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PANEL1.03 – Archaeology and Ancient History: Focus on the Pre-aksumite period.
(Iris Gerlach, German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, Sanaa Branch, Yemen
Ayele Bekerie, Mekelle University, Ethiopia)

**Reconsidering contacts between southern Arabia
and the highlands of Tigrai in the 1st millennium BC**

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For the last ten years, research concerning ancient history of Ethiopia focus on relations between the highlands of Tigrai and Eritrea and the adjoining regions, especially the Nile Valley. It is seemingly a way to reconsider the Ethiopian history in the 1st millennium BC, which was often called “pre-Aksumite” (following the suggestion of Fr. Anfray) in order to outline a process of development and to distinguish a kind of a preliminary phase which has to set up the emergence of the Aksumite kingdom. Such an argument claims against the idea of a culturally monolithic “pre-Aksumite” polity: yet, considering the various endogenous and exogenous elements, from Egypt and the Nile Valley to Southern Arabia, it emphasizes a complexity of different traditions, identities, or even socio-political systems, which are still difficult to discern.

Exogenous elements as well as any evidence for close contact and imprint of any kind may be considered as common, taking into account the geographical position of North Ethiopia and Eritrea as an important crossroads between northeast Africa, the Mediterranean basin, southern Arabia and the Indian Ocean. One of these elements though – the South Arabian one – appears to be more important, in such a way that one could have thought of a process of colonization or maybe the settlement of an independent state – that is, whatever the model, the migration in Ethiopia of South-Arabian people. Even legends, up to now, make the population in the villages assure that the first inhabitants came from Arabia...

In fact, a significant question comes out about a South-Arabian presence in the 7th century BC or earlier, which seems to set up a kind of, even localised, polity – named “D’MT” according to the inscriptions from the first half of the 1st millenium BC –, but which would have disappeared before the emergence of Aksum. The inscriptions represent a clear evidence for close contact, since the writing, the language (in spite of a few differences of phonetics, syntax and vocabulary), but also the pantheon – with ‘Astar (‘str), Hawbas (Hbs), Almaqah (‘lmqh) and other South-Arabian / Sabaean deities –, point in places to a strong cultural imprint. Together with monumental structures (at Yeha, perhaps also at Kaskase) and artworks, especially in religious context, the epigraphic evidence show some kind of influence, or even power, although nothing today reveals any model of socio-political system nor any expansion neither later fragmentation of the supposed model towards an “africanization” process.

Since there is no indication in South Arabian sources of any migration, whatever its form, from this country to Ethiopia at that time, the paper would like to propose to reassess and debate on the nature of contacts between the highlands of Tigrai and southern Arabia in the 1st millennium BC, and furthermore on the chronology of this period.

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Reconsidering contacts between southern Arabia and the highlands of Tigrai in the 1st millennium BC

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The idea that, in Antiquity, the different populations of North Ethiopia had contacts with either the East or the West, South Arabia or the Nile Valley and Sudan, is obvious as one may call to mind that the Highlands of Tigrai are situated at the focal point of the trade routes between India, East Africa, and the Mediterranean world.

Before reconsidering the relations between Ethiopia and South Arabia in the 1st millennium BC, let us have a glance at the 1st millennium AD, when both countries were part of an important trade and communication network straight linked to the one from the Mediterranean world, which took either from the Red Sea or from caravan trails on both sides, Arabian Peninsula as well as the Nile Valley and Egypt. This we know thanks to the rich documentation we have, either from Ethiopia or South Arabia. In the early 1st millennium AD in fact, the kingdom of Aksum rose in an amazing way: script evolved, the Aksumite coinage appeared, and probably the famous stelae we see at Aksum today were erected during this same period. [\[Slide 1\]](#)

Relations and trade between Ethiopia and southern Arabia in the 1st millennium AD

Iwona Gajda

Especially between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD, the kingdom of Aksum became powerful and tried to overcome some neighbouring countries, on the African continent, like Meroe, but also on the ones which prospered on the East side of the Red Sea: Ḥimyar and Saba', in the southern Arabian highlands. Several South Arabian inscriptions from the 3rd century AD indeed relate conflicts with the Ethiopians who invaded their territories [\[Robin 1981\]](#).

– The Sabaeans were first allied with the Ethiopians against the Ḥimyarites –

for example the inscriptions Nāmi N'Ġ 13 + 14, dated back to the very beginning of the 3rd century, and CIH 308 [\[Robin 1989, 1995\]](#)

CIH 308 mentions this alliance with an Aksumite king named Gadarat (*Gdrt mlk Ḥbst*), who might be identified with *Gdr*, author of a short Ethiopian inscription found at Addi Gelemo – on a curved bronze sheet [\[RIE 180\]](#).

– However, conflicts soon broke out: several South Arabian inscriptions relate fights against the Ethiopian army (*ḥms 'ḥbšn*), Ethiopian “pillagers” (*b'b't 'ḥbšn* or *b'b't-hmw*), Ethiopian groups (*'ḥzb 'ḥbšn*) [\[MAFRAY al-Mi'sāl 3/2, 8-9; 5/16 | Ja 635/23-24 | Bāfaqīh 1991\]](#), which were apparently allied to some South Arabian tribes, and attacked Sabaeans and Ḥimyarite territories.

– According to JA 631, the Ethiopians then took over the Ḥimyarite capital Zafār, for seven months; moreover, JA 577/8-12 relates their control over an important caravan city, Najrān, situated in the north-eastern part of the country, on the route leading to the North

and the Levant, and MAFRAY al-Mi'sāl 5/17 also over the port of Aden, a trading post between India and the Mediterranean.

Since there is no mention of any fight against the Ethiopians, nor of any presence of them after the second half of the 3rd century, it seems that the South Arabians finally succeeded in driving back the invaders out of their country till the 6th century.

Yet, a powerful king of Aksum, named Ezana, reigning in the 4th century and converted to Christianity, claims in his royal title the control over the South Arabian land of Ḥimyar and its royal castle Raydān, over the land of Saba' and its royal castle Salḥīn...

– Ezana uses the title of “king of Aksum and Ḥimyar, Raydān, Saba'...”:

– ‘ezana ... neguša / 'aksum / waza / ḥəmer / waza / raydān / waza / saba' / waza / salḥen /
waza / şeyāmo / waza / bəgā / waza / kāsū
[RIE 187, 188, 189 | RIE 270, 270bis, 271]

Anyhow, this title does not seem to reflect any Ethiopian domination since there is no other evidence of it. In fact, at that time, both Aksum and Ḥimyar seem to have directed their ambitions towards the North: in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, Aksum conquered Meroe, and Ḥimyar launched several expeditions in central Arabia. [Slide 2]

Conversely, in the first half of the 6th century, conflicts must have rise again between the two countries: few inscriptions (as well as Byzantine sources) relate about Abrahe, the chief of the Ethiopian army sent by *Negus* Kaleb from Ethiopia who reigned over the kingdom of Ḥimyar for a few decades, and was followed by his sons.

– CIH 541 | DAI GDN 2002-20 | Ry 506 | Je J44 + 545 + 546 + 547....
+ hagiographic texts = Martyrion Sancti Aretae,
+ Procopius.

The famous Aksumite king Kaleb, known as Ella Aṣḥəḥa, could then have claimed the control over a few lands of southern and even central Arabia, adding all the elements of the royal Ḥimyarite's title to his own royal title...

– ... klb / 'l / 'šbḥ / wld / tzn / b's / lzn / ngš / 'ksm / wḥmr / wzrydn / wsb' / wslḥn / wḥdm /
wzymnt / wthmt [RIE 191]

The reasons why the Ethiopian sovereigns tried to take over South Arabian lands in the 3rd century and again in the 6th century AD are undoubtedly the development of long distance trade of fragrances locally produced and various goods coming from India.

All these goods were carried towards the Near East by sea as well as by land, following caravan trails with camels.

The Ethiopians obviously wanted to take over the whole of this trade: it is noteworthy that they occupied Najrān [Ja 577/ 8-12], an important commercial centre on the way to the North. Hence, intensive, often hostile contacts existed between the countries on both sides of the Red Sea in the Aksumite period.

Straight contacts between South Arabia and Ethiopia might as well have existed much earlier, even as far as the very beginning of the 1st millennium BC. It is startling that script and monumental buildings appear simultaneously in both countries, around the 8th century BC.

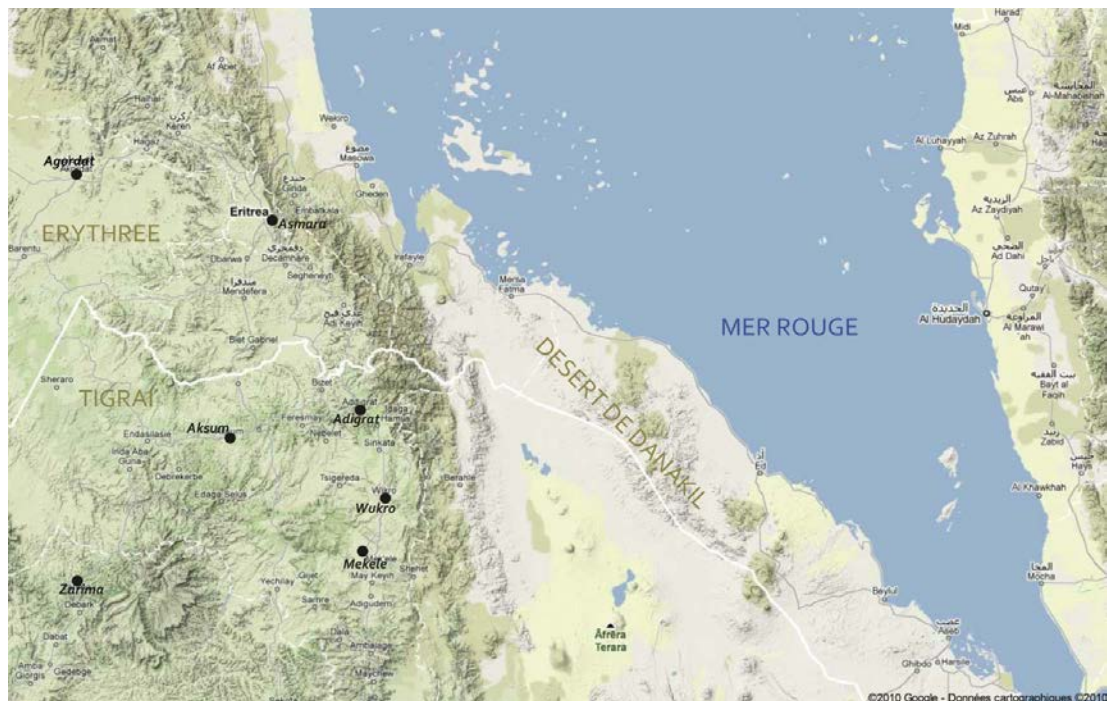
Even if we have less evidence of any kind of realm, it is obvious that the use of script – providing furthermore monumental inscriptions:

- Yeha [RIE 7 & 28 to 39], and small fragments or isolated letters [RIE 40 to 50],
- Aksum: Amda Tsyon / Seglamen) [RIE 1], Abba Pantaleon [RIE 2],
- and around: Enda Cerqos [RIE 3 to 6], Haoulti, Enda Cerqos, Gobochema [RIE 14 to 27],
- Kaskase in Eritrea [RIE 11 & 12],
- Mäqabər Ga'əwa near Wukro [Wolf & Nowotnick 2010 | MG 1 to 5 = DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-1 to 5]

together with the construction of huge temples:

- Yeha [De Maigret & Robin 1998],
- Haoulti [Leclant 1959 | de Contenson 1963],
- Kaskase – as far as the monolithic square-sectioned pillars are concerned [Tringali 1978 | Wenig 2006 | Curtis & Habtemichael 2008],

and the production of artworks of high quality, either in stone or bronze, point out a flourishing condition of the country at that time. [Slide 3]



(Cartography F. Dugast, 2010).

Documentation is at least scarce and fragmentary, and therefore more difficult to make clear: though it may be sufficient to bring out the question of the development, since the 8th century BC, even before, of strong political structures – wherever they were settled – associated with a trade network formerly fixed up between both sides of the Red Sea.

As it is, Ethiopian inscriptions and buildings seem to be very similar to the ones from South Arabia: though, nothing but this actual likeness indicates any relationship of any kind between both countries in early time.

In this very context, epigraphic data make up a significant set of evidence as far as relationship and/or South Arabian presence is concerned, as alphabet, written form, even language and its key feature clearly point out a Sabaic connection.

A similar script on both sides of the Red Sea (1st millennium BC-AD)

First of all, it is admitted that script appeared at the same time in South Arabia and in Ethiopia, as it may be concluded from the comparison of the inscriptions' palaeographic style on both sides, in its early stage – style A and B according to Jacqueline Pirenne's classification [Pirenne 1956].

The first monumental inscriptions were either contemporaneous – maybe the South Arabian ones occurred slightly earlier, a few decades at the most. Therefore it can be assumed today that the first monumental inscriptions were written in Ethiopia in the 7th or even 8th century BC.

- The ancient hypothesis according to which the script appeared in Ethiopia in the 5th century BC, based on the comparison with the chronology of Ancient South Arabia previously proposed, is now rejected by most of the scholars [De Maigret & Robin 1998]. This chronology has been recently confirmed by radiocarbon analysis on the first building stage of the Almaqah temple at Mäqabər Ga'əwa [Wolf & Nowotnick 2010].

Though, it is hard to estimate how long this initial phase lasted.

From this early period, we know about 70 monumental inscriptions, but also about 100 graffiti. That is to say that the use of script was not limited to sovereigns' purpose...

The monumental inscriptions, including less than 20 royal texts, were probably written during a relatively short period, possibly no longer than 100 or 150 years – as far as the actually known data are concerned. We cannot precisely date the graffiti: they could have been written at the same time or later on.

The script then knew several modifications: some letters have pivoted on their axe, some changed their shape – from circular to triangular for instance (the ' and the w). [Slide 4]

- A few inscriptions written on slabs of schist present some of these differences of palaeography [RIE 181 to 184 D], but are difficult to classify in a chronological order; a short text from *Gdr*, king of Aksum, dates probably from the 3rd century AD [RIE 180], that is the Aksumite period.
- It was once suggested that the evolution of the script in Ethiopia reflected the evolution of the cursive script in southern Arabia [Bernand *et al.* 1991].

This hypothesis has to be rejected in the light of the new thorough studies on numerous South Arabian inscriptions engraved on wood [Ryckmanns 1955; Stein 2003]. The two types of writing simply become more and more different in time. It is now sure that the Ethiopian script was modified by the Ethiopians themselves.

The major change occurred in the 4th century AD, when the system of noting vowels was introduced, and transformed an alphabet of South Arabian origin into a kind of syllabary – or rather a kind of vocalised alphabet. The origin of this invention which resulted in creation of a very precise system used for noting Ge'ez is but not known: some scholars supposed that it could have been inspired, afterwards, by some Indian script, the brahmī or karosthi [Rodinson 1963].

It is hard to find out exactly at what time the transition occurred from the very identical script from the 1st millennium BC in South Arabia and in Ethiopia to the modified script which evolved in Ethiopia independently from the evolution of the one in South Arabia, which changed very little. Anyhow, this foremost heritage shows the strong ties that evolved between the two countries in early Antiquity.

Later on, each of these civilisations took its own way: yet, this common point of the two does not seem to result from a punctual incident...

Some specificities of the Ethiopian inscriptions (1st millennium BC)

Although the script is clearly identical, most of the inscriptions we find in Ethiopia at this first stage reveal few elements, in language and its key feature, as well as in custom, still unknown in southern Arabia.

They are for sure quite short and mainly consecration or invocation texts, to one or more divinities, following the expression: X [son of XX] has dedicated something to D. Few of them though give only a personal name adjoined to religious symbols, associating them to a religious purpose.

Different groups can be hence distinguished depending on the content and the support:

- “Monumental” inscriptions: the text is a consecration to a deity, tidily engraved on part of a monument – building, altar, incense burner or statue. [Slide 5]

Most of them (about 20) are royal, granting the construction or the foundation of a temple which has been involved by a *mukarrib* (Yeha [RIE 7 & 37 | De Maigret & Robin 1998]);

Few others (about 30) are dedicatory texts, in some cases imploring something specific like a child – for example on seating woman statues, their hands on their knees, found at Addi Gelemo [RIE 52]:

= lwkb / ymnt / wldm

or, more recently, at Mäqabər Ga’əwa [MG 2 = DAI ‘Addi ‘Akawəḥ 2008-3]:

= [symbol] w’rn / mlkn / šr’n / bn / rd’m / w-šhtm / ‘rkytn / hḥds / l-lm qh / ywm / tb’l / byt / ‘lmqh / b-yḥ’ / b-nhy / ttr / w-lmqh / w-ḏt-ḥmym / w-ḏt-b’ dn /



Monumental inscription from Amda Tsyon, Seglamen (near Aksum), “Monumental A”, 8th-7th c. BC (RIE 1).



“Sitting woman”, Mäqabər Ga’əwa (near Makale), Addi Gelemo (RIE 52), 8th-7th c. BC

Few examples are namely from stonemasons (*grbyn*) who dedicated a kind of “ex-voto”, often incense burner:

= Gobochema: *ylbb / grbyn / hqnyl 'lmqh* [RIE 31]
 = Mäqabər Ga'əwa: *b-nhy / w'rn / hqny / hyrhmw / grbyn / bn / ḥd'n / 'lmqh /*
 [DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-2]

or other kind of religious item, and sometimes relating their performance:

= Yeha: *lhy / grbyn / bn / yqdm'l / fqmm / dmryb / śl' / 'ttr / w'lmqh / mhrt / ydhw / wbnhw /*
hyrhm [RIE 39]

– Rock inscriptions (about 100): the text is often an invocation to a deity, but scappily engraved on rocks or stones, and can be qualified as graffiti; many of them give only a personal name adjoined to religious symbols – especially in the region of Senafe (Eritrea):

= Matara [RIE 68] | Dibdib [RIE 69] | Feqya [RIE 71-83]
 + near Kaskase (Tokhonda, and around) [RIE 85-176]

[Slide 6]



Graffiti from Dakhanamo, Kotar (near Asmara), 8th-7th c. BC (RIE 157).



Graffito from Zeban Mororo (near Asmara), 8th-7th c. BC, “Monumental A/B” (RIE 124).

– Short inscriptions on different artefacts (about 15): the text is only a personal name, composed of a few letters or symbols, tidily arranged and sometimes enclosed in an animal form, and referred to as “property marks” [Anfray 1963 | Drewes, Schneider 1967];

= especially at Yeha [RIE 295-307] | Haoulti [RIE 293 & 294] | Sabea [RIE 292] | Matara [RIE 308]

Very recently, a bronze caldron, of religious matter if any, has been discovered, on the outer surface of which a personal name has been tidily displayed. [Slide 7]



Yeha, “property marks” (RIE 295, 305, 301).



Henzat, bronze caldron with personal name (© J. Gebre Selassie, 2011).

- inscriptions on pottery (less than 20): the text is excessively fragmentary as we have only shards, so that it is difficult to identify it; it is maybe from an early period (Matara, Yeha):

= especially at Matara [RIE 319 to 384] | Aksum [RIE 310-312] | Addi Keramaten [RIE 314]

but hard to date: only the kind of the writing form is very similar to the previous ones and make them contemporaneous; the pottery is of common use.

All together, these inscriptions give us straightaway a few elements, among them several personal names as well as the names of deities, some of them well known in South Arabia - for instance 'Astar / 'str, Hawbas / Hbs, Almaqah / 'lmqh, who come to be apparently favourites, as temples are consecrated to them

- at Yeha, Mäqabər Ga'əwa
- probably on several other sites in the region of Melazo [De Contenson 1961 & 1963 | Pirenne 1967 & 1970]
- at Kaskase

others of local origin (we will see below).

Moreover, six among the royal inscriptions

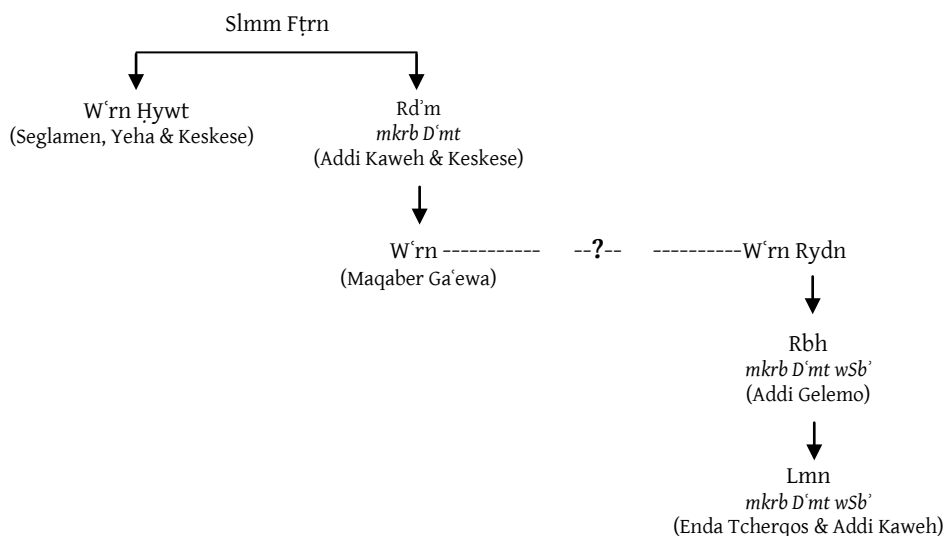
- three coming from Aksum [RIE 2, 3 & 5]
- three from Wukro [RIE 8-10]

identify the kind of a realm, called Da'amat / D'MT [RIE 2, 3 & 9], joined in three cases to the one of Saba' / SB' [RIE 5, 8 & 10].

- Five sovereigns are known, three of them obviously running over the latter realm of Da'amat, their name followed by the title of mukarrib / MKRB.
- Some have familial links with another (son, grandson or descendant, refer to bn or bn bn):

- W'rn Hywt and Rd'im, descendant of Slmm Ftrn;
- the second, mukarrib of D'nt, being the father of W'rn;
- Rbh, also mukarrib of D'nt, descendant of W'rn Rydn and father of Lmn,
- himself mukarrib of D'nt and Sb'

[Slides 8-9]



The few elements the inscriptions give us make out straight links between Ethiopia and South Arabia, since most of the deities refer to the ones from South Arabia, and the name of Saba', probably related to the state or the people coming from southern Arabia, is clearly given, associated to the name of Da'amat in the title of two *mukarribs*, *Rbh* and his son *Lmn* (*mkrb D'mt wSb'*).

Though, several other elements might point out specificities unattested and/or unknown in South Arabia.

A specific language

At this early stage of Antiquity, the language of the Ethiopian inscriptions appears to be tightly connected to southern Arabia. Though, it has been ordered in the 1960s into two different types [Drewes 1956 & 1959 | Schneider 1971].

The first group, described as “pure Sabaic”, was then distinguished from a second group which was characterised by elements revealing a local language.

According to P. Marrassini and Chr. Robin, this scheme is not founded, as there is no real distinction between all these inscriptions, many of them being short or fragmentary [Marrassini 1985 | Avanzini 1987 | De Maigret & Robin 1998 | Philippson 2009].

In fact, even if it seems uneasy to define it precisely, the language, close to Sabaic, is though slightly different in many texts. [Slide 10]

+ few differences of the language have been already pointed out [Robin 1998]

- First of all, a few variations can be noticed in phonetics such as the South Arabian letter *t* which occurs sporadically and is replaced by the letter *s*, reflecting a different pronunciation and transcription.
- Some words, which are used several times in the Ethiopian inscriptions, do not occur at all in the Sabaic ones – for instance *bnhy* or *bnh*, “with the guidance of” (the preposition *b-* followed by the noun *nhy*) [MG 3 & 4 = DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-1 | 2, RIE 26/4, 27/4]; or *tb'l*, attested on the altar at Mäqabər Ga'əwa, we do not know exactly the meaning: it may be rendered as “to offer” or “to dedicate” [Gajda *et al.* 2009 | Nebes 2010].
- In other respects, the verb *hqny*, “to dedicate, to offer”, followed by a complement of object (accusative) in Sabaic, appears here with a preposition, *hqny l-*, a syntax that survived likewise in Ge'ez in the expression *aqnaya li* [Drewes 1962].

Even if they seem to be of minor importance, all these differences might reveal a regional language, which could be either a form of Sabaic, slightly different from the Sabaic, or a locally spoken Semitic language different from Sabaic.

- Several words only used in the Ethiopian inscriptions and never attested in Sabaic are nevertheless of Semitic origin.
- Furthermore, several personal names – of the sovereigns but also of some of the authors of numerous graffiti, except the ones who say to come from Mā'rib

= ...*dmryb* – Gobochema [RIE 26, 27 & 30] | Yeha [RIE 39]

seem as well of local use, not known in southern Arabia even if of Sabaic or rather Semitic origin and structure:

- = *Ḥyṛhmw* – Mäqabər Ga'əwa [DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-2]
- = *Ṣbh ḥ* – Feqya, near Matara [RIE 73]
- = *Wkl l* – Zeban Mororo & Kelette Afa, near Tokhonda [RIE 130 & 89]
- = *ḥk'ḏt* – Yeha [RIE 47]

– Some others have the Sabaic defined article *-n*, but the roots are not attested in southern Arabia – especially in the Akkele Guzay region, near Tokhonda:

- = *gbrn* – La'lay Addi & Zeban Mororo [RIE 90, 91 & 124-126]
- = *grwhtn* – Gobo Fentseh [RIE 144]
- = *nqhn* – Zeban Mororo [RIE 117 & 118]

– At least, few of them have an unknown structure and do not bear any resemblance to any Sabaic root:

- = *bqlny'* – Zeban Mororo [RIE 121]
- = *b š l* – [Drewes 1962]
- = *wḏgly* – La'lay Addi & Zeban Mororo [RIE 95, 124, 127 & 128]

They could be of Semitic origin or even a transcription of Ethiopian names of a different origin.

Where did this Semitic language spoken in the beginning of the 1st millennium BC in Ethiopia come from? All the linguists agree at least on one point: the modern Ethiopian language has common origins with South Arabian languages. Whatever it is, the initial language seems to be a Semitic one and was probably spoken in Ethiopia before the first inscriptions occurred.

Specific traditions

All the most, the inscriptions reveal some specific practices and habits completely unknown in South Arabia.

– As for instance, the title of *mkrb*, used simultaneously in the first half of the 1st millennium BC by Ethiopian and South Arabian sovereigns:

- = *mkrb Sb'* (“*mukarrib* of Saba”) in South Arabia,
- = *mkrb D'nt* or *mkrb D'nt w Sb'* (“*mukarrib* of Da'amat” or “*mukarrib* of Da'amat and of Saba”) in Ethiopia

is sometimes preceded by a specific title the sense of which is still not clear: perhaps *mlkn šr'n* means “fighting king” or “victorious king”:

- = *mlkn šr'n yg ḏyn* [RIE 5, 8 & 10]
- = *mkl sr'n sryt* [RIE 9 | 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 1]

– Furthermore, several royal inscriptions mention the name of a woman, probably the royal spouse – maybe the mother, but it seems less likely [Nebes 2010]: [\[Slide 11\]](#)

- = *Sm ḥm ṛktn* [RIE 1]
- = *M...t ṛktn* [RIE 7]
- = *Yr ṛ ṛkytn* [RIE 9]
- = *Šhtm ṛkytn* [‘Addi 'Akawəḥ 1, MG 3 = DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-1]
- = *ḏtm ṛkytn* [RIE 36]
- = *Bšmt* [RIE 37]
- = *ḥsthmw* [RIE 8]



Altar of the temple at Māqabār Ga'āwa, 7th c. BC: W'rn the victorious king, son of Rd'm, and Šḥtm r[ktn] erected (this monument) for Almaqah, when he constructed (?) the temple of Almaqah at Yḥ', with the guidance of 'Attar, Almaqah, dāt-Ḥimyum and dāt-Ba'dan (interpretation I. Gajda).

Both of these practices are not attested in South Arabia and seem thus specific to the local population of North Ethiopia at that time.

Even the way of describing the country of Da'amat, which seemingly refers to different groups of population, is proper to Ethiopia and never attested in southern Arabia:

= "its East and its West, its Red (?) and its Dark, its Sabaeans and its immigrants / foreigners (?)"
(mšrqhy wm ṛbhy ḏmhy wšlmhy sb ḥy w ṛbhy) [RIE 5, 8 & 9, RIE 2, 4, 6 being fragmentary]

Among what we may consider as tradition, the inscriptions give us also a few information regarding religious conviction and belief. [Slide 12]

At first sight indeed, at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, religious tradition seems closely associated to the Sabaean one, since the principal deities which were venerated are explicitly the same. Apart from 'Astar and Almaqah, the names of Hawbas (*Hbs*) and dhāt Ḥimyam (written *ḏt Ḥmym* or *ḏt Ḥmn*) often come to be apparently favourites on many short inscriptions – among the rock graffiti – of common people.

for instance in the region of Senafe, in Eritrea [RIE 69-75, 85, 106, 146, 153, 155, 158, 163]

Few other deities are also venerated whose names are unknown in South Arabia and hence may plainly be of local origin:

= <i>Yf'm</i> [RIE 33]	= <i>Nrw</i> [RIE 33, 38]	= <i>Ṣdqṇ</i> [RIE 39, 47]
= <i>Šyhṇ</i> [RIE 51]	= <i>'wb</i> [RIE 135]	

Because common people apparently of local origin – as far as the personal names are concerned (see above) – venerated Sabaean gods from South Arabia, but also other deities of actually unknown origin, it is very likely that the Sabaean religion has been partly adopted by local population – at least in some regions for which we have evidence (as it is the case in the one of Senafe in Eritrea). On the other hand, several local deities seem to have been officially honoured since religious items were dedicated to them:

- an altar was offered to Yaf'am (*Yf'm*) [RIE 33]
- another to Ṣadaqan (*Ṣdqṇ*) [RIE 47]
- an incense burner is dedicated to 'Aybas (*'ybs*) [RIE 34]

Since all the former were coming from Yeha, well known from the magnificent temple to Almaqah, one may suggest that Sabaic deities and local ones were venerated in the same cities or regions: moreover, and as several inscriptions show it, they did coexist.

- for instance the fragmentary invocation on an altar from Yeha [RIE 33] at the end of which is the mention of the god *štr* together with the local god *Nrw* (...w *štr wnrw*)

Few evidence of continuity

As many of these inscriptions, especially the graffiti, are difficult to date, it is hard to say how long these religious convictions, or not to say cults, lasted. Even if the documentation is scarce and we do not know much neither about the second half of the 1st millennium BC nor about the first centuries AD, some elements of the ancient religion have obviously survived for a long time. Several inscriptions reveal for instance that a powerful king named Ezana invoked ‘Astar, the principal god of Ancient South Arabia: [Slide 13]

– for instance the inscriptions in Ge‘ez RIE 185 I/20-21 (*lštrm wḃḥrm w[...]*), RIE185 II/21 (*lštr wlmḥrm wlmḥrm*), RIE 185 bis I/22-23 (*lštrm wl[b]ḥrm wlmḥrm*), RIE 185 bis II C/35 (*lštr wḃḥr wlmḥrm*), RIE 188/25-26 (*la‘astar walabəḥer walamədr*)

The king probably has to be identified with the Christian Ezana reigning in the 4th century AD, who was first polytheist and then converted to Christianity. ‘Astar is mentioned also in an Aksumite inscription whose author was a private person.

= *ḥḥḥḥn zḡl / b štr wmdr* [RIE 198]

As a matter of fact, one may actually suppose that the cult of the god ‘Astar went on from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD in Ethiopia – as it was besides in South Arabia.

Moreover, it is startling that few words and expressions, unattested but in Ethiopia in the 8th or 7th century BC, are still in use in the 3rd century AD, such as *tb’l* (that could be rendered as “offer, dedicate”) engraved on Mäqabər Ga‘əwa’s altar, and again on an curved bronze sheet found at Addi Gelemo with an inscription of the king *Gdr*, supposedly reigning in the 3rd century AD.

= *gdr / ngšy / ksm / tb 1 / mzlt / l’rg / wllmq* [RIE 180]

At least, as they seem to be a kind of register or decrees of the lands’ administration, the few inscriptions written on slabs of schist in the quite same evolved script [RIE 181 to 184 D] would attest at that time the relative common use – that is not exclusive of “official” texts – of the writing already slightly modified but based on the script in use in the 1st millennium BC. In a way, the actual Ethiopian script appears to be the only remain of the initial one, no more in use in South Arabia since the 6th century AD...

As a matter of fact, all together, script, language and tradition the inscriptions make out seem to reflect a straight connection between South Arabia and North Ethiopia in the 1st millennium BC which results of more than punctual relations at that time, we are now to discuss.

The inscriptions’ authors: colonists, merchants groups or local communities?

Fabienne Dugast

Several questions are to be examined right away:

- Who did use, perform and order these inscriptions?
- For what purpose?
- What kind of population was then concerned?
- Hence, to what the tidily engraved texts on religious monuments echo? What are the temples and altars dedicated to Almaqah the evidence of?

- On the other hand, to what echoes a more common use of writing, either on rocks or pottery?

Since we have royal inscriptions, making out the reality of a realm as a result of the mention of a few *mukarribs*, it is obvious that a social system including a kind of hierarchy occurred in North Ethiopia in the 1st millennium BC, even if briefly.

We know almost but nothing about it, only it seems at first sight of Sabaic origin – as far as the script among others is concerned –, and has obviously provided a kind of propaganda’s monuments, among them Grat Be’al Gebri or the Great Temple at Yeha, as well as few “official” inscriptions.

The latter give only very few sovereign’s names: five to seven in number, that is:

- *W ṛn Hywt*, mentioned three times, once as *mlkn* [RIE 1]
- *Rd ṛn*, his brother (?), mentioned twice, once as *mkrb* [RIE 9], once as *mlkn* [RIE 12]
- their father (?) *Slmm Fṭrn*, mentioned only in his sons’ inscriptions, without any title
- *W ṛn*, son of *Rd ṛn*, mentioned once, as *mlkn* [DAI ‘Addi ‘Akawəḥ 2008-1]
- *Rbh* mentioned once as *mkrb* [RIE 8]
- his father (?) *W ṛn Rydn*, only mentioned in this inscription, without any title
- his son (?) *Lmn*, mentioned twice as *mkrb* and *mlkn* [RIE 5 & 10].

Though, it is startling that among the 20 kings we know to have run over the Aksumite kingdom between the 3rd and 7th centuries AD, a large number is known thanks to coinage whereas the inscriptions give only five of them.

- = Ezana, probably his father Ella Amida (mentioned only in Ezana’s inscriptions)
- = Kaleb or Ella Aṣbəḥa, probably his father Tazena (mentioned only in the inscriptions of Kaleb)
- = Wa’zeba, son of Ella Aṣbəḥa [RIE 188 to 195 in Ge’ez | RIE 270, 270 bis and 271 in Greek]

It is hence very likely that the seven *mukarribs*, whose name we know, reigning in the 1st millennium BC, represent as well only a part of a longer list of them.

The only realm’s name we have – Da’amat – may be, in the same way, one among others.

Nothing else is really asserted about it, neither the chronology [De Maigret & Robin 1998] nor the kind of polity the quality of “*mukarrib*” and the lineage some of them claimed out may be the indication of [Philipsson 2009]. Though, it might have been more important than we first thought.

On the other hand, because of the very similarities – in script, language, pantheon and monuments – to what is known in South Arabian civilization at the same period, the evidence was first ascribed to a colonisation of the highlands of Tigray and Eritrea by the Sabaeans coming from the western side of the Red Sea [Caquot 1955 | Schneider 1971: 25].

Yet, no facts or any indication point out any domination purpose:

- one notices no military or somewhat prepared action at that time,
- no mention or any sign of control, dependency, or kind of outpost being identified on either side.

The idea hence was rejected, already in the 1950s and 1960s, by few scholars who supposed the Sabaean presence was limited to the settlement of small groups of individuals, mostly stonemasons [Drewes 1959, 1962 | Schneider 1976 | Schneider 2003 | Philipsson 2009].

- The only activity mentioned on several monumental inscriptions is in fact stonework (*grbyn*), as Chr. Robin notices it [De Maigret & Robin 1998].
- Moreover, some of the stonemasons are said to be natives of Mā'rib, in such a way that one may think about a kind of foreign "faction".

The reason of their coming around in Ethiopia would have been for work as they seem to have been highly qualified stonemasons: they indeed might have performed several stone monuments, as altar or incense burner, some of which were dedicated by themselves to a deity:

- = on an altar at Gobochele: (symbol) / *šbhmw* / *w* / *lhy* / *bn* / *fqmm* / *dmryb* / *hqny* / *lmqh* / *lʔl* / [RIE 30]
- = on an incense burner at Yeha: *lhy* / *grbyn* / *bn* / *yqdm l* / *fqmm* / *dmryb* / *sl'* / *ʔtr* / *w lmqh* / *mhrt* / *ydhw* / *wbnhw* / *hyrh* [RIE 39]
- = as their names seem to be of Sabaeen origin [Nebes 2011], we may also add the altars from Matara, dedicated respectively by *h ʔb l* / *bn* / *lmt* (RIE 53), and ... *bn* / *tb krb* [RIE 55]

They obviously erected also the famous Great Temple at Yeha, and maybe other similar buildings we do not know, but few fragmentary freestone may be the evidence of it – as for instance the pillars from Kaskase.

Yet, the construction of this kind of monuments does not seem sufficient to insure the migration of such a specific group, unless the work was ordered by a kind of polity or another "faction" able to supply for it. This might be the case, since several other stonemasons, working together with the previous ones, seem to be of local origin, as far as the personal names, unknown in South Arabia, are concerned.

- For instance on a fragmentary engraved freestone recently discovered at Mäqabər Ga'əwa: *b-nhy* / *w ʔn* / *hqny* / *hyrhmw* / *grbyn* / *bn* / *hḏ n* / *'lmqh* = the king Wa'rān gave the stonemason Ḥayrhum, obviously of local origin, the task to work on the temple to 'Almaqah [DAI 'Addi 'Akawəḥ 2008-2 | contra Nebes 2010].

Be that as it may, the migration of a few South Arabian people would have had other motivations but to erect some monumental buildings and perform royal ensigns – as far as the words *mkrb* and *mklh* are concerned –, which would not have made any sense in any context, all the more if the phenomenon has been relatively sudden, superficial and for a very short time, and without any influence on the following development of civilisation [Bard & Fattovich 2001 | Philippson 2009].

On the other hand, the local specificities the inscriptions point out would rather make evidence of a local and even previous use.

- In fact, the particularities of language, syntax, personal names, altogether unknown in South Arabia, might indicate a so far adapted and modulated local idiom spoken previously to the use of script, which seems to have kept a few typical features.
- Moreover, the use of script by common people, who theoretically would not have access to, and who were not Sabaeans, as far as their personal names and few practices are concerned, might indicate a general way which might have occurred plainly before the 8th century BC.
- As a matter of fact, and according to the excavations of late Al. De Maigret, the Great Temple at Yeha has been erected on a previous one, which would be dated back to the 8th century BC [De Maigret & Robin 1998].

Even if the epigraphic data point out several similarities between the inscriptions found in Ethiopia dated back to the 8th-7th centuries BC and the ones from South Arabia, the specificities we noticed here suggest but cultural differences, and visibly a flourishing state which seems to have existed earlier in Ethiopia, maybe in the same way as on the other side of the Red Sea.

- A recent ¹⁴C analysis at Mäqabär Ga'äwa seems to confirm the so far supposed contemporaneity of the inscriptions on both sides of the Red Sea in the 8th century BC [Wolf & Nowotnick 2010]: they then were concurrent at that time, but their relations might go further back.

The existence of a kingdom called Da'amat is documented by several inscriptions. Though, what do the names *D'mt* and *Sb'* exactly mean is not clear:

- Considering the new elements we point out of local origin, we may expect that *D'mt* was the name of a local ethnic group or region;
- *Sb'* would hence refer to the local Sabaeen population who came before and settled in Ethiopia, if not Saba' on the other side of the Red Sea since it could have kept or engaged a kind of administrative regulation [De Maigret & Robin 1998];
- The mention of the kingdom of Da'amat, and, concurrently the monumental inscriptions and the erection of public buildings as temples we know at Yeha, Haoulti, Mäqabär Ga'äwa, Kaskase, might then echo to the development of a wealthy population, which is not trifling since it can easily be connected to the expansion of a large-scale economic trade.

In this very context, it is difficult to assert that such a development could not have given rise to a centralised polity [Philippson 2009].

It is though more difficult to insure the reality of one or few independent realms in North Ethiopia and/or Eritrea in the 1st millennium BC.

Mutations coming out from trade development

Maybe we have to bring back to our mind – as far as we can trust it – the painting of the Deir el-Bahari's temple at Thebes, which describes the queen Hatchepsout's maritime expedition in the second half of the 2^d millennium BC, and the important trade relations between Egypt and East Africa, among the latter countries very seemingly Ethiopia who exported myrrh and incense, abundant goods like ebony, gold, malachite, amber, ivory, panther skin...

Northern Ethiopia would then have been part of the Near East economic system for centuries ago: though, different contexts might have given the country different fates. [\[Slide 14\]](#)

- In fact, economic trade necessarily induces transformations on the social and political structures, especially in the new cities, which come out and where exchange settles.
- Even the activities are affected, as the cities make prestige goods flowing, which are supplying to a kind of public administration and even to the army.
- Hence, the new institutions play a part on the development of a wealthy population, which is related by monumental inscriptions and buildings.
- Though, the cities can be very few, and in any case, the initial organisation, which is most often based on agriculture, remains, as it is the main support of subsistence of the whole people.

The perception of trade makes theoretically an opposition between the organisation of a city, which occurred in a complex and hierarchic system, and a group of small pastoral communities where social differences are less significant, as they are ordered in several familial nuclei connected with each another.

- As we point out some evidence of what we may qualify as local features, since they are unknown in South Arabia, it is possible that part of the local population knew a special development, regarding its new task, more exposed to foreign influences.
- It would then have manifested itself in a particular way, but remaining in straight contact with populations on the other side of the Red Sea, on whom though it would not necessarily have had any influence.

Be that as it may, the monumental inscriptions would be either the evidence of a Sabaeen settlement, but which occurred slightly before the 8th century BC, to play a part in the goods' trade which took place since then.

- The local feature the inscriptions reveal seems at least to refer either to some adjustment to local traditions, or to some influence: it but comes into sight that the Sabaeans, if they once moved to Ethiopia, have been integrated by the local population in the 8th century BC, and most likely before.
- Since then, the association of the two names of Da'amat and Saba' may not relate any protectorate from the Sabaeans: the two *mukarribs* who call on the title of "mukarrib of D'mt and Sb'" would have claimed the control on the two territories, in the same way Ezana or Kaleb did in the 1st millennium AD.
- At least, we do not know if Da'amat was the only realm in Ethiopia, from the end of the 2^d to the end of the 1st millennium BC – probably not.
- We do not know anything either about their relations: were there dynasties – as the few lineages may be the evidence of –, unity and/or division?
- And of course nothing about their social, political and economic system.

When trade declined – was it in the 4th century BC? [Bard & Fattovich 1994 | Fattovich 1997] –, the wealth failed as well, and possibly the social and political organisation. We though have to be careful about the limited data we have to deal with.

As the two regions of North Tigray and South Arabia are at the centre of the long distance trade from India to the Mediterranean world and so far nor out-of-the-way nor necessarily full of activity, it comes into sight that realms may have coexisted or interchanged, from one or the other side of the Red Sea. It is then likely that the countries on both sides knew alternatively an intensive and flourishing stage and a relative poverty; a complex system pattern and a somewhat basic one.

Though, their relations seem not to have ever been broken off. We would rather represent both civilisations as closely related at their rise. The concept of "continuity" may not be hence in contradiction between the 1st millennium BC, merely "Sabaic," and the 1st millennium AD, of a more complex feature regarding cultural transfer, as one may notice a kind of either South Arabian influence in the Aksumite period.

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