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Exhibition

THE INDIGENOUS & THE FOREIGN

The Jesuit Presence in 17th Century Ethiopia

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To the Department of Oriental Manuscripts of the British Library, to

Catalogue

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THE INDIGENOUS & THE FOREIGN

The Jesuit Presence in 17th Century Ethiopia

In the rural plateaux of northern Ethiopia, one can still find scattered ruins of monumental buildings alien to the country's ancient architectural tradition. This little-known and rarely studied architectural heritage bears silent witness to a fascinating if equivocal cultural encounter that took place in the 16th-17th centuries between Orthodox Ethiopians and Catholic Europeans. The Indigenous and the Foreign explores the enduring impact of the encounter on the religious, political and artistic life of Christian Ethiopia, one not readily acknowledged, not least because the public conversion of the early 17th-century King Susenyos to Catholicism resulted in a bloody civil war enveloped in religious intolerance.

Included in this presentation are photographs showing the surviving architecture of a number of religious and stately buildings of early 17th-century Ethiopia, a period when a mission of Jesuits from Goa, in Western India, was most active at the Ethiopian Christian king's Court. This important heritage, known as pre-Gondarine, is scarcely known outside of Ethiopia.

The photographic exhibition is complemented by a show of Jesuit books belonging to the Biblioteca Pública de Braga, and manuscripts from the Archive of the Conde da Barca, which are now in possession of the Arquivo Distrital de Braga.

The catalogue includes a number of images from illustrated Ethiopian manuscripts and texts from the period, kindly lent by The British Library and the SOAS Archives, with further examples of Ethiopian art from Private Collections, which were in display when the present exhibition was shown at the [Brunei Gallery](#) (SOAS - University of London), from July to September 2004, on the occasion of the launching of the book [*The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Ethiopian Art*](#) (eds. I. Boavida e M. J. Ramos).

The Jesuits in 16/17th-Century Ethiopia

The Christian kingdom that controlled the Ethiopian high plateaux suffered a series of very deep political, economic, military and religious crises in the period between the late 15th century and the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries in 1633. The Somali and Afari armies led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, called the Gragñ (or “left-handed”) seriously threatened the very existence of the Christian state from 1529 to 1543, when they were finally defeated by the Abyssinians with the help of a small Portuguese expeditionary force sent from Goa, India. Subsequently, parties of Borana and Barentuma Oromo pastoralists began raiding deeper and deeper into Abyssinian territory and, by the end of the 16th century, many had settled in Gojam and Shoa and had become the main adversaries of royal power in Abyssinia.

The Portuguese military collaboration with the Christian Ethiopians served their own strategic interests in their regional rivalry with the Ottoman Turks for control of the trade routes in the Red Sea and the north-western sector of the Indian Ocean. But the Portuguese rulers, together with the Pope in Rome and the head of the Company of Jesus, had the additional intention of establishing a mission in Ethiopia to encourage the population to switch from their Orthodox faith to Catholicism – an intention that made sense in the light of the Counter-Reformation concerns in Southern Europe.

A Jesuit mission led by Father Andrés de Oviedo first entered the country in 1557, only to find that the conversion project was too utopian. They began visiting the royal court, where they participated in a number of theological discussions with the Orthodox clergy. But they were eventually persecuted and expelled to Tigray where, in May Gwagwa, they preached and gave support to the Portuguese community that had stayed in Ethiopia in the wake of the Gragñ wars. As the years passed and the Portuguese either dwindled in numbers or converted to Orthodoxy, the mission became almost extinct.

By the end of the century, when Philip II, the Emperor of Spain, inherited the Portuguese royal crown, he decided to revive the Jesuit mission in Ethiopia. A new priest, Father Pedro Páez, was sent from Goa. Once in Ethiopia, he forced his way into the royal court. Other priests joined him and together they gradually gained the favour of the new Ethiopian King Susneyos and, very



O rei etíope recebe o patriarca católico Afonso Mendes. Frontispício da tradução francesa do *Itinerário* de Jerónimo Lobo: *Relation historique d'Abyssinie Traduite sur le manuscrit portugais...* (ed. Joachin Legrand). Paris, Veuve Coustelier, 1727

importantly, converted his brother the Ras Sela Krestos to Catholicism.

In 1621, Susneyos publicly announced his adherence to the Latin faith, a strategy to reinforce his political power and his independence from the influential Orthodox clergy. A consequence of the public conversion of the king was the arrival of a growing number of Jesuit priests intent on rapidly introducing Catholic reforms into Ethiopia. In 1626, the Catholic Patriarch Afonso Mendes imposed a number of changes on the ancestral religious practices of the Ethiopians. Social unrest and civil war followed and Susneyos was forced to resign. His son Fasiladas, who succeeded him, rejected Catholicism upon his accession to the throne and, in 1633, expelled or killed all Jesuit missionaries.

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Stone architecture in Ethiopia

According to the legend of the foundation of Gondar by King Fasiladas, an old prophecy said that a new era for Ethiopian Christianity would begin once a righteous king had permanently established his royal court in a place with a name bearing the letter G. By trial and error, the predecessors of Fasiladas built stone castles in Gorgora, Gomange, Guzara and Gannata Iyasus.

This legendary prophecy indicates, after the fact, how the concept of the royal camp as a political and cosmological centre and, more generally, the concept of urban life in Ethiopia changed so deeply with the replacement of semi-itinerant royal tents with castles built of stone and mortar. It also stresses the existence of an historical and structural connection between Gondar and the pre-Gondarine royal

Stone architecture in 17th Century Ethiopia

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between Gondar and the pre-Gondarine royal compounds.

The first castles were built in Dambya and Gojam, after the establishment of a Portuguese community in the highlands (after 1543), and the occupation of the Eritrean coast by a Turkish force (in 1557). From site to site, the royal residences follow this same general architectural pattern: quadrangular castles in stone and mortar, with adjacent cisterns to maintain a permanent water supply, surrounded by roughly circular walled compounds surmounted by cylindrical towers with egg-shaped tops.

A more systematic discussion of the origin of the pre-Gondarine and Gondarine castles is still awaiting a comparative analysis of architectural typologies and building procedures. Scholars have suggested that Portuguese and/or Turkish defensive architecture may have been particularly influential. For instance, the central tower of the castle of Fasiladas in Gondar is reminiscent of the telescopic towers of early 16th-century Portuguese military architecture.

A rather different influence can be detected in the leisure pavilion in the centre of the basin at Azazo. It seems to have been inspired in Indian palace architecture: according to Father Manuel de Almeida, a piping system raised water to the roof, from which it fell as a screen, refreshing the pavilion.

It is relatively easy to trace the design of the 17th-century Catholic churches and residences in Ethiopia to the Jesuit missionaries arriving from Southern Europe, via Goa in India. Building in stone and mortar required technical knowledge, tools, and suitable stone for cutting into blocks and for carving, as well as limestone or shells to prepare mortar. It also required qualified masons, carpenters and plasterers. All this was made possible through the exchange of craftsmanship between Ethiopians, Turks, Indians and Portuguese.

To build the churches, the priests relied on two alternative plans that had been developed by the Society of Jesus in Europe to be adopted in their missions all over the world:

- the "hall church" (as in New Gorgora and Azazo), which responded to a congregational idea of the religious community;
- the Latin cross-shaped church, in which the inner space was organized according to the very strict ritual rules codified at Trent and was well lit by large windows (the cathedral of Dankaz followed the same plan as the that of the Roman Church of Jesus, by the architect Vignola). The plain architecture favoured the decoration of the inner walls and arches, as in Martula Maryam.

The Catholic patriarch's house in Dabsan, built in at least three different stages, is a particularly interesting



example of the mix of building techniques tried by the masons that worked for the Jesuit missionaries.

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Martula Maryam

Within the hilltop compound of the Martula Maryam Monastery, in the Gojami district of Mota, stand the tall ruins of the ancient rectangular church dating from the time of King Susneyos. The three-nave building was started by the Jesuit missionary Bruno Bruni and Brother Juan Martinez (the architect of the Jesuits) in 1628, on the site (and most probably using the materials) of an older church built by order of Queen Eleni in the late 15th or early 16th century and subsequently destroyed by the Muslim armies of Ahmad Graññ and by Oromo raiding activities.

Susneyos allocated the badly damaged Martula Maryam compound to the Jesuits, on condition that they would restore it. The new church was not yet finished when the missionaries were expelled from the country in 1633. Its remaining walls (more than 10m high) and elaborate stone decorations testify to the importance and originality of the church: the delicately chiselled flower decoration of the main arches is indicative of the probable presence of Gujarati masons in the Abyssinian court and of the influence of so-called Indo-Portuguese decorative art. The bas-reliefs and other stone decoration in the altar area and around the windows and chapel doors are of Western Catholic origin, as are the anthropomorphic corbel figures.

[Guzara castle and Dabsan's "house of the patriarch"](#)

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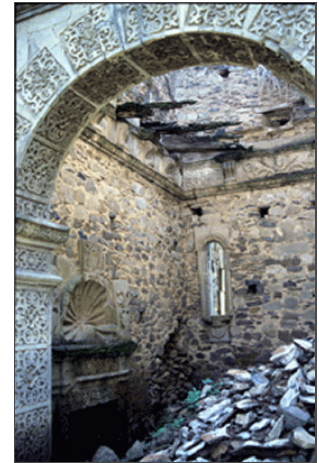
[Tis Abbay bridge](#)

MERTULA MARYAM - Plan of the Church

The Church

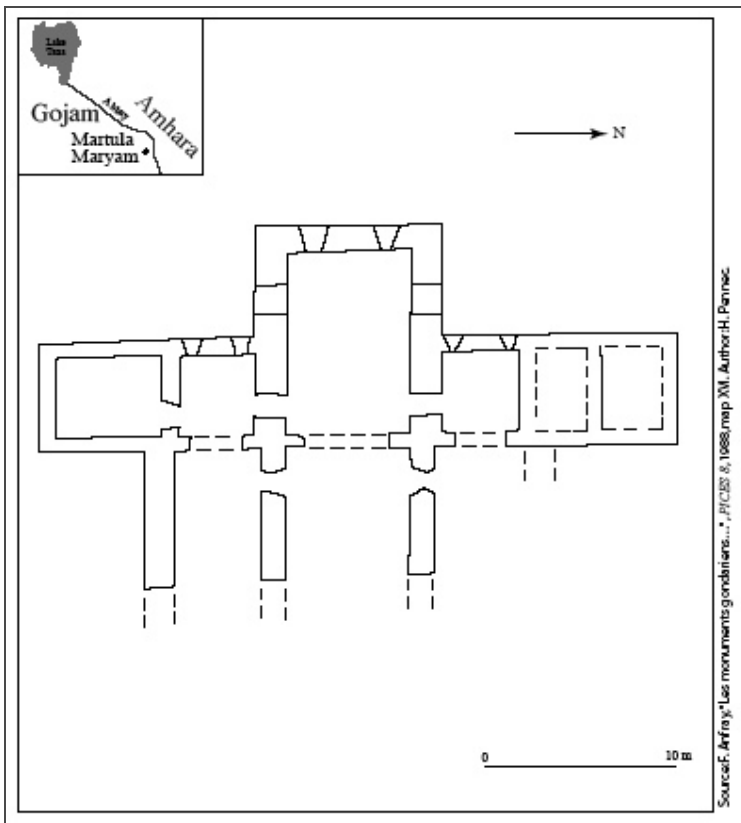


Martula Maryam church, Interior (Photo: H. Pennec)



Martula Maryam church, Archway (Photo: H. Pennec)





Martula Maryam church, Chapel entrance (Photo: M. Ramos)



Martula Maryam church, Window (Photo: M. Ramos)



Martula Maryam church, Corbel (Photo: M. Ramos)



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Guzara

The imposing, albeit ruined, castle of Guzara was built on a once strategic hill, 5 kilometres south of the small town of Emfraz, in the district of Gondar-Zuriya, not far from the north-eastern shores of Lake Tana.

Measuring 18 m by 12 m, it stands in the centre of what was once a royal walled compound of some significance. Its inception is frequently attributed to King Sarsa Dengel, around 1570 (see Monti della Corte, *I Castelli di Gondar*, 1938, pp. 105-108). Most probably, the present building, very similar to the early castles of Gondar (in its rectangular plan, four supporting turrets with egg-shaped tops, arched windows and doors), was built over a former defensive royal structure during the reign of either Susneyos or his son Fasiladas, in the first half of the 17th century.

The name "Guzara" is totally absent from the missionary documentation, which refers to the place as "Coga" or "Nova Gubae" (P. Páez, *História da Etiópia*, 1905, p. 204).

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Plan of Guzara palace

The castle

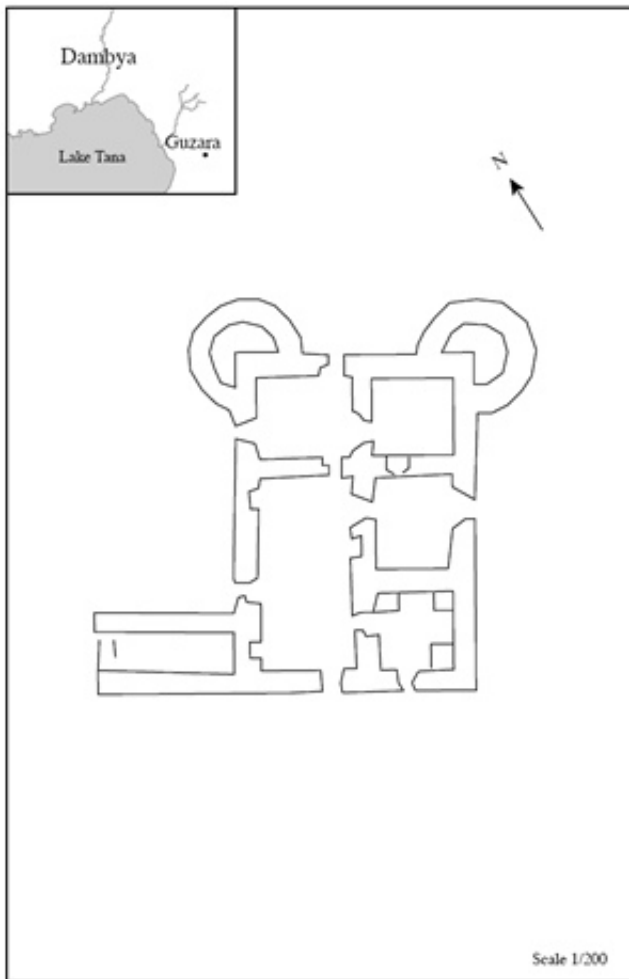


Guzara royal palace, General view (Photo: H. Penneç)



Guzara royal palace, Northeast view (Photo: M. Ramos)





Guzara royal palace, Corner tower (Photo: M. Ramos)



Guzara royal palace, South façade (Photo: M. Ramos)

The bridge



Emfraz bridge (Photo: M. Ramos)

The "house of the patriarch"



Dabsan ("house of the patriarch"), General view (Photo: H. Penneç)



Dabsan ("house of the patriarch"), South entrance (Photo: M. Ramos)

Dabsan

On a hilltop lying 2 kilometres north of the Guzara castle compound, the smaller walled compound of Dabra San, or Dabsan, evolved around the now ruined Jesuit residence described in the missionary documents of the 1620s as the *casa do Patriarca Afonso Mendes* ("house of the [Catholic] Patriarch Afonso Mendes").

This ruin is of special archaeological interest for the understanding both of the dynamics of the early Jesuit presence in Ethiopia and of the stylistic and masonry evolution of western-influenced architecture in the country. The 24 m by 6-8 m building seems to have been built in at least three different stages, using different building solutions. Like other compounds of this period, the remains of a cistern adjacent to the residence are still clearly visible.

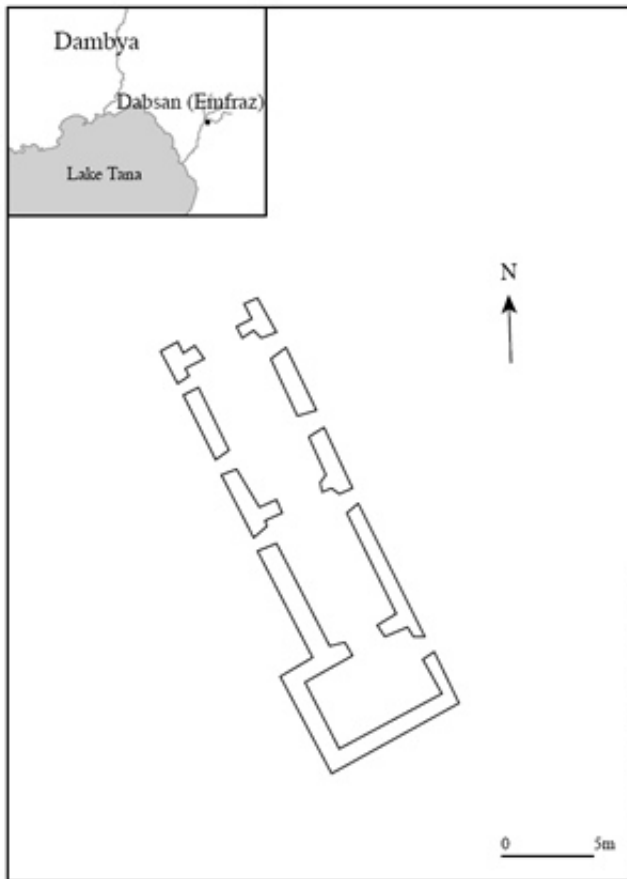
The building became the official residence of the

Catholic Patriarch in 1626 and it was from here that the attempted Latin reformation of the Ethiopian Church was organized. There are references in the Jesuit correspondence that it even harboured a religious painting studio



Dabsan ("house of the patriarch"), Interior view (Photo: S. Infante)

Plan of the house of the patriarch



Dabsan ("house of the patriarch"), Niche (Photo: H. Pennec)

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Gorgora Nova - Maryam Gemb

The site the Jesuit documents refer to as Gorgora Nova is situated on a small peninsula on the northern side of Lake Tana, district of Gondar-Zuriya, in the region of Dambya. Between 1611 and 1618, Gorgora Nova became the royal camp (katama) of King Susneyos, who had decided to abandon Dakana due to an epidemic caused by the place's poor health conditions.

Next to the remains of a yet unidentified building (a royal palace and/or a Jesuit residence?) whose walls are still standing, a large area of debris marks what was once the imposing structure of a single nave "baroque" Catholic church. After centuries of neglect, it collapsed in the summer of 1995. The only standing sections – the southern tip of the high altar and the lower part of the outer wall – testify to the richness and sophistication of the stonework and the overall monumental scale of the building.

The temple was arguably built circa 1626, under the supervision of Brother Juan Martinez (or João Martins), by direct order of King Susneyos who, after having moved the royal camp to Dankaz (in 1618), wished that a Catholic church in stone and mortar be erected in Gorgora Nova and entrusted to the Jesuits, for their missionary work.

[Martula Maryam church \(Gojam\)](#)

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The castle



Gorgora compound, General view (Photo: M. Ramos)

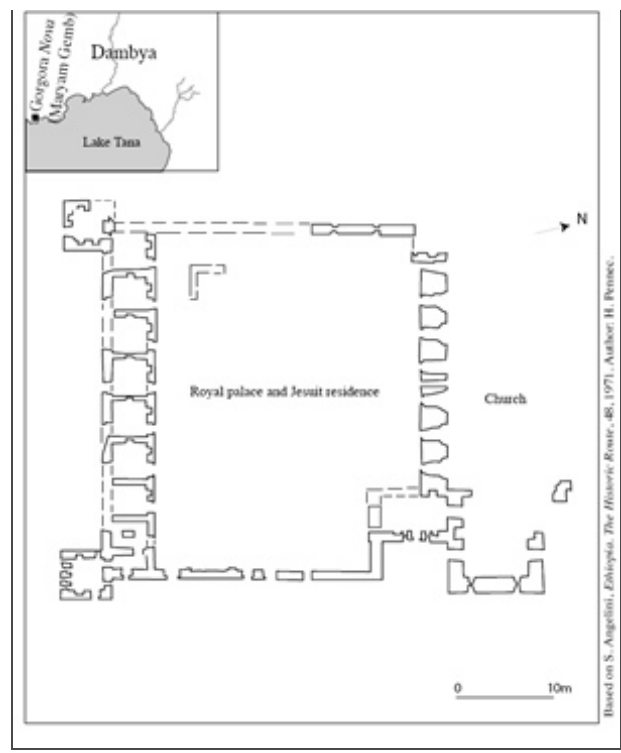


Gorgora compound, Northeast tower (Photo: M. Ramos)



Gorgora, Lake Tana view (Photo: M. Ramos)

Plan of Gorgora Nova



Gorgora cathedral, Remains of the high altar's south wall (Photo: M. Ramos)



1930's photo of the cathedral's north wall and the high altar, in Ugo Nanni, Che Cosa é L'Africa Orientale. Roma, L'Azione Coloniale, 1935



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Dankaz Gomange

This site of the Tadda warada, 70 km from Gondar (by dirt road) and 4 km from the village of Degoma, harbours the important remains of a large castle and of a Catholic cathedral, both built during the latter part of the reign of King Susneyos, who established the royal court here in 1618. The palace was built by the masons who had arrived from India in the company of the Catholic Patriarch Afonso Mendes, and was finished by 1630.

The castle stands on the north-eastern tip of a high plateau (alt. 2750 m), perched on a very steep slope facing the valley of Gadam Giyorgis. It is certainly the most elaborate of all pre-Gondarine royal structures: there are still traces of painted fresco decorative patterns on the interior walls; the ruined rooms have large arched windows, chimneys and built-in cupboards; the outer walls show elements of a sophisticated system for collecting rainwater. The drainage leads to a monumental subterranean cistern (14 m long, 5.5 m wide, 8.5 m deep) in surprisingly good condition – the vaulted ceiling is still almost intact.

The construction of the cathedral began in 1628, at the height of Jesuit influence over the king's court. Its ruins lie a mere 300 m south of the castle – a physical sign of the closeness of the relationship. It has a characteristic Catholic cross-shaped plan, with side chapels and traces of a Western-style stone decoration. The 27 m long vaulted roof collapsed long ago, but the supporting arches are partially still in place as are, on the western side, some of the carved stone boxes that decorated the ceiling. A cross, sculpted in high relief over a false stone canopy, is still visible (but damaged) on the wall facing the north-eastern section of the transept.

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The castle



Dankaz royal palace, General view (Photo: M. Ramos)



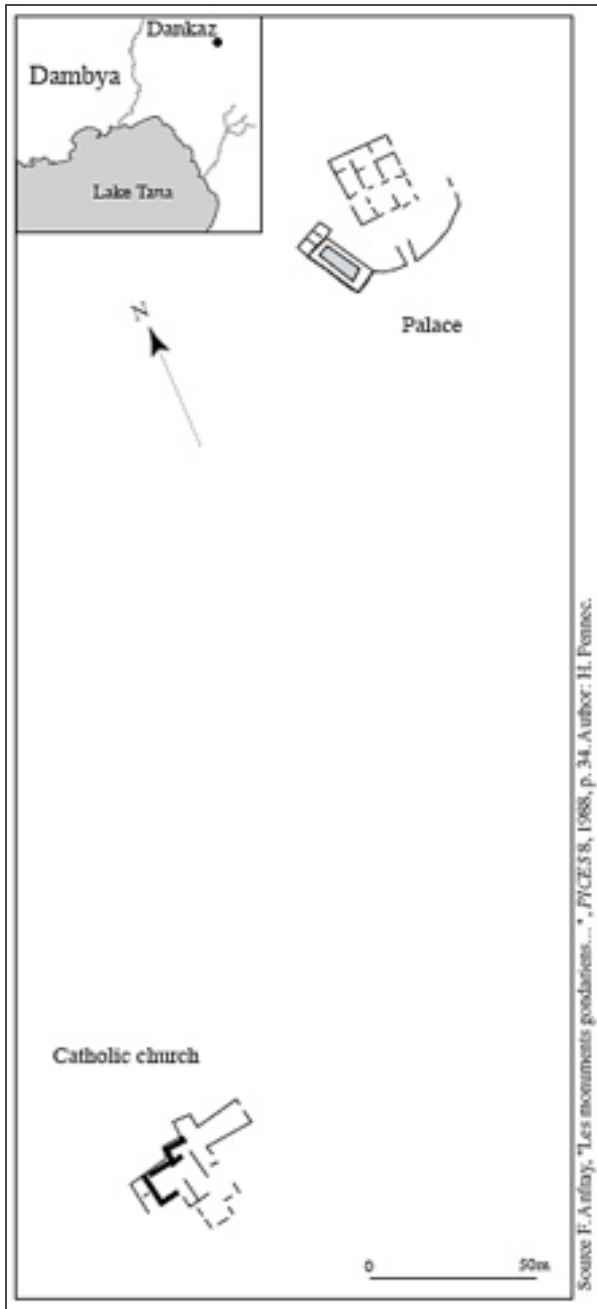
Dankaz royal palace, Interior (Photo: H. Penneç)



Dankaz royal palace, Wall decoration (Photo: H. Penneç)

Azazo and Gondar castles
Tis Abbay bridge

DANKAZ GOMANGE - General Map



Dankaz royal palace, Underground cistern (Photo: H. Pennec)



Dankaz royal palace, Cistern's ceiling (Photo: S. Infante)

The cathedral

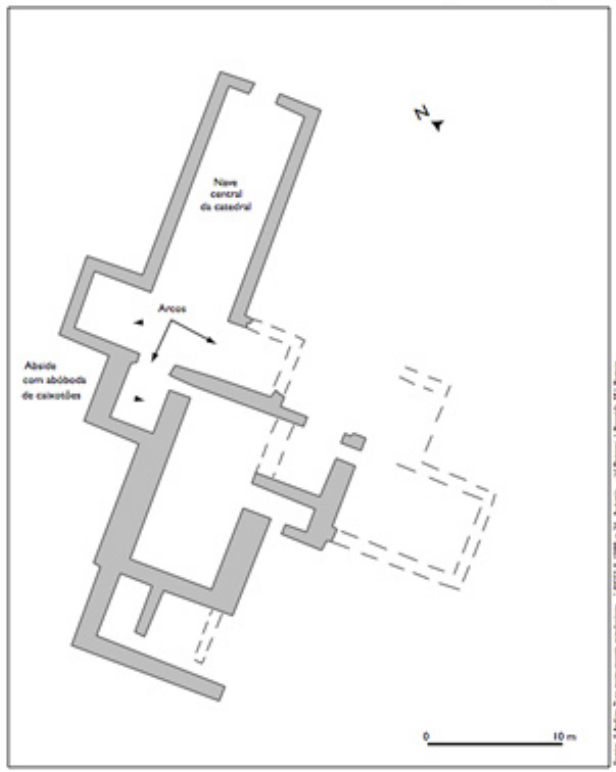


Dankaz cathedral, General view (Photo: M. Ramos)



Dankaz cathedral, Arch, high altar (Photo: S. Infante)

DANKAZ CATHEDRAL - Site Plan



Dankaz cathedral, View from the altar (Photo: M. Ramos)



Dankaz cathedral, Transept (Photo: S. Infante)



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Azazo and Gondar

The church of Takla Haymanot, which was for centuries the residence of the Etchage of the Monastic Order of Dabra Libanos, stands on a hilltop one kilometre from the village of Azazo (10 km south of Gondar). The church compound has preserved some architectural remains of the royal (Orthodox) church that was probably built there during the reign of King Susneyos (1607-1632).

Some of the decorative stones embedded in the inner walls of the church may even have been recycled from the structures of the royal compound of Gannata Iyasus whose remains lie 500 m toward the north-east (in Atie-Wogen). Besides a derelict conical tower and some barely visible foundation walls, little else has survived of what was once the place that came to symbolize the close association of King Susneyos and the once very influential Jesuit missionaries.

Azazo Gannata Iyasus may have been the direct model for the famed castle compound and pool in Gondar, built by order of Susneyos's son, Fasiladas (the "restorer" of the Orthodox faith). The originality and monumental scale of the compound, which included a leisure pavilion in the centre of a rectangular basin (which served as the model for the one in Gondar), a garden for acclimatizing foreign plants and a Catholic school, is well documented in the writings of Father Manuel de Almeida.

The square palace of King Fasiladas in Gondar was built after 1632. It was initially used as one of the sovereign's katamas (royal camps), in addition to the ones at Guzara, Dankaz and Guba'e.

Fasil's Bath, as the Gondar pool is called, is a very large rectangular baptistery ritually used to this day during the annual ceremonies of Temkat (Epiphany).



Azazo complex, Barbican tower (Photo: H. Pennec)



Gondar palace compound, Fasiladas' royal palace (Photo: H. Pennec)

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Tis Abbay (bridge)

The old bridge over the Abbay river, 30 km east of Bahir Dar, is an L-shaped, stone structure 64 m in length, composed of 8 arches. Like many other bridges, and indeed stone monuments, it is traditionally attributed to King Fasiladas. But, according to the Portuguese Father Jerónimo Lobo, it was built during the reign of Fasiladas's father, Susneyos, with the help of Indian masons brought in by the Jesuit missionaries from Goa. Father Manuel de Almeida mentions that the bridge was built in 1626.

The bridge was restored some years ago by the Ethiopian cultural heritage conservation authority.



Tis Abbay bridge (Photo: M. Ramos)

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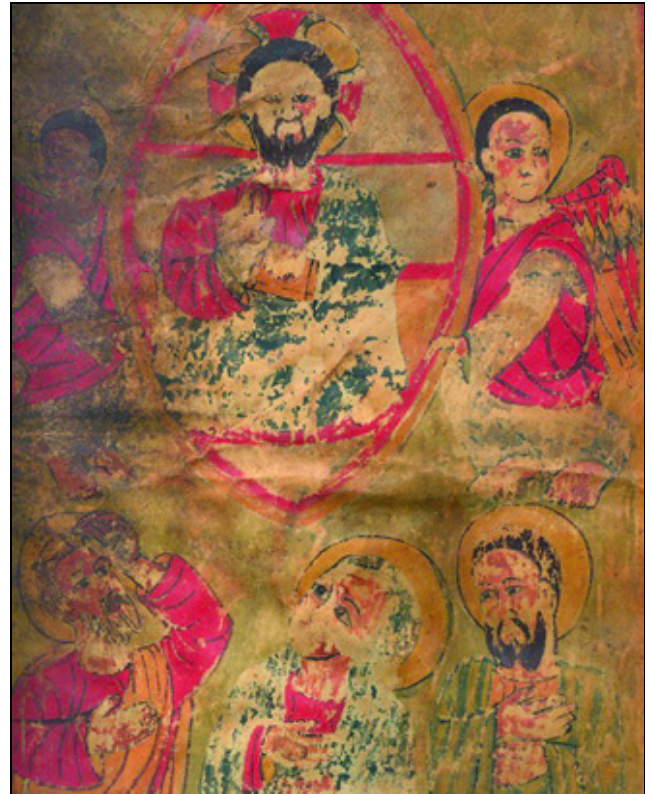
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The Jesuits and Ethiopian Art

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola set the basis for the Jesuits' use of imagery in their global missionary enterprise, recommending an active "application of the senses" at the end of each day in order to visualize the divine. In their drive to uphold Counter-Reformation policy, spread Catholic values and assert the authority of Rome, the Jesuits made widespread use of Loyola's approach to sacred imagery as part of their missionary strategy, copying and disseminating certain favoured iconographic types around the world, particularly the icon housed in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, dated c. sixth century AD but believed to have been painted by Saint Luke himself. Francisco Borja, the third Jesuit general, obtained permission from Pope Paul V to have an exact copy made, which became the prototype for the mass production of painted and engraved copies which were sent to Jesuit provinces around the world, from Brazil to Japan.

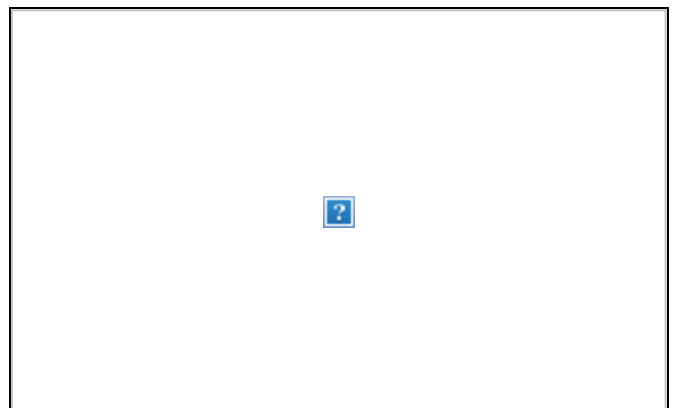
In Ethiopia, devotion to Mary had always been intense. King Zara Yaeqob (1434-68) insisted on the presence of a portrait of Mary during Mass, and supported a system of courtly art patronage which led to the production of an increasingly large number of Marian paintings, many of which done in tempera on gesso panels by the talented monk Fere Seyon. The Santa Maria Maggiore image, introduced by the Jesuits in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, became extremely popular in Ethiopia, and came to supplant all other representations of the Virgin and Child.

Since it was primarily a vehicle for its Eastern Orthodox theological and liturgical content, Ethiopian art was by its very nature conservative. The Jesuits, however, although expelled by King Fasiladas in 1633, left a lasting but subtle mark on Ethiopian visual imagery, paving the way for the acceptance of a few new iconographic types. Both Mary's Dormition and her Assumption, for instance, gained renewed popularity in the seventeenth century, being now depicted in substantially different ways from the earlier Ethiopian portrayals based on Eastern and Byzantine traditions. Another significant iconographic change was the well-known early sixteenth-century Flemish-Portuguese representation of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, wearing a crown of thorns. Known in Ethiopia as the Kwerata Reesu, it became an object of special veneration which Ethiopian emperors carried into battle.



Various Liturgical Prayers, Litanies and Readings

Ethiopian Manuscript on Vellum
Second half of the 19th century but with four late 15th century paintings
attributed to the Fere Seyon school
104 leaves, 210x270 mm
Private Collection



Arganonä Weddase

Ethiopian, second half of the 17th century
148 leaves 155x165 mm
Private Collection

The establishment of a settled urban court life in Gondar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a flourishing of Ethiopian liturgical, musical and artistic life. New churches were built, musicians and dancers employed, and writing and painting scriptoria set up, which produced large numbers of profusely illustrated works, from gospels and hagiographic texts to narratives of the miracles of Mary and Jesus (Tamra Maryam and Tamra Iyasus). The Jesuits' introduction of collections of prints like the *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* (Geronimo Nadal, 1593), which they presented to King Susneyos in 1611, had an impact on the development of Ethiopian painting by providing new sources of imagery, transforming somewhat the previous lack of interest in any form of naturalistic representation of the physical world.

Jesuit influence in the seventeenth century thus contributed to the formation of the so-called First Gondarene style, which introduced a few iconographic and compositional changes into the long-preserved traditional taste for flat areas of saturated colour and linear designs placed against empty backgrounds. Gradually, during the 18th eighteenth century, this style became softer and more modulated, with a greater degree of light and shading, more profuse ornamentation and more complex spatial settings, trends which define the Second Gondarene style. In both these phases of Gondarene painting, some garments, poses and decorative motifs appear to have been derived from India and Indian painting, and are generally attributed to models introduced by the Jesuits from their base in Goa. There had long been a history of contact between Ethiopians and the Muslim rulers of India, however, so the existence of direct Indian sources independent of Jesuit mediation cannot be ruled out.

Various Liturgical Prayers, Litanies and Readings

Ethiopian Manuscript on Vellum

Second half of the 19th century but with four late 15th century paintings attributed to the Fere Seyon school
104 leaves, 210x270 mm



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148 leaves 155x165 mm
Private Collection



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Private Collection

Private Collection

Although an invocation contained in the text dates most of this manuscript between 1855 and 1889, two sets of paintings [f. 4v, f. 46 r-v] can be dated to the late 15th century on the basis of both their pictorial and palaeographical style. These four paintings display the formal characteristics developed by Fere Seyon, court painter to King Zara Yaeqob (1434-68), and his followers: crisp lines, three-quarter profiles, the particular way the hair and beard are depicted, the gestures and poses of the figures. The picture on display here (f. 46r) shows Christ in Majesty, appearing within a mandorla flanked by two archangels who appear to be presenting this vision to the viewer. Underneath Christ's apparition, two apostles are represented in awe, their raised gazes and dramatic gestures drawing the viewer's attention towards Christ on the majestic throne above. The painting reflects the visionary tone that dominated north-eastern African Christianity, from Coptic Egypt to the Old Nubian kingdoms and Ethiopia. The vision of God's throne is a widespread iconographic motif in all three areas. It is a recurring feature of Ethiopian hagiographic narratives, which often describe it in detailed and flamboyant language, reflecting the complex mixture of Judaic and Greek sources that underlie Ethiopian cosmological notions. This painting's composition, in two registers, recalls a two-tiered design that had been widespread in Coptic apse-compositions of the seventh century, which sometimes conflated aspects of Christ's Ascension and his Majesty in heaven – as the Ethiopian artist has also done here – to effectively convey, by pictorial means, the experience of a true theophany.



Gospel of Saint John the Evangelist (a.k.a. Gospel of the Portuguese Man)

Ethiopian, mid-16th century

183 leaves

275x305 mm

Private Collection

Arganonä Weddase

Ethiopian, second half of the 17th century

148 leaves 155x165 mm

Private Collection

Although contemporary with Jesuit influence in Ethiopia, this striking illuminated manuscript presents a strictly geometricized pictorial style which is entirely devoid of European elements. Its paintings and geometric pages display figures in the traditional orant position, which goes back to Late Antique and Early Christian Egyptian representations of this subject. While the figures in the Fere Seyon paintings are in three-quarter profile, revealing the influence of paintings produced in Ethiopia by European artists brought in by King Dawit I (1382-1411), here the painter has portrayed the praying figures in strict traditional frontality and placed them against a simple flat background made up of areas of red, black and yellow, which contrast with the intricate interlacing of the figures' clothes. Such compositions preserve older Ethiopian motifs and taste, and are associated with a dozen other known works produced in the Lasta area around this time. Two of these still remain in Lalibela, but the best known example is the evangeliario kept in the British Library (Or 516), which shows a representation of Saint George and is characterized by the presence of a hornbill, defining an



The Four Gospels

Arabic

Rome, De Propaganda Fide, 1590-91

British Library Oriental 70.d.c

“artist of the hornbill” who was active in the 17th century. In the manuscript on display, this bird appears beneath the end of the text for the Friday reading [f. 123r], suggesting that it is a work by the same hand. The text – Arganonä Weddase [Harp of Praise] – is a popular Ethiopian Marian passage composed by Abba Giyorgis Saglawi during the 15th century. The original scribe’s name, Beselyos, appears on f. 123, and on palaeographical evidence he also appears to have been the scribe for the British Museum example.

Gospel of Saint John the Evangelist (a.k.a. Gospel of the Portuguese Man)

Ethiopian, mid-16th century
 183 leaves
 275x305 mm
 Private Collection

The writing style of this manuscript is consistent with a mid-16th century date. Although there is no colophon providing indications as to the patron, artist or scribe, other manuscripts with a similar hand are associated with the reigns of Lebna Dengel (1508-40) and Galadewos (1540-59). Possibly because the painter was aware of the Portuguese who had come to Ethiopia with Rodrigo de Lima in 1520 or Cristovão da Gama in 1541, this representation of Saint John the Evangelist is strikingly different from traditional Byzantine, Egyptian and Ethiopian portrayals. It shows the saint with European features, as indicated by his distinctive goatee beard, which was popular in the Iberian peninsula in the 16th and 17th centuries. The saint and his attendant are placed against a traditional, flat, uncoloured background, and flat areas of bright colour – including red, yellow and turquoise – make up the figures, particularly the saint’s clothes. Brilliant stars decorate the Evangelist’s gown, recalling the visionary aspects of traditional Ethiopian Christianity and the apocalyptic tone of the Revelation text in particular.

The Four Gospels

Arabic
 Rome, De Propaganda Fide, 1590-91
 British Library Oriental 70.d.c

Produced by the Stamperia Medicea of Cardinal Ferdinando de Medici, these are the earliest Gospels known to have been printed in the Arabic language. They are illustrated with a series of engravings by Leonardo Norsino (known as Parasole) after woodcuts by the Florentine artist Antonio Tempesta (1555-1630),



The Four Gospels
 Gondar, mid-17th century
 Vellum, original stamped leather cover
 238 leaves, 465x410 mm
 British Library Oriental 510



Double-sided triptych icon
 Ethiopian, mid 17th century
 Pigment on gesso-covered wooden boards
 250 x 320 mm (ht x w) (when open)
 Private Collection

many of which were in turn based on illustrations made by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) for his popular *Kleine Passion* series (1509-11). In accordance with Counter-Reformation policy, these Gospels were widely disseminated in India and the Far East as well as north-eastern Africa, where their illustrations came to influence the development of manuscript painting in Ethiopia.

The Four Gospels

Gondar, mid-17th century
Vellum, original stamped leather cover
238 leaves, 465x410 mm
British Library Oriental 510

It is unclear when the Arabic Gospels illustrated with the Antonio Tempesta compositions reached Ethiopia, whether during the reign of Susneyos or Fasiladas. In either case, Tempesta's compositions were well received in the scriptoria of Gondar and, after the Jesuits were expelled, became the sources for Gospel illustrations within the Ethiopian Orthodox theological tradition, as in this well-known work. It includes portraits of the Evangelists as well as narrative pictures and, unlike earlier manuscripts, which did not integrate text and image, here, as in the Arabic Gospels, they have been integrated. The original Arabic Gospels in themselves pose interesting problems of visual intertextuality, as they include Tempesta's Counter-Reformation version of Dürer's much earlier German illustrations. Produced in an even more removed religious, social and political environment, the Ethiopian Gospels' intertextual re-interpretations of the same compositions raise important questions about authorship and reception, as well as visual perception and stylistic originality. Apart from strictly theological considerations, when compared with the original scenes the Ethiopian versions show a considerable flattening of the spatial setting and figures, reflecting the painter's lack of interest in producing an illusionistic portrayal of the natural world, which had been so fundamental to European Renaissance artists. The Ethiopian painter also placed greater emphasis on the depiction of textile patterns – reflecting, perhaps, the great importance of luxury cloth in a kingdom where, until the establishment of a more settled court life in Gondar in 1632, the rulers had been predominantly warrior kings inhabiting a mobile tent court. Written in three columns, a note on f. 238 states that the Gospels were copied for King Yohannes I (Aalaf Sagad) (r. 1667-1682) and his Queen Sabla Wangel (d. 1689). In another note, however, which gives the date 1664-65, the original name has been erased, raising the likelihood that the



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
Private Collection



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

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161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
Private Collection



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
Private Collection

work had originally been started for Yohannes I's father, King Fasiladas (r. 1632-1667).

Double-sided triptych icon

Ethiopian, mid 17th century
 Pigment on gesso-covered wooden boards
 250 x 320 mm (ht x w) (when open)
 Private Collection

The earliest triptych icon of the Santa Maria Maggiore known to have been painted in Ethiopia (c. 1600) still recalls the Fere Seyon school and its crisp linear style. It places Mary and her Child against a flat red background, which emphasizes the monumental quality of these two figures, and only the apostles are portrayed on the lateral wings. Gradually, however, other figures were added to this basic composition, depicted with elongated faces that were already removed from the fuller, rounder figures of the 15th and 16th centuries. In the example shown here, the central panel portrays the Virgin and Child flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, as would become common practice. The left-hand panel depicts Gabra Manfas Qeddus, an Egyptian ascetic saint who covered his body with just his own hair and beard and lived in the desert accompanied by two lions; this points to the continuing importance of Ethiopia's early links with the Church of Egypt and Egyptian monasticism. Below Gabra Manfas Qeddus, a picture of six apostles signals the heavenly reward that awaits a truly ascetic life. On the right-hand side, the placing of the Crucifixion of Christ above an equestrian saint (probably Saint Theodore) spearing a man draws a parallel between the saint's martyrdom and that of Christ.

The geometrical patterning on the Infant's garment recalls the decorative patterns of traditional Ethiopian paintings and makes a marked contrast with the European-influenced figure of Mary, reflecting this period of stylistic transition.

Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
 161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
 Private Collection



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
 161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
 Private Collection



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
 161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
 Private Collection

Throughout the Middle Ages devotion to Mary was intense in Europe, Christian Egypt and Ethiopia. A series of stories had appeared in Europe by the 12th century that narrated miraculous events mediated by Mary's intercession. They were taken to the Middle East and North Africa by the Crusaders, where they were translated into Arabic in the middle of the 13th century. They reached Ethiopia via Egypt during the 14th century, where they were translated into Ethiopic and became King Dawit I's object of profound devotion. Under King Zara Yaeqob (1432-68), the monarch's drive to shape the theological and liturgical life of Ethiopia around his Marian devotion led to the miracle stories being used for liturgical purposes. By the 16th century there was a recognised canon containing 32 or 33 standard Miracles and their variations – the Tamra Maryam. Gradually many more stories dealing with local topics were added to the original canon. The largest collection known to date (British Library Or, 643, dated 1717) narrates 316 miracles. The collection shown here includes 61 miracles, although three of the stories are repeated. Twenty-six of them are part of the original canon of 32, and the names and locations in some reveal their Egyptian origin. Appealing to Mary's intercessory power, the text of each miracle is preceded by a short formula, such as "A miracle of Our Lady, the Holy, Twice-Virgin Mary, Mother of God. May her prayers and her blessing be with her servant (named in this book as S'ewa Dengel or Abadir) for ever and ever. Amen." Many miracles close with a short prayer or hymn to the Virgin. The eleven full-page illustrations are paintings done in simple flat areas of red, yellow and green, with lines, dots and cross-hatching. Folio 2r shows Mary as the popular icon of Santa Maria Maggiore, now flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel and accompanied by two warrior saints – in this case, George on folio 1r and Basilides on the verso – a combination that was to become widespread in icons of this period.

Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, mid-17th Century (with a separate painting of Mary on parchment dated to the early 16th century – folio 180r)

270 x 210 mm

Copied in the reign of King Fasiladas (r. 1632-67) and King Yohannes I (r. 1667-1682)

British Library Oriental 641

The picture shown here (on folio 180r) was a separate image painted on parchment in the early 16th century (as Mary's long flowing hair indicates), which was later inserted into a Tamra Maryam done in the following century for Yohannes I and queen Sabla Wangel (as the prayer written for these monarchs on the back of the picture indicates). The tender proximity between Mary and her Child and the position of their bodies within the pictorial space recall the Byzantine Marian type known as Mother of Tenderness. During the 16th century in Egypt and Ethiopia, this type became associated with the pilgrimage to the Egyptian site of Kuskam (or Qwesqwan in Fthionic) – the place where



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, 17th century
161 leaves, 155 x 165 mm
Private Collection



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270 x 210 mm

Copied in the reign of King Fasiladas (r. 1632-67) and King Yohannes I (r. 1667-1682)

British Library Oriental 641

Tadabba (or Sereqwan in Ethiopia) – the place where the Holy Family rested when fleeing to Egypt. Mary's flowing hair and the fashion adopted for her long red robe and undulating hems point to the style of Nicolo Brancaloneo, a Venetian painter who arrived in 1480 at the court of King Eskender (1478-1494) and met the Portuguese chaplain Francisco Álvares when his embassy to the court of Lebna Dengel (1508-40) reached Ethiopia in 1520. Called Marqorewos by his Ethiopian patrons, Brancaloneo left a relatively large body of painted work, including a signed collection of the Miracles of Mary, now in Tadbaba Maryam monastery (Wollo). The tender inclusion of this image into the later Tamra Maryam provides a touching insight into the profound devotion which coloured royal patronage in Ethiopia, apparently overpowering any self-conscious considerations of fashion, form or style.



Tamra Maryam (Small Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, mid-18th century
64 leaves, 165 x 253 mm
Private Collection

Tamra Maryam (Small Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

Ethiopian, mid-18th century
64 leaves, 165 x 253 mm
Private Collection

The firm adoption of the Santa Maria Maggiore image revived long-standing concerns about the theological correctness of details such as the positioning of the Child Jesus on Mary's right or left arm that had previously been voiced in response to European influences in the 15th and 16th centuries. Up until the end of the 18th century, there was no rigid rule governing this pictorial detail, although 16th-century painters seemed to prefer to depict the Child on his mother's right arm. Following the introduction of the Santa Maria Maggiore image, however, the infant Jesus began to be almost invariably portrayed sitting on Mary's left arm, holding a book and making a gesture of benediction. In 1769, the Scottish traveller James Bruce, who spent several years in the Ethiopian capital city of Gondar, observed that Ethiopian artists tended to rigidly adhere to this iconographic practice. The new style which emerged during the eighteenth century – now known as Second Gondarene - was defined by a much greater tonal modelling of the figures, the use of rich colours, and much more lavishly decorated compositions. Indian garments and textiles – such as



Tamra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), together with various other Marian texts

Ethiopian, late 17th - early 18th century
151 leaves, 102 paintings, 250 x 275 mm
Private Collection

those imported by King Sarsa Dengel (1563-97) – had long been worn by the Ethiopian aristocracy, and now became an important source of patterns for Ethiopian pictorial compositions. New iconographic motifs also appeared in the 18th century, including the conspicuous figure of the donor prostrated before a devotional figure – as can be seen, for instance, in the famous portrait of Queen Mentewwab (1730-69) at Narga Sellase monastery church on Lake Tana, where the Queen is depicted prostrated before the Virgin. In the picture shown here, the names of the original donor(s) have been replaced by those of Aster and occasionally Niqodimos. But an abstract idea of complete devotional surrender remains visually connoted by the figure of a donor – whoever that may be – prostrated in front of the Virgin, wearing clothes which appear to be made of luxurious Indian textiles. Mary sits against a rich crimson-coloured curtained background, which recalls 17th-century European Baroque settings for aristocratic portraiture. This aspect is reinforced by the Baroque-looking carvings that frame the Virgin's throne. She holds a ceremonial handkerchief, an iconographic mark of high rank, power and prestige which was already present in the Christian wall-paintings at Faras, Old Nubia (present-day Sudan), in the 11th to 13th centuries. On the opposite page, there is the well-known representation of Saint George on horseback spearing the dragon, which so often accompanies the Tamra Maryam narratives and the Marian icons produced during this period.



Tabiba Tabiban

Ethiopian, 1710-1730

Parchment

144 illustrations, 405 x 360 mm

British Library Oriental 590

Tamra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), together with various other Marian texts

Ethiopian, late 17th - early 18th century

151 leaves, 102 paintings, 250 x 275 mm

Private Collection

The manuscript is a collection of different Marian texts – the Prologue to the Miracles of Mary, the Prayer of Mary on receipt of the Covenant of Mercy from her Son (Kidana Mehret), various hymns to the Virgin (salam and esagged), the Homily to the Virgin Mary (Dersan), the Prayer of Mary at the tomb of Our Lord at Golgotha, and the Mas'hafa Ser'at, a text that accompanies the Weddase Maryam (Praises of Mary). The text of each Miracle is preceded by a variety of short formulas like "A miracle of Our Lady Mary. May her prayer and her blessing be with her servant [name] for ever and ever. Amen." They reveal the deep devotional attitude that characterized the readership for such works, and provide a poignant reason for the many erasures and replacements of the names of the book's successive owners and their relatives, all of whom would have hoped to gain the Virgin's blessing and protection by this means. A note of ownership even threatens anyone who might "steal the book or erase it" with excommunication "by the power of Peter and Paul". An additional note indicates that at some point the manuscript was donated to a church named Dabra Iyasus by Walatta Takla Haymanot, a woman whose name occurs over many erasures, together with her father, brother and mother.

The series of paintings collected here includes the portrayal of Jesus preaching to the Apostles (folio 3v), placing the devotion to Mary within a wider Christological context. This is further reiterated by the depiction of the Covenant of Mary (Kidana Mehret) on folio 9v, in which Christ acknowledges Mary's role. In the former picture, two lines of Apostles lead the viewer's eyes inexorably towards Jesus in the centre. This composition creates a certain illusion of depth and establishes a clear relationship among the figures by clearly directing of their gestures and gaze. In addition, delicate tonal modelling imparts an incipient illusion of bodily volume to Jesus and his Apostles, particularly their faces and hands. This painting thus reproduces some of the pictorial concerns that had been introduced into Ethiopia in foreign engravings. Rather than simply flattening the scene completely in the traditional manner, the painter unconsciously incorporates some of the representational concerns that had originally inspired these foreign models. The placing of traditional details like the handkerchief in Christ's hand – an age-old marker of power and prestige – and the depiction of flat patterned textiles within this incipient pictorial illusionism creates a novel interpretation that is clearly representative of the complex Ethiopian cultural context of the time.

Tabiba Tabiban

Ethiopian, 1710-1730

Parchment

144 illustrations, 405 x 360 mm

British Library Oriental 590

Gondarene art reached a high point in the early decades of the 18th century, nurtured by King Iyasus I (r. 1682-1706) and King Bakaffa (r. 1721-30). Bakaffa's wife, Queen Mentewwab (r. 1730-69), who became regent on her husband's death, reigning with her son, Iyasus II (r. 1730-55), and remained influential during the reign of her grandson, Iyoas (r. 1755-69), was also a generous patron of the arts who left an imprint on the artistic taste of her time. Reflecting the rich cultural life at Gondar and its renewed emphasis on theological discussions, numerous beautifully illustrated books were executed under these monarchs and new pictorial cycles and subject-matter were developed, including many illustrated Lives of Ethiopian saints. Again, the influence of the Jesuits was felt through the adoption of their imagery – not directly from Geronimo Nadal's original work but rather through French copies. Starting with the Tamra Maryam commissioned by King Takla Haymanot (1706-08), the use of such images became widespread in subsequent years. Fewer than half the available images were used, however, leading scholars like Jacques Mercier to suggest that Ethiopian theologians might have refused certain images. In any case, it was not a case of slavish copying. Rather, the Ethiopian artists borrowed selected visual motifs, re-working them into their own complete verbal-visual theological and artistic statements. Among these new cycles, the Sage of Sages (Tabiba Tabiban) covered the full extent of biblical knowledge, illustrating both the Old and the New Testaments, aiming to instruct and

educate its elite readership by means of complex and obscure distichs, which echoed the metaphorical subtleties of the “wax and gold” intellectual and poetic tradition taught in Ethiopia’s most important monasteries. The portrayal of Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise re-works a composition by Abraham Blomaert, while the *Evangelium Arabicum* was used for some New Testament scenes like the Baptism of Christ, Christ’s Temptation, etc. and the *Abrege de la Vie et de la Passion de Nostre Sauveur Jesus-Christ* (1650-1660) for others, like the Annunciation and Crucifixion. An isolated engraving by Raphael Schiaminozzi, dated 1609, was also used for the scene depicting Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives. The Ethiopian artist unified these visual sources by means of a gigantic representation of Christ emerging from the clouds, which appears in each composition (but not in the original engravings), dominating it with his powerful presence and all-embracing gaze. In this inter-textual process, Christ now functions as the great narrator for the human story, visually unifying all the different narrative – and therefore temporal – moments. In visual terms, the finished Ethiopian book thus makes the whole history of humanity dependent on this Christ-centred belief to a far greater extent than the European models did.

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European texts and maps on Ethiopia

This group of documents reflect the peculiarities of the extant European literature about the Abyssinian kingdom, a literature where travel and scientific exploration of that country have always tended to go hand in hand with mythical representations and cultural misunderstandings.

In 1610, the Dominican friar Luis de Urreta (ca. 1570-1636) wrote an Ecclesiastical, Natural, Ethical and Political History of Ethiopia, a late example of a stream of European geographical fantasies where Ethiopia was presented as the wondrous and utopian-like kingdom of Prester John. He fantasized about a supposed ancient Dominican presence in Ethiopia, and argued that they should thus be given precedence over the Jesuits as Catholic missionaries in that country.

The Jesuits reacted immediately to Urreta's writings, and published harsh refutations of the Dominican's views, based on information forwarded in the letters and reports written by Jesuit missionaries in Ethiopia (Fernão Guerreiro, *Addition to the Relation of Ethiopia*, 1611; Nicolau Godinho, *Of Abyssinian Matters*, 1615).

The most prominent of these refutations, was Father Pedro Páez' *History of Ethiopia* (c. 1622), a long and vivid account of Ethiopia, the Jesuit Mission, his own personal adventures in the country, and his explorations of the source of the Blue Nile. Although it was not published before the early 20th century, it was later rewritten by Father Manuel de Almeida (*History of High Ethiopia or Abyssinia*, c. 1645), who reduced the weight of Páez' refutation of Urreta but used most of the information provided on Ethiopia, on such diverse aspects as geography, zoology, theology and politics, and the role of the Jesuits in Ethiopia.

Like Páez' manuscript, Almeida's wasn't published. It was much later, in 1660, that Father Baltazar Teles, the then Superior of the Portuguese Province of the Society of Jesus, who had never set foot in Ethiopia, published a much-reworked version of the book, now called *History of Ethiopia or Prester John*.

Almeida's original manuscript was lost but three copies have survived: one is in Lisbon, another in the British Library and yet another in the SOAS Library. Almeida composed also a precious geographical, political and religious map of Ethiopia, which he attached to the manuscript of his book.

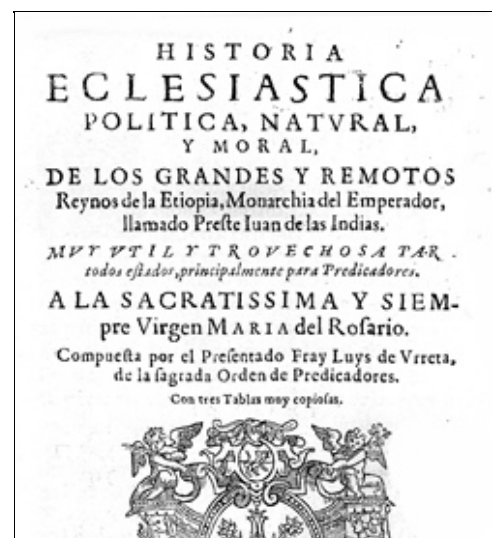
In the second half of the 17th century, the German scholar Iob Ludolf (1624-1704) published a series of books on Ethiopia. In the second edition of his *Ethiopian History* (1684), he inserted a map clearly inspired in Manuel de Almeida's, which he knew from the version published by Teles – as indicated in the box drawn in the left-hand side of the map. Among the different

The books



Frontispiece of Francisco Álvares, *Verdadeira Informaçam das Terras do Preste Joam das Índias, segundo vio e escreveu ho padre Francisco Alvarez capellã el Rey nosso senhor*. Lisboa, Casa de Luis Rodriguez, 1540.

(Photo: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa)



curious aspects of his map, we can see a representation of Dankaz as a tent city, in the fashion of the 16th century Iberian maps about Ethiopia.



Frontispice of Luis de Urreta, *Historia de la sagrada orden de Predicadores en los remotos reynos de la Etiopia. Trata de los prodigiosos Santos, Martyres y Confessores, Inquisidores apostolicos, de los conventos de Plurimanos, donde viven nueve mil frayles, del Alleluya con siete mil, y de Bedenagli de cinco mil monjas, con otras grandezas de la religion del Padre Domingo*, València, Casa de Juan Chrysostomo Garriz, 1611.

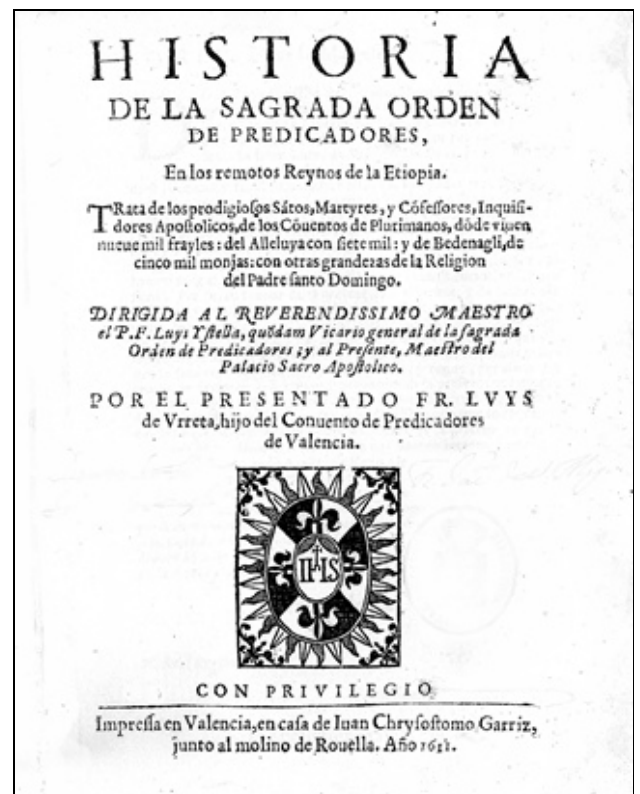
(Photo from private collection)

The maps



Map of Ethiopia and the Red Sea (c. 1640), in Manuel de Almeida's *Historia de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia*. Manuscript of the British Library.

(Photo from Camilo Beccari, *Rerum Æthiopicarum Scriptorum Occidentales Inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX*, vol. I, Roma, Casa Editrice Italiana, 1903. Plate VII-VIII)



Frontispice of Luis de Urreta, *Historia eclesiastica y politica, natural y moral, de los grandes y remotos Reynos de la Etiopia, monarchia del Emperador, llamado Preste Juan de las Indias, Con la Historia de Predicadores en los remotos Reynos de la Etiopia por Fray Luis de Urreta*, València, Casa de Pedro Patricio Mey, 1610.

(Private collection)





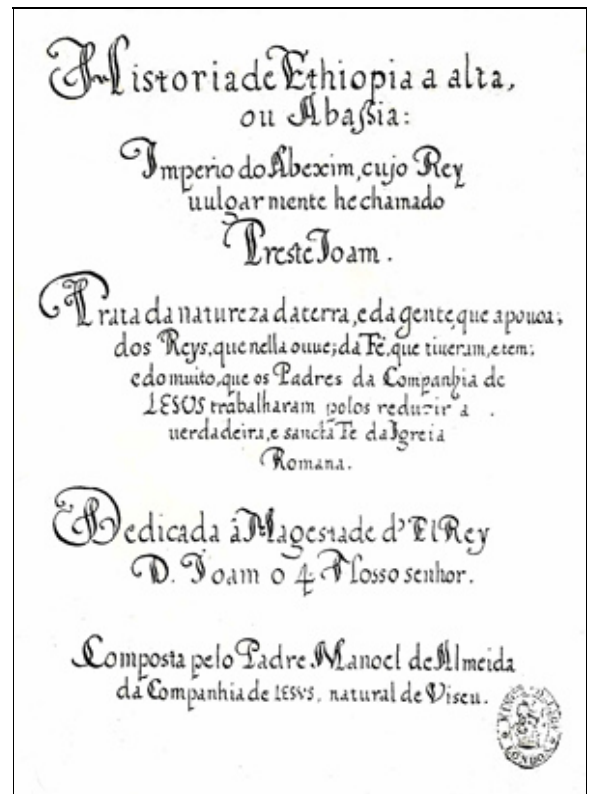
Map of Ethiopia (1683) in the first English translation of Hiob Ludolf's *Historia Aethiopica* (1681): A new history of Ethiopia being a full and accurate description of the kingdom of Abessinia, vulgarly, though erroneously, called the Empire of Prester John, London, Samuel Smith Bookseller, 1684.

(Photo: SOAS)



Page of the manuscript where Pedro Páez begins the description of his journey to the sources of the Blue Nile. Pedro Páez's *Historia de Ethiopia* (finished c. 1622), book I, Chapter 26, fil. 106-110 (Ms. Goa 42)

(Photo: Archivum Romanum S. I.)



Frontispice of Manuel de Almeida, *Historia de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia: Imperio do Abexim cujo Rey vulgarmente he chamado Preste Joam. Trata da natureza da terra, e da gente que a pouoa,*

dos Reys, que nella ouue; da Fé, que tiuream, e tem; e do muito, que os Padres da Companhia de Iesus trabalharam pólos reduzir a uerdadeira, e sancta Fé da Igreja Romana. ff [35], pp.1140 ff [69] (Ms. SOAS 11966, col. Marsden)

(Photo SOAS)



The Ethiopian king meets the Catholic patriarch Afonso Mendes. Frontispice of Jerónimo Lobo's french translation of the Itinerário: *Relation historique d'Abyssinie Traduite sur le manuscrit portugais...* (ed. Joachin Legrand). Paris, Veuve Coustelier, 1727.

(Photo: Biblioteca Pública de Braga)



Frontispice of Baltazar Teles, *Historia geral de Ethiopia a Alta ou Abassia do Preste loam, e do que nella obraram os Padres da Companhia de Iesus: composta na mesma Ethiopia pelo Padre Manoel d'Almeyda, natural de Viseu, Provincial e Visitador, que foy na Índia. Abreviada com nova releyçam, e methodo.* Coimbra, Officina de Manoel Dias Impressor de Universidade, 1660.

(Private collection)