

Case Study 5.2: Archive Building in Gondar Ethiopia

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The archival practice of Ethiopia is closely linked with the history of writing and manuscript production. In the traditional way of archiving, archival places are built together with the church and monastery, *‘aqā bet* (‘objects house, repository’) that are used as archives, libraries and a property store for precious objects of the church. It is a small and sacred room, not a building like a Gondarine archival building. There was a tradition in Ethiopia to build a church in the compound of the royal palace. The Gondarine period, from the 1630s up to the 1760s, had a strong imperial administration, and Gondar emerged as a major religious and cultural centre. The influence of Gondar in the political and literary history of Ethiopia persisted well into the nineteenth century.

In addition, the period was accompanied by a peculiar architecture and artistic style, traditionally known as Gondar-style architecture, Gondar-style art and Gondar-style melodies. The well-known Gondar royal castle building *Fāsil Gənb* (‘Fāsil building’) was initiated by King *Fāsiladas* (1632–1667) and expanded by his successors. *Yohānnəs I* (1667–1682), the son of *Fāsiladas*, in addition to constructing his palace, built an archive, which is called *beta mazāgbet* (‘home of archives’) within the same compound as his father’s palace. The archival-library building of *Yohānnəs I* was to the east of *Gəmgā Bet Māryām* church (Fig. 1). The architecture of the building is similar to other Gondarine architectural styles. It was a tradition in that period to build archives and libraries adjacent to the ruler’s residence or royal palace. Fig. 2 shows an archive/library which was built by *‘Ītege Məntəwwāb* (the widow of King *Bākāffā*, 1721–1730) in 1742, in the compound of the royal palace and *Dabra Šahāy Q’əsq’ām Māryām* church. It is located between the palace and the church specifically, to the east of the church and the west of the palace or the residence of *Məntəwwāb*. The building of the archive is connected to the surrounding wall. The manuscripts that were kept in this archive were brought to *Maqdalā* by *‘Ase Tewodros II* (1855–1868) and later taken by British expeditionary forces in 1868. However, there are some manuscripts, including the land charter, crowns and other ancient objects, which still remain in the archival building.



Fig. 1: *Mazgab bet* ('treasury house') of the main Gondar castle built by Yoḥānnas I (r. 1667–1682); photo: Dirbwork Kassa, March 2023.



Fig. 2: Beta Niqotā ('Home of Niqota'), Dabra Şahāy Qʿəsṗʿām Māryām church archival building; photo: Dirbwork Kassa, March 2023.