

The early history of Eritrea: a new perspective*

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The reconstruction of the ancient Eritrean past has been making considerable steps forward in the recent years. The understanding of the features peculiar for the early history of the coast and the highlands near the Red Sea has grown among the scholars. At the same time, several authors have contributed to the reassessment of the elements shared by the Eritrean and the North-Ethiopian areas in the period between the arrival of the Sabaeans (8th-7th cent. BC) and the rise of Aksum (1st cent.). The bulk of evidence is at the moment rich enough to provide a basis for a more accurate historical interpretation, and the archaeological, epigraphic and linguistic data can be exploited and integrated into a synthetic view, where a function is assigned to every element.

For a long time, all the scientific efforts for the comprehension of the Eritrean past were carried out within an ideological framework of positivistic origin, and the interpretation of the available documents was determined by the “colonial” approach of the more influential scholars. This attitude can be justified as a reflex of the 19th-20th cent. European history, but cannot be disguised further on as the only possible path to the truth. It is sufficient to remind that any construal in the field of ancient history is nothing but the projection of what people think about the past. Therefore, a good reconstruction is determined mainly by the sensitivity of the scholar in finding an appropriate place for each piece of evidence on his desk, in accordance with a general view of what must have really happened.

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In the late 19th and early 20th cent., the logical conclusion of the hegemonic cultural mood was simple and satisfying: the beginnings of the Eritrean and North-Ethiopian civilization were owed to the Sabaeans, who colonized a part of the highlands in the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. In this synthetic reconstruction every element played its role: the ESA inscriptions and the monuments on the African soil were seen as the first documents of the historical presence of the Semites in Africa, the report of Greek and Latin authors seemed to confirm the Yemenite origin of the colonizers, the ethnographic and racial features of the peoples of Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia were considered the result of the mixture between the foreign Sabaeans and the autochthonous Cushitic groups.¹ According to the same view, the relationship between South Arabic, Gə‘əz (Classical Ethiopic) and the modern Ethiosemitic languages was interpreted in terms of strictly genetic derivation. These answers to the historical questions put by the discovery of the ESA inscriptions in Africa took into account all the pieces of evidence known until then, but the reconstruction bore a pronounced ideological character. The use of words like “colonizers” and “colonies”, for instance, to denote a special political relationship between the motherland in Yemen and its dependants in Africa, resulted from the application of an external and aprioristic model.² The assumption that history in Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia began with a “colonization” implicitly reflected the *Zeitgeist* of the period when Africa was nothing but a territory open to the European conquest. Yet, as a matter of fact the results of those researches were perceived as exhaustive in the light of the scientific knowledge of that time.

In the second half of the 20th cent. new epigraphic data disturbed this systematic reconstruction and threw it into a structural crisis. The discovery of more ESA inscriptions on both sides of the Red Sea allowed scholars to put

¹ Eduard Glaser, *Die Abessinier in Arabien und Afrika*, München, H. Lukaschik, 1895; Carlo Conti Rossini, *Sugli Habašāt*, “Reale Acc. dei Lincei. Rendiconti”, cl. sc. mor., s. v, XV, 1906, pp. 39-59; Id., *Schizzo etnico e storico delle popolazioni eritree*, in *L'Eritrea economica*, Novara-Roma, I.G. de A., 1913, pp. 61-90: pp. 66-68; Id., *Expéditions et possessions des Habašāt en Arabie*, “Journal Asiatique”, s. xi, XVIII, 1921, pp. 5-36; Id., *Storia d’Etiopia*, I, *Dalle origini all’avvento della dinastia salomonide*, Bergamo, I.I.A.G., 1928, pp. 91-108 (iv. L’Arabia meridionale e il passaggio dei Sud-arabi in Africa).

² G. Fiaccadori, *Sembrouthes ‘Gran Re’ (DAE IV 3 = RIÉth 275). Per la storia del primo ellenismo aksumita*, “La Parola del Passato”, LIX, 2004, pp. 103-157: pp. 134-135, reaffirming this general view, speaks of «contatti ‘precoloniali’» and «modello ‘coloniale’».

aside some aspects of the “classical” hypothesis and to introduce new historical subjects. After a close analysis of the ESA vocabulary, Arthur K. Irvine eliminated from the scene the fancy Yemenite tribe of the Habashat, imagined as the one responsible for the Semitization of the African shore.³ On the contrary, Habashat is nothing but the Sabaeen place-name for Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, without any reference to the claimed South Arabian origins of its inhabitants. Upon discovery of dozens of new ESA inscriptions on the African soil, Roger Schneider introduced a distinction between two groups of texts (A and B); one of these (group B) exhibits linguistic features revealing that the authors of the inscriptions were Semites who had arrived in Africa before the Sabaeans and were using a variety of South Arabic influenced by their Semitic mother-tongue.⁴

The regions concerned by these reconstruction attempts were essentially the same as the area that later, since the 1st cent. AD, was ruled by the Kings of Aksum. For a long time, the fact of any possible autonomous role played by the Eritrean regions was kept in shade. In fact, the epigraphic documents in “monumental” script did not allow any specific conclusion about the Ḥamasen, Sära’e or Akkälä Guzay regions, since most ESA inscriptions were found in Təgray, between Aksum and Yəḥa. Yet, a different case is that of the South Arabic graffiti, particularly those carved on the Qoḥayto plateau (Akkälä Guzay), first scientifically investigated by Abraham J. Drewes.⁵ These writings

³ A.K. Irvine, *On the Identity of the Habashat in the South Arabian Inscriptions*, “Journal of Semitic Studies”, X, 1965, pp. 178-196.

⁴ R. Schneider, *Deux inscriptions Sudarabiques di Tigré*, “Bibliotheca Orientalis”, XXX, 1973, pp. 385-389; Id., *Documents epigraphiques de l’Éthiopie*. V, “Annales d’Éthiopie”, X, 1976, pp. 81-93; Id., *Les débuts de l’histoire éthiopienne*, “Abbay (DSHCE)”, VII, 1976, pp. 47-54; cp. E. Bernand, A.J. Drewes & R. Schneider, *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, introd. de F. Anfray, I, *Les documents*, Paris, A.I.B.-L., 1991, pp. 30-32.

⁵ A.J. Drewes, *Inscriptions de l’Éthiopie antique*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1962, pp. 5-29 (II. Petites inscriptions), and 71-88 (V. La graphie des inscriptions jusqu’à l’époque d’Ézana). Most of these graffiti have been edited by L. Ricci: *Ritrovamenti archeologici in Eritrea*, “Rassegna di Studi Etiopici”, XIV, 1955-58, ed. 1959, pp. 48-68; pp. 48-49; *Iscrizioni rupestri dell’Eritrea*, *ibid.*, XV, 1959, ed. 1960, pp. 55-95, and XVI, 1960, pp. 77-119; *Iscrizioni rupestri dell’Eritrea*, in *Atti del convegno internazionale di studi etiopici* (2-4 apr. 1959), Roma, Acc. Naz. dei Lincei, 1960 (Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura, 48), pp. 447-459; *Iscrizioni rupestri dell’Eritrea. – Kēsàd Qernì*, “Rassegna di Studi Etiopici”, XLII, 1998, ed. 1999, pp. 71-88; *Iscrizioni rupestri dell’Eritrea. – Zēbàn Tāhsès*, *ibid.*, XLIII, 1999, ed. 2000, pp. 133-151; *Iscrizioni rupestri dell’Eritrea: I. (Qoḥaytò) Sàro. – II. Tokhondà’*, *ibid.*, n.s. I, 2002, pp. 63-84.

proved to have a genetic relationship with the “non-monumental” (or “thamudenic”) “pre-classical” scripts of Southern Arabia,⁶ like that of the Wādī Yalā (Ḥawlān),⁷ in particular of the pottery fragments from the ad-Durayb/Yalā site.⁸ The subsequent debate about the origins of the *fidāl* allowed one to draw conclusions focusing on the importance of the Akkälā Guzay district as a cultural mediator during a period marked by the scarcity of documents (between 7th cent. BC and 1st cent AD), as first emphasized by Francis Anfray.⁹ This material witnesses that in the early 1st millennium in south-east Eritrea, on the borders of the polity led by the Ethio-Sabaeans (D‘MT), there existed a different cultural milieu. The inhabitants of the area had their own writing habits, and later on they became so influential that from their “cursive” script the *fidāl*

⁶ G. Garbini, *La chronologie «longue» : une mise au point*, in *Arabia Antiqua. Early Origins of South Arabian States*, ed. By Ch. J. Robin & I. Gajda, Roma, IsMEO, 1996, pp. 15-22: pp. 19-21.

⁷ A. de Maigret, *Archaeological survey on the Wādī Yalā antiquities*, in *Sabaeen Archaeological Complex in the Wādī Yalā (Eastern Ḥawlān at-Ṭiyāl, Yemen Arab Republic). A Preliminary Report*, ed. by A. de Maigret, Rome, IsMEO, 1988, pp. 1-20; A. de Maigret & Ch. Robin, *Les fouilles italiennes de Yalā (Yémen du Nord): nouvelles données sur la chronologie de l'Arabie du Sud préislamique*, “Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et des Belle-Lettres”, 1989, pp. 255-291; A. de Maigret, *I dati degli scavi yemeniti per un'ipotesi sull'origine della «cultura sudarabica»*, in *Arabia Antiqua*, cit., pp. 111-119; cfr. Id., *Arabia Felix. Un viaggio nell'archeologia dello Yemen*, Milano, Rusconi, 1996, pp. 163-176.

⁸ G. Garbini, *The Inscriptions of Si‘b al-‘Aql, al-Gafnah and Yalā/ad-Durayb*, in *Sabaeen Archaeological Complex in the Wādī Yalā*, cit., pp. 21-40 (tavv. 38-55); Id., *Le iscrizioni su ceramica di ad-Durayb-Yalā*, “Yemen”, I, 1992, pp. 79-91; L. Ricci, *Iscrizioni rupestri dell'Eritrea*, “Acc. Naz. dei Lincei. Rendiconti”, s. IX, V, 1994, pp. 1-11; F. Anfray, *Erythrée antique: entre période initiale et période axoumite un intervalle problématique*, “Rassegna di Studi Etiopici”, XXXVIII, 1994, ed 1996, pp. 9-12.

⁹ Anfray, *Erythrée antique*, cit., pp. 7-12. In Anfray's general view «des traditions forts anciennes se sont maintenues tout au long de cet intervalle multiséculaire, mais obscurément» (*ibid.*, p. 12). Consequently, the statement by A. Bausi, *Il testo, il supporto e la funzione: alcune osservazioni sul caso dell'Etiopia*, in *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. by V. Boell, D. Nosnitsin, Th. Rave, W. Smidt & E. Sokolinskaia, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 2004, pp. 7-22: p. 12, fn. 28 «lo stesso Anfray (*ibid.* 12, n. 12) pare indicare una possibile via d'uscita, rinviando a Lanfranco Ricci» (“Rassegna di Studi Etiopici”, XXXVII, 1993, ed.20 1995, pp. 187-197) reveals a misunderstanding of the author's thought; cp. G. Lusini, *Questioni di paleografia etiopica*, “Scrittura e civiltà”, XXIII, 1999, pp. 407-417: p. 411.

developed.¹⁰ They were part of the ancient “erythraic” cultural community involving Ḥiḡaz, Southern Arabia, Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, with the trade between the two shores of the Red Sea serving a common material ground.¹¹

The evidence emerging from the archaeological research of the last twenty years allows one to go back to an even more remote chapter of the Eritrean past. A new phase in the archaeology of the Horn of Africa was actually opened when Rodolfo Fattovich drew attention to the findings of the “Ona” sites (“Ona-culture”) in the Greater Asmara Area.¹² This material culture, particularly the “Ona Group” ware, does not only bear affinities to the black-topped ware of the Sudanese Nile Valley, dating to approximately 1500 BC, but also reveals the presence of a cultural influence from the South Arabian coastal culture (Tihama Cultural Complex). According to this construal, in the mid-2nd millennium BC, the Nile Valley, the lowlands between Sudan and Eritrea, the Eritrean highlands and the Tihama coast were connected into one interregional interaction zone. In this context, the “Ona culture” played a central role, possibly as a more ancient evidence of the diffusion of Arabian cultural elements toward the Horn of Africa, long before the implantation of the Sabaean communities in the regions around Aksum and Yəḥa.

It is possible to link these archaeological data and the results of the research carried on in the past decades in the field of the Ethiosemitic comparative linguistics. Since 1972, Robert Hetzron called for attention on

¹⁰ A.J. Drewes, *Problèmes de paléographie éthiopienne*, “Annales d’Éthiopie”, I, 1955, pp. 121-126; Id., *Inscriptions de l’Éthiopie antique*, cit., pp. 76-77; cp. G. Garbini, *Storia e problemi dell’epigrafia semitica*, Napoli, I.U.O., 1979 (“AION. Supplemento”, 19), pp. 79-82; R. Schneider, *Les origines de l’écriture éthiopienne*, in *Ethiopian Studies dedicated to Wolf Leslau on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday*, ed. by S. Segert & A.J.E. Bodrogligeti, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1983, pp. 412-416; pp. 413-414; Lusini, *Questioni di paleografia etiopica*, cit., pp. 407-411.

¹¹ G. Lusini, *A proposito delle iscrizioni sudarabiche d’Etiopia*, “Studi epigrafici e linguistici”, XVII, 2000, pp. 95-103.

¹² R. Fattovich, *Materiali per lo studio della ceramica pre-aksumita etiopica*, Napoli, I.U.O., 1980 (“AION. Supplemento”, 25), pp. 83-86; Id., *Remarks on the Pre-Aksumite Period in Northern Ethiopia*, “Journal of Ethiopian Studies”, XXIII, 1990, pp. 1-33; pp. 11-16; Id., *The Contacts between Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa in Late Prehistoric and Early Historical Times: A View from Africa*, in *Profumi d’Arabia*, Atti del Convegno, a c. di A. Avanzini, Roma, “L’Erma” di Bretschneider (Saggi di storia antica, 11), pp. 273-286; pp. 282-286; cp. P.R. Schmidt & M.C. Curtis, *Urban Precursors in the Horn: early 1st-millennium BC communities in Eritrea*, “Antiquity”, LXXV, 2001, pp. 849-859, emphasizing the endogenous nature of the communities around Asmara.

some archaic features of the Təgre grammar,¹³ which are not explicable in terms of genetic derivation from Gə‘əz:¹⁴ the definite article *lä-* that can be compared to the “emphatic Lamed” in Biblical Hebrew,¹⁵ the third person independent pronoun with glottal fricative *h-* (*hətu*) against the glottal stop in Gə‘əz (*[wə]’ətu*)¹⁶, the active participle *qatəl* (<**qātil*) against *qətali* in the rest of Ethiosemitic, the ablative preposition *mən* (<**minna*) against *’əmənna* or *’əm-* in Gə‘əz, and the comitative preposition *’ət* that can be compared with the element *’et* <*’*itt* in Biblical Hebrew.¹⁷ Given that there is little doubt that all the Ethiosemitic languages descend from one and only ancient Semitic,¹⁸ one can presume in such cases that some features of the Protoethiopic remained

¹³ The absence of the labiovelars could be considered too, since Təgre is historically and geographically tied to Semitic and Cushitic languages provided with this phonological series (Gə‘əz, Təgrəñña, Beḡa and Bilin): W. Leslau, *Étude descriptive et comparative du Gafat (Éthiopien méridional)*, Paris, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1956, pp. 12-15 (§ 6).

¹⁴ R. Hetzron, *Ethiopian Semitic*, Manchester, U.P., 1972, pp. 19-21.

¹⁵ W. Gesenius, *Hebräische Grammatik, völlig umgearbeitet von E. Kautzsch*, Leipzig, F.C.W. Vogel, 1909²⁸, §143e, pp. 466-476, c. §119u, p. 386; English translation edited by A.E. Cowley, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, as edited and enlarged by the late E. Kautzsch, 2nd English Ed. revised*, Oxford, Clarendon P., 1910, p. 458, cp pp. 381-382; F. Nötscher, *Zur emphatischer Lamed*, “Vetus Testamentum”, III, 1953, pp. 103-122. See also Mauro Tosco, *A parsing view on inconsistent word order: Articles in Tigre and its relatives*, “Linguistic Tipology”, II, 1998, pp. 355-380, dealing with the Təgre syntax in the light of the presence of the article *lä-* as a conditioning factor. For a clitic deriving from an article see the case of *-š* in Gafat: Wolf Leslau, *Étude descriptive et comparative du Gafat*, cit., pp. 44-46 (§ 31).

¹⁶ This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by two passages of the inscription RIÉ 192₃₊₄ (p. 275), dictated by the king of Aksum W’ZB (Gabra Masqal, r. 534-548 ab.), son of Kālēb ’L ’ŠBĪḤ: here the third person independent pronoun appears in the form *h’*; R. Schneider, *Trois nouvelles inscriptions royales d’Axoum*, in *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici*, I, Roma, Acc. Naz. dei Lincei, 1974 (Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura 191), pp. 767-786: p. 779; A.J. Drewes, *Some Features of Epigraphical Ethiopic*, in *Ethiopian Studies in honour of Wolf Leslau on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday*, ed. by A.S. Kaye, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1993, pp. 382-391: pp. 388-389.

¹⁷ L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1953, p. 100; W. Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament, von L. Koehler und W. Baumgartner, 3. Aufl. neu bearbeitet*, I, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1967, pp. 97-98; English translation edited by M.E.J. Richardson, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, I, Leiden - New York - Köln, E.J. Brill, 1994, p. 101; H. Bauer & P. Leander, *Historische Grammatik der Hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testamentes*, Halle, M. Niemeyer, 1922 (rist.: Hildesheim, G. Olms, 1969), §81j’-o’, pp. 641-642; P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l’hébreu biblique*, Rome, Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1923, §103j, p. 280; P. Joüon & T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 2000, §343j, pp. 686-687 (table 20).

¹⁸ Hetzron, *Ethiopian Semitic*, cit., pp. 17-19.

documented in the “conservative” Təgre more than in the “innovative” Gə‘əz. At least, the article *lä-* and the prepositions *’at* and *mən* are not documented in Sabaic. These could be the remnants of an independent Semitic dialect spoken in Eritrea well before the Sabaeen expansion, around the end of the 2nd millennium BC.¹⁹

The hypothesis corresponds well to the archaeological results, suggesting the emergence of a complex society of Arabian origin on the Eritrean highlands, some time between the middle and the end of the 2nd millennium BC. Most probably the *terminus post quem* could be placed around 12th century BC, simultaneously with the weakening of the Egypt-Punt maritime trade-link during the New Kingdom. To the possible reasons of the collapse of the Egyptian hegemony on the African shore of the Red Sea one can now count the growing of this urban civilization of Eritrea, pivoting around the east-west trade (from Nubia, via Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia, to Southern Arabia and Ḥiğaz), rather than around the earlier north-south axis (from Egypt, via Nubia, to Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia).²⁰ If this construction is correct, in the 8th-7th cent. BC the Sabaeen expansion in Africa merged with an earlier Semitic stratum of Arabian origin, at least in the Eritrean area from around Asmara up to the Saḥəl coast.

Since 332 BC, after the Greek conquest of Egypt and during the domination of the Ptolemies (306-31 BC), a new phase started in the Eritrean history, too. Within the Ptolemaic program of intensive and regular trade along the Red Sea coast, a strategic role was played by the Eritrean inland and its products. We know very little about the events that occurred in those and subsequent centuries, but at least one 1st -cent. AD Greek source, the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea*, §5, attests that in the Roman times, in the regions north and west of Adulis there was an independent kingdom ruled by a certain Zôskalês.²¹ In his capital city, Greek was the *lingua franca* spoken by traders, cultivated

¹⁹ P. Marrassini, *The Semites in Abyssinia. Onomastic and Lexicographical Notes*, in *Studia Semitica*, ed. by L. Kogan, Moscow, Russian State University for the Humanities, 2003, pp. 141-151; pp. 145-147.

²⁰ R. Fattovich, *The Problem of Punt in the Light of the Recent Field Work in the Eastern Sudan*, in *Akten des vierten Internationalen Ägyptologen Kongresses, München 1985*, ed. by S. Schoske, 4, Hamburg, Buske Verlag, 1991, pp. 257-272; Id., *Punt: The Archaeological Perspective*, in *Atti del VI Congresso Internazionale di Egittologia*, 2, Torino, SEI, 1993, pp. 399-455; K.A. Kitchen, *Further Thoughts on Punt and its Neighbours*, in *Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honour of H.S. Smith*, ed. by A. Leahy & J. Tait, London, Egypt Exploration Society, 1999, pp. 173-178.

²¹ L. Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei, Text with introduction, translation, and commentary*, Princeton, U.P., 1989, pp. 52 (text) and 53 (translation).

persons, and by the king himself (“the ruler of these regions, from the Moschophagoi to the rest of Barbaria, is Zôskalês, a stickler about his possessions and always holding out for getting more, but in other respects a fine person and well versed in reading and writing Greek”). Possibly the language spoken by the common people in Zôskalês’ kingdom was a Semitic dialect different from the Gə‘əz spoken in Aksum and close to modern Təgre. This is suggested by the etymology of the name Adulis as “(territory) allotted”, from Təgre *‘addälä* (0₂ < **‘adlä*), “to allot”.²² Only the passive participle *‘addul* is attested, but the basic form **‘adul* can be easily restored. The initial *a-* (instead of *‘ə-*) was probably determined by the Greek pronunciation of the place-name, and by the related etymological interpretation (“wanting in slaves”), first reported by Plinius the Elder (*N.H.* VI 34 [172]: *Aegyptiorum hoc [sc. oppidum Aduliton] servi profugi a dominis condidere*). The same suffix *-is* could be interpreted as a “grecizing” ending, like *-is* or *-es* in the personal names (e.g. Endybis, Sembrouthês, Zôskalês).²³ This reminds the etymology of the name Aksum, proposed a few years ago by Lanfranco Ricci, as “(territory) assigned”, from the Gə‘əz verb *’aksämä* and its passive participle *kəsum*. Both *aksämä* and *kəsum* are attested in the land charters promulgated by king Lalibälä (*r.* 1186-1225 *ca.*), and transmitted by the *Golden Gospel* of Däbrä Libanos, with the meaning “to assign a land” and “land assigned”.²⁴

These elements additionally support the claim that a Semitic language was spoken in Eritrea from the end of the 2nd millennium BC, before the introduction of Sabaic and the development of Gə‘əz, and that this language is the most direct ancestor of modern Təgre. One or more waves of peoples coming from the Arabian peninsula crossed the Red Sea and reached the regions north and west of Adulis, where contemporary Tigre-speaking groups are still living. In the African context they contributed to the complex society reflected by the “Ona-culture”. All this admitted, it is possible that, after the Sabaeans took control over a part of the Eritrean highlands, the Semitic-speaking groups, settled down in those regions long before the Kingdom of Saba turned up, received the denomination Təgre, a name derived from the Semitic root **grr*, to

²² E. Littmann, & M. Höfner, *Wörterbuch der Tigrē-Sprache. Tigrē-Deutsch-Englisch*, Wiesbaden, F. Steiner, 1962, p. 483.

²³ P. Marrassini, *The Semites in Abyssinia*, cit., p. 143.

²⁴ L. Ricci, *Post scriptum*, “Rassegna di Studi Etiopici”, XXXVIII, 1994, ed. 1996, pp. 188-190; C. Conti Rossini, *L’Evangelo d’oro di Dabra Libanos*, “Reale Acc. Dei Lincei. Rendiconti”, s. v, X, 1901, pp. 177-219: pp. 186 and 189, docc. 6-7.

which Gə‘əz *gärärä*, *gärrä* “be subject to, obey”, and Tigre *tägärrärä* “to be a vassal (*təgre*)” are related.²⁵ As a matter of fact, the name *Təgre* is documented for the first time, in the Greek form *Τιγρηῆται*, only in the 6th-cent. scholia to Cosma Indicopleustes (*Topographia Christiana*, II 60-63), but most likely the root and the word date back to earlier times²⁶. Thus, the linguistic term *təgre*, meaning “language of the vassals”, could be an old reference to these Semitic speakers, considered as subjects since the times of the Sabaeen expansion. And if the term *gə‘əz* can be etymologically interpreted as “language of the free men”, as opposed to *təgre* or “language of the vassals” (true or alleged), this would be a new argument in favour of that linguistic and social dualism (between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Semitic-speakers) introduced in the Ethio-Eritrean history by the 8th-7th cent. Sabaeen expansion.

²⁵ A. Dillmann, *Lexicon Linguae Aethiopicæ, cum indice Latino*, Lipsiae, Th.O. Weigel, 1865, coll. 1155-1156; W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez*, Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1991, p. 203b; E. Littmann, & M. Höfner, *Wörterbuch der Tigrē-Sprache*, cit., p. 573ab; cp. A. Zaborski, *Beja and Tigrē in 9th-10th century period*, “Rocznik Orientalistyczny”, XXXV, 1972, pp. 117-130: p. 118, fn. 9.

²⁶ W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie Chrétienne*, I, (*Livres I-IV*), *Introduction, texte critique, illustration, traduction et notes*, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1968, pp. 373-379 (text) and 372-378 (translation) ; G. Lusini, *Note linguistiche per la storia dell’Etiopia antica*, in *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig*, cit., pp. 67-77: pp. 71-77.