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Erving E. Beauregard
University of Dayton

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Menelik II: Another Look

Erving E. Beauregard

Mankind has a penchant for adulation. This trait glows in the great man theory of history. Thomas Carlyle gave the classic rendition of this: "We come now to the last form of Heroism; that which we call Kingship. The Commander over Men; he to whose will our wills are to be subordinated, and loyally surrender ourselves, and find their welfare in doing so, may be reckoned the most important of Great Men."¹ Carlyle, being a racist, raised only Europeans to that supreme hall of the earthly Valhalla. Various writers, historians and other sundry, perhaps lesser, breeds, have entered the fray in order to trumpet the virtues of African leaders.

One monarch whose private and public qualities have been rapturously lilted to the four quarters of the earth has been Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia. Indeed, the treatment of this King of Kings is reminiscent of Dante's words as applied to the sixth heaven of Paradise:

How well is loved in heaven the righteous king;
Which he betokens by his radiant seeming.²

Adventurer and arm-chair theorist, explorer and concessionaire, diplomat and university student, journalist and scholar—many of such diverse callings have discerned in Menelik II the mark of the quintessence of statesmanship, military glory, reform and modernization. For these persons, members of several nationalities, Menelik II was the veritable foundation of present day Ethiopia because of his unstinting work, first as the King of Shewa 1865-1889 and then as the King of Kings of Ethiopia 1889-1913, most notably 1889-1909. This view has won practically universal approval in textbooks on the history of Africa, the history of modern Europe, the history of the modern world and the history of civilization.³ Truly there seems to be an unchallengeable position in the universal pantheon for Menelik II.

Now a swift move into the camp of the hero-worshippers. Even the most ardent of his admirers would acknowledge that some of the attraction of Menelik II lay in certain circumstances of his ancestry. Born in 1844, he belonged to that branch of the reputed House of Solomon domiciled since about 1700 in the Kingdom of Shewa, one of the realms of the Empire of Ethiopia. His grandfather, Sahlé Selassié, King of Shewa 1813-1847, completed the process of conquering and consolidating Shewa, and won plaudits from foreign visitors.⁴ Sahlé Selassié's son and successor, Haile Malakot, struggled to maintain Shewa's autonomy against the centralizing power of Tewodros II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, but died in this endeavor in 1855.⁵

Menelik, then called Sahlé Mariam and eleven years of age, was taken hostage by Tewodros II and brought to the imperial capital, Magdala.⁶ There Tewodros treated Sahlé Mariam like a prince⁷ and eventually gave him the hand of one of his daughters.⁸ In 1865 Sahlé Mariam escaped from Magdala and made his way to Shewa where he was crowned King Menelik of Shewa.⁹

Thereupon Menelik labored to expand Shewa. In 1875 he acquired parts of Gurage; subdued Kaffa in 1881 as well as Jimma, Limmu, Geva and Guma; occupied Wallaga and Arussi in 1886 and Harar in 1887; and in 1889 annexed the rest of Gurage and also Konta and Kulo.¹⁰ Menelik "had moved Christian Semitic power back into areas where it had not existed since the 16th century."¹¹ Moreover, shortly before King of Kings Yohannes IV's death in 1889, Menelik "allowed a return to religious tolerance and amity" among the conquered Gallas.¹²

With Menelik II's accession as King of Kings of Ethiopia the encomiums accelerate. "His reign was one of intense activity in every field."¹³ He was the masterly personage who accepted guns and cartridges from the Italians in anticipation of the day when he must use them to beat back the dastardly Italian attempt to impose a protectorate over the holy soil of Orthodox Ethiopia. He was the soul of statesmanship in wielding together utterly heterogeneous forces—Amharas, Tigréans, Gojjamites, Gallas, Somalis—in reacting to the Italian invasion of 1895-1896. Menelik II was, moreover, the actual architect of victory on that noblest day in the millenia-old history of the land of the Queen of Sheba, March 1, 1896, the Battle of Adua.¹⁴ Thereupon, this warrior-emperor, who had distinguished himself in combat, acted magnanimously to the vanquished Italians.¹⁵

Furthermore the praise-singers affirm, Menelik II followed up military victory with diplomatic success. He secured the recognition of Ethiopia's independence by treaties with the great Powers. He received diplomats and others who became his staunchest admirers.¹⁶

In addition, this King of Kings of Ethiopia continued his policy of expansion which he had begun as King of Shewa. His agents pushed on in the south and west. Menelik II thus created the present Empire of Ethiopia.¹⁷

Also, the court historians chant, Menelik II defended his realm against "The Mad Mullah of Somalilan." Menelik wisely joined British forces in driving back this upstart leader of primitive nomads.¹⁸

Moreover, the eulogists proclaim, Menelik II played the principal role in modernizing the realm established by the first Menelik. He centralized the government and employed loyal civil servants. He ordered the construction of the new capital Addis Ababa, named fittingly after his able collaborator, Empress Taitu. He brought about the beginning of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway, a road system and modern bridges. Menelik II also abolished slavery and inaugurated the first national currency. He introduced electricity, the telegraph and telephone, postal system, vaccination, a hospital and a school.¹⁹

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The panegyrists strongly note Menelik II's private virtues. His piety, disciplined life, generosity, openheartedness, willingness to work with his hands, wide range of interests (the world at large, Russia, Japan, India, the United States of America), gadgets, the automobile simplicity, plain garb, humor, his being loved by his countrymen—all these are blown skyward by the modern heralds.²⁰

Finally the devotees of the Menelikian cult point with pride to Menelik II's loyalty to duty as illness, beginning in 1906, increasingly debilitated him. In 1908 he signed important treaties settling longstanding boundary disputes, chose his grandson as his successor and arranged for that person's marriage to a granddaughter of Emperor Yohannes IV.²¹ In 1909 Menelik became totally incapacitated but lingered on until December 12, 1913.²²

Such is a sketch of the life of Menelik II as seen by the upholders of the image of the great man. Is there another view? Indeed, is it possible for a prosecutor to draw up an indictment of Menelik II before a bar of justice? May a writer stand with that school which "deems the canonisation of the historic past more perilous than ignorance or denial, because it would perpetuate the reign of sin and acknowledge the sovereignty of wrong, and conceives it the part of real greatness to know to stand and fall alone, stemming for a lifetime, the contemporary flood."?²³ Let me echo this profound thought by attempting to construct a bill of charges against Menelik II.

The scene begins with Menelik, i.e., Sahlé Mariam as he was then called, escaping from captivity at Magdala, this being possible because the truly tragic Emperor Tewodros II was engaging in one of his increasingly frequent orgies. Sahlé Mariam obtained refuge from Queen Woizero Worqet of the Wello Gallas. When this monarch refused to turn Sahlé Mariam over to Tewodros II, the latter had her hostage son, called the Imam, executed.²⁴ Woizero Worqet allowed Sahlé Mariam to proceed to Shewa. Sahlé Mariam expressed no gratitude to her. Later he repaid the Gallas with fire and sword, dispossession of land and heavy taxation.

When Sahlé Mariam returned to Shewa, there was no spontaneous outburst of welcome. Veritably there was armed opposition. Sahlé Mariam was opposed by his cousin, Bezu Aba Dika. Sahlé Mariam triumphed and ordered Bezu Aba Dika burned alive in wax-soaked bandages.²⁵ Sahlé Mariam was then crowned Menelik II, King of Shewa.

Menelik II now undertook to expand Shewa's borders. His eyes focused first on the rich lands of the Gallas, beginning with those to the north and then shifting to the areas south and west of Shewa. All these he proposed to conquer with out-of-date small arms purchased from French adventurers.²⁶ Menelik II thereupon in wanton aggression assailed a prosperous and industrious people engaged in agriculture and cattle raising. His troops overran the lands of the courageous but disunited Gallas. Then this king of Shewa ordered the permanent occupation of districts "with permanent garrisons of his own troops, providing at the same time for their ad-

ministration under a hierarchy of his own officials. In most cases he reduced the unfortunate natives to the position of *gabars*, little better than serfs, who in return for exemption from massacre were forced to pay tithes, to provision his troops, and to render many heavy personal services, such as forced labor for sixty or seventy days in the year or in war-time acting as baggage carriers."²⁷

Another area which Menelik II's soldiers overwhelmed was the Sultanate of Harar. This was an area which "Between the days of Mohammed Gran's conquests in the sixteenth century and the capture of the city (Harar, the capital) by Menelik II, after the defeat of the last emir in 1886, Harar lay outside the stream of Ethiopian history."²⁸ Nevertheless, Shewan troops conquered the realm.

Menelik II's Shewa also participated in imperialism in the case of the state of Wellegga. Kumsa, King of Wellegga, agreed to making his kingdom a vassal of Menelik II provided that land ownership would not be altered. Ultimately the Shewan government broke the agreement by imposing the notorious *gabar* system.²⁹

Menelik II also made a tributary state of the Sultanate of Jimma Abba Jifar. This area was permitted internal autonomy at the cost of heavy tribute. Here the slave trade flourished openly until late in Menelik II's reign as King of Kings of Ethiopia and slave-ownership continued openly until the 1930's.³⁰ Furthermore, Menelik II, who has been loudly acclaimed as a great humanitarian, received slaves as tribute from Abba Jifar II, Sultan of Jimma Abba Jifar.³¹

One must note another serious charge against Menelik II. As King of Shewa "he could and did acquiesce in the territorial encroachments of foreigners. He traded concessions and alliances for the arms and gold which he so badly needed, and he could agree with an easy conscience to the suppression of one of his rival Ethiopian neighbors, as long as no collusion with the Moslems was involved."³²

Very damaging to Menelik II's reputation were his actions toward the Empire of Ethiopia while he was King of Shewa. Instead of being an outstanding Ethiopian patriot, he played the role of a coldly calculating pragmatic politician, veritably a knave standing by to profit by Yohannes IV's death. In 1875 and 1876 the Ethiopian forces of Khedive Ismail invaded Ethiopia. At the battles of Gundet and Gura the imperial forces of Yohannes IV won glorious victories, victories due to the energies of Ethiopians except Shewans because Menelik II held aloof.³³ In 1887 Italy invaded Ethiopia but her forces were annihilated at Dogali by Ras Alula, Yohannes IV's general; again Menelik II gave no help to the Emperor of Ethiopia. On the contrary, Menelik II and Italy made an agreement in 1888,³⁴ thus sealing the friendship between Menelik II and the Italian monarchy which had begun in 1872.³⁵ Moreover, Menelik II sent no support to Yohannes IV when the Sudanese Mahdists invaded Ethiopia in 1889; Menelik even encouraged Yohannes IV's other royal vassal, King Taklé Haymanot of Gojjam, to rise in rebellion. Yohannes IV suppressed this infamous deed and rallied all of Ethiopia, except Shewa, to face the Mahdists; fighting courageously, Yohannes IV lost his life in the Battle of Gallabat in 1889.³⁶

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Menelik II's treachery should be noted in the light of his earlier relations with Emperor Yohannes IV. In 1878 when the latter invaded Shewa, Menelik II "submitted without fighting and consented to receive his crown from the Emperor's hands."³⁷ In 1882 Yohannes IV and Menelik II agreed that the former's son, Aria Sellasie, would marry Menelik's daughter, Zauditu; Yohannes recognized Menelik as his immediate successor as King of Kings of Ethiopia; in turn, Menelik recognized Aria Sellasie as his imperial successor.³⁸ Sometime in 1888 the eighteen-year old Aria Sellasie died.

The critical eye now turns to Menelik II as King of Kings of Ethiopia. His relations with the Italians can be faulted. Upon his imperial accession Menelik II made no move to stop the Italian advance in the land that they came to call Eritrea in 1890, indeed "taking in all the wide plateau lands of a Christian province."³⁹ Furthermore, Menelik II in May, 1889 willingly signed the notorious Treaty of Wuchalé which confirmed Italian possession of Massawa, the Red Sea lowlands and parts of the Eritrean highlands including Asmara.⁴⁰ This is the very region from which Italy launched her attack on Ethiopia in 1895-96 and also one of the two areas from which Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935-36. Moreover, the Treaty of Wuchalé permits one to question the high intelligence that court historians have assigned to Menelik II. Why, in the Amharic version, did Menelik accept the option of using the Italian government as intermediary in negotiations with other powers; this option, in the Italian version, being changed to mean consent. Did not Menelik see the obvious scenario, viz., "the slow establishing of a protectorate by blandishment and purchase."⁴¹ Actually in October, 1889 Italy formally informed all the European Powers the establishment of her protectorate over Ethiopia.⁴² It was not until May, 1893 than Menelik II formally denounced the Treaty of Wuchalé.⁴³

The upshot was the battle of Adowa on March 1, 1896, called the finest day in Ethiopian history. However, Menelik "never really wanted a battle and would have preferred to negotiate."⁴⁴ The victory was due to Ras Alula and Italian incompetence.⁴⁵ Moreover, "had Menelik not ordered all his troops back into camp on the evening of the battle, the cavalry could have cut off the few passes available and exterminated the whole Italian army."⁴⁶

Furthermore, Menelik II did not move to drive the Italians into the Red Sea. He feared the arrival of many new enemies and did not love spilling blood.⁴⁷ It is also most important to recall Menelik's failure to press claims to Eritrea in the peace treaty with Italy in October, 1896.⁴⁸

Menelik was happy to depart from the north. He was never loved by the Tigréans who remembered his deplorable actions against their beloved Yohannes IV. Additionally, they frowned on Menelik for he had not been crowned King of Kings of Ethiopia at the traditional spot, Aksum, in Tigré but instead at Entotto in Shewa.⁴⁹ Indeed, the traditional Tigréan-Shewan rivalry "exacerbated by the sacking of villages led to many skirmishes as Menelik's Shewan army turned south again. They culminated in a severe defeat inflicted by the Azebu Galla; in all, more men were lost on the return journey than on the field of Adowa!"⁵⁰

Notwithstanding his self-proclaimed aversion to the spilling of blood, Menelik, as Emperor of Ethiopia, practiced imperialism at the expense of other Africans. He carried on the policy he had inaugurated as King of Shewa. For instance, he sent the combined forces of Shewa and Jimma Abba Jifar against the ancient and venerable Kingdom of Kaffa; the people of Kaffa, having only spears, resisted for eight months before being vanquished; the victors then burned the capital.⁵¹ Menelik's southward expansion was helped by the effects of the great Ethiopian famine of 1888-1892; "the economic dislocation facilitated the southward movement of Menelik's forces, for the semi-nomadic Gallas . . . suffered particularly acutely from the rinderpest and were therefore less able to resist Menelik's forces than might otherwise have been the case."⁵²

Menelik II's eastward-expanding empire found a formidable foe in Muhammad Abdullah Hassan, rightfully styled "The Poor Man of God" and ignorantly called "The Mad Mullah of Somaliland." In 1900 his daring attack on the new Ethiopian fort at Jijiga greatly shook the Ethiopians. Large scale Anglo-Ethiopian operations in 1901 against the dervish followers of "The Poor Man of God" accomplished little. Twice more in 1903 sizeable Anglo-Ethiopian armies failed to make notable headway against the numerically inferior forces of Abdullah Hassan.⁵³

Menelik's conquests scarcely improved the lot of the people. "Large amounts of land were given to loyal civil and military servants of the Crown."⁵⁴ Moreover, the reactionary Ethiopian Orthodox Church "systematically acquired one-fourth of all lands in the annexed areas."⁵⁵

Menelik's government's has been described as "a military despotism tempered by distance." The foundation of the Emperor's power was the Shewan army of which, like the Pretorian guard of imperial Rome, he took good care. Himself governing Shewa and Ifat, Menelik II ruled the newly conquered countries through military officers of his own choosing, officers in charge of garrisons of his own troops.⁵⁶ Menelik's appointees to the provincial governorships were generally his kinsmen or connections by marriage. These individuals were surrounded with minor officials, envious of the governor's position and ever ready to report any indiscretion on his part to the imperial capital. Each province was divided into districts, and each district into groups of villages, every unit being under its appropriate official who was only responsible to his immediate superior. Thus the Emperor's orders as they filtered down could be easily watered.⁵⁷ The regime inevitably came to be equated with oppression.⁵⁸

In addition, Menelik himself can be accused of hypocrisy. For example, in 1889 he "prohibited members of the Coptic Church (i.e., Ethiopian Orthodox Church) from selling and purchasing slaves. Such provisions, however, were wholly ineffective, because the Emperor himself continued the old practices."⁵⁹

One may also wonder about other so-called innovations of Menelik. The Addis Ababa-Djibuti railway, on which construction began in 1897, faced all kinds of ob-

stacles and did not reach Addis Ababa until 1918, five years after Menelik's death.⁶⁰ "In road-making Menelik was even less successful."⁶¹ The Emperor's spasmodic efforts to develop Ethiopia's rich resources met with but little success.⁶² Menelik failed in legal reform and in forbidding the importation of alcoholic beverages.⁶³ Menelik introduction of an advisory council and of ministers to aid him in affairs of state has been overrated.⁶⁴

Menelik II's private life was not blameless. He could be narrow-minded, e.g., referring "to his country as an 'island of Christians in a sea of pagans,' the pagans being Moslems, Falashas, as well as other non-Christians."⁶⁵ He had no esthetic feelings.⁶⁶ His piety might be viewed as excessive due to spending the hours three to five a.m. in devotions.⁶⁷ Moreover, for years his sexual life had been highly irregular. He abandoned his first wife, Tewodros II's daughter who had helped him to escape from Magdala, in order to marry a pretty Galla princess. Then he married a noble Shewan, Bafana. He had numerous affairs, the result being some illegitimate children. Finally he settled down with his fourth wife, the scheming Taitu, this union being barren.⁶⁸

Lastly, a writer may venture perhaps uncharitably into Menelik II's last years. The paralytic Emperor became a pawn in the power struggle for the regency and imperial succession. In one imbroglio Menelik had to be carried to safety in a cellar.⁶⁹ So often was his death reported that the international press was most skeptical when the Ethiopian authorities issued the official notice of Menelik's death in December, 1913.⁷⁰ However, there may be substance for the belief that Menelik expired in November, 1909.⁷¹

In conclusion, one school, call it orthodoxy, regards Menelik II as the astute statesman, the valiant warrior-emperor bent on reunifying the Empire of Ethiopia, the modernizer of an ancient realm, a man of almost universal interests, a humane and selfless individual, a tragic figure in his last years, and the creator of the modern Empire of Ethiopia blessed with his innovations. Another school, name it revisionism, views Menelik II as a machiavellian pragmatist, a slaughterer bending the land of Ethiopia and nearby states to his selfish purposes, a superficial reformer, a man of shallow interests, a hypocritical and sensual individual, a pitiful form in his final years, and the creator of modern Ethiopia burdened with his retrogressive legacy.

Thus the pros and cons have permitted another look at Menelik II.

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