

Research article

Royal patronage for indigenous and foreign craftsmanship in the Kingdom of Šäwa (Ethiopia) under *Nəguś Šahlä Šəllase*, 1813–1847

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Abstract: *The study examines the history of royal patronage of indigenous as well as foreign craftsmanship in the kingdom of Šäwa under the rule of King Šahlä Šəllase (r.1813–1847). It also investigates the commitment and support of the King to advance indigenous craft technology. The qualitative method was the main approach utilized, and data was collected using interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The findings show that the kingdom of Šäwa experienced more technological progress than any other part of Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The ascendancy of an 'enlightened' regional monarch, Šahlä Šəllase, to the throne was the main reason. To improve the kingdom's technology, unlike his predecessors, he established royal workshops in the main capitals and residential areas, known for their specialization in craftsmanship. The King was also fond of visiting workshops, and he paid considerable attention to them during his reign. In addition, he was the first Šäwan King, who improved*

contact with foreigners and foreign powers, resulting in the unprecedented arrival of European travellers, visitors, and artisans. The arrival of foreign artisans created a new environment for economic and technological progress, which the King used to teach his people and advance the kingdom's technology. Workshops such as Säräteña Säffära (a workers village), Royal iron-Works and Yä-barud Mäwqäča (gunpowder foundry), were evidences, which confirmed that the kingdom was making significant technological progress. Thus, the first half of the nineteenth century saw craftsmanship reach its zenith, and King Šahlä Šəllase was a "passionate industrialist" in the kingdom of Šäwa, Ethiopia.

Keywords: *Kingdom, Šäwa, craftsmanship, workshops, technology*

Article History: *Received 26 November, 2023; accepted 30 December, 2023*

DOI:

1. Introduction

Craftsmanship is one of the economic activities of human beings from the early times of civilization. In its original form, it is both an occupation and a way of life that served as a means to sustain and improve life.¹ In Ethiopia, it has a long history that dates back to the pre-historic period. The pre-historic rock paintings and carvings are evidence.² In the later periods, craftsmanship (including traditional architecture, metallurgy, and pottery) was also continued by the Ethiopian states of Aksum and Zagwe up until the thirteenth century.³

As craftsmanship continued in the early seventeenth century, it flourished, as evidenced by the short-lived capitals of Enfranz, Dänqāz, Azäzo, and Gorgora, all of which were located in the area surrounding Lake Tana. They were known for massive structures such as royal palaces, churches, bridges, and defensive structures constructed with sophisticated building techniques and designs. In light of their architectural significance, they are known in the country's building culture as having been products of local and foreign artisans.⁴ In 1636, a new development emerged in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, which was referred to as the "Gondär period," when Emperor Fasiladas (r. 1632–1667) made Gondär his principal place of residence and capital for the kingdom. During this time, foreign artisans and Ethiopian craftsmen were in continuous demand. Consequently, craft technology reached its peak in the Gondärine period.⁵

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, based in Gondär, declined. It resulted in socio-economic and political turmoil called the *Zämäna-Mäsafernt* (Era of the Princes), which lasted from 1769 to 1855. Sources reveal that craft

¹J. Dubois, *Feasibility Study of Traditional Handicrafts Development in the Tourist Industry of Ethiopia* (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 1996), 6.

²Richard Pankhurst, "History of Ethiopian Handicrafts and Handicraft Workers," in P. Dicei & C. Viezzoli (Eds.), *Resettlement and Rural Development in Ethiopia. Social and Economic Research Training and Technical Assistance in Beles Valley* (Franco Angeli, 1993), 25.

³David R. Buxton, "Ethiopian Medieval Architecture: the Present States of Studies," 2nd *International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (1963), 239–240.

⁴ Víctor M. Fernández, et al., *Archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in the Lake Tana Region: Review of the Work in Progress*, *Aethiopica* 15 (2012), 72.

⁵Yared Germa Häilu, *Yä Gondär Tarik: Kā Ethiopia Yä Nägestat Tarik Getše Sitay* (Manuscript, 1980), 68.

technology, mainly for constructing monumental buildings, declined in the territories of Gondär and the kingdom's adjacent provinces. This was because, during the period, the *Mäsafents* (prominent regional lords of the period) did not build new castles and stone dwellings, and the demand for artisans such as masons and carpenters dwindled. However, in the first half of the nineteenth century, new craft and technological endeavours flourished in the Kingdom of Šäwa more than in any other region of Ethiopia. During the period, under the rule of King Šahlä Šöllase (r.1813-1847), Šäwa was *de facto* independent from the Gondärine kingdom. The form of government was an absolute monarchy ruled by its dynastic system.⁶ Between 1697 and 1847, unlike other regions in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, the rulers of Šäwa held different titles such as *Abeto*, *Märäd ʿAzmač*, *Ras*, and *Nəguś* (King) to rule the kingdom. These titles would have been their preferences for rulers of the kingdom. In 1813, Šahlä Šöllase was the first ruler of Šäwa who used the title *Nəguś* and was crowned as Šahlä Šöllase, *Nəguś* of Šäwa, which was one of the oldest and highest titles used by the Ethiopian monarch.⁷

According to the tradition, following the unsuccessful military campaign of the imperial authority from Gondär to the kingdom of Šäwa in the first half of the eighteenth century, the ruler of Šäwa, *Märäd ʿAzmač* Abbəyye (r.1719-1743) had got some captives, among whom were the skilled *Fälaša* (Bate Israel).⁸ They were professionals in ironworking and made axes, plowshares, and other tools. Half a century later, Šahlä Šöllase consolidated the tradition and recruited many *Fälaša* artisans from northwestern Ethiopia to work as masons, carpenters, and blacksmiths for the workshops in the town of Ankobär, the then capital of the kingdom.⁹ In addition, the King has brought a master carpenter from Gondär to build the church of *Mädhane Aläm* in Ankobär.¹⁰ The coming of skilled *Fälaša* was an indigenous impulse for the progress of Šäwa's craftsmanship and joined another important paradigm

⁶ Major W. Cornwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia Described, During Eighteen Months' Residence at the Christian Court of Shoa*. Vol. III (London: Longman, 1844), p.35; James Bruce, *Travels to discover the Source of the Nile*, Vol. IV (Edinburgh: J. Ruthven, 1970), p.96.

⁷ Šahlä Šöllase was crowned as *Nəguś* of Šäwa, "ዘ ራስ ሣሕለ ሥላሴ ንጉሰ ሸዋ፡፡" *Feṣum Wäldä Maryäm, ye Asme Giyorgis Gebre Mesih Dersetoch Ye Oromo Tarik ke 1500-1900* (Addis Ababa, 2009), 273.

⁸ According to a definition provided by Bairu Tafla, *Fälaša* is 'the Ethiopian term, which signifies to migrate as well as to go into exile or to be carried into captivity. Bairu Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis, and his work on the history of [Oromo] and the kingdom of Šäwa* (Stuttgart, Wiesbaden, 1987), 391.

⁹ E. Combes and M. Tamisier, *Voyage en Abyssinie, dans le Pay des Galla, de Choa et d'Ifat, 1835–1837: Precede d'une excursion, Dans l'Arabie-beureuse* (4 vols. Paris, 1838), Vol. II, 349–351.

¹⁰ Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: the Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, IES, 1990), 232.

with the introduction of foreign artisans, which was apparent with the coming of skilled craftsmen from abroad.¹¹

2. Methods and Materials

This study focuses on the actual province of North Šäwa in the Amhara Regional State, where rulers in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia used it as a political seat and place of residence across centuries. The study aims to examine the history of royal patronage for indigenous as well as foreign craftsmanship in the kingdom of Šäwa under the rule of Šahlä Šəllase during the first half of the nineteenth century. It also investigates the commitment and support of the King to advance the status of indigenous craftsmanship in the kingdom. Hence, the researchers addressed the following research questions: Why did the kingdom of Šäwa show considerable technological progress than any other region of Ethiopia during the first half of the nineteenth century? Why and how Šahlä Šəllase did improve the traditional status of local craft activities in the kingdom? What kind of technological progress was witnessed in the realm? And why and where were royal workshops established? Thus, to answer these questions, the researcher used a qualitative method, and data was collected using interviews, field observations, and document analysis of both primary (travelers and missionaries accounts, chronicles and manuscripts) and secondary (published and unpublished) sources.

3. King Šahlä Šəllase “the Passionate Industrialist?” in the Kingdom of Šäwa¹²

Šahlä Šəllase (r. 1813–1847), the seventh king of Šäwa, was eighteen years of age when he ascended the throne in 1813.¹³ During his long reign, the kingdom conspicuously maintained its political independence, economic prosperity, territorial expansion, security, and unity. As part of his efforts to advance the kingdom's craftsmanship, he organized different artisans into royal workshops in his capital cities and residential areas, who performed their activities under his direct supervision. In addition, he established better contacts with foreigners and foreign powers, which ensured the introduction of foreign artisans and technology. Nevertheless, the absence of patronizing indigenous craftsmanship among rulers of Šäwa

¹¹ Richard Pankhurst, “Menilek and the Utilization of Foreign Skills.” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. V, No. 1 (January 1967), 29–30.

¹² Richard Pankhurst, “The Saint Simonians in Ethiopia,” *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopia Studies*, Vol. I (1969), 185.

¹³ Shiferaw Bekele, “Šahlä Šəllase,” *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* Vol. IV (2010), 465.

before Sahlä Səllase, other than Abbəyye can be taken as a significant foundation for the study of craft technology in the kingdom.

As discussed earlier, during the time of Mārəd ʿAzmač Abbəyye, the imperial authority from Gondär, Emperor Iyasu II, launched military expeditions to the kingdom of Šäwa due to political and economic reasons. However, Abbəyye resisted and allegedly defeated the imperial forces, and some members of the imperial army were captured and became prisoners of war.¹⁴ This victory subsequently strengthened the kingdom's political independence and consolidated the kingdom's territorial expansion to the neighboring regions. The earliest note of this type comes to us from the works of the nineteenth-century Ethiopian historian, *Aśmä* Giyorgis, who argues that the prisoners taken at this time had particular respect and treatment by Abbəyye. These measures of Abbəyye attracted other settlers from Gondär to migrate to Šäwa. The prisoners at this time and other immigrants from Gondär had contributed much to the Šäwan administration and craftsmanship.¹⁵ In the same vein, Hiruy Wäldä Šallase notes:

በጌንደርና በአማራው አገር ከሚኖሩ ሰዎች ይበልጥ እነዚህ በሽዋ የቀሩት ምርኮኞች ትልቅ ክብር ማግኘታቸውን በሰሙ ጊዜ ብዙዎች ስለመጡ በደስታ እየተቀበለ ሪም እየሠጠ አኖራቸው። [...] የእጅ ሥራ ከሚያውቁ ፈላሾች/ጠቢቦች/ ወገን ብዙ ሰዎች መጥተው [...] ማረሻ፣ ወገል፣ ማጮድ፣ ምሳርና መጥረቢያ ስለሠሩለት የእርሻ ስራው እየለማለት ሄደ።¹⁶

The English translation of the couplet reads:

Rather than those who lived in Gondär and Amhara, those who were captives in Šäwa had high prestige. Hearing the prestige, many people [from Gondär and Amhara] came to Šäwa [and] the King received them with great pleasure and settled them by giving rim lands. [...] many skilled handcraft men [called] Fälaša (wise men) came [to the court of Mārəd ʿAzmač Abbəyye] [...], and they made to him plowshares, Wägäl¹⁷, sickles and axes that helped him in maximizing agricultural productivity.

¹⁴ Ahmed Hassan, "A Historical Survey of Ethnic Relations in Yefat and Temmuga, Northeastern Šäwa: 1889–1974" (MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1994), 25.

¹⁵ After Nägaši Krastos and Səbəstyanos, "Abbəyye" was the third representative of the Šäwan Dynasty. Svein Ege, "Abbəyye," *Encyclopedia Æthiopica* Vol. I (2003), 32.

¹⁶ For the quotation see Belaten Geta Hiruy Wäldä Šallase, *የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ ከንግስተ ሣባ እስከ ታላቁ የኢድዋ ድል* (አዲስአበባ: ሴትራልማተሚያቤት, ፲፱፻፺፱ ዓ.ም.), 52.

¹⁷ According to Wolf Leslau's *Comparative Dictionary of Geez* 'Wägäl' denotes an iron ring that holds the share of a plow beam. Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geez* (Classical Ethiopic) (Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 1991), 608.

The above narration shows that Abbəyye is believed to be the first of the Šāwan rulers who used the skilled *Fālaša* in the kingdom and granted *rim land* for settlement.¹⁸ Hiruy Wāldä Šallase and Ašmä Giyorgis both confirmed that the skilled *Fālaša* helped Abbəyye to clear forests, and the land of Yefat was prepared for agriculture. They made plowshares and wāgāl for him; he plowed the land of Šāwa using these tools. Therefore, the coming of the skilled *Fālaša* into the kingdom was an indigenous impulse that benefited the kingdom's craftsmanship and constituted an essential impetus for expanding agricultural settlements. Henceforth, they officially started living in the kingdom by forming their isolated villages in the different regions of Šāwa. The *tābiban* (craftsmen) monastery of Māntəq can be mentioned as an example, which was inhabited solely by the *Fālaša*, who came from Gondär during Abbəyye's rule. As some sources asserted, the internal influence of the skilled *Fālaša* in the domain joined another important pattern, which was apparent with the advent of foreign artisans who introduced new forms of skills in technology and artifacts.

Economically, the society of Šāwa was primarily dependent on agriculture, most often in the form of a subsistence economy.¹⁹ According to nineteenth-century European explorers and members of the Saint Simons mission, Edmond Combes and Maurice Tamisier, the fields of Šāwa were "better worked and better cultivated than in the other parts of Ethiopia"²⁰ Thus, it could "produce everything."²¹ Trade and craftsmanship also added considerable input to the Šāwan economy. The former centered at the principal market, Aleyyu Amba, held weekly on Friday.²² On a market day, local products such as coffee, ivory, skins, hides, raw cotton, woven and cotton clothes were put in circulation for exchange.²³ Craftsmanship also had an intrinsic economic value for the society of Šāwa. Some artisans from the surrounding areas participated and sold their handicrafts on the market day of Aleyyu Amba. As Johnston points out:

¹⁸Rim is a form of land tenure found throughout the historic Christian highlands. It was also a kind of *Madariya* land that was granted by the king (grantor). It was known in Sawa, Gojjam, Bagemedet, and Lasta. Ernst, Hammer Schmidt, *The Rim Documents of Lake Tana Manuscript* (German Project Catalogue, 1968), 134–136.

¹⁹ Svein Ege, *Class, State, and Power in Africa: A case study of the Kingdom of Šāwa (Ethiopia) about 1840* (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 1996), 50-54.

²⁰ Pankhurst, "The Saint Simonians," 184-185.

²¹ Pankhurst, *A Social History*, 138.

²² Aleyyu Amba was one of the largest trade centers of the nineteenth century in the kingdom of Šāwa. Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. I, 381.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 365.

Saddle makers from Ankobär, spear, and sword manufacture from the tabeeb or artificers monasteries, supply it with their wares, and the industrious inhabitants of the later also bring hoes and plow-irons and their woman and children hawk about the town, with loud cries, coarse, earthenware utensils for sale.²⁴

Indeed, the economic viability of craftsmanship (tanners, potters, blacksmiths, and silversmiths) was not only limited to the production of agricultural materials and weapons.²⁵ Traditionally, these craftsmen were partially avoided by non-craftsmen, and they did not intermarry with non-craftsmen, who considered them *buda* (sorcerers).²⁶ However, this was changed under the rule of Šahlä Šöllase. He established different handicraft workshops, and all manual work was carried out under his supervision and he rewarded them by considering their performance.²⁷ He was also fond of artisans and the closest friend to the “*täbibs*.”²⁸ In the kingdom, all artisans were known by the Amharic term called “*täbib*.”²⁹ Thus, the King's efforts would have been the main foothold in changing the society's negative perception of craftsmen in the kingdom.

In the courts of the King, there was a huge cottage industry of royal spinning that was occupied exclusively by six hundred women. They were grouped into two spinning divisions based on the quality of their products. The division was, as Isenberg and Krapf remark:

*The first class of the royal spinning women, who are two hundred in number, have to spin the finer cotton for the royal cloth, which the king dresses and presents to his friends, ladies, and governors. The second class of spinning women is four hundred in number: these spin ordinary cotton for soldiers and others. All are in the service of the King and seem to be free. [...] at each of the king's residences at Ankobär, Angoläla, Däbrä Berhan and Kundi.*³⁰

The people of Šäwa had a long experience in cotton and wool spinning and weaving. It was an art indispensable to existence because the climate was too cold. The woman had to prepare

²⁴ Charles Johnston, *Travels in Southern Abyssinia, through the Country of Adal to the Kingdom of Shoa*, Vol. II (London: Leaden Hall Street, 1844), 244.

²⁵ Wolfgang Weissleder, “The Political Ecology of Amhara Domination” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1965), 89.

²⁶ A *buda* in Ethiopian society was considered to be a spirit that possessed certain people, enabling them to cause harm. Jamse Quirin, “Caste and Class in Historical North-west Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900,” *Journal of African History*, 1998, 208.

²⁷ Jonathan Lewis Krapf, *Travels, Researches, and Missionary Labors during an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa* (Frank Cass, 1968), 23–24.

²⁸ Johnston, Vol. II, 330–332.

²⁹ In Šäwa, every skilled man is called *Tabib*. Carl Wilhelm Isenberg and Johann Ludwig Krapf, *Journals of C. W. Isenberg and J.L. Krapf, Detailing Their Proceedings in the Kingdom of Shoa and Journeys in Other Parts of Abyssinia in the Years 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1842* (London, 1843), 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 120.

the cotton for spinning and thread, which were transformed into fabric by men. Thus, those women who engaged in the production of handicrafts were called *tābib* women, which the Šāwan women designated.³¹ Raw cotton was the main raw material for woven clothes, as cheap as abundant. According to Charles Johnston's observation, there were two kinds of cotton specimens in the kingdom of Šāwa. The indigenous cotton with short fiber was called *Yefatee tut* (Yefat cotton). With a longer fiber, straight from the ground and soft like silk, the other was called *Gondāree tut* (Gondār cotton), had by far superior quality and was used by the King and the society in the kingdom. These cotton plants appear to flourish best at an elevation between 900 and 1200 meters above sea level.³²

Like the Ethiopian emperors, the rulers of Šāwa had long recognized the significance of acquiring technological knowledge and firearms from abroad.³³ Šāhlä Šəllase was a pioneering king who established relations with foreigners and foreign powers. In the last three decades of the first half of the nineteenth century, a large number of foreign artisans, armorers, builders, tanners, and artists arrived in the courts of the King.³⁴ They were accompanied by foreign-made articles, which included special gifts for the King, such as a few double-barreled guns and pistols, various instruments, and a powder mill.³⁵ These positioned the kingdom as exposed and accessible to European travelers, diplomats, missionaries, and artisans.³⁶ Hence, it was the first encounter ever in the diplomatic history of Šāwa.³⁷

According to Johnston's observation, foreigners closely attached to the courts of the King were regarded as government employees. One of the first artisans to arrive in Šāwa in the 1820s was a Greek armorer named Elias, who stayed for nearly a decade. During his stay at the King's court, he introduced the skill of gun repair and trained Šāhlä Šəllase's men.³⁸ Between 1839 and 1843, one of the French travelers, Rochet d'Hericourt, visited Šāwa. He was a tanner and a professional chemist who discovered coal at Čäno and discussed

³¹ Johnston, Vol. II, 332.

³² *Ibid.*, 320; Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 425.

³³ Rexford Henry Kofi Darkwah, *Sawa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire 1813-188* (London, 1975), 57.

³⁴ Richard Pankhurst, "The Greeks and the Development of Early nineteenth century Technology in Šāwa (Ethiopia)," *Miscellanea* 5, Vol.1 and 2, 1976, 147.

³⁵ Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1976), 148, 168.

³⁶ Darkwah, 57.

³⁷ Pankhurst, "The Greeks," 147.

³⁸ Pankhurst, "Menilek," 30, 144.

mineralogy at the court of Šahlä Šəllase. He has also discussed with the King the "greatness" of France, its resources, and industry, particularly in the technology of manufacturing arms. Moreover, he showed his powder mill in operation and sugar manufacturing under the royal eye. It increased the King's interest in acquiring foreign technology, emphasized the production of armorers, and improved gunpowder production techniques in the kingdom.³⁹ Meanwhile, the King persistently asked for European travelers and technicians to teach his compatriots in his kingdom about craft and technology in general and the skill of making guns or gunpowder in particular. As Johnston states, for instance, the King requested the travelers that, "If you know all about guns, and when you are quite well, you must teach my servants how to make them."⁴⁰ In this case, the King's desire to teach his people how to make firearms was well-intentioned. Following that, the first gunpowder foundry in the history of Šäwa was established at Mähal Wänz. Thus, it seems that the Šäwan army had been equipped with guns and muskets and spears, shields, and swords.⁴¹

The advent of the well-known Armenian artisans, Demetrius and Yohannes, who were prominent in building and mechanics, brought new abilities to the kingdom.⁴² Their accomplishment was constructing a grinding mill. Demetrius the Armenian made a machine to grind corn, which was 'the hand corn mills' presented by the British Government and had been erected within the palace walls and operated by slaves who worked tirelessly to move the wheels. However, due to criticism from priests in the church, it was not functioning. As Harris writes, "[...] it [the grinding machine] was useless... because the priest declared that it to be the devil's work and cursed the bread."⁴³ This was indeed one of the challenges facing the king that deterred the technological progress of the kingdom. In addition, these two Armenians erected a water mill on the Ayrarra River, three kilometers south of Ankobär.⁴⁴ This was also unemployed. During this period, indeed, the most laborious employment for the women of Ethiopia was grinding flour. The watermill was therefore erected to solve the

³⁹ Rubenson, 148, 168-169.

⁴⁰ Johnston, Vol. II, 306.

⁴¹ Krapf, 36.

⁴² Johnston, Vol. II, 60.

⁴³ Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 382.

⁴⁴ According to the description provided by Bairu Tafla, Ayrarra is 'a river which rises in the southern slopes of Emma Mehrat and which flows through Ankobar. Bairu Tafla, 887; Johnston, Vol. II, 60-61.

women's burden in the kingdom.⁴⁵ Hence, these mills were yet another worthy addition to the kingdom's technology.

Another valuable contribution made by these artisans was the construction of splendid palaces for the King at Ankobär, Angoläla and Däbrä Berhan, which served as the main capitals of the king. Yohannes, the Armenian architect, also built a bridge over the Bäresa River across the Tora Mäsk, which runs between Ankobär and Däbrä Barhan. The first-ever was built in Šäwa and was known as "the king's bridge."⁴⁶ In addition, two more bridges were built over streams, greatly facilitating royal movement during the rainy season when floods occurred in the kingdom. As a reward for such skill, the Armenian architect Yohannes had received a highborn woman from the King.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Yohannes was the first man in Šäwa, who taught the people how to use lime for building purposes.⁴⁸

Besides the influx of foreigners into the kingdom, Šahlä Šöllase established diplomatic relations with the governments of Great Britain and France in the early years of the 1840s. Therefore, a treaty of commerce and friendship was signed through which the King attempted to acquire foreign skills. As technological knowledge was the main concern of the King, some aspects of technology were included in the treaty signed with Great Britain. On November 16, 1841, the first Anglo-Šäwan treaty was signed at Angoläla.⁴⁹ According to the treaty, "the king assured that five hundred pairs of hands efficiently employed at the loom would bring into his country more permanent wealth than ten thousand warriors bearing spear and shield."⁵⁰ This quotation reveals that the coming of foreign artisans into the kingdom brought more permanent improvement to the kingdom's craftsmanship than those who brought arms with them. Thus, it was the first formal relationship England established with Ethiopia, specifically with the kingdom of Šäwa. The consequent treaty with France was also signed at Angoläla on June 7, 1943. The terms of the treaty indicate: "The right of Frenchmen

⁴⁵ Johnston, Vol. II, 61; Harris, Vol. II, 383.

⁴⁶ Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 46; Isenberg and Krapf, 64-65.

⁴⁷ Regarding Yohannese's nationality, there are two different arguments: Harris states that he was an Armenian. Harris, Vol. II, 46. On the other hand, he was an Albanian. Isenberg and Krapf, 64-65.

⁴⁸ Pankhurst, "The Greeks," 144-145.

⁴⁹ Isenberg and Krapf, 262-263.

⁵⁰ Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 384-385.

to trade all over Šäwa and France protects Šäwan subjects on their pilgrims to Jerusalem and the import of technology.”⁵¹

These treaties, therefore, increased the diplomatic significance of Šäwa, which had been commenced on legal grounds in the period and continued until the second half of the nineteenth century. More importantly, King Šahlä Šəllase's demand for foreign technology had a family foundation. At the same time, Krapf was in the kingdom and provided some gifts, such as a shawl of many colors, a pair of fine English scissors, a looking glass, an Ethiopian New Testament, and a complete Amharic Bible to the King's mother, Zänäbe Wärq. She was very impressed and interested in having such innovation and manufacturing at her home, Sälä Dngay.⁵² Subsequently, like her son, in the same fashion, she asked Krapf a question: "How did your countrymen come to be able to invent and manufacture such wonderful things?" He replied that:

*God had promised in his word not only spiritual but temporal rewards to those who obeyed His Commandments; that the English, German, and Europeans, in general, had once been ignorant, but after they accepted the Gospel, God had given them science and arts wondrous blessings of an earthly kind; and that if Šahlä Šəllase went on imitating the enlightened princes of Europe and above all improving the moral condition of his subjects, Šäwa would be able to produce the wonderful things.*⁵³

In this regard, Šahlä Šəllase's interest in craftsmanship had a family foundation, which was supported by the positive outlook of his mother.⁵⁴ Regarding foreign-made objects, Šahlä Šəllase used foreign artifacts like a pair of red Turkish slippers and white socks. European articles of clothing were adopted and wore in the palace.⁵⁵

The King also imported a variety of colored cloths for the balcony where the King sat at the judgment, and the grounds where his grantees, governors, judges, and others sat and stood were covered with Persian and Turkish carpets.⁵⁶ For instance, on the Saturday of Passion Week, a firm assembly is held in the palace court, decorated with carpets, velvets, and gay clothes.⁵⁷ In addition, the King imported stick guns and seven-barreled pistols, which were

⁵¹ Rubenson, 152-168.

⁵² Isenberg and Krapf, 297; Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 155.

⁵³ Krapf, 87- 88.

⁵⁴ Harris, *The Highlands*. Vol. II, 155.

⁵⁵ Johnston, Vol. II, 305.

⁵⁶ Isenberg and Krapf, 134.

⁵⁷ Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. III, 18.

initially used at court.⁵⁸ Some of the objects used by the king inside the court were illustrated in Fig 1.



Figure 1: The image of *Nəguś Šāhlä Šəllase* of Šäwa. Source: Rochetd'Hericourt:1841 and freely accessible in different websites)

By and large, Combes and Tamisier witnessed and recorded contemporary data from King Šāhlä Šəllase's courts in the 1830s and were highly impressed by the King's commitment to advancing the kingdom's craftsmanship. And therefore, they associated the King with the spirit of Saint Simony, who believed “the industrial class is the sole useful class,” as expressed by the founder, Saint Simon. As a result, they called the King the ‘first industrialist’ in the kingdom of Šäwa in the period under study.⁵⁹ Thus, under the rule of Šāhlä Šəllase, the kingdom experienced more remarkable technological progress than any other part of Ethiopia during the era of the princes in the first half of the nineteenth century.

4. The Royal Workshops in the Kingdom of Šäwa in the Nineteenth Century

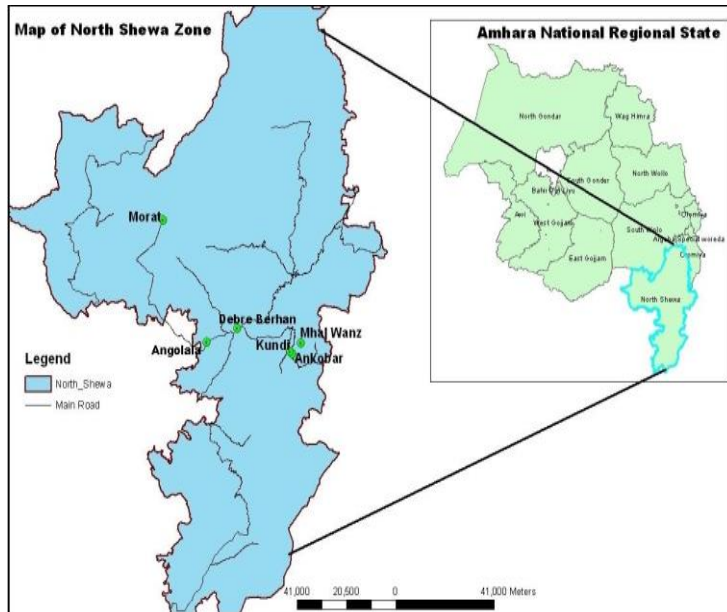
As indicated above, the study covered the main handicraft workshops established by Šāhlä Šəllase to advance the kingdom's technology. As part of his efforts, he founded royal workshops in the main political centers and his favorite places of residence. This was evident in the main political centers of the kingdom (Ankobär, Angoläla and Däbrä Berhan).⁶⁰ There were also some other unique places where handicrafts were produced, namely Mähäl Wänz,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 29.

⁵⁹ Pankhurst, “The Saint Simonians,” 185; Combes and Tamisier, *Voyage en Abyssinie*, 349.

⁶⁰ Isenberg and Krapf, 120.

and the *täbiban* monastery of Mäntəq. They were geographically close to the capital, Ankobär, and known by their products and specializations.



Map 1: Royal Workshop sites in the Kingdom of Šäwa

4.1. Ankobär: the first royal workshop in the Kingdom of Šäwa

According to local tradition, Ankobär was served as a seat for medieval Ethiopian kings such as Ase Yekunno Amlak (r. 1270-85), Amdä Šiyon (r. 1314-44), and Lebnä Dengel (r. 1508-40).⁶¹ Among the rulers of Šäwa, it also served as the seat of Amməha Iyäsus (r.1747-1775), Asfa Wäsän (r. 1775-1808) and Šahlä Šəllase (r.1808-1847). However, its glory and prestige flourished under Šahlä Šəllase, when it was visited by foreign merchants, visitors, and agents of foreign European powers.⁶² Geographically, Ankobär was placed on a hill in a strategic location. The King's palace dominated the hill, with its thatched roofs rising above the height of the pyramidal hill.⁶³ In the area, added to the royal buildings were hundreds of thatched roofs of little circular houses and the royal slaves and servants resided in them with their families.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ahmed Hassen Omer, "Ankobär," *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. I (2003), 273-274; Deresse Ayenachew; *Yä-Ankobär Tarik (1733-1929 E.C.)*, 1987 E.C.(mammography),73f: 6-10; Johnston, Vol. II, 56-57.

⁶² Rita Pankhurst, "In Quest of Ankobär's Church Libraries," *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopia Studies* Vol. I (1994), 199.

⁶³ Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. I, 315, 365.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 414.

At Ankobär, a large number of craftspeople, including blacksmiths, weavers, spinners, joiners, woodcutters, carpenters, masons, stoneworkers, dressmakers, sewers, painters, and traditional physicians, surgeons and others, gathered in the workshop, and the King paid them frequent visits and provided them with good treatment. As Combes and Tamisier have confirmed, all visitors to the court were impressed by the wide range and high quality of goods produced by his workshops in Ankobär.⁶⁵ The skilled *Fälaša* were the main actors in producing handicrafts in the workshop. According to oral tradition, therefore, the workshop is still remembered by the name *Säräteña Säffär* (workers' neighborhood). His grandson, Emperor Menilek II (r. 1889-1913), also used the term when Addis Ababa was established as the empire's capital city, and he relocated some artisans from Ankobär to Addis Ababa.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Ankobär is well-known for its exceptional quarter of spinning women known as *Fätay Amba* (spinning hill). Members worked with limited working hours for ten months before taking a two-month break in July and August. They had produced for the dignitaries and soldiers. Besides, in Ankobär, the clergymen were also involved in manuscript writing (copying), painting, and weaving in the kingdom.

Merchants settled and traded on market day, held every Saturday about two kilometers away on the River Ayrarra and Čaka Mountain.⁶⁷ The surrounding community and the King purchased various commodities and objects from the local producers and caravan merchants on market day. According to Harris, traders from Gondär and Tigray had a habit of selling glassware, clothing, and firearms to the King of Šäwa for a significant profit.⁶⁸ Due to its political significance, Ankobär attracted many foreign visitors. Several Greek and Armenian artisans played an essential role in developing craftsmanship at Ankobär. Among these foreign artisans was the Greek armorer Elias, who trained King Šahlä Šöllase's chief armorer, Ato Čakol.⁶⁹ He was working with Elias and was skilled at making entire rifles.⁷⁰ The other two Armenians, Demetrios and Yohannes built the King's palace as well as a grinding mill at Ankobär.⁷¹

⁶⁵Combes and Tamisier, 349-351.

⁶⁶ *Liqä kahənatə Qalä Həyəwätə Habətä Wälədə*, interviewed by Chalachew Yegifneh, Ankobär, February 22, 2018; Daniel Tesfaye, "History of Serategna Safer" (MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 2007), 1-5.

⁶⁷Isenberg and Krapf, 95.

⁶⁸Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 33.

⁶⁹Pankhurst, *A Social History*, 238.

⁷⁰Pankhurst, "The Greeks," 147.

⁷¹Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 43; Johnston, Vol. II, 60.

Craftsmen of any kind in Ankobär were rare, as the Armenian silversmith Stefanos arrived, new technological endeavors were witnessed. However, he fled the area when he was accused of minting coins. Another foreign artisan was the Greek or Armenian merchant called Petros, who introduced the art of dying leather in red and green.⁷² As a result, more significant handicraft works were carried out by foreign and domestic artisans working under the King's supervision. Near Ankobär, craft production centers were available. These were Mähal Wänz and the *täbiban* monastery of Mäntəq.

4.2. Mähal Wänz:Yä-barud Mäwqäčä (Gunpowder Foundry)

Mähal Wänz was one of King Šahlä Šəllase's establishments located ten kilometers north of Ankobär in the most fertile region.⁷³ According to Krapf, the King frequently visited it and spent the rainy season there and retired when a pest or smallpox outbreak occurred in the capital Ankobär.⁷⁴ The King also used Mähal Wänz to maintain a strict fast during the *Fəlsäta* days.⁷⁵ As the King's residence on some occasions, it was well-known for its well-organized workshop, which specializes in gunpowder manufacturing. One request made by the King was, as he desired, to learn how to make gunpowder and wanted to see how saltpetre, charcoal, and sulphur were produced in the realm. Both saltpetre and sulphur are abandoned in Šäwa. In the royal arsenal, all the sulphur was employed in the manufacture of gunpowder. In addition, trees like *Tid* (*Juniperus procera* endle) and *Qulqual* (*Euphorbia ampliphylla*) were chosen as best ingredients for charcoal production, which is essential to produce excellent articles required to make gunpowder as manufactured in any country. As Johnston eloquently described the gunpowder foundry:

Now exhibited a lively scene, several men standing around a huge mortar two feet and a half high, made out of the round trunks of trees, and pounding the charcoal, or else the saltpeter into fine powder. Pestles consisted of heavy pieces of wood three feet long, which were generally kept going up and down by two men standing opposite each other and who were relieved three or four times in an hour [---] others were leaning over a coarse flat stone, grinding the sulfur beneath another heavy one they moved about with the hands [---] were employed in this occupation

⁷²Pankhurst, *A Social History*, 238.

⁷³Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 6; Johnston, Vol. II, 286-287.

⁷⁴Isenberg and Krapf, 169-170.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 225. The sixteen days of fasting is called *Fəlsäta* and was fasted in memory of the ascension of St. Mary. This is prescribed by the Church at this time of St. Mary. In those days, no meat is allowed to be eaten and the first food taken daily must be after three o'clock in the afternoon. Johnston, Vol. II, 258.

[---] several materials were reduced to a sufficiently fine powder to commence mixing them.⁷⁶

After a lengthy process, the gunpowder was produced in the workshop and examined, each taking a distance of approximately forty yards (37 meters). It had a ball-like structure.⁷⁷ Here, King Šahlä Šəllase's dream to manufacture firearms was achieved. According to oral tradition, the location of the King's gunpowder industry is remembered by the name *yä-barud mäwqäča* or *mäwqäča bet*. It is now found in a district called Gağälo.⁷⁸ From our observation, some ruins and industrial spare parts are still available in the area. The material remains, such as two-shape creators (made of stone) and two wheels (made of stone and iron), are shown in Fig 2, and the ruins of the building where the foundry was located are illustrated in Fig 3.



Figure 2: Moulds (left) and wheels (right) of the gunpowder foundry at Mähal Wänz.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2018.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 274-275.

⁷⁷ Johnston, Vol. II, 275, 338.

⁷⁸ Ato Täklä Šadiq Habtä Wald, Qäsis Abäğä Täklä Šadiq and *Liqä kahənatə* Qalä Həyəwätə Habətä Wälədə, interviewed by Chalachew Yegifneh, Mähal Wänz and Ankobär, February 22-23, 2018.



Figure 3: The ruins of the building where the foundry was established at Mähal Wänz.
Source: Photograph by the author, 2018.

Generally, the gunpowder manufacturing industry and the workshop at Mähal Wänz show that the kingdom of Šäwa was making significant technological progress in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, it is evident that craft technology reached its zenith and created a new pre-industrial dynamism in the technological history of Ethiopia in general and the kingdom of Šäwa in particular. In fact, the tradition continued by the succeeding monarchs in the second half of the nineteenth century Ethiopia.

4.3. *Mäntəq: monastery of the Təbiban*

The Monastery of Mäntəq is located at the bottom of Emamrät Mountain, about two to three hours' walk from Ankobär.⁷⁹ The inhabitants were *təbibans*, who widely considered themselves as *Bete Israel* descendants only.⁸⁰ They pretended to be skilled iron, wood, and clay workers. In the monastery, the *təbiban* were Christians. As Johnston stated, they differ from the surrounding Christians for the following reasons:

*Every day in the week, except Saturday and Sunday, was a strict fast; they had no bed to sleep upon, as they sat up all night in their church, and they did not pray to the Virgin Mary and believed that Christ had no father, but still was a man like us. They have no altar, called tabot, like Christians of Šäwa.*⁸¹

⁷⁹Ato Šumu Hayläslase, interviewed by Chalachew Yegifneh. Mäntəq, February 22, 2018; Isenberg and Krapf, 238-239.

⁸⁰James D. Barker, *Narratives of a Journey to Shoa and an Attempt to Visit Harar* (Bombay, 1841), 59.

⁸¹Johnston, Vol. II, 331-332.

From their religious practice and ideas, they were living a *gädam* (monastic) life. The nineteenth-century traveler accounts remarked that they had Jewish origins.⁸² Similarly, the oral tradition confirms that the founding members of the monastery were the *Fälaša*, who came from Gondär during the reign of *Märäd ʿAzmač Abbəyye*.⁸³ The monastery's main economic activities were agriculture and handicraft production. Besides religious activities in the monastery, monks and nuns worked on various handicrafts (including pottery, blacksmithing, weaving, and tanning). Inside the monastery, gender division of labor was practical. Women were responsible for pottery and spinning, while men were responsible for weaving and blacksmithing.⁸⁴ The responsibilities of men are shown in Figure4.



Figure 4: Pottery workshop of the monastery (left), a monk weaving (right). Source: Photograph by the author and Alebachew Belay, 2018.

On the market days of Aleyyu Amba and Ankobär, the monastery craftsmen were in charge of selling their goods. Occasionally, the neighboring community purchased their handicraft products from the monastery where they were made.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, those who engaged in blacksmithing and pottery were marginalized and ostracized by the surrounding community in the early days of its establishment. According to Krapf, the people of Šäwa insulted them by calling them *buda* or sorcerers. However, the *täbibans* intentionally entertained this fear, which protected them against the persecution of the other Šäwan inhabitants. Thus, this would have been one of the mechanisms used to maintain their security in the area. Indeed,

⁸²Isenberg and Krapf, 240.

⁸³*Liqä kahnat Qalä Hywät Habtä Wäld*; Bairu Tafla, .512.

⁸⁴*Ato Šumu Hayläslase*; Johnston, Vol.II, 331-332; Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol.364, 244.

⁸⁵Johnston, Vol. II, 244; *Ato Šumu Hayläslase*.

they believed in “God, they have the Bible in another language and were in possession of other books.”⁸⁶ Because of its proximity to the capital, Ankobär, and their handicraft production, however, the King was a great friend to them and gave them several oxen as a reward throughout the year.⁸⁷ In addition, he granted land to the *täbibs* of Mäntəq, which showed that the monastery was in its heyday. Such kind of treatment and support from the King gradually changed the society's negative attitude towards crafts people. Slowly, the surrounding community learned the skill from the monastery. Therefore, we can suggest that the Mäntəq monastery could be one of the centres for transferring talent and technology in the kingdom.⁸⁸ Descendants of these people still inhabit the area throughout the more significant part of the kingdom of Šäwa.

4.4. Angoläla: Royal iron-works and industrial workshop

Angoläla was one of the second capitals of the emerging kingdom of Šäwa, which was essentially founded by the reigning monarch, Šahlä Šəllase.⁸⁹ During the period, it mainly served as the capital of the western portion of Šäwa, situated in the immediate neighborhood of the Oromo tribes. It was chosen for strategic reasons, with an impressive natural fortification by the River Čäča. During the more significant part of the year, it served as the King's favorite place of residence. In the area, the King built a city, which he named "*Salaish*." In the area, the King built a new city with a long trench, a wall, and houses of wood, and a new governor was assigned, along with a number of soldiers. In this manner, the King intended to secure his frontiers against the incursion of the Oromos.⁹⁰ The settlement pattern of Angoläla lay on the "three extensive, but low hills of nearly equal height," which were covered with houses. In the town of Angoläla, foreign artisans built an impressive palace for Šahlä Šəllase on the summit of the most considerable eminence near the church of *Kidanä Mihrät*.⁹¹ In the area, the castle was erected, occupied the center, and was defended by six rows of solid and high fences. As Harris describes it "superior to all other domiciles in the realm," it was a two-storied stone construction erected by the Greek artisans Demetrius,

⁸⁶Isenberg and Krapf, .89.

⁸⁷Johnston, Vol. II, 332.

⁸⁸Ato Šumu Hayläslase.

⁸⁹Krapf, 23-24.

⁹⁰ Isenberg and Krapf, 67; Johnston, Vol. II, 65; Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 87.

⁹¹ Gäbärä Sillase Wäldä Arägay (*TsähafäTezaz*). *Tarikä Zämän Zä Daymawi Menilek Nigusä Nägäst Zä Ityophiya* (Addis Abab: Artistic Press, 1959), 85.

who was assisted by his compatriot Yohannes.⁹² The palace was considerably superior in terms of architecture, which holds firm possession of the royal attention.⁹³ Thus, Angoläla has risen, new settlers arrived, and a large village was created within a short time.⁹⁴ Settlers such as weavers, blacksmiths, and jewelers inhabited the area in the service of the King.⁹⁵

Angoläla was known by its royal workshops where Šahlä Šəllase loves industrial arts passionately, and all manual work is carried out under his eyes. As Combes and Tamsier observed, the workshop was “[f]ull of weavers, carpenters, masons, and other workers engaged in making gunpowder, repairing rifles, or working in gold, silver, and ivory, and that the monarch's workshop produced magnificent cloth, bracelets, swords, shields, and armguards.”⁹⁶ In similar terms, Isenberg and Krapf state that Šahlä Šəllase was highly concerned about the quality of products and he often visited the workshops to watch their operation. In the workshop as Isenberg and Krapf write:

*Numerous blacksmiths, gun-makers, weavers, and others were gathered within a large space where each of them performs the piece of work assigned to him, which has finished, he is obliged to show the King, who if not pleased with it, orders him to improve it.*⁹⁷

In addition, there was a royal iron works, situated near Angoläla at a little village, Gureyo, which was very rich in metals, which was deeply buried in the valley of Čäča. Many *täbiban* settled in small huts on its shores, where they dug and worked iron. However, this iron did not seem to be as good as the iron of Tigray, which had excellent quality.⁹⁸ According to Harris, the ironworks at Gureyo mentioned that this industry was one of the largest of such an establishment in his day. However, the operation of the workshops had faced a crisis following the death of Šahlä Šəllase in 1847.

4.5. The spinning workshop of Däbrä Berhan

The town of Däbrä Berhan was founded by King Zär’aYa’aqob in the fifteenth century. The King built his palace and resided there for over a decade. The palace served monarchs until

⁹²Johnston, Vol. II, 64-65; Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 88.

⁹³Harris, *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 140, 88.

⁹⁴Isenberg and Krapf, 67.

⁹⁵Richard Pnkhurst, “Angoläla,” *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. I (2003), 267-268.

⁹⁶Combes and Tamsier, 349.

⁹⁷Krapf, 62.

⁹⁸Isenberg and Krapf, 150-151.

the reign of King Labnä Dəngəl.⁹⁹ In the late seventeenth century, the founder of the Šāwan dynasty, Abeto Nāgasi Kərstos made Däbrä Berhan his residence and rebuilt King Zār'aYāqob's palace, claiming that the area was the site of the Ethiopian Emperors' medieval metropolis.¹⁰⁰ Däbrä Berhan, like other cities in Šāwa, served as one of the capitals of the Šāwan monarchs, especially Asfa Wäsän, Wäsän Sägäd, and Šahlä Šəllase in the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰¹ In the early nineteenth century, Šahlä Šəllase made it his third favourite place of residence, located about ten kilometres east of Angoläla.¹⁰² It was known for its handcraft manufacturing centres. In the King's palace, 'two hundred royal cotton spinners made a vast and exquisite cloth, as they produced weaved and delicately long drowned thread.' The thread and fine fabric created in Šāwa were valued at thirty dollars, were delivered as a present to the Queen of England by Šahlä Šəllase, and were manufactured in the workshop. The spinning women in the palace produced cotton clothes for the King and courtiers.¹⁰³ In addition, the cotton trade, which is used for the finer account of clothes, is presented by the King to all his greatest favorites and governors. According to oral tradition, the artisans who lived in the town of Däbrä Berhan came from its surroundings mainly from Ankobär.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Muslim Argobba in the lowlands were employed in weaving activities, and in and around the town tents and black wool had been produced.¹⁰⁵

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that, generally, the kingdom of Šāwa under the rule of King Šahlä Šəllase showed considerably more technological progress than any other part of Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century. Šahlä Šəllase was a notable king who passionately attempted to advance the indigenous status of craft technology. As part of his efforts, he established workshops in the main political centers and residential areas. The workshops in Ankobär, Angoläla, Däbrä Berhan, Mähäl Wänz and the *täbiban* monastery of Mäntəq were evident. They still exist and serve as tourist attractions and center for historical and archaeological studies. The unlimited efforts of Šahlä Šəllase towards indigenous and foreign craftsmanship thereby gave his kingdom a much more varied and international

⁹⁹Harris *The Highlands*, Vol. II, 51- 95.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Pankhurst, "Däbrä Barhan," *Encyclopedia Æthiopica*, Vol. II (2005), 12.

¹⁰¹Krapf, 274.

¹⁰² Isenberg and Krapf, 120, 274.

¹⁰³ Johnston, Vol. II, 79-80.

¹⁰⁴Ato Šumu Hayläslase, *Liqä kahnat Qalä Hywät Habtä Wäld*,

¹⁰⁵Pankhurst, *A Social History*, 238; Volker Stitz, "The Amhara Resettlement of Northern Shoa during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Rural Africana* 11, 1970, 76–81.

character, which subsequently established strong diplomatic relations with the powerful European powers (Britain and France). Therefore, the King was the first among the kings of Šäwa to play a great role in improving the kingdom's technology, and the kingdom was remarkably different from the other parts of Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Acknowledgement: We are grateful to those who have funded and contributed to shaping this article.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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