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Ethiopic Palimpsests

Abstract: While spectacular scholarly breakthroughs and technological advances have led to a surge in recent scholarship on palimpsests, their existence within the Ethiopic manuscript tradition has hitherto received virtually no attention. Nonetheless, at least sixteen Ethiopic palimpsests have been identified, with many more to be found within collections inaccessible at present. Those available for study exhibit strong tendencies towards having biblical commentaries overwritten and being manufactured around the seventeenth century, though the only such manuscript to have undergone multi-spectral imaging thus far (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Petermann II Nachtrag 24) is of slightly later date. This manuscript contains no less than ten discrete *scriptiones inferiores*, but in this regard it likely constitutes an outlier to palimpsesting as practised within the Ethiopic tradition more broadly.

1 Introduction

In contrast to the Greek, Latin, Syriac, and even Arabic traditions, the subject of palimpsesting in Ethiopic manuscripts has received effectively no scholarly attention whatsoever. To date, the sum of strictly academic publications involving such material includes only a handful of references in catalogues describing relevant items (the most recent dating to 1935) and a scattering of passages on the unique palimpsest with a Greek overtext and Ge'ez undertext in the decades since the discovery of the St Catherine's New Finds in 1975.¹ Only a 2018 semi-popular article in *Bibliotheksmagazin* by Loren Stuckenbruck and Ira Rabin on the multi-spectral imaging of an Ethiopic palimpsest belonging to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Petermann II Nachtrag 24) and a small assortment of internet references have supplemented these.² As no fewer than sixteen palimpsests involving Ge'ez are now known, most lying among the thousands of uncatalogued codices available in surrogate forms, the time seems ripe to fill in this lacuna with at least a provisional study of the phenomenon in the Ethiopic tradition. The aim here is twofold: firstly, to provide a general orientation to the

1 d'Abbadie 1859, 190; Dillmann 1878, 52; Chaîne 1912, 115; Conti Rossini 1912, 458; Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, vol. 1, 147, 180; Fiaccadori 2014, 513; Brown 2023, 98; Justin of Sinai 2023, 27; Phelps 2023, 35; Rapp 2023, 43, 47–49, 51; Rossetto 2023a, 55; Rossetto 2023b, 17–18, 38, 56, 265.

2 Stuckenbruck and Rabin 2018; e.g. Németh *s.a.*

practice in this tradition through a survey of all exemplars identified thus far, with some observations regarding noteworthy trends; and, secondly, to delve more deeply into the aforementioned Berlin manuscript, the only Ethiopic-Ethiopic palimpsest to have undergone multi-spectral imaging.

Before turning to these matters, it is necessary to remark upon two general considerations undergirding this study. First, the definition of ‘palimpsest’ adopted is a codex containing at least one quire in which a text from a discrete manuscript has been erased and written over in a way that includes at least part of a principal text of the newly produced manuscript as overtext. While not excluding any item traditionally classified as a palimpsest, this does eliminate certain cases casually or erroneously referred to as such, especially with respect to flyleaves, for which other explanations, including fading, water damage, or erasure without deliberate overwriting, are more applicable. For example, in one of her *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften* catalogues, which remain the benchmark for cataloguing in the field, Veronika Six describes the opening and closing folios of a manuscript in Stuttgart as being palimpsested.³ However, as, according to the description, no overwriting exists apart from scribbles on one page and the erased text seems to be a list of cereals – almost certainly a scribal *additio* rather than part of a copied work – this aligns much better with the types of erasures commonly seen upon Ethiopic flyleaves. Indeed, fundamental to the practice of palimpsesting is deliberate reuse, which is not evidenced in this instance; therefore it is not considered in the present context along with other comparable cases.⁴

Second, access to relevant materials and the form such access usually takes creates significant challenges. When factoring in the enormous quantity of privately owned manuscripts in the Horn of Africa – which are habitually overlooked in scholarly estimates in favour of a myopic focus on institutionally held volumes⁵ – the number of extant Ethiopic codices in Ethiopia and Eritrea certainly approaches or exceeds one million. As direct scholarly access to nearly all of these is effectively non-existent, a situation unlikely to change, the field’s entry point to this

3 Six 1994, 459.

4 For instance Strelcyn 1978, 36.

5 The prevalence of codices of this type (often defaced with crude miniatures before being trafficked) in Western sales of Ethiopic manuscripts over the past three decades provides a glimpse into the overwhelming abundance of such personal books still present in the Horn of Africa. On one of the earliest episodes of such Ethiopian miniature forgery for foreign markets, see Juel-Jensen 1991. The fabrication of miniatures over text, observable in many instances, can from a certain perspective be viewed as a form of palimpsesting. Since, however, such forgeries rarely cover more than a single folio within a quire, thus failing to comport with the more circumscribed definition adopted above, this myriad of contemporary cases shall not be considered here.

critical corpus instead comes through various surrogate copies taken of codices in Ethiopia, the majority on bitonal microfilm.⁶ While *scriptiones inferiores* within these microfilm copies are sometimes identifiable, lack of contrast and resolution mean that additional identifications might be possible with direct physical access to the manuscripts or high-resolution colour digital photographs; the prospect of obtaining either generally remains improbable. Insufficient bitonal microfilm contrast also raises the possibility that particularly well-executed palimpsesting would be indistinguishable from the shade of the parchment, even if visible autoptically.

Despite these challenges, undertext identifications can and continue to be made on the basis of current resources, though not all have received extended attention. Yet, it would be amiss to become too heavily invested in the *scriptiones inferiores* alone, and not only because many of their identities will remain indecipherable. Much can be learned about the practice of palimpsesting in the Ethiopic manuscript tradition regardless of the precise undertexts involved, reorienting us towards not the volumes that were lost, but rather those which emerged via this phenomenon.⁷

2 Survey of known Ethiopic palimpsests

The first Ethiopic palimpsests known to Western scholars were those to reach European libraries. Although exactly when and who initially identified them as palimpsests remains unclear, two codices of this type, the first to become part of any such institution, entered the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana as members of its earliest Ethiopic holdings. Their early entrance and combined use of parchment and paper as writing materials suggest that they likely came from Santo Stefano dei Mori in Rome,⁸ with their shared sixteenth-century origins intimating that both probably were created by the Ethiopian community there. As detailed by Sylvain Grébaut and Eugène Tisserant, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.et. 39 forms a smallish 13.4 × 10.1 cm

⁶ Around half of all Ethiopic codices accessible for study derive from the labours of the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) project, which operated in Ethiopia between 1973 and 1994; on its history, see Stewart 2017.

⁷ For similar methodological reflections criticising the myopic scholarly focus on the undertexts of palimpsests, see Butts 2017, 285–288.

⁸ Such a mixture of supports appears to be exceptional during this era, despite growing evidence for the copying of Ethiopic manuscripts on paper outside the Horn of Africa, particularly in Egypt, throughout the second millennium. Nonetheless, parchment and paper remain broadly segregated as material supports until quite late. The integration of paper into Ethiopic parchment codices is almost completely unattested outside of Europe until the nineteenth century, when it begins to occur sporadically, particularly in Jerusalem. For examples, see Isaac 1976, 182–183 and Isaac 1984–1986, 59, 78.

volume of anaphoras, with its first eighty-eight folios written perpendicularly over sections of an erased fifteenth-century psalter.⁹ Its counterpart, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.et. 30, is a composite volume containing six sections with quires of varying heights and support materials.¹⁰ Only the last of these (fols 74–80), containing the end of the *Image of Jesus*,¹¹ is palimpsested, again along the vertical plane. Though not sufficiently legible to the naked eye for more than a few unconnected words to be read, a pair of underlying scribal hands are visible, of approximately the fourteenth (fols 75–78) and fifteenth (fols 74, 79–80) centuries respectively. These jointly constitute two rather abnormal cases among the known Ethiopic palimpsests: both can be characterised as personal books in their repurposed forms, whereas all the others are corporate volumes, and the use of a psalter as source material is unprecedented, despite being the most copied Ge'ez text by far. These elements further intimate that a likely extraordinary situation grounds these two cases of palimpsesting.

A more mainline exemplar arises with the next Ethiopic palimpsest to reach Europe, acquired and brought from Ethiopia, along with more than two hundred other manuscripts, by the French-Irish explorer Antoine d'Abbadie during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.¹² Eventually bequeathed to the Académie des sciences in Paris, this collection is now housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The solitary palimpsest, located under the shelfmark Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 191 (Fig. 1), measures a comparatively gargantuan 30 × 27.5 cm – the second largest among those identified to date.¹³ Its *scriptio superior*, copied in the seventeenth century, consists of the Ethiopic translation of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's *Commentary on the Gospels*, written over parts of at least four *codices antiquiores*.¹⁴ With the exception of one sheet, the underwritings are exclusively orientated parallel to the overtext. Two *scriptiones inferiores* have been identified: (1) parts of an early-sixteenth-century *Acts of the Martyrs* manuscript covering approximately fols 33–58 and 86–93; and (2) nearly forty leaves of a slightly earlier *Homiliary for Mary* (fols 94–132).¹⁵ Their earlier counterparts, one possibly antedating the fourteenth century, have eluded identification thus far.

9 Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, vol. 1, 176–180. Despite his penchant for such items, Angelo Mai (1831, 96–97) makes no reference to the palimpsested character of this manuscript or the following one.

10 Grébaut and Tisserant 1935–1936, vol. 1, 142–147.

11 No. 123 in Chaîne 1913, 199. Although this exemplar represents one of the earliest witnesses to this poetic text and provides a definitive compositional *terminus ante quem* for it in the sixteenth century, Tedros Abraha (2005) neglects the manuscript entirely in his study and translation.

12 On Antoine d'Abbadie's manuscript collecting, see especially Bosc-Tiessé and Wion 2010.

13 d'Abbadie 1859, 190; Chaîne 1912, 114–115; Conti Rossini 1912, 458.

14 Roger W. Cowley (1988, 443–445) ascertained the overtext's *Vorlage*.

15 For example, lines from the lives of Mamas and Basilides can be read on fols 42 and 41 respectively, while the *incipit* of the homily of Yohannes of Ethiopia on Mary is legible on fol. 105^r (Fig. 1). Incred-

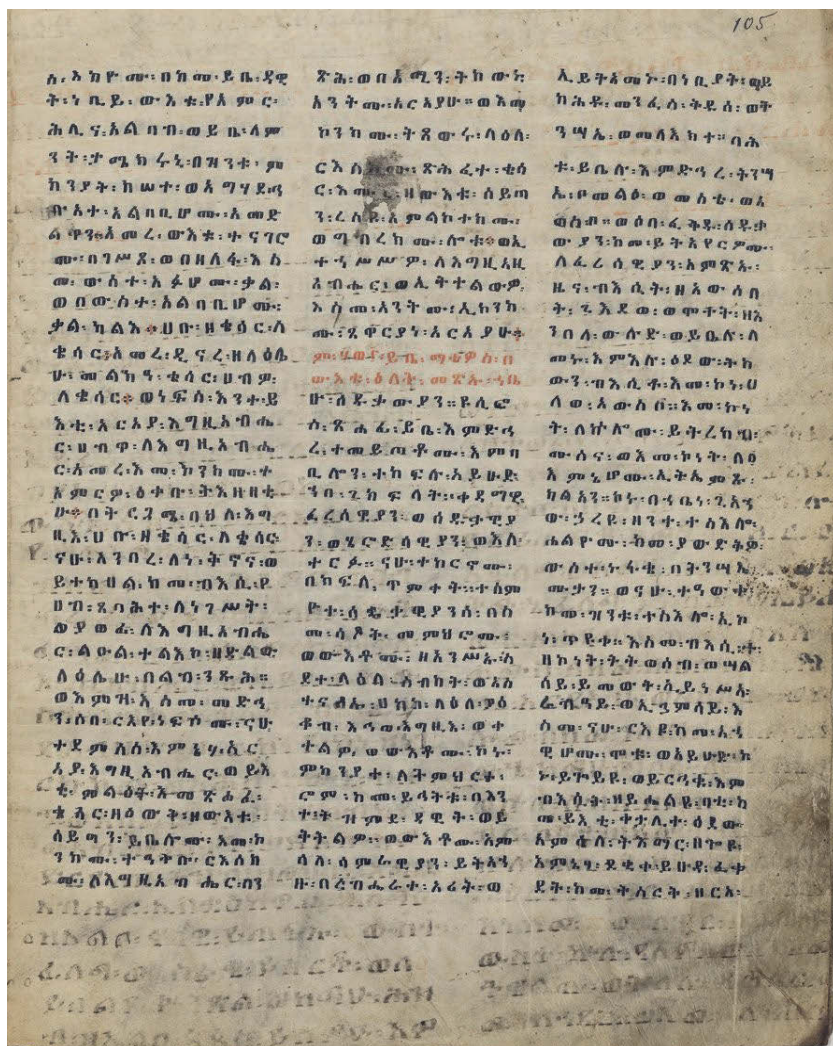


Fig. 1: Ibn al-Tayyib's *Commentary on the Gospels* (seventeenth century) over the homily of Yohannes of Ethiopia on Mary (fifteenth century) in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 191, fol. 105r; courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

ibly, although the same homily of Yohannes of Ethiopia was available elsewhere in the same collection (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 158), none of its three cataloguers (see n. 13 above) were able to identify this underwriting despite being able to read the author's name in the rubricated *incipit*. As the *scriptio inferior* on this page is quite legible, especially in the bottom margin, such an identification should have been a formality.

A few decades later, a fourth Ethiopic palimpsest arrived on the continent via Julius Heinrich Petermann, who probably acquired the small codex in Jerusalem. Now forming part of one of his legacy collections at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, this manuscript (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Petermann II Nachtrag 24) underwent multi-spectral imaging in 2016, revealing no less than ten *codices antiquiores* lying beneath the pages reinscribed in the eighteenth century with an abridged version of Ġirġis al-Makīn b. al-ʿAmīd's *Universal Chronicle* and an Ethiopic commentary on the Apocalypse of John. The *scriptiones inferiores*, dating between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries and consisting of an assortment of biblical, parabiblical, homiletical, hagiographical, and other works, are explored in detail below.

Although the date of its arrival in Europe cannot be ascertained, a fifth Ethiopic palimpsest, hidden from view until now, entered the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana during the second half of the twentieth century as one of the items donated by Enrico Cerulli, an Italian civil servant and scholar, to that institution.¹⁶ Unlike each of the previously mentioned palimpsests, no reference to this key feature appears in its official catalogue entry,¹⁷ one of copious oversights and inaccuracies. Even setting aside the often ignored or misdescribed short excerpts included in this unusual miscellany manuscript, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cerulli et. 303, significant errors are to be found, most notably with respect to the end of the volume, where a version of the amorphous *Ordering of the Church* compendium occupies fols 97^r–132^r.¹⁸ While not quite as woefully delineated, the remaining principal contents generally lack precision. For example, the two commentaries opening the manuscript are not merely on the Gospel of Luke (fols 5^r–48^r) and the Nicene Creed (fols 51^r–68^r) but the Lukan portion of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's *Commentary on the Gospels* and the tenth chapter of the so-called *Sec-*

¹⁶ Among his multiple foreign postings, Cerulli served more than one stint in Ethiopia, including from 1937 to 1940 as a high-ranking official in the occupying Italian administration. While it is more likely than not that certain Ethiopic manuscripts in his collection were acquired during this period, particularly those commissioned in the preceding years by departed Emperor Haile Selassie, others clearly were obtained in different contexts; see Dege-Müller 2015. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cerulli et. 303 bears no indication of belonging to the former category, though its precise provenance admittedly cannot be ascertained.

¹⁷ Cerulli 2004, 224–225.

¹⁸ This compendium is entitled *Šerʿāta bēta krestiyān* in the indigenous tradition, a name that denotes not a particular fixed work but rather an assemblage of loosely related texts appearing together in a variety of forms. Isolation of the individual works encompassed by these collections and identification of their Arabic *Vorlagen* remains a desideratum.

ond Book of Sawīros ibn al-Muqaffa'.¹⁹ Even less accurate portrayals exist for two shorter following works: an extremely rare *erotapokriseis* of Basil and Gregory extant only in Syriac and Ethiopic (fols 81^r–84^r),²⁰ and a slightly mutilous excerpt from the portion of the Copto-Arabic florilegium *I'tirāf al-abā'* pertaining to the Council of Nicaea (fols 85^v–91^v). Only the indigenous conciliar theological treatise titled *Mazgaba hāymānot* (fols 68^v–79^v), a work edited by Cerulli himself from other manuscripts in 1960,²¹ and a version of the apocryphal Abgar correspondence (fols 95^r–97^r) are reasonably well described.²² These were copied towards the beginning of the eighteenth century over both new leaves and folios culled from perhaps three *codices antiquiores*, most often orientated horizontally, though not exclusively. While the texts transmitted by at least two different contemporary or slightly later hands visible in the second half of the manuscript are insufficiently legible to identify with the naked eye, it has been possible to determine that the earliest *scriptio inferior*, underlying the initial handful of quires, is the *Weddāse masqal* ('Praise of the Cross') of famed Ethiopian theologian Giyorgis of Saglā.²³ Edited by Getatchew Haile in 2011 on the basis of the single witness then known to him (EMML 5041),²⁴ this palimpsested exemplar, copied in the late fifteenth century, stands as the oldest yet to come to light. These two, along with a third copy in the library of Dimā Giyorgis (EMDA 399),²⁵ constitute the only direct evidence for this indigenous composition, and so its failure to attain a more mainstream circulation may have contributed to the work's expendability in this case. Written in a two-column, twelve-line format, the *codex antiquior* probably did not exceed the 13.7 × 12.7 cm dimensions of Cerulli et. 303 by much, if at all.

¹⁹ Further information on the Ethiopic attestation of the latter is detailed below.

²⁰ While a number of *erotapokriseis* texts involving Basil and Gregory developed in Late Antiquity, this particular one appears to be preserved only in one other relatively late Ethiopic witness (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 214) and a ninth- or tenth-century Syriac manuscript (Wadi Natrun, Deir al-Surian Monastery, Syr. 17). For the latter, see the thorough, professional description in Brock and Van Rompay 2014, 90–92. Although an Arabic intermediary will have stood between the two extant versions, its loss may be inferred from Roggema 2018, 400.

²¹ Cerulli 1960, 1–101.

²² Several different forms of the Abgar correspondence (CAVT 88) are found in Ethiopic; the version attested here is the one edited in Haffner 1918.

²³ The *incipit*, for example, is discernible on fol. 33^r.

²⁴ Getatchew Haile 2011. For EMML, see n. 6 above.

²⁵ The Ethiopian Manuscript Digital Archive (EMDA) is a collection of digitised Ethiopian manuscripts available from the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. Unlike the EMML, this collection remains open for additions to the series, which at present mainly consists of items from Marṭula Māryām, Moṭā Giyorgis, Dabra Q'ayaṣā, Qarānyo Madhānē Ālam, Dabra Ḍaḥāy Mārḳos, Dimā Giyorgis, Dabra Gannat Ēlyās, and Na'akk^weto La'ab.

Ethiopian palimpsests started to come to light through microfilming projects in Ethiopia during the 1970s and 1980s. This began at the start of the former decade, when a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) mobile microfilm unit visited the important monastery of Dimā Giyorgis in Goḡgām and filmed two such manuscripts in succession as project numbers 10.71 and 10.72.²⁶ The first, measuring 23.5 × 19.5 cm and containing the Ge'ez translations of *Josippon* and the *Physiologus*,²⁷ was written on palimpsested leaves, orientated both horizontally and vertically, of three *codices antiquiores* dating to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While the contents of one of the three remain enigmatic, the other two consist of Exodus (or perhaps the entire Octateuch) and the *Maṣḥafa berhān* ('Book of Light') of Emperor Zar'a Yā'eqob.²⁸ This copy of the latter scarce work might even have been penned during its author's lifetime, but two hundred years later was apparently deemed of insufficient value to escape erasure when *Josippon* and *Physiologus* were needed in the seventeenth century. Likely manufactured a few decades later, UNESCO 10.72 is a slightly smaller manuscript (19 × 17 cm) with Ibn al-Ṭayyib's commentaries on the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John. Although still unidentified, at least two discrete underwritings seem to be attested within certain quires, each of approximately fifteenth-century origin but orientated in a different direction. A third palimpsest contemporaneous to the last and with similarly bi-orientated undertexts was more recently photographed at Dimā Giyorgis (EMDA 380). Repurposed for a copy of the widely diffused Ge'ez translation of Dāḏiṣo' Qatrāyā's *Commentary on the Paradise of the Fathers*, the number, content(s), and age(s) of the underwriting(s) cannot be ascertained. The potential interrelationships between these three palimpsests and any others held in the large Dimā Giyorgis library provides one avenue for further research. No other single repository possessing as many Ethiopic palimpsests has emerged in the Horn of Africa, and as the *scriptiones superiores* cluster around c. 1700 a local workshop for this purpose may have existed in the area around that time. Such a possibility is enhanced by the presence of another manuscript microfilmed by the UNESCO project at the nearby monastery of Dabra Warq.²⁹ Manufactured at roughly the same time, UNESCO 12.1, presented on

26 On this project, see Department of Fine Arts and Culture 1970. A map detailing the monastery's location is available in Persoon 2005, 162a.

27 On the Ethiopic versions of these texts, see Kamil 1938 and Villa 2021.

28 *Maṣḥafa berhān* is edited and translated in Conti Rossini 1964–1965; supplementary textual material appears in Getatchew Haile 2013.

29 For the monastery's location, see Bosc-Tiessé and Fiaccadori 2005, 51b. Dabra Warq's library may be the largest of any ecclesiastical institution in Ethiopia but is almost completely unstudied beyond the twelve codices microfilmed by the UNESCO project more than half a century ago.

nearly square leaves measuring 20.5×20 cm, includes a combination of both biblical (1 Enoch [CAVT 61], Job, and Exodus 25:1–40:32) and non-biblical (the treatise of Sawīros ibn al-Muqaffa' entitled *Kitāb al-majāmi'*) overtexts.³⁰ Underlying these are portions of a late-fourteenth-century synaxarion, some of the oldest surviving evidence for this now fundamental churchbook, orientated perpendicularly on account of the much larger size of the *codex antiquior*. Additional underwritings might also be present.

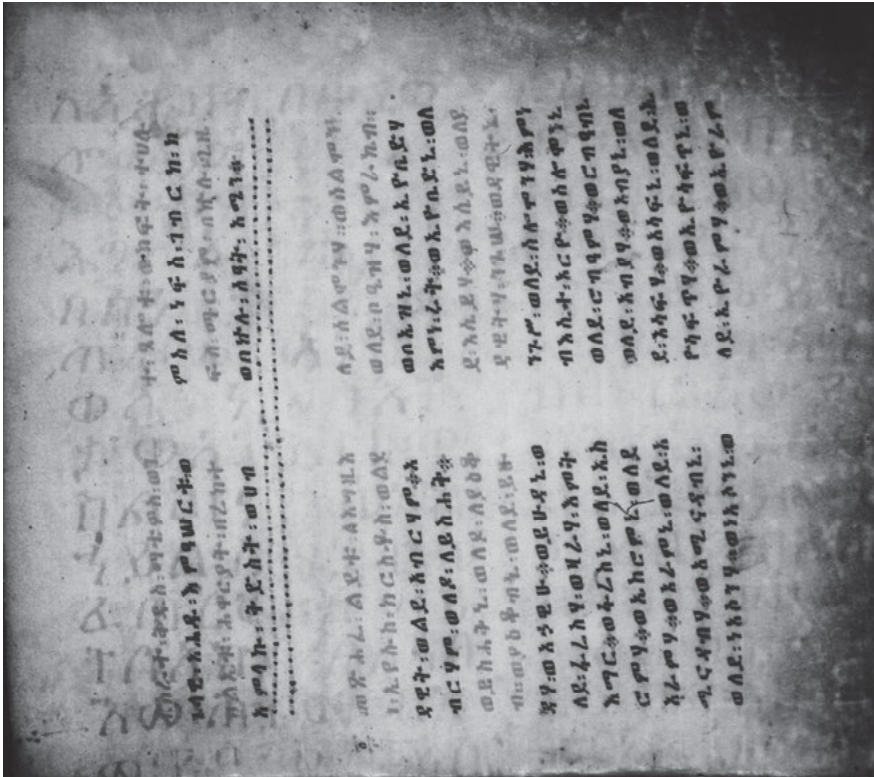


Fig. 2: Beginning of the Gospel of Matthew (late sixteenth century) over the homily of pseudo-Basil on angels, divinity, and faith (thirteenth or fourteenth century) in EMM 6620, fol. 17r. Image courtesy of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. Published with permission of the owners. All rights reserved.

Other palimpsests might well be preserved in this library if a regional workshop existed in the vicinity some three hundred years ago.

³⁰ A slightly more detailed description of this manuscript appears in Erho and Stuckenbruck 2013, 125–126.

Together with some other microfilming endeavours in 1960s Ethiopia, the UNESCO project laid the groundwork for a much more ambitious undertaking of this type: the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML).³¹ Between 1973 and 1994, the EMML microfilmed more than 9200 codices held principally in Ethiopian Orthodox churches and monasteries, and as this project accounts for nearly half of all Ethiopic manuscripts currently accessible for scholarly consultation, it is not surprising from a statistical standpoint that some palimpsests exist therein. None of them, however, are found in the opening 6000 catalogued items,³² which mostly came from Addis Ababa and nearby parts of Šawā province, but instead surface in the final third of the series, when more venerable ecclesiastical libraries further afield became the focus in the late 1970s and 1980s.

The first EMML palimpsest emerged from the church of Werāf Abbā Libānos in north Wallo in the form of a late-sixteenth-century Gospel Book microfilmed as project no. 6620.³³ Though fresh parchment may have been integrated sporadically, a single *codex antiquior* underlies the vast majority of the manuscript, several texts from which can be identified: (1) the conclusion of the second part of the homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Annunciation (fols 12, 13),³⁴ which is immediately followed by (2) the beginning of an anonymous one on Frumentius (fols 12^v, 18, 23),³⁵ (3) three contiguous leaves from a homily of pseudo-Basil on angels, divinity, and faith (fols 17 [Fig. 2], 24, 83, 85, 88, 90),³⁶ (4) a section of the third part of the homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Annunciation (fols 131, 132, 182, 193); and portions from the indigenous homilies of (5) the earlier Retu'a Hāymānot on the Nativity (fols 130, 133, 140, 143, 169, 170)³⁷ and (6) Ēleyās on Maṭṭā' (fols 81, 92).³⁸ While some of these texts are also found in other contexts, the one attributed to Retu'a

31 Stewart 2017, 447–448.

32 William Macomber and Getatchew Haile published ten catalogues covering the first 5000 project numbers between 1975 and 1993. An eleventh catalogue covering a further 1000 manuscripts, prepared by Getatchew Haile before his recent death, awaits editing and posthumous publication.

33 Zuurmond 1989, 244 assigns the manuscript to the early seventeenth century, a plausible alternative dating.

34 The Ethiopic version of this homily is edited and translated in Tedros Abraha 2019. Together with Aaron Butts, I am currently preparing an updated inventory of homilies attributed to Jacob of Serugh circulating in Ethiopic homiliary and homiletical-hagiographical manuscripts.

35 Published in Getatchew Haile 1979. A new edition of this homily, based on a wider manuscript attestation, is in the final stages of preparation by Aaron Butts.

36 Cf. EMML 1763, fols 86^r–88^r.

37 Cf. EMML 1763, fols 90^v–96^v.

38 Edited and translated in Getatchew Haile 1990.

Hāymānot has yet to be attested outside the so-called *Homiliary for the Year*.³⁹ Since the others commonly appear in this context as well, and in fact cluster together in its first part, the *codex antiquior* can be described as an exemplar thereof. Although all the identified texts stem from the first half of the year, the sequencing wherein the homily on Frumentius immediately follows the second part of Jacob of Serugh's homily on the Annunciation is otherwise only evidenced in another manuscript of the homiliary from Wallo, the celebrated EML 1763, whose contents span the entire *annum*.⁴⁰ Ancillary evidence suggesting that the *codex antiquior* probably covered this period as well comes from the manuscript's dimensions, as the folded and trimmed leaves measure 21.5 × 19 cm; a height exceeding 38 cm comports closely with that of EML 1763 (44.5 cm) and EML 8509 (39 cm),⁴¹ both covering the full year, while standing markedly taller than London, British Library, Or. 8192 (30.3 cm),⁴² which encompasses only its latter half. However, the underwriting of EML 6620 lies slightly anterior to the early-fourteenth-century manufacture of the three aforementioned codices, rendering it the earliest exemplar of this important homiliary yet discovered.

A couple years later, the project encountered a second, smaller palimpsest in the library of the north Šawān monastery of Ġar Šellāsē, located not far from the provincial border with Wallo.⁴³ Transmitting a series of commentaries (dubbed *Mamhera Orit* by Roger Cowley)⁴⁴ on the Octateuch and 1–4 Kingdoms, an excerpt from 1 Enoch consisting of the entire *Astronomical Book*, and the tenth chapter of the *Second Book* of Sawīros ibn al-Muqaffa',⁴⁵ along with some more minor pieces, the rear half of EML 7202 contains two *scriptiones inferiores*, neither of which have been identified. Dating to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they are distinguishable from their differing hands and orientations – one appears upside

39 Unlike all of its medieval counterparts, the ancient Ethiopic name for this homiliary has yet to be isolated, so I use here and elsewhere the construct *Homiliary for the Year* to refer to it. The most complete and accessible of its recorded witnesses are noted below, though this represents only a minority of those now known.

40 For its full description, see Getatchew Haile 1981, 218–231. Perhaps no other manuscript in the whole EML series has been the subject of more scholarly publications than EML 1763.

41 Sergew Hable-Selassie 1991, 67. Fiaccadori 1989, 150 and 162 offers an important corrective to the dating of this manuscript.

42 Strelcyn 1978, 89.

43 For its location, see Raineri 2005, 695b. The leaves of this manuscript measure 17 × 15 cm.

44 See Cowley 1988, 116 and throughout. In the indigenous tradition, these texts are entitled *Terg'amē orit* ('Commentary on the Old Testament') or the like, thereby indistinguishable on this basis from a variety of other commentaries to which the same generic title is applied.

45 James Hamrick made the first precise identification of the *Vorlage*.

down, while the other reads in the same direction as the *scriptio superior*. This palimpsest's creation can be placed in the seventeenth century via palaeography.

Table 1: Identified *scriptiones inferiores* in EML 6620.

Location ⁴⁶	Textual identification
fols 13 ^v + 12 ^r , 13 ^r + 12 ^v	Homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Annunciation (second part); homily on Frumentius (beginning fol. 12 ^v)
fols 18 ^v + 23 ^r , 18 ^r + 23 ^v	Homily on Frumentius
fols 88 ^v + 85 ^r , 88 ^r + 85 ^v	Homily of pseudo-Basil on the angels, divinity, and faith
fols 17 ^v + 24 ^r , 17 ^r + 24 ^v	Homily of pseudo-Basil on the angels, divinity, and faith
fols 83 ^r + 90 ^v , 83 ^v + 90 ^r	Homily of pseudo-Basil on the angels, divinity, and faith ⁴⁷
fols 132 ^r + 131 ^v , 132 ^v + 131 ^r	Homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Annunciation (third part)
fols 182 ^v + 193 ^r , 182 ^r + 193 ^v	Homily of Jacob of Serugh on the Annunciation (third part)
fols 169 ^r + 170 ^v , 169 ^v + 170 ^r	Homily of Retu'a Häymānot for the Nativity
fols 143 ^v + 140 ^r , 143 ^r + 140 ^v	Homily of Retu'a Häymānot for the Nativity
fols 130 ^v + 133 ^r , 130 ^r + 133 ^v	Homily of Retu'a Häymānot for the Nativity
fols 81 ^r + 92 ^v , 81 ^v + 92 ^r	Homily of Ēleyās on Maṭṭā'

The rich monastic libraries of Lake Ṭānā, which the EML reached in the late 1980s, brought forth two more palimpsests, both from the august monastery of Kebrān Gabre'ēl. The first to be microfilmed, as EML 8265, is another copy of Ibn al-Tayyib's *Commentary on the Gospels*, contemporaneous in manufacture to Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 191. With leaves measuring 35 × 30 cm, it stands even larger than that manuscript as the most expansive Ethiopic palimpsest currently known. Given these dimensions and the comparatively robust numbers of extant medieval witnesses to the text, the *scriptio inferior* unsurprisingly consists of an early-fifteenth-century Octateuch, manuscripts of which are typically among the biggest in the Ethiopic tradition. The availability of an even more massive Octateuch of similar antiquity at the monastery, still preserved in its library today (Ṭānāsee 4),⁴⁸ may have contributed to the reuse of this *codex antiquior*. Little can be said about the second manuscript, EML 8339, a much smaller (18 × 13 cm) eighteenth-century volume containing commentary and

⁴⁶ Dividing lines in the table denote non-contiguous leaves from the original manuscript.

⁴⁷ The recto of this sheet is illegible but will contain the *desinit* of this text and the *incipit* of the following one, most likely the third part of Jacob of Serugh's homily on the Annunciation.

⁴⁸ Hammerschmidt 1973, 98–99.

computus materials relating mostly to the *Astronomical Book* of 1 Enoch. Underwriting in a fairly late hand appears towards its end.

A fifth palimpsest was microfilmed in the province of Gondar during the final stages of the EML project, possibly the oldest manuscript from Ethiopia attesting this practice. A composite codex dating primarily to the sixteenth century, EML 8971 exhibits palimpsested writing from approximately two hundred years earlier beginning on fol. 52. Orientated vertically, the *scriptio inferior* seems to be limited to one or two quires. The *scriptiones superiores* consist of a wide assortment of Ge'ez Old and New Testament commentaries and related texts, among them portions of Cowley's *Mamhera Orit*, as well as one of the two Ethiopic versions of pseudo-Athanasius's *Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem* (CPG 2257).⁴⁹

A more recent endeavour, a project funded by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), has revealed one further palimpsest in Ethiopia, a damaged fragment with a contiguous section of a commentary on the Minor Prophets belonging to the Abuna Yoḥannes Museum in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle (EAP 357/1/2).⁵⁰ Badly miscatalogued – a growing threat to the field⁵¹ – its unidentified underwriting dates not more than two hundred years earlier than the *scriptio superior* from c. 1800 CE. This therefore represents the youngest Ethiopic palimpsest yet known. Uniquely among the manuscripts surveyed here, the *scrip-*

⁴⁹ Both versions are represented in e.g. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 96. The second text in this manuscript corresponds to the one attested in EML 8971 (fols 40^r–43^v, 135^r–137^r) and covers in sequence the following sections of CPG 2257: I, III–XI, XIII, XV–XVII, XIX–XXI, XXIV–XXVI, XXXIV–XXXVII, XXXIX, XLVI, XLIX–LI, XLV, LV, LVII, LXIV–LXV, CI–CII, CXI, CXIII, CXV, CXXIV. For the sections included in the other Ethiopic version, see Zotenberg 1877, 257.

⁵⁰ Copied in a two-column, nineteen- to twenty-three-line format, the manuscript contains commentaries on Micah (acephalous, fol. 1^{rv}), Joel (fols 1^v–4^r), Obadiah (fols 4^r–5^r), Jonah (fols 5^r–6^r), Nahum (fols 6^r–10^r), Habakkuk (fols 10^r–16^r), Zephaniah (fols 16^r–18^r), and Haggai (fols 18^r–19^r). These commentaries are the same as those transmitted in e.g. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. or. quart. 986, but they lack the lemmata included in that witness. A variant description of the manuscript is offered on the Endangered Archives Programme website at <<https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP357-1-2>> (accessed on 1 May 2024).

⁵¹ Given the growth of the subfield of Ethiopic manuscript studies over the past few decades and the slow progress of cataloguing historically, an absence of catalogue information cannot be understood to present an obstacle so long as the manuscripts or photographs thereof are openly accessible, since scholars may then consult them without prejudice. Conversely, the insidious, pernicious upsurge of erroneous manuscript descriptions in recent years, principally in electronic databases, must be characterised as a major threat, given that they obscure reality via misleading competent specialists and scholars from other fields alike.

tio inferior, lying perpendicular to the overtext, is in three columns – a format rarely seen in Ethiopic codices of the medieval era, but increasingly common thereafter. Although these leaves now measure 23 × 16 cm, they have been trimmed, and those of the *codex antiquior* probably were nearly square and exceeded 30 cm along each axis.

Lastly, there is the exceptional case of an assuredly non-Ethiopian Ethiopic palimpsest,⁵² the curious thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Greek horologion with seventeen folios containing Ge'ez undertext discovered in 1975 among the new finds at St Catherine's Monastery (Sinai, St Catherine's Monastery, gr. NF M 90 [Diktyon 60917]). The Ethiopic writing, allegedly transmitting portions of a funeral rite in part,⁵³ does not significantly antedate the Greek *scriptio superior*.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, as the *terminus ante quem* provided by the overtext unambiguously places the *scriptio inferior* of these leaves in the pre-Solomonic period (before 1270 CE), a rarely encountered stratum within this tradition's surviving material evidence,⁵⁵ its careful study and publication via experts in early Ge'ez manuscripts and palaeography working together with image-processing specialists on the multi-spectral-imaging data produced by the Sinai Palimpsests Project remains a *desideratum*.

52 Given the enormous quantity of Ge'ez manuscripts produced outside the boundaries of modern Ethiopia in locales such as Eritrea, Egypt, Jerusalem, and Rome, which cannot be properly dubbed Ethiopian, and the thriving Arabic manuscript culture within Ethiopia, the products of which are as Ethiopian as Ge'ez scrolls and codices, the equation of 'Ethiopian manuscripts' with 'Ethiopic manuscripts' must be eschewed.

53 Rapp 2023, 43.

54 Rossetto 2023b, 56 assigns the manuscript to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, a seemingly preferable position to the thirteenth-century date in Holy Monastery and Archdiocese of Sinai 1999, 172; Hieromonk Justin of Sinai 2023, 27; and Rapp 2023, 43, insofar as the latter falls uncomfortably close to the most likely age of the *scriptio inferior*. It cannot be precluded, however, that a quite recently produced Ethiopic codex became fodder for another in a different language if its contents were unintelligible to a new owner.

55 At this juncture, the earliest securely dated Ethiopic manuscript evidence comes from elsewhere in Egypt; see Maximous el-Antony, Blid and Butts 2016. The previously unidentified text on the recto of this fragment can now be correlated with the short anonymous monastic treatise extant in EMMML 7469, fols 560^v–561^v, which stands as the only more or less complete exemplar of this work despite the existence of at least ten additional Ge'ez witnesses.

3 Trends in Ethiopic palimpsesting

All fifteen known Ethiopic-Ethiopic palimpsests (we shall turn to Petermann II Nachtrag 24 in depth below, which in no way contradicts these findings) postdate the medieval period. Such is perhaps a surprising result from the perspective of other traditions which preserve significant numbers of late antique and medieval codices. However, comparatively few medieval Ethiopic manuscripts exist, and the vast majority of extant codices derive from the last two hundred years, so the attestation of no more than a single palimpsest from the latter timeframe should instead probably be considered statistically significant, providing evidence that palimpsesting became more or less extinct in this tradition after the Gondarine Period (c. 1632–1769). Although the earliest *scriptiones superiores* date to the sixteenth century, this fact, conversely, should not necessarily be construed as a *terminus post quem* for the practice, given the much more limited surviving corpus of codices from this era and earlier. But the clustering of palimpsests in and along the boundaries of the seventeenth century does seem to indicate the ostensible zenith of Ethiopic palimpsesting.

If the current repositories of manuscripts in Ethiopia can serve as approximate geographic indicators of their origins, it may be significant that seven of the ten items under concern reside in ecclesiastical libraries located within 150 km of Lake Ṭānā. Šawā, Tegrāy, and Wallo have been subject to far more extensive microfilming and digitisation projects than Goḡḡām and Gondar (the two provinces covering Lake Ṭānā and its environs), but only single palimpsests have been unearthed in each member of the former trio.⁵⁶ Likewise, the presence of multiple palimpsests at both Kebrān Gabre'el and Dimā Giyorgis heightens the possibility of this practice having been performed either at or in the vicinity of those monasteries. Historical and economic factors that may have contributed to a palimpsesting peak in this region in the seventeenth century would be a topic worthy of a historian's attention.

With the possible exception of the two manuscripts from the early part of the Vaticanī etiopici fonds, which likely have somewhat anomalous histories,⁵⁷ each palimpsest represents a corporate, not private, volume; that is, it was intended for a church or monastic library, not personal use. So far as identifications have progressed, this holds equally true for overt texts and undertexts, suggesting a predominantly, if not exclusively, institutional phenomenon.

⁵⁶ Ongoing lack of open and unrestricted scholarly access to the full corpus of materials digitised in Tegrāy during the course of the ERC-funded Ethio-SPaRe project (Universität Hamburg), in contrast to the fully consultable EML archives focusing on Šawā, Wallo, Goḡḡām, and Gondar, means that this impression might prove illusory in part.

⁵⁷ See Adankpo-Labadie 2021.

A gap of approximately two centuries between a *scriptio superior* and the youngest underwriting beneath is broadly attested despite the diverse range of works being sacrificed. Such a timeframe is more indicative of dismemberment of *codices antiquiores* with texts that had fallen out of common use than of damaged ones. Together with the mid-sixteenth-century revision of the Ethiopic Bible, which rendered many earlier manuscripts at least somewhat obsolescent, the presence of numerous scarce works among the identifiable *scriptiones inferiores* – most notably *Weddāsē masqal*, *Maṣḥafa berhān*, and various sermons from the *Homiliary for the Year* – also supports a reconstruction along these lines.

Nonetheless, the most remarkable trend exists with respect to what texts these institutions were pursuing: Ge'ez biblical commentaries stand as principal overtexts in a majority of the known Ethiopic-Ethiopic palimpsests. Laying aside the Vaticani etiopici manuscripts, nine of the remaining thirteen contain *scriptiones superiores* of this type. Nowhere, however, is the striking connection between palimpsesting and biblical commentaries more visible than in manuscripts transmitting the Lukan section of Ibn al-Ṭayyib's *Commentary on the Gospels* (normally alongside most or all of the remainder), as close to one-third of its witnesses exhibit this feature.⁵⁸ A much rarer, but equally conspicuous, correlation arises with the *Second Book* of Sawīros ibn al-Muqaffa'. While two copies of the full Ge'ez translation are now known,⁵⁹ another pair of manuscripts contain only the tenth chapter, presenting it as an anonymous commentary on the Nicene Creed; both of the latter are palimpsested and also include biblical commentaries. In one of these manuscripts, EML 7202, the biblical commentary materials consist of parts of an Ethiopian work exegeting certain Old Testament writings – the materials Cowley dubbed *Mamhera Orit*. Many of the same sections of this text appear in another palimpsest alongside interpretative works on a wide range of other biblical books. Other Old Testament commentaries appear in two further palimpsests, one with materials related to the *Astronomical Book* of 1 Enoch, an ancient treatise held canonical by the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox churches, and the second with a series on the Minor Prophets. Lastly, Petermann II Nachtrag 24 – a manuscript to which we shall turn in detail momentarily – contains a commentary on one of the New Testament books, the Apocalypse of John, as one of its two princi-

⁵⁸ Several exemplars can be appended to the listing in Cowley 1988, 444. Together with Aaron Butts, I am preparing an updated study on the Ethiopic reception of Ibn al-Ṭayyib, which makes numerous additions to Cowley's pioneering work.

⁵⁹ Located respectively in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 155 and UNES-CO 10.46. The former served as the basis for the study of the Ge'ez version in Leroy and Grébaut 1911.

pal overtexts.⁶⁰ Although not rare, Ge'ez biblical commentary manuscripts are certainly scarce, magnifying the significance of this correlation.⁶¹ In contrast, entire major categories of Ethiopic literature, such as hagiographies and homiliaries, have yet to provide any *scriptiones superiores* whatsoever.

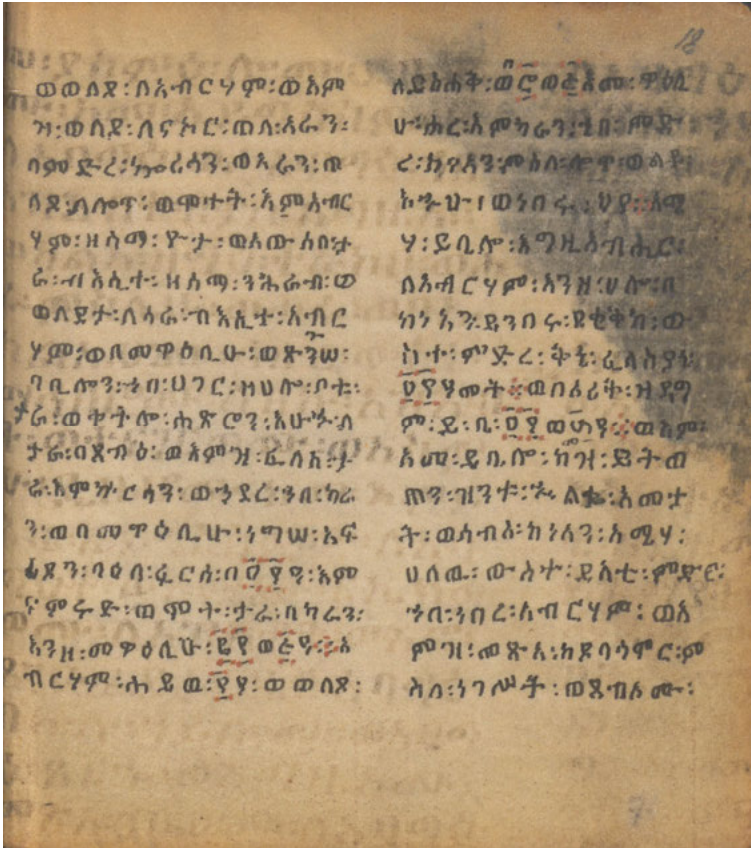


Fig. 3: Natural-light image of the *Universal Chronicle* of Ġirġis al-Makīn b. al-Amīd (eighteenth century) over the *Animal Apocalypse* of 1 Enoch (early sixteenth century) in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Petermann II Nachtrag 24, fol. 18r.

⁶⁰ An annotated translation of this commentary on the Apocalypse of John was published in Cowley 1983, 63–156.

⁶¹ This is not the only tradition with a strong link between palimpsesting and production of a particular type of manuscript, as a similar situation has been observed with Greek Euchologia; see Rapp 2023, 43.

4 An unusual Ethiopic palimpsest: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Petermann II Nachtrag 24

Of all known Ethiopic-Ethiopic palimpsests, only one has been subject to extended academic study and scientific treatment: a smallish manuscript now residing in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin acquired by the orientalist scholar Julius Heinrich Petermann, most likely during his appointment as German vice-consul in Jerusalem in 1867–1868.⁶² Copied in a two-column, seventeen- to twenty-line format, the codex's *scriptiones superiores* consist of an extremely rare abridged version of the thirteenth-century Egyptian historian Ġirġis al-Makīn b. al-'Amīd's *Universal Chronicle* trailed by a somewhat more popular indigenous Ethiopian commentary on the Apocalypse of John.⁶³ Although August Dillmann noted that Petermann II Nachtrag 24 was a palimpsest in his 1878 description of the manuscript,⁶⁴ no progress seems to have been made towards deciphering its underwritings until 2014, when I was able to determine on the basis of a microfilm reproduction that several leaves contain portions of Old Testament books.⁶⁵ Subsequent colour images and a visit to examine the manuscript in person led to the identification of two further texts: the *Testament of Abraham* (CAVT 88) and, critically, 1 Enoch (Fig. 3). With Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft funding previously secured for a new critical edition and translation of the Ethiopic version of Enoch, the presence of the latter resulted in arrangements being made for multi-spectral imaging via reallocation of part of the grant. Led by the Early Manuscripts Electronic Library, this was undertaken in Berlin between late October and early November 2016.

Unlike other Ethiopic palimpsests, where a single *codex antiquior* often seems to underlay extended spans, the multi-spectral imaging revealed fragments of no less than ten independent manuscripts scattered throughout Petermann II Nachtrag 24, often with long gaps between leaves of the same *scriptio inferior*. The underwritings range in date from the sixteenth to the thirteenth century, with the number of discrete undertexts likely to rise if the contents of more leaves can be identified.

⁶² On Petermann, see Bobzin 2001.

⁶³ While Cowley translated the latter through consultation of four manuscripts, at least twice as many are now known. Only one other copy of this abridged version of the *Universal Chronicle* has come to light via EMMML 7109. For the Arabic original, see the important new edition of Diez 2023.

⁶⁴ Dillmann 1878, 52.

⁶⁵ Multi-spectral imaging helped to determine that these comprised the remnants of a medieval Old Testament lectionary (codex ε), only one other of which has been located among the accessible parts of the Ethiopic manuscript tradition.

Table 2: *Scriptiones inferiores* in Petermann II Nachtrag 24.

	Leaves	Orientation	Codex	Textual identification
Quire 1				
Sheet 1	1 + 7	Vertical	α	Homily of pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem on the Resurrection (CPG 3598)
Sheet 2	2 + 6	—	—	Not palimpsested
Sheet 3	3	—	—	Not palimpsested
Sheet 4	4 + 5	—	—	Not palimpsested
Quire 2				
Sheet 1	8 + 15	Vertical		Unidentified
Sheet 2	9 + 14	Vertical	β	<i>Martyrdom of Romanos</i> (BHG 1600y)
Sheet 3	10 + 13	Vertical	γ	Chants
Sheet 4	11 + 12	Vertical	β	<i>Martyrdom of Cyprian and Justina</i> (BHG 455)
Quire 3				
Sheet 1	16 + 23	Vertical	δ	1 Enoch (CAVT 61)
Sheet 2	17 + 22	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (2 Chronicles 6:29–39)
Sheet 3	18 + 21	Horizontal	δ	1 Enoch
Sheet 4	19 + 20	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Deuteronomy 4:3–16)
Quire 4				
Sheet 1	24 + 31	Vertical	ζ	Homily of Retu'a Häymānot on Easter
Sheet 2	25	Horizontal	η	<i>Testament of Jacob</i> (CAVT 99)
Sheet 3	26 + 29	Vertical	δ	1 Enoch
Sheet 4	27 + 28	Horizontal?		Unidentified
Sheet 5	30	Vertical	η	Homily of pseudo-Ephrem on Abraham and Sarah (CAVT 90)
Quire 5				
Sheet 1	32 + 39	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Habakkuk 3:1–16 preceded by another lection)
Sheet 2	33 + 38	Vertical	β	<i>Martyrdom of Theocritus the Lector</i>
Sheet 3	34 + 37	Vertical	δ	1 Enoch
Sheet 4	35 + 36	Vertical	γ	Chants
Quire 6				
Sheet 1	40 + 47	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Isaiah 6:3–7:3)
Sheet 2	41 + 46	—	—	Not palimpsested
Sheet 3	42 + 45	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Isaiah 7:4–23)
Sheet 4	43 + 44	Vertical	θ	<i>Life of Basilides</i> (BHO 162)

	Leaves	Orientation	Codex	Textual identification
Quire 7				
Sheet 1	48 + 55	Vertical	δ	1 Enoch
Sheet 2	49 + 54	Horizontal	η	<i>Testament of Abraham (CAVT 88)</i>
Sheet 3	50 + 53	Vertical	θ	<i>Life of Basilides</i>
Sheet 4	51 + 52	Vertical	β	<i>Martyrdom of Theodotus; Martyrdom of Theocritus the Lector</i>
Quire 8				
Sheet 1	56 + 63	Vertical	β	<i>Martyrdom of the Forty Soldiers of Cappadocia (BHG 1201)</i>
Sheet 2	57 + 62	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Daniel 3:62–63)
Sheet 3	58 + 61	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Isaiah 11:13–12:6, 2:3–4)
Sheet 4	59 + 60	Horizontal	α	Homily of pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem on the Resurrection
Quire 9				
Sheet 1	64 + 71	Vertical	θ	<i>Life of Basilides</i>
Sheet 2	65 + 70	Horizontal	ι	On the True Cross; <i>Life of Zenobios and Zenobia</i>
Sheet 3	66 + 69	Horizontal	ι	On the True Cross; <i>Life of Zenobios and Zenobia</i>
Sheet 4	67 + 68	Horizontal	ι	On the True Cross
Quire 10				
Sheet 1	72 + 79	Vertical	γ	Chants
Sheet 2	73 + 78	Horizontal	α	Homily of pseudo-Chrysostom for Easter Monday; homily of Benjamin of Alexandria for Easter Tuesday
Sheet 3	74 + 77	Vertical		Unidentified
Sheet 4	75 + 76	Vertical	θ	<i>Life of Basilides</i>
Quire 11				
Sheet 1	80 + 87	Vertical	ζ	Homily of Retu'a Hāymānot on Easter
Sheet 2	81 + 86	Vertical	ζ	Homily of Retu'a Hāymānot on Easter
Sheet 3	82 + 85	Horizontal	α	Homily of pseudo-Chrysostom for Easter Monday; homily of Benjamin of Alexandria for Easter Tuesday
Sheet 4	83 + 84	Vertical	ε	Lectionary (Zephaniah 3:10–20 followed by another lection)
Quire 12				
Sheet 1	88 + 95	Vertical		Unidentified
Sheet 2	89 + 94	Horizontal	α	Homily of Benjamin of Alexandria for Easter Tuesday
Sheet 3	90 + 93	Horizontal	α	Homily of pseudo-Chrysostom for Easter Monday
Sheet 4	91 + 92	Horizontal	α	Homily of Benjamin of Alexandria for Easter Tuesday

	Leaves	Orientation	Codex	Textual identification
Quire 13				
Sheet 1	95 ^{bis} + 104	Horizontal	κ	Acts 9:39–10:9, 10:38–47
Sheet 2	96 + 102	Horizontal	κ	Acts 9:23–38, 10:48–11:13
Sheet 3	97 + 100	Horizontal	κ	Acts 9:10–22, 11:13–22
Sheet 4	98 + 99	Horizontal	κ	Acts 10:10–38
Sheet 5	101	Horizontal		Unidentified
Sheet 6	103	Horizontal		Unidentified
Quire 14				
Sheet 1	105	Vertical	α	Homily of pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem on the Resurrection
Sheet 2	106 + 107	Vertical		Unidentified
Remainder of codex apparently not palimpsested				

Despite this overarching tendency, it is useful to begin a review of the manuscript's *scriptiones inferiores* with the two cases confined to single quires. These represent the sole instances in which contiguous leaves from any of the antecedent codices lie alongside one another in Petermann II Nachtrag 24, a situation possibly due in part to the fact that they are also the only underwritings exclusively oriented horizontally, that is, parallel to the *scriptio superior*. This suggests that even though the leaves have been trimmed somewhat, these two manuscripts possessed folios not significantly larger than the 12 × 11 cm dimensions of Petermann II Nachtrag 24.⁶⁶ However, since this palimpsest contains only a single quire, or segment thereof, of each of the earlier codices, it is impossible to offer a reasonable conjecture as to which, if any, additional works might have appeared with the fragmentarily preserved texts in either case.

⁶⁶ No axis could have reached 20 cm in any of these instances, however.

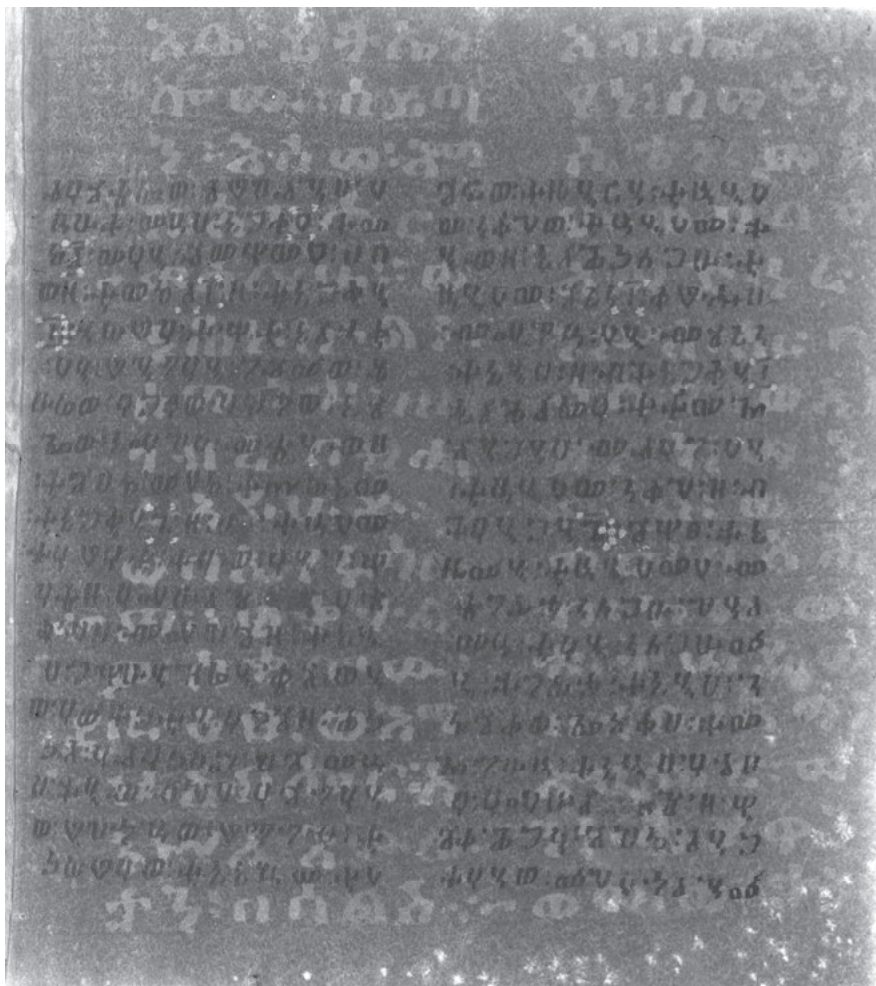


Fig. 4: Acts 10:38–42 (c. thirteenth century) underwritten on Petermann II Nachtrag 24, fol. 95bis^v; image processed by Keith Knox, © Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung.

Notwithstanding two singletons with unidentified underwritings, quire thirteen of Petermann II Nachtrag 24 is composed of a quaternion from a copy of the Acts of the Apostles (codex κ), with running text spanning 9:10–11:22 preserved with scattered lacunae (Fig. 4). After being erased, the outermost sheet of the quaternion became the third sheet of the new quire (fols 97 + 100), and the second sheet of the quaternion was placed behind it as the second sheet of the new quire (fols 96 + 102). Both were folded backwards and consequently reversed from their prior orienta-

tion. To the rear of these, the third sheet of the quaternion was positioned upside down, which thus became the outermost sheet (fols 95^{bis} + 104). Inside the new quire the innermost sheet of the quaternion was deposited, orientated in accordance with the original manuscript (fols 98 + 99). On palaeographic grounds, this highly imperfect witness is among the oldest known material evidence for the Old Ethiopic translation of the Acts of the Apostles, standing at least a century earlier than any available to Curt Niccum for his 2014 critical edition.⁶⁷ In view of the highly unsettled state of early Ethiopic manuscript palaeography,⁶⁸ it cannot be precluded that these fragments antedate the thirteenth century, with various linguistic archaisms and unique variant readings aligning with the Greek *Vorlage* corroborating their antiquity. For example, throughout the leaves, assorted prepositions, relative pronouns, and conjunctions exhibit a robust mixture of normal forms terminating in the first order vowel (-a) and archaic ones ending with the fifth order (-ē), the latter being one of the most common features in non-standardised early Ge'ez.⁶⁹ Since the tremendously valuable textual readings of this witness cannot be characterised so generally, two cases illustrate its uniqueness and importance. One of these appears in Acts 11:2, wherein the second clause stands asyndetically in contrast to the rest of the Ethiopic tradition according to Niccum, but aligning with the absence of a conjunction in Greek there. A more striking case, however, lies in the first half of Acts 10:39, where a concentration of elements brings a previously fairly distant Ge'ez text into far closer conformity with its *Vorlage*:

καὶ ἡμεῖς μάρτυρες πάντων ὧν ἐποίησεν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ.⁷⁰
 'We are witnesses of everything that he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem.'

67 Niccum 2014.

68 While in most cases the limited amount of legible underwriting means that the undertexts in Petermann II Nachtrag 24 will remain more of a curiosity than textually significant, together with some other early palimpsest inferior hands they shall play a role in another sphere: namely, a prolegomenon to early Ethiopic manuscript palaeography intended to address this deficiency, which will be prepared and published within the context of the ERC-funded 'Beyond Influence: The Connected Histories of Ethiopic and Syriac Christianity' project. Uhlig 1988 remains an indispensable and reliable resource for Ethiopic palaeography apart from the earliest period (pre-1350), which, among other issues, is unduly compressed.

69 This is particularly well attested with ጎበ/ጎቤ, አለ/አሉ and እንዘ/እንዚ, but archaic forms are also found elsewhere, such as መንገሉ and ሶቤ in Acts 10:6 and 11:15 respectively. On archaic Ge'ez, see especially Bausi 2005 and 2023.

70 Aland et al. 2012, 414.

ወንሕነ ፡ ኩልነ ፡ ሰማዕቲ ፡ በዘገብረ ፡ በብሔረ ፡ አይሁድ ፡ ወበኢየሩሳሌም ፡⁷¹

‘All of us are witnesses to what he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem.’

ወንሕነ ፡ ኩልነ ፡ ሰማዕቲ ፡ በዝ ፡ ግብረ ፡ በብሔረ ፡ ደሁዳ ፡ ወበኢየሩሳሌም ፡⁷²

‘All of us are witnesses to this thing in the land of Judea and in Jerusalem.’

Given its textual significance and accompanying antiquity, codex κ represents one of the most significant *scriptiones inferiores* uncovered in this palimpsest.

Somewhat similarly, three contiguous sheets from codex ι form the inner portion of the ninth quire of Petermann II Nachtrag 24, with no material from it found elsewhere. In this case, the innermost sheet of the original quire occupies the same position, albeit inverted (fols 67 + 68), and the preceding two sheets lie adjacent to it, having been folded backwards together and then also jointly inverted (fols 66 + 69 and fols 65 + 70). Although the bottom third of these leaves has been trimmed away,⁷³ their surviving sections preserve portions of two texts: the end of an anonymous narrative on how the Cross appeared as an image to Constantine and how Helen found it (fols 66^v, 66^r, 65^v, 65^r, 68^v, 68^r, 67^v),⁷⁴ and the beginning of the *Life of Zenobios and Zenobia* (fols 70^v, 70^r, 69^v, 69^r).⁷⁵ Despite being codicologically conjoined here, these works do not collocate anywhere else in the Ethiopic manuscript tradition, as the first is otherwise only attested within copies of the *Homiliary for the Year* and the second within *Acts of the Martyrs* manuscripts. As both of these extensive external collections are transmitted through large codices, the appearance of two of their seemingly independent members together in a relatively diminutive late-thirteenth- or early-fourteenth-century manuscript should not be casually disregarded. While this combination might simply represent a rare instance of a small quasi-hagiographical Ethiopic miscellany akin to Oslo, Museum of Cultural History, UEM35900,⁷⁶ both texts may have been translated from Greek. This opens the possibility that the two may have been transmitted together at times in smaller codices during an earlier stage of the Ethiopic manuscript tradition and only later separated when norms changed after

⁷¹ Petermann II Nachtrag 24, fol. 95bis^v.

⁷² Niccum 2014, 150.

⁷³ Twelve of a reconstructed eighteen lines of text per page are usually preserved on these leaves.

⁷⁴ For the Ethiopic text and translation of this narrative, see Getatchew Haile 2018, 130–149.

⁷⁵ Cf. Ṭānāsee 121, fols 71^r–73^r (Six 1999, 89). The story found in Ethiopic is completely different from the Greek accounts (*BHG* 1884–1885), and while a Latin translation of this version with introductory notes appeared in van Hecke et al. 1883, 270–273, scholars from multiple fields would doubtless welcome a critical edition and updated translation.

⁷⁶ See Erho 2017, 54–56. The unusual compositional history of this manuscript is described in its colophon.

the massive influx of new hagiographic and homiletic translations from Arabic in the early second millennium.

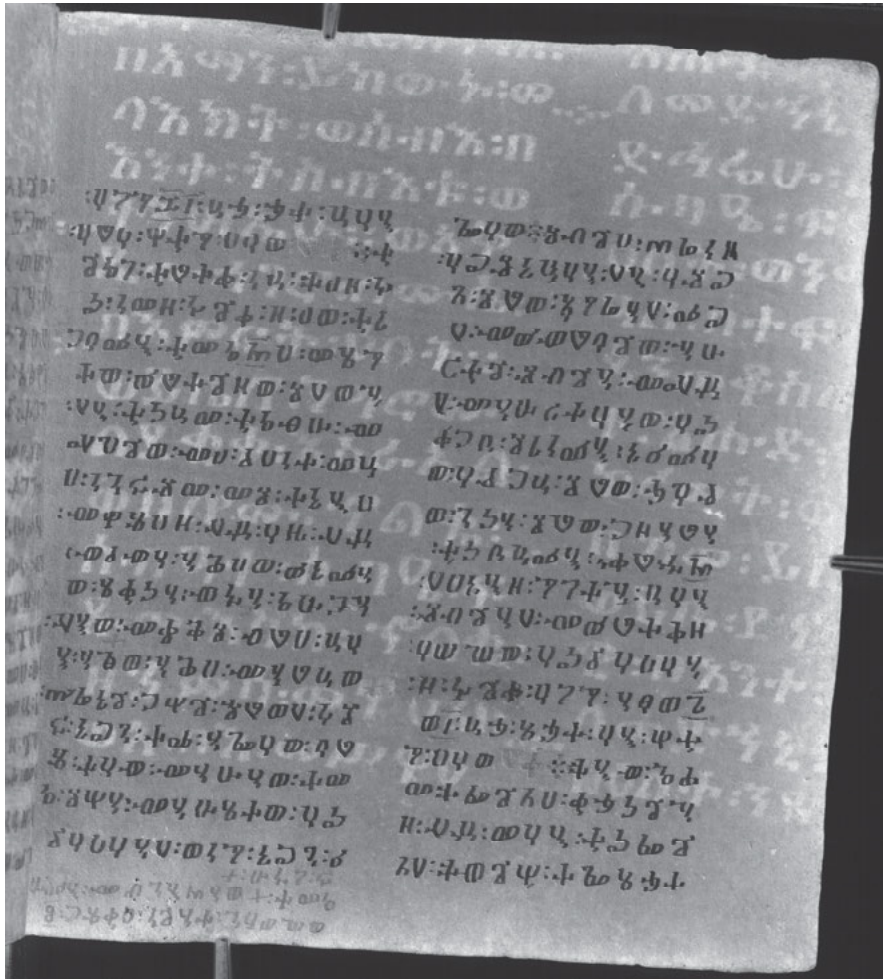


Fig. 5: Homily of pseudo-Benjamin of Alexandria (fourteenth century) underwritten on Petermann II Nachtrag 24, fol. 94v; image processed by Keith Knox, © Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung.

Other *scriptiones inferiores* lie upon both the horizontal and vertical axes in Petermann II Nachtrag 24, likely representing a set of slightly larger original codices than the two just described. The most widespread of these – and indeed the most

dispersed antecedent manuscript represented in the palimpsest, with seven sheets and a singleton spread throughout six quires – is codex α, a fourteenth-century copy of a medieval Ethiopic homiliary entitled *Dersāna panṭaqʷastē* ('Homiliary for Pentecost'). Only leaves from the opening section of this homiliary are present, attesting portions of the first three of its seventeen total works: (1) a homily of pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem on the Resurrection (CPG 3598, on fols 1, 7, 59, 60, 105);⁷⁷ (2) a homily of pseudo-Chrysostom on the Resurrection for Easter Monday (fols 73, 82, 85^r, 90, 93);⁷⁸ and (3) an otherwise unknown (and probably spurious) homily of Benjamin of Alexandria on the Resurrection for Easter Tuesday (fols 78, 85^v, 89, 91, 92, 94 [Fig. 5]), in which is embedded the *Narratio de vita sua* of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (CPG 6633).⁷⁹ A second bi-orientated codex (η), probably penned in the early fifteenth century, survives in a more limited fashion via two singletons and a sheet located within the fourth and seventh quires of Petermann II Nachtrag 24. Three hagiographical-homiletical works appear across these leaves: the *Testament of Abraham* (fols 49, 54), the *Testament of Jacob* (CAVT 99, on fol. 25), and a homily of pseudo-Ephrem on Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (CAVT 90, on fol. 30).⁸⁰ Together with the *Testament of Isaac* (CAVT 98), these homilies commonly circulate as a unit within the Ethiopic manuscript tradition,⁸¹ often alongside a diverse range of other works.⁸² A third codex (δ) displaying this multi-orientational

77 While neither the tertiary Ge'ez version nor the well-preserved Coptic original of this homily have been edited or translated, van den Broek 2013, 82–86 presents an extended summary of its contents. Two other Ethiopic witnesses to CPG 3598 are noted in Erho 2024, 321, though a comprehensive listing of its known Ge'ez exemplars will appear only in a future publication.

78 This is a different recension (i.e. a discrete Ethiopic translation of a different Arabic version) of the same homily found in the Ethiopic *Homiliary of the Fathers* corresponding to CPG 5160.11 (as in e.g. London, British Library, Or. 774, fols 108^v–111^v).

79 An edition of the Ethiopic version of CPG 6633, which takes into account only a handful of recent manuscripts, was published in Muthreich 2019. Copies of this homily offer the earliest Ge'ez evidence for this apocryphon by far, but a definitive answer to the important question of whether the *Narratio de vita sua* was interpolated into the Ethiopic version of the homily soon after its translation or belonged to the original translated text and then served as the basis for a fuller version subsequently executed from Arabic must await the publication of the full pseudo-Benjamin sermon.

80 For editions and translations of the Ethiopic versions of these works, see Caquot 1988; Heide 2000; Heide 2012. Further updates to their manuscript attestation are provided in Erho 2013 and forthcoming.

81 The *Testaments of the Three Patriarchs* (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) are all formally homilies spuriously attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria in Ethiopic.

82 It seems more plausible that additional leaves from codex η might emerge than from almost any of its counterparts, insofar as this undertext thus far has been one of the most difficult to recover. For a handful of examples illustrating the surprisingly diverse works with which these four homilies collocate, see Erho 2013, 92–93.

character transmits but a single work, 1 Enoch, which may have been the sole text contained in the original manuscript, especially given its textual affinities and probably closely related provenance to the unipartite Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Petermann II Nachtrag 29.⁸³ The two are also of similar age, with the fragments palaeographically datable to the early sixteenth century, thus representing the latest *scriptio inferior* in this palimpsest. Five sheets from this codex bearing witness to chapters from the three concluding tractates of 1 Enoch (the *Astronomical Book*, *Book of Dreams*, and *Epistle of Enoch*) lie between quires three and seven (fols 16, 18, 21, 23, 26, 29, 34, 37, 48, 55).

Insofar as Petermann II Nachtrag 24 constitutes a relatively small manuscript, especially in comparison to the significantly larger average dimensions of surviving medieval Ethiopic codices,⁸⁴ the largest number of antecedent volumes are represented by sheets forming bifolia orientated in an exclusively vertical direction. Each of these must therefore have stood at least 22 cm tall, a height likely exceeded significantly in most cases.

The two youngest *codices antiquiores* of this type are attested by series of single sheets spread out among multiple quires. Codex θ transmits the *Life of Basilides* (BHO 162) across four sheets (fols 43, 44, 50, 53, 64, 71, 75, 76), offering in an early-fifteenth-century hand some of the earliest Ethiopic evidence for this work, translated into Ge'ez in 1396/1397 CE according to a colophon included in some copies.⁸⁵ Forming three sheets (fols 10, 13, 35, 36, 72, 79) and probably harkening from later in the same century, the roughly contemporaneous chants codex γ embodies the only palimpsested liturgical material identified in Petermann II Nachtrag 24.

One of their counterparts, also conveying only a single text in its surviving portions, presents an interesting case. The homily of the earlier Retu'a Hāymānot on Easter, represented by three sheets in the fourth and eleventh quires (fols 24, 31, 80, 81, 86, 87), comprises the entirety of the fourteenth-century codex ζ .⁸⁶ Since the leaves are well over 20 cm tall and this is a relatively short text, it certainly would have been accompanied by others – a supposition bolstered by its external

⁸³ See Dillmann 1878, 1 and Erho 2023, 193–195.

⁸⁴ This may well represent an illusion, however, in view of the types of early Ethiopic manuscripts that survive in relatively large quantities versus those that do not, especially liturgical and personal books. Almost all early Ethiopic manuscripts of these types are found in European libraries, and in some of these collections, especially the oldest parts of those in the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, they are relatively well attested.

⁸⁵ For instance Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien d'Abbadie 127, fol. 80^v. For a now quite dated edition of the Ethiopic text, see Esteves Pereira 1955, 1–67.

⁸⁶ Cf. e.g. EMMI 1763, fols 190^r–199^r.

presence only in large homiliary manuscripts. The extent to which the full contents of the *codex antiquior* might have mirrored these contemporaneous witnesses, such as London, British Library, Or. 8192 or EML 1763, can only be conjectured, however.⁸⁷

No prior codex supplied more writing material for Petermann II Nachtrag 24 than ε, from which are derived eight sheets spread out among five quires. These constitute the remnants of a late-thirteenth- or early-fourteenth-century Old Testament lectionary written in a two-column, twenty-five-line format on folia approximately 25 cm in height. Whereas New Testament lectionaries are scarce in the Ethiopic tradition, counterparts devoted solely to the Old Testament are virtually unknown, with these leaves forming one of just two fragmentary exemplars unearthed to date. In addition to a portion of 2 Chronicles 6 (fols 17, 22), which offers the earliest Ge'ez evidence for any part of that biblical book, the extant lections include passages from Deuteronomy 4 (fols 19, 20), Habakkuk 3 (fols 32, 39), Zephaniah 3 (fols 83, 84), Isaiah chapters 2, 6, 7, 11, and 12 (fols 40, 42, 45, 47, 58, 61), and the Song of the Three Young Men from the Septuagintal version of Daniel (fols 57, 62).⁸⁸ The 2 Chronicles leaf also contains the non-standardised spelling **ዩሰራኤል** (*Yesrā'ēl*) for 'Israel' in 6:33, though the normal form, **ኤሰራኤል** (*Esrā'ēl*), appears elsewhere in the codex (e.g. Isaiah 11:16 and 12:6). Principally attested in the earliest manuscripts of 1–4 Kingdoms, some have adduced this unusual spelling as an archaism.⁸⁹

A final codex (β) whose leaves are orientated exclusively on the vertical axis brings forth the last *scriptiones inferiores* identified in Petermann II Nachtrag 24. These consist of the martyrdoms of Romanos (*BHG* 1600y, on fols 9, 14), Cyprian and Justina (*BHG* 455, on fols 11, 12),⁹⁰ and the forty soldiers of Sebaste in Cappadocia (*BHG* 1201, on fols 56, 63),⁹¹ each represented by single leaves, as well as an acephalous fragment of the *Martyrdom of Theodotus* of Galatia (fols 51^r, 52) and a slightly larger portion of the *Martyrdom of Theocritus the Lector*, including its

⁸⁷ Such a connection can be more readily inferred in the case of EML 6620, discussed above, in view of its wider range of identified undertexts, which jointly cohere fully with the established patterns of the *Homiliary for the Year*.

⁸⁸ A few lines of two other lections are extant, but neither has yet been identified due to the lack of clear textual markers among the handful of surviving words and letters.

⁸⁹ For instance Gehman 1931, 103.

⁹⁰ An edition and translation of the Ethiopic version is available in Goodspeed 1903.

⁹¹ A preliminary comparison of the Ethiopic version of this text with the Greek form published in von Gebhardt 1902, 171–181 reveals a number of notable differences, particularly in the absence of certain passages and the names of Kandidos (Kyrion often fills his role) and Peter, but it may nonetheless preserve an ancient form of the story going back to the same ultimate source.

beginning (fols 33, 38, 51^v, 52^r). Since these hagiographies are all generally otherwise found in Ethiopic *Acts of the Martyrs* codices, this may have constituted an early form of such a manuscript, even though differing in certain respects from the main stream of this tradition. Unless, for instance, the leaf containing the story of the forty martyrs of Sebaste derives from another codex (a possibility that, while unlikely, cannot be ruled out entirely), the sequential progression from the *Martyrdom of Theodotus* of Galatia directly into the *Martyrdom of Theocritus the Lector* excludes an ordering strictly following the martyrological calendar, since the commemoration of the first (13th Maggābit) falls between the other two (7th and 17th Maggābit [March–April in the Gregorian calendar]). Though sequences failing to adhere perfectly to the yearly progression do exist elsewhere in the tradition, hagiographies from this month also seldom appear in manuscripts together with those from Ṭeqemt (October–November), when Cyprian and Justina (7th) and Romanos (18th) are celebrated.⁹² This precise grouping is found in a few cases, however, most notably in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, éthiopien 131,⁹³ one of the earliest surviving Ethiopic *Acts of the Martyrs* codices. Perhaps, then, these palimpsest fragments provide corroboratory evidence for the production of such volumes in accordance with different norms earlier in the medieval period.⁹⁴ As commonly seen in the surviving remnants of the early Ge'ez tradition, several archaisms are attested in β, such as the undivided rendering of ኢጲስቆጶስ (*ēppisqoppōs* [‘bishop’], on e.g. fols 38^v [Fig. 6] and 56^r).⁹⁵ Others include the fifth order *ē*-ending on words such as the relative pronoun ኢላ (*ella*) and the preposition ውስተ (*westa*). On palaeographic grounds alone, codex β does not postdate the early fourteenth century, though creation up to a couple hundred years earlier cannot be precluded. Despite the full texts being available elsewhere, such an early dating underscores the importance of these fragments to the study of hagiographies translated into Ge'ez.⁹⁶

92 See Bausi 2002, 3–6.

93 For the full contents of éthiopien 131, see Zotenberg 1877, 196–198. Zotenberg’s thirteenth-century dating must be eschewed in favour of the early fifteenth century.

94 As discussed above, the testimony of codex ι buttresses the possibility of significant production changes in the Ethiopic hagiographic manuscript tradition during the late medieval period.

95 In later Ge'ez, this noun is invariably written as ኢጲስ : ቆጶስ (*ēppis qoppōs*).

96 The extant Ethiopic manuscript tradition is much younger overall than any of its Eastern Christian counterparts, with less than fifty known Ethiopic codices and fragments that likely antedate the fourteenth century. At present, no more than four of these can be placed prior to the second millennium on any reasonable scientific grounds.



Fig. 6: *Martyrdom of Theocritus the Lector* (c. thirteenth or early fourteenth century) underwritten on Petermann II Nachtrag 24, fol. 38^v; image processed by Roger Easton, © Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung.

With at least ten discrete prior manuscripts contributing to its *scriptiones inferiores* – a number that may well be augmented through further image processing allowing for the identification of additional undertexts⁹⁷ – Petermann II Nachtrag 24 seemingly constitutes a rather curious Ethiopic palimpsest. Although none of its Ethiopic-Ethiopic counterparts have undergone similar multi-spectral imaging, such examination as they have been subject to suggests assembly through large sections taken from one to four *codices antiquiores* as a general practice. Peter-

⁹⁷ On one of the important image-processing developments for this palimpsest, see Knox 2023, 404–405.

mann II Nachtrag 24 reveals a very different pattern of manufacture, combining a significantly higher number of source manuscripts from which individual pieces were randomly dispersed to form most quires. This pattern suggests the existence of a pile of leaves from many concurrently disbound and erased codices, which was then drawn upon for writing material to create multiple new volumes – that is, a palimpsest workshop of some sort. Such a practice most closely aligns with that attested in some non-Ethiopic codices; for example, certain complex Arabic palimpsests include leaves derived from up to twenty independent manuscripts, with those manufactured in the same locale sometimes sharing source materials.⁹⁸ Given this seemingly unprecedented situation for the Ethiopic manuscript tradition and the fact that no evidence exists for Petermann II Nachtrag 24 coming from the Horn of Africa,⁹⁹ a foreign origin seems likely, especially Jerusalem, where a diaspora Ethiopian community with a large library and probably limited access to parchment existed.¹⁰⁰ The identification of *membra disiecta* from any of the *codices antiquiores*, in palimpsested form or otherwise, would resolve the provenance matter more definitively.

While the question of why so many codices were being simultaneously repurposed in this case, in contradistinction to the much more circumscribed Ethiopic palimpsesting witnessed elsewhere, is perhaps unanswerable, an interrelated one pertaining to why these particular manuscripts were involved can be addressed. Since both the *scriptio superior* and *scriptio inferior* are exclusively Ge'ez, this cannot be a circumstance where the texts were discarded simply due to in-

⁹⁸ See Kessel 2023.

⁹⁹ Since few Ethiopic manuscripts contain colophons, especially with geographical information, it is often a misguided assumption in scholarship that they ought to come from the Horn of Africa, and especially Ethiopia, unless there are overwhelming markers to the contrary, despite much evidence for scribal activity in foreign locales such as Rome and Egypt. For one recent example of this scholarly phenomenon involving Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Or. 148, see Nosnitsin 2022, 44. Careful examination of this manuscript reveals no evidence whatsoever for Ethiopian or Eritrean production, while numerous elements, including its unconventional textual assembly, challenge such an origin in view of established codicological norms in that region, implying creation in a foreign land. Indeed, prior to the late eighteenth century, the number of Egyptian, Jerusalemite, Roman, and other Ethiopic codices of foreign manufacture in European collections may well have exceeded those of Ethiopian and Eritrean provenance. This situation only began to shift with the rise of European travellers to Ethiopia for cultural and missionary purposes, from James Bruce (1730–1794) onwards, who brought back manuscripts with them, exponentially widening a previously microscopic direct transmissional pathway.

¹⁰⁰ See Isaac 1984–1986. Islamic and virtually all non-Ethiopian Christian communities had shifted to writing on paper long before this time, so new parchment bifolia probably would have required considerable effort and financial resources to source in this region.

comprehensibility or a complete lack of situational value, as may have been true for the Ethiopic leaves at Sinai overwritten with Greek. This palimpsesting must have taken place within an Ethiopian Orthodox community as part of a process of internal literary readjustment, providing texts more needed in that particular situation than those offered by the dismembered volumes.¹⁰¹ All ten of the discarded manuscripts in fact exhibit a certain obsolescence that probably contributed to their involvement. The chants book lacks musical notation, an element that became standard for all Ethiopic collections of this type in the sixteenth century. Hagiographies of foreign saints, which form the basis of multiple *codices antiquiores*, became superseded by the synaxarion, with its shorter and more compendious notices, around the same time, leading to a sharp decline in the production of *Acts of the Martyrs* manuscripts and smaller volumes of this type. Similarly, no evidence exists for the copying of the homiliaries that supplied further leaves after the beginning of the sixteenth century, indicating that they too had fallen out of active use throughout the tradition long before. Different issues probably rendered other codices superfluous. The Acts of the Apostles and 1 Enoch remain integral parts of the *de facto* Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox canon, but their textual standardisation alongside the rest of the Ethiopic Bible during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries might well have led to the consignment of older copies for palimpsesting, especially if the updated versions had become available to the community.¹⁰² The linguistic archaisms saturating the Acts of the Apostles as well as one of the *Acts of the Martyrs* manuscripts may have made these texts difficult to read nearly half a millennium after Ge'ez had reached a fairly standardised state, further undermining their communal value. Lastly, as Old Testament lectionaries are nearly unknown within the tradition, that codex probably had seen little use since its creation, rendering it particularly expendable. Only the *Testaments of the Three Patriarchs* manuscript cannot be readily characterised as obsolescent, but the works contained therein stand on the periphery of the Ethiopic literary landscape, and any number of possible explanations for its presence alongside the other *codices antiquiores* might be postulated.¹⁰³ All, therefore, seem to have been culled from the fringes of a library pos-

101 This is not to claim that the community necessarily physically dismembered the *codices antiquiores* itself, but that one or more of its members possessed them before their erasure, instigated this process, and ultimately were the recipients and end users of the resultant manuscripts.

102 On the *de facto* Ethiopian Orthodox canon, see Erho 2015.

103 Two plausible and particularly simplistic explanations are that the manuscript was damaged and thus discardable due to its physical condition or contained duplicates of works available elsewhere in the library.

sessing plenty of volumes from a bygone era and repurposed for works more central and useful to a community whose literature, practices, and needs had developed in new directions.

5 Concluding considerations

While stories abound narrating the exciting discoveries of lost and unknown texts hidden within palimpsests from other traditions, not a single comparable case has surfaced in Ethiopic. Lack of scholarly attention and multi-spectral imaging does not fully account for this situation, however. A comprehensive understanding of the Ethiopic manuscript tradition and its development reveals a level of homogeneity fairly distinct from that found elsewhere. Codices were customarily copied as complete units; indigenous compositions are exceptional until the end of the medieval period. The literary corpus is relatively narrow, and even though unknown texts are disproportionately found in pre-fourteenth-century manuscripts,¹⁰⁴ well-attested ones (mostly biblical) populate that same earliest stratum to a far greater extent. Thus, the literary homogeneity that allows so many underwritings in Ethiopic palimpsests to be identified without multi-spectral imaging or other special tools implies that few new Ge'ez texts will come to light from this quarter, despite dazzling results in others. Although it always remains possible that an unknown writing might emerge from one of these manuscripts, in no individual case is this likely. Moreover, since translations dominate early Ethiopic literature, even a new work in Ge'ez often will be available in one or more prior traditions, reducing the overall impact of such a find.¹⁰⁵

Admittedly, *scriptiones inferiores* contribute significantly to the comparatively small corpus of pre-fourteenth-century Ethiopic textual evidence, whose general lateness stands in contrast to other Christian manuscript traditions where larger – and sometimes quite voluminous – amounts of first millennium material survive. Nonetheless, such cases are exceptional within the palimpsests identified to date, which are generally composed of late-medieval and early-modern *codices antiquiores*, overlapping with a well-preserved cross-section of mainstream manuscripts. Not only, therefore, is Ethiopic palimpsesting modern, but most of its underwritings appear to be relatively late, especially when compared to the broader cross-cultural landscape.

¹⁰⁴ For instance Erho and Henry 2019; Bausi 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Butts and Erho 2023.

Just a fraction of extant Ge'ez manuscripts are accessible for academic study: only approximately 20000 out of an estimated total that may surpass one million. The fifteen identified Ethiopic-Ethiopic palimpsests among this corpus suggests a rate of approximately one per thousand corporate volumes,¹⁰⁶ though the sample size and potential outlier repositories, such as Dimā Giyorgis and its multiple holdings, could be skewing these figures drastically. However, if this is a somewhat accurate representation, this ratio intimates that perhaps 400 palimpsests might exist among the 36000 church and 1500 monastic libraries in Ethiopia. Their Eritrean counterparts would augment this figure further. However, insofar as age seems to play such an essential role in whether volumes have any reasonable, albeit remote, possibility of being palimpsested, the inclusion in these calculations of numerous ecclesiastical institutions founded in recent centuries almost certainly results in an overestimation. Nevertheless, a surviving total exceeding one hundred stands as the most reasonable conjecture. Most of these unstudied Ethiopic palimpsests are very likely to remain inaccessible to scholars, but, if the prevailing trends hold, their *scriptiones inferiores* are also likely to be comparatively uninspiring.¹⁰⁷

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106 An increasing number of private prayerbooks and other manuscripts lacking any real scholarly value have been added to this total over the past two decades through the injudicious labours of various institutions and private collectors, so the number of corporate volumes lies a few thousand below the total number of accessible Ethiopic codices. Although still represented in earlier times, both collecting activities and microfilming projects were instead orientated towards the larger and more diverse corporate manuscripts, with the result that they formed a strong majority of items available to Western scholars.

107 Due to their accessibility and the accompanying possibilities of applying new scientific techniques like multi-spectral imaging to them, academic study of Ethiopic palimpsests in the future seems likely to focus on the five in European libraries and the unique Ethiopic-Greek palimpsest at St Catherine's Monastery. Given that private books, not corporate ones, now almost wholly drive increases of Ethiopic manuscripts in Western collections, additions to this corpus are unlikely to be forthcoming.

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Abbreviations

BHG = François Halkin, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, 3rd edn (Subsidia Hagiographica, 8a), Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1957; *Novum Auctarium* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 65), Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1984.

BHO = Paul Peeters, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 10), Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1910.

CAVT = Jean-Claude Haelewyck, *Clavis Apocryphorum Veteris Testamenti*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1998.

CPG = Maurits Geerard, *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, vol. 2: *Ab Athanasio ad Chrysostomum*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1974.

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