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Praying with Holy Pictures: An Ethiopian Triptych and its Donors

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The church of Yəmrəhannä Krəstos in Lasta province* is famous for its extraordinary architecture and painted interior decoration. It is less known however that the site possesses a good collection of manuscripts and interesting liturgical objects, among them a triptych which for several reasons deserves special attention. (Fig. 1)

The painting is executed with tempera on gesso primed wood. The central panel depicts the Trinity in the form of three elders, each holding a codex and with a hand raised in blessing. They sit within a patterned mandorla supported by the Four Living Creatures, which are identified by inscriptions. Below these are the twenty-four Celestial Priests, represented as nimbed, bearded youths, each weaving a censer.

At the top of the left wing Mary with the Child is depicted. Jesus wears a decorative cruciform halo and holds a white bird attached to a cord, the middle of which is also held by Mary. The archangels Gabriel and Michael, each armed with a sword, raise their wings above her head. Below, two saints face each other: Täklä Haymanot carrying an interlaced cross and a prayer stick and St. Libanos a hand cross.

* The authors are indebted to Father Emmanuel Fritsch and liqä ḫaruyan qäsis Alemnew Azene for checking the inscriptions against the original painting and for suggestions concerning their interpretation.

1 For the literature on the church see, Ethiopian Churches 2: Yemrehannä Krestos, ed. E. Balicka-Witakowska & Michael Gervers, forthcoming.
2 For the list of church possessions and the description of several items belonging to this collection see ibid., chapter 4 and appendix 2.
3 90 x 130 cm; wings 30 x 90 cm; central panel 70 x 90 cm; local inventory number: A.Mä/SäWä/LaSY 1231. The painting is mentioned in B. Playne, Saint George for Ethiopia (London, 1954), 120.
4 gässä 'ambása - face of lion; gāddä sāb' - face of man; gāddä lahom - face of ox; gāddä nəsr - face of eagle.
On the right panel the Crucifixion occupies the uppermost register. The dead Christ is accompanied by the inscription⁵ "Jesus of Nazareth, said (to be) the king of the Jews"⁶ and is flanked by the dark Sun and the red Moon, both anthropomorphic and labelled as "the Moon became blood" and "how the Sun darkened". A tearful Mary and John stand at the foot of the cross. In the lower register are three saints in half figure: Gābbrä Krostos, Qirqos and Kiros and below them St. George mounted on a white horse and armed with a spear.

The borders of the paintings are also coated with gesso and painted yellow with a scrolling half-palmette pattern, outlined in black in the central panel and by a simple interlace and the strips on the wings.

The back of the panels was once covered by a woven silk and cotton cloth, a fragment of which remains on the right-hand wing.⁸ (Fig. 2) It bears, on a blue-green background, a repeated golden pattern of lotus and palmette tendrils growing between ogival medallions.⁹ A rooster is set in the centre of each medallion, encircled by an honorific inscription in Arabic naming an unidentified ruler: "al-Sultan al-Malik al-Muzaffar al-Ghahir? / Ghamir? / Ghalib?".¹⁰

The iconography of the scenes and figures depicted on the triptych reflects Western European influences that appear in Ethiopian art from the middle of the 15th century, a result of the presence in the country of a small group of European painters, as well as of the circulation of devotional images of European and Italo-Byzantine provenience.¹¹ This connection is visible in the first place in the depiction of Mary with Child, both playing with the bird – an iconographical formula that derives from Italian Renaissance,¹² and in the Crucifixion: Christ is fastened to the cross by three nails, flanked by Mary and John displaying their emotions, the latter not only crying but also turning his back to the cross, because he does not dare to face the suffering of his master.¹³ Also dependent on Western models is the Trinity depicted as three similar figures accompanied by the Celestial Priests rendered

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⁵ Ḥv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N:
⁶ Above the inscription appear six signs, probably an awkward copy of INRI by a painter who did not understand the letters – one more element pointing towards a remote West-European Vorlage.
⁷ ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N: ḡv ḫw r ḡ̄ N:
⁸ May be a Mamluk damask from the Ottoman period.
¹⁰ The author is indebted to Drs. Michael L. Bates, Ramzi Bikhazi, Linda Northrup, Frederika Voigt and Michael Bates for information about this textile.
¹¹ Chojnacki, Major Themes, 375-468.
as young men. This iconography replaced the theophany of the Ancient of the Days in Ethiopia by the end of the 15th century or in the early 16th century.  

While our triptych shares the Western iconographical features with a large group of similar paintings, all dating to the end of the 15th or to the 16th century and originating, it seems, from different parts of Ethiopia, the style places it in a much smaller assemblage of works executed within the same time-frame in the Lasta province. In this group the double-sided triptych, Addis Ababa, IES 3450 is the closest parallel (Fig. 3). Both paintings share the figures deprived of naturalistic proportions and with oval or egg-formed faces and, in some instances, a round mouth divided by a line. The stylisation of clothing goes in two directions: some vestments are stiff, covered by parallel geometrical patterning, others are fluidly draped with swirling lower edges. The range of colours is large: in addition to the dominant red and yellow there are white, blue, brown and green – this latter being composed with aquamarines to embellish the cloth of the main figure: the Trinity in one case and Mary in the other.

The holy figures and subjects chosen for depiction on the triptych belong to those most popular for devotional purposes. The Marian cult focusing on Mary as mother of God and the main intercessor between Him and mankind, flourished in Ethiopia at the end of the 15th century, under the special patronage of the emperor Zär’a Ya’eqob, that resulted in the mass production of pictures representing Mary with Child which then became the dominant theme of Ethiopian painting ever since. The other figure making an entrance at the same time into Ethiopian religious imagery was St. George depicted as a holy warrior, struggling against evil powers on behalf of his devotees. Certain texts frequently used in the liturgy encouraged the juxtaposition of his

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17 The central panel of the triptych depicts on one side Mary with the Child and on the other Crucifixion, Chojnacki, *Icons*, cat. 17. See also the round painting published by Mercier, *op. cit.*, fig. on p. 102 and S. Fogg, *Ethiopian Art* (London, 2001), no. 13.

18 Only saints Peter and Paul in the IES triptych. This detail appears similarly depicted in the 16th century triptych IES 4126, Chojnacki, *Icons*, no. 133, 377-379.

image with that of Mary and the Child. The Crucifixion, which in 15th century Ethiopian painting abandoned the symbolic redaction of the scene and used the West-European models expressing the idea of Christ’s redemptory death, became the devotional picture par excellence. Gäbrä Mänfäss Qaddus (“Servant of the Holy Spirit”), Kiros and Gäbrä Kræostos (St. Alexius), belonged to the most venerated and most often depicted saints of foreign origin. The portrayal of Täklä Haymanot (“Plant of the Faith”), the 13th century abbot of the largest Ethiopian monastic house of Däbrä Libanos in the Śäwa province, was introduced to the repertory of Ethiopian painting in the 15th century and then became the most often depicted Ethiopian saint. The painter of our triptych accentuated his elevated status by making him larger than all the other saints. His companion in the picture, St. Libanos, who according to his vita arrived in Ethiopia from Constantinople in the 6th century, was one of the founders of Ethiopian monasticism. Not often portrayed, he seems to appear on triptychs as a result of the special devotion of the donors. Also the presence of St. Qirqos has a particular explanation. The cult of this child martyr spread to Lasta in the 15th century from his main shrine on an island of the Lake of Tana. Many churches in the province were dedicated to him, among others being the church of Yämrañannä Kræostos to which the triptych was obviously a votive donation. Finally, the choice of the Trinity for the central panel of the triptych can be explained by the fact that its representation became very popular in the 16th century – probably as a result of Trinitarian disputes initiated in Ethiopia at the end of the 15th century.

Although the triptych does not differ from other relevant works in matters of iconography, composition, style or choice of the subjects, it is distinguished by the dedicatory inscription and by the presence of numerous invocations and prayers inscribed either next to each holy figure or within their nimbi. They are supplications on behalf of three persons: ‘Àṣratā Wälđ (‘The Tithe of the Son’) and his two companions: Teyogolos (a garbled form of


21 This iconographic type did not represent Christ on the cross. His presence was expressed symbolically by the depiction of a lamb above the cross or simply by a jewelled cross, see E. Balicka-Witakowska, Crucifixion sans le Crucifié dans l’art éthiopien. Recherches sur la survie de l’iconographie chrétienne de l’Antiquité tardive (Wiesbaden & Warszawa, 1997).


*Tewologos, i.e. ‘Theologian’) and Aṣa’ʿonā Maryam (‘The Sandals of Mary’).

The writing is non-calligraphic, often unclear and the text inserted hap-hazardly. Moreover, the scribe did not use black colour but an ink, obviously of low quality, which has partially faded away leaving several lacunae. In contrast to the manuscripts where the names of the holy figures are customarily written with red ink, here all the words are black with the exception of the long dedicatory inscription under the Trinity. This was written in red and would be the best preserved were it not for the candle-grease droppings covering some letters.

The inscriptions read as follows:

Central panel

1. Above the Holy Trinity:

\[\text{Image of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God; 'Aṣratā Wāld together with Aṣa’ʿonā Maryam and Teyogolos make him hear the voice of joy.}\]

2. Below the Trinity:

Twenty four Priests of Heaven, all of you. The prayer of 'Aṣratā Wāld. “One bowl” for you, this image that I, 'Aṣratā Wāld, have ordered, by my ardent love for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the only (God) and by (my)

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27 In many letters the difference between the first and the fourth vowel orders is almost invisible; the same applies to the two dots indicating the end of a word and the four dots marking the end of a sentence.

28 The text is not always written horizontally but also vertically.

29 Wherever it was possible, the text was conjecturally restored and is not entirely certain.

30 Here and in all the other inscriptions the orthography of the texts has been kept, but in the translation the names of the persons have been made regular, i.e., in accordance with the spelling provided by the extant dictionaries.

31 Cf. Ps 81:1; 98:4; 100:1.

32 Cf. Num. 7:13.
love for Mary and for the sake of the heavenly priests [...] so that they might take care of him, together with Teyogolos, by the majestic [...] bring them into the luminous circle.

*Left-hand panel, top: Mary with the Child*

1. Inside Mary’s halo:

“O, Mary with (your) son! Bless the soul of ‘Ašratā Wāld together with your servant Teyogolos, amen”.

2. Inside the Archangel Michael’s halo:

“O Michael! With the tip of your wing cover ‘Ašratā Wāld”.

3. Inside the Archangel Gabriel’s halo:

“O, Gabriel! May you guard ‘Ašratā Wāld from perdition”.

*Left-hand panel, bottom: Saints Täklä Haymanot and Libanos.*

1. Täklä Haymanot, across his halo:

“Abunā 34 Täklä Haymanot! accept ‘Ašratā Wāld (as) the tithe of mercy 35”.

2. Libanos, inside his halo:

33 There: nasa’ instead of nasā’ and similarly in other places.
34 “Our father” - title applied to address the abbots and important ecclesiastic figures.
35 This should be understood as the tithe given to receive mercy and belonging to the concept of Kidanā mahrāt - the “Covenant of Mercy”, see S. Weininger, “Kidanā mahrāt”, EAE 3, p. 396 f. Compare also the expression used in the inscription accompanying St. Kiros.
“O, abba 36 Libanos! Receive the tithe 37 on behalf of your servant Aṣa’ena Maryam together with Teyogolos.”

Right-hand panel: top, Crucifixion

1. Under the right hand of Jesus:

“Through this blood of Yours, have mercy on ‘Aṣratā Wāld your servant, amen”.

2. At Jesus’ feet:

“For the sake of the nails of your feet 38 have mercy on me, your servant Teyogolos”.

3. Above Mary:

“O, Mary! Because of your tears, receive (as) the tithe ‘Aṣratā Wāld your servant, amen”.

4. Above John:

“O, John! Receive the tithe on behalf of your servant Teyogolos”.

Right-hand panel, middle: Saints Gābrā Kròstos, Qirqos, KiroS

1. Inside Gābrā Kròstos’ halo:

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36 “Father” - title used to address the ecclesiastics.
37 Most probably here “the tithe” makes allusion the donation of the painting.
38 By using ‘nails’ (in the plural) the inscription follows a standard formula that contradicts the picture, which, in accordance to the current iconographical type, shows Christ’s feet nailed by a single nail.
“O, Gábrä Krëstos! Receive ‘Asråtä Wäld in the New World (as) the tithe’.

2. Inside Qirqos’ halo:

“O, Qirqos the Child! Receive ‘Asråtä Wäld in the New Time (as) the tithe of the Covenant”

3. Above Kiros’ halo:

“O, abba Kiros! Intercede on behalf of ‘Asråtä Wäld’.

Right-hand panel: bottom, St. George

“O, George, the unique martyr! Take your servant ‘Asråtä Wäld as a tithe ‘Asråtä into the splendid circle”.

In most cases the inscriptions that appear in Ethiopian paintings on wood identify the scenes and figures and only occasionally before the 18th century are invocations on behalf of a donor and his name added. In our triptych, however, there are several identifications that are developed into longer texts, some of them composed in original way. The main purpose of the prayers is to plead for protection. They are not mechanically repeated but vary from figure to figure, alluding to the characteristics of each. They also gave the author an opportunity to write the poetic and at the same time scholarly verses, inspired by a reading of the sacred texts, as well as perhaps by the contemplation of the holy images.

The prayers to the Holy Trinity contain a paraphrase of a psalm on one side and a multifaceted likeness on the other: “one bowl for God” refers most probably to the biblical “one silver sprinkling bowl”, which was brought as an offering at the dedication of the Tabernacle set up by Moses,

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39 To be understood as “the tithe for the sake of the Covenant”, see n. 35.
40 Probably a poetic expression for Heaven.
41 The largest repertory of such the painting can be found in: Chojnacki, Icons. See also n. 15.
42 See Chojnacki, Icons, nos 78, 161, 181, 199, 274.
just as the triptych was brought by the donors to the church and offered as a *votum*. The luminous circle to which they hope to be raised, also mentioned in the invocation to St. George, is probably an allusion to the text of *Revelation* that describes the setting of God’s throne. It is also depicted on the central panel with great use of emerald green, a choice that does not seem to be a pure coincidence.43

Whereas the prayer to Mary and Jesus belong to standard invocations, the texts accompanying Michael and Gabriel do not. The archangels are conceived here less as the most important leaders of the angelical hosts than as guardian angels and as deliverers. The donors ask Gabriel to protect them from downfall and meekly plead to find shelter under the tip of Michael’s wing. It is very possible that the latter entreaty derives from the text telling how Michael dipped his wing in the fire of Hell, allowing the souls of the sinners to climb up and escape final condemnation.44

The supplications to Täklä Haymanot and St. Qirqos each contain a literary figure using the word “tithe” (Eth. “aśrat), which also happens to be part of the main donor’s name. It can be taken for granted that its repetition in several other invocations had the same purpose – to make a connection to this supplicant, elevating his name and thereby accentuating his importance.

Among the prayers appearing in the Crucifixion scene, one invokes the nails of the cross. In Christian spiritual culture these famous relics of the *arma Christi* were always considered to be a powerful means of protection.45 Ethiopia was not an exception: the nails were supplied with names that are found in several prayers and were also used in a purely apotropaic context (for instance written in the protective scrolls).46

Having learned this much about the painting, we may now try to guess who the donors were. Although their names occur without any titles we may surmise that they were ecclesiastics and most probably monks. One indication is the choice of the depicted saints which very much focuses on monastic figures. Thus we have St. Alexius who incorporates all monastic virtues; St. Kiros, a Coptic hermit-monk, known from his successful battles with the evil spirits; and the two most important founders of Ethiopian monasticism, one from abroad (Libanos) and one local (Täklä Haymanot).

The presence of the Trinity in the central panel is also significant. It is doubtful that this subject would be the first option of a layman donor, particularly at the time when the Trinitarian disputes took place among the ec-

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43 Cf. Rev. 4:3-5.
clesiastics and when the iconographical formula was new and difficult to understand for the uninitiated.

The names of the donors also point towards their monastic affiliation because they are of a kind that only appear among ecclesiastics. Moreover the uniqueness of the names can be explained by a custom of the Ethiopian church according to which the abbots or monastic hierarchs changed their names to unusual ones after their appointment.47

The donors were also educated persons. As the inscriptions prove, they had a good knowledge of Scripture and were skilled in church poetry. The un-calligraphic nature of the script and the rather freestyle writing suggest that the texts were added by the donors themselves: if the task was commissioned to a triptych maker the inscriptions would have been made with much more care. Also the whole concept of turning a painting into an open prayer book and all the figures into intercessors by adding supplications to each of them indicates a well thought-out project. The donors were professionals who issued for themselves an effective and well designed ticket to eternal life.

47 The information provided by liqū ḥoruyan qāsis Alemnew Azene.
Fig. 1 Triptych, Church of Yomraphannā Kraastos
Fig. 2 Triptych. Church of Yamarhania Krestos, seen from back
Fig. 3 Triptych, Addis Ababa, Institute of Ethiopian Studies nr. 3450
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