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Julien Loiseau

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Two unpublished Arabic inscriptions from Bilet (Tigray, Ethiopia)

The Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) of Ethiopia preserves in the museum of its local office in Mekelle (Tigray) two fragments of Arabic stelae. These basalt stones have been brought in 1993 to Prof. Tekle Hagos (Addis Abeba University, Department of archaeology) by inhabitants of “Old K^wiḥa”, in the vicinity of the church of K^wiḥa Ćərqos, at the north end of the town of K^wiḥa (Tigray)¹. The Arabic inscriptions carved on the stones have been reported and photographed in 2008 by François-Xavier Fauvelle (CNRS, Toulouse)². They have been examined, measured and once again photographed by Amélie Chekroun (ERC HornEast), Bertrand Hirsch (Paris-1 University) and Julien Loiseau (ERC HornEast, Aix-Marseille University) in March 2018, with the kind permission of Dr. Dawit Hailu, director of the ARCCH office in Mekelle³.

These two stones belong to the corpus of stelae of the Muslim cemetery of Bilet⁴. In 1937, Carlo Conti Rossini identified in the same area four Arabic stelae in reuse, in the stonework of a wall under construction⁵. The inscriptions of two of them were published in 1945 by Costantino Pansera, and their publication revised by Madeleine Schneider in 2009⁶. In 1967, Madeleine Schneider already published the Arabic inscriptions of twelve stelae, among fourteen stones brought to French archaeologists or found by them in reuse in the same area⁷. They are now preserved in the storerooms of the National Museum in Addis Abeba as we have seen in March 2018. The two other ones were unfortunately unreadable. In 2004, Wolbert Smidt published another inscription from the same provenance: the stone is currently stored inside the church of K^wiḥa Ćərqos⁸.

The stones preserved in the ARCCH’s museum in Mekelle add two items to the fifteen Arabic inscriptions found in the area of K^wiḥa and already published. But the corpus of Bilet is much larger, considering that twenty-one stelae ou fragments of stelae have been found in survey in March 2018 by the Franco-Ethiopian mission of Bilet, along with the identification of the exact location of the cemetery. The publication of their inscriptions is in preparation by

¹ Personal communication of Prof. Tekle Hago to Bertrand Hirsch (Université Paris-1).

² Personal communication to the author.

³ This paper owes also much to Yohannes Gebre Sellassie for his precious help in Mekelle.

⁴ Regarding the clues leading to the identification of this cemetery, see Bertrand HIRSCH, “À la recherche des stèles musulmans de l’Endertā. Les sites de Wager Ḥaribā et Kwiḥā,” <https://horneast.hypotheses.org/>.

⁵ Carlo CONTI ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana presso Uogri Haribā nell’Enderta,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 17 (1937-1939), pp. 399-408.

⁶ Costantino PANSERA, “Quattro stele musulmane presso Uogher Haribā nell’Enderta (fine sec. IV Egira),” in *Studi etiopici raccolti da C. Conti Rossini*, vol. 1, Rome, Istituto per l’Oriente, 1945, pp. 3-7. Madeleine SCHNEIDER, “Des Yamāmī dans l’Enderta (Tigre),” *Le Muséon* 122 1-2 (2009), pp. 131-148.

⁷ Madeleine SCHNEIDER, “Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 7 (1967), pp. 107-122.

⁸ Wolbert G.C. SMIDT, “Eine arabische Inschrift in K^wiḥa, Tigray,” in *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Verena BÖLL, Denis NOSNITSIN, Thomas RAVE, Wolbert SMIDT, Evgenia SOKOLINSKAIA (eds.), Harrassovitz, Wiesbaden, pp. 259-268.



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J. Loiseau. With 38 stelae known to date, the Muslim cemetery of Bilet accounts for half of the corpus of Medieval Arabic inscriptions from Ethiopia⁹.

The two fragments from Mekelle's museum edited below are of unequal importance. The first one preserves the last seven lines of an epitaph, recording the name and death date of the deceased. The funerary stele of Ḥafṣ b. 'Umar al-Yamāmī, dead on 4 Jumādā I 361 A.H. (22 February 972 C.E.) bears the oldest Arabic inscription from Ethiopia known to date. The second fragment preserves the first four lines of another epitaph, i.e. the *basmala* and a short Quranic quotation.

Fragment 1. Stele of 361/972

I. Picture



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⁹ For a state of knowledge in 2010, see François-Xavier FAUVELLE & Bertrand HIRSCH, “Muslim Historical Spaces in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: A Reassessment,” *Northeast African Studies* 11-1 (2010), pp. 25-54, here pp. 30-32 and figure 3 p. 40.



II. Description

Basalt stone roughly rectangular, the upper section of which is missing (L. 52 x W. 52 x T. 6 cm.). On the first line, only the last three letters are preserved. A chip cut the first two letters of the last line. No line is missing at the end. The inscribed area is plane and might have been prepared by cutting. The inscription is carved in the stone, in a simple Kufic script without diacritic dots. Words are quite well lined up. Note the rising tail of the *nūn* in final position.

III. Arabic text

١. (...) [والأخـ]رين
٢. ميقات يوم معلوم فاجمع يارب
٣. حفص بن عمر اليمامي مع النبيين
٤. والصديقين والشهداء والصالحين
٥. وحسن أولئك رفيقا توفي رحمه الله
٦. يوم الخميس لأربع خلون من جمدى الأول
٧. [سنة] واحدة وستين وثلثمائة سنة رحمه الله

IV. Translation¹⁰

1. (...) [the latt]er
2. *one day, the hour of which has already been appointed* (Quran, LVI, 49-50).
O Lord! Gather
3. Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar al-Yamāmī with *the prophets*,
4. *the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous*:
5. *what excellent companions these are that one may get!* (Quran, IV, 69) He died –
God have mercy on him –
6. on Thursday, the Fourth of Jumādā I
7. [of the year] 361 (22 February 972)

V. Comments

Madeleine Schneider published in 1967 a funerary stele from Bilet in the name of Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar b. al-Yamāmī (note the presence of *ibn*, “son of”, before the *nisba*), dead on Thursday, 4 Jumādā I of a year the digit of which is readable, the ten unclear and the hundred missing. M. Schneider suggested to identify Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar b. al-Yamāmī with Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar al-Yamāmī, a name evidenced on other stelae from Bilet. As for the date, she suggested to read

¹⁰ The English translation of Quranic verses is that of Abul Ala MAUDUDI, *The Meaning of the Qur’an*, 1972.



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371 or 391 A.H., with a preference for the latter, the determination of the hundred being dictated by the date of other stelae from Bilet mentioning Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar al-Yamāmī as a forefather of the deceased¹¹. She did not notice that the 4th of Jumādā I did not fall on Thursday (*yūm al-khamīs*) neither in 371 nor in 391, as it is the case in 361 A.H.¹².

The present fragment belongs to the category of twin stelae, highlighted by M. Schneider in the Arabic inscriptions of Dahlak islands, Red Sea, as well as of Qūṣ, Egypt¹³. Some wealthy people used to commission two stelae, the first one placed at the head of the deceased, the second at his feet, with two different epitaphs bearing the same date. This fragment is what remains of the second stele of Ḥafṣ b. ‘Umar al-Yamāmī. The safe reading of its date makes the chronology of Bilet cemetery going back in time and beginning in 361 A.H./972 C.E., provided that no older inscription is to be found among the twenty-one stelae discovered in March 2018. To date, this fragment bears the oldest Arabic inscription known from Ethiopia.

Fragment 2. Stele without date

I. Picture



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¹¹ SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 108-109, n° 1. Picture is not reproduced.

¹² It is worth remembering that the present research would have been far more difficult without the help of Madeleine Schneider exemplary works on Arabic inscriptions from Ethiopia.

¹³ Madeleine SCHNEIDER, *Stèles funéraires des îles Dahlak (mer Rouge)*, Le Caire, IFAO, 1983, 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 79-81.



II. Description

Basalt stone of rounded shape, the lower part of which is missing (L. 27 x W. 13 x T. 14). The inscription, which first four lines only are preserved, is carved in the stone. The script is awkward, without diacritic dots.

III. Arabic text

- ١ . بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
- ٢ . قل هو الله احد الله الصمد لم
- ٣ . يلد ولم يولد ولم يكن له كفوا
- ٤ . احد اللهم صلى على محمد واله الحمد

IV. Translation

1. *In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*
2. *Say: "He is God the One, God the Independant. Neither*
3. *Has he an offspring nor is He an offspring of anyone. And none is equal with Him in rank. (Quran, CXII)*
4. *O God, send blessings on the Prophet and his family. Praise (...)*

V. Comments

The inscription delivers no direct information about its datation. Provenance and material suggest however that the stele belongs to the corpus of Bilet cemetery. Its script is closed to that of inscription n° 8 published by Madeleine Schneider¹⁴. The *sura* quoted in full (Quran, CXII) after the *basmala* is missing in the corpus of inscriptions from Bilet published to date. However, its meaning, by rejecting the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ, son of God, and of the Holy trinity, is explicitly related to a Christian context. This fragment suggests that the Muslim people buried in Bilet cemetery from the second half of the Tenth-Century onwards¹⁵ used to live among Christian people or were at least aware of the Christian identity of their environment.

¹⁴ SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 113, n° 8 and planche XLIX.

¹⁵ The issue of the *terminus ante quem* of Bilet cemetery's activity must be reconsidered in light of the new material discovered by the Franco-Ethiopian mission in March 2018. According to the data already published, the later date of the corpus is 549 A.H./1154 C.E. But it should be noticed that the hundred is not readable on the inscription involved and that Madeleine Schneider suggested to read « five hundred » according to her reconstitution of the family tree of the descent of Ḥafṣ al-Yamāmī : M. SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 115-116, n° 11.





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This short reporting paper is the first step of a comprehensive study of Bilet cemetery and its Arabic inscriptions currently under preparation.

Julien Loiseau
P.I. ERC HornEast
Aix-Marseille Université, CNRS, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, France



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