

Two Amharic letters of *debtera* Tewelde Medhin of Welqayt from the collection of Antoine d'Abbadie (1849)

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with translations by HAGOS Abrha⁸ and ABREHA Tsegay⁹

Abstract

The two Amharic letters presented in this article are kept in the “fonds Antoine d'Abbadie” in the archives of the Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques¹⁰ in Pau (reference number: 152 J 651), found there recently by Viviane Delpech during her doctoral research on Antoine d'Abbadie. This article summarizes the life of this early researcher, who resided for many years in Ethiopia, and puts the letters into their context.

Keywords: French research history in Ethiopia – *debtera* Tewelde Medhin – Ethiopian scholarly history – *Fithe Negest* – Amharic letter writing

Antoine d'Abbadie, researcher in Ethiopia in the 19th century

Antoine d'Abbadie was a Basque-French scientist, born in 1810 in Dublin in Ireland. From his childhood he admired James Bruce¹¹ and dreamt of equalling his brave explorations in Ethiopia.¹² His explorer soul was revealed very early by his systematic questions about his environment and his plans to explore the unknown himself one day.¹³ After six years of material, financial and intellectual preparation, he landed on the Massawa Peninsula on 17 February 1838. He was accompanied by his younger brother Arnauld-Michel d'Abbadie, who later played a leading role at the court of an Ethiopian prince and got strongly involved in military campaigns under that ruler. In spite of the mythic quality of his trip to find the source of the Nile, d'Abbadie's approach was

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¹⁰ Services des Archives départementales des Pyrénées Atlantiques.

¹¹ *Travels to discover the source of the Nile* was his childhood book.

¹² Abbadie, A. (d'), Radau, R., *Géodésie d'une partie de la Haute-Ethiopie*, Duprat, Paris, 1863; Abbadie, A. (d'), *Géographie de l'Éthiopie, ce que j'ai entendu faisant suite à ce que j'ai vu*, vol. I, G. Mesnil, Paris, 1890.

¹³ Darboux, G., *Antoine d'Abbadie. 1810-1897, notice historique sur Antoine d'Abbadie*, Académie des Sciences, Stedi, Paris, 2001.

characterized by its singularity and complexity. He not only planned to localize the source of the Nile, but he also purposed to provide a geographic work about the territory, an ethnographic, linguistic and anthropological study of the Ethiopian people, and the development of French diplomacy and involvement of the Catholic Church in the region. Initially intending to stay for three years, he ultimately spent eleven years travelling throughout Ethiopia, from Tigray to Harer, the Oromo countries, Innarya, Shewa and Begémdir, among others.¹⁴ His scientific equipment consisted mainly of a trip telescope, a theodolite, chains and pickets – to make observations and measurements, to study the sky, the mountains and the rivers, and to sketch maps. For this, he had worked out a method of data collection, “la géographie expéditive”, which made use of natural landmarks.

His way of travelling was unique as he pursued a peaceful and intellectual approach. Towards the end of his life, he gave a speech, entitled *Credo d'un vieux voyageur*, in which he explained the best way to travel safely and peacefully. One important lesson that he noted was that it was better not to travel with weapons, considering them as ineffective, just conveying a message of conflict and aggressivity. He also valorized human sciences and found it mandatory to learn local languages in order to integrate into the local cultures and to protect himself from translators whom he considered as often too unreliable.¹⁵

In contrast to his brother who was strongly engaged in military activities, d'Abbadie soon became a recognized scholar in Ethiopia. He succeeded in integrating himself within the circles of Ethiopian intellectuals and religious elites in the traditional schools of higher learning of Gonder and other areas, and was proud of being considered a *membir* [a designation used for learned personalities who were active in teaching]. Moreover, he also became known through his Christian engagement. Between 1838 and 1840, as he needed to acquire more adequate scientific material, he used the opportunity of a trip to Europe to visit Pope Gregory XVI in Rome. He presented three fellow Ethiopian Christians to the Pope in order to demonstrate that “*nos frères de religion*” [‘our brothers in faith’] deserve the support and the attention of the Roman Church for an evangelization mission in Ethiopia.¹⁶ This activity lies at the beginning of the later Lazarist (and much later Capuchin) missions in Ethiopia (then mainly encompassing the highlands) and further south in the Oromo lands. For his involvement in this missionary project, d'Abbadie was awarded the Cross of Knight of Saint Gregory's Order.

¹⁴ Abbadie, A. (d'), Radau R., op. cit. 1863; Abbadie, A. (d'), op. cit. 1890. The provinces and independant kingdoms mentioned are just examples.

¹⁵ Abbadie, A. (d'), *Credo d'un vieux voyageur*, Paris, 1884. The same recommendations had been made much earlier in his « Instructions pour les voyages d'exploration » in *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, Martinet, Paris, 1867, p. 29-30.

¹⁶ See Abbadie, A. (d'), « Sur l'abolition de l'esclavage en Afrique », *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Coloniales et Maritimes*, numéro d'avril 1896, Paris, 1896.

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Back in Ethiopia, Antoine d'Abbadie succeeded in accomplishing one truly major project. In 1846, after an exhausting expedition, the two brothers reached what they thought to be the source of the Nile, between the Innarya and Jimmaa kingdoms.¹⁷ For this incomparable achievement they received the prestigious Légion d'Honneur and the Gold Medal of the French Society of Geography in 1850.¹⁸ Unfortunately, after claiming for more than ten years to have located the Nile's main stream, the discovery of its source was ultimately attributed to the British explorers Speke and Grant. It was discovered that the d'Abbadie brothers had mistakenly studied the Omo River instead of the Nile. However, this error and deception did not take away the value of their contribution to Ethiopian studies. Indeed, Antoine d'Abbadie created the first Amharic-French dictionary consisting of 15.000 words,¹⁹ elaborated with the help of his teacher, the Ethiopian professor *debtera* Tewelde Medhin. Started already during his journey in Ethiopia, d'Abbadie continued with the colossal task of updating and deepening this dictionary over a period of thirty years. This also explains its fairly late publication in 1881, long after Tewelde Medhin's death. The French scholar also worked for many years on the sketching and publication, in 1863, 1873 and 1890, of the first geodesy and cartography of Highland Ethiopia.²⁰ Furthermore, he collected a treasure of nearly three hundred Ethiopian manuscripts, kept today at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.²¹ Throughout his life, he valorized Ethiopian culture and passed on his studies about Ethiopia's people through many of his speeches and publications, which focused particularly on the fight against slavery.²²

On his way back home in 1848, d'Abbadie accompanied Tewelde Medhin to Egypt and Jerusalem for his Christian pilgrimage.²³ The return to France did not mean the end of his Ethiopian engagement, however. He kept in touch and developed relations with Ethiopians, such as Assegeheñ and Tewelde Medhin, western explorers such as Munzinger, and Catholic missionaries such as Massaja, Taurin and Juste d'Urbin, who used to send him information,

¹⁷ « Lettre de M. d'Abbadie à M. Arago, sur la découverte de la principale des sources du Nil blanc », in *Compte-rendus hebdomadaires des séances de l'Académie des Sciences*, vol. 25, juillet-décembre 1847, Bachelier, Paris, p. 485-487.

¹⁸ Darboux, G., op.cit., 2001.

¹⁹ Abbadie, A. (d'), *Dictionnaire de la langue amariniña*, Actes de la Société Philologique, tome 10, F. Vieweg, 1881.

²⁰ Abbadie, A. (d'), Radau, R., op.cit. 1863 ; Abbadie, A. (d'), *Observations relatives à la physique du globe*, Paris, 1873; Abbadie, A. (d'), op.cit, 1890.

²¹ On this particular subject, see Bosc-Tiessé, C., Wion, A., « Les manuscrits éthiopiens d'Antoine d'Abbadie à la Bibliothèque nationale de France. Collecte, copie et étude » in Dercourt, J. (ed.), *Antoine d'Abbadie, de l'Abyssinie au Pays basque, voyage d'une vie*, Atlantica, Biarritz, 2010, p. 77-116.

²² For example, Abbadie, A. (d'), op.cit., 1896.

²³ Darboux, G., op.cit., 2001.

objects or manuscripts that he had ordered.²⁴ When he had his personal ‘castle of Abbadia’ built by the famous architect Viollet-le-Duc,²⁵ he also sought to decorate it with references to Ethiopia. This is also the reason why two *éthiopisant* portraits were found in his lounge: one showing d’Abbadie in 1838 on his aforementioned visit to Rome with his three fellow Ethiopian Christians, and the other Tewelde Medhin’s portrait, indicating d’Abbadie’s admiration for his Amharic teacher. These artworks are significant examples for the orientalist stream of arts in the 19th century.

The originality and uniqueness of d’Abbadie’s castle lies especially in the painted scenes of Ethiopian daily life. These wall paintings are found in the hallway and were arranged by the architect decorator, Duthoit. Based on rationalist principles recommended by Viollet-le-Duc, Duthoit depicted a real ethnologic study: women’s preparation of *injera*, the reception of a chief, an Oromo parliament, a Christian school, a warrior holding a speech, a Christian procession, one painting shows a case of church asylum (with a fugee running to a church compound to protect himself from persecution), and a hunting scene. These scenes convey a didactic message that is underlined by an Ethiopian calligraphic register, composing the figurative paintings’ legends. Throughout the castle, he used Ethiopian proverbs in Ge’ez script as decoration. More than teaching Ethiopian habits, d’Abbadie’s choice of emblematic Ge’ez calligraphy serves the purpose of elevating Ethiopia to the level of an antique and authentic civilization. He also integrated in his neo-gothic decors an Ethiopian collection composed of leather shields, hunt trophies and numerous daily objects. Last but not least, he positioned a statue of the young Ethiopian Adula in the center of his hallway, in remembrance of Adula, who had accompanied him and had lived with him in France. This refined wooden sculpture is situated at the second floor of the main staircase, positioned at the centre of the building, surrounded by the wall paintings described above. The symbol is very eloquent: dressed as a warrior and holding a torch, Adula is settled on a powerful buffalo head. With his youth, his garment and his attitude, he characterizes and even serves as an allegory of the Ethiopian nation, which d’Abbadie considered to be young, proud, combative, intellectually enlightened and free. Its central positioning reveals the

²⁴ Delpech, V., *Orientalisme rêvé et souvenirs de voyage au château d’Abbadia*, Master 2 recherche Histoire de l’art, Laboratoire ITEM EA 3002, Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, 2008.

²⁵ V. Delpech has done a Ph. D. thesis in History of art on this castle and its owners, Antoine and Virginie d’Abbadie (*Le château d’Abbadia à Hendaye: le monument idéal d’Antoine d’Abbadie*, Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, 2012). The castle of Abbadia was built near Hendaye (French Basque country), on the French southwest coast cliffs, between 1864 and 1879. It is characterized by its blend of oriental and Gothic concerning furniture, decor, architecture and collections. As stipulated in d’Abbadie’s last will, it belongs today to the French Academy of Sciences, along with his entire legacy.

Two Amharic letters of *debertera* Tewelde Medhin of Welqayt importance of his attachment to Ethiopia, as the centre of this scientist's universe even far away from Ethiopia.²⁶



Fig. 1: Portrait of debtera Tewelde Medhin in Egypt (kept in the Abbadia castle, Hendaye, France), courtesy of the French Academy of Sciences

D'Abbadie's distinctions are extremely numerous. The most glorious one was his election as a member of the French Academy of Sciences in 1867 in recognition for his geographical works concerning Ethiopia. He became one of

²⁶ See Delpesch, V., « L'Ethiopie au château d'Abbadia: de la création à l'expression d'un programme orientaliste », *Annales d'Ethiopie* 26, 2011, pp. 129-165.

the most important *éthiopisants*, and was consulted by numerous travelers and scientists. In 1885, some years before his death in 1897, he went back to Ethiopia once more, aged more than 70, accompanied by his wife Virginie. During this last stay he felt nostalgic, given the increase of European influence, which would profoundly change the mythic land of his youth.

The letter writer: *debtera* Tewelde Medhin of Welqayt²⁷

The letters presented here belong to the first ones written by his Ethiopian travel companion Tewelde Medhin after his arrival in Jerusalem and d'Abbadie's departure to France. Tewelde Medhin had been commissioned to write a full scholarly commentary to the *Fithe Negest*, the Ethiopian law book of the kings, and had been promised payment by Antoine d'Abbadie. These letters are of minor importance, but still interesting examples of Amharic letter writing. They document an exchange of information regarding the payment, which was carried out by d'Abbadie, but more slowly than expected by Tewelde Medhin. An interesting feature of this otherwise rather prosaic document is that Tewelde Medhin underlined his report and his claims by an Ethiopian proverb and also some cultural references: The Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem had troubled him, but the patriarch had become his "relative", with which he shows that by now he is well protected and accepted by the leading personalities of Jerusalem – while hinting indirectly at some controversies with the monks, probably about doctrinal questions (we shall note here that he was close to d'Abbadie and thus perhaps also to some of his ideas of religious reform).

The Ge'ez inscription in the above-mentioned portrait (see fig. 1) of Tewelde Medhin "from Aqewerq in Welqayt" describes him as a professor of law at Medhané Alem in Gonder, which shows that he had already acquired a certain scholarly rank in the traditional schools of higher learning. He was therefore not just the Amharic teacher and main source for d'Abbadie's Amharic dictionary, but also an experienced scholar, before he decided to retreat to Jerusalem as a pilgrim and later as a monk.²⁸

²⁷ I am grateful to Wolbert Smidt for contributing this section and the annotations to the two letters.

²⁸ The information in this paragraph is based on a reading and analysis of the portrait of Tewelde Medhin and the scarce biographic information found in d'Abbadie's writings and other sources; see Wolbert Smidt, "Tewelde-Medhin ze-Aqewerq", in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 33, 2012, München - Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, Sp. 1411-15. See also the summary of his biography: Wolbert Smidt, "Täwäldä Mädhän", in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 4 (O-X), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2010, p. 876f.

Translation of letter I²⁹ (s. fig. 2)

This letter is sent by debtera Tewelde Medhin to Int'onyos,³⁰ the Frenchman. Peace be to you, my dear, and peace be to your brothers, who are also my brothers. Have you arrived at your country peacefully, and is your family fine?

Concerning the book,³¹ four paragraphs have already been written, and the fifth is begun. However, we have agreed that the writer would get fifty birr³² after writing some; why did you say twenty? You transgressed what you had said. A proverb says: 'Better to be the death of one's child than to break a promise.' I did not break my promise.

The monks troubled me, but the patriarch and the counsel are with me (have become my relatives).

I have written this on Thursday, on the 21st of the month of Sené, in 1841 E.C.³³ Amen.

[Followed by a postscript:]³⁴

Regarding abune [our father] P'awlos it is like this: He said, 'I have asked an old Roman – before the church was burnt, there were two graves around our Lord's shrouding [maybe the name of a place], after the church was burnt, Rome built a temple inside, but I don't know whether the skull is (still) there or was taken away.'

Translation of letter II³⁵ (s. fig. 4)

This letter is sent by debtera Tewelde Medhin, Professor of Fithe Negest, to Debadi Int'onyos.³⁶ Greetings to you, my dear. I am happy you reached home in peace. The Fithe Negest has fifty-one articles. I have written ten of them and sent this to you. But, you have not sent the salary of the scribe yet. You promised me that you will send a letter about the money by Birut Hup. But you did not. So the scribe refused to write without agreement. That is why I received that fifty birr.

You know that I never disobey your orders and I will not. However, shortly after you left they took me down to the ground floor and then put me out of the house. I lost my dignity and

²⁹ Translated by Hagos Abrha.

³⁰ Ethiopian form of the name Antonius.

³¹ The two letters show that he is referring here to the writing of the Fithe Negest commentary, which he was commissioned to write by Antoine d'Abbadie; the final manuscript was produced by a scribe, as we learn from these letters, to be paid by Tewelde Medhin from the funds provided by d'Abbadie (for information on the incomplete manuscript in the possession of d'Abbadie, see Smidt 2010, op. cit.).

³² Amh. for 'silver', referring in this case to Maria Theresa Thalers, the silver currency most widely used in Near Eastern countries at that time.

³³ The note on the back of the letter by Antoine d'Abbadie (s. fig. 3) clarifies that this is the date according to the Ethiopian Calendar (1849 in the Gregorian Calendar). According to the note he replied to this letter on 19 August 1849.

³⁴ This probably refers to a question by Antoine d'Abbadie regarding local traditions on an ancient sacred grave.

³⁵ Translated by Abreha Tsegay.

³⁶ I.e. "d'Abbadie Antonius", which is the full Ethiopian version of Antoine d'Abbadie's name.

rented a house for ten girsh³⁷ monthly payment. I am living only from what you gave me. Now the only thing I have is twenty girsh. This letter has been written on Wednesday, 3 Meskerem 1842 E.C.³⁸

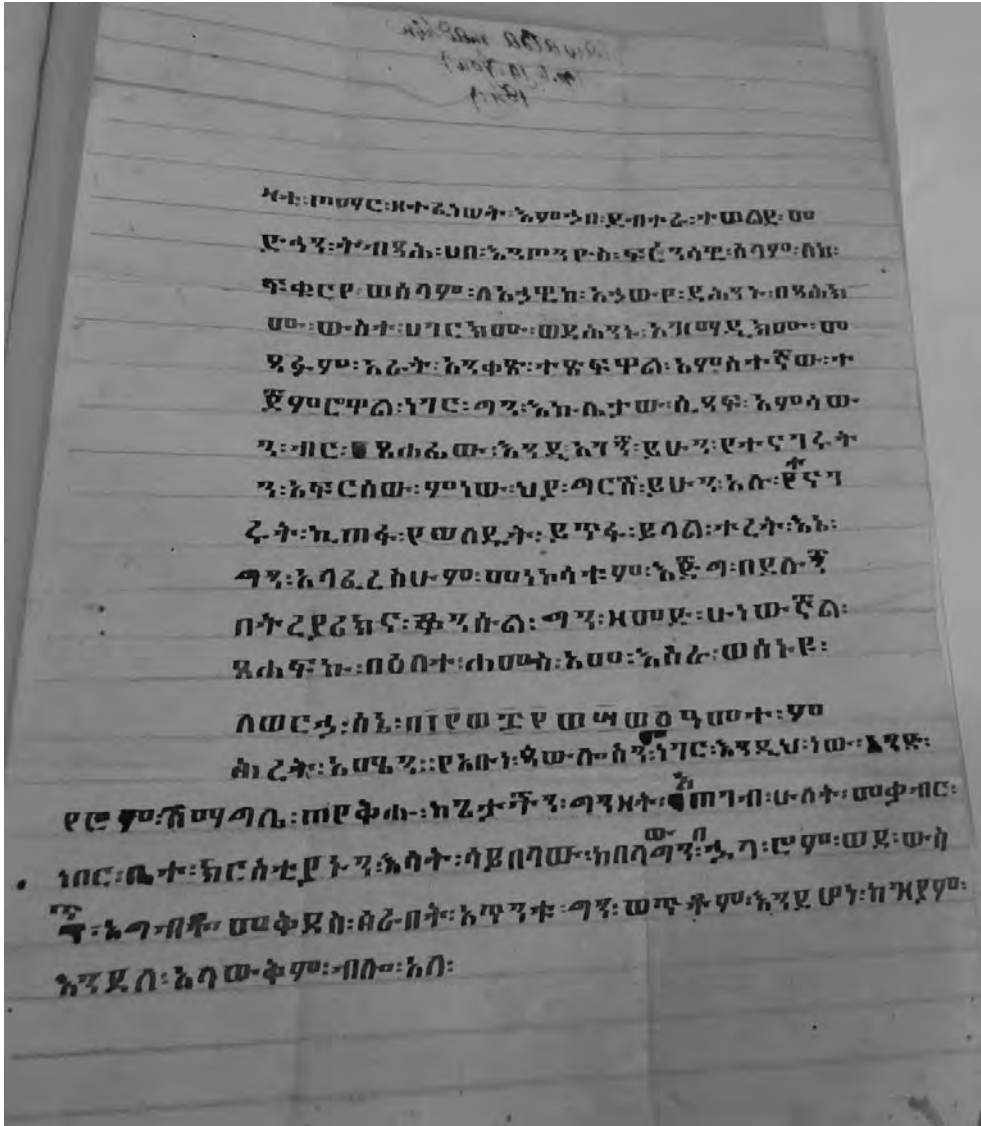


Fig. 2: Letter I by debtera Tewelde Medhin

³⁷ Ottoman term for the local money (from Lat. *grossus*, Germ. *Groschen*, Tgn. *qirsh*).

³⁸ The note on the back of the letter by Antoine d'Abbadie (s. fig. 3) shows that he received this letter on 4 October 1849 and answered it the same day.

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Fig. 3: Notes by Antoine d'Abbadie on the letters by *debtera* Tewelde Medhin, with dates

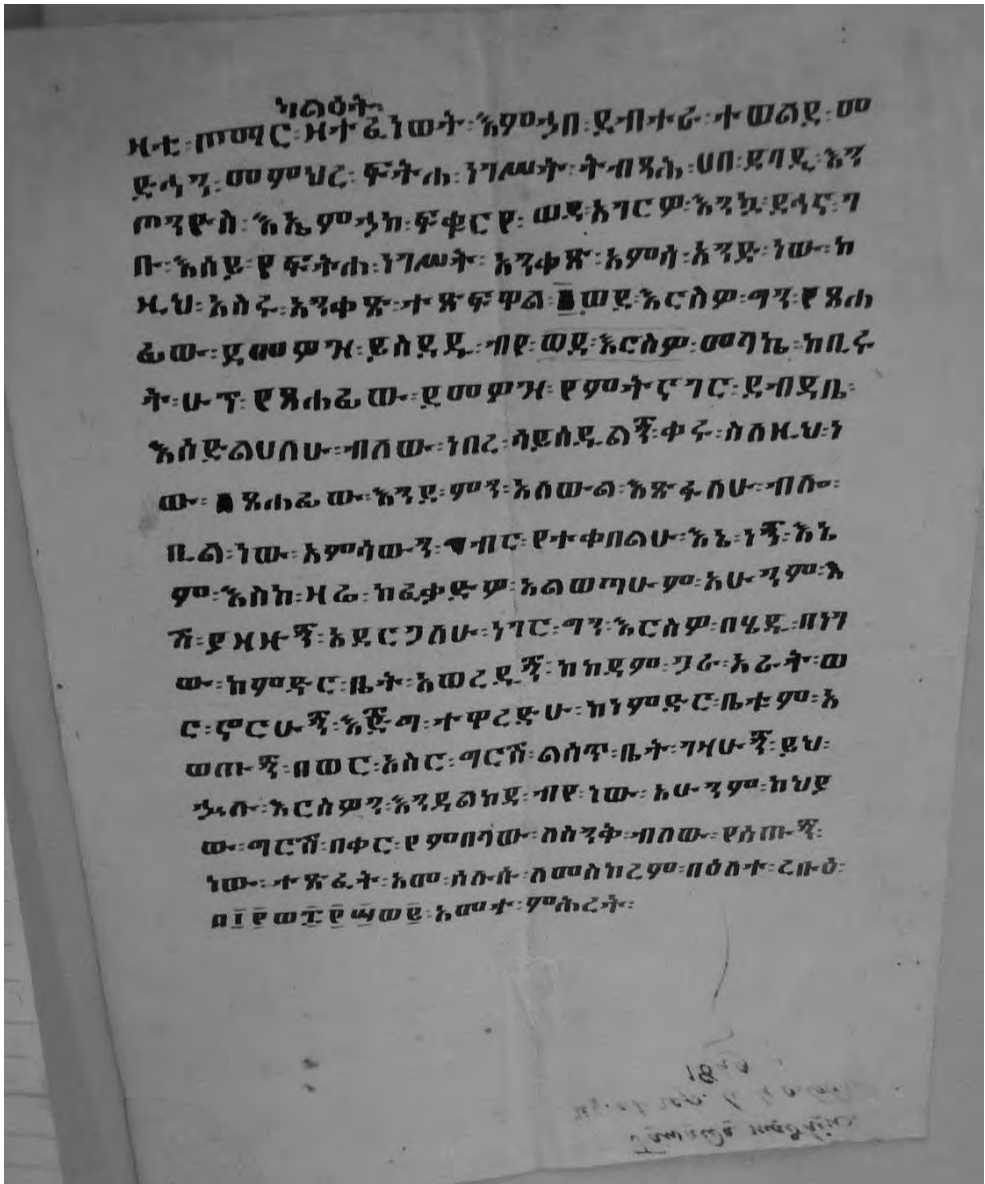


Fig. 4: Letter II by *debtera* Tewelde Medhin

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