

Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia

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The workshop “Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia” was held on 15th-16th July in the Hiob Ludolf Center for Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg University. Organized by the project Ethio-Spare, the workshop became the first in the series of scholarly meetings planned to take place in the course of the project, meant to become a professional forum for presenting progress of Ethio-Spare and stimulating the discussion among the professionals dealing with the study of the historical cultural heritage created in the Christian environment of Ethiopia.

The organizers did not intend to confine the workshop within the narrow thematic frames of one specific topic. The idea was to convene the participants – specialists dealing with Ethiopian Middle Ages – who have the first hand experience of field work in Ethiopia and deal with the material (in the first line texts, but also pieces of art or architecture) in its proper local context. The accent was then set upon the definition of the “ecclesiastic network” and those ecclesiastic networks present in North Ethiopia which historically played an extraordinary role in the production of the cultural heritage. Besides, presentations of individual sites, their libraries and history were also included into the program.

The introduction into the discussion was made by the head of Ethio-Spare, Dr. D. Nosnitsin (“Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Methodologies and Types of Approach”). He exposed the pre-history of the current undertaking in the broader context (starting from the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition to the Ethiopian images data base *Mäzgäbä Seelat*) and presented the research strategy and the method of documentation currently implemented by Ethio-Spare. He underlined the necessity of (re)establishing and closely attending the original historical context in which the material used for historical or philological studies (esp. manuscripts) emerged and was kept. He reiterated a special character of North Ethiopia research area where the scholars faces several important and complicated tasks, to be completed at the same time: search for, recording, preservation and study of the cultural heritage.

A. Wion (“Monastic Networks in North Ethiopia”) discussed the notion of an ecclesiastic network – a term which has been recently introduced and is increasingly used in the scholarly discussion – as referring to the historically interconnected net of ecclesiastic institutions and their “sphere of influence”. The discussion which followed the presentation revealed the broad and somewhat indefinite meaning of the term, on one side, and its biased usage, on the other side. It appears to be useful in “structuring” the ecclesiastic landscape of North Ethiopia as composed of several “networks”, but should be understood rather as “working model” for reconstruction of the history of the region. While referring to the networks of the ?Ewostateans or ?Estifanosites, the 14th-15th and 15th-16th-cent. monastic movements of North Ethiopia, it turns out that we still know too little to understand how they were organized and operated. At what stage several ecclesiastic institutions become a

“network”? What are the features of a network? Did every ecclesiastic institution in North Ethiopia necessarily belong to a network? Were there other networks than those of the ?Ewostateans and ?Estifanosites? The further discussion contributed a lot to the clarification of the notion of “networks”, with useful comments coming from specialists in other disciplines (anthropologists, archaeologists). A few similar phenomena from other traditions were also referred to. Further communications contributed with fresh material, new questions and new points of view.

A. Brita (“Ecclesiastic Sites of the Nine Saints”) presented a talk about the sites connected with the so-called Nine Saints and made a survey of their local hagiographic and veneration traditions. The historical core of the Nine Saints’ hagiography is represented by three ancient traditions: that of Pāntalewon, Zä-Mika?el ?Arägawi, and Gärima. The veneration of some others is attested at ancient sites known every since, but no full-scale old hagiographic traditions has been discovered so far (Yem?ata, ?Afše, Liqanos). Finally, sites of a few Saints have not been identified yet (?Alef, ?Oş). The issue of the “horizontal links” between the institutions has been raised: did any of the traditions create a network? At least in some cases we can assume that it did: Zä-Mika?el ?Arägawi, whose veneration was centered upon the ancient and powerful monastery Däbrä Dammo, and whose hagiography is widely spread in North Ethiopia. Which institutions, however, can be referred to as the members of the network? Did the priests and monks of the “Nine Saints” sites share a feeling that their founders belonged to the same group?

F. Le Cadre (“Monastic Network of Mädhaninä ?Egzi?”) presented his study of the sites linked to the important monastery Däbrä Bänkwal and its founder, ?abunä Mädhaninä ?Egzi?. In the course of his PhD research, he managed to locate the monasteries and churches of the most of the 19 disciples of the Saint, scattered over very wide area, from Gondär to East Tigray, and known before only from his hagiography and traditional monastic genealogies. In those churches and monasteries he found and recorded around 11 hagiographic works, most of them previously unknown or known through secondary references.

Prof. M. Gervers raised the issue of the ?Ewostatean monastic network in the context of the contemporary ecclesiastic landscape. Historical sources provide us with a substantial amount of the information on the core of the ?Ewostatean congregation. However, projecting the historical picture upon the contemporary context creates some difficulties (especially in view of the fact that the ?Ewostateans were fully reconciled with the Church already by the end of the 15th cent.). Moreover, as the field research demonstrates, the known sources provide only a rough picture which does not include or explain details found in the course of the field research. What are the indications of the (historical) adherence of an ecclesiastic community to the ?Ewostatean movement? The so-called ?Ewostatean style as well as images of ?abunä ?Ewostatewos in the churches (wide-spread in the Gondärine Ethiopia) can hardly be considered as secure references to the ?Ewostatean influence. Apparently, a secure hint is the veneration of ?abunä ?Ewostatewos himself proved through the

presence of his hagiography, or *tabots*, or the cult of another saint whose links to the ?Ewostatean network are well attested. E.g., Däbrä Ṣärabi, being apparently an important ?Ewostatean monastery (in which ?abunä ?Ewostatewos received his monastic habit) previously escaped close attention of the scholars, and only now attempts have been undertaken to investigate its rich library. A few previously unknown sites with traces of connection with ?Ewostatean movement have recently been discovered. They are churches scattered from South Tegräy (where the ?Ewostatean influence came indirectly, from Däbrä San in Bägemdär) to Gulo Mäkäda, East Tegräy, where the link to the ?Ewostatean network is attested through the veneration of ?abunä ?Ananya, the third abbot of Däbrä Ṣärabi.

Dr. Denis Nosnitsin, the head of the project Ethio-Spare, presented previously unknown sites of East Tegräy ("New Branches of the "Stephanite" Monastic Network? Unknown Sites in East Tegräy") whose libraries contain traces of historical links with the monastery Gundä Gunde, the former center of the ?Eṣṭifanosite movement. As an introduction, he summarized the state of the studies of the movement, referring, among others, to our poor knowledge of the precise geographical extension and members of the Gundä Gunde's network, and to insufficient attention to the later stage of the history of Gundä Gunde. The scholarly historiography of the movement has mostly focused upon the 15th-cent. controversy and conflict. Most of the studies rely upon the hagiographic works created in Gundä Gunde, which are biased sources, and, though informative, are not really useful for the reconstruction of the real historical geography of the ?Eṣṭifanosite movement and its influences. In the course of the field missions in Ganta ?Afäšum and Gulo Mäkäda, the team found indications revealing historical links to Gundä Gunde in the libraries of at least four sites (three of them previously unknown): the monastery of Kidanä Məhrät Mäködä; the churches of Maryam Mäkan, Maryam Ḥarenät Gäbäzäyti, Maryam Fogäda. Located to the southeast from የAddigrat, Maryam Ḥarenät Gäbäzäyti was within the area of Gundä Gunde influence already in the 16th cent. In cases of Kidanä Məhrät Mäködä, Maryam Mäkan and Maryam Fogäda, the connection to Gundä Gunde is proved by the veneration of Mäzgäbä Šellase, a prominent 17th - early 18th-cent. abbot of the monastery, and the presence of his hagiography. These three sites apparently represent the western border of the network of Gundä Gunde (with Mäködä located far behind the የAläqwa pass, quite distant from Gundä Gunde), which was reached, however, only in the early 18th cent. In all these cases, it is difficult to speak about the ?Eṣṭifanos influences in the sense of the 15th-cent. movement; at the same time, historical connection to Gundä Gunde and the cult of ?abunä Mäzgäbä Šellase implicated also the veneration of ?Eṣṭifanos, the ideological had of the movement, and awareness for the reasons of his persecution.

Two individual sites were represented by the other members of Ethio-Spare. S. Ancel made an overview of the history and library of the church Mäkanä Ḥeywät Paraqlītos. Recently, a South Arabian inscription suggestive of the ancient age of the

site was found at ዴብረ ቀለስ. The inscription became known due to a publication, but the later (medieval) tradition present at the church remained outside the discussion. An overview of the site and a thorough research of its large library have been recently conducted by the team of the project. It turned out that the site was mentioned, in fact, by the 16th-cent. Francisco Alvares (*The Prester John of the Indies*, chs. 42-44), but the reference was obscured by the wrong interpretation of the Portuguese itinerary. The church library shows several stages of development, the first being represented by a number of 16th-cent. manuscripts. The library was profoundly renovated and enlarged in the late 19th cent., with ca. 10 new manuscripts having entered the collection. The most interesting feature of the site is the local veneration of a group ሳደቅን ንጂ-ዲብረ ቀለስ, “the Righteous Ones of ዴብረ ቀለስ”, called also ሳማታት ዴብረ ቀለስ, “the Martyrs of ዴብረ ቀለስ”, a group of previously unknown “anonymous saints”. Their hagiography is attested in a number of manuscripts dating into different periods (the oldest one dating into 1523 A.D.); according to their Vita, they came to Ethiopia in from “Tiberias”, preached Christianity, founded the church at ዴብረ ቀለስ, and were later martyred by “Jews”. When King ዘእልሬ በመዳደ fell sick he came to the burial of the “Righteous Ones”, was cured and donated a land charter to the church. In the course of the time, the hagiographic dossier of the “Righteous Ones” of ዴብረ ቀለስ was enriched by a collection of miracles, a short Synaxarion version of their Vita and *Mälkə?*-hymns.

V. Pisani (“Manuscripts and Scribes of the Church of Mädrä Ruba, Gulo Mäkäda, Tegräy) presented an overview of the library and history of the church Mädrä Ruba Šellase. The oldest manuscripts from the library of the church date into the second half of the 16th cent. The study of the manuscripts of Mädrä Ruba revealed that the collection incorporated manuscripts from at least three other churches. They do not exist today; their books and their *tabots* were brought to Mädrä Ruba. Besides, one of the local scribes who were identified in the course of the project work, called Wäldä Muse, lived in the area of Mädrä Ruba in the second half of the 19th cent., as contemporary of King Yohannès IV (1872-89). At least 8 manuscripts of the church library were written by Wäldä Muse, and some more books copied by him were discovered in a few churches around. His handwriting, one of the numerous 19th-cent. local styles, is not particularly refined and characterized by a tendency to square shapes, very thick vertical and very thin horizontal elements of the letters, and by a particular way of executing ornamental bands.

The final presentation was done by Gäbrä ዘግዥአብሔር Nayzghi, a representative of the Tegräy Culture and Tourism Agency (“Churches and Monasteries of North Ethiopia: Cultural Heritage”). He outlined the broad historical and cultural context of North Ethiopia (Tegräy), and explained plans and prospects concerning the cultural heritage of the region. He described the achievements (construction of museums, running archaeological missions), but also referred to serious problems and difficulties of implementing any research schemes or projects

in Tigray, and prospects of their solution. He cordially invited the scholars to cooperate with the agency and to speak frankly about problems.

The sections of the workshop were regularly followed by discussions, during which the participants made useful comments remarks to the presentations, asked questions and expressed their views and opinions, and investigated the possible ways of the collaboration. The deadline of the submission of papers has been set up upon the end of 2011; the publishing of the proceedings of the workshop has been planned for 2012.

