

Enno Littmann: German expedition to Aksum in 1906



Enno Littmann was a pioneer of Ethiopian Studies in the 20th century. He played a crucial role in its establishment as an academic discipline. Littmann had already been recommended for a professorship in Ethiopian Studies in the 1920s, but the post failed to be set up. Research into Ethiopia was nonetheless very much in vogue due to the blend of African and Oriental exoticism with a perceived proximity and the common ground owed to a shared Christian faith. Since the times of Menilek II, German research interest in the region had risen. It was not least tied to an economic interest the internationally isolated Germany had, which led it to seek for new trade partners. Even if during his lifetime no professorship dedicated specifically to Ethiopian Studies was established in Germany, it must mainly be attributed to Littmann's lifetime achievements that Ethiopian Studies became recognised as an academic discipline in its very own right. Littmann was appointed professor for Semitic Studies in Tübingen, where he focused on Ethiopian

languages, Arabic, as well as philological and historical questions especially in relation to the northeast African region. As a young man Littmann had achieved a decisive breakthrough: first he received generous research funds from Princeton in the year 1905 for a detailed documentation of the Tigré language and its oral traditions, and travelled to Eritrea. With this commission he created an extensive body of Tigré literature, which had up until then been passed on only orally, and which is now part of the rare indigenous sources on the culture of the inhabitants of Eritrea's lowlands. At the same time as he undertook this research, he negotiated with Emperor Wilhelm II, who was interested in the late antique Christian Ethiopia. Having entered into diplomatic relations with Menilek II, Wilhelm II had resolved to send a scientific expedition to Ethiopia. Littmann was entrusted with leading it, and it arrived in Tigray at the beginning of 1906, where, under the title of German Axum Expedition, it undertook archaeological excavations, philological and epigraphic investigations, and research into oral traditions. The expedition enjoyed the Ethiopian emperor's protection, but suffered from the constant threat of being expelled by the local priesthood, who rejected the excavators as treasure diggers. Ethiopia's archaeology had its starting point in this very expedition. Having returned to Strasbourg, where Littmann was working at the university at the time, the young Tigré poet Naffa' wad Ethman followed him. Over the months to come, they documented Tigré poetry and together laid the foundations for a Tigré dictionary. Naffa' thus inhabits a crucial position in the exploration of northeast Africa's rich oral traditions, and his importance shall be recalled by this exhibition. The other crucial partner of Littmann to be recalled is dejjazmach Gebre Sillasé Barya Gabir (see picture), the governor of Aksum, without whom Littmann's research in Tigray would not have been possible.

Text: Wolbert Smidt

