The early history of Eritrea: a new perspective*

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The reconstruction of the ancient Eritrean past has been making considerable steps forward in the recent years. The understanding of the features peculiar for the early history of the coast and the highlands near the Red Sea has grown among the scholars. At the same time, several authors have contributed to the reassessment of the elements shared by the Eritrean and the North-Ethiopian areas in the period between the arrival of the Sabaeans (8th-7th cent. BC) and the rise of Aksum (1st cent.). The bulk of evidence is at the moment rich enough to provide a basis for a more accurate historical interpretation, and the archaeological, epigraphic and linguistic data can be exploited and integrated into a synthetic view, where a function is assigned to every element.

For a long time, all the scientific efforts for the comprehension of the Eritrean past were carried out within an ideological framework of positivistic origin, and the interpretation of the available documents was determined by the “colonial” approach of the more influential scholars. This attitude can be justified as a reflex of the 19th-20th cent. European history, but cannot be disguised further on as the only possible path to the truth. It is sufficient to remind that any construal in the field of ancient history is nothing but the projection of what people think about the past. Therefore, a good reconstruction is determined mainly by the sensitivity of the scholar in finding an appropriate place for each piece of evidence on his desk, in accordance with a general view of what must have really happened.

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In the late 19th and early 20th cent., the logical conclusion of the hegemonic cultural mood was simple and satisfying: the beginnings of the Eritrean and North-Ethiopian civilization were owed to the Sabaeans, who colonized a part of the highlands in the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. In this synthetic reconstruction every element played its role: the ESA inscriptions and the monuments on the African soil were seen as the first documents of the historical presence of the Semites in Africa, the report of Greek and Latin authors seemed to confirm the Yemenite origin of the colonizers, the ethnographic and racial features of the peoples of Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia were considered the result of the mixture between the foreign Sabaeans and the autochthonous Cushitic groups.¹ According to the same view, the relationship between South Arabic, Ga‘az (Classical Ethiopic) and the modern Ethiosemitic languages was interpreted in terms of strictly genetic derivation. These answers to the historical questions put by the discovery of the ESA inscriptions in Africa took into account all the pieces of evidence known until then, but the reconstruction bore a pronounced ideological character. The use of words like “colonizers” and “colonies”, for instance, to denote a special political relationship between the motherland in Yemen and its dependants in Africa, resulted from the application of an external and aprioristic model.² The assumption that history in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia began with a “colonization” implicitly reflected the Zeitgeist of the period when Africa was nothing but a territory open to the European conquest. Yet, as a matter of fact the results of those researches were perceived as exhaustive in the light of the scientific knowledge of that time.

In the second half of the 20th cent. new epigraphic data disturbed this systematic reconstruction and threw it into a structural crisis. The discovery of more ESA inscriptions on both sides of the Red Sea allowed scholars to put

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aside some aspects of the “classical” hypothesis and to introduce new historical subjects. After a close analysis of the ESA vocabulary, Arthur K. Irvine eliminated from the scene the fancy Yemenite tribe of the Habashat, imagined as the one responsible for the Semitization of the African shore. On the contrary, Habashat is nothing but the Sabaean place-name for Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, without any reference to the claimed South Arabian origins of its inhabitants. Upon discovery of dozens of new ESA inscriptions on the African soil, Roger Schneider introduced a distinction between two groups of texts (A and B); one of these (group B) exhibits linguistic features revealing that the authors of the inscriptions were Semites who had arrived in Africa before the Sabaeans and were using a variety of South Arabic influenced by their Semitic mother-tongue.

The regions concerned by these reconstruction attempts were essentially the same as the area that later, since the 1st cent. AD, was ruled by the Kings of Aksum. For a long time, the fact of any possible autonomous role played by the Eritrean regions was kept in shade. In fact, the epigraphic documents in “monumental” script did not allow any specific conclusion about the Ḥamasen, Sāra’e or Akkālā Guzay regions, since most ESA inscriptions were found in Tḥəray, between Aksum and Yḥa. Yet, a different case is that of the South Arabic graffiti, particularly those carved on the Qḥaytō plateau (Akkālā Guzay), first scientifically investigated by Abraham J. Drewes. These writings

proved to have a genetic relationship with the “non-monumental” (or “thamudenic”) “pre-classical” scripts of Southern Arabia, like that of the Wāḍī Yalā (Ḩawlān), in particular of the pottery fragments from the ad-Durayb/Yalā site. The subsequent debate about the origins of the *fidāl* allowed one to draw conclusions focusing on the importance of the Akkālā Guzay district as a cultural mediator during a period marked by the scarcity of documents (between 7th cent. BC and 1st cent AD), as first emphasized by Francis Anfray. This material witnesses that in the early 1st millennium in south-east Eritrea, on the borders of the polity led by the Ethio-Sabaesans (D’MT), there existed a different cultural milieu. The inhabitants of the area had their own writing habits, and later on they became so influential that from their “cursive” script the *fidāl*

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developed. They were part of the ancient “erythraic” cultural community involving Ḩiḡaz, Southern Arabia, Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, with the trade between the two shores of the Red Sea serving a common material ground. The evidence emerging from the archaeological research of the last twenty years allows one to go back to an even more remote chapter of the Eritrean past. A new phase in the archaeology of the Horn of Africa was actually opened when Rodolfo Fattovich drew attention to the findings of the “Ona” sites (“Ona-culture”) in the Greater Asmara Area. This material culture, particularly the “Ona Group” ware, does not only bear affinities to the black-topped ware of the Sudanese Nile Valley, dating to approximately 1500 BC, but also reveals the presence of a cultural influence from the South Arabian coastal culture (Tihama Cultural Complex). According to this construal, in the mid-2nd millennium BC, the Nile Valley, the lowlands between Sudan and Eritrea, the Eritrean highlands and the Tihama coast were connected into one interregional interaction zone. In this context, the “Ona culture” played a central role, possibly as a more ancient evidence of the diffusion of Arabian cultural elements toward the Horn of Africa, long before the implantation of the Sabaean communities in the regions around Aksum and Yaḥa.

It is possible to link these archaeological data and the results of the research carried on in the past decades in the field of the Ethiosemitic comparative linguistics. Since 1972, Robert Hetzron called for attention on

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some archaic features of the Təgré grammar,\(^\text{13}\) which are not explicable in terms of genetic derivation from Gə‘ɔz:\(^\text{14}\) the definite article lä- that can be compared to the “emphatic Lamed” in Biblical Hebrew,\(^\text{15}\) the third person independent pronoun with glottal fricative h- (hətu) against the glottal stop in Gə‘ɔz ([wə]’ətu)\(^\text{16}\), the active participle qatəl (\(<*qātil\)) against qātali in the rest of Ethiosemitic, the ablative preposition mən (\(<*minna\)) against ʾəmməna or ʾəmn in Gə‘ɔz, and the comitative preposition ʾət that can be compared with the element ʾet \(<*ʾitt\) in Biblical Hebrew.\(^\text{17}\) Given that there is little doubt that all the Ethiosemitic languages descend from one and only ancient Semitic,\(^\text{18}\) one can presume in such cases that some features of the Protoethiopic remained

\(^{13}\) The absence of the labiovelars could be considered too, since Təgré is historically and geographically tied to Semitic and Cushitic languages provided with this phonological series (Gə‘ɔz, Təgraŋña, Beğga and Bilin): W. Leslau, *Étude descriptive et comparative du Gafat* (Éthiopien méridional), Paris, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1956, pp. 12-15 (§ 6).


documented in the “conservative” Tǝgre more than in the “innovative” Gǝ‘ǝz. At least, the article lā- and the prepositions ’at and man are not documented in Sabaic. These could be the remnants of an independent Semitic dialect spoken in Eritrea well before the Sabaean expansion, around the end of the 2nd millennium BC.¹⁹

The hypothesis corresponds well to the archaeological results, suggesting the emergence of a complex society of Arabian origin on the Eritrean highlands, some time between the middle and the end of the 2nd millennium BC. Most probably the terminus post quem could be placed around 12th century BC, simultaneously with the weakening of the Egypt-Punt maritime trade-link during the New Kingdom. To the possible reasons of the collapse of the Egyptian hegemony on the African shore of the Red Sea one can now count the growing of this urban civilization of Eritrea, pivoting around the east-west trade (from Nubia, via Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, to Southern Arabia and Ħiḡaz), rather than around the earlier north-south axis (from Egypt, via Nubia, to Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia).²⁰ If this construction is correct, in the 8th-7th cent. BC the Sabaean expansion in Africa merged with an earlier Semitic stratum of Arabian origin, at least in the Eritrean area from around Asmara up to the Saḥal coast.

Since 332 BC, after the Greek conquest of Egypt and during the domination of the Ptolemy (306-31 BC), a new phase started in the Eritrean history, too. Within the Ptolemaic program of intensive and regular trade along the Red Sea coast, a strategic role was played by the Eritrean inland and its products. We know very little about the events that occurred in those and subsequent centuries, but at least one 1st -cent. AD Greek source, the Periplus of the Eritrean Sea, §5, attests that in the Roman times, in the regions north and west of Adulis there was an independent kingdom ruled by a certain Zǝskalǝ.²¹ In his capital city, Greek was the lingua franca spoken by traders, cultivated

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persons, and by the king himself (“the ruler of these regions, from the Moschophagoi to the rest of Barbaria, is Zôskalês, a stickler about his possessions and always holding out for getting more, but in other respects a fine person and well versed in reading and writing Greek”). Possibly the language spoken by the common people in Zôskalês’ kingdom was a Semitic dialect different from the Gê’êz spoken in Aksum and close to modern Têgre. This is suggested by the etymology of the name Adulis as “(territory) allotted”, from Têgre ‘addâlā (0, < *‘adlā), “to allot”.[22] Only the passive participle ‘âddul is attested, but the basic form *‘adul can be easily restored. The initial a- (instead of ‘ə-) was probably determined by the Greek pronunciation of the place-name, and by the related etymological interpretation (“wanting in slaves”), first reported by Plinius the Elder (N.H. vi 34 [172]: Aegyptiorum hoc [sc. oppidum Aduliton] servi profugi a dominis condidere). The same suffix –is could be interpreted as a “grecizing” ending, like –is or –es in the personal names (e.g. Endybis, Sembrouthês, Zôskalês).[23] This reminds the etymology of the name Aksum, proposed a few years ago by Lanfranco Ricci, as “(territory) assigned”, from the Gê’êz verb ’aksâmâ and its passive participle kâsum. Both aksâmâ and kâsum are attested in the land charters promulgated by king Lalibâlā (r. 1186-1225 ca.), and transmitted by the Golden Gospel of Dâbrä Libanos, with the meaning “to assign a land” and “land assigned”.[24]

These elements additionally support the claim that a Semitic language was spoken in Eritrea from the end of the 2nd millennium BC, before the introduction of Sabaic and the development of Gê’êz, and that this language is the most direct ancestor of modern Têgre. One or more waves of peoples coming from the Arabian peninsula crossed the Red Sea and reached the regions north and west of Adulis, where contemporary Tigre-speaking groups are still living. In the African context they contributed to the complex society reflected by the “Ona-culture”. All this admitted, it is possible that, after the Sabaeans took control over a part of the Eritrean highlands, the Semitic-speaking groups, settled down in those regions long before the Kingdom of Saba turned up, received the denomination Têgre, a name derived from the Semitic root *grr, to

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which Gəʼəz gə̀rə̀, gə̀rrə̀ “be subject to, obey”, and Tigre tə̀gə̀rrə̀ “to be a vassal (təgrese)” are related.25 As a matter of fact, the name Təgre is documented for the first time, in the Greek form Τιγρῆταϊ, only in the 6th-cent. scholia to Cosma Indicopleustes (Topographia Christiana, Π 60-63), but most likely the root and the word date back to earlier times26. Thus, the linguistic term təgre, meaning “language of the vassals”, could be an old reference to these Semitic speakers, considered as subjects since the times of the Sabaeen expansion. And if the term gəʼəz can be etymologically interpreted as “language of the free men”, as opposed to təgre or “language of the vassals” (true or alleged), this would be a new argument in favour of that linguistic and social dualism (between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Semitic-speakers) introduced in the Ethio-Eritrean history by the 8th-7th cent. Sabaeen expansion.
