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Contemporary Scribes of Eastern Tigray (Ethiopia)

Abstract

Ethiopia is the milieu of one of the few living manuscript cultures of the world. However, since the early 20th century the manual production of books has gradually been supplanted by print. Also, the erosion of this manuscript culture has been unwittingly abetted by the endeavours of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, initiated by Emperor Haylä Səllase, to publish Christian texts, which heretofore had been transmitted only through the handwritten medium. Although the number of scribes is steadily diminishing, those who still practice their craft try to adapt themselves to new conditions in keeping the old, dynamically changing tradition alive. This paper gives an account of eight contemporary scribes from eastern Tigray, in the northern part of Ethiopia. It also lists seventeen other scribes who are said to be currently working in that area and provides a map of eastern Tigray indicating their location. The majority of the scribes are lay priests who were trained in various monasteries in the Däg‘a Tämben region and in the village of Ləgat. The patrons of the scribes are people from different walks of life who wish to donate a book to a local church or, seldom, use it for private devotion. The most frequently copied works are liturgical texts read in regular religious services. Some of the scribes prepare a codex only on commission while others sell their products at the market in Aksum. All of the craftsmen work individually and are responsible for the entire process of bookmaking: from parchment preparation, through text copying, to binding the codex. The exemplar is often taken out on loan from a church or monastery library. Also, copying texts from printed church editions is gradually becoming more and more popular among the scribes. For binding the codices, the craftsmen integrate materials that are currently available at the market. The study draws upon interviews with the eight scribes, augmented by photographs, digitized manuscripts and other illustrative materials collected by the Ethio-SPaRe¹ members during the 2010–2015 field trips to eastern Tigray.

¹ This study on the scribes of eastern Tigray is a by-product of the digitization and research missions undertaken by the project “Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia, Salvation, Preservation and Research”, founded

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May Ḥmori, a hamlet some fifteen kilometres away from Mäqäle, the capital of Tigray in northern Ethiopia.² *Märigeta*³ Ḥarägä Wäyni⁴ sits huddled on a low bench inside his small house, just next to the threshold. A few sheets of parchment rest on his lap. He glances at an open exemplar in front of him just to turn a moment later to the sheet and write a few words on it with a reed pen. From time to time he scares away a chicken which comes too close to the pots of ink, drives off a nosy donkey and rebukes his children for disturbing him. He has to hurry because there is one more passage to copy and dusk will come shortly. He does not try to work after twilight by the feeble light of the bulb.

Märigeta Ḥarägä Wäyni is one of the few scribes of eastern Tigray who still practises the craft [Image 1]. Yet he fears that the future holds nothing in store for him. He and other scribes dispersed over the Ethiopian highlands keep the Christian manuscript culture alive. They manually copy religious texts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church employing parchment as a writing surface. The craftsmen are referred to as *ṣāḥafi* ('scribe') or *qum ṣāḥafi* ('scribe [who writes] upright script', also 'scribe [who writes] calligraphically') in Amharic and *ṣāḥafi* or *qum ṣāḥafi* in Tigrinya.⁵ The term focuses only on one part of the task that the manuscript maker does – manually copying the text. In fact, he is responsible for the whole process of book production.

by the European Research Council within the 7th Framework Programme IDEAS. For the mission reports see Nosnitsin 2013 and the web-site: <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE/>.

² I would like to heartily thank Denis Nosnitsin, the Principal Investigator of the Ethio-SPaRe project, for facilitating my visits with the scribes during our field trips, for reading the draft version of the present paper and for generously sharing with me his ideas. Thanks go also to my dearest friends Orin Gensler who proofread the present paper and to Agnieszka Jagodzińska whose suggestions enabled me to make the text more reader-friendly. I would like to thank Alessandro Bausi for reading the paper and providing me with his advice, Luisa Sernicola for her mapmaking skills and Marco Di Bella, the book conservator collaborating with Ethio-SPaRe, who read the section dealing with materials and tools used in the book production and who welcomed my many questions. I am also indebted to Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, Hiruy Ermiyas, Gidena Mesfin and Dorothea McEwan for helping me with some issues raised in the paper. Finally, I thank the scribes from eastern Tigray who talked about their work with passion and were eager to share it with me. I dedicate the paper to them.

³ *Märigeta* is a church rank given to a teacher of church music, *qone*-poetry or liturgical dance (Habtä Maryam Wärqənäh 1970/71: 300).

⁴ The proper names are spelled in keeping with the language of their speakers, either Tigrinya or Amharic.

⁵ What the scribes write is termed *qum ṣāḥafät*, which means "upright script": a generic name for any kind of handwriting produced on parchment (Fäqadä Sällase Täfärra 2010: 71–72).

The Ethiopic manuscript culture is thought to be nearly as old as Christianity of the Aksumite Kingdom, dating back to the mid-4th century.⁶ At that time a certain number of books must have been produced and circulated for the use in the liturgy. Nevertheless, no manuscripts originating from that period are known to us.⁷ The most ancient codices are thought to be the so-called Abba Gärima Four Gospels manuscripts whose age has recently been estimated by radiocarbon dating at not less than 1500 years.⁸ Several other codices come from before the 14th century,⁹ including the oldest preserved dated codex *Arba tu wängel* ('Four Gospels') from the Däbrä Ḥayq Ḍṣṭifanos monastery, produced in 1280/81.¹⁰ Many of the surviving manuscripts, however, are datable only from the 16th–17th century onwards.¹¹ The total number of extant codices in both Eritrea and Ethiopia has been cautiously estimated at about 200.000 volumes,¹² but in a recent publication Bausi argues that the calculation should be much higher.¹³ A few thousand Ethiopic manuscripts are also housed in European and North American libraries as well as in the Ethiopian Archbishopric establishments in Jerusalem.¹⁴ The language of the Christian texts of the Ethiopic manuscripts is Gə'əz (Ethiopic), the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There are also certain works, like *Amməstu a'əmadä məšṭir* ('The Five Pillars of Mystery'), not older than the 17th century, that are typically transmitted in the vernacular Amharic. To write both Gə'əz and Amharic the Ethiopic script is used.

Because no systematic and comprehensive study of contemporary Ethiopic manuscript culture has been conducted, we do not know to what extent it is still practised throughout the country. The culture is alive only insofar as it reproduces itself: there are professional scribes who continue making manuscripts and passing their skills on to the next generation. The second essential factor is that the production should retain its original purpose. In this case, it means that the manuscripts are made for the Orthodox Christian communities in Ethiopia to serve them in their religious practices. Nowadays, the manuscript culture is marginal in Ethiopia. It might be, however, that it is better preserved in certain regions¹⁵

⁶ For a general introduction to the Ethiopic manuscript culture see Uhlig & Bausi 2007 and Bausi 2014. For the current state of the art on Ethiopic codicology see Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015. For Ethiopic palaeography see Bausi & Nosnitsin 2015.

⁷ Uhlig & Bausi 2007: 739–740.

⁸ Bausi 2015: 47.

⁹ For general discussion on Ethiopic manuscripts from before the 14th century see Bausi 2015. For studies into ancient manuscripts and fragments see Sergew Hable Selassie 1987–1988; Bausi 2011; Nosnitsin & Bulakh 2014; Nosnitsin & Rabin 2014.

¹⁰ Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 170–171. The manuscript is the so-called Four Gospels of Iyäsus Mo'a, EMM 1832 (Getachew Haile & Macomber 1981: 293–301).

¹¹ Uhlig & Bausi 2007: 739.

¹² Sergew Hable Sellasie 1981: 35.

¹³ Bausi 2015: 47.

¹⁴ Bausi 2015: 48.

¹⁵ Mellors & Parsons (2002a) conducted a field study on scribes in the environs of the town Iste in South Gondar where, according to their estimation, there should be as many as around one hundred active scribes. They are probably right when they point out that the high number of scribes in this area, yielding intensive manuscript production, must be exceptional for the country as a whole (Ibidem, p. 4).

and on the verge of extinction in others. What we do know is that up to the beginning of the 20th century, manuscript production was the main way of transmitting texts. From the early 20th century onwards, manual book production has been declining as Christian literature has been increasingly proliferated in print. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church runs one publishing house, *Tənsa'e Zäguba'e*,¹⁶ that edits and prints texts which previously were exclusively copied by scribes.¹⁷ Additionally, individuals and religious establishments, like monasteries and associations, publish Christian books in both private and institutional printing presses.

Aim

This article gives an account of contemporary scribes from eastern Tigray. It focuses on eight scribes, but at times other copyists working in that area are also mentioned. The scribes are: *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni from May Ḥmori,¹⁸ Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Tawäldu and Priest Tawäldä Bərhan from Qäqäma,¹⁹ *Abba*²⁰ Taddäsä Məruṣ from Gwaḥtərat,²¹ Priest Ḥaylä Səllase²² and Priest Gäbrä Mädḥən Gäbrä Ḥgzi' abəḥer from Qorrrar,²³ *Mäl'akä* *Ḥəyywät*²⁴ Dästa Gäbrä Maryam from Ləgat²⁵ and Priest Täklü Mārəssa from Məngas.²⁶ Taking interviews with them as the basis, the article seeks to provide an answer to the general question: What does it mean to be a scribe in a present-day eastern Tigray? More specifically, it deals with such questions as: Who are the scribes in terms of their social position and how did they become scribes? Who are their clients? What are the ways of selling manuscripts? Which texts do they copy and where do they look for exemplars? What are the materials and tools they use and what are their writing practices? The final question concerns how they earn their living. To shed more light on what has changed since the manual production of books ceased to be the predominant way of bookmaking, reference is made at certain points to the situation of the pre-20th-century Ethiopic manuscript culture.²⁷

¹⁶ Mersha Alehegne 2010: 918.

¹⁷ The majority of printed Gə'əz editions have a parallel Amharic translation. The books containing church music are simply printed copies of manuscripts, like *Mäṣḥafä ziq wä-məzmur* ('The Book of Ziq and Hymns'), *Tənsa'e Zäguba'e*, Addis Abäba 1987/88, and *Amməstu ṣəwatwä zemawočč* ('The Five Categories of Chants'), Bərhananna Sälam Qädəməwi Ḥaylä Səllase Mattämiya Bet, Addis Abäba 1968.

¹⁸ Interviewed on 02.06.2012 and 08.02.2014. In 2014 he was 36 years old.

¹⁹ Interviewed on 10.12.2012. Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Tawäldu was in his mid-forties, while Priest Tawäldä Bərhan was around 35 years old.

²⁰ That is 'father'.

²¹ Interviewed on 02.04.2014. He was in his mid-sixties.

²² Priest Ḥaylä Səllase presented his craft at a fair in Switzerland a few years ago.

²³ Interviewed on 12.05.2012. Priest Ḥaylä Səllase was around 60 years old. Priest Gäbrä Mädḥən Gäbrä Ḥgzi' abəḥer was in his early forties.

²⁴ Lit. 'angel of life', a church rank given to a priest (Habtä Maryam Wärqənah 1970: 303).

²⁵ Interviewed on 06.12.2012. He was 67 years old.

²⁶ Interviewed on 16.11.2012. He was 90 years old.

²⁷ For a short online introduction to the manual bookmaking in Ethiopia see Winslow 2011.

Source materials

The primary source materials for this study are interviews with the eight scribes, photos illustrating their work and the materials they use, information about the historical and current situation of the places visited as well as some exemplary digitized manuscripts. All of the source materials were collected during the Ethio-SPaRe team missions to eastern Tigray between November 2010 and March 2015. It must be stressed, however, that everything the Ethio-SPaRe team managed to amass concerning the scribes is a by-product of the field trips. Only from the 5th mission (May–June 2012) onwards did the author of the present paper ask systematically about active scribes in the vicinity of the church that was visited. If a scribe resided within easy reach and was available, upon agreement, an interview was conducted with him. Thus, the present study cannot have and has no pretensions to be systematic or in-depth. Nevertheless, it may serve as a point of departure for further timely research.

Places of scribal activity in eastern Tigray

“Eastern Tigray” refers in this paper to the geographical area encompassing Mäqäle, the capital of Tigray, and the following administrative *wäräda*-districts: Gulo Mäkäda, the town of ‘Addigrat, Ganta Afäšum, Īndārta, Kələttä Awla‘lo, the town of Wəqro, Sa‘si Ša‘da Īmba and Däg‘a Täm̄ben were the Ethio-SPaRe team visited or heard about twenty-five scribes. This number, however, is certainly underestimated for at least three reasons. First, the Ethio-SPaRe members did not regularly ask about scribes during the first four missions. Secondly, our informants might have forgotten or not known about some active scribes in the area. Lastly, Ethio-SPaRe did not reach a few monasteries in Däg‘a Täm̄ben *wäräda* that are of great significance for traditional book-producing activities.

The places with scribes are indicated on the map of eastern Tigray [Image 2]. They will be commented on, beginning from the most northerly point, then going southwards and, finally, to the west. Scribes whom I did not visit personally but only learned of indirectly are marked below with a dagger (#).

Seven of the twenty-five scribes live in the northern part of Gulo Mäkäda *wäräda*, of whom one, Priest Mulu‘aläm Gäbrä Maryam[#], lives in Zalambäsa, a town close to the border with Eritrea, and six live in the nearby village of Ləgat: Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam, Priest Fəssəha Gərma[#], Deacon Mähari Asfəha[#], Priest Mäbrahtom Dərər[#], Priest Täsfa ‘Aläm Mähari[#], Priest Ḥaylä Səllase (Ḥaylay) Gäbrä Šadəq[#]. Two scribes, *Mäm̄hər* ‘Əzra Səmur[#] and *Märigeta* Həllawe[#] work in ‘Addigrat. Priest Täklü Märässa from Məngas, in the Ganta Afäšum *wäräda*, no longer produces manuscripts because of his advanced age. The only active scribe in Ganta Afäšum is reportedly *Märigeta* Gäbrä Mika‘el Bärhä[#] from the vicinity of ‘Addimḥara village, Abba Yoḥanni Church.²⁸ *Abba*

²⁸ For the following place and church names: ‘Addimḥara Abba Yoḥanni, Gwaḥtärat, May Bä‘atti Arba‘tu Īnsäsa, Kunale, Qorrar and Qäqäma see Nosnitsin 2013.

Taddäsä Məruş works in Gwahtärat, Kələttä Awla'lo *wäräda*. Apparently two scribes, *Mämhər*²⁹ Ғarägä Wäyni Säyfu[#] at St Mary Church and Priest 'Əzra[#], work in the capital of Tigray, Mäqäle.³⁰ *Märiqeta* Ғarägä Wäyni lives in the small village of May Əmori, some fifteen kilometers northwest of Mäqäle, on the road to the May Anbäsa monastery. As many as ten scribes are known to produce manuscripts in Däg'a Tämbeñ district. Thus, *Märiqeta* Şäqaw[#] and Priest Ғaylä Maryam[#] are said to work in the neighbourhood of 'Addadi Maryam, a church situated not far from May Bä'atti village, Arba'tu Ənsəsa Church. There is reportedly one scribe, *Aläqqa* Gäbrä Kiroş[#], in Kunale. In the monastery of Qorarr [Image 3] there are three scribes: Priest Ғaylä 'Əzra Şəllase, Priest Gäbrä Mädhən Gäbrä Əgzi'abəher and *Abba* Gäbrä Amlak Gäbrä Əgzi'abəher[#].³¹ Finally, four scribes are affiliated to the Qäqäma monastery [Image 4]: Priest Wäldä Ғawaryat Tawäldu, Priest Tawäldä Bərhan, *Abba* Täsfay[#] and Solomon Gäbrä Əgzi'abəher.

In connection with Däg'a Tämbeñ, there are three other monasteries that will be mentioned further on. These are Çih Şəllase, Ənda *Abba* Ғadära and Mänäwe; none of these was visited by the Ethio-SPaRe team. Çih Şəllase monastery³² is an important, though declining, writing centre, located around twenty kilometres from Mäqäle, near Ғagärä Sälam.³³ A similar centre is said to exist in Ənda *Abba* Ғadära,³⁴ about 2 kilometres to the southeast of Ғagärä Sälam, and in Mänäwe situated southeast of 'Abiy 'Addi, near Agbe.³⁵

All of the scribes come from rural areas with the exception of *Mämhər* Ғarägä Wäyni Säyfu and Priest 'Əzra who live in Mäqäle. As might be concluded from the map, there is a relatively high concentration of scribes in the village of Ləgat and the Däg'a Tämbeñ *wäräda*. This may be partly attributed to the fact that these places are well known for scribal activity and, consequently, attract clients. Asked about scribes, the local clergymen in many churches of the eastern Tigray *wärädas* frequently mentioned Däg'a Tämbeñ as their location. As for Ləgat, it is an old place³⁶ surrounded by once-important and vital monasteries and churches possessing large manuscript libraries, such as G^wənağ^wəna,³⁷

²⁹ That is 'teacher'.

³⁰ According to *Märiqeta* Ғarägä Wäyni there had been another scribe who abandoned the scribal craft for a cobblestone job with a road construction company (interview February 2014).

³¹ *Abba* Gäbrä Amlak Gäbrä Əgzi'abəher is perhaps the scribe photographed by Michael Gervers on 4.12.2002 (see Mazgaba Seelat under "Qoraro Maryam").

³² Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, who visited the place on three occasions in 2004, 2005 and 2009, and Denis Nosnitsin who accompanied her in 2009, confirm that there were a few scribes working on the premises of the monastery.

³³ Ғagärä Sälam is the main town of the Däg'a Tämbeñ *wäräda*.

³⁴ Ewa Balicka-Witakowska visited the place (together with M. Gervers) on 27.11.2002. She confirms the presence of scribes. For pictures of the monastery paraphernalia see Mazgaba Seelat, under "Endaba Ғadära".

³⁵ Coordinates of Mänäwe: 13°33' [N] 39°04' [E], according to Bernhard Lindahl, *Local history in Ethiopia*, accessed on 14.06.2015, http://www.nai.uu.se/library/resources/dossiers/local_history_of_ethiopia.

³⁶ Ləgat is mentioned in a land donation document issued by King Yəkuno Amlak (r. 1270–1285), contained in the Golden Gospel of Däbrä Libanos monastery in Ham (in Şəmāzana), Eritrea, (Conti Rossini 1901: 20, no. 10).

³⁷ Bausi 2005: 943–944.

Däbrä Libanos of Ham (in Šəmāzana),³⁸ ‘Ura Mäsqäl and others.³⁹ [Image 5] Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam says that before the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998–2000) a large number of manuscripts made in Ləgat were traded to Eritrea. On the whole, however, it is difficult to say why specifically Däg‘a Tämben and Ləgat have remained as operating centres of book production whereas in other places of eastern Tigray the craft declined or disappeared.

Social position and apprenticeship

The vast majority of the scribes are secular priests,⁴⁰ like *Märigeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni and Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat; only one, *Abba* Taddäsä Məruṣ, is a monk.⁴¹ Each of the priests belongs to the usually numerous local clergy that serve in the parochial church. For instance, in the Qäqäma monastery, with which two scribes: Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu and Priest Täwäldä Bərhan are affiliated, there are around fifty priests and sixty deacons.

The tendency for scribes to be secular priests, rather than monks, seems to reflect a general pattern known from other parts of Ethiopia⁴² and from the previous periods.⁴³ In contrast to medieval western Europe, where knowledge of writing was something normal and unthreatening among both clerics and the laity,⁴⁴ in pre-modern Ethiopia writing is said to have aroused mistrust tinged with anxiety.⁴⁵ This, in turn, has come from identifying scribes with *däbtäras*, highly educated unordained clergy some of whom practise religious magic by prescribing healing formulas and preparing magic scrolls.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in the northern regions of Ethiopia, the appellation *däbtära* continues to be assigned not only to people who practise religious magic but also to those who have resigned from their priesthood. If a scribe remains aloof from the local clergy, he may be accused of being a *däbtära*. Habtä Maryam Wärqənäh mentions in his book that still in his times, members of ecclesiastical staff who copied books on a regular basis were not allowed to celebrate the liturgy in some monasteries and churches.⁴⁷ In a more distant past, some clergymen were convinced that the skill of writing could lead to the propagation of magic; hence, they discouraged students from it. A disciple

³⁸ Bausi 2005: 28–29.

³⁹ Nosnitsin 2013: 3–9.

⁴⁰ In contrast to a monk, who may also be ordained a priest.

⁴¹ It is not certain whether he took monastic vows at a relatively young age or he became a monk after he was widowed.

⁴² See for instance the scribes mentioned in Mellors & Parsons (2002a).

⁴³ This might be inferred from the fact that in manuscripts collected by Ethio-SPaRe produced between the 16th and 21st century scribe’s signature sometimes is accompanied by his church rank.

⁴⁴ Sirat 2006: 97.

⁴⁵ Habtä Maryam Wärqənäh 1970/71: 37.

⁴⁶ Kaplan 2005: 53–54.

⁴⁷ *Märigeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni had never heard about this prohibition.

caught red-handed in the act of writing could be even dismissed from a church school.⁴⁸ Nowadays, this suspicious attitude has surely changed to a great extent due to the spread of education and, consequently, of writing skill. Another possible explanation for monks being less involved in copying books might be that the profession of scribe has not been well integrated into the concept of Ethiopic monasticism, unlike in Georgia⁴⁹ and in the western part of early medieval Europe.⁵⁰

This does not mean, however, that a monastery could not be a centre of manuscript production. At least in one monastery in eastern Tigray, in Qäqäma, established during the reign of King Yoḥannäs IV (r. 1872–89), all monks were involved in copying manuscripts, probably to meet the needs of newly founded churches. The then-numerous community of some fifty to sixty monks has today dwindled to a mere nine ascetics. Only one of them, *Abba* Täsfaye, fairly advanced in age, still copies books, himself being the last living survival of the scribal past of the monastery. Priest Täḳlu Mārässa from Məngas, in 2012 a ninety-year-old scribe, mentions that at the time he was a disciple in the Ḃnda Abba Ḃadära monastery, there were scribes half of whom were priests and half monks [Image 6]. In general, in one way or another, a scribe belongs to the clergy, be it as a *däbtära*, deacon, priest or monk.⁵¹ Commercial secular scribes⁵² are unlikely to have ever worked in Ethiopia. Because all education was run by the church and the literature was almost exclusively religious, there was no need to turn to lay scribes or create alternative secular centres. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church monopoly on education was only broken up by missionaries who introduced schools and printing presses in the second half of the 19th century.⁵³

The apprenticeship for almost all the scribes took place while they were students of the traditional church school: in the school of liturgy (*qəddase bet*) where they were trained as deacons (*gəbrä diqunna*) and finally as priests (*gəbrä qəsanna*), and at the higher level in the schools of church music (*zema bet*) and *qəne*-poetry (*qəne bet*).⁵⁴ However, in Ethiopia book production is not an intellectual activity or rather not predominantly an intellectual activity.⁵⁵ Because there is no division of work, the scribe must have mastered the whole process of book production which includes preparing the parchment, making the ink, cutting the pen, copying the text and, finally, binding the codex. Scribes are said to be often recruited from among students who have a flair for manual work and who are not necessarily good at memorising religious texts, singing or creating poetry. Even though most of them claim a proficient knowledge of Gə‘əz, as a matter of fact

⁴⁸ Habtä Maryam Wärqənäh 1970/71: 37; see also Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 169.

⁴⁹ Gippert 2015: 184.

⁵⁰ Hamel 1992: 5.

⁵¹ Differently on this issue Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 168.

⁵² A “commercial” scribe refers to a professional craftsman who copies and binds books as a full-time occupation (Mooney 2011: 193).

⁵³ Pankhurst 1962: 249–256.

⁵⁴ Haile Gabriel Dagne 1976: 339–348.

⁵⁵ Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 168.

only adept students of the school of poetry acquire that level of language skill. It is clear then that some of the scribes, despite being adroit at mechanically duplicating the text, may make errors without being aware of it. Also, they may not spot others' mistakes and rectify them, neither in the exemplar nor in their own copy. For the scribes, to be highly competent in copying the text is to know its *məstir* ('mystery', 'arcanum'). This means to be able to accurately translate it into Amharic bringing out senses of the text. To find the sense and message of a text is what students learn in the school of *qəne*-poetry.

The scribes learnt how to copy texts and bind books from their masters first by observing them. After some time, they were encouraged to write their own letters on scraps of parchment, to prepare parchment and ink, and to bind a book. The apprenticeship lasted from two to three years. At the beginning, still as disciples, they made all by themselves small and thin codices containing, for instance, *Laḥafä şədq* ('Bandler of Righteousness') [Image 7], *Müşəhafä qedär* ('Book of the Jar'), *Müşəhafä krəstənnä* ('Book of the Christening'), or *Dərsanä sänbätä krəstiyān* ('Homily on the Sabbath of Christians').

Most of the scribes interviewed became familiar with bookmaking while studying in one of the monasteries in Däg'a Tämben. Thus, Priest Gäbrä Mädhən from Qorarr studied in the schools of liturgy, church music and *qəne*-poetry in Čih Šəllase for five years [Image 8]. There he was trained as a scribe by *Abba Wäldä Maryam*. *Märigeta Həragä Wäyni* first joined the school in Mänäwe, but shortly after he moved to the music and *qəne*-poetry schools in Čih Šəllase. As he was lodged near the place where the scribes would gather together and work each on his own book, he would watch them. In their absence he would take a pen and some parchment leftovers, and would imitate their gestures. Also, along with other students he used to help the parchmenter who supplied all the scribes. Nevertheless, he did not pursue his interest further enough to become a scribe. Only later did he decide to stay for one month with the scribe Gäbrä Mika'el in 'Addi Märfe to obtain a solid basis in the craft. Priest Wäldä Həwaryat Täwäldu and Priest Täwäldä Bərhan, both from Qäqäma, learnt how to make manuscripts while preparing themselves for priestly ordination in the same monastery. Priest Täwäldä Bərhan's scribal master was *Abba Gäbrä Tənsa'e*. Priest Həylä Šəllase was a student of *Yänta*⁵⁶ Abrəha (also the teacher of *qəne*-poetry) in the Qorarr monastery. His older colleague, *Abba Taddäsä Məruş* from Gwahtərat, also stayed in Qorarr, but his master was his maternal grandfather Abrəham, a *Dəgg^wa*⁵⁷ teacher. Priest Təklü Mārəssa, in turn, learnt liturgy and church music from *Yänta Yətbərak* in the monastery of Ənda *Abba Hədəra*. After completing the school he came back to his home village Məngas. Finally, Priest Dəsta Gäbrä Maryam was apprenticed first to *Abba Wäldä Qirqos* and then to his son *Märigeta Dərar Wäldä Qirqos*⁵⁸ in the same village where he now lives. Aside from bookmaking

⁵⁶ A title for addressing a *qəne*-poetry teacher.

⁵⁷ *Dəgg^wa* is an antiphony (a collection of hymns) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church containing chants for the Divine Office (Habtemichael Kidane 2005: 123).

⁵⁸ At least two manuscripts written by *Märigeta Dərar Wäldä Qirqos* have been registered by Ethio-SPaRe: MY-023, *Gədlä Yoħannəs Mätməq* 'Vita of John the Baptist', dated to 1969 (Däbrä Ma'şo Qəddus Yoħannəs) and ETH-010, *Müşəhafä qəddasə* 'Missal', dated to 1970/71 ('Əmbäyto Təklä Haymanot).

he also learnt the liturgy. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam trained five other scribes: four of them live in Ləgat and one, Mulu‘aläm Gäbrä Maryam (his brother), lives in Zälambäsa. None of the scribes attended a governmental school.

Clients and texts copied

Scribes sell manuscripts to people who either wish to use them for their private devotion or who want to donate them to a church for different reasons. Before 1974, the year when Emperor Haylä Səllase (r. 1930–1974) was overthrown and the monarchic system fell, clients of the scribes were typically nobility of different ranks, from the king down to an ordinary local landlord or landlady. Also, representatives of churches and monasteries that possessed vast lands, generating considerable income, often appear in the manuscripts as manuscript donors.⁵⁹

Currently, patrons are people from different walks of life who can afford to spend at least two thousand Ethiopian *bərr* for a small codex of forty folios.⁶⁰ Ordinary people usually determine the amount of money they will use for commissioning a manuscript according to their financial circumstances. Wealthy donors may commission the work missing in the church to which they intend to give it, irrespective of the size of a codex. To show their prosperity and status some of them may even order a manuscript of an extravagantly huge size. Local religious cults and the patron’s devotion to a particular saint may also influence the choice. Additionally, all commissioners turn to their spiritual father for advice on which book to choose. At times, the potential donor, his spiritual father and the scribe discuss the selection of text, the size of book and letters, presence of decoration as well as miniatures, textile in-lays and even mirrors, used for looking at oneself and for warding off evil spirits.⁶¹ Patrons are most often men who represent the whole family. This is reflected in colophons and supplication formulas where the name of a commissioner stands at the beginning and is followed by, sometimes quite long, list of family members. Women usually donate a book as a token of thanks for giving birth.

Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam,⁶² Priest Haylä Səllase, *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni and Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu mostly write on commission. Upon our visit in May 2012 Priest Haylä Səllase was just working on a large and long *Haymanotä Abäw* (‘The Faith

⁵⁹ Habtä Maryam Wärcəñäh 1970: 367. For contemporary religious arts patronage in Ethiopia see Johnson 2003; Sobania & Silvennan 2006.

⁶⁰ In 2014 this was about eighty euros. This amount is similar to the monthly salary of a secondary school teacher with long experience.

⁶¹ Six 2012: 11–15.

⁶² At least three manuscripts produced by Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam have been registered by Ethio-SPaRe. These are: QQM-007 *Dərsanä Mika‘el* ‘Homiliary for the feasts of St Michael’, dated to 1972/73 (‘Addi Qiyahito Qəddəst Maryam’); UM-008 *Gädlä Qirqos* ‘Vita of Cyricus’, dated to 1976 (‘Ura Qirqos’); and FBM-012 *Gädlä Mäzgäbä Šəllase* ‘Vita of Mäzgäbä Šəllase’, dated to 2003/04 (Fäqada Qəddəst Maryam).

of the Fathers')⁶³ valued at as much as twenty thousand *bərr* [Image 9]. In February 2014, Priest Ḥarägä Wäyni was about to complete a middle-size codex containing *Gädlä Abunä Arägawi* ('Vita of Abunä Arägawi') for three thousand five hundred Ethiopian *bərr*. Also, he had finished a codex of *Gädlä Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus* ('Vita of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus'). In November 2012, his colleague from Qäqäma, Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu, had just finished an impressive manuscript containing *Tä'ammərə İyäsus* ('Miracles of Jesus') [Image 10]. A common practice among the scribes is to enter a colophon into a book that is bespoken. Embedded into a set of formulaic phrases, at times colophons might be rich in content. A good example is afforded by the two-part colophon composed by Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu in his *Tä'ammərə İyäsus* – it encompasses the name of the donor and his status, names of his relatives, the name of the scribe, the name of the institution to which it will be handed over, as well as the dates of commencing and completing the copying, supplied with many details [Image 11]. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam and *Märiqeta Ḥarägä Wäyni* say that the scribe notes the name by which he is known, either his "worldly" or his baptismal name.

Aside from individuals, churches as institutions are also important commissioners. The church administrator may ask a scribe to copy specific texts. For example, Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam in 2013 accepted a commission from the head of Golgota Mädhane 'Aläm ('Saviour of the World') Church in 'Addigrat [Image 12]. He and his two former apprentices were asked to copy altogether six books such as *Dərsanä Mika'el* ('Homiliary for the feasts of St Michael'), *Zena nügäromu lä-Şällase* ('Story of the Trinity'), and *Gädlä Yoḥannəs Mätməq* ('Vita of John the Baptist').

Commissioning is not the only way of selling hand-made books. Some of the scribes go once or twice per year to Aksum carrying three or four manuscripts to sell at the market. The market is held on the feast of Aksum Şəyon (on 21 *Hədar*, i.e., 30 November), and on the last Sunday before Easter (*Hosa 'əna*) [Image 13]. Because many people come to the feasts from all over Ethiopia, the scribes have a better chance to find a buyer, whether a priest sent by a church or an individual interested in buying a codex for his own devotional reading or for donation to a church. Taking into account the limited budget of potential clients, the scribes often decide to cut costs by reducing the elaboration of manuscripts and the quality of the materials used. *Märiqeta Ḥarägä Wäyni* complains that writing for the market does not bring enough money to cover the expenses of materials and labour. For this reason he relies chiefly on commissions. The case is otherwise with Priest Täwäldä Bərhan, who produces manuscripts primarily with the intention of selling them at the market [Image 14]. *Abba Taddäsä Məruş* takes every opportunity to make a profit and so he both accepts commissions and displays his codices at the market in Aksum.⁶⁴ The scribes are of the same opinion – the book market is shrinking every year. It seems that selling manuscripts at the market is less

⁶³ For comparison: the Ethio-SPaRe manuscript GMG-005 containing *Haymanotä Abäw* measures 295 mm (width) x 320 mm (height) x 75 mm (thickness) and runs to 190 folios.

⁶⁴ Mellors & Parsons mention that young scribes from South Gondar also trade their codices at the Aksumite market (2002a: 6).

prestigious (and less lucrative) than producing them on commission. One reason for the higher status of working on commission might be the fact that scribes working on commission always sign their codices.

In manuscripts that appear at the market the range of texts copied is fairly limited. The point is that to find a client, the scribes repeatedly produce copies of the most popular works – those which are ‘a must’ during the liturgy, like *Tä’ammərə Maryam* (‘Miracles of Mary’), *Tä’ammərə İyäsus* (‘Miracles of Jesus’), *Dərsanä Mika’el* (‘Homiliary for the feasts of St Michael’), and hagiographic works such as *Gädlä Täklä Haymanot* (‘Vita of Täklä Haymanot’). More rare and unusual texts are written exclusively on commission. Additionally, there are some texts that are not copied manually any more, such as *Mäzmurä Dawit* (‘Psalter’), by far the most important devotional book of the Ethiopian Christians. The faithful simply prefer to use the smaller, lighter and cheaper printed version. Likewise, scribes no longer make codices containing liturgical music, like the monumental *Dəgg^wa*-antiphonary for the entire year.⁶⁵ This work is particularly difficult because the scribe has to write, in a minute script, musical notation over the main text. Various Orthodox Church publishers and printing presses have published the entire set of books containing church music.⁶⁶

As distinct from commissioned manuscripts, codices that are displayed at the market for sale usually do not bear a colophon.⁶⁷ The scribe remains anonymous. Not so with the buyer. While copying a text, the scribe leaves blank spaces in supplication formulas to be filled in with the name of the buyer and his relatives. The name is inserted either by the scribe himself upon purchase or later, when the book is donated to a church. Sometimes the spaces are simply left blank and are never filled in.⁶⁸ *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni says that unless a commissioner pays for the manuscript in advance, he does not insert his name into supplication formulas. The copyists of Qäqäma explain that occasionally the scribe and the buyer write down the transaction note on a blank folio of the codex. In such cases, the name of the scribe and the approximate dating of the manuscript may be extracted from it.

Apart from codices, some of the scribes are engaged in preparing magic scrolls (in Tigrinya *ma’rä qumät*, meaning ‘equal to one’s height’ [with reference to the length of the scroll]) which contain protective and curative texts and pictures representing good and evil spiritual powers. With a width of up to 500 mm and length of one metre or more

⁶⁵ Scribes involved in copying such manuscripts had to graduate from the school of church music (*zema bet*) where they acquired a high level of mastery.

⁶⁶ For instance, *Mäṣḥafä Dəgg^wa zä-däräsä qəddus Yared İtyopyawi* (‘The Book of *Dəgg^wa* composed by St Yared the Ethiopian’), Täsfa Gäbrä Səllase Mattämiya Bet, Addis Abäba 1994/95. See also footnote 16.

⁶⁷ According to Mellors & Parsons (2002a: 6) the scribes of Andabet sell manuscripts to brokers in which case they do not sign their works.

⁶⁸ Blank spaces left to be filled in with the name of a supplicant are evidenced in some manuscripts registered by Ethio-SPaRe, for instance in MA-005 *Nägärä Maryam* ‘The Story of Mary’, dated to 1955 (Anḍel Qəddäst Maryam) and MKL-022 *Mäṣḥafä täklil* ‘Book of the Marriage Ritual’, datable to 1930–1974 (Läqay Kidanä Məhrät).

they are hung up in the house and serve as “wall amulets”.⁶⁹ Although the production of scrolls is disapproved of by the Orthodox Church, *Abba Taddäsä Məruş* [Image 15] and Priest *Ḥaylä Səllase* [Image 16] seem to write them in less than a clandestine way. They prepare them in advance and adjust them to the client’s needs upon purchase. In 2012 Priest *Ḥaylä Səllase* asked one hundred *bərr* for one scroll. Priest *Dästa Gäbrä Maryam* makes scrolls on commission.

Working place and exemplars

The majority of the scribes work individually, at home or, like *Abba Taddäsä Məruş* inside the *əqa bet*,⁷⁰ next to the door [Image 17]. *Märiqeta Ḥarägä Wäyñi*, Priest *Ḥaylä Səllase* and Priest *Dästa Gäbrä Maryam* store their tools and materials in the darker inner room of their house, but they copy texts in the first outer room illuminated by the daylight.

As mentioned before, the monastery in *Qäqäma*, as well as *Çih Səllase*, *Ḥnda Abba Ḥadära* and *Mänäwe*, might be referred to as writing centres. Their organization, however, is based on a different principle than the scriptorium known from medieval Europe. Thus, the four scribes of *Qäqäma* often work together in the same room on the monastery premises, but there is no division of labour between the craftsmen. Each of them prepares the materials and copies the book individually. An elder clergyman, *Märiqeta Ḥaylä Səllase*, remembers that even before the 1970s when *Qäqäma* was a thriving monastery with some fifty monks, there was no collaborative work with the exception of a parchment maker who served the whole community. A few manuscripts registered by Ethio-SPaRe provide evidence that scribes occasionally worked in pairs⁷¹ or even in bigger groups,⁷² in particular on larger manuscripts.⁷³ But the scribes interviewed are not familiar with this practice, nor have they heard about it.

Returning to the four scribes of *Qäqäma*, it is not a shared work that unites them but a shared type of work, for which the monastery provides good conditions. First, they have more clean space for accommodating the tools and materials needed at the various stages of bookmaking. Given that a typical Tigrayan rural house is often occupied by a large family, the living and working space there is highly limited. Secondly, the peace and quiet that the monastery offers is crucial for the scribes to maximally concentrate on their work. Lastly, the monastery library containing around one hundred codices is an easily accessible and rich source of exemplars for copying. Undoubtedly, there is also ongoing exchange of experiences, materials and tools among the scribes.

⁶⁹ Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 159.

⁷⁰ Lit. “thing house”; a building in the church yard where manuscripts and paraphernalia are kept.

⁷¹ Scribes *Täklä Mika’el* and *Gäbrä Mädḥən* copied together two Four Gospels books, KTM-004 and MMA-009.

⁷² Manuscript DD-017, the 185-folio *Synaxarion* for the first part of the year (*Däbrä Dammo*), was produced jointly by as many as five scribes.

⁷³ *Bausi* offers an example of a colophon in the *Octateuch* (*Martini etiop.* 5) which mentions two copyists along with parchment makers (2014: 42–43).

The responsibility of finding an exemplar, ideally a well-preserved and reliable one, rests upon the scribe. Upon accepting a commission, the scribe inquires about a church or monastery where a manuscript with the given text is housed [Image 18]. The community may either agree to lend him the book for a certain amount of money (as rent) or allow him to copy it into a notebook on the spot.⁷⁴ In the latter case, the scribe spends a few days on meticulously copying the whole work, only to later transfer the text onto parchment. Occasionally, the commissioner may himself bring the book from which he wants the text to be copied.

A recent phenomenon is the employment of printed religious books as an exemplar. Priest Gäbrä Mädhən from Qorraq admits to having copied texts from a printed book. In his view, they make a better source for a text as they contain fewer mistakes [Image 19]. His colleague and neighbour, Priest Ḥaylä Səllase, lists a few texts that he copied from a printed book, such as *Məşḥafä Qəddase* ('Missal'), *Gädlä Abunä Arägawi* ('Vita of Abunä Arägawi'), *Tä'ammərə Maryam* ('Miracles of Mary'), *Dərsanä Mika'el* ('Homiliary for the feasts of St Michael') and others. He believes that because the books published by the Orthodox Church have been properly edited, they are more reliable. He does not have to pay attention to the correctness of the text, thus speeding up and facilitating the work. Other scribes express a similar thought. Their attitude indicates that the scribes are quite aware of textual deficiencies and are concerned about the quality of the text. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam says that the six manuscripts prepared for the church in 'Addigrat were copied from printed books. In fact, it was the patron himself, the head of the church, who gave them the printed exemplars to be employed for copying.⁷⁵ Some of the commissioners of Priest Ḥaylä Səllase also provided him with a printed book.

Materials and tools used in the process of bookmaking

The scribes of Ethiopia are typically responsible for the whole process of bookmaking, from preparing parchment, through copying the text, to binding the manuscript.⁷⁶ Since all the stages of traditional manuscript production along with scribal tools and materials have aptly and thoroughly been described elsewhere,⁷⁷ the focus of this section is on the practices that are specific to the scribes of eastern Tigray.

⁷⁴ In a manuscript of *Gädlä Säma'tat* ('[Spiritual] Contendings of the Martyrs') from Duramba Səllase (Qolla Tämben, Təgray), 16th–17th century, there is a note cursing anyone who would take the book out of the church for using it as an exemplar (*lä-gäbirä ab*) (Brita 2014: 172–173). The curse provides evidence that the practice of renting manuscripts was widespread.

⁷⁵ In the Ethio-SPaRe database there are at least two manuscripts, UM-021 and QSM-015, which are certainly a copy of the various missals published by the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia.

⁷⁶ Marco Di Bella has kindly checked the section to ensure that the information is correct.

⁷⁷ Assefa Liben 1958, Sergew Hable Sellasie 1981, Mellors & Parsons 2002b, Bausi 2008: 525–543, Fäqadä Səllase Täfärra 2010, Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 154–174.

The majority of the scribes make their own parchment, for which goatskin⁷⁸ is used [Image 20]. *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyṇi is the only one who buys ready-made material from a parchmenter, who is at the same time a skin trader, in Mäqäle. Exceptionally, a commissioner may ask for a scroll to be written on a sheepskin which he brings along with him. Otherwise sheepskin is disfavoured, as it easily cracks when scraping away the hair. As for black ink, they usually prepare it on their own, but there is also a possibility to buy it from another craftsman who makes it in greater quantities for sale. *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyṇi always purchases dried ink from a colleague in Däg'a Tämben. Red ink based on natural ingredients is not produced any more. The scribes buy synthetic ink of a colour ranging from pink to red either in Aksum, 'Addigrat or Mäqäle. According to *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyṇi it is also possible to use the same dye as for colouring baskets; but this is of inferior quality and fades quickly. Ink is most often kept in plastic containers [Image 21] or, rarely nowadays, in a goat or a cow horn [Image 22].

The pens employed for writing are made of reed (*šämbäqo*): two are used in tandem, one for black ink and one for red. Priest Gäbrä Mädhən from Qorarr mentions two distinct ways of cutting the nib.⁷⁹ The first, called *säyf* ('sword'), is to trim it slantways [Image 23]. In the other, *qum*-style (*qum* means 'upright') the nib is cut straight. In his view, the type of the nib, *säyf* or *qum*, does not influence how the letters are shaped; the same calligraphic effect can be obtained by using either type of nib. What determines the scribe's choice between *säyf* and *qum* is purely his own personal habit [Image 24]. Priest Täwäldä Bərhan and *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyṇi stick to copying with a *säyf*-pen; Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu says that although he usually uses a *säyf*-pen, he finds a *qum*-pen with a narrow nib more suitable for writing minute letters. *Märiqeta* Ḥaylä Səllase adds that the tiny musical notation in antiphonaries, such as *Dəgg^wa* and *Mäwaśa't* ('Antiphony for feasts and funeral service'), used to be written with the *qum*-pen.⁸⁰ Despite these plausible explanations, the distinction between *säyf* and *qum* still requires further examination. Fäqadä Səllase Täfärra argues in his book that all scribes cut the nib in the *säyf* shape (*gadämm əyyadärrägä näw* 'he makes [it] obliquely'). Instead he mentions two ways of holding the pen, either almost perpendicularly to the writing surface (*qum yalä*) or slightly tilted to the side (*gadämm yalä*).⁸¹

To copy the text the scribe places on his lap one quire.⁸² A quire consists of four or five bifolia, sometimes including single leaves, which are tied at the top and bottom by means of tackets. The latter are usually made out of twisted pieces of parchment

⁷⁸ In 2012 one piece of goatskin cost fifty *bərr*.

⁷⁹ On this topic see also Denis Nosnitsin, *Field Research, Digitizing and Conservation missions 7 and 8*, Part 2, p. 22, footnote 40, 2014 [Online].

Available from <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE/missions.html>.

⁸⁰ Fäqadä Səllase Täfärra (2010: 172) claims that it was still the same *säyf*-pen that was used for such musical notation. Obviously, the nib had to be very narrow.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁸² Because of this, the posed photos of scribes in Mellors & Parsons (2002a) (also Anne Parsons, p.c.) writing on or holding one single folio (not one quire) are incompatible with the real current practice.

[Image 25]. Some scribes, like *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni, forms a quire using synthetic or twine thread. Once the text is copied and the quires are ready they are sewn together and attached to the boards. According to Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam the most desirable wood for boards is *wäyra* (*Olea Africana*), which however, is now almost impossible to obtain. He simply buys a piece of any wood from a carpenter. *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni prefers to use modern plywood, which he finds very suitable for the boards: its surface is smooth and its edges are even. Since ready-made planks are available at the market and are easy to cut to the desired size, the scribes themselves no longer cut boards out of tree trunks.

To bind the codex, *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni utilizes either synthetic or twine thread. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam, in turn, sews the manuscript with thread made of parchment. Depending on the thickness of the codex, he makes his thread by successively joining together a few tightly twisted long strips of parchment.

For the cover the scribes use tanned goatskin,⁸³ usually of reddish colour [Image 26].⁸⁴ It is glued to the boards with a paste made of wheat or red *tef*⁸⁵ flour mixed with hot water. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam uses a blend of both flours in the proportion one to one. As an alternative to the traditional red *tef* adhesive, *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni employs a PVA (polyvinyl acetate) glue, which he calls *k^wolla* (Italian *colla* ‘glue’). To save time and money the scribes seldom decorate the inner surface in the middle of the boards with textile inlays, which was a common practice in previous centuries [Image 27].⁸⁶ Then the cover is blind-tooled and decorated outside with a cross design and frames running along the edges [Image 28]. Because in this technique a heated stamp is impressed against the leather, there is a possibility of damaging it. To protect the leather Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam greases the tools with cow fat [Image 29]. The stamps, with each set composed of the same types of motifs, are available in Aksum [Image 30]. The satchel for protecting and carrying a codex is made of cowskin or oxskin, whose texture is thick and tough. *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni produces a satchel with a lid [Image 31] instead of the more common satchel consisting of two cases: an inner one ideally fitting the codex snugly and an outer one of a larger size [Image 32]. Using a lidded satchel allows him to save a piece of leather that will be used elsewhere.

In comparison to the script and its mode of execution prior to the mid-19th century, the handwriting of the modern scribes makes a rather poor aesthetic impression. The letters are often uneven and written in a careless way. Partially this might be due to the fact that the scribes have many other duties that compete for their time and so must do their copying work in short sessions and in haste. Still some of the copyists, such as Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam’s, do write in a fine and careful hand [Image 33].

⁸³ The procedure of tanning animal skins in Ethiopia needs to be studied.

⁸⁴ This is the same type of leather piece that is used for a baby sling in Tigray.

⁸⁵ *Eragrostis tef* or *Eragrostis abyssinica* is a cereal endemic to Ethiopia (Jones 2010: 885–887). The ingredients and preparation of the adhesive are to a large extent the same as for the starchy porridge called *gänfo* (Amh.) or *ga’at* (Tgn.).

⁸⁶ Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015: 172.

The Ethiopic palaeography seen in the manuscripts distinguishes several styles of script, from the earliest monumental script up to the 20th-century bulky script.⁸⁷ Possibly the script may also show some local variation.⁸⁸ However, when asked about the existence of a certain style of writing typical for the area, the Tigrayan scribes are puzzled by the question. Naturally each of them has his own characteristic handwriting, but they can see no general pattern that would be shared by the scribes of the entire area and that would distinguish it from the scribes of, say, South Gondar.

All of the scribes are capable of drawing an ornamental band but if a client asks for a miniature, they give a pre-prepared codex, with blank spaces left for accommodating the pictures, to a professional painter. Uncomplicated images that appear on magic scrolls, the scribes manage by themselves [Image 34].

The scribes integrate into their bookmaking new materials that can be bought from the market. This certainly facilitates their work, even though it may raise production costs. It seems, however, that the scribes try to maintain a balance, and they choose durable and, at the same time, low-priced materials. The copying is always done onto parchment. To copy a text onto paper, the writing surface universally used for Arabic manuscripts in Ethiopia,⁸⁹ is an alien idea to the scribes. *Märiqeta* Ḥarägä Wäyini is the most innovative of the eight scribes as he makes as much use as possible of ready-made materials available at the market. Also, he readily outsources the production of some manuscript components. He explains that this saves much time. For him as well as for the other scribes, aesthetic considerations play a subordinate role.

Scribal work and other duties

For the scribes manuscript production is not a full-time occupation. In addition to their work as scribes, they are also church servants and farmers. In fact, it is serving the religious community and tilling the land that brings them a relatively secure income. Because they receive commissions only irregularly and do not gain much profit from trading their products at the market, the copying that they take on is in addition to their other jobs. Once they are commissioned, they try to produce a manuscript as quickly as possible depending on the season. But first of all they need to take care of the land. On the other hand, Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam says that in the rainy season with drenching rainfalls, despite less work in the field, he puts his tools and materials aside. Too much humidity in the cold air disturbs parchment preparation and prevents ink from drying.

The social position of the scribes in their local communities is an interesting issue, yet it cannot be examined here because of lack of careful research. One may wonder whether the scribes are perceived differently than other priest-farmers, and if so in what

⁸⁷ Uhlig 1988; Bausi & Nosnitsin 2015: 289–290.

⁸⁸ Bausi & Nosnitsin 2015: 289.

⁸⁹ Gori 2007: 747.

way and why? *Märiḡeta* Ḥarägä Wäyni mentions that the scribe commands less respect than, for instance, the *qəne*-poetry composer. This is because the scribe earns money by producing books whereas the *qəne*-poetry composer's service is voluntary. Other related questions to be considered are: Is the once-common belief that scribes are involved in magic still alive? Was this belief indeed as pervasive in the past as it is claimed? Are there teenagers interested in the scribal craft who might carry on the tradition? Finally, one may ask how the overall attitude to scribal work is related to the attitude to hand-copied books in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The eight scribes from eastern Tigray appear as a relic of a bygone age in today's (post)-print culture. Yet, they try to find within it a space for their craft. Far from being indifferent to printed church editions, they take advantage of them to use as exemplars. Also, they integrate into their products modern materials that are compatible with their conception of a codex. Thus, they transform the scribal work, adjusting it to the changing conditions. The book production is, as ever, in a state of flux. Additionally, they have been responsive to social changes: manuscript donation is no longer the exclusive privilege of the elite but is also possible for ordinary, working people. This undoubtedly has happened at the cost of the aesthetics of the manuscripts.

There are still scribes in Ethiopia and there are patrons, too. But is it the force of tradition, drawing on reserves of energy which have accumulated over the centuries, that empowers them to produce and to buy manuscripts? Or is there any positive value that is assigned to the scribal work and its products? Given that texts (and to some extent layouts) are studiously and eagerly copied from printed editions, what then is the reason for commissioning or buying a parchment book? Is it prestige – an obscure notion behind which stands the high price of a codex reflecting the current cost of parchment? The fact that codices are hand-made, in contrast to printed books, surely does not have the same positive connotation in Ethiopia that it has in Europe; modernity and technology are the favourite buzz words. In healing rituals, however, handwritten codices and scrolls still have a potency that printed books can never have.

One may suggest that manual book production is sustained in Christian communities thanks to the religious value that is attached to it. To copy a religious text and to donate it to a church is counted as a pious deed which brings the remission of sin and eventually salvation. This belief is explicitly stated in many a covenant (*kidan*), found in *gädlät*,⁹⁰ which Christ grants to a saint and which assures special favours to the faithful who venerate this particular saint.⁹¹ Thus, in the *kidan* given to Saint *Abba* Kiros, Christ promises him as follows: “[...] and everyone who will write your *gädl*, I will write

⁹⁰ *Gädl* (pl. *gädlät*) lit. ‘[spiritual] combat’ is the term used for an Ethiopian saint's life (Kaplan 2005: 642).

⁹¹ Kur & Nosnitsin 2007: 394.

his name in the book of life and heaven.”⁹² The *kidan* granted to Saint Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus also mentions a commissioner: “[...] who will commission your *güdl* and will write it [...] I will write his name in the book of life.”⁹³ Despite this priceless reward promised in the *kidan*, the donation of a manuscript is becoming less popular among the faithful. Most probably contemporary clergymen prefer a donation of other items for the use in the church. In many places in eastern Tigray manuscripts are not used in everyday celebrations anymore but are simply stored in the vestry.

‘Addi Abun Täklä Haymanot, a church significant for the history of Coptic patriarchs of Ethiopia, located on a hill adjacent to ‘Adwa. While we are studying a rich collection of manuscripts, the priests prepare for the liturgy. One of them comes out of the office carrying in a plastic bag a few printed paper books that will be read from during the liturgy.

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⁹² *Gädlä Kiros* (‘Vita of Kiros’), Ms MAKM-053 (Ethio-SPaRe), fols. 59v-60r.

⁹³ Marrassini 2003: 231.

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Image 1. *Māriḡeta* Ḥarāḡā Wāyṇi presenting a sample of his handwriting.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

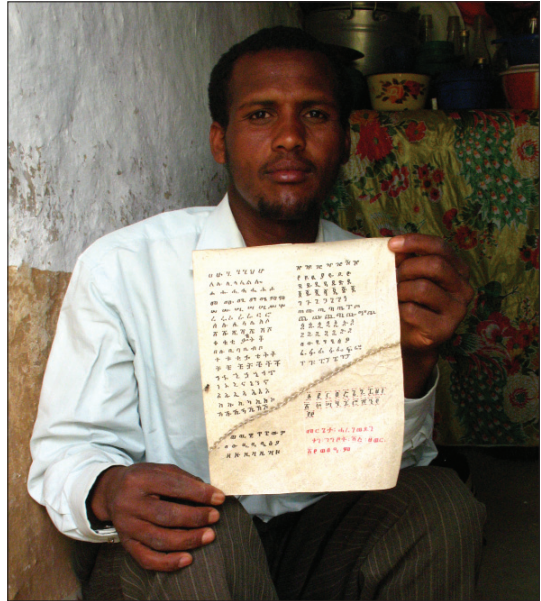
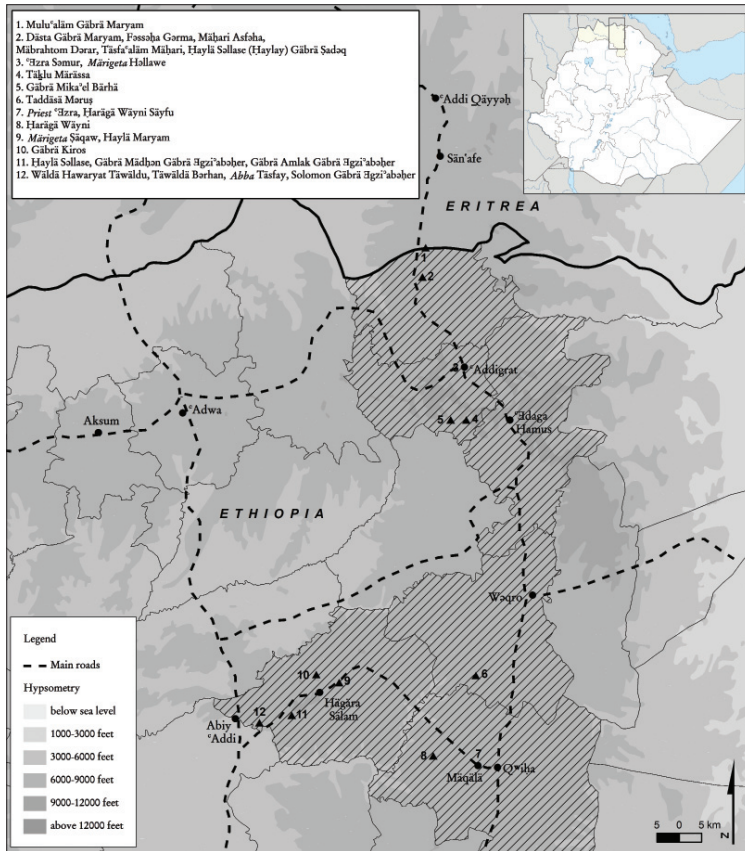


Image 2. Map of eastern Tigray indicating places where the scribes reside.
Cartographer: Luisa Semicola, Naples



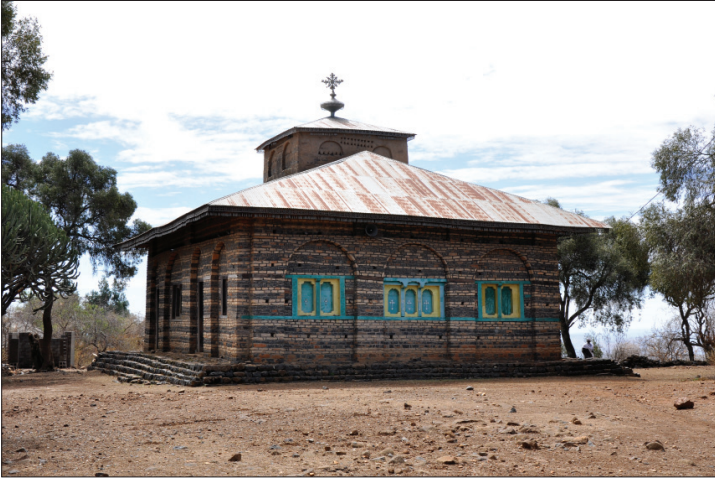


Image 3. St Mary church in the monastery of Qorarr.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 4. St Mary monastery in Qäqäma.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 5. Church in 'Ura dedicated to St Cyricus (Qirqos).
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 6. Priest Täklu Märässa with his wife Harägä Wäyni Bärhä, Mängas.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

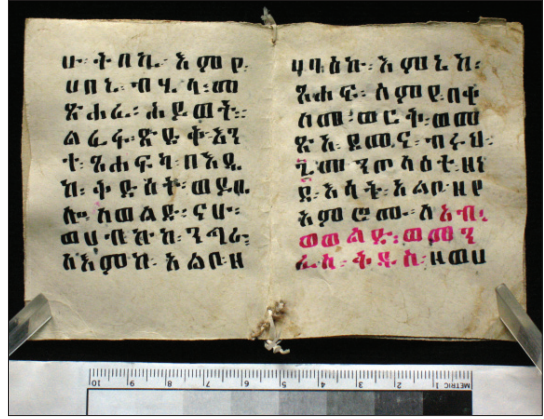


Image 7. The middle of a quire from *Ləfəfä şədq* ('Bandlet of Righteousness').
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 8. Priest Gäbrä Mädhən with *Məşhafä gaşşawə* ('Lectionary') that he copied, Qorraq.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 9. Quires of *Haymanotä Abäw* ('The Faith of the Fathers') prepared by Priest Haylä Şöllase, Qorraq.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 10. Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu holding *Tä'ammärä İyäsus* ('Miracles of Jesus') that he copied, in a textile wrapping, Qäqäma.
Photo: Antonella Brita CSCM, Hamburg

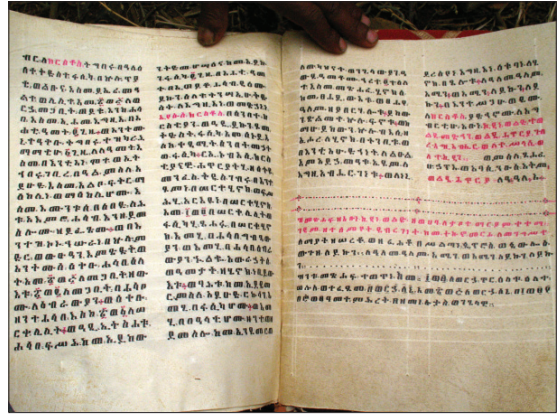


Image 11. *Explicit* of *Tä'ammärä İyäsus* ('Miracles of Jesus') and a colophon with the name of the scribe Priest Wäldä Ḥawaryat Täwäldu, Qäqäma.
Photo: Antonella Brita CSCM, Hamburg



Image 12. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam preparing a sample of his handwriting, Ləgat.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

Image 13. Scribe binding a book at the market in Aksum. Photo: Antonella Brita CSCM, Hamburg



Image 14. Priest Tawäldä Bərhan preparing a sample of his handwriting, Qäqäma.
Photo: Antonella Brita CSCM, Hamburg



Image 16. Priest Haylä Səllase holding magic scrolls that he copied, Qorarr.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 15. Abba Taddäsä Məruş presenting a magic scroll that he copied, Gwaḥtərat.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 17. *Abba Taddäsä Məruš* working on *Şälotä 'Eṭan* ('Prayer of Incense') for a female commissioner in the *əqa bet*, Gwaḥtərat. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 18. *Abba Taddäsä Məruš* with an exemplar placed on a bookstand, Gwaḥtərat. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

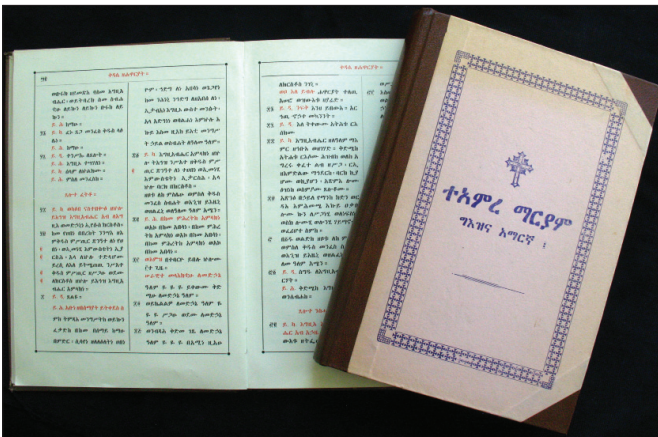


Image 19. Printed editions of *Mäṣḥafä Qəddasə* ('Missal'), Kokäbä Şəbaḥ, Addis Abäba 1957/58 and *Tä'ammorä Maryam* ('Miracles of Mary'), Tənśa'e Zäguba'e, Addis Abäba 1983/84



Image 20. *Māmhar* 'Ezra Səmur scraping away the hair from a goatskin, 'Addigrat.
Photo: Nikolas Sarris, Zakynthos



Image 21. Plastic ink pots, May Əmori.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

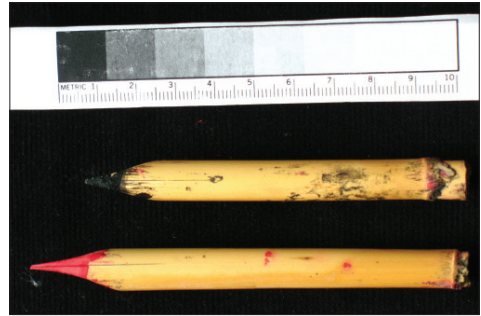


Image 23. Reed pens with a *säyf*-nib belonging to Priest Haylä Sallase.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 22. Cow horns used as ink pots, Qäqäma.
Photo: Antonella Brita CSCM, Hamburg



Image 24. Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam writing his name, Ləgat.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe

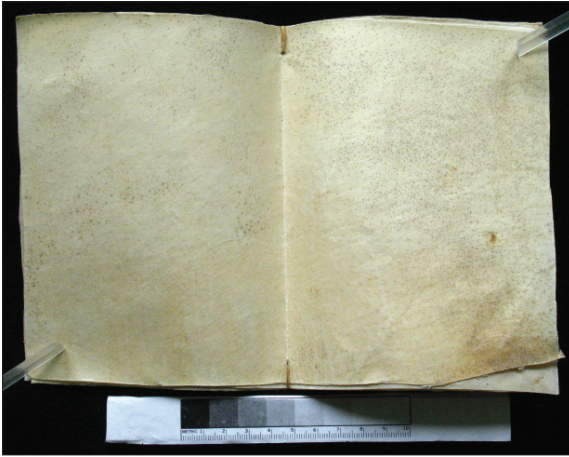


Image 25. Quire held together with tackets, Ləgat. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 26. Piece of tanned goatskin used for covering the boards, Ləgat. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 27. Inner side of the back board, May Ḥmori. Photo: Marco Di Bella, Palermo



Image 28. Blind-tooled leather cover of Ms FBM-012 produced by Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 29. Set of stamps belonging to Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam, Ləgat.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 30. One of the stamps, *zämbaba* ('palm tree'), used for impressing decoration on leather book cover.
Photo: Nikolas Sarris, Zakynthos



Image 31. Satchel with a lid sewn by *Märiqeta* Harägä Wäyni, May Ĕmori.
Photo: Marco Di Bella, Palermo



Image 32. Satchel composed of two cases, *Qorrar*.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 33. Sample of Priest Dästa Gäbrä Maryam's handwriting, Ms QQM-007, fol. 4r. Photo: Ethio-SPaRe



Image 34. Picture of a guardian angel on a magic scroll made by Priest *Ḥaylä Səllase*.
Photo: Ethio-SPaRe