



**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
CENTER FOR AFRICAN AND ASIAN STUDIES**

ETHIOPIA AND PORTS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

MA THESIS

**BY
MIKIYAS ADUGNA**

MAY 2025

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA



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**ETHIOPIA AND PORTS IN HISTORY: OPPORTUNITIES AND
CHALLENGES**

MA THESIS

BY

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**AN MA THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL GRADUATE
STUDIES OF ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT FOR MASTERS OF ARTS DEGREE IN AFRICAN
AND ASIAN STUDIES**

MAY 2025

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Numerous individuals and institutions have provided me with various forms of assistance during the writing of this thesis, making it challenging to acknowledge each one here. I express my gratitude to all of them for their diverse support. Nonetheless, it is essential to highlight the following individuals. I wish to convey my profound appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Yasin Mohammed, whose invaluable guidance and feedback have been instrumental from the beginning of the research to this point.

I am also indebted to my sister, Dagim Aduugna, and Fantahun Alemu for their unwavering care, encouragement, and emotional support during stressful periods while I pursued my studies in general, and specifically while writing this thesis. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to Denise E. Allen for the financial assistance that facilitated this research work, making it a relatively straightforward and enjoyable academic endeavor. Finally, my sincere thanks go to Tiawana Shermese for her constant presence and support as I completed the necessary paperwork.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Ethiopia's historical engagement with maritime ports and the enduring efforts of its rulers to gain access to the sea. Using a qualitative approach, it draws from diverse primary and secondary sources to shed light on a often-overlooked aspect of Ethiopia's history.

Historically, Ethiopia was a significant maritime power, controlling crucial ports along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, such as Adulis, Massawa, Assab, Baylul, Zeilam, Berbera, and Djibouti. These ports played vital roles in trade and strategic defense but also made Ethiopia vulnerable to foreign invasion. The rise of Muslim Arabs, who destroyed the port of Aksum, marked the beginning of external threats, culminating in Ottoman occupation of Massawa and later European colonization by Britain, France, and Italy ultimately leading to Ethiopia's loss of its historic ports.

Despite setbacks, Ethiopian rulers consistently prioritized access to the sea. Between 1952 and 1991, the union with Eritrea temporarily granted Ethiopia maritime access, but its secession in the early 1990s retracted this gain under contentious circumstances. For over two decades, the government remained silent on this issue, but recently, efforts have been renewed to make access to the sea a national priority, reflecting Ethiopia's ongoing desire to restore its maritime sovereignty.

This thesis highlights Ethiopia's historical struggle for maritime access a quest marked by resilience, loss, and renewed hope for sovereignty and global connectivity.

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CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROND

The thesis explores Ethiopia's historical ports and its contemporary quest for access to the sea. It is fascinating that ancient Ethiopia and its predecessor states, such as Aksum, as well as the Muslim Sultanates that flourished in the Ethiopian region, had control over vibrant ports like Adulis, Massawa, Assab and Zeila. Moreover, these ports played a pivotal role in the rise and consolidation of these states by serving as crucial trade routes for centuries.

According to Ethiopian historiography, the Ethiopian state is assumed to be a broadly continuous political entity spanning at least the past two millennia if we take the kingdom of Aksum as a point of departure. Alternatively, it could be over the past three millennia according to the Kebra Nagast, which explains the story of Queen Sheba and King Solomon in detail¹. In this thesis, we may even consider the land of Punt as a precursor of the Ethiopian state because ample evidence indicates that it flourished around the places where historical ports like Adulis and Massawa were later established.¹

However, the rise of neighbouring powers and their encroachment on the ports previously used by Ethiopia and its predecessors were the main cause for the decline of the power and civilization of Aksum and the Christian kingdom. To be precise, the rise of the Muslim Arabs and their destruction of the port of Adulis was the major reason for the decline and downfall of the kingdom of Aksum, which led to disruptions in Aksum's relations with the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantine starting from the beginning of the eighth century. Similarly, as a result of the Ottoman's occupation of Massawa by 1557, the Christian Kingdom lost its direct access to the sea through Massawa, and as a result, Massawa continued to be indirectly administered by the deputies of the Ottoman and then Egyptians inherited it until the arrival of the Europeans in the region during the period of the European scramble for Africa.²

¹ Christopher Clapham, "Rewriting Ethiopian History," *Annales d'Ethiopie*, Vol. 18, annee 2002, pp.38-40; Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

² Hasebella Kafil, Massawa: Pearl of the Red Sea, Feb 12, 2022 <https://shabait.com/2022/02/12/massawa-pearl-of-the-red-sea/>; Bahru Zewde, *A History Of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2001), p. 51 .

The establishment of European powers' military bases on the Red Sea coastal areas and the Gulf of Aden was also another major development that was a detrimental factor for Ethiopia's access to the sea. It is fascinating that next to perhaps North Africa, the Horn of Africa was the second area where the then two leading colonial powers, Great Britain and France, established bases or colonies for strategic reasons. Therefore, for instance, despite the discovery of minerals like gold and diamonds, South Africa was mainly colonized by Great Britain and a minor power, Portugal. Similarly, central Africa, despite its rich resources, came to be dominated by a small power like Belgium. Similarly, the west was conquered peacefully without considerable rivalry between Great Britain and France. Perhaps, North Africa, the area around Egypt, was the area where the two powers engaged in trying to exclude each other and wanted to have their own stake. But finally, the British won the race. It is perplexing that in the Horn of Africa, in addition to the two superpowers, the third power, Italy, was involved, perhaps with the blessing of one of the superpowers, Great Britain, in order to use it as a watchdog against French expansion. It was also in the region that the two powers were almost on the verge of fighting against each other in what is known as the Fashoda incident in 1898 in modern Sudan.

By this time, the French came to establish their base at Oboc, later renowned by its colonial rendering, French Somaliland or the modern-day Djibouti. The British came to control British Somaliland with its pre-colonial ports of Zeila and Berbera. The Italians, on the other hand, initially came to acquire the Port of Assab a 20 years lease agreement for a free zone in Assab Ethiopian use included for the construction of road from Assab to Dessie they signed with the local chief. Above all, through the good office of the British, the Italians came to acquire the Port of Massawa when the Egyptians evacuated Massawa following their defeat in Eastern Sudan. In one way or another, these actions curtailed Ethiopia's access to the sea but almost until the federation of Eritrea. In this regard, Abdi Sheikh Abdi argues that while interior pastoralists and cultivators maintained their traditional way of life, coastal towns became hubs of activity and international intrigue with renewed interest from Britain, France, Italy, Turkey, and Egypt.³

Despite all these challenges and continuous besiege by local as well as international powers, Ethiopia remained the African country to thwart European colonization, although the

³ Abdi Sheikh Abdi, "Somali Nationalism: Its Origins and Future", <https://www.jstor.org/stable/159586?seq=1>, p. 658.

independence came at the expense of losing her historical ports like Adulis, Massawa, Zeila, and Tajira. Therefore, the thesis will explore Ethiopia had access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Ports for centuries until the coming of the Ottoman Turkey in the second half of the sixteenth century and the European powers in the nineteenth century.

It is imperative to clarify that when we refer to Ethiopia in this thesis, we are including Aksum, Zagwe, the Solomonic Dynasty, the Muslim Sultanates that thrived in the Ethiopian region, such as (the Sultanate of Shawa, Ifat, and Adal), as well as the territories under their control, including the ports they utilized and the modern Ethiopian state. It is important to note that the territories of these states expanded and contracted based on the balance of power throughout history. For example, from the fourth to the sixth centuries, the kingdom of Aksum controlled both sides of the Red Sea. Similarly, the Christian Kingdom's domain extended to regions including ports like Zeila and Djibouti. Additionally, the domain of the Adal Sultanate, which originated in historic Ethiopia, reached from at least Massawa in the north to present-day Somaliland in the southeast during the time of Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim Aligazi in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. This researcher firmly believes that Ethiopia's historical claims for access to the sea align with this perspective.

Therefore, in the thesis, we delve into Ethiopia's long-standing demand for access to the sea, which spans for centuries if not millennia, and how this affects its relations with neighboring polities, regional and extra-regional actors with which it collaborated and engaged in discourses and clashes. The thesis also explores how ports in the Horn of Africa were used by regional or extra-regional powers to invade and weaken Ethiopia throughout history. Similarly, we also unpack how Ethiopian sovereigns like Sartsa Dengel during medieval times, Yohannes, Menilek, and Haile Selassie I during modern times left no stone unturned in their efforts to gain access to the sea.⁴

1.1. Research Questions

Hence, the following are the central and sub-research questions that we have been addressed in one way or another in the thesis.

⁴ Gulaid Yusuf Idaan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea" Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications" in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

1. Which ports historically served as Ethiopia's gateways to the sea from ancient times to the modern era?
2. In which manner did Ethiopia become landlocked despite its previous access to the sea following European invasion?
3. To which extent did international powers aim to restrict Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean?
4. For which reasons has access to the sea become a primary focus of the current Ethiopian government, and what reactions have neighboring countries and other global powers displayed regarding this issue?

1.2. Objectives

1.2.1 General Objective

The main objective of the thesis is to explore Ethiopia's historical ports and the tensions between Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa countries regarding Ethiopia's access to the sea.

1.2.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the thesis are to:

1. Identify the ports that the Ethiopian state access from time ancient to modern times.
2. Describe how Ethiopia became a landlocked country despite its historical access to the sea after European invasion on the horn of Africa.
3. Elaborate on how international actors strive to isolate Ethiopia from access to the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean in history.
4. Highlight the current Ethiopian economic demand for access to the sea rather than Djibouti and how neighboring countries and other powers have reacted to this issue.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research is important as it greatly contributes to the study of the complex issue of Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea in addition to Port of Djibouti. It modestly adds to the understanding of this issue and may also inform policy formulation by the governments of the

Horn region in general, and the Ethiopian government in particular. Therefore, it is one of the most important issues that warrant comprehensive study at this level and even beyond.

1.4. The scope of the study

It includes examining ancient ports accessed by Ethiopia and their importance for trade. It analyzes the historical and current challenges Ethiopia faces in accessing ports, focusing on regional geopolitics, diplomacy and infrastructure development. The study also explores strategies Ethiopia can adopt to secure and diversify port access emphasizing regional cooperation, legal rights and economic implications within the Horn of Africa context.

1.5. Research Methodology

In order to effectively conduct the research, it is crucial to appropriately utilize relevant sources. This study primarily employs qualitative research method, particularly document analysis. The sources for this investigation can be categorized into three main types: literature, archives, and manuscripts. A considerable amount of essential canonical literature concerning the history of Ethiopia, as well as the specific topics under review, is available at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University. As a result, the research heavily relies on books, articles, and theses found at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. Additionally, some sources are available online and have been integrated into our research. Another method of data collection involves identifying relevant archival sources, most of which are obtained from web archives, especially for contemporary materials, and these are crucial to our research. Furthermore, there is a significant collection of sources that includes reports, journals, articles, and books written by European travellers. Although these sources may seem straightforward initially, they often contain complexities that hinder complete understanding. These materials are classified as primary and/or archival sources rather than secondary literature. A key challenge with these sources is that they include both factual data and subjective interpretations. Therefore, it is essential to critically evaluate these materials to identify issues arising from interpretations and fact

CHAPTER TWO

2. ETHIOPIA'S PORTS DURING THE ANCIENT MEDIEVAL TIMES

2.1. Port of Adulis: The Earliest Entrepots in the Ethiopia and the Horn

There is no doubt that the Port of Adulis was one of the earliest ports in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, although not the earliest. The states that emerged in the Ethiopian region were predominantly maritime states that controlled the western coastal areas of the Red Sea and the Gulf, as well as both sides of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden at times. In this regard, Richard Pankhurst argues that the coastline of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in Africa was located adjacent to the earliest maritime trade routes in the world, which connected Egypt and later the Mediterranean nations with Arabia, India, and the Far East.⁵

During Pharaonic times, the coastal regions of Ethiopia were part of what the ancient Egyptians referred to as the Land of Punt. This area has often been regarded as an undefined expanse along the shores of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, encompassing both Africa and Arabia. However, a thorough examination of the artifacts sourced from Punt would, as noted by modern British Egyptologist K.A. Kitchen, suggest a clear indication of an African Punt, thereby excluding the possibility of an Asian counterpart.⁶

As indicated elsewhere the land of Punt and Pharaonic Egypt had had strong commercial relations and perhaps they used a port or ports located on the coastal areas of the Red Sea for this trade. In examining the geographical context of the Land of Punt, it can be assumed that although the Egyptians may have employed the term to denote an extensive area encompassing both sides of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the African portion held greater importance. This area was known for its abundant resources of gold, ivory, and myrrh. Furthermore, it is plausible to assert that the northernmost region, corresponding to the present-day Eritrean coast, was likely the most frequented African segment of Punt. Its closeness to Egypt would have provided a significant trade advantage compared to more remote areas, such as Somalia.⁷

⁵ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to The End of the 18th Century* (Lawrenceville and Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1997), p. 3; Kitchen, K.A. (1971) "Punt and How to Get There", *Orientalia*, XL, P. 185. Cited in Pankhurst; Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (California: University of California Press, 1994), p. 5.

⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 3.

⁷ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 4.

When it comes to the trade that emanates from the ports located on the coastal areas of the Red Sea, it is often emphasized that time was crucial. The prevailing trade winds dictated that vessels departing from Egypt, which traveled at an approximate speed of 30 miles per day, needed to navigate during the three summer months of June through August, when the winds blew in a southerly direction. They were required to complete their trading operations, which were likely to be time-consuming, by November, as the winter winds began to shift and blow in the opposite direction. It is estimated that it took about a month for southbound ships to reach the northern part of Eritrea, another month to cross to the coast opposite Aden, and an additional month to arrive at Cape Guardafui. By that time, the southerly winds would have begun to diminish. Consequently, it raises questions about whether Egyptian commercial navigators could have effectively ventured much further within the constraints imposed by natural conditions.⁸

Be that as it may, the port of Adulis on the Red Sea functioned as the entrepot located in what is now Eritrea. It is believed that this site was founded long before the Hellenic era. This coastal area, positioned between Ptolemais and Deire, was referenced in classical literature as being filled with hunting and trading posts by the mid-3rd century B.C., serving the affluent hinterland of the northern Ethiopian highlands even extending to areas located further south. Pliny's description of Adulis suggests a strong commercial activity in the area, with the merchandise traded reminiscent of those from later medieval times. He also notes the existence of a significant trading hub for the cave-dwellers and the Ethiopians, who brought in a substantial volume of goods.⁹

Perhaps we can infer from this that the origins of the Port of Adulis predated the Aksumite Kingdom, indicating that it was truly an Ethiopian port dating back to the Pre-Aksumite times. Moreover, the export goods from the port listed by Pliny are reiterated nearly word-for-word by the unnamed writer of the *Periplus* as we shall see after a while.

Similarly Adulis was a prominent ancient port city for the bulk of the external trade of the Kingdom of Aksum, connecting it with the Indian Ocean as well as Mediterranean world, and other regions. Adulis was famous for its trade in ivory, tortoise shell, and rhinoceros horn. Therefore, it is undeniable that the Port of Adulis was one of the earliest well-known

⁸Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 4.

⁹ Cited in Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, pp. 30-31.

ports in Ethiopian regions, as clearly stated by the anonymous writer of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. The author notes:

*Below Ptolemais of the Hunts, at a distance of about three thousand stadia, there is Adulis, a port established by law, lying at the inner end of a bay that runs in toward the south..... From that place to the city of the people called Auxumites there is a five days' journey more; to that place all the ivory is brought from the country beyond the Nile through the district called Cyeneum, and thence to Adulis. Practically the whole number of elephants and rhinoceros that are killed live in the places inland, although at rare intervals they are hunted on the seacoast even near Adulis. Before the harbor of that market-town, out at sea on the right hand, there lie a great many little sandy islands called Alalzi, yielding tortoise-shell, which is brought to market there by the Fish-Eaters*¹⁰.

From the above passage, we can see that Adulis was a well-established international port by this time, used for trade on a global scale. There was also a decently sized village located approximately 3km from the shore, known as Adulis¹¹. The document also mentions an inland town called Coloe, which was a three days' journey from Adulis on the way to Aksum. The author further states that it took five days to travel from Coloe to Aksum. Interestingly, the author describes Aksum as the city of the Axumites. It is evident from the passage that all goods from the Axum Kingdom, beyond the Nile through the district called Cyeneum passed through Aksum before reaching the Port of Adulis. In this passage, 'the Nile' seems to refer to the River Tekezze, whereas Cyeneum has been linked to the region of Sennaar in eastern Sudan.

The *Periplus* further notes that Zoscales served as the ruler of Aksum, managing not only the kingdom but also two ports along the Red Sea: Adulis, which is near Massawa, and Avalites,

¹⁰ Wilfred H. Schoff, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea: Travel And Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (New York, London, Bombay and Calcuta: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1912), pp. 22-23.

¹¹ According to Pliny, cited in Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, P. 31 footnote 1, the origin of the town was attributed to the runaway slaves from Egypt. Tadesse claims that Pliny did this by attaching a Greek meaning Adoulus (non-slave, free) to the name Adulis which may have only been Kushitic in origin; See also Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from the Early TIMES to 1800* (London: Lalibela House, 1961), p. 17, who indicates that Pliny calls it a very large centre.

found in Assab. He was acknowledged for his proficiency in Greek literature and governed regions from the Calf-Eaters to the neighboring Berber territory.¹²

The previously mentioned quotation distinctly demonstrates that a monarch named Zoscales, acknowledged as one of the notable kings of Aksum, likely ruled over the coastal areas of the Red Sea and perhaps the Gulf of Aden. Additionally, as highlighted by Tadesse Tamrat, the Calf-Eaters are recognized in different contexts as a community living inland from the coastal region between Berenice and Ptolemais, which is also known as 'the land of the Berbers.' The phrase 'the other Berber country' refers to the coastal region of the Horn of Africa, located beyond the Bab-el-Mandeb strait.¹³ According Pankhurst the 'Berber Country' refers to the coastal areas of Somaliland¹⁴. Perhaps, it seems that Zoscales' dominion stretched from the southern part of Egypt (Berenice and Ptolemais) to the area around the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. In other words, by this time, the coastal areas of present-day Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somaliland were part and parcel of the Aksumite Kingdom although Tadesse was cautious and indicates that Zoscales, certainly a forerunner of the king encapsulated in the inscription of Adulis, governed a large empire that reached the Bab-el-Mandeb strait in the southeast and extended past the Tekezze River to the west.¹⁵ Consequently, it appears that while the Aksumite sovereigns effectively controlled the whole coastline, Adulis became their primary port, overshadowing other coastal settlements.

Map 1: The Port of Adulis and Internal and External Trade Routes adopted from

¹² Wilfred H. Schoff, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, P. 23.

¹³ Tadesse Tamrat, 'Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527' (University of London, PhD, 1986), p. 36, Perhaps the country of Berberi refers to *the* fertile lands between the Shabeelle and Jubba rivers.

¹⁴ Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from the Early TIMES to 1800* (London: Lalibela House, 1961), p. 16.

¹⁵ Tadesse Tamrat, 'Church and State,' pp. 47



<https://kwasikonadu.info/blog/2018/3/18/aksumite-trade-and-the-port-of-adulis>

By using its currency minted from gold, silver, and copper, Aksum thrived during the fall of the Roman Empire and expanded its reach into South Arabia, establishing military outposts in the area. The inscriptions found on its coins and steles offer evidence of Aksum's ascent and eventual decline, which began in the first century with the initiation of its international trade and waned in the eighth century due to the emergence of Islam in the region.¹⁶

¹⁶ <https://kwasikonadu.info/blog/2018/3/18/aksumite-trade-and-the-port-of-adulis>



Map 1: Adulis and Other Ports of the Kingdom of Aksum described in the 1st century *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*

For the next several centuries, Adulis seemingly retained its significance as the primary port in the north. This observation was made by the early sixth-century Egyptian merchant and monk, Cosmas Indicopleustes, who visited in 523 AD. In his geographical work, the *Christian Topography*, he detailed its commerce, as well as that of the Ethiopian and Nubian regions, with India, Ceylon, and other locations.¹⁷ By this time Adulis seems to have been the most important trading centre on this part of the Red Sea and the centre of flourishing trade in emeralds from Nubia for Cosmas witnesses, “The Ethiopians who procure this stone from the Blemmyes in Ethiopia (i.e the Nubia area) take it to India”¹⁸ Perhaps it was also considered as the the main commercial centre of exchange between the Byzantine Empire and the countries of the Indian Ocean¹⁹.

¹⁷ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 24; See E. O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (Cambridge, At the University Press, 1909).

¹⁸ Cited in Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, p. 37.

During this period, the Aksumites were said to require all ships navigating that section of the Red Sea to pay for passage and to dock at Adulis. A Byzantine delegation visiting in 531 AD noted the abundance of elephants just off the coast and reported encountering a sizable herd of approximately five hundred elephants at Aue, which is situated between Aksum and the port. They further remarked that the local inhabitants found it challenging to approach or disperse the elephants.²⁰

Significant trade activities were conducted along the coastal areas of the Horn of Africa, which Kosmas identified as the region of Barbaria. He noted that its residents ventured into the interior to collect frankincense and various other goods. Furthermore, it appears that merchants in later periods also utilized the Dahlak islands, which the ninth-century Arab historian and geographer al-Yaqubi regarded as the primary trade route for the Ethiopian area.²¹ In a comparable manner, Taddesse Tamrat claims that the Dahlak Islands have effectively taken the place of the ancient city of Adulis situated along the Eritrean coastline, and that their reason for existence was rooted in their trade connections with the Ethiopian plateau.²²

Nevertheless, it appears that the Persians and the rise of Islam curtailed the authority of Ethiopian rulers over the coastal areas of the Red Sea. Taddese Tamrat firmly contends that Kaleb's engagement in South Arabia was primarily at the behest of the Patriarch of Alexandria and Emperor Justinian. However, Byzantine interests in the region went beyond merely establishing the Church. A crucial aspect of Justinian's strategy was to protect eastern trade from Persian control, which necessitated forming an alliance with Aksum and its territories in South Arabia. Despite this, Aksum's readiness to collaborate was lukewarm and ineffective against the superior economic and military power of the Persian Empire. This scenario likely provided the Persians and their allies with a motive to aggressively target Aksum's maritime trade in the Red Sea. Local legends in the islands and coastal regions, once under Aksumite governance, recount a period when they were ruled by a group referred to as the Purs, likely alluding to the Persians, as many wells are attributed to them. It is clear that the Persians inflicted the first significant damage to Aksumite economic and political

²⁰ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 24.

²¹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 24-25.

²² Crowfoot, J.W., "Some Red Sea Ports", in G. J. Vol. 3F (1911), pp. 547-8 cited in Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, P. 149.

interests in the Red Sea during their brief victory over the Byzantine Empire. The emergence of Islam further exacerbated this trend, ultimately resulting in a more lasting decline in effective Christian influence in the coastal regions.²³

2.2. The Port of Massawa, Hergigo, Baylul and other Red Sea Ports

Let us now examine the period which witnessed three significant developments and transformations in imperial Ethiopian authority: the weakening of the kingdom of Aksum, the emergence and subsequent fall of the Zagwe dynasty in Lasta, and the establishment of the 'Solomonic' dynasty in Shawa. One of the most notable rulers of this latter dynasty, Emperor 'Amda Seyon, is said to have conducted an expedition to the northern frontier and led substantial military campaigns in the eastern, southern, and southwestern border regions. These endeavours, along with those of several of his successors, played a crucial role in integrating, or re-integrating, the peripheral territories into the domain of the Christian highland kingdom.²⁴

The northern periphery was relatively little affected by the above political changes and transformations that took place in the interior of Ethiopia and the Horn. The foreign trade of the hinterland persisted through the coasts of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which were vital to the entire region. Although the Aksumite port of Adulis experienced a decline and ultimately vanished, it was supplanted in the early medieval period by two proximate twin ports: the island port of Massawa and the adjacent mainland port of Hergigo, also referred to as Arqiqo. These two ports, along with others located further east along the Gulf of Aden coast, managed the majority of the region's trade. The exports and imports, considering technological progress, mirrored those of the Aksumite era, with ivory, gold, and slaves being exported in exchange for textiles and manufactured goods.²⁵

Throughout the centuries, the political connection between the Christian empire and the northern borderlands has remained remarkably robust. Hamasen and Saraye swiftly fell under the control of the Zagwe dynasty, and subsequently, the Shawan overlordship. It is reported that 'Amda Seyon led a military campaign to the Red Sea coast, and at least four Ethiopian rulers - 'Amda Seyon, Sayfa Ar'ad, Dawit, and Yeshaq - allocated land to significant religious

²³ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 60.

²⁴ Tadesse, *Church and State*, pp. 151-152; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 24-25.

²⁵ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.93, Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, p.11.

institutions in the northern regions. Additionally, Yeshaq is recognized for establishing a military outpost at Massawa.²⁶

Furthermore, it is noted that during the reign of Emperor Lebna Dengel (1508-1540), the majority of northern Ethiopia's international trade continued to be conducted through the mainland port of Hergigo, also referred to as Dehono, along with the adjacent island port of Massawa. In the early sixteenth century, exports included gold, ivory, honey, wax, and slaves, as reported by the Portuguese state. The significance of the ivory trade is reflected in the name Dehono, which is derived from dakano, a term in the Saho or possibly Afar language meaning elephant. Upon reaching Arabia, most slaves were converted to Islam.²⁷

It seems that despite the alleged dominance of Muslim merchants Muslim merchants in the trade of the coastal Red Sea an early account of Hergigo, the port of Bahr Nagash, comes from the Portuguese mission members. They noted that "the port's two thousand inhabitants on learning that their visitors, like them, were Christians, rushed down to the water's edge, and with "great delight", all jumped into the sea, attempting to drag the vessel ashore".²⁸

In a similar manner, the Portuguese mission visited the Port of Massawa, noting that the port operated with local autonomy and was located on an offshore island. It was described as having 'an excellent harbor, well-protected.' Claimed to surpass Carthage, it featured 'a very good anchorage' along with several cisterns for the storage of fresh water²⁹. Meanwhile, according Francesco Alvarez, Prester John, i.e the Ethiopian sovereign, dominated the the coastal areas of the Red Sea that stretched from the vicinity of Suakin ,or more conservatively from Massawa to the area dominated by the Muslim Sultanate of Danakal , whose principal port was Beilul.³⁰

Imported goods that arrived at Massawa were primarily sent to the mainland port of Herqiqo. This port was vital for the island, as it supplied the majority of its food and nearly all of its

²⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.94; Tadesse, "Church and State", pp. 151-152.

²⁷ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.104.; See also C.F Beckingham and G.W.B Huntingford, , *The Prester John of the Indies* (Cambridge, 1961), p.55; However, Merid Wolde Aregay, "Southern Ethiopia and the Christian Kingdom 1508-1708, With Special Reference to the Galla Migrations and Their Consequences", PhD Dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1971, p. 26 argues otherwise and claims that While Lebna Dengel asserted sovereignty over the island of Massawa, it was, in reality, under the control of the sheikh of Dahlak.

²⁸ Henry Thomas and Armando Cortesao, *The Discovery of Abyssinia by the Portuguese* (London, 1938) , p. 9; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 104-105.

²⁹ Thomas and Cortesao (1938), p. 88; Merid, 1971, p.116.

³⁰ Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, p. 108.

drinking water. The Portuguese noted that Herqiqo, which was governed by the Bahr Nagash at that time, was situated merely two archery shots from Massawa and was well-supplied with food. Provisions were plentiful and reasonably priced. Additionally, the region was home to a significant number of cows, sheep, goats, gazelles, and hares, making meat readily available and affordable.³¹

At that time, the exports of Massawa, as reported by Alvares, included gold, slaves, and agricultural produce. It is likely that the gold and slaves came from the interior, while the agricultural products were grown on the northern plateau. The Debarwa area was known for producing a variety of grain crops, which were then transported to the coast for sale in major towns located in Arabia.³²

Suakin, an island port located off the Red Sea coast to the north of Massawa, was characterized by Alvares as being situated "at the end of the countries" of Prester John; however, it actually existed outside the boundaries of Ethiopian governance. Despite this, the port was frequently visited by Ethiopian Christian pilgrims, many of whom utilized it as a stopover on their journeys to or from Jerusalem, whether by sea or land. Among those who traveled through Suakin were several Ethiopian informants of Zorzi.³³

During this period, the northern highlands continued to be the empire's primary access to the sea, just as it had been in earlier times. As a result, it continued to play a significant role in the overall economy of the region. The trade in much of the surrounding area was still centered around the twin ports of Massawa and Hergigo. These ports primarily exported gold, ivory, slaves, honey, and wax, much like they had done in the past³⁴.

The significance of the ivory trade is evident in the fact that Hergigo was also referred to as Dehono, which was probably a translation of the local term for elephant. Moreover, the more northern port of Suakin contributed to the trade in the region during this time. It was used by

³¹ Thomas and Cortesao (1938), p. 88; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 104-105.

³² Beckingham and Huntingford (1961), 1, 117-18.

³³ F. Alvarez, *The Prester John of the Indies*, II, p. 449; Merid, 1971, p. 21; Crawford (1958), pp. 28, 30-1, 46-7, 61, 78, 129, 137, 145-7, 155, 157, 167; Beckingham and Huntingford (1961), I, 144, II, 449-51. Pilgrims seem to have travelled by way of a monastery in the Baqla area, See J. W. Crowfoot, "Some Red Sea Ports", *Geographical Journal*, XXXVII, (1911), pp. 104-105,

³⁴ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 156

Christian pilgrims and others traveling to and from Jerusalem. Some traders even chose to take the overland route through Sudan to reach Cairo and Tunis³⁵.

The northern highlands and a portion of the adjacent coastline were governed on behalf of the Emperor by an official known as Bahr Nagash, or ruler of the sea province, a title possibly established by Emperor Zar'a Ya'qob. This official resided in Debarwa, a location deemed significant, as evidenced by the fact that one of its former occupants was the uncle of Lebna Dengel. The authority of Zar'a Ya'qob over this region was further illustrated by the on-going issuance of imperial land charters in Hamasen and Saraye, along with the deployment of a contingent of Maya archers from the southern territories in the former district. Local lore suggests that he also strengthened the defenses of the Gerar peninsula, situated across from Massawa³⁶. Meanwhile Trimingham indicates that Zara Yaeqob's domain in the north extended as far as Massawa³⁷.

The region of Bahre Nagash, as documented by Alvares in the early sixteenth century, contributed significant taxes to the Emperor, primarily in the form of high-quality horses and imported fabrics³⁸.

The trade of the Afar region with the interior remained significant. salt bar, a highly sought-after resource from the Dankali depression, was distributed, as noted by Alvares, throughout the empire and beyond. The relationship between the Afar leaders and the emperors of the interior varied over time. In the fifteenth century, an Afar chief allied with Emperor Ba'eda Maryam during his campaign against the Dobe'a people. However, later that century, tensions escalated when individuals from Arho, likely situated within the Afar territory, killed one of Emperor Eskender's attendants. The enraged emperor retaliated by launching a military campaign into the region, but he was struck down by a Maya arrow, prompting his furious troops to exact vengeance on the Arho community³⁹.

Massawa was used as a port by the Christian Kingdom in their confrontation with the forces of Imama Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim. It is said that Ahmad's dominance in military affairs was ultimately concluded in 1541, when the Portuguese, arriving to support Emperor

³⁵ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 156.

³⁶ Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, p. 27; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 156 ;

³⁷ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 78.

³⁸ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 156.

³⁹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 156-57.

Galawdewos, deployed a heavily armed expeditionary force at Massawa. This contingent comprised more than 400 soldiers, armed with six cannons, at least a hundred swivel guns, and over 600 matchlock firearms⁴⁰.

The widespread downfall of the Adal Muslim regime, under the leadership of Imam Ahmad, was succeeded by the swift restoration of imperial Christian authority across a significant portion of the nation by Emperor Galawdewos. The repercussions were experienced not only within the empire's core but also at its borders. In the Christian northern regions, the Turks captured the port of Massawa and began advancing into the interior. In the strategically vital Muslim eastern region, near Harar, Galawdewos met his demise in combat. Furthermore, the affluent animist territories in the southwest continued to provide substantial tribute, as they had historically⁴¹.

Emperor Sarsa Dengel (1563-1597), the nephew and successor of Galawdewos, made further efforts to unify the empire. Unlike his predecessor, who concentrated on the eastern regions, Sarsa Dengel journeyed south to convert non-Christian populations and north to challenge the Turkish invaders. His confrontations with the Turks were crucial, as he obtained a substantial number of firearms, including cannons and rifles, and enlisted numerous Turkish marksmen. This armament advantage positioned him more favorably than any rival forces he faced, particularly in the militarily exposed southern and western territories.⁴²

Following the passing of Imam Ahmad in 1543, the administration he had founded in the northern regions, along with areas further south, quickly fell apart. Galawdewos subsequently took command of the territory known as Bahr Nagash. Notably, he reinstated Emperor Zar'a Ya'qob's land grant in support of the Dabra Bizan monastery.⁴³

The Bahr Nagash, in the meantime, solidified his position as a vassal of the Emperor. Galawdewos expelled numerous Portuguese individuals to his capital in Debarwa, as they

⁴⁰ Pankhurst(1967), pp. 203-4; Dombrowski (1985), pp. 18-20.p; See also Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 168.; Merid, 1971, p. 533; Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 233.

⁴² Conti Rossini (1907), pp. 3-4, 9. 15-16, IX, 21 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 233.

⁴³ Huntingford (1965b), p. 54. Cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 233.

had aided in the Imam's defeat but were starting to conspire against him and attempting to convert the nation to Catholicism.⁴⁴

Galawdewos's early achievements in the northern region were fleeting, as the Ottoman Turks captured the port of Massawa in 1557⁴⁵. Within a year, a Turkish military contingent, commanded by Ozdemiir Pasha, commenced their advance into the interior. They caused destruction or significant damage to several Christian places of worship, notably the prominent monastery of Dabra Damo. The invaders devastated areas of Tegray and the semi-coastal region of Bur, while also extensively searching for slaves and livestock. The local population mounted a resistance, armed with a considerable number of firearms, and managed to overcome the occupying forces. During the conflict, it was reported that the peasants killed a Turkish general, beheaded him, and gave it to the Emperor as a symbol of their victory.⁴⁶ Pankhurst maintains that the Turkish attempted to occupy the Eritrean plateau for two decades⁴⁷.

The Turks, recognizing the futility of their goal to dominate the northern Ethiopian highlands, ultimately relinquished the port of Hergigo. They transferred control to a local Beja chieftain, who was granted the title of Na'ib, meaning Deputy. This designation was utilized for more than two hundred years. In 1557, the Ottoman Empire captured Massawa and designated it as the capital of the *Habesh Eyalet*, an Ottoman province, also known as *Pashalik of Habesh*⁴⁸. Under the leadership of Özdamir Pasha, a Circassian Mamluk general, Ottoman force aimed to extend their influence over the rest of Medri Bahri. However, local opposition and unexpected demands for additional troops in the Mediterranean and along the Persian border led the Ottoman authorities to delegate the governance of the city and its vicinity to an aristocrat from the Bellew people. This person was appointed as the 'Naib of Massawa' and was responsible to the Ottoman governor in Suakin, Sudan.⁴⁹ It seems that the Ottomans Control over Massawa was not effective as Bahru indicates the Ottomans had merely a

⁴⁴ Whiteway(1902), pp. 247-53. Cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 233.

⁴⁵ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethioia*, p. 92.

⁴⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 234-35.; Merid, 1971, p. 167; Hasebella Kafil, Massawa: Pearl of the Red Sea, Feb 12, 2022 <https://shabait.com/2022/02/12/massawa-pearl-of-the-red-sea/>

⁴⁷ Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, p. 78.

⁴⁸ See Mordechai Abir , *Ethiopia and the Red Sea: The Rise and Decline of the Solomonian Dynasty and Muslim European Rivalry in the Region* (Oxford: Frank Cass, 1980) ,pp. 125-26.

⁴⁹ <https://zantana.net/ottoman-turks-occupy-the-harbor-of-massawa/>

□titular hold over the coast for centuries⁵⁰. In a similar vein, Trimingham asserts that following the year 1589, the Turkish conquest was alleviated, as the Ottoman power waned, leading to Arkiko and Massawa being entrusted to a local Beja (Balaw) chief who was designated as Naib.⁵¹ However, there is no doubt that this event contributed to the isolation of the Ethiopian state and can be compared to the destruction of Adulis although the effect of the latter was less significant than the former.

According to Mordechai Abir, the Ottomans did not conquer the coastal regions of northern Ethiopia through military defeat of the Ethiopians. He asserts that the Ethiopians successfully triumphed over the Ottoman troops commanded by Uzadmir, who were later annihilated by the forces of Bahr Negash Yeshaq. Nevertheless, the Turks continued to maintain a presence in the area, likely due to the longstanding Ethiopian aversion to their coastline⁵².

Yet it is fascinating that the Christian highland kings despite lack of direct control over Massawa continued to have maritime access through the Afar country. In this regard, Pankhurst argues that by the early seventeenth century, the Afar rulers had established amicable relations with the Christian monarchy, whose capital was located in the Lake Tana region, despite historical conflicts. This necessity for peaceful coexistence between the two entities was driven by a significant factor: the Turkish occupation of Massawa, which hindered the Emperors' access to the port, leaving the Afar territory as potentially their sole secure passage to the sea.⁵³

During this time, the Afar rulers acknowledged the authority of the Christian empire. Almeida discussed the relationship between them and the Christian rulers during Susneyos' reign. He stated that the Muslim "King of Dankali(Afar) people called Kamil", while not technically a subject of the Ethiopian monarch, viewed the Ethiopian ruler as his□superior". The Afar ruler, according to Almeida, was so lacking in land and power that he could be considered more of a goatherd than a king. This is why he showed respect and some acknowledgment to his powerful Christian neighbor⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 51 .

⁵¹ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 98.

⁵² Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, p. 125.

⁵³ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.383.

⁵⁴ Beckingham, and Huntingford (1954), pp.12, 72 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.383.

Additional insight into the role of the Afar ruler concerning the Christian state is provided by Susneyos's chronicle. The chronicle recounts that in 1620, the Dankali king Kamil, who had recently usurped his brother Sahim, made his way to the Emperor's camp at Dehana. Upon arrival, he bowed before Susneyos and sought his protection. The Emperor then crowned him, held a celebration in his honor, affirmed his royal status, and decreed that he was to pay half of the taxes collected in his realm as tribute. Subsequently, several members of Kamil's family were brought to the Emperor's court.⁵⁵

Susneyos, like many of his predecessors, was apprehensive about Turkish dominance over Massawa and showed a strong interest in the Afar region, which he believed could provide an alternative route to the sea. This concern led him, as discussed in the previous chapter, to support the Jesuit missionaries Machado and Pereira in their ill-fated expedition. In 1624, he advised them to travel through the Dankali kingdom; however, they instead arrived in Adal, located significantly east of Afarland, where they met their demise⁵⁶.

Jeronimo Lobo, a fellow Jesuit, achieved greater success. Following the Emperor's counsel, he landed at the Afar port of Baylul in 1625. Susneyos had communicated via letter that access to Massawa was challenging at that time, but he could enter the empire through the Dankali kingdom, whose residents, despite being Muslim, were considered his vassals and allies. Lobo, the first foreign author to explore the region, offers significant insights. He notes that the Afar ruler, motivated by 'self-preservation' or due to an 'historic feudal relationship,' acknowledged 'a certain vassalage to the Emperor' and remained 'consistently loyal and obedient' to his commands⁵⁷

In 1663, Murad journeyed from Gondar to Baylul prior to his voyage to India. He later informed the French explorer Francois Bernier that he chose this path due to certain issues with the Massawa route, but was compelled to traverse, similar to previous travelers, through extremely challenging terrain."⁵⁸

During this period, Baylul was not used extensively. This was attributed in part to challenges faced during the journey, but also, as reported by the Dutch merchant Justinus Weijns in

⁵⁵ Esteves Pereira (1900), pp. 156-7 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.383.

⁵⁶ Lockhart (1984), pp. 48-51 cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.384.

⁵⁷ Lockhart (1984), pp. 11, 48 cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.384

⁵⁸ Donzel (1979), p. 20 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.389.

1676, because the Turkish authorities in control of Massawa aimed to obstruct any attempts to evade their tolls at that port. Consequently, they would not allow vessels to depart from Baylul, which they viewed as a competing access point to the sea⁵⁹.

During a subsequent expedition to Batavia in 1689, Murad offered his hosts additional insights. He observed that the coastal regions of Ethiopia were completely under Turkish control, with the sole exception of Baylul. He elaborated on the state of the port and its trade, as well as the relationship between the Afar ruler and the Emperor, stating:

The port of Beilul... in the small kingdom of Dankale, still belongs to the emperor of Ethiopia, but is kept as a fief by a Muslim. who leaves his children as a pledge with the emperor and has to pay an annual tribute. But since the inhabitants there and in the surrounding regions are...mostly Muslims, no Christians are found there nor as many Muslim merchants from up country as in Matsua [Massawa] because of the bad reception and great extortions. There is however a moderate navigation from Mocha, Aden, etc. whose inhabitants, the Arabs, come there with their ships, taking provisions of corn, butter, honey and also tusks, cow-hides and civet, which together with a few slaves are brought there from the highlands and are exchanged for spices, pepper, broadcloth, etc.⁶⁰

During a subsequent visit to Batavia in 1697, Murad firmly reiterated that the king of the Afar remained under the authority of the emperor of Abyssinia⁶¹.

Emperor Za-Dengel expressed his opposition to the Turkish presence along the coast. In a letter to King Felipe III of Spain in 1604, he urged the king to take control of Massawa, suggesting that they could then share the profits. The Ethiopian ruler contended that his people could easily assert their dominance in the coastal region, as the Turks stationed at the island port relied on supplies of food and water from the mainland; without these essentials, they would perish from hunger and thirst. He assured that his subjects would refrain from sending honey, slaves, or other goods to Massawa until they had liberated it from Turkish control. However, assistance from Spain was not forthcoming.⁶²

⁵⁹ Donzel (1979), p. 52 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.389.

⁶⁰ Donzel(1979), p. 78. Cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.390.

⁶¹ Donzel(1979), p. 78. Cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.390.

⁶² Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp. 394-95.

During the reign of Emperor Susneyos, the connections between the Country of the Bahr Nagash and the interior remained strong. One of his daughters was married to a Bahr Nagash named Amda Mika'el, likely for political and strategic reasons. Susneyos, like his ancestors, was deeply concerned about the coastal situation. Shortly after ascending to the throne, he received a visit from Kefla Wahid, the governor of Tegray, who presented him with tribute that included exquisite horses and numerous other valuable items. The chief was accompanied by subordinate officials from a vast region extending from the Tegray highlands to the farthest reaches of Hamasen and Baqla, the latter being an area located to the northwest of modern-day Asmara.⁶³

The conflict between the Ethiopians and the Turks resurfaced in 1615 when the Turks confiscated supplies intended for the Emperor's Jesuit associate, Pero Paes, which had been dispatched from India. The Turks justified their actions as retaliation for an Ethiopian attack that had resulted in the defeat of a Turkish raiding party. The Turkish Pasha announced that he would retain possession of the supplies until the Ethiopians returned sixty rifles they had taken. In response, Susneyos expressed his outrage, asserting that the Turks were culpable for seizing cattle belonging to the local community. He warned that if the items taken by the Turks were not returned, he would prohibit any provisions from reaching the port. Consequently, he instructed the governor of Tegray to shut down the trade route to Massawa. The Turks subsequently agreed to engage in discussions. However, the negotiations were drawn out and ultimately yielded no results, as the Pasha departed for pilgrimage and was later summoned back to Constantinople without any resolution being achieved⁶⁴.

Emperor Fasiladas subsequently recognized the significance of the coastline. Following the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1632, he established strategic agreements with the Pashas of Massawa and Suakin, both of whom consented to deny access to their ports for Catholics seeking to enter the area. Additionally, he dispatched envoys to these ports with orders to notify him of any vessels that might be arriving with Portuguese cargo.⁶⁵

The significance of Hamasen during Iyasu's reign is highlighted by a reference in the chronicle to an event that took place in 1693, when the Emperor's Armenian trade

⁶³ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.395; Merid, 1971, p. 23 , claims that Baqla and a region known as Dagore represented the northernmost territories inhabited by Christians.

⁶⁴ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp.395-96.

⁶⁵ Budge (1928b), II, 401,403 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.397.

representative, Murad, returned from the Dutch East Indies. His belongings, primarily gifts intended for the Emperor, were confiscated by Na'ib Musa, the ruler of Massawa. In response, Murad promptly sent a message to Iyasu detailing the incident. Iyasu, who was deeply incensed, chose to implement a blockade along the coast, similar to the actions taken by Susneyos prior to him. He subsequently communicated with Hab Sellus, a key official in the aforementioned local traditions, as well as two other officials, Zar'a Beruk and Gabra Krestos, instructing them and all the inhabitants of Hamasen to announce throughout their territories that no one was permitted to travel to Massawa with honey, butter, cheese, or any essential goods until he could arrive in Massawa to launch an attack. He sternly warned that anyone who violated this order would face execution and have their home destroyed⁶⁶.

Upon receiving this message, Hab Sellus and the Hamasen officials obstructed any supplies from reaching the Na'ib. When the Na'ib became aware that he was being denied sustenance and that the monarch was approaching to confront him, he was filled with terror, as recorded in the chronicle,

Trembled, not knowing what to do; the size of Massawa was for him [as small as] the hole of a needle. He suffered pains like a woman about to give birth. He reflected, and realised that there was nothing he could do to save himself, except to restore the King's possessions and make peace with him. For this reason Na'ib Musa hastened to restore the King's property which he had seized from Murad, and added to it objects a thousand times more numerous, which he brought to the King.⁶⁷

The event, vividly depicted in Iyasu's chronicle, is also mentioned in the more concise annals. These records claim that the Na'ib, in an attempt to atone, presented Iyasu with 'numerous slaves' sourced from 'the land of the Turks'. Hab Sellus, who is traditionally believed to have reigned for four decades, seemingly survived Emperor Iyasu, as the chronicle implies he was still living around the year 1710.⁶⁸

Both Susneyos and his successor Fasiladas regarded the Afar port of Baylul as a politically interesting alternative to Massawa, potentially serving as a more significant maritime access

⁶⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.403.

⁶⁷ Guidi (1903-5), p. 171 cited in Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.403.

⁶⁸ Basset (1881), XVIII, 331 cited Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.404.

point for the empire. Several prominent figures, such as the Jesuit Jeronimo Lobo, the Yamani envoy Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Haymi, the Egyptian bishop Abuna Mika'el, and the Armenian trader and Ambassador Khodja Murad, entered the empire through Baylul. However, none found the route entirely satisfactory due to the challenging and arid terrain inland from the port, as well as frequent incursions by the Oromo into the interior. Despite this, two later eighteenth-century authors, the Czech missionary Remedius Prutky and the Scottish traveler James Bruce, still believed that the port held interesting potential.⁶⁹

As a consequence of the Turkish dominance in Massawa, the imperial authorities of that era developed a strong interest in the port of Baylul, viewing it as a potential alternative maritime access point. Susneyos established strong connections with the Afar leaders, particularly Kamil, who, along with various chiefs from the region of Bahr Nagash, traveled inland to secure the monarch's acknowledgment. Additionally, several individuals from the Afar ruling family later took up residence in Gondar.⁷⁰

Be that as it may accord Ambassador Zewde Reta, the hinterlands of the port Of Mssawa, known as Mara Melash was undoubtedly an integral part of an ancient and modern Ethiopia until the Italian occupied it and declared the formation of their colony of Eritrea. He further indicates that although the Ottoman said to have occupied Massawa for three centuries and the Egyptian for short period of time, to use his words, ይሁን እንጂ ቱርኮቹም ሆኑ ግብፆች በወደቡ ላይ የኢትዮጵያ ነገሥታቶች ያላቸውን የባህር በር መጠቀሚያ መብት አናወቅም አላሉም። የወደቡ ሹማምንቶች የቱርኮችን አስተዳደር መከተል ግዴታ ቢሆንባቸውም ከኢትዮጵያ ነገሥታት የሚታዘዙትን ሁሉ አከብረዉ ከመፈፀም አላቋረጡም።⁷¹ (Nonetheless, both the Turks and the Egyptians acknowledged the Ethiopian kings' entitlement to utilize the port. While the port officials were required to adhere to the regulations set by the Turks, they continued to honour and execute all directives issued by the Ethiopian kings.)

2.3. Zeila and Berbera

It is noted that Zeila and Berbera began to function as ports prior to the decline of Adulis as the primary port. For instance, Pankhurst claims that Adulis was the principal port of the

⁶⁹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.428 ; see also Bruce (1790), II, 643-4; Guidi (1912), pp. 128-30.

⁷⁰ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.441.

⁷¹ Zewde Reta, *Ya Eritrea Guday (The Issue of Eritrea) 1941-1963*

Aksumite Empire, while Avalites, or Zeila', and Malao, or Berbera served the more southerly and easterly regions of the Horn of Africa.⁷²

It seems that as early as the Aksumite Kingdom times the area around Zeila was part of the Ancient Ethiopia. In this regard Tadesse Tamrat stipulates the narrative of Digna-Jan, one of the Kings of Aksum whose reign was estimated to be around the ninth century AD suggests that the kingdom controlled most part of the African Side of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden stretching from the Dahlak islands to Zeila.⁷³

It is said that Zeila was located at or near the ancient port of Adal and has been a crucial entrepot in the Horn of Africa since time immemorial. Early Arab geographers made a passing reference to it; for instance, al Ya'qubi in the ninth century and al -Mas'udi in the tenth century, describing it as an 'Abyssinian' coastal town populated by Muslims but under the suzerainty of the 'Abyssinian' state. Furthermore, Ibn Hawqal, towards the end of tenth century, mentioned that this settlement acted as a departure point for Abyssinian Christians traveling to Hijaz and Yemen.⁷⁴ To be specific, by about 935 AD Al Masudi writes,

The capital of Abyssinia is Ku'bar. It is a great city and the seat of the kingdom of the Najashi. The country has many towns and extensive territories stretching as far as the Abyssinian Sea. To it belong the coastal plain opposite Yaman where there are many cities such are Zaila, Dahlak, and Nasi(i.e. Badi), in which are Muslims tributary (dhimmi) to the Abyssinians⁷⁵.

From the passage, we can see that Al Masudi, an Arab writer, clearly identifies the Red Sea as the Abyssinian/Ethiopian Sea. He also confirms that the governors of ports like Zeila and even the largest island in the Red Sea, Dahlak, were under the authority of the Ethiopian state.

Throughout this period, Damot was instrumental in the gold trade within the Horn of Africa. This is supported by al-'Umari, who asserts that valuable metals from the area were

⁷² Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.32; According to the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea author (P. 24) the Arabian Gulf trends toward the east and becomes narrowest just before the Gulf of Avalites.

⁷³ Tadesse Tamrat , *Church and State*, p. 73 ; Admin, *Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea* Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications, in *Somaliland Standard* , Nov 27, 2023, <https://somalilandstandard.com/>

⁷⁴ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.54.

⁷⁵ Cited in J Spenser Trimingham *Islam in Ethiopia* (London, 1952),p. 51.

dispatched to distant locations as Ifat, most likely for export through Zeila or other ports along the Gulf of Aden.⁷⁶ It is fascinating that Masudi and Ibn Khaldūn describe that as early as tenth century the Muslim Sultanate Ifat as tributary of Damot.⁷⁷

During the early twelfth century, Zeila' attracted the interest of Al-Idrisi, who noted that it was frequented by numerous foreigners and ships delivering provisions to Abyssinia. The city exported gold and slaves, likely sourced from the Ethiopian hinterland. Furthermore, it acted as a transit hub for numerous Muslims touring to and from the important Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.⁷⁸

In the early thirteenth century, an Arab author, Ibn al-Wardi, referred to the port as 'the emporium of Habash,' indicating Abyssinia. At the same time, Shams ad-Din Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad asserted, with clear hyperbole, that gold, likely sourced from the interior, was so abundant in that region that its value was comparable to that of iron.⁷⁹

In the fourteenth century, Ibn Sa'id depicted Zeila' as an important center for the export of slaves and horses from Abyssinia. During the same era, Ibn Mutat referred to the port as a vast town featuring a remarkable bazaar, yet he also remarked that it was 'the dirtiest, most abominable, and most stinking town in the world' because of the excessive presence of fish and the blood of camels that were killed in its streets. His contemporary, Abu'l Fida, likewise recognized Zeila' as a prosperous port serving the Habash..⁸⁰ In the meantime, Zeila appears to have been the most important conduit of Islamic influence in the Ethiopian area. Even prior to the mid-fourteenth century, all Muslim communities were collectively known in Egypt and Syria as "the Country of Zeila."⁸¹ In this context, Al-'Umari documents that during the early part of the fourteenth century, the Sultanate of Ifat was the preeminent Sultanate in the area, recognized as the most significant among the 'seven kingdoms of Muslim

⁷⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.88; <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-worldcivilization/chapter/the-sultanates-of-somalia/>

⁷⁷ Tadesse, *Church and State*, p.236.

⁷⁸ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p, 53.

⁷⁹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p, 53.

⁸⁰ Gibb, H.A.R. (1929) *Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa* (London, 1929),p. 110; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p, 53.

⁸¹ Tadesse, *Church and State*, p. 155.

Abyssinia,' with its king ruling over Zeila and overseeing the passage between Zeila and Shewa.⁸²

Zeila, though loosely associated with Adal, was essentially independent at this time. According to the fourteenth-century Coptic historian Al-Mufaddal ibn Abi-'l-fada'il, the port and its surroundings were inhabited by various tribes. Each tribe recited the hutbdh, or prayer of allegiance, in the name of their own chief.⁸³

The trade route to Zeila' partially competed with the routes to Hergigo and Massawa. While the latter primarily facilitated the export-import trade of the northern regions, the Zeila' route catered to the eastern trade, with both routes playing significant roles in the commerce of the central and particularly the western provinces.⁸⁴

The lowland section of the Zeila' route was consequently dominated by two relatively strong provinces: Ifat, located at the highland's periphery⁸⁵, and Adal, situated near the coast⁸⁶. It seems that the Christian Highland Kingdom and the Adal Sultanate ruled Zeila one after the other. When the later became powerful there is no doubt it was under Adal rule⁸⁷. There is no doubt both polities fought over the control of Zeila. For instance, it is said that the ruler of Adal, Muhammad ibn Azhar ad-Din (1488-1518), realized the heavy cost of constant fighting. He reportedly attempted to establish peace with the Christians of the interior, but was outmaneuvered by Mahfuz, characterized as a charismatic Amir of Zeila', who was determined to pursue a more aggressive warlike policy⁸⁸. It is reported that Mahfuz exploited

⁸² Isaac Samuel, 'A Muslim kingdom in the Ethiopian highlands: the history of Ifat and Adal ca. 1285-1520', in *African History Extra*, June 16, 2024, <https://www.africanhistoryextra.com/p/a-muslim-kingdom-in-the-ethiopian>; Tadesse, 'Church and State', p. 245, footnote, 1.

⁸³ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.94.

⁸⁵ According to Tadesse, 'Church and State', pp. 151-152. Maqrizi states that the forebears of 'Umar Walasma initially established themselves in Jabara (or Jabarta), a territory he claims was part of Zeila; they subsequently migrated further inland and took control of Ifat as well. However, Maqrizi does not provide details regarding the rulers preceding 'Umar Walasma, nor does the chronicle of the Walasma dynasty, despite its extensive genealogy for 'Umar, who appears to embody the traits of a legendary figure.

⁸⁶ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, pp.94-95.; Tadesse, 'Church and State', pp. 151-152.

⁸⁷ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.115.

⁸⁸ J Spenser Trimingham *Islam in Ethiopia* (London, 1952), p 82; Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.115.

the wealth and influence of the port to initiate a series of annual invasions into Amhara, Shawa, and Fatagar.⁸⁹

Apparently, it is said that by this time the Amir of Adal was characterized by Alvarez as 'great and powerful', and he persisted in ruling over a considerable region. The Portuguese writer noted that this region included not only the port of Zeila', but also stretched to Berbera in the east, and encompassed land extending towards Cape Guardafui and further⁹⁰. It is fascinating that as we have seen earlier the Aksumites rule also stretched to this locality.

One of the Christian Highland emperors whose name is associated with the medieval port of Zeila was Dawit (1380-1412). It is reported that King Dawit expelled Sultan Sa'd ad-Din to the port of Zeila and may have exerted control over it, as it is noted that Sa'd ad-Din's sons fled to Arabia but later came back to establish a new dynasty in Adal, with its center in Dakar.⁹¹ Trimingham claims that this incident took place during the rule of Yeshaq (1413-1430), indicating that Sa'd ad-Din sought sanctuary on the Island of Zeila, where he was eventually besieged and killed. The capture of Zeila signified the end of the Sultanate of Ifat, which was irrevocably seized by the Abyssinians and has since disappeared from historical accounts⁹².

The origin of the name 'Adal,' which was sometimes used to refer to the entirety of the East African Horn, has not been thoroughly explored. This term exists in various forms, including Adal, Adel, Adail, Adaiel, Adela, Adem, among others.⁹³ There

While Adal was associated with Yifat, it received little attention from Arab writers. Nevertheless, this is clearly recorded by Marco Polo, who referred to a 'Saracen Province of Adem' located on the Somali Peninsula. By the year 1300, Adal had emerged as a recognized geographical and political term in the coastal region.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.158; <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-worldcivilization/chapter/the-sultanates-of-somalia/> It is apparent that the sultanate the polity controlled large parts of Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea.

⁹⁰ Buckingham and Huntingford (1961), I, 16, 295-6, II, 402, 408, 410-15, 453.

⁹¹ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p.436.

⁹² Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 74.

⁹³ Braukämper, *Islamic History*, p.29.

⁹⁴ Braukämper, *Islamic History*, p.29.

The downfall of the Sultanate of Adal and the rise of Afar rule cannot be accurately dated due to the lack of contemporary records. Cerulli, who had a negative perspective on the change, believed that Awssa's fate mirrored that of the Ethiopian Christian Empire. Just as the Ethiopian empire fell victim to Oromo military leaders who diminished the power of the Gondar emperors, Muslim Adal, which had spent two centuries spreading Islam in Ethiopia, transformed into a semi-barbaric state controlled by Dankali nomads.⁹⁵

However, it seems that the name Adal persisted even after it was replaced by the Afar/Hawussa Sultanates or Emirates. For instance, in modern Ethiopia's popular parlance, the Afar themselves continued to be identified as Adal. Moreover, it seems that the northwest region or regional state of modern Somalia known as Awdal, must have been named after Adal. In a public letter addressed to the Secretary General of the United Nations, entitled "Awdal Republic Declaration of Independence", the letter begins with an emphatic statement, "Proud to be the direct descendants of the Awdal (Adel) empire inhabitants, we are happy to announce that from now on we will revive our civilization and bring it back to the track from which it was derailed by the foreign forces."⁹⁶ It is not a coincidence that the Port of Zeila is located in this locality. Moreover, there have been historical claims and counter claims between the Afars and the Somalis concerning the persona of Imam Ahmad, the charismatic spearhead of the Sultanate of Adal in the sixteenth century, and the reasons behind the shift of the headquarters of the Sultanate from Harar to Awussa. In this regard Mu'uz Gidey Alemu writes,

both groups claim over the Persona of the Imam, his great victory and the right to succession to their own while they do mutual incrimination for the eventual defeat of the multi-ethnic army of Imam Ahmed to each other's "malice and weakness"... The Afar who succeeded to inherit Adal sultanate and formed the powerful Awusa Sultanate in the homeland of the Aydahiso moving their center from Hararge Highland to the fertile bank of lower Awash basin were, to the Issa, usurpers whose absolute tyranny caused their eventual distraction. Among mainly the Awusa Afar,

⁹⁵ Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands*, p 391.

⁹⁶ <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Hornet/awdal.html> ; see also *Ikechukwu* "The History of the Adal Sultanate in the Horn of Africa", in *Pan African Central Core* , April 2, 2024, who argues that "The region of Adal, also known as Awdal, Adl, or Adel, was situated east of the province of Ifat and was a general term for a region of lowlands inhabited by Muslims. It included the territory between the Awash River towards Lake Abbe, as well as the area stretching from Zeila to Harar, according to historical accounts".

the demise of the Sultanate is widely held to have been caused by persistent Issa invasion from the South⁹⁷.

There is no doubt that during the medieval times up until at least the dramatic Oromo population movement the ports of Zeila and Berbera might have been more important than the northern Ethiopia ports of Massawa and Suakin. In this regard, Pankhurst indicates,

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when the emperor's camp was still situated in Shoa or its vicinity, the trade route to the port of Zeila and Berbera in the Gulf of Aden were of considerable importance. The Red Sea Ports of Massawa and Suakin were then relatively far from the empire's centre of gravity . . .⁹⁸

Hence, it appears that even prior to the Ottoman occupation, Massawa's significance as the primary entrepot in the region had greatly diminished, being surpassed by the southeastern ports of Zeila and Berbera. However, in the sixteenth century, Massawa seemed to have regained its importance, albeit under the rule of Ottoman deputies. Similarly, it seems that as a result of the sixteenth century Adal Sultanate - Christian kingdom war and the dramatic population movement the vibrant trade route to Zeila and Berbera seemed to have been disturbed and the South- North trade route in the Ethiopia region seemed to have surpassed it especially in the nineteenth up until the rise of Menilek and the foundation of Addis as the capital of the Ethiopian Empire. Moreover, Zeila came to be under foreign powers influence after the from the sixteenth up until it was occupied by the British in the late nineteenth century. To be precise, in 1548, the Ottomans annexed Zeila. By about 1875, the Egyptians secured a mandate from their Ottoman overlords, designating Zeila and Harar as Egyptian territories. During the 1880s, Zeila and Berbera were incorporated into British Somaliland⁹⁹.

⁹⁷ Mu'uz Gidey Alemu, 'Issa-Afar re-memering, re-presentation and dramaturgy of violence,' in *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.7(5), May 2015, pp. 138 -150 (<https://academicjournals.org/journal/IJSA/article-full-text/CB045F552521#>)

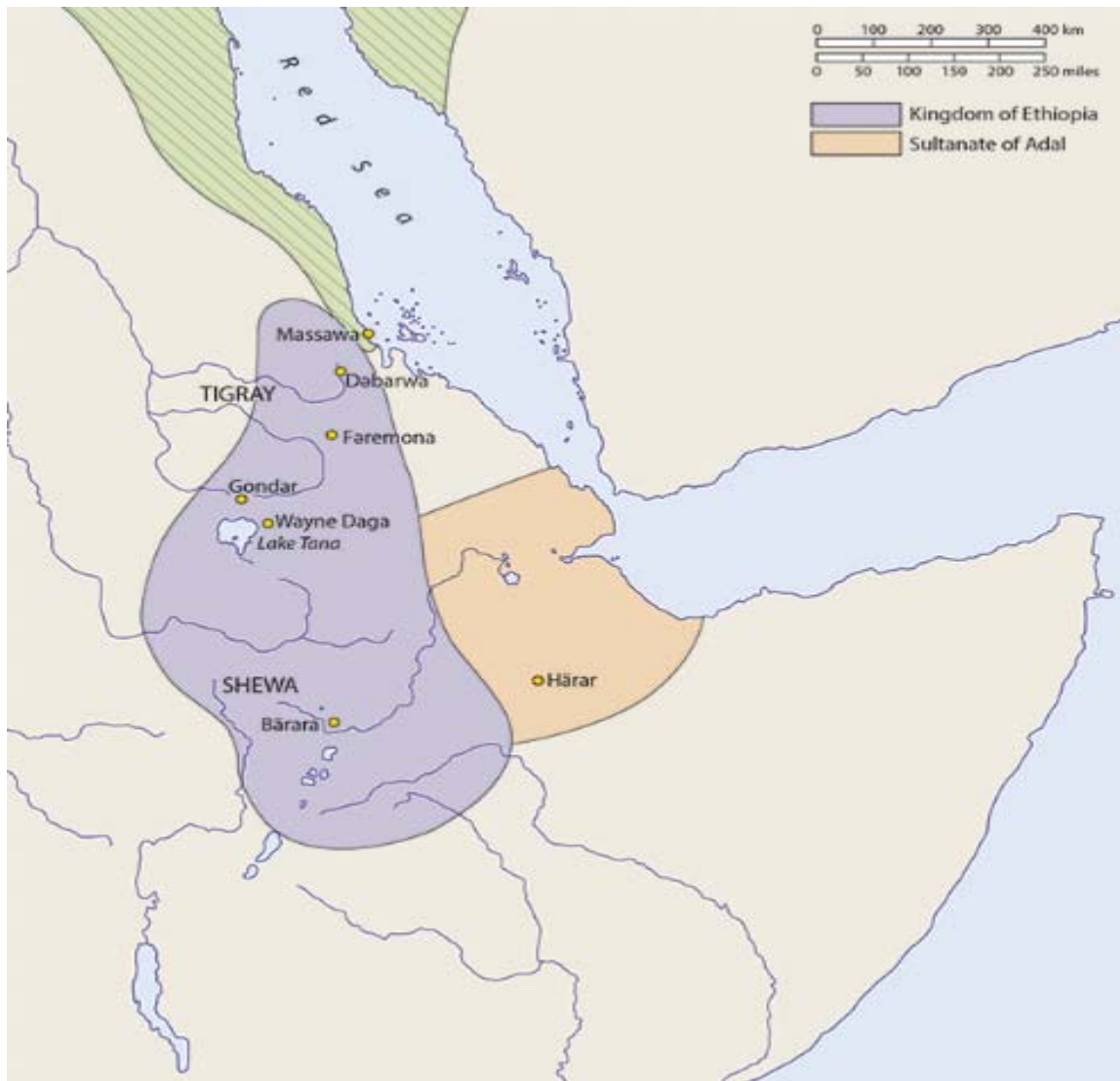
⁹⁸ Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History*, p. 312.

⁹⁹ Samuel Negash, 'Ethiopia's Elusive Quest for an Outlet to the Sea: The Case of the Haud-Zeila Exchange from the 1920s to the 1950s,' in *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* [online]. Addis Ababa, Los Angeles: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2016 (generated 07 juillet 2023). Available on the Internet: <[http:// , p. books.openedition.org/cfee/1177](http://books.openedition.org/cfee/1177)>. ISBN: 9782111723139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cfee.1177>, p. 258.



Map 2: The Ajuuraan, Adal, and Warsangali Sultanates in the 15th century
<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-worldcivilization/chapter/the-sultanates-of-somalia/>

Map 4: The Northern Horn of Africa at the Beginning of the 16th C



CHAPTER THREE

3. ETHIOPIA'S QUEST FOR ACCESS TO THE SEA

3.1. Ethiopia's Quest for Access to the Sea in the 19th century and the Establishment of the European Colonies in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Region

Apparently Emperor Tewodros was the first monarch during modern times in Ethiopia to seek access to the sea. In his correspondence with Queen Victoria and Napoleon III, Tewodros expressed his grievances regarding Turkey's expansion into his nation and lamented the restrictions imposed by Turkish dominance over the Ethiopian coastline, which hindered his access to the international community. He conveyed his plans to dispatch ambassadors to London and Paris, seeking assurances from the two monarchs for their safe passage through Turkish lands. The correspondence concluded with the poignant remark, 'observe how Islam subjugates the Christian.' Although no explicit alliance was proposed, there was a clear underlying request for assistance.¹⁰⁰

However, the European sovereigns turned a deaf ear to Emperor Tewodros's plea and showed no interest in his Christian solidarity. Subsequent events, however, tell a different story. Consul Cameron's visit to Matemma in Sudan, which went against Theodore's wishes, along with the lack of a response from Britain to his correspondence with Queen Victoria, and the official directive for Cameron to leave Ethiopia for the Turkish port of Massawa, in addition to the previous withdrawal of British protection from Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem, all appeared to be acts of hostility towards Ethiopia. These events suggested a possible secret agreement among Britain, France, Egypt, and Turkey against Ethiopia. Fueled by rumors of an imminent attack on his nation by these powers, Tewodros took the precautionary step of detaining the British Consul and other Europeans in Ethiopia, likely as a security measure rather than a hostile act towards Britain.¹⁰¹ This event ultimately led to Tewodros's downfall in 1868.

¹⁰⁰ Krishnamurthy Venkataram, "Foreign Policy of Theodore II of Ethiopia: an Interpretation" in *Transafrican Journal of History*, Vol 3, No. 1/2, 1973, P. 139; Samuel Negash, p. 257; Richard Reid, Reid, *Frontiers of Violence In North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict Since C.1800* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 69.

¹⁰¹ Venkataram, pp. 139-43.

The ascension of Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia in the 1870s and 1880s similarly ignited interest in the Red Sea. This era aligned with the initial phase of the 'Age of New Imperialism' (1870-1914), which followed Europe's second industrial revolution. European countries aimed to secure industrial resources and markets across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Notably, European powers such as Britain and France gained control over the Red Sea as a result of the Ottoman Empire's decline and the opening of the Suez Canal, which offered a more direct shipping route to Asia than the longer passage around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.¹⁰²

It seems that soon after his rise to power Yohannes faced the vexed problem of Egyptian expansionism to the mainland of the Marab Melash and the embargo on the goods that he imported through Massawa. No doubt Massawa was more important to Yohannes than his medieval predecessors whose capital was in central Ethiopia who could also use ports like Zeila, Berbera and Beilul because the capital of Yohannes was at Makalle. Hence, almost in the year he came to power Marcus indicates,

In mid-1872, the khedive's forces invaded the sub-province of Bogos and prohibited the importation of all arms and ammunition through Massawa into Ethiopia, clearly intending to absorb the entire Red Sea Coast and as much of north-eastern Ethiopia as possible. Yohannes protested at once to Egypt and Great Britain/ but to no avail, although European public opinion was so incensed by Egypt's overt aggression that Werner Munzinger, commander of the khedive's expedition and governor of Suakin and Massawa, felt it expedient to point out in an open letter to Petermanns that only sixty-two German square miles of territory and 36,600 people were involved¹⁰³.

Yohannes IV asserted his authority over the highland regions along the Red Sea coast by appointing his military leader, Ras Alula, as the governor of Medri Bahri (present day Eritrea). Nevertheless, the Red Sea, a crucial maritime route for the prominent European powers of that era, remained beyond his reach. Britain controlled territories in Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, and Somaliland, while France strategically established its presence in the Bay of Tajura within the Gulf of Aden. The acquisition of a 'trading post' from the sultan of Assab

¹⁰² Yohannes Abera, "Ethiopia's Access to Sea: Political Machinations and the Quest for Justice" in [NewsAddis https://newsaddis.com/ethiopia-s-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/](https://newsaddis.com/ethiopia-s-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/) Accessed on May 15, 2025

¹⁰³ Harold Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II Of Ethiopia, 1844-1913* (New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1995), pp. 37-38.

by Italy marked the beginning of Italian occupation in what is now Eritrea, ultimately resulting in Ethiopia's loss of maritime access .¹⁰⁴

Any attempt by Yohannes IV to venture into the Red Sea coast required the approval of the powerful British Empire. On February 5, 1885, Britain violated the Treaty of Adwa, aka the Treaty of Hewett—an agreement signed on June 3, 1884, between Britain, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The Emperor initially demanded a sea port for Ethiopia but ultimately settled for free transit of all goods, including arms, through the port of Massawa (በምጥዋ ቦር የሚወጣና የሚገባ እቃ ሁሉ የኒጋዴም እቃ ቢሆን የጦር መሳሪያም ቢሆን ከግብር ነጻ ይሆናል)¹⁰⁵. The treaty had granted Emperor Yohannes IV to use the freely the Red Sea port of Massawa on the one hand and obligated him to facilitate the withdrawal of stranded Egyptian troops, with Britain pledging to protect Ethiopia's rights.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps as per the agreement Massawa was to remain under the British protection.¹⁰⁷

Subsequent events indicated that the British, whom Yohannes had persistently sought for arbitration, were hesitant to provide him with unhindered maritime access, which was crucial to his strategy. Even after he altered his demand from Massawa to Zula or Anfilla, which are smaller ports located to the south, they continued to disregard his appeals. The primary concern was that the British did not wish to witness Ethiopia triumph over the Egyptians. As early as 1879, they began formulating a strategy to replace the Egyptians along the Red Sea coast while simultaneously safeguarding British interests. Gordon's proposal to assign Zula to the Italians, who already had control over Assab further south, foreshadowed their occupation of Massawa in 1885 with British backing.¹⁰⁸

However, Britain handed Massawa over to Italy in a calculated move to block French expansion and secure Italy as an ally in the Red Sea. This blatant violation marginalized

¹⁰⁴ Yohannes Abera, "Ethiopia's Access to Sea: Political Machinations and the Quest for Justice" in [NewsAddis https://newsaddis.com/ethiopias-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/](https://newsaddis.com/ethiopias-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/) Accessed on May 15, 2025

¹⁰⁵ Adwa/ Hewett Treaty, see Appendix 1

¹⁰⁶ Elias Wondimu, "The Berlin Conference and the Treaty of Adwa at 140: Ethiopia's Resistance and the Struggle for African Sovereignty" in *The Ethiopian Herald Newspaper*, November 23, 2024 ; Yohannes Abera, "Ethiopia's Access to Sea: Political Machinations and the Quest for Justice" in [NewsAddis https://newsaddis.com/ethiopias-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/](https://newsaddis.com/ethiopias-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/) Accessed on May 15, 2025;

¹⁰⁷ Bahru, *A History Modern Ethiopia*, p. 54

¹⁰⁸ Bahru, *A History Modern Ethiopia*, p. 54; Bereket Habte Selassie, p. 52 also indicates that the Italian occupied Massawa with the support of the British.

Ethiopia's role in regional trade, restricted its access to the sea, and undermined its sovereignty. Emperor Yohannes IV protested fervently, but international powers ignored Ethiopia's objections, prioritizing imperial agendas¹⁰⁹.

This treachery planted the seeds of a conflict that would ultimately culminate at Adwa—the very place where the treaty was signed—decisively shattering Europe's colonial dream of total domination over the African continent. Italy, emboldened by its foothold in Massawa, sought to expand its influence in the region, but Ethiopia's resolve remained unyielding.¹¹⁰

In 1869, Italy obtained the port of Assab, situated to the south of Massawa, through a team that prominently featured missionary Giuseppe Sapeto and the navigational firm Rubattino Company. Subsequently, in 1882, the Italian government assumed control of the entire port.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, it was Massawa that functioned as Italy's strategic hub for penetrating the Ethiopian interior. The gaining of Massawa was made possible through British intervention after the withdrawal of Egyptian troops from the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coasts. This withdrawal also led to British dominance over Zeila and Berbera, alongside French authority over Tajura. While the British and French attainments were confined to small coastal territories—referred to as British and French Somaliland—the Italians sought to dominate all of Ethiopia, which ultimately resulted in the Battle of Adwa..¹¹²

According to Trimingham, France took control of Obock in 1881 and extended her authority over Tajura and Djibouti in 1885. That same year, during the Berlin conference, the Great Powers formally consented to the division of Africa. In 1888, the British and French convened to delineate their spheres of influence, with England relinquishing ownership of the islands in the Gulf of Tajura. The boundaries of the British protectorate in Somaliland were ultimately defined through agreements with Italy in 1894 and with Ethiopia in 1897.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Elias Wondimu, "The Berlin Conference and the Treaty of Adwa at 140: Ethiopia's Resistance and the Struggle for African Sovereignty" in *The Ethiopian Herald Newspaper*, November 23, 2024

¹¹⁰ [Elias Wondimu, "The Berlin Conference and the Treaty of Adwa at 140: Ethiopia's Resistance and the Struggle for African Sovereignty" in *The Ethiopian Herald Newspaper*, November 23, 2024](#)

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¹¹¹ Bereket Habte Selassie, 51.

¹¹² Bahru, *A History Modern Ethiopia*, p. 54; Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 132.

¹¹³ Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, p. 132.

Shortly after the ratification of the agreement, Ethiopia honored its commitments, leading to Egypt's withdrawal from Massawa, which was subsequently occupied by Italy with implicit British consent. This act of betrayal sparked a series of confrontations between the Italians and Yohannes IV. Although Ras Alula and Yohannes IV achieved victories in several battles against the Italians, all efforts to expel Italian forces from the coastline were unsuccessful. The Hewett Treaty turned out to be a 'double-edged sword'; it allowed the Italians to occupy the coast with the long-term goal of invading Ethiopia, while simultaneously enabling their advance into the highlands, exploiting Yohannes IV's absence as he went to Metema to address the significant Mahdist threat in Gondar. The Mahdist uprising against Egypt had surrounded and isolated numerous Egyptian garrisons. When Yohannes IV permitted the evacuation of these garrisons to Massawa via Ethiopian territory, the Mahdist leader viewed Ethiopia as an adversary and launched an attack from the west, effectively allowing Britain to eliminate its competitor, Yohannes IV.¹¹⁴

Apparently the Hewett Treaty marked the beginning of the end of Yohannes IV eventful reign. This is because as As Rubenson aptly describes, as a result of the treaty Yohannes unknowingly compelled to trade 'one weak enemy [Egypt] for two strong ones, the Mahdist state and Italy'.¹¹⁵

Despite this, Yohannes IV, along with his esteemed military commander, Ras Alula, who later became the governor of what is now Eritrea, remained determined in their quest to reclaim the coastal territories along the Red Sea. Alula emphasized Ethiopia's claims against Italy by stating that he had defeated the Italians before, at Dogali, and he would do so again. He believed that Ethiopia's rightful border was the Red Sea, and the Italians would only gain land in Ethiopia if Alula were appointed as the Governor of Rome.¹¹⁶ In the interim, the ports of Massawa and Asseb were often traded among Ethiopians, Egyptians, and subsequently Italians. Nevertheless, as Ras Alula claimed, Ethiopian leaders consistently upheld their entitlement to maritime access and participated in conflicts with Egypt and Italy. Ethiopian combatants effectively repelled a major attack from the coastal city of Massawa in

¹¹⁴ **Yohannes Abera, "Ethiopia's Access to Sea"**

¹¹⁵ S. Rubenson, *The Survival Of Ethiopian Independence*, 1976, p. 362

¹¹⁶ Gerald Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London: 1892) as cited in Abebe T Khasay, "Ethiopia's Sovereign Right of Access to the Sea under Ethiopia's Sovereign Right of Access to the Sea under International Law".

1875 and 1876 during the Battles of Gundat and Gura.¹¹⁷ The battles were said to have been part and parcel of the Egyptians bid to succeed the defunct Ottomans¹¹⁸.

Similar to his predecessors, Emperor Menilek, even prior to his rise to the throne and during his reign over Shawa, maintained the longstanding tradition of the nation's rulers seeking maritime access. In a correspondence dated 1878 addressed to Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, Menilek reached out to all European nations, invoking Christianity as his basis for appeal:

*My country is far distant from your country. My road to the coast, to Zeila, Tajura and Aden is at present closed by the Muslims... Will you kindly raise your powerful voice in order that I may have this way opened to me...*¹¹⁹

It seems that Menilek has understood the importance of a sea coast as Marcus succinctly indicates that this was one of the factors that had negatively impacted his rise to power domestically also. Hence, Marcus writes,

*Menelik could not wine and dine his way into power... He had no easy access to the sea to enable him to sell the musk and ivory obtainable from the south-west*¹²⁰.

It seems even several years before the above letter Menilek approached as early as 1872 the French who seemed to have on the verge of formally establishing themselves at Obock, probably as we shall see by constructing the railroad through this route that Menilek secured for Ethiopia the most important entrepot which has eclipsed to date the ancient and Medieval entrepots of Massawa, Arkiko, Baylul, Bebera and Zeila.

According to Marcus in a correspondence addressed to Theophilus Waldmeier on June 15, 1872, the king expressed his willingness to welcome missionaries and indicated that the most favorable route to Shoa was via Aden and Tajura. He requested the dispatch of a doctor, an engineer, a mechanic, and skilled craftsmen in woodworking and metalworking, assuring that

¹¹⁷ Bahru, *A History Of Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 52-53; Abebe T Khasay, p. 20

¹¹⁸ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1980), p. 50.

¹¹⁹ F.O. 407/11 Menelik, December 1878. Cited in Richard Pankhurst. *Economic History of Ethiopia*, (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University, 1968), pp. 101; see also Nuraddin Farah, "Which Way to the Sea, Please?" in *Horn of Africa Journal*, October/December 1978 Volume 1, Number 4, pp. 31-36.

¹²⁰ Harold Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menilek of Menelik II Of Ethiopia, 1844-1913* (New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1995), p. 37.

he would treat them with respect, kindness, and appropriate rewards. In exchange, he was open to allowing missionary activities among the Oromo, but not among the Christian Amhara. Moreover, in the same year, Pierre Arnoux, a French entrepreneur based in Alexandria, proposed an ambitious plan.

*Nothing less than to open a European route toward central Africa via Obok and Shoa ... to furnish in the markets of Marseilles an entrepot for Ethiopian products without any Egyptian interference, to found on the high plateau a French colony, to introduce to Shoa our industry and our civilization, to assist King Menilek by all moral and material means*¹²¹.

Inspired by Arnoux's concepts, Menelik welcomed him to Shoa, his aspirations ignited by this initial encounter with a modern European. The Frenchman fervently proclaimed: 'From Shoa... will emerge the beacon for Ethiopia's revival; your reign will mark... a new epoch, more illustrious and radiant than that of the ancient King Caleb, whose dominion reached Yemen.' Arnoux emphasized that France would serve as the driving force behind this national renewal. Menelik reacted to these notions with profound emotion, expressing to his guest, 'You have given life to my deepest aspirations. It is undoubtedly God who has brought you to me. I am eager to heed your advice... The French are my allies; I shall rely on them for the hope of my reign.'¹²²

*Europeans continued to travel to Shawa, primarily from the Somali coast. Recognizing the potential of a route not under imperial control, Menelik corresponded with the President of France, proposing that the advancements of European civilization could be introduced to enhance his kingdom through Obok, which he referred to as 'the natural port of Shoa'. This French territory was destined to become the hub of Shoa's commerce with Europe.*¹²³

However, it is said that even in the first half of the nineteenth century—Menelik grandfather Sahle Selassie wanted to redirect the commerce through Shawa and to the ports of Zeila and Tajura, drawing profits and increased prosperity for Shawa from transit duties and taxes and the increased commercial activity.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Cited in Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.43.

¹²² Cited in Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.44.

¹²³ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.59.

¹²⁴ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.11.

The Frenchman aimed to establish Obok, located on the Gulf of Tajura, as the Shoan trading hub, deliberately bypassing Zeila due to its cunning governor, Abu Barka Pasha, and the machinations of the Egyptian government that sought to obstruct Menelik's military support from Europe. Concerned that the commercial prosperity of Obok would lead to the economic downfall of Zeila, Abu Barka convened a gathering of chiefs and dignitaries to deliberate on suitable actions against Arnoux, who was prepared to depart from Shoa with documents from Menelik intended for various European heads of state. He bid farewell to the king on July 6, 1876, while carrying goods valued at approximately 199,849 francs¹²⁵.

Perhaps it seems that the French and the Italians already got foothills in the coastal areas of the Red sea and Gulf of Aden. By 1870, signs of European interest in the Ethiopian coastline along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden had already emerged. On March 11, 1862, the French parliament approved Henry Lambert's acquisition of Obok from 1856, although full exploitation of the colony did not commence until after 1883. In 1870, an Italian expedition led by Marchese Orazio Antinori journeyed to the Red Sea coast, claiming Assab and its surrounding areas, with the backing of the Italian government and the Rubattino Company, who intended to establish the port as a fueling and commercial hub. The members of this expedition conducted reconnaissance of the Bogos, Dambalas, Keren, and the Dahlak Islands.¹²⁶

Alongside Obok, Menilek was considering to use the Port of Assab during this period. Reports indicate that in October 1880, Menelik consented to establish a trade route between Assab and Shawa prior to its formal designation as an Italian colony in 1882.¹²⁷ Therefore, in such away Assab also emerged as a competing maritime route against Zeila and Berbera, in addition to Obok.

However, it is fascinating that the Egyptians delegates who by now were at Zeila left no stone unturned to prevent the Shawans use of Oboc and maintain Zeila *status quo* probably a sentiment have been felt by the Ethiopia's neighbouring countries nowadays. The leader of Arnoux's caravan was the son of Abu Barka, and under his father's orders, he commenced the journey towards Zeila rather than Obok. In response to Arnoux's protests, he stated: 'There is

¹²⁵ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.44.

¹²⁶ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.45.

¹²⁷ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, pp.61, 63.

no established route to Obok, nor are there guides available; the drivers will not accompany you as they prefer to return to Zeila where their families and interests lie; ultimately, at Obok, you will find neither boats nor supplies.' Faced with these challenges, the Frenchman reached Zeila on 21 August, where his enforced stay turned into a persistent ordeal filled with betrayal, deceit, and insinuations. Menelik's goods were confiscated and stored in one of Abu Barka's warehouses. Due to the treachery of his two Ethiopian aides, significant doubts were raised regarding his documents. Arnoux believed that Egypt was behind his difficulties, aiming to sabotage his efforts since French involvement in the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia would threaten the aspirations of an Egyptian African empire. However, while Abu Barka did collaborate with Egypt, his actions were ultimately motivated by the desire to protect his trading monopoly and to maintain Zeila as the primary entrepot for the Shoan region.¹²⁸

In the early months of 1884, the French warship l'Infernet was dispatched to Obok, carrying Leonce Lagarde, the newly appointed Resident, along with twelve soldiers. Despite being a modest contingent, their presence was crucial, as the impending evacuation of Egyptian forces from Harar would create a power vacuum in the region. On 9 August 1884, Lagarde entered into a treaty of friendship and trade with the sultan of Gobad, Ahmad Mahammad Liota, thereby securing French dominance over the inland route from Sagallo. An additional agreement granted the French jurisdiction over the territory extending from Ad Aeli, located south of Ghubbat Kharab, to Imbabo. Subsequently, on 18 October, the sultan of Tajura formalized a protocol with Lagarde, placing Ras Ali, Sagallo, and Ghubbat Kharab under French protection. Sagallo was occupied on the same day, following the evacuation of the small Egyptian garrison, and on the 19th, the French flag was hoisted over Ras Ali. Lagarde then proceeded to Tajura, where on 17 November, he took formal possession in the name of France, raising the tricolor amidst a twenty-one-gun salute.¹²⁹

Menelik wrote another famous letter in 1891, this time addressing the Governments of Britain, Italy, France, Germany, and the Czar of Russia as follows:

Ethiopia has been for four centuries a Christian island in a sea of pagans □. Formerly, the boundary of Ethiopia was the sea ... our frontiers on the sea coast fell into the power of the Muslims □. At present, we do not intend to regain our

¹²⁸ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, p.45.

¹²⁹ Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik*, pp. 75-76.

*sea frontiers by force but we trust that the Christian powers guided by our Saviour, will restore to us our sea coast-line . . . at any rate, certain parts of it. If God gives me strength, I shall re-establish the ancient frontiers (tributaries) of Ethiopia up to Khartoum and as far as Lake Nyanza with all the [Oromos] included.*¹³⁰

After numerous unsuccessful attempts, Menelik ultimately granted the French a concession in 1894 to construct a rail line linking the Red Sea coast to Addis Ababa, and Harar. A firm called "Le Compagnie Imperiale des Chemins de Fer Ethiopienne" commenced building from Djibouti. The British expressed their dissatisfaction, worried that the railway would negatively impact trade in Zeila. They sought to purchase the existing company and relocate the terminus from Djibouti to Zeila, or to establish a rival line from Zeila to Harar.¹³¹

As the rail line company encountered financial difficulties, English investors obtained a considerable share and proposed the development of a railway extension from Zeila to link with the Djibouti railway. Nevertheless, this initiative was hindered by considerable opposition from the French.

The boundary delimitation agreement between Ethiopia and the Italian colony of Eritrea was established in 1900, designating the Marab River as the official border between the two regions. This agreement legitimized the territory that the Italians had seized through military force. This situation has likely been the most significant drawback of the Battle of Adwa and of Emperor Menilek's policies regarding Ethiopia. The battle at Adwa did not address Ethiopia's long-standing desire for access to the sea, a need that had intensified in the modern era, as demonstrated by the correspondence and actions of Tewodros and Yohannes. Ironically, Menilek, who was responsible for creating the largest empire in the Ethiopian region, oversaw a series of developments that completely obstructed access to the sea. His successors were compelled to futilely negotiate with neighboring colonial powers for a maritime outlet, reaching out to the British for Zeila and the Italians.¹³²

¹³⁰ F.O. 1/32 Abyssinia Diplomatic Correspondence. cited in *Somali Peninsula* (Mogadiscio 1962), p. 23: See also Nuraddin Farah, "Which Way to the Sea, Please?" in *Horn of Africa* Journal, October/December 1978 Volume 1, Number 4, pp. 31-36.

¹³¹ FO/41/1902; Pankhurst 1968 cited in .Samuel,p. 258.

¹³² Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*,pp. 84-85.

In addition to the peaceful and diplomatic attempts made by modern Ethiopian Emperors like Tewodros, Yohannes IV, and Menilek, the wars they fought in the nineteenth century against the British, the Egyptians, and the Italians were apart from the territorial integrity of the country, part and parcel of the centuries-old endeavor to gain maritime outlets on the Red Sea coastal areas and the Gulf of Aden¹³³.

Consequently, Ethiopia nearly lost all of her coastal territories to European powers by 1952, the year Eritrea entered into a federation with Ethiopia. As previously mentioned, this was likely preceded by the Ottoman occupation of Massawa in 1557. Undoubtedly, Ethiopia enjoyed access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean for centuries, if not millennia, which enabled trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges with coastal civilizations. The loss of these ports interrupted established connections, sparking a lasting aspiration for maritime access.

Now, in the next section, we will turn briefly to the process of the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia and how it was later made to go freely by the EPRDF regime. However the withdrawal of Italians from Ethiopia and the end of WWII did not automatically restore Ethiopia's right of maritime outlet on the Red Sea coastal areas. One of the victors of WWII Britain preferred to retain „Italian Eritrea“ under its control. It seemed that the British, who had betrayed Yohannes IV and denied him access to the Red Sea, were in a mood to repeat their harmful action on Ethiopia. They could not digest the possibility of Ethiopia owning a thousand kilometers of Red Sea coast and be a power in the Red Sea as Axum had been a thousand years ago. They consider Ethiopia, which did not succumb to European colonialism, as an ever shining symbol of their failure¹³⁴

3.2. Ethiopia's claim to Access to the Sea and The Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia

Like his predecessors Haile Selassie I (1930-1974) also continued to search a maritime corridor for Ethiopia. According to John Spencer,

¹³³ Belete Belachew Yihun , *Djibouti Yatigagnat Masfarya (Djibouti: The Yardstick of Dependence)* , 2006, p.9.

¹³⁴Yohannes Abera, „Ethiopia's Access to Sea: Political Machinations and the Quest for Justice“ in NewsAddis <https://newsaddis.com/ethiopias-access-to-sea-political-machinations-and-the-quest-for-justice/> Accessed on May 15, 2025

*Many times before the war, the Emperor had sought access to the sea through Djibouti and through Zeila , a port in British Somaliland not far from Djibouti... Zeila and Djibouti were not possibilities. Eritrea offered the only solution.*¹³⁵

Meanwhile, it seems that Ethiopia's quest for the maritime access was begun in earnest while Haile Selassie was a regent. It seems that one of the objectives of Tafari Mekonnen's 1924 European tour was to assess whether the neighbouring European colonial powers grant to Ethiopia maritime ports.¹³⁶

In the same decade, the Italians proposed to Ethiopia the establishment of a port at Assab located on the Eritrean coast; however, their demands were excessively high. The Italians sought the construction of an electric railway connecting the port to Addis Ababa, a proposal that the Ethiopians were not prepared to accept. In 1926, H. Kittermaster advised his government to cede Zeila to Ethiopia and to acknowledge Ethiopian sovereignty over the Gadabursi people who have been permanently residing in Abyssinia. Although certain segments of the Gadabursi and the Habr Awel of Ishaq came under Ethiopian jurisdiction as a result of the 1897 Treaty, the majority of lineages only traversed the border as seasonal migrants. Consul Plowman even proposed that the handover of a portion of Esa country to Ethiopia in return for a piece of Isahq abode. These considerations may have contributed to the exchange initiative that was subsequently proposed by Ethiopia.¹³⁷

During conversations with the UK's representatives in Addis Ababa, Ras Kassa sought information about the possibility of establishing a plan for the lease of Zeila to Abyssinia. Kassa clearly expressed Ethiopia's desire to come to an agreement regarding the port of Zeila. At that moment, the British were involved in discussions for a water storage project on Lake Tana, and certain officials thought that providing a lease under particular conditions in exchange for the Tana agreement would not present any difficulties.¹³⁸ As a result of on-

¹³⁵ John Spencer, *Ethiopia At Bay : A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie's Years* (Michigan, 1984), p. 141.

¹³⁶ Belete, p. 9; Spencer, p.

¹³⁷ Samuel, p. 260; Gulaid Yusuf Idan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea" Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

¹³⁸ FO/371/13110, 1927 cited in Samuel , p. 260 ; see also Gulaid Yusuf Idan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea" Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023,

going disputes regarding the condition of the Gadabursi located around the boundary, an Anglo-Ethiopian Border authority delineated the boundary between Ethiopia and British Somaliland from 1931 to 1934.¹³⁹ In 1931, the Emperor once more brought up the topic of leasing or creating an Ethiopian owned harbour at Zeila, proposing a strip in return for the lease of the Tana project. However, the British responded with indifference when Sir S. Barton mentioned that the matter was being assessed but it was improbable that any response can be provided for several months.¹⁴⁰

In 1936, Italy launched an invasion of Ethiopia and, during World War II, expelled the British from the Somaliland Protectorate in 1940. Subsequently, they combined the Ogden and the British Somaliland with Somalia to form the Region of Somalia, leading to the ambiguous designation of 'Greater Somalia'. However, soon the British regained control, ousting Fascist Italians from the Horn of Africa in 1941. They also incorporated Kenya's Northern Frontier District (NFD) and sustained to manage the Region of Somalia as a cohesive entity, thereby providing a clearer definition to the idea of 'Greater Somalia.' In 1942, the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement was established; wherein the British consented to transfer the governorship of Ethiopia to Emperor Haile Selassie, with the exception of the Ogden and a 40 km wide corridor surrounding French Somaliland, referred to as the 'Reserved Area.'¹⁴¹

Concerning access to the sea, the Emperor focused his attention on Eritrea. He claimed that this area had been seized from Ethiopia by the Italians between 1869 and 1889. The British were also contemplating the possibility of a thorough revision of the Anglo-Ethiopian borders, with the intention of granting Ethiopia a coastline as part of a broader settlement. After returning from the 1945 Conference of, Mekonnen Endalkachew, the Premier, expressed optimism about Ethiopia obtaining its own ports along the coast. Nevertheless, no decisions could be reached till the WWII came to an end and the subsequent Peace Conference took place.¹⁴²

<https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

¹³⁹ Mersie Hazen Wolde-Qirqos, 2003, 'Yeetiopiana Yeingliz Sumaleland Yewesen Kilil Tarik 1924-1927', in Amharic (Mersie Hazen Wolde-Qirqos, 2010/11, 'A History of Boundary Demarcation of Ethiopia and English-Somaliland, 1931-1935', Addis Ababa), private collection;

¹⁴⁰ FO/371/16099, 1932 cited in Samuel, p. 260.

¹⁴¹ Samuel, p. 261

¹⁴² FO /371/35631, 1942; FO/371/46092, 1945 cited in Samuel, p. 261

When Ethiopia aimed to restore the Somali territories within its borders and the Reserved Areas during the discussions of 1944, the British were secretly pursuing a plan to create a "Greater Somalia." In December 1944, a new Agreement was reached to prolong the British Military Administration (B.M.A.) in the Ogaden and the Reserved Area, although this was limited to areas adjacent to British Somaliland, such as Jigjiga and the Haud. Nonetheless, the British were undertaking activities that compromised Ethiopia's territorial integrity. To gain control over the Reserved Area and the Haud, Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary introduced the infamous "Bevin Plan" in 1946. He argued that the unification of British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, and the neighboring Ethiopian regions (Ogaden) under British Trusteeship would provide substantial advantages to the Somalis. However, due to the rivalry among the Four Powers and Ethiopia's strong opposition, the proposal was quickly rendered ineffective.¹⁴³

In the aftermath of the failure of the 'Bevin Plan', the British shifted their focus towards the permanent establishment of control over the Haud for their Protectorate kinsmen. The Reserved Area was primarily populated by a group of sedentary Gadabursi clans that had adopted mixed farming techniques. Furthermore, the Issa clans from Ethiopia also resided in this region. However, the British's main priority was the Haud, where nearly half of the Protectorate's populace traditionally migrated on a seasonal basis. On the other hand, Ethiopia was ready to offer considerable concessions in order to secure access to the sea. In 1946, Aklilu Habte Wolde, Ethiopia's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, met with Bevin in London and presented a significant proposal. Ethiopia was prepared to give a substantial part of the Ogaden to Great Britain, contingent upon Great Britain granting Ethiopia a strip to Zeila in return. Aklilu illustrated the land to be transferred on a map, showing that the eastern frontier of the Zeila strip would run from the coast in a straight path to connect with the then Ethiopian border outside the Ogaden nearby Segeg in the extreme west. British Somaliland

¹⁴³ FO/371/69291, 1949; FO/371/41448, 1944 cited in Samuel, p. 261; See also Amanuel Abraham, *Ye Hiwote Tizita, (My Life's Memoir)* (Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press. 1992); Gulaid Yusuf Idaan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea" Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

would retain the entirely area east of that line, north of the Wabi Shebelle, and west of the former Italian Somaliland.¹⁴⁴

According John Spencer, "His Majesty had pursued with great persistence since his first trip to Europe in 1924- cession to Ethiopia of the port of Zeila on the coast of the British Somaliland."¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile Spencer further argues that Aklilu never showed him enthusiasm about Zeila which is below Djibouti, perhaps strategically less significant, and above all would compromise Ethiopia's demand for Eritrea with its ports of Massawa and Assab¹⁴⁶.

The proposal's extreme nature can probably be linked to the concerns of the Ethiopians about the future of the Italian colonies. This proposal took the British officials by surprise, and Bevin even commented, "it would be an exaggeration for us to assert such a significant portion of the Ogaden."¹⁴⁷

He also suggested postponing the proposed exchange until the future of the former Italian colonies was resolved, as this could adversely affect Ethiopia's prospects of obtaining Eritrea. Nevertheless, other factors also contributed to the British decision to delay. They viewed the proposed strip of territory as considerably wider than what Ethiopia needed for maritime outlet at Zeila. Additionally, this region was inhabited by the famous Somali subgroups like the Isa, Gadaburssi, and Ishaq. Although they were prepared to withdraw protection from the small portion of the Isa within the Protectorate, they found it difficult to justify the exchange of the Gadaburssi and the Ishaq, apparently among the most prominent Somali subgroups in the British Somaliland. As a result, the British decided to provide a strip of land limited to the way leading to Zeila and the abode of the Issa Somali.¹⁴⁸

For the British, it would be adequate to focus solely on the Haud and the Reserved Area, since the proposed region of the Ogaden was a parched area inhabited by various Somali subgroups with which the British had no previous connections. The British would only consent to the wider Ogaden scheme in the unlikely event that Italian Somaliland came under

¹⁴⁴ Spencer, p. 176, indicates that Aklilu was not enthusiastic about Zeila FO/371/53467, 1946 cited in Samuel, pp. 261-62.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer, p. 176.

¹⁴⁶ Spencer, pp. 176-77, according to Spencer the exchange Haud, the most important part of Ogaden for Zeila with narrow corridor was unrealistic.

¹⁴⁷ FO/371/53467,1946 cited in Samuel , p. 262,

¹⁴⁸ FO/371/53467, 1946 cited in Samuel, p. 262.

British control. However, they considered it imprudent to entirely dismiss the Ethiopian proposal. They submitted to the Emperor a Letter that recognized Ethiopia's proposal, while signaling their willingness to grant only a more restricted strip of land as a corridor.¹⁴⁹

In the meantime, in September 1947, Emperor Haile Selassie called for the prompt restoration of the Ogaden and the Reserved Area. However, the British insisted on retaining the territory till the United Nations (U.N.) passed a resolution concerning the prospect of former Italian Somaliland. Ultimately, a conciliation was reached when Ethiopia presented the Anglo-Ethiopian Etiquette on 29th May 1948. Ethiopia agreed to permit the grazing area and the Haud to remain under the British Military Administration (B.M.A.) for duration while awaiting a conclusive settlement on the Zeila-Haud exchange. The rest of the region was returned to Ethiopia.¹⁵⁰

So far in this section, we have seen how Emperor Haile Selassie cautiously attempted to secure maritime access to his country, specifically in the southeast direction towards the historically important port of Zeila. However, it appears that Emperor Haile Selassie desired the restoration of Eritrea and its historic ports, such as Massawa and Assab, more than anything else, as he devoted much time and energy to this endeavor as we shall see hereunder.

Ethiopia first expressed its aspiration for maritime access before the end of World War II. In 1940, upon realizing that Britain would back his return to power in Ethiopia, Haile Selassie launched a campaign aimed at bringing Eritrea under the control of Addis Ababa. Great Britain's official position was that this matter could only be suitably resolved during the peace talks.¹⁵¹

In June 1943, Haile Selassie dispatched Yilma Deressa to the US to request assistance in various areas, one of which pertained to the matter of maritime access. The United States received Yilma's mention of Ethiopia's requirement for a seacoast with calm consideration. The US Secretary of State believed that a compelling argument could be constructed to

¹⁴⁹ Spencer , p. 174; FO/371/53467, 1946; CASTAGNO 1970; FO/371/73688, 1949.

¹⁵⁰ FO/371/69296, 1948; FO/371/69292, 1948 cited in Samuel, p. 262.

¹⁵¹ Harold G. Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States, 1941-1974: The Politics of Empire* (California: University of California Press, 1983 p. 20.

support Ethiopia's claim that Eritrea or a portion thereof, ought to be integrated into Ethiopia.¹⁵²

On February 13, 1945, the Ethiopian Emperor met with the US President in Cairo after the Yalta Conference. During their meeting, the Emperor outlined Ethiopia's key concerns, which were thoroughly detailed in a memorandum provided to Roosevelt. Harold Marcus asserts that these memoranda highlighted Ethiopia's ongoing frustration with Paris's refusal in 1935-1936 to allow the shipment of arms through the Franco-Ethiopian railway to Addis Ababa. Apart from the deployment of poison gases, it is clear that the main factor contributing to the defeat of Ethiopia in 1936 was the political control exerted over the Franco-Ethiopian Railway. Therefore, it can be concluded that Ethiopia's lack of access to the sea was the true precursor to fascist occupation.¹⁵³

Under the guidance of Aklilu Habtewold, who initially held the position of Foreign Minister and later ascended to the role of Prime Minister of Ethiopia, the country consistently championed its entitlement to maritime access. This advocacy was evident during the Paris Peace Conference and persisted in all major forums until Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. Professor Techola Hagos has chronicled Ethiopia's struggle and underscored the efforts of Aklilu Habtewold, noting that Italy actively sought to exclude Ethiopia from the discussions through a campaign of misinformation and possible corruption. It was the exceptional talent and resolve of the young international law attorney, Aklilu Habtewold, that convinced representatives from France (which maintained an antagonistic position towards Ethiopia), Britain (which had conflicting interests and ambitions to assert control in East Africa), the Soviet Socialist Republic (which was opposed to Ethiopia's interests and held considerable reservations about Emperor Haile Selassie's involvement), and the United States (which was highly supportive and had a new strategic vision for the region) to acknowledge the fairness of including Ethiopia in the Peace Treaty..¹⁵⁴

In the meantime, the issue of Italian colonies in Africa has been a subject of discussion among the Allied Powers since 1942. The fate of these colonies was collectively examined on

¹⁵² Harold G. Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States*, pp. 50-51,

¹⁵³ Harold G. Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain, and the United States*, pp. 50-51,

¹⁵⁴ Techola Hagos <http://www.tecolahagos.com/part4.htm>, See also Zewdie Reta for details of the diplomatic activities and the obstacles the then Foreign Minister was encountering, (2000)

July 22, 1945, during the Potsdam Conference.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, on August 2, 1945, the leaders of Britain, the United States, and the USSR reached a consensus to form a Council of Foreign Ministers, which would include representatives from China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, to address the allocation of the Italian colonies along with other extensive issues related to peace and security.¹⁵⁶

However, it seems that during the September 1945 London conference, the four superpowers - the USA, USSR, UK, and France - represented by their foreign ministers, started to discuss the fate of the formerly Italian colonies. This included Ethiopia's historic northern territory, which had been named Eritrea by the Italians in 1890. In addition to the superpowers, Italy also appealed to participate and explain their case to the superpowers, which was allowed. However, Ethiopia's appeal to participate in the conference to explain and demand the restoration of her historic territories of Eritrea and Somalia did not receive recognition. Instead, Ethiopia was only allowed to present her appeal through written communication, not represented physically. According to Zewde Reta, this decision was flagrant discrimination against Ethiopia.¹⁵⁷

The government of Emperor Haile Selassie made utmost efforts to oppose discrimination and tried to pressure the superpowers to change their decision, although it fell on deaf ears. Some of the measures taken by Addis Ababa included sending urgent messages to President Harry Truman of the USA and UK Prime Minister Clement Atlee, convening foreign diplomats at Ganata Leul Palace to inform them of Ethiopia's disappointment with the four powers' decision, ordering Ethiopia's ambassadors to the USA and UK to convey Ethiopia's dissatisfaction to the governments of these two powers, Emperor Haile Selassie giving an interview to the Reuters news agency to explain the matter, and finally, Eritrean-born inhabitants of Addis made a demonstration in Addis requesting the union of Eritrea with its motherland.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ ¹⁵⁵ (Marjorie M. Whiteman, Post War Territorial Settlements, *Digest of International Law*, Volume 3, p.5, October 1964, U.S. Government printing Office cited in Abebe,p. 33; see also Zewde Reta, p. 23.

¹⁵⁶ XIII Bulletin, Department of State, No 319, Aug.5, 1945, pp. 153,160 cited in Abebe,pp. 33-34.

¹⁵⁷ Zewde Reta , p. 26 ; See also Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997, p. 29, who states When the issue of Eritrea's disposal was initially addressed during the autumn of 1945 at the London Conference, Ethiopian assertions regarding Eritrea were met with little sympathy.

¹⁵⁸ Zewde Reta, p. 27.

It is said that the Italians presented their case at the conference, stating that Italy did not conquer Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia through warfare or seceding from any country. Moreover, Italy further added that Ethiopia's claim for Somalia and Eritrea was unfounded. Italy stated that Eritreans did not have any historical, cultural, or linguistic ties, and their people did not have similar physical appearances. Italy also stated that Ethiopia only knew about the arid coastal areas of the Indian Ocean after Italy's occupation of the region. However, Ethiopia's appeal following Italy's claims indicates that the above statements were merely propaganda.

ካለፉት ሃምሳ ዓመታት ጀምሮ ጣሊያን በጦር ኃይል ከኢትዮጵያ ገንጥሎ የወሰዳቸዋል። የኤርትራና የሱማሌ ህዝቦች ዝቅተኛነዘር እየተባሉ ሰብአዊ ክብራቸውን ገፍፎ በሥቃይ ያስተዳደራቸዋልና ድህነት ላይ የጣላቸው በመሆናቸው የወደፊት እድላቸውን ለማሻሻልና ሙብታቸውን ለማስከበር ከወንድሞቻቸው ከኢትዮጵያ ህዝቦች ጋር ከማዋሃድ በስተቀር ሌላ መፍትሄ የለውም።¹⁵⁹

For the past fifty years, the Eritrean and Somali peoples, who have been separated from Ethiopia by military force by Italy, have been stripped of their human dignity, treated with suffering, and have been reduced to poverty. There is no other solution than to integrate with their Ethiopian brothers and sisters in order to improve their future prospects and protect their rights.

Regarding the outcome of the London Conference, the ministers of the three superpowers made a decision that favored Italy. They stated that Ethiopia's request should not be presented as an agenda item and should be rejected without considering Ethiopia's claim to the territory based on history and culture. However, the UK Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, disagreed. He argued that Ethiopia's request deserved consideration, pointing out the interconnected lives of Eritreans and Ethiopians. Bevin believed that the issue should be critically examined and discussed as an agenda item.¹⁶⁰

On July 15, 1946, Secretary of State Byrnes provided an update on the progress achieved by the Council of Foreign Ministers during the second segment of its meeting in Paris. No definitive decision was reached regarding the fate of the Italian colonies. If the four main Allied Powers fail to agree on the management of the colonies within one year of the treaty's

¹⁵⁹ Zewde Reta, p. 30.

¹⁶⁰ Zewde Reta, p. 30; see also Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, p. 25; G.K.N Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 58 indicate that Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea was based on historical, strategic and economic grounds.

enactment, they have pledged to enact the recommendations for their disposition as put forth by the General Assembly of the United Nations.¹⁶¹

In the meantime, during the Paris Peace Settlement of 1946, Ethiopia's assertion regarding Eritrea was met with a favorable reaction. Bevin proposed that the suitable course of action would be to support Ethiopia's appeal for the reinstatement of Eritrea. The British were eager to finalize an agreement with Ethiopia on various issues, including the Tana Project, Baro Salient, Kenya-Moyale, and the Haud-Zeila exchange. Recognizing Ethiopia's apprehension about access to the sea, the British emphasized that their backing for Ethiopia's claim over Eritrea would depend on Ethiopia's response to the previously mentioned issues. In 1946, both the French and Russians supported the idea of Italy having trusteeship over all its former colonies during the Council of Foreign Ministers (C.F.M.). Aiming to connect the western lowlands of Eritrea to Sudan, the British sought to enable Ethiopia to take control of Eritrea while allowing the Italians to return to Somalia. They were confident that Ethiopia would not oppose such an arrangement, provided it retained the eastern section along with Asmara and the ports.¹⁶²

Ethiopia's diminishing interest in the exchange was subtly revealed when Aklilu presented a draft of a "Treaty of Friendship and Commerce" to the British Consul in September 1947. It became clear that the Treaty took precedence over the exchange when he noted that the Reserved Area and Ogaden should be regarded as having been "blocked" or placed in a state of suspension. They would only be considered "negotiable" again if no oil discoveries occurred. Nonetheless, Ato Aklilu reassured the British by indicating that the adjustments to the frontier and the new Treaty should be concluded simultaneously. In November, the Vice-Minister expanded on Ethiopia's stance concerning Eritrea and briefly touched upon the situation in Italian Somaliland to the Deputies for Italian colonies. Overall, he conveyed satisfaction with the reception of the Ethiopian case.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ XIII Bulletin, Department of State, No 319, Aug.5, 1945, pp. 153,160 cited in Abebe p.34.

¹⁶² (FO/371/53467, 1946 cited in Samuel, p. 263.

¹⁶³ FO/371/63216, 1947 cited in Samuel, p. 264; Gulaid Yusuf Idan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea – Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications" in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

The British sought to address several unresolved matters, such as the division of Baro Salient, Lake Tana, and the alteration of the British Somaliland-Ethiopian border, before entering into treaty discussions. They were keen to progress these talks while they still possessed leverage over Eritrea. The British recognized that once Eritrea's status was settled, their chances of obtaining advantageous agreements would greatly decrease. Nevertheless, they had to delay, especially the Haud-Zeila exchange, due to opposition from the French. For almost a year, they were unable to submit their counter-draft because of the French objections.¹⁶⁴

In the perception of the Ethiopians, a distinct connection was recognized between the Zeila Haud exchange and the destiny of Eritrea, while the British viewpoint was markedly different. From the British standpoint, it was impractical to delay the Zeila exchange until the Eritrean situation was clarified. Ultimately, the matter revolved around the purported Ethiopian tactic of stalling negotiations until the Eritrean issue was resolved in one way or another. The British were of the opinion that even minor justifications were employed to defer discussions concerning both the Treaty and the Haud-Zeila exchange. For instance, talks were postponed until January 1949 due to Ato Aklilu's health issues. The British opted to take the initiative as the Ethiopians were reluctant to continue discussions on the Haud-Zeila after Aklilu's return from medical care abroad. By 1949, it was increasingly apparent that with the possibility of Eritrea's federation and the acquisition of Assab as a beneficial outlet, Ethiopia was withdrawing its commitment and displaying a waning interest in the exchange.¹⁶⁵

In the meantime, the French objection to the Haud-Zeila trading weakened the negotiating position of the British. This resistance compelled the British to postpone negotiations and forfeit prospects that were advantageous for finalizing suitable arrangements. When the Haud-Zeila interchange, which included a corridor, was proposed in November 1946, there were concerns that it would provoke the sensitivities of the French and create complications with the Isa Somali subgroup. The suggested corridor was situated along the eastern border of French Somaliland. Furthermore, the primary aim of Ethiopia's suggestion was to secure maritime access, thus circumventing the French port of Djibouti and the railway under French

¹⁶⁴ FO/371/63158, 1947; FO/371/73688, 1948 cited in Samuel, p. 264 .

¹⁶⁵ FO/371/69290B, 1948; FO/371/69291, 1948; FO/371/73688, 1949 cited in Samuel, P. 264.

control. The Ethiopians and the British concurred to withhold information from the French until they reached a conclusive agreement regarding the exchange.¹⁶⁶

The exchange became intertwined with various international issues, including the deliberations regarding the fate of Libya, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland. As the conversations about the fate of Italian colonies commenced, the British found it increasingly challenging to maintain the secrecy of the exchange. They believed that disregarding French perspectives would complicate their efforts to reach an agreement on the crucial matters concerning Tripolitania and Eritrea. The British required French support to prevent Italy's return to both Libya and Ethiopia¹⁶⁷.

The conflict between the British and the French was an authorized matter, specifically concerning the legitimacy of certain requirements of the Tripartite Treaty of 1906, which involved France, Italy, and Britain. The British contended that the entire requirements, with the exception of Article 10 regarding the rail line service, had become void when Great Britain and France acknowledged Italy's seizure of Ethiopia. This Clause restricted the British from building a rail line from British Somaliland to Ethiopia without French approval, as it would directly compete with the Franco-Ethiopian Railway. Conversely, the French maintained that Article 4 remained valid. This Article stated that 'in any case' the three powers should coordinate their efforts regarding the interests of France in relation to the hinterland of French Somaliland¹⁶⁸.

By the time the British informed their French counterparts about the negotiations for trading in 1948, the latter responded with an insufficient Memo. This Memo specified that they could not entertain British suggestions up until a pronouncement concerning the disposal of Eritrea had been completed. Concerned about the potential founding of a competing rail line, the French objected the swapping. Additionally, the French voiced their apprehension about encirclement, particularly pertaining to Ethiopia's possible attainment of Eritrea, which included the Assab port. It took more than a year for the British to convince the French to alter their stance. When the French ultimately relinquished their disagreement in 1949, they imposed adverse circumstances. Among these preconditions was the rail line servitude established in 1906. Most of the Isa Somali resided in Ethiopia and Djibouti, with only a

¹⁶⁶ FO/371/53467, 1946 cited in Samuel, p. 265.

¹⁶⁷ FO/371/69290B, 1948; FO/371/73688, 1948 cited in Samuel, p. 265.

¹⁶⁸ FO371/69290B, 1948; FO371/69291, 1948 cited in Samuel , p. 265.

small percentage of them living at the northern part of Somaliland along the Zeila strip. Despite having entered into a protectorate treaty with the British, the latter planned to relinquish control of the strip following their extraction of protection. The Ethiopians were wary of the implications of the 1906 Tripartite Treaty and sought to maintain freedom of action within the strip.¹⁶⁹

Negotiations regarding the Haud-Zeila exchange were halted in July 1949 and only resumed in January 1950 due to Italy disputing Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian Government's inclination was to prolong the situation until the Eritrean issue was conclusively resolved. As Ethiopia was quite confident of acquiring either Assab or Massawa, the significance of Zeila Port further declined. Additionally, the servitude associated with the Zeila Corridor significantly reduced its worth. Should the Haud-Zeila exchange fail, the British anticipated the subsequent arrangements: (a) a lease of the Haud, which was considered relatively reasonable, (b) a new grazing arrangement, which was deemed less practical, and (c) complete buying, which was viewed as highly impractical.¹⁷⁰

The negotiations regarding the Haud-Zeila exchange were complex, encompassing detailed discussions about territorial modifications, the interests of different clans, and the wider geopolitical context of the era. Ethiopia's ambition for access to the sea, alongside Britain's desire for advantageous territorial agreements involving the Essa, Gadabursi, and Ishaq (Habr Awel) tribes, created a foundation for an extended diplomatic endeavor with significant implications. The negotiations and the proposals presented were crucial components of a complicated historical scenario that left a lasting influence on the region¹⁷¹.

In 1949, the Four Powers could not reach a consensus on the situation in Eritrea, which resulted in the case being referred to the United Nations, while Somalia was designated as an Italian trusteeship. Subsequently, in 1951, the U.N. passed Resolve 390 V, which led to Eritrea being federated with Ethiopia in 1952. After a span of over 500 years, Ethiopia's enduring quest for access to the sea was finally acknowledged. This resolution had a considerable effect on the Haud-Zeila swapping. In 1953, Ethiopia once again brought up the

¹⁶⁹ FO/371/69290B, 1948; FO/371/73688, 1948; FO/371/63133, 1948 cited in Samuel, pp.265-66.

¹⁷⁰ FO/371/73688, 1949 cited in Samuel, p. 266.

¹⁷¹ Gulaid Yusuf Idaan, "Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea" Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

matter of reclaiming the Haud and the Reserved Area by formally suggesting a Treaty of Friendship. Negotiations began in March 1953, with specialists from both sides examining the issues at hand.¹⁷²

Now it is necessary to briefly highlight how the process of the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia was materialized. It is said that of the Four Powers, Great Britain and USA inclined albeit partly to support the Ethiopian Case, that is Ethiopia request for the union of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The remaining Two Powers, France and USSR were against Ethiopia. While the French vehemently supported the Italians while USSR was as a leader of the Communist Block was sceptical of the moves of the Capitalis countries like USA and UK . To borrow Zewde Reta's words, 'የሶቪየት ህብረት እንደተለመደው በአንግሎ አሜሪካኖች የቀረበው ሀሳብ ለኮሎኒያሊስቶች መጠቀሚያ የታቀደው ነው። በማለት በጥብቅ ተቃወመው።'¹⁷³ (The Soviet Union, as usual, strongly opposed the proposal put forward by the Anglo-Americans, saying that it was intended for the benefit of the colonialists)

Meanwhile, Emperor Haile Selassie's Memorandum delivered to the United Nations in 1948 encapsulates the demands of Ethiopia as follows:

Before the race among European powers to partition the continent of Africa, Ethiopia possessed a vast coastline along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It was only during the final 15 years of the 19th century that Ethiopia lost its access to the sea due to the loss of the Somali Peninsula and Eritrea¹⁷⁴.

As previously discussed, the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, which signified the conclusion of World War Two, had significant repercussions, forcing Italy to give up its former colonies, yet it postponed the matter of their administration. This situation fostered a conducive atmosphere for the rise of competing factions seeking acknowledgment and backing. The demands became sharply divided between those advocating for union with Ethiopia and those pursuing independence. The Unionists emerged as the leading political group in Eritrea. The

¹⁷² Spencer, p. 235; Bereket Habte Selassie, p. 56; FO/371/73688, 1950 cited in Samuel, p.266; Gulaid Yusuf Idaan, 'Undying Ambition Ethiopia's Enduring Quest for Access to the Sea' Historical Foundations, Geopolitical Strategies, and Regional Implications' in *Somaliland Current*, December 12, 2023, <https://i0.wp.com/www.somalilandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IMG-20231127-WA0000-1.jpg?fit=720%2C405&ssl=1>

¹⁷³ Zewde Reta, p. 143.

¹⁷⁴ Nuruddin Farah, <https://www.hiiraan.com/>

Independence Bloc, as it was known, consisted of a coalition of diverse groups united solely by their opposition to union. This bloc encompassed the Muslim League, which was well-established in the Muslim-majority lowlands; the Liberal Progressive Party, which promoted the independence of an Eritrea that was allied with Tigre; and a faction of Italian settlers, former askaris, and individuals of mixed descent who supported independence as a pretext for the continuation of Italian influence.¹⁷⁵

In contrast to the common belief regarding the struggle to define Eritrea's future, the primary divisions were not solely based on religious affiliations: Christians did not uniformly advocate for union, nor did Muslims uniformly support independence. For example, a Muslim faction known as the Independent Muslim League of Massawa (a breakaway group from the Muslim League) favored union, contingent upon the protection of Eritrean Muslims' interests. Conversely, the pro-independence Liberal Progressive Party was largely composed of Christians. What remained indisputable was the presence of external backers for the various factions. Consequently, the unionists received support from the Ethiopian government. The Liberal Progressive Party was significantly influenced by the British, who had promoted a strategy of dividing Eritrea by linking the lowlands to Sudan while consolidating the Tsegre-na-speaking highlands. Similarly, the pro-Italian faction received substantial financial backing from Italy, which, after its bid for trusteeship was rejected, aimed to maintain indirect control by endorsing Eritrean independence. Indeed, the Italians emerged as the primary benefactor of the Independence Bloc as a whole.¹⁷⁶

Unable to resolve the Eritrean issue, Great Britain, the USA, the USSR, and France ultimately brought the Eritrean matter to the attention of the United Nations in 1948. The UN established a committee composed of five individuals from five countries: Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, and South Africa, to determine the desires of the Eritrean people. Four out of the five members, with the exception of Norway, held an anti-Ethiopian position. However, the strong pro-Ethiopian sentiments they encountered in Eritrea compelled at least two of them to modify their perspective. One advocated for independence,

¹⁷⁵ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 182.

¹⁷⁶ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 182.; See also Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, p. 28, The foundation of the Separatist Movement in Eritrea was initiated by the British, who provided their complete support.

representing the strong pro-Italian Latin American lobby, while the other supported the Muslim cause in Eritrea..¹⁷⁷

The stance of the powers particularly that of Britain and the United States, significantly influenced the promotion of the federation formula. In a bid to secure the Ogaden as a quid pro quo, Britain shifted its earlier position regarding Eritrea and began to support Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea, or at the very least, to the highland region of Eritrea. As a result, the partition plan was revised to propose that the highlands be incorporated into Ethiopia while the lowlands be allocated to British-controlled Sudan. Nevertheless, when it became clear that the Ethiopian government was not prepared to trade the Ogaden for Eritrea, the British sought to withdraw their support. By that point, it was too late, as the federation formula had already received backing from numerous members of the United Nations.¹⁷⁸

Another factor that influenced the acceptance of the federation formula was the support provided by the United States. The American approach in Eritrea was largely shaped by the need to secure the communications base they had acquired from the Italians - Radio Marina. Consequently, they were more inclined to support the federal structure, placing their trust in Ethiopia rather than an independent Eritrea, which was seen as an unpredictable factor. The federation not only played a significant role in the internal narrative of the nation but also marked the beginning of a new phase in its international relations - the decline of British influence and the start of a close alliance with the United States, a partnership that lasted until the Revolution of 1974.¹⁷⁹

The Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia was the result of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime's diplomatic maneuvering, and to use Spencer's words, "a goal for which he personally had struggled since 1924" ¹⁸⁰ serving as a solution to Ethiopia's longstanding desire for a maritime harbor. This allowed Ethiopia to utilize its historic ports like Massawa and Assab. However, this union only lasted for just over a generation, ending with Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1993. In the next chapter, we will explore why and how the EPRDF regime allowed Eritrea to leave with these historic ports. Additionally, we will examine why and

¹⁷⁷ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 182; Bereket Habte Selassie, p. 56.

¹⁷⁸ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 182; Spencer, p. 176

¹⁷⁹ Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, p. 182.

¹⁸⁰ Spencer, p. 251.

how the current reformist regime has brought up the issue of Ethiopia's need for a maritime port, and how neighboring countries and regional powers have responded to this request

CHAPTER FOUR

4. ETHIOPIA'S QUEST FOR ACCESS TO THE SEA DURING THE POST-EPRDF ERA AND TENSIONS WITH NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

4.1. The Cession of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the EPRDF/TPLF Regime

Following the federation with Eritrea, Ethiopia acquired ownership of two significant ports, Assab and Massawa, situated along the coastline of the Red Sea. These ports represented around 93 percent of the nation's import-export operations. The port of Djibouti, functioning as a free port, managed the remaining 7 percent of Ethiopia's maritime freight. All three ports were designed to support deep-sea vessels, included a range of mechanized cargo-handling equipment, and provided both covered and open storage facilities.¹⁸¹

The port of Assab was linked by road to Addis Ababa. Established by the imperial government in the late 1950s, Assab, along with Djibouti, primarily facilitated trade for Ethiopia's central and southern regions. In 1988, Assab represented roughly 71% of the import-export trade. During the Ethiopian Fiscal Year 1986/87, more than 2.8 million tons of cargo transited through Assab, with approximately 66% being imports, which included around 792,000 tons of crude oil intended for Assab's refinery. Although the port of Assab itself was not in jeopardy, anti-government forces regularly targeted the Addis Ababa-Assab highway.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ <https://geographic.org/>

¹⁸² <https://geographic.org/>

Massawa was linked to Asmara through both road and rail networks. Prior to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) taking control of Massawa in early 1990, the port primarily managed traffic destined for the northern part of the country. Additionally, the Ethiopian navy had the majority of its vessels based in Massawa. During the Ethiopian Fiscal Year 1986/87, Massawa handled approximately 470,000 tons of cargo, with imports constituting about 14 percent¹⁸³

In addition to the primary ports, Eritrea has a limited inland water transportation network. The Baro River is navigable and is used for the transport of goods to Sudan. During the drought of 1986-87, significant problems arose at the port of Aseb, where food aid sent to Ethiopia spoiled in storage facilities, and ships experienced lengthy delays in unloading their cargo. In response to these difficulties, the government revealed plans in 1988 to build a new terminal at Assab, supported by an US\$11 million loan from the European Investment Bank. This multipurpose terminal was intended to handle general cargo, container ships, and roll-on/roll-off vessels, featuring a transit shed of 6,400 square meters. The government aimed to complete the first berth by 1991, with the entire project expected to be finished by 1992.¹⁸⁴

Following the occupation of Asmara by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1991 and the subsequent collapse of Mengistu Haile Mariam's Marxist Derg regime, Eritrea proclaimed its independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Consequently, Ethiopia became landlocked as a result of losing Eritrean territory along with the ports of Massawa and Assab located in the Red Sea. Consequently, since the onset of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, Djibouti has functioned as Ethiopia's main seaport, managing around 90% of its import and export requirements.¹⁸⁵

Although the specific agreement established between TPLF and EPLF during Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia remains unclear regarding the Red Sea Ports in general and Assab in particular, it is reported that the agreements made in 1991 and 1993 facilitated reciprocal rights for citizens, permitted Eritrea to utilize Ethiopia's birr for a fair division of assets,

¹⁸³ <https://geographic.org/>

¹⁸⁴ <https://geographic.org/>

¹⁸⁵ Ethiopian News Agency, "Ethiopia's Trade, Investment Flow to Djibouti Significantly Growing Over Past Three Years: Ethiopian Ambassador," 11 January 2024; The New Humanitarian, "Accord signed to use Djibouti port," 15 April 2002, <https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/02/12/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access/>

regulated Ethiopia's access to Assab to mitigate the impact of losing its coastline, among other provisions. Any tensions that arose seemed to be minor and certainly resolvable with goodwill. Those in Ethiopia who continued to oppose Eritrea's independence appeared subdued or, at the very least, reluctantly accepting¹⁸⁶.

Therefore, it appears that there was a brief partnership between TPLF and EPLF. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and newly independent Eritrea initially formed a strong partnership. In 1993, an agreement between the internal affairs ministries of both countries reaffirmed a previous accord exempting each other's citizens from visa requirements for entry. This provision aimed to strengthen the historical and cultural ties valued by both peoples and enhance the bonds of friendship between them. Article 2.3 of the agreement stated that, "until the citizens of one country residing in the territory of the other are fully identified and the citizenship issue is resolved in both nations, the traditional right of citizens from one country to reside in the territory of the other shall be respected."¹⁸⁷

Moreover, besides enabling the free movement of people and goods across their common border, the two countries consented to execute collaborative security training programs and work together on police training and operations, drug trafficking prevention, motor vehicle regulation, and other associated issues. They also formed a high-level joint governmental commission aimed at fostering political collaboration and economic integration between them. The bond between the two nations was so strong that in June 1996, President Issayas Afewerki of Eritrea stated to a newspaper in Addis Ababa that the border separating Eritrea and Ethiopia was becoming "meaningless."¹⁸⁸

However, this does not mean that there were no problems regarding the relations between the governments led by former insurgent leaders, Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afwerki. The fault line began to appear even before the end of the honeymoon following their expulsion of the military junta from Addis Ababa and Asmara. It is sad that the independence of Eritrea, whether de facto in 1991 or de jure in 1993, resulted in a completely new array of challenges. This was partly due to the apparent lack of thorough consideration regarding both the strategic and economic implications. For Ethiopia, there were the actual or perceived

¹⁸⁶ Why? The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 25, No. 77, Britain's African Policy: Ethical, or Ignorant? (Sep., 1998), pp. 510.

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/ethioerit0103/ethioerit0103-02.htm>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/ethioerit0103/ethioerit0103-02.htm>

consequences of approximately half a million Eritreans remaining in Ethiopia with unrestricted access to employment, at a time when around 150,000 Ethiopians were suddenly expelled from Eritrea during 1991 and 1992.¹⁸⁹

The Ethiopian government's lack of protest concerning the expulsions was met with significant resentment. There was a prevalent, and largely accurate, belief that there was no true reciprocity in employment opportunities, with Eritrea and its citizens seen as the main beneficiaries at the expense of Ethiopia. Eritrea was perceived to be gaining a considerable trade advantage through the ongoing use of Ethiopia's birr, which had been acquired in the form of loans at the time of independence. These funds were later utilized to export Ethiopian products, especially coffee, and to obtain hard currencies for Eritrea instead of for Ethiopia. Recent assertions from Ethiopia indicate that Eritrea has made little to no effort to comply with any repayment schedules, possibly viewing the loans as reparations. A growing middle class in Tigray has started to voice concerns regarding this seemingly pro-Eritrean economic approach and Ethiopia's relationship with Sudan. This scenario is broadly interpreted as being beneficial to Eritrea rather than to Ethiopia or Tigray. Undoubtedly, one result has been the depreciation of Tigray's acquisition of an international border with Sudan and the constitutional amendments of 1995.¹⁹⁰

In Eritrea, a number of similar challenges have emerged, causing both irritation and concern. These issues range from Ethiopia's initial refusal to offer any reparations, despite having left behind considerable assets, to the dissatisfaction within the Tigray industry, which has adversely affected the growth of emerging industries in Eritrea. Furthermore, border controls have disrupted food supplies entering Eritrea, and Ethiopia's decision to import refined oil products while effectively restricting the use of the aging Assab oil refinery, although commercially justifiable, has led to financial setbacks for Eritrea. Most recently, there has been the introduction of new currencies, specifically the nakfa in Eritrea and the new birr note in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's subsequent insistence on the use of letters of credit and hard currency for nearly all commercial transactions has undermined the fundamental value of this operation for Eritrea, which had hoped that the introduction of the nakfa would help alleviate

¹⁸⁹ Why? The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict [Review of African Political Economy](#), Vol. 25, No. 77, Britain's African Policy: Ethical, or Ignorant? (Sep., 1998), pp. 510.

¹⁹⁰ Why? The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict [Review of African Political Economy](#), Vol. 25, No. 77, Britain's African Policy: Ethical, or Ignorant? (Sep., 1998), pp. 510.

its currency reserve shortages; these reserves are primarily sourced from overseas remittances.¹⁹¹

In light of this context, it is essential to comprehend the complex range of border issues. There are several points of dispute along the border: Om Hager/Humera to the west; Badume and the Yirga triangle near Sheraro, located between the Merab and Takazze rivers; Tserona and Zalembessa to the north of Adigrat; Alitiena and Irob; Badda and the northern Dankalia depression; as well as Bore along the route to Assab. The most notable conflicts have taken place in the Yirga triangle, especially around Zalembessa, Alitiena, and Bore.¹⁹² Since this issue is beyond the scope of this this lets now turn to its ramifications on the Ethiopia's access to the Sea.

The commencement of the Ethiopia-Eritrea War in May 1998 necessitated Ethiopia's reliance on Djiboutian ports. In his analysis of the conflict's economic repercussions, Jon Abbink contends that throughout the war, "Eritrea obstructed all shipments in the port of Asseb intended for Ethiopia, leading to losses amounting to tens of millions of dollars. Consequently, Ethiopia shifted all its maritime activities from Massawa and Asseb to the port of Djibouti, even threatening to bar other vessels from docking at Eritrean ports."Ethiopia-Eritrea Port Agreement void but also designated the Port of Djibouti as the sole maritime access point for Ethiopia.¹⁹³

In addition to international and regional influences, it was the domestic policy decisions made by the EPRDF regime that rendered absolute reliance on Djibouti unavoidable. The Meles Zenawi administration made no effort, either during the Eritrean secession or the subsequent negotiations after the border conflict, to reaffirm Ethiopia's necessity for continuous access to the seaport. As noted by one commentator, Ethiopia "was officially rendered landlocked by a dubious and ignominious decision of the government in power and its international backers"¹⁹⁴. This viewpoint is also echoed by, Gebru Asrat,¹⁹⁵ once the

¹⁹¹ Why? The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict [Review of African Political Economy](#), Vol. 25, No. 77, Britain's African Policy: Ethical, or Ignorant? (Sep., 1998), pp. 510.

¹⁹² Why? The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict [Review of African Political Economy](#), Vol. 25, No. 77, Britain's African Policy: Ethical, or Ignorant? (Sep., 1998), pp. 511.

¹⁹³ Tezera Tazebew, "Ethiopia's Quest for Utilizing the Port of Berbera, Somaliland, since 2010: Drivers, Processes, and Challenges," in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* Vol LVI, No. 1 (June 2023), p. 5.

¹⁹⁴ Addis Fortune 11.1.2015 cited in Tezera, p. 5.

¹⁹⁵ Gebru Asrat, *Lualawinet Ena Democracy BeEthiopia (Amharic) [Sovereignty & Democracy in Ethiopia]*, Addis Ababa, 2007 E.C.

president of Tigray regional State, and Abebe Teklehaimanot¹⁹⁶ both of whom were former high-ranking officials and senior members of the TPLF. The regime lacked the sensitivity to understand the consequences of not having a coastline for the Ethiopian state. Therefore, the shortcomings of this policy stem from its misguided belief in the significance of maritime access.¹⁹⁷

So far, we have been examining the EPRDF's/TPLF's blatant policy of disregarding Ethiopia's centuries-old quest for a maritime outlet. This decision has once again left the country landlocked, undoing the efforts of its predecessors dating back to medieval times. Ethiopia and its leaders have worked tirelessly to secure access to its historic maritime ports. Throughout history, the country has fought numerous wars and many leaders have lost their lives defending against aggressors seeking to control these ports as we have seen elsewhere in the thesis. Even the conflict between Mengistu's military junta and the EPLF and TPLF insurgents can be viewed in this context. Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam elaborate on this issue as follows:

For Ethiopia, except during the EPRDF era, accessing the sea was considered an existential matter. However, the Red Sea-centered foreign policy orientation was tactically silenced following Eritrea's independence in 1991, de facto, and in 1993, de jure. This marked a significant departure from the pre-existing narrative, as the government (EPRDF period 1991-2018) voluntarily abandoned Ethiopia's claim to the sea and politicized the issue, characterizing those who raised it as expansionists and war-monger.

Although Ethiopia's loss of sea access was caused by a combination of historical, geopolitical, and international factors including the 16th-century Portugal-Ottoman Empires rivalry and the 19th and late 20 century British-Italian-French rivalry it was primarily the policy orientation of the EPRDF that transformed Ethiopia into a landlocked country and ended the struggle for permanent sea access. This EPRDF's siloed worldview curtailed the generations-long quest for a permanent seaport, aligning with the intended policy objectives pursued by Ottoman Empire, European colonial powers, and post-independent Egypt. It was not the aspirations of the people

¹⁹⁶ Abebe Teklehaimanot, "Ethiopia's Sovereign Right of Access to the Sea under International Law" (Athens: Georgia, MA Thesis 2007) cited in Tezera, p. 5.

¹⁹⁷

*that were realized, but rather those of Egypt, a country that supported insurgents and secessionists, including the EPLF and TPLF, from the beginning. Under the EPRDF's siloed worldview, the narratives that regarded access to the sea as an existential matter were reduced to viewing ports as mere tradable commodities*¹⁹⁸.

The regime also separated access to the sea from its essential need for development and national security, asserting that there was no significant causal relationship. This perspective was further validated by the double-digit economic growth experienced during that period. As the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi remarked: "If we don't utilize the two ports [Misewa and Aseba], we lose nothing. Being landlocked does not render us impoverished. We cannot and should not endure the disadvantages of being a landlocked nation. In terms of development and growth, Ethiopia achieved its fastest results ever." Nevertheless, this viewpoint fails to acknowledge the fact that the nation's economic growth and strategic interests have been limited by its absence of direct access to the sea, resulting in a reliance on a single maritime outlet.¹⁹⁹

Let us briefly outline the consequences of lacking maritime ports. Landlocked developing nations, such as Ethiopia, experience an average reduction of 30% in trade compared to their coastal peers, resulting in a slower economic growth rate approximately 1.5% lower due to their landlocked condition. This predicament has led to increased import costs and diminished export revenues, with transportation expenses posing a significant challenge. Ethiopia relies heavily on Djibouti for nearly 80-90% of its imports and exports, which has escalated transport costs. In 2023, the nation is confronted with a staggering annual expense of \$1.6 billion in port fees as a result of its absence of direct sea access. Furthermore, the port of Djibouti is struggling to accommodate Ethiopia's growing trade requirements and its rapidly developing economy. Factors such as prolonged transit times (averaging about 50 days), elevated logistics costs for imports, inconsistent customs procedures, and delays at the port all contribute to Ethiopia's heightened logistics costs for bulk imports²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁸ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events/>

¹⁹⁹ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events

²⁰⁰ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events

In addition to the economic consequences of being landlocked, Ethiopia's geographical situation renders it a passive participant in the geopolitical interactions of the Red Sea Theatre, where both major and regional powers are actively involved. This landlocked status intensifies Ethiopia's security vulnerabilities, as it becomes more dependent on the maritime strategies and decisions of its neighboring coastal nations, thus reducing its own strategic independence²⁰¹.

Moreover, the absence of direct access to the sea severely limits the country's military capabilities, confining it to land and air forces. This geographical constraint undermines its capacity to project power and influence maritime security within the region. Consequently, Ethiopia is forced to depend on land and air power, which may not sufficiently tackle the evolving security threats posed by non-state actors such as terrorists and pirates²⁰².

Thus, Ethiopia's pursuit of sovereign and permanent access to a seaport arises as a solution to the strategic and economic difficulties that limit its physical and existential security. This endeavour transcends the mere enhancement of trade routes or the acquisition of a physical edge; it signifies a crucial attempt to restore a sense of belonging within the global community, which has been diminished by geographical isolation. Historically, Ethiopia's lack of a coastline has cultivated feelings of detachment from the strategic dynamics of the Red Sea region, exacerbating the nation's sense of vulnerability.²⁰³

Be that as it may, Eritrea's secession followed what many consider an unjust referendum, with Ethiopia's transitional government being the first to acknowledge it. However, a formal state succession between the predecessor and successor states did not occur. There was no agreement for devolution between the two nations to oversee the division of property and the

²⁰¹ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

²⁰² Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

²⁰³ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in *FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs*, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

transfer of rights and responsibilities stemming from the treaties that Ethiopia had entered into while Eritrea was part of it. The subsequent interactions were conducted informally, relying on the key figures and major political entities of both countries, particularly the TPLF and the EPLF (People's Front for Democracy & Justice post-1991), which played a pivotal role in overthrowing the Dergue.²⁰⁴

It is indeed paradoxical that not only the EPRDF/TPLF, but also the intelligentsia and the majority of the emerging political parties, despite being intentionally obstructed by the TPLF, remained silent regarding Ethiopia's entitlement to claim one of its historic ports for maritime access. This silence was eventually shattered by Abiy Ahmed of the Prosperity Party, a topic we will delve into in the subsequent section. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions prior to this. One such exception was Dr. Yaqob Haile Mariam, an Ethiopian law professor based in the United States and a former member of an opposition party in Ethiopia. He worked tirelessly to raise awareness about Ethiopia's right to access a maritime port, particularly the Assab Port.²⁰⁵

Another notable exception is Abebe Kansas's Master's thesis entitled "Ethiopia's Sovereign Right of Access to the Sea under International Law." In this thesis, Abebe contends that access to the sea represents a crucial issue in Ethiopian politics that warrants attention, irrespective of the then-existing EPRDF government. Ethiopia reclaimed its right to access the sea through a Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly in 1952. After nearly four decades of exercising this sovereign right, Ethiopia now confronts the potential of becoming permanently landlocked once again. In 1998, the EPRDF agreed to and signed the Algiers Agreement, which could result in Ethiopia being designated as a landlocked country. Should the opposition prevail in the forthcoming election or any future elections, it may officially repudiate the Algiers Agreement and pursue a new arrangement that acknowledges the right to access the sea. It is widely perceived that access to the sea was one of the pivotal factors that contributed to the opposition's success and reduced the government's support during the 2007 elections.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Dejen Yemane, "After Fumbling Assab, Meles Did Right by Nile," in *Fortune*, Mar 21, 2020, <https://careers.addisfortune.info/>

²⁰⁵ See Yaiqob Haile Mariam, *Assab: Whose Port Is It? (Asab Yeman Nat?)*, 2004 for detail.

²⁰⁶ Abebe, p. 2.

Abebe further argues,

□..Ethiopia has the right to access to the sea as recognized by the recommendation of the United Nations General Assembly of 1950 which was implemented accordingly by federating Eritrea to Ethiopia. I recognize the right of self-determination and independence of the Eritrean peoples, but, argue that the independence of Eritrea and the sovereign right of access to the sea of Ethiopia are not mutually exclusive. The legal regime that governs the territorial disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea is the □treaty between the United Nations and Ethiopia□ or strictly speaking as the □treaty between the Victorious Four Powers of WWII and Ethiopia□according to which Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia in 1952.²⁰⁷.

Furthermore, he asserts that the citizens of Eritrea have shaped their own fate and attained independence, realizing their ambitions through the sacrifices endured during their quest for freedom. Nevertheless, the 'treaty between Ethiopia and the Four Powers' encompasses more than merely the wishes of Eritrea's populace; it also considers the security needs of East Africa and Ethiopia's rightful demand for maritime access. Indeed, he argues that the principal objective and intention of this 'treaty' is to guarantee Ethiopia's entitlement to access the sea. Any resolution aimed at resolving the territorial conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea ought to be grounded in the recommendations of the UN General Assembly from 1950 and comply with international law, which upholds Ethiopia's right to maritime access.²⁰⁸

Abebe argues that the treaties formed in 1900, 1902, and 1908 between Ethiopia and Colonial Italy cannot be utilized as a basis for resolving the ongoing territorial disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea. To begin with, Italy breached these treaties by invading and occupying Ethiopia. Ethiopia pointed out the material breach of the treaties and subsequently declared them null and void in line with customary international law. Furthermore, the most recent UN recommendation, known as a 'treaty between the Four Powers and Ethiopia,' takes precedence over the earlier treaties. Even if Italy had not violated the treaties, the agreements from 1900, 1902, and 1908 have been made obsolete by the latest 'treaty', specifically, the

²⁰⁷ Abebe, p. 2; **UN Resolution 390 A (V) - federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia**
(<https://zantana.net/un-resolution-390-a-v-passed-to-federate-eritrea-with-ethiopia/#:~:text=Following%20the%20adoption%20of%20UN,the%20sovereignty%20of%20the%20Emperor>)

²⁰⁸ Abebe, p. 2.

recommendation from the General Assembly, which was sanctioned by the four powers and implemented half a century ago.²⁰⁹

He further argues,

Resolution 390 V became the governing legal regime to all relationships when Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. The agreement of marriage should be the basis for dispute settlement between the parties when the marriage is dissolved by divorce. 138 Eritrea which seceded from Ethiopia is now a recognized member of the United Nations. When Eritrea got its independence in 1993 the issue of territories was not raised and was in suspension when the war started in 1998 and is still not solved. In fact Ethiopia and Eritrea are in a state of no peace no war and no one knows where the situation might lead. The agreement of marriage in this case the law that made Eritrea an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown should be the point of reference and the basis to resolve any territorial disputes. The resolution should be interpreted according to international law in general and the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties in particular²¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the EPRDF/TPLF did not address Ethiopia's rightful claim to one of its historic ports during the Algiers Conference. It is indeed ironic that the conflict, which concluded with Ethiopia's victory, later evolved into a diplomatic and legal dispute. Many Ethiopians view this decision as a shameful act that reinstated victory for the defeated nation. The Algiers Agreement, signed by the leaders of both countries at the time, required the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague to adjudicate the border dispute and the claims of the two nations. The arbitration process was carried out in a way that was detrimental to Ethiopia's national interests, from beginning to end. A major reason for this was the exclusion of the Assab sea outlet from the arbitration, despite widespread public concern and appeals from academics like Yakob Hailemariam (PhD).²¹¹

International law, which encompasses the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, asserts that "Land-locked States shall have the right of access to and from the sea for the

²⁰⁹ Abebe, pp. 3-4.

²¹⁰ Abebe, p. 45.

²¹¹ Dejen Yemane, "After Fumbling Assab, Meles Did Right by Nile," in *Fortune*, Mar 21, 2020, <https://careers.addisfortune.info/>

purpose of exercising the rights provided for □ including those relating to the freedom of the high seas and the common heritage of [humankind]." Ethiopia would have had valid reasons to seek the right to access the port. It may have been fortunate that this issue was not part of the litigation at The Hague. The matter remains unresolved, and Ethiopia retains the option to assert its right to use the Assab port at any time in accordance with international law. Furthermore, instead of pursuing litigation regarding the Assab port, Meles responded to public concerns by remarking, "let them water their camels with it." □²¹²

Therefore, Ethiopia's claim for access to the sea and the freedom of its historic port or ports is legitimate. However, as we have seen in the previous section, the EPRDF/TPLF regime remained silent and even relinquished the country's historic ports in a dubious manner. Following the recent change of government in the country, the issue of the country's quest for ownership of port or ports resurfaced after Prime Minister Abiy's speech to the Ethiopian Parliament. This was soon followed by the signing of an MoU with the de facto government of Somaliland, which has faced opposition from Mogadishu, neighbouring countries, and regional powers like Egypt. Therefore, in the final section of this thesis, we will delve deeper into these issues

4.2. The Ethio-Somaliland January 1, 2024 MoU Its Aftermath

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has articulated his aspiration to obtain sea access for Ethiopia since he assumed office in 2018. Nevertheless, during a speech to Ethiopia's House of Peoples' Representatives in October 2023, Abiy emphasized the critical significance of the Nile River and the Red Sea for Ethiopia, asserting that without access to these vital resources, the country cannot attain prosperity. He also reiterated Ethiopia's readiness to engage in negotiations with neighboring nations to secure sea access. In reaction to these remarks, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia dismissed Ethiopia's assertions and declined to participate in any discussions regarding the issue.²¹³

²¹² Dejen Yemane, "After Fumbling Assab, Meles Did Right by Nile," in *Fortune*, Mar 21, 2020, <https://careers.addisfortune.info/>

²¹³ <https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/02/12/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access/>; Fana Television, "Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed's conversation with the leaders of the defense army part two," 11 June 2018; Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), "From the drop of water to seawater," 13 October 2023; Alain Amharic, "The Eritrean government said that the talks about the sea gate are confusing," 16 October 2023; Simon Marks, "Somalia Rebuffs Ethiopia's Bid to Gain Direct Access to Red Sea

Before finalizing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, Abiy's administration implemented several initiatives to improve its maritime access. In 2018, the Ministry of Defense was assigned the responsibility of assessing the feasibility of establishing a naval force, culminating in the graduation of the inaugural group of navy recruits on June 27, 2023. Prior to Abiy's ascension to power, the previous Ethiopian government exhibited minimal interest in rejuvenating a naval base and marine force, which had been disbanded following Eritrea's independence, resulting in Ethiopia being landlocked. Abiy is convinced that the formation of a naval force is essential for equipping the army with fourth-generation warfare capabilities to safeguard the nation and Africa against non-physical threats such as cyber-attacks and geopolitical pressures.²¹⁴

The Ethiopian government argues that having direct access to the sea is essential for meeting the needs of its growing population.²¹⁵ On the other hand, the Somaliland government has stated that the recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) only relates to the proposed naval base.²¹⁶ Ethiopia, however, intends to use the Berbera port to protect its commercial interests. In 2016, Somaliland signed an agreement with DP World, a company based in Dubai, to improve and manage the Port of Berbera²¹⁷. Initially, the Somali government opposed this deal, claiming it infringed on its sovereignty. However, after discussions with the president of Somaliland, they eventually approved it. But when Ethiopia secured an 18% stake in the Berbera port project through a deal with DP World in March 2018, Mogadishu objected. This led the Somali parliament to vote to cancel DP World's contract with Somaliland. The economic challenges caused by the conflict in northern Ethiopia and the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the finalization of the agreement. Despite this, there are signs that Ethiopia and DP World may try to revive the deal, as representatives from both sides have shown interest in working together to develop the Berbera port.

[Port](#), [Bloomberg](#), 17 October 2023; [Simon Marks](#), [Djibouti Latest Nation to Reject Ethiopia's Red Sea Access Plea](#), [Bloomberg](#), 19 October 2023

²¹⁴ <https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/02/12/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access> ; [Fana Television](#), [Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed's conversation with the leaders of the defense army part one](#), 11 June 2018; [Fana Television](#), [Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed's conversation with the leaders of the defense army part two](#), 11 June 2018

²¹⁵ [Addis Standard](#), [News: Ethiopia's quest to access sea not a matter of luxury but of survival](#), [premier's security advisor briefs military attachés, reps of international partners](#), 19 January 2024

²¹⁶ <https://epo.acleddata.com/2024/02/12/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access>; X @MadaxtooyadaJSL, 25 January 2024

²¹⁷ [Africa Confidential](#), [Washington eyes a base at Berbera](#), 12 April 2022; [Richard Wachman](#), [Somaliland backs Dubai's DP World over Berbera Port](#), [Arab News](#), 19 March 2018; [Al Jazeera](#), [Ports war: Somalia bans Dubai ports operator](#), 15 March 2018

n the meantime, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been depicted as the most significant milestone in the lengthy narrative of Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access, according to the official Ethiopian media. For example, the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA) reported on the day the MoU was signed that "Ethiopia has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland to secure access to the Red Sea for the purpose of developing a seaport and establishing a military base today." The MoU was signed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the President of the Republic of Somaliland, Muse Bihi Abdi, in Addis Ababa.²¹⁸

Apparently, the move by the incumbent Ethiopian government has been long overdue regarding Ethiopia's ongoing quest for access and ownership of a maritime port. However, the readiness of the administration, both diplomatically and otherwise, and the specific port to be claimed have been subjects of debate. There is no doubt that Ethiopia's sovereign access to the sea has been influenced by a complex interplay of domestic, regional, and international factors, which include economic, demographic, and strategic considerations. The nation aimed for a more varied access to the sea, considering its rapidly growing economy, increasing population, and aspiration for regional integration. Although the geographical distance between Ethiopia and the Red Sea coast is relatively minimal, Ethiopia has, in practice, become a remote observer of the Red Sea theatre, as the region has been home to several military bases established by major and middle powers from far-off areas. Additionally, neither dependence on Djibouti nor the diversification of ports, which is a policy option for Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti, has fulfilled Ethiopia's import-export requirements. Moreover, the absence of a permanent seaport has adversely affected the country's strategic and political interests.²¹⁹

While the specifics of the agreement between the Ethiopian and Somaliland governments remain subject to speculation, the Foreign Minister of Somaliland has stated that it provides landlocked Ethiopia with access to the sea. In exchange, Ethiopia acknowledges Somaliland as an independent state. According to the agreement, Ethiopia will obtain more affordable and dependable access to the sea by leasing a 20-kilometer section of coastline for a duration

²¹⁸ https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_3805390,

²¹⁹ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De-Escalation" in FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

of 50 years. Additionally, the agreement permits Ethiopia to construct a naval base and establish a commercial port on the strategically important Gulf of Aden²²⁰.

Nevertheless, the MoU has ironically become intertwined with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), altering the interstate dynamics within the region. Mogadishu perceives the MoU as a fundamental threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Consequently, it has chosen to securitize the MoU and form alliances as a form of deterrence. Egypt and Eritrea have also engaged in the securitization of the MoU, aiming to counter Ethiopia's sovereign access to the sea. Following the recent implementation of the Nile River Cooperative Framework Agreement, the Cairo-led alliance has intensified its subversive operations in the region.²²¹

The new geopolitical developments in the region seem to have offered Cairo a new geopolitical opportunity to initiate a tripartite coalition of Cairo, Asmara, and Mogadishu. The formation of a tripartite alliance to counter Ethiopia is a continuation of Cairo's long-term strategy to undermine the position of Ethiopia in the region. While Cairo-Asmara-Mogadishus path has been one of securitization, Addis Ababa has taken a de-escalatory approach, employing tactical de-escalation and strategic de-securitization. Ethiopia has emphasized that its sovereign access to the sea is achieved through peaceful and diplomatic means based on give and take. Ethiopia's strategy focuses on regional cooperation and economic integration, aiming to establish stability and mutual benefit in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's emphasis on peaceful and diplomatic means contrasts with Cairo-Asmara-Mogadishus tripartite coalition's more aggressive tactics, highlighting a fundamental difference in approach to regional issues. By prioritizing cooperation and integration, Ethiopia seeks to foster long-term stability and prosperity in the Horn of Africa.²²²

Meanwhile, some critics viewed the MoU as a premature decision given the unfavorable conditions on the ground. The lack of strategic backing from a significant regional or global

²²⁰ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

²²¹ Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

²²² Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing Between Escalation and De- Escalation" in FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nov 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/upcoming-events>

power indicated that this initiative was likely to fail. Although the UAE showed some support for the agreement, it did not provide explicit endorsement, highlighting Ethiopia's vulnerable internal and diplomatic situation. This weakness hindered Ethiopia's ability to pursue such a consequential project effectively.²²³

Moreover, the Ethiopian government appears to have acted out of desperation, engaging with Somaliland a lesser player seeking international recognition in exchange for access to the sea. This move is characterized as a serious diplomatic misstep, as it involved entering into a deal with a breakaway state that lacks substantial legitimacy. Ethiopia's miscalculations were primarily due to a disregard for the geopolitical implications of this bold action. Consequently, the country faced significant regional and global backlash, prompting it to seek a way out of the ensuing diplomatic quagmire.²²⁴

The Ankara Declaration (11 December 2024) holds significance in these contexts. While it offers some relief to both parties, it also causes unease for others involved. Ethiopia must now persuade the new government of President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Irro) about the current status of the January 2024 MoU and the importance of engaging in 'technical talks' with Mogadishu regarding Ethiopia's access to the sea. The absence of any mention of Somaliland or the 2024 MoU in the Ankara Declaration creates uncertainty. If the Declaration had specifically addressed the principles of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity in relation to the unresolved agreement with Somaliland, Ethiopia could end up on the losing side. Given the 2018 deal with Hargeisa and DP World, where Ethiopia secured a 19% stake in the port of Berbera, simply using existing infrastructure may not convince Somaliland leaders of Ethiopia's commitment to the 'recognition' clause.²²⁵

Concerning the significance of the Ankara declaration for Ethiopia it is said that Ethiopia's foreign policy stance has reverted to a time-honoured method characterized by a principled and institutional approach in managing its international relations. The statement issued by the Prime Minister, which was both scripted and formal, marks a significant shift from earlier declarations. The themes of coexistence, cooperation, and regional development have been

²²³ Belete Belachew Yihun, "Ethiopia and Somalia: Back to Square One", January 29, 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/01/ethiopia-and-somalia-back-to-square-one/>

²²⁴ Belete Belachew Yihun, "Ethiopia and Somalia: Back to Square One", January 29, 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/01/ethiopia-and-somalia-back-to-square-one/> <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/eti-yopya-federal-demokratik-cumhuriyeti-ve-somali-federal-cumhuriyeti-nin-ankara-bildirisi.en.mfa>

²²⁵ Belete Belachew Yihun, "Ethiopia and Somalia: Back to Square One", January 29, 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/01/ethiopia-and-somalia-back-to-square-one/>

emphasized. Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access, whether through Somalia (including Somaliland) or another nation, must now be approached with careful consideration of all relevant factors. Long-standing proposals to leverage Somalia's extensive coastlines as alternative maritime routes can serve as a topic for discussion in upcoming negotiations. However, the realization of these proposals is contingent upon the prevailing peace and security conditions in Somalia. Given the current uncertainties, such an initiative would likely be unfeasible in the immediate future²²⁶.

²²⁶ Belete Belachew Yihun, "Ethiopia and Somalia: Back to Square One", January 29, 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/01/ethiopia-and-somalia-back-to-square-one/>; See <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/etiopya-federal-demokratik-cumhuriyeti-ve-somali-federal-cumhuriyeti-nin-ankara-bildirisi.en.mfa> for the detail of the official communicate issued by Ankara .

CONCLUSION

The thesis underscores the historical significance of Ethiopia's ports and their crucial role in the rise of Ethiopian civilization. Throughout history, Ethiopia's sovereignty over its maritime ports has been challenged by neighboring and global powers seeking control over the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden regions. Despite these pressures, Ethiopian rulers have consistently fought to maintain their access to the coast, with some sacrificing their lives in the process. Ethiopia's ownership of these ports particularly Massawa and Assab has been a longstanding element of its national identity and strategic importance.

Although periods of foreign control, such as Ottoman influence and European colonization, temporarily disrupted Ethiopia's access to the sea, the country demonstrated resilience through diplomatic efforts, notably during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign, when Ethiopia regained its ports via the federation with Eritrea. However, Eritrea's secession in the 1990s again severed Ethiopia's direct access to its historic ports, a situation that remains a point of contention.

In recent years, Ethiopia has renewed its efforts to assert its legitimate right to access the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports, including Assab. Opposition from regional neighbors like Egypt, which seeks to control the Nile waters and access to the sea, as well as Turkey's historical and strategic interests in the region, complicate these efforts. Nonetheless, the international community, through resolutions such as UN Resolution 390 V of 1950, has recognized Ethiopia's right to sea access.

Given these circumstances, Ethiopia should prioritize diplomatic channels to resolve its access issues. Engaging in sustained diplomatic negotiations and leveraging international legal mechanisms is essential for securing its maritime rights. The country should avoid resorting to military force, which could escalate regional tensions and undermine long-term stability. Instead, Ethiopia's approach should focus on peaceful dialogue, international diplomacy, and legal avenues to reaffirm and realize its rightful access to the ports in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, including Assab, ensuring sovereignty and regional stability are maintained.

RECOMMENDATION

Further studies are essential in this area to deepen understanding and develop more effective strategies. Future research should focus on comprehensive legal analyses of Ethiopia's maritime rights, the geopolitical dynamics of regional port access, and the economic impacts of port development on Ethiopia and neighboring countries. Additionally, studies examining successful regional port agreements and dispute resolution mechanisms can provide valuable insights for Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts. Such research will strengthen Ethiopia's negotiation strategies and contribute to sustainable solutions for accessing its historic ports, ensuring long term regional stability and economic growth.

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