Copying Manuscripts:
Textual and Material Craftsmanship

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Scribes and Scholars in Medieval Ethiopia

Gianfrancesco Lusini

In order to shed light on the role played by Ethiopian monks as guardians of the written tradition (a process dating to the very origins of the monastic life) and to give a general idea of how clergymen understood and interpreted their roles as scribes and scholars, let us start from the basic Gəʿəz lexicon of the writing craft. We can draw our first example from among the opening formulas typical of every medieval Ethiopian work, one of which reads as follows: [1]

> 'In the name of the Triune Lord, the first having no beginning and the last having no end. We begin to write (*ṣəḥifa*) this book (*maṣḥaf*) that was written (*zataṣəḥfa*) about the deeds and the rule of King Alexander, the beloved of the Lord. May his prayer and his blessing be with his beloved […] Amen.'

This incipit is adapted from the so-called *Christian Romance of Alexander the Great* or *Zenā Ǝskəndər*, a work composed under the rule of ʿaṣe ʿAmda Ṣəyon (1314–44) by taking Arabic sources and modifying them in a rather original form.[2] Soberly and without the least presumption of originality, the passage reproduces the tripartite scheme we regularly find in the Ethiopian literary tradition: the Trinitarian statement of faith, occupying the first position, is followed by the presentation of the theme, containing the title of the work, and preceding the request for divine assistance.

[1] Budge 1896, 259.
[2] Lusini 1994.

The formulaic passage *qadāmāwi zaʾənbala ṭənt wadaḥarāwi zaʾənbala tafṣāmet* ('the first having no beginning and the last having no end') aims to concisely express the concept of the spatial and temporal infinity of God. In the words *nəweṭṭən ṣəḥifa* ('we begin to write'), we recognize the syntagm found at the beginning of every Ethiopic manuscript, taking the title of the work (*baʾəntagəbru wamangəśtu laʾƎskəndər nəguś*, 'about the deeds and the rule of King Alexander,' namely *de gestis et imperio Alexandri regis*) as its object. The verb *ṣaḥafa* indicates the mechanical action of 'writing,' derived from the original meaning of 'carving,' as reflected in the nature of the Aksumite epigraphic texts, which were inscribed on hard material, either metal or stone.[3] Later on, the term was applied to the activity of spreading ink over a soft base, like parchment, with the pen. Finally, *ṣaḥafa* became a term for 'copying,' and particularly in the incipit of a manuscript—as in this case—it began to indicate the act of 'transcribing' a text from an antigraph to an apograph, or from a 'father' (*ʾab*) to his 'son' (*wald*), in Ethiopian philological vocabulary.[4] Therefore, we may presume that the scribe (*ṣaḥāfi*), by using the word *maṣḥaf* in the incipit of the *Zenā Ǝskəndər*, wanted to concretely refer to the 'manuscript' he was about to copy.

The creative action of 'writing' as 'composing,' however, was regularly indicated by the verb *darasa*, from which the terms *dərsān*,[5] 'literary work,' and *darāsi*, 'author,' derive. Therefore, the relative clause *zataṣəḥfa*, containing the verb *ṣaḥafa* in the passive stem, refers to the mechanical activity from which the manuscript physically resulted, and not to the creativity of its unknown author, as we find in a different opening formula, *dərsān zadarasa*, 'homily that was composed.'

To denote the manuscript itself, the modern literary languages Amharic and Tigrinya use the word *bər(h)ānnā*,[6] a Gəʿəz word of Greek ori-

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[3] Bernand et al. 1991, 243 [*RIÉ* 185 I₁₉ and II₂₀]; ibid., 247–248 [*RIÉ* 185*bis* I₂₁ and II₃₂]; Littmann 1913, 9–11 [*DAE* 6₁₉ and 7₂₀]; Marrassini 2014, 223.

[4] Brita 2014.

[5] Lusini 2005.

[6] Bausi 2015, 154–155; Sergew 1981, 9–13.

gin ([μεμ]βράνα) meaning 'parchment.' This is a simple case of metonymy (the material representing the object), the same process by which Italian diplomatic vocabulary adopted the word *pergamena* to indicate a charter issued by a chancellery. Yet this is a later use, becoming prominent the end of the nineteenth century, after the introduction of printing, when *maṣḥaf*, having indicated a 'manuscript' for centuries, began being used to refer to a new object, i.e. the printed book.

This elementary picture shows that this scenario was not significantly different from the typological paradigm one can recognize in every medieval Christian culture. We should recall in this context that even in the golden age of Ethiopian Christian literature, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, the ability to write was not a prerogative of each and every member of the clergy. Writing wasn't the same as reading, a basic activity for daily and personal liturgical observances, and in itself a precondition for memorizing texts. On the contrary, for the activity of writing, additional specialized instruction was required, which wasn't accessible to the general clergy or laypeople. This circumstance traditionally had some significant consequences.

Let us first consider those manuscripts in which one often finds short notes penned by a different hand, evidently later writings added by a second clergyman, particularly on the flyleaves or blank pages.[7] After receiving the manuscript, the new owner would fill in the blank spaces by writing a *nota possessionis* or some expression of personal devotion. Other times, the notes were longer texts of various natures, like marginalia and additions, written by a crude and uncertain hand and completely incongruous with the original and accurate craftsmanship of the manuscript. In such a case, we can recognize that the new owner had only a partial command of writing. This is further confirmed by evaluating the correctness of these texts, which often prove to be full of orthographic and grammatical mistakes.

[7] Lusini 1998, 5-16.

Secondly, for many centuries, the copying of liturgical codices was the prerogative of a specific class of non-ordained ecclesiastics, the *dabtarā*,[8] specialists in various non-sacramental activities linked to religious life: beyond writing, manuscript illustration (*sәʾәl*), the composition of sacred hymns (*qәne*) and the performance of liturgical chants (*zemā*) and dances (*aqqʷāqʷām*). Due to their knowledge of writing, the capacity for managing and directing the therapeutic effect of the written word is recognized as belonging exclusively to the *dabtarā*, and therefore people consult them especially for the preparation of the *kәtāb*,[9] namely the magic scrolls. These objects are a hybrid phenomenon[10] in which philological elements—consisting in the transcription of a defined number of narrative texts, each of them with a specific therapeutic goal—are combined with formulas based on the focused repetition of particular syllables, normally written at the end of the parchment strip. The memorization of these mantras is aided by the preparation of codices and notebooks for the personal use of the *dabtarā*, by whom a typical 'magic' literature is transmitted,[11] belonging to a specific genre sometimes known as *asmāt*[12] and more recently also as *abәnnat*.[13] From these manuscripts, time and again, the *dabtarā* select the textual passage most appropriate to the needs of the believers, and for this specialized skill, mainly directed at beneficial aims—such as the prevention of disease— the *dabtarā* are regarded with a reverence mixed with fear and suspicion. The effect of the manipulation of the writing finds its most evident expression in the *ṭalsam*,[14] 'talismans,' drawings that are supposedly able to cast enchantments aimed at restraining the spirits dwelling in the earthly world and inhibiting their activity when they interfere in human lives.

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[8] Kaplan 2005.
[9] Burtea 2001; Chernetsov 2007.
[10] Mercier 1979, 7–33.
[11] Griaule 1930; Rodinson 1967.
[12] Chernetsov 2003.
[13] Gidena 2017.
[14] Dege and Smidt 2010; Mercier 1997.

Undoubtedly, this millenarian writing tradition represents one of the more peculiar aspects of Christian Ethiopia, the only non-Islamic African civilization that granted the manuscript a central role in the transmission of culture.[15] From the point of view of literary creativity and manuscript production, the process did not cease until very recent times, displaying a series of interesting phenomena we can trace through the study of some artistic and philological milestones.

Let us consider the monastic networks of eastern Təgrāy. Due to the politico-religious milieu between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a powerful revival in copying activity, pivoting around the revival of the myth of the 'Nine Saints.'[16] Under the rule of ʿaṣe Yoḥannəs IV (1871–89), a native of Təgrāy, there was an awakening of interest in the hagiographic traditions of the saints venerated as the founders of the Ethiopian Christian institutions. One of these saints was Yəmʾattā, the mythical founder of the community of Guḥ in Garʿaltā. His *Vita* (*Gadla Yəmʾattā*), recently edited and studied, is transmitted by at least ten manuscripts (plus one *descriptus*), all dated between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.[17]

According to the traditional pronunciation of Gəʿəz and the articulation of Tigrinya native speakers, we should transcribe the name exactly as Yəmʾattā, with a doubling of the last radical. Most likely, a Semitic etymology can be posited for the numeric adjective 'hundred,' *məʾət* in Gəʿəz, from which we can derive the reconstructed verb **maʾata*, meaning 'to increase a hundredfold' (just as *śalasa* 'to triple' is derived from *śalās* 'three'). This verb isn't attested, but *yəmʾat* seems to be a perfectly regular subjunctive form from **maʾata*. Thus, the name Yəmʾattā would be the expected outcome of adding the feminine suffixed pronoun *-ā* to the form *yəmʾat*, with the doubling of the third radical of the verb. The supposed meaning could be 'may he increase her a hundredfold,' with logical reference to divine grace, namely *yəmʾattā* (*laṣaggā*). If we

[15] Bausi 2004 and 2008.
[16] Brita 2010, 100–101.
[17] Hagos 2014.

accept that the name of the saint contains an ancient verb no longer used in medieval Gəʿəz, this could be a first clue to the antiquity of the traditions attributed to him.

However, the only version of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* that we possess is quite recent. There is clear evidence that the text we know is a true nineteenth-century literary creation. One lexical argument is the author's use of a word like *manganiq,* 'gun.'[18] Still more decisive evidence is found in the passage below:[19]

> '[…] because that temple of the Holy of Holies is symbolized by the four cherubim; secondly it is symbolized by the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; thirdly it is symbolized by the four corners of Solomon's temple; fourthly it is symbolized by the four archbishops (*tətmessal baᵤliqāna pāpāsāt*).'

Indeed, in 1881, Yoḥannəs IV was sent four bishops from Egypt—a unique achievement for Ethiopia, which was usually appointed only one bishop at a time. Consequently, this reference to the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* is not only a terminus post quem, but also a clue that at the time of the hagiographer, the appointment of four bishops to Ethiopia was a rather recent event, still considered an extraordinary accomplishment. Should we conclude that the stories about Yəmʾattā were created at the end of the nineteenth century?

First, let us consider some additional data to take into account.[20] For instance, we know at least of a *salām* to Yəmʾattā, 'whose body was buried in a rock at the top of a mountain' in the *Sənkəssār* (28th of *Ṭəqəmt* Moreover, mentions of the saint are found in the two eighteenth-century *Zəmmāre* at the National Library of Paris (ms. BnF Éth. 372, fol. 25) and the Vatican Library (ms. Vat. Aeth. 280, fol. 24). What were the sources of these eighteenth-century texts, if the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* did not yet exist at that time? Rather, these references could serve as evidence that

[18] Hagos 2014, § 100.
[19] Hagos 2014, § 34.
[20] Brita 2010, 237–238.

another version of the same text already existed in the eighteenth centu-ry, long before the composition of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* that we know.

Secondly, even more enigmatic is the matter of the well-known fif-teenth-century wall painting preserved in the church of Guḥ, represen-ting Yəmʿattā on horseback, surrounded by hermits, saints and ani-mals.[21] For some reason, the scene has yet to receive an adequate expla-nation. The legend on the painting allows one to clearly identify the saint together with an unknown figure called Bənyām. In the form of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* as we know it, a man called Binyāmi is mentioned dozens of times, the nephew of Yəmʾattā, a foreigner like himself.

The author of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* describes Binyāmi as the artist the saint summoned from abroad to build the church and paint the saint's portrait. This is somehow confirmed by the caption on the wall, between the head of the saint and that of his horse, whose words read 'painting of our father, the saint and holy Yəmʾattā. May the strength of his prayer protect our father Bənyām' (*səʾəla abuna Yəmʾattā qəddus wabəṣuʿ haylä ṣalotu yəʾəqābo laʾabuna Bənyām*). A second caption, on another wall of the church, beside the portrait of Thomas the Apostle, also mentions this Bənyām. The sentence, 'may their prayer steer Bənyām and all the others' (*ṣalotomu təmaggəbo Bənyām walakʷəllomu*), seems to indicate that Bənyām was also a leader of the community, most probably the fifteenth-century abbot under whose guidance the cycle of paintings was made.

Interestingly, in the *Gadla Yəmʿattā*, Binyāmi, nephew of the saint, an artist and foreigner, is described as a skilled horse rider. Possibly, this was the result of confusion between the portrait of the saint on horse-back and the name Bənyām written on the same wall. Moreover, the portrait of Yəmʾattā is surrounded by a lion, a cock, a dog-faced figure and a man depicted in profile to the right of the scene, most likely a demoniac figure: according to artistic convention, frontal representa-tion of demons must be carefully avoided to prevent their gaze. The two animals, the dog-faced figure (bearing a sickle) and the man (holding a spear) are completely absent from the form of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* as we

[21] Lepage and Mecier 2005, 172–173.

know it. In the latter version, a special role is played by a pig, the innocent victim of a mystic duel between the saint and a sorcerer, later a loyal follower of the saint, who renders him able to speak and to preach.

These significant contradictions between the narrative of the text and that of the painting can be reconciled if we accept that at least part of the tradition of Yəmʾattā went missing before the author of his *Vita* decided to write down the new text in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, until now, the true meaning of the scene seems to be obscure even to the monks living in Guḥ. The author of the *Gadla Yəmʾattā* was partially inspired by the painting, but at the same time he adapted the stories and details of the life of the saint because he wasn't able to fully account for the images on the wall. Evidently, the unusual portrait of the saint on horseback and the scenes around him were the result of traditions circulating in Guḥ in the fifteenth century, which allows us to assume the existence of an ancient written *Vita*, now lost, containing those traditions.

As is well known, with the exception of the hagiographic 'lives' of saints and the semi-hagiographic royal 'chronicles,' most medieval Ethiopian liturgical books were translations of Arabic models. In fact, the majority of monastic literature in Gəʿəz is the result of the extensive Arabic translation campaign of the fourteenth century, in which Ethiopian religious instruction was updated and adapted based on models imposed by the Alexandrian Patriarchate.[22] Mostly, this consists of anthologies of various monastic rules and rituals, thus called *Sərʿata mənkʷəsənnā*, and a collection of three texts called *Maṣāḥəfta manakosāt*, variously based on the works of celebrated Syrian writers: *Mār Yəsḥaq*, by Isaac of Nineveh; *Filkəsyos*, attributed to Philoxenus of Mabbogh; and *Aragāwi manfasāwi*, an anthology of John of Saba's works.[23] Most probably, the large-scale flow of these outstanding pieces of Syrian monastic culture into Ethiopia can be connected with the presence of a community of

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[22] Lusini 2011.
[23] Witakowski 1989–90.

Ethiopian monks in the monastery of Dayr as-suryān, the stronghold of Jacobite culture in the Egyptian desert of Nitria.[24]

In spite of the importance of this process, we know too little about how these translations were made, by whom they were undertaken and where the centres of writing activity were located. Some information is provided by a handful of polyglot manuscripts of the highest value from a codicological and historical point of view, the outcome of a sort of 'ecumenical' programme. The Barberinianus orientalis 2, in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,[25] is a paper codex (234ff.) of medium size (355 × 210 mm) containing the text of the Psalter in Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian (fols 3–197) in five columns, followed by the Canticles of the Prophets (fols 197^v–224^v) and several shorter texts, including the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The Ethiopic text is written, by different hands, in the first column of the recto pages and in the last column of the verso pages. The shapes of the letters clearly show that the manuscript originally dates back to the most ancient phase of Gəʿəz palaeography that we know, namely the fourteenth century.

To this amazing masterpiece of scribal craftsmanship we may compare two similar paper manuscripts from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana.[26] The first, ms. B 20 inf. A (275ff.), of medium size (358 × 267 mm), contains the text of the Pauline Epistles in the same five languages. Based on the palaeography of the Ethiopic text, it can be dated to the fourteenth century. The second, ms. B 20 inf. B (186ff.), of same size and age as the former, contains the text of the Canonical Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles in four languages—Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic and Arabic—with the exclusion of Armenian, because the copying of this column was never completed. The three manuscripts share an Egyptian origin, most probably from the monastery of St. Macarius in the Scetis Desert, and the two 'pentaglot' codices at least are explicitly connected with the activity of the Syro-Egyptian monk Rabban Ṣalībā (*qassis ṣalib*

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[24] Proverbio 1998.
[25] Proverbio 2012.
[26] Uluhogian 2008.

soryāwi, according to the Ethiopic *subscriptio* in Barb. or. 2, fol. 224ᵛ. The third, 'tetraglot' codex contains no reference to this 'Master of the Cross,' but based on its features, it can easily be attributed to the same 'editorial' project, conceived (though apparently not completed) in the desert of Wādī al-Naṭrūn in the fourteenth century.

There is little doubt that these three manuscripts were part of a singular cultural and religious initiative, justified by the presence of different Christian communities speaking and reading different languages in Dayr Abū Maqār. This means that in the fourteenth century, an Ethiopian community was well established in Lower Egypt. The Abyssinian monks living there had the task of promoting and undertaking the translation of Arabic liturgical works into Gəʿəz, taking advantage of the favourable inter-religious atmosphere and using the manuscripts kept in the monastery. This allows us to explain why not even a single page of an Arabic literary text has been discovered in the monasteries of Ethiopia: the translations were predominantly made abroad, and the 'new' Gəʿəz texts occasionally left Egypt and arrived in Ethiopia with the entourage of Coptic ecclesiastics who were appointed heads of the Church. The 'pre-philological' approach of these Abyssinian scribes is a distinctive feature of the Ethiopian literary tradition, and the effort of these ancient African scholars to provide their Christian homeland with new liturgical texts can be considered one of the least-known predecessors of modern philological practice.

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