
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

S. Chernetsov

ETHIOPIAN “MAGIC SCROLLS” FROM THE MAE COLLECTION

The African funds of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) RAS contain Ethiopian scrolls, some of which are the so-called “magic scrolls”, i. e. hand-written amulets which were used as means of protective magic and are well known among researchers.

The first scholar greatly impressed by the role of magic in Ethiopia was Hiob Ludolf himself, the father of Ethiopian studies in Europe [1]. Much later his compatriot, Enno Littmann, called Ethiopia “a real well” of superstitions and magic, while a Russian scholar Boris Turaev described the local religious situation as follows:

“In Christian, though culturally backward Abyssinia, almost no borderline exists between the faith and superstitions, religion and magic. Priests and clergymen trade in writing and selling magic prayers, which are venerated together with canonical ones; the latter may in their turn be used for magic ends, as well as the Scripture itself, by the way of its mechanical reading, or by wearing on neck, or even by the very fact of its possession” [2].

Philologists were fascinated with these written amulets which constituted a peculiar kind of literature designed not at all for reading, but for protection of its owner, and called these Ethiopian written amulets “magic scrolls” both for their specific form of scroll and its protective function. Russian scholar Ignatiĭ Krachkovskĭ wrote about these specific literary pieces:

“They may contain various texts, sometimes even the canonical ones, to which, however, magic power is ascribed. More often they are filled with charms and spells, and sometimes it is just a collection of mysterious names, whose meaning and origin is almost impossible to determine. It is of no importance for a scroll holder, because the efficiency and protective function are usually ascribed not so much to the reading of a scrolls, as to wearing of it, or just to its presence in a dwelling place” [3].

So their function was quite obvious and clear-cut: they were written protective amulets — a phenomenon common and typical for many religious cultures, Judaic, Christian and Muslim as well. As for the content of this specific magic literature Russian scholars called it *orationes falsae* [4], or “interdicted literature”, because the very practice

of “writing amulets with names” had been officially prohibited by the Church and the Councils at Ephesus and Galata.

Ethiopian hand-written amulets are written in the Ge‘ez language; it stopped being a spoken language as early as in the 13th c., and since then it has only been used as a literary and church language. This is what makes Ethiopian written magic different from verbal magic, as local languages and dialects are used for verbal incantations and spells.

Thus, Ethiopian magical literature follows old literary traditions, and not the traditions of verbal magic. On the other hand, literary works of Ethiopian magic written in the language obscure for the people, are meant not for reading, but perform the function of preventive amulets whose meaning lies with owning, wearing or keeping them at home. The appearance of Ethiopian amulets also proves to this fact: the middle and the end are well-preserved even in the oldest scrolls. Only the beginning and the edges of scrolls are faded and battered, which means that they were not unfolded or read.

The usual form of an Ethiopian written amulet is scroll made of parchment or more or less well tanned hide. Sometimes, however, these amulets may have a form of tiny books with wooden cover. In Amharic these scrolls are called *ketab* — “a charter”, but books may be also called simply *meshhaf*, i. e. “book”. The size of a scroll may vary from 4 to 25 cm in width, and from 40 to 200 cm in length. Long scrolls are usually sewn together of two or three parts with little straps of the same material. Text is usually written on the smooth side of the scroll. Sometimes the other, rougher side, is also covered with writing, but these records are usually made by another hand and another *qalam*, and have nothing to do with the text of the right side. According to their size, and partly to their use magic scrolls can be divided into two categories: (i) small scrolls, no wider than 6 cm and no longer than 50 cm which are rolled up and tied with a piece of cloth or tucked into a leather cylindrical container to wear them on neck [5], they are worn also on a strap tied to shoulder or forearm; (ii) larger scrolls, up to 25 cm in width and up to 200 cm in length, which Prof. Oscar Löfgren called *Wandamuletten*, i. e. wall amulets [6], because they are designed not for wearing on neck, but for hanging up at a wall of a dwelling unfolded [7]. This functional division is not strict at all. For example, the scrolls, which Prof. Dmitriĭ Ol'derogge