CHANGES IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA DURING THE GONDAR PERIOD (1632-1769): Their Influence on the Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty

Hiroki ISHIKAWA*

In this paper, the author examines how the changes in the military system during the Gondar period (1632-1769) influenced on the decline of the Solomonic dynasty. His conclusion is as follows: The regiments, which were under the control of the emperors, were stationed at strategic points in northern Ethiopia during the first half of the Gondar period. These regiments, however, ceased from performing during the latter half of this period. The emperors depended increasingly on nobles of the Amhara-Tigre people and of the Oromo people in military affairs. The political situation was temporarily stable during the reign of Iyasu II and Iyo’ás on the corporation between emperors and nobles. As emperors’ power declined, nobles came to increase wä’alyan, or retainers and strengthened their power. Then the power balance between the emperor and nobles tipped in favor of latter, a race for power triggered a severe civil war in the end of the Gondar period. Nobles destroyed the ruling system of the Solomonic dynasty and made puppets of the emperors.

Keywords: Ethiopia, history, Gondar, military, retainers

Introduction

From the reign of Lōbnā Dëngol² (r. 1508-1540) to the reign of Susnayos (r. 1607-1632), attacks by Muslim armies and the Oromo people, civil wars, and other conflicts disrupted the society in northern Ethiopia, which was under the control of the Solomonic dynasty. However, the system of administration of this dynasty endured even during the following Gondar period (1632-1769).³ It was only at the beginning of the Zämänä mäșafont, or the Era of the Princes (1769-1855), that this system collapsed, and the emperors became puppets of powerful nobles. The decline of the Solomonic dynasty changed the power structure of

* Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science

Vol. XLI 2006  163
northern Ethiopian society and resulted in the rise of the Oromo people and the
great nobles. In particular, the Shoan dynasty, which formed during the Gondar
period, had great influence on Ethiopian history from the nineteenth to the
twentieth century.

Over the last few decades, several studies have been carried out on the
history of northern Ethiopia. There is fairly general agreement that the religious
controversies of the Ethiopian church during the Gondar period led to the
decline of the emperors’ authority (Merid 1971, 600; Berry 1976, 371-376).
However, little is known of how Iyasu II (r. 1730-1755) and Iyo’äs (r. 1755-
1769) managed to reign even after the disorder of the first quarter of the
eighteenth century. Little is known either about how the nobles could quickly
strengthen their military power at the end of the Gondar period, or why they did
not disestablish the Solomonic dynasty in this period. In particular, the changes
in the military system during the Gondar period, which must have had an
influence on the decline of the Solomonic dynasty, have so far been strangely
neglected by scholars. The purpose of this paper is to answer the above
questions by investigating these changes.

I. The Military system during the first half of the Gondar period

At the beginning of the reign of Fasilädäs (r. 1632-1667), the first emperor
of the Gondar period, northern Ethiopian society was being disturbed by a
rebellion which had started in the reign of his father Susnoyos, and the rule of
Fasilädäs was so fragile that the rebellious army could easily capture his capital
(Basset 1882, 29-30). After that, though, the rule of the Solomonic dynasty
stabilized, and Iyasu I (r. 1682-1706) attempted to reconquer the regions which
had been occupied by the Oromo people. As a beginning, we will examine the
military system, which supported the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty
during the first half of the Gondar period.

Even before the attacks by Muslim armies in the sixteenth century,
regiments which were under the control of the emperor had been stationed at
strategic points (Taddesse 1972, 89-94; Merid 1971, 89-91; Merid 1993, 11-25;
Merid 1997, 41-54; Abir 1980, 48-51, 64-65, 79). These regiments, or the
soldiers whom such regiments comprised, were called ćāwa.4 M. Abir suggests
that this system also existed during the Gondar period (Abir 1975, 559, 564,
566, 567). Merid Wolde Aregay, on the other hand, argues that the regimental
system collapsed in the reign of Susnoyos and that Fasilädäs did not reconstruct
it (Merid 1971, 544; Merid 1997, 59-60). L. Berry follows Merid’s theory and
CHANGES IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA DURING THE GONDAR PERIOD

says that nobles kept many wā‘alyan (wā‘ált, sg. wā‘al), or retainers, and čāwa became wā‘alyan of nobles or themselves gathered wā‘alyan during the Gondar period (Berry 1976, 250-256). To consider whether the regimental system existed or not during the first half of the Gondar period, firstly, let us examine the record concerning the military expedition led by Iyasu I in 1689 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 127-132).

In this expedition, Iyasu I initially sent an army led by Yoḥānna, then ordered “all čāwa of Itu, Wallağ, and Zāgār” to follow Ruru and raised “all čāwa of Wāgāra, Dāmbya, Bād, Ācāfār, Sarka, and Gwāžžam.” After that, he reached Dāra (the region in the south of Wālāqā), making the following troops the vanguard: Gwāžžam-Nāgaš, or the governor of Gwāžžam,⁵ Giyorgis with “all people of Gwāžžam,” Sele with “all Gadisa,” Ruru with “all čāwa of Wollağ,⁶ which are called “Wild Carnivores,” and other troops. The royal army fought against the Tulāma Oromo in Dāra and “all the čāwa and all the strong men in the military camp” found and killed the Oromo people who had taken refuge in caves.

Thus, in the above record, we see that many čāwa were raised by the emperor and that they saw action. List I shows that čāwa participated in various military activities from 1686 to 1699. Who or what kind of a group were the čāwa in the reign of Iyasu I?

List I: Military activities in which čāwa participated in the reign of Iyasu I

“All čāwa of Bahır and Āruse (Bahır Āruse?), Dāgbas, Ācāfār, ḇalāfā, and Sagāba” took part in the suppression of the revolt of Tābdān and others in Gwāžžam in 1686-1687 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 100, 101, 106).


“All čāwa” participated in the military expedition to Bātkom and other districts, or to regions to the west of ḇāmāsen in 1692-1693 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 157, 158).

Vol. XLI 2006 165
The emperor ordered Gra-üzmač Ámonewos to go to the defense of Gwäßam with “all čäwa of Baḥr Āruse, Elmana, and Densa” in 1694 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 169).


The emperor left “all čäwa of Kokäb” in Gondar for defense of this city in 1695 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 175).

“All čäwa which dwell on the opposite side of the ‘Abawi River, that is to say, Elmana, Densa, Baḥr Āruse, Dägbsa, Ābole, Gwata, Çälīha, Donsor, Ğawi, Tulāma, and all Ágäw,” participated in the military expedition to Ágäwmdr in 1696 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 177).

Twice, in 1697 an 1698, the emperor summoned čäwa for military expeditions, but most of them refused to follow him (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 190, 192).

“All čäwa of Begāmädr,” “all čäwa of Shoa,” and “čäwa of Maya” took part in the military expedition to Shoa in 1699 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 198, 199, 200).


We come across such descriptions as “nobody died in the royal army, except one čäwa called Mäzmure, in that day” and “Mika’el, čäwa of Gadisa,” in the chronicle of Iyasu I (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 158, 190). It is clear that in these descriptions the word čäwa signifies an individual person. On the other hand, the emperor made known by a herald that “gwaz” leaves with the čäwa of Maya in the military expedition to Shoa in 1699 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 199). In this case, the word čäwa seems to signify a regiment rather than an individual person. Therefore, we can say with fair certainty that the word čäwa is used to signify both a regiment and an individual soldier of such a regiment in the chronicle of Iyasu I.

We meet “čäwa of Itu,” “čäwa of Ğawi,” “čäwa of Tulāma,” “čäwa of Wälläg,” “čäwa of Ágäw,” and “čäwa of Maya” in the records of military expeditions in the chronicle of Iyasu I (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 84, 127, 129, 177, 199). Itu, Ğawi, and Tulāma are groups of Oromo people. That is to say, there were čäwa which were composed of Oromo people, of Ágäw people, of Maya people, and of Wälläg in his reign. Iyasu I raised “all čäwa which dwell on the opposite side of the ‘Abawi River” for the military expedition to
 Ägäwâdmâdr in 1696, and “all çâwa in the lands of Gwâzzâm and Damot” for the military expedition to Shoa in 1699. Çâwa came frequently from Gwâzzâm, Damot, and Amhara and reported to the emperor that the Oromo people would attack and then begged him for military aid (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 66, 69, 82, 154, 169, 175, 177, 201, 206). These descriptions make clear that çâwa dwelt in various places. We can be fairly certain that the çâwa which were called not by ethnic names but by place names, such as “çâwa of Dâmbya,” were composed of Amhara-Tigre people and stationed in those places. List 1 indicates that the çâwa dwelt in Wâgâra, Dâmbya, Begâmadr, Gwâzzâm, Ägäwâdmâdr, Damot, Amhara, and Shoa in the reign of Iyasu I. Most of these provinces or districts are around the Lake Tana region, which became the center of the kingdom during the Gondar period.

List 1 shows that in the reign of Iyasu I most of the military activities of çâwa were under the control of the emperor and that çâwa also took part in military expeditions under the control of commanders who were appointed by the emperor. There are no records which indicate that çâwa undertook military expeditions on their own or that they played a part in the private expeditions of nobles. Therefore, it is obviously that çâwa in this period were under the control of the emperor.

It is clear that çâwa had an obligation to serve the emperor in a military capacity, because they were often raised for military expeditions by the emperor. Moreover, çâwa needed to provide for themselves in military expeditions, judging from the account in 1689 where Iyasu I ordered “all people in the military camp and all çâwa” to prepare provisions for two weeks (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 128). With what did the emperor reward çâwa for their service? There is a record that Iyasu I ordered the inhabitants of Wag to accept “çâwa of Sulala,” because they refused to pay the hundred mules which they had paid as tribute in the reign of Yoḥânnas I (r. 1667-1682) (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 139-140). One can safely state that this passage indicates that the emperor gave çâwa the gwâlt right, or the right to receive a part of the tribute, from that land. It may safely be assumed that other çâwa also earned their living mainly from the income of the lands to which they had the gwâlt right. Iyasu I adorned “all çâwa” and other peoples, and he also “distributed all riches and gave to all people” (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 79-80). Such goods which the emperor gave to çâwa must have been a part of their income.

What kind of position did the çâwa hold in the military system in the reign of Iyasu I? On this point, we first need to take into account the fact that various groups other than çâwa participated in military expeditions in the reign of Iyasu

Vol. XLI 2006

167
I. For example, “all musketeers of Ṭaqwĕsa, Wǝrǝñša, Tānkāl, Nǝḥāb, and Itu,” “people of Gwāẓzām” led by Giyorgis, the governor of Gwāẓzam, and “people of Tigre” led by Gālawdewos, the governor of Tigre, took part in military expeditions (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 100, 128, 160). However, it is obvious that ḍāwa held a key position in the military system in the reign of Iyasu I, judging from the fact that he raised ḍāwa for most of the military expeditions from 1686 to 1699, and that he had to abandon a military expedition in 1698 because most ḍāwa refused to follow him (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 192).

We find no mention of this military system in the reign of Susnayos, the last emperor before the Gondar Period (Merid 1971, 472-477; Abir 1980, 197-199), so when was it reconstructed? There are no records which indicate that Iyasu I or his immediate predecessor Yohānnos I reconstructed it. Because Fasilădās carried out various reforms, such as making Gondar the capital and banishing the Jesuits, who were causing disorder in northern Ethiopian society, it may safely be assumed that it was Fasilădās who reconstructed this system.14

II. The royal army during the latter half of the Gondar period

It was observed in the preceding chapter that the regimental system was reconstructed during the first half of the Gondar period and that the ḍāwa were the main body of the royal army during this period. The emperors were able to lead many military expeditions because ḍāwa performed their obligation to serve them in a military capacity. Until 1697, there is no case in which ḍāwa refused to participate in military expeditions. However, in that year, most ḍāwa refused to follow Iyasu I when he summoned them to attack the Oromo people across the ‘Abawi River, as can be seen in the following quotation (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 190):

He [Iyasu I] left all the gwaz in a fortified ámba [a flat topped mountain] in this month [June / July 1697]. He ordered by herald as follows: “All ḍāwa who can not cross the ‘Abawi River, leave and enter the fortified ámba. All ḍāwa who can cross the ‘Abawi River, cross [the river] with me.” Most [Ḍāwa] left, saying, “We will not cross [the ‘Abawi River], because we love our own lands. Why should we be afraid of abandoning our service in a region which will bring us death? Aren’t we free? As the saying goes, Sāh ḥāra wā gābbar mādr15.”

Next, as I mentioned above, Iyasu I also had to abandon a military expedition in 1698, because most ḍāwa disobeyed his order. As the reason they
refused to campaign, čäwa said again that they loved their lands and they had no
obligation to take part in such a dangerous military expedition as that to the
lands occupied by the Oromo people.

It will be clear from these accounts that at the end of the reign of Iyasu I,
čäwa had come to consider their gwèlti rights as vested rights and that they did
not regard it an obligation to take part in highly dangerous military expeditions.

What kind of troops did the royal army comprised near the end of the reign
of Iyasu I? Let us look at some examples. When he led a military expedition
against the Gudru Oromo in 1702, “people of Gwäźźam and Damot, and all
Baso” led by Ānore, the governor of Gwäźźam, and Tulu, the governor of
Damot, joined him, and the Libän Oromo also fought for him. The Qalä Gända
Oromo and the Libän Oromo, the Maya people, and troops such as the Wäreza
Iyäsus participated in the military expedition to Ħnarya in 1704 (Guidi 1960-
1961, vol. 3, 220, 237, 249, 251, 252, 255, 257). Thus the royal army towards
the end of the reign of Iyasu I comprised troops led by provincial governors,
troops of the Oromo people, and other troops.

The emperors between 1706 and 1721 all reigned only for a short time.
There were few military expeditions; moreover, we do not know what kind of
troops the royal army comprised in this period.

We have some information on the military system in the reign of Bäkaffa
(r. 1721-1730), who succeeded to the throne after the death of Dawit III (r. 1716-
1721). For example, in 1723, Bäkaffa decided to attack the Ĝawi Oromo and
raised soldiers, as can be seen in the following quotation (Guidi 1960-1961, vol.
3, 276):

The king [Bäkaffa] ordered and said [on 5 February 1723] to the
accompaniment of a trumpet, “All troops should assemble, so that I
can review them in the plain of Āringo.”\(^{16}\) The king departed [for
Āringo], riding a horse called Y-absa, after they [the soldiers] had
assembled. On this day, all people were astonished seeing that King
Bäkaffa resembled an angel of heaven and did not resemble a human
being. Then he realized the scarcity of the soldiers when he could see
all his troops without getting off the horse.

What the passage makes clear immediately is that it had become difficult
for the emperor to collect soldiers after the disorder of the first quarter of the
eighteenth century. In this military expedition, the troops of the royal army
which fought against the Ĝawi Oromo were “Gwäźźam, Libän, and Baso,” led
by Däg-äzmäč Täsfä Iyäsus, and “Ägäw and Mäčça,” led by Däg-äzmäč
Mammo and Azaži Bonyam. In addition to these, Belma, Gadisa, Lenča, Wäreza,
Elmana, and Densa troops followed the emperor (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 278, 279, 282). Täsä Iyäsus seems to have been the governor of Gwäţzam and Mammo to have been the governor of Damot at this time.¹⁸ Bänam was the governor of Yābaba.¹⁹ That is to say, the royal army in this military expedition comprised troops led by provincial governors and other troops.

There are several records indicating that čäwa took part in military expeditions during the latter half of the Gondar period (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 113, 128, 154, 187, 195, 243). There is, however, no evidence that they were garrisoned at strategic points or that they held a key position in the military system. Therefore, it is clear that the character of čäwa changed and that the regimental system ceased functioning during this period.²⁰

Scholars refer to the fact the emperors had considerable household troops and that they depended increasingly on the Oromo people and that the latter’s political position rose during the latter half of the Gondar period.²¹ We should also not overlook the fact that the emperors relied increasingly on nobles of the Amhara-Tigre people in military affairs. The principal provincial governors in the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs, such as Mika’el of Tigre, Äyo of Begämadr, and Wädäge of Amhara, generally cooperated with the emperors in military expeditions and in the suppression of rebellions, although these governors occasionally disobeyed the emperors’ orders (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 105-107, 132-136, 175-176, 190-192). Iyasu II (r. 1730-1755) and Iyo’äs (r. 1755-1769) succeeded to the throne in their infancies, and they did not have a sufficient military base. However, the political situation during their reigns was stable. It is obvious that these emperors’ rule was sustained by their cooperation with the nobles. The nobles had not yet greatly strengthened their political power in the 1740s, judging from the fact that even Mika’el of Tigre, who would be the most powerful noble at the end of the Gondar period, surrendered to the royal army in 1746-1747 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 133-136). Therefore, it must have been valuable for nobles wishing to enhance their authority to be appointed provincial governors by the emperors in return for their cooperation.

As we shall see later in the next chapter, the nobles strengthened their power as the emperors came to depend on them in military affairs. Then, at the end of the Gondar period, the power balance between the emperors and the nobles tipped in favor of the latter.

III. Wä’alyan of nobles during the latter half of the Gondar period

The regimental system, as we have seen, ceased functioning during the
latter half of the Gondar period. We can observe another military change during this period — the marked increase in the military importance of nobles' wā’alyan. For example, wā’alyan of Mika’el, the governor of Tigre, played important role in the suppression of the rebellion by Yämaryam Barya, as can be seen in the following quotation (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 238):

He [Iyo’ās] saw many corpses which lay from the foot of Çaćāho to Šolage because wā’alyan of Ĭras Mika’el had defeated the rebels like leaves. They [the soldiers of the army of Yämaryam Barya] lay before them [the wā’alyan of Mika’el] like grass as when the corpses of the Philistines lay on the Get road up to the gate of Āsqālōna and Āqaron.22

List 2 indicates that there are many records of actions of wā’alyan of nobles in the chronicles of Iyasu II and Iyo’ās. These military actions can be classified into three categories: participating in military activities for the emperors, joining private military activities of their masters, and skirmishing with other groups.

**List 2: Military actions of wā’alyan of nobles during the Gondar period**

| During the reign of Yohannos I (r. 1667-1682) |
| Wā’alyan of Kōflā Giyorgis, the governor of Šāgādē, skirmished with wā’alyan of Bāžrwind Ākalā Krōstos in 1677 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 1, 18). |

| During the reign of Iyasu I (r. 1682-1706) |

| During the reign of Tāklā Haymanot (r. 1706-1708) |
| Wā’alyan of Ras Fares fought against wā’alyan of Dāg-āzmač Ānore in 1706 (Basset 1882, 58). |

| During the reign of Bākaffa (r. 1721-1730) |
| Zāwe and Wāmbār together skirmished with wā’alyan of Baša Ārkāledos |

Ämha Iyäsus and his wä’alyan rebelled against the emperor in 1724 (Basset 1882, 85).

During the reign of Iyasu II (r. 1730-1755)

Wä’alyan of Kombe participated in the suppression of the rebellion of the people of Damot and Gawi in 1730 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 43).


Wä’alyan of Blatten-geta Wäldä Lo’ul, Däg-äzmač Ärkäledos, Balamberas Adäm, Azaž Bonyam, Wäldä Ämlak, and Häbt Bäwäsän defended Gondar when Tänse Mammo rebelled against the emperor in 1732-1733. Wä’alyan of Ras Niqlawos took part in the rebellious army (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 51, 56, 57, 60, 63, 64, 66, 71).

Wä’alyan of Ras Wädägë played a part in the suppression of the rebellion of the people of Wägära in 1733 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 77, 78, 79).


Wä’alyan of Ras Wäldä Lo’ul took part in the military expedition to the land of “Bäläw” in 1744 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 113).

Wä’alyan of Ras Wädägë and of Fit-äwrarti Yolännas Adära played a part in the military expedition to the land of “Bäläw” in 1746 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 124, 125).

Wä’alyan of Ras Wäldä Lo’ul, Däg-äzmač Mammo, Baša Ėwsabyos, Yäšaläqa Kanfu, and Yäšaläqa Muzo played a part in the suppression of the rebellion of Mika’el and his wä’alyan in 1746-1747 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 130, 131, 134).


Wä’alyan of Däg-äzmač Wälde fought against the army of Däg-äzmač Mika’el in 1750 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 146).

During the reign of Iyo’as (r. 1755-1769)

Wä’alyan of Ĉarqin Nàço skirmished with wä’alyan of Wäldä Häwaryat

Wä’alyan of Balambaras Ṭšate participated in the military expedition to the land of “Ṣanqalla” in 1758 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 184, 185).

Wä’alyan of ṭras Wältä La’ul, Dāg-āzmač Geta, and Dāg-āzmač Gošu took part in the military expedition against the Māčča Oromo in 1758 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 188).


Wä’alyan of Mika’el and wä’alyan of Yāmaryam Barya fought each other for their masters in 1766 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 208, 209).

Ṭras Mika’el sent his wä’alyan to protect lyo’as and Mentowwab from the skirmish between the people of Qwara and the Oromo people in 1767 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 227).


Wä’alyan of nobles took part in military expeditions led by emperors or military officers appointed by emperors. For example, wä’alyan of Dāg-āzmač Geta, of ṭras Wältä La’ul, and of Dāg-āzmač Gošu participated in the military expedition against the Māčča Oromo in 1758, and wä’alyan of Mika’el and of Gošu attacked the army of Yāmaryam Barya in 1768-1769 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 188, 237, 238, 240).

Wä’alyan of nobles also often fought against the royal army or wä’alyan of other nobles. The following is a record concerning the rebellion of Nāčo (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 195).

Dāg-āzmač Nāčo sent his wä’alyan with many horses and ḥabd [horse blankets?], and many muskets and spears on a three-pronged attack. They surprised the king’s army, and heavy battle broke out. Wä’alyan of Dāg-āzmač Nāčo shouted so loudly that their shout could be heard from a distance. In contrast, [the soldiers of] the king’s army kept silent, and did not cry out like them.

The following provides a notable example of conflict between two nobles’
wāʿalyan on behalf of their masters (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 208-209).

In this day, Wānd Báwāsān, a wāʾali of Yāmaryam Barya, surprised a gwaz [of Mikaʾel’s army.] Zārāʾ Dawit was with the gwaz as rear guard. He met Wānd Báwāsān with his seven wāʾalyan on horseback in the battle. Then Wānd Báwāsān fled and many of his wāʾalyan died.

. . . He [Mikaʾel] said to his wāʾalyan, “Go and attack Yāmaryam Barya. He [Yāmaryam Barya] must not escape your hands. Do not leave even one of his wāʾalyan to announce the news [of the defeat].”

Several skirmishes between wāʾalyan of a noble and other groups also occurred, as can be seen in the following quotation (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 181-182):

When they [Iyoʾās and nobles] were eating and drinking [on 26 January 1756], wāʾalyan of Čeɾqin Nāčo skirmished with wāʾalyan of Wāldā Ḥāwaryat in Kayla Meda over a trivial matter. Many people died on each side.

There were many nobles who had wāʾalyan in this period. List 2 shows that officials and commanders who had such titles as Ras (Ēras), Blatten-geta, Dāḡ-āzmač, Gra-āzmač, Fit-āwrari, and Balambaras had wāʾalyan during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyoʾās. According to the chronicle of Iyasu II, when the rebellious army led by Tānše Mammo besieged Gondar, the wāʾalyan of many nobles, e.g. Blatten-geta Wāldā Leʾul, Dāḡ-āzmač Ārkāledos, Balambaras Ādāru, and Āzaʾ Bonyam, fought to defend the city (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 56, 57, 60, 63, 64, 66, 71).

Prutky, who visited northern Ethiopia between 1751 and 1753, reported on the wāʾalyan of nobles as follows (Prutky 1991, 147):

In time of peace the ministers of the provinces are provided with servants according to the pressure of their needs, and in wartime these become soldiers, so that at times in the larger provinces, such as Tigré, Syre and Serai, as many as two thousand servants are supported, while elsewhere the number reduces to one thousand, or in a smaller province five hundred, and so in proportion elsewhere. When war breaks out they all march out in companies under the command of their ministers, each man being fed and supplied by his colonel or captain with food, arms and ammunition, with none of which the emperor is concerned.

What the passage makes clear at once is that nobles who were provincial governors in those days had five hundred to two thousand servants, or wāʾalyan, according to the pressure of their needs, that these servants became soldiers in
wartime, and that they were fed and supplied with food and arms by their masters.\textsuperscript{23}

There are many records concerning wä’alyan of nobles in the chronicles of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs, and Prutky reported at the beginning of 1750s that provincial governors had many wä’alyan. On the other hand, List 2 clearly shows that there were few records concerning wä’alyan of nobles earlier, during the first half of the Gondar period. C. J. Poncet, who visited Gondar near the end of the reign of Iyasu I, did not say that nobles had many wä’alyan or that the wä’alyan of nobles were the main body of the royal army.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore we can be fairly certain that it was not in the first half of the Gondar period but during the latter half of the Gondar period — strictly speaking, during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs — that nobles came to increase the number of their wä’alyan.\textsuperscript{25} It is entirely fair to say the decline of the emperors’ power due to the disorder in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and the corruption of the regimental system facilitated the ability of nobles to gather wä’alyan.

Nobles strengthened their power as they increased the number of their wä’alyan during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs. We find in the chronicles of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs some records that nobles led private military expeditions and enlarged their area of rule. For example, Mika’el, the governor of Tigre, fought Wälde, the governor of ḇändärta, and Yämrayam Barya, the governor of Begämadr, and enlarged his area of rule and governed the provinces and districts between the Täkäže River and Samen by the end of the reign of Iyo’äs.\textsuperscript{26} It is clear that wä’alyan of Mika’el played an important role in enlarging the territory of their master, as can be seen in the above records on the conflict between Mika’el and Yämrayam Barya.

The emperors, who depended on nobles in military affairs, could not adopt a strong attitude toward them, as can be seen in Prutky’s following report on the relation between Iyasu II and nobles (Prutky 1991, 143-144).

\ldots for most of the Ethiopians are thieves, cheats and double dealers, producing a variety of excuses, avoiding the quota assigned to them, refusing to appear when summoned, or openly declaring themselves rebels for a time and refusing to pay their tribute, small though it is. If ever they return to their allegiance they are absolved from the tribute they owe, because the Emperor is ever afraid to punish rebellion, and makes himself a pauper thereby.

In the chronicle of Iyo’äs, we come across nobles such as Yämrayam Barya of Begämadr, Gošu of Amhara, Fasil Wäräňña of Damot who acquired the office of provincial governor previously held by their fathers.\textsuperscript{27} These appointments
clearly show that the nobles strengthened their power base in each province and attempted to inherit governorships.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, the following conclusions were drawn: the regimental system, which became corrupt in the reign of Susnayos, was reconstructed during the first half of the Gondar period, and these regiments contributed to strengthening the power of the emperors. This system, however, ceased functioning during the latter half of the Gondar period, and the emperors depended increasingly on nobles of the Amhara-Tigre people and of the Oromo people in military affairs. The political situation was temporarily stable during the reign of Iyasu II and Iyo’äs due to the cooperation between emperors and nobles, because the former needed the military aid of latter, and the latter made use of the authority of the former to strengthen their own power. As the emperors’ power declined, nobles came to increase the number of their wā‘alyan and strengthen their power. Mika’el of Tigre, in particular, succeeded in assembling many wā‘alyan and annexing many regions.\(^{28}\)

Then when at the end of the Gondar period the power balance between the emperor and nobles tipped in favor of latter, a race for power to control the national administration\(^{29}\) triggered a bitter civil war which involved Emperor Iyo’äs and the nobles. As a result, the nobles destroyed the government of the Solomonic dynasty and made puppets of the emperors.

Scholars have insisted that theological controversies within the Ethiopian church resulted in the decline of the emperors’ authority. However, not only this, but also the changes in military system had a great influence on the decline of the Solomonic dynasty during the Gondar period.

We should note that not even Mika’el could control northern Ethiopia by himself and that he made use of the authority of the emperors of the Solomonic dynasty. This indicates that during the Gondar period nobles, who were gradually strengthening their power making use of the emperors’ authority, did not yet have the ability to establish a new dynasty and also did not have a political theory to justify such an attempt. It was only after nobles had strengthened their power base during the Zämänä mäsafőnt\(^{30}\) that they themselves succeeded to the throne.

**Notes**

\(^{1}\) This is a corrected and revised version of my article published in *Les Annales d’Éthiopie*
CHANGES IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA DURING THE GONDAR PERIOD

18 (2002), 215-229. The editor of Les Annales d’Ethiopie published it without giving me an opportunity to proof read. Therefore I could not correct mistakes caused by the editor. Although I sent him a list of about 100 errors found in it, I have not received any reply from him. Now, Les Annales d’Ethiopie 18 (2002) has gone off sale without explanation. Under these circumstances, I feel justified in republishing my article. I would ask readers to use this version when citing it.

2 When transliterating the Gə̀az and Amharic scripts, I have observed the usage of Aethiopica: International Journal of Ethiopian Studies. However, I have used transcriptions such as Ethiopia, Amhara, Shoà, Tigre, and Tana, since these are well known.

3 Many scholars consider that the end of the Gondar period was 1769. On the other hand, there are some scholars who consider the year to be 1784. This is because they make much of the fact that the emperor Täklä Giyorgis wielded power in some measure from the year 1779, when he succeeded to the throne, up until 1784, when Ali I of the Yäggä Oromo defeated him (Molla 1994, 197-198). In this paper, I adopt the former for convenience.

4 For example, F. Alves, a Portuguese clergyman who visited the court of the emperor Lebna Dengel in the 1520s, explained θëwà as men-at-arms (Alves 1889, 25, 30, 146, 154, 155, 169). However, most scholars interpret θëwà as meaning regiment (Alves 1961, vol. 1, 116; vol. 2, 555-556; Abr 1880, 48).

5 There were various titles of provincial and district governors, especially from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century (Ludolf 1982, lib. II, cap. XVII). For example, the title of the governor of Tigre was Togre-mäkwämnä, the title of the governor of Gwäzzän was Gwäzzän-nägwä, and the title of the governor of Amhara was Sähafé-láhám sā-Ámhrá.

6 Descendants of slaves (Pankhurst 1990, 111-113); Guidi 1901, 559).

7 Baggage train with attendant followers.

8 People of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century who were famous for using poisoned arrows (Bekkingham and Huntingford 1954, 120).

9 For a detailed argument about the relation between the emperors of the Solomonic dynasty and the Áğaw people, see Tadesse 1988.

10 At least Áçafar, Háli, Saqába, Bád, and Sarka are known to be places in Ágawmad.

11 For example, Ámonewos went to defend Gwäzzän with “all the θëwa of Bahý Ærëse, Elmana, and Densa” at the emperor’s order in 1694. Iyasu I ordered Fares to defend Gondar with “all the θëwa of Kokab” and other troops in 1695 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 169, 175).

12 For further detailed reading concerning the granting of g沃尔 rights by the emperors during the Gondar period, see Crumney 2000, 73-89.

13 The emperors of the Solomonic dynasty permitted the soldiers who followed them to plunder villages (Pankhurst 1961, 177-178; 1990, 11, 79). One can say that provisions gained by plunder were a part of the income of the θëwa.

14 Pankhurst and Merid Wolde Aregay suggest that Fasilädäs carried out military reforms (Pankhurst 1961, 170; Merid 1971, 537-544).

15 Emperor Zäändängal (r. 1603-1604) also decreed “Säb ḥära wá gäbbär madr” according to The Short Chronicle. Scholars interpret this sentence variously. For example, C. Conti Rossini (1893, 807, 811) translates it as “Gli uomini tutti sieno soldati, e nel tempo stesso la terra paghi il tributo” (All men are soldiers, and at the same time, land pays tribute); J. Perruchon (1896, 359, 361-362), as “Que les hommes (soient) soldats et agriculteurs” (All men should be soldiers and peasants); F. M. Esteves Pereira (1892-1900, vol. 2, 322), as “Os homens para soldados, e os lavradores para (lavar) a terra” (Men are to be soldiers, and peasants are to plow land); F. Béguinot (1901, 41), as “Gli uomini (siano) soldati e la terra (paghi) il tributo” (Men are soldiers, and land pays tribute); and Merid Wolde Aregay, followed by Crumney, as “Man is free; land is tributary” (Merid 1971, 378-380; Crumney 2000, 63-64, 278). It is entirely fair to say that the decree of Zäändängal was intended to raise all adults of age and that the θëwa quoted this sentence to explain that they did not need to participate in a dangerous military expedition to the land of the Oromo people.
16 For Aringo, see Pankhurst 1982, 139-140.

17 Most titles of provincial governors which appear in the chronicle of Iyasu I are not mentioned in the chronicles of Iyasu II and of Iyo’aṣ. Instead, we see many records of appointments to the office of Däg-āzmač of the various provinces. R. Prutky, a Franciscan missionary who visited northern Ethiopia at the end of the reign of Iyasu II, and J. Bruce reported that Däg-āzmač was the title of the provincial governors in most provinces (Prutky 1991, 129-131; Bruce 1790, vol.3, 268). It will be clear from these descriptions that the title of the provincial governor became Däg-āzmač in most provinces during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo’aṣ.

18 Nobody with a title such as Gwāžzam-Nāgaš or Šāhāfe-laḥem zā-Damat, which were titles of provincial governors in the reign of Iyasu I, appears in the chronicle of Bäkkaffa. Moreover in 1722 Bäkkaffa appointed Täsfa iyäsus to the office of Däg-āzmač of Gwāžzam, and Mammo (Tânse Mammo) to the office of Däg-āzmač of Damot according to The Short Chronicle (Basset 1882, 80, 81). It may be assumed that titles of the provincial governors of Gwāžzam and Damot became Däg-āzmač in the reign of Bäkkaffa.

19 Bäkkaffa appointed Banyam to the office of Šāḥ of Yababa in 1722 according to The Short Chronicle (Basset 1882, 80). Bruce mentions “the post of Ibbaba Azage, or governor of Ibbaba” (Bruce 1790, vol. 2, 624). For Yababa, see Pankhurst 1982, 140-141.

20 Abir was wrong when he said that qāwa of the Oromo people became the main body of the royal army in the reign of Bäkkaffa and that their importance increased during the reign of Iyasu II (Abir 1975, 566-567). On the other hand, Crummeys correctly observes that the meaning of the word qāwa changed from “military regiment under royal control” to “gentry” during the Gondar period (Crummeys 2000, 126; Crummeys 2003, 703).

21 See, for example, Pankhurst 1997, 308-323; Fiquet 2000, 135-146.
22 1 Sam. XVII, 52.
24 Poncet states that people who were given real estate by the emperor, were obliged to serve him in time of war at their own expense and to furnish him with soldiers in proportion to the size of the estate they were given (Poncet 1713, 88-89).
25 Berry supposes that nobles came to gather wā’alyan during the first half of the Gondar period (Berry 1976, 253-255). His argument, however, is unsound.
26 Šū, the governor of Begämadr, also attacked and virtually annexed Lasta (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 82-83, 145-147, 149-151, 204-224; Bruce 1790, vol. 2, 653-655, 657; vol. 3, 250-252).
27 Šũramar Barya was a son of Šū, the governor of Begämadr; Gošu was a son of Wàdâghe, the governor of Amhara; and Fasil Wàrànhì was a son of Wàrànhì, the governor of Damot (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 193, 194, 209, 225, 228, 230).
28 Mika’el was the most powerful noble from the end of the Gondar period to the beginning of the Zämànà màsafon. For example, no other noble governed an area as large as Mika’el did in the beginning of the 1770s, nor could any mobilize as many troops as he could in the battle of Serbraxos in 1771 (Bruce 1790, vol. 3, 248-261; vol. 4, 63, 116-120).
29 On the race for power and political factions at the end of the Gondar period, see Perret 1989.
30 For example, nobles increased their authority in military affairs in each province during the Zämànà màsafon (Shiferaw 1990, 170-173).

Bibliography
CHANGES IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF NORTHERN ETIOPIA DURING THE GONDAR PERIOD


Béguinot, F. 1901: La cronaca abbreviata d’Abissinia, Roma.


Bruce, J. 1790: Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, and 1773, 5 vols., London.


Crummey, D. 2000: Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century, Urbana and Chicago.


Esteves Pereira, F. M. 1892-1900: Chronica de Susenios, Rei de Ethiopia, 2 vols., Lisbon.


Merid Wolde Aregay 1971: Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom, 1508-1708, with Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and their Consequences, Ph.D. dissertation, University of London.


