

ISTITUTO PER L'ORIENTE "C.A. NALLINO"  
UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE

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# RASSEGNA DI STUDI ETIOPICI

Vol. 8

3<sup>a</sup> Serie

(LV)



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**Vol. 8**

3<sup>a</sup> Serie

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RASSEGNA DI STUDI ETIOPICI – RIVISTA FONDATA DA CARLO CONTI ROSSINI

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## *Ai lettori*

In questo ottavo volume della “3a Serie” della *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (cinquantacinquesimo dalla fondazione della rivista) il lettore troverà una serie di contributi che spaziano dalla storia dell’arte all’archeologia, dall’archeobotanica alla storia moderna, dallo studio dei problemi dello sviluppo alle questioni collegate alle politiche e alle pratiche di decolonizzazione degli studi. Una simile ampiezza di orizzonti disciplinari e metodologici scaturisce da una scelta ponderata della redazione della *Rassegna*, che da tempo ha varato un programma editoriale volto a includere fra le declinazioni del proprio ambito di ricerca anche alcune tematiche proprie delle scienze antropologiche e sociali. Tale scelta non contrasta con le tradizionali linee d’indagine perseguite dalla redazione della rivista, che da sempre comprendono tutte le discipline e le metodologie di studio caratterizzanti le scienze umane: archeologia, etnografia, filologia, linguistica, storia, letterature, arti e religioni. Piuttosto, s’intende in questo modo allargare l’orizzonte, per riconoscere l’importanza di ricerche che mostrino una maggiore sensibilità verso gli sviluppi contemporanei delle dinamiche sociali dell’Eritrea e dell’Etiopia, rispetto alle quali lo studioso più accorto ed empatico non può dichiararsi estraneo. Si tratta di un’opzione che accomuna tutti gli specialisti che operano all’interno dei vari gruppi di ricerca attivi presso l’Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”, e che si è imposta anche nella ricerca e nella didattica del nostro Ateneo dagli inizi del XXI secolo.

Piace ricordare che, fra le espressioni della collaborazione fra gruppi di lavoro dediti agli studi etiopici, nel mese di marzo del 2023 vi è stata l’organizzazione e la celebrazione di un evento scientifico internazionale, il convegno *From Aksum to Lalibäla: The myth of the ‘dark age’ of Eritrean and Ethiopian history (7th–13th cent.). A multidisciplinary approach*, patrocinato dal Dipartimento di Asia Africa e Mediterraneo (DAAM), dal Centro di Studi sull’Africa (CeSA), e dal progetto “Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia” (CaNaMEI), col contributo finanziario dell’Istituto per l’Oriente “Carlo Alfonso Nallino” (IPOCAN) e di ISMEO. Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente. Vi hanno partecipato due dozzine di studiosi che hanno affrontato il tema da prospettive diverse, ma convergenti nella ricostruzione di pagine poco note della storia etiopica.

Da relazioni presentate in occasione di quelle tre giornate (1-3 marzo 2023) scaturirà presto una pubblicazione monografica, curata da Luisa Sernicola e Massimo Villa, e inserita nella collana “Studi Africanistici. Serie Etiopica” del DAAM. Vi si darà conto dei risultati emersi dal confronto e dal dialogo fra studiosi di diverse discipline, che hanno inteso contribuire a gettare nuova luce su fasi cruciali per la storia eritrea ed etiopica, in particolare quelle relative ai periodi post-aksumita (VII-XII sec.) e Zag<sup>w</sup>e (ca. 1137-1270).

In chiusura del volume, viene ricordato Michael Knibb (1938-2023), un intellettuale la cui vicenda personale è stata tutt’uno con la militanza scientifica. Il suo contributo mancherà molto a quanti fra di noi continuano a perseguire le sue ricerche, guardando alle nostre scienze come ad altrettante forme di amore per la verità.

La redazione dedica questo volume alla memoria del Prof. Grover Hudson (1940-2022), che con le sue ricerche nel campo della linguistica semitica e cuscitica per un cinquantennio ha indicato e percorso un sentiero segnato da rigore e originalità.

Il Direttore

### *To the readers*

In this eighth volume of the “3a Serie” of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* (the fifty-fourth since the establishment of the journal), the reader will find a series of contributions ranging from art history to archaeology, from archaeobotany to modern history, from the study of development problems to issues related to the policies and practices of decolonization studies. Such a breadth of disciplinary and methodological horizons is the result of a well-considered choice of the editorial staff, which long since launched an editorial program aimed at including themes from the anthropological and social sciences within the research scope of the journal. This choice does not conflict with the traditional lines of inquiry pursued by the journal’s editors, encompassing all the disciplines and the methodologies of studies in humanities: archaeology, ethnography, philology, linguistics, history, literatures, arts and religions. Rather, it is intended in this way to broaden the horizon, recognizing the importance of research that shows a greater sensitivity to contemporary developments in the societies of Eritrea and Ethiopia, with respect to which an attentive and empathetic scholar cannot declare himself a stranger. This is an approach that unites all the specialists working within the various research groups active at the University of Naples “L’Orientale,” and which has been introduced in research and also in teaching since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is pleasing to mention that, as an expression of collaboration among working groups devoted to Ethiopian studies, in March of 2023 an international scientific event was organized and celebrated, namely the conference *From Aksum to Lalibäla: The myth of the ‘dark age’ of Eritrean and Ethiopian history (7th–13th cent.)*. A multidisciplinary approach, sponsored by the Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies (DAAM), the Center for African Studies (CeSA), and the project “Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia” (CaNaMEI), with financial support from the Istituto per l’Oriente “Carlo Alfonso Nallino” (IPOCAN) and from ISMEO. Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente. The conference was attended by two dozen scholars who approached the topic from different perspectives but converged in reconstructing less well-known pages of Ethiopian history.

From papers presented during the three days (March 1–3, 2023), a monographic publication, edited by Luisa Sernicola and Massimo Villa, and included in the series “Studi Africanistici. Serie Etiopica” of the DAAM, will be produced. It will give an account of the results that emerged from the discussion and dialogue between scholars from different disciplines, who aimed to contribute to shedding new light on crucial phases in Eritrean and Ethiopian history, particularly those related to the post-Aksumite (7th–12th centuries) and Zagwe (ab. 1137–1270) periods.

At the close of the volume, an obituary remembers Michael Knibb (1938–2023), an intellectual whose personal life was at one with academic activism. He will be greatly missed by those of us who continue to pursue his researches, looking to our sciences as so many forms of love for truth.

The board of the *Rassegna* dedicates this volume to the memory of Prof. Grover Hudson (1940–2022), who with his investigations in the field of Semitic and Cushitic linguistics for a fifty-year period has indicated and walked a path marked by rigor and originality.

The Director

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Cover image: clay model of a rural house forming part of the grave good of Tomb 12, Seglamen (Tigray, Ethiopia), first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, Photographic archive of the Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples L’Orientale and ISMEO. (photo: Laurel Phillipson).

## AT THE DAWN OF ETHIOPIAN LANGUAGE STUDIES: THE ROLE OF GIUSEPPE SAPETO (1811–1895)

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### Abstract

Among the Italian scholars who contributed to the early study of the languages of Ethiopia, the figure of Giuseppe Sapeto (1811-1895) stands out. His historical role in the acquisition of the Bay of Assab has been extensively investigated by generations of scholars, however, his unpublished documents, have been largely overlooked. These documents shed light on his linguistic knowledge, and will be examined and re-evaluated systematically within the framework of a PRIN project.

### Keywords

Assab – Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma – Giuseppe Sapeto – Missionary linguistics – Società Geografica Italiana

Within the PRIN project InALC – *Investigating African Languages and Cultures*,<sup>1</sup> the Unit of Naples is responsible for documenting, studying, and preserving historical, linguistic, and ethnographic artifacts related to Eritrea and Ethiopia. They are held by public and private archives and libraries (particularly ecclesiastical institutions) in Italy and Ethiopia. The aim of the research is to uncover and preserve an important segment of the national heritage, consisting of data collected by travellers, explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is a vast field that has long attracted the attention of scholars. Notable recent initia-

<sup>1</sup> Call 2022, Prot. 2022XMRNF9. P.I. Ilaria Micheli, Università di Trieste; Associated Investigators: Mauro Tosco, Università di Torino, Gianfrancesco Lusini, Università di Napoli L’Orientale.

tives include the international conference “Lingue e culture dei missionari” organized in 2006 by the University of Udine, which led to the publication of two volumes edited by Nicola Gasbarro, *Lingue dei missionari* and *Culture dei missionari*.<sup>2</sup> More recently, in 2016, Graziano Savà and Mauro Tosco published a volume containing the grammatical notes of Father Giovanni Toselli (1883–1959) on some Omotic languages of southwestern Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> Within this extensive documentation, our focus has been on a figure so well-known that he is even mentioned in school textbooks: Giuseppe Sapeto, universally recognized for facilitating the purchase of the Bay of Assab, first by the Genoese company Rubattino (1861) and then by the Kingdom of Italy (1869). Throughout the post-war period, the academic and scientific community has continued to investigate the role of the missionary and scholar as a facilitator of the early stages of Italian colonialism, through works of varying value but always well-grounded in document study. Francesco Surdich (1944–2024), who recently passed away, made significant contributions by restoring the complexity of Sapeto’s human and scientific dimension, constantly balancing missionary vocation, historical-linguistic interest, scholarly curiosity, and undeniable diplomatic skills.<sup>4</sup>

Giuseppe Sapeto was born in Carcare in 1811. When he was just 23 years old, after taking vows and training for five years in the Congregation of the Apostolic Missionaries of St. Vincent de Paul (the so-called Lazarists), he began missionary and evangelization activities in Syria. For two years, Sapeto had persistently requested to be assigned to overseas missions, and once he obtained permission to leave, he diligently studied the languages, religions, cultures, literature, history, political and social institutions, as well as the geographical and environmental characteristics of the Near East and the Horn of Africa.

Sapeto’s interest in Africa and his thirst for knowledge are clearly evident in a letter dated January 11, 1837, kept at the Archivio dell’Istituto Mazziniano in Genoa (inv. 26276) and addressed to Giovanni Battista Spotorno (1788–1844), a librarian and professor of geography, as well as a great ex-

<sup>2</sup> Gasbarro (2009a); (2009b).

<sup>3</sup> Savà, Tosco (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Surdich (2005); (2009); (2010); (2017); (2019).

pert in botany, topography, numismatics, and epigraphy.<sup>5</sup> In 1837, Sapeto was still in Syria (the letter was sent from Tripoli, now in Lebanon), but he was about to move to Egypt. Although in Syria he had the opportunity to learn Arabic, even compiling an Arabic-Italian and Italian-Arabic dictionary for the benefit of his fellow missionaries, probably the same one now kept at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma (Orient. 142), and to study Eastern history, he was not entirely satisfied with his experience. In the letter, he writes:

[...] per me l'opera è soverchia e presuntuosa, che non sono ch'iniziato in questi studi, e mi lambicco il cervello da due anni a decifrare alcune iscrizioni greche, latine, arabe etc., che pure sono chiare, come mi pare rilevare quando le ho conosciute. Onde io aveva già quasi abbandonato il pensiero di più applicarmi a questo studio in un paese in cui mancano libri, e maestri per insegnare, e il mio giornaleto cominciai a restringerlo a quel solo che non mi costava così improba fatica [...].<sup>6</sup>

Despite this, Sapeto did not lose heart, and in the same letter, he continues writing:

[...] Senonché la nuova occasione di vedere nuove contrade e sparse ad ogni poco di questi mucchi d'antichità, mi risvegliò di bel nuovo nell'animo quell'idea di voler conoscere le sopra dette cose [...].<sup>7</sup>

He was therefore determined to undertake the journey to Egypt with a much broader knowledge base than he had in Syria and eager to expand it further. Given Spotorno's specific expertise, Sapeto asked for his help:

<sup>5</sup> The letter is only partially edited in Surdich (2019: 55–6). My thanks go to dr Massimo Angelini, Conservator of the Istituto Mazziniano, who put the document at my disposal, during my visit to Genoa, April 10, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> '[...] for me the work is excessive and presumptuous, as I am only a novice in these studies, and I have been racking my brains for two years to decipher some Greek, Latin, Arabic inscriptions, etc., which are clear, as it seems to me when I have recognized them. So I had almost abandoned the idea of further applying myself to this study in a country where there are no books or teachers to teach, and I began to restrict my journal to only what did not cost me such arduous effort [...]' (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> '[...] However, the new opportunity to see new lands and scattered heaps of antiquities awakened in me once again the desire to know the aforementioned things [...]' (my translation).

[...] La prego pertanto a volersi degnare di dirmi cosa ci vuole per fare un simile viaggio con profitto, perché, ancorché in molti libri abbia letto come si deve viaggiare, veggio che sono ognora poco contento del viaggiare come ho letto, e benché molte cose vi aggiunga io ancora, dopo aver finito la mia visita ad un tal luogo, ad una tale città, mi accorgo d'aver molte cose lasciate degne d'essere osservate. Innoltre la prego di 4 cose: 1° A volermi favorire il suo opuscolo stampato in Savona sull'arte d'interpretare ed imitare etc. – o altra opera, o mezzo, per intendere ricopiare trarre l'inscrizioni, medaglie etc. – Mi è stato detto che recentemente si è trovato il modo di ritrarre sulla carta l'inscrizioni con un certo ordigno o instrumento, che applicato all'inscrizione segna sulla carta lo scritto. 2° Un metodo per conoscere a interpretare i geroglifici, simboli, emblemi nascosti sotto ai monumenti idoletti, Diavoli e Diavoloni eretti nell'alto Egitto. 3° Una nota, o un trattato per conoscere la forma del vestire, dell'armi (da battaglie e gentilizie, o stemmi) delle diverse nazioni, e lor maniera particolare di fabbricare per conoscere qual tempo, e da chi furono innalzati tanti magnifici monumenti. 4° Infine una lista dei re e mutazioni di governo che ebbero luogo. Ne[gli] sopraccennati, con una carta geografica, e geografia coi nomi antichi, e nuovi [...].<sup>8</sup>

In 1837, while in Egypt, Sapeto met the brothers Antoine and Arnauld d'Abbadie, who were organizing their own scientific expedition to Abyssinia. Recognizing the value of the 26-year-old scholar, they invited him to join a mission in Upper Ethiopia (a term that at the time referred to the Tigrinya-speaking territories, i.e., Eritrea and Tigray, or northern Ethiopia), first to Massawa and then to Adwa. Sapeto wrote to his superiors and to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to try to reactivate the evangelical mission in

<sup>8</sup> '[...] I therefore ask you to kindly tell me what is needed to make such a journey profitable, because, although I have read in many books how one should travel, I see that I am still not very satisfied with traveling as I have read, and although I add many things myself, after finishing my visit to such a place, to such a city, I realize I have left many things worthy of being observed. Furthermore, I ask you for 4 things: 1° To favor me with your booklet printed in Savona on the art of interpreting and imitating, etc. – or another work, or means, to understand, copy, and draw inscriptions, medals, etc. – I have been told that a method has recently been found to transfer inscriptions onto paper with a certain device or instrument, which, when applied to the inscription, marks the writing on the paper. 2° A method to understand and interpret hieroglyphs, symbols, emblems hidden under monuments, idols, Devils and nasty Devils erected in Upper Egypt. 3° A note or treatise to understand the form of clothing, weapons (for battles and noble, or coats of arms) of different nations, and their particular way of manufacturing to know what time and by whom so many magnificent monuments were erected. 4° Finally, a list of kings and changes of government that took place. In the aforementioned, with a geographical map, and geography with ancient and new names [...]' (my translation).

Abyssinia, which had previously failed due to communication difficulties with local ecclesiastical authorities. It should be noted that the Lazarists, whose headquarters were originally in France, specifically in Paris,<sup>9</sup> were funded and protected by the French Crown, which in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had turned its attention to Egypt and the Eritrean coasts. In agreement with the leaders of Propaganda Fide, France had linked religious proselytism to political and commercial interests, in a final attempt to colonize the area. This multi-level intervention model left a lasting mark on Sapeto, who connected the missionary dimension with the political-commercial one, along with the need to deeply understand the customs, traditions, histories, and languages of the countries involved in the proto-colonial European intervention.

Having obtained permission to leave, Sapeto joined the d'Abbadie expedition as a chaplain. During the mission, he maintained relationships with the most important religious figures in Adwa, always keeping in mind the fundamental goal (as he himself stated<sup>10</sup>) of studying languages, which he considered an essential tool for effective evangelization. He used his stay in Abyssinia to visit several cities, including Aksum, where he had the opportunity to find inscriptions useful for reconstructing the origin of the Ethiopian language. His efforts in spreading Catholic doctrine were more than convincing, earning him the privilege of saying Mass in the church of Qəddus Gäbrä'el in Adwa, led by *aläqa* Wäldä Šəllase. This was a significant event, as it had been a long time since a Catholic priest was allowed to celebrate a religious service inside an Orthodox church.<sup>11</sup>

The success he achieved in Abyssinia earned him the position of vice-apostolic prefect of Ethiopia and the surrounding territories in 1839, while Giustino De Jacobis (1800–1860) was the apostolic prefect. Despite the

<sup>9</sup> The name Lazarists, in fact, owes its origin to their first seat, established in 1832 in the Paris Priory of St. Lazarus.

<sup>10</sup> “Mio primo pensiero fu di studiare le lingue: fuggî le controversie, cercai guadagnarli la tolleranza, se non poteva l'amore di tutti” (Sapeto 1857: 106) – ‘My first thought was to study languages: I fled controversy, sought to gain tolerance, if not the love of all’ (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in a letter now kept in the Propaganda Fide Archives, the Ethiopian priests congratulated Pope Gregorio XVI for having sent on an evangelical mission a priest who “[...] aveva saputo con le sue parole ed esempio [...] farli rientrare nell'amore con il Capo della Chiesa [...]” (Surdich 2019: 61–62) – ‘[...] had been able by his words and example [...] to bring them back into love with the Head of the Church [...]’ (my translation).

many successes of the missionary from Savona, De Jacobis did not always agree with the actions of the Lazarist, due to his independent character and reluctance to follow the orders and directives of his superiors. In fact, Sapeto repeatedly requested that the temporal powers normally granted only to the Pope (such as absolution from any type of sin) be extended to missionaries, in addition to asking for the construction of churches and religious schools not only in Massawa and Adwa but also in Gondar, Goğğam, Šäwa, among the Oromo, and in Ānnarya.

His initiative cost him the favor of his superiors, who used his illness (the elephantiasis) to remove him from Abyssinia, also accusing him of having contracted syphilis as a result of relations with indigenous women. Sapeto found himself in a hostile environment, not only due to ecclesiastical conflicts but also because of the lack of cooperation from the d'Abbadie brothers, about whom he wrote, noting that he had received “né consigli, né protezione, né conoscenza di lingue, né direzione di viaggio”.<sup>12</sup>

Removed from Ethiopia and retreating to Egypt, in a letter addressed to Propaganda Fide dated December 1843, Sapeto expressed his regret for leaving.<sup>13</sup> During his years in Abyssinia, Sapeto dedicated himself to an intense study of languages, as evidenced by a letter from May 1839 addressed to Vito Guarini (Procurator General of the Congregation of the Mission) in which he wrote that he was about to finish “[...] la traduzione del Libro santo di Enoch [...], un piccolo Dizionario Italiano Amarico pe' Missionari e una grammatica Amarica, un Catechismo, e una breve relazione sulla religione Cattolica, tutto in Amarico”.<sup>14</sup>

Since he was no longer able to continue his work of Christianization in Abyssinia, Sapeto moved to Syria, to Antura (now in Lebanon), where he remained until early 1844. Gradually, his relations with the Congregation of the Mission deteriorated to the point of recalling him to Europe and excluding him from evangelization activities. From 1844 to 1849, he shuttled between Genoa, Savona, Casale, Turin, Rome, and Paris, never ceasing to

<sup>12</sup> Giacchero, Bisogni (1942: 35–36). ‘Neither advice, nor protection, nor knowledge of languages, nor travel direction’(my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Surdich (2019: 68).

<sup>14</sup> Surdich (2009: 248). ‘[...] the translation of the Holy Book of Enoch [...], a small Italian–Amaric Dictionary for Missionaries and an Amharic grammar, a Catechism, and a brief account of the Catholic religion, all in Amharic’ (my translation).

complain to his superiors about their decision to keep him in Italy. They cited his precarious health conditions as a pretext.

After persistent requests, in 1850 he obtained permission from Propaganda Fide to be sent back to Ethiopia. There, he dedicated himself to scientific studies (analysis of the territory's geology, collection of insect, herb, and seed specimens), philological and historical studies (interpretation of texts, research and collection of ancient manuscripts), as well as the study of agriculture, aiming to enhance fruit and vegetable production. Although there is no certain data, we can imagine that it was during this phase of his activity that Sapeto made a significant collection of manuscripts in the Ge'ez language. This topic is the subject of another type of research, related to the cataloguing and philological study of Ethiopian manuscript codes, but it should be noted here that Sapeto's scientific activity resulted in both the historical-linguistic documents we are dealing with and the material in Ethiopian languages that he acquired in Abyssinia in unknown times and ways.

In fact, we mean by 'oriental' manuscript also the manuscript created by Europeans in a missionary or colonial context, on African or oriental subjects and languages, so much so that often the two types of texts are kept together, for example at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma and the Società Geografica Italiana. We can therefore distinguish between first-hand oriental manuscripts, such as Ethiopian codes and scrolls, and second-hand oriental manuscripts, such as the autograph codes of Sapeto and other missionaries (such as Giovanni Stella, Giusto da Urbino, and Léon des Avanchers), because of their content and context similar to the former. The corpus of traditional Ethiopian manuscripts acquired by the missionary from Savona, consisting of liturgical codes and protective scrolls, is today divided between the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma (10 manuscripts) and the Castello d'Albertis, Museo delle Culture del Mondo, in Genoa (13 manuscripts).<sup>15</sup>

From 1851 to 1853, Sapeto undertook a new journey aimed at exploring the western shores of the Red Sea, accompanied by his fellow countryman Giovanni Stella (1822–1869). Thanks to the material collected during the exploration, he was able to write the work *Viaggio e missione cattolica fra i*

<sup>15</sup> Brita, Helmholz, Hummel, Villa (2017: 171–175). It remains to be ascertained whether two other Genoese manuscripts, kept in the Berio Library, can be traced back to Giuseppe Sapeto's collection: a protector scroll and a codex (probably a *Mäṣṣafä gənzät*), see Ferro (2008: 27–28).

*Mensa, i Bogos e gli Habab*,<sup>16</sup> which was published in 1857. The account is divided into three parts: the first provides a historical and ethnographic description of Abyssinia; the second focuses on the Mensa (a Tigré-speaking group, i.e., Semitic) and the Bogos (a Bilen-speaking community, i.e., Cushitic), while the third describes the natural history of that territory. There are also two appendices: one contains the edition and translation of some unpublished historical documents, drawn from first-hand sources in Gə‘əz, while the other hosts a small vocabulary (about 400 terms) of the Italian, Bilen, Tigré (with reference to the Massawa dialect), Amharic, and Gə‘əz languages. During this second expedition to Abyssinia, he actively engaged in evangelizing the local Muslim populations, sometimes using the harsher tones of a spiritual crusade.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, despite his efforts, his superiors did not allow him to continue the mission of evangelization in Ethiopia, so in 1854 he moved to Egypt and then to Rome. Still fatigued from his recent illness and increasingly in conflict with the hierarchies, he tried to obtain a position as a chaplain or librarian from the cardinals of Propaganda Fide, so that he could be granted the right to a pension. He was not successful, so he tried to sell his works to the Congregation, providing a precise list in a letter dated August 24, 1857, a document once again preserved by the Archive of Propaganda Fide.<sup>18</sup> Some of these works, after his death, were transferred to the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, where they are still located today.

Thus, we can certainly identify the work titled *Rituale ad uso dei Preti abissini nell'amministrazione dei Sacramenti in lingua gheez, con le indicazioni in amharico* as manuscript Orient. 130, the *Grammatica Gheez-Amharica ad uso degli italiani* as Orient. 131 (written between 1840 and 1854), and the *Dizionario italiano Gheez-Amarico, arabo e viceversa con la dichiarazione etimologica delle parole* as the work divided into the three volumes Orient. 139, 140, and 141, while the *Viaggio sulla sponda occidentale del Mar Rosso con ricerche sui Monasteri di Reifha, di Clisma, di San Giovanni il Piccolo, di S. Paolo e di S. Antonio comprovate da documenti inediti* is certainly Orient. 136 (dated 1876). Probably other works from Sapeto's

<sup>16</sup> Sapeto (1857).

<sup>17</sup> "Porto ferma credenza, che il tempo del castigo sia per avere il suo fine" (Sapeto 1857: 162) – 'I bear firm belief, that the time of punishment is to have its end' (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> Lazzarini (1981: 71–72).

list can be traced back to the manuscripts of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, but at this moment the study of the collection has allowed us to identify with certainty only those mentioned here.

To continue working in Africa and satisfy his scientific interests (as well as some ambitions in diplomatic processes), Sapeto decided to serve France. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Abyssinia, governed by *negusä nägäst* Tewodros II (1818–68; *r.* 1855–68), was dealing with the autonomist tendencies of Tigray. *Ras* Nəguše, the political-military leader of the region, sought to assert his independence, trying to win the favor of the Pope and Napoleon III, to find support in their struggle against *aše* Tewodros. In 1859, Nəguše sent an embassy, of which Sapeto was a part,<sup>19</sup> and he became the advisor to the *ras* and was employed by him to convince France to intervene in Ethiopia, enticing them with the promise of ceding a territory in the Bay of Adulis, now Zula (Eritrea).<sup>20</sup> Napoleon III listened with interest to the proposals of the *ras* of Tigray and sent a mission led by Captain Russell, in which Sapeto also participated as an interpreter.<sup>21</sup> Upon arriving in Africa, *aše* Tewodros forcibly prevented them from reaching Adwa, where Nəguše had established his headquarters. The failure of the French mission brought Sapeto back to Europe, where a new phase of his life began, consisting of teaching. Thus, he replaced his friend Michele Amari (then Minister of Public Education) first as the curator of Arabic manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (from 1860 to 1862), then as a professor of Arabic language and literature at the Regio istituto di studi superiori pratici e di perfezionamento di Firenze (from 1863 to 1864).<sup>22</sup>

In 1862, the ongoing conflicts with his superiors, who did not appreciate his dual role as a priest and diplomat, led Sapeto to leave the priesthood and settle in Genoa. It was in the following year, 1863, that he wrote his first letter to Amari, in which, based on the experience accumulated in previous years, he advised the occupation of a port on the southwestern coasts of the Red Sea, identifying the Bay of Assab as a strategic point. In the same year, he was sent to Aden (in Egypt) by the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and

<sup>19</sup> Sapeto (1871); (1890: 319–363).

<sup>20</sup> Fusella (1948).

<sup>21</sup> Del Boca (1976: 9–11).

<sup>22</sup> His teaching experience was reflected in the drafting of a *Grammatica araba volgare ad uso delle scuole tecniche* (Sapeto 1866).

Commerce and the Ministry of Public Works, to negotiate with the British governor the purchase of some coal lands located along the African coasts of the Red Sea, which would be useful for the opening of the Suez Canal. In 1864, he also held a series of lectures that preceded the opening of the canal (1869) and which culminated in a text from 1865 (*L'Italia e il canale di Suez*) defined as an 'operetta popolare'.<sup>23</sup> The contacts acquired at the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce allowed him to obtain the chair of teacher of colloquial Arabic at the Istituto tecnico industriale professionale e di marina mercantile di Genova, where he taught until his retirement in 1890.<sup>24</sup>

Starting in 1869, on behalf of the Italian government, Sapeto dedicated himself to the negotiations that led to the purchase of the Bay of Assab. His first task was to explore the shores of the Red Sea to identify a suitable port. Admiral Guglielmo Acton accompanied Sapeto, and together they reached the Eritrean coast and began negotiations with local authorities. They signed an agreement with the Danakil chiefs, committing to pay 6,000 Maria Theresa thalers in exchange for the land needed to build the future Assab.<sup>25</sup>

The purchase of the bay faced strong criticism when the utility of acquiring a commercial port on the Red Sea was questioned by significant sectors of the Italian political and economic environment, as Sapeto also highlights in some of his unpublished letters preserved at the Biblioteca di Scienze dell'Università di Firenze. In these, he addresses Odoardo Beccari, an Italian naturalist and botanist who collaborated with Sapeto on finalizing the purchase. An interesting point emerges: on one hand, prominent political figures like General Ezio De Vecchi (a member of the commission tasked with studying the issue of establishing a colonial settlement abroad) believed that the impracticability of certain channels, the impossibility of finding water, and the aridity of the soil made it impossible to establish not only a maritime station in Assab but even a penal colony.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, a substantial group of scholars and scientists, including Sapeto, Odoardo Beccari, Orazio

<sup>23</sup> Sapeto (1865).

<sup>24</sup> For Sapeto's activities as a lecturer and populariser on the sidelines of his teaching assignments, see Ferrari (1985).

<sup>25</sup> For a summary of the historical facts, see Ambrosini (1950), Giglio (1958; 1959), De Leone (1970) e Del Boca (1976: 36–43).

<sup>26</sup> On the political debate triggered by the Assab affair, see Natili (2008).

Antinori (a key figure due to his role at the Società Geografica Italiana), and geologist Arturo Issel, supported the opposite view.<sup>27</sup>

In an unpublished letter dated September 8, 1871,<sup>28</sup> addressed to Beccari, Sapeto's words reveal a certain indignation at how the government was handling the situation:

[...] Se chi aveva il dovere di avere già messo mano, e da gran tempo, alla formazione della colonia non vuole più saperne, tanto peggio, io me ne lavo le mani, dicendo con Pilato: sono innocente della perdita e dello smacco: ho fatto il mio dovere [...].<sup>29</sup>

In another letter from the same years,<sup>30</sup> Sapeto writes to Beccari:

[...] Il Ministro non mi lascia speranza di prossima partenza per lo mar Rosso, ed io stanco di aspettare ritorno a Genova; donde farannomi venire, se avranno bisogno di me. [...].<sup>31</sup>

Sapeto continued to reiterate the reasons justifying the purchase of the Bay of Assab in many forums, organizing them coherently in the work *Assab e i suoi critici*, published in 1879.<sup>32</sup> In the same year, he wrote a letter to Beccari listing some of his works,<sup>33</sup> several of which had already appeared in the list compiled for Propaganda Fide in the mid-1850s, such as “[...] Dizionario comparato delle lingue semitiche [...] L’opera consta di 3 grossi volumi in fogli [...]”<sup>34</sup> or “[...] un vocabolario gheez-amharico italiano, un altro italiano amhara gheez con le rispettive grammatiche, e un lessico italiano

<sup>27</sup> For discussions within the Società Geografica Italiana, see Carazzi (1972).

<sup>28</sup> Preserved in the Biblioteca di Scienze dell’Università di Firenze, sezione di Botanica (Serie I, busta 16, fascicolo 9, lettera 2). My thanks go to dr Alessandro Cerretti, Conservator of the Biblioteca di Scienze, who put this and more documents at my disposal, on the occasion of my visit to Florence, September 18, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> “[...] If those who had the duty to have already started the formation of the colony long ago no longer want to know about it, so much the worse, I wash my hands of it, saying with Pilate: I am innocent of the loss and the disgrace: I have done my duty [...]” (my translation).

<sup>30</sup> Undated, ca. 1870, Biblioteca di Scienze dell’Università di Firenze, sezione di Botanica (Serie I, busta 16, fascicolo 9, lettera 7).

<sup>31</sup> “[...] The Minister gives me no hope of a forthcoming departure for the Red Sea, and tired of waiting, I return to Genoa; they will call me if they need me. [...]” (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> Sapeto (1879).

<sup>33</sup> Dated 3 November 1879, Biblioteca di Scienze dell’Università di Firenze, sezione di Botanica (Serie I, busta 16, fascicolo 9, lettera 5).

<sup>34</sup> “[...] Comparative Dictionary of Semitic Languages [...] The work consists of 3 large volumes in folio [...]” (my translation).

arabo [...]”.<sup>35</sup> Evidently, the Congregation had decided not to purchase Sapeto’s writings, which he now offered to his friend Beccari to aid him in studying African languages.

The bay was only purchased in 1882. Until that date, Sapeto had continued to defend and claim the importance of Assab as a strategic location, although his role and authority were gradually diminished (due to the jealousy and disagreements of those operating in the area), until his removal and final return to his homeland in 1881. Worn out by the illness that had confined him to bed for the last years of his life, Sapeto passed away in Genoa in 1895. The subsequent fate of the manuscripts he brought from Abyssinia and his personal papers is not entirely clear at the moment. Different scholars have provided conflicting versions.

Giulio Giacchero and Giuseppe Bisogni write that the scholar had instructed two of his students, probably Erminio Faveto and Ettore Fontanabona, to donate part of his private library to a Roman library.<sup>36</sup> According to Silvio Zanutto, Sapeto’s library was sold by his heirs and subsequently purchased by the same Faveto and Fontanabona.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, as mentioned, most of his manuscripts are located at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma within a collection named after the Lazarist missionary, and arrived there in March 1896 thanks to a donation by Irene Ferreri, a figure whose identity is still unclear.

Another substantial portion of manuscripts is located at the Castello d’Albertis, thanks to a donation by Fontanabona to the Municipality of Genoa in 1928.<sup>38</sup> This collection is supplemented by other manuscripts scattered between Florence, Genoa, Rome, the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, and Paris, for a total of fifteen institutions.

In light of the considerations presented so far, we can say that Sapeto’s interest in African languages stemmed from various motivations:

1. There is no doubt that the young Sapeto had a preference and aptitude for linguistic study.

<sup>35</sup> ‘[...] an Italian–Gə‘əz–Amharic vocabulary, another Italian–Amharic–Gə‘əz with the respective grammars, and an Italian–Arabic lexicon [...]’ (my translation).

<sup>36</sup> Giacchero, Bisogni (1942: 330).

<sup>37</sup> Zanutto (1932: 150).

<sup>38</sup> Fontanabona (1928).

2. His experience as a missionary led him to develop a specific focus on linguistic issues.
3. His strong proto-colonial sensitivity pushed the Lazarist to see the practical use of languages as a tool for diplomatic ends.

Let's look in more detail. At the Biblioteca di Scienze dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze, sezione di Botanica (Serie I, busta 16, fascicolo 9), seven unpublished letters dated between 1871 and 1879 have been found. The letters, all addressed to Odoardo Beccari, vary in content but provide some interesting information about Sapeto's political ideas, his movements and contacts, as well as his constant need to travel to Africa for diplomatic and study purposes.

In Rome, the Società Geografica Italiana also preserves unpublished documents<sup>39</sup> of the Lazarist missionary. So far, two letters, one addressed to Giuseppe Dalla Vedova (inv. 575) and one to Marquis Giacomo Doria (inv. 577/2) and a manuscript titled *Studi su l'Etiopia. Preludio Storico e Geografico, Politico e Religioso*, dated 1843 (inv. 28), have been identified.

Also in Rome, the Sapeto collection at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma consists of a total of 34 manuscripts and has been systematically consulted.<sup>40</sup> In Genoa, the already mentioned letter to Spotorno from 1837 is preserved at the Archivio dell'Istituto Mazziniano. As for the collections in Paris, we currently have only incomplete information, which, in the absence of registers, catalogues, and inventories, both paper and digital, can only be clarified following an inspection at the Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission.

In conclusion, we have three categories of manuscripts that require different treatments:

1. Ethiopian manuscripts, which will be included in online databases of projects such as CaNaMEI (Naples) and 'Beta maṣāḥəft' (Hamburg);
2. The large lexicographical works and historical-linguistic essays that can be digitized in the future and placed on a dedicated platform (possibly linked to the InALC project);

<sup>39</sup> My thanks go to dr Patrizia Pampana, Librarian of the Società Geografica Italiana, who put many documents at my disposal, on several occasions.

<sup>40</sup> My thanks go to dr Andrea Cappa and dr Valentina Longo, Conservators of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, who put many documents at my disposal, on several occasions.

3. The remaining epistolary documentation, which we intend to include in an essay, whether an article or a monograph; the essay will include both the transcription of the texts (chronologically ordered) and a commentary.

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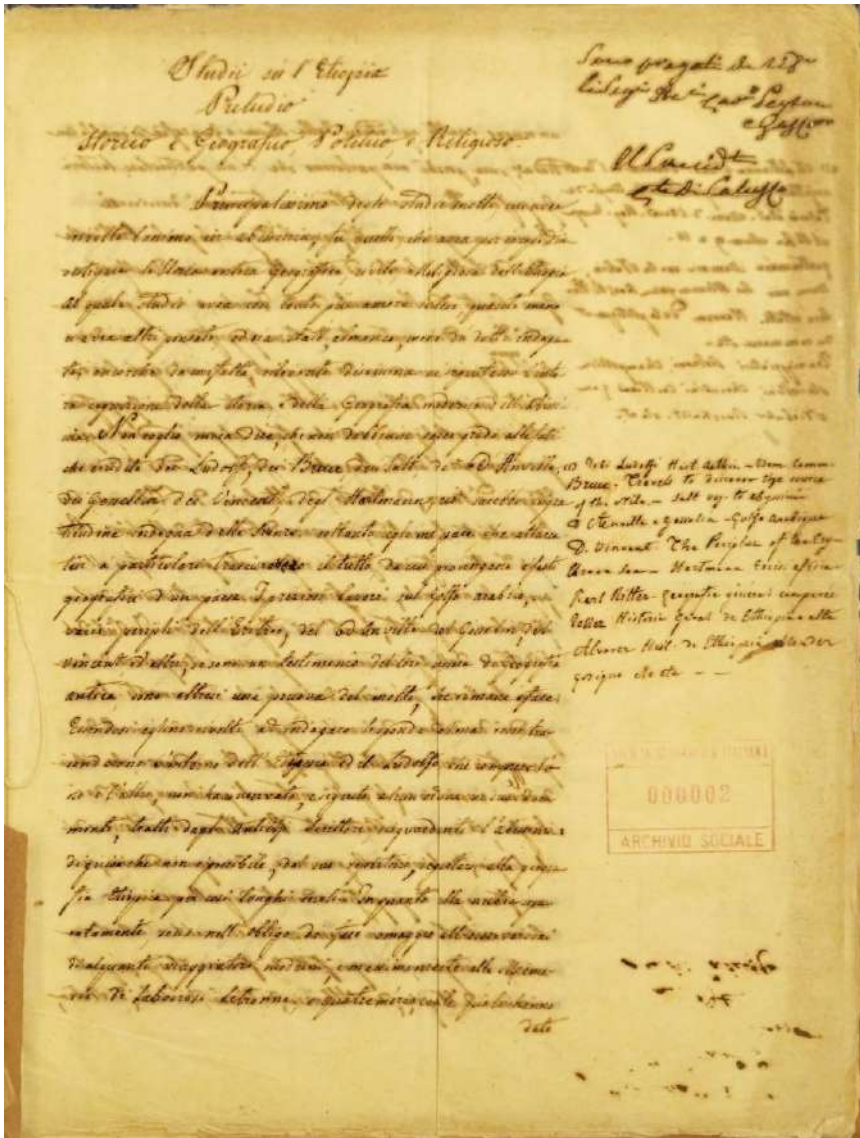


Fig. 1 – Rome, Società Geografica Italiana, inv. 28, 1843  
Giuseppe Sapeto, *Studi su l'Etiopia. Preludio Storico e Geografico, Politico e Religioso.*  
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