

**Another Arabic inscription from the eastern Tigrayan trade route (III):
the *malik al-Ḥabaša* in Negaš¹**

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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 an important role in the Muslim historiographical tradition.⁴ 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; Šihabaddin Aḥmad ibn 'Abdalqadir 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 Wuqro (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 found⁵. But further inquiries changed the picture. During another

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 Ġa'far b. Abī 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 Ishaq (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 Wuqro (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 dignitaries⁶ 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:

هنا قبر ملك الحبشة
سيد أصحمة توفي
من هجرية سنة 9
في شهر ...
... الشهداء ...

bunā qabr malik al-Ḥabaša
sayyid Aṣḥama tuwuffīya
min hiǧrīya sanat 9 (tis ‘a)
fi šahr ...
... al-šuhadā’

This (here) is the grave of the king of Abyssinia⁷,
the lord *Aṣḥama*.⁸ He died in
the year 9 of the *Hijra*⁹
in the month ...¹⁰
the martyrs¹¹

in order to contribute to the understanding why and under which circumstances they were preserved and which role they may play for the local communities; for a similar discussion of the role for local historiographical traditions of an Ethio-Sabaic inscription kept in private possession in Tigray until 2010, see Smidt 2011a). Since 2009 the research continued in the framework of the EGAMA (*Joint Ethiopian–German Archaeological Mission to Addi Akaneb and surroundings*). Within the EGAMA project I carried out research on local oral traditions, including the history of the eastern Tigrayan trade route in the wider Wugro area (WS).

⁶ I thank *shayb* Adam Muḥammad and *shayb* Muḥammad ‘Umar in Negash for their help (WS).

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

⁸ *Aṣḥama* is the name of the king of Abyssinia, who lived in the time of the prophet Muḥammad and who welcomed the Muslims who had left Arabia as refugees (the ‘first Hijra’ of Muslim tradition) (MHR).

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

¹⁰ The rest of the text is very unclear and could be read in different ways, e.g. *alāf* (‘thousands’) *muharram* (first month of the Islamic year) (MHR). In fact, it should be read as 10 *muharram* (the ‘*ašūra*’ day), as this is the pilgrimage day devoted to the *naǧāṣī* (cp. Gori 2007b).

¹¹ Also the word *šuhadā’* (‘martyrs’) is not very clear; this reading is just a suggestion (MHR).



Fig. 1: Photo of the inscription kept in the shrine, 8 May 2011 (photo: W.S.)

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-naǧāš* al-Aṣḥama. His title is rendered as *malik al-Ḥabaša* ('king of Abyssinia'), referring to the name

of the country as it is known in Arabic tradition¹². The title “*malik*” is simply the translation of ‘king’, which is a bit unusual in this case, as this specific ruler was usually referred to as *an-naǧāšī*¹³. Historical sources show, however, that over the centuries the rulers of Ethiopia were called *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 tradition¹⁴. 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 Muḥammad¹⁵. 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. 12th/13th century²), 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 9th/10th 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.

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, *ngś ḤBŠT n-’KSM*, or in epigraphic South-Arabian: *mlk ḤBS²T n-’KSMN*, while the short form *nəgusī* Aksum [‘king of Aksum’] became better known in Western tradition, s. Smidt [in preparation]) (WS).

¹³ Arabic form derived from Ge’ez *nägasī* ‘the one who rules / king’ (see van Donzel 2007).

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 (*naǧāšī*) for a name.

¹⁵ This is further supported by the fact that the name of the king is rendered as *Aṣḥama*, a form which is known only from the medieval Arab tradition about *an-naǧāšī* [= ‘the king’] *al-Aṣḥama* and does not correspond to any known name in Ethiopian languages and tradition; as was demonstrated quite recently by Fiaccadori (2005), the form *al-Aṣḥama* is the Arabic rendering of the original name ʿIllā Ṣaḥam(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.



Fig. 2: The Muslim graveyard of Negaš 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-Aṣḥama. 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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¹⁶ Translation of: "Eine weitere arabische Inschrift von der osttigrayischen Handelsroute: Hinweis auf eine muslimische Kultstätte in der 'dunklen Periode'?", in: *Aethiopia. International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 12, 2009, 126–35.

¹⁷ Date of his death.