

Case Study 3.3: Leather-laminated Boxes from Ethiopia

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Monasteries, churches, royal palace archives and private archives have had a long-standing tradition in Ethiopia of storing or keeping manuscripts, archival documents and other essential goods in a *sānduq* ('box'). The design and pattern may differ, but it was an object widely used to store manuscripts and historical documents. The raw material that was used was wood, leather or metal. Predominantly wooden boxes are familiar in the monasteries and private archives. The material and type of boxes manifest the status of the archival centre in which the manuscripts are kept, with leather-laminated boxes indicating the royal family or a high class of person in the community.

This leather-laminated box is to be found in the archival centre of the Gondar Dabra Şahāy Qʷəsɣʷām Māryām church archive. It is as old as the church and the archival building, which were built by 'Etege Məntəwwāb in 1743. The box is made from sawn bamboo and laminated with leather. The lamination is stitched using a strong string. It is rectangular and similar in shape to storage boxes of other monastic archives. The dimension of the box is 60 cm in length, 40 cm in width and 40 cm in height. The peculiarity of this box compared to other manuscript storage boxes is that the lamination and the raw material of which it is made – bamboo – is not popularly used in Ethiopia to prepare such boxes. Perhaps it was prepared subsequent to a special order of 'Etege Məntəwwāb for the church. In addition to this manuscript storage box in the archival centre, there are other circular-shaped, leather-laminated, bamboo and wood boxes that were used to store clothes and crowns of 'Etege Məntəwwāb, *ʾatəronəs* ('traditional reading table') and several traditional paintings. The remaining manuscripts, including the land charter of Gondar (Qʷəsɣʷām Māryām church), are currently kept on the newly prepared wood and glass shelves. These boxes are kept beside the manuscripts on the shelf.



Fig. 1: Leather-laminated bamboo box from Dabra Şahāy Qʿəsṗām Māryām church which was established in the eighteenth century in Gondar.