

Säblä Wängel was a steadfast supporter of the traditionalists who wished Christian Ethiopia to remain Orthodox. This did not prevent her from interceding on behalf of foreign Roman Catholics who had fallen foul of the Emperor. Her intervention saved from execution both the Portuguese adventurer Bermudes, who had angered Gälawdewos by pressing him to give allegiance to the Pope, and the Spanish Jesuit Patriarch Oviedo, who had irritated Emperor Minas by siding with the rebellious Yəsh.aq. Girma and Merid (1964: 62-4).

Säblä Wängel's last achievement was to ensure that her grandson Särs.ä Dəngəl (1563-1597), one of several rival contenders, came to the throne. He was thirteen years old. Her choice was wise, as he succeeded in defending the integrity of the realm throughout his thirty-four year reign. In 1579, about half way through it, Säblä Wängel died. Conti Rossini (1907: 103 n.) She had been an active participant in the state affairs of her husband, Lebnä Dəngəl, of her sons, Gälawdewos and Minas, and of her grandson, Särs.ä Dəngəl. The chronicles mentioning her, extol her piety. Castanhoso reported that, at Christmas: 'There were several [friars] in the Queen's trains, some priests and some friars, for they said Mass wherever she happened to be' Whiteway (1902: 25); and Särs.ä Dəngəl's chronicle refers to her as 'the great Queen who loved fasting and prayer'. Conti Rossini (1907: 103).

Säblä Wängel conformed to the model of wise, deeply religious Ethiopian queens who were involved in state affairs, while retaining the qualities of gentleness and mercy often attributed to women. It fell to her to live in dangerous times, during which she exhibited not only diplomatic talents, but also courage and fortitude in battle and defeat.

### **Bati Dəl Wämbära**

Bati Dəl Wämbära,<sup>19</sup> a contemporary of Säblä Wängel's, was the youngest daughter of the famous *Amīr*, later *Imām*, Mah.fūz. ibn Muh.ammäd, governor of Zäyla. He was also the *de facto* ruler of Adäl. Mah.fūz., a zealous Muslim, who had adopted the title of *Imām* because it carried the connotation of spiritual, as well as temporal leadership, had been conducting raids into the interior that had only temporarily been halted by his losing one battle. Mah.fūz was able to acquire much booty, including gold and slaves. He was encouraged by Arab emissaries who proclaimed a *ġihād* against the Christian empire, and assisted him with arms and trained soldiers. However, in 1518, Ləbnä Dəngəl, as we have seen, successfully defeated Mah.fūz.who was then killed in a man-to-man engagement with a Christian soldier turned monk. Beckingham and Huntingford (1961: 410-15); Trimmingham (1952: 83-4); Cuoq (1981: 165-7). Dəl Wämbära grew up under the shadow of a passionate Muslim father, who led annual looting expeditions against the Christians.

Probably at an early age she married young Ah.mäd ibn.Ibrāhīm al-Gāzī (ca 1506-43), a captain in the cavalry guards of the Sultan of Adäl. At eighteen or nineteen, Ah.mäd had already shown bravery and intelligence. He had restored order within Adäl, and subdued the Somali nomads. It is not unlikely that Dəl Wämbära saw in him the hope of avenging her father's death. As for Ah.mäd, the marriage ensured him the loyalty of Mah.fūz.'s followers,<sup>20</sup> especially as she 'became a symbol of succession in the holy war'. Trimmingham (1952: 85-6); Girma and Merid (1964: 37-8); Muth (2003: 155-158).

<sup>19</sup> The Arabist, René Basset, in his translation of the *Futūh*, states that the name *Dəl Wämbära* means 'Victory is her seat' 'en éthiopien'. Basset (1897:51).

<sup>20</sup> Probably for similar reasons, Ah.mäd married the daughter of the Muslim chief Makatter, ruler of Mazäga in the west, who asked for assistance against Ləbnä Dəngəl in 1535. The chief controlled a

Dəl Wāmbāra was determined to accompany her husband on the *ḡihād*. He intended to replace the Christian kingdom by a theocratic Muslim state. Ah.mād, like Mah.fūz. before him, had adopted the religious title of *Imām* in preference to the secular one of *Amīr*. At first, Dəl Wāmbāra's presence on campaign led to discontent among the soldiers. On the fourth raid into the highlands Ah.mād's chronicler, 'Arab Faqīh, records: 'When the army reached Kub, they said to the *Imām*: 'We will not accompany you to Abyssinia unless your wife Dəl Wāmbāra returns to the country of the Muslims. She shall not come with us to the country of the infidels. Not one of the *Imāms* ever took his wife with him [on campaign], only you.' Ignoring the protests of Ah.mād's soldiers, Dəl Wāmbāra imperiously replied: "I will not go back". So her husband took her as far as Ifat in the land of the infidels.' Ifat was at this time held by Christians. Ah.mād seems for once to have arrived at a compromise: she was not returned to the safety of Muslim-held territory, but neither did she remain with her husband. Stenhouse (2003: 32).

After this confrontation the soldiers seem to have accepted her presence on the *Imām*'s expeditions. They even tried to present her with some gold, given to them by the people of Gendebelo, but Ah.mād would not hear of it, and declared that it was to be used for the *ḡihād*. Stenhouse (2003: 38-9). She was with him at Ant.okyā [site of one of Ləbnā Dəngəl's palaces]. The chronicler reports: 'In Ant.okyā there was a Christian church, which the great emirs among the Muslims entered... The *Imām* entered, as did his wife Del Wāmbāra...When they could not find any treasure in it, they set fire to it, and destroyed it'. Stenhouse (2003: 36).

At times Dəl Wāmbāra had to be carried on the soldiers' shoulders Stenhouse (2003:37), up and down steep and rocky mountain slopes, twice in a state of pregnancy. In 1531<sup>21</sup>, while, for six days the army camped at Zifah, near Harār, Dəl Wāmbāra gave birth to Muh.ammād, the first of several sons. 'She deferred going on the expedition on account of this, and stayed with the *Imām*'s sister, Munisah'. Stenhouse (2003: 45). In 1532 or 1533, her second son, Ah.mād an-Nāgaši<sup>22</sup>, was born during a campaign in Təgre, but died shortly afterwards in Sārayə. Basset (1897: 51, n. 2); Stonehouse (2003: 350, 373); Huntingford (1989: 122). (Another son, Nas.raddīn, mentioned only in Christian sources, was governor of Dāwaro in 1540 and died after a battle, (by poison or disease). Muth (2003: 155).

In 1539, when his empire was collapsing, Ləbnā Dəngəl was defeated by Ah.mād in a battle in which, as mentioned earlier, the king's eldest son Fiqtor, was killed and his youngest, Minas, was captured and taken to Adāl. He was neither castrated nor killed, as was customary, though he was converted to Islam. According to Minas's chronicle, Ah'mad's counselors advised him to kill Minas, but the *Imām* went to his wife and told her what they had said. The two of them decided that the young Minas had not committed any crime for which he should perish, and that they would treat him well – so well that 'they would give him their daughter in marriage according to their law'. Some scholars have suggested that Dəl Wāmbāra 'tried to create here some sort of transition of power' and that the marriage was part of this plan. Chernetsov (2003: 505). After the celebrations Ah.mād's counselors pointed out the political folly of allowing his daughter to be Minas's wife. Some time later, when Ah.mād was in need of reinforcements, they persuaded him

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force of some 15,000 Nubians.

<sup>21</sup> According to Muth (2003: 155) Muh.ammād was born in 15 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ah.mād an-Nāgaši was the name of one of the first Ethiopian followers of Islam, whose grave is in Təgre. Trimmingham (1952: 152). It is significant that the *Imām*, and/or Dəl Wāmbāra, chose this name for their second child, born in Təgre. Basset (1897: 51.n. 2).

to send the Emperor's son and cousins as a gift to the Turkish Pasha of Zabīd [in Yemen], asking in return for soldiers to fight the *Fārānġ* [Roman Catholics, i.e. Portuguese] who had disembarked at the coast. Dəl Wāmbāra must have regretted this decision, for Minas's chronicle records that 'on the day he left the camp there was much lamentation and sadness in the house of Dəl Wāmbāra'. Esteves Pereira (1888: 38-39).

It is indicative of Dəl Wāmbāra's status that, when there was a plot against the *Imām*, and the plotters were trying to exile him, they declared, according to 'Arab Faqīh, that they must 'leave the country to us and go away, he and his wife Dəl Wāmbāra'. Stenhouse (2003: 103). Subsequently Dəl Wāmbāra obeyed her husband when, at the height of his conquests, he commanded his followers to settle their families in the conquered areas. The *Futūh. al-H.abaša* mentions that she 'made preparations for the journey up', at a time when not all his soldiers showed similar willingness. Stenhouse (2003: 331).

As mentioned earlier, in 1543 the *Imām*'s army was routed, by the combined forces of Emperor Gālawdewos and the remnants of the Portuguese expedition. Ah.mād was killed and Dəl Wāmbāra's eldest son, Muh.ammād, was captured. Dəl Wāmbāra fled to the north-west of Lake T.ana together with Nūr ibn al-Muġāhid, son of Ah.mād's sister. Eventually Dəl Wāmbāra succeeded in returning to Harār, then at the centre of Adāl power. Her first task was to make arrangements for the exchange, as we have seen, of her son, then some twelve years old, for Emperor Gālawdewos's brother, Minas. Conzelman (1895: 142). Dəl Wāmbāra was in a good position to achieve this ambition because Minas's life had earlier been spared through her intervention. It was no easy task, however, as his captors feared, rightly, as it turned out, that if released, he would come to the throne, and be a powerful enemy.

The exchange took place the following year, 1544.<sup>23</sup> Minas's chronicler wrote that the Lord inspired Dəl Wāmbāra to consider the return of Minas and to send a message to the Queen suggesting the exchange of their sons. They agreed with much good will for they were both overjoyed as mothers. Dəl Wāmbāra dispatched a message to the Pasha of Zabīd urging him to support the exchange, which he did, after consulting the Sultan and asking for 1,000 ounces of gold in addition. Säblä Wāngel then ordered much gold to be piled up, with the assistance of the princes and noblemen of Təgre, and sent Dəl Wāmbāra's son with the gold. Then the Pasha sent back Minas and his two cousins, 'because he was compelled by his faith and his greed for gold'. 'The ships carrying the sons to be exchanged met in the middle of the [Red] sea: the messengers of the Basha were in one ship and the messengers of the Queen were in another. The agreement was concluded by oath. The release was simultaneous, and there was neither first nor last, for fear of treachery'. Esteves Pereira (1888: 41-2).

Soon after Ah.mād's death, his nephew, *Amīr* Nūr, who, with Dəl Wāmbāra, had succeeded in returning to Harār, asked her to marry him, as was expected of a Muslim whose close male relative had died leaving a widow. She replied: 'If you want to marry me, go and kill that Christian king, the murderer of my husband.' Basset (1894: 107). Nūr was eventually to fulfil her demand in a battle in 1559, Basset (1881 Aug.-Sept.:103); Burton (1894: Vol. 2, 11-12) whereupon the marriage took place. Thereafter no more is heard of Dəl Wāmbāra.

One may speculate, given Dəl Wāmbāra's dynamic character, that she was involved in her second husband's achievement, when as *Amīr* of Harār, he built the wall around the

<sup>23</sup> Chernetsov (2003: 505) gives the date of the exchange as 1547.

city that is still visible in places today. Leaving aside all speculation, Bati Dəl Wämbära was one of the most famous women of the Horn of Africa in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. She emerges from the *Futūh.*, and from the royal chronicles, as a strong-willed woman, working in tandem with her husband. She was capable of mercy in cruel times, but her great achievement was her successful diplomacy that resulted in the unprecedented exchange of important prisoners, negotiated by two noble and brave ladies.

### Conclusion

Enough has been said to demonstrate that Empress T.aytu's undeniable achievements were by no means unique among consorts of Ethiopian kings (and prominent chiefs). All three women who figure in this account were skilled diplomats; all three were strong supporters of their faith. At least two of them were no strangers to the battlefield. They show that, long before the great T.aytu came to the fore, Ethiopians accepted the notion that women, whether they bore children or not, could be strong, independent decision-makers, accepted and respected as leaders.

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