

**EVIDENCE FOR THE HISTORY OF EARLY SOLOMONIC
ETHIOPIA FROM TÄMBEN
PART I: GÄBRʼEL WÄQEN**

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Abstract

This research note presents some of the preliminary results of two recent fieldwork trips to the Q^wälla Tämben *wärädä*-district, located in the Central Zone of Təgray. The visits enabled us to gather some new documentation that will be of value for research on the history of early Solomonic Ethiopia. The evidence presented in these series of contributions will be of interest to scholars focused on the foundation and decoration of Ethiopian churches during the fifteenth century. The first contribution of the series discusses the figure of a male saint carved on the wall of the church of Gäbrəʼel Wäqen, which is located on the eastern slope of the mountain mass of Däbrä ʼAśa and was reportedly established by the Šäwan monk *abunä* Danəʼel.

Keywords

Ethiopian art – Early Solomonic period – Q^wälla Tämben – Däbrä ʼAśa – Gäbrəʼel Wäqen – Church – Carving

Our knowledge of the history of medieval Ethiopian art – that is of the material culture produced between the post-Aksumite and early Solomonic periods and of oral and written traditions associated to this heritage – is still poor. Multiple factors, ranging from the underdevelopment and marginalization of the field to a lack of self-reflexivity and methodological rigor in the relevant literature, have contributed to this situation. More qualitative and quantitative research is needed to better understand the dynamics behind art making and, in the current state of research, two types of research seem especially needed.

First, it is necessary to critically analyse and improve the existing approaches to the topic. Scholarship on Ethiopian art continues to focus too much on issues of formal exchange between the Ethiopian Empire and other traditions, and too little on a series of fundamental and interrelated questions which have to do with the production, significance, and function of art. The word “influence” continues to be used as a blanket term to refer to wide range of phenomena related to the circulation, transmission, adaptation, reconceptualization, and creation of visual culture without tackling the complexities inherent in such processes. In fact, to this day, some studies continue to adopt positivist methods, disregarding the conceptual and theoretical debates that have arisen in art history and other fields since the 1970s. Crucially, even the act of image making has been taken for granted, and insufficient attention has been paid to the background, intentions and motivations of artists and patrons. As others have argued elsewhere for the study of texts (e.g. Lusini 2001), the socio-cultural background of Ethiopian artists must be taken into consideration even when the objective is to explore the existence of formal connections between medieval Ethiopian images and earlier (possibly late antique) local antecedents or other artistic traditions.

This “cultural” turn needs to be combined with a more rigorous application of the “philological” method:¹ it is no longer acceptable to simply observe that certain features of Ethiopian art are attested in other traditions, as has been done in the past, just as it would not be acceptable to simply observe that an Ethiopic text is attested in other languages. Rather, in the same way as our understanding of the history of the Ethiopic literature has greatly benefited from a critical comparison of text versions in other oriental Christian traditions, it is necessary to flesh out, in as much as possible, the internal development of the different artistic themes attested within Ethiopia, seeking, on the one hand, to determine the material and cultural causes which prompted use and change, and, on the other hand, to establish whether there are correlations with other artistic traditions. Evidently, this research cannot ignore recent developments in other fields; for example, the study of the miniatures should proceed hand in hand with research on the diachronic development of the textual and material features of the Ethiopian manuscript;

¹ For an overview of the trajectory of this approach to the study of manuscript illustration, see Bernabò 2017.

the study of church architecture needs to take into consideration the evolution of the liturgy;² and so on.

Secondly, scholars must continue to heed Leroy's call to publish and describe the existing evidence (1955: 135). The importance of cataloguing has been repeated a number of times over the years (Bausi 2007; Wion and Bosc-Tiessé 1998), and we have recently emphasized its continuing importance for the study of written and material heritage of Ethiopia (Gnisci 2017; 2018; 2019; Villa 2018). Where possible, local traditions should also be recorded and published (e.g. Girma Elias 1977; Nosnitsin 2013a). To this end, we have been collaborating with colleagues who are working towards this common objective. However, despite continuous advancements, which cannot be summarized in a short contribution such as this, the amount of unpublished and uncatalogued data remains considerable, while the volume, and at times the methodological rigour, of relevant publications remains below an optimal level.

The present research note has been put together bearing in mind chiefly the second of these two research objectives. In other words, it aims to present some evidence for the study of early Solomonic Ethiopia, but it does not set out explore the significance of this evidence in detail. More specifically, our aim is to present readers with some valuable evidence that we recently had the opportunity to observe and photograph during a short fieldwork expedition to the the Q^wälla Tämben *wärädä*-district, located in the Central Zone of Təgray (Ethiopia).³ This includes a carving in the church of Gäbrə³el Wäqen (Fig. 1), discussed in greater detail below, and a damaged wall painting that decorates the south altar of the church of Abba Yoḥanni, that will be discussed in a subsequent issue of the *Rassegna*. A second research trip carried out by Dr Villa in early December 2019 allowed for the gathering of oral traditions concerning the history of these and other monasteries in the area (on this, see Bulletin, pp. 177–78) – traditions that were documented

² As Fritsch, Gervers (2012) attempt to do in their study of the development of the lateral sanctuaries in Ethiopian churches.

³ With Dr Rafal Zarzecny (Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome) and Tesfay Gebremedhn (St. Yared Center for Ethiopian Philology and Manuscript Studies of the Mekelle University), to whom goes our gratitude for his assistance during the research trip.

through interviews with one or more local clergymen per monastery.⁴ Interviewees were asked to respond to questions on the foundation and the early history of their communities, on the commemoration practices in honour of the local saint, and on the number of the community members as well as the manuscript holdings in their possession.

In making this new data available for further research we have two main objectives. The first is to briefly review some comparative evidence to support a fifteenth century dating for the carving from Gäbrəʾel Wäqen and the painting in Abba Yoḥanni and to show that they deserve further attention than they have hitherto received. Indeed, both remain unpublished even though their existence has been known to scholars for several years, who have at times mentioned them in passing. This lack of interest may perhaps be attributed to their poor state of preservation. Nevertheless, both the wall painting fragment and the carving are of considerable importance because they offer evidence of artistic practices that are otherwise practically unattested for the period and region in question, thus allowing us to improve our knowledge about the decoration of churches in fifteenth-century Ethiopia. Our second objective is to create a written record of the oral traditions that were documented through interviews as a way to offer some preliminary material which shall facilitate the cultural orientation of future research enterprises in the area. A wide number of large- and small-size institutions in Qʷälla Tämben remain approximately or insufficiently studied on the grounds of their history and literary activities, and the two institutions considered here are no exception. Even worse, historical sources and the secondary literature sometime provide contradictory data, which results in the merging or, at the opposite extreme, in the multiplying of places and holy men. It is thus evident that a reliable mapping of the institutions and the spiritual genealogies cannot be carried out without a survey of the field. One further issue is obviously that of the local manuscript heritage, which has re-

⁴ The research trip was financed within the frame of the long-established cooperation agreement between the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and the St. Yared Center for Ethiopian Philology and Manuscript Studies (Mekelle University).

mained substantially and deplorably unexplored by scholarship, with the notable exception of a recent survey of the library of Abba Yoḥanni.⁵

The carving comes from the church of Gäbrəʾel Wäqen (Fig. 1),⁶ which is situated approximately 10 km north-west of the town of ʿAbiy ʿAddi, the administrative center of Qʷälla Tämben. The church lies on the eastern slope of Däbrä ʿAśa and to the west of the ʿAbiy ʿAddi–ʿAdwa road. Däbrä ʿAśa (sometimes Däbrä Ansa), literally “Mount of the Fish(es)”, is a mountain mass in the shape of a tau cross on which seven sites, namely four monasteries (*güdam*) and three churches, are located. The four monasteries are (from west to east) Abba Yoḥanni, Qaqa Arbaʿtu ʿEnsässa Däbrä Təguhan, Däbrä Maryam Täʾamina, and Wäqen Qəddus Gäbrəʾel. The three churches are Qəddus Yoḥannəs Wäldä Nägʷädgʷad, Abunä ʿAbiyä ʿEgziʾ, and Qəddus Mikaʾel (see map in Fig. 2). As to the peculiar name of the mountain, a local narrative claims the existence of a legendary underground lake populated with fishes or with as many saintly hermits as fishes.⁷ Locals also refer to a system of internal galleries which would cross the mountain and connect some of the above monasteries, in particular Abba Yoḥanni and Däbrä Maryam Täʾamina. At the same time, Gäbrəʾel Wäqen also belongs to a constellation of five monasteries collectively referred to as Däbrä Bärtarwa – which only partially overlaps with the Däbrä ʿAśa cluster. In addition to the above-mentioned monastery of Däbrä Maryam Täʾamina, this latter grouping includes the churches of Däbrä Abunä Tadewos, Qəddəst Maryam Abba Nob,

⁵ The survey was fostered by the exceptional finding of a new manuscript witness to a rare non-canonical work, the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Erho 2020). In 2017 Abba Yoḥanni’s library contents were systematically investigated, though not photographed. A full report of the manuscript collection will be published in the coming years (personal communication from Ted Erho, January 15, 2020).

⁶ Full name Wäqen Qəddus Gäbrəʾel *güdam*. Coordinates: 13°43′35.2″ N, 38°58′12.4″ E.

⁷ Local people in Abba Yoḥanni explained the place name in the following way: ቅዱሳን ፡ ከም ፡ ዓሳ ፡ ውስጣ ፡ ባሕርን ፡ ዓሳን ፡ ።, “the saints are as (numerous as) fishes, inside (there is) a lake and fishes”. A further explanation documented in the monastery of Qaqa Arbaʿtu ʿEnsässa Däbrä Təguhan connects the events to the pre-Christian time: ብዙሙነ ፡ ኢልያስ ፡ ቴስያዊ ፡ ዝበሃል ፡ ከ-ፋ-እ ፡ ንጉስ ፡ ነይሩ ፡ ቅዱሳን ፡ ናብቲ ፡ ባሕሪ ፡ ተዋሒጦም ፡ በዝሓም ፡ ከም ፡ ዓሳ ፡ እዮም ፡ ።, “at the time of Elijah the Tishbite there was a violent king, the saints entered the lake and were as many as fishes”. These traditions are apparently extant only in oral shape.

and Däbrä Abunä Qawlos.⁸ This situation points to the existence of multi-layered institutional “nets” that are based on geographical proximity and partially overlap with each other.⁹

At present, it is possible to reach the foot of the mountain on which Gäbräʾel Wäqen is located with a 4WD. A gentle climb about a third of the way up the mountain’s side leads to the church. The complex, like a lavra monastery, is associated to a group of caves that are used for storage and dwelling and are situated at approximately the same level of the church further to the west. A steep climb up the mountain leads to a ledge with a hypogeum. A damaged and steep set of stairs leads down to two roughly hewn chambers that appear to have had a funerary function (Fig. 3); a brick structure has been erected at an undetermined later period above it. Finally, a steep climb to the top mountain leads to a rock pillar that has been hewn out at its centre, like a chimney, to enable ascent to its top (Fig. 4).

Local traditions, reported elsewhere, and reiterated to us, connect the church, tombs, and pillar to the memory of a local fifteenth-century saint, Danəʾel of Wäqen (Buxton 1971: 62).¹⁰ Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke reports that *abunä* Danəʾel lived at the time of king Zärʾa Yaʿqob, by whom he was well-

⁸ This information was collected during the 2019 research trip. It is important to stress that, contrary to a general claim, Däbrä Abunä Tadowos (locally named also Dabba Tadowos) did not disappear long ago. Coordinates of the site are 13°46'26.8" N, 38°59'37.6" E. The church is reportedly situated over the place where the original building was set on fire and *abunä* Tadowos of Däbrä Bärtarwa died (De Santis, 1942; Conti Rossini, 1943). The name Däbrä Bärtarwa, possibly linked to the name of the river Wärʿ (Tigrinya Wärʿi), is locally explained as a contracted form from *bärri tärara* “gate of the mountains”, to refer to the area lying between the two mountain masses of Wärqamba and Däbrä ʿAśa, and also evocatively referred to as *bärri qəddusan* “gate of the saints”, because the saints coming from the north were forced to transit between them. The name Batarwa is also mentioned in a land charter of the *Liber Axumae* (Conti Rossini 1910: 24, no. 8).

⁹ I deliberately avoid here to use the term “network”, well aware of the latter’s limitations in term of vagueness and especially in the absence of detailed studies on the historical interconnections among the various ecclesiastical institutions (Nosnitsin, 2013b; Lusini, 2015). It is however informative, as emerged on multiple occasions during the research trip, that different interviewees in different places never hesitated to list the five institutions as “members of Däbrä Bärtarwa”.

¹⁰ Not to be mistaken, according to Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke (1975: 68), for an even more mysterious local saint called Danəʾel of Tämben, styled as the “apostle of Tämben” and connected to the foundational legend of the monastery of ʿĪnda Abunä Märʿawi Krəstos in Šere.

respected (1975: 68). According to these local traditions, which were reiterated to us by the monks, he was a native of Šäwa who was exhorted to leave his home country by God in his dreams and move to Tämben.¹¹ Therein Danə³el was visited again by God in his sleep. Because of God's will Danə³el's hand became like "divine fire" (*əssatä mäläkot*) and he was able to shape the rock like wax. In so doing, the church construction was miraculously completed in three days, as promised by God.¹² Danə³el is also credited with having excavated his "prayer house", i.e. the chimney-like rock pillar situated atop the monastery. *Abunä* Danə³el died on 19 Taḥśaś, but his commemoration (*täzkar*) is celebrated on 10 Miyazya.¹³ Information recorded on the founder's life is probably identical to the narrative exposed in the hagiographical account of the saint (*Gädlä Danə³el*), which is reportedly preserved in the local library.¹⁴ This cannot be assessed with certainty, since the manuscript holdings of the community, estimated by locals to be approximately one hundred fifty units, were not surveyed during the research trip. At present, the community claims that manuscripts are not locally made and that books are purchased from other places. The monastic community, once flourishing, has also declined over time and now only four monks live at the church or in the surroundings (Fig. 5).¹⁵ The church hosts four *tabots*. These

¹¹ He was reported to have come from the south; more specifically, and not without a patent anachronism, from Addis Abäba. As acknowledged by Marrassini (1981: lxxii), the theme of God's or an angel's call to leave the home country and settle in a new land is very common in the Ethiopic hagiography (e.g., Iyäsus Mo³a, Märha Krəstos, Zäyoḥannəs, Tadewos of Däbrä Maryam, and others) and is ultimately dependent upon the story of Abraham (Gen 12:1–4).

¹² Another tradition claims that the place name comes from the Amharic expression *wäy qän* "what a day," pronounced by *abunä* Tänäś³a Mädhən during his visit to *abunä* Danə³el's monastery. The church of Tänäś³a Mädhən lies at an approximately thirty-minute walk from Gäbrə³el Wäqen, to the north-west of Däbrä 'Aśa.

¹³ No commemorative notice for Danə³el of Wäqen is found in the known edition of the Ethiopic Synaxarion.

¹⁴ The *Life* of Danə³el remains unpublished. Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke (1975: 68) records the existence of at least two copies: one kept at the monastery of Däbrä Təguhan (perhaps mistaken by the author for Gäbrə³el Wäqen) and the other on a microfilm at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abeba (no. 116, originating from the same site).

¹⁵ Among them we are particularly grateful to Abba Tadewos Ḥaylu, who kindly accepted to be interviewed during the 2019 research trip.

are consecrated to the archangels Gäbrəʾel, Mikaʾel, to St. Mary and to *abunä* Danəʾel.

Both the cave-dwellings and the funerary structure associated to Gäbrəʾel Wäqen have received limited attention and would deserve a more detailed investigation.¹⁶ On the other hand, the church, hewn out of limestone and measuring approximately 10 x 13 x 2.6 meters, has been described by other researchers including David R. Buxton (1971: 60–62) and Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2010), who believe that it was built in the fifteenth century (Fig. 6).¹⁷ This dating is supported by a study of Ethiopian sanctuaries published by Michael Gervers and Emmanuel Fritsch, who point out that this church, like the nearby church of Abba Yoḥanni, has a triple sanctuary with a rock-hewn high altar at the centre and two smaller hewn altars in the side rooms to the north and south – a feature which they associate with structures created between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (2012: 50). The church also owns a cross, locally referred to as *mäsqäl zä-wärq*,¹⁸ that can be tentatively dated to the fifteenth century on the basis of its style (Balicka-Witakowska 2010: 1136). The cross has an inscription that indicates that it belongs to the church of Gäbrəʾel Wäqen, so it may be tentatively taken as additional evidence that the church was built by the fifteenth century.¹⁹

Gäbrəʾel Wäqen's southern façade is exposed and can be reached through a hewn trench with a south-north orientation which may once have been roofed (Fig. 7) and which recalls the solution adopted for other rock-hewn churches in the Təgray and Amhara regions (e.g. Phillipson 2009: figs. 159;

¹⁶ It would be especially important to attempt to establish a date for the hypogeum and determine its relation to similar funerary structures in other parts of the region (e.g. Phillipson 2009: 40–41, 46–47, 88–91), which are, however, usually connected with the sanctuary area of a church. If this structure approximately dates, like the church, to the fifteenth century, it would represent an interesting example of both continuity and discontinuity with earlier traditions.

¹⁷ Ruth Plant (1985: 153–54), drew plans of the church without attempting to date it. The church has also been discussed in connection to its tablet-woven hangings (e.g. Gervers 2004; Henze 2007).

¹⁸ I.e. “golden cross.” The cross is said to have originally belonged to *abunä* Danəʾel. Like other such objects associated with the memory of holy men, it is believed to have curative powers: once it is ritually washed, the water used to wash it is given to drink or make ablutions to women in labour, the sick, or people who have been bitten by a snake.

¹⁹ Evidently, the inscription could have been added at a later date.

167; 172). Access to this trench is gained through a brick structure of later date. An ambulatory, obtained by hewing the rock, surrounds the other three sides of the church. Rough carvings decorate the exterior of the southern and western walls of the church, most are small crosses, but there is a standing figure to the right of the western door (Fig. 1), which appears to be a male saint, although there are no elements to attempt an identification. This feature of Gäbräʾel Wäqen is of considerable interest because, as far as we can say, there are no other churches featuring carved figurative decoration on their exterior walls, and the few parallels that come to mind are found in churches in Lasta.²⁰ The first obvious comparison is offered by the standing figures in relief the chapel of Betä Golgota (Fig. 8; Phillipson 2009: figs. 265; Mercier and Lepage 2012: 5.37, 5.39). Another, less-known, example is offered by the carved figure on the door Qanqanit Mikaʾel (Phillipson 2009: fig. 169). The Gäbräʾel Wäqen figure has not been compared to these carvings before, even though it clearly bears comparison to them both in terms of medium and iconography.²¹

It is known that such carvings are difficult to date. Thus, for instance, Fritsch and Gervers argue for a late fourteenth to early fifteenth century date for Betä Golgota (Fritsch and Gervers 2012: 15), and thus implicitly for a post-fourteenth-century date for the carved figures; Phillipson proposes a twelfth to early thirteenth century date for the figures in Betä Golgota (2009: 179–80) and a ninth to tenth century date for Qanqanit Mikaʾel (2009: 188); while Mercier and Lepage argue that the figures in Betä Golgota were created prior to the thirteenth century (2012: 113) and consider the figure in Qanqanit Mikaʾel as a subsequent adaptation of the same concept (2012: 111). These carvings, in which a figure stands under an arch, have been rightly compared with depictions of evangelists in late antique and early Solomonic Ethiopic Gospels (e.g. Phillipson 2009: 191). Some of the figures in Betä Golgota, such as St George, hold a cross in one hand and an unidentified object in the other. Phillipson (2009: 191), as well as Lepage and Mer-

²⁰ Other parallels between the churches built in these areas have been pointed out elsewhere, see for instance the evidence presented in Phillipson (2009) and Fritsch, Gervers (2012).

²¹ Another example of figurative carving can be seen in the prayer room of *abunä* Abrəham associated to the ambulatory of the late fourteenth or fifteenth-century church of Däbrä Səyon, reproduced in Fritsch, Gervers (2012: fig. 11).

cier (2012: 113), have suggested that this latter object could be a book, in the light of evangelist portraits such as the ones that appear in the *Gärima Gospels* (McKenzie, Watson 2016: figs. 74–76) and in later manuscripts.²² The *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* figure also appears to be holding an object in its right hand, but it is difficult to discern what this might be, whereas his left hand appears to point at something. This gesture appears in portraits of evangelist and holy men in Ethiopia as in other traditions, in which the figure points towards the codex held in the opposite hand (Fig. 9), so it quite possible that the *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* figure has a manuscript in his right hand (Fig. 1).

If the figures at *Qanqanit Mikaʾel* and *Betä Golgota* can be compared in terms of iconography and medium to the *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* carving, they differ considerably from it in terms of style and technique. The former are carved in relief, whereas the features and garments of the *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* are outlined with incised lines. In this respect, metal objects decorated with incised figures and paintings provide better material for a comparative analysis – though even among this enlarged body of evidence few examples provide firm dates. Stylistically, the *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* carving recalls the paintings in the oratory of *Qorqor Danäʾel* (Mercier and Lepage 2005: 138–39), which, as others have pointed out (Bosc-Tiessé 2014: 13), appear to belong to a period between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Fig. 10); and a number of crosses that have been assigned to the fifteenth century (e.g. Heldman 1993: cat. 79). It thus seems quite possible that the *Gäbräʾel Wäqen* figure was carved at the time of the church’s construction or shortly after, if we accept the fifteenth-century date suggested by other researchers.

What will now need to be established is the significance of this figure in relation to our understanding of early Solomonic art and culture. Was it originally painted like the figures in *Betä Golgota* must have once been? Was this type of decoration seen as complementary or alternative to adorning the exterior of churches with paintings? Is it possible that similar figures were found on the exterior of other churches but have been eroded by atmospheric weathering? Should the practice of decorating the exterior of churches be placed into relation with certain areas or monastic groups? Or, alternatively,

²² This is not implausible, but it is worth noting that in some Gospel books, such as ms Paris, BnF Éth. 32 (Lepage 1987: figs. 13–16), the evangelists hold a small cylindrical object that could perhaps represent a scroll (cf. Lowden 1988: pls. III, V, VII).

should we seek connections with other traditions, such as the Armenian, where carved figures often decorate the exterior of religious buildings (e.g. Pogossian, Vardanyan 2019)? What was the function of such figures? Could they have been understood as portraits of the founder(s) of a monastic or ecclesiastical institution and have been the object of veneration or commemoration? Or, alternatively, could they have been made for a group of people who were not allowed to enter inside the church? Addressing these and similar questions about Gäbräʾel Wäqen figure is challenging but vitally important for understanding the society which produced it.

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Fig. 1 – An unidentified saint, Gəbrə'el Wäqen, 15th century (?)
(Photo: Jacopo Gnisci)

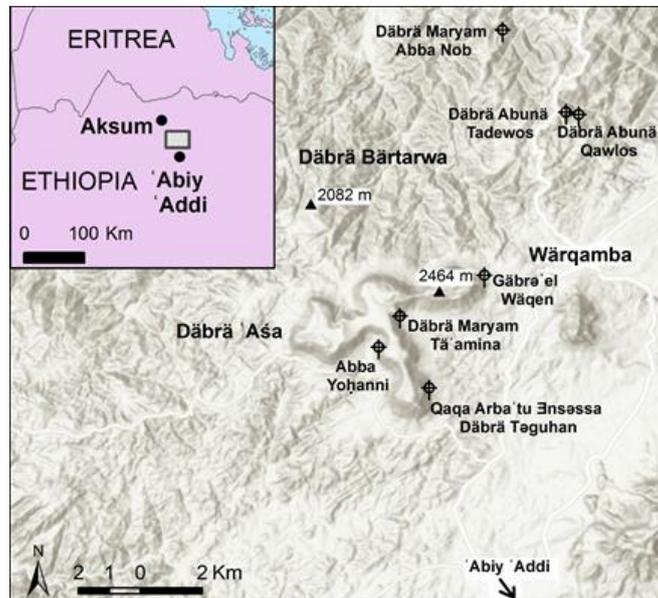


Fig. 2 – Map of Q'älla Tämben (courtesy of Luisa Sernicola)



Fig. 3 – The entrance to the hypogeum of Gäbräʾel Wäqen
(Photo: Jacopo Gnisci)



Fig. 4 – The pillar used for prayer by Danəʾel of Wäqen
(Photo: Jacopo Gnisci)



Fig. 5 – Interview with the monk Abba Tadewos Haylu, to whom we express our gratitude
(Photo: Massimo Villa)

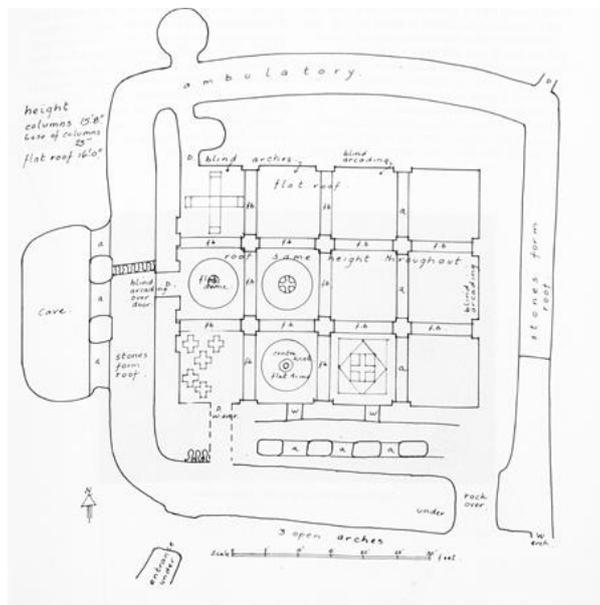


Fig. 6 – A plan of the Church of Gäbrä'el Wäqen (image from: Ruth Plant 1985)



Fig. 7 – The trench leading to the Church of Gäbräʾel Wäqen, 15th century (?)
(Photo: Jacopo Gnisci)



Fig. 8 – Carved figure from Betä Golgota, 12th–15th century (?)
(Photo: Martijn Munneke, Creative Commons)



Fig. 9 – Portrait of the Apostle Thomas next to the beginning of his Acts, Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, Däbrä Šärabi, 14th–15th century, ff. 132v-133r
(Photo: Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS Project)



Fig. 10 – Evangelists and Archangels, Oratory of Qorqor Danəʿel, 14th–15th century
(Photo: Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS Project)