

‘Wandering Capitals’ and the Genesis of Addis Ababa

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Abstract: Addis Ababa’s current urban form in the old part of the city shows very irregular pattern filled with very dense, overcrowded or suffocated low-rise settlements. This urban area owes greatly to the original land colonization or inhabitation and culture. This inhabitation culture also goes further to the tradition of the ‘wandering capitals’, which were non-permanent settlements or camps of kings. The paper tried to expound on the nature of these settlements and the shaping of the earliest urban form of Addis Ababa.

Keywords: capital city, camps and nomadic settlements, moving cities, Addis Ababa.

Introduction

Historians have taken two positions regarding urbanization types in Ethiopian history after the Axumite period (100–940 CE). The majority takes the position that after this period, Ethiopian urbanization has not resulted in ‘true cities’. They mostly discuss urbanization in connection with Addis Ababa or with the phenomenon of ‘the wandering capitals’. Others feel that this position doesn’t reflect other forms of towns, which had ‘nucleated concentrations’.² This paper will try to shed light on the impact of the tradition of the ‘wandering capitals’ in informing the urban form of the old parts of Addis Ababa.

The city of Addis Ababa has inherited many aspects of the traditional way of settlement logic of ‘city’ settling. This tradition is unconventional because the ‘cities’ didn’t intend or become permanent cities. They are known as ‘wandering cities’ or ‘moving cities’.

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2. CRUMMY 1986, p. 9.

'Wandering Capitals'/'Moving Capitals'

Although Ethiopia is considered one of the earliest civilizations, it came to pieces in the Middle Ages. The middle age in Ethiopian history is referred to as "the Era of the Princes". At any one moment more than one king or ruler were present constantly wandering from place to place. The reason for this constant wandering was to conduct different state affairs such as personal inspection of provinces, collection of taxes, and waging of frequent wars against internal or external enemies. This obliged them to travel extensively in their empire.³ Their existence was no different from nomads with respect to the frequency of their mobility, and structures they lived in. This constant movement necessitated some practical trends in the material of their settlements. The monarchs and their followers «lived for the most part in tents and wooden huts which could be transported with a minimum of effort and cost».⁴ The Emperors accompanied by many courtiers and innumerable soldiers and followers lived successively at the expense of the populations of different provinces, the resources of which were soon exhausted.

Different Europeans who come for different reasons in this period have kept some accounts of these camps. The Florentine trader Andrea Corsali reported in 1517 that the royal retinue and army was so considerable that it could not remain in any one locality for more than four months, nor return to the same place in less than ten years because of the resultant shortage of food, while a century later, the Portuguese Jesuit Manoel de Almeida noted that changes in location were made specially because of lack of firewood, and noted: «They chose primarily a place near which firewood is found in plenty but as they have no method in cutting down forests and groves the neighboring hills and valleys are bare in a few years. It is then a question of moving the site to another place where there is firewood».⁵ The extent to which this trend of living in moving capitals eventually became the norm is expressed by Almeida who noted that the Ethiopians, evidently forgetting such earlier capitals such as Axum and Lalibela (which

3. BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD 1954, p. 42.

4. *ibidem*, p. 42.

5. *ibidem*, p. 42.

were permanent), were «amazed to hear that in other parts of the world big cities can remain for many years on the same site without experiencing a remarkable lack of firewood». The movement of the camps was considered an integral part of the country's political and social life that the seventeenth century German historian Hiob Ludolf went so far as to claim that reports of a "Royal City or Metropolis" were "mere Fables", for "The Kings of Habessinia live continually in tents".⁶

Camps as "Cities"

Spiro Kostof mentions nine main aspects for cities. These are energized crowding, urban clusters, physical circumscription, differentiation of uses, urban resources, written records, having relationship to countryside (surrounding), monumental framework and presence of buildings and people.⁷

With these criteria, clearly the 'wandering capital' doesn't qualify as city because it doesn't fulfill the majority of the requirements. But the travellers like Almeida consider it as a city by looking at three aspects of these settlements, which are characteristics of cities. These reasons are comparison with other settlements and area, population number and mix and hierarchic organization.

Comparison with other settlements and its area

The imperial camp compared to the existing settlements had been the greatest and sometimes the only present agglomeration in the territory as witnessed by many visitors. Almeida reported that «apart from the Emperor's camp there is no settlement in the whole empire that deserves the name of city, or even of town. They are all villages, some larger and some smaller, but such that no other name suites them».⁸

For all these reasons the royal camp was defined by Almeida "the royal city and capital" of the empire. The term city was justified, he insists, not only because of "the multitude of people", but also be-

6. *ibidem*, p. 42.

7. KOSTOF 1991.

8. BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD 1954, p. 42.

cause of the «good order they observe in siting it particularly of the place to which they retire to spend the winter».⁹

Population number and mix

There are different estimates from different accounts on the number of the population in the camps. But all writers were amazed and thought it unbelievable and narrated the immense number of population. Almeida estimated the army to be 30,000-40,000 while the total population was from 100,000 to 120,000.¹⁰ It was not only of soldiers but it also consisted numerous non combatants including wives, children, priests, servants and slaves, traders, beggars, tent carriers, craftsmen, armorers and prostitutes. The size and the mix tell that it is no ordinary camp.

Hierarchic Organization

One character of these “cities” was the replication of earlier camps following a hierarchic organization. The replication was so similar that at times it appeared that the only difference was the natural topography and environment. This meant a facilitated subdivision of land and erection of the camp because every one knew his place and proportion. Even at times the same paths or streets and lanes appeared.

The hierarchical make up of the campers is reflected in the layout of the camp. The king usually assumes the center, usually of the highest elevation. A number of tents are erected there including a reception and festivals tent. As it was the custom for the monarchs and officials to show their kindness to the common folk, the front of the royal tents has a large place, covered, which can gather 20,000-30,000 people.

Fencing with hedges was a feature of the royal district but had several gates, two of which led to churches set up to the south and north. Around the emperor's place are placed his wife's tent, patriarch, judges, and officers. Servants' tents usually surround the noble person to whom they are assigned. Further out are located prostitutes' tents with lodges for strangers that come for trade or to meet the king. Smith crafts also take a large space. The area in front of the palace or palace fence is an

9. *ibidem*, p.42.

10. *ibidem*, p. 42-43.

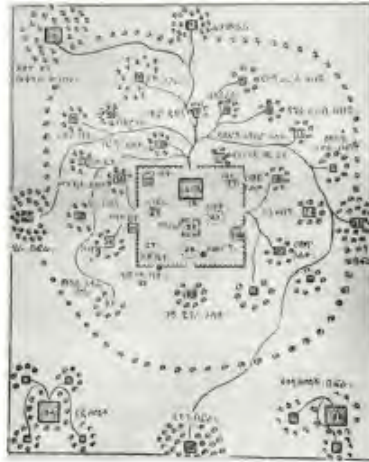


Fig. 1. The traditional camp layout. The king is surrounded by the other nobilities who are in turn are surrounded by their followers. Source: Berlan, Edouard. *Addis-Abeba: la plus haute ville d'Afrique: étude géographique*. Grenoble: Impr. Allier. 1963

area of activity like martial displays and beyond the display was a tent of Court and another for prisoners. There was also a market place with its own “market church”. According to Pankhurst because most of the merchants were Muslims, the market church was the prayer place for them.

The Medieval period was a period of constant instability and political turmoil. At a relative peaceful situation there was the chance for the camp to grow into a town. One notable static city is the northern town of Gondar. But even such a city where building techniques were flourishing and more permanent structures were being built, the turmoil and rebellion that constantly ensued resulted in their destruction. One exception was the eastern Muslim town of Harar which escaped such fates owing to its protective walls «which were guarded by a small but relatively powerful force of musketeers» that «provided the citizens a fair measure of security against attack by the surrounding Galla population which would otherwise almost certainly have overrun the town». ¹¹

The tradition of constantly living in wandering capitals and destruction of towns are reasons usually attributed to low level of urbanization. Addis Ababa, the present capital is what brought this trend to a

11. PANKHURST 1982, p. 299.

halt but it also owes much to the previous tradition. The establishment of Addis Ababa in the late 19th century can be attributed to the relative peace that prevailed.

Addis Ababa-Between establishment and Italian Occupation (1935-85)

The earlier capital before Addis Ababa was *Entoto*, a mountain site located to the immediate north of the present Addis Ababa. It was intended for the purpose of defense but didn't prove to be a suitable place at peaceful times. Already it was the seventh moving capital of Emperor Menilik II. Its distance from agricultural land provision was difficult and it also lacked a good source of water. It also suffered from a temperate climate during rainy season. The plain of *Filwaho*, or *Fin-fine*, immediately to the south of *Entoto*, on the other hand enjoyed a mild climate and was the site of hot thermal springs. In 1885 the emperor formed his camp near the spring. In 1887 impressed by the scenery, which was more wooded and with good climate, the Empress Taitu called it "Addis Ababa", literally meaning "new flower".¹² By this time permanent buildings have started to appear. But even then it lacked the look of a town for most of the Europeans who happened to visit it. A. E. Pease wrote in 1899: «**What struck me most was the absence of anything in the nature of a town, as we understand it, and the extraordinary way in which the population is scattered over the valley; single huts here, bunches of huts there, white tents pitched in groups**».¹³ A similar description is given by Powell-Cotton, who made several expeditions throughout Africa and Asia: «dotted about the plain were clusters of huts, many stockaded enclosures – large and small – and several camps, but all very much scattered and more resembling a collection of villages and farmsteads than a capital of a great empire».¹⁴ The palace was built on the hill overlooking the hot spring and two years later the Church of Sellase was built and major distribution of land was made to important personalities of state and some servants and soldiers. A number of foreigners were also recipients of land.

12. PANKHURST 1982, p. 203.

13. *ibidem*, p. 212.

14. *ibidem*, p. 213.



Fig. 2. Emperor Menelik and his followers. Source: Fasil Giorghis, and Denis Gérard. *The City & Its Architectural Heritage: Addis Ababa 1886-1941 = La Ville & Son Patrimoine Architectural*. Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2007

Addis Ababa as Spontaneous Dots and Lines on Sloppy Terrain

The clustering, distribution and disposition of settlements follows the tradition of wandering capitals. The king is surrounded his servants, soldiers and other nobilities (generals), who are themselves surrounded their soldiers and servants.

The clustered sets of huts appear as dots scattered on the landscape linked by footpaths. There is vast space that lays in-between clusters. The paths follow an organic form dictated by landscape terrain and relationship of settlement clusters. The palace area becomes the central focus area and paths radiate from it connecting to important nobilities, churches and some continuing all the way to the regions. Although this scattered, dotted settlement follows the logic of the wandering capital, it is highly spontaneous for a permanent city. This dotted settlement starts the spontaneous development of Addis Ababa.

City or Camp?

Although previous observers considered wandering ‘cities’ as cities, there were others who doubted Addis Ababa’s description as a city. Edward Gleichen at the end of the 19th century, visiting the city barely a decade after its establishment, said: «The capital presents the



Fig.3. Camp of a dignitary near Addis Ababa (c.1910). Source: Fasil Giorghis, and Denis Gérard. The City & Its Architectural Heritage: Addis Ababa 1886-1941 = La Ville & Son Patrimoine Architectural. Addis Ababa: Shama Books. 2007



Fig. 4. Early look of the city, showing the palace at the background on the hilltop. Source: Fasil Giorghis, and Denis Gérard. The City & Its Architectural Heritage: Addis Ababa 1886-1941 = La Ville & Son Patrimoine Architectural. Addis Ababa: Shama Books. 2007

appearance of a gigantic camp, and indeed, this is actually what it is». ¹⁵ Still two decades later Merab said «the first impression that one gets of the town is that of a huge camp». ¹⁶

Spatial Features of Addis Ababa

Although the city has the hierarchic organization reflected in the positioning of different nobilities with respect to the emperors palace, several factors make it look spontaneous.

Sprawl

The ‘camp’ nature meant a lot spatially. The first and foremost is its sprawl nature. The extent of the sprawl can be estimated by measuring roughly the distance between churches located at furthest distances that existed at the turn of the century. The distance between *Petros we Paulos* Church in the west and *Yeka Michael* Church in the east is almost 10 kilometers. Very sprawled land colonization made the city very much extended and without boundary. Several nobilities took huge tracts of land. Some of the earliest title deeds indicate that top officials had as high as 3 square kilometer of land in their possession. ¹⁷

Temporality

In the first decade after settling in Addis Ababa Emperor Menelik II had no intention of remaining permanently in Addis Ababa. This meant all the urban spatial features taking shape were not planned. This translates into lack of concern on the on going structure. The footpaths that slowly emerged also had no strict planning. The decision to make it permanent was based on two factors. The emperor after his decisive victory over Italy in 1896 became very popular and powerful: he didn’t need to move to different regions to conduct his affairs as before. Instead regional rulers started to come to Addis Ababa. Secondly, the introduction of eucalyptus tree from Australia – fast to grow and regrows after being cut – avoided the need to relocate in search of firewood.

15. GLEICHEN 1898, p. 157.

16. ZEWDE 1986, p. 44.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 48.

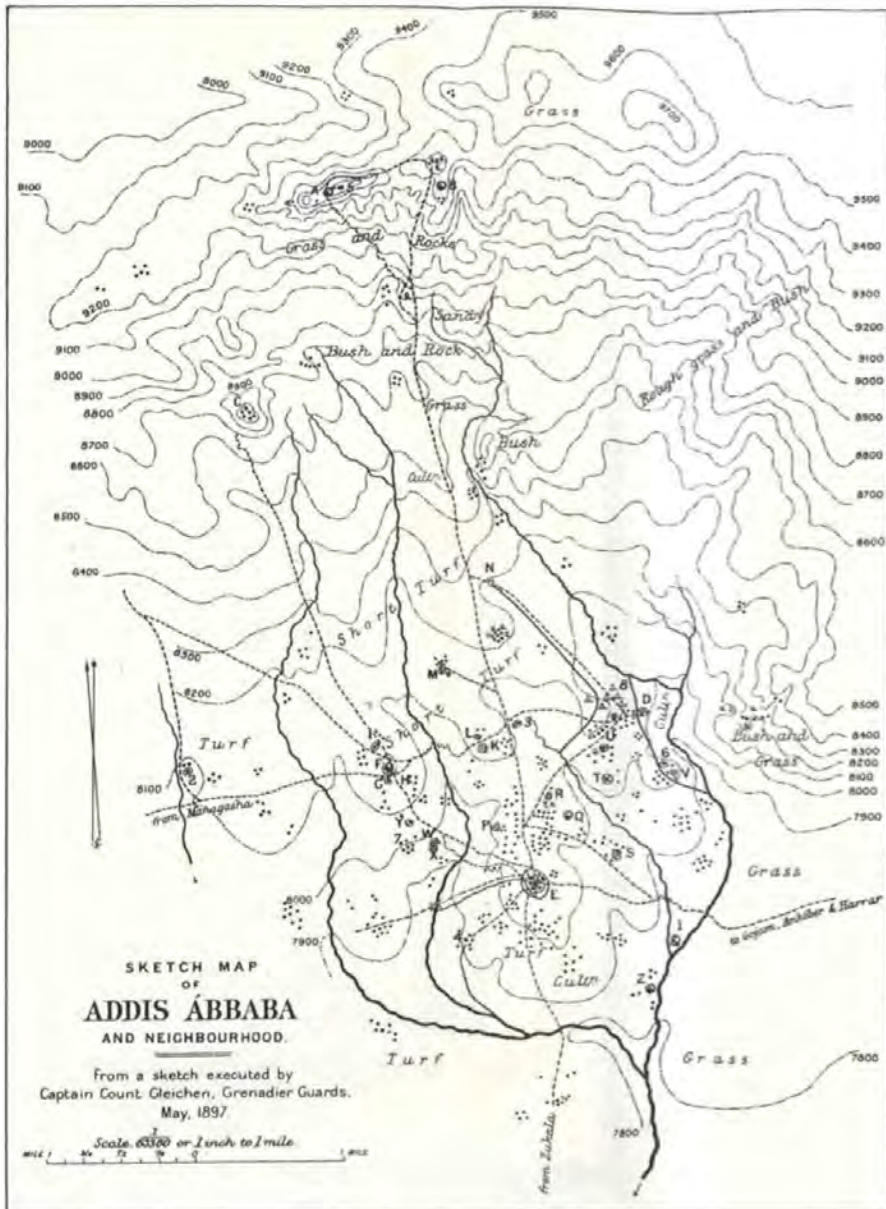


Fig. 5. Early map of Addis Ababa, 1897. Source; Gleichen, Edward. *With the Mission to Menelik*, 1897, London: E. Arnold. 1898

Topography and Path/'street' Geometry

The topography of Addis Ababa around the place where the emperor and his followers settled has a system of interfluves, rivers, valleys and hills. Although there are hierarchic systems followed in settling, the topography made it look very spontaneous. Different nobilities/generals and their soldiers occupied vast area of land separated from one another across valleys. The paths form many triangulated land parcels. These parcels are very large tracts compared to the idea of 'urban block'. Street paths don't form streets-building relationships. The only place where buildings formed direct relationship with and faced streets was in the Arada market area. Even in this area the parcels bounded by streets are very large and filled with irregular property lines or fences. Grid pattern is unknown in Addis Ababa until the occupation of the city by Italy. The paths that cross the rivers during the dry season become disconnected during the rainy season.

Building Culture

The lack of building permanent cities is also reflected in the nature of the settlements. The buildings were mainly huts made of non-durable materials. Their arrangement is to cluster around their noble person/general. Therefore, the relationship of streets and buildings was not established.

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