

UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE
DIPARTIMENTO ASIA, AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO

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Serie Etiopica

13

**FROM AKSUM TO LALIBÄLA
THE MYTH OF THE “DARK AGES” OF
ERITREAN AND ETHIOPIAN HISTORY
(7TH–13TH CENTURIES)**

Edited by
LUISA SERNICOLA
MASSIMO VILLA



UniorPress

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Cover: private reading inside the church of Yəmṛəḥännä Krəstos (photo by Luisa Sernicola).

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GIANFRANCESCO LUSINI

Foreword

One of the oldest wishes of scholars in Ethiopian studies is to fill the knowledge gap about the period between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, around the seventh to twelfth centuries. For historiographers, this crucial timeframe is made unintelligible by the documentary *vacuum* and the apparent silence surrounding ruins and monuments. Every specialist involved in the study of the Eritrean and Ethiopian Christian cultures has had to recognize how puzzling the lack of evidence is about what happened in the half millennium between the collapse of the kingdom of Aksum in the seventh century and the revival of the urban civilization in the twelfth century. Recently, an awareness has emerged that a multi-sided approach, integrating archaeology, history of art, manuscript studies and linguistics, is a promising way to give a reliable representation of the facts and processes otherwise shrouded in darkness. The First Neapolitan Meeting of Eritrean and Ethiopian Studies, which took place in Naples March 1–3 2023, was an attempt to give a multidisciplinary answer to this specific historical problem. Many of the contributions published here date back to that scientific event, and for having supported its celebration my gratitude goes to the Department of Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies and to ISMEO Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente, through Prof. Adriano Rossi, who included the conference within the programs of the five-year agreement (2022–2026) with the Ministry of the University.

Of course, “dark ages” is nothing but a label and is attached with a certain degree of European presumption. As in the case of the history of Bronze Age Greece, this expression denounces our difficulty in understanding what happened due to the absence of written documents, as if they would be the only reliable records. Firstly, to avoid this distortion, we should think about the whole Mediterranean world and the way it was affected by an effective break-up after the end of Roman political unity. Apart from the centuries-long unity of Byzantium, Medieval Christianity was the result of a revival of traditions and a restart of social order after a dramatic interruption. Secondly, we must also consider that ancient societies (not only African) didn’t pay attention to the written transmission of knowledge as we do nowadays. This is implicitly

suggested if we accept in principle that the space left empty by texts could have been filled by something else and that our comprehension of the facts can be enhanced by the appreciation of the constant intermingling between the oral and the written. There are several examples of how the legacy of Late Antiquity, of which Eritrea and Ethiopia were components, via Aksum, was transferred to the later phases with the help of the oral transmission of knowledge.

The chronographies used in the Ethiopian ecclesiastical circles, and occasionally recorded in blanks and flyleaves of manuscripts, are instructive examples of how orality and literacy can interact fluidly, as they may include data which are not included in historiographical works. The same can be said for hagiographies. The reception of oral elements in these has been stressed on many occasions, sometimes with astonishing effects, like in the case of the celebrated wall-painting of the church of Guḥ (Təgray) showing an episode of the life of the ancient saint Yəm'atta, not recorded in his *Vita*. Admittedly, in the process of “decline and fall” of Aksum, elements of economic crisis and cultural discontinuity intertwined according to a pattern of “transformation without disaster”, even though social and institutional actors, formerly dominating the political scene, faded away quickly. Consequently, intellectual centers and circles of this African kingdom of Late Antiquity, that for centuries had ensured the written transmission of knowledge, stopped working with the efficacy of earlier times when Adulis used to function as a place of transfer and exchange of goods and riches. In this context, the two civil elites, that of the state officials and that of the businesspersons, but also the two main institutions, the Crown and the Church, were forced to redefine their own social roles, very much reduced within the new economic and political context. Archaeologists and historians can agree in identifying the causes that determined this new phase, namely the decline of trade and towns, the gradual weakening of the state authority and growing international isolation.

This is key to interpreting the latest known inscriptions carved in Aksum at the request of a political authority. RIÉ 193 I–II = DAE 12 and 13 (cf. RIÉ 194 = DAE 14) are cut on the same stone by a historical, but enigmatic, figure named Danə'el, self-styled *ḥaḍani*, a well-known Gə'əz word meaning “tutor, guardian”. Possibly, this indicates that Danə'el, who lived at some point between the ninth and eleventh centuries, played a hegemonic role *de facto*, but without full legitimacy. He titles himself also “son of Däbrä Fərem”, a qualification which could be the clue to a possible religious affiliation. In his texts, the sovereign includes, among his military deeds, the victory over another *ḥaḍani*, named Karuray, the fight near Kassala against the Barya people, and the submission of the *nəguś* of Aksum. The latter information reveals the persistence in the old capital city of a ruling class showing a continuity with the imperial past, even though the royal title was purely formal, and the *nəguś* was

no more than the head of one of the various chiefdoms struggling for dominance over Northern Ethiopia. This leadership has the merit of having allowed the survival of a “capital without empire” thanks to the agreement with the Christian Church. From this pact between the religious and the secular institutions, the new profile of Aksum arose as that of a “holy city” for the whole of Ethiopian Christianity, where the emperors went for centuries to receive the religious investiture from the hands of the *abun*, the only heir of Aksum of Late Antiquity.

In the future, new conclusions may be drawn from the palaeographic study of the most ancient Ethiopic manuscripts we know of. Until twenty-five years ago, the accepted chronology for the development of the Gəʿəz script usually took for granted that all the records we had did not date back beyond the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Then, the discovery of an absolute chronology of the Abba Gärima Gospel Books, which now are considered to date from the fifth to the seventh centuries, through C14 analysis, opened a new phase offering at least two examples of the writing habits of Late Antiquity. The consequences of this big discovery are still to be fully appreciated. Parm. 3838 is a gorgeous exemplar of the *Mäṣḥafä säʿatat* (or *Horologion*), a calligraphic masterpiece in the Mordini collection in the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma. The small codex was in a very bad and delicate state because the original cover was lost, together with the binding. The remaining six quires (33 pages) were loose. Now they have been correctly rearranged through the competent intervention of Dr Massimo Villa and Dr Gioia Bottari; the latter is also credited with an accurate restoration of the codex within the project “Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia” (CaNaMEI). Interestingly, a palaeographic comparison of this codex with the Abba Gärima Gospel Books allows one to express some doubts about an “early medieval” dating of this kind of script which is not comparable with the oldest script of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, as in Vat. Aeth. 21 or Borg. Aeth. 3. In the case of Parm. 3838, not only do we notice the number of caesuras and non-textual signs in page margins and intercolumns (christograms, *cruces ansatae*, etc.), but the shape of the characters seems to belong to a phase of the Ethiopic script coming from Late Antiquity but prior to the ‘early medieval’, namely the same period when *ḥadani* Danəʿel made his inscriptions.

Certainly, this collection of essays will provide new contributions for a better understanding of the historical problem of the Ethiopian “dark ages” and put forward new hypotheses for its solution. Our series is therefore grateful to Dr Luisa Sernicola and Dr Massimo Villa who took on the burden of editing this volume. As the coordinator of the “Centro di Studi sull’Africa”, I extend my special welcome to the scholars who kindly accepted the invitation to

contribute to this book drawing from their knowledge and the outcomes of their research.