

# CHANGES IN THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF NORTHERN ETHIOPIA DURING THE GONDAR PERIOD (1632-1769): Their Influence on the Decline of the Solomonic Dynasty<sup>1</sup>

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'äs 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 Ləbnä Dəngəl<sup>2</sup> (r. 1508-1540) to the reign of Susnəyos (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).<sup>3</sup> It was only at the beginning of the *Zämānä mäsaḥānt*, 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

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

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 Susnəyos, 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 *čäwa*.<sup>4</sup> 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 Susnəyos and that Fasilädäs did not reconstruct it (Merid 1971, 544; Merid 1997, 59-60). L. Berry follows Merid's theory and

says that nobles kept many *wä'alyan* (*wä'ält*, sg. *wä'ali*), or retainers, and *čäwa* became *wä'alyan* of nobles or themselves gathered *wä'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 Yoḥännəs, then ordered "all *čäwa* of Itu, Wəllaḡ, and Zägär" to follow Ruru and raised "all *čäwa* of Wägära, Dämbya, Bäd, Äčäfar, Sarka, and Gwäžžam." After that, he reached Dära (the region in the south of Wäläqa), making the following troops the vanguard: *Gwäžžam-Nägaš*, or the governor of Gwäžžam,<sup>5</sup> Giyorgis with "all people of Gwäžžam," Səle with "all Gadisa," Ruru with "all *čäwa* of Wəllaḡ,<sup>6</sup> which are called "Wild Carnivores," and other troops. The royal army fought against the Tuläma Oromo in Dära and "all the *čäwa* 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 *čäwa* were raised by the emperor and that they saw action. List 1 shows that *čäwa* participated in various military activities from 1686 to 1699. Who or what kind of a group were the *čäwa* in the reign of Iyasu I?

#### List I: Military activities in which *čäwa* participated in the reign of Iyasu I

"All *čäwa* of Baḥr and Äruse (Baḥr Äruse?), Dägbas, Äčäfar, Ḥaläfa, and Sagäba" took part in the suppression of the revolt of Ṭäbdän and others in Gwäžžam in 1686-1687 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 100, 101, 106).

*Čäwa* played a part in the military expedition to Ägäwmədr in 1688 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 113, 115).

"All *čäwa* of Itu, Wəllaḡ, and Zägär," "all *čäwa* of Wägära, Dämbya, Bäd, Äčäfar, Sarka, and Gwäžžam," and "all *čäwa* of Wəllaḡ, called Wild Carnivores," participated in the military expedition to Dära in 1689 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 127, 128, 129, 132).

"All *čäwa*" took part in the military expedition to Ägäwmədr in 1691-1692 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 156).

"All *čäwa*" participated in the military expedition to Bätkom and other districts, or to regions to the west of Ḥämasen in 1692-1693 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 157, 158).



The emperor ordered *Gra-äzmač* Ämonewos to go to the defense of Gwäžžam with “all *čäwa* of Baḥr Äruse, Elmana, and Densa” in 1694 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 169).

*Čäwa* played a part in the military expedition to Ägäwmədr in 1694-1695 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 173).

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 Äruse, Dägbasa, Äbole, Gwəta, Čäliha, Dənsər, Ğawi, Tuläma, and all Ägäw,” participated in the military expedition to Ägäwmədr in 1696 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 177).

Twice, in 1697 and 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 Begämədr,” “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).

“All *čäwa* in the lands of Gwäžžam and Damot” participated in the military expedition to Dära in 1699 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 201).

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*<sup>7</sup> leaves with the *čäwa* of Maya<sup>8</sup>” 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 Tuläma,” “*čäwa* of Wəllaḡ,” “*čäwa* of Ägäw<sup>9</sup>,” 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 Tuläma are groups of Oromo people. That is to say, there were *čäwa* which were composed of Oromo people, of Ägäw people, of Maya people, and of Wəllaḡ in his reign. Iyasu I raised “all *čäwa* which dwell on the opposite side of the ‘Abawi River” for the military expedition to

Ägäwmədr in 1696, and “all *čäwa* in the lands of Gwäžžam and Damot” for the military expedition to Shoa in 1699. *Čäwa* came frequently from Gwäžžam, 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 *čäwa* dwelt in various places. We can be fairly certain that the *čäwa* which were called not by ethnic names but by place names, such as “*čäwa* of Dämbya,” were composed of Amhara-Tigre people and stationed in those places. List 1 indicates that the *čäwa* dwelt in Wägära, Dämbya, Begämədr, Gwäžžam, Ägäwmədr,<sup>10</sup> 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 *čäwa* were under the control of the emperor and that *čäwa* also took part in military expeditions under the control of commanders who were appointed by the emperor.<sup>11</sup> There are no records which indicate that *čäwa* undertook military expeditions on their own or that they played a part in the private expeditions of nobles. Therefore, it is obviously that *čäwa* in this period were under the control of the emperor.

It is clear that *čäwa* had an obligation to serve the emperor in a military capacity, because they were often raised for military expeditions by the emperor. Moreover, *čäwa* 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 *čäwa*” to prepare provisions for two weeks (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 128). With what did the emperor reward *čäwa* for their service? There is a record that Iyasu I ordered the inhabitants of Wag to accept “*čäwa* of Sulala,” because they refused to pay the hundred mules which they had paid as tribute in the reign of Yoḥännəs I (r. 1667-1682) (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 139-140). One can safely state that this passage indicates that the emperor gave *čäwa* the *gwəlt* right, or the right to receive a part of the tribute, from that land. It may safely be assumed that other *čäwa* also earned their living mainly from the income of the lands to which they had the *gwəlt* right.<sup>12</sup> Iyasu I adorned “all *čäwa*” 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 *čäwa* must have been a part of their income.<sup>13</sup>

What kind of position did the *čäwa* 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 *čäwa* participated in military expeditions in the reign of Iyasu



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

We find no mention of this military system in the reign of Susnəyos, 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 Yohännəs I reconstructed it. Because Fasilädäs 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 Fasilädäs who reconstructed this system.<sup>14</sup>

## 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 *čäwa* were the main body of the royal army during this period. The emperors were able to lead many military expeditions because *čäwa* performed their obligation to serve them in a military capacity. Until 1697, there is no case in which *čäwa* refused to participate in military expeditions. However, in that year, most *čäwa* 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 *ämba* [a flat topped mountain] in this month [June / July 1697]. He ordered by herald as follows: “All *čäwa* who can not cross the ‘Abawi River, leave and enter the fortified *ämba*. All *čäwa* who can cross the ‘Abawi River, cross [the river] with me.” Most [*čäwa*] 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, *Säb’ hāra wä gäbbbar mäd*”<sup>15</sup>.

Next, as I mentioned above, Iyasu I also had to abandon a military expedition in 1698, because most *čäwa* 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 *gwəlt* 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 Gwäžžam and Damot, and all Baso" led by Ānore, the governor of Gwäžžam, 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 Ēnarya 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 Ġawi 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."<sup>16</sup> The king departed [for Āringo], riding a horse called Yəbsa, 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 Ġawi Oromo were "Gwäžžam, Libän, and Baso," led by *Däğ-äzmač*<sup>17</sup> Täsfa Iyäsus, and "Ägäw and Mäčča," led by *Däğ-äzmač* Mammo and *Āzaži* Bənyam. In addition to these, Belma, Gadisa, Lenča, Wäreza,



Elmana, and Densa troops followed the emperor (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 278, 279, 282). Täsfa Iyäsus seems to have been the governor of Gwäzzam and Mammo to have been the governor of Damot at this time.<sup>18</sup> Bənyam was the governor of Yəbaba.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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 Begämədr, and Wädäğe 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' *wä'alyan*. For example, *wä'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'äs] saw many corpses which lay from the foot of Čäčäho to Šolage because *wä'alyan* of *İras* Mika'el had defeated the rebels like leaves. They [the soldiers of the army of Yämaryam Barya] lay before them [the *wä'alyan* of Mika'el] like grass as when the corpses of the Philistines lay on the Get road up to the gate of Äsqälonä and Äqaron.<sup>22</sup>

List 2 indicates that there are many records of actions of *wä'alyan* of nobles in the chronicles of Iyasu II and Iyo'äs. 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 *wä'alyan* of nobles during the Gondar period

During the reign of Yoḥännəs I (r. 1667-1682)

*Wä'alyan* of Kəflä Giyorgis, the governor of Şägäde, skirmished with *wä'alyan* of Băžrwänd Äkalä Krəstos in 1677 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 1, 18).

*Wä'alyan* of Äbbeto Dəlbä İyäsus and of Dăğ-äzmač Zämaryam participated in the suppression of the rebellion of Fares and his *wä'alyan* in 1678-1681 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 1, 26, 27, 31, 32, 33).

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

*Wä'alyan* of Ras Änəşasyos took part in the military expedition to Ägäwmədr in 1688 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 114).

During the reign of Täklä Haymanot (r. 1706-1708)

*Wä'alyan* of Ras Fares fought against *wä'alyan* of Dăğ-äzmač Änore in 1706 (Basset 1882, 58).

During the reign of Bäkaffa (r. 1721-1730)

Zäwe and Wämbär together skirmished with *wä'alyan* of Baša Ärkäledəs

in 1723 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 281).

Ämħa 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 Ğawi in 1730 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 43).

*Wä'alyan* of *Gra-äzmač* Ärkäledəs skirmished with shield bearers in 1732 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 48).

*Wä'alyan* of *Blatten-geta* Wäldä Lə'ul, *Däg-äzmač* Ärkäledəs, *Balambaras* Ädäm, *Äzaž* Bənyam, Wäldä Ämlak, and Häbt Bəwäsän defended Gondar when Tənše Mammo rebelled against the emperor in 1732-1733. *Wä'alyan* of *Ras* Niqolawos took part in the rebellious army (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 51, 56, 57, 60, 63, 64, 66, 71).

*Wä'alyan* of *Ras* Wädäğe 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 Lə'ul fought against the army of *Däg-äzmač* Äyo in 1740 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 107).

*Wä'alyan* of *Ras* Wäldä Lə'ul participated in the military expedition to the land of "Bäläw" in 1741 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 109).

*Wä'alyan* of *Ras* Wäldä Lə'ul took part in the military expedition to the land of "Bäläw" in 1744 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 113).

*Wä'alyan* of *Ras* Wädäğe and of *Fit-äwrari* Yoħännəs Ädära 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 Lə'ul, *Däg-äzmač* Mammo, *Baša* Äwsabyos, *Yäšaläqa* Kənfu, 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 Buko Basle skirmished with *wä'alyan* of *Äbbeto* Wäldä Lə'ul in 1747 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 141).

*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 Ćərqin Näčo skirmished with *wä'alyan* of Wäldä Həwaryat

in 1756 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 181-182).

*Wä'alyan* of *Balambaras* ፫፳ቴ participated in the military expedition to the land of "Šanqella" in 1758 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 184, 185).

*Wä'alyan* of *፫ras Wäldä Lə'ul*, *Däğ-äzmač* Geta, and *Däğ-äzmač* Gošu took part in the military expedition against the *Mäčča* Oromo in 1758 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 188).

*Wä'alyan* of *Ras Wädaḡe* fought against the army of *Däğ-äzmač* Äwsabyos in 1758 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 191).

*Wä'alyan* of *Däğ-äzmač* Äwsabyos participated in the suppression of the rebellion by *Däğ-äzmač* Näčö and his *wä'alyan* in 1760 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 195, 196).

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

*፫ras* *Mika'el* sent his *wä'alyan* to protect *Iyo'as* and *Məntəwwab* from the skirmish between the people of *Qwara* and the Oromo people in 1767 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 227).

*Wä'alyan* of *፫ras* *Mika'e1*, *Däğ-äzmač* Gošu, and *Däğ-äzmač* Kənfu played a part in the suppression of the rebellion of *Yämaryam Barya* and his *wä'alyan* in 1768-1769 (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 232, 233, 235, 237, 238, 240).

*Wä'alyan* of nobles took part in military expeditions led by emperors or military officers appointed by emperors. For example, *wä'alyan* of *Däğ-äzmač* Geta, of *፫ras Wäldä Lə'ul*, and of *Däğ-äzmač* Gošu participated in the military expedition against the *Mäčča* Oromo in 1758, and *wä'alyan* of *Mika'el* and of Gošu attacked the army of *Yämaryam 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 Näčö (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 195).

*Däğ-äzmač* Näčö sent his *wä'alyan* with many horses and *ləbd* [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 *Däğ-äzmač* Näčö 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'



*wä'alyan* on behalf of their masters (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 208-209).

In this day, Wänd Bāwāsān, a *wä'ali* of Yāmaryam Barya, surprised a *gwaz* [of Mika'el's army.] Zār'ä Dawit was with the *gwaz* as rear guard. He met Wänd Bāwāsān with his seven *wä'alyan* on horseback in the battle. Then Wänd Bāwāsān fled and many of his *wä'alyan* died. . . . He [Mika'el] said to his *wä'alyan*, "Go and attack Yāmaryam Barya. He [Yāmaryam Barya] must not escape your hands. Do not leave even one of his *wä'alyan* to announce the news [of the defeat]."

Several skirmishes between *wä'alyan* 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 [Iyo'äs and nobles] were eating and drinking [on 26 January 1756], *wä'alyan* of Čərqin Nāčo skirmished with *wä'alyan* of Wäldä Hāwaryat in Kayla Meda over a trivial matter. Many people died on each side.

There were many nobles who had *wä'alyan* in this period. List 2 shows that officials and commanders who had such titles as *Ras* (*İras*), *Blatten-geta*, *Däğ-äzmač*, *Gra-äzmač*, *Fit-äwrari*, and *Balambaras* had *wä'alyan* during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo'äs. According to the chronicle of Iyasu II, when the rebellious army led by Tānše Mammo besieged Gondar, the *wä'alyan* of many nobles, e.g. *Blatten-geta* Wäldä Le'ul, *Däğ-äzmač* Ärkäledəs, *Balambaras* Ädäru, and *Äzaž* Bānyam, 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 *wä'alyan* 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 *wä'alyan*, 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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*.<sup>25</sup> 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 Ēndārta, and Yämaryam Barya, the governor of Begämädr, and enlarged his area of rule and governed the provinces and districts between the Tākäze River and Səmen by the end of the reign of Iyo'äs.<sup>26</sup> 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 Yämaryam 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).

... 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 Yämaryam Barya of Begämädr, Gošu of Amhara, Fasil Wārāñña of Damot who acquired the office of provincial governor previously held by their fathers.<sup>27</sup> 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 Susnəyos, 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'ās 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 *wä'alyan* and strengthen their power. Mika'el of Tigre, in particular, succeeded in assembling many *wä'alyan* and annexing many regions.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> triggered a bitter civil war which involved Emperor Iyo'ās 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 *Zāmānā mäsafənt*<sup>30</sup> that they themselves succeeded to the throne.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a corrected and revised version of my article published in *Les Annales d'Éthiopie*



18 (2002), 215-229. The editor of *Les Annales d'Éthiopie* 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'Éthiopie* 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.

<sup>2</sup> When transliterating the Gə'əz and Amharic scripts, I have observed the usage of *Aethiopica: International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. However, I have used transcriptions such as Ethiopia, Amhara, Shoa, Tigre, and Tana, since these are well known.

<sup>3</sup> 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 Tāklä Giyorgis wielded power in some measure from the year 1779, when he succeeded to the throne, up until 1784, when Äli I of the Yäggü Oromo defeated him (Molla 1994, 197-198). In this paper, I adopt the former for convenience.

<sup>4</sup> For example, F. Alvares, a Portuguese clergyman who visited the court of the emperor Ləbnä Dəngəl in the 1520s, explained *čäwa* as men-at-arms (Alvares 1889, 25, 30, 146, 154, 155, 169). However, most scholars interpret *čäwa* as meaning regiment (Alvares 1961, vol. 1, 116; vol. 2, 555-556; Abir 1980, 48).

<sup>5</sup> 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 *Təgre-mäkwännən*, the title of the governor of Gwäzzam was *Gwäzzam-nägaš*, and the title of the governor of Amhara was *Šähäfe-lahəm zä-Ämhära*.

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

<sup>7</sup> Baggage train with attendant followers.

<sup>8</sup> People of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century who were famous for using poisoned arrows (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954, 120).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed argument about the relation between the emperors of the Solomonic dynasty and the Ägäw people, see Tadesse 1988.

<sup>10</sup> At least Äčäfar, Ḥaläfa, Sagäba, Bäd, and Sarka are known to be places in Ägäwmədr.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Ämonewos went to defend Gwäzzam with "all the *čäwa* of Baḥr Äruse, Elmana, and Densa" at the emperor's order in 1694. Iyasu I ordered Fares to defend Gondar with "all the *čäwa* of Kokäb" and other troops in 1695 (Guidi 1960-1961, vol. 3, 169, 175).

<sup>12</sup> For further detailed reading concerning the granting of *gwəlt* rights by the emperors during the Gondar period, see Crummey 2000, 73-89.

<sup>13</sup> 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 *čäwa*.

<sup>14</sup> Pankhurst and Merid Wolde Äregay suggest that Fasilädäs carried out military reforms (Pankhurst 1961, 170; Merid 1971, 537-544).

<sup>15</sup> Emperor Zädəngəl (r. 1603-1604) also decreed "*Säb' ḥära wä gäbbär mədr*" 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 tribute" (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 Äregay, followed by Crummey, as "Man is free; land is tributary" (Merid 1971, 378-380; Crummey 2000, 63-64, 278). It is entirely fair to say that the decree of Zädəngəl was intended to raise all adults of age and that the *čäwa* quoted this sentence to explain that they did not need to participate in a dangerous military expedition to the land of the Oromo people.

<sup>16</sup> For Äringo, see Pankhurst 1982, 139-140.

<sup>17</sup> 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'äs. Instead, we see many records of appointments to the office of *Däğ-äzmač* 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 *Däğ-äzmač* 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 *Däğ-äzmač* in most provinces during the reigns of Iyasu II and Iyo'äs.

<sup>18</sup> Nobody with a title such as *Gwäzzam-Nägaš* or *Šähäfe-lahäm zä-Damot*, which were titles of provincial governors in the reign of Iyasu I, appears in the chronicle of Bäkäffa. Moreover in 1722 Bäkäffa appointed Täsa Iyasus to the office of *Däğ-äzmač* of Gwäzzam, and Mammo (Tänše Mammo) to the office of *Däğ-äzmač* of Damot according to *The Short Chronicle* (Basset 1882, 80, 81). It may be assumed that titles of the provincial governors of Gwäzzam and Damot became *Däğ-äzmač* in the reign of Bäkäffa.

<sup>19</sup> Bäkäffa appointed Bonyam to the office of *Äzäž* of Yəbaba in 1722 according to *The Short Chronicle* (Basset 1882, 80). Bruce mentions "the post of Ibaba Azage, or governor of Ibaba" (Bruce 1790, vol. 2, 624). For Yəbaba, see Pankhurst 1982, 140-141.

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

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Pankhurst 1997, 308-323; Fiquet 2000, 135-146.

<sup>22</sup> I Sam. XVII, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Prutky reports on the salary of the nobles' servants in peace time (Prutky 1991, 280-281).

<sup>24</sup> 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).

<sup>25</sup> Berry supposes that nobles came to gather *wä'alyan* during the first half of the Gondar period (Berry 1976, 253-255). His argument, however, is unsound.

<sup>26</sup> Äyo, the governor of Begämädr, 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).

<sup>27</sup> Yämaryam Barya was a son of Äyo, the governor of Begämädr; Gošu was a son of Wädäge, the governor of Amhara; and Fasil Wärränña was a son of Wärränña, the governor of Damot (Guidi 1954-1962, vol. 1, 193, 194, 209, 225, 228, 230).

<sup>28</sup> Mika'el was the most powerful noble from the end of the Gondar period to the beginning of the *Zämänä mäsaḫant*. 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).

<sup>29</sup> On the race for power and political factions at the end of the Gondar period, see Perret 1989.

<sup>30</sup> For example, nobles increased their authority in military affairs in each province during the *Zämänä mäsaḫant* (Shiferaw 1990, 170-173).

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