

Case Study 2.2: The Golden Gospel of Dabra Libānos, at Ham, Eritrea

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Until the seventeenth century, when a two-storey building for hosting the royal archive is attested for the first time, according to tradition, in the capital town of Gondar (the construction of the archive is attributed to King Yoḥannās I, 1667–1682 CE), the status of Ethiopian royal archives, probably existing for centuries and already since antiquity, is nebulous, although likely, and positive evidence is missing. Under these circumstances, literary manuscripts in codex form often acquired archival functions. Especially codices of special importance and significance hosted, in addition to their main texts, copies of royal documents in blanks and/or additional leaves or even quires added on purpose, thereby, allowing easy access to otherwise inaccessible archival documents. This process implies the neutralisation of a clear material and functional distinction between library and archive, at least as far as the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period are concerned.

This archival function was often accorded to so-called Golden Gospels (Gə'əz *Wangela warq*, lit. 'Gospel of gold / golden Gospel', with corresponding expressions attested in modern languages). These gospel manuscripts often have a gold-like or metal cover, but the 'golden Gospel' term seems to indicate specifically the gospel codex in this specific archival and repository function, regardless of the material appearance. One of the most notable Golden Gospels, containing the earliest authentic documents, is from the monastery of Dabra Libānos, at Ham, Eritrea, at the southern border with Ethiopia (Fig. 1), probably dating from the twelfth century. The Golden Gospel of Dabra Libānos hosts a double set of documents recorded on additional leaves eventually bound in the codex before the Gospel, with one bundle hosting the early copies of the documents, and another hosting copies carried out several centuries later, so that several documents appear twice. The documents were assembled and collected in the course of time, starting from the earliest documents (an authentic copy for the local institution) issued by King Lālibalā, dated to 5 Təḥśās of the Year of Grace 389 (= 29 November 1204 CE; Fig. 2) and to 3 Miyāzyā 409 of the Year of Grace (= 29 March 1225 CE).



Fig. 1: Eritrea, 'Akkala Guzāy, Šəmazānā, monastery at Dabra Libānos at Ham, no shelfmark; 260 × 195 mm; c. 1200 CE: Golden Gospel with metal cover, held by the abbot of the monastery; photo: Alessandro Bausi 1993 for the Missione Italiana in Eritrea (MIE), 1992–1994, funded by Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche and Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, and directed by Irma Taddia.



Fig. 2: Eritrea, 'Akkala Guzāy, Šəmazānā, monastery at Dabra Libānos at Ham, no shelfmark; 260 × 195 mm; c. 1200 CE: Golden Gospel; donation of King Lālibālā, dated 5 Təḥšās of the Year of Grace 389 (= 29 November 1204 CE); photo: Alessandro Bausi 1993 for the Missione Italiana in Eritrea (MIE), 1992–1994, funded by Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche and Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, and directed by Irma Taddia.

