

The Story of an Early "Book": Garima Gospels

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The “book” that I selected for this assignment is actually a set of two books called the Gospels of Abba Garima or the Garima Gospels. These two volumes are believed to have been created between 330 and 650 C.E., according to carbon-testing, making them two of “the most ancient complete Christian texts” (Taylor, 2010, para. 3). The second volume has been determined to have been created prior to the first volume (Bausi, 2013), however it is believed that both volumes were written by Abba Garima, a Byzantine royal and founder of the monastery where the volumes are held (Taylor, 2010). In fact, for the last 1,600 years, essentially from their creation, the Gospels of Abba Garima have remained in one piece at the Abuna Garima Monastery, which is located in the Tigray Highlands in Ethiopia (Taylor, 2010). This means that the texts were protected by the monks of the monastery from several notable threats, such as “Muslim invaders, colonial conquerors and a fire in the 1930s which destroyed their church” (Taylor, 2010, para. 4). Although there is a possibility that the volumes were moved to a local cave in order to keep them safe during the time when the area was occupied by Muslims from the 9th century until the 14th century and were later rediscovered and returned to the monastery (“Garima Gospels,” n.d.).

In recent years, the Ethiopian Heritage Fund, a British charity established in 2005 with the purpose of helping to preserve and promote Ethiopia’s artifacts, held a program of work to conserve the two volumes (The Ethiopian Heritage Fund Charity, n.d.). This involved inviting Lester Capon, an experienced bookbinder, to the monastery to rebuild and restore the gospels (Taylor, 2010). This process has required several trips to the monastery. The first trip, which occurred in 2006, focused on conserving illustrated pages and repairing the binding on the first volume of the Garima Gospels (The Ethiopian Heritage Fund Charity, n.d.). The second trip, which occurred in 2012, focused on making sure the pages of the gospels were correctly ordered,

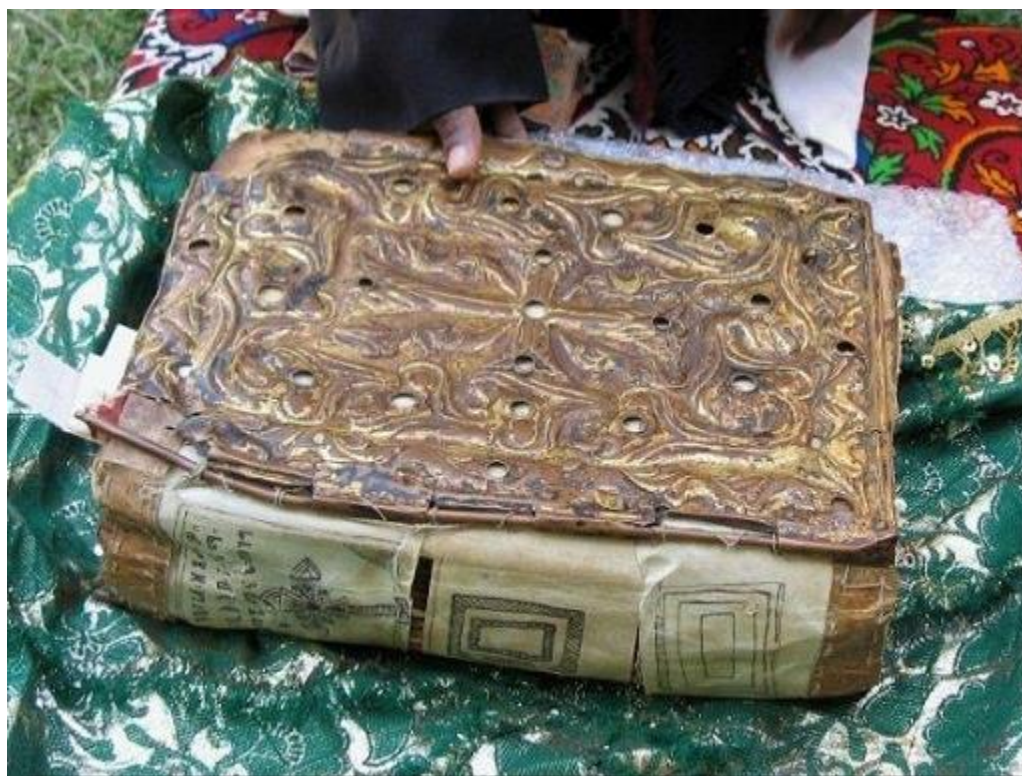
especially the pages of the second volume, before the binding was redone and strengthened (The Ethiopian Heritage Fund Charity, n.d.). During his trips, Capon noticed that the monks were very protective of the books. He could tell that the monks were nervous to have someone take apart their books but ultimately, they allowed it because they understood that repairing them would be for the best (Taylor, 2010). The behavior of the monks can be explained if you understand the religious significance of the Garima Gospels.

The Gospels of Abba Garima have been regarded as holy relics for the monks of the Abuna Garima Monastery for centuries, beginning with the legend of their creation (Livingstone, 2013). The monks strongly believe that “Abba Garima finished his exquisite work in a single day because God stopped the sun from setting while he worked” (Taylor, 2010, para. 5). So, to the monks, these books are the physical representation of an impossible task that was performed by their founder due to the assistance of God, the higher being that is worshiped in their religion. The monks at this monastery throughout the centuries have found these books and what they symbolize to be so significant that they have risked their lives to take measures to protect them, as was mentioned earlier in this essay.

Along with a religious significance, the Garima Gospels also have historical significance. The Garima Gospels are “the earliest testament of the lost art of the Christian Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia” (University of Oxford, 2017, para. 1)., which includes illustrated portraits of the evangelists and decorated “canon tables” (University of Oxford, 2017, para. 2). Also, the Garima Gospels are the earliest translations of the four gospels from the Greek text into Ge’ez, which is the language of the Ethiopian Church (University of Oxford, 2017, para. 2). Together, these two facts highlight how the Garima Gospels are representations or examples of how Christian culture developed in the Aksumite kingdom when it prospered around 350-650 C.E. (University of

Oxford, 2017). They also give a glimpse of how gospel books of the past were created and what they included, which allows them to be compared to gospel books today, showcasing how religious traditions may have changed throughout the centuries. Getting a glimpse of how the books were made could start with describing what the books look like.

The Gospels of Abba Garima are “two 10-inch-thick volumes, which are written on goat skin and brightly illustrated” (Taylor, 2010, para. 2). The first volume of the gospels has copper boards with holes that likely held jewels or colored glass at one point (Capon, 2008). Aside from the holes, it appears that the front cover had a cross decorating the center of it. According to Capon (2008), the spine consists of three pieces of vellum, which appear to have writing and illustrations on them. The edges and corners in the picture below appear to be worn or torn, which can hint at the object’s age and use, however, it should be noted that this picture was taken prior to Capon’s repairs of some of the torn and damaged edges (Capon, 2008).



(Capon, 2008)

The second volume of the gospels, which was bound together with a later manuscript from the 14th century at the time of the photo below, has “wooden boards [that] are covered in a chased metal” (Capon, 2008). Similar to the first volume, there appears to be a cross on the center of the cover. There is no material that makes up the spine, which allows for the sewing to be seen. During repairs, Capon separated the later manuscript from the earlier, original manuscript, and then reattached the front board and corrected the sewing to its original format (Capon, 2008). It seems like the edges and corners of this volume are damaged; similarly, to the first volume, these edges and corners were likely somewhat repaired by Capon.



(Capon, 2008)

For more information about the Gospels of Abba Garima, check out the resources in the short bibliography below:

Capon, L. (2008). *Extreme bookbinding - A fascinating preservation project in Ethiopia*. Skin Deep. https://www.hewit.com/skin_deep/?volume=26&article=1#article

Garima Gospels: World's oldest illuminated manuscripts. (n.d.). Encyclopedia of Art History. Retrieved September 9, 2023, from <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/garima-gospels.htm>

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Kiely, A. (2023, March 7). *The Garima Gospels – medieval illuminated manuscripts in Ethiopia*. A Scholarly Skater. <https://ascholarlyskater.com/2021/11/16/garima-gospels/>

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ROME REPORTS in English. (2010, August 2). *The oldest illustrated Christian works dated to before 650 A.D.* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zREZbRGuyxw>

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<http://www.ethiopianheritagefund.org/document-page-2>

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highlands. Faculty of Classics. <https://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/event/hidden-gospels-abba-garima-treasures-ethiopian-highlands>

Livingstone, E. A. (2013). *Garima Gospels*. Oxford Reference.

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Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts->

entertainment/books/features/unearthed-the-ancient-texts-that-tell-story-of-christianity-
2019188.html