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“Against Thirty and Twenty Five Devils”: Two Ethiopian Painted Amulets in the British Museum Collection**Abstract**

The paper discusses two paintings on parchment preserved in the British Museum collection, one representing the cycle of Moses, the second St. Mary, St. George and a pair of suppliants. Both are found to be amulets, although they lack protective prayers, which is an unusual feature. Their effectiveness is based upon a carefully chosen set of apotropaic images.

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The British Museum owns a small, but interesting, collection of Ethiopian items which were donated in 1912 by the family of the British traveller and adventurer Charles Speedy.¹ He spent many years in Ethiopia, first at the court of King Theodore II and later as a political adviser to General Napier. Eventually, after the British government decided to take charge of Theodore's son Alämayyāhu, he was also made responsible for the care of the prince.²

Among this collection, a pair of large pieces of painted parchment, attributable to the same artist deserves particular attention.³ At first glance it seems as though the scenes and figures depicted on them have very little in common with each other. However, due

¹ *The Illustrated London News*, 18 July 1868, p. 52; R. Pankhurst, 'Captain Speedy's 'Entertainment': The Reminiscences of a Nineteenth Century British Traveller to Ethiopia', *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute*, 38:3 (1983), pp. 482–48.

² J. Southon, 'Prince Alamayehu and Captain Speedy', *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, 1–6 April 1991*, ed. Bahru Zawde, R. Pankhurst, Tadesse Beyene, Addis Ababa 1994, vol. 1, pp. 251–63.

³ The pieces, which measure approximately 120x120 cm each, are presently separately framed under glass. They are catalogued as: Af 1912, 1120.2 and Af 1912, 1120.3.

to a relatively transparent iconography and the presence of inscribed captions, we are able to interpret their meaning and establish the purpose of the pictures.

The piece designated as A (Fig. 1), can be divided into two registers. The upper is dominated by the figure of St. Mary with the Child flanked by two angels and accompanied by the unfortunately somewhat obscure legend: አተበገ: [?] ማርያም: ምስለ: ወልደዝበ:- “Atabaga [?] Mary with her Son”.⁴ Rendered in a half figure, even somewhat simplified, she follows the most common Ethiopian iconographical type, which reproduces a Byzantine icon, still preserved in the Roman church of Santa Maria Maggiore and called “*Salus populi romani*”.⁵ Mary holds in her left hand a diminished, but still visible handkerchief, the characteristic detail of the famous *Vorlage*. The disposition of her right hand has been changed into a gesture of blessing by elongating the fingers. She is the only person crowned by a halo and the only one who gazes straight at the viewer, establishing eye contact. Jesus’ blessing hand also has long, extended fingers. He wears a necklace, which is typical of Ethiopian silver jewellery and has an unusual hearstyle with tufts of hair around his head like a nimbus. One may suppose that the latter detail was inspired by a depiction of *Kwər’atā Rə’əsū* in which the nails stick out of Jesus’ head creating a sort of halo,⁶ and that, by the addition of this element, the painter was recalling the predestination of the Child.⁷ The angels, identified as Gabriel and Michael⁸ are armed with swords and each raise a wing above St. Mary’s head, according to an iconographical formula well established in Ethiopian art since the middle of the 15th century.⁹ The importance of Michael and his superiority over his companion is expressed by the dimensions of his figure: in fact, he is the largest figure in the painting.

The centre of the lower register is occupied by the mounted St. George killing the dragon and is labelled with the caption: ጊዮርጊስ: ፈረስ: (sic) – “mounted George”. The saint is throwing spears towards the beast and one of them has already pierced its profusely bleeding jaws. The dragon (ደራጎን) is represented as a decoratively crueld snake, with ears on its head. A little devil called ጋኔን: – *ganen* emerges from the middle of

⁴ The figure of Jesus is labelled with the inscription: ግዛ: – “the Child”.

⁵ S. Chojnacki, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting: Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and their Adaptation: from the 13th to the 19th Century*, (ÅthForsch 10), Wiesbaden 1983, pp. 228–232.

⁶ Cf. for instance the painting of the 17th century diptych in IES, no. 4116, S. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Icons: Catalogue of the Collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Addis Ababa University*, Milano 2000, nr. 131, p. 154; K. Stoffregen-Pedersen, ‘The Nail Version of the Kwer’atā Re’əsū Icon’, paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on History of Ethiopian Art, Addis Ababa 2002, (typescript).

⁷ The same idea is expressed in the Byzantine pictures of St. Mary called *Panaghia tou Pathous*, or the “Passion’s Madonna”, which depict the Jesus-Child seeking protection in Mary’s arms when the angels approach Him carrying the instruments of the Passion, H. Hallensleben, ‘Maria, Marienbild’, in: *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Bd. 3, Rom-Freiburg, 1971, cols. 173–174; N. Schmuck, ‘Passionmadonna’, in: *Marienlexikon*, hrsg. R. von Bäumler, L. Scheffczyk, Bd. 5, Ottilien 1993, pp. 117f.

⁸ ቅዱስ: ገብርኤል: and: ቅዱስ: ማከኤል:

⁹ S. Chojnacki, *Major Themes...*, (n. 5), pp. 179–195, 229–233. Some earlier examples are known from the 13th century, cf. J. Leroy, ‘Notes d’Archéologie et d’Iconographie éthiopiennes, 1: Une icône éthiopienne de la Vierge au Musée Copte de Vieux-Caire’, *AE*, 6 (1965), pp. 229–235.

his body.¹⁰ This element, as well as the princess Bərutawit (ቡሩታዊት) sitting on a tree is typical of the 18th century iconography of the scene.¹¹

In the left corner of the picture is represented a little, naked figure, sitting with spread legs and raised hands. The inscription አደራ፡ የበሳት፡ [for የበሳት] – “Ἐδära became barren” makes it clear that she is a childless woman praying to conceive.¹² Behind her, also with raised hands, stands a man, certainly her husband, described as ድራታኦስ፡ ተማገፀነ፡ – “Dərataʾos praying”.

On the second piece, called B (Fig. 2), biblical scenes connected to Moses are represented. Chronologically the story begins in the lower register. Moses, armed with a lance and a shield is galloping on a white horse. He is identified by the caption: መሴ፡ በላላ፡ ፈረሱ – “Moses on his horse”. A similarly-armed man riding a blue horse accompanies him.¹³ Behind the prophet flies an angel or rather a cherub and the inscription explains the event: መልአክ፡ (sic) ነገሮ፡ ለመሴ፡ – “the angel spoke to Moses”. We may surmise that the scene alludes to the moment when God decided to confide in the prophet regarding the rescue of the Israelites and warned him of his plan through an angelic messenger. The episode took place when Moses was still a young man, attached to the Pharaoh’s household and was appointed by him to be chief of the army.¹⁴

The next episode is depicted in the upper register and represents the Crossing of the Red Sea. To the right, Moses has just used his staff to close the parted waters, as explained by the inscription: መሴ፡ ገብጣ፡ [for፡ ዘበጣ] ለባሕር፡ – “Moses smote the sea”. Two people who accompany the prophet, each armed with a stick and a sword, are designated as ሠራዊተ፡ ለመሴ፡ – “the soldiers of Moses”. From the sea emerge the Pharaoh on a white

¹⁰ Most probably a misinterpretation of a European, somewhat crudely painted picture in which a rather ugly princess in a half-figure was pictured directly behind the dragon’s body; changed to a devil by the Ethiopian painters, the figure became one of the enduring elements of St. George’s iconography in Ethiopia, cf. for instance the central panel of the St. George triptych IES 4191, produced by Nicolò Brancalone, S. Chojnacki, Major Themes (n. 5), cat. 151, p. 169.

¹¹ Major Themes (n. 5), 301–302, and *idem*, ‘The Iconography of St. George in Ethiopia, Part II: St. George the Dragon-Killer’, *JES*, 11:2 (1973), pp. 51–92.

¹² A similar figure appears in the magic scroll IES 293 on the picture representing Samuel of Wäldäbba riding the lion. Lacking an inscription it was wrongly interpreted both by C. Lepage as an apotropaic figure in: J. Mercier, ‘Les peintures des rouleaux protecteurs éthiopiens’, *JES*, 12:2 (1975), p. 141, and by J. Mercier who saw it as a prostitute sent to tempt the saint, J. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, New York 1979, p. 73.

¹³ It is difficult to understand the inscriptions which accompany this figure, one placed above him: ሐመልሟል፡ ፈረሱ፡ and another below: ሐመልሟል፡ ፈረሱ፡ – “his green horse”? It should be recalled here that usually in Ethiopian painting no special meaning or symbolism is attached to the colour of horses which can be chosen at will and need not be realistic, as in our case. However some of the Equestrian Saints are traditionally represented on horses of a particular colour, for instance St. George on white, St. Mercury and St. Claudius on brown or black etc., cf. E. Balicka-Witkowska, ‘Equestrian Saints’, in: *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. II, ed. by S. Uhlig, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 347b–351a. An anonymous young man is depicted on a green horse in the Abba Yäm’ata church, Guh, Gä’alta, cf. *Mäzäbü sä’alat*: <http://ethiopia.deeds.utoronto.ca> (username & password: student), 2002.017:017 and 018.

¹⁴ The legends concerning Moses’ youth circulated in the Christian world and found their way into many literary works, see *infra*, notes 26, 42–45.

horse and his two soldiers,¹⁵ both trying to keep their swords and shields above the surface of the water. The inscription reads: ነጉሠ፡ ፈርዖስ፡ ተሰጥመ፡ በውስተ፡ ባሕር፡ – “King Fär’os drowned in the sea”.

The last episode is portrayed on the right-hand-side, in the middle of the picture. Inside a white circle a little figure is sitting on a low chair under which the following text is placed: [ለ?]ቤተ፡ ሙሴ፡ ኪዳነ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ሀሎ፡ – “The house of Moses made a covenant with God”. The figure’s right hand is surmounted by a cross and, holding a stick, marks a light-coloured line on the water while its left hand touches one of two hands which protrude from a patch of blue. The other hand is holding a square decorated with a cross. That part of the painting is explained by two inscriptions, one above the spot: ጸላት፡ [for: ጸላት፡] ዘመሀየ፡ ለሙሴ፡ በደመና፡ ሰማይ፡ ወረደ፤ – “Tablets of Law which He gave Moses”; “He descended on a heavenly cloud”, and the second, unclear, below it: እግዚአብሔር፡ በእንተ፡ ሙሴ፡ – “Our Lord on account of Moses [...]”. It seems that two events, both in very abbreviated form, are conflated here: Moses with his hand strengthened by the cross making a passage through the water for his fellow-countrymen and Moses as the representative of all Israelites, (the inscriptions mentions *betä Muse*) receiving the Ten Commandments¹⁶ from God who is hidden behind a cloud.¹⁷

Judging from many details in this picture it is obvious that the painter did not follow the main literary source for the story of Moses, that is the *Old Testament*,¹⁸ particularly the *Book of Exodus*. Most probably he was inspired by some Ethiopian versions of the apocryphal and magic texts which also had Moses as their central figure, such as the *Gädlä Muse*,¹⁹ the Fälasa version of the *ʿArdəʿet*,²⁰ the *ʿAsmatä Muse*,²¹

¹⁵ One of them is called ሰንግርጤስ፡ – Sängərṭis. I was not able to establish from which literary source origins this person.

¹⁶ The painter making this pictorial fusion obviously had to disregard the chronological sequence of the events.

¹⁷ The representation of God by means of a hand, the *manus dei*, emerging from a cloud or “from above” is well established in Ethiopian art. The motif appears first in depictions of the Equestrian Saints combating the forces of evil or receiving the crown of martyrdom. The oldest representations of that type, dated to the 12th century are to be found in the church of Yəmrəhannä Krəstos, Lasta, cf. E. Balicka-Witakowska, ‘The Paintings of Yəmrəhannä Krəstos: a preliminary report’, *AfrBull*, 59 (2002), pp. 39–44, Figs 13–16. The other scenes in which the *manus dei* frequently appears are Moses receiving the tablets of law and the Sacrifice of Abraham.

¹⁸ The story of Moses is to be found in *Exodus* 2–40, *Numbers*, *Deuteronomy* 1–34.

¹⁹ *Acts of Moses*, in: *Recueil de textes falachas: Introduction. Textes éthiopiens (édition critique et traduction)*, [par] A.Z. Aešcoly, Paris 1951, pp. 34–37, 101–143.

²⁰ *The Disciples* – an apocalyptic text, both magic and liturgical (it is read during the baptism ceremonies), which contains one of the largest collections of the mysterious names of God used as magic formulae against any mental and physical disease, E. Littmann, ‘Arde’et: the Magic Book of the Disciples’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 25 (1904), pp. 1–48; R. Basset, *Les apocryphes éthiopiens, VII: Enseignement de Jésus-Christ à ses disciples et prières magiques*, Paris 1896. In the Fälasa version the names were revealed to Moses who used them to perform the miracles fighting with the Pharaoh and his magicians, *Receuil...*, (n. 19), pp. 29–34, 80–101.

²¹ The full title is: *ʿAsmatä mogäs zä-wähäbo ʿəgzäʿabher lä-Muse gäbru wä-näbiyu* – “Names of the favor which God gave to Moses the prophet”, S. Strelcyn, ‘La magie éthiopienne’, in: *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di*

the *Qal zä-Muse*²² and *Šälot zä-Muse*, which is known from many different versions.²³ For instance, according to the *Old Testament* Moses always talked to God directly, while in the apocryphal texts and magical prayers an angel, usually called Gabriel, is the go-between.²⁴ In the biblical books God reveals himself to Moses in the form of lighting, thunder and smoke, the other texts mention the cloud,²⁵ and that Moses was the chief of an army.²⁶ Finally the staff with which he parted the sea is described in detail and its magical features are pointed out.²⁷

The question arises as why these pictures were produced. We find a clue in two additional inscriptions. On parchment A, the text below the figure of St. Mary reads: **ዋጋውን፡ ሹ፡ ነው፡** –“there are thirty *wagawən*”, while on B, below Moses’ horse it is as follows: **ዋጋውን፡ ሸ[for ሹ]፡ ነው፡** “there are twenty five *wagawən*”. The name *wagawən*, corrupted *legewon* or *legəwon* derives from Greek (legion) *λεγεών*²⁸ and is one of the names of Satan. In the Ethiopian magic texts it designates the frequently-occurring devils which cause many medical conditions,²⁹ among them barrenness.³⁰ We may surmise that both captions were included as an identification of malevolent spirits, the careful enumerating being a way of controlling them. Therefore there can be little doubt that these pictures are a double amulet made for the childless couple ʿĪdāra and Dərataʿos depicted on piece A. We may surmise that a learned healer first found the cause of his client’s trouble, that is the presence of thirty and twenty-five demons and then prescribed a remedy in form of

Studi Etiopici, Roma 2-4 aprile 1959, Roma 1960, p. 150, and C. Conti Rossini, ‘Notice sur le manuscrits éthiopiens de la collection d’Abbadie’, *JA* 1912–1915, no. 74:VI, p. 463.

²² *The Words of Moses*, Strelcyn, *op. cit.* (n. 21), p. 51. On difference between *qalat* – ‘words’ and *ʿasmat* – ‘names’, see *idem*, *Prières magiques éthiopiennes pour délier les charmes (maṭṭəhe šārāy)*, Warszawa 1955 (= *RO* 18), pp. XXVII–XXXII.

²³ *The Prayer of Moses*, see for instance Mss: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fond d’Abbadie 115, 7, 207; cf. Conti Rossini, ‘Notice...’ (n. 21), nos 36, 39, 74, pp. 36, 39, 463. See also G. Nolle, ‘Prière de Moïse’, *Aethiopica* 1 (1933), pp. 7–12.

²⁴ Nolle, ‘Prière de Moïse’, (n. 23), pp. 7, 9; *Receuil...* (n. 19), pp. 102–103.

²⁵ Nolle, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 10; *Receuil...* (n. 19), pp. 106–107.

²⁶ *Receuil...* (n. 19), pp. 134–135. This is connected with the Jewish and early Christian legends about Moses’ childhood and youth, his military expedition to Kush (called Ethiopia) and his “Ethiopian” wife, which were already noted by Joseph Flavius, *Antiquities* II, 217–25, T. Rajak, ‘Moses in Ethiopia: Legend and Literature’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 29 (1978), pp. 111–122. The story was known in Ethiopia as witnesses for instance the *Universal Chronicle* by Giyorgis Wäldä Amid, cf. ms. London, BL Or. 814, fol. 24 ff.

²⁷ It was made from a branch of a citron tree cf., Nolle, ‘Prière de Moïse’ (n. 23), p. 11; *Receuil...* (n. 19), pp. 110–111, 136–137. The citron is useful in magical practices and appears as a remedy in many medicinal recipes, cf. Strelcyn, *Prières magiques...*, (n. 22), p. 368, and the prescriptions quoted in *idem*, *Médecine et plantes d’Ethiopie, I: Les traités médicaux éthiopiens*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 139, 197; M. Griaule, *Le livre de recettes d’un dabbara abyssin*, Paris 1930, no. 130.

²⁸ Cf. Luke 8:30 and Mark 5:9.

²⁹ W.H. Worrell, ‘Studien zum abessinischen Zaubwesen’, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 29 (1914–1915), p. 139; A.Z. Aešcoly, ‘Les noms magiques dans les apocryphes chrétiens des Éthiopiens’, *JA* 220 (1932), p. 115; *Actes de Samuel de Dabra Wagag*, éd. (& trad.) par S. Kur, (CSCO 287–288 = Sae 57–58), Louvain 1968, pp. 26, 41; Strelcyn, *Prières magiques*, references on p. 327; *idem.*, *Médecine et plantes...* (n. 27), nos 1321–1340, pp. 564–570.

³⁰ Strelcyn, *Médecine et plantes...*, no. 1328, p. 578.

the amulet which he possibly executed himself. Judging from the size of the parchments they were not meant to be carried by the owners but rather permanently displayed in their home, in the same way as the magic scrolls called “wall-amulets”.³¹

However, it must be pointed out that our paintings have little in common with regular Ethiopian magic scrolls.³² The most important difference is the use of pictures rather than text as the main therapeutic medium. Moreover, these are purely figural representations which were not chosen from the typical pictorial repertory of scrolls dominated by the abstract drawings with secret meanings.³³ They are purely religious, and were it not for the addition of the spell and the very particular depiction of the female owner,³⁴ they could easily be accepted as devotional or church paintings.

Although unusual, the omission of text in an amulet seems to be not unacceptable, particularly since the owners of the scrolls can seldom read. Wearing or simply possessing the scrolls is considered enough to activate their protective function.³⁵ In the case of the childless couple the carefully chosen, very personalized pictures would offer powerful talisman.³⁶

³¹ Most of these scrolls are of imposing size and are often written in two or three columns. They are called wall-amulets because they are displayed unrolled on the wall of a house for apotropaic and curative purposes, O. Löfgren, ‘Äthiopische Wandamulette’, *Orientalia Suecana*, 10 (1962), p. 104; S. Chernetsov, ‘Ethiopian “Magic scrolls” from the MAE Collection’, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, 10:4 (2004), pp. 40–42. For the examples see *infra*, note 47.

³² On the Ethiopian magic scroll cf. W.H. Worrell, ‘Studien zum abessinischen Zauberwesen’, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 23 (1909), pp. 149–183; 24 (1910), pp. 59–96; 29 (1914–1915), pp. 85–141; D. Lifszyc, ‘Amulettes éthiopiennes’, *Minotaure*, 1 (1933), pp. 71–73; S. Strelcyn, *Prières magiques...* (n. 22), pp. I–LXXVI; *idem*, ‘La magie éthiopienne’, (n. 21), pp. 147–166; E. Wagner, ‘Die Illustration der äthiopischen Zauberrollen der Sammlung Littmann’, in: *Der Orient in der Forchung: Festschrift für Otto Spies*, Wiesbaden 1967, pp. 706–732; E. Balicka-Witakowska, ‘Enluminures d’un rouleau magique éthiopien rapporté par la 1^{ère} Expedition d’Étudiants Polonais en Afrique’, *AfrBull* 24 (1974), pp. 59–65; J. Mercier, ‘Les Peintures des Rouleaux...’, (n. 12), pp. 107–146; *idem*, *Art that Heals: the Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*, [Catalogue of the exhibition presented by the Museum for African Art, New York] New York 1997; *idem*, *Le roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard: art et médecine en Éthiopie* [Catalogue of the exhibition presented by the Musée national des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie], Paris 1992.

³³ Ethiopian talisman makers call the first category *səʔal*, the second *tälsäm*.

³⁴ This kind of representation would never appear in the religious paintings although they are not free from the obscene scenes which usually represent the punishment of evil people and evil spirits, cf. for instance a painting from Gundä Gundé monastery showing the devils tormenting the soul of a sinner, Gigar Tesfaye, ‘Note sur Gunda Gundé et d’autres couvents stéphanites dans le Tigray’, *Abbay*, 10 (1979), Figs 5–8, or the reproof of Arius introduced to the wall-painting programme dated to the end of the 18th century, cf. ‘Arius’, in: *Mäzgbä səʔalat* (n. 13).

³⁵ For more information on this subject, see Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (n. 12), pp. 21–23; Chernetsov, ‘Ethiopian “Magic scrolls”...’, (n. 31), p. 40.

³⁶ On the importance of the image for miraculous cures see G. Vikán, ‘Art, Medicine and Magic in Early Byzantium’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984), p. 72.

St. Mary, the compassionate and most approachable intercessor between God and mankind who was particularly venerated in Ethiopia,³⁷ is represented here as a mother,³⁸ and so it is to her that the sterile woman and her husband direct their prayers. The promise of divine assistance is expressed by the clearly depicted gestures of blessing, made by Jesus and Mary while her intensive gaze may have been intended to have curative powers.³⁹ Since the picture of St. Mary with the Child does not belong in the pictorial repertory of the scrolls, we may surmise that the painter allowed himself to take such an unprecedented step in order to make the amulet particularly effective.

The enlargement of the figure of St. Michael also seems to have been done deliberately. Michael, the most militant of all the archangels, was appointed by God to fight with the powers of evil⁴⁰ so he would have been emphasized by the painter as the best possible protector of the unfortunate couple. Since the archangel in contrast to St. Mary is one of the most popular figures in the repertory of the amulets, his picture was certainly selected because of its proven effectiveness.

In turn, the depiction of St. George can be understood as a pictorial prayer. The scene shows him about to vanquish the multiple evil forces and most probably depicts the popular spell "let the evil spirits be pierced by the lance of St. George". The saint appears quite often in the magical scrolls but usually as a single figure. The representation on the amulet of his most famous and impressive rescue action may also seek to improve the efficacy of the token.

The story of Moses should also be seen in this context. The Crossing of the Red Sea belongs to those events which showed Gods intervention on behalf of the chosen people and in the early visual language of Christianity was used as a symbol of the particular protection of God.⁴¹ Moreover, Moses himself was believed to be a magician. This tradition, which is based on the biblical account of *Exodus*, was elaborated in the legends and apocryphal literature, which circulated widely in the Christian world,⁴²

³⁷ G. Nolle, 'Le culte de Marie en Éthiopie', in: *Maria: études sur la sainte Vierge*, sous la direction d'Hubert du Manoir, Paris 1949, vol. 1, pp. 363–413.

³⁸ On this aspect of the cult of St. Mary see I. Kalavrezou, 'The Maternal Side of the Virgin', in: *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. M. Vassilaki, Milan 2000, pp. 41–45.

³⁹ On the particular meanings of eyes, gaze and eye contact between the painted figure and the viewer in the magico-medical context cf. Mercier, *Art that Heals...* (n. 32), pp. 87–95; Vikan, 'Art, Medicine...' (n. 36), p. 72.

⁴⁰ F. Spadafora & M.G. Mara, 'Santo Michele arcangelo', in: *Biblioteca Sanctorum*, vol. 9, 1967, cols 410–446; V. Saxer, 'Jalons pour servir à l'histoire du culte de l'archange saint Michel en Orient jusqu'à l'iconoclisme', in: *Noscere Sancta: Miscellanea in memoria di Agostino Amore OFM († 1982)*, Romae 1985, pp. 357–426.

⁴¹ Together with for instance the "Sacrifice of Abraham", "Three youths in the burning furnace", "Jonah and the whale", "Daniel in the lions' den", "Susanna and the Elders", cf. for instance A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: a Study of Its Origins*, Princeton 1980, index.

⁴² Cf. for instance the material presented in *Moïse: L'Homme de l'Alliance*, Paris 1955.

Ethiopia included.⁴³ According to some accounts the prophet was taught by the famous Egyptian magicians Jannes and Jambres whom he eventually defeated in a competitive display of magical powers performed in the presence of the Pharaoh.⁴⁴ There are also versions which state that he learnt augury, divination and the art of enchantment.⁴⁵

Despite the popularity of this tradition, the introduction of Moses to our amulet is surprising. As far as we know neither he nor his story were ever depicted in an Ethiopian magical scroll, although, as was mentioned above, texts connected to him appear frequently. Looking for a source of inspiration we cannot exclude the possibility that the painter was to some extent influenced by the programme of wall-paintings which from the second half of the 18th century permanently place the Crossing of the Red Sea on the main door of the sanctuary,⁴⁶ obviously for the apotropaic purposes. It would be easy for a person versed in Ethiopian ecclesiastical traditions to transfer knowingly this popular motive from one medium to another.

The dating of our two paintings is problematic because they contain no written indication of when they were produced. However closer examination of the stylistic features can yield some indications. The painter used very distinctive means of expression. The heads of all the figures are drawn as regular circles or ovals and the skin is tinted red. The large eyes, with big round pupils, perceived as the central point of the face, skilfully use the contrast between black and white in order to attract the attention of the spectator. The mouths are marked by a zigzag line or simply missing. The range of colours is limited to black, white, red, dark green, and sapphire blue while the yellowish parchment is used as background. Also characteristic is the decorative pattern composed of red and blue repetitive and overlapping curves, applied mostly on the garments of the depicted figures and on the wings of the angels.

It is significant that the same style also distinguishes a group of magic scrolls, all belonging to the category called “wall-amulets”⁴⁷ and dated to the middle or end of the

⁴³ The magicians Jannes and Jambres are mentioned in the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu (chapter 30) which is preserved only in the Ethiopian version, cf. *The Chronicle* of John, Bishop of Nikiu, translated from Zotenberg's Ethiopic text by R.H. Charles, (Text and Translation Society [Works, 13]), London 1916, p. 28.

⁴⁴ ‘Jannes and Jambres’, transl. by A. Pietersma & R.T. Lutz, in: *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, London 1985, pp. 427–442.

⁴⁵ S. Brock, ‘Some Syrian Legends Concerning Moses’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 33 (1982), p. 250.

⁴⁶ Cf. the useful drawings showing the disposition of paintings in the Gondarene churches in: O. Jäger & I. Pearce, *Antiquities of North Ethiopia*, Stuttgart, pp. 47–65 and the entry “Crossing the Red Sea” in *Mäzḡäba səʾālat* (n. 13).

⁴⁷ For instance: Lifszyc, ‘Amulettes’ (n. 32), Ms 172; Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (n. 12), pls 14–16; *idem*, *Art that Heals...* (n. 32), cat. 21, fig. 103; *idem*, *Le roi Salomon...* (n. 32), nos 32, 120, 128, 130, pp. 112, 162, 167, 169 and also published there on pp. 114, 173 the scroll: Munich, Staatliche Museum für Völkerkunde, no. 87-309327; Addis Abeba, IES, nrs 234, 237, 293, cf. Mercier, ‘Les Peintures..’ (n. 12), pp. 138–139, 140–141, Figs/nos 21–23, 29, 34–35; Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, O. Etiop. 44, 45, 46, cf., Löfgren, ‘Äthiopische Wandamulette’, (n. 31), pp. 95–120, Figs I–IV; Berlin, Museum für Völkerkunde, Ms. III A 2364 Kaschke, cf., O. Jäger, ‘Äthiopische Zauberrollen und ihre Bilder’, *Baessler-Archiv*, NF 14 (1966), 154, Figs 7, 8; Sankt Augustin (Bonn), Museum Haus Völker und Kulturen HVK mu300681, cf., V. Six, *Äthiopische Handschriften, Teil 3: Handschriften deutscher Bibliotheken, Museen, und aus Privatbesitz*, hrsg. E. Hammerschmidt, (VOHD

19th century.⁴⁸ Among them there are some which show such close similarities to our paintings that they should be attributed to the same artist, for instance the scroll in the Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek.⁴⁹ It is illustrated by four large pictures. (Figs 3 A–D). The first depicts an apotropaic figure with raised hands and a big head encircled by two snakes which also encircle the enormous eyes dominated by black pupils. However, it is not clear what the figure represents since the amulet-makers interviewed about this gave very different explanations.⁵⁰ The second picture shows two angels armed with swords, very similar to Michael and Gabriel in the British Museum painting.⁵¹ Even closer to it is the figure of St. George and particularly his horse. The last representation shows a devil grasping a child and its mother. They are helped by Gäbrä Mānfās Qəddus who rises his cross and an angel who covers the devil's eyes with his sword.⁵² Another scroll which almost certainly was executed by the same artist belongs to a private collection in Paris. Its apotropaic figure with the head encircled by two snakes is very similar to the figure in the Uppsala scroll while St. George to the Pharaoh in the British Museum painting.⁵³

It seems that the style of our painter was admired because an important group of scrolls obviously display artistic dependence of him and either came from his workshop or are close imitations of his work.⁵⁴

Searching for more comparative material, we may also recall a piece of painted parchment in the collection of the Yoḥannəs IV Museum in Mäqāle, Tigray,⁵⁵ dated on stylistic grounds to the second half of the 18th century.⁵⁶ (Fig. 4) It measures 75 x 65 cm and presents an iconographical programme, which could also be designated “religious”. The pictures are arranged in three registers. The uppermost is dominated by a centrally-placed St. Mary with the Child between Michael and Gabriel. Two scenes flank the group:

20:6), Stuttgart 1994, Ms 25, pp. 105–107 and A. Marx, *Katalog der Äthiopienabteilung, Museum Haus Völker und Kulturen, Sankt Augustin*, Sankt Augustin 2001, p. 124, Figs 111, 112.

⁴⁸ On the dating of the Ethiopian magic scrolls see, J. Mercier, ‘Les plus anciens rouleaux protecteurs éthiopiens de la Bibliothèque nationale de Paris’, *AE* 10 (1976), pp. 227–238.

⁴⁹ Presently divided into three pieces and catalogued as O. Etiop. 44, O. Etiop. 45, O. Etiop. 46, O. Löfgren, *Katalog über äthiopischen Handschriften in der Universitätsbibliothek Uppsala*, Uppsala 1974, pp. 137–138 and *idem*, ‘Äthiopische Wandamulette’, (n. 31).

⁵⁰ Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (n. 12), p. 66.

⁵¹ In the Uppsala scroll the angel on the right-hand side lacks wings. The shadows above his shoulders show that the painter intended to add them but was prevented because of lack of space.

⁵² A very similar picture illustrates a scroll kept in the IES, no. 234, where Gäbrä Mānfās Qəddus and the devil are identified by the inscriptions, cf. Mercier, ‘Les Peintures des Ruleaux..’, (n. 12), no. 23.

⁵³ Cf. Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (n. 12), pls 14, 16. Unfortunately it is not known what represent its other pictures.

⁵⁴ To the examples quoted in n. 47 we can add: Paris Musée national des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, nos 6, 12, 18, 19, 52, 62, 64, all published in Mercier, *Le roi Salomon*, (n. 32), pp. 179, 169, 168, 109, 120, 119, 167, 118 and also there exp. 101, p. 162.

⁵⁵ *L’Arche éthiopienne: art chrétien d’Éthiopie* [Catalogue of the exhibition] 27 septembre 2000 – 7 janvier 2001, Paris, Pavillon des Arts, Paris 2000, pp. 146–147.

⁵⁶ The convincing proof is its stylistic similarity to the wall-painting in the church of Yoḥannəs Mä‘aquddi in Gär’alta dated by an inscription to the reign of King Fasilädäs, G. Gerster, *Churches in the Rock: Early Christian Art in Ethiopia*, London 1970, pp. 126–127, 130, Fig. 130 and Mäzgäbä sə‘əlat (n. 13), 2002.006:015–2002.009:005.

the Crucifixion and the Anastasis. The first, which visualises the act of redemption, is a standard image in the scrolls.⁵⁷ The second, symbolising the triumph of Christ over Death and Satan, belongs to the category of scenes which depict the victory of Good over Evil. In Ethiopia, where it is always represented as the liberation of Adam and Eve from Hell, it recalls the divine intervention on behalf of the faithful.⁵⁸

In the second register four Equestrian Saints defeat the maleficent figures. They are followed by Ss. Gäbrä Mānfās Qəddus and Täklä Haymanot, both well-known persecutors of demons, and for that reason often represented in the scrolls.⁵⁹ The program is completed by twenty-eight figures of the Stephanite abbots,⁶⁰ each carefully identified by an inscription. It is not impossible that this gallery of named saints was considered to be a sort of textual and pictorial litany.

Taking all this into consideration one might be tempted to see in the Mäqāle painting an amulet similar to the British Museum parchments, but lack of any direct reference to the evil powers prevents us from drawing such a conclusion. Nevertheless all three pieces clearly prove that it is very difficult to distinguish between the religious and the magical sphere as reflected in the spiritual life of Ethiopians and that the term “magical-religious” once introduced to designate the Ethiopian magical texts⁶¹ can with good reason be applied in the case of same paintings.

⁵⁷ It appears predominantly in a simplified form as a cross flanked by two figures or as three crosses, see the examples in: D. Appleyard, *Ethiopian Manuscripts*, London 1993, nrs 88, 94, 100, 110, 119, 123.

⁵⁸ Amazingly, the scene never appear in the magical scrolls. Instead it is frequently used in the programme of the devotional paintings, cf. the examples in S. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Icons*, (n. 6).

⁵⁹ E.A.W. Budge, *The Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot*, London 1906; G. Nolle, ‘Les miracles de Gabra Manfas Queddus’, *Aethiops*, 4 (1931), pp. 33–36, and *Aethiopica* 1 (1933), pp. 41–47, 64–73; 2 (1934), pp. 37–43, 70–81; 3 (1935), pp. 109–114, 162–170. See also R. Kriss & H. Kriss-Heinrich, *Volkskundliche Anteile in Kult und Legende äthiopischer Heiliger*, Wiesbaden 1975, pp. 9–19, 30–41, and the representations of the saints in the magic scrolls: Mercier, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls*, (n. 12), pl. 18; *idem*, ‘Les Peintures des Rouleaux...’, (n. 12), no. 23, and here Fig. 3D.

⁶⁰ See for instance Tadesse Tamrat, ‘Some notes on the fifteenth century Stephanite “Heresy” in the Ethiopian Church’, *RSE*, 22 (1966), pp. 103–115.

⁶¹ By D. Lifchitz (= Lifszyc) in: *Textes éthiopiens magico-religieux*, [éd. & trad. par] Déborah Lifchitz, (Université de Paris: Travaux et mémoires de l’Institut d’Ethnologie, 38), Paris 1940.



Fig. 1. British Museum, painting A (photo M. Gervers)



Fig. 2. British Museum, painting B (photo M. Gervers)



A



B



C



D

Fig. 3 A–D. Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, O. Etiop. 44, 45, 46 (photo courtesy of UU)

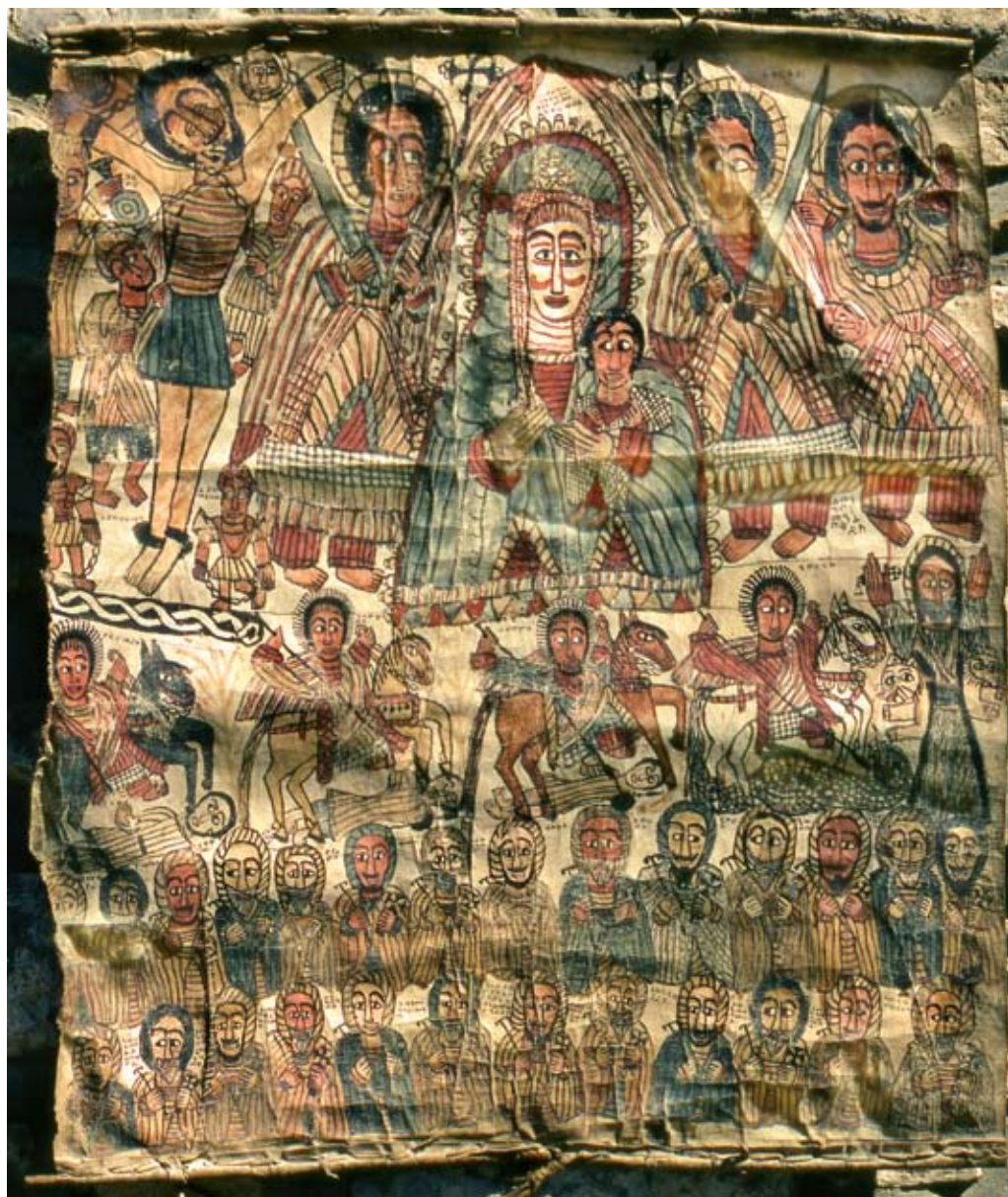


Fig. 4. Mäqāle, Yoḥannēs IV Museum, painting no. P3 (photo M. Gervers)