TRADITIONAL LAND TENURE IN ETHIOPIA

New documents from Dabra Dehulhan and Dabra Seghe
(Sarâ‘é, Eritrea)

As everybody knows, the Ethiopic documents on traditional land tenure are transmitted in some mss. in form of additiones, i.e., of short notes unrelated to the main text, which were originally written on the occasion of land granting and thereby inserted in the blanks of codices already completed. To this typology belong both the legal texts and the copies of documents issued by different authorities, especially the land charters brought forward by the beneficiaries to claim their alleged rights and privileges – texts written in Ge‘ez or Amharic and exceptionally in Tigriñña or Arabic.

In any blank of an Ethiopic ms. additiones can be found, but chiefly in the guard leaves it is possible to find series of writings, often dating from different ages, which give primary clues about the relationship of a certain monastery to its own territory. Evidently, in each monastic community mss. were chosen as the favourite containers of these records, so that now they form a sort of documentary body, the codicological study of which, in most cases, is still awaited. These mss. are the real historical archives of both the convents and their territories, as in the exemplary case of the


«Golden Gospels» (Wangēlāt zawarq)

With regard to land charters, the exclusive survival of the copies owned by the beneficiaries is still to be explained, as are the reasons for the systematical wreck of the originals, along with the royal archives in which most probably they were kept. One hypothesis could be issued from the assessment of the special nature of the Ethiopian court, a «moving» one in a State wanting in fixed capital. In these conditions the royal archives had to follow the court in its movements, which recalls the «moving archives» known in the western Middle Ages before the foundation of formal State archives from the Carolingian age up to the XIIth c. with the royal archives in which most probably they were kept. One hypothesis could be issued from the assessment of the special nature of the Ethiopian court, a «moving» one in a State wanting in fixed capital. In these conditions the royal archives had to follow the court in its movements, which recalls the «moving archives» known in the western Middle Ages before the foundation of formal State archives from the Carolingian age up to the XIIth c.

Traces of this way of keeping and transferring Ethiopic documents seem to show in a passage of the Gadla Marqorēwos, a saint who lived between the XIVth and the XVth c., whose «life» was written in the XVIth c., but on the grounds of more ancient traditions.

Let’s write the story of our father Marqorēwos who received towns and lands from the hands of our king Dawit, when he came back from the land of Sennar, having received the Cross of Jesus from the legates of the patriarch, etc. The King told Gawār, steward of his

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court: “Bring me the document I gave you!” The steward brought the document according to the King’s words. The King called the seyyum of Šarāwē, Dabāsina Egzi’, and in his presence he read the names of the towns, the number of which was 85, and he gave those towns to our father Marqor wos, saying: “May they be for you and for your sons for ever!” Then he told him: “May their boundaries be a fire for you, their center a garden!”. And he sent the players of the horns, etc.10

The scene seems to represent a sort of ceremony of grant confirmation by the King, in this case Dāwit I (1382-1413), as the quoted ritual words lead us to think. According to this passage, at least from the beginning of the XVth c., there was a court officer, the maggab bet, «steward of the court, chamberlain», in charge of the preservation of the documents issued by the King. Because of the frequent transfers of the court, in the process of time the original documents got lost and now they are known only by copies owned by the beneficiaries. We ignore when this custom declined, but probably the fixing of the capital in Gondar, at the beginning of the XVIIth c., contributed greatly to that, as well as to the success of some ecclesiastical seats as keepers of official grant registers. The archives of the church of Ḥamara Noah in Gondar11 and those of Máryam Ŝeyon in Aksum12 should be considered as the result of this historical change.

The documents presented here are kept in the convents of Dabra Dēhuľjan (Endā Abuna Yonās Tāḥtāy) and Dabra Šegē (Endā Abuna Yonās Lā’elāy), in the Eritrean region of Šarā’e13. Both monasteries were visited by the present writer in 1992, within the scope of the Italian Expedition to Eritrea (=MIE), designed and directed by Prof. Irma Taddia, funded by the Italian National Research Council and the Department of


History at the University of Bologna, with the assistance of the Italian Embassy in Asmara and the Italian Cooperation in Eritrea. The aim of the MIE was to supply documentary evidence in order to assess the contribution of Sarā‘ê’s monasteries to the settlement and the keeping of traditional land tenure, by gathering oral information and transcribing inedited documents found in mss. kept in monastic libraries.

The Eritrean monasteries of Dabra Deẖuţhān and Dabra Šegē lie in two different provinces of the Sarā‘ê region, in the Qәwaỳn and the Takalā respectively, but they share the same founder, the monk Yonās (1403-98), a religious and political personality in the history of the XVth c. Eritrea. Although Dabra Šegē, founded in 1455, is the older one, Dabra Deẖuţhān, dating back to 1489, today is the more active convent. Since their origins, both foundations have been subjected to the authority of one single mamher. According to tradition, Yonās founded a third monastery, named Dabra Śahl (doc. MIE 19 I and MIE 22 V) or Dabra Sel (doc. MIE 20 I), referred to in the Gadla Yonās too. The evidence of doc. MIE 22 V makes it possible to place Dabra Śahl in the Qәwaỳ Særā‘, Daqqi Tasfā district, the same as Dabra Sinā and Dabra Demāh. Doc. MIE 20 I and a short note in EMML 566, ff. 64v and 171v inform that Dabra Śahl or Sel was still active on the eve of the Italian aggression, but during the expeditions of the MIE we couldn’t gather any more data. According to the monks, Dabra Deẖuţhān possesses about 120 mss.: six have been described and four additiones transcribed, that were found in a Gospel and in two hagiographical codices (mss. MIE 17-19). The fund of Dabra Šegē is believed to include about 70 mss.: five codices have been described, and nine additiones transcribed, found in a Gospel, in a hagiographical codex, in a Psalter and in a Historia monachorum (mss. MIE 20-23). The value of these texts is clear if we simply consider that until now only one document relating to both the convents is known: Paris, B.N. d’Abb. 152, f. 59, dated 1519. A tentative chronology of the new documents is the following:

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15 More information on both the monasteries are in BAUSI & G.L., "Appunti", cit., pp. 12-16.


17 Data about the ecclesiastical career of Yonās and the origins of both the convents are found in doc. MIE 19 I from Dabra Deẖuţhān and MIE 22 I from Dabra Šegē, the latter partially reproduced by doc. MIE 23 I.

18 CONTI ROSSINI, "Yonās", cit., p. 253, ll. 4-8.


MIE 18 I.

Transmitted in a XVIIIth-XIXth c. ms. of the Gadla Yonäs, owned by the library of Dabra Deñûn, doc. MIE 18 I contains a list in Tigriñña of tributes owed by different subjects to an unspecified beneficiary.

(f. 3v) Half a qarş of Walda Yoñannes son of aşe Kâhsû. Half a qarş of Sà’educ son of Taklà Giyorgis guarantor. Half a qarş of Zamuda Haylu guarantor and of Walda Giyorgis son of Takla Şem. 2 qarş of Mikâ’el son of Bak’eru guarantor become 3. 2 färﬁ of Mahammad Gëtû Ali, which is a guarantor, become 3 (...).

The list goes on by filling the whole page. The structure is very simple: the preposition này (even if not always) + a personal name (included the patronymic) + wâhs (if that is the case) + a sum expressed by qarş (equivalent to the Amharic berr) or färﬁ and gerbáb (measurements for cloth). Documentary writings in Tigriñña are extremely rare: only two are known, dating back to the first half of the XIXth c.: an additio on Paris, B.N. d’Abb. 72, f. 17921, and the celebrated Charter of Loggo Sàrdà, written on the guard leaves of an ancient Gospel belonging to a church of Hamûsên22. On these grounds, we can date to the same age this piece of writing too. In addition to the use of Tigriñña, the presence may be observed of names belonging to both Christian and Islamic traditions. No doubt the document contains a record of tributes owed to the convent by private persons, but we do not know the exact reason why the payment was due. The word wâhs, «guarantor», probably refers to the obligation the party underwent on behalf of his lineage. Because of the presence of names of gàbarți, a list of rents for the usufruct of monastery’s lands could be hypothesised, written in Tigriñña since Ge’ez is obviously unknown to Ethiopian Moslems.

MIE 21 I.

Transmitted in a XIX c. ms. of the Mazmura Dāwit, owned by the library of Dabra Šegē, doc. MIE 21 I contains a contract of sale in Ge‘ez, concerning the lands of the village of ‘Ad Kesād, Qwolhayn, Endā Mosi district, a document dating back to the first half of the XVIIIth c.

(f. 3v) This is the document written in the times of king Makālu, while the šeyyum of Šārāwē was Azmās Šāmrīt. The buyer of Ad Kesād at his own expense was Belēn Sagadē; the sellers of Ad Kesād were the relatives of Zawalda Mīrs, Minās and Tewodros. The guarantors were Bāselyos, son of sum Takla Krestos, and Hārnafu, son of sum Taklit: both guaranteed for Ad Kesād with its territory (...).

The document goes on with a long list of witnesses. We do not know who king Makālu is, but Azmās Šāmrīt, šeyyum of Šārā‘ē, could be the personality known by oral tradition by the name of Aytā Samrat, who struggled for power during the reign of Iyāsu II (1730-55). Documentary writings in Ge‘ez containing land sales between private persons are only a few. In addition to doc. MIE 21 I we know of only three cases, which date back to the Sixties and Seventies of the XVIIIth c. and concern the territory of Medra Qalqal, in northern Hamāsēn, written on two different mss. kept in ‘Addi Qonī and Šazzegā. Formally the text exhibits all the elements of a contract: indication of time, identity of buyer, sellers and guarantors; only the list of witnesses is astonishingly solid and out of proportion to the documentation we know. The preservation of a copy of this contract (if not the original) in the library of the convent could be explained by both the authority of the monastery and the nature of the land, maybe originally a rim, an «ecclesiastical land which could be bought and sold», in Donald Crummey’s words.

MIE 17 I-II and MIE 22 V.

Docc. MIE 17 I-II from Dabra Dehūḥān and MIE 22 V from Dabra Šegē contain two versions of the same land charter in Ge‘ez, the oldest we know referring to these convents. In the first case, the text is divided into two parts, inserted at the


beginning (MIE 17 I) and at the end (MIE 17 II) of the codex respectively; this version is the shorter and probably the older one. Doc. MIE 22 V is the longer version, written on the occasion of a renewal of the previous grant, in a period unknown.

MIE 17 I.

(f. 1v) This monastery of abbà Yonàs has been founded in holyness, purity and equality. And as for me, Belèn Sagada, ‘aqàṣan of Šàràwè, named Tànse’a Krestos, my father Bagada Seyon, my mother Magdalàwit, my mother Sofyà, and my sons Ato Anbàsà, Abrehàm, Yeshaq, Yà’qob, Musè Deruy named Yoḥannènes, Sàmu’èl, Seḥbat Lå’ab, Aròn, Tiwòdros and Tàsfà Hèywàt, and my brothers Gabre Krestos and Bak’era Seyon Sà’èlu...

A donation was made to them, to our father Èwoṣtàtèwos, to our father Absàdì, to our father Musè, to our father Demyànos, to our father Yonàs and to our fathers their disciples, novices and monks, in order to build their monastery and to make their tazkàr.

In past times I built the holy monastery, in the days of king Zar’a Yà’qob (...). Then, in the days of king Eskender, our father Yonàs received Nunà Yèmæssel (...).

The mention of king Eskender (1478-94) makes it possible to date the older core of the document. The grantor, Belèn Sagada, is the ‘aqàṣan known by other documents", portrayed in a Psalter dating to 1476/77: Paris, B.N. d’Abb. 105, f. 89v. On the grounds of the data contained in this text, his rule could be dated between 1455 and 1489. He bears the same name as his grandfather, who lived between 1350 and

MIE 22 V.

(f. 3, col.b) This monastery of our father Yonàs has been founded in holyness, purity and equality. And as for me, Belèn Asgada, ‘aqàṣen of Šàràwè, named Tànse’a Krestos, my father Bagada Seyon, my wife Magdalàwit, my mother Sofyà, and my sons Ato Anbàsà, Abrehàm, Yeshaq, Yà’qob, Musè Deruy named Yoḥannènes, Sàmu’èl, Seḥbat (f. 3v) Lå’ab, Aròn, Tiwòdros and Tàsfà Hèywàt, and my brothers Gabre Krestos and Bak’era Yaṣeyon Sà’èlu...

A donation was made to them, to the justs of Dabra Dé’ũn, to our father Musè, to our father Demyànos, to our father Yonàs and to our fathers their disciples, novices and monks, in order to build their monastery and to make their tazkàr.

In past times I built Genbà Lè’ul, under the reign of our king Zar’a Yà’qob (...). Then, in the days of king Eskender, our father Yonàs received Nunà Temæssel (...).

1370\textsuperscript{28}. As to his name, it is to be noticed that the second element appears in one case as Asgada (with the derivative Asgad), meaning «he caused the Bilens to kneel», while Belën Sagada means «the Bilens revered him»\textsuperscript{29}. In oral tradition the same component appears as Säggäd, according to a nominal pattern known in both Amharic and Tigrinya onomastics (for ex. Mälläs)\textsuperscript{30}. The second part of the document seems to be an appendix and a completion of the first one, recognizing the convent of Yonās as a place of refuge and granting the people living in its territory the exemption from tributes. Though it does not contain elements for a chronology, it can be dated during the reign of Lebna Dengel (1508-40). The close relationship between the two parts is confirmed by doc. MIE 22 V, which contains a single text. Some of the lands recorded in both the charters appear in another document: Paris, B.N. d’Abb. 152, f. 59, dated 1519, a grant from Lebna Dengel, but doc. MIE 22 V accords to Dabra Deḫuḥān a territory still wider. This fact allows us to conclude that from the XVIth c. the importance of Dabra Deḫuḥān grew so much that it superseded the authority of the oldest convent of the whole region: Dabra Māryām, founded by Absādī in 1374.


\textsuperscript{29} Cpr. doc. MIE 17 I (Sagada) and MIE 22 V (Asgada and Asgadē).