

Sub-project C05

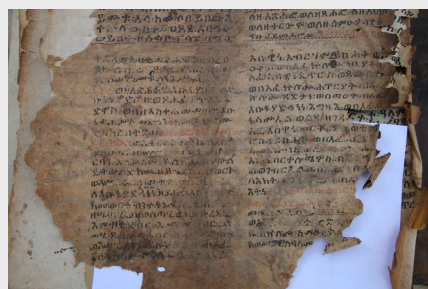
'Parchment Saints' - The Making of Ethiopian Hagiographic Manuscripts: Matter and Devotion in Manuscript Practices of Medieval and Pre-Modern Ethiopia

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Description of the project

Christian Ethiopia possesses a remarkable hagiographical manuscript tradition that includes hundreds of foreign and local saints to whom written narratives and literary praises are dedicated. This various corpus represents a still scarcely explored field of research which transversally involves single and institutional actors in the relevant manuscript culture. From the creator/translator of the narrative and/or the producer of the material and the manuscript, to the scribe, copyist, and painter, from the commissioner, donor, and destinee, to users and audience, to its fundamental monastic and ecclesiastic institutional background, the whole Ethiopian Christian environment and landscape has been marked



Däbrä Bänk'al, Tagray, Northern Ethiopia, Ethiopic parchment manuscript, uncatalogued, fifteenth century, hagiographic collection: colophon

by the material, iconic, ideal, and performative presence of hagiographic manuscripts and 'parchment saints' throughout the time frame from Late Antiquity to the fourteenth century CE — time limit of the attestation of Ethiopian hagiographical manuscripts — to the present.

Objectives

The project aims to study the specific manuscriptological features of a new creation of intrinsic revolutionary character: extremely sporadic until the fourteenth century, more substantially from the fifteenth century on, Ethiopian prominent figures who had promoted monastic practice and intellectual debates, were recognized as saints and became in their turn characters of narratives fixed in manuscripts for devotional use. So far investigated in its historical and literary aspects only, the making of hagiographic manuscripts promises to disclose unexplored aspects of the Ethiopian manuscript culture: how and why Ethiopian hagiographic manuscripts were first produced; which was the labour division; which the ritual and liturgical accommodation of the manuscripts; which hagiographies went with which; how local saints were assimilated with foreign saints; how manuscripts contributed to shape and organize hagiographic cycles; which the role of archaic multiple-text manuscripts ('homilies') in prompting the creation of new models of manuscript; which are the parallels to this practice in other related and unrelated manuscript cultures.



Craftsman sewing the end-binding of a liturgical manuscript in the town of Aksum, Tagray, Northern Ethiopia



Däbrä Mädhanit, Tagray, Northern Ethiopia, uncatalogued, fourteenth/early fifteenth century, hagiographic collection: Ethiopic version of the *Acts of Cyprian and Justina*, with indication of liturgical reading on the margin

Ethiopic Manuscript Culture

Rooted in the premises 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 first millennium BCE, it bears witness to the relatively early introduction of parchment roll and codex, the latter favoured by the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century CE. Manuscript production has enjoyed a steady for-tune for centuries till the present time, when the practice is attracting an increasing number of scholars interested in marginal less known areas potentially preserving archaic or peculiar features. A constitutive part of its cultural and material tradition for centuries, the production of hagiographic manuscripts is universally acknowledged as a central and marking feature of Ethiopian manuscript culture.



Yohannes Käma, Tagray, Northern Ethiopia, Ethiopic composite parchment manuscript, uncatalogued, fifteenth/sixteenth century; hagiographic collection