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Article

The Antiquities of Däbrä Zäyt Qaddast Maryam (East Tigray, Ethiopia)

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The Antiquities of Däbrä Zäyt Qǝddast Maryam
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The old historical route linking the area of ‘Addigrat with that of the famous monastery of Däbrä Dammo is one of the most interesting and historically important corners of East Tǝgray. However, it has remained mostly outside the attention of travellers and scholars, who passed mostly along the route Sän’afe–‘Addigrat, or paid attention to the historically prominent town of ‘Addigrat and the famous monastery of Däbrä Dammo, without attending much to the region in between. The cultural and historical geography of the area remained poorly studied also after the modern road to Bǝzǝt (Däbrä Dammo) was built.1 The team of the Ethio-SPARE project systematically investigated the area, and visited two sites, ‘Addäqäharsi Pǝraqliitos and Däbrä Zäyt Qǝddast Maryam.2 In particular the latter site, previously unknown to scholarship, proved to be of special interest and yielded valuable material.

To reach the site of Däbrä Zäyt Qǝddast Maryam, one drives some 20 minutes on the road to Bǝzǝt.3 The main church of the site is partly visible from the road (fig. 1). At some point, one must stop driving and continue on foot on a difficult path to Däbrä Zäyt, descending into the deep gorge, crossing the dry riverbed and then climbing up. The picturesque site is situated on several terraces below the cliff. The more recent part of the site comprises a few storehouses, a massive recent rectangular church, a sacristy (‘aqa bet), and a bell tower. A path leads down to the gate house (fig. 1, on the right).4 The part of the site with recent structures is in principle accessible to everyone. Separated by a wall with a door is another part of the church compound, invisible from the outside and hidden by the overhang.

1 A side road to the left, ca. 8 km from ‘Addigrat on the main road to Zǝla ‘Ambäsa.
3 Today this area is included in Ṭabiya Kasad Maṭtib, ṭurarada Gulo Måğåda.
4 Outside the gate, a few more community structures are built under the rock.

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ing cliff and the bushes. The local people say that this part of the site once hosted a monastic community; it is considered sacred, and one can enter it only after leaving one’s shoes outside. Here, a few older structures are located one after another on a narrow strip of ground along the cliff. The terrace becomes a narrow path which leads to a small cave with a spring of holy water. A small protective barrier is built on the left side of the terrace; behind the barrier, an abyss opens.

Churches within the Site

The large rectangular church visible from the road was constructed in the late 1980s. Local tradition recounts that, before the spread of Christianity, the site was an “Old Testament synagogue” (yā’Orīt mək=ərab), and a church was established here in the time of the half-legendary King Bazen. The only historical source mentioning Dābrā Zāyt appears to be an additio in the “Golden Gospel” of Dābrā Libanos of Ham.

During the investigation of the site it turned out that, beside the recently built main church, there is another, older one standing in the part of the

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5 However, it was dry at the time of the visit.
7 This is a land grant donated by Ya‘bikā ‘lgzi’, mentioning a certain Tāsfa Șayon, ‘aqabe sâ’at of Dābrā Zāyt (CONTI ROSSINI 1901: 26, no. 17; with a date corresponding to 1319 A.D.). The places referred to in the document are located in the same area as Dābrā Zāyt (Dābrā Ma’ṣo [see NOSNITSIN 2011], Damamo [Dābrā Dammo?]; and Zāreda, which has not yet been identified).
compound located behind the wall, not commonly accessible. According to the local people, the church is some 400 years old. It is certainly the most remarkable architectural feature of the site. An assessment of its age still remains to be done by specialists, but the traditional date does not seem unreasonable. Indeed it appears to be a church predating the Gondarine period, and it seems to have escaped any major rebuilding or renovation. It is a small basilica-like structure (ca. 8 x 4 x 2.5 m) with one nave and two rows of four timber columns inside, and a narthex. The narthex can be entered through the double doorway (fig. 2). Made of solid woodwork, the ceiling is supported by two wooden piers. There are murals on the northern (fig. 3) and eastern walls, partly white-washed over but partly still visible. One cannot overlook a striking similarity between these murals and those of
another church of the area, Ara’ro Tâklâ Haymanot; probably, the murals were executed by the same painter.\textsuperscript{8} A doorway in the western wall leads into the nave. The eastern part of the church cannot be entered because it is used as a sanctuary and the tabot is kept there.\textsuperscript{9} However, one can see that the “throne” of the tabot (mănharâ tabot) is situated in a (square?) apse, formed by a stonework barrier and a rough arch above (fig. 4). The sanctuary is screened by a curtain. The church is built directly against the rock, which thus substitutes for the southern wall (fig. 5). The roof of the church is flat, with a small dome over the sanctuary indicating the presence of a cupola inside. In addition to the main entrance, there is a small door and a window in the northern wall of the narthex, a window in the northern wall of the nave, and a door and a window in the eastern wall of the church building (fig. 6).

The Inscription

Behind the old church, stairs cut in the rock lead upwards, to a small elevated piece of ground. On the left, a small house stands, described by the priests as the former \textit{́eqa bet} of the old church. The surface of the rock at the bottom of the stairs is covered with crudely done and weathered graffiti-like designs; among those still

\textsuperscript{8} See Lepage – Mercier 2005: 206–07. In the Dâbrâ Zäyt murals, note the depiction of Gâbrâ Mänfâs Qaddus to the right of the Virgin and the Angels.

\textsuperscript{9} The liturgy is still regularly celebrated in the church.
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visible, crosses and vocalized Ethiopic letters can be distinguished (fig. 7). On the left side of the surface, above a row of eight crude and weathered crosses, two larger letters (each ca. 23 cm high) can be read as ḫy “here”. The signs (?) which follow are too weathered to be identified. Below, under the string of crosses, the letters (each ca. 7 cm high) form an inscription in Gəəz: ḥ̱Ale ḥ̱Ale | ḫ̱Ale | ḫ̱Ale, meaning: “Pray for (me); I (am) Məḥrom”(?). Possibly the two inscriptions can be read together: “Here, pray for (me); I (am) Məḥrom”. A string of (five?) crude and weathered crosses is also vis-

10 The verb ṣallāyā requires an indirect object which is governed by the preposition bā- nṯā or lāʾ/lāʾ/lāʾ with a pronominal suffix (cp. DILLMANN 1865: 1263; I thank Alessandro Bausi for useful suggestions concerning the reading and translating of the inscription). ḥ̱Ale is the archaic isolated form of the preposition attested both in epigraphic documents and in old manuscripts. The suffix of the 1st pers. sing., where called for by the context, is usually indicated. Perhaps in the case of the Däbrä Zäyt inscription the suffix was not expressed explicitly (the form would be lāʾ/lāʾ/leyā) or simply contracted to ḥ̱Ale(?). Otherwise, if we consider ḥ̱Ale an isolated form with adverbial meaning (better conveyed by mēʾalā, however) the translation of the inscription could be: “(Here) above, pray. I (am) Məḥrom.”

The name Məḥrom is somewhat difficult to explain. There seems to be no known substantive mahr in Gəəz; however, the word could also be a verbal form (perfect), mābrə (existing alongside with mābərə; cp. DILLMANN 1865: 157; 1907: 87), with the 3rd pers. masc. plur. suffix. The form -om instead of -omu could be explained by the influence of the spoken language (cp. -om suffix in Tägrānā; cp. also Tāgrānā personal names such as ḡšāddom, “Aṣmārom etc.) or by inconsistent vocalization. Finally, the inscription might indeed have originally read məḥromu, but the stroke of the u-vowel is no longer clearly visible (weathered or damaged).
ble below the inscription. The crudeness of the crosses, as well as the full vocalization of the Ethiopic letters, indicate that the inscription should probably be attributed to the (early) medieval period.

The Gospel manuscripts

It seems overwhelmingly likely that some old manuscripts of the collection have perished in the course of time. Though in very poor shape, some others have survived; it seems that the manuscript collection of the church was extended in the 16th century and again perhaps in the late 19th or early 20th century.

11 A few more inscriptions have been found in Gulo Mâkâda. A short, unvocalized inscription with content similar to that of Dâbrâ Zâyit, also accompanied by crude crosses, was recorded by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition at the foot of Dâbrâ Dammo: s. DAE I, 61, no. 33 [B] (BERNAND – DREWES – SCHNEIDER 1991, no. 233; the size of the letters is not known; the location of the inscription on the rock was not recorded exactly, and I was unable to find it during my visit in November 2011). Another short inscription was reported by C. Conti Rossini from the site of Dâhane (BERNAND – DREWES – SCHNEIDER 1991, no. 22; cp. ANFRAY 1973: 22, map "Plan du site de Etch-Marè, dans l’Agame").

12 Three types of crosses are visible on the rock surface. In the upper row, two crosses on the left and one on the right are crudely incised in the rock surface (cp. the inscription of Dâbrâ Dammo); they may represent technological stages leading to the cross of finer design seen in the middle, above the word ‘anâ. Similar crosses, though of superior quality, are found elsewhere in the region (usually in a burial context, sometimes accompanied by monograms): e.g., at "Mârra/ Mâre (LECLANT – MIQUEL 1959: 108); two similar crosses were seen by the author on the walls of the shaft of a tomb at the church of Bet Marya near ‘Addigrat in December 2011; a stone plaque with a finely cut cross and monograms was also seen by the author near the church of Foqâda Maryam, Gulo Mâkâda (May 2010; it is similar to the cross plaque of Dâbrâ Libanos of Ham, BAUSI – LUSINI 1992: 29, table 6, fig. 11). The third one, a kind of geometric design composed of incised lines, appears under the word ‘anâ.

13 At least four manuscripts of the collection can plausibly be dated to the 16th century: a manuscript containing the Gadli hätwarat (a collection of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles); a manuscript with part of the Haymanotä ‘abäw (‘Faith of the Fathers’, a theological treatise) and a 95-story collection of the Miracles of Mary (Tä’ämâr Maryam); a manuscript containing the Ritual of Baptism [Mâshaftâ krostonn], a portion of the Book of Spiritual Medicine [Mâshaftä fäwes mânfâsaw] etc.; and a “leporello” manuscript of fine quality, with miniatures depicting scenes from the lives of the Holy Family and the saints on one side of the parchment, and a text narrating a single miracle of St. Mary on the other side. The presence of such a substantial number of 16th-century manuscripts is not accidental, and may hint at a generous donation made by a wealthy person. (As to the precious wooden tryptich, also preserved in the collection of Dâbrâ Zâyit, an art historian should judge if it can be assigned to the same period.) Indeed we know that King Labnà Dangol (r. 1508–1540) was active precisely in this area during the last years of his reign.
An important and interesting part of the church library is represented by its Gospel books. One of them is a recent manuscript dating to the late 19th/first half of the 20th century.14 As such the manuscript is of less interest, but it evidently replaced another, much older (pre-16th century) Gospel book (fig. 08). This older manuscript is in poor condition: its binding is destroyed, many leaves are in disorder and some are lost. There are no marginal notes15 or other indications of the age of the manuscript; the shape of the ductus, however, is suggestive of the 15th century or perhaps even earlier. The last folio of the Gospel of Mark and the next (originally blank) folio host a guest text, which is a protective *asmat-prayer*. The hand is different from that of the Gospels. Its age is difficult to estimate; less carefully executed, with an obvious tendency to cursive writing (fig. 09), it is certainly later than the main text, but not recent (late 16th cent.?).16

14 The time of King Manilk II (1889–1913).
15 But an *additio* has been erased on the recto folio, fig. 13.
16 The presence of protective *asmat-prayers* in the manuscripts is in itself not remarkable, but it is not usual to find them in the (“Golden”) Gospel books. Here are the *incipit* and *explicit* of the prayer: *Ykкqь* : *мkLk* : *лкLk* : *лнв* : *Ykкqь* : *лкLk* : *лнв* : *

Seven “guest leaves” of smaller format and a few fragments are crudely inserted between the end folios of the Gospel book. Though badly damaged by humidity and rodents, the leaves are remarkable as they are the only remains of another, older Gospel manuscript (in the following referred to as DZG = Dâbrà Zâyt Gospel). The ductus on these leaves shows typical features of the so-called “monumental script” predating the mid 14th-century. The leaves contain a portion of the Gospel of Matthew: from Mt. 21:32(ii) […ʔןא “ואוֹיֵה nu] to Mt. 23:5(i) […] נֵאְכֹל $i…$]. The text matches that of the so-called B(a)-recension, or the ancient B-recension of the Gospel of Matthew. The ancient B-recension of Matthew is attested in three main old manuscript witnesses. The first is Ms. London, British Foreign Bible Society no. 170; the second one is Ms. London, British Foreign Bible Society no. 170; the third is the well-known manuscript from the Vatican Library, Vat. Aeth. 25, which was recently dated on palaeographic grounds.

17 Height x width: 28 x 17 cm; writing area: 19.5 x 12.5 cm. The dimensions of the page of the 15th-century Gospel book are: 29.5 x 19 cm; writing area: 22 x 13 cm.
18 Foliated as fols. 241–44.
21 HAMMERSCHMIDT 1977: 50–53 (cp. also ZUURMOND 1989, II, 58–59; no. 13) from the monastery of Dâbrà Maryam on Lake Ṭana, roughly dated to the 14th–15th cent. in the catalogue; cp. UHLIG 1988: 414–15 (with a sample photo), where the manuscript is ascribed to the period mid 15th–mid 16th cent. on palaeographic grounds.
aeographic grounds to a time prior to the mid 14th century.24 Though only a fragment, DZG is a new, fourth ancient witness of the B(a)-recension.

In Ethiopian palaeographic studies, the criteria for attributing a ductus to one of the major seven periods have been more or less securely established25. In contrast, a systematic approach to the identification of the geographical provenance, the style, and the hands/scribes has not yet been tried. Observations on the similarity of handwriting in different manuscripts26 are based mostly on subjective “general impression” or assessment of scattered traits of the script shape27. However, there may be some more or less clear cases. Making a general assessment of the handwriting of DZG (fig. 10), one cannot help noticing that, beside the secure attribution of

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26 Obtained, e.g., during the cataloguing work.
27 Though sometimes supported by the identification of the scribe’s identity.
DZG and Vat. Aeth. 25 to the same (pre-1350) period, the texts are written, in all probability, by the same hand.

As in Vat. Aeth. 25, the script of DZG is relatively tall and slender, with letters very slightly and not uniformly slanted, and broadly spaced. Below I present a few traits of the handwriting observed in both DZG (figs. 10–22) and Vat. Aeth. 25 (see publications in nn. 23–24) which in my opinion provide support for attributing the manuscripts to the same hand:

- (Fig. 11): the passage reproduced in UHLIG 1988: 130, from Mt. 23: 5(ii) to Mt. 23: 14, has a few words overlapping with the text in DZG (fol. 244v): showing the identical shape of the curved bottom stroke of Yot in the sixth order, with the stem of the letter very slightly slanted to the left; and Ayn in the fourth order.

- (Figs. 12, 13, 14): the long zigzagging stroke towards the left, marking the sixth order of Alif, rises in the same way, at an angle of ca. 40 degrees; Waw has a round or slightly elliptic form, which is more pronounced in the sixth order (especially in the words or ).

- (Fig. 15): cp. the shapes of and ( and , ) with two descendant side strokes starting not very high up (in the word ) UHLIG 1989: 130, col. B, lines 10–11 from below.

- (Fig. 16): the shape of Tāyt in the sixth order with side strokes reaching close to the bottom (typical for the period) and a sharp, strongly articulated kink in the central stroke, located close to the upper part of the sign (cp. in UHLIG 1989: 134, and Tāyt in , GRÉBAUT – TISSERANT 1936, table VIII).

28 An important feature of the ancient pre-15th-cent. handwriting, cp. UHLIG 1988: 84.
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Fig. 17: Fol. 241ra
Fig. 18: Fol. 242va
Fig. 19: Fol. 243vb

- (Figs. 17, 18, 19): the circular vowel marker of the seventh order for Nähas, Ra’as, Fäf etc. is attached in the same way, directly to the (strongly) slanted stem of the sign, with no overhanging extension (cp. Uhlig 1989: 132).

Fig. 20: Fol. 244rb
Fig. 21: Fol. 242va

- (Figs. 20, 21): cp. the word ΩΩΩΩΩΩ (cp. Uhlig 1989: 130, col. a, ll. 12–13 from the bottom), ΠΠΠΠΠΠ (cp. Grébaut – Tisserant 1936, table VIII, ΠΠΠΠΠΠ), in which it can be observed that the way of attaching the marker of the seventh order for Lawi is somewhat inconsistent in Vat. Aeth. 25 (sometimes attached directly to the right leg of the sign, sometimes on a thin stroke), but becomes consistent in DZG (always directly to the right leg). The bodies of Bet and Lawi appear very similar in both manuscripts: Bet with the upper part sometimes very slightly slanted to the left, nearly parallel legs, a big and very clear marker for the fifth order. Lawi tends to a parabolic shape. The loops of Mim are connected in exactly the same way in both manuscripts, as can be seen on figs. 12, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21 (notice also that the marker of the sixth order is attached at the same place and slanted at the same angle, ca. 45–50 degrees, figs. 12, 16, 19, 23).30

- (Fig. 22, and also fig. 10): both manuscripts show a very similar execution for Chi-Ro and paragraph-signs (cp. Grébaut – Tisserant 1936, table VIII). The set of punctuation signs appears to be similar in Vat. Aeth. 25 and DZG: notably, colon, double colon, and a sign consisting of two colons connected by two dashes in between to mark the end of a paragraph (on the same line, in the margin to the left of the column, a paragraph-sign appears).31 In DZG, the last sign is executed somewhat inconsistently: sometimes it is placed in the margin to the right of the text column, sometimes it has one colon less or one more (usually on the right side).

Fig. 22: Fol. 243r, ChiRo

A quick comparison of DZG with the “B-recension” as reproduced in Zuurmond 2001 demonstrates that, in terms of textual variation, DZG fre-

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30 In addition to the features described above, Dolt in the third order should be also discussed. Zuurmond 1989, II, 57, refers to the archaic shape of Dolt in the third order (with two strokes on the right descending leg), but this feature is not visible in the photo published in Grébaut – Tisserant 1935 (table VIII, c), where the character occurs all four times (and in the same column) in its usual form. Uhlig 1988: 132 mentions the occurrence of both forms of the character in Vat. Aeth. 25; also in DZG (at least in the available fragment) the marker of the third order for Dolt has its usual shape.

31 Described in a slightly different way in Zuurmond 1989, II, 57.
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quently sides with Vat. Aeth. 25. This fact provides further evidence in support for suggesting a relationship between the two manuscripts.

The size of Vat. Aeth. 25 is smaller than that of DZG. The pen nib used for DZG appears somewhat broader (0.9–1 mm), and the strokes are somewhat thicker, which can make the similarity of the handwriting, at some points, not so obvious. A column in DZG has on the average 9 (sometime 10) signs for each line, which is a few characters more than in Vat. Aeth. 25.

The fragments of DZG can be dated to the late 13th–first half of the 14th cent., and they are the oldest manuscript discovered by the Ethio-SPARE team at the site. On this basis, no final conclusions concerning the history of the site of Dabrâ Zâyêt appear to be possible for the moment, and it is still an open question how the pieces of evidence described above should be inter-


Apart from the variants, features occur which are usually considered as pertaining to “Ancient Ethiopic”: nearly regular -e endings with some (unsuffixed) prepositions and conjunctions: sobe, ⾊me, ̣habe/em- ‎habe (but not siege) (cp. Bausi 2005a: 156; not indicated in the collation). Other ancient features are, e.g., the consistent spelling of some words with laryngeals in the fourth order: ӕӈ҃, ӕӈ҃, ӝпӕӈҷ, ӝпӕӈҹ, ӝпӕӈҹ (Vat. Aeth. 25, however, appearing twice in Uhlig 1988: 130; these forms are not indicated in the collation), and the forms like ӕӈҹ (Mt. 21: 37), (h.)俁хтн (Mt. 22: 16), ڪ.ہ.ہ.ہ.ہ (Mt. 22: 30) without the change of the prefix vowel before a laryngeal (cp. Zuurmond 1989, II, no. 6; indicated in the collation).

33 According to my experience, the (outer) dimensions 20 x 12,5 cm are unusually small for an Ethiopian Four Gospel codex. One wonders whether the makers and scribe of Vat. Aeth. 25 produced a compact small-size Gospel book on purpose, intending it, e.g., for convenient use during a long journey (pilgrimage)?

34 Cp. Uhlig 1989: 131–132 states that Vat. Aeth. 25 has 6–7 characters per line, which is in agreement not with Uhlig’s published photo, but with the photos in D’Auito et al. 2000: 167. However, when I counted the number of signs per line in Uhlig’s photo, I observed 7–9 per line (with word dividers).
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interpreted to provide a coherent historical narrative. However, if correct, the attribution of both Vat. Aeth. 25 and DZG to the same hand is significant. In this respect, the fact that Vat. Aeth. 25 went abroad is remarkable in itself. Over the centuries, scores of Ethiopians embarked en route to Egypt and the Holy Land; and it is well known that one of the routes out of Ethiopia, indeed, went through the area of Gulo Mäkäda.35 Could DZG have been written by the same person who produced Vat. Aeth. 25, and in the same place? Could Ms. Vat. Aeth. 25 have been acquired by Ethiopian pilgrims who were passing through the area, preparatory to leaving the country? If not in Däbrà Zäyt, where could manuscripts DZG and Vat. Aeth. 25 have been written? Further research may reveal which churches or monasteries of the contemporary wäräda Gulo Mäkäda could be relevant.

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Summary

The article summarizes the results of the research at Däbrä Zäyt, one of the historical sites discovered by the team of the project Ethio-SPARE (Hamburg University, Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies) in Gulo Mäjäda, East Tigray. It presents different types of historical evidence (old church building of the site, an inscription, the church library) and focuses on the analysis of the fragments of the so-called “old Golden Gospel” of Däbrä Zäyt, written presumably by the same scribe as the one of the well-known manuscript Vat. Aeth. 25.