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# Debark (Simen) – A Market Town in the Highland of Ethiopia (with two maps)

By Ruedi Nägeli\*

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## Summary

Debark is a small market town with about 5,800 inhabitants, which lies to the north of Gonder on the Addis Abeba–Asmera highway, and forms the administrative center of the Simen district. This settlement serves as a typical example, formally and functionally, for many similar towns in the Ethiopian highland. Firstly, a detailed mapping of the functional structure showed the great importance of the town as a market and retail center for a vast rural population. But it revealed also the surprising fact that the taverns and hotels widely dominate all other employment sectors. More than 60 % of all economically used buildings are tap rooms, bars, eating houses, tea houses and modest hotels. They get their clients mainly from the highway traffic and from the big weekly market. This market attracts more than 7000 visitors from an influence area of two to three travel days. Therefore the population of the town is more than doubled during one day of the week, bringing employment not only to the merchants, but also to other business sectors. A detailed investigation of the mechanism of this weekly market showed some main characteristics of internal Ethiopian markets: Although the market is held in the open air and without permanent installations, a clear division of goods can be found. Three-quarters of these goods are agricultural products and animals. One-quarter includes various commodities. Because there is no similar well-furnished market in the whole Simen highland, this last part of the market maintains an important supply function for a vast area. How does the attractiveness of Debark influence the image of its settlement? A mapping of the changes of the settlement within the last twelve years and a comparison of a newly carried out census with earlier ones have shown a growth of its size and population by more than 50 %. These are surprising changes when one realizes that the initial catalyst for a town-like settlement dates back to the period of Italian colonization (1936–41). Previously Debark was only a small rural settlement, although it had an importance as a customs station, a caravan stopping point and a market.

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## Zusammenfassung

Debark ist eine kleine Marktstadt von rund 5'800 Einwohnern, die nördlich von Gonder an der Überlandstrasse Addis Abeba–Asmara liegt und den Verwaltungshauptort des Semienhochlandes bildet.

Am Beispiel dieser Siedlung werden formale und funktionale Strukturmerkmale sowie einige Entwicklungsursachen aufgezeigt, die für ähnliche Kleinstädte im äthiopischen Hochland als typisch betrachtet werden können.

So zeigte eine detaillierte Kartierung der funktionalen Struktur die erstaunliche Tatsache auf, dass nicht die Markt- und Versorgungsfunktionen dominieren, sondern das Gastgewerbe. Über 60 % aller ökonomisch genutzten Gebäude bestehen nämlich aus Trinkstuben, Bars, Speisehäusern, Teehäusern und einfachen Hotels.

Diese beziehen ihre Kundschaft – abgesehen von dem in Debark durchziehenden Überlandverkehr – vor allem vom grossen Wochenmarkt, der über 7000 Besucher aus einem Einzugsgebiet von bis zu drei Tagesreisen Entfernung in die Stadt zu locken vermag. Damit wird deren Bevölkerung an einem Tag in der Woche mehr als verdoppelt, was natürlich auch anderen Erwerbszweigen Beschäftigung bringt.

Eine eingehende Untersuchung dieses grossen Wochenmarktes zeigte einige wesentliche Merkmale einheimischer äthiopischer Märkte auf: Obschon der Markt unter freiem Himmel, praktisch ohne feste Einrichtungen und zumeist in dichtem Gedränge stattfindet, liegt eine deutliche sektorale Gliederung des Warenangebotes vor. Dieses besteht zu drei Vierteln aus agrarischen Produkten und Tieren. Gewerbliche und übrige Güter machen somit nur den letzten Viertel aus. Da sich aber im ganzen Semienhochland kein ähnlich gut ausgestatteter Markt befindet, kommt gerade auch diesem Teil des Warenangebotes eine bedeutende Versorgungsfunktion für ein ausgedehntes Umland zu.

Wie wirkt sich nun das Attraktionsvermögen der Marktstadt Debark auf ihr Siedlungsbild aus?

Eine Kartierung der Siedlungsveränderungen innerhalb der letzten zwölf Jahre sowie der Vergleich einer neu durchgeföhrten Bevölkerungszählung mit früheren Werten zeigten auf, dass Siedlung und Bevölkerung im erwähnten Zeitraum um mehr als die Hälfte angewachsen sind. Erstaunliche Veränderungsprozesse, wenn in Rechnung gestellt wird, dass der eigentliche Impuls zu einer städtischen Siedlung in Debark erst auf die italienischen Kolonisationsbemühungen von 1936–41 zurückgeht und der Ort vor dieser Zeit trotz wichtiger Bedeutung als Zollposten, Karawanenstapenort und Marktort nur als ländliche Weilersiedlung bestanden hat.

## Résumé

Debark, chef-lieu du massif de "Simen", est un lieu de marché d'environ 5'800 habitants, qui se situe au nord de Gonder, sur la route reliant Addis-Abeba–Asmara.

Des indices de structure formels et fonctionnels ainsi que diverses causes de développement peuvent démontrer que ce genre d'agglomération est typique pour des villes analogues du haut plateau éthiopien. Une carte détaillée de la structure fonctionnelle démontre que ce n'est pas le marché et sa fonction de ravitaillement qui domine dans la

ville, mais le problème de la restauration et de l'hébergement.

Plus de 60 % des bâtiments servant à l'économie concernent des buvettes, bars, restaurants, tea-rooms et des hôtels modestes. A l'exception du trafic de transit, la clientèle se recrute parmi le grand nombre de personnes se rendant au marché, environ 7000, qui viennent de l'arrière-pays et qui accomplissent des trajets allant jusqu'à trois jours de marche. Ainsi le nombre de la population de Debark est plus du double un jour par semaine, ce qui évidemment procure des ressources à d'autres professions.

Une étude approfondie de ce grand marché hebdomadaire fait apparaître quelques signes importants du marché indigène éthiopien. Bien que le marché se tienne en plein air, pratiquement sans installations fixes et souvent dans une grande cohue, on constate une division sectorielle bien définie dans l'offre des marchandises qui comprend pour les trois-quart des produits agricoles et du bétail et pour un quart des marchandises industrielles et autres. Aucun marché aussi bien fourni n'existant dans les montagnes du "Simen", celui-ci est d'une grande importance pour le ravitaillement d'une région environnante très étendue.

Quelle est la force d'attraction du lieu de marché de Debark sur l'agglomération elle-même? Un relevé des développements de l'habitat durant les douze dernières années, ainsi qu'une comparaison de recensement récent de la population avec des chiffres antérieurs, démontrent que l'habitat et la population ont augmenté de plus de 50 %. Il s'agit d'une évolution extraordinaire si l'on considère que les premiers signes de développement de Debark remontent aux années 1936–41, époque de la colonisation italienne, et que cet endroit, bien qu'étant poste douanier, relais de caravanes et lieu de marché, n'était guère plus important qu'un simple hameau.

## 1. Introduction and general background

### *Introductory remarks*

The formal and functional structure of a small Ethiopian town, as well as some main development characteristics, are presented in this paper.

This town, named Debark, lies to the north of Gonder on the Addis Abeba–Asmara highway and forms the administrative center of and the access point to the Simen highland (see fig. 2, chapter 3). I carried out detailed research work on this town for two reasons: a) because there is rarely any statistical and cartographical work on small towns in Ethiopia, little research on such towns has been carried out until now; b) more information on this central place with its big weekly market at the foot of the Simen mountains is crucial for all future development planning in this region.

## *Some aspects of Ethiopian town development*

The structure and development characteristics of Debark can only be understood in light of the general development of urban settlements in Ethiopia. This development differs greatly from the European one, and is, as in many other tropical African countries, a very recent phenomenon (KULS 1970: 14).

GAMST (1970), for instance, has referred to the period between the breakdown of the old Aksumitic Empire in Ethiopia (when large towns existed) and the end of the 18th century as "civilization without urbanism". With this term, he wanted to emphasize that a peasant subsistence economy dominated because of the rough topography, with its limited communications possibilities, and because of numerous tribal wars which forced ruling emperors to wage military campaigns, changing again and again the place of the capital.

This peasant economy was, as a rule, suited to a slightly developed rural type of settlement. As a result, no urban settlements and hierarchical network of "central places" had fully evolved, with the few exceptions of Gonder (the empire capital of the 17th and 18th centuries) and Harrar (an old Islamic-founded town).

These unfavorable conditions only changed during the rule of Menelik II (1881–1913). He founded Addis Abeba as the permanent capital in 1881 and built up for the administration of the growing country a network of settlements, roads and communications.

The next important catalyst for town development was the attempted Italian colonization from 1936–41. The Italians built roads (the major ones being the two highways from Asmara to Addis Ababa) and new settlements. Furthermore, they improved already existing settlements by adding solid stone houses with new administrative functions. They also promoted the availability of traditional supplies by drawing outlying markets and craftsmen into the towns (KULS 1970: 14–17; HORWATH 1968: 45f.).

The Italian retreat set back town development in several areas for more than ten years. At the end of the 1950's, road and administrative improvements by the Ethiopian government rekindled town growth which continued at a faster and faster rate. HORWATH (1968: 46f.) calculated that, for the period between 1957 and 1964, both the total population growth and physical town size increased by 125 % in 21 small towns surrounding Addis Abeba. Today, in spite of this fast-moving development, only an estimated 8–16 % of the country's 23–26 million population lives in towns and, with the exception of the two national centers (Addis Abeba and Asmara), there are only 20 towns with

more than 10'000 inhabitants. Besides this, there exist already more than 50 small towns with more than 5'000 inhabitants. These towns can, at this point, be found primarily above the 1'800 meter level in the Malaria-free zone and bordering highways (KULS 1970: 19; MESFIN WOLDE MARIAM 1972: 169, 190). They are the most important intermediaries between the hinterland and the large urban centers because they serve not only as exchange places for economic goods and as focal points for social communication, but also as meeting points between rural backwardness and the whole spectrum of up-to-date civilization, which advances as known most easily along existing highways into barely accessible areas.

Looking back again at Debark, we can regard it as a typical small market town, which serves as an example for many other towns in the Ethiopian highland.

## 2. Fieldwork problems and preparation of topographic map

The fieldwork for this research was carried out during two stays in Ethiopia in the spring and fall of 1976 (NÄGELI 1977). The greatest handicap to my fieldwork, especially in the inquiries and mapping, was the prevalence of mostly unskilled and illiterate residents, although the research work itself was helped by the district governor and police.

The preparation of the basic topography of Debark took much time: Although there already existed a photogrammetric interpretation of an aerial photo (see fig. 1, expl. 1), I was forced to carry out my own mapping of the town to a scale of 1 : 2 000 because I needed to separate the blocks of buildings into subdivisions for the functional mapping. This goal couldn't have been realized with the simple instruments at hand (compass and measuring tape) and in the short time available without finding by chance a rough masterplan of the town in the governor's office. This plan was to a scale of 1 : 2 000 but, unfortunately, had no information of its date and author. I totally revised, detailed and brought it up to date using positively identified houses as reference points. Due to these simple mapping methods the degree of accuracy varies and is more precise in the center of the town than in the outlying areas (expl. 2).

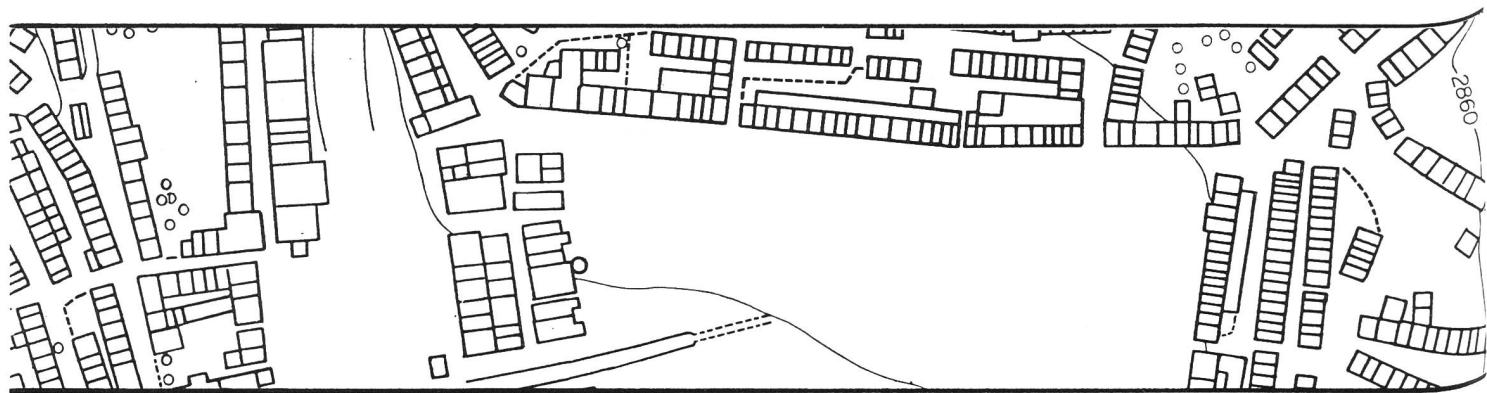
Reduced to a scale of 1 : 5 000, the map was further used as a basis for the second map dealing with the changes of settlement and forests (expl. 3). It was again reduced to a scale of 1 : 25 000 and served as the foundation for the drawing of the town sector in the new topographic map of Debark and its environs (expl. 4).

Figure 1: Working steps in the preparation of the topographic map of Debark



Example 1:

The topographic basis of my mapping: A stereo-photogrammetric interpretation of an aerial photo from 1964 (by M. Zurbuchen, field survey by P. and S. Stähli) at a scale of 1 : 25 000, enlarged to a scale of 1 : 2 000 (here shown in 1 : 5 000)



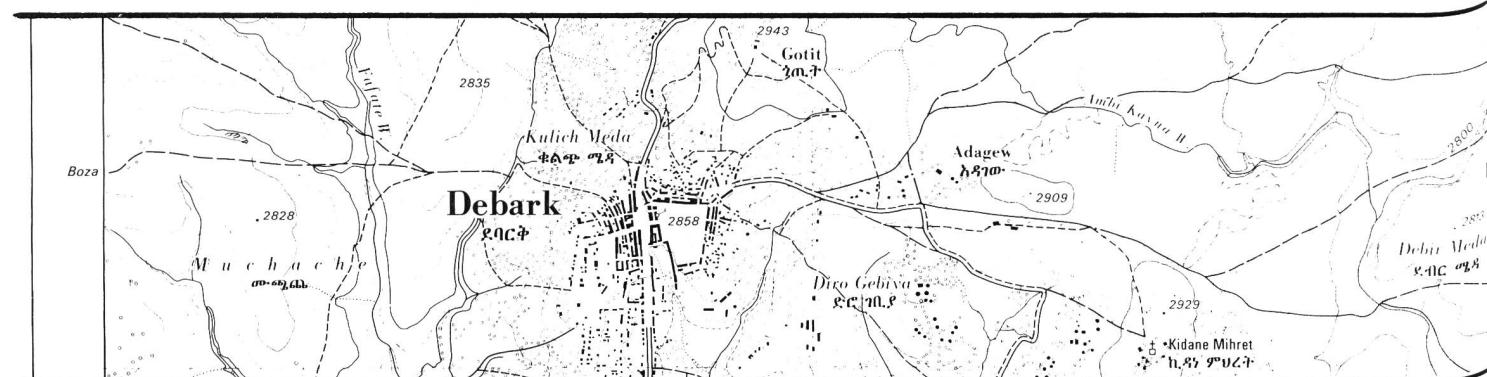
Example 2:

My field mapping in 1976, the basis of the added map on the functional structure of Debark 1 : 2 000.



Example 3:

Reduction of example 2 to a scale of 1 : 5 000, the basis of the added map on the changes of settlement and forest 1 : 5 000.



Example 4:

Reduction of example 2 to a scale of 1 : 25 000, the basis of the Debark sector in the new topographic map 1 : 25 000 sheet "Debark".

### 3. The topographic and geographic site of Debark

The town of Debark lies, surrounded by dense eucalyptus-afforestations, at an altitude of about 2850 m in a slightly-hilly terrain, which is typical of the northern Ethiopian highlands (see photo 1). In addition to the favorability of the topographic site, the town is flanked by two small rivers, which supply water even in the dry season.

Of far greater importance for the formation of an urban settlement was the *geographic site*, which can be characterized by a combination of settlement-inducing factors (see fig. 2):

So, in former times, Debark was a stopping point on the caravan trail from Gonder to Aksum. Because this was the last stop in front of the difficult Wulkifit (or Lemalimo) pass, which formed the northern border of the imperial influence area, an important customs post has existed here at least since the 17th century (SIMOOONS 1960: 195; RÜPPELL 1840, vol. 2: 68f.). This post was controlled by a feudal tenant.

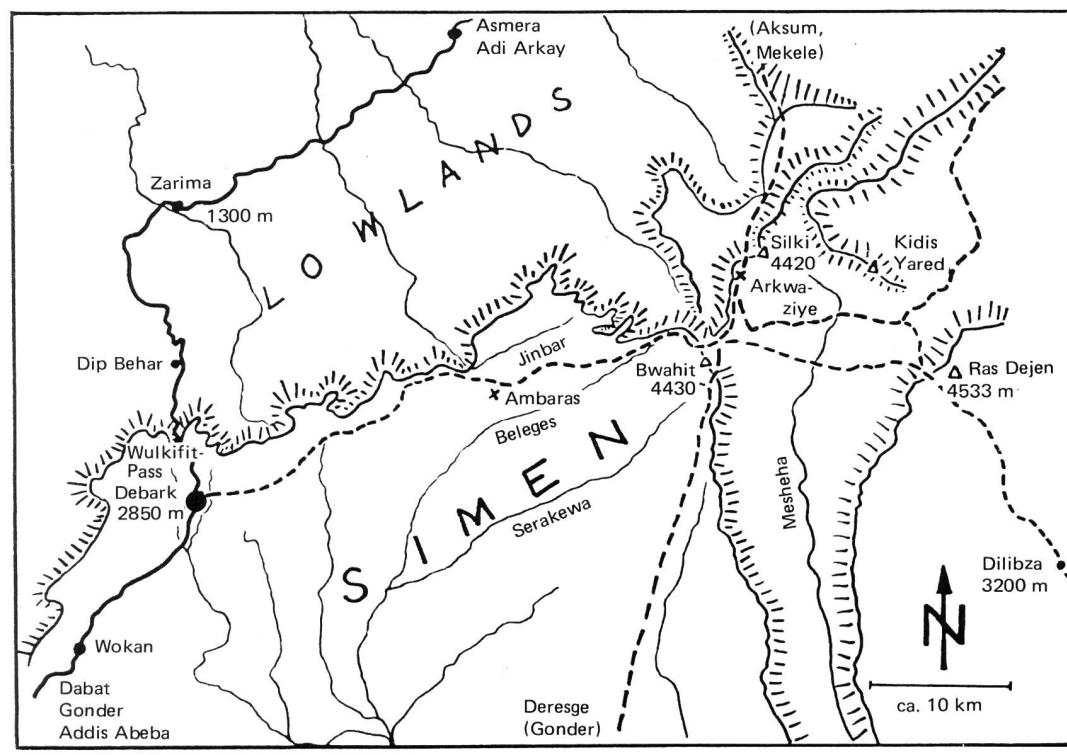
Furthermore, another caravan trail forked in Debark and separated after two travel days to the east

into two branches; one crossed the mountain passes of Arkwaziye and Silki and lead to the northern towns, the other one went to important trading centers east of the Tekeze River.

Then, as Gobat, a French traveler of the last century, and Rüppell, a German traveler, reported in their itineraries, even in former times, there must have been a big weekly market held in Debark, with more than 10 000 visitors coming from up to 12 hours away (RÜPPELL 1840, vol. 2: 68f.). This market was even reputed to have been one of the most remarkable in the whole of Ethiopia, as a weekly caravan came from Gonder with 1200–1500 persons, to exchange animals and cloth for salt (GOBAT 1834: 154).

In addition to these locational assets in former times, Debark gains more advantages in recent times because of its position alongside the important Addis Abeba–Asmera highway, which was constructed by the Italians during their short occupation from 1936–41. Since the early 1960's the town has also benefited from its function as the administrative capital of the Simen district.

Figure 2: Location of Debark in relation to the relief and to former and present connections



Escarpment of the northern Ethiopian Highland

— Highway Addis Abeba–Asmera, built by the Italians from 1936–41 (former caravan-trail Gonder–Aksum–Mitsiwa)

— Former caravan-trails crossing the Simen Mountains. Today important inter-regional trails.

X Mountain markets of the upper Simen Highland

#### 4. Physiognomy of the settlement

In its appearance, Debark hardly differs from any of these small towns which today line the Ethiopian highways. They all give the foreign visitor the impression of being temporary and poorly constructed. This is mainly because the dominant *construction materials* are wood, clay and tin, and because these small towns grew so quickly.

In 1976, 98 % of Debark's structures were so-called "chika"-houses. Their *construction* is characterized by a simple wooden frame with a rectangular foundation, faced with clay or tin, and by a corrugated iron roof. Some old houses even have grass roofs, which are still common in the countryside (see photos 2, 3, 4).

Some of the few solidly-built stone houses, called "gimb"-houses were constructed by the Italians; the others were constructed in recent times by the government and by some rich merchants. In 1976 Debark had a total of 33 buildings of this type.

Studying the *groundplan* of the town (see added map 1 : 5 000) we already notice its main characteristic: Around the big market place ("gebiya") and to the west of the main road, the buildings are compactly grouped into long rows.

Further to the south and in the eastern and western periphery, we find, on the other hand, a very scattered distribution of short blocks or single houses.

From this difference in the density and distribution of houses we can undoubtedly ascertain the existence of a "center function" around the market and to the west of the town. This observation will be detailed by a functional analysis of all houses.

#### 5. Analysis of the functional structure

##### *General remarks*

The functional mapping of the town of Debark (see added map 1 : 2 000: "Debark-Functional Structure of an Ethiopian Market Town") has been carried out using the "unit method", as it has already been applied in a similar way by two other authors who analyzed Ethiopian towns (KULS 1970; HORWATH 1968). In this sense "function" stands for the "use of" or an "activity in" a house (see also HOFMEISTER 1969: 49). Unit of record was the subdivision of a house-row or a single house itself. A subdivision or single house is normally occupied by one family.

The methodical and practical difficulties which occurred while limiting and recording such functions are discussed in greater detail in my unpublished manuscript (NÄGELI 1977: 40ff.). I will

only mention here that the Ethiopian-Amharic urban society and, as such, also the population of Debark, shows an already quite advanced division of labor, which is, however, for the most part independent from a functional specialization of the houses.

This means that, for example, the living area and the work room are often found together in the same building (in Debark this occurs in 34.5 % of all recorded houses, see tab. 1, bottom). The houses also are, in some cases, living houses without an obvious economic function (in Debark 5.5 % of the houses). Buildings with only an economic function, therefore, can very rarely be found (in Debark only 4.5 % of the houses).

The thirty recorded functions of Debark's buildings have been grouped into six classes. They are:

- trade and market
- crafts
- hotels and taverns
- public services and supplies
- administration
- living and various other functions

The following text is a short description of these functional classes in the order of their statistical importance (compare with tab. 1).

##### *Hotels and taverns*

Surprisingly, the hotels and taverns dominate all other employment sectors in Debark, representing 25 % of all used houses and 64 % of all economically-used houses. At first glance, this is a very high percentage, but, in reality, it is reduced by the fact that about 88 % of these taverns are "talla"-houses. Such houses are usually living houses, where on a special week-day, women, who are predominantly single, sell a locally-brewed beer called "talla". These activities should, therefore, be classified as additional and secondary functions; on the map this has been indicated by filling the concerned houses with a half signature only. By the way, where there is "talla" selling there is often prostitution which is as common in Debark as in other African towns.

The other, less numerous, but permanent inns are bars and "araki"-houses ("araki" is a local brandy), eating-houses (separated for Muslims and Christians), tea-houses and one "tej"-house ("tej" is the name of a well-liked kind of honey wine).

Several lodges (without food) and three very modest hotels (food obtainable) provide a night's shelter for bus passengers, truck drivers and long-distance merchants.

Table 1: Functional structure of the total amount of buildings in Debark for 1976

FUNCTIONS		No.of units	Percentage
TRADE	TOTAL	72	4,68%
Retail shops		32	2,08%
Retail shops with 1-2 tailors		11	0,71%
Stores of wholesalers		29	1,88%
CRAFTS	TOTAL	110	7,14%
Tailor shops		21	1,36%
Weavers		73	4,74%
Smiths		3	0,19%
Butchers		2	0,13%
Barbers		2	0,13%
Laundries		3	0,19%
Grinding-mills (one not functioning)		6	0,39%
HOTELS and TAVERNS	TOTAL	385	25,0 %
Hotels		3	0,19%
Lodgings		8	0,52%
Eating-houses		11	0,71%
Tea-houses		6	0,39%
Bars and "araki"-houses		16	1,04%
"Tej"-houses (additionally "tej" is available in 9 lodgings and bars)		1	0,06%
"Talla"-houses		340	22,08%
PUBLIC SERVICES			
SUPPLIES	TOTAL	15	0,97%
ADMINISTRATION	TOTAL	20	1,30%
LIVING HOUSES (including some inseparable functions as basket-making, spinning)	TOTAL	900	58,44%
EMPTY UNITS	TOTAL	15	0,97%
UNITS UNDER CONSTRUCTION	TOTAL	23	1,49%
TOTAL of UNITS (excl. kitchen huts)		1540	100 %
<u>From the total:</u>			
"Genuine" living houses		900	58,5%
Living houses with an economic function		532	34,5%
Houses with only an economic function		70	4,5%
Uninhabited or under construction		38	2,5%

## Crafts

Different kinds of crafts which played, for instance, an important role in European medieval town development, are not very well-developed in Debark.

According to KULS (1970: 23) and SIMOOONS (1960: 174) this is a typical phenomenon in the whole of the northern Ethiopian highland. It seems to be due to a historically-grown distaste for these occupations by the Christian-Amharic peoples.

Because of the recent and slow development of urban settlements, several crafts, such as weaving, blacksmithing or pottery, are still mostly performed in the rural areas. This is another reason why one finds so few crafts in the towns.

In Debark the dominant group of craftsmen is the *weavers* (who in 1976 totaled 73), most of them Muslims, who weave a cotton fabric on simple looms. This fabric is the starting material for the traditional "shemma", a shawl-like piece of clothing. The second dominant and fast-growing craftsmen's group is the *tailors*, who number 50. They make simple clothes on pedal-driven sewing machines and later sell them in the market to peasants mainly from the wide area surrounding the town. Many of them are working for shopkeepers, because they themselves would never be able to afford to buy a sewing machine.

*Other craftsmen*, such as smiths, butchers, hair-dressers and washers, are only rarely found in Debark.

Furthermore, it was not possible to record on the map the group of craftsmen, such as spinners, basket-makers, carpenters (about 30), and matress-makers (2), because their work is not bound to a building.

Finally, there are five grain-mills, which can be considered quasi-industrial services (one was not functioning in 1976). They belong either to rich merchants or retired army officers.

## Trade and market

Trade, like crafts, has traditionally not been a speciality of the Christian Amharas (MESFIN WOLDE MARIAM 1972: 159f., and PANKHURST 1968: 38). Today, however, their involvement in trade seems to be continually increasing.

In Debark the big periodic weekly market, which concentrates the buying power of thousands of farmers from a vast area, surely holds the most important function in this category. However, because it takes place in the open air, it couldn't be recorded by the house-use method and will be treated in the next chapter after using special methods.

On the functional map 1 : 2 000, therefore, the area of the weekly market, has to be considered as "function" in the wider sense, as does the area of an additional small daily market.

We can, however, find outside the market place numerous retail shops ("suk" or "arab-biet"). They are maintained partly by Yemenitic Arabs, partly by Amharic Muslims, and they sell nearly everything from food to clothes and medicaments.

## Public services, supplies and administration

These functions together represent only 2.3 % of all recorded units, but 50 % of the exclusively economically-used units. This shows that, in contrast to other small towns on the highway, Debark plays an important role as the district capital. There we can find offices from all Ethiopian administrative levels. Up to now the most important ones have been the district governor and the police, but today the so-called "local communities", which belong to the town level, make great efforts to reach local self-administration and seem to play an increasingly important role. This is due mainly to the socialist politics of the Provisory Military Government (for more details see NÄGE-LI 1977: 76).

As public services and supplies we find a post office, a small diesel power station, a telecommunications office, a gasoline station, a very primitive health station, a big new mosque and (outside the map) a Christian church. A primary school (with 670 pupils in 1976) and a secondary school (with 860 pupils up to the eleventh grade) also belong to this group of functions.

## Living and various other functions

As the last functional class, the living-houses have to be mentioned. Within this category I have summarized all the units which have not yet been recorded in one of the above-mentioned categories. In these units there often occurs, in addition to the pure living function, several secondary functions which cannot be properly distinguished from living in daily Ethiopian life. For example, the modest living room is often used as a night stable for cattle, a store for different goods or a work room for a handicraft such as basket-making or spinning. In this category I also summarized the *agricultural employment sector*, which up to now has not appeared in the functional analysis because it is not fixed to special buildings. According to the research work done by MILLER et al. (1976: 37) 1972 about 9 % of the active population belonged to this sector.

This percentage shows that agriculture plays a minor role in the functional structure of the town.

Close to the living room, or attached to it, a small kitchen hut is often found.

Latrines have been noted very rarely. MILLER et al. (1976: 37) estimated, that only 15 % of the houses have a private latrine.

### *Functional differentiation*

A summary of the functional differentiation of the town already shows some sort of "functional sections" (compare with the added map 1 : 2 000): *Permanent trade* is located around the market place, which itself is the functional focus of the periodic weekly trade.

In the same way most of the *craftsmen* are located; with the exception of the weavers who are distributed around the whole town.

*Hotels and taverns* are concentrated mostly in the center of the town around the bus stop, "talla"-houses are also found around the market.

*Public service and supply buildings* are lined up more or less along the highway (with the exception of the two schools), and the *administration buildings* form some sort of administrative zone in the western part of the town.

The *living houses* are distributed rather haphazardly in the northern part of the settlement, but in the southern part one almost gets the impression of living sections.

## **6. Structure and importance of the market**

### *Introductory remarks*

The main aim of the research on the market has been to understand its mechanism.

Additionally, I have tried to get an idea about the importance of the Debark weekly market for the town and for the Simen Highland.

Most of the research work has been done on the weekly market. On the small daily market only two simple records and some observations have been made.

The many inquiry problems are discussed in my former manuscript (NÄGELI 1977: 26f.) and will be illustrated here only by quoting a very impressive sequence from an article by P. HILL (1963: 477):

"... an African Market is one of the most uncomfortable and inconvenient places in the world in which to conduct respectable fieldwork ...

It is not so much the heat, the glare, the bustle, the over-crowding, the noise, the shouting (and consequent hoarseness), or even the sneezing caused by open bags of

pepper and maize ( . . ) — the difficulties are rather the extreme fluidity and complexity of the undocumented situation and the need to trouble informants at their moment of maximum anxiety, when they are concluding transactions."

As general structures of the market, its site, day-activity, size and sectoral division will be discussed, followed by a short differentiation of economic and social groups which interact in the market, and some comments on the traditional system used to weight and measure.

As special structures its supply of goods as well as its importance for the town and the environs will be analyzed.

### *Market site*

The market place of Debark is formed by a 200 x 200 m earthy area inside of the eastern part of the settlement (see the added map 1 : 5 000).

Besides some small stone pedestals carrying about a dozen of improvised market stalls, and a number of permanent decimal scales, the market place is completely uninhabited.

### *Day-activity of the weekly market*

By dawn on Saturdays many merchants arrive at the market and sit on the ground to display their goods.

Their arrival seems to be without any kind of system or order.

Later on in the day the buyers stream into the market in droves, and between 11 and 12 a.m. the bargaining is at its peak. At this time the place is so crowded with people, animals and goods, that it cannot be crossed without great difficulty (see photo 5).

After lunch business slows down quite quickly because customers have a long way to travel back home.

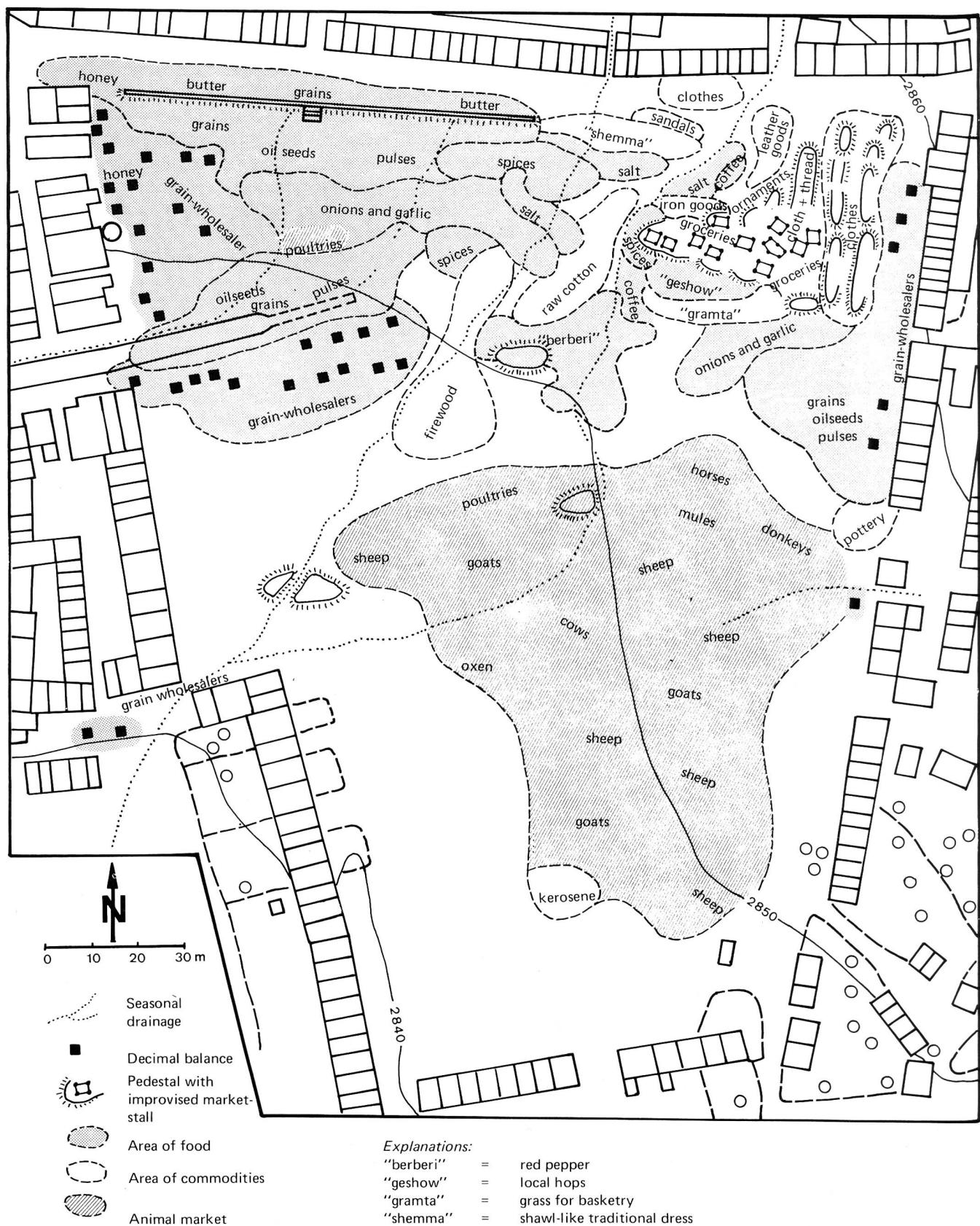
Depending on the season, the market closes between 5 and 6 p.m.

### *Size of the weekly market*

The size of the market also depends on the season and on the sequence of the many Ethiopian religious and national holidays. Big markets are usually held one week before an important holiday, because people want to buy new clothes, sheep (especially for Easter), spices, butter, coffee, sugar and similar items.

To get an idea of the number of people who were at such a market, I took an "aerial photo" at

Figure 3: Sectoral division of the Debark weekly market. Example of the 17.4.1976



probably the largest market of the year, the market one week before Easter (17.4.1976). From that photo I counted at least 6'800 people, including 740 donkeys and mules, 350 horses and innumerable sheep and goats (see photo 5).

This means there was a respectable number of visitors, which would even be higher if we could have counted the total of market visitors during the whole day. But this would have been too difficult because of the more than ten gates leading to the market place.

### *Sectoral division*

At first glance, an Ethiopian market seems impossible for the foreign visitor to comprehend because of the hustle and bustle and the many comings and goings.

But at a closer look, one finds there is a logical and rational system to the market.

This organization is not an official system, but has been worked out by the people to satisfy their needs to oversee the market supply.

In figure 3 we see such a division into different groups of goods. This organization principle hardly changes on different market days.

Summarized, the whole market can be divided into the three main sections food, commodities and animals.

The food and commodities are concentrated in the upper area of the market, the animals in the lower area.

Two additional rules, which attempt to keep the market orderly and which also stem from tradition, are today more or less institutionalized: One rule concerns supervision of the market by the police (which is important for law and order) and the other is a monthly merchant tax which is regularly collected by the town administration.

### *Economic and social groups*

The problem of different economic and social groups interacting in the market needs more intense study than was possible to carry out during my research stays in this country.

Here I can only say, that in Ethiopian markets typical groups of people could be distinguished by the following criteria:

- the regularity of trading: merchants or occasional traders
- the quantity of goods: wholesalers or retailers
- the level of carrying trade: selling producers, different middle-men dependent on the invested money
- the vertical direction of exchange: collecting or distributing traders

– the change of place: stationary, itinerant or long-distance traders etc.

Such a distinction between different groups could lead to a better understanding of the market's economic and social function and importance.

In the Debark market we first see a special group of *wholesalers* with about 37 installed decimal scales, who buy agricultural products (see fig. 3 and photo 6). On the other hand this group acts also as a distributor of imported wares, like cotton, salt, "berberi", etc.

There are also the *commission-buyers* who work for the wholesalers, and the *retailers* (see photo 7), who buy the goods either on their own accounts, or get it from the wholesalers on a credit basis.

The largest group of vendors are those who produce the goods themselves, like *farmers and craftsmen* (tailors, potters etc.).

### *Weights and measures*

The traditional system of weights and measures, which is very important for the understanding of the market mechanism, and requires an extensive knowledge, shall be the last point of the general structure's discussion (a more detailed description can be found in NÄGELI 1977: 104–112).

Photos 7 and 8 demonstrate some contradictions: Only wholesalers and grocers in Debark know how to use the decimal scales. The retailers, farmers and craftsmen still count and calculate with traditional and less accurate methods.

For measuring they use for instance various types of cups and baskets, as we see in photo 8 only a few.

For weighing is often seen a simple balance called "mizan", and to measure distances, the ell is very common.

Many of the traditional measures have their roots in the Arabic, Persian and Greek, as well as Biblical times (compare with PANKHURST 1969a, b, and 1970).

This variety of measures, as well as the system of calculation, which dates back partly to the long-disappeared English and Italian colonial money, makes the exchange of goods quite difficult. Furthermore, the farmers are forced to be on their guard so as not to be cheated by the sellers.

### *Supply of goods*

An especially significant aspect of Debark's weekly market are the goods sold there.

Based on two total surveys in April and in November of 1976, the whole market supply was

Table 2: Supply of goods of two weekly and two daily markets in Debark  
(examples from spring and fall 1976)

CATEGORIES OF GOODS	PERIODIC WEEKLY MARKET				DAILY MARKET			
	Number of Vendors				Number of Vendors			
	APRIL 17.4.76	NOVEMBER 20.11.76	Average		TUESDAY 16.11.76	THURSDAY 18.11.76	Average	
1) GRAINS					52	35,8%		
2) OILSEEDS	334	29,3%	161	14,8%	22,05%	2	1,4%	46
3) PULSES						13	9,0%	
4) VEGETABLES	63	5,5%	259	23,8%	14,65%	10	6,9%	7
5) FRUITS						0	-	0
6) SPICES	155	13,6%	189	17,3%	15,45%	27	18,6%	29
7) STIMULANTS	6	0,5%	5	0,5%	0,5%	0	-	0
8) AROMATICS	15	1,3%	24	2,2%	1,75%	5	3,4%	3
9) TEXTILES	130	11,4%	115	10,6%	11,0%	2	1,4%	2
10) GROCERIES	39	3,4%	39	3,6%	3,5%	4	2,7%	3
11) COMMODITIES	12	1,1%	12	1,1%	1,1%	3	2,1%	2
12) HOUSEHOLD- GOODS	32	2,8%	28	2,6%	2,7%	1	0,7%	1
13) ANIMAL PRO- DUCTS	54	4,7%	56	5,1%	4,9%	18	12,4%	10
15) ANIMALS	ca. 300*	26,3%*	ca. 200*	18,4%*	22,35%	8	5,5%	6
T O T A L	1140	100%	1088	100%	100%	145	100%	109
								100%
								100%

\* estimates

studied and summarized in a well-documented table (NÄGELI 1977: table 7, 117–124).

The table shown here (table 2) contains only an overview of the most important results.

About 50 kinds of goods are assembled into 15 groups, and their values (number of vendors) show that Debark's weekly market is primarily a means of food exchange:

About half of the goods are agricultural, including spices, stimulants and aromatics.

About one-quarter of the goods are animals and animal products. Crafts and other goods, including textiles and dresses, represent the last quarter only. The table clearly shows, moreover, a certain *fluctuation in the offer* of agricultural goods: For example a shortage of grain is seen in the autumn before the new harvest as well as an oversupply of recently-harvested onions and garlic (vegetables) at the same time.

This supply-demand imbalance is a typical structural phenomenon in such primary-goods markets in agricultural developing countries and could be changed only by measures taken by the government (see NÄGELI 1977: 152–155; compare also with de YOUNG 1966a, b, and 1967a, b).

Finally, the table shows also the situation of the *daily market*, which is held in Debark every day for the past few years. It's rather small and its structure is even more typically a primary goods market than the weekly market (more than 80 % of the products can be considered primary goods).

### *Functional importance*

To close this chapter, we look at the functional importance of the weekly market, not only concerning the town, but also concerning the influence area.

The Debark weekly market has an immense attraction power, which is represented by the thousands of visitors who travel from far away places to Debark.

Together they bring money and employment into the town. This phenomenon can, although no special research has been done on this topic, qualitatively be illustrated very well by the following quote from HORVATH (1968: 49f.):

“The periodic markets are of considerable importance to the towns in which they are located.

...

These large gatherings of people concentrate the meager buying power of the semisubsistence peasants who then support certain activities in the markets and the towns which would otherwise be absent from the economic landscape.

A peasant woman who earns some money in the market by selling eggs may spend the money on some cloth in the retail shops or have her grain ground at the millers, thus foregoing the arduous tasks of grinding it at home. A man may spend a portion of the money earned to pass a few pleasant hours chatting and drinking with kin and friends in one of the taverns.

All in all, on market day small towns come alive: the taverns are full, grain mills are active, and retail shops are busy.”

*The importance of the market for the “Umland”* is a diffusion phenomenon and is more difficult to judge.

More research must be done in this area as well.

Nevertheless it can be admitted, that people travel great distances to Debark because of its favorable location between the northwestern lowland and the eastern Simen Highland.

From the lowland the farmers come to the Debark market up to a distance of a day's journey, and bring grains, spices, vegetables, butter, honey and animals.

The influence area to the highland goes at least up to a three-day journey, as we can find every week in Debark a lot of sellers from the Mesheha Valley or even from the region around Dilibza and the back side of the Ras Dejen (see fig. 2 in chapter 3). From these regions people travel to the market a distance of 60–70 km, cross two passes at an elevation of 4300 m (Ras Dejen) and 4200 m (Bwahit) and a valley in between of 2900 m (Mesheha); an extraordinary journey, which seems to have no economic or rational reward, in light of what the travelers receive for their goods at the market. For many such remote places, however, there exist no other connections to the road and the people have no other choice than to travel these distances. From the highland the farmers bring mostly barley, lentils and unprepared animal skins to Debark. There the wholesalers buy it and bring it by truck to Gonder or Asmara.

Additionally the market has a great supply function for the remote area farmers:

They buy there all the food, which they cannot produce themselves such as salt, “berberi”, coffee and sugar, as well as the needed commodities which are imported into the region such as raw cotton, thread, leather goods, iron goods etc.

The farmers buy these goods predominantly in Debark, although there exist several off-the-road weekly markets in the lowland as well as in the highland (here for example the markets of Ambaras and Arkwaziye, see fig. 2 in chapter 3), because those markets mostly provide a minor spectrum of goods and at higher prices.

## 7. Development of the population and settlement

### *Introductory remarks*

In this chapter I try to combine the data on the functional structure of the town with those on its population, as well as with the dynamics of the continuous settlement changes.

Data on the structure and development of the population of Debark has been taken partly from my own census in 1976, partly from the excellent work of an English nutrition research team which was in Debark from 1969–72 (MILLER et al. 1976).

### *Population structure and growth*

The population of Debark consists primarily of Christian Amharas (about 79 %), a minority of Moslems (about 18 %), as well as an insignificant proportion of other religious groups, notably Ethiopian Jews (MILLER et al. 1976: 36).

From my own observations, Christians and Moslems do not live in ethnic sections of the town, but are well-integrated throughout the settlement.

The only exception is the small, external Moslem settlement "Kulich Meda" in the north of the town.

From this pronounced tolerance of religious differences, we can perhaps understand the astonishing fact that in the middle of Debark there is a big, new mosque and the Christian church is half an hour outside the town.

But there may be also a historical reason for this, as the Christian church is the famous age-old "Kidahne Mihret" (HEUGLIN 1868: 201).

As shown in table 3 and figure 4, the population structure is characterized by two peculiarities: An extremely high annual growth rate and a marked surplus of women.

The annual population growth since 1968, the first census year, was about 4.7 %. This means, that until 1976, the total population of Debark has grown from 4247 inhabitants to 5839, or by more than one-third.

In comparison to the calculated natural growth rate of only 2.2 % (MILLER et al. 1976: 41) we come to the conclusion, that the additional annual growth rate of 2.5 % must be the result of a migration into the town.

This seems to mean that people have come from different parts of Simen to Debark, and eventually there must be seen even a connection to the shifting of population from the highlands to the lower plateaus, as described by STÄHLI (1978: 35). Hence we do not have yet concrete results on this topic.

The second noticeable characteristic of the population structure, the surplus of women, especially in

Table 3: Population growth of Debark from 1968 to 1976

Census	Total population	Average yearly growth	Source
1968	4247	4.6 %	MILLER et al.
1970	4637	2.3 %	1976: 31
1972	4847	4.7 %	NÄGELI
1976	5839	5.1 %	1977: 67

the middle-aged years, is undoubtedly influenced by the "talla"-selling business: Lonely, single, divorced or widowed women, who have a hard life in the rural Ethiopian society, come to Debark to find earning opportunities by opening a "talla"-house.

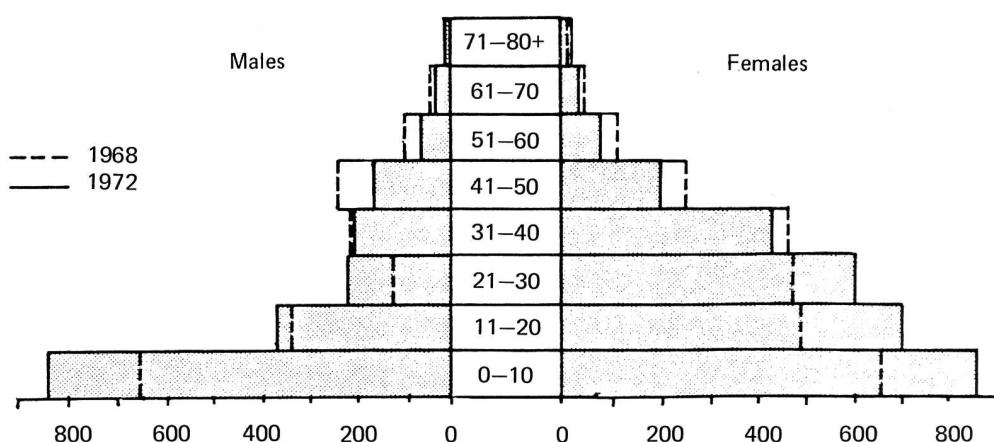
Summarized, these two population characteristics, compared to other research work on Ethiopian towns (ENGELHARD 1970: 213; KULS 1970: 24) should be looked on as a significant phenomenon of an Ethiopian town's population.

#### Growth of settlement

Let's now have a look at the dynamics of how such a population growth has influenced recent settlement development.

For this purpose a map at the scale 1 : 5 000 of the settlement and forest changes in Debark was drawn up for the time period 1964–76 (see the added map "Debark-Growth of Settlement and Forest"). Before we discuss these settlement developments, however, it is worthwhile to take a short look at the *general development of Debark* from the 19th century to the time after the Second World War; as the latest changes can be fully understood only in this light.

Figure 4: Population structure of Debark for the years 1968 and 1972



Source: MILLER et al. 1976: 31

The rare background information for this has been obtained either from some journey reports of former travelers, or from the residents themselves. As shown in chapter 3, Debark has reached a favorable importance already since the 17th century through its role as a caravan stopping-point, a toll station and a market. However, this doesn't mean, that there existed already an urban settlement!

Debark appeared to be up until the 1936 arrival of the Italians rather a "scattered group of villages" as described by the English traveler MAYDON (1925: 29f.). He observed a village, consisting of several smaller hamlets, as is typical for the rural parts of Ethiopia still today. A change towards a town-like settlement obviously did not begin before the Italian colonization.

The Italians started to build not only the first highway from Asmara over Wulkefit Pass and Debark to Gonder, but constructed also the first stone houses in Debark.

These houses served as a food storehouse for the road workers, a small garrison and several administration offices.

The Italians also removed the weekly market, which took place until then on a large field east of the settlement (see on the map 1 : 5 000 the local name "Diro Gebiya", which means old market), close to the road. And they even built an improvised airfield to the south of the town (STÄHLI 1978: 37).

Thanks to the Italian colonization effort new houses were built around the market place and along the streets.

Shops were set up by Moslems or Yemenites, and a few tailors who were before scattered in small hamlets, moved to the growing town.

An Arab opened the first tea-house and soon afterwards there was a hotel as well as a telephone connection to Asmara and Gonder.

The departure of the Italians in 1941, which was accompanied by heavy fighting, lead to the destruction of some of these buildings.

The development of the settlement itself started again with the efforts of the Ethiopian government at the beginning of the 1950's.

A very important event in the further development of the settlement was the change of the district capital functions from Dip Behar and Dabat to Debark. Therefore a prison, schools, a post office and all the other necessary public and administrative buildings had to be constructed.

A new daily bus line from Gonder over Debark to Aksum and the increase of truck traffic between Asmara and Addis Ababa in the 60's have brought further employment opportunities to Debark.

As a result, inns, taverns and hotels had to be built, and as mentioned in chapter 5, the restaurant and

tap room business became the most important employment sector of the town.

From this short description we must conclude that Debark is a very young urban settlement and is still in a relatively early stage of development. It's therefore not astonishing that since 1964, the year of the first aerial photograph, a significant town growth can be recorded:

After counting all new houses and division of houses on the map 1 : 5 000 of 1976, and comparing it with the situation on the aerial photo, the growth of the settlement within these twelve years could be calculated at 67 %.

This percentage has to be reduced to an effective growth of 55–60 % due to the fact, that, because of the poor quality of the photo and because many houses were densely-covered from view by trees, not all the houses of 1964 had been identified and counted.

A comparison of this town growth with the population growth since 1964, which I assumed at 55 %, shows an obvious parallel between the population growth and the development of the settlement.

*The distribution of the new buildings* throughout the settlement area gives the impression of a quite regular development of the town.

The only exceptions are a certain concentration of new houses in the western part (zone of administration) and a new small hamlet to the east on the way to Sankaber, where no research has been done.

#### *Growth of forest*

Besides the building growth, the map 1 : 5 000 also shows a significant change in the forest area around the town. Here we see an area of about 35 hectares of new afforestations and only 3 to 4 hectares of clearing.

That means there has been during the last decade an important enlargement of the firewood and construction wood reserve, which is vital to the needs of the town inhabitants.

These afforestations which have been carried out only with quick-growing and deep rooted eucalyptus trees, today the most prominent tree in the central highland, seem also to have an ecological disadvantage:

Today most of the wells within the settlement which have been built between 1959 and 1961, are dry.

Only two are still used, and the people have to get their drinking water from unsanitary sources or brooks outside the town.

The most important goal of the "local communities" (see chapter 5) is therefore the rebuilding of a new drinking water supply.

## Conclusions

In conclusion of this chapter, we can say, that the administration and market town of Debark has on one hand a quite long history as customs station and market place, but on the other hand its history as a town is rather young.

It began 40 years ago, when Debark started to become a real urban settlement, and today the town is characterized by a marked growth as well of the population as of the number of buildings.

These astounding changes, which occurred in such a short time, reflect the situation of many developing countries today, as well as the reality of the Ethiopian Highland: A constant migration from rural, marginal areas to urban centers, causing increasing problems of overcrowding and unemployment.

The growth of Debark, as it has been recorded for the last twelve years, may today have been interrupted for some time by the current political situation. But it will be interesting and important to see, how far the development of the settlement and population will go within the next ten to twelve years, because this growth is a direct indicator for the structural tensions and difficulties caused by the impact of modern civilisation, a phenomenon which is already occurring in the up to now remote Simen highland.

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### Explanation of the photos

Photo 1 The town of Debark with its surrounding eucalyptus forest. Part of an aerial photo of the Institute of Mapping and Geography (Addis Ababa) from 1964. This photo has been the basis for a stereo-photogrammetric interpretation, which itself became the geometric basis of my topographic map.

Photo 2 View into a typical alley in Debark. The houses are built together in long rows; the width of a subdivision is often 2–3 m only. The walls are faced with clay or tin. Windows are very rare. The roof and the door are normally made from corrugated iron.

Photo 3 Old living house as it can still be found in Debark. With its rectangular groundform, walls from wood and clay and its grass-roof this house is an example for the change from the traditional rural roundhouse (“tukul”) to the urban rectangular house.

Photo 4 New, solidly built “chika”-living house with foundation of stones and a flat hip-roof of corrugated iron.

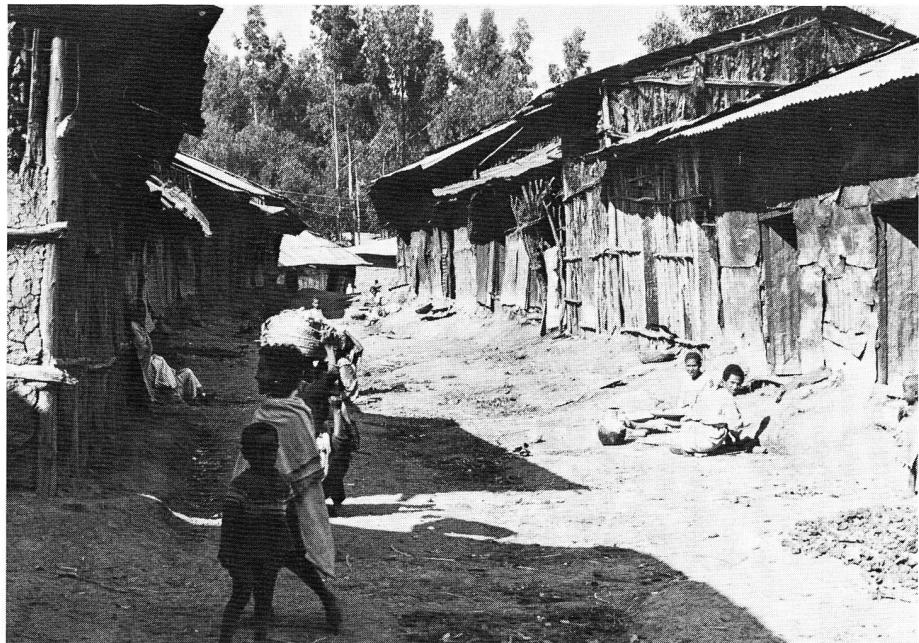
Photo 5 Saturday weekly market in Debark (17.4.1976, 11.30 h). View from the minaret on to the crowded market place. At this moment the market is at its peak, and after a count from this photo there must be present at least 6800 people.

Photo 6 A grain-wholesaler with his decimal balance. A farmer is taking back his two “akomadas” (leather bags) with grain and also gives back the already received money, because he doesn’t agree with the price payed for his product.

Photo 7 A cotton retailer weighs on her traditional “mizan” (simple scale) a good measure of raw cotton.

Photo 8 A collection of traditional measuring cups: In front a “kubaiya” from aluminium. On its left side a “finshal” from porcelain. In the middle a small “misiye” (basket), filled to its half with beans, inside a “berchiko” (glass cup). To the right of it a big “misiye”. In the back a big “askatla” (tin).

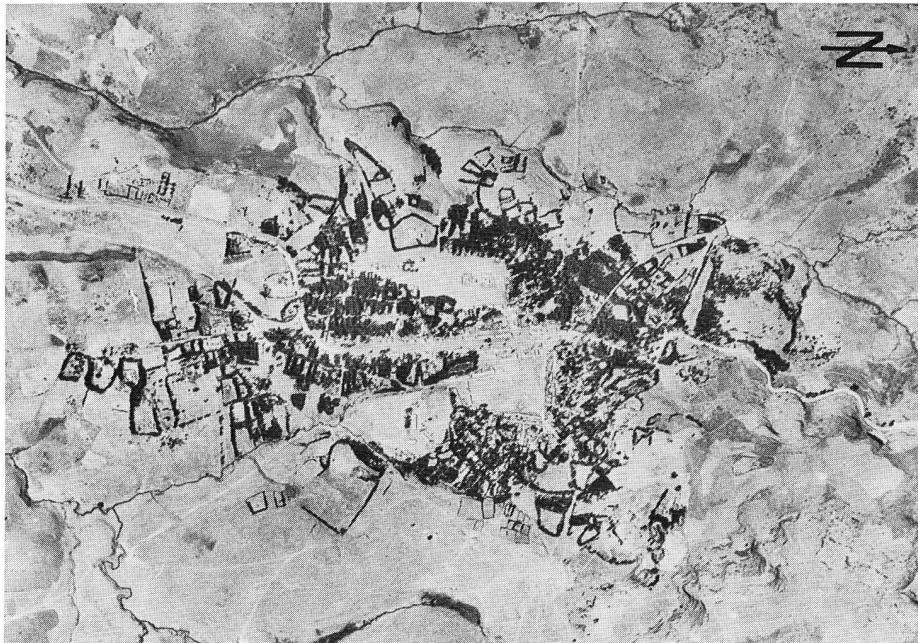
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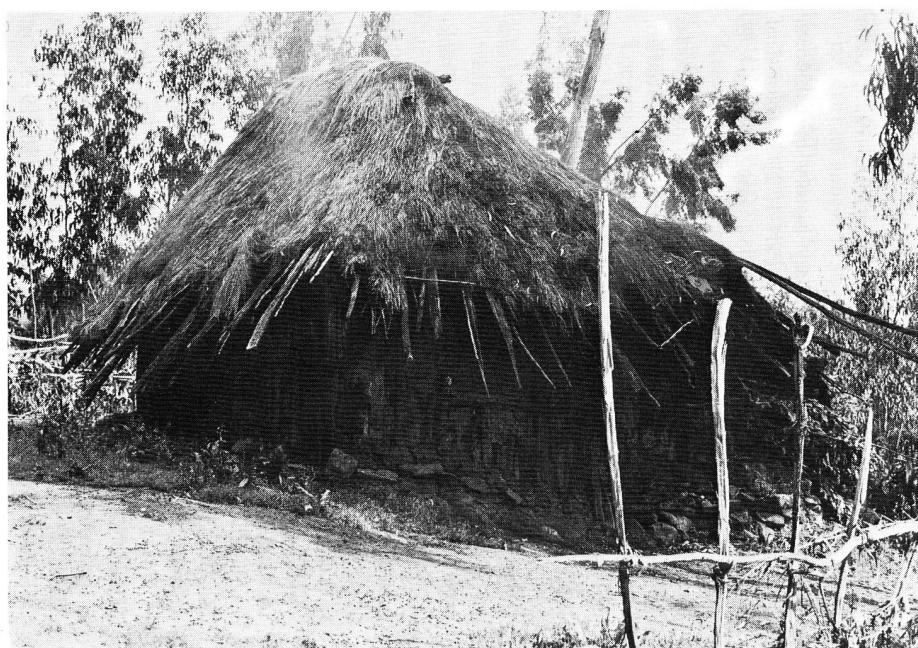
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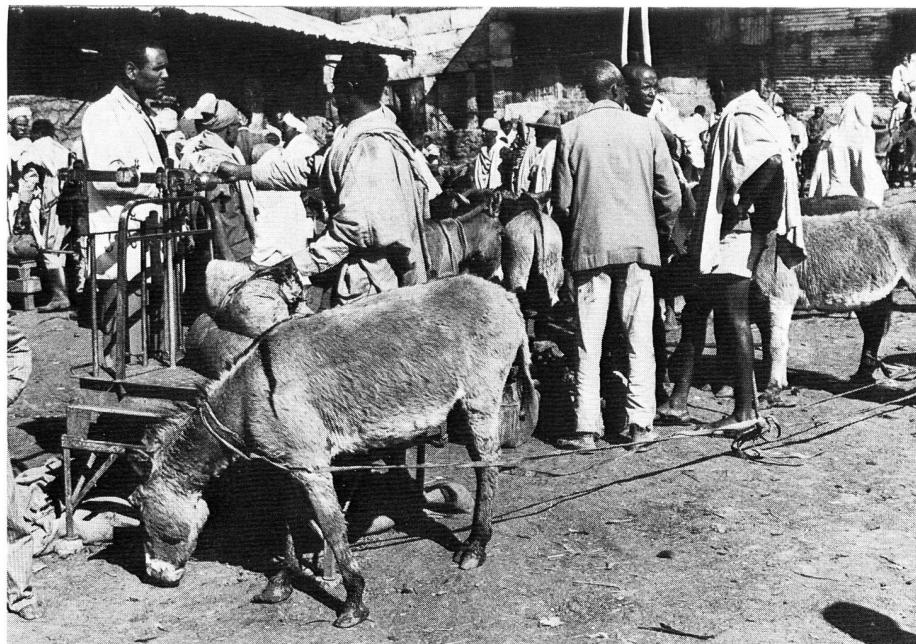
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