

Book Review

Barara: Foundation, Growth, Destruction and Rebirth 1400-1887

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Themes and Organization

Dr. Habtamu Mengistie's *Barara (Addis Ababa's Predecessor): Foundation, Growth, Destruction and Rebirth (1400-1887)* is a meticulously researched contribution to Ethiopian historiography that coherently presents and addresses complex historical debates and long-held assumptions about urbanization, political authority, and state formation. The book's 11 chapters show a clear continuity from Barara's foundation, growth, destruction, and eventual rebirth in the late 20th century as Ethiopia's modern capital city of Addis Ababa.

Overall, I found this book to be a landmark of scholarly achievement on Barara. Its original arguments, comprehensive documentation, analytical depth, and excellent methodology make it an indispensable resource for anyone interested in Addis Ababa and origin studies in general.

The first chapter investigates the exact location of Barara through eyewitness testimonies, particularly the writings of Arab Faqih and Fra Mauro's world map. The second explains medieval Ethiopian history and its Aksumite heritage. The third chapter explores Barara's historic political, cultural, and commercial roles from the reign of Emperor Dawit (1382 – 1413) until the city was plundered and destroyed by Ahmad Grag in the 16th century. This chapter demonstrates that Barara functioned for more than a century as a stable capital city, serving as the primary seat for Ethiopian popes and kings. The fourth chapter details the multi-faceted diplomatic relations that connected Ethiopia and Europe during the Middle Ages, while chapter five discusses how politics shaped and impacted Barara, especially the invasion of Ahmad Grag's army and his catastrophic destruction of Barara, resulting in the death and displacement of its inhabitants. Chapter six examines the subsequent invasion, expansion, and settlement of the Bereytuma and Boran Oromo clans in Shewa and other Ethiopian provinces following Ahmad Grag's invasion. Chapter seven continues this theme, focusing on the demographic depletion

and cultural assimilation caused by the Oromo to indigenous Ethiopian peoples, such as the Amhara, Gurage, Gafat, and others. Chapter eight surveys military campaigns led by Ethiopian kings and nobles to reunify their weakened country, which had been fragmented through the aforementioned invasions and incursions. Chapter nine continues Ethiopia's national recovery through campaigns to reclaim ancestral lands, along with the rebirth of Barara. Chapter ten analyzes ongoing disputes and/or competitions over the history and nomenclature of Addis Ababa. The book's final chapter offers a comparative review of the nation-building principles utilized by Spanish monarchs and Emperor Menelik II as they reunified their respective countries.

Brief Overview

Barara . . . investigates the birth, growth, destruction, and rebirth of the medieval precursor to modern-day Addis Ababa from 1400 to 1887 by addressing several key questions: Where and how was Barara established? How did the city develop during the early 15th and 16th centuries? Why was Barara destroyed? And how was the city reconstructed in the early 20th century?

The author addresses two principal objectives: first, he challenges inaccurate historical narratives that have contributed to Ethiopia's fragility and troubled political landscape. Secondly, he presents a substantive evidence-based account of Barara, demonstrating how historical events shaped the city's sociocultural, political, and administrative realities, as well as those of contemporary Ethiopia.

Pursuant to his first objective, Dr. Habtamu challenges what he regards as fictitious historical narratives advanced by left-wing student activists during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930 – 1974) which inaccurately maintained that Ethiopia had no meaningful history before the reign of Emperor Menelik II (1889 – 1913). The author also discredits assertions that Ethiopia's history has been characterized by ethnic domination, segregation, and polarization under Amhara governing elites. Recent policies granting special privileges to the Oromo ethnic group have, in his estimation, complicated the political, economic, and sociocultural foundations of both Addis Ababa and Ethiopia as a whole.

Regarding the second objective, the author demonstrates that modern-day Addis Ababa has a recorded history of more than 600 years and that it served, under the name of Barara, as Ethiopia's capital during the 15th and 16th centuries, first as the royal seat of Dawit I (1380 –

1413), followed by Lebna Dengel (1508 – 1540). Barara was within the pivotal district of Wereb, which also contained major churches. The book further proves that there was no pre-16th-century Oromo presence there, or in neighboring districts; Barara and its hinterland were in fact populated by the Amhara, Gafat, and Gurage peoples who peacefully shared a common lineage, history, language and culture.

As a reviewer, one of my fundamental questions concerns Barara's precise geographical location. Dr. Habtamu provides four persuasive pieces of evidence for restoring Barara to its rightful place in Ethiopian history. First is the world map drawn in around 1450 by the famed Venetian cartographer Fra Mauro, who was known for his thorough and scientific research. This map was unrivaled in its time for the amount of information it contained—based not on religious ideology, but on actual geographic features and empirical data.

The second point of evidence is Eskindir Zorzi's study of geography and trade routes, based on interviews with Europeans who personally visited Barara, as well as Ethiopians who traveled to Jerusalem and other European countries during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Thirdly, the author describes the actual geology of the land surrounding Addis Ababa, showing that ancient Barara shares topographical and geographic characteristics with other Ethiopian cities that served as principal royal seats of Ethiopian kings, dating back to the pre-Aksumite period. Archaeological excavations in and around present-day Addis Ababa have uncovered artifacts and structural remains that provide additional corroboration for identifying the very similar locations of Addis Ababa and Barara.

The fourth argument is an account by the Yemeni chronicler Arab Faqih, who documented the military invasions of Ahmed Gragh between 1529 and 1543. After arriving in Barara with Gragh's army, Faqih noted that the city included artisans who tailored garments for the king and palace staff, and who also fashioned iron armor to protect the king's cavalry horses. He further records that these artisans were originally with Emperor Lebna Dengel in the Fetegar district and that when they returned to Barara, they welcomed in Muslims after the king fled to Wenji.

After generations as a commercial and royal center, Barara and the Ethiopian empire were destroyed during the military campaigns (1529 – 1543) of Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi,

commonly known as Ahmad Grag. The city, along with numerous churches, was burned; invaluable manuscripts and historical records were lost; countless people were killed; and much treasure, including gold, silver and fine fabrics, was looted.

Oromo incursions which followed during the 16th century spelled the end of the historic city of Barara, as well as the conquest of many provinces, including Bale, Fetegar, Damot, Werab, Gafat, Shewa, and Gurage. The result was a dramatic transformation of Ethiopian politics, demographics, and society as a whole.

When Emperor Menelik went to both Mount Wachecha and Mount Entoto, his intention was to locate Barara, the city of Emperor Dawit—not to found Addis Ababa as a new imperial capital. As the author explains, present-day descendants of the Gafat and Amhara have no reason to view their ancestral lands as new territories because Barara was where their shared language and culture originated and thrived for centuries.

Following the precedent of his forefathers, Menelik established his capital at Wechecha because he believed it was the exact location of Emperor Dawit's Barara. But Dawit's city was not found there and in 1881 Menelik relocated to Entoto, which became his royal seat for more than a decade. Later, through the influence of his wife, Empress Taytu, he relocated again to a new city, which he founded as Addis Ababa—an event the author marks as Barara's rebirth.

In light of the above, the book establishes the medieval city of Barara as the immediate precursor of present-day Addis Ababa. It further argues that there is no credible support for the claim of some Oromo activists that Addis Ababa was founded exclusively by the Oromo.

Critical Appraisal

In addition to the book's structural coherence and core arguments outlined above, it is essential as well to examine both its scholarly merits and limitations. One of the key strengths is the author's willingness to confront sensitive and contentious questions. Addis Ababa's historical ownership, identity, and development are deeply connected to contemporary ethnic and political debates in Ethiopia. A potential limitation, however, is that the author has studied and presented his arguments without considering the possibility of criticism, opposition, or personal consequences arising from groups that hold competing interpretations of the city's history. By the same token,

this stance demonstrates considerable courage in the face of real personal risk from those positioning themselves as true representatives of Ethiopia's Oromo people.

Another major strength is the book's contribution to scholarship and debate concerning the existence of medieval Ethiopian capital cities. The author effectively challenges the claim that Ethiopia had no permanent capital before Emperor Menelik II, asserting that Barara served as both a royal and ecclesiastical capital from the late 14th through the mid-16th centuries. In presenting detailed historical and geographic evidence, the author contributes to a better understanding of the political and urban organization of medieval Ethiopia. In this respect, the book gives us an important basis for reconsidering conventional interpretations of Ethiopian medieval history and resolves longstanding confusion among historians.

As noted previously, Dr. Habtamu also challenges the narrative (still common among left-wing activists) that Ethiopia was largely unknown to Europeans before the 1500s. He presents evidence suggesting that European knowledge of Ethiopia was relatively well developed at the time, especially in comparison with other parts of Africa, and cites the remarkably detailed mid-15th-century Fra Mauro map as evidence that Ethiopia was not isolated from the wider world.

Another strength of the book is its contribution to the debate concerning special historical claims over Addis Ababa. The author situates the city's history within the broader development of Ethiopia, rather than exclusively through the lens of a particular ethnic group, thus providing material for understanding Addis Ababa as an inclusive historical space whose significance has developed over a long period. Dr. Habtamu presents Addis Ababa as a city with a broad, complex and multilayered history that belongs to all Ethiopians—a particularly noteworthy insight, as he himself identifies with the Amhara community. Yet he does not use the historical evidence presented in his book to promote exclusive Amhara claims.

The methodology of this book is another important strength. The author draws upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources to support its central argument that Barara was the precursor of present-day Addis Ababa. Research sources include writings by medieval European and Ethiopian historians, hagiographies, travelers' accounts, official correspondence, royal chronicles, field notes by explorers and missionaries, historic maps, and other documents. Such a diverse range of sources strengthens the investigation, allowing the subject to be approached

from different perspectives. Additionally, the combined use of textual, geographical, cartographical, and documentary evidence enriches this book as a more interdisciplinary study.

The author strongly emphasizes that history grounded in credible evidence serves as a foundation for national unity, justice, and sociopolitical harmony. To this end, I found his work faithful to the principles of his profession, regardless of whether readers accept or reject the findings. Importantly for current scholarship, he identifies fear of inquiry, fabrication, denial, revision, or the distortion of history as signs of intellectual and societal decline—knowledge advances only when new evidence is discovered and shared.

A noteworthy strength is the author's clear separation of the Islamic faith from the destructive military campaigns Ahmad Gragh (Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi). Some narratives have interpreted the violence of his campaigns as evidence of an inherently violent Islamic tradition; but this book does not identify the actions of a particular historical figure with Islamic teachings or doctrine. The author also discusses the destruction of Christian churches and monasteries and observes that Ahmad Gragh did not establish mosques in the territories he conquered.

The author's geographical knowledge is another laudable feature of the book. He fluently interprets complicated medieval maps, relating their information to the historical arguments of his study, as well as identifying current locations around Barara using modern latitude and longitude coordinates. The combination of historical descriptions with geographic and cartographic evidence is particularly useful when attempting to locate debated historic sites such as Barara.

Finally, this book presents a substantial body of evidence supporting its central argument around the historical relationship between Barara and Addis Ababa. A comparative reading of Dr. Habtamu's work with attempts to challenge its conclusions, further reinforces the strength of his research. As an example, Dr. Teferi Bizuayehu Dorsis authored *Barara: Its Place and Politics* (Solar 2020, Amharic language) immediately after *Barara: Foundation, Growth, Destruction and Rebirth* was published to interrogate and challenge some of Dr. Habtamu's conclusions. Dr. Teferi, however, does not provide sufficient historical evidence to conclusively dismiss the central arguments of *Barara*.

Having outlined the book's multiple strengths, it is equally important to address some of its limitations. The book would benefit from a more neutral use of language in discussing the historical and political status of Addis Ababa. In several instances, the choice of terminology and presentation of claims may be interpreted as carrying implicit normative or political assumptions. Given the contested nature of the subject matter and its significance for different communities, careful attention to balanced and precise wording is essential. Revising such expressions would enhance the academic rigor of the work and reduce the likelihood of the analysis being perceived through a particular ethnic or political lens.

A more substantial limitation is the book's limited discussion of the origins and pre-16th-century history of the Oromo people. This is important as the author discusses the expansion and presence of Oromo groups during the 16th century in the context of conflicts associated with Ahmad Gragn. A fuller examination of competing interpretations concerning the origin and movements of the Oromo would have strengthened this study.

The book also contains some technical writing faults involving punctuation, diction, phrasing and sentence construction which may affect its readability, without, however, undermining the book's central historical argument.* A related technical limitation is the use of inappropriate Amharic characters and orthographic errors. In a historical work such as this, correct (Amharic) spelling is essential as small errors can change the meaning of a word and can make it difficult for readers to identify its original historical meaning. *Barara*. . . would therefore benefit from a careful editorial review.

**Editor's note: This English-language review is from a reading of the book in its original Amharic. An English translation, directed by Dr. Habtamu, is currently underway and expected to be available in 2027.*

Conclusion

Barara: Foundation, Growth, Destruction and Rebirth 1400-1887 sheds new light on the history of Addis Ababa, a subject that has received too little scholarly attention. It explores the history of the medieval Ethiopian Empire from the reign of Emperor Dawit I (1382 – 1413) to Emperor Lebna Dengel (1508 – 1540) showing that the city of Barara was not only a thriving political center, but also a major hub of commerce, culture and diplomacy. Based on substantial

researched evidence, the author challenges long-held assumptions by reconstructing the history of Barara as a place where diverse ethnic communities lived together in peace.

In addition to uncovering Barara's history, the book offers numerous insights into Ethiopia's past and encourages Ethiopians to confront the challenges posed by ethnic extremism. I believe that in the interests of justice and unity, it is right and fair to acknowledge peoples who have suffered historic wrongs and to provide them with the economic and political support needed to recover from that harm. Yet Ethiopia's reality is quite the opposite. People whose ancestral lands were seized and whose languages were suppressed have been subjected to further victimization by being labeled as "invaders." As the saying goes, "the horn that grew later surpassed the ear that grew earlier"—the descendants of the Gafat and Damot, as well as the Gurage and Amhara, have been driven out of their ancestral homelands under the pretext that those spaces do not belong to them.

As a result, Addis Ababa has become one of the most controversial topics in modern Ethiopia's political, social, and historical discourse. As a reviewer, I recommend a balanced and integrated reexamination of historical records, constitutional provisions, demographic realities, and the history of population movements so as to impartially resolve questions regarding Addis Ababa's political and cultural "ownership." It should be emphasized that Addis Ababa developed through the contributions of groups from all parts of Ethiopia; people who intermarried, lived and worked together, and built a common urban society in a city that is home to all and a center of economic and social life.

For the future, Addis Ababa must be liberated from the old prison of competing historical narratives and viewed from a new and progressive perspective. To continue defining the city exclusively in ethnic terms ignores today's sociopolitical and economic realities. The most sustainable solution is to work at dissolving historical grievances and competing narratives and instead to rebuild Addis Ababa—like ancient Barara—into a symbol of national unity, fairness, and shared prosperity.

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