

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum
für Äthiopistik



Northern Ethiopia as the last refuge of King Ləbnä Dəngəl (1508-1540): evaluation of the evidence

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“Medieval Ethiopia, II: Christians and Pagans”

The reign of King Ləbnä Dəngəl (r. 1508-40)

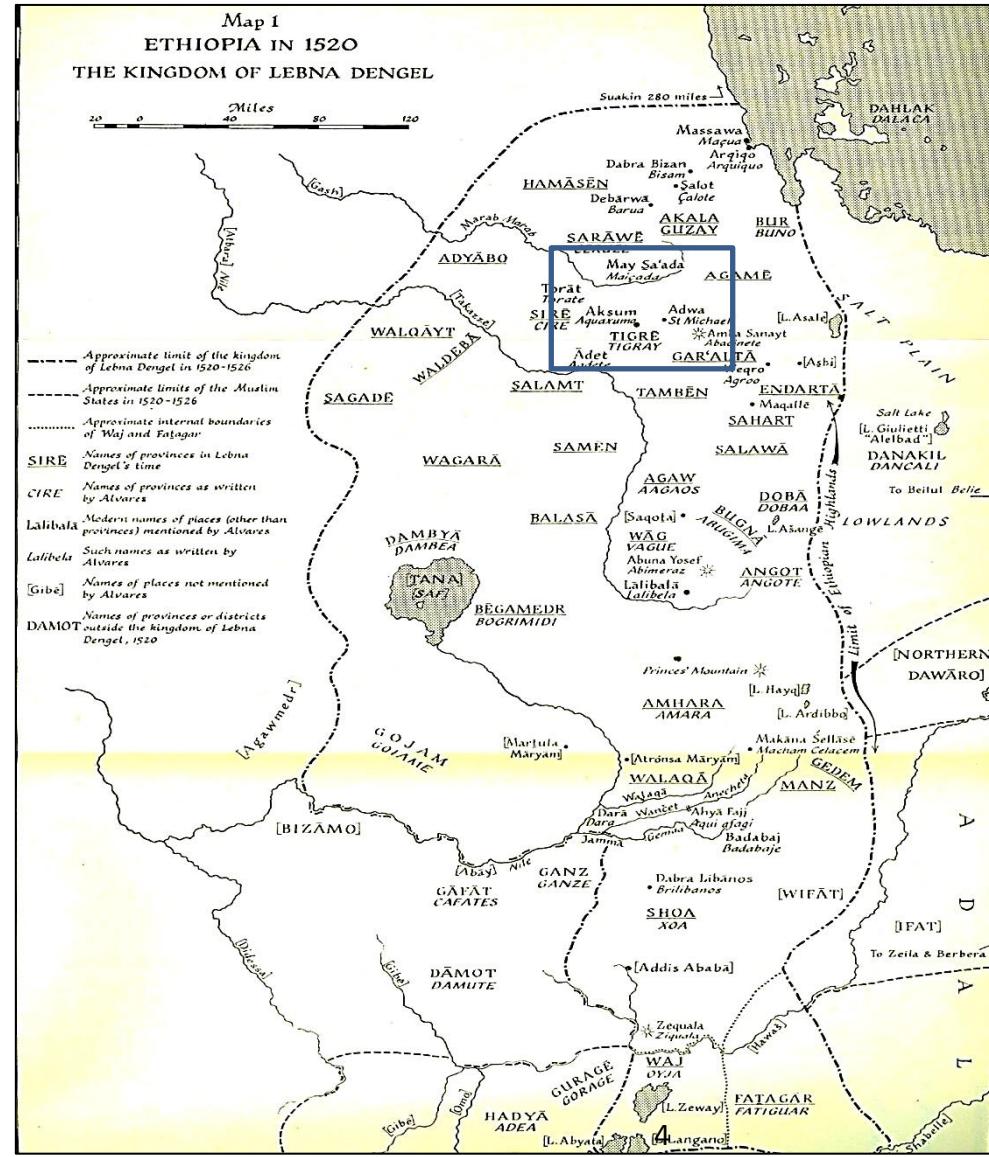
- Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, ca. 1528: peak of the prosperity and power
- Surge in culture: literature, manuscript production
- Internal problems of Ethiopia: fragmented and heterogeneous state
- Deteriorating external political conditions: rise of the Ottoman Empire
- Radicalization of Muslims in the “southern tributary states”



ATANADI DINGHIL MAGNVS · ABYSSINORVM · REX ·
· VULGO · PREEIANES · APPELLATVS · 1532 ·



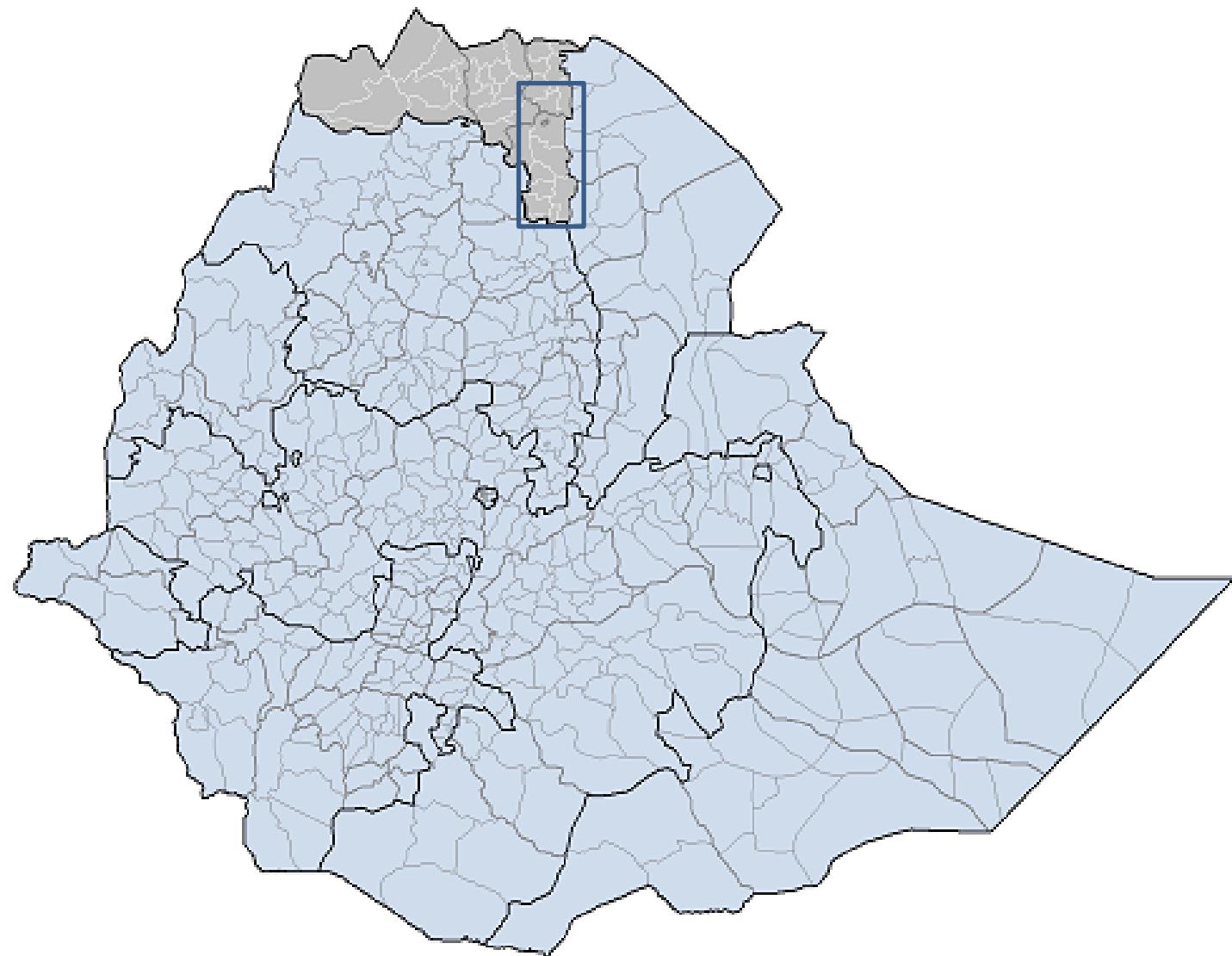
Portrait of Ləbnä Dəngəl,
Cristofano dell'Altissimo,
c. 1552-68,
Uffizi, Florence



Jihad of Ahmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ğāzī “Graňň”, 1529-43

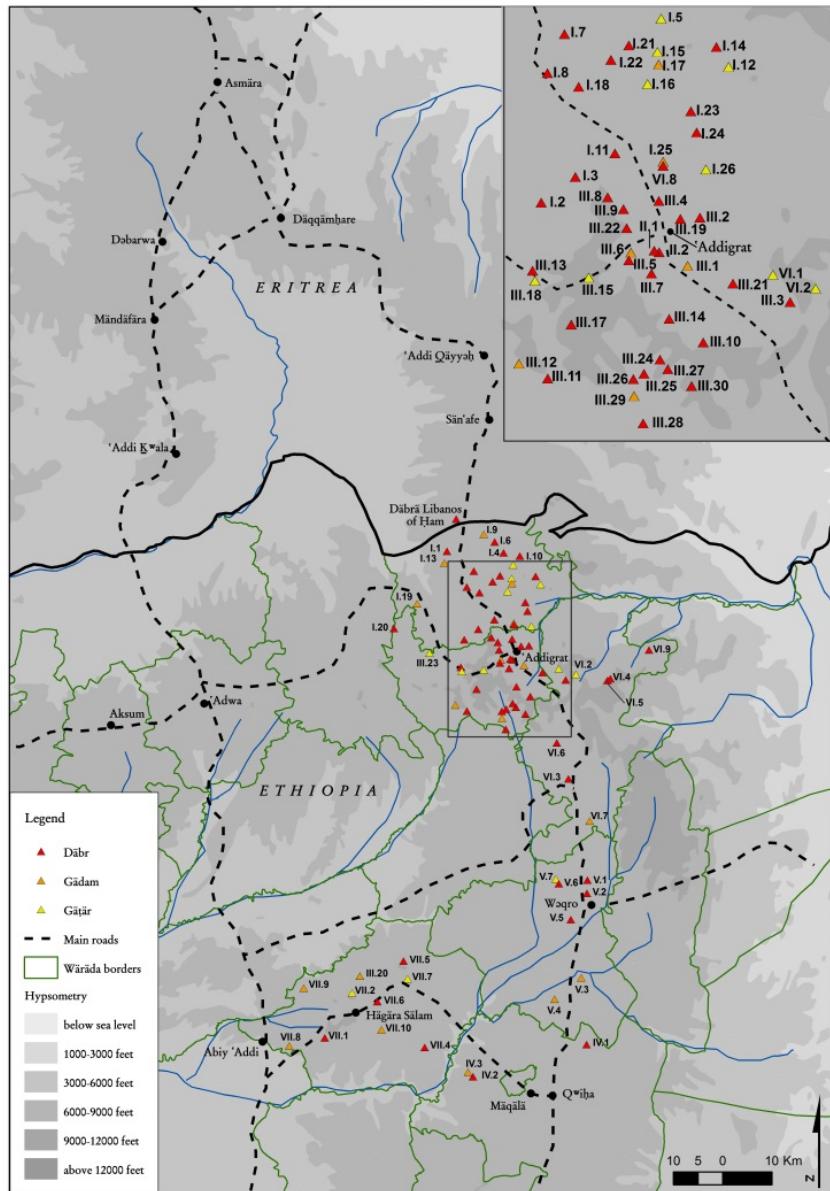
- Successful raids of the Muslim after 1529
- Quick collapse of the Christian Kingdom
- Some nobles, part of the population and troops defected
- Muslim troops on the northern frontiers: by 1534
- Aksum Zion cathedral destroyed: early 1535
- King Ləbnä Dəngəl without army, “cornered” in northern Ethiopia by 1539
- According to various traditions, died on 2 September (5 Mäskäräm) 1540 in Däbrä Dammo, buried in Däbrä Dammo

- Project “Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia, Salvation, Preservation, Research” (EU 7th Framework Programme, ERC Starting Grant 240720)
- 11 research and digitalization missions in 2010-2015
- 103 ecclesiastic sites of Tigray (North Ethiopia) surveyed
- Over 2000 manuscripts digitized



The last years of King Løbnä Døngøl

- Is there any direct evidence in the area of the Kings refuge clarifying the events of his last years?
- Are there any manuscripts that can be directly linked to the king and royal family?
- Are there any ecclesiastic institutions that can be linked to the king and royal family?
- Are there are any local oral traditions about Løbnä Døngøl?



East Təgray districts

Ganta Afäsum: 41

Gulo Mäkäda: 30

Kələttä ?Awlə'alo: 9

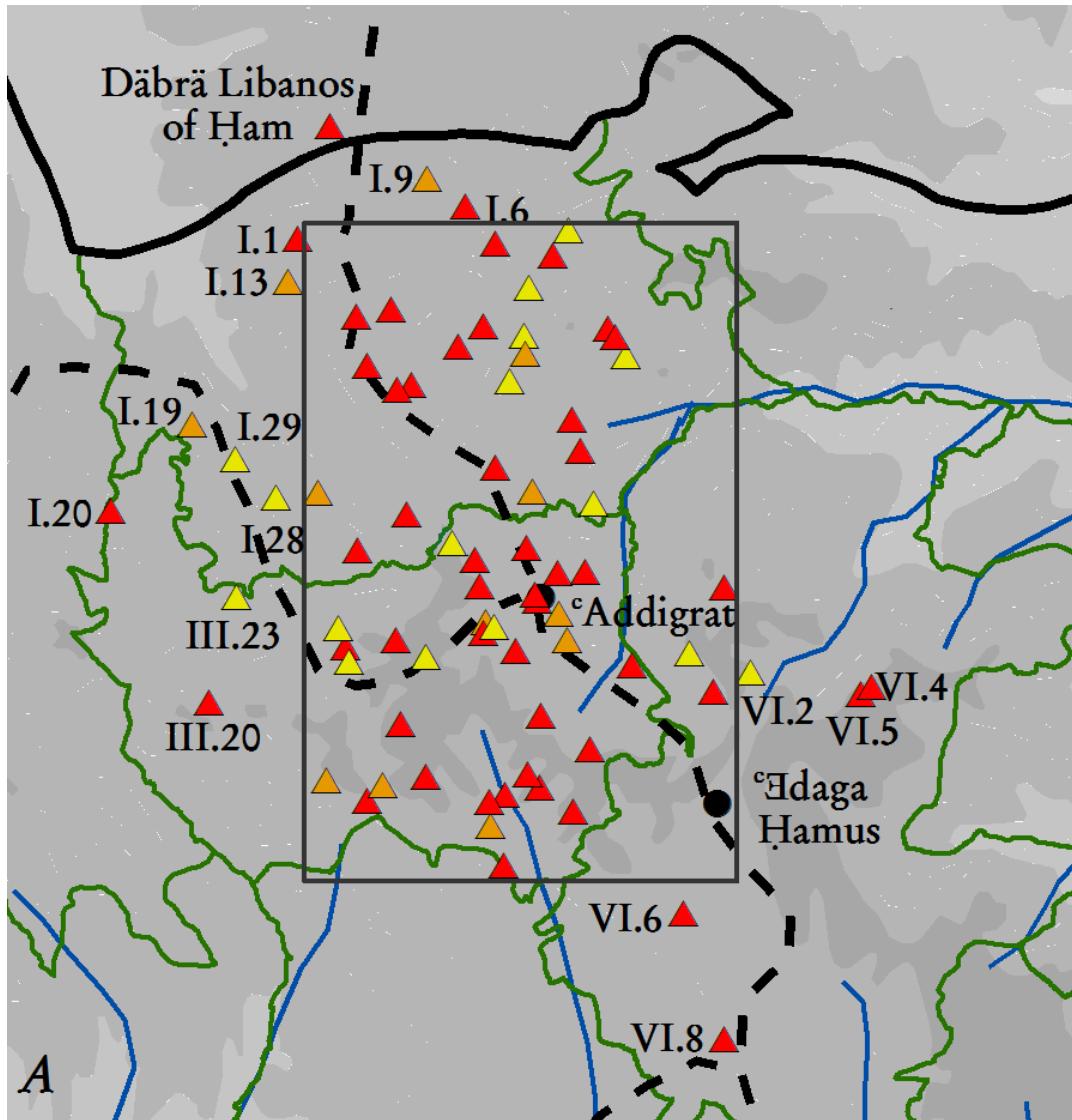
Sa'si Sa'əda ?Emba: 10

?Endärta: 4

?Irob: 1

The city of 'Addigrat: 3

map©Luisa Sernicola,
University Napoli
“I’Orientale”



Surveyed by Ethio-
SPaRe in East Tigray:

Ganta Afäsum: 41
institutions

Gulo Mäkäda: 30
institutions

map©Luisa Sernicola, University
Napoli “l’Orientale”

The refuge area of Ləbnä Dəngəl in 1530s

- Loyal population of Märätta, Mädäbay, Zana, Tabor, Mäzabər, ‘Agamä, Särayä
- Supportive churches and monasteries
- Proximity to Aksum, the main sanctuary of Ethiopia
- A number of significant churches between on the route Däbrä Dammo – Qärsäbär/‘Addigrat - Eritrea (Särawe)
- A royal residence at Awagir/Awgir (?)
- Strategic location on the route to the Red Sea coast
- Transparent region, terrain only partly ragged
- Few military resources

Documentary evidence: over 30 deeds from northern Ethiopia

- Confirmation and renovation of existing rights
- The first datable land grant to the Cathedral of Axum (1517)
- The last charter to Däbrä Libanos of Ham, Särawe (ca. 1539)
- New land grants to dignitaries: Robel (d. 1529), confessor Tənśa'e Krəstos (congregation of Yonas, Särawe), 'aqqabe sā'at Nägädä lyäsus, some other nobles
- New land grants to institutions: Cathedral of Axum, Däbrä Halleluya, congregation of Yonas, Däbrä Qonaşəl, Maryam 'Əmba Sänayti, etc.

Literary evidence: surge in hagiographic production, the early 16th century

- Acts of the Martyrs of ‘Addiqäharsi Päraqlitos (‘Addiqäharsi Päräqlīṭos)
- Possibly Acts of Zä-Mika’el Arägawi (Däbrä Dammo)
- Possibly Acts of Yonas (Särawe)
- The works emphasize motives of the martyrtom, struggle with rebels and infidels

‘Addiqäharsi Päräqlitəs

- Mentioned in the itinerary of the Portuguese mission to Ləbnä Dəngəl in 1520 (narrative of F. Alvares)
- At least five books datable to the 16th century (AP-005, 009, 016, 035, 046), out of ca. 65
- Aksumite; re-established by Ləbnä Dəngəl, land deed available in copy (BritLib Orient 481,f. 132v)
- Vita of the Righteous Martyrs of Päräqlitəs written or rewritten in 1520s; claim for land possession

‘Addiqäharsi Päräqliṭos



MS AP-009, Rite of the Passion Week, 218 ff., 51x37x11



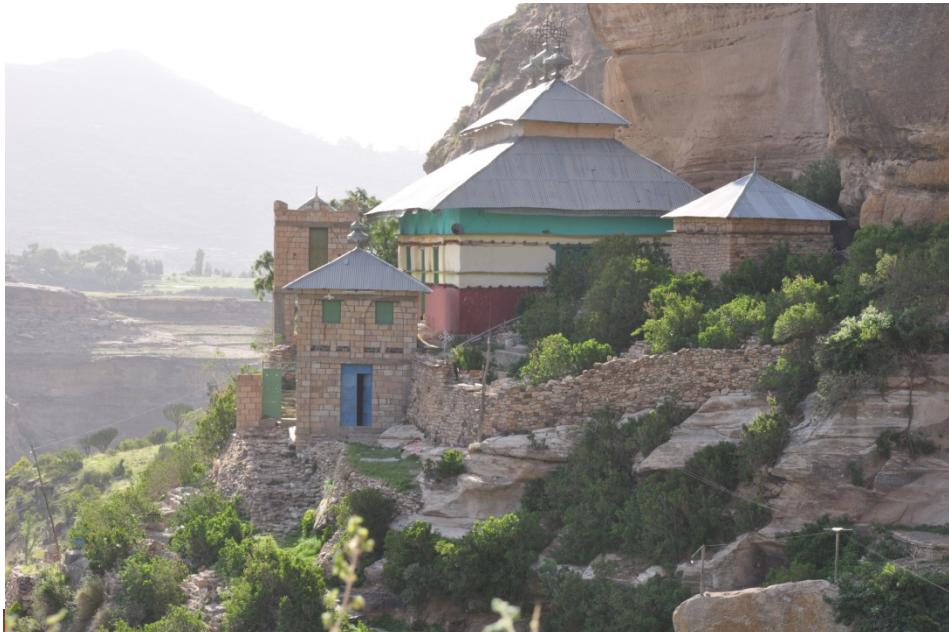
Deed of Wänäg Sägäd Læbnä Dængæl issued to the “tabot of Päräqliṭos”

MS London, British Library,
Orient. 481, Four Gospels,
f. 132vb

Däbrä Zäyt Maryam

- Unknown before, at least early medieval
- Presence of high quality objects
- Library of ca. 35 books only, old books destroyed
- At least one manuscript (DZ-004) produced by the scribe known from the library ‘Addiqäharsi Päräqlitos (AP-009)

Däbrä Zäyt Maryam



Däbrä Dammo

- Only one book certainly datable to Ləbnä Dəngəl's time in the monastic library, but ca. 80% of the library lost
- An earlier land grant included in the Acts of the founder, Zä-Mika'el
- The “lower church” constructed by Ləbnä Dəngəl (after a text in MS DD-044, f. 137ra)
- Däbrä Dammo only mentioned in a “collective charter” (*Liber axumae* no. 44)

Däbrä Dammo



Däbrä Dammo



Conclusions

- No direct data clarifying the events of 1530s so far
- No manuscripts clearly identifiable as donated by the king or the queen
- Spurious traditions about Ahmed Grañň
- Important information: “Nella sacrestia posta a sinistra del *maqdas* oltre all’aver potuto esaminare le spoglie mortali del re Lebda-Dengel (che la tradizione ancora esistente nel convento afferma morto in Addi Caièh il 2 Septembre 1540), conservato in una grande cassa...”, A. Mordini, “Informazioni preliminari sui risultati delle mie ricerche in Etiopia dal 1939 al 1944”, *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 4, 1944-45, pp. 145-54, here p. 147
- The king died in Akkälä Guzay, at ‘Addi Qäyyih (today in Eritrea) possibly waiting for the Portuguese, after exchange of letters in 1540; his body was transferred later to Däbrä Dammo
- Is the coffin with the kings’ bones still somewhere in the church? Did it perish with the biggest part of the monastery’s library in the fire of 1990s?

Many thanks!

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