära* means 'Victory is her seat' 'en éthiopien'. Basset (1897:51).

²⁰ Probably for similar reasons, Ah.mäd married the daughter of the Muslim chief Makatter, ruler of Mazäga in the west, who asked for assistance against Ləbnä Dəngəl in 1535. The chief controlled a

Dəl Wāmbāra was determined to accompany her husband on the *ḡihād*. He intended to replace the Christian kingdom by a theocratic Muslim state. Ah.mād, like Mah.fūz. before him, had adopted the religious title of *Imām* in preference to the secular one of *Amīr*. At first, Dəl Wāmbāra's presence on campaign led to discontent among the soldiers. On the fourth raid into the highlands Ah.mād's chronicler, 'Arab Faqīh, records: 'When the army reached Kub, they said to the *Imām*: 'We will not accompany you to Abyssinia unless your wife Dəl Wāmbāra returns to the country of the Muslims. She shall not come with us to the country of the infidels. Not one of the *Imāms* ever took his wife with him [on campaign], only you.' Ignoring the protests of Ah.mād's soldiers, Dəl Wāmbāra imperiously replied: "I will not go back". So her husband took her as far as Ifat in the land of the infidels.' Ifat was at this time held by Christians. Ah.mād seems for once to have arrived at a compromise: she was not returned to the safety of Muslim-held territory, but neither did she remain with her husband. Stenhouse (2003: 32).

After this confrontation the soldiers seem to have accepted her presence on the *Imām*'s expeditions. They even tried to present her with some gold, given to them by the people of Gendebelo, but Ah.mād would not hear of it, and declared that it was to be used for the *ḡihād*. Stenhouse (2003: 38-9). She was with him at Ant.okyā [site of one of Ləbnā Dəngəl's palaces]. The chronicler reports: 'In Ant.okyā there was a Christian church, which the great emirs among the Muslims entered... The *Imām* entered, as did his wife Del Wāmbāra...When they could not find any treasure in it, they set fire to it, and destroyed it'. Stenhouse (2003: 36).

At times Dəl Wāmbāra had to be carried on the soldiers' shoulders Stenhouse (2003:37), up and down steep and rocky mountain slopes, twice in a state of pregnancy. In 1531²¹, while, for six days the army camped at Zifah, near Harār, Dəl Wāmbāra gave birth to Muh.ammād, the first of several sons. 'She deferred going on the expedition on account of this, and stayed with the *Imām*'s sister, Munisah'. Stenhouse (2003: 45). In 1532 or 1533, her second son, Ah.mād an-Nāgaši²², was born during a campaign in Təgre, but died shortly afterwards in Sārayə. Basset (1897: 51, n. 2); Stonehouse (2003: 350, 373); Huntingford (1989: 122). (Another son, Nas.raddīn, mentioned only in Christian sources, was governor of Dāwaro in 1540 and died after a battle, (by poison or disease). Muth (2003: 155).

In 1539, when his empire was collapsing, Ləbnā Dəngəl was defeated by Ah.mād in a battle in which, as mentioned earlier, the king's eldest son Fiqtor, was killed and his youngest, Minas, was captured and taken to Adāl. He was neither castrated nor killed, as was customary, though he was converted to Islam. According to Minas's chronicle, Ah'mad's counselors advised him to kill Minas, but the *Imām* went to his wife and told her what they had said. The two of them decided that the young Minas had not committed any crime for which he should perish, and that they would treat him well – so well that 'they would give him their daughter in marriage according to their law'. Some scholars have suggested that Dəl Wāmbāra 'tried to create here some sort of transition of power' and that the marriage was part of this plan. Chernetsov (2003: 505). After the celebrations Ah.mād's counselors pointed out the political folly of allowing his daughter to be Minas's wife. Some time later, when Ah.mād was in need of reinforcements, they persuaded him

force of some 15,000 Nubians.

²¹ According to Muth (2003: 155) Muh.ammād was born in 15 27.

²² Ah.mād an-Nāgaši was the name of one of the first Ethiopian followers of Islam, whose grave is in Təgre. Trimmingham (1952: 152). It is significant that the *Imām*, and/or Dəl Wāmbāra, chose this name for their second child, born in Təgre. Basset (1897: 51.n. 2).

to send the Emperor's son and cousins as a gift to the Turkish Pasha of Zabīd [in Yemen], asking in return for soldiers to fight the *Fārānġ* [Roman Catholics, i.e. Portuguese] who had disembarked at the coast. Dəl Wāmbāra must have regretted this decision, for Minas's chronicle records that 'on the day he left the camp there was much lamentation and sadness in the house of Dəl Wāmbāra'. Esteves Pereira (1888: 38-39).

It is indicative of Dəl Wāmbāra's status that, when there was a plot against the *Imām*, and the plotters were trying to exile him, they declared, according to 'Arab Faqīh, that they must 'leave the country to us and go away, he and his wife Dəl Wāmbāra'. Stenhouse (2003: 103). Subsequently Dəl Wāmbāra obeyed her husband when, at the height of his conquests, he commanded his followers to settle their families in the conquered areas. The *Futūh. al-H.abaša* mentions that she 'made preparations for the journey up', at a time when not all his soldiers showed similar willingness. Stenhouse (2003: 331).

As mentioned earlier, in 1543 the *Imām*'s army was routed, by the combined forces of Emperor Gālawdewos and the remnants of the Portuguese expedition. Ah.mād was killed and Dəl Wāmbāra's eldest son, Muh.ammād, was captured. Dəl Wāmbāra fled to the north-west of Lake T.ana together with Nūr ibn al-Muġāhid, son of Ah.mād's sister. Eventually Dəl Wāmbāra succeeded in returning to Harār, then at the centre of Adāl power. Her first task was to make arrangements for the exchange, as we have seen, of her son, then some twelve years old, for Emperor Gālawdewos's brother, Minas. Conzelman (1895: 142). Dəl Wāmbāra was in a good position to achieve this ambition because Minas's life had earlier been spared through her intervention. It was no easy task, however, as his captors feared, rightly, as it turned out, that if released, he would come to the throne, and be a powerful enemy.

The exchange took place the following year, 1544.²³ Minas's chronicler wrote that the Lord inspired Dəl Wāmbāra to consider the return of Minas and to send a message to the Queen suggesting the exchange of their sons. They agreed with much good will for they were both overjoyed as mothers. Dəl Wāmbāra dispatched a message to the Pasha of Zabīd urging him to support the exchange, which he did, after consulting the Sultan and asking for 1,000 ounces of gold in addition. Säblä Wängel then ordered much gold to be piled up, with the assistance of the princes and noblemen of Təgre, and sent Dəl Wāmbāra's son with the gold. Then the Pasha sent back Minas and his two cousins, 'because he was compelled by his faith and his greed for gold'. 'The ships carrying the sons to be exchanged met in the middle of the [Red] sea: the messengers of the Basha were in one ship and the messengers of the Queen were in another. The agreement was concluded by oath. The release was simultaneous, and there was neither first nor last, for fear of treachery'. Esteves Pereira (1888: 41-2).

Soon after Ah.mād's death, his nephew, *Amīr* Nūr, who, with Dəl Wāmbāra, had succeeded in returning to Harār, asked her to marry him, as was expected of a Muslim whose close male relative had died leaving a widow. She replied: 'If you want to marry me, go and kill that Christian king, the murderer of my husband.' Basset (1894: 107). Nūr was eventually to fulfil her demand in a battle in 1559, Basset (1881 Aug.-Sept.:103); Burton (1894: Vol. 2, 11-12) whereupon the marriage took place. Thereafter no more is heard of Dəl Wāmbāra.

One may speculate, given Dəl Wāmbāra's dynamic character, that she was involved in her second husband's achievement, when as *Amīr* of Harār, he built the wall around the

²³ Chernetsov (2003: 505) gives the date of the exchange as 1547.

city that is still visible in places today. Leaving aside all speculation, Bati Dəl Wämbära was one of the most famous women of the Horn of Africa in the 16th century. She emerges from the *Futūh.*, and from the royal chronicles, as a strong-willed woman, working in tandem with her husband. She was capable of mercy in cruel times, but her great achievement was her successful diplomacy that resulted in the unprecedented exchange of important prisoners, negotiated by two noble and brave ladies.

Conclusion

Enough has been said to demonstrate that Empress T.aytu's undeniable achievements were by no means unique among consorts of Ethiopian kings (and prominent chiefs). All three women who figure in this account were skilled diplomats; all three were strong supporters of their faith. At least two of them were no strangers to the battlefield. They show that, long before the great T.aytu came to the fore, Ethiopians accepted the notion that women, whether they bore children or not, could be strong, independent decision-makers, accepted and respected as leaders.

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