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## Written sources about Africa and their study. Introduction

Mena B. Lafkioui, Vermondo Brugnatelli

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# WRITTEN SOURCES ABOUT AFRICA AND THEIR STUDY

## LE FONTI SCRITTE SULL'AFRICA E I LORO STUDI

edited by / a cura di  
Mena Lafkioui & Vermondo Brugnatelli



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## INTRODUCTION

Even though contemporary research on African languages and cultures is usually based on oral and audiovisual data obtained from fieldwork, a vast and irreplaceable repository of knowledge about this continent is contained in written sources involving all sorts of texts. Some of these texts trace back to remote times and are written down in the most ancient scripts attested. Others are more recent and include for instance accounts written in European languages by different kinds of authors, such as diplomats, officers, travellers and missionaries. The study of written sources about Africa is covered by various disciplines; the main ones being Numidic and Punic epigraphy, Ethiopistics, Coptology, Berberology, classical philology, papyrology, Arabic palaeography and philology, history of religions, cultural anthropology, linguistics and sociolinguistics. For all disciplines involved in the study of written sources, the most striking and challenging texts are the oldest ones, as they push scholars to search for ever more ancient texts and to increasingly provide information on the beginning of Africa's history. For linguists, for instance, the most archaic texts are precious for the purpose of historical linguistics, which deals with ancient language forms and compares them with forms of later language stages, in order to reconstruct the earliest genealogical features and systems of the language families examined. But even contemporary texts have their importance in these reconstructions, not only because they are needed for retracing the evolution of the languages in question from their current stages to their earliest stages, but also because sometimes they retain archaic elements that cannot be detected in the earliest sources. In addition to the benefits of studying written sources per se, the ancient written texts also provide valuable support and additions to the findings that can be obtained from other sources, such as archaeological artefacts.

The present volume is dedicated to the study of written sources about Africa and aims at bringing together various disciplines. The research results presented here take into account the specific features of the texts examined regarding both form and content, along with the different historical periods in which the texts have been produced (i.e. antiquity, medieval, modern and contemporary period) and the diverse geographic areas to which the texts relate, which are North Africa, including Egypt and the Sa-

hara, East Africa and West Africa. In doing so, the findings of these studies could benefit diverse scientific domains working on Africa, and particularly those of humanities and social sciences.

Written sources lie at the intersection between different approaches of research in humanities; on the one hand, linguistics and philology, since each text represents a language and its writing tradition and, on the other hand, history and anthropology, since the sources examined allow to reconstruct phases of the past either by examining the textual content – especially the “historical” texts or chronicles – or by looking at the circumstances in which the texts were produced. It is in this respect that the contributions in the volume have been organised into two major sections, the linguistic-philological section and the historical-anthropological section. It should be mentioned, however, that these sections are just a way of appropriately arranging the content of the volume and should therefore not be understood as a way of strictly dividing these scientific disciplines, which would be in most cases artificial and counterproductive, as would be the case, for instance, if one tried to separate philology from its historical component and vice versa.

The volume starts with Shiferaw Bekele’s study, which is emblematic of the interdisciplinary approach it stands for, since it combines research into written sources, in particular the *Kibrä-Nägäst*, which is “the” Ethiopian founding text, with archaeological research, especially regarding the *tabot* altars and their particular form, so as to determine the era of the formation of a collective “Ethiopian” identity. An inquiry that leads the author to conclude that the period between the 7th-8th century appears to be crucial to the transition to Ethiopia as it has been constituted in recent centuries. The next two contributions present general considerations on the state of Coptic studies. Stephen Emmel examines in detail the historical circumstances in which numerous Coptic texts were written and, in many cases, rewritten and adapted. The author points out that these texts are important to historical research, irrespective of their historical or chronological content, which may also be completely absent, because they allow to have a better understanding of various aspects of late antique (Upper) Egypt’s culture, as in the case of monk Shenoute the Archimandrite. Philippe Luisier, on the other hand, seeks to overcome a rooted prejudice that regards the Sahidic language variety as the main literary variety of Coptic. By closely examining the numerous and valuable literary testimonies of Bohairic, he recognizes to this variety a status similar to that of Sahidic in the literary field. Coptic Egypt also lends itself to interesting sociolinguistic considerations, illustrated by the following two contributions in this volume. Anne Boud’hors,

for her part, verifies and updates the current knowledge of Coptic language varieties by examining different typologies of written sources. Rather than labelling a text as belonging to this or that variety, the author shows that it is more appropriate to consider not only the diatopic variables but also the diastratic and diaphasic variables. Likewise, Jean-Luc Fournet examines numerous cases of intra-sentential and extra-sentential code-switching between Greek and Coptic in written texts and makes significant observations about the complex relationships between these two languages as well as about multilingualism of Egyptian society of that time in general. Next, Vermondo Brugnatelli offers an overview of manuscript studies in the field of Berber studies, with a special focus on the most ancient texts. He also provides a review of the literary genres these texts represent as well as a list of the places where they are accessible. The author points out the possibility we have today to compare between medieval texts of very distant regions of North Africa, which is of great value to historical linguistic studies. Always within the framework of medieval North African manuscripts, Mohamed Meouak demonstrates, by focusing on toponymy and on anthroponymy, that a large number of Berber language features, especially of the lexical type, are attested within Arabic texts. The last three studies of the first section put in some way the authors of the texts at the centre of the research. Samuel Moawad's contribution presents a project in progress that aims at creating a database of the authors of Coptic texts of the first millennium, along with a list of their works, based on a meticulous analysis of the Coptic manuscripts and repositories. In doing so, he makes a mass of disparate documents available in one framework by clear and consistent cross-referencing. By means of solid philological tools, Adel Sidarus' study intends to single out the true author of the compilation known as *Mukhtār al-akhbār* and shows that this work was composed by the Coptic polygraph Ibn Kabar, in contrast to the former attribution to the Ayyubid sultan Baybars. Mohamed Saadouni and Harry Stroomer, on the other hand, present a Berber author of the 16th century, Ibrahim Aznag, together with five unpublished chapters of his main work, *Leqayd n ddiin*, the oldest literary text from Morocco (Tashelhit, South Morocco) known so far.

The historical-anthropological section opens with Robert Beylot's extensive review of the genesis and development of certain theological controversies in Ethiopia in the 15th century, in correspondence with several stages in the life of monk Ḓstifanos, placing them in the largest possible historical and cultural context of that time. This study, which makes ample use of literary sources, is followed by a contribution by Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, which focuses on epigraphic sources instead. The latter

study highlights the wealth of data that can be obtained from medieval inscriptions of West Africa in Arabic script, to this day largely neglected. These valuable inscriptions and the amount of details they provide allow for a deeper understanding of the history of Africa and its socio-cultural and religious conceptions and practices, which have a number of indigenous specificities different and independent from the so-called “centre” of the Islamic world (i.e. Middle East). This is evident from various aspects of the texts addressed here, such as the indications that accompany the dates or the presence of royal titles attributed to female individuals (without any reference to male counterparts), which suggests ancient traditions of matrilinearity today ignored. Helena de Felipe’s study concerns the ethnonymes and the perception of the non-Arab populations by Arabs in the course of their conquests. In particular, it looks at the different names used by three Arab authors of the 9th century to designate the populations of North Africa. She points out that the terms used are generally more precise and analytic when the authors had a direct knowledge of those regions, which she explains, for instance, through contrasting the texts of Ibn ‘Abd Al-Ḥakam and al-Ya‘qūbī with those of Khalīfa B. Khayyāt. Specific topics concerning Ethiopia’s history are dealt with by two subsequent studies. Based on certain Ethiopian chronicles, especially the account of *Liq Atqu*, whose reports are translated in this contribution, Manfred Kropp reconstructs with rich details the events that led to the foundation of the church of Dābrā-Ṭəbāb Bā’ata at Gondār. As for Denis Nosnitsin, he focuses instead on the persona of ‘*abba* Yoḥanni of Dābrā Sina, to whom a particular song was dedicated. In addition to providing the edition and translation of a manuscript fragment in which this song was found, he takes into account other songs devoted to the same pious individual as well as to several other homonyms of ‘*abba* Yoḥanni, describing the evolution of the modes of expressing the cult of these holy men. Manuscript production is not just limited to the past centuries and to times preceding the introduction of modern technologies, but continues to this very day. In many cases, contemporary manuscripts allow to study in a comprehensive and integrating way the historical and anthropological aspects of the texts, which generally relate to the context in which the documents were created. A case in point is the study of Michele Petrone, which presents a group of texts produced in the 20th century by the head of a mystical brotherhood, Badr al-Dīn b. Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥāḡḡ Surūr al-Zabbī al-Guragī. The combined approach adopted in this study provides interesting insights into the historical developments of the Rašādiyya brotherhood, with accounts of the lives of its major spiritual leaders with regards to both the internal context of the brotherhood, such as the context of the ritual uses of its adepts, and the larger context of the

country's history. As for the socio-anthropological study of ancient texts, Virginie Prevost presents a thorough investigation of the role and functions of women in the Ibādī society of medieval North Africa. She identifies, in particular, the educational, pious, and charismatic qualities of these women, qualities that are associated with the epithet of *'ağūz* in Arabic or *nanna* in Berber. The last two chapters of this volume deal with the problem of the conditions in which texts are created by means of "intermediaries" between native populations and exogenous users of the texts concerned. The first study by Pieter Reesink offers a direct testimony to the work of the "White Fathers", starting from the foundation of the order by Cardinal Lavigerie, by focusing on the preservation and study of North Africa's oral traditions, and in particular those of the Berber people. A large part of the research is devoted to the figure of Fr. Jean-Marie Dallet, inspirer of the *Fichier de Documentation Berbère*, which is an inexhaustible mine of texts and ethnographic studies on the Berber language, culture and society. Dallet is also co-author of the great Kabyle-French dictionary, which even today is still a lexicographic reference for Kabyle Berber. Vincent Zarini's contribution, which concludes the volume, addresses in detail the figure of Corippus, an author of the 6th century who wrote in Latin but was of African origin, through the analysis of his writings. So far, Corippus has been studied from a Eurocentric perspective, seeing in him above all an imperial official who describes and judges North African indigenous peoples with the eyes of the Byzantine colonizer. As this study demonstrates, more in-depth research allows instead to grasp how Corippus' official support was not an a-critical acceptance but rather emphasized the need to integrate indigenous peoples without unnecessary cruelty, by focusing on the concept of *Afri*, signifying "civilised" Berbers in contact with Romans, more than on that of *Mauri*, which stood for the indigenous people living in tribes and therefore considered outside the "civilised" world.

The various contributions which are brought together in this volume allow us to have a good idea of the wealth of data and insights that written sources offer to the studies about Africa, which is even more the case when different disciplines and approaches are brought together.

In conclusion, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Ambrosiana Academy and to all members of the Classis Africana for believing in the importance of studying Africa and for making this interdisciplinary volume possible, which we dedicate to our late colleague Giampaolo Calchi Novati, whose vision of Africa and commitment to its study were a great inspiration to us all.

We also pay tribute to our late colleague and Academician Lionel Galand, who passed away while preparing this volume, to which he contributed by means of his many enlightening and encouraging comments as member of the *Classis*' scientific committee. We are in great debt to him for his numerous scientific and human achievements, especially in the area of Berber languages and cultures.