

**Deggwa and Märha Ewwur [Guide of the Blind]  
In Ge'ez and Amharic, manuscript on parchment  
Ethiopia, 19<sup>th</sup> century**

68 ff., complete (?), mostly in gatherings of 8 leaves, written by two scribes, in a reasonable but small hand (on 1-2 mm.) with cantillation signs (1), and in an untidy hurried hand (2-3 mm.) for the secondary text on ff. 58v-68v (2), in two columns, on 17 lines for the main text, 26-30 lines for the secondary text, written in black with the usual rubrics in the deggwa text (alternate opening lines, sub-section headings, modal instructions, etc.), with interlinear and marginal musical notation, ruling and pricking visible throughout. Bound between plain wooden boards, the front board split and repaired with cord. Dimensions 145 x 150 mm.

Ethiopian manuscripts, even those of a relatively late date such as the present example, are marvellous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries. More remarkable than the binding in the present manuscript is its musical notation. Indigenous to Ethiopia, a series of interlinear signs called *melekket* in Ge'ez, provide a mnemonic system, requiring the singer to remember the tunes of the melodies associated with the signs and apply them to the words below.

**PROVENANCE**

1. There is no colophon or note of the date of writing. The name of the owner and scribe of the secondary text is given, ff. 58r and 58v, as Mämher (Abbot or Teacher) Bälaynäh. The Amharic version of this text is believed to have been written in 1896 by one Keflä Giyorgis.
2. European Private Collection

**TEXT**

f. 1r-v, blank;

f. 2r-v, [different hand] A text called Nägärä (näragärä in the text) Hawaryat ["Words or Acts of the Apostles"] listing the feast days of the Apostles and concluding with a short text with musical notation;

ff. 3r-57r1, part of the Deggwa for the Feast of St. John on 1 Mäskäräm, beginning "Halleluya. Blessed are you, John, who know God and go before Him. Pray for us at the start of the year."

ff. 57r2-57v, [different hand] hymn to "the hosts of angels ..., cherubim and seraphim";

f. 58r, blank except for the name Mämher Bälaynäh;

ff. 58v-65r, [different hand] The text Märha Ewwur (here ewwer) ["Guide of the Blind"].

This text, written in Amharic, consists of a collection of treatises providing instructions for calendar calculations, predominantly for fixing the dates of the moveable feasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The text is noted as having been copied here by Mämher Bälaynäḥ.

ff.65v-68v, [same hand as preceding text], Prayer and hymn in praise of the dove of the Holy Spirit.

The principal text is part of the Deggwa, or non-monastic Liturgy for the Divine Office. The Deggwa comprises many parts covering the entire liturgical year, including all the orders of service for daily worship as well as special feast days and other occasions. Ethiopian tradition ascribes its composition to the sixth-century Saint Yaréd, but this is disputed and the work is most likely a composite composition by various authors at various dates. The oldest known Deggwa manuscript [Vat. Aeth. 28] dates from the fifteenth century.

The physical text of the Deggwa is notable for the use of cantillation marks or musical notation, called in Ge'ez *melekket* or "signs," inserted between the lines of text. The system is indigenous to Ethiopia. These do not depict the melodies in any visual way, but are more a mnemonic device for recalling the chants, especially during study of the liturgy by trainee *däbtäras* rather than during the actual performance of the liturgy. This mnemonic system requires the singer to remember the tunes of the melodies associated with the signs and apply them to the words below. The *melekket* comprise (a) characters from the Ethiopian script, occurring singly or in groups, (b) a small number of conventional, non-alphabetic signs, (c) numbers indicating the repetitions of the "halleluyas," and (d) marginal signs indicating related groupings of melodies. Though, again, Ethiopian tradition ascribes the origin of the system to the sixth-century Saint Yaréd, pre-sixteenth-century copies of the Deggwa are without musical notation, and some sources mention two *däbtäras* who codified the system following the Muslim invasions between 1529 and 1541. Manuscripts containing *melekket* are very rare in private hands.

Ethiopian manuscripts, even those of a relatively late date such as the present example, are marvellous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries. Christianity came to Ethiopia in the fourth century, and until the seventh century Ethiopia maintained close contact with the Coptic Church. Despite a brief period of Portuguese rule, the country remained isolated until the nineteenth century. Features of Ethiopian, or Coptic, bindings found here include: chain stitching (also called "Coptic" stitching) without cords and sewn directly into the thickness of the boards, paired sewing stations, square unbeveled wooden boards on which traces of the adze are left visible, and textblock flush with the boards (see Szirmai, 1999, pp. 45-50). The flat spine is covered with brown leather. The bindings are often rustic in appearance, and the present one retains the knot hole on the upper cover, which was at one time broken in two and is now stitched together with cord.

#### LITERATURE:

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Szirmai, J. A. *The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, Ashgate, 1999.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Ethiopian Lives and Liturgies"

<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/harvard-divinity-bulletin/articles/ethiopian-lives-and-liturgies>

<http://www.deezer.com/en/music/result/all/chants%20from%20ethiopian%20liturgy#music/result/all/chants%20from%20ethiopian%20liturgy>

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