

Treasures of Ethiopia and Eritrea in the Bodleian Library, Oxford

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MANAR AL-ATHAR, University of Oxford

MANAR AL-ATHAR MONOGRAPH 5

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A record of cataloging-in-publication data is available from the Library of Congress.
A catalogue record of this book is available from the BritishLibrary.
ISBN: 978-0-9954946-5-7 (hardcover)



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant No 694105)

Printed in the United Kingdom on acid-free paper.

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7 Hagiography in Ge'ez

Antonella Brita and Jacopo Gnisci

MS AETH. D. 23

The Lives of Zämika'el Arägawi and Gäbrä Krəstos,

70 fols., 2 columns, ca. 18 lines to a column, 25.5 × 23.4 × 5 cm, parchment.

Date: first half of the eighteenth century.

The term hagiography is used to refer to a body of literature connected with the practices of veneration of saints. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, as in other Christian traditions, the hagiographic genre encompasses a wide range of works focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the life of a holy person. Hagiographic works in Ge'ez may include: the Life (*gädl*), miracles (*tä'amməṣ*), homilies (*dərsan*), and hymns (*zema*) of a saint.¹

THE BODLEIAN'S HAGIOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

The Ethiopic collection of the Bodleian Library includes several hagiographic works. MS Aeth. c. 3, for instance, contains the Life and miracles of Täklä Haymanot, who is one of the most venerated saints in the Orthodox Churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea and is famous for having prayed for so long while standing that one of his legs fell off. MS Aeth. e. 4 contains the life of Krəstos Šämra, a female mystic saint who gave birth to eleven children before embracing the ascetic life. Among the manuscripts acquired by James Bruce, there is also a two-volume copy of the Synaxarion, a collection of commemorative readings of saints and martyrs arranged according to the liturgical year (MSS Bruce 82–83).

THE HAGIOGRAPHIC TRADITION IN ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA

The hagiographic genre has a long tradition in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Hagiographies were in fact among the first works to be translated from Greek into Ge'ez during the Aksumite period (ca. fourth to seventh centuries AD), soon after the Christianization of the country. The aim of these translations

¹ For an overview, with further bibliography, see Kaplan 1984. For an example, see Marrassini 2003.

FIG. 7.1 MS Aeth. d. 23, The Nine Saints next to Aksum's cathedral (above), and eight of the Nine Saints in procession (below), fol. 12r.

was to provide the local Church with the necessary resources for the education of the local clergy and the spiritual edification of the congregation. Hagiographic works – including the acts of martyrs and saints and collections of homilies – were translated into Ge‘ez during the Aksumite period. The lives of these saints, many of whom are also celebrated by the Eastern and Western Churches, were to be read on the day of their commemoration.

However, our understanding of the history of this genre depends largely on later evidence, since all the hagiographic books from the Aksumite period have been lost and the earliest material is found in manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The evidence that these provide suggests that the interest in hagiographic works grew after the rise to power of the Solomonic dynasty, in 1270, since numerous new texts were translated from Arabic into Ge‘ez.² This period also witnessed the creation and diffusion of a local hagiographic literature, influenced, at least initially, by the literary tradition of the genre.

TEXTUAL AND MATERIAL FEATURES OF MS AETH. D. 23

The manuscript contains two hagiographic texts: the Life of Zāmika’el Arägawi (fols. 5r–49r) and the Life of Gäbrä Krəstos (fols. 50r–67v). Zāmika’el Arägawi has been considered, from the sixteenth century onwards, as the most prominent figure among a group of holy men, known as the Nine Saints, who, according to local traditions, came from different areas of the Byzantine Empire and encouraged the spread of Christianity in the Kingdom of Aksum between the fifth and sixth centuries (fig. 7.1).³ Gäbrä Krəstos (lit. “the servant of Christ”) is the Ethiopic name of the famous Byzantine saint Alexis whose Life was translated from Greek or Arabic into Ge‘ez.⁴

Additional archival notes, added subsequently, include two land purchases (fols. 1r, 49v). The most interesting of these notes concerns the construction of a church named after Zāmika’el Arägawi in the region of Bädawo to which the present manuscript was donated (fol. 26r). Additionally, this note states that the church was commissioned by a daughter of Queen Məntəwwab, *wäyzäro* Əḥətä Maryam, during the reign of Emperor Iyasu II (r. 1730–55). The note also states that two priests came to the church to bless it, bringing with them this manuscript which was written during the reign of Emperor Iyasu. This could be a further reference to the reign of Iyasu II or, more likely if one considers the style of the illuminations, to that of his homonymous predecessor, Iyasu I (r. 1682–1706). The latter additions to the manuscript also include a section of a hymn written on the guard leaves at the front and back of the manuscript (fols. 1r–4v, 67v–70v).

The quire structure of the manuscript is quite regular. It has a protective fascicle at the beginning (fasc. 1), consisting of two bifolia, followed by two blocks of quaternions (fasc. 1–2 and 4–8) separated by one quinion (fasc. 5). The manuscript is bound between two wooden boards covered with dark-brown finely-tooled leather. The volume is kept in its traditional leather

2 Bausi 2018: 73–74.

3 Brita 2010; 2013.

4 Cerulli 1969.

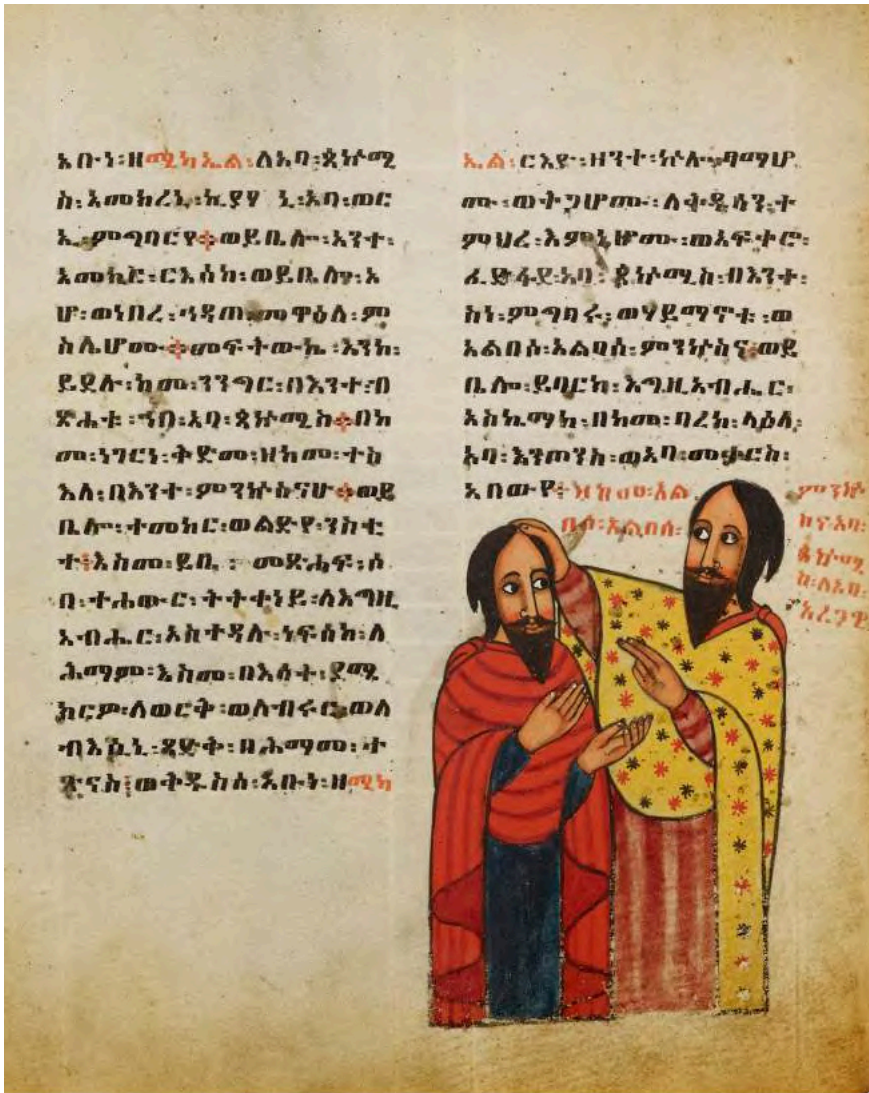


FIG. 7.2 MS Aeth. d. 23, Zāmika’el Arāgawi receiving his monastic garb from Pachomius, fol. 6v.

satchel, which in Ethiopia and Eritrea is used for storage and transportation (fig. 3.5).

MS Aeth. d. 23 was exported out of Ethiopia with a license in 1987 and sold at auction by Sotheby’s. It was purchased by a dealer, Mr Alan Thomas, who, that same year, sold it to Dr Bent Juel-Jensen.⁵ Juel-Jensen argued that the manuscript had been copied in the monastery of Däbrä Dammo – traditionally considered as a foundation of Zāmika’el Arāgawi.⁶ However, while it is true that the iconography of the miniatures of a now-destroyed copy of the Life of Zāmika’el Arāgawi kept in the monastery Däbrä Dammo is close to that of MS Aeth. d.23,⁷ the Bodleian’s manuscript provides no definitive evidence in support of such a hypothesis.

MANUSCRIPTS AS CROSS-CULTURAL MEETING POINTS

It has been observed that foreign hagiographic traditions affected, on a textual and ideological level, the composition of local production of hagiographic texts.⁸ This is also the case with the two works contained in MS Aeth.

5 Juel-Jensen 1991: 481.
 6 Juel-Jensen 1993; Thomas 1990: 394.
 7 Mercier 2000b.
 8 Marrassini 2005.

d. 23. In fact, the coexistence of the Life of Zāmikaʾel Arägawi and Gäbrä Krəstos in the same manuscript is not fortuitous but testifies to the impact of the latter on the former. Such influence, discernible at a textual level, is also evident in the fact these two texts are often found in the same manuscript.⁹

Indeed, as noticed by Paolo Marrassini, “if two or more saints are present in the same manuscript, there must be some similarity felt between them by the tradition.”¹⁰ The similarities between the Life of Zāmikaʾel Arägawi and the Life of Gäbrä Krəstos can be summarized as follows: both saints were born to a Roman (Byzantine) king¹¹; both escape from marriage – Zāmikaʾel Arägawi refuses to marry despite the will of his parents,¹² Alexis gets married but leaves his wife¹³ – and embrace the monastic life in a foreign country; and, finally, in the Geʿez translation Gäbrä Krəstos also goes by the Arabic name *ʿabd al-masih*,¹⁴ which is also the name given to Zāmikaʾel Arägawi by his mother.¹⁵

THE LIFE OF ZĀMIKAʾEL ARĀGAWI

MS Aeth. d. 23 is a multiple-text manuscript, but greater prominence is given to the life of Zāmikaʾel Arägawi, since it opens the manuscript and it is the only text that is accompanied by illustrations. Although a passage attributes its authorship to Saint Yared, there is no evidence to support this statement.¹⁶ Zāmikaʾel Arägawi was born to a family related to the royal dynasty of Rom (Byzantium). He received a good education and was raised in the fear of God. When he reaches the marriageable age of 14 years, his parents find him a wife of royal blood whom he refuses to marry, choosing instead to move to Egypt where he asks Pachomius to initiate him into monkhood (fig. 7.2). From Pachomius he receives his monastic garb and the name Zāmikaʾel. His mother later follows his example, by becoming a nun and establishing a monastery in Təgray.

Zāmikaʾel is joined by seven of the Nine Saints in Egypt who also receive their monastic garb and name from Pachomius (fig. 2.3). They appoint Zāmikaʾel as their spiritual leader and move back to Rom together, where they convert many people to Christianity. After an unspecified amount of time, the archangel Gabriel carries Zāmikaʾel to Ethiopia on the back of his wings. The saint decides to stay in Ethiopia, and, with the other members of the Nine Saints, reaches Aksum on the fifth year of the reign of King ʿĪlla ʿAmida (fig. 7.1). Since the locals love and honour him, they start calling him the “elderly” (*arägawi*) to emphasize his wisdom.

Seven years later, the Nine Saints decide to part ways and Zāmikaʾel Arägawi, together with his mother and his disciple Matyas, embarks upon an adventurous journey during which he works many miracles (fig. 7.3). At the end of this journey, he reaches the foot of a mountain called Däbrä Dammo. Since the mountain’s steep flanks make climbing impossible, the saint begins to pray. As he does so a large snake appears in the sky and tries to dissuade him from living in such a forsaken place. Ignoring the snake’s advice, the saint orders it to lower its tail which he then uses to climb up the mountain (fig. 7.4).

9 See for example London, British Library, Or. 709; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, d’Abbadie 46; Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Comb.S.3; and Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, orient. oct. 1305; cfr. Marrassini 2005: 116–117.

10 Marrassini 2005: 112.

11 Guidi 1895: 57; Van den Oudernrijn 1939: 38; Cerulli 1969: *passim*.

12 Guidi 1895: 57; Van den Oudernrijn 1939: 38.

13 Cerulli 1969: pars 8–9.

14 Cerulli 1969: *passim*.

15 Guidi 1895: 57; Van den Oudernrijn 1939: 38.

16 On this point see Guidi 1896: 54, n. 2, who proposes an alternative reading of the passage; and Brita 2010: 57–62.



FIG. 7.3 MS Aeth. d. 23, Zāmika'el Arāgawi blessing a sick man with his hand cross, fol. 17v.

Zāmika'el Arāgawi starts living in a cave on Dābrā Dammo praying, fasting, celebrating the mass, and working miracles. One day, King Kaleb sends the saint a message asking for his spiritual help and prayer to aid his departure for the city of Najran (South Arabia) and his military expedition against the Jewish King Dū Nuwās responsible for the persecution and death of many Christians (fig. 7.5).

After a successful campaign, Kaleb decides to become a monk and his son and successor, Gäbrä Mäsqäl, builds a church at the top of Dābrā Dammo. This is accomplished by building a ramp to carry the building materials to the top of the mountain. The consecration of the church by the Bishop is followed by a celebration during which Zāmika'el Arāgawi performs the Divine Liturgy. The following day the saint has the ramp demolished and substituted with a rope which commemorates his ascent on the snake's tail. To this day, the monastic complex on Dābrā Dammo can be accessed only by using a rope.



FIG. 7.4 MS Aeth. d. 23,
Zāmikaʾel Arägawi ascending
Däbrä Dammo, fol. 22r.

THE *KIDAN* OF ZÄMIKA'EL ARÄGAWI

As the fame of Zämika'el Arägawi spreads across the world, many people come to visit him to become monks, to plead for a miracle, or to ask for advice. One night the Lord appears to the holy man to give him the *kidan* (pact), that is the gift of eternal life in paradise and the promise of benevolence towards those who will commemorate him after his death (fig. 7.6). After his encounter with God, Zämika'el Arägawi talks to his disciples about his impending death and, after giving them the necessary spiritual advice, appoints his disciple Matyas as his successor. The next day, upon entering Arägawi's cave, Matyas discovers that his body has disappeared.

The *kidan* is one of the most significant episodes of the Life of Zämika'el Arägawi and a recurring feature in Ethiopic hagiographic literature.¹⁷ In the *kidan*, Jesus appears to a saint pledging to benefit those faithful who will celebrate the saint's *täzkar* (commemoration), build churches in his name, or read, translate or commission a copy of a manuscript containing his Life, etc. This textual section is usually inserted in the narrative soon before the death of the holy man. From a hagiographic point of view, the *kidan* is connected with the liturgical use of the manuscript, since it implicitly conveys the idea that the Life of the saint is not a mere literary product but a work that should be used for purposes of veneration. The Life of Zämika'el Arägawi illustrates this clearly by describing how his disciples commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of his death.

The Life of Arägawi, as found in MS Aeth. d. 23, would have been read to the community of the faithful on the commemoration day of the saint. One should not be surprised by the lack of historical accuracy or by the fact that episodes of his daily life are missing or not exhaustive. In fact, the aim of these texts was to educate the community through the example given by the exceptional life of a holy man, rather than provide a historical narrative. For this reason, these texts also feature a great number of quotations from the Scriptures.

ILLUSTRATING HAGIOGRAPHIC MANUSCRIPTS

Some of the earliest hagiographic manuscripts in Ge'ez are provided with illustrations. The earliest dated example contains the apocryphal lives of the Apostles and was probably copied for Zä'yäsus, an abbot of the monastery of Däbrä Ḥayq Ḍstifanos, between 1292 and 1297.¹⁸ Each section of text in this manuscript, except for the one that deals with Saint Paul, is introduced by a frontispiece portrait of the relevant Apostle who is shown standing under an arch with a book in hand. There is also a prefatory folio, now probably misplaced (fol. 2), with three portraits of Old Testament prophets on each side.

Until the seventeenth century hagiographic manuscripts continued to feature iconic portraits which were generally placed at the beginning of a text section like the ones in the Zä'yäsus manuscript. However, from the late seventeenth century onwards, it became increasingly common to in-

¹⁷ Kur 1984.

¹⁸ Getatchew Haile and Macomber 1981: 237–39, EMMML 1767.



FIG. 7.5 MS Aeth. d. 23, King Kaleb sailing to South Arabia with Zämika'el Arägawi's blessing, fol. 28r.

clude narrative scenes that glorified a saint by illustrating his or her life and miracles. In most cases, the miniatures, framed or unframed and painted against the neutral parchment background, were also distributed throughout the text. This new approach to the illustration of manuscripts is well exemplified by the Bodleian's MS Aeth. d. 23.

ILLUSTRATING THE LIFE OF ZÄMIKA'EL ARÄGAWI

Members of the Nine Saints were rarely depicted prior to the seventeenth century. A fifteenth-century Book of Hours, kept at the monastery of Däbrä Q'äyäsa, features hieratic full-length standing portraits of four of the Nine Saints: Gärima, Şəḥma, Pänṭälewön, and Liqanos.¹⁹ The manuscript also contains portraits of two Desert Fathers, Pachomius and Shenute. Like the

19 Chojnacki 1983: 119.



FIG. 7.7 MS Aeth. d. 23,
King Kaleb building a church and
vanquishing his enemies in South
Arabia, fol. 28v.

ies associated with the Nine Saints placed greater emphasis, in art as much as in literature, on their founder.²¹

The thirty-three miniatures in MS Aeth. d. 23 function as a visual gloss of the text that would have enhanced the reader's understanding of the spiritual example set by Zāmika'el Arägawi. The miniatures, some taking up a full- to half-page, others just a column, illustrate and complement the text they accompany. This type of approach to the distribution of images in manuscripts, as noted above, became widespread in Ge'ez manuscripts after the second half of the seventeenth century and it was probably in this period that the cycle of illustrations that accompany the Life of Arägawi was created.

The style of the miniatures – which are painted in flat colours without modelling – is also typical of the second half of the seventeenth century and is known as the first Gondarine style.²² The miniatures are stylistically very close to the earliest set of miniatures found in a seventeenth-century copy of the Miracles of Mary in the British Library (Or. 641),²³ in a manuscript documented in the Kidanä Məḥrät monastery,²⁴ and in an unpublished copy of the Life of Gärima (another member of the Nine Saints) kept in the Gärima monastery.²⁵ They are also close in style to the wall paintings of the monastery of Däbrä Sina Gorgora, on the northern shores of lake Ṭana, which feature a representation of the Nine Saints.²⁶

It is evident that the miniatures of MS Aeth. d. 23 were added to the manuscript after it was written, for several pages of the Life of Arägawi have been left partly or entirely blank (fols. 7v, 25r, 27r, 45v). The most logical explanation for this is that the scribe was expecting these areas to be filled in later by the illuminator. This, in turn, suggests that he was copying the text from an illustrated manuscript. It is impossible to say with certainty why some of the pages were eventually left blank or unfinished (fig. 7.6).

The first miniature in MS Aeth. d. 23 shows Arägawi being ordained by Saint Pachomius (fig. 7.2). The episode, which could never have taken place, serves an ideological rather than historical purpose. It gives prestige and legitimacy to the Ethiopian monastic tradition by tracing the spiritual descent of its founders, the Nine Saints, from Pachomius.²⁷

A few pages later, we see Arägawi miraculously reaching Aksum on the back of an angel, while the facing scene illustrates the arrival of the other eight saints in Aksum (fig. 7.1). The holy men, welcomed by Arägawi, carry the equipment for the liturgy including a chalice, thuribles, a book held in a case, and, most importantly, the altar tablet, held in the box on top of the head of the last figure in the procession. The scene and the objects appear to replicate a real-life liturgical procession in an idealized form. Thus, the artist of MS Aeth. d. 23, or the model which he followed, made sense of the past by drawing on contemporary experiences of worship and, in this respect, followed a long-standing tradition of Ethiopic manuscript illumination.²⁸ Among the various scenes, two of the most striking show Arägawi's miraculous ascent of Däbrä Dammo on the back of a snake (fig. 7.4)²⁹ and the South Arabian expedition of King Kaleb (fig. 7.7), in which the king and his men slay a number of enemies and build a church.

21 Brita 2013: 37.

22 On the development of this style of painting, see Annequin 1972; and Bosc-Tiessé 2008: 87–115.

23 Wright 1877: 48–49.

24 Nosnitsin 2013: 168, fig. 46.

25 Mercier 2000b: 172; see also Leroy 1973: 166, fig. 74.

26 Staude 1959: 199.

27 Brita 2010: 86–92.

28 Gnisci 2015.

29 A similar scene appears in the British Library's Or. 590 (fol. 64v).