

# Berichte und Kommentare

## Natural Objects Transformed into Symbolic Meaning among the Sidāma of Northeast Africa

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This article is concerned with symbolic support for cooperation, what Searle has recently referred to as resulting in the collective allocation of functions based on rules that result in institutions grounded in the moral power of the actors (2006: 12–15). These activities are often connected to elements which, when associated with the status of actors, tend to become transcendent symbols. Specifically, I want to focus on cattle, wood, water, butter, and milk. These are common elements used by the Sidāma of northeast Africa in varying contexts to convey meaning. The concern is to show how these phenomena are given social significance in institutional relationships. As will be shown, these things are linked by the Sidāma to social control, emotions, and above all production. The latter, Graeber has suggested, is not simply about creating material things as ends in themselves, but of making people and social relations (2006: 69–71).

If social being and production are basic to the creation of symbols, the process by which the latter are shifted from one context to another in changing meaning is more complex. To get at this process I shall rely on the concepts developed by Ivo Strecker (1988). He indicates that the emotional and the social are the two key aspects in ontology. They constitute the basis for the moral order that merges in a symbol, and the latter becomes the key to gaining power over the unknown (Strecker 1988: 25–30, 37 f.). The main issue is use rather than meaning in controlling status. Further, the social pressure created by symbolism becomes an indirect way of communication about events and material elements. As Terry Turner has phrased it,

perhaps a little more elegantly, it is a matter of regarding “minimal elements” as being changed “in both epistemological and ontological senses to the combinatorial structures in which they are incorporated in cultural discourse and social action” (1991: 122). This pressure may be used for domination or to avoid humiliation. To summarize, symbols develop alternatively to satisfy the social and emotional aspects of the moral order; expression of the power of communication regarding events and things; and finally for dominating others and/or avoiding humiliation.

### The People

Elsewhere I have written extensively on Sidāmo culture (Hamer 1987, 2003).<sup>1</sup> The Sidāma are a Cushitic-speaking people with a social structure grounded in a generational class system (*lua*) leading to pervasive elderhood authority. They reside in small hamlets (*kača*) surrounding plateaus on the edge of the Rift Valley, between Lakes Awassa and Abaya. Although the population is probably much larger at present, the official 1984-census placed it at 1.5 million with an estimated 240 persons per square mile (*Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission* 1984). Hamlets (*kača*) are organized into neighborhoods (*olau*) for community labor in house building, trail maintenance, and pond clearance, as well as for the performance of large rituals such as mourning the dead (*kayičo witta*). Today coffee is the cash crop mixed with gardens producing subsistence crops.

<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out under grants from the Ford foundation, Great Lakes Colleges Association, and the Canada Council in the 1960s and 70s. Later brief interviews with individuals were completed in the 1980s and 90s. Sidāma is the designation of the Alēta people where most of the research was conducted. Brögger (1986), Cerulli (1956), and Vecchiato (1993) use the term Sidāmo, though the former designation has been recommended by a Sidančo (singular) (Hotesso 1983). I use Sidāmo as an adjective.

The latter consist of *ensete edulus* (*wese*)<sup>2</sup> along with a variety of vegetables. Cattle which provide milk, butter, and meat for ritual purposes graze in the communal pasture on the center of the plateau. The people follow a division of labor in which wives manage households, care for young children, and prepare food. Husbands are responsible for planting and herding cattle. Both parents rely on the youth as a supporting labor force (Hamer and Hamer 1994).

The Sidāma are organized into exogamous patrilines (*gurri*) and because of unilineal descent through males women have no claims on land in either their own or their husband's clan. The pervasive male authority of the generational class system means that men are conceptualized as fathers or foster fathers, regardless of agnatic or affinal connections. This is structured through the generational class system (*lua*) which crosscuts clan divisions. Women have no such organization though old women, beyond childbearing age, receive a degree of respect and converse as well as share food with male elders.

There are five classes in the *lua* which follow in sequence, changing every seven years over a 35-year cycle. Preinitiates belong temporarily to a second class beyond the one into which their father is initiated. When the latter is promoted to elderhood, the son is initiated into the class behind the father and the son's son becomes a preinitiate in the class preceding his grandfather. By the time the son is promoted to elderhood, 28 years following his father's ascendancy to that status, the son's son becomes an initiate in the class preceding his father's. In effect a man becomes related on a father-foster father basis to all the elders in all five classes at different periods in the life cycle. The resulting linkages make it possible not only to optimize conflict resolution, but for men to acquire land and increased wealth in clans other than their own. This is because generational father-foster father bonds of the *lua*.

It is in the myths, rituals, and spiritual beliefs of the Sidāma that one finds support for the social structure and production process. Principally in these areas of institutional daily life concerning fear, hope, and well-being one finds a richness of symbolic transfers from one experiential context to

another. Thus seemingly mundane objects such as butter, milk, wood, and cattle become more than elements as they acquire transcendent meanings in changing social situations.

### The Emotional and Social

I begin with two versions of the story of Queen Furra, which portrays the origin of the institutionalized emotions and social divisions between men and women. In this myth women hunted wild animals and went to war under the leadership of the Queen. Marriage negotiations were conducted by women for husbands who were expected to prepare the food for their warrior wives. The beginning of the end of these practices is portrayed in two different versions of the story. In one version, when the women count their numbers after a battle, they always come up short of one warrior unaccounted for. This is because the person counting fails to include herself. Furra changes marriage rules so that women can prepare food, but are told to never show newly made butter or *ensete* (*wasa*) to their husbands and to always deny the first requests of the latter. Nevertheless, the Queen continues to exercise her power by ordering the young men to kill all the elders who are hiding in the forest. Further, she assigns the youth certain impossible tasks like building a house that doesn't touch the ground and finding a zebra that she may ride like a horse. The elders tell the young men to capture a zebra, then help Furra to mount the animal, and send them off at a gallop. Following these instructions they help her mount, but then insist that to steady the Queen they must tie her to the beast. This done, they whip the zebra which goes off at a gallop. Before long Furra is being buffeted against trees and boulders until her body begins to fall apart and is scattered in various places. So in the first version of the story this is the end of the woman ruler and roles of authority and social control are reversed.

A second version emphasizes women hunting and killing a water buffalo. When, however, they return from the hunt, they cannot say which one actually killed the animal. The Queen tells them all to take credit for the act by putting butter in their hair. Another variation in this version indicates that Furra's body finally disintegrated in the area of the Shabādino clan (*gurri*) at Curra. Here her remains are said to be buried, and women still put butter on a tree near the alleged grave. Butter as emblematic of the moral status of women is still used in the two months of seclusion following

<sup>2</sup> *Ensete edulus* (*wese*) is referred to as the "false banana tree" since the fruit is nonedible, but the trunks and root are harvested as food (Bezueh 1972: 9, 12). It has a high caloric value and is drought resistant (Smeds 1955: 38; Olmstead 1974: 153). *Wese* is the Sidāmo term for the plant and *wasa* is the refinement of the plant as prepared food.

the birth of a child. Each woman in the hamlet (*kača*) brings a bowl of *ensete* (*was*) smothered in butter. The husband expresses moral approbation by killing a cow to feed the wife who has provided a male heir or a female child whose exchange in later life will enable the son to marry.

Thus there are both emotional and social aspects to the mythic meaning of butter even to the present day. It is indicative of the status of women that gives them a role extending beyond the mere consequences of production and reproduction. It is a signification of their moral importance of their contributions to the power and authority of men in maintaining communal order.

As an anthropologist my awareness of the connection between women and butter was first observed by watching them place butter on a tree. On inquiry I was told this was the equivalent of making a bargain (*tana*), “If I return in peace, I will put butter on the tree.” The tree doesn’t have to be associated with a particular spirit. It was a bargain and a practice I was to hear about frequently. The butter in this context of seeking to insure safety is symbolic of woman power. Women, and occasionally even men, will often feed butter to possession spirits (*šatana*) when they have a serious illness. These spirits are believed capable of healing the sickness if properly fed (Hamer and Hamer 1966). Again the butter becomes a bargaining ploy suggestive that the human petitioner, while not as powerful as the spirit, is not lacking in a valued resource for exchange. For a woman this procedure gains symbolic credence when the husband places butter in her hair before calling the spirit and repeats the process when she sends it away.

The power and control of men, which has been greater than that of women since the demise of Queen Furra, is legitimated by the mythical tale of Abo and his bull. This myth is suggestive that as butter is the sign of woman’s moral power, cattle serves the same purpose for men. In this legend Abo, following a quarrel with his brother, decides to leave the hamlet with his bull. He follows the bull to the highlands where it digs a hole in the ground from which emerges a spring, ultimately becoming the Gidabo River. Abo builds a hut at this place and ultimately produces *tej*, a fermented drink made of honey and spring water. He then makes two containers of the drink, one of *tej* and the other mixed with snake venom. Then he invites people from the surrounding area to drink, unbeknownst to them, from the poisoned containers. As they succumb, Abo acquires all their land. People begin to believe that he is

possessed by a powerful spirit and come to serve and bring him bulls and honey as tribute. In time his descendents increase in number, and the area becomes associated with the Holō an Gārbičō clans (*gurri*), two of the most powerful groups in present-day Sidāmo land. His grave, high on one of the forested mountains, is a shrine to which descendents and supplicants bring bulls annually in search of favors from his powerful spirit (Hamer 1976: 328–330).

With the passage of time the ultimate grounding of the socioemotional power of the elders has come to involve presentation of bulls to the spirits of deceased fathers. If the living elders have controlling authority over the moral order, their spirits are believed to be even more powerful. At various times the spirit of a deceased father will appear in a dream to his eldest son, often admonishing the latter for violating the moral code (*halālu*). To show repentance the spirit will request his son to feed him a bull. In this context the feeding represents ultimate respect for male authority for which the bull becomes a symbol.

As symbols of authority and the division of labor, butter and bulls transcend mundane forms of producing nourishment and everyday social activities, to stand for moral order in the community. Sidāmo women are considered able to produce what is considered positive value in the household. It is not merely a matter of making *ensete* (*was*) edible, but on occasion embellishing it with butter to show her importance in correctly supporting the status of the husband, especially in the presence of guests.

By contrast, cattle are herded by men and boys over distant pastures that bring together the resources of the several households in the neighborhood (*olau*). Numbers and quality of cattle provide a man with an emotional sense of value among other men.<sup>3</sup> It is also suggestive of successfully maintaining connectiveness with previous generations by having the means to honor the requests of deceased elders. Therefore, both butter and cattle become symbols, confirming Graeber’s concept of “floating above and unaffected by the mundane details of human life” (2006: 74).

3 Indeed as one old elder explained to the anthropologist a man would rather die than lose his cattle. He went on to explain how during the Italian occupation soldiers had taken his cattle and he spent days going all over the countryside begging for their return rather than go home without them to his village. Only when he had collected most of them did he feel he could return without feeling less than a man.

## Power by Communication about Events and Things

If butter and bulls symbolically express moral authority of women and men, wood can be seen as reflecting communication power in differing structural contexts. In its most notable form as a tree it signals the responsibility of elders for enforcing morally acceptable rules. The latter always meet under special trees to make policy and settle disputes. As these sessions often last longer than a day, as sundown approaches, the oldest man will suggest they leave the matter under discussion upon the tree until morning. In a different context, that of mourning (*kayičō-witla*) for a man of esteemed age or an especially courageous youth, a smaller tree will be felled. It will then be ceremonially carried, with appropriate lamentations to the place where the mourners are assembled. Here it will be appropriately placed upright on the ground for three days as a representation of the deceased's fame and exploits. People will dance and sing songs concerned with the importance of following the moral code (*halālu*). Often these are laments expressing how people were more faithful to the rules of harmonious community in the past (Hamer 1987: 91–94).

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the symbolic tree honoring the deceased is the change from youth to elderhood, marked by circumcision and initiation to this esteemed status. The Sidāma are unusual in using circumcision to indicate status associated with advanced age rather than the beginning of adolescence. It is after the operation and the movement into a special hut for two months that wood becomes emblematic of the transition. A young boy (*jalla*) is appointed to serve the novitiate elder during the seclusion period. One of his first duties is to kill a special bird (*wanji*), pluck the feathers from its tail, and tie them to the end of a four-foot-long bamboo pole. Then on the evening of a sacred day (*ayanna*) in the celestial calendar, the *jalla* takes this object and places it in the mud of the nearest river. Prior to this event the newly circumcised must speak with humility to others who enter the seclusion hut, but now he may show his soon to be realized elderhood authority especially in regard to his wife and family. Thus the pole becomes more than a piece of wood in the context of nature, being transformed into a symbol of nascent elderhood power.

Thus trees in different contexts translate tangible objects into communicating the struggle to balance individual justice with maintenance of social cohesion, in which recognized persons of

wisdom mediate between the two. The tree under which the elder's council meets becomes a symbol of their presence. It communicates figuratively as symbol of what has happened previously in policy making and dispute settlement and what is yet to follow before consensus is achieved. Disputes and policies are about things (i.e., property) and events using symbols to communicate moral values. They become a means of telling all persons about the importance of community and individual responsibility. In their minds trees become associated with the continuous struggle to maintain social cohesion. Finally, felled trees represent esteem for the dead elders by ordinary people who carry them, singing songs of lamentations to the mourning place. Here they are placed upright while the mourners lament further and urge support for the moral code (*halālu*). After three days of mourning the tree is taken down and sprinkled with water by a female relative, perhaps indicating that in the end the deceased has been returned to the powerful world of spirits, such as those associated with the waterways. Alternatively, it could be a metaphor in which the water stands for one of the most important blessings of the elders calling for rain in time of drought. The fall of the elder in death becomes analogous to the fall of rain.

In another context wood acquires the meaning of punishment. Both parents and elders use sticks, sometimes literally, to punish wayward children. Even a Christian acquaintance of the anthropologist occasionally beat his wife with a stick to reinforce his authority. Younger siblings in later life will sometimes claim that they no longer resent similar beatings of older siblings which they now recognize as useful in "... making them be good." The stick as an instrument of punishment becomes a symbol of moral order.

In a more abstract sense the spear of an elder can communicate the power of an oath. It is not uncommon in cases of theft when there are a number of suspects, and it is difficult to obtain definitive proof against a suspect, to require the latter, on pain of death, to swear their innocence upon an elder's spear. Of even greater solemnity is the use of spears in cursing sorcery. The elders meet in a barren place so as not to harm the soil through cursing, and form a semicircle around their spears. They then ask all the residents of the neighborhood (*olau*) to come forward and swear their innocence by saying, "If I have done this act, may you kill me with these spears." The elders follow the oaths by cursing all sorcerers.

An alternative is oath taking over a wood burning fire, specially kindled in a circle of elders.

A person who fails to tell the truth is believed to ultimately dry up and wither away. In this respect it is interesting that the word for lineage in Sidaminya is *bosello* which consists of ones' closest relatives. *Bosello* literally translates "near the fire." Thus to lie in oath taking is to deny one's antecedents and descendents, essentially becoming a nonperson.

Though women's roles are not associated with trees, wood to a lesser extent than for men in mourning rituals becomes a communicative symbol of power and control differences. This is achieved through rites in which small wooden poles are placed in the ground with the deceased's shawl (*semma*) wrapped around them and surrounded by cooking utensils. The latter are emblematic of household control, the domain of women in food preparation. Wood appears again in the dances of men, in front of the memorial, who continuously wave their spears back and forth as they move forward and backward toward a dancing line of women. I was told this is not done in mourning for young women, but only for the old or those who have died in childbirth. This implies that death in old age is a sign that the deceased by living a long life has shown proper respect for moral authority of the elders of the lineage into which she has married, by seeking to perpetuate its continuity. A young woman dying in childbirth has presumably given up her body, an ultimate act of respect.

Another symbol of the communicative power of things, but in a more ambiguous form, involves the use of milk. In the past men gave cattle rather than cash as bridewealth. The wife, however, continues to support the husband through his cattle. She does this daily by placing the dung of the animals on *ensete* seedlings, nourishing the staple food *ensete* (*wese*) which when suitably prepared by her with butter should be served with milk. Her success in providing milk, especially when there are guests, increases the husband's prestige. But milk, unlike butter, is not solely associated with or controlled by the wife since it comes from cows which are a part of the husband's domain.

The ambiguity of milk is also demonstrated by mythology. According to one such tale the creator (Magāno) appears on earth disguised as an ordinary mortal and asks a woman for water. She seeks to show hospitality by offering milk instead of honoring his request. The creator leaves and meets a snake to whom he makes the same request for water. When the snake responds by bringing water, Magāno grants the latter eternal life, but condemns humans to death. Nevertheless,

the importance of cow's milk as alternative to other life sustaining drinks remains as a symbolic form of separation used in ending the prolonged connectedness with the mother at the time of weaning. Further, it can be used for separating one, especially women, from danger. Again there is a mythical tale of the Hārbigonā and Kavenna clans in the highlands. In this narrative the former escape from slaughter by the latter people by fleeing across the Loghta River. At the request of the Hārbigonā elders the river stops flowing until the fugitives have crossed, only to resume flowing swiftly upon the arrival of their pursuers. Tradition gradually develops of honoring the river and seeking its protection by slaughtering a sheep or a bull. If a supplicant can't afford such a gift, often women seeking safety on a journey, they may alternatively rub butter on rocks and pour milk into the river.

Therefore milk, associated with cattle as emblematic of male control, communicates an ambiguity of the symbolic power in changeful events. For women the animals that provide milk are given by men as a means of separating them from their own agnates and joining them affinally with their husbands. Their off-spring are bodily separated from them at weaning to become a part of the husband's clan. In the event it involves separation of control dominance and dependence of the children on the mother to future control of men over the female child, through marriage negotiations, and the male offspring in inheritance allocation. As to women providing milk as hospitality in serving their husband's guests, the latter's high status and authority are communicated to the community. Reciprocally, the power gained by the husband can then be transferred to the wife as protection, as in the example of a journey involving dangerous water crossings. However, in these two examples it is not simply the symbolic communication of male power in changing events, but also that of women when butter as well as milk is put to protective use. The fragility of human power in general is, however, indicated in the tale of the creator deity who shuns the human means of communicating the obligatory power of hospitality through offering milk by demonstrating the greater power of water in the universe.

### **Domination and Avoidance of Humiliation**

In the connectedness between kinship, generational classes (*lua*), and the establishment of a gerontocracy the giving and receiving a bull, milk,

butter, and prepared *ensete (wasa)* acquires a transcendent meaning. It becomes a process for demonstrating power and the avoidance of humiliation. An example is the relation between an older brother and a younger sister. The bond is always one of protection, even after marriage, but in return the latter's son(s) should serve their maternal uncle by providing him with labor and more than ordinary respect for his age (Hamer 2005: 563 f.). Though this is the cultural norm, there are variations in individual choosing that may work against the prescribed constancy of service of the sister's son to the mother's brother, and reciprocal service of the latter in presenting tangible gifts to the former. Such variation may be attributable to the early death of a mother's brother, the erosion of the bond in recent years due to the cash economy and religious proselytization, and the limitations of time and distance (565). There may also develop a more personal connection with a father's brother and the possibility the mother's brother may lack the resources to properly reciprocate his nephew's service. Regardless of these variables of agency there is general consensus that the elder sister and her son must support the promotion to elderhood rites of her brother. This is done by bringing the aforementioned gifts and in recent times money to pay the circumcision specialist for the operation that marks the beginning of promotion to elderhood (Hamer 1987: 247; ns 16, 17).

The bull brought by the sister's son represents the connectedness between father and son. The wife by bearing a son has created a linkage to the power and authority of the father that will in time become part of his son's status. If the uncle and nephew have had a long relationship of service and gift exchange, the bull becomes a transcendent symbol of respect. On the other hand, should they have been negligent in performing their obligations the gift animal becomes a means of overcoming embarrassment and humiliation. Though the uncle may not have shown the power of authority, he is supposed to show over his nephew, and as the latter has neglected his service and respect duties, the bull remains a symbol of what is supposed to happen. As Strecker suggests, it disguises support for the ideal location of power and control and as an "artful placement" becomes an important symbol for avoidance of humiliation (1988: 208–211; 214). The presentation of butter, milk, and *ensete (wasa)* becomes in like manner an indication of the support the sister should have shown, or partially neglected by not insisting on her son's responsibilities, is a means of avoiding humiliation. It is also an indicator that mother and

son support the norms of elderhood for authority and power. This shows a respect for normative continuity over generations to come.

### Discussion and Conclusion

As Strecker (1988: 214 f.) proposes, when the natural order of phenomena is ignored, symbols occur. For example, milk does not normally exist with water, but through artful displacement in certain contexts it communicates the fear of women of powerful water spirits when crossing dangerous waterways. In this situation milk may be poured in the water as an offering. In the myth of the creator's (Magāno) visit and request for water, it is shown as hospitality to a guest rather than for satisfying thirst. Nevertheless, milk also communicates ambiguity as well as power in that it can as easily become an indicator of social separation.

Butter is a food, but with the reversal of the social order from female to male dominance it is also an emotional symbol of support for the new social status of women. Not only is it a means of enhancing status but can be used to bargain with powerful spirits to protect women from illness and support emotional and practical desires to bear children. Bulls and cattle have similar functions for men. They support their notional desires by symbolizing wealth and elderhood status as gifts from the more powerful deceased elders.

The sheer power of communication is provided in certain living trees as the setting for resolving social conflict. Alternatively, trees may be removed from their natural environments to become symbols of death. Lesser use of wood fragments occurs by attaching it to blades or using simply sticks for admonishing wrongdoing in contexts of childhood punishment and adult oath taking. But trees and sticks of wood also become symbols of finality in the deaths of men and women.

Dominance and fear of humiliation involve gift giving in linking agnates and affines in elderhood promotion rituals. Agnatic-affinal ties of marriage are critical in supporting the gerontocratic authority that overcomes kinship divisions in seeking to form communal harmony. Ritually it involves the symbolic meaning of bulls, butter, milk combined with the staple food of *ensete* in gift giving. These are the objects given to an initiate elder kinsman to show respectful commitment to a form of dominant authority, that insures continuity of the gerontocratic process. Even if the required practices leading to initiation promotion ritual have

been neglected or ignored, the symbolism of the gifts provides compensation and avoidance of humiliation for the participants.

Thus the natural objects of butter, milk, wood, and cattle are easily translated in the imaginings of the Sidāma into symbols for social control of the moral order and production. This is because the people unlike, for example, Westerners are not saturated with modernism. Sidāma have not lost touch with the environment which has remained so much a part of their imaginings and have not given way to the sense that technology and consumerism ultimately controls the universe and their destinies.

In all of this I have been interested in looking at Sidāma symbols that are of considerable cultural and historical depth. But I have hinted at changes in ritual associated with the modern phenomenon of a cash economy. The people have had a cash economy in coffee production dating at least from the middle of the twentieth century. Money is used as the medium of exchange in traditional market places and is given, as indicated, to compensate the circumciser who now performs the elderhood promotion rite with a razor rather than an obsidian blade. Currency has even penetrated the elder's councils (*songo*), with fines being paid in currency rather than cattle. Relations of power and support between husbands and wives have to some extent been eroded by the latter resenting, even threatening their husbands, for not being permitted to adequately share in the new symbol (Hamer and Hamer 1994).

It is evident, however, that the new does not simply replace old symbols, but new forms are often given old meanings or the reverse. Consequently currency, rather than replacing, is simply a modern version of butter, cattle, wood, and milk. It becomes simply an alternative symbol added to the others. So far it does not seem to have created contradictions or discordancy as the struggle for cash seems to have done in some areas of Papua New Guinea (see especially Knauff 2002).

The question remains, however, as to when and if symbolic forms of consumerism replace the old symbols? Robert Foster, following Miller (1995: 1), defines consumerism as living through "objects and images not of one's own creation" (Foster 2002: 60). This implies degrees of Western-style education, industrialization, and capital formation only to be found in the most elementary forms in Sidāma land. Moreover, as Foster elaborates, such a movement toward modernity is "indeterminate and nonlinear" (2002: 62). So the presence of currency is not a change in meaning leading inevitably to global consumerism. Nor is

there at present a noticeable class distinction between young intellectuals and elders leading to conflict. For most Sidāma it is still objects and images of one's own making that dominate symbolism with money providing only an alternative. The latter does not provide the emotional personalism so important in the social relations of power and production.

To conclude there is an important point that V. Turner made years ago about the creation of symbols through artful displacement involving "a unitary power, conflating all the powers inherent in the activities, objects, relationships, and ideas" (1967: 298). Nevertheless one cannot ignore an important caveat by Strecker that involves the difficulty of the ethnographer in discourse and participant observation, as well as contemplating the transcendence of objects from one context to another in making symbols (1988: 222). As he suggests, meaning is hidden and its potential "can never be exhausted" nor proven as an ultimate explanation. Beliefs and values are always in flux, even consciously, and the unconscious element in discourse and observation is virtually impenetrable.

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## The Origin of the Rhaetians

Alfréd Tóth

I dedicate this article to the blessed memory of my unforgettable teacher and best friend in this world, Prof. Dr. Linus Brunner.

### 1 Towards a Relative Chronology of the Rhaetic Language

The existence of the Rhaetians and their language, Rhaetic, although known since the first mentioning of the Rhaetic wine in Cato (234–149 B.C.), *de re rustica*, fragm. 364 (Schönberger) = fragm. 8 (Jordan), and especially Pliny XVIII, 172 who tells us that the Rhaetic name for the plow with wheels was *ploum*, has not been deciphered correctly until 1982, when the Swiss linguist Prof. Linus Brunner (1909–1987) published the first readings of the Rhaetic inscriptions (Brunner 1981). In a long series of articles,<sup>1</sup> Brunner proved that Rhaetic was an Eastern Semitic language, most closely related to Akkadian, but also showing roots and grammatical features that are only known in Western Semitic languages, mostly in Arabic and Hebrew. Brunner also found 1 Ugaritic, 1 Phoenician, 1 Hittite, and a few other words of Indo-European origin (Tóth and Brunner 2007: 104 ff.). In Tóth and Brunner (2007) and in a few recent works (Tóth 2007a–o), I have assembled the additional information we have gotten about Rhaetic and the origin of the Rhaetians in the past twenty years. I will sum them up here briefly:

1. Initial Akkadian *w-* that has disappeared at about the time of King Hammurabi (1792–1750) (cf. Brockelmann 1908: 139). But we find it preserved in the Rhaetic inscription PNAKE VITAMU LAKHE "I have asked you for help, Vitam(m)u)"<sup>2</sup> in VITAMU, the name of an Assyrian death-ghost which appears in Akkadian as Etem(mu), Itammu. Since this Rhaetic inscription was found on a granite boulder close to Vadana/Pfatten in South Tyrol (Italy), this proves that the Rhaetians must have left their Mesopotamian homeland before Akkadian *w-* >  $\emptyset$ -, i.e., before the end of the 18th century B.C.

1 Brunner 1982a–d; 1983a–d, 1984, 1985a–e, 1986, 1987a–d.

2 PID 196; Brunner and Tóth 1987: 61; Tóth and Brunner 2007: 68. The numbers after "PID," "Bravi," and "Mancini" refer to the numbers of the inscriptions and not to pages.