

## **Ethiopian Crosses: Art in Motion**

[AFB.483]

### **00. Hand Cross**

Ethiopia, or Eritrea, early 16th century

Wood, ... (42.2 x 9 cm)

Private collection

Provenance: Sam Fogg, 2005.

Selected references: Fletcher 2005. pp. 28–29.

[AFB.094]

### **00. Processional Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 12th–13th century

Copper alloy, 10 x 4 ¾ x 1 in. (25.4 x 12.1 x 2.5 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, New York (2000.95.1)

Provenance: Eric Goode,; his gift to the Brooklyn Museum,

Selected references: Harrison 2022.

[AFB.372]

### **00. Cross (unknown function)**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 13th–14th century

Iron, niello, 16 15/16 × 2 3/8 in. (43 × 6 cm)

Private collection

Provenance: purchased from Sam Fogg, Ltd., London, October 2009

[AFB.095]

**00. Processional Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid 15th–early 16th century

Copper alloy, 11 1/2 x 7 3/16 in. (29.0 x 18.3 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, New York (81.163.2)

Provenance: George V. Corinaldi Jr., New York; his gift to the Brooklyn Museum

**Selected References:** Selected references: Harrison 2022.

[AFB.373]

**00. Pectoral Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 15th century

Bronze, 2 3/8 × 1 15/16 in. (6 × 5 cm)

Private collection

Provenance: purchased from Trotsky and Sanders, New York, July 2008

[AFB.374]

**00. Pectoral Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid 15th–early 16th century

Copper alloy, 3 1/8 × 1 in. (8 × 2.5 cm)

Private collection

Provenance: purchased from Sam Fogg, Ltd., London, October 2009

[AFB.388]

**00. Processional Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid-15th–early 16th century

Copper alloy, 10 1/16 x 12 13/16 in. (25.6 x 32.6 cm)

Private collection

Provenance:

Selected reference: Fletcher 2005, pp. 24–25, no. 6

[AFB.447]

**00. Staff or Hand Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 14th century

Iron, gold inlays, H. 13 5/16 in. (33.8 cm) WIDTH?

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 707)

Provenance:

Selected references: Mercier 2000, p. 44.

[AFB.398]

**00. Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 14<sup>th</sup>–early 15<sup>th</sup> century

Bronze, H. 11 13/16 in. (30 cm)

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 588)

Provenance:

[AFB.453]

**00. Processional Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 14th–15th century

Copper, H. 11 13/16 in. (30 cm)

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 683)

Provenance:

[AFB.399]

**00. Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid-15th century

Bronze, 15 15/16 × 11 1/4 × 1 in. (40.5 × 28.5 × 2.5 cm)

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 686)

Provenance:

Selected references: Chojnacki 1983, p. 213; Jacques Mercier in Mercier 2000, p. 74, ill. p. 75;

Girma Fesseha 2002, p. 105, fig. 98;

[AFB.450]

**00. Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 14th–16th century

Iron, gold, 11 13/16 in. (30 cm)

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 684)

Provenance:

[AFB.479]

**00. Processional Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 17th Century

Brass,

Private collection

Provenance: purchased from Trotsky and Sanders, New York, 2007

[AFB.451]

**00. Cross**

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 20th century

Wood, H. 7 7/8 in. (20 cm)

Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich (86-307 635)

Provenance:

*The Cross is a tree of life. / The Cross is a medical plant. / The Cross is a tree of prophesy. / The Cross is a tree of rest. / The Cross is an axe of perdition against Satan, / and a sword for cutting off the heads of demons.*

—Giyorgis of Sägla, *Wəddase mäsqäl* (Praises of the Cross), early 15th century<sup>1</sup>

The cross has been used as a symbol of Christian faith in the Ethiopian Empire since late antiquity. It appeared on coins starting in the mid-fourth century with those issued by King ‘Ezana, the first Aksumite ruler to convert to Christianity (see “Aksumite Coinage” in this volume). Later coins, dating between the fourth to sixth century, feature crosses in a variety of settings: beneath an arch, within a hexagon or a triumphal wreath, or at the top of a building.<sup>2</sup> Christian Ethiopians wore crosses around their necks (cats. [AFB.373, .374]) and rulers held cross-topped sceptres (see cats. [AFB.384–.386]). Beginning in late antiquity, crosses also appeared on paintings or carvings in churches. Moreover, churches could be built on a cross plan or dedicated to this symbol, while features of the landscape could be named after it.

For centuries the symbol of the cross has been omnipresent in every act of worship of the Ethiopian and the Eritrean Orthodox Täwəḥədo Churches.<sup>3</sup> It surmounts church buildings and appears on patriarchal crowns and clerical vestments (cat. [AFB.372]). It is drawn on the covers of sacred scriptures, tattooed on foreheads and arms, and embroidered on the dresses of Christian women. Based on their use, Ethiopian crosses are divided into three principal types: the processional cross (*qäqʷami, mäsqäl* or *mäṣor mäsqäl* [AFB.388, .398, .399, .450, .453, .454, .479]), the hand cross (*yä-’əḡḡ mäsqäl* [AFB.451, .483]), and the pendant cross (*yä-’angät*

*mäsqäl* [AFB.373, .374]). Processional crosses are usually mounted on poles and held up by deacons during liturgical services and processional parades (AFB.094, .095). They are also used by priests to bless baptismal waters, burial grounds, and the congregation at Mass. Some large hand crosses function as altar crosses and are used by priests for blessing during eucharistic services, whereas smaller ones are kept in the pockets of individual priests and used to bless the faithful in all their meetings and greetings. Pendant crosses are worn around the neck, primarily for protection, but also as a talisman or souvenir.<sup>4</sup>

A homily for the Feast of the Cross attributed to the metropolitan Minas of Aksum, the second head of the Ethiopian Church, after Frumentius, exemplifies the significance of the cross for Christian Ethiopians:

For behold, we men and women carry, like the crown of a monarchy, the sign of the Cross on the face, the chest, the arm, the hand, fingers—on the body. This victory on Satan happens when we use this sign of the Cross on houses, walls, shutters, in the desert, on paths, on mountains and hills, cloisters, meal-tables, and vestments, like a fence and refuge against demons. We celebrate this sign of the Cross for all things on the seas, rivers, vessels, and on the road.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the cross has such great theological significance for Christian Ethiopians that it is praised next to the Lord and the Virgin Mary. Prayers are started by blessing oneself in the sign of the cross (*bä-tə'märtä mäsqäl*), and all blessings in all prayers and services are done by and in the sign of the cross.<sup>6</sup> The Feast of the Finding of the True Cross (*mäsqäl*) is a major open-air celebration in commemoration of the finding of the True Cross.<sup>7</sup> Ethiopian tradition claims that a fragment of the True Cross (*gəmmadä mäsqäl*) was brought to Ethiopia at the turn of the fifteenth century and gifted to the Church of ʾĒgzi'abəḥer Ab, located on a cross-shaped mountain called Gəšän, which remains a site for pilgrims who view it as a second Jerusalem. Dedications to the cross can be seen in the titles of prayers and literary works, such as the

*Wəddase məsqäl*, quoted at the start of this text, as well as in the names of places and of buildings, such as the Church of the True Cross (Betä Mäsqäl) in Lalibäla.<sup>8</sup>

Over the centuries, Christian Ethiopians have exhibited their artistic skills and devotion by producing crosses in a variety of media and forms. At times, controversy could arise over whether it was appropriate to use precious metals such as gold, rather than wood, for making sacred objects.<sup>9</sup> Some crosses were attached onto a long and slender iron rod (*bäträ məsqäl*); crosses of this type were probably used as pastoral staffs or to single out hermits and prominent members of a monastic community, who might use them as praying or walking aids.<sup>10</sup> Today, a number of churches preserve staff crosses that belonged, according to local oral traditions, to some of the country's most famous saints.<sup>11</sup>

Some hand crosses with long handles may have served liturgical functions and are comparable to examples from Nubia and Egypt (see, for example, cat. [AFB.244], from Qasr Ibrim).<sup>12</sup> Other hand crosses feature precious-metal inlays to encourage theological and aesthetic appreciation (cat. 00 [AFB.447]).<sup>13</sup> While some scholars have argued that this technique developed in the fourteenth century as a result of exchanges with the Mamluk court, further research is needed to support this opinion (see “Medieval Islamic Inlaid Metalwork in the Churches of Lalibela” in this volume”).<sup>14</sup> In exceptional circumstances, gilding was also used as a means to enhance the features of crosses. In the example shown here, which probably dates to the fifteenth century and must have belonged to a prominent ecclesiastical figure, the gilding has been used to emphasize the outlines of the cross and the smaller pattée crosses nestled within its interlace (fig. 00).<sup>15</sup> This piece has a movable openwork cube attached to its base that may have been understood as a reference to the altar.



Processional crosses were used throughout the “Middle Ages” and early modern era in the Ethiopian Empire. The earliest securely dated example of this type is a circular cross donated around the mid-twelfth century by King Ṭāntāwädəm (r. 12th century?) to the Church of ‘Ura Mäsqäl.<sup>16</sup> Circular processional crosses were perhaps inspired by paintings of Christ or a cross within an aureole that existed in Ethiopia, as well as in Egypt and Nubia, and continued to be widely employed between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (cat. [AFB.450]).<sup>17</sup> The dating of most of these crosses is generally tentative and based on stylistic evidence.<sup>18</sup>

Processional crosses were produced in a rich variety of shapes, sizes and materials and feature an extensive range of geometric patterns that carried theological and symbolic meanings.<sup>19</sup> An early example, dating to the twelfth or thirteenth century, features three horizontal and three vertical crosses (cat. 00 [AFB.094]) formed by the voids in the in metal that allow each one to effectively become “a cross of light.”<sup>20</sup> The openwork of this example may have been inspired by the wooden carvings in Ethiopian churches.<sup>21</sup> A different type of decoration appears in a group of quadrilobed crosses that can be attributed to a period between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (cats. [AFB.398; 453]). The elaborate interlace patterns of these crosses may have been inspired by similar patterns that appear in coeval illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts (see, for example, cat. [MMA 1998.66]). However, it is also possible that these patterns were understood as a skeuomorphic reference to the textiles that were used to envelop sacred paraphernalia or the baskets used to carry the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup>

The mid-fifteenth century saw the widespread diffusion of crosses featuring figurative engravings. Strikingly, the Crucifixion appears only occasionally as a theme on these objects, as showcased by cat. [AFB.399]—a piece that bears a strong resemblance to a cross commissioned by Emperor Yəṣṣāq (r. 1414–29/30) and features a prostrated figure beneath the Crucifixion.<sup>23</sup>

According to the inscription, this figure, who can be identified as Täsfa Masqal, the cross's donor (mentioned on the other face), fell to the ground upon seeing the Crucifixion. His reaction is deferential and is meant to echo that of the apostles during the Transfiguration.

Numerous lozenge-shaped crosses from this century that feature figurative panels at their center framed by lacework or floral patterns may have been produced at the command of the Ethiopian Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob (r. 1434–68), who was particularly devoted to the Virgin Mary and expected his subjects to venerate images of her in church (cats. [AFB.095, .388]).<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, and similarly to icons, a majority of crosses made during this period feature a representation of the Virgin and Child on one side (see “Icons in Ethiopia and the Advent of Panel Painting” in this volume). Other subjects that appear on crosses of the period include the apostles (cat. [AFB.095], face b), the saints, God in Majesty, and the Traditio Legis (cat. [AFB.388], face b). Emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob also promoted the use of pectoral crosses, so it is probably not a coincidence that there exist a number of examples that can be tentatively attributed to this period on stylistic grounds (cats. [AFB.373, 374]).

When exhibited in a display case, Ethiopian processional crosses appear still and bare. However, it is important to keep in mind that they originally would have been enlivened by solemn liturgical movements. Draped in precious fabrics, surrounded by other sacred objects, and held by individuals who strove to become like angels, these crosses would have been viewed in a symbolically charged space and in a sensorially rich environment filled with the smell of incense and the sound of scriptural utterances. **JG and AG**

Abbink, Jon. 2015. 'The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity: Ecclesial Symbolism and Religious Experience'. In *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba, 122–40. New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Chojnacki, Stanislaw. 2006. *Ethiopian Crosses: A Cultural History and Chronology*. Milan: Skira.

[Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church]. 1999/2000. ጸሎት ዘዘውትር፤ (*Ṣälot Zäzäwätər*, "Daily Prayer"). Addis Abäba: Täsfa mattämiya bet.

Getatchew Haile. 2011. 'Praises of the Cross, Wəddase Mäsqäl, by Abba Giyorgis of Gasəčča'. *Aethiopica* 14: 47–120.

Getatchew Haile. 2017. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's Tradition on the Holy Cross*. Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 10. Leiden and Boston, MA: BRILL.

Gnisci, Jacopo. 2018. 'Crosses from Ethiopia at the Dallas Museum of Art: An Overview'. *African Arts* 51 (4): 48–55.

Gnisci, Jacopo. 2020a. 'Ecclesiastic Dress in Medieval Ethiopia: Preliminary Remarks on the Visual Evidence'. In *The Hidden Life of Textiles in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean: Contexts and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Islamic, Latinate and Eastern Christian Worlds*, edited by Nikolaos Vryzidis, 231–56. Turnhout: Brepols.

Gnisci, Jacopo. 2020b. 'Christian Metalwork in Early Solomonic Ethiopia: Production, Function, and Symbolism'. In *Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa*, edited by Susan Cooksey, 254–65. Gainesville, FL: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art.

Gnisci, Jacopo. 2022. 'Copying, Imitation, and Intermediality in Illuminated Ethiopic Manuscripts from the Early Solomonic Period'. In *Illuminating Metalwork: Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts*, edited by Joseph S. Ackley and Shannon L. Wearing, 139–65. Sense, Matter, and Medium 4. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Hect, Dorothea, Brigitta Benzig, and Girma Kidane. 1990. *The Hand Crosses of the IES Collection*. Addis Ababa: The Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Juel-Jensen, Bent. 1993. 'The Evolution of the Ethiopian Cross'. In *Aspects of Ethiopian Art from Ancient Axum to the 20th Century*, edited by Paul B. Henze, 17–27. London: The Jed Press.

Kaplan, Steven. 2002. 'Seeing Is Believing: The Power of Visual Culture in the Religious World of Aṣe Zār'a Ya'eqob of Ethiopia (1434–1468)'. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32 (4): 403–21.

Kaplan, Steven. 'Finding the True Cross: The Social-Political Dimensions of the Ethiopian *Mäsqäl* Festival'. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, no. 4 (2008): 447–65.

Mercier, Jacques, ed. 2000. *L'arche éthiopienne: Art chrétien d'Éthiopie*. Paris: Paris musées.

Mercier, Jacques. 2021. *Art of Ethiopia: From the Origins to the Golden Age (330-1527)*. Paris: Éditions Place des Victoires.

Mercier, Jacques, and Claude Lepage. 2012. *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia: The Monolithic Churches and their Treasures*. Translated by Jennifer White-Thévenot and Jane Degeorges. London: Paul Holberton.

Munro-Hay, Stuart. 1999. *Catalogue of the the Aksumites Coins in the British Museum*. London: Trustees of the British Museum.

Silverman, Raymond A. 2019. 'Forging Faith: Ethiopian Iron Crosses'. In *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths*, edited by Allen F. Roberts, Tom Joyce, and Marla C. Berns, 420–23. Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum at UCLA.

---

The authors thank Jonas Karlsson for commenting on a draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Getatchew Haile 2011, p. 56 (text in Ethiopic), p. 85 (English trans.). ALL GOOD]

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Aksumite coinage, see Munro-Hay 1999; on the different cross types that appear on these coins, see Juel-Jensen 1993

<sup>3</sup> The Eritrean Church split from the Ethiopian Church in 1993, after the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

<sup>4</sup> Chojnacki 2006 offers the most thorough review of these material and cultural traditions; see also Abbink 2015; Gnisci 2018.

- 
- <sup>5</sup> English translation of quotation taken from Getatchew Haile 2017, p. 123.
- <sup>6</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Täwähədo Church 1999–2000.
- <sup>7</sup> Kaplan 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> On the *Wəddase mäsqäl*, see Getatchew Haile 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Gnisci 2022, p. 163.
- <sup>10</sup> Chojnacki 2006, pp. 25–26.
- <sup>11</sup> Chojnacki 2006, pp. 102–5; Silverman 2019, p. 420.
- <sup>12</sup> For an overview of Ethiopian hand crosses, see Hecht, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990.
- <sup>13</sup> It's unclear if AFB.447 is a hand or a staff cross, as its handle may have originally been longer.
- <sup>14</sup> Mercier 2021, p. 155.
- <sup>15</sup> This example is also reproduced in Mercier 2021, fig. 144.
- <sup>16</sup> Gnisci 2020a, pp. 255–56, fig. 28.3; Mercier 2021, p. 49.
- <sup>17</sup> Mercier and Lepage 2012, p. 141; Gnisci 2020a, p. 256.
- <sup>18</sup> Recently, Harrison 2022, has attempted to establish whether there are correlations between the style and alloy type of some Ethiopian and Eritrean crosses.
- <sup>19</sup> The complex significance of some of these features defies contemporary interpretation and resists translation into English. On the latter point, see the example in Getatchew Haile 2011, p. 53.
- <sup>20</sup> Quotation taken from an English translation of the Ethiopic version of a Homily of James, Metropolitan of Sarug on the Cross, by Getatchew Haile 2017, p. 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Mercier and Lepage 2012, p. 141.
- <sup>22</sup> Gnisci 2020c, p. 231.
- <sup>23</sup> On Emperor Yəshaq's cross, see Mercier 2021, p. 147, fig. 150.

---

<sup>24</sup> Kaplan 2002.