

# Ancient Harar in Legend and History

Harar is considered by some writers to have been originally a Christian settlement which was superseded by a colony from Hadramaut in the seventh century A.D.—some say the ninth century A.D. Harar is not mentioned in the Ethiopian Chronicles till the fourteenth century. Local Harar history and legend name Sheikh Hossein as having introduced Islam to the Harar region. He is said to have been a king of the Argobba, south of Harar, and to have adopted Islam soon after Mohammed's flight from Mecca. He was succeeded by his grandson, Amu, who founded a town called after him—Emir Amu Magalla (the town of Emir Amu). Being vanquished by a rival who seized his kingdom, Amu

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journeyed across Mount Hakim and built a camp on the very hill where Harar now stands. Five villages grew up on the hill.

About 1204, at the fall of the Fatimite Moslems of the sect of Ali, some members of the sect fled to Africa. Led by a pious man, named Abd el Kadir, they eventually reached Harar where Abd el Kadir was accepted as religious chief also by the villagers already established on the hill.

After some years Abd el Kadir desired to return to Bagdad. He called his followers together, urged them to live in brotherly concord and instructed them to appoint a leader to replace him. Each man was to remove his turban and to girdle his house with it. The man whose turban most nearly girdled his home was to be the leader. Chance favoured Abba Derb (or Abadir). The spot where this meeting took place outside the walls of the City is still celebrated with honour. Bardey,\* the French merchant, who spent a number of years in Harar, tells us that even the Egyptians during their occupation of Harar did not fail to send flags and music to the ceremony. Abadir is highly revered in Harar and many local poems celebrate his virtues.

The Moslem Governors of Harar bore the title Ahu. The tomb of one of them, Ahu Said Ali, built of rough stones, is said to be in the market-place. Legend has it that if the city is besieged, but only then, a deep well fed by an abundant stream may be found under those stones. In Bardey's time many of the old people declared their ancestors had been saved from death by that beneficent spring.

Among the subsequent governors of Harar is said to have been Ayah Abida (Mother of abundant prayer) who had carried water to the troops in battle and exhorted them to deeds of valour.

The Harar Chronicles give a list of some 26 personalities as rulers of Harar during 300 years, but these appear to have governed a wider area, of which Harar at times formed part. According to Dr. Phillip Paulitschke, the first of the 26 to make his residence in Harar was Sultan Abu Bakr in 1521 A.D.

Ahmed ibn Ibrahim el Ghazi, known as Gran (the left-handed). There had then been intermittent warfare between the Moslems of Adal, where Harar was situated and the Emperors of all Ethiopia, for several centuries, and particularly since the time of the Emperor Amda Sion (1314-1344); but there were intervals of peace when the Moslem chiefs appointed by the Emperor to administer Adal and other areas acknowledged the supremacy of the imperial power and accepted office as governors responsible to the Emperor. In the periods of warfare many parts of the country were laid waste and the population suffered bitterly. When Gran rose to prominence the warfare was terribly intensified. The Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese were then contending on the seas for control of the East and the Eastern trade.

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\* Alfred Barday *Notes sur le Harar*, 1900, reprinted from *Bulletin de Géographie historique*, 1897.

Gran became an instrument of the Ottoman Empire ; in this attack on the rest of Ethiopia he was supplied with Turkish cavalry, cannon and matchlockmen; these played havoc with the Ethiopian forces, then armed only with swords and spears. The aim of the Turks was to add Ethiopia to the Ottoman realm. In fact they succeeded in occupying the Ethiopian Red Sea coast and were not dislodged from it till the nineteenth century. Gran made Harar his headquarters.

The history is well known of the small Portuguese force headed by Christopher da Gama, which landed at Massawa to assist sorely beleaguered Ethiopia, the defeat of the Portuguese, the capture and decapitation of Christopher da Gama, the ultimate rally of the Ethiopians under their young King Claudius, aided by the remnant of the Portuguese and their firearms, the death of Gran in battle near Lake Tana.

The history of Gran's campaigns by his own chronicler is sad to read ; the destruction of works of art, of historic monuments and of accumulated wealth was stupendous, the immense slaughter of the population was pitiable in the extreme.

Gran was succeeded by Nur who initiated the building of the wall round Harar City, and according to Dr. Paulitschke, introduced also the Harar currency.

In 1577 the Imam who ruled Harar, Mohammed Gaza, removed his capital to Aussa because Harar had become too much exposed to attack by the Galla tribes. Henceforth the City contended (and now for its very existence), not with the Emperors of Ethiopia, but with the Galla and Somali tribesmen.

The Emir Ali ibn Da'ud (1647-1653) established a dynasty of 15 descendants.

During this period it is said the Gallas first established themselves within the City walls and the rulers of the town commenced marrying Galla and Somali women.

It was under the rule of the Emir Ahmad ibn Abi Bakr (1755-1782), in the year 1761-2 precisely, that the minaret called " al Suhayle," one of the two minarets of the ancient Mosque of Yami, was constructed. It bore an inscription in Arabic verse. According to Cerulli,\* the Harar rulers at this time were called " Aftal." The woman's title was " guisti."

The last of the dynasty of Ali ibn Da'ud was the Emir Ahmed bin Abu Bakr whom Burton visited in 1854. Toward the end of the following year Ahmed passed the government to his wife, Guisti Fatmah, whom Bardey tells us was a woman of great energy. Sheikh Mohammed Abd el Shakur, who coveted the power, then absconded to the Gallas, and successfully incited them to attack the City. Fatmah," greatly beloved by the people," succeeded in encouraging the Hararis to withstand the siege till her husband died in 1856. Then Abd el Shakur became its governor. He debased the currency, Bardey says, by adulterating the silver with lead. He introduced a small copper coin, the Mohalak, rated at 25 to the dollar. Abd el Shakur was in power when the Egyptian forces assumed control.—E.S.P.

\* Enrico Cerulli Gliemiri di Harar dal Seccolo xvi alla Conquista Egiziana, Rassengna Etopici, Vol. 11, No. 1, page 13.

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