

HIOB LUDOLF CENTRE SUMMER SCHOOL IN ETHIOPIAN AND ERITREAN MANUSCRIPT STUDIES 2020

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# AMHARIC MANUSCRIPT TRADITION



## Amharic, *lingua franca* of Ethiopia

- Ethio-Semitic language family, southern subgroup
- Language of a large ethnic group
- Language of cross-cultural communication, an African *lingua franca*
- Language of the royal court (*læssāna nəguś*)
- “Learned language” of instruction in the traditional church education system

## Amharic written tradition

- Application of Ethiopic written system to Amharic
- Amharic as the second written language in the pre-modern time
- Language development stages:
  - Old Amharic: ca. before 18th cent.
  - Early modern Amharic: ca. 18th to late 19th cent.
  - Contemporary Amharic
- Texts attested starting from ca. 16th cent.
- Amharic modern literature starts only in 1908, Afawarq Gabra Iyasus, *Ləbb wallad tārik*.

## Early evidence: texts in Old Amharic

- The language of ca. 14 texts written before the 18<sup>th</sup> cent.
- Fluid orthography
- Palaeographic features: archaic shapes of some Amharic letters (  for ቸ,  for ጀ, etc.)
- Some words that are missing from the modern Amharic
- Consistent use of some Gəʕəz words, *ənbala* for *yāla* (“without”), *tafaśḥa* for *dass ala*, *tadassata* (“rejoice”)

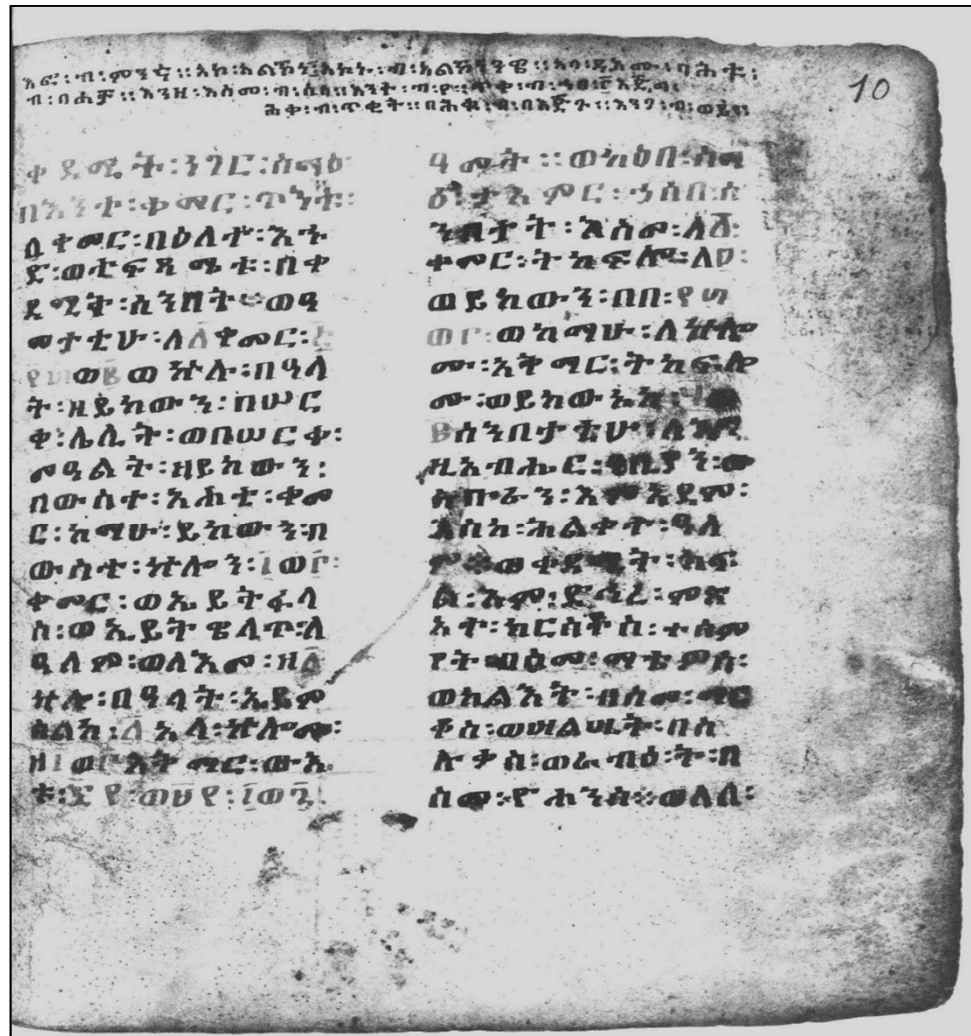
## Early evidence: texts in Old Amharic

- Some phonetic and morphological peculiarities
  - characters for *h*, *h*, *h*, *ʕ* and *ʔ* still kept in many words, ሐንድ vs. አንድ; ሐየ vs. አየ, ሄት vs. የት, በግዕ vs. በግ
  - plural marker -*ačč(i)* vs. later standard -*očč*
  - post-pronominal -*t*: የተሐየኝ፣ ይኸት
  - suffix 3 pers. plur. -(*w*) *āččo* vs. later -*āččaw*
  - lack of the particle -*m*- in negated verbs: አይኖራቸው, አልነሳ

## The earliest known Amharic texts

- Portions of Gəʿəz-Amharic grammar (*sawāsəw*), 16th-cent. additions in Ms. BnF Ethiopien 160
- Praising poems for Abāla Krəstos in Ms. EMMML no. 1943, late 16th-/early 17th-cent. additions, Dabra Ḥayq ʾEṣṭifānos
- “Royal songs” in Ms. Oxford, late 16th/early 17th cent., BodL Or. 29 = Bruce 88
- “Tract about Mary who anointed Jesus’ feet”, Jerusalem, Ethiopian Patriarchate, Ms. JE 9, an added text in the Four Gospel book, reportedly 16<sup>th</sup> cent. (?)

# Sawāsəw in Old Amharic, 16th cent. (?)

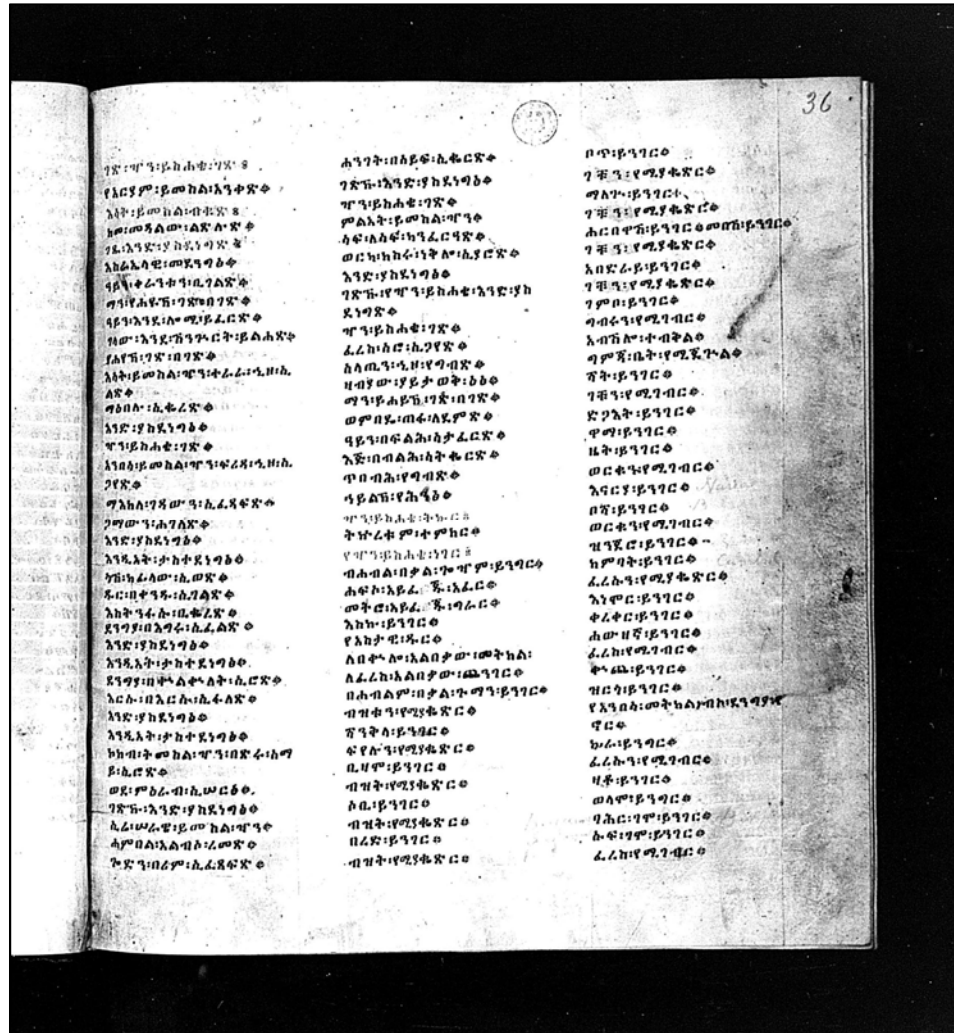


Ms. Bibliothèque nationale de France Éthiopien 160, first half of the 16th cent. (?), fol. 10r

The manuscript of *mamhər Pāwlos*, see C. Conti Rossini, “L’autobiografia di Pawlos, monaco abissino del secolo XVI”, *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Rendiconti, Classe di scienze morale, storiche e filologiche* Serie quinta, 27 (1918), 279–96.

@ Bibliothèque nationale de France

# Beginning of the “Royal Songs” , early 17th cent.



Ms. Bodleian Library, Or.  
29 = Bruce 88, 1610 -  
1632, f. 35r,  
three column layout

© Bodleian Library



## Amharic pre-modern literature

- Translations of Gəʿəz works
- Catechisms, “explanations of faith” of various types
- Theological treatises
- *Sawāsəw*: lexica and grammar treatises
- *Andəmta*-commentaries
- Narratives developed from biblical stories

## Early Amharic poetry

- “Royal songs” and praising poems (*mawaddəs*)
- “Condemnation of Glory” poems (*margama kəbr*)
- Minor poems on various matters
  - Religious matters
  - Historical events
  - Everyday life etc.
- *Məştira səgeyāt* “Mystery of the Rosary”, praises to St. Mary

# Amharic pre-modern literature

- Computus and calendar texts
- Magic-medical texts (recipes, prayers)
- Historiography
- Documentary writing
- Epistolography

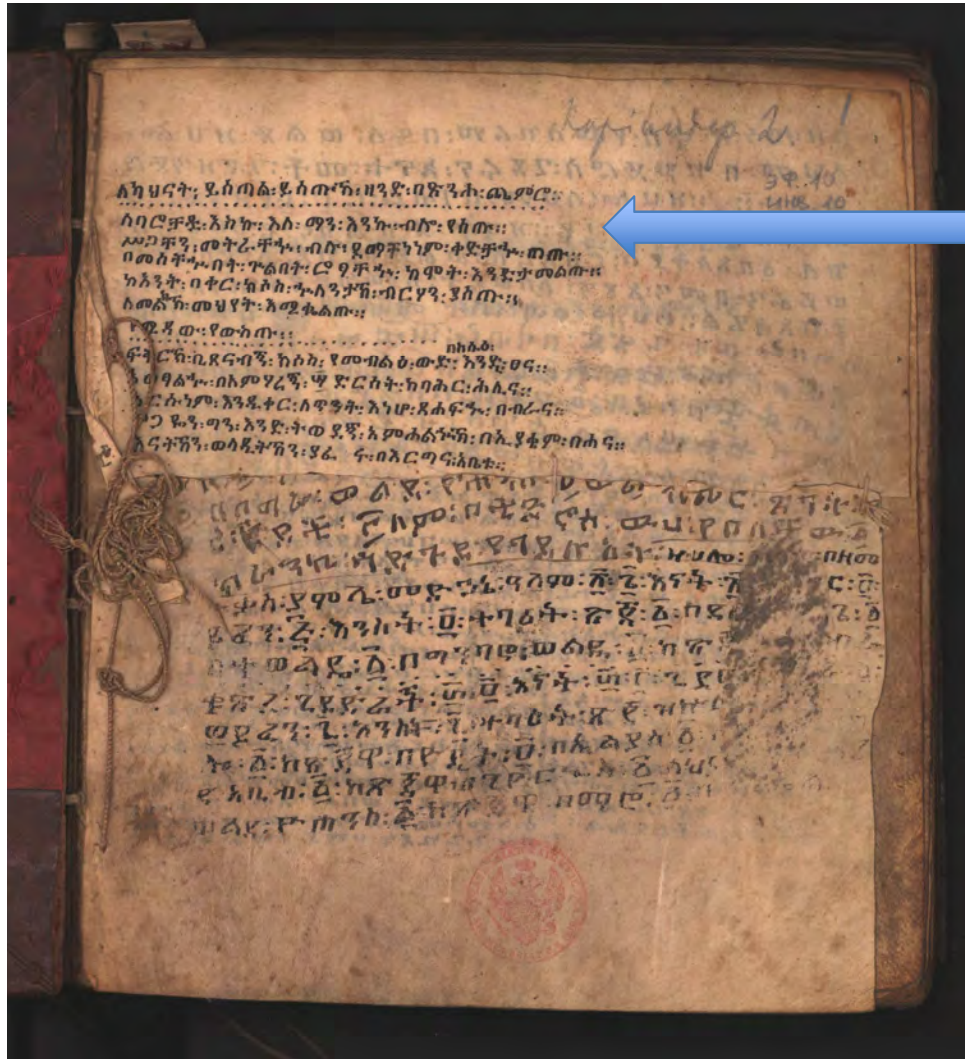
## Amharic pre-modern literature

- Not equivalent to the Amharic oral literature
- Related to Gəṣəz literature, but not its vernacular variant
- Strong residue of oral culture
- Fluid textual traditions
- Small number of witnesses in many cases
- Auxiliary character
- Not always appears as continuous texts
- Some works clearly addressed to “commoners”
- Didactic overtones

# Amharic manuscripts

- Non-pretentious appearance, small size
- Inferior materials
- Frequently inferior handwriting
- Nearly no ornamentation
- Many Amharic manuscripts in private possession
- Wide geographical dispersion of Amharic texts
- Circulation: marginalia, paratexts, added texts, texts in Gəʿəz collections, Amharic collections

# Amharic poems as marginal notes



Ms. St. Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Ms. Ef. 10/Koriander 2, *Wəddāse Amlāk* “Praises of God”, 32 x 31 cm, mid-17th/mid-18th cent., fol. 1r

See Bulakh – Nosnitsin (forthcoming)

© Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St Petersburg

## An Amharic text on guard leaves



(<https://gundagunde.digitalscholarship.utoronto.ca/>)

Ms. Gunda Gunde  
114/C3-IV-214,  
*Arganona wəddāse*  
“Harp of Praise”,  
17.5 x 18 cm, 18th  
cent., and Amharic  
treatise *Anqasa*  
*hāymānot* “Gate of  
the Faith” on fols  
1v-1r, ed.

See Getatchew  
Haile 1983



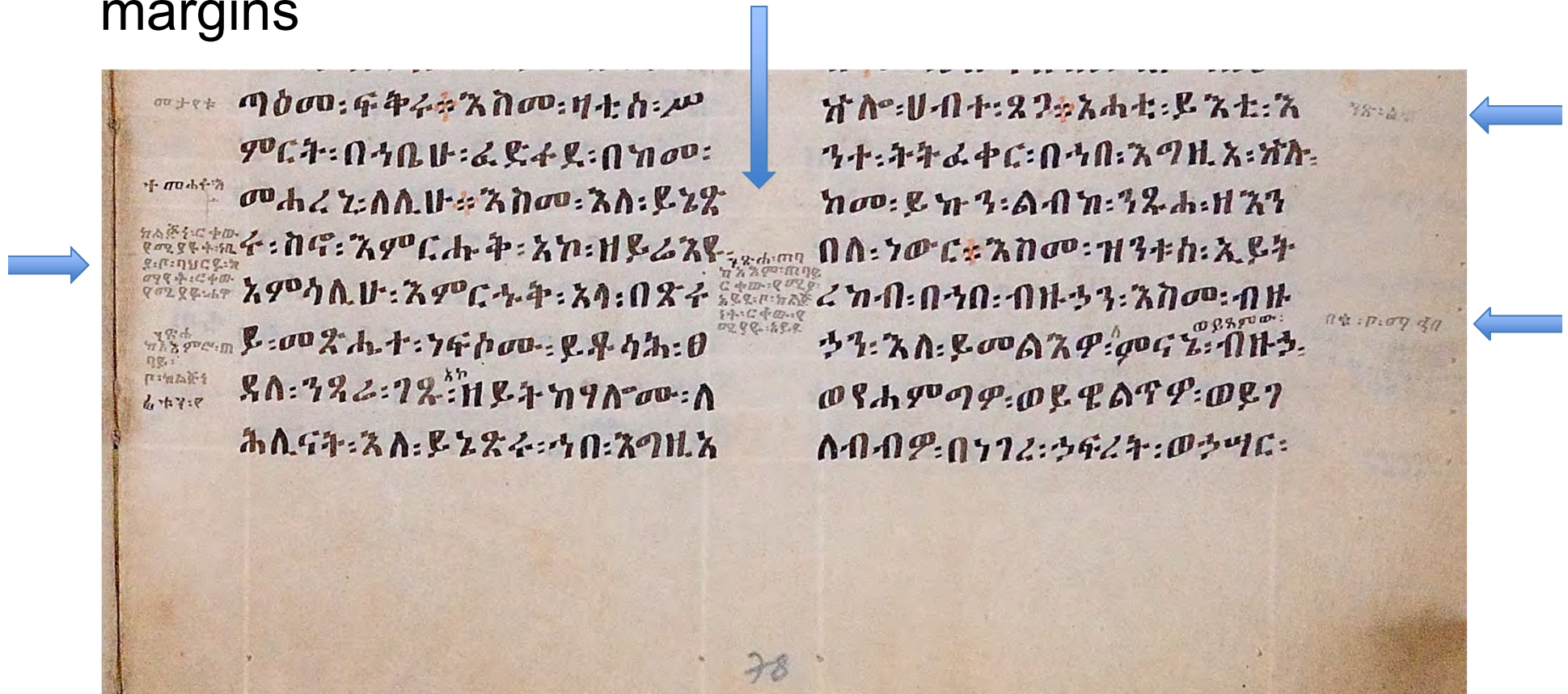
# Amharic texts added in the guard quires



Ms. Māy Baʿātti Arbāʿəttu ʿEnsəsā, MBAE-001, *Wəddāse Amlāk* “Praises of God”, 19.4 x 16.5 cm, 18th cent., *Margama kəbr* “Condemnation of glory” poem added on fols 1r-3v.

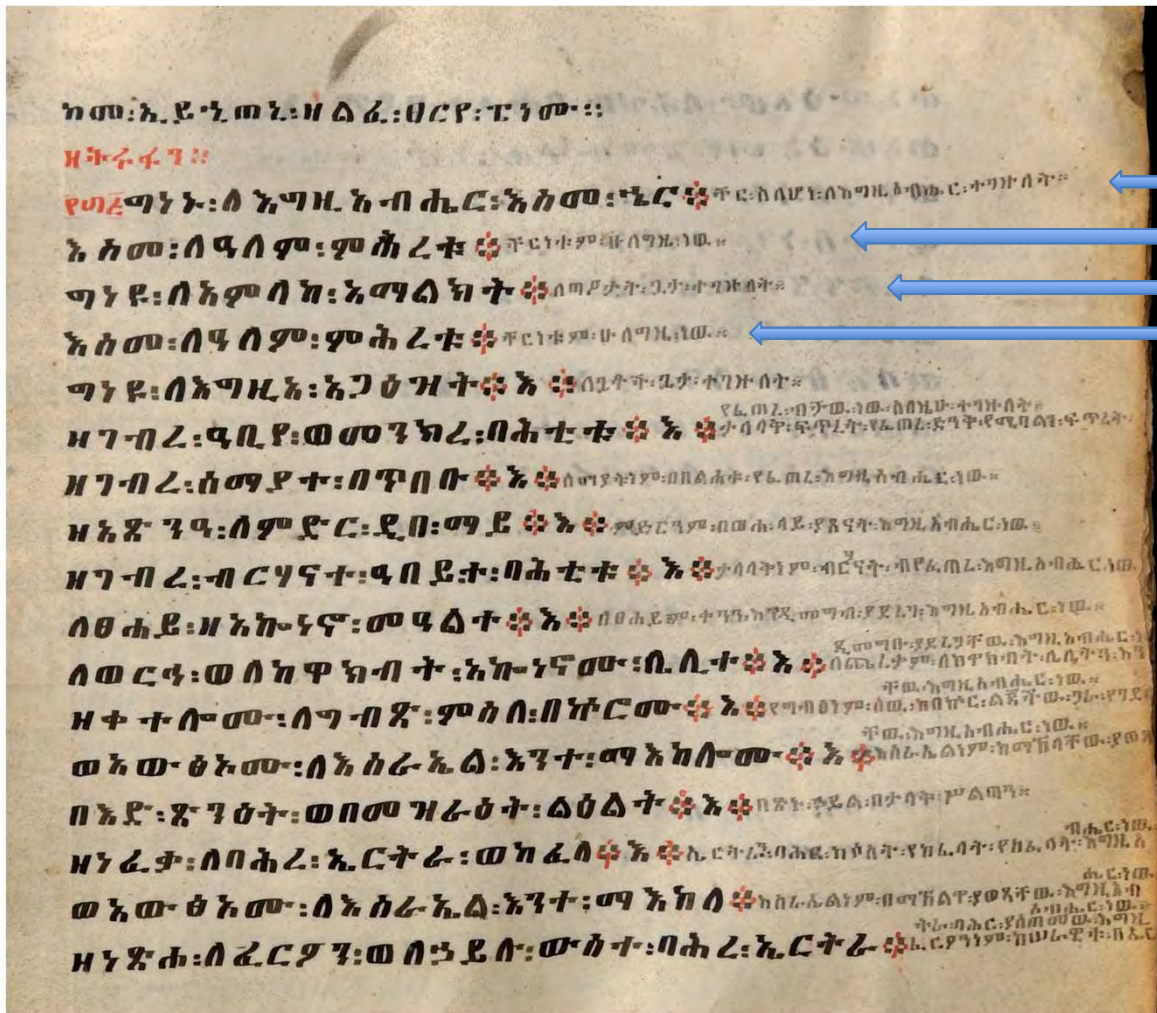


# Amharic glosses and commentaries as paratext in the margins



Ms. Dabra Dämmo, DD-036, Collection of monastic texts, 25 x 21 cm, ca. 1650-1750, fol. 78r

# Amharic translation of the Psalter



Ms. Rubākusā Qəddus Giyorgis, RQG-015, *Psalter* with Amharic translation (?), 33.2 x 29 cm, 18th cent., fol. 163r



# An Amharic work in a collection of Gəʿəz poems and prayers



Ms. Sotā Dabra  
Salām SDM-019,  
*Məšṭira səgeyāt* and  
other texts (*malkəʿāt*,  
prayers, hymns), 7 x  
7.7 cm, 18th cent.,  
fols 2v-3r



# An Amharic work in a Gəʿəz miscellany



Dating: “no later than the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Cowley)”

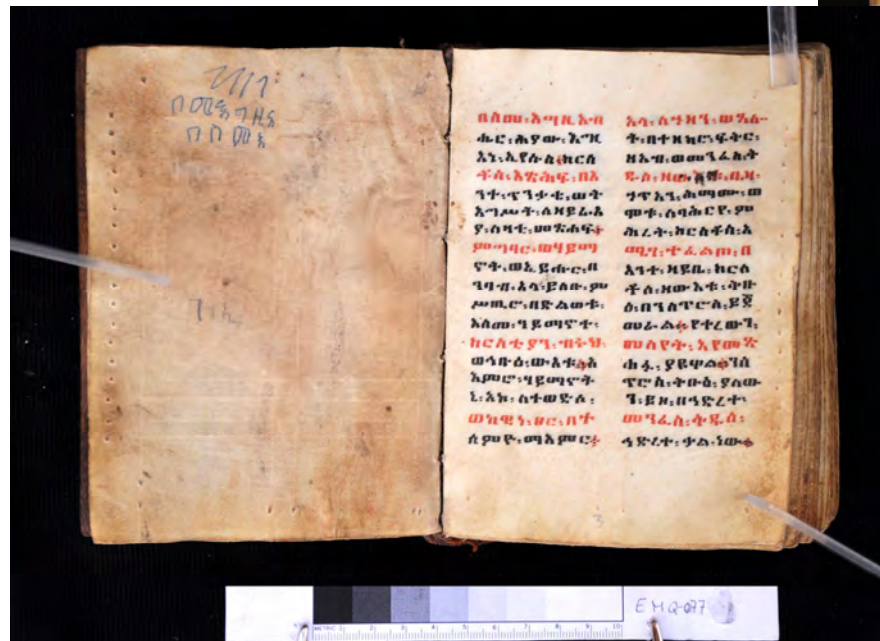
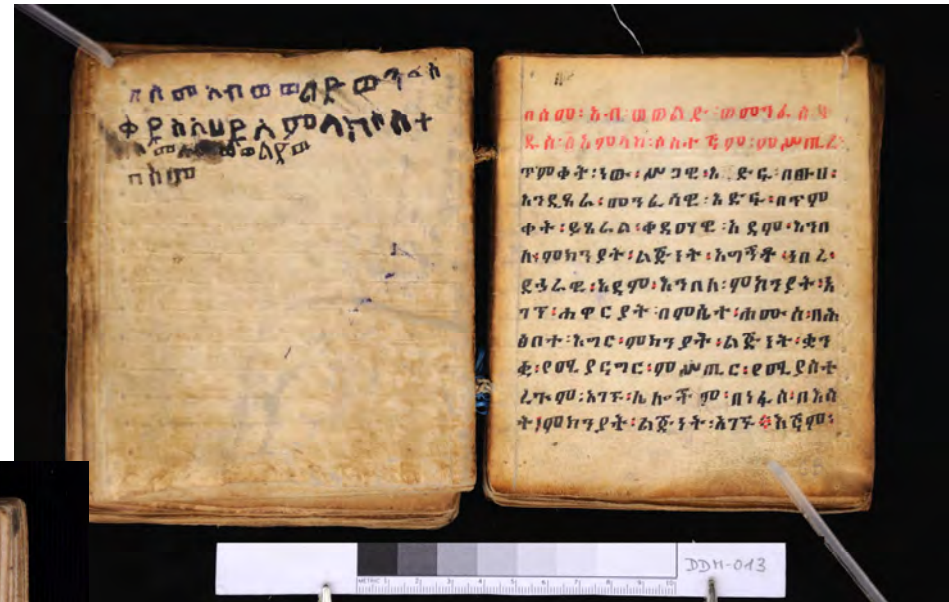
Second half of the 17th/18th cent. (?); not very professional but careful scribe, possibly imitating the Gondarine script

Ms. Māy Anbasā Kidana Məḥrat, MAKM-004, Miscellany in Gəʿəz and Amharic, 15.5 x 15.5 cm, here fols 24v-25r, treatise *Təmhərta hāymānot* “The teaching of the faith”



# Amharic single text manuscripts

Ms. Dänderā Mikāʾel, DDM-013, *Amməstu aʿmāda məštir* “Five pillars of mystery”, 14 x 12 cm, 19th cent.



Ms. ʿEndā Māryām Qorrār, EMQ-077, *Amməstu aʿmāda məštir* “Five pillars of mystery”, 15.3 x 11 cm, late 19th/early 20th cent.

# Collections of Amharic text



Ms. Mədra Rubā Śəllāse, MR-035, Collection of historiographic texts, 17 x 11 cm, 1855-1904, fol. 3r, “History of faith of Ethiopia which is the tradition of the saints”



Ms. Rubākusā Giyorgis, RQG-034, Sawāsəw and historiographic texts, 14x8 cm, fols 76v-77r, “A History of Aḥmad Grāññ”

***Thank you for your attention!***