Once more on the proper name ḫabbān in *Acta Thomaë*

Today, the most common opinion continues to maintain that the *Vorlage* of *Acta Thomaë* was a Syriac text.¹ This idea dates back more than a century ago when Burkitt stated the hypothesis of a Syriac original for the *Acts of Thomas*.² In a brief note, the author reasserted one of the arguments with which he built his hypothesis: the theory that proper names “sounds much more Semitic than Greek”, and that “they appear in a Syriac form which (to say the least) does not suggest transmission through the Greek”.³

Burkitt, using the first of these two arguments, suggested that the author of the text of the *Acts of Thomas* lived in the territories of Mesopotamia and the Euphrates valley when referring to the proper name ḫabbān, of which he stated the following:

> I was not, however, able to say more of the merchant’s name ḫabbān (ܚܒܢ, Ἀββάνης or Ἀμβανής) than that it sounded more Semitic than Greek (*J.T.S.* i 288). The derivation of this name still remains entirely obscure, but it occurs again in the very regions where the Acts took their literary shape.⁴

Burkitt echoed a Latin papyrus dated 166 AD in which *Abban* (Ἀββάς) was mentioned as one of the two names (*nomine Abban quem Eutychen sive quo alio nomine*) of a young slave (*puerum*) of seven years old coming from the other side of the Tigris river (*nationale transfluminianum*) acquired for 200 denarii by C(adius) Fabullius Macer, a lieutenant in the

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Imperial Fleet of triremes on the Tigris. In Burkitt’s opinion “the name of the slave is obviously identical with that of the merchant” that appears in the Acts of Thomas. The information provided by the Latin papyrus is certainly relevant. Likewise, other potential references from the Semitic environment can be adduced. Thus, we have the Aramaic Nabatean proper names Ḥbn and Ḥbnw, North-Arabian the first while the second from the Sinai, for which Negev offered the Arabic correspondence حبان (cf. the correct form حبان, “dropsical”) and the Greek transliterations Ἀβεν, Ἀβίνας y Αβανος, with parallels in Palmyrene Aramaic.

But, in our opinion, the spectrum of possibilities regarding the origin of this proper name must be expanded in a more appropriate way. In fact, the author of the text of the Acts of Thomas refers to Ḥabbān saying that he was an Indian merchant (Syr. tagarā bad bendwaya, Gr. ἔμπορον ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰνδίας) who would have gone to a certain place at the confluence between the Persian Gulf and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Both the Greek and Syriac texts run as follows:

(…) ἔμπορον (…) ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰνδίας (…) ἔλθόντα ὡς δυομα Ἀββάνης¹⁰

(“(…) a merchant (…) coming from India whose name was Abbanes”) whose name was Ḥabbān”).¹¹

According to this information, the proper name, rather than having a “Semitic” provenance, should, consequently, be of Indian origin given the geographical association mentioned in the text. The fact that the Arabic manuscripts of the Acts of Thomas give the name as جبان (Jābān)¹² must be due to a mistake by the copyist who changed the ḫāʾ (ح) to a jīm (جم).
Therefore, the origin of this proper name is not Semitic, but Indian: both the Syriac form Ḥabbān and the Greek Ἀββάνης come from Appan, but with the addition of the ending –ης of the 1st declension for masculine nouns in Greek. However, it could be that neither of the two forms comes directly from the Indian name, but perhaps through Middle Persian (Pahlavi) or even through an Eastern Aramaic dialect as occurred, for instance, with the transmisión of Indian medical texts.

On the other hand, in the case of the Syriac Ḥabbān one possibility is that the name Appan could have been adapted into Aramaic with possible interference by contaminatio with the Arabic ḥbn thus adding the unvoiced pharyngal fricative /ḥ/ to the initial vowel /a/. But we think that a more suitable possibility is that Appan's initial /a/ was adapted directly as /ḥa/, as in other cases (v.gr. /ʕ/), because the unvoiced pharyngal fricative /ḥ/ has been weakened to the glotal stop /ʔ/, thus corresponding with the spiritus lenis in Greek. It should also be noted that in Aramaic dialects there is a strong inclination to weaken ḥēq to be. 

Resumen: La cuestión del texto original de las Acta Thomæ sigue siendo asunto de controversia para algunos autores. Entre los diversos argumentos esgrimidos a comienzos del siglo XX a favor de un original siriaco se encuentra el de los nombres propios, entre los cuales se halla Habbān. El objetivo de esta nota es contribuir con nueva información que ayude a resolver este ítem.

Abstract: The question of the original text of the Acta Thomæ still remains a matter of controversy for some authors. Among the various arguments put forward at the beginning of the 20th century in favor of a Syriac original is that of proper names, among which is Habbān. The aim of this note is to contribute new information that helps resolve this item.

Palabras clave: Vorlage; Acta Thomæ; Ḥabbān; Siriaco; Griego. Key words: Vorlage; Acta Thomæ; Habbān; Syriac; Greek.

13 M. S. Ramaswami Aiyar, “Apostle Thomas. Was it a Mysore Mahraja that brought him to India?”, The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society XX/1 (1929), p. 27.