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## Review

MELEY MULUGETTA, *Ethiopian Church Archives Collection, I: Ethiopian Manuscripts Digital Library, Codices 1–213*

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MELEY MULUGETTA, *Ethiopian Church Archives Collection, I: Ethiopian Manuscripts Digital Library, Codices 1–213*, The Harriet Tubman Series on the African Diaspora (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2016). xviii, 253 pp. Price: \$59.95. ISBN: 978-1-56902-448-5 (HB), 978-1-56902-449-2 (pb).

This catalogue by Dr Meley Mulugetta makes available the results of a recent digitizing project entitled Survey and Digitization of Christian Manuscripts in the Gojjam and Tigray Regions of Northern Ethiopia. The project ran from 2011 to 2014, and was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); it was based at The Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of African Peoples, York University, Ontario. The materials recorded by the project include sets of images of many Ethiopic manuscripts which Meley Mulugetta refers to as the Ethiopian Manuscript Digital Library (EMDL). The 253-page catalogue encompasses 213 descriptions of Ethiopic manuscripts from seven ecclesiastic collections of northern Ethiopia (Təgray). Three collections are presented in full (from the churches of Däbrä Məhrät Qəddəst Maryam Dāhan, Mäqälä Mäkanä Sämaʿt Qəddus Giyorgis, Romanat Däbrä Məhrät Qəddus Mikaʿel), and four only in part. Some of the churches are located in Mäqälä, the main city of the region of Təgray, and others in the surrounding rural areas of *wäräda* (district) Əndarta. The descriptions are preceded by introductory texts, such as Acknowledgements, Bibliographic Abbreviations, the Preface by P. Lovejoy (the former director of the Tubman Institute), the Introduction, and a list of works contained in the manuscripts, compiled in Amharic. The catalogue concludes with 'Photographs and Oral Narratives of the Church', References and three indexes (listing literary works, miniatures, personal and place names). Thirty-eight figures and images of three churches are included in the catalogue.

The project Survey and Digitization of Christian Manuscripts in the Gojjam and Tigray Regions of Northern Ethiopia was far less visible than other recent digitization projects of the last five to seven years. To my knowledge, it published no progress reports and did not publicize its work. However, on the basis of the first catalogue, one can say that the number of digitized manuscripts appears to be no less significant than that of other undertakings, and that the results and experience of the project deserve close attention. The author underlines the fact that most of the manuscripts contained in the aforementioned collections and presented in the catalogue are recent; but this is the reality of many ecclesiastic collections in Ethiopia. Any digitization enterprise is to be welcomed because it offers the chance of capturing the actual state of an ecclesiastic manuscript collection, in full or in part.

The catalogue under review demonstrates that a versatile digitizer is not necessarily a skilled manuscript cataloguer simply by having photographed many manuscripts and amassing images. In general, the catalogue is useful as it brings to light the content of several Ethiopian ecclesiastic libraries. Unfortunately, the book gives the impression of having been hastily prepared, with mistakes of various kinds which are too many, even assuming that the cataloguer was working under great pressure, and against time in order to keep the deadline. Nowhere in the catalogue does the reader find any explanation of the cataloguer's approach and descriptive method, of the structure of the individual descriptions, of the principles of transcription, and so on. This alone makes the proper evaluation of the catalogue difficult. Here, I wish to take three specific examples where the cataloguer's decisions appear odd and should be reconsidered in the future. (1) In the first section of the individual descriptions, the reader encounters the formulaic description of bindings which frequently contains the local Ethiopian terms *adim* and/or *säbän*. The expression 'säbän fabric' is used to refer to any textile in the bindings, old and new, local or imported; and 'adim leather' refers to leather of all kinds. The terms are not very specific and do not belong, at least to my knowledge, to the professional vocabulary of Ethiopian manuscript-makers. They cannot be understood without a dictionary, and one must guess which language the cataloguer had in mind (Amharic? Təgrəñña?). Also the use of the term 'Coptic' for the description of the sewing is questionable. It is a known fact that 'Ethiopian' link-stitch sewing resembles that of later Coptic manuscripts, but it is not 'Coptic' as such. (2) In the field 'Notes' (the penultimate section in the description), one wonders if the name of the owning institution needs to be repeated in each description, taking up no less than three lines each time; and what is the relevance of the information 'originally digitized as EMDL [number]'? (3) The descriptions lack a section on script/handwriting, considered to be indispensable in modern catalogues, even if most of the manuscripts described are recent.

To sum up, the catalogue is the work of an industrious and ambitious young specialist who, however, needs more experience in the theory and practice of cataloguing, and a more solid theoretical background in various fields of manuscript studies. I hope that Meley Mulugetta will succeed in that task for the next volumes of EMDL as she has the bulk of the cataloguing work still ahead of her.

One of the collections Meley Mulugetta presents had been digitized as early as in 2009–2010 with a grant of the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) of the British Library (under the supervision of the reviewer), project EAP 254 Preservation of the Historical Literary Heritage of Tigray, Ethiopia: the Library of Romanat Qeddus Mika'el. The shelf list of the collection and the

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images of all manuscripts were made accessible on the website of EAP ([www.eap.bl.uk](http://www.eap.bl.uk)) several years ago. It is not clear why Meley Mulugetta does not refer to it.<sup>1</sup> However, thanks to this coincidence the usefulness of the catalogue has been greatly enhanced, at least for the Romanat collection, offering, as it does, the possibility of simultaneously consulting both the descriptions and images. Below I provide the concordance with the signatures according to the EMDL catalogue, the EAP 254 website mentioned above, and the internal register of EAP 254 made during digitization:

EMDL 95 = EAP 254/1/60 = RQM-003	EMDL 132 = EAP 254/1/68 = RQM-068
EMDL 98 = EAP 254/1/42 = RQM-042	EMDL 133 = EAP 254/1/34 = RQM-034
EMDL 99 = EAP 254/1/29 = RQM-028	EMDL 134 = EAP 254/1/20 = RQM-019
EMDL 100 = EAP 254/1/47 = RQM-047	EMDL 136 = EAP 254/1/25 = RQM-024
EMDL 101 = EAP 254/1/36 = RQM-057	EMDL 137 = EAP 254/1/11 = RQM-011
EMDL 102 = EAP 254/1/18 = RQM-017	EMDL 138 = EAP 254/1/30 = RQM-029
EMDL 103 = EAP 254/1/70 = RQM-070	EMDL 139 = EAP 254/1/45 = RQM-045
EMDL 104 = EAP 254/1/23 = RQM-022	EMDL 141 = EAP 254/1/8 = RQM-008
EMDL 105 = EAP 254/1/22 = RQM-021	EMDL 142 = EAP 254/1/53 = RQM-053
EMDL 106 = EAP 254/1/12 = RQM-012	EMDL 143 = EAP 254/1/6 = RQM-006
EMDL 107 = EAP 254/1/7 = RQM-007	EMDL 144 = EAP 254/1/36 = RQM-036
EMDL 108 = EAP 254/1/7 = RQM-023	EMDL 145 = EAP 254/1/16 = RQM-015
EMDL 109 = EAP 254/1/19 = RQM-018	EMDL 146 = EAP 254/1/43 = RQM-043
EMDL 110 = EAP 254/1/17 = RQM-016	EMDL 147 = EAP 254/1/43 = RQM-044
EMDL 111 = EAP 254/1/2 = RQM-002	EMDL 148 = EAP 254/1/46 = RQM-046
EMDL 113 = EAP 254/1/9 = RQM-009	EMDL 149 = EAP 254/1/58 = RQM-058
EMDL 114 = EAP 254/1/4 = RQM-004	EMDL 150 = EAP 254/1/52 = RQM-052
EMDL 115 = EAP 254/1/39 = RQM-039	EMDL 151 = EAP 254/1/56 = RQM-056
EMDL 117 = EAP 254/1/41 = RQM-041	EMDL 152 = EAP 254/1/48 = RQM-048
EMDL 118 = EAP 254/1/13 = RQM-013	EMDL 153 = EAP 254/1/5 = RQM-005
EMDL 119 = EAP 254/1/1 = RQM-001	EMDL 154 = EAP 254/1/33 = RQM-033
EMDL 120 = EAP 254/1/27 = RQM-026	EMDL 155 = EAP 254/1/50 = RQM-030 (uncertain)
EMDL 121 = EAP 254/1/21 = RQM-020	EMDL 156 = EAP 254/1/45 = RQM-054
EMDL 122 = EAP 254/1/37 = RQM-037	EMDL 157 = EAP 254/1/32 = RQM-032
EMDL 123 = EAP 254/1/40 = RQM-040	EMDL 158 = EAP 254/1/69 = RQM-069
EMDL 124 = EAP 254/1/10 = RQM-010	EMDL 159 = EAP 254/1/55 = RQM-055
EMDL 125 = EAP 254/1/26 = RQM-025	EMDL 160 = EAP 254/1/49 = RQM-049
EMDL 126 = EAP 254/1/51 = RQM-051	EMDL 161 = EAP 254/1/60 = RQM-038
EMDL 127 = EAP 254/1/59 = RQM-059	EMDL 162 = EAP 254/1/66 = RQM-066
EMDL 128 = EAP 254/1/65 = RQM-065	EMDL 164 = EAP 254/1/62 = RQM-062
EMDL 129 = EAP 254/1/50 = RQM-050	EMDL 165 = EAP 254/1/63 = RQM-063
EMDL 131 = EAP 254/1/28 = RQM-027	

<sup>1</sup> In the course of the work of the project EAP 254, some of the older manuscripts were placed in protective boxes; a new cupboard was procured to accommodate other manuscripts which had simply been kept on the floor. The manuscripts were foliated. A digitizer must be attentive to the work of other colleagues, to avoid double digitization and unnecessary disturbances to the collection and its owners (Meley Mulugetta's constant concern, as she says in the Introduction), and to use any opportunity to enhance the existing records and fill in the gaps in the documentation. As practice has shown, one cannot always rely on the guidance and advice of the local Ethiopian agencies in charge of cultural heritage preservation.

Most of the records of the two projects coincide, but there are some discrepancies. In the case of MS EMDL 155, the identification with EAP 254/1/50 on the basis of the EMDL description is uncertain. No matches could be found for MSS EMDL 112, 130, 135, 140, 163. The manuscript described as EMDL 116 was not located during the work for EAP 254. And, vice versa, several items recorded for EAP 254 do not find exact matches among the EMDL descriptions, such as EAP 254/1/35, 49, 60, 64. All these manuscripts are recent and could be easily missed because they are constantly in use. There are two older items which seem to be missing in the EMDL catalogue: a late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth-century psalter whose several parts were found torn into pieces, but which was photographed as EAP 254/1/15, as well as a late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth century *Miracles of Mary*, EAP 254/1/61, with one recent miniature and one talismanic picture (written by the scribe Gäbrä Maryam, donated by Wälättä Maryam). One case, which might be described as the ‘death’ of a manuscript is represented by EMDL 164 = EAP 254/1/62, a late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth-century *Därsanä Mika’el*. When I examined the codex in 2010 it included a ‘rejected leaf’, the only surviving fragment of an older (seventeenth century?) *Därsanä Mika’el*. The EMDL catalogue does not record this leaf. The whereabouts and fate of these items will probably never be clarified; the only evidence we have are digital duplicates. These examples underline the importance of digitization. In the traditional context, old, damaged, worn codices are gradually substituted by new copies or, today, by prints. The old codices are sorted out and put to one side; if such a manuscript is not an item of particular value (and most of them are not), its chances of survival are low. It will not be repaired (because it is out of use); at a certain point it will disintegrate and perish. This possibility is part of the natural process of a ‘living manuscript culture’, alongside theft and other natural and man-made dangers. The opponents of digitization, inside and outside of Ethiopia, should consider this.

Given the present opportunity, I would like to present here some additional information on a few specific manuscripts and on the history of the church of Romanat. The *Synaxarion* for the first half of the year, EMDL 111 = EAP 254/1/2, one of the most remarkable manuscripts of Romanat, is easily datable since it contains the name of the donor, *Nəgəstəniä Šəllus Həyła* ‘our Queen Šəllus Həyła’, who was probably the wife of King Minas (1559–1563). The dating is supported by the paleographic data; only the last text quire is a later addition.<sup>2</sup> The last time I saw this codex it was disfigured. For no apparent

<sup>2</sup> This codex was not produced in northern Ethiopia and predates the foundation of the Romanat church. On some folia, the name of ‘our King Yoḥannəs’ (*Nəgusəniä Yoḥannəs*)

reason, a new crudely tooled leather cover had been glued over the elegant original cover. MS EMDL 103 = EAP 254/1/70, the finely produced *Synaxarion* for the second half of the year, dates to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The names of the original donors (half-erased and overwritten by other names, but still readable) are Wäldä Maryam and Ewostatewos; a scribe's name on the last text folium can be read as Täsfa Iyäsus. *Liqä mä(n)k<sup>w</sup>as* Gäbrä Mika'el, who donated the manuscript to the Romanat church, lived at the time of King Yoḥannəs IV (1872–1889); this information can be gleaned from the 'Inventory' registered in the description of MS EMDL 103 under 'Notes' (n. 3). The inventory may be an important document for the history of the church collection. *Liqä mä(n)k<sup>w</sup>as* Gäbrä Mika'el also donated a large processional cross to the church. Another cross was given to the church by *Abunä* Wäldä Ananya, who also donated MS EMDL 121, the fine eighteenth-century *Book of the rite of Passion Week*.<sup>4</sup> MS EMDL 123, in poor condition, contains more than one text. The commissioner's name inscribed in the supplications is Wäldä Krəstos. The text listed as the first under 'Varia', fols iv–iiv, *Mälkə'a ḥəmmatä məsqäl*, is in fact the end of the work; the beginning is found in the middle of the manuscript. The user is directed to the continuation (i.e. fol. i) by the scribe's note: *tämäyyät dəḥrā bā-rə'əs-u hallo* 'return back, it is in the beginning'. According to local tradition recorded *in situ* in 2009, the church was founded during the reign of King Bäkaffa (1721–1730) by the 'local people'. It is possible that the foundation was somehow connected to Wäldä Yoḥannəs Moḥramo, the donor of the four Gospels manuscripts EMDL 114 = EAP 254/1/4.

I hope that the catalogues yet to be published by Meley Mulugetta will contain more detail, and will be better conceived in terms of structure and descriptive method. It is important that all manuscripts of EMDL be catalogued and made accessible for research.

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is added over an erasure, most probably referring to King Yoḥannəs IV (1872–1889); the erasure on the first text folium allows us to surmise that the codex was once in the library of Mäqdäla Mädhane ʿAläm of King Tewodros II (the same might also be true of EMDL 121 = EAP 254/1/21).

<sup>3</sup> Not twentieth century, as indicated in the catalogue.

<sup>4</sup> The complex data in the colophon of the manuscript (produced outside of Təgray) require further study, but the name Ananya recorded by the catalogue under 'Colophon' is secondary, written in a later hand above the erased original names; *nädäy* ('poor, meek'), is, of course, not part of the name. On the first text folium and elsewhere the name is mentioned in full, *Abunä* Wäldä Ananya.