



EASTERN AND WESTERN INFLUENCE IN WALL PAINTINGS OF ABUNA YEMATA GUH CHURCH (ETHIOPIA)

ВОСТОЧНОЕ И ЗАПАДНОЕ ВЛИЯНИЕ В СТЕНОПИСИ
ЦЕРКВИ АБУНА ЙЕМАТА ГУ (ЭФИОПИЯ)



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The rock-hewn church Abuna Yemata Guh, situated in the Gheralta Mountains of the Ethiopian Tigray region, houses one of the best preserved and least studied wall paintings of medieval Ethiopia. The pictorial program is dated to the second half of 15th century, by stylistic and iconographic characteristics. In fact, no well-proved date has been suggested so far.

This research seeks to bridge the existing scholarly gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the iconographic and stylistic attributes of the paintings. It also considers the historical backdrop of the church, identifying key conduits of cultural influence. Furthermore, the study incorporates a scientific examination of the pigments employed in the paintings of Abuna Yemata Guh, comparing them with those found in other Ethiopian churches.

The artistic motifs found within the paintings of Abuna Yemata Guh indicate an amalgamation of influences, notably drawing from Osman and Goan Christian art traditions. Additionally, traces of the iconographic style seen in the Roman icon *Salus populi romani* are evident, with a copy of this icon only arriving in Ethiopia after the 1570s. Consequently, the most plausible timeframe for the execution of the wall paintings falls within the latter part of the 16th c.

Keywords: Ethiopian art, Ethiopian painting, Abuna Yemata Guh, Ethiopian rock-hewn churches, Eastern Christian art, Tigray



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Скальная церковь Абуна Йемата Гу в Тиграе — один из самых целостных и, одновременно, практически не исследованных памятников средневековой монументальной живописи Эфиопии. Живописная программа датируется по стилю ориентировочно второй половиной XV века. По сути, обоснованная датировка росписей церкви до сих пор не была предложена. Настоящее исследование представляет собой первую попытку такой датировки, базирующейся на комплексном анализе иконографии, стиля, исторического контекста памятника, векторов художественного влияния, а также сопоставлении имеющихся технико-технологических исследований красочного слоя росписей церкви Абуна Йемата Гу и других эфиопских памятников монументальной живописи. В живописи явно усматриваются черты османской культуры, гоанской христианской живописи, а также иконографического типа Богородицы *Salus populi romani*, копия которой была доставлена в Эфиопию не ранее 70-х гг. XVI в. Соответственно, наиболее вероятная датировка росписей — последняя четверть XVI века.

Ключевые слова: эфиопское искусство, эфиопская живопись, Абуна Йемата гу, эфиопские скальные церкви, восточно-христианское искусство, Тиграй

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The rock-hewn church of Abuna Yemata Guh, located in the Gheralta Mountains of the Ethiopian Tigray region, accommodates one of the best-preserved yet least-studied wall paintings of medieval Ethiopia. The lack of publications is likely due to its extreme inaccessibility. The church is carved into a cliff, and its interior comprises two interconnected, approximately square domed rooms aligned on a single axis perpendicular to the entrance. To the right side of the entrance, three arcs supported by two cross-shaped columns lead to a rectangular room. Part of this room serves as a sacred space inaccessible to visitors (*Fig. 1*).

According to local legend, the church in question was carved during the prosperous era of the Axumite Kingdom in the 6th century. However, there is no scientific confirmation or refutation of this date. Based on their style, the wall paintings are loosely dated to the second half of the 15th century [Lepage, Mercier, 2005, p. 154; Gebremariam, Kvittengen, Nicholson, 2016, p. 1]. Claire Bosquet-Tiessé argues that a well-grounded dating is yet to be established [Bosc-Tiessé, 2020, p. 342]. The



**Fig. 1. Rock-hewn Church of Abuna Yemata Guh
The Gheralta Mountains, Tigray**

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 1. Скальная церковь Абуна Йемата Гу в Тиграе
Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



stylistic and iconographic characteristics of the wall paintings appear to reflect different periods and have sparked some controversy. Additionally, at least one scene of the pictorial program was partially repainted [Gebremaryam, Kvittengen, Nicholson, 2016, p. 4, 6, 8].

The church and its pictorial program are dedicated to nine Syrian saints (Aftse, Alef, Aragawi, Garima, Guba, Liqanos, Pantelewon, Tsahma, and Yemata) who spread Christianity in Ethiopia during the 6th century. The program also includes depictions of Old Testament figures, apostles, archangels, and local saints. Analyzing these wall paintings requires an understanding of the historical context of the Ethiopian Christian Kingdom during the 14th–16th centuries.

ETHIOPIA IN THE 14–16TH CENTURIES

The Abyssinian Solomonic dynasty was founded in 1270, upon the overthrow of Zagwean kings. To legitimate the takeover, the first Solomonides promoted a narrative (a legendary epos *Kebra Negast*, which means “the glory of kings”) on the origins of the dynasty from the King Solomon and the queen Makeda, that was identified as a queen of Sheba. Their son Menelik was the mythical ruler of Ethiopia.

The founder of the dynasty likely came from Shewa, a region in the highlands to the northeast of Addis Ababa. The political center initially shifted from Lalibela to Shewan Tagwelat, but the town never officially became a capital city. Instead, the Solomonides opted for an unusual, semi-nomadic lifestyle, frequently moving across Shewa and neighboring provinces [Hovath, 1969, p. 207]. During the first century of their rule, they kept Tagwelat as a temporary royal residence but since 1412 the royal court had been constantly migrating. The court moved several times per year [Hovath, 1969, p. 206]. The Ethiopian Christian king are likely to had chosen this lifestyle due to persistent threat coming from Islamic neighbor strates [Hovath, 1969, p. 213], and the future proved their fears were justified.

The nomadic lifestyle significantly reduced temple construction activities, nearly halting them altogether. However, there were a few rock-hewn churches built in the 14th century, though, as is the case with Abuna Yemata Guh, the exact dates of their construction are difficult to determine. Many of the Gheralta churches' wall paintings can be dated back to the 14th–15th centuries. These churches, like Abuna Yemata Guh, are all rock-hewn and artfully concealed within the mountains.

During the 14th and 15th cc, panel painting and manuscript illumination flourished. Some painters traveled with the royal court, while others established workshops in the relatively secure region of Gojam, situated to the south of Lake Tana. The rapid development of these new forms of fine arts was greatly influenced by foreign sources. While the wall paintings of the Zagwean period were primarily inspired by Coptic art, the Solomonides established close connections with Western Europe. The earliest interactions occurred in the early 15th century, when an Ethiopian embassy reached Venice, resulting in the delivery of embroidered European clerical apparel and engraved church plates to Ethiopia in 1403 [Salvadore, 2017, p. 21]. Ethiopia received not only traders but also painters, as some Spanish artists accompanied an Ethiopian embassy to the court of Alfonso de Aragon in the early 15th century [Trasselli, 1941, p. 266].

In the late 14th century, Cretan icons are believed to have arrived in Ethiopia, sparking a widespread practice of icon worship [Chojnacki, 2000, p. 22]. In the 15th century, Italian presence dominated the artistic scene. Italian artists worked in Gojam toward the end of the century, with Nicolo Brancalion (c.1460 – after 1526) being one of the most renowned among them [Chojnacki, 2000, p. 25; Salvadore, 2017, p. 136].

Starting from the 16th century, the Portuguese became the most noticeable foreign power in the Solomonid kingdom [Martinez D'Alos-Moner, 2011, p. 5]. In 1520, Portuguese military and diplomatic fleet arrived in Ethiopia. Prior to this, the mission had spent some time in the Portuguese colony of Goa in India. Portuguese Jesuits brought



Fig. 2. **Abuna Yemata Guh church**
Abuna Yemata and his servant

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 2. **Церковь Абуна Йемата Гу**
Абуна Йемата и его слуга

Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



Fig. 3. **Abuna Yemata Guh church**
Abuna Benyam and an unknown horse-rider

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 3. **Церковь Абуна Йемата Гу**
Абуна Йемата и неизвестный всадник

Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©

engravings and printed samples to the country, some of which were produced in Goa, a long-standing center of Jesuit missionary expansion in India. Goan masters created engravings and illustrations for Christian holy books, adding elements of their own tradition to Western European iconography. Moreover, from Goa to Ethiopia were also brought book miniatures of the Empire of the Great Mughals, as well as works of Persian secular painting. Ethiopian masters adopted the oriental Goan interpretation of clothing, so from the 16th century onwards, male characters are most often depicted in oriental attire.

FEATURES OF THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM

All these vectors of influence were reflected both in the selection of subjects and in the style of Ethiopian painting, including the murals of the Abuna Yemata Gu church. Its iconographic program is quite unusual. The church consists of two conventionally domed spaces, which is not typical for medieval Ethiopia. A significant part of Ethiopian temples were built according to the conventional basilica type. An unusual feature

is the placement of the figurative program in the domes. As a rule, the vaults of Ethiopian churches were adorned with carved or painted ornamental decor, and only in a few churches does figurative painting appear under the dome.

The choice of scenes for dome painting is also surprising: One of them depicts nine of the twelve apostles, the second — eight of the nine Syrian saints. The theme of the apostles first entered Ethiopian monumental painting in the 14th century, apparently under the influence of book miniature. However, no surviving monument contains a standard depiction of all twelve. As a rule, artists chose several apostles and placed them in the company of biblical prophets and the most venerated saints in Ethiopia. Of all the Ethiopian monuments, including images of apostles, the scene from the Abuna Yemata Gu church is closest to the Byzantine tradition. Somehow, through the Middle East or Coptic Egypt, the vector of Byzantine influence, whose impulse had almost faded by the 16th century, returned to Tigray at this period.

The central scene of the iconographic program of the walls is the image of the church's patron, Abuna Yemata, on horseback, accompanied by Abuna Benjamin, servants and another rider



Fig. 4. **Abuna Yemata Guh church. Mary with the Child and apostles Peter and Paul**

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 4. **Церковь Абуна Йемата Гу. Дева Мария с апостолами Петром и Павлом**

Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



Fig. 5. **Abuna Yemata Guh church. Archangel Michael**

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 5. **Церковь Абуна Йемата Гу. Архенгел Михаил**

Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



Fig. 6. **Ottoman official. Turkey, Istanbul, ca 1650. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada. Ink, watercolor, gold on paper**

Илл. 6. **Османский чиновник. Турция, Стамбул, пригл. 1650 г. Музей Ага Хана, Торонто, Канада**

Open source: URL: <https://clck.ru/35jsnq>



Fig. 7. **Rock-hewn church of Abuna Debre Tsion The Gerafta Mountains, Tigray**

Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 7. **Скальная церковь Абуна Дебре Цион в Тиграе**

Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



(Figs. 2, 3). The rest of the wall and support surface are occupied by images of the Virgin Mary with the infant in the company of apostles, as well as saints and archangels. And immediately noticeable is the difference in the interpretation of faces and clothes of different characters.

The interpretation of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ, whose faces bear Ethiopian traits, is striking (Fig. 4). These traits are emphasized by dark carnation. However, the apostles flanking Mary clearly belong to the Europoid type. In the history of Ethiopian painting, no other monuments with such an interpretation have been preserved. It is possible that it is connected with the aforementioned epic Kebra Nagast, according to which the Ethiopian dynasty of the Solomons traces its origin to Solomon and, consequently, is related to Mary and Christ. In addition, in the scene with Abuna Yemata, there is another character with Ethiopian appearance — the third rider. The combination of ethnically different characters will be encountered in wall-painting in the future.

DATING ISSUES

In the iconography and style of the murals of the Abuna Yemata Guh church, there are indeed elements indicating the 15th century. The most noticeable parallels are found with the murals of another church in Gheralta — Debre Zion. Its program was executed in several stages. On the colophon of one of the manuscripts preserved in Debre Zion, there is an inscription stating that the second stage of the murals, which shows similarities with Abuna Yemata Guh, dates back to the 1460s, during the reign of Emperor Zara Yaqob [Friedlander, Frieland, 2007, p. 79]. The most apparent parallels can be seen in the depiction of the apostles Peter and Paul, flanking the image of the Virgin Mary (Figs. 4 and 7). Some resemblance is also noticeable in the interpretation of the garments.

Several characters in Abuna Yemata Guh are depicted wearing specific headdresses that sharply contrast with Ethiopian traditions (Figs. 2, 3).

Similar headwear is rarely seen in other monumental paintings, except in Debre Zion (Figs. 7). Similar depictions of saints with such headdresses can also be found on a 16th century icon from the collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa [Chojnacki, 2000, p. 169, cat. 150].

These headdresses seem to have their origins in Venetian, Aragonese, and Portuguese sallet helmets, which had a characteristic element covering the neck (Fig. 9). These helmets were made not only of metal but also of leather, and according to Italian tradition, noble knights wore sallets covered in velvet [Беха́йм, 1995, p. 39]. Ethiopian artists may not have directly seen these helmets, but their depictions were often present in engravings and decorative art objects, possibly imported from Venice. Additionally, Spanish artists working in Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Zara Yaqob (the same period as the second phase of Debre Zion's murals) could have depicted such helmets in their works. Foreign artists were active at the imperial court, and foreign art objects likely remained within the court's confines. However, the masters of Debre Zion clearly saw some examples, possibly created by Ethiopian artists.

Apart from the specific headdresses, there is noticeable similarity in the ornamental decor of Debre Zion and Abuna Yemata Guh. Such decor is not found in other churches in Gheralta or the broader Tigray region. It likely entered monumental painting from book illumination. Illuminated pages of Ethiopian manuscripts from the 14th to 16th centuries were often adorned with similar ornamentation [Gnisci, 2019, Figs. 1.1, 2.1, 3.1, 4.2]. For instance, a comparable ornamental decor can be seen in the Bodleian Psalter, dated to the late 15th to 16th cc. [Gnisci, 2019, p. 51], as well as on a sensul (a fan or foldable icon) dated to the 15th century, kept in Debre Zion (Fig. 10). The sensul itself might have served as a model for the masters painting Debre Zion.

Despite several stylistic and iconographic similarities, there are noticeable differences between the paintings of Abuna Yemata Guh and Debre Zion, which prevent an automatic synchronization



Fig. 8. **Icon Salus populi romani**. 6th century,
restored in 13th century
Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome

Илл. 8. **Икона Salus populi romani «Спасение народа Римского»**

VI в., отреставрирована в XIII в.
Санта-Мария Маджоре, Рим

Source: URL: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/
File:Virgin_salus_populi_romani.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Virgin_salus_populi_romani.jpg)



Fig. 9. **Martin Bernat, fragment of Crucifixion**
1480–1490, San Diego Museum of Arts

Илл. 9. **Фрагмент Распятия, Мартин Бернат**

1480–1490, Художественный музей Сан-Диего

Source: URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/
wiki/File:The_Crucifixion_by_Martin_
Bernat,_c._1480-1490,_oil_on_panel_-_San_Diego_
Museum_of_Art_-_DSC06599.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Crucifixion_by_Martin_Bernat,_c._1480-1490,_oil_on_panel_-_San_Diego_Museum_of_Art_-_DSC06599.JPG)



Fig. 10. **Sensul from Abuna Debre Tsion**, 15th century
Photo courtesy of Vladimir Melnik ©

Илл. 10. **Икона-веер из церкви Абуна Дебре Цион, XV в.**
Фото из личного архива Вл. Мельника ©



of their dating. Based on several characteristics, the style and iconography of the murals lean more towards the tradition of the 16th century.

An unusual interpretation of the halo of Christ is noteworthy: the arms of the cross have the shape of bordered ellipses. A similar form is infrequently seen but can be found on Ethiopian icons confidently or tentatively dated to the 16th century [Chojnacki, 2000, cat. 27, 70, 78, 161].

The garments of Abuna Yemata and his companions differ from the attire of the apostles, saints, and archangels. Researchers do not have clear insights into the local costume traditions of the 15th and 16th centuries. However, the attire of the character with Ethiopian facial features, distinct from traditional interpretations of the garments of saints and apostles, cautiously suggests that the Ethiopian elite of that period may have worn such clothing (*Fig. 3*). Moreover, neither he nor Abuna Yemata's servant wears a headdress. It is also necessary to pay attention to the horse trappings depicted with many details. Such details do not carry specific semantic significance; artists depict them based on their own visual experience. Until the 16th century, for example, following the Coptic style, horse heads were always depicted in a three-quarter view, and the trappings were portrayed very simply. In the 14th c., profile images emerged, but the interpretation of the trappings remained minimalistic. Suddenly, the master painting Abuna Yemata Guh preferred a highly realistic approach.

The majority of the Ethiopian Christian kingdom was situated in highland areas with rugged cliffs. A stable tradition of horseback riding could not have formed there. What samples could local artists have copied? Looking at the monuments of regions with a developed equestrian culture that influenced Ethiopian painting, one can notice a lack of similarity in the interpretation of horse harnesses. At the same time, there is an obvious resemblance to the interpretation of trappings in depictions of Ottoman riders, including coloristic solutions¹. This circumstance appears initially mysterious. In

the 15th century, which is the dating of the paintings of Abuna Yemata Gu, the Ottoman Empire focused on conquering Anatolia, and only in the early 16th century did its interests expand to Egypt and the Red Sea coast. The beginning of the 16th century also saw active involvement of the Turks in the military actions waged by the neighboring Adal Sultanate against Christian Ethiopia. Located in the territory of modern-day Somalia, Adal had long been a concern for the Ethiopian kingdom, but in the 16th century, its aggression against the Christian neighbor multiplied. Similarly to the case of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom, there is virtually no information about the clothing and harnesses used by Adal warriors. It is possible that the tradition was shaped under Turkish influence, but it cannot be ruled out that Turkish costumes and harnesses found their reflection in the paintings of Abuna Yemata Guh's church.

Could Ethiopian artists of the 15th century have seen examples of Ottoman art and copied them? The development of Ottoman painting occurred in the 16th century, so when it comes to the appearance of Turkish costumes and horse harnesses earlier, one has to rely on Western European painting and graphics. It is unimaginable that Europeans brought such works to Ethiopia. Historical realities raise doubts about the accuracy of the proposed dating of the paintings of Abuna Yemata Gu to the 15th century.

The second characteristic detail is the distinctive headwear. Above all, the voluminous turbans, previously unseen in Ethiopian painting, catch the eye. The depictions of archangels are interpreted in an Oriental manner, but it is difficult to determine a specific vector of influence (*Fig. 5*). When comparing the paintings of Abuna Yemata Gu with Iranian and Middle Eastern traditions, their concise monumentality, characteristic of certain directions within Ethiopian and Nubian painting, becomes apparent. As for the interpretation of turbans, one can see that it is closest to the Turkish version of this headwear. The resemblance becomes even more

1 See the Albrecht Durer's engraving of *The Osman Horseman* (1495, Albertina Museum, Vienna): URL: <https://www.albrecht-durer.org/Turkish-Horseman.html> (accessed 23.09.2023).



noticeable when comparing the paintings of Abuna Yemata Gu's church with examples of Turkish painting from the 16th to 17th centuries (*Fig. 6*). Similarities are evident not only in the forms but also in the coloristic solutions. Thus, regardless of whether the Ethiopian master worked with artistic samples or relied on their own visual experience, dating the paintings to the 15th century seems too early.

The iconography of the Mother of God with the Child also raises many questions. The 15th c. marks the beginning and explosive growth of the veneration of Marian icons. As a result, Ethiopian masters used various models for copying, including Western European and Cretan examples. Consequently, in the 15th century, several styles emerged that differed from one another. The same variety can be observed in the transitional period of the 16th century, moving from earlier variations to the unified first Gondarine style. However, attributing the image from Abuna Yemata Gu in terms of style and iconography is challenging. At first glance, the interpretation of garments in Abuna Yemata Gu resembles the so-called "moonface" style of the 15th century, but the personal differences are more than evident. The other styles of the 15th century offer even fewer parallels to the paintings of Abuna Yemata Gu. Nevertheless, in the 16th century, there were still directions where the folds of the garments were interpreted in a somewhat similar manner.

The most unusual feature of the iconography of the scene is the white object in the hands of the Mother of God. It does not appear in any other monument. In 15th century icons, the Mother of God either holds a flower or her hands are free. The white object in Abuna Yemata Gu partly resembles a book or scroll, and on many icons from the 17th century, a book is indeed present, but in the hands of Christ, while the Mother of God holds a veil. In the examined composition, the object is depicted where the book in the hands of Christ is usually placed on Ethiopian icons from the 17th to 19th century. At the same time, Mary's hands are not folded on her knees but hold the child in such a way that the object ends up in the left hand of

the Mother of God. This raises the question of the origin of such a detail.

Another important element that supports this hypothesis is the cross on the forehead of the Mother of God. None of the depictions of the Mother of God dating back to the period before the 17th century show this element. However, its origin is evident and seems to stem from the same prototype as the origin of the white object in the hands of Mary. In 1569, the Jesuits obtained permission from Pope Pius V to make a copy of the famous icon *Salus Populi Romani* [Chojnacki, 2000, p. 33; Heldman, 1993, p. 75] (*Fig. 8*). The copy was brought to Ethiopia and had a significant influence on the development of the iconographic type of the Mother of God with the Child. It is associated with the tradition of depicting a cross on the forehead of Mary and the veil in her hand [Chojnacki, 2000, p. 304]. However, the question of when it was actually brought into the country remains debatable. S. Chojnacki, following E. Pennec's argumentation, suggests that it could not have appeared in Ethiopia before 1603 [Chojnacki, 1991, p. 359; Chojnacki, 2000, p. 33; Pennec, 1995, p. 135–165], while M. Heldman believes it could have been as early as the early 1570s [Heldman, 1993, p. 75].

However, the presumed time of the appearance of the copy of *Salus Populi Romani* in Ethiopia does not play a fundamental role in the question of dating the church frescoes, as the conducted technical and technological study has shown that it is specifically the scene with the Mother of God that bears traces of later additions [Gebremaryam, Kvittengen, Nicholson, 2016, p. 10]. The fresco contains vermilion, auripigment, and lead white, which are not found elsewhere in figurative compositions or ornamental décor. These pigments themselves cannot aid in dating, as they were used in Ethiopian monumental painting earlier [Gebremaryam, Kvittengen, Nicholson, 2013, p. 1]. However, their absence in other areas indicates subsequent alterations made to the specific composition. The cross and embellishment of the Mother of God's maphorion are executed with auripigment, and the white object in her hands is likely done with lead white.



Neither the cross on the maphorion nor the object resembling a book and a *mappula* in the hand of Mary could have appeared in the Marian iconography before the Jesuits brought the copy of *Salus Populi Romani* to Ethiopia. Regarding the latter, it is possible that in this case, what is known as iconographic contamination occurred: While copying the new iconography for themselves, especially not from the original but from one of the copies of the original, the artists did not fully grasp what they were seeing. The unusual interpretation of Christ's figure with the missing lower part confirms this assumption. Consequently, the changes to the scene were made no earlier than the 1570s. The subsequent intervention might also explain the peculiar interpretation of the left hand of the Mother of God, which is not outlined from the maphorion with a black contour, as is the case with all other instances, including the right hand of Mary. The impression is that the garment was painted directly over her hand, and rather uncertainly at that. Researchers did not take samples of the blue pigment used for the maphorion, yet, judging visually, it is present only in this scene. Apparently, the attire of the Mother of God also underwent subsequent modifications.

Furthermore, the research results indicate the presence of limestone in both the preparatory and paint layers [Gebremaryam, Kvittengen, Nicholson, 2016, p. 7]. Meanwhile, A. Wion suggests that the use of this mineral is linked to either Portuguese or Turkish influence [Wion, 2004, p. 109]. Both vectors of influence prominently manifested themselves in the 16th century.

Indirectly, the potential period of the frescoes is also indicated by their location. Abuna Yemata Gu is one of the most remote, if not the most inaccessible, churches in Tigray. Without knowing its location, it is practically impossible to discover. The interest of Ethiopian Christians in such places was particularly pronounced during periods of military conflicts within the Christian kingdom. In 1529, Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim from Harar invaded the territory of the Christian kingdom and, during a fourteen-year campaign, inflicted immense

destruction upon the lands of the Solomonic dynasty. Numerous churches and monasteries were destroyed, and hundreds of manuscripts were burned [Fauvelle-Aymar, François-Xavier, Hirsch, Bertrand, 2004, p. 47; Binns, 2017, p. 121–122]. The military campaign continued until 1543, when King Gelawdewos (1540–1549), with the assistance of the Portuguese, emerged victorious over the forces of the imam [Binns, 2017, p. 122–123].

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, from a stylistic perspective (the interpretation of faces, figures, garments, and Christ's halo), the frescoes of Abuna Yemata Gu Church lean towards the tradition of the 16th century. The oriental rendering of faces of archangels and certain other characters resembles Goan style. During the initial wave of missionary activity in the 1520s, the Portuguese introduced Ethiopian art to Goan Christian painting, which in turn had been influenced by Persian art. This may also explain the oriental treatment of clothing for some figures. It was the Goan version of attire that dominated Ethiopian painting in the 16th to 17th centuries. The manner of depicting garments and horse harnesses, reflecting Turkish tradition, also points to the 16th century.

Certain similarities with the second phase of the frescoes at Abuna Debre Zion Church could be attributed to the direct reference of the artists to this neighboring monument. Abuna Debre Zion is one of the largest churches in Tigray, possessing splendid manuscripts and ecclesiastical treasures, while Abuna Yemata Gu is small, inaccessible, and unsuitable for grand religious ceremonies. There are no signs of royal patronage for the latter. Referring to the monument of Abuna Debre Zion as a model seems entirely reasonable.

In its final form, the scene of the Mother and Child appears to be an attempt to modify the original iconographic type to resemble the *Salus Populi Romani* type. This is evidenced, among other things, by the contradictory interpretation of Christ's figure and the object in the Mother's



hand, as well as the appearance of the cross on the maphorion.

The frescoes of the rock-hewn church of Abuna Yemata Gu give the impression of an experimental platform where the artist attempted to combine established traditions of Ethiopian painting with elements of new vectors of influence. They distinctly exhibit features of Ottoman culture, the Goan Christian tradition, and the iconographic type of the *Salus Populi Romani* Mother of God. The most likely dating of the frescoes is the 16th century. Most likely, the depiction of Mary was transformed into the *Salus Populi Romani* type in the 17th century, when the fashion for this specific iconographic type spread during the late Renaissance and Baroque periods, roughly from the 16th to the 17th century.

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