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Guardians of Ink and Vellum: Ethiopian Magical Scrolls

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Abstract

Ethiopian magical scrolls are powerful tools to combat sickness and demons in Ethiopian folk belief. As works of art, they display influences from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sources. The scroll showcased in the “Wonders of Nature and Artifice” Exhibition was graciously donated by Mike Hobor, Gettysburg College Class of 1969. A prolific traveler, Mike purchased this piece in an art shop in Rome along with two other scrolls. ¹ The scroll is believed to come from the city of Gondar, and is believed to date to the eighteenth-century. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Ethiopia, Ethiopian magical scrolls, Mike Hobor, Gondar, Prester John

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/ethiopian-scrolls/>

Guardians of Ink and Vellum: Ethiopian Magical Scrolls

By Zachary Austin Wesley

Ethiopian magical scrolls are powerful tools to combat sickness and demons in Ethiopian folk belief. As works of art, they display influences from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sources.



Ethiopian Magic/Healing Scroll, Gondar, Amhara, Ethiopia, 18th century, Ink on Goat Vellum, 4.875 x 78.5 in, On loan from Michael J. Hobor, class of 1969 – This image depicts the featured image of the scroll on display in the physical exhibition. For more information on this image, see “WHAT’S IN A SCROLL.”

The scroll showcased in the “Wonders of Nature and Artifice” Exhibition was graciously donated by Mike Hobor, Gettysburg College Class of 1969. A prolific traveler, Mike purchased this piece in an art shop in Rome along with two other scrolls. ¹ The scroll is believed to come from the city of Gondar, and is believed to date to the eighteenth-century.



Here we see the scroll as it is placed into a case for display in the exhibition. Photo Credit: Dr. Felicia Else



The scroll is unrolled to reveal the cherub and a portion of the text. Photo Credit: Dr. Felicia Else

The scroll's dimensions are approximately 4.875×78.5 inches, and it is composed of three pieces of goat vellum bound with leather thongs. The images seem to indicate that the talismans present made this scroll important in protection from demons and curses alike. These images also have powerful healing properties.

The Context: Space and Time

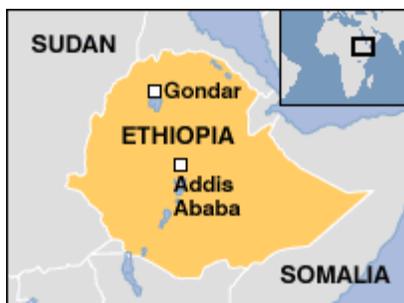
At the time of the scroll's manufacture, Gondar was an important trading, political, and religious center of the Kingdom of Ethiopia. Established as the first true permanent capital of Ethiopia, Gondar came to be a home to numerous churches and palaces, many of which still stand today.



This is the Palace of Fasiladas, Emperor of Ethiopia. He established Gondar as the first permanent capital of Ethiopia in 1636. This is among the earliest palaces built in Gondar.

Photo Credit: Bernard Gagnon – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=29185220>

The eighteenth century saw the city go into decline as the emperor lost much of his power to the nobility. Political turmoil rose to such a pitch in the 1700s that four different emperors sat upon the throne from 1706-1730.² Although stability then briefly returned, the kingdom was in turmoil once again by the late 1760s.



This map shows Gondar's location in Ethiopia. Photo Credit: BBC News, "Ethiopian Church Collapse Kills 15," Accessed November 7, 2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3365599.stm>.

Throughout this period, a vibrant, diverse community of artisans and craftspeople emerged in Gondar. At the peak of imperial power, the city's population was estimated to consist of two-thirds Orthodox Christians and one-third Muslims.³ The Muslim population dominated the city's commerce, due in large part to their connections to Arabia and the Middle East. Christians dominated the imperial service.⁴ Falashas, or Ethiopian Jews, also resided in Gondar. Despite tensions between these groups, Muslims and Jews came to have profound impacts on Ethiopian Christian beliefs of mysticism and talismanic art.

Ethiopia and the Renaissance



This depiction of Prester John dates to 1558 and is found in an atlas given to Mary I, Queen of England and Ireland. Public Domain, British Library, Add. 5415 A, folio 15. verso https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prester_John.jpg

Ethiopia entered the imaginations of Europeans by way of Prester John, a supposedly nearly immortal (by way of the Fountain of Youth) ruler and priest of a great Christian kingdom in Ethiopia.⁵ In 1441, a delegation from the King of Ethiopia arrived at the Council of Florence, who believed these men to be sent on a mission by the mythical king himself. This sparked an intense interest in this figure that lasted throughout the Renaissance. Jesuit missionaries traveled to Ethiopia in the 1550s in an attempt to minister and contact Prester John, though they did not find him. In fact, it was not until the 1600s that a German scholar named Hiob Ludolf proved that no connection existed between Ethiopia and the legendary monarch.⁶

Nevertheless, countless European collectors in the Renaissance would have seen a scroll from Ethiopia as a piece of great importance from the realm of the great ruler himself. This seeming proof of the tales of exotic lands would be a great boon to any collector, and it is likely that such a piece might be displayed with reverence, not unlike that shown by bearers of the scrolls.

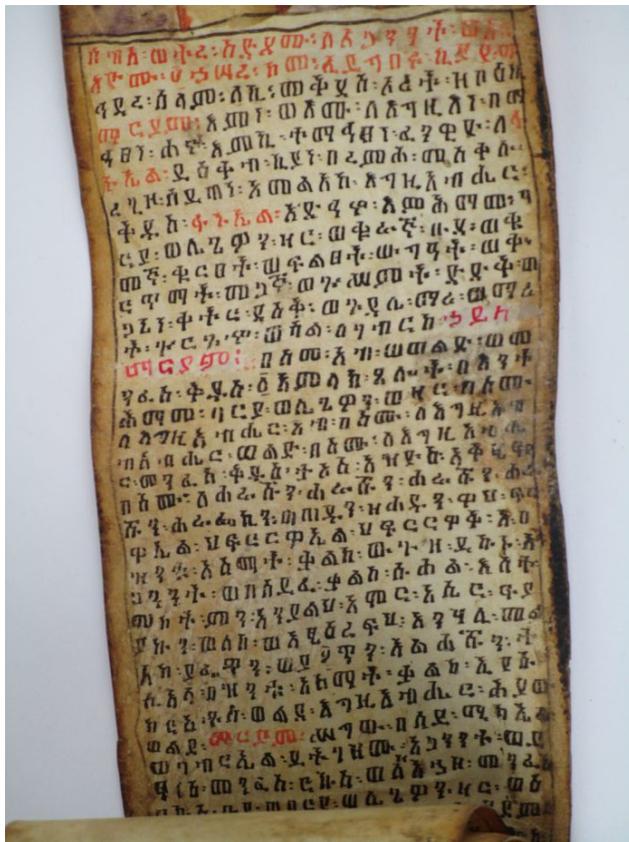
The Tradition of Ethiopian Scrolls

Ethiopia has a centuries-long tradition of using scrolls for healing and protective purposes. Manuscripts containing compilations of protective talismans date to the fourteenth-century.⁷ The oldest known scrolls, however, only date to the eighteenth-century. Scrolls were — and still are — used on a daily basis until they become too fragile for further use.⁸



This is the scroll before it was unrolled for display.

Most scrolls are composed of multiple sheets of parchment or vellum that are bound together, and most are written in black and red ink (See “HOW A SCROLL IS MADE”). Nearly all scrolls are written in Ge’ez, which is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Coptic Church.



Here we see a detail of some of the writing present on the scroll. Note the use of both black and red ink.

Although this language shares the same alphabet as many of the modern languages of Ethiopia, it is a different language altogether. Just like many modern Orthodox Christians cannot read Old Slavonic, neither can the average Ethiopian fully understand Ge’ez. The text may be read by a visiting priest or scholar to a sick individual, but the images take on a power of their own.

Scroll Production and Use

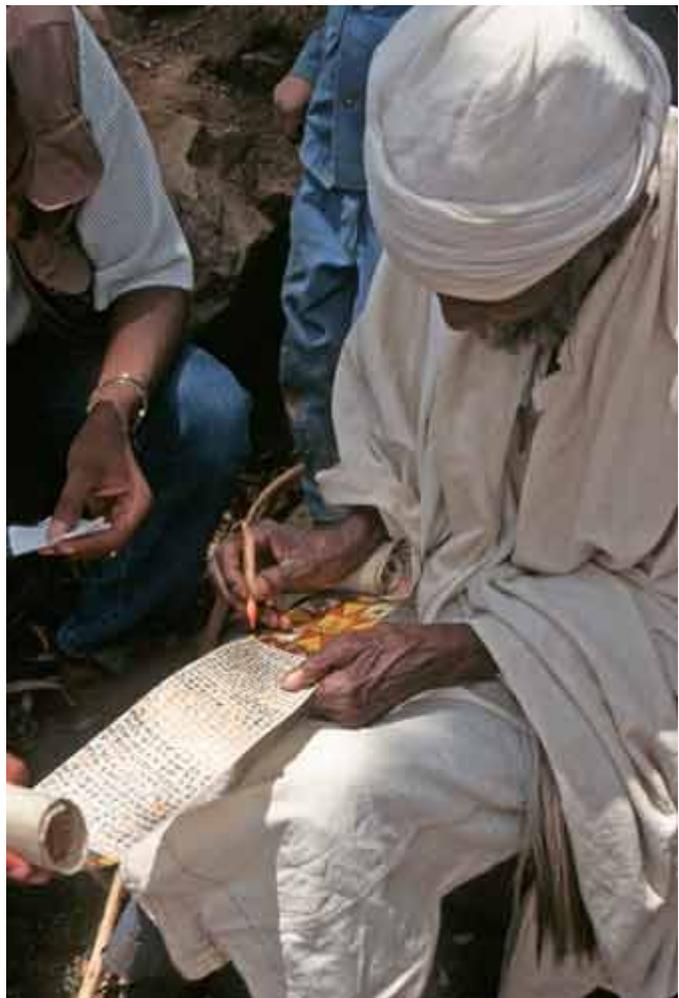
The majority of scrolls are prepared by dabtara, variously described as scribes, cantors, and lay clerics.⁹ The scroll is made from animal skins, most often of goats or sheep, that are prepared by first soaking for several days, drying and stretching, and then repeated scraping, washing, and drying the skin to produce the parchment or vellum.¹⁰ The example shown here is made of thicker vellum, most likely goatskin, in three sections which are bound together with thongs, which are thin strips of leather. Ideally, a scroll is made to the same height as the individual it is intended for, although it

may be made longer on occasion.¹¹ This scroll stands at 78.5 inches tall.

The dabtara next draws the images onto the inner side of the scroll, then prayers and other appropriate text are written in black ink. Texts may be chosen based on astrological means, such as the numerical alignment of a name with an astrological sign; in so doing, inks, protective prayers, and talismans may be selected for use in a protective scroll.¹² This is a method that many Muslims use in divination as well. In other instances – especially those involving illness – a dabtara will consult his books of talismans and prayers to select appropriate protections.

Once this is written, the dabtara writes the baptismal name of the recipient, the introductory phrases for prayers, and important words from scripture in red ink.¹³ The dabtara then makes a cylindrical case for the scroll, completing the piece.¹⁴

Scrolls, though especially their talismans, are used in a variety of ways as part of folk medicine in Ethiopia. As many diseases are believed to be caused by the actions of demons and spirits, protective scrolls are believed to have the power to drive the evil entities out of the afflicted individual. Some individuals, such as pregnant women, may wear the scroll on a string around their neck or shoulder. Others may place the scroll so that they may gaze upon the illustrations, praying until they feel better. Still, others may sleep with the scroll beneath their pillow as a safeguard against nightmares.¹⁵ Then, when a dabtara or priest visits the individual to whom the scroll belongs, the clergy member will read the text and bless the bearer with holy water.¹⁶



A *dabtara* at work preparing a scroll.

This photograph was taken in 1997 in Tigray Province by Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania.

<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/geez.html>

What's in a Scroll: Interpreting the Meaning of Images

The scroll on display has three images, one on each piece of vellum. The first of which, shown here, depicts an angel.



This is the uppermost image on the scroll. It shows an unknown angel brandishing a sword. Traditionally, this type of image is a safeguard against demons.

In some cases, specific angels are mentioned by name in the text of a scroll, imploring them to smite all devils who attempt to harm the bearer. In the case of this particular image, it is possible that the angel depicted is Michael, though it could also be an unnamed guardian angel as well. It was said that guardian angels walked at the right-hand of those whom they were charged to protect.¹⁷

The captivating gaze of the figure is no accident, as the gaze is said to deter devils and also focus the healing power of the drawing on the viewer, thus drawing the viewer in.¹⁸ The three rings shown around the neck are representative of goiter, a condition common in Ethiopia at the time due to iodine shortages in the diet.¹⁹

The second image depicts a king with a two-horned crown dressed in a purple robe. Although both Solomon and Alexander the Great appear in scrolls with a similar crown, Alexander is

almost always shown in this manner; his Arabic surname translates to “the Two-Horned.”²⁰ Unfortunately, as both figures are present in scrolls with a similar crown, it is not possible to determine which figure is shown based solely on this image.



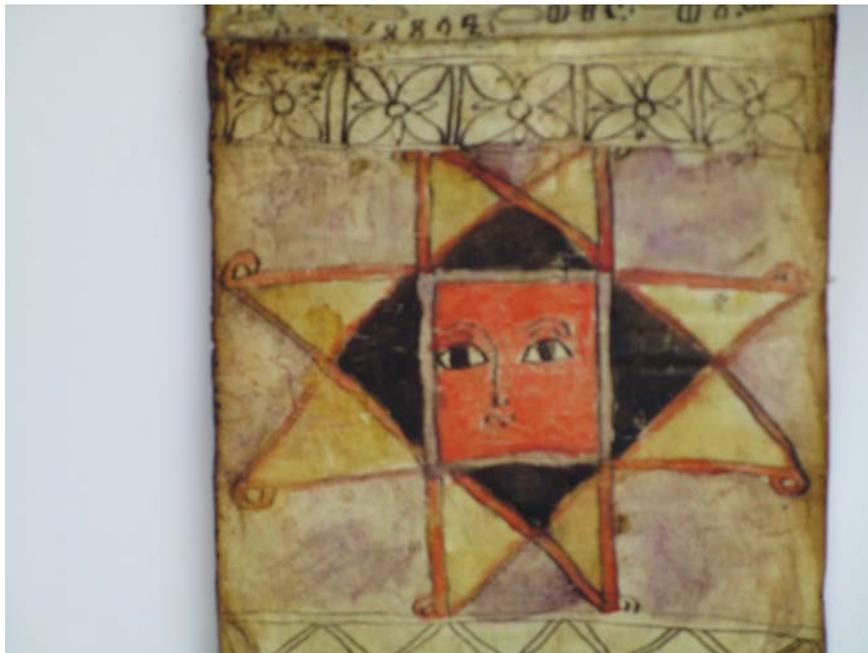
This king's name is unknown, though it is likely that this is either Solomon or Alexander the Great.

Both figures are renowned in Ethiopian tradition for their fight against demons. Solomon's wisdom and Alexander's piety, too, are central themes. The latter individual may seem surprising, as he died long before the Birth of Christ. Ethiopians adapted a text written in Alexandria around the beginning of the Common Era, turning Alexander into a “chaste and Christian king.”²¹ Solomon was famous for his defeat of the Demon-Blacksmith King, whom Solomon forced to reveal evil spells before the demon spit up his tongue in fear.²² Solomon, along with the Queen of Sheba, was hailed as the ancestor of the kings of Ethiopia.²³ The child of Solomon and Sheba – Menelek – supposedly brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.²⁴



This detail of Alexander the Great comes from a scroll dating to the late 1800s. The full image depicts Alexander on one leg of his journey to paradise. Compare the horned crown to that in the scroll on display. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 38, 116-117.

The third image depicts an eight-pointed star, which is often seen in Islamic talismans and decorations as well.²⁵ In the center of this particular image is a face that seems to be smiling. The square face has the same wide, oval eyes present in the previous two images in the scroll. This depiction seems to indicate that the figure shown is not demonic, as these entities are often depicted with round, dilated pupils. Specifically, this image may depict a cherub.²⁶ One text declares that cherubs have eight wings, which are here most likely represented in the eight-pointed star.²⁷



This image may depict a cherub. This type of angel is often seen as a defense against demons.

1. Mike Hobor to Zachary Wesley, October 25, 2017, "Ethiopian Scroll Question," Email.
2. Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 121.
3. Ibid, 117.
4. Ibid.
5. John Binns, *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 138.
6. Ibid, 139.
7. Jacques Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (New York: George Braziller, 1979), 10.
8. Ibid., 12.
9. Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 52.
10. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 16.
11. Jacques Mercier, *Art that Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia* (New York: Prestel Books, 1997)46.
12. Ibid., 44.
13. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 16.
14. Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 46.
15. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 21.
16. Ibid.
17. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 55.
18. Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 94-95.
19. Munro-Hay, 57.
20. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 113.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 19.
23. Binns, 21.
24. Ibid.
25. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, 56.
26. Ibid, 100.
27. Ibid., 76.