



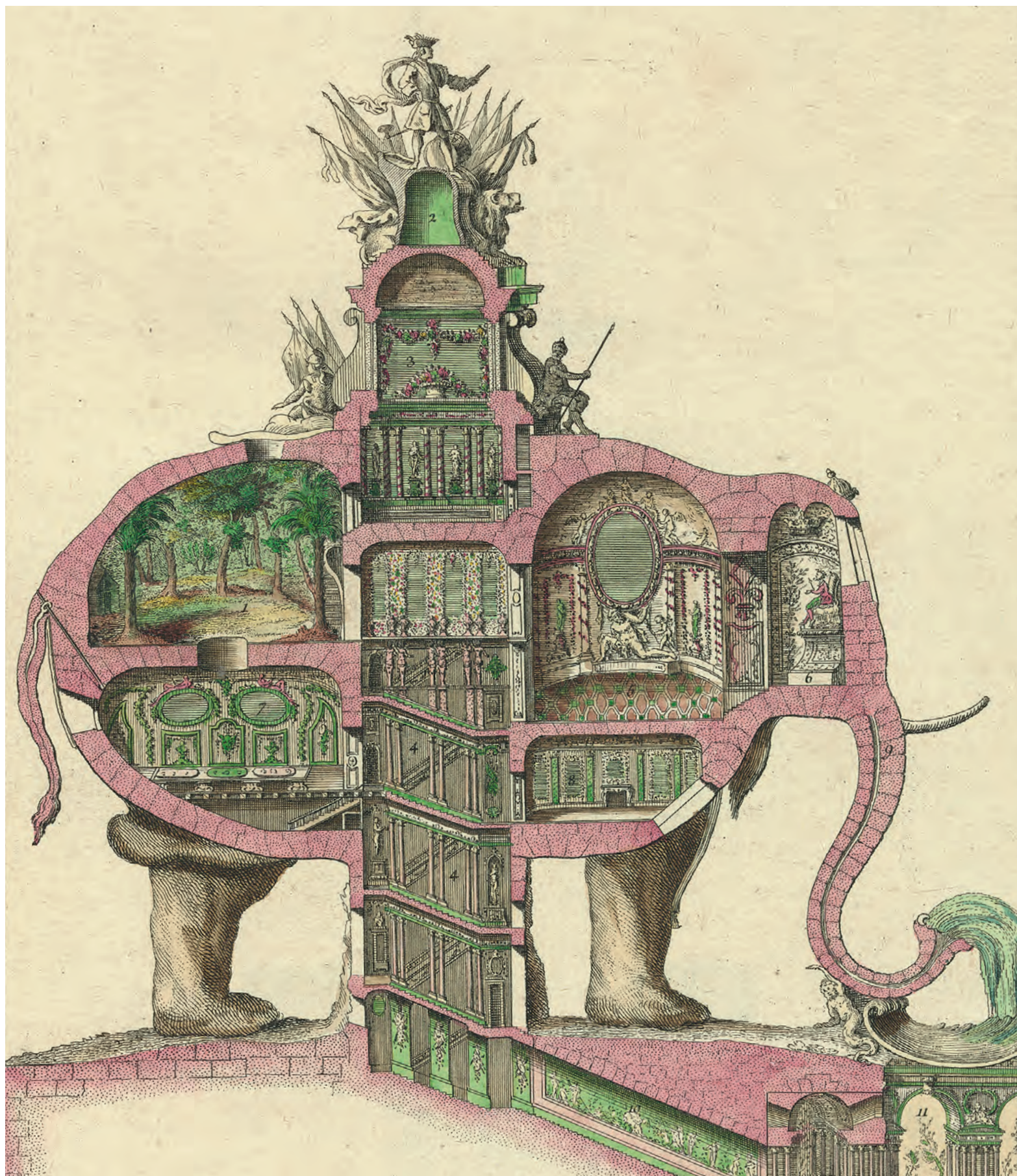
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Front cover illustration: Attributed to Baselyos (scribe) and the Night-Heron Master (illuminator). Image (ሥዕል, ṣəʾəḷ) of *abba* Giyorgis [of Säglä] (አባ፡ጊዮርጊስ), fol. 1v in the *ʿĀrganonā Maryam (The Organ of Mary)*, late 17th century. Ethiopia, Lasta region. See fig. 1, p. 133.

Back cover illustration: Kneeling female figure, 15th–early 16th century. Mexico, Mesoamerica, Aztec. See fig. 5, p. 17.

Illustration on p. 2: Pierre Patte after Charles François Ribart de Chamoust. Section view of Ribart's elephant monument from Ribart 1758, pl. VI. Hand-colored etching. See fig. 4, p. 86.

Illustration on p. 4: Mask. Mexico. Olmec, 900–400 B.C. Jadeite, H. 5¼ × W. 5½ × D. 3 in. (14.6 × 14 × 7.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1977 (1977.187.33)

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## MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

Founded in 1968, the *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually that features original research on the history, interpretation, conservation, and scientific examination of works of art in the Museum's collection. Its range encompasses the diversity of artistic practice from antiquity to the present day. The *Journal* encourages contributions offering critical and innovative approaches that will further our understanding of works of art.

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### ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*  
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

*Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.*

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**JOURNAL** 56



# Talismanic Imagery in an Ethiopian Christian Manuscript Illuminated by the Night-Heron Master

**KRISTEN WINDMULLER-LUNA**

For the Christian faithful of Ethiopia, prayers offer the best protection against the challenges of life. But in a world threatened by demons, beasts, and everyday misfortune, sometimes words of prayer need amplification. A manuscript of the *ʾÄrganonä Maryam* (*The Organ of Mary*, አርጋኖን፡ማርያም) (fig. 1) now at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a rare example of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian prayer book that combines religious words with talismanic imagery.<sup>1</sup> The text is written in Gəʿəz (ግዕዝ), an Afro-Asiatic Semitic language used in the Horn of Africa since at least the fifth century B.C. Also known as Ethiopic, Gəʿəz remains the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwəhədo Christian Church. Different layers of religious protection intermingle in this book, blending the powers of word and image.

fig. 1 Attributed to Baselyos (scribe) and the Night-Heron Master (illuminator). Image (ሥዕል, *śəʾəl*) of *abba* Giyorgis [of Sägla] (አባጊዮርጊስ), fol. 1v in the *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* (*The Organ of Mary*), late 17th century. Ethiopia, Lasta region. Parchment, pigment ink, wood, leather, fiber, 6½ × 6⅞ in. (16.5 × 15.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Louis V. Bell Fund, 2006 (2006.99)



These include the prayers themselves, artfully written script spelling out rich, moving prayers to the Virgin Mary, as well as talismanic images (ጠልሰም, *tälsäm*), whose unity of design and motif are incorporated throughout the manuscript in association with narrative images (ሥዕል, *śəʾəl*) in a way rarely seen in Ethiopian Christian manuscripts. By considering how these potent words and images blend, we gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between “magical” knowledge and Ethiopian Christian belief, and of the role of art as both an aesthetic and spiritual tool.

#### THE ʾĀRGANONĀ MARYAM

The *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* is a fifteenth-century text dedicated to the Virgin Mary, one of the central figures in Ethiopian Orthodoxy since the adoption of the faith in the region about A.D. 330. *Abba* Giyorgis of Sägla, a major fifteenth-century author of religious texts in *Gəʿəz*, is traditionally credited with writing this hymn of praise. Composed when the cult of the Virgin Mary was being vigorously promoted by both the Ethiopian Church and rulers such as Emperor Zärʾä Yaʿəqob (r. 1434–68), the book is an effusive adoration of the mother of Christ. Written in *abba* Giyorgis’s signature





fig. 2 Colophon with the name of the scribe Basəlyos (ገሰልዮስ) and the “visual signature” of the illuminator the Night-Heron Master. From fol. 123 of the *Ārganonā Maryam* (fig. 1)

fig. 3 The Night-Heron Master. Banded border (ሓረግ, *ḥārāg*) with birds. From the “Life and Deeds of Monasticism” (ሓረግዊ : መንፈሳዊ *Ṿāragawi* Mānfāsawi). Church of Maryam Dibo, Ethiopia (fol. 1r)



style, the text lauds the Virgin in elegant language rich with metaphor and simile, as well as references to the natural world and to Scripture, praising the Virgin while guiding the reader as they atone for their sins and seek her prayers. The introductory prayer, for example, lauds her grace and virginity, comparing her to a “ship of gold” and to a “pillar of pearl.”<sup>2</sup> A scribe copied the luxury manuscript now at The Met—a handwritten copy of Giyorgis’s original text—in the late seventeenth century in Lasta, a historical district of northern Ethiopia best known for its distinctive red volcanic mountains, where architects and builders carved some of the most famous churches in the world, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibāla. While the exact site of this manuscript’s manufacture is not known, its precise, even handwriting suggests the scribe first trained in a royal scriptorium in Gondār, some one hundred miles to the west, before working in a Lasta monastery. A colophon on the recto of folio 123 identifies the scribe of this book as a man called Basəlyos (ገሰልዮስ) (fig. 2). Below the colophon is an ochre and black drawing of a sharp-beaked bird, previously identified as a ground hornbill.

Some believe this avian is the visual signature of an artist eponymously dubbed the Ground Hornbill Master, to whom scholars have credited ten works with a distinctive style of bold, linear, geometric graphic ornamentation.<sup>3</sup> However, the ornithological identity that informs this artist’s alias requires a reassessment based on the formal evidence. Following Bent Juel-Jensen’s assertion that “these are almost certainly Abyssinian ground hornbills,” the red-throated bird has been linked to a (male) Abyssinian hornbill (*Buceros abyssinicus*), an avian with all-black legs, blue circling its eyes, and a red skin flap at the throat.<sup>4</sup> However, a closer analysis of the plumage and legs suggests it is in fact another bird, the White-Backed Night-Heron (*Nycticorax leuconotus*/*Gorsachius leuconotus*). Like that in the illuminations, that bird has a smooth-crested head, a pointed beak, a white crest circling the large eye, a red-brown throat, yellow legs and feet, and white or buff feathers on its dark back and underbelly.<sup>5</sup> In another manuscript at the Church of Maryam Dibo, attributable to the same illuminator (fig. 3), the bird’s plumage is depicted with greater detail. While the ground hornbill has a prominent casque (a hornlike bump or ridge) on its upper beak, these birds have none. Indeed, we may speak more accurately of the Night-Heron Master than of the Ground Hornbill Master; as such, this article will use that moniker.

It is tempting to link the Night-Heron Master with the scribal name Basəlyos written in this volume’s

fig. 4 Left: Talismanic illumination (ጠልሰም, *ṭälsām*): Seal of Solomon, fol. 123v. Right: Banded border (ሐረግ *ḥāräg*) with notation for Saturday, fol. 124r. From the *ʾĀrganonä Maryam* (fig. 1)



colophon. However, this supposition is unlikely for several reasons. First, multiple people often worked on the same manuscript; its scribe (calligrapher) and illustrator (painter) were almost always two distinct individuals.<sup>6</sup> The possibility that Basalyos (scribe of the presently considered manuscript) and the Night-Heron Master (illuminator of the manuscript) are two different people becomes even more likely when the volume is compared to other manuscripts whose illuminations scholars ascribe to the avian-monikered artist. Those volumes present different scribal hands and names.<sup>7</sup> Given the evidence, this article will refer to the Night-Heron Master (formerly the Ground Hornbill Master) as the painter of the manuscript and to Basalyos as its scribe.

While the original text of the *ʾĀrganonä Maryam* was probably a continuous passage, subsequent manuscripts—including this one—divided the text's prayers according to the days of the week for liturgical reasons. In this book, selected folios have elaborate upper borders, themselves topped by small boxes containing the names of the days of the week, allowing the owner to locate the appropriate daily prayer. Called *ḥāräg* (ሐረግ)—literally “tendrils”—in reference to their vinelike interlacing motifs, these banded borders both highlight and separate key parts of the text. The *ʾĀrganonä Maryam* now at The Met contains five full-page *ḥāräg* (fig. 4, right), and a smaller half-page frame that encloses the

column of text intended for Friday. Painted with the same colors used in the primary illumination, the *ḥāräg* incorporate three major motifs in a variety of arrangements: interlace bands; gyronny squares filled with radiating triangles; and nested triangles. The repetition of motifs ensures that each *ḥāräg* within the manuscript is unique, yet visually harmonious throughout the work. The manuscript's artfully written letters—bold vertical strokes of black and red, with stylishly rendered angles and even heights—suggests that Basalyos was trained in *Gwelḥ*, the official script developed at the court of Gondär in the mid-seventeenth century for use in official documents and presentation manuscripts. Its use in the *ʾĀrganonä Maryam* implies the importance of the text's commissioner. While the manuscript's handwriting is clearly that of the Gondärine court scriptoria, its illuminations and *ḥāräg* diverge from Gondärine pictorial norms. Gondärine-style artists innovated a vividly colored, graphically bold—yet naturalistically shaded and observed—form that essentially dominated Ethiopian Christian art for a century and a half from roughly 1600 onward (fig. 5). The limited palette, sharp geometry, and flat color planes of this *ʾĀrganonä Maryam* thus contrast with the illuminations typically accompanying the courtly *Gwelḥ* script. These characteristics further support the argument that the work had two makers: a court-trained scribe who wrote the text,





fig. 5 Second Gondārine-style artist, Ethiopia. Double diptych pendant icon, early 18th century. Wood, tempera pigment, string, open, mounted  $3\frac{3}{4} \times 6 \times 5\frac{1}{2}$  in. ( $9.5 \times 15.2 \times 14$  cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1997 (1997.81.1)

and an artist who created the full-page illuminations and the borders. Moreover, artists almost never signed their work at the time of this manuscript's creation and were rarely acknowledged in colophons, making it unlikely that the man Baselyos also made the illuminations.

#### THE POWER OF THE BOOK

The very nature of this manuscript—simultaneously a vessel for the written word and a symbolically potent object in its own right—echoes the relationship between sacred word and image found within its pages. As in Roman Catholicism, the Virgin Mary holds a special place in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity; she mediates between Christ and the people, interceding on their behalf. Spoken aloud, or read silently, prayers to Mary were believed to be especially effective. In vivid language, the *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* describes some of the blessings bestowed upon a reader simply for reading or enunciating its prayers: “let each one of him who having read/recited this book let his mouth become delighted by the salt of divinity, [and] the sweetness from the honeycomb and the wines of sugar.”<sup>8</sup> The act of holding this particular volume would also have delighted the senses: perfectly sized to fit in the palms of the hand, its small pages were cut from buttery smooth parchment. The intimate size and fine quality suggest that the *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* under discussion was an elite person's devotional book. But even if the prayers were not read or studied by the manuscript's owner, they still offered protection just by having been written on the parchment. The act of writing, no matter what the support, held spiritual significance. The book of the *Organ of*

*Mary* in and of itself is considered to be a kind of amulet, or talisman, which offered its owner supernatural safekeeping. Even when closed, the book held power. Furthermore, the scribe decorated its leather-wrapped wooden cover with blind tooling, stamping designs into the leather with heated metal tools (fig. 6). The decorative motifs are not purely abstract, but often carry names that evoke both their own forms or the names of religious symbols. The bars of the central cross and the outermost border are filled with the hatched “crisscross” design (*Cōh rəʿəs*) punctuated at the ends and corners by nested circles called “dove's eye” (*ʾəḥ:ḥḥ ʿaynā rəgb*) (fig. 7).<sup>9</sup> The border surrounding the central cross is filled with an X-form motif also known as “cross” (*ʾəḥḥ mäsqāl*), amplifying the symbolic energy of the central image through repetition. Symbolic in their own right, they are arranged in a series of nested borders that evokes the designs on the *tabot*, the altar stone that consecrates each Ethiopian Orthodox church. Epitomizing the blend of religious and esoteric beliefs that characterize Ethiopian Orthodoxy, the cross is a Christian symbol—the device of the Crucifixion—but also has shielding and healing capabilities, adding yet another tier of protection to the volume. A book of prayers enclosed by a cover imbued with protective religious symbols was not unusual in Ethiopia; in fact, it was, and remains, the standard for Christian texts. What is remarkable about this particular manuscript is its use of *ṭälsām*.

#### ṬÄLSÄM: FAITH IN FORM

Ethiopian Orthodoxy is characterized by an entangled blend of Christian and “magical” (or noncanonical) beliefs.<sup>10</sup> In the Ethiopian context, and indeed throughout much of the African continent, “magic” is a kind of religious belief in the ability to affect the course of events by appealing to supernatural powers. It is about using secret knowledge of the divine and the spiritual domain to better one's everyday life. In practice and theory, “magic” is linked to religion. Formally, the Church condemns “magic,” though in practice its stances are ambivalent or even contradictory; equally, what can be sacred or miraculous from a religious perspective (a cross) can also be “magical” from a different vantage point (the same cross used to heal or expel demons).<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the books common to many forms of Christianity, like the Gospel or the Psalms (the latter of which themselves have apotropaic and therapeutic usages in Ethiopia), Ethiopian Orthodoxy uses a series of other texts described by scholars as “magical” or “magico-religious.”<sup>12</sup> Some theological texts see both liturgical and “magical” use, like the *Təmhərtā ḥəbuʾat*

fig. 6 Cover with blind tooling. From the *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* (fig. 1)

fig. 7 Diagram of blind tooling motifs from the *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* (fig. 1). Illustration by the author

(the Doctrine of Mysteries), which is often excerpted in healing scrolls. Not officially acknowledged by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and sometimes condemned, these texts or extra-liturgical uses of theological writing are a widespread popular expression of religion that exists alongside and draws from Christian beliefs and texts. This secret knowledge, both aural/oral and textual, is based above all on the *ʾasmat* (አስማት): the sacred names of God, the saints, and other holy figures (like angels), names that give special weight to prayer.

The secret knowledge from these texts and names is then incorporated into *ṭälsām*. *Ṭälsām* describes the kind of image that appears in some genres of Ethiopian literature, such as healing scrolls or protective prayers.<sup>13</sup> These images can also be the subject of their own manuscripts, as seen in an eighteenth-century *Mäshäfä Mädhānit* (“The Book of the Pharmacy,” መጽሐፈ መድኃኒት) now at The British Library, London (MS Orient 11390), or a nineteenth-century Amharic-language prayer collection, *Mäfätahä Šəray* (መፍትሔ ሥራዬ; British Library MS Orient 566). They also appear as “magical” additions or marginalia—whether textual or image-based—inserted by additional hands into otherwise canonical Christian texts. The inherent strength of the *ṭälsām* protects against demons, the evil eye, and disease, or heals those already marked by illness or possession. *Ṭälsām* depict the invisible world, including esoteric symbols like seals, grids, or designs representing the secret names of holy figures. Typically included in scrolls or codices, talismanic images are a particular kind of representation of “magical” belief.

Imbued with their own capacity to heal or shield against disease and misfortune, these images can be best understood as defensive tools. *Ṭälsām* did not illustrate a text literally, but instead amplified the potential of the written word through the image’s own inherent strength. Unusually for a Christian manuscript, this *ʾĀrganonā Maryam* contains two of the most common talismanic images, which in turn inform the manuscript’s sole figurative illumination, an image of *abba* Giyorgis of Säglä. In contrast to the talismanic depiction of the invisible world and its symbols, figurative or narrative images called *śəʿəl* depicted the visible world. This blending of talismanic imagery (*ṭälsām*) into a Christian illumination (*śəʿəl*) itself—rather than its appearance in the same volume as or as marginalia alongside strictly religious Christian imagery—appears to be a hallmark of the Night-Heron Master. It is a noteworthy and uncommon combining of “magical”/Christian and invisible/visible imagery in a single illumination within a seventeenth-century manuscript. Both stand-alone talismanic images in this volume reference Solomon, the wise Biblical king of Israel who was said to have “magical” powers, and who is believed to be the ancestor of Ethiopia’s Solomonic line of kings through his union with Queen Makeda, better known as the queen of Sheba.

The first *ṭälsām*, bound by a red-orange frame with a watery ocher background, floats on the upper third of the verso of folio 123 (fig. 4, left). Its borders are filled—and tested—by a cross whose solid geometry explodes with dynamic movement, from the outward-pointing triangles capping its crossbars to its tightly wound



ርዕስ ራዕሶ  
 (“crisscross”)



መስቀል  
 (“cross”)



ዓይነ፡ርግብ ፣aynä rəgb  
 (“dove’s eye”)





fig. 8 Talismanic illumination (ጠልሰም, *ṭälsām*): Net of Solomon (መርበብተሰሎሞን, *Märbäbtä Sälomon*), fol. 134v. From the *ʿĀrganonā Maryam* (fig. 1)

fig. 9a, b Detail and overall image. Unidentified Ethiopian maker(s). Healing scroll (*ṭälsām* or *yä branna ketab*), 19th century. Parchment (vellum), pigment, W. 6 × L. 78 in. (15.2 × 198.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, transferred from the Library (95.66)

framing curlicues. Smaller white crosses set on a diagonal fill the cross, reinforcing the image's symbolic strength via insistent visual repetition. This eight-pointed star or cross is the Seal of Solomon. The archangel Michael was said to have given Solomon a ring bearing the seal of God; Solomon then used the seal to summon demons and forced them to build a palace at the center of a labyrinth. The eight branches of the star represent the seal of God on Solomon's ring, while the curlicues are designated as leg-fetters for trapping demons or other malevolent spirits. At the same time as it evokes the story of Solomon and the demons, this seal can also be understood as a symbol of Christ's cross.

Crosses have been used in Ethiopia since at least the fourth century A.D., when they replaced crescent moons on the Aksumite Empire's coins. There are many forms of crosses in Ethiopia, from the personal (tattoos and necklaces) to the public (like the hand and processional crosses carried by monks and priests) to the liturgical (the aforementioned *tabot* altar stones and manuscript covers). The imagination of Ethiopian artists was inexhaustible when it came to designing crosses, frequently using the lost-wax casting technique to make a wide variety of unique examples. Playing with

positive and negative space, these bold works of art are symbolic of the Crucifixion, and furthermore, use complex geometric symbolism to allude to other elements of the Christian story. The cross in Ethiopian Orthodoxy was the symbolic representation of the body of Christ and the Crucifixion, and simultaneously an allusion to the Tree of Paradise, from which the cross was cut.

Linking the cross with the seal of God in the illumination emphasizes the Ethiopian concept of the cross as an instrument of the Passion as well as an emblem of the victory over Satan and death. Thus, its inclusion in this text was an affirmative, life-giving symbol. Sometime in this volume's centuries-old life, someone other than its original scribe filled the wide parchment margins surrounding this illumination with text written in the vernacular language Amharic. To the left of the talisman is a short text that describes the table below, which has months written across the top row, and a series of numbers filling the remaining squares. Together, text and table aid in measuring the hours of the day at different times of the year, almost like a sundial; one can speculate this was a useful tool for keeping track of the time of the morning liturgy, which varied according to the time of sunrise. Text and image combine literally here, each augmenting and informed by the other, though likely laid down on the page centuries apart.

Roughly ten folios later, a grid forms an even larger talismanic image meant to deflect evil (fig. 8). Framed by bands of red interlaces, the grid incorporates the same squares that compose Solomon's Seal, divided into quarters by white diagonal crosses. Within the grid, they are further divided into eights, the slices of which pinwheel with alternating reds, ochers, whites, and blacks. The dizzying shapes trap the eye, spinning it across the page, only to stop it against the hard black bounds of the outer frame. Appropriately, given its ability to hold the viewer's attention, this rhythmic talisman is known as the Net of Solomon (መርበብተሰሎሞን, *Märbäbtä Sälomon*). Judaic and Christian traditions of Solomon portray him as wise, as well as the lord and master of demons. In one such demonstration of his sway over such creatures, he used a net to capture the demons of hell as easily as if they were fish in the ocean; the crisscrossing grid painted in the manuscript refers to this legendary rope netting. Still another interpretation of the grid binds its triangles and crosses to words. The painted net could thus also be a geometric representation of the secret names (*ʿasmat*) of Solomon, a kind of "magic square" represented in other works with an actual grid of these sacred words. The white diagonal rods that both divide the individual squares



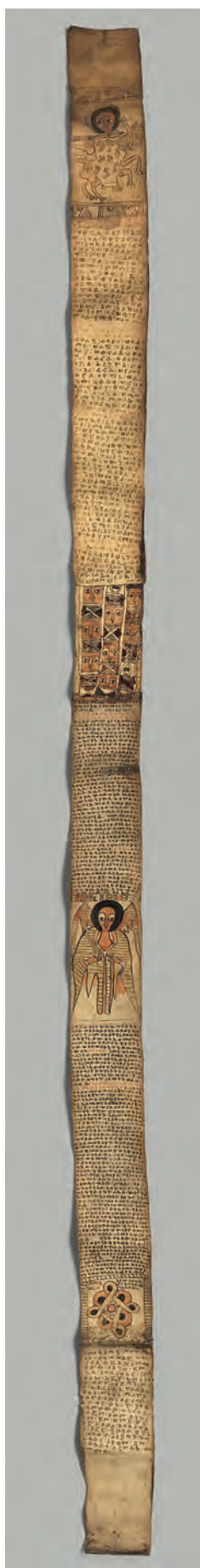


and subdivide the illumination into smaller quadrants form a series of X-shapes. Together with prayers, these white X-motifs aid in the undoing of spells.

While Christian and “magical” practices mingled in everyday Ethiopian Orthodox life, it is unusual to find a Christian manuscript such as the *ʿĀrganonā Maryam* that incorporates talismanic imagery in this way. Talismanic imagery was more frequently associated with long texts of “magical” prayers, or what has come to be called healing scrolls or textual amulets (*tälsām* or *yä branna kətab*), a type of personalized protective manuscript. Cut to the height of their intended user, such parchment scrolls contained prayers for healing and safeguarding based on the repetition of the secret names of God, including requests for safe pregnancy or guarding against the evil eye. Juxtaposing the written word with the talismanic image, they were generally rolled up, stitched inside leather cylinders, and worn by their users, who were frequently illiterate; when worn, the potent blend of text and pictures shielded the wearer from harm, despite being hidden from view. Two healing scrolls in The Met’s collection contain talismanic imagery nearly identical to that seen in *The Organ of Mary*. A nineteenth-century scroll, one of the first African works to enter The Met’s collection, includes a Seal of Solomon at its very top (fig. 9a, b). A second nineteenth-century scroll incorporates a modified Net of Solomon, alternating the squares of the net with the faces of angels and singular eyeballs, whose wide-open stares repel the evil eye (fig. 10a, b). After the angels drew in evildoers, the net would trap them. These healing scrolls were created by *dābtāra*, clerics who, while affiliated with the Orthodox Church, are simultaneously sought-after and feared for their knowledge of religious and esoteric healing.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the Night-Heron Master (illuminator of The Met’s *ʿĀrganonā Maryam*) was a priest-artist, and would not typically have been trained in making talismanic imagery. Yet, this prayer book to the Virgin Mary is filled with talismanic imagery.

Though dedicated to Mary, one of Ethiopia’s most popular saints, this *ʿĀrganonā Maryam* does not include her image, unlike other religious manuscripts dedicated to her. Instead, it opens with an idealized portrait of *abba* Giyorgis of Sägla, the text’s author, entwined with talismanic geometry (see fig. 1). A frame of ocher, red, and black divided squares surrounds him, the same protective squares that compose the large Net of Solomon. The front of his triangular priestly robe is also covered in the squares, like spiritual body armor that shields him as he raises his hands in prayer. The upper part of his scapular, an apron-like religious garment worn atop





the black robe, is patterned with fields divided by a central cross into eight triangles, and then again by a cross set on the diagonal. Called a “gyronny,” this motif repeats both in the border of this illumination and throughout the work. Thin hatching brings lightness both to the robe and in the border, interrupting the otherwise matte planes of color. Posed in the *orans* position, a gesture of raised hands with upturned palms, the oversized hands and extended fingers with prominent nails (or finger pads) exaggerate his prayerful stance. Rather than the three-quarter pose favored by Ethiopian artists from the seventeenth century onward at Gondär, his frontal pose is archaizing, reflecting those typically used in fifteenth-century Ethiopian manuscripts (fig. 11). The talismanic imagery in this manuscript is not limited to these three examples: further along in the text, at the beginning of the prayers for Saturday, the *ḥaräg* is filled with talismanic squares, wrapping the text in apotropaic geometry (see fig. 4, right).

The Night-Heron Master incorporated freestanding talismanic images into at least one other manuscript, an *ʾÄrganonä Maryam* in the University of Oxford’s Bodleian Library (fig. 12), which also shares an identical *ḥaräg* with The Met’s prayer book. Talismanic images—nets and squares of Solomon—are built from the same visual vocabulary of squares, lines, and gyronny triangles used throughout the book to frame Marian prayers and dress a saintly author, visually linking the Christian narrative (*šəʿəl*) and “magical” (*ṭälsäm*) imagery. In a copy of the Four Gospels now at The British Library that bears the visual signature of the Night-Heron Master (Or. 516, fol. 100v), the clothing of Saints Mark and Luke, as well as the borders that surround them, is treated in the same way as that of *abba* Giyorgis of Säglä—built from shapes that create a talismanic whole. Along with the extensive use of talismanic imagery, these works are linked by the frontal depiction of figures with raised hands and geometrically patterned robes, which appears to be a kind of convention that the Night-Heron Master developed for depicting a variety of sacred figures. Each man has an oval-shaped head, with their hair, turban, and halo nested as concentric forms. Crescent-shaped black eyebrows frame their half-moon eyes, their sloping forms echoed below by long mustaches. Modifying little more than the pattern of their robes, or their placement within the composition, he employed this archetype to depict saints like Luke the Evangelist, Täklä Haymanot, and Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus. If not for the identifying caption written in *Gəʿəz* above his head, the figure depicted in The Met’s manuscript would be impossible to distinguish



*fig. 10a, b* Detail and overall image. Unidentified Ethiopian maker(s). Healing scroll (*ṭālsām* or *yā branna ketab*), 19th century. Parchment (vellum), pigment, W. 3½ × L. 75 in. (8.9 × 190.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift, 2011 (2011.377)

*fig. 11* Unidentified Ethiopian artist. Probably Däbrä Hayq Ḑstifanos Monastery, Ethiopia. Image (ሥዕል, *ṣəʾəl*) of Saint John from the ሐርባዕቲ፡ ወንጌል (The Four Gospels), late 14th–early 15th century. Parchment (vellum), wood (acacia), tempera, ink, H. 16½ × W. 11¼ × D. 4 in. (41.9 × 28.6 × 10.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1998 (1998.66)

*fig. 12* The Night-Heron Master. Image (ሥዕል, *ṣəʾəl*) of *abba* Giyorgis; Gäbrä Mānfās Qəddus; and Tāklä Haymanot. ሻጽጎንጎን ማሪያም. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (Ms. Aeth. e.28, fol. 1v)



from those other holy men, who are depicted without the attributes that would typically identify them, such as the quill, single leg, or lions and hair shirt, respectively.

How the Night-Heron Master became acquainted with talismanic imagery, which he likely did not encounter in his training as an elite artist, and why he chose to incorporate it into this and several other Christian manuscripts, remains unknown. Perhaps he did so because he was well aware of the supernatural properties of *ṭālsām*, and he added talismanic images to narrative images to enhance the protective power of the Marian prayers. He may even have received training as a *däbtära* at one point in his career, which would have familiarized him with making *ṭālsām*, though this too remains unknown, and perhaps unknowable. Talismanic images that evoked Solomon's powers reflected a Christian ambition to partake in, and even to possess, some of that "magical" ability. Indeed, this desire is mirrored in the blending of talismanic images and prayer texts outside Ethiopia, in Coptic, Syrian, Pharaonic Egyptian, and, to a certain degree, even in European manuscript traditions.

Through the Night-Heron Master's use of Christianized "magical" symbols—the talismanic image—and his unique pairing of them with narrative religious images, inherently effective prayers to the Virgin Mary were amplified, magnifying their sound and strengthening their impact in this unique Ethiopian work of art. Harnessing the strength of the invisible world in support of the visible, combining *ṭālsām* with *ṣəʾəl*, the artist created a bold signature visual style, the power of which reverberates centuries after the manuscript's creation.

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#### NOTE TO THE READER

*Gəʿəz* transliterations from the *fidäl* are by the author, following the transliteration system from Aaron Michael Butts, *Classical Ethiopic in Twenty Lessons* (2020). The *fidäl* is the script of the *Gəʿəz* language; each sign represents a consonant and vowel, with consonants varying in transliteration systems. When the original *fidäl* of a term is unavailable, transliteration conventions from the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* are used. Translations are by the author.

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## NOTES

- 1 The title is also known as the *ʾĀrganonā Weddase* (አርጋኖን፡ውድሴ. *The Organ of Praise*) and the *ʾĀrganonā Dāngel* (አርጋኖን፡ድንግል *The Organ of the Virgin*).
- 2 Fol. 2v: እንተ፡ይእቲ፡ሐመረ፡ወርቅ . . . ወይእቲ፡ካዕበ፡ዓምጸ፡ባሕርይ (She is the ship of gold . . . And furthermore, she is a pillar of pearl).
- 3 Bent Juel-Jensen (1977) identified the artist solely as the Ground Hornbill Artist. Thérèse Bittar (in Mercier and Lepage 2012, 297–300) argues that the bird is the visual signature of the scribe named Basəlyos, whereas Stanislaw Chojnacki (1983, 491–94) argues for a “Lasta school” of artists whose distinctive style emerged in the Lasta province, around the city of Lalibāla, and in the Tagray region in the seventeenth century. As names of painters rarely appear in colophons, the appearance of such a bold visual signature is even more unusual.
- 4 Juel-Jensen 1977, 63.
- 5 While its present range does not include Lasta or Gondār (two locations linked to this manuscript), it was recorded twenty-five miles west of Lake Ṭana in 1927, suggesting a greater historical presence where the artist may have encountered the bird (Fuertes and Osgood 1936, pl. 12).
- 6 Historically, scribes and illuminators were male. While some women began to paint Christian subjects on wooden supports and on church walls in the late twentieth century and into the present century, they remain exceptions in a male-dominated field. Historical examples of female scribes or illuminators working on parchment have yet to be located, though some rare female artists such as Etsubdink Legesse now paint on parchment for both commercial and religious clients.
- 7 Importantly for the present argument the illuminator the Night-Heron Master and the scribe Basəlyos are not the same individual. Juel-Jensen (1977, 71) indicates that the manuscript (British Library Gospel MS Orient 516) illuminated by the artist he called the Ground Hornbill Artist was “written by MAHTSENTE MIKAEL,” as per an inscription on folio 20. The British Library confirms this scribe as Mahanta Mikael in its current records. Throughout his article, Juel-Jensen indicates that all “Ground Hornbill Artist”-illuminated works are written in a “17th-century hand,” and not *the same* scribal hand. While stylistically similar, the hand in two digitized volumes illuminated by the artist henceforth called the Night-Heron Master is not the same (MMA 2006.99 and British Library MS Orient 516, available at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/733038> and [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Or\\_516](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Or_516), respectively). For more on work division in Ethiopian manuscript production, see Bosc-Tiessé 2014.
- 8 Fol. 3v: የሀልዮ፡ዘኢይማስን፡ወእኩ፡ዘይማስን፡ወእኩ፡ዘይማስን፡ወኵሉ፡ዘይነብቦ፡ለዝ፡መጽሐፍ፡ይኩን፡አፋሁ፡ቅህመ፡በዚወ፡መለኮት፡ጥዑመ፡እምፀቃውዓ፡መዓር፡ወአስራብ፡ሦከር (Let him sing in celebration of that which is not corruptible and not that which is corruptible, and let each one of him who having read/recited this book let his mouth become delighted by the salt of divinity, [and] the sweetness from the honeycomb and the wines of sugar).
- 9 Sergrew 1981, 25.
- 10 As no single Geʿez or Amharic word is equivalent to the English word or concept of “magic,” it is used in this article in quotation marks, and specific terms in those languages will be deployed when possible. Eyob Derillo (2019, 121) suggests that *ʾasmāt*—as it “calls for the assistance of God”—is both the closest approximation to the English “magic,” and lawful to the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, while Gidena Mesfin Kebede (2017, 16–27) prefers the Amharic *abənnāt* (አብነት; “model, pattern, medicine”).
- 11 While the Church’s relationship with “magic” linked to healing or protection is one of tolerance, or at least ambivalence, it condemns other “magical” practices including *śəray* (“charms” or “aggressive/black magic,” and sorcery), and fortune-telling (oracles). Section 46 of the *Fəṭḥā nāgāšt* (ፍትሐ፡ነገሥት; “Law of the Kings”), includes penal provisions for such forbidden “magic” practices. It was in legal enforcement from the sixteenth-century reign of Emperor Zärʾä Yaʿeqob—a particular opponent of magical practices—until Emperor Ḥaylā Səllase I’s 1930 Penal Code, itself based on that text. See Strauss 2009, v, xlii.
- 12 A further note on the term “magic,” which, while used by some scholars of Ethiopia, has popular English-language connotations of Harry Potter, witches, and rabbits conjured out of hats, and often negative Western scholarly connotations drawn from the study of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman cultural practices, or from binaries that opposed magic-science or magic-religion. In the context of Ethiopianist scholarship and belief, “magic” and “magic (Christian) literature” are terms that do not carry these implications. Rather—absent an equivalent indigenous Ethiopian use of the concept of “magic”—they summarize a variety of texts, rituals, and practices. As Getatchew Haile (2011, xxxiii) notes, given the invocation and beseeching of God by those who use such texts, “magic” may not be the most accurate descriptive term. For further discussions on “magic” in Ethiopian religion, see Strelcyn 1955; Balicka-Witakowska 1983; Kaplan 2004; Getatchew 2011; Wolk-Sore 2016; Eyob 2019; and Eyob 2020.
- 13 The term *tā/sām* can also be used to describe talismanic or amuletic objects, such as healing scrolls, but is used here to describe illuminations.
- 14 A *dābtāra* is a lay ecclesiastic in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church whose responsibilities include the creation of amulets and the talismanic imagery on them. Typically not members of the royal or monastic scriptoria (who worked for elite clientele and produced luxury religious arts), *dābtāras* are amateur artists who worked for common people. Monks or priests only rarely made healing scrolls because of this class-based artistic distinction. *Ṭānqʾay* (“magic specialists”) are also connected to “magic” literature because of their roles in amassing and refining it, often drawing from Biblical or other religious sources.



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# METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 56

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Max Hollein

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## RESEARCH NOTE

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