King Ṭanṭawǝdǝm’s land charter: state of the art and new perspectives

The source: challenges of translation

Marie-Laure Derat’s edition¹ and translation of King Ṭanṭawǝdǝm’s land charter to the church of Qǝfrǝyă – attested in MS Ethio-SPaRe UM-035 (‘Urǝ Qıırqos, XVIIIth century) – sheds more light on the much earlier history of Ethiopia, X-XIIIth centuries.² This land charter has all chances to improve our knowledge about Christian-Muslim relationships at that early time and therefore, has a direct interest for the ERC project HornEast. The most relevant passage of the land charter for us is the following:

(f. 6r)

エルヒント፡ ለጎለትኩ፡ለቤተ፡መስቀል፡ችዓንድዋት፡እምነ፡ጽራዕ፡ምድረ፡ተንባላት፡ዉወ<ህ

እንዘ፡ተንበላት፡እሙንቱ፡4

M.-L. Derat’s translation reads as follows:

Et encore, j’ai fait attribuer à l’église de la Croix, Ṣāʾāndǝwāt depuis Ṣǝrā’, la terre des musulmans, le Très-Haut nous a donné leur terre et leur possessions – nous avons foi (dans) le Seigneur – les ayant combattus, eux étant musulmans.

The text is very problematic, but one can still think of an alternative working translation of the same passage, which yet sheds different light upon Christian-Muslim relationships, depicting Muslims as loyal kings’ subjects and potentially due tax-payers for the church of the Cross:

And again, I granted, as gwɔlt for the church of the Cross, Ṣāʾāndǝwāt of Ṣǝrā’, lands of Muslims. Their land(s) offered us superior prosperity and (as) we (both) believe in God, they fought (for us), although they are Muslims.

¹ Derat 2018, 261-265 (text) and 266-271 (translation).
² Internal sources do not allow us to date King Ṭanṭawǝdǝm’s reign, his land charter is dated to his twelfth year of his reign.
³ M.-L. Derat notes (n. 14) it as ‘lire ṓw_trampoline’, to which Alessandro Bausi suggests: ‘Ed. p. 263, fol. 6r. ll. 4-5 : ṕውች기에 ; and also ṓw_trampoline : can be interpreted as verbs to be referred to Muslims (ምድሮሙ፡) and possibly the correction on p. 263, n. 14 (for ṕውች기에 ‘lire ṕውች기에’) it is not necessary (but obviously, ṕውች기에 has to be emended to ṕው<ው-ትምጥยะ), see Bausi 2018, 11.
⁴ Derat 2018, 263.
One of the difficulties for interpreting these passages, besides language and genre, is presence of dots like ﹒. In the passage above ቅወስ ከ is marked with four dots on both sides, which would be a mark of ‘le Très-Haut’, according to M.-L. Derat’s interpretation, whereas an alternative interpretation simply ignores them, as we do not know their exact meaning and function. The above suggested interpretation is mainly based on the meaning of a conjunction እንዩ, which can be used for concessive clauses, standing for ‘while, whereas, although, even though’.

The word, ግወስ፡ / ግወስ፡ (tanbāl / tanbal) has various meaning, one of which is a Muslim. King ሰንትወውאדם’s land charter, if not being materially a late copy datable to the XVIIIth century and as such potentially contaminated with later terms, would be the earliest known document attesting the word ግወስ፡ as reference to a Muslim.

M.-L. Derat relates the presence of Christian-Muslims fights in Ethiopia to what was reported about XIth-century Metropolitan Sawiros as his alibi against the Fatimid vizier’s accusation for not building mosques as he promised. Sawiros’ brother, የጭ እ, argues on behalf of Sawiros:

O my lord, he built seven mosques in the places, where it was possible to build (them), and their case is well known, namely, (how) the Abyssinians demolished them and wished to kill him (the Metropolitan), and that, when the news of this reached the king, he arrested the Metropolitan and imprisoned him.

The archive: its research history and further perspectives

Land charter Ethio-SPaRe UM-035 is part of the library that belongs to the church of ወርኢ ሰርወል (Qǝfrǝyāı ’Urā Masqal / ’Urā Dabra Masqal). The church was founded in pre-XVth century, today deserted and inaccessible. The land charter to ’Urā Masqal, together with other manuscripts (55 in total) were transferred to the church of ’Urā Qirqos, founded, according to the local tradition, at the time of King Yoḥannas IV (1872-89). Apparently the first set of images of our land charter was taken by Paul Henze, who travelled in that area in 2004. M.-L. Derat has identified the manuscript in the report I quote below as being our land charter. Thus, we read:

Near the end of our travels Ato Kebede Amore took us to a picturesque old monastery church located on the Eritrean border where we made perhaps our most significant discovery during 2004: a very early manuscript, said by the local priests to be a land grant to the church from the 8th or 9th century. Along with it we were shown a beautiful inscribed cross, said also to date from the same period. We sent photographs

5 https://betamasheft.eu/Dillmann/lemma/L3960568be0164b6d81d5e9e7edefca41
6 https://betamasheft.eu/Dillmann/lemma/Lea92766fd21949089b569a312242ac9c
7 On terms referring to Muslims in hagiographic sources see Krawczuk 2019.
8 Derat 2018, 72-73, 120-123.
9 History of the patriarchs of the Egyptian church, 350.
of both to Professor Getatchew Haile at the Hill Monastic & Manuscript library in Collegeville, Minnesota, for his examination and evaluation. He questioned the attribution to the 8th or 9th century but confirmed that the manuscript and cross were from Zagwe times. Following are excerpts from his letters:

… the priests who told you that the text is a land grant of Emperor Tentewedim were right. The document records that the king styles himself ‘Hatsey Tentewidim, whose regnal name is Solomon and whose other name is Gebre Medhin’. The grants are to the church of Masqal and Harayo in Qifriya. I do not doubt that it is a credible and valuable document. Only ancient manuscripts begin in the language it does… This document gives us more information about the Zagwe than any other source.13

From this communication we learn about a set of images taken by Henze in 2004, which he sent to Getatchew Haile.14 One cannot doubt that the anonymous church ‘located on the Eritrean border’ is the church of ‘Urā Masqal of Qofrayā. One cannot doubt that the content of the land charter described by Getatchew Haile is very close or the same as what we know from other set of images, however, it does not exclude the possibility of existing of another copy of the same document or even of a different document issued by King Ṭanṭawdám or in his name. The set of images by Henze needs to be compared with any other sets of images that I describe below. Getatchew Haile is the first one to confirm the importance of this land charter for historical reconstruction.

In 2005 the church of ‘Urā Masqal was visited by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers, who photographed King Ṭanṭawdám’s land charter, MG-2005.092:012 -023.15 After them, in 2009 the place was visited by M.-L. Derat, who also photographed King Ṭanṭawdám’s land charter, the same as MG-2005.092:012-023.16 In 2010 the team of the Ethio-SPaRe project 17 visited the place and digitized most of the manuscripts.

A lot of work has been done, which resulted into a database and into a monograph ‘Churches and Monasteries of Tǝgray: A Survey of Manuscript Collections’.18 56 manuscripts were photographed, mostly of liturgical and hagiographical content, but many of a great importance for palaeography and textual history.19 Most of the manuscripts are now described by Ethio-SPaRe project team.20 The Beta mašāḥaft (lit ‘house of books’) database gradually accommodates the data from Ethio-SPaRe, so the description was transferred, sometimes with further updates into Beta mašāḥaft, where one can consult images which are only watermarks protected.21

13 Henze, 158-159.
14 https://www.vhmml.org/
16 Two of the images, the first and the last folia are included in the ‘Planches’ of her book, see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. For the description and discussion see Derat 2018, 30-38.
17 The project reports are available at https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/research/ethiospare/missions/mission1-2010.html
19 The siglas assigned to this collection are from UM-001 to UM-056. 42 descriptions are available at https://beta-masaheft.eu/manuscripts/INS0017UM
20 https://mycms-vs03.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/domlib/content/below/index.xml, the description is accessible for everyone, while images are password protected.
21 The list of the manuscript from the church of Urā Masqal can be consulted at
Our land charter UM-035 which consists of 11 folios inscribed by one hand was studied extensively by M.-L. Derat and Denis Nosnitsin, they both dated the writing to the XVIIIth century (from 1700 to 1750, according to DN22). As it was discussed by M.-L. Derat, King Ṭانتawədəm’s land charter to the church of Ḍqəfrayə, our UM-035, shows parallels with King Ləlībalə’s land donations to the monastery of Dabra Libənos in Ham, which allowed the scholar to conclude that King Ṭانتawədəm’s land charter is an authentic document.23 The comparison of the hand attested in UM-035 shows no similarity with other hands attested in other manuscripts photographed at the church of Ṣrə Masqal Qirqos. Nevertheless, in personal communication D. Nosnitsin wrote me that he has managed to elaborate a solid hypothesis concerning the scribe, which he will present in “Some ‘scribal profiles’ from East Tigray”, which is in preparation.

Albeit UM-035 narrates about events of the X-XIIth century, there is another archive, the so-called ‘Golden Gospel’ UM-027,24 datable to mid-XIV-XVth century. Various archival notes were added in the blank spaces, among which is a land grant by King Ləbna Dəngəl (r. 1508-40) that shows no similarity with our UM-035 neither in terms of structure or content, nor in terms of language.

The results of my further research on the archive of Dabra Libənos in Ham25 that I started within the Ethiopian Manuscript Archives Project (led by Anaïs Wion), which existed within the frame of ANR EthioChrisProcess (directed by M.-L. Derat), help us to contextualize the early archiving processes and their further copying. Thus, to understand the archiving process one can look at one of the examples from the archive of Dabra Libənos in Ham, given already by M.-L. Derat in her book26: archival note n. 7 (according to numeration, introduced by Carlo Conti Rossini), Ləlībalə’s land donation to the monastery of Libənos. This document is attested twice within the same archive: its earliest attestation is palaeographically datable to King Ləlībalə’s time, therefore contemporary, presumably the original; its copy, most likely direct, is datable to the XVIIIth century.

While its original is contained in a single leaf, the copy is attested in a four bifolia quaternion. One of the main characteristics of this quaternion is that it contains only copies of documents, all inscribed by one and the same hand, although these archival notes are dated to various centuries. The antigraphs of these archival notes in the quaternion are still found scattered on

https://betamasheft.eu/manuscripts/INS0017UM/list?per-page=20&start=21& also see Bausi , A. ‘Serendipity in the Tigray Highlands. When a scholar kneels down to look underneath a church cupboard’ in SFB950 - Manuscript of the Month 08/2015, 1-2. https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/mom/2015_08_mom_e.html
23See the discussion in Derat 2018, 34-38.
25Some results and images can be explored at https://betamasheft.eu/manuscripts/DabraLibanosHamGG1/viewer
26See Derat 2018, 55-59.
various folia kept together with new copies. Palaeographically the writing on these folia seems to be much older than their copies and their state of preservation is sometimes very low. 27 28

Given the assumption that King Ṭanṭawādám’s reign comes presumably before Lālibalā’s, given the notion that land charters are frequently used and exposed to every potential harm, one can speculate that King Ṭanṭawādám’s land charter’s content was also circulating on various folia. In the XVIIIth century, while deteriorated materially, the content was newly copied and started to circulate as a land charter. The antigraphs, i.e. the sources from which the texts were copied, are either to be found one day or to be considered lost forever: if one wants to introduce a notion of archival ‘copying’ style, one can see similarities on the formatting level. 29

Admitting that one cannot judge how close the content of King Ṭanṭawādám’s land charter to its original is, the analysis of two copies of the same document in the archive of Dabra Libānos of Ham shows that none of the copies are identical, certain changes were intentionally introduced. This makes us assume that likewise King Ṭanṭawādám’s land charter, in all its credibility, cannot be a 100% truthful copy and one can only speculate what might have been changed or updated.

Conclusion

The work on King Ṭanṭawādám’s land charter, MS Ethio-SPaRe UM-035, is promising. It guarantees intellectual challenges and (hopefully fruitful) debates. The difficulties one faces at this stage, being unable to interpret punctuation marks, can be illustrated with a following example from a common English grammar: what one reads in King Ṭanṭawādám’s land charter is rather just ‘A woman without her man is nothing’, while it can stand either for ‘A woman, without her man, is nothing.’ or for ‘A woman: without her, man is nothing.’ Thus, we can learn two opposite opinions about a woman – about Muslims portrayed by Christians in our case – depending on how we read the text. Further, one has to keep in mind that MS Ethio-SPaRe UM-035 comes from the XVIIIth century, even if one considers it a copy of an older document.

References


27 See Bausi 1998, 13-56.
28 Some are also noted in apparatuses for those documents which occur twice : CCR 7, CCR 18, CCR 19, CCR 20, CCR 22, CCR 33, in Conti Rossini 1901, 189-219.
29 The description is progress, but shall appear soon.
Bausi, Alessandro, Antonella Brita, Marco Di Bella, Denis Nosnitsin, Nikolas Sarris, and Ira Rabin. ‘The Aksumite Collection or Codex Σ (Sinodos of Qǝfrǝyä, Ms C3-IV-71/C3-IV-73, Ethio-SPaRe UM-039): Codicological and Palaeographical Observations. With a Note on Material Analysis of Inks’. Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin 6, no. 2 (2020).


