

## **Abba Bärtäloméwos**

According to the local tradition he was the founder of the Däbrä Sahel monastery and according to a local tradition his grave is in a cave below the monastery. [???

We may surmise that he should be identified with Metropolitan Bärtäloméwos who was sent from Egypt to Ethiopia in 1399 as the successor of Sälama II. Due to the internal problems in Ethiopia during the reign of King David I (1380-1412), Bärtäloméwos arrived to the country some dozen years after the death of his predecessor. The exact date of Bärtäloméwos' death is not known but he is mentioned last time in a document dated 1434.

His long episcopate extended through the reign of seven kings: David I (1380-1412), Tewodros (1412-1413), Yeshaq (1413-1430), Enderyas (1430), Hezba Nan (1430-33), Mehrake Nan, Badel Nan (1433-34) and Zä'ra Ya'eqob (1434-68).

In Ethiopia Bärtäloméwos played an important role as the adviser to King David. He was also the *spiritus movens* of the missions which the king sent to Europe in search for religious relics believing that they would attest God's favour towards David. The first mission, which reached Venice in 1402, was successful. Beside the precious Wood of the Holy Cross the king received several other important relics: the bones of the Holy Innocents and parts of the body of St. Anne.

As the head of Ethiopian church Bärtäloméwos became involved in the religious quarrels between two monastic fractions, one maintaining that Saturday should be observed as the Sabbath (the Ewostatewans), the second defending the observance of Sunday alone. The metropolitan, in conformity with Coptic tradition and the king's preference, supported the partisans of the celebration of Sunday. However, about 1404 the king changed his mind which put Bärtäloméwos in a difficult position.

Under King Yeshaq the metropolitan faced other difficulties being accused of sympathies towards the dissident movement of the Zä-Mikaelites: he was forced to condemn them. On the other hand it does not seem that he was involved in the controversies concerning the movement of the Stephanites (Estifanosites) who were accused of heresy.

It should be noted, in connection with the documents found in the Däbrä Sahel Gospels, that Bärtäloméwos was mentioned in a note in the manuscript of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Borgianus 26, dating to 1409, and in a tri-lingual document (Coptic-Ge'ez-Arabic) added to a Gospel book kept in the church of Mädhané Aläm in Lalibäla. The Coptic part is signed by Bärtäloméwos and dated 29 May 1410.

On the basis of the written sources and oral tradition we may surmise that if Bärtäloméwos was not the founder of Däbrä Sahel, he certainly favoured the monastery, endowed it and most probably chose it as the place of his retirement.

## **King Yeshaq (1414-29)**

He was the son of King David I. During his whole reign Y. campaigned heavily, mostly in the region of Lake Tana and Sémen where he struggled with the rebelling people of Fälasha, professing Judaic faith, and with the Muslims in Adal and the sultanate of Wälasma. As a part of his pacific strategy he founded many churches in the regions of

Dämbiya and Wägära, inhabited by the Fälasha. He also endowed many churches and monasteries in the provinces of Shäwa and Tigré, one of them being Däbrä Sahel.

Y. was a very pious ruler who, according to tradition, entered a battle holding a cross. He also reacted by attacking the Muslims of Ethiopia when in 1422 the ruler of Egypt forbade the Christians pilgrims to enter the Holy Sepulchre.

### **Patriarch Gabriel V (1409-27)**

Gabriel was the 88<sup>th</sup> patriarch of the Alexandrian See. At an uncertain age he joined the monastery of Anba Samuel of Qalamun in Fayyum where he was ordained a priest. Later on he became the *hegumenos* of the Church of the Virgin al-Mu'allaqah in Old Cairo.

At that time the Coptic Church faced severe difficulties. Unstable political and economic situation resulted in the persecutions of the Copts by the Muslims (exclusions from the governmental and public offices, confiscations, raised taxes, demolitions of churches) which led to many conversions to Islam. The harassments intensified in 1423 when Ethiopian King Yeshaq attacked the Muslim living in his country, answering in that way to the persecution of the Christian pilgrims going to Jerusalem. His action did not however improve the relations between Ethiopia and the Coptic Church, already strained: Gabriel and Yeshaq had already been on bad terms because the King had stopped sending to the Coptic Church traditional annual contribution.

Another event which badly affected the Coptic community during Gabriel's reign was thefts by the Venetians of the main relics of the Copts – the head of St. Marc.

### **King Zära Ya'eqob (1434-68)**

Zära Ya'eqob, the youngest son of King Dawit, was born in 1399. He came to the throne in 1434 as an adult, spending his youth first in different monasteries, where he received his education, and later on in the prince prison on Amba Geshén. Involved in the reorganization of the Church he authored several theological works (the most important ascribed to him are *Mäshafä Berhan (The Book of Light)*, *Mäshafä Milad (The Book of Nativity)*). He settled the internal conflicts between the Ethiopian clergy, mostly concerning the observance of the Sabbath and dependence on the Coptic Church, enforced several religious reforms and worked hard to abolish the pagan cults and practices. His policy was to buy the loyalty of the most important monasteries by land endowments of and other kinds of donations.