RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MYTH OF THE FORTY FOUR CHURCHES OF GONDAR

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ለምነው በድርቡሽ ጎንደር መፈታቱ
"In spite of the presence of the clergy of the 44 churches
Why is the absolution of Gondar held by the Dervish?"
(traditional *qene*, Mahteme Sillase Welde Mesqel, 1961, p. 256)

ABSTRACT

Gondar is today often labelled as the city of the 'forty four churches'. Since Gondar became the royal capital of Ethiopia in the first half of the seventeenth century many churches were founded in the city and in its surroundings but this myth seems to have emerged only when the glory of the city was over, in the nineteenth century. In addition, from the mid-twentieth century onwards several different lists on the 'forty four churches' were produced. The result is that over sixty churches from Gondar city and its surroundings have been included in at least one of these lists. The paper searches the roots of this tradition on Gondar's churches. The study argues that the myth was buttressed on a number with an important symbolic meaning in highland Ethiopia that signified 'wholeness'. Moreover, its emergence can be explained by two different phenomena: on the one hand, the Gondarine society was eager to reclaim a central role for its city during a period when Gondar and its nearby provinces had become peripheral regions within the Ethiopian state; on the other, foreign travelers popularized a myth that came in handy to supply their narratives with strong, quantifiable facts.

Keywords: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, Gondarine Kingdom, travel literature, symbolic numbers, churches

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widespread traditions about the city of Gondar in Ethiopia is the one telling about its 'forty four churches'. The tradition is today very much alive in Gondar and the visitors of this ancient capital of Ethiopia are often informed about it. For instance, an authoritative travel guide on Gondar and Lake Tana published recently, christens the city as 'The City of the 44 Christian Churches' (Chiari, 2012, p. 34; see also List of Gondarine churches, n.d.). Such a large number of temples would symbolize the strong religious identity of the city and at the same time show the strength the urbs once acquired. Indeed, no other city in Ethiopia–not even the two

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ancient capitals of Aksum and Lalibela or its present day capital Addis Abeba–could claim the number of Christian sanctuaries Gondar people do for their locality.

Significantly, this old tradition of the forty four churches of Gondar seems to have spread to other areas of the Ethiopian highlands. Thus, today officials and clergy of Lake Tana, Axum and North Shewa claim the same number of churches for their respective regions.

This paper looks into the origins of the tradition on the forty four churches of Gondar. Firstly, the paper discusses the central role that church foundations had in Ethiopian and Gondar history. Then, the paper searches into the historical literature in order to find the earliest references to this tradition. When did the tradition originate, was it during the period of Gondarine hegemony or when Gondar was replaced by other regions as the centre of the kingdom? In a final stage a 'list' of the forty four churches is proposed. This list, however, does not intend to be a canonical one, but instead is made out of four different lists that during the twentieth century Gondar intellectuals and foreign scholars have produced. While the four lists agree in a 'core' number of thirty one churches, they disagree with the rest. The result is that about sixty one churches have been mentioned at some point as being part of the famed 'forty four'. The article concludes with some hypotheses that might explain the divergences in the four lists.

The paper uses different sets of historical sources. In order to find the earliest references to the tradition of the forty four churches, local and foreign accounts are scrutinized. Nineteenth-century foreign accounts have resulted particularly informative in providing historical references to the tradition. On the contrary, Ethiopian royal chronicles are silent about this tradition. Yet, these later sources have been useful in order to reveal that the number forty four is well embedded in the local intellectual traditions and that this number (more a symbol than a real sign) might have older roots than the tradition itself of the forty four churches. Finally, the search for lists on the forty four churches, which were compiled only during the twentieth century, has brought us to read different texts compiled by Gondarine and foreign scholars.

THE FOUNDATION OF GONDAR AND ITS CHURCHES

Gondar was founded by King Fasiledes (r. 1632-1667) around 1636. Before Gondar and until the mid-sixteenth century, the Ethiopian kings who ruled the country after the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270 used to live in roving capitals.[2] Reportedly, the first semi permanent capital was founded by King Gelawdewos at a locality called Wej, in central Ethiopia (Conzelman, 1895, p. 47 [text], p. 149 [tr.]). But it was the latter's nephew,

3. The possibility has been recently raised that during medieval times the Ethiopian Solomonid rulers had a permanent capital at the site of Barara, located in what today is Entotto hill, Addis Abeba; at Entotto the ruins of what could have been an impressive medieval fortress are currently in the course of study; see Vigano, 2016.

King Sertse Dingil (r. 1563-1597), who, at Guba'e (Infraz), started a trend by Ethiopian rulers to set up their cities in the regions to the northwest of Lake Tana (Pennec, 2003, p. 203). Two short-lived successors of Sertse Dingil, Ya'iqob (r. 1597-1603, 1605-1607) and Zedingil (r. 1603-1605), settled down in the same geographical locations. Later on, Susinyos (r. 1607-1632) founded *ketemas* (royal cities) in areas not too far from Infraz, first at Gorgora, then at Denqez and finally at Azezo. These *ketema*s included impressive structures made of mortar that represented an innovation with previous royal architecture in the region. They were founded when the kingdom fell under the influence of Jesuit missionaries, who came from Portugal, Spain and Italy. The missionaries managed to convert the king to Catholicism and in 1625 they placed a Catholic Patriarch, Afonso Mendes, as the head of the Ethiopian church. The presence of the missionaries had also a strong influence in the architectonic techniques and models that Susinyos used for the erection of his palaces and castles. So the most ambitious buildings were built with the help of Indian masons and Jesuit missionaries (Martínez d'Alòs-Moner, 2015, p. 241 et passim). In 1632, following the death of Susinyos and the succession in power of his pro-Orthodox son Fasiledes, the foreign missionaries were banished from the country. Yet, Fasiledes, like his successors, kept using a foreign–principally of Indian origin–workforce–together with local masons–to erect their palaces, castles and churches in the Gondar region. Thus, the innovations brought about under Susinyos, such as the use of limestone and the construction of monumental structures with a military character, became the trademark of the so-called Gondarine architecture (Fernández, 2016).

Concerning the history of the foundation of Gondar Ethiopian royal chronicles, which since the fourteenth century recorded the deeds of the Solomonic monarchs (Chernetsov, 2007, p. 41), are meager in details. Fasiledes himself was not 'rewarded', as his predecessors were, with a royal chronicle (Kropp, 1986) so that the task of reconstructing Gondar's foundation and earliest developments can only be attempted with much caution. Be it as it may, the choice of the site, the *amba* ('flat mount' in Amharic) overlooking the rivers of Qaha and Angereb, must have been determined both by its strategic location, at the crossroads of important trade routes, and by Fasiledes's familiarity with the area. Fasiledes grew up at the courts his father had established at Azezo (Genneta Iyesus) and Denqez, which were at a short distance from Gondar (see also Ghiorghis, 1969, p. 166). Even during his earlier years as a monarch the king spent his days at these latter *ketema*s and he was to be buried at Azezo (Perruchon, 1898, p. 84 et passim). The scant historical sources on Gondar's origin are complemented with legends that even today are vividly recounted by the population of the city and of the surrounding provinces. One of such legends, which has several variants, tells that Fasiledes's father, Susinyos, encountered a prophet who announced him that he will found several capitals whose name would start with the syllable 'go'; Gondar, indeed was preceded by royal capitals that followed this naming pattern, thus Gorgora and Gomenghe (Denqez) (on an extensive study of oral traditions related to prophecies on the origin of Gondar, see Pollera, 1936; Ramos, 2010, p. 205 et passim; Solomon, 2006, p. 1).

As it happened with the civil buildings, the churches of Gondar were only built progressively and throughout many decades. The tradition in the Christian Ethiopian highlands required every new ruler to build or endow churches (see Derat, 2003, p. 222 et passim; also Ancel, 2006, pp. 57-59). This act, besides showing the religious devotion of the ruler, served to gain the favour of the Orthodox church and it was by itself a statement of political power, for royal churches were usually sumptuous buildings that were also endowed with extensive landed states. Royally-endowed churches in the countryside, which were often placed on top of hills with a commanding view over the surrounding areas, might have had an additional function, that of territorial control. Last but not the least, churches acted as royal mausolea and several of the Gondarine rulers and members of the royal family lay buried in different Gondar sanctuaries such as Azezo Tekle Haymanot, Addebabay Tekle Haymanot, Debre Birhan Sillasc, Atatami Mikacl, Lidcta Lcmaryam and Qwcsqwam.

Traditions that can be collected in the Gondar region tell that some of Gondar's famous churches were founded before the attested foundation of the city occurred, which indicates the existence of a stable population in the area prior to the arrival of Fasiledes. Among the churches to which tradition attributes a 'pre-Gondarine' foundation are Gondaroch Giyorgis, Qaha Iyesus, Aberra Giyorgis, and Arba'itu Insisa. These churches are all situated in areas peripheral to the royal citadel or 'Fasil Ghimb', the site where political power came to reside. Reportedly, the first proper Gondarine churches were those founded by King Fasiledes on the main *amba* of Gondar. To him not less than seven church foundations are attributed in central Gondar: Fit Abo, Fit Mikael, Gimjabet Maryam, Ilfign Giyorgis, Medhane Alem, and Kiddus Gabriel (Ghiorghis, 1969; on oral traditions about these foundations, see Ramos, 2010, pp. 210-212). Four of such temples, Iyesus, Maryam, Giyorgis and Medhane Alem were built in the immediate vicinity to the Fasil Ghimb, while Fit Abo, Mikael and Gabriel were situated in the extremes south and north of the city. Fasiledes's successors, Yohannis I (r. 1667–1682) and Iyasu I (r. 1682–1706), who ruled during a period of relative stability, were also actively involved in founding religious temples. Yohannis I endowed several churches but only far away from Gondar city; the closest churches he built to Gondar would have been Abba Antonyos and Tsedda Egziabher Ab, at about 5 and 13 km as the crow flies from central Gondar, respectively. In his turn, Iyasu I is associated with at least twelve church foundations throughout the Gondarine state, two of them on the main *amba* of Gondar, Adebabay Tekle Haymanot and Debre Birhan Silassie.

Following the death of Iyasu I in 1706 Gondar entered into a period of crisis: the changes in the throne were frequent and several political and religious factions destabilized the state. This period culminated in the so-called *Zemena Mesafint*, 'The Era of the Princes' (conventionally dated 1769 –1855), when power fell totally in the hand of provincial lords (see Shiferaw Bekele, 1990). Yet, even then the practice of church founding among the royalty did not stop and the town experienced a second era of glory as far as the building of sanctuaries is concerned. King Tekle Haymanot I (r. 1706 –1708), who only ruled for a short time and died assassinated, did not

found any church. His successor and uncle, Tewoflos (r. 1708–1711), endowed Hamere Noh, situated just at a close range from the royal citadel. Yostos (r. 1711–1716) founded Lideta Lemaryam, another of Gondar's most famous churches of today. Dawit III (r. 1716–1721), the son of Iyasu I is associated with Attatami Mikael, one of the three churches situated within the imperial citadel, and with Abuna Ewostatewos, the latter today disappeared. The next ruler in power, Bekaffa (r. 1721–1730), endowed the city with the church of Rufael in central Gondar and another church situated beyond the Angereb river, Defecha Kidane Mihret. The latter's son and successor, the weak Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755), endowed at least one church, Qiddus Yohannis (Yohannis Metmaq), which was actually sponsored by *ras* Wolde Le'ul. Iyasu II's powerful mother, Mintiwab (Birhan Mogesa), who ruled as regent during large part of Iyasu II's rule, founded Debre Tsehay Qwesqwam, which was part of an ambitious citadel-abbey built at the outskirts of Gondar. Nine churches were founded during the reign of Tekle Haymanot II (r. 1769-1777). King Solomon (r. 1777-1779) founded the church of St. Fasiledes reusing the building known as Fasil's Bath. The last of the royal foundations of Gondar can be considered to be the church endowed by Tekle Giyorgis I (r. intermittently between 1779 and 1800), Debre Metmaq Maryam, situated today in a central area of the city.

With the years, the churches of Gondar became essential nodes in the social and political fabric of the city. Churches became centers of learning, of refuge and of devotion. At the same time the Christian sanctuaries played an important role in the city's urban network, functioning as true centres for each of the *sefer* (quartiers) growing around them (Solomon, 2006, p. xii). The central role Gondar churches acquired is captured in the following historical *qine* which is said to have been composed during the period of Gondar's prosperity:

> መልካሙ አገር ጎንደር፣
> በተስኪያን ስሞ ለመኖር፤
> አየቀርምና መዳኘት ፣
> ከተማ ሰው መግባት::
> The finest city Gondar
> To live acquainted with churches
> It is obvious to stand before the court
> So that the man go to the city
> (Mahteme Sillase, 1961 AM, p. 30)

As it occurs with the origin of the city and with some other royal buildings, Gondar churches have several legends associated with them. The tabot of the church of Fit Abo, allegedly the first royal Gondarine church, protected the city–at the time when it was only a small settlement–from the wild beasts that came to Gondar from the mounts and valleys surrounding it.[4] The Mahdi invasions (known locally as 'Darbush') that laid waste the Gondar region and city in 1888 and 1889 are also the origin of marvelous

4. A similar tradition was recounted to the authors on May 3, 2016, during a visit to the nearby church of Fenter Medhane Alem by the abbot of the church, *qomos* Gebre Kidan. The church is situated some 5 km to the south of downtown Gondar and in a more rural setting.

stories. One such story holds that Debre Birhan Sillase was spared destruction by the invading Muslim forces by a swarm of bees. Similarly, the inner part of the church of Medhane Alem is said by its clergy to have miraculously escaped fire and even destruction by the Mahdist forces (Chiari, 2012, p. 68).

THE EMERGENCE OF A TRADITION

The tale of the 44 churches of Gondar is well embedded within the *afa tarik* ('oral tradition') that recounts several episodes of Gondar's past. Yet, due to its orality it is difficult to date the origin of the stories told in the *afa tarik*. At the most, the story teller may remember he or she first learnt of the story a couple of generations back, thus rendering a terminus post quem for the event concerned to eighty or so years ago.

The Gondar region, however, besides having a rich oral tradition, has an impressive collection of written sources, local and foreign. Royal chronicles, hagiographical acts and foreign accounts are among the historical sources one can tap when searching information on Gondar, in particular, and on Christian Ethiopia, in general. The chronicles of the Gondarine Kingdom are written in Gi'iz language and they span from the rule of Yohannis I (Guidi, 1960) to that of Tekle Giyorgis I (the latter was not the object of a chronicle proper; see Conti Rossini, 1917) about one hundred and fifty years later. Additionally, from the nineteenth century onwards Christian Ethiopians began writing chronicles in the Amharic language. Such texts contain valuable information on Gondarine churches, particularly when the church has some direct association with the ruler and the royal family. However, no chronicle or royal account mentions as large a number as 'forty four sanctuaries'. After all, Gondar churches were only built progressively, throughout different centuries and by different rulers.

The first written reference to the legend of the forty four churches appears to date to the early nineteenth century. It is then that the number of 'forty-something churches' makes its appearance, with gusto, into the historical record. Significantly this occurs in foreign travel accounts rather than in pieces of local historiography. Early into the century, towards 1811, the British soldier William Coffin wrote that "The priests [of Gondar] are of opinion that their city is very grand, and they even call it *Cuttermer Arbar arrat Bate er Christian* [i.e. *yearbarat bete kristiyan ketema*], meaning the city of the forty four churches" (quoted in Pearce, 1831, vol. 1, p. 241). A few decades later the French Edmond Combes and Maurice Tamisier, who travelled across Ethiopia from 1835 to 1837, wrote of "Gondar village and surroundings having forty two churches" (Combes & Tamisier, 1838, vol. 3, 342). These references show that by the first half of the nineteenth century there was a trend towards associating Gondar as an urbs with a large number of Orthodox Christian temples.

By the mid-nineteenth century the tradition of the 'forty-something churches' was popular enough so as to be recounted by every foreign traveler visiting Gondar. The French explorer Arnauld d'Abbadie, who was active in the Gondar area in the 1840s and 1850s, wrote that the city had

"nineteen churches; the locals [however] say that the city has forty four churches, but [because] they count those from the areas that have been almost abandoned and all from the eastern side" (1868, p. 160). The German diplomat and traveler Theodor von Heuglin, who visited the Gondar region in the 1850s and 1860s, wrote that "according to the missionaries [those in the service of Tewodros II] Gondar has forty four churches and ca. 1200 faithful" (1868, p. 216). His fellow Henry Stern referred the same number of churches in his account *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (Stern, 1968 [1862], p. 230), which was the product of his stay in the Gondar region in the 1860s. The Frenchman Achille Raffray, active in the city from 1873 to 1875, wrote in his travelogue that "the city and its surroundings are occupied by churches; we are told there are forty three, of which many were built by the Portuguese" (Raffray, 1898, p. 31). To about the same period we can date the tradition collected by the German explorer Gerhard Rohlfs. In his travelogue *Meine Mission nach Abessinien* Rohlfs wrote that "according to the locals Gondar has forty churches" (1883, p. 268). The British scholar Charles Armbruster, who was resident of Gondar from 1909 to 1912, informed that "it is said that Gondar contains no less than 44 churches" (cited in Pearson, 2004, p. 204). Finally, well into the twentieth century, the French diplomat Maurice de Coppet, who edited King Minilik II's chronicle, reported that the Gondarine people were "once proud of their forty four churches" (Guèbrè Sellassié, 1930, vol. 1, p. 561; see also Bairu Tafla, 1981, pp. 82-83).

So, until the turn of the twentieth century different numbers were provided for Gondar churches: forty (Rohlfs), forty two (Combes and Tamisier), forty three (Raffray) and forty four (Coffin, d'Abbadie, von Heuglin, Stern, Armbruster, de Coppet). Forty four was the dominating number and eventually it will become the one sanctioned by tradition and by travel guides. Yet, the slight divergences seem to indicate that during the nineteenth century the tradition had not yet fully crystallised and that it was in the process of 'negotiating'. So slightly divergent traditions claimed preminence and a consensus had not yet been reached about the exact number of Gondar churches.

Supporting the accounts by the foreign travelers above, there are pieces of *afa tarik* that have been transmitted orally among the Gondar society. One such instance is perhaps the poem that opens this text, which reflects melancholically on the devastation inflicted in the 1880s by the "Derbush", i.e. Mahdists, upon the city and on the powerlessness of its forty four sanctuaries. In addition, the *Gi'iz – Amharic dictionary* by Kidane Weld Kifle defines Gondar as follows:

> (ጉንደ ሀገረ ፤ የፋሲል ከተማ ከግራኝ በኋላ የቀናች ባለ ፵፬ ደብር፤ ዳግም ግራኝና ሣልስ ግራኝ (ቴዎ፤ደር) ተከታትለው እስኪያጠፏት ድረስ መናገሻ ታላቅ ከተማ የነበረች
> Gondar: the main city, the mother of cities; the city of Fasil established after Gragn with its forty four churches; it was the royal city until its successive destruction by the second and third Gragn, Te [wodros] and the De[rvish]
> (Kidane Weld Kifle, 1948 A.M., p. 323)

THE ROOTS OF THE NUMBER FORTY FOUR

As it was shown, most of the written sources describing Gondar in the nineteenth century converged on the number of forty four, which today has become the authorized number of the historical churches in that city. The British historian Stuart Munro-Hay plausibly suggested that the number was meant to be taken symbolically, rather than literally (Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 156). Yet, the question as to why the tradition became fixed with such a number remains unresolved. Gondar's past, in particular that related to its court life, might help to explain why this number was preferred over others.

While the idea of the forty four churches of Gondar seems to have emerged during the nineteenth century, the number forty four has older roots. Back in the late eighteenth century the Scotsman James Bruce reported a local tradition on a similar number: the "forty-five islands in the lake [Tana]" (Bruce, 1790, vol. 3, p. 387). But more significantly this number is frequently mentioned in two important corpus of texts related to the Solomonic monarchy. One of them is the *Sir'ate Mengist* ('the ordinance of government'), a series of writings concerning court rituals, hierarchy and the appointment and privileges of dignitaries (see Kropp, 2011; Nosnitsin, 2010). Another corpuses where such reference has been recorded are the royal chronicles, to which attention has already been given.

The text known as *Sir'ate Mengist* is of difficult dating: the German scholar Varenbergh edited it on the basis of four texts dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but its origins might be much older (Nosnitsin, 2010, p. 634). The text mentions that among the court dignitaries administering justice there are "forty four legislators ['Gesetzgeber' in the German translation and **ይውዕሉ· በበሥርዓቶሙ·** in the Gi'iz original], each with his own rank" (Varenbergh, 1916, p. [text], p. 33 [trans.]). In its turn, in the chronicle of King Susinyos (r. 1607-1632), which was written when the ruler was in office, there is a mention of "forty four tribes" from the southern regions (Gurage?) who came to the encounter of Susinyos as his subjects (Alemu, 2005, p. 26; Pereira, ch. XV, vol. 1, p. 41[text], vol. 2, 26 [trans.]; see also Bairu Tafla, 1981, p. 84). A little less than one century later, the chronicler of Iyasu I, Susinyos's great grandson, mentioned that the office of *Tigre mekwennin* (i.e. 'ruler of Tigray') had the command over "forty four *negarit* [a kettledrum and royal insignia]" (Guidi, 1961, p. 165 [text], p. 173 [trans.]; see also Bairu, 1987, p. 81). Not directly from the same literary tradition, but probably strongly influenced by it, is the famous travelogue of James Bruce referred to above. The Scotsman, who was a host at the Gondar court from 1769 to 1771, mentioned that "forty five [kettledrums, i.e. *negarit*]... constantly go before him [the king], beating all the way while he is on his march" (Bruce, 1790, vol. 3, p. 391).

With hindsight it can be argued that it is such royal tradition that influenced the Gondarians when, in the nineteenth-century, they elaborated their own myth of the forty four churches. After all it was in Gondar and the Gondar region where most of the royal texts mentioned above were written and transmitted. Whether the number forty four

described any real fact can be doubted and it rather seems to have been used as an idiomatic expression. The Gondar intellectuals, church scholars and scribes might have considered forty four as a strong, 'perfect', number, one that, like the number forty, was synonymous, as Bairu Tafla has already suggested, for "many" or "wholeness" (Bairu, 1987, p. 84 et passim; see also Zitelmann, 2007, p. 1203). Following Bairu we may locate the roots of the symbolism of the number forty four in the biblical narrative, where the number forty is associated with prominent events (1987, p. 78).

FORTY FOUR ... OR SIXTY ONE?

As it seems, it was only during the twentieth century that effort was made on identifying with precision the exact identity of the forty four churches. Until the present a few lists on the forty four churches have appeared. In Table 1 four such lists have been tabulated. The first well organized list of the forty four churches was prepared by the Italian scholar Monti della Corte (1938, pp. 99-102), who supervised archaeological surveys in Gondar during the period of the Italian occupation. After him, in chronological order, we shall situate the list preserved in a manuscript authored by *aleqa* Mengistu Nega (1960 A.M.), the former head of the church of Abun Bet Gabriel. In the 1970s a local historian, Gerima Teffera (1966 A.M.) published a third list in the municipal journal of the city. More recently a fourth list appeared in the memorial bulletin of *liqe liqawint* Menkir Mekonnen (*Liqe liqawint*, 1989 A.M.), a prominent ecclesiastic and intellectual of the city.

As it can be seen there are significant disagreements between the four lists. So, all the four lists comprised, at least sixty one churches have claimed at some point to belong to Gondar's 'golden church list'. Yet, as it can be seen when comparing the four lists, thirty one sanctuaries appear in the four lists, namely Abbajale Tekle Haymanot, Abba Abiye Egzi Kidane Mihret, Abba Antonyos, Addebabay Iyesus, Adebabay Tekle Haymanot, Arba'itu Insesa, Atatami Mikael, Ayira Mikael, Be'ata Lemaryam, Bilajig Mikael, Daregenda Ewost'atewos, Debre Birhan Sillase, Debre Mitmaq Maryam, Debre Tsehay Qwesqwam, Defecha Kidane Mihret, Fasiledes (Fasil Bath), Fit Abo, Fit Mikael, Gabriel (Abun bet Gabriel), Gondaroch Maryam, Ilfign Ghiyorgis, Lideta Lemaryam, Medhane Alem, Qaha Iyesus, Qirqos, Rufael, Selestu Mi'it (Hamere Noh), Tsedda Egziabher Ab, Worangheb Gabriel, Yohannis Mitmaq, and Yohannis Wolde Negwadgwad. A second group totalling ten churches appear in at least three lists, namely Abba Samuel (Mikael), Abera Ghiyorgis, Azezo Tekle Haymanot, Damot Giyorgis, Fenter Lideta, Ghimja Bet Maryam, Gondaroch Ghiyorgis, Hawaryat, Menzoro Tekle Haymanot, and Sehor Maryam. The churches of Chachquna Maryam and Gana Yohannis appear in two lists and a group of eighteen churches appear only once.

Table 1: *The forty four churches of Gondar according to four different lists*

No	Church name	MdC	MN	GT	MNK	Founder/refounder
1	*Abba Abiye Egzi Kidane Mihret*	x	x	x	x	Ras Gebrie
2	*Abba Antonyos*	x	x	x	x	Yohannis I
3	Abba Samuel (Mikael)	∅	x	x	x	locals/Tekle Ghiyorgis
4	*Abbajale Tekle Haymanot*	x	x	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II
5	Abera Ghiyorgis	∅	x	x	x	locals
6	*Adebabay Iyesus*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes
7	*Addebabay Tekle Haymanot*	x	x	x	x	Iyasu I
8	*Arba'itu Insisa*	x	x	x	x	unknown
9	Amanuel	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown
10	Aroghe Lideta	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown/Yostos
11	*Atatami Mikael*	x	x	x	x	Dawit III
12	*Ayira Mikael*	x	x	x	x	unknown
13	Azezo Tekle Haymanot	x	∅	x	x	Fasiledes
14	*Be'ata Lemaryam*	x	x	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II
15	*Bilajig Mikael*	x	x	x	x	unknown
16	Brahila Qwesqwam	∅	x	∅	∅	Yohannis I
17	Chachquna Mariam	∅	∅	x	x	unknown
18	Damot Giyorgis	x	∅	x	x	unknown
19	*Daregenda Ewost'atewos**	x	x	x	x	Iyasu II
20	*Debre Birhan Sillase*	x	x	x	x	Iyasu I
21	*Debre Mitmaq Maryam*	x	x	x	x	Tekle Ghiyorgis
22	Deber Tekle Haymanot	∅	x	∅	∅	Iyasu I
23	*Debre Tsehay Qwesqwam*	x	x	x	x	Mintiwab
24	*Defecha Kidane Mihret*	x	x	x	x	Bekaffa
25	Diba Hawaryat (Diba Abo)	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown
26	Diba Kidane Mihret	∅	x	∅	∅	unknown
27	*Fasiledes (Fasil Bath)*	x	x	x	x	Solomon
28	Fenter Lideta	x	∅	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II
29	*Fit Abo*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes
30	*Fit Mikael*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes
31	*Gabriel (Abun bet Gabriel)*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes

32	Gana Yohannis	∅	∅	x	x	unknown
33	Ghimja Bet Maryam	x	x	x	∅	Fasiledes
34	Gondaroch Ghiyorgis	∅	x	x	x	unknown
35	*Gondaroch Maryam*	x	x	x	x	unknown
36	Gwara Yohannis	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown
37	Hawaryat (Petroswepawlos)*	∅	x	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II
38	*Ilfign Ghiyorgis*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes
39	Lamefeji Ghiyorgis	∅	x	∅	∅	Mintiwab
40	*Lideta Lemaryam*	x	x	x	x	Yostos
41	Loza Maryam	∅	x	∅	∅	unknown
42	Macha Ghiyorgis	∅	x	∅	∅	unknown
43	*Medhane'Alem*	x	x	x	x	Fasiledes
44	Menti Merqorewos	∅	x	∅	∅	Mintiwab
45	Minziro Tekle Haymanot	x	∅	x	x	unknown
46	*Qaha Iyesus*	x	x	x	x	unknown
47	*Qirqos*	x	x	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II
48	*Rufael*	x	x	x	x	Bekaffa
49	Seher Maryam	x	∅	x	x	Yishaq
50	*Selestu Mi'it (Hamärä Noh)*	x	x	x	x	Tewoflos
51	Seyon Maryam	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown
52	Simon Tsamdi	x	∅	∅	∅	unknown
53	Tarenseba Iyesus	∅	x	∅	∅	Mintiwab
54	*Tsedda Egziabher Ab*	x	x	x	x	Yohannis I
55	Tsedda Maryam	∅	x	∅	∅	Yohannis I
56	Wogeriet Maryam	∅	x	∅	∅	unknown
57	*Worangheb Ghiyorgis*	x	x	x	x	unknown
58	Woybla Maryam	∅	x	∅	∅	Bekaffa
59	Yibrarag Gabriel	∅	x	∅	∅	Mintiwab
60	*Yohannis Mitmaq*	x	x	x	x	Wolde Le'ul
61	*Yohannis Welde Negwadgwad*	x	x	x	x	Tekle Haymanot II

Note: MDC=Monti della Corte; MN=Mengistu Nega; GT=Gerima Teffera; MNK=*liqe liqawint* Menkir Mekonnen; X=mentioned; ∅=not mentioned. The churches in italics are those appearing in the four lists; *=church today disappeared.
Sources: Gerima Teffera, 1966 AM; *Liqe liqawint*, 1989 A.M., pp. 59-60; Mengistu Nega, 1960 A.M., pp. 7-9; Monti della Corte, 1938, pp. 99-102.

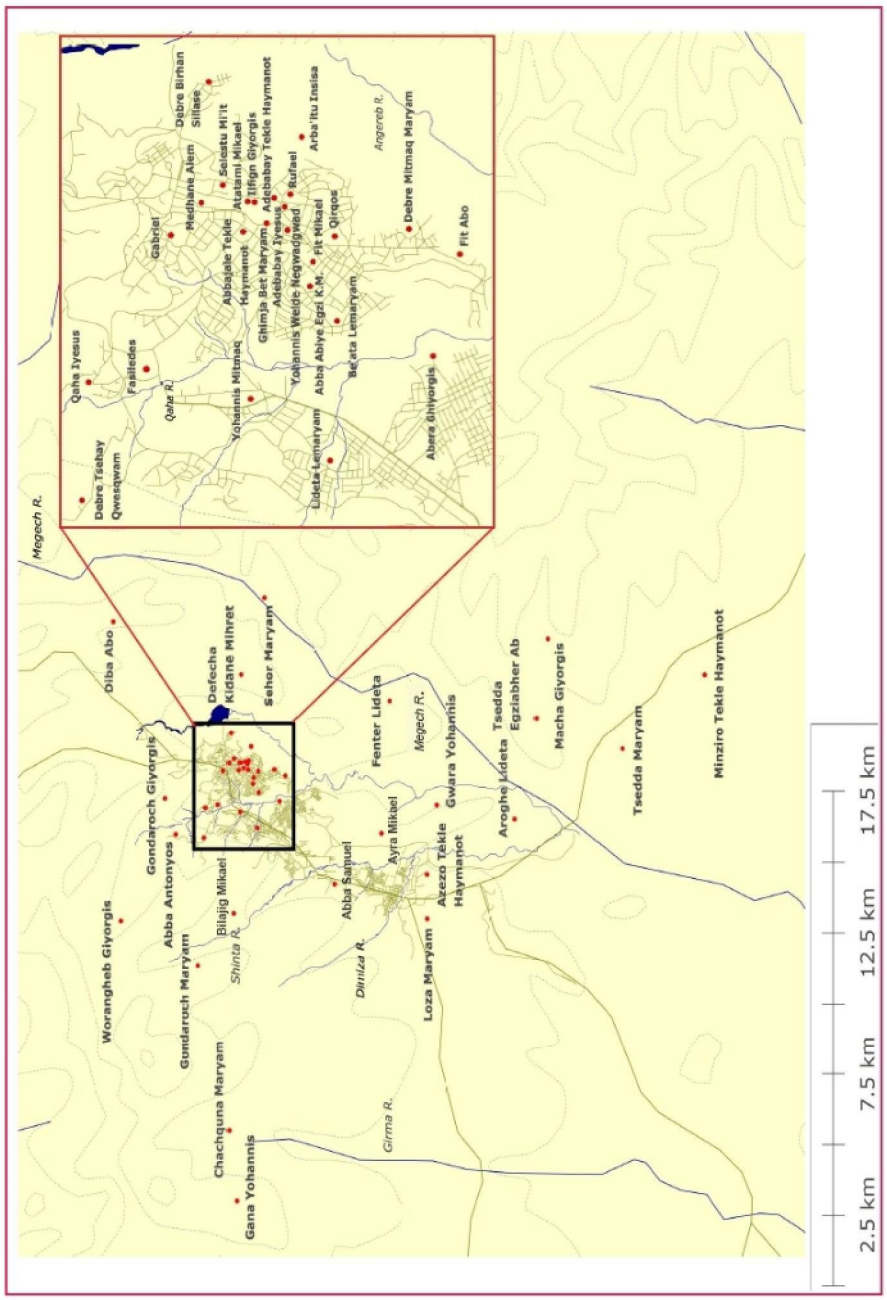

Figure 1: *The churches mentioned in Table 1* (shown only those churches whose location is known)
Source: Andreu Martínez on Global Maper

All the mentioned lists share some common features. A common characteristic shared by all the lists is the inclusion of all churches founded by the royal family in Gondar city and the exclusion of churches founded during and after the Era of the Princess, such as Lalibela and Addis Alem Egziabher Abb (both today disappeared). Contrarily, all the lists have significant differences regarding pre Gondarine foundations. For instance the lists of Monti della Corte, Gerima and Mengistu diverge concerning the pre Gondarine churches they include. Monti della Corte listed several unknown churches with unknown founders that are probably forgotten due to time interval. Similarly, the lists of Gerrima and Mengistu diverge concerning the geographical areas occupied by their churches. Mengistu seems to have given emphasis to churches situated to the east of the city while Gerrima focused on those to the west. Following this geographical bias their lists diverge in at least ten churches. Such a divergence might be due to the use of different oral sources or to the own bias of the authors. Finally, while important Gondarine foundations in the periphery of Gondar, such as Defecha Kidane Mihret and Tsedda Egziabher Ab, are included in some of the lists other equally important Gondarine churches from the point of view of their architectures, such as Dakwa Kidane Mihret or Gorenko Maryam (see Anfray, 1988-89, pp. 11-12), are ignored.

A TRADITION BETWEEN POLITICS AND MEMORY

As it was found above, the tradition of the forty four churches seems to have emerged in the nineteenth century, when Gondar's glorious days were over. But where exactly did the tradition originate and, above all, who brought it into the fore and why? To find answers to these questions we can only speculate.

It is reasonable to assume that the tradition originated where today it is more vivid, namely in the city of Gondar and its surroundings. It is after all there that most of the nineteenth century travelers recorded it. With hindsight it can be also speculated that the foreigners who recorded the tradition on the 'forty-something churches' were not mere passive receivers in the tradition but they also had their share in it. Since the publication of James Bruce's book in 1790 and the intensification of travel to tropical Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century, highland Ethiopia became the end destination of plenty of young Europeans in search of adventure, fame and purpose. Gondar in particular, with its ruined castles and imperial past, was an obliged visit for these travelers. During the nineteenth century, through dozens of descriptions and engravings produced about the city, Gondar became an exotic icon in the European imagination on Africa. The Europeans often pondered about the origin of Gondar's monumental castles and it was from their hand that the myth, still alive today, of the Portuguese as the main builders of these architectures emerged (see Martínez d'Alòs-Moner, 2007, p. 82; Id., 2015, p. 190 and note 228). A similar search into Gondar's past might have pushed these *ferenji* travelers to enquire about the city's once magnificent churches, which by the late nineteenth century, thanks to the deeds of Tewodros II, the Sudanese Mahdists and of natural decay, were a mere

shadow of their former times. It is perhaps from the interaction between inquisitive and creative Europeans and melancholic local intellectuals and clergy that the idea of a 'whole' number of churches emerged. Such a legend came in handy to the Europeans, ever eager of facts, statistics and clear-cut explanations and it equally satisfied local Gondar intellectuals, who could revel in the glory once attained by their city and kingdom.

Yet, the hypothesis can also be raised that Gondarine society fostered the tradition with clear political purposes in mind. Gondarine nobilities, for instance, might have promoted the inclusion of 'their' churches into the list in order to claim *rest*, a royal legitimacy and other symbolic benefits. But local clergy might have also benefited from having their church within the list, for it could have given them the right to claim lands formerly endowed by the royal family.

In the twentieth century the legend seems to have been refined. Thus, from the period of the Italian occupation onwards several authors have attempted to put a name on each of the 'forty four churches'. Significantly, the oldest list to date was authored by an Italian scholar, further substantiating the role foreigners might have played in shaping and popularizing the legend. Yet, total consensus has not been reached. Thirty one sanctuaries appear in the four lists this study compiled but the remaining thirteen churches have at least thirty two candidates. The caprice of the informants, the preference of the interviewee or other factors having more to do with opportunity and haphazard, could have determined the divergences between each of the lists.

As noted above, today the tradition of the forty four churches seems to have spread to other areas of the Ethiopian highlands. The peoples from Lake Tana, Axum and North Shewa claim the same or a similar number of sanctuaries for their respective regions (Dessie Qeleb, 2007 A.M., pp. 176-184; see also Munro-Hay, 2002, p. 156). Yet, considering the ethnic drift of contemporary Ethiopia, we may see this reactivation of the legend of 'forty four' less as an example of memorialization of a glorious past than as a political statement, where heritage becomes a proxy for real politics.

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