The Iconography and Roles of an Ascetic Monk: A Painting of Abba Samu'el of Waldabba

Madison Gilmore-Duffey

Florida State University

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The recent developments in Ethiopian studies, including translation and digitization, have made accessible texts and objects that were previously unavailable to non-Ethiopian specialists. Many of these translations include gādlat, or saints’ vitae. The saints are central figures in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church (EOTC), and by studying their vitae and associated iconographies we can gain a better understanding of the ways in which saints functioned for the faithful.\(^1\) Abba ("Father") Samu’el of Waldəbbə (fl. fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries), the focus of this study, has been for centuries depicted in Ethiopian Orthodox public and private devotional art. These depictions include the painting now in the Blick-Harris Study Collection (BHSC) in the Department of Art History at Kenyon College (fig. 10.1; cat. 36). The iconography of his images, and the ways in which they reflect aspects of his vitae, have not been treated in depth, nor recognized for its relationship with Ethiopian identities. In what follows I analyze the iconography of Abba Samu’el and consider the ways in which aspects of his vitae are represented and emphasized in art. Variations of these iconographies evoke and invoke different roles, or identities, of Abba Samu’el as a Good Shepherd, as a witness and legitimizer, and as a representation of Ethiopian identity. The interpretation of these iconographies relies in part on the work of art, but it is also dependent on the viewer, owner, patron, placement of its display and use, as well as the individual and broader cultural context. The painting of Abba Samu’el of Waldəbbə in the BHSC serves as a case study through which we can consider this variability.

The painting of Abba Samu’el of Waldəbbə is an irregular rectangle, thick, and stiff; this thickness indicates that it may be made of goat skin, which is often used to make parchment throughout Ethiopia.\(^2\) There is a tear along the upper left edge and two holes in the upper corners of the parchment. The larger hole, on the right, is a wormhole, while the smaller perforation, on the left, may be from a nail — a possibility to which I shall return.\(^3\) The parchment has darkened edges; the bottom right edge is significantly darker. The front — the flesh side — is painted and features a depiction of a bearded figure riding a lion, within an orange-red rectangular frame on top of a darker orange background. Partial frames, similar to that which surrounds the central image, are visible on the bottom right and upper left of the fragment. There is a horizontal crease in the parchment below the lion’s hind feet that extends across the fragment; it appears to have been used by the artist as a ground line when drawing the lion.\(^4\) The underdrawing — faint brown lines — is visible under the lion’s body, legs, and mane. The reverse of the fragment — the hair side — is unpainted.

The upper left of the frame contains a Ga’az inscription, labeling the figure as “Abunä Samu’el

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\(^1\) For background on Ethiopian Christianity, see the essay by Neal Sobania (ch. 5).

\(^2\) Gnisci 2019, p. 24. Sheepskin is also used, although it is not as thick.

\(^3\) I thank Erika Loic for bringing this to my attention, as well as for her generous assistance on all matters concerning parchment.

\(^4\) It is unclear if the artist intentionally created the crease as a guide for a groundline, or if the parchment was creased before they painted it.
Figure 10.1. Parchment Fragment with *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba (cat. 36). Photo: Birhanu T. Gesesse.
The figure — as well as his clothing and accouterments — is outlined in dark paint. His skin is painted the same orange as the background within the frame, but his halo and the stone cap are unpainted and are therefore the same color as the parchment. He is clothed in a dark blue robe and red belt. In his right hand he holds a prayer stick: a tall stick with volutes at the top that can be used as a walking stick and portable chair to rest on during long periods of prayer or during a church service (fig. 10.2). Only his bare right foot is visible. He wears a hollowed-out stone cap, and his halo encompasses his head, shoulders, and cap. Abba Samu’el sits astride the lion’s back, gripping its mane with his left hand while the lion rears up on its hind legs. The lion’s body, teeth, and hair are outlined in a dark color; its body is unpainted except for the brown tuft of hair at the end of its tail, which curls up into the air. The lion has long, attenuated triangles representing the thick hair of its mane, large and slanted eyes, and a humanoid nose. Its teeth are bared and emphasized by the artist; they take up almost half of the lion’s face and are represented by wide triangles.

To my knowledge, there is no published comparanda for this object. For this reason, we must compare it with depictions of Abba Samu’el in other media. While the iconography is not standardized, there is an unofficial formula within which images of him are constrained. Through the study of depictions of Abba Samu’el and the iconographies that recur, it is possible to consider which of his roles are evoked and invoked in this particular work. This approach, I suggest, sheds light on the messages conveyed by the iconography of our piece, and the ways in which it may have been used.

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5 I thank Felege-Selam Yirga for his translation. “Abuna” is the Go’aṣ word for “father” and is often used to refer to priests or bishops. I have chosen to use the Amaroña (Amharic) word for “father” (“Abba”), also used to refer to priests and bishops, as this is the title primarily given to Samu’el of Waldabb in current English-language scholarship. Additionally, while Go’aṣ is the language of the Church, it was replaced as a spoken language in the tenth century by other Semitic languages like Amaranoña. See Sobiana’s essay (ch. 5) for more on Go’aṣ and Amaranoña. Today, Amaranoña is the state and inter-ethnic language primarily spoken by Ethiopians. Given that we do not know when or where this parchment fragment was made, and in following the standards set by scholars of Ethiopia, I have decided to use the Amaroña word. See also Haile 2001, pp. 20–21.
these roles, it is important to contextualize him within the history of the church, and to examine the evolution of his *vitae*. We therefore take a slight detour, into the history of Ethiopian monasticism as it relates to *Abba* Samu’el, followed by an overview of his *vitae*.

There are two primary narratives that recount Ethiopia’s conversion to Christianity. The earliest of these survives in a fourth century Roman text written by the historian Rufinus. In this contemporary account, two traveling Christian merchants, Frumentius and Aedesius, are taken into the custody of King Ḫallā’Amida and are called upon to serve his son — King Ḫizana (d. 356 CE) — after his death. Eventually, they convert Ḫizana and spread Christianity throughout Ethiopia. The second narrative, dated to the late fifth to early sixth centuries, emphasizes the primacy of monks and the monastic system, and positions Ethiopia’s religious tradition and conversion as distinct from that of the Coptic Church of Alexandria. In this narrative, a group of missionaries from the Eastern Mediterranean (Rome or Byzantium), known as the Nine Saints, brought a collection of Greek homilies and monastic rule books to Ethiopia. These saints are credited with implementing monasticism within the early church. Robust legends regarding these saints did not develop until the fourteenth century, during the early Solomonic period (1270–1530), when local monastic establishments began to develop across Ethiopia, with major movements in the provinces of Šäwa and Tağray. The Nine Saints are considered students of Saint Pachomius (d. 348 CE), the founder of cenobitic monasticism, which emphasized monastic community. Pachomius was Coptic, and his status gave him a legitimacy and authority that was passed on to the Nine Saints and their students.

Monastic authority was dependent upon pious legitimacy that passed from teachers to students and others with whom they interacted, thus creating a spiritual lineage or descendancy. This concept is integral to the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition and is emphasized in both art and textual sources. The Ḫsrā Nāgāṣt (Glory of Kings), a thirteenth-century compilation of religious texts, emphasizes the importance of this descendancy, characterizing it in both spiritual and political terms. According to the

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6 See Sobiana’s essay (ch. 5). Most of the information that survives about King Ḫillā’Amida comes from his coins.
7 Upon arrival, Frumentius and Aedesius’s entire crew was killed by Ethiopian coast guards except for these two men who were then taken as servants to the king where they gained his favor and that of his son. After converting the son (the new king), Frumentius traveled to Alexandria to request a bishop for the newly converted Ethiopians and was given the position himself. This narrative emphasizes the ties between the Ethiopian and Coptic churches — a relationship that was continued during the Solomonic period, where the Ethiopian patriarch was chosen from an Egyptian monastery. See Sobiana’s essay (ch. 5); Haile 2001, pp. 28–29; and Kaplan 2009, pp. 293–94.
8 Lusini 2020, p. 199 notes that this second narrative regarding the conversion of Ethiopia by the Nine Saints suggests that the earlier conversion of King Ḫizana was “superficial.”
9 Their names are Alef, Afje, Žamika’el called Aragawi (“the Elder”), Yashaq also called Gārīma, Guba, Liqanos, Pūntu’l’w called Zātoma’e (“the one from the cell”), Ša’ma, and Yam’ata, and sometimes Ūsh. In some accounts, the Nine Saints are from Syria; see Gnszc 2019, p. 16; and Brita 2020, p. 262. Unlike the story of Frumentius and Aedesius, there are no contemporary accounts that support the Nine Saints’ legend. See Lusini 2020, pp. 199–200. See also Sobiana’s essay (ch. 5).
10 Kaplan 2009, p. 298.
11 The Solomonic Dynasty ruled from 1270–1974 with brief interruption. Their rule is split into various periods. These include the early Solomonic period (1270–1530) and the late Solomonic period (or Gondārīne period, 1632–1769). For more, see Mann 2005, p. 5. The Šäwa province was the first to have an anti-royal militant monastic movement during the Solomonic period. In Tağray two new monastic movements were born; the first group, the Ewostatewos, advocated for traditional Ethiopian practices, such as a Saturday Sabbath. The second group, the Ūṣṭǐfanosites, rejected Emperor Ūṣ’a Ya’eqab’s (r. 1434–68) promotion of the cults of the Cross and of the Virgin and favored local saints and shrines. Betē Ṣa’al (Fālaṣa), also known as Ethiopian Jews, developed their own monastic movement. Kaplan 2009, pp. 298–300 has suggested that this movement was part of the group’s ethnogenesis. See also Kaplan 1984, p. 118; and Lusini 2020, p. 201.
13 The text was intended to provide or detail a legitimate background for the Zag’ē Dynasty (ca. twelfth to thirteenth centuries), who usurped the Solomonic line. Kings in the Solomonic Dynasty trace their lineage back to the Kingdom of
text, Ethiopian Christians are the descendants of the Jewish King Solomon and the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, Makädda, as well as possessors of the Ark of the Covenant. Through this text, the Ethiopian faithful are positioned as descendants and inheritors of Judaism and so as the chosen people of God, as are the kings of Ethiopia, who trace their lineage back to Solomon and Makädda. It is important to consider the significance of this spiritual descendancy and the legitimacy it conveys within Ethiopian Orthodoxy, as well as in the political landscape of Ethiopia.

According to *Abba* Samu’el’s *vitae*, his father, Ṣṭifanos, a “holy man,” and his mother, ‘Amātā Maryam, moved to Aksum to teach him the Holy Scriptures.⁴ After his parents’ death, Samu’el traveled to Däbrä Bänk“äl to become a monk, studying under *Abba* Màdḥañinā Ḥzi’ (fl. fourteenth century).⁵ *Abba* Samu’el fasted, prayed, and worked at the monastery. He eventually found the other monks visiting him to be a nuisance, and so went into the desert where he fasted and prayed alone for forty days and forty nights. In the desert, wild animals bowed down to him, and licked the dust off his feet. He was protected from natural disaster by God and tempted by Satan, until one day Christ visited him while in prayer and “sealed his whole body...with His spittle.” This inspired *Abba* Samu’el to become an anchorite (a monk who rejects a monastic community in favor of solitude), to wear fetters and a sackcloth, and to self-mortify.⁶ During this period he also began to administer to the lions’ needs, tending to their wounds and plucking thorns from their paws. He began to attract disciples, and met other, historically important monks, including *Abba* Gábrä Màşqāl of Däbrä Lägaso.⁷ While consecrating the Eucharist, a chalice and bread came down from Heaven, and while reading the Praises of Our Lady Mary, *Abba* Samu’el was lifted off the ground. The Virgin then gave him a stone that shot out light and the scent of incense. Before his death, the Archangel Michael carried him through the Heavenly Jerusalem, bringing him before the throne of God who said he would be praised on Earth. *Abba* Samu’el then returned to his bed, reported the events to his disciples, and died.

As a student of Màdḥañinā Ḥzi’, who was a student of Täklä Haymanot (1215–1313) — a major church leader and, later, a saint, who is credited with monastic reform and the establishment of monastic communities across Ethiopia — *Abba* Samu’el is connected to the Nine Saints and to Pachomius. As we recall, this is the group of missionaries who brought Christianity to Ethiopia.⁸ *Abba* Samu’el’s association with Waldabba, now in Tagray in Northern Ethiopia — the same province from which the Nine Saints spread their teachings — ties him to these figures in a second way.⁹ He is therefore — by location and monastic training — part of a long spiritual lineage that links him to the Nine Saints and to the foundations of Ethiopian monasticism.

*Abba* Samu’el lived during the fifteenth century, a period of intense monastic reform in Ethiopia. Prior to this period, the kings of Ethiopia supported the Coptic patriarch and metropolitan — whose offices were in Alexandria — over the Ethiopian monastics who did not participate in courtly power

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⁴ Brita 2020, p. 273. *Abba* Màdḥañinā Ḥzi’ was a disciple of Täklä Haymanot and a teacher to *Abba* Samu’el, and he founded Däbrä Bänk“äl; see Zelleke 1975, p. 81.
⁵ Each of these actions is a type of self-mortification.
⁶ *Abba* Gábrä Màşqāl of Däbrä Lägaso is most known for having founded a hermitage; see Zelleke 1975, p. 74.
⁷ Moore 1936, p. 283; and Brita 2020, p. 273. Täklä Haymanot studied under *Abba* Yohanni of Däbrä Damo. He established monastic communities, including Däbrä ‘Asbo (later, Däbrä Lībānos); see Budge 1928, p. 2:365; Zelleke 1975, pp. 81, 92; and Brita 2020, p. 273.
structures. As the Solomonic Dynasty (1270–1974) sought to expand its territory during this period, local aristocrats allied themselves with local monasteries in order to protect their autonomy and disrupt the power systems that benefited the king and elites of his court, including priests and church leaders. This changed under King Dawit II (r. 1379/80–1413) and the Emperor Zär’a Ya’eqob (r. 1434–68); both recognized Ethiopian monastics as representatives of a specifically Ethiopian Orthodox identity.

Monastic reform during the Solomonic period emphasized the dichotomy between cenobitic monasticism and anchoritism. Abba Samu’el, like other monastic saints during this period, operated in both spheres. His depiction in art, to which I now turn, is similarly informed by this seeming dichotomy.

20 The priests were part of Ethiopia’s political hierarchy and many were often in close communication with the king; Lusini 2020, pp. 211, 214. The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria is a Non-Chalcedonian Church. From the introduction of Christianity until 1959 — when the EOTC received its first Ethiopian Patriarch and gained autocephalic status — members of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition followed the patriarch in Alexandria.

21 See footnote 11; and Lusini 2020, pp. 211–12.

22 Lusini 2020, p. 214. Sometimes King Dawit II is referred to as “Dawit I.” The other “King Dawit I” is the King Manilak, son of King Solomon and Queen Makadda of Sheba, anointed “Dawit (David)” by Solomon; see Ayenachew 2020, p. 59.

23 Lusini 2020, p. 209.

24 Saints Bāṣālotā Mika’el and Filappos of Dābrā ’Asbo are also known for participating in both cenobitic monasticism and anchoritism. Bāṣālotā Mika’el was a fourteenth-century monk who accused Abunā Yoḥannas (an Egyptian Bishop in Ethiopia) of practicing simony. He improved monastic conditions and played a large role in the early monastic reform; see Zelleke 1975, p. 66. Filappos of Dābrā ’Asbo (ca. 1323–1406) was another leader in the monastic reform movement, pushing for the observance of two sabbath days. See Zelleke 1975, p. 71; and Lusini 2020, p. 209.
Iconography and Identity in Depictions of Abba Samu’el of Waldabba

The varying iconographies associated with Abba Samu’el convey and emphasize different aspects of his life. The placement of certain iconographical elements in relation to the saint’s body, and the selection and inclusion of other saints with him are variables that communicate his many identities. Abba Samu’el’s physical characteristics are also subject to variability and choice. He is depicted with different beard lengths and hair colors, and at different ages; there are variants in the colors of his clothing; sometimes he wears shoes, and sometimes he does not; he carries different symbols of piety; he is sometimes shown riding a lion, is sometimes accompanied by lions, and is sometimes depicted without them. What remains consistent and acts as confirmation of his identity is his naming inscription. Sometimes these inscriptions tell us more than just his name, as we find in the inscription on a fifteenth-century wall mural at the church of Däbrä Ṣayon. This mural depicts Abba Samu’el beside two lions; the inscription reads: “...Abunä Samu’el, you cover him as with the clothing of his heart... and make him sit with the blessed doves [monks] in Däbrä Ṣayon, the temple. Amen” (fig. 10.3).  

Both the longer inscriptions and the shorter ones, such as that on our parchment fragment of Abba Samu’el of Waldabba, clarify who, specifically, is depicted, and are typically written in Ga’as.

There are aspects of Abba Samu’el’s vitae that are consistently depicted in all of his images, such as his status as a monk, which is visually communicated by his clothing. He is always in traditional monastic garb, consisting of a long cloak or robe, and a belt. This choice of clothing clearly identifies his position as a monk, rather than a saint with a lay or clerical background. The consistency with which he is depicted in this clothing indicates that it is an important aspect of his visual identity. In some images, he is shown barefoot. Not all saints or monks are depicted in this way, and it is possible that, for Abba Samu’el, this iconography refers to his rejection of the earthly realm.

The symbols of piety associated with Ethiopian saints and monks in medieval visual and textual sources — including prayer sticks, hand crosses, and instruments of self-mortification — have persisted into the modern period. Of the surviving images of Abba Samu’el, the prayer stick is the most consistently depicted of these symbols, with examples surviving to us in a variety of media. He is also depicted with hand crosses, as we see, for example, in the wall painting at the Church of  

25 Translation from Tribe 2009, p. 20, with spelling emendations.

26 Tribe 2009, p. 18. Many saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition are monks.
Maryam Quiat (fig. 10.4), and with symbols of his self-mortification. Abba Samu’el’s vitae and associated legends tell us that he fasted, prostrated so often that he became flat-footed, and practiced self-mortification, specifically through flagellation, but none of these practices are included in images of the saint. Instead, he is sometimes depicted with a stone cap that covers his ears and resembles a helmet, as we see in our parchment painting; stone caps are still worn today by monks as a form of self-mortification (fig. 10.5). These symbols of piety — his prayer stick, hand cross, and stone cap — are therefore attributes that are used to emphasize Abba Samu’el’s spiritual devotion.

Abba Samu’el’s association with lions is not unusual in hagiography and art; multiple Ethiopian saints are said to have tended to them. He is, however, the only saint shown riding a lion, often grasping its mane (fig. 10.6). The bared teeth and claws emphasize the fact that the lion is powerful.

There is no mention of the subsequent use of this stone — whether it was worn or held.

27 These hand crosses are similar to those in the BHSC. See the essay by Lynn Jones (ch. 6).
28 It may also be that the stone cap is a symbol of divine favor; as we remember, Mary gave him a “precious stone” from which shot out both light and incense; Kaplan 1984, p. 77.
and deadly, thereby displaying Abba Samu’el’s ability to ride, and ultimately control, the animal as something unusual and incredible. In other depictions, Abba Samu’el does not ride a lion, but is accompanied by one. These images emphasize other aspects of his identity, such as his relationship with Abba Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus (fl. fifteenth century) — a saint from Egypt credited with founding multiple monasteries in Ethiopia. On a fifteenth-century diptych owned by Daga Ḫṣṭifanos on Lake Ṭana, these two saints are shown together in the lower-left corner of the right panel (fig. 10.7). Abba Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus, on the left, stands in front of four lions, and is shown with his hands raised in prayer. Abba Samu’el, on the right, is accompanied by one lion, whose head is partially visible.

In all extant depictions of Abba Samu’el, we can see different roles, or identities, based on the iconography chosen, the context in which he is shown, and the saints with which he is depicted. In what follows, I identify three primary identities in depictions of Abba Samu’el: as a Good Shepherd, as a witness and a legitimizer of other Ethiopian saints, and as a representative of Ethiopian identity. These suggested roles are not mutually exclusive, and some images of Abba Samu’el are multivalent.

Abba Samu’el as a Good Shepherd

As we have seen, Abba Samu’el is depicted with his lion companions more often than not. A wall painting from the church of Däbrä Ṣayon depicts

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30 These monasteries include Däbrä Zaq’ala and Madrā Käbd; see Zelleke 1975, p. 73; and Sobania’s essay (ch. 5).
the saint returning a lost lion cub to its mother (fig. 10.3). Tania Costa Tribe situated this wall painting within the larger context of the church, arguing that this image demonstrated one aspect of the saint’s *vitae*: using his special bond with animals to protect people from attack.\(^3\) I push this argument further by suggesting that the text and iconography associated with *Abba* Samu‘el parallel Biblical verses detailing Christ’s return of a lost sheep to the flock and his protection of them.\(^3\) Depictions of Christ as the Good Shepherd are found in Ethiopian church decorative programs, including the east wall of the Church of Ba‘çäna Giyorgis (date unknown) in Goğğam province (fig. 10.8).\(^3\) Two side-by-side scenes on the third register depict Christ protecting his flock of sheep from wolves. Iconographically, depictions of Christ and Abba Samu‘el as Good Shepherds differ; thematically, however, there are parallels between Christ as protector of animals, and by extension, mankind, and *Abba* Samu‘el as a similar protector. Just as Christ returns the lost sheep to its flock, so too does *Abba* Samu‘el return the lion cub to its mother; each figure tends to the faithful.

**Abba Samu‘el as Witness and Legitimizer**

*Abba* Samu‘el’s role as a legitimizer is emphasized in images where he is shown alongside depictions of other monastic saints and church leaders. In a painting, dated to 1905–12, now at the Kunstkamera in Saint Petersburg, we see him depicted with Täklä Haymanot, Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus, and Gäbrä Krastos — all descended from the Nine Saints — in a grid pattern that visually associates *Abba* Samu‘el with the lives of these three men (fig. 10.9).\(^4\) We see this too on the seventeenth-century diptych from Daga Asṭifanos, where *Abba* Samu‘el is shown beside Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus (fig. 10.7). In both of these works, *Abba* Samu‘el’s

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33 There is little information recorded for this church; the dates of both the building and wall paintings are unknown.
34 For Gäbrä Krastos, see Zelleke 1975, p. 73.
Figure 10.9. Painting of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəsidus (upper left), Tākla Haymanot (upper right), Samu'el of Waldabb (bottom left), and Gäbrä Krastos (bottom right), 1905–12 (?). Oil (?) on linen. Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (The Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg, Russia (МАЭ № 2594-3). Photo: http://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT/281507
association with these particular saints highlights their shared spiritual lineages. His image, then, functions to legitimize: he provides spiritual legitimacy to these other saints and they in turn legitimize him. The spiritual powers of all these figures are increased when they are shown together.

*Abba* Samu’el’s legitimizing power also comes from his role as witness. The *vita* of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus recounts a story in which *Abba* Samu’el, along with Saints Anbäs of Hazalo and Banyam, appeared from the heavens with their lions to learn from him. According to his *vita*, Satan killed the saints’ lions with his own, but Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus raised them from the dead. In this narrative, *Abba* Samu’el acts as witness, deferring to him, asking if he was God.

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35 *Ede*, 2:621b. Modern translations of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus’s *vita* record *Abba* Samu’el, Anbäs, and Banyam as the three saints who arrive on lions to learn from him. Budge’s translation (1928, p. 3:767), however, identifies the figures as Samu’el, Anseso, and Banyam. Like Anbäs, Budge’s Anseso is from Hazalo.

36 Budge 1928, pp. 3:768–69.

37 Budge 1928, p. 3:769.
witness to Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus’s act. His role as witness thus served to legitimize another saint’s miraculous deeds. The authority that he possesses through his esteemed spiritual lineage empowers him to acknowledge and verify the event.

Abba Samu’el and Ethiopian Identity

*Abba* Samu’el’s role as a representative of Ethiopian identity is also reflected in his *vitae*, which as we recall, was developed during a period of intense monastic reforms that connected monastic saints with Ethiopian power and identity. His spiritual lineage from the Nine Saints, through Täklä Haymanot and *Abba* Mädḫanä Egi, and his relationship with Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus, underscore his ties to the foundation of Ethiopian Christianity and to the development of Ethiopian monasticism. In art, this role is visually detailed through two main iconographies: the combination of cenobitic and anchoritic elements, and the depictions of legendary events that show *Abba* Samu’el interacting with Ethiopian political figures. While *Abba* Samu’el participated in the cenobitic monastic tradition, he later left the monastic community to become an anchorite. In art, this dichotomy is represented through the monastic clothing of the cenobitic tradition, while the lion he rides, the stone helmet of mortification, his prayer stick, and his bare feet (a rejection of earthly possessions) identify him as an anchorite.

Each of these elements are depicted in the painting of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba in the BHSC. The references to cenobitic and anchoritic traditions reflect the variety of monastic practices within Ethiopia, many of which developed during the period of reform in *Abba* Samu’el’s own lifetime. His images, then, serve as visual markers in this history and as a representation of a distinctly Ethiopian monastic tradition.

In the Church of Yoḥannas Mä’aquddi, we find a seventeenth-century wall painting that shows *Abba* Samu’el aiding King Fasilädäs (r. 1632–67) against Muslim insurrections (fig. 10.10). On the second row, *Abba* Samu’el stands beside a disciple-attendant; both hold hand crosses. Neither the saint nor his attendant is depicted in the midst of action; however, they are surrounded by scenes that depict soldiers on horses, figures being hung, and other battle scenes. The viewer, looking at a work of art such as this, would have been familiar with the legends about *Abba* Samu’el and his role in the battle, and would remember how he defended Christianity and protected the Ethiopian faithful. The viewer’s familiarity with the legend means that depiction of his participation is not necessary; his inclusion in the scene is enough. Legends such as this are examples of the ways in which monastic saints such as *Abba* Samu’el can become representations of Ethiopian Orthodox identity; here, deceased saints return to earth to aid the state against Muslim insurrection or rebellion, indicating that both the saints and the kings have a shared goal in maintaining Ethiopia as an Ethiopian Orthodox state.

The Painting of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba

The various roles of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba can be invoked through different iconographies. The visual expression of each is dependent upon which iconographies the artist or patron chose, the location of the image, the media, and/or the audience. Sometimes these roles converge and sometimes they are distinct. For example, the image of *Abba* Samu’el that depicts him with King Fasilädäs emphasizes his roles as protector of Ethiopia, a legitimizer of the king’s piety and faith, and a preserver of Ethiopian Orthodoxy and identity. Depictions of him alone and riding his lion, on the other hand, rely on the viewer’s knowledge of his *vitae*, and aspects of his life that speak to the viewer in that moment, including his role as a Good Shepherd and as a model of monastic piety. These

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38 Lusini 2020, p. 209.
39 Kaplan 1984, pp. 87–90.

40 King Fasilädäs is credited with “restoring” the Ethiopian church by removing the Jesuit, Roman Catholic, and Muslim presence; see Moore 1936, pp. 281–82.
iconographies can evoke and remind the viewer of specific aspects of the saint and his *vitae*, but it is the people who interact with the image that invoke and call upon *Abba* Samu’el’s various and specific roles.

For the painting of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba in the BHSC, the loss of context prevents us from identifying the original uses and intents of the people who interacted with the object. We are left with only a few clues based on the current state of the parchment. It is possible the fragment may have been used as a personal devotional object. As we have seen, the small perforation in the upper left corner is similar to the shape of a nail. This perforation is not smooth but contains jagged edges on the reverse side, as if something had been pushed through it (fig. 10.11). While there is limited comparanda for objects similar to this fragment, there are examples of other pieces of parchment being hung and displayed on the walls of Ethiopian homes (fig. 10.12). This photo shows a magic scroll (*katab*) nailed to the wall. Magic scrolls are sometimes displayed this way in order to function as traps for demons (see cats. 34, 35).41 The painting of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba may have once been nailed to a wall the same way. It would have had a similar importance as an object used for personal devotion, and its display on the wall is indicative of it having once served as a protective or meditative device that needed to be visually accessible to the viewer.

Other aspects of the fragment’s condition also indicate personal use, including the edges darkened by skin oils, the tear on the left side, and the uneven edges. As we have seen, the bottom right corner is significantly more worn, and darker, than the remainder of the parchment. This wearing is similar to the discoloration caused by skin oil found on the corners of manuscript pages, where the parchment has been turned and touched many times. The discoloration would occur from similar haptic use during personal devotion.

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41 These scrolls are personal and made specifically for the purchaser, then buried or destroyed after they have served their purpose. They are usually kept in cases and are displayed only to perform specific functions; see Nosnitsin 2012, p. 4; and Windmuller-Luna 2015.

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Figure 10.11. Parchment Fragment with *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba (cat. 36), back, detail of the nail hole. Photo: Birhanu T. Gesese.

Figure 10.12. Photograph of a woman displaying her magic scroll on the wall alongside photographs. Photo: after Mercier 1997, p. 50.
The tear and jagged edges indicate that this fragment was cut from a larger piece. Had our parchment originally been part of a manuscript, it would have been cut in straight lines, as seen in the sansul and sansul fragments featured in this catalog (cats. 31, 32, 33.) This fragment was originally part of a larger piece that included other framed images; the upper and lower right edges of the fragment preserve colored lines that match the frame surrounding Abba Samu'el. As we have seen, images of multiple saints, each contained within a single frame, are found on a variety of objects, including wall paintings and manuscripts (figs. 10.4, 10.7, 10.9).

We do not know what the original message of the fragment may have been, as Abba Samu'el’s roles change depending on who is depicted with him. The iconography of the parchment fragment is meant to recall his relationship with cenobitic monasticism and anchoritism. In this way, his own piety is emphasized. He also serves to legitimize the viewer’s piety. The viewer — who is already participating in the act of pious devotion by either displaying, viewing, or holding the object — is witnessed by Abba Samu'el in the same way that the miraculous acts of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qaddus were witnessed. The viewer could also recognize and invoke Abba Samu’el’s role as protector. As we have seen, he rides his lion, emphasizing his control of animals, and the legends that place him as a Good Shepherd.

Abba Samu’el’s vitae and associated legends, which are well known to the faithful, would have informed these different perceptions and uses. We cannot know if the owner, artist, or viewer was also a native of Waldabba or Tagray, but if so Abba Samu’el could represent a specific local identity — in the same way that he invokes a larger Ethiopian Orthodox identity when depicted alongside kings and saints.

The iconography of Abba Samu’el functions to convey a spectrum of Ethiopian identities. While there are no standardized iconographic formulae for the depictions of Abba Samu’el, there is formal continuity among depictions of him. As the essays and catalog entries in this volume demonstrate, this continuity in Ethiopian Orthodox art and material culture is indicative of the persistence of form and function in the Ethiopian Orthodox artistic tradition.
36. Parchment Fragment with *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba

Ink on parchment, possibly goat skin
6¹⁵/₁₆ × 4³/₄ × ¹/₃₂ in. (17.6 × 12.1 × 0.08 cm)

**INSCRIPTION:** *Abunä* Samu’el [of Waldabba]

**CONDITION:** Worn with evidence of handling and bending at the foot of the lion. There is a worm hole in the upper right corner and a nail hole in the upper left. The edges are uneven, and a piece appears to have been cut from the upper left side.

**PROVENANCE:** Purchased by David P. Harris. Date, receipt, and supplemental documents are unavailable. Harris bequest, The Blick-Harris Study Collection, Department of Art History, Kenyon College (2020.408).

https://digital.kenyon.edu/arthistorystudycollection/667/

This parchment is thick and stiff. The edges are uneven, suggesting that this fragment was cut from a larger piece. It contains a depiction of *Abba* Samu’el of Waldabba, a fifteenth-century Ethiopian monk. *Abba* Samu’el is shown within an orange-red frame on a light-orange background. He sits on the back of a lion, who is growling and rearing up on his hind legs. *Abba* Samu’el grasps the lion’s mane in his hand and is guiding it. He is shown with a beard and wears typical monastic garb: dark robes with white borders and a red belt. He is barefoot and carries only a prayer stick in his right hand. *Abba* Samu’el has a halo and wears a stone cap.

The hole in the upper-right corner of the parchment is a wormhole. That in the upper-left corner is possibly a nail hole, and may be evidence that the parchment was once hung on the wall. There remains evidence of another two border frames, visible at the upper-right and lower-right edges of this fragment, further suggesting that *Abba* Samu’el’s icon was removed from a larger parchment that contained multiple, similar icons of other Ethiopian saints.

There is a crease below the rear feet of the lion that the artist used as a ground line, suggesting that it was there before this image was painted. The under drawing is visible for the lion’s body, legs, and mane.

MGD

1. “*Abunä*” is a Ga’az word for “father” and is often used to refer to priests or bishops. I have chosen to use the Amaroňña (Amharic) word for “father” (“*Abba*”), also used to refer to priests and bishops, as this is the title primarily given to Samu’el of Waldabba in current scholarship. For more information, see my essay (ch. 10).
2. Stone caps, or hollowed stones worn on the head like a hat or helmet, are used by some Ethiopian monks as a type of self-mortification device. References to *Abba* Samu’el’s self-mortification are found in his *vitae*. For more information, see my essay (ch. 10).
3. *Abba* Samu’el is sometimes depicted alongside Gäbrä Mánfás Qoddu, Täklä Haymanot, and Gäbrä Krastos — other Ethiopian monastic saints and church leaders. In one example (see figure 10.9 of my essay), each figure is framed by borders similar to those on this parchment fragment. For more on *Abba* Samu’el’s relationship with these saints and what may have originally been depicted, see my essay (ch. 10).
Cat. 36B. Parchment Fragment with Ṣaba Sam‘el of Wadóbbà, front. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.
Cat. 36B. Parchment Fragment with Abba Samu’el of Waldoba, back. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.
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