

Case Study 3.2: Archival Bags in Ethiopia

Alessandro Bausi

In the library of the monastery of 'Ēndā 'Abbā Garimā, a monastic foundation going back to Aksumite times illustrates nicely how manuscripts are stored according to Ethiopian tradition. The room where the manuscripts are preserved (sometimes a well-protected building also inside a rock-hewn cave) hosts other kinds of artefacts, not necessarily written, and is generally known as 'āqā bet (Amharic, lit. 'objects house, repository'). The 'āqā bet is a room or even a building, that can be locked, where all kinds of precious objects pertaining to monastic and church activities are preserved (bells, candles, incense and incense burners and other liturgical vessels, carpets, textiles, vestments, and books as well), under the strict responsibility of someone, as a rule, distinct from the abbot and mainly in charge of this delicate task. There is no ordering device and the 'āqā bet is not provided with any kind of facility to carry out library and archive work, including writing and copying, even though consultation may take place in it.

In the 'āqā bet, larger manuscripts may be placed on pieces of furniture provided with shelves or in wooden or metal chests, particularly if disarranged. Smaller manuscripts can be placed in leather bags provided with straps, hanging on pegs inserted into the walls, as is still current practice at the monastery of 'Ēndā 'Abbā Garimā (Fig. 1). Very often, however, books simply lie on the ground, usually on carpets. Similar ways of storing manuscripts are also described in Robert Curzon's travel report from 1837 for the monastery of Dayr as-Suryān (Fig. 2), which housed a library of some fifty books:

A wooden shelf was carried in the Egyptian style round the walls, at the height of the top of the door, and on this shelf stood sundry platters, bottles, and dishes for the use of the community. Underneath the shelf various long wooden pegs projected from the wall; they were each about a foot and a half long, and on them hung the Abyssinian manuscripts, of which this curious library was entirely composed.¹

Leather bags and satchels have the function of making the books easily portable and manageable, but more or less precious (also silk) textiles, often of foreign provenance, wrapped around the covers of the bindings add to their protection and connote the books as luxury objects.

References

- Curzon, Robert (1865), *Visits to the Monasteries of the Levant*, 5th edn, London: John Murray.
- Emmel, Stephen (2023), 'Robert Curzon's Oriental Manuscripts in Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Persian Collected in Egypt in 1837–1838', in Diliāna Atanassova, Frank Feder and Heike Sternberg El-Hotabi (eds), *Pharaonen, Mönche und Gelehrte: Auf dem Pilgerweg durch 5000 Jahre ägyptische Geschichte über drei Kontinente, Heike Behlmer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Texte und Studien zur Koptischen Bibel / Texts and Studies on the Coptic Bible, 4), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 233–301.
- Nosnitsin, Denis and Dorothea Reule (2021), *The Ethiopic Manuscripts of the Egyptian Monastery of Dayr as-Suryān: A Catalogue* (Supplement to Aethiopica, 10), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

¹ Curzon 1865, 106; about Curzon's voyages see Emmel 2023.



Fig. 1: Tagrāy, monastery of 'Ēndā 'Abbā Garimā (Ethiopia); museum from the local 'āqā bet; photo: Marco Di Bella 2016.



Fig. 2: Monastery of Dayr al-Suryān (Egypt); library ('Abyssinian library') of the local Ethiopian monastic community ('Abyssinian college'); woodcut from Curzon 1865, 105 (see also Nosnitsin and Reule 2021, xvii–xviii).