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Die Deutsche
Aksum-Expedition 1906
unter Enno Littmann

Herausgegeben von
Steffen Wenig

in Zusammenarbeit mit
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und Kerstin Volker-Saad

Band I:
Die Akteure und
die wissenschaftlichen
Unternehmungen der
DAE in Eritrea



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Uoldelul Chelati Dirar

Colonial Eritrea at the time of the DAE

THE BACKGROUND

Eritrea at the moment of Littmann's visit was undergoing a period of delicate transition in its political and economic balances. The earliest years of Italian rule over Eritrea started with the occupation of Massawa in 1885 and the subsequent expansion toward the highlands of Hamasen and Akkele Guzay and had been marked by constant instability both in terms of local politics as well as relations with neighbouring countries. Beyond this situation of permanent instability there was a variety of factors both at the internal as well as regional level. Internally Italia's scarce knowledge of the legal and economic tradition of Eritrea had led to the unsuccessful attempt to implement settlement schemes aimed at bringing poor Italian farmers into the highlands of Eritrea (Rainero 1960; Pankhurst 1964). This situation was further complicated by the severe sequence of natural and man-made disasters which had ravaged the region between 1888 and 1892. Among those disasters were four years of drought, locusts' invasion and rinderpest epidemics. The interaction of those calamities had seriously affected the food-production capability of farmers and herders and had also led to massive exodus of population within Eritrea and also from neighbouring Tigray (Pankhurst 1985). This weakened the ability of Eritreans to resist Italian encroachments in the region and gave to the Italians the wrong impression of having to do with a submissive and apathetic population. In terms of foreign relations two main reasons can be taken as factors that contributed to instability and tension in the region. The first reason has to be found in Italy's expansionist schemes which considered the occupation of Eritrea mainly as the first step of a more ambitious plan aimed at the conquest of Ethiopia, which was thought to be a rich market for Italian goods

and source of raw materials. A second further element of tension and instability in the region is to be found in the ambiguities in Italian diplomacy that reflected the contradictions within the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, split between supporters of a friendly relationship with Emperor Menelik's court (the so-called *politica scioana*) and supporters of a friendly relationship with rulers of Tigray, particularly with *ras* Mangasha (*politica tigrina*)¹. The existence of such contradictions led to permanent diplomatic tension exacerbated by frequent military clashes.

THE IMPACT OF ADWA

The most important and most known of those clashes is certainly the battle of Adwa, an event that paved the way to a substantial readjustment of diplomatic and economic balances in the region. In fact, in spite of being one of the most important battles between an European led army and an African one, the most immediate outcome of the battle of Adwa in regional politics was the official acknowledgement of Eritrea as a separate political and administrative unit out of Ethiopian reach. This was first sanctioned by the Treaty of Peace of Addis Ababa, signed on the 26th October, 1896 (17 Tekemt, 1889), and finalised by the Treaty of 15th May, 1902, which settled the disputed contentious about the delimitation of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. An immediate result of the battle of Adwa was also the acknowledgement of Menelik's undisputed authority over Ethiopia and, as a consequence, the end of Italian diplomatic

¹ A detailed though partisan reconstruction of this diplomatic activity in Cagnassi 1898.

oscillations and the beginning of a policy of 'good neighbourhood' with Ethiopia. Therefore, it is possible to say that, to a certain extent, the 1902 treaty represents a crucial event to have a deep understanding of the situation of Eritrea at the moment of Littmann's visit to the country.

THE RELEVANCE OF 1902'S TREATY

In fact, the treaty signed on May 15, 1902 between Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia and Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy, on the final shape of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was the result of a long and difficult process of negotiation between Italian authorities, Menelik's court and local dignitaries from Tigray. The 1902 Treaty sanctioned officially the existence of Eritrea as politically and administratively separated from Ethiopia, similarly to what was sanctioned by the 1900 treaty with the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The Italian and the Ethiopian delegations met repeatedly and after long negotiations, focusing on the interpretation of toponyms, the exact location of populations, the protection of interests of local pastoralist and agriculturalist communities, and the preservation of territorial and political prestige of Tigrayan authorities, agreed upon the demarcation of the most sensitive part of the border, the one which stretches from Um Hager to the Badda region (Hertslett 1967). An immediate consequence of this treaty beyond the diplomatic sphere, lies in the fact that Italy, in virtue of the achieved peace, was thus able to divert a substantial amount of resources allocated until that moment to warfare and defence purposes to the infrastructural and administrative development of the colony.

Another crucial development in Eritrea in those years was the beginning of a slow process aimed at cancelling the original plan of making Eritrea a colony of Italian settlers. The result of both the fierce resistance of the local population culminated in the famous rebellion of Bahta Hagos (Tekeste Negash 1986) as well as the incapacity of Italian authorities of making the settlement scheme successful. The vision of the colonial administration for the future of Eritrea was now marked by a new attitude. Already by 1895², in the aftermath of the rebellion led by Bahta Hagos, schemes for the confiscation of the so-called abandoned land had been progressively revoked and new perspectives for the exploitation of Eritrea were investigated.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Therefore, Eritrea at the time of Littmann's visit was experiencing deep and lasting transformations of its administrative institutions, social and economic structures, infrastructures and a substantial redefinition of the models and symbols of political authority. Under the energetic leadership of Governor Ferdinando Martini substantial changes were undertaken in all the above-mentioned sectors. The settlement scheme having been declared unrealistic (Martini 1913), Eritrea was then expected to become both a source of raw materials and a market for Italian manufactures as well as a trading centre (Tekeste Negash 1987). Eritrea, in Italian expectation, should have been able to attract the main commercial flow from and to Ethiopia and the Sudan. Particularly the markets of Gonder and Burrumeda in Ethiopia and Gallabat and Kassala in Sudan were identified as main targets. The expectation was, on one side, to make Italian products more appetitive and competitive for Ethiopian and Sudanese markets. On the other side, the Italians hoped to direct Ethiopian and Sudanese export to Eritrea and its ports. To make Eritrea a source of raw materials, ambitious schemes were devised both in the agricultural as well as mining sector. Feasibility studies were undertaken to investigate the possibility to introduce cash-crops like cotton and coffee. Particular attention was given to cotton which was expected to become a major item in the Eritrean export sector. After preliminary studies made by scientists such as Gino Bartolommei Gioli (1913) and Isaia Baldrati (1911) privileged areas for export oriented agriculture were identified in the western lowlands in Mansura, Akordat, Dumba, Karkabat, Ducambia (Checchi 1913) and given to private companies such as *Ditta Bruni e Carpanetto* or the *Società per la Coltivazione del cotone in Eritrea* (Ciasca 1940). Similar areas were identified also on the eastern escarpments and lowlands. An experimental station was established in Filfil to study the possibility of producing coffee and bananas. In the area of Hirhigo and the Zula plain the cultivation of cotton was also introduced in the western lowland particularly as well as in some areas of the eastern escarpments. Another sector which attracted the enthusiastic and overoptimistic attention of the Italian colonial administration

² Decreto Governatoriale, 30 June 1895, *Bullettino Ufficiale della Colonia Eritrea*, 3 July 1895, n. 77.

was mining. Few days after having met Littmann, Martini in his diary annotated enthusiastically about successful prospecting which had revealed the presence of gold³. In fact, in those years gold mines were opened in Medri Zien, Saroa, Addi Nefas, Tukul, Dase, Addi Quntsi, and Barentu.

To transform all those ambitious plans into reality, substantial efforts were to be undertaken at the level of infrastructures. In fact, the communication system of Eritrea at the beginning of the 20th century was desolately poor and made economic development a remote utopia. To reverse this unfavourable setting, the strategy of the colonial administration was to launch a series of public works which saw the deployment of substantial human and financial resources. One of the first investments was in the building of a railway linking the port of Massawa to the highlands. The first tracks of the railway had already been laid down by the Italians in 1887 but in those years, until the beginning of the 20th century, the main purpose of building railways was military. In fact, railways were considered the most effective way to quickly deploy troops – and even the Italian defeat at Dogali in 1887 was attributed to the lack of adequate infrastructures for the transportation of troops. It is only after the signature of peace treaties with Ethiopia and the delimitation of southern boundaries that the railway started being considered as instrumental to the economic development of the colony. By September 1904 the railway had reached Ghinda and, few months before the arrival of Littmann in Eritrea, a proposal had been approved for the extension of works to Nefasit and Arbarobu⁷. The railway finally reached Asmara in 1911 and was later on extended to Keren (1921), Akordat (1928) and Biscia. The decision to develop the railway westward rather than southwards reflected the Italian expectation to attract the commercial flow from Kassala directing it to Massawa, technically its closest access to the sea. This justified the enormous amount of resources allocated for this enterprise. In fact, more than 3000 Eritrean labourers and 300 Italians were employed for the realisation of the Massawa – Asmara track, which costed approximately twenty six millions of Italian Lira.

Another significant development in infrastructures was the development of the road system, to make the circulation of people and goods easier. In those years were built some of the most important roads like Mai Atal–Asmara, Asmara–Segeneyti, Asmara–Keren–Akordat, Asmara–Medrizien, and Deqqemhare–Teramni.

However, a very important aspect of those ambitious projects, which up to now has been little investigated, was the building or improvement of caravan routes (*carovaniere* in the Italian colonial literature) aimed at influencing both the internal and the main trans-border trade. Part of that scheme were the Keren–Mansura (63 km), the Akordat–Barentu–Ducambia–Sittona–Gonder (475 km), the Akordat–Noggara (239 km), the Akordat–Sabderat–Kassala (178 km), the Assab–Ela (54 km) and the Massawa–Mahio–Addi Qayyeh (118 km) routes. The majority of those caravan routes aimed at attracting Ethiopian and Sudanese cotton as well as hides and coffee. Part of this ‘technological imperialism’ was also the deployment of a telegraph line connecting Asmara–Addi Kwala–Addis Ababa. Strongly wished by Martini, this telegraph line, apart from the obvious role in facilitating communication between the two ends of the line, had also a more important and subtle implication for regional politics. In fact, to lay down such a long line through a huge territory under the control of different and often rival chiefs implied a heavy but also rewarding diplomatic work. It was in fact necessary to stretch a large and complex web of alliances and exchanges to win over reluctance, suspicion and open hostility of local rulers whose territory was to be crossed by the telegraph.

However, to be successful, all those Italian plans for the economic exploitation of Eritrea necessitated also a more suitable administrative and political framework. A first step taken informally by Martini already in 1899 was the transfer of the capital of the colony from Massawa to Asmara. However, some of the most significant changes were being implemented approximately around the time of Littmann’s visit. One of the most important steps was the administrative reorganisation of the colony. A crucial move in this direction had been the approval of the Law of the 24 May 1903 (*Legge organica 24 Maggio 1903*) which had eliminated the existing confusion between military and civilian administration by establishing a civilian administration under the command of the Governor and the reorganisation of the colonial government into various departments (*Direzioni* in the Italian administrative jargon). Also the territory was reorganised and divided into seven administrative units known as *Commissariati*

³ F. Martini [s. a.]: 54.

and *Residenze* (Ciasca 1940: 317), which, with slight changes, represented the blueprint for subsequent colonial administrators of Eritrea until 1941.

Nevertheless, this complex and, to a certain extent, over-ambitious political and economic engineering to be successful needed the identification and development of suitable strategies of domination over indigenous populations, being that through co-optation or repression. This was the meaning and relevance of the so-called *Politica indigena* which synthesised the main guidelines of Italian colonial rule expressing how the Italian colonial administration looked at its relations and interaction with indigenous populations. The preliminary step in Italy's definition of its colonial rule was to sketch a map of power and its symbolism in Eritrean society as well as in neighbouring countries. The failure of the settlement scheme together with the rebellion of Bahta Hagos had represented a bitter lesson for colonial administrators which had taught them, how 'loyalty' was a quite volatile concept and had made them realise that a better understanding of the local society represented a basic prerequisite to design colonial policies.

It is in this perspective that should be understood the exceptional production of sundry material commissioned by the colonial administration between the last years of the 19th century and 1908, which has now precious value for historians, anthropologists and social scientists at large. In fact, in those years a variety of data were collected in form of genealogies, list of chiefs, proverbs and oral traditions. In this enormous effort of data collection, the colonial administration was able to avail itself of the precious presence among its civil servants of scholars of the calibre of Carlo Conti Rossini, Alberto Pollera, Dante Odorizzi, and Ruffillo Perini, as well as other very efficient and meticulous officers. From the published and unpublished material produced in those years is apparent the colonial will to draft a map of power and authority in colonial Eritrea in order to better devise strategies for colonial domination. A special role in this strategy seems to have been attributed to the study of local ruling families, both in Eritrea and the bordering region of Tigray. Privileged object of the colonial investigation were webs of alliances between families of chiefs and the extent of the support they enjoyed among the local population⁴. In this context the collection of lists of genealogies were instrumental in measuring the depth of

legitimacy and claim to power. Subsequently this material was used by the colonial administration to select local chiefs to be co-opted in the colonial administration or to assess the implications in case of demotion of chiefs deemed not enough 'loyal' or reliable (Taddia 1986). In fact, by the time Littmann arrived in Eritrea, the majority of the traditional Eritrean leadership and educated elite had been dramatically suppressed either by imprisonment (and often death) in the notorious prisons of Nokra and Assab or by exile. To those who managed to avoid imprisonment or who successfully escaped from jail the only alternative left was the exile to Ethiopia where under Emperors Menelik II. and Haile Sellassie later many of them managed to achieve prominent political and administrative positions.

Another important aspect in the colonial strategy for domination was represented by the study and, possibly, codification of customary laws. Again a harsh lesson had been the settlement scheme of the early years of Italian rule over Eritrea. By the time of Littmann's travel to Eritrea, the inadequate knowledge of customary laws and their incorrect reading had been acknowledged as some of the main reasons for the failure of the settlement scheme. Therefore, the study of customary law and their written codification became an important activity of the Italian colonial administration⁵. The aim was to develop a diversified and segregated juridical system in which different and parallel legal systems for Europeans and indigenous populations had to coexist⁶.

Finally, a further area of colonial intervention in this complex strategy for domination was religion. Some of the main guidelines of Italian religious policy in Eritrea were drafted during the years of Martini's governorship. The main feature of this policy was the attempt to reach what the colonial literature called a *modus vivendi*, a policy of coexistence based on the two apparently contradictory principles of avoiding as much as possible state interference in religious matters and, at the same time, try to use religion as an instrument to gain consensus to colonial policies. In practical terms the policy

⁴ Exemplary from this point of view remains Perini 1905.

⁵ Among the published material of those years, Conti Rossini 1904; Falcone 1905a; Cafarel 1909; Odorizzi 1917; Solinas de Logu 1912.

⁶ Among the output of this effort Gianturco 1904; Falcone 1905b; D'Amelio 1911.

of *modus vivendi* consisted in trying to avoid the interference of the state in modifying religious balances in the region. Therefore missionary expansion was not supported in areas predominantly Islamic or Christian Orthodox, as it was assumed that it would have engendered religious tension and political instability. At the same time through a policy of social manipulation based on financial or material support for the construction of churches and mosques, donations to religious institutions and prebends to prominent personalities, the colonial administration tried to use religion as a tool to win consensus or at least acceptance among Eritreans. The main efforts were directed to use religion as a tool for the strengthening of Eritreans as an identity separated from the others. To this end, in the Orthodox sphere, efforts were undertaken to sever the traditional administrative and religious ties between the Orthodox church in Eritrea and the Orthodox church in Ethiopia by establishing independent centres of religious authority in Eritrea. Negotiations in this direction were started in 1903 and continued until 1906, when they were interrupted without achieving any substantial result (Buonaiuti 1988). Similarly, among Muslim communities efforts were undertaken to establish religious centres prestigious enough to become authoritative for Eritrean Muslims, neutralising the attraction that centres like Kassala, in the Sudan, traditionally exerted over them. To achieve this result, the prestigious family of the Morghani, representatives of the *Mirghaniyya*, one of the most important Islamic brotherhoods of the region was settled in Keren.

It is apparent, from the few events sketched in the previous pages that Eritrea at the moment of Littmann's visit was going through a complex and lasting process of transformation of its economic, administrative and social structure which marked for decades its development.

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