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**Ethio-SPaRe**

**Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia:  
Salvation, Preservation and Research**



**Ninth Mission**

**March 2015**

**Report**

(by Denis Noslitsin, PI)



Hamburg University  
2015



## Ethio-SPaRe Ninth Field Mission (March 2015)

### Public Report

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### Introduction

The final field mission of the Ethio-Spare project took place on 13.-29.03.2015. This time, the trip was undertaken in cooperation with the University of Mekele, Department of History and Cultural Studies, which had enquired, earlier in the year, for collaboration in the task of urgent study of Mäzäga. This is a *wäräda* of West Tigray (previously out of the project's research scope) where many areas will be submerged or affected in various ways, after a while, by the unfolding development projects<sup>1</sup>. The first studies of the area were conducted as early as 2008 and resulted in some discoveries; on 22 June - 1 July 2012, the specialists from Mekele University conducted further archaeological survey of the area<sup>2</sup>, identifying more historical sites of importance. In the course of the discussions about current a future research opportunities which took place on the final conference of Ethio-SPaRe (July 2014), an idea was raised to make a survey of manuscripts in the ecclesiastic libraries of at least some of the main churches of the area, and it was realized in March 2015. The participants of the field mission (16.-25.03.2015) were the PI Dr Denis Nosnitsin and Magdalena Krzyzanowska from the side of Ethio-SPaRe project, and Yohannes Gebreselassie and Yohannes Aytnew from the side of Mekele University<sup>3</sup>.

The areas which today are embraced by the West Tigray zone – *wärädas* Kafta Humära, Şägäde, Wälqayt – are distant from the core of Tigray; they are climatically harsh, especially the lowland part, the lowland part of Wälqayt, also known as Mäzäga, which was to become the object of the joint research<sup>4</sup>. Even though, specifically the area Wälqayt – Mäzäga is known to play a role in the history of Ethiopia<sup>5</sup>. Formerly it was more heterogeneous then it is now in terms of languages

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called Welqayt Irrigation Project aimed at the large-scale sugar production.

<sup>2</sup> See the press-release of Mekele University "Rescue Project in Mezega and Surroundings, Western Tigray – Discoveries in Heritage and Culture, Improving the Livelihood" (accessed on 05.08.2015, <http://213.55.94.36/Old%20site%20backup/index.php/announcements/312-press-release-rescue-project-in-mezega-and-surroundings-western-tigray--discoveries-in-heritage-and-culture-improving-the-livelihood>"); a report was submitted to the French Center for Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abeba, which supported the research. Among the most important findings of the project was the systematic documentation of the Bet Mulu Castle site.

<sup>3</sup> I express my sincere thanks to Prof. Dr. Wolber Smidt (Mekele University) whose help was decisive during the preparation of the trip.

<sup>4</sup> The area of Lowland Wälqayt – Mäzäga (sometimes called also Mäzäga Wälqayt) seems to have been mostly uncovered by the studies of G. Ellero, who dealt predominantly with the "Highland Wälqayt" (its administrative center in ʼAddi Rämäs, cp. Ellero 1948, Dore – Mantel-Niecko – Taddia 2005). Moreover, in his excellent anthropological studies, he paid only small attention to the manuscript materials preserved in the churches, concentrating on the oral traditions.

<sup>5</sup> The information from historical sources is summarized in EAE III, 891a-b-892b (it seems however that the historical Mäzäga does not fully coincide with today's Lowland Wälqayt-Mäzäga); EAE IV, 1122a-1123a.



inscribed also a short supplication of the person (donor or commissioner?) called Gäbrä Ləʿul (fig. 9). The blank pages are covered with additional notes, mostly inventories (fig. 10).

Among the hagiographic manuscripts, the most interesting was a 17<sup>th</sup> century (?) codex containing the Vita of Kiros, Miracles of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus and (added later) *mälkä*<sup>2</sup>-hymn for Kiros. The manuscript, of small size, is written in a peculiar broad and big script by the scribe called Zä-Mikaʿel, and commissioned by someone called ʾAfä Krəstos (fig. 11).

A 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of Horologium (*Mäṣḥafä säʿatat*) contains interesting images: the church building (ʾAksum Şəyon or another one?), a variation on the topic “Ephrem the Syrian meeting St. Mary” and four pictures of saints, among them such rare personages as Lätşun and Pälamon<sup>12</sup> (figs. 12-14).

The *Mäṣḥafä gəbrä ḥemamat* “Book of the Rite of the Holy Week”, written in the nice Gondärine (*gwalh*) script was produced, according to the colophon, in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of King Yoḥannəs (most probably possibly Yoḥannəs I, r. 1667-1682, then 1680?), commissioned by Zä-Giyorgis, and written by the scribe Matyas (though the colophon, with name of the commissioner, was added by a different scribe) (figs. 15-16). Underscoring the complexity of the library, from other additional notes in the book it follows that it was in the possession of another church, Kidanä Məḥrät of May Ləbäṭa, another church in Waldəbba.

## May Gaba Mikaʿel

May Gaba Mikaʿel<sup>13</sup> is a big church located at the outskirts of the town of May Gaba. It is a monastic community with ca. 20 monks and 5 nuns. A traditional school is run at the monastery, offering teaching up to the level of liturgy (*qəddase*). The church has only one *tabot*, that of St. Michael.

The history of this institution is peculiar since it was formerly located in another place, at the Bet Mulu Castle, which was the foundation of ʾAyanä ʾƏgziʾ, the local governor in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The church was moved from the hill of the castle down in 1953 by *fitawrari* Yəlma; in ca. 1971, the town of May Gaba was founded. Currently the town is quickly expanding; soon the monastery will stand in the urban area, the circumstance which will endanger the local ecclesiastic collection.

The current church is a recent building (fig. 17). However, the monks could not tell the name of the founder and an approximate foundation time. The head of May Gaba Mikaʿel only stated that the local community is closely connected with the Betä Minas of Waldəbba.

The collection of May Gaba Mikaʿel has scores of interesting books, and shows a few typical for the monastic library<sup>14</sup>. As in the case before, there are some books marked with the sing of the “House of Minas” (Betä Minas). A sizable (25 quires) 17<sup>th</sup> century (?) manuscript of *Täʾamrä Maryam* “Miracles of Mary”, written in several hands, was donated, according to a note, by “communities of ʾAbrəntant to Kəsad ʾAga Maryam”; but the original commissioners were ʿAśratä Şəyon, Mälkäʿa Krəstos and Märqorewos (fig. 18-20). Däbrä ʾAbrəntant is one of the biggest Waldəbba monasteries<sup>15</sup>. The library possesses a late 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century *Tərgʷame mälʾəktä Pəwlos*, Commentary of John Chrysostom on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews (with added glosses in commentaries in Gəʿəz) (fig. 19) which occurs in monastic libraries of the upper level rather than in

<sup>12</sup> Cp. Hummel 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *Gaba* means in a kind of thorny tree in Təgrəñña (Kane 2000:2289, *Zizyphus spina christi*).

<sup>14</sup> The library encompasses up to 15 historical books, and some 15 recent books.

<sup>15</sup> S. EAE II, 8a-9b.

modest church libraries; a 17<sup>th</sup>-century (?) copy of *ʾArägawi mänfäsawi* “Spiritual Elder” and not very common *Zena ʾAbäw*, probably of the same age. A manuscript of *Mäşḥafä gənzät*, Book of the funeral ritual, donated by ʿAśratä Şəyon (the same as above?) and Wäldä Haymanot, datable to the 17<sup>th</sup> century at least, appears to be an exceptionally well preserved example of the service book (figs. 20-21)<sup>16</sup> which is intensively used for the funeral service and do not survive over a long time.

## Conclusion

The monastic libraries of the Waldəbba churches and monasteries are reportedly extremely rich but have never been explored, and this area has been hardly accessible to the scholars. The field research produced clear indications that the manuscript culture of the area of study, adjacent to Waldəbba, is richer than it was assumed. A lot of books which entered the collections of the churches, also of those recently founded, appears to have come from Waldəbba or through the intermediation of Waldəbba. It is important to start the systematic exploration and reconnaissance at least in the neighboring districts, which were also under the strong influence of Waldəbba, to approach the latter in the future. It is equally important that the authorized institutions and scholars will start elaborating the strategy as to how this very specific cultural area can be recorded and protected, in view of the ongoing development projects and the overall deep changes taking place in the local physical and cultural landscape.

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<sup>16</sup> Noticeable are a rare ligature for the word *halle luyya* ሃሌ:ሉዮ:፣ contracted into two signs (fig. 21, col. Va, Ra), and the elegant frame for the readings’ indications in the upper margin (fig. 21).

Plates



Fig. 1. May Hargash 'Enda Giyorgis, the main church



Fig. 2. May Hargash 'Enda Giyorgis, the main church



Fig. 3. May Hargäş 'Ēnda Giyorgis, seen from afar



Fig. 4. May Hargäş 'Ēnda Giyorgis, the gorge of the river May Čä'a





Fig. 5. May Hargäş 'Ēnda Giyorgis, monks' dwellings



Fig. 6. May Hargäş 'Ēnda Giyorgis, communal house





Fig. 11. May Ḥargäs ʿĒnda Giyorgis, Vita of Kiros

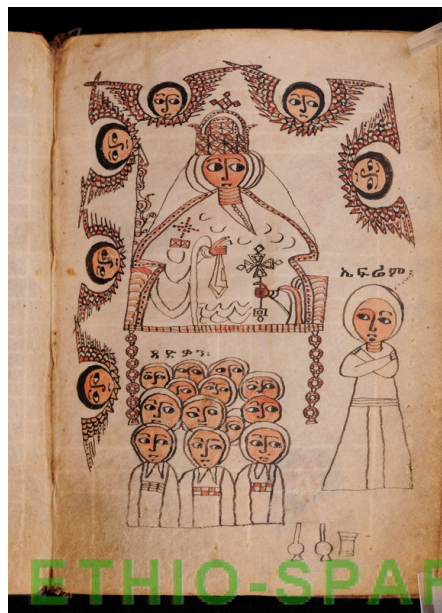


Fig. 12, 13, 14. May Ḥargäs ʿĒnda Giyorgis, Horologium

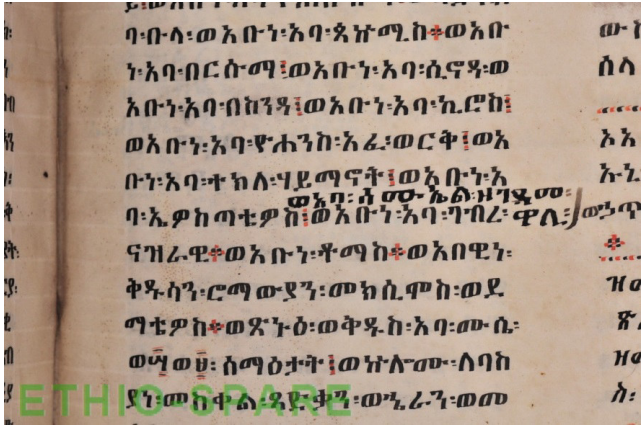


Fig. 15. May Hargäṣ ʿĒnda Giyorgis, Book of the Rite of the Holy Week

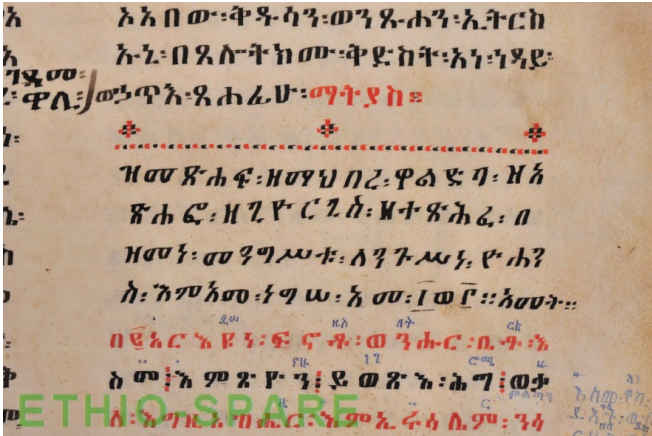


Fig. 16. May Hargäṣ ʿĒnda Giyorgis, Book of the Rite of the Holy Week



Fig. 17. May Gaba Mikaʿel, the main church



Fig. 18.-20 May Gaba Mika'el, Miracles of Mary



Fig. 21. May Gaba Mika'el, Commentary of John Chrysostom on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews



Fig. 22. May Gaba Mika'el, Book of the funeral ritual

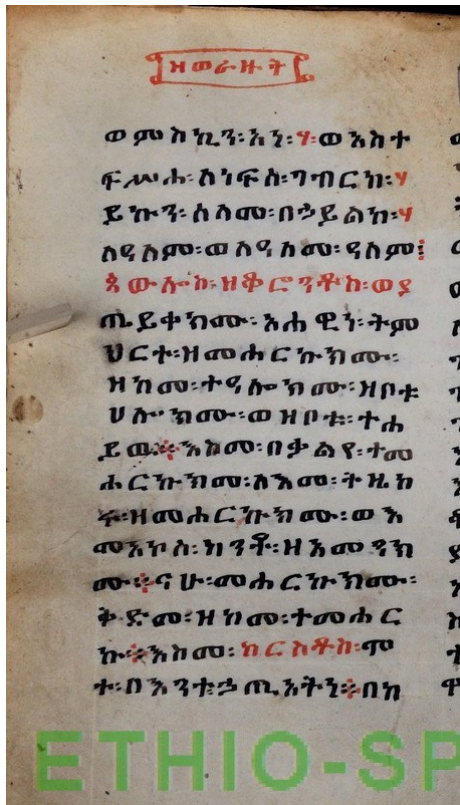


Fig. 23. May Gaba Mika'el, Book of the funeral ritual





## IMPRESSUM

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