

A Hundred Years Of Aksumite Epigraphy Since Enno Littmann

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When a hundred years ago, Enno Littmann entered Aksum with his *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, among his primary objectives was the study of the Aksumite inscriptions. Although Littmann headed what we nowadays would call an interdisciplinary expedition, his own profession was always philology, the study of texts.

I would like to review briefly the state of Aksumite Epigraphy in the year 1906. Altogether three inscriptions in Sabaic,¹ one in Greek² and ten in Gə'əz³ were known, not to mention the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, that is the two Greek inscriptions, the texts of which are preserved in the *Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*, that in my view do not count to epigraphy proper, because they are transmitted through the medium of a literary text, and also not to mention several Gə'əz graffiti from Qohayto, published by the German traveler Max Schöller (1895: 186-191).

What makes epigraphy so important for the early history of Ethiopia is that there is no reliable historiographic tradition for the Aksumite period. Although we know, that Aksumite civilization had a literary culture of high standards, all of the historical writings were either lost by neglect during the decline of the Aksumite empire or destroyed purposefully during the reign of the Zagwe dynasty or the so-called Solomonic dynasty, who established their own foundation myth as a legitimate Ethiopian rulers, as reflected in the *Kəbrä nägäst* "Glory of the Kings".

During his stay of less than three months in the region Littmann managed to check and review the readings of nearly all the known inscriptions, which resulted in many improvements of the texts. The travelers who had recorded the inscriptions, people like Henry Salt or Eduard Rüppell usually were not trained as philologists or epigraphers, so the original publications inevitably had their faults. But what is even more important: Littmann succeeded in collecting more than 80

1 DAE 28 = RIÉ 36; DAE 29 = RIÉ 36; DAE 31 = RIÉ 38.

2 DAE 4 = RIÉ 270.

3 DAE 6 / 7 = RIÉ 185; DAE 8 = RIÉ 186; DAE 10 = RIÉ 188; DAE 11 = RIÉ 189; DAE 15 = RIÉ 200; DAE 18 = RIÉ 199; DAE 19 = RIÉ 202; DAE 27 = RIÉ 33; DAE 34 = RIÉ 223.

additional inscriptions and graffiti, 14 inscriptions in Sabaeen, three in Greek, and twenty-two in Gə‘əz, thus increasing the number of known longer texts nearly by the factor of 3. In addition to these 39 more substantial texts, 61 graffiti⁴ were collected comprising mostly names.

All the inscriptions were recorded by drawings, paper squeezes and photography by Littmann and his companions, thus using the most advanced technical devices of his time.

The materials collected by Littmann were finally published in 1913 in the fourth volume of the *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*,⁵ together with an inscription from an older publication that Littmann couldn't verify,⁶ and together with an additional inscription discovered after the departure of the Expedition by Richard Sundström⁷, a Swedish missionary. Thus Littmann produced a complete collection of Ethiopian epigraphy.

The fourth volume of DAE was a milestone and a major achievement of Aksumite and Ethiopian epigraphy. In the reviews of Theodor Nöldeke (1913, on vol. IV only), Ditlef Nielsen (1914) and Nikolaus Rhodokanakis (1914) Littmann's volume was received warmly, but after that, for several decades, only very few activities in the field of Ethiopian epigraphy are notable (at least judging from published material). Even Littmann himself didn't publish anything on Ethiopian epigraphy after DAE, vol. IV for 36 years before he touched it again in 1950 with a revision of three of 'Ezana's inscriptions (Littmann 1950). After all, he was a prolific researcher active in many fields of Semitic studies, who by the time of his death, has left 549 publications. Some of the reasons for this interval in Aksumite epigraphy are easily named: From 1914 to 1918 the First World War ravaged Europe, where nearly all initiatives in the field were based, and the economic crises in the 1920s didn't really encourage epigraphic fieldwork. Ethiopia was in a difficult situation during the war, which resulted in the downfall of *ləḡ* Iyäsü, and the rise of *ras* Täfäri. In his quest for modernization and international recognition, archeology and epigraphy were not among his major goals. After the Italian invasion of 1936 extensive research was done by Italian scholars, but the efforts in the field of epigraphy were limited to some surveys by Carlo Conti Rossini and Antonio Mordini, and so were the results. During all the decades between the publication of DAE IV and the end of

4 „Felseninschriften aus Cohaito, die fast nur Namen enthalten“ (Littmann 1906: 5).

5 The spelling of the first word on the title page „Sabaische“ in stead of „Sabäische“ is a misprint. This is obvious from two facts.

a) On some copies of the print, but not all, the Umlaut-dots were added manually with ink.

b) In the text of the book Littmann used the usual spelling with Umlaut („sabäisch“), and so he does in other publications.

So probably for some reasons, an “a” was used on the title-page, and the mistake was noted when already a part of the print has been sold.

6 DAE 18 = RIÉ 199 (but later documented by a photo of A. J. Drewes).

7 DAE 3 = RIÉ 275.

World War II only a handful of substantial papers were published, which enlarged the knowledge of Ethiopian inscriptions.

Noteworthy is the inscription of Ḥam (RIÉ 232), in what is now Eritrea published by Giorgio Brunetti in 1927. It is the epitaph of a woman, important insofar, as it contains an allusion to the Old Testament, and thus is a testimony of the Ethiopian Bible translation. The text was first studied in depth by Conti Rossini, and is discussed again in recent articles by Gianfranco Fiaccadori (1996) and Manfred Kropp (1999).

Also the stela of Maryam-ʿAnza (RIÉ 218) was discovered by Mordini and first published in 1942, also by Carlo Conti Rossini. It is a text by a local king (Bzt, nəguś of the ʿgb) concerning tax levies.

After the liberation of Ethiopia and the end of the Second World War, Ethiopian epigraphy accelerated at a significant pace. With the establishment of the Institute of Archeology and the improved possibilities of archeological work since the mid-1950s, epigraphy also flourished. During the fieldwork of French and Italian archaeologists hundreds of small inscriptions in Sabaeen and Gəʿəz language appeared. They were published in whole series of articles in the journals *Annales d'Éthiopie* and *Rivista di studi etiopici* by scholars like Lanfranco Ricci, Abraham Johannes Drewes, and Roger Schneider. Space doesn't permit to comment on every piece, but I'd like to pick several outstanding discoveries.

Several Sabaeen inscriptions were found near ʿĪnda ʿĀrqos and other places. A royal Sabaeen inscription of seven lines in boustrophedon writing (RIÉ 1), found at ʿAmdä Şayon in the vicinity of Aksum was published by Schneider in 1976 (Schneider 1976: 81 f.). It's testimony of a hitherto unknown king of the Yāḥa period, Wʿm Ḥywt.

Including small inscriptions, nowadays about 180 pre-Aksumite inscriptions in Sabaeen letters from places like Yāḥa, Meqele, and Sänʿafä are known. Together they show, how widespread literacy must have been in the time of Sabaeen cultural domination, although this number seems to be rather small, seen in comparison with the ca. 5300⁸ Sabaeen inscriptions of Yemen.

Turning again to Aksumite inscriptions proper, i.e., from the Aksumite period, I'd like to mention one object that has the reputation of bearing the oldest text in Gəʿəz (RIÉ 180). It was found in 1953 or 1954 in an unscientific excavation at ʿAddi Gälämo, north-east of Meqele. It is a curved, boomerang-like piece of bronze with 7 inscribed words. The interpretation however is disputed. In the first edition of André Caquot and A. J. Drewes (1955) the following translation is given “*gdr*, King of Aksum, occupied the passages of ʿrg and *lmq*.” Manfred Kropp (1994) offers two possibilities: “*gdr*, King of Aksum, may the *mzlt* (the votive offering) of the ʿrg and the *lmq* make him rich” or “*gdr*, King of Aksum - his *mzlt* (the votive offering) may bring riches to ʿrg and *lmq*.”, two interpretation that at least don't raise the question why a report of a regal victory is written on such a small object, that probably couldn't be seen by many people.

8 This is the number given by P. Stein (2003: 3).

Many short inscriptions, inscribed small objects, graffiti, monograms etc. were recorded and published between 1955 and 1974.

Even more examples of the famous great royal inscriptions of Aksum itself were found during this time: in 1959 an inhabitant of ʿĪnda Səmʿon found three great Aksumite stele (RIÉ 190 / 271; RIÉ 191; RIÉ 192) while excavating the foundations for his new house. For fear of trouble with the authorities he kept them hidden until his death in 1968. Only then did they become known to scholars, and were published by Anfray, Caquot, Nautin, and Schneider. The first is another bilingual text by nəḡuś ʿEzana with the same text in Gəʿəz written with Sabaeen letters and in Greek (RIÉ 190 / 271). He invokes the trinity, and so leaves no doubt about his conversion to Christianity. The second is an inscription by nəḡuś Kaleb, written in Gəʿəz with Sabaeen letters, in which he claims sovereignty over territories in South Arabia, but does not mention his successful war there (RIÉ 191). So obviously this text was written earlier than the war. The third is an inscription by a certain nəḡuś Wʿzb, who might be a son of Kaléb (at least he calls himself wäldä ʿĪllä Ašbəḥa). This text too is written in Gəʿəz language and Sabaeen letters.

A highly important inscription for the history of the Aksumite empire was found not in Ethiopia or in Eritrea, but in Yemen. In 1947, the Egyptian Archaeologist Aḥmad Faḥrī made a three months journey to Yemen, a country totally unexplored from an archaeological point of view at this time, where he recorded many artifacts and Sabaeen inscriptions. Among this rich material was also a fragment of a Gəʿəz text found at Mārib, the ancient capital of the Sabaeen empire. Faḥrī entrusted his copy to the Coptic scholar Murād Kāmīl, a famous éthiopianist and student of E. Littmann, who published it in 1964. It turned out to be part of a royal inscription of nəḡuś Kaléb, erected after his victory in the year 525 A.D. over the Jewish king of Ḥimyar, Yūsuf Asʿar Yaḥʿar, called Dū Nuwās in the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Decades later, in 1970, when the Deutsche Jemen Expedition could work in the storeroom of the Imam's palace in Ṣanʿāʾ, that later should become the National Museum of Yemen, Walter W. Müller found two additional pieces of this very inscription, which is the epigraphic proof of the historical accounts of nəḡuś Kaléb's invasion of South Arabia (Müller 1972). Other testimonies of this war are several fragmentary inscriptions in Gəʿəz that were found in Ẓafār, the capital of the Ḥimyarite empire, king Yūsuf's see, situated in the southern highlands of Yemen, that was sacked and utterly destroyed by the Aksumite army. Currently a German team supervised by Paul Yule is excavating at Ẓafār. Perhaps further Ethiopian inscriptions may appear there, although the campaigns of the last years yielded no Ethiopian inscriptions, or new Sabaeen ones.

Another major discovery was also made by sheer luck. In 1981, farmers⁹ near Aksum found a huge stele (2,68 m high) with a Gəʿəz inscription in Sabaeen letters, the same text repeated with Ethiopian letters, and a Greek translation. It turned out to be a copy of the well-known inscription of king ʿEzana about his

9 RIÉ I, p. 246 mentions „un paysan“. A small tablet in the hut, that nowadays shelters the inscription, mentions three person who found the stele: Godefa Leghese, Tsegay Hagos, Kahsay W/ Gerima.

war against the Beja, recorded already by Henry Salt in 1805 and studied by Enno Littmann during the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (DAE 6-8). However, the text studied by Littmann has been in the open for a very long time and is eroded to great extent, the newly found copy, on the other hand, covered by the soil for centuries, is in a much better state of preservation. A comparison of the two copies allows an improved reading of the text. This piece has been studied recently by Siegbert Uhlig (2001), and again by the late Alexander Sima (2003-2004).

The most important publication in the late 20th century was the *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumites et axoumite (RIÉ)* in which all the known epigraphic material in Sabaeen, Greek and Gə'əz, together with the inscribed small objects, monograms and graffiti, previously published in wildly scattered books and journals, was to be collected with improved readings and translations by Étienne Bernand, who was responsible for the Greek texts, and Abraham J. Drewes and Roge Schneider who were in charge of the Semitic texts. The first volume, published in 1991, comprises the transcribed texts, publication data, drawings where necessary, and a commentary on the paleography for each inscription, altogether 443 numbers, more than 4 times as in the DAE. The second volume, published together with the first, comprises the photos. Although the *Recueil* is published by a major French publishing house, several of the reproductions leave much to be desired. The translations and indices for words and names were scheduled for volume III. Unfortunately, old age and other projects prevented Schneider, who died in 2002, and Drewes, who followed him in 2007 from completing their task. After several years, Bernand obviously had lost patience, and so the translations of the Greek inscriptions were published separately as vol. III.A in 2000. So we have the awkward situation in having a unified system of numbering the texts, but having to refer to the translations in the older editions.

But the discovery and publication of Aksumite and pre-Aksumite inscriptions continued after RIÉ I-II. During the 1990s Ricci published several rock inscriptions in Eritrea recorded by Vincenzo Franchini already during the 1950s. One tiny inscription, probably an owner-mark, was found in a quarry during the excavations conducted by the British Institute in Eastern Africa and published in the reports by David Phillipson. The present writer during the Second Littmann Conference at Aksum had the opportunity to study four new Ethio-Sabaeen fragments and one small fragment and publish them (Weninger 2007). Obviously there is a lot more material waiting out in the field!

But the field of Aksumite epigraphy has gone beyond the mere discovery and publication of inscriptions. Several papers study Ethiopic epigraphy from a more systematic point of view. Worth mentioning is the article of Drewes and Schneider on the origin and development of the Ethiopic script until the great royal inscriptions of Aksum (1976). – The vocabulary of the Sabaeen inscriptions found in Ethiopia was studied in depth by Drewes in his 1980 article. This is especially important for two reasons: Firstly, the Sabaic Dictionary by A. F. L. Beeston and others (1982) does not cover the Ethio-Sabaeen inscriptions (for good reasons!), and secondly, the Ethio-Sabaeen inscriptions show distinct lexical traits that set

these texts apart from the bulk of Sabaean texts as found in Yemen. Among these traits there is one very important aspect that is frequently overlooked, although the age of Drewes' article has reached a quarter of a century now: The Ethio-Sabaean inscriptions show several lexemes (i.e., words), that are not part of the Sabaean vocabulary, but can be found in Gə'əz and other Ethio-Semitic languages. This shows that the Ethio-Semitic Languages are not, as is stated time and again, an offshoot of Sabaean, because, when the Ethio-Sabaean inscriptions were written, during the 8th or 7th century B.C., Ethio-Semitic was already present in the region. – And talking about time-honored erroneous opinions, I would like to point your attention to another important paper. It is a revision of the inscriptions RIÉ 185 and its copy RIÉ 185bis by Alexander Sima, but also treats the question of the use of the Sabaean alphabet for Gə'əz during the Aksumite period. The traditional view is that the Aksumite kings used Sabaean to give their inscriptions a more traditional, dignified appearance. The present writer is among the many scholars who have repeated this view (Weninger 2001: 8). Sima gives several striking reasons why this is wrong:

1. The Sabaean script is not in the Old Sabaean style, like the Yāḥa inscriptions, but the contemporary Sabaean as used in Yemen in their time.
2. In the period immediately before the Aksumite empire, Sabaean wasn't used in Ethiopia, so there was no tradition to appeal to.
3. So the use of Sabaean letters was probably a propagandistic means to corroborate the imperial claims over Yemeni territories stated in their titles, where they claimed to be kings not only of Aksum, but also of Saba, Ḥimyar, Ḥaḍramaut etc. – Special features of the grammar of epigraphic Gə'əz are studied by Drewes in a paper in the *Festschrift for Wolf Leslau* of 1991. – The personal names found in Ethio-Sabaean as well as in epigraphic Gə'əz are studied by Drewes in his paper of 1998. – The extensive article "Inscriptions" in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* by Alessandra Avanzini, Norbert Nebes, Walter W. Müller, Serguei A. Frantsouzoff, Gianfranco Fiaccadori and Alessandro Gori gives a comprehensive overview on pre-Aksumite, Aksumite and post-Aksumite Ethiopian epigraphy.

What tasks lie ahead? The most immediate project is the completion of the *Recueil des inscriptions*, where, as I pointed out, the larger part of the translations is still missing. However, after the death of R. Schneider and A. J. Drewes, the prospects for this endeavor are not promising. Most important for Gə'əz language history and for Comparative Semitics in general would be the production of a grammar of the Aksumite inscriptions. The Aksumite inscriptions are the oldest extant texts in Gə'əz, and even more, they are the only texts we have from Aksumite times, that are non-translation texts. A grammar of the inscriptions with full references to the textual evidence would be most welcome. At the University of Hamburg, a young Russian scholar, Miss Maria Bulakh is working on such a grammar, and I sincerely hope, she can complete her project for the benefit of Ethiopian and Semitic studies. Also a dictionary of the Gə'əz inscriptions would be desirable, basically for the same reasons. Some of the words attested only in inscriptions (but not all!) were included in Wolf Leslau's *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (1987) but without re-

ferences. Epigraphic additions to the Gəʿəz vocabulary are indicated only by the abbreviation “Lt.” (i.e., “literature”), the same abbreviation Leslau used for any word he took from texts.¹⁰ I’m sure everybody would agree, that this is not enough. One last point: Most of the Aksumite inscriptions were published with translations in German, French or Italian. Hardly anything has been done in the language that is the first foreign language in Ethiopia and is the most widely read today, i.e., English. So I would suggest that a selection of the longer inscriptions with English translations and commentaries would make a most useful tool for archaeologists and historians, similar to the book *The Monuments of Aksum*, compiled and ed. by David W. Phillipson (1997), based on the work of the Deutsche Aksum Expedition.

Abbreviations

DAE = Littmann 1913.

RIÉ = Bernand, Drewes & Schneider 1991 ff.

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10 On this problem, cf., already Kropp’s review (1990: 271).

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