On the Dating of the Ethiopian Dynastic Treatise *Kəbrä nəgāšt*: New Evidence

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Abstract

The present article argues the garbled text of the Lev. 18:8 as found in the Ethiopian dynastic treatise *Kəbrä nəgāšt* to be intentional. It refers to the conflict between the King of Ethiopia ‘Amdä Şəyon I (1314–1344) and the Däbrä Libanos monastic congregation. The author argues that the second half of that verse was deliberately changed in order to make the royal marriage of ‘Amdä Şəyon I to a wife/concubine of his late father to be seen as the mother – son incest. The conflict took place in the 27th year of the reign of ‘Amdä Şəyon I. The new interpretation of the Lev. 18:8 as appears in the *Kəbrä nəgāšt* allows to attribute the treatise rather precisely: the *terminus ante quem non* can be set from the beginning of the 40s of the 14th century AD, i.e. somewhere in the 1340s.

Keywords

Ethiopian Christian state – monarchy and monasticism in medieval Ethiopia – Solomonic dynasty – King ‘Amdä Şəyon I – dynastic treatise *Kəbrä nəgāšt* – Ethiopic version of the Bible

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The Ethiopian dynastic chronicle *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, or the “Nobility of the Kings,”¹ was written in Ge’ez language. One of its aims was to justify the right of descendants of the Biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba to the supreme power in the Christian Ethiopia. Its precise attribution has since been one of the major topics in Ethiopian studies. Professor Sevir B. Chernetsov (1943–2005) had significantly contributed to this attribution. He saw Ya’əbikā Ēgzi’, the hereditary ruler of the region Ēndārta in south-eastern Təgray in 1314–1322² to be instrumental for the whole concept of this historical opus. Ya’əbikā Ēgzi’ was soon removed from power by ‘Amdä Šəyon 1 the King of Ethiopia (1314–1344), who made a full use of the concept for legitimization of the dynasty developed by his unhappy rival himself. It should be noted that the so-called Solomonid dynasty was founded by his grandfather the King Yəkunno Amlak in 1270 as a result of the *coup d’État* which overthrew the previous dynasty of Zagwe.³

The suggestions brought forward by the Russian Professor of Ethiopian Studies have been enthusiastically met by his colleagues all over the world. Being called as “a new and interesting approach” they were mentioned in full in the leading article of the international project *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.⁴ However, the debate on the exact date of transcription of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* is not over. For example, a French Syrologist Muriel Debié some years ago saw in the chronicle “un apocryphe du VI^e s. à la gloire du roi Caleb.”⁵ According to Debié, the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* would have been written shortly after the Ĥimyar-Aksumite war which was unleashed to revenge for atrocities the Christian martyrs from the oasis of Nagrān suffered from by the Jewish King of Ĥimyar Yosef (Masrūq).⁶ This suggestion as appeared in a reputable volume is at least surprising. One knows that the hagiographic tradition linked with the veneration

1 The traditional translation of that title as the “Glory of the Kings” is less accurate.

2 The name of that “righteous prince beloved by Lord” is found in the colophon to the treatise (*Kebra Nagast: Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, hrsg. und mit deutscher Übersetzung versehen von C. Bezold (Abhandlungen der Königlichen Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1. Klasse, XXIII. Bd, 1. Abt.), München, 1905, S. 172, Kol. 2.12–13).

3 С. Б. Чернецов, *Эфиопская феодальная монархия в XIII–XVII вв.* (S. B. Chernetsov, *The Ethiopian Feudal Monarchy in the 13th–16th centuries AD*), Moscow, 1982, pp. 35–40.

4 P. Marrassini, “Kəbrä nəgäšt,” in: *EAE*, Vol. 3, 2007, pp. 365–366.

5 M. Debié, “Le *Kebra Nagast* éthiopien: une réponse apocryphe aux événements de Najran?,” in: *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux V^e et VI^e siècles: regards croisés sur les sources*, éd. J. Beaucamp, Fr. Briquel-Chatonnet et Ch. J. Robin (Collège de France – CNRS. Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance. Monographies 32. Le massacre de Najrān. Religion et politique en Arabie du Sud au VI^e siècle, II), Paris, 2010, pp. 255–278, here p. 257.

6 M. Debié, “Le *Kebra Nagast* éthiopien.”

in the quotation of a rather large Biblical fragment (Lev. 18:5/6–15) included in the chapter XLII of the *Kəbrā nāgāst*.¹¹

The alteration of the Biblical text invites to see a reflection of the conflict, which took place between the King ‘Amdä Šəyon I and the southern monastic congregation of Däbrä Libanos because of the increasing land acquisitions by the monasteries in South Ethiopia hindered by the King. In outward appearance this conflict took a shape of the condemnation of the monarch’s polygamy by a number of clerics. The condemnation itself took place in the 27th year of the reign¹² of the King ‘Amdä Šəyon I. It reached its pinnacle when the King for political reasons married one of his late father’s concubines or wives. Then the clerics did even accuse him of incest because from the point of view of the ecclesiastical law this woman technically ranked to his mother.

Those condemnation found their reflection in other known texts. Thus the *Life of St. Philip of Däbrä Libanos* who was the second abbot of that monastery says: *And when our Father Philip was staying in such a way, the men, who knew sorcery, seduced the king and said to the king whose name was ‘Amdä Šəyon: ‘Take the wife of thy father. What does it matter to thee: in any case thou wilt not marry that who gave birth to thee. And we know that thy kingdom will persist, if thou marriest her, otherwise, it will not persist* (ወእንዘ: ሀሎ: አቡነ: ፊልጶስ: በዘከሙዝ: ግብር: ናሁ: አስሐትዎ: ለንጉሥ: ሰብእ: እለ: የአምሩ: ሰገለ: ወይቤልዎ: ለንጉሥ: ዘስሙ: ዓምደ: ጽዮን: ንግእ: ብእሲተ: አቡኩ: ሚላዕሌኩ: እመ: አውሰብኩ: ዘኢወለደተኩ: ወባሕተ: ንሕነ: አእመርነ: ከመ: ትቀውም: መንገሥትኩ: እመ: አውሰብኩ: ኪያሃ: ወእመ: አኮሰ: ኢትቀውም:).¹³ There is no doubt that St Philip disapproved of the royal marriage and clearly accused the King of incest: *And the king said to him: ‘Be ashamed, oh monk!’ And our Father Philip said to him: ‘Be ashamed, thou who married the mother like a brute beast! ...’* (ወይቤሎ: ንጉሥ: አንተ: መነኮሰ: ጎፈር: ወይቤሎ: አቡነ: ፊልጶስ: ጎፈርሰ: አንተ: ጎፈር: ዘታወሰብ: እመክ: ከመ: እንስሳ: እለ: አልቦሙ: ልብ:).¹⁴

The so-called “Shorter Chronicle,” which was also compiled in the monastic milieu, again re-iterates the charges against ‘Amdä Šəyon I: *Then in those days*

¹¹ Cf. *Kebra Nagast*, S. 43, Kol. 1.3–2.3.

¹² Чернецов, *Эфиопская феодалная монархия*, pp. 54–56; J. Mantel-Niećko, D. Nosnitsin, “‘Amdä Šəyon I,” in: *EAEE*, Vol. 1, 2003, pp. 228–229. It is interesting to note that Boris A. Turayev did not see any socio-economical background underlay this conflict. He wrote that “the noble defenders of Christian morals” among the monks of Däbrä Libanos “raised their voice against the lawless act of the king” (Б. А. Тураев, *Исследования в области агиологических источников истории Эфиопии* (B. A. Turayev, *Studies in the Field of Hagiological Sources of the History of Ethiopia*), St. Petersburg, 1902, p. 118).

¹³ *Monumenta aethiopiae hagiologica*, ed. B. Turaiev, fasc. 1: *Vita Philippi Dabralibanensis ad fidem manuscriptorum Orient.* 728 *Musei Britannici edita*, Lipsia, 1902, p. 37.11–16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, fasc. 1, p. 42.15–17.

the persecution of Däbrä Libanos took place, since Abbâ Honorius of Šagağğa excommunicated the king 'Amdä Šəyon, when he took the concubine of his father. There were those, who said that he fornicated with his sister, and those, who said that he committed the obscene act with two sisters (ወካዕበ: በመዋዕሊሆሙ: ኮነ: ሰደተ: ዘደብረ: ሊባኖስ: እስመ: አባ: አኖሬዎስ: ዘጽጋጃ: አውገዞ: ለሐዜ: ዓምደ: ጽዮን: ሶበ: ነሥአ: ዕቅብተ: አቡሁ: ቦ: እለ: ይቤሉ: ዘመወ: በእኅቱ: ወቦ: እለ: ይቤሉ: አበሰ: በ፪ኤ: አሐት:).¹⁵

The cited information about the King 'Amdä Šəyon I's marriage and the acrimonious invectives sent by the monks leave no doubt that the direct quotation from the Scriptures *it is thy father's nakedness* (Lev. 18:8) in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* was transferred into an obvious allusion by intentional changes to *it is thy mother's nakedness*. Such an obvious change did support the accusation of the King 'Amdä Šəyon I of incest brought forward by the Ethiopian monks. Witty and intelligent, that allusion, however, could be understood by a very few people who received the traditional education and mastered the Ge'ez language. As a result the "defenders of Christian morals" committed a real falsification of the Holy Scripture for self-interested motives.

The above mentioned conflict between King 'Amdä Šəyon I and the Däbrä Libanos monastic congregation took place in the last years of his reign, *i.e.* somewhere between 1340 and 1345. This short period can be justly considered as the *terminus ante quem non* for the final version of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*.

15 R. Basset, "Études sur l'histoire d'Éthiopie," *Journal Asiatique*, 7^{ème} série, XVII (1881), p. 324.21–25. The French translation of that passage is not always exact (cf. R. Basset, "Études sur l'histoire d'Éthiopie," *Journal Asiatique*, 7^{ème} série, XVIII (1881), p. 93).