Jacopo Gnisci

Imaging Sanctity in Early Solomonic Ethiopia: The Portrait of '*Qəddus*' ʾIyasus Moʾa

Abstract: The monastery of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos owns a richly illuminated gospel book that was commissioned by its founding abbot ʾIyasus Moʾa who appears in a prefatory portrait at the very front of the volume. The image is accompanied by a caption which identifies the figure as a 'saint'. Because it uncharacteristic for the Christian Ethiopian tradition to identify a living individual in such a way, scholars have debated whether this portrait was added to the manuscript after ʾIyasus Moʾa's death. The present contribution revisits this question to show that the image and the caption were part of the abbot's commission. The article then goes onto to demonstrate that the miniature deliberately blurred the distinction between ʾIyasus Moʾa and the other saintly figures in the volume and argues that this was done intentionally to legitimise his position as one of the most powerful individuals of his time.

1 Introduction

The illustrated Golden Gospel book of the monastery of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos (EMML 1832) is a most valuable document for the history of the Ethiopian empire in the last quarter of the thirteenth century.[1] In addition to the text of the Four Gospels, which is accompanied by paratextual and commentarial matter, the manuscript contains numerous notes by later hands in blank pages found at its beginning and between the gospels and their prefatory material.[2] These additions deal with some of the material transactions and possessions of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, including land and paraphernalia, and offer evidence of a network of relationships between its members and the outside world. The codex is also decorated with an extensive cycle of miniatures that embellish the Eusebian Appa-

1 The manuscript was fully photographed in black and white in 1974/1975 by the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) project, and it was subsequently described in Getatchew Haile 1981, 293–301. For a digital copy of the microfilm, see <https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/203663> (accessed on 1 July 2024).

2 Taddesse Tamrat 1970; Getatchew Haile 1981, 294–300; Kropp 1998.

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ratus, illustrate episodes from the Old and New Testaments, such as the Entry into Jerusalem, and portray holy men and women, including the evangelists and martyrs.[3]

Among the additions to EMML 1832 is a note on fol. 24^{v}, located between a prefatory cycle of illuminations and the *Synopsis of Classes* (*Gəṣṣāwe śərʿāt*, CAe 1548), that provides information about the circumstances and time of its making:[4]

> In thanksgiving to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I, the sinner and wrong-doer monk ʾIyasus Moʾa, have had this Gospel written for ʾƎsṭifānos of Ḥayq in the year of mercy 465 (= 1280/81 CE). And I, ʾIyasus Moʾa have presented this Gospel to ʾƎsṭifānos of Ḥayq, so that God may save me with his prayer, may remit my sins in his great mercy, and may (this Gospel) intercede with its God for me. I donated this Gospel (on condition) that it is not taken from this place or made to cross the lake and be taken elsewhere as a deposit, be it by any *ʿaqqābe saʿāt*, or by the *qasa gabaz* or by the archdeacon, or by the children of place (i.e. the monks), nor by one from the outside or from within. May anyone who takes this Gospel by force or under duress be excommunicated in heaven and on earth, forever. Amen.[5]

The text provides an *ante quem* date of 1280/1281 for the completion of the manuscript and tells us that it was commissioned by ʾIyasus Moʾa – the founding abbot of the monastery of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos. It moreover tells us that the gospel book was destined for the monastery where it is still kept and where, in all likelihood, it was also produced. Thus, if the note is accepted as reliable – and, so far, most scholars have accepted its authenticity – it allows us to determine when, where, for whom, and possibly by whom the manuscript was made. Precious few manuscripts from the Early Solomonic Period (1270–1527) provide us with this kind of information, so EMML 1832 is a particularly important witness for the history of book illumination in the Ethiopian empire. The first miniature of EMML 1832, on fol. 5^{v}, shows the patron of the manuscript, ʾIyasus Moʾa, standing beneath an arch surrounded by birds and between drawn curtains (Fig. 1).[6] He holds a cross in one hand and a manuscript in the other. The miniature is accompanied by a caption which reads 'Image of *Qəddus* (Saint) ʾIyasus Moʾa' and informs viewers

3 The miniatures are listed in Getatchew Haile 1981, 300–301; and Heldman 1993, 176.

4 On the *Synopsis of Classes*, see Zuurmond 1989, vol. 1, 8–9.

5 Translation by Massimo Villa. Sections of this note had been edited and translated in Sergew Hable Selassie 1992, 245–246.

6 On the history of this abbot, see Taddesse Tamrat 1970, 88–91; Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 158–167, 177–178; Marrassini 1986; Derat 2003, 88–96. His hagiography has been edited and translated by Kur (ed. and tr.) 1965; it may have been composed in the fifteenth century, see Kaplan 1986; Derat 2003, 55; Brita 2020, 274–275.

that the figure they are beholding is comparable to other in the manuscript.[7] Except for a few details, such as his protruding ears and lack of halo, he cannot be distinguished from the other saintly figures in the manuscripts. His movements are constrained, his expression impassioned, and his vestments are flat so as to obscure his gendered features.[8] This lack of likeness was deliberate to strengthen association with the other holy bodies represented in this codex: in early Solomonic Ethiopia, as in other Christian contexts, 'in order to be lifelike, a portrait had only to be accurately defined in relation to the portraits of other saints'.[9]

The miniatures in the gospel book of ʾIyasus Moʾa are the earliest firmly dated examples of book illumination from the Early Solomonic Period, while his portrait offers the earliest surviving representation of a living individual in an Ethiopic manuscript. Despite its importance for the history of early Solomonic book illumination, EMML 1832 has not been the subject of a monograph, though its miniatures have been recurringly discussed by art historians since the 1980s.[10] As for the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa, while frequently mentioned in passing, it has been the subject of only one in-depth article by Claire Bosc-Tiessé[11] In this paper, I focus on hitherto overlooked features of ʾIyasus Moʾa's portrait to explore hitherto unconsidered issues of patronage and self-representation that throw light on broader questions about monastic leadership, canonisation, the use of the visual, church–state relationships, and the socio-religious role and significance of illuminated gospel books.

7 While seldom used for living individuals, the term *qəddus* may have been used on occasion to refer to the patriarch of the Church. I am not aware of any studies of this topic, but I am grateful to Augustine Dickinson for drawing my attention to this possibility.

8 On holy men in Ethiopian art, see especially Tribe 2009. For a discussion on the representation of holy figures in other Christian traditions, see Maguire 2000; Miller 2009; Bolman 2016, 17–26; Tomeković 2011; for a wider discussion about body studies, see the essays collected in Turner 2012.

9 Maguire 2000, 5. I use the term 'portrait' in this context, but I do not wish to draw a rigid boundary between this image and the iconic images of saints that are found in the same manuscript. For some considerations of this question beyond the context of Ethiopian studies, see Marsengill 2013, 4; Belting 1994, 131. On the use of the term 'icon' in the context of Ethiopian studies, see Heldman 1994, 21.

10 Early art historical discussions include Heldman 1983; Chojnacki 1983, 33–35, 53–55, 74–77; Balicka-Witakowska 1992. More recent literature is discussed below.

11 Bosc-Tiessé 2010.

Fig. 1: Gospel book, portrait of the abbot ʾIyasus Moʾa and later notes, Ḥayq, Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Four Gospels of Iyäsus Moʾa (EMML 1832), fols 5ᵛ–6ʳ, 27.5 x 30 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the Documents of Early England Data Set (DEEDS) project.

2 The date of the miniature

Most authors discussing ʾIyasus Moʾa's portrait have taken for granted that it is coeval with the other miniatures of the manuscript and that it was painted before the abbot donated the codex to Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos. For example, in his study of donor portraits, Stanislaw Chojnacki says that it was 'painted during his lifetime'.[12] Similarly, for Marilyn E. Heldman, the note on fol. 24ᵛ and the portrait 'leave no question concerning the age of the manuscript or the identity of its patron'.[13] Ewa Balicka-Witakowska is more cautious about the manuscript's illumination, noting that the inscription on fol. 24ᵛ may just refer to its texts and that a second note on fol. 338ᵛ records that Emperor Yāgbā Ṣəyon (r. 1285–1294) decorated EMML 1832 with gold and silver in 1293.[14] In her view, this note could be taken either as an

12 My translation from the French, see Chojnacki 1999, 623.

13 Heldman 1993, 176.

14 Getatchew Haile 1981, 299; Balicka-Witakowska 1997, 123. The last digit of the date appears to have been rewritten at an undetermined point in time, but this does not prejudicated the attribu-

indication that the manuscript was illustrated at this later date or as evidence that the emperor had a treasure binding added to its covers. More recently, Jacques Mercier has also touched on the matter. He argues that the palaeography of the caption beneath the images is similar to that of the other figures, that the images and text are contemporary, and that the abbot 'was thus recognized as a saint during his lifetime, both by his community and himself'.[15]

To date, Bosc-Tiessé is the only scholar who has investigated the questions of the date of the illuminations of EMML 1832 and the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa in considerable detail and with methodological rigour. Bosc-Tiessé is more critical in her approach to the document on fol. 24^{v} as a source for dating the miniatures in the manuscript, rightly noting that the manuscript has not been the object of a detailed codicological study and that the quires with the miniatures may have been added at a later stage.[16] Moreover, in view of the absence of information on the matter in this text, she points out, like Balicka-Witakowska, that the note on fol. 339^{v} could be taken as an indication that Emperor Yāgbā Ṣəyon sponsored the illustration of the Gospel.[17] Ultimately, however, she thinks it unlikely that the manuscript could have been produced without the illuminated Eusebian Apparatus that typically decorates early Solomonic gospel books. Thus, she concludes that

> it is plausible that the image of ʾIyasus Moʾa – and its legend – were added in 1293/1294 by order of Yāgbā Ṣəyon who strove to have ʾIyasus Moʾa recognised as a saint, not as a martyr, but – as the image shows – because of his qualities as a priest monk.[18]

As I see it, the main problem with Bosc-Tiessé's otherwise convincing line of thought is that it rests on the opening premise that it would be 'inconceivable that ʾIyasus Moʾa would call himself a saint' or that those around him would address him in such a way during his lifetime.[19] In view of the belief that the portrait and its caption could have only been executed after the death of that ʾIyasus Moʾa in 1293, Bosc-Tiessé argues that they are not coeval with the production of the Gospel and its other miniatures. Several arguments go against this hypothesis. First, as Bosc-Tiessé herself recognises, the caption of the portrait appears to have been

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tion of the note to the reign of this sovereign. I am grateful to Jonas Karlsson for drawing my attention to this detail.

15 Mercier 2021, 82.

16 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 220.

17 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 205.

18 My translation from French, Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 222.

19 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 199.

written by the same hand who penned down the gospel texts and the captions of the other miniatures.[20] Secondly, the portrait is executed in the same style and with the same colours used for the other illuminations. Moreover, while this can only be confirmed by a codicological analysis of the artefact, from the available images the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa seems to have been painted on the first page of the second gathering of the manuscript, a ternion (fols 5^{r}–10^{v}), and to have been executed on a bifolio that is decorated with Canons V (fol. 10^{r}), VI and VII (fol. 10^{v}).[21] It does not, in other words, appear to be an inserted folio, though it could well have been painted by the same artist/scribe on the blank pages preceding the Eusebian Apparatus at a later stage.

Nevertheless, the latter possibility seems to me unlikely, given the interval of over ten years between the donation of the gospel book to Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos in 1280/1281 and the death of ʾIyasus Moʾa. Even if the same artist/scribe had been alive, I find it improbable that he would have been able to execute a miniature with the same tones used for the earlier paintings, or that he or his patrons would have felt compelled to achieve such visual coherence. The addition of such an extensive cycle of illuminations to a manuscript long after its donation also seems doubtful. All of this suggests that the simplest explanation is also the most likely – namely that all the miniatures were executed at the same time and when the manuscript was commissioned by ʾIyasus Moʾa around 1280/1281. Other details point in this direction. Notably, the fact that the abbot does not have a halo, unlike most other holy figures in the illuminations, and, as I have argued elsewhere, that he is the only figure with an iron rather than a gold cross.[22]

If the above conclusion is correct, it follows that ʾIyasus Moʾa had some say in the creation of his portrait – though the exact relationship between him and the painter eludes verifiability – and that EMML 1832 must have had a number of blank pages at its beginning at the time of its donation. Empty pages, subsequently filled with notes, were also left throughout the manuscript between the prefatory

20 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 205.

21 This observation is based on the black and white microfilm of the manuscript and on available photographs of it.

22 Chojnacki 1999, 624; Gnisci 2022, 162 on the absence of a halo. On the use of black to represent iron, see Chojnacki 2006, 118; and Gnisci 2022, 161–163, where I argue that yellow was used in this period and in EMML 1832 as a way to represent gold; cf. the yellow cross held by an angel in the scenes of the Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace (fol. 17^{r}) and the Annunciation (fol. 17^{v}) in this manuscript, but also with the chalice held by Stephen the Protomartyr (fol. 15^{v}), with the jewelled cross of the Crucifixion (fol. 22^{v}), and with the covers of the gospel books held by Christ (fol. 23^{r}) and three out of the four evangelists (fols 35^{v}, 184^{v}, 269^{v}).

matter, the evangelist portraits, and the texts of the Gospels.[23] We do not know for sure whether these pages were intentionally included to allow room for additions to the manuscript and whether the first quire of the manuscript, a binion (fols 1^{r}–4^{v}), was added at a later stage. Nevertheless, the current evidence suggests that the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa was conceived as the first page with any content and as the first image of the codex.[24] This is a remarkable feature that has not yet drawn sufficient attention. Equally significant is the fact that ʾIyasus Moʾa is described as a 'saint', since the term was not systematically deployed to describe the other holy figures represented in this manuscript – it is not used, for example, for the Apostles Paul (fol. 13^{v}) and Timothy (fol. 14^{r}). In the miniatures the title is only associated to the martyr Cyricus, Saint Mary, and the evangelists. Finally, it is worth noting that the arch under which ʾIyasus Moʾa stands is clearly meant to evoke those above the Canon Tables and evangelist portraits. All these aspects deserve further comment.

3 Legitimising ʾIyasus Moʾa: The visual cues

The inclusion of a portrait before the Eusebian Apparatus is not without some precedents in Eastern Christian art. In the Syriac Rabbula Gospels three images precede the *Epistle to Carpianus*: the Election of Matthias, the Virgin and Child, and Eusebius with Ammonius (fols 1^{r}–2^{r}).[25] All three scenes in this frontispiece are set under architectural canopies which present features, such as the plants and

23 While it was not uncommon to leave the page behind the evangelist portraits empty in Ethiopic gospel books, some of the solutions in EMML 1832 stand out for their lavishness: the opening between the ending of the chapters of Matthew and Luke and their subsequent portrait were originally blank (fols 34^{v}–35^{r}; 183^{r}–184^{v}); more striking still is the fact that several folios before (fols 23^{v}–24^{r} – with at least one leaf missing) and after (fols 25^{r}–29^{v}) the donation note by ʾIyasus Moʾa on fol. 24^{v} were left empty, were these pages not proven to be later additions by a codicological analysis of the manuscript.

24 If the first quire was presented in 1280/1281, it would have been empty as the notes are all associated with later abbots. Since the note on fol. 5^{r} is missing its beginning, some empty pages at the beginning of the manuscript must have been lost.

25 Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 1.56. On this extensively discussed manuscript, and its miniatures, key studies include Leroy 1954; Leroy 1964, 139–197; Cecchelli, Furlani and Salmi 1959; Bernabò (ed.) 2008; Pacha Miran 2020. The manuscript's illustrations have been frequently viewed in comparative terms with the Ethiopian tradition, starting with Monneret de Villard 1939; and including Lepage 1987, 177, 186; and, more recently, McKenzie and Watson 2016, 51; Gnisci 2020a, 22.

birds, that recall Canon Table decoration and the evangelist portraits found on their margins.[26] The Armenian Etchmiadzin gospel book has a similar set of images, showing Christ and the evangelists standing under a sequence of arches that recall those found in Canon Tables (fols 6^{r}–7^{r}) – though in this example the portraits are placed after the Eusebian Apparatus.[27] As for the Ethiopic tradition, the late antique gospel book of Garimā III, according to the reconstruction by Judith S. McKenzie and Francis Watson, originally featured an opening with Eusebius on one page and Carpianus on the other.[28] In this example Eusebius is placed in a laurel frame, rather than under an arch, but he does hold a codex like ʾIyasus Moʾa and he is positioned before the *Epistle to Carpianus*. The pose of three of the evangelists in this manuscript also bears comparison with that of the abbot of Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos.

26 On the evangelist portraits in the Rabbula manuscript, see Friend 1929, 4–5; McKenzie and Watson 2016, 70, 75–76. In the Syriac Four Gospel book of Diyarbakır, a portrait of Christ prefaces the Canon Tables, see Bernabò and Kessel 2016. On the circulation of visual prefaces to the Eusebian Apparatus, see also Zamparo 2018.

27 On this manuscript, see Strzygowski 1891; Macler 1920; Der Nersessian 1933; and Mathews 1982. This manuscript has also been frequently compared with Ethiopic works, again, starting with the seminal study by Monneret de Villard 1939. Other comparable late antique and medieval examples showing the evangelist under arches can be seen in various contexts, including Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna; the throne of Maximian; Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Library, Garrett 6; Rossano, Museo Diocesano e del Codex, Codex purpureus Rossanensis; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, gr. Z. 540, all reproduced and discussed in Friend 1927, figs 17–20, 26, 31–40, 144–147, 173–176. Other comparable examples include the portraits in the Gundohinus Gospels, Autun, Bibliothèque municipale, 3, which are discussed in Nees 1987, 83–130, pls 32–35, alongside additional relevant versions of the motif; a Coptic gospel book in the Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. copt. 8, discussed in Leroy 1974, 154–155, pl. 38; and the Georgian gospel manuscript kept at Mt Sinai, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Georg. 38, discussed in Weitzmann 1973, 11–12, figs 8–9. For the Ethiopian tradition, research on the evangelist portraits in Ethiopic gospel books has been pioneered by Monneret de Villard 1939; other discussions include Lepage 1987, 162–163; and Gnisci 2018, 370–371, with further bibliography.

28 McKenzie and Watson 2016, 51, figs 55–56.

Fig. 2: Gospel book, Canon Tables X^1 and X^2, ʿĀdwā, ʾƎndā ʾAbbā Garimā, Garimā III, fol. 4^v, 33.2 × 25.4 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

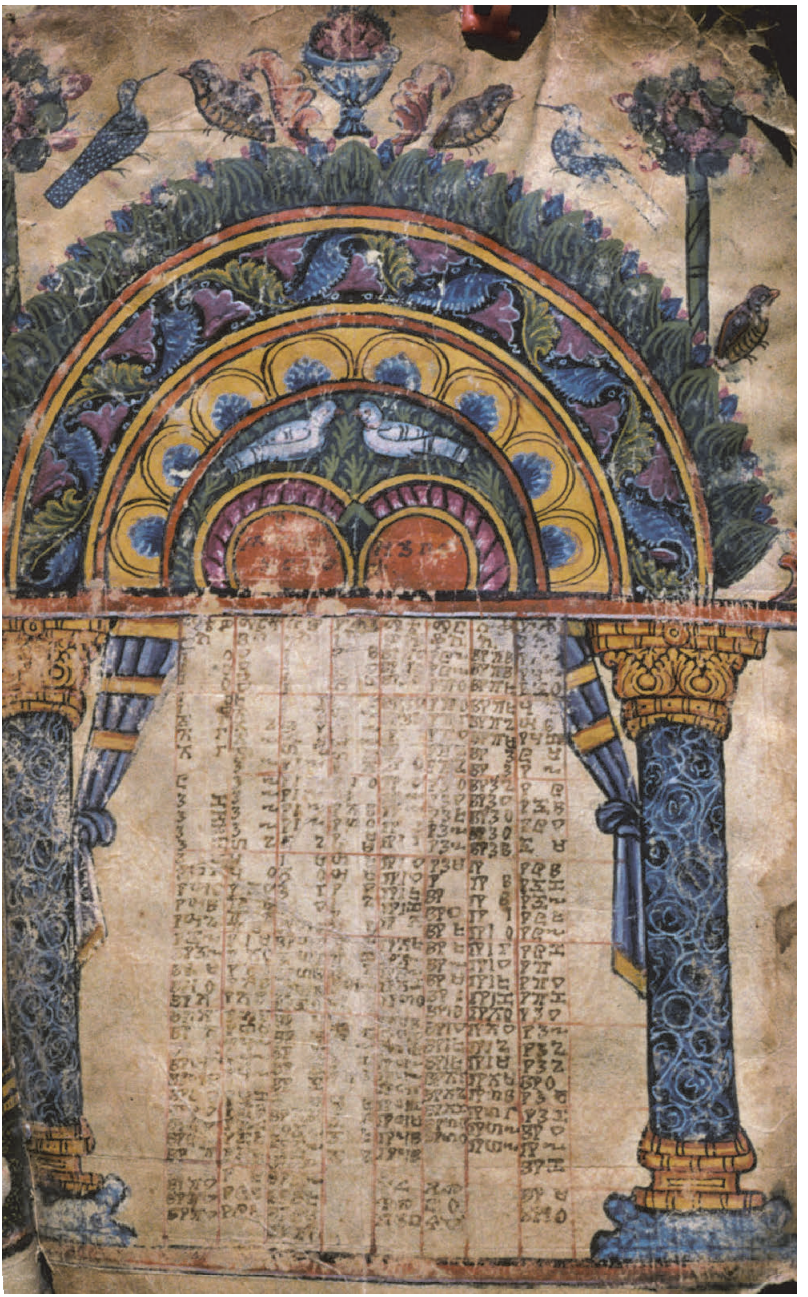

Fig. 3: Gospel book, Canon I, ʿĀdwā, ʾƎndā ʾAbbā Garimā, Garimā I, fol. 2^{v}, 35.3 × 26.4 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

The illuminator of EMML 1832 must have drawn on precedents like these when he painted the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa. The pattern that fills the arch above him evokes those seen in the Canon Tables and frames of the manuscript Garimā III (Fig. 2), while the birds and fruit-filled vase bring to mind late antique motifs and especially the Canon Tables of Garimā I (Fig. 3).[29] Some authors have viewed these explicit references to Aksumite models in early Solomonic images as an index of artistic conservatism or, worse, as evidence of an incapacity to develop new and independent visual ideas.[30] I have argued elsewhere that such approaches are open to criticism when they do not actively interrogate the social, religious, and political reasons behind the visual approaches of early Solomonic artists and patrons.[31]

In the case of ʾIyasus Moʾa's portrait, I would argue that the miniature's Aksumite tone lends authority to his image by including visual citations taken from earlier illuminated gospel books. The presence of the Eusebian Apparatus and of a frontispiece of full-page miniatures showing the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus in most illuminated Ethiopic gospel books from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries epitomise broader antiquarian interests.[32] Comparable attitudes can be detected in the inclusion of Aksumite regalia in later illuminated psalters.[33]

Arguably, the painter and patron of EMML 1832 – the exact roles of the two individuals in the creation of the pictorial scheme remains to be analysed – felt compelled to include references drawn from earlier illustrated Ethiopic manuscripts because of the value they attached to the codices in which they were found. After all, even if textual and visual transmission were not necessarily bound by the same principles, Christian Ethiopian illuminators operated within a culture that valued the reproduction of sacred texts, such as the Four Gospels, and attached particular significance to individual manuscripts as repositories of institutional records and objects for ritual or daily use that contributed to a sense of continuity and communion be-

29 On the motifs in the Canon Tables of these two manuscripts, see Leroy 1962; Lepage and Mercier 2012; McKenzie and Watson 2016, 83–116; and Gnisci 2020b, with additional bibliography. For a more general discussion of the Canon Tables, see Nordenfalk 1938 and Crawford 2019.

30 Negative views of early Solomonic book illumination are found, for example, in Conti Rossini 1927 and Monneret de Villard 1943, 42. The question is more nuanced for the approaches deployed, e.g. in Lepage 1987, which still deserve greater scrutiny.

31 Gnisci 2020a. I am not aware of in-depth discussions about the possible roles of multiple actors in the articulation of the visual in manuscripts from the Early Solomonic Period, but there have been studies focusing on royal patronage and artistic personalities for Ethiopian icons, most notably Heldman 1994. For a discussion on the significance of patronage in Ethiopian society, see Bausi 2013.

32 There have been extensive discussions focusing on this group of images, frequently referred to as the 'short cycle', or on individual scenes from it, see in particular Monneret de Villard 1939; Heldman 1979; Heldman and Devens 2009; Lepage 1987; Lepage 1988; Lepage 2002; Lepage and Mercier 2012, 111–115; Balicka-Witakowska 1997; Fiaccadori 2003; Gnisci 2015a; Mercier 2021, 84–92, 159.

33 Juel-Jensen 1989; Heldman and Devens 2009, 81, n. 18; Gnisci 2020a.

tween the biblical church and the communities to which they belonged.[34] Biblical citations were also integral in Christian Ethiopian literature and are a manifestation of a culture that valued engagement with as well as the re-enactment of tradition.[35] The use of Aksumite motifs may have also been seen as a visual quotation of sorts.

Fig. 4: Gospel book, Matthew the Evangelist, Ḥayq, Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Four Gospels of Iyäsus Moʾa (EMML 1832), fol. 35ᵛ, 27.5 × 17.5 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

34 For general discussions about scribal practices in Ethiopia, see Lusini 2004; Bausi 2008; Bausi 2014; Bausi et al. 2015; Bosc-Tiessé 2014; on the use of manuscripts as repositories of land grants and historical information, including colophons, see, respectively, Crummey 2000; Bausi 2016. On the impact of these cultural and material practices on the visual realm, see Gnisci 2017; Gnisci 2020.

35 For a discussion about the use of biblical parallels in the canonisation of Ethiopian men, see Kaplan 1984.

In this regard, the portrait epitomises the desire to encourage meaningful interconnection between biblical times and the present: ʾIyasus Moʾa is associated with the evangelists by virtue of matching pose and setting. The arch surmounting the abbot rests on a pair of fluted columns with composite capitals that are especially similar to the ones that flank Matthew the Evangelist (Fig. 4, fol. 35^{v}).[36] This suggests that the caption which invites the viewer to identify ʾIyasus Moʾa as a 'saint' reiterates a point that is just as clearly expressed in visual terms.

Moreover, by turning our attention to the attire of ʾIyasus Moʾa we discover that his portrait operates in a second and more subtle manner. The abbot dons several attributes that identify him as a monk, including the skullcap, staff-cross and belt.[37] His mantle and tunic are red. As Mercier has recently observed, this latter detail invites comparison with the portraits of St Peter (Fig. 5, fol. 14^{v}) and St Mark (Fig. 6, fol. 132^{v}) from the same manuscript, since both are shown with a hooded red over-vestment. Mercier concludes that 'the red of ʾIyasus Moʾa's garments seems to make him their equal in Ethiopia and, at the very least, constitutes the earliest evidence of the eminence of his status'.[38] In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that, according to local traditions, ʾIyasus Moʾa secured a favourable deal with the soon-to-be founder of the Solomonic dynasty, Yəkunno ʾAmlāk. In return for his support, Yəkunno ʾAmlāk granted land and privileges to Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos.[39] These included elevating its future abbots to the position of *ʿaqqābe saʿāt* ('keeper of the hours'), which has been described as 'the most important ecclesiastical official in court'.[40]

36 The motif of the fluted columns is discussed in Mercier 2021, 82.

37 On the ecclesiastical vestments of the Ethiopian Church, see Hammerschmidt 1970; discussions about their representation in images, and especially the monastic garb of ʾIyasus Moʾa, are available in Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 212; Chojnacki 1999, 623; Gnisci 2020c; Mercier 2021, 82.

38 Mercier 2021, 82.

39 An English translation of the account of the pact between the two men according to the saint's posthumous biography is available in Kur (ed. and tr.) 1965, 19–28. This pact has been discussed elsewhere, including Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 67; Kropp 1998, 306, 318; Derat 2003, 88–110; Nabert 2012, 56. The tradition is also recorded in a slightly later (fourteenth century?) note found in the Gospel of ʾIyasus Moʾa aptly placed on the page opposite to his portrait (fol. 6^{r}), where it follows a list of manuscripts in the property of the monastery. Such tradition is not recorded instead in the saint's homely, discussed in Marrassini 1986, 177. The dating of these works remains an object of considerable scholarly debate, as discussed in Nosnitsin 2005, esp. 224–225.

40 Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 272. See also Kaplan 2003.

Fig. 5: Gospel book, Saint Peter, Ḥayq, Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Four Gospels of Iyäsus Moʾa (EMML 1832), fol. 14^{v}, 27.5 × 17.5 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

The juxtaposition of ʾIyasus Moʾa with St Peter and St Mark teases out connections between Ethiopia and Egypt, since the latter two figures can be said to embody the Church of Alexandria. The link is most evident with Mark, as the founder of the Alexandrian see. Heldman has convincingly shown that St Mark's miniature is different from those of the other three evangelist in the Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos Gospels. She observes that 'only St Mark wears a pointed cap similar to the *qob* or monastic headpiece worn by ʾIyasus Moʾa', an attribute that singles him out 'as a monastic scholar, the spiritual father of the scholars of the Egyptian Church, a figure with

whom ʾIyasus Moʾa and his successor abbots at Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos could identify'.[41] In her view, both the miniature of Mark the Evangelist before his Gospel and that of the relic head of this evangelist (Fig. 7, fol. 13^{v}) from the same manuscript, are indicative of ʾIyasus Moʾa's desire to underscore and promote his personal ties with, as well as the Ethiopian Church's affiliation to, the Egyptian Church.[42]

Fig. 6: Gospel book, Mark the Evangelist, Ḥayq, Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Four Gospels of Iyäsus Moʾa (EMML 1832), fol. 132^{v}, 27.5 × 17.5 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

41 Heldman 1983, 568.

42 On the ties between the Churches of Egypt and Ethiopia, see Munro-Hay 1997. On the impact of these connections on early Solomonic art, with reference also to some of the miniatures in the Gospel of ʾIyasus Moʾa, see Heldman 2007; on their impact on the literary culture, see Bausi 2020, with an extensive bibliography on the subject.

Fig. 7: Gospel book, head of Mark the Evangelist, Ḥayq, Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Four Gospels of Iyäsus Moʾa (EMML 1832), fol. 13^{v}, 27.5 × 17.5 cm. © Michael Gervers, courtesy of the DEEDS project.

The connection of St Peter with Egypt is less readily apparent. Because he holds the Keys of Heaven, it is clear that he is the leader of the Apostles. However, the caption blurs his identity by describing him as 'Peter the archbishop, last of the martyrs'. Therefore, according to this caption, the figure standing before us is actually Pope Peter I of Alexandria (d. 311) who was martyred during the Great Persecution. Most likely, the author of this image consciously conflated the two

figures to strengthen the manuscript's figural connections with Egypt – a conclusion first drawn by Bosc-Tiessé.[43] Based on these observations, we may reasonably conclude that the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa invites observers to associate him with some of the most prominent figures of Egyptian Christianity, a strategy that occurs frequently also in Ethiopic hagiographic writing of the subsequent centuries, but also in the representation of Ethiopian saints.[44] As Antonella Brita puts it, such strategies were widespread and represented 'an anachronistic attempt to create an ideological connection with Egyptian monasticism in order to validate the authority of Ethiopian-Eritrean monasticism as its direct descendant'.[45]

To summarise my arguments, I set out to show that the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa is enriched by an array of visual references that confer legitimacy to its subject. The abbot's pose is almost identical to that of the evangelists Matthew, Luke, and John, as well as the Apostles Paul and Timothy, so as to assert transtemporal continuity with the apostolic past. The position of the image before the Eusebian Apparatus and its architectural frame were drawn from an earlier illustrated gospel book – possibly a venerated copy dating to Late Antiquity – in order to enhance its authoritativeness and present its subject as participant to a tradition dating back to the Aksumite Period. Finally, the abbot's attributes single him out as a prominent monastic figure and his red vestments elicit associations with the patriarchs of Alexandria that likely reflect his new-found prominence as a close ally of the emperor, his monastery's present connections with Egypt as well as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's historical, institutional, and theological ties with the Coptic Orthodox Church.

43 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 210.

44 Brita and Gnisci 2019.

45 Brita 2020, 281. Alexandrian traditions concerning Mark the Evangelist and Peter I of Alexandria circulated already in Ethiopia during the Christian Aksumite Period, as attested by an early Ethiopic manuscripts that preserves, among other texts, a copy of the *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae* edited in Bausi and Camplani 2016. As Camplani 2015, 98, notes, the text aims, among other things, to 'support the prestige of Alexandria as an eminently Christian city, whose episcopal see is of apostolic origin (thanks to the mediation of Mark the Evangelist)' and 'has suffered martyrdom and persecution through its most illustrious representatives (Peter I and Athanasius)'. It remains to be established whether the illustrations of Mark and Peter in EMML 1832 were inspired by such early Ethiopic sources.

4 The perception of gospel books at Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos

Crucially, all these visual cues also enhance the status of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos as an institution founded and led by such an eminent figure as that which appears before us in the portrait. On this premise, we might further argue that the book held by ʾIyasus Moʾa is a mise-en-abîme of his gift which, in turn, stands in metonymic relationship with the monastic community for which and by whom it was created.[46] Central to my argument is the notion that Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos was an institution where manuscripts such as EMML 1832 were produced, scribed and painted – a view held by all scholars who have dealt with its collection – and the idea that the gospel book shared a symbiotic relationship with its users.[47]

In fact, while ʾIyasus Moʾa may have provided the input and funds for its creation, as a material artefact, the codex would have been the result of the coordinated labour of multiple individuals: some monks would have purchased the skins, while others would have prepared them for writing. The inks and colours may have been produced by one or more monks, but their sourcing was likely a collective endeavour, especially if some pigments were imported from other regions. Likewise, the ruling, binding, painting, and scribing had to be carried out by one or more individuals. In turn, the daily needs of all these individuals would have been supported by communal work of other monks.[48]

As a text-carrier of the Four Gospels, the manuscript commissioned by ʾIyasus Moʾa bears all those layers of significance that Christians derive from the narratives about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As an object that is a 'representation of the Word and the absent person of Christ', as Beatrice E. Kitzinger puts it for the medieval Latin tradition, it functioned as an icon.[49] Lastly, as a unique material artefact, the codex effectively represents the community of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos and its activities: the collective labour that went into its production reflects the monastery's organisation and social structure; the notes it con-

46 On the significance of this detail, see also Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 212.

47 On the existence of a 'scriptorium' at this monastery, see Bausi 2006, 538; Bausi 2008, 518; Derat 2012, 69; Bosc-Tiessé 2014, 10–11. On the monastery's collection of manuscripts, see Sergew Hable Selassie 1992 and Hirsch 2004.

48 Ethiopian sources are frequently silent about the material activities involved in the production of manuscripts, but there is evidence suggesting that they were typically the result of 'teamwork' effort, as presented in Bausi 2014, 42–43.

49 Kitzinger 2019, 119. For discussions about the iconicity of manuscripts, beyond the context of Ethiopia, see, as examples, Lowden 1990; Lowden 2007; Parmenter 2006.

tains about its lands and possession record the monastery's wealth, property, and interactions and mention some of its most prominent representatives; and, lastly, because of its educative and liturgical uses, it both shaped and participated in the religious, daily, and spiritual life of the monastery.

If, as I believe, the book held by ʾIyasus Moʾa was meant to be read as a representation of the manuscript within which it is situated, which he presents as much to the viewers as to the holy figures that decorate the manuscript, then I would suggest that the monks of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos who gazed at the volume shortly after it was commissioned would reflexively view it as an instantiation of the community to which they belonged and for which they worked under the spiritual leadership of the abbot. Additionally, they would have also associated it with their sacramental activities, a connection that is further affirmed by the fact that the abbot stands under an arch, a motif which symbolises the sanctuary in the context of early Solomonic painting, and by the existence of a plethora of liturgical references in several of the other illuminations in the manuscript.[50]

The position of the portrait, at the very front of the codex, also calls for interpretation and, in my view, is open to two opposite readings. The first is that the image conveys a message of power and hierarchical authority by virtue of its preliminary position and that ʾIyasus Moʾa was so self-assured and confident about his new-found prominence that he did not object to having his likeness shown before that of the Apostles, the Virgin Mary and even Jesus. Such a display of hubris is all the more remarkable when we consider that in most subsequent examples of portraiture from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the donor is shown in attitudes of reverence towards the divine.[51] The second is that ʾIyasus Moʾa stands at the threshold between the earthly world outside the book and the sacred world within, positioned at a respectful distance from the most holy part of the manuscript and temporally removed and physically set apart from the sacred history represented within. And, yet, he is closer to that which is holy than the viewer and acts as a mediator between them

50 Bosc-Tiessé 2010, 212–213, who mistakenly describes the arch above ʾIyasus Moʾa as a 'tempietto', puts forward the noteworthy argument that his cross is a large processional cross used in a liturgical setting rather than a staff cross. I am not convinced by this possibility, even if elsewhere, I have suggested that a number of miniatures from the Early Solomonic Period, including some found in the Gospels of ʾIyasus Moʾa, contain liturgical allusions, see Gnisci 2015a; 2015b; 2015c.

51 See the examples discussed in Chojnacki 1999; I discuss this point more extensively in Gnisci 2023, 130–131. One rare exception to this observation is a miniature discussed in Bausi 1994 [1996], 57–62, which shows an early-fifteenth-century prince surrounded by his retinue and represented as a saint on horseback except for the missing halo.

because of his liminality.[52] We may never be able to fully determine whether the placement of his image was informed by poised swagger or deference towards the sacred, but it may well have been a bit of both in some measure.

5 The image of ʾIyasus Moʾa beyond the confines of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos

So far, my analysis has focused principally on the patronage of ʾIyasus Moʾa, the strategies employed by the painter of his gospel book to encourage visual rumination, and the possible reception of his portrait within the confines of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos. This approach is informed by the belief that close-up viewing of the manuscript was always intended for a restricted audience within the monastery. However, it is also beneficial to widen the scope of this discussion and situate the portrait within the broader context of early Solomonic painting. My main argument in what follows is that although this image draws on local and coeval ideas about imaging holiness, it is also quite unique in several significant respects. In pursuing this line of inquiry, my goal is to go beyond simplistic readings of early Solomonic art that posit an undifferentiated system of attitudes towards the visual.

By its very existence, the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa affirms the possibility of comparing a living individual to a saint visually as well as in writing. This is not entirely unparalleled: authors like Steven Kaplan and Antonella Brita have shown in their research on hagiographic material from the Early Solomonic Period that it was not uncommon to find local saints compared or equated to angels and figures of the Old and New Testaments.[53] However, hagiographies were generally composed *after* the death of their protagonist and, among the dozens of illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts that survive from the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, none bear a portrait like that of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos Gospels. The only comparable image is found in another, slightly younger, gospel book from Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos. The manuscript was commissioned by *ʿAqqābe saʿāt* Krəstos Täsfanä, a successor of ʾIyasus Moʾa, and shows him in the latter's company alongside two other deceased monks from Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos (Fig. 8, fol. 16^{v}).[54] This image speaks to the endur-

52 For a discussion of the notion of liminality in medieval art history, see De Blaauw and Doležalová 2019.

53 Kaplan 1984; Kaplan 1985; Brita 2015; Brita 2020.

54 Addis Ababa, National Archive and Library Agency, 28. On this miniature and the manuscript, see Pāwlos Ṣādwā 1952 and Balicka-Witakowska 1997, 124–125, who describe the manuscript's visual features and provide additional references.

ing significance of the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa within the confines of his monastery, but it is of limited value for thinking about a wider context.

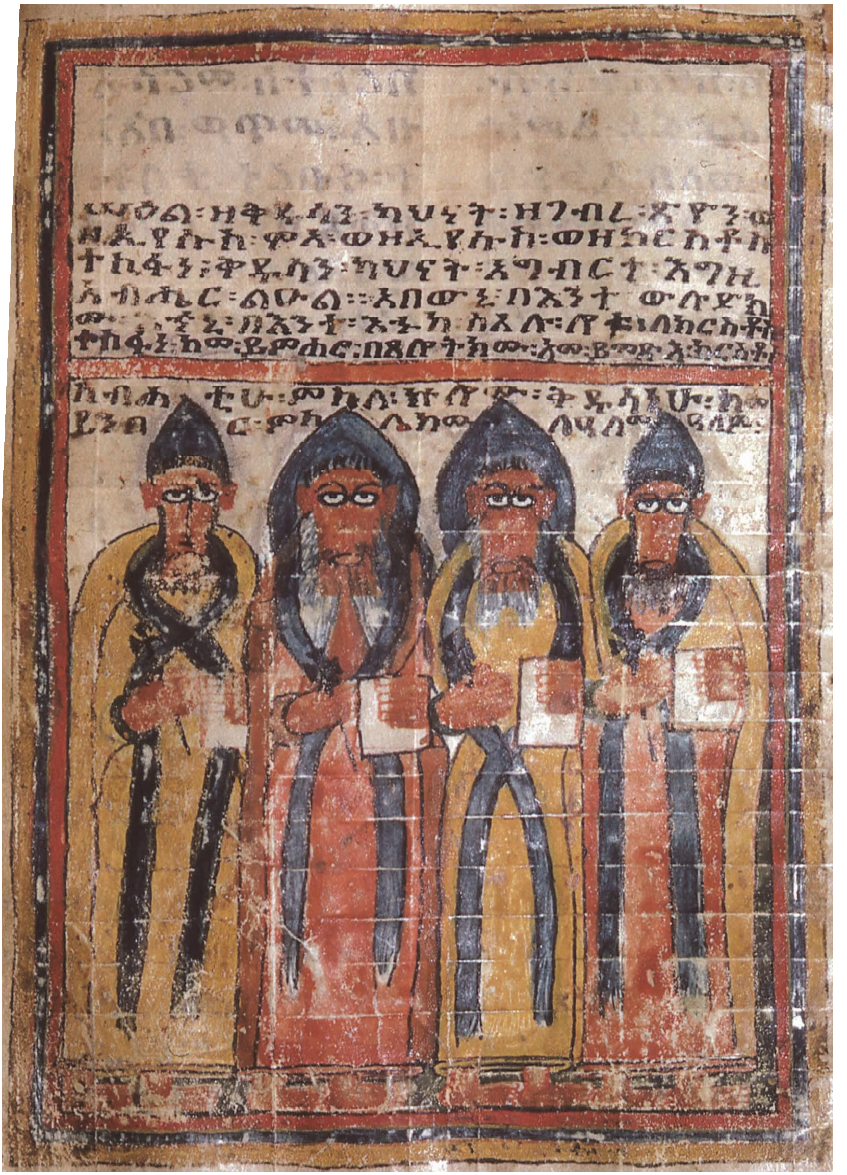

Fig. 8: Gospel book, abbots of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos, Addis Ababa, National Archive and Library Agency, 28, fol. 8^{v}, 29.5 × 20.5 cm. © Stanislaw Chojnacki, courtesy of the Beta maṣāḥəft project.

In my view, the lack of comparable miniatures in a numerically significant, though admittedly slightly posterior, corpus of manuscripts suggests that the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa was somewhat unprecedented and did not inspire widespread imitation. The lack of other images of the abbot beyond the context of his monastery also suggests that his cult did not gather momentum across the Ethiopian empire after his death.[55] In this regard, I believe that the closest visual parallel to our miniature is a near-coeval wall painting showing Yəkunno ʾAmlāk between two ecclesiastical attendants in the church of Gannata Māryām.[56] I have recently discussed this image in considerable detail in another paper where I observe that, besides the emperor, the only other figure who is shown flanked by attendants and seated in full-frontal view is Jesus Christ himself. This consideration, and the lack of comparable examples of imperial portraiture in the following century, led me to conclude that the Christomimetic features of his portrait must have been 'scandalous' for those contemporary viewers that did not have strong ties with his court. I conclude by arguing that his imperial portrait was

> created to support his [the emperor's] devotional and political aspirations. […] At least in the intention of its makers and sponsor, the image would sustain the emperor's legitimizing agenda and bolster the standing of the monastic community which operated within the church. […] While the church's pictorial scheme is overall ingenious and multifunctional, the decision to show the emperor and some of his family members not as supplicants, but as powerful political figures with a right to be visually equated to Christ and the Virgin Mary may have ultimately backfired. This ambitious iconographic solution may have been adopted because Yəkunno ʾAmlāk needed to shore his status as a dynastic founder, but the lack of such blatantly panegyrical images in the centuries that followed his reign, strongly suggests that this type of image was not met with widespread approval.[57]

Despite the fact that they were painted on different types of supports, the images of Yəkunno ʾAmlāk and ʾIyasus Moʾa have a lot in common. In particular, they (1) show individuals who had acquired power thanks to the demise of the previous dynasty rather than because of their lineage (dynastic in the emperor's case and monastic in the abbot's); (2) were painted at a time when their subjects were still alive; (3) aggrandise their subjects by including visual details that encourage associations with holy models (e.g. saints, evangelists, Christ himself); and (4) did not, as far as the evidence goes, engender widespread imitation, in all likelihood

55 This conclusion is bolstered by the limited copies of his hagiography, as discussed in Marrassini 1986, 175.

56 For details about this church and the literature about it, see Gnisci 2023.

57 Gnisci 2023, 131.

because they were out of the step with the deferential attitude that characterised Christian Ethiopian engagement with the sacred in the fourteenth century.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that the image of ʾIyasus Moʾa that decorates the beginning of a gospel manuscript he commissioned, as well as the caption which accompanies it and identifies him as a saint, were in all likelihood painted when this powerful abbot was still alive. The style of the miniature, the palaeography of the caption, and the fact that the abbot does not have a halo are among the elements that support such a conclusion. The placement of the abbot's image as well its iconography are remarkable. ʾIyasus Moʾa portrait occupies a liminal position between the viewer and the sacred content of the book and presents himself as a mediator between the two. Many visual elements in this miniature, such as the arch under which the abbot stands, appear in the portraits of other holy figures that decorate the rest of the manuscript and I have suggested that this was done to drive home the point that the founder of Dabra Ḥayq ʾƎsṭifānos should be viewed as a saint.

Finally, pointing out that is unusual to find living people represented in Christian Ethiopian art in such a self-aggrandising way, I suggested that the closest parallel to the portrait of ʾIyasus Moʾa is offered by a wall painting that shows Emperor Yəkunno ʾAmlāk, the abbot's closest political ally. These two honorific images were probably emanations of the courtly milieu in which the two men played prominent roles. Moreover, both paintings were probably sponsored individuals who needed to consolidate their power: Emperor Yəkunno ʾAmlāk had to legitimise his position as the initiator of a new dynasty and ʾIyasus Moʾa needed to secure and validate the new-found prominence of his monastery as the site which appointed one of the most important ecclesiastical officials in the country. No doubt, both emperor and abbot faced considerable opposition from rival parties and may have viewed images as a means to strengthen their claims to authority. Retrospectively we can views the emperor and the abbot as two of the most successful political actors of their time. However, since there were almost no comparable portraits of living individuals produced in the decades after their death, I have suggested that their common approach to visual propaganda did not set a successful precedent to be followed by subsequent patrons.

Abbreviations

CAe = Clavis Aethiopica.

EMML = Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, deposited at Addis Ababa, National Archives and Library of Ethiopia, and at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, MN.

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