BOOKMAKING IN ETHIOPIA
by
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Preface

Bookmaking is alive and well in Ethiopia, but at the same time a virgin field for in depth study. Though the preparation of ink and manufacturing of vellum is still practised today, using the same methods as in the old days, it has not drawn the attention of the scholars. As far as I know there is no work dealing with this subject. When the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library was created in 1973, besides its main objective, microfilming Ethiopian manuscripts, it has been preoccupied with preservation and reviving traditional writing materials. A man with long experience in this field has been assigned to it and the preparation of ink and the manufacturing of vellum started. Since then it has occupied my mind and I began to take notes. Whenever I saw in the newly arrived manuscripts a miniature related to writing I took a picture. All the illustrations included here are the result of this effort. It should be noted, however, that the first attempt of mine in this study is far from perfect.

For points which were not clear to me, particularly regarding the preparation of ink, I prepared a questionnaire and sent it to Addis Ababa to Fäqätì Selassie Täfäärä, who is on the staff of the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library and competent in this field. After consultation with other colleagues of his he prepared an extensive report and sent it to me. I thank him warmly for his prompt reply. The picture which appears on the front page as well as many inside are his. I would like to thank also J. J. Witkam, Keeper of Oriental manuscripts of the University Library of Leiden, my host since my arrival in the Netherlands, for his suggestions and encouragement to write on this topic.

Sergew Hable Selassie.
Contents

Preface ................................................................. p. 3
Contents ............................................................... p. 4
List of Illustrations ............................................... p. 5
Transliteration ....................................................... p. 6
I The Development of Writing materials ....................... p. 7
II Writing materials ................................................ p. 9
III Bookmaking ....................................................... p. 22
IV School of Calligraphy and the Prospects for its Graduates p. 27
Bibliography ........................................................ p. 36
Index ........................................................................ p. 38

List of Illustrations

1. A stretching frame .............................................. p. 11
2. Tools and writing materials in the present day .......... p. 12
4. Pricking of the folded vellum ............................... p. 13
5. Process of dissolving ink ........................................ p. 17
6. Process of dropping of water through fingers .......... p. 17
7. Pens from MSS ...................................................... p. 19
8. Scraping pen ......................................................... p. 19
9. Pen cutting on smooth goat's skin ......................... p. 20
10. Pens and ink horn ................................................. p. 21
11. Various sizes of codices ....................................... p. 22
12. Long time buried MS ........................................... p. 23
13. A sample cover from already curved board .......... p. 23
14. Ornamantation tools ............................................ p. 26
15. Tooled MS, morocco leather and a few ornamantation tools p. 27
16. Typical traditional scribe ..................................... p. 31
Transliteration

The transliteration of Ethiopian words is moving towards standardization. This is the impression that one can gain from reading some scholarly works at least. But it is still remote to talk about uniformity of transliteration. The present work is not either an exception. For the sake of convenience an accent is put on the vowel of the fifth order. For well established proper names, however, the generally accepted transliteration is retained.

I. The seven orders
1) ‚ – ha, 2) ù – hu, 3) ས – hi, 4) ཟ – ha, 5) ས – he, 6) ས – ha, 7) ས – ho

II. Syllabary

| U | = h |
| L | = l |
| n | = h |
| m | = m |
| w | = s |
| r | = r |
| s | = g |
| h | = sh |
| q | = q |
| b | = b |
| t | = t |
| c | = c |
| k | = k |
| w | = w |

I The development of writing materials.

In early times, the inhabitants of the opposite side of the Red Sea, the Sabaeans, emigrated to Ethiopia, and around 1000 B.C. brought with them a written language which began to be used by the indigenous inhabitants\(^1\). We find today many Sabean inscriptions engraved on stones of various size\(^2\). This of course does not mean that stone was the only medium of writing. As one can see from their initials marked with a seal, iron also was used for this purpose\(^3\). However, since iron in early times was so precious metal in Ethiopia, and because of its rarity, more precious than gold, the use of it as writing medium was very limited\(^4\). In the Hellenistic period when Greek culture found its way to Aksum, the same material, stone, was the common medium. The famous inscription of Adulis, *Monumentum Adulitanum*, was engraved on stone\(^5\). *The Periplius of the Erythraean Sea* which speaks about the spread of Greek culture in Ethiopia fails to mention the medium\(^6\). Neither does he mention writing materials among the items imported to Ethiopia.

When we come to the third and fourth centuries A.D. we find a variety of writing materials, stone, metal, clay and probably wood. The earliest Go‘iz inscription so far known, discovered by A. J. Drewes in the highland of Eritrea in Safrar not far from Addi Gleyh, is engraved on granite stone\(^7\). Another early Go‘iz inscription where a name Gādir, probably a monarch of the third century A.D. on a votive iron was among the antiquities collected from the province and deposited in Māqāl and unlike many Semitic languages was written from left to right\(^8\). In the third century A.D. Aksumite coins began to be minted using gold, silver, bronze and iron\(^9\). Besides the effigy of the monarch and other symbols, Greek and Go‘iz legends were engraved on the coins, which incidentally are invaluable sources of information about history. As a result of excavations and reconnaissance, sherds and pieces of pottery have been discovered, sometimes with inscriptions\(^10\).

So much for hard writing materials. What about soft writing materials? In Egypt and in the Sudan, papyrus had been used widely as a writing medium for a long time. Did it not find its way to Ethiopia? Though the plant is available in Ethiopia\(^11\) it is being used today for a purpose other than writing. It is used to build canoes for communication in the islands of Tana Sea and Ziway\(^12\), or as raincoats for herdsmen who are tending their cattle during the rainy season in the field. Due to the proximity of Ethiopia to the Sudan and Egypt, it is quite conceivable to expect to see papyrus as a writing medium in Ethiopia as well, but we

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3. F. Anfray, *Un campagne de fouilles à Yéba*: *Annales d’Éthiopie*, 5(1963), Fig. CLIII-CLIV.
10. A. Anzani, *Numismatica e storia di Etiopia*, 4ibid., ser. 3, nos. 5-6 (1928-29); Sergew H. S., *Ancient History*, pp. 82-84.
11. F. Anfray, *La poterie de Matar*: (pp. 20-21; R. Schneider, *Quelques inscriptions céramiques de Matar*)
12. D. B. Regis, *La nature et la vie des Pharaons*, (Yorkshire, 1973), p. 5. Here it is precisely stated that: ‘...at the present time papyrus flourishes in the Sudan and it also grows in Ethiopia’.
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lack evidence. The archaeological excavations so far conducted in Ethiopia have not brought to light any evidence in this regard, neither was this information transmitted by word of mouth, nor was the tradition. It still remains a matter of doubt.

The introduction of soft writing materials seems to be the work of the Nine Saints, whose arrival in Ethiopia in the second half of the fifth century is believed to be a landmark in the history of Christianity in Ethiopia. It is characterized as a `second evangelization' of the country. According to the information deduced from their lives, the majority of them came from Asia Minor. In this region since the third century B.C. Pergamum began to rival Alexandria in acquisition of books. Attalus (died 197 B.C.) the founder of the Attalid dynasty and Eumenes II, (died 159 B.C.) another monarch of the same line, founded and promoted the library of Pergamum which had far-reaching effects on the history of writing materials. The Attalids at first used papyrus for the production of literary works imported from Egypt. The Ptolemies of Egypt were not reluctant to see a rival library to their own, banned the export of papyrus to Pergamum and because of this the Attalids had to find another source for the continuation of their ambitious project.

Skin as writing material was known long ago to the Middle East countries, including Egypt itself, however, it was not such good quality as vellum. In Pergamum vellum was manufactured making both the flesh and hair sides suitable for the purpose of writing. One can perhaps say that vellum in its present form is the achievement of Pergamum, and deservedly it went down in history as charite pergamenae.

As it has already been mentioned above, the skill of preparing such writing material was most probably introduced to Ethiopia by the Nine Saints. The Nine Saints intended to translate the whole Bible into Ge'ez, so the urgency of getting dependable and abundant writing materials was absolute. Ethiopia had, and still has, many cattle, the only country rich in livestock in the whole continent of Africa. The purpose was well served: the Nine Saints had sheep and the country the raw material and so the manufacturing of vellum started which became the uncontestable writing medium almost for 1,500 years until the nineteenth century, when paper began to be partially used.

At the same time it all seems, Greek terms and words related to writing materials were introduced into Ethiopia which are still in use. But, it should be noted that they did not reach us without some discrepancies. The Greek word (Calamon=pen) the Ethiopians attributed to ink, and this erroneous term remains to the present day. When did the error occur?

I am not in a position, at least at this stage, to be definite. Dasta Takla Wald in his New Amharic Dictionary 19, has a causal expression which is worthwhile mentioning. In defining 21 ለ_magic ለGosh Maaq= reed), inter alia, he says የማcimiento የማማር የማልFalFr Araba "the people of Gondar call it calamon". Does this mean until the Gondar period, i.e. until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term 'calamon' applied to 'pen'? Again, this question cannot be answered with any certainty. We have to wait until more evidence come to light. For 'pen', a Semitic word ኢትዮጵያ (AbC 20) for 'vellum' in Ethiopia the same Greek word is used but in a condensed form 31 , instead of the full Greek word ኢትዮጵያ (membrana)

II Writing materials

These are three in number: Vellum, ink and pen.

A. Vellum.

Parchment or what is commonly called nowadays, vellum, can be prepared from any domesticated mammals, such as the ox, cow, calf, sheep, goat, horse and wild animals, such as the lion, tiger, gazelle, antelope etc. But goat, sheep, calf and horse skin are preferred among the domestic animals and gazelle and antelope from the wild ones. Goat and gazelle skins are fine white and take ink very well. Sheep skin usually is yellowish and is not used for religious books unless goat skin is scarce. Calf and horse skins are preferred for thick books which consume a great amount of vellum. It is estimated from one horse skin one can obtain 16 leaves of 8

24. H. Zsotter, Catalogue des manuscrits eothiopiens (Ge'ez et Amharique) de la Bibliothèque Nationale, (Paris, 1877), MSS. 52, 78, 93, 109, 118.
29. Technically speaking there is no difference between vellum and parchment. It is only a matter of choice. R. Reed mentions various possibilities and suggestions put forward by various people. He arrives at the conclusion "Hence at the present time it is impossible to make any clear distinction between vellum and parchment". (The Nature and Making of Parchment, pp. 78-79).
large size book. In terms of goat skin a manuscript like Brit. Mus. Or. 778, which measures 18 inches by 15½ inches, and as that volume contains some 245 leaves, over 120 goats must have been killed to provide vellum. The use of horse skin as vellum is something of the past. Some scribes gave eye witness accounts that horse skin was used for preparation of vellum until the dawn of this century.

The quality of vellum depends on the following factors:

a. The animal whose skin is going to be manufactured as vellum should never be fattened. The more meagre is the animal, the better the vellum.

b. It should not be beaten at least a week or so before it is salted, otherwise it will leave dark-coloured markings in the final parchment.

c. During the process of playing the skin, one should be very careful not to cut the skin with the knife.

d. After playing the skin, the best way is to fold it flesh side together, until it is immersed in water.

There are two ways of immersion, firstly to soak it in pure water in a clay or large wooden bowl, which serves as tank in Ethiopia. In this case it should be properly covered, or well sealed so that dogs and cats can not reach it. The other way is to take it to the river and bury it under the running water, making sure that the current does not carry it away. In this latter case the skin is put under heavy rocks. This prevents the skin from being carried away by the current and also protects it against wild beasts which are equipped with a keen sense of smell. Both ways have their advantages and disadvantages. Immersion at home under close supervision is the safest way, but during the process of preparation it produces a strong unpleasant smell which people find distasteful. Soaking in the river avoids the unpleasant smell but there is a risk that the skin could be partially eaten by fish and in this case end up with a number of holes. Sometimes it suffers so much it is rendered useless. The advantages of immersing the skin at home in a tank outweigh the disadvantages.

The duration of immersion varies from case to case. If the skin is fresh it should not take long; three days would be enough to loosen the hair. If the skin is dried it takes more than a week. If the weather is cool, salt is put in the water for a quicker loosening of the hair. The treatment with salt water helps kill bacterial micro-organisms, which sometimes cause irreparable damage. After the soaking the actual process of preparation of vellum begins.

It is stretched on a rectangular frame which is made of two thick wooden poles with two holes at each end. In the holes are fitted the other two poles, less thick and forming a rectangular shape. There are, actually two kinds of frames, large and small. The large one is for horse and calf skin and the small one for goat and sheep skin. As the horse skin has virtually ceased to be used for vellum nowadays, the large frame is non-existent. The skin is stretched after being pierced with a knife around the edges. In the holes are inserted four or six sticks each of about 1 meter. The number of sticks depends on whether the scribe wishes to use every last bit of the skin. In that case he would need the head part and uses six sticks, otherwise if he cuts the head part away it will give him an approximate square shape and he needs only four sticks. A cord of 16 m. long is needed to tie the sticks tight around the poles. To stretch the skin well, the cord should be tightened as much as possible, and anchored firmly to the wooden frame. Then the frame is laid on four columns of stones, flesh side up. Pure water is sprinkled on it and the fat is removed with a curved knife and lunette. Pumice is also applied from time to time to remove the grease. The process goes on until the skin is found clean enough. In the old days when the Ethiopians used horse skin to manufacture vellum, they used powdered pumice and rubbed the skin with the pumice to remove the fat and grease.

Since horse skin is no longer used, the treatment is unnecessary. For goat and sheep skins, powdered pumice is also unnecessary, the curved knife, lunette and pumice alone can do the job satisfactorily.

After the flesh side has been properly cleaned, the stretching frame is put up high, supported against a wall or a fence and exposed to the sun to dry. According to the Ethiopians it is believed that the sun has a beneficial effect on the brightness of the vellum. For this reason they prefer vellum to be made during the dry season, when the sun shines all day. Whenever circumstances force them to manufacture vellum during the rainy season, when the sun rarely shines, they try to create artificial brightness by putting white cloth around the stretched frame. The skin needs 3-4 days to dry properly. Then it is turned hair side up. It will be carefully scraped with a sharp axe so that the skin is not cut. It is also sprinkled with water on this side after shaving, the pumice is applied to remove traces of hair debris and the pelt cleaned by removing any hypodermal and muscle tissue still present. By means of this process the side of the flesh side becomes smooth and reasonably level.

Again it is turned to the flesh side and washed properly with pure water and soap, in the old days with andool (= phyllobacca docedandra). The same is done to the hair side. After a thorough cleaning on both sides, the vellum is exposed to the sun to dry. This is the way in which vellum is manufactured in Ethiopia. Before concluding, however, it might be useful to list the tools and other materials necessary for manufacturing vellum.

1. A two-edged curved knife (mąqad) for the flesh side.
2. Pumice to remove the grease.
3. Two thick and two thin poles for stretching the frame.
4. Four or six sticks for stretching the skin.
5. 16 m. cord to tie the sticks to the poles.
6. Needle to sew the vellum in case it tears, and to stitch it.

[Sources cited in the text are not listed here.]
7. Thread.
8. Axe for removing hair.
9. Whetstone for the knife, lunette and axe.
10. A slab for putting the final touches to the vellum before beginning to write.
11. Wooden or clay bowl for soaking the skin.
12. Reed ruler.
14. Shears to cut the vellum.

Fig. 2 Tools and writing materials in the present day.

The final operation before removing the vellum from the stretching frame is to put in some marks by pricking with the awl and by using the reed ruler the size suitable for the intended manuscript is marked out. Then the vellum is removed from the stretching frame and laid on a soft surface to be cut into sheets, folded and ruled on the flesh side. As Ethiopian manuscripts are usually written on not less than two columns, except the Psalter, which is written on a normal page, the scribe arranges the sheets in columns using his reed ruler, on the flesh side. It is quite possible for the vellum to have some holes or tears suffered during the manufacturing process. All these should be mended at this stage. In this connection there is a note in one of the Ethiopian manuscripts in Manchester where it is stated "Holes have been patched and tears have been sewn." Now the vellum is ready for use. But before the actual work of writing or, perhaps illumination could start, the scribe should not forget to treat the surface of the sheet with a slab to improve its smoothness and ability to take ink and colour.

Mainly two kinds of ink, black and red, were used and still are used in Ethiopia for writing. So far as I can judge from the manuscripts I have examined, other colours, for example, blue, are non-existent. Only once have I seen a manuscript written in blue and that was in Tigray. The local priests told me it was "nil ink" (= Nile). It was probably prepared in Egypt and imported into Ethiopia ready made. Palaeographically speaking, I think the composition of the manuscript does not go beyond the eighteenth century. In this connection it should be also mentioned that the Ethiopian manuscripts composed in Egypt and Jerusalem by Ethiopian monks, do not vary in colour and pattern. They remain orthodox both in material and bookmaking.

The black ink is of a slightly different variety. Its colours are mainly two, charcoal black and greenish black. The former is prepared for serious works and the latter for daily use, particularly for magical prayers. Of course the colour depends on the composition of ingredients and the way of preparation. The composition of the ingredients varies from place to place. The experience of the scribe is another important factor. The more experienced he is, the better will be the combination of different ingredients. From an interview compiled by Ato Fäşqadā Selassie Tafari, there are six such ways of preparing black ink. Also the time factor should not be forgotten. It is an important consideration for the quality of the ink. The more time devoted to the preparation the better will be the result.

Preparation one.
Method: Roast some cattle hair, a scrap of vellum, a piece of cedar, kakekta (odoraea viscosa), leaves of qantäfa (pterolobium abyssinicum) and leaves of gumara (capparis tomentosa) until they become charcoal. Pulverize them and mix them with soot. Gradually add water and knead the mixture in a clay or wooden vessel. Stir and beat the mixture with a mallet, keeping it exposed to the sun. Roast the barley or wheat and boil it with water in a pot. Pour the juice extracted from it daily into the original mixture and beat it well with the mallet. In a 3-4 month time you will have the ink.

Preparation two.
Method: Scrape soot from the bottom of a cooking pot and grind it in a stone mortar. Cut leaves of amáro (dicsoodium pennisierum) which are neither tender nor matured and burn them until they turn to charcoal. Then grind them in a mortar and sieve the dust very carefully. Put in a vessel 1/3 soot and ½ dust of amáro and mix well. Prepare a solution from dagusa (small millet) which is burned to charcoal. Drop the solution on the mixture and beat it in a mortar for 30 minutes daily. (If it is more it will not matter) and expose it to the sun. As soon as it becomes dry, pour on the solution and beat it. Be careful not to add any pure water during the process of preparation. Ensure that no wind and dust reach it.

The time involved in this kind of preparation depends upon the diligence of the man in charge. If he devotes a little more than half an hour daily he can get a good result in 15 days, otherwise it takes more than a month. Finally the ink is tested by writing on a scrap of vellum and its indelibility checked by rubbing it with a wet finger. If it remains intact it is ready for use. Otherwise the process of preparation will continue. When it is ready, it is made into cake and dried in the shade. Ink prepared in this way is considered to be ideal for serious religious books.

Preparation three.
Method: Take soot from the bottom of a cooking pot or baking pan. Mix ½ gum and 2½ soot. Knead it with a solution of burned wheat or barley and grind it well in a mortar, then cook it in a vessel until it boils. Take it out and let it settle slightly. Filter it with a piece of cloth into a mortar which has previously been smeared with butter so that the mixture will not stick to it, and beat it well until it becomes dry. Then make it into a cake.

Preparation four.
Method: Take the leaves of qantäfa (pterolobium abyssinicum) burn them until they become charcoal and grind them into dust. Then mix the dust with juice extracted from the leaves of åstäneg (datura stramonium) and the solution of burned barley or wheat. This is an instant ink and it can be used immediately.

Preparation five.
Method: Take soot from a burning lamp and soot from a cooking pan. Burn pieces of paper until they become charcoal. Mix the soot and the charcoal. Knead the mixture with juice extracted from the leaves of åstäneg (datura stramonium) and paraffin. If the soot does not mix with the paper charcoal, add juice extracted from garlic.

Preparation six.
Method: Take soot from a burning lamp and mix it with a powder from a dead battery and knead with a solution of burned wheat adding a little gum. Beat in a mortar for about half an hour daily for eight days and it will produce first-rate ink.

Preparation one.
The preparation of red ink is neglected nowadays in Ethiopia. The possible reasons are as follows:

a. Availability of ready made powdered red ink.

b. Limited use of red ink.

c. The rather complicated and laborious manufacture.

a. From the second half of the nineteenth century when the self imposed isolation of the country from the outside world (particularly Europe) ended, foreign goods began to arrive. One of the imported items was red coloured powder which is used not only for writing purposes, but also for paintings. Because of the availability of this red powder, the scribes ceased production of red ink.

b. Red ink is used for headings, proper names, very often for numerals and punctuations, so it is not necessary to produce a large amount.

c. Experience is important in knowing the right amount of each ingredient to use. As far as we can judge from the manuscripts examined, rarely can one see properly prepared red ink. Either it becomes black-red, when proportionally too much gum is used, or tends to be yellow, when the component, ådäy åbäba (coreopsis macrantha), or the egg yolk are used in too great a proportion. For this reason, unlike the black ink, we have only two varieties.

Preparation one.
Method: Red pepper, yolk egg, red earth and gum are mixed in a vessel and beaten in a mortar for not less than 40 days.

Sometimes it may take more than 50 days to prepare a standard ink. It depends on the climatic conditions and the diligence of the man engaged in making the ink. It should be noted here that the amount of each ingredient is not specified. This is exactly what makes the preparation difficult. Perhaps those who are in charge of the school of calligraphy and a few of their graduates might know the exact amount needed of each ingredient. Unfortunately I had no chance to interview such people.

Preparation two.
Method: Root of ñpëber (not identified), the red petals only of ådäy åbäba (coreopsis

36. While I was in Addis Ababa, I had a chance to follow up the preparation of ink. The result of making the black ink was excellent, but the red was very poor. Despite repeated attempts it was impossible to improve the quality.
macranta) which after being dried are reduced to powder. Boil the leaves of qar'at (osyris compressa) and azanor (bersama abyssinica) in water. Knead the powder with the solution of leaves and beat it for 3-4 weeks. Filter it with a piece of cloth over a vessel and leave it to settle, adding a little gum (some prefer myrrh)\(^{37}\). When it dries you will have a red ink ready for use.

d. Gold ink.

Although neither a manuscript nor painting has been found where gold ink has been used, there is detailed information about preparation of gold ink in Ethiopian literature. It is mentioned in the following account of an event which took place during the reign of the Emperor Dawit (1382-1411).

‘Listen carefully to what I have to tell you concerning the wonderful miracle which was performed for King Dawit, God’s beloved one, (who is called Constantine) with the prayer of our Lady, the two-fold Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Miracles occurred to him since his childhood and if they had been written in a book, it would be as big as Octateuch. There was once an intelligent young man engaged in translating books from Arabic into Ge'ez. He prepared gold ink for the palace, with which to write the name of our Lady two-fold Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and for the illumination of Her dress in miniature, because the heart of the king was burned with love for Her. So the king’s book which was to have gold ink for our Lady’s name was begun, but the gold ink which the man had wanted prepared. The king told the young man: ‘Prepare gold ink for the ornamentation of the dress of our Lady, Holy two-fold Virgin Mary, the Mother of God’. He replied: ‘I have no utensils to prepare gold ink, my country is far away and it takes a long time to bring them’. The king said: ‘Do it quickly because I long to see the completion of the book’. The young man, because he was afraid of the king prepared gold ink in a utensil which was not the appropriate one. The colour of the ink became like earth. The young man was sad when he saw the colour of the gold ink. He said: ‘How can I face the king now? Certainly he would be grievous to see this gold ink’. Indeed when the king saw that the gold ink was wasted he was deeply grieved and he did not know what to do. He went in front of the (picture) of his Lady saying: ‘O my Lady is that because of my sins or do You not wish it?’. The man who prepared the ink was also very depressed by the grief of the king and with a heavy heart he went to his bed to sleep. When it was midnight he saw in a dream a man in the image of a Roman who stood near him to comfort him. The Roman asked: ‘Why are you sad young man?’ The man who had prepared the gold ink replied: ‘I am very sad because the gold ink is wasted and this is why the king is also very sad’. The image asked the painter: ‘Why is the king sad? Because he loves our Lady, Holy two-fold Virgin Mary, the Mother of God very much, or because she loves him very much? No do not be sad anymore, tell me whether you have a white stone to brighten the colour’? He replied: ‘I do not have one’. The Roman pulled from his cloth a bright white stone and ground it to powder in a mortar, boiled the gold and put it into the dust of the stone. The dust disappeared and the gold ink became clear. At this point the young man awoke and wondered about what he had seen in his dream. He went to the bishop (to inquire) whether that stone he saw in his dream was to be found with him. He asked the bishop: ‘Do you have a bright white stone?’ He described it. The bishop replied: ‘It does not exist here, but it is found in the country of Zemam\(^{38}\). If there is one here they will fetch it for you’. When they opened the first chest they found the stone in it just at the top. The young man took that stone, he ground it as he had seen in his dream and put it into the gold ink. Its rust colour disappeared and it became bright and shining. The young man was happy and he went leaping to the king to tell him about the miracle. The king rejoiced too and praised the God of Israel’.\(^{39}\)

Another miracle of the Virgin Mary which actually happened in Philippi alludes to the knowledge of gold ink.

‘...And that monk was a scribe, and it came to pass that, as he was copying the manuscripts (of her History), every time he had to make mention of [the name of] the Lady Mary he magnified

\(^{37}\) Dasta Tikidch Wold defining the word ‘ink’ says: ‘In black ink gum and in red myrrh is mixed’. (Dictionary, p. 1066).

\(^{38}\) I could not locate the site from the available sources.

\(^{39}\) E. Cerulli, Il libro etiopico dei miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature dei medio evo latino, (Roma, 1943), pp. 87-88.

\(^{40}\) E. A. W.udge, One Hundred and Ten Miracles of our Lady Mary, (Oxford U.P., 1933), p. 10.

In the meantime, it seems, the use of gold ink has been forgotten. It has only very recently been reintroduced and is used strictly for painting. The gold powder is imported from abroad.

**Dissolving the ink.**

Normally, as it has been mentioned already, both black and red inks are made into cakes and dried. Then they are stored in a dry place. Whenever the scribe needs to have ink, he cuts from the bar the portion he needs and inserts it in the ink horn and dissolves it. Some thought should be given as to the fluid in which to dissolve the dried ink. As it has already been indicated in the methods, sometimes it is dissolved in a solution of roasted and boiled barley or wheat and sometimes with water. In the case of water the scribe drops water (about five drops) from his palm through his fingers, and then exposes it to the sun. After a while he stirs it with a piece of wood and from then on it remains in the ink horn. In the case in which a solution of barley or wheat is used he pours out enough fluid from the container to cover the core. When the fluid dries he gradually pours some more until the ink horn becomes full. This process lasts three days. Now the ink is ready but it should be first tested to see whether it is too thick or watery. If either should be the case the scribe will try once again to check it and bring it to standard. Then he begins to write the manuscript he intended to compose. In the course of writing, whenever he finds the consistency of the ink has changed, particularly
when it becomes watery, he cuts a small piece from the cake and drops it into the ink horn and stirs it with the piece of wood, stirrer. For a better result this is done in the evening and next morning it will be clear. Ink is renewed in this way twice at the maximum. Then the ink horn should be cleaned and new ink prepared. As the process of dissolving the ink takes three days the scribe should have a spare ink horn, so as not to be idle in the meantime, or, as the scribe does not work on a weekend, the process should begin on Friday evening and the ink will be ready for Monday morning. A full ink horn is enough for 8-10 day work. The quality of the ink can be judged from its colour at intervals. When it becomes too thin, or when it does not roll easily from the nib, or when it sprays over the vellum then it needs treatment.

What has so far been said applies to the black ink. The red ink does not need so much treatment. Because of its components it has little residue. Its quality greatly depends on the fluid in which it is dissolved. It is dissolved with pure water, or juice extracted from garlic and both, naturally, do not generate residue. To cover any eventuality they add acacia gum to standardize its fluidity. As in every page only a few words or signs are rubricated, red ink is not necessarily used every day. Scribes usually leave blanks for rubrics until the end. Then they prepare red ink, and most of the time they can finish the whole rubric in one day. Ink in the Amharic poetry is an allegory for learning. Here is an example:

I sent my child to Bággemdr to learn,
He became bright (fire) and grasped everything, I heard.

This is an impromptu elegy composed by a lady who received the bad news of the death of her son by a fire accident while he was pursuing his study in Bággemdr.

d. Pen.

Pens are prepared from reed, qastanica (asparagus aethiopicus), from tămábalé (jasminum abyssinicum) and quill. It has been passed down by word of mouth that people in Ethiopia used quill pen. In different Gospels, however, at different times, where the Evangelists are painted writing their Gospels, they appear to hold reed pens.

So the common and widely used one is reed pen. The making of pens from plants is done in the following manner:

The straight and medium size of plants are cut in abundance and stored in a place where there is no smoke. When the bunch dries the scribe takes one piece and cuts it into pen size. In comparison with the Middle East, the Ethiopian reed pens are generally short; only about 12 cm. long. They are scraped only on one side using the curved sharp knife. It entirely depends on the scribe whether he wants his pen straight or a little bit curved. When he finishes scraping, he splits the nib with the same knife. He lays the pen on a smooth rib bone from a goat or sheep and cuts it. The scribe prepares five or six such pens at a time and puts them aside to use whenever he needs them.

I do not know of a pencase in which all the pens might be stored, but E.A.W. Budge believes that ones similar to those used in Oriental countries existed. When a pen becomes blunt or excessively sharp, the scribe tries to give it the appropriate shape by using his knife. If this effort does not produce the necessary result then he changes the pen.


42. የአግለ毫 የአማርኛ ያስፋር ለጆች ያስፋር. የአግለEXAMPLE. The student fetches qastanica to write something. Because the reed pen is no good and spoils the ink.

43. Pen-cases, with rounded ends and a sliding drawer, similar to those used in India, Persia and Egypt, have been used in Abyssinia for centuries. (E.A.W. Budge, A History of Ethiopia, p. 558).
e. Ink horn.

Ink horn is prepared from goat, antelope or cow horn. The most common one is that of goat. It is very striking that the technique as well as the material has not changed through many centuries. Illuminated manuscripts from the fourteenth century onward represent the Evangelists holding reed pens in their hands with two ink horns placed in front. They are identical with those used in Ethiopia today. The ink horn is made as follows: The horn is buried in mud or in cattle dung for seven days. During this time the horn becomes soft, so very easy to cut and shape. Around the middle a projecting circle is curved to be used as a handle. The lower part is curved to a point so that it can be stuck into the ground which suits the scribe. Unless it is very rough the inside part is not touched. Otherwise it may open up a hole for grease which can spoil the ink. The circumference of the upper tip is cut and shaped. Usually black colour horn for black ink and white horn for red ink are assigned. The size of the ink horn varies according to the horn. If it is a cattle horn the ink horn is larger and longer. If the ink horn is of goat or antelope horn the size is smaller, about 12 cm. long. This latter size is the most commonly used. When the horn is made a wood lid is cut to fit or else a piece of vellum is prepared and bound with a slice of vellum around the handle. Usually there is a clay or wooden frame with two holes for two ink horns to fit. This is recommended because the scribe has no fixed place to sit and write, he sits either in the court yard of his house or, if the weather is good, under the shade of a tree.44 If he has such a frame he can easily move the ink horns. In the absence of a frame he has to press the ink horns into the earth. The reason that he prefers to sit outside in the open air while he writes is to protect his eyesight. In the old days glasses were not known in Ethiopia. The scribe has to protect his eyesight by writing only in the day time, when there is still day light, still sunshine and in the open air. Writing in a dim place is believed to cause eye trouble. For this reason a scribe never writes during the evening hours using lamp light. He does not even read during the evening except when he is asked during a night church service.

Another way to protect his eyesight is to put, as frequently as possible, fresh butter on his head under his headband. The problem is when it is during the fasting period. Ethiopia fasts for more than one third of the year. In that case he has to use a sort of margarine extracted from grain. Any other nourishment, except fat and flesh, is not considered to be breaking the fast.

When the scribe writes outside, it is obvious that the ink is exposed to insects, especially flies. To keep them away he pours a drop of juice extracted from embuway (solanum campylacanthium) fruit into the ink. Scribes in general are regarded as most cunning! If necessary they can defend their property accordingly. In Ethiopia this anecdote was passed down by word of mouth. It is said, while a scribe was writing under a tree, he was watched by an ape. When he went home for lunch, the ape came down to where the scribe was writing and spoiled the pages he had written, smearing them with ink. This occurred for several days. One day as the ape was watching as usual, sitting on a bough of a tree, the scribe took his knife and put the blunt side to his throat and pretended to cut it. When he went home for lunch the ape came down quickly to try the dernier cri. It took the knife, not as the scribe did but using the sharp side, and cut its throat. The story adds that only a scribe was able to deceive an ape.

Ink horn is an allegorical expression of learned man in Amharic poetry. Here is an example:

44. In one of the Ethiopian manuscripts in the possession of the Bodleian Library of Oxford, the following note is attached in English: 'This book with four others was taken by Hassan Bey from an Abyssinian who was found writing under a tree near the British army in Upper Egypt and given by Hassan Bey to Col. Murray Or. Mr. Gen. J and by him given to me. Sep. 1901 at Rosetta. J. W. Turner.' (E. Lillendorf, Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, vol. II (Oxford, 1951), p. 4.

Fill (the grave) with earth but not with stone
You will break the ink horn.45

This is an impromptu elegy composed by a lady when her learned brother died and was put in his grave.

III Bookbinding

In Ethiopia the use of codex form of book is as old as the use of vellum itself. In this field, as some Arab writers mention, the country had influenced the Arabs on the other side of the Red Sea. Sir T.W. Arnold and A. Grohmann summarized thus the Arab sources:

The learned Arab philologist AL-JAHIZ says in one of his works that the Abyssinians claimed the credit of having introduced to the Arabs, along with other things, the codex or bound book (mushaf), the form in which its contents are most easily, most strongly and most beautifully kept. We have no reason to doubt the truth of this statement, all the less as the Arabic word mushaf or mihaf... is actually borrowed from the Ethiopic. According to tradition Sulim b. Ma'qi, the client of Abu Hugha'a was the first after Muhammad's death to put the Qur'an together into a book (mushaf) and adopt the Ethiopic name for it.'46 Further they say that the idea of using wooden covers for books had been adopted by the Arabs from the Ethiopians.'47

As far as I know, the earliest information we hear about books in Ethiopia is from Arab writers, which is summarized thus by Parrinder:

'Baidawi and other commentators mentioned this Christian Jabr and another Yasara, and the Traditions related that Muhammad used to stop and listen to these two Christians as they read aloud the Torah and the Gospel; this is recorded by Husain. ... It is possible that both Jabr and Yasara were Abyssinian slaves, and the name Jabr may be an Arabic version of Gabr, meaning 'slave' in Ethiopic. If this is so then the tongue of these men would indeed be 'foreign', and they would no doubt read the Gospel in Ethiopic.'48

It has been already mentioned that a quire in Ethiopia mostly consists of five sheets or ten folios or twenty pages. 50 The number of quires depends on the size of the book. In any case, a volume of a book should not exceed fifteen quires, otherwise the book will disintegrate easily and quickly. This is why the Ethiopian Synaxarion is written in two volumes, and sometimes in three. For the same reason one hardly finds a full Biblical text in a single volume. It is very common to find individual books separately. If they appear in a group then they will be in groups of four. The Old Testament appears in four parts, Octateuchs, Historical Books, Books of Poetry and Wisdom and Prophets; the New Testament also in four, The Four Gospels, Pauline Epistles, The Catholic Epistles, and Acts and Revelation.

It has been said also that after the preparation of a volume the scribe cuts the sheets into the size suitable for the manuscript he intends to write. Then he folds the sheets, flesh sides

47. Ibid, p. 44; Cf. M. Levey, Medieval Arabic Bookmaking, p. 3.
50. E. A. W. Budge, A History of Ethiopia, p. 557; Wright, Catalogue, p. IX.
together. Temporarily each quire is connected with a slice of vellum. When he starts writing he notes the number on the top left-hand corner, 51 though this does not always occur. In the final binding he uses the sequence of the text as a guide line. This method of sorting out is not always error-free. Among the collection of Ethiopian manuscripts in the University Library of Leiden there is one manuscript which is misplaced 52 and another which is bound upside-down. 53

As a rule the covers of manuscripts in Ethiopia are wooden and rarely leather. Woods which are used are mainly for covers are wanza (cordia africana), cedar and wayra (olea africana). Wanza is light and can be easily curved. Cedar and wayra are much used because firstly, they are not damaged by insects and secondly they never decay and disintegrate when they remain buried for a long time underground. Now and then, because the people are subjected to persecution burying books under the earth or in caves is inevitable, and then woods of cedar and wayra trees are preferred, despite the resistance they offer during the preparation. It is preferable to have a single board from a piece of wood. This is when the size of the manuscript is small or medium. The problem arises when the manuscript is too big. In that case, if a very thick wood is not available then two pieces must be used and connected with a gut string, sometimes but not often with a bar of iron. Firstly an axe is used to flatten the wood to a certain degree. Then a sharp knife is applied. To ease the work the wood is soaked in water for some days. Ply is rare in Ethiopia. For this reason, after using a sharp knife and removing the rough part and trying to level the surfaces, wax is used to smooth both sides of the board, but the outside is treated further by rubbing with a piece of cloth. When it is ready, it is cut to the size of the manuscript. Although wood curve is known in Ethiopia, it does not seem to have concerned the men who made the boards. From over 10,000 manuscripts which have passed through my hands, I have not encountered a single one which bears a decoration on the surface of the boards. Those which are not covered with leather remain blank and simple.

The binding in Ethiopia starts from the front board. It is drilled at the left edge with a glow awl. The holes number 2-6 depending on the size of the manuscript. If the manuscript is large, normally it is bound in six rows, if it is medium, in four and if it is small in two. For binding, a natural or pig-skin ozen gut string is used. For the preservation, particularly for large manuscripts, string of ozen gut is preferred. Next to the board on the inside, there are two or sometimes four protecting flyleaves. They are usually left blank, but later they could be used for various purposes, transactions, genealogy, painting etc. or just for scribbling. Sometimes they are used by the scribe for trying out his pen. Then the quires follow in their sequence. At the end, as in the beginning, there are two or four protecting leaves. These, however, are not regular as are the front ones. When the text ends leaving a few leaves of the quire, these remaining leaves can serve as back-protecting leaves. If the scribe makes a good guess beforehand where the text will finish approximately, he can add the necessary sheets to the quire, or he can deduct. This is why the last quire is usually irregular if the text ends somewhere on the last sheet, then normally protecting sheets are added. Sometimes the back protecting sheets serve for continuation of the text which still need some space for completion. Finally the back board is bound and both boards are trimmed on all three sides with a sharp knife.

Some of the manuscripts, particularly those which have been commissioned by the emperors and high dignitaries, are covered with leather and finally tooled. Some of them are lined with a coloured cloth.

There are actually two types of leather used for covering a book, locally manufactured and imported leather. The imported leather was of higher quality than the local one prior to this century, because, though the skin originally was from Ethiopia, the tanning and dying was done better. It is called እ.Param. As the name itself indicates, it was imported from the Arab world. It is red or brown in colour, morocco leather. Other colours are not widely used. Personally, I have not come across a manuscript covered with black leather.

Leather tanning has been practised in Ethiopia for a long time for various domestic purposes. 54 In the highlands, leather is used mainly for bed covers and grain sacks, the bed cover manufactured from cattle skin and the sack from calf, goat and sheep skin. For the sack, the skin is flayed without splitting it into two. As a tanning agent the leaves of the plant, æmhood (chenopodium album) are used in particular. The skin is buried wrapped with leaves for three days. Then, if it is to be used for a bed cover, it is stretched in order to dry, after being tamped on to be smooth. If it is to be used for sacks the legs and head part are sewn together first then the sack is inflated with a reed pipe. When it has been sufficiently inflated it is tamped on until the hair comes off. The process continues until it becomes clear and smooth. Skins from all kinds of animals are also tanned for book covers. Such skins are treated on both hair and flesh sides. The treatment is more or less similar to the vellum. The skin is stretched on a frame, the hair scraped, the flesh side is treated with pumice and sharp blade, then exposed to the sun to dry. Because of this treatment the bad smell disappears, whereas in other cases the strong leather smell remains for a long time. Of course this is the traditional method for tanning. Today the situation is different. Chemical agents are used for tanning and dying. Such development in leather manufacturing made the import of foreign leather unnecessary.

For gluing, starch paste is used, mostly wheat pounding. Both the leather and the two board covers are pasted with glue and the book is laid squarely on the leather, then the leather is turned gently inward. The inner part of the boards are partially covered by overlapping of the outer leather. Usually the space in the middle is lined up with stripped silk or simple cotton cloth. It is not unusual to see the inside of the boards left blank. The leather is stretched as far as possible and made flat with the palms. It should be ensured that all the wrinkles have been smoothed out. Then it is rubbed with a piece of cloth until the paste has fixed properly. Sometimes only the spine is covered with leather. This has more to do with the preservation of the manuscript than decoration. The technique employed here is the same but simpler. The headband (totan) still remains to be inserted in the upper and lower inside corner. It is plucked by hand from a fine strip of morocco leather. The bookbinder first uses his ruler to measure the size. When he ascertains that the headband fits well to the corner he sews it with a string made from gut. Now the MS. is ready and should be pressed under stones, or wood.

The manuscript which is covered with leather is ready for tooling. The book binder traces the surface using his ruler. He marks the area where patterns are going to be tooled. Usually the decorative patterns used are the same on the front and back boards. It should be pointed out, however, that it is an asset to have as many patterns as possible. This is the key to success in the job. The more patterns there are, greater is the chance of success. For this reason many patterns are designed and used. It is not, however, easy for us to list them all. Here only the most common and widely used are mentioned. They are ten in number.

1. ሏንታይ (ስሸኢ) three horizontal lines
2. እንታይ (ሸኢ) criss-cross
3. እንታይ የን ➤ double circles
4. እንታይ (ሸ) crescent
5. እንታይ X-form
6. እንታይ palm shape ➤
7. እንታይ žig-zag ➤
8. እንታይ wave form ➤
9. እንታይ rosette ➤
10. እንታይ cori-form ➤

52. OR. 17943 (Hebr. 539).
53. OR. 14617 (Hebr. 296).
54. As a matter of fact, Ethiopians were those who had introduced the techniques of tanning into the Arab world in early times. (A. Maz, Die Renaissance des Islam, (Heidelberg, 1922), p. 422.)
The patterns are made of iron and fitted to wooden handles. They are heated in a fire and dipped into water to temper the glow and then stamped on the leather. A skilled designer with imagination becomes famous very quickly, people come to him not only for their books but also for him to stamp their scabbards, shields, baskets and other objects. Manuscripts which are not covered with leather can be covered with a coloured or simple white cloth. Usually, a religious book should not remain uncovered. For this reason a manuscript already covered with leather will have over that a cloth cover.

On the other hand it should be noted that book gilding is not a recent phenomenon as some people would like to believe. According to our information it goes back at least as far as the fifteenth century. In an Ethiopian manuscript in the collection belonging to the British Museum, now the British Library, we have a list of books presented by the Emperor Na'od of Ethiopia to St. Mary's church in Däbrä Berhan. Among these is a Tāmra Miṣaṭ gilded with gold. Šihab ad-Din, the Arab author of Futuh al-Habash (the conquest of Abyssinia), speaks about books bound in gold. But in the meantime this technique seems to have been forgotten, and only some forty years ago began to be revived. As a matter of fact the idea was introduced from Eastern Churches, in particular the Greek Church, through fresh contacts. At first the Four Gospels of the capital and few of other prominent churches of the country were gilded. Nowadays one can, with some reservations, say that this technique is rather proliferated and many other churches acquired their own gilded Four Gospels. It should be, however, noted that gilding is still limited to the Four Gospels. Many manuscripts have leather cases with a strap with which to hang it up or sling it over the shoulder during a journey. When the manufacture of such cases started is hard to say. It is highly improbable that Ethiopian manuscripts prior to the sixteenth century had leather cases.

55. W. Wright, op.cit. NS. CCLXXXII (p. 187).

In Daga, Judifanos and Keban Gabriel in Tana See one can see a heap of books laying on beds of striped leather. The condition of the manuscripts in Lake Zuwray is worse. They are scattered all over the place and through damp and heavy rain the leaves are glued together and are absolutely useless. Had there been a leather case they could have been preserved better. I presume leather cases began to be used, at least in any number, from the sixteenth century onwards. Regardless of its age and origin, the making of the leather case is an important landmark in book preservation. Apart from its practicality, it is a sort of waterproof material which can protect the content at least for a limited time. In a country like Ethiopia where the torrential rains are heavy and houses are covered with thatched roofs, the case is an ideal protection for manuscripts. But not all manuscripts have leather cases.

IV School of Calligraphy and the prospects for its graduates

In the past, the general attitude of many Ethiopians was not favourable towards writing. It was more or less identified with black magic, and consequently the man who writes considered as a magician. It is beyond any doubt that such an attitude was a serious impediment to the development of literature as a whole. Conforming to this general attitude, the Ethiopian scholars avoided writing and concentrated in memorizing their subject whatever its length. For example if his field was exegetic of the Old Testament, he sought to memorize the whole commentary without even changing one word. It would be unthinkable for a teacher to use notes during a lecture. If he did he was not regarded as a teacher of high calibre and students avoided him. It was no surprise, therefore, if an Ethiopian scholar could not write. There is an anecdote in this regard. In 1929 for the first time in the history of the country, five Ethiopian monks of high educational calibre had been selected and sent to Egypt to be ordained bishops. Among them were some who could not sign their names and they had a hard time in doing so. This in the eyes of the Ethiopians, then, was not viewed as a disadvantage, but for the Egyptians it was a source of
entertainment, assuming that the candidates were completely illiterate. 

Despite such an unfavourable situation, however, some children start writing at a quite early age using charcoal or instant ink which they prepare themselves. The composition of this ink is charcoal and soot mixed with juice extracted from leaves of *hâdrâ nisa* (llane-cadavre) in a clay pot. For a pen they use a sharp-pointed piece of wood without a nib. However this tendency on the part of the children is sometimes checked by the elders fearing that their children might end up 'magicians'.

Most of the elementary church school teachers, if not all, are scribes. Hence the proverb:

*خَلَقَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْهِ الصَّلَاةُ وَالْمَغْفِرَةُ أَنْ أَقْرَأَ مُسَّكَلَةً لا أَكُتُبُ جَمِيلَةً.*

A Dábêtâ who does not write,

An eagle without wings.

Even when they are teaching they write. Such devotion inevitably will have an impact on, at least, some of their pupils. Teachers are willing to help those pupils who show an interest in writing. They encourage them by providing them with scraps of vellum, residue of ink and used pens. The pupils also have the opportunity to watch the preparation of vellum and ink. Such a preliminary approach to calligraphy sometimes leaves such a deep influence on the pupils that they decide to attend the school of calligraphy to earn their living by writing.

We do not know for sure where people were trained in calligraphy in early times. As the monasteries in the Middle Ages were centers of learning it is quite possible that such courses were offered there. Alessandro Zorzi of Venice, in his account, has a piece of information regarding education in general. He got it from an eye-witness, a traveller, Brother Thomas, on the 7th of April 1523: “From Ufate to Eson, a great city in which is a university of many scholars.” The information is of short and general nature; but it suggests that all branches of knowledge were being dealt with in this centre.

Today this centre is located in the province of Gondar in the district of Dabër Tabor. It is called Andabêt. The gift of the inhabitants of this village in calligraphy is proverbial. It is said that everybody who drinks the water of Andabêt becomes a skillful calligraphist. This might be a good piece of public relations with lasting results. No other place contests it today in this field.

The candidate who wishes to join this school must have at least finished the church elementary school. Knowledge of good Ge’iz language is highly recommended, because such a background would shorten the length of the course and, to a certain degree, it guarantees a good career.

Andabêt attracts students from two other prominent centres of learning, Bêtâhâm, in the same province as Andabêt but in a different district, Gâynt, and from qêne poetry schools of Gojäm and Wâdâ in Wâwî. Bêtâhâm is the famous centre of learning for church music and the hymns of Yared, the composer of the sixth century. In other words, it is the centre which qualifies the candidate to teach church music and the hymns of Yared. A candidate, whatever is his rank, is accepted here as a simple freshman and goes through all the stages.

The problem is when he is certified as a qualified teacher of church music. He should have a copy of *Degwa* (hymnary) to enable him to obtain a chair somewhere. He cannot, however, afford to buy a copy because the price of *Degwa* in his financial circumstances is astronomical. The only way is to copy one; but the knowledge fails him. So he decides to go to Andabêt to learn calligraphy and the general training of bookmaking. If, by chance, the graduate of Bêtâhâm school has a prior knowledge of calligraphy then he can go ahead with copying the hymnary from the authorized version and go to a place of his preference to resume teaching.

Actually the idea which prompts the man to attend the school of calligraphy is not only to acquire a copy of *Degwa*, but because he would like to make writing a second source of income. A teacher of *Degwa*, while teaching, copies a book which is ordered by someone, or commissioned by a church.

For two main reasons, the other group from qêne poetry is attracted to this school. Either they wish to make writing a career or, as some people say, are interested in black magic. Well-qualified scribes with sound Ge’iz knowledge have a good chance to join the imperial scripторium or, to earn their living by working privately. Those who intend to join the imperial scripторium should have a thorough training in all subjects offered by the school, calligraphy, and all other techniques related to bookmaking. Those who intend to practice black magic are interested in short-cut courses, such as preparation of ink, manufacturing vellum but very little calligraphy. This is why we very rarely find neat and fine handwriting in magical prayers. Many qêne teachers practise black magic at the same time and quite possibly influence some of their students. Sometimes by sheer chance some of students wandering from house to house are offered a magical prayer by a recently widowed lady. He is tempted into the world of magic.

The kind of courses offered in Andabêt are firstly calligraphy, then preparation of ink, manufacture of vellum, painting, bookbinding and decoration. The student can choose in which courses to participate and concentrate. For this reason it is quite possible that a single course is followed and completed. However a large number of students attempt to participate in all, because they need them later for their career.

Virtually all courses are empirical. The student has to observe what the teacher is doing. In the case of calligraphy he has to sit beside the teacher while he is writing and observe keenly how the teacher shapes each letter. The basic principle is that the pen should always move to the right. When I was in the Theological School in Addis Ababa, we happened to have a teacher of calligraphy, Abraham, who was a graduate of Andabêt. He trained us consistently to write to the right without returning to the left. There are of course a few exceptions such as palatalized consonants when a return to the left is a must. He used to tell us that a return to the left distracts the mind and impedes the speed.

After the observation period a practical training follows. The teacher writes the first letter on a piece of vellum with its six derivations and passes it on to the student to copy it identically. The student tries his best to copy it as perfectly as possible and shows it to his teacher. In the case that he has not done it properly he is shown once again how to do it and the process lasts until the student is able to write everything without error. Then the teacher gives him many pieces of vellum to sew together and then he is to copy a booklet called *Lolafa Sdqy* either in book orolf form. This is not only an exercise in calligraphy but also in orthography. When the teacher finds the work of his student satisfactory he assigns him another book to copy, this time a more serious one. Meanwhile the student must have acquired the necessary practical knowledge on how to manufacture vellum. The same is true for preparation of ink. First, as before, he observes how his teacher prepares the ink, then he makes it using various ingredients and after some time he can manufacture it by himself. However cutting, folding and ruling is not an easy task. As vellum is precious the teacher does not risk giving the student the responsibility of the cutting etcetera too quickly. The student is urged to observe many times until he can do it by himself. Once he is proficient at this, bookbinding will not be so time consuming.

The most difficult course of all is designing and painting. That is the weakest point for many students and despite the priority given to it by devoting many teaching hours, very few of the students have success in this course. The difficulty is not only with sketching and colouring but also with the preparation of various colours. In painting one needs at least four basic colours: white, blue, red and yellow. The candidate is required to know the various ingredients needed for each colour and their composition. Once he masters that he is entitled to be called a scribe and painter.

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59. W. Wright, *Catalogue, MS. Lit.* (p. 34).
Painting by itself could be a career. A gifted and well-trained painter can have a full time job. Whenever a new church is built, the external mural of holy of holies should be covered with paintings on all four sides from bottom to top, or the painting of an old church to be removed and replaced by new. This is an opportunity for a painter. The work takes a long time unless the work is given to many painters so that the job is done quickly. However whatever the situation, such a job brings a good income to the painter. During the work the painter is provided with shelter and food free of charge. At the end he gets the sum agreed as well as a present, a piece of land or decoration.

The duration of the course depends on the subject on which the student would like to concentrate. In any case it runs between 17 months and two years. During his stay in Andebet the student, as in other schools, is fed by the community. Students are assigned to certain families where they can get food. Once a day, usually in the evening, he visits the families where he has been assigned and collects whatever they give him, bread, roasted beans etc.

When he goes there he is equipped with two things, a bag made of palm leaves in which to put the food he gets from the different houses, and a long stick to fend off dogs. Normally he does not enter the house, but announces his arrival by singing ‘in the name of Yared’ (the name of that day’s saint) afford me (very rarely he adds) a piece of bread’. Sometimes to show that he is a learned man he sings a piece from the hymns of Yared or a self-composed verse such as:

\[\text{We come without supply.} \]
\[\text{Gabra Manfis Odua is saint.} \]
\[\text{Unintelligible is the mystery of the Holy Trinity.} \]

If the lady of the house is in a good mood she brings him something and puts it in his bag. He leaves after thanking her. Otherwise she simply says to him ‘Thank you’.

After the visit he returns to his school and prepares food for dinner. Usually students form a group and eat together. If any bread remains it is dried next day in the sun, powdered and kept for an emergency.

He builds a shelter for himself, a thatched hut, near the house of his teacher. For clothing he helps to have some knowledge of handicrafts, eg. knitting cap, making palm-leaf umbrellas or a carpet from palm leaves which is used for burial. If he knows how to write magical prayers then that can bring him quite enough money.

After graduation, students disperse to different places to find a job. Those with better qualifications and not handcrafting go to the capital and join the imperial scriptorium. They try to introduce themselves through an influential person by presenting a book written by them in the hope that this will recommend them for the job. Naturally not all can join the scriptorium. Those who can join may enjoy special privilege and their social status is raised. In the receptions and other occasions they are classed with dignitaries and they are called áilaqua (= chief).

Their duty in the scriptorium is to manufacture fine vellum, to prepare ink, copy manuscripts and decorate them inside and out. They are supposed to know all the techniques concerned with writing. They must, if necessary, decorate the manuscript with illuminations, cover it with leather and tool it. The skin for vellum is provided by the court, who give the whole animal, goat or sheep. He eats the flesh and uses the skin for vellum. This is understood to be a perquisite and is not considered part of his remuneration. As the Ethiopian characters are usually written large then a manuscript of any length size consumes a lot of vellum. (Already it has been mentioned how many sheets of vellum are needed for a large thick book). His remuneration is in cash and kind. Monthly he earns a certain amount of money, depending on his qualifications and length of service. In the old days it was between 10 - 20 thalers. As well as this he is given about 500 kilos of grain, 17 - 34 kilos of butter and 17 - 34 kilos of honey each month. The honey is local wine called aj and it is a drink belonging to the higher classes. In lieu of kind he could be given 400 acres of land. These then are the economic benefits enjoyed by a scribe who joins the scriptorium. Others who come into the service of various dignitaries may also have similar privilege and benefits but only to a limited degree. The rest who have no chance of obtaining these two posts choose to be self-employed. They wander from one monastery to another, copy a manuscript and bring it to market. During their stay in the monastery they are given shelter and food free of charge, but the material for vellum they have to obtain for themselves. Usually they buy skin from a nearby market and manufacture it. As a token of gratitude for these facilities the guest is expected to take an active part in the divine service, particularly in chanting the hymns of Yared. Unlike those who joined the scriptorium these scribes are not highly regarded in the society. People think that they are ‘qualified’ magicians and are afraid that they might put a spell against them. Hence the expression የparagus - ‘scribe patcher’ in the sense that he might find some weak point which he uses to his own advantage. As we read in many colophons neither does he have a high opinion of himself. Usually it reads: ‘This manuscript is written by a wicked man and sinners who is unworthy to be mentioned’. Of course he writes that out of modesty, but still it reflects on his social condition.

It is perhaps important to mention the time needed for a scribe to finish a manuscript. Generally speaking Ethiopian scribes are not fast workers. This is due to various factors, firstly in the Ethiopian alphabet there are no cursive characters. Regarding Ethiopian handwriting, Wright says in his preface: ‘In the fifteenth century..... the handwriting is more angular than at a subsequent date.... The writing of the sixteenth century..... is very different in appearance from that of the fifteenth. It is more rounded in many of its forms, and, in the examples known to me, is decidedly small and delicate’. The changes since then are very minor. No dramatic change in Ethiopian handwriting is to be expected. Both forms mentioned by Wright call for calligraphical precision which is time-consuming. It has been mentioned above that a scribe does not write in the evening under lamp light. One should also take into account the number of holidays in Ethiopia in which the scribe remains idle. The conditions in which the scribe must work while writing a manuscript should also be mentioned. He has no chair nor desk – he sits on the ground on sheepskin or on a piece of wood. He uses his knee to support the vellum on which he is writing. These are not ideal conditions.

![Typical traditional scribe.](image)

60. W. Wright, Catalogue, p. X.
In some dated manuscripts we have colophons where the span of time is indicated. In the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris No. 35, Four Gospels, 202 ff., 336 x 230 mm. begun in 1482 (the month is not stipulated) during the reign of Zelaender and finished on 8 Mosâkrâm of the following year, 1483.\(^{61}\) Ethiopian manuscript in the Vatican Library, Vat. 38, Gospels, 304 ff., 123 x 105 mm. was begun in 1541, a year after the death of Lobnâ Dongel, and finished on 13 Qa'amât 1542.\(^{62}\) More concrete is the manuscript 232 of the British Museum, the first part of Synaxarium, 167 ff. 18 ¾ x 15 ¾ in. beginning 20 Mosâkrâm 1647 Year of Mercy and finished on 30th Qa'amât 1648 i.e. one year and one month was needed to complete the work.\(^{63}\) MS. 259 of the same Library, Arâgâwî Mâfâsâwî, 159 ff. 13 x 11 ¾ in. the composition began in Yâkâtî (without exact date) in 1665 Year of Mercy and finished on 2 Hâmîlî of the same year, about 5 months later. Now if we base our estimates on the given data, a scribe needs a year to finish a large manuscript, and about six months for medium size manuscript. At any rate he does not seem to be able to produce more than two books in any one year. This assumption is not very far away from reality if we take into account the 12 article regulation which used to govern the imperial scriptorium in modern times. As we shall see below in some cases the regulation is even more flexible than those we have already mentioned. For example, a half year Synaxarium, according to the Brit. Museum MS. needed one year and one month, and according to the regulation 16 months.

In June 1919 a regulation of scriptorium has been issued by the Minister of Pen, then Sâhâfê Ti'azz Wâlîâ Mâsqâl. Subsequent to this regulation a five man committee was formed whose duty was to determine the length of time needed for various size books:

- a. Liqâ Tâbût Wâruq of Shimén Gjorgis, Goj âm.
- b. Giya Gētâ Âmâra of Mâkanâ Ilyus, Gondâr.
- c. Âliya Wârâqinê of Goha Sêyôn, âhâwâ.  
- d. Mêqêtê Wâlîâ Rûfâ'êl of ânkaôbîr, âhâwâ. 
- e. Ato Sahâla Maryam Sîfâtâ, head of scriptorium.

This committee decided and outlined the time limit required for each book.

### Old Testament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Octateuch</td>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Kings</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Chronicles</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ezra-Nehemiah</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Job</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Psalter</td>
<td>5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The five books of Solomon</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Isiah</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Jeremiah</td>
<td>2 months and 15 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Ezekiel and Daniel</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Minor Prophets</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Judith, Esther and Tobit</td>
<td>2 months and 15 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Sirach</td>
<td>1 month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Enoch</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. The Four Gospels   8 months
16. Acts of Apostles  1 month and 15 days
17. Pauline Epistles  6 months
18. Catholic Epistles and Revelation 2 months

### New Testament

19. Haimanôtî Abîw   12 months and 20 days
20. The first part of Synaxarium 16 months
21. The second part of Synaxarium 16 months
22. Gâbrâ Jâmamat  11 months
23. Gêrêkçî (Cyril)   6 months
24. John Chrysoctomos 6 months
25. Mary Yëshâq   5 months
26. Sinodos   4 months
27. Çlêmënt (Qâlîmmû) 3 months
28. Missâl with musical notes 7 months
29. Fehtê Nâqêstî 8 months and 15 days
30. Full Miracles of the Virgin Mary 16 months
31. Nâgârâ Maryam 12 months
32. Full Tîgma Ilyus 6 months
33. Wûddasê Amlâk 5 months
34. Arganûn 5 months
35. Life of Tîkâl Haymann 9 months
36. Life of Gjorgis 8 months
37. Dersâna Mikêlê 3 months
38. Dersâna Gâbrîël 2 months
39. The Book of Funerals 6 months
40. Hâwî 17 months
41. Gjorgis Wûlâsê Amdî 14 months
42. Degwâ 15 months
43. Sômâ Sëgwâ 2 months and 15 days
44. Me'arat 2 months
45. Mâwâs 3 months
46. Zomâr 4 months

Here it should be noted that now there is a division of labour. A scribe does not bother about writing materials. Everything which he needs, vellum, ink etc. is provided and his sole duty is to concentrate on writing the whole day. In the regulation there is no provision for church feastsday. Apparently they have been kept to the minimum. The question now is whether a scribe earns enough to live on. I think the supply and demand principle applies here. The demand of manuscripts for church services and private use was high. One should note also that the printing press was introduced into the country as late as the end of the nineteenth century. Every book had to be written by hand and the market for suppliers was favourable.


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The copyist also should have in mind which book is in the most demand and he gears his production accordingly. At the institutional level there are certain books which are continually in demand, such as Psalter, Miracles of Virgin Mary, Miracles of Jesus, Missal, Book of Funerals and Book of Baptism. These are service books which every church must have. In the private sector, St. John’s Gospel, Sfârșitul Săsăie, Dorsană Mika’el, Life of Tătău Hâmanot and Găbrîl Mănas Qudus and Psalter are the most used ones. The copyists also have advertisements. They add in the beginning or the end that the reading of such and such a book daily guarantees the heavenly kingdom etc. This is particularly stipulated in magical prayers such as Lîfáfá Sodq.

Let us see now some prices as they have been written in the manuscripts themselves. Fifteenth century MS., Acts of Saints and Martyrs...has the following record of purchase: ‘This book is purchased by me, Sâga Kesito, for the sum of three pieces of cloth (shîma) and four salt bars (amolê) from the daughter of Abba Hable Selassie’.

It seems the rate changed from person to person and from place to place. A colophon of MS., probably end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century provides us with a valuable piece of information in this regard. It is about a contract entered between the Monastery of St. Stephen of Hayq and four scribes for writing the Old and New Testaments. I translated the Ge’ez text from the passage published by Taddesse Tamrat.

‘Having this (MS) copied and letting it be bound in one (volume), we deposited it in the Monastery of Hayq during the abbacy of Abba Nob, asecetic person. We had it copied for sixty ounces (of gold), forty ounces is paid to the scribes, ten each; ten ounces is spent for their provision, flesh, honey, grain and salt for sauce; ten ounces for vellum. We did the same for the canon of the New Testament without missing even a single one. Then we deposited them in one place. The rate (for N.T.) was the same, sixty ounces. We spent altogether one hundred and twenty ounces, hoping heavenly reward’.

Sixteenth century MS., ‘This Mâshufa Master was purchased by me, Šârža Meryam, for the sum of five cows for my commemoration in life and death’.

Seventeenth century manuscript, Synaxarium, part two, was purchased by Šobeta Kesito for the sum of seven ounces of gold. Another manuscript of the same century, The Commentary of John Chrysostomos on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 147 ff., 245 x 285 mm., was purchased later, probably in the nineteenth century, or in the first two decades of this century, for the sum of five thalers.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a man called Jambor notes in the colophon in Šomâ Degwa, that he has been commissioned two tamun (one eighth of a thaler) by Ras Mâkonnen, the father of the late Emperor Haile Selassie. The man does not seem happy with arrangements and adds ‘unhappy and weak’.

In 1908 C. H. Ambruster, member of the British Legation in Addis Ababa, bought a Haymanot Abâw 183 ff., 12 x 10½ in, from aliqa Yohannes for the sum of 80 thalers a very high price at the time. In 1945/6 a short Missal was bought for 15 thalers. One should of course take into account the purchasing power of the money at each time. Before the Italian occupation of 1930 a half thaler, people told me, was enough to feed a family of six persons for the whole month.

71. Ibid, MS. 59, (p. 59).
73. E. Ullendorff and W. Wright, op. cit., MS. XXX (p. 38).
74. Ethiopian manuscripts collection, University Library of Leiden, Or. 17:048, (Hebr. 343).

The price of a manuscript in recent years has risen sharply because skin in general became one of the main items of exporting commodities of the country. It earns foreign exchange, and it is not at all competitive for the scribes. Many of them were forced to change their job. The wide use of paper on the other hand, since the beginning of this century is one of the contributing factors to the decline of vellum manufacturing. All these reasons, however, in comparison with the arrival of tourists, are minor. Since the second half of this century thousands of tourists have visited Ethiopia. Their visits have resulted in the skyrocketing of the price of manuscripts. They started to offer unheard of sums for simple manuscripts and this depleted the stocks of treasures. Selling manuscripts became a lucrative and short-cut way to become rich. A recent survey shows that in Addis Ababa alone there were over a hundred shops selling manuscripts as souvenirs articles. As their supply they used various manuscripts owned by churches and monasteries. They had their agents to these various churches and monasteries offering tantalizing sums to priests and monks. The matter has a devastating result for the cultural heritage of the country. This tragic situation prompted the creation of the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library whose primary objective was to microfilm, at least the important ones, among 200,000 codices which were reputed to be owned by the 14,000 churches and monasteries of the country. So far, over 7,000 manuscripts have been microfilmed.

Conclusion: Despite an unfavourable situation Ethiopia is the country which keeps alive the art of the old method of preparing ink and manufacturing vellum. The tools which are still used in the workshops are unique. For the sake of knowledge we have to encourage the continuation of this tradition.
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Index

Abraham, 29
Abü Hudhayfa, 22
Abyssinia, 18n. 43, 26
Abyssinian(s), 22; Scribe 20n. 44; slaves 22
Acts of Apostles, 23, 33
Acts of Saints and Martyrs, 34
Addi Qâlid, 7
Addis Ababa, 3, 15n. 36, 29, 34, 35 University of 29n. 27
Adulis, 7
Adulitanum, 7
Africa, 8
Aksum, 7
Alejandro Zorzi, 28
Alexandria, 8
Amâra, Geira Gêta, 32
Amharic poetry, 16, 21
Andabêt, School of calligraphy, 28, 29, 30
Ankôrâb, 32
Arab, author 26; philologist, 22; world 9, 24, 25; writers 22
Arabic inscription 9; language, 16; source, 22; version, 22; world 22
Arabs, 11n. 33, 22
Arâgawi Mâñfâsawi, 32
Arganon, 33
Armbruster C. H., 34
Arnold T. W. Sir, 22
Asia Minor, 8
Attalus, King of Pergamum, 8
Attalanaí(s), 8
Bâgmêndr, 18
Bahar arab, 24
Bâdawî, 22
Baptism, see Book of Belâhâm, 34
Bay, see Hassan
Bible, 8
Biblical text, 23
Bibliothèque Nationale, 9, 32
Bodleian Library, 20 n. 44
Book of Baptism, 34
Book of Funerals, 33, 34
British army, 20; Legislation, 34; Library, 26
British Museum, 10, 26, 32
E. A. W. Budge, 18
Cambridge University Library, 23
Catholic Epistles, 23, 33
Christian(s), 22
Christianity, 8
Chronicles, 32

Chrysostomos, see John
Clement, 33
Commentary of John Chrysostomos to the Epistle of the Hebrews, 34
Constantinople, see Dawit Emperor of Ethiopia
Cyril, 33
Dâbër Borhan, 26
Dâbër Damo, Monastery, 9
Dâbër Tabor, 28
Dâjâmêr, 28
Daga Jišîfânos, 27
Dahlah, 9
Daniel, prophet, 32
Dâsta Tâklâ Wâld, 8, 16 n. 37
Dawit, Emperor of Ethiopia (1382 - 1411), 16
Degwa, hymnary, 28, 33
Dorsânâr Gabrî el, 33
Dorsânâri Mikàkî el, 33
Doressê J., 7 n. 12
Drewes A., 7
Eastern Churches, 26
Egypt, 7, 8, 9, 14, 18n. 43, 27, see also Upper Egyptian coins, 9; boat 7 n. 12
Egyptians, 27
English, 20 n. 44
Enoch, Book, 32
Epistle to the Hebrews, 34
Eritrea, 7
Erythrêan Sea, 7
Eson, 28
Esther, Book, 32
Ethiopia, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 34n. 65, 35
Ethiopians, history 7; manuscript(s) 9, 12, 14, 20 n. 44, 23, 24, 25, 32; pilgrims; 9; monks, 14, 27; literature, 16; syllabary, 23; scholars, 27;reed pens, 18; scribes, 31
handwriting and alphabet, 31; characters, 30
Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, 3, 35
Ethiopians, 8, 10, 11, 22, 25, 27
Ethiopic, 8, 22
Ethiopian(s), 8 n. 14
Etiopi, 8 n. 14
Eumenes II, King of Pergamum, 8
Europe, 15
Evangelists(s), 18, 20
Ezêkîl, prophet, 32
Ezra, 32
Îbêta Konslos, 34
Înda Abûrâ, 9
Îštîfânos, see Daga

Işıkânder, Emperor of Ethiopia (1476 - 1494), 32
Fâkâdâl Selassie, Ato, 3, 14
Fezha Nàgâst, 33
Funerals, see Book of Futuh al Habasha, 26
Gâbàr Mâñfâs Qudus, Abûnâ 30, see also Life of Gâbâr Selassie, see Tsâfâ
Gabriel, see Dorsânâr and Kebran
Gebru, see Jabr
Gülâdîr, King of Aksum, 7
Gaynit, 28
Gâbâr Hamamât, 33
Gâz, 7, 8, 9, 16, 28, 29, 34
Gigorîs, see Life of and Shimêns
Giyorkos Wâld Amdî, 33
God, 16
Goâhà Sàyon, 32
Goliàm, 28, 32
Gondár, 8, 28, 32
Gospel(s), 18, 22, 23, 26, 32, 33, see also St. John's
Greek, 7, 8, 9, Church 26
Grommann A., 22
Habasha, see Futuh al Hable Selassie, Abba, 34
Hailê Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, (1950-1974), 34
Harar, City, 9
Hassan Bey, 20 n. 44
Hawî, 10 n. 31, 33
Haymanot Abâw, 33, 34
Hayan, monastery, 34
Hebrews, see Epistle to Hellenistic, 7
Holy Trinity, 30
Hudîyàfà, see Abu-Husain, 22
India, 18 n. 43
Isâiah, prophet, 32
Israel, 16
Italian occupation, 23, 24
Jâbr, 22
Al-Jâbi, 22
Jâmâbîr, 34
Jeremiah, prophet, 32
Jerusalem, 8 n. 18, 9, 14
Jesus, see Miracles of Jewish Merchants, 9
John Chrysostomos, 33, see also Commentary of
Jomêr J., 9 n. 27
Judith, 32
Kebran Gabriel, 27
Kings, Book, 32

Lake, see Zuyaw
Leiden, see University Library of Labâná Dongel, Emperor of Ethiopia (1508-1940), 32
Lafafa Şöqê, 29, 34
Library, see Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm, British, Bodleian, University, Pergamum, Vatican, Cambridge
Life of Gâbâr Mâñfâs Qudus, 34
Life of Giroyôs, 33
Life of Tâklâ Haymanot, 33, 34
Mâkanê, 32
Mâkonnen, Ras, 34
Manchester, 12
Mâqâlî, 7
Maqlî, see Sâlim b.
Martyrs, see Acts of Mary's Church, see St. Mary's
Mary, Virgin, 16, see also Miracles of Mary Yeshuâ, 33
Mâşâfâ Mestîr, 34
Mâwàst, 33
Mèoraf, 33
Middle Ages, 28
Middle East, 8, 18, 23
Mîkâ'îl, see Dorsânâr and Tâmir
Minister of Pen, 32
Miracles of Jesus, 33, 34
Miracles of Virgin Mary, 33, 34
Missal, 33, 34
Muhammad, 22
Murray Col., 20 n. 44
Muslim(s), 9
Nâgârî Maryam, 33
Na'od, Emperor of Ethiopia (1494-1506), 26
Nehemiah, 32
Netherlands, 3
New Testament, 23, 32, 34
Nile, ink, 14
Nine Saints, 8
Nob, abba, abbot of Hayq, 34
Occtateuch, 16, 23, 32
Oid Testament, 23, 27, 32, 34
Oriental manuscripts 3, countries, 18
Oxford, 20 n. 44
Pântâléon, abba, 9
Paris, 9, 32
Parrênd, 22
Pauline Epistles, 23, 33
Pergamum, library, 8
Perplus, 7
Persia, 18 n. 43
Philippûl, 16
Prophets, 23, minor, 32
Psâler, 12, 32, 34
Proverbs of Egypt, 8
Qāllāmintos, 33
Qērlōs, 33
Qur’ān, 22
Red Sea, 7, 22
Reed R., 9 n. 28
Revelation, 23, 33
Roman, 16
Rome, 8
Rosetta, 20 n. 44
Sabæans, 7
Safra, 7
Šāgā Kerstos, 34
Šahāfī T’ezzaz, title, 32
Šahāl Maryam Sifātā Ato, 32
Saints, see Acts of and Nine
Šālim b. Ma’qīl, 22
Šarţa Maryam, 34
Sāyfa Selassie, 34
Semitic Languages, 8
Sēneksaš, see Synaxarium
Shāwa, 32
Shimēn Giyorgis, 32
Sifātā, see Šahāl Maryam
Šīhāb ad Din, Arab author, 26
Sinodos, 33
Sirach, book, 32
Solomon, five books of, 32
Šōmā Dōgwa, 33, 34
St. John’s Gospel, 34
St. Mary’s Church, 26
St. Stephen of Hayq, 34
Sudan, 7
Synaxarium, 10 n. 31, 23, 32, 33, 34
Taddesse Tamrat, 34
Taf’fārā, see Fākadā Selassie
Tāklī Haymanot, see L. Life of
Tā’l’mra Ilyasus, see Miracles of Jesus
Tā’l’mra Mika’el, 26
Tana Sea, 7, 27
Tasfa Gābrā Selassie, 23
Theological School, 29
Thomas, Brother, 29
Tigrai, 9, 14
Tobit, 32
Torah, 22
Turner J.N., 20 n. 44
Ufat, 28
University Library of Leiden, 3, 24, 34 n. 74
Upper Egypt, 20
Vatican Library, 9, 32
Venice, 28
Wadla, 28
Waldā Amid, see Giyorgis
Waldā Masqel, Šāhāfī T’ezzaz, 32
Waldā Rufta šīl, Mānegēta, 32
Wallo, 28
Wārqānāh, aliqa, 32
Warra, Liqā Tābābī, 32
Wilkinson J.J., Keeper of Oriental MSS., 3
Wright W., 10 n. 31, 31
Wucidas Amik, 33
Yākatīt, 32
Yared, the composer, 28, 30, 31
Yāsāra, 22
Year of Mercy, 32
Yohannes, aliqa, 34
Zemāt, 16
Zemar, 33
Zorzi, see Alessandro
Zuway, 7, 27