

ISTITUTO PER L'ORIENTE "C.A. NALLINO"  
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI "L'ORIENTALE"

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Vol. 2

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2018

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RASSEGNA DI STUDI ETIOPICI – RIVISTA FONDATA DA CARLO CONTI ROSSINI

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## *Ai lettori*

Questo fascicolo della *Rassegna* contiene buona parte delle comunicazioni presentate in occasione del seminario italo-eritreo *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects*, organizzato e tenuto presso l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" il 12 e 13 dicembre 2017.

L'evento scientifico rientra nei programmi dell'Accordo di scambio e collaborazione firmato il 5 febbraio 2008 tra il Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea (RDC) e l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" con il fine di stabilire un legame duraturo fra le due istituzioni culturali e accademiche, sviluppando programmi di ricerca e attività didattiche per la conservazione e la promozione del patrimonio nazionale eritreo. In questo contesto, negli anni scorsi a Napoli sono state celebrate due conferenze: *History and Language of Tigre-speaking peoples* (2008, atti pubblicati nel 2010) e *Eritrean Studies: Past and Present* (2010, atti pubblicati nel 2012); corsi avanzati per lo studio dei manoscritti Gə'əz sono stati tenuti in Asmara da docenti italiani; studenti dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" si sono recati in Eritrea per completare la loro formazione e studiosi eritrei hanno visitato l'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" e hanno tenuto lezioni e seminari su argomenti di linguistica eritrea.

Convocando studiosi da entrambi i Paesi, dando loro l'opportunità di scambiare esperienze e progetti circa la conservazione del patrimonio culturale eritreo, il seminario *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects* ha inteso una volta ancora dare concretezza agli scopi e alle finalità dell'Accordo di scambio e collaborazione italo-eritreo. Pertanto, per aver partecipato all'evento scientifico dobbiamo esser grati alle autorità delle due istituzioni: Azeb Tewolde, Direttrice del Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea, Giorgio Banti, Vice-Rettore dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" e Michele Bernardini, Direttore del Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo della stessa Università. In ugual misura, vogliamo esprimere il nostro più sincero ringraziamento nei confronti dei rappresentanti del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, in particolare del Dr. Raffaele De Lutio, già Direttore Centrale per i Paesi dell'Africa Sub-Sahariana, che ha porto ai convegnisti il proprio saluto e il proprio augurio di buon lavoro.

Il programma della conferenza ha incluso due relazioni introduttive di Azeb Tewolde e Gianfrancesco Lusini, e comunicazioni di storia (Silvana Palma), antropologia (Gianni Dore – Moreno Vergari), archeologia (Andrea Manzo, Chiara Zazzaro), filologia (Massimo Villa), storia dell'arte (Lorenza Mazzei), linguistica semitica (Tesfay Tewolde, Saleh Mahmud Idris) e linguistica nilo-sahariana (Gilda Ferrandino, Giorgio Banti e Graziano Savà).

Con questo fascicolo la redazione della *Rassegna* punta a contribuire al rafforzamento della cooperazione scientifica tra istituzioni italiane ed eritree, assumendo che il patrimonio culturale non sia soltanto un fattore identitario, ma anche un'occasione concreta di sviluppo per Paesi come l'Eritrea che conservano grandi tesori artistici, archeologici, linguistici e storici.

Con tristezza dobbiamo registrare una grave perdita per la comunità scientifica internazionale, e in particolare per l'africanistica all'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale". Mentre si completava la redazione di questo volume, il 23 marzo 2018 è mancato il Prof. Rodolfo Fattovich, a lungo professore ordinario di Archeologia etiopica nel nostro Ateneo, membro del Consiglio scientifico della nostra rivista, uno tra i maggiori indagatori e conoscitori della protostoria e dell'antichità del Corno d'Africa, autentico creatore di una scuola accademica di primissimo livello, che a Napoli viene mantenuta viva e vitale da un gruppo di studiosi formati grazie al suo insegnamento. La redazione della *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* si unisce al cordoglio di quanti, in Italia e nel mondo, avendone apprezzato gli straordinari meriti scientifici, piangono la sua scomparsa e avvertono il vuoto lasciato dalla sua dipartita.

Il Direttore

*To the readers*

This issue of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* contains the largest part of the papers delivered on the occasion of the Italo-Eritrean workshop *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects*, organized and held at the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

The scientific event fits into the programs of the Exchange and collaboration agreement signed on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 between the Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea (RDC) and the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” with the aim of establishing permanent ties between the two cultural and academic institutions, developing research projects and teaching activities for the preservation and promotion of the Eritrean national heritage. In this context, in the past years two conferences were held in Naples: *History and Language of Tigre-speaking peoples* (2008, proceedings published in 2010) and *Eritrean Studies: Past and Present* (2010, proceedings published in 2012); advanced courses for the study of Gəʼəz manuscripts were given in Asmara by Italian scholars; students from the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” went to Eritrea to complete their researches; Eritrean scholars visited the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” to give lessons and seminars in the field of Eritrean linguistics.

By gathering scholars from the two countries, giving them the opportunity to exchange experiences and projects about the preservation of the Eritrean cultural heritage, the workshop *The Eritrean Cultural Heritage: Facts and Projects* aimed once again at actualizing the scope and the purpose of the Italo-Eritrean Exchange and collaboration agreement. Therefore, for their presence on the occasion of that scientific event we have to be grateful to the authorities of both institutions: Azeb Tewelde, Director of the Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea, Giorgio Banti, Vice-Rector of the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” and Michele Bernardini, Head of the Department Asian, African and Mediterranean Studies of the same University. Equally, we want to express our most sincere thanks to the representatives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly Dr. Raffaele De Lutio, former Direttore Centrale per i Paesi dell’Africa Sub-Sahariana, who presented his greetings and wishes for a good work to the conference attendees.

The program of the conference included two introductory speeches by Azeb Tewolde and Gianfrancesco Lusini, and papers in History (Silvana Palma), Anthropology (Gianni Dore – Moreno Vergari), Archaeology (Andrea Manzo, Chiara Zazzaro), Philology (Massimo Villa), Arts (Lorenza Mazzei), Semitic Linguistics (Tesfay Tewolde, Saleh Mahmud Idris), Nilo-Saharan Linguistics (Gilda Ferrandino, Giorgio Banti and Graziano Savà).

With this issue the Editorial Board of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* is engaged in strengthening the scientific cooperation between Italian and Eritrean institutions, assuming that the cultural heritage is not only an identity-building factor, but a real occasion of development for countries like Eritrea holders of great artistic, archaeological, linguistic and historical treasures.

Sadly, we have to register a serious loss for the international scientific community, particularly for the African studies in the Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”. Before the editing of this volume was completed, 23 March 2018, Prof. Rodolfo Fattovich passed away. Full professor of Archaeology of Ethiopia in our University for many years, a member of the Scientific committee of our journal, he was one of the best investigators and experts of the Horn of Africa’s proto-history and antiquity. In Naples Prof. Fattovich created of a high rank academic school, still living and active thanks to a team of scholars raised through his teaching. Members of the Editorial board of the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* associate themselves to the regret of those who, in Italy as in the rest of the world, having appreciated his outstanding scientific merits, mourn his passing and feel the gap left by his demise.

The Director

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In copertina: villaggio di Ham (Šəmāzana, Akkälä Guzay, Eritrea), chiesa antica di ʾĪnda Maryam (foto A. Bausi)

# MONASTIC LIBRARIES IN ERITREA: AN AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

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## Abstract

Eritrea can boast a long-lasting scribal culture on parchment which is intimately associated with the presence of monastic and ecclesiastic centres. Monastic libraries scattered throughout the country preserve historical manuscript collections, in some cases very extensive, which are veritable parchment treasures still awaiting a proper cataloguing and investigation. Research initiatives that will hopefully carry out scholarly activities on the Eritrean manuscript culture will face manifold challenges, but will have the privilege to actively re-introduce that precious heritage into the scholarly discussion.

## Keywords

Monastic collections – manuscript heritage – Ewosṭatean monasteries – Däbrä Maryam – Missione Italiana in Eritrea (MIE) – Beta maṣāḥəft

## 1. The Eritrean manuscript heritage and the monastic landscape in Eritrea

A portion of the long colophon of a sumptuous late 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript hailing from Däbrä Bizän, 25 km east from Asmara, declares:

ወዝሰ ፡ መጽሐፍ ፡ ምክሕ ፡ ውእቲ ፡ ውነበ ፡  
ባዕዳን ፡ መካናት ፡ ኢይትረከብ ። ዕቀብዎ ፡  
በተጠናቅቆ ፡ ወበአክብሮ ።

As for this book, it is an object of pride and cannot be found elsewhere. Keep it carefully and with reverence (Bausi 1995 [1997: 36, 39]).

The volume, donated by the abbot Tāwäldä Mädhən to his community, is a *unicum* in its genre.<sup>1</sup> It hosts the eighty-one canonical books, i.e. the Old and New Testament books, plus the book of Enoch, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Testament of Our Lord, the Didascalia, and the Senodos.<sup>2</sup> Being a monumental example of ‘multiple-text manuscript’, it can be styled, to use a fitting expression, as ‘una vera e propria biblioteca in un solo libro’.<sup>3</sup> The book is of very large dimensions (48 cm of height x 39 cm of width), and the outstanding total number of leaves, 576, makes it the biggest Gə‘əz manuscript ever known. The status of the book, also visibly evidenced by the rubrication of the words **ዛቲ፡ መጽሐፍ፡** on f. 574<sup>vb</sup>,<sup>4</sup> reflects in its turn the leading position enjoyed by the owning community.

Veritable parchment treasures like the large-size Däbrä Bizän codex place the manuscript culture among the most striking expressions of the civilization which emerged and continues to flourish in the wide territory from the western shore of the Red Sea to the highlands of the Ethiopian Plateau. Since the institutional establishment of Christianity in the country, as far back as the fourth century, the manuscript tradition in the local language has been an essential tool to carry out the religious services, to safeguard the transmission of the written knowledge, and in a long-term perspective to consolidate the Christian faith over the country. The liturgical practice demanded very soon the translation into Gə‘əz of texts of primary importance for defining the religious identity, and encouraged the early dissemination of at least Gospel books, Psalms, and perhaps some church service texts. Considering

<sup>1</sup> Ms. MIE no. 6 (on this abbreviation see further down). The colophon on f. 574<sup>v</sup> indicates the year 1491/92 as the date of completion of the volume; however, the exact time range in which *abba* Tāwäldä Mädhən was abbot of Däbrä Bizän is still disputed, see Lusini (1993: 109), Bausi 1995 ([1997]: 34-37).

<sup>2</sup> The pseudoepigraphical and pseudo-apostolic writings which in the Ethiopian and Eritrean tradition receive equal authoritative status with the biblical books are sometimes different (e.g., the Book of the Jubilees is often counted), but the overall number of the canon books traditionally remains 81, or less frequently 82. The figure symbolically indicates the entire corpus of religious knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> On the expression (‘an actual one-volume library’), first adopted by Armando Petrucci in a different context, and the related aspects of the phenomenon of the multiple-text manuscripts in the Ethiopian scribal culture, see Bausi (2016).

<sup>4</sup> A treatment customarily reserved to the *nomina sacra* and to a restricted set of names of individuals: that of the saintly protagonist, of the commissioner and his family members, and of the copyist.

that the Eritrean historical regions of Ḥamasen, Säraye and Akkälä Guzay, at present inhabited by Christian Tigrinya-speaking people, were part of the heartland of the ancient Aksumite kingdom, it can be confidently stated that a bookmaking and scribal culture on parchment permeates Eritrea since at least one millennium and half with no interruption.

## 2. The Aksumite monastic sites

Manuscript making and literary activity are intimately associated with the presence of monastic and ecclesiastic centres. This interlinking between the scribal practice and the religious life has made monasteries and churches, be they of large or small size, the most significant repositories of the written knowledge. As a subsequent corollary of this, the history of the Eritrean manuscript collections cannot be made without outlining a history of monasticism in the area.

Some twenty-two monastic foundations are located in Eritrea (Kaplan 2007: 988), the oldest extant dating back to the Aksumite period. Unluckily, their early history can hardly be reconstructed. It is traditionally believed that the most ancient monastic sites are linked to the missionary activity of foreign monks who came to Ethiopia and Eritrea in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries from various parts of the Byzantine Empire and in different waves. These groups of most venerated saintly missionaries propagated the monastic practice into the country within the frame of the so-called ‘second Christianization’ of the country. Alongside with the Nine Saints, who established some of the most renowned and influential monasteries in northern Ethiopia,<sup>5</sup> other groups led their missionary activities in Eritrea in the same centuries such as, e.g., the *Ṣadaqan zä-Baräknaha* in the historical region of Šämāzana.<sup>6</sup>

Other monks, styled as ‘isolated saints’, operated alone. Of absolute pre-eminence is *abba* Libanos, or Mäṭa, active in Säraye and Akkälä Guzay. He is traditionally believed to have founded the famous monastery of Däbrä Libanos in Šämāzana (Akkälä Guzay), in all likelihood the oldest living mo-

<sup>5</sup> The most celebrated sites being Däbrä Dammo, Ḥnda Abba Gärima at Mädära, and Ḥnda Abba Püntälewön in Aksum.

<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Nine Saints, the ‘Righteous Ones’ of Baräknaha kept operating in group. The story of their activity is narrated in their *Life*, edited by Carlo Conti Rossini (Conti Rossini 1903a). On the manuscript tradition and the related bibliography, see Brita (2010: 446).

nastic institution in the country, as well as the nearby church of Ham.<sup>7</sup> *Abba Yoḥanni* is another saint whose veneration is particularly ancient, as supported by hymnological compositions in newly discovered manuscript evidence.<sup>8</sup> *Abba Yoḥanni* came from Egypt, as his name also would suggest, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, with many followers and *tabots*. He is credited with founding the monastery of Däbrä Sina in the region of ‘Ansäba (district of Sänhit, to the north of the road between Asmära e Kärän) and other monasteries affiliated to it.<sup>9</sup>

Däbrä Libanos and Däbrä Sina mark the first ‘generation’ of coenobitic foundations in Eritrea. They prove that monasticism was in existence in the country since Aksumite age, and most certainly also monastic libraries were. Unfortunately, even though the presence of Askumite sites and cultural centres can be traced through local historical traditions and archaeological surveys, no direct witness of the Aksumite manuscript culture has survived so far, the only outstanding exception rather hailing from Təgray (Ethiopia) and represented by two of the famous Gospel books from Ĕnda Abba Gärima.<sup>10</sup> As far as Däbrä Libanos is concerned, the antiqueness of the site might set

<sup>7</sup> On Däbrä Libanos see Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 26-31), Bausi (2005). The site hosts several architectural and material vestiges probably dating to the Aksumite age, starting from the old church of Ĕnda Maryam in Ham (or Aham); see Bausi (2003), Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 27-30). The church of *abba Maṭä‘* of Aham is mentioned in the Golden Gospel of Däbrä Libanos (document no. 7). The old church originally accommodated also the well-known Gə‘əz funerary inscription (Conti Rossini 1939; RIÉ no. 232), a unique late-Aksumite written testimony traditionally ascribed to the 7-8<sup>th</sup> century or perhaps later.

<sup>8</sup> Ancient chant material is found in ms. EMMML no. 7078, a pre-mid-14<sup>th</sup>-century *arba ‘ət*-chant manuscript from Betä Giyorgis (Lalibäla, see Noslitsin 2018: 300-02), and in a very old fragment from Däbrä Šahl (ms. DS II, Gär‘alta, northern Ethiopia). The text of the Däbrä Šahl fragment exhibits palaeographical features belonging to the so-called ‘monumental period’ and frequent peculiar forms with deviating vocalization (e.g., Yoḥanni is systematically spelled Yoḥannə). Given its age, certainly prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the chant fragment is representative of an early veneration of *abba Yoḥanni* (Noslitsin 2018).

<sup>9</sup> The main source of the history of Däbrä Sina and his founder is the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Zena Däbrä Sina* written by Ašratä Maryam and edited by Ignazio Guidi (Ašratä Maryam 1910). A more recent Eritrean source lists eleven churches and monasteries, only in part still active, which are linked to the veneration of *abba Yoḥanni* (also styled *abba Ḥanni*) or claim to have been founded by him, see Bərhanä Mäsqäl Täsfamaryam (1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Abba Gärima I* and *III*. Carbon-14 readings have given a result of 530-660 for *Abba Gärima I* (one test in 2012) and a range between 330 and 650 for *Abba Gärima III* (two tests in 2000 and one in 2012 on distinct pieces of parchment); see now McKenzie, Watson (2016).

the most favourable circumstances for the survival of exceptionally ancient manuscripts.

The literary pre-eminence of the site is borne out by a passage from the *Life* of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century monk Bäṣalotä Mika'el. The latter sojourned in several monastic centres of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, among which 'the place of Dammo' (Däbrä Dammo), Qəfrəya (today known as 'Ura Mäsqäl), Mäqäle, and also visited 'the house of *abba* Mäta'.

**ወእምዛ፡ ተግሕሠ፡ ወበጽሐ፡ ቤተ፡ ኣባ፡** He left and came to the house of *abba*  
**መጣዕ፡ ወነሥኣ፡ በረከቶ፡ ለብፁእ፡** Mäta'. He received the blessing of the  
**ሊባኖስ፡ ወነበረ፡ ኅዳጠ፡ መዋዕለ፡ እንዘ፡** blessed Libanos and stayed a few days  
**ይተግሠ፡ በአንብቦ፡ መጻሕፍት።** reading books.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, nearly nothing is known about the composition of the library. The last documented visit to the monastery recorded the existence of eighty-four manuscripts in good state of preservation.<sup>12</sup> However, a systematic survey has never been made, and whenever this will be possible in the future, outstanding findings might hopefully come to light.

Even though fieldwork experience in other historical monastic centres has revealed that antiqueness does not necessarily imply a remarkable concentration of very old manuscripts,<sup>13</sup> the presence of pre-14<sup>th</sup> century books in Däbrä Libanos is positively attested. It is the case of the well-known Golden Gospel (*Wängel wärqi*), the sole item which, saved for an illuminated 15<sup>th</sup>-century exemplar of *Gädlä Säma'tat*,<sup>14</sup> has received the share of scholarly attention. The Golden Gospel of Däbrä Libanos, most probably copied in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (or even earlier), and studied by Carlo Conti Ros-

<sup>11</sup> Conti Rossini (1905: 19 [text], 17 [transl.]).

<sup>12</sup> See below note 29.

<sup>13</sup> It is the case of the library of Däbrä Dammo. Founded by Zämika'el Arägawi, the most influential of the Nine Saints, it was particularly pre-eminent in medieval times, as also evidenced by the cited passage from the *Life* of Bäṣalotä Mika'el. The Turkish raid under Özdemir *paša* in 1557 certainly provoked heavy losses to the manuscript holdings, and a fire in the 1990s has severely damaged the treasury of the monastery, reducing the total number of books to some sixty items, see Nosnitsin (2013a: 82-86, 2013b: 9 n. 24). As a result, very few books or book remains predate the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They have been digitized by the Ethio-SPaRe project. Other pieces in fragmentary state had been collected by Antonio Mordini in the 1930s (Conti Rossini 1940), and are now deposited in Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Biblioteca Corsiniana (mss. Conti Rossini nos 134 and 135, Strelcyn 1976: 327-38).

<sup>14</sup> Ms. MIE no. 12, Bausi (1997 [1998]: 23-32).

sini and others,<sup>15</sup> raises manifold issues which cannot be fully treated here. Its main reason of interest is the presence, in two fascicles bound together with the main text, of a great number of records with archival functions, mainly land benefits and rights of exploitation granted to the monastery by several kings. Among these, leaving aside the spurious feudal acts attributed to the 6<sup>th</sup>-century king Gäbrä Mäsqäl, we find the earliest dated documentary Gə‘əz text ever known, i.e. a feudal deed emanated by king Lalibäla in 1204.<sup>16</sup> The history of the manuscript could be even older, if the inscription on the decorated metal cover mentioning king Solomon (*Sälamən*) as the donor actually refers to Ṭäntäwəddəm, one of the early Zag<sup>w</sup>e kings and son of the founder of the dynasty Murara.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The medieval monastic sites

A crucial reshaping of the Eritrean ‘monastic landscape’ was determined from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards by the intense activity of the Ewoṣṭatean movement.<sup>18</sup> The latter, associated with the predication of Ewoṣṭatewos of Däbrä Särabi (1273-1352) and his disciples, was responsible of the creation of a network of monastic communities scattered in the historical regions of Säraye and Ḥamasen. Especially from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the favourable resolution of the Church council at Däbrä Məṭmaq, the

<sup>15</sup> Conti Rossini (1901*a*), Schneider (1989); ms. MIE no. 11 in Bausi (1997 [1998]: 13-22).

<sup>16</sup> Document no. 6 (Conti Rossini 1901*a*: 12-15). The text is most probably a coeval copy to the original document (Schneider 1989). The correct dating ‘year of mercy 389’ (= 1204) has been restored by Gianfranco Fiaccadori against the untenable reading ‘year of mercy 1089’ (f. 15<sup>v</sup>), see Fiaccadori (2011 [2012]). An index of the proper names and other remarkable terms occurring in the land grants has been prepared by Alessandro Bausi (Bausi 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Excepting Lalibäla, Ṭäntäwəddəm is the only Zag<sup>w</sup>e king to be documented in coeval sources. These include the processional cross of ‘Ura Mäsqäl (Təgray) and a 17<sup>th</sup>-century cartulary from the same site (ms. Ethio-SPaRe UM-035) embedding much older feudal prerogatives granted by him. In both documents Ṭäntäwəddəm is also called with his regnal name Sälonon. This notwithstanding, it has been suggested that the name Sälonon on the book cover might rather, and perhaps more reasonably, indicate a later Solomonic king Yagba Ṣəyon (r. 1285-1294), see Schneider (1989), Fiaccadori (2015: 22).

<sup>18</sup> The notion of ‘monastic (and ecclesiastic) landscape’ (see Nosnitsin 2013*b*) is used here being aware of its somewhat nebulous meaning and the multiple implications due to the absence of a shared definition, see Lusini (2015: 194-97). Equally challenging is the use of the notion of ‘network’, a term which has to be necessarily circumscribed in space and time (Nosnitsin 2013*b*: viii).

Ewoṣṭatean congregation played a major role in a profound Christianization of the country by conducting missionary activities in the surrounding regions and confronting against the Islamic Sultanate of the Dahlak Islands.

In 1373/74, *abunä* Filəppos established in Ḥamasen the monastery of Däbrä Bizän (also called Ĕnda Abunä Filəppos), on the top of a hill on the way linking Asmära and Massawa.<sup>19</sup> *Abunä* Absadi, spiritual son of Ewoṣṭatewos, founded in the same year Däbrä Maryam (also called Ĕnda Abunä Absadi), in Q<sup>w</sup>äḥayn (Säraye). Däbrä Bizän and Däbrä Maryam are the best representatives of the ‘new’ generation of monastic centres. The former soon gained the political leadership among the Ewoṣṭatewos monastic network, and severely challenged the influence of Däbrä Libanos in Šəmāzana, which underwent a progressive loss of supremacy. On the other hand, Däbrä Maryam became a true ‘factory of saints’ of the Ewoṣṭatean congregation and, fully mirroring the bibliophilist vocation of his founder Absadi,<sup>20</sup> a cultural centre of the utmost importance. The prolific *scriptorium* of Däbrä Maryam gave rise, between the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> and the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, to a rich and stylistically remarkable hagiographical corpus. It includes the *Gädlä Absadi*, the *Gädlä Ewoṣṭatewos*, the *Gädlä Təwälda Mädhən*, and the *Gädlä Fiḳtor*.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The strategic position of the monastery, which dominates the route to the sea (the sultan of the Dahlak Islands was represented in Massawa by the so-called *nayb*, i.e. ‘deputy’), is suggestive of this role, and is its turn eloquent of the leading position played by Däbrä Bizän over the monasteries in Ḥamasen and Säraye, see Lusini (1993: 96-102, 2005: 16-17). The establishment of Däbrä Bizän is described in the *Gädlä Filəppos* (BHO no. 984, KRZ no. 55), published by Carlo Conti Rossini (Conti Rossini 1901*b*); see also Schneider (1978), see also Lusini (1993: 97-107)

<sup>20</sup> As celebrated in the *Gädlä Absadi* (KRZ no. 7), see Lusini (1996: 29 [§12, text], 20 [transl.]). On the culturally significant importance of the Eritrean monastery, see further down.

<sup>21</sup> The *Gädlä Ewoṣṭatewos* (BHO no. 295, KRZ no. 49), written in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is edited and translated into Latin by Boris Turaev (Turaev 1905; 1906). See also Lusini (1990 [1996], 1993: 35-67) for a text-critical enquiry. The *Gädlä Absadi* (KRZ no. 7), composed between the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, has been published by Gianfrancesco Lusini (Lusini 1996). The *Gädlä Təwälda Mädhən* (KRZ no. 156) and the *Gädlä Fiḳtor* (KRZ no. 57), written during Zär’a Ya‘qob’s reign and dedicated respectively to the fourth and fifth abbot of the community, have been published by Tedros Abraha (Tedros Abraha 2009). The term *scriptorium* is here not to be intended as a physical place specifically devoted to the scribal activity, the existence of which in the Ethiopian and Eritrean context is historically questionable.



Other monastic institutions were founded in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Bəşu'a Amlak founded Ĕnda Šəllase and Däbrä Bəşu'a Amlak in Šəlləma,<sup>22</sup> and Ĕndrəyas established Ĕnda Abunä Ĕndrəyas in Saffə'a.<sup>23</sup> The monastery of Ĕnda Abunä Buruk Amlak was established in Märag<sup>w</sup>əz on the place of the presumed martyrdom of Buruk Amlak, disciple of Absadi.<sup>24</sup> In the same area, on the top of a hill near Mändäfära, Yonas of Bur founded in 1455 Däbrä Şəge ('Monastery of the flower'), also called Ĕnda Abunä Yonas La'əlay ('Upper monastery of Abunä Yonas').<sup>25</sup> In Q<sup>w</sup>əḥayn the same Yonas founded in 1489 Däbrä Dəḥuḥan, also called Ĕnda Abunä Yonas Taḥtay ('Lower monastery of Abunä Yonas').<sup>26</sup> In 'Arräza Märqorewos,

<sup>22</sup> The main source of information on the foundation of Ĕnda Šəllase is the early-16<sup>th</sup>-century *Gädlä Bəşu'a Amlak* (KRZ no. 34), partially edited by Conti Rossini (1902). The monastery, whose name bespeaks the founder's efforts to promote the cult of the Trinity in the area, is situated on the top of a mountain near the May Wušate river at almost 2,000 meters (Conti Rossini 1902: 393 n. 4). A *däbdabe* ('register') appended to the *Life* of the saint records several land holdings granted to the monastery by king Na'od (r. 1494-1508), and even by the abbot of Däbrä Bizen *abba* Pētros, who transferred to Ĕnda Šəllase one third of the feudal grants received by king Zär'a Ya'qob (r. 1434-1468). According to Conti Rossini these benefices, most likely spurious, would prove the rivalry between Däbrä Bizen and Ĕnda Šəllase. The latter, although unable to supplant the economic leadership of the Däbrä Bizen, gained significant importance during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and extended its religious jurisdiction over large part of the Akkälä Guzay (Conti Rossini 1902: 394-95). On Däbrä Bəşu'a Amlak, also called Kodadu, see Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 17).

<sup>23</sup> Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 16-17). The *Gädlä Ĕndrəyas zä-Saffə'a* (KRZ no. 44) is known from one recent copy (ms. Rome, ANL Conti Rossini no. 84, see Strelcyn 1976: 216-20). Still unpublished, it is studied and summarized in Lusini (2014).

<sup>24</sup> Also called Ĕnda Abba Buruk or Dabra Kol, 'Mount of the Apple', the monastery hosts the sepulchre of the saint in the proximity of a spring of water that, according to the *Gädlä Buruk Amlak* (KRZ no. 35, published by Conti Rossini 1938a with no translation), miraculously began to flow from the place where the Ewoštatean saint was killed; see also Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 11-12) and Lusini (1993: 113-15).

<sup>25</sup> Located on the top of a hill previously called Gənbä Lə'ul ('its walls are high') by Ewoštatewos, the monastery was established in the twenty-first year of tenure of Zär'a Ya'qob, in the place where a flower in the shape of a cross miraculously sprouted during the dry season. On the life conditions of the monks and the site in the 1990s see Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 12-14); on Yonas of Bur see Bausi (2014). Selected passages of the *Gädlä Yonas* (BHO no. 526, KRZ no. 185) were edited by Conti Rossini (1903b), and additional notes of considerable historical value transmitted in some witnesses of the *Life* have been published and studied in Lusini (1998 [1999]). The *Gädlä Yonas* has been recently edited in its integrity by Tedros Abraha (Tedros Abraha 2015); see also the review by Bausi (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 15-16). Also called Nona or Nuna in the *Life* of Yonas (Tedros Abraha 2015: 402-03 [§115]). Conti Rossini provided a list of land properties and feudal pre-

spiritual son of Ewostatewos, founded Däbrä Dəmaḥ, also called Däbrä Märqorewos (Bausi, Lusini 1992 [1994]: 18-20). Däbrä Abranyos (also called Ĕnda Abbona or Däbrä Ṭəllul) emerged much later, in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Founded by *abba* Abranyos in Däqqi Bäk<sup>w</sup>ri, it is now the most prominent monastery in the area of Mändäfära.<sup>27</sup>

A quick look at the history of the Eritrean monasticism is enough to see that the country is featured by a complex and multi-layered monastic landscape. All the mentioned sites reportedly possess historical manuscript holdings, in many cases very extensive in number, thus confirming the commonplace statement that Eritrea is a land of books and monks. The record of manuscript holdings is claimed by Däbrä Bizan, with the impressive oft-quoted amount of 572 units presumably stored in its library.<sup>28</sup> Other collections are also remarkably extensive, as emerges from recent handlists in the possession of the *'aqqabe mäṣahəfti*, the 'librarian' of the community.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, scholarly knowledge of the manuscript heritage in the country is still largely approximate. The progress accomplished hitherto is moderate, and no major Eritrean collection has been properly investigated. Moreover, further historical mid- and small-size collections are completely unexplored or still unidentified. Accessibility is currently a true crux for researchers:

rogatives assigned to the two Ĕnda Abunä Yonas monasteries (Conti Rossini 1903*b*: 11-12). Yet another monastery, Däbrä Šahl, is traditionally ascribed to the saint's activity. According to the *Gädlä Yonas* it was received by Yonas' spiritual father *abunä* Dəmyanos of Däbrä Sina (not to be confused with the monastery in Sänḥit), see Tedros Abraha (2015: 418-19 [§131]). Still living during the Italian period, the whereabouts of Däbrä Šahl seem no longer detectable. According to Tedros Abraha (2015: 303) it is located in 'Arräza.

<sup>27</sup> Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 9-11). The main source of information on the foundation of the site is the *Gädlä Abranyos* (KRZ no. 3), published by Osvaldo Raineri (Raineri 1983).

<sup>28</sup> Data from Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 24). The total amount remains unconfirmed. If proven true, it would make the Eritrean collection the largest monastic repository of Gə'əz manuscripts in the entire Horn of Africa.

<sup>29</sup> These handlists of books and other holdings are drawn up in pen on paper copybooks and continuously updated. Their reliability is however debatable (Bausi, Lusini 1992 [1994]: 10 n. 11). According to them, Däbrä Dəmaḥ would have to date 162 manuscripts; the library of Ĕnda Abunä Täklä Haymanot would include 134 pieces; Däbrä Maryam Q<sup>w</sup>əḥayn is credited with preserving 95 manuscripts, and Däbrä Libanos in Šəmāzana 84 manuscripts. Däbrä Q<sup>w</sup>əsq<sup>w</sup>am reportedly preserved 92 pieces which were located in a safe place during the war. Däbrä Abranyos would possess 76 manuscripts; Däbrä Šəge approximately 70 manuscripts, some of which remarkably old, and Däbrä Bəṣu' Amlak's library would include 52 items. Data from Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]), see also Bausi (1994 [1996]: 15 n. 5).

work conditions have been severely prevented over the past decades by a variety of factors, among which the insecure situation determined by the recent conflict. To sum up, as compared to its richness, our knowledge of the Eritrean manuscript culture in its local context, as well as of the context itself, is ultimately deficient.

#### 4. A case study: Däbrä Maryam

One of the most promising collections is that of Däbrä Maryam. The cultural prominence of the monastery situated in Q<sup>w</sup>ähayn is evidenced by several local sources. One of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century literary products of that *scriptorium*, the *Life* of the fifth abbot of the community, *abba* Fiqtor (d. 1446), praises Däbrä Maryam as ፈልፈለ፡ መጻሕፍት፡ ምቅዳሕ፡ ሐዲስ፡ ወብሉይ፡ ‘fountain of books, [place] in which the Old and the New [Testament] are copied’ (Tedros Abraha 2009: 176-77 [§25]). The same work also recalls *abba* Fiqtor as *ḥasāse māṣahəft* ‘book-seeker’, a feature also shared by his spiritual ancestor *abba* Absadi, and narrates *abba* Fiqtor’s journey to Däbrä Ḥayq and to Šāwa in search for the book of Baruch.<sup>30</sup>

A further evidence of the role played by the scribal activity in the community life is witnessed by the uncommon prestige enjoyed by the copyists themselves. Such a prestige emerges from the frequent mention of the names of the copyists in the manuscripts, an uncustomary practice in the Ethiopian scribal context (Lusini 2004 [2005]: 236). Thus, we are informed that a certain Yostinos penned the famous Octateuch dated to 1408/09 (or at least the elaborated narrative appended at the end of the codex);<sup>31</sup> Tātāmqä Mādḥən copied a 15<sup>th</sup>-century book of the *Lives* of Ewostatewos and Absadi;<sup>32</sup> Tənsa’ē Krəstos wrote a finely illustrated Psalter and collection of songs and

<sup>30</sup> Tedros Abraha (2009: 188 [§38]). *Abba* Fiqtor is further styled as መተርጉም፡ ብሉይ፡ (!) ወሐዲስ፡ (‘interpreter of the Old and New [Testament]’) in a commemorative list of Ewostatean monks, embedded in the mid-15<sup>th</sup>-century ms. Vatican City, BAV Aeth. 46 and written by a certain Arkaledas (Conti Rossini 1927: 514-15).

<sup>31</sup> Lusini (2004 [2005]: 230). The concluding text, which is also the colophon of the book, is edited and published in Lusini (1996: 79-92 [text], 58-67 [transl.]).

<sup>32</sup> Ms. MIE no. 3, Bausi (1994 [1996]: 66-68).

prayers, now deposited in Paris;<sup>33</sup> Amlak Mähari copied a remarkable 14<sup>th</sup>-century Gospel book.<sup>34</sup>

More information on the role and the history of the library was collected some twenty-five years ago by a research initiative carried out by a team of Italian scholars. The initiative, called *Missione Italiana in Eritrea* (MIE), headed by Prof. Irma Taddia and supported by the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche), still offers the most updated picture on the Eritrean manuscript culture, and is for many respects the unique endeavour of its kind undertaken in the country.<sup>35</sup> Three expeditions were conducted by the MIE team between 1992 and 1994 in twelve monastic libraries in the historical regions of Säraye, Akkälä Guzay, and Ḥamasen. Though mostly oriented on studying the land property system in a historical view, the MIE project also provided precious information on the life conditions of the single communities and the status of their manuscript collections. The main scope was to gather historical data of documentary value preserved in manuscripts as additional notes and guest texts. Among these additional texts, particularly valuable for our scope are the inventory lists of the main holdings of a certain institution, i.e. books and other *paraphernalia*. Such booklists, true catalogues *ante litteram*, are essential tools to evaluate the composition of a certain collection at a specific time, to detect previously unknown texts, and to establish the *terminus ante quem* of a given text.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ms. Paris, BnF Éth. Abb. 105 (= Conti Rossini 19), see Abbadie (1859: 114-18), Chaîne (1912: 66), Conti Rossini (1914a: 45-48). According to the colophon (Conti Rossini 1912: 640 n. 1), the book was commissioned by Bəlen Säggäd, the 'aqaşən ('governor') of Säraye at the time of king Bā'ədä Maryam (r. 1468-1478).

<sup>34</sup> Ms. MIE no. 1, Bausi (1994 [1996]: 24). The manuscript is dated to 1360/61, prior to the alleged foundation of the monastery. However, it can hardly be maintained that the codex was produced and copied outside the Ewostətan community, given the status of recipient of additional writings of archival value it enjoyed in the following century; see further down, Lusini (2004 [2005]: 235).

<sup>35</sup> A presentation of the goals, the fieldwork methodologies and approaches, and the main results carried out is available in Bausi, Lusini, Taddia (1993, 1995) and Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]). The data gathered during the field research have stimulated a number of contributions appeared in the 1990s mainly on this journal.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the best-known example of a *terminus ante quem* established on the grounds of a dated booklist is that supplied by a 1292 inventory and accommodated in a 13<sup>th</sup>-century Four Gospel book from Däbrä Ḥayq ʿİstifanos (ms. EMMML 1832, f. 25<sup>v</sup>, Sergew Hable-Selassie 1992: 246-47). In addition, the presence of Arabic-based translated texts (such as, for instance, the *Acts* of the martyrs of Nagrab and the *Acts* of Barbara and Yolyana) among the

The MIE team successfully recorded, among other data, a mid-15<sup>th</sup>-century list of books donated to the Däbrä Maryam community by his abbot *abba* Gäbrä Krəstos. The inventory, added on some blank leaves of the previously mentioned Gospel book, gives us a first glimpse into the composition of the library in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> It evidences that the library was extensive and supplied with rare books, like the ‘Shepherd of Hermas’ (Gə‘əz *Herma*), a work belonging to the earlier textual heritage and hitherto attested in very few exemplars only. The present-day existence of a copy of *Hermas* in the collection is still unverified. Its study would be of the highest interest for the reconstruction of the text and the history of its medieval circulation.<sup>38</sup>

listed books proves that translations from Arabic had already begun during the Zag<sup>w</sup>e period. Before the MIE, booklists from Eritrean sites (Däbrä Dəmah, Šā‘azzāga, and Hazzāga) were also recorded by Johannes Kolmodin (Kolmodin 1910).

<sup>37</sup> Text: መጽሐፈ : ኦሪት : ፪ መጽሐፈ : ኩፋሌ : ፪ መጽሐፈ : ነገሥት : ፩ ሕፁፃን : ፩ : ኢሳይያስ : ፪ ኤርሚያስ : ፪ ሕዝቅኤል : ፫ ዕገራ : ፩ ዳንኤል : ፩ ሰሎሞን : ፩ ኢዮብ : ፪ ሲራክ : ፪ መጽሐፈ : ደቂቀ : ነቢያት : ፩ መቃብያን : ፩ ጦቢት : ፪ ዘዮዲት : ወአሱቴር : ፩ ኦሪት : ዘኖልቀኦ : ፩ ዘሌዋዊያን : ፩ ዘሄኖክ : ፩ ወንጌላት : ፳ ሐዋርያ : ፫ ጳውሎስ : ፫ ራእየ : ዮሐንስ : ፫ ሲኖዶስ : ፫ ቀሌመንጦስ : ፪ ትርጓሜ : ወንጌል : ፩ ኪዳን : ፪ ትርጓሜ : ዮሐንስ : ፩ ገድለ : ሐዋርያት : ፪ ገድለ : ሰማዕት : ፬ ኅብረተ : ቃላት : ፩ ጦማረ : ትሰብእት : ፩ መጽሐፈ : ብርሃን : ፩ ዲድስቅልያ : ፪ ሄርማ : ፩ ዜና : አበው : ፫ መጽሐፈ : አባ : ጳኩሚስ : ፩ አባ : ባርሶማ : ፩ አፈ : ወርቅ : ፩ ግጽው : ፪ መዝገብ : ፩ መጻሕፍተ : መዝሙር : ፫ ዝማራ : ፪ ሥርዐተ : ማኅበር : ፩ ገድለ : አበዊነ : ፬ ድርሳነ : ሚካኤል : ፩ ተአምረ : ማርያም : ፪ መጽሐፈ : ፍልሰታ : ፩ ጸሎተ : ዕጣን : ፩ መጽሐፈ : ግንዛት : ፩ መዝሙር : ሰላም : ፩. Translation: ‘2 Octateuch; 2 Jubilees; 1 Kings; 1 Chronicles; 2 Isaiah; 2 Jeremiah; 3 Ezekiel; 1 Ezra; 1 Daniel; 1 (books of) Solomon; 2 Job; 2 Sirach; 1 Minor prophets; 1 Maccabees; 2 Tobit; 1 Judith and Esther; 1 Numbers; 1 Leviticus; 1 Enoch; 8 Gospels; 3 Catholic epistles; 3 Pauline epistles; 3 Revelation of John; 3 *Senodos*; 2 Clement; 1 Commentary on the Gospels; 2 Testament of Our Lord; 1 Commentary on John; 2 Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles; 4 Acts of the Martyrs; 1 Concordances of words; 1 Epistle of humanity; 1 Book of Light; 2 Didascalia; 1 Shepherd of Hermas; 3 History of the Fathers; 1 book of *abba* Pachomius; 1 (Life of) *abba* Barsoma; 1 Chrysostom; 2 Lectionaries for the year; 1 *Mäzḡäb*; 3 books of *māzmur*-songs (Psalters?); 2 *Zammare*-chants; 1 Order of the congregation; 4 Lives of Our Fathers; 1 Homilies in honour of Michael; 2 Miracles of Mary; 1 Book of the Assumption (of Mary); 1 Prayer of incense; 1 Book of the funeral ritual; 1 *Sälam*-hymns’; see Bausi (1994 [1996]: 35-37, 43). The inventory is also published and translated in Erho (2015: 113).

<sup>38</sup> On the transmission history and the dissemination of *Herma* in Ethiopia and Eritrea see Erho (2015). The existence of a copy in the Eritrean foundation at some point in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is further substantiated by the presence of allusions in the *Gädlä Absadi* and in other hagiographical works penned at Däbrä Maryam, see Villa (forthcoming). A new critical edition of the Ethiopic *Shepherd of Hermas* is under preparation by the present writer.

Over the centuries, the library has most certainly been renovated. However, a cursory inspection by the MIE team has evidenced that it has not suffered heavy losses in terms of quantity. The more than eighty books donated by *abba* Gäbrä Krəstos in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century are counterbalanced by the ninety-five items listed by the *'aqqabe mäṣahəfti*.<sup>39</sup> Tracing the history of the collection from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present day with fresh and more detailed data would help solve a number of problems, and would certainly raise others. It has been very recently pointed out, for instance, that the monastery hosts a high number of copies of the *Arganonä Dəngəl*, the 'Organ of the Virgin' (Tedros Abraha 2009: 90 n. 24). The presence of multiple copies of a certain book may hint at a particular status of that work within the community, and certainly calls for an explanation.

## 5. Research initiatives: issues and challenges

Research endeavours that will hopefully intend to carry out scholarly activities on the Eritrean manuscript collections in the years to come will have to face manifold issues. Some considerations can be expressed hereby making no claim to exhaustiveness.

1. Mapping of the manuscript collections. This is necessarily a priority due to the lack of a reliable census of institutions and their bibliothecal holdings, for which the handlists in possession of the *'aqqabe mäṣahəfti* and surveyed by the MIE project can only be considered as a starting point. Previous research projects in different areas have evidenced that mapping the cultural geography in the context of the Horn of Africa is itself a challenge.<sup>40</sup> Only some historical institutions, traditionally considered as the main centres of bookmaking, are documented. Yet, experience has shown that a considerable number of lesser known or unknown churches, that are scattered in the surrounding areas and have not been in the focus of attention in the past re-

<sup>39</sup> Bausi, Lusini (1992 [1994]: 20-22). In the 1990s the monastery still exerted a considerable influence on the surrounding area, despite the remote location and the uneasy accessibility. Although quickly surveyed, the library remarkably proved to include many well-preserved pieces of relatively ancient age.

<sup>40</sup> One cannot overstate the role of the Ethio-SPaRe project (2009-2015), a regionally-focused research initiative that systematically mapped the ecclesiastical and monastic institutions of part of Təgray (North Ethiopia); see Nosnitsin (2013a).

search history, sometimes do retain archaic elements (Nosnitsin 2013b: 7). An additional recurrent issue is the lack of a standardized referencing toponymy in the historical written sources and in the previous scientific literature.<sup>41</sup> Yet, the most acute shortcoming remains perhaps the accessibility to the localities, a question which is suggestive of the need for a deep collaboration with the government authorities and the ecclesiastic institutions, both in terms of information, cooperation, and exchange of knowhow.<sup>42</sup>

2. A holistic approach towards the manuscript collections. Previous research initiatives in different areas have demonstrated the advantages of considering the collections as relational systems in their entirety and not as mere repositories of items.<sup>43</sup> Relationships are extant between the manuscripts which constitute the individual elements of the system, as well as between manuscripts of different collections. In this way, the geographical dissemination and the historical spread of a text can be recorded and investigated. For instance, the presence of a copy of the *Life* of a saint in a certain library might *potentially* say much about the historical connection of the owning in-

<sup>41</sup> The European interest towards the Eritrean toponymy obviously developed during the colonial period. It was in particular Carlo Conti Rossini who, in his *Saggio sulla toponomastica dell'Eritrea tigrina* (Conti Rossini 1938), managed to combine the local literary sources with the possibilities of data gathering provided by the colonial occupation. The toponymy data made available by the documentation concerning the *g'əlti-* and *rəsti-*land rights has also received attention by scholars, and has sporadically undergone indexing initiatives, e.g. in the case of the acts transmitted in the Golden gospel from Däbrä Libanos of Šəmāzana (Bausi 2007). A fresh and comprehensive census of all the Eritrean place names is hitherto missing, and a good deal of their meanings remains unaccountable or poorly understandable. In addition, it should be kept in mind that a single place name is not uncommonly recorded by local sources in multiple ways, or transliterated by scholars with insufficient accuracy (a caveat already made by Conti Rossini 1938: 4), and that its location might have been subject to administrative rearrangements over the decades. All these factors make sometimes difficult to trace the historical attestations and the present-day location of a certain place name, especially in the case of lesser known sites.

<sup>42</sup> Cooperation with the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) of Asmara, the main cultural institution of the country, is a necessity. A positive attitude from the local communities and the involvement of a local team of properly-trained researchers are also deemed as fundamental; see Lusini (2007: 97-98).

<sup>43</sup> See Nosnitsin (2013b: 8) for a brief presentation of the research methodology followed by the Ethio-SPaRe project.

stitution to that of the venerated saint.<sup>44</sup> Also, the geographical extent of a local scribal style or of a specific hand could be reconstructed.

All these possibilities of research have remained substantially untouched in the Eritrean context. Remarkably, the best-known Eritrean manuscripts are those currently preserved abroad, in European and particularly in Italian institutions. They have reached Italy mostly as a consequence of the colonial activity. Among these, the manuscripts that Carlo Conti Rossini acquired or those copied for him during his 1899-1903 stay, and now in the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome.<sup>45</sup> One could also tentatively add those donated to the Biblioteca Giovardiana in Veroli by Giuseppe Quattrociocchi, physician for the Red Cross in Eritrea in 1895.<sup>46</sup> Other manuscripts were incorporated within the frame of the catholic missionary activity, such as those deposited at the Monumento Nazionale Abbazia di Casamari in Veroli.<sup>47</sup>

Though better known, all these repositories of manuscripts are not homorganic collections. Each manuscript, decontextualized from its original cultural environment, has been studied as an individual object of antiquarian value. In most cases the exact provenance of a given manuscript is no longer traceable. This approach has dramatically overlooked that the Ethiopian and Eritrean manuscript culture is a living culture in which books are actively

<sup>44</sup> It is however worth remarking that it might *potentially*, and not necessarily, say much, e.g., on the affiliation to a certain ‘network’. The historical reasons of the distribution of the ‘elements’ in those relational systems that are the monastic/ecclesiastic institutions are sometimes more complex or simply lie beyond our research possibilities. Correlations between the ‘elements’, if not historically contextualized, might lead to a misinterpretation of the data gathered; see Lusini (2015: 197).

<sup>45</sup> Strelcyn (1976). A great part of the Conti Rossini collection consists of hagiographical texts copied on modern European leaves. This makes this collection greatly atypical as compared to other significant Western collections, yet it does not undermine its philological value: in some cases the Conti Rossini copies are still the only extant witnesses to a certain number of hagiographical works.

<sup>46</sup> The Veroli manuscripts, hitherto known from Silvio Zanutto’s inventory (Zanutto 1932: 92-94), have been digitized during a fieldwork mission conducted in June-July 2017 by Antonella Brita, Karsten Helmholz, Susanne Hummel, and myself. A preliminary report of the fieldwork mission and an inventory of the manuscript holdings is available in Brita, Helmholz, Hummel, Villa (2017). A detailed catalogue is currently under preparation.

<sup>47</sup> Among the Casamari holdings, only a 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century copy of the *Qälementos* (‘Book of [the Revelation of Peter to] Clement’, MNC-020, *olim* MS 121) had received some scholarly attention. The Casamari manuscripts, digitized in June-July 2017 (see previous note) are briefly described in Brita, Helmholz, Hummel, Villa (2017).



handled by the community as religious tools. Once they are detached from their original environment, a variety of features like the role they and their texts once played has been inescapably disregarded.<sup>48</sup>

3. Cataloguing, preservation, and the role of the digital resources. Manuscript cataloguing is not an aim in itself: its primary scope is to offer a satisfactory basis for further scientific investigation. Yet, cataloguing also constitutes a preliminary requirement for the preservation of the written heritage, since any attempt at securing the endangered cultural patrimony presupposes its appropriate identification and description. The need for safeguard measures is determined by several reasons, among which the geopolitical situation and the storage conditions of the books. It is furthermore agreed that the progressive substitution of old manuscripts with more recent ones is gradually reducing the number of historical pieces, most valuable for researchers. Fieldwork in past projects has evidenced that the majority of the bibliothecal holdings consists nowadays of recent books,<sup>49</sup> while ancient volumes are often in bad state of preservation, incomplete or even fragmentary. A proper cataloguing and, whenever allowed by the technical equipment, a digitization of the endangered manuscripts would at least provide a documentary basis of the heritage to be secured.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> A 'humanistic' approach towards the Gə'əz manuscript (as the one aiming at safeguarding the Classical and medieval manuscript heritage), complemented in the past by an ethnographically-based concern to document the exotic African civilization, seems therefore inadequate, see Lusini (2007: 96). See also Nosnitsin (2013*b*: 9-10).

<sup>49</sup> Nosnitsin (2013*a*: xviii). Statistics from the Ethio-SPaRe database of catalogued manuscripts (available at <<https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/results/data.html>>) are suggestive of this chronologically-based distribution: out of more than one thousand items, 18 are dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> cent., 41 to the 15<sup>th</sup> cent., 63 to the 16<sup>th</sup> cent.; 104 to the 17<sup>th</sup> cent.; 320 to the 18<sup>th</sup> cent.; 660 to the 19<sup>th</sup> cent.; and 480 to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A certain distortion in the data pool is determined by two factors. First, the Ethio-SPaRe team intentionally left out many post-1940 manuscripts, which therefore remained unphotographed (Nosnitsin 2013*a*: xiii). This explains why 20<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts are less in number than those dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, manuscripts dated within a timeframe falling between two centuries (e.g., 1750-1850) have here been ranked in both categories.

<sup>50</sup> A hope already expressed in the past for the Eritrean patrimony and hitherto unfulfilled: '[U]n censimento dei mss. eritrei in stato di conservazione precario – in vista del loro restauro presso un costituendo centro specializzato con sede in Asmara – sarebbe auspicabile, per evitare che vadano irrimediabilmente perdute testimonianze preziose di civiltà' (Lusini 2004 [2005]: 235 n. 24); see also Lusini (2007: 98-100).

One of the scholarly trends of the last years is a deeper and deeper awareness towards the employment of digital technologies, both in terms of high-quality imaging and of electronic cataloguing. High-resolution colorful images have enabled gathering a considerable amount of data through digitization projects, and have significantly enhanced the opportunities of registering and investigating codicological features that had not been adequately in the focus of attention in the past.<sup>51</sup> Concurrently, since the introduction of electronic means the number of digitally-based cataloguing projects is constantly growing.<sup>52</sup> Online catalogues are particularly promising in terms of opportunity to continuously update and/or revise the information and to accommodate high-quality images. Advantages in terms of lower costs of production, linkability and simultaneous large-scale accessibility of results are also evident.

A new phase of the application of digital humanities to the Ethiopian and Eritrean studies has been initiated with the employment of TEI/XML mark-up language structures,<sup>53</sup> in particular by the long-term project ‘Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: Eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung)’ (2016-

<sup>51</sup> Digital imaging has much facilitated analysis on several binding-related elements, on the quire structure, and on relevant scribal phenomena such as the rubrication. Palaeographical analyses can also benefit from it, and can be nowadays refined or complemented with the help of portable digital microscopes, such as Dino-Lite.

<sup>52</sup> A detailed presentation by Jost Gippert on the impact of the electronic cataloguing potentialities in the field of the oriental manuscript studies, as well as of the challenges posed in terms of safeguard of the rights of the authors/cataloguers, maintenance and longevity of data, is available in Bausi *et al.* (2015: 531-37).

<sup>53</sup> The TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) is ‘a consortium which collectively develops and maintains a standard for the representation of texts in digital form’ (<<http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml>>). Through its guidelines an ‘eXtensible Markup Language’ (XML) is defined for encoding text documents by means of mark-up constructs called tags. Tags are identifiers enclosed in angle brackets and are used to structure the relevant information nested within them: e.g., the number of leaves of a manuscript is encoded in a string like <measure unit="leaf">97</measure>, properly nested within other parent tags referring to the physical description of the codex. XML requires a strictly hierarchical tree-like structure to be respected, yet at the same time allows a high degree of flexibility, both in terms of extensibility (new ad-hoc tags can be created if needed) and portability across multiple platforms and applications. Updated encoding strategies for the manuscript description are proposed by the TEI at <<http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/it/html/MS.html>>. For a survey on XML-encoding of texts see also Bausi *et al.* (2015: 22-24).

2040), hosted at the Hiob Ludolf Center for Ethiopian Studies (Hamburg).<sup>54</sup> The project is developing an online searchable ‘hypercatalogue’ that will constitute a research environment able to perform queries on numerous textual and codicological features, as well as on repositories, authors, scribes, and owners. The project, still at its initial phase, is currently producing an electronic version of the early catalogues of some major European collections and, among other initiatives, a digital catalogue of some recently recorded manuscript collections in Italy.<sup>55</sup> By storing data in an XML-structured form, the Beta maṣāḥaft project is currently making the manuscript corpus not only accessible, but also *searchable*.

4. Text-critical evaluation of the data collected. Data gathered and properly catalogued in the Eritrean monasteries shall receive due evaluation by philologists, historians, art historians, codicologists, linguists, and scholars from other disciplines. Restricting the topic to the share of philological research, much could be done. Cross-checked analysis on the composition of the monastic libraries would enhance or refine our knowledge on the dissemination and circulation of certain works across time, while enquiry into individual texts would finally resolve a number of long-awaited issues. Just to limit to the written traditions about the most prominent saints, one cannot but acknowledge that *none* of them has been text-critically investigated in a proper way.

A fresh edition of the *Life* of Ewoṣtawos remains an urgent desideratum. In the introduction to his 1905 eclectic edition of the text, Boris Turaiev already deemed it worthy to produce three separate translations of the work, one for each of the existing redactions, a scholarly task which has never been accomplished.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The project, within the framework of which the present research has been carried on, is headed by Prof. Alessandro Bausi and coordinated by the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities under survey of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Hamburg. See <<https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/betamasaheft.html>>, including a link to the project website.

<sup>55</sup> These include some forty previously uncatalogued or very limitedly explored Gə‘əz manuscripts preserved in the following Italian institutions: Castello d’Albertis (Genoa), Biblioteca Giordiana, and Monumento Nazionale Abbazia di Casamari (both in Veroli); see Brita, Helmholtz, Hummel, Villa (2017).

<sup>56</sup> ‘Tres recensiones separatim latine vertendas esse censeo’ (Turaiev 1905: 1). Since the census by Gianfrancesco Lusini (see note 21) new witnesses have come to light. Some have been

A full edition of the *Life* of Märqorewos of Däbrä Dəmaḥ would definitely be most welcome. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century *Life* of the Ewosstatean leader was edited and translated by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1904 in a largely deficient state, the only known exemplar having been severely damaged by fire.<sup>57</sup> However, a trio of additional copies has been recorded by the MIE project in the collection of Däbrä Dəmaḥ.<sup>58</sup> The *Gädlä Märqorewos* notoriously embeds earlier sources and, through the prism of Märqorewos' missionary activities across the country, retells regional historical traditions to date known in a much incomplete way (e.g. Lusini 1993: 111).

The so-called third redaction of the *Life* of *abba* Libanos shares the same fate: rich in toponyms, ethnonyms and local narratives, it is only known from excerpts edited by Carlo Conti Rossini from one single codex from Däbrä Libanos.<sup>59</sup> Its literary sources and connections to the overall textual tradition of the *Gädlä Libanos* still require much investigation.

Equally partially published by Conti Rossini, yet untranslated, is the *Life* of the second abbot of Däbrä Bizän, *abba* Yoḥannəs, based on an unspecified manuscript 'from a small village in the vicinity of Asmära' (Conti Ros-

digitized: e.g., ms Ethio-SPaRe DMD-001 from Dəbla Yoḥannəs Mätməq (Təgray, second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Nosnitsin 2013a: 173), and ms. GG-012 from Gunda Gunde (18<sup>th</sup> century). Others still remain inaccessible, yet their recensional alignment has been identified: e.g., the witness kept in Īnda Abbona (see Bausi, Lusini, Taddia 1993: 458), belonging to the β-recension and, parenthetically, followed by a hitherto unidentified text which is beyond doubt a copy of the *Wisdom of the Sybil* (*Ṭəbāb lä-bə'sit əntä səma Sabela*). Other exemplars of the *Gädlä Ewosstatewos* are certainly in existence.

<sup>57</sup> *Gädlä Märqorewos* (BHO no. 754, KRZ no. 106); edition by Conti Rossini (1904). See also Lusini (1993: 110-112).

<sup>58</sup> Mss MIE nos 14, 15, 16. The first is an 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century exemplar; the beginning and the end of the text are missing. The others are complete and are dated to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Bausi (1997 [1998]: 37-39). The text of the otherwise unknown *Miracles* of Märqorewos has been recently discovered and digitized by the Ethio-SPaRe project (ms. Ethio-SPaRe AGKM-025, 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> century) in the church of Agula' Getesemani Kidanä Məḥrät (Təgray), see Nosnitsin (2013: 285).

<sup>59</sup> Perhaps a 15<sup>th</sup>-century reworking of an earlier text type of the *Life* of Libanos, the text of the third recension has been edited by Conti Rossini (1903a: 25-41) and republished in apparatus in Bausi's edition of the *Gädlä Libanos* (Bausi 2003). Although the historical traditions embedded in the text are considered of uncertain value, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century dating has supplied the earliest literary attestation to several place names and Tigrinya words; see Bausi (2003: xix-xx [text], xxvii-xxviii [transl.]). Other unspecified witnesses, included one listed in a recent booklist in Īnda Abbona (Bausi, Lusini, Taddia 1993: 457), are mentioned in Bausi (2003: xii n. 5 [text]).

sini 1901*b*: 68). Other exemplars are known today. Conti Rossini had one exemplar copied for his collection, and two more early 16<sup>th</sup>-century copies have been recorded by the MIE team in Däbrä Bizän.<sup>60</sup>

Text editing is certainly a priority which provides an undeniably important advancement of the scholarly knowledge.<sup>61</sup> It is always worth remembering, however, that a *text-critical edition* presupposes the fulfilment of some accepted methodological standards, which as known include an in-depth evaluation of *all* the available witnesses, the establishment of a genetic tree of the manuscript tradition on the basis of the textual deviations, and the selection or the reconstruction of the presumably primary reading through precise criteria. Such an approach should mark the guiding horizon to follow in any scholarly editorial enterprise.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, it remains to be hoped that the cursory considerations here expressed shall encourage the development of an agenda for the years to come, and that considerable joint efforts shall be invested to document the manifold expressions of the Eritrean manuscript culture in its local cultural environment, and re-introduce it into the scholarly discussion. By following the footsteps of the MIE research initiative, a pioneering endeavour in many respects, and ‘normalizing’ methodologies to the standards to date adopted in other fields of the oriental manuscript studies, such an agenda would successfully bridge the numerous lacunae in our knowledge, and have a regenerating effect on the studies on this rich and unique heritage.

<sup>60</sup> Ms. Rome, ANL Conti Rossini 10 (Strelcyn 1976: 31-32); mss MIE nos 8 and 9 (Bausi (1995 [1997]: 42-47).

<sup>61</sup> One cannot but be grateful to the tangible scientific efforts pursued by Tedros Abraha for the *Patrologia Orientalis* series. In the last decade the following editions have been published: the *Gädlä abunä Dämyanos*, the *Gädlä abunä Täwäldä Mädhən*, the *Gädlä abunä Fiḡtor*, and the *Gädlä abunä Yonas zä-Bur* (Tedros Abraha 2007, 2009, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> A caveat endlessly made by many scholars. With respect to a recently published edition of the *Life* of an Eritrean saint, see Bausi (2015: 257).

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