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## *From Aksum to Lalibäla: The myth of the 'dark age' of Eritrean and Ethiopian history (7th-13th cent.). A multidisciplinary approach*

### ▪ Alemseged Beldados Aleho (Addis Ababa University)

#### **Comparative archaeobotanical studies from Medieval Christian and Islamic sites: Lalibäla and Harar**

The data recovered from some sites in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, Aksum and Lalibäla indicates that the period which is commonly known as the dark period in the history of Ethiopia and Eritrea (7th to 13th centuries), is not completely devoid of data/information. Archaeobotanical investigation of soil samples from 'Ona Adi in Tägray and Wašša Mika'el, Yəmraḥannä Krəstos and Gännätä Maryam in Lalibäla has given us information on the subsistence economy and environmental context of the region. The Agricultural economy has continued in more or less a similar manner in the two millennia preceding this period. The agricultural base of the society at the time was on crops of Middle Eastern origin rather than locally available indigenous crops. The same trend was observed as of the second millennium BC.

### ▪ Ambu Martina (Université Aix-Marseille)

#### **Dayr al-Abyaḍ: Ethiopian pilgrimages and translations from Arabic into Gə'əz at the White Monastery (12th-13th c.)**

On the basis of an ex-voto inscription (now lost), a group of pilgrims from Ethiopia is likely to have stopped at the famous White Monastery (Dayr al-Abyaḍ) in Middle Egypt in the 222nd year of Mercy (= 1038 or 1114 CE). Furthermore, an Egyptian monk was being active at the same monastery and had completed the translation of the *Life of Theodore the Oriental* from Arabic into Gə'əz during the kingdom of Gabra Masqal, which corresponds to the royal name of several kings from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The aim of this contribution is to introduce a new hypothesis on Egyptian-Ethiopian relations before and during king Lālibalä's reign (?-1204-1225-?) and to draw the attention to the role played by Dayr al-Abyaḍ as a place of pilgrimages and translations.

### ▪ Banti Giorgio (ISMEO)

#### **Reexamining the non-Semitic lexicon of Harari, with a focus on the *Kitāb al-Farāyiḍ* and the oldest religious poetry**

In his study of Harari, which also included the editio princeps of one of the most important Old Harari texts, i.e., the *Kitāb al-Farāyiḍ* (KaF), Enrico Cerulli (1936: 438f.) pointed out that there were a number of words "di origine Sidama" in its lexicon. Some of them occurred in the KaF only, while other ones were still alive in contemporary Harari, where also words from other Cushitic languages are present, such as Oromo and Somali. Wolf Leslau didn't distance himself from Cerulli's view in his etymological dictionary of this language. For instance, he wrote: "Of particular importance for Harari are the Eastern Sidamo dialects (Sidamo, Qabenna, Kambatta, Hadiya, Alaba, Tembaro, and perhaps Darasa), since Sidamo was the substratum language of Harar and of southern Ethiopia" (Leslau 1963: 3). Also he pointed out that there were several Oromo and Somali loanwords in Harari. Leslau (1959: 290f.) includes a detailed list of what he regarded as Cushitic loanwords, where he separated those that occurred only in Harari from those it shared with other Ethiosemitic languages. The occurrence of Oromo and Somali loanwords is not surprising, because nowadays Harari is a Semitic language island surrounded by these two East Cushitic languages, and many Hararis know both of them. The occurrence of Sidamo, i.e., Highland East Cushitic languages like those listed by Leslau (1963) has instead to be re-assessed, because these languages are now much better known, and all the most important etymological studies of East Cushitic have been published after 1963, like Black (1974), Sasse (1979), Hudson (1989), and Bender (2020). Also Hudson (2013) is of considerable importance here, because it re-examines (especially on pp. 245f.) the Cushitic loanwords he identified in his corpus. More recently, the present author (Banti 2020: 275) pointed out that, comparing the known variants of the KaF, it is possible to identify two clearly 'Afar words in it, a language that had not been taken into consideration in previous studies of Cushitic loanwords in Harari.



▪ **Basanti Dil Singh (Northwestern University)**

**New formations of mortuary practice at the Mifsas Bahri cemetery (1000-1400 AD)**

This talk presents micro-CT histological research reconstructing elements of mortuary practice at the Mifsas Bahri cemetery (c. 1000-1400 AD) in Tigray, northern Ethiopia. Mifsas Bahri was the location of a late Aksumite church (c. 600-800 AD) and succeeding cemetery (c. 1000-1400 AD) that represents one of the richest mortuary contexts in Africa and occupies a critical place in the post-Aksum cultural period of Ethiopian history. The church and cemetery were excavated in a Heidelberg-Mek'ele University partnership from 2013-2016 and osteological analysis of the 112 skeletal find numbers produced insights into the local demography and the previously under-regarded importance of post-mortem processing and secondary burial in northern Ethiopian mortuary rites. Micro-CT histological research was recently conducted on 64 bone samples from Mifsas Bahri to further investigate the manipulation of human skeletons and reconstruct early-stage mortuary practice. Preliminary results show greater variation in mortuary rites at Mifsas Bahri than seen previously at Aksum. At the same time, mortuary practices at Mifsas Bahri appear to be less improvised and may show a deeper familiarity with preparing the mortuary body. Taken together, these data suggest community-level heterogeneity, technical innovation, and the formation of funerary culture that pushes against traditional narratives of isolation and region-wide 'social collapse' during the immediate post-Aksumite period in Ethiopian history.

▪ **Bausi Alessandro (Universität Hamburg), Keynote speaker**

**Textual transmission from Aksum to Lalibāla: A couple of case studies**

It is well known that one of the most dramatic missing gap that prevents our understanding of the textual transmission of Gə'əz texts from the Aksumite time to the medieval period is the lack of data on the materiality of the written culture. The few extant documents—a handful of codices predating the fourteenth century, and a still unidentified number of fragments, and very few epigraphic documents of uncertain dating—do not provide any positive consistent picture that helps us make a sense of what happened and of the material conditions of transmission, although some recent reinterpretations of some documents suggest new paths of inquiry. The distribution of the relevant findings and recently emerged data also help define a geographical area which appear to have played a key role in the vicissitudes of the transmission of written knowledge. Moreover, the missing evidence can be partly complemented with what later texts directly report and, even more, indirectly presuppose. The earliest documentary texts can also provide data that help fill the gap. Against this background, the paper intends to deal with a couple of case studies which illustrate the dynamics of transmission from the Aksumite to medieval times.

▪ **Bulakh Maria (HSE University)**

**Why did Old Ethiopic cease to be a spoken language**

It is generally acknowledged that Old Ethiopic (Gə'əz) was a spoken language in the Aksumite kingdom, and that it enjoyed a high status both politically and culturally. The political prominence is demonstrated by the fact that it is the only autochthonous language regularly employed by the Aksumite rulers in the inscriptions enumerating their deeds. The cultural prominence explains the choice of Old Ethiopic as the language into which the Holy Scripture was translated (a process which must have started in the 4th century AD), the language of liturgy and, in general, the sacral language of Ethiopian Christianity. Likewise, it is generally acknowledged that Old Ethiopic ceased to be a spoken language before the Solomonid dynasty came to power. Without attempting at a more precise dating, this presentation will discuss a question which seems to be largely neglected: why Geez went out of use as a vernacular? It is well known that at present, the major language spoken in the territories once belonging to the Aksumite kingdom is Tigrinya, an Ethio-Semitic language closely related to Old Ethiopic, but nevertheless not a direct descendent of Old Ethiopic. However, as it will be shown in the presentation, it is rather unlikely that Old Ethiopic speakers were ousted by Tigrinya-speaking population in the course of a migration wave or a military campaign. Rather, a more plausible reconstruction of interrelation between Old Ethiopic and Tigrinya in the Aksumite period – interrelation which eventually led to full replacement of Old Ethiopic by Tigrinya in the vernacular domain – will be offered.

▪ **Derat Marie-Laure (CNRS (Orient et Méditerranée), Keynote speaker**

**Beyond the thirteenth century: cultural and intellectual background of the churches of Lālibālā**

Long thought to be the capital of the Ethiopian kingdom during the reign of the Zāgwe dynasty, the site of Lālibālā appears to be one of the milestones testifying to the southward progression of Christianity and the Christian kingdom. A sort of heir to Aksum. The work carried out since 2009 in Lalibela in a program of archaeology and history co-directed by Claire Bosc-Tiessé and myself, has highlighted several aspects of this site. Far from being the ex-nihilo creation of a single ruler, King Lālibālā (13th c.), the site preexisted and testified to the establishment of a powerful elite from the 11th century onward. A rock culture, combining the excavation of underground chambers and carvings, can be observed in and around Lālibālā,



underlining the regional identity of this complex. However, when the monolithic churches were carved, the dimension of this complex changes radically. By combining local know-how with cultural and intellectual openness, some of which can still be seen in the artefacts preserved in the churches, the site of Lālibalā acquired a new status. The deed of King Lālibalā is visible, but the beginnings of these cultural transformations are perhaps earlier. The difficulty remains to unfold the decades of the 12th and 11th century, to follow precisely the evolutions at work. However, research into manuscripts and archaeological data dated by C14, still limits investigations due to the lack of precise dating. Although the 13th century is no longer an absolute deadline, it is certain that no settlement on the site and in its surroundings goes back beyond the middle of the 10th century for the moment. We still need to work, to go beyond Lālibalā to test other sites, but the understanding of what was happening socially, culturally and politically between the 7th and 13th centuries will not come from Lālibalā alone.

▪ **Dorso Simon (ERC HornEast, IREMAM, Aix-Marseille Université)**

**Not so dark after all? An attempt at mapping the Ethiopian 'Dark Ages' in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea**

In recent years, several historical and archaeological projects provided valuable additions to the knowledge on the so-called Ethiopian 'Dark Ages'. Drawing on this new data, and especially on the increasing contribution of archaeology to the understanding of political and cultural evolutions occurring between the 7th and 13th centuries CE, this paper attempts to offer a preliminary atlas for the period in the Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The maps will constitute a chronological and thematic synthesis open to discussion, and in highlighting uncharted areas, may also serve to orientate future investigations. Rather than a definitive or exhaustive answer, mapping will be used as a heuristic process to shed light on new or pursued connections (trade networks and roads, foreign involvements), the diversity of material, and religious cultures and wider historical dynamics in the region. Building on both positive and negative evidence, one will propose to consider the 'Dark Ages' of Ethiopian History as a transition period witnessing in particular the transformation of Aksum, the emergence of monastic networks and new Christian and Muslim polities.

▪ **Gaudiello Michela (Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw)**

**Mifsas Baḥri in the midst of a new dilemma: which is its connection with Lalibāla?**

From 2014 to 2016, the joint project of Heidelberg-Mekelle Universities excavated the Late Aksumite church of Mifsas Baḥri (c. 600–800 AD), in the remote Southern Tigray. After the publication of the monograph that presents the results of four archaeological campaigns, the first of 2013, and three seasons of survey and excavation, the time is come to review and re-evaluate the material culture and architectural features in the view of relevant comparisons.

Since the beginning, we stressed the inclusions of Mifsas Baḥri in the Red Sea trade circuit, mediated probably by the Aksumite capital. Indeed, the reconstructed plan of the church reveals many more affinities with the Eritrean sites instead of the core of the Aksumite culture, centered in central Tigray. The few ceramics that have emerged from the excavation of the church show a possible local pottery production, rather than a closer resemblance of "standardized and urban" Aksumite manufacture. Moreover, from the western fields located outside the fenced area of the Mifsas Baḥri excavation, the relative abundancy of sherds of so-called Purple painted-Aksumite ware and fragments of Aqaba/Ayla amphorae, lead us again to Eritrean and the Red Sea trade. More recent comparisons with the finds discovered near Lake Ṭana, support a theory of a new direction of contact, toward the west. This raises again the issue of the connection of Mifsas Baḥri and the Lake Ḥashenge area with the alleged Agāw-speaker Zagwe dynasty settled in the much closer Lalibāla site.

▪ **Gervers Michael (University of Toronto), Keynote Speaker**

**Periodization, Christianization, rock-hewn churches and the enigma of Ethiopia's 'Dark Ages'**

It may well be argued that the gap during which, according to Gibbon, Ethiopia "slept near a thousand years," was not so broad as has been thought. In the first place, the Aksumite kingdom provides strong evidence of having flourished during the sixth century and there is increasing evidence that the Zagwe prospered in the twelfth, if not well before. That reduces the missing millennium to about 500 years at most. During that time, Christianity must have endured unless, as some are currently suggesting, it waned or disappeared before being reintroduced by the Zagwe. What then, does one do with built churches like Dābrā Dammo which has been attributed to as early as the sixth century, Zarema to the ninth, and Cerqos Agobo to the eleventh? These churches, furthermore, all contain repurposed elements. Can Dābrā Dammo belong to the Aksumite period when it was itself constructed using Aksumite elements, or does it, too, belong to the Zagwe period? A significant number of post-Aksumite churches survive that are supported on Aksumite pillars and one may ask whether the sites have been continuously in use. Archaeology will help to unravel these uncertainties, as also will written evidence from the many manuscripts that have yet to be found and examined. Another consideration that demands particular attention is the phenomenon of rock-hewn ecclesiastical architecture. When did it start? Can a link be drawn between it and the rock-cut churches of Cappadocia that originated in the eighth and ninth centuries? Certainly, in the absence of a central





administration that could mobilize the materials and the work force necessary to produce sustainable architecture, rock-hewn churches were the obvious alternative. They can be produced with hammers and chisels, require no building supplies or knowledge of architecture, are consequently highly suited to a society of modest means, and require no maintenance for an untold number of centuries. It is in the rock-hewn churches that one can expect to find at least partial answers to the enigma of Ethiopia's 'Dark Ages'.

▪ **Hagos Abrha Abay, Birhan Gebru G/Mikael (Hamburg University, Mekelle University)**

#### **The monastery of Arba'attu Ānsəsa Gānti and its oral tradition in connection to Lalibāla**

As distant from the main roads, the district of Wāḡḡārat (southeastern Tigray) is the most covered area in all fields of study in Tigray; this place had been under its own independent administration with rich customary laws for a long time; 100% of the population are followers of Orthodox Christianity with strong Judaic elements; there are more than 50 churches and monasteries by now. The Monastery of Arba'attu Ānsəsa is found in Gānti village; sometimes also called the Monastery of Abba Kiros, which made the monastery known for the rituals of *Gādlā Abba Kiros*; it is situated on top of a small hill covered with jungle; over hundred ancient Gə'əz manuscripts and ecclesiastical materials, including old silver and golden crosses, golden grail, and golden cup, are preserved. Consistent oral tradition tells us that the church of Arba'itu Ānsəsa was established "during Amorion of Jan Amora who reigned around 1285"; today's Jan Amora, which was also mentioned by Jan Françisco Alvares in the same location is in the Southern Tigray Mountain chains connecting Lasta. Local elders also believe that both reign of Amaron and the arrival of Abba Yəm'atta (one of the Nine Saints according to hagiographic tradition) to Wāḡḡārat were in the 13th century; the discourse here can only mean the arrival of Yəm'atta's oral/hagiographic tradition. The monastery of Arba'attu Ānsəsa has a strong connection with Maryam Nazrā and the Monastery of Maryam 'Addi Batti of Wāḡḡārat (where two recent manuscripts of Yəm'atta are preserved); those three monasteries are assumed to be temporal palaces of 'Amdā Şəyon (1314-44). The capital of Wāḡḡārat is called 'Baḥi Ḥaşāy' (lit. sea/centre of the emperor) – referring Ḥaşāy 'Amdā Şəyon. On the right and left sides of the main gate of Arba'attu Ānsəsa church, there are two old well-shaped pillars of stone tools with dimensions of (55cm x 40cm x 40cm) and (65cm x 30cm x 35cm), which are assumed to the main gates of the palace of 'Amdā Şəyon. A preliminary heritage (including manuscripts) assessment, and archaeological survey of the monastery was conducted in 2020, has estimated the church to date from the 12th century. The other name of that part of Wāḡḡārat is Bātā 'Amḥara, and the vicinity where the monastery of Arba'attu Ānsəsa is found is called Ḥargusat (etymologised as Harbā-Ḥsat), which according to its well-established oral tradition is connected to Qəddus Harbāy (12th century) who is also among the Zagwe kings' list; Jerusalem, Jordan and other Judaic narratives of Lalibela time-space are bolder in Wāḡḡārat. The objective of this paper is to triangulate the oral tradition, archaeological survey, and secondary sources to reconstruct the historical connection between the vicinity of Arba'attu Ānsəsa and Lasta/Lalibāla time-space, and open eyes for other detailed studies.

▪ **Hahn Wolfgang (Universitaet Wien)**

#### **The last decades of Aksumite coin production up to the 630s**

The issuing of coinage is a good indicator of the political and economic strength of a government. Therefore the chronology of the latest Aksumite coins is of some importance for the question when the kingdom entered into the so-called dark Middle Ages. The exact dating of the coins in question has its difficulties as even the relative sequence of the kings after 540 AD and the length of their reigns seem to be ambiguous. The non-numismatic sources are not particularly helpful but better insights can now be derived from a closer study of a large numismatic material the data of which had to be thoroughly compiled. Thus it is possible to submit what seems to be a more reliable chronology of the last six coin-issuing kings, embedded into the political situation of the time and not contradicting the archaeological evidence.

▪ **Hiluf Berhe Woldeyohannes (Mekelle University/Collège de France)**

#### **The project of rock-carving and metal production between the 7th and 11th century in Tigray: new evidence from Gud Baḥri archaeological excavation**

The lack of research coverage and theme during the previous decades in studying the period between the 7th and 13th century history of Aksumite civilization has led scholars to hastily term the period as 'Dark Age'. The history of this period remained poorly understood until recent researches were undertaken in Tigray to deeply understand both spatially and temporally. The rock hewn churches of Tigray have attracted several scholars, but the objective has been mainly limited to understanding their distribution, architectural content, and geology; less attention was given to the scientific knowledge on how and when they were carved. Recent research results shade light on the aforementioned period. The state was highly engaged on large projects such as rock-carving, and iron production in order to meet the demand of tools for the project of rock-carving and agricultural activities. The eastern and southern region of Tigray was particularly very dynamic during the period between 7th and 13th in Christianization, churches carving and building, and metal production. Recent research



conducted at Maryam Nazret has confirmed that the state was actively engaged on building several churches in Tigray during the Metropolitan Michael, one of the churches being the monumental church of Maryam Nazret, built during the mid-12th century.

This paper presents archaeological evidence from Gud Baḥri archaeological site based on recent excavations. The site was occupied from pre-Aksumite to the Aksumite period; according to C14 dating and artifact analysis, the site was later used as iron ore smelting and tools manufacturing from the end of the 6th or beginning of 7th to the 11th centuries. Other iron production sites have been preliminarily recorded whose purpose must have been associated with the rock-carving and agriculture. The site of Gud Baḥri is located 46 km north of Mekelle, capital of Tigray.

▪ **Insoll Timothy (University of Exeter), Keynote speaker**

#### **Emerging from the Dark Ages? Harlaa (Ethiopia) and Indian Ocean trade**

The so-called 'Dark Age' of Christian Ethiopia was when the predominantly Muslim settlement at Harlaa in eastern Ethiopia was emerging and subsequently flourishing. Particularly between the 11th and late 13th centuries significant wealth was generated through trade and manufacturing, enhanced, by participation in international networks. In the absence of historical documentation, it is archaeology that is providing insight. Manufacturing evidence attests marine shell processing, copper, and iron metalworking, and agate and possibly glass bead making. Contacts, direct and indirect, with the Red Sea, western Indian Ocean, China, South and Central Asia, Egypt, the Ethiopian Interior, East African coast, and Arabian/Persian Gulf were indicated by material found including glass beads and vessel fragments, agate and rock crystal beads, marine shell, soft stone vessel fragments, glazed ceramics, and coins. This evidence will be considered with particular reference to Indian Ocean trade and the inferences that can be drawn about commercial networks and population and knowledge exchange.

▪ **Muhelbauer Mikael (Independent scholar)**

#### **Lalibāla as post-Aksumite architecture**

My talk presents a reconsideration of the architecture of Lalibāla in light of the dynasty's Tigrayan origins. I focus my attention on the style of three exquisite churches out of an overall multiphase 11, that wholly date to the 13th century: the churches of Mādḥane 'Alām, Emmanuel and Mary. I will suggest that these monuments should be understood as architectural hybrids, presenting a continuation of the architectural styles that preceded Lalibela in Ethiopia's northern province of Tigray, but accommodated to use the relatively soft stones of the central highlands to their fullest extent, perhaps with the input of local craftsmen.

▪ **Nosnitsin Denis (Hamburg University)**

#### **Ethiopian scribes and re-creation of ancient documents: survey of one manuscript collection from eastern Tigray**

The church of Ura Qirqos in eastern Tigray received scholarly attention some years ago as a few important manuscripts came to light there. The church, being accessible and not difficult to reach, remained hardly noticed over centuries and preserved a remarkable collection of manuscripts, many of which are old, probably only due to a lucky coincidence. While certain items of the collection have been actively studied by scholars and have inspired a number of publications, the collection in its entirety is still barely known. The presentation aims at surveying the whole collection, highlighting its chronological layers and presenting the scribal networks that produced its manuscripts. The properties and value of manuscripts can be better understood if we study relations between those manuscripts as interlinked units of the same traditional ecclesiastic library. As a case study, one sample of the documentary writing from Ura Qirqos will be briefly analysed.

▪ **Schäfer Carolin (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)**

#### **An old layer of paint: new discoveries in the mural painting of the church of Yəmṛəḥannā Krəstos in Lasta, Ethiopia**

The church of Yəmṛəḥannā Krəstos is well known among scholars of Ethiopian art history for its spectacular position – built inside a mountain cave under the patronage of a legendary priest-king. This paper will raise new questions about the dating and origin of the painters of the church's famous mural paintings. New discoveries in the murals on the eastern wall above the northern pastophorion show evidence of an earlier program that could affect the dating of the church itself: A layer of overpainted mural paintings shines through the visible paintings. It also includes an inscription in Greek letters, which suggests a foreign origin for the workshop. The paper will discuss and describe the visible parts of the older layer, based on photographic and sketched materials. Additionally, it offers suggestions for future treatment like focusing on the preservation rather than cleaning of the mural.

The potential for further cooperative projects in situ to complete our understanding of the currently fragmentary iconographic images of the earlier paintings below the visible ones will be presented.



▪ **Sernicola Luisa (University of Naples L'Orientale)**

**Building social complexity: private space and public places in early and medieval Aksum**

From about the mid-1st millennium BCE, Aksum progressively developed and emerged as the political and ideological focus of a vast and powerful polity that flourished between the 1st century BCE and the 7th/8th century CE. The early dates and the particularly high level of sophistication of these achievements made Aksum the most thoroughly archaeologically investigated of the historical centres of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. This has resulted in a wide range of environmental and cultural evidence on Aksum's development from the early 1st millennium BCE to the late 1st millennium CE.

Unfortunately, little attention has been paid so far to the archaeological investigation of medieval Aksum, despite the important religious and symbolic role that the city has played even after its decline.

During its long history, Aksum experienced the political leadership and its decline, economic successes and downturns, population growths and decreases, environmental favors and the crisis. All this is reflected in the history of Aksum's urban organization and in the diverse strategies of land occupation, exploitation and management adopted through time.

This paper intends to provide a reconstruction of Aksum's medieval urban topography, its settlement pattern and the relationship between public places and private places. Special attention will be given to "non-constructed spaces": open-air sites that tend to be underrepresented in archaeological research despite their social, economic and ideological significance.

▪ **Tarn Philipp (SOAS, London)**

**Reconstructing the narrative of Ethiopian rock-hewn churches**

The rock-hewn churches of northern Ethiopia are, according to Western scholars, generally thought to have been carved between the 10th-15th centuries. Recent Arcadia Fund research (2015-2020) has however identified some forty new rock-hewn churches, carved since the late 1980s. The present phenomenon corresponds with the fall of the Derg and relative stability in the region. It also suggests that the tradition of hewing a church from solid rock, may well have endured intermittently over the past 500 years and so represents a millennia-old tradition. It therefore seems prudent to revisit and reassess the chronology of early rock-hewn churches. Given churches have been carved intermittently since the 15th century, could others have in fact been carved prior to the 10th century?

Could some churches be post-Aksumite or even Aksumite and so represent a link between Aksum and Lalibela? And how might the contemporary craft and embodied knowledge provide insight into the possible origins and chronology of ancient Ethiopian rock-hewn churches? It is worth reiterating that local oral tradition indeed attributes many rock-hewn churches in Tigray to the 4th century, when Christianity was adopted as the state religion. During this period Aksum was deeply connected with the wider ancient world and subject to foreign influence and ideas. Rock-hewn churches are by definition, that is the removal rather than addition of material, extremely difficult to ascribe a date to. This is further complicated by the likelihood of large churches having been adapted and expanded over centuries, which in turn renders the original church obsolete. In the absence of substantial early built examples, archaeological evidence and written record, this paper draws on architectural progression, oral historiography, continued craft and tradition to reconstruct the narrative of rock-hewn churches.

▪ **Tribe Tania (SOAS, London)**

**The rock-hewn church of Washa Mikael (Gazo *wārāda*) and the emerging Solomonic cultural, religious and political domain in the 13th century: a preliminary assessment**

As part of the SolZag Research Project, this paper analyses the rock-hewn church of Wašša Mika'el in Gazo District, looking at its likely role as a powerbase for the emergence of the Solomonic dynasty in the 13th century. This role is expressed in the series of wall-paintings decorating the church, which refer directly to the family of Yəkunno Amlak, the first Solomonic king, confirming notions held in local memory. The paper looks at the engraved dado of animal imagery encircling the round space of the church interior, considering how it may reflect the *long-durée* cultural context of the region, out of which the Christian culture emerged. It also situates the church structure in its wider landscape, marked by numerous caves, and relates it to the cave typology that is being established for the area. The discussion considers the site's environmental context and takes an initial look at its material culture. It also assesses the church's significance for our understanding of the transition from indigenous forms of belief to the adoption of Christianity, which underpinned the emergence and expansion of Solomonic power - a transition which may be reflected in a figure described as "Saytan" by the local inhabitants, engraved on a column, and the probably later Christian cross painted beneath it.

▪ **Valieva Nafisa (Collège de France)**

**First six textual units of 'Gadla Lālibalā collection' and their connection with homilies**

The 'Gadla Lālibalā collection' is a working title which is used by the presenter for what is often referred to as the *Gadla*



*Lālibalā*, which has been considered the main source about the life and deeds of King Lālibalā (twelfth-thirteenth century) as a saint. The only scholarly yet partial edition of the *Gadla Lālibalā* was carried out by the French philologist Jules Perruchon in 1892. Later, in 1972, Polish scholar Stanisław Kur published his complementing partial edition of the *Gadla Lālibalā*. The planned contribution will discuss the 'First six textual units of 'Gadla Lālibalā collection'', which are almost unknown among scholars as being largely (3-6 completely) skipped by Perruchon and not regarded by Kur. These six textual units, unlike textual units 7-15 that contain narrative, appear to be poetical compositions closely based on Scripture and celebrating Saint Lālibalā's virtues:

1. Preamble
  2. Jesus and His redeeming fire
  3. Teaching about saints
  4. Eulogy of Lālibalā as the one who entered the Heavenly Jerusalem
  5. Eulogy of Lālibalā as the one who accomplished the Word of the Gospel
  6. Praise for Lālibalā
- The talk will be focused on the form and intertextual connections with other texts.

▪ **Villa Massimo (University of Naples L'Orientale)**

**Again on an ancient Gə'əz homiliary: MS EMLL 8509 from Ṭana Qirqos**

The early homiliary EMLL 8509, coming from the insular monastery of Ṭana Qirqos, is an undated – certainly pre-fourteenth-century – parchment codex microfilmed in the 1908s by the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) and currently available to scholars only in a surrogate form. Its importance for various research fields cannot be underestimated. First, it is a witness to very ancient (possibly Aksumite) translated and original texts, organized in a typology of homiletic collection attested in a very few other examples. Also, it accommodates remarkable palaeographic features, not yet adequately esteemed, and unconventional spelling forms that possibly betray a transitional phase of the Gə'əz language from a vernacular to a literary stage. Despite this, the manuscript is known only through the useful, yet preliminary, description provided by Sergew Hable Sellasse soon after its microfilming. This paper intends to offer an updated survey of the manuscript by specifying its textual contents and providing a discussion of a set of notable spelling forms and their linguistic implications. Scope of the paper is to allow precise textual identification and enhance future research on Gə'əz orthography and Ethiopian manuscript studies.

▪ **Wion Anaïs (CNRS)**

**The king's coronation and the annual liturgy of Hos'annā in Aksum: two rites serving the memory of one community**

This presentation will be based on field researches in Aksum (2009-2014) and a deep study of the *Book of Aksum*. It shows that the dignitaries performing the coronation rite in Aksum, since at least the reign of King Lālibalā, have maintained their prestige and privileges thanks to the rite of Palm Sunday (or Hos'annā) which acts as an annual rehearsal, so to say, of the very rare coronation rite. Although sources are not many and often re-written, it proves possible to understand how this society managed to preserve and, of course, adapt its identity throughout centuries. The long history of Aksum legitimacy can therefore also be understood through the history of its own population and their internal rights and duties.