

The philological study of the Eritrean manuscripts in Gə‘əz: Methods and practices

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Abstract

There is still a considerable and largely unexplored amount of Gə‘əz manuscripts preserved in Eritrean libraries, particularly in churches and monasteries, and it is desirable that this documentation is made available to the scholarly attention, as it is being done for other areas. Yet, if the exploration, acquisition, and first scientific study of this material is challenging in itself, of no less importance are questions which still tend to remain in the background, but the importance of which can hardly be underestimated; among these, there are: the cataloguing of the codices, a delicate task which must be done according to the standard and universally applied criteria, involving the description of each and every object in its material constitution and the analytical illustration of its literary contents; the method of approach to the texts, particularly to their edition, which must be achieved following the principles of textual criticism, namely exploiting all the available witnesses of the literary works and reconstructing their mutual relations; the typological analysis of the codex illuminations – if there are – in order to highlight the artistic ‘schools’ and personalities and to reconstruct the influences coming from abroad, mainly the ‘Mediterranean’ milieus. Once these conditions are satisfied, the linguistic, historical, or anthropological use of the texts become possible, and the Gə‘əz manuscripts will prove to be a priceless source for knowing the Eritrean civilization as a whole.

1. Introduction

Repeatedly, since the end of the 19th C., scholars and learned men called the attention upon the importance of the cultural heritage of Eritrea, particularly of the handwritten records still kept by different institutions, both religious and secular. The study of this material, chiefly of the documents in Gə‘əz language,

proved to offer the most solid base for the historical reconstruction of the Eritrean past, allowing to go back directly up to events and circumstances of the 12th-13th C. Furthermore, through the study of the traditional data preserved by the Gə‘əz manuscripts we can indirectly trace back to about the 4th C., and with the study of their folkloric elements we can reach up to undefined pre-Christian times.

The preservation and the systematic study of these documents is one of the main tasks of the Eritrean institutions. Since the establishment of the new State, the political and cultural authorities developed a full consciousness that the handwritten records – most of all its most ancient manuscripts – constitute an essential part of the cultural wealth of Eritrea. In our case this is particularly true, as Eritrea possesses an extraordinarily high number of ancient written documents, so as to be compared with that of any Asiatic or European country. This very important part of the Eritrean national heritage is still preserved in the ecclesiastical libraries. Therefore, we can refer to monasteries and churches as the oldest national archives of Eritrea, a peculiarity making Eritrea (with Ethiopia) unique among all of the African countries to the South of Sahara. The study of this documentary material brought about prominent results, such as the definition of the relations of Eritrea with the Red Sea (first of all through its historical harbours, such as Adulis and Massawa), and from here with Asia (Pre-Islamic civilizations of the Arabian peninsula, India) and with the Mediterranean Sea (flourishing trade with Ancient Greece, Greco-Roman Egypt, and Byzantium). On the whole, the purpose is to arrive to a more precise definition of the ancientness of the Eritrean culture, and to a better understanding of its complex and various components, which are mostly Oriental and Mediterranean in character.

As everybody knows, there is still a considerable and largely unexplored amount of Gə‘əz manuscripts preserved in the Eritrean libraries, particularly in churches and monasteries, and it is desirable that this documentation is made available to the scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the philological material requires a specific methodological treatment, taking into consideration a couple of basic facts. First, the handwritten transmission – whatever are the cultural and religious features of the manuscripts – constantly involves alterations of the original shape of the texts, through common corrupting phenomena. Omissions, interpola-

tions, mechanical mistakes and intentional changes as well, used to disfigure and transform the texts. Hence, it is of paramount importance to gather all of the extant witnesses of every ancient work, in order to apply a text-critical methodology, aimed at correcting the mistakes and reconstructing as much as possible the original texts, as well to understand their eventual history, being well aware that *textual criticism of the original* and *history of the tradition* are two complementary approaches usually interconnected in the evidence, yet clearly distinct in their own right.

Second, in every time the Christian Eritrean manuscripts were made to fulfil liturgical purposes, or at least to transmit texts intending to satisfy some religious needs. Even when we are facing a pretended historical text, like the chronicle of a king's reign, the account of a monk's life, the genealogy of an aristocratic lineage, the list of the abbots of a monastery, in front of us there is an object made for the prayer or to glorify a religious figure, a holy place. Therefore, we have to scrutinize the source in order to verify if what is written inside is compatible with what is recounted by other texts, or at least if facts and expressions are influenced by the religious attitude of the author more than by his respect for the real facts.

We must acknowledge that the Eritrean handwritten material has been insufficiently used till now (in spite of its importance) mainly because scholars were lacking a preliminary, comprehensive and systematic survey of the documentation, whilst the researches proceeded only thanks to personal undertakings. However, the cataloguing of the codices is a delicate task which must be done according to the standard and universally applied criteria, involving the description of each and every object in its material constitution and the analytical illustration of its literary contents.

The Italian contribution to the knowledge of the Eritrean historical documents has been particularly effective. Since the end of the 19th c. some Italian intellectuals were in the forefront, understanding the value of the Eritrean handwritten heritage and they carried out specific and pioneering researches and studies. Of these, it is worthy to recall at least C. Conti Rossini (1872-1949) and his catalogue of the manuscripts kept at that time by the Catholic Mission in Kärän (on the figure of Conti Rossini, see now Dore, 2014). Astonishingly, till now this article contains the only scientific description of an Eritrean manuscript

fund, though the collection went lost after the Second World War (Conti Rossini, 1904). During his four-year stay in Asmara (1899-1903), Conti Rossini developed a kind of sixth sense for the Eritrean written sources. Whenever he was able to discover one of them, he devoted himself to its edition and commentary, as in the case of the so-called *Golden Gospel* of Däbrä Libanos (Conti Rossini, 1901). This well-known manuscript, kept in the monastery of Däbrä Libanos of Šəmāzana (Akkälä Guzay) contains a collection of historical documents of capital importance for the historical reconstruction of the Eritrean Middle Ages, starting from two land grants issued by King Lalibäla and dated 1204 and 1225, therefore the most ancient Gə'əz documents known to us. After the edition by Conti Rossini, these documents were examined and photographed by R. Schneider, and later better documented by the Italian Expedition in Eritrea in 1993 and 1994. Also a general index of all personal names, place names, titles and notable terms was dressed (Bausi, 2007). These documentary texts have been recently the subject of publications by M.L. Derat (2010), and lastly by G. Fiaccadori (2012), with the correct dating of document no. 6 to 29 November A.D. 1204.

Not less important is the role played by Conti Rossini in procuring copies of manuscripts, particularly of the hagiographic works (*gädlät*), namely the *Lives* of abbots and monks of Eritrean monasteries. These copies were brought by the same scholar to Italy and then handed over to the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome. Consequently, nowadays this Italian public institution contains the most important European collection of documents pertaining to the Eritrean Middle Ages. They can be easily consulted thanks to a scientific catalogue made by Stefan Strelcyn (1974; 1976).

A survey of the hagiographic manuscripts kept in the Conti Rossini Fund of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei is very instructive about the state of the art. First, most of these are nothing but copies of manuscripts kept in Eritrean monasteries and churches, most probably to this day. Conti Rossini's work has been precious, because for more than a century these copies allowed the scholars to have an idea about the contents of these hagiographies. Yet, technically speaking almost all these manuscripts are nothing but 20th-c. *apographs*, namely they would have a very limited value if we could read directly their *antigraphs*, the manuscripts from which the copies were made on request of the Italian scholar. How European scholars made use of these copies of Eritrean manuscripts?

2. Lives of abbots and monks of Eritrean monasteries in the Conti Rossini Fund

Let's consider the nine *Lives* of abbots and monks of Eritrean monasteries kept in the Conti Rossini Fund. None of them was so far critically edited, namely published taking into account all the available witnesses of the work. In some cases, however, applying the rules of textual criticism, the editor was successful in identifying innovations, and reconstructing the history of the tradition of the work, he was able to make his well-founded hypothesis about the original and most ancient form of the text. Yet, from local sources and field work, we know that more manuscripts of the same text are still available and should be used for a perfect critical edition to be carried out in the future.

Gädlä Libanos

ANL Conti Rossini nos 26 and 88.
 C. Conti Rossini (1903*a*), from a manuscript of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos: the publication contains excerpts from a recension of the *Gädlä Libanos* (pp. 25-34), plus a selection of 7 *Miracles* (pp. 34-41) out of a collection of 32 (numbers 5, 11, 14, 20, 25, 34 and 68 according to the numbering in Bausi's, 2003*a*).
 Getatchew Haile (1990).
 Bausi (2003*a*), reviewed by G. Lusini, *Aethiopica*, 7 (2004), 245-250; M. Kropp, *Oriens Christianus*, 97 (2013-2014 [2015]), 242-245; see also Lusini (2004*a*: 68-73).
 Still on *Gädlä Libanos* see Bausi (2003*b*; 2014), Fiaccadori (2004; 2010).

A second text, the *Gädlä Absadi*, has been edited using the two available witnesses of the work. Yet, even in this case, from local sources we know that more manuscripts of the same text are kept in Däbrä Maryam of Qohayən ('Addi K^wala, Säraye) and in each and every religious centre belonging to the monastic network of the *däqiqä ewostatəwos*. Therefore, what we have available now is nothing but a temporary edition, and only when all the manuscripts could be exploited it will become possible to build up a critical edition, based on the application of the rules of textual criticism.

<i>Gädlä Absadi</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 8. Lusini (1996).
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Two other texts, *Gädlä Abranyos* and *Gädlä Matyas*, have been edited exploiting one and only witness, namely the manuscript available in the Conti Rossini Fund. Still, we know about the existence of several more manuscripts of both works: they are kept in Däbrä Zämika'el ('Addi Ta'e, Säraye) in the case of *Gädlä Abranyos*; in Däbrä Aḥaw (Mändäfära, Säraye) and in Däbrä Maryam of Qoḥayən ('Addi K^wala, Säraye) in the case of *Gädlä Matyas*. An assessment of their philological value, and of their relationships with the manuscripts already known, will be possible only when they are available for study.

<i>Gädlä Abranyos</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 22. Raineri (1983).
<i>Gädlä Matyas</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 84. Marrassini (1983).

About three more texts, *Gädlä Bəşu'a Amlak*, *Gädlä Buruk Amlak* and *Gädlä Yohannəs of Däbrä Biḫän*, we know limited portions of the texts, those Conti Rossini included in his historical essays, selecting the passages of the texts he considered more important and systematically omitting to give information about the manuscripts he had under his eyes.

<i>Gädlä Bəşu'a Amlak</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 97. Conti Rossini (1902).
<i>Gädlä Buruk Amlak</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 8. Conti Rossini (1938).
<i>Gädlä Yohannəs of Däbrä Biḫän</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 10. Conti Rossini (1900).

As for a fourth text, *Gädlä Yonas* – after having been first made known in excerpts by Conti Rossini like the former three – it was recently published in its entirety, but without making use of MS ANL Conti Rossini no. 92 (copied from an exemplar in the church of Ēnda Şadqan at Baräknaha, in Akkälä Guzay), on the basis of four manuscripts: one manuscript from the same church of Ēnda Şadqan (we do not know whether the model of Conti Rossini no. 92 or not),

MS BL Or. 698 (already known to Conti Rossini), the “base manuscript” from the monastery of Däbrä Dəḥuḥan (Säraye), and a fourth manuscript from ‘Addi Wəssək (‘Arräza, Säraye). More manuscripts are known of a reportedly later recension.

<i>Gädlä Yonas</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 92. C. Conti Rossini (1903 <i>b</i>). Tedros Abreha (2015), reviewed by A. Bausi, <i>Aethiopica</i> , 18 (2015), 257-260.
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Not only these three texts are substantially inedited, but local sources inform us about the existence of several manuscripts kept in different monastic centres around the whole Eritrean highlands. Finally, at least one work is completely inedited, the *Gädlä Āndəryas*, and besides the manuscript kept in the Conti Rossini Fund at least two more witnesses should be still in Eritrean monasteries, namely in Däbrä Səhin or Däbrä Ēffin (‘Arräza, Säraye) and in ‘Addi Gäbrä Mika’el (Ḥamasen).

<i>Gädlä Āndəryas</i>	ANL Conti Rossini no. 84. Lusini (2014).
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Among the sources not available in the Conti Rossini Fund of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, and still unpublished until recently, the *Gädlä Dəmyanos*, the *Gädlä Təwäldä Mädḥən* and the *Gädlä Fiqtor* were published a few years ago, with non-impeccable editions, from local manuscript sources.

<i>Gädlä Dəmyanos</i>	Tedros Abraha (2007), reviewed by P. Luisier, <i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i> , 74/1 (2008), 268-269; A. Bausi, <i>Scrinium</i> , 5 (2009), 429-436; M. Kropp, <i>Oriens Christianus</i> , 93 (2009), 282-286.
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*Gädlä Tämäldä Mädhəñ
Gädlä Fiṭtor*

Tedros Abraha (2009), reviewed by A. Bausi, *Aethiopica*, 13 (2010), 244-253; M.A. Knibb, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 57 (2): (2012), 453-454; G. Colin, *Le Muséon*, 123 (3-4) (2010), 488-490; M. Kropp, *Oriens Christianus*, 98 (2015 [2016]), 229-232.

This short survey clearly shows the most serious limit of the contemporary historical research, namely the lack of a systematic catalogue of the handwritten documents preserved in Eritrea. As a matter of fact, a direct knowledge of the thousands of manuscripts kept in monasteries and churches of the Eritrean highlands is a pre-condition for a well-based reconstruction of the past. Even though isolated manuscripts are known thanks to random (but precious) reports by scholars, travellers and art historians, the general outline remains extremely negative. A limited help comes from publications not specifically pivoted on the Eritrean national heritage, such as:

- 1) the general catalogues of Gə‘əz manuscripts made sometimes in the past, occasionally considering material coming from the Eritrean regions, as in the case of EMMML 1480 and 3473 from Däbrä Maryam of Qoḥayən, and EMMML 1636 and 1942 from Däbrä Bizan (Ḥamasen);
- 2) the catalogues of Gə‘əz manuscripts in Europe, here and there mentioning, thanks to indications contained in the colophons, the Eritrean origin of the codex; e.g. the celebrated Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, d’Abbadie éth. 105, a magnificent 15th-c. *Psalter*, rich in illustrations, coming from a monastery of Säraye, possibly Däbrä Maryam of Qoḥayən, and written for “Bəlen Säggäd, ‘aqanṣän of Särawe, son of Bägädä Şəyon”.

Some attempts to implement data about the Eritrean manuscripts in Gə‘əz and the monastic collections in which they are kept has been made on the occasion of a field work carried on in the years 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1997 in the frame of a project on the land tenure system of Eritrea. The results have been published in several occasions: Bausi, Lusini and Taddia (1993; 1995), Bausi and

Lusini (1992 [1994]), Bausi (1994 [1996]; 1995 [1997]; 1997 [1998]; 2001), Lusini (1998 [1999]; 1999; 2004*b*; 2004*c*; 2005; 2007 [2011]; 2010 [2012]), Mazzei (2010 [2012]). Additional information can be found in the relevant entries and in the register in the five-volume, recently accomplished, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (2003-2014). For a recent new interest in these sources, see Adankpo (2015*a-b*), Adankpo Labadie (2016).

3. Other European manuscript collections

Along with the Conti Rossini Fund, that is so peculiar and conspicuous in consideration of the extraordinary amount of Gə‘əz sources for the history of Eritrea it contains, not less remarkable is the potential contribution of so far still little explored European manuscript collections documenting Eritrean manuscripts, that deserve to be exploited further or in some cases, described and catalogued for the first time in a scholarly way. A few remarkable cases in point are the following:

A. Pistoia, Biblioteca Forteguerriana

More on this: to be furtherly exploited.

Lusini (2002). See also Fiaccadori (1993), Lusini (2015).

B. Genoa, Sapeto collection

As is well known, the missionary and explorer Giuseppe Sapeto (1811-1895), who was instrumental in the purchase of the ‘Asäb Bay by the Rubattino Shipping Company on behalf of the Italian government in 1879-1881, eventually teacher of Arabic in Genoa for many years, has left a remarkable collection of manuscripts to large extent of Eritrean provenance. This collection was dispersed after his death in at least three major sections. There has hardly been so far – after the still essential pages dedicated to the collection by S. Zanutto (1932: 78-79 [nos 150, 152], 85-87 [no. 164], 96 [no. 174]), with a few updates by Beylot and Rodinson (1995: 58-59, 106) – any attempt at a comprehensive presentation of Sapeto’s collection in its entirety.

The situation can be preliminarily summarized as follows, being well aware that various points need to be cleared and ascertained:

(i) Rome, Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele

The library possesses 24 pieces from Sapeto collection: 10 paper manuscripts in Eritrean and Ethiopian languages (either copied or written by Sapeto), and 14 manuscripts of drafts and notes of published and unpublished contributions by Sapeto.

(ii) Città del Vaticano, (formerly, Rome, Pontificio Istituto Biblico) Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana:

The fund consists of 8 (or 9) parchment manuscripts, including some ancient manuscripts of major apocrypha.

(iii) Genoa, Castello D'Albertis, Museo delle Culture del Mondo

Among the present 11 shelfmarks of Gə'əz manuscripts preserved in the Museo, 10 go back to the Sapeto collection. One manuscript of the Four Gospels, which was not mentioned in the previous descriptions, was donated by F. Saverio Mosso. It is erroneously quoted as a "Breviario etiopico, dono del Dr. F. Saverio Mosso, e che, fino a poco fa, apparteneva pure all'«Archivio Storico»" by Zanutto; see also (not quoted by Zanutto), "Doni e legati", *Rivista ligure di scienze, lettere ed arti*, 32 (1910), 47 (with reproduction of the decorated *incipit* of the Gospel of Luke). The manuscript also includes two parchment scrolls. Considered lost, the Genoa Sapeto manuscripts were identified in the Castello D'Albertis collection by the late Gianfranco Fiaccadori, who arranged an agreement among the Genoa and Roman institutions, and the Hamburg Centre for the Study of Manuscripts Cultures, for a comprehensive digitization, cataloguing, and analysis of the Sapeto collection. Collaboration with specialists for peculiar aspects (for example, art history, in case this applies), is also envisaged. In May 2015, the 11 shelf-marks of the Sapeto collection in Genoa were digitized by Antonella Brita and Karsten Helmholtz. Besides a detailed physical and codicological description accomplished on the spot, also a scientific analysis of some features was under

taken, for example with Dinolite microscope for preliminary indications on the types of ink used.

The CSMC at Hamburg University (Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, supported by the DFG, German Research Council) assumes the manuscripts as the most important medium writing has ever had, since for thousands of years, manuscripts have had a determining influence on all cultures that were shaped by them, their only serious rival arising in the early modern period, with the introduction of printing. Engaged in fundamental research, investigating from both a historical and comparative perspective, based on material artifacts, the empirical diversity of manuscript cultures, from East to West with marked pre-eminence of non-European evidence, CSMC's aim is that of establishing a new paradigm that is distinct from the research on manuscripts undertaken until now, which has been limited in its approach by region and discipline. Long-term goals include the establishment of an interdisciplinary research field dealing with general manuscript studies, and the development of sustainable and functional tools. Now formally affiliated to the CSMC is also the COMSt network (Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies), that between 2009 and 2014 has explored codicological, palaeographical, cataloguing and text-critical issues of codex manuscript cultures, meaning “all non-Occidental (non-Latin-based) manuscript cultures which have an immediate historical (“genetic”) relationship with the Mediterranean codex area”, that is, the Eritrean manuscript culture included.

Also at the University of Hamburg is placed the more precisely focused, long-term project “Bēta Maṣāhəft”. Started early in 2016 and to last up to 2040, the project is financially supported by the German Joint Science Conference (Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz – GWK) for the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg. Title of the project is “The written culture of Christian Eritrea and Ethiopia: a multimedia research environment”. The project aims at creating a comprehensive research environment for the description of the written heritage of Christian Eritrea and Ethiopia. At the centre of the environment there shall be a relational database on Gə‘əz manuscripts collecting information on texts, various physical elements, colophons and notes, but also institutions, authors, owners, and scribes. Digital images shall be supplied wherever possible, with some of the texts and passages edited and available additionally in textual form. The hyper-catalogue/portal interoperability with other online reposi-

ries shall allow search from one central place across all the existing platforms. The users shall be able to perform varied queries on texts, authors, scribes, and codicological elements for most known Gəʿəz manuscripts. Both manuscripts preserved in western libraries and those still in Eritrea and Ethiopia shall be incorporated, whenever possible. As a result, a repertory of manuscripts shall be enhanced by a repertory of texts (Clavis), literature (annotated bibliography), places (Gazetteer), and persons relevant for the Eritrean and Ethiopian written heritage.

C. Casamari, Veroli, Biblioteca del Monumento Nazionale, Badia cistercense

This little known collection – not yet catalogued – has grown up due to the activity of the Catholic Cistercian congregation, whose task was the education of Catholic clergy of Eritrea and Ethiopia. For some time starting from 1940, the Congregation was based in Asmara, in the newly established monastery of Santa Maria Assunta. People travelling from Eritrea have occasionally donated manuscripts to the Cistercian abbey, in whose rich library they are preserved at present. The collection consists of 20 Gəʿəz manuscripts, among which two codices are remarkable. Only one of the manuscripts of the collection has been described, digitized and philologically utilized so far; see Proverbio, Fiaccadori, 2004: 666, n. 2; Bausi 2006; Bausi 2008: 514-515, n. 15.

D. Other collections

Mazzei (2010 [2012]); Mazzei (2015).

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