

**A Note on the Islamic Heritage of Tigray:
the Current Situation of the Arabic Inscription of Wugro**
by Wolbert G.C. SMIDT¹

Many years ago priests of the ancient rock-hewn church Čerqos Wugro had found a piece of an inscription stone in the ground of the church compound, while digging for a grave. This exceptionally fine Cufic Arabic inscription had been transliterated, translated and published recently (in the framework of a research project carried out in 2004-05/2006, Smidt 2009/2010)² and identified as belonging to the oldest known set of Arabic inscriptions in Ethiopia. The inscription is remarkable in several aspects: It is the only known one which does not belong to a funeral complex but probably to a Muslim cult site, it is among the finest ancient Cufic inscriptions found in Ethiopia (and the finest in Tigray), is palaeographically comparable to 9th to 10th century mosque inscriptions of Cairo and Damascus and is the only ancient Arabic inscription known in the direct vicinity of Negash, the place where the followers of prophet Muḥammad found asylum in 615 granted by the *negasi* of Aksum (the *naǧāṣ*) as accounted in the *ḥadīth* tradition. The inscription had not been found *in situ*, but together with other stones and bones within the church compound, which suggests that it was part of an older grave construction, for which stones had been brought from elsewhere.

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² See Wolbert SMIDT: “Another unknown Arabic inscription from the eastern Tigrayan trade route: Indication for a Muslim cult site during the ‚Dark Age?“, in: Walter RAUNIG – Prinz ASFA-WOSSEN Asserate (eds.), *Orbis Aethiopicus. Beiträge zur Geschichte, Religion und Kunst Äthopiens. In memoriam Peter Roenpape. Juden, Christen und Muslime in Äthiopien - ein Beispiel für abrahamische Ökumene*. Dettelbach: Verlag J. H. Röhl, 2010, Band XIII, pp. 179-91 (Translation of: „Eine weitere arabische Inschrift von der osttigrayischen Handelsroute: Hinweis auf eine muslimische Kultstätte in der ‚dunklen Periode?“, in: *Aethiopica. International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 12, 2009, 126–35; cp. also Id.: “Wəqro”, in: Siegbert UHLIG, ed.: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010, p. 1180-81). – In addition, the findings of this research were presented at Mekelle University in a public lecture on the history of the Muslim trade routes, organized by the Department of History and Cultural Studies, College of Social Sciences and Languages (June 2009). On that occasion also the finding of another Arabic inscription in Kwiḥa was presented (Wolbert SMIDT: “Eine arabische Inschrift in Kwiḥa, Tigray”, in: Verena BÖLL – Denis NOSNITSIN – Thomas RAVE – Wolbert SMIDT – Evgenia SOKOLINSKAIA (eds.): *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2004, 259-68; cp. a short note in English: Id.: “Kwiḥa”, in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2007, 468-70). – This note is based on an ethnohistorical research project focusing on local history and culture around the Wugro region on the eastern Tigrayan trade route, started in 2009 within EGAMA (*Joint Ethiopian–German Archaeological Mission to Addi Akaweb and surroundings*, Cooperation Project between the German Archaeological Institute, Orient Department, Berlin, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena and the Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency).

The inscription fragment has been tentatively deciphered as *Māli]k al-Mulk al-...* ('possessor of all dominion', followed by an article³). *Mālik al-Mulk* is one of the 99 names of God (e.g., in Qur'an 3:26) – which would be very appropriate for a Muslim cult place. The fragment possibly belonged to a longer inscription containing several names of God. The question remains open if it has to be seen in direct connection with the tradition of Negash (only ca. 10 km away), e.g. being linked with a mosque connected to the graves of Muḥammad's followers, or to another ancient Muslim pilgrimage site in that context, or if it simply belonged to one of the oldest mosques or another cult place along the eastern Tigrayan trade route (linking the Red Sea and the Dahlak sultanate with the Ethiopian interior via Akkele Guzay, 'Agame, and then Negash, Wuḡro, Kwiḥa etc.), along which several ancient Arabic inscriptions had been found over decades (cp. the latest publication on early Islam, Fauvelle-Aymar – Hirsch 2010⁴). Due to its age, content and quality this inscription is a beautiful indication for the inclusion of the eastern Tigrayan–Red Sea trade route in the international networks of the then flourishing Muslim world, before the rise of the Zagwe dynasty in Ethiopia.



Fig. 1: The inscription (26.3 cm × 60.5 cm on the long side, 49.2 cm on the shorter side), October 2010 (W.S.)

³ ... which would perhaps belong to an adjective or another name of God. - In addition to the interpretation which I suggested in my previous paper one shall not exclude the following possibilities: (1) The main word *al-mlk* may be read as *al-malik* ('king'), possibly followed by the name of his dominion (e.g. *al-[Habasha]*). However, the initial *kāf* (if a *kāf* at all) then could not be explained through the known formulas. (2) The initial letter could also be read as a *dāl* instead of *kāf*, as in Cufic these two letters were sometimes graphically very close to each other (and in this case there is visibly a small difference between the two *kāf*, even if I still think that this difference is rather an aesthetical variation, not a substantial one). There would be several possibilities of reading in that case, such as the name [*'Abd al-Malik al-...* (a name, however, would typically be part of a funeral inscription, while this inscription stylistically does not fit into the other funeral inscriptions we know). More attractive than this explanation would be another name of God – there is quite a number of them, which end with *dāl* (for example *al-Hamīd*, *al-Wāḥid*, *al-Rasīd*). We can therefore still think of a series of names of God, such as [... *al-Wāḥid al-Malik al-[Mulk ...*

⁴ François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR – Bertrand HIRSCH: "Muslim Historical Spaces in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: A Reassessment", *Northeast African Studies* 11:1, 2004-2010 [2011], pp. 25-54. – See also Alessandro GORI: "Inscriptions: Arabic inscriptions in the Ethiopian regions", in: Siegbert UHLIG (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2007, vol. 3 (He-O), pp. 165-67 (with further bibliographic references).

State of preservation

The inscription was kept until early 2010 in the ante-room of the Ćerqos church, in the entrance area, which is open for visitors and is used by priests (to be distinguished from the doors on the right, used by women, and on the left, used by men, during service). When the church was visited during an excursion from Mekelle University, organised by the Department of Heritage Conservation, in May 2010, the priests reported that the inscription stone had been heavily damaged in early 2010: It was shown to „an elder tourist”, who tried to hold it, but then, surprised by its heavy weight, let it fall, so that it broke into two pieces (see fig. 1). It did not only break, but also the lower decorative lines and the elevated letter *kāf* have been severely damaged, with small pieces of the sandstone now missing.

Since then, the broken inscription is kept for protection in the closed area of the right wing of the church (i.e. the women’s wing)⁵, the *qiddisti* of Gebri’él, in the last room before the *meqdes* of the *tabot* of *qiddus* Gebri’él, which is not accessible to the general public (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The *qiddisti* in which the inscription stone is now kept, photo October 2010 (W.S.)

The inscription and tourism

Well before 2010, the inscription was already shown to tourists, the priests being aware of its importance as a witness of the local historical heritage. While some of them seem to know that the inscription is Arabic, there seems also to have been a tendency to ascribe it to the Aksumite ancestors⁶. Churches are seen as central places not only of the spiritual life of the people in the sense of religion, but also in the sense of preservation of their heritage (*qirs*), and thus are central places of cultural identity. In this sense it is not surprising that an

⁵ The women’s wing is on the right half of the church – but it is the right wing only when seen from the entrance. Dogmatically it would, however, certainly be more correct to call it the left wing: Seen from the *meqdes* (the holy of holies) of St Mary, which is the spiritual centre of the church, it is of course the left wing of the church. Archangel Gebri’él is on the left of St Mary, Archangel Mika’él is on her right.

⁶ This is possibly the reason why the geologists who recently published a photograph of this inscription in their book surprisingly described it as „a sandstone slab with inscriptions of the Axumite type“ (ASFAWOSSEN Asrat – METASEBIA Demissie – ABERRA Mogessie: *Geotourism in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Shama Books 2008, 136, plate 6.18).

Arabic inscription is found in a church (similar to Čerqos Kwiḥa, where another Arabic inscription is kept, described as “Hebrew”, s. Smidt 2004; 2007). The rising presence of tourists especially in the street-town Wugro, has evident problems, as this example shows: On the one hand historical objects are endangered by an inappropriate exposure to the public, which in this case has led to a severe damage, on the other hand there is no appropriate information on historical backgrounds which might help to increase the attractivity of Wugro for tourism⁷.

With this remark I do not wish to suggest that such objects should be removed from churches – there are many cases, where churches possess important collections, typically church objects such as paraphernalia and manuscripts, and also gifts of nobles such as *negarit* (ceremonial ‘drum’), *alga* (‘throne’ or ‘bed’), *das* (‘tent’ [of a noble]), and other heritages of local noble families, and other objects (including inscriptions). In the contrary, the concept of churches as places of living heritage and memory is important certainly also for the identification of the local community with their heritage, and a concept which is most convincing and impressing for the culturally interested tourist. However, due to rising tourism, some churches are slowly losing their character as remote centres of a peaceful, contemplative preservation of traditions and heritage – a process which cannot be fully stopped, but may be creatively answered by other and new modes of preservation and presentation – such as vitrines for easily damageable objects within the church, also containing scientifically reliable information on them. In this way these objects could continue to be integrated in the living church community instead of being removed into a (usually) more anonymous museum, far from their living context of daily contemplation and popular historical re-interpretation and appropriation.

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⁷ Even the latest travellers guides do not mention this important inscription, and as it is now removed from the entrance room but kept in a closed room, it loses its attractivity.