

EARLY TRAVELLERS IN ABYSSINIA¹

PART II

IN April of the following year (1526) the Mission eventually got away, taking with it an Abyssinian envoy and leaving a certain man named Bermudez behind as hostage for the envoy. Of Bermudez we shall hear again later.

The departure of the Portuguese Mission was closely followed by two serious catastrophes—the most serious, indeed, in the history of Abyssinia—namely, the invasion by the Moslems under the Imam Ahmad, which began in 1527 and lasted nearly twenty years; and the irruption of the Galla, which assumed serious dimensions in 1537 and was undoubtedly promoted by the Moslem invasion; for though the Galla did not join forces with the Imam, they followed in his wake and occupied the districts which he had devastated.

The invasions of Abyssinia by Ahmad Grañ, which covered a period of twenty years, came nearer to extinguishing the empire of the remote Christians than any event in their long history, and though the Portuguese forces sent to its relief were ridiculously inadequate, it may be fairly claimed that they saved the country from falling permanently into the hands of a Moslem power. The arrival of the Galla undoubtedly played an important part in the preservation of Abyssinian isolation and integrity, though this may sound paradoxical.

Although the Imam Ahmad during a period of twenty years led his troops more than once from Bali in the south to Tigré in the north, and made many converts wherever he went, he never succeeded in colonising the country with Somalis, who were of a far lower culture than the Abyssinians and of course numerically far fewer. As soon as he withdrew from a province the inhabitants speedily reverted to Christianity; ready, however, to confess Islam on the reappearance of the conqueror.

¹ This paper was read at a Meeting of the African Society held at the Royal Society of Arts on 29th March, 1922. For report of other proceedings on this occasion see JOURNAL for July 1922, p. 322.

The Rise of the Imam Ahmad.—At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Ethiopian kingdom under King David [Lebna Dengel] was at the zenith of its power. The Islamic country known as Sa'd ub-Din's Land, or Adel, paid tribute to the Abyssinians. When Lebna Dengel came to the throne in 1508 as a boy of twelve years of age, his mother, Queen Helena, really ruled the country, and he did not assume full powers until 1514. His first great success was a decisive victory over the Sultan of Adel in 1517. It is interesting to recall that in this same year the Portuguese viceroy, Lopo Soarez, returning from an unsuccessful expedition into the Red Sea, entered the port of Zeyla, the chief city of the Sultans of Adel, and set the town in flames. This he did without any idea of helping the Abyssinians. Indeed he had on board his own ship, as we have seen, the ambassador Matheus,¹ whom he still regarded with suspicion.

In 1527 there arose in the Sultanate of Adel a capable and courageous soldier known as the Imam Ahmad, and called *Grañ*, because his left hand was like his right, who, throwing off his allegiance to Lebna Dengel, began invading the country called Fatagar. The Portuguese writers suggest that he received assistance and arms and men from the Ottoman Turks, who were now in possession of Egypt and controlled the Red Sea. The Abyssinian legend regarding the rise of Ahmad Grañ is sufficiently curious to justify my reading it to you.

"Let us write about the doings of Grañ and the miracles performed by God at the time when the king, Lebna Dengel, reigned over the kingdom under the name of Wanag Sagad. Here is the story of the rise of Grañ.

"In the beginning of the reign, at the close of the nineteenth year, the king, Lebna Dengel, had no enemies to fight. He saw, not only that he had no enemies, but also a very large number of troops, and he gave orders for a census of these to be taken. When they were numbered, it was found that there were 900,000 robust young men, besides the rest, in the army. In consequence, he became very arrogant and boastful; his

¹ Correa, Vol. II., p. 487.

slaves said: 'All this, and of what use? As we have no military expeditions, our horsemen are growing fat and flabby, and we are becoming effeminate like women; so that we shall forget the arts of fighting. Let us divide ourselves into two armies, and fight each other; or, better still, let us pray to God that He may procure us an enemy in order that we may avoid fighting each other.' The king, hearing this, was pleased, and ordered the priests to make supplications, burning incense (twelve loads of it) in all the churches, and singing the praises of the beloved Jesus; in all the churches which were in the four quarters of the earth the priests fulfilled this pious duty. Furthermore, they struck 300 blows upon the earth, saying: 'Let our enemies appear.' The earth groaned, and God heard the groan.

"Just as humility transcends all other virtues, so is arrogance the worst of all the sins. God observing this arrogance caused Grañ to arise. The father of Grañ was Mamad (Muhammad): he paid, as tribute to the Abyssinian king, 700 white mules: his kingdom was Adel.

"Knowing that God had made him an enemy of the king, Mamad, when at the point of death said to his son Grañ:— 'After my death, do not continue to pay tribute to the king: go out against him and make war on him. God, having made you his enemy, will give you victory over him.' Grañ sent to announce the death of his father to the King of Abyssinia, who sent answer saying: 'I will give to you the Governorship held by your father, but you must pay tribute.' Grañ said: 'I will not pay.' Whereupon the King placed at the head of his army a general named Degal, and sent him to Adel: Degal, having defeated the Mussulmans of Adel and taken much booty, returned.

"Then Grañ arose and followed him, and having, in his turn, defeated the enemy and retaken the prisoners, went to his country."¹

Finding himself in such dire straits, the King Lebna Dengel, some time between 1533 and 1535, sent Bermudez who had, as we have seen, been left behind as a hostage, to beg material

¹ See Guidi's *Leggende storiche di Abissinia*, published in *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, anno I, Vol. I., Rome, 1907.

help from the King of Portugal. Bermudez was successful in his mission and left Portugal again for India in 1538.

When the Abyssinian king called on the Portuguese for help, the fame of their Indian conquests had spread to both the shores of the Red Sea, while he had nothing but the name and dignity of a king; his army and his empire had disappeared before the victorious armies of the Imam Ahmad. He fled from province to province, from *amba* to *amba*, accompanied by a handful of devoted captains. The Muhammadans naturally set about a campaign of conversion, and the people often found it preferable to accept Islam rather than to pay the tribute and endure the ill-treatment of the invaders. Monasteries and churches were pillaged and burnt. The clergy alone remained steadfast, and displayed heroic courage in the face of death.

It looked as if all Ethiopia were about to become a Mussulman state.

It is curious to remember that in the early days of Islam, when the sword and the book were sweeping over half Asia, Ethiopia remained untouched. It is quite conceivable that the early Moslems retained a memory of the fact that Abyssinia had been the asylum of these first converts to Islam prior to the Hijra.

But Ahmad was given no time to consolidate his conquests, and it would have required more than one generation of Muhammadan dominion to change the heart of this population, which resisted with such obstinacy the slightest modification of their own rites.

The incursions of the Galla were a very different matter. In the first place they were far more numerous than the Somalis, and they had to deal with a population worn out by their continued fighting with the Moslems; moreover, they brought with them their flocks and established themselves in the best pasture grounds in the heart of the Abyssinian kingdom. Having no interest in converting the inhabitants to their own religion, they ruthlessly murdered all who fell into their hands, and had it not been for the want of unity and cohesion among the various Galla tribes, they might very well have swamped the whole of the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia.

They at any rate succeeded in splitting this kingdom into two halves.

The Abyssinians in their writings account for their defeat at the hands of the Galla by explaining that whereas all the Galla are fighting men, the Abyssinians divide their men into ten classes, of whom nine never take part in warfare. These are the monks, the clerks, the lawyers, the women's grooms, the elders, the agricultural labourers, traders, artisans and musicians. The tenth class is the military, and as they were few their country was over-run !

I wish I had more time to-day to tell you more about these interesting people, who have a language of their own—the most widely spoken vernacular in Abyssinia to-day—a most interesting and curious tribal organisation and a peculiar religion. A very distinguished member of our Society, Professor Alice Werner, has contributed two important articles on the Galla to our JOURNAL, which may be usefully consulted by those who are interested. It will suffice here if I say that the Galla to-day are distributed over the Harar plateau as far as Lake Stephanie in the west and the Boran country in the south; and that they have driven a wedge into the heart of Abyssinia proper in the Wolo Galla country. Nothing is known of their early history, and no one has been able to determine whence they originally came. They are estimated at about 10,000,000 souls to-day, of whom many profess Islam. In their own religion they recognise a Supreme Deity to whom they pray, with lesser gods and goddesses below. They pay much attention to the worship of certain trees, and practise divination by the inspection of the interiors of slaughtered cows. They explain the origin of this divination by the following tradition: The Jews, Christians and Galla had a sacred book bestowed on them, but the Galla, with their usual carelessness, left their copy lying about and it was eaten by a cow, so that ever since they have looked for guidance inside that animal—and always in the hope of recovering the book !

We must now return to the Mission of Bermudez and describe the action which the Portuguese took in response to the appeal from the King of Ethiopia. Bermudez, having been appointed

Patriarch of Ethiopia by the Pope, reached India again in 1538. Owing to Sulayman Pasha's abortive attack on Diu in that year, no thought of an expedition to the Red Sea was to be entertained, and it was not until two years later, when Estavão da Gama had succeeded to the Governorship of Portuguese India, that a fresh expedition was proposed. The two objects of this expedition were—(1) to destroy the new Turkish fleet which was being equipped in Suez by Sulayman Pasha, and (2) to land an armed force to go to the aid of the Abyssinians.

In 1540 Don Garcia de Noronha, Viceroy of Portuguese India, died, and was succeeded by Estavão da Gama, second son of the great Vasco, who at once proposed an expedition to the Red Sea. Estavão da Gama sailed in command of this expedition, which reached Masawa on February 10th, 1541,¹ where he first heard of the death of Lebna Dengel in the previous September, and received here pitiful letters from Abyssinia, to which he replied with words of hope; making, however, no special arrangements for sending an expedition, he pressed on to Suez on February 18th. His heavy vessels were left in Masawa, under the command of his relative, Manuel da Gama. He reached Masawa again on May 22nd, and determined to send an expedition into Abyssinia, consisting of four hundred men under D. Christovão da Gama, his younger brother; and in this number were included some seventy skilled mechanics, whom Bermudez had recruited in India under special written agreements.

The following account of D. Christovão's expedition is condensed from Mr. Whiteway's admirable "Introduction" to his edition of Castanhoso and Bermudez (Hakluyt Society, London, 1902, p. xlv sqq.). Although much abridged I have placed it within quotation marks in order to indicate my indebtedness to Mr. Whiteway's work.

"It was natural that the selection of so young a man by his brother, the Governor, should have given rise to adverse comment; but it would be idle to contend that D. Christovão did not justify his brother's confidence. The work of Castanhoso is his monument, raised by the pen of a faithful follower:

¹ This was the first fleet sent into the Red Sea since 1517.

bold to temerity in action, chivlarous in his dealings with women, ready to share the burden of the common soldier, foremost in the fight, and willing, though wounded himself, to do the work of the wounded surgeon, Dom Christovão stands out through the book as a true leader of men; as the man to whom, when he died, his faithful followers would elect no successor, till they had exacted satisfaction for his death.

"D. Christovão's force was accompanied by the Baharnagash or ruler of the sea, the Abyssinian governor of the extreme northern province of that country. From July to December the expedition halted weather-bound at Debarwa. The position then was that the Portuguese with a small force were at Debarwa; the Preste, Claudius, with a still smaller force, was in Shoa, four hundred miles south, and the Imam Ahmad, with a force vastly superior to both combined, lay midway between them. From time to time communications from Claudius reached the Portuguese, all urging them to join him before fighting the Imam Ahmad, but it does not appear that Claudius himself started from Shoa.

"The negotiations for the Portuguese contingent had been carried on by Ite Sabla Wangel, the widow of Lebna Dengel (who had died in the previous September), and the Baharnagash; the then king was no party to them, he was too far away. D. Christovão's first act on reaching Debarwa was to send for the ex-queen (Ite Sabla Wangel), who was then on a neighbouring hill. The enforced leisure at Debarwa was spent in making carriages for the artillery and baggage. It seems probable that these carriages were sledges, not wheeled vehicles, as we are told that they were shod with iron, and that condemned matchlocks were used for the purpose.

"On December 15th, 1541, D. Christovão and his men, accompanied by the Dowager Queen and the Baharnagash, started from Debarwa. The westerly line from Debarwa to Shoa crosses all the great water systems of the country, and would have led the Portuguese into the very jaws of the Imam Ahmad. After marching for eight days, from December 15th, the Portuguese reached a mountain, in the territory of the Baharnagash, where they spent Christmas. In the next two marches they crossed the river Mareb, ascended the Tigré

mountains between Amba Krestos and Amba Beesa, and thus reached the plains of Dara Takle.

"D. Estevão da Gama had promised that reinforcements should be sent to them, and one vessel under Manuel de Vasconcellos reached Massowa in February, 1542, and landed a messenger to seek for news of D. Christovão and learn his urgent wants, but before a reply could reach him Vasconcellos was driven from the coast by Turkish galleys.

"When the octave of Christmas was ended, the Portuguese marched to the Church of St. Romanos, near Barakit, close to Senafé. After a short rest near this hermitage, the Portuguese marched to Agamé, thence advancing southward until they reached a solitary hill on a plain held by the Moors (Baçanete), where they camped on February 1st, 1542. From there they went to the Church of St. Michael, two days' journey east of Aksum, and after leaving there they reached Baçanete in two marches. On February 2nd the Portuguese stormed the hill and put all the garrison to the sword; their loss was eight killed and several wounded. As a feat of arms this capture was notable; but the queen was probably justified in opposing D. Christovão's intention to attack, for the news aroused the Imam Ahmad.

"All February the Portuguese remained encamped on the hill about two days' journey from Axum, and at the end of the month came the news that a Portuguese vessel had touched at Massowa; forty men were sent to communicate with her, and bring back her lading of stores." [As mentioned above, they never succeeded in even getting speech with her.] "After these men had started for Massowa D. Christovão continued his progress towards the south, marching but slowly, and only changing his ground to obtain necessary supplies. On the way to Sahart news came that the Imam Ahmad was near at hand, and on the Saturday before Palm Sunday (April 1st), D. Christovão pitched his camp, selecting the site with a special care in view of the expected attack. The army of the Imam Ahmad was very numerous; the numbers given by the Portuguese are, of course, mere estimates; they say fifteen thousand foot, fifteen hundred horse, and two hundred Turkish matchlock-men—they themselves numbered three hundred and fifty, and there

were no Abyssinians of any fighting value with them. The tactics of the Imam Ahmad were simple; he held the Portuguese closely invested, both day and night, and advanced his matchlock-men to worry the besieged, which they did effectually from behind some low stone breastworks. With his supplies cut off, D. Christovão had to fight in the open, or starve, and on the morning of Tuesday, April 4th, 1542, he marched out; his troops were formed in a square, with the queen and the non-effectives in the centre. The square moved slowly over the plain, until stopped by the advance of the Turks, musketry and artillery playing from each of its faces. D. Christovão was himself wounded, and the Portuguese were for some time hard pressed, until a lucky shot struck the Imam Ahmad, wounding him in the leg; when he was carried from the field the Muhammadan force gave way; the Portuguese were too weary to follow, but selected a new camp where some supplies could be obtained. D. Christovão desired, of course, the return of the Portuguese detached to Massowa before engaging again; but having no news of them, and finding that the forces of the Imam Ahmad increased daily, as troops from the more distant provinces came pouring in, he was compelled to move out again, and offer battle on Sunday, April 16th, 1542. This second battle was more obstinately contested than the first; the Muhammadan leader was present at the fight, but carried in a litter, and his followers must have missed the exhilaration of his more active presence; his horse, however, nearly succeeded in breaking the Portuguese square: they were only hindered by the opportune explosion of some gunpowder, which the horses could not face. This time the Muhammadans definitely retreated in disorder, and their camp was captured. In the two battles the Portuguese lost about thirty killed.

"After the battle the Imam Ahmad retreated to a strong hill opposite the straits, eight days' march away. After D. Christovão had been joined by the returning Portuguese from Massowa, he marched to Ofala. This is a district south of Lake Ashangi, and west of Zabul. D. Christovão's selection of a place for wintering showed little skill. He was, indeed, in sight of his enemy, but where he was posted he had

no means of knowing what went on behind the screen of the hills, and this was, in fact, the cause of his destruction. The Imam Ahmad, unknown to him, had obtained large reinforcements from Zebid, on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea, amounting to nine hundred matchlock-men and several field-pieces. By the end of August the Muhammadan force was so strong that it could at pleasure overwhelm the handful of Portuguese.

"After the Portuguese were hutted in for the rains at Wofla, [Ofala], a Jew came to D. Christovão and told him of a mountain stronghold, of which he had formerly been the Commander, but which had been captured by the Muhammadans since Claudius had retreated to Shoa. When driven south Claudius had of necessity crossed this mountain, as the only road lay over it; and now, unless the Muhammadans were driven from it, he could not join the Portuguese, as his following was too small to force a passage. It was this information that first opened Christovão's eyes to the extreme weakness of the titular King of Abyssinia. The mountain itself is described as four leagues across and twelve leagues long, inhabited by ten thousand or twelve thousand Jews, and with only two paths giving access to it. The Jew further told D. Christovão that the garrison of the Muhammadans then on the hill was weak, and that he could guide them by an unsuspected access, and that among the booty would be several good horses, a bait that was very attractive. D. Christovão determined to undertake the expedition, and, after providing for the guard of his camp, he started secretly at night with one hundred men; they carried a supply of skins to inflate, in order to make rafts for the crossing of the river Takazzé. The expedition was successful; the Muhammadans were taken by surprise and routed, those who escaped the Portuguese falling at the hands of the Jew inhabitants. The spoil was very considerable: goods and slaves, besides horses, mules, and cattle. It is not clear how long D. Christovão took in returning to Wofla from the hill, but thirty men, with the horses, came on much more slowly than he did. D. Christovão had returned hurriedly on account of his having a presentiment of coming trouble. This presentiment was correct. When he returned he

found that the Imam Ahmad had moved his army from Zabul, and was in position in close proximity to the camp. The following day (August 28th or 30th, 1542) the Muhammadans advanced to the attack, and in the evening D. Christovão himself sustained two wounds, his standard was captured, four out of his five captains had been killed, together with more than half their men, many of the remainder had been wounded, and the camp had been entered. As evening fell, the wearied remnant of the Portuguese escaped up the hill in company with the queen. During the night, however, D. Christovão and a few companions became separated from the rest, and hid in a thicket, where they were discovered at dawn by the Muhammadans. D. Christovão was taken to the Imam Ahmad, who, after torture, slew him with his own hand.

"After D. Christovão's death one hundred and twenty Portuguese, with the queen, took refuge in the Jews' hill, where they were hospitably received by the commander, whom D. Christovão had made a Christian. They were soon joined by Claudius, who was accompanied by a few followers, and by the mulatto Ayres Dias, whom D. Christovão had sent to the king as an envoy soon after he himself had reached Wofla.

"The final advance of the Portuguese began on February 6th, 1543. Before getting far they heard of a force, under the orders of some of the Imam Ahmad's generals, which was stationed at Woggera, a little south-west of Semien; this they attacked and defeated, killing the Muhammadan commander, Mir Ezman. From the prisoners they learned that the Imam Ahmad was only five days' march away, on the banks of the Tzana lake. Pressing on, the rival forces came in sight of each other at Wainadega. The Christians and Muhammadans remained for some days in sight of each other; there were skirmishes, but, knowing the importance of the engagement, neither side cared to risk a decisive battle. The Christians, too, had hopes of the Portuguese under Manuel da Cunha, who they had heard were coming after them by forced marches. In these preliminary encounters Azmach Keflo, who appears to have been the Fitauraris, or leader of the vanguard of the Abyssinian forces, distinguished himself, and inflicted such losses by cutting off the convoys, that the Imam Ahmad deter-

mined on his destruction; he effected it by a misuse of the white flag. This event put an end to the procrastination, for Azmach Keflo's death so greatly discouraged the Abyssinian forces that Claudius was compelled to offer battle before his army entirely melted away. On the 21st February, 1543, the Abyssinians and Portuguese advanced to the attack. The little band of Portuguese cared nothing for the main body of the Imam Ahmad's army: their quarrel was with the Imam Ahmad himself, and with his two hundred Turkish matchlockmen; one of them, John the Gallician, pressing through the throng, levelled his matchlock and shot the Imam Ahmad in the breast; his own life was the price he paid for his success. The dying leader rode away from the field, and his fall decided the fortunes of the day; only forty of the two hundred Turks survived the defeat, but in their flight they carried off Del Wanbara, the Imam's widow, and the treasure he had amassed by the spoliation of Abyssinia. This victory was decisive; Claudius had much fighting before him, but during his lifetime Abyssinia was never again prostrate before an alien conqueror."

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