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On the Etymological Awareness of the Traditional Arabic Lexicography: Aethiopica in *Lisān al-ʿarab* and *Tāj al-ʿarūs*

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Arab lexicographers rarely attempted to search for a foreign origin of Arabic words, trying instead to derive them—not very persuasively—from autochthonous Arabic roots. Known exceptions mostly involve Persian, a foreign language par excellence for most Arab philologists. This article explores this phenomenon in a different linguistic domain, viz., loanwords from Classical Ethiopic (Geʿez), the language of the ancient kingdom of Axum (the Horn of Africa). Our harvest, obtained from a systematic perusal of the lexica *Lisān al-ʿarab* and *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, is not very rich, but not totally insignificant either; a considerable number of conspicuous examples, often unrecognized in previous scholarship, have been detected, both within the quranic corpus and outside it. Taken together, this evidence provides a unique glimpse into language contacts between Arabia and Ethiopia. It also invites us to reconsider, in a more positive vein, the problem of the etymological awareness of traditional Arab philology.

§1. On the whole, the standard tools of traditional Arabic lexicography—notably, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (LA) and *Tāj al-ʿarūs* (TA)¹—show little interest in the origin of Arabic words of foreign descent. Explicit (quasi-)etymological² inquiries are rare on the pages of these resources, and if we meet some, the language involved is predominantly Persian—undoubtedly because of the centuries-long acquaintance with the Iranian world as well as the Iranian ethnicity of many prominent Islamic philologists. A characteristic example is the entry “Baghdad” in LA, 3: 114 (TA, 7: 442):

بِغْدَاد ... هِيَ فَارِسِيَّةٌ مَعْنَاهُ عَطَاءٌ صَنَمٍ لِأَنَّ بَغْ صَنَمٌ وَدَادٌ وَأَخْوَاتُهَا عَطِيَّةٌ

Baghdad . . . is Persian, and its meaning is “gift of an idol” because *bagh* is “idol” and *dād* and similar forms are “gift.”³

Author’s note: Valuable suggestions and corrections from Maria Bulakh are, as always, gratefully acknowledged. This article has been written within the framework of the project “Semitic Lexicography in Synchrony and Diachrony,” implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at HSE University, Laboratory for Middle Eastern and North African Languages and Cultures.

1. By Muḥammad ibn Manzūr (d. 1290) and Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1774) respectively. The principal reason behind the choice of these two compendia to illustrate the points raised in my study is their popularity among scholars, which makes my evidence easily accessible to nearly every interested reader. As I will try to demonstrate below, the pertinent data reflected in these two paradigmatic works usually go back to well-indicated sources that I have tried to peruse whenever possible.

2. “Etymology” is understood here in its modern scholarly sense, that is, as an attempt at establishing the origin of a given word in a language. Prescientific, Greco-Roman-like *ἐτυμολογία*—that is, semantic derivations from true or alleged prototypes *within* the language in question—is, conversely, among the hallmarks of the traditional lexicographic method of the Arabs.

3. This etymology has been accepted as “true” (or “scientific”) rather than “popular” by most modern researchers (Kennedy 1988: 412, but cf. Duri 1986: 894). The ancient Mesopotamian “Baghdad-like” toponym(s) from which the name of the Iraqi capital theoretically could have derived are usually read as *Hudādu(m)* by modern-day Assyriologists (Röllig 1972–75; Nashef 1982: 129–30).

§2. With regard to Ethiopian Semitic,⁴ Western scholars recognized long ago that a certain number of Arabic words, already in the Quran, were borrowed from Ethiopian.⁵ To what extent the traditional Arab lexicographers (or, for that matter, their sources) were aware of this is the question. Generally speaking, the answer to this question would be negative. For the majority of Arabic words regarded as Ethiopian borrowings by modern etymological scholarship, no such attribution can be found on the pages of the traditional Arab lexica—in neither quranic⁶ nor extra-quranic⁷ lexical entries.

A few interesting exceptions are not to be ignored, however.⁸

§3. The best-known quranic example is *mishkāt* ‘window’ (Q 24:35), about which LA, 14: 542 (TA, 38: 391) very laconically states:

هي بلغة الحبش

It is in the language of the Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian etymology, namely, Ge‘ez *maskot* ‘window’ (CDG, 365), acknowledged by a variety of Arab⁹ and Western authors (Nöldeke 1910: 51; Jeffery 1938: 266), is very likely correct.¹⁰

Another quranic example has been, to my knowledge, mostly disregarded by Western scholars. When discussing the meaning of *awwāh*, Abraham’s epithet in Q 9:114 and 11:75, TA, 36: 331 (LA, 13: 585) states:

أو الفقيه أو المؤمن بالحبشية

Or a jurist, or a believer, in Ethiopian.

What the lexicologist had in mind was, in all probability, Ge‘ez *yawwāh* ‘gentle, mild, modest, sincere’ (CDG, 628), a perfect match for *ḥalīm* which accompanies *awwāh* in the quranic text.¹¹

Somewhat more elusive are the Ethiopian equivalences of *ibla‘ī* in Q 11:44. In this passage God tells the earth to “swallow” the waters of the flood: *yā arḍu bla‘ī mā’aki*. According to al-Suyūfī (1991: 125; 2006: 64) and al-Bukhārī (2016: 92):

4. A group of Semitic languages spoken on the Ethiopian plateau and in adjacent areas of the Horn of Africa. It comprises Classical Ethiopic (Ge‘ez, now extinct) and several spoken languages (such as Tigre, Tigrinya, Amharic, Harari).

5. As far as the Quran is concerned, I am assuming that most of these lexemes were borrowed from Ge‘ez or an idiom closely akin to it (this may not be the case for later Ethiopisms). Strictly speaking, early forerunners of modern Ethiopian tongues (notably those of the Southern branch) may well have been in contact with Arabic upon the emergence of Islam, but, as far as I can tell, the Ge‘ez data are usually enough to explain what can really be explained among the lexical items dealt with below (and conversely, there is hardly any reliable case where modern languages would supply what Ge‘ez does not yield).

6. Such as *ḥizb* ‘party’, *ḥawāriyyūn* ‘apostles’, *khubz* ‘bread’, *mā’ida* ‘table’, and *munāfiq* ‘hypocrite’ (Jeffery 1938: 108, 115–16, 121–22, 255–56, 272). See further Nöldeke 1910: 47–59; Kropp 2008 and 2009.

7. Such as *minbar* ‘chair’ or *ḥarīsh* ‘rhinoceros’ (Nöldeke 1910: 49, 57).

8. The present study is thus a modest attempt to fill the lacuna accurately described by Manfred Kropp (2008: 388 n. 1): “Die Untersuchung der Termini und Wörter äthiopischer Herkunft in der frühen außerkoranischen muslimischen Tradition wäre der Gegenstand einer gesonderten, aber komplementär zu dem Studium des koranischen Korpus notwendigen Untersuchung.”

9. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 77; al-Suyūfī 1991: 130; al-Suyūfī 2006: 68–69; al-Bukhārī 2016: 95.

10. It is hard to concur with Chaim Rabin (1951: 123) who believes that the Ethiopian word was borrowed from Arabic.

11. *Inna Ibrāhīma la-awwāhun ḥalīmun; inna Ibrāhīma la-ḥalīmun awwāhun munībun*. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 79, al-Suyūfī 1991: 124; al-Suyūfī 2006: 63–64; al-Bukhārī 2016: 92.

بالحبشية ازدرديه

In Ethiopian it means: “Swallow it!”

At first glance, an appeal to Ethiopian is quite superfluous here: after all, *b-l-ʿ* is the Arabic root “to gulp down, to swallow,” while *z-r-d*, as explained in the commentary, means exactly the same. Still, it is hard to resist the temptation to hypothesize that the appearance of this form among possible Ethiopisms in the quranic lexicon is not accidental but conditioned by the Arab authors’ acquaintance (however vague) with the high functional prominence of *b-l-ʿ* in Geʿez (and Ethiopian in general), where it became the main verb for “to eat” to the detriment of Proto-Semitic **ʔ-k-l* (Kogan 2015: 445–46).¹²

A similar circumstance is probably to be reconstructed for *lan yaḥūra* in Q 84:14. This form has been generally (and convincingly) interpreted as “he will not return” (Ambros 2004: 80), which is supported by the relatively broad presence of *rajaʿa = ḥāra* in the classical corpora (e.g., LA, 4: 203). However, it is certainly not by chance that several traditional authorities (al-Suyūṭī 1991: 128; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 73–74; al-Bukhārī 2016: 98) stubbornly stuck to the idea that this usage is Ethiopian. Note especially the following statement from ʿIkrima ibn ʿAmmār, transmitted by Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī:

ألا تسمع الحبشي إذا قيل له حر إلى أهلك أي ارجع إلى أهلك

Don’t you hear when an Ethiopian is told “*Hur* to your family,” that is, “Return to your family?”

In all probability, such a keen interest in an Ethiopian connection for this verb is motivated by the authorities’ acquaintance with the very widespread Geʿez verb *ḥora*—although its meaning is “to go, to depart” rather than “to return.”

§4. A richer harvest awaits us when we go beyond the quranic corpus. By far the best-known case is *sanā* (*sanah*, *sanāh*) in the hadith of Umm Khālid bint Khālid, reproduced in LA, 14: 449:

فجعل يقول يا أم خالد سنا سنا قيل سنا بالحبشية حسنٌ

And he [Muḥammad] started to say, “Umm Khālid, *sanā*, *sanā*!” It is said, “*Sanā* in Ethiopian is ‘good’.”

The underlying Geʿez prototype *ṣannāy* ‘beautiful, good’ (CDG, 531) has been widely acknowledged both in the Arab tradition and in Western specialist literature (al-Suyūṭī 1991: 139; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 77; al-Bukhārī 2016: 100; Nöldeke 1910: 59; Podolsky 1991: 22; Gori 2007: 1043). Further confirmation for the Arab scholars’ acquaintance with this Ethiopian root comes from al-Suyūṭī 1991: 127 (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 74, al-Bukhārī 2016: 98), according to whom,

طور سينين الحسن بلسان الحبشة

Mount Sīnīna [in the designation of Mount Sinai in Q 95:2] is “nice, beautiful” in the language of the Ethiopians.

Another well-known extra-quranic case is the title of the Ethiopian king *al-najāshī*, whose Ethiopian origin did not go unnoticed by the Arab lexicographers (LA, 6: 422; TA, 17: 404):

12. Lexical loss and replacement in Semitic (including Ethiopian) is the main topic of my 2015 monograph where the interested reader will find some methodological premises behind my treatment of this issue as well as copious empirical evidence from a variety of Semitic languages and subgroups.

النَجَاشِيُّ كَلِمَةٌ لِلْحَبَشَةِ تُسَمَّى بِهَا مُلُوكُهَا

Al-najāshī is an Ethiopian word with which their kings are called.¹³

The Ge'ez prototype *nagāsi* is self-evident (CDG, 392).¹⁴

Much less known (cf. CDG, 121), but no less remarkable, is *dabr* ‘mountain’ (TA, 11: 254; LA, 4: 319–20):

وَالذَّبْرُ الْجَبَلُ بِلِسَانِ الْحَبَشَةِ وَمِنْهُ حَدِيثُ النَّجَاشِيِّ مَلِكِ الْحَبَشَةِ أَنَّهُ قَالَ مَا أَحْبَبُّ أَنْ لِي ذَبْرًا
ذَهَبًا وَأَنْتِي أَذْنِيَتْ رَجُلًا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ... وَقَالَ الْأَزْهَرِيُّ لَا أَذْرِي أَعْرَبِيَّ هُوَ أَمْ لَا

Al-dabr is ‘mountain’ in the language of the Ethiopians. A hadith of the Najāshī, the king of the Ethiopians, deals with it, as he said: “I do not want to have a mountain of gold [as a reward for] hurting a single Muslim man.” [. . .] And al-Azharī said: “I do not know whether it [scil. this word] is Arabic or not.”¹⁵

The identification with Ge'ez *dabr* ‘mountain’ is, of course, perfectly correct.

The following example is, to the best of my knowledge, entirely missing from the standard tools of Semitic lexicography. In TA, 32: 490 (LA, 12: 366) we read:

وَقَوْمٌ شُبُومٌ ... أَيِ أَمْنُونَ يُقَالُ إِنَّهَا حَبَشِيَّةٌ

The *shuyūm*-people [. . .] namely, the trustworthy ones, is said to be Ethiopian.¹⁶

The Ge'ez term in the background is, evidently, *ṣay(y)um* ‘appointee, official, governor, prefect’ (CDG, 540). Indeed, al-Najāshī’s speech in which the word occurs is directed to his *baṭāriqa* ‘nobles, patricians’, deeply unhappy about the king’s willingness to protect the Muslim immigrants of the first emigration (*hijra*).¹⁷

Also disregarded by comparative-philological scholarship is the following hadith excerpt, describing the signs of the approaching day of judgment (LA, 2: 454; TA, 6: 275):¹⁸

يَكُونُ كَذَا وَكَذَا وَيَكْثُرُ الْهَرْجُ قِيلَ وَمَا الْهَرْجُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ الْقَتْلُ ... قَالَ أَبُو مُوسَى
الْهَرْجُ بِلِسَانِ الْحَبَشَةِ الْقَتْلُ

It will be like this and like that, and there will be a lot of *harj*. They said: “What is *harj*, Messenger of God?” He said: “Killing.” [. . .] Abū Mūsā said: “*Al-harj* in the language of the Ethiopians is ‘killing’.”

13. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 104, with a discussion as to whether the term merely designated a particular individual or was a general title for Ethiopian rulers on the same level as “*kisrā* for the Persians or *fir‘awn* for the Copts” (cf. Nöldeke 1910: 59). Al-Suyūfī (1991: 69–70) was aware that *al-najāshī* was an early, obsolete royal title, whereas in his time (“now”) the Ethiopian emperor was called *ḥaṭī* (*ammā al-ān fa-yulaqqab al-ḥaṭī*). This is a welcome addition to the previously known Arabographic renderings of the Ge'ez title *haṣe* (Nosnitsin 2003: 364 and, more recently, Loiseau 2019: 639, reference courtesy M. Bulakh). From the vantage point of historical phonology, the Arabic rendering is interesting because it combines the anlaut *ḥ* (archaic) and the inlaut *ṭ* (innovative)—unless the *ṭ* (particularly when followed by a long *ī*) could actually render a glottalized affricate [tsʔ] (Bulakh and Kogan 2011: 618).

14. As is well known, *al-najāshī*’s name in the Arab historical tradition is *aṣḥama*, corresponding to *əlla ṣaḥam* in Ethiopian sources (Fiaccadori 2005, contra Munro-Hay 2003). The name does not seem to have any suitable Ethiopian etymology (it can hardly stem from *ṣaḥm* ‘beard’). Interestingly, Ibn al-Jawzī (1998: 104) explains the name as ‘gift’ in Arabic (*aṣḥama wa-huwa bi-l-‘arabiyya ‘aṭīyya*).

15. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 68, al-Suyūfī 1991: 158. In the tradition reported by Ibn al-Jawzī, the text is presented as *dabran dhahab* (*[min]* inserted by the editor), and cf. *dabrā lī dhahaban* in LA, 4: 319. It may be not too bold to suggest that the *a*-ending(s) in these forms, rather uncomfortable from the point of view of Arabic morphology and syntax, ultimately reflect the Ge'ez genitive marker *-a* (with **dabr-a warḥ* as an underlying Ethiopian form).

16. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 68; al-Suyūfī 1991: 158.

17. A detailed study of the historical context of the event and the Arab sources pertaining to it is Raven 1988, which, however, does not discuss any of the lexical issues that interest us here.

18. Also al-Suyūfī 2006: 77; al-Bukhārī 2016: 101.

In this case, the hypothetical donor language is not “Ethiopian” (where no reflex of Proto-West Semitic **h-r-g* ‘to kill’ is preserved), but (an idiom close to) Sabaeen where *h-r-g* ‘to kill’ is normal (SD, 56; Kogan 2015: 188). It does not undermine, however, the significance of this example for the aims of our inquiry: some (if not many) Arab philologists were indeed interested in the non-Arabic origin of obscure early lexemes, and a (slightly) mistaken dialectal attribution cannot be all that relevant in such a context.¹⁹

A harder nut to crack is the following example from TA, 8: 109, where Muḥammad is said to have been watching a dancing party²⁰ of young Ethiopians:

وفي الحديث أنه قال للحَبَشَةَ دُونَكُمْ يَا بَنِي أَرْدَفَةَ ... جِنْسٌ مِنَ الْحَبَشَةِ ... أَوْ لَقَبٌ لَهُمْ ... أَوْ
اسْمٌ أُبِيَهُمُ الْأَكْبَرُ يُعْرَفُونَ بِهِ

[It is said] in a hadith that he [Muhammad] said to the Ethiopians: “Beware, sons of *ardafa*!”
[. . .] [It is a term for] a subgroup of Ethiopians [. . .] or a nickname for them [. . .] or the name
of their forefather by which they are known.²¹

A quest for an Ethiopian origin of *ardafa* inevitably suggests itself, but at present I am unable to suggest any plausible Ge‘ez prototype for this enigmatic word.

§5. What are the sources for this lexicographic evidence? A comprehensive answer to this question would fall far beyond the modest scope of the present note. What immediately comes to mind, however, is the special genre of late medieval Arab scholarly discourse intended to exalt “the merits of Ethiopians and other black people” (Ahmed 1996: 48), which includes:

1. Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1208), *Tanwīr al-ghabash fī faḍl al-Sūdān wa-l-Habash*, especially chapter 12, “Concerning What Is Found in the Quran Agreeing with the Language of the Ethiopians.”

2. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 1505), *Raḥḥ sha’n al-Ḥubshān*, especially chapter 3, “Concerning What Is Found in the Quran [Written] in the Language of the Ethiopians.”

3. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *Azhār al-‘urūsh fī akhbār al-Ḥubūsh*.

4. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Bāqī al-Bukhārī al-Makkī, *al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh fī maḥāsīn al-Ḥubūsh*, authored 1583.

A quick browse through these works makes it clear that most lexemes discussed in the present note have been dealt with in scores of traditional scholarly works from a variety of fields, such as philology, hadith study, geography, and others. The lapidary remarks of the standard dictionaries are, thus, merely the tip of an immense iceberg of traditional knowledge from which the interest in possible Ethiopian sources of Arabic vocabulary has never totally disappeared.

§6. A careful perusal of the above works allows us to detect a few additional lexemes identified as Ethiopian borrowings by traditional Muslim scholarship. Five examples where this identification is, in my view, certain or likely are the following.

19. Cf. Kropp 2008: 387: “Das Sonderproblem der Abgrenzung der Herkunft dieses Wortgutes zwischen äthiopischem und altsüdarabischem Ursprung sei hier ausgeklammert; bei gleichzeitiger Bezeugung im (Alt-)Äthiopischen und Altsüdarabischen ist wegen der nahen Verwandtschaft beider Sprachen und wegen des—zumindest im Arabischen und Altsüdarabischen—defektiven Schriftsystems und des Fehlens einer kontinuierlichen Überlieferung diese Frage oft nicht zu entscheiden.”

20. Interestingly, the root for “to dance” in the introductory part of the hadith is *z-f-n* (*yazfīnūna*), which is fairly rare in Classical Arabic (LA, 13: 239–40, almost exclusively in connection with this hadith), but standard in Ethiopian (CDG, 632).

21. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 74–76; al-Suyūfī 1991: 88; al-Suyūfī 2006: 58–59; al-Bukhārī 2016: 103–4.

1. Al-Suyūṭī 2006: 95–96:

أَوَّلُ مَنْ جَمَعَ الْقُرْآنَ فِي مِصْحَفٍ سَالِمٌ مَوْلَى أَبِي حَذِيفَةَ أَقْسَمَ أَلَّا أُرْتَدِي بِرِءَاءِ حَتَّى يَجْمَعَهُ
ثُمَّ جَمَعَهُ ثُمَّ انْتَمَرُوا مَا يَسْمُونَهُ فَقَالَ بَعْضُهُمْ سَمَوْهُ السَّفْرَ قَالَ ذَلِكَ اسْمٌ تَسْمِيهِ الْيَهُودُ فَكْرَهُوهُ
فَقَالَ رَأَيْتُ مِثْلَهُ بِالْحَبِشَةِ يُسَمَّى الْمِصْحَفَ فَاجْتَمَعَ رَأْيُهُمْ عَلَى أَنْ يَسْمُوهُ الْمِصْحَفَ

The first who gathered the Quran into a codex²² was Sālim, a client of Abū Hudhayfa, [who] swore that he would not put on his cloak until he did that. When he finally did, people started to discuss how should they call it. Some of them said, “Call it *al-sifr!*” But he said: “That is how the Jews call it,” and they disliked the idea. Then he said, “I saw something like this in Ethiopia, and it is called *al-miṣḥaf*.” And they unanimously agreed on calling it *al-miṣḥaf*.

Here we find an explicit recognition of the Ethiopian origin of Arabic *miṣḥaf/muṣḥaf*.²³

2. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 78; al-Suyūṭī 1991: 130; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 71; al-Bukhārī 2016: 97:

ضعفين وهو بلسان الحبشة كفلين

Two shares, which in the language of the Ethiopians is *kiflayn*.

This is an explanation of *yu'tikum kiflayni min raḥmatihī* “[To these, then] He will give a double share of his mercy” (Q 57:28), which presupposes that its author was aware of Ge'ez *kəfl* ‘part, portion, share, lot’ (CDG, 276).²⁴

3. Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 78; al-Suyūṭī 1991: 131; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 72; al-Bukhārī 2016: 97:

إن ناشئة الليل هي قيام الليل بلسان الحبشة

As for *nāshī'a* of the night, it is “standing during the night” in the language of the Ethiopians.

The explanation refers to Q 57:28 and alludes to the Ge'ez verb *nasʿa*—or, to be more precise, one of its passive-reflexive manifestations such as *tanšə'a* (CDG, 404, 578).²⁵

4. Al-Suyūṭī 2006: 69, 81; al-Bukhārī 2016: 95–96:

سَبَّحِي بِلِسَانِ الْحَبِشَةِ... أَوْبِي مَعَهُ

awwibī with him [. . . means] “praise with him” in the language of the Ethiopians.

الأَوَابُ الْمُسَبِّحُ بِلِسَانِ الْحَبِشَةِ

al-awwāb [means] “the one who praises” in the language of the Ethiopians.

These remarks are in explanation of the verb *awwaba* (hapax in Q 34:10) and the more widespread substantive *awwāb* (Q 17:25; 38:17, 19, 30, 44; 50:32). Most traditional Muslim scholarship derives them from the basic meaning of *ʿ-w-b*, ‘to return’, but an alternative explanation suggesting for these attestations a special meaning ‘to praise’ (*sabbaḥa*, *musabbih*) has also been prominent (LA, 1: 259) and found its way into modern Western studies (cf. Ambros 2004: 31). The underlying Ethiopian etymology is, in my opinion, Ge'ez *yab(b)aba* ‘to jubilate, to shout with joy, to exult’ (CDG, 625), quite suitable (even if not exactly identical) both phonetically and semantically.

5. Al-Suyūṭī 2006: 69; al-Bukhārī 2016: 95:

22. Defined as *al-jāmiʿ li-l-ṣuḥuf al-maktūba bayna al-daffatayni* in LA, 9: 223.

23. Kropp 2008: 388–91. See further Weninger 2009: 404–5, with copious references to earlier studies. For Weninger, Ge'ez *maṣḥaf* (and related nominal and verbal lexemes) are ultimately of Sabaic origin (he hesitates about the exact source—Sabaic or Ethiopian—of the Arabic word). The Arab author’s direct functional-semantic equation between the hypothetical Ethiopian source word and Hebrew *sēpher* is, in any case, fascinating and betrays a high level of cross-linguistic conceptual awareness.

24. To be sure, **kipl-* ‘half’ is well attested elsewhere in West Semitic and the Arabic word may well be autochthonous (cf. Nöldeke 1910: 97; CDG, 276).

25. Cf. al-Suyūṭī 1991: 132 (*qāma min al-layl fa-hiya bi-lisān al-ḥabash nasha'a fulān*).

العزم بلسان الحبشة المسناة التي يجتمع فيها الماء ثم ينبثق

Al-ʿarim in the language of the Ethiopians is a dam behind which water is accumulated and then bursts forth.

The reference is to the description of the breaking of the Mārib dam in Q 34:16: *fa-arsalnā ʿalayhim sayl al-ʿarim* (“We sent against them the flood [caused by the breaking] of the ʿarim”; Ambros 2004: 187). As was long ago recognized, the word is well attested in Sabaic (SD, 19) as well as in postclassical and modern Yemeni Arabic (Paret 2005: 403; al-Selwi 1987: 151–52; Behnstedt 1992–2006: 822–23; Piamenta 1990–91: 324; al-Iryānī 2001: 749). Since no Ethiopian parallel is at hand, this case must be treated as one more example of confusion between “Ethiopian” and “Sabaic” in the Arab tradition (cf. §4 above).

§7. Returning to the lexicographical works, one can observe that some Ethiopian references there are covert rather than explicit. A case in point is the treatment of the name of the angel Jabraʿīl in LA, 4: 133:²⁶

الْجَبْرُ الْعَبْدُ؛ عن كراع وروي عن ابن عباس في جبريل وميكائيل كقولك عبد الله وعبد الرحمن الأصمعي معنى إيل هو الربوبية فاضيف جبر وميكا إليه قال أبو عبيد فكان معنى عبد إيل رجل إيل ويقال جبر عبد وإيل هو الله

Al-jabr: a slave, according to Kurāʿ. It was transmitted on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās about Jabraʿīl and Mikāʾīl: [It is the same] as when you say ʿAbd Allāh and ʿAbd al-Rahmān; al-Aṣmaʿī said: “The meaning of *īl* pertains to the lordship, then *jabr* and *mikā* were added to it”; Abū ʿUbayd said: “Its meaning [scil. of the name Jabraʿīl] is like ‘slave of *īl*’ [or] ‘man of *īl*’, and they say [that] *jabr* is ‘slave’ and *īl* is ‘God’.”

Since Ethiopian is the only branch of Semitic where **gabr-* came to mean ‘slave’ (CDG, 178–79), there can be little doubt that the author of the above etymology must have been acquainted, directly or indirectly, with Ethiopian lexical data.²⁷

A less transparent case stems from the biography of Bilāl the Ethiopian, by far the most illustrious Black individual of early Islamic history. After converting to Islam, the first muezzin was tortured by his master Umayya ibn Khalaf in a vain attempt to return him to paganism, but the only words Bilāl was prepared to say were *aḥad aḥad*, [He is] One, One! (Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 124; al-Suyūṭī 1991: 247; al-Bukhārī 2016: 152). In good Arabic usage, however, “one” is *wāḥid* rather than *aḥad*.²⁸ Conversely, Geʿez *aḥad-u* is the normal, regular exponent of this meaning. It may not be too bold to suspect that, especially in those tragic circumstances, Bilāl would shift to the language of his Black forefathers.

§8. One last type of *aethiopica* on the pages of the Arabic lexica is related to Abraha, an Ethiopian ruler of South Arabia, first appointed as a vassal by the Aksumite king Kaleb but then fully emancipated by his master (Sima 2003). In the historical tradition of the Arabs, Abraha acquired a prominent position because of his unsuccessful attempt to conquer Mecca in the “Year of the Elephant” (McAuliffe 2001). The entry *b-r-h* of LA, 13: 589 (TA, 36: 340–41) describes Abraha’s personality in the following terms:

26. Briefly dealt with in Kogan 2015: 382.

27. In the same way that *jabr* meant *rajul* in the same passage presupposed a knowledge of Aramaic *gabrā*, *gubrā* ‘man’ (Kogan 2015: 381–82).

28. With the remarkable (and still puzzling) exception of *huwa Allāhu aḥadun* in *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (112):1 (cf. Kogan 2023: 162).

وَأَبْرَهُهُ اسْمُ مَلِكٍ مِنْ مَلُوكِ الْيَمَنِ وَهُوَ أَبْرَهُهُ بْنُ الْحَارِثِ الرَّائِشِ الَّذِي يُقَالُ لَهُ ذُو الْمَنَارِ
وَأَبْرَهُهُ بْنُ الصَّبَّاحِ أَيْضاً مِنْ مَلُوكِ الْيَمَنِ وَهُوَ أَبُو يَكْسُومَ مَلِكِ الْحَبَشَةِ صَاحِبِ الْفِيلِ الَّذِي
سَاقَهُ إِلَى الْبَيْتِ الْحَرَامِ وَأَهْلَكَهُ اللَّهُ

Abraha is the name of one of the kings of Yemen; he is [called] Abraha, son of al-Ḥārith al-Rā'ish, also known as Dhū al-Manār, and Abraha, son of al-Ṣabbāḥ, one of the kings of Yemen. He is the father of **Yaksūm** (and) the king of the Ethiopians (and) the owner of the elephant that he led to the Sacred House and that God destroyed.

Three elements in this brief statement (bolded in the translation, underlined in the original) are potentially explainable as Ethiopian in origin. The last, Yaksūm (that is, Aksum ibn Abraha), is by far the most transparent one, even if the initial *y*, apparently with no precedent in Ethiopian sources, is puzzling.²⁹ We owe Gianfranco Fiaccadori (2006: 68) the identification of the name of Abraha's "father" al-Ṣabbāḥ with *alla aṣḥaba*, the other name of the Ethiopian king Kaleb. No hint to an Ethiopian pedigree of either al-Ḥārith³⁰ or Dhū al-Manār is known to me, but it is quite likely that al-Rā'ish is an attempt to render Ge'ez *rā'(ə)s* 'head, chief, principal' (CDG, 459).

APPENDIX 1

On the Sibilants

Since quite a number of the lexemes dealt with above contain sibilant phonemes, it seems appropriate to give a brief overview of the sibilant correspondences between Arabic and Ge'ez as reflected in this body of evidence.

In *shuyūm* < *ṣay(y)um*,³¹ *najāshiy-* < *nagāṣi*, and *nāshī'a* ~ *tanṣā'a*, the correspondence of Arabic *sh* to Ge'ez *ṣ* is both straightforward and etymologically correct.

Ge'ez *maskot* 'window' is traditionally transcribed with ḥ (CDG, 365), but the Semitic etymology (< PS **škw* 'to look, to watch'; Naumkin et al. 2022: 279) clearly points to the lateral **ṣ*. This is in agreement with the Arabic rendering *mishkāt* and suggests that the spelling **ṣṣṣṣṣṣ* is the historically correct and expected one.

These examples are opposed to *sanā* ~ *ṣannāy*, where the diachronic priority of *ṣ* (*ṣ*) is confirmed by the early manuscript evidence and, perhaps, etymology (Bulakh 2014: 198–99).

It is hard to say whether these meager facts are persuasive enough to support the widespread conviction according to which "in words borrowed by Arabic from Ge'ez in the pre-Islamic period, this fricative appears as *ṣ*" whereas "from the first centuries of the Hijra [. . .] we have evidence that the Ethiopian *ṣ* was pronounced like the Arabic *s*" (Ullendorff 1955: 113–14; Podolsky 1991: 22 respectively). The Prophet Muḥammad pronouncing on Bilāl's sibilant problems (*inna sīn Bilāl 'inda Allāh shīn*; al-Bukhārī 2016: 101) would support this claim, however.³²

29. Could it be on analogy with Ya'qūb? Or one of the many Arabic animal names of the same pattern (*yarbūʿ*, *yaḥmūr*, etc.)? Or related to the Amharic genitive marker *yä-* (viz., "of Aksum"; an ingenious suggestion of the anonymous reviewer)?

30. Maria Bulakh reminds me of St. Arethas (al-Ḥārith b. Ka'ab), the leader of Najran Christian martyrs, whose death was the immediate pretext for the Ethiopian intervention in Arabia. In such a context, calling Abraha's father al-Ḥārith becomes quite meaningful.

31. Also recorded as *suyūm*.

32. This laconic dictum can be interpreted in a variety of ways but the most natural reading is that Bilāl was unable to pronounce the Arabic *shīn* (Kogan 2011: 103–4). Another well-known piece of evidence to this effect is the anecdote about the Ethiopian slave-poet Suḥaym, who, while conversing with the caliph 'Umar, could not pronounce the *shīn* in *mā sha'artu* 'I did not know' (al-Jāhīz 1948–50, 1: 71–72; see Brockelmann 1908–13, 1: 133; Ullendorff 1955: 113).

APPENDIX 2

Uncertain, Problematic, and Fictitious Quranic Ethiopisms
in the Arab Scholarly Tradition

Most of the following examples come from the pen of al-Suyūfī, who proudly declares (2006: 74) “to have processed thirty relevant examples,” whereby he left his illustrious predecessor Ibn al-Jawzī, who “was able to deal with only very simple cases,” far behind.³³

1. *shaṭra* (‘toward’, Q 2:144, 149, 150), understood to be “in front of in Ge‘ez”: *tilqā’a bi-lisān al-ḥabash* (al-Suyūfī 1991: 122; al-Suyūfī 2006: 62; al-Bukhārī 2016: 91). No feasible Ethiopian source detected. For semantic reasons, hardly any relationship with Ge‘ez *śaṣṣara* ‘to cleave’ (CDG, 537).

2. *muttaka’* (Q 12:13), commonly understood as ‘feast, banquet’ (Ambros 2004: 294), but thought to designate a citrus fruit in Ge‘ez: *bi-kalām al-ḥabash yusammūna al-turunj muttaka’* (al-Suyūfī 1991: 126; al-Suyūfī 2006: 64–65; al-Bukhārī 2016: 93).³⁴ I am not aware of any Ethiopian source.

3. *al-jibt* and *al-ṭāghūt* (Q 4:51), two terms denoting pagan idols, said to be Ethiopian: *ism al-shayṭān bi-l-ḥabashiyya* and *al-kāhin* respectively (al-Suyūfī 1991: 123; al-Suyūfī 2006: 62; al-Bukhārī 2016: 91). While the two terms may indeed be of Ethiopian origin (Kropp 2009: 208–10), the subtle etymological and philological analysis leading to such a conclusion would hardly have been available to early Arab scholars.

4. *ḥūb* (Q 4:2), ‘sin’: *ḥūban kabīran ithman kabīran bi-lughat al-ḥabasha* (al-Suyūfī 2006: 63; al-Bukhārī 2016: 92). No suitable Ethiopian etymon known to me. As noted already by Arthur Jeffery (1938: 116–17), the ultimate source of the quranic term is certainly Aramaic. However, since a similar borrowing is attested also in late Sabaic (SD, 73), one cannot rule out that the Aramaic term penetrated Arabic from South Arabia. For the confusion between “Sabaic” and “Ethiopian,” see *h-r-j* ‘to kill’ and ‘*arim* ‘dam’ above (§4 and §6 respectively).

5. *ṭūbā* (Q 13:29), name of paradise: *ism al-janna bi-l-ḥabashiyya* (al-Suyūfī 1991: 127–28; al-Suyūfī 2006: 65–66, 127–28; al-Bukhārī 2016: 93; also LA, 1: 658). There is no reason to doubt the Aramaic origin of the word (Jeffery 1938: 206). An Ethiopian etymology is not possible if only because the root **ṭ-w-b* is missing in Ethiopian.

6. *sakar* (‘intoxicating drink’, Q 16:67), thought to designate ‘vinegar’ in Ethiopian: *bi-lisān al-ḥabasha al-khall* (al-Suyūfī 2006: 66; al-Bukhārī 2016: 93). With Arne Ambros (2004: 136), there is no serious reason to doubt that the word is autochthonous in Arabic. No comparable term for “vinegar” seems to be present in Ethiopian.

7. The enigmatic letters *ṭā hā* of Q 20:1 were thought to function as a vocative in Ethiopian: *yā muḥammad bi-lisān al-ḥabash bi-l-ḥabashiyya yā rajul* (Ibn al-Jawzī 1998: 74–76; al-Suyūfī 1991: 129; al-Suyūfī 2006: 66–67; al-Bukhārī 2016: 94). A puzzling equation with no etymological support—unless one thinks of Ge‘ez *ṣā* ‘go out!’.

8. The enigmatic letters *yā sīn* of Q 36:1 were explained as *yā insān bi-l-ḥabashiyya, yā rajul bi-lughat al-ḥabash* (al-Suyūfī 2006: 70; al-Bukhārī 2016: 96). Quite puzzling if taken at face value. More hypothetically, one could surmise that *sīn* alludes to Ge‘ez *sab* ‘men, people’, whose neo-Ethiopian cognates are widely attested with the individual meaning “man, person” (CDG, 483).

33. For Kropp (2008: 388), such examples are “eher Kuriositäten” rather than “echte afro-asiatische Perlen,” but it goes without saying that a proper boundary between the two groups can be achieved only through a meticulous diachronic analysis.

34. It was a common belief among both Muslim and Jewish interpreters of the episode that the women invited to Zulaykha’s feast were offered citrus fruit as a meal; see Goldman 1995: 103–5.

9. *jaram*, explained as “what is necessary (or a necessity) in Ethiopian”: *wajaba bi-l-ḥabashiyya* (al-Suyūṭī 1991: 126; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 67; al-Bukhārī 2016: 91) in connection with the fixed expression *lā jarama an* ‘certainly, necessarily’ (Ambros 2004: 58), in Q 11:22; 16:23, 62, 109; 40:43.³⁵ The only widespread meaning of *g-r-m* in Ethiopian is ‘to be frightful, fear-inspiring’, and it is hard to see how it could evolve into “necessity, obligation” (“something to be done without fear?”).

10. *ḥaṣab* (Q 21:98), thought to be equivalent to *ḥaṭab* ‘firewood [for the fire] of hell’ in the language of the Zanj (*ḥaṭab jahannam bi-l-zanjiyya*) (al-Suyūṭī 1991: 126; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 68). The image meant is, evidently, similar to Q 111:4: *wa-mraʿatuhu ḥammālat al-ḥaṭab* “While his [scil. Abū Lahab’s] wife will be carrying firewood [for the fire of the hell her husband will be in].” No fitting Ethiopian parallel is available. At the same time, the alternation *ṣ ~ ṭ* might point to the author’s acquaintance with this phenomenon in neo-Ethiopian (see n. 13).

11. *sijill* (Q 21:104): *bi-luḡhat al-ḥabasha al-rajul* (al-Suyūṭī 1991: 124; al-Suyūṭī 2006: 68; al-Bukhārī 2016: 95; also LA, 11: 390). No comparable Ethiopian term for “man” is available (unless one thinks of Geʿez *sagal* ‘divination, magic’—thus “as a magician”?). According to modern scholarship, *sijill* in the quranic verse *yawm naṭwī al-samāʾ ka-ṭayy al-sijill* means “scroll”: “When we fold the heaven as one folds a scroll for writing” (cf. Ambros 2004: 129). This line of interpretation was known to traditional Muslim scholarship, which, however, also had an alternative way of thinking about *sijill* as the semantic subject of the sentence: “in the same way as a *sijill* (subjective genitive) folds the documents.”

12. *minsāʿat* (‘staff, rod’, Q 34:14): *al-ʿaṣā bi-lisān al-ḥabasha* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 70; al-Bukhārī 2016: 96). No fitting Ethiopian parallel is known to me.

13. *munfaṭir* (‘split, cloven’, Q 73:18): *mumtaliʿa bihi* [filled by him] *bi-lisān al-ḥabasha* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 73; al-Bukhārī 2016: 97). No Ethiopian parallel with the meaning “to fill” or similar is known to me. It can hardly come from “to create,” attested for *f-t-r* elsewhere in the Quran and thought to be due to Ethiopian influence (Jeffery 1938: 221; Ambros 2004: 2014).

14. *qaswarat* (Q 74:51), ‘lion’: *al-asad yuqāl lahu bi-l-ḥabashiyya qaswarat* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 73; al-Bukhārī 2016: 97). Enigmatic.

15. *arāʿik* (Q 18:31; 38:56; 76:13; 83:23, 35), ‘beds’: *al-surur bi-l-ḥabashiyya* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 74; al-Bukhārī 2016: 98). While the etymology of *arāʿik* is indeed not quite certain (Kogan 2023: 159), there is no reason to ascribe it to Ethiopian influence (cf. al-Selwi 1987: 36–37).

16. *yaṣiddūna* (Q 43:57): *yaḍijjūna bi-l-ḥabashiyya* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 74; al-Bukhārī 2016: 98). The meaning “to shout, to vociferate” postulated for *ṣ-d-d* in this passage (vs. ‘to turn away’ elsewhere) is due to the unexpected thematic vowel *i*. No etymological justification in Ethiopian is known to me.

17. *al-durriyy* (Q 24:35): *al-muḍṭʿ bi-l-ḥabashiyya* (al-Suyūṭī 2006: 75; al-Bukhārī 2016: 99). The meaning “shining, glittering” is reasonably derived from *durr* ‘pearls’ (Ambros 2004: 97). The rare post-Aksumite Geʿez *dor* is evidently borrowed from Arabic (CDG, 140).

18. *wa-ghīḍa al-māʿ*: *inna māʿnāhu naqṣ al-māʿ* [shortage of water] *bi-luḡhat al-ḥabash* (al-Bukhārī 2016: 99). As far as I can see, this is totally arbitrary.

35. According to an alternative tradition, this remark belongs to *ḥarām* in Q 21:95: *wa-ḥarāmun ʿalā qaryatin ahlaknāhā*, commonly translated as “there is a ban on every town we have destroyed.” The meaning “to be necessary, obligatory” does not seem to fit the context and, at any rate, the meaning of *h-r-m* in Geʿez is not much different from its Arabic meaning.

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EI2 *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. 1960–2004. Brill.
EIr *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Various publishers.
EQ *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 6 vols. (Brill, 2001–6).
 LA Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 15 vols. (Dār al-Fikr, 1990).
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