

Emperor of Ethiopia



Menelik was crowned king of kings (negus negast) and emperor of Ethiopia on November 3, 1889, at the Church of Mary (also known as Mariam Church) on Mount Entoto.

His wife, Taitu (also written as Taytu and Taitou) Betul, whom he had married at Easter mass in 1883, was crowned empress two days after Menelik.

The Battle of Adwa

On May 2, 1889, Menelik signed the Treaty of Wichale (also written as Wuchale) with Italy. This treaty of friendship soon had a point of conflict: Article XVII in the Italian version of the treaty stated that Menelik had agreed to Ethiopia becoming a protectorate of Italy, while in the Amharic version the country's independence was maintained. Italy tried to get Menelik to accept their interpretation but he refused. In 1893, he **announced** his intention to nullify the treaty, informing Italy, "My kingdom is an independent kingdom and I seek no one's protection."

Italy, certain it could get its way by force, went to war with Ethiopia in 1895. Ethiopia had been hit hard by famine and disease outbreaks in previous years, but Menelik was able to mobilize a large army thanks to a rousing proclamation he issued on September 17, 1895, which **said** in part: "Our enemies have begun the affair by advancing and digging into

the country like moles. With the help of God I will not deliver up my country to them. . . . Today, you who are strong, give me your strength, and you who are weak, help me with your prayer."

With their freedom at stake, his countrymen came to fight with Menelik. This army wielded modern weaponry (much of which Menelik had acquired from Italy). Meanwhile, Italian leaders' racist beliefs left them doubtful that the Ethiopians could capably defend their land. The dispute came to a head at the Battle of Adwa on March 1, 1896, where 100,000 Ethiopian soldiers defeated 20,000 Italian forces. This made Menelik the first African ruler to successfully counter a colonial invasion.

Italy subsequently signed the Peace Treaty of Addis Ababa, which recognized Ethiopia's independence, on October 26, 1896. Other European nations soon recognized Ethiopia as an independent state as well.

Accomplishments

As king of Shewa and as emperor, Menelik expanded Ethiopia's territory. The country's borders today are a close match to those established by Menelik.

As emperor, Menelik created a new capital at Addis Ababa and had telegraph and telephone lines constructed. It was during his reign that the first newspaper in Amharic was issued and compulsory schooling was introduced. He saw Ethiopia's Bank of Abyssinia chartered in 1905 and had the country join the International Postal Union in 1908. Menelik coordinated with the French on a railway line from Djibouti to Addis Ababa (which was completed in 1917), set up a cabinet to oversee government functions, and encouraged the use of vaccines.

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After Italy and other powers recognized Ethiopia's independence, Menelik was able to maintain this status, making Ethiopia an outlier among African nations. He signed friendship treaties with the French, the British, and the Germans. In 1903 he agreed to a commercial relations treaty with the United States. Menelik also established diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Sudan.

Menelik's accomplishments were aided by his wife, Taitu. Queen Taitu was a well-educated woman who offered Menelik her full support at the Battle of Adwa and in political conflicts. It was Taitu who chose Addis Ababa's location, and who pushed Menelik to have both boys and girls be required to attend school.

Criticism

Menelik eventually took steps to end slavery in Ethiopia, but in earlier years he profited from the slave trade. As his territory expanded, the Christian Menelik destroyed mosques and had churches built. He installed Christian rulers in conquered areas, even places with non-Christian populations.

Those who opposed Menelik were sometimes maimed. The right hands and left feet of captured Askari prisoners, who'd fought with Italy at the Battle of Adwa, were amputated (a traditional step taken to prevent future attacks).

After his success at the Battle of Adwa, Menelik did not try to eject the Italians from Eritrea. However, this may have been a strategic move that allowed him to move forward with his plans for Ethiopia.

Death

Menelik died at the age of 69 on December 12, 1913, in Addis Ababa. His death was incorrectly announced several times before his passing. By 1907, Menelik's health was failing. He became nearly incapable of ruling following a stroke in 1909.

Menelik had daughters but no sons. The grandson who succeeded him was deposed by one of Menelik's daughters in 1916.