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One of the Famous Ethiopian Kings Three Hundred Years Back

Ethiopia is one of the oldest and independent countries in Africa, with a long recorded history. Since the early Sabeian period, the records of the country and its history of dynasties have been preserved by means of inscriptions and chronicles, most of which were inspired by the rulers.

A Chronicle (Latin *chronica*, from Greek χρονικά (from χρόνος)) is a historical account of facts and events in chronological order. It is usually continuous historical account of events arranged in order of time without analysis or interpretation of the text. In most Chronicles of Ethiopia, equal weight is given for both major and minor events and the purposes of these chronicles are recording of events that occurred at a particular time and place.

Most of these chronicles glorify the ruling monarchs. In addition, they have historical value. From the Royal chronicles, written during the late medieval period of Ethiopia, the chronicle of Iyāsu I, has much contribution for the development of literature in the country. During this period, in addition to the chronicles of king Iyāsu I, many religious manuscripts were written by scholars of the time.

Three hundred years back Iyāsu I was one of the famous king of kings (*nəgusä nügäst* (ንጉሠ ነገስት) of Ethiopia. He reigned for 24 years from 1682-1706. His throne name was Adyām Sägād (አድያም ሰገድ,) Ge'ez word which means to whom the confines of the earth bow. He was the son of Yohannes I and Empress Säblä Wängel. According to Täklä Şadəq Mäkuria he was also known as “Iyāsu the Great” based on his courage in war and his talent for administration.¹

¹ Täklä Şadiq Mäkuria (ተክለ ሻድቅ መኩሪያ) (1973) *የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ ከግዢ ልብነ ድንገል ስከ ዐፄ ቴዎድሮስ* (*The History of Ethiopia from King Libna Dingil to King Tewdoros*). Addis Ababa: Birhan and Selam printing Press, P. 165

Gondär was the capital city of Ethiopia during the reign of King Iyasu I. It is located in the historic Bāgemdār province, today north Gondär zone. According to the decree re- issued by Iyāsū I in 1684, in the second year of his reign, names were given for different parts of the city.²

Table 1- The names of Places in Gondär during Iyasu I

No	Name of the Place	Location in Gondar	Importance
1	Eslam Bet (Eslamge)	Lower part of the town besides the Qaha	The area where Muslims lived
2	Betä Esrael (Fälaša Bet)	At the Quarters of Abärra & Kaylamedä, beside the Qaha	The area where Fälašas lived
3	Mäkkäbäbiya (Fasil Gimb)	A side from the Royal enclosure	The place where Castles were built
4	Addäbabay	The side to the south of the Royal compound	Public square, a place of assemblies and the Monday market
	Abun Bet	North West of the castles	Residence of the Abun or metropolitan

² Siegbert Uhlig, (2005) (eds) Gondar in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol.II D-Ha, Printed and Bind, Memmin get Medians Centrum AG, Germany,

5			and a place of asylum
6	Ečäge Bet	West of the castles	Residence of Ečäge and also a refuge for offenders
7	Qäññ Bet	South-East of the castles	Home to many nobles



During the seventeenth century, the city's population is estimated to have exceeded 60,000 and was the second largest city in the world. In 1678, the visiting Armenian bishop Hovannes remarked that the city was "twice as big as Istanbul."³

Early Period of Iyāsu I

During his early years, he was carefully educated and happened to study the Holy Scriptures to learn about the fear of God and the Law. He spent most of his early age under good discipline and guidance of his family. He attended not only Church education but also worked for the benefits of the community and for his country. About the early age of Iyāsu I, his Chronicle said that:

³ Pankhurst, *History of Ethiopian Towns*, p. 128

አመ ተወልደ ሐፀንዎ ንጉሠ ነገሥት አቡሁ አዕላፍ ሰገድ ወእመ ንግሥት ሰብሰ ወንጌል ሠናየ ሕፅነተ ወአልሐቅዎ በጥበብ ወተግሣጽ። ወበትምህርተ መጻሕፍት ቅዱሳት ወበፍርሃተ እግዚአብሔር እስመ እሙንቱ ጻድቃን ወፈራህያነ እግዚአብሔር . . . ወውእቱሂ ኮነ ማዕምረ ወፍቁረ በኃበ ኩሉ ወጠቢበ ወተምህረ ተፅዕኖተ ፈረሰ። (Ms-C, Manuscript of *Annales Regis Iyāsu I* 60)

Translation

He was born from his father 'Äəläf Sägäd (Yohannes I) and his mother Empress Säblä Wängel. As they were righteous and had the fear of God, they made him grow up (Iyāsu I) in wisdom, advice, educating him in the Holy Scriptures and in the fear of God. He became knowledgeable and wise and loved by all. He also learned horse riding.

When Iyāsu I came to the throne after the death of his father, he was only 20 years old.⁴ His good upbringing during his early age contributed much to perform important things later on. His works, as written in the Chronicles, indicate that Iyāsu I was a naturally gifted person in leading the country wisely. His relation with Church leaders, government officials, people surrounding him and communities in Gondär also helped him to lead the country under good circumstances.⁵

⁴ Täklä Şadiq (1973) p. 168.

⁵ Täklä Şadiq (1973) p 168-69.

Contributions of Iyāsu I

King Iyāsu I contributed many important things for the church, the community and for the country. The main contributions of the King mentioned in his Chronicles are the following:

1 Recognition of Taxes on Salt (*Amole* አሞሌ)

In 1698, in the seventeenth year of his reign, Iyāsu I reorganized the system of taxes on the salt brought to Gondär by way of Tigre. First, he called a conference to discuss the matter. He called all the dignitaries, learned men and commanders and all the governors of the people of Tigre. He interrogated them on the subject of the taxes paid at the customs posts from Tigre to Gondär.

After he asked what the taxes on merchants were in the time of Kings Fasiladas his grad father and Yohannes I,⁶ he decided to institute uniform tax throughout the country and decree new regulation.

እምነ ጅ በቅል ዘተፅዕነ ይኩን ፩ አሞሌ ወእምነ ፰ አዕዱግ
ዘተፅዕነ ጺወ ይኩን ፩ አሞሌ ወእምነ ፀዋሬ ርእሰሂ ዘነሥኣ
ይትበርበር ቤቱ በርሂ ይኩን በ ፩ ሀገር ፩ በር ወለዝሥርዓት
በመጽሐፈ ታሪክ ወደብዳቤ ከዕቃቤት ከመ ይኩን ለትውልድ
ትውልድ » (Ms A, Maniscrpt of Tārikä Nägäst ,54)

Translation

The tax on five mules laden with salt was to be one *amolē* [*i.e.* one slab of rock salt] and the tax on eight asses laden with salt was to be one *amolē*. If anyone levies dues on those who carry salt on their shoulders let his house be pillaged, his goods be seized, and let him be condemned to death. This decision to be registered in the Book of Annals, and in

⁶ During the reigns of King Fasiladas and Yohannes I, no tax was levied on the porter who carried salt on his shoulder; he was exempted. The tax on salt carried by a donkey was one *amole* (*i.e.* bar of salt) for every load; for salt carried by a mule two *amoles* per load.

the register of the chief steward, ‘*Eka Bēt* and sent out to proclaim throughout the generation.

He also decided that there must be only one taxation place within one district or *Awraja*. The proclamation makes free of tax all merchants of sheep and goat in Gondär. For the implementation of this declaration, the King appointed experienced foreigners like Murad and Hajji Ali.⁷ The new law also warned those disposed to corruption.⁸

2. The Construction of Attractive Buildings

Adyam Sägäd Iyāsu’s Castle: In the third year of his reign (1685), *Zämänä Māteos*, the attractive building of the castle of Iyāsu I had been completed. Wäldä Gíyorgis finished the building of this palace at Gondär, and this palace is said to have been more beautiful than the house of Solomon.⁹ It was a very attractive and decorated palace.¹⁰ He found there a house with ceilings adorned with gold and precious stones. When Iyasu I saw it, he was very happy and preferred to live there than in his other house.¹¹

⁷ Täklä Şadiq Mäkuria , (1973) p. 191.

⁸ Budge, Wallis (1928) *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia and Abyssinia* Vol.II, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. p.417

⁹ Budge,(1928) pp. 409- 410

¹⁰ Yared Girma (2007), p. 155.

¹¹ Pankhurst ,(1967) p.107

Figure 1-Adyam Sägäd Iyāsu's Castle



The castle was one of the greatest works done by the King. According to the evidence I heard from the tourist guide of the castles, Iyasu's castle had been built with gold, ivory and precious stone. Even though some parts of the castle were destroyed by bombs from airplanes during the 2nd World War, it is still attractive and visited by many tourists from all parts of the world.

Figure 2-The Ceiling of the Large Room of Castle



Figure 3-Similar Room where the Ceiling has fallen



Däbrä Bərhan Səllase: Iyāsu I also built a beautiful Church called **Däbrä Bərhan Səllase (ደብረ ብርሃን ሥላሴ)** or the Trinity at the Mount of Light. It is one of the finest churches of Gondär situated on elevated ground to the north-west of the city. It was consecrated in January 1694 during the reign of Iyāsu I and it was the great work of the King. The roof of this Church was surmounted by a gold *gul₂lat* or roof decoration and a large gold cross holding gold spheres the size of ostrich eggs, which shone like the sun by day and the moon by night.¹²

¹² Pankhurst ,(2005) *Däbrä Bərhan Səllas*: in *Encyclopeadia Aethiopica* Vol.I p.9

Figure 4-Nəgstä Adbarat Däbrü Brəhan Səllase Church



Däbrä Brəhan Səllase Church in the city of Gondär has a rectangular shape in contrast with most other churches in Ethiopia. It is famous for its ceiling and the murals, and the paintings above the entrance of the Holy of Holies are unique pieces of Ethiopian art.

Its ceiling is decorated with beautiful winged angels and its walls with impressive scenes depicting Biblical events including the lives of Christ, Mary, and the Saints and Martyrs. There is also a painting of Emperor Iyāsu I.¹³

Figure 5- Icon of Holy Trinity

¹³ Haq, Rukhasana and Lawrance, Berbara (eds.) (1995) *Spectrum Guide to Ethiopia*. Camerapix (edited) Ethiopian Tourism Commission. Hong Kong. P. 94



Figure 6-The famous angelic faces on the ceiling of the Däbrä Bərhan Səllase Church



Däbrä Bərhan Səllase (ደብረ ብርሃን ሥላሴ) Church had two large bells, presented by the Dutch Indian company and imported by the Armenian trader Boğa Murad. The Church was important as a place where the Emperor and his courtiers celebrated the feast of the Trinity and where many prominent figures were buried. Its original establishment or *särit* involved over 170 clergy supported by grants of land in Dämbäya.¹⁴

On the day the *Tabot*, the Ark of the Covenant, entered into the new building, many scholars composed *qine* in Ge'ez and Amharic.¹⁵ The Amharic *qine* described the act of the King as the follows:

¹⁴ Pankhurst, (2005) ‘Däbrä Bərhan Səllase’ in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*: vol. I, p. 13

¹⁵ Täklä Şdaq, Mäkuria, (1973) p. 181

ወዴት ሄዶ ኖሯል ሰሞነኛው ቄሱ፤
ታቦት ተሸከመ ዘውዱን ትቶ ኢያሱ።።
የተሸሸገውን ያባቱን ቅስና፤
ገለጠው ኢያሱ ታቦት አነሣ።።
አየነው ኢያሱን ደብረ ብርሃን ቆሞ፤
ከኢሩቤል ጋራ ሦስቱን (ሥላሴን) ተሸክሞ።።

Translation

Where was the priest gone to?

Iyāsu put down his crown and carried the *Tabot* [on his head]

Iyāsu revealed the hidden ordination of his father

By this act of carrying the *Tabot*

We saw Iyāsu standing in Däbrä Bṗrhan

Carrying the Trinity along with the Cherubim

Däbrä Bṗrhan Səllase Church is today renowned for its fine murals which cover the entire interior and include paintings of the Church's original founder, Iyāsu I. The ceiling, decorated with cherubs, is today a major tourist attraction.¹⁶

In addition to Däbrä Brṗhan Səllase Church, Iyāsu I also built the following churches:

¹⁶ Pankhurst, (2005) ‘Däbrä Bṗrhan Səllase’ in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*: vol. I, p. 13

Table 2-Churches built by King Iyāsu I

No	Name of Churches	Amharic	Location
1	Adābabay Täklä Haymanot	አደባባይ ተክለሃይማኖት	Gondär
2	Gäränko Maryam	ገረገኮ ማርያም	Wägära
3	Gubiya Iyāsus	ጉቢያ ኢየሱስ	Qolla Dəba
4	Märäwa Aba Kiro	መረዋ አባ ኪሮስ	Qolla Dəba
6	Däqāwa Kidanä Məhərät	ደቀዋ ኪዳነ ምህረት	Dabat
7	Yəganda Täklä Haymanot	ይገንዳ ተክለሃይማኖት	Zäge Mountain Ararat

8 Kəbran Gäbrə'el
monastery