

Textiles in Ethiopian
Manuscripts Colloquium



3 October 2025

Massey College in the University of Toronto

4 Devonshire Place, Toronto

Acknowledgments

Organizers

Chana Algarvio, Massey College

Andreea Marin, Massey College

Sarah Fee, Royal Ontario Museum

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The *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts* Project

Ethiopia's Global Past through Imported Textiles

Scribes in highland Ethiopia have been creating illustrated Christian manuscripts for many centuries, and scholars have long studied their texts and illustrations. However, researchers have largely ignored the imported textile swatches pasted into manuscript covers. Since 2022, an international multidisciplinary team has joined forces as the *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts* project (TEM); at present, the team – composed of 22 members from a variety of disciplines, based in six countries – has located and studied over 2000 swatches or ‘pastedowns,’ dated 1450-1900, located in repositories around the world. As an unequalled corpus of early modern textile imports in sub-Saharan Africa, textile pastedowns from Ethiopia have enormous potential for understanding sub-Saharan Africa’s participation in global textile circulations.

This Colloquium will present the project aims and methodologies (textile identification, philology, interviews with practitioners), as well as its findings on historic Ethiopian culture, history, economy, international connections, and the arts. To date, the team has determined that the silk and cotton cloths used for book bindings in Ethiopian manuscript originated in China, India, Iran, Britain, France, Italy, Syria, Turkey and beyond; some date

to the late 15th century, and there is growing evidence for a distinct Ethiopian patronage or 'taste.' The majority come from India. Textual evidence supports these distant origins and further reveals that Ethiopian agents and actors (diplomats, merchants, buying agents, pilgrims) pro-actively travelled long-distance to acquire some of these foreign textiles. Beyond Ethiopia, this wide range of imported fabrics offers an as-yet untapped source for the study of textile products and trade networks in the early modern era, especially with India, during an extended period when textiles drove the global economy.

– *Sarah Fee, Co-director of TEM*

Program

- 8:30–8:50 AM Registration
- 8:50–9:00 AM Introduction to the *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts*
(TEM) Project
Michael Gervers
- Session 1** ❖ **Ethiopian MSS & TEM**
- 9:00–9:20 AM “A Short Introduction to Ethiopian Manuscripts”
Alessandro Bausi
- 9:20–9:35 AM “Chroniclers and Textiles in the 16th-17th Centuries”
River Hobel
- 9:35–9:45 AM Discussion
- Session 2** ❖ **What Texts Tell Us**
- 9:45–10:05 AM “Beyond the Coast: Textile Routes in the Ethiopian
Highlands, 1500-1900”
Abemmelek Ermeyes
- 10:05–10:25 AM “What (European) Texts Tell Us: Textile Imports in
Highland Ethiopia, 1500-1900”
Sarah Fee

10:25–10:35 AM

Discussion

10:35–10:45 AM

Coffee break

Session 3 ❖ What Textiles Tell Us

10:45–11:00 AM

“Indian Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscript Bindings”
Rosemary Crill

11:00–11:15 AM

“From ‘Bizarre’ Bodice to Book: Repurposing
European Dress Silks in Ethiopian Manuscripts”
Martina D’Amato

11:15–11:35 AM

“Japanese Textiles Preserved in Ethiopian
Manuscript Bindings”
John Vollmer

11:35–11:55 AM

“Travels of a 15th Century Indian Printed Cotton”
Michael Gervers

11:55 AM–12:05 PM

Discussion

Session 4 ❖ Next Steps and New Tools

12:05–12:45 PM

“‘To See the World in a Grain of Sand’: A
Visualization Dashboard for TEM”
Philip Sykas and Steven Delamarter

12:45–12:55 PM

Discussion

12:55–1:00 PM

Closing remarks
Andreea Marin

1:00 PM

Lunch & manuscript viewing

Abstracts

Alessandro Bausi, Universität Hamburg

“A Short Introduction to Ethiopian Manuscripts”

Since the pioneering contributions of the 1980s, which still retain their value as first-hand ethnographic evidence of a manuscript-making practice rooted in the region’s late antique past, the digitisation and systematic cataloguing of tens of thousands of Ethiopian manuscripts have transformed the study and perception of this rich heritage. Ethiopian manuscripts have been produced for fifteen centuries, from the oldest extant Gospels from the ‘Abbā Garimā monastery to manuscripts currently being produced in various parts of the region. Alongside interest in a textual and art-historical heritage that is still only partially known, the approach to manuscripts as complex, multi-layered ‘written artefacts’ has added a decisive dimension to our view of their role in Ethiopian social, religious, economic and intellectual history.

Rosemary Crill, Victoria & Albert Museum

“Indian Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscript Bindings”

The current *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts* project has led to a number of remarkable discoveries, including the predominant use of Indian textiles as pastedowns or linings in manuscript bindings. The date range of the Indian textiles is from the 15th to the 19th centuries, and they include many different techniques and levels of patronage, from simple monochrome cotton fabrics to lavish woven textiles in silk and metal-wrapped thread. Many others are block-printed, including the earliest pieces to have come to light so far. These early fragments add significantly to the corpus of surviving pre-Mughal Indian textiles and they shed new light on India’s textile trade with the Indian Ocean and East Africa.

Martina D'Amato, Independent Scholar

“From ‘Bizarre’ Bodice to Book: Repurposing European Dress Silks in Ethiopian Manuscripts”

The discovery of a significant number of early modern European silks repurposed within Ethiopian manuscript bindings prompts complicated queries about textile origins and eventual destinations. A study of about one hundred manuscripts reveals the recycling of early Italian and French silks. Among these are a distinct group of early 18th-century silks today known as “bizarres” for their whimsical and fantastical compositions that combine Asian and European design elements. The majority of these were made for European fashionable dress or ecclesiastical (Catholic) settings and were not intended for export, despite their appearance in Asia already in the 18th century and their adaptation and indeed replication by artists there. The additional Ethiopian reuse of these iconographically unique silks, however, raises new queries and insights regarding the movement of goods, secondary/secondhand markets, and changing tastes across Europe, Asia, and Northern and Eastern Africa.

Steve Delamarter, George Fox University, & **Philip Sykas**, Manchester Metropolitan University

“To See the World in a Grain of Sand’: A Visualization Dashboard for TEM”

From the start, the Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts project began collecting data and images organised within a database. Once this database had reached a thousand entries, it became increasingly clear that analysis of the unstructured content of its images would require a means to filter and present the textile images in meaningful groups for comparison. Harnessing the power of data visualisation to reveal patterns and trends in complex data sets, Prof. Steve Delamarter designed a “dashboard” as an enabling tool. This

dashboard permits filtering by categories to narrow down the full set of images to manageable sub-sets. It also correlates chronologies of textiles with those of manuscripts and maps out their geographies so that the relationships between manuscripts and textiles can readily be perceived.

A structured set of characteristics by which to catalogue the textiles was developed by Dr. Philip Sykas with input from the TEM textile team. The aim was to choose criteria that would avoid typical disunities in terminology between textile specialists. For example, does a rosette belong in the category of geometrical motif or that of floral? The number of categories also had to be kept to a minimum to allow the dashboard to comfortably accommodate them in its filtering toolbar. There was an overall weakness in working with images available from prior digitisation projects carried out on site in Ethiopia. Unevenness in image resolution made it challenging to discriminate textile features, and often, educated guesses had to be made to complete the Dashboard information sets.

This talk will explain the concept and operation of the Visualisation Dashboard and present its current state of development. Several searches will be demonstrated, and a few initial insights and observations will be discussed.

Abemmelek Ermeyes, University of Toronto

“Beyond the Coast: Textile Routes in the Ethiopian Highlands, 1500-1900”

Studies on Indian-Ocean trade networks have traditionally concentrated on exchanges at ports along the coasts of Asia, Africa, and Europe, creating an opportunity to better understand trade routes that reached deep into the African interior. The research team at the *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts* project has systematically studied foreign travelogues, trade records, and local chronicles to find references to textile exchange and use from the 15th to 19th centuries. Our research reveals that textiles consistently appear as one of the

few trade goods that reach into interior regions of the Ethiopian Highlands, without being exchanged for other commodities along the way. Used as both a luxury import and currency, textiles can play an important role for the historian in tracing developments of long-distance trade networks throughout the Ethiopian Highlands, tying a variety of cultures, faiths, and states across the Ethiopian Plateau in the pre-modern age.

Sarah Fee, Royal Ontario Museum/University of Toronto/Massey College

“What (European) Texts Tell Us: Textile Imports in Highland Ethiopia, 1500–1900”

The global turn in historical studies has revitalized interest in the vast translocal networks of the African continent. One branch of the TEM project has combed European historic texts for references to foreign cloth importations into highland Ethiopia and their uses in the period 1450 to 1930. This paper will present an overview of early results, on what these textual sources tell us of the types of foreign textiles arriving in nearby ports and markets and in the Ethiopian highlands, how they reached there, what they were used for and, in rare instances, indications of consumer preferences. These sources help us to reconstruct Ethiopian actors’ active patronage of multiple kinds of cloth extending over land and maritime routes to the Mediterranean, Red Sea and eastern reaches of the Indian Ocean world. It will discuss, too, some of the (usual) challenges presented by textual sources, such as terminology, gaps in information and a few disconnects with the surviving textile fragment pastedowns.

Michael Gervers, University of Toronto Scarborough

“Travels of a 15th-Century Indian Printed Cotton”

Textiles from the Indian subcontinent and points east have for millennia made their way westwards with the trade winds across the Indian Ocean to

Africa and up the Red Sea to Egypt and the Mediterranean world. They were used everywhere for clothing and furnishings and were only discarded when they had been reduced to rags and swatches. Despite the difficulties of ascent by donkey or camel, the highland peoples of Ethiopia, particularly members of the court, imported every kind of textile, from the most luxurious to the mundane, and used them from sanctuary hangings to the linings of book covers. The *Textiles in Ethiopian Manuscripts* project at the University of Toronto has examined thousands of manuscripts and found that in about 15% of the time a textile is adhered to the inner covers of the front and back book boards. Some of these textiles have survived from as early as ca. 1400 and, taken together, serve as a unique reflection of changing tastes and Indian Ocean trade routes over the past six hundred years.

This presentation focusses on the journey of a 15th-century mordant-dyed cotton cloth from Gujarat that made its way to Ethiopia where part of it was eventually cut into relatively small rectangles and affixed to the inner boards of a 15th-century gospel book. It is a known type of celebrated Indian Chintz that has counterparts found as wraps in aristocratic homes in Indonesia to rubbish pits in Egypt. In Ethiopia, it would appear to have lived a courtly life for 300 years before spending the last 250 in the secluded monastery of Dagna in the northerly Tigray region.

River Hobel, University of Toronto

“Chroniclers and Textiles in the 16th-17th Centuries”

This paper looks at a collection of royal chronicles from the early Gondarine period, as well the century preceding the epoch, in order to determine how Ethiopian scribes understood the importance of textiles for the Christian monarchy. Special attention is paid to how the references to textiles shed light on court dynamics, as well as how the descriptions of textiles function as markers of status, wealth, or power. Preference is also given for monarchs with

longer regnal periods, such as Gelawdewos, whose chronicles include substantially more material than the shorter-lived rulers, such as Za Dengel. Ultimately, the paper is focused more on the cultural location of textiles (and how scribes conceptualized the value of such items), rather than on reconstructing the historical economies or production lines that these products were embedded in.

John Vollmer, Independent Scholar

“Japanese Textiles Preserved in Ethiopian Manuscript Bindings”

There are surprisingly few examples of East Asian patterned silk textiles lining the inner boards of Ethiopian manuscripts in the TEM database. Out of nearly 2000 recorded bound manuscripts only two have textiles that can be identified with certainty as Chinese, and another two are possibly of Chinese manufacture. Somewhat unexpectedly, there are four manuscript bindings that contain textiles originating in Japan.

Given the volume of the (largely Chinese) trade textiles that were carried across the Indian Ocean by European commercial interests, including Portugal, England, France, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark, one might expect to find more. Certainly, some of the unpatterned silk satins, twills and tabbies used in manuscript binding may be Chinese, but without a selvage it is impossible to determine source.

The Japanese silks, on the other hand, are not typical export pieces. Three are associated with the luxury goods produced in Kyoto, known as Nishijin-ori, for the nobility, samurai and Buddhist clergy during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Such textiles were not commonly seen in the West until after Admiral Perry’s forced opening of Japan to foreign commerce in 1858. The 1868 ascension of the Meiji emperor and the restoration of imperial control further opened Japan to foreign trade. Prior to this, the isolationist

policies of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate had severely restricted foreign contact to Deshima, an island off Nagasaki. This trading post had given exclusive, but extremely limited, access to the Portuguese (1570-1639) and subsequently the Dutch (1641-1858).

