



article/ A Short Note on Queen Gaua: A New Last Known Ruler of Dotawo (r. around 1520-6)?

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abstract/ The Nubian Christian kingdom of Dotawo is attested in Old Nubian sources from the eleventh to the late fifteenth centuries. The reign of Dotawo's last "king" is dated to the period between 1463 and 1483 (at least). This short note wishes to highlight another ruler, a Queen Gaua (or Jawe), who is mentioned by the Portuguese historian João de Barros in his imperial history entitled the *Terceira Década da Ásia* ("Third Decade of Asia"), published in 1563. Her reign can be dated to encompass the early 1520s and knowledge thereof challenges certain narratives regarding the latter period of Dotawo and this note poses questions for further research to explore regarding Christian Nubia in the sixteenth century.

keywords/ Dotawo, Christian, queen, Gaua, Jawe, sixteenth century, Joel, Portuguese, Ethiopia, João de Barros, Francisco Álvares, Dongola

The Nubian Christian kingdom of Dotawo, which was the product of the unification between the kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa, is attested in Old Nubian sources from the eleventh century to the late fifteenth century.¹ Spanning from Aswan to an unknown distance beyond the confluence of the White and Blue Niles, this region had been politically Christian since the sixth century. The last *ourou* ("king") of Dotawo named in Old Nubian sources is Joel [II], who reigned between at least 1463 and 1483.² His reign is often seen as reflecting the last period of the Christian Kingdom of Dotawo before the kingdom witnessed

increasing strain, and ultimate collapse, following the Funj conquest of Soba in 1504 and their establishment along the Nile. How long this process took remains open for debate. The next known named ruler in the surviving corpus is Ḥasan *walad* Kuškuš, Muslim *mekk* (“king”: Funj title akin to Arabic *al-malik*) of Dongola in the 1680s, seemingly after the disintegration of the Christian kingdom.³

This short note wishes to highlight another named ruler, a Queen Gaua,⁴ who was first mentioned by the Portuguese historian João de Barros in his imperial history entitled the *Terceira Década da Ásia* (“Third Decade of Asia”), published in 1563. Her reign can be dated to encompass the early 1520s as she is said to have sent an embassy to Ethiopia as the Portuguese were resident at the Ethiopian court which would date this embassy between 1520 and 1526: the dates that the Portuguese arrived and left the Ethiopian kingdom. To date, she has hitherto been overlooked but she offers a significant anomaly in our current understanding of Christian Nubia: Gaua would be the only known female ruler to hold power throughout Christian Nubian history. Her reign also comes during a period of almost complete source silence, both internally and by external observers. Whether Gaua was a ruler of Dotawo or of a successor kingdom cannot be explored adequately here. As such, it is not the intention of this short note to explore the many questions her reign asks in-depth, but, rather, to offer some initial interpretations which shall receive greater attention at a later date.

Unlike the text of Francisco Álvares, a Portuguese Franciscan who was part of the Portuguese embassy to Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526 and who related a few comments about a people he called the *Nobiis*, which is known in Nubian Studies, the work of João de Barros remains overlooked.⁵ Before looking at the text of Barros, here is the most significant passage by Álvares for our purposes:

E contra ho norte confinam estes bellomos com una gente que se chamam Nobiiis: & estes dizem que foram x̄paos & regidos por Roma. Ouvi a hum homem Suriano natural de Tripulli de Suria, & se chama Joam de Suria (que andou com nosco tres annos na terra do Preste, & veyo comnosco a Portugal): que fora nesta terra, & que ha nella cento & cincoenta igrejas: & que ainda tem crucifixos & imagemes de Nossa Senhora: & outras imagemes pintadas pollas paredes & tudo velho: & ha gente da terra nam sam christãos, mouros, nem judeus: & que vivem com desejos de serem christãos. Estas igrejas todas estam em fortalezas velhas antigas que ha polla terra: & quantas fortalezas ha tantas igrejas tem. E sendo nos na terra do Preste Joam vieram de aquella terra leis homemes aho mesmo Preste como embaixadores, pedindolhe que lhes mandasse clerigos & frades que hos ensinassem: & elle hos nam quis mandar, & deziam que lhes disera, que elle havia ho seu Abima da terra dos mouros .f. do Patriarca de Alexandria que estava em poder de mouros: como poderia elle dar clerigos & frades, pois outro lhos dava? & assi se tornaram. Dizem que estes antigamente haviam tudo de Roma, & que ha grandes tempos que lhe falleceo hum Bispo que de Roma tinham: & pollas guerras dos mouros, nam poderam haver outro: & assi careceram de toda ha clerecia & de toda sua christandade. Estes confinam com Egipto & dizem haver nesta terra muyto ouro & fino: & jaz esta terra de tromte de çuaquem que he perto do mar roxo: & sam estas senhorias de Nobiiis de aquem & dalem Nillo: & dizem que quantas sam has fortalezas, tantos sam hos capitães: nam tem rey senam capitães.⁶

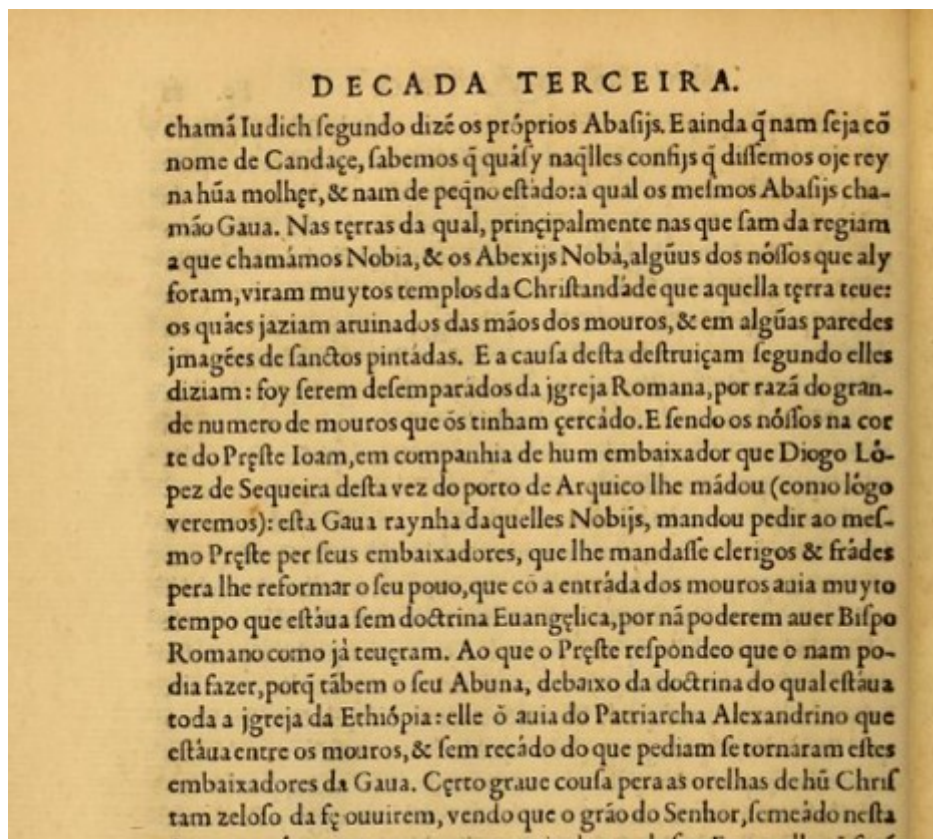
Towards the north, these Bellonos border upon a people who are called Nobii: and they say that they had [once] been Christians and ruled from Rome. I heard from a Syrian man, a native of Tripoli of Syria, who was called John of Syria (he accompanied us for three years in the Prester's country, and came with us to Portugal), that he had been to this country, and that there are a hundred and fifty churches in it, which still contain crucifixes and images of Our Lady, and other images painted on the walls. All are old. And the people of this country are neither Christians, Moors, nor Jews; and that they live in the desire to become Christians. These churches are all in ancient old castles which are [dotted] throughout the country; and as many castles there are, so there are as many churches. While we were in the country of Prester John there came six men from that country [of the Nobii] as ambassadors to the Prester himself, begging him to send them priests and friars to teach them. He did not send them; and it was said that he told them that [Ethiopia] had the Abun from the country of the Moors, that is to say from the Patriarch of Alexandria, who is under the rule of the Moors; how could he give priests and friars when [it was the power of] another to give them. And so [the ambassadors] returned. They say that in ancient times these people had everything from Rome, and that it was a very long time ago that a bishop had died, whom they had got from Rome, [but] on account of the wars of the Moors they could not get another, and so they lost all their clergy and their Christianity. These [Nobii] border up to Egypt, and they say that they have much fine gold in their country. This country lies in front of Suakin, which is close to the Red Sea. The lordships of the Nobii are on both sides of the Nile, and they say that as many castles as there are, so [too are as] many captains: they have no king, but only captains.

Álvares' account was first published in 1540 and, while a second printing in Italian in 1550 shows some changes, the content remains largely the same in this instance.⁷ Elsewhere in his narrative Álvares also highlights the strength of these *Nobii*, saying that on their frontier regions there are four or five hundred cavalry who were great warriors, that the kingdom was well supplied, and that only a short time ago they killed the son of the Ethiopian *Bäḥr Nəguś* ("ruler of the sea"), a quasi-independent regional ruler centred in modern Eritrea within the dominion of the Ethiopian *Nəguś* ("king") *Ləbnä Dəngəl* (r. 1508-40), though no great detail about this conflict is forthcoming.⁸ Álvares portrays a kingdom which is both simultaneously fragmented and apparently in decline, yet militarily strong.

The text of João de Barros equally relates the embassy but adds one additional key detail to the text of Álvares: Nubia was actually ruled by a queen called Gaua. The career of João de Barros (b. 1496-d. 1570) had him at the centre of Portuguese imperial affairs throughout his life.⁹ Educated at the palace of Dom Manuel I (r.1495-1521), his career saw him hold numerous roles: notably having a brief stint as captain of São Jorge da Mina (1524-5), becoming treasurer of the Casa da Índia (1525-8), and receiving a captaincy which made him a driving force behind the Portuguese colonisation of the region of Maranhão in Brazil from 1539. Following a stroke, he retired in 1567, returning to Portugal, before dying of another stroke in 1570. He wrote numerous published and unpublished works. His four-volume history of the Portuguese in India, the *Décadas da Ásia* (1552-1615), is the most well-known and is a key set of texts for chronicling the history of the first two centuries of the Portuguese empire and are remarkably well-informed.¹⁰ Whether

the noting of Queen Gaua remained an oversight on the part of Álvares or was contained in lost unpublished manuscripts remains impossible to know.

In a passage in Book Four, Chapter Two of the *Terceira Década da Ásia* Barros makes note of a Queen of Nubia (*Nobia*), who the Ethiopians (*Abasiis*) called Gaua, and who was said to be “not of small stature” (*nam de pequeno estado*)¹¹ and had sent an embassy to Ethiopia.¹² Given the two descriptions of a Nubian embassy being sent to Ethiopia concerned with the same issue of requiring clerics, it would appear that both Álvares and Barros were describing the same event. It was likely while treasurer of the Casa da Índia at the heart of the Portuguese imperial project that Barros had heard news or viewed documents relating to a Queen Gaua of Nubia soon after her embassy had arrived in Ethiopia. Nothing else is said of this queen. For example, it is not made known how long this Queen Gaua had ruled or would rule. The wider passage is about the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian tradition, describing her as a Candace (*kandake*: “queen” or “queen-mother”) of Meroë before leading on to a passage about Gaua inserted within the broader narrative. The section concerning Gaua relates:



João de Barros. *Terceira Década da Ásia*. Lisbon: Impressa per João Barreira, 1563, fo. 88, Mi, v.

E ainda que nam seja com nome de Candace, sabemos que quasy naquelles confijs que dissemos oje rey na huma molher, & nam de pequeno estado: a qual os mesmos Abasiis chamão Gaua. Nas terras de qual, principalmente nas que sam da regiam a que chamámos Nobia, & os Abexiis Nobá, algũus dos nósos que aly foram, viram muytos templos da Christiandade que aquella terra teue: os quães jaziam aruinados das mãos dis mouros, & em algũas paredes imagenes de sanctos pintadas. E a causa desta destruiçam segundo elles diziam: foy serem desemparados igreja Romana, por razá do grande numero de mouros que ons tinham cercado. E sendo os nossos na corte de Pręste Ioam, em companhia de hum

embaixador que Diogo López de Sequeira desta vez do porto de Arquico lhe mandou (como logo veremos): esta Gaua raynha daquelles Nobiiis, mandou pedir ao mesmo Pręste per seus embaixadores, que lhe mandasse clerigos & frádes pera lhe reformar o seu povo, que com a entráda dos mouros avia muyto tempo que estáva sem doutrina Evangęlica, pom am poderem aver Bispo Romano como já teveram. Ao que o Pręste respondeo que o nam podia fazer, porque tandem o seu Abuna, debaixo da doutrina do qual estava toda a igreja da Ethiópia: elle os avia do Patriarcha Alexandrino que estáva entre os mouros, & sem recádo do que pediam se tornaram estes embaixadores da Gaua.

And even though she is not named Candace, we know that in this region they say that the king today is a woman, and [she] is not of small stature: who these Abyssinians call Gaua. These lands are principally those which we call Nubia and the Abyssinians call Noba. Some of our people who went there saw many Christian temples that belonged to the land: they lay in ruins from the hands of the Muslims, and on some walls there were painted images of saints. The cause of their destruction, according to what they said, was that they were abandoned by the Roman Church because they had become surrounded by a large number of Muslims. And to the court of Prester John, in the company of the ambassador who Diogo López de Sequeira had sent to the port of Arkiko (as we will see), this Queen Gaua of the Nubians sent to the same Prester her ambassadors to ask for clerics and friars to be sent to Nubia to reform her people, who, as a result of Muslim incursion, had been without Christian doctrine for a long time so that they could see a Roman bishop as they used to have. The Prester replied that he could not do this, as they had the Abun, whose authority oversaw all of the Ethiopian Church: he had been sent from the Alexandrian Patriarch who was among the Muslims. No more [information] was received of what became of these ambassadors of Gaua.

While clearly the passage is portraying a Latin discourse onto Nubia with the suggestion that they sought Latin Christian priests – Bishop Tivoli was made first Latin Christian Bishop of Dongola in 1330, though likely only in name, following a period of increasing relations between Nubia and Latin Europe – it should not be dismissed out of hand.¹³ Indeed, the *Noba* (ኖባ) were the Nubians in Ethiopian Gə‘əz texts, as can be witnessed in the account of the monk Tāklä ʾĀlfa who travelled through Dongola in 1596 as a near contemporary example.¹⁴ The fundamental elements of the text, Gaua’s name and the act of sending an embassy to Ethiopia, need to be taken into consideration and not dismissed as purely Latin Christian hearsay and rumours. For instance, firstly, it is notable that Gaua could readily be a form of the female name Jawe (ḡawę), known in at least one c. tenth-century Old Nubian text regarding somebody described as the wife (εἵρωγ ḡawę: lit. “his wife Jawe”) of Ñešš of Atwa in a colophon of a hymn to the Cross and discourse on Christ, when rendered into Portuguese.¹⁵ While error and conflation are often a feature of European texts writing about regions of Africa without direct authorial experience, Barros does appear to be referencing a Nubian queen rather than combining different pieces of information. It should be said that a contemporary female ruler called Ga‘əwa is recorded in both Arabic and Gə‘əz sources as leading the Sultanate of Sälāwa/Māzāga in Tigray from 1534 (initially as her brother the sultan lay dying) until at least 1558. She allied with Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, the initial leader of a period of Muslim conquest within the Kingdom of Ethiopia until the latter was killed in battle by Ethiopian forces in 1543, before

Ga'əwa then allied with his followers.¹⁶ Barros certainly would have had ample opportunity to learn about this other Ga'əwa prior to the publication of his *Terceira Década* in 1563 which could have resulted in a later conflation. However, Ga'əwa is never portrayed as a Christian ruler – which her later nominal association with the tenth-century destruction of the pagan Queen Gudit, who also became to be known as Ga'əwa by some as a result, attests – let alone a ruler who would have wanted Christian clerics sent to her kingdom, and it is unknown how much power she held in the early 1520s in any case. Moreover, her kingdom was to the east of the Kingdom of Ethiopia towards the Red Sea, whereas Barros makes clear that he intended the region of the Nile Valley below Egypt in his text. It would therefore appear that any similarity in name between the Nubian Gaua/Jawe and the Ethiopian Ga'əwa is purely coincidental and need not necessarily result in any uncritical dismissal of the possibility of Gaua as a Nubian queen.

Despite being the only known female Nubian Christian ruler in the surviving corpus, it is unclear how unique, or indeed even unremarkable, Gaua's reign may actually have been given the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of rulers in general. Indeed, her reign poses questions regarding the commonality of the ability of daughters and nieces to be able to assume the throne akin to sons and nephews, whether as a sole heir or as a rival to a male challenger. Alternatively, she may have been acting as regent for a child male *ourou* and not an outright ruler after all, yet was still somebody who wielded significant power.¹⁷ In the absence of another illustrative Nubian scenario, a similar contemporary example of the latter situation can be found in neighbouring Ethiopia where an embassy was sent to Lisbon in 1509 by dowager queen Əleni, the acting primary regent for her adoptive great-grandson Ləbnä Dəngəl who would not become of age to rule independently until 1516. She had held significant influence at the Ethiopian court since the 1440s: Solomonic Ethiopia only witnessed one outright female ruler (Zäwditu, r. 1916-30) in its history between 1270 and 1974. Secondly, while the request for Latin Christian priests was in all likelihood a Portuguese fallacy, requesting aid from its sister church in Ethiopia would otherwise make sense for a ruler of Nubia. The relationship between the Churches of Nubia and Ethiopia is remarkably seldom featured in either internal or external sources beyond noting its existence. Nevertheless, these were not two disconnected Christian neighbours. Despite this passage, it remains unclear whether Dotawo continued to function in the same form into this latter period or had morphed into something new.

Questions remain regarding the territorial extent of Dotawo after Joel [II]. Indeed, while it is commonly assumed that the capital at Dongola relocated to Daw in 1365, both archaeological and textual evidence is by no means conclusive and remains open to the possibility for a new narrative: this will surely come to light in future work, but it is not for this brief note here to discuss this any further beyond providing a few key details for initial consideration. The most southern Ottoman permanent presence during this period was established at Sai Island by the late sixteenth century – though they appear to have had increasing influence as far south as Hannek – whereas Funj evidence does not suggest any prominent offensive into Nubian territory beyond Soba until the second decade of the seventeenth century, leaving a region along the Nile, which significantly included Dongola, potentially stretching as much as c.170 miles unconquered.¹⁸ In turn, given this reference to Gaua, a picture can be painted which highlights the possibility for the continuing functioning of a Christian kingdom centred at Dongola between both the Ottomans and the Funj for at least a century after 1504. It is also not until this mid-seventeenth-century period where archaeology is increasingly dating new urban developments in Dongola.¹⁹ Such developments may potentially speak to a later dating to the eventual Funj conquest and subsequent submission of Dongola as a client kingdom to the Funj under rulers such as *mekk* Ḥasan *walad* Kuškuš if

such evidence is to be viewed in this way. The acknowledgement of Gaua now poses even more questions for our understanding of sixteenth-century Nubia and further adds fuel to the need for a continual re-evaluation of this later period of Christian Nubian history prior to the *true* onset of the Ottoman and Funj periods.

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1. The circumstances of this unification are still unknown, though it would appear to be the result of a political union of both kingdoms via marriage, as there is no currently known evidence reflecting upheaval or a Makuritan conquest of Alwa. For a brief summary with references, see: Van Gerven Oei, *Reference Grammar*, p. 1n2. On Dotawo in the sources, see: Ruffini, "Newer Light on the Kingdom of Dotawo." ↵
 2. He is the second Joel known in the corpus but there may have been others not yet known. The earlier Joel is recorded as ruling in 1322 in an as-yet-published new interpretation of an inscription by Adam Łajtar: Łajtar, *A Late Christian Pilgrimage Centre in Nubia*, p. 388. On Joel [II], see: Łajtar & Ruffini, "Qasr Ibrim's Last Land Sale." The 1483 document found at Gebel Adda is known and currently housed at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo but remains unpublished. ↵
 3. Faḍl Ḥasan, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, pp. 183, 275. ↵
 4. There are currently no other known female rulers of Dotawo or of the earlier kingdoms of Makuria, Alwa, or Nobadia to know for sure what indigenous title akin to *ourou* Gaua would have held so

- “queen” is employed here for familiarity and in keeping with the Portuguese text. ↔
5. For example: Werner, *Das Christentum in Nubien*, pp. 149-50. ↔
 6. Álvares, *Verdadeira informaçam*, p. 168. ↔
 7. Álvares, “Viaggio fatto nella Ethiopia per don Francesco Alvarez Portoghese”, p. 269a. ↔
 8. Álvares, *Verdadeira informaçam*, p. 30. ↔
 9. On his life and works, see: Boxer, *João de Barros*; Coelho, *João de Barros*. ↔
 10. *Ásia de Joam de Barros*, *Segunda Década da Ásia*, and *Terceira Década da Ásia* were published in his lifetime, with the *Quarta Década da Ásia* being posthumously published in an edited and reworked form by João Baptista Lavanha. ↔
 11. It is unclear here whether this is a contemporary description or, given it follows a passage about Queen Candaces, was imitating Strabo’s description of his Queen Candace as being a “masculine woman” (ἀνδρική τις γυνή: Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.54). Barros certainly knew the text of Strabo and makes reference to it elsewhere; see: SMALL, *Framing the World*, p. 68. ↔
 12. De Barros, *Terceira Década da Ásia*, fo. 88ff. ↔
 13. On Bishop Tivoli, see: Simmons, *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World*, p. 132. ↔
 14. Ceccarelli-Morolli, “Un interessante brano.” ↔
 15. Griffith, *Nubian Texts of the Christian Period*, p. 47. On this text, see: Van Gerven Oei & Tsakos, “Apostolic Memoirs in Old Nubian.” ↔
 16. Levi, *Yodit*, pp. 104-6. ↔
 17. There are numerous examples of women who held the title of *ngonnen*, or “queen-mother”, in the surviving corpus and these individuals were influential and active in Nubian politics and society. Regrettably, we are not aware of an instance of a similar regency scenario prior to Gaua, if, indeed, that was the case, to be able to expand on this suggestion any further. The naming of Gaua directly would, however, suggest that she wielded great power in any case. ↔
 18. Elzein, “Ottoman Archaeology”; Faḍl Ḥasan, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, p. 61. ↔
 19. For example, see the results in: Obłuski & Dzierzbicka, *Old Dongola 2018-2019 vol. 1*. ↔

