beta maṣāḥǝft
Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea

Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: Eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung

Cooperation

The beta|maṣāḥǝft project is hosted by the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies at Universität Hamburg (https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies).

Its main research partners include:

• Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt, https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/comst/)

• Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC, http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de)

• Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia: Salvation, Preservation, Research (http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE)

• TraCES: From Translation to Creation: Changes in Ethiopic Style and Lexicon from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages (https://www.traces.uni-hamburg.de/)

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The Project

The project beta|maṣāḥǝft: **Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea** (Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: Eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung) is a long-term project funded within the framework of the Academies' Programme under the auspices of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Hamburg. The funding for the project will be provided for 25 years, from 2016–2040.

The project aims at creating a research environment that shall manage complex data related to the Christian manuscript tradition of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Highlands. Manuscript descriptions, accompanied by images wherever possible, shall be made available and searchable, and various texts shall be edited. In addition, a comprehensive prosopography and a historical gazetteer of Christian Ethiopian culture shall emerge, alongside a digital Clavis of literature in Ethiopic.

The Background

Writing was adopted by the Semites settled in the area between the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea as early as the first millennium BCE.

The Ethiopic language (Gǝʿǝz) and the vocalized Ethiopic script as they appeared by the fourth century are, apart from certain specific features, very near to the language and script used later on for centuries as the literary language of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia.

An extensive Christian literature in the region, consisting mostly of biblical and patristic texts translated from Greek, emerged beginning with the Christianization of Aksum in the fourth century CE. In the centuries to follow, texts translated from Arabic followed, as well as works composed locally in Ethiopic. A full repertory of known texts of Ethiopic literature does not yet exist and is one of the lacunae to be filled by beta|maṣāḥǝft.

The Manuscripts

From the Aksumite period (the earliest extant manuscripts, the so-called Abbā Garimā Gospels, have been dated to as early as fourth/sixth centuries AD) till the twentieth century (well beyond the date of the relatively late introduction of printing in the nineteenth century), the manuscript (Eth. *maṣḥaf*) has been the main medium of the transmission of knowledge.

Manuscript studies are thus of primary importance for those studying the history and culture of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The manuscript must be studied both as an artefact (the main subject of such disciplines as codicology and palaeography), product of human activity (focusing on the authors of texts, scribes and bookmakers, provenance, and other aspects of the historical and social context), and as carriers of texts (which are the primary subject of study in philology). All these fields shall be addressed by the beta|maṣāḥǝft project.