Monumentalised Accountancy From Ancient Ethiopia

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1. The Stele of Maryam ʿAnza

1.1 Introduction

Stele play a crucial role in the material culture of Ethiopia. Today it seems certain that they represent funerary monuments in a context of ancestral worship which is in perfect harmony with the meaning of *ḥwlt* "stele" in Gəʿəz, especially in the text of the Bible and the Old Testament. Between the primitive stelae still found in the south today and the elaborate monuments in Aksum, which imitate full-fledged architecture, they appear in all kinds of shapes and sizes. The most prominent representatives however, the stelae of Aksum, have – at least in their present state – one major disadvantage for the historian: They do not bear inscriptions, which could in any way inform us on their function, their dedicants, their makers, or the time and circumstances of their erection.

Thus despite the brevity of the texts inscribed stelae make a welcome contribution to our knowledge of early Ethiopian history and culture. The stele of Maryam ʿAnza (RIE 218) is known since 1939. It shows conspicuous similarities to the stelae of Mäṭära (RIE 223), known since 1896, and of Ḥǝnzat (since 1974; Ricci 1990 :142-156). To our great loss, the slightly longer text of the Ḥǝnzat stele is in too fragmentary a state to allow a coherent interpretation. The two other examples display the typical traits of stelae of this size, a slightly tapering shape terminating in a rounded top, but in addition both bear the symbols of the two principal phases of the moon – full and half – in the upper part. The older interpretation of these symbols as sun disk and half moon can now be discarded. Also the inscriptions resemble each other. In light of the fact that all interpretations put forward so far have immensely profited from a synoptic examination of the two texts, but show deficiencies as well, it seems justified and necessary to develop a new interpretation of one inscription, with reference to the other text for interpretive purposes.

1.2 Preliminary Remark

The present article has a genesis of its own. Considering the brilliant and relatively up-to-date new edition by A. J. Drewes (1962 : 65-67; pl. 22), this re-evaluation may seem surprising. But a long-due review of the first two volumes of RIE (texts and plates) has been postponed time and again, while awaiting the forthcoming third volume of translations and commentaries. A second project, a digitised corpus of Ethiopic texts, which is currently being created at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Beirut (Thesaurus linguae aethiopicae), is likewise concerned with the epigraphic evidence. The revision of the readings and previous interpretations in the framework of this project, and of seminars on Semitic epigraphy organised alongside it, has brought forth a number of new aspects and suggested alterations on various texts. Such new insights are incorporated into the database, which shall be made available to the scholarly public in an adequate manner; meanwhile, coherent and independent partial results – especially new interpretations – are published in the form of articles.

2. Location of the Stele

The stele is situated close to the modern village of Maryam ʿAnza, at an archaeological site 4-5 km to the northwest of Ḥawzen in ʿAgame. Three fallen pillars (Mordini 1946 :149) are found in the vicinity (c. 300 m) of an artificial mound, which probably bears Aksumite ruins. One of them is broken; the second one, which has the inscription, is still intact, but half of it covered by soil. The exposed part measures c. 3.30 m in length and 1.20 m in width at the top, which stands half a meter above ground. The side facing the sky displays the full and the half moon, while the opposite side, facing the ground, bears the inscription, which consists of eight lines between carefully incised lines. In other words, astral symbols and text are not found on the same side, as is the case with the stele of Mäṭära, but the observer had to walk around the stele to see and grasp the entire message. Could this be a first hint to the character of this text? Has this document of administration been deliberately tucked away on the back of the monument? The field measures c. 0.95 by 0.9 m; the average letter height is 10 cm. The script belongs to the same period as the stele of Mäṭära and can be dated on palaeographic grounds to the second or third century AD. Incised lines limiting the lines on top and bottom are also found in other Ethiopic inscriptions (Mäṭära, Ḥam), as well as in the inscriptions from Meroë. The execution is rather coarse and hasty, certainly not the result of meticulous planning and care. Is this a further indication of the rather casual, momentary character of the text? Considering the countless uninscribed stelae, the main point was the carving and setting up of the stele itself, whereas the textual communication of the details of its circumstance were more of a casual supplement. These priorities remained unchanged until the monumental stelae of Aksum were set up, accompanied by monumental royal

inscriptions, which however were not carved on the stelae themselves. Does this attest the increasing role of writing and literacy in that society?

3. Text

The following text corresponds to the last reading, corrected by R. Schneider in RIE 218. The plates published there are pictures of parts of the inscription taken by A.J. Drewes (1962: pl. XXII), but of far inferior quality. Due to the oblique position of the stele, which faces the ground with its inscribed side (it has not been re-erected to the present day), no complete photograph of the inscription exists. The plates at the end of the article show recent photographs of the church ʿAnza Maryam and the stele, especially it upper part in its actual position as well as detailed photographs of most of the inscription. One points out obvious corrections to or deletion of previously written letters to be seen for the first time on these photographs (details to line 4-6). The partial pictures enable us at least to check the passages under scrutiny here.

1. ṣḥf / bzt / ng
2. ś / ʾgb / zḥwl
3. t / zʾh / sḥbw /ʾ
4. gb / ḥzb / ʾtw
5. bqʿt / ʾtw / ʿl
6. t / 15 / ʾsy / swh
7. ṣḥb / 520 / ʾsy
8. ḥbst / 20620.

The discrepancies in Mordini's copy are certainly due to the painstaking assemblage of the various squeezes (Conti Rossini 1942:22). They are mentioned here for the reader to appreciate the interpretations of Conti Rossini and Littmann. It is worth pointing out that Mordini's copy renders letters of unusual shapes especially in the case of doubtful words, in particular when compared to the same letters elsewhere in the same text (e.g. *w* in line 5 etc.). The result of these erroneous readings are enigmatic words or forms, which have inevitably led to failed attempts at understanding the document: 5. *swʿt* instead of *bqʿt*; Conti Rossini: materiali da costruzione without further explanation; *ʿbt* instead of *ʿlt* ; Littmann: sacks. Line 6, the last word is hardly legible; also in Drewes' photograph (1962: pl. 22) the last letter looks like a vocalised *ha* (of the fourth order), which would of course be an inconceivable anachronism. Littmann's assumption that it is a word-divider directly attached to the letter (Littmann 1952 : 7) is not convincing, since there are no other dividers at the ends of the lines. A second peculiar case is the *q* in line 4 in *bqʿt*, which also has a diagonal bar for no apparent reason, giving rise to the erroneous reading as *w* (hence *swʿt*) mentioned above.

The transfer of the text into Ethiopic vocalised script, which Sergew Hable Selassie (1972 : 89) offers, has all the appearance of a version made from memory; it features a peculiar division of lines and word forms. But since these are necessary to trace and understand his largely divergent translation, his entire text is reproduced here, together with a version in unvocalised Ethiopic script:

ı. ጸሐፈ፡በዘተ፡ነገ 2. ሦ፡አገበ፡ዘሐወል 3. ተ፡ ዘኣሁ፡ ሰሐበወ፡ኣ 4. ገበ፡ሐዘበ፡ኣተወ 5. በቀተ፡ ኣተወ፡ዐለ 6. ተ፡፲፭፡ኣሰየ፡ ሰወሀ 7. ጸሐበ፡፩፻፶፮፡ ኣሰየ 8.ጐበሰተ፡፪፼፫፻፶፮፡።

4. History of Research

The inscription was discovered in 1939 by A. Mordini who explored various regions of Tigré on behalf of Conti Rossini. He painstakingly took 38 separate sheets of squeezes of the turned-over inscription, then proceeded to make a sketch from them on transparent paper. Based on this material, Conti Rossini (1942) published a photograph of the sketch, with further photographs of the site and the stele, a general introduction and his first attempt at a translation with many annotations and, not by chance, references to the inscription on the Mäṭära stele. Since Mordini's copy is deficient in line 5/6, this *editio princeps* was unable to solve all textual problems.

E. Littmann (1952) provided further corrections and commentaries. In 1955 A.J. Drewes visited ʿAnza and took pictures of parts of the inscription, which clarified the reading of line 5/6. In 1962 he presented in his study of ancient Ethiopic inscriptions a complete and new interpretation of the text. It was followed by the study – meanwhile the inscription has of course been quoted in common handbooks and syntheses on Ethiopic history, without further emendation on the text – by Sergew Hable Selassie (1972 : 89-90), who pointed out in particular the first attested usage of Ethiopic numerals instead of words for numbers written out. What follows is a synoptic display of the four translations (CCR = Conti Rossini; L = Littmann; D = Drewes; SHS = Sergew Hable Selassie), which in synchronic comparison will immediately show the diverging interpretations and uncertainties of the inscription. Since Sergew Hable Selassie for his translation relied on a version, which, despite being transferred into the original vocalised Ethiopic script, is marked by a peculiar division of lines and unusual readings of words, parts of it had to be adapted to the original division of the text...

1. Scrisse Bezzatā re	CCR
Scrisse (o: Fece scrivere) qui il re	L
A inscrit BZT, roi	D
Has written Bizet king of	SHS
2. di Agab questo obe-	CCR
di Agabo questo obelisco	L
des ACGB, cette stèle	D

Agabo [on] his Stele	SHS
3. lisco suo, che trasse ad A-	CCR
suo. Lo trasse	L
à lui. Les ACGB l'ont fait transporter	D
of his own after he had subdued	SHS
4. gab il popolo. [Esso] apportò [oppure: pervennero]	CCR
la gente di Agabo. Egli fece venire	L
par le peuple. Ils (le peuple) sont venus	D
the people of Agabo he came	SHS
5. materiali da costruzione swʿt , apportò [oppure: pervennero] ba-	CCR
un beneficio: fece venire sacchi	L
à la fête (?). Ils sont venus pendant	D
in Qo'at in fifteen days	SHS
6. si di colonne [in numero di] 15. Diede ovini	CCR
grandi [in numero di] 15, provvide la birra	L
15 jours. Ils ont fourni de la bière:	D
in fifteen days and donated beer	SHS
7. ṣḥb [in numero di] 520, diede	CCR
brocche [in numero di] 520, provvide	L
520 cruches. Ils ont fourni	D
520 jars and he gave	SHS
8. pani [in numero di] 20.620	CCR
pani [in numero di] 20620.	L
du pain: 20620.	D
bread 20,620.	SHS

5. The New Interpretation

Basic element: Keep down the number of proper names, especially unattested ones.

5.1 The File Form of Accountancy

The new interpretation of the inscription does not attempt, in the first place, to confirm or refute the hitherto existing translations on single points, but takes as a point of departure general considerations on this genre of texts, and then turns to individual questions of syntax and semantics. It needs to be stressed that each interpretation has its uncertainties and remains hypothetical. This is especially true for the proposed roots of single expressions and the proposed resulting verb and noun forms. On the other hand, the speculative nature of this exegesis, owed to the same lack of a live tradition of transmission, which obstructs our understanding of so many other epigraphic testimonies in Semitic languages, is also chiefly responsible for the particular appeal of this area of research.

As the figures show, the second part of the inscription belongs to the genre of lists. This ascription is confirmed by the laconic, asyndetic, but in the choice of words at the same time repetitive, syntax in short main clauset. The first part also makes the main and verbalised connection to the object – the stele -, which carries the inscription, furthermore the event, which links the object with the persons and things mentioned in the text to form one "unit of action", or rather sets them in a numerical relation; in brief, all elements of an official bureaucratic document, in particular from finance and accounting, are given. Consequently, the lexical units of the text do not belong to the same sphere of (religious) literature – the sphere from where our normal knowledge of Gəʿəz dervies – in their contextual meaning, though they may well do so in their etymology.

Let us start with a brief remark on the figures. In earlier inscriptions, such as that from Ṣäfra or others (cf. Ricci 1991), the figures are written out as words. Later Aksumite inscriptions are replete with figures (cf. above the remark on the pedantry of ancient Ethiopians)[no such remark], which were regularly written in numerals. As is well known (cf. e.g. Hallo 1926; http://www.geez.org/Numerals/) these numerals are derived from Greek alphabetic numerals, which reached Ethiopia either via Coptic mediation or thanks to its own direct contact to the hellenised world. The inscription of ʿAnza with its 11 (unfortunately only 6 different) numerals hence boasts the oldest testimony of Ethiopic numerals. It is therefore all the more regrettable that in the pictures of Drewes (1962 : pl. 22) one can only discern the numbers 100 and 20 in line 7, again 100 (also in the bound double form as 10,000), 6 and once more 20 in line 8. The reconstructed drawing by Conti Rossini (1942 : 24) is very unclear in comparison to the photographs. Since the most ancient numerals show considerable graphic variations (cf. Kropp 1999), good illustrations of these ancient testimonies are an urgent desideratum. The autopsy of the inscription during a trip to ʿAnza Maryam right after the conference at Aksum and a series of new photographs taken at this occasion gave new elements for a palaeographic study of the text within the frame of the historical development of the Ethiopic script which will be the object of a separate article.

The numbers as a point of departure give an elucidating angle on the structure of the text [from its end. In lines 4-8 the asyndetic style is clearly linked with the repeated verbs *atäwä* 'come to, join' – *asäyä* 'to remunerate, to compensate' or 'to supply (with food)'. One can read them without difficulty as entries in the fields of an accounting file, filled in for each respective category: "come for useful work (*bäqwʿet*), come for 15 days" corresponds to "remunerate / supply "with 520 mugs of beer, "remunerate / supply" with 20.620 loaves of bread. The number placed behind the respective category especially gives a particularly distinct impression of an example of the genre 'list' as opposed to a narrative text, which would require the numbers placed in a different position. What precedes it must hence logically be the action, which evokes the mentioned service and its remuneration: A stele (*ḥawəlt*) is carried (*ṣḥb*) – whose stele, by whom, where to? One may safely assume that a multitude, the people (*ḥəzb*), or rather *his* people (*ḥəzbu*), carries it. From then on it is the stele of the king (of) ʾGB, who has it dragged to ʾGB (?). The account form is thus preceded by two nominal syntactic elements in the form of the casus pendens (The king of Agabo – his stele - …), which together with the

following verbal clauses are linked to the nouns and verbs by referring back in the form personal affixes, but set in asyndetic sequence. Together they form a statement that is monumental, ponderous, yet at the same time bureaucratically concise. The ancient Ethiopic document of administration can thus be visualised in the form of an official file. One has the impression to be confronted with a payment slip: The entries in the fields for service and duration are calculated into the amount of remuneration now due, divided by categories: Commissioner: *ngś ʾGB* – The king of Agabo; object in question: *ḥwlt z ʾh* – his stele; Action / service: *sḥbw* – Transport and erection; acting persons: *ḥzb* – his people (of Agabo); (services in detail) *ʾtw bqwʿt* – they came for useful work; *ʾtw ʿlt 15* – Duration: they stayed for 15 days (remunerations in detail):): *ʾsy* – Remuneration (no. 1): 520 mugs of beer; *ʾsy* – remuneration (no. 2): 20620 loaves of bread.

5.2 Prologue of the Text

We have seen that the text represents a complete and independent statement, also without the first two words, according to the given style and genre. But what about this 'prologue'? We shall now examine its function and mode of expression, attempt to clarify its role with regard to this administrative form and at the same time review the other suggested interpretations.

Let us go back to the first word: Possible readings, apart from the perfect *(ṣäḥafä)*, are: Active participle *(ṣäḥafi)*, passive participle viz. adjective *(ṣəḥuf)*, imperative *(ṣəḥəf)*, alongside other forms of the definite verb, which we may neglect here.

In order to make a deliberate choice, it is not sufficient to refer to the context; all it provides, depending on how one separates it from the remaining text, is the form bzt, which until now all researchers except Littmann (1952) have interpreted as proper name (of the king), even though such a name is entirely unknown and nowhere attested in Ethiopian onomastics. One may refer to the numerous parallels in Sabaean and ancient Ethiopic inscriptions and graffiti – partly from the same area - , which begin with the word *ṣḥf* viz. with a Sabaean letter *f* (Ricci 1960 :84; 86; 87; 89; 90; 91; 93-95; 101; 103 etc.). The root and the word *ṣḥf* exist in Ancient South Arabic in the same meaning as in Ethiopic: originally "to incise", then "to write, create a piece of writing" etc. Therefore my first assumption would be that the letter f at the beginning of these texts is an abbreviation for the word *ṣḥf*. Such an introduction, either as abbreviation or written-out word, is often found at the beginning of all kinds of texts; what they have in common is their mere being pieces of writing. It is exactly this, which the introduction is trying to convey – a message, which to us as "burnt children of literate cultures" must appear obsolete and tautological; this is why this obvious explanation has so far escaped us. But one needs to remember that also in our times someone may start reading out a piece of writing with the words "It says here …"! This very formula, with which a reciter addresses his – often illiterate – audience, becomes part and parcel of the written form of a text and thus goes on to confirm the postulated pedantry of the ancient Ethiopians. Thus it should be read as a passive participle *ṣəḥuf*, and

the following word is easily intelligible, in the spirit of pedantry, as *bä-zatti* "on this here = (equivalent to an adverb of place) here", just to keep the reader from looking for the upcoming text elsewhere. Taking the contextual meaning one step further, one reaches the implicit call on the reader, which makes the formula more logical and palatable to us: "Read out what is written here!"

5.3 Alternative Interpretations of the Prologue

Before we continue the proposed interpretation of the beginning of the text as a verbal clause, I would like to provide a second possible interpretation of the "prologue". What could be more reasonable than throwing a glance at epigraphy further afield and gather comparanda for the creation and execution of inscriptions at different times and in different cultures. With minor differences, the technical procedures can be considered as universally valid for this kind of texts and objects. It is common to find notes of redaction and execution, meant as instructions to the stonemason, mechanically and inadvertently copied into the text: "Thus I speak (or dictate), write down"; "write this in one line" etc. From this angle, our example could be seen as an order (in the imperative): "Write hereon!" The form *ṣaḥafä bä-* is indeed attested, even though rarely, but it is usual for inscriptions to provide such rare attestations (DL 1267). The unkempt style, asyndetic parataxis, literal repetitions, word couples in parallel, numbers – all these traits, as mentioned above, make the text a typical representative of the genre of lists. It is originally an administrative list, extended by an introductory instruction for the stonemason: "Write this hereon". One can visualise the sheet of paper with these notes lying beside the unfinished stele, and the stonemason – though the inscription looks like a graffito rather than a carefully incised inscription – who duly starts his job with the words: "Write this hereon". However, illustrative though this second interpretive attempt is for the concrete procedure of incising the stele, one must object to this hypothesis in view of the frequent attestation of the form *ṣḫf* at the beginning of graffiti. Furthermore, this hypothesis presupposes that the stonemason knew how to read, a condition which is far from self-evident (cf. above the remarks on literacy), and did not simply copy the lines on the stone.

But let us now return to the first interpretation of the beginning of the text as a verbal clause ("(the king) has had this written hereon" viz. "BZT, king of Agabo (on) his stelae here"; viz. with a colon after Agabo and the beginning of the narrative (cf. the synopsis of the translations above)). A text referring to itself in such a circular way would be an unusual feature; though there is one parallel in the inscription of *Ḥaḍānī* Dānʾēl (DAE : Nr. 12), who proclaims in the first person: "I have had this written"; but this fragmentary and in large parts obscure inscription does not clarify whether the act of "writing" refers to the execution, or rather incision, of the graffito-like inscription, or to an action reported in the narrative of the text, such as the dispatch of a diplomatic letter by the imperial administrator Dānʾēl. Even if we retain the reading the perfect tense "has written", the easiest reading of *bzt* remains as preposition and demonstrative pronoun, which in combination are the equivalent of an adverb of place: "here, viz. hereon".

The deixis would then simply and plausibly refer to the object, which bears the inscription, the stele of 'Anza. The first sentence must hence read: "(He) has had (this) written hereon, the king of Agabo". Then starts a new sentence, which needs explanation. At any rate, this solution eliminates an otherwise unattested name of a king BZT, which can only obscure our knowledge of Ethiopian history. A further possible explanation for this syntax would be as a kind of objective conjugation: "He has written hereon, (namely) the king of Agabo on his stele".

In sum one needs to acknowledge that the self-reference in this brief text would be such an unlikely feature that it is far more plausible to consider the prologue a brief, stereotypical introductory formula likewise appearing in Ethiopian graffiti. Furthermore this hypothesis has the advantage – with regard to the economy of hypotheses – of offering a solution beyond this single case.

5.4 Notes on Single Grammatical and Lexical Questions

- *ng*ś does not need to be interpreted as *nəguś* "king"; it can also be read as *nägś* "taxes, villeinage"; this would not essentially modify the concrete contents of the text, but shift its style and main thrust: To have the person of the king, as author of the action and the inscription, in prominent position at the beginning, fits better with the overall tone of the text.
- – *ng*ś *ʾgb* can also mean "king Agabo" (title and name in the status constructus); this would save the king from anonymity. But in that case Agabo would of course need to be discarded as the destination of the delivery of the stele, or it would have to be read "… to king Agabo". It is also worth noting that the stele is erected solely for the king, not for his fathers or forefathers, as in the case of the stele of Mäṭära. Yet one doubt remains: How do we know that this king of Agabo is not already dead at this point and that the stele is not erected after his death? The remunerations in the last part of the text can also be read as impersonal passive voice (by reading the verb as third pers. pl. perfect tense). One should rather settle with the former interpretation, again because of the stylistic considerations described above. Agabo is taken as a purely conventional form of the name. There is the personal name Angabo in the mythical traditions of Ethiopia; it is exactly the king who kills the snake venerated by the early Ethiopians. But more important, the geographical name Agobo or similar is attested till today in the region. E.g. the church Ch'erkos Agobo, 8,5 km north of Aṣbi in Eastern Tigray (Rock-hewn churches 1974 : 15).
- *ḥawəlt* is apparently used in the old texts as a masculine. Here one can already observe the other function of grammatical genders, which is typical of the later Gəʿəz (and does not follow the biological genders): a big thing (cf. Littmann 1952 : 6-7; Ricci 1990 : 146 line 10 of the inscription of *Ḥənzat*).
- *ṣḥbw* must hence be read *säḥäbəwwo*; not only does it reveal itself as a clear plural form through the attached object suffix, which is represented by the glide *w* also in the unvocalised script and thus indicates both the number and the object suffix. At the same time it helps to clarify the syntax of the sentence:

First comes "his stele here" in the casus pendens, then it is taken up again in the object suffix of the verb "they pulled". The interpretations put forward so far are undecided on the distribution of roles; but the unequivocal parallel in the stele of Māṭārā leaves no doubt that inscriptions proclaiming such accomplishments mention the persons acting on the spot, not the commissioners ("the young team *mäḥazat* pulled, carried the stele …"). Likewise here, as already signalled by the plural form: "his people carried it".

- *sḥbw* after Agabo should be seen as an accusative of direction "… to Agabo". It is followed by the subject *ḥzb*, which should be read *ḥəzbu* "his people, i.e., that of Agabo". Since the hyphen separating the two words was not reproduced in the first drawings, the presumed composite noun "Agabo-people" gave rise to a number of peculiar interpretations.

- The following case offers a very simple solution if one considers the duration of the described action and the uncontested meaning of *bqˤt* "help, assistance": "They (the people) came for assistance and useful work; they came for 15 days". One explanation for the doubling of the verb could of course be that the scribe tried to avoid the coincidence of the two accusatives of place and time, and thus avoid a grammatical constellation hard to understand. But in the vein of the text it seems more likely that the scribe did nothing but fill in mechanically the fields in his database, as described above. - *bäqwet* (vgl. DL 515; LCD 100) has all the appearance of a euphemism from the point of view of the feudal lord: villeinage and feudal services is what he means by "assistance, useful work" etc. One only needs to think of the Latin term beneficium, which is indeed an apt description – from the point of view of the beneficiary! Altheim (1971 : 399; 1996 : 33ff) speaks of "liturgy, liturgical work", but goes on to interpret the term under scrutiny as "benefit" for the workers, in tune with his interpretation of the entire context, "the noblemen of Agabo invite to a banquet"! At any rate we can discard the peculiar notion that the workmen be asked to bring their own food or, according to another interpretation, that they had to pay for the feast to celebrate the accomplishment of the work. If the latter were true, the omission of meat in the text would be striking; the listed goods rather make dry workmen's food. There is no point in resuming the discussion on feudal exploitation here; yet I would like to point out that it is customary that such special occasions, which also had a cultic and religious significance, were celebrated at the expense of the author and commissioner.

- *ˀsy* "to remunerate, to compensate" has been interpreted as a root variant of *ˤsy ˤasäyä* (DL 974; LCD 73); comparisons with other Semitic languages suggest an initial *ˤayn*; but the meanings ("to make, to do") do not exactly correspond. A variant of *ˤayn* and *ˀalef* would not be unusual in Ethiopic, not even in Aksumite times. But one may also presume an independent root *ˀasäyä* "to remunerate, to compensate", even if in Ethiopic tradition the *ˤayn* is not uniformly employed, cf. LCD 73. A suggestion by Littmann (1952 : 7) to that effect considers the word a dialectal variant of *sesäya* "to supply with food", which is found in Aksumite inscriptions in comparable contexts (DAE : 6). The question, which at any rate only results in a minor semantic variation, has to await further epigraphic finds

to be settled. As mentioned above, one could also imagine the form as a third pers. masc. pl. in the sense of an impersonal in the passive voice.

- śwh, "beer" according to a less than certain reading (see above, TEXT); Littmann (1952 : 7) regards the final –h as an accusative morpheme, rarely found with simple nouns.

It is remarkable that the cited amounts do not represent respective multiples in whole numbers, neither the mugs of beer and loaves of bread in relation to the working days, nor the loaves of bread in relation to each mug of beer. Could it be that the Ethiopians were merely trying to make an impression with pretended pedantry and the listing of large numbers, which do not match? Or are these only mistakes of calculation or of writing? Still the figures appear reliable and allow, in combination with the parameters, certain conclusions on the number of workmen involved: 1374,666... loaves of bread per day; 34, 666... mugs of beer per day. For each mug of beer that makes 39.65, i.e., c. 40 loaves of bread. One can imagine that a certain number of workmen would share the one mug and the 40 loaves. Further precision, e.g. at least 40 workmen, has to remain conjectural, since we cannot determine either the volume of a mug of beer in Agabo at the time – traditional measures in various regions of Ethiopia vary between c. 6 and 120 litres (cf. e.g. Kropp 2004 : n. 39; 43; 48; 68; 72) – or the size of a loaf of bread. If we assume that a workman on average consumes 5 loaves of bread and 5 litres of beer per day, we end up with 8 times 40 = 320 workmen and a mug size of 40 litres – but this is mere speculation. A fruitful approach to the issue would be to consider how many men are needed to carry and erect a stele of 6 to 7 m length and 1.20 m width and a approximate weight of 10-15 tons.

Translation

1. (Read what) is written here: the king
2. (of) Agabo –
3. his stele here – they have pulled (and erected it) in
4. Agabo his people. They came
5. for villeinage. They came (and stayed)
6. for fifteen days. He remunerated (them) with beer in
7. mugs: 520. He remunerated (them) with 8. bread: 20620 (loaves).

And finally an attempt at a more fashionable version, adapted to modern bureaucratic jargon: "It is written here: The king's people carried the stele of the king of Agabo to Agabo in 15 days of villeinage, and they were remunerated / supplied with 520 mugs of beer and 20,620 loaves of bread."

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Fig. 1: The church of ʿAnza Maryam today; Photo by Peter Roenpage, October 2006.

Fig. 2: The stele in its actual position its upper part and details of the inscription; Photo by Wolfgang Hahn, January 2006.

Fig. 3: Upper part of the ʿAnza stele, January 2006.

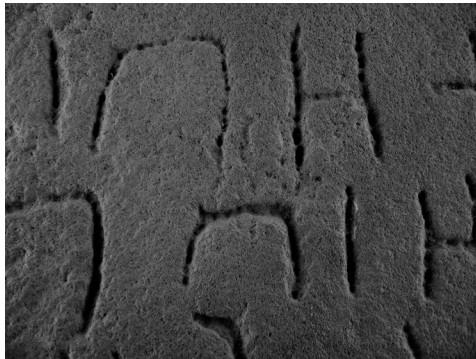Fig. 4: ʿAnza detail line 1 start; Photo by Wolfgang Hahn, January 2006.

Fig. 5: ʿAnza detail line 1-2 middle, January 2006.

Fig. 6: ʿAnza detail line 1-2 end, January 2006.

Fig. 7: ʿAnza detail line 4-5 start, January 2006.
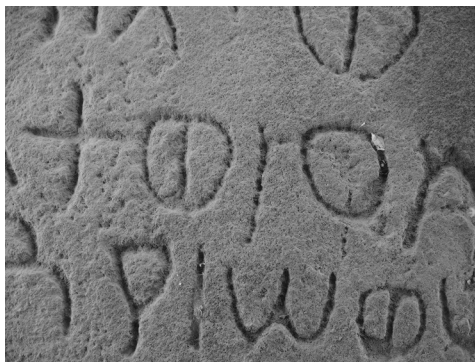

Fig. 8: ʿAnza detail line 4-5 middle, January 2006.

Fig. 9: ʿAnza detail line 4-5 end 2006.

Fig. 10: ʿAnza detail line 5 start, January 2006.

Fig. 11: ʿAnza detail line 6 middle, January 2006.

Fig. 12: ʿAnza detail line 6-8 end, January 2006.

Fig. 13: ʿAnza detail line 7-8 end, January 2006.

Fig. 14: ʿAnza detail line 7-8 start, January 2006.