European Union Seventh Framework Programme
IDEAS
ERC Starting Grant

Ethio-SPaRe
Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia:
Salvation, Preservation and Research

Ninth Mission
March 2015
Report
(by Denis Nosnitsin, PI)

Hamburg University
2015
Introduction

The final field mission of the Ethio-SPaRe project took place on 13.-29.03.2015. This time, the trip was undertaken in cooperation with the University of Mekele, Department of History and Cultural Studies, which had enquired, earlier in the year, for collaboration in the task of urgent study of Mäzäga. This is a wäräda of West Tigray (previously out of the project’s research scope) where many areas will be submerged or affected in various ways, after a while, by the unfolding development projects¹. The first studies of the area were conducted as early as 2008 and resulted in some discoveries; on 22 June - 1 July 2012, the specialists from Mekele University conducted further archaeological survey of the area², identifying more historical sites of importance. In the course of the discussions about current and future research opportunities which took place on the final conference of Ethio-SPaRe (July 2014), an idea was raised to make a survey of manuscripts in the ecclesiastic libraries of at least some of the main churches of the area³, identifying more historical sites of importance. In the course of the discussions about current a future research opportunities which took place on the final conference of Ethio-SPaRe (July 2014), an idea was raised to make a survey of manuscripts in the ecclesiastic libraries of at least some of the main churches of the area, and it was realized in March 2015. The participants of the field mission (16.-25.03.2015) were the PI Dr Denis Nosnitsin and Magdalena Krzyzanowska from the side of Ethio-SPaRe project, and Yohannes Gebreselassie and Yohannes Aytenew from the side of Mekele University³.

The areas which today are embraced by the West Tigray zone – wärädas Kafta Humära, Ṣägäde, Wälqayt – are distant from the core of Tigray; they are climatically harsh, especially the lowland part, the lowland part of Wälqayt, also known as Mäzäga, which was to become the object of the joint research⁴. Even though, specifically the area Wälqayt – Mäzäga is known to play a role in the history of Ethiopia⁵. Formerly it was more heterogeneous then it is now in terms of languages

¹ The so-called Welqayt Irrigation Project aimed at the large-scale sugar production.
² See the press-release of Mekele University “Rescue Project in Mezega and Surroundings, Western Tigray – Discoveries in Heritage and Culture, Improving the Livelihood” (accessed on 05.08.2015, http://213.55.94.36/Old%20site%20backup/index.php/announcements/312-press-release-rescue-project-in-mezega-and-surroundings-western-tigray--discoveries-in-heritage-and-culture-improving-the-livelihood”); a report was submitted to the French Center for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abeba, which supported the research. Among the most important findings of the project was the systematic documentation of the Bet Mulu Castle site.
³ I express my sincere thanks to Prof. Dr. Wolber Smidt (Mekele University) whose help was decisive during the preparation of the trip.
⁴ The area of Lowland Wälqayt – Mäzäga (sometimes called also Mäzäga Wälqayt) seems to have been mostly uncovered by the studies of G. Ellero, who dealt predominantly with the “Highland Wälqayt” (its administrative center in ‘Addi Rämäs, cp. Ellero 1948, Dore – Mantel-Niecko – Taddia 2005). Moreover, in his excellent anthropological studies, he paid only small attention to the manuscript materials preserved in the churches, concentrating on the oral traditions.
⁵ The information from historical sources is summarized in EAE III, 891a-b-892b (it seems however that the historical Mäzäga does not fully coincide with today’s Lowland Wälqayt-Mäzäga); EAE IV, 1122a-1123a.
and religions. In the 17th century it was, obviously, in the orbit of the Gondärine Kingdom; by the same period, the monastic culture of Waldǝbba became an influential factor in the life of region and the entire country. In the course of history, a number of churches and monasteries were established in both Highland Wälqayt and in Wälqayt-Mäzäga; to study and document their manuscript culture of the latter was set as the primary aim of the field research described below.

The research team made its base in May Gaba, the center of the ṭabiya-district called by the same name. In the next days, it made attempts to reach several churches in the surrounding area, which turned out to be very difficult due to the poor roads and the climate. A few church institutions refused access. Two of them, however, could be studied profoundly, May Ḥargäṣ Giyorgis and May Gaba Mika’el.

May Ḥargäṣ Giyorgis
May Ḥargäṣ (‘Ǝnda) Giyorgis\(^6\) is located in ṭabiya May Čä’a, qušät called by the name of the church. May Hargäṣ Giyorgis is a monastic community and considered gādam. The round church hosts four tabots: St. George, St. Michael, ‘abunä ‘Arägawi and St. Mary\(^7\). May Ḥargäṣ Giyorgis is located in the middle of climatically harsh, very hot area. The church of St. George is round, looking like plastered with concrete from the outside (figs. 1, 2), but it was unfortunately not possible to see the inner part and check the presence of the murals on the sanctuary walls. The compound of the church and monastic settlement are hardly visible from the road since they stand below the level of the ground (fig. 3), but close to a gorge with a small river (May Čä’a). The gorge is covered with thick vegetation (fig. 4); the local people say that it covers caves which were formerly used by hermits. The monastic compound is divided hosts dwelling for monks and nuns and there is a communal house (figs. 5, 6).

The priests and monks could not refer to a foundation time of the monastery, but said that it was founded by “‘abunä Minas hundred years ago”, which should be understood in such a way that May Ḥargäṣ Giyorgis is affiliated with the so-called Betä Minas\(^8\), and was founded by its representatives.

The manuscript collection of the monastery turned out to be interesting\(^9\). Some books (both older and very recent) bear the short notice “Minas” or “zä-Minas”, or “zä-betä Minas”, indicating that they were indeed sent to May Hargäṣ Giyorgis from the Betä Minas – the Minas congregation of Waldǝbba. Apparently, there were no books older than late 16th/17th cent. The “Golden Gospel” is an interesting, heterogeneous book possibly dating to the 17th century: the first two Gospels (Matthew, Luke) are written by a very skilled scribe (fig. 7); a portion of John is written by a less skilled, but still very careful scribe (fig. 8); the rest is written by the first hand. The rubrication is carried out by those two hands respectively\(^10\). The numbers referring to the Canon Tables, punctuations signs, and meticulous text corrections\(^11\) are carried out by a third hand, throughout the volume. The same hand

\(^6\) Ḥargäṣ means “crocodile” in Tǝgrǝňňa (Kane 2000:198); the reason for such a name is not known.

\(^7\) The main feasts are: 12 Ḥadar and 12 Sānē for St. Michael, 18 Ḥadar 23 and Miyazya 23 for St. George, 14 Ṭaqãmt for ‘Arägawi and 21 Ṭarr and 21 Sānē for St. Mary.

\(^8\) One of the two rivaling congregations of Waldǝbba (called after the 16th-century abbot Minas), the second one being Betä Ṭama (s. Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2014).

\(^9\) Containing at least 20 varios older books, and at least 10-15 more recent.

\(^10\) Including, for instance, the names Jesus and Christ.

\(^11\) However, the division of the text to be used for the Canon Tables is carried out only for half of the book.
inscribed also a short supplication of the person (donor or commissioner?) called Gäbrä Laˁul (fig. 9). The blank pages are covered with additional notes, mostly inventories (fig. 10).

Among the hagiographic manuscripts, the most interesting was a 17th century (?) codex containing the Vita of Kiros, Miracles of Gäbrä Mänfās Qaddus and (added later) mälkaˁ-hymn for Kiros. The manuscript, of small size, is written in a peculiar broad and big script by the scribe called Zä-Mikaˁel, and commissioned by someone called ˀAfä Krǝstos (fig. 11).

A 19th century manuscript of Horologium (Mâṣḥâfâ säˁatat) contains interesting images: the church building (‘Aksum Ṣǝyon or another one?), a variation on the topic “Ephrem the Syrian meeting St. Mary” and four pictures of saints, among them such rare personages as Lâṭsun and Pâlamon12 (figs. 12-14).

The Mâṣḥâfâ gabrâ hemamat “Book of the Rite of the Holy Week”, written in the nice Gondârîne (gwâlt) script was produced, according to the colophon, in the 13th year of King Yoḥannâs (most probably possibly Yoḥannâs I, r. 1667-1682, then 1680?), commissioned by Zä-Giyorgis, and written by the scribe Matyas (though the colophon, with name of the commissioner, was added by a different scribe) (figs. 15-16). Underscoring the complexity of the library, from other additional notes in the book it follows that it was in the possession of another church, Kidanä Maḥrât of May Lâbâṭa, another church in Waldabba.

May Gaba Mikaˁel

May Gaba Mikaˁel13 is a big church located at the outskirts of the town of May Gaba. It is a monastic community with ca. 20 monks and 5 nuns. A traditional school is run at the monastery, offering teaching up to the level of liturgy (qaddase). The church has only one tabot, that of St. Michael.

The history of this institution is peculiar since it was formerly located in another place, at the Bet Mulu Castle, which was the foundation of ˀAyanä ˀƎgziˀ, the local governor in the first half of the 18th century. The church was moved from the hill of the castle down in 1953 by fitawrari Yǝlma; in ca. 1971, the town of May Gaba was founded. Currently the town is quickly expanding; soon the monastery will stand in the urban area, the circumstance which will endanger the local ecclesiastic collection.

The current church is a recent building (fig. 17). However, the monks could not tell the name of the founder and an approximate foundation time. The head of May Gaba Mikaˁel only stated that the local community is closely connected with the Betä Minas of Waldabba.

The collection of May Gaba Mikaˁel has scores of interesting books, and shows a few typical for the monastic library14. As in the case before, there are some books marked with the sign of the “House of Minas” (Betä Minas). A sizable (25 quires) 17th century (?) manuscript of Täʾamrä Maryam “Miracles of Mary”, written in several hands, was donated, according to a note, by “communities of ˀAbrântant to Kasad ˀAga Maryam”; but the original commissioners were ˀAṣrâtä Šayon, Mâlkaˁa Krastos and Mârqorewos (fig. 18-20). Dâbrä ˀAbrântant is one of the biggest Waldabba monasteries15. The library possesses a late 16th or 17th century Targame mälʾaktä Ṭawlos, Commentary of John Chrysostom on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews (with added glosses in commentaries in Gǝˁaz) (fig. 19) which occurs in monastic libraries of the upper level rather than in

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13 Gaba means in a kind of thorny tree in Tagraña (Kane 2000:2289, Zizyphus spina christi).
14 The library encompasses up to 15 historical books, and some 15 recent books.
15 S. EAE II, 8a-9b.
modest church libraries; a 17th-century (?) copy of Ḍəragawī mānfāsawī “Spiritual Elder” and not very common Zena ṣ Abōw, probably of the same age. A manuscript of Māshafā ganzät, Book of the funeral ritual, donated by Ḍeṣratā Ṣayon (the same as above?) and Wāldä Haymanot, datable to the 17th century at least, appears to be an exceptionally well preserved example of the service book (figs. 20-21) which is intensively used for the funeral service and do not survive over a long time.

Conclusion
The monastic libraries of the Waldǝbba churches and monasteries are reportedly extremely rich but have never been explored, and this area has been hardly accessible to the scholars. The field research produced clear indications that the manuscript culture of the area of study, adjacent to Waldǝbba, is richer than it was assumed. A lot of books which entered the collections of the churches, also of those recently founded, appears to have come from Waldǝbba or through the intermediation of Waldǝbba. It is important to start the systematic exploration and reconnaissance at least in the neighboring districts, which were also under the strong influence of Waldǝbba, to approach the latter in the future. It is equally important that the authorized institutions and scholars will start elaborating the strategy as to how this very specific cultural area can be recorded and protected, in view of the ongoing development projects and the overall deep changes taking place in the local physical and cultural landscape.

Quoted bibliography


Noticeable are a rare ligature for the word ከለለየየ የላይ የሃለ፡ሉያ፡, contracted into two signs (fig. 21, col. Va, Ra), and the elegant frame for the readings’ indications in the upper margin (fig. 21).
Plates

Fig. 1. May Ḥargäṣ Ḕīnda Giyorgis, the main church

Fig. 2. May Ḥargäṣ Ḕīnda Giyorgis, the main church
Fig. 3. May Ḥargāṣ Ḥinda Giyorgis, seen from afar

Fig. 4. May Ḥargāṣ Ḥinda Giyorgis, the gorge of the river May Ṣā’a
Fig. 5. May Ḥargāṣ Ṣ̣nda Giyorgis, monks’ dwellings

Fig. 6. May Ḥargāṣ Ṣ̣nda Giyorgis, communal house
Figg. 7, 8, 9, 10. May Hargäs Ṣinda Giyorgis, the Four Gospels book.
Fig. 11. May Ḥargāṣ Ḳīnda Giyorgis, Vita of Kiros

Fig. 12, 13, 14. May Ḥargāṣ Ḳīnda Giyorgis, Horologium
Fig. 15. May Ḥargāṣ ḋinda Giyorgis, Book of the Rite of the Holy Week

Fig. 16. May Ḥargāṣ ḋinda Giyorgis, Book of the Rite of the Holy Week

Fig. 17. May Gaba Mikaʾel, the main church
Figg. 18.-20 May Gaba Mika’el, Miracles of Mary

Fig. 21. May Gaba Mika’el, Commentary of John Chrysostom on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews
Fig. 22. May Gaba Mika’el, Book of the funeral ritual

Fig. 23. May Gaba Mika’el, Book of the funeral ritual
**IMPRESSUM**

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