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**Article**

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## Notes on a Lesser-known Marian Iconography in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian Painting

STANISLAW CHOJNACKI

### *Dedication*

*This article is dedicated to Richard Pankhurst my long-time friend and a valued collaborator from the happy years in building the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa. His indefatigable writing activities have always been an inspiration to his many colleagues and friends.*

During the last fifty years, the iconography of the Virgin Mary in Ethiopia has generated an increasing number of studies. In 1946, the Italian scholar, Ugo Monneret de Villard, published an article in which he clarified the origin of the most popular image of the Mother of God in Ethiopia, the so-called Virgin of Santa Maria Maggiore. In addition, he also established the date when the first copy of this image was brought into Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup> In two other articles he discussed two important types of Marian iconography, namely the Crowned Virgin<sup>2</sup> as well as the Nursing Virgin<sup>3</sup>.

The 1960s and 1970s brought the discovery of countless new icons, manuscripts and wall paintings in the churches and monasteries of Ethiopia. Preliminary descriptions of these paintings were published and initial attempts made to establish their chronology. The question of their emergence in Ethiopia and subsequent evolution was also discussed. In 1983 the main

<sup>1</sup> UGO MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La Madonna di S. Maria Maggiore e l'illustrazione dei Miracoli di Maria in Abissinia* = *Annali Lateranensi*, Vol. 11 (1947) 9–90.

<sup>2</sup> UGO MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La coronazione della Vergine in Abissinia* = *La Bibliofilia*, Vol. 44 (1962) 168–75.

<sup>3</sup> UGO MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Miniatura veneto-cretense in un codice etiopico* = *La Bibliofilia*, Vol. 47 (1945) 1–13.

types of the Virgin's iconography were described by the author.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently other scholars focussed their attention on the iconography of the Virgin Mary in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in further varied interpretations.<sup>5</sup> The problem, however, of the inception of the iconography of St. Mary in Ethiopia and its evolution prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century remains to be studied in greater depth. The existence in Lālibalā, Lāstā of an ancient iconic image and the recent discovery of two paintings which almost certainly pre-date the 15<sup>th</sup> century, warrant closer investigation.

### Marian Painting in Lālibalā

In and of itself, the rarity of pre-15<sup>th</sup> century iconic images of the Virgin Mary compared to the many portrayals attributed to the 15<sup>th</sup> century is highly significant. A case in point are the 12–13<sup>th</sup> century rock-hewn churches in Lālibalā which at one time possessed a few treasured 15<sup>th</sup> century icons. Some have since changed hands,<sup>6</sup> however, none of the icons that have remained there is believed to date either to the period of the construction of churches or to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

It is precisely for this reason that a much-faded image of the Virgin painted on a particular *manbar* which was kept at St. Gabriel's church, Bēta Gabre'ēl, in Lālibalā is of special significance. A *manbar*<sup>7</sup> is the wooden stand or chest within which the sacred *tābot*<sup>8</sup> that is the altar slab is kept in the Ethiopian churches. The oldest form of *manabert* (pl. of *manbar*) had a

<sup>4</sup> STANISLAW CHOJNACKI, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting, Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and their Adaptation from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* = *Äthiopistische Forschungen*, Bd. 10 (Wiesbaden 1983) 171–366.

<sup>5</sup> MARILYN E. HELDMAN, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Šeyon. A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage and Spirituality* = *Orientalia Biblica et Christiana*, 6 (Wiesbaden 1994).

<sup>6</sup> STANISLAW CHOJNACKI, *Ethiopian Icons. Catalogue of the Collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. In collaboration with C. Gossage* (Milano 2000) 64–66.

<sup>7</sup> STEFAN STRELCYN, *Quelques inscriptions éthiopiennes sur des 'manbert' des Eglises de Lalibäla et de sa région* = *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. XXXVI, no. 3/4 (1979) 137; CHARLES FRAZIER BECKINGHAM and GEORGE W.B. HUNTINGFORD (eds.), *The Prester John of the Indies being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520 written by Father Francisco Alvarez* = *The Hakluyt Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. no. CXV (Cambridge 1961) II, 543–46; MAURICE DE COPPET, *Le tabot* = GUEBRE SELLASSIE, *Chronique du règne de Ménélik II* (Paris 1930–32) 549–51.

<sup>8</sup> FRIEDRICH HEYER, *Die Kirche Äthiopiens. Eine Bestandsaufnahme* (Berlin – New York 1971) 39–47.

chest-like shape. In fact, several of them are still preserved in certain of the churches of Lālibalā.

In September 1974, I was fortunate enough to be able to take black and white photographs of the Bēta Gabre'ēl chest. Regrettably later efforts to locate the object in question during the course of numerous visits to Lālibalā proved unsuccessful. It is possible that the chest was simply discarded and thus the photographs are now the only record of this unique relic. There is no doubt, however, that the *manbar* can be attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a fact attested to both by the carvings on it as well as by the paintings that adorned it. The four-legged chest was made from a single piece of wood ca 120 cm high, the box itself measuring 40 by 50 cm. It is clear from the photographs that the chest suffered varying degrees of damage during the course of Lālibalā's turbulent history and at some point lost two of its legs, one entirely and one partly, and deep cracks are in evidence as well. The box is hollow and small doors were cut on two sides. On four faces of the chest, two columns carved in the bas-relief support an arch; the pattern of which is similar to the ornamentation of Canon Tables in early Gospels. An acanthus-leaf pattern was incised on three edges forming a frame for the arched aedicula.

A unique aspect of this *manbar* included three paintings which were executed directly onto the wood and presumably were contemporary to the carvings. This is substantiated by a painting of St. George bearing an inscription in the script of the period "Saint George martyr of Christ pray and entreat for us" as translated by S. Strelcyn who also published a reproduction of the painting.<sup>9</sup> The saint's elongated face with sunken cheeks and piercing eyes is clearly reminiscent of the figures of saints in Coptic art.<sup>10</sup> The draping of his pallium and robe as well as the position of his hands are very similar to bas-reliefs of two saints at the church of Golgotha in Lālibalā, except for St. George's head which is uncovered. Due to the inscription, the saint's identity in the painting is absolutely certain, while the inscriptions 'Giyorgis' and 'Qirqos' accompanying the carved saints might be attributed to a later date.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this unusual image of Saint George is crucial in terms of the history of his iconography in Ethiopia (fig. 1).

On two other faces of the same chest, there are the images which are even more faded. As far as it is possible to perceive from the still visible outline in

<sup>9</sup> STRELCCYN (as in n. 7) 138, 143.

<sup>10</sup> JULES LEROY, *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés* = Institut Français d'Archéologie de Beyrouth, Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique, Vol. XCVI (Paris 1974) pl. 26 and 27.

<sup>11</sup> HERMANN DABBERT, *Die monolithenen Kirchen Lalibelas in Äthiopien* (Berlin 1938) 34.

one image, the half-figure of a female saint is depicted with both hands raised at the level of her breast. Although, the gesture is not clear, it appears to be that of a woman praying. A small half-length figure is shown on her right (fig. 2). The inscription is missing and the identification of these figures is uncertain, but there is the possibility that this is an image of the Virgin Mary to which the artist added the figure of the Christ Child. The second image probably presenting a female figure is hardly visible.

### The Painting of the Child Mary at Gannata Māryām

The figure of St. Mary as a child depicted together with her mother St. Anne appears in the wall paintings of the rock-hewn church of Gannata Māryām (Paradise of Mary) close to Lālibalā in Lāstā. The church was constructed at the time of King Yekunno Amlāk who reigned from 1270–85 and the paintings most probably date from the same period. Among the many subjects depicted in the church murals, this painting of St. Mary with her mother is the only one which can be considered iconic. This fact is borne out by the accompanying inscription “Hānnā mother of Mary, may her prayer encompass us”.

The figure of Anne appears to be standing and with both her arms she holds the small figure of Mary to her breast (fig. 3). Mary’s body below the waist is disproportionately small and her legs give the impression of either being crossed or drawn in close to her body. As far as can be discerned, given the badly faded condition of the painting, her right arm is turned to her left and probably her arms and hands are drawn similarly to those of the three rescued children of Babylon which are depicted in the same church. Mary’s hair is cut short and she has no veil, while Anne’s hair or veil flows over her shoulders. Mary’s whole body, with the exception of her head, is enclosed in a fairly regular oval, which gives the impression that the depiction was inspired by the form of the Enthroned Virgin holding Christ Emmanuel at her waist. The Gannata Māryām wall paintings also include the standing figure of St. Sophia with her three daughters, one of whom is standing in front of her mother.<sup>12</sup> This is in marked contrast to the depiction of Mary in an oval being held by her mother.

In the image of Anne with Mary as a child, four other figures are depicted on the left and one on the right. The latter’s size is equal to that of Anne’s and might represent Joachim, although positive identification is impossible because the figure lacks a beard. The identification of the figures on the left

<sup>12</sup> EWA BALICKA-WITAKOWSKA, *Les peintures murales de l’église rupestre éthiopienne Gännätä Maryam* = *Arte medievale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., years XII–XIII (1998–99) 200–1.

is also problematic, however the two upper figures are shown carrying staffs. It is interesting to note that we find a similar detail in an 6<sup>th</sup> century icon of the Virgin depicted between St. Theodore and St. George at St. Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai. The Virgin holds the Child on her lap while two angels in the upper register are carrying staffs according to the iconographic convention.<sup>13</sup> Although the analogy is striking and the possible conclusions should not be extended too far, the detail of the figures carrying staffs in the Gannata Māryām wall painting gives an indication of the kind of model which the artist used for painting the image of Mary and her mother.

### The Virgin Mary Praying

The motif of raised hands was not confined to Christian art and occurred widely throughout the ancient world. In Pharaonic Egypt it represented the soul of the deceased.<sup>14</sup> The orant posture is also common in early catacomb painting and became wide-spread in later Christian painting. The form was widely used by the Copts for depicting St. Mary, the Apostles and monastic figures appearing in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century wall paintings at monasteries at Bawit and Saqqara.<sup>15</sup> In Ethiopia, the wall paintings ascribed to the 13<sup>th</sup> century at Dabra Salām Mikā'ēl church, Aṣbi,<sup>16</sup> include figures of the Apostles shown with raised hands. The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript miniatures also include figures of saints depicted in an orant position as seen in the Lives of Saints and Martyrs at Tulu Gudo Dabra Ṣeyon Church on Lake Zewāy. Other examples existed in the Psalter originally in the possession of Dabra Warq in Easter Goḡḡām but the Psalter's present location is currently unknown. In this instance, several orant male and female saints were depicted, although it is evident that none of the female saints represents St. Mary.

There is no question, however, that in Ethiopian painting, the Virgin Mary is known to have been depicted in an attitude of prayer. One example is the miniatures of the Ascension in two mid-14<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts of

<sup>13</sup> KURT WEITZMANN, *The Icons: From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* = The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, Vol. I (Princeton, N.J. 1976) 18–21, pl. IV–VI.

<sup>14</sup> VIRGIL VĂTĂȘIANU, Considerations sur l'origine et la signification de l'orant = *Actes du VI<sup>e</sup> congrès international d'études byzantines, Paris 27 juillet – 2 août 1948*, Vol. II (Paris 1951) 397–401.

<sup>15</sup> C.C. WALTERS, *Monastic Archaeology of Egypt* (Warminster 1974) 326–27.

<sup>16</sup> CLAUDE LEPAGE, *Histoire de l'ancienne peinture éthiopienne (X<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle). Résultats des missions de 1971 à 1977* = *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions, séance du 20 mai 1977* (Paris 1977) 337–40.

the Gospels,<sup>17</sup> in which St. Mary is depicted with the raised hands and flanked by two angels.

A second example is a miniature in the Psalter and Praises of Mary, both common prayer texts among Christian Ethiopians. A privately-owned manuscript (EMML Nr. 2064), broadly ascribed to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is located at Ambässal, Wallo.<sup>18</sup> The Ethiopian scholar, Dr. Sergew Hable Sellasie considers that it was copied either at the end of that century or in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Considering the use of geometric forms for depicting figures in the miniatures as well as the alternating of the strictly frontal position of faces with those drawn in three quarter, either of these datings is feasible. It is clear, however, that the artist did not adhere to the style practised at the court scriptorium of King Dāwit (r. 1382–1413), and indeed he was trained in a distinctively different style.

On f. 155v, there is a figure of the orant Virgin Mary, identified by the inscription reading “Picture of Our Lady Mary Holy Virgin and Mother of God who prays on the Mount Golgotha while she says have pity [of them] my Son”. The text in red is the initial sentence of the Gate of Light, a text dedicated to Mary which in Ethiopia is traditionally included in the Psalters and might have been added by another hand (fig. 4). Mary has raised her hands to shoulder height and with the palms turned inwards. She wears a large striped robe and a shirt with an embroidered collar but not the traditional maphorion (‘shawl’ or ‘veil’ in Greek). Instead, her black hair flows down her back. Her yellow nimbus is edged with white as is common in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century art.

The figure thus reflects the accepted attitude of prayer and the inscription locates its place and circumstances. According to the History of the Death of the Virgin Mary, as told by St. John the Theologian, he took the mother of his beloved Master to his house after Christ’s Ascension. Thereafter, Mary never ceased visiting the grave, where she prayed and praised her Son. And when Christ wished to remove her from this ‘fleeting world’, she stretched out her hands to Him, and asked to take her soul from her into heaven.<sup>20</sup> The image is also an early illustration of the Prayer of the Virgin at Golgotha,

<sup>17</sup> CLAUDE LEPAGE, *Reconstitution d’un cycle protobyzantin à partir des miniatures de deux manuscrits éthiopiens du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* = Cahiers archéologiques 35 (1987) 180–181.

<sup>18</sup> GETATCHEW HAILE and WILLIAM F. MACOMBER, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscripts Library, Collegeville*, Vol. VII, (Collegeville, MN 1983) 126–28.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication in 1974.

<sup>20</sup> ERNEST A. WALLIS BUDGE, *Legends of Our Lady Mary the Perpetual Virgin and her Mother Hanâ translated from the Ethiopic Manuscripts Collected by King Theodore at Makdalâ and now in the British Museum* (Oxford–London 1933) 152.

*Sanē Golgotā*, a popular text among the Christian Ethiopians in the past, which was often included into selections of occult texts like the Doctrine of Mysteries, *Temberta ḥebu'āt*, and *Lefāfa sedq*, Bond of Justification, used for daily readings.

A third example of the figure of Mary at prayer is perhaps even more revealing. This is a late 14<sup>th</sup> or very early 15<sup>th</sup> century wall painting located in an abandoned cave church situated five km. north of Abbiy Addi in Tambēn. The church was hewn from soft reddish siliceous rock in the cliffs on the west side of the river valley. There is no path leading to the church and one has to climb through a thorny thicket some fifty metres up the bank of the stream to reach the narrow platform leading to the entrance of the church dedicated to Abbā Sāmu'el. This is most probably Sāmu'el of Waldebbā, a popular saint in the area because recently a small church bearing his name was constructed on the opposite bank of the stream.

The author had the opportunity to visit this cave church in November 2000, together with Mr. Paul Henze who extensively photographed the church and its two remaining paintings. To our great distress we discovered that vandals had defaced the paintings by scratching their names onto the surface. We were also told that the church was “burned” by the Italians after the 1936 invasion. Dale Otto, an American traveller, who visited the area in 1967 refers to a cave church dedicated to Archangel Michael which was said to have been burned by Moslem invaders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He describes the “fire-blackened walls and ceilings” revealing “only the remnants of two paintings.”<sup>21</sup> In the church we visited there are also only two paintings, thus the account of fire damage may refer to the same church, although various names were given to it by local people, and the blackened walls could simply be the result of more recent fires lit by interlopers. The Abbā Sāmu'el cave church consists of three chambers cut into the rock, one large cavern probably serving as a place reserved for cantors, and a second smaller area consisting of two oval rooms, one of which probably served as a sanctuary. The room adjacent to the external wall has a window which was partly constructed using uncut stones. The door, the blind window and the cupola are all hewn in Aksumite style.

There are two passages between the chambers and a large square semi-pillar in between. In the cantors' chamber are two paintings, however, the one painted on the pillar is unfortunately damaged beyond recognition.

The second painting found to the right of the passage between the two chambers is in better condition, though it has also been defaced by graffiti

<sup>21</sup> DALE OTTO, *The Rock-Hewn Churches of Tigre* = Ethiopia Observer, Vol. XI, 2 (1967) 127.



(fig. 5). The paint is mostly yellow, ochre and brown-red applied directly on the rock and it has fortuitously withstood six centuries of neglect and humidity. The painting shows an orant female figure flanked by two archangels with sheltering outstretched wings. This detail serves to prove beyond doubt that the figure represents the Virgin Mary. The artist apparently intended to represent the forms in full-length, but the disproportionately large heads give the impression of half-figures. Mary's hands are raised to the level of her ears and their palms are turned inwards, which was an early Christian attitude of adoration.<sup>22</sup> Her long hair falls down her back. Her face and those of the archangels are shown frontally and the irises do not touch the upper line of the eyes. The figures of the archangels are painted as a set of squares filled with crosses or lines crossing at an angle. Their shoulders are arched, a feature also found in the orant figures depicted in the Dabra Warq Psalter. Also the Virgin's body is painted as a set of squares forming two long rectangles arched at the top. All three figures are adorned with nimbi drawn with the characteristic 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century double line. The figures are framed with wide red-brown bands with dark blue squares at each corner in a manner reminiscent of the framing of icons adorned with precious stones.

This depiction of the Virgin combines in one composition two forms found in her 14<sup>th</sup> century iconography, the first being the upright figure of Mary at prayer, which is similar to her depiction in a late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript in the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz showing "Mary as she prayed standing".<sup>23</sup> The second form incorporated into this painting is the inclusion of the sheltering archangels, which is an integral part of the Ethiopian iconography of the Enthroned Virgin. The painting in the Abbā Samu'el cave is the only instance known of the combination of these two forms. The strictly geometric style and the manner of depicting the archangels indicate that the artist worked outside the influence of the painters of King Dāwit's court.

In the lower half of the painting, one wide brown band runs horizontally while the second band runs vertically, both bands forming an equal-armed cross suggesting Golgotha and the redemptory sacrifice of Christ. The juxtaposition of the figure of Mary intensely praying with the symbol of Christ's sacrifice infuses this image with its full significance showing her as

<sup>22</sup> HENRI LECLERCQ, *Orant, Orante* = Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne et de Liturgie, Vol. XII, 2 (Paris, 1936) 2292.

<sup>23</sup> ERNST HAMMERSCHMIDT, *Illuminierte Handschriften der Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz und Handschriften vom Tānāsee* = Codices Æthiopici, Bd.1 (Graz 1977) 21, pl. 4.

the glorified Mother of God interceding with the Redeemer on behalf of all Christian sinners.

The image has also a broader significance according to their belief in God's mercy which through the intercession of the Virgin Mary may lead to redemption of the condemned Christian sinners from the Infernal tortures. The text of the *Argānona Māryām* or Organ of the Praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>24</sup>, is expressing the well-rooted tenet of Ethiopian Christianity "I beseech thee, O Virgin Mary" writes a 15<sup>th</sup> century author, "that thy prayer may be to me a shield of help, and that the power of the arm of thy Firstborn may come down to deliver me".<sup>25</sup>

This is then an early pictorial expression of her title of "Compassionate" which is akin in spirit to the Byzantine Eleusa image but expressed by an entirely different iconographic form. We know that Ethiopian traditional art exhibits no interest in narrative for its own sake. The stories which it brings to mind are not told in detail. There are no scenic embellishments, neither are the figures expressed naturalistically. The story of Mary was familiar to the faithful and needed only to be indicated by the conventional form, i.e. of a female figure in an attitude of prayer, while the inscription guides the mind of the onlooker towards the corresponding narrative and gives to the image the real meaning.

The outstretched archangels' wings relate the above image to the iconography of the Mother of God seated on a throne and under a canopy of wings.

### The Seated Hodegetria

The seated Virgin is a variant of the Hodegetria, "The Guiding One", which was believed to be a pictorial expression of the mystery of the Incarnation. The form originally evolved from the full-length figure of Mary holding her Child on her left arm. This composition was gradually superseded by the half-figure of the Hodegetria and finally as a half-length figure of the Virgin holding the Child on either the left or right arm.<sup>26</sup>

The seated Hodegetria, however, occupies a unique position in Eastern Christian iconography, and Strzygowski has related this representation to

<sup>24</sup> ENRICO CERULLI, *La letteratura etiopica. L'Oriente cristiano nell'unità delle sue tradizioni*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Firenze–Milano 1968) 114.

<sup>25</sup> BUDGE (as in n. 20) 303.

<sup>26</sup> VICTOR LAZAREFF, *Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin* = *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. XX, no. 1 (1938) 46.

Pharaonic art.<sup>27</sup> In his view, the figures representing Isis and Horus provided a prototype for the seated Hodegetria. The type developed fully into the Enthroned Hodegetria in 6<sup>th</sup> century Coptic art as evidenced in paintings still preserved at the Bawit Monastery in Egypt. The Enthroned Virgin form was imported from Egypt into Syria and from there spread into the Caucasus and soon acquired great popularity. It flourished particularly in Armenia. The bas-reliefs of two 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century tombstones in Thalin show the Child sitting on his mother's left knee. Two angels flank them, each with one wing spread over the Virgin's head, creating the solemn effect which is thoroughly in iconic character.<sup>28</sup> The works show a fascinating similarity to the Ethiopian images of the seated Hodegetria.

Although the seated Hodegetria appears not to have been widely accepted in Byzantium, a few examples dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century betray a very strong Eastern influence gravitating towards the Syro-Egyptian cycle. The Child is depicted seated on either his mother's left or right arm or occasionally her knee, however, generally the left side was favoured. On the other hand, the image of the seated Hodegetria introduced into Western iconography from Coptic art acquired great popularity and became an indispensable element in the sculptural decoration of medieval cathedrals.<sup>29</sup>

### The Platytera Virgin

The Roman image of emperors and heroes in a medallion, *imago clipeata*, representing their apotheosis, was taken over by Christian art for the image of Platytera, which shows the Enthroned Virgin holding a medallion in which the full figure Christ Child is depicted.<sup>30</sup> The only depiction of this kind known in Ethiopia is the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century Enthroned Virgin found in the rock-hewn church dedicated to Mary on Mount Qorqor in Gar'alta, Tegrāy.<sup>31</sup> We find in 14<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia still another distant derivation from the Marian image developed by 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century artists in Rome as well

<sup>27</sup> ADOLF BAUER – JOSEF STRZYGOWSKI, *Eine alexandrinische Weltchronik* = Denkschriften der Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophischhistorische Klasse, Bd. LI, II Abh. (Wien 1906) 159–61.

<sup>28</sup> LASAREFF (as in n. 26), 53, 55.

<sup>29</sup> LASAREFF (as in n. 26), 54, 61–65.

<sup>30</sup> ADOLF WEIS, *Die Madonna Platytera. Entwurf für ein Christentum als Bildoffenbarung anhand der Geschichte eines Madonmenthemas* (Taunus 1985) 21–44.

<sup>31</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 174–79, fig. 64; TANIA C. TRIBE, *The World in the Desert: the Wall-Paintings of Debra Maryam Korkor (Ger'alta, Tigray)* = K. FUKUI – M. SHIGETA (eds.), *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective. Papers of the XIII<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. III (Kyoto 1997) 41–43.

as Constantinople.<sup>32</sup> It shows the Enthroned Virgin holding the figure of either a standing or seated Child in her lap. With both hands she grasps his shoulders as if she is supporting him. Mary is flanked by two Archangels holding crosses. A possible indication of the origin of this detail is a 6<sup>th</sup> century Syro-Palestinian ivory panel with the Enthroned Virgin accompanied by an angel on her right who is holding a cross.<sup>33</sup>

### The Virgin under a Canopy of Wings

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the canopy of wings became an indispensable feature of two types of Ethiopian Marian iconography – the orant and the enthroned, the latter having an overwhelming influence. The author has already attempted their classification by dividing them into three categories according to the form of the accompanying archangels. In some instances, they either hold crosses or carry swords. In other paintings neither crosses nor swords are in evidence.<sup>34</sup> In the interval, new paintings in the cross-holding category came to light, introducing new elements which warrant a renewal of the related discussion.

### Miniatures showing the Seated Hodegetria

In the miniature on f. 2v in a treasured late 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript in Dabra Abbāy in Serē, which according to the tradition was used as prayer book by Abbā Sāmu'ēl of Waldebbā, founder of that monastery,<sup>35</sup> the Virgin is seated on a chair, her waist and legs turned to the right, in a position similar to that of the Evangelists in early Ethiopian Gospels.<sup>36</sup> With both hands she holds the Child who is depicted on her left side with his right hand raised and all fingers outstretched. His left hand is empty. The miniature is painted in geometric style with the Virgin's and the Child's faces as well as of those of two flanking archangels positioned frontally. The irises of all figures appear in the middle of the eyes.

The miniature painted on f. 2r in the manuscript of Acts of Saints and Martyrs originally belonged to the Monastery of Hāmlo, Tegrē, but is kept

<sup>32</sup> WEITZMANN (as in n. 13), 18–21, pl. IV–VI; EVA TEA, *La Basilica di Santa Maria Antiqua* = Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, ser. 5, Vol. XIV (Milano 1937) pl. XIV.

<sup>33</sup> DAVID TALBOT RICE, *Byzantine Art. A Pelican Book* (Norwich 1968) 51.

<sup>34</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 179–200.

<sup>35</sup> GIRMA ELIAS, *The Monastery of Abrentant in Waldibba* = *Abbay*, Vol. 8 (1977) 99.

<sup>36</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 180, 202; C. GRIFFITH MANN, *The Role of the Illuminated Manuscript in Ethiopian Culture* = The Walters Museum, Ethiopian Art (Lingfield, U.K. 2001) 101.

at present in Kidāna Meh̄rat Church, close to Ankobar in Shoa. The text was copied between 1382 and 1388, and the miniature probably painted at about the same time.<sup>37</sup> The figure of the Virgin appears to be seated on a bench. The Child is depicted on the right of his mother, with his hands extended on his lap. The miniature is painted in geometric style with the background entirely filled with a chequered pattern, a feature seldom found in other miniatures of the series. All faces are drawn frontally with the irises touching the upper line of the eyes. One detects, however, some hesitation in the representation of the archangels' figures who appear to turn towards the central figure of Mary.

A folio with a miniature ascribed to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and identified as f. 2r is stitched into the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of *Miracles of Mary and Jesus*, no. 777, at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa.<sup>38</sup> The faces are characterised by the irises attached to the upper line of the eyes; the eyebrows drawn high above the eyes and separated from the line of the nose which is drawn in red reflecting the aesthetics of Islamic art practised by 14<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian artists. Similar to the Dabra Abbāy miniature, the Virgin is seated, but in this case on a square filled with an ornamental pattern – a common feature of the figures of Evangelists in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Gospels. On her left side, the Child is sitting on her knees. She supports him with both hands thereby concealing the Child's hands. The miniature is also painted in geometric style, with the archangels appearing as elongated rectangles and their folded wings and cloaks as triangles. The archangels extend their hands with the forefinger outstretched towards Mary and the Child which renders it distinctive from the other miniatures in which the archangels are depicted with all fingers outstretched. The faces are positioned frontally. Clearly the miniature originates from an artistic milieu beyond the influence of King Dāwit's (r. 1382–1413) scriptorium, while the miniatures discussed below were unquestionably painted in that scriptorium.

A prized set of miniatures of the Enthroned Virgin with the Child enhancing the book of the *Miracles of Mary* at Gešēn Māryām Monastery is culturally significant because one of the miracles narrated in that book presumably occurred in connection with these miniatures. The story goes that a young man who was translating the *Miracles of Mary* from Arabic into

<sup>37</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 181–2, 204.

<sup>38</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 180–81, 203; GETATCHEW HAILE – WILLIAM F. MACOMBER, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville*, Vol. V (Collegeville, MN 1981) 161.

Ge°ez<sup>39</sup> ran short of the golden colours imported from “far away” (suggesting foreign origin) that he had been using for writing the name of Mary. King Dāwit who had commissioned a copy of the manuscript insisted that it be finished as soon as possible and, as a result, the young man tried unsuccessfully to produce the golden colours by himself. The king concluded that this misfortune must be in retribution for his sins, however his copious prayers to St. Mary remained unanswered.

In a dream a foreigner, *Romāwi*, appeared to the young man in question and asked him the reason for his despair. He then revealed the secret formula for the golden colours which could be obtained from a certain type of pulverized white stone. When he awoke, the young man went at once to the bishop who indicated a place where such stone could be found and before long, much to the king’s delight, he was able to produce the desired colours and great praise was extended to St. Mary as the source of this miraculous event.<sup>40</sup> The Italian scholar, Cerulli who commented on the story came to the conclusion that the white dust must have been a type of gypsum.<sup>41</sup> Although, its precise location was not identified, it is possible that it was in the vicinity of the present day Adāmā (Nazārit), where the author has personally seen large quantities of naturally pulverized gypsum encrusted in volcanic tuff.

In the text of the manuscript at Gešēn, the name of Mary was written with golden ink and in the miniatures, her nimbus, the cushion and the ornamentation of her maphorion are also painted gold. It is, therefore, conceivable that this is Dāwit’s miraculous manuscript. Stylistically its miniatures are very distinctive and it is presumed that the style evolved in the scriptorium at the court of King Dāwit. The work was probably begun shortly after 1387, when the problems associated with Dāwit’s accession to the throne were finally settled.<sup>42</sup> The style which evolved at this scriptorium significantly influenced Ethiopian manuscript painting throughout the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Gešēn Māryām manuscript, the Virgin wrapped in a richly ornamented maphorion is seated on a large bench with two variously-drawn legs. A large decorated cushion is depicted below her robe, although her feet are not shown. In her left hand, she occasionally is depicted holding a long elaborately designed handkerchief, however in this case, the Virgin also

<sup>39</sup> The fact that King Dāwit initiated the translation of the Miracles of Mary is confirmed in the text of *maṣḥafa tēfut*, see ANDRÉ CAQUOT, *Aperçu préliminaire sur le maṣḥafa tēfut de Gechen Amba* = *Annales d’Éthiopie*, Vol. 1 (1955) 99.

<sup>40</sup> ENRICO CERULLI, *Il Libro Etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature del Medio Evo Latino*, Università di Roma, *Studi orientali*, 1 (Roma 1943) 89–90, 529–37.

<sup>41</sup> CERULLI (as in n.40) 92–93.

<sup>42</sup> SALVATORE TEDESCHI, *Les fils du négus Sayfa-Ar’ād d’après un document arabo-chrétien* = *Africa*, Vol. XXIX, 2 (Roma 1974) 579–80.

holds the Child seated on her left with both hands, and he makes a gesture of blessing with his right hand. The Child's fingers are displayed according to Oriental conventions. The two archangels, standing on either side of Mary extend their hands towards her in a gesture of supplication. They are invariably dressed in long skirts, usually green but sometimes also violet, and an open red cape trimmed in yellow. Their striped wings extend over Mary and are characteristically painted in red and yellow alternating with green. The red triangle on their hair, which is a remnant of the ribbons encircling the heads of Byzantine archangels, is missing although it appears in most depictions of 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century archangels.

The salient feature of the style is the rejection of frontality. All figures are depicted in three-quarter pose with faces characterised by long strongly delineated noses enlarged at the tips. The brows on the further side of the face are connected with the line of the nose and the lines of the eyes are open at the outer edges with large irises touching their upper line. The mouth is drawn with two black lines, the lower being shorter. The rounded chin is small. The black hair of the male figures is characteristically flat at the crown, angular on one side and falling onto the nape of the neck on the other. Another characteristic feature of the style is the richly ornamented robes of all figures except for those of the archangels. The pattern used is either floral or geometric or a combination of both and there is a diamond-shaped decorative form depicted on Mary's forehead. A distinct feature of the style emanating from Dāwit's scriptorium is the peculiar manner of drawing feet, with the big toe either left out entirely or strongly turned downwards and with the second sometimes crossing.

In all the miniatures in question, Mary is turned to the right towards the figure of the king and her face is slightly inclined towards him. Dāwit is depicted with bare feet, perhaps in this case as a sign of penitence. In the first miniature, he is standing erect in front of Mary, while in each successive representation he gradually inclines towards her. With the exception of a small beard, his face is similar to those of the archangels in the manuscript. He wears a long red or violet robe with a large ornamental band on his left arm – probably as a mark of royal distinction and a red or violet cloak (*šammā*) is tied up around his waist in a traditional gesture of respect.<sup>43</sup>

Dāwit's face is turned towards Mary's and he gazes at her while both his hands are raised in a gesture of supplication. In each miniature, however, his gestures are depicted differently. This series of ten miniatures appears to be a pictorial demonstration of the king's special devotion to the Mother of God.

<sup>43</sup> TILAHOUN PAULOS, *Forms of Greetings and Other Signs of Respect in Ethiopia* = Addis Ababa University College Ethnological Society Bulletin, N. 5 (1956) 27–28.

There is, however, the possibility of an ulterior motive that has more to do with politics than with religion. If so, this would be a highly unusual, if not unique occurrence in the history of Ethiopian art. Each depiction of the king is accompanied by captions which partially serve to reveal the reason behind these multiple images. The captions are declarations of the orthodoxy of Dāwit's faith and include a plea directed to the Virgin to witness to his sincerity. Instead of holding crosses, like the king, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, also extend their hands towards the Mother of God imploring her to answer Dāwit's plea.

There were, however, extenuating circumstances which might have compelled the king to become his own propagandist. Deep-seated resentment had arisen among some military and monastic centres because of his violent accession to the throne<sup>44</sup> and grave difficulties caused by the Sabbath controversy.<sup>45</sup> This made it convenient, if not imperative, to provide the people with evidence of his orthodoxy and his favoured status with the Virgin Mary as manifested by her miraculous intervention in the production of the manuscript.

#### Enthroned Virgin holding the Child on her Lap

In the two following miniatures and one engraving, the Child is placed in the middle of his mother's lap while the wings of the archangels flanking her form a canopy over them. One is a miniature in a Psalter tentatively ascribed to the last two decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> or first decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>46</sup>, which originally belonged to Dabra Warq Monastery, Goḡḡām, however its present whereabouts is not known. The Virgin appears to be seated on a large rounded cushion on a throne with no back (fig. 6). She is wearing a richly patterned maphorion. The Child seems to be holding a minute object in his left hand – probably a clumsy copy of the scroll depicted in Child's hand in Gešēn Māryām miniature. He makes a sign of blessing with his right hand turned upwards. His small feet are bare while Mary and the archangels wear white and scarlet shoes. The archangels are standing on cushions, however, unlike the Gešēn Māryām miniatures, there is no cushion under Mary's feet. The figures are painted in a somewhat geometric style and a moderate three quarter posture is used for the archangels. These two features are both reminiscent of the mode of painting developed at King Dāwit's scriptorium.

<sup>44</sup> TEDESCHI (as in n. 42), 573–80; STANISLAW CHOJNACKI, *Les portraits des donateurs comme sources de l'histoire politique, religieuse et culturelle de l'Éthiopie au XII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* = Nubica et Æthiopica, vol. IV/V (1999) 627–30.

<sup>45</sup> TADDESSE TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527*, (Oxford 1972) 213–219.

<sup>46</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 4), 187, 207.



The second miniature is found on a loose folio identified as 2v, which was stitched into the 18<sup>th</sup> century copy of the Miracles of Mary at Bāḥarā Māryām Church in Ḥārāmāt, Tegrāy (fig. 7). The manuscript from which the folio miniature originates had been damaged by rats and apparently the folio was spared because they found the paint used by the artist unpalatable – a phenomenon which has also been noted in other manuscripts. The upper margin bears the inscription “picture of Mary with her beloved son” and on the lower margin there is the first vowel of the name of Mikā’ēl and the full name of Gabre’ēl.

The miniature shows a marked similarity to the one in the Dabra Warq Psalter and is ascribed to the same period. It also displays the same devotion to frontality and vertical perspective which mirrors their distant Syro-Palestinian prototype. It is clear, however, that the Dabra Warq and the Bāḥarā Māryām artists copied from the same local model. The Bāḥarā Māryām artist was a less skilful copyist turning Mary’s ears into triangles and painting her veil and the archangels’ footwear in an ornamental pattern. He drew the Child’s right hand turned inwards instead of in a gesture of blessing and failed to include the Child’s feet. On the other hand, the figures of the archangels are very alike in both miniatures.

A similar type of Enthroned Virgin is graphically engraved on the back of the centre panel of a 16<sup>th</sup> century icon.<sup>47</sup> The wood used for this panel appears to be at least two centuries older than the icon itself, which corresponds to the period to which the two above-mentioned miniatures are ascribed. The forms display an identical arrangement to those in the Dabra Warq and Bāḥarā Māryām miniatures except for the figure of the Child who appears to be standing and his minute hands are on his waist. The archangels, Michael and Gabriel are positioned frontally and their triangular-shaped eyes have the irises attached to the upper line of the eyes. Each archangel is engraved with only one hand in which he holds a cross on an elongated staff. This is an indication of the influence of Coptic models in which the angels typically carry similar crosses.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

During the last fifty years of exploration in Ethiopia’s churches and monasteries, no iconic image of the Virgin Mary has been uncovered which could be ascribed to either the 13<sup>th</sup> century or any earlier period. The only possible exception is a badly faded image of the Virgin depicted on the portable altar in St. Gabriel’s Church in Lālibalā, Lāstā.

<sup>47</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 6), 340, fig. 74.

<sup>48</sup> WALTERS (as in n. 15), 328.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, however, the situation altered considerably. Three specific groupings of depictions of the Virgin bearing clearly iconic traits have come to light – the Orant Virgin, the seated Hodegetria and the Enthroned Virgin holding the Child in her lap. All three originate either from early Christian or Byzantine prototypes.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the orant form was widely used for depicting figures in manuscripts of the Acts of Saints and Martyrs, translated from Arabic into Ge'ez. It is possible that one of the Coptic/Arabic manuscripts used for the translation included depictions of orant saints which are frequently found in Coptic painting thereby providing Ethiopian painters with a model while illuminating the translated text. The example was followed by others. The orant form of saints, however, faded away with the advance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and reappeared only in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was employed exclusively for depictions of Abbā Gabra Manfas Qeddus and in 18<sup>th</sup> century for depictions of Abuna Takla Hāymānot.<sup>49</sup>

Ethiopian artists also used the orant form for depicting the Virgin Mary. A certain 14<sup>th</sup> century artist created an iconic painting by adding two archangels flanking the orant Virgin and sheltering her with their outstretched wings. This appears to be a purely local creation of which there is only one known example. There is no parallel form either in Coptic or Armenian art. Whether the painting in Wāšā Sāmu'el is an isolated case or represents a school is impossible to decide at the moment.

By the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopian artists – including the one at Wāšā Sāmu'el – were undoubtedly familiar with images of archangels with outstretched wings since that was already an established form used for depictions of the Baptism of Christ.<sup>50</sup> In a 14<sup>th</sup> century unpublished miniature of Christ's Ascension in the Dabra Māryām (Qoḥayn) Gospels, Mary is sheltered by the wings of the archangels on either side. It was also customary for Coptic artists to paint the Enthroned Virgin with the Child on her knees and flanked by two angels with their wings outstretched to form a canopy. Although it is possible that Ethiopian artists took some inspiration from the Copts, there is no close relationship between their paintings as we know them and the 14<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian miniatures of the Enthroned Virgin. In Coptic art, Mary is almost always shown nursing her Child<sup>51</sup>, while the *Virgo lactans* first appeared in Ethiopian paintings about the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as the result of Western influences.

<sup>49</sup> CHOJNACKI (as in n. 6), 37, 46, 514.

<sup>50</sup> STANISLAW CHOJNACKI, *A Note on the Baptism of Christ in Ethiopian Art* = *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, vol. 36, no. XXVI (1976) 103–115.

<sup>51</sup> LEROY (as in n. 10), 45, 203–4, pl. 31 and 34.

The key to understanding the evolution of these three forms lies in the depiction of the archangels despite small variations in terms of detail. They are depicted holding crosses which mirror the hand crosses used by ecclesiastics of the period. By the same token, the cross on the long staff characterises what is probably the earliest-known form of the archangels. Generally their inner wings are gracefully tapered towards the top, although they do not touch at the tips. It should also be noted a prevalent type of their attire is found in the Ḥamlo, Dabra Warq, Bāḥarā Māryām and Gešēn Māryām miniatures, although there is, as well, a certain difference in the attire of archangels in the Dabra Ab-bāy and the IES MS no. 777 miniatures. The above differences are in part explained by the existence of two different formal expressions which were practised during the period in question. One of these had its origins at King Dāwit's scriptorium and the second was practised in various monastic scriptoria and was characterised by an extensive use of geometric forms.<sup>52</sup>

It follows that in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopian artists combined a particular form for the depiction of the archangels with the Hodegetria type of the seated Virgin with the figure of the Child placed on either her left or right knee. The Ḥamlo miniature provides an initial date of this occurrence. The form was presumably well-established when King Dāwit commissioned a copy of the Miracles of Mary and ordered the artist to lavishly ornament it with miniatures bearing his likeness. The Child's hand gestures vary a great deal and rarely correspond to the distant prototype. There is also a lack of iconographic stability in depicting the figure of Mary. She is shown either seated on a chair or on an ornamented square and turned to the right, or on a bench and turned to the left.

During the same period, the form of the Virgin holding the Child in her lap made its appearance and Ethiopian artists combined this with the archangels sheltering her with their wings. In this form, which appears to be constant she is depicted frontally and usually seated on a cushion. There is no clear correlation between the varied forms of the archangels and those of the Virgin Mary. This instability appears to indicate that the artists did not have a single model but created their image of the Mother of God making use of forms which had long existed within Ethiopia.

In the final analysis, during the 14<sup>th</sup> and perhaps very early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopian artists created three distinct forms of the Virgin under the canopy of archangels' wings. One is the Orant Virgin, which due to its exceptional character failed to take root. The second form is the Hodegetria type, which evolved into numerous variants and the third is the Enthroned Virgin holding her Child in her lap – a form which faded away in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>52</sup> JACQUES MERCIER, *Ethiopian Art History* = The Walters Museum, Ethiopian Art (Lingfield, U.K. 2001) 51–52.

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### Summary

In this article the early evolution of iconic iconography of the Virgin Mary in Ethiopia is discussed. One particular image is postulated to exist on a painted *manbar* at Lālibalā. The figure of the Child Mary depicted together with her mother, St. Anne, in the wall painting at the Gannata Māryām Church can also be considered iconic. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, three specific groupings of depictions of the Virgin Mary, all clearly having iconic characteristics, have come to light: the Orant Virgin, the seated Hodegetria and the enthroned Virgin holding the Child in her lap. These three forms are characterised by the inclusion of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, who are shown sheltering her with their outstretched wings. They are depicted holding crosses, while in a particular group of miniatures they extend their hands towards Mary in a gesture of supplication. This Orant form appears to be exceptional, and exists only in 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Hodegetria type evolved into numerous variants depending on the position of the Child, on Mary's left or right arm. The form of the Enthroned Virgin holding the Child in her lap, faded away in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### Reproductions



Fig. 1: *St. George. Painting.* Bēta Gabre'el at Lālibalā, Lāstā.  
[Photo by S. Chojnacki]



Fig. 2: *Virgin Mary* (?). Painting. Bēta Gabre'ēl at Lālibalā.  
[Photo by S. Chojnacki]



Fig. 3: *St. Anne with Mary the Child*. Wall painting. Gannata Māryām church, Lāstā. [Photo by S. Chojnacki]



Fig. 4: *Virgin Mary praying*. *Book of Psalms*. Miniature. Private owner. Ambässal, Wallo. [Photo by S. Chojnacki]



Fig. 5: *Orant Virgin Mary with two Archangels*. Wall painting. Waša Sāmu'el, Tambēn. [Photo by P.B. Henze]





Fig. 6: *The Enthroned Virgin with the Child on her lap*. Miniature. Dabra Warq, Goğgām [Photo by P.B. Henze]

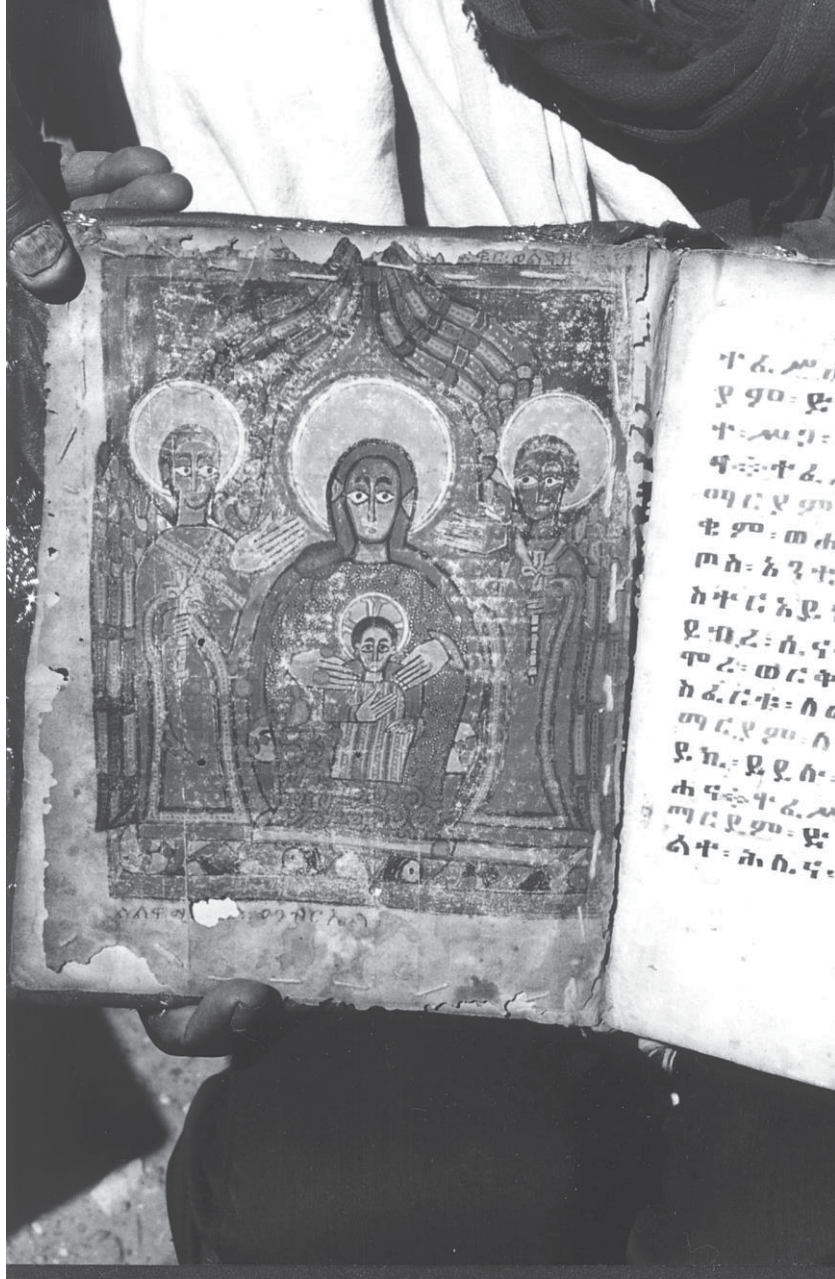


Fig. 7: *The Enthroned Virgin with the Child on her lap*. Miniature. Bāḥarā Māryām, Ḥārāmāt (Photo by P.B. Henze)