

A NOTE ON ZĀGWĒ KINGSHIP

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1. In his well known book on Ethiopian kingship (Haberland 1965), Eike Haberland has clearly set out the problem of two opposite conceptions underlying its ideology: that of the inactive and peaceful king, who by his very presence assures rain, prosperity and welfare for his country (and whom he calls “roi fainéant”), and that of the active and fighting one, whose main concerns are politics and war¹; the first is connected, according to Haberland, with the common type of African sacral kings, whereas the other is the result of another conception, that of the “Verdienstkomplex”, in turn probably tied to the “Megalithic” culture (Haberland 1965: 186), although with a strong influence of a much later “Israelite” ideology, typical of the Solomonic dynasty (Haberland 1965: 164).

Although, for the second type, there is plenty of examples from almost every Ethiopic text, for the first the relevant passages are not really very many; in fact Haberland quotes only one in the “Chronicle” of Claudius (Haberland 1965: 154 = Conzelman 1895: 92 [text]/173–4 [translation]), and one in that of Šarša Dengel (Haberland 1965: 154 = Conti Rossini 1905: 141 [text]/160–1 [translation]). The purpose of the present short note is to produce another example, even more telling and clear, from an unpublished text about a well-known Zāgwē king, the *Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos*²; a brief passage of it seems to put the difference between the two conceptions in a very sharp way.

2. There is no doubt that for the second type of king the activity *par excellence* is war; with war “nous abordons réellement la fonction sacrée du roi, car . . . elle est la guerre sainte” (Caquot 1957: 212), and the Ethiopian king must be the first warrior of his country (Haberland 1965: 81). But almost the same values of war are those of hunt: hunt is “une préparation à la guerre”, it is “le premier des exercices royaux”, where the “fonction surnaturelle” of the king manifests itself (Caquot 1957: 212); or rather, the actual value it has in the Ethiopic texts has to be ascribed to the same “Verdienstkomplex” (Haberland 1965: 145), and it is tied to the heroic character of the Ethiopian monarchy, the original feature of the ceremonial hunt in African kingship being almost totally obliterated (Haberland 1965: 123, 146).

Our *gadl* is of radically different opinion, and – what is, as far as I can see, unique amongst Ethiopic texts – it puts the opposition explicitly. At a certain point (f. 153v) God invites

1 Cf. above all Haberland 1965: 163–165, 187–188, 304, and *passim*.

2 Of this *gadl* at least three MSS are known, that seen by Tadesse Tamrat at Lālibalā (cp. Tadesse Tamrat 1972: 58 fn. 1), perhaps the same as the EMLM quoted e.g. by S. Kaplan (1984: 137), and not yet catalogued; that quoted by Kinfē-Rigb Zelleke (1975: 97 n. 172) as “IES, series 10, No. 34”; and the Cerulli Etiopico 223, of the Vatican Library. For the second no date is proposed, whereas the other two are very recent (19/20th century). A critical edition is necessary; in the meantime, the following notes are based on the Cerulli manuscript. The best general commentary is still that by Tadesse Tamrat 1972: 54 fn. 3, 55 fn. 3 on p. 56, 57 fn. 3, 58 with fn. 1 and 2, 59 fn. 5, 60 with fn. 1, 2 and 3; for other marginal questions see also my paper “Le *Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos*: aperçu préliminaire”, presented at the 10th Conference on Ethiopian Studies, held in Paris in August 1988.

Yemreḥanna Krestos to build a sepulchre for himself, in a place called Wagra Sehin³; God himself will show it to him when he will go out hunting with his men. Yemreḥanna Krestos obeys, and here the text runs as follows (ff. 154v–155r): *wabasānitā 'elat 'azzazomu lasarā-witu 'enza yebel ne'u kama nen'aw 'arāwita watalawewo ḥaba ḥora 'enza yetfēsseḥu wayebēlu tamayta lebbu lanegus ḥaba ne'wa 'arāwit bakama nagašt qaddamt wa'emze yegabbe' ḥaba mā'danena wayenasse'* 'anestiyā *bezuḥa bakama nebēlo 'esma nāhu waṭṭana ne'iwa 'arāwit. waneḥnassa netēkkez ba'entaze nagar 'enza qassis negus wašemmunāhu kama ge'za manakos* (f. 155r) *menta negabber nabarna 'enza nebel waye'ezēssa ḥawwasanna 'egzi'abeḥēr wawaṭṭana lana šer'ata zanagašt. wakāle'ān yebelu ḥēr we'etu wa'albo zayegabber šab'a ba'ebreṭu wasab'a romni yet'ēzzazu lottu 'akko bakwenātu 'allā bašalotu waneḥnani konna 'erufāna bamangeštu wazenāmani yefēnnu lana 'egzi'abeḥēr lallagizēhu barad'ētu šegābni kona lasarāwitu lament taḥammeyewo lazakamaze negus yebēlu sab' 'ella 'anbabomu manfas qeddus* “The following day, he ordered his retinue and said: ‘Come, so that we hunt wild animals’. They rejoiced and followed him where he was going, and said: ‘The mind of the king has changed, and now he wants to go hunting like the previous kings! And after that he will come back to our table, and he will take many wives⁴, as we have told him, because, look, he has begun to hunt wild animals. As for us, we are very sorry because of this fact, as he is a priest-king⁵, and he lives in loneliness according to the monastic habit, whereas we were wondering what to do. But now the Lord has visited us, and has started for us the custom of the kings.’ But others said: ‘He is a good man, and there is nobody who makes war under him; the people of Rom obeys to him, and certainly not because of his spear, but because of his prayer! And we are quiet in his reign, and the Lord sent us the rain at every moment; with His help there has been also satiety for his retinue; why are you insulting such a king?’ so said men that the Holy Spirit made speak”.

There is also a supplementary passage which could possibly be significant in this respect. On f. 144v Yemreḥanna Krestos, at the end of a homily on Creation composed by himself, pronounces against big-game hunting, and in favour of stock-breeding: *bazeni yezzēḥḥar sab' la'emma qanaya nāgēyāta wa'arwē ḥarisāta wa'agmusa wa'anābesta wa'anāmerta watamanāta ḥayyālāna wagerumāna 'allā ya'akkelo 'emqueddusān 5.fetrat 'ellu 'emuntu 'alhemt wa'abāge' wa'aṭāli dorho waneḥb wa'emrekusān 5. zewe'etu gamal faras 'adg kalb wademat* . . . “And because of this man is proud, if he dominates elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, lions, leopards, mighty and terrible dragons, but out of the clean animals five creatures only will suffice to him, and these are cows, sheep, goats, chickens, and bees; and out of the unclean another five, which are camel, horse, ass, dog and cat . . .” One cannot help noticing that the list of the wild animals is almost the same as that which can be found in the royal hunt in the “Chronicles”.

3 Already well known from the *Gadla Na'akweto La'ab* (Conti Rossini 1943: 173/230).

4 This is one of the main concerns of the *gadl*. In another passage (ff. 151r–152v) Yemreḥanna Krestos' retinue tries to persuade him to marry four wives in all, because after this a richer table will be prepared for them. Yemreḥanna Krestos refuses their requests, but after some insistence from the elders he seems to incline for that solution; immediately the heavenly bread that used to come to him ceases, and after a night of penitence (tears and blood from his nose moisten the earth) Jesus Christ and the angels promise him that the heavenly bread will come again, but only at his grave.

5 Yemreḥanna Krestos is proclaimed a priest throughout the text (and cp. Conti Rossini 1943: 117/182), but perhaps it is not necessary to take this fact too seriously (as Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 58 fn. 1 does); this could simply be a hagiographic *topos*, as many saints are priests too (e.g. Takla Hāymānot, Ewostātēwos, Ferē Mikā'el, Takla Ḥawāryāt, Anorēwos, Tādēwos of Bārtāwā, Batra Māryām, Buruk Amlāk, Yoḥannes Mešrāqāwi).

3. Interesting in this connection is also the fact that, generally speaking, other Zāgwē kings seem to be similar to Yemreḥanna Krestos in this respect: Na'akweto La'ab, although a skilled hunter (Conti Rossini 1943: 126/189, 138/200, 140/201), is a fundamentally peaceful king; in his struggle against Šara Qemes he "has neither bow nor spear", and only fights with the Old Testament and the Gospel (Conti Rossini 1943: 14/20); and after Lālibalā has given him the throne, he rules "with persuasion, without killings or quarrels" (Conti Rossini's translation: *bamanfas za'enbala qatl wabā'es*) (Conti Rossini 1943: 148/207). A little more warlike is Lālibalā, although it is only through his son that he kills the son of the rebellious chief (Perruchon 1892: 51/117 ff.); the chief himself dies afterwards by an accident (Perruchon 1892: 53/119). So, if we can conclude that the general representation of the Zāgwē dynasty was a peaceful one, this could also be useful for a better understanding of the sanctity of the Zāgwē kings. This is a "general" phenomenon, and does not concern Yemreḥanna Krestos, Lālibalā, and Na'akweto La'ab only; Masqal Kebrā (Kur 1972), Baḥayla Masqal (Na'akweto La'ab's son⁶), Ḥarbē (Perruchon 1892: XLIV; Conti Rossini 1917: 708; Qeddus Ḥarbē in the lists), and Yetbārak⁷ were saints as well. The problem of the individual royal sanctity, and that of the dynastic sanctity, are well known in the study of European hagiography of the Middle Ages⁸, but, as far as the Ethiopian tradition is concerned, royal sanctity seems to be very rare, except for some axumite, and because of this very fact "quasi-mythical" kings (Abreha and Aṣbeḥa, Kālēb, Gabra Masqal), and, for the historical ones, only for those who met a violent death, like Claudius (dubbed with the title of *mār*, and inscribed in the Synaxary [Caquot 1957: 212], but also with his corpse that does not rot after death, like that of the martyrs [Conzelman 1895: 103/179]), or Iyāsu I, addressee of a specific *gadd* (Conti Rossini 1943). From the point of view of general hagiography this is a minimal level for royal sanctity (cp. Vauchez 1981: 187–197), and makes the sanctity of an *entire* historical dynasty all the more remarkable. It is possible, of course, that the sanctity of the Zāgwē is due to their church building activities (Lālibalā, Na'akweto La'ab, and also Yemreḥanna Krestos⁹). This can also be the case of Europe (Vauchez 1981: 194), and, by applying its models, it is possible to interpret the sanctity of the Zāgwē as the result of a religious policy¹⁰ which favoured the clergy (or some part of it), and whose most "external" mark was just church building; or, on the contrary, as an attempt by the church to christianize a still weak institution (Vauchez 1981: 194). But another reason, not necessarily ruling the others out, could have well been their "sacral" character of kings bringing peace and prosperity, much more "african" and marked than that of their Solomonic followers; and this also has its counterpart in European medieval kingship, where the royal sanctity could find a good ground on which establish itself just in some kind of "sacral" preexisting conception¹¹.

6 Conti Rossini 1943: 108 (with an understandable *lapsus*: Baḥayla Mikā'ēl), 162: 220 ff.

7 Cp. what it is said on his *gadd* by Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 63 fn. 4.

8 Cp. most recently Vauchez 1981: 193–197, 209–215.

9 Ff. 149r–v, 154v–155v, 158v–159v.

10 Like, for example that of the Anjou in Hungary and Naples (Vauchez 1981: 212–213).

11 Cp. Vauchez 1981: 187–188, 190–193 (here limited to "martyr" kings). Folz 1984 seems to question the entire theory on pp. 19–21 of his book, but on p. 137 he clearly maintains that "... dans les pays du Nord-Ouest de l'Europe . . . on se trouve dans des sociétés dont les chefs furent d'abord censés descendre des dieux et assurer le salut du peuple. Lorsque disparut le paganisme, parfois par l'action du saint roi, celui-ci prit tout naturellement la place de l'ancêtre divin et devint la tête de la lignée désormais chrétienne"; cp. also p. 144.

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