# Language, Script And Society In The Axumite Kingdom[1]

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## 1. Classical Ethiopic as a Christian Language

One of the decisive turning points in Ethiopian history occurred in the first half of the 4th century A.D. when Ethiopia further opened herself up to the Hellenistic culture and by now also to the Near-Eastern Christian culture. This is witnessed by the Axumite royal inscriptions, which – though not anchored in the cultural awareness of the Ethiopians – "had caught the attention of several travellers early on" („schon in früherer Zeit von verschiedenen Reisenden bemerkt"). We owe our first summary to David Heinrich Müller *(Epigraphische 1894),* who edited the Axumite inscriptions with a commentary based on "impressions taken by Theodore Bent".

Further royal inscriptions by King 'Ezana were collected during the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (DAE) under the leadership of Enno Littmann, who published his findings in the monumental work entitled: *Sabaische, griechische und altabessinische Inschriften* (1913).[2] He took up this topic again in his article „Äthiopische Inschriften" (1950).

These inscriptions, already fully but by no means exhaustively explained and commented upon, have been supplemented by only one additional inscription, found in Axum in 1981 and published in 1991 (v. S. Uhlig: Trilinguale 2001) by E. Bernand / A. J. Drewes / R. Schneider (*Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie*

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1   A previous version of this paper was given at the *Second International Enno Littmann Conference,* that took place in Aksum / Tigrai (Ethiopia) in January 2006, and at the *19th Annual Conference of the Institute of Language Studies*, that was organized in June 2007 in Addis Ababa. I am grateful for discussion with Dr. Wilfried Günther, Puddington/ Devon, on various topics delt with in this article.

2   By the way, today we would say in German "Sabäische" rather than "Sabaische" as given in the original title. The only work on which Littmann could partly base his edition is that by David Heinrich Müller (*Epigraphische* 1894).

1991-2000) which is a collection of all Ethiopian inscriptions found by that date, unfortunately without commentary on the Ethiopic and pseudo-Sabaic inscriptions. Only the Greek inscriptions have been commented upon.

These inscriptions represent the most important historical documents of the 4th century A.D., a time when the history of Ethiopia reached one of its most important turning points. The foundations of the Ethiopian state were laid as a consequence of two momentous and fundamental decisions: The conversion to Christianity and – following from that – the development of its own literary language represented in its own, i.e., the Ethiopic Script. Both decisions are closely bound up with each other.

This close connection of conversion to Christianity and cultural self-determination and development can at least be seen as a valid claim for the Christian Orient, because Christian missionary work in the Near East was characterized by an acceptance of the languages and cultures of the individual peoples. For at the very beginning of their missionary work the Bible was translated into the respective vernacular language of the area, e.g., into Syriac, the first and for a long time most prominent Christian language of the Near East, and thereafter into Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Sogdian (see I. D. Băncilă: Christian 2009), Old Ethiopic and Arabic, to mention only the most important ones.

As far as the Arabic language is concerned, the beginnings of its literature do not lie – as is so often maintained, particularly from the Muslim side – in the Qur'ân or in the subsequent Islamic scriptures which drove out all non-Muslimic evidence in Arabic – but in the Christian-Arabic literature that was used at the time of the evangelization of the Arabs. There is ample proof of the spread of Christianity in pre-Islamic times, see the overview, now outdated, in the first volume of the Georg Graf's five-volume History of Christian-Arabic Literature (*Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 1944-1953).

Of the three oldest dated Arabic inscriptions, i.e., inscriptions in Arabic language and script, two are indeed Christian. The oldest of these inscriptions (512 A.D.) is trilingual, concerning the martyrdom of St. Sergios/Sargis/Serǧū, which was found in Zebed, South-East of Aleppo. The text is in Syriac, Greek and Arabic in their respective scripts and without any one version being a direct translation of the other (v. Sachau: Dreisprachige 1882). The third oldest dated Arabic inscription, an Arabic-Greek bilingual inscription, dating from 580 A.D., tells of the martyrdom of St. John.

It is self-evident that these scarce pre-Islamic inscriptions are of particular importance for the development of the Arabic script as well (v. A. Grohmann: *Arabische* 1971:14ff., B. Gruendler: *Development* 1993:13f.)

Thus it was only the development of their own scripts and literatures that created these nations, such as they understood themselves, have been doing so to this day and presumably will do so in future. A good example is the creation of the Armenian script which then allowed the founding of the Armenian nation, a nation which in the face of many dangers, e.g., iranisation or islamisation, has held out to this day. And to this day the "invention" or "reshaping" of the Armenian script through St. Mesrob, called Maštoc' or Mašt'oc', is regularly remembered,

but in particular in 2006, when the 1600th anniversary of the invention of the Armenian script was celebrated. It is most unlikely that without the combination of a common Christian belief, a common national script and a national literature this nation could have survived for so long.

This model can also be applied in broad outline to Old Ethiopic. The different peoples of Northern Ethiopia – by accepting Christianity and developing their own (Old Ethiopic) literary language – created for themselves the basis on which they founded their own nation. Combined with the imperial crown, this formed the national identity that has allowed the Ethiopian culture to withstand cushitisation and islamisation to this day.

This vernacular friendly Oriental Christianity was in sharp contrast to the practice in Catholic missionary work and even more so to the conversion efforts by Muslims, where the indigenous cultures were not supported, but the missionaries insisted on Romanisation or Arabisation, respectively. Let me remind you in this context of the Jesuits who wanted to teach the Ethiopians the *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary") in Latin (አዌ፡መሪእ፡ግረዚእ፡ፐሌነ፡ ዶሚኑስ፡ቴቁም፡ *ʾəwē Märiʾə gräziʾə pəlēnä dōmīnūś tēqūm*, Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum'); and that to this day the Qurʾân has officially not been translated nor is it to be recited in any vernacular language.

## 2. The Linguistic Situation and Writing

It may seem trivial to analyse in more detail how it came about that the Old Ethiopic language (Geʿez) came to be the basis of the newly created literary language. You may ask: Was there any other eligible language? Unfortunately, only very little is known about the linguistic situation during the first centuries after Christ. But we do know, for instance, something about the script revolution that lead to the invention and vocalisation of the current Ethiopic script.

Ignoring the Akkadian cuneiform script which relies on a totally different principle (of *CV* and *CVC* signs), there are only two basic possibilities in Semitic consonantal scripts to indicate the vowels, although vowels are commonly not shown at all in these scripts:

a) The increased use of the semi-vocalic consonant signs *w* (for *u* and *o*), *y* (for *i* and *e*) and *ʾ/h* (for *a*). This principle e.g. is applied in Arabic, but only for the long vowels *aː, iː, uː*, while in Syriac and Hebrew only long *iː/eː* and *uː/oː* are marked with *w* and *y*. A final (long) *a(ː)* is rendered with *ʾ* (Ålaph) and *h* (Hê) respectively. In Mandaic, an Aramaic dialect with a rich literature, the semi-vocalic signs *ʾ, w, y* and *ʿ* (that has lost its consonantal value) are used for the short vowels *a, e, i, o, u* as well.

b) The other way would be to add dots and dashes which are put above, inside or under the consonantal letters to indicate which vowel is to be pronounced after a given consonant. This system is used only in the Holy Scriptures, i.e., in the Hebrew and Syriac Bibles and in the Arabic Qurʾân, and in school books to express those vowels which are not represented according to the method described in a).

In Ethiopic a different path was chosen, which has no other parallel in the Semitic world. The basic consonantal signs *C,* e.g. በ, taken over from Sabaic (Epigraphic South Arabian) Π *b* without any additional moderation, is read as *bä* (or *ba* according to the transliteration system); it is interpreted as having the simplest unmarked vowel. By extending or shortening dashes, and adding dashes and squiggles, basic *C* was so far modified that new signs resulted with the reading *CV*, e.g. ቡ *bū*, ቢ *bī*, ባ *bā*, etc. The number of vowels that were considered phonemic was seven, and to this day the vowels are counted from 1. (*gəʿəz*) *(C)ä* to 7. (*sābəʿ*) *(C)ō*.

The idea to vocalize an existing consonantal script in this 'strange' way originates in the Indian cultural ambit, a fact that does not seem to be generally known or accepted. It is only in Indian scripts that the basic form of the sign, just as it was originally adopted from Aramaic, is read with the vocalization *a*, while the other vowels were indicated by adding diacritical strokes or some modification of the basic sign. The structural similarity of the two writing systems, Indian and Ethiopic, cannot be explained other than by historical dependence. The very close relations that Ethiopia and the island of Soqoṭra had with India (see the Brāhmī inscriptions found in a cave in Soqotra, v. I. Strauch – M. D. Bukharin: Indian 2004) excludes any other explanation than adoption from an older Indian script.

In this context it does not matter that the Indian script system that was taken over from Aramaic and the Old Ethiopic script that was taken over from Epigraphic South Arabian are related to each other and ultimately sprang from the same Near-Eastern source (Proto-Sinaitic script).

The astonishing factor here is not the influence of India, with which the Ethiopians have had intensive contacts, but the fact that such a syllabic system was developed at all. But foreign influence is not unusual in this context, since many other writing systems, e.g. the Armenian script, were also not just produced out of nothing but, we must assume, were developed on the basis and model of other writing systems. At least one can say that with the Ethiopic script a kind of syllabic writing system (i.e., not a true syllabary) was constructed on the basis of a consonantal script for the first and only time within the Semitic cultures. To this day the (Jewish) Hebrew speakers, the (Muslim and Christian) Arabs and the (Christian) Syrian-Aramaeans get by perfectly satisfactorily with their Hebrew, Arabic and Syriac scripts without any desire or need to introduce full vocalisation by adding dashes and squiggles. This is only done when dealing with their holy scriptures, where vocalisation enjoys some kind of sanctified status.

Then why did the Old Ethiopians or rather the imperial court see any need for introducing a full vocalisation? My answer is that a large part of the emperor's subjects were not Semites but Cushites, who found it just as difficult to supply the vowels when reading a purely consonantal text as modern Europeans do when learning Hebrew, Syriac or Arabic. If the reader does not know too many words and is not very familiar with the Semitic root structure, then reading causes great difficulties. If the Bible had been written in an originally unvocalized alphabet, the beginning of Genesis (ኦሪት፡ዘልደት፡ *ōrīt zä-lədät*) would read, after በቀደም፡ B-QDM, i.e., vocalized *bä-qädāmī*, the word *ገበረ፡ GBR. Any mother tongue speaker would

know immediately that, seen structurally, after an adverbial expression and before the subject of the sentence, only the reading of *ገብረ፡ GBR as the perfect form 3rd sg. of the verb is possible with the two likely forms ገብረ፡ *gäbrä* and *ገበረ፡ *gäbärä* (ignoring the derived stem *ገበረ፡ *gäbbärä*). He will then choose *gäbrä* over any other reading because only this form exists in the language and only the sentence በቀዳሚ፡ገብረ፡እግዚአብሔር፡ሰማየ፡ወምድረ። *bä-qädāmī gäbrä ʾəgzīʾa-bəḥēr sämāyä wä-mədrä* ('In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth') makes any sense.

This kind of insight into the structural possibilities and the lexicon of the language could not have been expected from all the inhabitants of the Axumitic Empire, which is why reading aids, like adding extra dashes and squiggles, were introduced for the Cushites.

This shows up the political dimension as the decisive factor in the development of the script. My choosing a sample-sentence from a sacred text, the Bible, only serves to illustrate the difficulties of Semitic reading habits and should not be seen as in any way contradictory to my view of the Axumites adopting their writing system for an essentially secular, i.e., political reason. The Near-Eastern missionary strategy at the time of translating Christian literature into the respective native languages surely must also have increased the aspiration to develop a Christian script that is available to everyone, i.e., a national script, and which is by design different in character from Sabaic or Greek. I believe that both ideas played a formative role in the development of the Ethiopic script, even though the chronology might not be as straight forward (v. R. Schneider: A propos 1995; personal communication from A. Bausi, Hamburg).

Apart from the obvious Indian model, Meroitic could have played a part as well. From the 2nd millennium BC to the 4th/5th century A.D. Meroitic was used in Nubia in numerous inscriptions in a hieroglyphic as well as a cursive form. Although at this moment only a few words are understood, the writing system does not seem to be sufficiently clear. It is an (syllabic or rather) alphabetic script (with consonant signs) which contains, however, some consonant + vowel signs. Thus apart from the sign for *t* there is also a sign for *te* and for *to*. It is therefore assumed that *t* itself could be a consonant + vowel sign and thus should be interpreted as being associated with the simplest unmarked vowel, i.e., *ta* (v. I. Hofmann: *Materialien* 1981:30).

Contrary to this, K. Demuß and Fr. Kammerzell (Meroitische 2003) have stressed that the sign *te* should rather be read as *t* without vowel, then *te* would be written with the sign *t* and the sign *e*. The basic sign *t* if no vowel follows should be interpeted as incorporating the unmarked vowel *a*, i.e., *ta*. This is reminiscent of the Ethiopic system where the unmodified basic sign can represent the inclusion of the unmarked vowel *ä* (or *a*), for further and different information see Cl. Rilly (*Langue* 2007).

However, there are considerable differences between the Ethiopic and Meroitic scripts. On the one hand Meroitic has only very few consonant + vowel signs; furthermore these consonant + vowel signs are not derived modifications from the basic consonant signs but are forms in their own right having their own independent shapes. Contrary to this an Ethiopic *CV* sign is always modified from a basic *C* sign

by dashes and squiggles. But according to Demuß and Kammerzell's interpretation a *CV* sequence (except *Ca*) is always represented by a given consonant sign followed by a vowel sign in its own right, i.e., it stands for the same vowel in all cases.

In spite of these fundamental differences I think it is very doubtful whether the knowledge of Meroitic could have tipped the Ethiopians' final decision towards the Indian model and thereby derive the vocalic signs by modifying the given consonantal signs by dashes and squiggles.

These deliberations concerning the origin of the Ethiopic syllabary do in no way belittle the achievements of the developers of the Ethiopic script, i.e., those officials in the Axumitic state chancellery who were concerned with correspondence. It was presumably the feat of a single official who – inspired by the knowledge of the Indian writing systems – created such a near perfect script. This script, unique in the Semitic world, has been in use continuously up to today and can basically not be improved upon. I cannot go into any further detail here, but I do not see it at all as a deficiency that to this day the writing system does not mark consonantal length or that it fails to distinguish between schwa-vowel and no vowel post-consonantally.


## 3.   Choosing a National Language


This now raises the question for which language was the Ethiopic script developed, a question which might appear trivial, but in two aspects it is not.

### 3.1. The Dialectal Situation

For one we have to assume that on the Northern Plateau and the Eastern Lowland there was dialectal divergence, just as in any other speech communities on Earth. This leads to the almost inevitable conclusion that the dialect on which the literary language was to be based was that of the capital, i.e., the dialect of Axum. This is a common pattern observable in many other language communities. Thus the Standard French of today is essentially the dialect of the Île de France, i.e., the region in which Paris is situated. In England the London dialect was one of the main contributors to Standard English, and the dialect of Addis Abeba is considered today's Amharic standard variety.

All this strongly suggests the existence of divergent dialects in the Axumitic Empire, and that the modern Ethio-Semitic languages do not necessarily solely derive from Ge'ez but from sister dialects of Ge'ez as well. It seems that this is not fully appreciated by all scholars of Ethiopic, although many parallels can be found in other speech communities. Thus the South American colonial dialects of Spanish show dialectal traits that are only common in Southern (Andalusian) dialects, e.g. the weakening of [s] to [h] in syllable-final position.

It is therefore in no way unusual if some dialectal differences between Northern and Southern Ethio-Semitic were to be explained as stemming from dialectal differences going back to Old Ethiopic. However, this view is not in accord with today's accepted standard theory where a sharp division is assumed between the North-Ethiopian languages Ge'ez, Tigrinya and Tigre and the South-Ethiopian languages Amharic, Argobba, Harari and the different Gurage idioms. I have disputed this view at another occasion because the facts indicated in the linguistic development of these languages cannot adequately be explained by a strictly dichotomous classification model (see R. Voigt: North vs. South 2009).

## 3.2. Why not Sabaic?

The second problem is why the language represented in the Sabaic inscriptions was not used for the newly to be created literary language. As a general observation one has also to keep in mind that the choice of a local language or dialect had to compete against two rivals: Greek and Sabaic. At the time Axum was a participant in two different cultural spheres, on the one hand the Hellenistic world, stretching from Afghanistan to North Africa, from the Crimea to Ethiopia, and on the other hand it was tied in with the South Arabian-Ethiopian cultural sphere, stretching from Oman to Axum. This explains the use of Greek as well as Sabaic in the royal inscriptions. In the official inscriptions both these languages always had to be used. Old Ethiopic only enters as a variant for commenting, and – as can be seen from the important trilingual inscription – lacking perhaps from the start the status afforded the other two languages of culture.

It comes as no great surprise that Greek was not chosen to be the new literary language, since knowledge of Greek was presumably restricted to certain circles only. But nevertheless Greek exerted a strong influence on Old Ethiopic, as shown in the choice of direction of writing, Greek number signs and a vast number of words borrowed from Greek into Ethiopic like ኢትዮጵያ፡ *ʾĪtyopyā* 'Ethiopia', ጳጳስ፡ *pāppās* 'metropolitan, bishop', ጳጒሜን፡ *Pāgʷəmēn* 'intercalary month', ጠረጴዛ፡ *ṭäräpēzā* 'table', ጠርሙስ፡ጠርሙዝ፡ *ṭärmūs/z* 'glass bottle', ጴጥሮስ፡ *Pēṭrōs* 'Peter' etc.

But is it surprising that the other candidate, Sabaic, was not chosen as the literary language? I think it is! Picture the situation in Abyssinia, a region on the Northern African Plateau that was settled by a ruling class of Semites who originated from the Southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Abyssinia, as the land was later called, was named after the *Ḥbśt* tribe or people who were obviously of great historical importance. In the royal inscriptions *DAE* 6 | 𐩵𐩬𐩰𐩦𐩩 … |ñ1ð / *DAE* 7 ንሥ| … ሐበሠተ| (*mlk / ngś*) … *w-Ḥbśt* (i.e., *malik / nəguś* … *wa-Ḥabaśat* or pl. *Ḥabaśāt*) '(king of) Ḥ.' is rendered in Greek as (βασιλεὺς) Αἰϑιόπων (*basileùs ʾAitʰiópōn*), i.e., '(king of the) Ethiopians'.

It is a widely held misguided belief that the name Abyssinia is derived from an Arabic word meaning 'mixture (of peoples)', but in reality *Ḥbśt* and *ʾḥbśn* [*ʾaḥbūśān*] is a tribal or people's name that figures in several South Arabian inscriptions (see W. W. Müller: *Ḥabašāt* 2005, H. Elliesie: Zweite Band 2007).

Abyssinia therefore, the region ruled by the South Arabian *Ḥbśt* and other tribes, forms the Western part of the South-Arabian–Abyssinian cultural sphere. This

area was again subdivided into the different South-Arabian kingdoms and their dialects (or languages) written and spoken like that of Sabaʾ / Sabaic, Qataban / Qatabanian, Maʿin / Minaean, Ḥaḍramaut / Ḥaḍramitic and others. The Westernmost of these kingdoms is the Kingdom of Sabaʾ (Sheba) which comprised Western Yemen and precisely Abyssinia. The unity of this cultural ambit was manifested by a common religion (with regional differences), a common language (with regional differences) and common cultural practices (like pilgrimage to sacred places). This culture was broken up in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century through the assault of the Arabs, but was preserved in the Ethiopian highlands, in Abyssinia – and evolved further in the centuries to follow.

It is regrettable that some Ethiopian and Eritrean scholars refute that the origins of the Ḥbśt and of other Abyssinian tribes are to be found in Southern Arabia, in spite of it being obvious that the centre of the South-Arabian–Abyssinian cultural sphere lay in Yemen. Those scholars' difficulty in accepting this stems – I assume – from them seeing Yemen only as the Arab country that it is today. They forget, however, that Yemen spawned its own culture and only became Arabicised as late as the 7th or 8th century.

### 3.3. Origin of the Speakers of Epigraphic South Arabian (Old South Arabians)

The ancestors of those peoples who were later to become the Old South-Arabians in Yemen, Abyssinia and ʿOmân must have come from the North, in particular the Fertile Crescent, where the centre of the Semites was to be found during the millennia before Christ. Then at about 1000 B.C. they progressed, as it is assumed, from the Syrian area to the south of the Arabian Peninsula, possibly even in those early days following the sweet scent of incense, a scent that later enticed others as well to South-Arabia. Very early on individual settlers and traders must have reached the Northern East-African highlands, later to be called Abyssinia or Ethiopia, where they found living conditions similar to those in their native Yemenite highlands.

## 4.  Modern South Arabian and Epigraphic South Arabian

Of great significance for the reconstruction of the early history of the South-Arabian–Ethiopian cultural area are the modern South-Arabian languages (e.g., Mehri, Śḥẹri, Ḥarsūsi, Soqoṭri) and the medieval Himyaritic as documented in the Arabic tradition, languages which were only "discovered" as late as the 19th century. For the first group of languages see Th. M. Johnstone: *Modern* 1974/75, for Himyaritic v. A. G. Belova: *Him'jaritskij* 1996. In them we recognize a type of language that is markedly different from the language(s) of the South-Arabian inscriptions. Let me point out two interesting features.

It is not quite clear if Epigraphic South-Arabian has a present tense formation of the type *(y)iparrVs* (in the basic stem) as we know it from Akkadian (e.g.

*iparras* 'he breaks', *ipaqqid* 'he entrusts', *irappud* 'he roams') or the present tense (imperfect) formation of the type *yVprVs-* as known from Hebrew (e.g. *yipros*), Aramaic (e.g. Syriac *nepros*) and Arabic (e.g. *yafris*). In Modern South-Arabian, however, the formation of the type *yəfōrəś* 'he spreads' which goes back to *\*yifarriś* is the usual present tense formation in the simple basic stem. (Both roots, although probably not to be connected etymologically, are chosen on behalf of their phonetic similarity.)

One can assume that the imperfect had the form *yaprVs-* as in Central Semitic, i.e., Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. This can be seen from forms like ١५○ᙛ٩ *yś'-n* (usually but wrongly transcribed in Arabicised form as *yḍ'-n*) 'he implores' of the root ١○ᙛ५ √*nś'*, and ١Ↄᙛ٩ *yṣr* 'he provides support' of the root ١Ↄᙛ५ √*nṣr*, where the nasal as first radical is assimilated to the second radical when in contact position (*\*yanṣur > yaṣṣur*). However, there are more forms with preserved *n* as first radical, e.g. ١५ⴼ⋝५٩ *ynś'-n* 'he takes out' of the root ⴼ⋝५ √*nś'*, and ١ⴼⵒ५٩ *ynd'* 'he makes flow' of the root ١ⴼⵒ५ √*nd'* (all examples from Beeston [et alii]: *Sabaic* 1982: 90ff). It is possible that in these cases other verbal forms or stems might be involved as well in which the first and second radical are not in contact. To find out it would be necessary to analyze all verba primae *n*, which cannot be done within the limits of this article. Nebes (Form 1994) has analyzed all relevant verbal forms of roots mediae *w*, which are important because forms with preserved second radical (like *w*) can be interpreted as forms of the type *iparrVs* (cf. Ge'ez ይከውን: *yəkäwwən*, Tigrinya ይኸውን: *yək̲äwwən*). However, Nebes supports a Central Semitic imperfect form of the type *yVqtVl*.

On the other hand there is a phenomenon that occurs in Old South-Arabian as well as in New South-Arabian and where the relation between the two has yet to be fully explained: I mean the Sabaic forms with added *-n* and the present tense forms of New South-Arabian with suffixed *-n*. For Sabaic, J. Tropper (Subvarianten 1997) has established a functional difference between the forms *yqtl* and *yqtl-n*, but scholars of Sabaic have denied such a difference (v. Stein: *Untersuchungen* 2003: 167). Both camps, however, are agreed that these forms derive from a Central Semitic syllable structure *yVqtVl* and *yVqtVl-Vn*.

A second feature to which I would like to draw some attention concerns the perfect forms of the 2nd sg. in Epigraphic South-Arabian. Following the pattern of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic one could assume a form with *-t (frs-t)*, which so far could not be documented in Old South-Arabian, possibly because of the impersonal character of the inscriptions. However, in a newly found inscription a 3rd pl. perfect form with *-t-* occurred (P. Stein: Materialien 2007:25). But in most recently found inscribed sticks a *-k* appears in the second persons (v. P. Stein: *Untersuchungen* 2003:175). One could assume that these texts do contain the *k*-forms due to their closeness to the popular tongue. But this is contradicted by the frequent use of *k*-forms in the Qâniya-Hymn (Chr. Robin: Plus anciens 1991-93: 122f. with transcription and photo but without translation). Since the language of this long but partially destroyed inscription has not yet been thoroughly analyzed we can so far only say that obviously several quite different dialects that were used for writing must have existed in Southern Arabia at that time.

2nd person forms with *-k* are found in Modern South-Arabian languages (e.g. *fərəś-k < \*faraś-ka*) as well as in modern Arabic dialects that in the past underwent strong influence from Modern South-Arabian languages. For the perfect forms of the 2nd sg. of the type *katabk, katbik* in Arabic dialects of Northern Yemen see P. Behnstedt: *Dialekte* 1987: 22f. (with a linguistic map on p. 108).

The remarkable find about this is that Ethiopic shares these traits with Modern South-Arabian:

(a) in the simple basic stem the form ይፈርስ፡ *yəfärrəs* ('he is destroyed') corresponds to the Modern South-Arabian *yəfōrəś*, and

(b) the 2nd persons of the Ethiopic perfect tense are characterized by *-k* (ፈረስከ፡ *färäs-kä*).
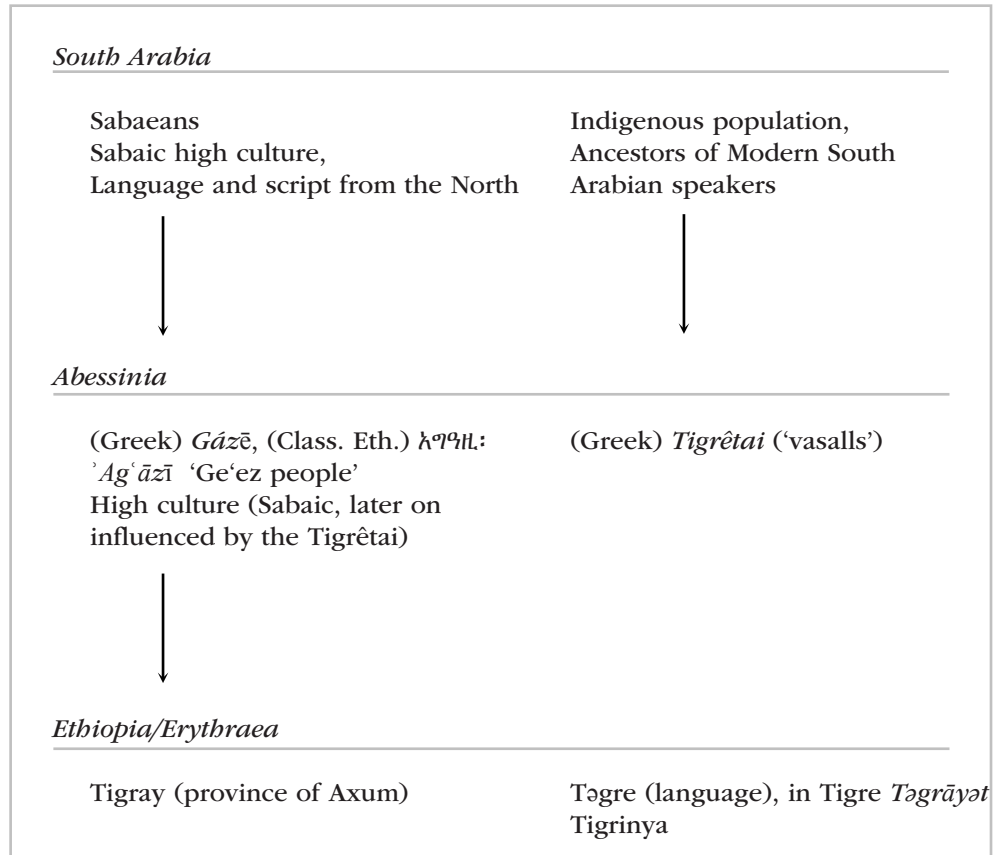
Although the linguistic evidence still needs to be worked on further one can possibly draw the conclusion that there must have been two different languages in prehistoric South-Arabia, the language of the Sabaic inscriptions and the precursor-language of today's modern South-Arabian languages. This linguistic difference may also mirror two different population groups, the Proto-Modern South-Arabians and the Old South-Arabians (whose language has been preserved in the inscriptions). Since the Old South-Arabians immigrated from the North at ca. 1000 BC (or even before), presumably the Proto-Modern South-Arabians had already settled there some time before as the result of another, older wave of immigrants from the North. For the Axumitic Empire as the Western-most outpost of the South-Arabian–Abyssinian cultural sphere this means that we also have to think of two population groups, the one group whose language we know from the Epigraphic South-Arabian inscriptions, and the other group whose language is related to the Modern South-Arabian languages. Both groups must have entered the East African Plateau at roughly the same time, but it is impossible to make any precise guesses whether the numerical strengths of the two groups were the same as back home in their Asiatic mother country. Be that as it may, the speakers of the language of the inscriptions do not appear to have been too numerous or prestigious enough, since it was their language that became extinct in the end.

G. Garbini (Origins 2004) as well assumes that there were two different population groups. According to him the members of the first group (the "Sabir" culture) migrated into South-Arabia between the 12th and 10th centuries. The second group, constituting the Sabaeans, were supposedly the last South-Arabian group to have entered Yemen, "towards 700 BC". This date must surely be set much further back in time. According to G. Lusini (Note 2004, Early history 2006) the ancestors of the 'Agʿāzī entered the country before the Sabaeans. This is a possibility and agrees with my own idea of immigrations by two population groups into South Arabia. However, I differ from G. Lusini's views in that I see a special connection between New South-Arabian and Ethio-Semitic as being the language descendants of the first immigration wave, while the second wave is represented by Old South-Arabian – especially in its Western dialects like Sabaean – which later did not survive in Abyssinia.

These two population groups did possibly continue in Abyssinia for some time. Cosmas Indicopleustes in his *Topographia christiana* (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) tells of the Τιγρήται Tigrêtai as the inhabitants of the region of Adulis, the port town of the Axumitic Empire. This is the region in which today Tigre (ትግሬ: *Təgre*) is spoken. This ancient name therefore lives on up to this day in the modern language name. But there might even be a further continuity. The ancient name Tigrêtai is presumably derived from classical Ethiopic root ገረረ: *gärärä*, ገረ: *gärrä* 'to be subject of, be subdued' (G. Lusini: Note 2004:76) – the modern name Tigre (*Təgre*) means 'vassal' with the denominative verb ተተግረ: ተግራ: *(tə)tagrā* 'to become a vassal' (v. E. Littmann / M. Höfner: *Wörterbuch* s.v.). In the *Topographia* the Tigrêtai are differentiated from the Γάζη *Gázē*, i.e., the አግዓዚ: ʾAgʿāzī, the Geʿez (ግዕዝ:) people. Presumably we must see in them the Axumites, the bearers of the high culture. Thus we have two population groups in the Axumitic Empire: the ruling Axumites and the subordinate Tigrêtai (see Lusini: o.c.). From the beginning the latter show a special relatedness to the speakers of modern South-Arabian while the former are originally identical with the bearers of the South-Arabian (Sabaic) high culture. But in the course of time they must have abandoned their culture and adopted that of the other population group.

The name ʾAgʿāzī might contain a clue as to the ethnogenesis. The use of the root ግዕዝ: *gəʿəzä* (rarius ገዐዘ: *gäʿazä*), castra movere {"move camp/tents"}, proficisci {set out, start"}, migrare; liberum fieri {"be made free"}, manumitti {"set at liberty"}, libertatem adipisci {"achive freedom"}', ተግዕዘ: *tägəʿəzä* (etiam ተገዐዘ: *tägäʿazä*), libertatem sibi sumere {"give oneself freedom"}, emancipationem appetere {"strive for freedom"}; manumitti, liberari {"be freed"}' (A. Dillmann: *Lexicon* 1865, col. 1187f.) seems to suggest one is dealing with an emigrating population that set out from South Arabia and settled on the East African Plateau in order to live a "freer life" at the frontier (v. St. Zimmer: *Ursprache* 1990, p. 26; id.: Problem 1999 [2003]). Because of a strong 'core of traditions' the contact situation did not give rise to Creole languages but rather resulted in firming up their own character (ግዕዝ: *gəʿəz* ,agendi ratio {"manner of proceeding"}, vita {"life"}, mores; indoles {"native quality"}, natura, essentia') which gains the upper hand due to the "strong ideology" and a "religious and political ideal". Thus Gəʿəz becomes finally the name of the national language: Old / Classical Ethiopic.

This concept is guided by Wilhelm E. Mühlmann's thoughts on ethnogenesis (*Rassen* 1964). According to his views peoples develop from other peoples by forming a *colluvies gentium* {i.e., "random conflux / caucus of people"} at the margins of other peoples. In our case this would be the group of pre-New South-Arabians that congregated on the Abyssinian Plateau and the northern Lowland to form a new entity. The Sabaeans, who were culturally dominant at the beginning, would later assimilate to the pre-New South-Arabians (the *Tigrḗtai*) whose language, Gəʿəz, they adopt.

This somewhat daring concept seems to be contradicted by the modern name Tigray (ትግራይ: *Təgray*) for the region of Aksum (v. W. Smidt: Selbstbezeichnungen 2005: 395f.). One would therefore have to assume that the Ethiopic form that is the source of Greek Tigrêtai was taken over by the later Axumites. This is reflected in

the process of infiltration the old Axumites experienced at the hands of the Tigrêtai who more and more took over power within the state and imposed their name on the old core province of Axum (i.e., Tigray). The old name of 'vassals' in the lowlands (today: Tigre) has been preserved to this day.

This concept can be summarized as follows:

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*South Arabia*
_____

Sabaeans                                    Indigenous population,
Sabaic high culture,                        Ancestors of Modern South
Language and script from the North          Arabian speakers

⬇                                           ⬇

*Abessinia*
_____

(Greek) *Gázē*, (Class. Eth.) አግዓዚ፥          (Greek) *Tigrêtai* ('vasalls')
ʾAgʿāzī 'Geʿez people'
High culture (Sabaic, later on
influenced by the Tigrêtai)

⬇

*Ethiopia/Erythraea*
_____

Tigray (province of Axum)                   Təgre (language), in Tigre *Təgrāyət*
                                            Tigrinya

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## 5.  The Linguistic Findings

The exact relationship between these two languages has not yet been fully worked out. Generally no clear direct relationship can be established between the language of the inscriptions and the Modern South-Arabian languages, but, of course, one must not forget the enormous time distance between them. It should be clear, however, that Modern South-Arabian together with Ethiopic belong to the South Semitic language group, while Epigraphic South Arabian (or at least

Sabaic) represents a Central Semitic language type together with Hebrew, Arabic and others. One isogloss although not totally compelling that correlates modern South-Arabian with Ethio-Semitic (i.e., present tense formation) has already been commented upon in the last chapter.

But there are also some direct correspondences between Modern South-Arabian and Epigraphic South-Arabian. Let me draw the attention to two remarkable parallels:

1. In nouns, forms containing *h* are conspicuous, e.g. dual st. emph. |ᚺᚤᚺ- -ᚤᚺᚺ and pl. st.emph. |ᚺᚤᚺ- -*nhn*, with both forms showing different vocalisation before the first *n*: presumably dual st. emph. -*ēn*- and pl. st.emph. -*īn*-, cf. the Arabic dual -*āni* / -*aini* and plural -*ūna* / -*īna*. An *h* is also found word-internally, e.g. in -ᚤᚺᚸ *bhn*- 'sons', cf. Hebrew *ben* 'son'.

   The simplest explanation is to interpret *h* as a mater lectionis for long /ā/ i.e., [-*ēnān*], [-*īnān*] and [*bān*] respectively. This is comparable to the *h* as mater lectionis word-finally (only) in Hebrew and Arabic, cf. Arab. <*mdynh*> *madīna*[b] 'town', Hebr. <*ʾšh*> *ʾiššå*[b] 'woman'. However, the origin of this latter writing convention lies in the fact that word-final *t* of the feminine noun ending of both languages weakens to an aspirate *h* resp. to zero (-*at* > -*ah* > -*a*). For this reason this writing convention in Hebrew and Arabic is of only limited value as a parallel to Epigraphic South-Arabian. This mater lectionis theory may be convincing enough as long as one does not take Modern South-Arabian forms into consideration, i.e., especially Soqotri forms which display a phonetically audible *h*. Cf. the plural ending -*hen* (-*hin*) and the many cases of epenthetic *h*, like in *rīhom* 'long' (v. the Hebrew names *ʾAb̲-råhåm*, *ʾAb̲-råm* and *Råm* from the verb *råm* 'he is high above'), *qáʿnhan* 'scorpion' (< *qaʿnān*), see M. Bittner: *Vorstudien* 1918: 27f.

   It would be helpful to find examples in which *h* occurs in Old South-Arabian (especially Minaic) as well as in New South-Arabian. As to Minaic |ᚺᛝᚤᛝ *t̲hmn*- 'eight' (cf. Arabic *t̲amāniyah*) a parallel can be found in the Mehri numeral for "three": Mehri *śhəlēt̲* (cf. ASA |ᛝᚹᛦ *s²lt̲*, Arabic *t̲alāt̲ah*).

   In the royal name *Mḥdys* found on Axumitic coins M. Kropp (Königsnamen 1996) has seen a corrupted or folk-etymologically changed form of *Mhdys* [*Mādiyās*] with a parasitic *h* which is said to represent the name *Mātəyās* 'Matthias'.

   According to this evidence one would have to assume that the Epigraphic South-Arabians did indeed pronounce the ᚤ *h* in cases like |ᚺᚤᚺᛞᛝᛦ ʿ*s₂rn-hn* 'the 20 (items)' (determinate state) [ʿ*is₂rū/īn-ahan*]. N. Rhodokanakis already treated this phenomenon in his *Studien* (1915). He speaks of a „zweigipfliger Akzent" (i.e., "twin-peak accent") of an originally long stressed syllable.

   Maria Höfner, who – by the way – co-authored with Enno Littmann the monumental *Wörterbuch der Tigre-Sprache* (1962), mentions the phenomenon of „Doppelgipfligkeit" (i.e., 'twin-peakedness') too in her *Grammatik* (1943). But since then nothing more has been said about the matter, although it is of great import for determining the relationship between Epigraphic and Modern South-Arabian.

2. An even more specific feature is encountered in Ḥaḍramitic where the personal pronouns of the 3rd sg. display a different sibilant in the masculine and feminine endings (|ᕼ- -$s_1$, |ⵔⵔᕼ- -$s_1ww$ 'his' as opposed to |ⵋ- -$s_3$ or  |ȣ-  -$t$ 'her'). This corresponds to a different form in the personal pronouns of Modern South-Arabian Śḥẹri (šɛḥ, šɛ 'he' as opposed to sɛḥ, sɛ 'she'). This agreement between Epigraphic and Modern South-Arabian (s. R. Voigt: Personalpronomina 1988) is the more astonishing as the personal pronouns of the 3rd person in Semitic always share the same initial sound (as e.g., sg. 3rd. m. : f. Akkadian šû'a : šî'a, Hebrew hû' : hî' and Arabic huwa : hiya).

We will therefore have to replace the simplistic view of a total separateness of Epigraphic and Modern South-Arabian with a more complex view. We have to see the individual Epigraphic South-Arabian dialects in a much more differentiated way. While Sabaic corresponds more with Central Semitic, other dialects or (languages), as Ḥaḍramitic, on the other hand, display more South Semitic traits, i.e., more traits that are encountered in Modern South-Arabian and also in Ethiopic. No doubt, a deeper-going investigation will lead to a far better understanding of the different peoples and population movements in the South-Arabian-Abyssinian cultural ambit.

## 6.  The Pseudo-Sabaic Inscriptions

The use of the South Arabian script, in conjunction with other cultural phenomena, is a conspicuous feature of the South-Arabian–Abyssinian culture. Therefore the use of this script in the Axumitic inscriptions is perfectly to be expected, just as is the shared use of elements of the traditional ruler styling. In *DAE* 6-7 (= *RIÉ* 185) |ᕼⵋⵔ / ⵔⵋⵔⵕ: ᶜĒzānā bears the title "King of Aksum, and of Ḥimyar and of Raidān and of Ḥabaśat (Abyssinia) and of Saba' (or Sheba) and of Salḥēn etc.". We can here recognise some South-Arabian place-names like Raidān (in real Sabaic commonly in the form ḏū-Raydān, i.e., the royal castle or original seat of the kings of Ṭafār (Arabic scholars transcribe: Ẓafār), the capital of the Himyarites. But it must be said that the knowledge of the Sabaic dialect of Epigraphic South-Arabian had by that time deteriorated to such a degree that people were no longer capable of producing a proper Sabaic inscription. All the Axumites were able to do was to simulate a Sabaic inscription. Some knowledge of the language was however still alive; this was in the main restricted to these points:

a. The knowledge of the Epigraphic South-Arabian script with its specific signs was at least known to the court chancellery. In appearance the inscription gives the immediate impression of being in Sabaic. And thus the main purpose of the official representation was achieved – especially vis-a-vis a population that could no longer (or never had been able to) read this script.

b. Apart from the Sabaic letter signs which have been preserved in Ethiopic except for some minor changes, the following graphic and orthographic peculiarities betray a certain familiarity with Sabaic. This is shown in the right-to-left writing direction, opposite to the left-to-right writing direction which was taken over by the Ethiopians from the Greek. Furthermore letter signs continue in use representing sounds which were not preserved in Ethiopic, like 𐩦 $\underline{t}$ and 𐩦 $s_3$. In Old Ethiopic the sounds that we find in Epigraphic South Arabian, namely the interdental $\underline{t}$ and the sibilant $s_3$ coalesce into ሰ [s]. The scribe was aware of this; this is why in some cases he writes in a hypercorrect way 𐩦 $\underline{t}$ instead of a simple ሰ s, e.g. 𐩱𐩫𐩩𐩃𐩣 ʾkt̲wm 'Aksum'. This word also illustrates another peculiarity, which he considers characteristic of Epigraphic South-Arabian, i.e., so-called plene-writing. In the Epigraphic South Arabian tradition the writing of long vowels with the help of w or y (plene writing) is not usual, but there are occurrences of w and y which one could interpret in this way. Instead, the long vowel $\bar{u}$ in Ethiopic, as it occurs, e.g., in the word Aksum, is expressed by an added stroke to the consonant shape, i.e., አክሱም: Aksum). Epigraphic South Arabian 𐩴 $\underline{d}$ which has become ዘ z in Ethiopia is used to represent the Aksumite z.

c. A small number of key words in the inscription are genuine Epigraphic South-Arabian, like ‖ሰ𐩣ሰ mlk instead of Ethiopic ንጉሥ: nəguś 'king', ‖ሳሰ𐩣ሰ‖ሰ𐩣ሰ malik malikān instead of ንጉሠ:ነገሥት: nəgūśä nägäśt 'king of kings, emperor', ‖ሳሰ bin instead of ወልድ: wäld 'son'. Mimation (tamyîm) as an indicator of indetermination, roughly corresponding to Arabic nunation (tanwîn), occurs in a number of cases (as in ʾkt̲wmᵐ 'Aksum'). However mimation occurs on far too many occasions to speak of any sensible usage.

d. As to the last matter, there are still quite a few differences that require a more detailed analysis (vide A. Sima: „Sabäische" 2003/04). Or to put it differently: apart from a few elements, inversions and different spellings we are dealing with a word for word transposition from Old Ethiopic into Sabaic. Concerning the many cases of the redundant suffixing of -m, which was obviously designed to create a „Sabaified" impression, Th. Nöldeke (Review 1894) drew the conclusion that we were dealing here with „ein blosser graphischer Unfug" (i.e., "a purely graphic nonsense") (p. 368). Nevertheless the 80 cases of word-final -m in the pseudo-Sabaic inscription DAE 6 (= RIÉ 185) are worth looking at again.

A comparison of the two versions, i.e., Old Ethiopic and the „Sabaic", leads to further interesting observations. The Sabaic text was carefully produced with a tendency to expressive playfulness and is in its make-up rather more comparable to the Greek version, while the Old Ethiopic letters give a more careless, cursive impression. This is further underlined by the marginal position of the Old Ethiopic text on the stone, e.g. in RIÉ 185, where in order to accommodate the entire Old Ethiopic version the text is forced under the „Sabaic" inscription and onto the narrow side of the stele. Primarily the official inscription consists only of the versions in the two imperial idioms, Greek and Sabaic. It is even quite possible that the Old Ethiopic version was only added on later.

## 7.  The Creation of the Old Ethiopic Literary Language

Before the composition of the Axumitic royal inscriptions it was the Epigraphic South-Arabian (Sabaic) script that was used for the writing of Old Ethiopic texts. This can easily be concluded from the many small changes and the greatly different styles of both scripts.

This way:

1. The originally left-to-right script changed under the influence of Greek (and Indian) scripts to right-to-left as a norm.
2. Many consonants have altered their position and shape. For example, ⊴ *m* was tipped 90° to the left (further developing to መ *mä*); in contrast ⌇ *ś* > ሠ *śä* was tipped 90° to the right; similarly ⋈ *d* > ደ *dä*; the letter ✕ t lifted itself up to a cross (!) shape (ተ *tä*); the dash on which ㅕ rests was abandoned (> ሀ *ha*); ╫ *ḥ* was turned on its head > ሐ *ḥa*; etc. Possibly some of these changes have their origin in the Sabaic cursive script, which means that they are not really innovations of Old Ethiopic. However, the so-called minuscule texts, which were found on wooden sticks, show a cursive script that has no special connection with the Old Ethiopic script.
3. A few Old Ethiopic inscriptions are still written in the unvocalised script, like *DAE* 7. Then, however, as explained above, (3) the vocalisation of consonantal letters is introduced, and apart from minimal differences these have remained to this day the received letter shapes.
4. The orthography reflects the sound changes that occurred from South Arabian to Old Ethiopic. Only some of them are here given mention. Of the three sibilants: ⊢ $s_1$, ⌇ $s_2$ (= *ś*) and ⋇ $s_3$, two of them, $s_3$ and $s_1$, collapsed into (ሰ >) ስ *s(ä)* in Ethiosabaic and Old Ethiopic. The three interdentals: ⥾ *t*, ⪥ *d̠* and ⍾ *ṯ* changed into the corresponding sibilants: ስ *sä*, ዘ *zä* and ጸ *ṣä*. Although *d̠* changed to *z* it was not the character ✕ *z* that came to be used in Ethiopic to represent *z* but the letter ⪥ *d̠* > ዘ *zä*. Characters which as a consequence of the sound changes had become obsolete fell into oblivion. However, the scribe of the Pseudo-Sabaic inscriptions was still acquainted with some of these characters and did occasionally use them (v.s.). For the sound changes from Proto-Semitic to Old Ethiopic cf. R. Voigt: Development 1989.
5. Some new characters that did not exist in Sabaic were developed by the Ethiopians for new sounds, like ፐ *p(ä)* and ጰ *P(ä)* used for loanwords from other languages such as Greek, e.g. ጠረጴዛ፡ *ṭäräpēzā* from Greek τράπεζα *trápeza* 'table' and ኢትዮጵያ፡ *Aἰθιοπία ʾĪtyopyā* 'Ethiopia'. Thus they formed the shape of ፐ *pä* on the basis of Greek Π and ጰ *Pä* on the basis of ጸ *ṣä* which shares the same feature of glottalization.

Also found in the royal inscriptions are a few occurrences of labio-velars (like ኰ *kw(ə)*), which become more prominent at a later stage of the language. In accordance with this fact it is not justified to arrange the labio-velar signs separately, as is still

conventionally done today in Ethiopia and Eritrea, thereby creating the impression that these sounds had joined the fidäl only at a later time. It was only later that the signs for the palatal sounds ሽ *š(ä)*, ች *č(ä)*, ኝ *ñ(ä)*, ጅ *ǧ(ä)* were added, modelled on their corresponding non-palatalized sounds ስ *s(ä)*, ት *t(ä)*, ን *n(ä)*, ድ *d(ä)*. In the case of ጨ *č̣(ä)* and ዥ *ž(ä)* a different path for derivation from the base forms ጠ *ṭ* and ዘ z was chosen, with some variants documented.

To conclude: It was the creation of their own script that led the Ethiosemites further to the development of their own culture. This led in turn to the freeing from the Hellenistic and South-Arabian heritage, and to the creation of an Ethiopian cultural identity, an identity that has survived over centuries and millennia.

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