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XV. — *Memorandum on Abyssinia.*

Communicated by the FOREIGN OFFICE.

Read, March 12, 1855.

In speaking at all of Abyssinian institutions, it must be remembered, as a general key to their peculiarities, that the form of government and its military spirit are feudal, whilst in the laws and customs the Jewish institutions are everywhere traceable.

The title of Ras signified, in the times of prosperous and hereditary succession, the prime minister and commander-in-chief of the emperor, and the highest rank in the empire.

The Ras now claims the right, as then possessed by him, of appointing all other chiefs of provinces and officers of every kind at his will and pleasure; and, having a sufficiently commanding force at his disposal, is, in fact, master and king of the country; the form even of consulting the emperor having been disregarded for many years.

Amidst the conflicts, however, of great families, whose members claim the hereditary chieftainship of different provinces, and whose name will at any moment conjure into existence a numerous army for rebellion or rapine, the Ras is obliged to employ a subtle and tortuous policy, rather than violence, to retain his control over those fierce warriors, his equals by birth, impatient of a superior, and, in some instances, sufficiently powerful to be nearly independent. The resemblance is apparent to the times of Louis XI. of France and his rebellious vassals.

Each chief holding the rank of Dejjamatch (quasi Duke), appointed by the Ras—or as often only obtaining his consent after a successful contest with his own immediate rivals—is entire master of all sources of revenue within his territory, with full power really of life and death, theoretically vested in the Ras alone. His feudal subjection consists in the obligation to send, from time to time, some presents to his superior, and to bear his shield—that is, to follow him to war with as large a force as he can muster; against private enemies he is generally expected to defend himself. He takes toll from all merchants passing through his district.

The immediate troops of the Ras consist of a number of petty chiefs, governing one, two, or more villages, who imitate, as far as they dare, the independence of the greater barons, and who take the field, when called on, with 5 or 500 men, according to their means.

Besides these (who are numerous) the Ras has his matchlock men, and four or five bands of rude and disorderly soldiery, his guards.

From the lax system of government, and the manner of paying these men by quartering them on the country-people, with instructions to levy so much grain or other property, it may be supposed that these undisciplined troops, when at a small distance from the camp, are almost equally independent of the Ras, and frequently are simply organised bands of robbers, the rather that, after the commission of any profitable crime, they have but to reach the camp of some great feudal chief, at a distance from the Ras, and, by entering his service, obtain perfect immunity; or, would they enjoy in ease their spoil, take shelter in the nearest well-reputed church, which is inviolable as the city of refuge of the Mosaic law.

Regarding the collection of duties, each chief claims them as part of his revenues, excepting those levied at Gondar, Adowah, and a few other towns, collected by an officer called the Negadeh Ras, who pays a fixed sum yearly to the Ras or Obeay, and extorts as much as he can from the merchants for his own profits.

Custom-houses, or rather passes, have been established in Abyssinia on every spot where nature, in that mountainous country, has confined the road to some narrow defile, not to be avoided without an immense détour, if at all, and near some commanding elevation where a good look-out can be stationed, or perhaps at a brook fordable only at one spot; and as the different chiefs sometimes give orders on the sudden to allow no one to pass, great trouble ensues, not only to merchants, but to all wayfarers. Frequent quarrels and even deaths occur at these posts, always kept by armed men, and it requires no little temper and knowledge of the country to avoid these inconveniences, or to send messengers, &c., to any distance in safety.

A merchant starts from Massowah for Basso, the last mercantile station to the southward of Christian Abyssinia. He pays at Massowah the import or export duty to the Turkish governor; he must then engage a guide from the Shohos, an independent tribe inhabiting the hills near the coast, and in possession of the only passable roads, winding through defiles for 50 or 60 miles. According to the agreement made and his appearance, wealthy or otherwise, he may pay this guide from 10 dollars to half a dollar. Arriving then in Obeay's dominions, he will be stopped four or five times before he reaches Adowah, and on each occasion must arrange with those in charge of the tolls as he best can as regards payment, the amount being arbitrary, and the system, in fact, one of legalised plunder. On arriving at Adowah he pays certain more regulated duties to the Negadeh Ras of that town, a *douceur*, moreover, being expected, as the price of a friendly settlement of dues. After meeting the exactions of several minor posts, he will next have to pay at the town of Dobaruk, in the province of Waggera, duties on the same scale with those of Adowah, generally one dollar per mule-load of merchandise; and being then clear of the territories of Dejjamatch Obeay, enters those of Ras Ali, whose tolls commence at Gondar. Here the duties are nominally somewhat settled, though long disputes almost invariably occur; and, after three or four more detentions and payments on a smaller scale in Begemder, he passes the Nile, and arrives in the domains of the chiefs of Godjam or Damot. These may be in a state of entire rebellion or of sulky submission to the Ras. As in the latter case they pay him a fixed tribute, he does not interfere with their toll-levying, and the merchant must disburse at some eight or ten more stages of his journey ere he can reach "Basso."

A code of laws, called the "Feth Negust," said to have been compiled by the Council of Three Hundred in the earlier ages of the Church, and regarded originally as almost of equal authority with the Sacred Writings, is the guide of the Abyssinian chiefs in their decisions as judges. The twelve "licks" of Gondar originally formed the supreme court of justice, a court of final appeal, but the office ceased with the power of the emperors. The Feth Negust is now expounded by some learned priest or scribe, and there are few in the country competent to the task. It is frequently consulted more after the fashion of the "Sortes Virgilianæ," the book being opened with much solemnity, and the first passage found that seems to bear upon the question being hastily dressed to suit the case in hand and present an aspect of oracular wisdom. In this light it is at least regarded by the uninformed multitude, that is, the whole nation, save the priesthood; and it is invariably set aside when the passions or whims of the presiding chief seem to require it.

On the accusation of any man in Abyssinia of any crime, he has the right to be heard in the first instance by his own judge, that is, either the chief of his village, or the master to whom he is attached for the time being, and to be forwarded to his residence, together with his accuser, by any authority to whom he shall appeal in the King's name.

Strangers may be judged by the district chief or the chief paramount, as they may choose. In every way the final right of appeal to the supreme ruler

exists ; but the Ras not being strong enough at present to enforce this right in the case of Obeay, the decisions of that chief are considered final. The chiefs of the Agows of Lasta, called the Wagshum, and the chiefs of Kivora, on the borders of Sennaar, although feudally subject to the Ras, claim also this privilege of final judgment ; but with these exceptions, the greatest chief may, on the complaint of a peasant, be summoned from any distance to appear at the Ras's court, and be obliged personally to answer the charge before the " Af-a-negus " (or " king's mouth "), an officer who hears all cases, and reports them concisely to the Ras for his verbal decision.

After an accusation, before the pleadings can commence, both parties must give security, approved of by the Af-a-negus. These bails or securities are answerable for the execution of the sentence, whatever it may be, or must suffer if themselves should the principals abscond. But at the end of the trial these first securities may declare off in case of doubting their principals, and others must be found, the only alternative to the convicted party being chains.

In all suits, civil or criminal, there is no prosecution by the Crown, and no police of any kind. The party aggrieved must lay the accusation, find out the aggressor, seize him, and convict him as he best may.

The Mosaic law of blood for blood being in full force, when a man is convicted of having killed another, whether purposely, by accident, or in self-defence, he is handed over to the relatives of the deceased to be put to death by them, unless they can be persuaded to accept the blood-money, a similar sum being also paid into the royal treasury. It not infrequently happens that no relation is found sufficiently near of kin to interfere in the matter, and the homicide then escapes scot-free. With the greater chiefs there is generally a desire to administer justice impartially, when not embarrassed by some political motive.

The power of the chief of northern Abyssinia dates nearly from the overthrow of the Ahtyee, or emperor of Gondar, by Ras Michael.

The present Ras, though no other chief is powerful enough to encounter him in the field, can only retain his title by the maintenance of a large army and constant wars against his rebellious vassals. Of all the inferior chiefs, whose title is Dejjamatch, the greatest is Dejjamatch Obeay, who, partly by the concurrence of the Ras, and more by subtlety, fortune, and the force of arms, governs with absolute sway the country from near the coast of the Red Sea to Gondar, and from Lasta to Sennaar—the only conditions that should prevent him from being regarded as an independent sovereign being his title of Dejjamatch, held from the Ras, and the payment of a tribute of money to him yearly as his feudal superior ; otherwise the Ras does not interfere with his rule over these vast provinces, by which he commands every avenue to the interior of the country available for trade or policy.

The Ras has been engaged in the siege of a hill-fort in Godjam for four years ; and another chief in rebellion, after gaining two battles, has pillaged Gondar, and rendered all communications with Godjam circuitous or dangerous.

It is now doubtful if the Dejjamatch Obeay will be faithful to his allegiance, or rebel in the hope of seizing the supreme power. In the latter case the whole land will bristle with arms, and all communication become impossible.

The boundaries of northern Abyssinia, at present defined as the districts inhabited by Christians, do not reach, by 90 or 100 miles, to the Red Sea at any point. This interval is occupied by various more savage tribes : the Adaiel, the Azobo Gallas, the Areya Gallas, the Danakil, the Faltals, the Shoho, the Habab, and the Arab tribes of the Beni Amir. These have adopted, more or less strictly, the Mahometan faith, and are all, excepting the Gallas, wandering tribes, living by their flocks or their camels, governed by no master, and occupied with incessant feuds or combats.

Through the district occupied by the Shoho is the nearest and the most practicable route to Abyssinia. It is indeed the only one desirable, seeing that it bears directly on Massowah, the only good harbour, as I believe, in the Red Sea from Sowakin to the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb.

These tribes of Shoho furnish guides to all passers for half a dollar each, and even conduct a party for the same sum. Rich native caravans pay according to their numbers, but always moderately, and a white man is of course considered fair booty, to be fleeced according to the extent of his ignorance or his fears. Though vexatious by their delays, they are never known to rob or ill-treat any voyager. They fulfil strictly their contract of safe conduct through their territories into Abyssinia, and no reasonable man can find fault with their moderate charges for this. It is true that occasionally the Faltal tribes make an incursion and plunder travellers not well-armed, in spite of the Shoho, watching their opportunity when the warriors of the latter tribe are engaged elsewhere; but this impugns not their good faith, having never been suspected of collusion.

They acknowledge no superior save the elders of their tribe in council, now that the Naibs of Arkiko are politically extinct.

The Turkish Government occupying the island of Massowah, their Pasha here claims also the coast for 50 or 60 miles inland, and forces various feeble tribes in those limits to pay tribute; but, in return, affords them no protection when devastated by the Shoho or the ruthless soldiery of Obeay. These people are therefore sufficiently miserable and poor.

XVI.—*Explorations into the Interior of Africa.* By the Rev.
DAVID LIVINGSTON, LL.D. (*Gold Medallist.*)

(Continued from Vol. XXIV.)

Extracted from communications to the FOREIGN OFFICE from E. GABRIEL, Esq.; to the LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY; Sir RODERICK MURCHISON; CONSUL BRAND, and others.

Read, Jan. 8 and Nov. 12, 1855.

Pungo Andongo, 31st Dec., 1854.

[THE letter marked No. 1. is a copy from memory chiefly of one I sent under date of August last, which, with a map of the country travelled over, I have lately heard, was lost in the destruction of the 'Forerunner' off Madeira. I had the fever so frequently after leaving Cassangé, that I could only take latitudes, inserting them and my route in pencil, and I promised to send a better map of Angola back from Cassangé on my return. This I shall do from the last point to which the postal arrangements extend. I have been detained some time here reproducing the letters lost in the 'Forerunner;' and I leave for Cassangé to-morrow morning.

I naturally feel some little regret at the loss of my map, for, believing it safe in your hands, I had been rather free in giving away latitudes, longitudes, and sketches of the country, some of which have been copied and sent to other parts, and I have some ambition, as I am the only one who ever made astronomical observations in this part of the world, that my own country should have the preference. At present I give the following list:—