

## *The Manuscript Bindings of Harar* *A preliminary examination*

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After his visit to the walled city of Harar in 1855, Richard Burton observed that he 'could not but admire' the bindings of Harari manuscripts, for 'no Eastern country save Persia surpasses them in strength and appearance' (*First Footsteps in East Africa*, 1856, p. 361).

Since then scarcely anything has been published on Harari manuscript bindings which to this day have remained little known to outside scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising, for remarkably few manuscripts from the walled city have found their way to Europe. The present writer has been unable to locate any in the great collections of Britain, Italy or Holland — the repositories of numerous Ethiopian Christian manuscripts — and only one, acquired in 1885 by the Austrian traveller Philipp Paulitschke, in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian study of Harari manuscripts has likewise been limited, the more so as the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, an institution supported by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Hill Monastic Library in Collegeville, Minnesota, has confined its attention to Christian works. No information on the number of Harari manuscripts in mosques or private hands is available to the present writer.

Some idea of the bindings which so impressed Burton can, however, be obtained from a score or so of Harari manuscripts in the Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (I.E.S.) in Addis Ababa and about a dozen in the recently established Harari Cultural Museum (H.C.M.) in Harar. Most of these volumes are *Qur'ans* and works of Islamic teaching; but the Institute of Ethiopian Studies also possesses an interesting volume of Harar court records (I.E.S. MS959) dating from the period of the Egyptian occupation of the late 1870s and early 1880s. Though the *Qur'ans* and most religious works are of course in Arabic, some texts are in Adaré, or Harari, one of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia which is used only within the walls of the city. The literature is for the most part theological, but also includes chronicles, court records etc.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the manuscripts examined date from the nineteenth century, but a few are of the late eighteenth. I am grateful to the librarian of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Ato Degiffe Gabre Tsadik, and to

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1 But see Cohen, 1931, pp. 251-2; Leslau, 1937, pp. 431-3.

2 Cohen, *loc. cit.*

3 Conti Rossini, 1919, pp. 401-25; Cohen, pp. 243-354; Cerulli, 1936; Leslau, 1937; Ullendorff, 1955, pp. 25-6.

Cohen's list of mss in Harari (pp. 251-2) includes excerpts from the Old and New Testaments as well as chronicle and philological materials.

Ato Abdulfetah Abdulkadir Sherif of the Harari Cultural Museum for permission to make rubbings which are so necessary in this kind of research, as well as to Ato Ahmed Zecharia of the I.E.S. for translation from Adaré.

Scrutiny of the Harari manuscripts at the two institutions shows that their bindings are squarely in the Islamic/Arab tradition. The covers were thus made, and decorated, in the fashion described in the early seventeenth century by the North African writer Abu'l 'Abbās Aḥmad b. Muhammad al-Sufyānī of Fez in 1619 AD, who noted:

You take the pared skin and smear it with strong glue on both sides. Then you place two unpared skins on it, smeared with glue on the inner side. Leave it until it dries. Apply on it a sheet of paper on which is marked with ink any design which you wish to use. This is done by taking a sheet of thin paper, wetting it with your saliva, leaving it until the saliva is absorbed, and dries a little. Press that sketch, whatever it is you wish to draw — a design, an illustration, or anything else relating to the book — with your thumb and finger. Outline it with pen and ink until the design is visible. When you have glued it on the previously mentioned leather, and it has dried, follow the sketch and the impression of the described drawing with a *mibzagh* (or book-binders' awl)... To decorate make the impression on the moistened leather to reproduce the design. (Levey, 1962, pp. 51-55.)

Extensive use was also made of metal stamps embodying a wide variety of ornamental designs.<sup>4</sup>

Besides their two covers, some Harari manuscripts also have an attached flap, known in Arabic as *lisān*, which is attached to the rear cover and tucked under the front, thereby protecting the pages and keeping them free from dust. This flap has been described by Duncan Haldane of the Victoria and Albert Museum as Islamic binders' 'greatest contribution' to the book-making craft.<sup>5</sup>

Most decorated Harari manuscripts, to judge from those in the I.E.S. and H.C.M. collections, have identical ornamentation on the front and back covers. The decoration usually embodies three or in some instances four basic features. These comprise (1) a central design, which is block-pressed on the back and front cover, and is usually oval, but occasionally round; (2) two smaller identical devices, which are often but not always stamped above and below the main design; (3) a simple border, in most cases consisting merely of one or more often two or three tooled lines; and (4) decorative motifs block-pressed in each of the four corners. The flaps are also frequently embellished with elaborate stamping and tooling.

Many of the bindings in the two collections under discussion are exceedingly well decorated. Ornamentation, as seen in plates I and II, is well proportioned. The former reproduces a rubbing of the binding of a *Qur'an*, probably dating from the nineteenth century (I.E.S. 260), and the latter of a religious commentary of about the same date (I.E.S. 267). None of the Harari bindings so far seen by the present writer are, however, either gilt or painted, as are for example the finer manuscripts of Persia.

4. Haldane, 1983, p. 14.

5. *Ibid.*

### The central motif

The central motif of Harari manuscript bindings, which is generally the most interesting and ornate part of their decoration, is almost invariably either oval or round. It is usually linked to the border design by tooled vertical and horizontal lines which are a characteristic feature of the bindings under discussion.

One of the oldest manuscripts in the Harari Cultural Museum, a *Qur'an* of 1174 AH (1760-1 AD), is stamped with an almost diamond-shaped 8 by 5 cm oval (fig. 1). This device is ornamented with a series of wavy lines which divide the decoration into numerous almost separate compartments, each containing a dot or tiny diamond.

A slightly later volume at the H.C.M., a *Qur'an* of 1198 AH (1783-4 AD), is ornamented with a 6 by 4 cm diamond oval (fig. 2) with scalloped edges. It is ornamented with a design of flowers and leaves.

One of the earliest manuscripts in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, I.E.S. 1852, a book of Friday preachings, appears to have been written in 986 AH (1578-9), but bears a stamp of Sultan Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Yusuf, with the date 1212 AH (1797-8). The cover is decorated with a 6 by 5 cm oval (fig. 3 and pl. III) containing a boldly designed snake-like creeper, adorned with small flowers.

An early nineteenth-century *Qur'an* in the H.C.M., produced in 1240 AH (1824-5), has a much larger, more elaborately decorated 9 by 7 cm roundel (fig. 4 and pl. IV) with floral motif and scalloped edges.

Another oval-shaped and intricately interlaced central device measuring 6½ by 4½ cm (fig. 5) with scalloped edges is found on I.E.S. 259, a *Qur'an* probably dating from the nineteenth century.

A smaller and more ornate 5½ by 4 cm oval decoration (fig. 6) is on I.E.S. 309, a volume on religious etiquette, morals and law of about the same age.

A larger 7½ by 5 cm floral device (fig. 7) with complex, almost abstract floral decorations is seen on I.E.S. 272, a nineteenth-century Harari religious commentary.

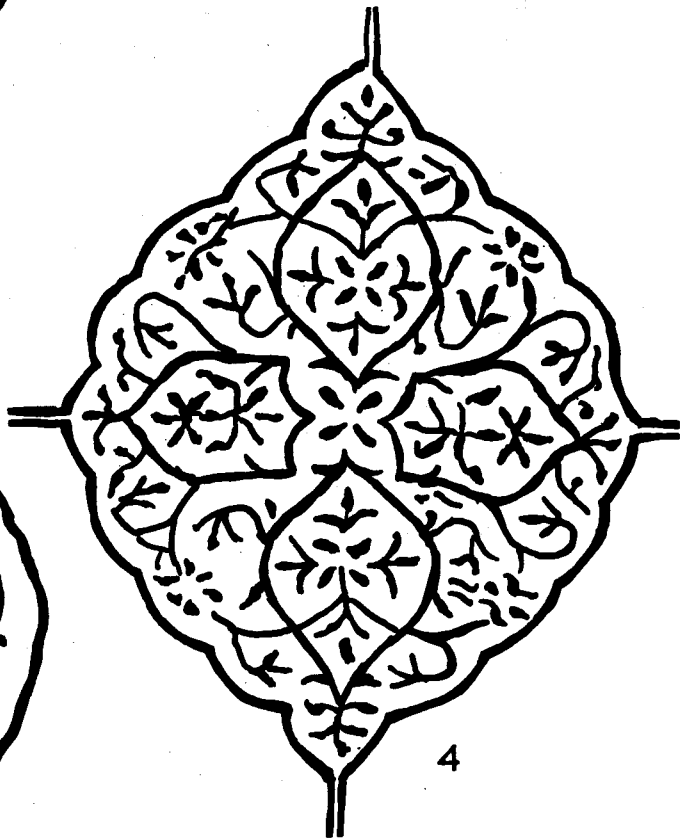
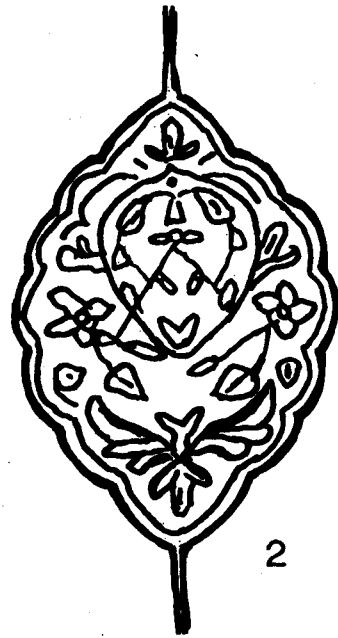
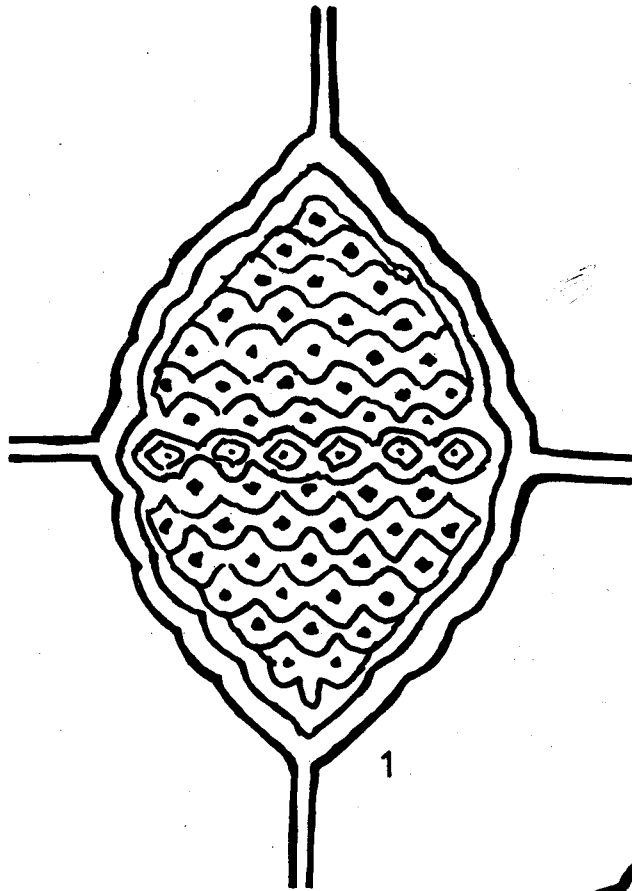
Particularly striking is the 8 by 6 cm scalloped decoration with a large central leaf (fig. 8) found on I.E.S. 959, a volume of Harari court records for the years 1290-7 AH (1873-4 to 1879-80 AD), the period of the Egyptian occupation.

One other example of the central motif on Harari bindings may be cited: a much smaller scalloped decoration (fig. 9), measuring only about 4½ by 3½ cm, on I.E.S. 264, a nineteenth-century *Qur'an*.

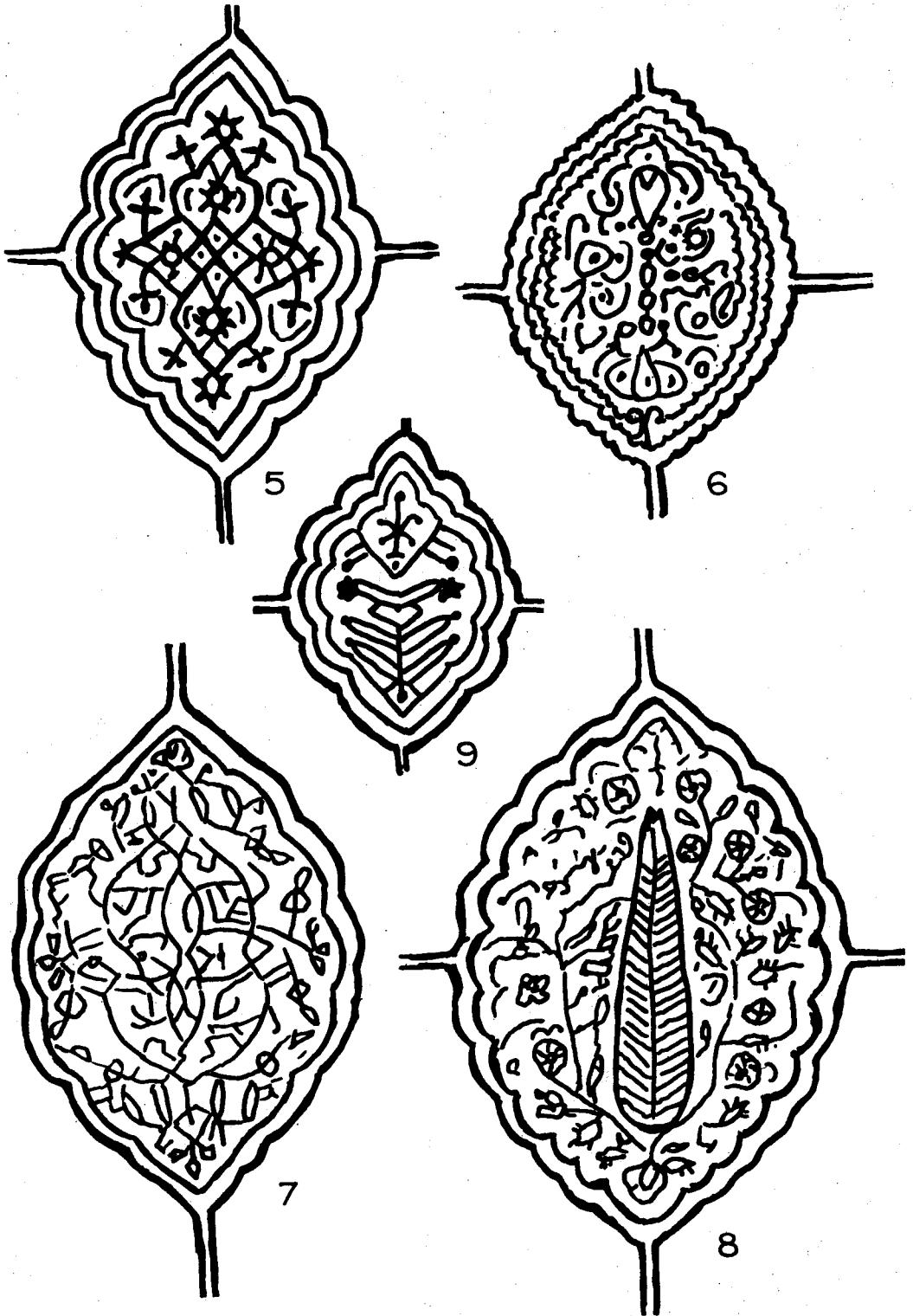
### Other decorations above and below the central motif

In many Harari bindings two subsidiary decorations are placed above and beneath the central motif. They are invariably identical — being probably stamped from the same die — and are linked to the central and border motifs by a thin vertical line. These subsidiary decorations are invariably much smaller, and therefore less elaborate, than the central design to which they seldom bear any very marked stylistic relationship. Most of these subsidiary decorations are less than 2 or 3 cm in height or width.

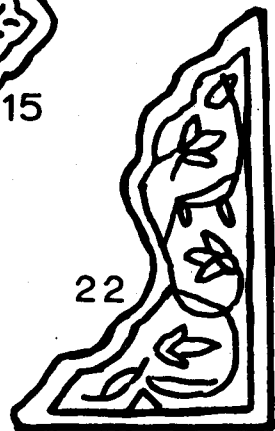
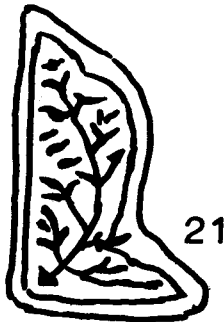
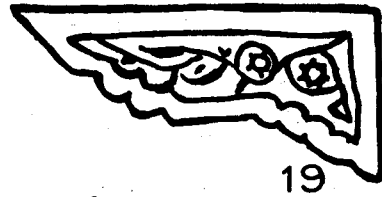
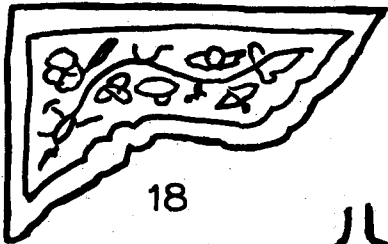
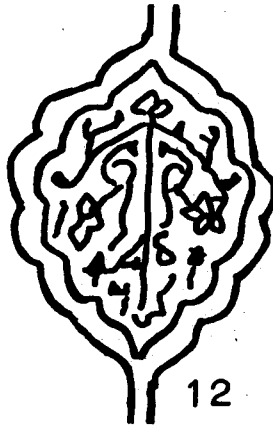
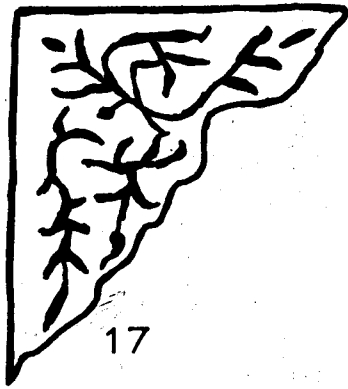
Characteristic of these decorations are those in the H.C.M. *Qur'ans* of 1783-4 (fig. 10) and 1824-5 (fig. 11), I.E.S. 959 (fig. 12) which, as we have seen, contains



Central motifs



Central motifs



Corner-pieces and decorations above and below central motifs

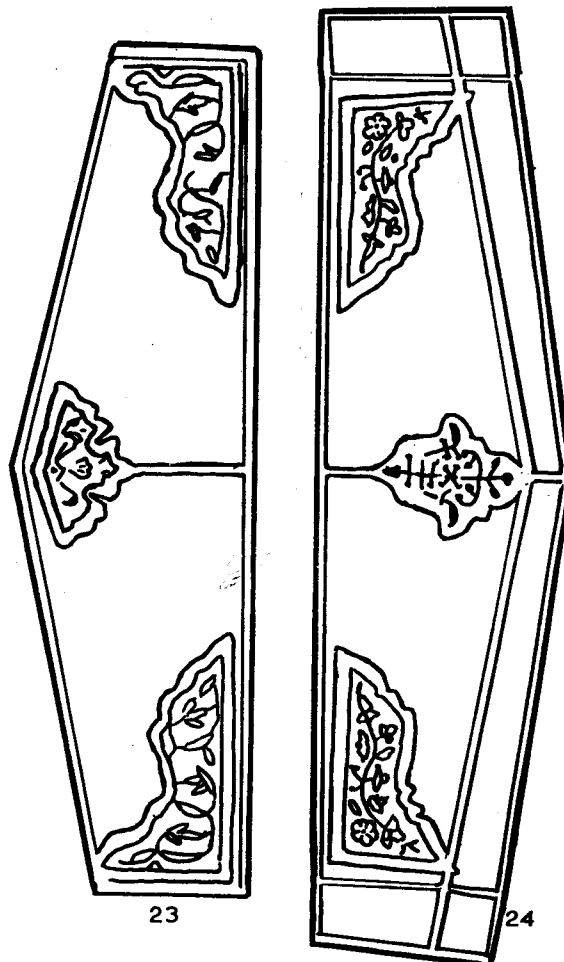
court records of from 1873-4 to 1879-80, and three other manuscripts which probably also date from the nineteenth century: MSS 264 (fig. 13), 267 (fig. 14) and 260 (fig. 15).

### Corner-pieces

The four corner-pieces on Harari bindings are always identical to each other, for they too are probably stamped from a single die. The decoration is almost invariably based on flowers and/or creepers. Typical motifs are those in the H.C.M. *Qur'an* of 1760-1 (fig. 16), and on such other volumes as I.E.S. MS 264 (fig. 17), MS 267 (fig. 18), MS 259 (fig. 19), MS 959 (fig. 20), MS 1853 (fig. 21) and MS 260 (fig. 22).

### Border design and flaps

The border design on Harari bindings consists almost invariably of one, or more often two or three, tooled lines. These are placed outside the corner-pieces, parallel to the edges of the cover. Characteristic of covers with such flaps are two attractively decorated nineteenth-century volumes at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, a *Qur'an*, I.E.S. 260 (fig. 23) and a religious commentary, I.E.S. 267 (fig. 24).



Border and flap designs

### Conclusion

The Harari manuscripts at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library and the Harari Cultural Museum reveal a high quality of workmanship (in common with other aspects of Harari scholarship and handicraft). The bindings, while broadly in the Islamic/Arab tradition, have so much in common that they must be considered as forming a group apart. Though never gilt or painted; and, perhaps for that reason not comparable to the finest Persian bindings, as Burton observed in the mid-nineteenth century, they justify nevertheless the praise he accorded them.

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