



Some Considerations on Premodern Written Amharic Poetry

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What is Old Amharic?

- The language of a number of texts, believed to have been written prior to the 18th cent.
- Some orthographical, phonetical and morphological peculiarities, e.g.:
 - *ḥ*, *h* still kept in many words: *ḥand* vs. later *and*; *ḥayyā* - *ayyā*;
harbäñña - *arbäñña*, *het* - *yet*, etc.
 - plural marker: *-ačč(i)* vs. *-očč*
 - suffix 3 pers. plur.: *-(w)aččo* vs. *-aččäw*
 - lack of the particle *-mm-* in the negative relative imperfect
 - copula *-t*
 - consequent use of Ethiopic words: *ənbälä* for *yalä* (“without”),
täfäšḥa for *däss alä*, *tädässätä* (“rejoice”)
 - some vocabularies missing from the modern Amharic
- The language of the 18th and 19th cent. is no longer “Old Amharic”

Beginning of Amharic Written Tradition

Such works as, for instance:

- “A Treatise on the Theology of the Trinity”, MS EMMML no. 2118 (Getatchew Haile 1979)
- “Fragmentum Piquesii”, MS BN éth. 109, cp. MS JE 9 (Cowley 1983)
- A treatise on theology, MS 79.MS Clarke Or 39, 16th cent. according to Ullendorff 1951:19
- *Säwasəw*, attested in a number of MSS, several versions (Getatchew Haile 1966, Strelcyn 1964)
- “A Teaching of Faith”, MS from May ?Anbäsa Kidanä Məhrät (Cowley 1974, Getatchew Haile 1980)
- A catechism, MS EMMML no. 5649 (Getatchew Haile 2011)
- A commentary on the Nicene Creed, MS JE 48 E = Dabra Gannat 148; preamble in BN d’Abbadie 101, EMMML nos. 2468, 7007 (Appleyard 2006); a version of the text is contained also in MS Gundä Gunde GG-144

Beginning of Amharic Written Tradition

- A treatise on the theology of *qəbʿat*, MS EMMML no. 2840 (Getatchew Haile 1986)
- “Mysteries of the Psalms”, MS BritLib Or. 11390 (Strelcyn 1981)
- Texts from MS EMMML no. 7007 (Getatchew Haile 1983, some edited in the meanwhile)
and some others texts.

Poetic works:

- “Royal songs”, MS Oxford, Bodleian Library Or. 29 = Bruce 88 (ff. 36-37), early 17th cent. (Guidi 1889; Littmann 1914)
- Praising poems in MS EMMML no. 1943 (f. 3r), early 17th cent. (Getatchew Haile 1979a)
- “Mystery of the Rosary” poem, nine MSS (Goldenberg 2013)

Beginning of Amharic written tradition

- “Condemnation of Glory” poems, four versions in six MSS (Getatchew Haile 2005, 2014; Nosnitsin – Bulakh 2014)
- Penitential poems, MS EMMML no. 6907, from Däbrä Libanos, 18th cent. (?) (Getatchew Haile 1991)
- A poem condemning the Arian heresy, MS EMMML no. 916, 17th/18th century (?)
- A poem praising a military victory, MS AATH-10, from ?Addi ?Abun Täklä Haymanot (?), Ethio-SPaRe
- Poems in MS St. Petersburg, IVRAN, Koriander 2, 17th/18th cent. (?)

Məştirä səgeyat “Mystery of the Rosary”

- Edited after six MSS by Goldenberg 2013:

PrKult Or. 234

EMML no. 1308

EMML no. 586

BritLib Add. 16238

BN d'Abbadie 235

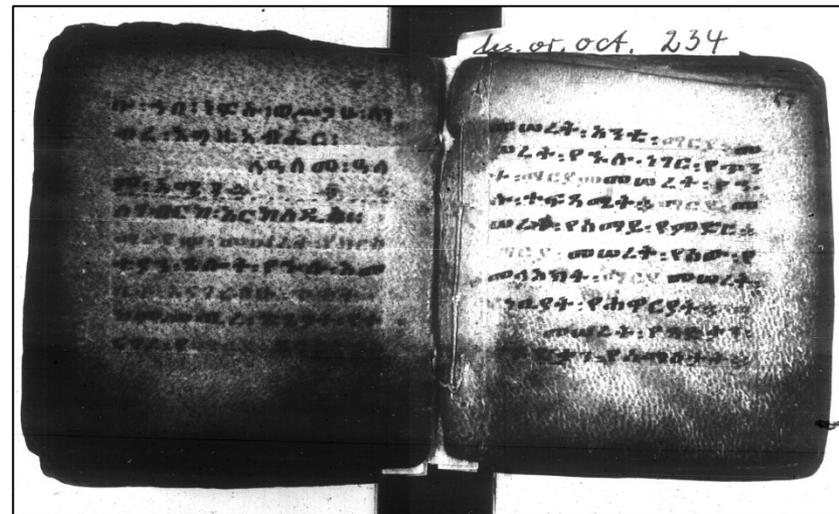
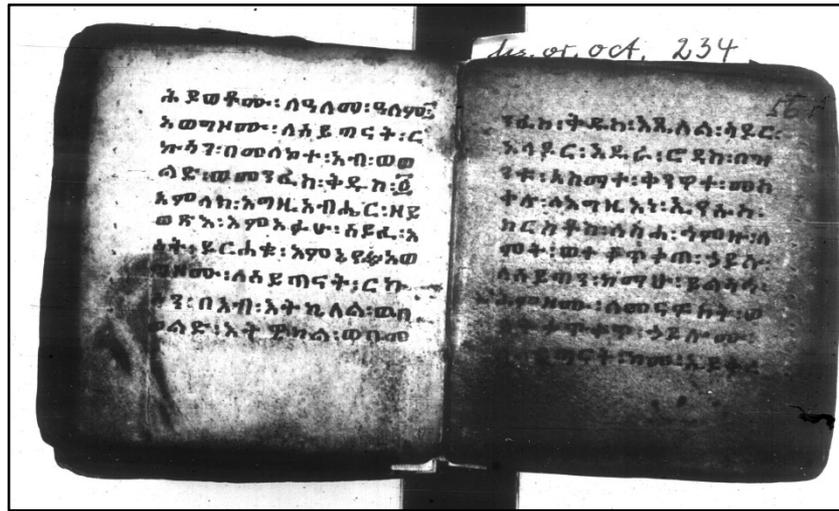
- MS BerPrKult Or. 234, not re-catalogued after Dillmann 1878; estimated by him to be “200 or more years old”; possibly 17th cent.

- More witnesses recorded by the project Ethio-SPaRe:

TKMG-012, SDM-019 (17th cent.)

AGKM-035 (19th cent.)

MS BerPrKult, Or. 234, Collection of poems and prayers,
7.3x7.0cm; 17th cent.; provenance unknown



MS SDM-019, Collection of poems and prayers,
7.0x7.7x2.2cm; 17th cent., in private possession,
Sota Däbrä Sälam (Tigray)



MS SDM-019, *Məştirä səgeyat* (incomplete)
ff. 20r, 37v.



Märgämä kəbr “Condemnation of Glory”

- 1) MS JE 541, the same text as in MS British Library, Orient 575, unpublished
- 2) MS EMMML no. 7007 (Getatchew Haile 2005)
- 3) MS EMMML no. 5483 (Getatchew Haile 2014), similar to MBAE-001, May Bäʾatti ʾArbaʿəttu ʾƏnsəsa (incomplete), unpublished
- 4) MS MKL-008, Lägay Kidanä Məḥrät (Bulakh – Nosnitsin, in print)

Copied as additional texts in all MSS except EMMML 7007

MS MKL-008, Missal, 18x 15.5x6.0 cm; 1650-60,
Läqay Kidanä Məhrät (Tigray)



MS MBAE-001, "Praises of God", 19.4x 16.5x7.5 cm; 18th cent.
May Bä'atti 'Arba'ëttu 'Ënsəsa (Tigray)



Märgämä kəbr “Condemnation of Glory”

- Groups of witnesses 1-2 and 2-3 share some portions of the text
- *Märgämä kəbr* in MKL-008 seems to be an independent composition
- *Märgämä kəbr* in MKL-008 could be written in the first half of the 17th cent.

Märgämä kəbr “Condemnation of Glory”

JE 541
Orient. 575

EMML 5483
(MBAE-001 ?)

EMML 7007

MKL-008

Märgämä kəbr “Condemnation of Glory”

- The topics are the same:
 - the worldly glory is delicious food, cattle, pretty women, luxurious things, reward for military service, etc.
 - the world is deceitful
 - everyone is mortal
 - death will come unexpectedly
 - the funeral ritual
 - the death angel
 - Last Judgement, etc.
- The wording is largely different

Märgämä kəbr “Condemnation of Glory”

- Ethiopic title *Märgämä kəbr* does not appear in all witnesses
- Introductory/concluding formulas not in all witnesses
- “Additional” character; edifying function
- Rooted in folklore
- Influenced by works of the Ethiopic literature
- Spread also outside of Amharic speaking areas
- European influence (?), cp. *contemptus mundi* works
- “Catalogue” of topics and images for preaching (?)
- “Fluid” text

The genres of Old Amharic (written) poetry

- Praising poems
- Poems dedicated to St. Mary
- Meditative penitential poems
- “Condemnation of glory” poems
- Reproaching poems (?)

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Thank you for your attention!



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