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The SGD Digital Collection: Previously Unknown and Uncatalogued Ethiopian Manuscripts in North America

Steve Delamarter

Between February 2005 and August 2006, I located and digitized 240 Ethiopian manuscripts and magic scrolls that have come to North America. These currently reside in the hands of several dealers, four libraries, and a dozen private collections. Until now, they have been unknown and uncatalogued. In this brief communication, I want to tell the story of how this digital collection, named the SGD collection, came into being and a bit about what it contains.

Ethiopian Manuscripts in North America

In February of 2005 I got a call from a man living in Cornelius, Oregon, about 45 minutes west of Portland. He told me,

I was in Bahir Dar in 1966 with the US military. One day I was walking across a field, and I met an old man carrying an interesting looking satchel. We couldn't speak one another's language, but we "struck up a conversation" with hand signals and gestures. I had some tea-making equipment, and we brewed some tea and enjoyed drinking it together. When it came time to go, the old man was eying my tea-making equipment — and I was eying his satchel. I gave him an additional ten bucks and we traded: the tea-making equipment for the satchel. When I opened it, I found this most amazing book. I've been carrying it around with me for 39 years now, and I have no idea what it is. Can you help me figure it out?

I had been to Bahir Dar myself. In the spring of 2004, as part of my sabbatical, I went to Ethiopia to study the sociology of scribal communities. Beyond their scribal techniques and practices, I wanted to know something about their social location, social roles, education, and the economic engines that drove their work. I got an affiliation with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University and eventually became fast friends with Ato Demeke Berhane, the head of manuscripts. After several days of study in their manuscript collection, my translator (Daniel Alemu) and I set out across the country to interview scribes in the center of the country (Addis Ababa and the monastery of Debre Libanos), in the far north (Axum and the monastery of Debre Damo), and in the region of Gojam around Lake Tana (Gondar, Bahir Dar, Iste, Gelawdawos, Zege, and the island monastery of Kibran).

By the time I returned from Ethiopia, I was rather familiar with Ethiopian books and with the scribes who produced them. So on that February morning, when I drove out to Cornelius to meet Paul Herron, the man with the satchel from Bahir Dar, one look at the covers and binding told me the story. For all those years, Herron had been carrying around a seventeenth-century Ethiopian Psalter.

My experiences in Ethiopia had sensitized me to the plight of Ethiopia's cultural heritage. Manuscripts by the thousands have been transported out of the country. The instance that gets the most attention these days is the so-called "Maqdala incident": a hostage standoff between Ethiopia and England escalated into a military expedition, in which England eventually made off with so much loot that it took fifteen elephants and two hundred donkeys to carry it all.[1] But the number of manuscripts that left the country in 1868, perhaps around a thousand, does not begin to compare to the numbers that have left the country by means of countless individual transactions between tourists and dealers and more recently as a result of the economic engine surrounding ebay. In the worst-case scenarios, unscrupulous dealers in the United States and Europe buy manuscripts, cut them up into single pages and sell them leaf-by-leaf on the Internet. The manuscripts that survive the ebay experience intact usually find their way into private hands; though they still have all their pages, they are, for all practical purposes, lost to the world. There do not appear to be any easy or certain remedies for this situation, particularly for a single individual with limited means. But, photography provides one avenue for preserving at least images of a manuscript even if not the manuscript itself. And, with the advent of digital photography, this is even more the case.

I made plans to digitize this first codex from Bahir Dar. I had in mind to deposit the images at the Hill Museum and Manuscripts Library (HMML) at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. The HMML is the single largest repository of images of Ethiopian manuscripts in the United States, if not the world. In the 1970s, the HMML participated in an NEH project that sent teams of photographers to Ethiopia to shoot thousands of manuscripts in monasteries and churches around the country. Sets of the microfilms had been deposited in three locations: the National Library of Ethiopia, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, both in Addis Ababa, and the HMML. I contacted the HMML and began to make the arrangements.

Over the next several days, I contacted two dealers with manuscripts. I told them about my work in Ethiopia and
asked them if they would be interested in letting their manuscripts be digitized and deposited for study in the HMML. To my surprise, within twenty-four hours I had agreements with both dealers. This brought the total number of manuscripts to thirty-three, and I found myself in the middle of a full-fledged project. After a couple of months, I stopped off at the HMML and met Father Columba Stewart, the director, as well as Professor Getatchew Haile, cataloguer of Ethiopian manuscripts. They were supportive of my plan, and Getatchew[2] pledged to help catalog the manuscripts when the images were ready.

This seemed to open a flood gate. Over the next several months, I established relationships with owners of manuscripts in Oregon (where I live and work), New York, New Orleans, New Jersey, Colorado, Utah, and Illinois. I also made connections with four libraries: Trinity Western University, the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History, the Mount Angel Abbey Library, and Abilene Christian University. By the time the dust had settled, those first thirty-four codices had turned into 105 codices and 129 magic scrolls, all currently in North America. In the same timeframe, I had come across six other Ethiopian manuscripts that I had been allowed to photograph: four in England (in the possession of Dr. Ian Mac Lennan),[3] one in Jerusalem and one codex reproduction that I bought from a book dealer out of Istanbul, Turkey. I added these six to the others as supplements to the collection, arriving at a grand total of 240 manuscripts.

In spite of the large number of manuscripts that have emerged, Professor Getatchew has not only stayed with the project, but has completed his part of the cataloguing of the codices in record time, performing a particularly thorough job on the magic scrolls. We are in conversation now with a publisher for the catalog.

Significance of the Collection

One measure of the significance of the collection is its size in comparison to the other collections that exist outside Ethiopia. The largest collections are in the Vatican Library and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, each with around one thousand manuscripts. There is a collection of 736 manuscripts at the Ethiopian Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The British library is next with 598 manuscripts. There are some 545 manuscripts in a series of libraries in Germany. Outside of the British Library, the rest of the major holdings in the British Isles are he Bodleian Library of Oxford University with 115, Cambridge University Library with 69, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin with 58, and the Rylands Library of the University of Manchester with 45. The largest collections I know of in Russia are in the libraries of Saint Petersburg with some 275 manuscripts. The largest collection in the United States is at Princeton, which has 133 manuscripts and 172 magic scrolls.[4] The next largest collection is at Duke University with 33 manuscripts.[5]

The Description, Digitization, and Cataloguing of the Manuscripts

My assistants and I processed each manuscript through four steps. First, we produced a physical description, complete with a quire map accounting for every folio in the codex. Second, we photographed the manuscript (in fluorescent light) with straight down shots to capture content and close-up shots for detail. Third, we digitally foliated the manuscript images. Finally, after processing and optimizing the images, we produced an Adobe pdf file of the images of the manuscript. These typically run anywhere from sixty to four hundred fifty megabytes for codices and ten to twelve megabytes for magic scrolls. Even with this processing, the images in the pdf files have very high resolution and allow the user to "drill down" into the smallest details of the images. In all, I have well over one hundred thousand images on a three hundred gigabyte hard drive. With all the backups, we have almost a terabyte of information. The entire collection of just the pdf's runs to about 18 gigabytes.

As any librarian will tell you, a collection is only as good as its catalog. We gathered a small team of people in Collegeville between June 19 and July 14, 2006, to complete the digitization process and begin the final cataloguing process. These included Demeke Berhane from Addis Ababa, Daniel Alemu from Jerusalem, Roger Rundell from Longview, Washington, myself, and Professor Getatchew Haile from the HMML. Some of the expenses for this part of the project were borne by a $5,000 grant from the Lilly/ATS Theological Scholars' Research Grant program. Our task was to complete the physical descriptions of the manuscripts; Getatchew would complete the identification of contents, include references to the editio princeps of works in the codices, and make a judgment about the dating of the manuscript.

The oldest Ethiopian manuscripts in existence are from the fourteenth century CE. The dating of the SGD collection is as follows:

2 manuscripts come from the sixteenth century;
7 manuscripts come from the seventeenth century;
25 manuscripts come from the eighteenth century; 39 manuscripts come from the nineteenth century; and 38 manuscripts come from the twentieth century.

We are now also in a position to see the scope of the contents of the collection. Of the biblical books, there are fully forty-seven Ethiopian Psalters in the SGD collection. This gives something of an idea of how significant the Psalter has been in the life of the Ethiopian Orthodox community.[6] Each Ethiopian Psalter contains five works: the 151 Psalms of David, the fifteen Biblical Canticles, the Song of Songs, the Praises of Mary, and the Gate of Light. There are also seven copies of the Gospel of John and a copy of the General Epistles to Revelation.

Of service books, there are a dozen manuscripts that are listed as Antiphonaries (2), Anaphoras (5), or Missals (5). There are five works that contain either services for a funeral and/or the work called the Bandlet of Righteousness. There are also calendars and timetables. There are Hymns and Greetings and Prayers of all sorts and several works devoted to Mary. One of the most common is the Prayer of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Golgotha, which is witnessed in six copies.

Of theological works, there are six copies of the Mystagogia, four of the Sword of the Trinity. Miracle stories are very popular. Three codices contain Miracles of Mary and another three contain Miracles of Jesus. But there are also miracles of Mercurius, Täklä Haymanot, and Saint George. When it comes to a genre known as the Image, the codices contain a bewildering array of images to Mary (10), Jesus (6), the Trinity (3), the Savior of the World (2), the angel Michael (5), the angel Gabriel (3), the angel Raguel (1), Saint George (3), and John the Baptist (1), as well as to various Ethiopian figures, for example, Gäbrä Mänfäs Qeddus (3), Fasilides (1), Täklä Haymanot (2), Kiros (2), Mercurius (1), Mäzra'tä Krestos (1), Arägawi Zä-Mika'el (1), and others.

Conclusion

This project has been dependent on the good graces and generosity of manuscript owners across North America. Almost to a person they seemed already to realize that they had something precious and that the value of a nation’s cultural heritage cannot be measured in dollars alone. Credit for the success of the project goes first to them.

In a sort of home going, the first set of digital images was sent back to Ethiopia with Ato Demeke for preservation and research at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa. A second set was placed on deposit at the HMML in July 2006. A third set was deposited with the Septuagint Institute of Trinity Western University in late September 2006.

When we completed our time in Collegeville this past summer, I had thought the project was just about over. However, since that time fully eighty more codices and one hundred more magic scrolls have come to light. We are seeking grant funding to assist us in digitizing and cataloguing this next group of manuscripts. Volume two is under way!

Steve Delamarter, George Fox Evangelical Seminary

Notes

[1] Whatever one may think about the manner in which the manuscripts were acquired — and there is a lot of controversy about that these days — one cannot fault the libraries in England for the way in which they have preserved the manuscripts and made them available for scholars to study. When Ato Demeke and I made our tour of English libraries (the Rylands in Manchester, Cambridge, the British Library, and Oxford) in the summer of 2005, within 45 minutes to an hour at each place, we were actually holding manuscripts.

[2] A note about Ethiopian names: The convention in Ethiopia is for men to have a first name, which is followed by the name of their father. Thus, Professor Getatchew Haile's name is Getatchew; Haile is his father's name. One does not refer to them by their "last name" (i.e., their father's name), but instead by their first (and only) name. I have followed this Ethiopian convention in the article.

According to Robert Beylot and Maxime Rodinson, *Répertoire des Bibliothéques et des Catalogues de Manuscrits Éthiopiens* (DNRS Editions; Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Éditions, 1995), 93. This work may be consulted to confirm many of the numbers in the paragraph above.

*Répertoire des Bibliothéques*, 53.

I delivered a paper at the annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting in November 2006, in Washington, DC, on "Scribal Practices in Ethiopian Psalters as Expressions of Identification and Differentiation: An Illustrated Lecture."