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Two Arabic inscriptions from Bilet (Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia)

The Office for Tourism and Culture in Tigray (Mekelle, Ethiopia) preserves in its museum 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 Čərqos, 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 published in 2013 by Tekle Hagos, Wolbert Smidt and Mahmoud Rashidy³. They have been examined, measured and once again photographed by Amélie Chekroun (ERC HornEast), Bertrand Hirsch (Paris-1 Sorbonne University) and Julien Loiseau (ERC HornEast, Aix-Marseille University) in March 2018, with the kind permission of Dr. Dawit Hailu, at that time director of the Office for Tourism and Culture in Tigray⁴.

These two stones belong to the corpus of stelae of the Muslim cemetery of Bilet⁵. In 1937, Carlo Conti Rossini identified in the same area four Arabic stelae in reuse, in the stonework of a wall under construction⁶. The inscriptions of two of them were published in 1945 by Costantino Pansera, and their publication revised by Madeleine Schneider in 2009⁷. In 1967, Madeleine Schneider already published the Arabic inscriptions of twelve stelae, among

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

² Personal communication to the author.

³ Tekle HAGOS, Wolbert G.C. SMIDT & Mahmoud M.H. RASHIDY, « The two Arabic inscriptions of Mekelle Museum: A further contribution to the history of the eastern Tigrayan trade route (IV) », *ITYOPIS – Northeast African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3 (2013), pp. 150-153. The author did not have access to this paper prior to the present research.

⁴ This paper owes also much to Yohannes Gebre Sellassie for his precious help in Mekelle.

⁵ 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/>.

⁶ Carlo CONTI ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana presso Uogri Haribā nell’Enderta,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 17 (1937-1939), pp. 399-408.

⁷ 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.

fourteen stones brought to French archaeologists or found by them in reuse in the same area⁸. 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 Čərqos⁹.

The stones preserved in the museum of the Office for Tourism and Culture in Tigray 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 J. Loiseau. With 38 stelae known to date, the Muslim cemetery of Bilet accounts for half of the corpus of Medieval Arabic inscriptions from Ethiopia¹⁰.

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. ʿUmar 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.

⁸ Madeleine SCHNEIDER, "Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 7 (1967), pp. 107-122.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

Fragment 1. Stele of 361/972

I. Picture



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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 لاربع خلون من جمدى الاول
٧. [سنة] اءد وستين وتلثمائة سنة رحمه الله

IV. Translation¹¹

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 yea]r 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 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 deceased¹². 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.¹³.

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, Egypt¹⁴. 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.

¹¹ The English translation of Quranic verses is that of Abul Ala MAUDUDI, *The Meaning of the Qur’an*, 1972.

¹² SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 108-109, n° 1. Picture is not reproduced.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Madeleine SCHNEIDER, *Stèles funéraires des îles Dahlak (mer Rouge)*, Le Caire, IFAO, 1983, 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 79-81.

Fragment 2. Stele without date

I. Picture



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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 Schneider¹⁵. 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 onwards¹⁶ used to live among Christian people or were at least aware of the Christian identity of their environment.

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

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¹⁵ SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 113, n° 8 and planche XLIX.

¹⁶ 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-Yamāmi : M. SCHNEIDER, « Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha », pp. 115-116, n° 11.