

## The italian áscaris. From Agordat to Adowa

(Askaris Italianos. Desde Agordat a Adowa)

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### **Abstract**

The term Ascari, which derives from a turkish word meaning soldier, has nowadays in Italy a very negative meaning: an Ascari is just a support person to a very important person, normally a politician and does all what it is ordered to do. It derives from a wrong reading of our colonial past and a certain deficence of knowledge of it; the Ascaris had a great part in building the Italian colonies, starting from the Colonia Primigenia, Eritrea. We will be able to understand the process of forming a very reliable military corps by a very young nation, with no colonial experience and less military history, through their first battles, and victories, and their first defeats in that corner of Africa which saw the Italian colonial adventure have place.

### **keywords**

Ascari, Ethiopia, native, battalion, battle.

### **Resumen**

El término Askari, que deriva de la palabra turca cuyo significado es simplemente soldado, tiene en la actualidad en Italia un significado muy negativo: un Askari es solo una persona de apoyo para otra más importante, normalmente un político, que cumple las órdenes sin cuestionarlas como si se tratara de un esclavo. Se deriva de una lectura errónea

del pasado colonial italiano y un cierto desconocimiento del mismo. Los Askaris tuvieron una indiscutible protagonismo en la construcción de las colonias italianas, desde los primeros pasos en Eritrea, hasta la formación del imperio italiano en África formado por el fascismo mussoliniano. Fueron la clave en la formación de un cuerpo militar por una nación muy joven, sin experiencia colonial y escasa historia bélica, a través de sus batallas, victorias y sus derrotas, en ese rincón de África en el que la aventura colonial italiana tuvo lugar.

### **Palabras clave**

Askari, Etiopía, Nativo, Batallón, Batalla

Italy can celebrate few military victories during its 150 years long life as united nation. Our country counts more military defeats than victories and few of them are taught at school. And funnily, the very first victory of the Royal Italian Army is almost forgotten, as well as on the boardgame tables, apart from few miniatures scenarios.

The battle which saw this event happened in a remote corner of our first Colony, Eritrea and was fight by native and loyal soldiers: the Ascaris, which will be among the protagonists of the next battles in that area, the Horn of Africa. Ironically nowadays the term Ascari represent a mere obedient servant of a political person....

### **Colony Eritrea**

The Italian flag started to wave on the shores of the Red Sea in 1882, after the purchase of the port of Assab by a private company, which sold it later to the Government.

In 1885 Colonel Saletta took up the port of Massaua and Assab in name of the Italian Government from the Ottoman Empire, with the help and permission of the British Empire, heavily involved into the rule of Egypt and Soudan, where it was facing the Mahdist revolt and therefore, needed an ally in the difficult struggle with the Mahdists or Dervishes (Quirico, 2002: 25).

Colony Eritrea, after the first months of Italian administration, started to grow, increasing the area of influence among the tribes around, thus starting the struggle with the Empire of Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, and getting in touch with Soudan.

After the defeat at Dogali (1887) and the San Marzano's expedition (1887), the Colony expanded, conquering Asmara and Cheren and building afterwards a fort at Agordat, guarding the Ben Amer tribe area from the raids of the Dervishes, thanks to the actions of General Baldissera, who imagined a new kind of develop of the native troops already present in the Colony.

Some minor clashes between Italians and Dervishes have already happened in the area of Agordat in 1890 (first encounter of Agordat) and in 1892 (Serobeti), where the Italian Colonial Troops, formed in majority by **Ascaris** (Askari is a term of Turkish origin to point out a soldier of Arabic race), won the day against raiding parties of Dervishes, arrived in our Colony seeking for cattle and slaves.

### **The Ascaris**

From the beginning of the colonial occupation of Massaua the need of a contingent of native soldier to escort caravans appeared. On April 30<sup>th</sup> 1885 the former commandant of the irregular Corps serving the Ottomans raised the first company of 100 men to serve with the Special Corps of Africa.

They were deployed in the small forts built around the city, like Monkullo and Archicò and soon a second company was raised. There were no recruitment rules and volunteers had no obligations in terms of service. During San Marzano's expedition the native troops were reorganized into three hordes, with the final replacement of all native officers by Italian ones. In 1889 the Basci Buzuk were finally disbanded.

Another native force available and hired by the Italians was the Black Bands; band of warriors followed a chief and were usually organized by an Italian Officer. A variable number of bands were under Italian service; it was usual that bands deserted and then returned into service, numbering a number variable between 1000 and 2000 warriors. The most notable chiefs were Batha Agos, who would later rebel against the Italians, Ras Sebhat and Ras Sejum, who will fight in Amba Alagi.

The first constitution in Eritrea of regular native troops by Italians, happened in June 1888, and in October the first four battalions (The I-II-III-IV) and the 2nd artillery Battery were born. The first battalions were deployed in the various forts built to strengthen the Colony.

The battery formed with Natives was numbered as second – whilst the 1st artillery battery was constituted by national artillerymen. It had three sections of two pieces each for a total of 5 officers, 108 artillerymen and 85 pack animals.

In 1891 the batteries were split in 1st and 2nd Native artillery, on 4 pieces each. The strength of each battery was of 4 officers, 16 NCOs and national soldiers, 165 Ascaris and 85 quadrupeds. All the Ascaris of the battery, due to the delicacy of their service, were recruited between the Sudanese tribes, fierce opponent to the Ethiopian empire and strong people.

November 11<sup>th</sup> 1892 the four battalions were acknowledged as part of the Italian Army.

Lack of financial means and political will delayed the full development of the corps, as General Baldissera, the creator of the Italian Ascaris, dreamed of (Quirico, 2002: 58)

Finally other 4 infantry battalions born during 1895 (but the 4th battalion had been totally destroyed during the unlucky battle of Amba Alagi (December 7, 1895). On July 1st, 1896 it will be reconstituted). The Ascaris battalion was composed by 4 companies, every company were split into two half companies, which were formed by 4 buluks (assimilable to Italian platoons), the only original native structure remained. The strength of a battalion was of 15 officers, 40 NCOs, and national soldiers, 750 ascaris.

The Ascaris were all volunteers, aged from 16 till 35, enrolled after a medical examination and after a long march of 100 km. They signed for a duty service of at least annual. At the end of their service they would become part of a new social class of former soldier from where to draw reserves in case of necessity (Mobile Militia) or native reliable administrative personnel for the Colony. Most of the ranks reflected those utilized from the former colonial native troopers called the " basci-buzuk ":

- ascari: private - buluk-basci: sergeant - uakil: 1st class soldier - scium-basci: marshal  
- muntaz: corporal. (Ruggeri, 2003: 25)

Here is the description of the uniform of the Ascari:

Red Tarbush (conical cap), jacket of white cloth with shoulder straps and five buttons, the senafilòs (short pants up to the knee), the leggings in cloth with nine small buttons, the etagà, a wool band long two and half meters and wide forty centimeters brought like a belt, of the same colour of the plume on the tarbush. It was red for the 1st battalion, blue for the 2nd battalion, crim-son for the 3rd battalion, black for the 4th battalion, Scottish-like for the

5th battalion, green (then red-black) for the 6th battalion, white (then red-light blue) for the 7th Battalion and ochre for the 8th Battalion.

The artillery had a yellow band with a green plume (then black), the company gunners yellow plume, the train of artillery red-yellow; the Engineers band and plume crimson, the Medical white, the Supply branches blue.

The equipment of the native soldier was simple and economic: haversack, leather bag, field blanket and blue cape as Bersaglieri. The armament was based on the rifle Vetterli mod. 1870 with long sabre-bayonet.

Other native forces were raised in the colony: on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1888, two buluks of Zaptiè were raised; the Zaptiè (a Turkish word meaning policemen) were the native “Carabinieri” and the best *Ascaris* were sent to this Corps as a prize of good service. Their use for gathering information and maintain safe the villages was a valuable asset for the colony till the end of it, in 1941. (Ruggeri, 2003: 26)

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1894, was raised the Mobile Militia, it was a corps formed by the discharged regular native troops. In total the Mobile Militia was able to put together around 1500 men, divided into groups from the different cities of the Colony. (Ruggeri, 2003, pag.30)

Later on, the Militia of the Ketit was raised and formed by natives not making part of the regular native troops nor in bands nor of Mobile Militia; it was mobilized in case of war only, like during the campaign of Adowa.

During San Marzano’s expedition the first mounted native units were raised, starting from the “Orda Kayala” formed by two officers, 25 men and about 30 *Ascaris*. Then the first mehari (camels) mounted unit was formed (Reparto Esploratori) by Capitain Toselli. The First Squadron “Asmara” derived from this corps and the Second Squadron “Keren” was formed in 1890. The two squadrons fought bravely in Agordat and Kassala but were finally disbanded in late 1894. Cavalry squadrons were composed by 5 officers, 25 NCOs and 127 *Ascaris*. They were called “Hawk Feathers” or *Penne di Falco*. (Ruggeri, 2003: 30)

A “Plotone Cammellieri” was raised for the patrolling of the frontiers and borders too and was formed by Meharists, mounting the local camels.

Eritrean *Ascaris* have been deployed in all the African fronts where the Italian Army has fought in the first half of XX century.

They have been employed in Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia, against Dervishes, Somali rebels, Turkish and Libyan Senussites and their greatest foe: the Ethiopian Empire.

### **The dervishes and the battle of Agordat**

Muhammad Ahmad, a Sudanese Sufi sheikh in the Samaniyya order, declared himself Mahdi in June 1881 and went on to lead a successful military campaign against the Turko-Egyptian government of Sudan. Although he died shortly after capturing the Sudanese capital (Khartoum) in 1885, the Mahdist state continued under his successor, the Khalifa Abdullahi b. Muhammad al-Ta'aishi until 1898, when it fell to the British army following the Battle of Omdurman. (Hill, 1967)

The first Italian Army victory happened near this small fort in the north west part of Eritrea, on December 21<sup>st</sup> 1893 (Ruggeri, 2003: 41; Mantegazza, 1896).

The need of the Dervishes to have a way to the sea, forced the Khalifa, successor of the Mahdi, to project an attack against Eritrea.

Wad Ahmed Ali, Amir of Gheraref, had then around 6000 dervishes armed with Remington rifle, 4,000 dervishes armed with spears and 1,500 horses.

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The warriors are disciplined, motivated and veterans of the wars against the Abyssinians and the Egyptians. They are classified into 4 Rub (bodies) led by emirs Abdalla Ibrahim (former Egyptian army colonel), Abdel-er Rasul, Ahmed Abdalla Daggasc and Addacher.

The Italian forces, aware of the Dervishes preparations, are concentrated to the Agordat fort, in the north area of the Colony.

In the left wing is positioned the 2nd native infantry battalion (757 men in 4 companies).

The 3rd company oversees the fort with the 2nd Mountain Battery (4 pieces). Between the fort and the Barka river is the 4th company, led by Colonel Cortese.

The two companies remain the reserve in a central position with the bands of the Barka (252 men) and with the indigenous cavalry Asmara squadrons (123 men) and Kheren (101 men). In the right wing, on a hill, Colonel Giuseppe Galliano drives a mixed battalion (734 men), consisting of the 1st and 3rd company of the 3rd battalion and the 1st and 3rd company of 4th battalion with the 1st mountain battery (4 pieces.)

A total of 42 officers, 33 national and 2,106 native soldiers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Giuseppe Arimondi, assisted by Captain Tommaso Salsa, Colonel Cortese and Colonel Giuseppe Galliano.

The dervishes cut the telegraph line, cross the Barka River and loot the villages Algheden and Sebdrat, 3 kilometers from the fort, then expect the night to attack the fort or circumvent it.

12:15 - Lieutenant Colonel Arimondi decides to prevent the attack and orders the colonels Cortese and Galliano to move towards the left side of the opponents.

The left wing advances through the palm trees beside the Barka River with the 2nd and 4th company of the 2nd battalion.

On reserve is the 1st company of the 2nd battalion which occupies the vacated hill, and the troops of the fort.

12:30 - After a brief stop at the river Damtai, the right wing is attacked on the left bank of the river Inchierai and opens fire with guns, then with rifles, while the artillery of the fort supports the frontal attack.

The dervishes react attacking the battalion Galliano with numerical advantage of 6 to 1, while the dervish cavalry tries to overlap the right wing.

12:50 - The Italians lose 4 officers (Galliano's horse is injured as well), and the enemy pressure forces the right wing to retreat behind the Damtai creek. The battery is abandoned after a last canister shot at just 50 meters, as there is no time to recover it. The two companies of the left side are forced to retreat in disorder as well.

13:00 - Arimondi decides then to send the reserves ahead.

The 1st company of the 2nd battalion with two dismounted squadrons supports the right wing which crosses the creek Damtai at the second attempt, recovering his artillery.

The 3rd company of the 2nd battalion supports the left wing, now reordered.

14:20 - The Italian deployment continues the advance and perform a conversion on the left, sweeping the field of the enemy who now retires.

A shrapnel explodes nearby Ahmed Ali, killing him. Without the emir of Ghedaref, the dervishes start to routing.

17:30 - Colonel Cortese ceases the pursuit, without managing to catch any of the fugitives.

In three hours the Italians have fired 80,000 rounds of rifle and 210 rounds from the batteries of the fort.

The dervishes leave on the field Emir Ahmed Ali, a thousand dead, thousands wounded, missing and prisoners, 73 flags, 700 rifles, a machine gun, several coats of mail, the red tent caught to Negus Johannes at Metemma, a trumpet brass manufactured in Milan and two camels with chains, prepared to slave the captured garrison of the fort.

Some prisoners told that the deployment in line taken by the Italians surprised the Dervishes, being accustomed to face the English square and then concentrating the attack in a single point.

The Italians have 3 officers killed and two wounded, an Italian soldier dead and one injured, 104 Ascaris killed and 121 wounded.

Arimondi receives promotion to general, Galliano to major and a gold medal and are also given 12 more nominations to knighthood, 39 silver medals and 42 bronze medals, among them are decorated 7 Ascaris for the first time!

The battle is called "Second battle of Agordat" and the name "Agordat" is given to a torpedo-cruiser.

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In 1894 the Ascaris were used to occupy the Sudanese city of Kassala and therefore secure the northern border. The Keren squadron was involved in a charge with the Beggara horsemen, losing its officer and 27 Ascaris. (Ruggeri, 2003: 44)

## **The Ethiopian Empire**

The Ethiopian Empire has its root from the Empire of Axum, a kingdom created by the Queen of Sheba and King Salomon's son, Menelik I, which ruled for centuries over the southern Arabic coasts. After its conversion to Monophysitic Christianity, it battled with several enemies in the area, developing a feudal system which enabled the organization of a powerful army. Military activity was very important in Ethiopia and ruled the social growth of people: everyone could get influence and economical power by taking up soldiering. The warrior's prestige come from its gallantry which led to get offices increasing its wealth and power. The Ethiopian Army was formed by many armies, one for every territory and every chief, not a single Imperial one. They were made up by volunteers and the numbers varied a lot. In case of war the Ketit (a call to arms) was played. The Negus (emperor) furnished the supply during the first months of war, thereafter the army lived on the terrain and it could



not stay too much in a single territory, to avoid depletion of resources for the army. Attack, quickness and speed of manoeuvres were the basis of Ethiopian tactics.

### **The battle of Amba Alagi**

The campaign of 1895-96 against the Ethiopian Empire presents some of the most iconic battles fought by the Ascaris.

In the previous years the Ascaris had already encountered their main foe in the campaign for the Tigrè in 1894-1895, with the battles of Coatit and Senafè in January 1895, when the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion under Major Hidalgo, the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion under Major Galliano and the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion under Major Toselli, under the command of General Baratieri defeated the warriors of Ras Mangascià of Tigrè.

In October 1895 the full Abyssinian Army started to move towards the Eritrea Colony a month after the issuance of the *ketit*, the assembling of the full army and the Italian Governor, General Baratieri organized the defence.

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 1895 the full 4<sup>th</sup> battalion, a native battery, Ras Sebgat's band together with some lesser bands were sent by General Arimondi to the Amba Alagi, the door to the Colony through the Imperial Way.

Major Toselli, commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion organized the defence of the passes, but persuaded that was impossible to resist without reinforcements, asked for help to General Arimondi, who sent a message of confirmation. General Baratieri forbade the latter to move forward to support Toselli and ordered him to keep contact with the enemy and eventually to withdraw as slowly as possible.

Major Toselli received unfortunately only the message that assumed to him reinforcements and he never got General Baratieri's orders to withdraw.

For a sum of mistakes, General Baratieri ordered later to General Arimondi to advance halfway towards Amba Alagi in order to wait for Toselli withdrawing. So Major Toselli was persuaded that reinforcements were on their way, while General Arimondi, once reached its new position, was waiting for him! (Quirico, 2002: 151)

At dawn of December 7<sup>th</sup> 1895 the deployment of the Italian forces along the southern slope of the Amba was as follows. In the centre Canovetti's company, guarding Alagi pass near the village of Atzalà, in the rear Captain Persico's 3<sup>rd</sup> company/3<sup>rd</sup> native

battalion with Angherà battery; in reserve Ricc's and Bruzzi's companies with Pagelli's century; the bands of Degiac Ali and of Ras Sebhat guarded Falagà Pass; in the west, Issel's company and, west of the top, the bands under Sheik Tahla and those from Okulè Kusai. The troops under Toselli command reached a strength of 1800 men and 4 mountain guns.

In that moment, Fiaurari Gebejohù, heading a part of the Ethiopian vanguard, went out for a reconnaissance while the whole Ethiopian Army was going to outflank the Italian positions. Suddently Gebejohù broke his orders and launched a frontal assault with 200 warriors against Canovetti's company. After a short engagement, the Ethiopians retired but this attack had already involved the whole vanguard, forced now to fight. In fact a large column under command of Ras Oliè from leggiù went towards Falagà Pass and forced Ras Sebhat to withdraw, investing Issel's company and then Canovetti's one. At 9 o'clock Major Toselli sent Ricci's company as a reinforcement to the left wing, under pressure; the counterattack succeeded, and the Ethiopians were forced to retreat. Soon after Sheik Tahla band and those from Okulè Kusai were crushed by Ras Alula and Ras Mangascià warriors, while in the centre, the warrior of Ras Makonnen from Harar and the Galla horsemen of Ras Michael advanced together with Ras Oilè 's warriors who defeated Ricc's company counterattack. Finding himself pressed from three sides, Major Toselli sent Pagella's century to support the right wing and defend Togorà Pass through which wounded soldiers and the train retired at 11 ate

After a while, in the centre and at the right all the resistance was beaten so at 12.40 am Major Toselli ordered the general withdraw by echelon, towards Togorà hill. Bruzzi's company and Manfredini's section defended the withdrawal but were overwhelmed by a new and strong attack of the Ethiopians vanguard. In the meantime, Major Toselli, with the last Ascaris left, was in the rear of the retreating column and was trying to reorganize the withdrawal. The Ethiopian pressed on and won the last resistance of Captains Canovetti, Angherà and Persico, who died fighting. Major Toselli managed to reach the church of Enda Medani Alèm, where, before being killed, sent a final message to General Arimondi through Lieutenant Bodrero, with the news of the defeat.

The Italians lost 19 officers, 20 nationals and 1500 Ascaris dead; 3 officers and 300 Ascaris wounded; 1 officer taken prisoner; the Ethiopians lost about 3000 dead.

In the meanwhile, at Aderat, General Arimondi's troops were still waiting for the retreat of Major Toselli's Ascaris and the whole 3<sup>rd</sup> native battalion clashed with incoming

Ethiopian warriors; Oddone's company and the 3<sup>rd</sup> company of the 5<sup>th</sup> native battalion arrived as a reinforcement and managed to secure the arrival of the first Amba Alagi survivors, battling some Galla horsemen.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> native battalion, the 5<sup>th</sup> native battalion and the rests of the 4<sup>th</sup> native battalion retreated to Makallè on December 8<sup>th</sup>; two days later they arrived at Edagà Hemus while the 3<sup>rd</sup> native battalion was left to garrison the Makallè fort.

After the Amba Alagi battle the 4<sup>th</sup> native battalion got the name of "ambessa" (lion) and was reformed in July 1896 in Keren.

The Ethiopian Army started to move towards Adowa and the fort of Makallè was the only position held by the Italian Army on the road between Amba Alagi and Adowa. (Quirico, 2002, pag. 106). On January 7<sup>th</sup> the Ethiopian Army started to attack it, surrounding it and using its artillery pieces to bombard it. The fort was commanded by Major Galliano, an African Campaigns veteran, and his 3<sup>rd</sup> native battalion, with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> native battalion, the 2<sup>nd</sup> company of the 8<sup>th</sup> native battalion, a native battery, two engineers sections and a detachment of Royal Carabiniers (Carabinieri). In total 21 officers, 54 nationals, 1150 *Ascaris*, 102 workers and 4 mountain guns, with a maximum range of 3800 meters.

On the other side, the Ethiopian Army could detach 12 guns and among them 10 quick firing Oxis French-made with a range of 4500 meters, thus not reachable by the Italian artillery and two Italian mountain guns taken at Amba Alagi. These guns were placed in batteries in five different positions. The fort could anyway resist due to the presence of a stream near the fort, which was used to resupply water to the garrison. The stream was unfortunately taken by the Ethiopians of Itieghiè Taitù on December 8<sup>th</sup>; the situation became serious because this left just two full water tanks for the garrison.

The following day and night there were violent firefighting due to frontal assault tempted by the Abyssinians.

Two days later Ras Makonnen's warriors made a strong massed attack without success, leaving on the ground around 1500 soldiers dead against a mere 4 *Ascaris* killed. Because of these losses, the Ethiopians did not attack anymore and decided to take the fort by thirst. Finally, on January 20<sup>th</sup>, when the final reserve of water has been already used, the

order of surrender arrived; the troops of Major Galliano, according to the agreement reached, had to be escorted by Menelik and could join the Italian forces.

On January 21<sup>st</sup> there was the formal surrender of the fort with military honours.

Major Galliano was promoted Colonel, despite he would never be fully satisfied of this promotion, gained with a defeat.

The troops from Makallè were released after the advance of the Ethiopian Army towards Adowa at the end of January.

### **The battle of Adowa**

On February 21<sup>st</sup> the Ethiopian Army arrived in Adowa and camped, waiting for the Italian moves; in the meantime, in the main camp of Saurià, the Italian General, commanded by General Baratieri, held a council of war in order to decide the next steps. (Quirico, 2005)

Three possible strategies were examined: an offensive in the hearth of Ethiopia that was immediately discarded due to supply difficulties; a passive defence, which wasn't possible to realize because of the enemy mobility and the extension of the operational front and finally a manoeuvred defence. The four Brigadiers commanders, General Arimondi, Dabormida Albertone and Ellena, underestimating the enemy, supported the idea of an advance; there were news of troubles in the Ethiopian army and disarray among their ranks. General Baratieri, under pressure from the Italian government in Rome held by Mr Crispi, suggested a temporary retreat to increase the size of the army with the just arrived reinforcements, but he was not able to impose his decision to the other generals. The operative orders were issued on 29<sup>th</sup> February; the troops, amounting a four Brigades, were divided into 4 columns, with a total of 551 officers, 7823 national infantrymen (mostly the worst privates sent by the national regiments to clean up the rosters and not fully acclimatized to the country), 1520 artillerymen, 6790 Ascaris and band warriors, including 400 Artillery Ascaris.

There were these native units:

In the Brigata Indigeni (Native Brigade): 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> battalions; Okulè Kusai Bands, Native Artillery.

Among the other Brigades there were the Milizia Mobile, the Ketit Milizia of Asmara, the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion and the 1<sup>st</sup> company of the 5<sup>th</sup> battalion. The 5<sup>th</sup> battalion was taken in the rear-guard in the Colony to eliminate rebels.

The Ethiopian Army had the strength of around 110,000 rifles, divided into the various local armies and levies, led by the most important Ras of the Empire, like Mangascià, Micael, Makonnen, commanded by Menelik II.

The Italian troops started the movement at 9.30 pm of 29<sup>th</sup> February towards a position between Rebbi Arienni and Erarà hill, wrongly called Kidanè Meret. The left column, during the night march, to which the Italian troops were not used and because of the delivery of a mere sketch map of the area, with inaccurate denominations of the area, instead of going on side by side, ended at the head of the central and reserve columns and reached Erarà Hill before the other columns got the Rebbi Arienni Hill and went further, till Adi Becci village. Only at dawn for 1<sup>st</sup> March, General Albertone, commanding the Brigata Indigeni, understood the situation seeing the Semaiata mountain on his left as the only reference point and having his vanguard too much ahead, on the true Kidanè Meret hill, which overlooks Adowa valley and it is much beyond the line Escisù-Rebbi Arienni-Raiò, which had to be reached by all the brigades.

Menelik was informed of the enemy presence at 4 am. Suddenly the first Ascaris patrol entered in the Adowa area and the ensuing fighting became immediately violent and lasted from 6 am to 8 am.; the vanguard was completely swept away. In the meantime General Albertone deployed his battalions and batteries along the Ambas awaiting for the incoming Ethiopians warriors, hoping to receive reinforcements from his right side.

The national batteries resisted well and managed to repulse several attacks; Menelik was at a step to order retreat but the Iteghiè Taitù, his wife, managed to restore morale in his husband and poured its own troops in the attack, which surrounded and overwhelmed the remnants of the Brigata Indigeni; General Albertone was taken prisoner; the national batteries were the last to fall on the Sendedò and all the men died at their places.

The right column, commanded by General Dabormida had occupied the Rebbi Arienni hill and received orders to advance towards west to support Albertone's Brigade but, due to some misunderstandings on the names of the hills and the inaccuracy of the maps, entered in Mariam Shoaitù valley, at the end of which was a large Ethiopian camp. The column was completely isolated in the deep valley and deployed in it and in the surrounding mountains, fighting fiercely. In the early afternoon the brigade was even able to attack and gain some terrain, but the waves of warriors were growing and growing; orders to withdraw were given

and units were deployed to organize a rearguard, which held part of the enemy for the rest of the day, being then annihilated. The withdrawal was a massacre; the Brigade was pressed on the flanks and rear by huge Ethiopian ordes and tried many times to resist on the way back. The last remnants of the Brigade retreated in the night; General Dabormida was killed in action.

The central column, guided by General Baratieri, holding Rebbi Arienni and Esciashò mountain, deployed to resist to the Ethiopian attacks, but facing the wrong menace; the third column was in reserve, with the units ready to intervene. Soon the Ethiopian warriors pursuing the Brigata Indigeni remnants invested the left flank of the General Baratieri's brigade, briefly overwhelming the resistance of some national units. The reserve units were deployed one by one to cover the menaces arriving from every side but with no success; entire companies and battalion resisted the enemy till total annihilation, like the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> national battalions, the 3<sup>rd</sup> company Alpini, 5<sup>th</sup> regiment and the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> native battalion led by Colonel Galliano, which was soon swept away. Some resistance of Alpini units and national formations made the withdrawal of the remnants of the Arimondi and Ellena brigades with General Baratieri back to Saurià. At noon the resistance is over.

The Italians had 289 officers, about 4300 nationals and 2000 Ascaris dead; about 500 wounded and 1900 prisoners, among them 800 Ascaris, who taken prisoners, payed for high treason with the amputation of the right hand and left foot.

The survivors amounted to about 258 officers, 4666 nationals and about 4000 Ascaris; in total the losses were about the 53% of the strength deployed. The Ethiopic losses were about 7000 dead and 10000 wounded. (Ruggeri, 2003: 64)

The battle of Adowa or Abba Garima was the biggest and most sanguinary colonial fight of the XIX century. The Ethiopian called it the battle of lions about lions. In Italy the battle had serious repercussions that caused the Crispi ministry fall, several riots and the block of the colonial development.

After the battle Menelik decided not to invade Eritrea, thinking that it was much better to have a weak neighbours than a colonial power looking for revenge, but it seems also that the Ethiopian Army suffered from losses and logistical issues too.

General Baratieri, who in his first report accused of cowardice his men, lost his command to General Baldissera and went under martial court; the court did not even

condemned him to avoid condemnation of the government as well and retired from the Army.

General Baldissera reorganized the troops in defence of the colony. Major Salsa, hero of Agordat, was sent to discuss peace, and Engineers companies were sent to bury the corps of the fallen.

On October 26<sup>th</sup> 1896 the treaty of peace was signed in Addis Abeba, with the recognition of the Ethiopic Empire by Italy and the setting of the borders. The Italian revenge will be the invasion in 1935.

### **Conclusions**

The *Ascaris* corps proved to be the right tool to be used by a military and financially weak country like Italy in the difficult overseas campaigns. Economic, reliable, with high morale when well commanded, the *Ascaris* proved to be the perfect soldiers in Africa, battling well against foes that had already piecemealed European armies, like the Dervishes and good fighters against the Empire of Ethiopia, which proved to be a nut too hard to crack for the ambitious but still disorganized Kingdom of Italy. They showed their skills since the very start of their history and will be a proud part of the Italian Army till the end of the Italian Eastern Africa in 1941.

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