

Marcin Krawczuk
University of Warsaw

The Ethiopic account of Anthony Rawḥ martyrdom and the perception of the Muslim Arab world in Christian Ethiopia

Abstract: The Ethiopic martyrdom of Anthony Rawḥ, attested in two relatively ancient manuscripts is a hagiographical text set in the Muslim Arab world. As such, it is an example of the perception that Christian Ethiopia had of the Muslim world at the time. This article offers some amendments to the printed edition and a few general remarks about the place of this text within the Ge'ez literary tradition.

Keywords: hagiography, Ge'ez, Islam, Anthony Rawḥ, textual criticism

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze a short and rare Ethiopic text containing the Gə'əz translation of the Arabic martyrdom of Anthony Rawḥ¹ (†799)². Although this text was published as early as 1912, it has not received much attention from historians of Ethiopic literature. Therefore, its place within the vast and complex body of Gə'əz writings has not been established. First, this article will outline the circumstances under which the biography of this saint was compiled in Arabic. The details of his life and martyrdom along with a de-

¹ I wish to thank Profs. Marek M. Dziekan and Paulina Lewicka for answering my various questions concerning the Arabic language and Islamic culture. The responsibility for all shortcomings is of course mine entirely.

² Such vocalization of the Arabic RWḤ is proposed by Samir 1992 with many variants given therein. Needless to say, Anthony is the baptismal name, given to the saint after his conversion.

scription of the manuscripts preserving the Ethiopic translation will follow. The article will conclude with some thoughts on the Ethiopic version and its peculiarities in the wider context of translations from Arabic into Gə‘əz.

The saint

Anthony Rawḥ, a young man from the famous Qurayš family, lived in Damascus. The hagiographical account of his life and martyrdom says thus: : As a zealous Muslim, Rawḥ engaged in sacrilegious activities in the sanctuary of Saint Theodore, such as damaging the crosses or drinking the eucharistic wine. On one occasion, he fired an arrow at an icon of Saint Theodore and the arrow miraculously bounced back and injured his hand. Sometime later, Saint Theodore visited Rawḥ in his sleep and asked him to convert from Islam to Christianity. He went to be baptised in the river Jordan and became a monk. Upon returning to Damascus, Rawḥ was imprisoned for apostasy. He was then brought before Hārūn al-Rašīd who offered him gold and honors if he would only denounce Christianity. Anthony refused the Caliph’s offer and consequently was beheaded on Christmas day in the year 799 (Fiey 1998, Samir 1992).

This story forms part of a large body of tales of neomartyrs composed not only in Arabic, but also in Syriac, Armenian, Coptic and Greek. These stories were compiled during the eighth and ninth centuries of this era. Any elaboration on these texts needs to be understood as a literary reaction that Middle-Eastern Christians had to the newly established Muslim-Arab hegemony in the region. These narratives appear to have been primarily addressed to new Muslim converts from Christianity. Their purpose was to encourage them to reembrace their original faith (Hashmi 2012: 32f.).

There is no convincing evidence that the story Anthony Rawḥ is actually authentic; the absence of his figure in Islamic sources is striking. However, a recent study demonstrated that our this account of Rawḥ’s life, fits quite well into the general pattern of Christian-Muslim encounter in the realities of the 8th-9th Century Caliphate. The number of references to its social and geographical reality sug-

gests a text deeply rooted in historical realities (Sahner 2016: 270-275).

The martyrdom of Anthony Rawḥ appears to be an original Arabic composition with a possible, but untraceable Syriac *Urschrift*. The text is preserved in a number of manuscripts ranging from the 10th to the 17th centuries (Graf 1959: 524). Apart from the conventional account of the martyrdom (published in Dick 1961), there exists also an Arabic text in which Anthony describes the events in first person, making it a hagiographical autobiography. This version exists in Georgian translation (Peeters 1913). Two famous Syriac chroniclers – Michael the Elder, also known as the Syrian, and Gregory Bar ʿEbroyo – refer to the martyrdom in their writings, but no Syriac hagiographical account of Anthony’s life or martyrdom has yet come to light. One can conclude, therefore, that hagiographical texts related to Anthony exist in only in three languages (Arabic, Georgian and Gəʿəz) and that his cult was unknown outside of the Oriental Churches.

Many years after Peeters initiated research on Anthony’s hagiographical dossier, his work was picked up by Ignace Dick. Dick later published the Arabic martyrdom of Anthony based on three manuscripts from Sinai. This text is very close to the Ethiopic writing, to the extent that it could be called its immediate *Vorlage*. Sometime later Samir Khalil Samir published a short study in which he focuses mainly on the onomastical problems raised by the Arabic text (Samir 1992).

The manuscripts

Anthony Rawḥ’s Ethiopic *dossier* is, at first glance, very modest. There are only two known manuscripts containing the text describing his martyrdom. They are:

- a) EMMML 1840, f. 264a-271a (catalogued in Getatchew 1975: 344-346)
- b) BN d’Abb. 179, f. 36r-38v (catalogued in Abbadie 1859: 183, Chainé 1912: 107-110, Conti Rossini 1913: 34). This manuscript served as a base for Peeters’ edition.

Other than that, the saint is mentioned in the Synaxary where the date of his veneration is set on the 25th *yäkatit* in the Ethiopian calendar (which corresponds to the 4th March in the Gregorian calendar) but no details of his life, nor of his martyrdom, are given. Besides that, his figure appears to be absent from both texts and religious art.

Both of these manuscripts are dated with high certainty. EMMML 1840 mentions Śārāqä Bərhan, the abbot of Däbrä Ḥayq ʿĒṣṭifanos (which is also the place where the manuscript was created), who began his tenure in the 1370s and died in 1403 (Derat 2010). Therefore, given our knowledge of the chronology of Ethiopic manuscripts, this piece is of considerable antiquity for an Ethiopian non-Biblical manuscript. BN d’Abb. 179 is approximately one century older and is dated at 1509 (cf. Bausi 2002: 4).

The Ethiopic text is not transmitted independently— that is to say, it belongs to a pre-arranged corpus. Both manuscripts are a compilation of hagiographical material from various sources, arranged according to the Ethiopian calendar. EMMML 1840 is entitled *Mäṣḥafä yäkatit* (“The Book for the month of Y.”) which already suggests its chronological scope – it contains hagiographical homilies for one month only. On the other hand, BN d’Abb. 179 covers the period from 27th of Ṭərr to 29th of Nāḥase (Bausi 2002: 4), so roughly two-thirds of the year.

BN d’Abb. 179 represents the so-called *Gädlä säma’ətat* (“The contendings of the Martyrs”) which is the oldest Ethiopic hagiographical calendar. As exemplified by the two above-mentioned manuscripts, most codices of *Gädlä säma’ətat* do not cover the whole liturgical year. This was one of the reasons why it subsequently fell into disuse and was replaced by the Synaxary which is still in use today.

An interesting feature of the EMMML 1840 manuscript is that it displays a somewhat ‘Egyptian’ character i. e. out of the ten texts identified by Getatchew, three (incidentally, the initial three) are relatively rare texts rooted in the Egyptian Christian *milieu*. On f. 3a-13b. we find the *gädl* of Paul, the first hermit (rendered in Ethiopic as Pāwli rather than the usual Pāwlos). It is certainly not the text analyzed and translated by Pereira, who used only one manuscript,

namely BN d'Abb. 60, for his edition. Unfortunately, no study of Paul's Ethiopic dossier ever followed (Pereira 1904). The second text concerns St. Longinus, abbot of Däbrä Mahəw 'in Alexandria', contemporary of the Roman emperor Marcian (reign 450-457). The much abridged entry for Longinus is to be found in the Ethiopic Synaxary on the 2nd of Yäkatit. Finally, the third text on f. 36a-46a is devoted to the hermit 'Abbəlo (which is the usual Ethiopic rendition of the name Apollo in its Arabic form) and rather than follow the usual hagiographical pattern, it draws closer to monastic historiography.

The translation

It is a well-known fact among scholars of Gə'əz literature that translations of Christian writings into Ethiopic were made first from Greek in the Axumite era (i. e. until ca. 7th Century). Arabic translations followed, probably from the time of the so-called Solomonid restoration (ca. 1270), although in reality we know only a handful of texts that old. The period covering the 13th and 14th Centuries saw a great number of translations of hagiographical, patristic and legal texts from Arabic. This phenomenon occurred as part of a larger renewal of ties between Ethiopian Christians and their metropolis in Alexandria. It involved cooperation between Ethiopian and Egyptian monastic centres of learning (Wellnhofer 2014). The literary activity of the period included compiling ancient layers of texts derived from Greek originals with new translations from Arabic. Since the hagiography in question does not exist in Greek, it is safe to assume that it was translated directly from Arabic.

The extant edition is based on one manuscript only. The course of events in the Ethiopic translation is very close to the one outlined above. Since EMMML 1840 offers some alternative readings to the published version, it is perhaps worthwhile to list some of the most interesting below:

Edition (Peeters 1912)	Page, line	EMML1840	Folio, column	Remarks
በክንፉ	426, 4	በክነፈሃ	265vb	Both forms grammatically correct.
ቤተ ክርስቲያን	427, 3	ቤተ ቍርባን	266ra	„Church” as opposed to „place of Eucharist” (i. e. the sanctuary?).
ወተወሰከኒ አንክሮ በአንተዝ። በአማን እስመ ሃይማኖትከሙ ከቡር።	428, 3-4	ወተወሰከኒ አንክሮ በአንተዝ ወሐልዮ ወተደሞ አማን እስመ ሃይማኖትከሙ ከቡር	266va	Preferable translation: “My admiration was increased for this reason, and [so was my] thinking and true amazement, for your faith is true”.
ወአፈርህኬ እነ እጠይቆትከ	430,10	ወአፈርህኬ እነ አጥምቆትከ	267va	The second version fits better in the context: “I am afraid to baptize you”.
ወድንጋጄ	430,11	ወድንጋጄ እምስልጣን	267va	The second reading “the fear of the authority” (or perhaps simply “of the sultan”) is better.
ኅበ ሱብአ ቤቱ በአምሳለ መነኮስ	433, 5-6	ኅበ ሱብአ ቤቱ ወኅበ ሕዝቡ ከዊኖ በአርአያ መነኮስ	268vb	Both versions are appropriate.
ወሶበ ሰምዐ መኰንን ዘንተ አዘዘ ...	435, 8	ወሶበ ሰምዐ መኰንን ዘንተ አንከረ ወአዘዘ ...	269rb	The second version slightly more elaborate: “When the dignitary heard this, he was amazed and ordered...”.
ወገብረ ሥምረቶ	437, 6	ወሐረ በሥምረቱ	270rb	“[He who] does his [God’s] will” as opposed to “[he who] follows his will”.
ወሣልሰኒ አንሰ ገበርኩ ኅጢአተ ወሐርኩ ብሔረ ሮሜያ	438, 7-8	ወሣልሰኒት ኅጢአት አንሰ ሐርኩ ኅበ ብሔረ ሮምያ	270va	The second version is somewhat better syntactically: “[My] third sin is that I went to the country of Romya”.

We might also add that in EMML 1840 we find a different year of martyrdom than in Peeters’ edition. The relevant passage is:

ብኔ፡ወከኔት፡ከዎዎ፡
 በወር፡ኔ፡ከዋል፡በዓ
 ጦት፡ዐዮ፡በወዐ፡ዘለ
 ጦዋዕለ፡ኣጋር፡ወከ

Fig. 1 The year of Anthony’s martyrdom in EMMĪ 1840, f. 271rb

Not only did the Ethiopian translator transcribe the Arabic month *šawwāl* into Ethiopic, but he also – it seems – faithfully rendered the year given in *anno Hegirae* (here called *māwa ‘alä ‘Agar*, literally “the days of Hagar”) as 434. The date is obviously incorrect, but still, it is surprising to find it in a Christian text.

In terms of the vocabulary employed, there are a few interesting points worth mentioning. In the text, we find an attestation of the word ቅኔ in the sense of “religious hymn performed outloud”. This is still today a widely used term to describe improvised religious poetry, which is of great importance to Ethiopian liturgy and Christian literature. Less frequent is the use of this word to describe a chant from another cultural area. Furthermore, there are two Greek loanwords describing parts of liturgy: ኣጳርኔ (from ἀπαρχή) “primal offering” and ኤውሎጊያ (from εὐλογία) “eulogy”.

Another interesting feature of this text is its setting in the Arabic and Muslim *milieu*. Surprisingly, such a setting is not as frequent as one would expect given the huge number of works translated from the Arabic language. In fact, the presence of the famous caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd as an important character in the narrative can be interpreted as a reflection of non-Ethiopian Muslim culture in Ethiopic literature. We do find mentions of Hārūn al-Rašīd in some Muslim Arabic writings from Ethiopia (e. g. Cerulli 1971: 203) but his name does not often surface in Gə‘əz Christian texts. .

The issue of representations of Muslims and Islam in Ethiopic literature in Gə‘əz appears to be seriously underinvestigated. Of course, there have been many successful scholarly attempts to extract from Ethiopic literature data on the history of Ethiopian Islam (or, as

some would say , Islam in Ethiopia). But apart from one article by Abraham Demoz (Abraham 1972) there has been hardly any scholarship on the presence of Islam in Ethiopian literature. The word literature should be stressed here, since literature requires different methodological approach than historical sources.

Such a survey, including not only chronicles and documentary texts but also hagiographical and various theological writing would contribute to our knowledge about the perception of Islam among Ethiopian Christians.

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