

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Historical Dynamics of the Heritage Values of Mount Gəšān, Ambassäl: Evidence from the *Māṣḥafä Tefut* (The Book of Tefeff Grains)

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## Abstract

*Mount Gəšān is a cross-shaped mountain in Ambassäl Wārāda, South Wällo Zone, Amhara Regional State. Scholarly literature of the area generally addresses the history of the landscape as a medieval royal prison, present-day religious values and marketability for tourism. A comprehensive study of the shifting values of the site are not informed by a manuscript of primary importance to which scholars had limited access, the *Māṣḥafä Tefut* (መጽሐፈ ጠፋት፣ lit. 'The Book of Tefeff Grains'), which is a 15th-century collection of manuscripts written in Gə'əz, presents the history of the Holy Cross. The present study is an investigation of the dynamics of the values of Mount Gəšān in light of the recently published version of this manuscript. Two field surveys have been conducted in 2013 and 2018, to corroborate or contest the storylines in the manuscript, hagiographies, royal chronicles and traveller accounts as well as to collect additional information on the changing values of the site, while retaining an uninterrupted religious significance of being a Christian parish. According to the *Māṣḥafä Tefut*, Mount Gəšān had served as home to earliest Christian communities in Amhara, a medieval royal prison and currently a well-known Pilgrimage site, bearing different appellations such as Däbrä Nägwädgwad, Däbrä Nägäst and Gəšān Däbrä Kärbe, since the 6th century. Its religious value, however, remained uninterrupted for centuries, only to be reinforced by the coming of the fragment of the Holy Cross, relics, sacred earth and paintings in the 15th century. As such, the religious reforms within the Ethiopian Orthodox church by Aṣe Zär'aYa'əqob monumentalized Mount Gəšān to an elaborated status of Dagəməwīt ʾEyārusalem ("the Second Jerusalem") and Wällo a sacred landscape.*

**Keywords:** Mount Gəšān, the *Māṣḥafä Tefut*, Changing Values, Däbrä Nägwädgwad, Däbrä Nägäst, Gəšān Däbrä Kärbe

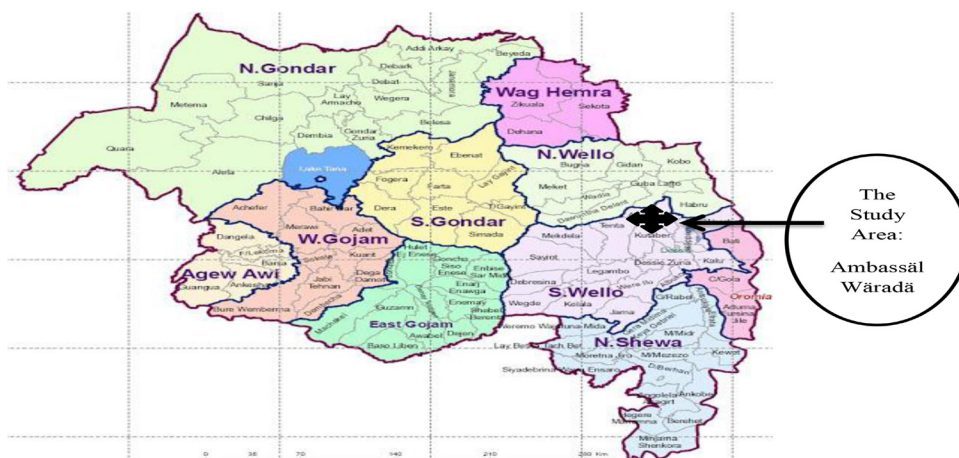
## Introduction

Mount Gəšān is a flat-topped, cross-shaped mountain located in Ambassäl Wārāda, South Wällo, 82 Kms to the North West of the town of Däse. It is one of the natural and historical heritages of the central Ethiopian highlands. Zamadkun tells that the name Gəšān is probably derived from the Gə'əz term “ጸሐፊ”, gesä, whose Amharic derivative is “ጸሐፊ”,

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Map 1: Map of South Wällo and Ambassäl Wäradä, the Study Area (Source: Google Maps)

*gäsägäsä*, [lit, walked fast], which denotes the exploration of an Ethiopian sovereign to locate the whereabouts of the cross-shaped mountain to house the fragment of the Holy Cross.<sup>2</sup> If it was named *Gəšän* by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the time of the exploration to locate the cross-shaped mountain was underway by Ase Zär'aYa'əqob (1434-1468), it means the name does not appear in the documents dating before that. While this requires a further inquiry into the existing documents, it is certain that *Gəšän* appeared in a written account of the 15th-century manuscript, the *Mäṣḥafä Tefut*. The earliest map depicting the mountain within the historic province of Amhara was the 17th-century account of a Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Manoel de Almeida, who arrived in Ethiopia in 1622.<sup>3</sup> Hagiographies, royal chronicles, Jesuits' accounts and travelogues have variably described its contemporary location, inhabitants and values.

As one of the historical landscapes of north-central highlands of Ethiopia, Mount *Gəšän* has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Few of the existing invaluable studies focus on general themes of history, heritage and tourism, combining literature surveys and fieldworks, lacking focused discussion of some of the significant aspects which defined and redefined the landscape down the centuries. Moreover, in many of these studies, a vital manuscript is missing, the *Mäṣḥafä Tefut* (መጽሐፈ ጤፋት, lit. 'The Book of Tēff Grains').

The name *Mäṣḥafä Tefut* is attributed to the shape of the size of the manuscript's *Gə'əz* script, which is as miniscule as a *Tēff* grain,<sup>4</sup> a collection of richly illuminated manuscripts,<sup>5</sup>

2 Zemedkun Bekele (1992), *Qədusan Mäkanat bā 'Itiyopya* (Addis Abeba), p. 43).

3 Beckingham, C.F. & Huntingford, G.W.B (1954) (eds/ tran), *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593 to 1646: Being Extracts from the History of High Ethiopia or Abassia by Manoel de Almeida, Together with Bahrey's History of the Galla* (London: Hakluyt Society), pp. 97-102.

4 Andre Caquot (1955), "Aperçu préliminaire sur le Maafa ēfut de Gechen Amba," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, I, p. 90.

5 It also contains the Octateuch, the Gospels, and the Senodos. The historical texts cover from the time of aṣe 'Amdä Şəyon (1314-1344) to aṣe Šärsä Dəngəl (1563-1597). (Bosc-Tiesse & Derat (2005), "Tefut: Mäṣḥafä Tefut," *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*, IV, 887.

locked in the church of Däbrä ʾĒgziʾabəherAb, one of the five churches on Mount Gəšān, the others being the church of Qəddus Gäbrəʾel, Qəddus Mikaʾel, Qəddus Uraʾel and Gəšān Mariam. An introduction to a recent Amharic translation of the original Geʾez manuscript states that it was written in the regal years of Aṣe ZārʾaYaʾəqob (1434–1468) and had been preached to the faithful for more than 550 years.<sup>6</sup> French scholars who had conducted various researches on the Ethiopian medieval period Bosc-Tiesse & Derat, however, argue that the writing up of the manuscript must have extended over many decades. “If paintings indicate that certain texts were copied during the reign of Aṣe Dawit II (1382–1412), other texts, such as many land grants as well as a historical text, were added during the reign of Aṣe ZārʾaYaʾəqob.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is a 15th-century manuscript, the iconography of which is a prototype of the *Täʾammərä Maryam* (Miracles of Mary), and its illumination of an ancient Aksumite model.<sup>8</sup> It is not precisely known if the text had been through interpolations and omissions of information throughout centuries, as such was the case in many manuscripts, which gradually contain different stories compared to/against the Vorlage, the earliest original version. Indeed, this requires a learned philological and historical study of the manuscript provided that access to the manuscript is permitted to scholars.



Fig 1: Partial view of the cross-shaped Church of Däbrä ʾĒgziʾabəherAb, rebuilt in the mid-20th cent, which houses the *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut*, the fragment of the Holy Cross and other relics. (Photo taken by the author, on September 29, 2013)

The historical text in the manuscript conveys information about several historical and contemporary events and personalities. It provides accounts of land grants, the foundation of the churches of Däbrä ʾĒgziʾabəherAb and Däbrä Maryam and the arrival of the fragment of the Holy Cross and other relics to Mount Gəšān by an unreserved effort of Aṣe Dawit II and Aṣe ZārʾaYaʾəqob. It is unique from the contemporary historical texts and hagiographies as it includes wide-ranging issues on the prevailing diplomatic relations,

6 *Märiqeta* Yämanäbərhan Adissie (tran) (Akutetä Publishers, 2007 A.M.), p. 15.

7 Bosc-Tiesse & Derat (2005), p. 887.

8 *Ibid.*

as well as the existing worldwide knowledge and faction over claim to possess the Holy Cross.<sup>9</sup>

From the wide range of information it carries, the manuscript is credited by scholars mostly for its historical narrative of the Holy Cross, as it was primarily written for the same purpose. It presents chronologically the circumstances of the finding of the Holy Cross, its history in the Middle East and Alexandria, and its final arrival at Ethiopia's Mount Gəṣān in the 15th century.<sup>10</sup> It includes the history of the contemporary archbishops and the confessions of the successive church leaders. The history of the turbulent period of Aṣe 'Amdä Səyon (1314-1344), Aṣe Dawit II and Aṣe Zär'aYä'əqob appear in greater detail.<sup>11</sup> The regal years of the latter two sovereigns of the 14th-15th centuries significantly account to the history of the coming of the Holy Cross to Ethiopia.

Yet, the *Māṣḥafä Tefut* is one of the least studied manuscripts due mainly to scholars' limited access and aborted attempts of reproductions, resulting from the official monopoly of possession over the manuscript by the church elites. Since the 15th century, it is known only in Gə'əz script, recited only by *Yä-Tefut Abat* (Father of Tefut), an officially nominated priest who has access to the manuscript. The long-serving *Yä-Tefut Abat, Märigeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie*, would translate and preach to the faithful in Amharic during great feasts, particularly on 21 Mäskärām, the day that observes the arrival of the Holy Cross at Gəṣān Maryam. To disseminate the knowledge to a wider audience, Empress Mänän Asfaw, wife of Aṣe ḤaylāSəllase I (1930-1974) and daughter of *ganṣarar*<sup>12</sup> Asfaw of the local dynasty of Ambassäl, had requested the publication of the manuscript.<sup>13</sup> After written digitally, it was presented for commentary to the council of elites in the Mänbärä Patrəyark (Seat of the Patriarchate).<sup>14</sup> The official publication, however, was delayed and later aborted for unknown reasons. Half a century after this unsuccessful attempt, only in 2007 E.C., it was published, translated from Gə'əz to Amharic in folio format. It presents both the Ge'ez script and the Amharic translation, the former in the recto and the latter in the verso. The other known published versions of the manuscript are the modern copy of the *Māṣḥafä Tefut* prepared for the church of Däbrä Bərhan Səllase in Gondär, and another one published by Caquot (1955). The presence of these versions is not mentioned in the introductory statements of the present publication.

The Ge'ez-Amharic translation of the *Māṣḥafä Tefut*, which is the source for this study, published only a selected part of the manuscript. It is stated that limited resource challenged the project to translate and publish the whole collections.

በይዘት ደረጃ መላውን የመጽሐፈ ጤፋት በአንድ ላይ ለማካተት ካለፈ የአቅም ውስንነት አንገር ለጊዜው የምእመናንና የታሪክ ተመራማሪዎችን ፍላጎት ለማርካት በሌሎች መዛግብት የማይገኘውን የመስቀሉን ወደ ኢትዮጵያ የመምጣት ታሪክና በወቅቱ የተከናወኑትን ድርጊቶች የሚገልፀውን ክፍል አቅርበናል፡፡ ወደፊት አቅም በፈቀደ መጠን አጠቃላይ የመጽሐፉን ይዘት ያካተተ የግእዝና አማርኛ ትርጉም ለማቅረብ የደብሩ ሊቃውንት እየደከሙ ይገኛሉ፡፡<sup>15</sup>

(Due to limited resources, we have produced to the faithful and historians some contents [of the manuscript] dealing with the arrival of the cross at Ethiopia and other pertaining events, which do not occur in other documents. [Nev-

9 *Märigeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007A.M.), p. 15.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

13 *Märigeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007A.M.), p. 16.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

*ertheless] the clergies of our church are working on publishing an Amharic translation of the whole contents of the manuscript, which will appear shortly.)*

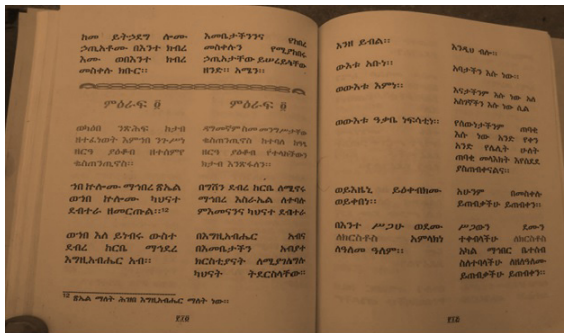
In the light of this, some remarks on the published version of the section of the manuscript are important, so to establish its significance for any scholarly study. An important feature of this book is its attempt in breaking the conservative restriction of access and any form of reproduction of the manuscript. The flexibility can be a new beginning for further works on this valuable document.

Commentary only on a translation of a section of a manuscript is difficult without comparing it with any other prior translation, which does not exist, or without comparing it with the Vorlage, which I was permitted reading only for a while. This being the main problem, the translation has both strengths and drawbacks. It is conducted by *Mārigeta Yāmanābərhan Adissie*, the present-day *Yā-Ṭefut Abat*, an elderly scholar with a huge reputation of knowledge of both Ge'ez language and history. It is an advantage to the book to be a work of elite with mastery of the language and the subject. Both the Ge'ez and Amharic are readable. At the beginning of the text, a very helpful synopsis of the purpose and significance of the present translation as well as the challenges and prospects of future works on the remaining section, and a summary of the history of the Holy Cross is explained. In a few occasions, footnotes are added to elaborate or give additional information on selected event, person or place, mainly by driving related story from the bible and theological references. In terms of the presentation of the story, it follows narration and does not include annotation and edition. In many cases, the chronology of events and the flow of narration is maintained.

The translation, however, is challenged by errors as some words or phrases which appear in the Ge'ez copy do not appear in the translation. Others occur in the Amharic but do not have equivalence in the Ge'ez. As the translator is well versed in both languages, it can be understood that these elementary mistakes are consequences of poor editing and cross reading. Another shortcoming is that the translator never really tells us what sort of translation he was aiming at. In some passages, the translation from Ge'ez to Amharic is literal. In some others, the Amharic is a paraphrasing of the idea in the Ge'ez, in a way that does not fully reflect the original. On top of that, he is not consistent in one of these approaches. Besides, the Amharic translation is very interpretive, sometimes in a way that overstates the story in the Ge'ez version. This partly reflects the underlying target for the published version, the Amharic reading audience, who cannot read and write in Ge'ez, which largely remained restricted to the church and some academic institutions. Apart from these shortcomings, it can be said that the published translation can yield information for researchers on the selected historical themes. The value of the work can be greatly enhanced if further annotated translation, on a section or full part of the manuscript is conducted, to which the recent translation can be an important input.



Fig 2: The Ge'ez-Amharic translation of the *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut* in 2007 by Märigeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie



### The *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut* Narrates the Changing Values of Mount Gəṣān

Value is a central theme in the concept and practice of heritage conservation. “No society makes an effort to conserve what it does not value.”<sup>16</sup> Contemporary social contexts define, redefine and shape the value of a particular heritage.<sup>17</sup> The changing world of heritages is functional to the changing views to heritages, which is primarily the result of social changes.<sup>18</sup>

The *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut* presents the periodic change of the historical designations and values of the Gəṣān cultural landscape. «መስቀሉ በደብረ ክርቤ ግሸን ማርያም ከመቀመጡ በፊት ቦታው የነበረውን ታሪክና አገልግሎት ይተርካል » (It narrates the history and significance of the site before the arrival of the (Holy) Cross in Däbrä Kärbe Gəṣān Maryam).<sup>19</sup> Mount Gəṣān had a long history of shifting names and adhering historical values, serving various religious-*cum*-political purposes. «የዚህች ቦታ ስመ ተፋልሶ ፫ ጊዜ ነዉ፡፡ ከወ፤ ካሉብ፡ እስከ፡ ወ፤ ይኩኖ አምላክ፡ ደብረ ነገድንድ፡ ከወ፤ ይኩኖ አምላክ፡ ወ፤ ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ ፡ ደብረ ነገስት፡ ከወ፤ ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ፡ ዘመን፡ ጀምሮ፡ እስከ ፡ አሁን ፡ ድረስ ፡ መስቀሉ ስለተቀመጠባት ፡ ደብረ ክርቤ ፡ ትባላለች፡፡» (The name has three variants. From *Aṣe Kaleb* to *Aṣe Yəkunno Amlak*, (it was known by the name) *Däbrä Nägwädgwad*. From *Aṣe Yəkunno Amlak* to *Aṣe Zär’aYa’əqob*, (it was known by the name) *Däbrä Nägäst*. From the time of *Aṣe Zär’aYa’əqob* until now, it is called *Däbrä Kärbe*, as it hosts the cross.) In another passage, we are told that it was also known by the name *Däbrä ʾEgzi’abəher*, probably upon the arrival of the Holy Cross.<sup>20</sup> In the existing secondary sources, *Mäsqäl Amba* and *Amba ʾEsra’el* are used to refer to the same site. In the recently published version of the *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut*, such names do not appear at all.

### Däbrä Nägwädgwad: The Southern Margins of Aksumite Christianity?

The *Mäṣḥafä ʾTefut* conveys the earliest reference to the religious significance of Mount Gəṣān. By the 6th century, it was known by the name *Däbrä Nägwädgwad* and it was the earliest Christian parish outside the Aksumite Christian circle.<sup>21</sup> By 514 E.C., it had

16 M. Toree (ed) (2002), *Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles), p. 3.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

18 Elene Negussie (ed) (2010), “Changing World, Changing Views of Heritage: Heritage and Social Change,” *Proceedings of the ICOMOS Scientific Symposium* (Dublin, Ireland).

19 Märigeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie (tran) (2007 A.M), p. 17.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

two churches, the altars of which were brought by a monk, a certain Fəkadā Krəstos. The monk is said to have arrived from Nagran, Yemen, together with Aṣe Kaleb Ēllā Asbēha, after the punitive expedition of the king to rescue the suffering Christians in the hands of a Jewish rebel. Accompanied by twelve monks, he had landed in Gəšān. He is said to have received a divine message showing him thunder hitting atop the mountain he had resided on.<sup>22</sup> He would name the place Däbrä Nägwädgwad, Mountain of Thunder. Ambassäl, the district under the auspices of the *ḡanṭərar*,<sup>23</sup> where the mountain is located, is purportedly named by Fəkadā Krəstos.<sup>24</sup> When he died, he was buried in the church of ʾĒgzi'abəherAb.

The relationship between Fəkadā Krəstos and the naming of Ambassäl is shrouded by history and oral tradition. Amba, Amharic and Təgrīña, and by extension Gə'əz, is a word for a mountain, usually difficult to access. It also refers to sites of a town, group of villages or military camp. Historically, such places were often commanded by a functionary that had the title of *Balambaras*, a word also applied to the mountain's summit.<sup>25</sup> Since it contains the term Amba and due to its topography, Ambassäl fits well to the category of a mountain. The origin of the term Assel, however, is not explained in the above study of Pankhurst and Eloi Ficquet's article, both published on *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*.<sup>26</sup> The missing definition is provided by an oral tradition in the interview conducted with informants in Mount Gəšān for this study. The researcher was informed that Assel is an Arabic term for honey, although the standard term is *easal*, لسع. This may suggest the importance of the tradition that traces the origin of the name to the monk, Fəkadā Krəstos, who might have spoken Arabic, as he is originally from Yemen. Moreover, the region is known to its production of honey. Though the use of Arabic to refer to honey, than the Ethiopic, ማር (mar) is strangely combined with Amba, which is Ethiopic, the tradition which circulates among the church elites clearly explains the origin of the term Ambassäl, Mountain of Honey. Contrary to this, M. Kroop suggests the connection between the nomenclatures of Ambasäl with Amba ʾIsra'el, literally, Mountains of Israel, named in respect of the members of the Solomonic dynasty who were confined in the nearby cross-shaped mountain. "Their presence gave it (Amba Gəšān) the name Amba Esra'el, from which the name of the nearby Ambassäl is probably derived".<sup>27</sup> So long as the history of the region is concerned, the first presence of Solomonic descendants on the mountain is a 13th-century phenomenon. This is preceded by the arrival of the monk, who is said to have named it Ambassäl. It is not cogently known if both the tradition about the monk and the Amba ʾIsra'el alternatively served to the naming of Ambassäl.

The presence of churches in Ambassäl, over Mount Gəšān, as far back as the 6th century is significant in expanding the scholarly view of the scope of Aksumite Christianity. At a time where Christianity had been struggling with uprooting Judiac-"Pagan" background,<sup>28</sup> scholars accept the southward expansion of the church only after the teachings

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

23 "ወክሶበ ወሀብነ ለጃንጠራር ሙከን አምባሰል" (to the *ḡanṭərar*, whom we designate to preside over Ambassäl) (*Märiḡeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007 A.M.), p. 148).

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-12.

25 Richard Pankhurst (2005), "Amba," *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*, I, pp. 217-218.

26 Eloi Ficquet (2005), p. 224.

27 Manfred Kroop (2004), "Four Gwelt Documents of Amdä Seyon from the Archive of the Church of Däbrä Egziabher-Ab on Amba Geshe (With An Additional Note on the Name Bätärgelä Maryam)," *Afrique and Histoire*, I, II, p. 215.

28 On the scope of Christianity in Aksum and the historiographical debates within, see Sergew Hable Sellassie (1972), *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Abeba University Press); Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (A), *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527* (London: Oxford University Press).

of the Nine Saints, the devote Zag<sup>w</sup>e Saint Kings<sup>29</sup> and Monastic Holy Men and Holy Women.<sup>30</sup> In this case, the passages from the *Māṣḥafā Tefut* about the role of Aṣe Kaleb and Fəkadā Krastos indicate the presence of earliest Christian communities in Amhara before the southward shift of capitals to Lasta in the 12th century. Later in the middle of the 12th century, Adafa had achieved glorious days of Christian architecture and literature.<sup>31</sup> Caves in Gəṣān, visible till today, are dated to the regal period of St. Lalibāla (1181-1221) showing not only the growing interaction between Christian communities of Lasta and Gəṣān, but also the role of the latter as a testing laboratory to the majestic rock-hewn churches of Lalibela.<sup>32</sup> At any rate, Dābrā Nāgwādgwad's significance as an important Christian parish remained uninterrupted in the Zag<sup>w</sup>e period.

### Royal Seclusion in Dābrā Nāgäst, The Home of the 590 Princes (13th -16th C)

The introduction to the *Māṣḥafā Tefut* mainly discusses the importance of the Gəṣān landscape as a centre of Christianity in the medieval province of Betā Amhara from the 11th to 13th centuries. It then skips to the 15th century, the time the fragment of the Holy Cross arrived, without mentioning in detail the history of the mountain as royal confinement. It is not clear if this is an interpretation of the continuity of the site only as a Christian heritage, and a shrewd way of removing the politico-military significance of the landscape, which may disturb a history of purely religious value. In any case, the reading of the book by cross-checking its storylines with other authority works on the period helps to reconstruct the politico-military importance of the mountain to the Solomonids from 13th to 16th centuries, without under-communicating its continued spiritual significance in serving the Christian community.

According to the *Māṣḥafā Tefut*, the former Dābrā Nāgwādgwad came to have a different designation and value following the “restoration” of power by the Solomonids of the 13th century. Though the place is frequently referred to with the name Amba Gəṣān in scholarly works, the manuscript uses Dābrā Nāgäst (Mount of Sovereigns), precisely explicating the value of the site as a place of royal confinement.<sup>33</sup> It also tells the new designation of the site as Dābrā Nāgäst.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, by the middle of the 13th century, the term Dābrā Nāgäst became a popular reference to the landscape due to its value as royal confinement.

There is a dearth of information on the origin and motives of the Solomoniads in establishing a royal prison, the identity of the royal members held in custody, the circumstances of life on the mountain and its final demise as a place of seclusion, except some vital pieces of evidence in the royal chronicles, Jesuits annals and traveller accounts. Concerning the origin of the practice of sending contenders to royal confinement, there are two groups of arguments. One group of scholars attributes its origin to the pre-Solomonic period, either

29 Sergew Hable Silassie (1972), pp. 115-121.

30 Steven Kaplan (1984), *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, (Wiesbaden, SKK 73).

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 165-187.

32 *Mārigeta Yāmanābərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007 A.M), pp. 11-12.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

34 The Ge'ez version states “ዙቲ ይእቲ ደብር ዓባይ ዘትሰመይ ደብረ ነጎድጓድ”-ደብረ ነጎድጓድ ተብላ የምትጠራው ታላቅ ደብር ይቺ ናት” (This is the greatest church/Monastery which is called Dābrā Nāgwādgwad). The Amharic equivalent provided in the manuscript, however, has a different content, which can be translated as “This is the greatest church/Monastery that was previously known as Dābrā Nāgwādgwad and later (renamed) Dābrā Nāgäst” (*Mārigeta Yāmanābərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007 A.M), p. 74). Indeed, while the Ge'ez version is not elaborative of the shifting names of the site from Dābrā Nāgwādgwad to Dābrā Nāgäst, the Amharic translation, which is not literal, explicates the renaming of the site, which can be dated to the 13th century.



to the Aksumite Kings of Ethiopia or King Solomon of the biblical kingdom of Israel. Others insist that it originated only after the ascendancy of the Solomoniads of Ethiopia. The Jesuit father, F. Alvarez conveys valuable information about the internment of potential contenders to the throne in Däbrä Nägäst, dating the practice to the kingdom of Israel and King Solomon.<sup>35</sup> A century after, another Jesuit, M. Almeida presented a detail and comparatively accurate geographic and historical description of the site, which he calls Amba Gəšän.<sup>36</sup> His work dedicates a chapter to Gəšän, entitled “The Fortress of Amba Guexen (sic): how and upon what the Emperors’ sons used to live there, and whether some of their descendants still live there.” His account is the most detailed one, providing considerable attention to its historical values, inhabitants and the complexity of the topography. Even though Mount Gəšän had ceased to serve as a royal prison by the time Almeida arrived, 1622, his account provides the importance of the historical significance of the site as a royal fortress and treasury. His description does not precisely tell the origin of the practice. From his narration, however, he seems to agree with the argument that it was invented by the Solomonic emperors. A century after M. Almeida left Ethiopia, the account of the Scottish traveller, J. Bruce, the first major traveller after the Jesuits, argues that sending male heirs to mountain confinement was an Aksumite culture, who had established the institution in Däbrä Dammo. In a nutshell, most travellers and Jesuit missionaries argue that the origin of establishing a royal prison in impregnable mountain fortress precedes the Solomonic rulers. This is in contradiction to what the second groups of scholars argue. Tadesse and Merid, two eminent scholars who had conducted various scholarly works on the medieval period, its institutions and society, connect the preliminary use of mountain strongholds to confine rivals and pretenders with their discussion of the history of power succession of the Solomonic kings. Compared to Tadesse, Merid is more sceptical about the historical roots of the practice. He does not state his argument explicitly while stressing that “the custom of confining rivals and pretenders in mountain strongholds may not have originated with the Solomonic kings.”<sup>37</sup> In any case, the most plausible conclusion would be the fact that even if the practice had a long history among the Aksumite kings, who did not identify themselves as Solomoniads,<sup>38</sup> and conflicts of succession were also endemic to the Zagwe dynasty,<sup>39</sup> it became influential to the Solomonic rulers whose descendants vying for power increased in number and faction.<sup>40</sup>

Many scholars agree that the establishment of the royal prison of Däbrä Nägäst was motivated by the increasing frequency of power faction for succession among the increasing number of claimants of the Solomonic throne. The primary causative goes to the long process of cultural interaction which gave multi-ethnic roots to the offspring of the royal family. Tadesse expounds this culture of polygyny.

*One major factor for the bitter rivalry among royal princes at the time was that the kings were under the habit of keeping many queens, and as a result, their sons were born from different mothers. Thus right from the time of the birth of a prince onwards, his mother and her relatives both within and outside the*

35 C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (eds/tran) (1961), *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, Being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society).

36 Beckingham, C.F. & Huntingford, G.W.B (1954) (eds/ tran), pp. 97-102.

37 Merid Wolde Aregay (1997), “Military Elites in Medieval Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, XXX, I, p. 4

38 For a detailed discussion of the issue in the hagiographic traditions, see Daniel Kibret, *’Ityopyawi’ Surafi, Yä-Abuna Täklähaymanot Yähayawot Tarikāna Asätäwašo* (Addis Abeba: 2011).

39 Gäbrä Krəstos and Əsra’el were involved in such a competition for power, Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (B), pp. 502-503.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 502.

*court continued to be anxious for the safety and eventual accession to power of their royal candidate or candidates. Each queen exercised all her influences on the king to outdo the others in favour of her sons.*<sup>41</sup>

Another factor for the gradual intensity of the problem of royal succession was the absence of a clear tradition of succession. Frequent claims were corroborated by the absence of fixed rule to succession to the throne of the Solomonic dynasty. The system's flexibility, which was not regulated by clear guidelines, enabled the integration of local elites into supremacy by the idioms of allegiance and legitimacy, both in the provinces, principalities as well as to aspire to and achieve sometimes the emperorship.<sup>42</sup>

This gave rise for multi-ethnic ruling families and the ever extension of the Tigre-Amhara tradition of kinship to the other people gradually integrated to the Ethiopian kingdom.

Merid's study of the military history of Ethiopia gives another major factor which motivated sovereigns to consistently send royal members to Däbrä Nāgäst, the increasing involvement of the army in politics. The army taking part in power faction, coupled with the various regiments that had regional bases whose leaders gradually grew into robust warlords, would only threaten the peace and integration of the kingdom and its principalities.<sup>43</sup> "As the brothers of the reigning king were older and more mature than his young sons their selection as successors could have helped to reduce the need for regencies in which military leaders would have been inevitably involved."<sup>44</sup> As such, confining all putative heirs in a mountain prison was intended to deprive armies of opportunities to decide the succession issues militarily.

The identity of the prisoners who had been on Däbrä Nāgäst and the circumstances of their detention are not well known. Inferring from the scarce sources, scholars provide contradicting arguments. Tadesse thinks the coronation of a new king would compel the imprisonment of all his brothers, though such a practice was not rigorously observed all the time.<sup>45</sup> Pankhurst tells that king confined their sons, the son of their predecessors, their brothers and any other closest relatives at the royal prison.<sup>46</sup> A comparative study of royal prisons expounds that all male members of the royal family of the reigning Ethiopian king were relegated to the mountain of the kings.<sup>47</sup> In fact, "royal descent was not always from father to son, but almost anyone with the Solomonic family, although usually but not necessarily by male descent".<sup>48</sup>

Only a few royal members are named to have been confined in the royal prison. Between 1294 and 1299, the rivalry for succession between Aṣe Yagba Ṣəyon's sons resulted in the sending to Däbrä Nāgäst of Sābə Asäggäd, one of the contenders.<sup>49</sup> The same story sur-

41 Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (B), pp. 517-518.

42 I. M. Lewis and P. A. Jewell (1976), "The Peoples and Cultures of Ethiopia," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences*, CXCV, A Discussion on Human Adaptability in Ethiopia, p. 13.

43 Getatchew Haile (1982), "Inside the Royal Confinement," *Northeast African Studies*, IV, I, p. 19.

44 Merid Wolde Aregay (1997), p. 46.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 534.

46 Richard Pankhurst (1990), *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Tewodros II*. (Addis Abeba: Addis Abeba University press), P. 27.

47 F. A. Dombrowski (1988), "Internment of Members of the Royal Family in Ethiopia Turkey, and India," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXXII, p. 47.

48 Steven Kaplan (2005), "Solomonic Dynasty," *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*, IV, pp. 688-690.

49 F. A. Dombrowski (1988), p. 48.

rounds the brothers of *Aṣe Säyfä Ar'ad* (1344-71).<sup>50</sup> By the middle of the 15th century, *Aṣe Zär'aYa'əqob* was certainly on the mountain at the eve of his coronation in 1434. Tadesse asserts that *Na'od*, the brother of the reigning king, *Ṭskändər* (1478-94), was imprisoned in *Däbrä Nägäst*. He cites the spiritual supplication of their mother to a certain *Mārha Krəstos*, in which she indicated the confinement of *Na'od*. “አማኅፀንኩክ፡ አእቡዮ፡ በእንተ፡ መንግስት፡ ወልድዮ፡ (እስክንድር)፡፡ ወበእንተ፡ እኅሁኒ፡ አማኅፀንኩክ፡ ዘሀሎ፡ ኅበ፡ ይነብሩ፡ ዉሉደ፡ ነገስት፡ ዘስሙ፡ ናዖድ፡ ከመ፡ ይትወቀብ፡ በሰናይ፡፡ “I make supplications to you, O, my father, about the kingdom of my son (*Ṭskändər*). And I also make supplications to you about his brother whose name is *Na'od* and who is at the place where the sons of the kings live so that he is well kept (there)”.<sup>51</sup>

The gaps in many studies about the number of royal prisoners and circumstances of their life are provided by the *Māṣḥafä Ṭefut*. By the middle of the 15th century, there was an already established Christian royal community who had inhabited the mountain. “እስመ፡ ጃንጥራር፡ ብሂል፡ ኃራዮ፡ ወፀዋ፡ ወአቅራቢ፡ ንጉስ፡ እም፪፻ወ፯፡ ዉሉደ፡ ነገስት፡ እለ፡ ይነብሩ፡ ዉስተ፡ ዛቲ፡ መካን፡፡ (The *ḡanṭərar* selects a candidate to the throne among the 590 sons of the sovereigns who are residing in this place).<sup>52</sup> This huge number elucidates the magnitude of dynastic instability within the royal court in *Šäwa*<sup>53</sup> due to the growing number of candidates to succession probably as a result of gradual inter-ethnic marriage across regional and ethnic boundaries. The long and remarkable importance of *Däbrä Nägäst* as an institution of the Christendom and home to multi-ethnic royal prisoners could not successfully disentangle the succession issue, nevertheless.

It is important to note that the *Māṣḥafä Ṭefut* excessively portrays the *ḡanṭərar* as the most powerful figure that influences power succession. While he might have enjoyed to a certain extent the privileges of selecting the successor who resides in his domain of *Am-bassäl*, succession was influenced by other politico-military dynamics outside his reach. Other scholarly works show the proceedings of deciding who, among the royal prisoners at the mountain should succeed the throne. Judges and prelates, queen mothers and their relatives, who occupied important positions in the court, had a huge impact on the succession issue. On occasions of competing claims, the regiments they could muster would involve.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the statement in the manuscript which dedicates elaborated picture to the voices of the *ḡanṭərar* is an exaggeration. His role in bringing the candidate to the throne would follow, in all likelihood, the final verdict of the major power elites in the court.

Concerning the conditions of life of the royal members, sources reflect mixed impressions, which combine a view that takes the mountain as a prison in the real sense of the term

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

51 Quoted in Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (B), p. 534.

52 *Māriḡeta Yämanäbərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007 A.M), p. 151. The Amharic translation adds information that does not appear in the Ge'ez version, which can be translated as “The *ḡanṭərar* selects among the 590 sons of the sovereigns who are learning here (on the mountain) the most devote [Christian] and big thinker as a candidate to the throne.” “The sovereigns who are learning here” and “the most devote [Christian] and big thinker” are either mere addition without consulting the Ge'ez or the Ge'ez version has omitted these phrases.

53 Tadesse Tamrat summarizes the power factions for succession in the post-13th century by presenting the major pertaining primary sources and research works. The case of dynastic faction among the descendants of *aṣe Yəkunno Amlak*, between *Wudəm-Ra'ad* and *'Amdä Ṣəyon*, between *Dawit's* sons and grandsons, in the court of *aṣe Zär'a Ya'əqob* and between *Ṭskändər* and *Na'od* appears in Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (B) pp. 501-535.

54 Merid Wolde Aregay (1997), p. 46.

and a view that takes it as a residence. An excerpt from the *Māṣḥafā Tefut* tells that the mountain was a centre of learning.<sup>55</sup> Pankhurst insists that though they were detained, the royal children were not guarded closely.<sup>56</sup> For Kroop, “it was an official residence that had been legitimized in religious terms for the non-governing sons of the royal family.”<sup>57</sup> Dombrowski disagrees, stating that they lived under firm conditions.<sup>58</sup> They had access to basic theological knowledge but limited exposure to military and court politics.<sup>59</sup> Any escape plan was punishable as runaway princes would easily be exploited by unscrupulous nobles’ plot to dethrone the reigning king. A Jesuit missionary of the 17<sup>th</sup> century reports that only daughters were allowed to leave the mountain,<sup>60</sup> sharply rejected by his fellow Jesuit successor M. Almeida, who insists daughters were never put in the mountain as no one had a right to the empire through the female line.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Däbrä Nāgäst was such a sacral prison to the bypassed royal kin.

The fall of the royal prison of Däbrä Nāgäst in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is attributed to the wars of Aḥmād *Grañ*. The decline of the Christian military regiments and frontier defence coupled with the strength of the Muslim army under Aḥmad Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Gaẓī, also known as Aḥmād *Grañ* [Aḥmād the left handed] exposed the church, the state and its representative institutions under threat of unparalleled proportion. After successive failure of the military operations to capture the mountain in the 1530s, the army of Aḥmād *Grañ* finally overran Däbrä Nāgäst in April 1540.<sup>62</sup> Following the fall of the royal prison, the *dāqiqā Isra’ela* (‘Children of Israel’), the monks and priests were slaughtered in their thousands.<sup>63</sup> By so doing, the Muslim army wrought the destruction of the Christian heritage, massacred the royal generation and plundered the riches of the treasures from the warehouses.<sup>64</sup> Däbrä Nāgäst as a state institution was never restored. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was replaced by Wāhni Amba, located in the present-day sub-district of Libo-Kāmkām, North Gondār.<sup>65</sup>

### From Däbrä Nāgäst to Gəṣān Däbrä Kärbe (Mount of Myrrh)

The religious significance of Mount Gəṣān was not interrupted by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century wrath of the Muslim army on Däbra Nāgäst. The *Māṣḥafā Tefut* tells in greater detail the shifting significance of the landscape as a result of the arrival of the fragment of the Holy Cross (*Gəmadā Mäsqāl*), which escaped the deadly and destructive military expedition of Aḥmād *Grañ*.<sup>66</sup> This also marks the consolidation of the continuity of the spiritual value of the mountain to an elaborated sacred landscape. Even though Ethiopian written sources and oral tradition relate the arrival of the Holy Cross to Ethiopia in many ways and link to different historical figures,<sup>67</sup> the manuscript credits only the role of Ase Dawit II and

55 *Märiqeta* Yämanäbərhan Adissie (tran) (2007 A.M), p. 151.

56 Richard Pankhurst (1990), p. 27.

57 Manfred Kroop (2004), p. 215.

58 F. A. Dombrowski (1988), p. 47.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Christopher Tribe (tran) (2011), *Pedro Paez’s History of Ethiopia* (London: The Hakluyt Society), p. 140.

61 Beckingham, C.F. & Huntingford, G.W.B (1954) (eds/ tran), p. 101.

62 Paul Lester Stenhouse (tran) (2003), *Futuh al-Habasa: The Conquest of Ethiopia* (Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers), p. 249.

63 F. A. Dombrowski (1988), p. 49.

64 Manfred Kroop (2004), p. 215.

65 Related landscapes with historical significances of various sorts, which frequently appear in the sources, include Harr Amba, in Šāwa, Amba Čara, northeast of Lake Tana, Amba Mäqdāla in Wällo, Amba Ēnnāwari in Morät, Tamo in Märhabete, Ambalage, south of Tégray, and Amba Aradom (Richard Pankhurst (2005), pp. 217-218).

66 Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2005), “Relics of the True Cross in Ethiopia,” *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*, p. 357.

67 On the various arguments on the subject of the arrival of the Holy Cross and the associated different historical figures, “whose importance increased after the cult of the Cross was enforced by Aše Zär’a Ya’aqob” (Ewa Balicka-Wita-

Aṣe Zār'aYa'əqob in elevating Gəṣān as one of the most venerated sacred sites of Ethiopia due to its housing of the Holy Cross discovered and divided into four (also five in Ethiopian tradition) pieces by Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor, Constantine.<sup>68</sup> Aṣe Zār'aYa'əqob is known by his diligent veneration of the blessed virgin St. Mary, his reforms within the church and contribution to Mariology, a new school to the study and veneration of the life and miracles of St. Mary. His reforms were uncompromising to reactions that he inflicted severe punishment to the opposing ecclesiastical and secular officials and his family members.<sup>69</sup>



Fig 2: Painting in St. Mary Church at Gəṣān, narrating the stoning of the Dāqiqä Esṭifa, (followers of Stephen) in the 15th century. They were accused of alleged heretical practices and refusal to venerate the cross. (Photo taken by the researcher in St. Mary Church, on Sept 29, 2013).<sup>70</sup>

The arrival of the Holy Cross is central to the storylines of the *Māṣḥafä Tefut* in which history and tradition work together, covering in greater detail the period of two successive sovereigns of the 15th century.<sup>71</sup> It then narrates chronologically the development of events starting with the concerns of the then Ethiopian king, Aṣe Dawit II about the conditions of fellow Christians in Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria). The king learned that Egyptians authorities had harshly treated Christians, imprisoning them and prohibiting the veneration of the cross.<sup>72</sup> The tradition that Aṣe Dawit II had reacted by diverting the course of the River Abbay, which Egyptians can't live without appears in detail. It also tells a military expedition to force the release of Christian prisoners. Egyptian rulers immediately freed the detainees and sent an appeal for negotiation to the marching Ethiopian king.<sup>73</sup> They sent him gifts in gold to show allegiance to long-lasting peace and reconciliation.<sup>74</sup> In the

kowska (2005), p. 357), see Marilyn E. Heldman (1990), "A Chalice from Venice for Emperor Dāwit of Ethiopia," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, LIII, III, pp. 442-445.

68 Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2005), p. 357.

69 Tadesse Tamrat (1972) (B), p. 519.

70 Key arguments in research issues on the monastic movements of the 15th century, the judgment of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and the assessment of the Christendom are well explained in the works of two prominent Ethiopian scholars of the period; Getatchew Haile (1983), "The Cause of the Ṭṣīfanosites: A Fundamental Sect in the Church of Ethiopia," *Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde*, XXIX, pp. 93-119; Idem (2010), *Dāqiqä Ṭṣīfanos Bāhag Amlak* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press); Tadesse Tamrat (1996), "Some Notes on the Fifteenth Century Stephanite "Heresy" in the Ethiopian Church," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, XXII, 103-115

71 *Märiḡeta Yāmanābərhan Adissie* (tran) (2007 A.M.), p. 24.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

74 *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.



study of the cross and other relics, Witakowska labels the above narration of the *Mäṣḥafä Tefut* as “pseudo-historical compilations.”<sup>75</sup> While the whole subject cannot be taken at face value, due to the dominance of tradition interwoven with history, the manuscript has a grain of truth that is corroborated by other historical shreds of evidence.

In the meantime, the *Mäṣḥafä Tefut* reports the failure of the proposed reconciliation as Aṣe Dawit II sent back a letter to the Alexandrian Patriarchate briefing that he is happy about the terms of peace<sup>76</sup> but that he does not want to receive the gold gifts.<sup>77</sup> “ወከመ፡ ተሀቡኒ፡ መስቀሉ፡ ለክርስቶስ፡ ዘተክዕወ፡ ደሙ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ላዕሌሁ፡ ዘሀሎ፡ በኀበ፡ እደሁ፡ ለሊቀ፡ ጳጳሳት፡ ዘእስክንድርያ፡ ፡” “I prefer you send me the Holy Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified and shed his blood upon, which is at the disposal of the Alexandrian Patriarch.”<sup>78</sup> After prolonged discussions, Egyptians agreed to meet the request of the king and sent him the fragment of the Holy Cross together with other sacred objects and paintings.<sup>79</sup> The later phases of events include the return of the Ethiopian king, who, en route saw a vision, “ይኀብር፡ መስቀልየ፡ በዲበ፡ መስቀል፡ ፡” “[May] My (Holy) cross will be put on a cross.”<sup>80</sup> The king was enquiring about this enigmatic message before he passed away in his way to Sinnar.

The next part of the history of the Holy Cross coincides with the ascendancy of Aṣe Zär’aYa’eqob, who succeeded Aṣe Dawit in 1434. According to *Mäṣḥafä Tefut*, the fragment of Holy Cross given to Dawit II, who died before getting it to Ethiopia, was placed in the church of Däbrä Egziabeher-Ab of Gəṣān by his son.<sup>81</sup> The reigning king, Zär’aYa’eqob, is reported to have seen in his dream the same divine message which his father had seen; “እኀብር፡ መስቀልየ፡ በዲበ፡ መስቀል፡ ፡” (Put my (Holy) cross on a cross).<sup>82</sup>

Identifying the whereabouts and later renaming of the cross-shaped mountain relates to Aṣe Zär’aYa’eqob. He states that he had found it after three years of exploration, apparently in contradiction to the statement in his *Mäṣḥafä Bərhan* that he had previously been a captive in the Däbrä Nägäst. In any case, he states “ወእምይእዚስ፡ ትሰመይ፡ ደብረ ክርቢ፡ ፡” (afterwards, this place will be known by the name Däbrä Kärbe, Mount of Myrrh).<sup>83</sup> On a different folio, we are told that Däbrä Kärbe connotes *Mānbārä Mäsqāl*, the throne of the Cross.<sup>84</sup> Since then it is referred to as Gəṣān Däbrä Kärbe and sometimes Gəṣān Maryam, named after one of the churches established by Aṣe Zär’aYa’eqob. In 1456, he placed all the relics on the mountain.<sup>85</sup>

The coming of the Holy Cross, sacred relics and sacral earth ushered the making of yet another *Dagəməwīt Eyärusalem* (“the Second Jerusalem”) in today’s Wällo. The earliest reference to the making of the second Jerusalem to Ethiopian Christians is attributed to the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. The *Mäṣḥafä Tefut* glorifies Gəṣān Däbrä Kärbe as the holiest of all Christian parishes.<sup>86</sup> Apart from the possession of the cross, the manuscript narrates that Aṣe Zär’aYa’eqob brought sacred earth in camels and mules from the Holy

75 Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2005), p. 357.

76 *Märigeta Yämanäbərhan* Adissie (tran) (2007 A.M), pp. 42-43.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

79 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

80 *Ibid.* p. 46.

81 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

84 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

85 *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

86 *Ibid.*, p.152.

Land of Qāranəyo and Golgotha and spread it over the mountain.<sup>87</sup> He also raises Gəšān Dābrā Kārbe to the status of the Holy Land of Jerusalem, where the faithful can heal the body and save the soul.<sup>88</sup> The king pledged that successive generations of the reigning Solomonic kings and the Christian faithful would strictly observe the feast of the Cross,<sup>89</sup> contributing to the continuity of the historical religious value of the landscape.

The historical values of the cross-shaped mountain in Ambassäl *Wārāda* has one marked feature. As a centre of the early Christian community from the 6th century to the 13th century, as a royal prison from the 13th century to the 16th century and currently as a pilgrimage site, Mount Gəšān has maintained an unbroken religious value. These days, the continuity pays off in the recognition of the feast of the finding of the Holy Cross, Mäsqäl, as an intangible world heritage and the growing number of Christian pilgrims and tourists to Gəšān Dābrā Kārbe.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Wällo provides the spiritual bridge between Jerusalem and faithful Ethiopian Christians by its century-old centre of pilgrimage.

### Conclusion

The shifting dynamics of Mount Gishen is preserved by a prolonged interplay of tradition and history. Its early history casts on its significance as one of the earliest Christian parishes in the historic region of Amhara-Wallo. The transformation of the landscape as a royal prison occurred with the ascendancy of Solomonids of Ethiopia in the 2nd half of 13th century. It had served the ruling elites as a trusted place of captivity of the royal descendants vying for power. By the end of the 15th century the cross-shaped mountain emerged as a holy site, reminiscent of its pre-13th century significance.

The historical trajectories of these shifting designations and values are recorded in a collection of manuscripts, dated to the 15th century, the *Mäṣḥafä Tefut*.

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87 *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

89 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

90 Ermias Kifle Gedecho (2014), "Religious Tourism Potential of Gishen Derbe Kerbe Mariam, Ethiopia," *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, III. I, pp. 1-19..

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