

Foreword

Ethiopian Manuscripts and their Preservation

Richard Pankhurst

Ethiopia is fortunate—and unusual in Africa—in possessing both a long-established written language and a rich literary heritage. The country was likewise well endowed with an abundance of cattle, sheep and goats from whose skins a seemingly limitless number of manuscripts could be fashioned.

Innumerable Ethiopian manuscripts have been produced over the last half millennium or so in many parts of the country—the oldest dating from perhaps the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, or even earlier. Such texts, written for the most part in Ethiopia's age-old Semitic language Gə'əz—but also in modern Amharic—are important not only for the understanding of the country's own history, culture and religion, but also more broadly for that of the Christian Orient as a whole.

Many manuscripts warrant scholarly study, primarily for their texts—as their authors and/or scribes intended, but other volumes are also of great interest for their calligraphy (or style of hand-writing), illumination and binding.

Ethiopian classical texts cover a wide range of themes, both religious and secular. These include theology and biblical studies, but also subjects as distinct from one another as literature, history and chronology, government, law, geography and mathematics—traditionally needed to determine the date of Easter and other religious festivals; also medicine, and music. Study of the latter was facilitated by the existence of Ethiopian musical notation, neatly placed above the words to be sung,

Much information about the past is also preserved in manuscript marginalia (i.e. otherwise blank or unoccupied pages usually at the beginning and/or the end of a bound text). These pages in not a few instances record such data as royal charters; purchase and sale of land; inventories of church and monastic property, including books; tax records; and marriage contracts.

Manuscript illuminations can also be historically instructive. Representation of biblical or other religious themes often reflect what the artist actually saw, rather than the supposed realities of biblical times, and

thus provide valuable glimpses of such important artifacts as agricultural tools and weapons, houses and clothing, crowns, jewelry, hairstyles, and horse, mule and other decorations.

Manuscript bindings may similarly be of historical interest in that that they are in many cases enlivened by the insertion of pieces of colorful silk or other imported cloth. The presence of such material would testify to its availability at the period of binding—and may thus throw light on the international commerce of the time, as well as on the trade routes through which it was probably procured.

The dating of Ethiopian manuscripts often poses problems. In some cases a scribe may record—either in the text or in marginalia—the date of the manuscript's composition, or may note the monarch in whose reign it was produced, or even in what year of that reign. In other cases reliance must be paid to other evidence. This may include the manuscript's calligraphy, the character of its illumination - perhaps even the kind of paints employed; the type of cloth used in the binding, if any—and finally the manuscript's general appearance—whether its text and binding seem *“fresh”* and *“new”*, or *“worn”* and *“faded”* etc.

Manuscripts (unlike printed books) are copied out by hand—and in many cases written out from memory. Every manuscript, whatever its text, is therefore unique. A manuscript library must therefore collect manuscripts in multiple copies—to establish the earliest or most original version, as well as to trace how its text and/or illuminations changed or evolved over time.

Many Ethiopian manuscripts have been lost, damaged or destroyed in the course of time, some as a result of fire or excessive exposure to rain, some through the depredations of insects or rodents, and some as a result of war, and looting.

The preservation of Ethiopia's surviving manuscripts is a matter of national importance, in which friends of Ethiopia and of scholarship can, and must, contribute. Manuscripts should at the same time be catalogued and digitized or microfilmed.

Pioneering efforts in the field of Ethiopian microfilming were carried out in the Lake Tana area after the close of World War II by Professor Ernst Hammerschmidt of the University of Hamburg. Subsequent microfilming, much of it directed by Professor Getatchew Haile, was organized on a considerably larger scale by the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML), in collaboration with the Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library of St John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, whose published microfilm catalogue currently runs to ten volumes.

The initiative in recording Ethiopian manuscripts—by digitization rather than microfilming—has more recently passed to the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project (EMIP). In the past few years, EMIP has located and digitized more than 8,500 manuscripts. The largest of their projects has been the digitization of 5,749 items in the Archives and Manuscripts Department of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, also in Addis Ababa, with the support of the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme.

The microfilming, or more recently digitization, of manuscripts is essential both to preserve them for posterity and to extend and facilitate their study. In this latter connection it should be emphasized that digitization can enlarge and enhance a reader's view of a manuscript, and thus contribute greatly to the comparative study of more than one volume, as Professor Delamarter has shown in several recent scholarly studies.

We are indebted to the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa for preserving the small, but interesting collection of 54 manuscripts here catalogued. Special thanks should go to its scholarly Librarian, *Aläqa* Meseret Sebhat Le-ab, who collected these works between 1977 and 1980.

We are all no less grateful to the dedication of Professor Stephen Delamarter, and to his Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project team from George Fox University in Portland, Oregon, who have expertly digitized this collection, as well as the considerably larger one at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.