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PLowden

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## CORRESPONDENCE

RESPECTING

# A B Y S S I N I A .

## 1846—1868.

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*Presented to the House of Commons, in pursuance of their Addresses of the 2nd and 5th  
December, 1867 ; with further Papers presented by Command of Her Majesty. 1868.*

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No. 184.

*Consul Plowden to the Earl of Clarendon.—(Received November 2.)\**

My Lord,

*Massowah, July 9, 1854.*

I HAVE the honour to inclose a Report containing some information on Abyssinia, as directed in your Lordship's despatch of October 3, 1853.†

I have endeavoured to give your Lordship a sketch of the laws, customs, government, and position of Abyssinia, with a short account of its neighbours.

I trust that this Report may assist your Lordship in deciding clearly the course to be pursued with reference to Abyssinia.

Struggling with the difficulties of the Abyssinian character and institutions; baffled by their ignorance, and more by the want of any supreme authority; obliged by my position to be recognized as a friend to the Abyssinian nation, yet forced by geographical circumstances to reside partly at a Turkish port, where the Governor necessarily regards me with suspicion and hatred, as one seducing from him the allegiance of his slaves; I can scarcely convey to your Lordship an idea of the difficulties I have had to contend with.

I enclose also a map which gives a rough notion of the northern frontier of Abyssinia.

The course of several of the rivers therein laid down will not be found in any other map, and have been hitherto the subject of much discussion amongst geographers. Your Lordship may depend upon the general accuracy of the map, though I do not pretend to astronomical exactness.

Both the map and the report are compiled entirely from my personal observations.

I have, &c.

(Signed) WALTER PLOWDEN.

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Inclosure in No. 184.

*Report.\**

NORTHERN ABYSSINIA is a State isolated from the sea and from the civilized world by surrounding tribes of savages, and is fast lapsing from its former condition as Christian realm, governed by one absolute Sovereign, into sub-divisions of small tribes, that will hereafter retain probably little of religion or civilization.

It is separated also from its kindred province of Shoa by strong and fierce races called Galla, who are independent, notwithstanding the boastful title of King of the Gallas assumed by Sahela Selassie and his successor, whose actual dominions do not equal a fifth part of the Galla territory.

The country that I name Northern Abyssinia, and which is inhabited by professing Christians, is about 400 miles in length from north to south, inclining westerly, and 300 in its greatest breadth, which is from N.N.W. to S.S.E., that is, from the neighbourhood of Massowah to the town of Ayjubay in Godjam, and from Wayhaynee, the limits of the Egyptian dominion in that quarter, to the borders of Effat, belonging to Shoa.

Its north-western and western boundary is formed by the Pashalic of Scmaar; partly on the west and to the south-west vast forests, frequented by wild beasts, or hot plains inhabited by negro races, exclude Abyssinia from the navigable part of the Blue Nile. To the south, that river, an impetuous torrent, forms its boundary, almost its safety, from the Gallas—excellent horsemen, whose delight is war. To the east and south-east the Gallas of Borona, Wallo, Worahaimano, and Worrakallo, separate it from Shoa. The three last are the stronghold of Islamism; and these are again barred from the sea by the savage Adaiel, by whose hordes, led by Mahommed Grayne, Abyssinia was nearly destroyed, when saved by Portugal and the introduction of firearms. To the eastward again, more northerly, other tribes of Gallas called Arcya and Azobo still interpose between Abyssinia and the sea-coast: and to the north-east and north various tribes with various tongues, Taltals, Danakil, Shihos, Hababs, &c., everywhere seclude that realm, and join the dominions of Abbas Pasha, in the tribes of the Beni-Amecr, ruled by the Pusha of Taka.

Agamee, in Tigré. They are nomades, as all that I have now to describe, and call themselves Mahomedans, though their creed is far from orthodox, and I do not suppose there is one that can read the Koran. It is certain that by their unceasing feud with the Abyssinians, they have acquired a strong hatred of Christians. They eat little or no corn, and never sow; living on milk and the flesh of goats and oxen. These are generally thriving, as they have the benefit of two rainy seasons, and luxuriant pasturage nearly all the year round. The rains of Abyssinia extend to within fifty or sixty miles of the sea in the months of June to September, and the rains of the coast are variable till the end of March, from October or November. They are unacquainted with horses, and are remarkable for bodily vigour and speed of foot. In this province are the plains of salt and sulphur that supply all Abyssinia: the road from thence to the sea is nearly a level plain, and the direct port is Amphylla. This was the road that Mr. Salt proposed to open. It was traversed at great risk by an Englishman, Mr. Coffin, who still lives in Abyssinia, and by him alone. The English Government had, I believe, consented, when the death of the Ras Welda Selasee, and subsequently that of Mr. Salt, prevented the further progress of the affair, which was afterwards lost sight of. Mr. Coffin performed this journey, I believe, forty-five years ago.

The Taltals are now treacherous and bloodthirsty, even towards each other; to strangers implacable and dangerous. They are hospitable from pride and custom; but a hospitable reception by no means insures the life of the guest: and when a Taltal enters the hut of his relative he lays his sabre across his knee, and places his spear and shield ready for his grasp. I attribute something of this fierce character to the heating nature of their diet; and it may be generally observed amongst the tribes who eat no bread. They are impatient of all yoke, and live independent of all law, with here and there a man possessing, like the ancient patriarchs, some influence from age and wealth in flocks and cattle, or in youth from sagacity and daring. These people scarcely know the value of money, and the Turkish Government at Massowah of course makes no attempt to encourage any communication. They are therefore totally ignorant of the world without, save the nearest districts of Abyssinia, but under better management would no doubt crowd to the market of Massowah, which is now often unfurnished with the necessaries of life; and their province would soon be as safe to visit as any other part of the country. Their sulphur should form a valuable article for trade, and their territory might be highly cultivated, and would afford much produce for export, besides bread for the inhabitants. Many years since a small body of Turkish troops were defeated and destroyed to a man by the Taltals of Kherto; having ventured to advance inland from the port of Amphylla. The attempt has never been renewed, and they have no garrison at that place.

The Danakil, who extend along the sea coast for a hundred miles or more, speak a dialect of the Taltal language, and have much the same character, being only poorer, less vigorous, and less courageous than their neighbours of the mountain. Not many years since both these tribes purchased stolen Christian boys, and sacrificed them in some superstitious rite. And although one of their chiefs assured me that this practice was discontinued, I doubt him much. Camels are bred in great numbers here, and the cattle and sheep of the Danakil are also numerous and in good condition, but never appear at the Massowah market, though within six hours' sail in a dull craft. Ostriches abound, but are little hunted, firearms being totally unknown. Elephants are plentiful, but are only killed by a few Abyssinian hunters, and in small numbers. The wild asses are numerous on the coast, and the zebra is said to exist in the interior, as well as the rhinoceros. The wild ass is sometimes taken in pits, his flesh being highly prized by the Arabs of Yemen as medicinal food.

The salt lake of Boorree, near the coast, formed of a filtered deposit at a lower level than the sea, furnishes that article for consumption to the Shihos, and some provinces of Tigré, but it is not used as a circulating medium.

To the northward of the Taltals is the powerful tribe of Shiho, now divided into two branches, called Assoworta and Tora. Through their territories pass all the roads from Abyssinia to Massowah. Their language is said to bear a close affinity