



Aethiopia 23 (2020)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

HABTAMU M. TEGEGNE, Rutgers University

Article

Fragility and Resilience:

Church History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia

Aethiopia 23 (2020), 120–148

ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Susanne Hummel,
Alexander Meckelburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

Editorial Team

Susanne Hummel, Francesca Panini

Fragility and Resilience: Church History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century Ethiopia*

HABTAMU M. TEGEGNE, Rutgers University

Introduction

Märṭulä Maryam is a celebrated monastery dominating the religious topography of Ethiopia's north-western province of Goḡgam, lying within the great eastern bend of the Abbay River. The monastery's current fame and prestige stem from its supposed fourth-century CE foundation during the earliest days of Christianity in Ethiopia. Despite its contemporary claim as one of the country's oldest monasteries, Märṭulä Maryam was actually established in the fifteenth century CE by Queen Ḫeleni (d.1524),¹ one of the remarkable female leaders in Ethiopian history. For the next four centuries, Märṭulä Maryam's clergy used Ḫeleni's name and reputation to build their institutional identity, all the while affectionately and warmly cherishing the memory of her religious and political virtues.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, however, Märṭulä Maryam's leaders suddenly embraced a grandiose cultivated mythical history, appropriating the legendary fourth-century CE twin kings and saints, Abrəha and Ašbəha, as their co-founders. To add substance to the myth, a hagiography dedicated to the twin king-saints was written during the 1880s entitled *Gädlä Abrəha wä'Ašbəha*. The construction of such a glorious mythical history necessitated a radical disavowal of Märṭulä Maryam's actual past, including its medieval royal patron. Consequently, Queen Ḫeleni was suddenly regarded as having had nothing to do with the institution's origins.²

* An earlier version of this paper was presented on 9 April 2018 as a public talk given to mark the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Center for African Studies at Rutgers University. I would like to thank the director of the centre, Genese Sodikoff, for inviting me to present it. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to Samantha Kelly for her incisive comments on the earlier version of this paper.

¹ Kleiner 2009, 45. Kleiner convincingly established that Ḫeleni died in 1524, rather than 1522.

² Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 1–2; Hummel 2016, 35–72.

Susanne Hummel has recently studied the circumstances of the writing of the hagiography of Abrəha and Ašbəha and the homily of the Archangel Uriel (*Dərsanä Uraʾel*) that took centre stage in the dispute over precedence and protocol between Dima Giyorgis, Märtulä Maryam and other churches during the latter nineteenth century.³ However, the context in which the Märtulä Maryam myth emerged and was propagated has not been given the attention it deserves. This study builds and expands upon Susanne Hummel's recent work on the twin kings' hagiography and the homily of Uriel by exploring why and how Märtulä Maryam's extravagant foundation legend came to be.

Altering and rewriting actual events, myths and myth-making—especially myths of origin—is the stuff of history. As was the case in many societies, foundation myths had played a central role in shaping Ethiopia's culture and identity. The *Kəbrä nəgäšt* was one such powerful and consequential foundation myth. Its text was the source of many traditions and values held sacred by the majority of Christian Ethiopians for centuries.⁴ Historians and anthropologists alike have produced extensive studies on the roles of myth and myth-making in identity construction, nation building, and social life for groups and individuals around the world.⁵ Yet why churches rewrite their foundation history and often claim ancient origins is a rarely asked question, especially in the Ethiopian context.

Since most origin myths cultivated by churches were used chiefly to emphasize their religious and cultural identity and had no practical use pertaining to social and economic rights, historians have simply ignored, mocked, or dismissed them. Enrico Cerulli reported the specious foundation myth of Märtulä Maryam as early as 1933,⁶ yet there was no follow-up on the issue until quite recently. My study seeks to remedy the oversight by focusing on the historical context in which Märtulä Maryam's origin myth emerged. I will show that such myths did in fact exert significant social impact and served as a means of claiming economic, political, and spiritual privileges.

Two essential historical contexts for the birth of Märtulä Maryam's origin myth will be considered. First and foremost, as noted by Hummel, nineteenth-century disputes over precedence that raged between the churches of Dima Giyorgis and Märtulä Maryam inspired competitive history rewriting and myth-making. A church based its seniority on the saintly figure(s) of its founder, combined with historical longevity; thus clergy of the oldest churches

³ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 1–2; Hummel 2016, 35–72.

⁴ Brooks 1995, 119–174.

⁵ Lévi-Strauss 1978, 1–20; Ashton 2000, 1–69; and Lowenthal 1985, 1–6.

⁶ Cerulli 1933.

held more privileges, rights, ritual authority, and spiritual power than those posted to churches of later foundation.⁷ This tradition of seniority and deference based on longer history was behind the spurious attribution of Märṭulä Maryam's foundation to Abrəha and Ašbəḥa.⁸

Conflict between monasteries over religious ritual and doctrine was a common theme throughout Ethiopian history. The nineteenth-century dispute over precedence between Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam was a continuation of centuries of sectarian controversy between them. As we will see, prolonged religious debate fuelled the rivalry between churches.⁹ In that context, this study also briefly reviews key monastic and sectarian disputes within the Ethiopian Church that provided a powerful backdrop to the dispute between Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam.

The rewriting of Märṭulä Maryam's origins reveals two dimensions of history: its fragility and resilience. The poorly composed hagiography, *Gädlä Abrəha wä Ašbəḥa*, which Hummel dates to the second half of the nineteenth century, posits a radical break with the past. Prior to the nineteenth century, the twin kings were never officially acknowledged as Märṭulä Maryam's founders. The consolidation of Märṭulä Maryam's origin myth therefore depended on erasing an important historical agent associated with its actual foundation.¹⁰ It should be mentioned at this point how the Märṭulä Maryam clergy planned to erase the memory of historical founder Queen Əleni. In 1897 they convinced Emperor Mənilək II (r.1889–1913) to write to King Täklä Haymanot (ruled as *Ras* Adal from 1874 to 1881, as king from 1881 to 1901) of Goğğam, instructing him to ensure that church records containing information contrary to Märṭulä Maryam's current origin myth be destroyed.¹¹ This incident is the best example of the mutability of history; even today, its clergy defend Märṭulä Maryam's revised history with arriviste zeal.

The case is enlightening for investigating the very nature of history, historical writing, and the understanding and attitude of contemporaries toward the past and truth. Among other things, it shows that past events were regarded as mutable in order to legitimize the present. When and if the status and privilege of a powerful institution were at stake, the clergy of churches such as Märṭulä

⁷ Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969–1970, 747–748 and 752–756.

⁸ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 26–50; Hummel 2016, 55–57; Ḥaylā Šəllase °Alämayyāhu 1996–1997, 24.

⁹ Bartnicki and Mantel-Niećko 1969–1970, 31–37; and Taddesse Tamrat 2009, 206–230; Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013, 45–70.

¹⁰ Hummel 2016.

¹¹ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, § 7; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998, 1–2.

Maryam had no qualms about rewriting and reinventing their past. It was the cultural mindset of the time that prevailed during the event of the royal assembly presided over by Emperor Mənilək II which convened in early 1897 to investigate the dispute between Dima Giyorgis and Märtulä Maryam that resulted in the acceptance of the twin kings hagiography as genuine.¹²

At the end of the day, however, the fabricated origin myth could not completely veil the truth of Märtulä Maryam's actual history. Efforts to erase the memory of the church's real founder or to change unfavourable past records were doomed to fail for several reasons. Firstly, Märtulä Maryam's foundation by Queen Əleni is factually secured in the chronicles and records of other churches over which it had no control. Secondly, material in the church's treasury store and the physical edifice named after Əleni survive to this day. Finally and essentially, a panegyric written in verse (excerpted below) that has also survived into our time records the deeds and contributions of Əleni to Märtulä Maryam.¹³ Thus, the distortion of Märtulä Maryam's history and the futility of its clergy's efforts to erase memories of its founder simultaneously affirm both the resilience and fragility of the past.

Christological Controversies and the Construction of Institutional Identity

Exactly when Märtulä Maryam's fabricated foundation myth originated and by whom is uncertain. As noted above, the earliest surviving evidence of a myth proclaiming the church's ancient foundation is the late-nineteenth century document *Gädlä Abrəha wä'Asbəha*. What is clear, however, is that the seniority dispute with Dima Giyorgis was central to the growth of Märtulä Maryam's revisionist origin myth. Dima Giyorgis and Märtulä Maryam had always found themselves on opposite sides of a monastic and sectarian controversy within the Ethiopian Church that spanned from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. This controversy served to cultivate an emerging idea of the historical status and institutional identity of the two churches. As this background is so important in understanding how the foundation myth emerged, an overview of their rivalry follows.

A major religious and doctrinal controversy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries concerned the well-known issue of Sabbath observance, pitting the Ewoṣtəwos monastic order against that of Täklä Haymanot. Tadesse Tamrat's research shows that the Sabbath dispute was so explosive it threat-

¹² Hummel 2016, 55–57; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 7–25.

¹³ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998, 5–6; and Märtulä Maryam, Goḡḡam, Märtulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Ewoṣtəwos*, fols 1–3.

ened to cause a disastrous schism in the entire Ethiopian Church. In 1450, an edict from King Zär'a Ya'qob (r.1434–1468) was issued in an attempt to settle the matter in favour of Ewoṣtatewos pro-Sabbath faction.¹⁴ Despite being founded shortly after the resolution of the Sabbath controversy, Märtulä Maryam's clergy continued to adhere to the Ewoṣtatewos Sabbath tradition, whereas Dima Giyorgis followed the opposite monastic tradition.¹⁵

Two centuries after the 1450 Sabbath issue resolution, a theological controversy pitting the so-called 'Unionist' party against a so-called 'Uctionist' party consumed the attention of Ethiopia's clergy, ruling class, and monarchs. And again, Märtulä Maryam and Dima Giyorgis found themselves on opposite sides. As a study by Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie shows,¹⁶ the Christological debate was just as explosive as the Sabbath controversy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As a result, it robbed the Ethiopian Church of its basic unity and spiritual peace from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century. Members of these opposing ecclesiastical groups competed for influence at the royal court and engaged in fervent debate throughout the second half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ These ongoing debates served to articulate rival doctrinal positions and consolidate the self-perceived importance and superiority of the key protagonists.

The monasteries of Märtulä Maryam and Däbrä Wärq in Goḡḡam adhered to the Uctionist position, while Dima Giyorgis took the Unionist side. Church youth were educated to believe in the superiority of their own monastery and the error of the opposing ones. In such protracted disputes there were always violent exchanges of words, each group calling the other 'heretical' or 'ignorant', thereby hardening sectarian divisions. The controversy resulted in the writing of many polemical texts, rebuttals, even poetry, extolling one's favoured monastery while denigrating its rivals.¹⁸

There are still extant examples in Goḡḡam of verses penned by clergy from rival monasteries glorifying their respective doctrinal positions. Dubbed *qəne*, the verses and sayings cited below illustrate the identity that Uctionist followers created around their position. One saying runs, **ለዘሐመ ልብ ቃለ ኃይማኖት ፣ ወእኩ መድሃኒቱ ቅባት**, literally, 'For a diseased

¹⁴ Tadesse Tamrat 2009, 206–230.

¹⁵ Guidi 1903, 69–70 and 72.

¹⁶ Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013, 45–70.

¹⁷ Bartnicki and Mantel-Niećko 1969–1970, 31–37; Guidi 1912, 17; Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013, 45–70.

¹⁸ Getatchew Haile 1986; Getatchew Haile 1990, 1–35; Guidi 1893.

heart the word of faith *qəbat* (oil, or butter) is the right medicine'.¹⁹ The author is anonymous, but this appears to have been a stock Unctionist phrase from Däbrä Wärq and Märtulä Maryam. The word *qəbat* carries a double-entendre that can also mean 'unction'. Hence the intended message is that Unctionist teachings are the only way to eternal salvation.

Another reads, የቅባት ልጅ በመጽሐፍ ፣ የጦጣ ልጅ በህፍ አይቻልም, literally, 'A son of an Unction excels in books; like the son of an ape in climbing trees'.²⁰ This saying emphasizes the pride that Unctionist scholars took in their extensive reading. Naturally, the Unionists of Dima Giyorgis also prided themselves on the sophistication of their religious knowledge and responded in kind to the polemical *qəne* of their rivals. Their saying, ንባብ ይቀትል ትርጓሜ የሃዩ (2 Cor. 3:6?), or 'Reading kills, while correct interpretation saves',²¹ inferred that the reading and knowledge of their Unctionist rivals was superficial. During the later nineteenth century, when the Unctionist faction was banned by a religious council under Emperor Yoḥannəs IV (r.1872–1889), a woman in Goḡḡam reportedly composed the following poem:

በዳሞት ገብያ ኑግ ተወደደብኝ
 በጎጃም ገብያ ኑግ ተወደደብኝ
 ወጡ አልጫ ሆነ ዋ ቅባት ቀረብኝ ።

'In the market of Damot *nug* is expensive
 In the market of Goḡḡam *nug* is expensive
 The stew is *aləça*, oh I miss *qəbat* (oil).'²²

In her poem *nug* refers to a crop grown for its edible oil and used to make a spicy stew. The word *qəbat* in the last line has the double meaning of 'oil' and 'unction'. This and similar poems indicate how seriously such matters were taken, not only within monastic orders, but also in popular culture. The dispute continued for several centuries and came to an end only around the end of the nineteenth century. It provided a powerful backdrop to the growth of Märtulä Maryam's foundation myth.

The religious controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were an important influence in Märtulä Maryam's growing sense of institutional identity, consciousness, and prestige that ultimately led to the desire to invent a glorious ancient past that would exceed the status of its rivals, which in turn heightened the pre-existing centuries-old discord with Dima Giyorgis.

¹⁹ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998, 42.

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Libanos Yätämäñ, oral informant interviewed at Däbrä Marqos, April 2008.

Rank, Antiquity, and Power

The rivalry between Dima Giyorgis and Märtulä Maryam was played out in the public arena, as well as at the royal court, banquet halls, and memorial services, as these were all influential social spaces. Strict ceremonial regulations and a rigid hierarchy were observed during public events. Meals on major Christian holidays and commemorative feasts were also highly ritualized. Lay and clerical dignitaries entered the royal banquet hall in strict order as to who would sit ‘above’ or ‘below’ their colleagues, according to their respective status.²³ Opulent banquets regularly given by Goğgam’s King Täklä Haymanot for the clergy of Däbrä Marqos and the surrounding countryside provide a representative example. These ceremonial gatherings were observed and extensively written about by the Goğgam historian Täklä Iyäsus Waqğəra, who also partook in the meals. Täklä Iyäsus writes that the clergy of the churches in and around the town of Däbrä Marqos were admitted to the banquet hall in sequence and took their places according to their respective status. The highest-ranking clergy from senior churches, in this case Däbrä Marqos, entered the hall first and sat at the front or centre close to the king; others were placed further away from the king, while the lower-ranking clerics were generally admitted last.²⁴

This protocol suggests that the entrance of low-ranking individuals was delayed until the senior clerics entered. Similarly, the highest-ranking clergy were served first, followed successively by those of lower rank. Täklä Iyäsus also noted that Däbrä Marqos clergy were served using special drinking vessels according to their status.²⁵ The rationale underlying the banquet hall entry protocols is not stated. It is clear, however, that entering among the first was a greatly valued privilege and an indicator of higher social rank. When clerical dignitaries received deferential treatment at court, the prestige of their ecclesiastical institutions increased accordingly.

Commemorative feasts (*täzkar*), religious festivals, and banquets were punctuated by prayers and recited benedictions at the beginning and end. On these occasions, clerics from the highest status churches gave the blessings and prayers before and after the meal. *Mämhər* Gäbrä Iyäsus, a cleric of Däbrä Marqos, led the blessing or grace during meals at King Täklä Haymanot’s court. Giving the benediction during a memorial feast was also extremely important, a matter of pride and a tribute to one’s honour and high status.²⁶ The

²³ Kropp 1988; Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969–1970, 747–748 and 752–756.

²⁴ Girma Getahun 2014, 244.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244–245.

²⁶ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 7–14; Girma Getahun 2014, 246.

entire ritual of the entrance, seating, and prayers preceding and accompanying royal banquets and religious festivities, was all designed to reflect status and rank.

Inevitably, public and state occasions brought church dignitaries into close physical proximity and contact, fuelling competitiveness leading to disputes, for instance over who was worthy to enter the royal court and banquet hall first. The roles of giving the benediction and leading prayers were just as highly prized and considered a means for exhibiting one's social standing and were also subjects of hot dispute.²⁷

The first recorded instance of a public dispute between Dima Giyorgis and Märtulä Maryam clergy over precedence and protocol occurred during the reign of the Goğğam governor *Däğğaç Dästa* (r.1865–1873). Clerical and lay dignitaries from the two rival Goğğam churches had assembled at the town of Bičäna for the memorial of *Däğğaç Tädla G^walu* (d.1865), father and predecessor of Dästa. The dispute incident was dramatic and later recorded by Täklä Iyäsus Waqğära. This encounter prefigured court battles to come over the foundation myth of Märtulä Maryam and its supporting hagiography later in the nineteenth century as the following evidences:

Abba Qämmaw Däsé [*Däğğaç Dästa*], the ‘brigand of the throne’, was sitting on [his father’s] couch comfortably; and while he carried out the memorial service for his father, *Däğğaç Tädla*, in Bečäna, [the clergy of] Dima [Giyorgis] and Märtulä Maryam quarreled [prior to the commencement of the memorial feast].

Then [intending] to arbitrate, *Däğğaç Dästa* put them on the right and left [sides of the banquet hall] and suggested letting them in through two doors. Upon this Raq Masärya Gobäzé [of Dima Giyorgis], breaking into jest as was his habit, made an insulting remark, saying [to him], ‘And why do you say this to us as though you were a child?’ *Däğğaç Dästa* was made an object of sarcastic remarks as there had been a rumour that he was not the son of *Däğğaç Tädla*; so the former spoke [of this] to him openly. *Däğğaç Dästa* was incensed by Raq Masärya Gobäzé’s remark and unleashed [his] soldiers on [the clergy], saying, ‘I have blessed their turbans and clothes for you!’ Thereafter, the clergy of Dima [Giyorgis] decided not to let Raq Masärya Gobäzé follow them.²⁸

²⁷ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 7–14.

²⁸ Girma Getahun 2014, 125.

Commemorative feasts were among the most important religious practices of Christian Ethiopia and had deep historical roots. The essence of these observances was to commemorate the deceased with prayer and food, yet these were not simply memorial and feasting events. Täklä Iyäsus’ account does not include all the facts about the ceremony or reasons behind the quarrel between the clergy of Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam. As noted above, high-ranking officials attending commemorations used these occasions to publicly parade their exalted status and assert their influence and authority, which depended greatly on the order in which they entered the banquet hall and were seated to eat and drink.

With issues of social status and spiritual rights and privileges at stake, heated exchanges were to be expected during the feast held to memorialize Tädla G^walu. His son Dästa tried (unsuccessfully, however) to resolve the dispute by suggesting that the clergy of both churches enter the banquet hall at the same time through different entrances. Consequently, the two churches carried on a constant battle with one another throughout the rest of the nineteenth century over the rights of benediction and who was to enter the banquet hall first during commemorative feasts.²⁹ Competition for prestige and influence at the royal court only amplified pre-existing tensions between the two institutions.

Prior to the final court battle held sometime in February 1897, the continuing controversy over the precedence of Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam inspired many chants, hymns, verses, puns, and sly retorts by rival clergy, especially when members of both groups met on public and state occasions. Each institution strove to assert its greater antiquity while at the same time seeking to prove its counterpart’s less prestigious foundation. A typical hymn composed to glorify Märṭulä Maryam while denigrating its rival is quoted below. It was composed by a cleric named *Mäggabi* Ḥaylu. Such hymns appear to have been composed at the height of the foundation controversy during the nineteenth century.

**ለአዳም ቢጸ እንተ ይመስሎ ፤ ሎቱ ፈጠሩ አጋእዝተ ሰማይ ሰለስቱ
ለዘበአማን አዳም ሕንጻ ደብረ ነገሥት ባህቱ
ቢጸ እንተ ይመስሎ ኢፊጠረ ሎቱ
ስነ ላህዩ እስመ ይሴኒ እምውሉደ ሰብእ አድባር እለ ተፈጥሩ በታህቱ
ኮነሂ በከረ ኩሉ በዘይትሌአል ሥርዓቱ
አምጣነ አድባር ይነስኡ እምነ ሥርዓተ ተረፈ ዝንቱ
ወጸጋ እምካልፅ ኢነሰዓ እስመ ዘባህርይ ውእቱ
እምአብ ዘተውሀቦ ቅድምኛ ጥንተ ሕይወቱ ።**

²⁹ Hummel 2016, 55–69; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 5–20.

‘Lord of Heaven, the Trinity, created a counterpart for Adam
 For the church of the (twin)-kings, verily the likeness of Adam;
 They created none like unto it.
 Its architecture surpasses all man-made churches that came after it.
 Since all churches follow the precedent of its regulations,
 It became leader of churches for the greatness of its regulations.
 It received this virtue from no one, but was with it from the beginning,
 endowed by its nature;
 Precedency was graciously bestowed upon it by (God) the Father.’³⁰

The above text greatly praises the magnificence and splendour of the architecture of the church of Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa. According to its author, Märtulä Maryam was truly God’s marvellous construction and the equal of his other splendid creation, Adam, the first man. However, while God created a companion to Adam, corresponding to him in virtue and beauty, the church of Märtulä Maryam was without equal in grandeur and magnificence. The beauty and spectacular excellence of its architecture were such that a more beautiful and splendid church could not be found in the entire world. As with its architecture, no other institution equalled the church of Märtulä Maryam in the greatness and soundness of its laws and regulations.

In a paper published in 1933, a more remarkable and assertive hymn attesting to the antiquity of Märtulä Maryam and critical of Dima Giyorgis’s claim of greater antiquity was published by Enrico Cerulli. According to the unknown author of the hymn, no other church could surpass Märtulä in antiquity. He therefore dismissed the claim of other churches to greater antiquity as suspicious and implausible.³¹ Thus, Märtulä Maryam not only excelled in all types of virtue and distinction over any church in the country but had far greater antiquity than any other.

At a certain point during the seniority controversy, someone representing Märtulä Maryam’s position composed the following beautiful but provocative phrase in a *qəne*: መርጡሉ ማርያም ሥዕርተ ርእሷ ዘበቁለት በመልዕልተ ድማህ, ‘Märtulä Maryam (is) like hair growing in the middle of the head (*dəmah*)’.³² The word *dəmah* carries a double meaning; as *dəmah*, the head can be understood as the church of Dima Giyorgis. Thus, this *qəne* suggests that Märtulä Maryam is the superior church. Naturally, the clergy of Dima Giyorgis challenged the credibility of its competitor’s claim and one of its

³⁰ Ayyāhu Ḥskāzziya, oral informant interviewed at Märtulä Maryam, July 1997.

³¹ Cerulli 1933, 106–107.

³² Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998, 43.

supporters replied **ሥዕርትስ ይትላጸይ ወደግህስ ይተርፍ** which literally means ‘hair could be removed (shaved), but the head (*dəmah*) remains intact’.³³ In this *qane*, the unknown cleric dismisses Märtulä Maryam’s recent foundation while asserting the deeper historical roots of Dima Giyorgis.

Legitimizing the myth of Märtulä Maryam’s apparent ancient origins required the underpinning of an acknowledged written text. Since the story of its co-foundation by Abrəha and Aṣbəha was not documented, it first had to be invented, then defended and promoted. The nineteenth-century creation of the hagiography concerning the twin kings Abrəha and Aṣbəha must therefore be understood in this context. The Dima Giyorgis clergy quickly and vehemently challenged the hagiography’s authenticity and the manner of its acquisition, as they stood to lose significant profile, prestige, and material, spiritual, and political benefits if the myth’s proclamation was successful. Remarkably, in early 1897 a royal court presided over by Emperor Mənilək II decided in favour of the revised Märtulä Maryam history, despite Dima Giyorgis having a more plausible narrative and factually stronger case. That fateful royal court decision turned an essentially fabricated foundation myth into an honourable past and undisputable historical fact.³⁴

It is very likely that the Märtulä Maryam’s leadership first petitioned King Täklä Haymanot of Goḡgam before turning to King Mənilək II. Thus, Märtulä Maryam’s 1897 legal victory came at the tail end of long preparation for having the foundation myth accepted in all its particulars. The construction of this myth and the intense rivalry over primacy between the two institutions proved long-lasting and intense.

Forgetting Queen Əleni

The clergy of Märtulä Maryam not only worked hard to construct a fabricated account of their monastery’s mythical origins, but also intentionally set about concealing and suppressing the memory of their actual founder. One of the instructions King Mənilək II sent to King Täklä Haymanot after the court ruling of 1897 was to ensure that all records in Goḡgam which contradicted Märtulä Maryam’s revised history be expunged. ‘Since the clergy of Märtulä Maryam have said that there are records in church [collections within Goḡgam] which assert that Märtulä Maryam was not founded by Abrəha and Aṣbəha’, the emperor wrote, ‘let such writing in churches be deleted’.³⁵ What

³³ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998, 43. See also Hummel 2016, 56.

³⁴ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 4–9; and Hummel 2016, 55–57.

³⁵ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, § 7.

measures the clergy of Märtulä Maryam and Tāklä Haymanot took to enforce the erasure and secure the legitimization of their invented history were not recorded. But it is certain that Märtulä Maryam clergy carried out a number of actions and measures to destroy the legacy and memory of their true founder, Queen Eleni, and perpetuate the cult of their mythical founders.

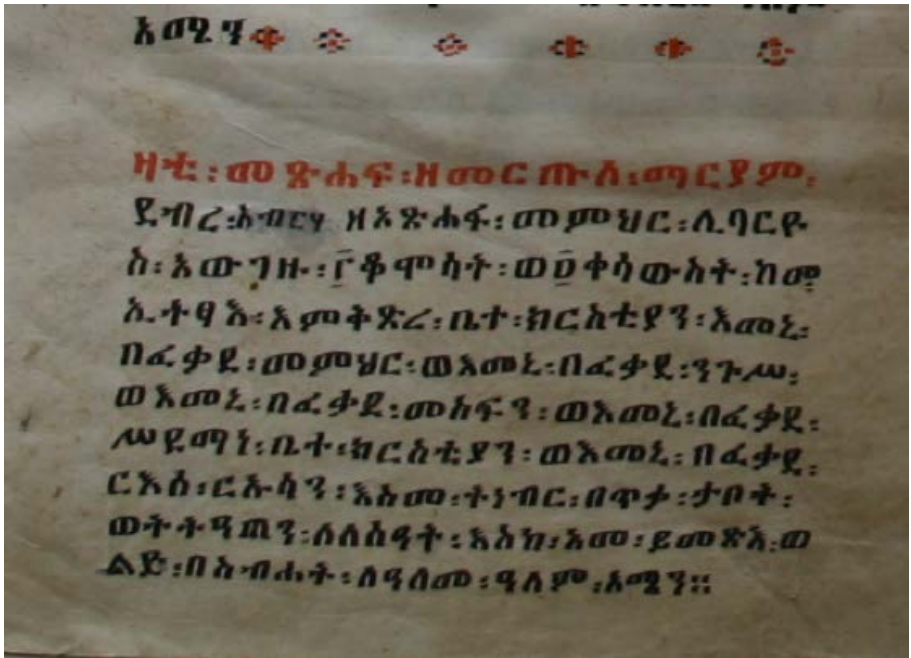


Fig. 1 HMML EMDA 00010, fol. 248v, colophon.

Among other things, the clergy of Märtulä Maryam interpolated the names of the twin kings into their records by deleting and overwriting the name of Queen Eleni, the original founder. A case in point is the manipulation (Fig. 1) of one of the most prized illuminated *Tāammärä Maryam* manuscripts in the church’s possession. The manuscript’s donor, Libariyos, was abbot of Märtulä Maryam during the late eighteenth century. In the colophon of this manuscript, Märtulä Maryam was originally identified as being a church built by Eleni. But sometime in the nineteenth century Eleni’s name was erased and the name of Abrəha, one of the twin kings, was interpolated. It now reads (italics

mine): ‘This book which belongs to Märṭulä Maryam, *church of Abrəha*, was sponsored to be copied by *Mämbər Libariyos*.’³⁶

As noted previously, the composition of *Gädlä Abrəha wä’Ašbəha* was a decisive moment in the reception and propagation of Märṭulä Maryam’s origin myth throughout Ethiopia. The clergy of Märṭulä Maryam regarded their fabricated hagiography of the twin kings as a valuable record, as shown by their continued copying of it even after the 1897 legal victory. As further corroboration, they also had copied *Gädlä Sälama*, a narrative dedicated to Sälama, first bishop of the Ethiopian Church, who was popularly believed to have converted Abrəha and Ašbəha to Christianity. In this way, the myth rapidly became regarded as factual and a popular part of Märṭulä Maryam’s history.³⁷

Other strategies of the church included naming or renaming many places in and around Märṭulä Maryam after the twin kings or *Abuna Sälama* and celebrating the anniversaries of their deaths. Other places were named after events involving either the twin kings or *Abuna Sälama*, such as alleged visits during the construction of Märṭulä Maryam; some of these names include Sälamge, Abrəha, Zenawo, and Adisge.³⁸

Märṭulä Maryam’s foundation myth appears in the work of the Goḡgam historian Täklä Iyäsus. Writing a decade after the debate and court proceedings in 1897, Täklä Iyäsus repeats the story almost verbatim, including the freshly-named places referring to Abrəha, Ašbəha, or Sälama in his genealogical book on Goḡgam, further solidifying the spread and currency of the Märṭulä Maryam ancient origin myth among church scholars of that time.³⁹ In addition, a hotel, elementary school, junior school, and senior preparatory school in the town of Märṭulä Maryam are all named after Abrəha and Ašbəha. And even more recently, a church dedicated to *Abuna Sälama* has been built on a hilltop called Sälamge, north-east of Märṭulä Maryam. Queen Eleni is practically erased from any official account of the church’s history.

Given its implausibility, Märṭulä Maryam’s origin myth should have been dismissed as fake and quickly forgotten. However, with the exception of the Dima Giyorgis community, it became rapidly accepted in Goḡgam and beyond. Many Ethiopian churches had ample opportunity to expose the fictitious foundation myth, but for various reasons lacked the motivation to do so. Firstly, they hesitated to challenge Märṭulä Maryam because they had no aspi-

³⁶ Collegeville, MN, St. John’s University, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, EMDA 00010, *Tä’ammərä Maryam* (= HMML EMDA 00010), fol. 248v.

³⁷ Märṭulä Maryam, Goḡgam, Märṭulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Sälama*.

³⁸ Mətəkku Dämäle 2002–2003, 39.

³⁹ Täklä Iyäsus Waqğəra 2010–2011, 26–27.

rations of raising their own status regionally or nationally. Secondly, the church of Abrəha and Aṣbəha in Təgray province collaborated with Märtulä Maryam in composing its mythical history.⁴⁰

Finally, Märtulä Maryam enjoyed good rapport with churches such as Däbrä Wärq, which regarded it as its mother monastery. A verse composed sometime during the 1897 court litigation or shortly afterwards by *Qesä gäbäz* Gobäze, a Däbrä Wärq cleric, further illustrates the rapid acceptance of Märtulä Maryam's origin myth.

**መርጡለ ማርያም ትትናጸር ምስለ ፈጣሪሃ
እስመ እንበለ ኣብ በምድር ወእንበለ እም በሰማያት
ወከመ በአምሳል ወላዲ ወላዴ ኩሉ ፍጥረት
በአርአያሃ ወአምሳሊሀ ፈጠረታ ለዘትሴብህ ደብረ ወርቅ መስዋዕት
እስመ ደብረ ወርቅ ደኃራዊት ለቀዳማዊት ደብርኑ ኢትትቃወማ በምንት
ንህነሰ በዘጠየቅኑ እምዜና አበው ቀደምት
እንተ ወለዳ ወወለደታ ናጤይቀክሙ ሊቃውንት
እስመ አቡሃ ውእቱ ሀገረ ኤዶም ገነት
ወእማ ዘወለደታ ኢየሩሳሌም ።**

‘Märtulä Maryam compares with its creator (God);
In heaven without mother, on earth without father
He created all creatures in his likeness.
In like manner, it (Märtulä Maryam) created the sacrifice Däbrä Wärq
that would glorify him (God).
The later-founded Däbrä Wärq church never opposes the first-founded
church.
Based on the history we learned from our elderly fathers,
We, the learned men, will tell you (the parents) who have begotten it.
Her father is Eden Paradise (the second heaven upon earth),
Her mother is (the heavenly) Jerusalem.’⁴¹

In this poem, Gobäze enthusiastically endorses the origin myth, indicating that Däbrä Wärq accepts the seniority and primacy of Märtulä Maryam. His poem also shows that, in the course of the twentieth century, the myth became invested with the conviction of undisputed historical fact.

⁴⁰ Hummel 2016, 61–67; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 48–54.
⁴¹ Ayyähu Ĕskäzziya, oral informant interviewed at Märtulä Maryam, July 1997.

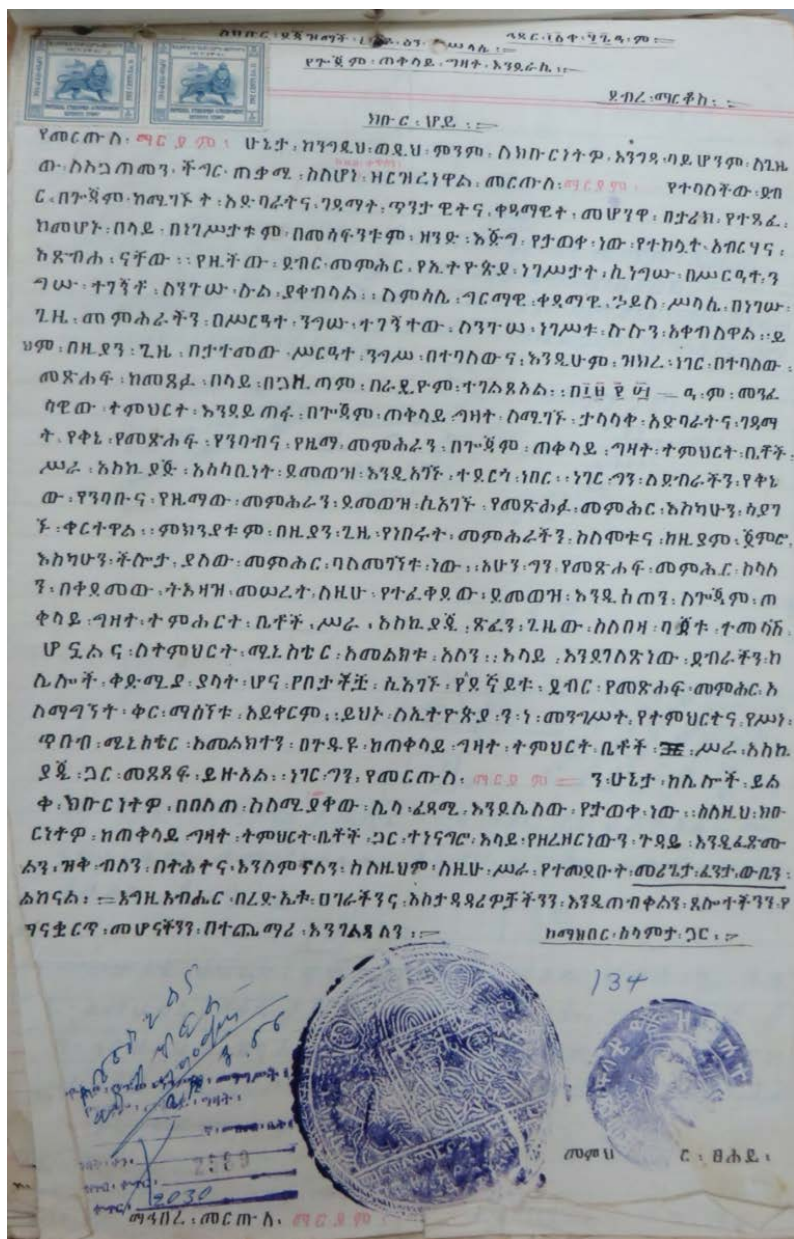


Fig. 2 Däbrä Marqos, Goğgām, Debre Markos University Documentation Center, Märṭulä Maryam files, Zone/Ad/0309, ‘From the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam to Dägğazmač Šäḥayu Enqu Šällase’ (22 November 1963).

The church of Märtulä Maryam continually promoted its foundation myth by including it with official correspondence and petitions addressed to regional and central authorities. One such petition, dated 23 November 1963, went to the then governor of Goğğam, *Däggäzmač Šäḥayu ጢባሽ ሰላሴ*, requesting government financial assistance in paying the salary of teachers at the Märtulä Maryam monastery school. The letter opens with a brief account of the foundation myth, stating that while the history of Märtulä Maryam is well known among government officials, they have included it in case Šäḥayu is not familiar with it.

የመርጠላ ግርዳም ሁኔታ ከንግዲህ ወዲህ ምንም ለክቡርነትም እንግዳ ባይሆንም ለጊዜው ለአጋጣሚ ችግር ጠቃሚ ስለሆነ ከዚህ ቀጥለን ዘርዘርነዋል ። መርጠላ ግርዳም የተባለችው ደብር በጎጃም ከሚገኙት አድባራትና ገዳማት ጥንታዊትና ቀዳማዊት መሆንዋ በታሪክ የተጻፈ ከመሆኑ በላይ በነገሥታቱም በመሳፍንቱም ዘንድ እጅግ የታወቀ ነው ። የተከሷት አብርሃና አጽብሐ ናቸው ። የዚችው ደብር መምህር የኢትዮጵያ ነገሥታት ሲነግሡ በሥርዓተ ንግሡ ተገኝቶ ለንጉሡ ሉል ያቀብላል ። ለምሳሌ ግርማዊ ቀዳማዊ ኃይለ ሥላሴ በነገሡ ጊዜ መምህራችን በሥርዓተ ንግሡ ተገኝተው ለንጉሡ ነገሥቱ ሉሉን አቀብለዋል ። ይህም በዚያን ጊዜ በታተመው ሥርዓተ ንግሥ በተባለውና እንዲሁም ዝክረ ነገር በተባለው መጽሐፍ ከመጻፉ በላይ በጋዜጣም በራዲዮም ተገልጾልኑ ።

‘Even if your honour is familiar with the history (lit. ‘situation’) of Märtulä Maryam, we have deemed it important to include it below as it (will help to show the church’s significance and explain) the current problem we encounter. That the church of Märtulä Maryam is the most ancient and oldest of all churches in Goğğam is documented in history and is common knowledge among the kings and noblemen. Its founders were Abrəha and Aşbəḥa. The head of this church participates in the coronation ceremony of Ethiopian kings by presenting the globe to the king. For instance, during the coronation ceremony of His Majesty Ḥaylä Šəllase I, the head of our church participated by presenting the globe to the king of kings. Besides being recorded in the *Book of Coronation* published contemporaneously to the (coronation of Ḥaylä Šəllase) and in the book titled *Zəkrä nägär*, this fact was broadcast on radio and appeared in newspapers.’⁴²

⁴² Däbrä Marqos, Goğğam, Debre Markos University Documentation Center, Märtulä Maryam files, Zone/Ad/0309, ‘From the clergy of Märtulä Maryam to *Däggäzmač Šäḥayu ጢባሽ ሰላሴ*’ (22 November 1963).

The document cited above is an example of the social and religious consequences resulting from the acceptance of Märṭulä Maryam's origin myth. Its claim of ancient history boosted its influence, prestige, and status as a spiritual centre. The head of the monastery participated in the 1930 coronation ceremony of Emperor Ḥaylä Šəllase I, which took place in Addis Abäba. During this ceremony, a sword, royal staff, spear, crown, holy oil, royal vestments, globe, and ring were presented to the king by senior clerics selected from the country's oldest churches.⁴³ The globe, which possibly symbolized the world under a Christian God, was presented to the king by the head of Märṭulä Maryam, whose participation in the coronation of Emperor Ḥaylä Šəllase was the upshot of its legal success against Dima Giyorgis in which the foundation myth had been put to practical use. The efforts of Märṭulä Maryam's clergy had invented an entertaining grand mythical-historical narrative.

The Resilience of the Past

For all the public commitment to their cause, it is tempting to suspect that the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam knew the weakness of their dispute with Dima Giyorgis. The protracted preparation time for their final legal showdown and the need for a poorly composed hagiography support this view. Despite the legal victory in Märṭulä Maryam's favour, the invented history could not completely veil its true origins, which were securely recorded in traditions of the church and in written documents. Thus, destroying the old and actual ties between the church and Queen Əleni proved harder than fabricating new ones between the church and Abrəha and Aşbəha. There were, and still are, both foreign and Ethiopian sources of written evidence countering Märṭulä Maryam's foundation myth. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam commonly attributed their church's foundation to Queen Əleni. Today, its ruins remain as relics of a glorious past, a memorial to Märṭulä Maryam's true founding by Queen Əleni during the late fifteenth century. Further to which, royal chroniclers during the reigns of King Iyasu I (r.1682–1707) and his grandson Iyasu II (r.1730–1755) recognized Märṭulä Maryam as having been founded by Əleni.⁴⁴

The records and material culture of Märṭulä Maryam itself unsettle its fabricated myth of ancient origin. Not only was the tampering of unfavour-

⁴³ Maḥtämä Šəllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969–1970, 747–748 and 752–756.

⁴⁴ Guidi 1912, 17; 1903, 72.

able historical records easily detected, but erasing the memory of Queen Eleni from the minds of local people was never completely successful. And the ruins of a once formidable enclosure wall surrounding Märtulä Maryam bears Eleni's name as a constant reminder that she was the true founder. The colophon to the *Tä'ammərä Maryam* manuscript of the church provides the best example of obvious tampering. The name of Abrəha was interpolated by erasing the name of Eleni, but not without leaving traces (see Fig. 1). The same manuscript has a beautiful illustration of Queen Eleni, King Bä'ədä Maryam, and the clergy of the church of Märtulä Maryam (see Fig. 3).⁴⁵ Finally, although inaccessible to most people, a royal raiment (or vestment) conferred by Eleni to her church still exists in the Märtulä Maryam treasury.



Fig. 3 HMML EMDA 00010, fol. 10r, King Bä'ədä Maryam, Queen Eleni, and the clergy of Märtulä Maryam.

⁴⁵ HMML EMDA 00010, fol. 10r.

What is more, the resilience of the past is demonstrated clearly through a surviving panegyric in the records of Märṭulä Maryam itself, extolling Queen Əleni’s virtuous life. Although she enjoyed a rare popularity in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Ethiopia, only in Märṭulä Maryam do we find a written source that so affectionately and warmly cherishes her memory. The untitled text, found inscribed in the flyleaves of a parchment manuscript of *Gädlä Ewoṣtatewos*, eulogizes Əleni’s life and achievements.⁴⁶ Its form and content reflect conventional features of a *mälkäə*’ (literally ‘image’), written exclusively to honour people regarded as saints. A typical *mälkäə*’ includes chanted prayers, supplications, and hymns expressing gratitude, love, and praise. The *mälkäə*’ was and still is a daily prayer, usually recited by individuals during private devotions, but it can also be used during public worship.⁴⁷

I have designated the document under discussion as *Mälkäə’a Əleni* (literally ‘The image of Əleni’). This *mälkäə*’, whose author and date of composition are unknown, contains sixty verses. It could have been written shortly after Əleni’s death. The fact that *Mälkäə’a Əleni* survives at all indicates that there was perhaps disagreement among the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam itself concerning the church’s fabricated origin story and the ethics of tampering with actual records of its past. The content of this work emphasizes the debts of gratitude the community owed to Əleni. The first lines read as follows:

ሰላ[ም] ለሰናዩ ዝክር ዝክረ ስምኪ
 ወለኅብረ ማላት ፍቱል ሥእርተ ርዕሥኪ
 እስመ እንቲ ቅድመ መሰረተ ቤታ አፅናዕኪ
 ትቤለኪ ለለዕለቱ መርጡለ ማርያም ደብርኪ
 ዕሌኒ ንግስት በሀኪ በሀኪ ።
 ሰላ[ም] ለርእስኪ ዘተቀጸለ አክሊለ ወርቅ
 ወለገጽኪ ብሩህ እምኅብረ መብረቅ
 እሌኒ ጸልይ እምሀበ አምላክኪ ሊቅ ።
 ደቂቅኪ ጊዜ መከራ ወጊዜ ሐዘን ጽፉቅ
 እስመ ይሲፊው ኪያኪ በጽድቅ ።
 ሰላ[ም] ለቀራንብትኪ ወለ አእይንትኪ ጽዱላት ከመ ከዋክብት
 በዓውደ ቀኖና ዘዘቆምኪ እሌኒ ንግሥት
 ኢይርእይ ገጸ ሕዝብኪ እንበለ ንስሐ ንስቲት
 አይነ መቃብር ወመሪር ሞት ።

⁴⁶ Märṭulä Maryam, Goḡgam, Märṭulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Ewoṣtatewos*, fols 1v–3r.

⁴⁷ Belcher 2015, 24–25.

‘Hail your name’s blessed memory
 And to the gracefully braided hair on your head.
 For you have laid its foundation first,
 Your church of Märtulä Maryam bows and says this everyday:
 “Queen Əleni, hail to you.”
 Hail to your head adorned with crown,
 And to your face which is fairer than lightning.
 Əleni, pray to your omnipotent God;
 In times of grief and tribulations, your children
 Truly trust in you.
 Hail to your eyelashes and eyes that shine like the stars.
 Queen Əleni, you who stand observing canonical obligations,
 Let not your people see before small penance,
 The eye of grave and cruel death.’⁴⁸

Əleni is praised for two key qualities. First, she is admired for her outward physical beauty, such as her royal dress, her braided hairstyle, eyes, and so on. In one verse, her glowing skin is described as resembling red and white roses; in another, her face is deemed ‘fairer than lightning’. Her teeth were whiter than snow, her breath more fragrant than incense, her eyes and fingernails shone like the stars, her ears were like rose petals. The queen’s feet were adorned with golden shoes revealing her lustrous heels, her waist was graceful to the eyes. Praise is also given to Əleni’s strength: ‘hail to your elbows which every day perform great accomplishments without measure’ (ሰላ[ም] ለመዝራዕትኪ ወለኩርናዕኪ በበዕለቱ እለ ይገብራ ኃይለ ዘእይትገለቁ መሥፈርቱ).⁴⁹

Second, she is praised for her pure soul, her piety and generosity. The author also describes her nature, temperament, and personality in great detail. Əleni was seen as a paragon of religious virtue. In one verse, she is likened to the eminent historical figure and namesake Queen Helena I (Əleni is another form of the name ‘Helena’): ዕሌኒ ንግሥት ካልዕተ ንግሥት ዕሌኒ (‘Queen Əleni, who is Əleni II’).⁵⁰ In other verses, she is revered as ንግሥተ ነገሥታት ዕሌኒ ለንጉሠ ነገሥት ተደላ መንበሩ which means ‘Queen of rulers, Əleni, the happiness of the throne of the king of kings’.⁵¹ In fact, it could be said that, in her virtue, faithfulness, purity, and obedience to God, Əleni was comparable to the author of her panegyric to the sainted Virgin Mary, mother of

⁴⁸ Märtulä Maryam, Goğgam, Märtulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Ewoşatewos*, fol. 1v.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 2r.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 1v.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 2r.

Jesus Christ. She was as generous as Saint Mary and embodied the essence of righteousness and salvation. She had neither erred in her life nor ever strayed from the paths of justice and orthodoxy. She forsook the world and dedicated her life to prayer. She did good works and was of good character. As a vessel of the Holy Spirit and resident in the house of holiness, her lips knew no gossip and her speech embraced tolerance. She followed rules faithfully and the writer even salutes her shoulder that faithfully carried ‘the burden of law and regulation’ (ፀወርተ ህግ ወሥርዓት).⁵² In one verse, Eleni is likened to and addressed as ‘dove of mercy’. For all these inner qualities, angels glorify and salute her, for her virtues seem almost infinite.

The author of this *mälkä*³ thus emphasizes the deep ties that bound Märṭulä Maryam to Eleni and extols her intercession and prayer. He reminds the church of the great trust it had placed in the power of Eleni’s prayer, especially in times of sorrow and tribulation. He beseeches her to pray diligently and continually to God, asking for forgiveness and salvation on behalf of her children; that is, the community of Märṭulä Maryam. She is entreated to relieve their pain and hardship and protect them from the dread of cruel death. Significantly, the author also beseeches Eleni to shield him with her wings from the false speech of an evil generation and to cleanse his soul of impurities, asking that her arms support him from falling under the weight of his sin. Finally, he again expresses grateful devotion to Eleni for founding Märṭulä Maryam, as follows:

ሰላ[ም] ለአብራክኪ ወለአእጋርኪ ዘኃብሩ
ንግሥተ ነገሥታት ዕሌኒ ለንጉሠ ነገሥት ተድላ መንበሩ
ሕዝበ ቤትኪ ንነግር ዜና ኂሩትኪ በበብሔሩ
አኮኑ ይደሉ ለውሉድ ዜና ኂሩተ እም ይንግሩ
ወበበዓመት ተዝካራ ይግበሩ ።

‘Hail to your legs and to your knees, which are well proportioned (lit. ‘united’).

Queen of rulers, Eleni, the happiness of the throne of the king of kings. We, the people of your house, tell news of your splendid deeds in every region;

For it is apt for children to tell the splendid deeds of their mother And to commemorate her anniversary every year.⁵³

⁵² Ibid., fol. 1v.

⁵³ Ibid., fol. 2r.

Mälkäʿa Əleni thus demonstrates the deep love and gratitude felt by the Märṭulä Maryam monastery toward their pious royal founder, through lines such as, “Ties of love bound Märṭulä Maryam to Əleni”.⁵⁴ Indeed, the queen was the pride of the community. The work then describes how Əleni died at Märṭulä Maryam peacefully and without pain and was subsequently buried at Däbrä Näg^wädg^w ad. The author concludes by praising Əleni’s value as worth all the precious gifts sent by the Queen of Sheba to the biblical King Solomon.

The identity of Märṭulä Maryam and the gratitude it owed to its founder as depicted in *Mälkäʿa Əleni* is clearly impossible to reconcile with the mythical history of its origin as invented by a later generation of its monastic community. Although historians consider the twin kings Abrəha and Aşbəha implausible as real-life figures, they nevertheless came to assume a central and prestigious place in the origin myth of Märṭulä Maryam. Regarded as Ethiopia’s first Christian kings and revered as saints, Abrəha and Aşbəha exerted symbolic and strategic influence in the nineteenth century construction of Märṭulä Maryam’s antique origin. In popular folklore they were renowned as church-builders and among the most revered saints in the Ethiopian Church. Their legend gained wider popularity and ecclesiastical respectability during the twentieth century, when Abrəha and Aşbəha were nationally venerated as saints.⁵⁵

Between Fiction, Myth, and History

The case of Märṭulä Maryam illustrates the manifestation of a larger theme. The nineteenth-century composers of its revisionist foundation myth and supporting hagiography reveal contemporary attitudes toward the past and to factual truth. The cultural, social, and religious issues underlying the dispute between the churches of Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam can be difficult to unravel for contemporary understanding today. But there remains little doubt that winning the battle of legal precedence and historical seniority was so all-consuming that Märṭulä Maryam clergy went to great lengths to completely rewrite their history and in the process disown their actual founder. Recognition of pre-eminence was critical for monastic communities, as they stood to gain increased prestige for their church institutions, which in turn ensured them of economic, spiritual, and social benefits.

⁵⁴ Ibid., fol. 3r (ለዘበረትለ ፍቅር ተዓሰረት መርጠ-ለ ማርያም አፅባብ ዛሬ).

⁵⁵ Hummel 2016, 36–40.

To what actual extent are the Märtulä Maryam origin myth and its hagiographic underpinning works of fiction? In the Märtulä Maryam area, the cult of the twin kings Abrəha and Ašbəha never existed prior to, or independently of, the nineteenth-century origin myth and its composers; they were, in fact, conjured into existence from nothing.⁵⁶ In significant ways, therefore, the origin myth and its parallel hagiography may be accurately likened to literary fiction in that they are free inventions of the human mind. Unlike modern historical scholarship, myth-makers and hagiographers are not constrained by the requirements of evidence or credibility in the sourcing and construction of their stories. In a sense, they espoused the concept of ‘alternate truth’, proving that this form of revisionism is not unique to the twenty-first century.

The historian Hayden White has noted that historical writing shares many features with literary fiction; the borderline between the genres is not sharply defined. He describes the process of constructing historical narrative as being ‘essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation. And to call it that in no way detracts from the status of historical narratives as providing a kind of knowledge.’⁵⁷ White and those who support his views have denied the existence of a clear distinction between historical and fictional narrative.

In the context of my discussion, however, myth-makers and hagiographers differ from novelists and historical scholars in both epistemology and methodology. Hagiography writers, while imaginative in their own right, were still limited by the norms of hagiographic structure and form. Unlike the fiction of novelists, myth-making and hagiography in the Ethiopian church tradition were acts of devotion; hagiographers did not regard their work as untrue.⁵⁸ Thus the origin myth of Märtulä Maryam and its hagiographic inscription should not be read as showing general indifference to historical accuracy, or seen as an abuse of the past in the service of current economic and social needs. In short, such hagiographies as that of Märtulä Maryam should not be judged by modern standards of historical scholarship. In order to rightly understand the action of the royal court that approved Märtulä Maryam’s revised origin myth and the attitude of the myth-makers and hagiographers who constructed it, we must accept that their standards of evidence, their notions of truth, and their attitudes toward the past radically differ from our own.

⁵⁶ Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 26–28.

⁵⁷ White 1978, 85.

⁵⁸ Belcher 2015, 18–30.

This is why it is important to place Märtulä Maryam's origin myth and its supporting hagiography within the broader context of pre-modern textual practice, within Ethiopia and beyond. In the past, history was perceived as dynamic and mutable, a narrative able to legitimize and give meaning to the present. The culture of imaginative hagiographic writing, and even forgery, in the medieval West is particularly illuminating in this case. Historian Derek Pearsall argues that, unlike their modern successors, people then had a 'flexible attitude' toward truth and falsehood and were more 'fully aware than we are, perhaps, that truth is a cultural artefact, or that a truth under the guarantee of a higher Truth does not have to answer petty questions about authenticity. If it was good that something be true, people believed it was true.'⁵⁹ Pearsall adds that, 'since the function of the life of a saint is to bear witness to the truth of faith in God, it could be said that in some sense their lives are always already known even if they never lived them [...] In the interest of this kind of Truth, fiction and invention are not falsehood.'⁶⁰ I believe this same premise also applies to the Ethiopian context of Märtulä Maryam.

Like their medieval and later European counterparts, Ethiopians embraced flexible attitudes toward truth, which made writing down definitive lives of the saints problematic. Most hagiographies in Ethiopian church collections were written long after saints' deaths, so the particulars of their lives were impossible to know. Some of those for whom we do have hagiographies, such as the twin kings Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa, are now known never to have existed at all as living, breathing human beings. And, as noted, those who did actually walk among us have had much of their narrative left to the liberal use of the hagiographers' imaginations. This is a major reason why hagiographic texts are so rigidly formulaic in their norms and standards.⁶¹ The hagiography of twin kings Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa closely adheres to stereotypical hagiographic traditions; it abounds with miracles performed by the two saints, not only during their lifetimes but also after their deaths. In keeping with hagiographic tradition, the miracles performed by saints are ultimately attributed to God.⁶² Having grown jaded with miracles, people in nineteenth-century Ethiopia seemed to have no difficulty accepting the hagiography of Märtulä Maryam as genuine.

⁵⁹ Pearsall 2003, 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ For the most recent statement about the genre of Ethiopian hagiography see Belcher 2015, 22–30.

⁶² Hummel 2016, 43; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 36–39

This is understandable, as cults of the royal saints Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa had existed in parts of Ethiopia at least since the fifteenth century. Furthermore, part of the hagiography of Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa concerned with Aksum is not entirely or necessarily inaccurate,⁶³ as there was no authoritative source to consult on ancient Aksumite history. In this and other cases, the absence of concrete, documented information about many aspects of ancient Ethiopian church history, including that of its first Christian kings, created many opportunities for the growth of folklore. On these grounds, it would have been difficult to disprove the claims of Märtulä Maryam's clergy. In light of the foregoing discussion, they were simply adding substance to myth by 'documenting' through hagiography a story long accepted as genuine.

Conclusion

This study has explored the context and content of the rewritten foundation history of the church of Märtulä Maryam which took place during the late nineteenth century. The virtually uncontested acceptance of Märtulä Maryam's mythic altered origins by its clergy and the royal assembly of Emperor Mənilək II reveals their collective understanding of concepts such as 'truth' and 'evidence'. The evidence presented in my research confirms that in nineteenth-century Ethiopia both ecclesiastical and secular authorities perceived history to be mutable and dynamic, and that the past must be shaped to serve the present. On this assumption, the clergy of Märtulä Maryam reframed the early history of their church to fit contemporary needs of the late nineteenth century and on into the turn of the twentieth century. In doing so, they disowned Queen Eleni, the actual founder of their church, and claimed in her place the legendary Aksumite kings Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa. However, this study also demonstrates the resiliency of the past, for Märtulä Maryam's constructed origin myth could never completely obliterate the factual history and legacy of its actual founder.

Although the case of Märtulä Maryam shows people's willingness to rewrite the past in the service of current and future needs, I have also argued that the church's foundation myth and its supporting hagiography are not identical to modern fiction. The standards of truth and the relations between truth and fact were different then. To the clergy of Märtulä Maryam, the foundation myth and the allied text of *Gädlä Abrəha wä'Aṣbəḥa* was anything but fiction. The myth is regarded by the church to this day as a

⁶³ Hummel 2016, 40; Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 2016, §§ 26–29.

serious account of heritage and origin. The epistemology of hagiographic writing and writers is sharply different from the epistemology of modern historical scholarship. Unlike modern historical scholarship, which is based on the gathering of data and responsible interpretation of evidence, in hagiographic writing, miracles, for instance, are a legitimate method by which truth is established.

Märṭulä Maryam's success in inventing, defending, and disseminating its re-imagined foundation myth was primarily due to a favourable political, religious, and cultural milieu in which the myth was generated, received, and legitimized. Without a receptive audience and permissive political and religious culture, such an extravagant claim could never have been constructed in the first place, much less have any chance of success in court. Nineteenth-century Ethiopians were very familiar with the wondrous miracles performed by saints in the very many mythical narrative texts such as the well-known epic of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*. Having grown overly accustomed, even jaded by them, they appear to have had no qualms in accepting the fictitious account of Märṭulä Maryam's origin.

This study has demonstrated that the nineteenth-century competition for status and seniority, preceded by doctrinal and Christological debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries between the churches of Dima Giyorgis and Märṭulä Maryam, framed the essential historical context from which Märṭulä Maryam's new foundation myth and its supporting hagiography emerged. Fuelling this competition was the promise of status, prestige and spiritual influence to be gained by those churches whose seniority entitled them to participate in state, ecclesiastical, and public occasions. The rights and privileges of such participation depended on verified claims to greater antiquity. As Märṭulä Maryam lacked the genuine antique origin needed to gain or keep coveted ceremonial privileges, its clergy resorted to myth-making and outright forgery to claim its pre-eminence. Only by re-fashioning history could Märṭulä Maryam exceed its competitors as an institution that had precedence over all others. Consequently, a new originating narrative was compiled, along with the supporting hagiography of the twin kings Abrəha and Aṣbəḥa, whose legal acceptance marked a successful outcome for the monastery church of Märṭulä Maryam.

List of Informants

Ayyähu Ĕskäzziya, oral informant interviewed at Märṭulä Maryam, July 1997.

Libanos Yätämän, oral informant interviewed at Däbrä Marqos, April 2008.

List of Manuscripts⁶⁴

Abunä ‘Asrat monastery, Goḡgam, *Zəkre wäPawli*.

Däbrä Marqos, Goḡgam, Debre Markos University Documentation Center, Märṭulä Maryam files, Zone/Ad/0309, ‘From the clergy of Märṭulä Maryam to *Däḡḡazmač Šəhayu Ĕnqu Šällase*’ (22 November 1963).

Collegeville, MN, St. John’s University, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, EMDA 00010, *Tä’ammərə Maryam* (manuscript held at Märṭulä Maryam monastery, G1-IV-310).

Märṭulä Maryam, Goḡgam, Märṭulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Ewostatəwos*.

Märṭulä Maryam, Goḡgam, Märṭulä Maryam monastery, *Gädlä Sälama*.

References

- Ashton, G. 2000. *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint*, Routledge Research in Medieval Studies (London–New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).
- Bartnicki, A. and J. Mantel-Niećko 1969–1970. ‘The Role and Significance of the Religious Conflicts and People’s Movements in the Political Life of Ethiopia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 24 (1969–1970, pub. 1971), 5–39.
- Belcher, W. L. 2015. ‘Introduction to the Text’, in W. L. Belcher and M. Kleiner, eds, tr., *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman, Written by Galawdewos* (Princeton, NJ–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–48.
- Brooks, M. F. 1995. ክብረ ነገሥት. *Kebrä Nagast (The Glory of Kings): The True Ark of the Covenant, A Modern Translation of the Kebrä Nagast (The Glory of Kings)*, ed., tr. (Lawrenceville, NJ–Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1995).
- Cerulli, E. 1933. ‘L’Etiopia del secolo XV in nuovi documenti storici’, *Africa Italiana*, 5/1–2 (1933), 57–112.
- Getatchew Haile 1986. ‘Materials on the theology of the Qəb’at or unction’, in G. Goldenberg, ed., *Ethiopian Studies: Proceedings of the sixth international conference, Tel-Aviv, 14–17 April 1980* (Rotterdam–Boston, MA: A. A. Balkema, 1986), 205–250.

⁶⁴ The manuscripts referred to in this article are mostly held in churches and monasteries in Ethiopia and uncatalogued. This list aims at providing basic information to identify these manuscripts.

- 1990. *The Faith of the Uctionists in the Ethiopian Church* (Haymanot mäsihawit), ed., *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 517, *Scriptores Aethiopici*, 91 (Lovanii: In aedibus E. Peeters, 1990).
- Girma Getahun 2014. *The Goḡgam Chronicle, by Aläqa Täklä Iyäsus WaqḂera*, ed., tr., *Fontes Historiae Africanae, New Series, Sources of African History*, 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Guidi, I. 1893. ‘Di due frammenti relativi alla storia di Abissinia’, *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Rendiconti, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Serie Quinta, 2 (1893), 579–605.
- 1903. *Annales Iohannis I, Iyāsu I, Bakäffä: Textus*, ed., *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Aethiopici, Series Altera*, 5/1–2 (Parisiis: E Typographo Reipublicae–Carolus Poussielgue Bibliopola, Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1903).
- 1912. *Annales regum Iyāsu II et Iyo’as: Versio*, tr., *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Aethiopici, Series Altera*, 6 (Romae: Excudebat Karolus de Luigi, Parisiis: Carolus Poussielgue Bibliopola, Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1912).
- Habtamu Mengistie Tegegne 1998. *A History of the Monastery of Märṭulä Maryam, c. 1500–1974*, BA Thesis, Addis Ababa University (1998).
- 2016. ‘Dispute over precedence and protocol: Hagiography and forgery in 19th-century Ethiopia’, *Afriques*, 7 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1909>.
- Ḥaylä Šöllase ‘Alämayyāhu 1996–1997. ታሪክ ነገሥት አብርሃ ወአጽብሀ (*Tarikä nägäšt Abrəha wä’Ašbəha*, ‘Chronicle of Abrəha and Ašbəha’) (Addis Abāba: n.pub., 1989 EC = 1996–1997 CE).
- Hummel, S. 2016. ‘The Disputed *Life* of the Saintly Ethiopian Kings ‘Abrəhā and ‘Ašbəha’, *Scrinium*, 12 (2016), 35–72.
- Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013. ‘“The Eighteen Million *Tāwabədo* Victims of Martyr-Saint Adyam Sägäd Iyasu”: Towards a Better Understanding of Lasta–Təgray Defiance of the Royal Centre of Gondärine Ethiopia (1630s–1760s)’, *Aethiopica*, 16 (2013), 45–73.
- Kleiner, M. 2009. ‘*Ras Wäsän Säggäd*, a Pre-Eminent Lord of Early 16th-Century Ethiopia’, in S. Ege, H. Aspen, Birhanu Teferra, and Shiferaw Bekele, eds, *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, IV (Trondheim: Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, 2009), 37–49.
- Kropp, M. 1988. ‘The Sar‘atä Gəbr: A Mirror View of Daily Life at the Ethiopian Royal Court in the Middle Ages’, *Northeast African Studies*, 10/2–3 (1988), 51–87.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1978. *Myth and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1978).
- Lowenthal, D. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- Maḥtämä Šöllase Wäldä Mäsqäl 1969–1970. ገክረ ነገር (*Zəkrä nägär*, ‘Remembrances of things’), 2nd edn (Addis Abāba: Artistik mattämiya bet, 1962 EC = 1969–1970 CE).
- Mətəkku Dämöle 2002–2003. መርጠ-ለ ማርያም እና ታሪክ (*Märṭulä Maryam ənna tarik‘a*, ‘Märṭulä Maryam and its history’) (Addis Abāba: Dašan mattämiya bet, 1995 EC = 2002–2003 CE).

- Pearsall, D. 2003. 'Forging Truth in Medieval England', in J. Ryan and A. Thomas, eds, *Cultures of Forgery: Making Nations, Making Selves* (New York, NY–London: Routledge, 2003), 3–13.
- Taddesse Tamrat 2009. *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270–1527*, repr. (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2009).
- Täklä Iyäsus Waqğəra 2010–2011. የጎጃም ትውልድ በሙሉ ከአባይ እስከ አባይ (*YäGoğğam təwlədd bämulu kä'Abbay əskä Abbay*, 'The genealogy of the entire people of Goğğam from Abbay to Abbay') (Addis Abāba: Addis Ababa University Press, 2003 EC = 2010–2011 CE).
- White, H. 1978. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

Summary

The growth of a myth of ancient origins pertaining to the church and monastery of Märtulä Maryam and the exploration of its content and context form the central focus of this study. Material related to the church's apparent ancient origin provides appropriate data through which to illustrate at once the themes of historical fragility and resilience. Märtulä Maryam consolidated its mythical history by suppressing the memory of its actual founder, thus altering the tradition of the church itself. This study will demonstrate that efforts to completely erase the memory of Märtulä Maryam's founder and its original history were wholly in vain. Such acts of suppression inevitably leave indelible traces of the true past, not to mention the fact that its actual history is well secured within the records of other Ethiopian churches, as well as in those of Märtulä Maryam itself.