

Prince Rasselas, Fact or Fiction?

A Glimpse at our History – Part Two

There are some discrepancies to point out in Rasselas, where Dr. Samuel Johnson used another major source of information besides James Bruce: the book by Father Jerome Lobo: *A Voyage to Abyssinia*.⁽¹⁾ Father Lobo, a Portuguese priest, had lived in Fremona, Adwa, long before Bruce. In Rasselas the prison is depicted as a wide valley surrounded by mountains and insurmountable escarpments. The opposite however, was the case.

Ethiopia has many table top mountains some of which were used as fortresses. Those surrounded by sheer cliffs and cannot be easily climbed up or scaled from below, would be chosen to serve as Wohni Ambas. That is what we saw in the photo of Gishen Mariam as well as in Mekdela's photo and lithograph sketch given below.

Another discrepancy in Rasselas is where Dr. Samuel Johnson seems to suggest only male sons of the emperor being imprisoned until the time of their succession to the throne. That, however, was not always the case as Ethiopia had a long tradition of men as well as women coming to the throne. Therefore, Wohni Ambas often had both male and female residents, all children of the nobility, and not just the male sons of the emperor.

At the end of the previous section we had mentioned Menelik escaping from Mekdela, where he had been imprisoned by Atse Tewodros. It is worth noting that it was also there that the young boy, Menelik, first saw a fellow inmate, a beautiful young girl, Tsehaitu Bitul, the love of his life, and his future wife and queen. She came from a powerful Begemedir family with close connections to the Tigray nobility, and sister to the famous Dejach, and later, Ras Wole Bitul. One can therefore argue that Wohni Ambas, besides being centers of higher education also served as meeting places for all the young men and women of the nobility, just like any college campus might have done.

Nevertheless, Wohni Ambas also had other sinister political objectives. The children of the nobility were kept under guard as valuable commodities and ultimate insurance policy against their parents' rebellion. With the children in his custody the king felt assured their parents would stay loyal to him, fearing their children might be harmed or killed if they rebelled. Kings used this major *threat* to keep the parents in line and in constant check.

In the story of Dr. Johnson, like Menelik, Rasselas ultimately escapes from prison and travels to Egypt and other places of interest. In real life however, when Menelik escaped from Mekdela he traveled back to Showa, passing through Wollo. It was there that the ruler of Wollo, Princess Workitu, had captured and held him prisoner for a short while. Her son, the young Alemayehu, was also held prisoner by Tewodros in Mekdela.

Workitu wanted to negotiate the release of her son in exchange for handing over Menelik. Tewodros, however, saw that as a veiled threat to his authority and blackmail. The *threat* was realized as Tewodros used the sheer cliffs of Mekdela for another sinister purpose: to have Alemayehu executed and his body thrown off the cliffs. Workitu was heartbroken and released Menelik to proceed on his journey. Once at home, Menelik became a rebel, declaring himself King of Showa and inheritor of his father, Haile-Melekot's, kingdom.

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Mekdela Mountains Photo and Lithograph Sketch



Notes

1) <http://www.fullbooks.com/A-Voyage-to-Abyssinia2.html>