

University of Iowa Libraries Conservation Final Report

Call Number	VAULT Ms 355ma UI Special Collections	Publication Date	between 1700 and 1900
Title	[Ethiopic Amulet Scroll] Marwick magic scroll 37	Publisher	
Author	unknown	Conservator	Katarina Stiller
Date Examined	1/31/24	Consulted	Giselle Simón, Director, Conservation and Collections Care, University of Iowa Libraries Beth Stone, Collections Conservator, University of Iowa Libraries Melissa Moreton, Research Associate Kristine Rose-Beers, Head of Conservation and Heritage, Cambridge University Eric Ensley, Curator of Rare Books and Maps, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa
Date Returned	8/8/24	Language	Ge'ez
Selection Method		Barcode	A602684
Format	roll	Photography	
Housing	box padded with loose tissue	Ownership mark	

Context

Scholarship on talismans, magic, and medicine in Ethiopic manuscripts is limited and still in its infancy. The term “Ethiopic” encompasses Ethiopian cultural heritage as well as Eritrean, which was once part of Ethiopia. Ethiopic also covers distinct cultural traditions, such as Tigrayan. Amulet scrolls are frequently referred to as magic, prayer, or healing scrolls. The term “magic scroll” is presently not widely encouraged due to its insinuations of “folk” medicine and religion, which was not actually associated with the Middle East and Africa. The term “liturgical scroll” is also discouraged as the traditional practices that the scrolls are associated with are banned by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Amulets have been used by Afro-Eurasian peoples for thousands of years. Amuletic scroll motifs and styles contain a blend of Near Eastern, Syriac, Hebrew, and Islamic magico-religious imagery. The 2nd to the 18th century was a period of considerable contact between Ethiopia and the world, suggesting that amulets were a global phenomenon with significant local influence. Most surviving scrolls of parchment, paper, or wood date from the 16th to 19th centuries, but decoration refers to earlier usage. The amulet practice presently remains strong in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, particularly in the Amhara and Tigray regions.

Ethiopic amulet scrolls, known as ketab, are textual amulets often written on narrow strips of usually goat or sheep parchment in roll format. The scrolls contain prayers, charms, incantations, and invocations of divine names and saints to protect against disease, malevolent spirits, demonic possession, and death in childbirth. They were written on organic material or cast in metal. They were often kept in leather cases or metal cylindrical ones. They were also hung in the home or worn around the neck.

The scrolls were made by dābtāras who were practitioners of magic. Dābtāras were highly educated, unordained laymen who usually studied for many years or came from a clergy family. Dābtāras often made amulet scrolls and practiced traditional medicine to supplement their income in addition to teaching at parish schools or working in the courts.

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Every aspect of scroll production was astrologically linked to their use, and the size, content, and quality of the scroll were dependent on the needs and means of the client. The scrolls are designed based on the client's zodiac sign. The client was first rubbed with a live animal (usually goat or sheep) and then washed with its blood and stomach contents. The skin of the animal was then used to make the parchment for the scroll. They were typically composed of 3 parchment sections sewn together. A scroll is often made to the same height as the individual it is intended for in order to provide "head to toe" protection. After the parchment support was constructed, the *däbtära* would draw in the scroll's images, which were usually located at the beginning, middle, and end. Then prayers are written in. Lastly, the name of the person being protected was written in red ink to activate the scroll. Scrolls were also repurposed, with the new individual's name written on them.

Typically, the texts are in Ge'ez, which is Classic Ethiopic and the most spoken of the Afro-Asiatic languages in the region. The texts could also be written in other languages such as Amharic. Text was written in black ink, with introductory prayer phrases, important words from scripture, and the name of the recipient in red ink. Black ink was usually carbonaceous. Red ink was often vermilion or cinnabar, though red ochre was also used—particularly in earlier scrolls. A limited color palette was used for amulet images. Materials testing of Ethiopic paintings is still very limited, but pigments including vermilion, ochers, indigo, orpiment, carbon black, and lead white have been detected in Ethiopic manuscripts before.

The *däbtära* chooses images that the *däbtära* considers to be relevant so that they exude the utmost potency. Amulet scrolls traditionally contain depictions derived from manuscripts. Images include abstract talismanic designs, guardian angels, archangels, saints, as well as events from major figures including Saint Susenyos, Alexander the Great, and King Solomon. An eight-pointed star with vertical and horizontal arms and a central human face is a very common motif seen in scrolls. It is known as the Seal of Solomon, which was derived from the prayer "Solomon's Net," which was for catching demons. Imagery also often incorporates eyes, which symbolize divine light that can drive away disease and demons.

The first image in an amuletic scroll is usually a guardian angel with outspread wings and a drawn sword in their right hand and scabbard in their left. This is a talismanic image used against *zar*. *Zar* is a possessing spirit requiring an individual as a medium. The cult of *zar* is practiced in Ethiopia and East and North Africa and is common among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish practitioners.

The images of amuletic scrolls have agency and were imbued with a power to draw in and trap demons and disease. The act of reciprocal viewing was key to the healing process, with the eyes of the scroll looking into the eyes of the demon, who is looking through the eyes of the scroll's human recipient. Because of this, Ethiopic scrolls are not just containers of ideas but rather are amuletic in function.

Sources:

Derillo, Eyob. 2024. "Text and Image: Magic Scrolls and Recipe Books as Part of the Healing Culture of Ethiopia." in *Ethiopia at the Crossroads*, edited by Christine Sciacca, 321-325. Yale University Press in association with the Walters Museum.

Derillo, Eyob. 2022. "Hidden Stories." Institute for Advanced Study.
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Derillo, Eyob. 2019. "Case Study, Traveling Medicine: Medieval Ethiopian Amulet Scrolls and Practitioners' Handbooks," in *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*, edited by Brian C. Keene, 121-124. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum).

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French, Karen, Hae Min Park, Abigail Quandt, and Glenn Gates. 2024. “*Technical Research on a Selection of Ethiopian Manuscripts and Panel Paintings in the Walters Art Museum.*” in *Ethiopia at the Crossroads*, edited by Christine Sciacca, 267-279. Yale University Press in association with the Walters Museum.

Mercier, Jacques. 1997. *Art That Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*. New York: Prestel.

Moreton, Melissa. 2024. E-mail correspondence, July 22, 2024.

Windmuller-Luna, Kristen. 2015. “Ethiopian Healing Scrolls.” The Met.
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/heal/hd_heal.htm

Media

- Writing is on recto and is primarily in black (carbon black ink). There is also red text (might be vermilion or red ochre).
- Colors for the painted images include black, red, blue, orange, pink, and yellow.
- The writing and images are on the flesh side of the parchment and run across the width, or short side, of the roll.
- There are two columns of text bordered with a pair of black lines and repeating wavy lines. For the final section of text, the border consists of straight black lines and yellow paint. The text is primarily black in addition to some red text. The ink is thinly applied and is composed of heterogeneous pigment particles.
- The paint for the image panels is applied more thickly than the text and in some areas the paint has tiny air bubbles.
- There are three separate image panels.
 - The first image has two heads on top of a broad panel with a checkerboard pattern. They are both looking to the right margin (proper left). Beneath this is a full figure with a red and black striped cloak and wings. The figure (likely a guardian angel) is holding a drawn sword in their right hand and scabbard in their left. It is also looking towards the right margin. Beneath the figure is a broad panel with a checkerboard pattern. There is a frame of twisted black and red lines around the figure and a panel after the checkerboard panel. This image is darker and glossier than the other images.
 - The second image has a 9-panel grid forming an 8-pointed star with a face at the center looking towards the right margin. The face is similar to the figure in the previous image. At the top and bottom are checkerboard patterned panels. There are twisted blue and purple/pink lines framing the 9-panel grid. The sections of panels around the face are filled with geometric patterns and eye symbols.
 - The third image is similar to the previous with a 9-panel grid containing a central face. The outer panels make an 8-pointed cross. The outer corner squares have a diamond pattern. The other squares have eyes as well as half-circle and diamond shapes. There is a border of twisted blue and purple lines at the top and bottom. There is a border of purple/pink twisted lines at the sides. The overall image is brighter than the previous images.

Scroll

Rolled

Before treatment: (5.4 L x 11.2 W x 9.2 D) cm

After treatment: (9.8 L x 11 W x 9.8 D) cm

Unrolled

- scroll could not be fully unrolled until humidification
After Treatment: (209.6 L x 5 W x 2.7 D) (with tie 225.7 cm in total length)
- Parchment Section 1:
 - Image: 32.2 cm
 - Total length: 70 cm
- Parchment Section 2:
 - Image: 19.5 cm
 - Total length: 71.5 cm

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- Parchment Section 3:
 - Image: 13 cm
 - Total length: 68.1 cm
- The scroll is made up of 3 narrow strips of parchment sewn together in sections with a running stitch with a thin strip of parchment.
- The scroll is made up of three lengths of (5 mm thick) parchment sewn together in a running stitch with a thin strip of parchment. For each attachment, the pieces are stitched at 10 points creating 5 long stitches visible from the verso with the ends wrapping over the scroll edges and finishing on the recto.
- The first length is attached on top on the 2nd with about 0.4 cm overlap. The 2nd length is attached on top of the 3rd with about 0.8 cm overlap.
- The top of the scroll is rounded, with a 18.5 cm long parchment tie laced through the top point.
 - The thin parchment tie closure is attached at the top center of the scroll with a single running stitch visible on the recto. The base of the tie is wider than the top end, helping anchor it in place. The width of the tie overall is 9-0.5 mm.
- The top end of the scroll is darker, along with the edges of the scroll its entire length. The rest of the parchment is a very pale brown on both the recto and verso.
- The verso or grain side of the parchment has traces of animal hair. There are large and small hair follicles, suggesting that the parchment may be goat though much of the follicle pattern is extremely faint.

Presence of Foreign Substances

- Upon flattening, dirt, frass, and staining were identified at the final 2.5 cm of the scroll.

Structural Change

- The parchment is stiff and tightly rolled into two cylinders. It is unable to be fully unrolled safely.
- There is some minor media flaking on the image panels.
- The tie closure is quite thin and worn. It is potentially vulnerable to tearing or breaking from improper handling.
- There is some minor creasing and undulation of the parchment overall.
- The edges of the parchment have minor abrasions.
- The ink overall shows signs of cracking, though it appears stable.

Treatment Proposal

1. Examine ink under stereo magnification. Consolidate with 0.5% methylcellulose if applicable.
2. Humidify gently overall via a damp pack until parchment has softened enough to enable gentle unrolling.
3. Use suction table to flatten out and dry the roll in sections.
4. Gently reroll parchment around foam or archival tube covered in Tyvek (approximately 2 inches in diameter)

Treatment

1. Before treatment photography. (1 h)
2. Examined media under stereo magnification. Minor consolidation needed for the second image with 0.5% mc, which was applied with a small brush. Areas with more thickly applied paint and where there was creasing of the parchment were more likely to have media flaking. (1 h)
 - a. Consolidation was conducted to avoid additional media flaking and loss. Future treatment steps would also involve extensive handling and manipulation of the object, heightening the need to stabilize the media beforehand.
3. Humidified overall via suction table's humidification chamber (70-85%). The scroll was unrolled and flattened in stages. (15 h)

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- a. Direct water contact can cause discoloration and gelatinization of parchment, so moisture was introduced in the form of water vapor for a more gentle and controlled humidification process. Parchment is very sensitive to relative humidity changes, so increasing relative humidity would enable the parchment to become flexible enough to safely flatten and reroll.
4. The suction table was attempted to further flatten the scroll while avoiding direct contact with the media, but this was unsuccessful due to the thickness of the parchment.
5. Examined media under stereo magnification. Media appeared stable. (1 h)
6. Mechanically removed some frass at the end of the scroll with soft brushes and porcupine quills. (5 h)
7. Gently rerolled parchment around archival tube covered in Volara and Tyvek (3 inches in diameter). (0.5 h)
 - a. The rerolling was conducted incrementally in the humidification chamber where the parchment would be more flexible.
 - b. The scroll would have originally been rolled much more tightly without any interior support and possibly stored in a leather or metal case. The archival tube's wider diameter better supports the scroll for regular rolling and unrolling. The scroll is expected to be regularly examined, so having it housed in a format conducive for this was a major treatment priority.
8. Worked with digitization to fully image the scroll. (1.5 h)
 - a. This will increase accessibility to the scroll's contents while reducing the need for handling.
9. After treatment photography. (1 h)

Final Notes

The scroll can be fully unrolled with the assistance of the tubes included in the housing and with small weights. There are still undulations overall, particularly at the attachment points between parchment sections. This is due to the inherent nature of the parchment as well as to being stored in a rolled format.

Housing

Housed in a cloth-covered clamshell box with a Volara sling covered with Tyvek. The scroll is rolled around a hollow archival tube wrapped in Volara and Tyvek. The beginning of the scroll is rerolled with a length of heavyweight Hollytex to keep the parchment tie secured.

- The smoothness of the Tyvek helps avoid abrasions to the parchment as the scroll is removed from the box, and the Volara provides supportive cushioning. It is stored with a second, similarly wrapped tube to be used for unrolling assistance—as the scroll is unrolled, the end can be rolled around the second tube.

When examining, a small weight or snake weight can be inserted into the hollow tubes to help hold the scroll in place. The scroll is lifted in/out of the box by handling the inside edges of the tube. The parchment tie closure is very fragile and should be handled with care. Please store the box horizontally. The optimal relative humidity for storage is around 50% to maintain a pliable or manipulative state of the parchment.

Additional Housing/ Display Resources

<https://blog.thepreservationlab.org/category/parchments>

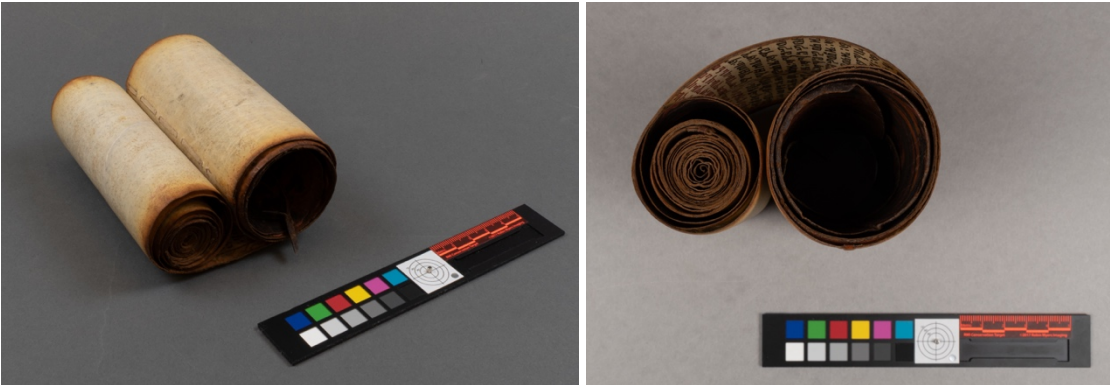
Hours

Examination, Documentation, and Treatment	29 h
Housing or Mounting	4 h
Cloth-covered clamshell box with a Volara sling covered with Tyvek.	

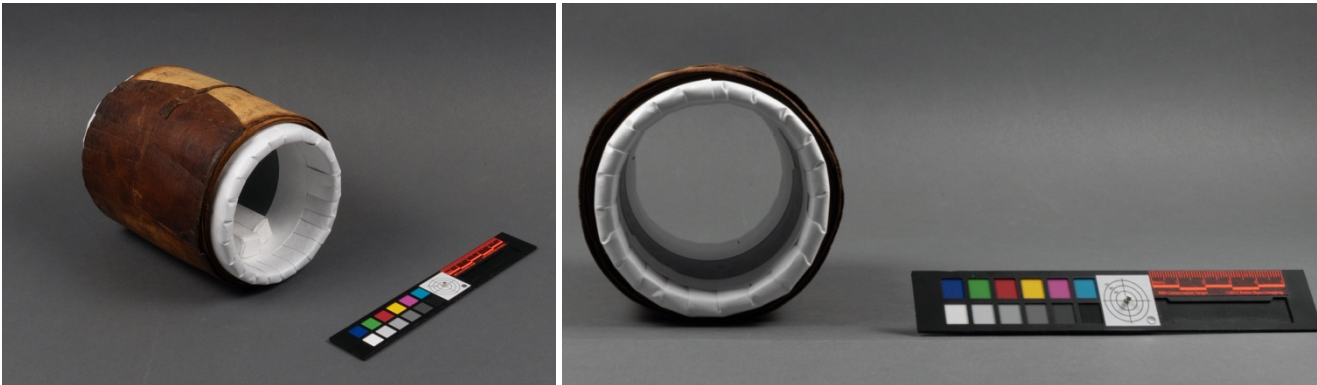
Total Treatment Hours **33 h**

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BT:



AT:



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