

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar  
Karin Pallaver *Editors*

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# Africa as Method

A Handbook of Sources and  
Epistemologies

 Springer

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Uoldelul Chelati Dirar · Karin Pallaver  
Editors

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ISBN 978-981-97-5766-4

ISBN 978-981-97-5767-1 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-5767-1>

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*To Irma Taddia*



Professor Irma Taddia, Salt Lake City, 2009. *Picture by Tommaso Centeleghe*

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# Introduction



**Karin Pallaver and Uoldelul Chelati Dirar**

*Africa as Method* is an examination of how scholars approach the study of Africa, specifically in terms of locating, choosing, interpreting, and combining sources to reconstruct Africa's history. This topic is not new, as the development of new research methodologies and the strong interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, have generated ongoing debate and reflection.<sup>1</sup>

The discipline of African history developed in the 1960s as part of area studies, which aimed to produce historical knowledge about regions of the world that had been largely overlooked by historians. In addition to this, area studies offered a fresh perspective that challenged the paradigms of Western historiography and presented new models of interpretation. In the case of African history, this meant examining and valuing “African agency”, which refers to the ability of Africans to shape their own history and explore new approaches to sources. The field of historical research on Africa emerged simultaneously in Western and African universities. In African universities, there was a strong political imperative to replace the colonial mindset that had dominated historiography with national histories. This was crucial for the nation-building process in newly independent African states, as it involved filling the boundaries imposed by colonialism with a shared historical past that would form the basis of a new national identity (Denon & Kuper, 1970: 277; Afigbo, 1975; Thioub, 2007). In the 1960s and 1970s, colonialism was often considered just an “episode” in African history (Ajayi, 1969), with historians primarily focused on the pre-colonial era as a means of highlighting the existence of an authentic African history. On the other hand, colonialism itself was not extensively studied, except when examining

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<sup>1</sup> See among the most recent ones: Falola and Jennings (2003); Spear (2019) and Jacobs (2014).

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anticolonial movements that underscored the active role of Africans in shaping their own history. Key themes during this period included state formation and pre-colonial trade, known as the “trade and politics” pair. Studies such as Dike’s *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956) marked a watershed in Africanist historiography because they overturned two cornerstones of the Eurocentric and denialist approach to African history that characterized Western historiography in those years. First, it placed itself in the realm of African history rather than imperial history. At the same time, despite his militant and passionate defence of oral sources, Dike based his book on written sources, mostly colonial archives. In doing so, he showed that, once read through different lenses and with a mutated methodological approach, written sources could open up new perspectives and a different appreciation of the African past.

This allowed for dialogue with historians from other regions, expanding the boundaries of the canon and engaging in a fruitful and equal exchange with Western historiography. This was, after all, a struggle against an exoticist view of Africa, which nevertheless carried with it, at least in this initial period, the danger of the continent’s historical distinctiveness being set aside (Eckert, 2003: 257). Recognizing Africa’s internal analytical coherence and the need to depart from European historiography was a fundamental principle for the discipline of African history and area studies as a whole. In the context of recognizing the unique history of the continent, the field of African studies emerged by proposing new research methodologies to reconstruct the history of societies with limited written sources. These methodologies include archaeology, historical linguistics, anthropology, and, most importantly, oral history. One of the most significant contributions of Africanist historiography was the recognition of oral sources as “legitimate” sources, as demonstrated by Jan Vansina in his influential book, *De la tradition orale: essai de méthode historique* (1961). Vansina provided a detailed methodology for employing oral sources, which allowed Africanist historians to shift the perspective from the history of European colonizers in Africa to the history of Africans themselves.

In the ecstatic and militant frenzy of the 1960s, the universities lent themselves to serving as the forge of the emerging nation, and historiography was the privileged tool in this process. After the excitement of independence, however, the brutal contradictions of power and the non-inclusive nature of the new national narratives became increasingly stark, forcing scholars to revise their positions and embark on a long and complex process of critically reviewing the epistemological foundations of their research. Notions of authenticity and historical continuity have been questioned and scholars have debated on what to do next seeking for new epistemological foundations to their researches in order to provide urgently needed answers to the dramatically deteriorated African political landscape. Political fragmentation, internecine struggle, and the shameful collapse of modernization projects disrupted narratives of a progressive destiny of African states and their societies and called for new epistemological perspectives. The debate on these issues has intensified especially since the 1990s, a probable side-effect of the end of the Cold War and its disruptive effect on African political processes and geopolitical alignments consolidated under that system. Theories of modernization, development and the nature of the African state began to be questioned. Scholars such as Chabal (1992) and

Bayart (1993) denounced the failure of the modernization theory and condemned the African state as kleptocratic, rooted in political predation, and driven by insatiable greed. This critique, while accurate in exposing the brutality and failures of many African states, went somewhat astray in that it failed to effectively historicize these processes, flattening their trajectories in an unnuanced account. On the same themes, Mamdani (1996) offered an equally provocative but historically more articulated analytical framework. He challenged the tendencies in Western social theory to frame its discourse on Africa in terms of absence (lack of history, development, civilization, etc.), suggesting that Africa should simply follow the steps of previous experiences of Western development. On the contrary, Mamdani proposed to bring African agency to the fore, grounding it in a nuanced analysis of the weight of historical processes. He began by dissecting the multiple legacies of colonialism, with particular emphasis on what he saw as a central feature of colonial power: the “bifurcated state”. According to Mamdani, the historical method shows that colonial administrations in Africa were torn by the tension between the urban space (originally planned for European settlers) and the rural areas which were administered along notions of ethnic division and retribalized authority, which entailed a distorted use of traditions to bolster alien rule.

In the same years, a parallel interdisciplinary debate has developed around the epistemological foundations of African studies. A central role in this process was played by Mudimbe’s (1988, 1994) reflections on the conceptual and methodological foundations of the discourse on Africa. With a particular focus on philosophy and anthropology, which inevitably reflects on history, he argues that the European structure of knowledge is deeply and systemically ethnocentric and that this has deeply flawed the approach to the study of African societies and cultures. Mudimbe further suggests that in order to maintain and justify this hegemony and power, the West invented an image of Africa as “primitive”, creating a sharp dichotomy that implied the superiority of Europe over Africa. Mudimbe suggests that this approach has produced an epistemological framework that has also been adopted by many African scholars, who have thus framed politics and discourses of otherness and ideologies of alterity along the same conceptual lines, the Négritude movements being a case in point. Mudimbe’s contribution to the field of African studies has been enormous in that he has deconstructed the politics of otherness, forcing scholars to rethink both their social role within their communities (Diouf, 2000) and the epistemological foundations of their research, with a particular focus on the legacy of what he calls the “colonial library”. A first result of this approach has been a dramatic shift in perspective that has emphasized the historical interdependence and mutual exchange between Africa and the rest of the world (Cooper, 2000), and at the same time demonstrated the contribution of African studies to the broader fields of social sciences and humanities (Bates et al., 1993).

In the ensuing debate, particular attention has been paid to the colonial archive as the source and foundation of the colonial library. Among the many contributions, a central role has been played by Stoler (2008) who, despite her focus on Dutch colonialism in East Asia, has raised crucial epistemological issues that have also affected the field of African studies. Stoler’s most important contribution is a new

approach to colonial archives, which are no longer seen as mere repositories of historical data but are increasingly being explored as objects of research. She argues that colonial archives embody the uncertainties, ambiguities, contradictions, and even ignorance of the colonial project itself, challenging the representation of colonialism as a centralized and coherent process.

In recent years, the field of African studies has been animated by the proliferation of scholarly research challenging Western epistemologies from a more radical perspective, calling for an Afrocentric perspective reminiscent of Cheikh Anta Diop's proposals. The latest results of this scholarly approach can be found in the work of Falola (2022), who proposes auto-ethnography as an alternative methodological approach to the study of African societies. Falola reaffirms as a priority the need to integrate indigenous systems into the formal Western style of education, arguing that African scholars should disengage from the West and its colonial library and base their research on alternative archives created by memory, orality, images, and photographs.

This volume adds to the extensive body of literature that from the 1960s onwards has examined sources and methodologies in African history and how they have evolved over time. Each chapter in this volume reflects on a specific type of source or set of sources, offering case studies that together provide a comprehensive overview of the methods and sources used by historians, anthropologists, and linguists working on Africa. The topics explored in this volume include the significance of oral sources and how they relate to written sources, the perspectives provided by female writings on and from Africa, the importance of Islamic court records for studying Africa, the use of songs and poetry in understanding contemporary political protests, the employment of photographs and other visual sources to study Africa's past, the relevance of new sources or reinterpretations of existing sources for reevaluating historical periodization, and, finally, how biographies and autobiographies—including personal experiences with fieldwork in Africa—can shed light on the continent's history.

The volume adopts a broad definition of what constitutes a source for African history. To illustrate this, it begins with two personal accounts that highlight the significance of conducting fieldwork in Africa in terms of method. The first account is by the historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, who describes her encounter with African sources during her first fieldwork in former French Equatorial Africa. It was 1965, only few years after independence. It is a fascinating journey, through archives that no one had yet seen and the discovery of oral sources that make clear how personal experiences in the field can serve as important reflections on method as well as sources in themselves. The second chapter in this section focuses on later periods and future perspectives of the anthropologist Judith Narowe. She recalls her two fieldworks in Ethiopia, one in the 1980s and another in the 2000s, with a particular emphasis on her interaction with Ethiopian women. She highlights how person-to-person relationships became crucial sources of knowledge to complement other types of sources, especially statistics. As several chapters in the book emphasize, the comparison and combination of different types of sources are crucial for studying the history of the continent.

Finding new sources, as well as revisiting and reinterpreting well-known ones, contributes to the development of new periodizations and the challenging of existing ones, as Sect. 2 highlights. In his chapter, Alessandro Bausi questions the validity of the definition of a “Middle Age” in the history of Ethiopia and argues for a reassessment of Ethiopia’s history within a broader global context. This includes the reevaluation of scholars who were already doing so in the 1920s. Gianfranco Lusini, through a re-examination of the epigraphic document *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8, argues that the transition from polytheism to Christianity in Ethiopia was a gradual process, contradicting previous, more simplistic explanations. Lusini also offers new insights into the distribution of languages and cultures in the Kingdom of Aksum. Torsten Hylén combines the analysis of two sources—one biographical and one legal—to reconsider the stories and myths surrounding the first Muslim migration to Africa. This migration, which involved Prophet Muhammad’s followers seeking refuge in Ethiopia and receiving protection from the emperor, holds significant historical importance for African Muslims and the origins of their faith. However, its reliability has been debated by scholars. Hylén argues that the migration did indeed occur, while acknowledging that some of the related events may have been mythologized over time. As both Bausi and Hylén emphasize, periodizations can be shaped by political and religious motivations, and the discovery of new sources or a fresh examination of existing ones can help reveal hidden truths.

Written sources, often used in combination with oral and material sources, have played a crucial role in reconstructing Africa’s past. Africanist historians have heavily relied on administrative sources from colonial archives, both in the former colonies and European metropolises, to study the political, economic, and social history of Africa. The third section of the volume is devoted to written sources that historians of Africa can employ. In his chapter, Jonathan Miran draws attention to Islamic court records, specifically those of Massawa, in Eritrea. These locally produced sources provide insights into the lives of ordinary, often overlooked individuals and groups, such as women, children, and enslaved people, shedding light on their social and economic lives. Written sources by missionaries have also played a significant role in the study of African history, extending beyond religious and church history. Lars Berge highlights in his chapter that these sources are “exceptionally rich” thanks to missionaries’ language expertise, often life-long experiences, and first-hand information about local regions. By comparing the Swedish Evangelical Mission and the Church of Sweden Mission Church, Berge argues that to fully exploit their potential for understanding the economic and social history of Africa and Africans, it is necessary to examine the specific motivations of different missionary societies and the contexts in which they originated and operated. Personal and unofficial writings by colonized women are difficult to locate in colonial Africa. However, Massimo Zaccaria’s chapter stands out by revealing a collection of sources written by Eritrean women. These women were wives of Eritrean soldiers who wrote letters to their husbands fighting in other Italian colonies, as well as to the Italian administration of the colony. These sources shed light on the independent spaces in which these women operated in their relationship with the colonial state, as well as their growing awareness of a broader world within the empire.

The study of colonial archives remains a significant component of African studies and scholarly research, particularly for the 19th and first half of the twentieth centuries. Africanist historians have explored these documents against the grain to uncover the *voices* of Africans during the colonial period. Section 4 focuses on these sources and especially on the divide between public/official documents and personal/unofficial ones. Bianca Carcangiu focuses on the discovery and exploration of archival traces related to the activities of the French Communist Party in the colonies, providing insights into the political and religious history of colonized Africans. Federica Guazzini discusses the relevance of the personal papers of the colonial officer Leopoldo Franchetti for understanding Italian colonialism in Eritrea, emphasizing the methodological challenges related to the use and interpretation of these specific sources.

Biographies and autobiographies are vital sources for studying the African continent. As Lee Cassanelli argues for twentieth-century Somalia, they provide insights into the emergence of local notions of individual and collective agency and how these change over time, both within the country and in the diaspora. Elena Vezzadini examines the lives of three Sudanese artists to explore the contribution that their artistic productions, such as songs and poems, make when analysed in relation to the biographies of the people who created them. These sources offer a means of writing political history *from below*. In her chapter, Silvia Bruzzi highlights the importance of personal papers of scholars who have worked in Africa. She specifically focuses on the papers of the Italian anthropologist Ester Panatta, arguing that they are valuable for revealing the scholar's personal relationship with the communities she studied, but also for the historical sources and documents she collected during her time in colonized Libya.

Historians of Africa have played a pioneering role in the debate about the use of photographic and other visual materials as sources for their studies. The Central National Library in Rome holds the most significant photographic collection on Africa in Italy, which includes the "Libya fund". Federico Cresti analyses this collection of visual sources and highlights its relevance for studying Libya and the other Italian colonies in Africa. Karin Pallaver addresses the historiographical significance and value of iconographic materials in her chapter on coins as a source for African history. She emphasizes how African institutions and European colonial states have used specific images on coins to represent themselves, and how African currency users have engaged with these images.

Studying recent conflicts and revolutionary movements presents several methodological challenges, both in terms of available sources and their accessibility. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar examines the different epistemologies that have coalesced to shape the contemporary state of Eritrea, analysing the complex interplay between pre-colonial politics, colonial administration, and revolutionary theories. The author uses the case of Eritrea to interrogate, in a broader perspective, the complex legacy that colonial policies have bequeathed to the African state and proposes an analytical framework that prioritizes the role of African agency rather than replicating the victimization approach. Tekeste Negash uses the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace treaty of 9 July 2018 to discuss the evolving nature of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations since the

1950s. Awet Weldemichael provides an overview of scattered and diverse primary sources, as well as an outline of the published literature in both popular and scholarly realms that reflects on the methodological challenges and opportunities of studying insurgencies in the Horn of Africa.

As Coquery-Vidrovitch points out in her contribution to this volume, sources are often difficult to find, and it often takes a strong determination and creative thinking to uncover them. The chapters in this volume testify to this tenacity and imagination and, ultimately, to the importance of the methodologies developed for studying Africa not only in understanding the continent itself, but also to the advancement of the historical method.

There are several reasons why a volume like this one comes into being. It can be the result of a thematic workshop, a call for papers, or made by invitation. *Africa as Method* has its own story. The idea to put it together came to us during the fall of 2020, when friends and colleagues started discussing how to celebrate the retirement of Irma Taddia, Professor of African History at the University of Bologna. Throughout her long and productive academic career, Irma worked on several topics, but perhaps the theme she contributed the most to is that of sources and methodologies. With a particular but not exclusive attention to the Horn of Africa, Irma Taddia has used oral sources extensively to reconstruct the colonial experience. Her work on oral sources in relation to Italian colonialism has been central to the development of a critical approach to the use of oral sources and has offered the unique opportunity to vent voice to both the former colonised Africans (Taddia, 1996) and former Italian settlers (Taddia, 1988), thus unveiling the complexity of the colonial milieu and emphasizing the agency of local actors (Taddia, 1994, 1998b). Always aware of the value but also the limitations of these sources, she reflected extensively on how to use them and how to combine them with other types of sources, which she also mastered. Her first monograph (Taddia, 1986)—which remains one of the most important works on the colonial history of Eritrea—was largely based on colonial sources from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as on Eritrean regional archives (Taddia, 1998a). At the same time, she has contributed extensively to the discovery and mapping of new and at that time untapped missionary (Taddia & Luciani, 1988) and colonial archives (Taddia, 1997, 1998a) as well as to the mapping and valorization of local manuscript traditions (Taddia et al., 1995). With a rigorous and meticulous focus on methodology and its epistemological foundations, Irma Taddia has thus played a crucial role in the historiographical debate on the Horn of Africa from the pre-colonial period to the post-colonial developments. This included a special attention to the process of state formation in the region and a detailed analysis of the interplay between colonialism and local agency in this long process (Taddia, 1990; 1993).

She edited several documents of the personal papers of Giovanni Ellero, a colonial officer who served in Eritrea and Ethiopia (Taddia et al., 1997, 2000, 2005). She also edited the personal papers of the Russian ethnographer Maria Right, believing that telling a scholar's personal experiences with fieldwork is a relevant source in itself (Taddia, 2009). She collected the letters that the Eritrean intellectual *Blatta Gäbrä Egzi' abeḥēr* wrote to the Ethiopian emperor Menelik (Taddia, 1994).

In summary, Irma used and reflected on almost all the sources discussed in this volume. Her career was characterized by the continuous search for new sources, that she collected, interpreted, and combined. She was convinced that there were no better sources than others. She used to say that a source is a source, no matter whether it is written, oral, or material. The important thing, she always emphasized, is to interpret it rigorously as historians always need to do. With this book, her friends and colleagues wish to pay homage and celebrate her extraordinary academic achievements as well as the mentoring and friendship that has shaped the academic trajectory of many of them.

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# Ousanas: A Ruler at the Crossroads of Aksum's History (*RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8)



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**Abstract** A fresh reading of the inscription *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8, attributed to Ousanas *bisi gisene*, King of Aksum, elder brother and predecessor of the renowned 'Ezana—allows for the proposal of a new hypothesis regarding the emergence of Christianity in the Ethiopian royal court. Contrary to the simplistic explanation of a ruler converting from polytheism to Christianity, one may observe how the monotheistic sensitivity of the Aksumite dynasty instead affirmed itself progressively, as the result of an internal debate, first manifesting itself in the henotheistic claim of Maḥrəm's primacy among the gods of the Ethiopian pantheon. Furthermore, an analysis of the personal and place names found in the same inscription leads to some innovative conclusions about the distribution of languages and cultures in the Kingdom of Aksum.

**Keywords** Kingdom of Aksum · Ousanas · 'Ezana · Maḥrəm · Henotheism

Marking the completion of the ambitious project conceived of thirty years ago, the publication of the last volume of the *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite* (Drewes, 2019) provides us with a valuable and up-to-date tool for the reading of documentary sources related to the ancient history of Eritrea and Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> Similar to *Storia e leggenda dell'Etiopia tardoantica*—the work of the Florentine Ethiopist Paolo Marrassini (1942–2013) which, after his death, was brought to press with skill and sensitivity by Alessandro Bausi (Marrassini, 2014)—this volume is also a *Lebenswerk*. It bears the name of the great Dutch scholar

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<sup>1</sup> A number of remarks and specific observations about this work can be found in the well-balanced review of Gajda (2022).

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The abbreviations refer to: *DAE* 8 = Littmann (1913), *Sabäische, griechische und altabessinische Inschriften*, Deutsche Aksum-Expedition IV, Reimer, Berlin, inscription no. 8; *RIÉ* 186 = Bernard and Drewes (1991), *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite – Tome I. Les documents – Tome II. Les planches*, Diffusion De Boccard, Paris, inscription no. 186.

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Abraham Johannes Drewes (1927–2007) and has been published sometime after his death by virtue of Manfred Kropp’s editorial and Harry Stroomer’s publishing efforts.

The volume contains a wealth of data and interpretations destined to have a profound impact on the progress of studies, particularly concerning those most relevant sources, in terms of type and scope, namely the great royal inscriptions of the rulers of Aksum from the fourth through the sixth century: from Ousanas to ‘Ezana; from Kaleb to W‘ZB (Drewes, 2019: 195–285, 459–516). Here, I am pleased to recall how my first visit to the capital of the largest African kingdom of late antiquity took place in 1992, on the initiative of the dedicatee of this volume, who involved Alessandro Bausi and me, scholars-in-training at the time, in her field research in Eritrea. I offer Irma the following pages as a belated but tangible thanks for that invaluable personal experience, hoping she may welcome this modest tribute from an old and grateful friend with a benevolent smile.

The question of the relationship between the “pagan” and “Christian” phases of Aksumite history is commonly resolved in the practical and concrete terms of the “conversion of the ruler”, who governed the city and its territory in the first half of the fourth century. Indeed, the reconstruction of the political-religious activities of ‘Ezana (*r. ca.* 330–65/70) is based on an impressive quantity and variety of documentation. Literary, epigraphic and numismatic sources all agree in defining an apparently simple and clear picture, one in which the missionary activity of Frumentius is indispensable: first as ‘Ezana’s instructor during his childhood; then as the first architect of the newly formed Christian community of Ethiopia; and finally as the first bishop of Aksum (Dombrowski, 1984; Lusini, 2019: 274–6). His role as an unwitting instrument of a “divine” plan clearly emerges from the concurrent epigraphic and numismatic documentation, in which a “before” and “after” ‘Ezana’s “conversion” is discernible; this leads us to the rational obligation to distinguish at least two periods in the religious life of the ruler and the history of his reign (Robin, 2017: xxviii- - xxxviii; Rodinson, 2001). The rereading of the epigraphic document *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 offers us the opportunity to propose a more refined view of the epochal events that influenced the court of Aksum in the first quarter of the fourth century; events which tied together the lives of three characters: Ousanas; ‘Ezana, younger brother and successor; and ʿIl(1)e ‘Amida,<sup>2</sup> father of both.

*RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 (Drewes, 2019: 207–15, 494–9; Marrassini, 2014: 204–11) is an inscription in Gə ‘əz written in South Arabian script containing the account of the *res gestae* of an unknown but identifiable ruler: Ousanas I \*bə’əse gəšän (cf. Greek *bisi gisene*), son and successor of ʿIl(1)e ‘Amida, and brother of the more famous ‘Ezana bə’əse ḥalen. The first line of the epigraph is illegible; as a result, the name of the Aksumite king who dictated it has been lost. Littmann (1913: 21), albeit with some uncertainty (“es bleibt daher eine gewisse Unsicherheit bestehen”), ruled out certain possibilities (“eine Möglichkeit anders zu lesen scheint mir ausgeschlossen”), and included this inscription as part of the sizable collection of epigraphs dictated by ‘Ezana. Schneider’s (1987: 615) rereading (now confirmed by Drewes, 2019:

<sup>2</sup> ʿIl(1)e ‘Amida according to the transcription adopted systematically by Drewes, adhering to the spelling of the inscriptions, as in Lusini (2004: 70–2); *pace* Bausi (2005).

209, 493, 496) has led to the conclusion that the patronymic is, indeed, the same as 'Ezana's, namely 𐩧𐩬𐩨𐩣 'Amida; however, the letters which follow—B'S[YM/.]ŠNM (with mimation)—contain the well-known royal epithet in its Greek form: *bisi gisene*. This is interpreted as \*bə'ase gəšān, which is attested by numismatic documentation as referring to Ousanas (Fiaccadori, 2004: 109–10, 2010).

Accordingly, *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 also represents the earliest known example of “pseudo-Sabaeian”, which consists of using South Arabian characters to produce texts in Gə'əz, or more accurately, a variant of Ge'ez that is intentionally characterized by Sabaeian phonetic and morphological traits. In particular, one observes the persistent and unconventional use of mimation (that is, utilizing a <m> suffix), which in South Arabian has the morphological value of indicating the indefinite noun state (Müller, 2007: 157a–b; Sima, 2003/4; Voigt, 2017: 202–4). Specifying the author and chronology of the epigraph would therefore also help us to reconstruct the creation and development of this particular writing practice, which seems to have played a specific function in the vindication of the Aksumite rulers' identity over the course of approximately two centuries.

“Ousanas”, the name which is conventionally used to indicate the ruler and which is also adopted here, is taken from the Greek inscription of his name as it appears on his coins: ΟΥΣΑΝΑΣ (ΒΙΣΙ ΓΙΣΕΝΕ). As seen in other cases, morphological adaptation has prescribed the addition of the final sigma (e.g., ΑΦΙΛΑΣ for Ḥafilā; Bausi, 2018). Also, considering how the initial diphthong is used as a graphic device, to which the vowel /u-/ is certainly subject, we may conclude that the original form for Ousanas must have been “Usana”. Accordingly, we are indeed considering a typical Aksumite royal name, such as 'Ezana, Sazana, Ebana, Nezana, Tazena and Wazena, characterized by the suffixes *-ana* or *-āna*, and whose derivational function may be understood by looking at Agaw languages (Conti, 1912: 105). As for the monosyllabic stems *Us-*, *'Ez-*, *Saz-*, *Eb-*, *Nez-*, *Taz-*, and *Waz-*, they too are frequent in languages such as Bilin, Ḥamtanga, and Kəmantnäy. For “Usana”, we can refer to the development of the base \*us-, which has the well-attested meaning of “man” or “male” (Appleyard, 2006: 65). With the addition of the nominal suffix *-ana*, the etymological meaning can thereby be reconstructed as “virility” (Lusini, 2018: 267–8).

It is evident that the portion of *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 that can still be read today begins with the four characters WLDM (“son of”, with mimation). These characters are arranged conjointly with the rest of the epigraph, i.e., aligned to the right, according to the graphic conventions of South Arabian. Consequently, either the first line of the text consisted only of the ruler's name<sup>3</sup> or it must have originally contained some additional text. Of all the other royal inscriptions known to us, none opens with a line devoted exclusively to the ruler's name, isolated and therefore accentuated with respect to the rest of his title. It would be, in fact, a difficult choice to understand since in the Aksumite context, the ruler's name, patronymic, royal epithet, and list of titles constitute a unitary incipit, that is, not hierarchical and not emphasized by

<sup>3</sup> Littmann (1913: 19), who, in the translation, opted for the graphic solution [‘Ēzānā], centred and extraneous to the numbering of the inscribed lines.

any indentation. If, on the other hand, one admits the presence of other words that preceded the nexus constituted by the ruler's name along with the noun *WLDM*—for example, a celestial invocation—we would have a form comparable to other documented works.

Indeed, we know of more than one Aksumite royal inscription that opens with a request for divine assistance, albeit that these are Christian texts and that surviving examples contain relatively long epicleses, as in *RIÉ* 271 ('Ezana) and *RIÉ* 191 (Kaleb). Only in the case of the well-known *RIÉ* 189 = *DAE* 11, a monotheistic inscription of 'Ezana, is the text of the incipit distributed over the first two lines, lending itself to a comparison with the epigraph of Ousanas.

1. By the power of the Lord of heaven, who is in heaven and on earth, victorious for me. Me 'E-
2. [za]na, son of ʾĪ(l)e 'Amida, man of Ḥalən, king of Aksum [...].

In this inscription, the “signature” of the ruler, the patronymic and the rest of the title have been relegated to the margin of the first line and the beginning of the second by the existence of an invocation to the “Lord of heaven”, who is also mentioned subsequently to the titling, starting from the fifth line. Therefore, the theoretical possibility arises that *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 also presented an analogous situation, namely:

1. [first line of lost text, with the invocation and name of the ruler]
2. son of ʾĪ(l)e 'Amida, man of [-]ŠNM, king of Aksum ...

Considering the fact that the author claims descent from the god *Maḥrəm* (the Greek *Ares*)—whose presence in Aksumite inscriptions is usually associated with 'Astār and Mədr or Bəḥer, forming an astral “triad”—it seems certain that *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 predates *RIÉ* 189 and therefore the adoption of monotheistic language within the Aksumite court. In fact, the Ousanas inscription does not mention any other figures of the Aksumite pantheon other than *Maḥrəm*. Accordingly, it may be postulated that the lost incipit of the epigraph contained a brief invocation to a god and that the ruler violated the practice requiring precedence to be given to one's own name, thus adopting a protocol that would only later become mandatory. In light of these assertions, the possibility cannot be excluded that the ruler recognized *Maḥrəm* not only as a dynastic deity, “[s]tammesgott des Herrschers und Erzeuger des Königs von Aksum” (Brakmann, 1994: 37), but also as the only one worthy of mention in the first line of his own text.

These considerations also provide an opportunity for further reflection on the course taken by the Aksumite court in its eventual placement of faith in the Gospel. Assuming that the custom of opening royal inscriptions with an invocation was occasionally practiced even before the court's “conversion” to monotheism, this practice could be well understood as the intentional expression of a henotheistic faith. It would suggest the need to abandon the paradigm of the “turning point”, linked to the “conversion of the ruler”, and replace it with a model of the gradual establishment of an “innovative” awareness, which coincided with the development and consolidation of the axis between Aksum and Rome, and perhaps also with the

emergence of personalities at the court who were capable of generating and nurturing a religious debate (Piovanelli, 2014: 350–1).

The coins of Ousanas unmistakably show his adherence to the symbology of the traditional astral religion. Therefore, the religious ideas that perhaps underlie *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 were not necessarily the culmination of a linear process but rather an episode in a path composed of successive adjustments, along which several characters are found, namely ʿĪl(l)e 'Amida and his two sons and heirs to the throne. The rereading of the epigraphs of Ousanas's brother and successor confirms this impression. The polytheistic inscriptions of 'Ezana are recognizable by the fact that they mention the "astral" triad composed by, in addition to Maḥrēm, Astār, and Mədər or Bəḥer. This is especially evident in the inscription *RIÉ* 188 = *DAE* 10 (campaign against the Sārane people), which also mentions Maḥrēm in the opening, to which it adds an offering of thanks to the triad, 'Astār, Bəḥer, and Mədər (the latter two being treated as separate deities).

Similarly, there is another inscription which belongs to the same religious moment, of which at least two copies remain, commemorating a campaign against the Bəga: *RIÉ* 185 I–II, with the Greek version *RIÉ* 270, which, however, only mentions Ares; and *RIÉ* 185bis I–II, with the Greek version *RIÉ* 270bis, which mentions Ares together with Heaven ('Astār) and Earth (Mədər or Bəḥer).

Only one "trinitarian" Christian inscription can be attributed to 'Ezana, namely the well-known *RIÉ* 271 (campaign against the Noba people). Its association with two other texts with similar content is rather problematic. In fact, *RIÉ* 189 = *DAE* 11 (whose incipit we hypothetically compared with that of Ousanas's epigraph) and *RIÉ* 190 undoubtedly express a monotheistic religious sensitivity, but not an explicitly "trinitarian" one. They do, albeit with some uncertainty, give thanks to both the "Lord of the Earth" and the "Lord of Heaven", following a gradual process of adaptation to the new Christian religious terminology also found in other cultures of late antiquity (Littmann, 1950: 125–6).

*RIÉ* 187 = *DAE* 9 presents, more than any other work, a context comparable to that of the Ousanas inscription. In both, the rulers proclaim their descent from Maḥrēm, but are silent on any other deity of the Aksumite pantheon. An even more articulated situation can be found in *RIÉ* 270bis, particularly in its *explicit* that is significantly longer than its twin *RIÉ* 270, in which we find the text, "and if therefore anyone wishes to offend him (i.e., Ares), let the god of heaven and of the earth destroy him" (Bernand, 2000: 12–15; Marrassini, 2014: 50, 214; Uhlig, 2001: 21, 29–31).

Therefore, the need arises to place these documents along a path of historical-religious development which is not finalistic, that is, a path in which Christianity is the necessary endpoint, and whereby what is not yet Christian is considered "als vollziehend und nicht als vollzogen" (Uhlig, 2001: 29). The terminology employed by the two rulers allows us to reconstruct their personal and at times contradictory approach to a henotheistic religious sensibility. The alternation between different ways of expressing their religious views within their discourses reflects ongoing contemplation and perhaps debate within the court itself. This stage must have lasted, with alternating outcomes, throughout the first half of the fourth century and involved the entire dynastic generation of ʿĪl(l)e 'Amida's children.

Ousanas and ‘Ezana ruled in succession, but both must have known Frumentius, who came to court during the reign of ʿIl(1)e ‘Amida. The traditional account of Ousanas’s reign contains no mention of him, while his father is undoubtedly referenced under the altered name of ʿIllä Alada (in which the first element was reinterpreted as a pronoun). It is evidently one of the “selective” procedures so dear to hagiographers, in which historical elements are trimmed and repurposed in light of the religious discourse. In particular, the construction of the myth of the “conversion of the ruler” must have entailed a reduction of the actors and the functional roles within the *mise en scène*. Even ‘Ezana himself did not come out unscathed from the comparison with Frumentius, *abba Sälama*, or *Käsate bərhan*, considering that his name was obscured and supplanted by the unrecognizable onomastic neoformation ʿIllä Azg<sup>w</sup>ag<sup>w</sup>a, which in all likelihood originates from a toponym, unrelated to the name of the king (Marrassini, 2014: 67–8).

It is more than probable that the emergence of a receptivity toward the henotheistic message was related to the events of the religious history which characterizes many Mediterranean civilizations of the fourth century, particularly South Arabia. In fact, as early as the third century, “la religion Sabéenne tendait peut-être vers l’hénothéisme avec Almaḡah apparaissant comme le dieu suprême” (Gajda, 2009: 223). The Sabaeen inscriptions from the Awwām temple in Mārib attest to this trend; the role of Almaḡah as the only deity worthy of invocation in the Sabaeen inscriptions is comparable to that of Maḡrēm in Aksumite inscriptions such as *RIÉ* 187 = *DAE* 9 (‘Ezana), and probably *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 (Ousanas). In both contexts, one god prevails over the others for different reasons, from the prestige of one of its cultural centers (Almaḡah in Mārib) to the existing link between the deity and the ruling dynasty (Maḡrēm in Aksum).

Around 340, ‘Ezana imposed Christianity as the official religion of the Aksumite court; by *ca.* 380, even the rulers of the kingdom of Ḥimyar had solidified their own choice in favor of Judaizing monotheism (Gajda, 2010: 117, 2009: 223–4, 239–45) or Judeo-monotheism (Robin, 2015: 173–4). However, this “new” wind must have begun to blow some time earlier on both coasts of the Red Sea, originally in a henotheistic form. From this point of view, Aksum and Ḥimyar, the two regional powers in open rivalry for control of trade in the southern Red Sea, each demonstrate independent development toward a common direction, an indication of a continuous (and not just conflictual) relationship between the ruling groups of the two kingdoms. Even the writing practice of “pseudo-Sabaeen” (used in the fourth century by Ousanas and ‘Ezana, and then two hundred years later by Kaleb and his son W’ZB) was not only an expression of the Aksumite ruler’s willingness to appropriate South Arabian tradition and to represent, through allography, his aspirations of a *translation imperii* between Zafār and Aksum (Lusini, 2022: 365–7). It was also a manifestation of reciprocal influence between the two cultures, as evidenced by the fact that when the same inscription exists in two different Gə’əz versions, the text in South Arabian script has a more “official” character than the one using Ethiopian characters (Marrassini, 2014: 37, 76). The effect of this “convergence” is noticeable, especially in the religious context. In the two hundred years that separated Kaleb from ‘Ezana, the ancient pluralism of distant near-eastern ancestry ended up definitively giving

way in both kingdoms to the advance of monistic thought. In this process, it cannot be ruled out that contacts with the Persian world also exerted a certain influence; that the tenets of Mazdean henotheism, the state religion of the Sasanian Empire, were echoed in Zafār and Aksum as an effect of the trade relations which undoubtedly took place (Cerulli, 1971: 457–9; Monneret de Villard, 1938: 327–8).

*RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 describes the itinerary of a campaign undertaken by Ousanas to re-establish his sovereignty over certain regions. Determining the borders of the Ag<sup>w</sup>ezat would benefit from recognizing that SWSWT (the name of the ruler who accepts the authority of Ousanas and pays him the tribute) is a dialectal variant of the Gə'əz *sisit* ("nourishment, food"). This is the convincing proposal of Drewes (2019: 211), who also appropriately establishes a parallel with the personal name Sisay, still widely used throughout Ethiopia. Therefore, SWSWT being a Semitic name, the Ag<sup>w</sup>ezat would have been a community settled in an area not too far from the provinces under the direct control of Aksum, in which Gə'əz was the language of the ruling class. A location east of the capital seems very plausible since, in the same inscription, Ousanas meets another authority, "the king of GBZ, SBL, with his troops", who offers him his submission. GBZ is certainly Gābāza, namely the port of Adulis (Drewes, 2019: 497–8); in all likelihood, the name SBL contains a reference to the well-known Gə'əz terms *səbul* ("covered with ears"), and *säbl* ("ear of corn") (as in proper names such as Säblä Wängel); the mention of Gābāza proves that Ousanas "était en route en direction de la côte" (Drewes, 2019: 500).

Moreover, it is no coincidence that even today Ag<sup>w</sup>äza or Agoza denotes a locality and district (*qušät*) of Tigray "located in the mountains facing the northern cliffs of the Gär'alta massif, on the east side of the Hawzen-Tämben road" (Balicka-Witakowska, 2014: 224a), where there are two distinct rock churches, one of which dates back to at least the fifteenth century. The addition of a plural suffix *-at* to the toponym Ag<sup>w</sup>eza, a variant of Ag<sup>w</sup>äza for an exchange between the first and fifth orders, determines without difficulty the ethnonym Ag<sup>w</sup>ezat to refer to the ancient political-social group established east of the Kingdom of Aksum, and which claimed a certain degree of political autonomy from it. Moreover, the inscription of Ousanas does not contain an actual account of military actions; instead, its prevailing intention is to commemorate the king's ability to "reintegrate and reorder the country",<sup>4</sup> alternating between punitive acts and confirmation of alliances sanctioned by the payment of tribute.

From his brother and predecessor, 'Ezana inherited the need to keep the Ag<sup>w</sup>ezat territory under control. Indeed, inscription *RIÉ* 187 = *DAE* 9 (Drewes, 2019: 215–28, 500–4; Marrassini, 2014: 224–8) recounts how 'Ezana celebrated victory over the same people, whose ruler is named Abä'alkə'o, probably to be interpreted as a compound of two terms. If *abä* is nothing more than the declined form (genitive) of *ab*, in the sense of "master, a person in charge", *alkə'o* would be the nominalized infinitive of the causative form of the verb *läk'al-'a* (Leslau, 1991: 313a), with the

<sup>4</sup> "[P]er reintegrare e riordinare il paese" (Marrassini 2014: 207); "um sein Reich wiederherzustellen und zu ordnen" (Littmann 1913: 19); "pour remettre en état le pays et lui imposer sa loi" (Drewes 2019: 208).



meaning of *signandum, consignandum curare*, that is “to seal, authenticate” (Dillmann, 1865: 50b). Therefore, being more than a proper name, it seems to be a title originally reserved for the head of a province or a local magistrate with political prerogatives,<sup>5</sup> subsequently crystallized in an onomastic form, like for instance *səyyum* or *māk<sup>w</sup>annən*. The Ag<sup>w</sup>ezat presence in Eastern Tigray, where their traces are found in the toponym Ag<sup>w</sup>eza, is confirmed in the inscription of ʿĪngabo, where it is mentioned as the location of the first meeting between ʿEzana and Abäʿalkəʿo, which must have then been followed by the breakdown in relations which is depicted in the rest of the inscription. Of the various proposals put forward, the most convincing is that of Drewes, who identifies ʿĪngabo with ʿGB of *RIÉ* 218 (Drewes, 2019: 312–15, 500), that is with Maryam ʿAnza, for which “le royaume des ʿAg<sup>w</sup>ezāt a dû se trouver à l’est d’Axoum, pas loin de Hawzen”, which means in the vicinity of the current *qušāt* di Ag<sup>w</sup>äza.

The itinerary of Ousanas’s campaign described in *RIÉ* 186 = *DAE* 8 touches on several localities that cannot be precisely placed on the map at the moment: ʿLB, where the meeting with SWSWT, king of the ʿAg<sup>w</sup>ezat, takes place; FNŞĤT, where the meeting with SBL, king of Gābāza, takes place; and HMŠ, which may be a broader reference that includes the Eritrean region of Ḥamasen (Huntingford, 1989: 53; Littmann, 1913: 22) since it is here that the meeting with “all the tribes of MṬN” takes place. Here, MṬN may refer to Metine, found in the inscription on Adulis’ throne, reported by Cosma Indicopleuste (Huntingford, 1989: 53; Littmann 1913: 22); it may also refer to Mātīn, which Ibn Ḥawqal places in the region of Bāḏī, i.e., Massawa (Drewes, 2019: 498–9; Lusini, 2003). These references allow us to reconstruct some of the stages of Ousanas’s “journey”, which had as its primary objective the affirmation of his control over the territories east and northeast of Aksum, from Eastern Tigray to the Eritrean coast. In fact, the vital land communication route with the port of Adulis, a genuine and irreplaceable source of Aksum’s financial wealth, passed through here.

Notably, these meetings seem to have occurred in the safe areas of the highlands. These were places under the direct control of the sovereign, who merely collected the tribute and granted the “peripheral” authorities the same title of “king”, which he had reserved for himself. Praxes such as this, in which other kings, to avoid military retaliation, paid a tribute tax in the form of a gift,<sup>6</sup> undoubtedly reinforced the most famous self-designation of the Aksumite ruler, namely *nəguśä nəgäšt*, “king who exercises primacy over other kings”, helping to redefine a title whose model dates back at least to Ptolemaic times (Fiaccadori, 2007). Furthermore, if the name of Usana/Ousanas, king of Aksum, has an Agaw etymology, while his counterparts bore Semitic epithets (from SBL king of Gābāza to SWSWT king of the ʿAg<sup>w</sup>ezat, and also his successor Abäʿalkəʿo), we may conclude that perhaps the history of Aksum is indeed far more complex than the simplifications of historiographical models have so far led us irresistibly to believe. Rereading the actual inscriptions

<sup>5</sup> Analogous to, for example, *abāgaʿəz* or *abāgaz* (Chernetsov 2003; Kane 1990: 1205a).

<sup>6</sup> As the “technical” expression *boʿa* or *gabʿa gada* suggests, see Drewes (2019: 210–11).

with an eye less oriented toward tradition may yet provide us with new elements of greater understanding.

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