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Vol. 6

3^a Serie

(LIII)



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Ai lettori

Nell'anno segnato dagli effetti della pandemia, la redazione della *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* ha prodotto il massimo sforzo per garantire la regolare e tempestiva pubblicazione di questo volume. Non solo l'impegno con i lettori è stato onorato, ma il volume appare caratterizzato da contributi di particolare ricchezza e complessità, accomunati dall'esigenza di favorire attraverso la ricerca scientifica la conservazione e la promozione del cospicuo patrimonio culturale etio-eritreo.

I rapporti culturali che lo stato cristiano intrattenne nei secoli XIV-XVI con alcune potenze europee, e la conseguente adozione da parte abissina di immagini liturgiche di provenienza 'mediterranea' sono al centro del saggio di Michele Bacci. I risultati della ricerca, in cui ampio spazio è riservato a figure chiave qual è quella di Nicolò Brancaleon (*fl.* 1480–1520 c.), ripropongono l'importanza del *network* artistico internazionale che, a partire da Venezia e Creta, giunse a coinvolgere la cultura cristiana d'Eritrea e d'Etiopia e ne alimentò alcuni specifici sviluppi.

La documentazione delle tradizioni e del patrimonio storico-artistico di alcune località del Təgray centrale (Q^wälla Tämben) è l'obiettivo del contributo di Jacopo Gnisci e Massimo Villa, secondo di una serie di articoli in cui sono profusi i risultati di ricerche condotte nel 2018 e nel 2019. Come già il precedente, dedicato a Gäbrə^oel Wäqen – apparso in RSE 3^a serie (LI), 4 (2020) – questo nuovo studio, incentrato su Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä ^oAśa, arricchisce le nostre conoscenze sulla storia religiosa, artistica e letteraria di una regione ancora poco nota, nel cuore dello stato regionale del Tigray (*təgray kəlləl*).

Non sfugge l'importanza di un contributo di questo genere, relativo a terre a sud di Aksum e a ovest di Mäqälä. Il feroce conflitto civile che infiamma tutta l'Etiopia settentrionale (Təgray, Amhara, ^oAfar), producendo irreparabili perdite di vite umane, sta suscitando in tutto il mondo preoccupazione anche per i possibili danni al patrimonio culturale, materiale e immateriale, di queste regioni. Poiché nessuno in questo momento può prevedere fra quanti anni la ricerca sul campo potrà riprendere in questa parte dell'Africa orientale, la pubblicazione di tutti i dati fin qui raccolti è preziosa, ed è facile prevedere che

per molto tempo questi articoli forniranno il solo riferimento scientifico esistente sui luoghi storici e sui materiali in essi conservati.

Anche la descrizione che Dorothea McEwan ha dato delle settecentesche pitture murali della chiesa di Birbir Giyorgis presso Säqota (Lasta), nella parte più settentrionale dello stato regionale dell'Amara (*amara kəlləl*), si presta ad analoghe considerazioni. Se allo stato di conservazione già precario – che questo contributo documenta – aggiungiamo i rischi che inevitabilmente gravano su edifici antichi posti in regioni attraversate da un fronte di guerra, ci sono fondati motivi di apprensione per i danni che potrebbero essere arrecati al patrimonio culturale della regione.

Al processo formativo del più antico fondo di manoscritti etiopici della Bibliothèque nationale de France, anteriormente alle grandi acquisizioni ottocentesche, è dedicato il lavoro di Claire Bosc-Tiessé. Con esso l'autrice ha inteso contribuire non solo alla maggior conoscenza del patrimonio di codici della biblioteca parigina, ma anche alla miglior comprensione delle relazioni storiche e intellettuali fra Europa e Africa orientale, prima che sviluppi economico-politici epocali determinassero la loro trasformazione in rapporti di pura forza, funzionali a politiche espansionistiche e coloniali. E proprio il peculiare e ambiguo rapporto fra scienza e amministrazione, che ha caratterizzato una personalità del calibro di Carlo Conti Rossini (1872–1949), fondatore di questo periodico (1941), viene indagato da Nicola Camilleri e Valentina Fusari. Non si tratta solo di portare alla luce gli elementi utili al disegno di una biografia intellettuale dello studioso, ma anche di capire quanto nel secondo dopoguerra, nei diversi ambienti accademici e culturali d'Europa e d'Africa, in particolare in Eritrea, la ricezione della sua 'militante' disamina delle strutture sociali tradizionali sia servita alle autorità postcoloniali per concepire e imporre un nuovo assetto amministrativo ai territori.

In ambito antropologico, Shauna LaTosky presenta alcune specificità della cultura dei Mun (Mursi), con particolare riferimento alla conoscenza delle piante selvatiche commestibili che crescono nel loro territorio, e richiama la nostra attenzione sulle inevitabili frizioni tra consuetudini di comunità tradizionali e moderne politiche di sviluppo economico promosse dalle autorità nazionali. Quanto al delicato rapporto fra diritto consuetudinario e legislazioni statuali, Susanne Epple offre un nuovo quadro del delicato problema, mettendo in evidenza sia le minacce che incombono sulla protezione legale degli individui nelle comunità a statuto tradizionale, sia le

contraddizioni in cui cade lo stesso pluralismo giuridico nel tentativo di creare le condizioni per una convivenza dei due sistemi.

L'anno alle nostre spalle ci ha privati della presenza di due maestri delle nostre discipline. Da quasi un cinquantennio nessuno studioso, o anche semplice curioso, dei rapporti fra Italia e Africa in età moderna può immaginare di accostarsi a questi temi prescindendo dai libri di Angelo Del Boca (1925–2021). Nella storia degli studi egli ha rappresentato un punto di svolta, e non solo perché le sue ricerche sono state determinanti nella demistificazione dei racconti stereotipati e tendenziosi intorno dell'avventura coloniale italiana. La sua lezione di giornalista esterno all'Università suona ancor oggi come un invito a non deflettere mai dalla ricerca della verità come obiettivo precipuo del lavoro accademico. Negli studi sulla letteratura gə'əz, dalle origini all'età moderna, la figura di Getatchew Haile (1931–2021) è stata di capitale importanza, al di là della quantità e del pregio assoluto dei suoi contributi scientifici. Prima di molto altri, infatti, egli capì l'importanza di avviare l'opera di descrizione e catalogazione della mole di manoscritti tuttora custoditi dalle istituzioni religiose in Eritrea e in Etiopia. La moderna filologia etiopica come critica del testo deve moltissimo a questa sua idea e al modo tenace e rigoroso con cui egli l'ha applicata per mezzo secolo, mentre il Comitato Scientifico Internazionale della *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* perde con Getatchew un insostituibile punto di riferimento.

Il Direttore

*To the readers**

In this year marked by the pandemic the editors of *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* have made the utmost effort to guarantee the regular and timely publication of this volume. Not only has our commitment to the readers been honoured, but this volume features contributions of particular richness and complexity. The above contributions are united in the necessity of favouring, through scientific research, both the conservation and promotion of the considerable Ethio-Eritrean cultural patrimony.

The essay of Michele Bacci is centred round the cultural relations entertained by the Christian State and several European powers during the XIV to the XVI centuries and the consequent adoption on the part of Abyssinia of liturgical images of Mediterranean provenance. The research which reserves ample space to the key figure of Nicolò Brancaleon (*fl.* 1480–1520 ca.) re-proposes the important influence of the international artistic network which, arriving from Venice and Crete, affected the Eritrean and Ethiopian Christian culture and nurtured several specific developments.

Documenting the traditions and the historical artistic patrimony of certain localities in Central Təgray (Q^wälla Tämben) is the objective of the contribution of Jacopo Gnisci and Massimo Villa, the second in a series of articles in which are to be found copious results of research conducted in 2018 and 2019. Just as the previous one was dedicated to Gäbrə³el Wäqen – appearing in RSE 3^a serie (LI), 4 (2020) – this new study centred on Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä ^ˆAśa enriches our knowledge of the religious, artistic and literary history of a region in the heart of the regional state of Tigray (*təgray kalləl*).

One cannot help but note the importance of such a contribution relating to lands south of Aksum and west of Mäqälä. The ferocious civil conflict that is inflaming all of northern Ethiopia (Təgray, Amhara, ^ˆAfar), resulting in irreparable loss of human life, is eliciting concern in the whole world, including concern for the possible damage to the cultural patrimony both material and immaterial in these regions. Since nobody at this time can predict how many years it may take for research in the field to be resumed in this part

* Translated into English by Mirella Daniell.

of East Africa, the publication of all the data gathered up to this point is precious. It is likely that for a long time in the foreseeable future these articles will furnish the only scientific reference in existence on the historic sites and on the materials preserved in them.

Similar considerations also apply to the description that Dorothea McEwan has given of the 18th century murals of the church Birbir Giyorgis at Säqota (Lasta), in the northernmost part of the regional state of Amara (*amara kəlləl*). If one adds to the already precarious state of conservation – that this contribution documents – the risks that inevitably weigh on ancient buildings located in regions traversed by a war front, there are well-founded motives for apprehensions over the damage that could be sustained by the cultural patrimony of the region.

The work of Claire Bosc-Tiessé is dedicated to the process of formation of the most ancient reserve of Ethiopian manuscripts of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, prior to the great acquisition of the 19th century. The intention of the authoress is to contribute not only to a greater knowledge of the patrimony of codices of the Paris Library but also to the greater comprehension of the intellectual and historical relations between Europe and East Africa before the epochal economic-political developments determined their transformation into relations of pure force, functional to the politics of expansionism and colonialism.

It is the particular and ambiguous relationship between science and administration which characterized a personality of the calibre of Carlo Conti Rossini (1872–1949) the founder of this periodical (1941), that is the subject of research of Nicola Camilleri and Valentina Fusari. Here it is not only a question of bringing to light the elements relevant to the drawing up of an intellectual biography of the scholar, but also to understand to what extent in the post Second World War period, in the different academic and cultural circles of Europe and Africa, in particular in Eritrea, the reception of his ‘militant’ analysis of the traditional social structures served the post-colonial authorities to conceive and impose on the territories a new administrative framework.

In the anthropological context, Shauna LaTosky presents some specific characteristics of the Mun (Mursi) culture with particular reference to the knowledge of the comestible wild plants that grow in their territory, bringing our attention to the inevitable frictions between customs of traditional

communities and the modern politics of economic development promoted by the national authorities. As far as the delicate relation between customary law and state legislation, Suzanne Epple offers a new picture of the delicate problem underlining both the threat incumbent on the legal protection of the individuals in the traditional communities and the contradictions that arise with a pluralistic conception of jurisdiction in the attempt to create the conditions for the coexistence of the two systems.

This last year has deprived us of the presence of two masters in our field of study. For almost the last fifty years it would have been unimaginable for any scholar or even just those curious about the relations between Italy and Africa in the modern age to approach the subject disregarding the books of Angelo Del Boca (1925–2021). He represents a turning point in the history of this field of study and not only because his research was determinant in demystifying stereotypes and biases in the narrative of the Italian colonial venture. His lesson as a journalist external to the University still calls out, even today, as an invitation to never deflect from the search for truth as the principal objective of academic work.

In the studies of Gəʼəz literature from its origins until the modern age, the figure of Getatchew Haile (1931–2021) has been of capital importance, beyond the quantity and the absolute value of his scientific contribution. In fact, before any others, he understood the importance of initiating the work of description and cataloguing the mass of manuscripts, even till this day, held in the care of the religious institutions of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Modern Ethiopian philology, conceived as textual criticism, owes a great deal to this idea of his and to the tenacious and rigorous way in which he applied it for over half a century. The International Scientific Committee of *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, with the passing of Getatchew, loses an irreplaceable point of reference.

The Director

CONTENTS

ART HISTORY

- MICHELE BACCI, *Mediterranean Entanglements as Reflected in 15th Century Ethiopian Images of the Virgin Mary* 13
- JACOPO GNISCI, MASSIMO VILLA, *Evidence for the history of early Solomonic Ethiopia. Part II: Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä ʿĀśa* 97

CULTURAL HERITAGE

- DOROTHEA MCEWAN, *The Painted Church of Birbir Giyorgis* 129

MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

- CLAIRE BOSCH-TIESSÉ, *Ethiopian Manuscripts in Old Regime France and the Collection of the French National Library* 153

COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL STUDIES

- NICOLA CAMILLERI, VALENTINA FUSARI, *Tra amministrazione e scienza. Carlo Conti Rossini durante e dopo la dominazione coloniale* 195

ANTHROPOLOGY

- SHAUNA LATOSKY, «*When the Milk Containers are Empty, the Children ‘milk’ Marula!*». *The Role of Wild Food Plants among Mun (Mursi)*..... 233
- SUSANNE EPPLÉ, *Unprotected Rights. Exploring Hereditary Status Groups’ Access to Law in Ethiopia* 257

MISCELLANEOUS

- Polish Archaeological Research in Təgray (POLART): A Note on the Activities at Däbrä Gärgis, 2020 Season* (MICHELLA GAUDIELLO) 287
- Uncovering History from Textile Pastedowns in Ethiopian Manuscripts: A Singular and Complex Research Project* (SARAH FEE, MICHAEL GERVERS, CAROLINA MELIS) 295

<i>Towards an Archaeology of the Zag^we Period: First Footsteps and Future Agenda</i> (LUISA SERNICOLA)	311
<i>Su due oggetti etiopici da collezione privata</i> (LUISA SERNICOLA).....	331
 BULLETIN FOR 2020–2021	 341
 BOOK REVIEWS	
Abraham J. Drewes, <i>Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite. Tome III – Traduction et commentaires. B. Les inscriptions sémitiques</i> (IWONA GAJDA)	355
Samantha Kelly (ed.), <i>A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea</i> (MICHELA GAUDIELLO).....	359
Derib Ado, Almaz Wasse Gelagay, Janne Bondi Johannessen (eds), <i>Grammatical and Sociolinguistics Aspects of Ethiopian Languages</i> (GRAZIANO SAVÀ).....	370
Firew Girma Worku, <i>A Grammar of Mursi: A Nilo-Saharan Language of Ethiopia</i> (ANDREAS JOSWIG).....	379
 OBITUARIES	
<i>Getatchew Haile, 1931–2021</i> (SHIFERAW BEKELE).....	387

Cover image: polychrome miniature of St Mamas, MS *Gädlä Säma'at* (15th–16th cent.), Archivio Diocesano di Savona, fol. 12vb (photo: CaNaMEI, 2021).

**EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF EARLY SOLOMONIC
ETHIOPIA FROM TÄMBEN
PART II: ABBA YOḤANNI DÄBRÄ °AŚA**

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Abstract

This contribution continues the series of articles dedicated to the traditions and decorations of some monastic sites located in Q^wälla Täm̄ben (Central Zone of Təgray, Ethiopia) by focusing on the monastery and church of Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä °Aśa. The paper presents data collected during two fieldwork visits in 2018 and 2019. It describes the early and later history of the monastery by considering written and material evidence, as well as local oral traditions. In particular, an analysis of the manuscript tradition of the *Life* of *abba* Yoḥanni – who is deeply associated with the site despite being neither its founder nor its abbot – provides new evidence about the relationship between holy men and monasteries; while a study of the wall paintings and architectural features of the church sheds light on the significance and history of visual culture in early Solomonian Ethiopia.

Keywords

Q^wälla Täm̄ben – Däbrä °Aśa – Abba Yoḥanni – Early Solomonian period – Ethiopian Art – Ethiopian Architecture – Monasticism

This paper continues the series of contributions dedicated to presenting data gathered by the authors in some monasteries in the Q^wälla Täm̄ben *wärädä*-district (Central Zone of Təgray, Ethiopia). The monasteries were surveyed twice, in October 2018 and in December 2019.¹ The first part of

¹ The 2018 survey was carried with Dr Rafal Zarzecny (Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome) and Tesfay Gebremedhn (St. Yared Center for Ethiopian Philology and Manuscript Studies of the Mekelle University). The 2019 survey was conducted by Dr Villa with the assistance of Tesfay Gebremedhn, to whom we are grateful. Our gratitude also goes to *abba* Gäbrä

this series of notes (Gnisci, Villa 2020), focused on the site of Gäbrəʾel Wäqen, whereas this paper considers some iconographic and hagiographical evidence from the site of Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä ʿAśa.²

The monastery of Abba Yoḥanni lies approximately 8 km north of ʿAbiy ʿAddi, on the south-western slope of Däbrä ʿAśa.³ Abba Yoḥanni can be reached via a road which bifurcates to the west from the ʿAbiy ʿAddi–ʿAdwa road, just a few kilometres north from ʿAbiy ʿAddi. The monastery is located about half-way up an impressive escarpment, 300 mt above the ground. Its whitewashed façade is well visible from afar (Fig. 1). After reaching the base of the cliff with a 4WD, a steep but manageable climb leads to the monastic complex and its rock-hewn church. The entrance to the monastery is forbidden to women.

As stated in the previous contribution, the rock massif of Däbrä ʿAśa (occasionally also Däbrä Ansa) is home to four rock-hewn monasteries and three churches (see map in Fig. 2). Abba Yoḥanni happens to be the most pre-eminent site in the area, so much so that it alone is often referred to with the place name Däbrä ʿAśa. The etymology of latter, lit. ‘Mount of the Fish(es)’, is traditionally explained with the local presence of as many saintly hermits as fishes in the pre-monastic age or with the legendary existence

Ḫgziʾabḫer Gäbrä Mikaʾel and *abba* Gäbrä Šəllase Kəflä from Abba Yoḥanni, who kindly accepted to be interviewed during the 2019 research trip; to Dorothea Reule and Dr Ted Erho for sharing some information about their research on the material of this region with us; and to Dr Denis Nosnitsin for sharing the photographic documentation collected by the Ethio-SPaRe project. Research for this study has been supported by the project “Fra Alessandria e Aksum. La tradizione greco-etiopeca del *Fisiologo* (secoli III–VI)” headed by Prof. G. Lusini at the University of Naples L’Orientale (2018–2020), in cooperation with the Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente – IsMEO; and the AHRC-DFG Project “Demarginalizing Medieval Africa: Images, Texts, and Identity in Early Solomonic Ethiopia (1270–1527)” (Grant no. AH/V002910/1).

² This study thus situates itself within the framework of research on the oral traditions and material histories of Ethiopian monasticism. On the former, see for instance Girma Elias (1977) and Persoon (2003); for the latter, see for example Lepage, Mercier (2005) or Tribe (2009). Surveys of the artistic and architectural features of the churches of northern Ethiopia continue to be an active field of investigation (e.g. Klyuev 2020; Muehlbauer 2020).

³ Full name Abba Yoḥanni Däbrä ʿAśa *gädam*. Coordinates: 13°42′19.5″ N 38°56′22.1″ E.

of an underground lake populated with fishes.⁴ According to locals, the mountain is crossed by a network of galleries which connect some of its monasteries, in particular Abba Yoḥanni and Däbrä Maryam Tä'amina, which lies on the opposite side of the central slope of the massif (Fig. 3). The collective memory of pre-coenobitical saints is witnessed by the veneration of the so-called Ṣadəqan ('Righteous') of Däbrä 'Aśa, unspecified holy figures who predicated in the area in ancient times.⁵

Remarkably, a place named 'Aśa occurs in a land grant issued by the 12th-cent. (?) *ḥaḍäy* Ṭäntäwədəm in favour of the church of Betä Mäsqäl of Qəfrəya. The original land grant is apparently lost, but a late copy survives in the so-called land charter of 'Ura Mäsqäl (*Yämäsqäl däbdabbe*).⁶ It is therein recorded that the Zag^we ruler assigned a large number of territories to the said church of the Cross and to saint Ḥaräyo, among which the area located 'from the ledge of the Lower 'Aśa' (እምኦፊ : ዓሣ : ታሕተ :).⁷ If the identification is correct, the document would prove that, as far back as the 12th cent., the area was Christianized and under the political authority of the Zag^we rulers, who had the power to assign it to the prominent foundation of Qəfrəya 'Ura Mäsqäl. It is also possible that the feudal regulation referred to a different 'Aśā from the site considered in this paper. Moreover, the reference to a place named 'Lower 'Aśa' might offer indirect evidence of the existence of at least two sites connected to this toponym, that is a 'Lower 'Aśa' and an 'Upper 'Aśa'.

⁴ The tradition is recounted in MS Təgray, Ganta Afäšum, 'Addimḥara Abba Yoḥanni, Ethio-SPaRe, ADMY-014, 21st cent., containing a hitherto unknown version of the *Life of abba Yoḥanni* (see MS I below). Here we read on fol. 41_{va-b}: ወበመጎሕቲ፣ ለይእቲ፣ ደብር፣ ሀ ሎ፣ ባሕር፣ በላዕለ፣ ባሕር፣ ውእቲ፣ ደብር ። ወበውእቲ፣ ባሕር፣ ዓሣት፣ ብዙኃት፣ ዘፈጠ ሮሙ፣ ለሊሁ፣ ከመ፣ ይከኑ፣ ሲሳዮሙ፣ ለእመንቲ፣ ጸድቃን፣ እለ፣ መጽኑ፣ እምርሑ ቅ፣ ወእምቅሩብ፣ ይነብሩ፣ ጎቤሃ፣, «beneath that mountain there is a sea, and above the sea there is the mountain. And in that sea [live] many fishes that were created to be nourishment to those righteous ones who had come from far and near to live there». On the same tradition see also Lepage, Mercier (2005: 164).

⁵ The Ṣadəqan are commemorated in the Ethiopian Synaxarium on 5 Ḥamle, see Brita (2010: 447_b).

⁶ The document is a small-size 18th-cent. manuscript apparently photographed first by Paul Henze in 2004 and later digitized by the Ethio-SPaRe project with the shelfmark UM-035; see Derat (2018: 30–33).

⁷ MS Ethio-SPaRe UM-035, fol. 6_r; Derat (2018: 263 [text], 268 [French tr.]).

The monastery of Abba Yoḥanni is named after a local saint commemorated on 5 Ḥedar.⁸ Interestingly, the written sources (especially the *Gädlä abba Yoḥanni* discussed below) never declare that *abba* Yoḥanni established or was the abbot of the monastery. He is rather described as a champion of asceticism and segregation from the secular world. Similarly to other monastic sites in Təgray, some locals maintain that the site of Abba Yoḥanni was founded at the time of a king named Gäbrä Mäsqäl.⁹ According to the local monks, however, the monastery was founded by a certain *abunä* Aron from Lasta.¹⁰ At this time, the place was named Däbrä Sähet. This oral tradition is not isolated. Construction activities attributed to a saint named Aron are also attested in an original piece of literature, the *Life* of the 14th-cent. Aron of Däbrä Daret, known as ‘the wonder-worker’ (KRZ 22).¹¹ The *Life* of *abba* Aron states that he ‘went to the land of Təgray and founded therein numerous monasteries; he sojourned in Tämben, and therein *built* [emphasis added] a monastery on the *amba* of *abba* Yoḥanni’.¹²

An unedited version of the *Life* of *abba* Yoḥanni (see MS I below) also attributes the construction of the site to *abba* Aron, who is said to have been inspired by St Gabriel and eloquently styled as ሐናጺ : ‘the builder’ (MS I,

⁸ Not to be mistaken for the 13th-cent. namesake monk from Däbrä Dammo or for the homonymous founder of Däbrä Sina in Eritrea.

⁹ Under this regnal name several Solomonic and non-Solomonic rulers are known, since the legendary 6th-cent. successor of king Kaleb up to Lalibäla (13th cent.) and °Amdä Şəyon (14th cent.). It is, however, beyond question that this is a widespread foundational *topos* in the area (Nosnitsin 2013: 7 n. 10).

¹⁰ This information is at odds with what is reported by Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke (1975: 99, no. 184), according to whom *abba* Yoḥanni was the founder of the monastery. Locals say that a *Gädlä Abunä Aron* would have existed in the past, yet is held to have been lost at the time of the Grañ, during the ravages perpetrated by Muslims in the 16th cent.

¹¹ Turaiev (1908: 133 [text], 120 [tr.]).

¹² Text from Turaiev (1908: 133): ሐረ : ምድረ : ትግሬ : ወተክለ : በሆኒ : ብዙ-ኃተ : መካኖ ተ : ወነበረ : በምድረ : ተምቤን : ወሐነጸ : በሆኒ : ዘደብረ : እምባ : ዘአባ : ዮሐኒ : . The verb used, ሐነጸ : , seems to indicate that *abba* Aron established a monastery in the place where *abba* Yoḥanni had previously dwelt, and *not*, as transpires from Turaiev’s translation ‘restituit’, that he renovated or re-established a pre-existing church. Historians claim that Aron was one of the rebel clerics who, because of tensions with the royal authority, in particular with ase °Amdä Şəyon (r. 1314–44), were removed from their local followers and exiled northward (Kaplan 1984: 98).

fol. 12ra). The oral and written traditions thus agree in indicating that coenobitism was introduced in this area from the south (in the 14th cent.?) some time after *abba* Yoḥanni. The church of Abba Yoḥanni houses three *tabots*, respectively consecrated to *abba* Yoḥanni, to St Michael and to Mary. The site, which also boasts an area destined for nuns called Kidanä Məḥrät, is currently home to nine monks.¹³

A steep path near the monastery leads to a cave where, according to tradition, *abba* Yoḥanni used to pray. A chapel has been rebuilt in recent times around the cave (Fig. 4). Legend has it that the cave prodigiously assumes the dimensions of the one who enters and prays in it (Fig. 5). Near the chapel there is also a tomb belonging to the spiritual father of the saint, the hermit *abba* Ammoni (see below).¹⁴ This sepulchre was built in the place where, always according to tradition, the hermit used to pray (Fig. 6). As far as we were able to ascertain, the remains of the founder *abba* Aron are not preserved in the monastic complex.

The main source of information on the life of *abba* Yoḥanni is his *gädl* (KRZ 184). It narrates that Yoḥanni, an extra-marital son of the wife of the governor (*šum*) of Tämben, was rejected by the governor after birth and subsequently raised by *abba* Ammoni, who abode in Däbrä ʿAśa. Nurtured by a goat and living ascetically, Yoḥanni remained in the wilderness even after his spiritual father's death. Here he copied manuscripts assisted by his disciple Abäydo. The saint wished to avoid all contact with women. Thus, when his mother, called Amätä Mänfäs Qəddus or Amät Zämänfäs Qəddus, came to visit him, he fled by jumping off a cliff, only to be rescued by St Gabriel who took him and brought him with his wings to the 'land of the living ones' (*bəḥerä ḥəyawan*), where he met Enoch and Elijah.

According to an oral tradition, the saint first stopped at Raʿasot, then at Bäläs, and lastly in Şällämt,¹⁵ before reaching Paradise. *Abba* Yoḥanni re-

¹³ Information based on personal communication from *abba* Gäbrä ʿEgziʿabḥer Gäbrä Mikaʿel and *abba* Gäbrä Şəllase Kəflä, who were interviewed in the monastery in December 2019.

¹⁴ According to our two informants, *abba* Ammoni, who is commemorated on 20 Gənbot, was a native of Däbrä Bänkwal.

¹⁵ Raʿasot and the namesake church dedicated to ʿAbiyä ʿEgziʿ are situated in the valley facing the Abba Yoḥanni cliff, towards Gʷəya and the Täkkäze river. Şällämt (Tigrinya Şällämti) is a region situated beyond the Täkkäze river in the direction of the Səmen highlands.

mained in Paradise, while his disciple *abba* Abäydo composed the acts of the saint.¹⁶ The *Gädlä abba Yoḥanni*, which boasts the record of being the earliest hagiography of an Ethiopian saint ever published in Europe,¹⁷ contains limited historical data. According to Denis Nosnitsin, the onomastic evidence in his *Life* may point to a non-Ethiopian origin, at least as far as the story is concerned (Nosnitsin 2018: 296).¹⁸ The textual tradition counts at present at least nine manuscript witnesses, available in physical or surrogate form.

A = Paris, BnF Éth. 132 (fols 39*ra*–42*ra*); 19th cent.; used by René Basset in his 1884 edition, not without several typos.

B = Roma, ANL Conti Rossini 125 (frag. XIII.3, fols 2*r*–5*r*); ca. 1900; Strelcyn (1976: 308). Copy executed by Carlo Conti Rossini; collation in Virgili (1983).

C = London, BL Add. 16,230 (Dill. no. 47; fols 5–8); Dillmann (1847: 50–51).

D = EMMML 1734 (fols 106*r*–110*r*); private library (Šäwa); early 19th cent.

E = EMMML 3445 (fols 21*r*–26*r*); from Märto Iyyäsus (Gubbalafto, Yäggü, Wällo); 18th cent.

F = EMMML 4268 (fols 82*r*–93*v*); from Əllägänd Mika^ʿel (Ankobär, Šäwa); 16th cent., so far, the earliest extant copy.

G = Təgray, Ganta Afäšum, Mäläkusäyto Maryam, Ethio-SPaRe, MALM-018 (fols 15*ra*–25*rb*); consisting of a 17th–18th-cent. quire sewn together with a manuscript of different origin and in bad state of preservation, cp. Nosnitsin (2013: 225).

H = Təgray, Ganta Afäšum, [°]Addimḥara Abba Yoḥanni, Ethio-SPaRe, ADMY-003 (fols 11*ra*–23*va*); 19th cent.; it also transmits two *mälkä*²-hymns

¹⁶ No text transmits the life of *abba* Abäydo. He is remembered on 4 *Ḥədar*, the day before the commemoration of *abba* Yoḥanni.

¹⁷ Basset (1884) on the basis of MS Paris, BnF Éth. 132 (MS A below).

¹⁸ Names like Yoḥanni, Ammoni, and Abäydo are Egyptian, despite that the saint is said to be Ethiopian. Furthermore, as noted by Marrassini (2005: 117), some sort of perceived affinity with other truly foreign saints, like Abib, Gäbrä Krəstos and Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus, is witnessed by the coexistence of their *Lives* in the same manuscripts, at least from the 18th cent. onwards.

to the saint (fols 7vb–10vb, 24ra–32vb), both unpublished; cp. Nosnitsin (2013: 228).¹⁹

I = Təgray, Ganta Afäšum, °Addimhara Abba Yoḥanni, Ethio-SPaRe, ADMY-014 (fols 5ra–47rb); dated by the colophon to 2007/08 (2000 EC, year of John, fol. 65rb). This manuscript transmits a revised and much longer text, entitled ድርሳን ፡ ዘብፁዕ ፡ ወቅዱስ ፡ አባ ፡ ዮሐን፡ ፡ ዘጸሐፎ ፡ አባ ፡ ዓቢይድ ፡ እምገብ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ ገብርኤል ፡, ‘Homily of the blessed and saint *abba* Yoḥanni, written by °Abiydo at the command of Saint Gabriel’, and subdivided into 12 monthly readings from 5 Yäkkatit to 5 Ṭərr. The known version of the *gädl* is reproduced on fols 30vb–36rb (reading for 5 Ḥədar). Interestingly, this unpublished version also narrates the prodigious construction of the church by *abba* Aron and his disciples, after *abba* Yoḥanni’s ascent to the ‘land of the living ones’. MS I also hosts a cycle of 24 miracles performed by the saint (fols 47ra–62vb) and the *mälkä*²-hymn (fols 62ra–64vb, identical to MS H, fols 7vb–10vb); cp. Nosnitsin (2013: 228).

According to the local monks, at least one additional exemplar is kept in the library of *abba* Yoḥanni.²⁰ Reportedly, the manuscript has been severely damaged by various factors over time. Given the increasing pool of textual witnesses, one might wonder whether the time has come for a fresh re-edition of this hagiographical text.

In addition to his *Life*, *abba* Yoḥanni is celebrated in numerous liturgical chants, including those preserved in MS Ethio-SPaRe SSB-002, a manuscript from Betä Ḥawaryat Şərha Şəyon dated to the 15th–16th cent. (Nosnitsin 2018). An *abba* Yoḥanni is also celebrated in a *dərsan*-homily authored by a certain Minas bishop of Aksum, who according to the tradition lived in the Aksumite period. The homily sometimes precedes or follows the *Gädlä abba Yoḥanni zä-Däbrä ‘Aśa*,²¹ but the identification of its protagonist seems less obvious than one might imagine. More generally, the identity of the *abba* Yoḥanni mentioned in these texts is often a conundrum, due to

¹⁹ MSS GHI have been digitized by the project Ethio-SPaRe, EU 7th Framework Programme, ERC Starting Grant 240720, PI Denis Nosnitsin, 2009–2015, <<http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE>>.

²⁰ This copy is possibly the same exemplar listed by Kinefe Rigb-Zelleke (1975: 99, no. 184).

²¹ As in MSS A, B, H. The text, still unedited, is also found in some pre-14th-cent. homiliaries (MSS EMLL 1763 from Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥstifanos; EMLL 8509 from Ṭana Qirqos; Ethio-SPaRe UM-46 from °Ura Mäsqäl).

both the scarcity of unambiguous clues for identification and the overlaps in the tradition between our saint from Tämben and an *abba* Yoḥanni of Däbrä Sina, who lived in an earlier time. It appears that the latter was progressively marginalized and eclipsed over time by the *Tämbenawi*, with the consequence that many chant motifs dealing with these two figures were rearranged and merged (Nosnitsin 2018: 309–10).

Having considered the textual dossier on *abba* Yoḥanni of Däbrä ʿAśa, it seems beneficial to say a few words about the monastic library of the institution. The manuscript holdings of the community are estimated by locals to amount, probably with some exaggeration, to approximately three hundred pieces. This collection was not surveyed during the research trips. However, a recognition of the library, carried out in 2017 by Ted Erho, led to a systematic investigation of the monastic library, albeit not to its digitization.²² The survey identified approximately 70 codices, none of them predating the 18th cent., as well as a sizable number of parchment fragments dating to the 14th–16th cent. were found in a bad state of preservation.²³ While visiting the library, we discovered several fragments of ancient manuscripts crumpled into a ball inside a hole.²⁴ Among the fragments, which appear to date to the 15th and early 16th cent., was a heavily damaged loose leaf from an early Synaxarium book (entries for 15 Yäkkatit, Fig. 7).²⁵ This seems to suggest that at some time the library underwent a deep renovation process, with the consequence that the earliest chronological stratum of the manuscript collection is now lost or only survives in a fragmentary state (Fig. 8).

²² The initiative was conducted in the context of DFG grant STU 469/1–1 and supported by the Authority for Research and Conservation Cultural Heritage and the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau.

²³ Erho (2020). Emergency measures, resulting in the cleaning of the parchment and the assignment of protective boxes and/or casings, were taken by conservator Marco Di Bella.

²⁴ A description of this fragments will be provided by Ted Erho in his study of the monastery's collection. We are grateful to him for sharing his knowledge about the collection with us.

²⁵ A full description of this particular fragment will be provided in Dorothea Reule's dissertation on the textual history of the Ethiopic Synaxarium (working title 'Die Übersetzungssprache des äthiopischen Synaxars'); we are grateful to the author who shared her research with us.

The architectural and artistic features of the church of Abba Yoḥanni of Däbrä °Aśa are equally worthy of investigation. The church has an oblong plan that is comparable to that of several other sites across Tigray (e.g. Lepage, Mercier 2005: 154). Access is gained by proceeding through a tunnel that leads to an Aksumite style doorway and into the second bay of the north aisle (Fig. 9). Three pairs of irregularly distanced cruciform pillars connected by arches divide the interior into four bays of varying width (Fig. 10). These bays are marked by domes with cruciform bosses (Fig. 11) that are similar to those found in other rock-hewn churches in this region and probably imitate wooden cupola constructions (Gerster 1970: 126). Moreover, a portion of the wall that rises above the arches in the church's second bay to the north is decorated by a frieze of blind Aksumite windows similar to those visible in Gäbrä°el Wäqen (Fig. 12).²⁶ Such parallelisms suggest that the builders of the church wished to situate their community within a wider ecclesiastical tradition, although the monastic networks and affiliations which enabled these associations await systematic investigation.²⁷

The unpublished *Life* of *abba* Yoḥanni found in MS I, which attributes the construction of the church to *abba* Aron, includes an interesting excerpt on the symbolism of the church's pillars (ff. 14rb–vb):

And after this all his disciples [of *abba* Aron] set out and arrived at the foot of the mountain. And, at first, they started [to build] the ladder with which to ascend and descend from it without wings. [...] And [having] arrived they divided the construction by entrance, as was their custom, and built within it the columns. And the number of pillars was 44. [...] In this way, they built and established the whole of it within the church. [...]. And they

²⁶ While Buxton (1971: 61) refers to these elements as blind arches, it may be more accurate to define them as blind windows given that similar patterns must have been originally inspired by a desire to replicate the clerestories of Aksumite basilicas. The imitation of Aksumite features in rock-hewn churches has been widely discussed, see for example Lepage (1972: 161–71). The fact that the blind windows motif was not used to decorate all the bays indicates that the church was not finished or that the significance of this particular feature had changed, as noted by Lepage, Mercier (2005: 165).

²⁷ The essays collected in Nosnitsin (2013b) are representative of the ongoing challenges faced by scholars that are pursuing this line of investigation.

were guided by *abba* [Aron], so that they worked in the best and most appropriate manner.²⁸

At first, the number 44 seems at odds with the plan of the church with its seven piers (Fig. 10). Even if one takes into the account that the Ethiopian tradition counts each face of a square pillar as one and overlooks the fact that six of the piers are cruciform, the total number would be 28. The only way to square this circle is to assume that the author of the passage: a) also counted the four pilasters of the aisles for a total of 11; and b) overlooked the fact that the pilasters only have 3 faces, and that the cruciform piers have 12 faces, and instead assigned a value of 4 to each of these units. Given the stretch that is needed to reach this figure, the number 44 must have been chosen because of its symbolism. The number may have had a protective value, or it may have been picked to allude to the days spent on earth by Jesus between the Crucifixion and his Ascension (Acts 1:9).

A portion of the original façade of the church has collapsed – this may have occurred during building phase, given that the south-western dome, still visible on the cliff-face, appears unfinished.²⁹ A wall, which cuts diagonally across the western portion of the nave and southern aisle, was built at an unknown date to shield the interior of the church (Fig. 1).³⁰

Today light comes abundantly through the doors and slits of this brick wall, but one must imagine that the church, had it been constructed according to the original plan, would have been poorly lit. The easternmost portion of the church, where the sanctuary is located, would have been especially dark, being the most distant from the source of light. While this feature has not attracted comment, it is striking if one considers that Christian architects often sought ways to allow light into the area of the sanctuary, and that

²⁸ Ethiopic text: ወእምድኅረዝ ፣ ሐሩ ፣ ኩሎሙ ፣ አርዳኢሁ ፣ ወበጽሑ ፣ ኀበ ፣ እግረ ፣ ደብር ። ወወጠኑ ፣ ቅድመ ፣ ማዕርገ ፣ በዘየዓርጉ ። ወይወርዱ ፣ ውስቴታ ፣ ዘእንበለ ፣ አክናፍ ፣ [...] ወበጽሑሙ ፣ ከፈልዋ ፣ ለይእቲ ፣ ኡንፃ ፣ በበእናቅጽ ፣ በከመ ፣ ልማዶሙ ፣ ወአቀሙ ፣ በውሳጤሃ ፣ አዕማደ ፣ ኅልቆሙ ፣ ለእሙንቱ ፣ አዕማድ ፣ ሻወ፬ [...] ወከመዝ ፣ ሐነጸዋ ፣ ወሳረርዋ ፣ ኩለንታሃ ፣ እምውሳጤ ፣ ቤት ፣ [...] ወከመዝ ፣ መርሆሙ ፣ አቡነ ፣ ከመ ፣ ይግበሩ ፣ ዘይህኒ ፣ ወዘይኒይስ ።

²⁹ Buxton (1971: 64) reaches a similar conclusion but does not explain the rationale for his observation.

³⁰ None of the authors who have worked on this site have commented on the possible date of the existing wall.

Christian authors, including those from Ethiopia, typically present sanctuaries as areas filled with light.³¹

As the monks proceeded inwards, towards Abba Yoḥanni's sanctuary (*mäqdäs*), they would have been enveloped by growing darkness. Candles or lamps, such as those which appear in some early Solomonic illuminations, may have provided focus points, directing the gaze towards or away from particular areas of church.³² Was this effect intentionally sought by the church's maker(s) or was it simply an unintended consequence of the site that was chosen for its construction? How did the local community respond and interpret this interplay between light and darkness? How did variations in the time of the day affect their perception of the church's sacred space?³³ Answering such questions would lead beyond the scope of this essay, but they are worth pursuing given that research has focused almost exclusively on the formal features of Ethiopian churches without considering the emotional and sensual responses of Christian Ethiopians to their space and furnishing.³⁴

The church of Abba Yoḥanni has been mentioned or described by several scholars, including David R. Buxton (1971: 64–65).³⁵ Based on its architectural features, Buxton – who also authored the relevant entry in Ruth Plant's still-useful volume on the architecture of Tigray's churches (1985: 156) – accepts the local tradition that the church was carved during the reign of *aṣe* Yəṣḥaq (r. 1414–29/30). A similar conclusion is reached by Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier (2005: 164–67) who date the building to the late 14th or early 15th cent. due to the presence of cupolas, monolithic altars, and open sanctuaries and the absence of Aksumite features. Emmanuel Fritsch and Michael Gervers (2007) do not explicitly suggest a date for Abba Yoḥanni, but they do situate the features of its sanctuary within an architectural phase which, in their view, lasted from the 14th to the 15th centuries. Finally, for

³¹ A discussion on topic will be available in Gnisci (2021).

³² Lamps are among the most noticeable features in early Solomonic representations of the Visit of the Holy Women to the Tomb (Gnisci 2015a).

³³ For recent approaches to such issues in other traditions, see, for instance, the remarks in de la Portbarré-Viard (2018: 288–90); and Pulliam (2020).

³⁴ On this area of research, see for instance the catalogue recently edited by Bagnoli (2016). Gnisci (2020a) has recently criticized the formalist approach to Ethiopian art and architecture.

³⁵ For early mentions of the site by Western travellers, see Sauter (1963: 258).

Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers, the church «exhibits all the characteristics of 15th-cent. rock cut architecture: high flat ceilings with cupolas throughout [...], tall and slender cruciform pillars connected by arches, negligible capitals, an open, full-width sanctuary with a flat east wall and three monolithic altars [...], and no chancel step» (Balicka-Witakowska, Gervers 2014: 209). Thus, there is a strong consensus that the church was carved around the first half of the 15th cent.

Of the three monolithic altars present at Abba Yoḥanni, the one located in the southern side chapel is chest-shaped, has a niche in its eastern face, and features traces of paint on all four sides (Fig. 13). The only discernable representation is located on its northern face and shows a standing ecclesiastical figure (Fig. 13). This figure has a halo and a short black beard. He wears a plain tunic (*qāmis*) with no decorations or drapery folds and a *kappa* decorated with a rhombus pattern.³⁶ The saint holds a staff cross in his right hand and probably a book in his left, although this latter object is not as easily identifiable due to damage.

The Abba Yoḥanni altar and its paintings have been mentioned in passing by Lepage and Mercier, who describe it as follows:

The south and central sanctuaries contain cube shaped monolithic altars, the same as at Bahera and at Debra-Tsion. On the south altar, there is a crudely painted portrait in a geometrical style. The inscription, identifying the figure as Anthony, dates from the 15th century (Lepage, Mercier 2005: 165).

While the authors talk about the date of the inscription rather than that of the painting, from the subsequent passage one can deduce that they consider the paintings coeval since they state that «there were other portraits of a similar age painted on the pillars [...] touched up in the 17th century» (Lepage, Mercier 2005: 165). While we were not able to locate the inscription they mention, the date proposed by the two French scholars, as others have observed (Balicka-Witakowska, Gervers 2014: 210), is convincing.³⁷ However, Lepage and Mercier do not present any evidence to support their hypothesis or comment on its significance, so the matter requires further attention.

³⁶ For a preliminary description of Ethiopian ecclesiastical vestment, see Gnisci (2020b).

³⁷ Based on their remarks, it would seem that Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers were also unable to locate this inscription (Balicka-Witakowska, Gervers 2014: 210).

Stylistically, the Abba Yoḥanni figure shares certain features with a small group of wall paintings in churches located in northern Ethiopia and to some miniatures dated to a period between the 14th and early 16th centuries. The saint's upward gaze, oval head and frontal pose can be compared, for example, with illuminations executed in the Ewoṣṣatean style – such as those found in a *Gädlä ḥawaryat* from Ḥnda Iyäsus in Ḥamasen, Eritrea (Heldman 1989: 6, fig. 3) and a Ritual for Passion Week from Mär'awi Krəstos (Heldman 1993: cat. 89) – and other manuscript from the period (Fig. 14). He may also be compared with figures that appear in earlier churches such as Qorqor Maryam (Lepage, Mercier 2005: 112–26) and near-coeval churches such as Baharä Maryam (Lepage, Mercier 2005: 140–46) and Abunä Abbrəham, Däbrä Şəyon (Tribe 2009).

However, while the figures in the above examples have elongated bodies, the Abba Yoḥanni figure has a short body that recalls the compressed proportions of the holy men in some Gundä Gunde style manuscripts that date to the late 15th and early 16th cent. (e.g. Heldman 1993: cat. 91) and in the *Ambassäl Psalter* (Gnisci 2020a: 18, Fig. 8), which has been dated, on the basis of its style and palaeography, to a period between the late 14th and early 15th centuries. In terms of style, among the examples listed above, the figures in *Ambassäl Psalter* are the closest to the Abba Yoḥanni painting: the saints are stocky, wide-eyed, and have a small mouth and pronounced eyebrows joined to the lines of the nose. Interestingly, the *Ambassäl* manuscript also contains a portrait of St Anthony (fol. 64v) where the holy man holds a cross-staff and a codex just like the Anthony on the altar Abba Yoḥanni, thus supporting the identification proposed by Lepage and Mercier.

If one accepts the hypothesis that the church Abba Yoḥanni was hewn in the first half of the 15th cent., then it follows, in view of the stylistic parallels considered above, that the first layer of paintings in the church must have been completed shortly after the church was hewn. The stylistic similarity of the church's paintings with the *Ambassäl Psalter* supports this conclusion, though the absence of firm dates leaves the matter open to further scrutiny. Additionally, it is worth noting that the iconographic similarities between the portraits of Anthony in the *Ambassäl Psalter* and on the altar of Abba Yoḥanni, suggests that the artist who painted the latter figure drew from a

stock of images of the Egyptian saint that were circulating at this point in time across the Ethiopian Empire.³⁸

The presence of Egyptian saints in a 15th-cent. Ethiopian monastic context such as Abba Yoḥanni is not surprising in view of the strong connections between the Coptic and Ethiopian churches. Moreover, as noted elsewhere (Balicka-Witakowska 1998–99: 130–131; Brita, Gnisci 2019), it was not uncommon for monastic groups in Ethiopia to use texts and images to emphasize links, real and fictitious, between their founders and Egyptian monastic leaders. It is for such reasons that portraits of Egyptian saints are a recurring feature in Ethiopian art. In addition to the manuscripts mentioned above, St Anthony appears already in 13th- or 14th-cent. Ethiopian churches such as ሙጻክና ሙጻክ ኃይለማርያም (Balicka-Witakowska 2004: 24, fig. 25) and Qorqor Maryam (Lepage, Mercier 2005: 125). Given the loss of earlier wall paintings, it is difficult to assess the age of this tradition and the nature of Ethiopia's visual links with those Coptic churches in Egypt where Anthony the Great would have been portrayed during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.³⁹

The significance of the 15th-cent. paintings of the southern altar of Abba Yoḥanni in relation to the history of Christian art in Ethiopia has hitherto gone unrecognized, but the existence of such an altar has broader implication that deserve attention.

Firstly, the painted altar at Abba Yoḥanni, together with an altar at Bäraqit Maryam Mägdälawit that featured an image of the Virgin and Child (Lepage 1972: fig. 8),⁴⁰ demonstrates that the Zagwe practice of decorating

³⁸ For another miniature of St Anthony, in which he holds a cross-staff and stands next to Macarius of Egypt, see Heldman (1989: fig. 10), though in this example the saint has a hand-cross rather than a book in his other hand. There is a second group of miniatures in which the saint does not hold this object, as shown by a psalter in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, MS IES 74, fol. 125v; for a discussion of this manuscript with further references, see Gnisci (2020a: 18). On the circulation of visual motifs and themes in Ethiopic manuscripts, the key study remains Balicka-Witakowska (1997); but see also the remarks in Bosc-Tiessé (2014); Gnisci (2017); and Id. (2020c).

³⁹ See, for example, the portrait of the holy man in the monastery of Saint Anthony at the Red Sea in Badamo (2019: fig. 5).

⁴⁰ This church is well within walking distance from *abba* Yoḥanni, given that it situated around 60 km east of it.

altars with painted or carved holy figures and inscriptions (e.g. Bosc-Tiessé 2010) continued during the early Solomonic period.⁴¹ Indeed, the wall paintings of *abba* Yoḥanni, like the carvings of a holy man on the exterior of Gäbrəʾel Wäqen discussed in our previous contribution (Gnisci, Villa 2020), testify to the existence of artistic continuities between the Zag^we and early Solomonic periods and of visual connections between the Tämben and Lasta districts.⁴² The existence of a land grant that, as discussed above, affords evidence of this region's political and religious ties with the Zag^we dynasty, as well as the endurance of local traditions that attribute the foundation of the monastery to an *abunä* Aron from Lasta further reinforce the impression that long-standing bonds linked the two regions.

Secondly, the Abba Yoḥanni altar improves our understanding of the visual programmes that could be employed in 15th-cent. Ethiopian churches and their significance, in that it gives an idea of the types of subjects that could be used to decorate altars. This evidence is all the more valuable because of the small number of early Solomonic churches that preserve their original wall paintings, and the even smaller number of churches from this period that feature painted altars.

The decoration of an altar with figures is in itself significant and should be considered in relation to the early Solomonic practice of constructing meaning by creating meaningful connections between the subject-matter of images and sacred space. In this regard, several authors have noted the placement of scenes in Ethiopian churches could serve to enhance their significance (e.g. Tribe 1997). Thus, for example, scenes of the Entry into Jerusalem and the Presentation to the Temple could be placed near the sanctuary to express the belief that each church stood as a metonymy of the New Temple in Jerusalem and thus as an earthly prefiguration of paradise and Heaven-

⁴¹ While the only known painted altars from the Zag^we period are portable ones made of wood, it remains to be established whether non portable altars featured paintings. A discussion of the much-debated question of dating of the carvings of the altars in the Trinity Chapel is beyond the scope of this contribution.

⁴² For a further example of continuity between these periods, see the examples discussed in Gnisci (2020c). It is important to note that such instances need to be demonstrated, not assumed *a priori*, as done, for example in Lepage (1987).

ly Jerusalem (Heldman 2000: 7–8; Gnisci 2015*b*: 259–61).⁴³ Similarly, the image of the Virgin and Child on the altar in Bäraqit Maryam Mägdälawit gives visual expression to the Ethiopian belief that the Ark of the Covenant prefigured the Incarnation. More generally, Christian Ethiopians interpret the Ark with the Tablets of Law and the Virgin with the infant Jesus respectively as prototype and embodiment of the Christian altar with its consecrated tablet.⁴⁴

It is likely that the Abba Yoḥanni altar was originally decorated with other figures of holy men: the fragmentary traces of paint on the other portions of the structure that bear vertical and diagonal lines probably belong to their vestments. Additional portraits of saintly figures were probably also found in other areas of the church. Their presence must have helped visualize the belief that the church was built on the ‘foundation of the apostles and prophets’ (Ephesians 2:20) and those who succeeded them by engaging with architectural metaphors similar to those at play in the altar of Bäraqit Maryam Mägdälawit.

Our picture of the decorative schemes of early Solomonic churches is fragmentary at best. However, as far as we can tell, iconic images of saints were frequently placed in the sanctuaries of early Solomonic churches (e.g. Balicka-Witakowska 1998–99; Tribe 2009) or on supportive elements, such as piers, to visualize biblical passages that contain anthropomorphic architectural metaphors and to bring together local Christian communities with Christ and his saints. Such portraits helped to connect those who entered into the church with ‘all things in heaven and on earth under Christ’ (Ephesians 1:10), but they could also intercede on their behalf (Balicka-Witakowska 1998–99). There is ample evidence to support this reading, given that it was

⁴³ For more general discussions on the links between Jerusalem and Christian architecture, see Krautheimer (1942); and Ousterhout (1990).

⁴⁴ The relevant literature is too extensive to be given in full here. The earliest evidence of the use of Marina imagery on altars comes from Lalibäla, see Mercier (2004: 8) for a discussion and reproduction. For additional research on Marian iconography in Ethiopian art, see Chojnacki (1983: 171–216); Heldman (1994); Mercier (2004); and Gnisci (2019). For the symbolism of the Virgin as the Ark of the Covenant in the Ethiopian tradition, see Amsalu Tefera (2015). On the existence of similar symbolic interpretations in other Christian traditions, see, for example, Van Esbroeck (2005); and Bolman (2016: 145). For a discussion of the visual interplay between Old and New Testament in Christian art, see, e.g. Kessler (2012).

not uncommon for Christian Ethiopians to compare holy men to pillars (e.g. Kaplan 1985: 238) and that architectural metaphors are attested in other media such as icons (Gnisci 2019).

As noted above, the church of Abba Yoḥanni is also decorated with paintings dating to the 17th (Figs. 15, 17) and early 20th (Fig. 16) centuries. These 17th-cent. paintings are accompanied by inscriptions that, for the most part, illustrate their subject-matter. However, one painting is also accompanied by an inscription which provides the name of the painter who was responsible for this phase of decorations and which reads ‘do not forget me – said Giyorgis the painter’ (Fig. 15).⁴⁵ The inscription showcases the importance of memory and commemoration in the soteriological thinking of Christian Ethiopians.

Another painting, showing the archangel Rufa³el (Raphael), features a hymn (Fig. 17) which reads:

ሰላም[፣] ለከ ፣ ለሩፋኤል[፣] ፈዋሲ[፣]	1. Salutation to you, o Raphael the healer,
መስተፍስሐ[፣] ብዕሲት[፣] ወብዕሲ ፣	2. Consoler of woman and man
እምድሕረ[፣] ኃዘኖሙ[፣] ጥቀ ። ቅንኣ ተ ፣ ከይሲ[፣]	3. after their great sorrows. [You are] the envy of the Serpent,
በጸሐከ ፣ ከመ[፣] ፈላሲ[፣]	4. having come to you as a wanderer (...)

The hymn, which is apparently incomplete, contains some of the central motifs that are typically associated with Raphael in the Ethiopian tradition: the archangel is represented as a consoler of human souls from spiritual sufferings and as a binder of demons.⁴⁶ The hymn probably served to reinforce the apotropaic power of the image of Raphael, but, probably, also to encour-

⁴⁵ The inscription, placed at the right of a set painting showing the twelve apostles and St Peter, reads እ.ትርስዑኒ ፣ ይቤ ፣ ሰኣሊ ፣ ጊዮርጊስ ፣.

⁴⁶ Both themes descend from the biblical book of Tobit, in which Raphael is first mentioned. The same motifs are also found in the Synaxarium entry for 3 Pāg^wmen, dedicated to the commemoration of the archangel, and elsewhere in the Ethiopic tradition. For the Synaxarium entry for 3 Pāg^wmen, see in particular Guidi (1913: 648–50 [444–46]). See also the *‘arke*-hymn appended to the Synaxarium entry for 2 Ḥamle, in which the archangel is described as መላልኣከ ፣ ጥዲኖ ፣ ወፈውስ ፣ ‘the angel of health and healing’ (Guidi 1909: 212 [228]). The same epithet is used in the *Mälkä’ä Rufa’el* (= Chaîne no. 131, cp. Chaîne 1913: 199), published in N.K. (1961/62 [1953 E.C.]: 215–20).

age devotional engagement with it. Thus, both these inscriptions open a fascinating window onto the relationship between artist, image, and viewers during the Gondarine period.

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ከአ ፡ ገብርኤል ። [Dərsanä Mikaʾel wä-dərsanä Rufaʾel mälkəʾa Mikaʾel wä-mälkəʾa Rufaʾel. Dərsanä Gäbrəʾel wä-mälkəʾa Gäbrəʾel]. Addis Ababa.

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Fig. 1 – The white façade of the monastery of Abba Yohanni Däbrä 'Asä.
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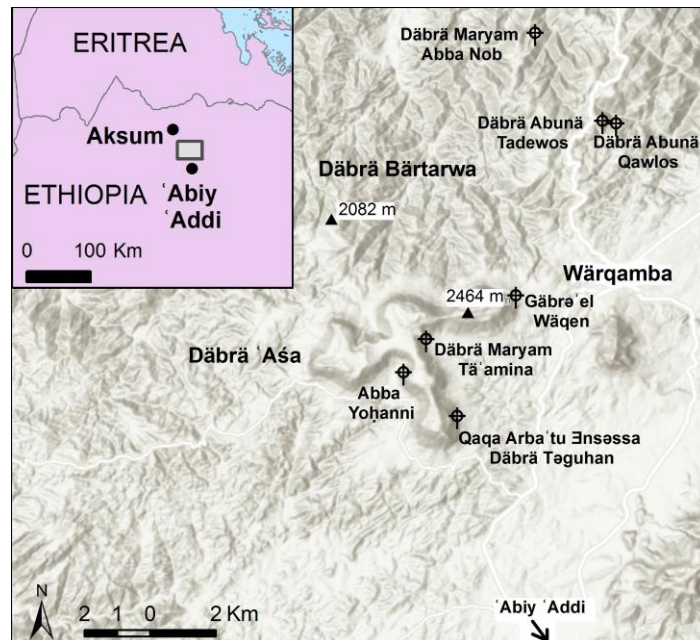


Fig. 2 – Map of Q'älla Tämben (courtesy of Luisa Sernicola)



Fig. 3 – The monastery of Däbrä Maryam Tä'amina, on the opposite side of Däbrä 'Aša's central slope. © Massimo Villa, 2019.



Fig. 4 – The chapel built around the cave in which *abba* Yoḥanni used to pray.
© Massimo Villa, 2019.



Fig. 5 – The cave in which *abba* Yoḥanni used to pray.
© Massimo Villa, 2019.



Fig. 6 – The place in which tradition places the tomb of the hermit *abba* Ammoni.
© Massimo Villa, 2019.



Fig. 7 – Loose leaf from a Synaxarium book, 15th–early 16th century.
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Fig. 8 – Fragments of old manuscripts found in Abba Yohanni Däbrä °Aśa.
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Fig. 9 – The interior of the Church of Abba Yohanni. © Jacopo Gnisci, 2018.

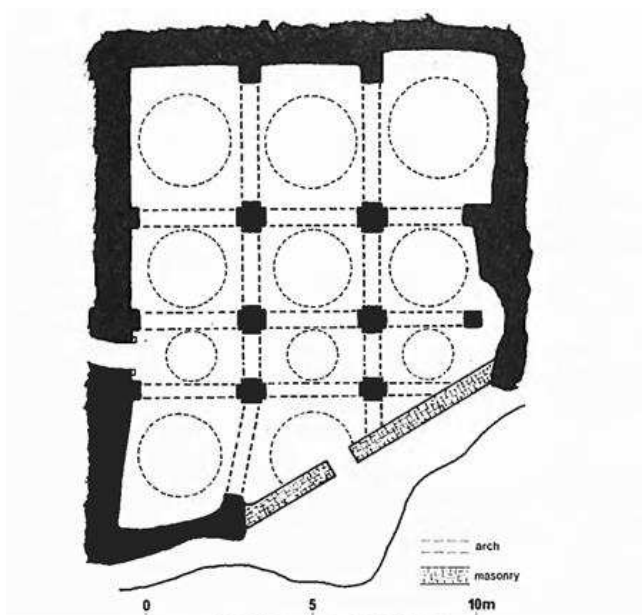


Fig. 10 – Plan of the Church of Abba Yohanni (Plan from Ruth Plant 1985)



Fig. 11 – A carved dome with central boss from the Church of Abba Yoḥanni.
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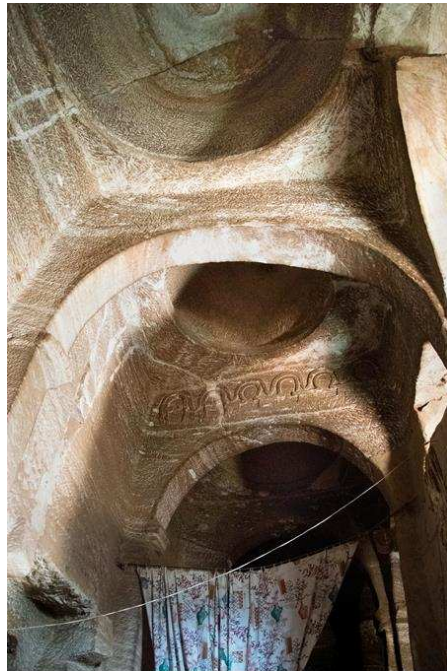


Fig. 12 – The blind Aksumite windows in the Church of Abba Yoḥanni.
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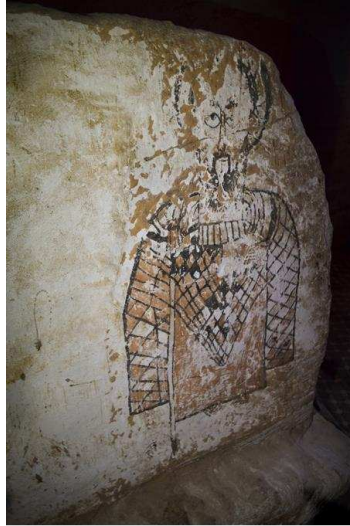


Fig. 13 – The southern altar in the Church Abba Yoḥanni with a standing figure.
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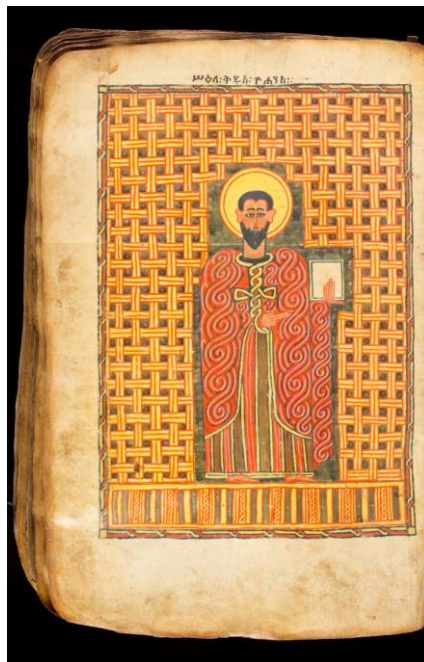


Fig. 14 – *The Evangelist John*, from an early 15th-cent. Ethiopic Gospel.
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 1998.66.



Fig. 15 – *The Twelve Apostles*, Church of Abba Yohanni.
© Jacopo Gnisci, 2018.



Fig. 16 – *St George, the Virgin and Child, and other figures*, Church of Abba Yohanni.
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Fig. 17 – *The Archangel Raphael*, Church of Abba Yohanni.
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