

MONDOFOTO

The shrine of *Nağāšī*¹ Aṣḥam b. Abğar and the tombs of the companions of Muḥammad (Nägaš, Ethiopia)

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There is a small village, along the road from Mäqälä to ‘Addigrat, in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, that is one of the most important Muslim holy place in the Horn of Africa. Its name is Nägaš, because it hosts what is known as the shrine of the *Nağāšī*³ (al)Aṣḥam(a) b. Abğar (d. 630 A.D), one of the kings of Aksum. According to Arabic sources, he was a contemporary of Muḥammad and reigned during the time of the first *hiğra* (ca. 615), also known as *al-hiğra ’ilā al-Ḥabaša* (‘migration to Abyssinia’)⁴. During that time of persecution Muḥammad sent some of his companions to the *Nağāšī* in order to receive protection. The tombs of twelve of them are in Nägaš. In *The life of Muhammad* written by Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (ca. 704-768 A.D.) one reads (Muḥammad ibn Ishāq 2004:657):

¹ The transcription of the Ethiopian and Arabic terms follows the system used in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.

² The notes are mainly taken from the works indicated in the References. See there for more detailed information.

³ Arabic *Nağāšī* is a loanword from Ge‘ez *nāgaši* ‘king, ruler’ (see Van Donzel 2007:1109).

⁴ This king has been identified with the Christian king of Aksum Ellä Šāḥam (Fiaccadori 2005:263a).

‘From Muhammad the apostle of God to the Negus al-Aṣḥam king of Abyssinia, Peace. I praise Allah unto you the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Faithful, the Watcher, and I bear witness that Jesus son of Mary is the spirit of God and His word which He cast to Mary the Virgin, the good, the pure, so that she conceived Jesus. God created him from His spirit and His breathing as He created Adam by His hand and His breathing. I call you to God the Unique without partner and to His obedience, and to follow me and to believe in that which came to me, for I am the apostle of God. I have sent to you my nephew Ja‘far with a number of Muslims, and when they come to you entertain them without haughtiness, for I invite you and your armies to God. I have accomplished (my work) and my admonitions, so receive my advice. Peace upon all those that follow true guidance.’

The Negus replied: ... ‘From the Negus al-Aṣḥam b. Abjar, Peace upon you, O prophet of Allah, and mercy and blessing from Allah beside Whom there is no God, who has guided me to Islam. I have received your letter in which you mention the matter of Jesus and by the Lord of heaven and earth he is not one scrap more than what you say. We know that with which you were sent to us and we have entertained your nephew and his companions. I testify that you are God’s apostle, true and confirming (those before you). I have given my fealty to you and to your nephew and I have surrendered myself to the Lord of the worlds. I have sent to you my son Arhā. I have control only over myself and if you wish me to come to you, O apostle of God, I will do so. I bear witness that what you say is true’.



In a manuscript of *Šayk* 'Umar Abrār, *Tarīke Negash*, written in Tigrinya 'ağamī, there is a poetic description of this event (tr. from Amira Abdulkarim 2016:143):

*The Prophet Muḥammad witnessed Najāšī's fairness
When his followers were persecuted in Mecca
For accepting Islam
Some of them were killed and others burnt
He advised them to leave for another land
Until the Lord makes it safe
Where to? they asked the Prophet Muḥammad,
May Allah's mercy be upon him forever
He pointed to the land of Abyssinia
There is a king under whose rule no one either oppresses or is oppressed, there is
neither robber nor rebellion.*

The oldest testimony of the presence of *Nağāšī* (al)Aṣḥam(a) b. Abğar's tomb is in the *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša* written by Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad in the 16th century (tr. by Paul Lester Stenhouse, 2003:351), where the visit of *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzi (known also as Grañ 'left-handed) to the tomb is depicted in the following way:

On the second day out they reached the tomb of Aḥmad al-Nağāšī who lived in the time of the Prophet – may God Bless him and give him peace. The Muslims said, 'Today, let us visit Aḥmad, the famous Aṣḥamat al-Nağāšī; tomorrow we will go into the battle'.





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Description of the pictures (12 July, 2013)

- no. 1 The site's sign
- no. 2 The way to the shrines
- no. 3 The major shrine
- no. 4 The shrine of the *şahābī* 'Uday b. Nađla, first Muslim refugee died in Ethiopia.
- no. 5 Board at the entrance of the mausoleum, with the *du'ā'* that has to be recited during the visit to the shrine.
- no. 6 The tombs of the companions of Muḥammad
- no. 7-9 The Muslim graveyard
- no. 10-11 Reading the Qur'ān
- no. 12-13 Preparing an ox for the evening meal (*iftār*) during the Ramađān
- no. 14 The new mosque

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