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Article

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**Stranded in Dongola:
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Introduction

Information on sixteenth-century Sudan is scarce, and first-hand accounts of travellers are all the more precious because of their rarity. This paper presents a reconsideration of such an account, which has received little scholarly attention thus far. It is a colophon of a text written in Gə'əz by Takla 'Alfā, an Ethiopian monk, during his stay at Dongola (now the site of Old Dongola on the bank of the Nile in Sudan) in 1596. The fragment of interest, MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. et. 44, 71v–76v, is preceded by hymns composed by the monk and includes a narrative concerning the circumstances of their creation.

The text under consideration is part of a volume kept in the Vatican Library. According to Grébaut and Tisserant, the manuscript was transferred there from the church of Santo Stefano dei Mori, located in the Vatican City, in 1628, along with 64 other volumes.¹ It was subsequently registered in the archive of the Vatican Library by its librarian, Felice Contelori, sometime between 1628 and 1630. This is indicated in the manuscript on fol. 1r by a short note 'Cantico della Madonna' apparently in Contelori's handwriting.² How the manuscript arrived at Santo Stefano is unknown. Throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Santo Stefano was home to a community of Ethiopian pilgrims, who came to

¹ Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, II, 9, 13.

² Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 193.

Rome largely via Jerusalem.³ Given the date of composition of the hymns and colophon in 1596, the manuscript must have come into being and arrived in Rome in the final years before the community of Santo Stefano dwindled, and its whole library consisting of 64 codices was transferred to the Vatican Library in 1628.

A transcription and Latin translation of the colophon under consideration were first offered by Grébaut and Tisserant in the 1930s.⁴ In 1938, Conti Rossini was the first to mention the importance of the ethnonyms in the colophon for the history of Nubia in a review,⁵ but since then, for some 60 years, the original colophon remained outside of the scope of interest of the wider scholarly community. In the 1990s, Danilo Ceccarelli-Morolli⁶ offered an Italian translation of the passage of interest based on Grébaut and Tisserant's edition and highlighted its role as a source on the religious conversion of the Dongolese community from Christianity to Islam. However, the text is far more interesting than this. Presented below is a re-edition and English translation of the colophon based on a newly acquired digital copy of the manuscript, also published in this paper,⁷ along with a commentary on the linguistic and historical aspects of this unusual text.

³ 'Santo Stefano dei Mori', *EAE*, IV (2010), 528b–532b (G. Fiaccadori). For a concise overview of the history of Santo Stefano see also Proverbio 2011. For a study of two prominent representatives of the community of Santo Stefano in the middle of the sixteenth century see Kelly and Nosnitsin 2017. The most comprehensive study of Santo Stefano is a recent monograph by Kelly 2024.

⁴ Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 191–192.

⁵ Conti Rossini 1938, 56.

⁶ Ceccarelli-Morolli 1998.

⁷ We are very grateful to Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung), a long-term project funded within the framework of the Academies' Programme (coordinated by the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities) under survey of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Hamburg, for the support in acquisition of the digital copy of the manuscript. The purchase of the black-and-white high-resolution images with publication rights from the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana was possible thanks to funding from the University of Warsaw Excellence Initiative Research University Programme (IDUB). We also want to express our gratitude to Denis Nosnitsin, University of Hamburg, for his valuable remarks on different aspects of this text. Furthermore, we are extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this paper, whose very thoughtful suggestions and remarks significantly contributed to this paper.

The rather lengthy colophon of the text,⁸ not of the manuscript, as has been suggested previously,⁹ shows several features not typical or rare for Ethiopic colophons. Although Ethiopic colophons remain a fairly understudied subject, and we still lack a comprehensive understanding of all their features,¹⁰ the colophon in question may seem striking for any scholar dealing with the Ethiopic manuscript culture. Firstly, this piece of writing apparently represents a phenomenon which has been designated by Alessandro Bausi as ‘an expanded colophon, grown into a consciously literary dimension’.¹¹ But most importantly, the colophon places the author of the text, his life, his intention, emotions and struggles, and the circumstances under which the text was composed including his religious visions, in the centre of the composition. This colophon represents a piece of the author’s autobiographical writing¹² and, simultaneously, it still functions as a colophon, providing an abundance of information concerning the composition of the text. Also, its linguistic features and some highly specific but valuable insights into the religious history of Ethiopia are of much importance.

⁸ For more details on the attribution of this colophon to the text see below.

⁹ Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 191–192; Villa and Reule 2018.

¹⁰ For the most recent overview of the Ethiopic colophons, their study, features, and related bibliography, see Bausi 2022. For a preliminary analysis of some common elements of Ethiopic colophons see also Uhlig 1986, 314–319.

¹¹ Bausi 2022, 163.

¹² Autobiographies are generally very rare in the Ethiopian tradition and, if present, they seem to be transmitted in a specific, almost paraliterary, form, like the colophon discussed in this contribution. Another example, also from the sixteenth century, is an autobiography of the monk Pāwlos, which is scattered in the form of additions and marginal notes throughout MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éthiopien 160 (Conti Rossini 1918; a new study of this text has been recently announced by Martina Ambu, Amélie Chekroun, and Bertrand Hirsch). A colophon, or in terms of Lusini, ‘operetta’ composed by the monk Yostos and dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century is another specimen of autobiographical writing in the Ethiopian tradition (for introduction and edition see Lusini 1996, I, v–vi, 79–92; for translation see Lusini 1996, II, 56–67).

Text

Ethiopic text according to MS Vatican City, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. et. 44, 71v–76v (Figures 1–11):

- | ለዝንቱ፡ መልክዓ፡ | እግዚእነ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክ | ርስቶስ፡ ወመልክአ፡ | እግዝእትነ፡ ማ fol. 71v
 5 ርያም፡ | አውጸዕክዋ፡ አንሰ፡ በ | ምድረ፡ ድንጉላ፤ ነቢር | የ፡ ማዕከለ፡ መስልማን፤ አ
 ነ፡ ተክለ፡ አልፋ፡ | ኃጥዕ፡ ወምስኪን፡ እን | ዘ፡ አሐውር፡ መንገለ፡ | ኢየሩሳሌም፤ ኃ
 ጢእ | የ፡ ዘእጼዓን፡ ቡቱ፡ ግመ | ለ፡ክመ፡ እትመየጥ፡ ው | ስተ፡ ሀገርየ፡ ምድረ፡ ኢ | fol. 72r
 ትዮጵያ፤ ወከመሂ፡ እሐር | ጎበ፡ ኢየሩሳሌም፡አ | ልብየ፡ (ኃይለ፡ S.L.) ወኢክሂለ፤
 እስ | መ፡ ምድረ፡ በድው፡ ው | እቱ፤ ጎቤሁ፡ አልቦ፡ ዕፀ፡ | ወማየ፡ወአነሂ፡ ኃጢ | እ
 10 የ፡ ጎበ፡ አሐውር፡ ነ | በርኩ፤ በውስተ፡ ድንጉ | ላ፡ ማዕከለ፡ ኖባ፡ ወተ | ንበላት፡ ባሕ
 ቲትየ፤ ወ | ወል (ድ.S.L.)የሂ፡ ኩሉ፡ አንዳዓለ | ጃ፤ ወዝውእቱ፡ ኃረዮ፡ | ክር<ስ>ቶስ፡
 ሞተ፡ በድንጉ | ላ፤ ወበዕለተ፡ ሞቱ፡ ኀ | በ፡ መቃብሩ፡ ወረደ፡ ብ | ርሃን፡ እንዘ፡ ይሬ
 እዩ፡ | ጎቡረ፡ ኩሉሙ፡ መስል | ማን፡ ወሰብአ፡ ድንጉላ፤ | ኖባ፡ ወጅላባ፡ አረብ፤ | እ fol. 73r
 ምድሃረ፡ ዕርበተ፡ ፀሐ | ይ፡ በጊዜ፡ ንዋም፤ አመ፡ እስራ፡ ለነሐሴ፡ በዕለተ፡ | ረቡ

¹³ *Malkə* 'is a poetic composition (a hymn) in the Go'əz language praising different parts of the body of a saint or a member of the Trinity ('Mälkə', *E Ae*, III (2007), 700b–702b (Habtemichael Kidane)). This colophon is a unique source on the process of composition of such poetic texts, the authorship of which is otherwise attested only in secondary sources. Although some *malkə* 'hymns themselves contain embellished remarks on their composition (also as separated stanzas), the colophons to *malkə* 'hymns as such are rather rare (for an exception see a later composition published and translated in Mersha Alehegne 2017). We are extremely grateful to our colleague Augustine Dickinson, University of Hamburg, for sharing with us these valuable insights into this tradition.

¹⁴ From the point of view of grammar, both compositions are considered as one literary work; the verb አውጸዕክዋ፡ incorporates an object suffix in the third feminine singular.

¹⁵ The term አውጸዕክዋ፡ referring to a philological practice in Ethiopia and Eritrea has diverse meanings. For example, the very same word is attested in the controversial colophon of the Ethiopic text of *Kəbra nagašt* (Bezold 1905, ፻፳፪, 138; for a recent translation see Bausi 2022, 169) and might also refer to the process of translation or maybe compilation. However, it is apparent that Takla 'Alfā was indeed the author of the hymn, consequently the verb stands here rather for 'produce, compose'. *Malkə* 'hymns represent a widespread poetic genre in Ethiopic literature which does not find immediate parallels in other literatures, so a translation can be excluded with certainty. See also below.

¹⁶ A case of double negation, see Dillmann 1899, 450.

¹⁷ The word might also stand for 'envoys, messengers, ambassadors', but here it clearly conveys its derivative meaning 'Muslims' (Leslau 1987, 576b–577a). There is no straight-

Translation

This *malkə*¹³ to our Lord Jesus Christ and the *malkə* to our Lady Mary,¹⁴ I, Takla 'Alfā, the sinful and poor composed¹⁵ while being in the land (*mādr*) of Dongola (*dəng^wəlā*), amongst Muslims (*maslāmān*), on my way to Jerusalem, without a camel to ride on, in order to come back to my region (*hagar*), the land (*mādr*) of Ethiopia (*'ityōpyā*), and also in order that I might go to Jerusalem. I have no strength and (even no) power,¹⁶ since this is a desert, there is no tree and water. And as I could not walk, I resided in Dongola (*dəng^wəlā*), amongst the Nubians (*nobā*) and Muslims (*tanbalāt*),¹⁷ on my own. And my son¹⁸ *k^wəllu 'andā 'āl(l)aññ*,¹⁹ that is to say, Christ chose him, he died in Dongola (*dəng^wəlā*), and on the day of his death a light came down on his grave, while Muslims (*maslāmān*), and the Nubian people of Dongola (*sab'a dəng^wəlā nobā*),²⁰ and the Arab(ian) *ǧəlabā*²¹ altogether saw (it) after the sundown at the time of sleep (*gize*

forward explanation for why Takla 'Alfā utilised two different terms for Muslims in his account: *maslāmān* and *tanbalāt*.

¹⁸ = spiritual son, disciple; see below for the persona of Takla 'Alfā.

¹⁹ = ጵጵ: አገዳላኝ: possibly, ጵጵ: አገዳላኝ: , *k^wəllu 'anṣā 'āl(l)aññ*. The text is incomprehensible. The first word is a Gə'əz word for 'all, everything'; the second word seems to be of Amharic origin. The character at the beginning of the fourth line on fol. 72v seems to be a graphical variant of ኝ, the first person singular object suffix pronoun in Amharic. Instead of a vertical stroke on the top of the character, it adds the stroke at the bottom. It might either be a phrase in Amharic, though not very comprehensible, or possibly the name of the disciple. Note that the character discussed above was omitted in the edition by Grébaut and Tisserant who instead suggest the reading አገዳላ: and translate the passage as 'filio meo etiam omnes conviciati sunt' (Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 192). Ceccarelli-Morolli follows them with 'inoltre tutti maltrattarono il mio discepolo' (Ceccarelli-Morolli 1998, 68). This reading would require a commentary on morphology.

²⁰ Note that the Ethiopic text has a punctuation sign after the expression 'people of Dongola', *sab'a dəngwālā*: (ወሰብአ: ድንግላ:). This might allow us to think that the text be rendered as 'the people of Dongola: Nubians and the Arab(ian) *ǧəlabā*'. However, the function of the punctuation signs in the text is unclear, see, for example, fol. 76v, lines 3–4, where the same punctuation sign is placed between the verb and its object (አውጸአኩ: ዘንተ: መልክዓ:). Current interpretation is thus based primarily on the position of the conjunction *wa*, 'and'.

²¹ The whole expression can also be rendered as '*ǧəlabā* of the West' since the word አረብ: ('*arab* or '*arab*') can stand for both 'Arabia' and 'west, sunset' (Dillmann 1865, 964; Leslau 1987, 68b–69a). For an association of the word with Arabia, see, for example, Bezold 1905, 12 (ed.), 33 (tr.). A precise interpretation of this toponym, or ethnonym, both being possible, varies considerably from case to case (for the most elaborate discussion see Nosnitsin 2005, 176). See also below.

- ፊ፡ ለፀቢሐ፡ ሐሙስ፡፡ | በክልኤ፡ ምእት፡ በአር | ብዓ፡ ወጁአመተ፡ ምሕ | ረት፡ በ
 መዋዕሊሁ፡ ለዮ | ሐንስ፡ ወንጌላዊ፡፡ ወው | እቱሂ፡ ብርሃን፡ እንዘ፡ | ንሬእዮ፡ ወንጌ
 ጽሮ፡ ኩ | ልን፤ በይእቲ፡ ሌሊት፡ | ዓርገ፡ መንገለ፡ ኢየሩ | ሳሌም፤ ወአንከሩ፡ እ | ሉ፡ መስ
 ልማን፡ ወሰብ | አ፡ ድንጉላ፤ እምነ፡ ብ | ርሃን፡ ዘርእዩ፡፡ ወአነ | ሂ፡ ተክለ፡ አልፋ፡ ኃ | ጥእ፡
 5 ወአባሲ፤ እንዘ፡ ሀሎ | ኩ፡ ባሕቲትየ፡ በህየ፡፡ | በጽሐ፡ ጾማ፡ ለእግዝ | እትነ፡ ማርያም፡ ዘደ |
 ብረ፡ ቊስቋም፡፡ ዘአ | ውጽኦ፡ ንጉሥነ፡ ሠርፀ፡ | ድንግል፡ በመዋዕሊሁ፡ | ዘኢተሠርዓ፡ ቀ
 ዳሚ፤ | በአበዊነ፤ ወባሕቱ፡ | ሠምረት፡ ቦቱ፡ እግዝ | እትነ፡ ማርያም፡ ድንግ | ል፡ ምስለ፡ ወ
 ልዳ፡ ወፍ | ቁራ፡ እግዚእነ፡ ወመድ | ኃኒነ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስ | ቶስ፡ ሎቱ፡ ስብሐ | ት፡ ምስለ፡
 ወላዲቱ፡ | ድንግል፡ በአፈ፡ ሰብ | እ፡ ወመላእክት፡ ለ | ዓለመ፡ ዓለም፡ አሜን፡፡ | ወአነሂ፡ ጸ
 10 ምኩ፡ በ | ውእቱ፡ ጾም፡ እንዘ፡ | እበኪ፡ ወአስቆቁ፤ | በኃጢአ፡ ቤተ፡ ክር | ስቲያን፡ በእንተ፡
 ሃ | ይማኖትየ፤ ወጥቆ | አተ፡ ክርስትናየ፤ ሰ | ርከ፡ ወነግሀ፡ ሌሊተ፡ | ወመዓልተ፤ እንዘ፡ እኬ |
 ልሕ፡ በዘምሮ፡ ዳዊት፡ | ወበሰዓታት፡ እስከ፡ | ፍቅደ፡ ጃዕለት፡፡ ወአ | መ፡ ሠሉሱ፡ ለወ
 ርኃ፡ | ጎዳር፤ መጽአት፡ ጎቤ | የ፡ እግዝእትነ፡ ማር | ያም፡ ምስለ፡ ፍቁር፡ ወ | ልዳ፡ እግዚእነ፡
 ኢየሱስ፡ | ስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ (ሎሙ፡ ሰጊድ፡ *s.l.*) ወምስ | ለ፡ ሚካኤል <ል>፡ ወገብርኤ | ል፡ ወካል
 15 አንሂ፤ እለ፡ | አልቦሙ፡ ጥልቄ፡ መ | ላእ(ክት *s.l.*)፤ እንዘ፡ ይዌድስ | ዋ፡ በዚማ፡ ጥዑም፡
 ዘ | ይሰልብ፡ ልበ፡ ሰብእ፤ | ወቦአት፡ ጎበ፡ ሀሎኩ፡ | ቤት፡ ቀዊምየ፡ ጊዜ፡ | መንፈቀ፡ ሌሊት፤
 ቅድ | መ፡ ሥእላ፡ ወሰ(ዕ*s.l.*)ለ፡ ወል | ዳ፡ ወሥዕለ፡ ፱እንሰሳ፡ ወ | እግዚአብሔር፡ አብ፡ | (ወ
 ሥዕለ፡ ሚካኤል፡ ወገብርኤል፡ *s.l.*) ብሉየ፡ መዋዕል፡ እኒዝ | የ፡ መስቀለ፡ እንዘ፡ እዜ | ም
 ር፡ በማሳበረ፡ ምእ | መናን፡ ወምዕመናት፡፡ | ወትቤለኒ፡ አውጽእ፡ | ሊተ፡ መልክዓ፡ ዚአየ፤ |
 20 ወመ<ል>ክዓ፡ ወልድየ፡፡ | ወበይእቲ፡ ዕለት፤ አ | ውጻእኩ፤ ዘንተ፡ መል | ክዓ፡ እግዝእትነ፡
 ማር | ያም፡ ወመልክአ፡ እግዚ | እነ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስ | ቶስ፡ እንዘ፡ ላዕላዕ፡ | ወጸያፈ፡ ልሳን፤ ዘ
 ገደ | ፍኩሂ፡ ወዘአጥፋእኩ፡ | ኦካህናት፡ አንትሙ፡ ዐርትዑ፡፡

fol. 73v

fol. 74r

fol. 74v

fol. 75r

fol. 75v

fol. 76r

fol. 76v

22 The word as it is written in the manuscript could stand for either **ጾማ**፡ (*šamā*) as in the previous edition, or for **ጾማ**፡ (*šomā*, ‘fast, fasting’). The very cursive and careless handwriting of the manuscript does not allow to identify the form with certainty. The Ethiopic tradition attests the so-called ‘fast of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām’, which lasts exactly forty days, from 26 Maskaram to 6 Həḍār. This period coincides with the period of time described in the colophon. Both previous translations seem to advance an inter-

nəwām) on the 20th of Naḥase (= 23 August) on Wednesday (in the night) to Thursday in the 248th year of Mercy (= 1596), at the time (i.e., year) of John Evangelist. And this light, as we altogether were watching and observing it, ascended in the direction of Jerusalem, and these Muslims (*maslāmān*) and the people of Dongola (*dəngʷəlā*) were amazed by the light, which they saw. And while I, Takla 'Alfā, the sinner and impious was there on my own, the fast²² of our Lady Mary of the Mount of Qʷəsqaʷām came, which our king Šarḏa Dəngəl²³ brought forth at the time, when it was not yet (formerly) established by our Fathers. And nevertheless, our Lady Mary is delighted with Her Son and Her Beloved one, our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ. Glory be with Him and His Mother Virgin through the mouth of people and angels, for ever and ever, amen.

And I was fasting during this fasting period, weeping and lamenting in the lack of a church on account of my faith and the destruction of my Christianity. Evenings and mornings, days and nights, I recited from the Psalms of David and Horologium (*sa'ātāt*) for forty days.

And on the 3rd of Ḥədār our Lady Mary came to me together with her beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ—veneration to them!—with Michael and Gabriel and other innumerable angels, while they were praising her with a pleasant chant, which blew away the human mind. She entered the house, in which I was, when I, having stood up at midnight in front of her image, and the image of her Son, and the image of the Four Living Creatures, and of God the Father, the Ancient of Days,²⁴ and the image of Michael and Gabriel and having taken a cross, was singing from *Māḥbara mə'əmanān wa-mə'əmanāt*.²⁵ And she told me: 'Compose²⁶ a *malkə* ' of mine and a *malkə* ' of my Son'. And on this day, I composed this *malkə* ' to our Lady Mary and the *malkə* ' to our Lord Jesus Christ, while being a stutterer and a stammerer (of the tongue). Oh, priests, you may correct what I have forgotten and corrupted.

pretation of ጸግ: as a derivative from ጸመወ: (*ṣāmawa*) and consequently the proposed translations are 'adflictio' and 'afflizione' (Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 192; Ceccarelli-Morolli 1998, 68). The suggestion of Ceccarelli-Morolli that it should be 'una preghiera particolare' does not seem plausible (Ceccarelli-Morolli 1998, 69).

²³ King Šarḏa Dəngəl reigned in 1563–1597, which confirms the dating.

²⁴ Cp. Daniel 7:9.

²⁵ Most probably, the text here refers to a *malkə* 'hymn known as *Māḥbara mə'manān* or *Malkə'a qʷərbān* (CAe 2733). This hymn is typically performed before the distribution of the Eucharist to the faithful (Fritsch 2001, 97). The Ethiopic ጸግዘ: ጸዘምር: በግሳብር: ምእመናን: ወምዕመናት: might, however, also be understood as 'was singing (Psalms) at the gathering of the believers, male and female'.

²⁶ The same term as at the beginning is used.

Figs. 1–11: MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. et. 44, fols 71v–76v (by permission of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved).

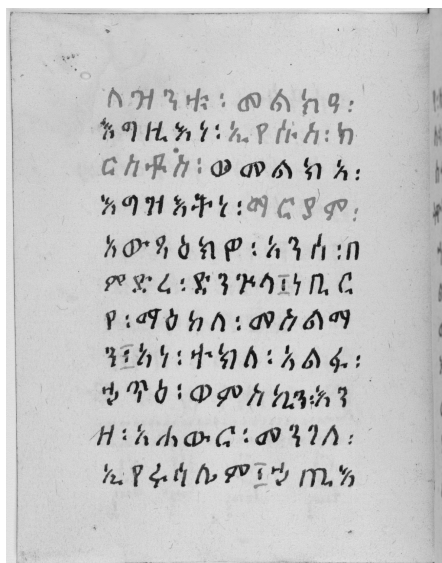


Fig. 1, Vat. et. 44, fol. 71v
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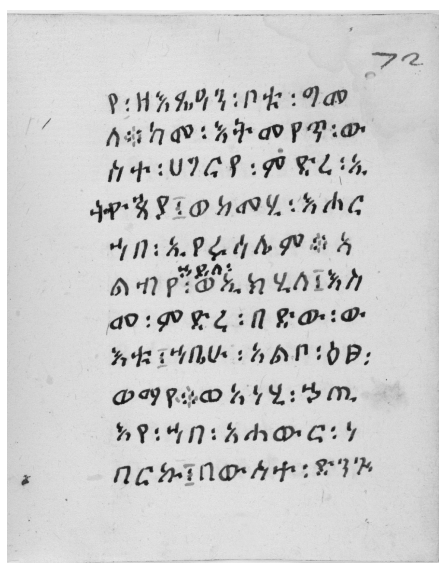


Fig. 2, Vat. et. 44, fol. 72r
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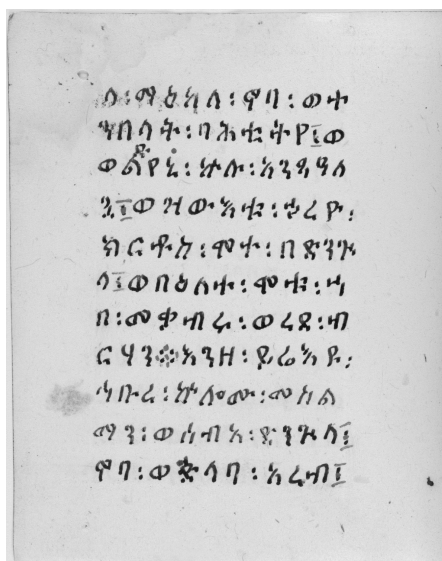


Fig. 3, Vat. et. 44, fol. 72v
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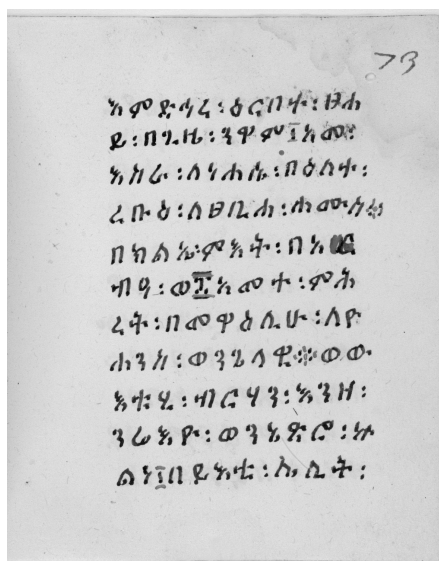


Fig. 4, Vat. et. 44, fol. 73r
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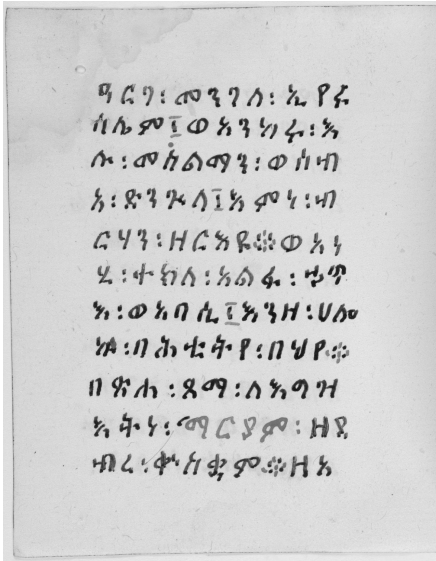


Fig. 5, Vat. et. 44, fol. 73v
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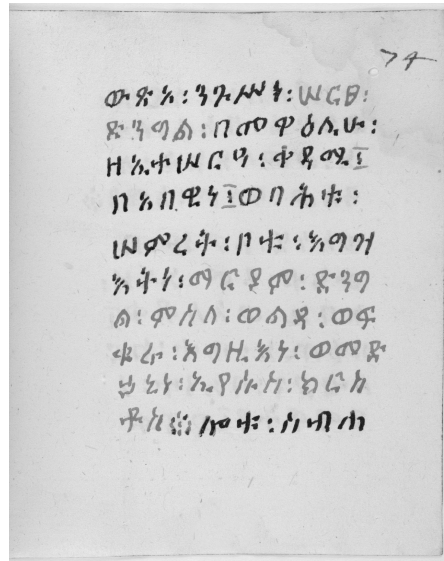


Fig. 6, Vat. et. 44, fol. 74r
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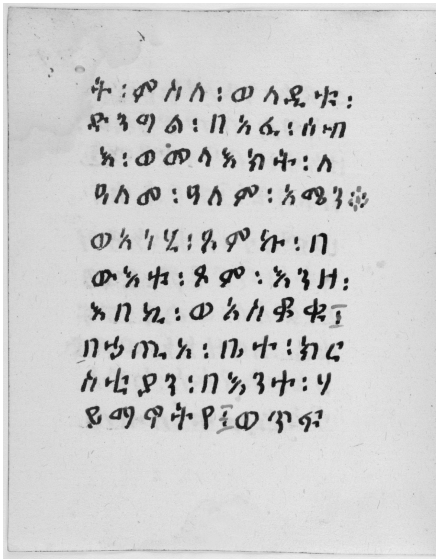


Fig. 7, Vat. et. 44, fol. 74v
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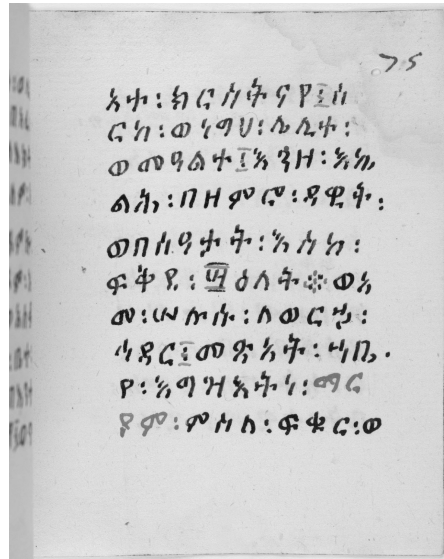


Fig. 8, Vat. et. 44, fol. 75r
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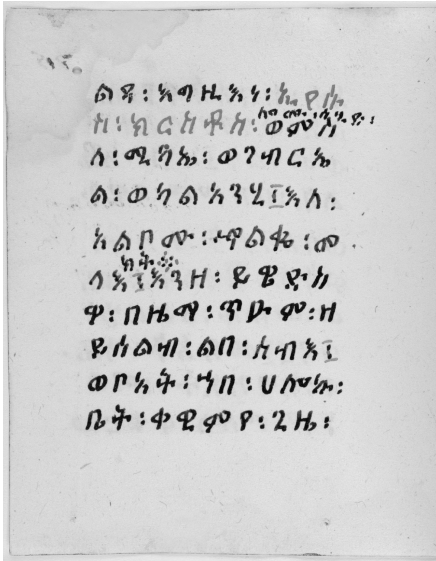


Fig. 9, Vat. et. 44, fol. 75v
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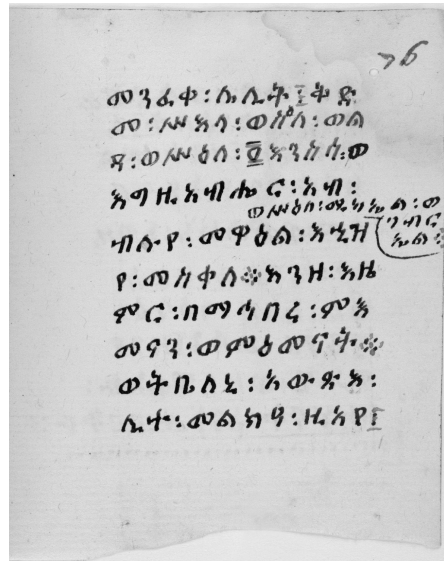


Fig. 10, Vat. et. 44, fol. 76r
 © 2024 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

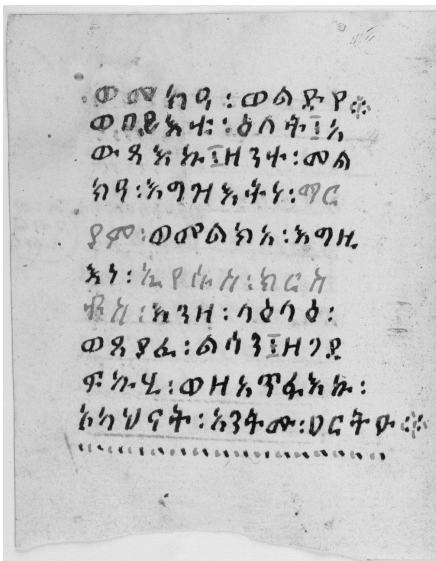


Fig. 11, Vat. et. 44, fol. 76v
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Description of the Manuscript

The manuscript is a relatively small paper codex, 9.2 x 7.5 cm, written in one column. Paper as writing support indicates that the manuscript was most probably produced outside of Ethiopia and Eritrea.²⁷ The manuscript is incomplete, and the first text, a hymn to Lady Mary, starts abruptly from the second stanza. All stanzas are numbered throughout the manuscript (65 in the hymn to Mary and 55 in the hymn to Jesus Christ). The beginning of the hymn to Jesus Christ, fol. 39r, is decorated with a simple and crude decorative frame. The hand of the scribe is irregular, and the lines and inscribed areas are uneven due to the apparent absence of ruling. The irregularities of the handwriting might be attributed to the unusual writing tools and material support. Numerous corrections are found throughout the codex, for example, on fols 5v, 6v, 7r, 36v, 37v, 47v, 52v, 56r, 59v, and 63r. There are sporadic fluctuations in handwriting, possibly due to a change of the writing tool. Judging from the material setting, such as the writing support and handwriting, it cannot be excluded that this manuscript represents an autograph and was written down by Takla 'Alfā himself somewhere on his journey or after its accomplishment. In any case, the manuscript production took place in circumstances where the scribe, be it Takla 'Alfā or not, had access to writing materials, such as ink and paper, and had working conditions that allowed him to accomplish this work. The binding of the manuscript is of European origin; the reddish-brown leather of the binding is decorated with gold tooling: linear frames, four bees in the corners on both boards, and four bees on the spine.

Dating

Although the text in the manuscript reads 'the year of Mercy' (*'āmata mǝhrat*), it stands here for the Era of Diocletian (or the Era of Martyrs),²⁸ not the Era of Mercy (also referred to as the Era of Grace),²⁹ which is a common error, or better to say

²⁷ See Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2015, 155–156. The manuscript is written on high-quality laid paper; watermarks, mostly cut, are visible on fols 41, 42, 44, 69, and 70. The watermarks on fols 41 and 70 are very close to the anchor motif popular among Italian papermakers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Mošin 1973). A more thorough study of the paper will follow.

²⁸ Note that the Era of Diocletian (or the Era of Martyrs) seem to have been applied both using the division of the Era into the cycles of 532 years (e.g., Chaîne 1925, 115–117 and Neugebauer 1979, 116) and without the division into cycles, as in MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éthiopien 35, fol. 1r and fol. 201v (Cerulli 1947, 394–396).

²⁹ The epoch year, that is the beginning of the Era of Grace, is year 77 of the Era of Diocletian, which corresponds to the end of the fourth 19-year lunar cycle ($4 \times 19 = 76$). Hence, the difference between the Era of Diocletian and the Era of Grace. The Era of Grace in the rule is subdivided into the cycles of 523 years.

confusion, in manuscripts;³⁰ it is proved by a simple calculation of possible dates according to different Ethiopic eras. To simplify the issue of converting the Ethiopian dates to the dates according to the Gregorian calendar, we might take 284 CE as a starting point for the calculations. This year corresponds to the beginning of the reign of Diocletian and thus is the epoch year of the Era of Diocletian. In the first cycle, year 248 of the Era of Diocletian corresponds to 532 CE ($284 + 248$) and year 248 of the Era of Grace to 608 CE ($532 + 76$). To calculate the dates for the next cycles we only need to add 532 (the number of years in a cycle). Thus, in the second cycle, year 248 of the Era of Diocletian would correspond to 1064 CE ($532 + 532$) and year 248 of the Era of Grace 1140 CE ($1064 + 76$). In the third cycle, year 248 of the Era of Diocletian corresponds to 1596 CE ($1064 + 532$) and year 248 of the Era of Grace corresponds to 1672 CE ($1596 + 76$).

The only date that is plausible for the dating of the colophon is the 248th year in the third cycle of the Era of Diocletian, which is 1596 CE. According to the Era of Mercy, a corresponding year might be either 1140, which is apparently too early, or 1672, which is too late.

The reason why the latter date is considered to be too late is the fact that the manuscript contains a note in the handwriting of Felice Contelori (1588–1652),³¹ and that it was inventoried among the manuscripts in the archives of the Vatican Library.³² Interpreting the year 1596 CE as the dating of the colophon is also confirmed by the mention of king Šarḏa Dəngəl, who reigned between 1563 and 1597 CE. The 248th year (of the Era of Diocletian) was indeed the year of John the Evangelist³³ as stated later in the colophon, which again proves the dating and excludes a scribal mistake. The only discrepancy in the dating is the provided weekday, as the 20th of Naḥase (or the 23rd of August) was a Friday, not a Wednesday.³⁴ This confusion indicates that the author might have written down this account sometime after the event he described.

³⁰ Neugebauer 1979, 116; ‘Chronography’, *EAE*, I (2003), 733a–737a (S. Uhlig).

³¹ Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 193.

³² Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, II, 9, 13. See also above.

³³ In the Ethiopic tradition, each year is associated with the name of one of the Evangelists, cyclically repeated in the canonical order: Matthew–Mark–Luke–John. Note that determination of the Evangelist associated with the year does not depend on the Era; to determine the Evangelist it is required to run a modulo operation (that is computing the remainder in Euclidian division): ‘year mod 4’. In case of year 284 ($284/4$), disregarding the Era, the remainder is 0, which corresponds to John (Neugebauer 1979, 44).

³⁴ The date can be easily checked using a useful digital calendar tool developed by Augustine Dickinson: <https://cal.ethiopicist.com/>.

Circumstances of the Text Composition

As it appears from the text of the colophon, it indeed describes the circumstances of the production of the *text*, not of the *manuscript* in which it is preserved. The text of the hymns was clearly composed by Takla 'Alfā in Dongola on his way to Jerusalem. As demonstrated above, a slight confusion of the days of the week in the colophon might signal that Takla 'Alfā first memorised his compositions and let them be written down or wrote them down himself later, together with the colophon. In any case, it is obvious that the colophon belongs to the text only and not to the circumstances of the manuscript production. Thus, the latter cannot be dated on the basis of the colophon and might be of a later date, even if it was in the hand of Takla 'Alfā.

The circumstances in which the text was composed deserve a more detailed analysis. We learn from the colophon that Takla 'Alfā was stranded on his way to Jerusalem.³⁵ He apparently departed from Ethiopia with his 'son', or rather his disciple, who died in Dongola presumably as a result of the hardships of the journey and was buried there. For Takla 'Alfā the journey was also not an easy endeavour; he writes that he had to stay in Dongola because he had no strength to walk. We do not know if he managed to continue his journey to Jerusalem or had to return to Ethiopia. However, it is more plausible that Takla 'Alfā managed to reach Jerusalem,³⁶ and he, or at least his hymns, travelled even further to Rome.³⁷

The composition of the text, as Takla 'Alfā describes it himself, was inspired by a religious vision of Lady Mary, Jesus Christ, and angels during the fast of our

³⁵ Pilgrimages to Jerusalem played a prominent role in the Christian culture of Ethiopia and Eritrea. A journey to Jerusalem is a recurrent *topos* in Ethiopic hagiography (Marrassini 1981, lxxx–lxxxi; Ancel et al. 2022, 146–148); however, also real pilgrimages, apparently following the routes of merchants, took place, either by land, by Nile or Red Sea (Gascon and Hirsch 1992, 690). Accordingly, besides the aspects discussed in this paper, the colophon in question is also an important source for the study of routes of Ethiopian pilgrims to Jerusalem and especially the role of Dongola (for Ethiopian itineraries see, e.g., Crawford 1958 and an Ethiopic text which describes a route to Jerusalem in MS Bibliotheca Vaticana, Combonianus Aethiopicus 88, pp. 67–70 (Raineri 2000, 90)). This topic will be discussed further by the authors of this paper in a forthcoming article (Dzierzbicka and Elagina forthcoming).

³⁶ Some Ethiopic manuscripts, around the same period, reached Europe through Cairo or generally Egypt (e.g., Bosc-Tiessé 2022, 164–166, 170, 173); however, in those cases they seem to have been purchased by Europeans. In the case of MS Vat. et. 44, the manuscript remained with the Ethiopic community until the transfer of the whole library of Santo Stefano to the Vatican Library.

³⁷ His name does not appear in the prosopography of Santo Stefano provided in Kelly 2024, 301–321; this is, however, not conclusive because the information on the community of Santo Stefano is very fragmentary.

Lady Mary of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām, an Ethiopian fast that is compulsory only for monks and priests (see also below). The fact that Takla 'Alfā observed this fast allows us to suggest that he was either a monk or a priest, and that the 'son' who travelled with him and passed away in Dongola was rather his spiritual son, that is, his disciple. We learn from Takla 'Alfā's devoted observation of the fast, despite his weakness, that he might have brought with him at least two manuscripts for his personal use (unless he was reciting from memory), the Psalter and Horologium, and maybe some holy images. At the culmination of his fasting, shortly before the feast of Q^wəsq^wām, he had a vision of Lady Mary who commanded him to compose the hymns. If we follow the suggested interpretation of the text that he was himself at that moment reciting another *malkə*'-hymn, we might assume that this proclamation was also one of the sources of his inspiration. Such a detailed description of the circumstances of the text composition and the source of inspiration seems uncommon for Ethiopic manuscript culture.

Nevertheless, the circumstances described by Takla 'Alfā in his colophon show considerable parallels to the *Vision of Theophilus*, an Apocryphon transmitted in several languages, including also Ethiopic (Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti 56, Clavis Patrum Graecorum 2628, Clavis Aethiopica 2487).³⁸ According to this text, Mary, being accompanied by Michael, Gabriel, and numerous angels, appeared before Theophilus while he was praying. Moreover, the Lady Mary reportedly commanded Theophilus to write down what she was telling him and spread this word all over the world.³⁹ These parallels suggest that the legend of Theophilus was also a source of inspiration, either for the vision of Takla 'Alfā or for his later interpretation of his struggles during his stay at Dongola.

Philological Practices in the Colophon

Some elements of the colophon pertaining to the process of composition as philological practice deserve attention. First, as already mentioned above, the verb that is used throughout the colophon in the meaning of 'produce, compose' (አውጽኦ, 'awṣə'a) is also attested with other meanings. For example, in the new translation of the controversial colophon of *Kəbra nagašt*, Alessandro Bausi translates the same verb as 'turn': 'We have turned (this book) into Arabic from a Coptic manuscript' (አውገእናሃ፡አመጽከፈ፡ቅብጥ፡ለዐረቢ፡, 'awḏā'nāhā 'əmməṣḥafa qəbṭ la-'arabi),⁴⁰ since it apparently describes in this case the process of translation from Coptic into Arabic. In his translation of the colophon of *Filkəsyos*, Conti Rossini also translates the word አውፅኦ፡, 'awḏə'ota, as

³⁸ For the edition of the Ethiopic text, see Conti Rossini 1912.

³⁹ Conti Rossini 1912, 20, 58.

⁴⁰ Bausi 2022, 169.

‘traduire’.⁴¹ At the same time, a derivative of the same stem, **አውግኢ፡**, *’awḏā’i*, also stands for ‘editor’.⁴² Consequently, the stem appears to cover a large semantic field and describe a variety of philological practices, which deserves further investigation. Since colophons to the production of such compositions are scarce, comparative material is very limited. In the already-mentioned colophon in the *malkə*’ to the martyrs of the monastery of Dabra Libānos, a work of a very late date (1948), the author chose to use different terms: ‘I prepared and compiled’ (**ቀሰምኩ፡ ወአስተጋባእኩ፡**, *qas(s)amku wa-’astagābā’ku*).⁴³

The second element of the colophon that deserves attention regarding philological practices is its conclusion: ‘Oh, priests, you may correct (**ዐርትዑ፡**, *’artə’u*) what I have forgotten and corrupted (**ወዘአጥፋእኩ፡**, *wa-za-’atfā’ku*)’. The appeal of the author to the priests to correct his poetry (or any other composition) in case of any mistakes is also not a particularly widespread feature, but it might provide some insights into philological practices of the manuscript culture of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Unless it is an additional self-deprecating rhetorical figure, this appeal might point to a practice of embellishment, adjustment, or grammatical corrections of individually composed texts by the clerical community. The practice of textual corrections, conjectures, or restorations is well-established in the Ethiopic manuscript culture, and some copies attest multiple attempts of scribes to improve corrupted passages.⁴⁴ Thus, we might evaluate this appeal to the priests as an acknowledgement of this philological practice.

The Fast of our Lady Mary of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām

The colophon contains an interesting piece of information on the fast that Takla 'Alfā was observing during his stay in Dongola: ‘the <fast>⁴⁵ of our Lady Mary of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām came, which our king Šarḏa Dəngəl brought forth at the time, when it was not yet (formerly) established by our Fathers’. The fast of our Lady of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām, or simply the fast of Q^wəsq^wām, commemorates the hardships endured by the Holy Family, especially by Mary, at the time

⁴¹ Conti Rossini 1915, 210.

⁴² Dillmann 1865, 947.

⁴³ Mersha Alehegne 2017, 129, 136.

⁴⁴ For example, MS Rome, Biblioteca dell’Accademia nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana, fondo Conti Rossini 27, one of the witnesses to the *Chronicle of John of Nikiu* attests regular attempts of a scribe to correct the corrupted or less understandable passages in the text (for a catalogue description, see Strelcyn 1976, 100–102).

⁴⁵ For this conjecture, see above.

of the flight into Egypt. The fast lasts for forty days and is compulsory for monks and priests only.⁴⁶ The connection between this fast and king Šarḏa Dəngəl has not been established elsewhere according to our knowledge, and tracing back the tradition of this fast could be a challenging task. However, taking into consideration that Takla 'Alfā was a contemporary of the emperor Šarḏa Dəngəl and was apparently well-instructed in religious matters, we might assume that this piece of information is factual. The information provided in the colophon on the role of Šarḏa Dəngəl in establishing the fast deserves further investigation and consideration in the study of the Ethiopian liturgical year, and more generally on the role of Ethiopian kings in establishing Christian feasts and fasts.⁴⁷

The Mention of *ǧəlābā*

A noteworthy element of the colophon is the occurrence of the term *ǧəlābā*.⁴⁸ No other attestation for this word or its variants in Ethiopic has been found so far. Grébaut and Tisserant did not provide any interpretation of this word,⁴⁹ and Ceccarelli-Morolli suggested that it might stand for a corrupted name of the Ġa'alīyīn tribe.⁵⁰ It is fairly clear, however, that the term is a loanword from Arabic, commonly appearing in later sources as a designation for merchants.

The Arabic noun *ǧallāb* (جالب) stands for 'importer, trader' and is a derivative of the verb جلب, meaning i.a. 'to bring along, to bring to the spot; to fetch, get, bring; to import; to procure'.⁵¹ The plural form of *ǧallāb* is *aǧlāb*, but also *ǧalaba*.⁵² The *ǧəlābā* (*ǧalaba*) are also more specifically defined as 'Persons who drive, or bring, camels and sheep or goats [&c.] from one place or country or town to another, for sale'.⁵³ As a designation of a profession, the term appears in

⁴⁶ Fritsch 1999, 110; Fritsch 2001, 83.

⁴⁷ Another prominent example is the famous religious reforms of king Zar'a Yā'qob (Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 231–240).

⁴⁸ The spelling of the term *ǧəlābā* adopted throughout the text is rendered as in the colophon. However, the sources and secondary literature offer a number of other spelling variants (*gellaba*, *galaba*, *gallaba*, *jallaba*, *jallabs*, *cellabe*, *djalaba*, etc.). The original spellings are provided in parentheses where relevant for reference purposes.

⁴⁹ Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, I, 192.

⁵⁰ Ceccarelli-Morolli 1998, 70.

⁵¹ Wehr 1979, 153.

⁵² Wehr 1979, 153; Lane 1968, I, 440.

⁵³ Lane 1968, I, 440; see Walz 1978, 71–72, 82.

Egyptian Arabic business letters already in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁵⁴ It sometimes occurs with a modifier indicating the type of goods in which the trader dealt.⁵⁵ From the nineteenth century, the increasing role of *ġālābā* in the slave trade shifted the meaning of the word to 'slave dealer': 'One who brings slaves from foreign countries, particularly from African countries, for sale'.⁵⁶

The term begins to appear in accounts of travellers to Sudan in the second half of the seventeenth century. According to Evliya Çelebi (1672) more than a thousand *ġālābā* (*cellābe*, sing. *cellāb*), or Sudanese merchants, were present in Dongola.⁵⁷ Also the Franciscan missionary Giacomo d'Albano (1698) reported meeting *ġālābā* (*giallaba*) on his journey from Egypt through the Funḡ kingdom to Ethiopia.⁵⁸ Theodoro Krump, who joined a caravan of merchants (*jallab*) from Esna through Dongola to Sinnār, offered a number of interesting observations concerning *ġālābā*.⁵⁹ From eighteenth-century documents kept in the *Maḥkama aš-šar'īyya*, archives of religious courts in Cairo, we learn about the activities of the 'Wakālāt al-Gallābā', a market and caravanserai used since the sixteenth century by merchants who traded in goods brought from and into Sudan.⁶⁰ These records indicate that Dongola was meaningful to many *ġālābā* not only as a stepping stone on a trade route, but also as a place with which they identified themselves. Among the names of about 200 *ġālābā* who appeared before Cairo courts in the eighteenth century or were connected with merchants of Cairo by legal or kinship ties, the largest number carried the placename nisba *ad-Dunqulāwī*, indicating their origin in Dongola. Walz surmises that such nisbas remained in the family long after its members had moved away from their ancestral home and are indicative of some migration patterns dating back as far as the late seventeenth century.⁶¹

⁵⁴ *P.Jahn* 17 = *P.Alqab* 106.4 (*n.p.*, AD 771–830); *P.Cair.Arab.* 295 = *P.Alqab* 59.4 (Edfu, ninth century); the sigla of Arabic papyri are cited according to the Checklist of Arabic Papyri available at https://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/isap/isap_checklist/index.html.

⁵⁵ For instance *ġālib al-amṭār*, 'Schlauchimporteur' in *P.Vind.Arab.* I 1.7 (*n.p.*, ninth until tenth centuries AD). *P.Vind.Arab.* I 62.10 (Qūs, twelfth century AD) mentions that *ma 'a hāḏā al-ġālī[b] awṣāt* [reconstructed] ('the merchant has waistbands'). A popular noun phrase, جالب العبيد (*ġālib al-'abīd*) designates a 'slave trader' (Wehr 1979, 153).

⁵⁶ Lane 1968, I, 440. We are grateful to Tomasz Barański for helpful advice on Arabic lexica.

⁵⁷ Specifically, Sudan, Aswan, and Funḡ (Çelebi 1938, 870; Prokosch 1994, 151) and Aswan, Ibrim, and the Oases (Çelebi 1938, 382; Prokosch 1994, 31). Although the author's visit to Sudan has been disputed, it still means that Çelebi's sources used the term *ġālābā* to designate Sudanese merchants.

⁵⁸ Montano 1948, 289–291.

⁵⁹ Krump 1710; Spaulding 1974, 214, 217, 221, 238, 263, 265, 304, 381.

⁶⁰ Walz 1978, 68–70.

⁶¹ Walz 1978, 71.

Importantly, an *al-ǧallāb* (الجلاب) is mentioned in an Arabic letter found at the site of Old Dongola, although the context of the word remains vague.⁶² The text bears no date and comes from a secondary archaeological context dated to the eighteenth century or later, providing no stratigraphic dating for the letter itself.

As this brief list of attestations demonstrates, the reference to *ǧalābā* in the colophon is the earliest known mention of the term in primary sources concerning Sudan. Furthermore, its occurrence in an account concerning Dongola aligns with information on merchant activity in the city conveyed in other texts.⁶³

The Light they Saw

Another element of the narrative that requires comment is the description of the light in the sky. Takla 'Alfā reports in the colophon that, on the night following his son's/disciple's death, a light came down on his grave, and the people in Dongola saw it after sundown. As they watched in amazement, it ascended in the direction of Jerusalem. The date of this event is precisely defined and corresponds to 23 August 1596. It does not seem to be referred to as a supernatural event, like a vision or a miracle.⁶⁴ Besides the description of the miraculous apparition of Mary and Jesus Christ that led to the composition of the hymns comprising the main part of the work, the account in the colophon is a matter-of-fact description of a time of trial: the monk was on his way to Jerusalem when he got stranded in Dongola among Muslims, his disciple died and he spent his time alone, praying and fasting as he waited for a caravan he could join. The light seen after sunset was not attributed to divine agency and was reportedly witnessed by the Muslim population of the city. It seems, therefore, that in this part of the text we may be dealing with a description of an astronomical phenomenon.

The way the phenomenon is described is somewhat similar to other accounts of astronomical apparitions that exist in Ethiopian literature. Observations like solar and lunar eclipses and comets were treated as subjects of fascination and were recorded in royal chronicles and other Gə'əz writings, as well as travellers'

⁶² Inventory no. 2976; Barański forthcoming. The letter was found during recent excavations in Old Dongola conducted as part of an ERC Starting Grant project 'UMMA. Urban Metamorphosis of the Community of a Medieval African Capital City' headed by Artur Obluski from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw. For an overview, see Obluski and Dzierzbicka 2021.

⁶³ See Dzierzbicka and Elagina forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Note that the above-mentioned *Vision of Theophilus* also contains a description of light which, however, is mentioned in relation to the apparition of Lady Mary. In the colophon, these two events are depicted separately, both in time and space.

accounts.⁶⁵ The description of the light in Takla 'Alfā's colophon is, however, not listed in any publications of historic observations of celestial events to date.⁶⁶ This is not surprising, as the text itself was not widely discussed and Richard Pankhurst, who studied such attestations of comets and eclipses, focused on observations made in Ethiopia.⁶⁷

The interpretation of the described phenomenon is problematic. One would at first glance be tempted to consider it a comet. From 18 July to 22 August 1596, a particularly bright comet, C/1596 N1, was recorded in the sky over Europe and Asia,⁶⁸ and the date given in the colophon—23 August 1596—is very close to the attested dates of its observation. However, there are multiple problems with this interpretation. A comet should remain visible for days or weeks, and the text only mentions one night. In addition, the movement of the comet C/1596 N1 as described by its observers was north-westward, and it was placed in relation to the constellations Lynx, Ursa Maior, and Leo, which indicates a northwestern direction also in Dongola. Meanwhile, in order to see a light that is headed in the direction of Jerusalem at Dongola, the viewer would have to look northeast. This is also the direction in which the city's cemeteries are located, so provided the disciple was buried there, the light would have had to appear to the northeast, not northwest of the city. In addition, the constellations in relation to which the comet C/1596 N1 was placed were barely, if at all, visible above the horizon at Old Dongola on that given day in 1596 (18°13'N 30°45'E).⁶⁹ Furthermore, the last observation of comet C/1596 N1 was apparently noon (Universal Time) on 22 August by Korean observers,⁷⁰ so the dating of Takla 'Alfā's observation as 23 August is not a perfect match. The text itself is also somewhat unconvincing. The report that the light 'came down' and then 'ascended' gives the impression of motion, while

⁶⁵ Pankhurst 1989.

⁶⁶ Pankhurst 1989; Kronk 1999.

⁶⁷ Historical observations of astronomical phenomena from the territory of modern Sudan have not, to our knowledge, been a subject of study. Among others, Krump recorded celestial observations during his journey in Sinnar in 1701–1702: 'Today at the first red of day-break a large, bright, beautiful star could be seen in the firmament, which sank from day to day until finally after a little time it could no longer be seen. But at Sinnar toward the end of the month of September we saw it again after sunset, and according to its course it sank, so that in March, after the period of a year, it was shut under the sun and vanished' (Spaulding 1974, 254).

⁶⁸ Kronk 1999, 329–330.

⁶⁹ The information on the location of constellations in the night sky over Old Dongola on 22 August 1596 is based on Walker 1998, <https://www.fourmilab.ch/cgi-bin/Yourhorizon>, accessed on 14 October 2024.

⁷⁰ Kronk 1999, 329–330.

a comet should appear stationary with respect to the background stars on any given night. In sum, while one cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that a comet was being referred to, it seems rather unlikely.⁷¹

The phenomenon recorded in the colophon could also be interpreted as a halo display. Halo displays are reflections and/or refractions of sunlight by ice crystals in the air, which appear around sunset, when the sun is below 10 degrees altitude.⁷² They also appear around the moon and have been misinterpreted as comets in the past. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the observed phenomenon was reported and probably seen for a brief period, only for one night, one evening, or maybe only a few minutes, at a time described as ‘after sundown’, which may well mean around sunset.

In the end, all of the above interpretations are impossible to prove. It may be that what the monk saw was indeed a celestial phenomenon, but the description he left is too general to enable a proper understanding of it. To complicate the matter further, the observation may have been distorted as a result of the fallibility of human memory or even intentionally altered by infusion with symbolic elements to achieve new dimensions of metaphorical meaning. Combining a description of a celestial light with references to Jerusalem and the passing of the author’s ‘son’ might have been an intentional literary device meant to impress the reader.

Conclusions

The text under consideration is an uncommon case of a colophon to a *malkə*’ composition, an example of an expanded, literary form developed into a piece of autobiographical writing. It may testify to some philological practices, e.g. the practice of corrections, and it bears testimony to the fast of Our Lady Mary of the Mount of Q^wəsq^wām, associating its establishment with the reign of king Šārda Dəngəl.

The colophon is a relevant historical source. It is the only account of a visitor to Dongola in a period spanning 176 years, between the visit of David Reubeni in 1523⁷³ and the sojourn of Charles Jacques Poncet and Charles François Xavier de Brèvedent in 1699,⁷⁴ and for that alone it is worthy of attention. Notably, Takla’ Alfā was the only known Ethiopian visitor to post-medieval Dongola to leave an account of his stay. Furthermore, he seems to be the only Ethiopian pilgrim who left an autobiographical account of his journey according to the state of knowledge.

⁷¹ We are grateful to Donald K. Yeomans, James C. Evans, and Ralph Neuhäuser for their helpful feedback concerning the possibility that this light was a comet.

⁷² See Neuhäuser and Neuhäuser 2015 for examples.

⁷³ Hillelson 1933; Verskin 2023, 39.

⁷⁴ Poncet 1709, 14.

In addition to being an unusual colophon, Takla 'Alfā's narrative offers pertinent insights into the operation of sub-Saharan trade routes, caravan traffic, Ethiopian pilgrimages, and social groups in the city of Dongola in the late sixteenth century. This time in Sudanese history, previously deemed obscure due to the scarcity of sources, is illuminated by the information the monk provides. This broader historical and socio-economic context, however, requires further in-depth studies.⁷⁵

The light in the sky observed by the monk and the people of Dongola is described too vaguely or inaccurately to be identified as a specific astronomical phenomenon. However, the account can be added to the corpus of texts that feature celestial apparitions as meaningful quasi-supernatural elements or signs in Ethiopic narratives.

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⁷⁵ Dzierzbicka and Elagina forthcoming.

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Summary

The paper offers a re-edition of a valuable first-hand account concerning sixteenth-century Sudan, recorded in Gə'əz by the Ethiopian monk Takla 'Alfā during his stay at Dongola in 1596. Notably, Takla 'Alfā was the only known Ethiopian visitor to post-medieval Dongola to leave an account of his visit. The colophon, MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. et. 44, 71v–76v, is preceded by hymns composed by the monk and offers insights into the circumstances of their creation. The text, which represents an expanded colophon with autobiographical elements, has received limited scholarly attention, but has a number of remarkable features. It sheds light on some philological practices and indicates a connection between the fast of our Lady Mary of the Mount of Qwəsqwām and king Šarḍa Dəngəl. The newly identified reference to *ǧālābā* merchants in the colophon is the earliest known mention of the term in primary sources concerning Sudan. While the reference to a light in the sky remains vague, it adds to the corpus of Ethiopic narratives featuring celestial apparitions as meaningful quasi-supernatural elements or signs.