Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia
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Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: History, Change and Cultural Heritage

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Denis Nosnitsin

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# Table of Contents

**Preface by Denis Nosnitsin** .................................................. vii

**Presentation by Gianfranco Fiaccadori** ................................. xi

**Part 1. Introducing the Subject** .............................................. 1

Denis Nosnitsin, *Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Remarks on Methodologies and Types of Approach* .......................... 3

Kebede Amare, *Churches and Monasteries of Tǝgray: Cultural Heritage* ................................................................. 15

**Part 2. Monastic Networks** ...................................................... 23

Antonella Brita, *Ecclesiastic Sites of the Nine Saints and Monastic Networks* ................................................................. 25

Michael Gervers, *Finding the Ewostateans* ................................ 49


**Part 3. Case Studies** ................................................................. 89

Stéphane Ancel, *Historical Overview of the Church of ‘Addiqāharsi Pāraqltos (Gulo Māḵāda): Site, Traditions and Library* ............ 91

Vitagrazia Pisani, *Manuscripts and Scribes of the Church of Dābrā Gānnāt Qāddāst Sāllase Madrā Ruba (Gulo Māḵāda)* ............ 107

Denis Nosnitsin, *The Charters of the Four Gospels Book of Dābrā Maʿṣo* ................................................................. 119

**Index** .................................................................................. 133

**Plates** ................................................................................ 143
Preface

The present volume collects the revised versions of papers read during the first workshop convened, on 15 and 16 July 2011, by the project Ethio-SPaRe: Cultural Heritage of Christian Ethiopia – Salvation, Preservation and Research, on the premises of the Hiob Ludolf Research Centre for Ethiopian Studies at Hamburg University. The project, supported by an Independent Researcher Starting Grant of the European Research Council within the 7th EU Framework Programme “IDEAS”, focuses on securing, cataloguing and analysing Ethiopia’s rich written heritage. Workshops of the project Ethio-SPaRe are a part of the research programme. Aimed at collecting feedback and exchanging experience with other colleagues, the meetings have been valid proofs of concept for the project’s research methodology and powerful catalysts of the project’s work.

The Ethio-SPaRe project consequently approaches manuscript and literary studies in their historical, geographical and social context, and it seemed logical to open the series of project workshops by a first assessment of the historical-geographical environment, in which the textual witnesses have been produced and preserved. In the following, I would like to reflect briefly on the structure of the workshop and the proceedings.1

The first project workshop was held in order to both provide a first insight into the activities of Ethio-SPaRe and offer an exchange platform for the professionals dealing with the study of the historical cultural heritage created in the Christian environment of Ethiopia. Among invited scholars, preference was given to those with first-hand experience of fieldwork in Ethiopia, who deal with the study material (texts, but also pieces of art or architecture) in its proper local context. The accent was then set upon the definition of the “ecclesiastic network” and those networks present in North Ethiopia, which historically played an extraordinary role in the production of the cultural heritage. Case studies focusing on individual sites, their libraries and history were also included into the programme.

The volume opens, just as the workshop did, by an introduction into the discussion (Denis Nosnitsin, “Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Methodologies and Types of Approach”, see pp. 3–13), in which the current undertaking is placed in the broader context of research history as well as its research strategy and methods of documentation and analysis are explained. The following paper (Kebede Amare, “Churches and Monasteries of Tagray: Cultural Heritage”, pp. 15–21, read on the occasion of the workshop by Gä-

1 The workshop programme and the final report can be consulted on the project website, http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE. The website also offers a list (and partially downloadable files) of the project-related publications.
brä Ṣǝgzi’abḥer Nayzgi from the Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency, the project cooperation partner in Ethiopia) outlines the broad historical and cultural context of North Ethiopia (Tǝgray), and explains plans and prospects concerning the cultural heritage of the region.

Four conference papers were devoted to defining and exploring the geography of “ecclesiastic” or “monastic networks” (it was only possible to include two in this volume). Anaïs Wion, in her presentation on “Monastic Networks in North Ethiopia” (unpublished), discussed the notion of an ecclesiastic network – a term which has been increasingly used in the scholarly discourse as referring to the historically interconnected net of ecclesiastic institutions and their “sphere of influence”. The discussion that followed revealed, on the one hand, the broad scope and a certain vagueness of the term, and, on the other hand, the bias in its usage. It appears functional for “structuring” the ecclesiastic landscape of North Ethiopia as composed of several “networks”, but should be understood rather as a “working model” for the reconstruction of the history of the region. While referring to the networks of the ṢЄwostateans or Ṣtǝstifanosites, the fourteenth–fifteenth and fifteenth–sixteenth-century monastic movements of North Ethiopia, it turns out that we still know too little to understand their organisation and modes of operation. At what stage did several ecclesiastic institutions become a “network”? What are the features of a network? Did every ecclesiastic institution in North Ethiopia necessarily belong to a network? Were there networks other than the ṢЄwostateans and the Ṣtǝstifanosites? Comments from specialists in such disciplines as anthropology and archaeology helped clarify the definition, by comparing to similar phenomena from other traditions (see also the contribution by A. Brita in this volume).

In his paper on the “Monastic Network of Mädḥaninä Ṣǝgzi” (unpublished), François Le Cadre presented his study of the sites linked to the important monastery Däbrä Bänkwäl and its founder, Ṣabunä Mädḥaninä Ṣǝgzi. He managed to locate the monasteries and churches of all the disciples of the saint, scattered over a very wide area, from Gondär to East Tǝgray, and previously known only from his hagiography and traditional monastic genealogies. Of the eleven hagiographic works Le Cadre recorded in those churches and monasteries, most had been only known from secondary references or unknown completely.

Antonella Brita (“Ecclesiastic Sites of the Nine Saints”, pp. 25–47) surveyed local traditions concerning the veneration of the so-called Nine Saints. She attempted to answer the question whether any of the traditions ever created a network. The answer appears positive at least for Za-Mika’el ’Arăgawi, whose veneration was centred in the ancient and powerful monastery Däbrä Dammo, and whose hagiography is widely spread in North Ethiopia.
The 'Ewoṣṭatean monastic network was placed by Michael Gervers (“Finding the 'Ewoṣṭateans”, pp. 49–59) in the context of contemporary ecclesiastic landscape. Historical sources provide us with a substantial amount of information on the core of the 'Ewoṣṭatean congregation. However, projecting the historical picture upon the contemporary context reveals that the known sources cannot fully explain details found in the course of the field research. (Historical) adherence of an ecclesiastic community to the 'Ewoṣṭatean movement is sometimes difficult to define, and written sources, but also dedication of tabot (altar tablets) and the existence of wall paintings should all be taken into consideration. A few previously unknown or little explored sites with traces of connection with the 'Ewoṣṭatean movement were further introduced.

The 'Ǝsṭifanosite (Stephanite) “network” was in the focus of my contribution (Denis Nosnitsin, “New Branches of the ‘Stephanite’ Monastic Network? Cases of Some Under-Explored Sites in East Tǝgray”, pp. 61–88). I presented some material from the previously lesser-known sites of East Tǝgray whose libraries contain traces of historical links with the monastery Gundä Gunde, the former centre of the monastic movement. While certainly involved in the Stephanite “sphere of influence”, most of the sites were probably only included into the network in the early eighteenth century.

The final chapter – and workshop section – contains two case studies conducted by members of the Ethio-SPaRe project. Stéphane Ancel (“Historical Overview of the Church of ‘:Addiqäḥarsi Paraqliṭos”, pp. 91–105) made a preliminary overview of the history and library of the church Mäkanä Ḥǝywät ‘Addiqäḥarsi Paraqliṭos. The site, though of ancient age, as witnessed by a South Arabian inscription recently discovered there, and by traces of Aksumite architecture, has been escaping scholarly attention. Its most interesting feature is the local veneration of a group of “the righteous ones”, previously unknown to scholars, locally known as Ṣadǝqan żä-Päraqliṭos, “the Righteous Ones of Päraqliṭos”, or Sämaʿatä Päraqliṭos, “the Martyrs of Päraqliṭos”. Their hagiographic cycle was for the first time introduced in Ancel’s paper.

VitaGrazia Pisani presented an overview of the library and history of the church Mǝdrä Ruba Śǝllase (“Manuscripts and Scribes of the Church of Däbrä Gännät Qeddast Śǝllase Mǝdrä Ruba [Gulo Mäḵäda]”, pp. 107–117). The collection possibly incorporated manuscripts from at least three other churches that do not exist any more. In her paper, Pisani pays a special attention to one more discovery made by the project: the identity of the scribe Wäldä Muse, who lived in the area of Mǝdrä Ruba during the reign of King Yoḥannǝs IV (1872–89) and copied a significant number of manuscripts in the local collection – in addition to more manuscripts from surrounding churches.

The section is completed by an additional study, not presented in the

Some of the points raised by the discussants and guests during the workshop found their way into the final shape of the papers collected here; others are additionally highlighted in the presentation to the volume, by Gianfranco Fiaccadori (pp. xi–xvii).

Since more than two years has elapsed after the workshop, some of the contributions of the Ethio-SPaRe members have been complemented with new information gained after July 2011, the up-dates (such as the editor’s annex to V. Pisani’s paper) basically representing the situation of 2012. In the meantime, a monograph has been published which contains a preliminary description of the findings made during the project’s field work in the years 2010–12 (D. Nosnitsin, Churches and Monasteries of Təgray. A Survey of Manuscript Collections = Supplement to Aethiopica 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2013). The editor refrained, with a very few exceptions, from including additional references into the present volume, as well as from striving towards full harmonisation of the information as this would eventually lead to an additional long and unnecessary delay – as well as go too far away from the actual scope of the conference proceedings. The monograph may be, however, a helpful supplement to the present volume, particularly for contextualising the contributions of the Ethio-SPaRe members, and for the detailed map of the sites in the area covered by the project.

The transliteration system applied in the proceedings volume is that of the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica (S. Uhlig et al. [eds.], Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, I: A–C, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2003, xix–xxii), with one exception: ወ is rendered as ወ. Quotations from texts are usually given in Ethiopic script, with the original orthography left without corrections. The readers are warmly advised to consult the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, quoted in most papers, for concise and well-structured reference on the terms, texts, places, historical persons and events mentioned in the volume.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank all the participants of the workshop as well as all those who supported me in organisational and administrative tasks. I am particularly grateful to Evgenia Sokolinskaia who carried out the editorial work on the volume. I also thank the director of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies, Prof. Alessandro Bausi, for hosting the workshop in the Centre, and offering the possibility to publish the volume in the Supplement series of the journal Aethiopica, as well as for providing numerous valuable comments on the original manuscript.

Denis Nosnitsin, editor
Hamburg, 1 August 2013
Presentation

An ancient African civilization arose and continues to flourish in the vast territory stretching from the western shores of the Red Sea to the highlands of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. There, at the far edge of the world known to the Greeks, writing is attested as early as the first millennium B.C., and Christianity was institutionally established already in the fourth century A.D. with a proper organization and literature. These two developments gave birth to one of the most conservative and intriguing cultures of the Christian East, an integrated international community to which Ethiopia definitely belongs – despite its being more often studied in virtual isolation from the Near and Middle East regions traditionally connected with the Red Sea area and the way to India.

Supported by a prestigious grant of the European Research Council, the Ethio-SPaRe project started in 2009 with the aim to promote the study and preservation of the cultural heritage of Christian Ethiopia by forming an international team of specialists in different fields of the study of written documents. Several thousand manuscripts, some of them hearkening back to the early Middle Ages, still survive as the treasured but unknown possession of the countless churches and monasteries scattered throughout the country that are, to a great extent, equally unknown.

The papers collected here arise from the workshop “Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: History, Change and Cultural Heritage”, held on 15–16 July 2011 as the first such gathering within the Ethio-SPaRe project successfully led by Denis Nosnitsin under the auspices of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies at Hamburg University, in whose conducive premises it is being carried forward.

A major scholarly achievement, the volume is a most welcome addition to the literature on Ethiopian civilization. It comes at a particularly appropriate moment: over the past decade, Ethiopian studies have enjoyed a new and exceptionally creative era – witness, not in the last place, the publication of the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. In some respects, they are now at a turning point, between a remarkable surge of interest in a neglected area of Eastern Christianity and readymade scholarly visions aimed at “rewriting history” by ignoring its sources or by taking them (mostly in translation) as documents of “historical myth” and “political strategy” – not to mention the emphasis on such abused categories as “monastic network”, “place of memory” or “fabrication of images”.

Focusing on the early medieval to contemporary periods, and breaking down idle methodological and conceptual divisions, this collection of essays quietly reasserts the importance of philological and linguistic skills as the
most natural basis for any first-hand investigation into Ethiopian history.

By its wide chronological and thematic sweep, the book not only documents the 2011 gathering and the new ideas it stimulated, but also mirrors the intellectual perception and scholarly experience of the milieu within which the workshop was organized. Not by chance, therefore, it appears as a supplement (the second) to Aethiopica, the Hiob Ludolf Centre’s official journal, immediately after the publication, in the same series, of Nosnitsin’s ground-breaking monograph, Churches and Monasteries of Tǝgray. A Survey of Manuscript Collections, which offers a useful complement to the present volume. The comparative perspective afforded by the colleagues from far and near who agreed to participate in the workshop and turned the results of their research into historical discourse finds there new material for resuming the discussion on more solid grounds.

Momentous conclusions were reached during the workshop on several aspects of Ethiopian history, beginning with religious trends in Tǝgray and their reflection in the local ecclesiastic landscape. An outline was provided for the broader historical and cultural context of the region as shaped by monastic experiences that appeared at different times and exerted a strong influence on the religious, cultural and social life of the Ethiopian highlands: in particular, the Nine Saints, however legendary the lore about them is, and the ‘Ewostateans and the ‘Ești̇fanosites, to whom the notion of “ecclesiastic network” seems to be cautiously applicable with reference to the “sphere of influence” of the respective monastic houses or congregations – as well as, under different circumstances, to at least one of the Nine Saints, Zā-Mika’el ʾArāgawi, through his reputed foundation of Dābrā Dammo.

Two case studies follow about the libraries and history of churches of Gulo Māḵāda, in eastern Tǝgray, that have mostly escaped scholarly attention: namely, ʿAddiqāḥarsi ʿāraqliṭos boasting an hitherto unknown group of the “Righteous ones” (Ṣādaqan) in accordance with the antiquity of the site, and Madrā Ruba Śallase, endowed with a multi-layered collection of manuscripts (also from other nearby places), quite a few of which are products of the late-nineteenth-century scribe, Wāldā Muse, whose personality is revealed here for the first time.

An additional paper specially prepared for the volume is a third case study. It offers the text and translation, with commentary, of several difficult documents, copied by the same Wāldā Muse, from the “Golden Gospels” of Dābrā Ma’ṣo Qaddus Yohannas, a lesser-known site, again in Gulo Māḵāda, that was first recorded by the Ethio-SpaRe team in 2010. This manuscript, dated to the reign of Dawit II (1379/80–1413), preserves in fact a few historical notes of various chronology and size, among them the isolated and yet striking commemoration, written under King Zār’a Ya’әqob (1434–68).
and recently published by Nosnitsin, of the mysterious “’abba ’Astona, the patriarch [liqä pappasat] of the land (city?) of Rome”, martyred there by “pagan” (ʾarämawiyan) together with the “Righteous ones” (Ṣädǝqan) of Däbrä Maʾṣo at an undefined date.

With an adequate set of illustrations, most previously unpublished, the book offers an authoritative record of the current state of scholarship on all these issues, aptly summarized in a preface by the editor, who has also well elucidated the different methodologies and types of approach to the peculiar ecclesiastic landscape of northern Ethiopia. Much progress has been made, but as the contributors indicate, there is still a great deal of work to be done on disentangling the often obscure and even contradictory evidence in the uneasy balance between hagiography and history, between traditional lore and actual remains. Thus, for the geography of “ecclesiastic” or “monastic networks”, we are in need of further data and, possibly, more nuanced definitions. Cross-examining physical sites with the aid of literary sources, mainly hagiographies and monastic genealogies, enables one to retrieve local identities and to draw a consistent historical picture of the region. Giving due way to such aspects of the research on ecclesiastic landscape is a challenge to which the authors of this volume have risen admirably.

There are, however, points for which the evidence is still lacking or is insufficient to give answers, although some may be of great interest. For instance, the historical personality of the aforementioned “ʾabba ’Astonā”. As I have tried to show elsewhere, his name is to be related to the Syriac honorific ʾd-ʾestûnā (’of the column, stylite’), bestowed since the tenth century on bishops and metropolitans. He could then be the “Syrian metropolitan”, possibly a Melkite, who with his retinue was called to Ethiopia by King Ṭakunno ʾAmlak, the “restorer” of the Solomonic dynasty, sometime after 1273 – and much complained about by the latter’s son and successor Yāgbʾa Ṣayon in his 1290 correspondence with the sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Manṣūr Qalāʾūn, and the patriarch of Alexandria, John VII, as transmitted in the Arabic sources. If so, the “pagan” are obviously Muslims raiding Däbrä Maʾṣo, a notorious place of banishment to which ’Astonā had been exiled with his attendants (the “Righteous ones”) by Yāgbʾa Ṣayon. Thus the newly-found Ethiopic text sheds light “from within” on the narrative of foreign sources, against which it can be checked in its turn. This would take us directly into the question – so crucial for Ethiopian studies – of how ancient collective or individual memories survived in recent garb (the Nine Saints, with their much later hagiographies, are a good example here). Closely connected questions are also how Ethiopian religious life actually worked in the context of the Christian state, as well as what inner or outer factors were key in building its long-standing image and encouraging specific developments throughout the
centuries (the ʾEwotsteans and the ʾEstifanosites, for instance).

Next, and in the same context, the more general issue of continuity in the production of manuscript from Late Antiquity to medieval and early-modern times and beyond should be addressed – a knot deserving further analysis precisely within the framework that the Ethio-SPaRe project is providing so painstakingly.

The project activities include field research, meetings and publication. Six mission reports have thus far appeared that are partly updated and complemented in Nosnitsin’s aforesaid monograph. They all give an accounting of the immense wealth of information – from manuscript collections, in focus of attention, to church paraphernalia, physical environment, historical topography and local traditions – produced by this most innovative project, with a deep regenerating effect on Ethiopian studies for many years to come.

The time is over when scholars like Carlo Conti Rossini could think, to their own dismay, that not much was left to be discovered in Ethiopia, except through archaeology, and perhaps only in epigraphy, art history and architecture (the recent 1906 Deutsche Aksum-Expedition directed by Enno Littmann and the publication of its findings were indeed the ultimate model). The country’s most important written records seemed by then to be all kept and catalogued in western libraries, whence they had become instrumental in bringing about the historical image of this part of the Horn of Africa.

The pioneering work begun already before the Second World War by Antonio Mordini on Late Antique and medieval Ethiopian architecture, with special attention to its preservation, and his extraordinary manuscript finds at Däbrä Dammo and Gundä Gunde (the former handed over, materially, to Conti Rossini) soon challenged this reassuring image as incomplete and unfair. Also, they clearly showed the need for immediate action to save such a unique heritage – partly on the verge of extinction – from disappearing. This realization, equally shared by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, led to subsequent endeavours aimed at recording Ethiopian manuscript culture and, almost at once, to the disclosure of an impressive flourishing of Christian buildings, from the ninth to the twelfth century, in south-eastern Tǝgray that opened up a world not even dreamed of before. (A further related discovery, made in those years and first appreciated by Stanisław Chojnacki, should incidentally be mentioned here, to wit, of painted and occasionally carved wooden icons, some of them belonging to the sixteenth century, as a consequence of King Zärʾa Yaʾqob’s religious policy or of the later activity of the so called Italianate school of painting.)

Such an unexpected disclosure dramatically changed our perception of medieval Ethiopian history and contributed to bridging definitely the time-gap between ʾAksum and Lalibāla, in Lasta, as forestalled more than half a
century ago by David R. Buxton, whose point of view has been now fully
developed – well beyond the acknowledged link between Aksumite and me-
dieval architecture – by Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier and, more in
detail, by David W. Phillipson. The Christian buildings revealed thereby,
mainly rock-hewn funerary or reliquary churches, sport features likely to be
traced to Aksumite monuments in terms of style and construction technique,
and should be better seen, with Lepage, as marking the presence of a local
political and economic power connected, or claiming connection, to the late
Aksumite times and to the dynasty that had then fled to the south from the
devastated and impoverished centres of the north. A few details, however,
can be added to substantiate his reconstruction.

South-eastern Ṭǝgray comprises historical ḤEndārta with Gärʿalta and
Wāmbārta, where doctrines later appropriated by the Ṣḥīfānites surface
already in the thirteenth century. It was a place of ancient settlement and a
major staging post in the trade routes from Ḥaksum and, via Ḥakkālā Gūzay,
from the Red Sea coast to inner Ethiopia; and always kept its importance
because of the caravans organized there travelling to the salt-mining places
of the Dankali desert. ḤEndārta in particular had experienced a Muslim pres-
ence since the last quarter of the tenth century (when Yamāmī elements from
Ḥiḡāz, maybe trading in salt, moved there via Dahlak), and had been ruled
since at least the thirteenth century, but possibly long before, by a family of
şeyyuman (‘governors’) whose fortunes have been brought into due relief
by Sevir B. Chernetsov. They bore such old titles as ṣaqāṣen (from ṣaquab
šanṣān, ‘keeper of the [large] fan’ or ‘of the fly-whisks’) and ḥasgā (‘head’, of
remote ṭAgāw origin), and were chiefly based at ḤAmba Śannayt, the epony-
mous stronghold of an “Aksumite” district east of ḤAdwa.

The ruling house of ḤEndārta, whose power seems to have once extended
over a great part if not the whole of Ṭǝgray (“up to the cathedral of Ḥaksum”),
boasted identity with ancient Israel, that is, continuity with the “last Aksum-
ites” and their kingship, and was thereby opposing the Zagw “usurpers”.
The most famous representative of the family is the “faithful prince” Ḥyaḥikā
Ḥezī, in charge between 1315 and 1321/22, who played a major rôle in the
composition of the Ḥabrā nāgāṣt (“Glory of the Kings”), a work that re-
counts the visit of the Queen of Sheba (called Makāddā) to King Solomon,
the birth of their son Mānilak (Bāynā Lḥkōm) and his seizing the Ark of the
Covenant, doomed to typify the divine election of the kingdom of Ethio-
pia, and is closed by the meeting of the emperors of Rome and Ethiopia in
Jerusalem at the end of times, to divide between them the rule of the world.
This work, with a clearly eschatological orientation, was originally meant
to celebrate the prince’s own lineage as against the Zagw “and became the
Ethiopian “national saga” only later, under King ḤAmə Ṣṣyon I (1314–44).
Yet, besides Aksumite features, the utterly refined sculpted decoration of medieval Tǝgrayan architecture – suffice here to recall the semi-monolithic church of ʾAbrǝha wä-ʾAšǝḥa, in Ṣǝraʿ, not far from Wǝro – reveals elements originating in the Middle East and/or in Egypt towards the tenth century and then elaborated within a much older local tradition itself inspired from diverse sources. Its geographical marginality notwithstanding, the house of ʾEndārtǝ was therefore strong enough to entertain cultural relationships with the external world, and to be continuously receptive to its influences. These arrived first and foremost through pilgrims to and from Jerusalem (via Egypt) and the maintenance of a monastic community established in the Holy Land since Late Antiquity. A constant, albeit variable, flow of men and ideas that also helps dispel the myth of medieval Ethiopia’s full isolation from the outside world. Nor is the distinctive continuity from Aksumite times by any means restricted to church architecture of this or other areas. If further evidence is required for mural painting (attested, though, in Arabic records), the Ethiopian manuscript production, including illumination, proves to be of comparable antiquity, as the outcome of long local development – with limited but appreciable impact of foreign elements – rather than of “imitation of contemporaneous versions elsewhere”, in the words of Phillipson.

A study of the Ethiopian monastic libraries and scribal centres against such a long-standing traditional background would constitute a different kind of endeavour, and this volume demonstrates how exciting that could be.

Gianfranco Fiaccadori
Milan, 1 October 2013

Bibliographical Note
Presentation