



Treasures from the Archives: Ethiopic scroll with a prayer in Ge'ez script



In the Westminster College archives, there is a small collection of scrolls. Seven are in Hebrew, but the eighth is in Ethiopic.

It's never been catalogued before, so we asked Dr Eyob Derillo, an expert in Ethiopic and Ethiopian collections, for his help in assessing the scroll and its subject matter.

Dr Derillo identified it as being a scroll of the Coptic Church, written in the nineteenth century, containing a prayer called 'Solomon's Net', which was a prayer to catch devils or demons. It begins with an invocation 'in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit': በሰሙ: አብ: ወውለድ: ወመንፈስ: ቅዱስ ፩ አምላክ:: ጸሎት: በእንተ: ማዕወርሙ: ለአጋንንት: አስማ: ሰሎሞን

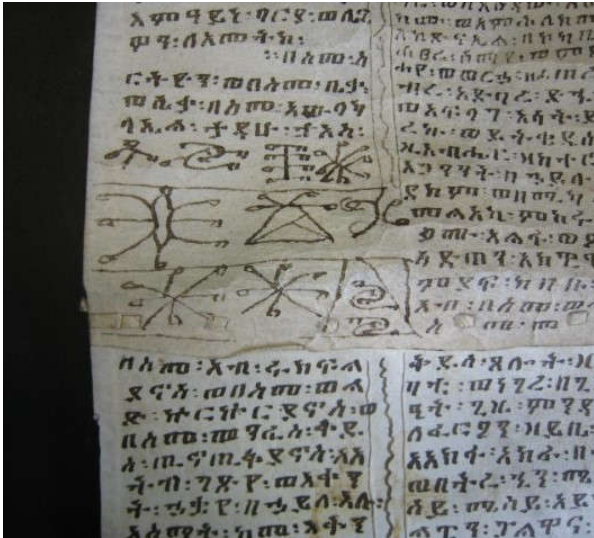


There's a long tradition of magical scrolls in Ethiopia. They were usually written by *debtera*, who are often described as unordained clerics. The scrolls are for spiritual protection – protection from demons, for example, or from the evil eye. Some are written to protect women in childbirth.

They are written in Ge'ez script (also known as classic Ethiopic), the liturgical language of the Coptic Church in Ethiopia.

As well as a written prayer, such scrolls often have pictures of 'guardian angels' or other illustrations added to their protective power. The style of illustration particularly emphasises their eyes. Our scroll has two angels at the top – they were usually painted, but ours haven't been. Further down the text, there are some other elements which might be protective talismans or magical symbols.

The majority of the text is in black ink; the red ink parts of a scroll are usually the names of the Holy Trinity, the headings, and the name of the person for whom the scroll has been written (Windmiller-Luna).



Scrolls are also made-to-measure: Wesley and Isaac both say the scroll should be the same length as the height of the person it is protecting. Ours is about 160cm long – about 5 feet 3 inches. It is made of several long pieces of vellum, sewn together end-to-end with thin strip of leather; and is about 13cm wide.

Once complete, the scroll could be worn by the person needing the protection, usually in a leather case; or left where they could look at in (hung on a wall, for example); or they could sleep with the scroll under their pillow.



The scroll rolled up, showing how strips of vellum are sewn together

How it came to us is a bit of a mystery – we don't have any records to show when it was given to the College, or by whom – but now we know a bit more about what it is!

Interested in looking at more Ethiopian manuscripts? Cambridge University Library has recently digitised some of its collection, which you can see online at <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/ethiopianmanuscripts/1>

Helen Weller, Archivist
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