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A Rock-Hewn Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos? An Investigation into Possible 'Northern' Zagʷe Churches near ᶜAddigrat, Təgray*

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The study of architectural history has become more geographically varied since the publication of Richard Krautheimer's articles on the iconography of architecture and the Carolingian revival of early Christian forms. Krautheimer theorized that buildings gain prestige by copying the formal attributes of esteemed prototypes.[1] Indeed, already in the 1990s, the late Marilyn Heldman applied this theory of 'architectural iconography' to the famous Lalibäla complex, a largely thirteenth-century, multiphase cluster of rock-hewn churches located in the central highlands of Ethiopia.[2] In two influential articles Heldman argued that the eleven churches were meant to evoke Christian holy sites: Roḥa (the capital of Edessa, of King Abgar and the Mandylion), Aksum, and Jerusalem.[3] While many of her conclusions may now be called into question with the development of a new relative chronology for the Lalibäla site, her logic remains sound, as specific churches on sites such as Golgotha (site of Christ's crucifixion), the hewn cross in the Yordanos river (Christ's baptism) and the unique five-aisled plan of Mädḫane ᶜAläm (Maryam Ṣəyon in Aksum) seem to correspond explicitly to places in one or more of those theologically-charged locales.[4]

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1 Krautheimer 1942a; 1942b. See also McCurrach 2011.

2 For the most recent overviews of the Lalibäla complex see Bosc-Tiessé and Derat 2019a; 2019b.

3 Heldman 1992; Heldman 1995. For a critique of Heldman's theory see Mercier and Lepage 2012, 267–275.

4 Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2010; Bosc-Tiessé et al. 2014; Bosc-Tiessé and Derat 2019a. For Maryam Ṣəyon see Buxton and Matthews 1971–1972.

However, in the case of Lalibäla, architectural iconography is entirely symbolic rather than formal, with the churches diverging significantly in scale and articulation from their 'prototypes'. In implementing metrological and stylistic means, this paper, highlights a formal example of architectural iconography in medieval Ethiopia, a hewn copy of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos near ᶜAddigrat in Təgray: Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus. This near-exact copying of a free-standing church from the central highlands in Ethiopia's far north is remarkable, and, in considering this church along with Maryam Qiᶜat and Maryam Qorqor, I suggest the possibility of extensive Zagʷe patronage of hewn churches in Ethiopia's north. Moreover, in reproducing the configuration of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos in northern Təgray, I show how architectural copying served as a projection of Zagʷe power.

The hewn and free-standing churches attributed to the 'Zagʷe dynasty' (twelfth–thirteenth centuries CE) have long been understood as part of a 'golden age' for architectural production in medieval Ethiopia.[5] Though little is known of this dynasty, the rulers appear to have emerged in the twelfth century and, in today's historiography, are associated with a transfer of power towards the central highlands of Ethiopia from Təgray after the collapse of the Aksumite empire. Often maligned as illegitimate 'usurpers' in later Ethiopian sources, the Zagʷe dynasty has also been attached to contemporary Agäw nationalism.[6] Despite their disputed legacy, their thirteenth-century architectural productions in Lasta are well known, including the lion's share of the Lalibäla complex, consisting of eleven rock-hewn monolithic and semi-monolithic churches and nearby Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos. These churches remain enigmatic—material testaments to the dynasty's material wealth and power. Though much of the written evidence of the Zagʷe dynasty comes from Təgray, they have not typically been identified as patrons of architecture in this northern region. That said, a closer look at those sources suggests a link. In Marie-Laure Derat's hitherto definitive account of the Zagʷe dynasty, she was able to collate from a virtual dearth of textual sources two documents located in Təgray, including the land grants of King Ṭänṭäwədəm (twelfth century?) from ᶜUra Mäsqäl in ᶜAddigrat and the gospel note of the Egyptian Metropolitan Michael II in Mikaʾel Amba in Aṣbi, Təgray.[7] In both documents, the Zagʷe are explicitly referred to as commissioning religious works in Təgray. Moreover, Derat

5 Tekeste Negash has even referred to this period as a medieval 'zenith'; see Tekeste Negash 2006.

6 Derat 2018, 195–256.

7 Ibid., 29–86 and 261–271.

challenges the long-standing belief that the Zag^{w}e were of non-Semitic speaking Agäw background, even going so far as to suggest a Təgrayan origin for the dynasty. This is compelling, underscored as it is by their conspicuous use of a post-Aksumite title *ḥaṣani*. Moreover, in Nubia, the Zag^{w}e king was even referred to as 'Aksumite'.[8] With heavy Egyptian ecclesiastical investment in King Lalibäla, and some documentation showing his kingdom's land grants in Təgray, it is likely that the Zag^{w}e dynasty controlled this northern region, albeit loosely, in the thirteenth century.[9] Indeed, the continued presence of a Coptic metropolitan centre at Maryam Nazret would have made Təgray a point of especially heavy contact with Lasta, since Egyptians were known to have worked on the complex and probably periodically moved to it from their base at Maryam Nazret in South Təgray.[10]

Though not as thoroughly studied as the Lalibäla complex, in recent years Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos has received some attention, especially for its mural decoration.[11] It is a free-standing church from the medieval period, built within a cave near Lalibäla in Lasta, Ethiopia. Dedicated most likely to the late Roman martyr Saint Cyricus, it is a 'cave church', indicating that the upper portions of the structure have been economically constructed, with exposed ceiling elements in place of timber roofing (the cave overhang shields the church from the elements).[12] It has been constructed by means of the Ethiopian practice of half timbering, its structure composed of alternating courses of dressed rubble faced with plaster and wood (Fig. 1). Interestingly, the church design also uses metal dovetail joins to suture the wood courses together at several points, a construction method also found in Zaräma Giyorgis in Təgray.[13] The church, which is basilican in configuration, is rectangular in shape with turrets forming a four 'towered' shape evocative of palaces (otherwise found only in foundations at Aksum), though aspects of sacred geometry may have been implemented in its archi-

8 Ibid., 179.

9 Ibid., 133–145.

10 Lepage 2002. See also Heldman 2007. On Maryam Nazret see Fritsch 2016, 58–64. See also Derat et al. 2020.

11 Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers 2001; Girmah Élias et al. 2001; Thiessen 2010; Gervers 2017. An important edited volume on it is due to come out in the near future, see Bosc-Tiessé 2020, 342, n. 72.

12 Marrassini 1995, 85; Gervers 2014; 'Rock-hewn churches and churches-in-caves', *EAe*, IV (2010), 400b–404b (M. Gervers and E. Fritsch).

13 Lepage 1973, 425.

tectural engineering (Fig. 2).[14] Reputed to have been built by the eponymous twelfth-century king, the Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos cave complex includes a two-storeyed building of unknown use and claimed to be his palace neighbouring the church.[15] The interior of the church is a three-aisled basilica consisting of nine bay modules. The church is almost 13 m long and its interior utilizes a two part pyramidal section centred on the nave elevation that rises to a height of 6.7 m with a saddleback roof supported by a central roof truss (Fig. 3).[16] The truss is composed of a queen-post tied together with joists, supporting the flat apex of the roof and connected to the sloped rafters by means of angled joists.[17] The aisle bays and the laterally oriented 'return aisle' on the church's west end each have a height of 3.6 m and feature carved ceiling panels in varied configurations with designs painted in both an ornamental and figural character (Fig. 4).[18] The nine-bay basilican layout is composed of bay modules, which are 2.7 m square in the nave's intercolumnar span and 1.7 m square in the aisles and return aisle. The sanctuary, which sits behind a triumphal arch, is defined through a painted wooden dome carried by angled-board supports (Fig. 5). Ashlar piers holding up the arcades with precise setback mouldings define the spandrels and support the upper level of the nave (Fig. 6). The church utilizes a 'clerestory' of blind window frames, while the main floor is well fenestrated. In line with Ethiopian building practices, each window has protruding square joins, though patterns inscribed on the window grilles are diverse.[19] The decorative wood revetments, which sheathe the building's interior, are eclectic, with painted and carved uncircumscribed strapwork patterns.

Previously dated from the twelfth century, with some even proposing an earlier date for its construction, in Michael Gervers's recent chronology of 'cave churches' Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos is considered contemporary to the Lalibäla complex.[20] Due to his implementing a combination of stylistic and liturgical parameters, such as the lack of a bema and a chancel, but the inclusion of a return aisle and reading platform, Gervers quite convincingly suggests it is actually a thirteenth-century construction. Furthermore, he notes the church's style of mural paintings and the ceiling panels more closely

14 Campbell 2006.
15 Gervers 2017, 35.
16 A saddleback roof is a roof with sloped gables on either side and a central ridge.
17 A queen post is two king posts which together support the flat apex of a gable roof.
18 Gervers 2017.
19 Gervers 2016.
20 Gervers 2014. For an argument favouring an eleventh-century date, see Phillipson 2009, 188–189.

resemble artistic productions of the Coptic Church under the Mamluks (post-1250) than those of the twelfth century (for which we have comparatively little evidence).[21] Indeed the central bay in the return aisle (Fig. 3) has a carved ceiling featuring a complex intarsia pattern very similar to that found in the Mamluk-era chapel underneath Saint George in al-Fusṭāṭ, Egypt (Fig. 7). The mode of transmission for the design of these wood elements may have been through portable objects like wood furniture or textiles, though Gervers has suggested carpet pages in Mamluk-era illuminated manuscripts.[22]

Thirteenth-century attribution becomes complicated, however, when considering the carbon-14 analyses undertaken on the site, published in the recent dissertation of Mengistu Gobezie Worku who dated most of the wood elements in the church to the late twelfth century, in line with hagiographic accounts.[23] Before the next round of scientific verification for the site, it is possible to reconcile the trees' twelfth-century *date of death* (in which they were felled) with a thirteenth-century *construction date* for the church. According to Worku, the church was partially composed of imported cedar in addition to local olive wood. Indeed, the great distance required to import Levantine cedar from the eastern Mediterranean to the Ethiopian highlands would preclude construction from green wood as architectural historians normally expect.[24] Furthermore, in the cave of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, where the floor is often wet and the atmosphere always humid, the builders would probably have preferred cured timber, which would be preshrunk and less likely to become waterlogged—thereby preventing rot and structural failure. This practice is common in the medieval West, as dendrochronology has often shown that structural timbers were reused, some even after centuries.[25] Moreover, timber was also cured

21 Gervers 2017, 43.

22 Gervers 2014, 39–40; Gervers 2017, 36.

23 Mengistu Gobezie Worku 2018, 59–80.

24 The assumption that green wood was always used in premodern constructions is rooted in the treatise of first-century BCE Roman author Vitruvius: 'The elm tree and the ash contain much water but little air and fire, with a moderate portion of earth. They are therefore pliant, and being so full of water, and from want of stiffness, soon bend under a superincumbent weight. When, however, from proper keeping after being felled, or from being well dried while standing to discharge their natural moisture, they become much harder, and in framings are, from their pliability, capable of forming sound work. The maple tree, which contains but little fire and earth, and a considerable portion of air and water, is not easily broken, and is, moreover, easily wrought', Gwilt 1826, 68.

25 Blain et al. 2015.

for long periods of time to guarantee adequate dryness.[26] Cedar, if it were actually used, once felled, tends to split during wood shrinkage.[27] As the church seems to have had cedar boards as roof rafters, it would probably have been pre-dried to prevent any possible defects caused by wood shrinkage. Furthermore, northern Ethiopia, which was deforested in late antiquity, may have reused wood beams in the absence of fresh sources.[28] The timbers used to make Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos were possibly reused from another structure, or, as Worku suggests, a gift by papal delegations from Egypt passing through on their way to Lasta.[29] Wood, rare in Egypt, would have probably been kept in storage in al-Fusṭāṭ in the interim. Indeed, the Təgrayan church of Zaräma Giyorgis may have reused fifth-century wood elements in an otherwise early medieval structure, presumably for their prestigious connotations.[30] By using a combination of imported and reused timbers as well as eclectic carved and painted wood revetments and Egyptian mural paintings, Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos would have been defined as an example of prestige architecture of the Zag^{w}e dynasty; a site of renown in the burgeoning kingdom near to what may have been their ceremonial centre at Lalibäla.

G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, which may be meaningfully compared to Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, is approximately 300 km away as the crow flies in the north-east part of Təgray province near the town of ʿAddigrat (Fig. 8).[31] First identified by Ruth Plant, little research has been carried out on the associated 'cluster' of churches. The ultimate number of churches there remains unknown. Unfortunately, the church has recently had a new floor installed and been coated with whitewashed concrete, making further archaeological investigation impossible. Manifested without any external articulation, the church is hidden behind a free-standing exonarthex of recent construction. The interior of the church is a three-aisled basilica accessed through hewn entrances corresponding to the side aisles. The west end of the church, now shored up with wattle and daub infill, appears, at one point in time, to have been crowned with some sort of rendered tympanum, visible now only through a residual setback on an otherwise blind arch (Fig. 9). The nave

26 Épaud 2007, 38–43.
27 Pope 1911, 670–672.
28 Butzer 1981.
29 Mengistu Gobezie Worku 2018, 195. See also Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers 2001, 18.
30 Lepage 1973, 442–446, 454.
31 Lepage and Mercier 2005, 130–134; Plant 1985, 186. See also the mentions in Nosnitsin 2010, and Nosnitsin 2013, 250.

(Fig. 10) is carried by four piers, though the south-west pier (which had previously collapsed) is today shored up with concrete fill. The aisle bay units are defined through engaged lintels which interact with engaged pilaster strips on the walls. The church is 12.9 m long, its aisles and nave 7.5 m long and 8.36 m wide with a nave height of 6.68–6.97 m and aisles 4.5–6 m high. The layout is composed of modules measuring 2.54–2.62 m by 2 m at the intercolumnar nave span and 2.1–2.15 m by 2 m on the aisles. G^{w}aḥgot is special as it fully emulates built constructions; its nave is crowned with a hewn saddleback roof with wooden roof trusses set into it at two parts (Fig. 11). The wooden roof trusses are identical to those found in Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos with a queen post and angled joists 'supporting' the peaked roof. Moreover, its nave arcade is made up of round arches with precise setback mouldings defining the spandrels (Fig. 10). The piers are square in section (approximately 60 cm square) and capped with chamfered cubic capitals. The aisles are crowned with flat ceilings. Immediately east of the nave is a narrow transverse eastern passage that connects the hewn pastophoria, which now contain extra altars (Fig. 12). The apse terminates in a conch defined from the springing by a cyma with a fillet moulding on top, which, prior to the recent raising of the floor, was probably some 6.2–6.4 m in height at its semi-dome apex (Fig. 13). The eastern portions of the church from the triumphal arch to the apse conch total 5.4 m in length.

While Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier already formally compared the church to those from Lasta (including Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos), having had the opportunity to measure the two churches in the summer of 2018, I find the church emulates Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos in Lasta closely in scale and articulation.[32] G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus and Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos are 12.9 m and 12.7 m long respectively with a difference of only 20 cm or ~ 1.5 per cent (Fig. 8). Though the church of G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus was probably extended later through new carving at the east end, the main vessels of G^{w}aḥgot and Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos have similar lengths at 7.5 m and 7.1 m respectively, a difference of 40 cm, or ~ 5 per cent. Both churches have a sharp pyramidal section with nearly exact aisle–nave heights. The relative nave and aisle heights correspond to 6.7–7 m/4.5–4.6 m at G^{w}aḥgot and 6.7 m/3.6 m at Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos respectively, a negligible difference in nave height and an aisle height difference of only 90 cm (~ 19 per cent).[33] Moreover, the arches mak-

[32] Lepage and Mercier 2005, 130–131. Moreover, in another article, the two authors even refer to the church as 'Zag^{w}e'. Lepage and Mercier 2006, 30.

[33] Because G^{w}aḥgot recently had a 70 cm-high concrete bema and a new floor installed, it is likely that the relative heights had some centimetres of further difference in the past.

ing up the arcades in each church closely match, 4.21–4.66 m tall (+/- 10 cm) in Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus and nearly 4 m tall in Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, a difference of around 20 to 40 cm (~ 7 per cent).

Furthermore, Gʷaḥgot's strange articulation seems to hint at a deliberate citation of a free-standing model. Roof trusses which are wholly unnecessary and probably expensive were wedged into the faux saddleback roof at two points. Likewise, round arches with setback mouldings are not found anywhere else in Təgray, with their only Ethiopian counterpart being Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos (though this practice is also found in twelfth-century Yemen and Egypt).[34] Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos has geometric designs painted on its wooden elements that appear to have been imitated on the faux saddleback roof in Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus, which replicates the strapwork designs and pigmentation otherwise found in cave churches in Lasta with exactitude. The wooden elements also bear precisely the same interlaced cusped-cross design found on Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos's roof trusses, and it is possible that they were even painted by the same workshop (Fig. 14). Despite the absence of pendants on the trusses in Gʷaḥgot, gaps in the painted decoration show where the pendants were intended to be applied (replete with nail holes), probably locally.

The church of Gʷaḥgot, however, has some key differences when compared with Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos. Despite having almost the same width, the ceiling layout differs between the churches. At Gʷaḥgot the saddleback roof covers a total of three bays, as opposed to two at Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, but, similar to Ǝmäkina Mädḫane ᶜAläm, it requires a second roof truss (Fig. 11). Occupying the same absolute dimensions, Gʷaḥgot therefore lacks a lateral aisle on its west end (return aisle), and the three-aisled main vessel takes up the entirety of the hewn footprint (Fig. 8). Furthermore, the liturgical layout east of the triumphal arch differs. A narrow transverse eastern passageway with a flat ceiling connects the pastophoria with the apsidal altar space at Gʷaḥgot (Figs. 12 and 13), instead of the timber portals found at Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos. In addition, the north pastophorion is conched, signalling its use as a secondary altar space, with its half dome springing from a poorly-carved cyma moulding with some shallow blind windows. The south chamber is not fully carved, and its ceiling is rather like an unfinished groin vault, though it was possibly intended to be hewn into a dome. This lack of consistency in the eastern chambers leads one to suspect they were only roughly hewn in their first phase to expedite altar consecration with the side chambers finished in a later campaign. Due to the fineness of the

34 Finster 1982, 232–241.

apse, one may think it integral to the church's first phase, with a conch in place of a dome to fit the artistic and cultural inclinations of the region it joined or perhaps to not compromise the stability of the sandstone overlay. The metre high *templon* screen of mitred wood, now in storage (Fig. 15), is also a Təgrayan embellishment.[35] Seemingly absent from Lasta churches (aside from the anomalous posts found at the church of ƎmäkinaMaryam), since Late Antiquity, Təgrayan churches used low wooden *templon* screens usually in conjunction with a step to define the choir and apse from the main vessel of the church.[36] While Emmanuel Fritsch has argued that this liturgical furnishing vanished from churches constructed in Təgray after the twelfth century, the examples found at G^{w}aḥgot and *in situ* at Qi^{ʿ}at (discussed below) seem to show this liturgical modification was longer-lived in the north than presupposed.[37] It is presumed that, as the Zag^{w}e were being innovative in the central highlands, in copying the plan of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos in Təgray, they also had to accommodate the church plan to local liturgical conditions, namely in terms of the conservative use of a wooden screen.[38] Relative decentralization in terms of style and liturgical practice should be taken for granted in Ethiopia even in a hewn building that otherwise so clearly emulates a free-standing prototype.

While no coherent system of measurement is apparent in Ethiopian churches, either in the past or today regarding hewn constructions, space must have been taken into account along with the ground plan in order to render G^{w}aḥgot a copy of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos with such exactitude. The Ethiopian cubit, as outlined in hagiographies, seems to have been variable, rooted in individual masons' arm lengths.[39] From the rendezvous point at

35 Slot-marks on the screen in addition to its large-scale illustrate its former use as a ∏-shaped *templon* otherwise found in early medieval churches in Təgray. Remains of a broken portable altar I also located in the storage cell.

36 Lepage 1972, 78–89.

37 Fritsch 2008, 72.

38 Though postholes have not been located in the east end of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, the pavement has not yet been archaeologically investigated. If the current floor was the product of a second building phase, it may be that this church too formerly had a chancel arrangement. Indeed, Michael Gervers has highlighted the fact that the frames and embellishments on several of the windows of the church appear to have been dismantled from the coffers and transennae of a chancel screen, Gervers 2016, 73, 89. This is deserving of further investigation as the channelled frames of those windows, along with the ornamentation of the slabs, closely resemble marquetry of the (twelfth-century) screens still *in situ* at Mika^{ʾ}el Amba.

39 Pankhurst 1969, 32–41.

Maryam Nazret, it is likely that builders, hired from Lasta possibly along with some Egyptian ecclesiastics, advised the hewing of Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus shortly after Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos's construction. In the absence of schematics or ground plans, casual measurements based on forearm length were likely used and thereby informed the spatial plan of the church, as it remained fresh in the memories of the builders. The slight differences in measurement between the churches are easily explained, as the masons themselves differed in their relative heights and thereby their forearm lengths.

Gʷaḥgot, therefore, is remarkable for its fidelity to Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos both in terms of its schematic form and articulation and is likely emblematic of the renown of both royal and free-standing constructions in the Zagʷe kingdom. Gʷaḥgot, overlooking a lush valley area with ample water resources, was probably built to project Zagʷe authority over a nearby population centre or fiefdom in the north.[40]

Another 'northern' Zagʷe production may be Maryam Qiᶜat, a rarely visited church in the same cluster as Gʷaḥgot, though it was constructed in at least two phases (my estimation, see Fig. 16).[41] The church is a three-aisled basilica, the main vessel measuring some 8.5 m long and 7 m wide with two altars visible. This first phase I date to the thirteenth-century timeframe and, possibly, the same campaign as at Gʷaḥgot. While today the church is of a hall type with multiple, surbased domes crowning its bays, all with apexes between 5.9–6.9 m in height, there is a suture above the dado level showing a possible raise in ceiling height. Presumably, the aisles were originally lower to create spatial hierarchy with the nave (Fig. 17). The church has the same general liturgical layout as the former examples, and is notable for its inclusion of a flying chancel arch, most likely the result of a considerable rise in ceiling height in its second phase (Figs. 16 and 18). Maryam Qiᶜat's painted programme, found in fragmentary condition on the first phase portions of the north wall and several pillars, is painted in red, yellow, and pink and the saints are depicted in an Egyptianizing painting style similar to those from Maryam Qorqor's first painting phase (Fig. 19).

Like Gʷaḥgot, Maryam Qiᶜat does not have a bema, but retains a ∏-shaped *templon*, which consists of coffered parapet slabs between mitred

40 ''Addigrat', *EAe*, I (2003), 78b–79b (Tsegay Berhe G. Libanos).

41 The church is mentioned in these three publications: Lepage and Mercier 2005, 126–129; Lepage and Mercier 2006, 41–42; Plant 1985, 188. Lepage and Mercier do not distinguish phases but also think that the church is from the same general period as Maryam Qorqor.

frames and ball top posts and a porch with higher rail posts (Fig. 18).[42] The small ball tops used on Qiʿat's *templon* seem to be indicative of this period's screens, as they are identical to those at Gʷaḥgot but lack platforms. These are in marked contrast to the ball tops found in the screens of earlier churches, such as the 'pinecones' in Abrəha wäʾAṣbəḥa, and the banded bullet-shaped ball tops found in Mikaʾel Amba. Maryam Qiʿat also retains two wooden doors on its west end of a type unlike others found in Ethiopia (Fig. 20). These doors, while not identical, are made of mitred wood frames enclosing four panels, secured through iron cross-rails opened through a tenon join. The panels, however, are decorated with channelled spindles inset between the mitred frames. Oral tradition states that these were imported from Egypt, and, while the marquetry resembles those remaining from the period, the channelled decoration on the frames is also similar to the Ethiopian chancel at Mikaʾel Amba. The doors are also regularly greased with animal fat to maintain them, and, while Lepage and Mercier also considered them Egyptian imports, they thought the doors post-dated the church considerably.[43] These, together with another door (Fig. 21) that was taken to Rome in 1940 from the church of Gunaguna in contemporary Eritrea, are probably rare survivals of medieval Egyptian material culture in Ethiopia.[44] Imported wooden elements found there seem to be a by-product of close relations with Egypt and the associated trade routes in the Zagʷe period, and had particular use in spaces representing 'thresholds', such as doors, windows, and triumphal arches.[45] Indeed, the posthumously-written hagiography of Saint Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos describes the use of Egyptian windows at the eponymous church.[46] While this detail was likely a later embellishment, and the windows of local manufacture, it seems to evidence a general material paradigm between architectural membranes and luxury imports of the Zagʷe period.

[42] The presence of chancel screens in both Maryam Qiʿat and Gʷaḥgot challenges the argument made by Fritsch and Gervers that these screens were phased out in the thirteenth century. Fritsch 2008, 72; Gervers 2014, 30–31.

[43] Interview with the parish priest at Maryam Qiʿat, 8 June 2018; Lepage and Mercier consider the spindles to be a Jesuit product (Lepage and Mercier 2005, 129). For *comparanda* see, for example, Pauty 1931; Bloom 2008. See also in Yemen, Bonnenfant and Bonnenfant 1987.

[44] Mordini 1940; Godet 1980–1982, 92–93.

[45] See, for example, the Indian *spolia* used in Mädḫane ʿAläm in Lasta, Mercier and Lepage 2012, 314–317; see also Monti della Corte 1940, 161.

[46] Marrassini 1995, 90.

The church of Maryam Qorqor, in Gärᶜalta, one of the best known churches in Təgray, was dated by the French team working there to the thirteenth century due to its decorative programme and liturgical layout, and may also be a 'northern' Zagʷe production.[47] This monastery church, which is set 400 m up from the surrounding countryside on a mountain ridge, is a popular destination for tourists as the difficult ascent is repaid by the large painted programme inscribed on its walls (Fig. 22).[48] While notable for its murals, which are of a contemporaneous Egyptianizing style to that found in Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, it is also important for its size, as the three-aisled church is approximately 18 m long, with two domes on its nave, like Maryam Qiᶜat.[49]

The identical roof trusses and the near exact dimensions between Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos and Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus strongly suggest a link between the two churches (if not the same building campaign). Furthermore, the painting styles, which connect Gʷaḥgot, Qiᶜat, and Qorqor, may begin to illuminate an extensive building programme undertaken by the Zagʷe in Təgray. Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, made of precious wood and lavishly adorned, must have been a site of great renown in thirteenth-century Ethiopia. Like the Holy Land sites invoked in Lalibäla's churches, it is no surprise that copies of such an expensive and prestigious free-standing church in medieval Ethiopia would exist elsewhere in Zagʷe domains using cheaper materials. While effectively hewn as a place of worship, in replicating the architectural form of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, seemingly a royal foundation made of expensive materials, Gʷaḥgot Iyäsus was effectively a projection of Zagʷe power towards Ethiopia's north. Indeed, given the close relations between the central highlands (Lasta) and Təgray gleaned from Zagʷe-era documents, as well as the international relations enjoyed by the dynasty, namely with Egypt, it may very well be that several churches in Təgray, outside the ᶜAddigrat cluster and Maryam Qorqor, may also be part of this enigmatic dynasty's productions.

[47] A large team, including an architect, conservator, chemist, and art historian has been working on the site since 2016, led by Claire Bosc-Tiessé; Bolman 2002, 90, 114, 116; Lepage and Mercier likewise dated the church to the thirteenth century in their relative chronology on stylistic grounds and similarities to the Lalibäla churches, Lepage and Mercier 2006, 30–32.

[48] Lepage 1990, 809–817, esp. Fig. 6.

[49] Lepage and Mercier 2005, 112–125.

Appendix: Selection of Images

Fig. 1 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, viewed from the north, Lasta, Ethiopia (photograph by the author, 2018).

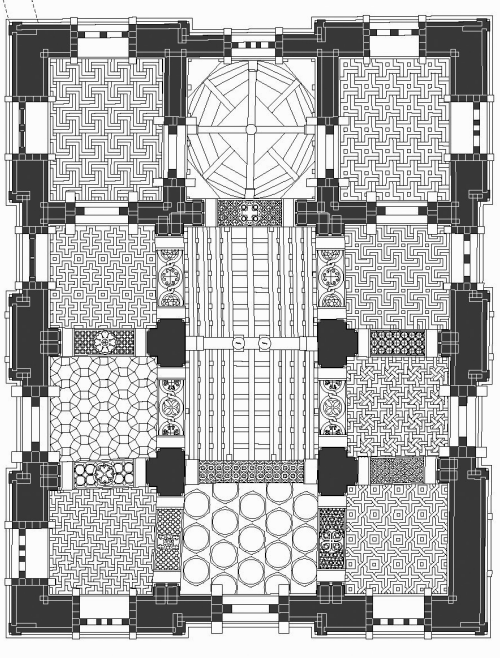

Fig. 2 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, ground-plan, after Thiessen 2010, 17.

Fig. 3 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, nave ceiling viewed west to east (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 4 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, return aisle, central bay (photograph by the author, 2018).

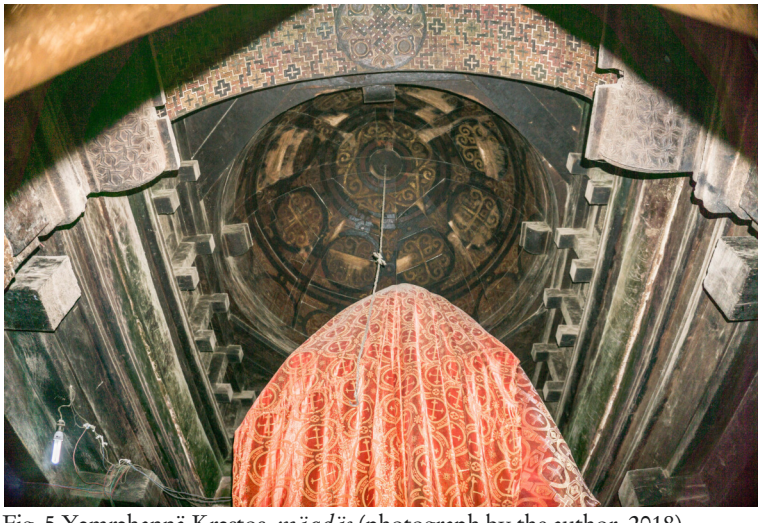

Fig. 5 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, *mäqdäs* (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 6 Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, nave and north aisle (note the reading platform; photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 7 Crypt of the church of Saint George, ceiling panel, al-Fusṭāṭ, Cairo, Egypt (photograph by the author, 2019).

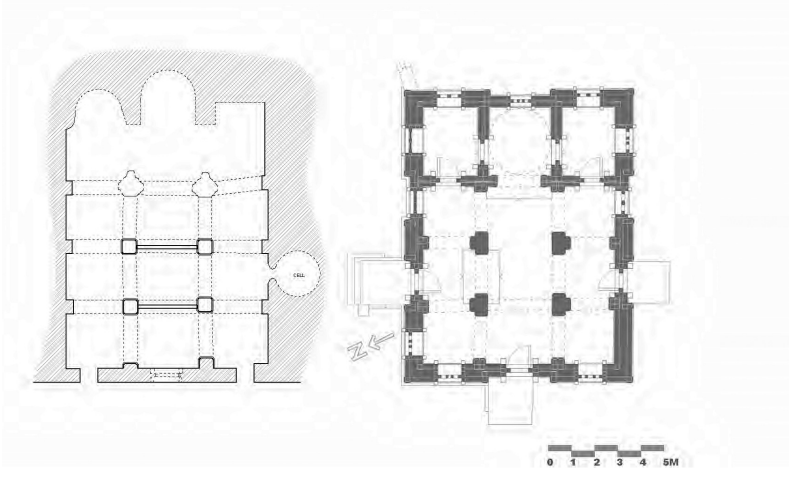

Fig. 8 Scaled plans: Gʷaḫgot Iyäsus (l) by the author and Binxin Xie; Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos (r) after Thiessen as published in Gervers 2014, 58.

Fig. 9 G^{w}aḫgot Iyäsus, west wall, near ^{c}Addigrat, Təgray, Ethiopia (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 10 G^{w}aḫgot Iyäsus, main vessel, viewed south to north (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 11 G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, nave vault (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 12 G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, eastern passage, viewed from the south apse (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 13 G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, *mäqdäs* (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 14 G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, roof truss (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 15 G^{w}aḥgot Iyäsus, chancel, flanking the portal to the south storage room (photograph by the author, 2018).

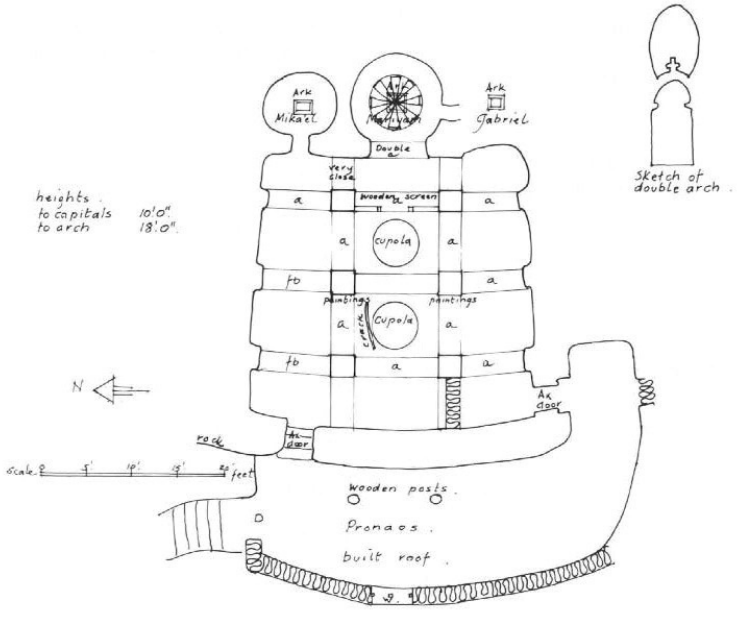

Fig. 16 Maryam Qi^{c}at, ground-plan, near ^{c}Addigrat, Təgray, after Plant 1985, 114.

Fig. 17 Maryam Qi^{c}at, nave, viewed west to east (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 18 Maryam Qiᶜat, east end, note the wooden chancel (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 19 Maryam Qiᶜat, north-east nave pier (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 20 Maryam Qiᶜat, south portal, 'Egyptian door' (photograph by the author, 2018).

Fig. 21 Door from the church of Gunaguna in Eritrea, photograph courtesy of the Archivio di Stato in Rome.

Fig. 22 Maryam Qorqor, decorative blind arch with a mural of the Angel Raphael, north-west wall, Gärᶜalta, Təgray, Ethiopia (photograph by the author, 2016).

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Summary

Rulers of the short-lived Zag^{w}e dynasty have long been lauded for their role as builder-kings, producing several churches in the Lalibäla complex in Lasta in addition to the nearby church of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos. Despite some textual evidence linking this group to Təgray, scholars have not hitherto identified any particularly 'Zag^{w}e' buildings therein. This paper proposes that several rock-hewn churches near ^{c}Addigrat in Təgray may be the product of thirteenth-century Zag^{w}e church building. My hypothesis is anchored by my identification of the church of G^{w}aḫgot Iyäsus as a hewn copy of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos in both form and measurements. This church, which replicates the dimensions of this famous free-standing church almost exactly, also has wood elements within that were seemingly imported from Lasta. Furthermore, I connect the painted decorations to other churches in the cluster: Maryam Qi^{c}at and even Maryam Qorqor in Gär^{c}alta. By expanding our view of the Zag^{w}e dynasty towards Təgray, we may better understand this little-known period of Ethiopian history.