IslHornAfr: Islam in the Horn of Africa. A Comparative Literary Approach

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The project IslHornAfr: Islam in the Horn of Africa, A Comparative Literary Approach (European Union 7th Framework Programme, ERC Advanced Grant 322849, 2013–2018) was conceived as a contribution to both African and Islamic studies, with the aim of producing a critical and comprehensive picture of the Islamic literary history of the Horn of Africa.

Launched initially at the University of Florence (Italy) in 2013, the project was transferred to the University of Copenhagen (Denmark) in its second year. Besides the Principal Investigator, Alessandro Gori, the project team is currently composed of (in alphabetical order) Sara Fani, Adday Hernandez Lopez, Irmeli Perho, Michele Petrone, and Anne Regourd. The project database has been managed by Orhan Toy.

The project explores the Islamic cultural history in the Horn of Africa as it is reflected in the literary traditions of the region (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia). It considers primarily the manuscript tradition but also printed texts. In most general terms, the project aims at considerably expanding our knowledge of the texts composed, translated, or copied by the Muslims in the Horn of Africa.

The material shall combine the elements already accessible to scholars with the new data to be recovered in a series of field missions. Field missions shall be organized in Ethiopia, Somaliland, Djibouti, and Eritrea. Institutional (primarily mosques and shrines) and private libraries shall be visited in order to record the manuscripts and their content in their local context. Not only the local literary production of the Horn of Africa but also locally copied texts of foreign origin are being considered.

In 2013, the bulk of research material came from the Arabic collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, digitized by the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project (EMIP).1 A hand list of these manuscripts has been published.2 Manuscripts from this collection are discussed in this volume by Michele Petrone and Sara Fani. In 2014, the work focused on the manuscripts from the ‘Abd Allāh Šarīf Museum (Harār, Ethiopia), digitized by the EMIP team.

1 Headed by Steve Delamarter, to whom the PI is most grateful.
Most of 2015 has been dedicated to examining manuscripts recorded by the project team during its field research in Šimma (Oromiyya Region) and Gurage (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region), during November and December, 2014. The mission was locally coordinated by Hassen Muhammad Kawo and Kemal Ibrahim from Addis Ababa University. It produced c.200 digitized manuscripts and several hundred fragments. First impressions of the mission are reflected in the mission report published on the project website (<http://www.islhornafr.eu/mission1.html>, last accessed 15 June 2015).

A field mission to Somaliland is planned in the summer of 2015. In addition, the collection of manuscripts and microfilms from Ethiopia of the late Abraham Johannes Drewes in Leiden has been digitized for the project and shall be evaluated by the team.

All texts (main texts and additional texts in the manuscripts, documents, books, whether in Arabic or in local languages) are classified with the help of the project database according to their genres, contents, titles, authors, places of creation, number of witnesses, distribution of witnesses, and linguistic and graphic peculiarities. At the time of this publication, c.350 distinct texts from 160 manuscripts have been listed in the database (see fig. 1), a considerable share of which is not widely known outside the region of study.

Besides extensive metadata on the texts, the relational database contains metadata on persons (authors, copyists, traditional scholars; at the time of this publication there are 355 names, see fig. 2) and places (at the moment, 84 entries), in addition to an extensive bibliography. A new prosopography of Northeast-African Islam is expected to emerge in the course of the project. Not only the local literary production of the Horn of Africa but also locally copied texts of foreign origin are being considered. A re-evaluation of external Islamic sources dealing with these areas completes the picture.

Codicological peculiarities of manuscript making among Muslims of the Horn of Africa are also explored (primarily by Anne Regourd).

A significant corpus of texts from various spheres—theology, law, history, hagiography, mostly previously unknown or unstudied—shall be critically edited and published (compare the case studies by the project members Alessandro Gori, Sara Fani, and Michele Petrone in this volume). They shall not only be considered in their local context but also compared to the ‘mainstream’ Islamic tradition, highlighting the individual character but also the common features shared by the literatures of the entire Islamic world.

The project team hopes to increase the awareness of Islam in the Horn of Africa for the scholarship, and the awareness of the value of local tradition in Africa itself, as well as contribute to the understanding of the processes of Islamization and their dependence of and effect upon local contexts. In addi-
tion, the project database (see figs. 1, 2) is expected to become an important tool for research in African Islamic literature, African Islamic biography and African Islamic topography.

In addition to co-organizing the conference that resulted in this volume, the IslHornAfr project organizes regular workshops. Among these are: in 2014, March (Addis Ababa, together with CFEE): Islamic Manuscripts in the Horn of Africa; in October (Copenhagen): Islam in the Horn of Africa,

3 For updates and reports, see <http://www.islhornafr.eu/>.