

THE SIMIEN AND BATU RANGES IN ETHIOPIA

BY DOUGLAS BUSK

As far as I can see no paper on the mountains of Ethiopia has appeared in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* since that in Vol. XXIV, p. 79. This gives, indeed, little information, but as it mentions snow seen from a distance,¹ I would stress that even fifty years ago snow, as opposed to hail, was most improbable.

About a quarter of Ethiopia must lie at over 8,000 ft. and perhaps a tenth of the whole country exceeds 10,000 ft. It is, therefore, at first sight surprising that there should be little mention of the area in mountaineering periodicals. The reason is the turbulence of the country until the twenties, the Italo-Abyssinian war and World War II that followed, and the difficulty since then of ascertaining conditions of travel and earmarking meritorious mountaineering objectives.

In an article in *The Mountain World* for 1955 I endeavoured to throw some light on the main ranges in Ethiopia and give hints to travellers. Further information has, however, since been published, which invalidates my remarks on the highest group, the Simien Mountains. As these are the most likely to attract visitors, I append below some up-to-date notes, which inevitably involve some repetition of what has already appeared in *The Mountain World*. I have also added a few lines about the Batu Group.

I. THE MOUNTAINS OF SIMIEN (SEMIEN)²

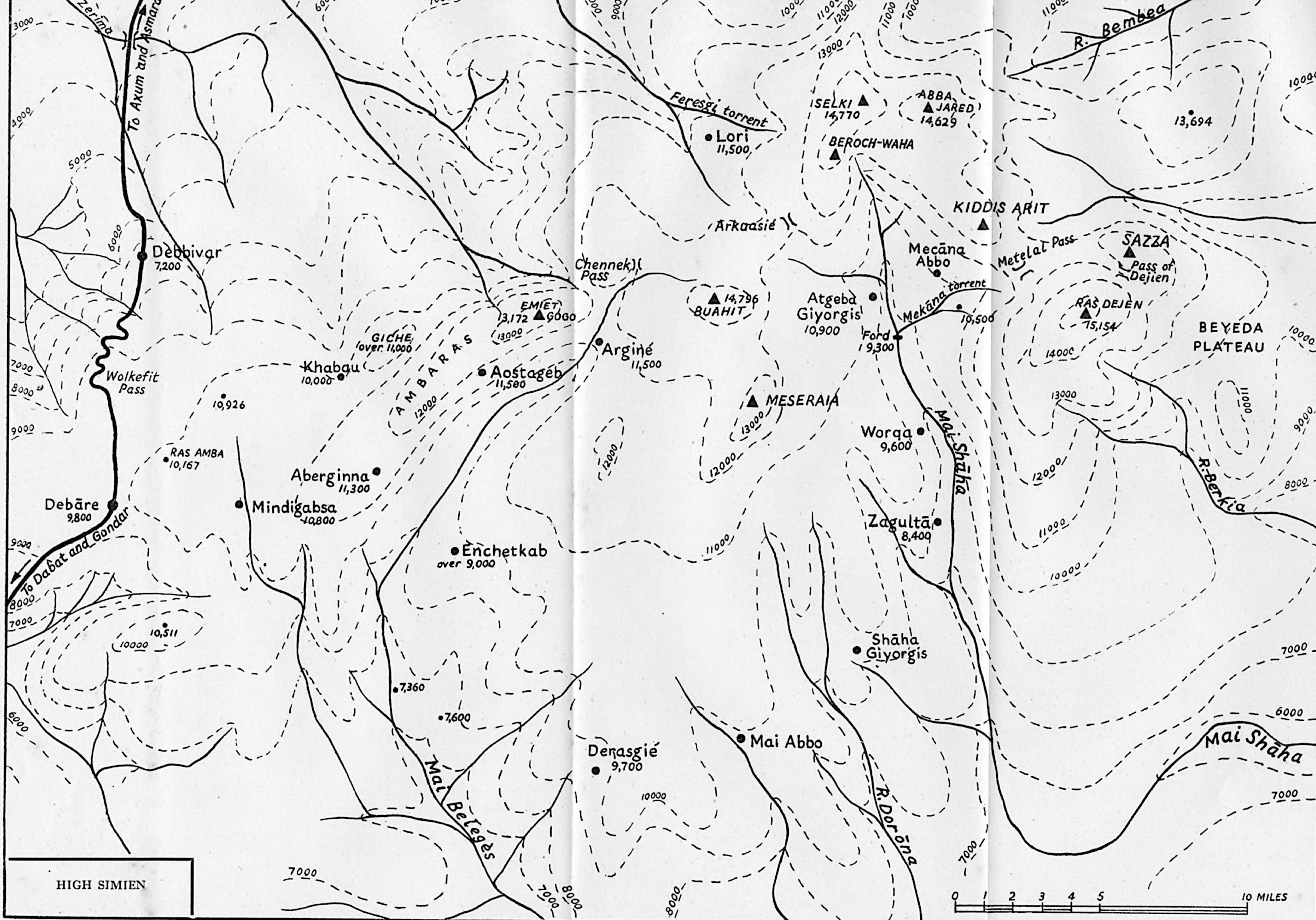
The most easily accessible sources known to me for Simien are Jeannel,³ Maydon⁴ and a guidebook published by the *Consociazione*

¹ Several travellers, seeing the peaks from far off, thought they descried snow, but on closer approach found they were misled by steep slopes of pale grass shining in the sun.

² As in my article in *The Mountain World* I have inserted in brackets variations of names or transliterations frequently heard or found in maps. I am indebted to the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research for permission to re-use the basic material.

³ Jeannel, *Hautes Montagnes d'Afrique* (Editions du Museum, Paris, 1950). This concentrates on flora and fauna, but geology is dealt with. It only deals with Ethiopian mountains north of the Hawash river (except for an addendum by Professor Scott on Chilalo). Its main importance attaches to the great massifs of Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda and the Congo. It is, however, most valuable for references.

⁴ *Simen, its Heights and Abysses* (Witherby, 1925), which concentrates on shooting.



HIGH SIMIEN

Turistica Italiana.⁵ I strongly recommend the potential visitor to consult all three.

Less accessible, but far more valuable and detailed sources, the first three illustrated, are Sermolli,⁶ Scott,⁷ Werdeker⁸ and Hövermann.⁹ The first includes a map of the higher peaks on a scale of 1:150,000 and gives a very clear account of the topography and history of the range. The second, with a map on a scale of 1:275,000 showing routes of access, concentrates on botany. The third has a sketch-map illustrating the photo-grammetrical work of the party on a scale of 1:100,000. It is stated that a contour map, 1:25,000, is under preparation. Werdeker's paper concentrates on survey, glaciology and geology and contains a valuable bibliography. Hövermann's treatise is a minor masterpiece of research. As the title reveals it deals primarily with the level of the snowline, but it gives a complete list of foreign expeditions to Simien. There are also valuable conclusions about the effect of precipitation in Ethiopia on the Nile flood waters.

The highest summit of Simien is Ras Dashan (Dascian), which is often locally pronounced Dejen (Dedjen, Degien).¹⁰ The Italian military expedition, recorded in *Africa Orientale Italiana*, was passionately anxious to produce a 5,000-m. peak in what was then Italian overseas territory and ingeniously contrived to discover that Ras Dashan was 5,005 m. (16,420 ft.). The height accepted on most maps is 4,620 m. (15,159 ft.), but Werdeker gives 4,580 m. (15,027 ft.). In addition to Ras Dashan there are many other peaks over 14,000 ft. All, except for isolated pinnacles, seem easy of access, though precipitous routes are available to cragsmen.

The best approach to the range is from Asmara via Axum and the road running south-west to Gondar, which was built for military purposes by the Italians. Both scenically and as an engineering feat it is one of the most magnificent I know in a country of remarkable roads.

⁵ *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Milan, 1938). This is, of course, out of date and must be used with great caution where such matters as roads, hotels, etc., are concerned. It is, however, a painstaking work and even now most valuable.

⁶ 'Appunti sull' altrimetria e la toponomastica dell' alto Semien,' published in *L'Universo*, the monthly review of the Italian *Istituto Geografico Militare* Florence (July 1940).

⁷ 'Journey to the High Simien District, Northern Ethiopia, 1952-3,' published (in English) in *Webbia*, Vol. XI, pp. 425-450, 1955, the review of the *Istituto Botanico dell' Universita*, Florence.

⁸ 'Beobachtungen in den Hochländern Äthiopiens auf einer Forschungsreise 1953-4,' published in *Erdkunde*, Vol. IX, part 4, 1955 (Dümmlers Verlag, Bonn). This includes a very brief summary in English.

⁹ 'Über die Höhenlage der Schneegrenze in Aethiopien und ihre Schwankungen in historischer Zeit,' published in the *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, 1954, No. 6.

¹⁰ Dejen was first ascended, according to Hövermann, by a European party on Jan. 14, 1841 (Ferret and Galinier).

It crosses the deep rift of the Takazze River and rises to Addi Arkai, which the Italian military party used as a starting point for the mountains. There follows the astounding ascent of the Wolkefit (Uolchefit) Pass. Just beyond the crest lies Debarek, which is the best starting point for the mountains.

As the crow flies the distance from Debarek to Ras Dashan is not more than 35 miles, but five days must be allowed because the caravan track traverses immense gorges, where mules can only progress slowly. A point to remember is that these high ridges are very waterless and what supply there is, is often of dubious quality. Ample should be carried. The route leads over or close to many lofty peaks, notably Buahit, which is probably the second highest in the group. The caravan track continues beyond the pass close under Ras Dashan, dropping down to the Takazze and thence to Axum. I know of no European party that has followed this route beyond Ras Dashan, which, while presenting no difficulties, should prove scenically spectacular.

Another route of access is from Dabat, on the road 17 miles south of Debarek, thence due east to Derasgie¹¹ and north to the mountains. The ideal is, therefore, a round tour.

Dabat and Debarek can, of course, easily be reached from Gondar to the south, but there is as yet no motorable track from Gondar round Lake Tana to Bahar Dar and Addis Ababa. I have floated vehicles across the lake, but it was a hair-raising experience and I do not recommend it.

The Simien mountains are rather a closed area and any party, even if coming from the north, should drive through to Gondar to call on the Governor General to obtain the necessary permits and recommendations to the local authorities at Debarek. Care should be taken to get a special and separate permit to take photographs, since in this remote region cameras are sometimes objects of suspicion. The Simien ibex (Walia), which exists nowhere else, is now protected and permission to shoot one is most unlikely. A police escort will certainly be provided and would be very useful in dealing with mulemen, local inhabitants, etc.

In 1955 the charge was E\$2 per day per mule when travelling and E\$1 per day when stationary. (E\$7 = £1.) Two mulemen strongly recommended at Debarek are Tasali and Saudu, who are brothers. A

¹¹ At Derasgie there is a cave containing a number of bodies in a remarkable state of preservation. They do not appear to have been deliberately mummified, but preserved by natural desiccation. The bodies are clothed and samples of the garments have been removed to be tested by modern processes in order to ascertain the age, which is unknown. It might be anything from one to ten centuries.

The Emperor Theodore was crowned at Derasgie, which is an abbreviation of Debra Egzyaber, the Hill of God.

written contract should be drawn up and thumb-printed by the mulemen. Food is available in villages passed en route ; it is not provided at the travellers' expense for mulemen or police escort. If they have done well, it would, however, be only fair to buy them a sheep as a parting present.

A map of the Simien area is attached. I am indebted to Dr. Hugh Scott for permission to reprint this in amended form from his article in *Webbia*.

I hope to present shortly to the library of the Alpine Club a volume in which I have had bound together offprints of my article in *The Mountain World*, of this article, and of the articles by Sermolli, Scott, Werdeker and Hövermann referred to above.

II. THE BATU MOUNTAINS

As mentioned in my article in *The Mountain World*, where routes of access are given, this group is, as far as I can ascertain, the least known in Ethiopia. I have still been unable to trace any record of European visits to the higher slopes and I have, alas, failed to penetrate the area myself.

I would, therefore, highly commend the group as worthy of an expedition. I doubt whether any really worthwhile objectives from a strictly mountaineering point of view will be found, but so large an area of untouched country merits a visit by scientists, surveyors or even those like myself who are happy to travel inexpertly in unknown country.