

Gudit, a Jewish Queen of Aksum? Some Considerations on the Sources and Modern Scholarship, and the Use of Legends

Raita Steyn

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7506-8179>

University of Pretoria, South Africa

raita.steyn@up.ac.za

Abstract

Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian sources agree that there is evidence of a mysterious queen who led an army to destroy the Christian faith in Aksum and put an end to the Aksumite dynasty. The events of Aksum are mentioned in chronicles and on monuments left behind. The latest research shows that there is no longer any doubt about her existence: she was indeed an empress of Aksum. This article re-examines modern scholarship on Gudit's life, religion, and importance. It also presents a new interpretation and analysis of the most important legends, thereby suggesting how such legends can be integrated into the historical events.

Keywords: Ethiopian Christianity; Ethiopian Judaism; Falasha; Zenobis; Aksum; Oromo; King George II of Nubia; *Chronicle of Ethiopia*; Amazons

Introduction

Queen Gudit or Judith is, in different tales, traditions and in different Ethiopian dialects known as Gwedit, Yodit, Isator, and Esther and in Amharic as Isat or Esato ('fire') and Tirda Gabaz. In Tiltal, she is known as Ga'wa and she is described as a legendary queen who flourished in the tenth century (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 226; Andersen 2000, 38–39; Levi 1992, 23, 83–85,104).

Today, it is generally accepted that Gudit was a historical queen who ruled Aksum during the second half of the tenth century A.D. Research by Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a), Caroline Levi (1992), Andersen (2000) and Hendrickx (2018a), primarily based on extracts from *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (Vantini 1975, 202–03,

205–07; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 223–24; Andersen 2000, 34; Hendrickx 2018a, 2–4), some Arabic notes by Ibn Hawqal (1964, 23, 46, 66) and some elements—selected after thorough and critical examination—from several legends found in chronicles, mostly unreliable (as we shall see further), indeed prove the historicity of Gudit. The most reliable ancient source, *History of the Patriarchs*, presents Gudit (who is not cited by name) as a foreigner, namely the Queen of Bani al-Hamwiah. Unfortunately, the tribe, region or country of her origin could not be identified.

Some researchers believe that Queen Gudit was the daughter of the Aksumite emperor Ayzour, while others have it that she was either the granddaughter of Emperor Wuden Asferé or the queen of the so-called Falasha (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 226 note 70).¹ Still others regard her as a ruler of the kingdom of Damot, and related to King Gideon, presenting her either as his daughter or as his wife² or as an Agaw woman or even an exiled woman who married Prince Zenobis, the son of the king of Sham (Syria) (cf. Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 228–30). According to popular belief, especially amongst Ethiopian Christians, Queen Gudit is described as a rebellious woman, and even as a prostitute who raised an army, invaded Aksum from where she had been exiled, and burned its palace and churches.

Henze (2000, 48) describes Gudit as someone who “is said to have killed the emperor, ascended the throne herself, and reigned for 40 years. Accounts of her violent misdeeds are still related among peasants in the north Ethiopian countryside.” Numerous accounts in Aksum recall her destruction of churches, monuments, artefacts, monoliths, and stelae that were shattered by her attacks as she laid waste to the countryside.

Gudit is indeed better known for her alleged wrongdoings than for the possible role she played in the transformation and transition of the social position of women in the political and economic domains of Aksum, which traditionally and culturally were male-dominated positions. She annihilated almost the entire “male line” of the Aksumite dynasty (Chiari 2009, 24; Bantalem Tadesse 2010, 109; Loth 1987, 35; Cebrian and Gozalbez 2006, 167; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 225).

In this article, the “chronicles”, legends, and more reliable sources on Queen Gudit are examined in order to assess—as far as possible—her role in Aksumite history, and determine whether, how and why Gudit’s beliefs were (or were not) fully or partly Hebraic and in how far her actions were (or were not) inspired by some Jewish ideology

1 The word Falasha derives from Ge’ez meaning “stranger” or “exile” (refugees from Israel) but today it is regarded as a derogative word. The Falasha today are referred to as Ethiopian Jews or the Beta Israel. See Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria (1992, 275); Baye Felleke (1996, 15); Le Roux (2003, 18); Parfitt (2008, 177–78); Brown-Lowe (2003, 204); Weil (2009); Molvaer (1998, 51–52); Pankhurst and Kaplan (1992).

2 Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria (1992, 275). There are innumerable popular stories: <http://www.alternatehistory.com/discussion/showthread.php?t=314380> (accessed 8 January 2018); <http://www.rejectedprincesses.com/princesses/gudit> (accessed 8 January 2018).

or beliefs. To demonstrate how these legends contain messages and expressions of popular beliefs, which in themselves form part of Ethiopian history, I will analyse and assess the two main and interconnected legends in Table 1 below.

Legends, Oral Traditions, and Tales Regarding Gudit

Oral tradition and tales have contributed to the understanding and—even more so—to the confusion regarding the question of who Queen Gudit was. It is difficult to trace Queen Gudit's exact origin due to limited reliable sources relating to her socio-political, ethnic, and religious background.

The relevant legends are found in different so-called chronicles. Ethiopian chronicles are often nothing more than collections of stories, legends, and lists of Aksumite kings, gathered in order to form a so-called historical chronicle. Their veracity, authority, and originality are often suspect and generally lack credibility. Few Ethiopian chronicles come from the Middle Ages; many are written in later centuries, often by ecclesiastics. Modern scholars doubt their value, but they have nevertheless published a number of them, while trying to evaluate their information. Conti Rossini (1909 and 1928) was one such scholar who made an invaluable contribution to ancient and medieval Ethiopian history.

As for Gudit, Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 225–41) has found legendary information on Gudit by studying manuscripts and notes in archives and churches and by consulting chronicles in the possession of private persons. Other scholars have negated the legends. A good example is the well-known Soviet scholar Yuri Kobishchanov (1979, 281–82), who did not even mention the name of Gudit.

In my opinion, two of the most striking legends are found in the *Chronicles of Ethiopia*, which was compiled by Qese Gebez Tekle Haimanot and published by Sergew Hable Selassie. The two legends complement each other and have partly the same story (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 225–29, notes 64, 66). The texts represent Gudit as a female warrior opposing male power, the state, and the church.

In one of these texts (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 228–29), Gudit was stripped of her title of princess (probably by the throne) and became a prostitute to survive. A young priest asked her to sleep with him and she refused for he was a priest and she from the royal family. The priest then—as a favour to Gudit—stole a gold veil of Zion. The elders passed judgement on Gudit, blaming her for putting the priest under “temptation” to commit such an act. She was further belittled by being held “solely responsible” for the sacrilege, the priest being declared “innocent of guilt” since, as “a boy under twenty years,” he was defenceless against her womanly charms. She was banned and finally became Jewish after marrying Prince Zenobis. Together they invaded Aksum, where she destroyed palace and churches, and she became queen of Aksum.

The other text published by Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 226) is chronologically the second one. It associates Gudit with the throne as the granddaughter of Aksumite emperor Wuden Asferé who, according to the Ethiopian “chronicles”, ruled from 792 A.D. to 822 A.D. (i.e., in fact, 892 A.D. to 922 A.D.).³ Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 226) cites the story from an unpublished Ge’ez chronicle in the possession of Qese Gebez Tekle Haimanot of Aksum without clarifying whether the latter had integrated it in his *Chronicle of Ethiopia*. The manuscript states that Gudit’s motherland was Hahaylé, in Tigré. The meanings of some of her names are given, such as “fire” (Esato), and “very beautiful” (Judith), while, due to her wickedness, “she was called Gudit” (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 227) and “a female *gud* or monster” (Levi 1992, 88), since she had burnt the cathedral of Aksum which was built with precious stones. It is further said in the manuscript that Gudit, together with her husband Zenobis, came from the land of Sham (Syria), before they embarked and camped at Dihono (Arkiko; see Figure 1). From this point onwards, the narrative is similar to the other chronicle referred to above. Gudit then sent messengers to her people and the land of Hahaylé.

Finally, Sergew refers to two passages from unpublished manuscripts.⁴ The one describes how the Aksumite king, Dagnajan, took his army on an expedition, west of Ethiopia, and marched against the “land of the Arabs” (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 230; Levi 1992, 33–34). This, Sergew says, was seemingly to enlarge his territory and secure the old trade route to the gold mine of Fazoli. However, due to his lack of knowledge of the territory, they all perished. The second passage, from a rather confusing and confused historical note in the National Library of Ethiopia (MS. Arch. 15), starts with the crowning of King Dagnajan, who took 150 priests with him from Aksum to Amhara and named them *Debtera* (itinerant religious figures). He then made his capital in Weyna Dega (a region east of Gondar). Dagnajan took sixty tabernacles with him into battle. The note also mentions that Dagnajan did not know the country and when his soldiers drank water from the lake in Dergina (a local place in Begemidir), he counted his soldiers and found that there were only “18,500 with battle helmets.” He took them to his father, who “wept because he left his son [now called] Dil Ne’ad [*sic!*]. After him the kingdom was given to others who were not Israelites” (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 231). The reference to the circumstances is not clear, nor is the relationship between Dagnajan, his father, and Dil Ne’ad. Recapitulating, Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 230) explains that Dagnajan did not have control over the land of the Arabs and wanted to affirm his power over this region but failed in his expedition. Sergew Hable Selassie accepts that the Aksumite army did indeed perish and believes that this motivated the queen to attack Aksum. Finally, Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a,

3 For correction of dates see Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 202, 226 note 70, 236 note 118); Andersen (2000, 55–58; Hendrickx 2018a, 11).

4 Sergew Hable Selassie is not clear on the origin of his passages: one comes from a note, MS. Arch. 15 in the National Library. He compares the second passage also with another version in the *Gedle Iyasus Mo’a* (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 231, note 96).

233–36) quotes yet two other traditions from manuscripts⁵ on King Dil Ne’ad and his official, Mera Tekle Haimanot, who found, later raped, highjacked, and married Dil Ne’ad’s daughter, Mesobe Werq, believed to be Gudit. Mera Tekle Haimanot defeated the king in battle.

Independently, Molvaer (1989, 47–58) published a small manuscript by Aleqa Teklé of Gojjam, which refers to Dignajan, Anbessa-Widim, Dil Ne’ad, and Yodit (Gudit) who here is described as the daughter of İtaliya [*sic*] staying in the highlands of Simén. This small manuscript, as well as Tanasee 106 (Dombrowski 1983), were unknown to Sergew Hable Selassie and Andersen, but were used by Hendrickx (2018a, 11, 14) in his argumentation on the consecutive rules of the Aksumite kings and princes in the tenth century.



Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia, indicating medieval as well as modern places

5 The first version cited by Sergew Hable Selassie is from *Chronicle of Ethiopia*, an unpublished manuscript in the possession of Qese Gebez Tekle Haimanot, and the second version is found in *Gedle Iyasus Mo'a*. See Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 233 and 236).

A Historical Source: A Tenth Century Letter to King George II of Nubia in *History of The Patriarchs of Alexandria*

Apart from the above legends, the reliable Christian Coptic-Arabic *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, due to some very important and historically acceptable information, can and should be used for the reconstruction of the archives of the Miaphysite Patriarchate of Alexandria and its correspondence with Nubia and Ethiopia (Vantini 1975, 323, 340; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 13–14, 18; Hendrickx 2018a, 1, 4–5; 2018b, 1–8; cf. also Ullendorff 1960, 107–08). The part of *History of the Patriarchs* relating to the Gudit episode and the civil war in Aksum was, according to Den Heijer's (1989) research, authored not by Sawirus, who traditionally has been credited with its composition, but more probably by Mawhūb Ibn Maṣṣūr Ibn Mufarriḡ (Pearse 2005; Hendrickx 2018a, 1–2, 18). It contains a letter to King George II of Nubia, written around 980 A.D., by a king of the Habasha (Abyssinia), who requested George to act on his behalf as his intermediary with Patriarch Philotheus of Alexandria, because King George “was indeed the leading Christian ruler in Nubia with much influence” (Hendrickx 2018a, 18). The passage of *History of the Patriarchs* and the cited letter in it refer to a certain “Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiah” who had rebelled against the king of Habasha and his kingdom by burning cities and destroying churches and imprisoning many Ethiopians: “It was that a woman, a queen of Banî al-Hamwiyah, had revolted against him and against his country. She took captive from it many people and burned many cities and destroyed churches and drove him [the king] from place to place” (Vantini 1975, 323).

The relevant passages in *History of the Patriarchs* describe how the Aksumite kings considered the queen's destructions a punishment by God, which led to civil strife and war between two royal brothers who were pretenders to the throne, how the Christian Orthodox Metropolitan in Aksum, appointed by the Patriarch of Alexandria, was banned and replaced by his non-consecrated assistant and how two monks falsified patriarchal letters and even occupied the metropolitan throne for a while. George sent a letter to the Patriarch, who appointed a new Metropolitan. After the queen's death, order was restored and the church re-established. Another source, the generally reliable Arab chronographer Ibn Hawqal, has confirmed that a woman was ruling Aksum in his time: “As regards to Abyssinia, for many years it has had a woman as its ruler. It is she who killed the king of Abyssinia who was known under the title of *hadani* in the west of Abyssinia. It is a vast limitless country, rendered difficult of access by deserts and wastes” (Ibn Hawqal 1964/I, 50; cf. Trimmingham 1954, 52).

Theses of Modern Scholars on Gudit's Origin, Religion and Actions

The majority of scholars who studied Gudit started with the *historical* sources, to which they then added relevant information from chronicles and legends. I have already referred to Sergew Hable Selassie's (1972a, 228–30) use of legends. On the basis of *History of the Patriarchs* and Ibn Hawqal, Sergew accepts that Gudit was a pagan queen.

There is nevertheless a dispute regarding whether Gudit was of the Jewish faith or a convert to Judaism by her husband and actually belonged to the Agaw people. Sergew has identified the Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiah as “one and the same” with Esat/Gudit and Ibn Hawqal’s queen. As for the “Banî al-Hamwiyah”, Sergew mentions Halévy’s interpretation of the name as meaning Haghouya (Agaws), but apparently prefers Conti Rossini’s (1928, 86) interpretation of Hamwiyah as a province of Damot, thus making Gudit a Sidama pagan woman (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 230; cf. Levi 1992, 41–43).

Andersen and Hendrickx have relied on Sergew’s presentation and published manuscripts, but both have re-examined the documents and given their own conclusions. Andersen (2000, 40, 63 and *passim*), in his conclusions, categorically rejects the possibility of Gudit being a pagan or Jewish illegitimate ruler, but holds that she was “a legitimate, competent member of the royal family, who after or in a succession struggle captured the throne from the apparently incompetent king, Gidajan, son of Dagnajan.” Andersen argues that King Dil Ne’ad was Gudit’s son and that he wrote the letter to King George II of Nubia. Dil Ne’ad moved his capital to Lake Haup and thus started the Zagwe dynasty. Andersen (2000, 40) also believes that the figure of Gudit developed from Ibn Hawqal’s female ruler and the historical Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiah. This, he explains, fits in well with his interpretation of Gudit as “a member of the Ethiopian royal family.” Andersen (2000, 28) maintains that Gudit was a Christian Ethiopian woman, making her neither Jewish nor a pagan woman.

Hendrickx (2018a, 15–16) who, like Andersen and Sergew, started with *History of the Patriarchs*, consents that Gudit is the same person as the Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiah. He has meticulously examined the succession struggle which is evident in *History of the Patriarchs*. He disagrees with Andersen who links her with the Aksumite royal family as an Ethiopian princess, for which thesis there is no conclusive evidence (Hendrickx 2018a, 14, 16). Consequently, Hendrickx, who believes that in general the Gudit episode has remained a “non-resolved problem” (cf. also Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 232), has clarified the episode’s chronological framework and the civil strife. He has also identified the unidentified Aksumite kings, who played the main role in the Gudit episode of *History of the Patriarchs*.⁶

Levi’s research is quite different. She concentrates on Gudit as a woman in power who mirrors the royal legitimacy between two opposing dynasties—the Aksumite versus the Lastans. Gudit represents the “image of the ancestress figure as the ‘mother’ of rival dynasties” (Levi 1992, 304) who acts as a mediator, but at the same time symbolises an

6 Hendrickx (2018a, 17–18) states that King Dagnayan died before 933, when the succession struggle between the two brothers, Digajan and Gidajan, begun. Digajan’s throne name in the lists of emperors was Ambassa Wudem. When Gudit seized the throne, she chased Wudem from place to place until his return after Gudit’s death (circa 979). His son was Dil Ne’ad. Either Wudem or Dil Ne’ad was the Aksumite emperor who wrote to King George II of Nubia.

un-Christian, usurping an illegitimate kingdom, i.e., the Lasta (or Zagwe) dynasty. With the introduction of the Mesobe Werq version, Gudit is portrayed in a less negative light. These two contrasting figures further underline the struggle between the two dynasties. It was also through the story of Mesobe Werq that the Amharans developed less hatred towards the Lastans (Levi 1992, 308–09).

Levi also doubted any connection between Gudit and Esat, stating that during Dagnajan’s military expedition, his soldiers died in *beherä aräb* (land of Arabia) while Gudit at that time was in Syria (Levi 1992, 33–34). Levi upholds the conventional view of Gudit’s origin, that she came from the pagan Sidama lands, south-west of Ethiopia (Levi 1992, 42). Arguing that Judith (Yehudit) means “Jewess” in Hebrew, she defines Gudit as being an unchristian sovereign, who acted against the Christian faith and broke “perhaps the first and primary Christian rule by being a female ruler” (Levi 1992, 87–89; Andersen 2000, 40), the law being that the Solomonic male line of kings ruled over Ethiopia until “that somewhat mythical woman Esther, Judith as some call her, succeeded in dethroning Delna’ad [Dil Ne’ad]” (Budge Wallis 1932, xxiv).

An Example of Interpretation of Legends: Gender and Power Motives

Finally, I will analyse and assess the two already-mentioned and interconnected legends on Gudit. According to these chronicles (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 226–29; 1972b, 113–24), Gudit came as a prostitute to Aksum to make a living because “she was deprived from her daily bread.” A young priest fell in love with her and asked her to sleep with him. She first refused and told him that this was impossible, him being a priest and she a royal. However, he replied that since state and church were equal, what could he do to change her mind. In exchange for sex, she required from the young priest a golden veil and a pair of golden shoes. The priest went to the treasury of Zion and tore a piece of the curtain to have the shoes made. Seeing the torn curtain, people started investigating and found Gudit with a pair of golden shoes, but she did not know from where the priest had brought them. The young priest, “a boy under twenty years,” was found, but due to his young age they declared him innocent and passed judgement on Gudit. She was severely punished by having her right breast cut off and exiled from the country to the Red Sea. Zenobis, a Jew and the son of the king of Sham (Syria), found her and asked her where she was from. She replied: “I have neither country nor relatives because of much evil done to me.” Zenobis then healed her and married her. Gudit “denied Christianity and embraced Judaism, because her husband was a Jew.” Looking for revenge, she wanted to return to Ethiopia and kill her enemies, but Zenobis refused, because he feared the powerful Aksumite emperors. Gudit sent spies disguised as merchants to Ethiopia, who returned with news that Emperor (King) Dagnajan had left for the Arab country and perished in the desert. Gudit together with Zenobis then raised an army and sailed to her country. After they had landed at Massawa and set camp at Dihono (Arkiko), Gudit sent messengers to her motherland Hahaylé asking people to

join her cause. The ones who would not join became her enemies. On her way to Assawirta (a region in southern Eritrea), the people of Hahaylé received her. Gudit was the first to inaugurate a road from Massawa. “Nobody could stop her or obstruct her way and she entered Aksum in safety” (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 227). She destroyed first the palace, then the church built by Abreha and Asheba. “The stelae which were constructed by Greek craftsmen” (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 227) were overthrown and broken, the wells were blocked, and the country became deserted. One day she wanted to measure her army and to do so ordered each soldier to take a stone and leave it on the Gobedra mountain.⁷ Thereafter, she publicly decreed that “churches should be closed because I am a Jewess and my husband also is a Jew.” Subsequently, the Levite priests and the people were persecuted. During Queen Gudit’s reign, the tabernacle Zion was removed and kept in a place called Zuway (in the eastern region) for a period of forty years, until her death. Thereafter, Emperor Anbessa Wudem ruled, the Ethiopian Orthodox Levite priests returned with Zion, the tabernacle, to Aksum and restored peace and order in the year 910 A.D. (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 226–29).

The main themes of the texts are indicated in Table 1 below, which contrasts humiliation with restitution, fall with victory, prostitute with queen, church with state and Christianity with Jewishness.

Discussion and Analysis of Table 1

(i) Regarding the relationship between Gudit and Wuden Asferé, one should bear in mind the unreliability of the many lists of kings, as well as names and dates, and the many other citations of her alleged descent (cf. Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 226 note 70; Levi 1992, 86; Molvaer 1998, 48).

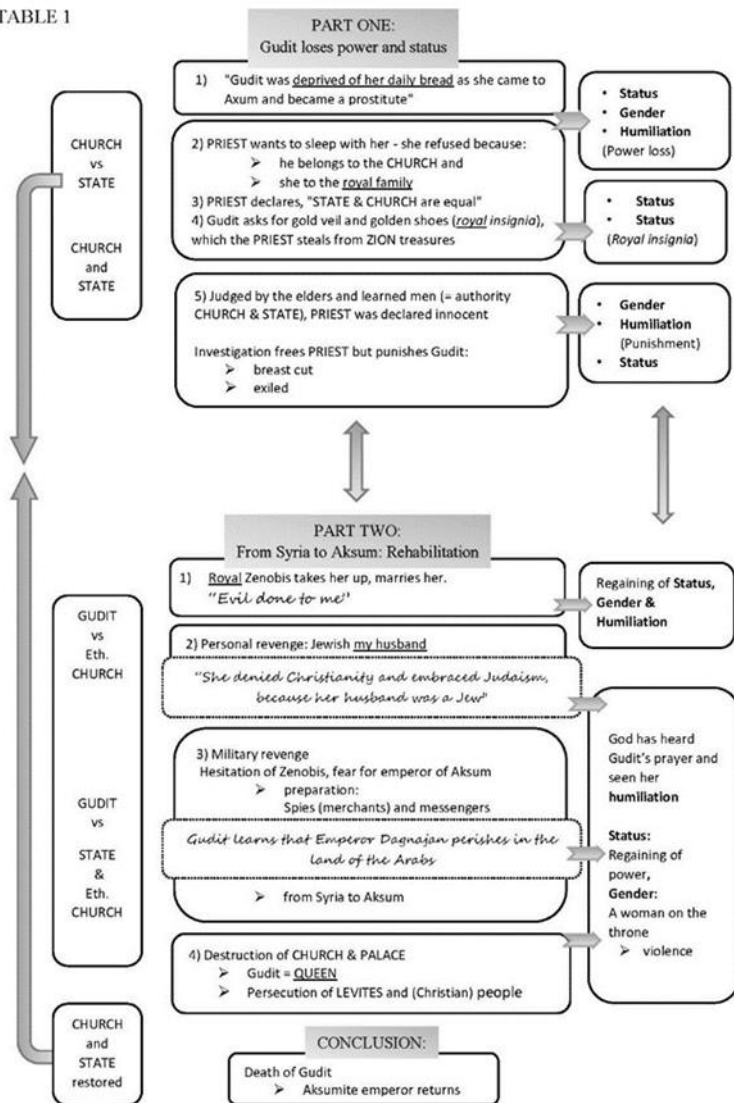
(ii) The connection of Gudit’s invasion with Dagnajan’s death is most probably historically correct. Indeed, as we have already seen, two historical notes on this king’s disastrous expeditions to the “land of the Arabs,” which is in western Ethiopia, neighbouring the region of Shanqilla as well as Damot, where the king perished together with his troops (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 230 note 95; for the geography, cf. also Huntingford 1965, 54 and Figure 1). According to Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 231), the notes on Dagnajan should be believed because “it is this which encouraged the queen of that region to undertake a direct expedition against Axum.” The Gudit legend diligently incorporated this story, rationalising Gudit’s invasion as being the will of God: “God has heard my prayer and seen my humiliation.”

7 Two heaps of stones are still found today in Begemidir (east of Gondar). The story is retold by H. Blanc (a war prisoner during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II). See Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 231).

(iii) That Gudit was a princess before being deprived of her daily bread is stated in most of the legends and notes, but the name and ethnicity of her parents, as we have seen, differ.

Table 1: Story analyses of the two Gudit sources

TABLE 1



(iv) The statement by the priest that "state and church are equal" hints at a real situation in tenth century Aksum, where church and state were both embroiled in turmoil, as clearly stated in *History of the Patriarchs*. The problem continued in the eleventh century, because the emperors tried in vain to make the Ethiopian Church independent

from Alexandria (Vantini 1975, 202–18; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 242–48). Gudit's exile also fits in with the series of royal and ecclesiastic exiles that accompany the troubled period of confrontations in the tenth century (Hendrickx 2018a, 10–15).

(v) The cutting of the right breast as punishment is a theme that is not surprising. This form of punishment has survived in Ethiopia until modern times. Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913) used to punish men by cutting off their right hand and women their right breast during his push to make the Oromo accept his monarchical rule in 1889. Anoole Statue was constructed on April 6, 2014 as a tribute to the Arsi Oromo victims of Menelik in Hetosa in Oromia by the local regional government. The enormous Anoola memorial statue depicts a right hand holding in its middle a cut female breast (Mulualem Daba Tola 2017, 43–49).

However, the ritual of cutting or mutilating the right breast is also found in other Ethiopian contexts, such as for transforming girls into Amazons. Father Joano dos Santos, who visited Abyssinia as a missionary in 1606, states,

In the neighbourhood of Damute is a province in which the women are so much addicted to war and hunting that they constantly go armed. [...] They are much more daring than the men of the country, and that they may have no impediment to the proper exercise of their right arm, they are accustomed, while their daughters are young, to scar the breast of that [=right] side with a hot iron, and thus wither it to prevent growth. Most of the women are more occupied with warfare than the management of their domestic affairs, whence they rarely marry, and live as formerly did the Amazons of Themyscira [=“Paradise Island” acc. to Greek mythology]. [...] Indeed, the power of this monarch is such as to make her another Queen of Sheba, whose authority over her subjects, as is related by the Patriarch Bermudes in his book on Prester John, was without limit. (Pinkerton 1814, 722)

Shalva Weil (2009) and Tseday Alehegn (2007) have also referred to the theme of violence and strength exercised to and by women. Violence against women (e.g., violence against Gudit) was also portrayed in a sexual form, that is, by cutting off her breast, or could this be a psycho-social viewpoint as expressed by Loth (1987, 21), who finds that matriarchal customs slowly changed to patriarchal; women in mainly “socially privileged strata” were being cut off from the rest of the social order. The cutting of the breast can also be seen symbolically as the taking away of Gudit's womanhood/femininity, even as a “dethronement” of Gudit from her royal status. On the other hand, she acquires the status of a warrior amazon.

(vi) Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 226–27) points to a decree (in *Chronicle of Ethiopia*) made by Queen Gudit, that “churches should be closed because I am a Jewess and my husband is also a Jew” and that after this proclamation the Levites and people were persecuted. This statement, I believe, needs some special attention.

In this text, Gudit proclaims that she is “a Jewess” and, furthermore, that her husband is “also a Jew.” On the one hand, this could mean that she sought legitimacy for her position as a Jewess, or perhaps she merely meant that she was of the Jewish faith. Perhaps the use of the words “and” and “also” may indicate that she was a Jewess not because of her husband, but rather that both of them were Jews and therefore persecuted the Church of Ethiopia. Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 225) describes Gudit as being “credited with having mobilized the first persecution of the Church of Ethiopia.” Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 228–29) also refers to yet another chronicle in the possession of Qese Gebez Tekle Haimanot, which states that Gudit “denied Christianity and embraced Judaism, because her husband was a Jew.”

According to some traditions, Gudit followed an indigenous African-Ethiopian religion and practices, which might explain her strong resentment towards the Judeo-Christian Aksum and the so-called Solomonic lineage belief. Thus, Leeman (2009) believes Gudit’s faith to be pagan-Hebraic rather than Jewish due to the indigenous traditions that surrounded her burial in Adi Kaweh (cf. Henze 2000, 55), attributing to popular belief that her death was the result of divine intervention. Sergew Hable Selassie (1972a, 228) also refers to an unpublished text in the possession of Qese Gebez Tekle Haimanot that recalls how Queen Gudit actually met her death: she plundered the church of Abreha and Atsbeha in Gemad and afterwards fell ill, died, and was buried in eastern Tigré.

(vii) A possible reason for Queen Gudit’s acts of destruction was her hate for the Empire. Henze (2000, 55) attributes Gudit’s love for destruction to the antipathy of the Agaw and other more southerly peoples to adopt the Christian religion and the northern sovereignty. Religious conflict between the north and south continued in the sixth century as King Kaleb put more pressure on the pagans and Jews to “replace their theology” hence through retention or rebellion.⁸ From Gudit’s viewpoint, one may thus understand why she invaded Aksum with the help of an army (Jewish?) against a Christian sovereign. When the threat of foreign invasion was imminent, she took up arms against the Aksumite-Solomonic dynasty—a justified reaction within an Israelite perspective (Finneran 2010, 208; Chiari 2009, 22–24, 156).

Levi (1992, 184) questions whether Gudit’s destructive actions were solely inspired by God’s law given to Israel, and she refers thereby tentatively, I believe, to the following passage from Deuteronomy 12:2–3: “Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire, cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.”

8 On the conversion of Aksum, Niall Finneran holds that “this account would seem to be supported by a letter from the emperor Constantius addressed to the co-regents of Aksum, Aizana, and Saizana, offering terms for an alliance.” See Finneran (2010, 208). Cf. also Hendrickx (2017, 545–56).

(viii) The legend has cleverly interwoven Zion with the actions of Gudit. For instance, the golden curtain was believed to be a present to Zion from the (perhaps legendary) emperors Abreha and Asbeha.

(ix) The Syrian connection in the text may be due to the historical relations between the Syrian and Ethiopian Christians and to their belief in a second evangelisation by the Nine Saints from Syria (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972a, 115–21).

(x) Interestingly, the manuscript by Aleqa Teklé (Molvaer 1998, 49) states that Gudit crowned herself as empress of Aksum, which of course strengthens the view that she was not a Christian nor an Aksumite princess, since the latter would have been crowned by a bishop.

(xi) Finally, the unit of the two legends I discussed is quite consistent. It combines Gudit's "different" origins and actions into a logical explanation: a princess born in Adua, becoming a prostitute in Aksum, banished to Syria, becoming Jewish and again a princess through her marriage to Zenobis, finally destroys the Aksumite royalty, state, and Orthodox Church. Since Gudit was a royal granddaughter but born in Hahaylé (from an Adua mother?), she was partly "foreigner". The story does not say why she came to Aksum as a prostitute. Was her royal status denied because of her mixed, probably extramarital descent? After being exiled to Syria and having married Zenobis, she invades Aksum as a foreigner from another land (Syria). This solves the controversy regarding whether she was a foreigner. The story also tries to solve the controversy regarding Jewishness versus Christianity. The story thus presents Gudit as Aksumite, but born outside the city, and as a foreigner from Syria, and as a Christian as well as a Jew. Her mistreatment by the Christians can explain her hate for the Church and her marriage to the Jew Zenobis can explain her conversion to Judaism.

(xii) Having said this, I wish to strongly underline that my analysis of the texts of two of the Gudit legends does by no means mean that I believe that these legends present the historical truth of the life and reign of Queen Gudit.

Conclusion

Fact or myth, none of the legends and scarce historical sources fully and satisfactorily explain the origins of Queen Gudit. Whether she was a woman of Jewish faith, an indigenous Sidamo woman, an Agaw woman, a Beja, a former Christian, a pagan or a believer of another indigenous religion remains uncertain (Finneran 2010, 208; Chiari 2009, 22–24, 156).

My analysis of certain legends has shown that they are not illogical and that they express a certain point of view and attempt to solve existing problems. They send messages, use symbols, pictures, and statements which express the view of certain groups, rather than of individuals, regarding the Gudit problem and related ones, thus expressing opinions,

beliefs, prejudices and convictions which shaped Ethiopian history, culture, and political theory and which belong themselves to that history.

Although Queen Gudit destroyed the Aksumite-Solomonic line, one may conclude that she needs to be “credited” as the one who started the Zagwe dynasty. Queen Gudit also needs to be recognised for re-establishing a national consciousness in both the Beta-Israel and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity since the Aksumites believed that the Solomonic dynasty was undying and that the glory of their kingdom was everlasting. Where Ethiopian chronicles see her as an enemy, the Falashas claim her as one of their own heroines.

As for a place in Ethiopian history and from a socio-cultural viewpoint, one may perhaps view Queen Gudit as an inspiration for today’s Ethiopian women, being a symbol of feminine resistance and triumph over an established patriarchal system. For many women she may have been a heroine, but for men—and especially for the church—she was a rebellious woman who destroyed the Solomonic line.

References

- Andersen, K. T. 2000. “The Queen of the Habasha in Ethiopian History. Tradition and Chronology.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63 (1): 31–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00006443>.
- Bantalem Tadesse. 2010. *A Guide to the Intangible Treasures of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church: Historic Perspectives and Symbolic Interpretations of the Festivals*. Addis Ababa: Kalu Printing Press.
- Baye Felleke. 1996. *Questions about the Kibre Negest*. Addis Ababa.
- Brown-Lowe, R. 2003. *The Lost City of Solomon and Sheba, an African Mystery*. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing.
- Budge Wallis, E. A. 1932. *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek I*. London: Humphrey Milford.
- Cebrian, D. and J. Gozalbez. 2006. *Touching Ethiopia*. Ethiopia: Shama Books.
- Chiari, G. P. 2009. *A Guide to Aksum and Yeha*. Ethiopia: Arada Books.
- Conti Rossini, C. 1909. “Les listes des rois d’Aksum.” *Journal Asiatique* 14: 263–320.
- Conti Rossini, C. 1928. *Storia d’Etiopia*. Vol. I. Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d’Arti Grafiche.

- Den Hejjer J. 1989. *Mawhub ibn Mansur ibn Mufarrig et l'historiographie copto-arabe. Etude sur la composition de l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie*. Subsidia Series of the Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. CSCO vol. 513, Subsidia vol. 83.
- Dombrowski, F. A. 1983. *Tanasee 106: Eine Chronik der Herrscher Äthiopiens*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz.
- Finneran, N. 2010. "Beyond Byzantium: the Non-Chalcedonian Churches." In *A Companion to Byzantium*, edited by Liz James, 199–224. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444320015.ch16>.
- Hendrickx, B. 2017. "The 'Letter' of Constantius II to Ezana and Sezana: A Note on its Purpose, Range and Impact in an Afro-Byzantine Context." *Graeco-Arabica* 12: 545–56.
- Hendrickx, B. 2018a. "The Letter of an Ethiopian King to King George II of Nubia in the Framework of the Ecclesiastic Correspondence between Axum, Nubia and the Coptic Patriarchate in Egypt and of the Events of the 10th Century AD." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 99. Accessed 14 December 2018. <http://www.pharosjot.com>.
- Hendrickx, B. 2018b. "Some Remarks on the Reconstruction of Ethiopian, Nubian and Miaphysite Patriarchal Archives and Documents." *Proceedings Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 1: 3–11. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-10a622e82f>.
- Henze, P. B. 2000. *Layers of Time, A History of Ethiopia*. New York: Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-11786-1>.
- Huntingford, G. W. B. 1965. *The Glorious Victories of Amde Sion King of Ethiopia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ibn Hawqal. 1964. *Configuration de la terre*. Translated by J. H. Kramer and G. Wiet. 2 vols. Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve and Larose.
- Kobishchanov, Y. 1979. *Axum*. Translated by Lorraine T. Kapitanoff. University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Leeman, B. 2009. "The Sabaean Inscriptions at Adi Kaweh – Evidence Supporting the Narrative of the *Sheba-Menelik Cycle* of the Kebra Nagast." Paper presented at the African Studies Association of Australasia and Pacific Conference, University of Queensland, 2 October.
- Le Roux, M. 2003. *The Lemba, A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* Pretoria: ABC Press.
- Levi, C. 1992. "Yodit." PhD diss., University of London.
- Loth, H. 1987. *Women in Ancient Africa*. Leipzig: Edition Leipzig.

- Molvaer, R. K. 1998. "The Defiance of the Tenth-century Empress Yodit Judith of Ethiopia from an Unpublished Manuscript by Aleqa Teklé Tekle-Iyesus of Gojjam." *Northeast African Studies* (New Series) 5 (1): 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.1998.0010>.
- Mulualem Daba Tola. 2017. "The Theses and Antitheses of Anoole Statue in the Ethiopian Polity." *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 7 (9): 43–49. Accessed 20 January 2019. <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/RHSS/article/view/37251/38293>.
- Pankhurst, R. and S.B. Kaplan 1992. *The Beta Israel Falasha in Ethiopia: From Earliest to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Publisher.
- Parfitt, T. 2008. *The Lost Ark of the Covenant, The Remarkable Quest for the Legendary Ark*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Pearse, R. 2005. "Severus of Al'Ashmunein (=Hermopolis), History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria. Preface to the Online Edition." Ipswich. Accessed 14 May 2018. http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/s/s2/severos_i_a_m.shtml.
- Pinkerton, J. 1814. *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World*. London: Longman.
- Sergew Hable Selassie. 1972a. *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*. Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University.
- Sergew Hable Selassie 1972b. "The Problem of Gudit." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10 (1): 113–24.
- Trimingham, J. S. 1954. *Islam in Ethiopia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria. 1992. "The Horn of Africa." In *General History of Africa. III. Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, edited by I. Hrbek, 270–78. Abridged Edition. Place: Unesco, University of California Press: James Currey.
- Tseday Alehegn, . 2007. "Queens, Spies, and Servants: A History of Ethiopian Women in Military Affairs." *Tadias Magazine*. Accessed March 2018. <http://www.tadias.com/07/23/2007/queens-spies-and-servants-a-history-of-ethiopian-women-in-military-affairs/>.
- Ullendorff, E. 1960 *The Ethiopians, an Introduction to Country and People*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Vantini, G. 1975. *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*. Heidelberg: Akademie der Wissenschaften; Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Weil, Shalva. 2009. "Ethiopian Jewish Women." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. Access 13 January 2018. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ethiopian-jewish-women>.