Exegesis and Lexicography in the Ethiopian Tradition: The Role of the *Physiologus*

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The Ethiopian native lexicographic corpus (the so-called sawāsw) and the traditional commentaries (the ‘andomtā corpus) are intended to explain, with different strategies and expectations, the meaning of poorly understandable Gǝ’az words and canonical or non-canonical passages. This paper intends to offer an unprecedented evaluation of the role of the *Physiologus* as a literary source for both traditions. The influence of the small naturalistic treatise on the sawāsw compilations appears far less significant than previously believed. Several pieces of evidence prove that for most zoonyms treated in the native vocabularies a derivation from the Scriptures is to be privileged. It is known, by contrast, that a variety of accounts from the *Physiologus* were embedded into several Amharic commentaries. A thorough look at their textual features displays a certain closeness to one particular recension of the *Physiologus*, i.e. Et-a. The survey has also highlighted the repeated and intentional reuse of the same literary material in newly-composed commentaries, a phenomenon that might have implications for understanding the historical development of the traditional exegetical literature.

It is a well-known fact that the attitude towards the canonical and quasi-canonical texts in Ethiopia did not remain passive throughout the centuries. A variety of strategies developed in order to clarify the text of the Scriptures and other books, and help the reader understand them. On the one hand, the Bible underwent an extensive process of revision and ‘conflation’; on the other, a rich set of complementary tools emerged with the purpose of interpreting obscure words and passages. Lexicographic compilations and exegetical expositions are among such tools.

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* An earlier version of this paper was read on the occasion of the workshop ‘Beyond the Physiologus – animal stories and representations in Oriental manuscript’ held at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC, Hamburg University) on 28–29 June 2018. The research was partially funded by the long-term project ‘Beta maṣḥāḥft: Die Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: Eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung’ (2016–2040), headed by Prof. Alessandro Bausi at the Hiob Ludolf Center for Ethiopian Studies (HLCES), Hamburg University, and funded within the Academies’ Programme, under survey of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Hamburg.

It is claimed that native lexicographic compilations, called sawāsǝw (literally ‘ladder’), were traditionally transmitted orally and received a standardized written form in the seventeenth century, during the so-called Gondarine Age. They typically consist of a grammatical section on morphology, and a vocabulary, which accommodates lists of lesser known Gǝʿǝz words. Words are indexed according to the book of provenance or the subject, and each is given a Gǝʿǝz or Amharic equivalent. In subject-based lists the source of a lexeme is typically missing, thus making the task of recognizing the text of provenance particularly hard. Sawāsǝw have been regularly used in modern local and Western dictionary-compiling initiatives, yet very rarely explored with reference to their own text history, spread, and transmission.

Commentaries are subdivided into tərg“āme and ’andəmtā commentaries. The former represent an early stage of the Ethiopian traditional exegesis. They are in Gǝʿǝz and are attested from the fourteenth century onwards. They constitute a heterogeneous corpus since different manuscripts admit different interpretations of the same passage. The decline of the tərg“āme corpus is linked to the rise of the ’andəmtā commentaries. The Amharic ’andəmtā corpus, originating in the Gondarine Age and committed to writing only in recent times, intends to explore in depth the true meaning of a given text, verse by verse. Commentaries have generally escaped the attention of the scholars due to several factors. First, they are rife with abbreviations, elliptic or laconic sentences, difficult syntax, and use of rare words. Furthermore, very few scholarly editions of the commentaries have been published, even though a number of them are available in Ethiopian printed editions. Finally, the source of the material used is as a rule seldom indicated. This makes determining the textual source of an explanation often challenging, as it requires a profound knowledge of the religious literature.

2 A word calqued on Arabic sullām, i.e. the ‘scala’ or vocabularies. This, together with the structure and some of the grammatical terms adopted, betrays a distant Copto-Arabic derivation of the entire genre.

3 An updated overview on the tərgwāme tradition is in García 2010; see also Mersha Alehegne 2011, 2–7. The transmissional itinerary of numerous Greek and Oriental (Syro-Copto-Arabic) sources into the Ethiopic tərgwāme corpus is explored in Cowely 1983 (which also contains the translation of the commentary of the Book of the Revelation) and Cowley 1988.

4 The Amharic word ’andəm, meaning ‘and (there is) one (who says)’ (from which the term ’andəmtā is derived), is typically used to introduce the hidden explanation of a canonical passage.

5 Despite the high number of commentaries published in Ethiopia, especially in the last decades (see Tedros Abraha 2007), few of them have been hitherto critically edited. For an updated state of the art, see in particular Mersha Alehegne 2011, 13–20.
In this paper I will focus on the role of the Ethiopic version of the Physiologus as a possible source of interpretation of zoonyms and animal-related biblical passages respectively in the sawāsəw and ’andəmtā literature.6

The Physiologus and the Ethiopian lexicography

It is believed that many zoonyms explained in the sawāsəw originate from the Physiologus, or that many difficult animal and stone names appearing in the Physiologus were later explained in the sawāsəw lists.7 This assumption, however, has never undergone a proper scrutiny.

It is difficult to assess with clarity the direct impact of the Physiologus on the lexicographic compilations. A preliminary and immediate way to estimate the share of influence of the small naturalistic treatise on the sawāsəw is by singling out all the Ethiopic names of animals, plants, and stones treated in the Physiologus and also incorporated in the sawāsəw lists. The total amount is not insignificant. The words are karādyon (caladrius), finǝkǝs (phoenix), ḥalastǝyo (wild donkey), qaḥm (ant), qʷənšəl (fox), māʿnaq (turtledove), qʷərmǝnaʿät (frog), häyyal (deer), ḏəmdəs (diamond), ḏərdyoṃ (heron). Other words are attested in slightly different spelling forms: ḥeṗoṗos (hoopoe), and gālen (weasel).8 Nevertheless, this argument alone is not sufficient to predicate a provenance from the Physiologus. The same words might in fact originate from different pieces of literature. In order to remove interference from other textual sources, we need to isolate those words, or even glosses matching exclusively the Physiologus context. Admittedly, none of the above words meets this requirement. All of them also occur elsewhere, specifically

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6 The Gəʿaz version of the Physiologus (፲ስአልጎስ፡, Fisalgos, or ታስአልጎስ፡, Fisəʾalgos) was translated in the Aksumite Age (fourth to seventh century) from a Greek model. It therefore belongs to the oldest layer of the literary heritage of Christian Ethiopia. Place and authorship of the translation remain unknown. The work survives in at least nine relatively recent manuscript copies. Dated to the 18th–20th century, these copies were executed more than one millennium after the work made its way into the Horn of Africa. The work is transmitted into three recensions, called Et-α, Et-β, and Et-γ. Only Et-α is sufficiently known to scholars, thanks to the 1877 edition by Fritz Hommel (Hommel 1877; Italian translation in Conti Rossini 1951; English translation in Sumner 1982). For an updated presentation of the text history and the manuscript tradition, see Villa, forthcoming.

7 Weninger 2005.

8 Transcribed in the sawāsəw as ḥepõe and gāle. Names are given according to the reasonably earliest extant orthography as provided by the available documentation. Since a number of them are loanwords from Greek, they have undergone, not unexpectedly, a proliferation of formal variants over the text transmission.
in the Bible.⁹ Provided that the biblical books undoubtedly had a far broader circulation than the *Physiologus*, one is inclined to assume, as a privileged hypothesis, that their legacy in the subsequent lexicographic literature was more conspicuous than that of the *Physiologus*.

An illuminating evidence to this statement comes from a list of bird names contained in MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éth. 150 (f. 47ra–b), an eighteenth-century copy of a *sawāsəw*. Under the section እአንከ村里ቀጭ፡ አዕ富力ቃ፡ the *sawāsəw* lists the following species:

Finǝks, i.e. a large vulture-like bird; gepä, i.e. a bird of prey; […] ’arodoyon, i.e. the heron; qağıño, i.e. the stork; ’ibǝn, i.e. the cross-bird (ibis); […] herodyanos, i.e. a fish-eating bird; senerēsaros bǝdyon, i.e. the partridge.

Four names are significant: the finǝks, the gepä, the ’arodoyon, and the ’ibǝn. They indeed recall the Greek forms of four species of birds described in the *Physiologus*, respectively the phoenix, the vulture, the heron, and the ibis. However, the provenance of at least three lexemes of them from the *Physiologus* is unlikely due to their spellings. In fact, gepä, ’arodoyon, and ’ibǝn are exactly the accusative-based forms inherited from γῦπα, ἐρωδιόν, and ῥῆβων, and attested in biblical lists of clean and unclean animals (Lv 11, 14–19 and Dt 14, 12–16). By contrast, the *Physiologus* styles them respectively as gi/popperos (from the genitive form γυπός), ’arodyon, and ’abisor (perhaps from Ῥῆβων [νις]). Therefore, a derivation from the Old Testament lists of animals appears philologically more grounded. The same argument can be extended to the ḥeṗoṗā, ‘hoopoe’ (in Lv 11, 19 and Dt 14, 17, and in the *sawāsəw*), which originates from the accusative form ἐπόπα, versus the genitive-based form ἐποπος transmitted in the *Physiologus* (from ἐποπος).¹⁰ As the example above efficaciously shows, one must not underestimate the pervasive role played by the biblical books. In view of these examples, the real influence of the *Physiologus* on the *sawāsəw* tradition remains an open question.

⁹ Six names out of twelve are genuine local words (ḥalastǝyo, qaḥm, qʷǝnsǝl, māʾnaq, qʷǝrnanaʾät, ḥāyyal), the remaining six are Greek loanwords. In all cases the animal names are spelt in an identical or very close way both in the *Physiologus* and in the Bible. Concerning the gâlen (weasel), coming from Greek γαλῆ, it is worth mentioning that the word appears in Lv 11, 30, in the list of unclean reptiles and other species that crawl on the earth. As already noticed by Hiob Ludolf, in this list the Greek word is simply transliterated rather than translated (Ludolf 1691, 210). Interestingly, the reptile-like appearance of the gâle survives in its *sawāsəw* explanation, as quoted in August Dillmann’s *Lexicon linguae Aethiopicae*: here gâle is described as ቁለ፡ የ፡ ነሆ насел፡ የ፡ ና፡ እሆኔ፡ ያ, i.e. a monstrous two-mouth snake (Dillmann 1865, 1138).

¹⁰ Hommel 1877, xxix; Conti Rossini 1951, 15 and 22.
The Physiologus and the 'andəmtā corpus

Echoes of animal stories from the Physiologus have been more solidly identified in a number of 'andəmtā explanations. The merit goes to Roger W. Cowley, who devoted much efforts to investigate and document the traditional Ethiopian exegesis. He properly addressed the question of the complex and abundant literary background behind it, and managed to identify a number of biblical and non-biblical explanations sourced from various chapters of the Physiologus. Among the published commentaries, references are extant to the lion (Rev 5, 5), the caladrius (Mt 8, 17; Wǝddāse Māryām), the eagle (Is 40, 31), the viper or echidna (Mt 3, 7; Fǝṭḥa nagašt), the snake (Mt 10, 16), the panther (Hos 5, 11), and the unicorn (Ps 21, 22).\(^ {11}\) Cowley’s work, although pioneering in some respects, is a solid starting point for our purpose. I will examine in this paper some passages containing references to the stories of the eagle, the viper or echidna, and the caladrius.

The commentary explanation of Is 40, 31 (አለፈ፡ ይሴፈውዎ፡ ለ እ ግ ዚ አ ባ ሔ ር፡ ይሔድሱ፡ ኀይሎም፡ ወይበቍሉ፡ ክነፊሆም፡ ከመ፡ ንስር፡ ‘those who hope in God will renew their strength; and their wings will sprout like eagles’) is as follows:

When the eagle grows old, it secretes the so-called 'abdo. After smearing itself with it and after collecting firewood, it fits closely its wings and flutters them.

‘Fire comes out of the body of that bird’ (Gǝʿǝz), as Giyorgis Walda ‘Amid says: fire comes out of its body. Then, it burns the firewood and burns down itself together with the wood. In Egypt it has not rained for five hundred years; however, as soon as the eagle has renovated itself, it drizzles. The first day (the eagle) is a worm; the second day [it becomes] a bird; the third day, (having the sky) cleared up, it goes away.

The chapter of the Physiologus on the eagle also narrates a story on rejuvenation; but it is quite different from the one retold in the ‘andəmtā. According to the Physiologus, the eagle, grown old and become blind, flies towards the heat of the sun, burns its wings and its blindness, and plunges three times into a source of pure water, thus becoming young once more.\(^ {13}\) The two stories

\(^ {11}\) Cowley 1983, 44. For the reference to the panther in the ‘andǝmtā commentary on Hos 5, 11, see Weldetensae Andeberhan 1994, 124, and Villa forthcoming.

\(^ {12}\) ‘Andǝmtā commentary on Isaiah, 270a–b.

\(^ {13}\) Hommel 1877, 6–7 (text of Et-α), 51–52 (German translation); Conti Rossini 1951, 21 (Italian translation); Sumner 1982, 16–17 (English translation).
have little in common. By contrast, the passage from the 'andəmtā displays a striking resemblance with another well-known tradition, that of the legendary phoenix. According to the Physiologus, the phoenix, when it has reached the age of five hundred years, enters the forest of Lebanon and fills its wings with the scent called 'abdu, then it enters the city of the sun, i.e. Heliopolis, and burns itself above the altar. When the priest examines the ashes, he finds a worm, which turns then into a big bird. The phoenix then greets the priest and comes back to its place.14

The mention of the 'abdu is significant and demands for a plus of attention. It does not appear either in the Greek or in two of the three recensions of the Ethiopic Physiologus (i.e. Et-β and Et-γ). As it is only mentioned in Et-α, it seems to be an innovative reading. Also the 'andəmtā commentary attests the word 'abdo which, despite minor discrepancies, equals the 'abdu fragrance in form and function. This supports a connection between the eagle story in the commentary and the phoenix chapter as transmitted in Et-α, because both share a non-polygenetic secondary variant which, technically speaking, is a ‘conjunctive error’. One is therefore inclined to assume that the exegete learnt the story of the prodigious self-burning bird according to Et-α. As to the confusion between the phoenix and the eagle, it might be conjectured that the exegete did not have the source text nearby and, while retelling the legend from memory, he deliberately replaced the rare and perhaps obscure word finǝks with a more familiar bird name. However, other explanations cannot be ruled out.15

In Mt 3, 7 Jesus calls the Pharisees ‘brood of vipers’: መወልደ አራዊተ ምድር ይላት አርዌ ገሞራዊት ናት አፈ ማኅፋኑዋ ጠባብ ነው ከ ረ ን ም  ፏ ቤ ባ የቀበለዋች አባለ ዘሩን ቆርጣ ታስቀረዋለች። በፅንስ ጊዜ እባት ሥጋዋን በ ል ተው ሆ ዷን ቀደው የወጣሉ። በዚህ ጊዜ እናት የሚህኑዋቸው ሐዋርያት ገድለዋና። 16

14 Hommel 1877, 7 (text of Et-α), 52–53 (German translation); Conti Rossini 1951, 21–22 (Italian translation); Sumner 1982, 17–19 (English translation).
15 For instance, that a parallel story on the eagle circulated in a very different form than that transmitted in the Physiologus. Hard to explain is also the reference to Giyorgis Walda ‘Amid, author of a historical treatise (Tārika Walda ‘Amid), where, however, no reference to the myth of the self-burning bird seems to be found. Further investigation is needed to clear up this point.
16 ‘Andəmtā commentary on the Holy Gospels, 36b.
‘Brood of vipers’: (the viper) is a snake of Gomorrah, and the opening of her womb is tight. (The female) receives the semen from her mouth. After cutting off the (male) organ, she abandons him. At birth the sons eat the flesh (of their mother), lacerate her belly, and come out. Thus, she dies. The prophets, which are like the fathers (of the vipers), and the apostles, which are like the mothers (of the vipers), were likewise killed.

This passage is certainly indebted to the chapter of the Physiologus on the viper, or echidna, which contains the same narrative. Comparison with the multiple-version text of the Physiologus evidences once more a closer affinity to Et-α. Such an affinity emerges with clarity in the conclusion of the ʾandəmtā explanation. Here, the reference to the ‘prophets’ and the ‘apostles’ parallels the conclusion of the Et-α recension, which reads እየሱስ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ነቢያተ።, ‘so they killed their fathers, the prophets, and also our Lord, their father, and his disciples’ (‘apostles’ in the ʾandəmtā evidently continues ‘disciples’). Conversely, Et-β only has ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡, ‘they killed our Lord, Jesus Christ’, and Et-γ only has ክርስቶስ፡, ‘they killed your fathers, the prophets’.

Remarkably, a very similar account is also found in the ʾandəmtā commentary of a renowned Arabic-based compilation of law, ‘The Law of Kings’ (Fǝtḥa nagaśt).

The womb of this snake of Gomorrah is tight. (The female) receives the semen from her mouth. After cutting off the (male) organ, she abandons him. The male dies. When the time of the birth has come, the sons lacerate her belly and come out, and she dies. Thus, they kill their own fathers during conception, and their own mothers at birth.

The collation of the two texts shows that they are no doubt two version of one and the same story. Several explanations can be invoked. The most viable explanation is that one version is based on the other. The version from the commentary of Matthew is more likely to be earlier for several reasons. First, it is textually more complete, because it retains the mention of the prophets which, as seen, is also found in the Greek Physiologus and in two Ethiopic recensions. Moreover, the reconstruction fits well with the expected process of development of the ʾandəmtā tradition: most probably, commentaries were initially produced to cover the most pre-eminent New Testament books. At a later stage they were extended to prestigious yet non-canonical books such as

17 Hommel 1877, 10 (text of Et-α) 56 (German translation); Conti Rossini 1951, 24 (Italian translation); Sumner 1982, 23 (English translation).
18 ʾAndəmtā commentary on the ṵeqṭha nagaśt, 163c.
the *Fǝtḥa nagaśt*, presumably by learned men well acquainted with the exegetical literature already in existence.

That of the echidna is not the sole instance of a verbatim or slavish reuse of material based on the same animal story. The same strategy also affects another account from the *Physiologus*, that on the caladrius. The caladrius is a miraculous all-white bird with diagnostic powers: placed in front of a sick person, the caladrius reveals if he will live or die, depending on whether it looks directly at the face of the sick person or turns away from him. The legend of the caladrius is found in two exegetical passages, the former embedded in the commentary of Matthew (Mt 8, 17, here on the left), the latter in the commentary of a non-biblical text, ‘The Praise of Mary’ (*Wǝddāse Māryām*, here on the right):

Story of the caladrius: it is a white bird which is brought and dwells in the royal palace. When someone is ailing, (the caladrius) is brought forth and is put near to him. If he remains sick, (the caladrius) turns its face away; if he survives, it comes close and receives his breath. With the breath (the bird), which was white, becomes black and goes out to the air.

After three hours ..., it enters into the sea. After being three days and three nights in the sea, it replaces its old feathers, it renovates, and comes out.

The white bird is the Lord, and it is white because of his divinity.18

Story of the caladrius: it is a white bird which dwells in the royal house. When someone is ailing, (the caladrius) is brought forth and is placed in front of him. If he remains sick, (the caladrius) turns its face away; if he survives, it comes close and receives his breath. (The bird), which was white, becomes black and goes out to the air.

After three hours ..., it enters into the sea. After three days and three nights in the depths of the sea, it replaces its old feathers, it renovates, and comes out.

The white bird is the Lord, and it is white because of his divinity.19

Here again the similarity between the two explanations supports the assumption that one stems from the other. Other instances of the same phenomenon are certainly in existence in the *ʾandǝmtā* literature,22 most probably also outside the domain of the *Physiologus*.

18 Hommel 1877, 3–4 (text of Et-α), 48–49 (German translation); Conti Rossini 1951, 18–19 (Italian translation); Sumner 1982, 13–14 (English translation).
19 ʾAndǝmtā commentary on the Holy Gospels, 76b–c.
20 ʾAndǝmtā commentary on the *Wǝddāse Māryām*, 155–156.
21 By way of example, the commentary on the *Wǝddāse Māryām* contains a further reference to the centuries-old drought in Egypt and the legend of the eagle (i.e. the phoenix), which corresponds to the above-mentioned explanation in Is 40, 31 (ʾAndǝmtā commentary on the *Wǝddāse Māryām*, 102).
Some conclusions: A multifaceted impact?
The case studies presented here show that the dissemination of echoes of the *Physiologus* in the lexicographical and exegetical literature is far from allowing easy-made conclusions.

Evidence from the *sawāsǝw* compilations is not uncontroversial: contrary to what is generally claimed, *Physiologus*-related names do not seem to have received extensive treatment in the native vocabularies. Observations based on the orthography of some bird names show tangibly that it is much safer to attribute the latter’s provenance to scriptural readings.

The impact on the ‘andǝmtā corpus is more firmly grounded. It is demonstrated that several accounts from the *Physiologus* were incorporated into the Amharic traditional commentaries. This provides a valuable information on the transmission of the text, since it proves that the latter circulated and was read in the monastic centers where the ‘andǝmtā tradition emerged. Besides, a dependence from a text type which is closer to Et-α (the most conservative recension) sporadically surfaces from independent text-critical observations, even though more evidence would be required to make solid generalizations.

Even though studies on the sources and the development of the traditional exegesis are still in their infancy, a brief look has revealed clear phenomena of reuse of the literary material. One the one hand, some legendary properties were attributed to a different animal (e.g. the eagle replaces the phoenix as the self-burning bird in the commentary on Is 40, 31) for reasons which are still overall unclear. On the other hand, material from existing commentaries was reused for newly-composed exegetical treatises. This holds true for at least two explanations in the commentary of Matthew that are paralleled by nearly identical passages in the commentaries of two non-biblical books, the *Fǝṭḥa nagaśt* and the *Wǝddāse Māryām*. This corroborates the idea that the ‘andǝmtā corpus, despite being a complex body, possesses its own integrity. Studies on this topic might be very inspiring in the coming years, as they provide information on the process of historical development of the Amharic exegetical literature. Obviously, a prerequisite for more precise statements in this respect is the availability of a reliable text edition of the *Physiologus* on the one hand, and of the commentaries on the other, taking into due consideration that the latter existed for a long time as an oral tradition.

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