



LABORATOIRE TRAVAUX ET RECHERCHES ARCHÉOLOGIQUES  
SUR LES CULTURES, LES ESPACES ET LES SOCIÉTÉS

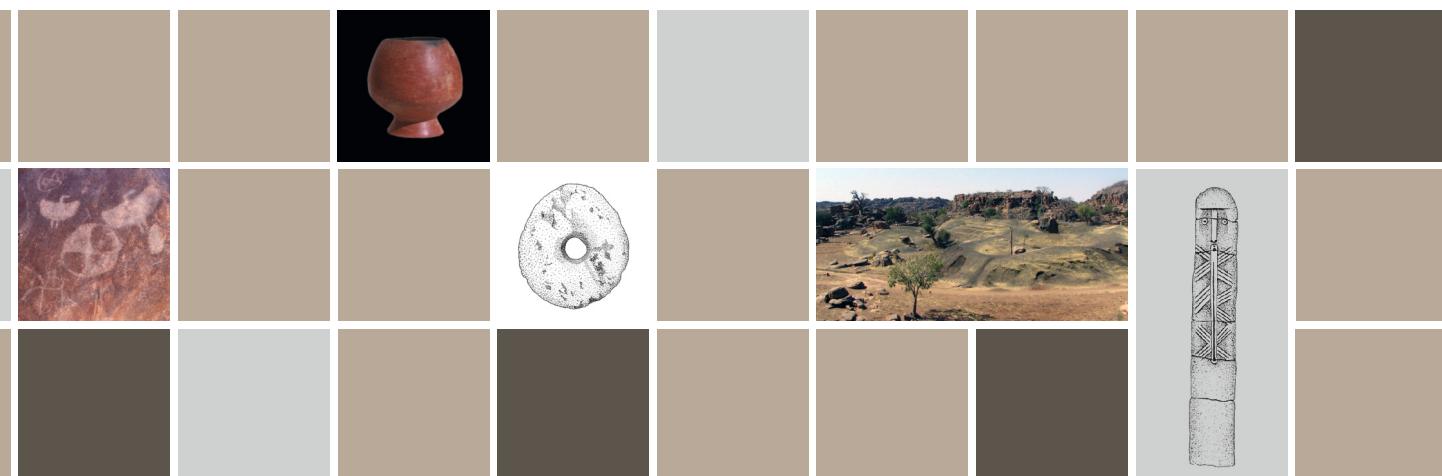
2012 # 4

<http://www.palethnologie.org>

ISSN 2108-6532

edited by PALETHNOLOGY OF AFRICA

François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR



Review published by the P@lethnologie association, created and supported by the TRACES laboratory, the Ethnologie Préhistorique laboratory, the University of Liège and the Ministry of Culture and Communication.

## Director

Vanessa LEA

## Editorial committee

François BON

Sandrine COSTAMAGNO

Karim GERNIGON

Vanessa LEA

Monique OLIVE

Marcel OTTE

Michel VAGINAY

Nicolas VALDEYRON

## Scientific committee

Michel BARBAZA, university of Toulouse, France

Laurent BRUXELLES, INRAP, France

Jacques CHABOT, university of Laval, Canada

Jesús GONZÁLEZ URQUIJO, university of Cantabria, Spain

Dominique HENRY-GAMBIER, CNRS, France

Jacques JAUBERT, university of Bordeaux, France

Béatrix MIDANT-REYNES, CNRS, France

Karim SADR, university of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Boris VALENTIN, university Paris I, France

Jean VAQUER, CNRS, France

Randall WHITE, university of New York, USA

## Editorial office

Claire LETOURNEUX

## Translation

MAGEN O'FARRELL

## Layout, graphics

Fabien TESSIER

## The contributions should be addressed to:

REVUE P@LETHNOLOGIE

Vanessa LEA, Research associates

TRACES - UMR 5608 of the CNRS

Maison de la recherche

5 allées Antonio Machado

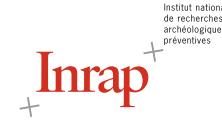
31058 Toulouse cedex 9, FRANCE

Phone: +33 (0)5 61 50 36 98

Fax: +33 (0)5 61 50 49 59

Email: vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr

## This numeric publication received support from

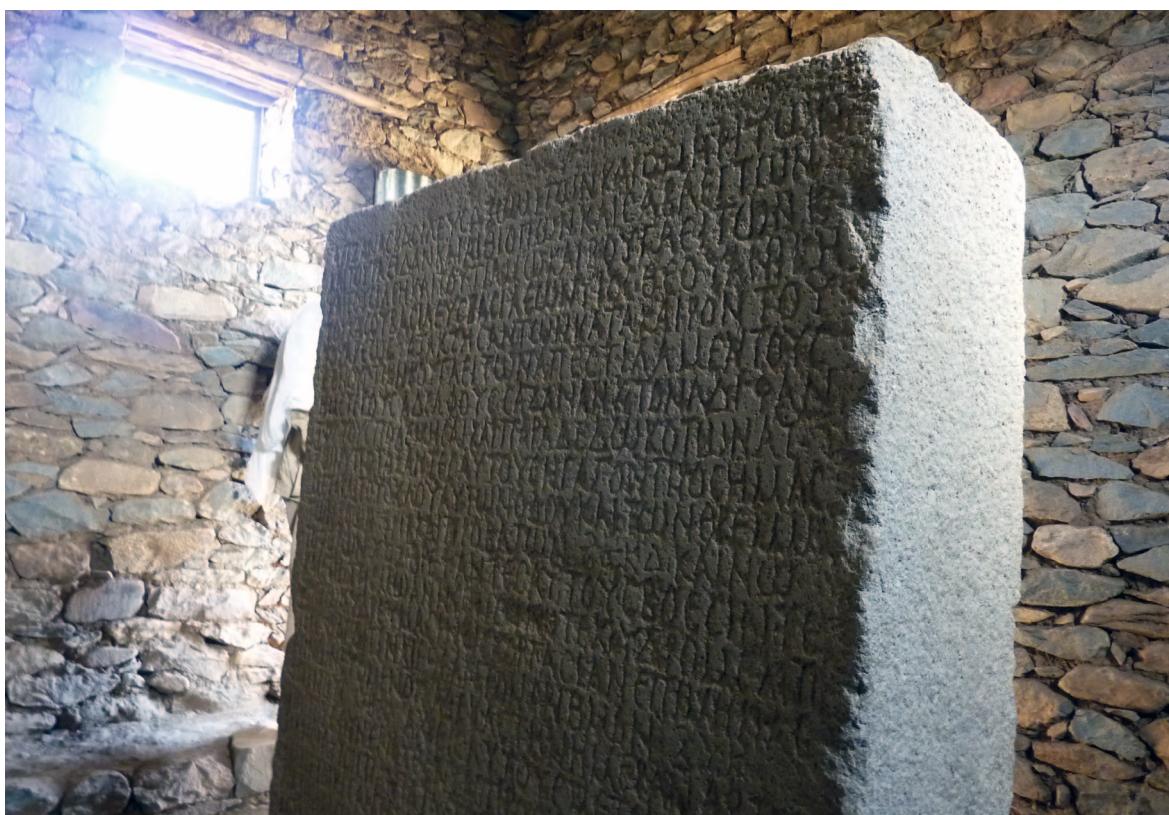


## IN THE SHADOW OF THE KING: the hunter-gatherer, the livestock breeder, the metallurgist, the artist, ...

### Introduction

François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR

Toward the first third of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, in the far north of what is now Ethiopia, King Ezana of Aksum ordered a stone engraved giving thanks to his gods. The stone bore a long bilingual inscription in Greek and Ge'ez in which the king told of the victorious expedition led by his brothers against the Bougaeitai tribe (figure 1). The Bougaeitai had revolted, but were subdued, following which 4400 of them were brought to the capital, along with their livestock – cattle and sheep – and their draught animals – probably camels and donkeys – and for four months sustained upon spelt bread and wine. The king then transferred them to another location, establishing them



**Figure 1** – The bilingual (Greek and Ge'ez) and trigraphic (Greek, Ethiopian and South Arabian) stele of Ezana at Aksum, Ethiopia. The inscription (here the start of the Greek text) provides information on how the social and spatial peripheries of the kingdom were viewed by the political centre (photograph: F.-X. Fauvelle).

permanently and endowing each kinglet (*basiliskos* in Greek, which we are here translating as “chief”) with a much greater number of cattle than had been taken as the spoils of war (inscription 270b in Bernand *et al.*, 1991, 2000). We recognise the name of the Bougaeitai; they are the Beja, a nomadic pastoral population that live, now as before, in the lowlands of Sudan and Eritrea. We are not certain whether a population displacement conceived by the king (*basileus* in Greek) and the plan – which we deduce by implication – of more or less “subsidised” settlement succeeded, but there are grounds to believe that it did not. For many centuries, the Beja remained what they were at the time of the kingdom of Aksum: troublesome nomads on the outskirts of the major political formations dominating the Nile valley and the Horn of Africa, creating sufficiently constant and insidious embarrassment to require the regular dispatch of troops.

From June 1352 to February 1353, Ibn Battuta, a famous Arab traveller originally from Morocco, visited the kingdom of Mali, then ruled by Sultan (Islamic royal title) and Mansa (Mandingo royal title) Sulayman (for the story of Ibn Battuta and the contemporary account by al-Umari, with which it should be read, see Cuoq, 1985: 254-323). On both his outward and return journeys he crossed the lands of the Berber nomads “who have no residence”, living under tents and sustaining themselves exclusively on gruel made from cow’s milk and sorghum. During the ten days’ walking that separates Oualata (in what is now Mauritania) from the first large town of the “Land of the Blacks” (*Bilâd al-Sûdân* in Arabic), the traveller met more people travelling with all their possessions – bedding and tableware made from calabashes – taking with them women and slaves. If long-horned cattle were mentioned, we would readily imagine that these were Fulani. Elsewhere, he recounts a hippopotamus hunt on the banks of the river, then tells the tale of a delegation of pagan cannibals to whom the black Sultan offered a slave, which they ate. True or false, the story is above all of value to us due to the reason for which the king of Mali chose not to take offence at the fate of the unfortunate slave: the – unconquered – land of the cannibals was that of the gold mines, and its inhabitants were themselves gold miners. The kingdom’s prosperity was a result of the gold trade. Nomadic livestock farmers, hunters and prospectors lived as much on the periphery of the kingdom as within it, in spaces left vacant by royal control that was exercised more over people than over land.

The two documents that have been examined above talk of relationships between kingdoms and subordinate groups or societies. The rare literary sources on ancient Africa almost exclusively discuss centralised societies and the political formations that were constituted on the basis of a productive, sedentary economy, which saw the development of powerful elites who activated long-distance trade links and established markets and towns that were able to attract foreign merchants and travellers. While these written sources enable us to retrace the history of the African kingdoms, it is not because the latter alone foster history. It is rather because they have left us sources produced internally – in Greek (in the case of Aksum), the lingua franca of the Red Sea region in Antiquity – or by the foreign merchants and travellers of the Middle Ages, most often in Arabic (as in the case of Mali).

The written sources tell us principally of centralised powers. This is only to be expected. Both the merchants who sometimes leave us their stories, and the scholars through whom power was expressed, flourished in proximity to these powers. Sometimes, however, these sources (as in the two cases mentioned above) offer us glimpses of the “Other”: the nomadic livestock-breeder, the hunter-gatherer, the fisherman, the miner, the artisan, the artist... sometimes nominally subject to the central power (as Ezana had sovereignty over the Beja), but who did not take part directly in the system of agricultural production which formed the economic basis for political power.

We see them on the periphery of the kingdom, but they are in truth “peripheral” in both the social and spatial senses. Evidence for this includes their reputation as a homeless group which was nonetheless ineradicable; a turbulent tribe, a pagan and cannibal group and a people of a caste both necessary and despised. This is the paradox of their situation: estranged from the social fabric of the kingdom, pushed to its edge or into its “folds”; judged by contemporary sources to be irreconcilable with the sedentary, agricultural or urban order, these “others” nevertheless maintained a relationship of economic complementarity with the kingdom. Attempts were made, during the time of the *Mansa Mûsâ*, brother and predecessor of Sulayman, to subdue the inhabitants of the auriferous regions, but this was always at the price of a decrease in the gold supply (al-Umari in Cuq, 1985: 264-265). And how many “marginal” social groups, traditional hunters of wild beasts or elephants, suppliers of ivory or hippopotamus leather, iron producers, gold prospectors, shell gatherers and other “specialists” not directly dependant or paying tribute to the kingdom have nevertheless formed an integral part of its economic catchment? As for the nomads, however uncontrollable they were – or were reputed to be by the central powers that so feared them – they still fulfilled the role of protectors of the caravan routes, provided they were correctly paid (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013: Chapter 26). Social differentiation does not prevent economic complementarity; it is perhaps its very condition.

Naturally, these peripheral societies and social groups were no less historical than the others, if by this we mean that they had a history; it is merely less well documented by the historical sources. In fact, they are primarily documented by archaeology. Where the written sources are mute or allusive due to their origin in the centres of major political formations – where those who wrote naturally concentrated: clerks, travellers, merchants – the observation of material data reveals the traces left by the production systems, and more generally, the cultures, which have remained unnoticed or merely glimpsed by the historical sources. These societies and social groups have not left the same traces: nomadic pastoralism produces infinitely more tenuous remains than several centuries of mining or siderurgical activity. But they have in common having been confined or rejected outside the political horizons of the kingdoms, and thus outside the narrative horizons of the written sources, of having initially been envisaged as “prehistoric” or “protohistoric” societies in the strict sense; in other words societies for which we have no direct historical sources.

Faced with the observation that “historic” and “prehistoric” (or “protohistoric”) societies were contemporary over the course of the last two millennia, we are justified in sweeping away the nominalism on the basis of which we endow the dignified “historic” and the pejorative “prehistoric” upon social entities simply as a result of the presence or absence of written sources. Once the “kingdoms” (and in general all form of centralised political formation of any kind) and the “peripheral” societies (and in general all form of non-centralised society not directly subject to such centres) have created extensive regional scale economic catchment unified by the circulation of products, should we not consider them to be part of the same regime of historicity? Or, to put it another way, is it not true that “prehistory” and “history” are not chronological categories but rather documentary categories applying to societies of the same period? Undoubtedly. Conversely, we must not fail to explore the forms of co-presence of history and prehistory in “ancient” Africa (i.e. prior to the generalisation of writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). The contribution of this issue is exactly this: to employ archaeology in the service of an alternative examination of the centres of power and the more or less distant political peripheries that this examination reveals as the sources of specific technological or cultural movements.

We begin our re-examination with Aksum, the great African kingdom that dominated the highlands of the Horn of Africa between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The contributions by Francis Anfray and Bertrand Poissonnier give us the opportunity to open this issue with two viewpoints on a political formation with all the attractions of centrality: a powerful monarchy; a commercial elite who participated in the commercial dynamism of the Red Sea, that corridor between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean; towns and monumental architecture. Francis Anfray's article delivers a re-examination of the results of the excavation led by him fifty years ago in Matara, today in Eritrea; Bertrand Poissonnier's presents the previously unpublished results of the archaeological investigation that he carried out in 1999 at the base of one of the gigantic monolithic stelae on the site of Aksum in Ethiopia. In both cases, the sites involved are among the most spectacular in Africa.

While the kingdom of Aksum was Christianised in late Antiquity, thus sustainably implanting Christianity in African soil, other societies continued to develop in the centre and south of what is now Ethiopia. They were to remain "prehistoric" until the point at which, encountered during the Middle Ages by missionaries from the Christian kingdom, they were briefly seen as the last flickerings of paganism to die and disappear in the face of the conquering religion. Roger Joussaume, a specialist in Ethiopian megaliths, here provides a synthesis of the results of the excavation carried out on the site of the phallic, anthropomorphic stelae of Tuto Fela. He documents both the last, undated, stage of the site and the previous stage, associated with graves of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, lifting a corner of the veil on the nature of traditional cults in this part of the continent.

While the sites at the lagoon of Luanda, in what is now Angola, provide information on the history of settlement over two millennia, the ethnographic and archaeological surveys carried out by Nicolas Valdeyron and Sonia Ludmila da Silva Domingos on several shell middens document the exploitation of a mollusc, *Arca senalis*, in economic contexts that vary over time. The use of this marine resource, initially practised with a view to local consumption of the flesh, later forms part of a regional system for the production and circulation of products derived from the shell, including both shell discs and lime. Apparent in the background, beyond the horizon, is the kingdom of Kongo during its formative period, followed by the Portuguese colonial power.

It is through the filter of colonial power, in this case Dutch, that we receive information on 18<sup>th</sup> century pastoral populations in the Cape Colony, later to become South Africa. Without these historical sources, our knowledge of the populations encountered by the coloniser would be restricted to the meagre archaeological remains attributed indiscriminately to the region's most recent hunter-gatherers. However, François Bon and his co-authors show that it is possible to employ the results of a geomorphological study of the landscape to locate the most recent prehistoric sites, then to identify among them camps (Dutch *kraal*) belonging to the Khoekhoe precolonial nomadic pastoralists. While validating the hypothesis of their existence posed by the sources, this approach also makes possible the proposal of an archaeological signature unique to these populations.

Markoye is located in the north of what is currently Burkina Faso. The region is located inside the bend of the river Niger and constitutes both the extreme south of the area of distribution of Libyco-Berber engravings and the heart of an area marked by the numerous remains of intense iron smelting activity. On the basis of recent observations carried out in this region of the Sahel and forming part of an overall inventory of this art, Michel Barbaza proposes a mythological

interpretation of some recurring rock art motifs. Jean-Marc Fabre reveals the intensity and standardisation of the characteristic production carried out in a major siderurgical district from the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD. In each case, it is the significant economic and political changes in the middle of the period that become visible in the background: on one hand the Berber settlement that connects the two banks of the Sahara and establishes regular commercial relationships between north Africa and the Sahel; on the other, the rise of the towns (Gao, Timbuktu) and powerful political formations linked to this commerce and which may have been the sponsors of the metal produced.

Dogon Country, in Mali, was also an area of intensive iron production, exploited until very recently (early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Employing an ethnoarchaeological approach, Caroline Robion-Brunner identifies the siderurgical traditions found in the archaeological remains from the Bandiagara plateau and the Séno plain, and offers a historical reconstruction of the migratory route of the groups responsible for each technology. These technologies, like the linguistic variety of the Dogon, form part of a social complexity whose formation over the centuries we are today only beginning to perceive. That this historical reconstruction covers the period of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps not merely by chance. As in the case of Markoye, Dogon Country seems to have undergone a sudden increase in metallurgical activity during the political apogee of another great kingdom; this time Mali. We can only suggest a relationship between these two phenomena. And it is once again medieval Mali that interests François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, who questions the capital status that seems to have been acquired by the site of Niani, in what is now Guinea, despite the absence of any archaeological evidence. Here we have a “centre” which is not a centre, while the real archaeological site of the kingdom’s capital still escapes us, leaving the historian and archaeologist faced with the challenges of future research in Africa.

### ***Editorial post-script***

It would not have been possible to publish this issue without the essential support of several bodies that we would like to thank. Firstly the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) in Johannesburg (CNRS and MAEE IFRE 25) which made possible the publication of two articles concerning the nomadic pre-colonial pastoralists of south Africa (François Bon and collaborators) and the shell middens of Angola (Nicolas Valdeyron and Sonia Ludmila da Silva Domingos). We would also like to thank the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE) in Addis Ababa (CNRS and MAEE IFRE 23) which financially supported the publication of articles relating to megalithism at Tuto Fela (Roger Joussaume) and at Aksum (Bertrand Poissonnier) in Ethiopia, together with that dedicated to the site of Matara in Eritrea (Francis Anfray). Our thanks to Sophie Didier and Éloi Ficquet, the former directors of these two institutions. Finally, the *P@ethnologie* team would like to thank its loyal partners, without whom this review would not be able to function: the service régional de l’Archéologie de Midi-Pyrénées and the TRACES laboratory (CNRS, UMR 5608).

### **Références bibliographiques**

Bernard E., Drewes A.-J., Schneider R., 1991 - *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, tome 1 « Les documents », Paris, Académie des inscriptions et des belles-lettres - De Boccard, 540 p.

Bernard E., Drewes A.-J., Schneider R., 2000 - *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, tome 3 « Traductions et commentaires. A. Les inscriptions grecques », Paris, Académie des inscriptions et des belles-lettres - De Boccard, 69 p.

Cuoq J., 1985 - *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle (Bilâd al-Sûdân)*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 515 p.

Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., 2013 - *Le Rhinocéros d'or. Histoires du Moyen Âge africain*, Paris, Alma, 319 p.

### To cite this article

Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., 2012 - In the Shadow of the King: the Hunter-gatherer, the Livestock Breeder, the Metallurgist, the Artist, ..., in F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar, *Palethnology of Africa, P@lethnology*, 4, 5-10.

**François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR**

Research director  
CNRS, Traces (UMR 5608)  
Toulouse, FRANCE  
francois-xavier.fauvelle@univ-tlse2.fr

Associate researcher  
Centre Jacques-Berque  
(USR 3136 CNRS-MAEE)  
Rabat, MOROCCO

