

CATALOGUE OF THE
ETHIOPIAN DOCUMENTS
FROM THE SOCIETÀ GEOGRAFICA ITALIANA
(ROME)

Series Catalogorum, XI

Série dirigée par Maria Szuppe (Centre de recherche sur le monde iranien, CNRS, Paris)

COMITÉ SCIENTIFIQUE : Michele Bernardini (Università di Napoli L'Orientale), François Déroche (Collège de France, Paris), Claudio Lo Jacono (Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, Roma), Angelo Michele Piemontese ("Sapienza" Università di Roma), Francis Richard (Bibliothèque Universitaire des Langues et Civilisations, Paris), Roberto Tottoli (Università di Napoli L'Orientale)

COMITÉ ÉDITORIAL : Daniela Amaldi (Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, Roma); Sacha Alsancakli (Centre de recherche sur le monde iranien / INaLCO, Paris).

Cette série est dédiée à la valorisation de la recherche systématique sur les collections méconnues des sources primaires, sous forme manuscrite, épigraphique, iconographique ou autre, pour l'histoire des sociétés du Proche et Moyen Orient depuis la Méditerranée orientale jusqu'à l'Asie centrale. La série entend contribuer à une meilleure sauvegarde des patrimoines historiques et culturels de l'aire géographique concernée en mettant à la disposition de la communauté scientifique de nouvelles sources primaires à travers la publication de catalogues.

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Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

Via A. Caroncini 19

I-00197 Roma

Italia

Tél. : +39 06 8084106 / Fax : +39 06 8079395 / e-mail : ipocan@ipocan.it / www.ipocan.it

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CaNaMEI
Catalogo Nazionale dei
Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia



**SOCIETÀ
GEOGRAFICA
ITALIANA**



**Ministero
dei beni e delle
attività culturali
e del turismo**

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ISTITUTO PER L'ORIENTE C. A. NALLINO
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Gioia Bottari, Massimo Villa



Rome 2025

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PREFACE

THE SOCIETÀ GEOGRAFICA ITALIANA

The Società Geografica Italiana (SGI) was founded in Florence in 1867 and since then has continuously pursued the promotion of geographical disciplines, the documentation and publication of research, and the expansion and enhancement of its collections—books, periodicals, maps, photographs and drawings, correspondence, handwritten diaries, films, and objects—which together form the most important documentary corpus on geography in Italy and one of the largest in the world.

Now recognized as a ‘Terzo Settore’ entity under the supervision of the Italian Ministry of Culture, the institution is committed to research, dissemination, and scientific communication, in collaboration with a wide range of associations and institutions both in Italy and abroad. Actively involved in project-based initiatives, particularly in the field of international cooperation, the Società Geografica Italiana supports and promotes investigations and updates on a variety of issues concerning land use, territorial management, and sustainable development, relying also on the trust and support of governmental bodies and other public and private entities.

Based in the prestigious 16th-century Palazzetto Mattei in Villa Celimontana in Rome, the institution organizes cultural events, conferences, book presentations, and exhibitions, while maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the public—especially on environmental and territorial issues—through its communication channels. Its activities are largely focused on the promotion of scientific research and outreach initiatives, carried out through territorial and environmental study programs, a dynamic editorial production, meetings, conferences, multimedia exhibitions, guided tours, scientific excursions, book launches, photography contests, and events such as the ‘Festival della Letteratura di Viaggio’. Education, training, and professional development also form a key part of the initiatives promoted by the institution, which offers research grants and honorary awards.

The collections held by the Società Geografica Italiana are remarkable in both scale and diversity: over 450,000 volumes, 250,000 maps,¹ 400,000 photographic items,² along with a rich archive of documents, drawings, scientific instruments, relics, and films.³ These materials span more than five centuries, documenting the history of geography, exploration, and travel. The Archives, in particular, preserve original documents and materials related both to the institution’s activities and to notable figures such as explorers, travellers, geographers, scientists, cultural figures, and diplomats.⁴ Their significance has been formally acknowledged by the relevant Superintendencies, which have declared them of particularly high historical and artistic interest.

Among the institution’s main priorities is the mission to make its heritage accessible to the public. Thanks to meticulous cataloguing and organization, the collections are largely available and divided among various sectors: Library, Map Collection, Historical Archive,

¹ On the founding of the library and the growth of the SGI Map Collection, see: Benedetti 2009.

² On the establishment of the SGI Photographic Archive, see: Mancini 1996.

³ On the establishment of the SGI Historical Archive, see: Trovato 2019.

⁴ On the history of SGI, see: Cerreti 2000 and Azzari *et al.* 2017.

and Photographic Archive. This approach reflects a contemporary vision of cultural heritage as a shared, accessible, and collective resource. Through its efforts in preservation and outreach, the Società Geografica Italiana not only safeguards the past but also builds a bridge to the future, promoting geographical knowledge as a key to understanding the world and its transformations.

Among the collections housed at the Società Geografica Italiana, the Ethiopian Collection stands out, testifying to the richness and diversity of the institution's holdings. It has been studied and catalogued as part of the CaNaMEI project (Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia),⁵ available online (<https://www.ipocan.it/index.php/it/canamei-2>).

This important research project was made possible through collaboration with the Istituto per l'Oriente 'C. A. Nallino' and the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, two leading institutions in the field of Oriental studies in Italy. The Società Geografica Italiana's participation in the CaNaMEI project enabled the complete digitization of the volumes and paintings belonging to the collection, as well as the study and cataloguing of the items and the organization of a conference held on 2 December 2021, at Palazzetto Mattei, which included an exhibition of selected original works.

More recently, the Ethiopian Collection was the focus of a conference titled *Museo, patrimonio e geografie: un cammino comune per narrative e immaginari decoloniali*, an interdisciplinary occasion for dialogue and critical reflection on the role of cultural institutions—such as museums and archives—in relation to Italy's colonial legacy. For the event, an exhibition curated by Gianfrancesco Lusini, Gioia Bottari, and Massimo Villa was installed in the Sala del Mosaico of the Library, featuring a selection of original Ethiopian documents accompanied by explanatory panels.⁶

The Ethiopian collection includes manuscripts in Gəʿəz and Amharic that not only transmit rare texts originating from early Christianity and from cultural exchanges with Coptic Christian Egypt, but also preserve ancient illustrative cycles with remarkable fidelity to the originals. In addition, the collection contains handwritten documents of various kinds—vocabularies, notebooks, notes—left by missionaries and explorers in Ethiopia. Alongside the well-known figure of Guglielmo Massaia (1809–1889), whose efforts brought Catholic missionary activity in Ethiopia to its peak, other religiously affiliated scholars also took an interest in Abyssinia from linguistic, cultural, and political perspectives. Among them stand out, for their interests and literary contributions, Giuseppe Sapeto (1811–1895), Giusto da Urbino (1814–1865), Giovanni Stella (1822–1869), and Léon des Avanchers (1825–1879), the latter of whom took part in the Italian expedition to the equatorial lakes (1876–1882), promoted by the Società Geografica Italiana and led by Orazio Antinori. During their time in Africa, they compiled valuable texts—primarily, though not exclusively, linguistic in nature—which, after their deaths, were deposited in various preservation institutions, including the Società Geografica Italiana, and served as tools for study and education. Some of these materials remain unpublished to this day and are still awaiting proper evaluation.

Patrizia Pampana
Head of Archives and Library of the Società Geografica Italiana

⁵ The CaNaMEI project, promoted by the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, with the collaboration of the Istituto per l'Oriente "Carlo Alfonso Nallino" (IPOCAN) and the Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo (ISMEO), is coordinated by Professor Gianfrancesco Lusini (Università di Napoli L'Orientale); see his Foreword in the following pages.

⁶ <https://societageografica.net/wp/2024/10/16/mostra-sul-fondo-etiopico-della-societa-geografica-italiana-8-ottobre-2024/> (last access: 24 April 2025).

FOREWORD

THE CANAMEI PROJECT

The publication of this volume is a turning point for the activities conducted in the past six years within CaNaMEI (Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia), an Italian research project centered in Naples. Actually, the Authors of the book, Dr Gioia Bottari and Dr Massimo Villa, from the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, are a part of this team, together with Jacopo Gnisci, from the University College of London, and the present writer.

Since the time of August Dillmann (1823–1894), William Wright (1830–1889) and Hermann Zotenberg (1836–1894), cataloguing of manuscript collections has been one of the most engaging activities in Ethiopian philology. And for a long phase in the history of studies, the creation of extensive and in-depth catalogues was the spearhead of the scientific work, even more than the same editions of Gə'əz texts, that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were rather lacking in terms of methodological principles and editorial practices. The same cannot be said of the catalogues of manuscripts, which on several occasions offered as many emblematic and still unsurpassed application models, so that they can be considered one of the finest achievements in Christian Oriental Studies.

The reasons are many and have long been well known. The simple fact that, among the cultures of the Christian East, until the mid-19th century, the Ethiopic tradition was the less known outside church circles, determined the need to produce manuscript catalogues that would also serve as repertories of ancient literature, particularly in its relations, in one respect, with the Islamic and Christian Arab contexts (as in the cases of Wright and Zotenberg), and in the other, with the Biblical and Apocryphal background (according to Dillmann's sensitivity). Therefore, the catalogues of Ethiopic manuscripts played the role of showcases of a cultural heritage, to enhance and publicize its relations with other literary traditions, in the wake of the general Christian lore.

In more than a century of scholarly research on the Ethiopic manuscripts preserved in Italy by public and private libraries and institutions, the need for a systematic initiative, aimed at compiling comprehensive catalogues of codices of Ethiopian provenance found in this country, never seems to have been felt. Elsewhere in Europe this happened as an integral part of study and research programmes on the national manuscript heritages. For this reason, governments and universities of Europe have in the past promoted and supported important work on their respective manuscript collections, fostering the creation of works that have led to the scientific description of hundreds of artifacts.

Actually, apart from pioneering enterprises, such as the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Germany was the country that undoubtedly made the greatest contribution to the cataloguing of Ethiopian manuscripts. The series *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland* proved to be for years the most comprehensive working tool ever produced in Europe, with a conspicuous part devoted to Ethiopia, to which Veronika Six—renowned specialist of manuscript studies—contributed much. Still in Germany, a leap forward within Ethiopian studies was represented by the project “Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia: Salvation, Preservation, Research”, a European Research Council Starting Grant (240720) headed by Denis Nonsitsin (Universität Hamburg) from 2009 to 2015.

One cannot talk about these topics without stressing the contribution made to our discipline by the scholars and the researchers of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean

Studies (HLCEES, Hamburg). Suffice it to mention the cooperative network “Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies”, born from a European Science Foundation Research Programme and coordinated by Eugenia Sokolinski (HLCEES), and the ERC Advanced Grant “TraCES: from Translation to Creation”, headed by Alessandro Bausi (“Sapienza” Università di Roma) from 2014 to 2019. Through this series of initiatives, the center has gradually established itself on the international stage as the main driver of Ethiopian studies, with specific reference to the cataloguing of manuscripts, as witnessed by “Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea”, a ‘research environment’ that over time carved out a leading role for several European projects.

In Italy, all the studies of the past decades have consistently had an occasional character, and so the various cataloguing notices—sometimes written by by the most renowned specialists in the field—have been directed toward limited publishing channels, such as academic journals, series of cultural institutions, monographic publications. The negative consequences of such a situation can hardly be underestimated. As a matter of fact, this dispersed way of proceeding did not provide the basis for a general reflection on the way and purposes of cataloguing Ethiopic manuscripts. Inevitably, each scholar has developed his own approach to the issue, with the result that the works followed different layouts and they came to unequal results.

At the initiative of the University of Naples L’Orientale, with the help of the Istituto per l’Oriente C. A. Nallino (IPOCAN) and the Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente (ISMEO), it was intended to start filling this gap by launching the *Catálogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia*. The objectives of CaNaMEI consist in the identification of all public and private collections in which Ethiopian manuscripts are kept, particularly those still unreported or not appropriately studied, in the scientific description and cataloguing of the finds, and in the digitization and study of the manuscripts. Whenever possible, it is also expected that appropriate conservation or restoration measures are taken, together with initiatives to promote the materials through the organization of events such as exhibitions and conferences.

At least three fundamental skills were identified: first of all textual analysis and philology, then codicology in the sense of manuscript archaeology, finally the history of arts, particularly of miniature paintings. This explains the crucial role played by the three researchers Massimo Villa, philologist of the L’Orientale, Gioia Bottari, codicologist with the same affiliation, and Jacopo Gnisci, art historian of the University College of London, who were instrumental for the actual launching and the subsequent development of the project. Allow me to say that it was basically because of their technical skill and enthusiastic commitment that the project has been running for six years producing sometimes even unexpected results.

For reasons that often have to do with the very manner in which the artifacts were acquired, the distribution of Ethiopic manuscripts within the public and private collections of Italy is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation and dispersion. Consequently, the mapping of the collections turned out to be a kind of work in progress, a path of continuous acquisition of new data. The work experience enabled the identification of different types of collections and consequently required diversifying ways of operating within 1. areas with a high concentration of manuscript collections, 2. significant collections in terms of quantity and provenance, 3. funds of small size but represented by pieces of significant historical, textual, and iconographic value.

To account for this diversity of situations and keep the public informed about the progress of the project, the series ‘CaNaMEI Reports’, an online annual monographic publication, was designed.¹ The concept was precisely to provide periodic, albeit partial, updates on the

¹ See <https://www.ipocan.it/index.php/it/canamei-2> (last access: 30 July 2025).

research, selecting institutions and artifacts based on their potential interest to the public. So, the first five issues of the series presented as case studies a *Four-Gospel Book* from the Museo Archeologico e d'Arte della Maremma of Grosseto, a private collection in Rome, a copy of the *Acts of Martyrs* from the Archivio Storico Diocesano of Savona, three 15th-century codices from the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma, and the Octateuch from the Biblioteca Forteguerriana of Pistoia.

Although CaNaMEI's purpose is the identification, cataloguing and digitization of the Ethiopian manuscripts preserved by cultural institutions, archives, public and private libraries in our country, the heart of the project is its digital catalogue, the result of the philological, codicological and art-historical expertise of the international study group. With a simple and intuitive search method, and in just a few well-marked steps, it is possible to interrogate the database and go in search of the various collections and numerous indexed texts, with the possibility of freely downloading images. The digital database will be accessible worldwide as open source, particularly in Eritrea and Ethiopia, where students and scholars are constantly seeking new tools for their researches.

CaNaMEI does not shy away from the challenge posed by the need of making even the liturgical manuscript an object that has its own 'third mission', the first being constituted by the original religious function, which determined the creation of the object; the second by its intrinsic nature as a historical document, subject to all the scientific analyses we know, codicological, paleographic, philological-literary, text-critical, chemical-physical, and so on; the third summarized in the notion of *objet ambassadeur* according to the original definition matured during the 1990s within the Centre culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou of Nouméa, with reference to the kanak culture of New Caledonia. The 'ambassadorial objects' are to be understood as hybridized signs of a history of violence and domination, but for that same reason endowed with a third *agency*, an efficacy intermediate between the religious and the scientific. They function both as a warning and recapitulation, and as support for the cultural and cognitive growth of both communities, the one in which they were generated and the non-original one that happens to host them.

Thus, in 2020, the CaNaMEI team agreed with the Museo Archeologico e d'Arte della Maremma of Grosseto an intervention on a beautiful late 15th-century illustrated *Four-Gospel Book* that arrived in Tuscany by the usual routes of forced appropriation. Thanks to the involvement of various public and private institutions, the result was a series of educational initiatives, at the Museum and even inside the Cathedral of Grosseto, that allowed hundreds of people to establish a first contact with the Christian Ethiopian culture. A qualifying element of the project was the restoration work, because the artifact had been removed from Ethiopia in the 1930s and since then had been kept in poor conditions, as a consequence of the lack of awareness of the object's value.

With this multi-level work, both scientific and educational, a kind of public engagement protocol was created, referring to the specific category of objects constituted by Ethiopian manuscripts, with the aspiration to reactivate it on other occasions as well. And in fact the operation, in all the articulation just illustrated, was happily repeated in 2021 at the Archives of the Bishopruc of Savona-Noli, where very few years ago an artifact entered, that turned out to be a valuable and voluminous 15th-century illustrated *Acts of the Martyrs*. After the restoration work, a series of dissemination events were also promoted, and a study day was held around the display of the codex, which marked an important step in the consolidation of the project itself.

Furthermore, concerning the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma, three manuscripts of extraordinary value from the collection of Antonio Mordini attracted our attention: a 15th-century *Book of Enoch*, the coeval and celebrated *Shepherd of Hermas*, and a *Book of Hours* produced not later than the 14th century, also valuable for its writing and the dense pattern of aniconic decorations. A public engagement protocol aimed at fostering a dialogue between African

artifacts and the local community was also applied to these three codices. The challenge was bringing academic expertise to the territories, and making it part of decolonial reasoning, centered on the objects. Again, they were studied, catalogued, described, digitized, properly restored, and at the conclusion of the intervention a press conference, in the presence of the national media, kicked off a series of educational and exhibition events in Italy, attended by hundreds of people, especially schoolchildren.

As for the Società Geografica Italiana of Rome, hosting a significant collection of Ethiopian artifacts, most of them tracing back to the activity of 19th-century missionaries, these too have been involved in a public engagement event. On the prestigious premises of Villa Celimontana, an exhibition was organized, aimed at a sizeable audience of non-specialists. Codices and documents were displayed in October 2024, with an accompanying set of explanatory posters. I dare to emphasize this aspect of our research programme, because within the contemporary cultural complexity, in which dark clouds are gathering over our civic future, academic militancy can be a kind of antidote against intolerant and racist drifts.

All these efforts would have been fruitless without the great expertise, dedication and skills of Dr Patrizia Pampana, librarian of the Società Geografica Italiana of Rome. To her, I wish to extend my most sincere thanks. But I can't take my leave before remembering all the colleagues and friends who over time had confidence in the project and its chances of success, and concretely supported it: the rector of the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Prof. Roberto Tottoli, the former Director of the Department, Prof. Andrea Manzo, and the current Director, Prof. Roberta Giunta, the PhD curriculum coordinator, Prof. Michele Bernardini, the President of ISMEO, Prof. Adriano Rossi and the Director of IPOCAN, Prof. Claudio Lo Jacono, the President of the Accademia Vivarium Novum (Frascati, Italy), Prof. Luigi Miraglia. If we have reached this stage, we owe something to each of them.

Gianfrancesco Lusini
Director of the CaNaMEI project