

D. Nosnitsin

ETHIOPIAN MANUSCRIPTS
AND ETHIOPIAN MANUSCRIPT STUDIES
A BRIEF OVERVIEW AND EVALUATION

In recent years, in the context of developing disciplines studying the medieval manuscript tradition, and a growing interest in Oriental and African manuscript cultures, Ethiopian manuscript studies are beginning to take on a new momentum. As a result, several publications summarizing the available knowledge, current bibliography and state of the field have recently appeared (see A. Bausi, “La tradizione scrittoria etiopica”, *Segno e testo* 6, 2008, pp. 507-557; v. “Manuscripts”, in: S. Uhlig [ed.], *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. III: *He-N*, Wiesbaden 2007, pp. 738-752; esp. Fäqadä Sellase Täfärra, *Tentawi yäbranna mäsaheft azzägäjajät*, “The Ancient Way of Preparing Parchment Books”, Addis Abäba 2002 E.C. = 2010 A.D., in Amharic). To avoid repetitions and generalities, I will first give a brief overview of Ethiopian manuscript culture, and then summarize my point of view on the current state of affairs and the outstanding tasks in the field of Ethiopian manuscript studies. The discussion below is devoted only to the book tradition of Christian Ethiopia.

History

In sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia is exceptional in that it had its own written tradition – in Gé’éz* (Ethiopic, Old Ethiopic), an indigenous Semitic language – from a very early period, while Ethiopian Christian literature in Ge’ez is unique in terms of quantity and quality of the works. Writing existed in Ethiopia long before the production of literature and manuscripts, and left traces in the form of epigraphic monuments. The introduction of Christianity as the state religion around the second quarter of the 4th century A.D. created a new situation. It is commonly assumed that the requirements of the new religion caused a “reform” of the writing system (introduction of a graphic means for representing the vowels), the use of new materials for writing, and the adoption and further development of book-making techniques.

* In the following, Ethiopian terms and names are given in a simplified and approximate transcription.

Presumably, Ethiopian manuscript culture was never interrupted during Ethiopia's long history: the time of the antique state of Aksum and its aftermath (up to the 8th cent. A.D.); the post-Aksumite period and the reign of the so-called Zagwe dynasty (8th cent. – 1270); the “classical Medieval” period of the Solomonic dynasty (1270 – middle 18th cent., including the flourishing kingdom in central and southern Ethiopia, 15th – early 16th cent.; the Gondarine kingdom of the middle 17th – middle 18th cent.); the period of decentralisation (the so-called “Era of the Princes”; middle 18th cent. – the last third of the 19th cent.); and the modern period. Production of manuscripts according to the traditional technology, though gradually declining, continues to the present day. One should bear in mind that only the post-antique period of the Ethiopian book tradition is documented through real manuscript witnesses. The earliest (pre-thirteenth century) evidence is limited virtually to a couple of manuscripts, the oldest material being contained in the famous Gospel book of Enda Abba Gärima monastery (see Bausi, “La tradizione scrittoria etiopica”, pp. 518-520). The dating of a different antique manuscript, containing the so-called “Aksumite collection” (see Bausi, “The Aksumite Background of the Ethiopic ‘Corpus Canonum’” in: S. Uhlig et al. [eds.], *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies...*, Wiesbaden 2006, pp. 533-541), is expected to be suggested soon. The so-called sixteenth-century “Muslim wars” are considered to have been devastating for the Ethiopian manuscript heritage, the bulk of which thus comes from a later period.

Collections of Ethiopian manuscripts in museums and libraries

Ethiopian manuscripts are known to have reached Europe as early as the 15th cent. or even earlier, via Egypt, through Ethiopian pilgrims to the Holy Land and through members of the Ethiopian monastery Santo Stefano dei Mori in Rome. In later times, adventurers and travellers, missionaries, and military officers, as well as scholars contributed to the emergence of extensive collections which provided material for numerous studies. Today, in Europe alone, only the three biggest collections of Ethiopian manuscripts (Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France; London, British Library) together include ca. 2,700 manuscripts. Oriental collections of nearly all significant European libraries include also Ethiopian fonds, some of them still getting new acquisitions (see, e.g., V. Six, “Neuzugang von äthiopischen Handschriften an die Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz”, *Aethiopica* 10, 2007, pp. 177-83). Recently, the contents of some private collections of considerable size have been published: e.g., O. Raineri, *Catalogo dei rotoli protettori della collezione Sandro Angelini*, Roma 1990 (the collection has been recently acquired

by the Biblioteca Vaticana); O. Raineri, “Inventario dei manoscritti etiopici ‘Raineri’ della Biblioteca Vaticana”, in *Collectanea in honorem Rev.mi Patris Leonardi E. Boyle, O.P...*, Città del Vaticano, 1998 (*Studi e testi* 385); for the Schøyen collection, Oslo, see D. Appleyard, *Ethiopian Manuscripts*, London 1993; for the Sam Fogg collection, London, see S. Fogg & D. Hosking, *Ethiopian Art*, London 2001, etc. In Ethiopia, large collections are found in two institutions in Addis Ababa: the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia (ca. 1500 and ca. 835 manuscripts, resp.; the collections are still largely uncatalogued).

The number of known Ethiopian manuscripts greatly increased in the late 1970s-80s, thanks to the successful microfilming project of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library (now Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA), directed in Ethiopia by Dr. Sergew Hable Selassie (EMML: Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library). More than 9,000 manuscripts were photographed, 5,000 of which were described in the 10-volume catalogue prepared by Dr. Getatchew Haile.

Manuscripts and manuscript culture in Ethiopia

In the early 1980s, the number of manuscripts in Ethiopia was estimated at ca. 200,000 (Sergew Hable Selassie, *Bookmaking in Ethiopia*, Leiden 1981, p. 35), which appears realistic in light of the large number of Ethiopian parish churches and monasteries: 12,596 and 800, resp., according to Aymro Wondmagegnehu & Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa 1970, p. 125; no exact statistical data is available for today, but the number will not differ much from that of the 1970s.

No doubt, the interest in Ethiopian manuscripts and indeed the Ethiopian manuscript culture itself persists today thanks to the fact that traditional manuscript-making still exists in Ethiopia not only as a “tourist attraction”, but in its original function, as an important part of the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox culture and life. One can hardly claim that the techniques of Ethiopian manuscript-making are precisely the same today as they were many centuries ago; however, they do represent the organic and conservative continuation of the ancient tradition. Moreover, despite the great changes that took place in Ethiopia in the 20th century, Ethiopian manuscript culture can still be found, at least in a few places, in cultural settings which still closely resemble the original medieval context. Parchment manuscripts are slowly being replaced by printing, but are still very much desired and preferred to the printed books (which are in fact not so cheap as to be affordable to all churches). Especially in conservative rural areas, the people still retain the traditional reverential attitude to manuscripts,

considering them sacred objects of the Church. Due to political turbulence and difficult conditions in the country, attempts at registering manuscripts in different regions undertaken by the Church and State administrations were not done in a consistent way and have not contributed much to our knowledge of the Ethiopian manuscript culture. In the meantime, a large part of the Ethiopian manuscript evidence has been irreversibly lost; remainder is considered endangered, though the preservation conditions have somewhat improved in recent years.

Types of Ethiopian manuscripts

The main type of Ethiopian handwritten book is the codex, made of folded parchment leaves which are collected in gatherings, sewn together, and given covers. The codex (*māshaf*, *branna*) has dominated the local manuscript culture throughout its history. It is impossible today to establish the exact time when it was first introduced to Ethiopia, but the earliest known Ethiopian manuscripts are codices. The size of the codex varies greatly, depending on the time of preparation and the given text: from “pocket-size” books to volumes more than 45 cm in height, so heavy that a grown man could hardly carry them.

One could speculate whether other, archaic forms of codex were ever used in Ethiopia. Today, manuscripts resembling the “primitive codex” can still be found, with all parchment leaves united in a single quire. Probably, individual leaves were also once used for writing.

Another type of Ethiopian manuscript is the so-called protective (or “magic”) scroll, which is used as a written amulet. Such scrolls (interestingly called *ketab*) are mostly reserved for a very specific (protective or “magic”) type of literature. The scroll is a strip of parchment (or two sewn together), with texts and pictures on one side only. The scrolls are usually prepared by the *dābtāra*, the so-called Ethiopian “non-ordained clergy” who specialise in different fields of church learning and, occasionally, in magic and healing. One type of magic scroll is of smaller size (up to approximately 30 cm), intended for personal use (portable, usually not read, rolled up and carried on the chest); another type, of larger size (up to 2 m), is meant to be unrolled and hung on the wall of the house. The idea that the scroll might have been the “original” manuscript medium in Ethiopia remains merely a hypothesis. The overwhelming majority of Ethiopian Gē‘ēz texts were transmitted in codices, and the oldest known scrolls are not more than some three centuries old.

Still another, less common type of manuscript is represented by the so-called accordion book (called *sensul*). It is made of one or more folded strips of parchment, with or without covers, to which ties can be attached. The earliest known

Ethiopian accordion books date to the late 15th/early 16th century. They were used mostly for pictorial representations (saints, episodes from the life of the Virgin Mary, Christ etc.), but some had both pictures and text (running horizontally, all the pictures on one side and all the text on the other). Remarkably, most of the oldest known exemplars represent high-quality manuscript production, meant for the upper class. Today, however, accordion books of small size (put in a small leather box and carried on the body) appear to be used predominantly for certain “protective” texts.

Writing material: parchment, ink and pen

In Ethiopia, the writing material has always been parchment. There are no hints that any other material was ever used for manuscript production (paper was introduced only in the 19th century, and used mostly for the needs of Europeans). From the available descriptions, it seems that the technology of parchment-making is very similar in most places in Ethiopia (for a summary, see Bausi, “La tradizione scrittoria etiopica”, pp. 531-536). Animals (usually goats, or sheep; less commonly lambs, calves, horses etc.) are selected, washed, and slaughtered; they are flayed with care, to avoid unnecessary cuts or contact of the skin with gall or intestinal fluid. After being soaked in water (in a pot or in a natural stream) for several days and cleaned, the skin is stretched on a wooden frame. The flesh side is scraped with a curved knife and pumice, washed and dried in the sun. Then the hair side is processed. The hair is removed with a special adze-like instrument, and the surface of the skin is sprinkled with water, treated with pumice, and dried. If necessary, the process for each side can be repeated. In addition, both sides of the skin can be treated with fine sand or clay. Leaves of the required size are estimated with a template, the corners of the leaves being marked with small holes made by an awl. Then the leaves are cut out. The quality of parchment can differ considerably, depending on the intended status of the book and the financial resources of the one who commissions it: from finely processed, very white, thin parchment (vellum; made of calf or lamb skin) to parchment of inferior quality, crudely prepared, with hair remaining on the edges of the leaves.

Usually ink of two colours is used for writing: black for the main text and red for *incipit* passages, headings, *nomina sacra* and some other names, elements of punctuation signs etc. A few other colours can be used for decorative ornaments and miniatures. Iron gall ink seems to be unknown in Ethiopia; only carbon ink has ever been used. Traditionally, the basic ingredient of the black ink has been soot, collected from the bottom of cooking utensils. The binder is prepared from roasted grains (maize, barley, etc.); the juice of fruits of an insect-repellent plant

is added (Mellors & Parsons, *Ethiopian Bookmaking: Bookmaking in Ethiopia in the Twenty-First Century*, London 2002, p. 12). The mixture is kept in a vessel and is regularly stirred for several months. The upper layer that dries on the surface is removed and stored apart. After becoming completely dry, the mass can be kept for years; an amount necessary for writing can be taken at any time and mixed with water. Traditionally, red ink is reported to have been prepared on the basis of exclusively plant materials, but today the traditional technology seems to have completely disappeared, due to the availability of industrially produced red ink.

Pens are made from a few local sorts of reed or bamboo. The stem The reed stem is cut into sections which are left to dry. The pen length is around 12 cm. The pen end is carved with a knife and the pen nib is shaped; it is then trimmed, to create the writing edge, and split. The nib of the pen is repeatedly re-sharpened during writing. For ink of different colours different pens are used.

Lay-out

The lay-out is pre-determined already at the stage of cutting out the leaves, since the manuscript-maker usually follows the lay-out of a model manuscript. Different ways of formatting the written space – and, to a certain extent, the dimensions of the codex – are prescribed for different texts: e.g., a Synaxarion is always written in three columns; the Psalms are always arranged in one column, each verse beginning on a new line (stichometrically); most of the liturgical books are arranged in two columns; prayer books are written in one column, etc. For some books, more than one type of lay-out may be used within one manuscript (e.g., Four Gospels). To rule the manuscript and prepare it for entering the text, the bifolios are pricked with an awl (to this end, templates are widely used); then the small holes are connected with faint lines scored on the flesh side of the parchment with a dull awl or the dull edge of the knife, with the help of a ruler. These lines are also visible on the other side of the parchment. The vertical lines are impressed as the first, and then the text lines. The columns are demarcated in the same way. The places for miniatures are calculated in advance, and space is left free on the respective pages.

Assembling the quires

In assembling the quires, the flesh side of one bifolio is commonly put opposite the flesh side of another one, and, correspondingly, the hair side opposite the hair side (Gregory's rule). The most common types of quires are *quaternion* and *quinion*, through other types can also be found. Protective gatherings, most

commonly *binions*, are added to the text block, one after the front cover, and one before the back cover. Originally blank, these folios are frequently filled with additions of different kinds. If the codex was repaired, it could be given a protective quire or leaves taken from another (older) manuscript which, by whatever reason, had been taken out of use, unbound and utilized for repairing other books (maculature) [see fig. 1]. Recent codices (19th-20th cent.) show a tendency to contain more unbalanced quires than older ones, and include more leaves of irregular shape or made of several pieces of parchment.

Writing and script

Usually, Ethiopian scribes did not use any special equipment like writing desk, pen-box etc.; nor did they have any special rooms to work in. Right before the writing, the parchment is again treated with fine sand or clay. The scribe works outdoors sitting on the ground in the shade; he holds the new parchment leaves on his raised knees, and the text to be copied is on his left. The inkhorn and stand for pens (both made of cow horn) are fixed in the ground on his right. The scribe usually works during the daytime, several hours a day. He first produces the main text, in black, leaving lacunae for words to be later written in red by a rubricator (sometimes the same scribe, but frequently another person), and space for miniatures and decorations. The sequence number of the given quire is sometimes indicated in the upper margin of the first recto folio or of the last verso folio.

The Ethiopic script is a majuscule writing system and well intelligible in the bulk of the medieval manuscripts. However, it greatly varies depending on the time, region, and the given text: from microscopic, nearly unreadable letters of the notation system in hymn manuscripts, to nearly 10-mm high slim and elegant script in some Gospel books; from clear handwriting of the main text, to lesser intelligible additional notes [see fig. 2]. *Scriptio continua* was never practiced. In the manuscripts, words are consistently separated by word dividers, though the system of punctuation signs was not too sophisticated and used more irregularly after the 15th century.

Decorations and miniatures

Ethiopian manuscripts lack elaborated initials, and the script basically does not have any decorative elements. The initial text pages can be decorated with ornamental bands (filled with geometric, floral or even anthropomorphic motifs). These can be simple, uncoloured and limited to the upper margin of the page, or, especially in older manuscripts, extremely elaborate, filling the whole

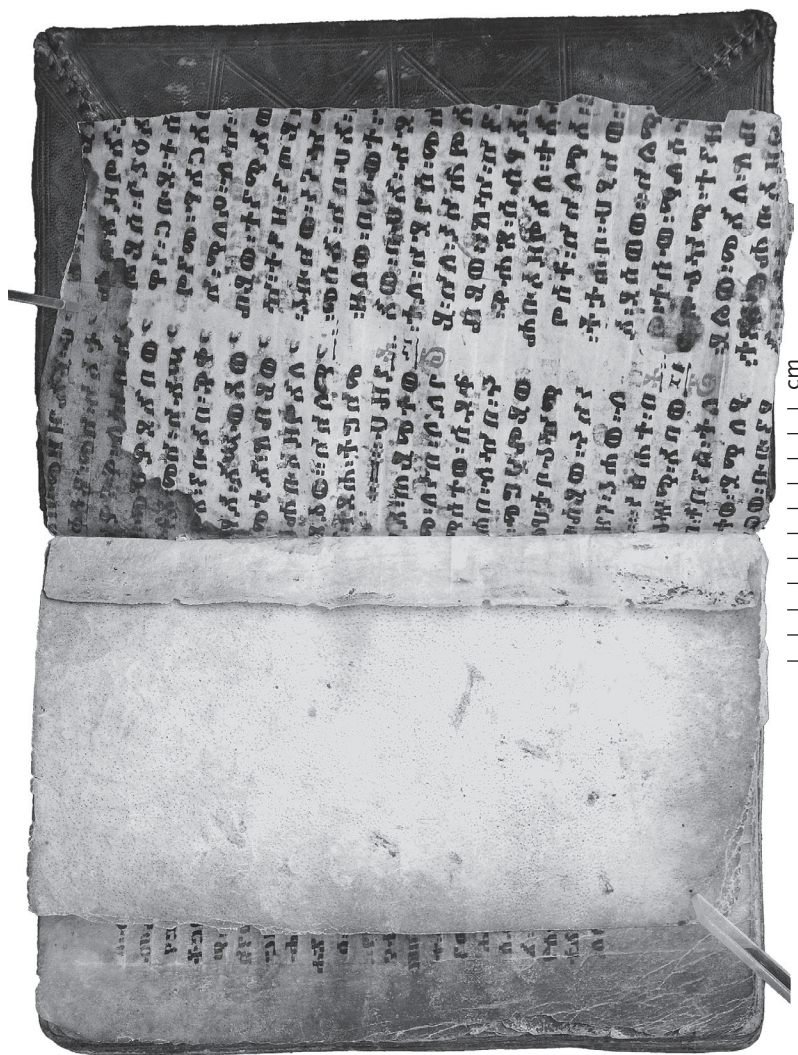


FIG. 1. — A folio from a pre-14th cent. Gospel book (Luk. 6.45 – 7.6) attached as protective leaf to a 15th-/early 16th-cent. homiliary (Däbrä Ma'eso, Tegray, North Ethiopia).

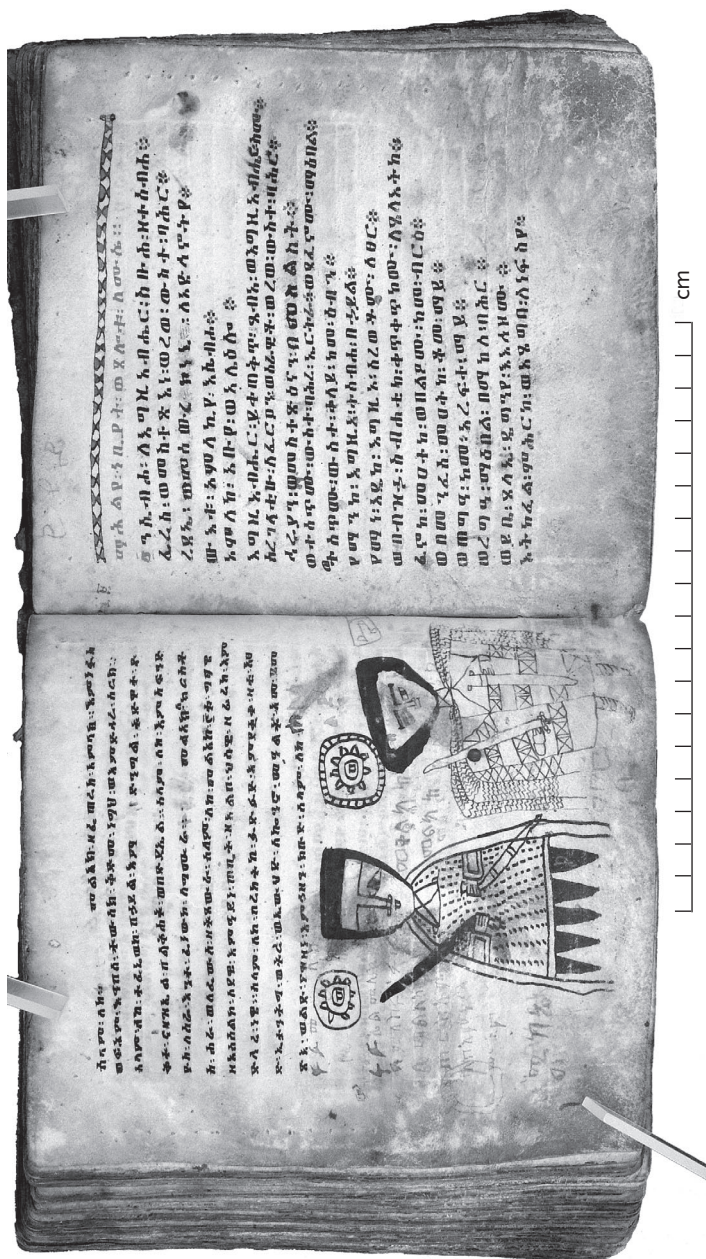


FIG. 2. — The script of the main text (recto) and later addition ("protective" hymn to an Angel and drawings, verso), from a 18th-cent. Psalter (Addigrat Mādhane Alām, Tegray, North Ethiopia).

un-written space of the page. The Ethiopian tradition of manuscript miniatures (historically represented by several “styles”) is highly developed, although the number of illuminated codices is not very high.

Binding

The main type of binding of the Ethiopian codex is relatively simple. The front and back cover boards are commonly made of *Cordia africana* (*wanza*), *Olea africana* (*wäyra*), or cedar, though other kinds of wood are also used. They are cut roughly with an adze and rarely have a perfectly square form.

The threads for binding have traditionally been made of guts. The use of different sorts of linen or cotton string or twine is also not uncommon, especially in secondary or repaired bindings (today, synthetic materials are also widely used).

The quires are attached to the boards usually at two, and sometimes at one or more than two (up to six), paired sewing stations, depending on the size of the manuscript. For this, holes are made at the appropriate places on the covers, where the threads are to be anchored. Ethiopian chain-sewing has been described in detail; it is the dominant way of assembling a codex in Ethiopia (J. A. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, Aldershot 1999, pp. 45-49). The binding is relatively solid but not too tight, so that the book can be easily opened. Its weak point is the vulnerability of the threads, especially on the edges of the boards: if the thread is broken, the codex quickly disintegrates. Because of this, Ethiopian original bindings older than the early 19th century are rare.

Starting approximately from the 16th or early 17th century, the boards of the binding began to be covered with reddish-brown leather (slightly tanned sheep or goat skin; rarely, imported morocco leather). The turn-ins are usually glued to the inner faces of the covers; the remaining open surface may be covered with textile inlays (of domestic production, or imported cloth in case of luxury manuscripts). The leather cover is decorated with tooled ornaments of traditional design (crosses, circles, palm-leave shapes, etc.; see e.g., R. Pankhurst, “Ethiopian manuscript bindings and their decorations,” *Abbay* 12, 1983-84, pp. 205-257). Such a binding is usually strengthened with endbands.

Traditionally, a small- or middle-size codex is stored in a portable leather case with attached slip (*mahdär*), which hangs on a peg inserted in the wall inside the book repository or storage house. A manuscript of high status can be wrapped in a piece of brocade; in rare cases, their bindings may be adorned with metal (silver) plates, with engraved pictures of saints, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary etc. [see fig. 3] However, usually the bindings are modest, and most Ethiopian codices look simple and unpretentious.



FIG. 3. — The binding of a late 19th-cent. Gospel book decorated with engraved silver plate (Addiqäharsi Paraqlitos, Tegray, North Ethiopia).

Ethiopian manuscript studies

Though the first notices concerning traditional Ethiopian manuscript-making were made already in the 19th century (cf. A. d'Abbadie, *Catalogue raisonné de manuscrits éthiopiens appartenant à Antoine d'Abbadie*, Paris 1859, pp. XII-XIII), scholars have long appreciated Ethiopian manuscripts first and

foremost as conveyors of texts, focusing on the message much more than the medium. Although the number of edited Ge'ez texts has been steadily growing since the late 19th century, the issues which today lie at the centre of the manuscript studies (codicology and palaeography) were earlier given little attention, not even by the most accomplished Ethiopicists.

In late 1970s-80s, the quantity of known Ethiopian manuscripts greatly increased thanks to the EMMI project. Also in this period, a few pioneering publications marked significant new progress in Ethiopian manuscript studies. Such works are, e.g., Sergew Hable Selassie, *Bookmaking in Ethiopia*, which provided the first full and coherent description of traditional techniques of Ethiopian manuscript-making (cf., recently, Fäqadä Sellase Täfärra, *Tentawi yäbranna mäsaheft azzägäjäjät*); or S. Uhlig, *Äthiopische Paläographie*, Stuttgart 1988, which established the main stages in the history of Ethiopian handwriting, on the basis of a large corpus of material. Despite some deficiencies, these works will remain seminal for years to come. A few others studies (including, recently, video recordings) have documented different aspects of Ethiopian manuscript culture, and augmented and systematized our knowledge of it (e.g., a section in J. A. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, describing Ethiopian bookbinding techniques professionally and in comparative setting). However, a truly modern stage in Ethiopian codicology and palaeography has yet to be achieved. With a few exceptions, Ethiopian manuscript studies have remained limited to small-scale essays, predominantly of descriptive nature and concerning isolated aspects of the manuscript culture.

Today, the lack of solid studies, applying up-to-date methodology and systematic investigation of a substantial body of material, is noticeable in regard to most basic questions of Ethiopian codicology and palaeography, ranging from the description of traditional manuscript-making techniques to the historical development of handwriting.

In descriptions of the process of manuscript-making, some details of technological stages have been described somewhat differently, perhaps reflecting local variations, but some have not been clarified at all (e.g., pricking techniques, the way and angle of trimming the pen nib). Basically, there is little information on regional peculiarities; the process of manuscript-making was simply recorded where it was possible to do so.

The techniques of Ethiopian binding appear to be well known, but there is no work sufficiently documenting all types, phenomena and techniques of binding, e.g., binding with covers made of roughly tanned leather (usually with small and thin manuscripts); or use of strips of leather to reinforce the quires, or to protect the spine. The statement that a single codex cannot include more than 15-16

quires (Sergew Hable Selassie, *Bookmaking in Ethiopia*, p. 23; *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* III, col. 750b) probably refers only to modern practice. Certain types of codices can include up to 25 and more quires [see fig. 4].

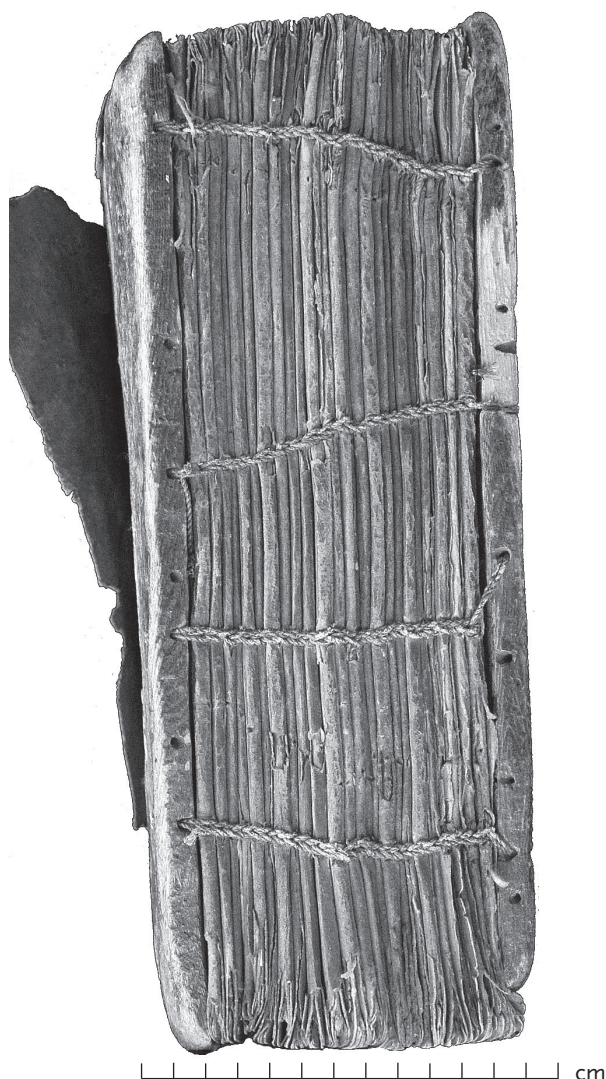


FIG. 4. — The spine of a 15th-cent. (?) manuscript of *Acts of the Apostles*, showing traces of ancient rebinding and reparation (Däbrä Ma'eso, Tegray, North Ethiopia).

Except for scattered remarks in the catalogues and a few short essays (e.g., Uhlig, “Grundlagen äthiopischer Kodikologie”, in F. Déroche [ed.], *Les manuscrits du Moyen-Orient. Essai...*, Istanbul – Paris 1989, pp. 35-38; see also the appropriate sections of *Äthiopische Paläographie*), there have been no regular observations on the different kinds of lay-out specific to different types of Ge’ez texts (which were formerly much more diversified than today), nor on the relationship between lay-out and dimensions of the codices.

As regards Ethiopian palaeography, the work of S. Uhlig mentioned above, though highly important, serves only to introduce the discipline to the Ethiopian material, and to provide a broad framework for the history of Ethiopian handwriting. Though a few further steps have been taken, the discussion has mostly concerned the genesis and early stages in the history of Ethiopic script (see, e.g., G. Lusini, “Questioni di paleografia etiopica”, *Scrittura e civiltà* 23, 1999, pp. 407-417). No further study was conducted on local styles and forms of script, on the relationship between the type of script and the text, etc. There are still no helpful tools for carrying out the practical tasks of research on the manuscript material, such as attributing a given manuscripts to a specific time, location, and, if possible, hand. Only a few short articles have been written on ornamental decorations in Ethiopian codices (cf. “Haräg”, in *EAE* II, pp. 1009-10).

Modern technology for determining the age of the writing materials has been applied in only one case, that of the Enda Abba Gärima Gospel book, considered the oldest known Ethiopian manuscript (radiocarbon dating, see J. Mercier, “La peinture éthiopienne à l’époque axoumite...”, *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 114, 1, 2000, pp. 40-41).

The issue of the possible influence of the Coptic manuscript culture, or some other Mediterranean tradition, on Ethiopia (presumably not very great) has not yet been properly investigated.

The absence of substantial progress in the field has been partly caused by the lack of scholars dealing professionally with the Ethiopian tradition. Classical Ethiopian studies are still perceived as a marginal field of Near East studies – interesting and exotic, but less attractive than other traditions. At the same time, it has proved difficult to master the Ethiopian manuscript material without profound study of Ge’ez language and literature. A certain isolation of Ethiopian manuscript studies from the “mainstream” of the field, an isolation which is both a cause and a consequence of the problem has resulted in large methodological gaps.

One serious difficulty impeding progress concerns the quantity and integrity of the accessible or recorded manuscript material. Despite the substantial number of Ethiopian manuscripts preserved in European and American libraries, of utmost important for the research, these nevertheless represent only a

small fragment of the Ethiopian manuscript heritage. One can wonder whether solid, reliable or important conclusions at least in certain areas of manuscript studies, can be achieved on this basis (this is particularly true for the early stages of the Ethiopian manuscript tradition).

Today, there is a growing understanding that a substantial body of research remains to be done in Ethiopia. As is well known to scholars who are familiar with the ecclesiastic and cultural geography of Ethiopia, of the several dozen most important and ancient historical collections in Ethiopia, only a few have been documented in full, e.g., those of several churches and monasteries on Lake Tana (see *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland* XX, 1; XX, 2; XX, 3); and to a large degree, Däbrä Hayq Estifanos (EMML vol. 5).

Collections of the most important monasteries and churches of Gojjam (West Ethiopia) remain largely unexplored (e.g., Märtulä Maryam, Däbrä Wärq, Däbrä Semmuna, Mota Giyorgis, Getesemane, Bechena Giyorgis and others). So far no one has properly investigated or thoroughly recorded the manuscripts of Geshen Maryam, Este, Mäkäna Sellase, Däbrä Tabor (Central Ethiopia), Waldebba, Däbrä Abbay (North Ethiopia), or Däbrä Libanos (South Ethiopia). The monasteries and churches in Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, currently remain completely inaccessible to researchers (see Bausi, “La tradizione scrittoria etiopica”, pp. 510-512). As in the past, the libraries of Ethiopian churches and monasteries are still largely meant to hide the manuscripts away from outsiders. The cultural policies of both the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian government suffer, as in many African countries, from a lack of financial means and trained personnel, and are inadequate in respect to the manuscripts, even though the manuscript topic is regularly featured in contemporary Ethiopian political discourse.

Nor has the era of digital photography brought any undertaking comparable in scale to the EMML project. As exceptions, the highly endangered Gundä Gunde collection and a few more small collections in North Ethiopia were recently recorded. The biggest effort in digitizing, however, is outside Ethiopia, and is represented by the Ethiopian Manuscript Imaging Project led by Prof. S. Delamarter (see Getatchew Haile et al., *Catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project*, vol. 1, *Codices 1-105, Magic Scrolls 1-134*, Eugene, Oregon 2009). He has recently conducted digitizing of manuscripts in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Certainly, the issue concerns not merely the quantity of the manuscript material; there is little doubt that only a portion of the estimated number of manuscripts in Ethiopia is of real interest for the study. The research in Ethiopia should be aimed at defining the historical picture of the manuscript culture and its centres (*scriptoria*), and characterising them through their local manuscript

heritage. This would definitely stimulate a discussion concerning the main issues of Ethiopian manuscript studies. This task is urgent, since it is becoming difficult to say for how long such studies will continue to be possible. The geography of Ethiopian manuscript culture appears to have changed drastically in the second half of the 20th century: it is quickly disappearing in most of the monastic communities, but moving closer to the urban centres. Besides, the most valuable part of the manuscript heritage in Ethiopia is definitely endangered and requires, if not proper full-scale conservation measures (which have proved to be difficult in this region), then at least quick recording and evaluation through cataloguing.

The considerations exposed above underlie the idea of the five-year project Ethio-SPaRE (“Ethiopian Cultural Heritage: Salvation, Preservation and Research”), a recent research initiative supported on the level of the European Research Council (7th Work Programme IDEAS). The concept took shape during the years of work on the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, a research and editorial project (Hiob Ludolf Center for Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg University) aimed at creating a reference work of Ethiopian studies, which, after the issue of the fourth volume, entered its concluding phase. The information collected during that project became the informational base of the Ethio-SPaRE project, while other research initiatives (like the COMSt – Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies research networking programme) have provided it with methodological support and feedback. The overall goal of Ethio-SPaRE is to augment and systematize our data on Ethiopian manuscript culture, integrating new information into the available knowledge, and to stimulate further discussion and research in the field. The programme has found full support from the relevant Ethiopian authorities, namely the Tigray Culture and Tourism Commission, whose excellent cooperation made the first field missions. So far, the focus of these missions was on the historical region of Gulo Makāda, heavily affected during the recent Ethio-Eritrean conflict. The collected material is currently being evaluated.

Denis NOSNITSIN

Ethio-SPaRE

Hiob Ludolf Center for Ethiopian Studies,
Asien-Afrika Institut, Hamburg University
nosnitsin@yahoo.com