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## Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London, 1917ff.).
- CSCO* Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- PdP* *La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi classici*, Napoli 1946ff.
- PICES 8* TADDESE BEYENE, ed., *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Addis Ababa (26–30 November) 1984*, I–II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies–Frankfurt am Main: Frobenius Institut, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, 1988–1989).
- PICES 10* C. LEPAGE and É. DELAGE, eds, *Études éthiopiennes: Actes de la X<sup>e</sup> Conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes, Paris, 24–28 août 1988* (Paris: Société française pour les études éthiopiennes, 1994).
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND, A.J. DREWES, and R. SCHNEIDER, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches* (Paris: (Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres) Diffusion de Boccard, 1991).
- RRALm* *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Roma, 1892ff.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli, 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.

## Miscellaneous

### Judith and the Dragon: A Jesuit Architectural Relief from Gorgora Iyäsus Church, 1626–1632

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The preserved ruins of the church of Gorgora Iyäsus are one of the most impressive historical monuments of the Gondär region. The church was part of the complex of Gorgora Nova, at a site known today as 'Maryam Gəmb' or 'Susinyos', on the northern shore of Lake Ṭana and some ten kilometres west of the modern port of Gorgora as the crow flies. In the first half of the seventeenth century Gorgora was an area strongly associated with Jesuit missionaries and with royal activities. Between 1611 and 1618, *nəguś* Susənyos established his *kätäma* or royal camp at a place known as 'Kund Amba'. In 1614, the king commissioned Pedro Páez to construct a palace for him in the 'European way',<sup>1</sup> which the latter did using the traditional Ethiopian construction technique of dry stone. Shortly afterwards the site was abandoned by the ruler in favour Dänqäz, on a more mountainous and secure location. In 1624 or thereabouts the Jesuits relocated their Gorgora ('Gorgora Velha') residence from Ombabaqha to Kund Amba, where once the royal *kätäma* stood; they renamed it 'Gorgora Nova' and made it their most important settlement in Ethiopia.

After the arrival in 1625 of the Catholic Patriarch Afonso Mendes, the Jesuits started to upgrade their residences in Ethiopia. Thus, in 1626, worked on a new residence and a large church started in Gorgora Nova. In imitation of the Jesuits' mother church in Rome, the new temple was to be dedicated to Iyäsus, i.e. Jesus. Both the church and the residence used more sophisticated building techniques than at Gorgora Velha, including mortar masonry and beautifully-cut ashlar. The parallel rooms or cells of the residence are still well preserved while the only extant part of the once massive church of Iyäsus is a tip of the chapel's barrel vault, decorated with carved coffered rosettes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Almeida in Beccari 1907, VI, 293–295.

<sup>2</sup> Almeida in Beccari 1907, VI, 234 and 1908, VII, 7–8.

According to the historical record the church was erected over the remains of the structure that had earlier hosted the palace of Susənyos; sources inform that during construction work at the church, parts of the palace were used as scaffolding to support the new building.<sup>3</sup> Building works at the temple were described by several Jesuit priests, the last being in a letter of Father Barradas dating from the summer of 1631, only one year before the Jesuit mission collapsed. While the launching of the works of construction was supervised by Brother João Martins, who had come from India for that specific purpose, during the final stages construction was supervised by Father Gaspar Paez.<sup>4</sup>

As part of an archaeological project led by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and focusing on missionary sites of the Lake Tana region, excavations were carried out in Gorgora Nova from 2011 to 2014. During the last exploration in June 2014 an outstanding architectural stone relief was recovered from the ruins of the church. The relief was found to have been part of the church's façade. An earlier excavation at Gorgora Nova in 2012 had focused on of the rooms of the residence and had started to dig at the western area of the church. In 2014 works targeted the large rubble deposit, around six metres below the debris of the ruins. Surprisingly, the relief had not been described in any of the several missionary letters and treatises produced by the missionaries.

The excavation covered an area of 5 x 6 metres and concentrated on the southern half of the church's entrance. It covered part of the southern wall and 3 metres of the internal width of the church, which measured 10.4 metres in total. The excavation unearthed a great number of decorated stone ashlar; its quantity and variety exceeded those previously recovered in other excavated areas and in the zone immediately surrounding the church ruins. Additionally a large number of dressed plain stone ashlar, mostly quite large, were recorded, most of them belonging in all likelihood to the church's frontispiece. The decorated parts came from columns (both fluted and plain, and of circular, squared and polygonal sections), rectangular plinths or pedestals, capitals, door or window frames, ornamental tops, friezes, entablatures, arch keystones and other parts that could not be identified due to fragmentation. The motifs were mostly vegetal, though there are a few geometric and zoomorphic designs. The raw stone used for decoration was a kind of whitish, calcitic sandstone, easy to work yet brittle, and which had been already identified and chemically analyzed during previous excavations.

A few of the decorated parts unmistakably came from the internal wall of the church aisle, which was preserved until its collapse in early summer

<sup>3</sup> Almeida in Beccari 1912, XII, 270.

<sup>4</sup> Barradas in Beccari 1912, XII, 439.



Fig. 1: Relief of Judith beheading Holofernes and the dragon with Ge'ez inscriptions; Gorgora Nova, church of Iyäsus, façade; source: photo 2014, Photoshop editing by Víctor M. Fernández and Jorge de Torres

1995. A few pictures were taken before the wall's collapse,<sup>5</sup> and the general decorative layout of that part of the church is thus quite well known. The great majority of the adorned ashlar recovered during the 2014 season, however, corresponded neither to the church's side wall nor to the eastern chancel

<sup>5</sup> For example, Angelini 2006.

vault: their original position was undoubtedly the building's façade, usually the most lavishly decorated part of Catholic churches. Since the church façades invariably have symmetric patterns, the architectural elements and decorative motifs found during the recent excavations probably represent the complete catalogue of the façade decoration. However, the hypothetical reconstruction of the whole frontispiece, a genuine jigsaw, will only be possible with further research and analysis. The missionaries informed that Gorgora Iyäsus was erected by João Martins or Martínez, the same architect responsible for building the church of São Paulo in Diu (India) and they also emphasized that it had been inspired by that Indian model.<sup>6</sup> This, however, seems to hold true only for what concerns the church plan, since with a very few exceptions the decorated parts excavated in Gorgora do not match its alleged Indian model.<sup>7</sup>

A few days before the end of the excavation and some fifty centimetres above the church's original floor, a group of flat, decorated blocks appeared in the southern corner of the original church gate (Figure 1). They formed a big ornamented and inscribed section, which probably served as a kind of 'emblem' for the church. Its size suggests its original place was the upper part of the church's frontispiece, and its position at the southern end also implies that it was not the only instance of its kind, other similar pieces probably lying buried in the unexcavated façade area.

The emblem consisted of nine squared parts of approximately equal dimension (c. 55 x 55 centimetres, 19–20 centimetres wide), though the pieces at the right side seem to have been smaller, with a complete dimension of around 1.65 x 1.65 metres. The central part, by far the most important, was preserved almost entirely but for the lower half of the central human figure. The whole composition was enclosed by four quarter-of-circle bands, 7 to 9 centimetres wide, ending in scrolls. The central part of those bands has a projecting, quadrangular design, only partly preserved, while the upper and lower scrolls correspond to the lateral limits of two horizontal, quasi-rectangular panels. Although two of the broken pieces seem to be partially burnt, this does not suggest that the church was destroyed by fire since they were the only parts which showed signs of burning.

A careful analysis of the relief led to the identification of its main iconographical features. Two figures occupy the centre of the emblem, the biblical heroine Judith in the upper part, and a winged dragon in the lower. Judith and the dragon's head are encircled by an oval band, nine centimetres wide, preserved in approximately three quarters of the whole, with a Gəʿəz

<sup>6</sup> Martínez d'Alòs-Moner 2015, 244.

<sup>7</sup> Azevedo 1959.



inscription. If complete the inscription should read: ‘You are the glory of Jerusalem, you are the joy of Israel Judith, in cha(pter) 1[5]’; ተ፡ አንቲ፡ ስብሐተ፡ [አ.የሩሳ]ሌም፡ አንቲ፡ ፍስሐ[፡ እስራኤል፡] [upside down] የዲት፡ በም፡ ፲[፮] († *anti sabbatä [Iyärusa]lem anti fässäha [Äsraʾel] Yodit bämä(ʿəraf) 1[5]*). It must be noted, however, that the Gəʿəz text does not correspond to the Book of Judith from the old Ethiopic Bible but is a direct translation from the Latin Vulgata (‘tu gloria Hierusalem tu laetitia Israhel’).

The dragon also has the following inscription over its body: ‘She will break your head’; ይእቲ፡ ት[ቀ]ጠቅጥ፡ ርእ[ሰ]ከ፡ (*yəʾəti tə[qä]tāqqət rəʾəsäkä*), which seems to continue in the inferior panel: ‘Octateuch, Ge(nesis), cha(pter) 3’; አሪ፡ ዘል፡ ም፡ ፫ (Ori(t) *zälə(dät) mə(ʿəraf) 3*). It could refer to the Genesis phrase about the enmity between the woman and the serpent, ‘ipsa conteret caput tuum’ (3:15) again in the Latin Vulgata.

This Gəʿəz piece represents one of the few recorded inscriptions on stone between the end of the Aksumite period and the present time.<sup>8</sup>

The preserved part of Judith’s relief shows the heroine’s face, with her hair nicely combed backwards and with clearly marked eyes and lips; the nose is partially fragmented, a (metallic?) torquee adorns her neck and a tunic hangs from her left shoulder. Her right hand holds a straight sword and her left hand something that resembles human hair, most probably part of the head of the Assyrian king Holofernes whom Judith beheaded for the sake of Israel’s freedom. Both the tunic at the left side (leaving the right hand free for the fight) and the neck torquee have long been identified as masculine rather than feminine attributes and are probably intended to emphasize the warrior character of Judith. The sword with a straight blade and guard recalls medieval, even Byzantine, models, though the same model appears very often in Ethiopian icons and mural paintings.

The winged dragon occupies half of the total relief area, which would indicate its symbolic importance. While Judith’s figure is very rare, dragons appear frequently in Ethiopian iconography, usually representing the devil being slain by St George. In this case the beast would appear under the power of Judith, which historically has often been identified with the Virgin Mary. This identification is further supported by the biblical words engraved on and beneath the dragon, referring to the damnation of the serpent after its expulsion from Paradise. It is perhaps in this light that the Christian Ethiopians who visited Gorgora Iyäsus could have interpreted the piece. However, the image’s symbolism could have been broader, thus affording a more ‘Catholic’ interpretation. Indeed, the dragon featured as a central

<sup>8</sup> S. ‘Inscriptions: Gəʿəz inscriptions in Eritrea/Ethiopia in medieval and modern times’, *EAE*, III (2007), 163a–165a (G. Fiaccadori).



Fig. 2: Detail of the relief with the emblem of the coat of arms of Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni, Collegio Romano, Rome; source: photo 2015, Laia Martínez

symbol in the coat of arms of two influential popes who reigned in early modern times, Gregory XIII (1572–1585) and Paul V (1605–1621). While Paul V showed little inclination towards the Jesuit order, the Boncompagni pope was one of the staunchest promoters of the Society of Jesus during its first decades. In the 1570s he generously sponsored the *Collegio Romano* in the Eternal City and, with his help, the institution became the intellectual flagship of the Catholic Church; later the *Collegio Romano* would be renamed the Gregorian Pontifical University in his honour. Interestingly, dragons are ubiquitous feature of the decoration of the original building of the *Collegio*, which today hosts the Liceo Visconti (Fig. 2). Additionally, one of the features of the dragon as represented in the coat of arms of Gregory XIII is its cut tail, which also seems to be the case in the Gorgora relief. Therefore, the ‘victorious’ dragon dominating part of the façade of Gorgora Iyäsus could have been conceived as an eloquent homage to one of the Society’s greatest patrons—the emblem of another great patron of the order, the fleur-de-lys of the Farnese pope, Paul III, also appears in the internal decoration of the same temple as well as in other Jesuit temples in Ethiopia—and, in a wider context, as a sign of the victory of Rome over the heresy.

As far as the role of Judith in Catholic thought and iconography is concerned, this biblical figure was an important theme during early modern times. During early Renaissance times, the myth of Judith symbolized the courage of the commune against tyranny. Later on, the Catholic Reformation appropriated the image turning it into an allegory of Roman Catholic power and the conflict with Protestantism. Thus, according to the art historian Elena



Ciletti, 'Judith is a historical personage and a prototype of both *Ecclesia Militans* and its pope, who will ensure the defeat of their heretical enemies'.<sup>9</sup> Judith's significance was particularly cherished by the Jesuits, often dubbed as the 'soldiers of God'; the disciples of St Ignatius used to associate themselves with the allegory of the Hebrew widow killing Holofernes.<sup>10</sup> The Jesuits equated their order's eloquence with Judith's strength against her enemies.<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, the myth of Judith was a popular theme in European art since at least Renaissance times. The heroine was usually depicted with a sword in her right hand and the head of Holofernes held from her left arm. Such artists as Donatello, Michelangelo, Tiziano and Rubens produced masterworks depicting this theme. Minor works using the same motif include, among many others, wooden reliefs in the cathedral choirs in Leon or stone medallions on the church façade of Plasencia cathedral.<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the model that could have inspired the relief at Gorgora Iyäsus, the missionary report is completely silent about the iconography of the façade of Gorgora Iyäsus. Yet, we still can speculate. From the several icons and sculptures dedicated to the theme during Renaissance times one, painted by an unknown Master probably in the early 1500, resembles to some extent the Gorgora one (Fig. 2) Although the quality of the Ethiopian piece is poorer than the Italian masterwork, they do share the same frontal display and position of Judith's body. The hypothesis that the artist of the Ethiopian relief was acquainted with such work could be raised. Yet, the poor quality of the Gorgora relief invites also to think that the artist was not well acquainted with this scene. Thus, another more reasonable hypothesis is that the artist was being inspired from second hand sources, perhaps by copying one of the several engravings that were produced on the myth of Judith since the second half of the sixteenth century.

### Conclusions

The recently discovered relief of Gorgora Iyäsus is a remarkable piece, both from the point of view of the global iconography of the Society of Jesus and the history of the Jesuit mission in Christian Ethiopia. The use of old testament motives is rare in the iconography of Jesuit façades in Portuguese Asia and indicates that Christian Ethiopia not only imported and replicated Catholic art produced abroad but also became a field for artistic experimentation and innovation. The use of inscriptions in local non-European languages, has

<sup>9</sup> Ciletti 2010, 352.

<sup>10</sup> Scaglione 1986, 106–107.

<sup>11</sup> Fumaroli 1980, 181.

<sup>12</sup> López 1986, 130.



Fig. 3: Judith with the head of Holofernes; unknown Italian Master (active in 1500s in Siena), today in Palazzo Chigi Saracini, Siena; source: Wikimedia Commons

been attested elsewhere: thus, the famous façade of the church of São Paulo in Macao, built between 1620 and 1627 under the direction of the Italian Jesuit, Carlo Spinola, contains one inscription in Mandarin Chinese, curiously similar to Gorgora's text ('Holy Mother tramples the heads of the dragon'), which is also associated with an analogous image: a woman stepping on a seven-headed hydra (the beast from the Book of Revelation, 12:3). Yet, both the human figure, at prayer with hands together, and the dragon are different from the Gorgora Iyäsus's relief (Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, the Gə'əz inscription underscores the elevated status enjoyed by 'Ethiopian Latin' in the Jesuit mission. Last but not least, the piece



Fig. 4: Façade of the church of São Paulo in Macao, detail; source: photo 2010, Deror Avi and Wikimedia Commons

can be interpreted against the backdrop of the theological debates provoked by the *padres*' activities in Ethiopia. Indeed, the tensions between old and new testamentary practices, between oriental (Orthodox) and Catholic Roman traditions, were major leitmotifs of the Jesuit mission. It is quite possible that the Jesuits chose an 'ambiguous' symbol as the frontispiece for their mother church in Ethiopia, such that, on the one hand, it was easily understood by the local faithful and, on the other, it conveyed strong messages representing of a victorious Roman Ethiopian Church. The dualistic use of religious symbols could also help in bringing about the reconciliation of divergent religious traditions: the 'Hebraic' traditions of Ethiopian Orthodoxy and Roman dogmas. That such a magnificent façade probably collapsed soon after its construction is further testimony to just how difficult such an ambitious project was.

about the reconciliation of divergent religious traditions: the 'Hebraic' traditions of Ethiopian Orthodoxy and Roman dogmas. That such a magnificent façade probably collapsed soon after its construction is further testimony to just how difficult such an ambitious project was.

<sup>13</sup> Guillén-Núñez 2009, fig. 42; Tambling and Lo 2009, 84.

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### Summary

In the 2014 excavations at the Jesuit church of Gorgora Iyäsus on the northern shore of Lake Ṭana a remarkable relief in stone was unearthed. The relief was originally part of the church's façade. It represents the biblical heroine Judith over a dragon and it contains two inscriptions in Gəʿəz from the Book of Judith and Genesis. This piece represents one of the few recorded inscriptions on stone from the end of the Aksumite period to the present time. The article focuses on the historical context that witnessed the production of this relief and provides an interpretation of its iconography.