

Sonderdruck aus/Offprint from

AETHIOPICA

International Journal
of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies

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

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in cooperation with
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25 (2022)

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Vignette:

Gold coin of King Aphilas, early third century CE, as drawn by A. Luegmeyer after the coin in Rennau collection. Weight 2.48 grams, diameter 17 mm.

AETHIOPICA. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHIOPIAN AND ERITREAN STUDIES is an internationally refereed academic journal, edited at the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies and at the Department of African and Ethiopian Studies of the Asien-Afrika-Institut at Hamburg Universität, Alsterterrasse 1, 20354 Hamburg, Germany, Tel: +49 40-42838-7730/8380; email: *aethiopica.aai@uni-hamburg.de*.

The journal focuses on philology, linguistics, archaeology, history, cultural anthropology, religion, philosophy, literature, and manuscript studies with a regional emphasis on Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and related areas. The editors welcome contributions on relevant academic topics as well as on recent research in the respective field. Each issue of AETHIOPICA contains reviews of books which form a substantial section of the journal.

AETHIOPICA is published mainly in English. Articles in French, German, and Italian are also accepted for publication. An English summary for all articles in any language is provided.

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Publication of this journal is partially supported by the project Beta maṣāḥaft: Die Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung, funded by The Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities through a project of the Academy of Hamburg, and includes immediate Open Access.

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Printing and binding by Memminger MedienCentrum, Memmingen

Printed on permanent/durable paper

Printed in Germany

<https://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de/>

ISSN 1430-1938

eISSN 2194-4024

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Editorial

The present issue of AETHIOPICA is the twenty-fifth since the journal's founding in 1998. It is also the thirteenth issue I have worked on as editor-in-chief, one more than that of founder Siegbert Uhlig. The present time, however, does not lend itself to celebrations of any sort. The global political crisis and the situation in the Horn of Africa are having a deep impact on the scholarly community, which appears divided and radicalized on opposite or increasingly diverging positions as never before. The growing influence of diaspora communities is at times marked by waves of resurgent nationalism. The challenge posed by main-stream policy in countries of established scholarly traditions gives less and less space to small fields—as is the case of Ethiopian and Eritrean studies. The consequent lack of resources triggers the fragmentation of the scholarly scene. New balances based on mutual legitimation and acknowledgement of a common scholarly method are not obvious. The consequence of this complex situation, which reflects global changes, is that scholarly and academic freedom can be put at risk. Of all priorities envisaged in the mission of AETHIOPICA, preservation of academic freedom along with scholarly quality has been, is, and will remain the top priority of the journal.

I regret that in the past, and still now, the lack of available qualified authors has prevented AETHIOPICA from duly commemorating distinct colleagues and researchers recently passed away who were more than deserving of an obituary. I would like to remember at least some of them here, by name, as a very modest tribute to their work and memory: Johannes Launhardt (1929–2019), Mesfin Wolde Mariam (1930–2020), Steffen Wenig (1934–2022), Girma Fisseha (1941–2020).

To end on a positive note, three colleagues active in Ethiopian and Eritrean studies have received important awards this year, and we would like to mention them here: Samantha Kelly (Professor of Medieval History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, also on our International Editorial Board), has won the Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2020, and the African Studies Review Prize for the Best Africa-focused Anthology or Edited Collection 2021, for her *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2020); Verena Krebs (Junior-Professorin für Mittelalterliche Kulturräume at Ruhr-Universität Bochum) has received the Dan David Prize for her *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); and Massimo Zaccaria (Professore Associato in Storia e Istituzioni dell'Africa at Università degli Studi di Pavia) has received the Giorgio Maria Sangiorgi award of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei 'per la Storia ed Etnologia dell'Africa'. To all of them—the warmest congratulations from AETHIOPICA!

Disputed Translations from
The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros (2015)
Reconsidered: Some Notes on Gə‘əz Philology

MICHAEL KLEINER, Göttingen

1 Introduction

In the fall of 2015, Wendy Laura Belcher and I published an annotated English translation of the *Gädlä Wälättä Pētros (GWP)*.¹ Already in the run-up to this publication, our work had begun to stir controversy in some Ethiopian Orthodox circles due to a series of university lectures given by Belcher in late 2014 and 2015 in the United States. In these lectures, she presented her personal views, independent from our translation, on potential allusions to same-sex desire in the *GWP*. Unsurprisingly, some members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwähədo Church (EOTC) were not happy with Belcher’s views and theses. Following her oral presentations, Belcher received many hostile emails and negative social media commentary, a formal rebuke in writing from an Ethiopian parish, and even two credible death threats. Committed to debating the issue nonetheless, in 2016 Belcher published a peer-reviewed journal article on the topic.²

Four years later, in the fall of 2020, Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, a senior lecturer at Curtin University in Australia, published a long (more than eighty pages), wide-ranging, and often vitriolic critique of our *GWP* translation in a special issue of the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture (JAAL)*.³ Previously, Belcher’s independent interpretations had prompted the mentioned adverse reactions. Now, Yirga accused us of jointly preparing the ground for these interpretations with faulty philology, through mistranslations of—as he saw it—a number of innocuous, non-erotic expressions in the *GWP*’s Gə‘əz in a sexualizing manner. Yirga seemed to regard these alleged errors as due partly to

¹ Belcher and Kleiner 2015. All chapter divisions and chapter titles refer to us, and are not original to the *GWP*.

² Belcher 2016.

³ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020. Formerly, the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture* carried the shorter title of *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages*. On this basis, it still uses for itself the siglum *JAAL*.

incompetence, but mostly springing from a conscious scheme of ours to distort and desacralize Wälättä Petros's *gädl*.⁴

I had no role in the first round of controversies, triggered by Belcher's lectures. Yirga's 2020 article altered things significantly, for unlike earlier critics not only did he attack Belcher's interpretations but claimed they were grounded in faulty and tendentious translations. In my collaboration with Belcher, I had been the one essentially responsible for translating from the Gə'əz. Subsequent to submitting my translation drafts, Belcher and I regularly discussed them in detail, with Belcher honing and refining my non-native English in the process.⁵ Against this background, I was directly challenged now.

Consequently, I wrote a rebuttal to Yirga's article reconsidering all the instances in which he accused us, and de facto primarily me, of sexualizing translation inadequacies. My article did not deal with Yirga's less central and less numerous philological criticisms of any other thematic thrust, nor with the non-philological issues he brought up. Subsequently, I contacted the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture* and asked them whether they would be prepared to publish my reaction. To its credit, *JAAL* agreed to this in principle. I then submitted my article for review, and *JAAL*, deeming it upheld scholarly standards, accepted it, slating it for publication. I was to expect merely 'some minor comments' at a later date.⁶

However, when *JAAL* contacted me again after a one-month hiatus, those 'minor comments' materialized as a qualitatively major request, namely, to excise any positive references to Belcher from the text.⁷ Effectively, this concerned two instances of my rejecting Yirga's allegations regarding Belcher's and my motivations, namely, that we harboured a negative attitude toward Ethiopian Orthodox culture and mores, and had therefore intentionally sexualized the *GWP* text in our translation. *JAAL* requested that in these short remarks regarding Belcher's and my shared appreciation of Orthodox Ethiopia and its heritage I refer strictly and only to myself, with absolutely no inclusion of Belcher—thereby leaving open the possibility that sinister motives had been behind her work on the *GWP*.⁸ However, after many years of intense collaboration with Belcher, I am certain that this was not the case. During all our common labours, I never sensed in Belcher the slightest touch of ill will toward Ethiopia general-

⁴ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 150, 152, 155, 156, 157, 162–163, 175, 176, and *passim*.

⁵ See Belcher and Kleiner 2015, xxiv–xxv for a full description of our procedure.

⁶ Email from *JAAL*, 27 December 2020.

⁷ Email from *JAAL*, 27 January 2021.

⁸ At the same time, *JAAL* had no problem with those parts of my article where I made it clear that I do not share Belcher's published *GWP* interpretations.

ly, or its Orthodox Christian heritage specifically. Although Belcher herself was prepared to have me purge my article of all positive references to her, I was not. Firstly, *JAAL*'s demand was substantively unwarranted. Secondly, it was unfair, for the journal had permitted Yirga to speculate—at length—on Belcher's and my mindset in his 2020 article. In view of all this, it seemed legitimate, even necessary, to react, at least in short, to this aspect of Yirga's charges as well. Explaining my views in detail, I asked *JAAL* to reconsider its request. However, the journal was not prepared to alter its stance. So, an impasse was reached, and my text could not be published in the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture*.

2 Alleged Mistakes, Alleged Motives

Leaving aside Yirga's ad hominem accusations,⁹ his actual criticism of our work boils down to two things. First, there are his allegations of a string of tendentious mistranslations on our part, mostly, but not exclusively of a sexualizing nature. Even though he 'concedes' plain incompetence to be their occasional possible cause,¹⁰ his dominant tendency is to ascribe them, especially the 'sexualizing' ones, to—thus Yirga's second charge—our alleged ill will toward the moral and cultural heritage of Orthodox Ethiopia. By repeatedly distorting the *GWP* text in our translation, he claims, we executed a premeditated and malevolent plan to besmirch that heritage.

Facts can be argued. But how can one hope to convince a counterpart who ascribes sinister motives to you of your sincerity and untainted intentions? Any such attempt appears as an exercise in futility, doomed to fail from the outset. So, I will merely state here, once and for all, that Belcher and I never harboured any long-term, nefarious master plan to skew the *GWP* translation in any direction whatsoever. Rather, we approached the *GWP* with an open mind, prepared to go wherever its text would take us, with only the intention of producing the best and most adequate translation of which we were capable. Obviously, this does not exclude the occasional translation mistake, to which almost nobody can claim immunity. But that is a different thing altogether from conscious, surreptitious distortion. Furthermore, Belcher and I went to extraordinary lengths to be transparent about what we did: we put brackets around any English words added for stylistic reasons that have no direct equivalent in the Gə'əz text, and provided hundreds of notes documenting original Gə'əz wording together with its literal translation where we felt compelled to deviate from such a literal translation

⁹ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 135, 168, 179, 206, 209.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150, 209.

in the body of our text. This transparency in and of itself counters any claim we intended to stealthily spin and twist the text.

Concerning Yirga's philological criticisms, the following pages will specifically address those among them that allege unwarranted sexualizations, as well as one related issue that, in Yirga's view, also amounts to an attempt on our part to desacralize the *GWP*, and is thereby similar to the 'sexualizations'. This rejoinder is not, however, intended as a comprehensive counter-critique of Yirga's extensive and multifaceted article, and so I will limit myself to this. Such a self-imposed limitation is, however, not arbitrary. Rather, it finds its justification in the quantitative preponderance of the 'sexualization criticisms' in the philological parts of Yirga's text, as well as in their qualitative centrality, for Yirga bases his more far-reaching, non-philological accusations against Belcher and me mainly upon them. Therefore, if Yirga's allegations of sexualizing translation distortions on our part are refuted, his broader charges also collapse.

3 Yirga's Criticisms and Their Refutations

3.1 'Biography'

The first instance to address is the one, signaled above, that does not concern translation, but rather a free wording choice of our own. Yirga criticizes our title and subtitle wording, writing,

The curious nature of *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* starts from the title. The use of the words 'struggle' and 'biography' both desacralizes and secularizes the spiritual subject of the book. The word 'biography' secularizes the text to make it responsive to non-spiritual themes.¹¹

Yet Yirga soon indicates that he is, in fact, fine with translating *gädl*—a semantically rich and culturally specifically Ethiopian term—as 'struggle'.¹² How could he not, given that *Aläqa Kidanä Wäld Kəfle* lets *təgəl* ('struggle', 'fight') head the list of Amharic translations for *Gə'əz gädl* in his famous *Gə'əz–Amharic dictionary*?¹³ As it turns out, Yirga's initial objection to our 'struggle' was merely motivated by his unhappiness with a nuance of interpretation Belcher brought to it in her 2016 article.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹² *Ibid.*, 152–153.

¹³ *Kidanä Wäld Kəfle 1955–1956*.

¹⁴ Belcher 2016, 34; Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 152–153.

As to the subtitle's 'biography', we acknowledge that it is legitimate to wonder whether 'hagiography' might have been a better choice. Yirga is right that the first term is secular and the second religious. Yet our feeling was that 'hagiography' was an unfamiliar term to the general English-speaking public—an important consideration given that our book is not exclusively intended for a scholarly audience (especially the 2018 paperback edition, already envisaged in 2015). Also, 'hagiography' might mislead some potential readers only superficially familiar with the term to believe that the *GWP* is a largely fictional text, and Wälättä Pēṭros no historical, and historically important, character. We categorically wanted to preclude such misunderstandings from the outset, as the *GWP*, while definitely a spiritual text, is also a historical one. To say such is not to desacralize it.

To make his argument, Yirga completely ignores Belcher's detailed discussion of the term and genre of *gädl* in her introduction to our *GWP* translation.¹⁵ There, Belcher indicates that she has strong sympathies for 'hagiobiography' as the substantively best translation of *gädl* when referring to the literary genre. In the end, however, we decided that 'hagiobiography' was too cumbersome and unappealing. Therefore, we opted for 'biography'—but in the subtitle only, whereas in the main title 'life and struggles' reflects Gə'əz *gädl*. We still feel that the use of all three terms, in their respective positions, does the most justice to the complexities of the *GWP*.

3.2 'Companion'

In the early stages of her spiritual journey, shortly after leaving her husband for good but long before becoming a revered founder and leader of monastic communities, Wälättä Pēṭros lived as a solitary nun, only attended to by a newly found maidservant.¹⁶ In this situation, a certain *Abba* Şəge Haymanot counselled her that she should not live alone (the maidservant does not count in this context), but rather together with another woman of comparable social status who had also embarked on the path of spiritual life. Ultimately, that led to Wälättä Pēṭros and Əḥətä Krəstos being introduced to each other.¹⁷ At their first encounter, the two women immediately took a strong liking to each other, with Əḥətä Krəstos in due course becoming Wälättä Pēṭros's closest and most trusted follower, and even succeeding her as leader of her community after Wälättä Pēṭros's death.

¹⁵ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109–113, Chapters 10 and 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 113–119, Chapters 12 and 13.

When *Abba Şəge* Haymanot first advised Wälättä Pētros against the solitary life, he suggested, couched gently in question form, that she should not live *zä`ənbälä biş*. We translated this as ‘without a companion’.¹⁸ Yirga takes umbrage with this translation of *biş* as ‘companion’, categorically asserting that it ‘means “friend” or “neighbor”, not “companion”’.¹⁹ He goes on to hypothesize that we opted for ‘companion’ because in English that term can be used, he says, with reference not only to ‘a platonic relationship, but it also relates to a sexual or romantic partner’.²⁰ Our translation was thus intended, Yirga claims, to lay the groundwork for Belcher’s later interpretations of Wälättä Pētros’s and Ǝḥətä Krəstos’s relationship as possibly having a romantic component (never acted upon though, as Belcher has always insisted).

Yet the dictionaries do not restrict the meaning of *biş* to ‘friend’ or ‘neighbour’. Wolf Leslau’s authoritative 1987 *Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez* (hereafter *LComp*), for instance, lists the following translation options for this lexeme: ‘single, individual, a certain, piece, some, friend, fellow, companion, comrade, equal, neighbor, intimate’.²¹

Some of these options are obviously not suited for the context under discussion. From among those applicable in principle—viz. some(one), friend, fellow, companion, comrade, intimate—did we opt for the one with the greatest potential for an eroticizing interpretation, that is, ‘intimate’? No. Nor did we stray from the dictionary to use a term like ‘partner’. As for the other options, ‘some(one)’ comes across as too anodyne, while ‘fellow’ and ‘comrade’ seem more suited to a masculine than to a feminine context. In addition, ‘comrade’ has strong overtones of communist jargon.

That leaves us with ‘friend’ and ‘companion’, with ‘friend’ happening to be, in fact, Yirga’s favoured option. We accept that ‘friend’ is an arguable alternative to ‘companion’. But does it really signal a less close relationship than ‘companion’ does, and above all one whose semantics are totally insulated against erotic(izing) undertones? No. To the contrary, we felt, and still feel, that ‘companion’ is the more detached term. Also, while Yirga is not wrong saying that in contemporary English ‘companion’ can also be used with reference to a sexual or romantic partner, ‘friend’ can be likewise. Simultaneously though, it has to be insisted that neither term holds the erotic interpretations as the default implication.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Leslau 1987, 116.

Ultimately, we opted for ‘companion’ over ‘friend’ because the former term is more strongly suggestive not only of an affectionate relationship, but also of an enduring commitment to each other—even in adversity—that is underpinned by of a commonality of outlook and purpose. The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* for instance characterizes a companion, in its primary definition of the term, as ‘a person [...] with whom one spends a lot of time or with whom one travels’, and elaborates by adding ‘a person who shares the experiences of another, especially when these are unpleasant’, and ‘a person with similar tastes and interests to one’s own and with whom one has an enjoyable and friendly relationship’.²² These descriptions of what constitutes a companion appear as eminently applicable to Wälättä Pēṭros’s and Ǝḥətä Krəstos’s relationship, which was built on personal affection as well as on a lifelong collaboration in the service of monastic goals. Against this background, we regarded ‘companion’ as the best choice for translating the *biṣ* under discussion.

3.3 ‘Kiss of Greeting’

Remaining within the context of the same episode relating to Wälättä Pēṭros’s and Ǝḥətä Krəstos’s initial encounter, Yirga raises his next objection. The *GWP* tells us that when the two new and hitherto solitary nuns first met each other, their mutual affection was instantaneous. The crucial Gə‘əz phrase reads *täsäwṭä fəqr wəstā ləbbä kəl’ehon fəqr aḥatti ḥabä aḥatti wätä’aməḥa bābäynatihon*. We translated this as ‘love was infused into both their hearts, love for one another, and [approaching,] they exchanged the kiss of greeting’.²³

Yirga takes exception, first, to our ‘they exchanged the kiss of greeting’ for Gə‘əz *tä’aməḥa bābäynatihon* and, second, to our ‘was infused’ for *täsäwṭä*.²⁴

Yirga opens his argument regarding ‘exchanging the kiss of greeting’ by saying that since the verb in question is *tä’aməḥa*—which he claims means exclusively ‘to greet by bowing the head’²⁵—and not *täsa’amä* (‘to kiss each other’), there is no lexical rationale for having the noun ‘kiss’ appear in our translation. From his premise that only *täsa’amä* but not *tä’aməḥa* can serve to express any notion of kissing, he then infers that we, as deliberately as baselessly, inserted ‘kiss’ in order to romanticize Wälättä Pēṭros’s and Ǝḥətä Krəstos’s encounter from the very outset. He further indicates, factually correctly, that we uniformly used (contextually adapted) variants of ‘exchanging the kiss of greeting’ whenever the *GWP* uses the verbs *tä’aməḥa* or *tä’amməḥa* regarding interactions

²² ‘companion, 1’, Pearsall and Hanks 1998, 372c.

²³ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 115.

²⁴ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 157–159.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

between Wälättä Pēṭros and Ǝḥətä Krəstos. In so doing, we merely strove for consistency. Yirga, however, apparently regards this as a systematized effort on our part to hammer home the alleged romanticization.

Yirga may well have had a point if the ^ʾ*-m-ḥ* root of *tä'aməḥa* were really devoid of any notion of kissing. This, however, is not the case. For *amməḥa*, the most basic verb formed from this root, *LComp* offers the following translations: 'kiss, embrace, greet, salute, worship, revere, pay respect to, offer a gift out of respect'.²⁶ Not coincidentally, '[to] kiss' even appears first here. For the *GWP*'s *tä'aməḥa*, the derived verbal stem specifically under discussion, *LComp* goes on to give the options of 'exchange salutations, kiss in greeting, salute, hail, show respect',²⁷ and for the noun *amməḥa* offers the choices 'kiss, salute, salutation, greetings, gift offered out of respect, present'.²⁸ As these examples show, the notion of kissing is very much present in the ^ʾ*-m-ḥ* root, as one of its primary semantic dimensions, together with 'greeting', 'saluting'. It even makes sense to assume that 'kissing' is the primary meaning of the ^ʾ*-m-ḥ* root, from which 'greeting', 'saluting' was subsequently derived, as greeting was ever so often accompanied by gestural (cheek) kissing in the Mediterranean world of antiquity, a cultural sphere that strongly influenced Christian Ethiopian culture, and hence Gə'əz, in their early phases.²⁹

Yirga argues, though, that in today's Gə'əz as used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwähədo Church liturgy, the deacon at some point tells the faithful, '*tä'aməḥu bābäyinatikəmu*' (an imperative *mutatis mutandis* fully parallel with the *GWP*'s indicative *tä'aməḥa bābäyinatihon*), which is commonly understood as 'greet one another!'—but only by bowing the head, without any implication of physical contact, let alone kissing (even if only on the cheek) between the believers. In view of this testimony of current usage, is *LComp* simply wrong when it includes, even privileges, 'kissing' within the range of ^ʾ*-m-ḥ* meanings?³⁰

Fortunately, there is historical linguistic evidence available that allows us to discuss the semantic issue at hand beyond merely the level of competing claims. That evidence is documented in August Dillmann's 1865 Gə'əz–Latin dictionary *Lexicon linguae aethiopicae* (hereafter *DLex*)³¹ and ultimately takes us back to the Gə'əz New Testament which has been translated, as decades of research

²⁶ Leslau 1987, 23b.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Incidentally, Leslau regards the ^ʾ*-m-ḥ* root as originating in Cushitic, where it expresses the notion of 'kissing' in various Agāw languages; also, there is the Harari cognate *mah bāya*, 'to kiss' (Leslau 1987, 23b–24a).

³⁰ Leslau 1987, 23b.

³¹ Dillmann 1865, reprinted 1955 and 1970.

have shown, from Greek templates. Unlike *LComp*, which gives its English translations of Gəʻəz lexemes without furnishing proof texts, the monumental *DLex* regularly underpins its translations with illustrative quotes from, and even more references to, a plethora of Gəʻəz writings.

Dillmann's first, and therefore default, translations for its three most common verbal and nominal derivatives (cf. above), namely, *amməha* (verb), *tä'aməha* (verb), and *amməha* (noun), are *osculari* ('to kiss'), *osculari inter se* ('to kiss each other'), and *osculatio, osculum* ('kissing', 'kiss', noun), respectively.³²

As evidence for each of those meanings, Dillmann goes on to identify a number of instances where the respective terms appear in original Gəʻəz texts or in Gəʻəz translations, and even provides some direct quotations. Below, I will cite three examples taken from that *DLex* material. All of them are translations from the Greek of the New Testament, and in all three cases, Greek φίλημα ('kiss', noun) was translated into Gəʻəz as *amməha*. This demonstrates incontrovertibly that in living Gəʻəz the '-*m-h*' root did indeed comprise the notion of 'kissing'.

1) Toward the end of his Letter to the Romans (verse 16:16), St Paul enjoins the Christians of the imperial capital to greet one another ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ, 'with the holy kiss'. Greek φίλημα became *amməha* in the Gəʻəz New Testament.

2) A verbatim identical injunction recurs in 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and again Greek φίλημα resulted in Gəʻəz *amməha*.

3) Slightly different wording appears in 1 Peter 5:14. There, the letter's author admonishes the faithful to greet each other ἐν φιλήματι ἀγάπης, 'with the kiss of brotherly love'.³³ What remains unchanged though is the Gəʻəz New Testament reflecting also this φίλημα with *amməha*.

In view of this evidence, it is no longer questionable that 'kissing' was the foremost notion expressed by the root '-*m-h*' in living Gəʻəz. Of course, the '-*m-h*' root did not signal erotic kissing (rather, this is the semantic domain of the *s-*'-*m*' root) but social, ritualized kissing on the cheek as a part of affectionate greeting. St Paul as well as the author of 1 Peter disambiguated Greek φίλημα by adding the qualifiers 'holy' (ἅγιον) and 'of brotherly love' (ἀγάπης). Analogously, we made it clear that the kisses exchanged between Wälättä Pētros and Ǝḥətä Krəstos were specifically 'kisses of greeting' and thus had no erotic dimension.

³² Dillmann 1865, cols 734–735.

³³ As the letter's name indicates, tradition regarded St Peter as its author. However, modern New Testament scholarship has shown this to be unlikely. Therefore, from this point neutral language is used when referring to this letter's composer.

Structurally, we adopted a disambiguating strategy analogous to those of the cited apostolic letters. What was good enough for their authors should be good enough for us, should it not?

In addition, the ancient Gə'əz translation of *The Apostolic Tradition* as found already in the first millennium *Aksumite Collection* (which was, in the second millennium, reworked and expanded to form the *Senodos*) contains a phrase using *tä'aməha* in the sense of 'to kiss each other', as the added accusative *afä*, '[on] the mouth', at its end makes clear beyond all doubt. That phrase reads *wä'abiyä krəstiyan yät'aməhu 'əd məslä 'ədäw wä'anəst məslä anəst yät'aməh afä*, 'the full Christians (viz. as opposed to the catechumens) shall kiss each other (viz. at the end of their communal prayer), the men with the men and the women with the women; the mutual kissing shall be [on] the mouth'.³⁴

As to Yirga's remark that in today's liturgical use *tä'aməha* means 'to greet each other' (i.e. by bowing the head) only, without any notion of kissing being present, in light of the above adduced evidence this must now be regarded as a narrowing modern usage at odds with the original and traditional usage of the '-m-h' root generally, and the verb *tä'aməha* specifically. Therefore, it must not be projected back to the seventeenth-century *GWP*.

Finally, at one instance Yirga, unwittingly, even supports our argument regarding the social acceptability of ritualized mutual kissing on the cheeks in affectionate greetings, even between relative strangers, in Orthodox Ethiopian culture up to the present day, by writing that '[t]he statement that Ethiopians do not kiss strangers in greeting is untrue'.³⁵

With regard to our translation of *täsəwṭä* [...] *wəstä* as 'was infused into', Yirga claims that it 'suggest[s] a sudden attraction [between Wälättä Petros and Əḥətä Krəstos] upon seeing each other's bodies'.³⁶ Yirga alleges that his preferred alternative, 'was poured out into', would not suggest this because it is, according to him, not only a more default translation of *täsəwṭä* but also more evocative of God pouring out his Holy Spirit or other blessings into the hearts and minds of the faithful, and of similar instances from the Christian literary heritage.

Firstly, I fail to see how the use of 'to infuse' can possibly 'suggest a sudden attraction [between Wälättä Petros and Əḥətä Krəstos] upon seeing each other's bodies'. Secondly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* not only defines 'to infuse' as 'to introduce as by pouring', it even adds 'Used spec. of the work of God in the

³⁴ Bausi 2011, 40–41. I am indebted to Prof. Bausi for alerting me to this instance. The translation of the cited Gə'əz phrase is mine.

³⁵ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 158; here and subsequently, bracketed insertions in Yirga quotes are mine.

imparting of grace'.³⁷ So, obviously 'to infuse' not only carries no erotic overtones, it even appears as especially suited for spiritual contexts like the one under discussion. Tellingly, Yirga does not attempt to back up his specious claim with any philological argument. We acknowledge that 'to be poured out into' may be a more default translation for *täsäwṭä wästä* than our—lexically fully legitimate—'to be infused into'. Yet by the same token, it is a more pedestrian one. Therefore, as the more elegant and at the same time more spiritually evocative translation choice, 'to be infused into' seemed better suited to highlight the joy of Wälättä Pēṭros's and Ǝḥtā Krəstos's momentous initial encounter.

3.4 'To Be Lustful'

The episode of the 'lustful nuns'³⁸ is the one that sparked the most controversy in previous debates about eroticism and sexuality in the *GWP*. Yirga too devotes many pages of his article to it,³⁹ in the process rehashing some points made before by others (but refining them here and there) as well as articulating fresh criticisms. Below, I will, for clarity's sake from the outset, state first my views on the content of the pertinent scene, and then go on to discuss the underlying philology, explaining how my substantive views flow from it.

I do not believe that the episode shows *Emmānä qəddəst* Wälättä Pēṭros as being sexually aroused herself. However, I do believe that the actions of the young nuns (*dānagəl*) that Wälättä Pēṭros happened to witness, and that angered her deeply, were erotically charged, and not just innocent girlish fun and horseplay.

Regarding Wälättä Pēṭros herself, the text leaves us in no doubt that she reacted with intense emotion to the episode she accidentally witnessed: she was enraged by it. The text does not, however, present her as being aroused herself by what she saw.⁴⁰ The crucial Gə'əz phrase here, spoken by Wälättä Pēṭros, is *näddä ləbbəyā*, which we translated, quite literally, as 'my heart caught fire'. While we were working on this passage, it never occurred to me, given the centrality of Wälättä Pēṭros's punitive anger in the episode as a whole, that this English translation might be construed in the sense of 'my heart caught fire *with arousal*'. Therefore, I did not even think of suggesting the insertion of a clarify-

³⁷ 'infuse, 2.a', *Oxford English Dictionary* online (<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95683?rkey=N4Gxv0&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>).

³⁸ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 254–257, Chapter 86.

³⁹ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 162–176.

⁴⁰ I am aware that a former Ethiopian Orthodox monk who discussed the issue with Belcher, and Belcher in his wake (Belcher 2016, 33–34), have speculated that this might be the episode's veiled *sāmanna wärq* meaning. I do not share this view.

ing bracketed text—for instance, expanding the translation to ‘my heart caught fire [with anger]’—or of suggesting different, and perhaps less easily misconstruable, wording altogether (e.g. moving the metaphor of a heart catching fire to the notes and providing ‘I became enraged’ in the body of the text). I still believe that the translation as it currently stands is sufficiently clear and unequivocal due to the episode’s overall context. In retrospect though, upon witnessing so much unfortunate back and forth over this issue, I nonetheless regret not having suggested a potentially clarifying expansion or translation modification.

Concerning the *dānagəl* and the erotic nature of their actions, it is not only philology that militates for this view (see below), but also Wälättä Pētros’s extreme reaction to the incident. Wälättä Pētros was incensed by what the *dānagəl* did, and relieved by seeing them die and go to heaven soon thereafter. The *GWP* explains these sentiments as arising from Wälättä Pētros’s fear that, had they lived much longer, the *dānagəl* would have jeopardized their eternal salvation by repeating the same kind of sin. Wälättä Pētros’s reaction to what she saw that day makes certain it was a transgression of extreme gravity. It is inconceivable that mere girlish playfulness would have sufficed to stir her to both rage and desperate concern. Something far more serious must have come into play here. The sexual transgression that the relevant passage clearly speaks of—something that not even Yirga ultimately denies; he just advocates a metaphorical interpretation to get around this, to his mind, scandalous fact—is a much more plausible cause for Wälättä Pētros’s extreme reaction than mere girlish playfulness.⁴¹

The *GWP*’s crucial, philologically contested phrase about the *dānagəl* is a statement by Wälättä Pētros that reads as follows in nine of our manuscripts (including the earliest ones): *rə`ikəwwoṅ anä lādānagəl ənzä yətgaffə`a wäyətmar-rə`a bābäyinatihon aḥatti məslä aḥatti*. We translated this as, ‘I saw some young nuns pressing against each other and being lustful with each other, each with a female companion’.⁴² We complemented our translation with an extended footnote that documents both the majority reading *yətmarrə`a* (thus in nine manuscripts) as well as the *yətmarrəḥa* and ‘zero’ variants of the three other manuscripts at our disposal, with a discussion of their relative merits. We arrived at the conclusion that it made sense to follow the majority text. I regarded the minority variants as attempts to sanitize text seen as scandalous by some copyists, while Belcher speculated in her interpretive 2016 article that the variants resulted from a misunderstanding.⁴³

⁴¹ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 164–168.

⁴² Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 255.

⁴³ Belcher 2016, 33.

The extended note we added to our translation in and of itself rebuts any accusation that we surreptitiously intended to spin and twist the phrase under discussion toward sexualization. We were completely transparent about the variants and our views of them.

Yirga disputes several elements of our understanding and translation of the pertinent sentence. The central ‘word of contention here is ቤትግርግ’, as he correctly states, which ‘[Belcher and Kleiner] translate [...] as “being lustful with one another”’.⁴⁴ Initially, Yirga seems to dispute the lexical correctness of our translation, characterizing Belcher’s remark that ‘according to the Gə‘əz–English dictionaries’,⁴⁵ *m-r-* ‘(መርዐ) ‘is unequivocally sexual [in meaning]’ with the dismissive comment ‘Unfortunately, this is a sign of a poor understanding of the Ge‘ez language’.⁴⁶ Later, however, Yirga admits that the overt meaning of the *m-r-* ‘ root is indeed sexual.⁴⁷

Before conceding this though, Yirga first provides, on the basis of a *Māṣḥafā sāwasəw* (‘Grammar book’, but also comprising, as becomes clear from Yirga’s article, a Gə‘əz–Amharic dictionary) published by Täsfa Gäbrä Šəllase in 1963 EC,⁴⁸ four roots-cum-lexemes for መርክ and መርዐ, with four different meanings. Leaving aside semantics for a moment, it is noteworthy methodologically, especially in the context of a philological polemic like his, that Yirga fails to address with a single word his list’s Amharicizing levelling of the *alifl’ayn* distinction so important for Gə‘əz lexemes and their meanings. Be that as it may, with regard to substance Yirga then neglects to discuss seriously three of the four መርክ/መርዐ options he presents.⁴⁹ While we agree that those three are not relevant, one cannot help but wonder why Yirga brought them up in the first place. In any case he considers only one of the four to be relevant for the *GWP* phrase under discussion, namely, ‘መርክ (*sic* for መርዐ)—*merca* (*sic*), ተዳራ = to behave

⁴⁴ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 163.

⁴⁵ Belcher 2016, 33.

⁴⁶ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 164.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 164–166.

⁴⁸ Yirga does not provide the full publication data of this *Māṣḥafā sāwasəw* when quoting it (Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 164), nor does he include it in his article’s bibliography (*ibid.*, 210–216). I have been unable to establish the title’s full bibliographical data independently. On Täsfa Gäbrä Šəllase see ‘Täsfa Gäbrä Šəllase’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 869b–870a (Mersha Alehegne).

⁴⁹ The three options Yirga tacitly but correctly dismisses as contextually irrelevant are (1) ‘መርዓ [...] = wedding, or bride or bridegroom. The verb form is ተመርዐዎ [...] = to be wedded or to be beautified like a bride or groom’; (2) ‘መርክ [...] = to support an elderly person till he/she dies’; (3) ‘መርዓ [...] = a compound or gathering area’ (Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 164).

adulterously'.⁵⁰ That is, he is in perfect agreement with our understanding of the *m-r-* root at the given instance! It is gratifying to see Yirga thus acknowledge, albeit somewhat indirectly, that the overt and literal meaning of the *m-r-* root as used in the *GWP* phrase is indeed 'to engage in erotic or sexual behaviour'.

There is even more evidence for the erotic meaning of the *m-r-* root generally, and hence also of the *GWP*'s *tāmarə'a*. Once again, this evidence comes from *DLex*, in the form of quotes from historical Gə'əz texts that use the basic stem verb *mār'a* in clearly sexual contexts. Initially, *DLex* translates *mār'a* into Latin as '*lascivire, luxuriare, libidinosum esse, in spec. venerea voluptate frui, libidinem explere*' ('to revel, to be excessive, to be debauched, in particular: to enjoy sexual pleasures, to satisfy one's lust') and then goes on to illustrate the verb's usage with four quotes.⁵¹

In strong support of our translation, two of these quotes even refer to same-sex activity: first, *bə'əsit əntä tāmarrə' bābə'əsit* ('a woman who is lustful with a[nother] woman'; from the *Canon ancyrantum* no. 18);⁵² and, second, *bə'əsit əntä tāmarrə' bābə'əsit aw bə'əsi zäyämārrə' bābə'əsi* ('a woman who is lustful with a[nother] woman, or a man who is lustful with a[nother] man'; from the *Māšhafä qedär*).⁵³ In view of this evidence, there emerges the distinct possibility that the *m-r-* root is not only by default sexual in meaning but used preferentially when referring to same-sex activity.

But let us return to Yirga's article. As he concedes that the *m-r-* root used in the *GWP* refers to erotically or even sexually charged conduct, how can he still claim that our translation of *ənzä [...] yətmarrə'a* as 'being lustful with each other' is substantively incorrect? His magic wand for this is, it turns out, metaphorical interpretation. The *tāmarə'a* of the *GWP* must not, Yirga insists, be taken at face value or understood literally, as referring to sensual or lascivious behaviour. Rather, it should be seen, in accordance with the understanding of contemporary, but traditionally trained Ethiopian church scholars, as a drastic metaphor for 'showing any form of love or lust for this world'.⁵⁴

For the episode under discussion at least, I find this unconvincing. Why should text that makes perfect sense on the literal level—which Yirga concedes—be in need of a metaphorical interpretation? To insist it does requires

⁵⁰ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 164, citing Täsfa Gäbrä Šöllase's *Māšhafä säwawesew*, p. 150.

⁵¹ Dillmann 1865, col. 167.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, cols 167–168.

⁵⁴ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 165, 167–168. Belcher has informed me that in her own discussions with traditionally trained scholars she never heard this. Unfortunately, Yirga does not identify the traditionally trained scholars he consulted anywhere in his article.

adducing compelling evidence. Yirga fails to do this; he merely appeals to contemporary local authority. Yet with all the respect due to today's traditionally trained local scholars, in the absence of persuasive philological evidence an appeal to their authority remains insufficient for a text written in the seventeenth century.

Obviously, important segments within contemporary Ethiopian Orthodoxy are uncomfortable with the depiction of erotic transgression in a historical monastic context. While such bashful attitudes deserve respect, the resulting insistence on a metaphorical interpretation of a historical hagiography is suspect of being a relatively recent development; hence, it should not be uncritically projected back in time. The demonstrably historically inaccurate (i.e. narrowed and dephysicalized) understanding of *tä'aməḥa* in a modern Orthodox environment has already provided linguistic evidence for such a tendency. Yet in his days Gälawdewos, the *GWP* author, while disapproving of the *dānagəl's* erotically charged comportment, had no problem with characterizing their improper acts accurately and unabashedly. By contrast, to some present-day Orthodox believers and scholars alike, the mere thought of such a transgression occurring in a monastic environment is horrifying, and therefore apparently in need of being explained away by way of the *deus ex machina* 'metaphor'.

To sum up, Yirga has not brought forward compelling arguments against our non-metaphorical understanding and translation of *ənzä* [...] *yətmarrə'a* as 'being lustful with each other'. Our translation is lexically sound as well as contextually fitting, and therefore not in need of revision.

But *təmarə'a* is not the only verb in the *ənzä* clause under discussion. Rather, it is preceded by a parallel *tägafə'a*, with the full modal clause reading *ənzä yətgaffə'a wəyətmarrə'a bābäynatihon*. We translated *ənzä yətgaffə'a* [...] *bābäynatihon* as the *dānagəl* 'pressing against each other'. Yirga also considers this translation to be unduly eroticizing. Pointing to the cognate Amharic *gäffa* ('to push', 'to shove'), he argues that 'pushing one another' (viz. in innocent playfulness) would have been the correct translation.⁵⁵

Yet Yirga's reliance on an Amharic cognate misleads him here. While 'to push' is undoubtedly the primary meaning of Amharic *gäffa*, the same is not true for Gə'əz *gäf'a*. Rather, its primary meanings are 'to compress, to oppress, to repress, to press; to harm s.o., to do violence to s.o.', with 'to push' being only tertiary in importance.⁵⁶ Analogously, the same holds true for the *GWP's* reciprocal *tägafə'a*. Therefore, translating it as 'pressing against each other' is lexically legitimate. At the same time, I concede that this translation choice of ours

⁵⁵ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 169.

⁵⁶ Leslau 1987, 183b; see also Dillmann 1865, cols 1212–1213.

was informed by our well-founded erotic understanding of parallel *tämarə‘a*, and indeed of the depicted episode as a whole. So, while the lexical legitimacy of our translating *ənzä yätgaffə‘a* [...] *bäbäynatihon* as ‘pressing against each other’ cannot be in doubt, its situational legitimacy hinges on the legitimacy of translating *ənzä* [...] *yätmarrə‘a* *bäbäynatihon* as ‘being lustful with each other’. Since, as explained above, we see compelling reasons for this latter translation, and no need to revise it, likewise we wish to stand by our *tägafə‘a* translation.

Finally, Yirga takes umbrage with our ‘each with a female companion’ for the phrase’s closing *aḥatti məslä aḥatti*, claiming that it represents another unjustified sexualization of the text. He states that we should have translated the phrase as ‘one with another’ and omitted the word ‘companion’⁵⁷—which this time around, unlike with earlier *biṣ*, does not have any one-on-one counterpart in the Gə‘əz.

I have already explained above that, in our view, ‘companion’ does not have the sexualizing overtones Yirga ascribes to it. Beyond this, a look at the alternative Yirga suggests clarifies why we translated as we did. His ‘one with another’ is almost, but not fully literal for *aḥatti məslä aḥatti*. The fully literal translation would be ‘one with one’. This though would be unidiomatic and inelegant English. Yirga’s ‘one with another’ is better, but still unconvincing stylistically—standard English would be ‘with one another’. More importantly, the wording Yirga suggests fails to reflect the gendered character of Gə‘əz *aḥatti* (twice spelled out and not reduced to numerals in the manuscripts at our disposal), which refers specifically to a female ‘one’; the masculine equivalent would be *aḥadu*. So, Yirga’s proposal goes only halfway, failing to convey some important information of the Gə‘əz. With our ‘each with a female companion’ we strove, firstly, to produce a fully idiomatic and stylistically acceptable translation and, secondly, a gendered English text, thereby reflecting the gendered nature of Gə‘əz *aḥatti məslä aḥatti*. That was the rationale behind our ‘female companion’ (with ‘female’ being the important element here, while the ‘companion’ that Yirga focuses on was only added to provide the adjective with a noun referent), not some sinister sexualizing intention.

3.5 ‘To Talk and Flirt’

Furthermore, Yirga takes exception to our twice translating Gə‘əz *täzawə‘a* *bäbäynä* as ‘to talk and flirt with one another’ in Chapter 58.⁵⁸ He insists that mere ‘to speak with one another’ would have been the correct and sufficient

⁵⁷ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 168–169.

⁵⁸ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 204–205.

translation.⁵⁹ On this basis, he regards our ‘flirt’ as part of a ‘deliberate strategy’ to—no surprise by now—willfully sexualize the text, to ‘construct life in the monastery as a constant struggle with sexual desire’.⁶⁰ Later in the same paragraph, Yirga even claims that our *tāzawə‘a* translation amounts to ‘a clear manifestation of epistemic racism. Belcher has imposed a sexualized identity on the devout spirituality of black African nuns and monks’.⁶¹ Such sloganeering would be disgraceful even in the presence of a philological inaccuracy. In its absence—which I will demonstrate below—it becomes even less palatable.

The default verb for ‘to speak’ in Gə‘əz, without any connotations as to the manner of speaking, is *tānagärä*, not *tāzawə‘a*. By contrast, *tāzawə‘a* refers to specific ways of speaking. Accordingly, *LComp* offers the following translation options for it: ‘entertain oneself, enjoy oneself, confer, converse, meditate (talk to oneself), talk nonsense, talk idly, jest, be wanton, be petulant, play, be impudent’.⁶² For the associated verbal noun *tāzawə‘o*, *LComp* lists ‘idle talk, lewd talk, babbling’,⁶³ and for other derivatives from the same *z-w-*‘ root translations indicating light-hearted jesting, joking, or even lascivious talk also preponderate. Furthermore, in the comparative part of its *z-w-*‘ entry, *LComp* points to the Amharic root *w-z* as cognate (with *z-w* metathesis and the customary loss of ‘*ayn*).⁶⁴ This root produces such Amharic lexemes as *tāwazza* (‘to joke with one another’), *waza* (‘joke’, ‘mockery’, ‘banter’), *wazāñña* (‘one who talks light-heartedly, jokingly, frivolously’), and so on.⁶⁵

In light of this evidence, there can be no doubt that *tāzawə‘a* refers to exchanging light-hearted talk, on a spectrum between mere pleasantries and innocent joking on one end and all the way to openly lascivious back-and-forth on the other. By denying this specific semantic dimension of *tāzawə‘a*, Yirga seems guilty of precisely that ideological reading of the text of which he accuses us—albeit, naturally, with a different thrust.

Clearly, our hendiadys translation of *tāzawə‘a* as ‘to talk and flirt with each other’ is lexically legitimate and lies squarely within the verb’s semantic spectrum.⁶⁶ Within that spectrum, we did not even opt for a radical choice (e.g. ‘to talk lewdly’ or ‘to talk lasciviously with one another’).

⁵⁹ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 176.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Leslau 1987, 645a.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 645a–b.

⁶⁵ From Kane 1990, 1554a with my own expansions on the basis of Kane’s translations.

⁶⁶ In retrospect, ‘to speak flirtatiously with each other’ might have been stylistically preferable, but of course would not have made Yirga any happier.

However, should we nevertheless have chosen an entirely non-erotic translation, such as ‘speak jokingly with one another’ or ‘banter with one another’? Even though Yirga’s assertion that *tāzawə‘a* means merely a bland ‘to talk’ is demonstrably false, is he perhaps correct that the verb as used twice in our *GWP* Chapter 58 carries no overtones of erotic tension?

In attempting to answer this question, one must look at the narrative context. At the first occurrence of *tāzawə‘a* in Chapter 58,⁶⁷ the *GWP* does not merely report that Wälättä Pēṭros established a rule against *tāzawə‘o* between her monks and nuns but adds justification for this prohibition: Wälättä Pēṭros did not want to give Satan a chance to attack members of her community by sowing weeds in their hearts, weeds that might suffocate the seeds of righteousness trying to sprout in them. The legitimacy of Wälättä Pēṭros’s prohibition is then underscored with an alleged quote from the prestigious Council of Nicaea (325 CE): ‘More than anything else, the righteous ones and the monks must stay away from women. They must not respond to them, and definitely must not actively engage them in conversation’.⁶⁸ The given rationale and the added corroborative quote make it clear to any unbiased observer that for the *GWP* author *tāzawə‘a* connotes flirtatious, erotically charged talk.

At the second occurrence,⁶⁹ Wälättä Pēṭros expresses her desire to pierce jointly, with a single spear, any monk and nun pair of hers whom she finds engaged in *tāzawə‘o*. This shows that even if *tāzawə‘o* were not a transgression of an erotic character, Wälättä Pēṭros clearly considered it an extremely serious sin. This renders Yirga’s claim that *tāzawə‘a* refers to ordinary, unmarked talking patently absurd.

Wälättä Pēṭros goes on to say that she would not even be worried about such a killing of hers being considered a crime (viz. in God’s eyes). As justification, she refers to the biblical case—which evidently she regards as a precedent and parallel—of the Israelite High Priest Phinehas killing his fellow-countryman Zimri and the Midianite woman Cozbi, Zimri’s concubine, for entertaining a sexual relationship in defiance of Moses’s orders and in disrespect for the holiness of the nearby tent of the testimony (Numbers 25:6–8, 14). In view of this analogy, it becomes unambiguously clear that *tāzawə‘o* in the *GWP* passage under discussion is an erotically charged term.

To summarize, our translation of *tāzawə‘a* as ‘to talk and flirt with each other’ in the two discussed instances is not only lexically legitimate but contextual-

⁶⁷ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 204.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 205.

ly compelling. At the second instance, one could even argue that it would have been justified to translate it as ‘to talk lasciviously with each other’.

Contrary to Yirga’s allegations, we are far from construing ‘life in the monastery as a constant struggle with sexual desire’.⁷⁰ However, we do not subscribe to the idealized view that sexual temptation was entirely absent from Wälättä Pētros’s monastic communities either. ‘Ought’ and ‘is’ do not always coincide, and the adoption of spiritual ideals, such as chastity, does not *ipso facto* guarantee that they are always fully actualized. Since its very inception, the Christian monastic tradition everywhere, inside and outside Ethiopia, has been keenly aware, at all times, of the challenges posed by the flesh, by erotic and sexual temptation. Great monastic traditions and leaders have not denied this reality but in fact acknowledged it—while at the same time trying to master and transcend it. Wälättä Pētros stands firmly in this tradition, as the *GWP* shows in many instances Yirga chooses to ignore.⁷¹ As a result, he fails to appreciate the *GWP*’s realistic—as opposed to idealizing—spiritualism. Also, Yirga seems strangely forgetful of such arch-Christian concepts as temptation and sin, those ever-present dangers even for God-fearing believers. The entire Christian tradition, very much including that of Orthodox Ethiopia, teaches that they can only be overcome, but not be wished away, and that victory over them must never be taken for granted.

3.6 ‘Curviness’

Yirga also objects to our translation of *gəzäf* (literally, ‘thickness, stoutness, obesity; obstinacy’)⁷² as ‘curviness’ in the context of Wälättä Pētros severely castigating the young and beautiful nun Amätä Krəstos for reveling in her own attractive appearance.⁷³ Yirga accuses us, once again, of thereby eroticizing a scene that is allegedly devoid of such a dimension. Wälättä Pētros, he claims, was scandalized by Amätä Krəstos’s *gəzäf* simply for it signalling her continued unmonastic attachment to food and plentiful eating.⁷⁴

I remember clearly that while working on this passage, Belcher and I had a spirited debate about the appropriate translation of *gəzäf* in the given context. We too were asking ourselves what was behind Wälättä Pētros’s ire against Amätä Krəstos. Did *əmmənā qəddəst* perceive in the young woman only a lingering worldly attachment to eating one’s fill, despite her now being a nun who

⁷⁰ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 176.

⁷¹ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 118–119, 132, 162, 212, 215, 240.

⁷² Leslau 1987, 211a.

⁷³ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 219.

⁷⁴ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 178.

therefore should willingly renounce such pleasures? Given the paramount importance of fasting in Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality generally, and in its monasteries in particular, it seemed a quite plausible possibility. But was there perhaps more to it? Could Wälättä Pētros have taken offense at Amätä Krastos's behaviour because she perceived a sensual component in it, namely, that Amätä Krastos was not prepared to lose her feminine beauty and appeal through fasting and emaciation? Ultimately, we did in fact incline to this latter understanding of the scene—hence our 'curviness' for *gəzäf*—for reasons I will present in a moment.

Firstly, however, I would like to mention that, per our usual practice, we appended a footnote to 'curviness'. In it, we documented the underlying *gəzäf* and provided its more literal translations, in order to give full transparency to what we were doing. In addition, that note referenced also how Lanfranco Ricci had translated this *gəzäf* as Italian *floridezza* ('flowering', 'blossoming'), a term close in thrust to our 'curviness'.⁷⁵ So, once more, it must be insisted there were no stealthy machinations on our part to twist the text, and every aspect of the argument was revealed, so to speak, in the full light of day.

While we found Ricci's similar understanding of *gəzäf* heartening, we did not, of course, base our translation on his authority, but on our own assessment of the episode as a whole. Hence what indicators are there that *gəzäf* is sensually charged here?

The episode begins with the statement that Amätä Krastos was so 'beautiful' and 'pretty' that 'nobody in the world compared to her'.⁷⁶ From the outset this suggests that the episode about to unfold has a sensual dimension: why mention Amätä Krastos's beauty if the entirety of the case is solely about a monastically inappropriate love for eating? Why, in that case, not speak directly of gluttony, or focus on Amätä Krastos's lack of restraint and monastic discipline? Furthermore, the episode mentions Amätä Krastos's bragging about her appearance. This too suggests that the term *gəzäf*, even when used derogatorily by Wälättä Pētros, refers to a quality normally seen as an important component of feminine appeal and beauty.

What finally tipped the scales for us in favour of a sensually charged understanding of the episode was the harsh culmination of Wälättä Pētros's upbraiding of Amätä Krastos. Wälättä Pētros concludes her castigation of the self-indulgent young nun with the emphatic declaration that she would like to see Amätä Krastos pierced with a spear and killed for her behaviour. Although Wälättä Pētros does not, of course, initiate any such physical action against

⁷⁵ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 219, n. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

Amätä Krəstos, the chapter goes on to tell us that by virtue of Wälättä Pētros's spiritual power—probably best understood here as the power of her prayers—Amätä Krəstos fell ill soon afterward with ‘the piercing sickness’ (*ḥāmāmā wəgʻat*), thus as if pierced by spear, and became forever paralysed.⁷⁷

Wälättä Pētros's desire to see Amätä Krəstos punished by piercing with a spear parallels the punishment she had in mind for any monk and nun engaged in *tāzawəʻo* (see 3.5 above). Moreover, the piercing punishment for *tāzawəʻo* was itself modelled on the biblical Phinehas's way of killing the sexually licentious Israelite Zimri and his Midianite concubine Cozbi. The parallelism in the envisaged forms of punishment for *tāzawəʻo* on the one hand and for Amätä Krəstos's attachment to *gəzäf* on the other can hardly be accidental. Rather, it must surely be indicative of related underlying transgressions. Therefore, just as *tāzawəʻo* in Chapter 58 has an erotic dimension to it, so must *gəzäf* in Chapter 66. Hence our decision to translate it as ‘curviness’ is reasoned and reasonable, and we stand by it.

4 Concluding Remarks

For both Belcher and me, our *Gädlä Wälättä Pētros* translation was an endeavour motivated by our appreciation of Ethiopian Orthodox culture and its literary heritage. To any fair-minded observer the final product is clear testimony of this, I believe, and counters any ascription of nefarious motives. For many years, both Belcher and I devoted considerable parts of our professional lives to this translation. Negative motivations do not carry one through tasks of such scale, only sincere sympathy for the material on which one works.

Such appreciation does not, of course, preclude the occasional translation infelicity or even outright mistake. We acknowledge, for instance, that two translation criticisms of Yirga's unrelated to sexuality have merit philologically.⁷⁸ However, I have, in the preceding pages, demonstrated that our translations at those instances where Yirga alleges our unwarranted sexualization of the text are, in fact, well-founded. Certainly, some may, for whatever reasons, continue to disagree with us. However, no claim whatsoever can be made that our choices were willful or baseless, that they were not thought through, or that we lacked any transparency about them. Therefore, any allegations that we engaged in an ill-intentioned attempt to surreptitiously sexualize the text of the *Gädlä Wälättä Pētros* are patently absurd.

⁷⁷ Belcher and Kleiner 2015, 219.

⁷⁸ Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020, 180–182.

Authors tend to have little say in the reception of their publications: *habent sua fata libelli*, as the Romans used to say. In closing, I would nonetheless like to express my dismay that so far at least, the reception of our *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* translation has focused virtually exclusively on erotic aspects of the text. Certainly, sensuality and sexuality are relevant dimensions of the narrative—since they are of human life—and as such they deserve to be debated. However, they are far from being the dominant themes of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, with the text also touching on many other aspects of seventeenth-century Christian Ethiopian life and history that are worthy of study. In the interest of a more comprehensive and balanced reception of our translation, I hope that those other aspects too will receive their due share of attention in the future.

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Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes 2020. 'Colonial Rewriting of African History: Misinterpretations and Distortions in Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggles of Walatta Petros*', *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture*, 9/2 (2020 = *Special Issue: Colonial Rewriting of African History: Misinterpretations and Distortions in Belcher and Kleiner's Life and Struggles of Walatta Petros*), 133–220.

Summary

The present article was prompted by Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes's 'Colonial Rewriting of African History: Misinterpretations and Distortions in Belcher and Kleiner's *Life and Struggles of Walatta Petros*' as published in a special issue of the *Journal of Afroasiatic Languages, History and Culture* in the fall of 2020. Yirga's text of more than eighty pages is a wide-ranging and often acrimonious critique of Wendy Laura Belcher's and my scholarship in our 2015 annotated translation of the *Gädlä Wälättä Pétros*. This reply does not attempt to address all the philological and non-philological issues Yirga raises. Rather, it focuses on refuting Yirga's allegations of sexualizing mistranslations on our part. As these alleged mistranslations form the virtually exclusive basis for Yirga's more far-reaching accusations against our scholarship, refuting them also collapses his broader case.