Perspectives on coffee culture: Ge’ez conundrums

Ethiopia is the cradle of coffee culture, yet early evidence for it is scant. Does the Ge’ez word for coffee reveal clues? I propose an etymological link to the Zorastrian Emperor of Persia, Khosrow I (or II), reflecting contemporaneous Aksumite ‘anti-coffee’ sentiments.

Ge’ez, used in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo liturgy since the fourth century, is traced to the first century emergence of Aksum(1). Ge’ez for coffee is Etse Kusra/Khusra (Etse=plant)(2). Few early manuscripts exist(1). The fifteenth century Dǝrsanä ለዮን probably reflects earlier traditions: coffee is described as ‘a devilish evil tree’; kusra as traded with Moslems but strictly forbidden for Christians(3).

Tadesse(2) links kusra to Asian words, including eunuch. In Persian, kusra can mean ‘the habit of drinking much wine’(4). Semantic shifts from ‘wine’ to ‘coffee’ are noted in other languages. Alternatively, or concomitantly, the origin could be a name. Likely an enemy: kusra shares the Ge’ez consonants of ‘abominable’(3).

Khosrow I ‘Anushirvan’ was a powerful enemy in the sixth century, so was his grandson Khosrow II ‘Parviz’ in the seventh. Transliterations of Khosrow include ‘Khusrau’(5) and ‘Khusra’(6). Furthermore, Anushirvan likely knew of coffee. He ousted Aksum from Yemen, and actively sought out medical knowledge from other cultures(5).

References:


