Another Arabic inscription from the eastern Tigrayan trade route (III):  
the malik al-Ḥabaša in Negaš

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According to tradition, Negaš, a small town on a mountain pass in eastern Tigray, is the most ancient centre of Islamic presence in all of Ethiopia and northeastern Africa. There are several tombs identified as those of the first Muslim migrants who settled in Ethiopia as refugees during the first days of Islam. They had been welcomed in Negaš, as the local tradition claims, by an Aksumite king who plays in important role in the Muslim historiographical tradition. This king’s tomb is, according to local tradition, also found in Negaš (the town’s name itself, meaning ‘king’ or ‘ruler’ in Tigrinya, refers to precisely this tradition). Since at least the 16th century Negaš is documented in historical sources as a Muslim pilgrimage site (Gori 2007b; Ṣihabaddin Ḥamad ibn ʿAbdalqadir 1897, 1902). Therefore, one could expect to find epigraphic traces of this early presence of Islam.

Initial quests for historical Arabic inscriptions were, however, unsuccessful: During an excursion organized by the Department of Heritage Conservation of Mekelle University in May 2010 the renovated tombs of the companions of prophet Muḥammad, sometimes also identified as the king’s tomb, were visited (s. figs. 3, 5), during which the author W.S. checked information collected during previous field research in nearby Wūgro (cp. Smidt 2010; photo in Fiaccadori 2006). However, even though oral tradition claims an ancient Muslim presence in Negaš, the local dignitaries said that they do not possess any inscriptions from the time of the first Muslims. This was surprising, as not far to the south along the same route, several medieval Arabic inscriptions have been found. But further inquiries changed the picture. During another

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¹ The first short research visit to Negaš, which ultimately led to the present article, was carried out by Wolbert Smidt in January 2006 together with the late Professor Hussein Ahmed, Addis Ababa University, to whose memory we dedicate this article.
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⁴ The followers of the prophet Muḥammad led by Ḥaṭṭār b. ʿAbī Ṭālib got asylum in the Aksumite kingdom, “al-Ḥabaša”, when fleeing from persecution in Mecca (the first Hijra, 615 A.D.), as reported already in the 8th-century biography of the prophet Muḥammad by Ibn ʿIṣḥāq (s. van Donzel 2007, for all relevant references; see also Taddesse Tamrat 1972).
⁵ This article belongs to a series of publications on Arabic inscriptions in Tigray. It is the result of a small research endeavor which focuses on inscriptions found in Tigray and their place in local tradition and culture (carried out by the author, W.S., starting from 2000). During that research two unknown (Muslim) Arabic inscriptions were found in Christian churches, in Kwiḥa (I) and in Wūgro (II), s. Smidt 2004, 2007, 2010, 2011b, Gori 2007a (these publications discuss not only the inscriptions themselves but also how they are kept and interpreted locally,
visit in May 2011 (in the framework of EGAMA) the dignitaries\textsuperscript{6} reported having found a stone slab with an inscription (s. fig. 1), which, according to them, belonged to the ancient area of the graves of the first Muslims. The slab is kept today in the historical shrine of the 12 companions of the prophet Muḥammad, near the graveyard of the Imam Mesgid (‘Imam mosque’).

As this complex belongs to the wider compound of an old Muslim graveyard (see fig. 2), it seems in any case clear that it was a funeral inscription belonging to an older grave in the context of that graveyard. As there are only a few Arabic inscriptions in Tigray, every single finding is important.

The inscription reads:

\begin{verbatim}
هنا قبر ملك الجيشه
سيد أصحمة توفى
من هجرية سنة 9
في شهر ...
الشهداء ...
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
bunā gabr malik al-Ḥabaša
sayyid Ašhama ṭawwāfiya
min biğrīya sanat 9 (tis ’a)
fi sabr …
… al-sabāda’
\end{verbatim}

This (here) is the grave of the king of Abyssinia\textsuperscript{7},
the lord Ašhama.\textsuperscript{8} He died in
the year 9 of the Hijra\textsuperscript{9} in the month ...\textsuperscript{10}
the martyrs\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{6} I thank shayḥ Adam Muḥammad and shayḥ Muhammad ʿUmar in Negash for their help (WS).

\textsuperscript{7} The word Abyssinia (al-Ḥabaša) is not complete. The last letters ʿaša are missing in the text due to damage in the upper left corner of the stone slab (MHR).

\textsuperscript{8} Ašhama is the name of the king of Abyssinia, who lived in the time of the prophet Muhammad and who welcomed the Muslims who had left Arabia as refugees (the ‘first Hijra’ of Muslim tradition) (MHR).

\textsuperscript{9} In the text the word order is different: it says “of the Hijra in the year 9” (min biğrīya sanat 9). This could indicate that the writer of the text was not a native speaker of Arabic (MHR).

\textsuperscript{10} The rest of the text is very unclear and could be read in different ways, e.g. alf (“thousands”) muḥarram (first month of the Islamic year) (MHR). In fact, it should be read as 10 muḥarram (the ‘aṣāra’ day), as this is the pilgrimage day devoted to the nağāḥ (cp. Gori 2007b).

\textsuperscript{11} Also the word sabāda’ (“martyrs”) is not very clear; this reading is just a suggestion (MHR).
The content of the inscription, even if not completely clear, shows that it was meant as a marker of the grave of the Aksumite ruler, an-naḡāṣ al-ʿAṣḥama. His title is rendered as malik al-Ḥabaša (‘king of Abyssinia’), referring to the name
of the country as it is known in Arabic tradition\textsuperscript{12}. The title “\textit{malik}” is simply the translation of ‘king’, which is a bit unusual in this case, as this specific ruler was usually referred to as \textit{an-naḡāsī}\textsuperscript{13}. Historical sources show, however, that over the centuries the rulers of Ethiopia were called \textit{malik al-Ḥabaša} in Arabic and also referred to themselves in this when using Arabic (e.g., Tewodros II in the 19th century; see Smidt [in preparation], with references to the sources). This inscription reflects this Ethiopian tradition\textsuperscript{14}. The letters are partially still filled with soil, witnessing for the discovery of the stone underground.

This inscription was set up posthumously, as shown by the writing style which does not fit into the period of the prophet Muḥammad\textsuperscript{15}. But it is very difficult to date due to the lack of a systematic compilation and comparison of Ethiopian-Arabic palaeographic material. The style of the script is not very refined, which suggests its production by a local craftsman, similar to the medieval inscriptions found in Kwiḥa (Conti Rossini 1938; Pansera 1945; Schneider 1967; cp. the inscriptions of Dahlak: Pansera 1976, 1987; Oman 1976; Schneider 1983). That similarity suggests a possible connection in time (e.g. 12\textsuperscript{th}/13\textsuperscript{th} century?), which could further be supported by the fact that Kwiḥa is the southward prolongation of the trade route leading through Negaš. We should also note that the rather refined Arabic inscription fragment kept in Wugro, only around ten kilometers further down the same trade route, may be dated to the 9\textsuperscript{th}/10\textsuperscript{th} century (a tentative dating based on comparison with similar Arabic inscriptions in the wider Muslim world). These connections support the possibility of the presence of a Muslim community in Negaš already in the medieval period, on the same trade route, as oral tradition also suggests. However, a much later date for the production of the Negaš inscription cannot be excluded.

\textsuperscript{12} This form goes back to one version of the title of the Aksumite rulers, ‘king of Ḥabashat and Aksum’ (as known from epigraphic Ge’ez, \textit{ngṣ HBST w-’KSM}, or in epigraphic South Arabian: \textit{mlk HBSTw-’KSM}, while the short form \textit{nagṣi} Aksum [‘king of Aksum’] became better known in Western tradition, s. Smidt [in preparation]) (WS).

\textsuperscript{13} Arabic form derived from Ge’ez \textit{nagaši} ‘the one who rules / king’ (see van Donzel 2007).

\textsuperscript{14} The scribe may also have seen the need to explicitly use the Arabic word for ‘king’ for greater clarity, as sometimes people wrongly took this Ethiopian title (\textit{naḡāsī}) for a name.

\textsuperscript{15} This is further supported by the fact that the name of the king is rendered as \textit{Ashama}, a form which is known only from the medieval Arab tradition about \textit{an-naḡāsī} [= ‘the king’] \textit{al-Ašama} and does not correspond to any known name in Ethiopian languages and tradition; as was demonstrated quite recently by Fiacchadori (2005), the form \textit{al-Ašama} is the Arabic rendering of the original name \textit{Allā Ṣaḥām(a)}, the Ge’ez name of an Aksumite king. The difference in pronunciation and spelling is typical for the transformation of historical names in oral memories when transported from one language to another. This inscription thus depends on traditions in the Arabic language, not on an original Ethiopian tradition.
Dereje Feyissa – Markus Virgil Hoehne: Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa. Woodbridge 2010 (SZÉLINGER Balázs) 140

Conference Reports

The 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Dirre Dawa: "Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement", 29 October to 3 November 2012 (Wolbert SMIDT – Chikage OBA-SMIDT) 1 44

National Workshop: "Socio-cultural Impact Assessment of the Welqayt Sugar and Irrigation Project", 6 October 2012, Mekelle University (MITIKU Gabrehiwot) 150

The Mikael Iyasu Library: Mekelle University Acquires 2,500 Books from the Family of the Late Mikael Iyasu – Inauguration (AYELE Bekerie) 1 53

International Workshop on Documentation and Preservation of Ethiopian Cultural and Art Heritage of the Haddis Alemayehu Cultural and Research Institute, Debre Markos University, 19 May 2012 – An Illustrated Conference Report (Manuel RAMOS) 155

International Workshop on "Culture, Environment and Development" at Mekelle University, 15 March 2012 (Yoko FURUSAKI) 1 60

From Ambivalence to Acceptance – International Conference on Azmari in Ethiopia, University of Hildesheim, 6 −8 January 2012 (Andreas WETTER) 164

Workshop "On the History and Culture of the Horn of Africa" at Mekelle University, 17-18 March 2011 (Carsten HOFFMANN – Zeus WELLNHOFER) 166

Research and Expedition Reports

A Journey to Central and Western Tigray (Dietrich RAUE) 169

Did the gold of the Aksumites originate in Tigray? A report on ongoing research on local traditions of gold mining in Tigray (Wolbert SMIDT, in collaboration with GEBREMICHAEL Nguse) 1 81

Research Abstracts

Selected abstracts of research projects in social sciences and humanities at Mekelle University 193

Fig. 2: The Muslim graveyard of Negash beside the shrines, with modern Arabic and Tigrinya inscriptions, 8 May 2011 (photo: W.S.)

Fig. 3: The shrine of the twelve companions of the prophet in the middle, in which the inscription is kept, beside a smaller shrine on the left, 8 May 2011 (photo: W.S.)
To conclude: The inscription described here provides early epigraphic and material evidence for the historical Muslim presence in Negaš, and is a witness to a local memorial tradition referring to the Aksumite ruler, an-nağāšī al-Asḥamā. It is a further example for the Tigrayan Muslim tradition following the Arabic tradition, by using the king’s the name as he is remembered in Arabic. In addition, this seems to be the first example of a stone inscription in Ethiopia bearing the country’s name in Arabic, which is otherwise well attested in numerous other sources starting from medieval times.

Fig. 4: Another view of the same inscription, and fig. 5: The renovated tomb of the 12 companions of the prophet Muḥammad, covered by a tapestry embroidered with the 99 names of God, 8 May 2011 (photos: W.S.)

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17 Date of his death.