

**Research Article**

**A History of Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Bichena\*) Town: The Former Capital of Gojjam Proper (c. 1670s to 1850s)**

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**Abstract:** *In Ethiopia, many towns were established spanning centuries across different regions. Bichena Giyorgis town (also called Arogew Bichena or Old Bichena) is found in Enemay Woreda, East Gojjam Zone. Bichena Giyorgis town was founded during the reign of Atse Yohannes I (r.1667-82), yet its history is under-researched. Therefore, the current study attempts to explore the origins, development and functions of this town applying a historic research method. To this end, manuscripts, chronicles, European travel accounts and oral sources collected from informants were used. Existing data were selected, cross-checked, described and interpreted. Findings reveal that the foundation and development of Bichena Giyorgis town was attributed to its location, topography, hospitable climate and expansion of church education. Bichena Giyorgis was the capital of Gojjam proper from the late 1670s to the early 1850s. Bichena Giyorgis served socioeconomic and political functions, and it was the seat of power for Dejjazmach Wodaje Abedib, Dejjazmach Wolde Abib (d. 1752), Dejjazmach Yosedeq (r. 1752-58), Ras Haylu Yosedeq (r. 1759-95) and other provincial governors. The town was*

*one of the regional market centers visited by merchants, artisans and customers from various parts of the country. Bichena Giyorgis was also a center of religious learning in Orthodox Christianity. Intensification of rivalries among members and power contenders of the ruling house of Gojjam and Damot, and the appearance of temporary seats of power ushered in the decline of Bichena Giyorgis in the early 1850s, and gradual rise of Menkoror (Debre Markos) as a regional capital.*

**Keywords:** *Town of Bichena Giyorgis, Origin, Development, Functions, Gojjam Proper*

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## **1. Introduction**

Archaeological remains indicate the origins of towns between the sixth and fifth millennia BC along the Nile valley, Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. These sites were center of ancient art, architecture, philosophy, religion and science.<sup>1</sup> The establishment of towns is an important achievement and feature of civilization.<sup>2</sup> Among others, Mokhtar has mentioned Ethiopia as one of a few countries in sub-Saharan Africa that founded towns in ancient times. Ancient towns and market places of Aksum, Adulis, Metera and Coloe sprung up in northern Ethiopia and the Horn.<sup>3</sup> Aksum was the capital of the Aksumite Kingdom<sup>4</sup> until the rise of the Zagwe Dynasty in 1150.<sup>5</sup> In mediaeval Ethiopia, monarchs had no fixed capital rather they used mainly royal campsites as temporary headquarters.<sup>6</sup>

Integration of Ethiopian regions with the medieval Christian state happened at different times. For instance, the eastern portion of Gojjam was integrated with the medieval period Ethiopian Christian state politically and socially particularly since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The upland area of Mengisto (Mengiste Semayat) in the district of Enemay,<sup>7</sup> to the west of modern Bichena town, was its main political center. Mengisto was the seat of the *Seyum of*

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<sup>1</sup> Wahdat Wahidi, "Origin and Growth of Towns." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, Volume 8, Issue 10, 2020, p. 627.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*. (3rd ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Mokhtar, G. (Ed.), *General History of Africa: Ancient Civilizations*. Vol. II (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2000), pp. 364, 369, 386.

<sup>4</sup> Sergew Hable-Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Department of History, Haile Selassie I University, 1972), p.72.

<sup>5</sup> Mokhtar, p.363; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1972), p.54.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800-1935* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968), p. 137; Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 1990), p.23.

<sup>7</sup> As explained by Sergew, Enemay was one of the Twelve House of Gojjam which includes: Ene May, Enesie, Sebrad, Machakel, Gozzamin, Aneded, Tilat Gin, Awabal, Wudmit, Gafat, Damot, and Agew. Ene May had five children and three of his sons namely Jirameny (ጅራሞኔ), Endeshignet (እንደሽኝት) and Enamebelit (እናምብሊት) settled in different localities of Ene May, Shaba-Berenta, Enarj Enawuga and Debay Tilat Gin. The descendants of Jirameny controlled Arara, Wuqema, Qenebuwat, Denguwa, Nefasam, Qeshemish, Enekeriker, Gatanis, Mojhen, Feqomeda, Bayle, Sekut, Rejim Gira, and Lemichen. Enamblit had controlled Mojhen and Yeqegan. Whereas, the descendants of Endeshignet controlled Arara, Qempata, Wuqema, Telma, Gurezam, Gotera, Yenischicha, Endeshignet, Shabal, Eyesus (Sir Eyesus), and Woyba Debir. As Sergew noted, *Aleqa Tekle Eyesis* described the physical boundary of Ene May which covered the area found between Cheye and Suha Rivers, and from Cheye to the Abay Rivers. There were 95 rivers and 105 churches in the territory of Ene May. In the course of time for administrative or other reasons areas which were part of Ene May has gone shrunk (Sergew Gelaw, Ed. & Ann., *Ye Ityopiya Tarik Be Alleqa Tekle Iyesus Waqjerra*, Addis Ababa: Birhan Ena Selam Printing Press, 2008 E.C.), pp. 30, 233, 235.

*Gojjam* (provincial governor) of the medieval period the Ethiopian state.<sup>8</sup> Historically, Mengisto is strongly associated with the names of Queen Mother Elleni, who was the wife of *Atse Be`ede Mariyam* (r. 1468-78) and regent of his successors; and *Etégé Seble Wengel* was the wife of *Atse Libne Dingil* (r. 1508-40).<sup>9</sup>

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Oromo population movement highly impacted the demographic as well as political features of the same region. Among others, the Ethiopian Christian state, which had already been weakened by the wars with *Imam Ahmad*, was forced to shift its political center from the Shewan plateau first to Mengiste Semayat in eastern Gojjam in the early 1560s, and after a few years, to the Lake Tana basin.<sup>10</sup> The major provinces of the Christian Kingdom during the period included Gojjam proper, Damot proper, Agaw Midir, Dembiya, Simien, Lasta, Begemdir, Tigre (Tigray and highland Eritrea) and part of Shewa. Each of them had provincial capitals and rulers originating from local dynasties with ever growing powers.<sup>11</sup>

Under this state of affairs, Gojjam encompassed by the Abay River was administratively divided into three main regions practically since the last quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These were Gojjam proper, Damot proper and Agaw Midir. Since the reign of *Atse Susinyos* (r. 1607- 32) in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, these divisions of Gojjam by the Abay River became more eminent. Gojjam proper was located at the historic political center of Mengisto. Later on, during the reign of *Susenyos*, *Ras Se`ela Christos* of Gojjam used both Mengisto and Debre Abraham in Machakel as his seats of power.

However, as time went on, first Zewa (since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century) and later Bichena Giyorgis (since the late 1670s) emerged as provincial/regional capitals of Gojjam. Similarly, Damot proper had its center first at Yibaba since the early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at Bure. In a similar vein, Agaw Midir (including Metekel) had two main political centers at Sigadi Mika`el in Zigem and Banja in Ankesha-Banja areas. Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the vast region to the south and south-west of Lake Tana as far as Abeya River close to Mota and Jemma River in Dega Damot

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<sup>8</sup> Geremew Eskezia. "Ethiopian State Campaign, and Settlement and Integration of Oromo Military Regiments in Gojjam (Ethiopia): Ca. 1586-1855" (Ph.D. Dissertation, History, Bahir Dar University, 2021), pp. 16-18, 331.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> G.W. Huntingford, *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century AD to 1704* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 38-39, 44-45.

became a separate administrative region called Mecha proper with its center at Yibaba.<sup>12</sup>

In Gojjam proper, Mengiste Semayat remained as the residence of several important royal families including ancestors and descendants of *Atses* Libne Dingil (r.1508-40), Minas (r.1559-63) and Sertse Dingil<sup>13</sup>. Like other regional (provincial) rulers of the Christian kingdom, the new politico-military rulers of Gojjam proper established their own respective political and administrative centers. Hence, most probably around the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, *Ras* Asgadir Tewodros founded the historic town of Zewa in the district of Yenach around the upper course of Muga River during the reign of *Atse* Fasil (r. 1632-67).<sup>14</sup> In the course of reworking the land tenure system of Gojjam proper, Asgadir “built a church at Zewa [as its central institution] and endowed it with land that he purchased for fifty ounce of gold”. Later, the church was burnt for unknown reasons and remained in ruins until the early years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when another ruler of Gojjam, *Blatengeta* Amonewos (died in September 1703), rebuilt it.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Yerez Mikael and Dima Giyorgis to the north of Bichena Giyorgis had served as important seats of power of *Azazhoch* (local governors) of the region where Bichena Giyorgis was located. For instance, available sources show that *Azazh* Abedib was a local governor in Bichena area from Yerez.<sup>16</sup> However, since about the late 1670s, Zewa was replaced by Bichena Giyorgis as the political center of Gojjam proper, and continued providing this function until the early 1850s.<sup>17</sup> In the Ethiopian context, urban history is an emerging research area.

Ethiopian and foreign scholars studied a number of old and modern Ethiopian towns.

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<sup>12</sup> Geremew, p.19

<sup>13</sup> Sergew Gelaw (Ed. & Ann.), *Ye Ityopiya Tarik Be Alleqa Tekle Iyesus Waqjerra* (Addis Ababa: Birhan Ena Selam Printing Press, 2008 E.C.), pp. 183-184.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Habtamu Mengistie, Lord, Zega and Peasant: A Study of Agrarian Relations in Rural Eastern Gojjam (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, Special Monograph Series, No. 1, 2004), p. 35. 14.. As indicated in Sergew Gelaw's (Ed. & Ann.), *Ye Ityopiya Tarik Be Alleqa Tekle Iyesus Waqjerra*, Zewa was founded by *Ras* Asgadir during the reign of Emperor Fasiladas and it was used as seat of power by *Ras* Haylu Yosedeq besides Bichena Giyorgis. The local community expressed their appreciation to the town of Zewa as capital of Gojjam in Amharic as follows “ከትግራይ አድዋ፤ ከጎጃም ዘዋ” that is literally “Adwa for Tigray and Zewa for Gojjam Proper.” Zewa is located in Debay Tilatgin *woreda* 7 km south of Kuy (center of Debay Tilatgin *woreda*. According to Sergew, 2008, pp.264-265, *Ras* Asgadir had *gult* lands in Qolela, Yinach, Enese, Yewofit, Quwami Cheri, Zachena, Ambalay, Yedit, Jirashum, Qeshemish, Nabira, Deboza Mikael, Kuy, Asene Mariyam, Ayshal, Asendabo and Sinan.

<sup>16</sup> Silesh Mengistie, “A History of Dima Giyorgis Monastery from its Foundation to 1974” (BA Thesis, History, Addis Ababa University, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Giyorgis Sebeka Guba'e, “Ye Bichena Debre Birhan Qidus Giyorgis Betekristiyani Tarik,” (Letarik Printing Enterprise, Tir 2011 E.C), p 14; Informant: Kidus Ayalew.

For instance, Donald Crummey studied the urban history of Ethiopia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which Bichena Giyorgis has been mentioned as one of the *gedam* (parish) urban centers of Gojjam.<sup>18</sup> In his book, *A Social History of Ethiopia, 1990*, Richard Pankhurst mentions Bichena Giyorgis as one of the towns in Ethiopia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>19</sup> Shibiru Tedla's memoir: "*Kegureza Mariam Eske Addis Ababa*", (*From Gureza Mariam to Addis Ababa* (2008 E.C.) is another important source of our understanding about Bichena Giyorgis town's past.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Agedew Redie's short entry ("Bechäna") in *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* (vol. 2),<sup>21</sup> and a topic in Geremew Eskezia's dissertation (2021) provide some information on the history of Bichena Giyorgis as a regional capital of Gojjam proper.<sup>22</sup> Besides, the accounts of some of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European travelers like Charles Beke, Arnauld d'Abbadie and Lefebvre provide some descriptions about the town of Bichena Giyorgis.<sup>23</sup> Ethiopian chroniclers mentioned Bichena Giyorgis particularly in association with the history of *Ras Haylu Yosedeq* (r.1759-95).<sup>24</sup> The renowned writer Haddis Alemayehu, mentioned Bichena Giyorgis frequently in his Amharic novel of *Feqer Iske Mekabir*.<sup>25</sup> These works provide an overview on Bichena Giyorgis. Yet, additional study is needed to deepen existing body of knowledge about the history of this town. The current study attempts to explore the origin, development and functions of Bichena Giyorgis town as capital of Gojjam proper from the late 1670s to the early 1850s.

This study sheds light on the existing body of knowledge about how Bichena Giyorgis originated and developed from a small village to the capital of Gojjam proper and its socio-economic and political functions from the 1680s to the 1850s. Documenting the history of Bichena Giyorgis town has significant contributions to know its past history and to transfer research-based knowledge to the coming generations. This study has importance to readers who want to know the history of this town, and it may serve as a source of information to

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<sup>18</sup> Donald Crummey, "Some Precursors of Addis Ababa: Towns in Christian Ethiopia in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Proceedings of the Symposium on the Centenary of Addis Ababa*, November 24-25, 1986, eds. Ahmed Zekaria, Bahru Zewde and Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa, 1987), pp. 18-20

<sup>19</sup> Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, p. 275.

<sup>20</sup> Shibiru Tedla, "*Kegurezam Mariam Eske Addis Ababa: Ye Hiwot Guzo Ena Tizitaye*", Addis Ababa: Eklips Printing Enterprise, 2008 E.C., (Chapter two), pp. 19-28.

<sup>21</sup> Agedew Redie, "Bechäna" in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, p. 512

<sup>22</sup> Geremew, pp. 331-342.

<sup>23</sup> Crummey, pp. 18-20.; see also, Charles T. Beke, "Abyssinia Being a Continuation of Routes in that Country" *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Volume 14 (1844), p. 25; \_\_\_\_\_. "Route from Ankober to Dima" *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 1842, Vol. 12 (1842), p.257.

<sup>24</sup> Agedew, p. 512; Geremew, pp. 331-342.

<sup>25</sup> Haddis Alemayehu, *Feqer Iske Mekabir* (Love unto Crypt), Ninth Edition (Addis Ababa: Mega Publishing PLC. 1996 EC), p. many pages.

researchers who are interested in undertaking further study in the area.

Historical research method has been applied to study the history of Bichena Giyorgis town. European travel and missionary accounts, manuscripts (published and unpublished), chronicles (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries) as well as oral sources were utilized as data sources. Study participants who were thought to have knowledge about Bichena Giyorgis were identified with the assistance of local persons. The participants were informed about the objective of the study, and they expressed their willingness to participate in the interview sessions. The data collected from different sources were carefully selected, cross-checked, examined, interpreted and described.

## **2. Description of Study Area**

Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Bichena) is located in Enemay *Woreda*, East Gojjam Zone. It is 3 km east of present day Bichena town, and 268 km north-east of Addis Ababa.<sup>26</sup> The latitudinal and longitudinal location of Bichena Giyorgis extends 10°27'N latitude and 38°12'E longitude. Bichena Giyorgis is within the territory of the district of Enemay in East Gojjam Zone.<sup>27</sup> The region where the town of *Bichena Giyorgis* (Arogew Bichena) evolved was extremely fertile known for its agricultural production. It was also traversed by several rivers including Muga, Suha, the two Cheye, Tidan, and Minase, which are tributaries of the Abay River. Hence, it is possible to assume that the region was favourable for human settlement since early times.

Embawachom was the earliest site of Bichena Giyorgis, and the oldest church Embawachom Mariyam was founded in the area in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by *Aba Bekimos* (Tekeste Birhan),<sup>28</sup> who was buried at Dima.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, local tradition indicates that the church of Cholemit Mariyam situated near Arogew Bichena was also founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Since 1941, the local people has been using the name Arogew Bichena in order to differentiate it from present day Bichena town which evolved from the Italian “*Cambo*” (Camp).<sup>31</sup> According to the Bichena *Debir Kebele* Administration Office, Bichena *Debir*

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<sup>26</sup> Agedew, p. 512. However, the distance between Bichena and Addis Ababa (365km) is not correct in this source. See also Shibiru, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Agedew, p. 512.

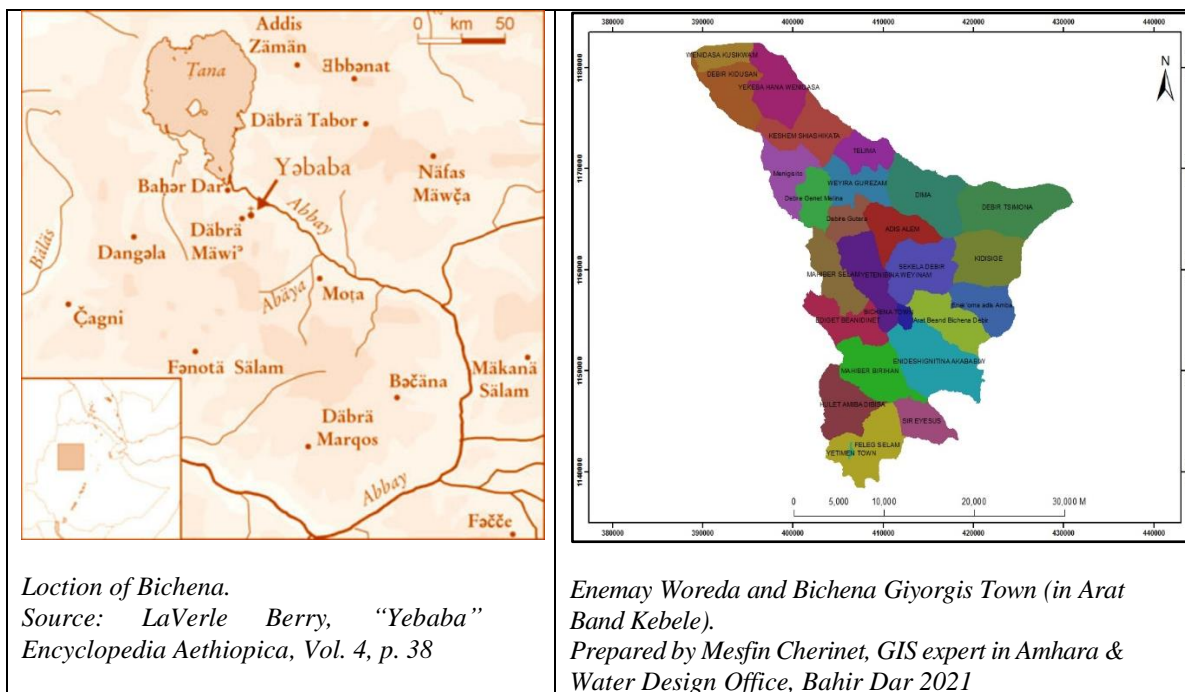
<sup>28</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Giyorgis Sebeka Guba`e, p 14; Informant: Kidus Ayalew.

<sup>29</sup> Yibabe Belay (*Liqe Birhanat Qomos Aba*), *Gedle Abune Tekeste Birhan*, Qidus Giyorgis Printing Enterprise, Bahir

<sup>30</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Giyorgis Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 15-17.

<sup>31</sup> Shibiru, p. 19.

consists of 6 *gottes* (literally villages) namely Gedam, Mahal Amba, Dereq Gind Qentafa, Gung, Abri Wonz and Goterely. In 2023, the total population of Bichena *Debir kebele* (also called *Arat Beand Bichena Debir*) was estimated to be 13,000.



### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Origin of Bichena Giyorgis Town

The name Bichena is traditionally associated with the name of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Tulema Oromo chief from across the Abay River named Bécho. Bécho seems to have succeeded in becoming a local *Azazh* of the area of Embawachom (later Bichena) as far as the district of Shebel Berenta during the reign of *Atse* Yohannes I (r.1667-82).<sup>32</sup> The inhabitants of Embawachom were resentful of unbearable mal-practices perpetrated by Bécho and his soldiers. Fighting broke out between the local people and Becho at Dereq Gind but the later got the upper hand.<sup>33</sup>

In his visit to Manqorqoriya Mariyam (6 to 8km south-west of Embawachom) *Atse* Yohannes I heard precarious events happening in Embawachom. The emperor ordered *Azazh* Wodaje Abedib of Yerez Mikael to punish Becho militarily. Wodaje was a notable figure and local governor of Yerez nearby Dima and Debre Work. Wodaje mobilized forces

<sup>32</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Giyorgis Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 19-20; Informants: Niguse Zegeye; Markos Amha.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

from Yerez, Embwachim, Dima, Manqorqoriya, Shebel and Berenta areas. Becho could not withstand the forces of Wodaje that he had to retreat to Kosheshila located near Manqorqoriya accompanied by his soldiers.<sup>34</sup>

Then, Becho and his men moved to Mojhen, and he is said to have been killed at Eret Amba. Still another informant indicates that Becho was killed at Mergech near Qidame Gebeya on the bank of the river. Today, Mojhen, Eret Amba and Mergech are closer sites located in the district of Shebel Berenta. However, there is nothing known about the funeral site of Becho.<sup>35</sup> Wodaje seems to have spent no time to announce the death of Bécho to *Atse* Yohannes I, who was in the region. As a reward, the emperor granted Wodaje the title of *Dejjazmach* and appointed him as the ruler of Gojjam proper. And it was *Atse* Yohannes I, who had advised Wodaje to make Embawachom his seat of power as the later paid sacrifices to dislodge Becho from this area.<sup>36</sup> Later on, the name of the locality of Embwachom was changed to Bichena after the words local rulers exchanged during the conflict with Becho, i.e. Bécho na, meaning “Bécho, come on!”<sup>37</sup>

In the aftermath of the battle, as mentioned above, *Atse* Yohannes I made Wodaje the *Dejjazmach* of Gojjam proper,<sup>38</sup> who ruled it from his center at Bichena Giyorgis for the next twenty-five years, i.e. until about 1705.<sup>39</sup> There is a widely recounted local tradition that gives much credit to *Dejjazmach* Wodaje as the founder of Bichena Giyorgis town. The following local saying confirms this fact: “ብቸና ጊዮርጊስ በወዳጅ ቀና፤ በወልደ አቢብ ፀና”<sup>40</sup> (Bichena Giyorgis was founded by Wodaje and consolidated under Welde Abib). Informants also confirm this fact that Wodaje was the actual founder of Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Bichena) town.<sup>41</sup> Wodaje Abedib was a famous ruler of Gojjam.<sup>42</sup> He had vast *rist* land in Enemay.<sup>43</sup> In any case, Bichena Giyorgis continued as the most important economic, social, political, cultural and urban center of Gojam proper since its foundation in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ye Bichena Ketema Mewakirawi Plan (The Amhara National Regional State, East Gojjam Administrative Zone, Bichena City Administration, 2008 E.C), p.2; Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Markos Amha, and Fenta.

<sup>35</sup> Informant: Kidus Ayalew.

<sup>36</sup> Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Markos Amha; Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp.19-20.

<sup>37</sup> Agedew, p. 512; Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> Agedew, p. 512.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid; Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Fenta Yayeh.

<sup>42</sup> Informant: Tibebe Taye.

<sup>43</sup> Informant: Kidus Ayalew.

<sup>44</sup> Agedew, p. 512.



### **3.2. Circumstances for the establishment of Arogew Bichena Town**

Conditions that made Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Bichena) a preferable site as the capital of Gojjam proper were its location, topography, climate, strategic importance, and growing importance of church education in the area. Later on, these circumstances also contributed to the development of the town of Bichena Giyorgis. Bichena Giyorgis was adjacent to the provinces of Wollo and Shewa bordered by the Abay River. It is situated in proximity to the districts of Gojjam proper and to deal with administrative and political issues. It was also located on the top of a semi-plateau and a dry area, which is a bit sloppy on the northern side.<sup>45</sup> Beke, an English traveler and geographer, who visited the town in November 1841, described the site of Bichena Giyorgis as “pleasantly situated on a low eminence”.<sup>46</sup> The town had moderate and hospitable climate.<sup>47</sup> Like other towns of Gojjam such as Mertole Mariam, Debre Worq and Dima, its strategic importance to protect Gojjam from any external incursions particularly from beyond the Abay River also prompted the rulers of Gojjam to choose Bichena Giyorgis as a capital.<sup>48</sup> Being the center of church education, Bichena Giyorgis could get attention from the rulers to be a capital.<sup>49</sup> In this regard, Donald Crummey illustrates the contribution of monasteries and churches to the establishment of towns and markets in Gojjam.<sup>50</sup>

### **3.3. Urban functions and development of Arogew Bichena Town**

The town of Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Becha) had evolved from a rural hamlet and emerged as the capital of Gojjam proper. As will be elaborated below, the collective efforts of the people who had been engaged in diverse occupations taking different duties and responsibilities as rulers, peasants, clergy, merchants, artisans and so on had transformed Bichena Giyorgis town embracing basic features of a town that had positive socio-economic influence on the society.

As mentioned above, the earliest church at the site where Arogew Bichena emerged was Embawachom Mariam. Later, *Dejjazmach* Wodaje built the church of Bichena Giyorgis probably in the late 1670s or early 1780s at the present site. Bichena Giyorgis became

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<sup>45</sup> Shibru, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Beke, “Route from Ankober to Dima”, p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> Informants: Mihirka Admasu, Lebeza Alemu.

<sup>48</sup> Shibiru, p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Informant: Mihirka Admasu.

<sup>50</sup> Crummey, p. 18.

not only the main religious center of the town of the same name, but also one of the main centers of religious learning of Gojjam. Later, Wolde Abib (r. 1708- 1749) reconstructed the church of Bichena Giyorgis, assigned 88 clerics to serve the church under *Aleqa* Tegbare Silassie and donated *Arbaytu Wongel* (the four gospels), *Gedle Giyorgis* and other religious books to the church.<sup>51</sup> Then, *Dejjazmach* Yosedeq (r. 1752- 59) promoted the church of Bichena Giyorgis to the status of *debir*, and donated 88 mats, four big tents and different religious apparel and books made of parchment.<sup>52</sup> In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Nigus* Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam renamed the church as Debre Birhan Bichena Qidus Giyorgis, which was also to be ruled by a religious leader under the title of *Melake Birhan*.<sup>53</sup> Besides, Bichena Giyorgis *debir* had collections of hand crosses made of gold or silver, paintings, crowns, drums decorated with silver, crowns, religious paintings, *negarit* (kittle drum), golden plate shoe, *lemid* (men`s cloak, velvet made of lion or leopard skin decorated with gold) presented by kings, princesses, bishops and notables.<sup>54</sup>

#### **a) Land endowment to Bichena Giyorgis Debir**

In Gojjam most monasteries in the past owned large tracts of land called *rims* or *qefefs* granted by monarchs, provincial governors or others.<sup>55</sup> Bichena Giyorgis was not an exception. *Ras* Haylu Yosedeq granted tracts of land from Borebor Silassie (in Gubaya), Eneqora, Gerarma (Berenta), Yegmit (Enemay), Yerez Mikael, Woynam Kidane Mihiret, Yezerezer Mariyam, Nabra Mikael, Manqorqoriya Mariyam, Yezba (Telatgin), and Enazhema Mariyam (Debay Telatgin) to the Church of Bichena Giyorgis.<sup>56</sup> Other *qefefs* of Bichena Giyorgis included Yesenbi/Afirenjim Kidane Mihiret, Addis Amba Yohannis, Densa Amanuel, Sherer Medhanit Alem, Woyba Debir Kidanemaryam Mihiret, Agam

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<sup>51</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, p. 21; Abebaw Ayalew, "A History of Painting in East Gojjam in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Study of the Second Gondarine" Style of Painting" (MA Thesis, History, Addis Ababa University, 2002), pp. 16, 64.

<sup>52</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 26.; Shibiru, p. 20.

<sup>54</sup> Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Mihrka Admasu. These relics are today kept in a museum built recently within the church`s compound.

<sup>55</sup> Temesgen Gebeyehu, "Power, Church and the Gult System in Gojjam, Ethiopia", *Asian and African Studies* (2016 | 25 | 1 | 51 – 73, accessed 1/12/2023), pp. 65-66.

<sup>56</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 28-30; Informant: Qidus. *Qifef* and *Rim* church lands have more or less similar definitions. The first refers to the tributary church land itself, and the second refers to the tribute obtained from each *Qifef*.

Borebor Mariyam, Donzo/Gatanis Gebriel, Yesobet/Jenji Be`ale Egziabher, Loya/Mahibere Birhan Giyorgis, Debissa Mariyam, Qutquwate Hanna, Delgolma Giyorgis, Zeqoret Beale Egziabher, Nabra Mikael and Borebor Mikael.<sup>57</sup> By 1942/43 the total number of *qefefs* of Bichena Giyorgis was 24 1942/43.<sup>58</sup>

The church of Bichena Giyorgis and the *qefefs* altogether were administered by the clergy of the church headed by a *Melak Birhan*. Here is the list of some of the names of *Melak Birhans* who administered the Church of Bichena Giyorgis at different times: *Melak Birhan Tedla Nigatu*, *Melak Birhan Gebre Giyorgis*, *Melak Birhan Admassu Jembere* (1885-1962 E.C.), *Melak Birhan Gebre Mariyam Alamineh*, *Melak Birhan Belay Shashu*, *Melake Birhan Nahusenay Worqineh*, *Melake Birhan Markos Kebede* and *Melake Birhan Ayalew Tsehay*.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, land was one of the most important economic bases of Aroge Bichena town and Bichena Giyorgis *debir*.

#### **b) Church Education at Bichena Giyorgis**

Traditional church education was widespread in Gojjam proper (currently East Gojjam Zone) since about the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and several monasteries and churches gained reputation.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Bichena was one of the most important centers of traditional education. Based on the church education system *qene*, *degwa* and *aquaquam* were given to the students in the same church for centuries. Informants could not exhaust lists of names of church scholars who taught thousands of students since the beginning of church education at Bichena Giyorgis *debir*. One of our informants at least tried to mention certain church scholars who held different titles and positions and taught in the *debir* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The list includes *Liqe Tebebit Wubshet Engida*, *Melake Birhan Chekol*, *Melake Birhan Desta Goshu*, *Melake Birhan Admassu Jembere*, *Qese Gebez Wondim*, *Merigeta Baye Chekol*, *Liqe Tebebet Teshale*, *Liqe Tebebet Tizazu Akalu*, *Merigeta Gezie Wondim*, *Merigeta Tingirtu*, *Re`ese debir Tekle*, *Merigeta Ferede* (nicknamed Enqoqow), *Liqe Tebebet Tariku Meshesha* and *Merigeta Fisseha*. Many deacons and priests were canonized at Bichena different parishes.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 28-30; Informant: Kidus Ayalew.

<sup>58</sup> Informants: Mihirka Admasu, Kidus Ayalew.

<sup>59</sup> Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 31-32; Shibiru, p. 20; Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Mihirka Admasu. **NB:** These sources show that particularly *Liqe Liqawint Melake Birhan Admasu Jembere* is still famous.

<sup>60</sup> Abebaw, p. vii.

<sup>61</sup> Informant: Kidus Ayalew



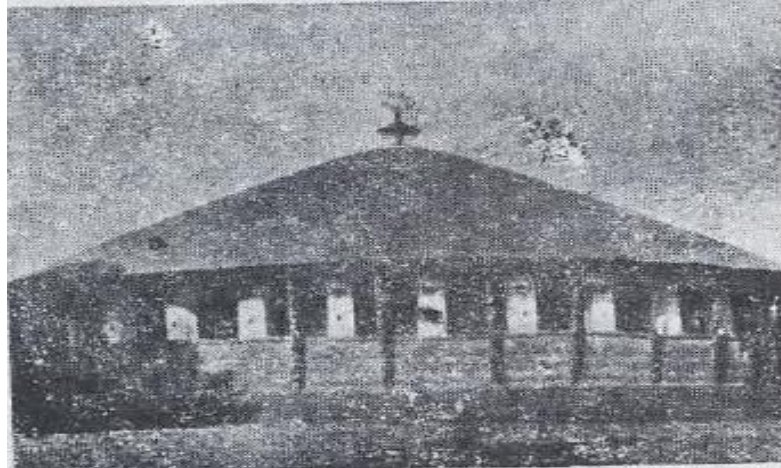
Bichena Giyorgis gained a reputation as the center of traditional church education and attracted church scholars and students, and people started to settle around the church. As capital of Gojjam proper, Arogew Bichena became the hub of socio-economic and political activities. The *sefers* (different neighborhoods of a town) flourished around Bichena Giyorgis *debir*. In this case, Crummy has explained the emergence of towns and market centers in Gojjam close to the monasteries and church sanctuaries.<sup>62</sup>

Presumably, the income from all the *qefefs* mentioned above in the form of court fees, market dues and tax in lieu of tithe was very important for the development of Bichena Giyorgis as an urban center. The development of Bichena Giyorgis *debir* as an educational center was another factor for the development of Bichena Giyorgis town. Consequently, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bichena Giyorgis and the nearby *gedam* based town of Dima to some extent had developed urban characteristics similar to Adwa, Antalo, Cheleqot, Addigrat, Seqota, Debre Tabor, Ankober and Angolela.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Crummey, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, p. 275.



*The old thatched church of Bichena Giyorgis, before it was renovated and covered with tin roof in 1936 E.C (Source: Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, p. 15)*

Inhabitants settled around Bichena Giyorgis *debir*, and the names of the *sefers* established were Gedam *Sefer*, Mehal Amba/Mehal Meda, Gotrely, Abri Wonz or Chak, Bisanit, Dereq Gind and Gung.<sup>64</sup> Besides, one or two-storey residential buildings were built for the rulers, princes, *Melak birhans* and dignitaries in Bichena Giyorgis. Among others, *Ras* Haylu Yosedeq had built a palace and the ruins are still visible behind the church compound. Beke, a British traveller and geographer had visited Arogew Bichena in November 1841, and he observed the ruins of the palace of *Ras* Haylu Yosedeq and residential buildings of the notables. He stated that many of the houses were stone walls.<sup>65</sup> People also dwelt in round huts with grass roofs, walls plastered with a mix of straw and mud.

Gedam *Sefer* is very close to the church, and it was the residence of aristocrats, the clergy and well-to-do people. Mehal Amba or Mehal Meda was an open space located in front of the main gate of Bichena Giyorgis *debir*. Mehal Amba served as a market place; and social events, public and religious holidays, funeral processions and parades were conducted in the same place.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Beke, "Route from Ankober to Dima", p.257

<sup>65</sup> Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Fenta Yayeh, Mihirka Admasu.

<sup>66</sup> Informants: Mihirka Admasu. Fenta Yayeh.





**Some old edifices at Bichena Giyorgis Debir**

*The above photographs taken in 2002 E.C and shared with researchers by Professor Shibiru Tedla show the renovated and roofed old buildings (17<sup>th</sup> century) of Bichena Giyorgis church. The first is the gate to the present-day church of the same name, and the rest are houses within the church compound which still provide some kind of service at the church.*

*NB: The palace of Ras Haylu I at a nearby location was demolished by Fascist Italian forces during the Occupation Period (1936-41), see Shibiru, p. 19.*

### **c) Bichena Giyorgis as regional market centre**

Bichena Giyorgis was also known for its weekly Monday market. Sometimes local people called the market place Yewodaje Gebeya (meaning the market place founded by *Dajjazmach* Wodaje) who was the founder of Arogew Bichena town. Buyers and sellers from various districts of Gojjam proper, from the districts of Southern Wollo and Shewa from across the Abay River, attended the weekly Monday market. As it was the norm in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries highland Ethiopia, bartering system might have been the main medium of exchange; *amole* (a bar of salt) and Maria Theresa *Thalers* were also used occasionally. Peasants, traders and artisans brought a variety of items to the market such as agricultural produces, livestock, horses, mules, goats, sheep, butter, honey, coffee, spices, perfume, ornaments, cotton, clothes, dyes, hides and skins, wooden and pottery products,

farm tools, knives and household utensils.<sup>67</sup>

The markets at Bichena, Mota, Adet Medhani Alem, etc. were particularly famous since the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century because of the patronages they obtained from the rulers of Gojjam like *Ras Haylu Yosedeq*. For instance, the famous market place at Adet was called Haylu Gebeya (Haylu Market) until the 1974 Revolution because it was established by *Ras Haylu Yosedeq* in the 1780s.<sup>68</sup> In this regard, Pankhurst indicated that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the markets of Bichena and Mota were larger than those of Bahir Dar and Yifag, and they were known markets for cereals, cloth, cattle and horses.<sup>69</sup> According to the informants, separate sites were arranged for *chew tera* (salt market), *kebita tera* (cattle market), grain market, jewellery market, green paper, tomato and other merchandise.<sup>70</sup> Tax collectors assigned by the office of *Melak Birhan* levied market tolls. The weekly Monday market of Bicheno Giyorgis brought people from different places together. Besides buying and selling goods and services people established relationships, exchanged values, norms, customs, fashions and opinions. In the absence of modern mass media, people visited market places to update themselves with current information. The open market served as a public square in which the rulers of Gojjam proper at all levels and their officials announced decrees, made major political and military decisions, mobilization orders, and carried out promotion and demotion of officials at the market place. The town of Bichena Giyorgis hosted emperors, princes, princesses, bishops, provincial governors, rases, dejjasmaches and contemporary personalities.<sup>71</sup>

#### **d) Craftsmanship in Bichena Giyorgis**

Craftsmen were required to provide services to the state and the church in the local capitals.<sup>72</sup> Bichena Giyorgis and the rulers created a favourable condition for the expansion of craftsmanship in the areas of pottery, carpentry, blacksmithing, jewellery, and weaving. Artisans could exchange their indigenous knowledge and skills to improve the quality and quantity of their products to meet consumers' needs.<sup>73</sup> In this case, as cited in Pankhurst, Beke stated about the existence of a number of specialized craftsmen in Gojjam. Beke had visited the courts of *Dejazmach Goshu Zewde* and his son, *Dejazmach Birru Goshu*. He noted that in Gojjam many craftsmen had an attachment to the court of *Dejjazmach*

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Geremew, p.322

<sup>69</sup> Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, p. 214.

<sup>70</sup> Informants: Fenta Yayeh, Mihirka Admasu.

<sup>71</sup> Informants: Kidus Ayalew, Fenta Yayeh, Mihirka Admasu

<sup>72</sup> Pankhurst, p.275.

<sup>73</sup> Informants: Fenta Yayeh, Markos Amha, Mihirka Admasu

Birru Goshu and rendered services.<sup>74</sup> Stone masons, carpenters, weavers, potters, blacksmiths, tanners and jewelers had settled in Bichena Giyorgis and contributed considerably to the growth of the town, supplied goods and services important for the day-to-day lives and activities of families and the community. Some specialized craftsmen had come from different districts and provinces and rendered services.<sup>75</sup>

Stone masons, carpenters, weavers, potters, blacksmiths, tanners and jewelers had settled in Bichena Giyorgis and contributed a lot to the growth of the town, supplied goods and services important for the day-to-day lives and activities of the families and the community. Some specialized craftsmen had come from different districts and provinces and lived in Bichena Giyorgis (Arogew Bichena), doing their businesses and marketing their products and services to the court, church and the people at large. Considering the nature of their occupation particularly tanners, blacksmiths and potters were assigned to live in Gortele. Gortele is situated west of the church of Bichena Giyorgis, and it is about two kms far from the church. The Kuy River crosses Gortele and supplied water to the craftsmen that had been used for pottery making, tannery and metal work.<sup>76</sup>

In Bichena Giyorgis the craftsmen were accustomed to making different household utensils and tools. The tanners made saddles, shields, scabbards, belts, tents, thongs, straps, bags and pouches, sleeping-skins, clothing, parchment making, sandals, whips, cases, and *lemd* (cloaks made from lion skin, worn by noblemen or heroes). Blacksmiths could make ornaments, sickles, axes, ploughshare, knives, razors, spear-heads, daggers, swords, spare parts for rifles, hammers, pincers, drills, nails, hatchets, saws, steels for striking fire, pans, bits and stirrups for horses and mules, chains and rings, tweezers, scissors and needles. Potters used to make clay vessels, cups, bowls/dish, pots and jars, incense burners, coffee pots, *enjera*-baking plates and roof tops. Weavers prepared garments; and carpenters could make stools, wood-carving, beds, doors, windows, and were involved in house construction.<sup>77</sup>

#### **e) Political function of Bichena Giyorgis**

From late c. 1670s to the 1840s the rulers of Gojjam proper made Arogew Bichena a capital. Being the capital of Gojjam proper, Bichena Giyorgis played a significant role in the

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<sup>74</sup> Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia*, p.236.

<sup>75</sup> Informants: Fenta Yayeh, Markos Amha, Mihirka Admasu.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid



process of political and dynastic integration between the ruling house of Gojjam and the Gondarine royal family. The nature of succession to governorship of Gojjam proper was mainly based on descent as approved by the reigning monarch at Gonder or sometimes by his *Rasbitweded*. The ruling house of Gojjam continued until 1932 when *Ras* Haylu Tekle Haymanot was deposed by *Atse* Hayle Selassie I (r. 1930- 35; and 1941-74).

To begin with, *Dejazmach* Wodaje died sometime in the early years of 1700s, and was succeeded by his son, *Dejjach* Girgis (Ze Giyorgis) who died shortly after. Upon the death of *Dejjach* Girgis, his son, Wolde Abib (died in 1752), who held the title of *Yeshaleqa* during the reign of Iyasu I (r. 1682-1706), was made a *Dejjazmach* and governor of Gojjam by *Atse* Téwoflos in 1708.<sup>78</sup> Wolde Abib's coming to power in Gojjam was associated with the battle of Qebero Meda (September 1707) close to Yebaba town in Mecha province. He participated in the battle against *Atse* Tekle Haymanot I's (r. 1706-07) imperial forces led by *Dejjazmach* Darmen, whom the emperor had made a new governor of Gojjam in the late 1706. *Dejjazmach* Darmen defeated and killed the usurper named Amde Tsiyon, whom the *Qebatoch* of Gojjam had supported. Sources show that following this battle, Wolde Abib became a bandit. However, a year later, Darmen himself was killed by the forces of the new emperor, *Atse* Téwoflos (r.1708-11).<sup>79</sup> Wolde Abib played a big role in the capture of Darmen and his associates who had murdered the late Emperor, *Atse* Iyasu I.<sup>80</sup> In return, as already mentioned, *Atse* Téwoflos made Wolde Abib a *Dejjazmach* and governor of Gojjam.<sup>81</sup>

It was during the time of Wolde Abib that the *Qebat* partisans of Gojjam began to get the backing of the monarchy at Gondar. The main reason for *Atse* Téwoflos's official proclamation of *Qebat* as his government's faith was the need to maintain the support from Gojjam.<sup>82</sup> Wolde Abib was famous particularly in the 1730s. His name is mentioned in the chronicle of Iyasu II as the leader of troops from Gojjam in the emperor's campaign against Lasta in 1745.<sup>83</sup> In addition, Wolde Abib made a significant

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<sup>78</sup> Abebaw, p.10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> Tekle Tsadiq Mekuriya, *Ye Ityopiya Tarik Ke Atse Libne Dingil Eske Atse Tewodros*, Fourth Edition (Addis Ababa: Berhan Ena Selam Printing Press, 1961 E. C.), p. 217.

<sup>81</sup> Abebaw, p. 64.

<sup>82</sup> Dessie Qeleb (Trans. & ed.), *Tarique Negest* (Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Mahebere Qedusan, 2007 E.C), p.298.

<sup>83</sup> Ignazio Guidi, *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyo`as* (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Scriptorum Aethiopicum, Versio, Series Altera, Vol. 6, Reprinted. Louvain: L. Durbecq, 1954), p. 120.

contribution to formalizing Arogew Bichena as the capital of Gojjam proper. As cited above, the following proverb gives credit to his contribution: *Bewodaje qenna bewolde Abib Tsenna*.<sup>84</sup>

In the late 1740s, another yet more powerful regional lord emerged in Gojjam proper whose name was *Abeto Yosedeq Wolde Abib* (r. 1752-58). He laid the foundations of the ruling dynasty of Gojjam, which later also included the ruling house of Damot (because *Dejjach Zewde Silin* was married to the daughter of *Ras Haylu Yosedeq*). Yosedeq himself married *Walate Israel*, the daughter of *Etege Mentwab* and maternal sister of *Atse Iyasu II* (r. 1730-55), and in 1753 he was recognized as the ruler of Gojjam with the title of *Dejjazmach*. He fathered *Abeto Hayle Iyesus* (later, *Ras Haylu I*), who inherently became a member of the Gondarine royal family.<sup>85</sup> Yosedeq ruled Gojjam from his centre at Bichena Giyorgis as one of the most influential officials of his period until his death in 1758.<sup>86</sup>

In 1759, Yosedeq was succeeded by his son, *Hayle Iyesus* (later *Ras Haylu I*) as the governor of Gojjam proper. As indicated above, the development of Arogew Bichena and Bichena Giyorgis *debir* is particularly associated with the period of *Ras Haylu I* (r. 1759-95). Because of his many contributions to the growth and development of Bichena Giyorgis town and church of the same name, until the 1936 Italian Occupation, local people described Bichena Giyorgis as “*Ye Talaq Ras Haylu Yosedeq Ketema*” (the town of *Ras Haylu I*).<sup>87</sup>

In 1777, *Atse Selemon* (r. 1777-79) recognized *Haylu Yosedeq* for the first time as the ruler of the whole of Gojjam extending from *Dengel Ber* and *Dura River* west of *Lake Tana* to the great bend of the *Abay River* in the east. His rule over the whole of Gojjam continued up to 1795.<sup>88</sup> His main political center was Bichena Giyorgis, where he built a small palace. He decorated his palace with paintings and rebuilt the church of Bichena

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<sup>84</sup> Agedew, p. 512.

<sup>85</sup> Fantahun Birhane, “Gojjam: 1800-1855” (BA Thesis, History, Haile Selassie I University, 1973). p. 1; Abebaw, p.10; Sergew, p. 176.

<sup>86</sup> Sergew, p. 176; Fantahun, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Shibiru, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Weld H. Blundell, *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 330, 396-97, 429-430.

Giyorgis and decorated it with murals.<sup>89</sup> The Scottish traveller, James Bruce, described him as: "... one of the largest men that I ever saw, the only particular remarkable in him."<sup>90</sup> Haylu`s rule in Gojjam was characterized by relative peace, stability and cultural revival. He commissioned the construction and decoration of many churches.<sup>91</sup> As mentioned above, Haylu also made Bichena`s weekly Saturday market as one of the most known regional markets of Gojjam which attracted merchants from various parts of the country.<sup>92</sup> Sources invariably agree that lavish banquets were held at Aroge Bichena by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries` rulers of Gojjam beginning from *Ras* Haylu Yosedeq. *Mekuwanints*, the clergy and other dignitaries of Dima, Debre Worq, and Bichena were regularly invited to participate in such banquets.<sup>93</sup>

Later in 1960 E.C., *Melake Birhan* Admasu Jembere, wrote the following about Bichena Giyorgis:

የብሽና ጊዮርጊስ... በጻድቁ ዮሃንስ ዘመነ መንግስት የጎጃም ጠቅላይ ገዥ የነበሩት ደጃዝማች ወዳጅ ተክለዉት የጎጃም ጠቅላይ ገዥ መኖሪያ ከተማ ሆኖ ከጠቅላይ ገዥ ከተማነቱም በላይ በራስ ኃይሉ የሴዴቅ ግዛት የደብሩ ገዥ አለቃ ተብሎ ተደብረ። ከዚህ በኋላ ከጻድቁ ዮሃንስ እስከ አዲሱ ቴዎድሮስ ዘመነ መንግስት በጠቅላይ ከተማነት ቆይቶ በደጃዝማች ተደላ ጓሉ ግዛት የጎጃም ጠቅላይ ገዥ ከተማነት ወደ ደብረ ማርቆስ (መንቆረር) ሲዛወር ያዉራጃ ከተማ ሆኖ (ቆየ) ...<sup>94</sup>

Bichena Giyorgis... was established by *Dejjazmach* Wodaje, who was the governor of Gojjam province during the reign of *Tsadiqu* Yohannes [I]. Apart from this, during the time of *Ras* Haylu Yosédéq, its church was promoted to the status of *debir* administered by an *Aleqa*. It had served as capital of Gojjam from the reign of *Tsadiqu* Yohannes to that of *Atsé* Téwodros [II], and when *Dejjazmach* Tedla Gualu transferred his seat of power to Debre Marqos [Menqorer], it [Bichena] became a provincial town ...

Eventually, Bichena Giyorgis (Aroge Bichena) declined as a major seat of power of the rulers of Gojjam since the late 1840s. Three conditions may stand out as contributing factors for the gradual decline of Bichena Giyorgis as the capital of Gojjam proper. The first is the

<sup>89</sup> Sergew, p. 183. ; Shibru argues that the palace was demolished during the Italian Occupation period during which the Italians built a "Cambo" some three km west of Aroge Bichena town. This Italian camp later evolved into the new Bichena town, see, Shibru, pp. 19-20.  
<sup>90</sup> James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773 in Five Volumes* (Edinburg: Printed by J. Ruthven et.al, 1790), Vol. 2, pp. 613; Vol. 3, p. 219.  
<sup>91</sup> Abebaw, p. 11; Debre Bichena Qidus Giyorgis Sebeka Guba`e, pp. 23-24.  
<sup>92</sup> Geremew. p. 322.  
<sup>93</sup> Among others, see, Debire Birhan Bichena Qidus Sebeka Guba`e, p. 24; Fantahun, p. 5; Shibiru, pp. 26-27; Tekle Tsadiq, pp. 298-299.  
<sup>94</sup> Admasu Jembere (*Melake Birhan*), "Yedebre Marqos, Yebichena, Ye Yerez, Ye Teb ena Ye Chelemit Hulqo Niwaye Qidisat Be 1960 E.C. Yetemezegebe" (IES-MS-203), p. 4.

rivalry and conflict among rulers and power contenders, particularly between *Dejjazmach* Zewde Silin of Damot and *Dejjazmach* Merid Haylu of Gojjam since the death of *Ras* Haylu I in July 1795. The second is the emergence of other localities that were used as alternative seasonal seats of power for rulers of Gojjam proper.<sup>95</sup> The last factor was the political turmoil of the period that forced not only the rulers but also the local people to migrate out of Bichena for safety.<sup>96</sup> As the preceding quotation shows, the first to move out of his seat of power from Bichena Giyorgis was *Dejjach* Tedla Gualu, who moved his capital to Yewish near Menqorer (later Debre Marqos) in the late 1840s. In this regard, Beke who visited the area of Bichena in November 1841, reports:

... that the town "which is pleasantly situated on a low eminence" was surrounded by "strong stone walls" and most of the houses were of stone too; however all is now fallen into great decay, the walls being broken down, and the present houses being merely hovels of wattles covered with mud. In its time of greatness, it was the capital of *Ras* Hailu (*Dejasmach* Goshu's maternal grandfather), whose residence, a little way out of the town, was pointed out to me.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of its decline and low status, Bichena Giyorgis again served as the capital of *Dejjach* Birru Goshu during the 1840s and early 1850s.<sup>98</sup> Later, Bichena Giyorgis continued to provide this function until the early 1850s. The transfer of *Dejjazmach* Tedla Gualu's seat of power in the late 1840s from Bichena Giyorgis to Yewish close to Menkore (now Debre Markos) did not mark the complete decline of Bichena Giyorgis, however.<sup>99</sup>

#### **4. Discussion**

This section discusses major findings in line with the objectives of the study that focuses on the origin, development and functions of Bichena Giyorgis from ca. 1670s to the early 1850s. The coming of Becho Negaya and his troop to Embawachom was an important moment for the later foundation of Bichena Giyorgis town. This situation made Embawachom the precursor of Bichena Giyorgis. However, there is no evidence supporting Becho as founder of the town of Bichena Giyorgis. Nothing was mentioned about the contribution of Becho to the process of the foundation of the town of Bichena Giyorgis. Rather, Becho is mainly remembered for his cruel acts against the local people, and for lending his name to Bichena. There is also a place known as Becho Negaya located in Agam Borebor *Kebele*, Shabal-

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<sup>95</sup> Informant: Tibebu Taye; Agedew, p. 512.

<sup>96</sup> Crummey, p.20.

<sup>97</sup> Beke, "Route from Ankober to Dima", p. 257.

<sup>98</sup> Crummey, p. 19; Beke, "Abyssinia Being a Continuation of Routes in that Country", p. 25.

<sup>99</sup> Geremew, pp.339-340

Berenta *woreda*. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Oromo had the tradition of naming settled areas after clan names or names of clan leaders.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the name Becho might have been used as a root word to call the Embawachom area Bichena. Oral sources gave credit to *Azazh* later *dejjazmach* Wodaje Abedib (1670s –1680s) as founder of Bichena Giyorgis town.

The foundation of a town is a historical incidence and a rigorous process that involves among others decision making to select the proposed site considering its advantages and disadvantages. The current study identified location, topography, favorable climate, strategic importance and expansion of church education as contributing factors for the foundation of the town of Bichena Giyorgis and its likelihood as capital of Gojjam proper. Empirical studies<sup>101</sup> explore the historical background to the origin of towns and issues considered while selecting sites. In Ethiopia, sites for royal camps sometimes known as “moving capitals” were chosen carefully considering their suitability for various purposes.<sup>102</sup> According to Crummey’s<sup>103</sup> explanation as time went on those royal camp sites became origins of towns. Slightly elevated sites surrounded by plain areas that have a combination of strategic importance for military operations and for settlement were preferable to set up royal camp sites.<sup>104</sup> Officials assigned by the emperor and his dignitaries gave attention to abundance of trees for house construction and firewood,<sup>105</sup> and availability of water and pasture to select a camp site.

Assessment of sites to establish a town might have been conducted in other countries too. For instance, the foundation and growth of ancient Egyptian towns was attributed to suitability of sites for agricultural activities, military, trade, handcraft and administrative purposes.<sup>106</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and for the last three consecutive centuries from 1500 to 1800 AD in most parts of Europe and Russia the church, military needs and trade

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<sup>100</sup> Misganaw Tadesse. “Social and Political History of Wollo Province in Ethiopia: 1769-1916.” Ph.D. Dissertation, History, University of the Western Cape. 2019. pp. 76-77

<sup>101</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp. 137-138; Crummey, 1986, p.9, 12, 13, 15; Connah, 2016, p. 22, 51, 143, 144, 146, 254; Wahidi, 2020, p.631, 633)

<sup>102</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp.137-138).

<sup>103</sup> Crummey, 1986, p.9.

<sup>104</sup> Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp. 137-138;

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> Connah, 2016, p. 22, 51

were “*the bases of towns’ origins.*”<sup>107</sup> Connah<sup>108</sup> described the role of trade and Islam in Swahili, Tanzania for expansion of towns. In addition, Connah expounded that Islam has major influence in the socioeconomic lives, material and non-material culture and settlement patterns of the Swahili Muslims. In Ethiopia, too, the role of Islam in the emergence of pilgrimage sites and in the origin and growth of towns is indispensable. In Crummey’s article,<sup>109</sup> Akalou strongly associated the origins of towns in Ethiopia prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century with political factors, and he identified the role of economic factors as secondary level. Crummey challenges Akalou’s view and he advocates the idea that in the Ethiopian context the origins of towns are embedded with the physical geography, social, religious, economic and political factors. There are common grounds shared across countries regarding origins of towns and issues considered to select sites. The origin of a town is not a mono-causal phenomenon, but it is an outcome of several factors. Therefore, the origins and development of Bichena Giyorgis town can be explained based on this perspective.

## **5. Conclusion**

Bichena Giyorgis evolved as a town in the 1670s in a place called Embuachom Mariyam during the reign of *Atse Yohannis I* (r.1667-1682) and served as the capital of Gojjam proper until the 1850<sup>s</sup>. Its geographical location adjacent to neighboring *woredas* and provinces, topography, strategic importance and expansion of church education can be mentioned as contributing factors for the origins and visibility of Bichena Giyorgis as capital of Gojjam proper. Relatively, by standard and customs of the time Bichena Giyorgis exhibited town characteristics. Wodaje Abedib took the credit as founder of Bichena Giyorgis town, and successive governors of Gojjam proper contributed to the development of the town. The town served social and political functions and in the areas of expanding church education. Bichena Giyorgis was a market center where people from different places came together to exchange goods, services and customs. The town had seen a period of greatest success, power and influence; and conversely, it experienced an age of decline. Currently, Bichena Giyorgis a small village under a *kebele* administrative structure.

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<sup>107</sup> Wahidi, 2020, p.633.

<sup>108</sup> Connah, 2016, p.254

<sup>109</sup> Crummey, p.9

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**List of Informants**

No	Name and title of Informant	Age	Date	Residential Address	Remarks
1	Markos Amha ( <i>Ato</i> )	86	29 March 2016	Bichena town	He attended church education, and has knowledge about Arogew Bichena Giyorgis.
2	Niguse Zegeye ( <i>Rese Debir</i> )	70	26 Jan 2019	Bichena town	He is a native of Bichena, and served as a high priest, church official and secular administrator. He knows a great deal about the history of Gojjam.
3	Tibebu Taye ( <i>Ato</i> )	82	29 Jan 2019	Bichena town	He is a native of Bichena. He served as a government official at different places of Gojjam during the <i>Derg</i> . He has great knowledge on the history of Gojjam
4	Kidus Ayalew ( <i>Malak Birhan</i> )	45	7 July 2023	Arogew Bichena	Administrator of Debre Birhan Bichena Kidus Giyorgis.
5	Lebeza Alemu ( <i>Malak Genet</i> )	50	7 July 2023	Debre Markos	Staff of East Gojjam Diocese. He is knowledgeable about Arogew Bichena, and the provincial governors of Gojjam.
5	Mehirka Admassu ( <i>Ato</i> )	84	11 July 2023	Addis Ababa	He is the son of <i>Malak Birhan</i> Admassu Jembere and grew up in Arogew Bichena in his childhood. He has rich information about the town.
7	Fenta Yayeh ( <i>Ato</i> )	75	11 July 2023	Arogew Bichena	Inhabitant of Arogew Bichena, and he is knowledgeable about history of the town.