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ANDREA MANZO, Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale

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by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995.
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011; 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG, *ibid.*, 2011f.; 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI, *ibid.*, 2012ff.
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"*, Napoli: Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London 1917ff.
- CSCO* *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003; II: D–Ha, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005; III: He–N, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007; (in cooperation with A. BAUSI), IV: O–X, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010; A. BAUSI (ed. in cooperation with S. UHLIG), V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014.
- EFAH* Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Abteilung, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, herausgegeben im Auftrag des Instituts von NORBERT NEBES.
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- IJAHS* *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Boston, MA – New York 1968ff.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- JSS* *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
- NEASt* *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig – Roma – Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- OrChrP* *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, Roma 1935ff.
- PICES 15* S. UHLIG – M. BULAKH – D. NOSNITSIN – T. RAVE (eds.) 2005, *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg July 20–25, 2003* = *AethFor* 65, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- PICES 16* H. ASPEN – BIRHANU TEFERRA – SHIFERAW BEKELE – S. EGE (eds.) 2010, *Research in Ethiopian Studies: Selected papers of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim July 2007* = *AethFor* 72, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND – A. J. DREWES – R. SCHNEIDER 1991, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches*, Paris: [Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres] Diffusion de Boccard.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma 1941–1981, Roma – Napoli 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.
- ZDMG* *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Leipzig – Wiesbaden – Stuttgart 1847ff.

Snakes and Sacrifices: Tentative Insights into the Pre-Christian Ethiopian Religion

ANDREA MANZO, Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale

In recent years scholarly interest in the pre-Christian religion of Northern Ethiopia has been influenced strongly by the late Paolo Marrassini and his essays. Marrassini dealt with the Ethiopian dragon, which, as we will see, remains a crucial element in the surviving traditions of the pre-Christian cults,¹ the characteristics of some gods mentioned in the royal Aksumite inscriptions of pre-Christian times,² and the transition from paganism to Christianity as seen in inscriptions.³ Some observations based on the epithets and possible iconographic elements associated in general with the pre-Christian gods and especially with Mährəm were also proposed.⁴ More recently, some intriguing archaeological elements were collected in a building most likely related to the cult of fertility, investigated by the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" directed by Rodolfo Fattovich.⁵ Nevertheless, the mystery of the pre-Christian religion of Northern Ethiopia is far from being solved, reflected in the few lines devoted to this subject in the most recent synthesis on the archaeology and ancient history of Northern Ethiopia.⁶

It was stressed that the mystery surrounding pre-Christian Ethiopian religion may be considered as a clear evidence of the success of Christianity.⁷ But if this may be the case for the material and epigraphic evidence, which was possibly effaced up to a certain extent after the adoption of Christianity, it is certainly not true for the Ethiopian tradition, which is very rich in this respect. As a matter of fact, the scanty evidence from epigraphic and iconographic sources contrasts with the Ethiopian tradition, which provides quite a lot of details on ritual practices of pre-Christian times.⁸ The Ethiopian tradi-

¹ MARRASSINI 2006.

² ID. 2010.

³ ID. 2012.

⁴ CONTI ROSSINI 1928: 141ff.; MANZO 1999a: 123–127; FATTOVICH 1994: 129f.; FRANTSOUZOFF 2010.

⁵ See SERNICOLA forthcoming.

⁶ PHILLIPSON 2012: 91.

⁷ ID. 1998: 112.

⁸ CONTI ROSSINI 1901; 1928: 249ff.; LITTMANN 1947; MARRASSINI 2006: 461ff.; RAMOS – BOAVIDA 2005; YAQOB BEYENE 1987: 180ff., §§ 21–32, see also BUSTORF 2010: 636f., MUNRO-HAY 1991: 12; ID. 2003.

tion outlines a phase when the country was ruled by a snake to whom young girls were periodically offered. The rule of the king-snake, often named Arwe, was challenged by a hero who became king and generated the Queen of Sheba. The Ethiopian ruling dynasty originated from the intercourse between the Queen of Sheba and Salomon. At a certain point this dynasty shifted from Judaism to Christianity. In certain variants the same Nine Saints who contributed greatly to the spread of Christianity in the country, and the pious king Kaleb himself, were directly involved in the killing of the king-snake.⁹ Interestingly, the king-snake is in turn mentioned as the first ruler of the country in the life of some of the Nine Saints, when the relationship between the related facts and the traditional chronology based on the chronological lists available to the writer is made explicit.¹⁰

Of course, the tradition of a king-snake ruling over the country may suggest that snakes had a special symbolic meaning, while the ritual offering of a young girl to the snake reported in the tradition suggests that human sacrifice was practiced. But the crucial point is whether Ethiopian traditional tales about these very remote times can give any insights into the real pre-Christian religion. In my view, this hypothesis cannot be excluded *a priori*, as the tradition of the king-snake and of the ritual human offerings to him is typical of Ethiopia. It does not occur in the foundation myths of the rest of the Oriental Christian traditions, which is the only possible source that could have influenced the Ethiopian tradition particularly on the affirmation and spread of Christianity. The possibility that this tradition may contain some elements of a very ancient local religious tradition, even earlier than the diffusion of South Arabian cultural elements in the 1st millennium B.C., has been acknowledged but not adequately explored.¹¹

Therefore, the issue is whether the archaeological and epigraphic records provide any evidence of ritual human sacrifices and of religious symbolisms related to the snake which may support this hypothesis.

Human sacrifice

Some passages in the royal Aksumite inscriptions suggest that at the end of wars, part of the booty consecrated to the god Mährəm consisted of human beings. Nevertheless it is debatable if this “consecration” of captives, as in the case mentioned by the inscription DAE 10,¹² involved the ritual killing of the

⁹ BRITA 2010: 12f., 64f., 71, 205; CONTI ROSSINI 1928: 161, 250, 252; MUNRO-HAY 2003; YAQOB BEYENE 1987: 188, §§ 35f.

¹⁰ BRITA 2010: 79f.

¹¹ PHILLIPSON 1998: 112, 141.

¹² RIÉ 258–261, no. 188, lines 29f.

prisoners, as some authors maintain.¹³ They could have been assigned as slaves or tributaries to religious institutions, following the system of the assignation of goods to the religious institutions, which is well known for Medieval Ethiopia.¹⁴ If we believe to some charters attributed to 6th-century kings, this practice may go back to at least Late Aksumite times,¹⁵ as is also supported by the reference in the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas* to the goods endowed on newly established churches in Yemen by king Kaleb.¹⁶ These short passages in the Aksumite inscriptions do not resolve the uncertainty about the destiny of the people “given” to Mäḥräm. However, although the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas* relates the accomplishments of the certainly Christian Aksumite king Kaleb, it also states that after the victory Allasbās (Kaleb) “built in the same spot an altar and offered up their blood (i.e. of the prisoners) to God and slaughtered the damned (i.e. the Jewish king of Saba) and his relatives”.¹⁷ It is clear from the passage, that not only the punishment of a criminal is meant here, but also an explicit reference to the offering of the blood sacrifice on an altar. This suggests that such rituals of human sacrifice may have survived up to Christian times.¹⁸

As far as the archaeological evidence is concerned, it is admittedly very scanty. At the moment we do not have any remains which can be ascribed with certainty to an Aksumite pagan temple. We may expect to find elements related to the human sacrifices in the temple, if we admit that at least some of the people “offered” to the divinity were sacrificed. The same paucity of evidence also characterizes the Aksumite funerary contexts,¹⁹ but perhaps some remarks can be added in this respect. To date an important aspect of the pre-Christian Aksumite funerary ritual has been largely overlooked by scholars. I am referring to the funerary offerings, which may have been a crucial element both in the interment ceremonies and in the funerary cults that continued after the funeral. The fact that such rituals took place is clearly demonstrated by the decorations of the most elaborate base plates in the main stelae field at Aksum, which tend to be regarded merely as structural elements to provide stability to the stelae.²⁰ Actually, in the most elaborate cases, the base plates

¹³ KOBISHCHANOV 1979: 154, 219, 233; MUNRO-HAY 1991: 142, 198, 227.

¹⁴ See e.g. CRUMMEY 2000: 11f.; HUNTINGFORD 1965: 11ff., see also MUNRO-HAY 1991: 198.

¹⁵ HUNTINGFORD 1965: 9.

¹⁶ BAUSI – GORI 2006, Arabic version pp. 86f. § 25, Ethiopic version pp. 296ff., §§ 38, f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Arabic version pp. 84f., § 25, Ethiopic version pp. 292f., §§ 37, f.

¹⁸ *Contra* KOBISHCHANOV 1979: 233f.

¹⁹ PHILLIPSON 1998: 110f.

²⁰ See e.g. ID. 2012: 147.

are characterized by the carved representation of offering bowls.²¹ Interestingly, also a stela at Yəḥa, likely to go back to Aksumite times, was characterized by a well carved rounded stone offering basin at its base,²² although the fact that this is *in situ* can be debated. For this reason and for this function suggested by some scholars,²³ the term “ara” (altar) adopted to indicate this specific element by C. Conti Rossini, or the term “altarplatte” or simply “altar” used by Krencker should be regarded as more appropriate than “base plate”.²⁴

Of course it is not easy to find traces which may help in the reconstruction of the offering rituals because of the continuous remodelling that affected the most extensively investigated Aksumite funerary area, the May Ḥəḡḡa stelae field. A small amount of evidence found scattered on the top of the platforms, around them and in the areas around the stelae, such as deposits of carbonised bones, suggests that offering rituals or sacrifices did take place there.²⁵ Despite the ongoing agricultural exploitation of part of it, the Proto-Aksumite cemetery at ʿOna Ḥnda Abboy Zäg^we (ʿOAZ), on Betä Giyorgis hill, north of Aksum, was less disturbed and provides some evidence of funerary offerings, as shown by the concentrations of ceramic materials, mainly basins and bowls, which were recorded on the surface of the platforms on which the monolithic stelae were erected.²⁶

Evidence of subsidiary graves possibly related to human sacrifices and to funerary rituals, were identified in the Proto-Aksumite (3rd–1st century B.C.) cemetery at ʿOna Ḥnda Abboy Zäg^we. In the upper part of an undisturbed funerary pit, Feature 3, of excavation unit ʿOAZ I, an almost vertical, badly preserved skeleton associated with an atypical black pot with knobs was brought to light, with the main burial discovered underneath at the base of the pit.²⁷ In excavation unit ʿOAZ VII, on top of the platform in which the opening of several funerary pits occurred, at least one subsidiary burial was brought to light (fig. 1).²⁸ In this specific case, the fact that the burial, with a body in

²¹ CHITTICK 1974: 163, pl. VIa; KRENCKER 1913: 13ff., Abb. 25; MANZO 1999b: 351ff., figs. 4f.; MUNRO-HAY 1991: 137f., 142, see also KOBISHCHANOV 1979: 233.

²² KRENCKER 1913: 2, 78f., Abb. 2, 163; MUNRO-HAY 1991: 142.

²³ See VAN BEEK 1967: 116f.

²⁴ See CONTI ROSSINI 1928: 241 and KRENCKER 1913: 13, 20ff.

²⁵ MUNRO-HAY 1991: 134, 202, 257 see also FRANTSOUZOFF 2010: 361

²⁶ FATTOVICH – BARD 1993: 24f.; 2001: 5, 8, 10, 15; BARD – FATTOVICH – MANZO – PERLINGIERI 2002: 34.

²⁷ IID. 1997: 390; 2002: 36f.; FATTOVICH – BARD 1991: 51; 2001: 6f., fig. 1; FATTOVICH – MANZO – BARD 1998: 48.

²⁸ BARD – FATTOVICH – MANZO – PERLINGIERI 2002: 36f., Pl. II; FATTOVICH – BARD 1995: 60f.; 2001: 10, fig. 4.



Fig. 1: Excavation unit °OAZ VII at °Ona Enda Abboy Zägwe, top of the Proto-Aksumite funerary platform with a subsidiary burial in the foreground and a collapsed stela on the background (archives of the Joint Archaeological Project of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Boston University)



Fig. 2: Detail of a subsidiary burial on top of the Proto-Aksumite funerary platform in excavation unit °OAZ VII at °Ona Ḃnda Abboy Zäg^we, to be remarked the bronze armlets found in association with it (archives of the Joint Archaeological Project of the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and Boston University)

contracted position and head to the East facing south, was not intrusive and ancient is shown by the type of bronze armlets found in association with it, recalling items found in other Proto-Aksumite funerary assemblages at °Ona Ḃnda Abboy Zäg^we (fig. 2). Moreover, the position of the body on top of the platform at °OAZ VII seems to be similar to the one characterizing other Proto-Aksumite burials.²⁹ Both in the case of the subsidiary grave at °OAZ I, Feature 3 and in the one on top of the platform at °OAZ VII, the graves seem to be of the same phase as the ones found at the bottom of the associated funerary pits. But from their location, they clearly represent an element of a funerary ritual centered on another burial, to be regarded as the main burial.

To these elements from the Proto-Aksumite phase, some later evidence can be added. In the main stela field at Aksum, two human burials were found in the pit where a stela (no. 137) was erected. Moreover, the occurrence of animal and human bones often burned among the fill and capping materials of

²⁹ See e.g. IID. 1991: 51, fig. 5; 2001: 7, fig. 2.

the platforms, on top of which the stelae were erected, may refer to sacrifices and offering practices.³⁰

More recently, it has been claimed that some remains of children buried in pots that were discovered in an Aksumite building at Bəriḳ ʿAwdi, north-east of Aksum, should also be regarded as sacrifices.³¹ They may however represent simple burials in pots, like the ones already recorded at other Aksumite sites such as Adulis and Mätära.³² At the same site, a burial under what seems to be the foundation of a pillar was interpreted as a human sacrifice, but more complete information on the general archaeological context is needed to assess its nature.³³

Snakes

Interestingly, in the same Proto-Aksumite contexts of Betä Giyorgis related to the funerary offerings, also some hemispherical ceramic basins with ring base and ledge characterized by the occurrence of modeled decorations on the rim representing snakes were discovered, like in the case of Tomb 10 at ʿOna Ənda Abboy Zäg^we (fig. 3).³⁴ Similar basins were also found in the Proto-Aksumite

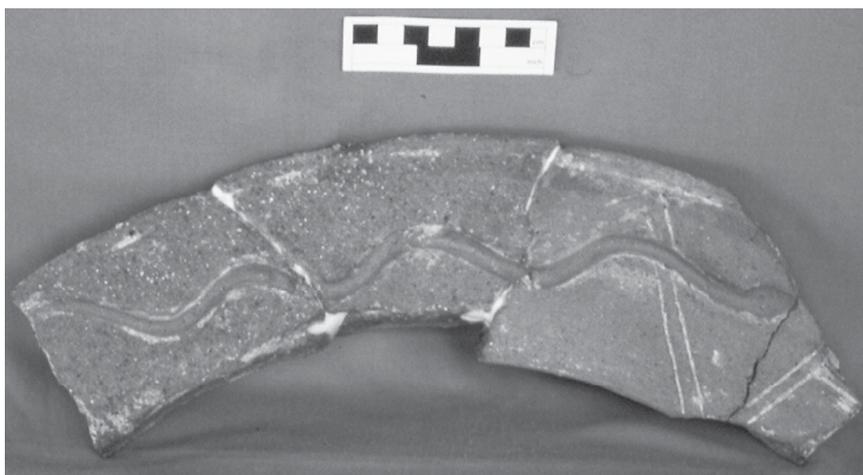


Fig. 3: Fragment of a basin with modeled decorations on the ledge rim representing snakes from Tomb 10 in the Proto-Aksumite cemetery at ʿOna Ənda Abboy Zäg^we (archives of the Joint Archaeological Project of the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and Boston University)

³⁰ MUNRO-HAY 1989: 325f.; 1991: 142, 256f.

³¹ WENDOWSKI – ZIEGERT 2003, fig. 1

³² See ANFRAY 1974: 752f., fig. 1; MUNRO-HAY 1991: 256.

³³ ZIEGERT 2001: 32, figs. 6f.

³⁴ MANZO 2003: 39f., fig. 2, a.

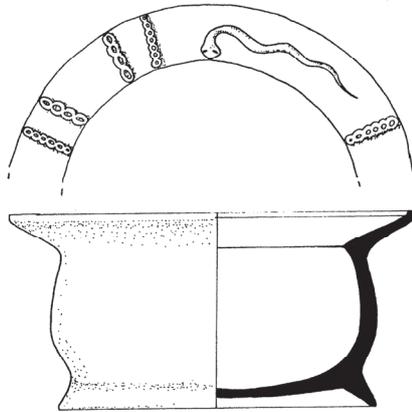


Fig. 4: Basin with modeled decorations on the ledge rim representing snakes from the Proto-Aksumite cemetery of Säläkläka, approximate diameter 40 cm (modified from COSSAR 1945, fig. 15)

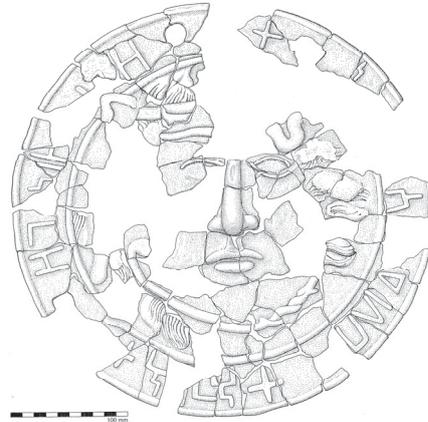


Fig. 5: Bronze plaque with the representation of the head of Gorgon from the Tomb of the Brick Arches at Aksum (modified from PHILLIPSON 2000, figs. 79–80)

cemetery of Säläkläka³⁵ (fig. 4) and in the assemblage associated with the earliest remains of a monumental building under the Cathedral of Ĕnda Maryam Şəyon at Aksum.³⁶ The fact that they were discovered in association with elite cemeteries and with a monumental building, i.e. in contexts that are highly meaningful from an ideological point of view, strongly suggests that the snake had a crucial symbolic meaning in Northern Ethiopia in the last centuries B.C.

Also in later Aksumite assemblages there are iconographic traces of the snake and related subjects, as shown by the bronze plaque from the Tomb of the Brick Arches at Aksum,³⁷ which can be identified with the head of a Gorgon as usual surrounded by the contorted bodies of snakes (fig. 5).³⁸ Moreover, a fragmentary capital from a monumental building at Toḵonda^c, an Aksumite site in what is now Eritrea, is characterized by two symmetrical tails of snakes (fig. 6).³⁹ The two tails may be interpreted as the two “knotted” snakes under the head of a Gorgon, thus confirming the occurrence of this iconography in the Aksumite context, but it cannot be excluded that they may

³⁵ COSSAR 1945: 16, fig. 15; MANZO 2003: 43, fig. 4, f.

³⁶ MANZO 2003: 44, fig. 5, a.

³⁷ PHILLIPSON 2000: 95ff., figs. 79f.

³⁸ MANZO 2012a: 430ff.

³⁹ CONTI ROSSINI 1928, Tav. XLVI, n. 143; DAINELLI – MARINELLI 1912: 533, tav. XLI, b; KRENCKER 1913: 147, Abb. 306.



Fig. 6: Fragmentary capital from an Aksumite monumental building at Tokonda^c, with a decoration representing two symmetrical tails of snakes, length 87 cm (modified from KRENCKER 1913, Abb. 306)

be just part of a representation of snakes. Anyway, in both cases, also considering the rarity of examples of figurative art from Aksumite Ethiopia, the fragmentary capital from Tokonda^c and the bronze plaque from Aksum seem to suggest the relevance of the snake and symbols related to snakes in Aksumite ideology. The fact that we are here dealing with ideological manifestations related to the elite is strongly supported by the fact that the capital from Tokonda^c was part of a monumental building, while the bronze plaque from Aksum was not only found in an elite tomb, but may even have been placed on the top of one of the largest stone stelae with architectonic decoration,⁴⁰ i.e. a kind of monument which was clearly an expression of the Aksumite elite. This also may be true for the earlier phases, as it has been suggested that the cemetery at ^cOna Ḥnda Abboy Zäg^we was possibly used for the burials of Proto-Aksumite rulers.⁴¹

Final remarks

The evidence described above, although scarce, may suggest that two aspects characterizing the well-known traditions about pre-Christian Ethiopia, i.e. the crucial role of the snake and the practice of human sacrifice, may indeed have been part of Aksumite religious beliefs.

As far as the practice of human sacrifices is concerned, it should be remarked that its occurrence in the Aksumite context is somehow not unexpected. Actually, human sacrifices are a well known component of the fu-

⁴⁰ PHILLIPSON 2000: 100.

⁴¹ FATTOVICH – BARD 2001: 19f.

nerary ritual in the neighbouring regions of Ethiopia since very ancient times. In the Middle Nile valley, the earliest examples of human sacrifice date to the 4th millennium B.C., and this practice is widely recorded in the 3rd–2nd millennium B.C.⁴² Human sacrifice also characterized the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic cultures, roughly contemporary to the above discussed Aksumite examples, and there it was especially but not exclusively related to a triumphal symbolism.⁴³ Human sacrifices of foreign chieftains or rulers related to triumphal symbolism and to the expression of the capability of the ruler to protect his country, or perhaps even to guarantee the cosmic order may have taken place also in the Meroitic temples.⁴⁴ Moreover, human sacrifice is a practice attributed to the inhabitants of this part of Africa and more specifically to the Meroites also in the external literary sources such as *Aithiopia* by Heliodoros.⁴⁵ Interestingly, both in the Aksumite and in the Middle Nile cultural contexts the sacrifice is often related to the funerary rituals. For the moment, we cannot specify if these similarities between the possible human sacrifices at Aksum and the ones in the Middle Nile cultures are a matter of simple parallelisms, suggest any kind of relationship or even manifest a very ancient cultural common background. Crucial elements for clarifying this question may arrive from the ongoing archaeological investigations in the intermediate area of the Sudanese-Eritrean lowlands and especially at the site of K1 (Mahal Teglinos, near Kassala). Here in an early 2nd millennium B.C. funerary context, not only the use of funerary stelae was recorded, as at Aksum,⁴⁶ but also a so far unique tomb with a double sepulture⁴⁷ was discovered, in which the main burial is clearly distinguishable from the one of a possible sacrificial victim (fig. 7).⁴⁸

It is also hoped that new evidence will arrive from the continuation of the archaeological exploration of the Ethiopian plateau. In particular, if we acknowledge the existence of human sacrifice then new elements can possibly help us to understand who was sacrificed and how. As we mentioned, in the Meroitic context human sacrifice was often associated with the triumphal symbolism. Taking into account the very explicit passage in the *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas* quoted above, then this also may have been the case at Aksum if

⁴² GEUS 1991: 58, 64.

⁴³ LENOBLE 1997: 299f. see also GEUS 1991: 70.

⁴⁴ ZACH 2010.

⁴⁵ COLONNA 1987: 538f., § X.7; EIDE – HÄGG – PIERCE – TÖRÖK 1998: 1048, § 274.

⁴⁶ FATTOVICH 1989; MANZO 2006–2007: 263f.

⁴⁷ K1 BPLF-Z/BPQA-E, Tomb 15.

⁴⁸ I am indebted to Charles Bonnet for this remark. He suggested this possibility when looking at the images of the double tomb of Mahal Teglinos during the International Conference of Nubian Studies held in Lille in 1994.



Fig. 7: Tomb with a double sepulture (K1 BPLF-Z/BPQA-E, Tomb 15) at Mahal Teglinos (archives of the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Sudan (Kassala) of the Istituto Universitario Orientale [presently University of Naples “L’Orientale”])

we decide to admit that some of the prisoners, who were consecrated to the divinity mentioned in the Aksumite royal inscription, were sacrificed. Unfortunately, for the moment the archaeological evidence does not help to clarify this point. Only the objects discovered in association with the bodies of the possible sacrificial victims at °Ona Ḥnda Abboy Zäg^we may be helpful in this respect, although they seem ambiguous: while the bronze bracelets found in association with the skeleton in excavation unit °OAZ VII are similar to the ones discovered in other Proto-Aksumite graves and therefore cannot be ascribed to foreign people, the black pot found in association with the skeleton in trench °OAZ I is atypical and may actually be exotic. Similarly, while the position of the skeleton on top of the platform in excavation unit °OAZ VII is similar to the one of other Proto-Aksumite graves, the vertical position of the skeleton in the upper part of Feature 3 in trench °OAZ I seems to be atypical.

As far as the religious value of the snake and its possible cult is concerned, parallelisms with the surrounding regions may be possible. It is likely that the snake had a religious relevance in ancient South Arabia,⁴⁹ just like in the popular beliefs of the Yemeni Tihāmah, likely rooted in pre-

⁴⁹ ANTONINI 2004: 87ff.; RYCKMANS 1988: 108.

Islamic practices,⁵⁰ not to speak of the numerous symbolisms related to the snakes in the Nile valley.⁵¹ Nevertheless, no close parallels for the king snake of the Ethiopian myth can be identified except for an Egyptian tale dating to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.). In this tale a shipwrecked sailor mentions a divine snake which was the king of Punt, remarkably a region of the southern Red Sea: an Egyptian official whose ship sank in a storm met this benevolent and protective king snake on an island.⁵² Conti Rossini considered this tale as related to the common background of the African cultures,⁵³ which yet remains a possibility. But, interestingly enough, in the tale the snake is presented as the benevolent divine king of a foreign land and not of Egypt itself,⁵⁴ as one would expect if the king snake was an element of a wide-ranging, ancient African background emerging both in Egypt and in Ethiopia. For the moment, given the chronological distance between the Ethiopian Arwe and the Puntite king snake, the question of a possible relationship between the two cannot be resolved.

If the king snake does not seem to occur widely, on the contrary the fight of the hero with the snake or the dragon, which is another relevant aspect of the Ethiopian tradition, occurs in other cultural traditions with which the people of Northeastern Ethiopia may have had contacts. This is a widely occurring element in the Near Eastern mythologies.⁵⁵ The fight of the hero with the snake or the dragon also characterizes the classical myth of Perseus, said to have killed a sea-monster and salvaged Andromeda, a girl offered by her parents to the monster to placate Poseidon. The Greek myth of Perseus is sometimes located on the Syrian coast, a region where many of the above mentioned pre-Classical mythical fights between hero and Sea-monster took place,⁵⁶ but it is also very often located in a region labeled as “Ethiopia”.⁵⁷ Also in the case of the myth of Perseus, as in the tale of the serpent king of the Shipwrecked Sailor, the foreign location is frequently stressed: in the Mediterranean representations of the myth it is made evident by the aspect of the people shown with Andromeda, often clearly African.⁵⁸ Of course, “Ethiopia” is a Greek term which cannot be precisely identified with a specific region but indicates a broad area at the southern fringes of Northwest Africa or of Egypt, but which may

⁵⁰ MYERS 1947: 208f.

⁵¹ See e.g. WATTERSON 1984: 35, 45, 60f., 64, 108, 117, 134f., 179f.

⁵² LICHTHEIM 1973: 211ff.

⁵³ CONTI ROSSINI 1901.

⁵⁴ LICHTHEIM 1973: 214.

⁵⁵ See e.g. GASTER 1937; GREEN 2003.

⁵⁶ SNOWDEN 1970: 153f.

⁵⁷ CARLIER 1981; SCHAUBENBURG 1981: 774; SNOWDEN 1970: 153f.; 1981: 414.

⁵⁸ SCHAUBENBURG 1981: 776, I, 2, I, 3; SNOWDEN 1970: 157f.; 1981: 416f., 419, nos. 19ff.

include the region of Aksum.⁵⁹ We can wonder if the location of the myth in “Ethiopia” suggests a possible awareness in Mediterranean peoples of local “Ethiopian” myths, such as the ones described at the beginning of this article and centered on the hero killing the serpent-monster, similar to the awareness that Mediterranean peoples clearly had about such myths in the Near East. Some pre-Islamic ceremonies, practised until recent times on the Yemeni coastal strip, the Tihāmah, may recall both the Ethiopian myth of the hero rescuing the girl offered to Arwe and the Classical myth of Perseus and Andromeda. Actually, the Tihāmah tradition is about a holy man named Al-Shamsī who arrived in the village now named after him and found its people under threat of a monster, who lived nearby and demanded one or more virgins every year. Of course Al-Shamsī slew the monster and liberated the village, and this is commemorated with a special festival every year.⁶⁰ For the moment the question of the possible relationships between the Ethiopian myth of the hero killing the monster, the other myths of the southern Red Sea, and the Near Eastern ones remains unanswered. Nevertheless, although it is true that this relationship remains unproven and that similarities may result from simple parallelisms,⁶¹ recent archaeological discoveries suggest that the Near Eastern myth of the hero killing the snake-monster may have already been present in Egypt in Middle Kingdom times (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.).⁶² From here it may well have reached the southern Red Sea, an area with which Egypt had intense contacts in that period, perhaps also resulting in innovations and enrichments even in the field of Egyptian royal ideology.⁶³

All of this remains hypotheses, until new evidence becomes available. To go back to more solid ground, at Aksum, in the elite milieu of the 3rd–4th centuries A.D., there may have been a certain awareness of the myth of Perseus, the killer not only of the monster menacing Andromeda, but also of the snake-haired Gorgon.⁶⁴ Actually, among the Mediterranean iconographies used in the Aksumite context, we find the head of the Gorgon listed among the representations of snakes. I suggested that the use of this iconography by the Aksumite rulers may be related to its use as an imperial symbol in the Mediterranean.⁶⁵ It cannot be excluded that its adoption was favoured by a possible Aksumite *interpretatio* of the Greek myth, related to the local mythology, in which the snake may have already represented a crucial element,

⁵⁹ ID. 1981: 413.

⁶⁰ STONE 1985: 122f.

⁶¹ MARRASSINI 2006: 466.

⁶² PORADA 1984.

⁶³ MANZO 2012b: 80ff.

⁶⁴ CARLIER 1981; DAHLINGER 1988: 286f.; JONES ROCCOS 1994: 332f.

⁶⁵ MANZO 2012a: 434f.

as suggested by the earlier offering basins with decoration consisting of modelled snakes of Proto-Aksumite times (4th–1st centuries B.C.).

Interestingly, several of these archaeological finds bearing representations of snakes or related to the snakes were found in funerary contexts related to the Aksumite elite, i.e. in the same contexts where also the traces of human sacrifices were identified. This is particularly evident for the Proto-Aksumite period, the formative period of the Aksumite culture dating to the 4th–1st centuries B.C. Unfortunately, in the absence of further archaeological or textual data, the question whether there were relationships between the offering rituals related to the snake and the practice of human sacrifice for the moment remains unanswered. Nevertheless, the occurrence of these two rituals in the same cemetery at Betä Giyorgis is in any case highly suggestive, bearing in mind the relationship between the king snake and human sacrifice attributed to pagan times in Ethiopian tradition. It was also suggested that some of these ancient beliefs and rituals may be echoed by practices that have been ethnographically recorded in more recent times in some parts of Ethiopia: rituals related to the snakes and to their symbolic and religious value were performed among Agäw and Oromo groups,⁶⁶ while human sacrifice was practiced periodically or near the tomb of the deceased chief among groups living in the Omo valley and in central Ethiopia.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, for the moment it remains difficult to say if these practices are in any way related to the ancient ones discussed in this article and further studies on their origins are needed to trace them back to ancient times.

Finally, it may be worth noting that in the Christian tradition of Northern Ethiopia, the snake is not always seen as negative and dangerous: a good snake helps the saint in the tradition of Arägawi, which is perhaps related to the *topos* of the dominion of the holy man over dangerous animals.⁶⁸ In the Life of Liqanos a snake recalls the neglected gift of incense to be given to the saint,⁶⁹ and a snake is said to have guarded the tabot of Bušurro Maryam.⁷⁰ Perhaps these good snakes, somehow reminiscent of the positive connotation of the king snake of Punt in the Egyptian tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, reflect a phase of the pre-Christian religion in which the snake was considered a positive and benevolent entity. The ambiguity of the role of the snake in Ethiopian myth, in which both negative but also positive aspects occur, is also highlighted by the association between the snake and fertility symbolized by the cereals flourishing on its head after its death.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the possible reference to

⁶⁶ CONTI ROSSINI 1928: 79.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 80, 84f.

⁶⁸ BRITA 2010: 68 and 253; BUSTORF 2010: 637.

⁶⁹ BRITA 2010: 144.

⁷⁰ BUSTORF 2010: 636f.

⁷¹ BOAVIDA – RAMOS 2005: 88; CONTI ROSSINI 1928: 251; MARRASSINI 2006: 463.

the myth of Perseus in pre-Christian Aksum and the Ethiopian tradition itself which usually predates the death of Arwe to a period prior to the adoption of Christianity, makes it clear that a myth related to the hero killing the snake may have existed before Christianization. Thus, already in pagan times the snake may have changed its skin for the first time and from benevolent and helpful entity, became a dangerous monster that had to be killed in order to allow a peaceful and civilized life to begin. In turn, the traditions ascribing the killing of Arwe to the Nine Saints can be explained by the appropriation and reinterpretation of this pre-Christian myth of the king snake killed by the hero at the time of the adoption of Christianity, when the snake started to be considered a symbol of deplorable pagan cults. At that time the snake changed its skin once again and became, as in the rest of the Christian *oikumene*, the symbol of sin.⁷²

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⁷² URECH 1972: 167f.

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Summary

Despite the recent efforts which were recently made in this field of study, our knowledge of the pre-Christian religion of Aksumite Northern Ethiopia remains very limited. This article presents the contribution that archaeology can make to debate on this topic. In particular, some archaeological finds from Betä Giyorgis, north of Aksum, and from Aksum itself which can be related to the cult of the snake and to the practice of human sacrifices are described. These finds, dating from the Proto-Aksumite (3rd–1st centuries B.C.) and the first part of the Aksumite (1st–4th centuries A.D.) periods, may support the reality of the cult of the snake and of the practice of human sacrifices, two elements characterizing the Ethiopian traditions related to Arwe, the mythic snake-king of Aksum. In the conclusions, these specific aspects which may have characterized the pre-Christian Ethiopian religion are put in a broader regional context, compared to what is known about similar cultic traits in the Nile valley, in the Near East, and in South Arabia. Possible links to be explored with further research covering the different traditions are suggested. Moreover, a possible evolution in the meaning of the snake in Ethiopia, from benevolent and helpful entity to dangerous monster, and, finally, to symbol of sin, is outlined.