

Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Remarks on Methodologies and Types of Approach

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Introduction

The concept of the project *Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia – Salvation, Preservation and Research* (2009–2014)¹ evolved as a result of various aspects of my scholarly activities in the preceding years. Thus, my work as an assistant editor of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (since 1999) helped me to get a comprehensive picture of the contemporary Ethiopian studies in general and of the fields of Ethiopian philology and pre-modern history in particular. It also equipped me with the basic research tools, mainly the systematic knowledge of the available written primary as well as secondary sources. Since 2005, I have regularly taken part in field research expeditions, first organized by senior colleagues, then by myself. This experience shaped my individual perception of the elements of the traditional culture in the contemporary Ethiopia as well as showed me potential areas for future research. My involvement, since 2009, in the Europe-wide research networking programme Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies has additionally ensured that my approach meets the universal standards accepted across the neighbouring disciplines.

Research history

A number of researchers and researcher teams have already treated the ecclesiastic landscape of Ethiopia as the reservoir of the historical heritage of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the past. Some initiatives that investigated or recorded the manuscripts which remain in Ethiopia may be considered similar to the Ethio-SPaRe in the ways they approached the material and/or defined the area of research.

Among the first Oriental philologist to approach the Ethiopian written culture in its original context was the great German Orientalist Enno Littmann (1875–1958), the head of the Princeton University Expedition and the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition in 1905–06. The results of the expeditions in the field of philology and manuscript studies were less significant than those in other fields; perhaps the main outcome was the acquisition of manuscripts

1 The following text is an extended version of the paper presented during the workshop. It summarizes and complements what has now been published as the “Preface” to the first project monograph (NOSNITSIN 2013:xi–xxi).

by Littmann himself.² Also in 1905, Johannes Flemming, professional librarian and member of a German diplomatic mission, travelled extensively across Ethiopia, trying to acquire valuable (ancient) manuscripts with rare or unknown texts. The aim was to increase the number of Ethiopian manuscripts in German libraries. Flemming had neither intention nor technical capacity to conduct a deeper research in at least a few libraries, but he visited over sixty churches and monasteries scattered over a very large territory within fifty two days.³

A different approach emerged only after many years, and was connected with the 1968 Lake Ṭana Expedition of Ernst Hammerschmidt (Hamburg). Not much is known as to how the concept of the expedition took shape except what is said in the first volume of the well-known series of the catalogues.⁴ Hammerschmidt decided to focus on the important cultural area of Lake Ṭana and its monastic libraries, and was able to secure a strong local support for his project. As a result, collections of five important monastic libraries were microfilmed.⁵ The expedition and the subsequent cataloguing of the microfilmed manuscripts from the monasteries on Lake Ṭana had a long-lasting influence on historical and philological studies.

A UNESCO team photographed manuscripts in the city of ᐾAddis ᐾAbāba and in a few regions of Ethiopia between September 1969 and February 1970, but the mission did not envisage a thorough study of the collections⁶.

- 2 The relatively large collection, of 149 codices and 167 scrolls, had a difficult destiny as it was divided between Berlin and Princeton, with a few items having been left in Littmann's private collection (see WION 2011).
- 3 Flemming acquired only 70 manuscripts and 10 scrolls. He was not completely satisfied with this result, particularly considering the fact that the majority dated to between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century, and the old (fifteenth-sixteenth-century) manuscripts proved to be very rare (according to FLEMMING 1906:9, the best had been brought out of the country earlier). He purchased most of the manuscripts at a few locations only (among them 33 codices and 10 scrolls in ᐾAksum). There is no list of the institutions that he visited, and no record about the size and composition of the collections. A rare opportunity was missed to take an inventory of the ecclesiastic libraries at the time before they were affected by the major disturbances of the twentieth century, in the areas which have been since difficult to access for the researchers.
- 4 HAMMERSCHMIDT 1973.
- 5 And a few selected items came from three more churches (HAMMERSCHMIDT 1977:74–75). The first volume contains useful summaries of basic information on the ecclesiastic institutions, see *ibid.* 49–73.
- 6 The expedition was organized against the background of the growing interest in Ethiopian ancient manuscript painting (which resulted, among others, in the publication of beautiful volume LEROY – JÄGER – WRIGHT 1961). The team photographed more than 350 manuscripts, among them many valuable items, from four libraries in ᐾAddis

A series of research initiatives were conducted by French scholars (esp. Jean Leclant, Roger Sauter, Jules Leroy, André Caquot) in the 1950s-70s. Aiming at the study of ancient churches, they contributed a lot to the identification of sites interesting because of the manuscript collections,⁷ just as the study of Ruth Plant⁸ did. The short-lived but productive Oxford British Expedition of 1974 in South-east Təgray (ጎAṣbi) focused mostly on the architecture of ancient churches,⁹ but collected also data on the ecclesiastic libraries which, even though very concise,¹⁰ proved to be very helpful in facilitating further research.

The Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library project of the 1970s-80s (EMML) is the so far biggest attempt at recording the Ethiopian manuscript heritage which resulted in microfilming of ca. 8000 manuscripts. Initiated in 1973, the most active phase of the project was short as the conditions deteriorated after the 1974 events. However, its legacy produced a long-lasting impact on Ethiopian studies.¹¹

Among other undertakings, one should mention the joint project of Illinois and Addis Ababa Universities aimed at recording historical documentation in some churches and monasteries, in Goḡḡam and Gondär, in the late 1980s.¹² In 1992–1994, a small team of Italian scholars were able to visit 12

⁷Abäba and six old collections of Eastern Goḡḡam (MACOMBER 1972:83, n. 6; STRELCYN 1977:117). The microfilms were deposited in the major institutions in ጎAddis ጎAbäba (Institute of Ethiopian Studies, National Archives and Library of Ethiopia, Library of the Patriarchate), but are not easily accessible; the published lists of the manuscripts are also difficult to access (see *ibid.*). The situation will hopefully change now that most if not all of those microfilms have been digitized. Another UNESCO – NALE mission to Lake ጥana took place in 2011.

7 Starting from such publications as, e.g., LECLANT – MIQUEL 1959, SAUTER 1976, etc. LEROY was the first to properly record the oldest known Ethiopian manuscript, the Gospel Book from the monastery of ጎጇnda ጎAbba Gärima (BAUSI 2011:17).

8 PLANT 1985.

9 JUEL-JENSEN – ROWELL 1975.

10 *Ibid.* 49–73, the register listing 295 manuscripts in 20 collections.

11 Today, the merits of the EMML project and its huge impact on the field are obvious. Unfortunately, not much can be learnt about the particularities of the organization of the work, in particular in Ethiopia, except for what is said in the prefaces to the catalogues and in a few reports on the project's progress.

12 The publically available information about this project, at least to my knowledge, is minimal. A significant number of the microfilmed manuscripts were used, e.g., in the publications of Donald Crumme, such as CRUMMEY 2000. Recently, some shelf-lists of the microfilms were posted online by the French hyper-catalogue project by Anaïs Wion, Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Marie-Laure Derat *Inventaire des bibliothèques et des*

Eritrean monasteries and survey their libraries and situations; the research brought to light a number of important text witnesses as well as collected geo-historical data on some ecclesiastic libraries in Eritrea¹³.

The introduction of digital photography facilitated greatly the field work of the researchers, but many other problems remained, in particular that of the accessibility of collections and the place of research on manuscripts in the cultural policy of the contemporary Ethiopian state and the Orthodox Church. Several research undertakings of various scales have been conducted in the last twenty years, some placing emphasis upon the general preservation task, some upon both preservation and research; also some individual researchers kept collecting material in Ethiopian ecclesiastic libraries.¹⁴

In the twentieth century, researchers kept turning to manuscripts preserved in Ethiopia. While each project had to face diverse difficulties, from technical deficiencies of recording equipment and poor infrastructure to negative impact of political instability, each and every one was successful in one or another way and brought results. Still, recording the manuscript heritage of Ethiopia which is preserved in the country remains one of the urgent tasks of Ethiopian studies. Today, as thirty and more years ago, it still seems that the progress achieved in this field is relatively moderate, as only a few of the major Ethiopian collections have been fully recorded.

Methodology

The concept of the project has been based on the critical evaluation of the results of the aforementioned enterprises, and the understanding that we still need a scholarly project that would widen our knowledge of the Ethiopian manuscript heritage as found in its original context as well as the knowledge of the context itself. Besides, it appears that, being in itself a seemingly technical task, recording the Ethiopian medieval manuscripts requires a strong scholarly basis. The capacity of highly effective digital equipment is limited without a good orientation in Ethiopia's cultural landscape, ability to make the way through the complications of the local history and historical geography, and sufficient knowledge of the local languages and culture.

catalogues des manuscrits éthiopiens (www.menestrel.fr): SHUMET SISHAGNE 1988, DANIEL AYANA 1989, ABEBE FISSIHA 1992.

13 BAUSI – LUSINI 1992, and further publications in the journal *Rassegna di studi etiopici*.

14 One could recall, e.g., a recent survey of Lake Tana sites and libraries (BOSC-TIESSÉ 2000, resuming the study of the local manuscript collections after Hammerschmidt and EMMML); smaller preservation projects within the framework of the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme; long-running activities of Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers and their online research database *Mazgaba seelat*.

I would like to provide a few remarks and considerations on the principles followed by the Ethio-SPaRe project team, and comment on some of its experience.¹⁵

1) During the planning of the first mission it became evident that not only the biggest and well-known centres (like Däbrä Dammo, Gundä Gunde, ʾĒnda ʾAbba Gärīma etc.) require further intensive study, but also the cultural landscape surrounding them, with dozens if not hundreds of lesser known or completely unknown ecclesiastical institutions which have also been constituent parts of the cultural context of traditional Ethiopia. The large centres are rightly thought to be the primary places for manuscript making and literary activities.¹⁶ Nevertheless, smaller and mid-size institutions around them built up the actual context in which the large centres were embedded. Speaking in the terms of the manuscript and literary culture of North Ethiopia, the small and mid-size institutions acted as recipients and transmitters, or occasionally as custodians of the elements considered obsolete in more dynamic cultural circles.

The ecclesiastic landscape has been constantly changing: new institutions were established; the old ones could acquire new dedication or change their status. Today, it is possible to detect and investigate the layers of the past through the study of the local ecclesiastic manuscript collections, revealing former prominence of some of them.

2) The reasons and criteria for the selection of research areas have already been extensively explained elsewhere.¹⁷ In those areas, the project team has been as systematic as possible in registering the ecclesiastic collections. In the course of the field missions, it became obvious that our knowledge of Ethiopia's cultural landscape is far less detailed, and the landscape itself is much more complex, than one might have thought. As a result, the geographic area covered was somewhat smaller than originally planned whereas the number of the institutions visited was considerably larger than foreseen. A few little known or practically unknown localities were unveiled, where the traditional manuscript culture has been less affected by the modernity. As contributions

15 The Ethio-SPaRe team could profit from the lengthy period of stability in North Ethiopia in the last years. The cooperation of Ethiopian institutions was crucial for the success of the field missions: the Tigray Tourism and Culture Agency represented by the head Kābbādä ʾAmarā Bālay (project coordinator), Mäsārät Haylä Səllase (field coordinator) and research assistants; the Diocese of East Təgray of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with His Eminency ʾabunä Mäqaryos (ʾAddigrat), the Diocese representatives and the heads of the local church administration.

16 Even though we have only partial knowledge as to precisely which institutions, when and where played that role, and how exactly they operated in that quality.

17 See above, and cp. NOSNITSIN 2013, see "Preface" and introductions to each chapter.

in the volume show, the progress in our knowledge of the Ethiopian cultural landscape results in a significantly better understanding of the Ethiopian culture and history.

3) The project team avoided recording single selected objects (such as the oldest, most interesting manuscripts etc.). Rather, it studied ecclesiastic libraries in their integrity, and tried, in each case, to identify the historical core of the collection and recorded it in full.¹⁸ The notion of the library of the provenance was retained for each manuscript and remains a fundamental element for any further study of the gathered material. Each manuscript can be studied in itself, as a unique product of Ethiopian traditional intellectual and technological environment, but also in relation to other manuscripts of the same collection or in relation to other collections which can also be recorded and studied.¹⁹

4) The search for unknown or lesser-known texts as well as important documents has been among the project's priorities. Still, the aforementioned holistic approach to the collections has been preferred, as the overall aim has been documenting both literary and material aspects of the local manuscript culture. On the one hand, the project team does trace valuable manuscripts and rare texts;²⁰ on the other hand, it also tries to define what is common and typical in the areas studied regarding both the literary composition of the collections and the local codicological and palaeographical features as they appear in the manuscripts.²¹

18 It was decided to record manuscripts dating earlier than the 1930s–40s; only in very exceptional cases, manuscripts that are more recent were recorded. Defining the “historical core” of an ecclesiastic collection is often a difficult task. (Partial) registers are available only for a few collections; in many cases items are preserved in more than one place, or in private houses, or in the sanctuary (*māqdäs*) of the church where the access is impossible for the laymen, or in treasuries which are unsuitable for any research work. It was sometimes impossible to be absolutely sure that the information collected on a collection is comprehensive and complete. In addition, the owners frequently overestimate their collections, in terms of quantity, age and quality.

19 Further opportunities arise from this situation: e.g., it may be possible to attribute manuscripts to scribes and define their places of origin; or to precisely trace the geographical distribution and historical spread of a text; a text-critical study may receive quite real geographical dimension. In the course of the project, it has been possible to clarify the relations between the copies of the texts of some local hagiographic traditions.

20 As a rule, only a few libraries (mostly those of monastic communities) show extended range of literary works. However, during the field missions a few previously unknown texts were indeed discovered, and a few lesser known textual traditions have been better recorded (see NOSNITSIN 2013).

21 This point assigns new value to “common books” whose importance is not defined

5) The issues of the age of the manuscripts and the proportion of historical and recent manuscripts in the collections have been briefly discussed elsewhere.²² It seems useful to emphasize that a discovery of an unknown ancient manuscript was always a remarkable event during the field missions. Pre-sixteenth century manuscripts in more or less good condition are very rare; fragments of old manuscripts can be occasionally found damped in the corners of the sacristies, or recycled for repairing other manuscripts. Only a small number of big monastic libraries (many of them well known), or collections in hardly accessible areas, have a significant concentration of pre-sixteenth-century items. Most of the small rural collections possess only a few (or just one single) old or remarkable item and otherwise a significant number of quite recent books.²³ The ravages of time, negligence and illegal trafficking took heavy toll on manuscript collections throughout the country, also in North Ethiopia.²⁴

As a particular point, one should stress that the Ethiopian manuscript culture is a living, dynamic culture, which serves the needs of the church life and is shaped and modified accordingly. The books in ecclesiastic libraries

exclusively by their age and/or “uniqueness” of their content. The approach is different from what the expectations addressed to the EMMML collection (cp. MACOMBER 1986:390, and most of the reviews of the EMMML catalogues), but it indeed reflects the recent scholarly trend in assigning a greater role to the manuscript as a material object, and viewing both quantitative and qualitative studies of different features of the manuscript culture.

22 NOSNITSIN 2013:xvii.

23 This situation was noticed already by FLEMMING (1906:9), and again reiterated many years later in respect to the EMMML project, e.g., by MACOMBER (1975:399, 1976:204). However, it appears that this picture reflects the reality currently existing in large parts of the country – and the way the manuscript culture exists in time and space. A quick look in the records of the 1974 Oxford British Expedition, JUEL-JENSEN – ROWELL 1975:49–73, is enough to see that this project witnessed a similar situation in its region of research.

24 One of the most disastrous accidents was the fire in the sacristy of the famous monastery of Däbrä Dammo (MERCIER – DANIEL SEIFEMICHAEL 2009:97); as a result, the collection seems to have reduced from an unknown but probably high number to approximately 60 volumes only. Another extraordinary case is that of Gundä Gunde where the size of the collection as seen in 1939 was estimated at some 800 volumes, a next to incredible number (MORDINI 1944–45:152) reduced, probably due to several (only partly clear) reasons, to 212 volumes as digitized in 2006–07 (<http://www.hmml.org/preservation10/GG.htm>). While such huge losses appears to be rare (as are such huge collections), at many sites the project team did witness manuscripts damaged by water (the most widespread problem) or fire, partly or fully disintegrated. I made some remarks on the condition of the collections in NOSNITSIN 2013.

are treated not as valuable antiquarian objects, but according to the functions assigned to them in religious life.²⁵

Thus, the bulk of the information retrieved from the manuscripts concerns post-fifteenth-century period. Still, taken in their entirety, the collections do allow us to make insights into an earlier period and, as we shall see, draw conclusions upon very different issues.

5) The history of each individual manuscript recorded by the project team is seen in relation to the history of the relevant ecclesiastic library, and both, in turn, are linked to the history of the custodian institution. Therefore, the team has made great efforts to secure data on the original environment of ecclesiastic libraries, and has strived to build up a historical narrative on the history of the respective institutions. For this purpose, it collected different types of data on each of the institutions visited: exact location and variants of the name; when possible, images of paraphernalia; images of historical church murals; information coming from the local people (including, e.g., the “foundation stories”); data on the archaeological remains in and around the site. Of course, these data are of various nature and value, but, as the contributions collected in the volume show, they can be incorporated into any type of a research narrative.

6) Historical contacts between the institutions resulted in the emergence of different “networks”: hierarchical monastic congregations (like Stephanites and ³Ewos̄tateans); loose associations of institutions linked to the same founder or based on shared veneration (e.g., of a local saintly monk); associations emerged on the basis of geographical proximity, shared economic or political interests, common ethnic origin, family relations etc. Historical “networks”, being active also the in the field of the manuscript and text production, enriched the local libraries and provided the students with clearly

25 Despite the high status of the church books, which are considered holy objects, they may be treated in a very “practical” and “rough” way, without regarding them as historical objects of abstract value. Worn books are renovated and rebound without considerations as to how to preserve old bindings. New images can be painted into the leaves of old books, disfiguring them. If the community acquires a new copy of an older manuscript, the latter can be discarded with no special measures to preserve it as an “antique object”. If a text is out of fashion or not in circulation, manuscripts that contain it have little chance to survive. It is unlikely that this attitude, typical especially in rural or conservative areas, will ever be completely overcome, despite considerable efforts from different sides. In spite of some improvement of preservation conditions in the recent years, only in a very few places we witnessed conscious activities aimed at preserving the old books with care (on the contrary, the idea that the manuscript heritage can be used for getting profit gains wider circulation). All this proves that the work of studying the collections, detecting valuable manuscripts and seeking ways for securing them, at least digitally, should not stop.

visible “landmarks” that facilitate orientation in the cultural landscape of North Ethiopia. Therefore, “historical (ecclesiastic) networks” appear as a leitmotif in a number of contributions.

To conclude, I should note that, while field missions have been a crucial part of the Ethio-SPaRe project and supplied it with the first hand new material, the project pursues a diversified research programme. Its fundamental part is the on-going cataloguing work, which is carried out in an online relational database environment.²⁶ The database itself is a crucial instrument for the systematic study and analysis of the material.²⁷ On the basis of the information registered in the database, the research develops mainly in two directions: general historical and literary studies on the one hand and the codicological and palaeographical studies on the other hand.

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²⁶ Currently at <http://mycms.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/domlib/>.

²⁷ A few important innovations have been introduced into the description scheme. In particular, codicological aspects receive the attention they deserve but have never been given before. Composite manuscripts are clearly distinguished; “quire map” is provided for each manuscript; binding is described in detail; so is the ruling system; a system for the coherent description of different “text areas” has been introduced.

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