

# The Political and Theological Significance of Gondar in Early Modern Global Christianity, 1636–1769

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**Abstract:** This article examines Gondar during the Classical Gondarine period (1636–1769) as a political-theological center within early modern global Christianity. Drawing on royal chronicles, Jesuit missionary writings especially those of Manuel de Almeida and Pedro Páez and Ethiopian ecclesiastical sources, it analyzes how doctrinal debate and imperial authority were mutually constitutive. Rather than interpreting Jesuit involvement solely as political intrusion or theological conflict, the study argues that the encounter compelled Ethiopian rulers and clerics to redefine the relationship between orthodoxy and sovereignty. Christological controversies, missionary interventions, and synodal deliberations functioned not merely as religious disputes but as instruments of state formation and imperial consolidation. Methodologically, the study employs historical research design based on textual and archival analysis of Ethiopian and European sources. By situating Gondar within both Ethiopian and European historical memory, the article repositions the city as a central arena in which theology, political authority, and global Christian exchange intersected. Gondar thus emerges not as a peripheral site of missionary rupture, but as a formative locus in the negotiation of religious legitimacy and imperial power in early modern Christianity.

**Keywords:** Gondar; Political Theology; Jesuit Missions; Ethiopian Orthodox Church; State Formation; Early Modern Global Christianity.

**Introduction:** Gondar occupies a singular place in Ethiopian history as an imperial capital, a center of Orthodox learning, and a site of sustained encounter between Ethiopia and the wider Christian world. From the sixteenth century onward, it emerged not only as a political and religious heartland but also as a city deeply embedded in global networks of memory, travel, and textual production. European missionaries and travelers most notably the Jesuits did not merely pass through Gondar; they lived within it, debated theology, recorded its institutions, and remembered it with striking affection (Pankhurst Richard, 1982). Central to this argument is the testimony of the Portuguese Jesuit Manuel de Almeida (c. 1580–1646), who entered Ethiopia in 1622 and authored *Historia de Etiopia a Alta ou Abassia*. Almeida's famous declaration "I do not know any country in the world, not even Portugal where I was born, for which I have greater affection than Ethiopia" as quoted by Philip Caraman, encapsulates a deeply personal attachment that challenges reductionist interpretations of the Jesuit

presence as merely imperial or coercive (Caraman Philip, 1985, 158).

The complex interaction between religion and politics shaped the course of Ethiopian history during this period, profoundly affecting military strategies, diplomatic relations, and internal political developments (Salvadore Matteo, 2010, 182). While Jesuit involvement has often been remembered primarily through the lens of doctrinal conflict and political rupture, this study argues that Jesuit and post-Jesuit texts also preserve admiration, emotional attachment, and sustained intellectual engagement with Gondar-Ethiopia (Caraman Philip, 1985). By tracing a chronological arc from the first Jesuit missions to the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868), this article situates Gondar within a long history of religious encounter and memory-making. Nineteenth-century missionary and traveler engagements particularly those involving Capuchin and Lazarist missionaries were shaped by, and consciously responded to, the remembered legacy of the Jesuits (Rubenson Sven,

1976).

After decades of missionary effort, Emperor Susānyos converted to Catholicism on 1 November 1621 (Crummey Donald, 1972, 7). This decision provoked fierce resistance from the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, the nobility, and military leaders. Facing widespread unrest, Susānyos abdicated. His successor, Emperor Fasilādās, expelled the Jesuits in 1632–1633 (Crummey Donald, 1972, 7–8). Despite their expulsion, Jesuit influence left a significant imprint on Ethiopian religious and political life, contributing to the emergence of the Qəbat, Tāwahədo, and Şägga factions within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Crummey Donald, 1972, 8).

### Gondar as Imperial and Sacred Space



**Fasilādās Castle, Gondar (1636) Seat of imperial power and a hub of political-theological life in Early Modern Global Christianity. (Author’s photograph, 2025)**

The decision to establish Gondar as a permanent capital represented a deliberate move toward political centralization and administrative stability. Two years after the expulsion of the Jesuits, Fasilādās formally established Gondar as his capital. The relocation coincided with the arrival of Abuna Marqos, the first metropolitan appointed after the restoration of Orthodoxy. The Short Chronicle records: ቍ-እቱ፡ ጊዜ፡ ሙጽኡ፡ አቡነ፡ ማርቆስ፡ ወገብረ፡ ሙዲናሁ፡ በጎንደር። The construction of Fasilādās’s castle inaugurated an architectural tradition continued by successive emperors from Fasilādās (r. 1632–1667) to Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755) (Getahun Solomon, 2005, 3; Pankhurst Richard, 1985, 117). These monumental structures embodied the vitality of the seventeenth-century Gondarine period.

### Jesuit Missions and the Formation of Gondarine Memory

The first Jesuit mission, led by André de Oviedo in 1557,

The establishment of Gondar as a permanent imperial capital in 1636 marked a transformative moment in Ethiopian history. Royal chronicles and monastic traditions depict Gondar as both a seat of kingship and a sacred landscape structured by churches, monasteries, and ritual life (Pankhurst Richard, 1967). Under emperors from Susānyos to Fasilādās, political authority and theological legitimacy were continuously negotiated (Wolde Aregay Merid, 1987). Gondar entered European consciousness not as an exotic periphery, but as a significant node within early modern global Christianity (Ullendorff Edward, 1960). Before the seventeenth century, Ethiopian monarchs ruled from itinerant royal camps rather than fixed capitals (Berry LaVerle, 1995).

initiated sustained Catholic engagement with Ethiopia (Wolde Aregay Merid, 1987). The Jesuits encountered a deeply rooted ecclesiastical tradition closely tied to royal authority (Tamrat Tadesse, 1972). A central area of controversy concerned Christology. Emperor Gālawdewos responded by composing his Confession of Faith, defending Ethiopian Orthodoxy and affirming doctrinal unity (Ullendorff Edward, 1973, 77). The second mission, led by Pedro Páez, marked a period of dialogue and intellectual exchange. Páez’s *Historia de Etiopía* presents Ethiopia as a land of theological seriousness and learning (Páez Pedro, 1945). His diplomatic skill and personal affability earned him admiration at court (Beckingham C. F. and Huntingford G. W. B., 1954). The third Jesuit phase, under Afonso Mendes, shifted toward doctrinal rigidity. Mendes’s enforcement of Catholic orthodoxy following Susānyos’s conversion fractured ecclesiastical unity (Haile Getatchew, 1981). His mission ultimately culminated in expulsion under Fasilādās (Crummey

Donald, 2000). The failure of the Jesuit enterprise stemmed less from individual shortcomings than from the resilience of Ethiopian monastic traditions and deeply embedded theological identities.

### **Doctrinal Dispute as Religious and Cultural Encounter**

The Christological controversies centered on the nature of Christ and the mystery of Unction. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church articulated its theology through five central mysteries: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, Baptism, and Holy Communion (Haile Getatchew, 1981). Disputes crystallized into the Qəbat, Tāwahədo, and Şägga factions, shaping both church and state (Wolde Aregay Merid, 1997). Synods such as Fogāra, Rača, Fārās Māgria, and Amba Ćara functioned as arenas of theological debate (Kaplan Steven, 1992). Rather than representing mere conflict, these debates demonstrate sustained intellectual engagement. Gondar appears in both Ethiopian and Jesuit narratives as a city of learning and disputation.

### **After the Expulsion: Travelers and the Survival of Memory**

The expulsion of the Jesuits did not erase their legacy. The French physician Charles-Jacques Poncet entered Ethiopia in the late seventeenth century and left detailed descriptions of Gondar (Huntingford G. W. B., 1989). In the eighteenth century, James Bruce resided in Gondar and recorded that the memory of the Jesuits remained vivid (Bruce James, 1790). His writings preserved Gondar within European historical imagination (Ullendorff Edward, 1968). Nineteenth-century missionary engagement intensified, shaped partly by economic and diplomatic motives (Zewde Bahru, 2002; Rubenson Sven, 1998).

### **Emperor Tewodros II and Religious Consolidation**

The accession of Emperor Tewodros II marked a decisive effort to restore central authority and religious unity (Rubenson Sven, 1976). His reign represented the beginning of Ethiopia's modern political era (Crummey Donald, 2000; Zewde Bahru, 2001). The Council of Amba Ćara (1855) sought peaceful resolution of doctrinal disputes. Although it did not fully eliminate doctrinal controversy, it laid the groundwork for the Boru Meda Synod of 1878.

Through military consolidation and selective diplomatic engagement, Emperor Tewodros II reopened Ethiopia to European artisans and missionaries, including Martin Flad, Henry Stern, Samuel Gobat, and Eduard Zander (Flad Martin, 1869; Stern Henry, 1862; McEwan Dorothea, 2012). Their writings correspondingly referenced earlier Jesuit encounters, reinforcing Gondar's layered historical memory.

### **Conclusion**

From the first Jesuit missions to the reforms of Emperor Tewodros II, Gondar functioned as a decisive center in which theology and political authority were negotiated and contested. It was not merely an imperial capital, but a space where doctrinal orthodoxy and state legitimacy were mutually constructed. Christological disputes, missionary interventions, and synodal deliberations were inseparable from questions of sovereignty, centralization, and imperial stability. The Jesuit encounter did not simply produce rupture; it compelled Ethiopian rulers and ecclesiastical authorities to articulate more sharply the theological foundations of political order. The expulsion of the Jesuits under Emperor Fasilādās and the later synodal initiatives under Tewodros II demonstrate that doctrinal settlement was inseparable from projects of state consolidation. Religious unity functioned as political strategy. Within this broader framework, Manuel de Almeida's well-known declaration of affection for Ethiopia illustrates the depth of intellectual and relational engagement that characterized these encounters. His testimony complicates interpretations that reduce the period to coercion or conflict, revealing instead a space of sustained theological seriousness and reciprocal perception. Gondar thus emerges as a political-theological center within early modern global Christianity: a city in which empire, doctrine, and memory intersected. By situating Gondar within both Ethiopian and European historical consciousness, this study underscores its role not as a peripheral site of missionary failure, but as a formative locus in the negotiation of religious authority and imperial power.

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