



*Melik Ambar, un miserable esclave, Protecteur du Royaume de Decan.*

# Malik Ambar: ABYSSINIAN DEFENDER OF THE DECCAN

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In warfare, in command, in sound judgement, and in administration, he had no rival or equal ... History records no other instance of an Abyssinian slave arriving at such eminence.

Mu'tamad Khan, Mughal court chronicler, 1627<sup>1</sup>

No other African had left such a legacy in India. Originally from Ethiopia—historically called Abyssinia—Malik Ambar is best known for having defended the Deccan from being occupied by the imperial Mughal forces of northern India during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Ambar's ingenuity as a military leader, diplomatic skills, and land reform policies contributed to his success in keeping the Deccan free of Mughal rule. Like the great Deccani political leader Chand Bibi, whom he served under for a time, he engendered admiration, respect, and jealousy; and like her, his example inspired his generation and generations thereafter, including the great Hindu military and political leader Shivaji, to fight for their independence.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Mu'tamad Khan, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, Memoirs of Jahangir*. 1964. In *History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, Henry M. Elliot and John Dowson (Editors). Allahabad, page 292.
- 2 The following chapter is based on the author's book *Malik Ambar: Power and Slavery Across the Indian Ocean*.

1. Malik Ambar. Plate from a scarce volume published ca. 1725 in Leyden by P. Van der Aa. This plate was originally published in *Naauwkeurige versameling der gedenkwaardigste zee- en land-reysen*, a series of accounts of voyages (1706–08). Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins.



2. Poster showing icons of the Indian freedom struggle: Shivaji, Netaji, and Baghat Singh. Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins.

Born in approximately 1548 in Hararghe in the eastern part of Ethiopia, Ambar was ethnically Oromo—a pastoral and semi-agricultural people whose religious and spiritual practices included ancestral veneration, and whose social and political organization was based on the age-grade *Gadaa* system. Ambar was captured in his youth and sold into slavery and taken to southern Arabia in approximately 1560. From there he was traded and then taken to Baghdad. He adopted Islam and was educated while in the service of Mir Qasim, a merchant who later took him to India.

Around 1571 Ambar was sold on the western coast of India to the Abyssinian statesman Mirak Dabir, also known as Chengiz Khan. Khan, who had once been a slave himself, was now the *peshwa* (prime minister) of the Nizam Shah—the Sultan of Ahmednagar in the northwestern part of the Deccan (one of five sultanates in the region). Ambar mentored by Khan in courtly and military affairs over the course of several years but was murdered in 1574. Leaving Ahmednagar after being freed by Khan’s widow, Ambar led a small cavalry force, serving as a mercenary in neighboring Bijapur as part of the many thousands of African slave-soldiers and mercenaries who were in demand among Indian monarchs at the time.

In 1595 Ambar returned to the Ahmednagar Sultanate to help protect its capital and main fort against Mughal attack before dispersing into the countryside and continuing to build his own following. At the turn of the seventeenth century Ambar, having grown a sizable army under his command, made himself Regent of the sultanate on behalf of a young royal member of the family he installed as Nizam Shah. Ambar later placed another young heir onto the Nizam Shahi throne, serving as *de facto* ruler for two and a half decades, that is, until his death in 1626.

Not only was Ambar a skilled diplomat, administrator, and military strategist—whose name was known to emperors, princes, and peasants—but he also developed a highly effective form of guerilla warfare, *bargi-giri*, which employed quick-striking Maratha light cavalry. Ambar strengthened Ahmednagar’s existing fortifications; created an innovative land revenue system that increased agricultural productivity; designed and built a model capital, Khirki (Fatehnagar), with palaces, mosques, and a water supply system (the *Nahr*); maximized the flow of trade in his realm; and patronized Muslim and Hindu artisans, adding to the unique artistry of the region. Most famously, however, and for over a quarter-century, Ambar defended the Deccan against Mughal rule—at times conceding territory to the imperialists, but then turning around and pushing them out.

Having spent much time surveying the land of the western Deccan under the mentorship of Chengiz Khan, traversing the area in his days as a guerilla mercenary leader, and during his rise to power in Ahmednagar, Malik Ambar had developed a shrewd ability to use the rough—often barren and rocky—terrain to his advantage against the Mughals to his north. His mastery of the land, command and deployment of light cavalry, and reinforced fortifications, made him a formidable foe.

It was indeed a rare moment in which Ambar's enemies could breathe a sigh of relief during the interminable wars he waged against them. As Ambar struck fiercely at all hours, including with "fiery missiles (*átash-bázi*)" followed by cavalry raids, those who opposed him could hardly rest—a critical aspect of guerrilla warfare. Ambar's Muslim combatants were Habshi, Maratha, and Persian warriors. And yet there were moments of respite. The respected Mughal envoy Mirza Asad Beg, who was sent to the Deccan to strengthen imperial relations, personally observed Ambar's encampments. Describing the Abyssinian leader in his memoirs as "a brave and discreet man," he went on to note, "One of his qualities was that in his camp every night twelve thousand men recited the Holy Qur'an. He offered his prayers with the common people whose number was never less than a thousand. His charities are beyond description."<sup>3</sup> Yet Ambar was principally a man of war who took ruthless action when necessary as part of his command. Nonetheless, he did not distance himself from those he ruled. As Beg notes, he regularly connected with "the common people."

Outside of the momentary serenity of *namaz* (prayer), Ambar dealt with almost constant attack and discord around him: armies attacking from the north, internal dissent, assassination attempts, and opposition by his on-again, off-again Bijapuri and Golconda allies. Ambar's perseverance surely played a part in reclaiming the Fort of Ahmednagar in 1610, when his forces finally ousted the Mughals from the important garrison. Emboldened by a string of such victories against the northern imperialists, Ambar moved his capital once again, this time even farther north, from provincial Junnar to Daulatabad (his first headquarters, at Parendā, was much further south). The new capital was located northwest of Ahmednagar, near Khirki, which he developed as a model city.

Ambar was both a master tactician and strategist, simultaneously pragmatic and visionary. As a general and diplomat he tended to think and act with a long-term view, and in this way, he was at disciplined

3. Bhadkal Darwaza, the principal gate of the Naukonda Palace built in Khirki by Malik Ambar. Photograph by Klaus Rotzer.

3 Mirza Asad Beg. 1941. *Wakiat-i-Asad Beg*. In *Proceedings*, Indian History Congress. Hyderabad. Pages 601–603.

and flexible, where some of his enemies tended towards being rash or rigid. Ambar knew how to bend with the wind. His own “intelligence” included an extensive network of spies throughout the sultanate to ensure that he had the very best information to make whatever decisions were necessary. As one of his earlier biographers Radhey Shyam notes, “He never failed to obtain the fullest and minutest information about the movements of the enemy, its strength and its weak points.”<sup>4</sup> Firm yet flexible, Ambar acquired an air of invincibility. Several narrow escapes from being captured on the battlefield added to his mystique and Ambar’s surviving multiple assassination attempts surely gave pause to those who tried but repeatedly failed to kill him.

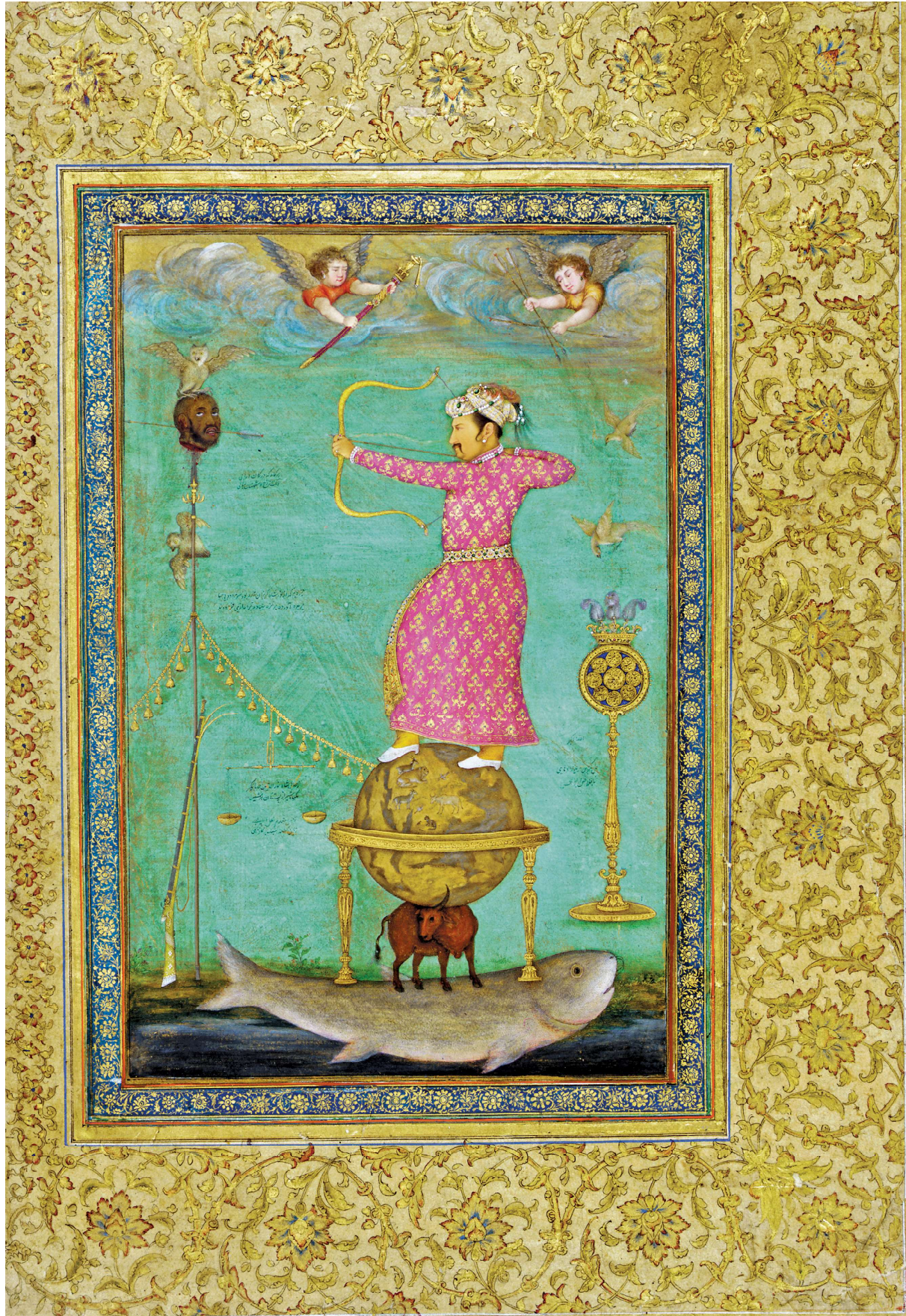
In 1612 Ambar signed a treaty with the Mughals. For the moment, at least, secure from overt imperial attack, Ambar’s power and authority within the sultanate appeared supreme. Soon, however, jealousies flared and intrigues formed around him. Complaints among some commanders about Ambar’s heavy-handed rule simmered beneath the relative calm across the land. Among those opposing Ambar were several Rajput officers ostensibly under his command. The proud descendants of northern Hindu warriors, the Rajputs took issue with the degree to which Ambar wielded power and authority. In 1613 one small group of Rajputs attempted to kill Ambar. Describing the assassination attempt, the Mughal court chronicler Mu’tamad Khan writes that “the Rajputs who had resolved to kill Ambar had concealed themselves till they found the opportunity of approaching him, when one of them gave him an effectual wound. The men in Ambar’s escort killed the Rajputs and carried their master off home.” Khan ends by noting, “very little more would [have] made an end of this cursed fellow.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the curses of his powerful detractors near and far, including the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who famously commissioned a portrait of him shooting an arrow into the Abyssinian, Ambar’s *kismet* (destiny) seemed to lay elsewhere. Ambar’s path to survival and success were in no small part the product of his disciplined military organization, careful

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4 Shyam, Radhey. 1968. *Life and Times of Malik Ambar*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal. Pages 149–150.

5 Mu’tamad Khan, pages 275, 340; Tamaskar, Bhaskar G. 1978. *The Life and Work of Malik Ambar*. Delhi: Idara-i Adabiyat Delli. page 93. Cursed by some, praised by others, Ambar survived this and all other assassination attempts—including those of 1614 by a group of Nizam Shahi chiefs as well as agents of Ibrahim Adil Shah II in 1621 and 1624; see Tamaskar, page 122. In addition to assassination attempts, there were directives to capture Ambar, as in 1607 when Jahangir sent a force to capture him; Yimene, page 113.



planning, and battlefield tactics. Next to the Mughals, Ambar's forces were almost always outmanned and outgunned. Although there were certain times in which his forces outnumbered those of the Mughals—when, for instance, he mustered the considerable combined support of the sultanates of Bijapur and Golconda—Ambar and his commanders were mostly at a disadvantage in terms of canons, munitions, elephants, and foot soldiers. But what Ambar lacked in numbers and weight, he made up with speed and agility—namely, his lightning-quick Maratha cavalry force, the cutting edge of his army. For the most part, he avoided pitched battles in open fields. Rather, he favored quick engagements in uneven terrain with attacks on enemy supply lines and encampments. As the historian Bhaskar Tamaskar describes, “Generally, he chose his time carefully, made the necessary preparations and dealt blows on the enemy suddenly and struck hard ... He knew when to bend and when to strike.”<sup>6</sup>

Ambar seems to have mastered certain aspects of *bargi-giri* (guerrilla warfare) early in the protracted war against the Mughals. Just after the turn of the century Mughal court chroniclers wrote, “At Mulkapur, a great fight took place with Malik Ambar ... the imperialists, unaccustomed to the warfare of the Dak'hinis, lost heavily.”<sup>7</sup> Abu'l Fazl wrote, “Ambar Jiū [a variation on the name “Chapu”] attacked with a large force of Deccanis and Abyssinians ... He made little fight and then retired ... that evil disposed Abyssinian [Malik Ambar] collected a number of presumptuous men, and the prosperity of the rebellious increased.”<sup>8</sup> Still another imperial account notes:

The enemy [Ambar] kept a sharp watch over his [the Mughal general 'Abdu-llah Khan's] movements, and sent a large force of Mahrattas (*bargiyán*), who skirmished with him all day, and harassed him at night ... Ambar the black-faced, who had placed himself in command of the enemy, continually brought up reinforcements till he had assembled a large force, and he constantly annoyed 'Abdu-llah [Khan] with rockets and various kinds of fiery missiles (*átash-bázi*), till he reduced him to a sad condition ... it was deemed expedient to retreat, and prepare for a new campaign.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Tamaskar, pages 313–314.

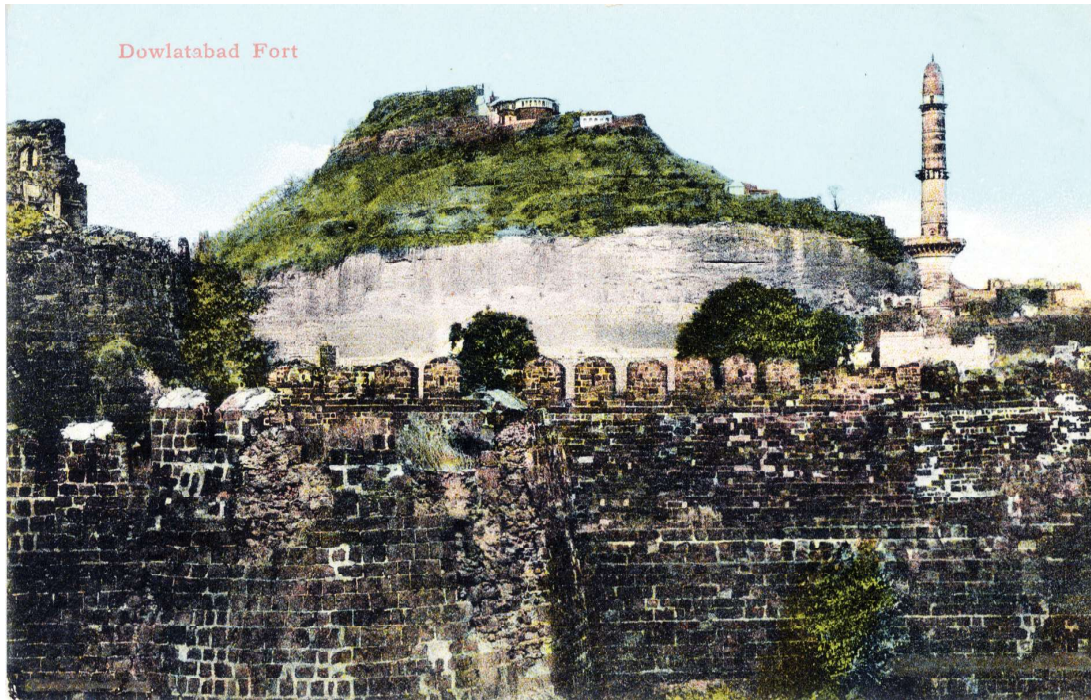
7 Abu'l-Fazl. 1909. *The Akbarnama of Abu-l-Fazl*, Henry Beveridge (Trans.). Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society. Vol. 1, page 503.

8 Abu'l-Fazl, Vol. 3, page 1178.

9 Mu'tamad Khan, page 292, 333-334.

4. (opposite) The emperor Jahangir imagining shooting an arrow through the head of his nemesis, Malik Ambar. This is a nineteenth century copy of a 1616 painting by Abu'l Hasan. Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.





European travelers who accompanied Mughal expeditions into the Deccan noted several embarrassing victories over them by Ambar's much smaller forces. Joannes De Laet, a Flemish geographer and philologist who worked at the Mughal court and later became a director of the Dutch East India Company, recalled how in 1611 Ambar resisted joint Mughal armies, the first commanded by General Khan Jahan Lodi and the second by the Governor of Gujarat Abdullah Khan. De Laet writes, "The plan was that the two forces would meet at Daulatabad and attack [Malik Ambar], the minister of Ahmednagar, but Abdullah Khan ... arrived early and was harassed by the guerilla bands (Bargis) of the Nizam Shahi minister." Here, Ambar seized upon the lack of discipline among the imperialists' leadership, which was prone to impulsive action, including (as in this case) the Mughal general Lodi overestimating his armies' strength by trying to grab the glory of defeating Ambar without waiting for the second army to be in position to attack. De Laet goes on to describe Ambar's other military successes, including capturing "the provinces of Candhees and Baraer."<sup>10</sup>

Although Ambar was helped by the undisciplined military actions of some Mughal leaders, his ability to defend the Deccan was also a

5. Daulatabad. Collection of  
Kenneth and Joyce Robbins.

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10 De Laet, Joannes. 1957. *A Contemporary Dutch Chronicle of Mughal India*. Brij Narain and Sri Ram Sharma (Trans.). Calcutta: Susil Gupta India Limited. pages 45–46.

function of his long-term planning: military recruitment, training, and the maintenance of a chain of fortifications across the land and on the coast. Indeed, one of the most important ways Ambar kept watch over his enemies' movements was through the forts. While Ambar was less active in building new forts during his rule, he expanded, structurally reinforced, and maintained those that already dotted the countryside of the western Deccan and its seaboard. For more than a quarter century, the forts of Galna, Junnar, Daulatabad, Ahmednagar, Parendā, Mahur, Sholapur, Morro, and Janjira were among the forty fortifications that enabled Ambar to guard the realm against repeated attacks.

At times, some of Ambar's forts were taken, such as Ahmednagar—which was retaken by his Deccani forces before going back into Mughal possession. Most, however, remained firmly in his hands. The siege warfare used to capture forts could sometimes last for months. The long stretches required additional munitions and the renewal of fresh supplies (food and water) for soldiers, horses, and elephants. Indian war elephants, critical to sieges, were loaded with light cannon and guns and used in battering the walls of fortresses. The French navigator François Pyrard de Laval, who visited the Nizam Shahi on his way back from the Maldives, noted that the sultanate had a “large number of elephants” as part of its army.<sup>11</sup> Ambar actively sought such elephants, as when the *Akbarnama* carefully records that Ambar captured fourteen war elephants from Bidar and then twenty-nine elephants from Golconda during the early stages of the war against the Mughals.<sup>12</sup>

Ambar proved particularly adept at undermining Mughal sieges, notably in the case of the Mughal siege of the fort of Ahmednagar. He did so by disrupting Mughal supply lines and raiding them for his armies' use. The supply lines feeding the Mughal's large and slow-moving armies were invariably weaker at the margins and more vulnerable to *bargi-giri*. Siege warfare, however, was a critical part of establishing territorial boundaries and therefore critical to the Nizam Shahi. But whether Ambar's troops were defending one of their own forts against a siege or laying siege to a fort themselves, the support of the people was vital. For the capture of forts and fortifications, *hasham* (infantry) was necessary; however, so was winning the hearts and minds of those in the countryside—those who ultimately fed the armies and could aid



## 6. Antur Fort. Photographs by Klaus Rotzer.

- a. Main Bastion
- b. Inscription of Malik Ambar on third gate of Antur Fort. Inscriptions there refer to him as Benefactor of Humanity, Defender of the Devoted Servant of the Lord of Earth and Sea, and Pillar of the Kingdom.\*

\* Rotzer, Klaus. 2006. The Architectural Legacy of Malik Ambar, Malik Sandal, and Yaqut Dabuli Khan. In Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing. pages 68-105.

11 Tamaskar, page 286; François Pyrard de Laval, *Travels to the East Indies, the Moluccas, and Brazil*, 1890, pages 257–258; *The Voyage of François Pyrard de Laval, to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*.

12 Abu'l-Fazl, Vol. 3, page 1209.

them in particularly challenging times. Ambar's popular support was therefore an essential part of his ability to defend and take offensive action. We get a sense of his support in Ferishta's observation that the "Khan-Khanan [Mughal commander-in-chief], well aware of [Malik Ambar's] enterprising character and popularity in the country, feared the Moghuls might be eventually overpowered."<sup>13</sup>

Equally important for Ambar was winning over the Deccan's large number of Maratha warriors, and in particular its cavalymen. Relying heavily on his cavalry—the pride of Maratha horsemanship—Ambar tended not to use as many foot soldiers in his army as other Deccani leaders, and certainly not in comparison to those deployed by the Mughals. Outside of siege warfare, only in critical circumstances did he call for battle leading with foot soldiers since the numbers rarely favored him. Nevertheless, Ambar did use infantry. As Shyam notes, late in Ambar's career, for instance, "while fighting against the Portuguese at Ravadanda he requisitioned 100 foot-soldiers (*hasham*) from the *karkoons* of Chaul."<sup>14</sup>

Ambar seldom engaged in conventional warfare where two armies met in an open field and attacked each other. Typically, in the quiet but tense prelude to such battles, if one of the armies did not back down, a shot was fired, signaling the start of the engagement. A round of artillery meant to break up and thin out enemy lines would be followed by a hail of arrows. During one battle with the Mughals in Qandahar, for instance, the gun smoke was so thick—with arrows "whizzing" past Ambar's soldiers—that the imperial chronicler Abu'l-Fazl describes how "From the smoke of guns and muskets . . . day put on the dark robes of night."<sup>15</sup> When the air cleared archers aimed to pierce light armor with the hope of hitting spaces unprotected by chainmail. Infantry would then battle it out in a slaughter of hand-to-hand combat before elephants and cavalry charged, adding to the death and destruction. And whichever army was able to hold its position longest was the "victor." In war, however, winning often meant little more than the claim of having done so, with the aftermath of such battles being bloody scenes of horror: the cries of the injured eventually dying out, bodies and body parts of warriors and animals alike strewn across the killing fields.

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13 Muhammed Qasim Ferishta, *Tarikh-i-Ferishta*. 2013. *History of the Rise of the Mohammedan Power in India*, Vol. III, John Briggs (Trans.). New York: Cambridge University Press. page 316.

14 Shyam, pages 149–150.

15 Abu'l-Fazl, Vol. 3, page 1212.

Given both the Mughal's numerically superior forces and the rugged terrain of the western Deccan, cavalry was of better use in defending the Deccan than infantry. Toward this end, Ambar appointed a separate commander-in-chief for his cavalry force. Siddi Yakub Khan, an Abyssinian, was given this important charge and reported directly to Ambar. Khan had apparently proven his leadership capacities among the Maratha and perhaps served as one of Ambar's confidants. Such high-ranking officers were necessarily close to Ambar. These officers included a number of Maratha commanders who he entrusted and held in high esteem (Ambar would name several districts of Khirki after his Maratha generals). It may be said that Ambar's attention to Maratha military leadership in the Deccan was a glowing feature of his rule; in turn, Maratha warriors joined his guerrilla forces in increasing numbers.

The steady growth of Ambar's Maratha cavalry, which more than doubled in size about every decade, appears to have been done in a very deliberate way. While his cavalry consisted of fewer than four thousand soldiers in 1600, by 1609 he had enlarged the number to ten thousand; and by 1624, it is estimated that Ambar had fifty thousand Maratha cavalymen under his command. When recruiting new Maratha he trained them in the quick-striking techniques he had refined from battle tactics already in existence in the region. Describing the maneuvers of Ambar's Maratha light cavalry, Shyam notes how they "engaged in hovering on the right and the left flanks of the enemy, cutting off their lines of communication, intercepting their supplies, seizing their provisions and delivering surprise attacks on their camps in the night." Sweeping in at full speed, "the Maratha *bargis* would in the first instance fight the enemy and then disappear in different directions and collect again and take the enemy by surprise." Ambar's cavalry was particularly deadly during the rainy season, swarming into enemy camps and causing chaos while remaining organized themselves.<sup>16</sup> As one scholar put it, Ambar essentially "waged a war of movement rather than of sieges."<sup>17</sup>

For Ambar, defending the Deccan sometimes meant taking particular offensive action—that is, even going into Mughal territory or lands over

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16 In addition to *bargis*, there were two other kinds of mounted warriors in the Deccan: *silehdars*, which were "mail-clad" knights, and generally less reliable than *bargis*, and the horsemen maintained by local feudal chiefs, which Ambar seldom enlisted; Shyam, pages 149–150.

17 Rotzer, page 90.

which the Emperor had suzerainty. In 1609, an English contemporary observed how Ambar attacked Surat (in Gujarat): “Malik Ambar, a noble of Nizam’sah’s court ... invaded Gujarat at the head of 50,000 horse and plundered, and [then] retired, as quickly as he came.” The next year Ambar laid siege to the Mughal headquarters at Burhanpur, and in 1620 he even attacked Malwa beyond the Marmada.<sup>18</sup> But even as Ambar sometimes carried war into Mughal land, he was also flexible, conceding nominal victory on his own land to the imperialists for strategic purposes. As Shyam notes:

“It is true that Prince Shah Jahan won victory twice over [Ambar] but his success on both the occasions was more [for show] than real. In spite of his superiority of numbers and resources he failed to seize even an inch of territory or a single fort from the hands of Malik Ambar ... Each time, no sooner did the prince turn his back than Malik Ambar started the counter offensive, driving the enemy across the Narbada [river] and recovering his losses.”<sup>19</sup>

While securing land, Ambar also developed an alliance with Habshi sailors whose impressively-built and located island fortress of Janjira was just off the coast of the Sultanate of Ahmednagar. The populations on the western coast of India had seen a number of Abyssinians gain prominence going back at least a century before Ambar’s rule—with a wider presence across the western Indian Ocean world going back many centuries earlier. As observers from the ninth-century Ethiopian-Iraqi literary figure Al-Jahiz to the fourteenth-century North African jurist and traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa variously noted, black warriors were a visible part of many of the kingdoms of the western Indian Ocean world—the latter describing Abyssinians as “the guarantors of safety” on the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> Some of these seafaring Africans came to hold significant power and leadership positions on India’s western seaboard. For instance, in 1530, Sayf al-Mulk Miftah, described as an Ethiopian, was the governor of Daman on the coast of Ahmednagar, commanding a force of four thousand Habshi soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

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18 Tamaskar, page 286.

19 Shyam, pages 149–150.

20 Ibn Battuta. 2002. Tim Mackintosh-Smith (Editor). *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*. London: Picador. Page 216.

21 Ali, “East Africa” essay in “The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World,” online exhibit, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, 2011.

Janjira, derived from the word *jazeera*, meaning “island” in Arabic, was one among several key forts either built or overtaken by Abyssinians on the western coast of India. Janjira, perhaps the most impressive of the forts along the coast, was built on a rocky island at the mouth of the Bay of Rajapuri leading into the Kundalika River. It was one of over a dozen forts, largely on the mainland, controlling sea access from Daman in the north to just south of Goa. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, Habshi sailors-turned-rulers established a royal lineage at Janjira that reigned for the next three centuries. During Ambar’s time, the Nizam Shahi controlled several seaports with accompanying forts along the Konkan coast, including Chaul, Dabhol, and Janjira. In 1621 Ambar, who made the backwaters of the island a base for his naval fleet, appointed Siddi Ambar, known as Sainak (“The Little”—to distinguish him from Malik Ambar) as *subhedar* (governor) of Janjira.<sup>22</sup>

Ambar’s military planning, construction of forts and reinforcement of existing ones, intelligence gathering, use of both conventional and guerrilla warfare, and ongoing recruitment and training of soldiers were complemented by his diplomatic skills as a statesman. He understood the importance of diplomacy when possible and force when necessary. Moreover, as his relationships with Deccani leaders, Mughal envoys, European traders, and both Maratha and Abyssinians attest, he dealt with a range of constituencies.

Part of Ambar’s diplomatic strategy was making long-term political investments, including creating family connections. In 1608 he negotiated an alliance with Sultan Ibrahim II of Bijapur in the south in order to concentrate his efforts in battling the Mughals to the north. As the historian Richard Eaton writes, “His efforts paid off, for just two years later, the Mughal garrison in Ahmednagar would fall and the Habshi *peshwa* would be emboldened to move the Nizam Shahi court from Junnar further north, to Daulatabad.”<sup>23</sup> But because Ambar was equally concerned about the long term he also worked to build more lasting kinship ties with Bijapur by having his son Fateh Khan marry the Adil Shah’s daughter in 1609. Such relationships could and would help at future times when Ambar needed to draw upon Bijapur’s assistance to combat other forces or mitigate against attacks from Bijapur itself.

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22 Tamaskar, Page 156; Sidi Ambar would govern until 1641, at which time Sidi Yusuf took over; Robbins and McLeod, pages 179, 213.

23 Eaton, Richard. 2005. *A Social History of the Deccan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Page 129.

Ambar's recorded interactions with the Mughal envoy Asad Beg, a Mughal ally named Hasan Ali Beg, and the Dutch trader Pieter van den Broecke testify to his diplomatic handling of people, which he seems to have done at a personal level, in warm ways, and, at times, with extraordinary fanfare. Asad Beg describes a particular dinner reception held by Ambar at Balaghat in the envoy's honor:

“All the amirs, members of the government, men of letters, religious leaders, and saints formed an assemblage even one tenth of which was to be rarely seen at one place in India. Religious discourses and recitals from the Qur'an were held on a scale only to be witnessed in the holy town of Mashad ... Between the two prayers a magnificent dinner party was held, which in the Deccani dialect is called “Kanduri.” A large tent was pitched in an open space, and round it were *Shamiyanas* [ceremonial awnings] decorated with the figures of fish woven into the covering. In every corner were placed brass and silver vessels, one on the top of the other to [the] height of a man, each filled with dainty eatables. Every item of food was tastily cooked, sprinkled with a profusion of spices. There were numerous varieties of delicious puddings, sweets, cakes, unleavened bread, all beyond praise, description or exaggeration.”<sup>24</sup>

The opulence of the reception is reminiscent of a description by the Portuguese Francisco Álvares of the sprawling imperial encampments in Ethiopia—which he described as “a city in a great plain,” filled with colorful pavilions—and speaks to Ambar's power, prominence, and influence.

Such was the wealth of the ruling classes of India, which often set the stage for important talks. Following the formal part of the reception, Asad Beg asked Ambar to join him in breaching a misunderstanding with a Mughal ally. Following the great reception, “the two retired into the [*sic*] privacy and laid bare their inmost thoughts in an open-hearted talk ... and both of them parted company with each other as friends,” writes Asad Beg.<sup>25</sup> But Ambar treated Mughals in “friendly” terms for tactical purposes. After all, the Mughals were fundamentally his enemy, no matter how kindly and openly he appeared to treat any one of their representatives or allies.

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24 *Asad-i Waqiat*. 1941. In Banarasi Prasad Saksena in *Proceedings, Indian History Congress*, 5. Hyderabad. pages 601–603; Tamaskar, pages 66–67, 75.

25 Tamaskar, page 67.

Diplomacy without the backing of force, however, was ultimately limited in its effect. Ambar was repeatedly left fighting without the support of, or sometimes even under direct attack by, other Deccani sultanates. At several points in his career he was in fact placed in the position of having to appear as if he had capitulated to the Mughals as a way of buying more time, sometimes simply to give his soldiers time to rest, or as a way of opening up new political opportunities. Ambar started one set of negotiations with the Mughals after being defeated in battle by sending his agents and officers to his victor, Prince Shah Jahan, with requests that “after this I will not drop the thread of service and loyalty from my hand nor put out my foot beyond and will regard whatever tribute and fine be commanded as favour and will send it to the government.” It was a humiliating peace but one that was necessary since the rulers of Bijapur and Golconda were not willing to back him up; in fact, they often used Ambar as a “safety valve” in order to protect their own immediate interests.<sup>26</sup>

The Emperor Jahangir, who died just one year after Malik Ambar passed away, may have been pleased to hear the news that his nemesis was finally gone. Ambar’s eldest son Khan, who took over as Regent, however, would deny the emperor the pleasure of conquering the Nizam Shahi. Under the weight of the Mughal armies and their Deccani allies, Khan was only able to hold out for so long. In 1633 Ambar’s son was forced to hand over the young Sultan of Ahmednagar, Hussain Nizam Shah, to the Mughals. He did so along with other members of the royal family, ending nearly one hundred and fifty years of dynastic rule. But then came a sudden turn of events.

The Maratha commander Shahaji Raje Bhonsle, who had fought with Ambar in the Battle of Bhatvadi but had since gone into the service of Bijapur, installed a new boy sultan as Murtaza Nizam Shah III with the help of the Adil Shah (the Nizam Shahi’s off-again, now on-again ally), breathing new life into Ahmednagar, just as Ambar had done over three decades earlier. But like Khan, Shahaji could not withstand the imperialist forces, holding out for just three more years—that is, until 1636. In that year the Mughals under Prince Aurangzeb led imperial armies at his father Emperor Shah Jahan’s direction, wresting control of the rebel sultanate and absorbing it into the empire. What neither Akbar nor Jahangir was able to do, Aurangzeb accomplished for his father, Shah Jahan, who had rebelled against his father, just as his

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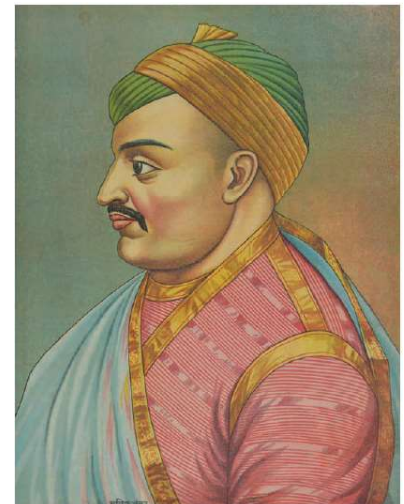
26 Shyam, pages 102–103; Mu’tamad Khan, page 208.





grandfather had rebelled against his. Without a clear line of succession (for instance, with the system of primogeniture, where the eldest son assumes the throne upon the king's death), brother fought brother. In Aurangzeb's case, he would imprison his father *and* kill his brother, Dara Shikoh, in order to become emperor.

In the end, Ambar's model city, Khirki, twice destroyed by the Mughals during his lifetime, was renamed Aurangabad, in honor of the emperor Aurangzeb (whose piety took him down a very different path than the one Ambar created).<sup>27</sup> Within a generation after the end of the Nizam Shahi, both Bijapur and Golconda would also fall under the weight of the imperial Mughal armies, yet the seeds of resistance had been sown in a line of warriors Ambar had helped to inspire and train: the Maratha warriors of the Bhonsle clan and in the extraordinary career of the Deccan's next and most outstanding rebel leader, Shivaji Bhonsle—Maloji Raje Bhonsle's grandson and Shahaji's son (the latter two having served in Ambar's army at high ranks). Born in the city of Junnar located in the district of Puna, Shivaji would effectively press the Mughals back. Perhaps as a child hearing stories of the Regent of Ahmednagar at the Battle of Bhatvadi, where his father led Maratha troops under Ambar's command, he caught the spirit of rebellion passed down from one generation to the next: Chand Bibi to Ambar, Ambar to Shahaji, and finally Shahaji to Shivaji. In creating a counterweight to Mughal imperialism, Shivaji drew upon some of the same organizing and guerrilla tactics used by those who preceded him, most effectively developed and practiced by the Abyssinian defender of the Deccan—Malik Ambar.<sup>28</sup>



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27 Despite the renaming of Khirki first and very briefly to Fatehnagar (after Ambar's son Fateh Khan) in 1627 and then to Aurangabad in 1653, there is a vibrant oral tradition of Ambar's role in having founded the city. Oral interviews conducted in Aurangabad and Daulatabad, March 10–12, 2012, by Omar H. Ali.

28 Ambar's descendants are scattered across the Deccan. Ambar's eldest son Fateh Khan received a pension after surrendering to the Mughals. It is unclear what happened to his second son, Chengiz Khan. His daughter Shahir went to Nanded in Marathwada, where her tomb may be found. His other daughter, Azija, married Siddi Abdulah, who was given a *jagir* in the village of Velup, also in Nanded. Other descendants may be found in the regions surrounding Ahmednagar; Sadiq Ali, page 104. Today, Siddis in India live in Gujarat, the area of Janjira, as well as in Karnataka and Hyderabad (they also live in southern Pakistan and Sri Lanka); see Malieckal, page 48. The anthropologist Helene Basu has explored the Siddis of Gujarat; see Basu, pages 223–249.

7. (opposite) Malik Ambar's tomb in Khuldabad. Photograph by Klaus Rotzer.

8. (above) Chromolithograph printed ca. 1880 by Poona Chitrashala Press, after a portrait of Malik Ambar by an Indian artist. Collection of Kenneth and Joyce Robbins.



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