

Written Sources about Africa and their Study

Milan, January 26–28, 2017

From 26 to 28 January, the Ambrosian Library in Milan convened the Third Dies Academicus of the Accademia Ambrosiana's Classis Africana. The three-day symposium, organized by Vermondo Brugnatelli (Milan) and Mena Lafkioui (Paris), was dedicated to the study of written sources about Africa, and a significant number of contributions dealt with manuscript studies.

The conference was organized into panels focusing on linguistics and philology, history, sources, and persons linked to the African written heritage and its study. Both Christian (primarily Coptic and Ethiopic) and Islamic (Berber, West African, and East African) manuscript areas were considered.

The Coptic tradition received probably the best coverage during the conference. Stephen Emmel (Münster) gave a general overview of Coptic written tradition, discussing the ways in which Coptic literature, that according to him has little what can be properly described as historiography, can be seen as a source for African history. Samuel Moawad (Münster) introduced the ongoing project dedicated to systematic study of a segment of Coptic literary tradition (highlighting the activities of *c.*30 writers) in his talk entitled 'Coptic authors and their literary works in the first millennium'. Several papers focused on the linguistic aspects witnessed by Coptic manuscripts. The language of Coptic papyri was closely studied by Anne Boud'hors (Paris) in her paper 'Dialectes et régionalismes: la langue des papyrus coptes documentaires'. She identified up to seventeen distinct dialects and sub-dialects that were used in the Nile Valley between the fourth and the sixth centuries CE. Philippe Luisier (Rome) rehabilitated the Coptic literature in Bohairic in his paper 'La prima documentazione scritta in boairico: traduzioni bibliche, testi liturgici, iscrizioni', successfully demonstrating the wide literary use and importance of this Coptic dialect already in the early period usually associated with the dominance of Sahidic. In his talk 'Les textes bilingues dans l'Égypte byzantine: typologie et fonction', Jean-Luc Fournet (Paris) focused on the parallel use of Coptic and Greek in the manuscripts in Egypt during the Late Antiquity. A later development, the Copto-Arabic tradition of the medieval Egypt, was in the focus of the paper by Adel Sidarus (Évora), 'Abū 'l-Barakāt b. Kabar (m. 1324) et le manuscrit de l'Ambrosienne C 45 Inf.', about the manuscript containing the *Muḥtāṣar al-aḥbār* by the Copt, Šams al-Ri'āsa al-Naṣrānī Abu 'l-Barakāt b. Kabar.

Four papers dealt with Christian Ethiopic written tradition. Shiferaw Bekele (Addis Ababa) took a historian's approach to the Ethiopian sources in his paper 'The genesis of Ethiopian nationalism in late antique and the early

medieval Ethiopia in light of recent historical and philological research'. In his talk 'An overview of the hagiographic traditions of Gulo Mākāda (East Tigray, Ethiopia)', Denis Nosnitsin (Hamburg), basing on the new data collected by a major project under his supervision, showed how manuscript research revealed previously unknown facts about the religious and social history in this African region: layers of veneration of saints could be identified, showing how the tendencies changed across time. The paper by Manfred Kropp (Mainz), 'The foundation of the church Dābrā Ṭəbāb Bā'ata as reflected in witnesses' documents and Ethiopian historiography: the role of the written word in traditional customary law dominated by orality' was read *in absentia* by Alessandro Bausi. It introduced previously unpublished documents preserved in the manuscripts kept in a church in the city of Gondar, in central Ethiopia, and discussed the importance of the codification of legal transactions in manuscript form. Finally, Robert Beylot (Paris), in his 'Note sur l'origine des querelles théologiques du XV^e siècle en Éthiopie', discussed texts whose composition, or translation, reflected religious controversies in medieval Ethiopia.

In addition, Ethiopian Islamic manuscript tradition was in the centre of the paper by Michele Petrone (Copenhagen), 'Sufism and textual production in 20th-century Ethiopia: the case of the *Ḥulāsāt al-Tağrīd* by Badr al-Dīn al-Ubiyy (d. 1962) and of the Rašādiyya of Wolkite', presenting first results of an investigation into a previously unknown source, discovered during a recent field mission in the country.

Berber studies were another focus of the conference. The inscriptions left by the North Africans during the Spanish Conquest on the Canary Islands were introduced by Lionel Galand (Paris) in his talk 'Les inscriptions canariennes et l'étude du berbère'. Harry Stroomer (Leiden) spoke of the 'Archives on Berber languages and cultures and what to do with them', providing a general overview of existing collections on Berber languages and cultures, including manuscripts, and the state of the art in their study. Vermondo Brugnatelli focused on the Berber manuscripts, and in particular on how the texts they transmit reflect the peculiarities of the Berber dialects, in his talk 'Les manuscrits médiévaux à l'est et à l'ouest de la Berbérie'. Peter Reesink (Amsterdam) offered a glimpse into the history of Berber lexicography in the paper 'La confection du dictionnaire Kabyle Français de J.-M. Dallet. La contribution des pères blancs aux études berbères'. Sources dealing with the Berber peoples were further assessed by Mohamed Meouak (Cádiz), 'Anthroponymie et toponymie berbères dans *al-Tašawwuf ilā riğāl al-tašawwuf wa-aḥbār Abī l-'Abbās al-Sabtī* d'Ibn al-Zayyāt al-Tādīlī (ob. 1230–1231): observations historiques et linguistiques', Helena de Felipe (Alcalá de Henares),

‘Naming and Shaping North African People’, and Virginie Prevost (Brussels), ‘Les femmes berbères dans les sources ibadites du Maghreb médiéval’.

Several papers were dedicated to West African written sources. Paulo F. de Moraes (Birmingham) spoke of ‘Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from West Africa (401 AH / 1011 AD to 894 AH / 1489 AD): a still neglected historical source’, and Jean Allman (Washington) introduced an issue of more recent tradition in her talk on ‘Shadow Archives and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History Writing: Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana, 1957–1966’.

A link between Europe and Africa—a study of Classical sources speaking of the African continent—was offered by Vincent Zarini (Paris) in his paper ‘L’Afrique de Corippe, terre de contrastes’.

The conference organizers provided a rare opportunity for the participants to view manuscripts of African provenance—or representing African manuscript traditions—preserved in the collection of the Ambrosian Library.

The entire conference was recorded; the video files are available at <http://www.ambrosiana.eu/dms/Accademia_2016-17/CSAfr/20170126-28_III_DA_1-16.html>. Conference proceedings are expected to be published within 2018.

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