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“Behold, I have written it on parchment...” Two Early Amharic Poems from Ms. Ef. 10 (Koriander 2), St. Petersburg

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“Behold, I have written it on parchment...” Two Early Amharic poems from Ms. Ef. 10 (Koriander 2), St. Petersburg

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Abstract:

The article deals with two short poems in Amharic from Ms. Ef. 10 kept in the Library of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg. Amharic, a Semitic language of Ethiopia, came to function as the second written language of Ethiopian Empire in the course of the 19th century. Samples of Amharic texts prior to this period are scanty and worthy of special study. The poems in question can be dated to the period end of the 17th – beginning of the 18th century. The article provides the texts of the poems with translation and linguistic and philological commentary, accompanied by a short description of Ms. Ef. 10.

Keywords: Amharic, Ethiopian literature, Christian poetry, Manuscript studies

1 D. Nosnitsin carried out the present study within the framework of the long-term project “Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea”, funded by the Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Hamburg (<https://www.betamasasheft.uni-hamburg.de/>). M. Bulakh’s work on this article was funded by RFBR/РФФИ (grant #17-06-00391). Both authors thank the Library of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St. Petersburg, for making the photographic images of the manuscript Ef. 10 (Koriander 2) available for the research. D. Nosnitsin is grateful to Magdalena Krzyżanowska for fruitful discussion on the translation issues. Both authors sincerely thank Dr Orin David Gensler for English proofreading and a number of insightful comments. Besides, our gratitude is extended to the anonymous reviewers of the submitted version of the paper, who have made numerous critical observations and improvements.

1 Introduction

The present article contributes to the growing corpus of samples of pre-modern Amharic poetry which are being mined from Ethiopian Christian manuscripts, most frequently in the form of additional, supplementary texts and only sometimes as part of the main content. The early Amharic written tradition is a remarkable cultural phenomenon that flowed alongside the mainstream of medieval literacy in Geez, and had its parallels in the vernacular writing traditions of some other parts of Africa.² A significant part of the surviving early Amharic texts is represented by poetic pieces of various kinds.³

In many cases, early Amharic poems are very difficult to understand. Apart from the commonly known linguistic complexities, early Amharic poems partly employ vocabulary and motifs from Geez sources, but also partly from the Amharic oral literature, hardly understandable today even for native Amharic speakers. In many cases deciphering such a poem strongly relies upon the understanding of the context. We have to guess the reasons that prompted the composition of the poem and the cultural situations in which the poem

2 In the 15th–18th centuries, a number of vernacular African languages started to be written in Arabic script in the framework of Islamic culture, on the fringes of the Islamic Arabic literary tradition. The most important among these so-called ‘*ajamī*’ traditions are those of the Tamashek (Berber), Hausa, Fulfulde, Wolof and Swahili languages, but also Old Harari in Ethiopia (Wetter 2012: 176–180; see *ibid.* for ‘*ajamī*’ literature in other languages of Ethiopia).

3 Along with an edition of an Old Amharic *Märgämä kəbr* poem, some considerations on the genres of early Amharic poetic texts are presented in Bulakh & Nosnitsin 2019. After the article was submitted to print, still another witness of the *Märgämä kəbr* was discovered by D. Nosnitsin, in the 18th-century Ms. MBAE-001, *Waddase Amlak* ‘Praises of God’, from the church of May Bä’atti Arba’əttu ʾİnsəsa (Təgray), photographed by the project Ethio-SPaRe (“Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia – Salvation, Preservation, and Research”, 2009–2015, ERC Starting Grant 240720; see <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare.html>). The text contained in this manuscript is akin to that of Ms. EMMML no. 5483 (see Getatchew Haile 2014). The present article offers an occasion to report (in passing) three more recently discovered witnesses of another Old Amharic poem, *Məštirä şəgeyat*, that could not be considered in the edition Goldenberg 2013. These are Mss. TKMG-012, from the church of Tənsəhe Kidanä Məhrät (17th century); SDM-019, Soṭa Däbrä Sälam Qəddus Mika’el (17th century); and AGKM-035, Agulaᶜ Getesemani Kidanä Məhrät (19th century), all digitized by the project Ethio-SPaRe.

could have been used, and also identify historical events or personalities that the poem refers or alludes to.

Looking through the catalogues of Ethiopic manuscripts in search of texts written in older varieties of Amharic, we came across two short poems noted by the Russian scholar Boris Turaev (1868–1920) in his catalogue *Efiopiskija rukopisi v S.-Peterburge* (Sankt Petersburg: Tipografija imperatorskoj Akademii Nauk, 1906), on pp. 74–75, in the description of Ms. Koriander 2 (part III, no. 28 of the catalogue). Today the manuscript is kept in the Library of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg and bears shelf-mark Ef. 10.⁴ The catalogue records the poems as *additiones* and the work *Wəddase Amlak* as the main text of the manuscript.⁵ The two Amharic poems will be the subject of the present article. Below, a short description of the manuscript as a whole will be followed by the presentation of the poems, which will include an introductory note, transcription in Ethiopic script⁶ and translation, orthographic and linguistic commentaries.

2 Ms. Ef. 10 (Koriander 2)

The description of the manuscript prepared by B. Turaev offers only the absolute minimum of information, and is rephrased here in English with a few additions and adaptations.⁷ The manuscript is a parch-

4 See Platonov 2017:190.

5 The work *Wəddase Amlak* is attested in manuscripts starting from the 16th/17th century, see Daniel Aseffa 2010.

6 We have refrained from offering a phonological transcription or transliteration. Direct transliteration, without reconstruction of phonetic shapes behind the Ethiopic graphemes, would obscure the linguistic facts. As for phonological transcription, it would involve not only reconstruction of gemination and presence/absence of the vowel ə, not reflected in the Ethiopic script, but also interpretation of various paleographic and orthographic phenomena of Old Amharic. Such a task is beyond the aims of the present paper. In the linguistic discussion, when necessary, we do provide (tentatively) reconstructed phonological transcriptions of the relevant Old Amharic morphemes. In the discussion of orthography, transliterated elements are given in angle brackets.

7 In the future, an updated description of the manuscript will be accessible in the electronic catalogue of the project “Beta maṣāḥəft” (<https://www.betamasaheft.uni-hamburg.de>).

ment codex, 146 ff., the outer dimensions being 320 x 310 mm;⁸ its handwriting has been estimated by B. Turaev as datable to the 17th century. The name of the owner was Kəflä Sämaʿt. The main text *Wəddase Amlak* (‘Praise of God’) is distributed across the days of the week: the portion for Monday begins on f. 2r, for Tuesday on f. 18r, Wednesday on f. 44v, Thursday on f. 66r, Friday on f. 92r, Saturday on f. 112r, Sunday on f. 128r. Additional notes are recorded as follows: f. 1r: a) the two Amharic poems (presented below); b) two notes probably on tributes, poorly readable; f. 1v: a) a note on the calendar (in Amharic but with admixture of a few Geez words), b) two protective texts; ff. 17v-19v: a Miracle of Christ recounting the Resurrection, in Geez,⁹ a text which begins in the blank space on f. 17vb and fills the margins of this and the next two leaves; f. 127v: a list of the feasts of the Apostles; f. 145v: incantations followed by a couple of magico-medical recipes; f. 146r-v: tax records in Amharic (half of the leaf is cut off).¹⁰ The leaf numbered as f. 1, bearing the Amharic poems and other writings, is physically composed of two halves (see fig. 1) of slightly different shapes, sizes and parchment colors.¹¹ The halves have been loosely stitched together to make a single leaf. Both halves are unruled and might be remnants of original flyleaves or just later insertions.

A few details can be added to Turaev’s description of the manuscript. The manuscript is obviously a high-quality book. It is bound on two boards that are covered with reddish-brown blind-tooled leather (turn-ins also tooled); the inlays are made of fine crimson

8 Indicated as 23x31 cm in the catalogue, “23” (supposed to indicate height) being most probably a mistake for “32”.

9 Incipit (f. 17va): ተአምሪሁ፡ ለእግዚአን፡ ወመድኃኒን፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ በእንተ፡ ትንግሴሁ፡ እሙታን፡... ወበጌሰአተ፡ ሌሊት፡ ዘአሁድ፡ ተንሥኦ፡ እግዚአን፡ እምነ፡ መቃብር፡ ወአድኃኖ፡ ለአዳም፡ እምኃጢአቱ፡ ወሐደሶ፡ ለአምሳሊሁ፡... This unedited miracle may appear, for instance, as 36th, 37th or 38th story in a collection of the Miracles of Jesus (*Täʿammārä Iyäsus*) that encompasses ca. 42 accounts (e.g., Strelcyn 1978: 21, no. 16 [Ms. Or. 8824], possibly also EMMML no. 3005, (36), Getatchew Haile 1985: 8; on the Ethiopic work, see Witakowski 2010).

10 All the notes except the poems on f. 1r are written in inferior later hands.

11 Those additional notes on f. 1 marked above as “a”, including the poems, belong to the upper half leaf; those marked as “b” are written on the lower half. The upper half leaf seems to be closer to the shape of the textblock. It doesn’t seem that a part of the second poem on f. 1r was cut.

textile. The manuscript is not dated. The handwriting is very fine and regular, and reminiscent of the calligraphic script from the so-called Gondärine period, i.e. ca. mid-17th to mid-18th centuries.¹² Decorated quire marks are placed in the upper and bottom left corners of the first page of the quire. The readings for the days of the weeks are marked in the incipit pages of the sections by the names of the days of the week written in red, between two red and black dotted lines, in the center of the upper margin. The readings are also marked by leaf string markers (colored threads) inserted in the outer margin of the folios. The presence of additional notes in Amharic (esp. tax records), and of a few codicological and paleographical features characteristic of Gondärine-period book production, suggests that the origin of the manuscript was somewhere in the Amharic-speaking area, possibly around Gondär.

3 The poems

B. Turaev transcribed the Amharic poems in question in his catalogue, but he left out one line. Below, the poems are transcribed as they appear in the manuscript, with the exception of two cases where an editorial choice had to be made (the last grapheme of ለባርቻቻ in line 2, and the last grapheme of እንድ in line 8; cf. Section 4) and the photographic image of the text should be consulted.

Typically for additional notes, the hand of the poems is hasty, by far not regular and less careful than the hand of the main text, though it belongs to a skilled scribe who used a thinner pen. The script of

¹² The dating of the manuscript to the 17th century, proposed by B. Turaev (see above), can be thus slightly corrected on paleographical grounds, as its script fits the period mid-17th to mid-18th century. The handwriting is calligraphic, very regular and clear, executed by a skilled scribe. The script is slightly (and very uniformly) right sloping, finely rounded, with straight downstrokes. On the handwriting styles of the period (the so-called *gʷālḥ* script), see Uhlig 1988: 545–653. The current article is not a proper place to carry out a full paleographic evaluation of the manuscript, it is sufficient to indicate the general proximity of the handwriting to such samples of the period as Mss. London, British Library Or. 619 (cp. Uhlig 1988: 548, 641), Or. 620 (ibid., 556, 568–570), or Oxford Bodleian Library, Bruce 86 (ibid. 581–582), and some others. On the period in the history of Ethiopia known as the “Gondärine Kingdom” (after Gondär, the then-capital of the state), famous for its refined culture and large cultural production, see, e.g., Crummey 2005 and other related articles in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*.

the poems is datable to ca. late 17th–18th century, like that of the main text (cp. above), and is marked by more rounded, fluent forms. In Girma Awgichew Demeke’s definition (2014: 3), the term “Old Amharic” only refers to pre-18th century texts. Still, the text of the poems contains several undeniable Old Amharic linguistic features (see Section 4), which justifies our reference to their language as Old Amharic even in the absence of precise date of its creation.

In terms of text arrangement and layout, the poems are separated by an unsophisticated divider, a black horizontal dotted line. However, the status of the uppermost line 1, also separated from the rest by the dotted line,¹³ remains not quite clear. It does not clash with the first poem (lines 2–7) in terms of content; on the contrary it seems to relate to it and, if interpreted in a certain way, can help to elucidate the poem; but it ends in *-(r)o* and thus does not fit the very regular rhyme (in *-tu*) of the following lines. It has no relation to the second poem (lines 8–12). Does line 1 represent an abortive attempt at starting a poem rhymed in *-(r)o*? Did someone write only this one line and separate it from the rest on purpose? Obviously, it is not a remain of another text because the upper margin is not cut. There are no clear indications as to which option should be preferred; still, we tend to think that line 1 is not completely independent, but should be considered as somehow linked to the first poem. Keeping all possibilities in mind, we have introduced numeration of all the lines. To facilitate understanding, corresponding words of the Amharic text and the English translation are marked by numbers. Words given in {curly brackets} are interlinear additions on the manuscript, e.g. in line 8.

Text and translation

- (1) ለካህናት₁፡ ይሰጣል₂፡ ይሰጡኝ₃፡ ዘንድ₄፡ በጽንሐ₅፡ ጨምሮ₆።
 One gives₂ (gifts) to the priests₁ so that₄ they (in turn) will give to you₃, adding₆ (incense) to the incense burner₅.

.....

- (2) ለባሮቻች₁፡ እስኩ₂፡ እሊ₃፡ ማን₄፡ እንኩ₅፡ ብሎ₆፡ የሰጡ₇።
 Behold₂, who₄ (are) those who₃ have given₇ (the Eucharist) to their servants₁, saying₆: Take!₅?

¹³ In a similar way, a chain of dots – the simplest divider – is used in Ms. EMMIL no. 1943, see Getatchew Haile 1979.

- (3) **ሥጋቸን₁፡ መትራቸኑ₂፡ ብሉ₃፡ ደማቸነም₄፡ ቀድቻኑ₅፡ ጠጡ₆።**
 Cut₂ our flesh₁ (and) eat (it)!₃ Draw₅ our blood₄ (and) drink (it)!₆
- (4) **በመሰቸኑበት₁፡ ጉልበት₂፡ ሮግቸኑ₃፡ ከሞት₄፡ እንድታመልጡ₅።**
 So that you would escape₅ from death₄, running₃ with₁ the strength₂ that you (got) from (your meal) that you have eaten!₁!
- (5) **ከአንት₁፡ በቀር₂፡ ክሶስ₃፡ ጉለንታኸ₄፡ ብርሃን₅፡ ያሰጡ₆።**
 Apart from You₁₋₂ (yourself), Christ₃, (the priests are) those who cause₆ Your whole self₄, (which is) light₅, to be given/spread₆,
- (6) **ለመል{ክ}ኸ₁፡ መሀየት₂፡ እሚቈልጡ₃።**
 For those who crave₃ to see₂ Your image₁,
- (7) **የሚዳው₁፡ የውስጡ₂።**
 Whose inner part₂ desires this₁.
-
- (8) **ፍቅርኸ₁፡ ቢጸናብኝ₂፡ ክሶስ₃፡ የመብልፅ₄፡ ውድ₅፡ {በስሱፅ}₆፡ እንድ₇፡ ፀና₈።**
 While₂ (my) love for You₁, Christ₃, is becoming strong in me₂ as₇ the love₅ for food₄ becomes strong₈ in the glutton one₆,
- (9) **አወግልኩ₁፡ በአምሃረኝ₂፡ ፵ድርሰት₃፡ ከባሕር₄፡ ሕሊና₅።**
 I will bring out₁, according to my liking₂, forty treatises₃ from the sea₄ of thought₅.
- (10) **እርሱነም₁፡ እንዲቀር₂፡ ለጥንት₃፡ እነሆ₄፡ ጸሐፍኑ₅፡ በብራና₆።**
 Behold₄, I have written₅ it₁ on parchment₆ so that it may remain₂ in time to come₃.
- (11) **ዋጋዬን₁፡ ግን₂፡ እንድ₃፡ ትወደኝ₄፡ አምሐልጉኸ₅፡ በኢያቂም₆፡ በሐና₇።**
 But₂ I adjure You₅ (to make) my payment₁: (namely) that₃ You should love me₄, for the sake of Joachim₆ and Hannah₇,
- (12) **እናትኸን₁፡ ወላዲትኸን₂፡ ያፈሩ₃፡ በእርግና₄፡ አቤቱ₅።**
 Those who engendered₃ Your mother₁ in (their) old age₄, her who bore You₂, O Master₅!

4 Linguistic and philological comment on the poems

The poems contain a number of forms different from Modern Amharic,¹⁴ some of them well known from other Old Amharic compositions, some others sporadic and perhaps to be explained as scribal errors. Moreover, the sense of some of the lines is obscure and requires additional discussion. This section contains our remarks on some of the linguistic and textual difficulties attendant upon the reading of these poems, followed by a brief summary of those features of the poems which are characteristic of Old Amharic texts in general.

Line 1:

ጽንሐ must stand for **ጽንሐሕ** ‘incense burner’ (cf. 4.1.6, below). **ጨምሮ** corresponds to Modern Amharic **ጨምረው** (cf. 4.1.5).

Line 2:

The shape of the grapheme for <čo> differs from that of its Modern Amharic equivalent (ቻ) inasmuch as the additional horizontal stroke (for palatalization) is placed below the letter under its vertical stem, not on top of the circle marking the 7th-order vowel.

The 3 pl. possessive suffix (‘their servants’, lit. ‘their slaves’) probably refers to the members of the Trinity. It has thus a different referent from the subject of this clause.

እለ corresponds to Modern Amharic **እነ** (cf. 4.1.12).

እስኩ is a Geez insertion, see Leslau 1987: 42.

Line 3:

The form **ቀድቻኑ** is parallel to **መትራችሁ** and both are to be analyzed as 2 pl. gerund. The spelling **ቀድቻኑ** instead of the expected **ቀድታችኑ** is most likely to be explained as a scribal error.

The wording may allude to Mt. 26:26–27, Mk.14:22–24, Lk. 22:19–20, or also Jn. 6:53, or be somehow reminiscent of the Eucharistic liturgy ritual.

Line 4:

(በ)መሰቸኑበት may be corrected to **(በ)መሰቸኑበት**, relative perfect 2 pl. (with the applicative 3 sg. masc.) from the verb *mässa* ‘to dine’ (Kane 1990: 200).

¹⁴ Within the present article, the term Modern Amharic refers to the form of Amharic described in Leslau 1995 and Kane 1990, thus written Amharic, predominantly of the 20th century (cp. above, Section 3).

Line 5:

ክሰስ is a colloquial form of the name **ክርስቶስ** (Christ). It seems to have been wide-spread in the 17th and 18th centuries in Amharic-speaking areas, and predominantly used in compound personal names (such as Ḥawarya Kəsos, Akalä Kəsos, Mälkä'a Kəsos, etc.).

The relative verbal form **ያሰጡ** may be understood either as derived from the verb *assättä* ‘to cause to be given’ (Kane 1990: 589a, linked to *sättä* ‘to give’) or from the verb *asättä* (Kane 1990: 589b, ‘to spread out, lay out or hang out to dry’). The subject of the verb must be the priests (referred to in the lines before) whose work is to offer “the flesh and blood” of Christ (i.e. Eucharist), that is, to spread light to other people. The words ‘your entire self’/‘your entirety’ and ‘light’ are in apposition. The verbal form can be interpreted in two ways; the meaning ‘to give’ can be associated with the direct object **ኩሉንታኸ** ‘your entirety’,¹⁵ and the meaning ‘to spread’ with **ብርሃን** ‘light’. It is tempting to suggest that we are dealing here with an intended ambiguity that was actually a part of the literary technique commonly known as *sämanna wärq* ‘wax and gold’, employed in Geez and Amharic poetry. In particular, the twofold meaning of the verbal form corresponds to what is described in Mondon-Vidailhet 1907: 318 as “équivoques des verbes”, while the apposition of two nouns appears to correspond to “équivoques des noms en général” (Mondon-Vidailhet 1907: 318–320).

Line 6:

The preposition *lä-* precedes the whole relative construction rather than the relativized verb. This relative clause thus corresponds to Modern Amharic መልክህ(?) ማየት ለሚቆልጡ.

Line 7:

The meaning of the line is vague. **የሚዳው** may be a result of a scribal omission from **የሚዳዳው**. For the verb *dadda(w)* ‘to have a strong desire’, s. Kane 1990: 1824. The predominant contemporary usage of this verb is different, usually in combination with *lä-* + infinitive, or *l-* + simple imperfect form.

¹⁵ The word **ኩሉንታ** is an obvious borrowing from Geez *kʷəllänta* ‘totality, entirety, the whole person’, used also with the possessive suffixes (Leslau 1987: 281, Dillmann 1865: 816).

Line 8:

ፍቅርኸ means ‘your love’ (to someone) in Modern Amharic, but cp. Getatchew Haile 1991: 522, ቢያሸንፈኝ: እንጅፍቅርኸ:… ‘because love for you has overwhelmed me...’.

The grapheme ጸ in እንጅ has two vowel markers, for the 3rd (cp. ዲ) and the 6th (ድ) orders that possibly reflects the uncertainty of the scribe in dealing with the prefix of the verbal form (yə-). On the separate writing of the conjunction cf. below, Section 4.1.1. On the absence of the element *-mm-* cf. below, Section 4.1.11.

Line 9:

አወግልኑ must correspond to Modern Amharic አወግለሁ. On the preservation of the affricate ሩ cf. below, 4.1.7. The 6th order of the grapheme ለ (instead of expected 1st order ለ) is also noteworthy. Is this peculiar form of the auxiliary element in the 1 sg. “compound imperfect” a feature of the dialect of the author/scribe, a sporadic deviation from the common form, or a scribal error?

በአምሃረኝ must correspond to Modern Amharic ባማረኝ (preposition/conjunction *bä* + relative perfect + object suffix; cf. Kane 1990: 1122–1123).

Line 10:

The translation of ለጥንት is very uncertain here; the context suggests that is to be understood as ‘future time, remote time in the future’. Actually, the word ጥንት means ‘beginning, origin’ etc. in both Geez and Amharic (Leslau 1987: 594; Kane 1990: 2161–2162).

Line 11:

አምሐልኑኸ should correspond to አማላሁህ in Modern Amharic (on the preservation of the guttural cf. below, 4.1.6). Cf. Getatchew Haile 2005: 257, line 4, on the same expression in another Old Amharic poem.

According to Ethiopian tradition, Joachim and Hannah, the parents of St. Mary, had their daughter born at an old age.¹⁶

4.1 Old Amharic features

4.1.1 The conjunction *and(ə)*- is twice separated from the governing verb by the word divider (in lines 8 and 11). Separate writing of conjunctions is recorded elsewhere in Old Amharic (cf. Richter 1997:

¹⁶ Cp., e.g., Getatchew Haile 2007.

550). Note, however, that the same conjunction is not separated from the verb in lines 4 and 10.

4.1.2 In the 2 pl. ending *-ačhu*, the final syllable is consistently spelled as ጉ (cf. lines 3, 4), and the 1 sg. ending *-hu* is spelled as ጉ as well in lines 9, 10, 11. For the same spelling elsewhere in Old Amharic cf. Cowley 1974: 605.

4.1.3 In the 1 pl. ending *-aččən* and 2 pl. ending *-ačhu*, the grapheme ቸ <čä> is employed consistently instead of the ቸ <čə> of Modern Amharic (in lines 3, 4). The use of the first order ቸ instead of the sixth order ቸ has also been observed in other Old Amharic texts (Bulakh – Nosnitsin 2019, III.2.3, with further references).

4.1.4 Word-initial ጠ is (at least graphically) preserved when preceded by the preposition ከ in the form ከጠጉጉ, line 5 (for similar cases elsewhere in Old Amharic texts cf. Cowley 1974: 603; Strelcyn 1981: 74; Bulakh & Nosnitsin 2019, III.3.1).

4.1.5 The spelling < -o > contra Modern Amharic < -äw > is found in three cases. Firstly, in line 2 we find the form ለባሮቻቸ (cf. Modern Amharic ለባሮቻቸው; cf. Cowley 1974: 603, 604 and Girma Awgichew Demeke 2014: 117–118 for similar cases). Secondly, the converb 3 pl. forms appear with the ending < -o > (rather than Modern Amharic < -äw >) in line 1 (ጨምሮ) and line 2 (ብሎ). For the same phenomenon elsewhere in Old Amharic cf. Goldenberg 2017: 553, fn. 1; Bulakh – Nosnitsin 2019, III.4.4.

4.1.6 The historical gutturals are preserved in the verb ‘to see’ (መሀየት in line 6) and ‘to be pleasing’ (በጠምሃረኝ in line 9).¹⁷ For some other words the spelling with historical gutturals may be explained via Geez influence, since they have reliable cognates (or sources of bor-

¹⁷ Note the spelling with < h > rather than the etymologically correct < ḥ > in both cases. For ‘to see’, cf. Arg. *ḥay*, *ḥenḡ* (Girma Awgichew Demeke 2013: 297). For ‘to be pleasing’, cf. Arg. *amḥer* ‘schön sein’ [to be beautiful] (Wetter 2010: 245), Tna. *amḥarä* ‘to suit, fit s.o. well (garment)’ (Kane 2000: 347). The direct Geez cognate, *amḥarä*, is semantically remote (‘move to pity’, cf. Leslau 1987: 336; on the semantic shift ‘to have pity’ > ‘to love’, here in the causative form ‘to cause to have pity’ > ‘to inspire love, to be pleasing’, cf. Syr. *rḥm* ‘to love; to have pity on’, Brockelmann 1928: 723–724). The influence of a formally similar Geez root *mhr* ‘to teach’ is unlikely.

rowing) in Geez (**መብልዕ** in line 8; **ሰሱዕ** in line 8; **ጸሐፍኑ** in line 10, **አምሐልኑኸ** in line 11).

Elsewhere (including some words with parallels in Geez), loss of gutturals ^ʔ, ^ʕ, ^ħ is observed: **ብሉ** (line 3), **ቀድቻኑ** (line 3), **በመሰቸኑበት** (line 4); **ቢጸናብኝ** and **እንዲ፡ፀና** (line 8), **አወፃልኑ** (line 9). In the word **ጽንሐ** (line 1), to be identified with Geez *ṣənḥāḥ* ‘fumigation, incense; censer’ (Leslau 1987: 560; cf. Modern Amh. *ṣəna*, *təna* ‘censer’, Kane 1990: 2254, 2155), the first guttural is preserved, whereas the word-final guttural is omitted. Note also that the root **bl* ‘to eat’ is spelled with ^ʕ in **መብልዕ** (line 8), and without ^ʕ in **ብሉ** (line 3).

This picture is similar to that observed in some other Old Amharic texts (cf. Bulakh – Nosnitsin 2019, III.3.1).

4.1.7 Preservation of ejective affricate *ɕ* (cf. Bulakh – Nosnitsin 2019, III.3.2, with further references) is noted in two cases: **ፎፃቸኑ** in line 4 and **አወፃልኑ** in line 9. Note also **ጸሐፍኑ** in line 10 and **ቢጸናብኝ** and **እንዲ፡ፀና** in line 8 (here Modern Amharic, too, has *ɕ*).

4.1.8 The object marker *-n* appears as *-nä-* when followed by the particle *-m(m)*: **እርሱነም** in line 10, **ደግቸነም** in line 3. Contrast **ዋጋዩን** in line 11 (where the object marker *-n* is in word-final position). The vowel *-ä-* also appears word-internally after the 2 sg. masc. marker *-h* in **እናትኸን**, **ወላዲትኸን** (line 12) and in the above-mentioned **ደግቸነም** (line 3) after the 1 pl. suffix *-aččən-*. For the same phenomena elsewhere in Old Amharic cf. Cowley 1974: 604, Getatchew Haile 1980: 580; Appleyard 2003: 115, Getatchew Haile 1986: 234–235, Girma Awgichew Demeke 2014: 59.

4.1.9 The 2 sg. m. personal pronoun appears as **አንት** (contrast Modern Amharic **አንተ**) in line 5. The same form is documented elsewhere in Old Amharic (Strelcyn 1981: 75, Girma Awgichew Demeke 2014: 206).

4.1.10 The relativizer appears as *ʔamm-* in line 6 (against the modern *yämm-*; but note Leslau 1995: 81 on *ʔamm-* in Modern Amharic). For the same form elsewhere in Old Amharic cf. Cowley 1983: 24, Cowley 1974: 605.

4.1.11 The absence of the relative marker *-mm-* after the conjunction *ʔand-* in line 8 has parallels elsewhere in the Old Amharic corpus, cf. Cowley 1977: 141.

4.1.12 The interrogative pronoun *ʾallä man* ‘who (pl.)’ in line 2 corresponds to Modern Amharic *ʾännä man*. This form is also attested in the Old Amharic treatise *Təmhərtä haymanot* (cf. Cowley 1974: 604). On the Old Amharic plural marker *ʾallä* as equivalent of Modern Amharic *ʾännä* cf. Cowley 1977: 139, 141, Girma Awgichew Demeke 2014: 93.

5 Summary of the poems

Poem 1

All six lines of the poem terminate in *-tu* (the issue of line 1 is discussed above); in five cases this represents the 3 pers. pl. verbal ending. (In fact, line 6 and the short line 7 might be interpreted as one line cut into two pieces). The poem opens with a kind of rhetorical question; it is known that those meant in line 2 are priests. Lines 3 and 4 may be seen as the priests’ “direct speech” (a continuation after the imperative “Take!”). Their role in liturgical life is metaphorically described in “mundane” terms. The priests serve “good food” to the faithful so that they have the strength to run away from death. Distributing “the body (self) of Christ”/light (= Eucharist) the priests spread light and chase away the darkness for those who strive to see the image of Christ.

Poem 2

The poem is composed of five lines each ending in *-na*. The last word of the last line, 12, does not fit the structure, but this may be an exception¹⁸ since the preceding word ends in *-na*, and the sentence would fully preserve its sense without the last word. The author speaks as a professional scribe or writer. The only reward he desires is that Christ should love him; his own love for Christ is explained, curiously, in “lower” physiological terms and compared to a kind of gluttony. The author seems to be about to embark upon a writing enterprise. He speaks about “40 treatises” he is going to copy — or even compose, if we interpret the words ከባሕር፡ ሕሊና ‘from the sea of thought’ as a reference to the intellect as the source of writing. However, he refers to the texts as already completed in the next lines.

¹⁸ Unlikely a later addition, since the word is written in the same hand and the sign marking the end of the sentence (four dots, or *arat näṭəb*) stands after it.

6 Conclusion

The poems seem to have been authored by representatives of the two wide-spread Ethiopian medieval professions. The first poem, possibly reflecting the point of view of a priest, is a poetic statement concerning priests and priesthood, explaining the importance of the priestly work. The second poem reflects the point of view of a scribe/writer; it is a rare case of first-hand evidence as to what medieval Ethiopian scribes thought of the purportedly sacral character of their scribal work, and how they understood their craft in terms of productivity and efficacy.

The existence of any other copies of the poems is unlikely, though it cannot be completely excluded. The poems are quite similar in form. In all probability, they are unique compositions that were improvised and written down by the author; peculiar forms and a general orthographic uncertainty may be a proof for that. Needless to say, combining both occupations – of priest and scribe – was in no way uncommon in medieval Ethiopia.

Despite their small size, translating and analyzing the poems is a challenging task; the translation is tentative and not all details could be sufficiently clarified. Moreover, the meaning of some lines is open to further interpretations and can be understood in more than one way.¹⁹

It is not easy to grasp what the purpose of these specific poems could have been. Were they meant to be used for addressing other people, and at what occasions and in which way? Were they composed for personal use only and reflected the individual’s thoughts of the moment? A few important categories – priesthood, Eucharist, love towards Christ, writing etc. – that are usually addressed in Geez in a sober and solemn way are presented here through the rhetorical means of the vernacular language, with a certain degree of didacticism but also, as we believe, with quite a bit of humor and wit. Was such a way of referring to holy things normal and typical for the “popular culture” or does it represent an isolated exception? There

¹⁹ For instance, we cannot be quite certain as to who is referred to in line 2 through the suffix 3 pl. (‘their servants’/‘their slaves’), the members of the Trinity or priests; it cannot be excluded that lines 3 and 4 are meant as words of Christ about himself (‘Our flesh’, ‘Our blood’), or both meanings were intended by the author. In line 11, the meaning of አምሐሌጉኸ oscillates between ‘adjure’, ‘beseech’ and ‘enjoin’.

are more questions than answers. In any case, as with other pre-modern Amharic texts, the poems speak in the indigenous voices of 17th- or 18th-century Ethiopian culture and give us a rare occasion to get a glimpse into the medieval Ethiopian mind that bypasses the filter of the Geez texts.

Abbreviations

Amh. - Amharic, Arg. - Argobba, Syr. - Syriac, Tna. - Tigrinya

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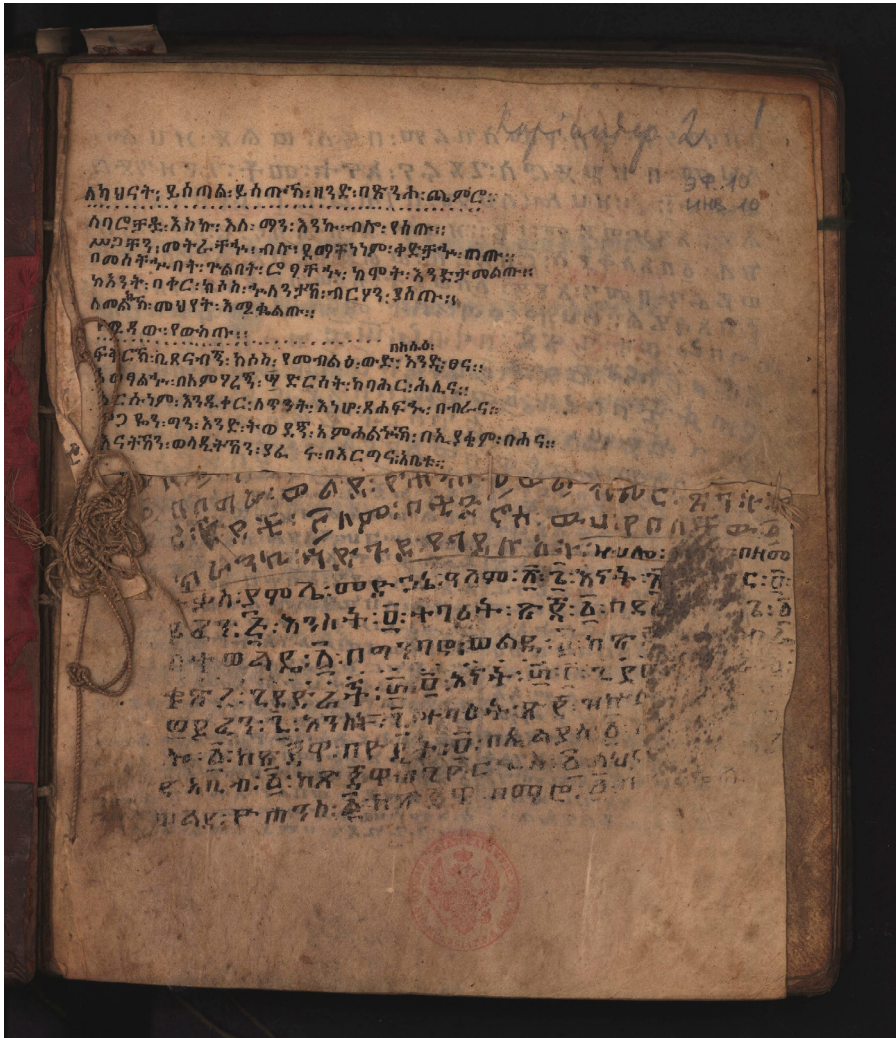


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