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The Legitimising Project: The Coronation Rite and the Written Word

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The rite I am concerned with here is the enthronement ceremony of Yoḥannəs IV (1872–89), the second in line of the so-called Neo-Solomonic rulers who reestablished strong imperial power in Ethiopia. His predecessor Tewodros II (1855–68) set this trend by successfully ending the so-called *Zämänä mäsaḥant* ‘Era of the Princes’ (1769–1855), known for the rule of the puppet kings in Gondär manipulated by powerful regional nobles. His rule was based on crucial changes in the understanding of the Ethiopian kingship.¹ Most importantly, Tewodros’ unprecedented reign introduced a more flexible interpretation of the royal lineage and opened the claim to the throne to a wider circle of contenders. His imperial propaganda was only partly successful, as questions about his legitimacy as emperor became an issue and together with other grievances of both the clergy and the nobility contributed to his downfall.²

Yoḥannəs IV was acutely aware of similar shortcomings of his claim and was anxious not to repeat the mistake of his predecessor. Hoping to persuade and influence beyond the established mechanisms of violence that he had already applied in the process of subjugating the core area of the state, Yoḥannəs needed an ideological statement that his subjects and his nobles could relate to and become a part of. Aware of the importance of this legitimising project, Yoḥannəs and his advisors looked into the body of idioms and symbols relating to practices of validating kingship. In order to be effective, this new ideology needed to draw on the symbolic repertoire familiar to all involved.³ Thus Yoḥannəs and his advisors mobilised a wide range of symbols associated with the Ethiopian kingship drawn from various times of its history in order to justify and validate his rule. One of the most comprehensive expressions of this project, a product of a team of carefully selected clerics, is the chronicle preserved in the church of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase. The legitimising ideology recorded in this text was most strikingly projected in 1872 during Yoḥannəs’ coronation as emperor that recreated and mobilised the ancient ritual of enthronement in the holy city of Aksum. The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle, despite being an act of propaganda, is a crucial source enabling us to reconstruct the ritual itself and its interpretation provided implicitly by the chroni-

¹ CRUMMEY 1998: 81.

² ID. 1988: 20ff., 31ff.

³ GEERTZ 1985: 30; KERTZER 1988: 2–5.

clers. Importantly, it also offers insights into the role of this performative act in the process of establishing Yoḥannəs' legitimacy.

Historical Source as Subject: The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase Chronicle (*DBSChr*)

The chronicle of Yoḥannəs' reign kept in the *ʿəqa bet* (vestry) of the church of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase in ʿAdwa is a powerful expression of his legitimising project. The document was written by a team of three highly learned ecclesiastics closely associated with the court and undoubtedly the key advisors to Yoḥannəs. As clergymen, two of whom were selected from outside of his home province of Təgray on the basis of merit, they had extensive knowledge of the wide body of Ethiopian religious literature, laws and royal chronicles. The manuscript we are concerned with here contains 102 pages (51 leaves) that measure around 40 by 30 cm and contain two columns on each page. The pages were probably numbered later, with an error after page 60. A couple of leaves at the front, probably originally blank, concern other matters related to land grants. The text does not cover the entire reign of Yoḥannəs. It briefly deals with his birth, childhood, rise to power and the early years of his reign. It is very beautifully calligraphed and written in good Gəʿəz. The document consists of two parts: the first 47 pages describe his life from birth until his coronation in 1872, then the narration begins afresh on page 48 and elaborates on several points mentioned earlier. The second part is less coherent. It is probably a later addition that unlike the first is not written chronologically. The text stops with a military expedition that took place shortly after the coronation. I will return later to the significance of the chronicle that remains unfinished.

Based on interviews that Bairu Tafla, the editor of a different chronicle of Yoḥannəs' reign, conducted with local church authorities in June 1972, it was the team of three clergymen who composed this text.⁴ Outside of Təgray and from the family of famous *nəburä əd* scholars, *liqä* Märʿawi Təklä Əstifanos was the chief scribe. In 1873–74 Yoḥannəs appointed him chief legal consultant at his court with the title of *liq*, given to experts in law. He is said to have held his office throughout Yoḥannəs' subsequent reign. The second member of the team was a highly educated monk *Mälʿakä bərhanat* Bərhanu, also not a Tigrean. In 1870 he was appointed the first head of the new Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase church in ʿAdwa, where the document on concern was preserved. The third writer was *nəburä əd* Iyasu, the head of the holy church of Maryam Şəyon in Aksum.⁵ As an outstanding cleric and a native of Aksum, Kaša appointed him

⁴ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 18.

⁵ The church of Maryam Şəyon in Aksum is believed to house the Ark of the Covenant central to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and the identity of highland Ethiopians as chosen people, the descendents of the legacy of ancient Israel.

the *nəburä əd* at the suggestion of the local monks. The writing of the chronicle is said to have taken place very shortly after Yoḥannəs' coronation in 1872.⁶

The chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase is one of the seven existing chronicles both in Amharic and Gəʿəz commemorating the reign of Yoḥannəs IV. These seven texts of different lengths and written at different times are of varying value for the historian. The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle covers only the early period of the reign, which was the reason for Bairu Tafla's decision to publish and translate another Gəʿəz chronicle. As Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase concentrates on the earlier period of the reign of Yoḥannəs, it naturally focuses on the most contentious issue at the time – his legitimacy. It is effectively hagiographical in nature, typical of the style of chronicles, setting out to justify Yoḥannəs' claim to the imperial crown and building a case for his legitimacy.⁷

The chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase is a product of the team of clergymen, who facilitated Ethiopia's restricted documentary tradition. Its written form and the use of the liturgical language Gəʿəz were symbolically meant to sanction the conveyed meaning and sanctify Yoḥannəs' claim to the throne. The text laid down and justified a new interpretation of the rules of succession through the use of culturally restricted literacy, associated with the sacred. A similar process applied in the case of land grants, where the function of writing them down was to sanctify them rather than precisely to define them.⁸ Since the written word was restricted to liturgical documents in Gəʿəz and royal chronicles that consciously linked Church and state, the legitimising message, sanctified by writing it down, needed to be conveyed through more conventional forms of political expression. Thus Yoḥannəs' legitimising project mobilised the performative aspects of Ethiopian political culture and projected the message through the pageantry of courtly ritual that evoked relevant symbols. Yoḥannəs and his entourage disseminated the transition from his noble status as *däggəzmač* Kaša Mərča to *nəgusä nəgäšt* ("king of kings") Yoḥannəs in a lavish ceremony of enthronement in the holy city of Aksum. The most detailed information about the rite comes from the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle that recounts it and elaborates on the issue of legitimacy. Here I focus on both, the document and the rite to learn about how legitimacy of imperial rule was achieved and about the role of performance in this process.

⁶ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 19.

⁷ I visited the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase church in ʿAdwa in August 2003, when I copied the text by taking photographs. I am grateful to the local priest for allowing me to do this and to the late *aläqa* Gərmay Elyas who wrote a letter of recommendation for me (hereafter I abbreviate the name of the document as *DBSChr*).

⁸ MCCANN 2001: 83f.

Based on his work on medieval European documents, Philippe Buc warns against reliance on such documents for analysis of rituals and other solemnities.⁹ The *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* chronicle provides us with the most comprehensive account of the enactment. Its authors, as the key ecclesiastics of Yoḥannəs' court, were the masterminds behind the ceremony. Because of their access to the holy books, chronicles and codes of law, they contributed their knowledge of suitable practices and advised on what symbols to use for Yoḥannəs' enthronement. Since they most probably attended the ceremony and advised on what form it ought to take, we are able to expect from them the closest account of what happened. This is where Buc warns and rightly so. Medieval authors and Ethiopian chroniclers in similar fashion tended to re-craft the actual events in their subsequent accounts. What Buc does not fully appreciate, however, is what these sources still have to offer us. The 'distorted' or the 'embellished' is still of value, as it points us directly to what the authors thought they should be talking about, what should happen during a ritual in order for it to serve its purpose. Thus such accounts provide us with important insights as to what the authors thought made up ritual work. Buc further states a crucial point that 'the medieval texts were produced in a political culture with specific traits and agents'.¹⁰ He points out that it is virtually impossible to approach these performative events in their textual form, without the mastery of the thought-world that informs the documents. This is certainly true and presents us with a somewhat contradictory dynamic, in which ritual shapes to our understanding of the period, especially in terms of the mindset of the decision makers. At the same time we need to be familiar with the value system and the political reality that formed the authors of the text.

Here, the *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* chronicle provides us with a narrative of the rite of Yoḥannəs' enthronement, which, as we will see, drew on past practices, idioms and procedures that in the chroniclers' minds had legitimising qualities, thus providing the intended outcome of the event. While Buc is right about the limits of these sources, I will argue here that his reservations are excessive and that *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* offers us unique glimpses of political mentalités of Yoḥannəs' contemporaries, in particular their ideas of the functions and uses of ritual in the process of legitimising kingship.

Sanctioning change: the Solomonic myth and the selection for kingship

Ethiopian monarchy had been deeply embedded in the so-called Solomonic myth that provided a national charter defining the kingship and providing

⁹ Buc 2001: 1–12, 249.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

distinct identity for Ethiopians as descendents of ancient Israel. The Semitic connection was sanctified in the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, the national epic that establishes a lineage deriving from a union between King Solomon, the Ethiopian Queen Makədda [Sheba] and their son Mənilək I. The queen, who is supposed to have travelled to Israel to meet with King Solomon bore a son, Mənilək I. On Mənilək's return from his subsequent visit to Jerusalem, a group of nobles from the priestly families of Israel who accompanied him back to Ethiopia, is said to have secretly taken with them the ultimate symbol of the Israelites, the tablets of the Law of Moses known as the Ark of the Covenant.¹¹ Through the transfer of this symbol of God's selection, the Ethiopians became a chosen nation and the city of Aksum gained the rank of the second Jerusalem.¹²

Yoḥannəs' claim to the Solomonic line of kings was one of the most controversial issues that his legitimising project had to deal with. Just like in the case of Tewodros, his lineage connected him to the royal line through the female, whereas the orthodox interpretation of the rules as laid out in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* spoke of legitimate descent only through the male line, as in the case of the legitimate kings of Gondär.¹³ The *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* chronicle shows how the rules of the Solomonic kingship were being reinvented and manipulated to Yoḥannəs' advantage. The text very gracefully justifies Yoḥannəs' claim by downplaying its shortcomings:

There were some envious people who said 'We have never seen the son of a *nəgus'* daughter become a *nəgus*.' We give them answer thus: You backbiters and wicked men, have you not heard that the son of Empress Helen, Constantine, who organized the faith, became a *nəgus*? Moreover, although his kingdom was natural, was not Christ the grandson of David through a woman, called the chief priest and the King of Kings? Many were those who occupied the throne through their mothers!¹⁴

Yoḥannəs' claim to the throne is persuasively justified by drawing a parallel to Christ himself and Emperor Constantine. The fact that the *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* and other chronicles extensively dealt with this issue further indicates how contentious it was. More importantly, the text officially sanctions a change in the interpretation of the Solomonic claim.

The chroniclers of *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* also engage with Yoḥannəs' local claim to power and his transition to emperorship. 'Adwa, his working capital, was a seat of mighty local rulers *ras* Wäldä Šəllase and *ras* Mika'el

¹¹ BUDGE 1922: 61–80.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 146ff.

¹⁴ *DBSChr*, p. 21b; see also BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 27–33.

Səḥul, to whom Yoḥannəs was related. The chroniclers refer to their names and legacies stressing Yoḥannəs' association with them and the legitimacy of his rule on the local level. A king maker and the initiator of the *Zämänä mäsafənt*, *ras* Mika'el is introduced by the chronicle as honourable and mighty. The text compares Yoḥannəs to him: 'He defeats powerful ones and loves justice, because a son does not leave the work of his father.'¹⁵ The chronicle further excuses Mika'el, a blood relative and a spiritual father for Yoḥannəs, for his removal of the Gondärine emperor Iyo'as portrayed here as unjust.¹⁶ The authors faced with the problem of explaining why Mika'el 'mighty and just' did not claim the imperial throne, unlike Yoḥannəs, use this opportunity to deal with the issue of the Solomonic claim, the lack of which restricted Mika'el's options. The chronicle presents his reservations to seize the throne as a sign of his humbleness and a virtue:

God gave him [*ras* Mika'el] the kingdom of Ethiopia because he abolished king Iyo'as, the son of Iyasu, who was the king of Ethiopia ... He did not sit on the throne of the kingdom, because he was humble and patient. He said: "I do not want to have the kingdom" then appointed Aše Yoḥannəs [Yoḥannəs II] as king of Ethiopia.¹⁷

The story of Mika'el is helpful to enhance Yoḥannəs' local claim. This comparison also introduces the issue of Yoḥannəs' imperial ambitions, as he took the next step in the power game and claimed the throne. Here his actions fundamentally differ from Mika'el's, who accepted his limitations and the position of the highest non-royal title of *ras bitwäddäd*. This difference was the very reason why Yoḥannəs needed a legitimising project, in form of the chronicle and the rite of enthronement.

The chronicle provides us with insights about the role of ritual in the process of selection for the highest office. It explains that the divine selection of Yoḥannəs took place prior to the formal enthronement. We are told that *däggäzmač* Kaša was chosen to rule the Ethiopian people through a secret bestowal of power by God, who had selected him as His representative on Earth.¹⁸ The proof of the divine selection, as explained, is in his ability to successfully defeat his enemies and their inability to stop him.¹⁹ The battlefield provided a forum, as it were, to reveal a chosen candidate for ultimate supremacy. At the same time, the chronicle presents the failure of

¹⁵ *DBSChr*, p. 62a.

¹⁶ *DBSChr*, p. 4a.

¹⁷ *DBSChr*, p. 4a, 4b.

¹⁸ *DBSChr*, p. 1b; Kaša Mərça was Yoḥannəs' name before accession to throne.

¹⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 46b.

Kaśa's opponents as evidence of their lack of divine support.²⁰ Geertz described a very similar principle in the case of the Alawite Morocco ruled by 'God's elects' also identified by their success in military confrontation, which was said to have revealed their *baraka* (amh. *bäräkät*).²¹ The concept of *baraka*, divine favour, seems particularly helpful in dealing with competition of equally eligible contenders in the late-19th century Ethiopia.

The cultural origin of such an understanding of the source of authority and power was embedded in the *Fəṭḥa nəgəst*, the Ethiopian legal code. Following the Bible, the text indicates that leader, ruler or king can only assume office through the will of God. Once successful in obtaining their status they should be obeyed, as opposing their rule would mean rejecting God's will. Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase repeats this notion outlined in the *Fəṭḥa nəgəst* that elucidates Ethiopian conception of the sources of authority:

And you Ethiopians be ruled by the wise king of kings Yoḥannəs and after him by his son and sons of sons, be afraid of him, give the revenue as our Lord said in the Gospel, 'Give the revenue of God to God'. And as Paul said in his letter to the Romans 'be under the rule of all governors [*mäk^w annənt*], because the ruler cannot be appointed unless it is by God'. Again, the one who cheats the governors cheats God their creator, those who reject the governor be judged and killed by the sword.²² ... Do not reject the orders of the governors ... because no one is appointed unless it is by the will of God.²³

The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase text further provides more explicit insights into the role of the ritual of enthronement in the process of empowerment that, as we have established was first initiated by the divine selection that manifested itself through military success:

God anointed him secretly with the oil of kingdom [or state: *qəb^ca mängəst*] until he was openly [publicly] anointed by the hand of *abunä* Atnatewos as was the custom of his fathers, kings of Ethiopia.²⁴

The above passage indicates that the 'secret anointment', in order to be fully valid, was to culminate in the ritual involving *abun*, the Coptic head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. According to the text, it was through the

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ GEERTZ 1985: 23–31; s. also ORŁOWSKA n.d., ch. 2.

²² *DBSChr*, p. 10a; PAULOS TZADUA 1968: 272; The passage from the *Fəṭḥa nəgəst* is incorporated into the *DBSChr* chronicle on p. 10a, as well as the chronicle of *ras* Šəyyum and possibly other chronicles.

²³ *DBSChr*, p. 10a.

²⁴ *DBSChr*, p. 1b.

crowning and the anointing that the earthly king, a representative of God on earth, received ‘the crown of the kingdom of his fathers’ – the highest earthly honour.²⁵ The implication here is that despite the ‘secret anointment’ it was the ceremony that completed the process and only then did the king receive full kingship and ‘lived in his kingdom as king’.²⁶ Hence, we can conclude that the *DBSChr* postulates that it was both the secret anointment concluded in the rite that fulfilled the process of empowering emperors in the late 19th century. Thus, the ritual is presented as the second and crucial stage that followed the initial selection in line, with the widely accepted notion that it is God who bestows authority and places one in position of power.

Building propriety of procedure: the role of the clergy in validating the king

The key group involved in formulating and disseminating Yoḥannəs’ legitimising project was the clergy. The Church and state in Ethiopia were mutually dependent. The clergy depended on the ruling elites and the court for economic resources and in turn the rulers, ranging from regional lords to emperors, expected them, to support their policies in their preaching. The ecclesiastics were of fundamental importance to the social order and were able to reinforce the authority of rulers. Unsurprisingly, the clergy was instrumental to Yoḥannəs’ legitimising project.

One of the essential criteria for the legitimacy of the procedure of enthronement was, as presented by *DBSChr*, the anointment and crowning by the Coptic bishop, the *abun*, not the Ethiopian head of Church, the *əččäge*. Following the death of *abunä* Sälama, who served during the reign of Tewodros, there was no *abun* in Ethiopia. Yoḥannəs, still as *däğğazmač* Kaša, tirelessly tried to obtain the service of the Coptic bishop, at the same time blocking similar attempts of his rivals. He was eventually successful and used his achievement to manifest legitimacy of his enthronement:

The city of the government [or kingdom], the cathedral of *Ak^wasäm* is ours and the *abun* is with us, why should we not encourage and enthrone our master? Even *däğğazmač* Gobäze proclaimed himself king and named himself Täklä Giyorgis by the anointment of the *əččäge*²⁷ ... They raised him above themselves and named him Täklä Giyorgis, his wife was *ətege* Dəñqənäš, but he was not anointed by the hand of the *abun* throughout the three years.²⁸

²⁵ *DBSChr*, p. 95b, 96a.

²⁶ *DBSChr*, p. 47b.

²⁷ *DBSChr* pp. 23b, 24a.

²⁸ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 94f.; see also *aläqa* LÄMLÄM n.d, fol. 6; MÄNGESTU LÄMMA 1959 A.M.: 45; TÄKLÄ ŠADƏQ MÄK^wƏRIYA 1968 °A.M.: 43; *ətege*: the title of emperor’s wife.

The crowning by the *abun* is juxtaposed here with the *aččäge*'s anointment of Täklä Giyorgis, Yoḥannəs' short-lived predecessor and a son-in-law. The failure of Täklä Giyorgis to receive anointment by the *abun* was repeatedly used by Yoḥannəs' advisors:

Mäk^w annant of Bägemdər, Lasta, Yäggu, Wällo, Šäwa, Goḡgam, Səmen, Gondär, all people of Amhara became jealous and appointed a king with the *aččäge*.²⁹

Thus the chronicle portrays Täklä Giyorgis' ritual as an infringement of the correct procedure, attempting to channel the interpretation of his rite and justifying why it should be perceived as invalid.

At the same time, the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chroniclers use this issue to stress the propriety of Yoḥannəs' anointment by *abunä* Atnatewos:

But this Yoḥannəs, king of peace and love, was enthroned by *abunä* Atnatewos, by the will of the Trinity the creator of heaven and earth. There was a great love and happiness gathered in Däbrä Šəyon [the church in Aksum], because there was Atnatewos, archbishop, the father of all and other fathers, the *nəburä əd*, the clergy of Təgre, the clergy of Goḡgam whose leader is *rə'əsä rə'usan*, the clergy of Amhara whose head is *bäträ yarək*, the clergy of Lasta and Bägemdər whose head is *liqä kahənat* and the clergy of Gondär whose teacher is the *aččäge*.³⁰

The joy and happiness refers to the correctness of the procedure involving the *abun*. Atnatewos is presented as head of the church hierarchy that was to be strengthened by the accession of Yoḥannəs and the revival of the relationship between the imperial centre and the clergy. The coronation of Täklä Giyorgis', who had lost hold of the provinces to his brother-in-law, Yoḥannəs was viewed as invalid due to the anointment that was conducted by the Ethiopian *aččäge*. An example of what Buc calls a 'bad', failed ritual, this interpretation of Täklä Giyorgis' coronation was useful to Yoḥannəs' legitimising project.

Other sources dating from early 20th century also point to the importance of the crowning by the *abun* and stress a serious flaw in Täklä Giyorgis' ritual.³¹ A broader historical perspective shows, however, that not all emperors were crowned by the Coptic bishops. Thus, what the *DBSChr* essentially did, was to set and sanctify a new rule of enthronement that had been flexible in the past.

²⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 94b.

³⁰ *DBSChr*, p. 84b–85a.

³¹ MÄNGƏSTU LÄMMA 1959 A.M.: 45, TÄKLÄ ŞADƏQ MÄK^wƏRIYA 1968 °A.M.: 43; GÄBRÄ MIKA²EL GƏRMU n.d.: 6.

Aksumite enthronement: a historical perspective

Although the *DBSChr* postulates the necessity for the *abun*'s anointment in the Aksumite rite, it is wrong to assume that it was crucial in the past. In order to get closer to an understanding of the significance and the meaning of the rite, one needs to know more about this practice. Having looked at the available record, it is safe to propose that the Aksumite ceremony was not essential to enthronement. Yəkunno Amlak, the first emperor of the revived Solomonic dynasty in the 13th century, was not crowned by the *abun* since there was no Coptic bishop in Ethiopia during his reign.³² Only 5 out of 58 Solomonic emperors who reigned between 1270 and 1855 went to Aksum for the coronation: Zär'a Ya'əqob in 1436, Šäršä Dəngəl in 1579, Susənyos in 1608, Fasilidäs in 1667 and later Iyasu I in 1693, who appears to be the last one to be crowned there.³³ The Gondärine emperors from Iyo'as (1755–1769) onwards dispensed with it altogether, limiting themselves to a modest ceremony at Gondär.³⁴

In his study of the Gondärine monarchy (1632–1769), LaVerle Berry gives importance to the crowning ceremony. He argues that the sanctity and mystique associated with kingship were acquired rather than inherited. This, he quite rightly perceives, was a consequence of the absence of a rigid concept of primogeniture that gave rise to a sizable group of potential pretenders with a valid claim to the throne.³⁵ Thus the coronation ceremony and the anointment with the 'oil of kingdom' had been the final manifestation of God's sanction.³⁶ Just as indicated by the *DBSChr* the ritual was a fulfillment of the prior bestowal of the divine sanction onto a chosen candidate. Once crowned, an aura of sanctity was meant to gather around each king, which was further enhanced by the adoption of a regal name by the new emperor.

The Gondärine enthronement practices show flexibility of this ritual. The palace ceremony was performed in the presence of certain state officials and involved anointing, enrobing and crowning.³⁷ Its purpose was to mark transition of succession. Although the *Šər'atä mängəst*, a collection of procedures and customs on Ethiopian monarchy speaks of two ceremonies, one in the palace at Gondär and the other in the holy city of Aksum, the latter was more than often unfulfilled.³⁸ It is useful to see who underwent the Aksumite rite from the line of Solomonic kings actually: It was Zär'a Ya'əqob (1434–68)

³² MUNRO-HAY 1997: 204ff.

³³ ID. 2004: 185.

³⁴ ZEWE GABRE-SELLASSIE 1975: 34.

³⁵ BERRY 1976: 115.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115f.; LEVINE 1965: 150, 165.

³⁷ MUNRO-HAY 2004: 181.

³⁸ GUIDI 1922: 74–75; s. also NOSNITSIN 2010: 632b–634b.

who reintroduced this ritual. One of the most charismatic emperors of medieval Ethiopia, he significantly strengthened the monarchy and the Orthodox Christianity as state religion to ensure the unity of an expanding empire. Zär'a Ya'eqob aimed at standardising religious practices, with particular attention to the orthodoxy of the Christian faith and the propriety of royal procedures.³⁹ For his coronation he traveled from Šäwa to Aksum in order to, in the words of his chronicler, restore the law and practices of his 'fathers, former kings'.⁴⁰ His Aksumite enthronement seems therefore to have been in line with the policy of the 'revival' of old traditions in order to ideologically strengthen the medieval empire. Zär'a Ya'eqob's son, Bä'ädä Maryam (1468–78) and most subsequent Solomonids underwent, however, only an unassuming coronation ceremony in locations other than Aksum.⁴¹

The chronicle of Šäršä Dəngəl (1563–1597) provides the most comprehensive description of this ritual, presented as conducted in accordance with the law: 'The king sat on this throne and through that fulfilled the law.'⁴² Having dealt with the turmoil of the long war with the Muslim sultanates on the southern marches of the empire, Šäršä Dəngəl consolidated his power and is likely to have used the Aksumite coronation to reconfirm his rule. With three contenders for the royal throne and the strong position of the nobility, the situation in the country during the reign of Susənyos (1607–32) was remarkably similar to that of the reign of Yoḥannəs. Susənyos carried out the Aksumite ritual, as Ethiopian sources point out, 'according to the tradition of his fathers as it is written in the book of kingdom', with both the *əččäge* and the *abun* present.⁴³ Having eliminated his two rivals and undergone the Aksumite ritual, Susənyos' cemented his claim to the throne and dealt with his somewhat controversial parentage.⁴⁴ His subsequent conversion to Catholicism led to open conflict with the Orthodox Church, which was only resolved by his son and successor, Fasilidäs. The latter restored Orthodoxy, and rebuilt the church of Maryam Šəyon in Aksum, where he was also crowned. Iyasu I (1682–1706) represents Gondarine kings and his coronation in 1691 does not seem to have made a particular statement in terms of legitimacy. His Aksumite ceremony most likely had something to do with the shift to Gondär that monopolised the royal life, including the religious and symbolic dimensions. Iyasu commissioned the church of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase in

³⁹ TADESSE TAMRAT 1972: 248.

⁴⁰ PERRUCHON 1893: 49f.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124ff.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ BAIRU TAFLA 1987: 323.

⁴⁴ Susənyos was the son of Abetohun Fasil, who was the son of Ya'eqob, the step-brother of Gäläwdewos (1540–59). Ya'eqob was born from an Oromo maid.

Gondär that was not only spectacular architecturally, but was to serve as a centre of learning and a sanctuary.⁴⁵ Iyasu's coronation, the last one to take place in the holy city, might have been a gesture towards the monks of Aksum, whose role was being replaced by the clergy in Gondär.

Many emperors, however, never attempted the Aksumite ceremony. Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508–40), an example of a strong and successful emperor with an unquestionable claim to the Solomonic line, visited Aksum more than once but never underwent this ceremony. It appears that Ləbnä Dəngəl and others like him could afford to dispense with the Aksumite ceremony, as they did not need a legitimising statement provided by this ceremony. The enthronement of the emperors of the *Zämänä mäsafernt*, such as Bä'ədä Maryam II (1787–88), were also very modest affairs at Gondär and did not receive much attention by their chroniclers.⁴⁶ It most likely has to do with the fact that the Gondärine puppet kings, despite having no actual power, had an unquestionable lineage-based claim to the throne. Once enthroned they were usually manipulated by a powerful noble who in turn needed to sustain their legitimate authority that was based on belonging to the Solomonic lineage. In the case of Yoḥannəs, the two aspects had to come together. Although he was militarily superior to his rivals, he needed to legitimise his unsatisfactory claim to the lineage which was only achieved through the connection to the lineage of the female line. Some regulation regarding enthronement did exist, however, the Aksumite ceremony was not a requirement. This is what led Yoḥannəs to undergo the rite and the authors of the *DBSChr* to recount it in great detail.

The rite of enthronement and the written source

The Aksumite rite, or what we know of it, evoked the symbolism of legitimate kingship by recreating practices associated with enthronement re-imagined from what was known from the available written records. Having had access to the required knowledge in their capacity as high ecclesiastics, the authors of the *Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase* chronicle were probably the key architects of Yoḥannəs' coronation. As chroniclers, however, they most likely did not recount the rite as it happened. In a detailed account of the ceremony and the accompanying events, the chroniclers most likely recorded it in the way they wanted it to take place. The text records are therefore an indigenous performative aspect of the Ethiopian political culture. While Buc warns us that we cannot be sure what exactly happened given the possibilities of embellishment, the account provides us nevertheless with what the authors understood of such events and with the

⁴⁵ The church in Gondär is not to be confused with the church in ʿAdwa with the same name, where the chronicle referred to was housed.

⁴⁶ WELD-BLUNDELL 1922: 433.

description of the best version of what may have happened. In their minds they presented the rite in the most effective way.

The chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase notes the date of the momentous event of 21 January 1872 in the most precise way: “Sunday, 13 *Tərr*, sixth night 13th day, 1 *abäqte*, 6 *tentyon*, in the year of John the Evangelist, 5500 year of the world, 1864 °A.M., 7364 after the creation of the world”.⁴⁷ It explains that Yoħannəs, still as Kaša Mərča, had arrived in his capital °Adwa, located in close proximity to the holy city of Aksum, on 24 *Tabśas* in order to “stay in the place of his father *ras* Mika²el, his famous ancestor closely associated with the town”.⁴⁸ On the following day, Kaša erected a big tent in front of this house in order to hold a council. He sat on his throne of kingdom (*mānbärä māngəst*) and ordered his retainers, the *mək^wannənt*, soldiers, learned men and the clergy, to sit according to the importance of their ranks. A lot of food and drinks were prepared for a banquet that followed the meeting conducted in preparation for the ritual.⁴⁹ Kaša remained in °Adwa for twelve days to celebrate the feast of Christmas, which in the words of the chroniclers, was organised by him “according to the custom”.⁵⁰ Food and drink was lavishly distributed for twelve days. He then left °Adwa for Aksum, where he arrived on 17 January (9 *Tərr*). Just before the celebrations of *Təmqät*, on 19 January (11 *Tərr*), he met *abunä* Atnatewos, the ecclesiastic whose presence was crucial to the coronation procedure.⁵¹

The proximity of *Təmqät* celebrations was not without significance for the coronation. It commemorated the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan and allowed to obtain purification from committed sins and as such played a part in preparations for the rite. Normally the priests would assemble with the *tabots*, taken out of churches for the festivities.⁵² Dancing and singing, the common participants would arrive at the place, where they submerged themselves in water as a sign of their rebaptism. Finally, the *tabots* would be returned to the churches in grand processions.⁵³ The chronicle stresses that *abunä* Atnatewos ‘baptised Yoħannəs just like St. John the Baptist baptised Christ’.⁵⁴ This symbolic act of purification of the future emperor was an important preparation for the more significant rite to come.

⁴⁷ *DBSChr*, p. 41b.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 42a.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Təmqät* is the celebration of Epiphany. This feast commemorates the baptism of Christ; s. also CHAILLOT 2010: 915b–916b.

⁵² *Tabot*: a replica of the Ark of the Covenant present in every Ethiopian church. s. also HELDMAN 2010: 802a–804a and FRITSCH 2010: 804b–807a.

⁵³ HARRIS 1844: 200ff.

⁵⁴ *DBSChr*, p. 42b.

On Sunday 21 January (13 *Tərr*) Kaša remained in his house with only a few followers, preparing for the coronation. The date does not seem to be accidental, as the same date appears in the accounts of the previous Aksumite coronation ceremonies of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Śārṣā Dəngəl.⁵⁵ The chronicle indicates that many gathered to witness the ceremony. An official *arwaḡ* had gone out saying 'Let all gather'.⁵⁶ The 35 year old slender and medium height Kaša Mərča, was preparing for his enthronement as the emperor of Ethiopia.⁵⁷ Zewde provides a description of Kaša's clothing based on Hassen's report. Franz Hassen, a French agent appointed at Massawa around 1870, happened to be present at the coronation ceremony and reported it to the Consul-General of France in Egypt in a letter of 26 February 1872. According to his record: Kaša wore 'an elegant robe of silk, entwined with gold thread; a white cotton garment in the Ethiopian fashion covered the royal robe leaving only the king's crown and eyes visible'.⁵⁸ The Däbrä Bərhan Śəllase chroniclers are less concerned with the specificities and instead stress the splendour: 'the throne [*mānbär*] robe [*ləbsä māngəšt*] belt [*qənat*] and his shoes were of gold and silver.' They provide details of the crown of pure gold, decorated with diamonds that 'shone like lighting'.⁵⁹ Having put on the 'clothes of government' Yoḥannəs began singing for Śəyon, which we are led to believe was to imitate the custom of David who 'sang in front of the Ark'.⁶⁰

Having finished his prayers in the church, Kaša proceeded 'in accordance with the custom' to *məšəllam*, a place where he was to appoint and decorate new officials.⁶¹ He unusually decorated four *liqä mäkwäs* that normally would be two or even one.⁶² The chroniclers give a description of how the appointees were dressed as a sign of their newly acquired status. The distinguishing outfit consisted of *kabba lanqa* ('cape'), *gəmgə qəmis* ('velvety tunic') and *gəmgə sānafəl* ('velvety trousers'). One of the appointees was the *nəburä əd* of Aksum, a former monk from the famous monastery of Däbrä Damo and one

⁵⁵ PERRUCHON 1893: 49f.

⁵⁶ *DBSChr*, p. 48b.

⁵⁷ *Sənkəssar* manuscript from the church of Mälfa, unpublished, also contains a short history of Yoḥannəs' reign as additional note on what was initially a blank page; on Mälfa s. SMIDT 2007: 695b–696b; O'MAHONEY 1987: 133; DE COURSAK 1926: 170.

⁵⁸ ZEWDE GABRE-SELLASSIE 1975: 35.

⁵⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 89a.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 129.

⁶² *DBSChr*, p. 43b; *liqä mäkwäs*: the title of one of the highest court functionaries who played an active role in royal counselling, royal ceremony and judicial administration. On the battlefield he would impersonate the sovereign. The officials mentioned here were: *liqä mäkwäs* Gäbrä Mika'el, *liqä mäkwäs* Səbhato, *liqä mäkwäs* Yəlma and *liqä mäkwäs* Wərqe.

of the authors of the *DBSChr* chronicle.⁶³ Another one was the head of the newly erected church of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase that would later house the chronicle. The church was built on the site of the house of *ras* Mikaʿel in ʿAdwa and was especially cherished by Yoḥannəs, who assigned to it more than 300 clergymen. He also created a new title of *mälʾakä bərhanat* for its head priest and one of the three authors of the chronicle. At the coronation, he was granted a golden crown-like headdress (*ras wärq*). Interestingly, this head decoration was the same as the headdress of the privileged *nəburä əd* of Aksum, most probably to indicate the equality of status between these key ecclesiastics of the empire and the authors of the chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase. Until then the title of *nəburä əd* was exclusive to the head of the church of Maryam Şəyon in Aksum, a status marked by particular ceremonial clothing.⁶⁴ Apart from *mälʾakä bərhanat*, five other clergymen from the church of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase received decorations as a sign of their new appointments.⁶⁵

The next group of appointees consisted of those who were to become the emperor's closest officials; many were members of his family. Another chronicle of Yoḥannəs refers to them as 'those who deserved it'.⁶⁶ Among them there was *ras* Arʾaya Dəmtsu, Yoḥannəs' prominent uncle, *blatta* Gäbrä Kidan, faithful follower and a brother-in-law, *šäläqa* Alula who was then made *ligäba*, and *bäğəron*d Ligzaw.⁶⁷ A further category listed by the chronicle refers to the *mäkʷannənt* of the central province of Amhara, which consisted of nobles from all the regions that submitted to Yoḥannəs prior to the coronation. *Wag šum* Täfäri, who was a cousin of the recently defeated Täklä Giyorgis II, belonged to this group.⁶⁸ As the hereditary chief of Wäğ and Lasta and the descendent of the Zagʷe kings, who ruled before the Solomonids, this ruler was treated exceptionally and allowed certain privileges granted by tradition, such as the right to 'wash in the golden basin' used by the emperor himself.⁶⁹ This honour was a right that the *wag šums* secured in the 13th century, when the Solomonic line of kings established their power.

⁶³ *Nəburä əd*: Head of the church of Maryam Şəyon in Aksum.

⁶⁴ *DBSChr*, pp. 66b, 86b, 89a.

⁶⁵ Fəśśəḥa Wäldä Mikaʿel MS, p. 32; *däbtära* – a priest before ordination. The officials mentioned above were: the administrator *Mäʾade Bərhan*, the treasurer *Mäzgäbä Bərhan*, the head of the *däbtära*, *Märage Liqä Mäzmur* and his two deputies *Yämanä Bərhan* and *Əde Bərhan*.

⁶⁶ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 128–129.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; the remaining officials were Asäläfi Abrəha, *ras* Ḥaylu, *ras* Baryaʿu, *däğğazmač* Waḥde, *däğğazmač* Gäbrä Täklä (one of the sons of Arʾaya Dəmtsu).

⁶⁸ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 130f.

⁶⁹ *Aläqa* LÄMLÄM n.d., fol. 17; WUDU TAFETE KASSU 1995: 14f.; BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 118f.

The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle affirms that ‘there was no one from among the clergy and secular officials living between Šäwa and *Məsəwa* [Massawa] who was not present’.⁷⁰ ‘All the officials and notables of Təgray, the 44 countries of the *nəgarit* assembled on that day’ referring to all governors from Təgray that came with their armies: ‘Present were all the children of Amhara and Təgray’,⁷¹ referring to all officials of authority from both regions, including the so-called *däqiqä mǎngǎst*, the children of the puppet kings of the *Zämänä mäsafǎnt*, *ato* Wäldä Ag’azit and *ato* Gäbrä Maryam. The chronicle also talks about some foreigners without specifying who they were, probably because their presence was accidental and insignificant to the event.⁷² Present were also the recently deposed Täklä Giyorgis II and Yoḥannəs III, last of the puppet emperors of the *Zämänä mäsafǎnt*, who apparently remained chained during the ceremony.⁷³

The actual rite began after Yoḥannəs completed appointing his officials in *mǎšəllam*. The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chroniclers explicitly stress both the propriety of the procedure of enthronement and the involvement of Šəyon, the Ark of the Covenant, throughout the account of the ceremony. ‘All important men, women, elders, children, believers, non-believers said ‘*Yədälləwo, yədälləwo, yədälləwo mǎngǎst*’ – he deserves it, it is right to give the kingdom to him’.⁷⁴ Kaša/Yoḥannəs then proceeded to the temple of Aksum where the women especially selected for this task, welcomed him with singing and chanting. They gathered to his right and left, accompanied by the rumbling sound of the *käbäro* drum and prepared the way for him to pass by carpeting it with cloth and blocking the entry to the temple with a ribbon of silk, by which they began the ‘customary procedure of the ancient kings’. As Kaša attempted to approach the church they challenged him three times on his identity. ‘Who are you?’ they asked provocatively, to which he responded ‘I am the king of Šəyon of Ethiopia’. They questioned him three times, after which he pulled out his sword saying: ‘I am the king of Šəyon’ and cut the ribbon. At that moment the women shouted out in response ‘The king cut the ribbon of silk’, and ‘It is completed’, ‘the Heavenly and Earthly king of Šəyon began scattering gold and silver on to the carpets prepared for him’.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, the clergy of Aksum and other monasteries started euphoric chanting ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the

⁷⁰ *DBSChr*, pp. 86b, 90a.

⁷¹ *DBSChr*, p. 86b.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *DBSChr*, p. 86b; Yoḥannəs III, was a son of Täklä Giyorgis I, the last of the Gondarine kings.

⁷⁴ *DBSChr*, pp. 87a, 71b.

⁷⁵ *DBSChr*, p. 45a.

name of God', while the women gathered ululating with joy in traditional fashion.⁷⁶ The priests were dressed in crowns of gold and ceremonial robes reflecting their status. They carried crosses, censers steaming with incense and waved fronds of palm trees. The procession that they formed moved slowly accompanied by the sounds of sistrum and religious hymns.

Led by this captivating parade, Yoḥannəs proceeded to what the chronicle tells us was a part of the custom. Accompanied by a group of clergy, he moved towards the church and approached the doors of *Däggä sälam*, the western gate, to find it shut. The accompanying clergy raised their voices asking for the door to be opened. After having repeated their request three times, the voices behind the door answered "The king of glory may come in".⁷⁷ The door opened and Kaša passed some gold to the doorkeeper, in observance with "the custom of the kings of Şəyon".⁷⁸ This part of the rite is a Biblical allusion, referring to Gabriel asking the nobles and the honoured ones to open the door of heaven to the king of the world. The meaning of it, as explained by the chronicle, was that it should be by alms that one enters heaven, not by demands.⁷⁹ *Abunä* Atnatewos together with the bishops, priests, deacons and monks had been inside and prayed to "God, the Heavenly King on behalf of the Earthly king of Şəyon": "O Lord we beg you place this crown on his head".⁸⁰ On the altar (*mänbärä tabot*) before them royal insignias (*bäträ mängəšt*) were placed. The scepter, the orb (*lul, həlät wärq*), the crown made of gold and diamonds (*aklilä mängəšt*) and the gown of state (*albasä mängəšt*) were placed there to be 'blessed by the holy flesh and blood of Christ and by the prayer of the holy Mass'.⁸¹ When the *abun* finished the coronation prayer, he took "the horn with the oil of the kingdom' (*qəb'a mängəšt*) and poured it over Yoḥannəs" head.⁸² "And through anointing him he made him king (*angäso*) and he named him Yoḥannəs"⁸³ and he is said to have said: "Your lord anointed you with oil by my hand, which distinguishes those like you, so that you may rule over people and heathens within the Kingdom of Ethiopia".⁸⁴

To complete the consecration ceremony the new king of kings received Holy Communion. *Abunä* Atnatewos clothed him in the gown of state (*ləbsä*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 132; *DBSChr*, p. 46a, quotation of the Psalm 24, 7.

⁷⁸ *DBSChr*, p. 45b.

⁷⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 45b; Psalm 24, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *DBSChr*, p. 45b.

⁸² BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 134f.

⁸³ *DBSChr*, p. 47a.

⁸⁴ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 136f.

māngāst) and placed on his head “the crown of gold and diamonds”.⁸⁵ Eventually, the emperor carrying his royal insignia went out of the church together with the *abun*, *nəburä əd Iyasu*, the *mäl’akä bərhanat*, the *liqawənt* and the ‘respectable’ *mäk^wannənt* [nobles].⁸⁶ The clergy adorned in church ornaments expressing the hierarchy between them, followed him slowly protected and marked by decorative umbrellas. Singing and chanting praises to God, they formed a procession encircling the church.⁸⁷ Finally, they reached the open space called *männagäša*, where they saw an ancient royal seat carved of stone, known as the throne of David. Accompanied by the *abun* to his right and the *aččäge* to his left, Yoḥannəs sat on the stone seat. He then proceeded to fulfill ‘the custom of the Aksumite kings’ and recited the Psalm of David.⁸⁸ At that moment, the chronicle records, a battery of cannons fired to mark the fulfillment of the procedure.

The ceremony is said to have culminated in an announcement from the book of customary procedures (*māšḥafä šərʿat*) that ‘was decreed during his [Yoḥannəs] time according to the advice of the appointed learned men’. ‘Yoḥannəs, king of kings, restored the *g^wəlt*s to all churches according to their position and their rank in hope that the clergy should be respected like in the past’.⁸⁹ It also listed the names of government officials and church dignitaries who had *rəst* and *g^wəlt* ‘according to traditions of their fathers’.⁹⁰ Having finished, the *abun*, who read it, priests and monks, one by one, threatened to excommunicate those who might break this law, that was being established by “Yoḥannəs, king of Šəyon, king of kings of Ethiopia”. Such a prayer invoking a curse for those who dare violate the grant was a common practice of granting land.⁹¹

The emperor then rose up and mounted a richly decorated mule accompanied by many horsemen adorned in silver, gold and purple. When the king of kings started moving, cannons fired to signal his departure to the enormous tent prepared for the feast for which the emperor summoned all, from “the eldest to the youngest”. They entered the tent according to their rank and offices and “no one was to be left out”.⁹²

⁸⁵ *DBSChr*, p. 47a.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *DBSChr*, p. 47b.

⁸⁸ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 136f.

⁸⁹ BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 138f.; a person granted *g^wəlt* had a right to collect tribute, in kind and in labour from peasants who lived on the land. He would also enjoy juridical rights over his subjects. s. also CRUMMEY 2005: 941b–943b.

⁹⁰ *Rəst*: a lineage based rights to land. s. also CRUMMEY 2005: 381a–382a.

⁹¹ PANKHURST 1966: 100.

⁹² *DBSChr* pp. 88a–88b; s. also BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 140f.

The symbolism and the agenda

The series of ceremonies described give us clues as to what aspects of past enthronement practices were being mobilised by the legitimising project.⁹³ The pre-Christian elements alluding to the ceremony of induction to kingship and the rite involving cord cutting by the future king evoked the legacy of the Aksumite kings. As illustrated, the induction ceremony at *männagäša* (lit. 'the place of empowering kings'), located to the east of the church of Maryam Şəyon, brought into light the 'magical' powers of the ancient stone throne, known as the seat of David and allegedly used during enthronements of Aksumite kings. This rite, here involving the *abun* and the *əččäge* the two most important officials of the Orthodox Church who joined the emperor on the throne of David, evoked the pre-Christian procedures of induction to kingship. It symbolised the future king and the twelve judges – the Israelite priest that accompanied Mənilək I, the legendary son of Solomon during his journey to Ethiopia. Despite the rite's clearly Christian dimension in the case of Yoḥannəs' enthronement, it still provided association with the legacy of the Aksumites and their links to Israel. The subsequent ritual of crowning, here in the holy Church of Maryam Şəyon, resonated the procedure associated with the Gondärine period in Ethiopian history.

The authors of the Däbrä Bərhan Şällase chronicle must have drawn on the available written records of the legitimising practices. By combining symbolic powers of different procedures of enthronement and what the texts repeatedly term 'ancient customs', they projected an image of propriety and the revival of state upon Yoḥannəs' accession. The knowledge about the rites of induction to kingship seems to have come from several chronicles of medieval kings and the *Şər'atä mängəšt*, the book of laws and royal ceremonies, which according to the chronicle of Əskəndər (1478–94) 'was brought by Əbnä Həkim [Mənilək I] the son of Solomon and the twelve judges who came with him.'⁹⁴ The *Şər'atä mängəšt*, in the form known today was compiled from older records, probably in the reign of Şärşä Dəngəl (1563–97) and expanded afterwards. It describes a ceremony to be undertaken immediately after the death of an emperor, the type that was performed during the Gondärine period. It also provides regulations on the Aksumite ritual.⁹⁵ It notes the involvement of 'respectable women' of Aksum in the rite of cutting the cord and the placing of the new king on the throne of stone.⁹⁶

⁹³ The *DBSChr* chronicle is the main source for the account I provide here. I did consult the remaining chronicles, mainly the one edited by Bairu Tafla and drew on them to clarify and add to the description of the rite.

⁹⁴ PERRUCHON 1894: 352f.

⁹⁵ VARENBERGH 1915–16: 31.

⁹⁶ According to Guidi, this text is taken from the longer description of the ritual which is sometimes found at the end of manuscripts of the *Kəbrä nəgəšt*; GUIDI 1922: 65–89.

Our knowledge about the actual practices of the ancient Aksumites remains very limited. According to Munro-Hay, the existing references in the chronicles of the Solomonic kings come from a description of a similar ceremony recorded in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* that speaks of the anointment of Mənilək I, first in a temple in Jerusalem and then in Aksum, where he was anointed with the ‘oil of kingship’. Munro-Hay identifies these practices as: “Evidently mythical tales, based on biblical accounts of royal Israelites’ anointing ceremonies”.⁹⁷ Hence, the pre-Christian element of the Aksumite ritual seems to have come from the *Kəbrä nägäšt* and contained traces of the ancient Semitic ceremony of induction to kingship.

The rite of cutting the cord was very rarely performed and is only described in detail in the chronicle of Śārṣä Dəngəl (1563–97). Yoḥannəs is said to have undergone a strikingly similar ceremony consisting of the rite involving women, who questioned the future king three times on his identity. Śārṣä Dəngəl, according to his chronicle, invoked at this occasion his ancient ancestors by answering: ‘I am the son of David, son of Solomon, son of Əbnä Həkim [Mənilək I]’.⁹⁸ Asked for the second time, he listed three of his recent Solomonic ancestors, Zär’a Ya’əqob, Bə’ədä Maryam and Na’od. The third time he replied with their regal names. The rite displayed powerful legitimising qualities by drawing descent from legitimate rulers of the past. Yoḥannəs and his advisors incorporated this otherwise rarely mentioned procedure into his enthronement to effectively deal with the crucial issue of his claim. Being a northerner, he also drew on the legacy of his region to evoke the symbolism of Aksum that he further stressed in one of his titles *Nəgusä Şəyon* (the king of Şəyon).

The symbolism of Şəyon

The aura surrounding the holy city of Aksum was central to the legitimising project of Yoḥannəs and the coronation rite. Yoḥannəs and his advisors mobilised the potent symbol of Şəyon, reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant and Ethiopians’ being God’s chosen people. The Däbrä Bərhan Şəllase chronicle portrays Aksum as “the seat of the spiritual books, law of the church and the place where baptism started” ... “the second Jerusalem [...] where the law of idols disappeared”.⁹⁹ The holy city is further described as the origin of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and the cradle of Ethiopian civilisation.¹⁰⁰ Aksum and the symbol of Şəyon were central to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

⁹⁷ MUNRO-HAY 2004: 177.

⁹⁸ CONTI ROSSINI 1962: 89ff.

⁹⁹ *DBSChr*, p. 22a.

¹⁰⁰ *DBSChr*, p. 21b.

and particularly useful for the Semitic connection that underpinned the ideology of the state. The legitimising project, which, among other aims, intended to project the continuity of the Ethiopian monarchy through Yoḥannəs' accession fully mobilised his own association with it.

Yoḥannəs' natural connection to Şəyon and Aksum, located in his home province of Təgray, is developed through the emphasis on his lineage and presents him as a guardian and disseminator of the power of Şəyon:

[Yoḥannəs] the light of the law of Şəyon, the guardian [*gäbäz*] of Aksum, the temple of Ak^wasam [...] He renewed the law and the rules of the house of Şəyon as she is the source of law for all countries in the world [...] He was born from the kings of Israel and the *mäk^wannənt* of Ethiopia [...] he is the son of David II, the wise king who brought to Ethiopia the right part of the cross of our lord Jesus from Jerusalem to Ethiopia [...] ¹⁰¹

An important part of the legitimising project was to create the impression that Yoḥannəs faithfully fulfilled and revived the rites of the Aksumite kings. The chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Şəllase attempted this in passages such as these:

Yoḥannəs, king of Şəyon, king of kings was crowned according to the order (law) of his fathers the kings Abrəha, Aşbəha and Gäbrä Mäsqäl.¹⁰²

This Yoḥannəs became a king in accordance with the rules of the books, rules of the monks and advice of the *Məkrä Liqawənt*. The council agreed to make him a king according to the rules of his wise fathers, the kings.¹⁰³

The references to the propriety of the procedure of enthronement create an image of continuity of ancient rites and portray Yoḥannəs as the reviver of both the state and the procedures.

The rite itself evoked symbolism of Şəyon in several other ways. The renewal of the office of the *nəburä əd* coincided with granting him a special role during the coronation.¹⁰⁴ The office and the title is said to date back to Azariah, the son of the head priest of the Israelites in the time of Solomon, who is believed to have brought the tablets of the Law of Moses to Ethiopia. He was a member of an official delegation of the representatives of the clergy and noble families of Israel, who were sent to Ethiopia with

¹⁰¹ *DBSChr*, pp. 1a, 2a and 3a.

¹⁰² *DBSChr*, p. 43b; see also BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 127ff.

¹⁰³ *DBSChr*, p. 43a.

¹⁰⁴ *DBSChr*, p. 71a; BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 85.

Mənilək I.¹⁰⁵ The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle mentions this event: “After some time she [Şəyon] stood up from Jerusalem by the will of God and came to our country by the hand of Azariah the priest and Əbnä Həkim [Mənilək I]”.¹⁰⁶ The including of this reference in *DBSChr*, presenting Azariah as a figure actively involved in the transfer of the Ark to Aksum, brought attention to the office of *nəburä əd*. So visible during the enthronement rite, he symbolically represented Azariah and his presence alluded to a link with Israel claimed by the Ethiopian monarchy.

The ritual and the state apparatus

Yoħannəs’ enthronement carries further clues about the functions of this ceremony. The *DBSChr* chronicle lists numerous clergy and nobles, especially those from outside of the Təgray province. Their presence was unusual and deliberate, since former ceremonies in Aksum were limited to local clergy.¹⁰⁷ The chronicle mentions foreigners, but does not specify who they were and only vaguely indicates where they came from. This is because their participation would not have been of great significance to the legitimising project and the internal political dynamics. The chronicle stresses, instead, that not only were present all provincial rulers who had submitted to Yoħannəs were present, but also a number of other important individuals, such as the so-called *däqiqä mängəst*, the children of the former kings of the *Zämänä məsafənt*. The presence of Yoħannəs’ contenders Təklä Giyorgis II and Yoħannəs III, who were present but restrained, was a powerful reminder that it was Yoħannəs who had been granted the divine sanction, proven by his ability to defeat them. The fact that they were not able to stop him confirmed his selection, the divine favour, the equivalent of what Geertz describes as *baraka* in Morocco.¹⁰⁸ The ritual form, therefore, displayed the divine selection once again and reiterated the social order initially established on the battlefield.

The coronation rite did not only deal with Yoħannəs’ legitimacy, but extended to the state apparatus through which he was going to rule. The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase Chronicle tells us that at dawn on the day of his coronation Yoħannəs entered *məsəllam* to empower four *liqä məq^was* and the *liqä gəbäz* Həyly, who was appointed *nəburä əd* of Aksum. The office of *liqä mək^wäs* was a very important one, especially during Yoħannəs’ reign. The bearer of this title was one of the highest palace functionaries and played an active role in the counselling, royal ceremonies as well as in judi-

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *DBSChr*, p. 71a.

¹⁰⁷ BERRY 1976: 123f.

¹⁰⁸ GEERTZ 1985: 23–31; s. also ORLOWSKA n.d., ch. 2.

cial administration. One of their duties was to supervise the observance of etiquettes of the palace and accompany emperors during official occasions, such as banquets. Moreover, on the battlefield one of them would act as emperor's double to redirect the attention of the enemy; this is probably why this official could also be referred to as *assasač* ('misleaders').¹⁰⁹ Yoḥannəs also bestowed the distinct clothing of authority to his closest circle: *ras* Ar^oayä Dəmšu, his maternal uncle and a powerful noble of Əndärta, *blatta* Gäbrä Kidan, one of the most trusted functionaries and a brother-in-law who was later given the highest non-royal title of *ras bitwäddäd*.¹¹⁰ Šäläqa Alula was made on that day *ligäba* – one of the most important titles granted to court officials responsible for the protocol. Alula, initially in the service of *ras* Araya, would later become one of the most important and talented warlords and a loyal subject of the emperor.

Wag šum Täfäri, the representative of the ruling houses of Wag and Lasta was treated especially respectfully. The tradition of *wag šums* was associated with the downfall of the Zag^we kings who preceded the Solomonids, whose reign dates from 1270. It was then that an agreement was reached between the two parties and although the Zag^we line was to lose power, the *wag šums* would retain their position under the emperor, but with special privileges. Distinguished by the silver *nägarit* (drum), they could beat it right to the gate of the king's palace when visiting the court, unlike other regional rulers. Similarly, they did not have to prostrate themselves in front of the emperor and were allowed to "wash in the golden basin" used by the emperor himself and sit next to him on a silver chair.¹¹¹ They also had the symbolic right to take the royal garments worn by a new emperor on the day of coronation.¹¹² The reference to the 'golden basin' is to the strict hierarchy observed at the feast that was organised after ceremonies and to mark holidays. The feast's strict protocol extended to the use of utensils in the act of washing hands before eating. *Wag šum* Täfäri, the cousin of the recently defeated Täklä Giyorgis II, submitted to Yoḥannəs and was present at the coronation, during which he indeed was treated with all privileges. Täklä Giyorgis, Yoḥannəs' most recent opponent – the previous *wag šum* Gobäze, was also present but restrained, in 'golden chains'. The elevation of Täklä Giyorgis'

¹⁰⁹ BAIRU TAFLA 1987: 938; MAḤTÄMA ŠELLASE WÄLDÄ MÄSQÄL 21962 °A.M.: 646; TÄKLÄ ŠADƏQ MÄK^wƏRIYA 1968 °A.M.: 145.

¹¹⁰ *Bitwäddäd*: lit. beloved, chosen from among the *rases*. Gäbrä Kidan married Yoḥannəs' sister Dənqənäš and they had children together. She was later remarried to Yoḥannəs' rival to imperial power Täklä Giyorgis II.

¹¹¹ *Aläqa* LÄMLÄM n.d, fol. 17; WUDU TAFETE KASSU 1995: 14f.; BAIRU TAFLA 1977: 118f.

¹¹² WUDU TAFETE KASSU 1995: 14.

cousin, *wag šum Täfäri*, and the observance of the agreement between the Zag^we and the Solomonids was also a powerful projection of the medieval tradition associated with the re-establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in the 13th century. It provided an opportunity for Yoḥannəs to yet again associate himself with legitimate kings.

The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle describes the act of appointing and decorating Yoḥannəs' officials as an integral part of the ceremony of his coronation, implying that it constituted a part of the main ritual. The officials present emergence was for the description as not only observers but active participants and their place in the new order of the monarchy as well as the confirmation by the new appointments. Their presence and participation meant that they acknowledged the new order, and they were rewarded with the assignment of a place, either at the court for the closest entourage or the reconfirmation of their position in the provinces. Their ceremonial robes visibly manifested their place in the new order as they took part in the rite of enthronement and projected consensus. The Šəwans from the southern province, who protected their autonomous and by then even independent status, are not mentioned as they did not subscribe to Yoḥannəs' emperorship in 1872. Mənilək of Šəwa was subjected to ceremonies, which, on the one hand degraded himself, on the other allowed him to keep his position as the local ruler while acknowledging the overlordship of Yoḥannəs. Focused entirely on the internal dynamics, Yoḥannəs' coronation did not pay attention to foreigners, in contrast to the coronation of *ase* Həylä Šəllase I in 1930, whose ceremony had a different role to fulfil and was widely attended by international observers.

Conclusion

The change in the political climate of the late 19th century that allowed a wider group of contenders to vie for the throne required a redefinition, a shift in the conception of the Ethiopian kingship. Yoḥannəs and his advisors successfully mined and manipulated past practices in order to link him with the legacy of former, legitimate emperors. The legitimising project carried out reveals that this pre-industrial African society drew on indigenous written records for symbols of authority in order to reshape their kingship, in particular the rules of succession. The masterminds behind Yoḥannəs' ceremony of enthronement and the authors of the written document recounting it, derived their knowledge of legitimising practices from available written records, but also pointed us towards the role of the performative in disseminating the message and effecting the change.

Providing exceptional detail about the ceremony, the chronicle of Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase is an example of the sources that these clerics consulted. Induced with sanctifying powers through its written form, the document essentially served to legitimise the shift from Yoḥannəs' status as head of *mäk^wannənt* and provided justification for his elevation to emperorship. The fact that the chronicle remained unfinished and does not cover the rest of Yoḥannəs' reign, further indicates its purpose as a legitimising tool.

The authors of the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase reveal to us the role of ritual in the legitimising project. They build a case to persuade us that God's selection of *dägğazmač* Kaša was completed and confirmed in the revived ceremony of enthronement in the holy city of Aksum. The initial 'secret selection' was completed in the eyes of the chroniclers, through the enactment that displayed multi-stranded symbolism of the past. The fact that the written document presents the completion of induction to kingship in the performance of the rite or a series of them, allows us to infer that such a form of political behaviour had the ability to achieve it. The act projected the answer to the crucial question, posed during the rite by the respectable women of Aksum, who symbolically blocked Kaša's path into the holy temple of Šəyon and challenged him: 'Who are you? What is your name, what is your faith, and are you coming in peace?' The answer 'I am the king of Šəyon of Ethiopia' captured the essence and the key purpose of the ceremony – Kaša's eligibility for the throne. The performance of the rite and the projection of the re-imagined legitimising practices had the ability to validate the new emperor and his monarchy.

Returning to Buc's concern with the usefulness of sources such as the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle for the study of rituals one needs to agree with their shortcomings. These texts, just like medieval documents, have serious limitations and should be considered in this context. They also carry invaluable insights into the mindset of their contemporaries, here the key ecclesiastics and the court officials are responsible for the ideological project that in their assessment had the ability to persuade and achieve consensus. What we can conclude from it is that ritual must have been the format to achieve the scenario of legitimate rule that the clergymen further elucidated in the chronicle.

The Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle is also an attempt to channel the interpretation of the rite subsequently sanctified by the written form of the document. It is most probable that the ritual did not happen in the exact way described, nevertheless, the Däbrä Bərhan Šəllase chronicle allows us to draw insights into what it ought to be to achieve its purpose. The fact that the legitimising project is embodied in performance further allows us to conclude that the legitimacy of rule and introduction of changes to the 'rules' of state in the late 19th century were projected in the ritual form. The

Däbrä Bərhan Śəllase chronicle is an expression of what in the minds of the authors, conditioned by the cultural context they were in, should persuade. Drawing on all available methods of validating kingship, they produced an elaborate picture justifying and manipulating the shortcomings of Yoḥannəs' claim in a way that they thought was effective.

Those who observed the rite emerge to have been actively involved in it. Their presence defined their position and manifested their support for what the rite was going to achieve – legitimacy for Yoḥannəs' monarchy and the reshaping of the Ethiopian kingship. It was the regional rulers who in the dyadic social structure based on personal ties would have transmitted the message to their subordinates. Since their courts reflected the structure of the imperial one, it was them who were required to subscribe to the imperial idea and the newly proposed revised ideology underpinning it.

Despite its shortcomings, the Däbrä Bərhan Śəllase chronicle does contribute to our understanding of the meaning of the rite of enthronement in the Ethiopian context. The face-to-face interaction, the performative in the Ethiopian political culture, here represented by the revived ritual of enthronement, played an essential role in reaching political consensus.

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Summary

The article and its argument are based on a hitherto unexplored Ethiopian chronicle, which offers a uniquely detailed description of a series of enthronement rites. The article explores and deciphers symbolism displayed in these acts, which was drawn from the past and remodelled to form ideological underpinning for the monarchy of Yoḥannəs IV (1872–89) and to legitimise his imperial project. The article argues that despite the fact that the record of these events is likely to have been ‘adjusted’ by Ethiopian chroniclers, their writings still points to what they thought should happen during a ritual in order for it to be effective. Consequently, the authors of the chronicle revealed to us the role of ritual in the legitimising project of late 19th-century Ethiopia.