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May He and His Kin Be Eradicated and Uprooted ... Curse Formulae in Aksumite Royal Inscriptions

Abstract A common feature of ancient Near Eastern written tradition is the curse formula, i.e. a threat issued against an individual or group of individuals who might commit some infraction, be it the violation of a treaty, an armed rebellion against an overlord, or the removal and/or destruction of an inscription or other monument. Typically, curse formulae invoke a divine force or forces as the agent(s) that would, if need be, carry out the punishment of anyone guilty of committing any of the aforementioned infractions. Although curse formulae from various ancient civilizations have been the subject of multiple studies over the years, one civilization that has been overlooked is the kingdom of Aksum that dominated northern Ethiopia from around the turn of the Common Era to the seventh century. This article seeks to rectify this situation by systematically presenting and analysing all known curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions and pointing out analogies with other ancient societies in which curse formulae are attested, as well as, where relevant, ethnographic analogies with modern societies. Aksumite curse formulae are limited to royal inscriptions and are concerned exclusively with the destruction of monuments erected by kings. Their thematic content, however, sheds light on concepts of crime and collective guilt in Aksumite society more broadly.

Keywords curse formulae, Aksum, inscriptions, divine punishment, religious ideology, Ethiopian society



1 Introduction¹

The fourth and sixth centuries CE are by far the best-documented periods in the history of Aksum, a kingdom based in northern Ethiopia that, at its height, controlled parts of present-day Yemen and sent its armies as far as Sudanese Nubia. A number of lengthy royal inscriptions, dating from both of these centuries, provide essential information on Aksumite political history, more specifically the military campaigns waged by Aksumite kings. One aspect of this epigraphic corpus that has yet to receive much attention from scholars, however, is the issuing of curses at the end of several inscriptions. These curse formulae, as we shall call them for the purpose of this article,² speak of the harm that would befall anyone who might attempt to damage an inscription or remove it from its place. Curse formulae have a very long history in the ancient Near East and have been the subject of a number of studies pertaining to Mesopotamia,³ Egypt,⁴ Syria-Palestine,⁵ and South Arabia.⁶ The use of curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions represents a very late stage in this Near Eastern tradition, one which survived the transition to Christianity in the mid-fourth century and which is attested as late as the sixth. However, despite their late date, relative to inscriptions from those regions of the ancient Near East that bear similar formulae, curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions provide evidence for concerns with the sanctity of the written word and its

¹ This article is loosely based on a power-point presentation, *Curse Formulae in Aksumite Royal Inscriptions: A Comparative Perspective*, that the author had intended to present at a conference in honour of the late Dutch Semitist Abraham J. Drewes that was scheduled to be held at the University of Hamburg in March of 2020. Although this conference never took place due to the outbreak of COVID-19—a curse indeed!—the author nevertheless wishes to thank Alesandro Bausi of the University of Hamburg for his very kind invitation to give a presentation, as well as for sending the author a copy of Drewes' posthumously published *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite* (Drewes 2019). It was Bausi's invitation that ultimately spawned the idea for this article. A PDF of the power-point can be viewed at the author's web-page on the Academia site (https://academia.edu/42225040/Curse_Formulae_in_Aksumite_Royal_Inscriptions_A_Comparative_Perspective). The author also wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for providing their invaluable feedback. Finally, the author thanks Michael Davis of the Princeton Theological Seminary for commenting on this article and for drawing his attention to some interesting references, as well as Maya Rinderer of the University of Vienna for sharing her thoughts on an earlier draft and for bringing to his attention Karen Radner's monograph *Die Macht des Namens: Altorientalische Strategien zur Selbsterhaltung* (Radner 2005). Any remaining errors are the author's.

² The designation 'curse formula' is an old one (see, e.g. Blank 1950–1951) and has become well established in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies.

³ Radner 2005: 73, 79, 173, 253, 254–258; Kitz 2014 passim.

⁴ Morschauser 1991; Colledge 2015.

⁵ Crawford 1992; Baranowski 2012; Kitz 2014; Ramos 2016.

⁶ Maraqtan 1998.

preservation, along with the importance of kin, children, and household, which are very much at home in other, earlier cultures. For this reason, the systematic study of Aksumite curse formulae presented here seeks to contribute to the discussion among scholars of the ancient Near East regarding the power of writing and the role of monumental culture in society, as well as to foster greater dialogue between Assyriologists, Egyptologists, Levantinists,⁷ and South Arabianists on the one hand and Ethiopianists on the other. In addition to drawing attention to one of Aksum's commonalities with the better-known cultures of the ancient Near East,⁸ this study also seeks to shed light on issues more specifically related to Aksumite society on which the use of curse formulae sheds light. Particularly important in this regard are the role of clan-based groups and notions of collective guilt, as well as the use of language regarding would-be defacers of royal monuments that recall the language used to describe enemies defeated in battle. In what follows, we will examine eight Aksumite inscriptions containing curse formulae, along with one that, while not containing a curse formula per se, contains a number of thematic elements found in curse formulae and is therefore useful for comparative purposes. The relevant portions of each of these inscriptions will be treated in chronological order, after which the broader implications for Aksumite society and culture will be discussed, including the contexts in which the inscriptions in question were erected. The article will then conclude with some thoughts regarding written curse formulae in post-Aksumite Ethiopia.

2 Theoretical background

Before proceeding, some preliminary observations on curse formulae and curses more broadly, as well as on scholarly treatments of the subject, are in order. To begin with, curses constitute a form of speech that is not a human universal, in the way that other forms like prayer and swearing are.⁹ Indeed, the use of curses can at times mark ethnic and/or social boundaries between those who curse and those who do not. Thus, for example, the Maasai people of East Africa regard cursing as a specialty of both blacksmiths and the Okiek, the latter a Southern Nilotic group based in southern Kenya.¹⁰ As defined by Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, curses are 'a genre of *verbal control*' that aims 'to control the behaviour

⁷ To coin a term that includes archaeologists and epigraphers working on Syria-Palestine, alongside Biblical scholars.

⁸ Of which Aksum can arguably be regarded as an extension, culturally speaking at least, while still remaining a sub-Saharan African civilization.

⁹ Kratz 1989: 637. Thus, for example, while curses seem to be a salient oral genre in African and Middle Eastern societies, fairly exhaustive ethnographies of Central and North American societies never mention them (Danet and Bogoch 1992: 134).

¹⁰ Kratz 1989: 642, 650.

of others, to invoke supernatural powers, and, in certain cases, even to alter the forces of nature.¹¹ Lexically, curses belong to the category of routine formulae that occur as fixed or semi-fixed expressions, such as *Guten Appetit* or *bon appétit*.¹² Unlike other types of bad language, curses are regarded as a more serious speech act on account of the perceived power of the words uttered.¹³ Another feature typically, though not universally, shared by curses is an implicit disparity in power between the parties involved. Thus, the elderly enjoy power of seniority over the young, a deity divine power over his creations, the king political power over his subjects, and the community collective power over its constituent individual members¹⁴—all factors that become salient if and when the power-holder issues a curse, or when one appeals to a power-holder to effect a curse. Curses, then, are generally unidirectional, top-down affairs that differ from other expressions of opprobrium or exclusion like insults and swearing, which can be bi- or even multi-directional,¹⁵ and which, again, are human universals.¹⁶ The general purpose of cursing is broadly the same across all societies where the tradition exists, though the thematic elements and patterns of expression within curses are region specific.¹⁷ While the present study is concerned with curses in written form, the example of cursing in a historically non-literate society in East Africa cited above illustrates the fact that curses are often, indeed more commonly, issued orally. In fact, it is in oral tradition that the curse formulae attested in written form are likely to have first emerged.¹⁸ When it comes to written curses, the most thorough study of curse formulae to date is Anne Marie Kitz's 2014 monograph *Cursed Are You! The Phenomenology of Cursing in Cuneiform and Hebrew Texts*. Although that volume focuses on Mesopotamian and Levantine material, many of Kitz's observations are broadly applicable to other parts of the ancient world, not least Aksumite Ethiopia. Referring to ancient Near Eastern views of curses, Kitz writes:

It cannot be denied that Ancient Near Easterners viewed curses differently than present day societies. For them, a curse did not necessarily constitute offensive language or even an insult. Rather, it was a much more serious affair. Simply put, maledictions solicit a deity or deities to do harm to a person, place or thing. Since curses are wishes, they are, therefore, petitionary prayers to the deities.¹⁹

¹¹ Danet and Bogoch 1992: 134 (emphasis theirs).

¹² Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 360.

¹³ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 360.

¹⁴ Baye Yimam 2013: 411.

¹⁵ Baye Yimam 2013: 412.

¹⁶ On the universality of swearing, see n. 9. On the universality of insulting, see Conley (2010); Mateo and Yus (2013).

¹⁷ Baye Yimam 2013: 415.

¹⁸ Danet and Bogoch 1992 *passim*.

¹⁹ Kitz 2007: 616.

Here again, the invocation of supernatural powers is identified as a key element of curses. As we shall see, a recurrent theme throughout Aksumite curse formulae is divine punishment, be it by the pagan gods of Aksum or, from the mid-fourth century on, the Christian god. Kitz further identifies several themes shared by curse formulae:

(i) divine judgement; (ii) the arousal of divine wrath; (iii) separation from the deities; (iv) separation from society; (v) and finally, if left unforgiven[,] separation from life.²⁰

That divine wrath is invoked in Aksumite curse formulae has been noted above. As we shall also see, separation, often couched in terms of banishment, is another theme that is commonly attested in such formulae. The aim of such separation, as Kitz argues in the context of ancient Near Eastern curse formulae, is ‘to establish a division between oppositional forces in an effort to restore divine order.’²¹ A similar idea of separation as punishment for wrongdoing, when brought into effect through a curse, is noted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his classic ethnographic study of religion among the Nuer people of South Sudan. So powerful are curses seeking to achieve this effect, Evans-Pritchard states, that they need not even be uttered aloud to take effect. Thus, for example, if a man is killed by his wife’s brother and the wife laments his death, her ‘curse of the heart’ (*biit loac*) will be heard by the deity, who will then ‘cause the slayer to become a wanderer on the face of the earth and to die in the midst of his wanderings’²²—separated, in other words, from his kith and kin in a very physical sense, as well as from divine aid in a superphysical sense. At their most basic level, these ideas of separation are linked to concepts of space and the concomitant guarding of boundaries against potential dangers caused by wrongdoing. The role of such conceptions of space has received attention in, among other publications, studies of the Jewish community of Qumrān. In reference to the role of cursing in this community, Russell Arnold states that

curses solidify the perception of the enemy and maintain clear insistence that members of the community must stay away from the enemy, and guard against following the enemy’s ways.²³

In a similar vein, Andrew R. Krause stresses the negative impact of separation on those at Qumrān who were judged to have entered into that community’s

²⁰ Kitz 2007: 618.

²¹ Kitz 2007: 619.

²² Evans-Pritchard 1956: 170–171.

²³ Arnold 2006: 164.

covenant insincerely and were consequently expelled, stating that ‘permanent expulsion is the harshest punishment meted out by the community, as it effectively removes the individual from God’s election.’²⁴ It goes without saying that the context in which Aksumite curses were issued differs markedly from the context in which curses were issued—or still *are* issued, in the case of modern ethnographic parallels—in the examples cited above. One salient quality that Aksumite curse formulae do, however, share with older Near Eastern counterparts, in addition to certain thematic elements, is their use of quasi-legal language, aiming to deter damage to a public monument through statements issued in a casuistic (if ... then ...) format.²⁵ Since the oral component of Aksumite society obviously cannot be accessed, our sole insight into the role of cursing in that society is provided by what relevant written evidence survives. Whatever the differences between Aksumite curses and those of other cultures, divine intervention and the idea of the separation of the individual targeted in the curse are important shared themes.

As for the targets themselves, curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions are directed exclusively at those who might overturn or in some other way damage a royal monument. To date, no Aksumite inscription has come to light that issues curses against those who might renege the terms of a treaty, for example.²⁶ This might, however, reflect nothing more than the fact that no written Aksumite treaties survive—in stark contrast to the Bronze- and Iron-Age Near East, where such texts are common.²⁷ Where Aksumite curse formulae do bear similarities to those of other cultures, be they in oral or written form, it is in their invocation of the divine and their emphasis on the cutting off of a potential offender from social or familial ties, even if these components of the curse are given a peculiarly Aksumite cast. In terms of structure, all known Aksumite curse formulae fall into the category of what Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch have labelled ‘whoever’ curses, so called because they begin with a phrase ‘whoever does X’, specifying the acts which the speaker wishes to prevent, after which they refer to a future state in which supernatural forces will cause harm to the offender(s).²⁸ Within this basic framework, there are a set number of elements from which the authors of Aksumite royal inscriptions choose for inclusion in curse formulae. These

²⁴ Krause 2018: 225.

²⁵ The author wishes to thank Michael Davis for making this point.

²⁶ In the Gə‘əz account of his Nubian campaign in 360, ‘Ezānā says of the Noba people then occupying the Middle Nile valley: ‘Twice and thrice did they break their pledges [...], spending the winter season killing neighboring communities, as well as the envoys and messengers whom I had sent to them to inquire into their plundering’ (*wa-ʿamāsana kaʿəba wa-šəls la-maḥalāhu ʾakrimo yəqattəl ʾagwārihu wa-tanbālāna wa-ḥawārəyāna za-[fannaw]ku lotu yəsməʿəwwo hedomu*) (RIĒth 189/11–12 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263]). At no point in the inscription, however, are curses issued against the Noba for having broken their pledges.

²⁷ See, e.g. Fensham (1962) and Hillers (1964).

²⁸ Danet and Bogoch 1992: 136–138, 157.

are: (1) physical harm done to the offender, his extended kin, and his children; (2) the removal, uprooting, or eradication of the offender from the land; (3) the offender being led to ruin; (4) the eradication of the offender's name from the land of the living; (5) generic eradication of the offender and his kin; and (6) the overthrowing, removal, or overturning of the offender after the manner in which he has removed or overturned the monument. Obviously, there is a certain degree of overlap between some of these thematic elements and, as we shall see, a few of them appear more frequently in curse formulae than others. In terms of their perceived function, Aksumite curse formulae conform to what Anne Marie Kitz labels 'display curses', i.e. 'curses incised on the objects they protect or on markers that specifically identify what it is they safeguard'.²⁹ In the case of Aksumite 'display curses', it is the stones on which inscriptions are carved and/or the thrones with which they were set up that are safeguarded, the belief being that the curse would be realized through divine agency.

Although this article is the first systematic study of curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions, it should be noted that the phenomenon of curses in a broader Ethiopian context has been the subject of a handful of earlier studies. Noteworthy among these is Baye Yimam's 2013 paper 'The Imagery of Cursing in Four Ethiopian Languages'.³⁰ In it, Baye Yimam analyses various types of curses used by speakers of Amharic, Oromo, Wolayitta, and Nuer. Of these languages, the first three belong to the Afroasiatic macro-family and are classified within the Semitic, Cushitic, and Omotic branches respectively. The language of the Nuer, whom we have encountered above in connection with Evans-Pritchard's research in South Sudan, but who also inhabit parts of southwestern Ethiopia, is a Nilotic tongue belonging to the East Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan macro-family.³¹ Dividing curses into endocentric (self-cursing) and exocentric (cursing of others) categories, Baye Yimam concludes that the evidence 'strongly showed that the speakers of the three Afroasiatic languages had a greater degree of convergence of both perceptual and linguistic features than did the Nuer of their Nilo-Saharan neighbours'.³² He attributes this to the peripheral position of the Nuer in modern Ethiopian society, on account of their being one of the groups most recently incorporated into the modern nation-state of Ethiopia.³³ Convergence in cursing traditions between the aforementioned Afroasiatic-speaking groups, he argues,

²⁹ Kitz 2014: 254.

³⁰ Baye Yimam 2013.

³¹ As a caveat, the existence of a Nilo-Saharan macrofamily, first proposed by the American linguistic anthropologist Joseph Greenberg (Greenberg 1963), is not accepted by all linguists, though few would dispute the validity of East Sudanic as a linguistic category.

³² Baye Yimam 2013: 395. Although the Afroasiatic membership of Omotic has been questioned by some (e.g. Theil 2006), it is currently accepted by most scholars (Blench 2006: 143; Amha 2012: 427).

³³ Baye Yimam 2013: 396.

'may indicate the level of contact and historical interaction among the groups, more than retentions of common linguistic phenomena.'³⁴ Endocentric curses often express wishes for some misfortune, such as death, to happen to oneself as a consequence of guilt felt.³⁵ Exocentric curses, on the other hand, play on a more diverse range of themes, such as denial of resources or bodily necessities, banishment, termination of lineage, or ill health.³⁶ While some of the curses treated are statements of the sort made by one person to another, others, as among the Boorana Oromo, are public affairs in which a council of elders issues a curse before an assembled crowd against an individual who committed some wrong, such as denying some of his fellow clansmen access to a well.³⁷ A curse of the latter type can, however, be lifted if the offending individual asks for forgiveness and, should this be granted, sacrifices a bull to the council of elders.³⁸ Similar public cursing, at times involving the church, is also documented among the Amhara of North Wällo.³⁹

Another noteworthy study of cursing in an Ethiopian context is a paper by Fekede Menuta and Ruth Vatvedt Fjeld from 2016, entitled 'Social and pragmatic rules of cursing and other routine formulae in Gurage and Norwegian culture'.⁴⁰ Like Baye Simam, the authors of the paper note the phenomenon of self-cursing among the Gurage people of central Ethiopia, something done to encourage children to perform some task, to express condolences, to bid someone farewell, or to swear an oath, among other situations.⁴¹ They further observe a gender difference in self-cursing, as men seldom utter such a curse, as compared to women, who do so frequently.⁴² Among the Gurage, exocentric cursing may target either individuals or groups. In the former case, no audience is needed, as it is assumed that spirits, divine beings, or forces of nature are listening.⁴³ In the latter, an individual who is suspected of having committed some misdemeanour, but does not admit the truth, is judged by a council of elders to be worthy of public cursing.⁴⁴ Curses issued may express wishes that whatever the accused sows will never grow, or that an evil identical to the one he is alleged to have committed be visited on his descendants for up to seven generations.⁴⁵ Similar to the Boorana Oromo, the

³⁴ Baye Yimam 2013: 396, 416.

³⁵ Baye Yimam 2013: 397.

³⁶ Baye Yimam 2013 *passim*.

³⁷ Baye Yimam 2013: 398.

³⁸ Baye Yimam 2013: 399.

³⁹ Baye Yimam 2013: 399–401.

⁴⁰ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016.

⁴¹ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 365–373.

⁴² Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 371.

⁴³ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 374.

⁴⁴ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 377.

⁴⁵ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 377–378.

Gurage believe that such a curse can be lifted if the accused confesses and participates in a cleansing ceremony that entails a ritual and some kind of payment to the victim(s).⁴⁶ Group cursing of this sort fulfils a valuable function in Gurage society in that it maintains social order over the course of multiple generations.⁴⁷ In other contexts, group cursing is regarded as directed at an individual believed to bear the evil eye, in which case it is thought to weaken that individual's power to cause harm to animate beings and inanimate objects.⁴⁸

Ethiopian traditions of cursing have been addressed in other studies, though usually in a tangential manner, as in the context of health. Thus, in their study of perceptions of health and illness among the Cushitic-speaking Konso of southwestern Ethiopia, Tebaber Workneh, Guday Emirie, Mirgissa Kaba, Yalemtehay Mekonnen, and Helmut Kloos note that curses issued by elders are believed to cause illness.⁴⁹ Rafael Youngman, Sara Minuchin-Itzigsohn, and Miriam Barasch discuss similar beliefs regarding curses among the members of the Ethiopian Beta

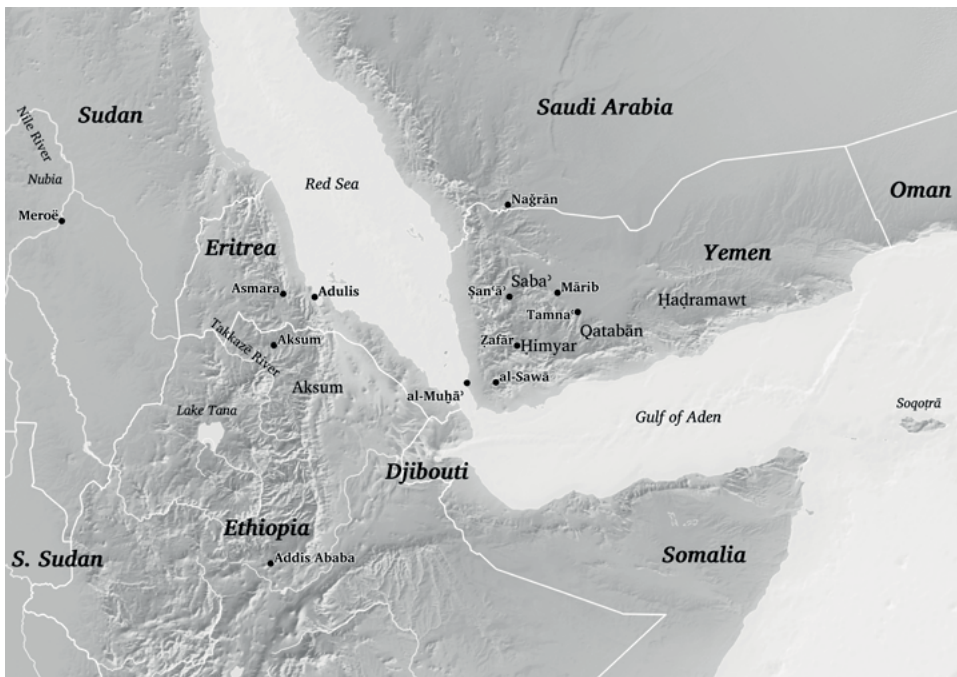


Figure 1. Northeast Africa and South Arabia in Late Antiquity
(map by Matthias Adelhofer, made with *Natural Earth*)

⁴⁶ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 378.

⁴⁷ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 378.

⁴⁸ Fekede Menuta and Fjeld 2016: 376.

⁴⁹ Tebaber Workneh et al. 2018: 4.

ʿĪsrāʿel immigrants to Israel, stating that curses, like the casting of the evil eye, are believed by that community to be placed on individuals by someone who hates or envies them, or by traditional healers endowed with magical powers.⁵⁰ The Beta ʿĪsrāʿel also lay great emphasis on honouring their parents and the elders of the community, in part out of fear that such individuals might curse them, and thereby cause illness, if they feel in any way dishonoured.⁵¹ As we shall see, elements of modern Ethiopian cursing traditions, particularly such themes as banishment, collective guilt, and the meting out of misfortune equivalent to the crime committed, are also encountered in Aksumite curse formulae.

3 Representative Aksumite inscriptions

This study of Aksumites curse formulae⁵² is based on the following inscriptions, all of them erected at the town of Aksum (14°7'16.68"N, 38°43'42.6"E), capital of the similarly named kingdom: RIÉth 185 I + II, RIÉth 185 bis I + II, RIÉth 270 bis, RIÉth 188, and RIÉth 189 from the reign of ʿEzānā (ca. 330–370); RIÉth 191 from the reign of Kāleb (ca. 510–540); and RIÉth 192 from the reign of Kāleb's son and successor Wāʿzeb (ca. 540–560). Except for a single Greek text, RIÉth 270 bis, all of the aforementioned inscriptions are in Gəʿəz, an Ethiosemitic language that served as the lingua franca of the kingdom of Aksum. Although Gəʿəz died out as a spoken language after the collapse of Aksum sometime in the seventh century, it has enjoyed the practically unchallenged status as the sole written language of Christian Ethiopia down to the nineteenth century, and has remained the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Tawāḥədo Church down to the present.⁵³ Of the Gəʿəz inscriptions that we shall examine, only two (RIÉth 188

⁵⁰ Youngman et al. 1999: 53.

⁵¹ Youngman et al. 1999: 53, 57.

⁵² In this article, transliterations of Gəʿəz material follow the system of transliteration used by Wolf Leslau in his *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Leslau 1991). In the case of the Aksumite inscriptions that constitute the main corpus of written material treated here, it should be noted that the morphology of the Gəʿəz employed differs at times from that of Classical Gəʿəz. In fully vocalised inscriptions, the author presents the Gəʿəz text as it appears in the inscriptions. In the case of consonantal Gəʿəz inscriptions, the consonantal text is provided, at times together with its equivalent in vocalised Classical Gəʿəz. In terms of scope, it must be stressed that the author's approach in this article is to examine a single thematic element in Aksumite inscriptions, rather than to attempt a detailed epigraphic survey of said inscriptions. For the latter, he directs the reader to such works as Littmann (1950); Marrassini (2014); and Drewes (2019). Except where otherwise noted, all translations of Gəʿəz and Ancient South Arabian inscriptions in this article are the author's.

⁵³ Aside from the numerous titles, names, and basic vocabulary of Amharic origin that appear in mediaeval Gəʿəz texts, some eleven songs in Old Amharic praising the power and courage of several mediaeval kings—namely ʿAmda Šəyon (r. 1314–1344), Yəshaq (r. 1414–1429), Zarʿa Yāʿqob (r. 1434–1468), and Galāwdewos (r. 1540–1559)—have been preserved in writ-

and RIÉth 189) are written in the fully vocalised *fidal* script, i.e. the syllabic writing system devised for Gəʿəz sometime around the 340s⁵⁴ and currently used to write such Ethiosemitic languages as Amharic, Tigrinya, and Tigre. Two other inscriptions (RIÉth 185 I and RIÉth 185 bis I) are written in an earlier, consonantal form of *fidal* that preceded the development of the syllabary. The remainder (RIÉth 185 II, RIÉth 185 bis II, RIÉth 191, and RIÉth 192) are written in the consonantal *musnad* script of South Arabia, a writing system on which *fidal* is based, but which differs from the latter in a number of respects, most notably in the form and orientation of its graphemes, along with the presence of graphemes which, owing to the phonological peculiarities of Ethiosemitic, were not adopted in *fidal*. Since none of the aforementioned inscriptions was found in situ, their original context remains uncertain. Two of the inscriptions that we shall examine, RIÉth 188 and RIÉth 189, state that they were erected in an area of the town of Aksum called *Śado*. Although this area cannot be located, it was presumably a public place in which the inscriptions and the monuments with which they were associated could be viewed by a large number of people. The significance of this *Śado* shall be addressed in detail in the section treating RIÉth 188⁵⁵ and in *Discussion and conclusions*.⁵⁶

The corpus of texts that shall be treated in this study is admittedly a very small one, and when one takes into consideration the fact that several of these inscriptions are effectively duplicates (RIÉth 185 I and RIÉth 185 II; RIÉth 185 bis I and RIÉth 185 bis II), while one inscription (RIÉth 192) contains no curse formula at all but rather a final clause that draws on a number of the thematic elements found in curse formulae, the corpus of relevant material becomes smaller still. That said, it must be borne in mind that the corpus of Aksumite royal inscriptions is already quite circumscribed to begin with. Thus, after the well-documented

ten form (Littmann 1914). The songs were originally composed to be performed, most probably by the (usually male) singers known as *azmāris*, on the occasion of a king's return home from a victorious battle (Littmann 1914: 7–8; Richter 1997: 545). Later on, as part of their promotion of Catholicism at the expense of the Ethiopian Tawāhədo Church, the Portuguese used Amharic, the lingua franca of Ethiopia that, as a spoken language, had a certain resonance with the common folk in ways that the rather arcane Gəʿəz language did not (Haberland 1992: 729). When, however, the Portuguese were expelled during the reign of Fāsīladas (1632–1667), all Amharic materials produced by the Portuguese were summarily destroyed and, though it remained the chief spoken language, Amharic was deemed too guilty by association with Portuguese missionary efforts to be a worthy literary language, such that the use of Gəʿəz for that purpose was revived (Fellman 1993: 124). Not until the reign of Tewodros II (1855–1868) was Amharic resurrected as a literary language, to the point that it would later permanently replace Gəʿəz in that capacity (Fellman 1993: 124).

⁵⁴ On the development of the *fidal* syllabary, see §3.3.

⁵⁵ §3.3.

⁵⁶ §4.

reign of ‘Ezānā we enter an obscure period of Aksumite history that lasts until the reign of Kāleb in the first half of the sixth century. No royal inscriptions dating from this interim period have (yet) been discovered, and for the time being our sole sources of information on the kings who reigned between ‘Ezānā and Kāleb are the coins that they minted.⁵⁷ In view of the thematic and stylistic continuities between fourth- and sixth-century inscriptions, including the use of curse formulae, it is not implausible to posit that fifth-century royal inscriptions also existed, and contained curse formulae, but have simply not yet been discovered. Also worth mentioning is the fact that a number of royal Aksumite inscriptions have come to light outside Ethiopia, namely RIÉth 286 and RIÉth 286 A, two inscriptions in Greek from Meroë in northern Sudan,⁵⁸ and a series of Gə‘əz inscriptions erected in Yemen, most probably in the aftermath of Kāleb’s invasion of Ḥimyar in 525: RIÉth 263,⁵⁹ RIÉth 264,⁶⁰ and Zafār 08–773⁶¹ from Zafār; RIÉth 195 I + II⁶² from Mārib; and RIÉth 265⁶³ and RIÉth 266⁶⁴—these last two being of unknown provenance.⁶⁵ Since, however, all of the Aksumite inscriptions erected abroad survive in very fragmentary condition, it is not possible to determine whether any of them originally contained curse formulae. Consequently, they will not be treated in this article.

Of the other known Aksumite royal inscriptions, one may note RIÉth 186,⁶⁶ a Gə‘əz inscription in *musnad* erected (most probably) by ‘Ezānā’s brother and predecessor Ousanas;⁶⁷ RIÉth 187, a Gə‘əz inscription in fully vocalised *fidal* dating from ‘Ezānā’s reign;⁶⁸ and RIÉth 190, a Gə‘əz inscription in *musnad* also dat-

⁵⁷ On the kings who reigned during this period, see Munro-Hay (1999: 33–39); Hahn (2005a); Fiaccadori (2005), but see Hahn (2001) for an alternative reading of the name Eōn as Nōe, i.e. Noah; Fiaccadori (2007); Fiaccadori (2010); Fiaccadori (2014a); and Fiaccadori (2014b). In addition, several issues of anonymous coins can also be assigned to the period between ‘Ezānā and Kāleb (Munro-Hay 1999: 33–34, 35–36, 37, 38). For a detailed treatment of Aksumite numismatics overall, see Hahn and Keck (2020).

⁵⁸ Bernand 1991: 385–387. For a discussion of the historical context of these two inscriptions, see Hatke (2013: 71–77).

⁵⁹ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 350–351; Müller 2012: 13–17.

⁶⁰ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 351; Müller 2012: 17–19.

⁶¹ Müller 2012: 10–13.

⁶² Drewes and Schneider 1991: 284–288.

⁶³ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 351–352.

⁶⁴ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 353.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the Gə‘əz corpus from Yemen from the perspective of religious ideology, see Hatke (2022).

⁶⁶ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 250–254; trans. Drewes 2019: 208–209.

⁶⁷ On the identification of the ruler associated with RIÉth 186, whose name is only partially preserved, see Hatke (2013: 70); Drewes (2019: 209).

⁶⁸ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 255–258; trans. Drewes 2019: 216–217.

ing from ‘Ezānā’s reign.⁶⁹ Here too, since the portions of text that might have originally contained curse formulae are not preserved, these inscriptions will not be treated here. Two further royal Aksumite inscriptions, in Greek, that bear mentioning are RIÉth 271⁷⁰ and RIÉth 277 (= Monumentum Adulitanum II).⁷¹ The first dates from the Christian phase of ‘Ezānā’s reign and documents that king’s invasion of Nubia, a campaign also documented in the Gə‘əz inscriptions RIÉth 189 and RIÉth 190. Since, however, only the initial portion of RIÉth 271 survives, it is not clear whether the original text contained a curse formula. As for RIÉth 277, this inscription was erected at the Aksumite trading centre of Adulis in northern Eritrea sometime around the turn of the third century, most likely in the reign of Gəḍura,⁷² an Aksumite ruler who is known from Sabaic inscriptions from Yemen⁷³ and is also mentioned in a short inscription in consonantal Gə‘əz engraved on a bronze object from ‘Āddi Galamo in northern Ethiopia.⁷⁴ Although the original inscription at Adulis has never been found by modern archaeologists, it was copied ca. 518 by the merchant-turned-Christian apologist Cosmas Indicopleustes, who reproduced the main bulk of the text in his *Christian Topography*.⁷⁵ RIÉth 277 documents a series of military campaigns waged by the Aksumites over a vast area extending from the Eastern Desert (located to the north of Aksum, between the Nile and the Red Sea) to northern Somalia, along with an attack on the Red Sea coast of Arabia.⁷⁶ As with other Aksumite royal inscriptions, it ends with a reference to its having been erected as part of a throne, in this case dedicated to Arēs,⁷⁷ the Greek god of war with whom the Aksumite god Maḥrəm is identified in Greek Aksumite inscriptions.⁷⁸ As we shall see below, Aksumite kings had a unique tradition of erecting symbolic stone thrones on the occasion of

⁶⁹ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 268–274; trans. Drewes 2019: 242–244.

⁷⁰ Bernand 1991: 371–372.

⁷¹ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* §2.60.1–§2.63.12 (= Bernand 1991: 379–380); trans. Wolska-Conus 1968 [I]: 372–378.

⁷² Speidel 2016: 291.

⁷³ Gl 1223/11.12.14 (Solá Solé 1964: 53); Gl 1222/9–10.13 (Solá Solé 1964: 52); Gl 1224/11.12.14 (Solá Solé 1964: 54); Gl 1330/10.11.13 (Solá Solé 1964: 56).

⁷⁴ RIÉth 180 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 219–220).

⁷⁵ Regrettably, the opening of the inscription, and along with it the name of the king who erected it, are missing in Cosmas’ copy, perhaps because that portion of the text had suffered damage and was illegible in Cosmas’ time.

⁷⁶ For a general treatment of the military campaigns recorded in RIÉth 277, along with the identification of the peoples and places mentioned in the inscription, see Bowersock (2013: 49–53). On the Eastern Desert campaign and the campaign against the land of Sasu in western Ethiopia, see Hatke (2013: 44–57). On the Arabian campaign, see Cuvigny and Robin (1996: 708–711); Speidel (2016 *passim*); and Cuvigny and Robin (2021: 406–409).

⁷⁷ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* §2.63.11–12 (= Bernand 1991: 380); trans. Wolska-Conus 1968 [I]: 378.

⁷⁸ Marrassini 2010: 11.

a military victory, and the inscriptions—whether in Greek or Gəʿəz—that recorded these victories formed part of said throne. At no point in RIÉth 277, however, does the Aksumite king so much as allude to his having entrusted his monument to divine protection, much less does he issue a threat against anyone who might damage or remove it—at least not according to the copy of the inscription made by Cosmas Indicopleustes.⁷⁹ For this reason, RIÉth 277 will likewise be excluded from the discussion.

3.1 RIÉth 185 I + II and RIÉth 185 bis I + II

This group of inscriptions documents ‘Ezānā’s campaign against the Beḡa people inhabiting the Eastern Desert.⁸⁰ RIÉth 185 I + II are carved on the same face of a single granite stele, found in a garden by the entrance of the town as one approaches from the east, that measures 247 cm in height, 98 cm in width, and 21–22 cm in thickness. The first text is written in the *musnad* script and the second in consonantal *fidal*. Despite the use of different scripts, both texts are in Gəʿəz, though RIÉth 185 I employs certain Ancient South Arabian features alien to Gəʿəz, such as mimation,⁸¹ vocabulary like *bn* ‘son’ (= Gəʿəz *wald*) and *mlk* ‘king’ (= Gəʿəz *nəḡuś*).⁸² On the other side of the stele, we find the Greek account of ‘Ezānā’s campaign, known by the siglum RIÉth 270. Although the English diplomat and antiquarian Henry Salt copied RIÉth 270 as early as 1805,⁸³ it was not until 1893 that another English traveller, Theodore Bent, took squeezes of the two Gəʿəz texts. These were first published the following year by the Austrian Semitist David Heinrich Müller.⁸⁴ Then, in 1906, the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition led by the German Semitist and epigrapher Enno Littmann took further squeezes, as well as photographs, of RIÉth 185 I + II and RIÉth 270, publishing these

⁷⁹ Judging from thematic and stylistic commonalities with other Aksumite royal inscriptions, Cosmas Indicopleustes’ copy of RIÉth 277 would appear to be accurate. Possibly relevant is RIÉth 269 (Bernand 1991: 362–363), an Aksumite inscription in Greek from the town of Aksum that alludes to a Red Sea crossing, perhaps associated with the attack on the Red Sea coast of Arabia described in RIÉth 277 (Hatke 2011: 43). On the other hand, there is some evidence that the Aksumites invaded Ḥimyar during the early fourth century (Hatke 2022a), in view of which RIÉth 269 could potentially date from that period.

⁸⁰ On this campaign, see Rodinson (1981) and Sima (2003).

⁸¹ I.e. the addition of a suffixed *-m* to a substantive to mark indefiniteness, adverbs, and certain proper names in languages of the Ancient South Arabian branch of Semitic. This feature is alien to Gəʿəz, and when used in Gəʿəz inscriptions in *musnad*, it often appears in contexts where it never would in an Ancient South Arabian inscription.

⁸² For a detailed discussion of Ancient South Arabian—specifically Sabaic—features in ‘Ezānā’s inscriptions, see Sima (2003–2004). On the political and ideological background, see Hatke (2022a).

⁸³ Mountnorris 1809: III: 179–192.

⁸⁴ Müller 1894.

in 1913.⁸⁵ Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider published an updated edition of the two Gəʿəz texts in 1991,⁸⁶ while Siegbert Uhlig published an edition of RIÉth 185 bis I + II with German translations twenty years later.⁸⁷ Most recently, Drewes' French translation of, and commentary on, RIÉth 185 I was published posthumously in 2019.⁸⁸ As they invoke the pagan Aksumite deities Maḥrəm, ʿAstar, and Bəḥer, these three inscriptions can be dated to the period before ʿEzānā's conversion to Christianity, an event that Wolfgang Hahn dates to the second half of the 340s.⁸⁹ RIÉth 185 I, the first inscription in this group that we shall examine, consists of twenty-six lines of text, the relevant portion of which reads as follows:

17. *w-ḅ*¹⁸. [n]^m *L-mḥrm*^m *ḡ-wldn*^m [ḡk]^t *ms*^l *ḡ-wrq*^m 19. *w-z-brwr* [ʾ] *ḡd*^m *w-z-šrq*^m *s*² *ls*¹ *t*^m *w-*
šḥfn *zt* 20. *šḥft*^m *w-s*² *mn* *w-ḅ*¹ *n*^m *L-s*¹ *tr*^m [w-] 21. *L-bḥr*^m *w-* [*L-mḥrm*^m *z-wldn*^m *w-L-*] *m-b*^m *ḡ*²².
*ms*¹ *n* *L-z-ḅn* [*šll*^m *w-nk*]^t *L-ykwn*^m *w*²³. *zmd*^m *w-wld*^m *w-ḅ*¹ *m-bḥr*^m *L-ys*² *m* 24. *w-ḅ*¹ [*ms*² *w* *L-ytb*]
tk *w-b-km* 25. *ḡ* *s*² *yymn-h*^m [*L-ḡ-ḅn*]^m *L-[y]* *dlw*²⁶. *n*^m *w-[L-]* *h[grn*^m *L-zlf*]^m 90

17. And we have offer¹⁸ed to Maḥrəm who begat us, out of gratitude, a statue of gold¹⁹ and one of silver [and three of bronze.⁹¹ And] we have written this²⁰ inscription and we have set it up and offered it to ʿAstar [and]²¹ to Bəḥer and [to Maḥrəm who begat us. [And] if there be one who has²² destroyed this stone, may he be [blinded and beaten(?)]⁹²—(he) and²³ his kin and his children. And may he be taken away

⁸⁵ Littmann 1913: 8–17.

⁸⁶ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 246–250.

⁸⁷ Uhlig 2001: 14–17, 22–26.

⁸⁸ Drewes 2019: 197–205. Since RIÉth 185 II, RIÉth 185 bis I, and RIÉth 185 bis II are virtually identical in content to RIÉth 185 I, Drewes did not bother to provide translations of these variant versions and instead notes only those places in which minor orthographic or morphological differences occur (Drewes 2019: 205–207).

⁸⁹ Hahn 2005b: 479.

⁹⁰ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 243.

⁹¹ The choice of *šariq* (*šrq*) as the word for bronze (χαλκαίους in RIÉth 270 bis) is a bit unexpected, as the former typically denotes a brass coin rather than the metal itself. In Gəʿəz, the preferred term for bronze (and copper) is *nāḥs*, a word with cognates throughout Semitic.

⁹² The phrase *šll*^m *w-nkt*^m can be restored here in light of RIÉth 185 bis I/24 and RIÉth 185 bis II/39–40, wherein we read *šllw* *w-nkt* and *šll* *w-nkt* respectively (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 247, 249). Abraham Drewes interprets the first word as the Gəʿəz adjective *šallul* ‘obscuratus, caligans, occaecatus, aveuglé’, arguing that the form *šllw* in RIÉth 185 bis I/24 is an error for **šlwl*. As for *nkt*, the root from which this word is derived is not attested in Classical Gəʿəz. None of the interpretations proposed thus far (e.g. Drewes 2019: 203–204) seem to fit the context. It is tempting to interpret *nkt* in light of Hebrew *nākkāh* ‘to beat’ (cf. Gəʿəz *nakaya* ‘to injure, to harm’ and Arabic *nakā* ‘to harm’), hence the tentative gloss of ‘beaten’ posited here. Although one finds the nominal forms *nəkyat* and *nəket* ‘injuring, harming’, the passive participle of *nakaya*, at least in Classical Gəʿəz, is *nəkyu*, not ***nəkut*.

from the land ²⁴and [from the (*meaning uncertain*)⁹³ may he be re]moved. And as ²⁵we have set up [this stone], may it be suitable ²⁶for us and [for] our coun[try, eternally].

RIÉth 185 II consists of twenty-five lines of text. The portion of text corresponding to the passage quoted above reads as follows:

18. w-ʔbʔn ʔk¹⁹.tt l-mḥrm z-wldn msl z-wrq ʔhd /1/ w-z-brwr ²⁰.[ḥ]d /1/ w-z-šrq šlst /3/
w-šḥfn [zt] šḥft w-šmn w-²¹.[b]ʔn l-ʔstr w-l-mḥrm z-wldn w-l-ʔm-b z-ʔm²².[s]n l-z-ʔbn šll
w-nkt l-ykn w-zmd w-wld ʔm-b ²³.[ḥ]r l-yšʔ w-ʔmšw l-ytbtk w-b-km šmn-h l-yd²⁴.[l]wn ln
w-l-hgrn l-zlf⁹⁴

As is obvious, this passage more or less mirrors RIÉth 185 I/21–26 but for such minor features as the lack of mimation, the lack of *scriptio plena* in the transcription of the jussive verb *ykn* ‘may he be’ (in vocalised form *yəkun*, cf. *ykwn* in RIÉth 185 I/22), and the superfluous *ln* ‘for us’ (vocalised *lana*) in the phrase *l-ydlwn ln* ‘may it be suitable for us’, as opposed to the correct form *l-ydlwn^m* (= *la-yədləwwana*) in RIÉth 185 I/25–26. Of particular interest is the reference to the blinding of anyone who might destroy the monument, as the same punishment is referred to in such Safaitic curse formulae as ‘May he who effaces this inscription be blinded’ (*ʔwr ḍ-yʔwr h-sʔfr*)⁹⁵ and ‘O Lāt, let there be blindness and a scab and starvation for he who would efface the inscription’ (*f-h-lt ʔwr grb w-gʔ l-ḍ yʔwr h-sʔfr*).⁹⁶ As we shall see in *Discussion and conclusions*, this type of punishment is attested in earlier times in the Fertile Crescent, where it was often meted out in military contexts to defeated enemies. As for the wish that the stone monument be suitable for the king and his country, this recalls similar wording in legends on Aksumite coins. Thus, Anonymous Type 53 bronze coins, dating from the second half of the fourth century, bear the Greek legend TOYTOAPECHTHXGOPA (= τοῦτο ἀρέσει τῆ χώρα) ‘May this please the country.’⁹⁷ The same legend, again in Greek, is attested on bronze coins from the reign of the late fourth-century Aksumite king Ouazebas⁹⁸ and on Anonymous Type 76

⁹³ Abraham Drewes’ (admittedly tentative) interpretation of *w-ʔms²w l-ytbtk* as ‘et qu’il soit coupé de la bière’ (Drewes 2019: 198, 204) seems rather implausible.

⁹⁴ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 243.

⁹⁵ Drewes 2019: 203.

⁹⁶ Hayajneh 2018: 61–62. As Hani Hayajneh points out, *wgʔ* can be interpreted as either *wgʔ* ‘painful’ (cf. Arabic *waḡīʔ*), in which case it would serve as an adjective qualifying *grb* (cf. Arabic *ḡarab*), or else as *w-gʔ* ‘and starvation’ (cf. Arabic *ḡūʔ*). Although the latter interpretation is adopted here, this remains hypothetical.

⁹⁷ Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995: 34.

⁹⁸ Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995: 34–35.

bronze coins dating from the second half of the fifth century.⁹⁹ A Gəʿəz calque on this phrase is similarly attested on silver Type 111 coins from the reign of Kāleb in the form *l-hgr z-ydl* (= *la-hagar zə-yədlu*) ‘May this be suitable for the country’,¹⁰⁰ while bronze coins of Types 118-123 from the reign of Wazēnā in the second half of the sixth century bear the slightly variant legend *l-hzb z-ydl* (= *la-həzb zə-yədlu*) ‘May this be pleasing for the people.’¹⁰¹ Clearly, Aksumite kings regarded it as important that they satisfied their subjects, and wished to advertise this sentiment in inscriptions and on coins. Interestingly, while the curse in RIÉth 185 I and the related inscriptions is levelled at individuals who might destroy the stone on which the inscription is carved, nothing is said of the consequences of destruction to the statues that ‘Ezānā erected. Unless the statues were themselves inscribed with similar curse formulae—which is impossible to say for certain, as they do not survive—it could be that destruction of an inscription was deemed a more serious offence, as inscriptions were the sole record linking the king by name to the act of dedicating the statues.

Let us now turn to RIÉth 185 bis I + II, two Gəʿəz inscriptions that are more or less identical with RIÉth 185 I + II, and that, like the latter pair of texts, are written in *musnad* and consonantal *fidal* respectively. The granite stele on which they are carved was discovered in 1981 by a peasant a few metres from the cistern of May Šum in the north of the town of Aksum and measures 268 cm in height, 92.5 cm in width, and 26 cm in thickness. Based on copies and photographs made by Roger Schneider and Francis Anfray in 1981, Drewes and Schneider published an edition of the text in 1991.¹⁰² Again like RIÉth 185 I + II, RIÉth 185 bis I + II share space on the same stele with a Greek inscription, RIÉth 270 bis, which will be treated below. In RIÉth 185 bis I, an inscription consisting of twenty-seven lines of text, the curse formula is presented as follows:

19.ᵝbʿn^m l-mḥr^mmn^m l-z-20.wldn^m ʾktt^m mtl q-wrq /1/ w-d-br[w]^{21.r} /1/ w-d-šryq s²ls¹t w-ᵝḥfn
z-[š]²²ḥft w-s²mn^m w-ᵝmḥdn^m l-ᵝtr^m w-l-[b]²³ḥr^m w-l-mḥr^m l-z-wldn^m ʾmky bw q-24.[m]
s¹n l-z-ᵝbn ṣllw w-nkt l-ykwn^m w-25.[z]mdw^m w-wldw^m ʾbh¹yr l-ys² w-ᵝm[s²]²⁶. [w]^m l-ytbtk
w-b-km s²mn-hm l-q-ᵝbn 27.l-ydlwn w-l-hgry l-zlfw^{m103}

As with RIÉth 185 I, mimation is widely used throughout RIÉth 185 bis I, though its use is not consistent and is not always attached to the words to which it is attached in RIÉth 185 I. Again like RIÉth 185 I, the relative pronoun alternates between *q-* and *z-* in RIÉth 185 bis I. On the other hand, the word for ‘statue’,

⁹⁹ Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995: 37.

¹⁰⁰ Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995: 40.

¹⁰¹ Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995: 41.

¹⁰² Drewes and Schneider 1991: 246–250.

¹⁰³ Drewes and Schneider 1991: 247.

which appears in RIÉth 185 I in the form *ms^l* (= Gəʿəz *māsl*), is here written with the grapheme for the voiceless interdental, thus *m̥l*, cf. Sabaic *m̥l* ‘statue, image’. RIÉth 185 bis I also displays a preference for *plene scriptum*, thus *šryq* (RIÉth 185 I *šrq* = Gəʿəz *šariq*) ‘bronze’ and *bħr* (RIÉth 185 I *bħr* = Gəʿəz *bəħer*) ‘land’, although both RIÉth 185 I and RIÉth 185 bis II present the form *brwr* (= Gəʿəz *bərur*) ‘silver’. In RIÉth 185 bis II, an inscription consisting of forty-four lines of text,¹⁰⁴ the relevant passage is presented as follows:

24.w-ʔb^{25.ʔ}n ʔktt l-26.mħrm z-wl^{27.dn} msl z-w^{28.rq} ʔhd /1/ 29.w-z-brr ʔh^{30.d} /1/ w-z-šrq 31.šlst
/3/ w-32.šħfk z-šħ^{33.ft} w-šmk 34.w-ʔmħḏnk 35.l-ʔstr w-b^{36.ħr} w-l-mħrm 37.z-wldn w-l-38.ʔm-b
z-ʔmsn 39.l-z-ʔbn šll w-40.nkt l-ykn w-z^{41.md} w-wld 42.ʔbħr l-yḡʔ w-ʔmšw l-ytbtk w-b-km
šmn-h l-ydlwn 43.ln w-l-hgrn l-zlf¹⁰⁵

If one compares this passage with the same passage in RIÉth 185 II, another text in consonantal *fidal*, one notes that RIÉth 185 bis II gives us *šħfk z-šħft* (= Gəʿəz *šahafku zā-šəħfata*) ‘I have written this inscription’, while RIÉth 185 II yields *šħfn zt šħft* (= Gəʿəz *šahafna zātta šəħfata*) ‘we have written this inscription.’ The references to dedication in the two texts also differ. Thus in RIÉth 185 II we read *šmn w-ʔbⁿ l-ʔstr w-l-mħrm z-wldn* (= *šemna wa-ʔabāⁿna la-ʔastar wa-la-maħrəm za-waladana*) ‘we have set up [these things] and offered [them] to ‘Astar and to Maħrəm, who begat us.’ In RIÉth 185 bis II, however, we find instead *šmk w-ʔmħḏnk l-ʔstr w-bħr w-l-mħrm z-wldn* (= *šemku wa-ʔamaħḏanku la-ʔastar wa-bəħer wa-la-maħrəm za-waladani*) ‘I have set up [these things] and entrusted [them] to ‘Astar and Bəħer, and to Maħrəm who begat me.’ The idea of entrusting monuments, including inscribed monuments, to deities for protection is well attested in Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, the verb *rtd* ‘to entrust’ being widely used in this context in Sabaic, Qatabānic, Minaic, and Ḥaḍramitic.¹⁰⁶ As we shall see, references to entrusting monuments to divine protection is a theme that persists in Aksumite royal inscriptions into the mid-sixth century.

Although RIÉth 277 states that a stele could form part of a throne, the inscriptions RIÉth 185 I + II and RIÉth 185 bis I + II speak only of a stone (*ʔbn* = vocalised Gəʿəz *ʔəbn*). As for the statues, it is not stated in the aforementioned texts whether these depicted Maħrəm/Arēs himself or ‘Ezānā, though it bears mentioning that in inscriptions from Aksumite Ethiopia deities are invariably mentioned

¹⁰⁴Despite the difference in the number of lines of text, RIÉth 185 bis I and RIÉth 185 bis II are basically the same length, as the individual lines of the latter inscription are shorter.

¹⁰⁵Drewes and Schneider 1991: 249.

¹⁰⁶The examples are too numerous to cite here. For attestations of the verb *rtd* in each of the four Ancient South Arabian languages, see the online Digital Archive for the Study of Pre-Islamic Arabian Inscriptions, http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=32&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=491325642&w1_group=19&w1_subgroup=22.

as *recipients* of statues. Explicit references to the fashioning of cult statues in the form of deities are lacking.¹⁰⁷ In South Arabia, where the dedication of statuettes to deities is a common theme, particularly in Middle Sabaic inscriptions dating from the first three centuries of the Common Era, it appears that the individual represented in said statuettes was the dedicant. Such offerings are believed to have taken the place of dedications of oneself, or of a member of one's family, for service in a deity's temple, of the sort described in earlier inscriptions dating from the first millennium BCE.¹⁰⁸ With the exception of the city-states in Yemen's Wādī al-Ġawf region, and then only during a relatively short period in the first half of the first millennium BCE, anthropomorphic depictions of deities were largely alien to South Arabian tradition.¹⁰⁹ In his 2012 article on South Arabian deities and their representations, Christian Robin draws attention to the link between deities and empty thrones, arguing that symbolic stone thrones were dedicated to deities.¹¹⁰ That the concept of empty thrones as linked to the divine, or exuding some sort of power, persisted into later centuries is suggested by mediaeval Arabic accounts of the revolt of al-Muḥtār bin Abī 'Ubayd al-Ṭaqafī against the Umayyads in the mid-680s CE. According to these accounts, al-Muḥtār's followers bore a throne (*kursiyy*) that was alleged to have belonged to the caliph 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib (r. 656–661) in the belief that it would grant them victory in battle and likened it to the Ark of the Covenant (*tābūt mūsā fīhi l-sakīna*).¹¹¹ It is entirely possible that similar beliefs with respect to empty thrones prevailed in Aksumite Ethiopia as well, at least during the pre-Christian period. In that case, the religion of pre-Christian Aksum would have belonged to the generally aniconistic traditions of West Semitic-speaking peoples.¹¹² If the Aksumites followed the practice of ritual dedications described in Middle Sabaic inscriptions, then the statues alluded to in 'Ezānā's inscriptions would likely have depicted the king. No trace of such statues has been identified in the archaeological record, at least not at Aksumite sites,¹¹³ most likely because they were fashioned from valuable metals,

¹⁰⁷Archaeology has yet to shed any light on the matter, for to date, no temples to any of the pre-Christian deities of Aksum have been identified in the archaeological record.

¹⁰⁸Robin 1997: 68.

¹⁰⁹Other exceptions date from a much later period and reflect influence from Graeco-Roman tradition (Gerlach and Schnelle 2013: 209).

¹¹⁰Robin 2012: 61–68; cf. Jung (2019 *passim*).

¹¹¹al-Balāḍurī 1936: 242; cf. I Samuel 4:3–7, where we are told that the Israelites brought the Ark of the Covenant into a battle with the Philistines.

¹¹²Cf. Hendel (1997) and Mettinger (1997).

¹¹³In one rare instance, a Qatabānic inscription from Tamna' in Yemen (CIAS 47.11/o 1/F 72), dating from the reign of King Waraw'il Gayl^{am} Yuhan'im (ca. 25–40 CE) and dedicated by a woman named Bar'at, still retains a bronze statuette of said dedicant, who is portrayed in a seated position. In the case of this piece, the block of stone on which the inscription was carved also functions as the plinth on which the statuette rests: <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=54&prjI>

in which case they were targets for looters, who would have melted them down and reused them for other purposes at some later point in time.¹¹⁴ However, a stone pedestal from the site of Aksum, bearing two foot-shaped indentations, is likely to have formed the base for one such statue. Judging from the dimensions of the foot-shaped indentations, which measure 92 centimetres in length, the statue would have been more than twice life-sized.¹¹⁵ Since the foot indentations were not deep enough to secure a standing statue of that scale, the figure is more likely to have been depicted in a seated position,¹¹⁶ presumably a throne of some sort, though one distinct from the thrones alluded to in inscriptions. One can only guess at the form such royal portraits took, as to date, the only known depictions of Aksumite kings are preserved on coins.¹¹⁷

3.2 RIÉth 270 bis

This next inscription preserves a Greek version of the account of ‘Ezānā’s aforementioned campaign against the Beḡa. It consists of thirty-seven lines of text and as noted above, is inscribed on the same granite stele on which RIÉth 185 bis I + II are inscribed. Based on copies and photographs of RIÉth 270 bis made by Francis Anfray and Roger Schneider in 1981, Étienne Bernand published an edition of the inscription with a translation and commentary in French in the following year.¹¹⁸ Some years later, Bernand published another edition with a commentary as part of the *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*.¹¹⁹ An edition of the text with a German translation was published by Siegbert Uhlig in 2001.¹²⁰ That RIÉth 270, the Greek text inscribed on the stele on which RIÉth 185 I + II are inscribed, is omitted from the discussion is due to the fact that, while it relates basically the same narrative as RIÉth 270 bis, it contains no curse formula and is therefore of no relevance for this article. Before proceeding to the relevant portion of RIÉth 270 bis, it is worth pausing to point out the significance of the use of Greek. Although Ethiopia was never invaded, much less conquered, by Alexander of Macedon or any of his Hellenistic-period successors, it had for centuries been indelibly linked by trade to the eastern Mediterranean,

d = 1&corId = 14&colId = 0&navId = 315617543&recId = 518&mark = 00518%2C001%2C001. Given their presumed size, the statues that accompanied Aksumite royal inscriptions would not have been placed in such a position vis-à-vis the inscriptions-cum-thrones. This could provide further support for the empty throne theory.

¹¹⁴Breyer 2012: 119.

¹¹⁵Breyer 2012: 119–120.

¹¹⁶Breyer 2012: 120.

¹¹⁷Munro-Hay 1999: 13; Breyer 2012: 39.

¹¹⁸Bernand 1982.

¹¹⁹Bernand 1991: 363–367.

¹²⁰Uhlig 2001: 18–21.

a region in which Greek served as a de facto lingua franca throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods.¹²¹ However, while the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt had sent out expeditions to the Horn of Africa to acquire elephants for use in warfare,¹²² it was not until the intensification of Red Sea trade during the early Roman period that Greek culture exerted any significant impact in Ethiopia.¹²³ Writing sometime in the mid-first century CE, the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a guide for merchants doing business in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean, notes that the Aksumite king of the time, one Zōskalēs, could both read and write Greek.¹²⁴ RIÉth 277, the Greek inscription from Adulis recording an early third-century Aksumite king's military exploits noted above, indicates that Greek was already being used in monumental inscriptions more than a century before 'Ezānā's time.

Given the widespread use of Greek during the early centuries of the Common Era, one might assume that such inscriptions were written in Greek in order to address foreign visitors. Although such intentions cannot be completely discounted, it cannot be taken for granted that the written transmission of a message was the primary purpose of inscriptions during antiquity.¹²⁵ In the case of RIÉth 270 bis and other Aksumite royal inscriptions in Greek, it is possible the use of Greek was instead a visual signal that Aksum was a participant in the vast network of trade and cultural diffusion that linked the Mediterranean with distant Central Asia and India, one in which the use of Greek in inscriptions, or of Graeco-Roman elements in art and architecture, signified a familiarity and a connectedness with an international vocabulary of cultural symbols.¹²⁶ In this respect, the use of Greek in Aksumite inscriptions signified Aksum's connectedness to the cosmopolitan world of Eurasia, much as the use of the *musnad* script signified identification with the cultural sphere of a more circumscribed region, namely South Arabia. It bears noting that Greek also enjoyed a certain status during the same period in Nubia, a region that, like Aksum, shared in the same cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman-inspired culture.¹²⁷ In view of this shared attitude to Greek, whether as a vehicle for conveying messages or as a symbol of belonging to a wider world, it comes as no surprise that two fragmentary Aksumite inscriptions from Meroë

¹²¹Breyer 2012: 117.

¹²²Casson 1993 passim; Schneider 2009 passim; Sidebotham 2011: 39–53.

¹²³On Mediterranean contact with, and influence on, the kingdom of Aksum, see Breyer (2021: 276–279, 281–284); Japp (2021: 362–364, 369, and the sources cited therein).

¹²⁴*Periplus* §5.2.19–22 (trans. Casson 1989: 53).

¹²⁵Macdonald 2010: 7.

¹²⁶On the phenomenon of Hellenism as a system of values, styles, and motifs shared by various eastern peoples, see Kuhrt and Sherwin-White (1987) and Bowersock (1996).

¹²⁷Burstein 2008 passim and Hatke 2020b: 314. On the more purely material and aesthetic aspects of Hellenistic influence on Nubia, see Török (2011 passim).

(RIÉth 286 and RIÉth 286 A),¹²⁸ recording an Aksumite invasion of Nubia during the early fourth century, are both written in Greek. Having placed RIÉth 270 bis in its cultural context, let us now see what this inscription has to say about curses. At the end of the inscription, we read:

²⁶ὑπὲρ δὲ εὐχαριστίας τοῦ μαι γεννήσαντος ²⁷ἀνίκητου Ἄρεως ἀνεθήκαμεν αὐτῷ ἀνδρὶ²⁸ ἄντα χρύσειον ἓνα καὶ ἀργύρειον ἓνα καὶ χαλκαίους ²⁹τρὶς καὶ ἀνέθηκα ταύτην τὴν στήλην καὶ παρε³⁰θέμην αὐτὴν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τῇ γῆ καὶ τῷ μαι ³¹γεννήσαντι ἀνίκητῳ Ἄρεϊ • εἴ τις οὖν τοῦτον ³²ἀδικῆσαι βουληθῆ, ἐξολεωθρῆσθαι αὐτὸν ὁ θε[ὸς] ³³τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς ἐκρίζων καὶ μὴ ὑπάρ³⁴[χ]ῆ αὐτοῦ ὄνομα ἐν γῆ ζώντων¹²⁹

With thanks to the invincible Arēs who begat me, we have consecrated to him a golden statue, one of silver, and three of bronze; I consecrated this stele and I dedicated it to heaven, to the land, and to the invincible Arēs who begat me. If, therefore, there be someone who wishes to offend the latter, may the God of Heaven and Earth lead him to his ruin, completely, and may his name remain no longer in the land of the living.¹³⁰

As noted above, Arēs is the name by which the god Maḥrēm is known in Greek Aksumite inscriptions. By identifying Maḥrēm with the Greek god of war, the Aksumites were following a time-honoured Near Eastern tradition in which local deities were identified with their Graeco-Roman counterparts. Although Maḥrēm enjoyed a privileged status in the Aksumite pantheon as the divine father of Aksum's kings, suggesting that he was a dynastic god of sorts,¹³¹ he was by no means the only Aksumite god to be identified with a Greek god. The final portion of the (likely) third-century inscription RIÉth 277 invokes, alongside Maḥrēm/Arēs, two other deities who are referred to as Zeus and Poseidon,¹³² who are to be identified with the local gods 'Astar and Bəḥer respectively.¹³³ More shall be said about religious references in RIÉth 270 bis shortly, but for now let us focus on the curse formula.

One striking feature of the curse formula in RIÉth 270 bis is the statement that the name of the one who offends Maḥrēm/Arēs will no longer remain in the land of the living. The nature of the offence is not specified, though, in view of the

¹²⁸Bernand 1991: 385–387.

¹²⁹Bernand 1982: 107 (= Bernand 1991: 369).

¹³⁰Translation based on the French translation of Bernand (1982: 108). Since the translated text does precisely not correspond line-for-line with the Greek text, owing to Greek syntax, the lines of text are not numbered in the translation.

¹³¹Sima 2007: 661.

¹³²Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography* §2.63.8–9 (= Bernand 1991: 379–380).

¹³³Marrassini 2010: 12.

language used in other Aksumite curse formulae, one presumes that it entailed damage to or removal of the inscription. Whatever the case, the obvious implication is that the offending individual will be totally forgotten. While none of the inscriptions treated above say anything about names in their respective curse formulae, it is well accepted by anthropologists that names have an important social function, encapsulating as they do an individual's uniqueness and, at the same time, his connectedness to others through the way in which he is viewed.¹³⁴ In the ancient Near East, among the Hebrews no less than among the peoples of Mesopotamia and the Egyptians, one's name was indelibly tied to one's soul, personality, and indeed existence.¹³⁵ By the same token, the lack or erasure of a name effectively implied non-existence.¹³⁶ Deuteronomy 9:14 speaks to this point in YHWH's curse against the sinful Israelites: 'I shall blot out their name from under heaven' (*'ēməḥēḥ 'ēṭ-šəmām mit-taḥaṭ haš-šāmāyim*), while in Psalm 109:13 we read 'May his progeny be cut off; in the following generation may their name be blotted out' (*yāhī 'aḥarītō lə-hakrīt bə-dōr 'aḥēr yimmaṭ šəmām*).¹³⁷ The link between destruction of one's name and destruction of one's progeny is similarly emphasised in Isaiah 14:22, where God threatens 'I will cut off from Babylon the name and the remnant' (*hikrattī lə-bābēl šēm ū-šə'ōr*). That names also had a special significance in Aksumite Ethiopia is evidenced by RIÉth 271, the Greek version of 'Ezānā's Nubian campaign, in which the king states that God 'bestowed on me a great name through His son, in whom I have placed my faith' (ἐχαρίσ[α] τό μοι ὁ [ν]ομα μέγα διὰ τοῦ Υἱοῦ [α]ύτου εἰς ὃν ἐπ[ί]στευσα).¹³⁸ Then, in RIÉth 191, using similar language, Kāleb states at one point: 'He (i.e. God) gave me a great name [in] order that I make war on Ḥimyar' (*w't whbn s'm 'by km 'ḏb' ḥmyr = wə'ətu wahabani səma 'abiya [ka]ma 'əḏbā' ḥəmer*).¹³⁹ That the Aksumite king is given a great name in the context of a military campaign, whether in Nubia or in South Arabia, recalls the ancient Mesopotamian belief that attributed a king's military victory to the gods' having called out his name.¹⁴⁰ In view of the close association of an individual's name with his place in society and, indeed, his very existence, the threat issued in RIÉth 270 bis regarding the name of anyone who might damage or remove what 'Ezānā had erected entails in effect the obliteration of all memory of the offending individual. CIH 541, the *res gestae* of the Ethiopian-born king of Ḥimyar 'Abrəhā (r. ca. 540–560) from the Great Dam at Mārib in Yemen, provides us with a very literal example of this in the fourth

¹³⁴Finch 2008: 711 (and the literature cited therein).

¹³⁵Seymour 1983: 110–111; Radner 2005: 15, 17, 19, 70.

¹³⁶Seymour 1983: 110; Radner 2005: 70, 252.

¹³⁷Cf. Exodus 32:33.

¹³⁸RIÉth 271/16–17 (trans. Hägg in Eide et al. 1998: 1102).

¹³⁹RIÉth 191/34 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 273).

¹⁴⁰Seymour 1983: 111.

line of text, in which ʾAbrəhā's name has been excised. According to Alexander Sima, 'es handelt sich dabei nicht um einen Akt von gedankenlosem Vandalismus sondern offensichtlich um eine bewußte *damnatio memoriae*'.¹⁴¹ Given the seriousness of removing an individual's name from a monument, it is significant that, when an inscription of the Old Babylonian king Samsuiluna (r. 1749–1712 BCE) some thousand years after its original dedication, its discoverer made a special point of emphasising the fact that he did *not* alter that king's name (*šu-um-šu la u₂-nak-kir*).¹⁴² However, despite the clear importance—cross-culturally—of the preservation of one's name, no Aksumite curse formula explicitly refers to damaging a king's name, or replacing it with another name, as an offence worthy of malediction, though it is likely that such an act was subsumed under the generic category of destruction alluded to in such formulae.

In terms of religious ideology, the passage quoted above is also highly revealing. That Maḥrəm/Arēs is referred to as invincible (ἀνίκητος) has some parallels in RIÉth 189, dating from the Christian period of ʿEzānā's reign, though there it is ʿEzānā who proclaims himself to be undefeated by his enemies,¹⁴³ and thus invincible, while his newfound Christian god is said to achieve victory on his behalf.¹⁴⁴ Although the epithet 'God of Heaven and Earth' does not directly follow the name Arēs, it is likely that Arēs is intended here, in which case it would be he, as opposed to a second, unnamed deity, who was understood as the divine agent who would execute the punishment described. That Arēs is the only deity mentioned in RIÉth 270 bis, and also the deity who is said to hold mastery over heaven and earth, is taken by some as evidence of a monotheising trend in Aksum during this period.¹⁴⁵ From the ecclesiastical historian Rufinus of Aquileia (d. 411) we learn that Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia sometime in the second quarter of the fourth century by a Syrian named Frumentius.¹⁴⁶ Although Rufinus' account never mentions ʿEzānā by name, nor, indeed, does he even allude to ʿEzānā's actual conversion to Christianity, it is clear that Frumentius' evangelising efforts led to the Aksumite king's conversion, as ʿEzānā would, sometime in the late 340s, replace the pagan symbols of the full moon and crescent on his coins with the Christian cross.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, it is ʿEzānā, along with his brother Šeʿāzānā, whom

¹⁴¹Sima 2002: 127.

¹⁴²Kitz 2014: 254–255. On Mesopotamian beliefs regarding the impact of obliterating the written name of an individual, see Radner (2005: 252–259).

¹⁴³Thus we are told that ʿEzānā was a 'king, undefeated by the enemy' (*nəguś za-ʾay-yətmaw-wā la-ḏarr*) (RIÉ 189/6 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263]).

¹⁴⁴At the beginning of the inscription, ʿEzānā invokes God as 'Lord of Heaven, [Who is in] heaven and (on) earth, victorious on my behalf' (*ʿəgziʾa samāy [za-ba] samāy wa-mədr mawāʾi lita*) (RIÉ 189/1 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263]).

¹⁴⁵E.g. Bernand (2000: 14).

¹⁴⁶Rufinus, *Church History* §10.9–§10.10.

¹⁴⁷Phillipson 2012: 97.

the Roman emperor Constantius II addresses in a letter dated 356/7 concerning Frumentius in his capacity as Aksum's first bishop.¹⁴⁸ It could be that RIÉth 270 bis dates from a period in which 'Ezānā had been exposed, through Frumentius, to ideas about a new god, and that these ideas influenced his beliefs regarding Maḥrəm/Arēs as a 'God of Heaven and Earth'. In other words, 'Ezānā was open to new religious ideas but had not yet fully committed himself to Christianity. Complicating the picture, however, is the fact that RIÉth 185 bis I + II, which share space with RIÉth 270 bis and are thus presumably contemporary with it, still invoke 'Astar and Bəḥer alongside Maḥrəm. Indeed, RIÉth 188, which we shall examine shortly and which appears to post-date RIÉth 185 I + II—and thus also RIÉth 270 bis¹⁴⁹—again invokes 'Astar and Bəḥer, in addition to Maḥrəm. When 'Ezānā eventually embraced Christianity, the Christian deity was invested with epithets comparable to the one borne by Arēs in RIÉth 270 bis. This we shall see in RIÉth 189, an inscription dating from the Christian phase of 'Ezānā's reign in which the new god is variously invoked as 'Lord of Heaven', 'Lord of All', and 'Lord of the Land'. This is not the only instance in which the Christian deity inherited aspects of deities from the Aksumite pantheon. Thus, in the Gə'əz translation of the *Book of Ecclesiasticus*, for example, God is referred to as 'Astar,¹⁵⁰ which, as we have seen, was the name of a pagan deity worshipped at Aksum, one based on the pan-South Arabian god 'Aṭtar.¹⁵¹ Whether the idea of a deity being 'God of Heaven and Earth' is also inherited from South Arabia will be discussed below.¹⁵²

3.3 RIÉth 188

Our next inscription, RIÉth 188, dates once again from the pre-Christian phase of that king's reign. Although this inscription was first copied in the 1830s by the German naturalist and explorer Eduard Rüppell,¹⁵³ it was not until 1913 that a proper edition was published, with a German translation and commentary, by Enno Littmann, based on copies, photographs, and squeezes taken by the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition that he had led seven years earlier.¹⁵⁴ Abraham Drewes and Roger Schneider published an updated edition in 1991,¹⁵⁵ with Drewes' French translation and commentary being published in 2019.¹⁵⁶ RIÉth 188

¹⁴⁸Athanasius, *Apologiae* §31.13–17.

¹⁴⁹A later date is suggested by the fact that RIÉth 188 employs the fully vocalised *fidal* script, while RIÉth 185 I + II still employ the earlier, consonantal version of that script.

¹⁵⁰Eccl. 31:8; Eccl. 37:21.

¹⁵¹Marrassini 2012: 108.

¹⁵²See §4 *Discussion and conclusions*.

¹⁵³Rüppell 1838: xiii f.; Rüppell 1840: 276–281.

¹⁵⁴Littmann 1913: 28–232.

¹⁵⁵Drewes and Schneider 1991: 258–261.

¹⁵⁶Drewes 2019: 228–232.

records a campaign against a kingdom (*mangəšt*) called ʾAfān.¹⁵⁷ In terms of aesthetics, the most significant difference between RIÉth 188 and the inscriptions discussed above is that here the Gəʿəz text is written in fully vocalised *fidal* script. This is significant for two reasons. For one, it indicates that a complete *fidal* syllabary had already been devised by the first half of the fourth century.¹⁵⁸ For another, it calls into question the assumed relationship between script reform and religious reform, as some scholars have sought to link the development of this syllabic system with the Christianization of Aksum, on the grounds that this would have facilitated the translation of religious literature into Gəʿəz.¹⁵⁹ It is true that the development of a writing system did coincide with Christianization in other parts of the Late Antique world, such as Armenia and Georgia. RIÉth 188, however, indicates that the situation was rather different in Aksum, as the invocation of the pagan deities of Aksum in this inscription points to a date before ʿEzānā’s conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, the consonantal South Arabian *musnad* script was used in later, sixth-century Christian inscriptions—inscriptions, moreover, which quote Biblical verses—which demonstrates that a consonantal writing system was in no way an impediment to the expression of Christian ideas.¹⁶⁰ More plausibly, as recently argued by Rainer Voigt, the syllabic writing system was devised in Ethiopia for the benefit of non-Semitic Cushitic-speakers, for whom a purely consonantal system might have posed problems,¹⁶¹ and who appear to have constituted a more significant demographic presence in the kingdom of

¹⁵⁷Given the region within which the Aksumite armies normally operated, this kingdom was likely located somewhere in the Horn of Africa. Abraham Drewes notes that, normally, the territory of a small kingdom in this region often bears the same name as that of the ethnic group inhabiting it, but suggests that, in this instance, ʾAfān was the kingdom of a people named Šarane who are mentioned in RIÉth 188 (Drewes 2019: 231). Alternatively, he suggests that ʾAfān could have been the name of the ruler or political centre of the Šarane people, though it is difficult to see how that is possible when ʾAfān is explicitly referred to in RIÉth 188 as a kingdom, thus *mangəštomu ʾa[fā]n* ‘their kingdom of ʾAfān’ (RIÉth 188/6–7 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 260]). However, in a more recent publication, Alessandro Bausi disputes Drewes’ theory regarding a people called Šarane and suggests instead that *šarane* is a common noun of uncertain meaning, based on his study of RIÉth 232, a Gəʿəz inscription from Ham in the Eritrean region of ʾAkkala Guzāy that he dates to 23 December 974 CE, and that speaks of *šarane* in connection with a royal name, ʾĪlla Šahl (Bausi 2021: 20–24 and *passim*; cf. Drewes and Schneider [1991: 324]).

¹⁵⁸On the development of this syllabary, see Voigt (2017: 188–192).

¹⁵⁹E.g. Robin (2001: 565–566) and Robin (2022: 185).

¹⁶⁰Nor should we expect it to have been, given that other monotheistic traditions, namely Judaism and Islam, relied for many centuries on texts that, with the exception of works like the Torah and the Qurʾān, were written in consonantal scripts. Even in the case of the Torah and the Qurʾān, the oldest manuscripts of these texts were written without vowels.

¹⁶¹Voigt 2017: 193–194.

Aksum than is often realised.¹⁶² As for the curse formula, the relevant passage of RIÉth 188 reads as follows:

²⁴wa-takalu manbara ba-zəya ba-śado wa-²⁵amaḥdanəwwo la-‘astar wa-la-bəḥe²⁶r wa-la-əmma bo-za naśato wa-²⁷naqalo wə’ətu wa-bəḥeru wa-zamadu la-²⁸yətnaqal wa-yət-naśat ‘əb-bəḥeru la-yəśšī¹⁶³

²⁴And they set up a throne here at Śado and ²⁵they entrusted it to ‘Astar and to Bəḥe²⁶r and to Mədr. And if there is anyone who has overturned it and ²⁷removed it, may he, together with his land and his kin, be ²⁸removed and overturned. From his land may he be seized.

Although RIÉth 188 makes no mention of the dedication of statues, this curse formula bears comparison with the other inscriptions of ‘Ezānā discussed above, in terms of both the type of mishandling of the dedication and the consequence of said mishandling. It speaks of the punishment that would be meted out to anyone who might overturn or remove it, as well as the overthrow of the kinfolk of the offending individual, and even the removal of that individual from whatever land he possessed. In addition to playing on the idea of overturning and removal with respect to both the monument and the one who acts thusly upon it, this version of the curse formula illustrates the importance of kinship in Aksumite society—a topic to which we shall return below.¹⁶⁴

RIÉth 188 is also important in that it is the first Aksumite inscription that explicitly mentions the place at which such an inscription was erected, namely Śado. The same name occurs in another inscription from ‘Ezānā’s reign, RIÉth 189, again in reference to the place at which a symbolic throne was erected. According to the latter inscription, however, it was the king himself, rather than his nameless followers, who erected the throne, as ‘Ezānā, speaking in the first person, says ‘I set up a throne here at Śado’ (*takalku manbara ba-zəya ba-śado*).¹⁶⁵ Given the provenance

¹⁶²Gianfrancesco Lusini points out that a number of Aksumite kings bear names of Agaw (Central Cushitic) origin, or else names that are influenced by Agaw morphology (Lusini 2017: 267–268). The idea that the Agaw had an important role in the kingdom of Aksum is not in itself new (Tadesse Tamrat 1988). To this, one should add what is likely a reference to the Agaw in CIH 541, according to which one of the military contingents involved in ‘Abrahā’s suppression of a revolt in the Ḥaḍramawt bore a name that has long been read as ‘lw (CIH 541/34 [e.g. Müller 2010: 112]). However, given that the graphemes for /g/ and /l/ are notoriously easy to confuse in Late Sabaic inscriptions, and in view of the prominent role of the Agaw in Aksum, it may be preferable to emend this to ‘gw, i.e. Agaw (Christian Robin, personal communication). This, in turn, would imply that the Agaw were represented among the Ethiopian soldiers stationed in South Arabia in the sixth century.

¹⁶³Drewes and Schneider 1991: 260.

¹⁶⁴See §4.

¹⁶⁵RIÉth 189/44 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 264).

of RIÉth 188 and RIÉth 189, *Śado* would appear to be the name of some place in the town of Aksum,¹⁶⁶ perhaps a ceremonial area. Abraham Drewes derives the name *Śado* from the Semitic root **śdw* ‘field’ and compares Hebrew *śādēh* ‘plain, field’.¹⁶⁷ A cognate form, *Sadū* (*s³dw*), is attested in two Qatabānic inscriptions (MuB 8 and RÉŠ 3854) as the name of a ‘fertile land’ (*gn*) that was the personal property of ‘Amm *Dū-Dawwān*^{im}, the main god of Tamna^c, capital of the South Arabian kingdom of Qatabān.¹⁶⁸ Although the exact location of *Sadū* remains unknown, it most probably lay near Tamna^c’s southern gate, as that structure bore the name *Dū-Sadū* (*d-s³dw*),¹⁶⁹ literally ‘Of/Belonging-to-Sadū’. Giovanni Mazzini suggests that the area known as ‘the fertile land of *Sadū*’ (*gnⁿ s³dw*) was a sacred space in which the Qatabānian king presided as high priest, while the area in and around the southern gate of Tamna^c served as a place of assembly where the king could appear before the community.¹⁷⁰ The latter hypothesis is strengthened by the existence of an open space behind the gate complex, ideal for the assemblage of people, as well as by the presence of stone benches inside the gate.¹⁷¹ This space was also an ideal setting for such public symbols of royal authority as monumental inscriptions, and indeed several royal edicts were erected at the southern gate.¹⁷² The parallel with *Śado* at Aksum, where similar royal symbols in the form of inscriptions and thrones were erected, is striking, even if the nature of the public events that might have occurred there was undoubtedly different, as indeed also are the topics covered in the royal inscriptions that were erected there.

3.4 RIÉth 189

With RIÉth 189, we come to our first Christian inscription. Throughout the text, God is referred to as ‘Lord of Heaven’ (*ʿəgzi’a samāy*),¹⁷³ ‘Lord of All’ (*ʿəgzi’a k^wəllu*),¹⁷⁴ and ‘Lord of the Land’ (*ʿəgzi’a bəḥer*).¹⁷⁵ Although there is nothing inherently Christian about these references, it is clear that ‘Ezānā had fully embraced Christianity by this point in view of RIÉth 271, a Greek version of the text—more of a paraphrased version than a word-for-word translation—which begins with the very Christian formula ‘By faith in G[od and] by the power of

¹⁶⁶Drewes 2019: 574.

¹⁶⁷Drewes 2019: 574.

¹⁶⁸Mazzini 2020: 28–29. Although the name *Sadū* occurs in both inscriptions, only MuB 8 explicitly identifies the area thus named as a ‘fertile land’.

¹⁶⁹Mazzini 2020: 28–29.

¹⁷⁰Mazzini 2020: 28–29.

¹⁷¹Mazzini 2020: 29.

¹⁷²Mazzini 2020 passim.

¹⁷³RIÉth 189/1.5.40–41.45.49.52 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263, 264, 265).

¹⁷⁴RIÉth 189/5.7 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263).

¹⁷⁵RIÉth 189/14–15.33–34 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 263, 264).

the [Fa]ther and the Son and the [Holy G]host, to Him who has [s]aved my kin[g]dom through faith in His s[on], Jesus Christ' (Ἐν τῇ πίστει τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ Υἱοῦ καὶ Ἀγίου Πνεύματος τῶν ὁσίων μοι τὸ Βασίλειον τῇ πίστι τοῦ Υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).¹⁷⁶ Other explicitly Christian references are found elsewhere in RIÉth 271. Thus, speaking in the first person in that inscription, 'Ezānā calls himself a 'servant of Christ' (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ),¹⁷⁷ thanks God for having aided him in battle,¹⁷⁸ and speaks of God's power as well as his faith in God.¹⁷⁹ Although differing somewhat in content, RIÉth 189 and RIÉth 271 clearly record the same Nubian campaign launched by 'Ezānā ca. 360, as both refer to the same aggressions committed by the Noba against the peoples along Aksum's northern frontier.¹⁸⁰ With respect to curse formulae, the relevant portion of RIÉth 189 reads as follows:

*48-wa-ʿamaḥḍa⁴⁹nku za-manbara za-takalku la-ʿagziʿa samāy za-ʿangaśan[i] wa-la-mə⁵⁰.
dr za-yəṣawwəro la-ʿamma-bo za-naqalo wa-ʿamāsano wa-naśato wəʿatu wa-⁵¹zamu
yəśśara[w] wa-yətnaqal ʿəb-bəḥer yəśśaraw wa-takalku za-[ma]⁵²nbara ba-ḥayla ʿagziʿa
samāy¹⁸¹*

⁴⁸And I have entrust⁴⁹ed this throne which I set up to the Lord of Heaven, who has made me king, and to the ground ⁵⁰that bears it. If there is anyone who has removed it and destroyed it and overturned it, may he and ⁵¹his kin be eradicated and uprooted, from the earth may they be eradicated. And I have set up this ⁵²[th]rone by the power of the Lord of Heaven.

In terms of content, this curse formula is effectively identical to the pre-Christian curse formulae treated above, but for the replacement of the names of pagan deities with that of the Lord of Heaven. Given that the religious terminology in RIÉth 271 is much more explicitly Christian than as the case in RIÉth 189, it would be quite interesting to know how the curse formula was expressed in Greek, or even *if* RIÉth 271 contained a curse formula. As noted above, however, that portion of text is not preserved, for the preserved text breaks off at Line 32, at a point in the narrative when 'Ezānā was about to embark on his Nubian campaign. As we have seen, Aksumite curse formulae are not limited to Gə'əz inscriptions. Thus, RIÉth 270 bis, a Greek inscription predating 'Ezānā's conversion to Christianity, contains a curse formula which is based more or less on the Gə'əz prototype, where-

¹⁷⁶RIÉth 271/1–4 (Bernand 1991: 371); trans. Hägg in Eide et al. 1998: 1102.

¹⁷⁷RIÉth 271/10 (Bernand 1991: 371).

¹⁷⁸RIÉth 271/10–22 (Bernand 1991: 371).

¹⁷⁹RIÉth 271/28.31 (Bernand 1991: 372).

¹⁸⁰For a detailed discussion of this campaign, see Hatke (2013: 85–135); cf. Breyer (2011: 341–347).

¹⁸¹Drewes and Schneider 1991: 265.

in the pagan Aksumite god *Mahrəm* is identified with the Greek god *Arēs*. It is certainly conceivable, then, that RIÉth 271, despite its thematic differences with RIÉth 189, originally contained a similar formula, albeit one which was suitably adjusted to reflect the beliefs and doctrines associated with ‘Ezānā’s new religion. Particularly striking in the curse formula quoted above are the references to the eradication and uprooting of the would-be offender and his kin, implying both banishment and a belief in collective guilt of the sort conveyed by some of the modern curse formulae treated in the section *Theoretical background*.¹⁸² It is worth adding here that, among the Amhara of North Wällo, curses decreed by a council of elders may include the statement that an offender be cast to Awsa, a hot lowland region wholly unlike the Ethiopian highlands.¹⁸³

Before leaving RIÉth 189, a few words about the implications of the curse formula in this inscription for religious trends in fourth-century Aksum are in order. In the discussion of RIÉth 270 bis above, it was suggested that, already during the pagan period of his reign, ‘Ezānā seems to have revered *Arēs* in the guise of ‘God of Heaven and Earth’. Similar language used in RIÉth 189 in reference to the Christian god suggests a rather gradual transition to Christianity. If so, then RIÉth 270 bis would seem to date from some transitional period when ‘Ezānā recognized the value of monotheism, but had not yet committed to the belief in the Christian god, as evidenced by the continued invocation of pagan gods in RIÉth 188. But if RIÉth 270 bis reflects a period in which ‘Ezānā had not yet accepted Christianity, RIÉth 189 hints that, once ‘Ezānā had embraced Christianity, Aksum’s pagan tradition had not yet lost its hold. That he saw fit to retain the curse formula hitherto employed in pagan inscriptions is a case in point. More significant still is the fact that, in RIÉth 189, ‘Ezānā entrusts his throne not only to the Lord of Heaven but also to the very ground that bears the throne. That the Aksumite king should seek divine protection for his monument comes as no surprise. Less immediately clear, however, is why he should also entrust his monument to the something as mundane as the ground—until one takes into consideration the fact that the word for ground, *mədr*, is also the name of a god to whom thrones were entrusted during the pre-Christian phase of ‘Ezānā’s reign. Thus, in RIÉth 188, ‘Ezānā is reported to have entrusted his throne not only to the gods ‘Astar and Bəḥer but also to a deity who is called *Mədr*. Although RIÉth 189 makes it clear that *mədr* is not a deity but simply the earth that bears ‘Ezānā’s throne, the fact that reference is made to *mədr* in the first place suggests that the name itself still resonated with certain elements in Aksumite society. One might attribute this up to a vestigial, covertly disguised retention of pagan loyalties on the part of ‘Ezānā, though this would probably be pushing speculation a bit far. It is more probable that ‘Ezānā was in the process of phasing out pagan tradition by recasting it in a manner that resonated with those

¹⁸²§2.

¹⁸³Baye Simam 2013: 401.

subjects of his who were still pagan but did not conflict with his Christian faith. In this way, what had been the name of a god now became a common noun for the ground on which a stone throne rested.

3.5 RIÉth 191

As we have seen, no royal inscriptions dating between the reigns of ‘Ezānā and Kāleb have (yet) been discovered, with the result that, as we turn to our next inscription, RIÉth 191 from the reign of Kāleb (ca. 510–540), we are skipping ahead roughly a century and a half. Although the small and often fragmentary corpus of Gə‘əz inscriptions from Yemen can most probably be assigned to Kāleb’s reign, more specifically the aftermath of his second invasion of South Arabia in 525,¹⁸⁴ the only inscription from that king’s reign which has yet come to light in Ethiopia is RIÉth 191. This forty-line Gə‘əz inscription is, like RIÉth 185 I and RIÉth 185 bis I from the reign of ‘Ezānā, written in the consonantal *musnad* script of South Arabia. RIÉth 191 was discovered in 1959 and is currently kept at the treasury of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion at Aksum. First published in 1974 by Roger Schneider,¹⁸⁵ RIÉth 191 was republished by Drewes and Schneider in 1991,¹⁸⁶ with a French translation and commentary by Drewes appearing in 2019.¹⁸⁷ Unlike the Gə‘əz inscriptions analysed thus far, RIÉth 191 employs explicitly Christian terminology, making it the first (known) Aksumite royal inscription to do so in Gə‘əz, as well as the first (known) Aksumite royal inscription to quote a verse taken directly from the Bible. It does so at the very beginning of the text with a quotation from Psalm 24:8: ‘God, strong and powerful; God, strong in battle’ (ʾgzʾbhr hyl w-šnʿ ʾgzʾbhr hyl wsʾt dbʾ = ʾagziʾabher hayl w-šənuʿ ʾagziʾabher hayl wəsta dabʾ).¹⁸⁸ Not for nothing does Kāleb style himself in RIÉth 191 as a ‘servant of Christ’ (*gbr krsʾtsʾ* = *gabra krastos*),¹⁸⁹ who takes refuge in Christ (*tmḥḍnk ḥbh l-krsʾtsʾ* = *tamāḥḍanku ḥabehu la-krastos*).¹⁹⁰ Likewise significant as an indication of the more developed stage of Christianization of royal ideology in sixth-century Aksum is the fact that Kāleb invokes the Trinity in RIÉth 191 before he gives his own royal title,¹⁹¹ whereas ‘Ezānā merely invokes the ‘power of the Lord of Heaven’ in RIÉth 189 before presenting his.

¹⁸⁴For arguments to this effect, see Hatke (2022: 54).

¹⁸⁵Schneider 1974: 770–777.

¹⁸⁶Drewes and Schneider 1991: 271–274.

¹⁸⁷Drewes 2019: 248–255.

¹⁸⁸RIÉth 191/1–2 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

¹⁸⁹RIÉ 191/11 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

¹⁹⁰RIÉ 191/5–6 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

¹⁹¹Thus, ‘with the aid of the Trinity: of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’ (*b-rdʾt l-sʾlsʾ l-b w-wld w-mfsʾ qdsʾ* = *ba-radʾeta la-šəllāse la-ab wa-wald wa-manfas qəddus*) (RIÉth 191/7 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272]).

The quotation of Psalm 24:8 in effect sets the stage for the descriptions of military campaigns that follow. These campaigns, so we are told, were carried out with the intervention of God,¹⁹² with the power of God and Jesus Christ,¹⁹³ and with the aid of the Trinity.¹⁹⁴ The majority of these campaigns targeted groups apparently based in the Horn of Africa, of whom only one, the 'Agwezāt people inhabiting the region to the east of the town of Aksum,¹⁹⁵ can be identified with any confidence. This same group had already been attacked by the Aksumites during the reign of 'Ezānā.¹⁹⁶ RIÉth 191 also documents, albeit in a very terse fashion, a punitive campaign which Kāleb sent against the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar in 518, in the course of which he is said to have built a church (*mqds'*), having been moved by zeal for the name of the son of God in whom he believed (*qn'y b-'nt s'm wld 'gz' bhr z-'mnk bt = qani'aya ba-'anta sama walda 'agzi'a bəher za-'amanku botu*).¹⁹⁷ RIÉth 191, then, is clearly and explicitly a Christian inscription, much more so than 'Ezānā's RIÉth 189. Like RIÉth 189, however, the text of RIÉth 191 terminates with a curse formula. This reads as follows:

*37-w-'r'yn 'gz' b³⁸.hr qds¹-h w-nbrk db z mnbr z-yw' w-'mhdkw hb '[g]³⁹.z' bhr gbr s¹my w-mdr 'm-z yms¹n w-yns²t w-ys¹b[r w-]⁴⁰.z ns²t w-'ms¹n ys²t 'gz-bh[r] b-bt w-b-s¹bs¹[...]'*¹⁹⁸
³⁷And God has shown me ³⁸His holiness. And I sat on this throne which [...] and I entrusted it to God, ³⁹creator of heaven and earth, against anyone who might destroy it, pull it down, or break it up. And ⁴⁰whoever might have overturned it or destroyed it, may God overthrow him in his (own) house and in [... ...].¹⁹⁹

¹⁹²Thus, Kāleb invokes 'the aid of God' (*rd't ['gz 'b]hr = rad'eta ['agzi'ab]her*) (RIÉ 191/11–12 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272]) and 'the power of God' (*hyl 'gz' bhr = hayla 'agzi'a bəher*) (RIÉ 191/23 [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272]). When referring elsewhere in the inscription to booty and prisoners seized, and enemy combatants slain, Kāleb says, 'This God gave to me, He in whom I place my trust' (*znt whbn 'gz' bhr z-kyh t'm[nk] = zanta wahabani 'agzi'a bəher za-kiyāhu ta'amanku* [Drewes and Schneider 1991: 273]).

¹⁹³RIÉth 191/2–3: 'by the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (*b-hyl 'gz'bhr w-b-mwgs¹ 'ys¹s¹ krs¹ts¹ = ba-hayla 'agzi'abəher wa-ba-mogasa 'iyasus krastos walda 'agzi'abher*) (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

¹⁹⁴RIÉth 191/7: 'with the aid of the Trinity: of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit' (*b-rd't l-s²ls¹ l-'b w-wld w-mfs¹ qds¹ = ba-rad'eta la-šəllāse la-'ab wa-wald wa-manfas qəddus*) (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

¹⁹⁵Drewes 2019: 551.

¹⁹⁶RIÉth 187/4–16 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 255–256).

¹⁹⁷RIÉth 191/34–37 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 273).

¹⁹⁸Drewes and Schneider 1991: 273.

¹⁹⁹ The meaning of *s¹bs¹* remains obscure, and it is possible that what we have here is only the fragment of a word. Abraham Drewes proposes reconstructing this word as Gə'əz *sabsāb 'marriage'*, suggesting that, in view of the reference to a house, *sabsāb* would in the present context mean something like 'foyer conjugal'. While this suggestion is possible, it remains speculative. Looking to Late Sabaic, we encounter the substantive *šbs¹* in the fourth line of Ry

Despite its invocation of Christ and the Trinity, RIÉth 191 still assigns to God, creator of heaven and earth—rather than to Christ—the protection of Kāleb’s inscribed throne. In this respect, it bears comparison to RIÉth 189. In contrast, however, to RIÉth 189, where God is called ‘Lord of Heaven’ (’əgzi’a samāy) in the curse formula, as well as elsewhere in that inscription, God is called ‘Lord of the Land’ (’gz’ bhr = ’əgzi’a bəher) throughout RIÉth 191, to the exclusion of all other epithets, such as ‘Lord of Heaven’ or ‘Lord of All.’ This point has a direct bearing on the historical development of religious terminology in Gə‘əz, for of all the epithets for God employed in RIÉth 189, only ‘Lord of the Land’ survived in later centuries, to the point that it became the standard Classical Gə‘əz name for God. If RIÉth 191 is any indication of the use of religious terminology in inscriptions, at least at the level of the ruling elite, this development might have taken place by the early sixth century. The reference to Kāleb’s having entrusted the throne to divine protection is also of interest in that, as we have seen, this same concept, expressed using the same verb, ’amāhdana, is found in Aksumite inscriptions dating from the pre-Christian phase of ‘Ezānā’s reign. The obvious point of difference is that the names of the pantheistic gods of Aksum are here replaced with the name of the Christian deity. Here too, one is reminded of formulaic conventions in neighbouring South Arabia, for the act of entrusting (rtd) a monument or built structure to a deity for divine protection survived the transition to monotheism in that region, using the same language employed in pantheist inscriptions but changing the name of the deity. Thus in CIH 537 + RES 4919, a Late Sabaic inscription of unknown provenance dating from Dū-Ḥirāf^{an} in Year 582 of the Ḥimyarite Era (= August 472 CE), the dedicants are said to have ‘entrusted their house and themselves and their children to Raḥmān^{an}’ (rtdw byt-hmw w-’f[s^l-hmw w-’lwd-hmw rhm]nn b’l s^lmyⁿ)²⁰⁰—Raḥmān^{an} ‘the Merciful One’ being a name for God derived from Judaeo-Aramaic.

Although, as we have seen, other Aksumite royal inscriptions mention thrones, RIÉth 191 is the only inscription that alludes to an Aksumite king having literally taken his seat upon a throne. That he did so could be an indication that the throne, formally viewed as the seat of an invisible deity, was reinterpreted with the accelerated Christianization of Aksum as the seat of a king. The implication here seems to be that, once a throne was set up, the Aksumite

534 + MAFY/Rayda 1, an inscription dated Dū-Ḥirāf^{an} of Year 543 of the Ḥimyarite Era (= August 433 CE). This term is glossed by Walter Müller as ‘Verehrung, Heiligung’ on the basis of Greek ὀββας, from which he claims the Sabaic term is derived (Müller 1980). That the šbs^l of Ry 534 + MAFY/Rayda 1 is in any way related to the s’bs^l of RIÉth 191 is, however, unlikely. Even if one were to attribute the choice of a different initial sibilant to alternative ways of transcribing a Greek term in Sabaic and Gə‘əz, the idea of honour and respect conveyed by Greek ὀββας would be entirely out of place in a curse formula of the sort which we find at the end of RIÉth 191.

²⁰⁰Müller 2010: 84.

ruler would take his seat there as part of the ritual of dedication. If so, then the empty throne had been by this point divested of any pagan associations, namely the link with an aniconic deity. On coins of the early seventh-century Aksumite king Armah, the ruler is indeed depicted seated on a throne,²⁰¹ though it is by no means clear that a case can be made for linking this image with the tradition of erecting stone thrones. The symbolic importance of the throne is highlighted towards the beginning of RIÉth 191, following a religious invocation in which Kāleb attributes the strength of his kingdom and his victory on the battlefield to divine aid. Thus we read:

*²b-ḥyl ʾgzʾ bḥr w-b-mwgs¹ ʾys¹s¹ krs¹³.ts¹ wld ʾgzʾ bḥr mwʾ z-ʾmnk bt [ḍ]-wʾt whbn mngs^{2t}
⁴sn^c b-z ʾgrr dry w-ʾkyd ʾr²s¹t šlʾty ḍ-wʾt ʾqb⁵n ʾm-nʾs¹y w-ʾbrn ws¹t mnbr ʾbwy²⁰²*

²By the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Victorious in whom I believe, he [who] has given me a strong kingdom ⁴with which I might subdue my enemies and tread upon the heads of my adversaries, who has protected ⁵me since my childhood and placed me on the throne of my fathers.

In this passage, the throne in question seems to be a symbolic one, a metaphor for Kāleb's rightful inheritance of kingship from his royal ancestors. This topic is treated in greater detail by the author in a recent publication,²⁰³ to which the reader is directed. As with his kingdom's strength and his victory in battle, the king's inheritance is said to have been safeguarded through the power of God the Father and the grace of His son, Jesus Christ. By contrast, the throne alluded to in the curse formula at the end of RIÉth 191 would appear to be a literal throne carved from stone that would have formed part of the monument in which the inscription was incorporated. Another important point of difference is that, while the curse formula invokes God, it omits any explicitly Christian references, such as invocations of Jesus. Rather, Kāleb states that he has entrusted the throne to God, creator of heaven and earth, and asks that God overthrow anyone who might overturn or destroy it.

3.6 RIÉth 192

Following in his father's footsteps, Wāzeb erected a Gəez inscription, known by the siglum RIÉth 192, at the town of Aksum to document his military campaigns, again employing the *musnad* script. Like RIÉth 191, RIÉth 192 was discovered in 1959 and was first published by Roger Schneider in 1974,²⁰⁴ Drewes' 2019

²⁰¹Derat 2018: 560–561.

²⁰²Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272.

²⁰³Hatke 2022: 91–92.

²⁰⁴Schneider 1974: 777–786.

translation and commentary being based on the updated 1991 edition of the inscription published by Drewes and Schneider.²⁰⁵ At fifty lines of text in length on Face A of the stele, with a further ten lines of text on Face B, RIÉth 192 is the longest known Aksumite inscription. Although Wā‘zeb claims dominion over South Arabia in his royal title in this inscription, he does not appear to have ever ruled there, and in fact all of the military campaigns recorded in the text appear to have been waged in the Horn of Africa.²⁰⁶ Again like RIÉth 191, RIÉth 192 is an avowedly Christian inscription, as it not only quotes—or at least paraphrases—Scripture throughout²⁰⁷ but also begins with an invocation of the Trinity.²⁰⁸ The relevant portion of the inscription for our purposes is found in the final five lines on Face B and reads as follows:

²⁰⁵Drewes and Schneider 1991: 274–278; Drewes 2019: 255–269.

²⁰⁶Although the places and peoples alluded to in RIÉth 192 have thus far eluded identification, the fact that none can be identified in the far more abundant documentation from South Arabia argues in favour of their location in Africa.

²⁰⁷ Lines 3–4: *ḥmmkm krs¹ts¹ yfšm lkm* = *ḥamamkəmu krəstos yəfeššəm lakəmu* ‘You have suffered, Christ shall restore you’ (I Peter 5:10); Line 19: *ʾqtlm l-ḏrk w-ʾḏrrm l-šlʾtk* = *ʾəqat-təlomu la-ḏarrəka wa-ʾāḏarrəromu la-šalāʾtəka* ‘I shall kill your enemies and on (your) enemies I shall make war’ (Isaiah 1:24); Lines 19–20: *ʾmlky ygbʾ lt bqly w-ʾgrr lt ʾḥzb z-mṯṯy* = *ʾam-lākəya yāḡabbəʾ lita baqaləya wa-ʾagrara lita ʾaḥzāba za-maṯṯəṯəya* ‘My Lord avenges me and has subdued the peoples under me’ (Psalms 18:48); Line 21: *ʾgzbḥr yḏbʾ lkm ʾtms¹ ʾrmm* = *ʾəgzi < ʾa > bəḥer yəḏabbəʾ lakəmu ʾattəmu-ssa ʾarməmu* ‘God shall fight for you, but you, be silent!’ (Exodus 14:14); Lines 25–26: *klhm ʾḥzb ʾktn w-b-s¹m ʾgzbḥr mʾkḥm* = *kʷəllomu ʾaḥzāb ʾakatani wa-ba-səma ʾəgzi < ʾa > bəḥer moʾkuhomu* ‘All of the nations surrounded me, but through the name of God I triumphed over them’ (Psalms 118:10); Lines 29–30: *ḏbʾm ʾgzʾ l-ʾl yḏbʾn ns² wlt w-knt w-ts² wsʾt rdʾty* = *ḏəbəʾomu ʾəgziʾ la-ʾəlla yəḏabbəʾuni nəšāʾ waltā wa-kʷənāta taššəʾ wəšta radiʾotəya* ‘Make war, Lord, on those who make war on me, take up the shield and the spear and rise to my aid’ (Psalms 35:1–2); Lines 30–31: *l-ygbʾ ḏḥrhm w-yṯḥfr ʾl mkr ʾky lʾly l-ykn km šbl z-qdm gš nfs¹ w-mlʾk ʾgzbḥr l-ys³ddm* = *la-yəgbəʾu dəḥrehomu wa-yəfəḥḥəru ʾəlla makaru ʾəkkuya lāʾleya la-yəkunu kama šabal gašša nəfās wa-malʾaka ʾəgzi < ʾa > bəḥer la-yəsdəddomu* ‘May they retreat and be ashamed, they who plot evil against me, may they be like dust before the wind, and may the angel of God follow them’ (Psalms 35:4–5); Line 32: *ʾdygnm l-ḏry w-ʾḥḏhm* = *ʾədeggənomu la-ḏarrəya wa-ʾəʾḥazomu* ‘I shall pursue my enemies and shall seize them’ (Psalms 18:37); Lines 32–34: *tqntn ḥl wsʾt ḏbʾ w-ʾwdqm l-klm ʾl qm lʾly b-mṯṯy w-mṯwkn [z]bnhm l-ḏry* = *wa-tāqannətani ḥəla wəšta ḏəbʾ wa-ʾawdaqqomu la-kʷəllomu ʾəlla qomu lāʾleya ba- maṯṯəṯəya wa-maṯṯawkanī [za]bānomu la-ḏarrəya* ‘You shall gird me with power in battle and You have caused to fall beneath me all of those who have stood up against me, and You have delivered to me the backs of my enemies’ (Psalms 18:39–40); Lines 34–35: *yml ʾgzbḥr [gbr]t ḥyl yml ʾg[z]bḥr ḥlʾtn* = *yamāna ʾəgzi < ʾa > bəḥer [gabra]t ḥayla yamāna ʾəgzi < ʾa > bəḥer alʾalatani* ‘The right hand of God has made strong, the right hand of God has exalted me’ (Psalms 118:15–16).

²⁰⁸*b-ʾkṯh l-ʾbⁿ w-wld^m w-mfs¹ [qds¹]ⁿ* = *ba-ʾakkʷatetu la-ʾab wa-wald wa-ma < n > fas qəddus* ‘With praise to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’

⁵w-l-m-⁶b d-ḥ[*lw-h*] w-l-mnlt-h whm gft' whm wgr ym[ḥr]h 'gz-b⁷ḥr w-lyt b-byt-h w-b-wld-h w-b-mbrt w-b-tgrb-h w-yfdy-⁸h [ʔ]g[z]bḥr w-mqs^{2ft} 'gz-bḥr 'yrf b-l'ly-h b-dn w-⁹d y[mṣʔ] 'lm dt mḥdk d-lh s'bhṯ ¹⁰w-ḥyl l-'lm 'lm 'mn w-'mn²⁰⁹

⁵And if there is ⁶one who has guarded its (i.e. the stele's) adornment(?) in case it is overturned or is thrown down, may God ⁷show him com[passion] and may he be blessed in his household and among his children, in his residence and in his labor. And may ⁸God recompense him. And may the chastisement of God not come to rest upon him in this world and ⁹that (world) which is to come. This I have entrusted to God, glory ¹⁰and power be to Him forever and ever. Amen! Amen!

Here, we find not a curse formula but rather its opposite, to wit a wish that anyone who restores the monument erected by Wā^czeb, should it be overturned, will be rewarded by God, and that such an individual will not suffer the divine chastisement that would be visited upon anyone who might damage or remove the monument. In so doing, however, RIÉth 192 indirectly reveals how the Aksumites viewed those who engaged in the damage or removal of royal monuments. If one who restored such a monument would be guarded against God's chastisement in this life as well as the hereafter, then, by implication, one who tore down a royal monument was viewed as deserving of such chastisement. The allusion to punishment in the hereafter—literally 'this and that-which-is-to-come world' (*dñ w-d-y[mṣʔ]* 'lm = DN [Sabaic demonstrative pronoun]²¹⁰ *wa-za-yamaṣṣəʔ* 'ālam)—is an innovation in the Aksumite epigraphic corpus. As there are no known Aksumite royal inscriptions post-dating Wā^czeb's reign, it is impossible to tell how influential this idea was in later times. Much as we saw in RIÉth 188, the reference to household, place of residence, and children (thus, implicitly, an individual's descendants for the foreseeable future) highlights the importance of kinship ties in Aksumite society, to the extent that the actions of an individual would have consequences for said individual's extended family. It would help greatly if we knew what exactly *mnlt* (RIÉth 192 B/6) means. In his commentary on the inscription, Abraham Drewes states that the suffixed *-t* probably marks the form as plural, but admits that the root **mnl* is not attested in Classical Gə^cəz.²¹¹ From the context, Drewes posits that the *mnlt* is linked in some way with the stone monument and he tentatively emends the word to *mn <g> lt*. This he compares with Gə^cəz *mangal/mangəl* 'that which is visible, adornment'.²¹² Such an interpretation is entirely possible, though for the time being this can only be regarded as hypothetical. In contrast

²⁰⁹Drewes and Schneider 1991: 276; Drewes 2019: 268.

²¹⁰Cf. Gə^cəz *zəntu*.

²¹¹Drewes 2019: 268.

²¹²Drewes 2019: 268.

to RIÉth 191, the curse formula in RIÉth 192 at no point explicitly refers to a throne, unless this is what is implied by ‘adornment’, in the sense of something supplementing the stele on which the inscription is carved.

4 Discussion and conclusions

To reiterate the point made in the *Theoretical background* section,²¹³ curse formulae in royal Aksumite inscriptions contain a set number of themes. These are again: (1) physical harm done to the offender, his extended kin, and his children; (2) the removal, uprooting, or eradication of the offender from the land; (3) the offender being led to ruin; (4) the eradication of the offender’s name from the land of the living; (5) generic eradication of the offender and his kin; and (6) the overthrowing, removal, or overturning of the offender after the manner in which he has removed or overturned the monument. Sorting these formulae by inscription in chronological order yields the following table:

Nature of the curse	Epigraphic attestation
‘may he be blinded and (meaning uncertain)—he and his kin and his children’	RIÉth 185 I/22–23; RIÉth 185 II/22; RIÉth 185 bis I/24–25; RIÉth bis II/39–41
‘may he be taken away from the land’	RIÉth 185 I/23–24; RIÉth 185 II/22–23; RIÉth 185 bis I/25; RIÉth 185 bis II/42
‘may the God of Heaven and Earth lead him to ruin, completely’	RIÉth 270 bis/32–33
‘may his name remain no longer in the land of the living’	RIÉth 270 bis/33–34
‘may he, together with his land and his kin, be removed and overturned’	RIÉth 188/27–28
‘may he and his kin be eradicated and uprooted, from the earth may they be eradicated’	RIÉth 189/50–51
‘may God overthrow him in his (own) house and in [... ...]’	RIÉth 191/40

Table 1. Curse formulae in Aksumite inscriptions

²¹³§2.

Except for RIÉth 191, which dates from the reign of Kāleb, all of the inscriptions listed in this table were erected by ʿEzānā. RIÉth 192 is not included here on the grounds that that inscription, rather than containing a curse formula, issues instead a blessing of the one who protects a monument, along with the blessing of his household and labours, followed by the statement that an individual thus blessed would suffer no harm in this world or the next. As can be seen from the table, the most common theme in Aksumite curse formulae is the removal, in one manner or another, of the offender from the land. This occurs in RIÉth 185 I/23–24, RIÉth 185 II/22–23, RIÉth 185 bis I/25, RIÉth 185 bis II/42, RIÉth 188/27–28, and RIÉth 189/50–51. Also significant is the guilt-by-association link between the offender and his kin, something mentioned in RIÉth 185 I/22–23, RIÉth 185 II/22, RIÉth 185 bis I/24–25, RIÉth bis II/39–41, RIÉth 188/27–28, and RIÉth 189/50–51. Since the term for house (*bet*) can in Gəʿəz, as indeed throughout Semitic, denote not only one's place of residence but also the members of one's household, it could be argued that the offender's kin are referred to obliquely in RIÉth 191 as well. The socio-cultural implications of such references shall be addressed shortly. RIÉth 270 bis, the sole Greek inscription in the group of Aksumite royal inscriptions bearing a curse formula, parts ways with the rest in that it introduces the themes of the offender being led to ruin by Arēs as a God of Heaven and Earth, and of the offender's name being eradicated from the land of the living. Worth stressing is the fact that, since all Aksumite inscriptions in which curse formulae appear are *royal* inscriptions that document military campaigns, such formulae belong to a very circumscribed corpus of texts. As discussed in the section *Theoretical background*,²¹⁴ however, cursing is documented among a number of Ethiopian peoples, suggesting that the curse formulae from royal inscriptions represent but a part of a much broader tradition.

Regarding the origins of the tradition of issuing written curses in Ethiopia, it is well known and well documented that curse formulae are a pan-Semitic phenomenon. Insofar as these formulae allude to damage done to inscriptions, they can only have developed after the invention of writing. Thus, they are not shared Proto-Semitic retentions²¹⁵ but must instead have developed in a single region, most likely the Fertile Crescent,²¹⁶ and from there were diffused to outlying areas. Since there is no evidence of direct contact between Ethiopia and the Iron Age Fertile Crescent, and no attestations of curse formulae in Pre-Aksumite inscriptions, the concept of curse formulae must have been diffused via an intermediary, most probably South Arabia, during the Aksumite period. The main difference between South Arabia and Aksumite Ethiopia with respect to curse formulae is that,

²¹⁴§2.

²¹⁵Although the origins of the Semitic branch of Afroasiatic has yet to be worked out in detail, there is no doubt that this branch emerged well before the invention of writing.

²¹⁶At least as far as Semitic curse formulae are concerned.

while all known Aksumite attestations are found in royal inscriptions, curse formulae in South Arabia are limited to private inscriptions.²¹⁷ To be sure, the Early Sabaic inscription RÉŠ 3945 from Širwāh-Ḥawlān, a *res gestae* of the Sabaeen king Karib'il Watar bin Damar'alī (fl. first quarter of the seventh century BCE), alludes to the destruction of inscriptions in a campaign against the kingdom of 'Awsān, stating: '[Karib]'il ordered the tearing down of all inscriptions from [his (i.e. the 'Awsānite king's)] palace [of Miswar], and all the inscri[p]tions of the temples of his gods' (*ms³r kl 's¹tr 'tb [krb]'l bn byt-h[w ms¹wr] w-'s¹[t]r 'byt 'l'lt-hw*).²¹⁸ That this vandalism merits mention in the inscription indicates that the destruction of the inscribed monuments of one's enemies was a significant and highly symbolic act. RÉŠ 3945 does not, however, invoke divine protection for Karib'il Watar's own inscription.

If, as seems likely, the concept of curse formulae was diffused to Ethiopia from South Arabia, this would have occurred via informal, non-royal interactions at some point before the fourth century CE. Presumably, curses first circulated through oral tradition, a phenomenon attested in other cultures.²¹⁹ As a possible parallel, one might point to modern Ethiopia, where, as noted above, convergence of cursing among Afroasiatic-speaking groups seems to derive from long-term interaction between said groups, rather than shared retentions of linguistic phenomena.²²⁰ In the context of Aksumite Ethiopia, it bears mentioning that there are other instances of cultural diffusion across the Red Sea during Late Antiquity. One such instance is the reference to God in RIÉth 189, the oldest known Christian inscription from Ethiopia alongside RIÉth 271, using an epithet, 'Lord of Heaven', that occurs regularly in the earliest monotheistic inscriptions in Sabaic beginning in the first quarter of the fourth century.²²¹ The adoption of this epithet is best

²¹⁷For a discussion of these, see Maraqtēn (1998).

²¹⁸RÉŠ 3945/6 (Rhodokanakis 1927: 24). For a discussion of this passage, see Hatke (2015: 114–116).

²¹⁹Danet and Bogoch 1992.

²²⁰§2.

²²¹Gajda 2005: 22, 27, 28; Gajda 2009: 224–231, 233; Prioletta 2012: 316, 317, 330; Jeschke 2022: 33–35, 37–39, 134–138. To be sure, epithets like 'Lord of Heaven' have a long history in the Semitic-speaking world (e.g. Gevirtz 1961: 143, 144 and Yakubovich 2010: 393). To cite one example, God-the-Most-High ('ēl 'ēlayōn) is at one point in the book of Genesis invoked as *qōnēh šamāyim wā-'ārēš* (Genesis 14:20). Although the root **qnh* denotes 'to acquire, to possess', the active participle *qōnēh* is often, in the context of Genesis 14:20, translated 'creator', in which case the aforementioned phrase can be glossed 'creator of heaven and earth'. For a discussion, see Cross (1973: 50–52). Since, however, South Arabia was the only region within that world with which Aksumite Ethiopia had significant, regular contact, and since there are no pre-Aksumite invocations of a 'Lord of Heaven' that might suggest a Proto-Semitic retention in Ethiopian tradition, it is likely that this epithet was introduced to Aksum from South Arabia during the fourth century CE. For a somewhat different view, see Marrassini (2012: 112–113 and *passim*). Paolo Marrassini opines that 'although it is still perfectly legitimate, of course, to search in

seen as a gradual process that began before ‘Ezānā’s conversion to Christianity, given that RIÉth 270 bis, dating from the pantheistic period of ‘Ezānā’s reign, invokes Arēs as ‘God of Heaven and Earth’. A very similar epithet is also attested (in Sabaic) in South Arabia, albeit in inscriptions that post-date ‘Ezānā’s reign.²²² Other examples of cultural diffusion from South Arabia to Ethiopia during the Aksumite period involve rather more aesthetic matters, though still indicative of the high status enjoyed by South Arabian culture in the southern Red Sea region. Already before ‘Ezānā’s conversion to Christianity, several royal inscriptions in Gə‘əz employ the South Arabian *musnad* script, even adding—albeit inappropriately at times—typically Ancient South Arabian-style mimation.²²³ It could well be the case, then, that curse formulae were a part of a broader cultural package that Aksum adopted from South Arabia at a time when Gə‘əz was being adapted for use as a medium in which to record lengthy narratives about the military campaigns of Aksumite kings.²²⁴ That Aksumite curse formulae often differ in format

South Arabia the origin of the appellation ‘Lord of Heaven’, this similarity cannot be stressed beyond bounds, because this was in fact the only appellation left in the entire ancient Near East in the first millennium B.C.’ (Marrassini 2012: 112)—and, by implication, later periods. He suggests alternative scenarios in which the appellation may have been introduced to Ethiopia from Syria-Palestine, or that it emerged independently in Syria-Palestine, South Arabia, and Ethiopia. Although these suggestions must not be dismissed out of hand, the theory of a Syro-Palestinian origin seems unlikely for reasons stated above, while the possibility of independent invention in Ethiopia and South Arabia also seems unlikely given that Aksumite references to a ‘Lord of Heaven’ appear so soon after they appear in Ḥimyar. For a useful list of references in Sabaic inscriptions, see Robin and Rijziger (2018: 278–283).

²²²The earliest known attestation of the divine epithet ‘Lord of Heaven and Earth’ (*mr’ s’myr’ w-ṛdḥ*) in Sabaic occurs in Gar Bayt al-Ashwal 1, an inscription that dates at the earliest from ca. 370 CE but might date from as late as 420 CE (Robin and Rijziger 2018: 278). If one assumes a South Arabian origin for the similar phrase in RIÉth 270 bis, one would have to posit that ‘Lord of Heaven and Earth’ initially circulated orally as a divine epithet, and that this spread from South Arabia to Ethiopia before it appeared in Sabaic in written form. Diffusion in the opposite direction is not impossible but seems less likely, given the well-attested phenomenon of Sabaic inscriptions serving as models for Aksumite inscriptions, in contrast to the lack of evidence for Aksumite inscriptions serving as models for their South Arabian counterparts. The association of deities with the heavens has a much longer history in South Arabia, though such a habit is of course hardly limited to that region. Already we read of a ‘God of Heaven’—or perhaps ‘Īl of Heaven’ in a short Sabaic inscription dating from no later than the seventh century BCE (Naumkin et al. 2005–2006), and beginning around the end of the first millennium BCE, the cult of another deity, one Dū-Samāwī ‘He of the Heavens’, is attested throughout South Arabia (von Wissmann 1964: 100–113; Stein 2009 *passim*). The cult of neither deity appears to have had any impact on Ethiopia, however.

²²³On this matter, see n. 81.

²²⁴To be sure, lengthy royal inscription recording military campaigns were not unheard of in earlier times, RIÉth 277 being a case in point. As noted above, however, that inscription was written in Greek. RIÉth 183, a Gə‘əz inscription in consonantal *fidal*, is the only Gə‘əz inscrip-

and content from their South Arabian counterparts is to be noted, but is likely nothing more than a reflection of the Ethiopians' genius in adapting aspects of South Arabian culture to suit the needs of their own. As for similarities between Aksumite curse formulae and much older curse formulae attested in inscriptions from more northerly regions of the Near East, these can be explained by the existence of a set of shared values among Semitic-speaking peoples regarding kinship, land, names, and the power of the written word. That the Aksumites emphasised these values in curse formulae is thus a phenomenon that parallels, but does not derive directly from, curse formulae from the Fertile Crescent.

A further point regarding aesthetics is the use of curse formulae in inscribed monuments that served as symbols of royal power in the context of communal events. In this connection, it bears reiterating that two inscriptions from the reign of 'Ezānā, RIÉth 188 and RIÉth 189, refer to Śado as the area in the town of Aksum at which they were erected, and that the name Śado is cognate with Sadū, the 'fertile land' located by the southern gate of the Qatabānian capital of Tamna^c at which royal inscriptions in the Qatabānic language were similarly displayed. Inasmuch as Aksumite curse formulae function like the 'display curses' identified by Anne Marie Kitz in the context of the ancient Near East, it is worth quoting Kitz's observation regarding the context in which such curses were presented.

Display maledictions are principally proactive. They are also public because their effectiveness depends on social awareness for their maintenance and ongoing respect. Therefore most of these imprecations are exhibited on monuments located in communal districts or in areas where the people might have occasional access such as temples and/or their courtyards.²²⁵

In addition, if Śado at Aksum served as a place of congregation like Sadū at Tamna^c, it might have functioned much like the church forests, i.e. the sacrosanct groves surrounding churches in rural Ethiopia, which similarly serve as gathering spaces—more specifically as gathering spaces at which feasting and drinking events are held to commemorate local patron saints.²²⁶ A key difference is that, in the case of church forests, the church has replaced the throne as the chief built structure within a plot of land set aside for congregation. The shift may have already begun in the sixth century, at a time when Aksumite kings were still erecting inscribed stelae to advertise their royal authority. The churches built in South Arabia following Kāleb's victorious campaigns there—like the one alluded

tion of any length that predates the fourth century but contains no narrative, as it is instead concerned with laying out rules and regulations regarding the offering of various foodstuffs (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 227–232; Drewes 2019: 177–191).

²²⁵Kitz 2014: 254.

²²⁶Orlowska and Klepeis 2018: 1–3, 5, 16.

to in RIÉth 191—are a demonstrative example of this trend, while one of the manuscripts of the Late Aksumite gospels of Abbā Garimā similarly speaks of the seventh-century Aksumite king Armaḥ as a builder of churches.²²⁷ By the Middle Ages, the change was complete, with churches now serving as the principal if not exclusive monuments through which Ethiopian kings expressed their power.²²⁸

That feasting was an element of Aksumite social life is implied by two inscriptions, both in consonantal Gəʿəz. The first, RIÉth 183, a four-part inscription from the site of Safra on Eritrea's Qoḥayto Plateau probably dating from the third century CE,²²⁹ speaks of the distribution of honey (*dbś*), flour (*tḥn*), bread (*ḥbst*), butter (*msg*), and beer (*śwh*), as well as the procurement of a cow (*lhm*), likely intended for slaughter.²³⁰ The occasion on which these items were consumed was evidently an official event that involved the central authorities, as RIÉth 183 also alludes to laws (*ḥgg*) regarding portions allotted to the king (*ngś*). Unfortunately, it is not clear on what sort of occasion such a feast was held, though the reference to a priest (*św*) suggests a ritual context. Alessandro Bausi suggests that RIÉth 183 documents a *tazkār*, or commemoration of the dead, noting that the very word *tzkr* occurs twice in the inscription,²³¹ adding, however, the caveat that there is disagreement regarding this rather obscure text.²³² The other inscription, RIÉth 218 from Māryām ʿAnza in the ʿĀgāma region of northern Ethiopia, speaks of the provision of beer and bread—using the same terms that occur in RIÉth 183—for those involved with the transport of the stele (*ḥwlt*) on which the inscription was carved.²³³ Here too, an unnamed king was involved, as it was he who is said to have had the inscription written (*śhf*). Although inscriptions from the Aksumite capital are silent on the matter, it is likely that the setting up of royal inscriptions as parts of stone thrones was similarly accompanied by feasting. While such a public event would have provided an ideal time in which to convey the message of such inscriptions—curse formulae included—to the gathered masses, it is by no means clear whether this was the case. In a recent study on Aksumite royal inscriptions, Christian Robin argues that the form that an inscription took counted for much more than the inscription's content. Focusing on those Aksumite inscriptions in South Arabian *musnad*—though the same observations apply equally to those inscriptions in fully vocalised *fidal* or in Greek—Robin writes:

²²⁷Derat 2018: 557, 563.

²²⁸Krebs 2021: 192–193, 201.

²²⁹Bausi 2013: 180.

²³⁰Drewes and Schneider 1991: 229–230. For a translation and commentary, see Drewes (2019: 178–191).

²³¹RIÉth 183 I/1; RIÉth 183 IV/4 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 229, 230).

²³²Bausi 2013: 180.

²³³Drewes and Schneider 1991: 312–313. For a translation and commentary, see Drewes (2019: 312–315).

Le nombre des habitants d'Aksūm capable de lire un texte en alphabet sudarabique qui était une écriture différente de l'alphabet consonantique éthiopien, avec un écart comparable à celui qui sépare le grec du latin, devait être infime. Quant à la langue, elle était incompréhensible pour un utilisateur habituel de l'écriture sudarabique, et fort étrange pour un utilisateur des écritures éthiopiennes. On peut donc estimer avec assurance que pratiquement personne n'était capable de lire et de comprendre ces textes guèzes maquillés en sabàïque qui étaient exposés à Aksūm.²³⁴

While one cannot reject out of hand the possibility that public inscriptions were at times read aloud to an audience,²³⁵ hard evidence to that effect is lacking. What seems clear is that inscribed monuments in Aksum—as, indeed, throughout the ancient world—were first and foremost symbols of authority, rather than media for conveying written messages. The question that then arises is: Why include curse formulae in an inscription at all if no one was—or, at least, very few people were—able to read them? The same question could, however, equally be asked of the *dabtarās*, i.e. lay ecclesiastics in Ethiopia,²³⁶ who have historically written magical charms for clients containing names and phrases, despite knowing full well that the majority of said clients would have had no idea how to read them.²³⁷ The fact of the matter is that the physical written word was itself a form of authority. One need not have understood its meaning to grasp the power with which it was invested, be it to combat malignant spirits in the case of magical charms or would-be vandals in the case of curse formulae in royal inscriptions. Belief in this power may well have been enhanced through use of such foreign scripts as the Greek and South Arabian alphabets, both representative of cultures that enjoyed high status in Ethiopia. If the link between symbolic stone thrones—with which royal inscriptions are associated—and the world of the divine suggested in this article is correct, one must also consider the possibility that the texts of Aksumite inscriptions, while inscrutable to most Aksumites, were intended for divine eyes. In that case, a curse formula was a king's way of demonstrating to his divine lord—or lords—that he would punish anyone who might harm a monument offered by him to said lord(s).

Let us turn now to the social implications of Aksumite curse formulae. According to these formulae, the act of destroying, tampering with, or removing an inscription had dire consequences not only for one guilty of such acts but also for his family and extended kin group. This indicates that, in the kingdom of Aksum,

²³⁴Robin 2022: 195.

²³⁵For examples of this, see Hatke (2022: 86 [n. 262]), and the sources cited therein.

²³⁶On the term *dabtarā*, see Kaplan (2005: 53); Boylston (2018: 67).

²³⁷On Ethiopian beliefs in the power of these magical charms, the names they contain, and the authority invested in them by virtue of their being written in the ancient language of Gə'əz, see Malara (2020: 448–451).

collective guilt was assigned in cases of wrongdoing. Similar ideas about crime and collective guilt by virtue of kinship are reflected in Ancient South Arabian legal texts, which speak of compensation and expiatory rituals against homicide and other crimes requiring the involvement of the tribal community at large.²³⁸ That curses targeting an individual also affected that individual's kin group and/or progeny is likewise a belief that E. E. Evans-Pritchard notes among the Nuer,²³⁹ much as Fekede Mentuta and Ruth Vatvedt Fjeld observe it among the Gurage.²⁴⁰ The concept is a very old one, as evidenced by ancient Mesopotamian treaties in which curses are collective and intergenerational in scope, involving not only individuals but also their family and progeny.²⁴¹ The references to the wrongdoer's kin (Gə'əz *zamad*) in curse formulae also highlight the importance of kinship in Aksumite society. This is also reflected in the fact that Aksumite kings advertise their clan identity in inscriptions and on coins, using the so-called *bə'səya*-formula. Thus, 'Ezānā bore the title *bə'səya ḥalen/ḥalən* 'the man of Ḥalen/Ḥalən', i.e. a member of the clan of Ḥalen,²⁴² while Kāleb was *b's¹ lzn (= bə'se la/lāzen)* 'the man of La/Lāzen'.²⁴³ The importance of clan ties in Aksum is also indicated by the fact that military units, identified in Gə'əz as *'ahzāb* (sg. *ḥəzb*), were organised along clan lines.²⁴⁴ Sabaic inscriptions dating from the third and sixth centuries similarly refer to armed bands of Aksumites, when operating in South Arabia, as *'ḥzb*.²⁴⁵ Related to kinship ties is another integral aspect of identity, that of one's name. As we have seen, Aksumite kings like 'Ezānā and Kāleb laid great emphasis on their being bestowed a 'great name' by God in the context of their military undertakings, an idea which is part and parcel of the broader notion that preservation of one's name was central to one's very existence, while the erasure of one's name effectively implied the nullification of one's very existence. This is another concept of great antiquity, as evidenced by the parallels from the Old

²³⁸Mazzini 2020: 51–55.

²³⁹Evans-Pritchard 1956: 75, 166–168.

²⁴⁰Fekede Mentuta and Fjeld 2016: 378.

²⁴¹Freire 2017: 670, 674–675.

²⁴²RIÉth 188/1–2; RIÉth 189/2 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 259, 263).

²⁴³RIÉth 191/8 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 272).

²⁴⁴Merid Wolde Aregay 2005: 161–162.

²⁴⁵Thus *'ḥzb ḥbs²t* 'fighting bands of the Ethiopians' (Ja 574/5; Ja 576 + Ja 577/3.19.26; Ja 585/15–16 [Jamme 1962: 60, 67, 77, 91]) and *'ḥzb hgr-hmw 'ks¹[m]* 'and the fighting bands of their town of Aks[um]' (Wellcome A 103664/8 [Beeston 1980: 12]). In Sabaic, this substantive is almost without exception employed in the plural form. The sole instance in which the singular form, *ḥzb*, is employed, is found in MAFRAY-Mi'sāl 5/11 (Müller 2010: 30). On the derivation of Sabaic *ḥzb-'ḥzb* from Gə'əz *ḥəzb-'ahzāb*, see Beeston (1994: 41). In Gə'əz, *ḥəzb* denotes everything from a clan to a nation, including a generic multitude of people. In its plural form, it can also denote gentiles.

Testament and ancient Mesopotamian noted in our discussion of RIÉth 270 bis.²⁴⁶ That ideas born of this tradition continued to resonate into modern times is most famously²⁴⁷ evidenced by the ban (Hebrew *hērēm*) placed on the philosopher Baruch Spinoza by the Sephardic rabbinate of Amsterdam in 1656, one clause of which read: ‘And may the Lord erase his name from under the heavens.’²⁴⁸ From this perspective, one can appreciate the seriousness of the crime of defacing or in other ways destroying a royal monument in view of the statement in RIÉth 270 bis/33–34 that the very name of anyone guilty of such a misdemeanour would be cast out from the land of the living.



Figure 2. An early modern display of *hērēm* in effect: *Spinoza and the Rabbis*, by Samuel Hirszenberg (1907) Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baruch_Spinoza#/media/File:Hirszenberg,_Spinoza_wykl%C3%A4r_\(Excommunicated_Spinoza\),_1907.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baruch_Spinoza#/media/File:Hirszenberg,_Spinoza_wykl%C3%A4r_(Excommunicated_Spinoza),_1907.jpg) (public domain)

Having said that, RIÉth 270 bis happens to be the only (known) Aksumite inscription whose curse formula explicitly mentions the obliteration of a name as

²⁴⁶§3.2.

²⁴⁷Or infamously, depending on one’s opinion.

²⁴⁸Quoted in Nadler (2018: 141).

punishment for destroying a royal monument. More common in Aksumite curse formulae are imprecations that one who damages or topples a royal inscription be banished from the land.²⁴⁹ Variants on this theme include references to eradication from the earth²⁵⁰ and being overthrown in one's own house.²⁵¹ The positive flipside is the affirmation of blessing in household/residence for anyone who guards and maintains a royal monument.²⁵² The theme of banishment as a component of malediction is firmly rooted in ancient Near Eastern tradition and is an idea related to a broader conception of the wilderness as a place in which cursed people wander.²⁵³ To quote Jeff S. Anderson,

[w]hile the relentless power of the curse to pursue violators and bring malevolent force to bear on them is frightening, one also must not underestimate the power that threat of expulsion from the community can wield. The »contagious« nature of some curses to infect a whole family, tribe, or nation, created an incredibly strong taboo against one who would be perceived as »cursed«.²⁵⁴

That a curse might affect one's kin group at large is, as we have seen, a concept implicit in Aksumite curse formulae and need not be repeated here. On the other hand, references to banishment in Aksumite curse formulae have distinctly Ethiopian overtones in that they play on a theme attested in Aksumite inscriptions in descriptions of actions taken against defeated enemies. In inscriptions recording his campaign against the Beġa, for example, 'Ezānā speaks of how the defeated Beġa—men, women, and children—were taken from their land and resettled in another region within the kingdom of Aksum.²⁵⁵ Thus, in the Aksumite context, the punishment meted out to one who destroys a royal inscription is described in terms that are very much at home in records of military operations. It bears noting that one finds remarkably similar language in ancient Near Eastern treaties, the violation of which was grounds for military action. For example, in his treaty with Mati³-ilu, king of Arpad in Northwestern Syria, the Neo-Assyrian emperor Aššur-nārāri V (r. 753–746 BCE) issues the threat that if his vassal were to break

²⁴⁹RIÉth 185 I/22–23 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 243); RIÉth 185 II/22–23 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 243); RIÉth 185 bis I/24–25 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 247); RIÉth 185 bis II/40–42 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 249), RIÉth 188/28 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 260).

²⁵⁰RIÉth 189/50–51 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 265).

²⁵¹RIÉth 191/39–40 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 273).

²⁵²RIÉth 192 B/5–7 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 276).

²⁵³Kitz 2014: 250.

²⁵⁴Anderson 1998: 227–228.

²⁵⁵RIÉth 185 I/4–6.14–15 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 242); RIÉth 185 II/5–7.15–16 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 243); RIÉth 185 bis I/5–8.16–17 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 246, 247); RIÉth 185 II (B)/6–8.(C)11–15 (Drewes and Schneider 1991: 247, 248); RIÉth 270 bis/18–23 (Bernand 1991: 368 [trans. Bernand 1982: 107–108]).

said treaty, he would be ousted from his country, along with his sons, daughters, magistrates, and subjects, never again to return.²⁵⁶ Closer in time and place to Aksumite Ethiopia, Middle Sabaic inscriptions provide another interesting parallel in that, when referring in curse formulae to the punishment of those who might destroy a monument or memorial, they use the very verb *qmʿ* ‘to overthrow’ (cf. Arabic *qamaʿa* ‘to restrain, to subdue, to suppress’) which is employed when describing the defeat of enemies in warfare.²⁵⁷

Possibly relevant in this regard are the references in Aksumite curse formulae to the blinding of an offender against a royal monument. As we have seen, there are parallels to such language in Safaitic inscriptions.²⁵⁸ Comparable allusions to blinding in curse formulae in inscriptions from the reign of ʿEzānā, on the other hand, may take their cue from military practice, much like the theme of

²⁵⁶Freire 2017: 670.

²⁵⁷In a military sense, *qmʿ* is employed in the following contexts:

1. GI 1223/23: *w-qmʿw ḏ-bn ḥqʿn w-gbḏw kl ḥblt-hw* (Solá Solé 1964: 53) ‘And they **overthrew** a part of Ḥaql^{an}, and they ravaged all of its vineyards.’
2. Ja 576 + Ja 577/4: *tbrw w-hbʿln w-qmʿ w-hsʿbʿn byt ḏ-sʿmtn w-hgrʿn dll w-byt yhr w-hgrʿn ʿzwr b-wtrʿn b-rḏ qsʿmʿn* (Jamme 1962: 67) ‘they destroyed and seized and **overthrew** and brought to submission the house of Dū-Šāmat^{an} and the town of Dalil and the house of Yahirr and the town of ʿAḏwar on the border of the land of Qašam^{um}.’
3. Ja 576 + Ja 577/12: *w-qmʿw hgrʿn qrsʿ1* (Jamme 1962: 68) ‘And they **overthrew** the town of Qaras.’
4. Ja 629/28–29: *w-gbzw kl ʿsʿrr-hmw w-wtr w-qmʿ mḥrmt w-hykl w-ʿbʿr w-msʿqy* (Jamme 1962: 128) ‘And they devastated all of their valleys, and they destroyed and **overthrew** the sanctuaries and palaces and wells and irrigation networks.’
5. Ry 533/12: *w-yʿdw [q]mʿ qrytnhn*
<http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=79&prjId=1&corId=10&colId=0&navId=995903892&recId=4057> ‘And they furthermore **overthrew** Qaryatānhān.’

In curse formulae, we find *qmʿ* in the following contexts:

1. A-20-274/1–2: [... ...] *n l-qmʿn sʿrqn ḏ-ytʿ(bn-h)[w]*
2. <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=54&prjId=1&corId=27&colId=0&navId=329714410&recId=319&mark=00319%2C001%2C003> ‘[...] may Šāriqān **overthrow** the one who destroys i[t].’
3. CIH 445/2: *w-l-qmʿn ʿttr sʿrqn ḏ-yḥrsʿn-hw* (Robin in Calvet and Robin 1997: 107) ‘And may ʿAṭtar Šāriq^{an} **overthrow** the one who might damage it (i.e. the funerary stele).’
4. CIH 969/2: *l-qmʿn ʿttr sʿrqn ḏ-yḥrn-hw* (Pirenne 1965: Pl. IX b) ‘And may ʿAṭtar Šāriqān **overthrow** the one who might break it (i.e. the image).’
5. RÉŠ 4156/3–5: (w-) *q[m]ʿ ʿttr sʿrqn kl ʿnsʿ1-y[ḥrsʿn]n w-ysʿtrn nfsʿ1n* (Mordtmann and Mitwoch 1932: 53 [Pl. XIII]) ‘And may ʿAṭtar Šāriq^{an} **overthrow** any person who might damage or destroy (this) funerary stele.’

The direct link between the act of cursing and the divine world is evident from the fact that in each of the aforementioned curse formulae, the subject of *qmʿ* is the god ʿAṭtar Šāriq^{an}, even though only ʿAṭtar’s epithet appears in A-20-274.

²⁵⁸§3.1.

banishment/uprooting. Although the blinding of prisoners of war is not explicitly mentioned in Aksumite records of military campaigns, such a practice, with the aim of inhibiting such prisoners' mobility while in captivity, is documented in Mesopotamia from the mid-third millennium BCE down to the Neo-Assyrian Period (911 BCE–609 BCE).²⁵⁹ The same practice is described in the Hebrew Bible, wherein we are told that Samson was blinded by the Philistines (*γῆναqqərū ʾēṭ-ʿēnāw*),²⁶⁰ while the defeated Judaeen king Zedekiah (r. 597–586 BCE) is said to have been blinded (*wə-ʾēṭ-ʿēnê šidəqiyāhū ʿiwwēr*) before being taken into captivity in Babylon.²⁶¹ Judging from the fact that punishment by blinding is alluded to in Aksumite curse formulae, it is possible that captives taken by the Aksumites in warfare occasionally suffered a similar fate. It must be stressed, however, that with curse formulae we are most probably dealing with rhetoric. None of the punishments with which would-be offenders are threatened are likely to have ever been enforced, at least not in the manner described in curse formulae. The point was that the written word and the monument on which it was presented were regarded as sacrosanct, and that any offences committed against either were grave crimes that threatened the preservation of a society's collective memory of a king, much as uprisings by rebellious subjects were crimes that threatened the preservation of a king's authority.

In closing, it is worth considering the afterlife, as it were, of written curse formulae in Ethiopia. As we have seen, the issuing of curse formulae in written form survived the transition to Christianity during the Aksumite period. This, and the fact that various forms of cursing are still practised by Christian Ethiopians confirms that belief in the power of curses is easily accommodated within a Christian belief system. To this, it should be added that the tradition of issuing written curses survived the very kingdom of Aksum itself, even after the habit of erecting inscribed stele died out as a means by which Ethiopian kings advertised their royal authority, to be replaced by royal edicts, chronicles, and treatises in manuscript form. Although manuscript curses are a not uncommon topos in the Ethiopian tradition, they have yet to be systematically studied.²⁶² In the present context, we shall limit ourselves to a few representative examples. One such example is found in the homily from the *Maṣḥafa Bərḥān* 'The Book of Light' on the rite of baptism and religious instruction, penned by King Zar'a Yā'əqob (r. 1434–1468). As part of his campaign against pagan practices in his kingdom, Zar'a Yā'əqob issued the following curse for those guilty of idolatry who might call upon their idol while in church:

²⁵⁹Gelb 1973: 87.

²⁶⁰Judges 16:21.

²⁶¹2 Kings 25:7.

²⁶²As recently pointed out by Sophia Dege-Müller (2020b: 31, 33).

la-za-yəgabbər kama-zə yəbarbaru beto wa-yək^wannənu nafso wa-yəkun la-bā‘əd mədra rəstu ʾəsmā la-zəntu gəbr səmana ʾəgziʾabher wa-ʾangāsana kama nətbaqal šaləʾto wa-nəsrəwwomu ʾəm-gaṣṣa mədr²⁶³

For whoever acts thusly, let them pillage his house and condemn his soul, and may the land of his inheritance go to another; for God has appointed us for this matter and has appointed us king that we might punish His enemies and eradicate them from the face of the earth.

One recognizes here much of the sentiment conveyed by Aksumite-period curse formulae, most notably in such thematic elements as estrangement from one’s land and harm done to one’s house. In the chronicle of Zar’a Yā‘əqob’s reign, we read further that it was decreed: ‘And whoever does not act (in accordance with the edict), may his house be pillaged and his body tortured’ (*wa-zanta za-ʾi-gabra yətbarbar betu wa-yətk^wannan səgāhu*).²⁶⁴ Then, in a later document, King Galāwdewos (r. 1540–1559) is said to have restored land to the Ya-Dəbā Māryām Church in Ethiopia’s North Wällo region, with the understanding that no future king should infringe the donation. To emphasise this point, Galāwdewos states:

za-heda wa-za-tāaggalā wəguza la-yəkun ba-ʾafa ʾab wa-wald wa-manfas qəddus ba-ʾafāhā la-ʾəgzəʾtəna māryām ba-ʾafa nabiyaṯ wa-ḥawārayāṯ²⁶⁵

Whoever confiscates and whoever defrauds it, may he be cursed by the mouth of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; by the mouth of our lady Mary; (and) by the mouth of the Prophets and the Apostles.

This curse formula bears some similarities with its Aksumite counterparts in that it was issued to ensure the sanctity of a tangible entity, as opposed to an intangible one like the orthopraxy that Zar’a Yā‘əqob sought to uphold. On the other hand, it appeals to a wider range of authorities in that, whereas Aksumite curse formulae invoke deities, whether pagan or Christian, the curse issued in the name of Galāwdewos invokes not only the Trinity but also Mary, the Prophets, and the Apostles. Also worth noting is the fact that the issuing of such curses in written form was not limited to kings, nor even to Christians, in post-Aksumite Ethiopia, as evidenced by similar manuscript curses in literature produced by the Beta ʾƏsrāʾel Jews of Ethiopia. Beta ʾƏsrāʾel curses are similar in format to their Christian counterparts but replace invocations of Mary, the Trinity, and the Apostles with Old Testament figures like Moses and Aaron.²⁶⁶ One such curse is

²⁶³Getatchew Haile 2013: 67.

²⁶⁴Perruchon 1893: 7.

²⁶⁵Wudu Tafete Kassu 2018: 148.


²⁶⁶Dege-Müller 2020b: 33.

found the so-called *Genealogy of the Hoḥwārwa Monastery* (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, Ms. Or. 87), a genealogical account of an ascetic community of the Beta ʿEsrāʾel.²⁶⁷ Appended to the second of two genealogies in the manuscript is a note by one ʿAbbā Warqe, who may have been the head of the Hoḥwārwa community at one time, that reads: ‘This is the *Orit* of ʿAbbā Warqe, who bought it for 30 *šamma*,²⁶⁸ whoever steals it and erases it shall be anathematized by the words of Moses and Aaron’ (*zātti ʿorit za-ʿabbā warqe za-taśayāta ba-30-šammā za-saraqā wa-za-faḥaqā ba-muse wa-ʿaron qāl wəguz*).²⁶⁹ Then, in another manuscript (MS Faitlovitch MS13), we find the following curse: ‘Whoever steals it (i.e. the manuscript), and whoever erases it, shall be anathematized by the authority of Moses, and Aaron, and Melchizedek, the high priest’ (*za-saraqo wa-za-faḥaqo wəguz la-yəkun ba-səltāna muse wa-ʿaron wa-malka šedeq kāhən ʿabīy*).²⁷⁰ In both cases, as with Aksumite curse formulae, the threat of a curse is directed at one who might remove and/or destroy a text. But however they are worded, and regardless of the ethnicity or religious affiliation of those issuing them, the fact that curse formulae are attested over such a long period testifies to the tenacity of this tradition in Ethiopian culture, as well as to the strength in the conviction that curses are very real, and very potent, deterrents.

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²⁶⁷Uniquely among Jewish communities, the Beta ʿEsrāʾel have historically had a monastic tradition, though this had all but disappeared by the mid-twentieth century (Dege-Müller 2020b: 63–65).

²⁶⁸I.e. pieces of cloth.

²⁶⁹Translation based on Dege-Müller (2020b: 73 [n. 76]). Note Dege-Müller’s emendations to the text in the aforementioned reference.

²⁷⁰Translation based on Dege-Müller (2020a: 33).

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