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Article

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**Two Unpublished 19th Century Ethiopian Letters:
From Emperor Tewodros to Sir Robert Napier, and
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RICHARD PANKHURST, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa

Emperor Tewodros II was a known letter-writer. Over two dozen of his letters – to Queen Victoria and other foreign potentates, to his concubine Wäyzero Yätämaññu, to the British envoy Hormuzd Rassam, to the foreign craftsmen in his service, and to his courtiers and servants, are extant.¹ Often extremely brief, and at times almost elliptical, they constitute an important source for the understanding of their author and his reign.²

An important, but hitherto unknown, letter from the Emperor, has recently come to light. It is in the possession of a private collector: Ian Shapiro. To understand its significance we should recall that it was apparently written almost at the conclusion of the British Expedition to Mäqdäla, and would seem to have been a reply to the first message the invaders had sent him since their landing on the Red Sea coast in September of the previous year. The British commander, Sir Robert Napier, who had by then reached the Wadla plateau, less than a week's march from Tewodros's citadel, wrote somewhat imperiously to the Emperor on 5 April 1868, in what Holland and Hozier, the official British historians of the expedition, describe however as "firm, but moderate terms".³ He wrote:

By command of the Queen of England, I am approaching Mägdala with an army, in order to recover from your hands Envoy Rassam, Consul Cameron, Dr Blanc, Lieutenant Prideaux, and the other Europeans now in your Majesty's power. I request your Majesty to send them to my camp, as it is sufficiently near to admit of their coming in safely.⁴

¹ See GIRMA-SELLASSIE ASFAW and DAVID APPLEYARD, *The Amharic Letters of Emperor Theodore to Queen Victoria and Her Special Envoy* (London, 1979).

² See for example RICHARD PANKHURST, "Imperial Orders in a Command or Pre-Market Economy: An Unpublished Letter from Emperor Tewodros II". *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Wiesbaden, 2006), pp. 321–27.

³ TREVENEN JAMES HOLLAND and HENRY MONTAGUE HOZIER, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia* (London, 1870), II, 50–51.

⁴ CLEMENTS ROBERT MARKHAM, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London, 1869), pp. 308–09.

The story of this letter is shrouded in mystery. The British official historians claim – on what basis they do not state – that “it was ascertained to have reached Theodore, but no answer was returned to it”.⁵ The letter from Tewodros with which we are concerned however may well have been intended as that reply. It is the only letter to him from the British for which a reply is not extant.

This letter, which bears Tewodros’s Great Seal, and seems to refer to Napier’s above-mentioned letter, addresses its author as Queen Victoria’s “servant”. The text, like that of most of Tewodros’s letters, is in Amharic, and is undated. It was however probably written on or immediately after the dispatch of Napier’s letter of 5 April, in other words little over a week prior to the battle of Mäqdäla and his suicide on 13 April. The letter’s authenticity is evident from the fact that it resembles several pages of Tewodros’s tax records now housed in the British Library in that it is written on blue paper with a watermark representing Britannia.⁶

The letter’s fate is obscure. It seems evident from British accounts – and from its absence from British archives – that the letter (which was sealed and folded for dispatch) never reached its destination. The reason for this can however, only be a matter of speculation. Was it dispatched; and somehow intercepted; did Tewodros change his mind, and not send it; was its *raison d’être* overtaken by events, and in particular by the approaching armed confrontation? We cannot say.

It is however curious to note that the Amharic originals of Tewodros’s last two letters to Napier, translations of which were published at the time, also never found their way into official archives. Auctioned in London over a century later they were purchased by the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture, through the intervention of the present author, and published by him in collaboration with David Appleyard.⁷

The letter now under discussion is important in that it reveals its author’s thinking prior to the battle of Mäqdäla. He seems to have been imbued with

⁵ HOLLAND and HOZIER, *op. cit.*, LL, 50–51; HENRY MONTAGUE HOZIER, *The British Expedition to Abyssinia* (London, 1869), p. 180.

⁶ This paper seems identical to that used in part of Tewodros’s tax documents in British Library Orient 829*, folios 14, 15, 26, 30 and 32 published in RICHARD PANKHURST and GIRMA SELASSIE ASFAW, *Tax Records and Inventories of Emperor Tewodros of Ethiopia (1855–1868)* (London, 1978). The watermark also incorporates the words “& SON”, apparently part of “LUMSDEN & SON” as found in Orient 829* folio 14.

⁷ DAVID APPELYARD and RICHARD PANKHURST, “The Last Two Letters of Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1987, 1, 23–42. See also DAVID APPELYARD and others, *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers (Early and Mid-Nineteenth Century)*, London 1985, p. 82.

a deep and on-going desire – unrealistic as it may now seem – to become friends with the British. This hope sprang largely, it would appear, from the fact that he had only a few years earlier befriended the former British Consul Walter Plowden (whose surname is rendered as Buladin), and who was later killed by Garäd Kənfu, an ally of *däggəzmač* Nəguše (see below).

Tewodros clearly, if mistakenly, seems to have assumed that the friendship he had thus forged with the British envoy was an enduring one. He presumably felt that it would survive – and override – British displeasure at the detention of Rassam, Cameron, Blanc, Prideaux, and the other Europeans referred to in Napier's letter of 5 April – and whom he so pointedly ignored in his letter.

Tewodros, in his letter, thus reiterates that he had befriended Plowden “and others” – a reference perhaps to his other English friend John Bell (though the latter is not expressly mentioned by name). He goes on to express his confidence that the British commander would reciprocate by affording him (Tewodros) comparable friendship.

This friendship with Plowden (and Bell) was clearly an important factor in Tewodros's thinking. He had referred to it in his famous letter of 1862 to Queen Victoria – to which the British Government had not replied, and which had thus led to his quarrel with London. In that historic letter he recalls that he had “wiped out” Plowden's murderers, “not sparing even one” though they were his relatives.⁸ Reverting in 1865 to that same incident in a letter to Rassam he reiterated that he had “avenged” the blood of his two English friends – only to find himself denounced by their compatriots as a “murderer”.⁹

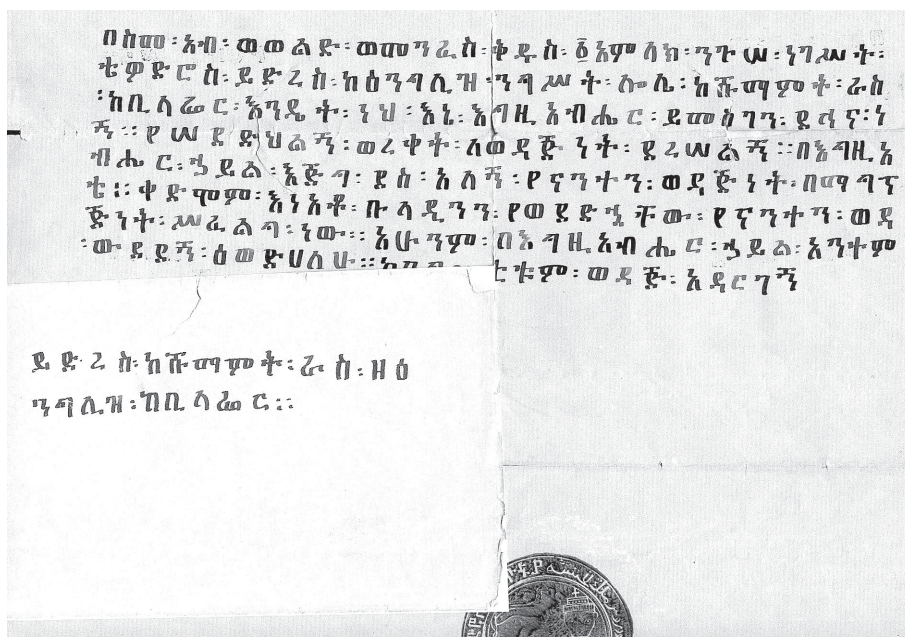
A curious feature of Tewodros's letter which we are considering is the manner in which it is addressed, on a small piece of paper. The Emperor and/or his scribe were doubtless unfamiliar with the name Napier, and found it difficult to transcribe. The letter is thus addressed to Kābilafer, a name which is hard to explain with any certainty.¹⁰ The Emperor's problem with the name is likewise apparent in his penultimate letter to Napier, of 11 April 1868, in which he refrains from mentioning him by name. His final

⁸ SVEN RUBENSON, *Tewodros and his Contemporaries 1855–1868* (Addis Ababa and Lund, 1994), pp. 197–200.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁰ The latter part of the word Kābilafer possibly represents a corruption of the name Napier. Thanks are here due to Professor Bairu Tafla, of Hamburg, who notes that the *p* in Napier could easily have been rendered in Amharic as *b* or *f*. Professor Edward Ullendorff comments that the rendering in the letter is in fact “a not unknown bowdlerization of Napier”, and adds: “I have seen it before” (Personal communication 5 March 2007). It is, however, rare.

letter, written on the following day, solves the matter differently by ingeniously observing: "Because we have met unexpectedly over a matter that I had not foreseen, I was prevented from writing your name as 'such-and-such'."¹¹



Letter from Emperor Tewodros

The letter, in English translation, reads as follows:¹²

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, King of Kings Tewodros. May it reach the servant of the Queen of England, the head of the appointees Käbilafer. How are you? I, thanks to God, am well. I have received the letter you sent me for our friendship. I am happy, by the Power of God, to have found your friendship. Previously I befriended Ato Buladin [Mr Plowden] and others, in wanting your friendship. Now, by the Power of God, we are friends. And now, by the Power of God, you will be my friend, and I will be your friend. Make me a friend with the Queen too.

[On a small piece of paper] To the Head of the Appointees of England, Käbilafer.

[Great Seal of Tewodros]

¹¹ RUBENSON, *Theodore and his Contemporaries*, pp. 154–57.

¹² Translator: Alula Pankhurst.

A Letter from *däggazmač* Nəguše

A further, apparently unconnected, letter from *däggazmač* Nəguše Wäldä Mika³el, the mid-19th century ruler of Təgray and one of the most important rebels against Tewodros's rule, has also come to light.¹³ Written in Amharic, on parchment, to a personage referred to as Kāhasānbe (see below), it was dispatched from Arāza,¹⁴ in Seraye. The letter was dispatched sometime between 1857, when its author came to power, and 1861, when Tewodros defeated him in battle, and had him executed. This – and the fact that it ended up with Tewodros's letter discussed above – gives rise to the suspicion that it fell into Tewodros's possession, and formed part of that monarch's papers at Mäqdāla – which were subsequently looted by the British in 1868.¹⁵

Nəguše's letter is addressed to Kāhasānbe, which would seem to be the scribe's rendering of *kä* (an abbreviation for *yädəräs kä*) i.e. “may it reach to” Hasān Bey. The latter was a Turkish title used by the Ottoman rulers of nearby Hərgigo, or Arkiko, the principal mainland port, with which Nəguše, as ruler of Təgray, must have been in close contact. Two functionaries holding that rank were in power in this period: Muhammad ³Abd al-Rahim of the Bet Hasān line (who was ruling 1859–61) and Idris Hasān Bey (who succeeded him in 1861).¹⁶

The letter states that it was written in the Year of Marqos – a reference to the Ethiopian Evangelists Calendar in which years are named after the Four Evangelists, Matewos (Mathew), Marqos (Mark), Luqas (Luke) and

¹³ On *däggazmač* Nəguše, a nephew of *däggazmač* Webe Haylä Maryam of Təgray, see SVEN RUBENSON, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, 1976), pp. 189–207; GIUSEPPE PUGLISI, *Chi è? dell'Eritrea: dizionario biografico* (Asmara, 1952), pp. 219–20; CARLO CONTI ROSSINI, “Vicende dell'Etiopia delle missione cattoliche ai tempi di Ras Ali, Deggiac Ubie e Re Teodoro”, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche* (1916), XXV, 547 (index); LUIGI FUSELLA, “La cronaca dell'Imperatore Teodoro II di Etiopia in un manoscritto amarico”, *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* (1954–56), VI, 92–95; IDEM, “L'ambasciata francese a Nəguše”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (1948), VII, 176–191; IDEM, “Le lettere del *dabtarā* Assaggākhañ”, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (1954), XIII, 20–30.

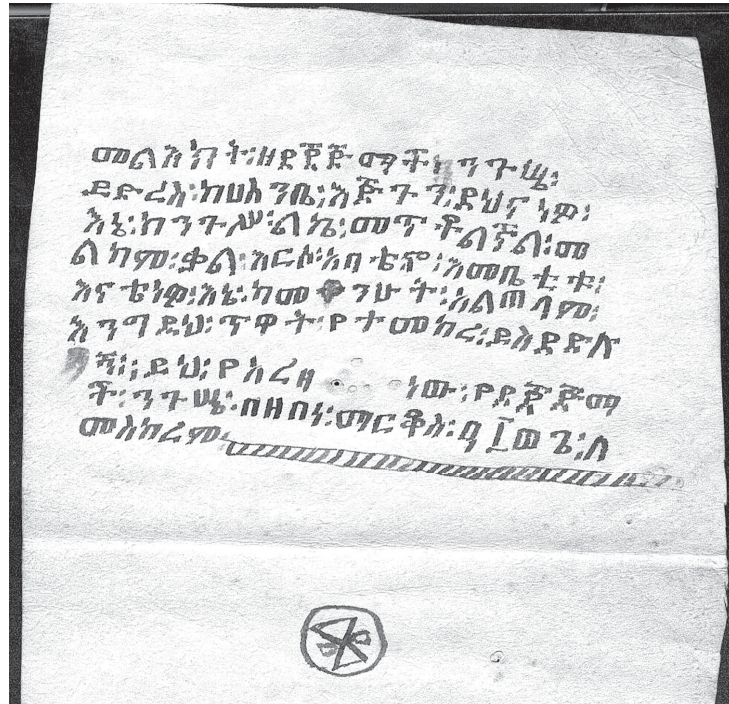
¹⁴ Arāza, a settlement associated with Nəguše's family, 60 km SW of Asmara, and 115 km inland from the port of Hərgigo. JOHANNES AXEL KOLMODIN, *Traditions de Tsazzege et Hazzega, translation*, p. 150. See also *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (Milano, 1938), p. 236.

¹⁵ On the looting, and destruction, of “loose leaves and fragments” at Mäqdāla see GERHARD ROHLFS, *Meine Mission nach Abessinien* (Leipzig, 1883), p. 257.

¹⁶ PUGLISI, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–69, 207, I am indebted to Professor Bairu Tafla for suggesting this identification.

Yohannəs (John), whose names recur cyclically every four years. Nəguśe's reign, from 1854 to 1861, spanned two years of Marqos, i.e. those of the Ethiopian years 1850 (corresponding to the European year 1857–8), and 1854 (i.e. European calendar 1861–2).

An earlier rather than a later dating is perhaps indicated by the fact that Nəguśe states in the letter that he is still in correspondence with “the King” – presumably Tewodros, which would seem less likely during the bitter struggle between them which later ensued. The probability of an earlier dating appears to be reinforced by the fact that the letter makes no use of the Lion of Judah seal which its author subsequently placed on virtually all his later correspondence. The letter was validated instead of a seal by a Cross. This accorded with a long-established Ethiopian Christian practice.¹⁷



Letter from *däggazmač* Nəguśe

¹⁷ It had long been customary for Ethiopian letter-writers to draw a Cross on their letters, though this practice was abandoned by rulers who made use of a seal instead. On the history of this practice see RICHARD PANKHURST, “Letter writing and the use of royal and imperial seals in Ethiopia prior to the twentieth century”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* (1973), X1, no. 1, pp. 179–208.

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Nəguše's letter in translation reads as follows:¹⁸

From *däggazmač* Nəguše. May it reach Kāhasänbe.

How are you? Are you very well? I sent the King [a message] and a good word [answer] has come back to me. If I trust you. I would not mind [i.e. I would like to trust you]. You are like a father to me, and the mistress [i.e. the addressee's wife] is like a mother. And if I trust you I will not hurt you. So send me what was discussed [i.e. agreed upon] this morning. This is from Aräza.

From *däggazmač* Nəguše. 16 Mäskäräm in the Year of Marqos.

[Handwritten Representation of the Cross]

Summary

The two letters here published supplement those in Sven Rubenson's invaluable compilation "Tewodros and his Contemporaries". The first letter throws intriguing light on Emperor Tewodros's remarkably amical attitude to the British in the run-up to his military confrontation with them at Mäqdäla. The second letter, the background to which has still to be established, may be regarded as a contribution to our knowledge of *däggazmač* Nəguše's rule in Təgray.

¹⁸ Translator: Alula Pankhurst.