

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

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Vol. 2

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2018

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RASSEGNA DI STUDI ETIOPICI – RIVISTA FONDATA DA CARLO CONTI ROSSINI

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## *Ai lettori*

Questo fascicolo della *Rassegna* contiene buona parte delle comunicazioni presentate in occasione del seminario italo-eritreo *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects*, organizzato e tenuto presso l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" il 12 e 13 dicembre 2017.

L'evento scientifico rientra nei programmi dell'Accordo di scambio e collaborazione firmato il 5 febbraio 2008 tra il Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea (RDC) e l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" con il fine di stabilire un legame duraturo fra le due istituzioni culturali e accademiche, sviluppando programmi di ricerca e attività didattiche per la conservazione e la promozione del patrimonio nazionale eritreo. In questo contesto, negli anni scorsi a Napoli sono state celebrate due conferenze: *History and Language of Tigre-speaking peoples* (2008, atti pubblicati nel 2010) e *Eritrean Studies: Past and Present* (2010, atti pubblicati nel 2012); corsi avanzati per lo studio dei manoscritti Gə'əz sono stati tenuti in Asmara da docenti italiani; studenti dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" si sono recati in Eritrea per completare la loro formazione e studiosi eritrei hanno visitato l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" e hanno tenuto lezioni e seminari su argomenti di linguistica eritrea.

Convocando studiosi da entrambi i Paesi, dando loro l'opportunità di scambiare esperienze e progetti circa la conservazione del patrimonio culturale eritreo, il seminario *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects* ha inteso una volta ancora dare concretezza agli scopi e alle finalità dell'Accordo di scambio e collaborazione italo-eritreo. Pertanto, per aver partecipato all'evento scientifico dobbiamo esser grati alle autorità delle due istituzioni: Azeb Tewolde, Direttrice del Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea, Giorgio Banti, Vice-Rettore dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" e Michele Bernardini, Direttore del Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo della stessa Università. In ugual misura, vogliamo esprimere il nostro più sincero ringraziamento nei confronti dei rappresentanti del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, in particolare del Dr. Raffaele De Lutio, già Direttore Centrale per i Paesi dell'Africa Sub-Sahariana, che ha porto ai convegnisti il proprio saluto e il proprio augurio di buon lavoro.

Il programma della conferenza ha incluso due relazioni introduttive di Azeb Tewolde e Gianfrancesco Lusini, e comunicazioni di storia (Silvana Palma), antropologia (Gianni Dore – Moreno Vergari), archeologia (Andrea Manzo, Chiara Zazzaro), filologia (Massimo Villa), storia dell'arte (Lorenza Mazzei), linguistica semitica (Tesfay Tewolde, Saleh Mahmud Idris) e linguistica nilo-sahariana (Gilda Ferrandino, Giorgio Banti e Graziano Savà).

Con questo fascicolo la redazione della *Rassegna* punta a contribuire al rafforzamento della cooperazione scientifica tra istituzioni italiane ed eritree, assumendo che il patrimonio culturale non sia soltanto un fattore identitario, ma anche un'occasione concreta di sviluppo per Paesi come l'Eritrea che conservano grandi tesori artistici, archeologici, linguistici e storici.

Con tristezza dobbiamo registrare una grave perdita per la comunità scientifica internazionale, e in particolare per l'africanistica all'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale". Mentre si completava la redazione di questo volume, il 23 marzo 2018 è mancato il Prof. Rodolfo Fattovich, a lungo professore ordinario di Archeologia etiopica nel nostro Ateneo, membro del Consiglio scientifico della nostra rivista, uno tra i maggiori indagatori e conoscitori della protostoria e dell'antichità del Corno d'Africa, autentico creatore di una scuola accademica di primissimo livello, che a Napoli viene mantenuta viva e vitale da un gruppo di studiosi formati grazie al suo insegnamento. La redazione della *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* si unisce al cordoglio di quanti, in Italia e nel mondo, avendone apprezzato gli straordinari meriti scientifici, piangono la sua scomparsa e avvertono il vuoto lasciato dalla sua dipartita.

Il Direttore

*To the readers*

This issue of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* contains the largest part of the papers delivered on the occasion of the Italo-Eritrean workshop *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects*, organized and held at the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

The scientific event fits into the programs of the Exchange and collaboration agreement signed on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 between the Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea (RDC) and the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” with the aim of establishing permanent ties between the two cultural and academic institutions, developing research projects and teaching activities for the preservation and promotion of the Eritrean national heritage. In this context, in the past years two conferences were held in Naples: *History and Language of Tigre-speaking peoples* (2008, proceedings published in 2010) and *Eritrean Studies: Past and Present* (2010, proceedings published in 2012); advanced courses for the study of Gəʼəz manuscripts were given in Asmara by Italian scholars; students from the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” went to Eritrea to complete their researches; Eritrean scholars visited the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” to give lessons and seminars in the field of Eritrean linguistics.

By gathering scholars from the two countries, giving them the opportunity to exchange experiences and projects about the preservation of the Eritrean cultural heritage, the workshop *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects* aimed once again at actualizing the scope and the purpose of the Italo-Eritrean Exchange and collaboration agreement. Therefore, for their presence on the occasion of that scientific event we have to be grateful to the authorities of both institutions: Azeb Tewelde, Director of the Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea, Giorgio Banti, Vice-Rector of the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” and Michele Bernardini, Head of the Department Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies of the same University. Equally, we want to express our most sincere thanks to the representatives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly Dr. Raffaele De Lutio, former Direttore Centrale per i Paesi dell’Africa Sub-Sahariana, who presented his greetings and wishes for a good work to the conference attendees.

The program of the conference included two introductory speeches by Azeb Tewolde and Gianfrancesco Lusini, and papers in History (Silvana Palma), Anthropology (Gianni Dore – Moreno Vergari), Archaeology (Andrea Manzo, Chiara Zazzaro), Philology (Massimo Villa), Arts (Lorenza Mazzei), Semitic Linguistics (Tesfay Tewolde, Saleh Mahmud Idris), Nilo-Saharan Linguistics (Gilda Ferrandino, Giorgio Banti and Graziano Savà).

With this issue the Editorial Board of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* is engaged in strengthening the scientific cooperation between Italian and Eritrean institutions, assuming that the cultural heritage is not only an identity-building factor, but a real occasion of development for countries like Eritrea holders of great artistic, archaeological, linguistic and historical treasures.

Sadly, we have to register a serious loss for the international scientific community, particularly for the African studies in the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”. Before the editing of this volume was completed, 23 March 2018, Prof. Rodolfo Fattovich passed away. Full professor of Archaeology of Ethiopia in our University for many years, a member of the Scientific committee of our journal, he was one of the best investigators and experts of the Horn of Africa’s proto-history and antiquity. In Naples Prof. Fattovich created of a high rank academic school, still living and active thanks to a team of scholars raised through his teaching. Members of the Editorial board of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* associate themselves to the regret of those who, in Italy as in the rest of the world, having appreciated his outstanding scientific merits, mourn his passing and feel the gap left by his demise.

The Director

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In copertina: villaggio di Ham (Šəmāzana, Akkälä Guzay, Eritrea), chiesa antica di ʾĪnda Maryam (foto A. Bausi)

# ASMARA IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL TIMES: ABOUT THE HIDDEN STORY OF A CAPITAL CITY

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## **Abstract**

The history of the Eritrean capital city doesn't begin in 19<sup>th</sup> cent., as commonly admitted. Evidences from archaeological excavations prove that the Asmara plateau, particularly the Sämbäl zone, hosted of a proto-urban culture already in early and mid-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. The remnants of ʼĒnda Maryam, the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cent. Christian church unhappily demolished by the Italians, indicate that Asmara was one of the main East African centers of Late Antiquity. In 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> cent. Gə‘əz hagiographic texts and Latin and Italian notes and itineraries help clarifying the historical picture of the Märäb Məllaš territories and the role of the political authority dwelling in the Eritrean capital city.

## **Keywords**

Modernist Asmara – Eritrean history – Sämbäl – ʼĒnda Maryam – ʼĒndəryas of Säffə’a – Alessandro Zorzi – Francesco Suriano

The international public opinion has become deeply interested in the cultural heritage of the Eritrean capital city at least since summer 2017, when UNESCO added Modernist Asmara in the World Heritage List. That important decision put in value the network of civil buildings several Italian architects designed during the fifty-year period of their stay in Eritrea, following the Italian occupying troops. The contemporary aspect of Asmara owes a lot to the handful of professionals and experimenters who created the shape and the myth of the ‘Piccola Roma’, as the dwellers proudly use to call their town until today. Yet, this positive circumstance shouldn't overshadow that the Eritrean cultural heritage is not confined to the beautiful buildings of Modernist Asmara, wanted by foreigners for their own plans (Denison,

Guang Yu Ren, Naizgy Gebremedhin 2003; Barrera, Triulzi, Gabriel Tzeggai 2008; Godio 2008: 107-84; Anderson 2015). Other essential facts deserve to be considered in order to reconstruct and understand the multifaceted history of the East African country, particularly of its capital city. It's a matter of archaeological, linguistic, literary, architectural, artistic expressions of past and present communities till now composing a country where many cultures of different origin live together.

The Eritrean town the Italians built in its modern shape and embellished with urban and architectural creations of high aesthetic level (but still inspired by the political projects of a foreign occupant) developed on a stratified territory, rich of historical records, subject to the human settlement and building activity for three thousand years. At the moment we don't know much about these aspects of the history of Asmara because they have been little studied till now, although they are part of the same sequence of events which brought to the Modernist town. Nevertheless, scientific investigations are casting new light on the most ancient history of the Eritrean capital city, refuting the prejudice of those who state that Asmara doesn't have a past beyond the period immediately preceding the Italian occupation, when *ras* Alula Īngəda moved his military headquarters to the north-eastern zone of the modern town, around 1884 (Pankhurst 1985: 112-15).

The oral traditions about the foundation and the development of Asmara reflect the claim of leading political groups to the possession of the Ḥamasen territories, and they refer to a typical phenomenon of synoecism among different clan groups. The core of the folk-tales relies on the stories created and transmitted by the clergymen of Īnda Maryam and the same etymology of Asmara is explained by the consolidation of four villages previously fighting among themselves. The women of the villages forced their men to unite, and this gave birth to the sentence *'arba'tä asmära*, meaning 'they (f.) harmonized the four ones' = 'the women harmonized the four villages' (Killion 1998: 94). Interestingly, the four clans involved in these traditional records are told to come from different regions of Eritrea and Təgray (Conti Rossini 1942: 162, text, 189-90 translation and commentary): the 'Asmə'a from the Saho-speaking group of 'Asawərta, namely from Akkälä Guzay (Kolmodin 1912 and 1916, § 23.8); the Sərənsər from the Təgre-speaking group of 'Ad Tawra or Sawra (or Şawra), namely from Sämḥar (Kolmodin 1912 and 1916, §§ 19.4, 32.12); the Şəlälä from the town of Wəqro, in the Şəra' province of

Təgray (Kolmodin 1912 and 1916, § 20.3); and the G<sup>w</sup>ərättom from the originally Beğə-speaking group of Bälāw (Kolmodin 1912 and 1916, § 17.2).

These traditions concerning the unification of clans could be dating to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> cent., when the Ottomans controlling the African coast of the Red Sea occupied the Eastern edge of the Eritrean highlands, indirectly helping the defensive consolidation of linguistic and political entities of the plateau. From that time on the Ḥamasen territories crossed by a pivotal caravan route became the scenario of military clashes among the Turks, the Ethiopian army and the troops of the *baḥr nāgaš* (d'Avray 1996: 1-6; Marrassini 2003: 597-607; Gori 2003: 627-32). Undisputedly, the residence of the 'ruler of the sea' (Chernetsov, Smidt 2003) was in the strategic center of Dəbarwa (Pankhurst 1982: 65-72, 2005), but repeatedly the lords of Ḥamasen were forced to leave the town in the hands of the rivals (Abir 1980: 125-27). In this context the Asmara plateau could have effectively played the role of a rally point where peoples and soldiers concentrated during Turkish or Ethiopian expeditions. Yet, apart from these inferences, what do we know about the most ancient phases of the history of Asmara? Can we date its foundation to a period well before the alleged synoecism told by the oral traditions?

Since the two excavation campaigns conducted in 1998-99 and 2001-02 by an Eritreo-American research team, the archaeological investigation of the Greater Asmara Area made remarkable steps forward (Schmidt, Curtis 2008). Particularly in the strategic southern zone of Sāmbāl, close to the modern Asmara airport, a unique settlement with stone-built structures (rectangular rooms made of stones fitted closely with mud mortar) has been recovered. Radiocarbon dating indicates that Sāmbāl was occupied during the early and mid-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. The artifacts, e.g. the 'bull's head' figurines, belong to the so-called 'Ona culture, a label created by exploiting a phonetic basis used by the Tigrinya-speaking communities of Ḥamasen, where the word 'ona means 'ruin' (cf. 'Ona Gudo, 'Ona Hašel, etc.). The interpretation of the archaeological evidence, particularly of the vessels made of burnished and red slipped ceramic (Curtis 2009), allowed scholars to connect the Asmara plateau and the 'Ona culture to the 1<sup>st</sup>-millennium surrounding cultural regions within an Afro-Arabian cultural complex, extending from Sudan (the C-Group culture) to the Red Sea coasts of Eritrea and Yemen (the Tihāma cultural complex). In this context the proto-urban culture of Sāmbāl, Asmara plateau and Ḥamasen played a crucial role within

an Afro-Arabian trade system fostered by well-established caravan routes (Schmidt, Curtis 2001).

In spite of the lack of systematic surveys, occasional findings allowed scholars to reconstruct a continuity of the human settlement in the Asmara area through the centuries (Godet 1980-82: 82-85). After Christianity was introduced in Eritrea and Ethiopia, the town played a prominent role within the East African centers of Late Antiquity. Religious buildings were erected, particularly ʿĪnda Maryam, probably dating from 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cent. (von Lüpke 1913; Fiaccadori 2005, 2006). Of the old church no more than forty carved wooden panels survive (Sauter 1969), once decorating the interior and now kept in the National Museum of Eritrea (Ricci 1983), because in 1920 the building, in the north-eastern zone of the modern town, was demolished and replaced by the new sanctuary Ernesto Gallo designed in an interesting Euro-Eritrean ‘hybrid’ style (Gallo 1920). In 1938 this too was superseded by the present-day church, to which Odoardo Cavagnari (the creator of the Asmara’s first urban plan), inspired by the previous model, gave a more typical Modernist aspect. The demolition of the old building, between 1916 and 1919, was a painful event, an act of negligence of the Italians toward the Eritrean heritage and a loss for the history of the Christian architecture of Late Antiquity. It is sufficient to recall the words written ten years later by Carlo Conti Rossini (1928: 227), expressing regret, if not disapproval, for that decision.

A precious information about the history of the church is contained in the 14<sup>th</sup>-cent. *Vita* of ʿĪndəryas of Säffə’a, a contemporary of Ewostatewos of Däbrä Šārabi (1274-1353), transmitted by a manuscript kept in Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini 84 (Strelcyn 1976: 216-20). In the passage *wəstä betä krəstiyan zä’əgzə’ətənä maryam zätəssämmäy asmära*, «in the church of Our Lady Mary which is called Asmära» (MS Conti Rossini 84, f. 8<sup>r</sup>, ll. 15-17), the author of the *gädl* makes the oldest written mention of the Christian sanctuary. This reference to the church of the Eritrean capital city, till now dedicated to the Virgin Mary, gives a clue for the etymology of the name of the town, through connecting the relative clause *zätəssämmäy asmära* to the words *wəstä betä krəstiyan*, namely «in the church ... which is called Asmära». Indeed, if the building dedicated to the Virgin Mary was known under the name of *Asmära*, this could be nothing but an abbreviated form of *Asmära läMaryam*, from which easily As-

*mära* (*Maryam*) is derived, namely «it is grateful (to Mary)», with the personal name implied. Later on, the abbreviated form *Asmära*, initially referred only to the church, could have been used to indicate the community and the houses established around it over time, that is the village in the north-eastern zone of the modern town, from which the modern Eritrean capital city originated (Lusini 2014: 532-33).

Most part of what we know about Middle Ages Asmara and Eritrea relies upon anonymous itineraries occasionally written down by monks and missionaries wanting to inform their brothers about the routes to reach remote African countries and lands. Fortuitously, some of them were copied in miscellaneous manuscripts, or were inserted in later books as isolated sheets of paper. Among them the Latin *Iter de Venetiis ad Indiam* (Jorga 1910; Crawford 1958: 28-39, *Iter F*) is transmitted by a manuscript of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence (MS Misc. II, IV, 109, cc. 87a-88b). The text is to be dated to the times of *aše Dawit II* (r. 1379/80–1413), according to an explicit reference: *Presto Johannes sedet in solio suo tempore hiemali in Chaamera [Amḥara]. Tempore autem estivo sedet et inhabitat in Sciahua [Šäwa]. Cui principi nomen proprium est David.* The *Iter* follows the route from Venice to Cairo by Rhodes, Cyprus, Ramlah (*Ramale*) and Jerusalem. Following first the Nile, then the desert route by ‘Aydab and S(a)wakin, the text eventually mentions the unknown place of Adam (probably around Tokar) and the Marya region: *Ab Ada(m) ad montem Maria iter per desertum x dierum. Scias te ad Ethiopiam pervenisse.* Then, the description of the Eritrean territories, in which Təgre-speaking communities are settled, goes on mentioning Gängärän, north of Kärän, on the way to Ḥalḥal: *A monte Maria ad Gianghari duorum dierum est iter, in quo inveniuntur hospitia: et pedester et equester, ut libet, ambulare potes.* This is the road Ewoṣtawos of Däbrä Šärabi followed from south to north in 1337 (Lusini 1993: 61-64), when the monk was forced to leave Ethiopia and Eritrea by the order of *aše ‘Amdä Šəyon* (r. 1314–1344) and *abunä Ya‘əqob* (r. 1337-1344). Here the mention of the Eritrean capital city comes: *A Gia(n)ghari ad Asmara(m) in diebus iiii ambulabis. In ipsa urbe moratur unus rex.* According to the style of an itinerary, the statement is concise, nevertheless it is important because of its reference both to the town and to the presence of a political authority described as a ‘king’ (*rex*). South of Asmara, it is unclear what was the route followed by the *Iter* to reach Aksum. Before *Chaxum* the place-names

*Tuoaita*, *Dubeb*, *Antisiment*, *Ligaxo(n)* and *Turat* have a phonetic aspect whose interpretation is doubtful, with the exception of the last one, which is Torat, the district of Təgray north of Aksum, close to the river Mārāb, where the monk Samu'el established a monastery known as Däbrä Halleluya in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> cent.

It is to be noted that the *Iter* mentions a second political authority south of Asmara, after a two-day journey, namely about 40 km: (*Ab*) *Asmara autem ad Tuoaita in duobus diebus pervenitur, ubi etiam alius habitat rex*. The localization of *Tuoaita* seems impossible on the basis of the phonetic correspondence. This can be a consequence of important changes in the linguistic landscape of the Eritrean highlands in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> cent. Assuming that the *Iter* was following the western roadway directed to 'Addi K<sup>w</sup>ala, *Tuoaita* could be Däbarwa. If the journey was oriented to 'Addi Qäyyəḥ along the eastern road, it should be rather around Wäqärti, between Asmara and Däqqämhare. Apparently the mention of Torat in Təgray makes the first solution preferable.

No less important information is in the 'Notes and Itineraries' written down by Alessandro Zorzi (Bausi, Fiaccadori 2014) and now kept in another manuscript of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence (MS Magliab. iii 84, ff. 25-58<sup>v</sup>). The Venetian nobleman Alessandro Zorzi, who was active between 1470 and 1538, used to gather information about lesser known African countries and lands from different oral sources, mostly monks coming back from their ecclesiastic services as missionaries. Probably he was preparing a geographical book, never published, in which he intended to report the widened geographical knowledge of his times. For our purposes the most valuable itinerary of Zorzi's collection is the one contained on ff. 33-34<sup>v</sup> (Crawford 1958: 55-63 commentary, 124-31, text, *Iter I*). The text can be dated to the same time of the previous one, because at the very beginning it reports the words *Axon: cita magna di Davit, prete Jani di Hetiopia* «Aksum, great city of Dawit (II), Prester John of Ethiopia». Interestingly, this text is oriented south-north and it provides a sort of return trip from Aksum to Cairo. The journey starts again north of Aksum: *Da Torat a Golti cita pur per pianure vano in giornate 2* «From Torat to G<sup>w</sup>əlti city over the plain they go in two days», and mentions again Torat, a district of Təgray, and the center of G<sup>w</sup>əlti, which is a rather generic designation indicating an allotted land (g<sup>w</sup>əlt, here according to the Tigrinya form g<sup>w</sup>əlti).

Then, the text contains the words: *Da Golti a Lelia che ve monestier di S. Tomaso grandissimo pur per pianure vi son frati 500, giornate 1* «From G<sup>w</sup>alti to Halleluya, where is a very great monastery of St Thomas of 500 monks, over the plain, 1 day». *Lelia* is Däbrä Halleluya, and the mention of Thomas the Apostle must be a reference to the *tabot* of the monastery church. Its position is confirmed by the following words: *Da Lelia a Aila cita pur per piani son giornate 2. Tra ditta Lelia et Aila passa il fiume Marab grande* «From Halleluya to Aylä city over the plain is 2 days. Between the said Halleluya and Aylä one crosses a river, the great Märäb». The description of the route is rather precise, because the place-name *Aila* refers to the Aylä Gundät district, in the Sära'e region between the Märäb and 'Addi K<sup>w</sup>ala. After *Sardale*, a province *che é dil Re di Seraue*, the text mentions first the town of *Berach*, then *Debda* and *Desbai*, separated by the river *Asque*. All these place-names can be hardly interpreted and identified with modern geographical terms. What is clear is the reference to a 'king' (*Re*) of Sära'e, which is the well-known medieval governor bringing the title of *səyyumä särawe* or 'aqaşən. The itinerary goes on mentioning *Devarva*, namely Däbarwa: *Da Devarva a Asmera, cita grande, che tra l'una e l'altra pasa il fiume Vrai; in fin qui il Re di Seraue soprascripto signoregia si va in giornate 1* «From Däbarwa to Asmara, a great city, between which towns passes the river *Vrai*; as far as here the aforementioned king of Sära'e bears rule; one goes in 1 day». In spite of the impossibility to identify each and every place-name, like the river *Vrai*, this itinerary confirms the road described by the *Iter*. The prominent role of Asmara clearly emerges from the use of the words 'great city', although the definition must be interpreted in a political sense more than as a reference to the size of the town.

The iter goes on stating: *Di poi se intra in la provincia dil Re di Masen, et la so cita é distante da Asmera, che si chiama Embandero, cita regal, giornate 10. Tra le qual passa un fiume grande si chiama Corar pur sempre si va per pianure* «Then one enters the province of the king of Ḥamasen, and his city, which is called Ĕmba Dərho, a royal city, is 10 days far from Asmara. Between these one crosses a great river called *Corar*, going ever by the plain». The 'king' here mentioned must be the political leader of Ḥamasen, the *kantiba*, even though identifying *Embandero* with Ĕmba Dərho, 12 km north of Asmara, makes difficult to explain why the itinerary says that the two towns are separated by a journey of ten days. A copying mistake could



have occurred and the real distance should have been just one day. Therefore, the following words: *Da Dembandero a Denefas cita per pianure, giornate 2* can be interpreted «from Īmba Dərho to ‘Addi Nāfas city over the plain, 2 days», so that the three main centers of the Asmara plateau are mentioned by the itinerary. Looking back to the *Iter* and the problem of *Tuoaita*, a ‘royal’ city about 40 km south of Asmara, possibly Dābarwa or a center around Wāqārti, we can deduce that the political situation of 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> cent. Eritrea was rather complex for the presence of a net of urban centers, from where different local authorities were controlling the surrounding territories.

To the times of *aše Zār’a Ya’əqob* (r. 1434-68) a new mention of Asmara in Gə‘əz sources can be dated. The well-known manuscript of the British Library, London, BrM Or. 481, dated to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> cent. (Wright 1877: 1-6, no. 2; cf. Kropp 1989-90), contains a statement of the king about the lands of Eritrea (f. 208<sup>r</sup>) where the two main monasteries of the Mārāb Məllaš provinces should be preaching the orthodox faith (Conti Rossini 1921-23). The part of Dābrā Maryam (*wākəflomu lādäbrä maryam*) is first the Särawe, then Bäšerwaget, Baḥrā Maryam, Durbeta Īḥəya, Bägidda, Gäm‘idda, Ḥazo, Däsāmo, Tāro‘a, Asawərta, the land of Barya which is Dubani (*mədrä barya zādubani*) and the two Marya (*kəl’e marya*). The part of Dābrā Bizan (*wākəflomuhi lādäbrä bizän*) is first the Ḥamasen, then Ḥəmbərt, Asmära, Sāḥart, Wāqārt, Baḥrā Amba, Durbeta Abrəham and Wakito. The text is dated to the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of Zār’a Ya’əqob’s reign, namely 1456-57. At that time, from the king’s perspective the main towns of Ḥamasen were Asmara and Ḥəmbərti, 28 km west of the capital city, where a church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Ḥəmbərti Maryam).

The data contained in these sources can be integrated with the account of the Franciscan [Giovanni] Battista [Brocchi] da Imola (Crawford 1958: 40-54, *Iter S*). His story is told by Francesco Suriano (Golubovich 1900: 84-87), a Franciscan too, in the *Itinerario de Hierusalem, overo dele parte Orientale*, known as the *Trattato di Terra Santa*. The mission to Africa is dated to 1480-82. This report starts from Cairo and describes first the travel through Egypt, then the arrival of the missionaries in the Eritrean territories. Here Asmara is not mentioned, but two Eritrean authorities are recorded: *un Signor de Abassini chiamato Syonsirave*, who is clearly the *səyyumä särawe*, and *un altro Signore chiamato Aschadi*. Most probably the *Syonsirave* is

Bølen Sägäd, *aqaşən* del Sära'e, a well-known historical figure mentioned in the *Psalter* transmitted by the manuscript Paris, BnF Abb. 105, dated 1476/77 (Conti Rossini 1914: 45-21, no. 19). The identification of *Aschadi* with Asgäde, the ancestor of the three Təgre-speaking groups of Ḥabab, 'Ad Təkles and 'Ad Təmaryam, collectively called Bet Asgäde, is tempting (Littmann 1910*a*: 279-81, 1910*b*: 337-38; Conti Rossini 1913; Pollera 1935: 192-95; Miran 2003). According to the oral traditions, Asgäde originated from Akkälä Guzay, in the community of Şän'adäglä, based in and around Sägänäyti. Then he gathered his family and migrated northwards, first in the Ḥamasen village of 'Addi Näfas, then further north, over the Rora Baqla, in the Saḥəl region. Relying upon the Italian source, one can infer that Asgäde is a historical figure and that he predates the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> cent. (Crawford 1955 = 1958: 205-11 [Asgade and the Habab tribe]; d'Avray 1996: 6-10). The mission of Battista da Imola met him somewhere in Akkälä Guzay or in Ḥamasen, during the transfer of his clan, and the place where he used to live could be *Embandero* or *Denefas* of Zorzi's itinerary.

To conclude this synthetic presentation of facts, one has to admit that the amount and interweaving of archaeological, linguistic, philological and literary data referring to the ancient and medieval history of Asmara and Ḥamasen is still waiting for a comprehensive approach. A reassessment of the traditional sources and a close study of the place-names of the Greater Asmara Area would help clarifying the language stratification through the centuries. A combination of the geographical information displayed by the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> cent. European notes and itineraries and the data transmitted by Eritrean manuscripts could improve our understanding of the political history of the Märab Məllaş territories. Archaeological excavations, particularly in the areas already touched by previous surveys, will open new perspectives for the history of Asmara before the Italians. When the 'Piccola Roma' didn't exist yet, in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC as well as in the Late Antiquity, up to the Middle Ages, the Eritrean town was the political center of the Ḥamasen, within a cultural circuit already including the Roras, the *käbäsa*, and all the peoples dwelling there.

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