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# Articles and notes

## **The manuscript as a leaf puzzle: the case of the *Gädlä Säma 'tat* from 'Ura Qirqos (Ethiopia)\***

*Antonella Brita, Universität Hamburg\*\**

In the course of time, the life of a manuscript can be affected by a series of transformations which, very often, have an impact on its material appearance. These changes can depend on several factors. A manuscript can change its function, its recipient, its owner, or it can be reused for different purposes till its final demise. Usually these factors leave one or more marks on the body of the manuscript which can be immediately visible and detectable, or, on the contrary, need to be revealed through a more accurate autopsy. These marks, if not identified in time, can radically influence the perception of the manuscript and compromise the result of the study focusing on it.

The manuscript protagonist of this article was indeed affected at least by one of these factors. It was used till a certain time as a liturgical book but was then gradually relinquished. Its dismissal brought about a sort of disinterest among its owners: not being concerned anymore about its text, the priests started to neglect also the object, i.e. the manuscript. This fact led to a gradual dismemberment of the codex that had a dramatic impact on its codicological structure. Its complete disintegration and breaking down were avoided by a hair's breadth, thanks to the efforts of a group of people who worked hard for saving it from falling apart.

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\* A slightly different version of this article was presented on the occasion of the 2. Tag der Offenen Tür, on 31 May 2013, at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (SFB 950 "Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa"), Hamburg University.

\*\* The research was carried out within the framework of the sub-project C05 "Cross-Section Views of Evolving Knowledge: Canonico-Liturgical and Hagiographic Christian Manuscripts as Corpus Organizers" directed by Alessandro Bausi, SFB 950, "Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa", funded by the DFG.

### The manuscript

The manuscript is written in Gə‘əz (Classical Ethiopic) and contains a collection of hagiographic texts identified at least from the thirteenth century with the label of *Gädlä säma ‘at*, ‘Spiritual Combat of the Martyrs’. These collections have as their core texts translated from other languages into Ethiopic, and were later implemented with new original texts written in Ethiopic. These hagiographies refer to both non-Ethiopian (oriental, mostly Egyptian) and Ethiopian martyrs and saints, although the former exceed the latter in number and the Ethiopian characters are rarely attested. The texts are arranged within the manuscript according to the commemoration day of the relevant saints and follow the order of the calendar.

### The collection

The manuscript is part of the collection of the church ‘Ura Qirqos,<sup>1</sup> located in Təgray, the northern region of Ethiopia, in the area of Zäla Ambässa, close to the border with Eritrea. The church stands on the crest of the highland and is dedicated to Cyricus (or Quiricus; Qirqos in Ethiopic), one of the Christian martyrs who suffered his martyrdom together with his mother Julitta (Iyäluṭa in Ethiopic) in Tarsus, in south-central Turkey, at the beginning of the fourth century CE.<sup>2</sup> It is not a mere coincidence that the church where the manuscript is preserved is dedicated to Qirqos: he is among those whose martyrdom is narrated in this codex.

Most the manuscripts and objects of the church collection had once belonged to the church of ‘Ura Mäsqäl, which stands on the opposite side of the plateau, on top of a high rock pinnacle, and is extremely difficult to access. According to the local priests, the manuscripts were carried to ‘Ura Qirqos when the monks decided to abandon ‘Ura Mäsqäl soon after the beginning of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war in 1998. The church is actually close to the border where the fights took place; there were (and still are) land mines scattered in the whole valley between the two crests of the highland, and it might have been extremely risky for the people to climb up the mountain in order to reach the church. Nowadays the church of ‘Ura Mäsqäl has

- 1 A description of the church and its manuscript collection is provided in Noslitsin 2013: 3–8.
- 2 The Ethiopic tradition of the martyrdom of St Quiricus with a critical edition of the text, consideration of its oriental parallels, and an analysis of 21 manuscript witnesses was the object of study of the PhD thesis by Pisani (2013). Cf. now Pisani 2015.

been rebuilt, but the service there takes place only on the occasion of few annual festivities, and it does not have a new collection of manuscripts of its own yet, apart from the few books used for the liturgical service.

### **First contacts**

I first saw the manuscript in June 2006, during one of my field trips in Ethiopia. It was kept in a chest together with other manuscripts, all in rather bad conditions; many of them were unbound and their leaves were mixed up. At that time I was working on a different topic, so I did not digitize it.

In 2010 Denis Nosnitsin and his team carried out the first mission of the project Ethio-SPaRe. During this mission they had the chance to visit the church of 'Ura Qirqos and to see and digitize the manuscript of the *Gädlä säma 'tat* (assigning to it the project shelfmark UM-018).<sup>3</sup>

### **Preservation, reconstruction and conservation of the manuscript**

The preservation and conservation efforts took place within the framework of a partnership between the projects Ethio-SPaRe and Sonderforschungsbereich (SFB) 950, both of Hamburg University. A large group of people cooperated: for Ethio-SPaRe, Denis Nosnitsin (head of the project), Stefan Ancel, Vitagrazia Pisani and the book conservators sponsored by the Ethio-SPaRe project, mainly Marco Di Bella (University of Palermo, Italy) and Nikolas Sarris (University of Zakynthos, Greece); for SFB 950, Alessandro Bausi (head of the sub-project C05), Antonella Brita (sub-project C05), Ira Rabin (sub-project Z02); besides, Meseret Hailesellassie (Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency, Ethiopia) provided essential logistical support in Ethiopia. The work was carried out in several phases:

#### *Phase 1: acquisition of the documentation (Ethio-SPaRe)*

In 2010, the members of Ethio-SPaRe were able to digitize, among others, the manuscript of the *Gädlä säma 'tat*. Prior to photographing, they numbered the leaves of the manuscript with a pencil<sup>4</sup> (in the following: 1<sup>st</sup> seq.).

3 See Nosnitsin 2013: 5, fig. 3.

4 The numbering of the leaves, which could seem an impious act, is, instead, a fundamental operation. The pages of the Ethiopic manuscripts are normally not numbered and do not contain catchwords, like in other manuscript traditions; only quires are sometimes numbered. In normal condition, the numbering of the leaves helps the scholars in tracking easily the alteration of the sequence of leaves of a manuscript in the course of time, when the bindings get broken. In extreme conditions, like in this specific case, number-

*Phase 2: philological work (SFB 950).*

I received from Denis Nosnitsin the image set of the *Gädlä säma 'tat* in 2011, with the aim of providing a description for the Ethio-SPaRe cataloguing database and studying it for my sub-project in the SFB 950. It became clear immediately that it would have been very difficult to work on the manuscript. The leaves, 280 in total, were all mixed up to such an extent that it was impossible to identify the individual hagiographies. Sometime in the past, at a moment difficult to determine, the binding was broken and the leaves started to mingle. Although some leaves show traces of repair, the binding was not restored. This could be due to the negligence of the priests who, in general, do not have the resources to take proper care of the items of their collection, but also, and primarily, due to the fact that the manuscript was not used in the liturgy any longer.

I first had all the images printed out to produce a sort of a model of the manuscript to work upon. Not having the physical manuscript in my hands, I had to set temporarily aside the codicological features (apart for the very few ones detectable from the pictures) and focus on the textual aspects. I identified the *incipits* of the hagiographies, the layout of which is easily recognizable, and started to reconstruct the sequence of the plot of each single text with the help of other manuscripts of the *Gädlä säma 'tat* available in microfilm copies. After that I identified the sequence of the reconstructed textual units wherever no material boundary was present (that is when the beginning of a text and the end of the previous one were placed on the same page or on the same folium). When the reconstruction was completed, I renumbered the leaves of my model manuscript, arriving at a new sequence. This preliminary work allowed me to identify the number of the single hagiographic texts, the presence of three different hands, and to recognize that at least two leaves must have gotten lost in the course of time and were now missing. To facilitate further work steps, I then prepared a table containing the correspondence between the previous numbering and my new numbering.

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ing the leaves is extremely important because it helps to document a “before and after”, that is the state in which the manuscript was initially found and the state it acquired after the reconstruction. Furthermore, in our case it also fulfils a practical need since the numeration represents the only point of reference for the book conservators (who cannot read Ethiopic) to maintain the correct order during the conservation process.



Fig. 1. 'Ura Qirqos, May 2012: from left to right: Vitagrazia Pisani, Nikolas Sarris, Marco di Bella, Antonella Brita, Denis Nosnitsin examining MS UM-018.

*Phase 3: comparison between the textual reconstruction and the codicological structure (SFB 950, Ethio-SPaRe).*

Once the plot and the sequence of the hagiographies were reconstructed from the textual point of view, it was necessary to verify if the reconstruction tallied with the physical structure of the manuscript. This was decisive mainly for the non-continuous sequence of the texts, interrupted by a caesura<sup>5</sup> (that is when a new text starts on the recto leaf of the first folium of the quire and the previous one ends on the verso leaf of the last folium of the preceding quire). In May 2012, I joined the Ethio-SPaRe mission to 'Ura Qirqos, together with the book conservators, with the aim of reordering the sequence of the leaves of the manuscript according to my reconstruction (fig. 1). On that occasion, a first attempt at describing the quire structure and identifying the hair and flesh sides of the parchment sheets was also done but, due to the difficult work conditions, it was only a preliminary attempt. On verifying the correctness of the reconstructed sequence, the leaves of the manuscript were then numbered with a pencil for the second time (below: 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.) and digitized again by Ethio-SPaRe according to the new reconstructed sequence.

*Phase 4: codicological analysis and conservation (SFB 950 and Ethio-SPaRe book conservators).*

In November 2012 it was possible to carry out a careful codicological analysis of the manuscript and also to start the work of conservation. Two volunteers additionally supported the book conservators: Robert Procter

5 On the codicological concept of caesura see Gumbert 2004: 24.



(London, UK), and Teresa Zammit Lupi (Valletta, Malta). A conservation lab was installed in one of the rooms of the Təgray Culture and Tourism Agency building in Mäqälä<sup>6</sup> (North Ethiopia) and the manuscript was carried, with a special permission obtained by Ethio-SPaRe, from 'Ura Qirqos church to Mäqälä. The codicological examination allowed us, on the one hand, to reconstruct properly the structure of the quires and the way the single leaves bearing a stub had been originally folded into the quires; on the other hand, it set us before some problems not always easy to understand or solve, like, for instance, if two separated leaves were, in origin, one bifolium. At least in one case, the inner margins of two single leaves without stub were too damaged to be able to determine on the basis of the breaking traces if they had formerly belonged to one folded sheet, simply because they did not match. In that case, following the suggestion of Marco di Bella, we put the two leaves close together, backlit them, and took into consideration other elements, such as the direction of the hair on the hair side and the direction of the ruling lines (fig. 2).

The first operation of the conservation work was the removal of the remnants of the old binding from the manuscript. A quire scheme was sketched on a sheet of paper: each quire was visualized by an empty line, and the old threads were attached with a sticker according to their original position in the manuscript (fig. 3). Subsequently the conservators started to repair the damaged corners of the sheets and the split bifolia (fig. 4).

In the meantime I crosschecked one more time the sequence of the quires, both on the manuscript and on my paper scheme, and I noted that one quire at the end of the manuscript seemed misplaced: the text it con-

6 Since it is impossible to find in Ethiopia all the necessary equipment for manuscript conservation, organizing a laboratory was a very difficult task both in terms of logistics, coordination, work place comfort, and in terms of costs (the conservation of the manuscript was funded by the Ethio-SPaRe project). Work conditions in Ethiopia are not comparable to those in a European library. All the necessary materials were bought in Europe and brought to Ethiopia, with enormous efforts. Each day it was necessary to try to find solutions to problems. Still, Marco di Bella and Nikolas Sarris revealed great patience, creativity and ability to adapt to this situation. Just as an example: the month of May can be very hot and dry in Təgray, and it is difficult to handle the parchment since it becomes dry and hard. To get around this problem, the book conservators created a rudimentary but efficient humidifier from an old electric fan and a wet cloth placed over a chair in front of it. Soaking repeatedly the cloth in the water, they managed to maintain a relatively high and constant level of humidity in the lab.

Fig. 2. 'Ura Qirqos, November 2012: matching the folia in UM-018.



Fig. 3. 'Ura Qirqos, November 2012: registering the old binding threads.



Fig. 4. 'Ura Qirqos, November 2012: repairing the damaged leaves.



Fig. 5. 'Ura Qirqos, June 2014: examining the inks with the help of X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy.



tained would be expected to be in a different place according to the usual arrangement of the collection. We tried then to replace the quire exactly where, I assumed, it was expected to be and, at the same time, we cautiously looked for clues that could justify the displacement. Finally the evidence: blots of ink on the first (recto) page of the quire corresponded to the ink melted from the last (verso) page of the preceding quire, showing that the two leaves had once been contiguous. The stains of ink by themselves of course only show that the fascicle was in that position at a certain time, but along with the evidence provided by the textual analysis this demonstrates that this was the original position of the quire in the manuscript.

In January and February 2014 the work of conservation proceeded and it was completed in June 2014. During the last phase, the conservators were supported by the volunteers Desiree Domec (Essex, UK) and Niki Pantazidou (Zakynthos, Greece).

*Phase 5: material analysis (SFB 950, Ethio-SPaRe conservators).*

In June 2014 a new joint mission was organized; its aim was to carry out the material analysis of selected manuscripts of the collection, including the manuscript of the *Gädlä säma‘tat*. Ira Rabin analyzed the inks using a portable X-Ray Fluorescence Spectroscopy Tracer (fig. 5). The results are currently being prepared for publication.

Upon the completion of the conservation, the manuscript, provided with new binding and wooden boards, was brought back to the church of 'Ura Qirqos, in a grey acid-free cardboard box containing, apart from the manuscript, also the original fragments of thread from the old binding.

Marco di Bella and Nikolas Sarris instructed the priest on how to take the manuscript out from the box and how to put it back without damaging it.

On that occasion, a bunch of loose leaves, previously unknown, was found in the church. Among these leaves, I identified a fragmentary leaf belonging to the *Gädlä säma‘tat*, which is one of the two leaves that had been missing. Thus, before the end of the mission, the conservators took the new leaf to the workshop in Mäqälä, made the necessary restoration and went back to ‘Ura Qirqos to accommodate it within the manuscript. The pages of the codex were then re-numbered again (below: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.), and the manuscript was digitized for the third time, by myself and Alessandro Bausi.

### Description of the manuscript

#### *Codicological description*<sup>7</sup>

Parchment. Fifteenth–sixteenth century. 53.5 × 38 × 20 cm. 281 leaves<sup>8</sup> (at least one is missing). Guard leaves missing.

Text area: 39 × 26 cm; intercolumn: 1.5 cm.

Margins: top: 4 cm; bottom: 4 cm; left: 1.5 cm; right: 9 cm.

Dimension of letters: height: 1 cm; width: 0.7 cm.

Ruling pattern (Muzerelle): 1A-1A-1A1A/0-0/0-0/C. Pricking and ruling are clearly visible.

Hand: three different scribes wrote the manuscript; change of hand on ff. 132rb, 259vb, 264ra.

Rubrication: *incipit*, indications of liturgical reading, boundaries, caesurae, numerals, punctuation, aides-memoire punctuation.

The structure of the hair and flesh sides is generally consistent (H-H/F-F); incongruences are visible between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> quires (F/H) and between the second and third leaves of the 30<sup>th</sup> quire (F/H).

One leaf is missing at the end of the 34<sup>th</sup> quire.

Quire structure: 1<sup>8</sup>-5<sup>8</sup>; 6<sup>3</sup> (ss.ll.); 7<sup>8</sup>-9<sup>8</sup>; 10<sup>8</sup>-11<sup>8</sup> (ss.ll.: 3,6); 12<sup>8</sup>-15<sup>8</sup>; 16<sup>6</sup> (ss.ll.: 1,2,3,6); 17<sup>8</sup>-19<sup>8</sup>; 20<sup>8</sup> (ss.ll.: 3,6); 21<sup>8</sup>; 22<sup>8</sup> (ss.ll.: 3,6); 23<sup>8</sup>-29<sup>8</sup>; 30<sup>3</sup> (s.l.: 2); 31<sup>8</sup>-32<sup>8</sup>; 33<sup>6</sup> (ss.ll.: 2,3); 34<sup>7</sup> (ss.ll.: 3,6); 35<sup>8</sup>-36<sup>8</sup>; 37<sup>8</sup> (ss.ll.: 3,6).

7 The description is made on the basis of the reconstructed manuscript, just before the conservation. The measurements are done on the f. 143r. The foliation is according to the last numbering (3<sup>rd</sup> seq.).

8 With the last fragment found, the total number of leaves is 281. An error was done during the first foliation and no. 122 was omitted. As a consequence, f. 122 does not appear in the 1<sup>st</sup> seq. and the final leaf is numbered 281 (even if the last leaf discovered was not known then). I will refer to f. 281 of the 1<sup>st</sup> seq. as f. 281a.

*Content description*

- (1) Yoħannəs Mätməq (1 *Mäskäräm*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 1-9; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 1-9v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 281<sub>a</sub>r; 187-192; 137; 139v];
- (2) Mamas, Tewodoṭos, Tewofina (5 *Mäskäräm*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: 9v-21r; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 9v-21r; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 139v; 26-32; 52-56r];
- (3) Əstifanos (15 *Mäskäräm*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: 21v-31v; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: 21v-31v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 56v-66v];
- (4) The discovery of St Əstifanos's relics (1 *Ṭərr*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: 32r-35ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 32r-35ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 67r; 46; 47; 42ra];
- (5) Ewoṣtəwos (23 *Mäskäräm*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 35ra-43v; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 35ra-43v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 42ra-45; 48-51; 41v];
- (6) Kirakos (5 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 44r-47v; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 44r-47v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 33r; 35-37v];
- (7) Pəntələwon *zəṣoma't* (6 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 48r-56ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 48r-56ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 38r-40; 34; 71; 80-83ra];
- (8) Pəntələwon the physician (6 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 56r-64va; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 56r-64va; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 83r-85; 70; 68; 74-77va];
- (9) Qopryanos and Iyoṣṭa (7 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 64va-67ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 64va-67ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 77va-79; 69ra];
- (10) Sərgis and Bakkos (10 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 67r-75; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 67r-75; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 69r; 277; 268; 271-276v];
- (11) Filəyas (17 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 76r-78va; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 76r-78va; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 86r-88va];
- (12) Romanos (18 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 78va-83v; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 78va-83v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 88va-93v];
- (13) Yoħannəs Dəylami (19 *Ṭəqəmt*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 84r-93ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 84r-93ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 94r-100; 72; 278; 102ra];
- (14) Zinobis and Zənoḃya (6 *Hədar*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 93r-96va; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 93r-96va; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 102r-105va];
- (15) Ṭaṭus (17 *Hədar*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: 96va-100ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 96va-100ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 105va-107; 186; 193ra];
- (16) Elewtəros and Əntəya (18 *Hədar*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 100ra-103rb; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 100ra-103rb; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 193ra-196rb];
- (17) Tewoflos, Pətroqya and Dəmalis (19 *Hədar*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 103rb-106va; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 103rb-106va; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 196rb-199va];
- (18) Qozmas and Dəmyanos (22 *Hədar*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 106va-113vb; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 106va-113vb; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 199va-203; 205; 206; 204vb];



- (36) Ākawəḥ (28 *Ṭərr*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 259vb-269rb; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 253vb-263rb; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 215vb-220; 228; 138; 124; 125; 126rb];
- (37) Orni (30 *Ṭərr*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 269va-275rb; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 263va-269rb; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 126va-132rb];
- (38) Ṭeqäla (30 *Ṭərr*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 275rb-277ra; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 269rb-271ra; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 132rb; 108; 135ra];
- (39) Abuqir and Yohannəs (6 *Yäkkatit*) [foliation: 3<sup>rd</sup> seq.: ff. 277rb-281v; 2<sup>nd</sup> seq.: ff. 271rb-274, 281v; 1<sup>st</sup> seq.: ff. 135rb; 136; 134; 133, 281].

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