

**The Study of the Ethiopic Manuscripts of Dayr as-Suryan:  
A Report on the Visit 26 February – 3 March 2017**

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Dr. Denis Nosnitsin and Dorothea Reule, M.A., researchers of the Project “Beta maṣāḥəft” based at the University of Hamburg (Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies) worked in the monastery of Dayr as-Suryan in the period of 26 February – 3 March, making a preliminary evaluation of its Ethiopic collection. “Beta maṣāḥəft” joined the efforts of preserving the cultural heritage of Dayr as-Suryan in collaboration with the Levantine Foundation which has been sponsoring manuscript conservation campaigns at the monastery for more than fifteen years, and with Stephen J. Davis and Yale Monastic Archaeology Project, engaged in the cataloguing of the Syriac, Coptic and Arabic manuscripts of the monastery.

It is well known that small groups of Ethiopian monks resided in the monasteries of Wadi an-Natrun over centuries until the recent time; they used to bring some books from Ethiopia and left them behind. The Ethiopic collection of Dayr as-Suryan represents only a tiny portion of the monastery’s manuscript holdings, but it is a piece of evidence which complements the history of Dayr as-Suryan with some remarkable data.

Within one week of work, the exact number of Ethiopic manuscripts has been established and a short register of the manuscripts has been drawn up. The condition of the manuscripts has been evaluated. Now, the Ethiopic manuscripts are ready for the full-scale cataloguing and detailed study. Parchment manuscripts are only five in number, but there are scores of paper manuscripts. The oldest Ethiopic manuscript dates to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (*Arganona weddase*, “Harp of Mary”). Other manuscripts are psalters, gospels of John, collections of prayers, liturgical texts, religious poetry, Miracles of St. Mary. For the moment, it is difficult to say how the moderate overall number of Ethiopic manuscripts kept in the monastic library can be reconciled with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century mentions of the Ethiopian monks and their books made by European travelers. We cannot exclude that a few more Ethiopic manuscripts or their fragments will be identified among the books of the large Arabic and Coptic collections.

Interestingly, the oldest object testifying to the early (pre-17<sup>th</sup> century) presence of Ethiopians at Dayr as-Suryan and their intellectual activities is not a book; it is a traditional Ethiopian bookrest made of iron rods and leather. The item was identified by the scholar Otto Meinardus in 1960s; now it is preserved in the museum of the monastery.

While staying at Dayr as-Suryan, Ethiopian monks kept transcribing religious texts in Ethiopic (the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), Amharic and Tigrigna (the spoken languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea) and made manuscripts of paper. Additional notes scattered in the manuscripts help us to identify some the owners. We know that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at least one member of the Ethiopian community came probably from the

monastery of Mahbere Sellase (located in northwestern Ethiopia, close to the Ethio-Sudanese border), another monk was from the famous monastery of Dabra Bizan (in today's Eritrea), the historical centre of the so-called Ewostatean movement. The third one came from the city of Gondar, his name was Gabra Maryam and he owned a number of books. Possibly he is identical to Gabra Maryam Hayla Maryam, the abbot of Dayr as-Sultan, an Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem, of whom we know that he resided at Dayr as-Suryan for some years in 1950s.

The next visit of the research group from Hamburg is planned for late 2018. Our cordial thanks go to the monks of Dayr as-Suryan for their collaboration and hospitality, particularly to the librarian Father Amoun and the head of the monastery Bishop Matta'us, to Prof. Stephen J. Davis who generously shared his knowledge of the collection with us, and to Ms Elizabeth Sobczynski from the Levantine Foundation for making the work possible and for help in arranging the visit.



Fig. 1) Dorothea Reule inspects a manuscript



Fig. 2) Denis Nosnitsin inspects a manuscript



Fig. 3) Dorothea Reule and Denis Nosnitsin with Bishop Matta'us



Fig. 4) Dorothea Reule talks about Ethiopic manuscripts to Father Qalimentus