



## Aethiopia 12 (2009)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

---

DOROTHEA MCEWAN, The Warburg Institute, University of London  
Miscellaneous

*Two illuminated manuscripts of Revelation of John*

Aethiopia 12 (2009), 199–201

ISSN: 1430–1938

---

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

## Miscellaneous

### Two illuminated manuscripts of *Revelation of John*

DOROTHEA MCEWAN, The Warburg Institute, University of London

Numerous copies of the text of *Revelation and the Acts of St John* exist in manuscript books. Selected scenes from *Revelation* are often illustrated in wall paintings in Ethiopian churches, the most common are the Last Judgment, the Coming of the Anti-Christ, the Tree of Life. A fuller pictorial programme can be found in the church Däbrä Marqos, Goğğam, where paintings on the walls and ceiling of the anteroom depict some twelve scenes from *Revelation* in beautiful vivid colours and in a very good state of conservation.

However, the same topic has only rarely been illuminated in manuscript books. To date only two illuminated manuscript books of *Revelation and the Acts of St John* have been researched in detail: the first is in the British Library in London, Or. 533, commissioned by Queen Məntəwwab (Bərhan Mogäsa) for the church Däbrä Şähay Q<sup>w</sup>əsqwam in Gondär, c. 1730; the second is kept in the *əqa bet* of Därsäge Maryam, the church near the town of Mäkanä Bərhan in the Səmen Mountains, and dates to c. 1850; it was commissioned and donated to the church by Wəbe Hıyälä Maryam, then a warlord, contending for the throne and possibly inspired by Məntəwwab's example. Thus, both books, works of art, were authorized by influential individuals. The reasons behind the choice for illuminating such a complicated intellectual text might well lie in the troubled political situation faced by both rulers, Məntəwwab as a woman and Wəbe as a soldier with aspirations to the throne.

The volume in the British Library, brought to London with other manuscript books and treasures in the wake of General Napier's expedition in 1868, is a large and precious manuscript book. It was presented by Sir Stafford Henry Northcote, Secretary of State for India, to the British Museum in August 1868. Its measurements are 36 cm wide, 38.5 cm high and 7 cm deep. It is bound in tooled leather, lined in red moiré silk (inside front cover) and red cotton (inside back cover). The text written in Gə'əz is arranged in three columns, the text block measuring 25 cm x 28.5 cm. Most of the illuminations are full size pictures, 26 cm x 30 cm, smaller sized pictures are artistically arranged to fit into the text. All 128 pictures are framed, and feature figures and scenes against a coloured background. Figures are not given a description or name. The pictorial programme is unique; the choice for illuminating the dif-

ferent scenes of *Revelation* must have been made by the artist/s. This manuscript is typical of the best of the second Gondärine style, technically, stylistically and aesthetically. Because of its unique subject matter it also exhibits atypical iconography and compositions. Some of these are unequalled in the modified iconic approach of the second Gondärine style, because there were no templates for the scenes, and the artist/s worked from imagination. There are some obvious and some less apparent similarities with European work as a source of iconography and composition.

The Däräsge Maryam volume has the following dimensions: 45.5 cm high, 30.5 cm wide and 14.3 cm deep. It is bound in leather, the text, in Gəʿəz, is arranged in three columns. Some pictures cover the whole folio, some share the folio with columns of text. The illuminations number 133, they have captions, but no frames, only a few of them have a faint black outline, as if a frame was considered but not completed, and none is painted on coloured ground. The composition and iconography of the majority of the pictures are the same as, or very similar to, those of its predecessor.

Well-known motifs are presented in both books in near identical treatments, for instance the seven golden lamp stands (Rev.1:12–17) following the compositional programme of Dürer's woodcuts of *Revelation*, the woman riding a scarlet beast (Rev.17:1–18) or the angel with the key to the abyss (Rev. 20:1–3).

Both BL Or. 533 and the Däräsge Maryam manuscript books are in the tradition of splendidly illuminated de luxe gospel texts, produced for a purpose far beyond the needs of officiating clergy. The later version is clearly derived from the first; whether there existed one or more intermediary copies is not yet known. The paintings of BL Or. 533 are sophisticated and original transpositions of difficult mental constructs into an Ethiopian world view; the paintings in the Däräsge Maryam manuscript book are more rustic; on the whole they follow the template of the earlier book, with modifications, but sometimes find new solutions for depicting the complex and sheer fantastical world as described in *Revelation*.

### Literature

OTTO ARNOLD JÄGER, "Ethiopian Manuscript Paintings", *Ethiopian Observer* 4, 1960, 354–91, here 386, 389f.

ROBIN MCEWAN, *Picturing Apocalypse at Gondär. A Study of the Two Known Sets of Ethiopian Illuminations of the Revelation of St. John and the Life and Death of John*, edited posthumously by DOROTHEA MCEWAN. Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2006, pp. 266.

**Illustration**

The McEwan/Otis photographic record is lodged with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abāba and with DEEDS Ethiopia in Toronto University.



The Apocalypse of Dārāsge Maryam, fol. 28v, with the verses Rev 6:1–2, ‘Then I saw the Lamb break one of the seals ... Immediately a white horse appeared ...’ Photo courtesy of the author.