Alessandro Bausi

Writing, Copying, Translating: Ethiopia as a Manuscript Culture¹

1 Introduction

Beginning with the remote past of the Aksumite kingdom (1st to 7th centuries CE, an “African civilization of Late Antiquity”), the Ethiopian cultural area offers a peculiar case study for the “manuscriptology” of ancient, medieval and modern times. Historically a land of written civilizations since the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE, the areas nowadays corresponding to the highlands of Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia witnessed the early introduction of the parchment roll and codex, the latter having been strongly fostered by the Christianization of the country in the 4th century CE. Taking advantage of the safe, dry climate of the Abyssinian highlands, which makes chemical treatment quite unnecessary, manuscript production has enjoyed a steady run of centuries, down to the present day. Even now, parchment is still produced in several areas of the region. Mainly an object of interest to historians, philologists and linguists as precious repositories of written historical and linguistic data, the Ethiopian manuscripts written in Ethiopic (especially literary texts), and to a lesser extent in Amharic (especially documentary texts), Arabic and Harari (in Islamic contexts), have not yet become a topic of codicological study within the frame of modern, so-called “manuscript archaeology”, nor have they been properly assessed from a comparative or quantitative perspective. The estimated number of manuscripts ranges from a minimum of 25,000 to 200,000, and the figure may even be higher if we take into account the treasure of still unexplored and hardly accessible manuscripts preserved in the Tegray monasteries, the “cradle” of Ethiopian civilization. Despite the relatively recent age of most Ethiopic manuscripts (among which only two or three Four Gospels books may predate the 12th century), several archaic features which Ethiopian culture has inherited from Mediterranean Late Antiquity make codicological evaluation all the more desirable. Nowadays, however, observable

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features (or even features traceable to medieval times) cannot be mechanically identified as archaic traditional practices. Ethiopian production of parchment and codices must have been of primary importance even in ancient times, bearing in mind that Islamic sources unanimously accredit the “invention of the codex” to African people and that the Arabic term *muṣḥaf* ‘codex’ (almost entirely associated with the Qur’an codex) was borrowed from Ethiopic. Ink production is an important material aspect of manuscript studies. Ethnographic observation of surviving examples, as well as philological and linguistic data (i.e. study of terminology) attest to the absence of metallic ink in Ethiopia, although it was widely used both in other Christian and in Islamic provinces in course of the 1st millennium CE. Yet much is expected from reliable laboratory analyses. As far as transmission is concerned, Ethiopic manuscripts reveal substantially “mechanical” textual traditions. This strongly clashes with both the purported predominance of orality in Africa and (as an assumed consequence) copyists’ arbitrariness in transmitting texts. Documentary texts may present peculiar transmission phenomenology. Yet, copyists’ actual attitude to the transmitted texts can only be ascertained through manuscript collation, which has not yet been extensively done for most printed editions of Ethiopic texts. I will present a panoramic view of the state of the research on Ethiopic manuscripts, and then a particular case study of “manuscript philology” that focuses on “gaps”, “adjustments” and “normalization” in the chain of traditional textual transmission.

2 A long written tradition

The peculiarities of manuscript production in Ethiopian culture find their origin in the very late introduction of printing, whose extensive use does not predate the 20th century. The existence of a writing tradition three millennia old is no doubt the most paradoxical and exotic aspect of Ethiopian civilization (historically understood) in the context of Africa south of the Sahara.² Geographically included in, though not corresponding to the political boundaries of the present independent states of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the geographic area of Ethiopian civilization is one of extreme linguistic and anthropological variety. The long continuity of the South-Semitic written tradition has made it the subject of linguistic, philological and historical studies which have been relatively consistently focused on long-lasting cultural features, from the origins of the civilization through ancient

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² Cf. Munro-Hay 1991; Brakmann 1994; for an updated and comprehensive presentation of all the main topics in Ethiopian Studies, see *EAe*. 
and medieval times to the premodern and – in some respects – the modern ages. The earliest evidence of writing in the area is represented by monumental and cursive Sabaic inscriptions which date to the mid-1st millennium BCE (probably the 8th–7th centuries). These bear witness to the strong influence of the South Arabian civilization then flourishing on the opposite side of the Red Sea, which probably settled on African soil over an earlier South-Semitic substratum also of Asiac origin.³

Mentioned in various sources since the 1st century CE, the “Kingdom of Aksum” – named after its capital city in Northern Ethiopia, in present-day Tegray – reached its peak of power in the period from the 3rd to the 7th centuries CE, after centuries of development. It represented – in ways not yet really clear – a well rooted Semitic civilization, increasingly penetrated by the Greek culture circulating along the shores of the Red Sea since the Hellenistic age. Near-Eastern South-Arabian, African and Asiatic components all influenced it, alone, mutually, and in combination. Starting from the 3rd century at least, evidence of inscriptions (until the 5th century) and coins legends testifies to the use of Greek as well as Ethiopic (also known as Ancient Ethiopic or Ge’ez).⁴ A South-Semitic language easily distinguished from South-Arabian (whose alphabet – not the language – was occasionally used in royal inscriptions), Ethiopic was destined to be the only written language of the Kingdom for a millennium and a half, well after it had ceased to be spoken or had become a different language, Tigrinya (probably around the turn of the 10th century). As will be shown, the language change had its “manuscriptological” consequences for the transmission of Ethiopic texts.

Conversion to Christianity, introduced in Ethiopia in the 4th century CE and, as Cosmas Indicopleustes attests in his Topographia Christiana, widely established throughout the East by the first half of the 6th, had a major and lasting impact on Ethiopian culture. The Ethiopian Church, whose official language was always Ethiopic, remained subordinate to the Egyptian Church of Alexandria, whose official language was initially Greek, later Coptic and finally Arabic, almost without interruption until the 20th century.⁵ Aksum reached the height of its glory as the main military partner of the Byzantine Empire in the early 6th century, when South Arabia had also been under Aksumite control for some decades. The emergence of Islam in the 7th century followed by the occupation of the African coasts in the 8th, dramatically put an end to Ethiopia’s central role in the trade routes along the

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⁴ Cf. Fiaccadori 2007a; Avanzini 2007b; Frantsouzoff 2007; Fiaccadori 2007b.
⁵ The Ethiopian Church became completely autocephalous only in 1959 with Patriarch Bäseljos, cf. Chernetsov 2005.
Red Sea, as well as to its intense relationship with other areas of Christian culture. In the following centuries, the core of the Christian kingdom moved progressively southwards from Aksum to Lālibalā, the rockhewn capital of the Zāgwē dynasty in the 12th century, until it reached Amharic-speaking areas, where it has been mainly based since the 13th century. At the southern limits of the kingdom, Addis Ababa, the present capital of Ethiopia, was founded at the end of the 19th century. Yet, the heritage of Aksum deeply marked the history of the whole Ethiopian area. The Christian kingdom played a hegemonic role in the region until the 20th century.

It is surprising, however, that maṣḥaf, the most general Ge’ez term for ‘manuscript, book, writing’ in all its meanings, was borrowed into Arabic, where muṣḥaf became a technical term for a Qur’anic codex. This seems to imply that Ethiopian production of parchment and codices must have been of major importance even in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times, and that the Arabs, “people of the Book” *par excellence*, adopted the use of the codex from the Ethiopians, who had received it in turn from the late antique Near-Eastern and Mediterranean world. This hypothesis is confirmed by a relatively ancient Islamic tradition attested in the middle of the 9th century by Abū ‘Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ in his *Fakhr al-sūdān ‘alā l-biḍān* (‘The boasts of the Blacks over the Whites’).⁶

As an “African civilization of Late Antiquity”, the Aksumite kingdom participated intensively in cultural movements and exchanges between the Near East, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea during the first Christian centuries, right down to the 7th century. More than that, modern Ethiopia has faithfully retained some features of this cultural environment: be they religious practices, literary texts, artistic motifs or elements of material culture. The same happened well after the medieval age in other areas of the Christian Orient, of which Ethiopia has been an integral, though remote component for centuries. Yet, due to its long isolation, it is likely that archaic elements are more easily to be found in Ethiopia than in other countries.⁷

In the script used in the earliest Ethiopic monumental inscriptions, round letter-forms proper of soft text-carriers are more prevalent than in the comparable South-Arabian inscriptions. This seems to demonstrate that manuscript writing, probably on parchment rolls and codices – there is no evidence for the

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⁶ Cf. Uhlig / Bausi 2007a, 739b; Bausi 2008a, 521, n. 44.
use of papyrus in Ethiopia⁸ – was introduced in the 3rd century at the latest.⁹ The ancient and deeply rooted practice of parchment manuscript production was certainly favoured by the dry, healthy climate of the Abyssinian highlands which makes use of chemical treatment rather unnecessary. Parchment has been the main medium for transmitting written knowledge (including documentary texts) for over 1500 years, up until the 20th century. In some areas it remains in use to the present day.¹⁰ Since the country’s Christianisation, Ethiopic manuscripts have been responsible for the diffusion and transmission of a literary corpus translated from Greek into Ethiopic which is instrumental to Christian practice: including the Bible with several Apocrypha and various patristic writings (theological, liturgical, hagiographic, homiletic, and monastic works). This Aksumite corpus survived in the course of time through complex processes of transmission. Some parts survived through copying, while other texts (starting in the 13th century) came down to us as translations from Arabic into Ethiopic. All these were transmitted on parchment. Interestingly, from the 10th century onwards copyists probably did not speak the language of the texts that they were copying.

During the obscure and scarcely documented period between the Aksumite (the 4th to 7th centuries and beyond) and post-Aksumite ages (which began in the 12th century), written culture was affected by traumatic events with a consequent loss of whole corpora of texts. Besides material factors, this was probably due to changes in linguistic standards. That is, translated texts had become virtually unintelligible even to the clergy. The combined effects of linguistic change on the one hand, and both decline in literary culture and long textual transmission by copying on the other, led to extensive textual corruption. In consequence, ancient Aksumite translations were either superficially revised or transformed by complex and unexpected processes (what I will briefly present below is evidence of such case), abandoned or even totally replaced with newer ones.¹¹ No wonder that the traditional teaching transmitted in ecclesiastical schools has sometimes no understanding of ancient texts or of the practices mentioned therein, the memory of which has definitely vanished. This past – in a way, a “classical past” rooted in the Aksumite period – can be recovered only if it is com-

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⁸ The very recent description of the Four Gospels Books of Abbā Garimā by its restorer, however, includes the important remark that the binding of the first of the two manuscripts bears traces of deteriorated papyrus: and this, as far as we know, would be the first evidence for papyrus as book material in Ethiopia, cf. Capon 2008, 7; Mercier 2009, 112; Bausi 2011a.
¹⁰ Cf. Mellors / Parsons 2002a; 2002b; 2003.
pared with its late antique original context; also, it is better understood if con-
trasted against other ancient Christian and Christian oriental traditions – for both of
which, in turn, the contribution of Ethiopian studies may be of extraordinary
importance.

It would not make sense to study Ethiopic manuscripts without consider-
ing the cultural context in which they originated: namely that of Late Antiquity
and the Christian East. The myth that Ethiopian Studies is a self-sufficient field
and/or a minor part of African Studies has often helped to obscure one essential
truth: that the mere existence of its manuscript tradition clearly shows that Ethio-
pian civilization was deeply influenced by Mediterranean, Byzantine and Near
Eastern cultures. The preservation of ancient techniques and their application
by modern copyists, however, have attracted the attention of only a few schol-
ars.¹² Notwithstanding some recent initiatives, Ethiopic manuscripts have not yet
become a subject of codicological study within the frame of modern “manuscript
archaeology”,¹³ nor have they been properly examined from a comparative or
quantitative (chronological distribution, format, size typologies etc.) perspective.

Present-day manuscript production practices, even those showing features
traceable to medieval times, do not have any absolute or paradigmatic value, nor
can they be mechanically interpreted as reflecting ancient traditional practices.
This does not, however, mean that no archaic features were retained in manu-
script production and other aspects of Ethiopian social and religious life. Manu-
script production simply underwent its own – mainly internal – development
over time. This can be illustrated by the following examples.

It is commonly said that one and the same person took care of all phases
of manuscript production, from parchment preparation to writing and binding;
something observed nowadays, and still customarily taught in a few surviving
traditional schools. However, we have evidence for other modes of book-produc-
tion as well. The Ga’az term berhānnā, probably a pseudo-etymological spelling,
as in Amharic, for the original berānnā, specifically means ‘parchment’.¹⁴ The
colophon of a manuscript in Pistoia’s Biblioteca Forteguerriana, Martini etiop. 5,
fol. 195rb, which dates to the first half of the 15th century (1437/1438) during the
reign of King Zar’a Yā’qob (1434–1468) and belongs to a series of monumental
Biblical “Octateuchs” (i.e. Genesis, Leviticus, Exodus, Numbers, Deutoronomy,

¹³ Cf. Maniaci 2002; Agati 2003; 2009; Géhin 2005. Cf. now Balicka-Witakowska / Bausi / Bosc-
Tiessé / Nosnitsin 2014.
¹⁴ The term is etymologically unclear: either from *brh ‘be light, be clear’, or (more likely) from Latin membrana, through Greek μεμβράνα.
Joshua, Judges and Ruth) of large size (195 foll., 2 cols., 465 × 350 mm), offers an interesting piece of evidence. The colophon reads:¹⁵

The Book of Ruth from the Octateuch has been finished. And this book was written in the ninety year of Mercy: it was started in the month of Yakkātit and finished in the month of Nahāsi, [while] our King [was] Zar’a Yā’qob and our Metropolitan ’abbā Bartaloměwos. It was Our Father Gabramāryām who had it written: let God write his name on the golden pillar by a bejewelled pen in the Heavenly Jerusalem with all his [spiritual] sons for ever and ever. Amen. Malka Ṣēdēq wrote the Book of Numbers, Deutoronomy and Joshua, while I myself, P̣āwlos, wrote the other [books]. If we added or omitted anything, either wittingly or not, forgive and bless us for ever and ever. Amen. And bless the makers of parchment, because they laboured much.

The colophon demonstrates that in this case the ‘parchment makers’, sarāhta berānnā, were definitely distinct from the copyists, who are mentioned by their names, Malka Ṣēdēk and P̣āwlos. Moreover, the making of the book was “team work”, because at least two copyists took part in it. They probably worked at the same time, as can be guessed from a codicological analysis of the manuscript: Malka Ṣēdēq’s portion of the text (Numbers, Deutoronomy and Joshua, on foll. 93–173) is written on a separate set of quires and the whole work took no longer than six/seven months. On the other hand, P̣āwlos is mentioned again in a caption (on fol. 5v) as the artist of an illustration that shows Moses with Joshua and Aron receiving the Tablets of the Law: although we do not know how frequent such illuminations were at the time, copyist-painters are not at all frequent today.¹⁶

Another example of manuscript production by “team” is the long subscriptio (fol. 574v), with a colophon to a second, even more monumental manuscript (576 foll., 3 cols., mm 489 × 390) preserved in the monastery of Dabra Bizan (Eritrea). The manuscript, which contains the so-called 81 Canonical Books (the whole Bible plus apocryphal and canonico-liturgical writings) is dated to the reign of King ’Eskender (1478–1494) at the end of the 15th century (1491/1492). As the abbot Tawalda Madḥen, who donated the manuscript to the monastic community, declares in the long and elaborated subscriptio:¹⁷

We have entrusted this book to the Lord, to Mary his mother and to all the angelical and human ranks, to all our forefathers, living and dead, and to this church, so that they should preserve it. May this word of the Lord preserve this church and this community from the burning of fire, from earthquake, from the assault of the enemy, from the stirring of wind,

¹⁶ Cf. Uhlig / Bausi 2007a, 739b; Bausi 2008a, 522.
¹⁷ Cf. Bausi 1997, 34–39, manuscript no. 6; the quotation on p. 36 [tr.], and p. 39 [text].
from lightning and thunder, and from every fraudulence of the enemy. As to this book, it is a source of pride, and [no similar one] is found anywhere else. Preserve it carefully and respectfully.

The statement of the abbot makes it clear that the completion of this book was important for two reasons: its monumentality visibly represented the richness and power of the community as well as its devotion and loyalty to the religious faith. In this respect, the presence in the manuscript of the apocryphal and canonico-liturgical writings besides the Bible has its own specific importance. By virtue of having realised the book, the abbot feels entitled to ask for a particular intercession in favour of the monastery. In this case, the manuscript displays the patronage of the monastic community and attests to its ideological identity.

The third case shows how dogmatic, monastic, and political controversies are sometimes reflected in centuries-old manuscripts. At the same monastery of Dabra Bizan, a wonderful 15th-century Maṣḥafa berhān (‘Book of the light’) has been preserved. The work is a compilation of doctrinal and historical materials written on the initiative of King Zar’a Yā’qob and primarily intended to settle the violent monastic disputes in the course of which Dabra Bizan sided with the party opposed to the King.¹⁸ A note in the manuscript states that the codex was donated by the King to P̣ēṭros, the community’s future abbot, on the occasion of his visit to the royal court in Sēwā in the year 1457/1458 (fol. 271va):¹⁹

This book is the Maṣḥafa berhān donated by our King Zar’a Yā’qob to Dabra Bizan when Our Father P̣ēṭros descended from the land of Sēwā, having taken this book in the year of Mercy 110. May he write in the Heavenly Jerusalem the name of Our Father P̣ēṭros, shepherd of the flock. For ever. Amen.

As we have it now, some specific portions of the historical narrative in the work (a sort of “official” history of the recent past) have however been censored, having been washed away and erased from the codex, no doubt on the initiative of some rebellious monks.

The passion of the Ethiopian saints for books is a hagiographic commonplace, and certainly reflects their holy devotion to the Holy Scriptures and to the books of Divinity.²⁰ Some of them, however, seem to go slightly further, being animated by a special bibliophily: this is the case of some saints of the house of

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¹⁹ Cf. Bausi 1997, 25–34, manuscript no. 6, figs. 1–8; the note on p. 28 [tr.], and p. 33.
'Ēwostätēwos (ca. 1273–1352),²¹ but also of Baṣalota Mikāʾēl, a 14th-century saint²² who, according to his Gadl (‘[Spiritual] Combat’), wandered among monasteries in search for books:

First he arrived at Makāna Dāmmo and remained there reading the books of the New and of the Old [Testament]; he also studied their interpretation with intellectual eagerness: so that the skin of his tongue fell off, like the sheath of a knife; but he did not abandon his reading because of this. Then he departed and arrived at the house of ʿabba Maṭāʾ: he received the benediction of the blessed Libānos and remained a few days being vigilant in the reading of books. Then he left and arrived at Makāna Qefryā, and from there he left to Makāna Qwāʾat, from Makāna Qwāʾat to Makāna Baʾaltabēḥat, from Makāna Baʾaltabēḥat to Makāna Maqalē, from Makāna Maqalē to Makāna Gēfē by Gabra Nāzrāwi, his beloved. And wherever he arrived, he built a cell for himself and stayed up day and night reading the Scriptures: he supplicated the Lord in fasts and in prayer so that He might reveal the secret of their mystery. (Conti Rossini 1905, 19.22–20.3 [text], 17.26–18.5 [tr.].)

3 Some data and the status quaestionis

3.1 Panorama

Beginning from the second half of the 20th century, modern research has clearly distinguished various branches within the general field of manuscript studies, each with its own methodology and scope, based upon the fundamental distinction between the text and the bearer of the text.²³ Codicology or “manuscript archaeology” studies hand-written books as artefacts with specific reference to their material constituents and techniques of production. Manuscript illuminations and drawings are the subject of art history. Palaeography deals with the peculiarities of writing and its general development and dating (which, historically, was always the primary aim of palaeography), but also with the general “act of writing” in all its contexts and reflexes. Textual criticism or philology has refined its methods in the search for reliable criteria with which to establish the original readings of texts, taking advantage of recent developments in other fields attested, for example, by the emergence of such specific sub-disciplines as “codi-

²² Cf. Samuel Wolde Yohannes / Nosnitsin 2003 (the reference on p. 494b to manuscript EMML no. 1843 is to be corrected into EMML no. 2134).
²³ The assertion that these areas of research should be subsumed in a single discipline of “manuscript studies”, though not unheard-of, certainly has a radical edge today, and needs justification.
colological stemmatics” or “material philology”.²⁴ These new fields of research are concerned with establishing the links between manuscripts and the texts they transmit. They also trace the history of each single manuscript, its material structure and/or the influence particular copies may have exerted within a single textual tradition. So far these recent disciplinary subdivisions have seldom been applied in Ethiopian manuscripts studies.

3.2 Number of manuscripts

Among basic issues that still need definitive assessment is the question of the total number of manuscripts, both inside and outside Ethiopia and Eritrea. The exact number of Ethiopic manuscripts in the Ethio-Eritrean region is not known. The estimated figure of ca. 200,000 (excluding scrolls) seems realistic and cannot be dramatically reduced if one considers the minimum number of manuscripts necessary for every church to be able to carry on its normal religious and liturgical practice (the estimated number of parishes ranges from at least 13,000 to 32,350). Large manuscript collections are often preserved in monastic libraries, especially in the still understudied Tegray churches and monasteries that formed the “cradle” of Christian civilization in Ethiopia.²⁵

The number of manuscripts abroad may run to several thousand. Most are catalogued. The four biggest collections in Europe are the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Città del Vaticano), the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), the British Library (London), and the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung (Berlin). The Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (also the first to have been catalogued) has well over one thousand (about 1,082) catalogued manuscripts plus a number of still uncatalogued collections including many items each. The Bibliothèque nationale de France has over one thousand manuscripts and scrolls. The British Library (the first to have been catalogued according to modern standards in 1848) has at present at least 624 manuscripts. The Berlin

²⁵ Cf. for details Bausi 1996, 14–23; 2004a, 8; 2008a, 510–515; 2009a; 2011b; Bausi / Uhlig 2007a; cf. also the important research project “Mäzgäbä Saalat”, edited by Michael Gervers and Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, with an immense database at <http://ethiopia.deeds.utoronto.ca/>; and now the even more important projects Ethio-SPaRe led by Denis Nosnitsin <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ethiospare.pdf> and “The Ethiopian Manuscript Imaging Project, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Saint John’s University, Collegeville, MN”, led by Steve Delamarter <http://www.hmml.org/Vivarium/sgd.htm>. By the Ethio-SPaRe project, see now Nosnitsin 2013a; 2013b.
Library preserves 328 manuscripts and an important microfilm collection of 182 items. As far as microfilms are concerned, the collection of the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (Addis Ababa and Collegeville, Minnesota) with its 9,238 manuscripts is the most important; moreover, the first 5,000 items have been catalogued in printed form, with other manuscripts being described in an online catalogue.

### 3.3 Manuscript cataloguing

To discuss methods and the state of the art in Ethiopic manuscript cataloguing would require a paper by itself.²⁶ A full list of collections and catalogues, with minor omissions, has been compiled by Robert Beylot and Maxime Rodinson in 1995; an updated online version – not without some inconvenient elements, misunderstandings and errors – was prepared by a team of French researchers (Anaïs Wion, Marie-Laure Derat, Claire Bosc-Tiessé) in 2006.²⁷ For information on a number of collections which can be considered of minor importance only from the point of view of the number of manuscripts, old repertories (such as the wonderful bibliography by Silvio Zanutto of 1935) are still useful.²⁸ Catalogues usually reflect only a certain angle on manuscript studies. Some put more weight on philological aspects, such as description of the text, identification of its antecedents and parallels, and the manuscript’s place in its textual tradition, while others focus on material or “archaeological” aspects of the manuscripts. From this perspective, a rather recent catalogue of 23 manuscripts deposited in public and private collections of the United Kingdom should be used with circumspection: though seemingly “progressive” and up to date in its detailed description of material aspects, it lacks similarly detailed description of the texts and has insufficient references to parallel versions and general repertories, with the con-
sequence that the description does not constitute a good basis for philological research.²⁹

3.4 Oldest manuscripts

Although the introduction of Christianity in Aksum certainly implies early diffusion of manuscripts, at least for the purpose of religious services and liturgical practice, none dating to that period are as yet known. The oldest preserved manuscripts which can confidently be dated go back to the early 13th century, but manuscripts survive in considerable quantity only from the 17th century. Christian tradition tends to attribute the scarcity of manuscripts predating the 17th century to the destruction of Christian heritage brought about in the first half of the 16th by the Islamic leader Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ǧāzī. The wars with Islam must seriously have affected the survival of Christian manuscripts, although the extent of the damage cannot be determined with any certainty. The intentional destruction or substitution of texts, the custom of burying manuscripts together with their owners, and poor preservation conditions in monastic libraries, have also been adduced to explain the scarcity of ancient manuscripts. The conflict with the Jesuits in the 17th century and the full restoration of traditional cult in the Gondarine kingdom may also have occasioned a substantial revival of manuscript production.³⁰

Three Four Gospels books from 'Endā 'Abbā Garimā (I, II and III) are considered to be the oldest known Ethiopian manuscripts. Their dating, however, is still uncertain and a matter of discussion: it ranges, according to different scholars, from the 7th or even the 6th centuries up to the 14th, with the earliest dating (i.e. ante the 7th century) supported by the style of the illuminations (Canon tables) and radiocarbon dating.³¹ While in several cases internal evidence is provided by a colophon or a subscriptio, in this, as well as in other cases, the manuscripts can


³⁰ Cf. Uhlig / Bausi 2007a, 739b–740b; Bausi 2008a, 518–520. The question whether more recent destructions – such as those caused by the Italian invasion and occupation in 1935–1941 – might also have played an important role has, curiously enough, remained totally unattended so far.

unfortunately be dated only on the basis of palaeographic evidence, for which, however, only uncertain epigraphic parallels or art-historical features of the illustrations are available.

3.5 Codicology

In the absence of a specialist monograph devoted to the codicology of Ethiopic manuscripts apart from a short, but useful booklet published by Sergew Hable Selassie (1981), Ethiopian codicology is still in its infancy.³² Two basic types of Ethiopic manuscripts are traditionally distinguished according to overall format, both of which are prepared on parchment according to fixed traditional procedures: a) the scroll, usually not calligraphic and almost exclusively used for magical texts and for paintings but not (as in Jewish culture) for sacred texts or large works, and b) the codex, usually with wooden binding and leather cover. Palimpsests are rarely attested; they are obtained more often by washing off the ink than by erasing. Manuscripts are almost without exception on parchment. Paper manuscripts are rare and very recent (from the end of the 19th or the 20th century), apart from exceptions easily explained by the context of production. Collections of Ethiopic manuscripts copied by Ethiopian copyists for European scholars sometimes have many European paper manuscripts. Quires are normally composed of four bifolia in older manuscripts; fascicles of five bifolia seem to have prevailed since the 17th/18th centuries. “Gregory’s rule” (“flesh side on flesh side and hair side on hair side”) is consistently observed. Although dimensions and other metric data of the manuscripts (number of columns, size of the writing, width of the margins etc.) should be studied as components of the general mise en page, no statistical study is yet available for Ethiopic manuscripts, apart from very limited sample studies.³³ On this provisional basis, one can say that the dimensions of the manuscripts range from 10–12 cm to more than 40 to 50 cm in height. The most ancient manuscripts usually organize text in two columns; from the 16th century the three-column model tends to become frequent and later on prevails in large format manuscripts. As a rule, the Psalter is copied in one

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single column. Guidelines are not drawn with ink but rather with a dry point by scoring the writing surface. Paragraph marks are very simple until the end of the 14th century when they become more elaborate. Geometrical ornaments and interlacing (ḥarag) also developed from the 14th century; this kind of ornamentation enjoyed a special revival in imperial scripторia in the 20th century.³⁴ Black (or dark brown, typical of the earliest manuscripts) and red inks are very common; other colours are also used, especially in ornaments; one special case of “negative” writing (black ink is erased to obtain “white” writing using the colour of the parchment) is attested in the colophon of an Octateuch, Bible House Library, Ethiop. 1, 284r.³⁵ One prevalent Ethiopian binding techniques seems to be of a specific type, technically termed “chain-sewing with two threads”. Manuscripts are usually provided with wooden covers, very often covered with ornamented leather according to traditional styles.³⁶

A particular question concerning the material aspects of the Ethiopian manuscript book is that of ink production. Although there has been no extensive laboratory analysis, present-day practice as observed by ethnographers, as well as philological and linguistic data (i.e. study of terminology) would attest that metallic ink was not common in Ethiopia, whereas it began to be used and tended to prevail both in Islamic and in Christian areas of the Mediterranean world in the course of the 1st millennium CE. Aksumite Ethiopic māya ḥemmat (‘ink’) literally means ‘water of soot’, and the earliest documentary text ever found, a feudal deed issued by King Lālibalā and dating to 1205/1209, mentions the office of qāla ḥemmāt, probably (if ḥemmāt stands for ḥemmat) ‘voice (or: word) of the soot’, with reference to his scribes or secretaries who read and recorded texts.³⁷ If analyses and further research will confirm these preliminary results, Ethiopian manuscript production could have preserved late antique practice through to the present day.³⁸

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³⁵ Cf. Cowley 1982, 71; at present, the manuscripts are preserved in the Cambridge University Library, cf. Beylot / Rodinson 2005, 46–47.
³⁷ Cf. Conti Rossini 1901, 187,16, doc. no. 6; 2008a, 524; additional references in Bausi 2005c; 2010e.
³⁸ Cf. a first attempt by Wion 2004, 107, that confirms that Ethiopian black ink is carbon-based. On the occasion of the workshop “Digital Approaches to Manuscript Studies”, Hamburg, July 23rd–24th 2010, in the frame of the European Science Foundation Research Networking Programme “Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies” (COMSt), Steve Delamarter presented the paper “X-Ray spectroscopy and a Fourier Transform-infrared analysis of Ethiopian Inks”, providing laboratory evidence for the use of iron gall ink in an 18th-century Ethiopian manuscript.
3.6 Palaeography

Apart from the study of writing in the strict sense, the modern concept of palaeography denotes both the analysis of the relationship within a single “data carrier” between texts of different status and, beside the material aspects of manuscript-making, the social context presupposed by their production and use. We have some information about how copyists in the 20th-century imperial scriptoria (adequately furnished with libraries and places of traditional religious education) were trained. Their education included some knowledge of Ethiopic and calligraphy. The special figures of the dabtarās (learned laymen who are the best bearer of traditional religious knowledge) play an important role in manuscript production, although it has been observed that copying skills are not of pivotal importance for them and other learned people of the church, writing being considered a task of lower prestige. This circumstance may also explain why autograph manuscripts are extremely rare, only beginning to emerge alongside private and official letters and documents in the 19th century.

The central role in the production of manuscripts was played by the monastic communities, and monasteries have also been – and in many cases still are – the main repositories. Manuscripts are rarely preserved in specially devised places (“libraries”): usually they are considered “precious objects”, and are inventoried and preserved in the same place as liturgical objects, paintings, clothes, textiles, crosses, and other paraphernalia. In some cases, manuscripts were entrusted to an ‘aqqābē maṣāheft, ‘keeper of the books’, who is responsible for their care; in many cases written inventories have also been drawn up. Old lists of books (attested from the end of the 13th century) are normally used by scholars in order to establish the terminus ante quem of literary works and/or the relative degree of interest of monastic communities towards them. Inventories of items and books often appear as additiones (“additional notes”), on blank pages and/or in spaces not completely used up by the text, at the beginning or more usually at the end of the manuscripts. Unlike the colophon, these notes of various types (personal and historical records; sentences and judgements on controversies; lists of important people, saints, foreign words, and months; prayers and short hymns; calendric remarks; fatina ber‘, ‘pen trials”) do not directly refer to the main manuscript text. The practice of additiones may be considered very old, as we find such notes (almost contemporary with their production) even in the most ancient manuscripts. The Bible (particularly the Four Gospels, Wangēla warq, ‘Golden Gospel’) and manuscripts of the Gadl (‘Spiritual Combat’) of the founder of a monastic

39 Cf. bibliography above.
community are frequently found to include documents of special interest, such as feudal deeds attesting benefits, historical records etc. In some cases, fascicles containing important feudal deeds are rebound together (e.g., in the “Golden Gospel” of Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā, in this case, together with a recent copy of the same deeds).⁴¹

3.7 Philology

The analysis of the scribes’ attitude towards their texts and the understanding of the typology of textual transmission may have some important implications for editorial methodology today. All the great scholars in Ethiopian Studies have also been editors of texts, though (with few exceptions) not necessarily up-to-date with, or sensitive to, the questions of text-critical method involved in that work.⁴²

In general, with some unavoidable simplifications, one can say that in the second half of the 19th century Romanists and Classical philologists adopted the methods developed by earlier New Testament editors, and brought to completion the slow ongoing evolution towards a “progressive” critical reconstructive method. This method, often called the “Lachmannian” approach, comprises the following stages: a) a complete survey of all the direct and indirect witnesses to the text under examination (recensio); b) the identification of their genealogical relationship established on the basis of conjunctive errors (Leitfehler); c) the reconstruction of an original or archetype text, using the majority reading of the manuscript families; d) a critical edition of what is believed to be a hypothetical reconstruction of the original text by the editor.⁴³ As is well known, the Romanist Joseph Bédier (once a pupil of Gaston Paris) advanced a drastic criticism of the reconstructive method. According to him, an overwhelming majority of the pub-

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⁴³ Any critical edition should of course distinguish clearly between manuscript tradition and critically established text – what has been called, e.g., “Befund” and “Bearbeitung” by Hahn 2001, 52.
lished *stemmata codicum*, or genealogical branches, of the manuscripts were two branched (*silva portentosa!‘a most unnatural branching’, as he put it). Bédier concluded that selection of preferred variants was a matter of personal judgment, and that the reduction of genealogical branches to binary oppositions was instrumental in making editorial choice more subjective. Moreover, such genealogical reconstructions must, he concluded, have produced editions containing texts that had never existed. From 1913 on, Bédier proposed and formalized what he termed the “base manuscript” method.⁴⁴ This involved publishing the text of a single selected manuscript, considered by the editor the best, and calling upon the remaining manuscripts only where they provide better readings of what from the editor’s point of view are problematic passages.

In reaction to Bédier, the Classical philologists Giorgio Pasquali (following Paul Maas, who had remained largely unaffected by Bédier’s ideas), his pupil Sebastiano Timpanaro and the Romanist Gianfranco Contini reasserted the importance of philological reconstruction.⁴⁵ In fact, there is no alternative to the modern reconstructive (or so-called “Neo-Lachmannian”) method, unless “transcribing” is understood as editing.⁴⁶ In Bédier’s view, one negative consequence of this method would be that every new edition would have a different text. To this criticism, G. Contini replied:

The likely absence of stable readings is for Bédier a vice, the complaint against which, though fundamental, is not as a point salient enough: continuous dynamic improvement cannot be viewed as something that is not a positive quality. This progressive approximation to the truth, a truth that is, so to speak, fractional in comparison with the presumed inherent truth of each single witness, a truth that involves a diminution of error, seems to represent a method worthy of the name of science.⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ Already known, but not usually extensively practiced, even before the development of the Lachmannian method – when the correction of an already edited texts (‘vulgata’) by eventually using additional manuscripts was the normal practice, cf. Timpanaro 2005 – under the name of “codex optimus ‘best manuscript’”, or *codex vetustissimus* “‘most ancient manuscript’ method”.


⁴⁷ “L’assenza eventuale di lezione stabile è un vizio per Bédier, della cui denuncia è questo un punto portante, non abbastanza rilevato; ma il continuo miglioramento dinamico non si vede come non sia una qualità positiva. Questa marcia di avvicinamento alla verità, una verità per così dire frazionaria in opposizione alla verità presuntamente organica dei singoli testimoni, una verità come diminuzione di errore, sembra un procedimento degno della scienza”. Cf. Contini
To my knowledge, there has been much less work on the history of Islamic manuscripts philology.⁴⁸ With regard to other Oriental traditions, I am not aware of detailed studies in the history of editorial technique. But there is, as far as I can see, much to be learned for example from Indic philology.⁴⁹

As far as Ethiopic and other Christian Oriental texts are concerned, one might reasonably ask whether the method of the “base manuscript”⁵⁰ (still

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⁴⁸ Cf. some references in Marrassini 1987, 348–349; 2007; Bausi 2006a, 544; 2008b, 22–24. The recent, comprehensive volume by Pfeiffer / Kropp 2007, is useful to get an overall idea of the “state of the art”, even though many of the contributors do not really focus on the methodology of textual criticism, whereas those who do with a few exceptions (Peacock 2007; Berschin 2007; Kleinlogel 2007), seem to go little further than the paradigmatic and rather disappointing conclusions expressed by Witkam 1988, who rightly criticized the mechanical application of stemmatic methodology to “Middle Eastern” literary traditions (Arabic, Persian, Turkish), yet totally ignored the fact that Classical and Romance philologists (cf. Pasquali 1954 and Contini 2007) developing the so-called “neo-Lachmannian” approach have provided a refined revision of mechanical stemmatic methodology, and that the seemingly specific problems troubling editors of “Middle Eastern” texts which are listed by Witkam (“The ‘unique’ manuscript”, “The edition of texts preserved in numerous manuscripts”, etc.) are almost exactly the same (the only exception being “The edition of the Qur’ān”) as those usually debated by Romance philologists; in a way, Endress’s 1982, 274 statement (“Auch die von Paul Maas: Textkritik ... erarbeiteten Grundsätze sollen bei der Edition arabischer Handschriften mehr Beachtung finden”), still makes sense: the reconstructive methodology should be considered insufficient only after attempts to apply it have been fully exhausted. For more nuanced position, see now Witkam 2013; and more in general, Bausi et al. 2014.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bharati 1988; Jha 1993; various contributions in Gärtner / Krummacher 2000; Thaker 2002; cf. also for further references the very interesting and exemplary article by Isaacson 2009.

⁵⁰ For a short survey and critical evaluation of recently edited Ethiopic texts, cf. Bausi 2006a, 544–546; 2008b, 24–28; 2010f; Marrassini 2009. The survey could be easily expanded: e.g., one can note that Getatchew Haile 1982, 69, even if almost unwittingly, appreciably applies eliminatoria codicum descriptorum to justify the use of a unique base-manuscript (EMML no. 6275); on the contrary, Gori 2001, 472 (probably on the initiative of the series editor Lanfranco Ricci), deals with the unique manuscript witness to the text he is publishing as if it were the autograph, even though it is not (“Il criterio fondamentale che ci ha costantemente guidato nella nostra edizione è quello della massima aderenza alla forma e al contenuto del manoscritto della Sylloge. Di quest’ultimo, abbiamo dunque rispettato con la scrupolosa cura le forme grafiche peculiari, anche quando errate ortograficamente, e le scelte morfologiche e sintattiche dell’autore, anche se sbagliate grammaticalmente” (“The fundamental principle which we have constantly followed in our edition is that of most adherence to form and contents of the manuscript of the Sylloge. Of the latter, we have therefore scrupulously respected the peculiar graphic forms, even where their orthography was manifestly wrong, and the morphological and syntactical choices of the author, although grammatically erroneous”); Gori 2003, 75, states that: “Data la relativa nitidezza della grafia in cui è stato scritto il testo dallo scriba Rāda Asrass, e la non grande difficoltà di lettura
largely accepted in these circles and seen by Alphonse Dain as an antiphilo-
logical concept⁵¹), continues to be practiced by force of habit, or, following the
more recent critical rethinking of the reconstructive method, is justified by pur-
ported special characteristics of the Ethiopic textual traditions themselves. But
although the peculiarities of the Ethiopic textual traditions have yet to be ade-
quately described, and better editions are needed to accomplish this task, we still
must face the question which of the two critical methods should be employed for
editing the texts. The “base manuscript” method is by “anti-reconstructionists”
in several fields justified by intrinsic, culture-specific reasons.⁵² I will now try to
discuss which method is best justified by the features specific to the Ethiopian
textual tradition.

Leaving aside the distinction – in my opinion, a fundamental one – between
texts of Aksumite time on the one hand, and those of the medieval period which
developed in a cultural environment which remained more or less homogeneous
down to the present day on the other, a point worthy of attention is the degree of
freedom the copyist allowed himself in copying the text. A high degree of freedom
would lead to “fluidity”, “variation” or “instability” and make the restoration
and the reconstruction of the text an impossible or simply a meaningless task.

In fact, some editors typically oppose the reconstructive methodology with
an empirical procedure based on “common sense”. Some also support their own
sceptical attitude towards reconstructive philology by quoting “internal evi-
dences”, like, e.g., the following exemplary passage from the Amharic andemtā
(Amharic commentary) on Maṣḥafa Qeddāsē, ‘Book of the Mass’, with reference
to the Ethiopic (Ge’ez) text:

maṣḥaf mešṭir yeṭṭanaqqaqāl enḏi andennā bezu, sētennā wand, ruqennā qerb ayṭṭanaqqaqem
(“the book takes care of the deep sense [mešṭir]; on the contrary it does not take care of sin-
gular and plural, masculine and feminine, far away and near”). (Garimā 1925/1926, 12b.)⁵³

che essa presenta, non si è ritenuto necessario ritrascrivere con mezzi informatici il contenuto
del manoscritto, ciò che avrebbe provocato, per altro, oltre che un notevole dispendio di energie
e di tempo, anche il rischio di introdurre degli errori involontari” (“In consideration of the rela-
tive clearness of the handwriting of the scribe Rāda Asrass, and of the fact that it is easily read-
able, we have not considered necessary to transcribe by informatic devices the contents of the
manuscript, which could have caused, among other things, besides the considerable waste of
time and energy, the insertion of unintentional errors”). The latter statement is quite disconcert-
ing: if the principle were consistently applied, no critical text could in fact ever be printed; for
similar approaches, cf. detailed references in my contributions quoted above.

⁵¹ Dain 1964, 171, “un concept antiphilologique”.
⁵³ Quoted by Tedros Abraha 2007, 120, n. 9. Tedros Abraha is a very active present-day scholar
If this attitude was consistently present in older times, they say – a fact still to be verified, notwithstanding the statements of some authors who mainly refer to the observation of present day practice⁵⁴ – Ethiopic textual transmission must have been “fluid”; and any attempts at a critical reconstruction of textual traditions, at least in their minor details, would be futile.

A closer examination of another quotation from the andemtā commentary on the Pauline Epistles, Letter to the Romans 5,2,⁵⁵ however, reveals how ambiguous and complex the attitude of traditional Ethiopian scholars really is:

\[\text{mašḥaf } \text{mešṭir } \text{biṭanaqqeq } \text{enğī} \text{ (“although the book takes care of the deep sense [mešṭir”])}\]
\[\text{zayebē } \text{aytanaqqeqemennā} \text{ (“on the other hand, it does not take care of the expression [zayebē”])}: \text{ “enta } \text{bātti } \text{qomna” belo (“after having said enta } \text{bātti } \text{qomna [‘in which we have stood’”])} \text{ “we’etu } \text{mekhena” ala (“he said we’etu mekhena [‘that [masc.] is our boast’”])}; \text{ yeččewem } \text{mammakiyāččen } \text{nāt (“and this [fem.] is [fem.] our boast”)} \text{ “wave’etu mekhena” bil (“if it says wave’etu mekhena [‘and that [masc.] is our boast’”], \text{ vekawem mammakiyāččen } \text{naw (“and this [masc.] is our boast”).} (Maḥari Terfē 1955/1956, 70.)\]

The commentary might not appear perfectly clear, but what is to note here is that some phrases which are identical in contents, only differ in grammatical gender. Although this variance does not affect the sense at all, the variant phrases have been listed one after the other, collected in the andemtā commentary text as attesting different utterances which have been considered worth recording (typically in the style of the oral commentary, as usually happens in the andemtā):

\[\text{after having said “in which we have stood”, he said “that [masc.] is our boast”, “and this [fem.] is [fem.] our boast”, if it says “and that [masc.] is our boast”, “and this [masc.] is our boast”}\]

⁵⁴ Cf. Heyer 1970, 143: “To be able to keep in mind not only the sacred text but the Tergum of the Fathers is considered more honourable... If the sacred text, when it is being read aloud, deviates from the way it is in the Mamber’s memory, he will intervene and correct the Ge’ez text from his memory. What the Mamber knows by heart is of greater value than all that is written”. I myself have witnessed to the application of such a principle while visiting Eritrean monasteries.

⁵⁵ Cf. δι’ οὗ καὶ τὴν προσαγωγὴν ἐσχήκαμεν [τῇ πίστει] εἰς τὴν χάριν ταύτην ἐν ᾗ ἑστήκαμεν, καὶ καυχώμεθα ἐπ’ ἐλπίδι τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ; “Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God”; zaba’enti’ahu tamarāḥna westa zātti šaggāhu ‘enta bātti qomna wave’etu mekhena wabātti nessēffo sebḥata ‘Egzī’abeḥēr, cf. Tedros Abraha 2001, 82.
The modern critical edition of the *Letter to the Romans* and of its Amharic *andemtā* commentary\(^{56}\) reproduces as its base text the same modern edition printed in 1948 (Maḥari Terfē 1955/1956). Yet the editor’s Italian translation reads\(^{57}\):

Il libro sta ben attento al contenuto profondo, ma non al testo; dopo aver detto «*sulla quale stiamo*» c’è infatti da aggiungere «*è il nostro vanto*». (Tedros Abraha 2001, 541.)

("The book is preoccupied with deep meaning, but not with the text; after having said «*on which we stand*», it must be added\(^{58}\) «*it is our own boast*»").

As it appears, the Italian translation omits the second part of the Amharic text – seemingly, a repetition – which is different only as far as the grammatical gender (*yeččewem* [fem.] versus *yekawem* [masc.]) is concerned. Indeed, the traditional Ethiopian scholar who first edited the printed *andemtā* text thought it necessary to give an account of the variation and was more sensitive to the gender distinction than the modern European scholar and translator. The practice demonstrates that traditional Ethiopian textual scholars can be, as it seems, attentive also to very minor, purely formal details, like variations of grammatical gender, which are also considered, recorded and included in the commentary text, even though they do not actually affect the sense.

Another example useful when we consider the attitudes of traditional copyists to their texts can be drawn from the manuscript tradition of the *Qalēmentos*, the seven-book *Revelation of Peter to Clement*, certainly translated from an Arabic *Vorlage* probably in the first half of the 14th century.\(^{59}\) I have extensively collated twelve manuscript witnesses of the text and tried to sketch a *stemma codicum* (see

\(^{56}\) Cf. Tedros Abraha 2001, 267 [text], and 541 [tr.], nn. 13–14, also with reference to the passage by Heyer 1970, 143.

\(^{57}\) Cf. Tedros Abraha 2001, 541, with n. 14: “Il testo su cui il commentario si basa ha omesso «*è il nostro vanto/la nostra gloria*»; il commento vuole riparare. È da notare la singolarità del principio: «la disattenzione può essere perdonata al testo ma non al commento». Per l’interprete etiope sarebbe blasfemo dire, «il testo è monco, corrotto» o cose simili, quindi si fa uso di circonlocuzioni onde trovare una via d’uscita dalle problematiche testuali” (“The text on which the commentary is based has omitted «*it is our boast/our glory*»; the commentary intends to amend it. The peculiarity of the principle must be noted: «the slip can be excused in the text but not in the commentary». The interpreter would consider it blasphemous to say «*the text is mutilous, corrupt*» or similarly, therefore circumlocutions are used in order to find a way out of textual problems”).

\(^{58}\) In fact, the editor seems to have misunderstood the omographs *ala*, “he said”, for *alla*, “there is”, because he translates, *ibid.*: “c’è infatti da aggiungere”.

\(^{59}\) Cf. Bausi 2006e; 2010b.
Manuscripts $F$ and $T$ belong in the main branch $\gamma$ (one of the three subarchetypes) and immediately descend from a common antecedent $\tau$, which also fits in well with their geographical provenance, as both were written in the town of Ankobar. Manuscript $G$, belonging in the main branch $\beta$, is a 20th-century copy in a paper exercise book, made originally by an Ethiopian scholar for his personal use (when microfilmed it belonged in the private library of mamher Šemrata Ab Qaṣalā, Dasē, Wallo), but which bears marginal and supralinear annotations that can be identified as $G^2$ readings. These annotations belong to a hand, different from the original copyist’s, which apparently corrected the text of $G$ according to the readings of $\varphi$, the common antecedent of both $F$ and $G^2$. It is important that the extensive marginal and supralinear notes and corrections in $G^2$ not only deal with large omissions or major textual variations, but also with minor ones (such as slightly different, yet actually equivalent, syntactical constructions, or synonymical variant readings and the like) that do not affect the fundamental meaning of the text. The scope of this paper will not allow me to expand on this in more detail. Instead, I will elaborate on how variant readings can reveal the real attitude of the copyists.

A passage in the second book of the Qalêmēntos states that “the Devil deceives Adam”: all the manuscripts have the same text ($\text{Diwābelos yāseḥ(ḥ)eto la-Addām}$), except for manuscripts $F$ and $G^2$ which have “the Devil deceives the world and Adam” ($\text{Diwābelos yāseḥ(ḥ)eto la-ālam wa-la-Addām}$), “the world and” being in manuscript $G$ a supralinear reading of $G^2$. Both the majority text and the variant reading of manuscripts $F$ and $G^2$ give a possible text, but the point is not that of ascertaining which is the primary or original reading (according to the general stemma, it is no doubt the shorter one). As in hundreds, if not thousands, of other cases, even in this one the second scribe of the manuscript $G$ who wrote the marginal and supralinear text $G^2$ verified and established his reading by comparison of the $G$ text with an unknown manuscript source depen-

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60 Cf. Bausi 2006e, where a detailed description of the manuscript tradition is given. The stemma codicum may be summarized as follows: from archetype $\Omega$ three branches stem through three distinct subarchetypes: $\alpha$, independent witnesses: mss. $A$ and $B$; $\beta$, witness: ms. $K$ and sub-subarchetype $\delta$, from which mss. $D$ and $G$ stem in turn; and $\gamma$, from which mss. $S C E$ and sub-subarchetypes $\pi$ and $\tau$ directly stem: in turn, from $\pi$ mss. $P$ and $V$ stem, and from $\tau$ ms. $T$ and a sub-sub-subarchetype $\varphi$; finally, ms. $F$ is derived from $\varphi$. The reason why $\varphi$ (a seemingly unnecessary intermediary between $\tau$ and $F$) needs to be postulated will become clear in a while (s. below). Only manuscripts $F$ (EMML no. 2147), $G$ (EMML no. 4857) and $T$ (Tübingen, Universitätsbibliothek, M. aeth. 1 = M. a. IX 1) will be considered here.

61 This clearly appears from the microfilm of the manuscript, which I have examined, but it is not noted in the printed catalogue where the manuscripts is described, cf. Getatchew Haile 1993, 338.
dent upon the antecedent φ, from which F and G² derive. But it is important to note that the second hand G², far from attempting at revising and correcting the text, only intended to collate it extensively. The copyist or scholar responsible for the G² readings was probably interested in recording and amassing variants. We have seen above that the traditional Ethiopian scholar who edited the printed andēmtā text gave account in detail even of gender variations which did not affect the meaning: the same did here the copyist of G² with his annotations, according to the very same methodological principle which has given birth to the andēmtā commentaries.

This example shows that mediaeval Ethiopian scribes, much like their European brethren, used multiple textual sources (so-called “contamination”). It is also instructive from the point of view of the history of the textual transmission in the proper philological sense. Ethiopian manuscript transmission is on the whole stable, and the textual tradition of each single text can be established on the basis of reconstructive principles. Scribes do not systematically change the received text by their own judgement, neither do they systematically correct its errors, although this may in some cases happen, of course. In the present case,

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62 The fact that even manuscript T does not have the small addition (as in other occurrences) demonstrates that the manuscript source is φ, not τ: cf. above the description of the stemma codicum.

63 According to Zuurmond 1989, part I, 39-40 (“Some 500 Ethiopic Gospel manuscripts are known today. Only rarely one of them is identical with another for more than a couple of verses. By far the largest number of variant readings obviously stems from internal corruption. It is hardly exaggerated to say that every Ethiopian scribe in his own way is an ‘Editor’. The average Ethiopian scribe must almost permanently have mixed the text he was copying with the text as he had it in mind, or even with the text of another manuscript to which he had immediate
the copyist of $G^2$ simply collates the text and amasses variants, yet, he does not try to establish the correct text. Ethiopian copyists usually accepted and tolerated even extremely corrupt texts,⁶⁴ which is consistent with the conception of an average copyist as not necessarily a man of learning.⁶⁵ This, I think, opens the way not only for the application of mechanical text-critical reconstructive methodology, but also to a better understanding of how written culture was transmitted in traditional Ethiopia.

### 4 A case study: The Aksumite Collection

I have devoted myself for some years to a research project which aims to recover an older layer of the Ethiopic literature that dates back probably to the Aksumite age. The targeted texts are those multi-textual works that are likely to retain Aksumite texts translated from a Greek *Vorlage*, such as the so-called *Sinodos* (or *Senodos*),⁶⁶ a corpus canonum of canonico-liturgical character, and hagiographic collections. This research has led to editions of the Ethiopic versions of the *Epistle 70* by St. Cyprian of Carthage, the *Acts of Phileas* (largely corresponding to the Greek text on P. Chester Beatty Library XV, one of the two papyrus witnesses known so far, the latter being P. Bodmer XX), the *Teaching of the 318 Nicene Fathers on the right faith and the monastic life*, the *Canonical answers* by Peter of Alexandria.⁶⁷ While this research was being conducted in 1999, I was asked to prepare a description of a manuscript recently found which looked very old and contained canonical texts (Figure 2). The description was prepared at once, but

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⁶⁴ It should be obviously better investigated, following the stimulating suggestion of the anonymous editorial reviewer, “How does it compare with other traditions? Is it a function of the perceived authority of the text, or of the poor skills of the copyist?” But this cannot be the task of an overview paper like this, in the given conditions of philology of Ethiopic texts. Yet I fully agree with the general statements that “the value assigned to particular classes/genres of religious literature (Bible; commentary; other genres) might help to establish how social attitudes to/use of texts may have affected copyists’ behaviour”, and that “variation itself is a complex phenomenon with different causes in different textual traditions depending on social factors and the ways in which texts are generated/regenerated and used”.


⁶⁶ Exactly so, not ‘Synodus’: *Sinodos* (or *Senodos*) is the transcription of the Ethiopic word; cf. Bausi 2010c.

the study of the texts was troubled by a series of problems which now seem to be finally resolved. An edition is being prepared, and the texts will soon be put at everyone’s disposal. Meanwhile, increasingly detailed descriptions of the contents, also covering some linguistic aspects, and partial editions have appeared.⁶⁸

Fig. 2: Manuscript of the Aksumite Collection, foll. 17v–18r, after restoration (foll. 16v–17r according to a preliminarily reconstructed numbering, cf. Bausi 2011c, 30–33). Traditio apostolica, 3:3–4; 7; 8:1–8; 13; 11; 10:1–3. Picture by Ethio-SPaRe project.

In its present form, the manuscript (witnessing to what I have called the Aksumite Collection) contains thirty-six Ethiopic texts of various length (some are very short), including writings of the Church fathers (patristic literature), liturgical texts (rituals and prayers for church service), canonical texts (ecclesiastic rules and counciliar canons), and one historical text. Although different in content, it much resembles the so-called Sinodos, a very influential collection of normative and liturgical texts translated from Arabic in the 14th century, still in use and much revered in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥedo Church. But whereas the bulk of the Ethiopic canonical and liturgical texts known at present, the Sinodos included, was believed to derive, through a complicated and patchy sequence of translations, from medieval and late Arabic textual recensions (made since the 14th century), with only occasional earlier texts surviving (i.e. some liturgical texts

⁶⁸ Cf. all details in Bausi 2006b; 2006c; 2009b; 2011c; 2012; 2013.
appear to be archaic and Greek-based, although they are mixed with the Arabic-based later ones), the new manuscript clearly reaches back to the oldest known layer of the early Christian (not only the Ethiopian) canon law and liturgy. Beside remarkable linguistic elements, the manuscript provides for the first time evidence that the development of a textual tradition may be traced in non-Biblical Ethiopic texts to such a degree of detail.

It is difficult to imagine that the Aksumite Collection is an isolated case and it is reasonable to assume that the number of the preserved Aksumite texts is relatively low thanks to a process of replacement, in which the old translations from the Greek (marked by linguistic and cultural peculiarities) were supplanted by new translations from the Arabic. We cannot, however, establish whether the revision of the texts was accompanied by parallel and consistent updating of codicological features, or whether the older models kept exerting their influence.⁶⁹

Some other characteristics of the manuscript are also worth mentioning. This is probably the oldest non-Biblical Ethiopic manuscript known so far. It shares some palaeographic and linguistic features with the other older Ethiopic manuscripts (including the two Four Gospels manuscripts from 'Abbâ Garimâ).⁷⁰ As to the content of the Aksumite Collection, I will mention two texts.

The first is a new Ethiopic version of the so-called Traditio apostolica, ‘Apostolic tradition’, definitely the most important Christian canonico-liturgical text, once attributed to Hippolytus of Rome. Its Greek original being lost, it has survived only in a number of versions in Latin, Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic, and in rearrangements in Greek, Syriac, Arabic, of which the most archaic and faithful is a Latin version preserved in the scriptio inferior in the palimpsest manuscript

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⁶⁹ In this context, the case of the Maṣḥafa tēfut, a manuscript consisting of the Octateuch, Four Gospels and Sinodos, dating from the 14th/15th centuries, that was accurately reproduced (directly from the original model or from an intermediary copy) by order of King Iyāsu I (1682–1706) is remarkable: cf. Bausi 2008, 539.

⁷⁰ Certain striking and so far never observed morphological affinities with verbal patterns of Tigrinya, the language at present spoken in the highlands of Tegray and Eritrea, spoil the monolithic structure of classical Ethiopic, where, except for a few examples in the causative prefix and pronoun morphology of epigraphic texts, no morphological variations had never been recorded before. One could make a number of observations on the linguistic and palaeographic aspects of this new document, and elsewhere I have already dealt with some philological and linguistic peculiarities. A partial list of the latter includes non-application of the laryngeal rules, phonetic change from diyā– to zeyā–, ̄e-ending (fifth order) forms in isolated prepositions and plural relative pronoun, peculiar pattern of imperfect of the passive t-stem (ye-t-qettal, instead of ye-t-qattal), a-prefixe (first order) in causative-of-the-reflexive ast-stem (yasta–, instead of yāsta–), cf. Bausi 2005a. Among a number of other linguistic features I can mention for example frequency of the nominative gerundive (as in Tigrinya) as opposed to accusative gerundive (as in Ethiopic and Amharic).
Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, Codex LV (53). But the Ethiopic text of the *Traditio apostolica* as previously known to us from other sources, is quite different from the text in the *Aksumite Collection*, the latter being clearly a new *independent* witness to the archetype. Although the two Ethiopic versions share few common passages and are thus in a complex relationship, numerous correspondences with the Latin testify to the new text’s belonging to the oldest recoverable textual phase of the *Traditio apostolica* and, at the same time, point to conjunctive errors (or innovations) of all the other witnesses. Moreover, as a large portion of the Latin text is lost, the new Ethiopic version represents a great step forward in our knowledge of the archetype of the *Traditio apostolica*; a problem that has challenged philologists for more than a century since Edmund Hauler’s publication of the Latin text in 1900.⁷¹

The second text is even more important. Probably prefixed to the collection as an introduction, it contains a *History of the Alexandrian Episcopate*, mutilated in some parts.⁷² The text is exceptional from two points of view: first, it is the first Ethiopian text of intentionally historical character dating from Aksumite period (with the exception of the epigraphical texts written by the initiative of the Aksumite kings); second, the historical fragments may be identified as belonging to a lost Greek *History of the Alexandrian Episcopate* (not to be confused with the later Copto-Arabic *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*), whose existence scholars from Tito Orlandi onward have traced in later texts, the most important of which are the Latin excerpts in Verona, Biblioteca Capitolare, Codex LX (58). The new Ethiopic manuscript provides by far the most important evidence for the reconstruction of the original text, of which, for long passages it is the unique witness.⁷³ The anonymous author of this *History* had access to materials drawn from the Alexandrian archives and some documents from the archive have been incorporated into the narrative. The narrative starts with the founding of the Alexandrian episcopal seat by Saint Mark and the early bishops, continuing with the events under the episcopate of Peter and his immediate successors down to the outbreak of the so-called “Melitian schism” and the story of Arius the priest.

⁷¹ Cf. Bradshaw / Johnson / Phillips 2002; Bausi 2009b; 2010d; 2011c.
⁷² The bishop of Alexandria was also head of the Egyptian Church from the 4th century onward.
The details it provides, including lists of bishops and their respective dioceses recorded for the episcopates of Maximus (264–282), Theonas (282–300) and Peter (300–311), provide unparalleled and hitherto unknown documentation for the history of early Christian institutions in Egypt. Furthermore, quotations from this History which survived in a few later Ethiopic texts are marked as passages from the Synodicon of the Law. This is probably the name under which the collection had been known until the 15th century in the Ethiopian literary tradition.

The existence of these and other ancient Latin versions of texts parallel to ancient Ethiopic versions in the manuscripts of the Biblioteca Capitolare of Verona is noteworthy: it seems that archaic and outdated texts have in this case been preserved in “peripheral” areas of the Christian world.

The manuscript confirms the pre-eminence of religious, literary and cultural relationships between Egypt and Aksumite Ethiopia, and definitely proves the existence in an early period of translated canonical and liturgical texts. The language of the newly discovered texts is mainly a word for word rendering of the Greek original; it is also a valuable source for Aksumite Ethiopic. Remarkable features pointing to dialectal (probably Tigrinya) peculiarities may be due to the copyists or redactors – less likely to the translator(s) – and deserve careful scholarly scrutiny. Some parts of the collection were reused and included in later Ethiopic works which were being translated anew from Arabic, such as the Sinodos.

The complex and unexpected “philological” processes attested in the Aksumite Collection textual tradition call for new methods of analysing and interpreting the Ethiopian literary tradition. The new evidence also strongly reasserts that neither the study of the Christian Orient nor that of Antiquity and Late Antiquity (Eastern and Western) is possible without taking into consideration the contribution of the Ethiopian sources.

List of sigla and abbreviations

EMML = Collegeville, Minnesota, Ethiopian manuscripts microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, St John’s Abbey and University.

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