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Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad

## Assab

Assab is the second most important port of the State of Eritrea and the capital city of the region formerly known as Dankalia (in today's Eritrea administrative division roughly corresponding to the Southern Red Sea Region). The Region is characterized by a number of coastal villages, e. g. Rahaita, Beilul, Edd, Barassoly and Thi'o. Assab is situated close to the Bab El Mandeb, a strategic geographical location. It consists of two towns, Assab Kabir, the main port, and Assab Saqeer, the old town of the Ankala-'Afar groups, which was the historical seat of the Sultan Ibrahim Ibn Ahmed.

### THE PORT OF ASSAB: OVERVIEW

Assab as a port was constructed by the Italians starting from the 1870s and from the beginning the Italian Colonial engineers Father Sapeto and later Antinori had planned to make Assab the main outlet for the potential trade of the Abyssinian region. It was described "... in terms of its advantageous proximity to the Strait of Bab El Mandeb and its easy communication with Yemen and also ... the advantage of being able to attract the 'Abyssinian' trade". The Italian government developed the plan to connect Assab with Shāwa and other regions of Abyssinia "the future of Assab, therefore, would depend on the development of the traffic with Shāwa and all the regions of Abyssinia, and in Italy's ability to offer them (Tigray, Amhara, Goggiam and Kaffa) a different outlet than the ports of Massawa and Zaila ... The programme, would it be put into effect must be directed towards the opening of the Assab - Awsa - Shāwa route. It should also aim at solving geographical problems such as mapping out the inland course of the Awash River up to Lake Awsa as well as the Assab route" (Yemane 1989:

73 and 81). Assab had been declared an Italian colony in 1882. The first aim was to secure a connection to the Shoan kingdom. In 1885 the Italians seized the chance to occupy the neighboring Egyptian coastal province of Massawa, thus redirecting their interest from Shāwa to the new neighbor Tigray (in 1890 culminating in the creation of the Colonia Eritrea) - but still the question how Assab would be connected to the Abyssinian hinterland occupied the colonial planners' minds - and how to secure the local trade routes from the 'Afar tribes. The Italian Government succeeded in negotiating a treaty with Menilek II for safe passage to and from the Shoan markets (Longrigg 1974: 113-115).

"After Italian colonialism, Assab witnessed a new deal of interest, when the Ethiopian government got hold of this port. In 1952 Eritrea and Ethiopia formed a federation, which in 1962 resulted into annexation of Eritrea. The latest development of Assab is a result of Ethiopian interests. During Haile Selassie's regime the city was further developed with aid from Russia and Yugoslavia. Close to the city Eritrea's only oil refinery is located; a modern salt industry that largely supplied the Ethiopian market (before the conflict) and a growing fishing industry are major sources of income" (Killion 1998: 99-102).

This development motivated a big number of Ethiopian immigrants, especially from Wollo and Tigray provinces to seek for job opportunities as dock workers and to work in the salt and fishing industries. Salt and salted fish are exported to Yemen and other Arab countries, because only a very small 'Afar coastal population consumes fish, but for the majority of the 'Afar hinterland fish is taboo, similar to other pastoral communities in the region. However, the 'Afar population in the surrounding area were marginalized from all activities in Assab,

due to capital shortage and educational backwardness<sup>1</sup>.

#### INTERNATIONAL CLAIMS OVER ASSAB

Already long before Ethiopia could effectively get hold over Eritrea, there was a project to cede Assab to Ethiopia. This old dream was reanimated, when Ethiopia actually got access to Assab starting from the 1950s. The Ethiopian leadership, sticking to their dream of regaining an access to the sea, was trying to put back into use the old suggestion of the European powers, Britain and France, which was defined by the Laval Hoare Plan in December 1935 in exchange of territories with the Italian Colony in the area. As the suggestion says: "Ethiopia will receive an outlet to the sea with fully Sovereign rights. It seems that this outlet should be formed preferably by the cession, to which Italy would agree, of the Port of Assab and of a strip of territory given access to this Port along the Frontier of French Somali Land" (Toynbee 1935: 295–296).

However, the Laval Hoare Plan was difficult to implement, because the Ethiopian government refused and opposed all secret negotiations from the beginning. Ethiopia could not accept the importance of Assab to Italian Eritrea, being far from the centre of the colonial administration; however, Assab had been the key port for the establishment of the Italian colony Eritrea and therefore not only of economical, but also great symbolical importance.

When Italy had failed to get a colony in North Africa, Manchini, the Italian foreign Minister at that time, made his famous statement by saying "the Mediterranean keys lie(s) in the Red Sea" in the year of the opening of the Suez Canal 1869 – the year, when first a private Italian company acquired Assab as a simple coaling station (Osman Abubaker 1994: 125–128). However, it was already visible that a group of colonialists prepared to get hold of this area in the name of Italy itself. The Egyptians were controlling the Western coast of the Red Sea, when Italians followed the British and French colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa.

#### THE HISTORY OF THE COLONISATION OF ASSAB

On November 15, 1869 the Rubattino Shipping Company, through Father Sapeto, signed an agreement with Sultan Ibrahim Ibn Ahmed

(Sultan of Assab) and Sultan Hassan Ibn Ahmed of the 'Afar tribes of Ad'ali and bought accordingly a piece of land for 8,100 Maria Theresia dollars as a station and store for the Company in their journey to India and Far East. Sapeto constructed a so called Scientific Center (*Stazione Scientifical Internazionale*) and the centre's function was to control the whole activities of the other powers in the region and to prepare Italian expansion in the Horn. It was stated that the Rubattino Shipping Company would buy the territory in its own name and with its own funds, but should undertake to use it in the national interests.

In March 1870 Sapeto signed another agreement with the Sultan Abdella Sheheim, representative of Sheikh Burhan Hasan, Sultan of Raheita in Assab and got additional land. After a few days, Sapeto hoisted the Italian flag for the first time at the coast of Assab Bay.

The Rubattino Company thus transferred its rights to the Italian State and in 1882 the Italian parliament accepted this transfer and declared the establishment of the Eritrean Colony. In order to cement its policy in the region, the Italian government tried its best to get the support of the 'Afar. That is why Count Antonelli went to Awsa in 1883, the seat of the Sultan Mohammed Hanfadhy, to justify the Italian occupation of Assab and to sign a commercial agreement with the Sultan (Osman Saleh Sabbe 1977: 162–163).

However, the local 'Afar protested against the Italian invasion. A protest was organized by Mohammed ben Akito, son of the Sultan of Beilul, and by Abubaker Ibrahim, Sultan of Zaila, by saying that the region belongs to the Ottoman Muslim State. An Egyptian battle ship arrived in Assab and destroyed Sapeto's residence which had been built with the assistance of the crew from the ship "Africa". Khedive Ismail, however, served only as an instrument of British ambitions in the Red Sea region. Italians called it the "British Jealousy". It was a means of keeping the French and Italians away from the coast. But in that time Egypt was

<sup>1</sup> As Tom Killion (1998: 99–102) puts it, the Ethiopian government, especially under the Derg, was even more eager than Haile Selassie to detach Assab from Eritrea administratively, particularly as nationalist sentiments began to spread among the 'Afar population in the 1970s. The share of Ethiopian commerce deriving from Assab port increased to over 60%, that is why the Ethiopian Government was studying ways to attach it to Wollo Province or a separate 'Afar political unit.

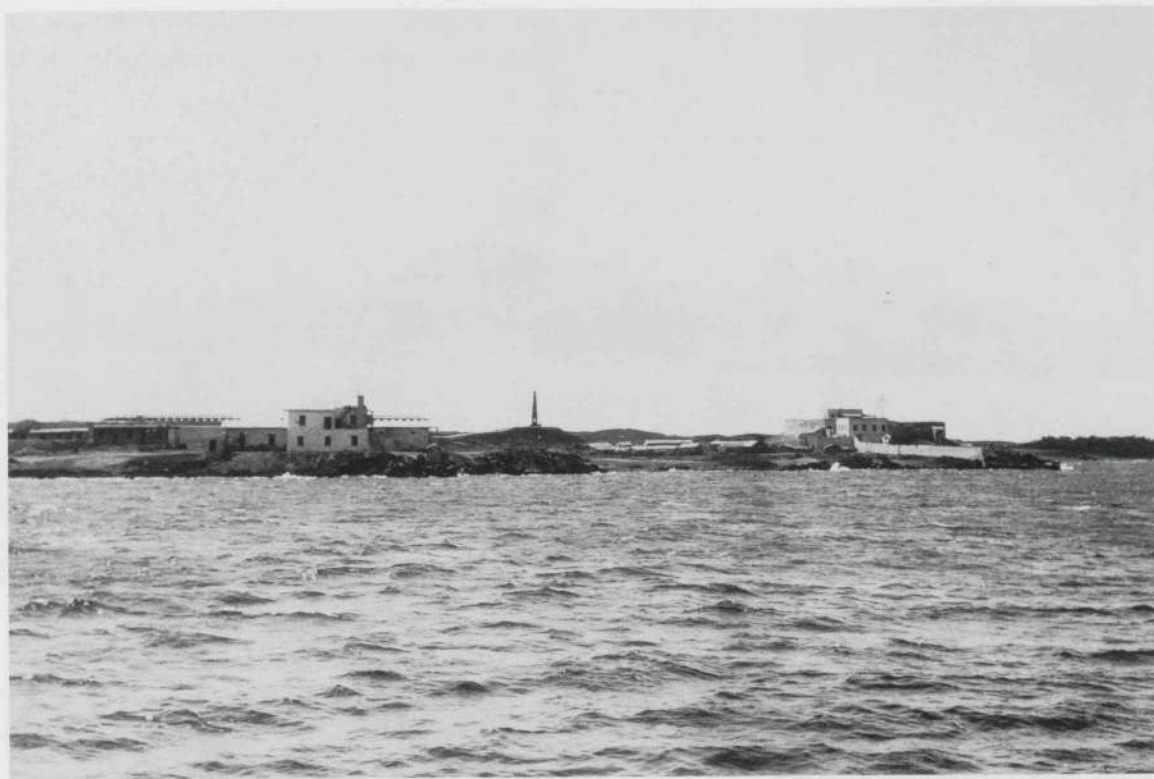


Abb. 1. Assab port (Foto: MBA 211.1).

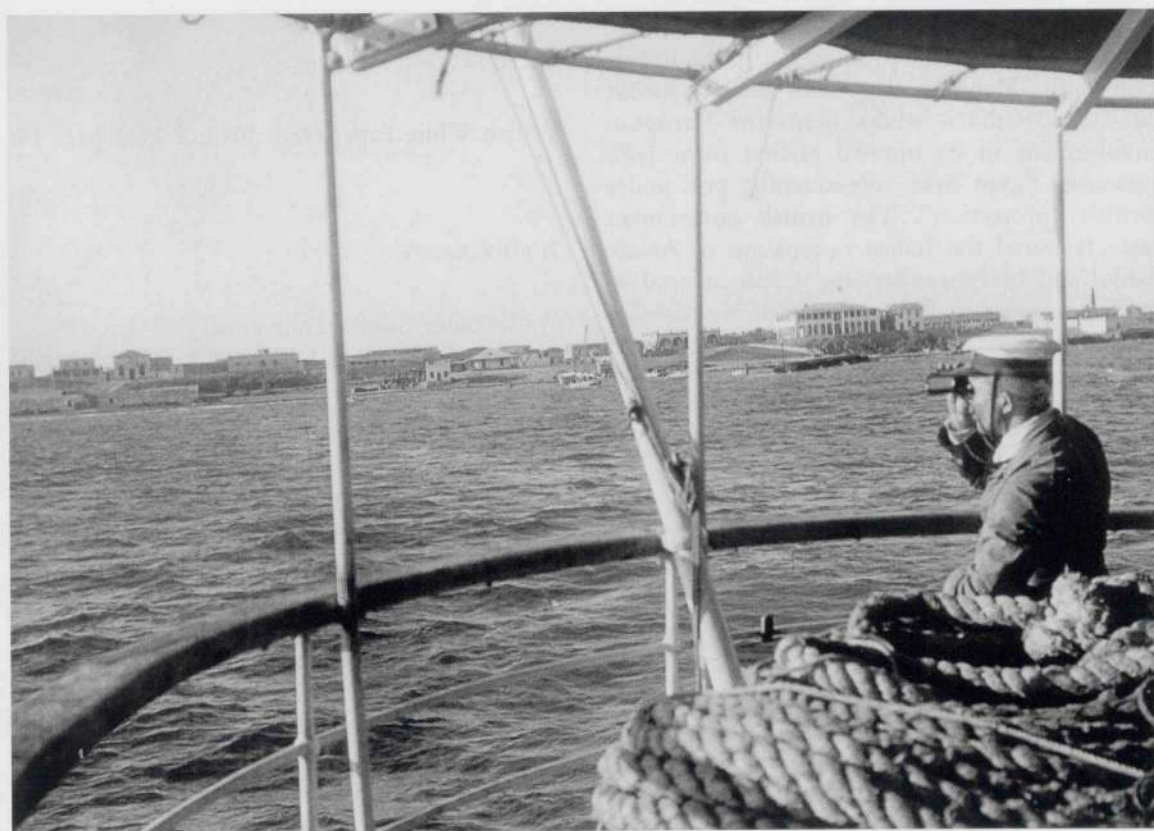


Abb. 2. Assab port (Foto: MBA 211.2).

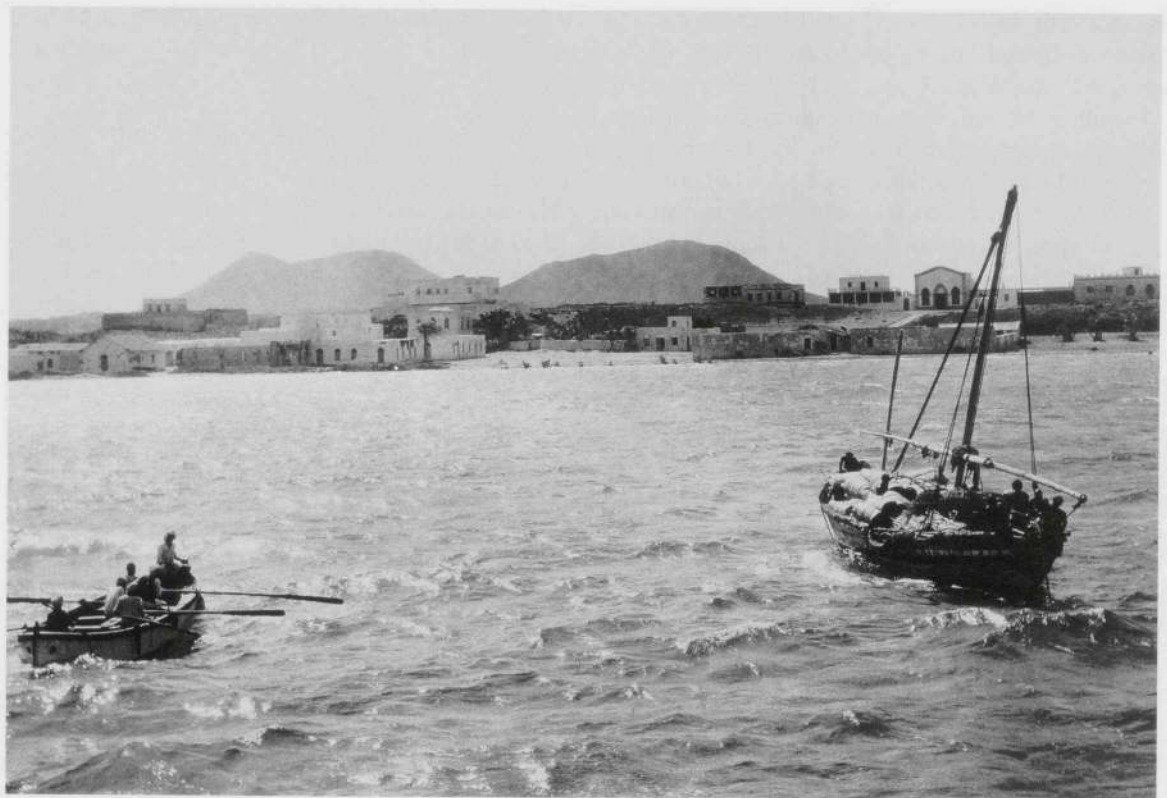


Abb. 3. Assab port (Foto: MBA 211.3).

facing serious internal problems, e. g. the Rebellion of the Mahdi in the Sudan and the Revolt of Orabi Pasha – which permitted European involvement in its internal affairs; from 1882 onwards Egypt was subsequently put under British “protection”. The British government later favoured the Italian occupation of Assab, Beilul and Massawa, because it was in need of Italian support in fighting against the Mahdist expansion in Eastern Sudan and Western Eritrea and, additionally, to counter the French Colonial Policy in the Region. The Italians therefore were encouraged by the British – the French by this time had just established themselves at Djibouti (Trevaskis 1976: 8).

[When the three members of the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, Daniel Krencker, Theodor von Lüpke and Erich Kaschke came over from Aden going to Massawa the steamer stopped at Assab. Some photos were done which illustrate the situation at Assab port hundred years ago (Figs. 1–3) The editors].

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