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Research article

The battle of Aroge revisited: a technical inquiry into military innovation and the might of firepower

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Abstract: *Based on a qualititave method, this study attempts to examine the battle of Aroge fought between the dwendling army of Emperor Tewodros II and the British expeditionary force sent to Ethiopia to get the release of European captives kept at the formidable Meqdela plateau. The researcher tries to make use of contemporary primary and secondary sources in an attmept to shed new light on the fateful engagement between the two forces. The British expeditionary force benefited tremendously from the invention of the first breech-loading rifles which were to be tested in the battle with Ethiopians. The Battle of Aroge fought on 10 April, 1868, proved that the muzzle-loading guns in the hands of Ethiopians were no match for the new breech-loading Snider rifles possessed by the British forces. During the brief engagement that lasted three hours, Tewodros lost hundreds of soldiers including his loyal commander Fitawrari Gebreye. Three days later, he committed suicide. The findings underscore how firepower decisively shifted the balance of power in favor of the British forces and allowed them to gain a strategic upper hand.*

Keywords*: Meqdela, Snider, breech-loading, muzzle-loading, rifles, mortars*

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1. Background

On 11 February 1855 (*Yekatit* 4, 1847 in Ethiopian calendar), *Dejjazmach* Kassa Haylu of Quara was crowned by Abuna Selama as Emperor Tewodros II, king of kings of Ethiopia following a series of stunning victories over several regional rulers. His coronation marked the end of the *Zemene Mesafint* (Era of the Princes) and ushered in a new epoch in the country's history. He set out not only to restore Ethiopia to its former glory but also to modernize the country along European lines (Rubenson, 1976: 172).

Seven years earlier, Kassa's army suffered heavy losses at the battle of Deberki in the hands of the Egyptian army that had been armed with modern weapons. That crushing defeat is believed to have a lasting impact on his military reforms and modernization programmes. He

came to realize that courage and bravery alone would take his army nowhere. He seems to have concluded that his army could successfully repulse foreign invasion and squash internal rebellion only if reformed and armed with modern weapons. Accordingly, Tewodros introduced military reforms in an attempt to create a professional national army with its own salary. Besides, he tried to instill a strict military discipline among his soldiers and a modern chain of command. Above all, his insatiable desire for modern weapons urged him to establish a gun foundry at Gafat with the help of European missionaries and travelers. That made Tewodros the first Ethiopian monarch who managed to manufacture mortars locally (Bahru, 1991: 28).

The production of mortars at Gafat did not stop his quest for European technology. His intimate relationship with two Englishmen, John Bell and Walter Plowden seems to have convinced Tewodros that it would be possible to get technical assistance from the British government. Then, in 1862, Tewodros requested the new British consul, Captain Duncan Cameron, to carry his letter to Britain and bring a response from Queen Victoria. Cameron's failure to go in person to Britain and bring a response from the queen led to his arrest (*Ibid*., 36).

While still in detention, Cameron managed to smuggle a message to his government warning that he would not be released until Tewodros received a polite response to his letter. The news about the detention of Cameron and other Europeans prompted British officials to search through letters of correspondence. It was discovered that Tewodros's letter had been received in February 1863 but due to either indifference or negligence, it was left unanswered. It was discovered that the British Foreign Secretary Lord Russell was responsible for the mishap. When asked by the Queen to justify the lack of response to Tewodros, he misinformed her by responding: "The king of Abyssinia wished to be invited to come to this country and to be assisted against the French..." (Rubenson, 1966: 86). That was a pure fabrication. In his letter, Tewodros did not request an official visit to England. Nor did he ask for support against the French.

In an attempt to secure the release of the British consul detained in Ethiopia, Queen Victoria assigned Hormuzd Rassam, an Iraqi Christian who had been serving the British foreign service at Aden, to carry her letter to emperor Tewodros II. Rassam was warmly welcomed by Tewodros in January 1866. However, Tewodros found the letter as well as his discussion with

Rassam unsatisfactory.Then, Tewodros detained Rassam and sent Martin Flad to England to bring with him technicians who could manufacture modern weapons (*Ibid*., 88).

News about the arrest of Rassam and the continued detention of Cameron and other Europeans prompted the British Foreign Office to send an ultimatum on 16 April, 1867. Although Tewodros received the letter on 13 June, 1867, he preferred to ignore it. Two months later, the British government decided to send an expeditionary force from India under the command of Sir Robert Napier to get the release of European captives (Rubenson, 1976: 256).

2.**The March to Meqdela**

Named after its commander, the Napier expedition was the largest military campaign to the African continent in the nineteenth century and its total cost stood at £9 million. Part of the huge expenditure was spent on hundreds of chartered ships and a total of 36,094 pack animals purchased from the Middle East and the Mediterranean region. In terms of manpower, the expedition was composed of 14,700 combatants and around 27,000 camp followers (*Ibid,* 257). Indian soldiers and camp followers formed the greater part of the expeditionary force. The Indian force included four cavalry regiments, 10 infantry battalions, four artillery batteries and two heavy mortars. In contrast, the British force was composed of four infantry battalions, one company of engineers and half a cavalry regiment (Myatt, 1970: 63).

Determined to confront this formidable force, Tewodros commanded an army weary of campaigning that had already dwindled to 3,000 – 8,000 men. The immeasurable toil and hardship of road building and dragging of mortars from Debre Tabor to Meqdela that lasted six solid months further exhausted his soldiers (Rubenson, 1976: 256). Although Tewodros faced a nationwide rebellion and his opponents commanded much larger forces, he was still the most feared emperor. According to Henry Blanc, "his name alone is worth 10,000 men (Quoted in Rubenson 1976: 255).

While he was dragging all the mortars manufactured at Gafat along a highly formidable terrain to Meqdela, the British expeditionary force was on its way from the Red Sea port of Zula to Tewodros's last stronghold. In the meantime, the British commander issued two proclamations: the first sent to Tewodros and the second addressed to all regional rulers of Ethiopia. While Napier warned Tewodros to release the captives, he required all regional lords to stay away from the conflict. Part of the second proclamation reads:

> ... When the time shall arise for the march of a British Army through your country, bear in mind ... that the Queen of England has no unfriendly feelings towards you and no design against your country or your liberty. ... All supplies required for my soldiers shall be paid for. No peaceable inhabitants shall be molested. The sole object ... is the liberation of Her Majesty's subjects (Myatt, 82).

As a result of this proclamation, the British expeditionary force faced no resistance on its way to Meqdela. Since all regional rulers wanted to see the downfall of Tewodros, no attempt was made to stop the advance of the British army. In addition to protecting their convoys and telegraph lines, Kassa Mercha had even gone to the extent of supplying the British troops with a total of 30,000 kilograms of grain per week while they marched through his territory. Paradoxical as it may seem, it was Tewodros, not the British army that marched through "enemy territory" in his own land. As a result, the British forces managed to travel 650 kilometers from Zula to Meqdela in a matter of a few weeks without much difficulty (Rubenson, 1976: 260-261).

3. Game-Changer at Aroge: The Arrival of the Snider Rifle

On the eve of the battle of Aroge, tremendous changes had been taking place in Europe to transform muzzle-loading rifles into breech-loaders. Muzzle-loading rifles were slow to operate. They used paper cartridges containing a lead bullet and gun powder. Before firing, a foot soldier had to tear the paper case, pour the black gun powder down the barrel, insert the bullet and ram down the whole stuff with a ramrod. An infantryman was expected to repeat the whole process before each round of fire. As a result, the rate of fire of a muzzle-loading rifle was usually two to three rounds in a minute (Myatt, 64).

The conversion of muzzle-loading into breech-loading rifles was effected by a Dutch-American gun maker named Jacob Snider (1811-1866). His major invention was cutting off two and half inches at the end of the breech for inserting cartridges into the barrel. The new system had also a mechanism to extract empty case from the breech to the chamber. Unlike the muzzle-loader, the Snider rifle named after its inventor, utilized brass cartridges (*Ibid*., Wilkinson, 1-6). In the meantime, Colonel Boxer invented a new cartridge that enhanced the accuracy of the Snider rifle (Wilkinson, 5).

Then, the new Snider rifle was put on a stress test. The result was remarkable. Even after 1,000 rounds, the Snider rifle was still accurate and dependable. In terms of the rate of firing, the Snider rifle was twice or three times faster than the old muzzle-loader (Myatt, 64). Finally, on 23 May, 1866, the Ordnance Select Committee proposed that the Snider should be the standard infantry weapon for the British army. Accordingly, the British government accepted the proposal and adopted the Snider rifle on 18 September, 1866 (Heptinstall, 2016: 30-31).

The Enfield which had been the standard infantry rifle of the British army until 1867 was successfully converted into a Snider breech-loading system (Myatt, 64; Heptinstall, 33). Once all these inventions and conversions were made, the new Snider rifles had to be tested in an actual battle together with the administrative and logistical services. For such a trial run, the expedition to Ethiopia offered a perfect testing ground (*Ibid*., 17). The expeditionary force was armed with 4,000 Snider rifles, 1,000 carbines, 9 pound Armstrong artillery pieces, 8 inch mortars as well as 2.5 million rounds of ammunition (*Ibid*., 65; Wilkinson, 8). Such new weapons were to decide the fate of the battle.

4.**The Battle of Aroge**

Aroge is a plain at the foot of the Meqdela plateau, the last stronghold of Emperor Tewodros. This natural fortress is surrounded by cliffs and has only one entrance. Hoping that his home-made mortars would destroy the British army, Tewodros positioned his 32 guns at Fala, one of the three peaks (the other two being Meqdela and Sellase) overlooking the Aroge plain. Eight years back, he had an invincible army with a manpower of 60,000 – 70,000 fighters. But in April 1868, his army had already dwindled to 4,000 – 7,000 men. Among these warriors, about 3,000 men were armed with old muzzle-loading rifles (Rubenson, 1976:264; Blundell, 1906:34; Molvaer, 1998: 50).

Fig. 1: The plain of Aroge seen from the Sellase saddle (photo by the author)

Although his army was immensely outnumbered and outgunned by the British expeditionary force, Tewodros tried to boost the morale of his soldiers by saying: "The English, ever since the time of Noah have cast cannons and manufactured guns and powder, whilst we only commenced yesterday; but don't be afraid, we shall strip them of their arms ..." (Stern, 1868: 378).

Tewodros was carefully watching through his binoculars while the British forces crossed the Beshlo River and came closer to the Aroge plain using the road he built to transport his mortars to the mountain fortress. Moments before giving his "go and fight" order, Tewodros addressed his soldiers sitting on the back of his horse:

> My children, be not afraid of these English soldiers, because they are like the Philistines who made war against David; but remember, David smote them and in the name of God I shall conquer. Am I not a son of David and Solomon? Has not God anointed me king of Ethiopia? Am I not the old hero in the battle, the pillar of fire to those who are afraid? Who can bear my countenance? Has not God given me victory after victory? Today you shall see that I who brought the English army to Abyssinia, shall also obtain the victory over them. As our Abuna Salama is dead, ... I absolve in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, every soldier who may lose his life in battle ... (Waldmeier, 1886: 108-109).

Immediately after Tewodros closed his speech and waved them, his soldiers rushed down the hill toward Aroge to fight against the British troops who were ready to give them battle. Some were galloping horses and the rest were running barefoot with amazing speed to the British camp. At the same time, the emperor instructed his artillerymen at Fala to open fire (*Ibid*., 109; Henty, 1868: 321; Stanley, 1896: 120). However, his artillery fire could not stop the advance of the British forces. Neither did it cause any casualty. The artillery fire was so inaccurate that, according to an eyewitness account, "most of the shot went over our heads" (Henty, 323). One of the largest mortars named after the emperor was overcharged with gun powder and it finally exploded (Waldmeier, 109) killing and wounding its artillerymen. Other mortars ran out of either balls or gun powder (Myatt, 137; Rubenson, 1976: 264).

Fig. 2: The largest mortar named Sevastopol still laying at Meqdela (photo by the author)

Although the mortars proved worthless, Tewodros's cavalrymen and foot soldiers came very close to the British line shouting war cries and *fukera* (morale boosting verses). Gebreye, Tewodros's intimate confidant and loyal commander with a title of a *fitawrari* (commander of the vanguard force) was galloping at the head of the central column. The bright red robe he wore made him an easily identifiable target. Troops of the 4th Regiment mistakenly thought that he was the emperor and many aimed their Snider rifles at him (Myatt, 140). Although the Snider could hit its target at 450 meters, the commander of the 4th Regiment, Colonel Cameron did not give his order until Ethiopian warriors were around 230 meters away. Before

the first volleys of the Snider, rockets were fired in quick succession. H. M. Stanley, who witnessed the battle as a special correspondent of the New York Herald reported:

> The enemy, from very astonishment at the novel sound by rockets, halted and cast inquiring glances at each other, as if to ask 'what manner of things are these' but urged by their chiefs they made another desperate essay to advance. ... A clear space was kept for the rocket guns to do good execution and incessantly they vomited their fiery darts at the enemy ... (Stanley, 123).

That was followed by a deadly fire from the Snider rifles. The first volley from 300 Sniders mowed down Ethiopian warriors in the central column as a monster scythe cut long grass. The first volley claimed the lives of *Fitawrari* Gebreye and hundreds of his warriors. But that did not deter the survivors from advancing to the British line with amazing courage and gallantry. The Ethiopian warriors expected an interval until their adversaries reload their rifles hoping that they were armed with the old muzzle-loaders like them. Since the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, there had been very little change in the muzzle-loading rifles possessed by Ethiopian fighters. However, the British forces were able to fire without any pause with a rate of "30 - 40 rounds per second" (Marsden, 2008: 306-307). As a result, Ethiopian fighters did not get any respite since each Snider rifle fired six to eight rounds in a minute. An eyewitness reporter had this to say: "Theodore's fighting men used only to muzzle-loaders apparently anticipated a decent interval while the slow ritual of powder and ball, rod and cap was obeyed, but it was not granted them" (Myatt, 140). The result was a horrifying massacre.

Although Ethiopian fighters saw their comrades in arms being mown down in hundreds by Snider and rocket fire, the survivors surged forward gallantly. To borrow Stanley's terms, "they leaped downward like tigers." They were expecting a hand to hand combat with British and Indian soldiers. But the continuous fire from the Sniders did not gave them that chance (Stanley, 126-127). The Ethiopian fighters had never experienced such a disastrous battle before. Even though they were shocked by the fall of hundreds of their comrades, they did not flee in panic. Some of them tried to take cover behind rocks and cactus trees. The volley from their muskets did not bring any harm on the British and Indian soldiers. In contrast, well aimed shots from the Sniders claimed more lives from the Ethiopian side. The survivors in the

central column thought that it was pointless to continue the fighting. As they retreated uphill to Fala, rockets continued to fall on their midst claiming more lives (Myatt, 141-142).

Despite the collapse of the central column, Ethiopian fighters in the left flank continued to advance toward the baggage camp. The 10th Native Infantry and the King's Own Regiment opened fire on the advancing Ethiopians in close range. The unscathed Ethiopians engaged the Sikhs in a hand to hand combat. Though they lost the battle, Ethiopian fighters did not show any sign of panic. One of the witnesses reported: "The natives, however, undoubtedly brave and behaved, they did not fly. There was no ...throwing of arms" (Henty, 325). Many Ethiopians were bayoneted by the Sikhs and some Indians were wounded with spears (Hozier, 1869: 195; Myatt, 141-142).

The distant voices of women and children to raise the morale of their fighters did not bring any change in the outcome of the battle (Stern, 384). At the height of the fighting, a torrential rain mixed with thunderstorm was falling as if to wash the blood of Ethiopians who died on the plain of Aroge. Moments later, the sun sent its rays through the clouds creating an amazing rainbow over the battlefield where bodies were still falling (Henty, 325).

The battle was fought between 1600 and 1900 hours (4:00 PM – 7:00 PM). During the engagement, the British and Indian infantrymen fired 10,200 and 7,800 rounds respectively. In addition, the mountain gunners and the Naval Brigade artillerymen fired 102 shells and 219 rockets respectively (Myatt, 142-143). All those deadly fires caused the death of 700-800 Ethiopian fighters and the wounding of 1,200-1,500 men (Rubenson, 1976: 264; Rodgers 1984; 146). On the British side, only 20 soldiers were wounded and two of them died later (Myatt, 142-143; Hozier, 197).

In the morning of 11 April, 1868, Captain Speedy and some of his troops were assigned to carry wounded Ethiopian fighters to the field hospital. But what they have witnessed at the battle field was horrifying. They saw many bodies devoured by wild animals during the previous night. They brought 75 wounded Ethiopians to the field hospital and buried 560 warriors. In the night of 10 April, 1868, General Napier had already sent the body of *Fitawrari* Gebreye to the Ethiopian camp so that he would be buried by Tewodros and his soldiers at a church on the mountain fortress (Stanley, 131).

When told about the death of his life long friend and loyal commander, Tewodros was so heartbroken that he covered himself with a cloak for several hours and then went into his tent (Myatt, 144).

Then General Napier told Tewodros that if he surrendered to him peacefully, he would be treated fairly. In his last letter sent to Napier, Tewodros expressed his determination to fight to the last man. The closing sentence of his last letter reads: "A warrior who has dandled strong men in his arms like infants will never suffer himself to be dandled in the arms of others" (Rubenson, 1976: 265). Just before the British troops stormed Meqdela, Tewodros told the last hard core of his soldiers estimated at 2000 to flee if they did not want to fight to the last man. Subsequently, many of them departed leaving him with only about 100 men (Myatt, 156).

On 13 April, 1868 at 1600 hours, the British army shelled Meqdela. During the shelling that lasted 15 minutes, 45 Ethiopians were killed and 120 were wounded. At this moment, Tewodros took his own life with a pistol he received from Queen Victoria as a present. The British troops buried his body at the church of Medhane Alem on the same day without military honours. Then, they destroyed all the mortars produced at Gafat except Sevastopol which refused to be destroyed (*Ibid.*, 168).

In the next two days, the British army plundered Meqdela. Eventually, they burned the mountain fortress on 18 April, 1868 and left. Among other things, they took away the personal belongings of the emperor including his Bible, clothes, cups, crown, and swords. In addition, they looted hundreds of manuscripts, altars, crosses made of gold, silver and bronze, paintings including the famous icon known as Kurate Re'esu (Pankhurst, 1973: 17). Richard Holmes, an archaeologist assigned by the British Museum to accompany the expedition, is reported to have gathered about 350 manuscripts (Marsden, 337).

5.Conclusion

The British expedition to Ethiopia was the largest and most expensive military campaign in the nineteenth century. The British expeditionary force marched through a highly formidable terrain in one of the remote corners of the world. Despite such adversities, the administrative and logistical service of the British army proved effective and no major disruptions occurred in transporting heavy mortars and artillery pieces from the Red Sea port of Zula to the

Meqdela fortress. Strangely enough, the British forces used elephants to transport heavy weapons across mountains and valley which had never been attempted anywhere in Africa.

The fact that emperor Tewodros was surrounded by his internal opponents contributed considerably to the success of the British campaign. The British forces met no resistance until they reached Meqdela. Regional rulers who wanted to see the downfall of Emperor Tewodros provided valuable support to the British forces. Support ranged from protecting their convoys and telegraph lines to supplying provisions.

In contrast, Tewodros II had a highly exhaused, demoralized and poorly organized army on the verge of total collapse. In addition, it was armed with the old muzzle-loading rifles and traditional weapons which were at all no match to the Britsh weaponry.

The battle of Aroge has come down in history as the first battle where the British forces effectively used the Snider rifle for the first time. The Snider rifle proved itself the most dependable infantry weapon in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The battle also showed that the old muzzle-loading rifles were no longer important and their days were over.

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