

Production, preservation and use of Ethiopian archives (14th -18th centuries)

Anaïs Wion, Paul Bertrand

▶ **To cite this version:**

Anaïs Wion, Paul Bertrand (Dir.). Production, preservation and use of Ethiopian archives (14th -18th centuries). 11 (2), pp.vii-xvi, 2011, 10.1353/nas.2011.0002 . halshs-00621974

HAL Id: halshs-00621974
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00621974

Submitted on 14 Dec 2015

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Production, Preservation, and Use of Ethiopian Archives (Fourteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)

Anaïs Wion *and* Paul Bertrand,
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France

Donald Crummey's article in this special issue starts by raising several crucial questions: "How documents and archives were created in historical Ethiopia remains opaque. How, physically and institutionally, were documents created in the first place? Did they go through several stages of development? If so, why? What determined the location where they were deposited? What considerations affected whether or not copies were made of a document? And, if copies were made, how were the number and their respective locations determined?" Is it necessary to point out that Crummey is a pioneer in the study and use of these documents by historians? His campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s for the photographing of manuscripts in Ethiopian churches and monasteries established an important collection of documents on microfilm. This collection has been digitalized and is now available for consultation at both the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa. This material has been the subject and source of Crummey's many publications up till his *Land and Society in the Christian*

Northeast African Studies, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2011, pp. vii–xvi. ISSN 0740-9133.
© 2011 Michigan State University Board of Trustees. All rights reserved.

Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century.[1] After so many years devoted to studying legal and administrative documents, it is significant that Crummey raises once again the aforementioned questions, which are fundamental for understanding how such documents were produced, how they acquired the status of written records, and how they were put to use during various phases of the chain that we can summarize as production, recording, preservation, and use. The study per se of these documents is still an almost unexplored field in Ethiopian studies.

For other periods of time and other places, such as the Middle Ages in Western Europe, a start was made on studies of this sort two to three decades ago.[2] In recent years, this approach has even become a fad. Old documents, whether narrative, normative, or practical, have become sources, subjects to be submitted to historical investigation. Their writing, conservation, and use provide evidence of social, economic, political, and cultural changes. In other words, they are no longer just sources from which to glean historical information. We now try to understand how and why they were written, copied, kept, and transmitted. Examining the history of such documents might be the only way to shed light on historical phenomena that would otherwise remain invisible. For instance, a study of the handwriting (characterized by a so-called "hybrida" Gothic script) used in fifteenth-century documents in the archives of certain convents in the diocese of Liège (Belgium) has brought to light the only known evidence of a reform of religious observance there.[3]

Manfred Kropp's research has begun an approach of this sort to Ethiopian documents, consequent to his long-term inquiry into the making, copying, using, and circulating of historical, administrative, and legal texts.[4] The intention is no longer just to reconstitute the archetype of a text but to study how a text has been transmitted through all the documents that have copied and recopied it, reworked and transformed it, made it longer or shorter. Each version is a text in and of itself. Such an analysis, typical of a historian's approach, neither rejects nor scorns traditional philological methods but, in fact, deems them necessary. However, the methods of a "renewed diplomatics"[5] yield more results when analyzing a highly complex set of documents, which are qualified as "archives."

The very concept of archives in both the historical and archival senses of the word has slowly matured in the Western world. Initially, an archive was a document produced by a juristic or natural person during the

course of its activities and formatted with the aim of helping it perform them. In this sense, a chartulary was an archival document.[6] The copying of documents for practical reasons or for the sake of institutional legitimation in a depository not initially foreseen for this purpose is also an act of "archiving." A charter is kept as part of an archive by an artificial or physical person, and deemed to be an archive. If the person making the charter decides to keep a trace of it in his own possession, he will register or record it before dispatching it. This record is clear evidence, from the making of the document, that we are dealing with an archive, since the person producing the document has already archived it.

What is meant by "archives" in the Ethiopian context? Can we transpose the concepts of Western archivists and medievalists to this country? Ethiopian studies have not, we must admit, used the word "archive(s)" very much up till now. It is worthwhile recalling Ignazio Guidi's seminal work, which led in 1906 to the publication of an extended Gondarine "chartulary," a collection of legal acts and charters[7] belonging to the Hamara Noh church, which was founded at the start of the eighteenth century. In the intellectual context of the times, Guidi stated in clear terms the problem of identifying such documents: "What the archives represent for the study of history in Europe is, to a certain extent, these notes in the codices where our [idea of a] library mingles, and merges so to say, with our [idea of an] archives."[8] Guidi saw the collection of diverse documents copied in the blank pages of a gospel as an expression of a determination to "archive" the document.[9] Contemporaries did not follow up on Guidi's suggestion that collections of documents should be published as they had been organized by their "producers" and/or the institutions responsible for keeping them. The absence of translations and "paratexts" in Gli archivi can be set down to the lack of reactions to Guidi's academic work.

In contrast to this respect for Ethiopian documents and their material form, Carlo Conti Rossini's reconstructivistic—and thoroughly positivistic—approach became the authoritative reference point. In 1901 with the publication of the Šemäzana documents and then in 1909–10 with the "creation" of *Liber Axumae*,[10] Conti Rossini aimed to bring order to the apparent disorder of Ethiopian documents.[11] For his *Liber Axumae*, he used one of the manuscripts collected by James Bruce, while adopting the Latin title devised by Dillmann, as the basis for a compilation of diplomatic and historiographical documents.[12] In this compilation,

he bowdlerized whatever he deemed unorthodox, arranged documents chronologically and logically, and added documents from other collections or manuscripts.[13] This "philologico-combinatory"[14] editing work left an unfortunate mark for a long time on the conception of archival documents in Ethiopian studies. *Liber Axumae* became a special source of access to Ethiopian administrative and legal documents and their analysis.

Two totally opposite positions existed. We would prefer replacing the traditional vision—which is strictly speaking (and sometimes coldly) Lachmanian[15]—with a dynamic view in which studying a text entails analyzing the conditions of its transmission. A "charter" cannot be studied without placing it in the context in which it was produced, preserved, and used as an archival document.

"Archives," a word with a broad meaning, should replace older terms used in Ethiopian studies, such as "marginalia" or "addenda," which reduce a document to the way it has been copied in the margin of, or the appendix to, the principal text. A criterion that can be applied to most of these documents has to do with the way copies were made and preserved, since these copies were very frequently made in blank spaces in manuscripts. Nonetheless, not all documents were copied in blank spaces. There are also "chartularies" and "collections" of legal documents. In fact, the word *mäzgäb* ("collection") refers, at least during the Gondarine era, to this sort of archival compilation.

It is worthwhile at the start of a project to raise questions about the terminology to be used, but it would be pointless to devote too much time to them, lest, like Gulliver, we draw a scientific map of imaginary lands. The terminology used in Ethiopian sources has to be further studied on the basis of a typological reevaluation of documents. Only the publication of sources along with a codicological and historical study of them will help us understand when, where, and how archival corpora were created and preserved. For instance, when were the *wängel zä-wärq* (*Golden Gospels*), which were used as places for recording official acts, created and diffused? What are a *mäzgäb*'s characteristics? What is the scope of the phrases *mäṣḥäfä gʷelt* (book of land grants) and *däbdabe* (letters), two frequently used terms? We should be wary of a priori categories, since they risk stifling the analysis of the documents themselves, of their periodization, their geographical scope, the circles in which they were made, or even the functions assigned to them.

■ ■ ■

This special issue represents a first attempt to jointly give thought to the problem area of the making of Ethiopian "archives," while grounding our efforts on precise examples of documents in all their complexity. The authors are taking part in the project titled *Zekra Nagar, Ethiopian Manuscript Archives.*[16] This project seeks to publish Ethiopian archives of various sorts on the website of Traitement électronique des manuscrits et des archives (TELMA):[17] land grants (legally qualified as *gʷelt*, *rest*, *rim*, etc.), charters founding religious institutions, tax regulations, contracts, acts for establishing ceremonies of commemoration or for naming officials, laws and regulations of various sorts, historical or pseudo-historical notes, liturgical instructions, and so on. A single document might belong to more than one category. Our primary objective is to publish these original documents in three forms: as images, transcriptions, and translations. Given its flexibility, an online publication allows for "versioning" a document as well as its "paratexts" (indices, descriptive notes, etc.) and for publishing in parallel the analyses made while editing a source. The intent is both to understand the contexts in which these texts were produced and to identify the means used to make archives, given that this had the potential of modifying a document's status. How were Ethiopian archives made? Our project would like to provide access to these texts—to the codices containing them and, thereby, to the institutional networks and the people who wrote, copied, kept, or used them. We will be devoting thought to the relationship between the practices of historians and this fundamental— exponential, hypnotic, or even "hallucinogenic"[18]—material that forms these "archives." Ethiopian documents are not the only ones to which little epistemological thought has been given. Indeed, we can unhesitatingly affirm that historians as a profession have shown little interest in the sources of their studies, despite, as previously pointed out, a clear reversal of trends in recent years.[19]

The contributions to this special issue were first presented at the November 2009 International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (ICES17) in Addis Ababa. We would like to acknowledge the collaboration of persons who attended the conference but have not written articles for this issue.[20] First of all, Shiferaw Bekele, whose work on the *gʷelt* forms a watershed,[21] presented to ICES17 his current research on contemporary

land archives. In particular, he showed how monasteries used old charters of land grants to support their claims after liberation from Italian occupation. Habtamu Mengestié, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois (Urbana–Champaign) studying under the supervision of Donald Crummey, has been working on a vast, unexplored until his study corpus of "acts" of private persons in Amharic written since the end of the eighteenth century.[22]

This special issue contains the five articles mentioned below.

Deresse Ayenachew has published royal charters from medieval times related to the foundation of the Bərbər Maryam church in the realm's southwestern marches during the fifteenth century (an area now known as Gamo-Gofa). He has deciphered the power relations between local elites and the Christian kingdom, and the latter's attempts to assimilate the former. These complicated texts yield, for the first time, keys for understanding geopolitics in the realm during the reigns of Zär'ä Ya`əqob (1434–68) and Bä'ədä Maryam (1468–78).[23]

This study of how charters record the relations between the monarchy and peripheral provinces is taken up for the following century by the examination of another corpus of royal charters granted to institutions in the north of the realm. Anaïs Wion has analyzed the recording and promulgating of acts during the sixteenth century. This preliminary approach to an administrative prosopography sheds light on the roles of royal officials and the clergy in Aksum and in recipient institutions.

From a long-term perspective with a focus on decentralization, Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Marie-Laure Derat have explored administrative documents in the Bəgwəna-Lasta area during the medieval and Gondarine periods.[24] They have examined the relations between the places where archives were produced and kept and the beneficiaries of royal grants (whether of land or of movable goods) in order to delineate a network of power in regional institutions and in relation to the kingdom of Ethiopia. By scrutinizing written sources, they have identified the unexpected forms that archival documents took during the Gondarine period, a time of very strong political opposition between Lasta and the royal court. As they show, the colophons in manuscripts served as acts of foundation and provide us with evidence of the activities of the persons who commissioned codices and, above all, of the local aristocracy's dominant role in politics.

Manfred Kropp invites us to take a fresh look at a text written by judges and high officials in the realm. His radically new interpretation of the *Śər'atä mängəśt*, "Ordinance of Government," sheds light on various aspects of this vade-mecum for the "wise" administrator. This article also lays out his method for making a critical edition that takes account of the variants in many manuscripts. He emphasizes the intertextuality relating the *Śər'atä mängəśt* to other historiographic writings. We thus catch a glimpse of the inner workings of "judges" and top officials in the Ethiopian kingdom.

Donald Crummey rounds out this special issue by describing the complexity of a document that could easily be placed in a simple functional category. He has examined five copies of the charter of Qʷesqʷam, a church founded by Queen Mentewwab in the mid-eighteenth century. While concentrating on this land grant and the processes of rewriting it and including it in the royal chronicles, he raises questions about the document's successive functions. Far from being a piece of evidence frozen at the time of the church's foundation, it was a companion piece to the land transfers recorded in it. The Qʷesqʷam grant is used as a starting point for analyzing another "document," namely, Täklä Haymanot's later land grant to Däbrä Ṭəbab, Gondär, which exists in nine different copies.

■ ■ ■

The *Zekra Nagar* project—of which this special issue is a part—endeavors to examine sets of documents as historically constructed collections. It tries to avoid being taken in by the "effects" these documents might seek to convey as depictions of an idealized reality. Is compiling a collection not also an organizing of the past? When is a document "archived"? When does it come to "document" the past? For how long is it a legal act, a piece of evidence about a situation to be borne in mind? We want to prepare the ground for raising questions about how these texts were in the first place evidence of a contemporary situation and then documents of the past that were worth keeping.

The intention is to establish an "Ethiopian diplomatics"—to develop analytical methods inherited from the diplomatic tradition but adapted to the formal characteristics and modes of production of Ethiopian documents. We are attentive to the new epistemological currents developing in diplomatic studies about the notion of "literacy," the need to take

into account data from global history, and the practices related to the publication and processing of data made possible by new information technology (with which diplomatists have long been familiar and in which they have sometimes been pioneers).

Translated from French by Noal Mellott,
Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France

NOTES

1. Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
2. In particular, Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Records in England, 1066–1307* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); and Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
3. Paul Bertrand, "Économie conventuelle, gestion de l'écrit et spiritualité des ordres mendiants: Autour de l'exemple liégeois (XIIIe–XVe siècles)," in *Économie et religion: L'expérience des ordres mendiants (XIIIe–XVe siècle)*, ed. J. Chiffoleau and N. Bériou, 101–28 (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2009).
4. In his philological and historiographical approach to the documents of the royal administration in manuscript BL Or 481 (a copy of the *Mäṣḥäfä Ṭəfut*), Kropp definitely considered this corpus to be an archive. In fact, one of his first articles on this question bore the title (our emphasis), "'Dann senke das Haupt und gib ihr nicht im Zorn': Eine testamentarische Verfügung des Kaisers Amda Seyon aus dem *Archiv* des Hs. BM. Or. 481," *Orientalia Suecana* 28–29 (1989–90): 92–104. See also his last article on this corpus, in which he tried to establish a typology of documents through a historical comparison of the Byzantine heritage in Sardinia and in Ethiopia: "*Antiquae restitutio legis*: Zur Alimentation des Hofklerus und einer Zeugenliste als *imago imperii* und *notitia dignitatum* in einer Urkunde des Kaiser Zär'ä Ya'qob im *condaghe* der Hs. BM Or. 481, fol. 154," *Scrinium: Revue de patrologie, d'hagiographie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique* 1 (2005): 115–47.

5. Paul Bertrand, "Cartulaires et recueils d'actes: Aux avant-postes d'une 'nouvelle diplomatique' (espace français, XIe–XIIIe siècles)," *Revue Mabillon* 17 (2006): 261–67; and "À propos de la révolution de l'écrit (Xe–XIIIe s.): Considérations inactuelles," *Médiévales* 56 (2009): 75–92.
6. O. Guyotjeannin, L. Morelle, and M. Parisse, eds., *Les cartulaires: Actes de la Table ronde organisée par l'École Nationale des Chartes et le GDR 121 du CNRS (Paris, 5–7 décembre 1991)* (Paris: Mémoires et documents de l'École des Chartes, 1993), 39.
7. Ms. BL Or. 508. Ignazio Guidi, *Gli archivi in Abissinia* (Atti del Congresso internazionale di scienze storiche, Rome, 1903) (Rome, 1906), 651–98; William Wright, *Catalogue of the Ethiopian Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1847* (London, 1877), 29–30.
8. I am grateful to Camillo Formigatti for the proposed translation of "Quello che sono gli archivi per lo studio della storia in Europa sono, fino ad un certo segno, s'intende, queste note dei codici nei quali si riunisce e si confonde, per cosi dire, la nostra Biblioteca ad il nostro Archivio," from Guidi, *Gli archivi in Abissinia*, 651.
9. In Yann Potin's quite accurate words in his "Conférence complémentaire de l'EHESS, 2009–2010," *http://sfhsh.hypotheses.org/227* (accessed 9 March 2011).
10. Carlo Conti Rossini, *Documenta ad illustrandam historiam I: Liber Axumae* (Paris and Leipzig, 1909–10) [CSCO 54 et 58; SAe 24 et 27]: translated into English by G. W. B. Huntingford, as *The Land Charters of Northern Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa and Nairobi: Institute of Ethiopian Studies and Faculty of Law of Haile Sellassie I University with Oxford University Press, 1965); and indexed by Alessandro Bausi, "Un indice del Liber Aksumae," *Aethiopica* 9 (2006): 109–53.
11. Carlo Conti Rossini had proceeded in like manner while putting documents in order for his edition of the "Evangelo d'Oro di Dabra Libanos," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei,* serie 5, 10 (1901): 177–219.
12. The manuscript was Bodleian Bruce 93. In *Catalogus codicum manuscriptorum bibliothecae Bodliana Oxoniensis: Pars VII* (Oxford, 1848), 68, Augustus Dillmann rendered in Latin one of the titles given by James Bruce in English.
13. Anaïs Wion, "Aux frontières de la codicologie et de la diplomatique: Structure et transmission des recueils documentaires éthiopiens," *Gazette du livre médiéval* 48 (2006): 14–25; and "Le *Liber Aksumae* selon le ms. Bodleian Bruce 93, le plus ancien témoin d'un projet historiographique sans cesse

ré-activé," *Oriens Christianus* 93 (2009): 135–171.

14. In the very critical words used by Arsenio Frugoni in his preface to *Arnaud de Brescia* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993), 1.
15. According to the methodological principles formulated by Lachman. See Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of the Lachman Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
16. The reference to the work of *maḫtämä* Śellāsē Walda Masqal in Amharic is worth noting. This book was first published in 1950 by the minister of archives (minister of the pen) under Haile Sellassie before the Italian invasion. It was to be a collection of administrative documents and an almanac for the country's top administration. Its title could be translated as *Res Memoriae* or *Things to Remember*.
17. See *http://www.cn-telma.fr/ema*.
18. In the words of Michel Melot, "Des archives considérées comme une substance hallucinogène," *Traverses* 36 (1986): 14–19.
19. On epistemological considerations, see O. Poncet and E. Anheim in the special issue "Archives et histoire" of *Revue de synthèse* (2004).
20. Nor should we forget to mention our discussions with Denise Ogilvie, a curator at the French National Archives, who attended the workshop organized in October 2009 in Addis Ababa.
21. Shiferaw Bekele, "The Evolution of Land Tenure in Imperial Ethiopia," in *An Economic History of Modern Ethiopia (1941–74)*, ed. Shiferaw Bekele, 73–142 (Dakar: Codesria, 1995); and "A Historical Outline of Land Tenure Studies," in *Anthropological and Historical Documents on "Rim" in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. Irma Taddia (Turin: L'Harmattan Italia, 2001), 23–46.
22. Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne, "Rethinking Property and Society in Gondarine Ethiopia," *African Studies Review* 52, no. 3 (2009): 89–106.
23. This work is an extension of the PhD dissertation in history defended by Deresse Ayenachew in 2009 at the University of Paris I Panthéon–Sorbonne: "Le Kätäma: La cour et le camp royal en Éthiopie (XIV–XVI siècle)."
24. Two articles laid out the groundwork for their study of this region: Marie-Laure Derat, "Du Begwena au Lasta: Centre et périphérie dans le royaume d'Éthiopie du XIIIe au XVIe s.," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 24 (2009): 65–86; and Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Gouverner et définir un territoire: Géopolitique, art et production manuscrite au Lasta en 1667 et 1768," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 24 (2009): 87–148.