[Review-note, 1187 words]

Paolo Nicelli (ed.), *L’Africa, l’Oriente mediterraneo e l’Europa. Tradizioni e culture a confronto*, Accademia Ambrosiana. Africana Ambrosiana 1 (Roma: Bulzoni, 2015). i-xi + 205 pp, plates i-viib. Price: € 17. ISBN: 978-88-6897-013-0.

The first volume of the series “Africana Ambrosiana” presents the activities of the newly founded “Classe di studi africani” of the Ambrosian Academy, in the premises of the Venerable Ambrosian Library in Milan. The “Class”, composed of three sections (Berberology, Coptology, Ethiopian studies) was formally established in April 2014. The volume presents the materials of a conference which was staged in the Ambrosian Library on the 1st “Dies Academicus” of the new “Class”, on 22-23 October 2014. The publication is dedicated to the late memory of Prof. Gianfranco Fiaccadori whose untimely death on 24 January 2015 became a great loss to the scholarly community. A prominent scholar of the Byzantine, Near East and Ethiopian Studies, G. Fiaccadori promoted the establishment of a new “Class” where Ethiopian studies are supposed to play a significant role. The underlying idea of the new foundation has been manifested in the title of the volume under review; and, as it was put by the Grand Chancellor of the Academy, Cardinal Angelo Scola, “the Academy, thanks to its richness and variety of its Classes and Sections, seemed to be showing, in an increasingly evident way, some guidelines for this new humanism, in order to answer fundamental questions put to us by young people and posed by the news coming from the world today” (“Preface”, p. X ). The extension of the Academy with the “Classe di studi africani” is an encouraging event in the time when humanities are on the whole under constraint in many universities, African studies of whatever sort can be easily subjected to reduction, and Ethiopian studies still have to prove their viability in hard competition with other Orientalist disciplines.

The volume opens with the “Prefazione” by P.-F. Fumagalli, the director of the “Class” (in Italian and English); followed by 10 scholarly contributions distributed between four sections (“Africa berbera”, pp. 15-43; “Africa occidentale”, pp. 47-86; “Il Corno d’Africa”, pp. 89-126; “La tradizione copta”, pp. 129-168). One contribution (P. Nicelli) is placed in the beginning outside all sections, probably because it relates to more than one African tradition. The contributions are followed by nine English “abstracts” (pp. 169-174), and the most useful “Informazioni accademiche” (in Italian and English, pp. 177-194) presenting the structure and statute of the Ambrosian academy. The carefully edited volume is concluded with registers and plates.

Despite the small size of the book, most of the contributions are full-fledged studies bringing forth a lot of essential information necessary for acquaintance with the regions as well as new data and ideas.

In P. Nicelli’s article, MS X 104 sup., if considered without the more recent paper production unit MS X 104 sub. bis, is a rare example of an old Ethiopic Psalter of very small size, only 135 mm x 12 mm, which originally did not have the additional texts *Wəddase* *Maryam* and ʾ*Anqäṣä bərhan*.

The contributions of “Africa berbera” - L Galand, H. Stroomer, V. Brugnatelli - provide a good overview of the cultural and linguistic situation in the vast Berber-speaking part of Africa which until not so distant time was considered the dominion of predominantly oral culture. The “recovery” of the written Berber literature and manuscript culture takes place in the time when various African traditions written in the local vernacular languages, in the most cases in Arabic script (the so-called *ajami*), previously ignored or poorly known, are coming to light and increasingly attracting the attention of the researchers.

In the section “Africa occidentale”, the article by P. Valsecchi presents the stories of two West-Africans in the seventeenth-century Europe, Aniaba of Assini and Wilhelm Amo. The accounts contextualize a similar story well-known to Ethiopianists, of the seventeenth-century fugitive “prince” Ṣägga Krəstos who presented himself in Europe as a son of the Ethiopian King Yaʿqob (1603-07)[[1]](#footnote-1). The contribution by A. Soldati presents a summary of the history of Usman dan Fodio and the Sokoto caliphate, which introduced the century of the great African religious leaders and religious wars. On the other side of the African continent the period resulted in the religious radicalism of the movement of Muḥammad Aḥmad (1844-85), the Sudanese Mahdi, and the Ethiopian Christian Kings Tewodros II (reg. 1859-68) and Yoḥannəs IV (1872-89).

The section “Il Corno d’Africa” is introduced by the “Prolusione” of G. Fiaccadori who made an outline of the history of the Aksumite polity and the most important aspects of its culture[[2]](#footnote-2). An important contribution by T. Erho concerns the issues of the status and circulation of the Ethiopic version of “The Shepherd of Hermas”, and presents an analysis of a few old traditional book inventories. Many dozens of such inventories are known and definitely require further systematic study[[3]](#footnote-3). The contribution of A. Gori discusses the situation of the “Islamic languages” in the Muslim parts of the Horn of Africa. One wonders if the elements of the model(s) presented by A. Gori (pp. 119-21) can at least partly be applicable for describing the linguistic situation in the Christian areas of the Horn. In similarity to the dichotomy of the Arabic and *ajami*-traditions, the non-spoken Ethiopic (Gəʿəz) was the main written language of the Christians while Amharic, also written language, was meant for daily communication and religious instruction (it can be equated to the “learned dialect”, p. 120, in terms of L. Brenner and M. Last). Apart from that, a number of local languages, purely oral, were used in the region for day-to-day communication only.

The volume is concluded with two solid and informative contributions on the Coptic tradition. A. Camplani discusses the language situation in Egypt during Late Antiquity and the origin and status of the Coptic language; P. Buzi summarizes the evidence on the veneration tradition of St. Onuphrius (known in Ethiopia as ʾAbunafer).

Hopefully, the series will continue with proceedings of the conferences organized after the year 2015 (“Dies Academicus” of 2015, 2016 and 2017).

D. Nosnitsin

1. Ṣägga Krəstos (d. 1638) was received in Europe with honors and got audiences with Pope Urban XIII (1633) and with King Luis XIII (1635). During the last years of his life he lived under the auspices of Cardinal Richelieu (see L. Störk, “Notizen zu Zaga Krestos”, *Scrinium. Revie de patrologie, d’hagiographie critique et d’histoire ecclésiastique* 1, 2005, 317-322). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The contribution is a transcript of G. Fiaccadori’s speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. At least 25 inventories have been recorded by the project Ethio-SPaRe (the signature UM-027, mentioned by T. Erho in relation to the Four Gospels manuscript which sourced the inventory edited on pp. 110-111, was assigned to the book by the project Ethio-SPaRe, in the course of digitization in May 2010; see https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare.html). T. Erho demonstrates that inventories can be valuable sources. At the same time, they are difficult sources. They contain not the exact titles of the works, but rather “labels” assigned to the manuscripts by the local users. The “labels” are related to the actual content of the manuscripts but they are schematic and in many cases not explicit enough (luckily, it seems to be the opposite in the case of the Shepherd of Hermas). Finally, the inventories were meant mainly to notice the physical availability of the books (exactly speaking, volumes). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)