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Mussie Tesfagiorgis

A Brief History of Asmara

Asmara¹, the capital city of Eritrea, is located at about 115 km southwest of Massawa², at an altitude of about 2,360 m above sea level. Asmara is roughly located in the centre of Eritrea, in the old province of Hamasen.

According to oral traditions, the name Asmara derived from an event when some four small villages in the area were united. The tradition indicates that there were four *Gezawti* (houses = family groups/clans), namely *Geza Gurotom*, *Geza Shelele*, *Geza Serenser* and *Geza Asma'e* around the modern city of Asmara. These villages were rivals. Added to the *Shifta* (banditry) looting, the conflicts of the clans worsened the situation in the area. Based on oral sources, the areas around the modern city of Asmara were covered with dense forests in which various wild animals and beasts were sheltered. Added to the banditry lootings, the wild animals constantly attacked the people and their livestock (Yisaak 1993: 11). The women of the four clans, eventually, decided to bring the conflicts to an end by convincing their men to settle their differences, and then cohesively face external threats. Having been able to jointly defeat the bandits, the four villages formed a unity. The treaty of co-operation among the four villages which took place on Sunday, November 1508 ended all their rivalries and all the villages agreed to be unified (Yisaak 1993: 13). Thereafter, "*Arba'ete Asmara*" became the name of the new unified village as an honour to the women. "*Arba'ete Asmara*" in Tigrinnya language literally means "The Four (fem.), made unity possible". After time, "*Arba'ete*" was dropped and "Asmara" remained as the proper name of the town. Asmara, again in Tigrinnya language literally means "They (fem.) have made unity possible". However, it is worth to note that "*Arba'ete Asmara*" still remains to be the name of one of the zones of the modern city.

Although evidences about the city started to emerge largely from the 16th c. onwards, archaeological and historical findings suggest that the modern city was inhabited by human communities starting from much earlier times (Pankhurst 1982: 7374). The base of such argument lies on the findings of artefacts from the Sembel area, and specifically from the 'Ona site in the south-western part of the city (Pankhurst 1982: 7374). Based on the findings of remains around Asmara, Theodore Bent, who travelled through the area in the 19th century suggested that the town was an early settlement area (Bent 1893: 20–21). Although with an obscure evidence, the town might have had a considerable relevance during the Aksumite period (1st A.D. – 7th A.D.) because geographically Asmara lies in the midway between the ancient port of Massawa and the interior. There might have been some trade routes which connected the town with Massawa, a small harbour area at least from the late Aksumite times, later identified with Badi, or Baši, which is mentioned by ancient Arab geographers, and probably Adulis³. Archaeology has yet contributed little concerning the above mentioned arguments, especially about the emergence and development of the city.

It is more evident, however, that the town suddenly came into importance in the 19th century, just after the collapse of Debaroa⁴, and

¹ "Asmara" probably was adapted from the European way of pronunciation to Asmära (Asmera). The city is known by the inhabitants as Asmära, not Asmara.

² Massawa was one of the biggest commercial ports along the coasts of the Red Sea. It became the first capital of the Italian occupation in Eritrea, just before Asmara.

³ Adulis was an ancient trading centre near the Red Sea coast and an important outlet for the Aksumite Empire.

⁴ Debaroa was the Capital of the Bah'ri Negasi, the office of the local ruler of the Eritrean highlands between the 16th and 18th centuries (later it remained to be a title).

after one of the local Bahri Negasi rulers; Gurade Zer'ay made his seat in the town (Kolmodin 1912: 194; Pankhurst 1985: 112). Although the impact of the Bahri Negasi's seat in Asmara and also his power is not clear, it is evident that the area was mainly chosen for its flourishing market. Soon after, Asmara was able to comparatively hold the former position of Debaroa (Pankhurst 1985: 112).

Asmara was severely affected by the political situations of the 1870s. Not only was the town affected by the military and political rivalries of the two ruling families of Hamasen; Hazzega and Tse'azzgan (Northwest of Asmara), but also the continuous attempt of control by King Yohannes IV of Abyssinia. Asmara had been at least twice a battlefield between the forces of the two families of Hamasen, and probably suffered heavy destruction. Ra'esi Woldemichael Solomon after consolidating his military superiority over Hazzega (which was ruled by Ra'esi Hailu), extended his control over Asmara in the early years of the 1870s (Checchi 1910: 4).

The Egyptians who had already occupied the Barka and Anseba provinces in the West, and Massawa and Hirgigo in the Eastern coasts, were advancing towards the plateau of Eritrea in the mid 1870s. Having won to bring Ra'esi Woldemichael Solomon to their side, the Egyptians occupied the Anseba Valley where they faced severe resistance from the forces of King Yohannes IV, and suffered a decisive defeat at the Battle of Gundet in December 1875. Four months later, the Egyptian forces again attempted another expansion, but again they were badly defeated at the Battle of Gurae. During all these military conflicts, Asmara suffered from looting and raiding of both the Egyptian and the Ethiopian armies.

In 1878, annoyed with the military advances of Ra'esi Woldemichael Solomon, King Yohannes sent one of his trusted military commanders, Ras Baria'u, to fight against Ra'esi Woldemichael. Soon, Baria'u came to Asmara commanding the King's army and fortified in *Campo Cintato* (within the town)⁵. A severe battle was fought between the forces of Baria'u and Woldemichael at the Battle of Asmara. To worsen the King's anger, the forces of Baria'u were severely defeated and Baria'u himself lost his life in the battle (Checchi 1910: 4).

Under all these military and political instabilities, however, Asmara continued to be an important market place in the Hamasen plateau. The town which its market was held once a week (every Saturday) gathered merchants, peas-

ants, soldiers, etc., and local and foreign goods such as silk, wax, honey, cattle, etc. were sold and exchanged there. According to Augustus Wylde, the population of Asmara by then had reached 5000⁶, hence was well settled. The typical house styles of the town were *hidmo*⁷, and huts, although it seems that there were some old Portuguese style houses at "Addi Abrahamu" [Geza B'rhanu] (Checchi 1910: 4).

In 1879 King Yohannes appointed another most trusted of his military commanders, Ras Alula Ingida, to fight Ra'esi Woldemichael, and the Egyptians. Ras Alula, after his fortification in Addi Tekhlay (about 40 km West of Asmara), moved with 8–12 thousand men to Asmara in 1884, and made his fortification at Bet Mekae⁸, from where he extended his raids both to the Eastern and Western lowlands of Eritrea (Checchi 1910: 45; Pankhurst 1985). Although not much is known concerning the impact of Alula's occupation of the town, it is evident that Asmara remained to be more like a military camp until it was occupied by the Italians. The city continued to grow and in the 1870s, the total population of the city was estimated at 5,000, and in the 1890s, during the initial period of Italian occupation, at 5,000 Eritreans and 300 Europeans, who soon became 800 in the first half of 1890s (Locatelli 2004: 24).

ASMARA SINCE THE ITALIAN OCCUPATION

Soon after, the political situation changed. The Italians who had already occupied Massawa in 1885 began to advance towards Asmara just after it was abandoned by Alula who was forced to retreat due to the political and military situation in the north-western parts of Ethiopia. The Italians occupied Asmara on August 3, 1889 without a noticeable resistance. The Italian occupation was made by two battalions composed of a white army, two battalions of indigenous army and two batteries, and General Baldisiera who commanded the army made his

⁵ *Campo Cintato* (Italian = fenced camp) known as *Kom-bishtato* is a famous and central part of the modern city (see Locatelli 2004: 89ff.).

⁶ Wylde 1888: 216; see also Pankhurst 1985: 112–113.

⁷ *hidmo* is a house typical to the highlands of Eritrea. *hidmo* is a flat roofed, mostly with one entrance door, and with wooden pillars within and at the entrance of the house. The old church of Asmara looked similar from the outside view.

⁸ A strategic site in the Northern part of the today's Asmara.



Fig. 1. Asmara, Governor's Palace (Palazzo del governatore, capi indigeni); (from: Michele Checchi, *Asmara: Estrato della Coloniale*. Roma 1910: 7).

fortification at Bet Mekha' (Alula's former camp). Soon in 1890, Eritrea was declared an Italian colony. Indeed, Asmara was made *campo di zona* (Checchi 1910: 5) (central commanding area) for the Italian further expansion.

Having considered its strategic location, Ferdinando Martini, the newly appointed Italian governor of Eritrea, made Asmara capital of the colony in 1897. According to Michele Checchi, Asmara was selected as the capital of the colony mainly for its location (equidistant to the mostly inhabited towns such as Massawa, Keren, Addi Ugri, Deqqemhare, and Segeneyti), its preferable fortification, and indeed, for its already started infrastructure (Checchi 1910: 6). The Italians who complained about the hot climate of their former capital, Massawa, described Asmara as a "village"⁹ with healthy climate (Checchi 1910: 6). However, Asmara had very few "modern" buildings prior to 1900. The buildings which already existed prior to 1900 included the house of Padre Bonomi, the old *commissariato*, part of the *carcceli* prison, part of the railway service, and the villa of the *comandante delle Real Truppe* (Royal Army building), and a small club reserved for the Italian officials (Checchi 1910: 6). Private houses were very few, and concentrated around a *zona* called *May Bela*.

Soon around 1900, the *fabbreechilizi* (massive construction) started. Many buildings were erected. Moreover, a town-plan was drafted in 1902 which became more feasible in 1908 (see Fig. 3). The most striking feature of this new town-plan (which was a bit late to be implemented) was that it divided the town into "areas of settlement". The three settlement zones were: the zone (mainly central parts of the town) reserved only for Italians, the zone reserved only for the *mista* (people of mixed descent), and the zone reserved purely for the indigenous population (Checchi 1910: 67). According to Checchi, most of the houses of the indigenous population, except churches, were of *hidmo* and hut types. The Italian massive construction schemes started with the building of town roads. By 1902, at least two main roads were built within the city. The *Corso dal Re* and *Via Ilena Regina* today's *Awet Street* and *Semaetat Street* respectively became the main roads of the town. Horse-driven carts and vehicles started to fre-

⁹ Checchi refers to Asmara as a village. This probably might be because he looked at it in the view of the European meaning of city. It is evident that there was at the time a hierarchical notification to a village, town, and city (in the European view).



Fig.2. Asmara in 1920 (from: Leonardo Oriolo, *Asmara Style*. Asmara 1998: 76).

quent the town for the first time along those streets (Yisaak 1993: 24).

It is evident that the town started to attract many rural dwellers during the massive construction period of the early 1900s. Based on the census of 1905, the population of Asmara had reached 8597 of whom were 1556 whites (Checchi 1910: 7). In five years time, the population increased to 36,853 (Oriolo 1998: 13)¹⁰. Trade was expanded in the town and by 1907, the capital flow in the town increased dramatically (Checchi 1910: 8). The items exchanged or sold in the markets of the town included cattle, wax, cotton, feather, coffee, honey, silk, textiles, etc.

As noted above, the massive construction program continued and in 1905–1906 alone several palaces were built including the palace of the governor (see Fig. 1), the first Italian school, and the building of the high court (Oriolo 1998: 13). Added to that, the *caravan-serai* (market place) was provided, the Institute of serum-vaccination was founded, the first electric plant was inaugurated, and more than 100 private houses were constructed between 1902 and 1905 (Checchi 1910: 8; see also Oriolo 1998: 13). The construction of the Synagogue was also completed in 1905–06 (Oriolo 1998: 13). One military hospital served both for the

army and civilians at the time (Checchi 1910: 8; Locatelli 2004).

As regards to the industrial sector, it was comparatively extended. Between 1901 and 1910 alone, several industrial sectors were built. The most remarkable ones included, the *Gandolfi* Factory which produced miscellaneous products such as pasta, bread, oil, purified water etc., the *Stabilimento Cinerello* Factory which produced electric power, and the *Vawedeto* Factory (?).

The most important thing during the early years of the 1900s was the start of remarkable urbanisation process in Asmara. The new factories and firms attracted thousands of indigenous workers. By 1910, Checchi noted that already the *operario* (working class) was founded (Checchi 1910: 10). Manual labourers began to flood the city from the rural villages to work on the new factories and construction schemes. As a result, Asmara expanded from time to time. The construction of the Cathedral (finished in 1922), the Asmara Theatre (finished in 1918), and the construction of the Supreme Court were among the significant constructions which attracted workers from the rural areas.

¹⁰ This number is based on the census of 1905 by the *commissariato dell'Hamasiem* in 1905.

Fig. 3. Asmara city plan, drafted in 1902, revised in 1908. Scale: 1:8000 (from: Michele Checchi, *Asmara: Estrato della Coloniale*. Roma 1910: 13).



The town plan of 1902 and 1908 was implemented by a decree in 1916 (see Fig. 2). The new decree which was purely based on racial segregation divided Asmara into zones of settlement, adding a fourth zone called the "industrial zone" (Pankhurst 1985: 335; Locatelli 2004). This decree completely prohibited the indigenous settlers from entering the city centre (see Figs. 3 and 4).

The third phase of the Italian administration (1930–1941) aimed at invading Ethiopia. The Fascist Italian administration at this time preferred Asmara to be a major base for the further objectives of invading Ethiopia. This time was accompanied by massive construction. Asmara was connected by road to the main towns of the colony such as Deqqemhare, Addi Ugr,

Massawa, Keren and Adi Qeyyih. The road network was expanded as far as to the borders of Ethiopia. Moreover, a comparatively huge international airport was built. On the other hand, Asmara was changed to a military base. Thousands of Italian soldiers and settlers flew to Asmara in preparation of the Ethiopian invasion. The population of Asmara dramatically increased and according to the census of the *Commissariato dell'Hamasién* (1937), it reached 101,724 inhabitants among whom were 3236 Europeans (Oriolo 1998: 21; Locatelli 2004). The transport construction schemes especially the railway, road and ropeway construction networks attracted hundreds of thousands of workers from all over the rural area and also from across the Eritrean borders. This facilitated

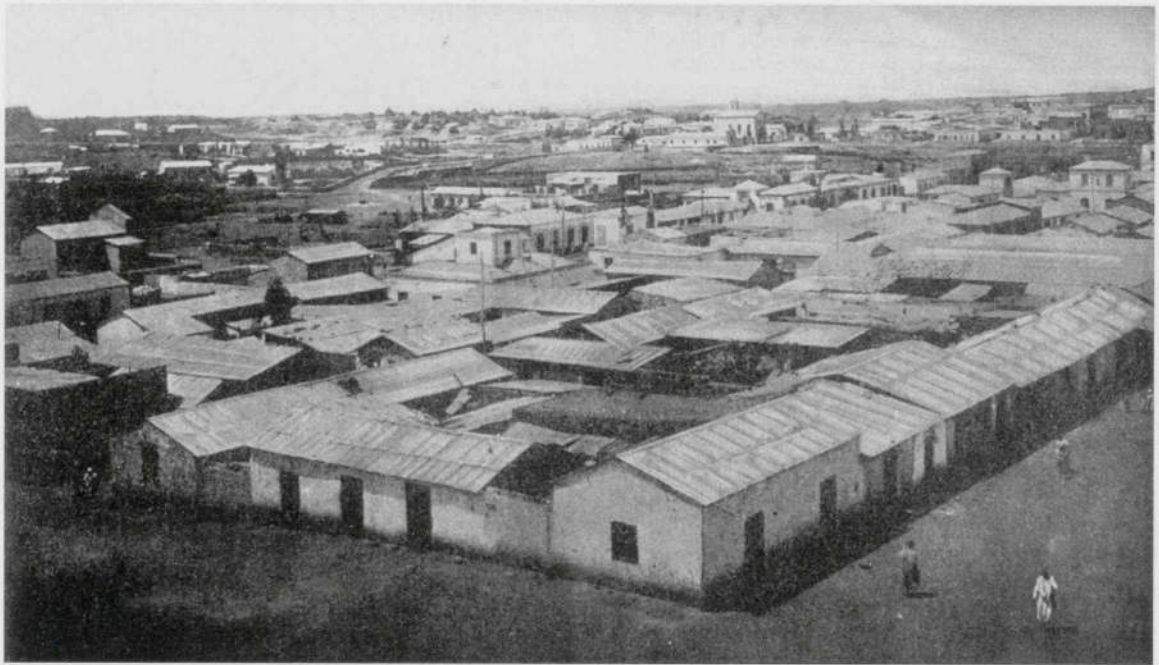


Fig. 4. Asmara, the European Zone (Veduta di Asmara. Zona europa); (from: Michele Checchi, *Asmara: Estrato della Coloniale*. Roma 1910: 9).

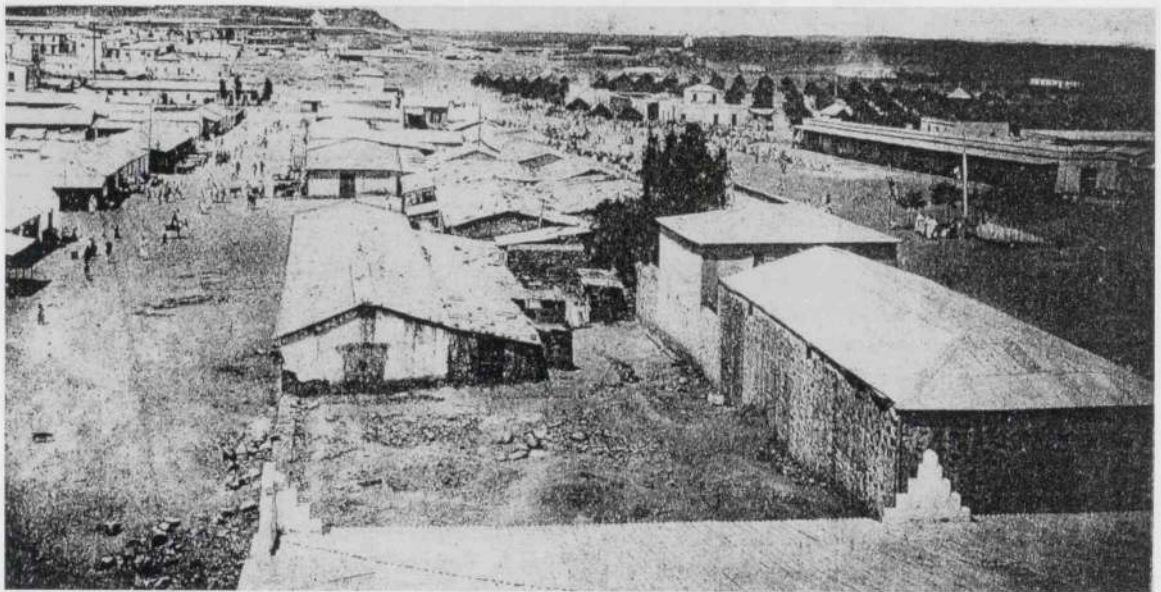


Fig. 5. Asmara, the Natives' Zone (Veduta di Asmara. Zona indigena); (from: Michele Checchi, *Asmara: Estrato della Coloniale*. Roma 1910: 11).

the process of urbanisation because the transport system efficiently connected Asmara with the major settlement areas throughout the country. Ropeway, road networks and the railway connected Asmara with Massawa, while complex road networks were constructed connecting the town with important centres from where people

could easily make their way towards the capital in search of new jobs.

Another important part of the development of Asmara was the progressive municipality system which, actually, was necessitated by the rapid growth of population and urbanisation of the city itself (Asmelash Beyene 1964: 7).

Municipal administrators, councils and commissioners were appointed under the decrees of 1935 and 1936. The bases for bureaucracy were laid. Asmara expanded its commercial and industrial capacity. The fascist massive urban development of the 1930s put Asmara to hold a position of becoming more like capital of the *Africa Orientale Italiana*. Its streets were widened; numbers of bars, cafés, restaurants, cinemas and theatre centres more than doubled (see Fig. 5).

Although the British occupation did not make remarkable changes in the architecture and infrastructure of the city, it continued to be the main commercial and political centre throughout the years. Asmara continued to grow in the 1940s when thousands of Italian askaries (native Italian ex-soldiers) settled in the city during the British occupation. The main nationalist movements in the 1940s were founded in Asmara. One of the most important American communication centres known as Kagnev was established within the city.

The Ethiopian occupation of Eritrea was the last phase when Asmara was badly affected. The *Derg* rule in Eritrea had negative impact on the city. Many Ethiopian army divisions were deployed in the city transforming it to more like a military camp than a civilian city. Many parts of the city were reserved only for military functions where civilians were prohibited from entering or settling. The Ethiopian army transformed several public buildings into terrifying prisons. A good example of many of the prisons located in Asmara was *Mariyam Gibi* where thousands of people were tortured and killed. The Red Terror applied in the city during the 1980s by the Ethiopian army transformed the city from a beautiful and attractive city into an isolated military camp. However, the importance of the city as a commercial centre continued to grow against all the odds of Ethiopian Red Terror.

Finally, Asmara was liberated by the EPLF army on May 1991. The city revived soon and continued to be the heart of Eritrean commerce and politics. The current government started to re-construct the basic infrastructure of the city. New complex of houses, major of which known as *enda Korya* and *Space 2000* were built recently. Moreover, one international "Intercon-

tinental Hotel" was also built offering the city more beauty. However, the construction of house complexes has not yet satisfied the demands of the inhabitants of Asmara. Due to the increasing population in the city, housing has become a major problem for its inhabitants. The city continues to grow in a speedy rate. The total population of the city is estimated to be over 400,000.

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