

ATNATEWOS (d. 1876)

Atnatewos was the immediate successor of the Abuna Salama III, who died in 1867. On the death of Negus Tewodros II on 13 [April](#) 1868, at the end of a military campaign conducted against him by British troops, the two principal rivals for the throne of Ethiopia were Gobaze Gabra Madkhen, Wagsum (or lord of Wag), and his brother-in-law Kasa Merca, master of Tigre. Each of them was well aware that to have any chance of acceding to the supreme throne, it was necessary to send a delegation to Cairo to obtain from the [Coptic patriarch](#) Demetrius II (1862-1870) the election of a new metropolitan who could consecrate and “anoint” the new “King of Kings” of Ethiopia. The delegation formed by Gobaze was not able to leave the country, for it was intercepted and blockaded by Kasa. In vexation, Gobaze had himself proclaimed King of Kings by his army and took the crown name Takla Giyorgis II.

The delegation formed by Kasa was able to reach Cairo, where it handed over to the Coptic patriarchate the sum of six thousand thalers in silver and requested the [sending](#) of the metropolitan. In the course of September 1868, Kasa received the patriarch’s reply by letter from his principal delegate. This reply was supposed to remain secret, but chance allowed the French traveler Alexandre Girard to look into it. The patriarchate demanded the payment of a supplementary sum and a promise from Kasa that he would energetically combat the penetration of the Catholic missionaries (French Lazarists) into northern Ethiopia. Kasa made haste to accept these conditions and, after collecting a sum of twenty thousand thalers (obtained by an extraordinary tax of two thalers for each adult man in Tigre), he sent it to the Coptic patriarchate, which decided to accede in his requests.

The new metropolitan, who was called Atnatewos (Athanasius), arrived in Tigre in June 1869, and Kasa took care to endow him with rich fiefs. The prelate began by playing for time, probably because he had instructions not to proceed to the consecration of a King of Kings before the struggle

for power between Gobaze and Kasa had been settled. Two years later, feeling sure of his strength, Gobaze invaded Tigre at the head of a large army but was decisively defeated on 11 July 1871 by Kasa, who immediately proclaimed himself King of Kings of Ethiopia; finally, some months later, on 21 January 1872, in the cathedral of Axum, the Abuna Atnatewos was able to crown and anoint Kasa, who then assumed the royal name of Yohannes IV.

The Ethiopian sources are silent on the episcopate of Atnatewos after the coronation, but it is known that the prelate's relations with the negus were difficult. The income from several fiefs assigned to Atnatewos had belonged to the local secular clergy, who fell into extreme poverty; this provoked litigation between the former beneficiaries and the prelate. It appears that in these lawsuits the negus often made decisions contrary to the interests of the metropolitan, which created a rift between the two men. The final storm broke at the time of the Egypto-Ethiopian conflict, which in 1875 and 1876 gave rise to two military expeditions of the [Khedive](#) Isma'il in Ethiopia, both victoriously repulsed by Yohannes IV. It seems that in the course of this conflict Atnatewos had leanings toward his land of origin and established contacts with Menelik II, who was king of Shewa and vassal of Yohannes IV and who entertained secret ambitions with regard to the throne of the King of Kings.

According to Guglielmo Massaia, the report ran through the country that Yohannes IV, at the time of his second victory over the Egyptians (at Gura, on 7 March 1876), had learned from Egyptian prisoners that Atnatewos was in touch with Menelik II and had even tried to flee to join him, but had been prevented. It was added that the negus had even seized letters that compromised the metropolitan. After his military campaign, Yohannes IV returned to Adwa on 7 June 1876 and began, it is said, by getting rid of the few [personages](#) forming the entourage of Abuna Atnatewos; then it was the metropolitan himself who disappeared, and the rumour spread that he had been suppressed by order of the negus.

There is no formal proof of this report, and later certain authors even maintained that the *abun* died of the consequences of a wound suffered at the time of the battle of Gura. The local sources confine themselves to reporting laconically that Atnatewos died at May Gwagwa, near Axum, on 23 Sane 1868 in the Ethiopian calendar (A.D. 29 June 1876) and that he was buried at Adwa, apparently without pomp or any particular ceremony. The successor of this metropolitan was Abuna Petros IV.

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