

Sub-project C05

Cross-Section Views of Evolving Knowledge: Canonico-Liturgical and Hagiographic Ethiopic Christian Manuscripts as Corpus-Organizers

Prof. Dr. Alessandro Bausi

Dr. Antonella Brita

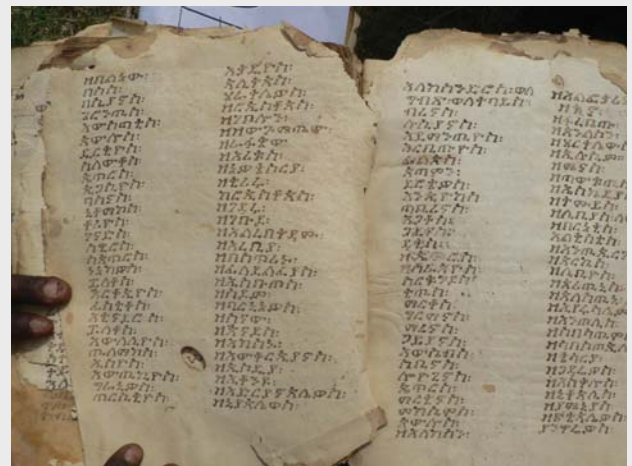
Description of the project

Ethiopic manuscripts dating back to the 13th/14th cent. at the earliest of a canonico-liturgical and a hagiographic corpus come to play the peculiar role of corpus-organizers in the trans-mission of the written knowledge in the crucial period between the vanishing of the ancient Late antique Greek-based heritage of Aksumite times (4th to 7th cent. A.D.), the absorption of fresh Christian Arabic culture in the Medieval period (since the 13th cent. A.D.), and the later development (since the 14th) of new knowledge ideologically related to the Aksumite past.

The two corpora have undergone different fates as a consequence of their institutional status: a) a more flexible and soft reshaping for the hagiographical collections; b) a more strict process of knowledge-filtering ending with a proper canonization and radical restructuring for the canonico-liturgical collections.

Objectives

The project aims to analyse each manuscript of the two corpora basing on material, textual, paratextual and contextual elements. A few selected discrete components will be analysed in detail by correlating material and textual evidence. The evolution of each corpus will be placed in a wider perspective considering their antecedents and parallels. A tentative reconstruction of a lost Alexandrian episcopal archive, traces of which appear to have been pre-served in several canonico-liturgical manuscripts, and in one in particular, will be attempted.



Ethiopic parchment manuscript of a canonico-liturgical collection from Tigray, Northern Ethiopia, with list of the bishops of the Nicaea council.

Ethiopic Manuscript Culture

Rooted in the remote past of the Aksumite kingdom, the Ethiopian and Eritrean area offers a peculiar case study of a manuscript culture in ancient, medieval and modern times. Historically a region of written civilization starting from the 1st millennium B.C., it bears witness to the relatively early introduction of parchment roll and codex, the latter having been strongly fostered by the Christianization of the country in the 4th cent. A.D. Taking advantage of the dry climate of the highlands, manuscript production has enjoyed a steady fortune for centuries till the present time, when the practice is attracting an increasing number of scholars.

Assessed linguistic and historical evidence as well as fresh data relating to the Alexandrian Church recently come to light corroborates the hypothesis of a strict dependence of the Ethiopian scribal practice and written culture upon that of Christian Egypt, which early provided Aksum with manuscripts transmitting Greek written knowledge. Yet the relatively recent date of most Ethiopic manuscripts (only two or three Four Gospels books could predate the 12th cent.) and the scholarly assumption of a mostly Arabic-based Ethiopian Christianity combined with the misleading effects of updatings and rearrangements in the course of time have conspired to bring about a substantial underestimation of several archaic features of the Ethiopian scribal and manuscript practice.



Ethiopic parchment manuscript from Eritrea, Sàra'e, including a 15th cent. inventory of manuscript books with mention of canonico-liturgical and hagiographical collections.