Teilprojekt C05
‘Parchment Saints’ - The Making of Ethiopian Hagiographic Manuscripts: Matter and Devotion in Manuscript Practices of Medieval and Pre-Modern Ethiopia

Prof. Dr. Alessandro Bausi

Dr. Antonella Brita

Description of the project
Christian Ethiopia possesses a remarkable hagiographical manuscript tradition that includes hundreds of foreign and local saints to whom written narratives and literary praises are dedicated. This various corpus represents a still scarcely explored field of research which transversally involves single and institutional actors in the relevant manuscript culture. From the creator/translator of the narrative and/or the producer of the material and the manuscript, to the scribe, copyist, and painter, from the commissioner, donor, and destinee, to users and audience, to its fundamental monastic and ecclesiastic institutional background, the whole Ethiopian Christian environment and landscape has been marked by the material, iconic, ideal, and performative presence of hagiographic manuscripts and ‘parchment saints’ throughout the time frame from Late Antiquity to the fourteenth century CE — time limit of the attestation of Ethiopian hagiographical manuscripts — to the present.

Objectives
The project aims to study the specific manuscriptological features of a new creation of intrinsic revolutionary character: extremely sporadical until the fourteenth century, more substantially from the fifteenth century on, Ethiopian prominent figures who had promoted monastic practice and intellectual debates, were recognized as saints and became in their turn characters of narratives fixed in manuscripts for devotional use. So far investigated in its historical and literary aspects only, the making of hagiographic manuscripts promises to disclose unexplored aspects of the Ethiopian manuscript culture: how and why Ethiopian hagiographic manuscripts were first produced; which was the labour division; which the ritual and liturgical accommodation of the manuscripts; which hagiographies went with which; how local saints were assimilated with foreign saints; how manuscripts contributed to shape and organize hagiographic cycles; which the role of archaic multiple-text manuscripts (‘homiliaries’) in prompting the creation of new models of manuscript; which are the parallels to this practice in other related and unrelated manuscript cultures.