

BOOK REVIEWS

Alessandra Avanzini, *By land and by sea. A history of South Arabia before Islam recounted from inscriptions* (Arabia Antica 10). «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, Roma 2016, 376 pp. ISBN 978-88-913-1110-8.

La corretta percezione degli eventi che hanno interessato l'Arabia meridionale tra la neoformazione statale degl'inizi dell'Età del Ferro, all'alba del I millennio a.C., e la fulminea diffusione dell'islām su tutta la Penisola, nella prima metà del VII sec., è stata a lungo condizionata dalla cronica marginalità degli studi sudarabici in rapporto a quelli sul resto del Vicino Oriente Antico. Tra i motivi che possono contribuire a spiegare le ragioni di un certo disinteresse degli orientalisti del passato per la frontiera meridionale del loro orizzonte di studi possiamo annoverare anche la mancanza di opere di sintesi capaci di dedurre da una documentazione epigrafica apparentemente piatta e ripetitiva un convincente quadro storico, con tutta la sua complessa articolazione geografica e culturale. A colmare la lacuna interviene ora il volume di Alessandra Avanzini, concepito e scritto «to refer students to an up-to-date manual on the history of the kingdoms of South Arabia» (p. 11), nella consapevolezza che quello dell'Arabia meridionale preislamica «is one of the few cases, maybe the only case in the ancient world, where a culture and its history may be reconstructed on the basis (almost exclusively) of an epigraphic *corpus*» (p. 13). Non a caso all'autrice si deve anche l'avvio e lo sviluppo di un progetto di sistematica raccolta e pubblicazione *online* delle iscrizioni sudaraboliche, che ha portato alla creazione dell'archivio digitale DASI (Digital Archive for the Study of Pre-islamic Arabian Inscriptions = <http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it>), divenuto ormai un punto di riferimento essenziale per gli studi sullo Yemen preislamico.

Le finalità didattiche e la vocazione manualistica del volume si manifestano fin dal capitolo iniziale, dedicato all'illustrazione dei fondamenti della disciplina (pp. 17-77). In particolare, la definizione delle diverse tipologie epigrafiche e l'analisi non solo dei loro aspetti funzionali, ma anche dei loro intrinseci caratteri testuali, permettono all'autrice di evidenziare importanti elementi narrativi e linguistici propri dei vari gruppi

di iscrizioni (commemorative, dedicatorie, legali) e di dedurre alcune conseguenze di carattere storico e ideologico. Valga per tutti il caso suggestivo delle epigrafi apposte sulle mura delle due principali città del Regno di Maʿīn, che trasmettono testi dettati dai capi delle famiglie dominanti e dei vari gruppi tribali per ricordare la costruzione e il restauro di questa o quella parte della cinta: la presenza di iscrizioni emanate da diversi centri di potere locale, che si affiancano le une alle altre senza apparente conflitto, appare mirata a comunicare l'idea cruciale di un alto grado di coesione politico-sociale vigente all'interno del Regno (pp. 27-28).

L'esposizione dei dati relativi alla storia del Regno di Saba' nel VII sec. a.C. ha comportato necessariamente l'inserimento di un paragrafo dedicato alle iscrizioni sudarabiche d'Etiopia (pp. 127-130). Assumendo come base il dato linguistico, per cui in Etiopia «a local writing school was formed with textual elements that differ from those of Southern Arabia» (p. 130), l'autrice collega la loro presenza al movimento espansivo sabeo che trova in un sovrano come Karib'il Watar il suo esponente meglio documentato, ma allo stesso tempo riconosce che «the arrival of populations from Saba' in Ethiopia occurred well before the formation of the kingdom of Da'amat and of its epigraphic documentation» (*ibidem*).

Proprio riguardo al processo formativo dell'organismo politico di Da'amat, vistosamente composto da «two contrasting elements: “the east, the Sabaeans, the men with pale skin” on the one hand, and “the west, the indigenous, the men with dark skin” on the other» (*ibidem*), ci si può spingere ancora più avanti nell'interpretazione dei dati. Se confrontata con la durata complessiva della presenza 'sabea' in Etiopia, i cui inizi risalgono almeno alla fine dell'VIII sec. a.C., la vita di Da'amat sembra essere stata piuttosto breve, e le manifestazioni della sua cultura materiale e artistica (frutto di un ambizioso progetto politico) «should be regarded as resulting from the adoption of South Arabian traits by a basically local elite, and can be explained by the leading political and economic role played by the kingdom of Saba in the southern Red Sea around the mid-first millennium BC» (A. Manzo, *Capra nubiana in Berbere Sauce?, African Archaeological Review* 26, 2009, 291-303: 300). Da'amat, dunque, ci appare sempre più come un episodio – il più rilevante per noi perché quello meglio documentato – di una storia più lunga, caratterizzata dalla coesistenza tra componenti di diversa origine culturale, con una *leadership* locale fortemente

influenzata dal modello sudarabico trasmesso dagli *emigrés* sabei da tempo attivi sul suolo africano.

Come noto, tra gli elementi d'ispirazione e di ascendenza sabea adottati dai sovrani di Da'amat vi è anche il titolo di *mukarrib* (o forse dovremmo dire *makrūb*), al quale l'autrice dedica opportunamente un importante paragrafo, che sgombra definitivamente il campo da interpretazioni scorrette dei sostenitori della cronologia 'corta' (pp. 80-83). Possiamo ragionevolmente ammettere che il consapevole ricorso a un titolo 'sovranazionale' (*mkrb d'mt wsb*) si riferisca alla volontà di esprimere il carattere 'plurale' della monarchia di Da'amat, i cui sovrani si presentarono come garanti della convivenza fra componenti di diversa origine in un contesto autenticamente 'etio-sabeo' (G. Lusini, *The costs of the linguistic transitions: traces of disappeared languages in Ethiopia*, in I. Micheli ed., *Cultural and Linguistic Transition explored. Proceedings of the ATrA closing workshop. Trieste, May 25-26, 2016*, EUT, Trieste 2017, 264-273: 266).

La lettura del volume di Alessandra Avanzini fornisce una grande quantità di dati e altrettanti spunti di riflessione per meglio comprendere il ruolo essenziale svolto dallo Yemen preislamico nei 1500 anni della sua storia. Ma soprattutto è la felice modalità narrativo-espositiva adottata dall'autrice, consistente nel 'lasciar parlare' le iscrizioni, a caratterizzare positivamente questo libro, che in alcune parti sa essere anche avvincente, come nel 'racconto' delle vicende che, a partire dalla metà del IV sec., portarono il gruppo dirigente di Ḥimyar ad abbandonare i culti animistici tradizionali e ad abbracciare il monoteismo giudaizzante, fino allo 'scontro finale' con il sovrano cristiano di Aksum (pp. 243-258).

Una menzione doverosa merita anche l'Appendice (pp. 261-304), contenente testo, traduzione e commento delle due iscrizioni RES 3945 e RES 3946, le cui narrazioni compendiano le gesta compiute agli inizi del VII sec. a.C. da Karib'il Watar (pp. 111-115): questa sezione finale del libro fornisce un saggio della nuova fatica intellettuale dell'autrice, da lei stessa annunciata come prossima (p. 11) e costituita da un volume che presenterà a un pubblico più ampio una selezione significativa di iscrizioni sudarabiche antiche.

Dovendo individuare una tematica che permetta da sola di collegare tutti gli argomenti di soggetto epigrafico, linguistico e storico del libro, non vi è

dubbio che essa potrebbe essere facilmente individuata nella costante vocazione mercantile dei gruppi dirigenti degli antichi Regni sudarabici. E infatti, la felice scelta del titolo del volume si riferisce all'espressione riportata da un'iscrizione qatabanica per indicare il commercio a lunga distanza 'per terra e per mare' (*bybs^ln wbħrn*), che rese possibile la fioritura dei Regni sudarabici. Il lettore interessato a questa suggestiva pagina di storia del Vicino Oriente Antico troverà nel volume di Alessandra Avanzini una guida aggiornata e una base rigorosa per l'approfondimento delle proprie conoscenze.

Gianfrancesco Lusini

Judith McKenzie, Francis Watson, *The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia* (Manar al-Athar Monograph 3). Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies, Oxford 2016, 264 pp., 52 pl. ISBN 978-0-9954946-0-2.

«Il riconoscimento dell'appartenenza dell'«Etiopia storica» – oggi ricompresa nei confini dei due stati sovrani di Etiopia ed Eritrea, ma per secoli regione unitaria dell'Oriente cristiano – all'area del Mediterraneo», namely «la collocazione dell'Etiopia – intesa nel senso ora precisato – entro l'alveo della civiltà mediterranea» (A. Bausi, *La catalogazione come base della ricerca. Il caso dell'Etiopia*, in B. Cenni *et al.* eds., *Zenit e Nadir II. I manoscritti dell'area del Mediterraneo: la catalogazione come base della ricerca. Atti del Seminario Internazionale. Montepulciano, 6-8- luglio 2007*, Thesan & Turan, Montepulciano 2014, 87-108: 87): these programmatic statements efficaciously express an essential point of view shared by the scholars at least since the last quarter of the 20th century. Those who are engaged in the study of the Ethiopian past are well aware that the centuries when the Kingdom of Aksum raised and grew up as a regional power have been decisive for the development of the Gə'əz literary tradition. The direct and intense contact of Aksum with the greater intellectual centers of the Mediterranean world, particularly after the conversion of kings and political leaders to Christianity (from mid-4th to mid-7th century), fostered the

establishment of a Hellenized cultural elite which took care of creating and updating the Ethiopian literary heritage for three hundred years at least.

A great difficulty in the study of this literary development is that all the comparative documents come from a historical phase subsequent to the Aksumite age, and that they are separated from the times of their composition by a gap of almost half a millennium. In the eyes of modern scholars, things appear radically changed at the end of this long temporal caesura. Starting at least from the reign of the Zag^we (1137-1270), the new cultural elite achieved a quasi-total re-invention of Late Antique facts and institutions, and this re-worked tradition substituted for the direct knowledge of the past. In the Middle Ages, once every effective link with the Aksumite legacy had been lost, the leading group of Ethiopia's Christian kingdom promoted the re-reading and the re-writing of the works of its own literary tradition in light of the textual updates made in the *scriptoria* of Copto-Arabic Egypt. The translations from Arabic into Gə'əz produced new archetypes and consequently new traditions completely independent from those which could be traced back to Late Antiquity. Reasonably, this development can be considered as mainly responsible for the impoverishment and the progressive disappearance of most of the Late Antique textual traditions and *a fortiori* of the related manuscripts. This explains why it is so difficult to document directly the literary activity of Aksumite times. Simultaneously, this situation justifies the desire of each and every scholar to identify, in the sea of medieval literary traditions, some remnants of the oldest phase, that of the translations from Greek, achieved while Greek was the language of everyday life in most parts of the Christian Mediterranean world.

Within this historical and cultural framework it is possible to appraise the inestimable value of the three Ēnda Abba Gärīma gospel books, being not only the oldest Ethiopian manuscripts ever found, but also an inexhaustible source of information about literary activity in Aksum after the spread of Christianity between the 5th and 7th centuries. The publication of this precious volume – the first monograph ever written about the Gärīma gospel books – is a cultural event which goes well beyond the limits of Ethiopian studies, representing a landmark in the research of both the early Ethiopian gospel books and the illustration of the rare Christian codices which date back to Late Antiquity.

The starting point for the scientific project which resulted in the publication of this book was the November 2013 conference *Ethiopia and the Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: the Garima Gospels in Context*, organized in Oxford by Jacques Mercier and the Ethiopian Heritage Fund. On that occasion, the meeting of two specialists from different disciplines, art history (Judith McKenzie) and New Testament studies (Francis Watson), made possible a joint program leading to the comprehensive study of the illustrations contained in the three most ancient Ethiopian codices, *ጌና ልባ ገላሳ I* and *ጌና ልባ ገላሳ II-III* (two codices of different ages bound together).

There are a number of philological and codicological problems posed by these invaluable Gəʿəz manuscripts. As reflected by the wide bibliography about them, the scholarship pivots around the central questions of reconstructing their structure and specifying their age. It is a well-known fact that at a certain stage of their transmission the three codices entered a critical phase of preservation, and that consequently some parts were mixed up and bound together in a chaotic and incorrect manner. For almost fifty years the relationship between the illustrated pages and each of the three manuscripts was somehow only imagined by scholars. Based on the extensive photographic documentation taken by Michael Gervers in 2005-2006, the book offers the most accurate and accessible documentation on the iconographic part of the three codices, proposing for the first time a reasonable and convincing association between manuscripts and visuals. Moreover, in the long lasting debate concerning the possibility of dating at least two of the three manuscripts to the time of Aksum, a turning-point was reached through radio-carbon testing, which allowed the illustrations of two of the three codices to be assigned to a period very close to the centuries when the translation of the gospel books from Greek to Gəʿəz was done: 330-650 for *ጌና ልባ ገላሳ III*, 530-660 for *ጌና ልባ ገላሳ I*. Once an early dating for the illustrations of the two older codices was accepted, puzzling and fascinating questions remained, particularly that of the origin of the artistic motifs (decorations and pictures) and their place of production, and the matter of dating the textual part of the three gospel books.

After a synthesis of the rich and cosmopolitan culture of the Kingdom of Aksum (pp. 11-30), the first section of the book deals with the history of the research about the Gärīma gospel books (pp. 31-41). Significantly, outside

Ethiopia initial information about the three codices dates back to Beatrice Playne, the British painter and art historian who played a significant role in broadening European knowledge of Ethiopia's artistic culture. After her, Jules Leroy and Claude Lepage began the scientific study of the illustrations, Donald Davies and Marilyn Heldman justified the early dating of the manuscripts on paleographic and art historical analyses, William Macomber and Rochus Zuurmond analyzed the codicological and philological value of the codices, Alessandro Bausi marked a decisive progress toward the reconstruction of the order of canon tables and decorated pages, and Jacques Mercier first proposed an absolute dating for some of the illuminated pages. It is to be emphasized that several decades went by before the Gärima gospel books aroused scholarly interest and that this did not happen before the 2005-2006 restoration and the aforementioned conference in 2013. The first part of the book ends with the chapter devoted to the description of the codices, of their material consistency and general layout, their bindings and covers (pp. 43-66), with special attention given to «determining which illuminated pages belong to which manuscript» (pp. 46-59). This is the true core of the book and one can say that from now on scholars have available a clear reconstruction of the sequence of texts in *Ἐnda Abba Gärima I, II and III*, of the folios containing full-page illustrations, and of the frames of the canon tables (cf. pp. 63-66 and the plates 1-52 between pp. 144-145).

The conclusions of the second part of the book, containing the comparative art-historical analysis, are momentous: the evangelists in *Abba Gärima III* (pp. 67-82), portrayed with two fingers of the right hand stretched out, either en face and standing with a book in their left hand, or in profile and sitting in front of a lectern, are «the earliest surviving set of author portrait frontispieces in a gospel book» (p. 82); the illuminated frames (pp. 83-116) of, «*Abba Garima I, II and III* each represent the work of artists trained in a different “school”» (p. 116); the interpretation of the building depicted in *Abba Garima I and III* (121-144) and placed after the canon tables, as tholoi in the garden of Paradise, surrounded by flowers and birds, is made possible through a comparison of these illustrations with those of later Armenian gospel books. These well-founded statements, together with the first detailed study of the plants, animals and architectural elements depicted, confirm the premises, namely that in Aksumite times luxury gospel books could have been produced in Ethiopia and that their artists were

familiar with the local context. Particularly in Abba Gärima III, the decoration «was not simply copied from foreign prototypes», but «there was also some creativity by the artist, who was well familiar with features of the Ethiopian natural and built environments» (p. 63).

With the third part of the book, dealing with the relationship between textual and visual elements, a different argument is confronted. Decorations in the first folios of all three manuscripts (arches and columns with bases and capitals) are but frames containing introductory texts, such as the Eusebian canon tables, the pseudo-Ammonian preface *bä'əntä ḥəbrätä qalat zäqəddusan arba'əttu wängelat* (On the agreement of the words of the four holy four gospels), and the *Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus*. Through the canon tables and their sophisticated frames (pp. 145-186) in the Gärima gospel books, one can identify «the development of an impressive decorative tradition of which the Garima books are among the finest and earliest examples», and they «provide evidence of the original Eusebian design, in which the emphasis was placed on function more than visual appeal» (p. 149). The portraits of the evangelists in Abba Gärima III (pp. 187-203), «a carefully designed set, with close correspondences between Matthew and Luke, and between Mark and John» (p. 187), are closely related to the *kephalaia*, a second system of enumeration integrating the Eusebian canon tables. A final chapter deals with the textual evidence for the early dating of the Gärima gospel books (pp. 205-209).

Appendices provide precious instruments for a better understanding of the arguments, particularly the foliation and content of all three manuscripts (pp. 211-216). About the text and translation of the *Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus*, one may point out that both must be updated (pp. 221-227), since a text-critical edition of the short text, with a number of learned comments, has been published by A. Bausi, *La versione etiopica della Epistola di Eusebio a Carpiano*, in R. Zarzeczny ed., *Aethiopia fortitudo ejus. Studi in onore di Monsignor Osvaldo Raineri in occasione del suo 80° compleanno* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 298). Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Roma 2015, 107-135.

Further studies will be carried out on these literary monuments of Early Christian Mediterranean culture, particularly concerning the investigation of their materiality, with the help of natural sciences such as physics and chemistry, but this wonderful publication provides a very solid basis for the progress of

scientific research. The authors should be thanked for their great and productive endeavor.

Gianfrancesco Lusini

Michela Gaudiello, Paul A. Yule, *Mifsaṣ Baḥri: a Late Aksumite Frontier Community in the Mountains of Southern Tigray. Survey, Excavation and Analysis, 2013-16* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 2839). BAR Publishing, Oxford 2017, 279 pp. ISBN 978-1-4073-1579-9.

The book, published under the auspices of the Mekelle University and of the Universität Heidelberg, presents the results of a joint Ethiopian and German archaeological research project in the region of the lake Ḥašāngä, in the homonym *ṭabiya*, on the southern fringes of the regional State of Tigray, not far from the modern centers of Korem and Alamata. The research project was launched by S. Wenig and P. Yule in 2013 and continued in the following years with the involvement of M. Gaudiello. It consisted both of a survey and of a more extensive excavation at Mifsaṣ Baḥri 001, a site already known since a long time, first recorded by the French traveler and explorer Théophile Lefebvre (see pp. 65-66, and not Lefèbvre as spelt there), and more recently brought to the attention of the scholars and local Authorities by Tekle Hagos, who also conducted there a small scale excavation in 2001.

The book includes 13 chapters and a bibliography. The first chapter by P.A. Yule, C. Hilbrig and M. Hazarika consists of the description of the excavations conducted at Mifsaṣ Baḥri 001. Chapter 2 is divided into two sections: a site gazetteer of the reconnaissance in the broad region of the lake Ḥašāngä conducted in 2014 by B. Gabriel, Yohannes Gebre Selassie and Hiruy Daniel, and the report by B. Gabriel and P.A. Yule of a more detailed survey around the main site, always conducted in 2014. Chapter 3 is also divided into two sections, both by A. Mortimer: the first one is devoted to the archaeological survey conducted in 2015 and the second one consists of the gazetteer of the sites recorded in 2015. The fourth chapter, by W.G.C. Smidt, deals with the history of the cartography on the region of Lake Ḥašāngä in the 19th century, with some references to local traditional

toponyms. Chapter 5, by M. Raith, consists of a brief description of result of analysis of the scoria, samples of volcanic rocks from the site Mifsas Bahri 001. Chapter 6 is again divided into two parts, the first one on the small finds by P.A. Yule, and the second one on the “small lithic finds” (in fact, the flaked lithic artefacts) always from Mifsas Bahri 001 by M. Hazarika and Tsehay Terefe. Chapter 7, by M. Gaudiello, deals with the pottery collected both in the excavations conducted at Mifsas Bahri 001 and from the survey, with a special focus on the wares and typology in the second part of the chapter. Chapter 8 is devoted to the human skeletal remains studied by S. Partheil. In chapter 9, the architecture of the structure investigated at Mifsas Bahri 001 and the architectural sculpture are discussed by P.A. Yule and M. Gaudiello. The stratigraphy and chronology are the subject of chapter 10 by C. Hilbrig and P.A. Yule. Chapter 11 is a very short contribution on the traditional agricultural terminology in the area of Mifsas Bahri. Chapter 12 deals with the oral traditions of the region of Ḥašängä. Finally, in chapter 13, P.A. Yule draws his conclusions. A part of the illustrations are printed in the book and part are available in the online image repository *heidICON* of the Universität Heidelberg. This is a very appropriate solution, not only because it allows the reader to access a very large number of illustrations, impossible to be all included in the printed publication itself, but also because the quality of the printed figures is sometimes bad, like e.g. in the case of the photos in the site gazetteer of the 2015 survey (pp. 53-60), which are too small to be useful.

It should be stressed since the very beginning that the investigated region was virtually unknown from the archaeological point of view before the Ethio-German research project started and this final report of the project throws for the first time some light on its earliest history. Moreover, the nature of the structure brought to light at Mifsas Bahri 001, a church, most likely built in the 7th century AD and certainly of Aksumite type from the architectural point of view, as shown by the stepped basement and the indented walls should also be stressed. Actually this church of Aksumite type, dating to what is considered as the end of the Aksumite period in the central and eastern Tigray and Agame, is ca. 60 km south of the southernmost Aksumite site known so far. Just these preliminary remarks show the relevance of the results of this research project and the happy intuition by S. Wenig and P.A. Yule of selecting for their research a region

far away from the core areas of the Aksumite culture and from the already known main archaeological regions of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Most likely, we are on the inner southern fringes of the Aksumite area, as it was in the 7th century AD, and the edification of a church there, given the tight ties between church and state already evident in Aksumite times, should be regarded a sign of the presence of the state. As far as the associated material culture is concerned, this point is also highlighted by the Ayla-Aqaba ware and by the Aksumite painted pottery occurring at the site (see below), as both classes of materials can be considered as markers of the involvement of this internal area in regional and long-distance distribution and/or exchange networks, perhaps at least partially commanded by the state, as emerges from the well known description of an Aksumite archon trading with the Agäw in the Christian Topography by Cosmas Indicopleustes (§ II, 56, see W. Wolska-Conus, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes*, Paris 1968-1973, vol. 1, 368-369). An insight on the kind of process which may have led to the edification of the church of Mifsas Bahri 001 in Aksumite times and on its political meaning is perhaps given in chapter 12, when a second more recent forced Christianisation of the region of Ḥašängä, at that time inhabited by Muslim groups, ordered by Yoḥannēs IV and precisely related to the construction of a church there is described (pp. 270-271). In general, a further relevant aspect is that the site, if its characteristics, location and chronology are considered, should be also regarded as a link in space and time between the Aksumite core areas in the North and the southern Medieval successors of the Aksumite kingdom, a point in the process of shift of the axis of the state to the South which was nevertheless characterized by a strong cultural continuity (see e.g. D.W. Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation. Aksum & the Northern Horn 1000 BC-AD 1300*, Woodbridge, Suffolk – Rochester, New York, 210-211, 227-229). As a matter of fact, this trajectory was so far mostly theoretically outlined, with very few real benchmarks on the ground. These remarks and sparse thoughts are enough to show clearly the relevance of this project and consequently of its final report for the archaeology and history of the whole Horn of Africa and in particular for the study of the dynamics center periphery of the states in the region and we should acknowledge the authors for that.

It should be remarked that the book suffers from some pitfalls. Looking at the table of contents it is difficult to understand why the chapters devoted to

ethno-history (4, 11 and 12) are separated. Moreover, it is a true pity that the surveys of 2015 and 2016 were published separately in chapters 2 and 3 and that they did not result in a more articulated discussion of the settlement pattern in the region, to be also related to the environmental changes outlined in the conclusions thanks to the crucial contribution to the project by Baldur Gabriel (see e.g. also pp. 29-30 devoted to the dynamics of the levels of the lake). Also the description of the scoria from Mifsas Bahri 001 in chapter 5, actually a couple of samples of the volcanic stones used as building material of the church, could be more coherently associated with chapter 9, on the architecture and the architectural sculpture of the same structure. Moreover, the chapters on the excavation of Mifsas Bahri 001, on the architecture of the structure brought to light there, the finds, the stratigraphy and periodization could have been more coherently grouped together.

Despite this, the general sequence of the site of Mifsas Bahri 001, characterized by two main architectural phases, the first one represented by the edification of the church in the 7th century and its use for ca. 100 hundred years, the second by an unspecified squatter reuse of the building, and by a third phase, represented by a later use of the spot as a cemetery, as emerging from chapters 1 (p. 3), 10 (p. 269) and again summarized in the conclusions (p. 272), is certainly clearly expressed and convincing in general terms. Nevertheless, some unsolved problems remain. Are truly all the graves several centuries later of the church? If so why the cemetery does not overlaps more extensively over the structure of the church which had to be completely ruined at the time of the funerary use of the spot? The discovery of several scattered and isolated human bones in the excavated sectors could result from a more prolonged funerary use of the area or is only related to later and also very recent disturbances aimed the collecting and reusing architectural elements from the ruined church?

Moreover, it should be remarked that the paleoenvironmental reconstruction could have greatly benefited from the involvement in the team of an archaeozoologist and a paleoethnobotanist, whose contribution could have been also crucial to confirm and understand better the evidence of food preparation and consumption around the church pointed out by the pottery, with special reference to the possible occurrence of trays used to bake *injera* (see p. 107 and again pp. 109, 146-147). In this perspective, it is also lamentable that the open areas and the possible structures around the church where these activities may have taken place were not extensively investigated, because this may have

provided elements on the possible relevance of food sharing in the social life of communities of late Aksumite and Medieval times of this region. Always dealing with the pottery, the comparative remarks with other sites of central and eastern Tigray and Agame are of course the only possible in the present situation of the archaeological exploration of the Country, but it should be stressed that, as also remarked by P.A. Yule (p. 273), they should be regarded very cautiously because of the distance in space and because a different ceramic regional tradition can be expected at Mifsas Bahri and environs. Unfortunately, this regional tradition, possibly much older than the church brought to light at Mifsas Bahri 001 itself, as suggested by some materials from the surveyed sites (see the remarks by M. Gaudiello at p. 126 and – although indeed less convincing – at pp. 131-133), is still obscure and only limited insights into its distinctive traits were provided in the present publications. Therefore, the only reliable links with the ceramic sequences of the archaeologically better known regions of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea are represented by the sherds of painted Aksumite pottery, very popular in the late Aksumite sites of Agame like Mätära and the ones of the region of Addigrat (see pp. 131, 142), and the fragments of Ayla-Aqaba ware, widely occurring in the whole Aksumite area (pp. 108-188 *passim*). As previously stressed, the identification of these two ceramic classes is extremely relevant and not just from the chronological point of view. Moreover, it should be remarked that the stratigraphic position of each find and consequently the association between finds and structures is not always so clear in the publication, as only the layers, i.e. the depth of the finds below the present surface is often specified and not the units of stratigraphy or the strata where they were collected (see e.g. the list of the flaked lithics at pp. 88-104). Finally, I think that the idea that the establishment of a church on the southern fringes of the Aksumite kingdom in the 7th century AD could be related to a direct Byzantine input (p. 272) is not very likely, as Mifsas Bahri is far away from the Red Sea where Byzantine strategic interests could be traced, and moreover such a kind of Byzantine intervention can be more easily imagined in the 6th century, when the competition with the Sasanians for the control of the southern Red Sea reached its climax, but not any more in the 7th century, when the Byzantines were facing the Arab expansion.

A minor pitfall at p. 121: no need to suggest that Late Aksumite and Post-Aksumite sherds intruded in the graves in “sub-recent time”, as if the graves

were cut in the earlier Late Aksumite and Post-Aksumite strata, their fillings were obviously containing earlier materials.

In the light of what was said, it is a true pity that the research project at Mifsas Bahri and its environs is ended because, as also stressed by P.A. Yule (p. 273), certainly a lot remains to do there. In conclusions, this book, whose reading is highly recommended, has the big merit of bringing this very promising area to the attention of the scholars. The “local flavor” rightly stressed by P.A. Yule in the conclusions (p. 271) deserves further investigations, and the continuation of the archaeological exploration of the region, the establishment of a complete regional cultural sequence, also including the periods preceding the Late Aksumite phase, promise to add a lot to our understanding of the relations between Aksum and more inner regions to the South of its core area, to throw some light on the so far obscure history of these regions, on the transition from Aksumite to Medieval times and on the complex transformations the state underwent in that phase.

Andrea Manzo

Gérard Colin, *Saints fondateurs du Christianisme éthiopien. Frumentius, Garimā, Takla-Hāymānot et Ēwoṣṭātēwos* (Bibliothèque de l’Orient chrétien). Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2017, XCVI + 240 pp. ISBN 978-2-251-44632-5.

L’attuale conoscenza dell’agiografia etiopica, genere tra i più fecondi nel panorama della produzione letteraria in gə‘əz, è senza dubbio grandemente tributaria delle energie profuse negli ultimi trent’anni da Gérard Colin. A lui si deve, oltre che il completamento dell’edizione del Sinassario, impresa avviata più di un secolo fa da Ignazio Guidi, la pubblicazione di numerose *Vite* di santi all’interno delle due maggiori collane di testi etiopici, il *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* e la *Patrologia Orientalis*. Il proposito di tale attività editoriale è indicato nel volume stesso: «l’objectif prioritaire [degli attuali studi filologici, in particolare agiografici] est de réaliser l’édition exhaustive des textes, de compléter l’analyse de leurs variantes, de reconnaître et classer les diverses versions et d’identifier les sources» (pp. XLII-XLIII).

È invece all'interno di un diverso orizzonte che si muove il volume qui recensito. In esso viene presentato, in traduzione francese, il dossier agiografico di quattro 'santi fondatori' del cristianesimo etiopico in altrettanti momenti cardinali della storia religiosa del paese. 'Fondateur' è infatti non solo Frumenzio, responsabile nel IV sec. della conversione del re aksumita e nominato primo metropolita del paese dal patriarca alessandrino Atanasio, ma anche Gärima (V sec.), in quanto rappresentante di quei leggendari gruppi di missionari di origine straniera, tra cui i 'Nove Santi', che presiedettero alla cosiddetta 'seconda cristianizzazione' del paese e alla fondazione delle più antiche istituzioni monastiche etiopiche (di cui sono esemplari siti come Däbrä Dammo e appunto Ḥnda Abba Gärima, che preserva i più antichi manoscritti etiopici ad oggi noti). E ancora un ruolo decisivo per la caratterizzazione dell'esperienza cristiana e soprattutto monastica etiopica ebbero il veneratissimo Täklä Haymanot (XIII-XIV sec.), che diede un impulso decisivo alla cristianizzazione del sud del paese, ed Ewoṣtatewos (1273-1352), leader dell'ordine monastico attivo in Eritrea e nel Tägray e che da lui prese il nome.

La necessità di un volume che presenti al lettore i documenti testuali in traduzione si è imposta all'autore a causa della ristretta accessibilità delle fonti da parte dei non specialisti. È d'altronde intento programmatico della collana "Bibliothèque de l'Orient Chrétien" quello di far conoscere al pubblico una letteratura che «est encore peu accessible dans des traductions en français alors qu'elle est un élément fondamental pour comprendre les enjeux culturels, historiques et religieux d'une région dont la complexité n'a d'égale que la richesse». A parlare a nome delle quattro figure storiche è stata scelta infatti solo la documentazione agiografica locale, rappresentata nella fattispecie da narrazioni in forma di omelie (*därsan*, come nel caso di Frumenzio e Gärima) o vere e proprie biografie (*gädl*, come nel caso di Täklä Haymanot ed Ewoṣtatewos), nonché dalle concise notizie commemorative incluse nel Sinassario.

Le traduzioni sono precedute da una corposa sezione introduttiva. A Gérard Colin va il merito di aver efficacemente sunteggiato in poche pagine l'itinerario storico che ha portato alla cristianizzazione dell'Etiopia e alla costituzione di un'eredità manoscritta e letteraria di cui l'agiografia fa parte a pieno titolo (pp. IX-XXII). Christian Julien Robin ha ripercorso il radicamento del cristianesimo ad Aksum in età tardoantica, soffermandosi

sul ruolo evangelizzatore svolto da Frumenzio e, nella persona di Gärima, dai Nove Santi (pp. XXII-LVI). Le pagine scritte da Marie-Laure Derat conducono il lettore in un contesto storico, quello in cui si svolsero le predicazioni di Täklä Haymanot e Ewostatewos, caratterizzato dalla formazione di *réseaux monastiques* e da rapporti politici mutevoli e non sempre scevri di antagonismo tra l'autorità centrale e i più preminenti centri monastici, nonché tra questi ultimi tra loro (pp. LVI-LXXXIV). Una breve cronologia, una nota sul calendario etiopico e una carta dell'area con i principali toponimi completano gli apparati introduttivi. Essi offrono nel complesso una messe molto copiosa di spunti e riflessioni e va riconosciuta agli autori la chiarezza espositiva nel trattare, compendiando, un'ampia varietà di tematiche che dall'età di 'Ezana a quella di Zär'a Ya'əqob abbraccia più di un millennio di storia religiosa del paese.

L'omelia in onore di Frumenzio (pp. 1-4) è riprodotta secondo l'edizione di Getatchew Haile, eseguita sulla base dell'allora teste unico, il trecentesco ms. EMMML 1763. Per una discussione critico-testuale sul rapporto tra il testo dell'omelia, oggi noto anche dal ms. EMMML 8509, e la versione greca di Socrate Scolastico, nonché tra l'omelia e la commemorazione sinassariale del 26 *Hamle* (anch'essa tradotta da Colin, pp. 4-5), si rimanda al contributo dello scrivente nel presente volume (pp. 63-87).

Il lettore non potrà che trarre beneficio dalla traduzione di Colin dell'omelia su Gärima (pp. 6-35). Il testo dell'omelia infatti, edito senza traduzione da Conti Rossini nel 1897, era già stato volto in italiano da Bruno Ducati, *La grande impresa di Amda Sion re d'Etiopia, romanzo storico del XIV secolo. I miracoli di Abbà Garimà, omelia del XV secolo. Tradotti dalla lingua originale*, Garzanti, Milano 1939, in un contributo tuttavia poco noto e poco frequentato dagli studiosi. Nell'introduzione di Ch. J. Robin ampio spazio è dedicato alla questione dell'origine geografica di Gärima e dei Nove Santi (pp. L-LIV). Il nome Gärima, dapprima associato ad un'etimologia siriana, parrebbe piuttosto trovare riscontro epigrafico nel nome del principe etiopico *grmt wld ngsy*, menzionato da due iscrizioni sabea della prima metà del IV sec. Più in generale, sulla presunta origine siriana dei 'Nove Santi' e sulla nota questione delle 'influenze siriane' nell'Etiopia tardoantica, non sarebbe stato inopportuno menzionare la tesi di Paolo Marrassini, secondo cui «there are no positive proofs that the Nine Saints and their colleagues were really Syrians. Nor is there a definitive proof that any Syriac – or

Aramaic – speaking people took part in the translation of the Bible into Geez» (On the problem of the Syriac influence on Aksumite Ethiopia. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23, 1990, 47-53: 42, e Ancora sul problema degli influssi siriaci in età aksumita, in L. Cagni ed., *Biblica et Semitica. Studi in memoria di Francesco Vattioni*, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli 1999, 325-337).

Le produzioni narrative concernenti Täklä Haymanot ed Ewoṣtatewos costituiscono dossier complessi. Dal loro nucleo originario sono rampollate nel tempo recensioni testuali plurime, caratterizzate da fenomeni di riscrittura e arricchite di cicli di miracoli. Il *Gädlä Täklä Haymanot* (pp. 38-70) è riprodotto nella forma della recensione waldebbana, la più arcaica, edita da Conti Rossini nel 1896 e già tradotta in inglese da E. A. W. Budge nel 1906. Del *Gädlä Ewoṣtatewos* (pp. 75-173, e della sua appendice di gesta miracolose, pp. 174-215), noto finora esclusivamente nell'edizione e tradizione latina di Boris Turaiev, appare sempre più stringente l'esigenza di una nuova edizione critica che fornisca adeguata visibilità a tutte e tre le forme testuali in cui la tradizione è ramificata, secondo un auspicio già formulato dallo stesso Turaiev (*tres recensioni separatim latine vertendas esse censeo*).

Gli errori tipografici (per es. “Gārimā” a p. LXXXVII, “Takla-Haymanot” a p. LXXXVIII, “efricanistici” a p. 225, “Akshum” a p. 235) sono marginali (il riferimento bibliografico in corrispondenza di “Nosnitsin, 2005” a p. 226, è da emendare con ogni verosimiglianza in “Denis Nosnitsin, *Wäwāhabo qob’a wä’askema...: Reflections on an Episode from the History of the Ethiopian Monastic Movement. Scrinium* 1, 2005, 197-247”). Nel caso del nome del santo Iyāsus Mo’a le oscillazioni ortografiche tra Iyasous-mo’a (p. XVI), Iyasus-mo’ā (pp. LIX-LXIV) e Iyasus-mo’a (pp. LIV, LXXVII) sono da attribuire alle convenzioni ortografiche adottate dagli autori delle tre diverse introduzioni.

In conclusione, questo prezioso contributo di Gérard Colin offre l’opportunità ad un pubblico meno ristretto di studiosi di fruire in modo valido degli strumenti testuali ad oggi disponibili per comprendere, attraverso la lente delle gesta biografiche di quattro figure centrali del cristianesimo etiopico, la vicenda complessa e dinamica dell’evangelizzazione e del radicamento del monachesimo nel paese africano. Il lettore non dovrà d’altronde dimenticare, per una corretta

interpretazione della documentazione, che la ricezione e la percezione dei fenomeni storici, in alcuni casi anteriori di numerosi secoli rispetto alla produzione delle fonti scritte che ad essi si riferiscono, è nella prassi agiografica etiopica non infrequentemente filtrata da processi di costruzione e rielaborazione ideologica, processi dettati dalle circostanze politiche del momento e che sono a tutt'oggi oggetto di indagini storiche e filologiche.

Massimo Villa