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Revised dating places Garima Gospels before 650—none from Ethiopia previously dated before 12th century—perhaps earliest illuminated manuscript to survive?

What could be the world's earliest illustrated Christian manuscript has been found in a remote Ethiopian monastery. The *Garima Gospels* were previously assumed to date from about 1100AD, but radiocarbon dating conducted in Oxford suggests they were made between 330 and 650AD. The radiocarbon dating could even link the manuscript to the time of Abba (Father) Garima, who established the monastery. Originally from Constantinople, the monk is traditionally believed to have arrived in Ethiopia in 494. Legend has it that he copied the Gospels in a single day. To assist him in completing this lengthy task, God is said to have delayed the setting of the sun.

The *Garima Gospels* are kept in an isolated monastery in the Tigray region. No other Ethiopian manuscripts are dated from before the 12th century, so the *Garima Gospels* represent a unique survival of an early Christian text in sub-Saharan Africa. The *Garima Gospels* have never left the monastery, and because of its remote location and the reluctance of the monks to show them, few scholars have had the opportunity to even briefly see them. Jacques Mercier, a French specialist in Ethiopian art, has seen them on brief visits. He took two, loose small samples of parchment. The manuscript was then in an extremely fragile state, and fragments of brittle parchment broke off almost every time it was opened.



Mercier arranged for the two parchment fragments to be radiocarbon dated at the Oxford University Research Laboratory for Archaeology. A sample of the parchment (probably goat skin) was dated to 330-540 and one from another illustrated page to 430-650. Radiocarbon dating can only yield a range of dates (the *Garima* figures are subject to a 96% probability), not a precise date, but the middle year of these two samples would be 487 or 488.

However, Mercier believes that on stylistic grounds the *Garima Gospels* are slightly later, perhaps around 600. Even this later date would make them among the earliest surviving illustrated Christian manuscripts. The oldest dated are the *Rabbula Gospels* in Syriac, completed

in 586. The texts date from the same period as the illuminations, although these pages have not been radiocarbon dated. They are written in Ge'ez, the ancient Ethiopian language, and they are by far the earliest texts (other than a few stone inscriptions).

A museum is now being set up to provide a secure place where the Gospels can be seen by visitors. On the edge of the monastery is a 19th-century church for female worshippers, but this has just been replaced by a modern building. Work is therefore underway to convert the old church into a museum. Its windows are small, which is good both for security and to keep light levels down, and steel bars are being inserted. The building will also be protected by armed guards.

Michelle Brown, manuscripts specialist, is excited about the discovery: “The *Garima Gospels* cast vital light upon early Christian illuminated manuscript production and upon the role of sub-Saharan Africa...It is the sort of model that inspired such vibrant later Ethiopic art and is an important early witness to the way in which the churches of the Christian Orient both absorbed the courtly Christian culture of Constantinople and developed their own voices and styles.”

Re-written from <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Discovery-of-earliest-illuminated-manuscript%20%20/20990>