

Introduction to the Text

Wendy Laura Belcher

This volume introduces and translates the earliest known book-length biography about the life of an African woman: the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*. It was written in 1672 in an African language by Africans for Africans about Africans—in particular, about a revered African religious leader who led a successful nonviolent movement against European protocolonialism in Ethiopia. This is the first time this remarkable text has appeared in English.

When the Jesuits tried to convert the Ḥabäša peoples of highland Ethiopia from their ancient form of Christianity to Roman Catholicism,¹ the seventeenth-century Ḥabäša woman Walatta Petros was among those who fought to retain African Christian beliefs, for which she was elevated to sainthood in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwāḥədo Church. Thirty years after her death, her Ḥabäša disciples (many of whom were women) wrote a vivid and lively book in Gəʿəz (a classical African language) praising her as an adored daughter, the loving friend of women, a devoted reader, an itinerant preacher, and a radical leader. Walatta Petros must be considered one of the earliest activists against European protocolonialism and the subject of one of the earliest African biographies.

The original text is in a distinctive genre called a *gädl*, which is used to tell the inspirational story of a saint's life, often called a hagiography or hagiobiography (de Porcellet and Garay 2001, 19). This genre represents a vital archive of African literature that has gone almost entirely unexplored, even though it contains fascinating narratives about folk heroes and is a rich repository of indigenous thought. More than two hundred Ethiopian saints have a *gädl*, including at least six women. One of them was Walatta Petros, a noblewoman who lived from 1592 to 1642, and whose composite name means Spiritual Daughter of Saint Peter (and should never be shortened to Petros). The ገድለ:ወለተ:ጳጥሮስ (*Gädlä Wälättä Petros* [*Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros*]) is the extraordinary story of her life and her fierce determination to do what was right. Despite the importance of these hagiobiographies, only four other Ethiopian saints have had their *gädl* translated into English (Anonymous 1898; Täklä Şəyon 1906; Täwäldä Mädhən 2006). The Gəʿəz scholar and translator Getatchew Haile recently translated one of the most important: the *Gädlä İstifanos*. The three other translations, done more than one hundred years ago by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, are available only to the wealthy, as there are no electronic versions

¹ For an explanation of the term *Ḥabäša*, see Müller (2005). For an explanation of the choice to use it sometimes rather than “Ethiopians,” see Belcher (2012).

on the Internet: they exist only in art books that cost thousands of dollars each. Two of these four translations are short, and all of them are about men. Furthermore, there has been only one translation into English of the life of any black female saint (whether African or of African descent), the as yet unpublished but carefully researched work on Teresa Chicaba (Houchins and Fra-Moliner 2009), and that was written by Europeans, not Africans. Our translation represents the first accessible translation into English of an early modern African woman's life. And it is one of only a handful of authentic African accounts of early modern African thought.

Our aim in translating has been to produce a rigorous scholarly publication with a wide-ranging introduction; rich substantive notes; a comprehensive glossary of people, places, and concepts; and vivid illustrations from the original manuscripts. Since both literary scholars and historians will use the text, our translation does not take liberties with the text (variations from the original are noted). At the same time, we have translated with a careful eye for the needs of undergraduates and scholars who have no knowledge of Ethiopia or Gə'əz (see Kleiner's "Introduction to the Translation of the Text" for information on all aspects of the translation). In this way, we hope to bring the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* into the global conversation, aiding its usefulness to religious, historical, literary, gender, and African studies. We believe that the publication of this translation should electrify medieval and early modern studies and meet the demand for early African-authored texts. Not only is the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* the earliest known biography of an African woman, and an early account of resistance to European protocolonialism from an African perspective, it also features a rare look at African women's domestic lives and relationships with other women.

An Exemplary Woman, Not an Exception

Walatta Petros might seem to be unique. She was, after all, a literate seventeenth-century African noblewoman. She was an important leader, directing a successful movement against Europeans and overcoming local male leadership. Her Ethiopian disciples wrote a book about her. Yet closer examination reveals that Walatta Petros is not unique but rather an exemplary case.

Many are surprised to hear that Africans were writing any books several hundred years ago, much less books in an African language about an individual woman. The general public assumes that ancient, medieval, and early modern Africans did not create written texts, and even scholars may assume that the publication of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 represents the genesis of written African literature. Yet, Ethiopia and Eritrea are nations in East Africa whose African peoples the Ḥabäša have been reading and writing bound manuscripts in their literary language of Gə'əz since the fourth century CE. (To learn more, visit Sean Winslow's online exhibit "Ethiopic Manuscript Production" at larkvi.com/mss/eth/production.) Like Latin (whose vernacular form, so-called Vul-

gar Latin, evolved into the Romance languages Italian, French, Spanish, and so on), vernacular Gəʼəz evolved into the modern language Təgrəñña, while written Gəʼəz became a fossilized language that changed little from then on (Weninger 2011). The written form, dating to the first millennium, has been and still is the sacred language for liturgy and literature in the church. Ḥabäša boys and some Ḥabäša girls learned how to read in this language from the age of seven onward, therefore some Ḥabäša were literate and are depicted as reading and loving books in the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*.

Many North Americans are also surprised to hear that Africans were Christians well before the 1600s, assuming that Christianity in Africa is always the result of Western missionary activity. Yet the Ḥabäša are among the oldest Christians in the world—King ʼEzana and his court converted in the 330s CE. The Ḥabäša practice a form of African Christianity that predates most forms of European Christianity and is variously called non-Chalcedonian, monophysite, Coptic, Oriental Orthodox, or Ethiopian Orthodox. Members themselves prefer the term Tāwahaḍo Church, which we use. Their ancient form of African Christianity is distinctive, holding some beliefs dear that are considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Thousands of churches and hundreds of monasteries have maintained these traditions for the past fourteen hundred years, while their monks and learned men have translated Greek and Arabic texts into Gəʼəz and also created an original literature of theological treatises, royal chronicles, and indigenous hagiobiographies. The hagiobiographies were a particularly important form because there is no formal process of canonization to become a saint in the Tāwahaḍo Church; rather, the main requirements are posthumous miracles and that the saint’s community write his or her hagiobiography. A marker of the strength of Western constructions of the world is that the scholar must explain that some black peoples were both literate and Christian before some Europeans.

Finally, many assume that Africa is the continent where women have perennially been the most abused and repressed. Yet, parts of Northeast Africa have long traditions of strong ruling queens, of legally independent and literate noblewomen, and of national reverence for female deities and saints. The Ḥabäša claim that their royal line has had women of such distinction that they are known worldwide, including the Queen of Sheba of the Old Testament and Queen Candace of the New Testament. During the early modern period, Ḥabäša queens and princesses were very powerful politically—acting independently of kings, ruling for young kings, owning vast lands, and being undeposable while alive (Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 92, 128, 212, 229; Barradas 1996, 96). For instance, Queen Eleni indirectly ruled the country for so long and so competently that when she died, people mourned her as both “father and mother of all,” according to a sixteenth-century Portuguese visitor (Alvarez 1961, 434). In the eighteenth century, the powerful Queen Məntəwwab ruled as regent for her husband, her son, and her grandson (Bruce 1813b, 94–104). Säblä Wängel, wife of the sixteenth-century monarch Ləbnä Dəngəl, was also a leader of the nation after the death of her husband (Kleiner 2010). Evidence from

multiple sources in multiple languages demonstrates that early modern African women were present in the histories of their nations (Thornton 1998, 1991; Nast 2005), not absent, as the modern public tends to assume.

To summarize, Walatta Petros is not *sui generis* but an exemplar of the Ḥabäša's long tradition of powerful noblewomen, indigenous literature, and independent Christianity. Unfortunately, scholars of early modern African women continue to write against an absence—not that of the women themselves but the absence of readers' knowledge about Africa and the scarcity of scholarship about these women, which creates assumptions about the scarcity of the women themselves. This book does much to undermine those unfortunate assumptions.

The Text's Seventeenth-Century Historical Context

The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is written without a Western audience in mind. Its Ḥabäša authors assume a contemporary Ḥabäša readership; that is, those as knowledgeable about its events, people, places, books, time, and rituals as the authors are. For instance, it proceeds without explaining where places are or how far they are from one another. The name of the king appears with little more announcement than those of the humble maids, fishermen, and boat owners of Walatta Petros's community. Thus, it is essential to give a substantial historical background for the twenty-first-century reader.

The seventeenth-century encounter between the Portuguese and the Ḥabäša that forms the backdrop of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is a fascinating moment in the history of colonial encounter.² As mentioned, the highland Ethiopian kingdom of Abyssinia, of the Ḥabäša people, had become Christian starting in the fourth century. In the 1520s and 1530s, they became concerned about Islamic incursions. A Muslim of the Afar people called Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī (nicknamed “Grañ” by the Ḥabäša, meaning “left-handed” in Amharic) started a war against the Christian kingdoms of the Ethiopian highlands (Morin 2004, 41–43), beginning with the provinces of Fäṭägar and Däwaro, from which Walatta Petros's family came. This military leader led a campaign—burning down churches and monasteries, killing monks and priests, and cutting a swath through the Ḥabäša army—that nearly eradicated the Ḥabäša Empire. The Ḥabäša king Ləbnä Dəngəl sent ambassadors to Europe to ask for help in defending the Ḥabäša, and in 1541 they arrived. Cristóvão da Gama, the son of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, led an expedition from Goa, India, of four hundred Portuguese with muskets to repel the conquest. After the Ḥabäša and Portuguese successfully repelled the incursion, many of the Portuguese returned home, but some stayed to form a small community, intermarrying with the Ḥabäša.

Then, missionaries from the new Roman Catholic order of the Jesuits, founded just twenty years earlier to combat emergent Protestantism, arrived in Ethiopia in

² Much of this section was previously published in an extended form in Belcher (2013).

1557 to endeavor to convert the Ḥabāša from their ancient form of Christianity to Roman Catholicism. The Jesuits' early methods were neither sophisticated nor successful—they declared the Ḥabāša heretics, demanded that they submit to Rome, and did little to persuade them (Pennec 2003, 373). The missionaries were barely tolerated by successive kings and did little beyond ministering to the tiny Catholic community descended from the intermarried families of the Portuguese soldiers.

Then, after fifty years of failure, the Portuguese sent a new group of Jesuits to the Ethiopian highlands in 1603, among whom was a Spanish priest named Pedro Páez. This man was a new sort of missionary, someone who learned the local language, engaged others in conversation, and was sympathetic to many of the tenets of the Tāwaḥədo Church. His extraordinary diplomacy, intellectual curiosity, and kind manner enabled him to gain influence among a range of nobles and high-ranking priests. Páez privately converted King Zä-Dəngəl within a few years of arriving. When that king was excommunicated from the Tāwaḥədo Church and killed for these actions, a new king seized the throne in 1607, Susənyos (regnal name Mälak Säggäd). Páez converted him and the new king's powerful brother Šə'älä Krəstos (who had the title of *Ras*, meaning “duke”) as well, in 1612, reassuring them that conversion was only a matter of consolidating Christianity against the threat of Islam, not of abandoning the faith of their fathers.

King Susənyos may not have been much concerned about such an abandonment anyway. He was the extramarital son of a previous king (Täklä Šəllase [Ṭinno] 1892, ix) and had grown up among another ethnic group, the Oromo, life experiences that may have made him more open to a foreign faith (Marcus 2002, 39–40). Certainly, he converted with an eye toward controlling the powerful Tāwaḥədo Church and gaining European military assistance (Crummey 2000, 68, 72; Cohen 2009a, 29; Henze 2000, 96). After violently repressing his people's anti-Catholic uprising in 1617 and 1618, Susənyos forced the matter in 1621 by publicly professing Roman Catholicism and rejecting the Tāwaḥədo Church, and inviting more Portuguese Jesuits into the country. Over the following decade, the Jesuits established nine churches, translated the Latin liturgy and theological texts into Gə'əz, and engaged in open debates with local religious leaders over doctrine. Many of the male members of the royal court and high-ranking priests followed Susənyos in converting.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of the population, including many lower-level ecclesiastics, the people in the countryside, and women of the court, did not (Lobo 1971, 189). They rightly suspected that, despite promises to the contrary, they would soon be asked to abandon their most cherished rituals to embrace the Jesuitical version of Christianity. Unlike the high-ranking men, these women and peasants were more involved in the distinctive beliefs and practices of the Ḥabāša church—which touched every part of their daily lives. A few of the practices that the Jesuits later decried included the Ḥabāša's refusal to eat pork or rabbit (as proscribed in the Old Testament) and their celebration of the Sabbath on Saturday and Sunday. The people were horrified at the prospect of eating foods that disgusted them and losing their days of worship. And, to the Ḥabāša mind, the Portuguese

priests were clearly barbarians, thinking nothing, for instance, of spitting in church (Castanhoso, Bermudez, and Correa 1902, 90). Many Ḥabāša refused to follow the king in converting to Roman Catholicism—which some called the “filthy faith of the Europeans.”

Then a fateful event occurred: Páez died. His successor, Afonso Mendes, was more aggressive, and the fears of the people were realized.³ In 1626, Mendes had the king issue an edict condemning many cherished Tāwahədo Church religious practices. For instance, the Ḥabāša baptize sons on the fortieth day after their birth and daughters on the eightieth day. Given infant mortality rates, many children died without baptism. The Jesuits insisted that all such children were in hell (Paez 1903, 63–64).

The king immediately began to face wholesale insurrection, with many taking up their weapons. In the countryside, some priests engaged the armed Portuguese military with nothing more than a portable sacred altar on their heads (Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 91). In his own immediate household, none of the women converted. His mother rebuked him (Páez 2011, 1:333–34), his wife left him due to his conversion (Mendes 1908, 333–34), his beloved niece gave land to shelter anti-Catholic resisters (Täklä Šəllase [Ṭinno] 1900, 78, 374n), and two of his daughters participated in anti-Catholic rebellions against him (Crummey 2000, 69). It seems he was dismayed at having to kill so many of his own people and disheartened by these domestic desertions: “it visibly appear’d that he broke his Heart with Grief, and Trouble, being in perpetual Anguish” (Tellez 1710, 243). Susənyos abandoned the effort to convert the country by force, rescinded his edict of conversion in 1632, and died three months later. His son Fasilädäs came to power and eradicated Roman Catholicism. By 1636, he was executing priests who had converted to Roman Catholicism (Beccari 1913, 110). By 1653, not a single Jesuit was left in Ethiopia: all had been banished or lynched (*ibid.*, 102; Tellez 1710, 264). Three hundred years later, the twentieth-century king Haile Selassie still prevented the Roman Catholic Church from establishing churches or congregations in highland Ethiopia.

Oddly, few scholars have commented on this annihilation of a European proto-colonial effort, its absolute failure. And a protocolonial effort it was. Although the Portuguese Jesuits did not engage in international trade, own private property in Ethiopia, or extract tribute, they traveled in and out of the country with soldiers, established a settlement, and lived in Ethiopia for almost a century. They were there due to Portuguese geopolitical interests in curtailing the Ottoman Empire, demanding that the Ḥabāša king submit himself to the European authority of the pope, and using superior military equipment to aid the king in forcing thousands to embrace a European system of very different beliefs and rituals from 1621 to 1632. After a decade of bloody conflict, however, the Portuguese were routed and Europeans did not attempt to colonize Ethiopia for the next two hundred and fifty years. In fact, Europeans never successfully colonized most of the nation afterward. This is the

³ Some have debated the painting of Mendes as a hard-liner, including Merid Wolde Aregay (1998); Pennec (2003). For a discussion of this point, see Salvatore (2010, 194).

backdrop of Walatta Petros's movement against the Jesuits and Roman Catholicism in Ethiopia.

The Text and Ḥabäša Noblewomen's Anticolonial Role

Two explanations have been offered for the Ḥabäša defeating the Portuguese effort in highland Ethiopia in the 1600s.⁴ European scholars tend to say that the Portuguese were culturally insensitive and enraged the populace. Ḥabäša scholars tend to say that rebellions among the Ḥabäša military ranks turned the tide. Both of these explanations are accurate. But the defeat must also be attributed in part to a group many assume had no power: women. Comparing the Portuguese and Ḥabäša sources from the seventeenth century (including the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*) reveals that Ḥabäša noblewomen were partly, and perhaps largely, responsible for evicting the Portuguese and Roman Catholicism from Ethiopia. Comparing the primary sources from two earlier traditions enables us to recover the role of African women in resisting European colonial efforts and shaping their nation's history.

In the seventeenth century, about a dozen now relatively unknown texts were written about the encounter in the first half of the century between the Portuguese and the Ḥabäša. Writing from the European perspective, five of the Portuguese Jesuits who lived in Ethiopia in the early 1600s—Manoel de Almeida (often Manuel de Almeida), Manoel Barradas, Jerónimo Lobo, Afonso Mendes, and Pedro Páez—wrote accounts of their experiences in Ethiopia. Perhaps because of the mission's failure, none of the Portuguese Jesuits' accounts were published in full in Portuguese until the twentieth century, in Camillo Beccari's fifteen-volume series *Rerum aethiopicarum scriptores occidentales inediti a saeculo XVI ad XIX* (Lobo 1983, xxix). Only some of these texts have appeared in English. Some of the Jesuits also wrote letters and reports that have been preserved (Beccari 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914). Writing from the African perspective, various seventeenth-century Ḥabäša scholars also documented the encounter, writing royal chronicles that detail the lives of Ḥabäša kings who ruled during this period, and some hagiobiographies that detail the lives of Ḥabäša saints. None of these Gə'əz texts are currently available in English. There are also the letters of the Roman Catholic Ḥabäša monk *Abba* Gorgoryos, who reported what he saw to the seventeenth-century German scholar Hiob Ludolf.⁵

The texts from this period display quite different perspectives on some of the Ḥabäša noblewomen—the Portuguese texts portray one of them negatively as *diabólica mulher* (diabolical woman), while the Gə'əz texts portray them positively as *qəddusat* (female saints)—but they concur that these African women participated in defeating this European incursion. The Portuguese texts disparage Ḥabäša noble-

⁴ Much of this section was previously published in an extended form in Belcher (2013).

⁵ Some of his Gə'əz letters to Ludolf were translated into German (Flemming 1890–91), and Michael Kleiner is working on translating them into English.

women for obstructing the Jesuits' efforts to convert the Ḥabāša to Roman Catholicism. The Gə'əz texts praise them for doing so. Comparing the two traditions reveals that the negative Portuguese representations of these Ḥabāša noblewomen were not just the result of misogyny, but were a vanquished foe's bitter depiction of a victorious enemy. Indeed, these early modern African women must be acknowledged as some of the earliest pioneers against European incursions in Africa.

Women appear rarely in the Portuguese accounts, but when they do, they are almost always resisting conversion to Roman Catholicism. Lobo and Mendes claim outright that the noblewomen surrounding the Ḥabāša king—in particular his senior wife, eldest daughter, a daughter-in-law, and a niece—are the reason for the failure of Roman Catholicism in Abyssinia (Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 73–74; Beccari 1903, 147). Part of the reason that Ḥabāša noblewomen were so powerful was that strict exogamous cultural laws meant that noblewomen (*wäyzazər* in Gə'əz) married outside the royal family; that is, they married men who were beneath them socially: “The *wäyzazər* are not submissive to anyone, not even to their husbands. Given that they do not marry and cannot marry men who are noble like them, only to those who are not, no matter how honored the men may be, their wives will always become their masters. And behind closed doors the men are treated as servants” (our translation) (Barradas 1906, 151–52; 1996, 64).

This asymmetrical power relationship probably contributed to noblewomen's strong sense of their own value and rights. Their literacy, unusual for any seventeenth-century person, would also have contributed to this confidence. Indeed, the Ḥabāša king expressed surprise that the noblewomen were not more interested in the foreign faith, given their literacy, saying, “he was amazed, that they, rising from such a noble lineage, gifted with clear minds and versed in books to such a degree, would endure themselves being inflicted upon by monks from the countryside and from the woods” (our translation) (Mendes 1908, 302).

In my article on the topic, “Sisters Debating the Jesuits” (Belcher 2013), I look more closely at the Portuguese texts' vivid portraits of six individual Ḥabāša noblewomen, five who resisted the Portuguese and one who appears to have supported them. Space does not allow that examination here, but the interested reader is urged to read the article for fascinating anecdotes about the Ḥabāša noblewomen of this period, whom nobody (including their fathers and husbands) could prevent from doing exactly as they liked.

One figure is worth spending a little time on, however: the king's niece. She is a discursively resistant figure in the Portuguese texts who has experiences quite similar to Walatta Petros. While remaining nameless in their texts, she takes up more space than perhaps any other woman, with the Portuguese describing her as well educated and the greatest heretic in the land (Beccari 1912, 185). Lobo wrote, years later, that they were never successful in converting this woman, but Thomas Barneto stated in 1627 that they were (1912, 185–89). They interpreted the encounter differently, as suggested by what Barneto himself recounts of the rhetorical indirection she used to avoid conversion.

In Lobo's account, the Jesuits met her husband when he asked them to come as Roman Catholic missionaries to his region (1983, 186). Unfortunately for the Portuguese, the king's niece was set against them: "a confirmed heretic, so blind and obstinate in her errors that she was unwilling to listen to any discussion of the Catholic faith or any true information concerning her heresies" (ibid.). Although "the greater part of our labours were expended with the king's niece," she heard their preaching with "ill will and worse predisposition" (ibid., 187). In a brilliant rhetorical move, she horrified the locals by telling them that the Jesuits had mixed the blood of unclean animals (camels, dogs, and hares) into the bread of the Eucharist host, polluting the sacred ritual (Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 57). This constituted a dire problem for the Portuguese, because the local women in the entire region refused to convert on the grounds that the king's niece had not converted (Lobo 1971, 386n2). Soon the entire region was "infected with the same prejudices as she" and "they fled from us whenever we approach'd" (Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 57). Whole towns would go into mourning when the Portuguese drew near (Lobo 1983, 188–89).

Given her tremendous influence, the Portuguese made repeated attempts to change her mind (Lobo 1983, 187–89, 197; Lobo and Le Grand 1985, 57–58, 61). At first they hoped that she would "yield" to her husband and convert, but she did not. Then they spent three days attempting to gain an audience with her, but she would not grant it. Eventually, the Portuguese abandoned the effort and returned home: "We again attempted the conversion of the aforementioned lord's wife, whom we found as blind and stubborn as before. And since she refused to give up the battle in any of the many bouts we had with her, we had to return again to Fremona [the Jesuit base, in northern Ethiopia]" (Lobo 1983, 197). Not long after, the entire Portuguese effort in Abyssinia unraveled.

The Portuguese did not record their "battles" with this woman at length, but the original Lobo draft contains a fascinating scene, deleted from the later manuscript, in which the woman debates with the Portuguese priests, employing rhetoric in resisting them (1971, 387). Perhaps Lobo deleted the scene because it demonstrated a mere woman defeating a team of men from the most famous educational European institution of its time, the Society of Jesus. Although the king's niece appears in Lobo's text as a shadow, without a direct voice, there is no doubting her extraordinary role in the text. She resists conversion, convinces other women to resist conversion, and remains true to her faith despite the best efforts of the Portuguese. Indeed, her repression in Lobo's later text makes her stand out all the more because she is the only individual conversion attempt Lobo records. As the reader, one immediately wonders why the Portuguese are spending so much time with one person, and with a woman. Clearly, this woman is a symbol of much more.

Interestingly, several events in Walatta Petros's life parallel those of the king's niece. Both women were noblewomen and the wives of high-ranking officials who had converted to Roman Catholicism. Both women were subjected to intense, one-on-one efforts by the Portuguese to convert them. Like the king's niece, "our holy mother Walatta Petros argued with them, defeated them and embarrassed them." It

is tempting to speculate that the hagiobiography and Lobo and Barneto's accounts are about the same woman. The names of their husbands are somewhat similar, appearing as "Miserat Christos" and "Melcha Christos" in the Portuguese sources (Beccari 1912, 185). But the king's niece lived in Šire, Təgray, and Walatta Petros never did. If they are not the same woman, the overlap in their stories suggests that the Portuguese accounts and the Ḥabäša hagiobiographies are both reporting on a much larger movement among Ḥabäša noblewomen during this period.

Despite the different valences of the Portuguese and Ḥabäša texts—the first condemning, the second praising noblewomen—the parallels between them are striking. In both, women are rhetorical warriors, striking at imperial and foreign power with the weapons of language. In the Portuguese texts this resistance is often depicted as sly sarcasm or sullen silence; in the Ḥabäša texts it is depicted as dialogic utterance. Indeed, in one of the other Ethiopian female saint hagiobiographies, the *Gädlä Fəqartä Krastos*, women perform a theater of abusive speech and violent physical response that ends not even with the speaker's death, but with a command that the living eat the bodies of the condemnatory and all-powerful dead.

By reading early modern European and African written texts through each other, we come to a better understanding of this period and, in particular, the role of women in the failure of an early modern European protocolonial effort. The Ḥabäša texts suggest that women played an essential role in defeating Roman Catholicism in Ethiopia, but do not say so outright. The Portuguese texts do. The Ḥabäša texts communicate the scale of the rebellion against the Roman Catholics, and the tremendous cost to the Ḥabäša both at the national and familial level. The Portuguese texts are necessarily more focused on the costs to Europeans. Read together, both sets of texts suggest some important historical truths.

The Text's Religious Context

The *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* was written within the Təwaḥədo Church tradition, which is both similar to and very different from other forms of Christianity. In this section, I describe the religious differences between Roman Catholicism and the Təwaḥədo Church, particularly their views of human and divine nature; the religious controversies that arose within the Təwaḥədo Church during this period, including Walatta Petros's monastery's affiliation with adherents of Qəbat teaching; the vital place that the Virgin Mary holds in the Təwaḥədo Church; the practices of monasticism in the Təwaḥədo Church, including female leadership; and the deployment of biblical passages in the text, including their alteration.

Təwaḥədo Church Doctrine

Readers familiar with Roman Catholicism or Protestantism will notice that the Christianity of the text is markedly different. Walatta Petros and other Ḥabäša re-

fused to convert to Roman Catholicism for a number of reasons, but one of the most often stated is Christological. That is, the Ḥabāša viewed the nature of Christ differently. The Roman Catholics agreed with the Council of Chalcedon of 451 that Christ had “two natures,” fully human and fully divine; the Tāwahədo Church disagreed with that council and insisted that Christ had “one nature,” melding the human and the divine. Along with the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and, later, the Protestant churches, agreed with the two-nature doctrine; it is only the so-called Oriental Orthodox churches, or non-Chalcedonian churches of Egypt, Syria, Armenia, India, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, that disagreed. While this difference may seem small or even nonexistent—neither claimed that Christ was only divine or only human—the theological and political implications were significant. More recently, the non-Chalcedonian churches have decided that the difference is merely semantic, based in a misunderstanding of the Greek terms for “nature” (Ayele Takla Haymanot 1982). Language is powerful, however, and has shaped some distinctive aspects of the Tāwahədo Church, particularly its emphasis on indivisibility, which seems to have shaped, or emerged from, its view of human nature.

The Tāwahədo Church does not have a doctrine of original sin, and thus does not posit that all human beings are born in a state of sin. Rather, it has a doctrine of theosis, the transformation of human beings by grace. When saved, people are restored into Christ’s image. Thus, all children are types of angels, and Ḥabāša and Africans who do bad things are rarely evil but are led to do evil acts by something outside of themselves: Satan. Walatta Petros’s pagan jailor makes advances toward her not due to his own bad character but because “Satan entered into [his] heart.” (The Europeans in the text are allowed no such excuse, however.) The text talks about the divinity of human beings, saying that the members of Walatta Petros’s flock are “without any blemish.” This doctrine means that human beings are not inevitably and wholly sinful but actually have the potential of becoming divine, like Mary (Wright 2002, 30). As a result, the ultimate goal of monks and nuns is to leave the human behind, in part by reducing the body’s desires to nothing. This has partly to do with another doctrine that the body as well as the soul will be resurrected on Judgment Day, therefore “both the body and the soul have to be purified and saved” (ibid., 34).

At the same time, if humans are more divine, the divine is more human. When Jesus Christ appears to commission Walatta Petros to guide the community, she does not agree in awe. She fights him tooth and nail, insisting that she is nothing but “mud.” Christ deigns to argue back, saying that mud mixed with straw is a strong building block. So, she comes to her main point. She knows her Bible well—she “was anxious that what had happened to Eve not happen to her.” She does not want to be tricked, but perhaps she also does not want to be mistakenly held responsible, as a woman, if harm comes to her flock. Only then, having been defeated in argument, does Christ give her his solemn promise that no one in her community, nor anyone who ever calls upon her name, will perish—that is, be condemned to eternal damnation. Only then, having extracted a promise from the all-powerful,

does she agree to do as God says. Similarly, an earlier Ḥabāša female saint, Krəstos Šämra, also argues with God, trying to reconcile him with Satan so that human beings will stop suffering due to the war between the two (Filəppos 1956).

Although many Ḥabāša, like Walatta Petros, refused to convert to Roman Catholicism, and eventually the country followed suit and abandoned Catholicism, the Ḥabāša's debates with the Jesuits set the stage for divisive theological debates in Ethiopia in the seventeenth century. This internal conflict, starting right after the expulsion of the Jesuits, centered on whether Christ needed the Holy Spirit to anoint him. One side, called Unctionist (adherents of Qəbat teaching, whose followers were called Unctionists, Qəbatočč, əllä Ewostatəwos, or Goğgamewočč), believed that he did need the Holy Spirit: "the Father is the anointer, the Son the anointed, and the Holy Spirit the ointment." The other side, called Unionist (adherents of Karra teaching, whose followers were called Unionists or Täwaḥədowočč), believed that he did not: "the Son is the anointer, the anointed, and the ointment" (Tedros Abraha 2010; Getatchew Haile 2007a). The Unctionists were associated with the monastic house of the fifteenth-century *Abunä* Ewostatəwos and the monasteries of Goğgam (south of Lake Ṭana); the Unionists were associated with the monastic house of thirteenth-century *Abunä* Täklä Haymanot and the monasteries of Azäzo (near Gondär) and Däbrä Libanos. That is, although the Täwaḥədo Church had no orders, it did have "houses," loosely connected networks of monasteries (Kaplan 2014a).

The second half of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, which relates what happened after the Jesuits were expelled, will be helpful to scholars trying to understand some of those shifts. In particular, the Ḥabāša monks and monasteries in the text suggest that Walatta Petros's community leaned toward Qəbat teaching. For instance, the high-ranking monk *Abba* Fätlä Šəllase appears in both Susənyos's chronicle and Walatta Petros's hagiobiography. In the hagiobiography, Fätlä Šəllase is a special mentor to Walatta Petros, as well as the "teacher of the entire world." He is the one who enables her to leave her husband's home to become a nun, who twice brokers peace between her and her husband, and who, much later, supports her when male priests attack her leadership on the grounds that she is a woman. Since Fätlä Šəllase is regularly associated in the hagiobiography with a pro-Catholic member of the court, Wälättä Giyorgis (whom Walatta Petros later converts back to Orthodoxy), we might assume that he was one of the priests who initially embraced Roman Catholicism. The hagiobiography speaks approvingly of him, however, so he must have abandoned any pro-Catholic position, if he had espoused any. Meanwhile, this same monk appears in Susənyos's royal chronicle, participating near southeastern Lake Ṭana in a famous debate about Christ's anointing, held before King Susənyos in 1622–23 CE. Fätlä Šəllase is the first of many monks arguing for the Qəbat side, which Susənyos then chose to support (also suggesting that Qəbat was aligned with Roman Catholicism). In the June 1655 public debate, held after Walatta Petros died, King Fasilädäs also chose the Qəbat side, but in the 1667 debate, Fasilädäs chose the opposing side. Likewise, his successor, King Yoḥannəs I, held public debates on the issue in 1668. The Qəbat side again lost, and did so permanently. It

seems that Walatta Petros's monastery still had its sympathies with the Qəbat side as of the 1672 writing of the hagiobiography, however. Further evidence is that an entry on Ɔḥətä Krəstos in the *Sənkəssar* (Synaxarium), the thirteenth-century compilation of saints' lives, states that she excommunicated two monks for being Unionist (Nollet 1930).

The Təwəḥədo Church is also distinctive in having great reverence for the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother, the "mother of salvation." Christ saved all humanity by dying on the cross, but Mary is present day to day, providing basic needs, comfort, and forgiveness. The pious recite the prayers in her honor, *Wəddase Maryam*, every day. In the *Tä'amərə Maryam* (Miracles of Mary), read during many church services and the subject of many sermons, Mary is so powerful that she is called "redeemer":

O Mother of God, our Lady and redeemer, pray for us! Thou hast become the habitation of glory. . . . O Mother of God, our Lady and our redeemer, pray thou for us, and lay peace and safety upon those who are in this thy house! O Mother of God, Bearer of Life, glorious one . . . O our Lady and deliverer, pray thou and make supplication on behalf of all the world; thou wast an earthly being and hast become a heavenly being through carrying the One. . . . O Mother of God . . . who existed before everything. . . . O Mother of God, . . . thou shalt fashion completely Him Who is set over everything, Who appointeth king[s], Who establisheth him that putteth his trust in Him, and giveth glory and grace. (Budge 1933b, 104–7)

Indeed, those Christians who do not believe in her power are thought to not attain heaven (Wright 2001, 47). The Jesuits thought that their own reverence for Mary was one reason they were at first successful in converting many Ḥabäša. This reverence opens up a space for female leadership. Mary is seen as having paid Eve's debt and thus having erased the sin of all women (Wright 2001, 42). Walatta Petros also has redeeming power; those who pray directly to her are delivered.

Təwəḥədo Church Monasticism

Those unfamiliar with monastic practices, or familiar with only European monastic traditions, will need some explanation of the life Walatta Petros sought to live as a nun. Since the beginning, the Təwəḥədo Church has been deeply connected to the Egyptian Orthodox Church and to its practices of monasticism and asceticism. Over the centuries, many praised the Ḥabäša for the depth of their commitment to such practices, in particular, to a life of abstaining from worldly pleasures. The Təwəḥədo Church believed (and still does today) that weakening the body reduced desire and thus led to purity. Even ordinary Christians in the Təwəḥədo Church abstained from animal products at least half of the days of the year, and monks and nuns ate once a day or every other day. They often engaged in other rigors, such as praying while standing in cold water, staying up all night in prayer, or living in caves. The body was as nothing to them.

Təwəḥədo Church monasticism had no orders and each monastery had its own rules and procedures. A monastery was not something inextricably tied to a par-

ticular monastic building or church edifice but something marked more by its practices of austerity, celibacy, education, and preaching the Gospel. Monks and nuns were not cloistered but lived near the monastery, at home, or as wanderers (Barradas 1996, 141; Alvares 1881). Some monks and nuns lived entirely on their own, as hermits in cells in the mountains or the wilderness, called *anchorite* (Greek, from “to go out”) monasticism. Others lived individually but in the same general area, called *idiorythmic* (Greek, from “each according to his rhythm”) monasticism. Others lived fully together, sharing meals and work, called *cenobitic* or *coenobitic* (Greek for “communal”) monasticism. Nuns moved among these forms, as did Walatta Petros, and the boundaries of the forms were themselves porous. Monks and nuns could live together in monasteries but the double monastery or dual community of monks and nuns living side by side was more typical of Ḥabäša monasticism. As the hagiobiography also explains, it was believed that in the original monasteries, men and women existed without desire for each other, even sleeping in the same bed and wearing each other’s clothes (Wright 2001, 10). Thus, the monastery was not a building behind a wall under lock and key, but more like a village surrounding a church in which each monk or nun had a thatched house of stone or wood and clay (figs. 4–5). They maintained themselves through charity and sometimes by farming the land.

Monks and nuns would join one of three types of holy institutions in the Täwahədo Church: *gädam*, *däbr*, or *maḥbär*. The term *gädam* was not used for a church or a wealthy, established monastery but for a more autonomous or less settled community of monks, and we have translated it throughout as “monastic settlement.” By contrast, a *däbr* was a substantial, established church that had at least three priests and, often, royal patronage, and that served as a center of education. It might or might not have a monastery attached, but since it is the most formal institution, we have always translated it as “monastery.” A *maḥbär*, which we always translate as “community,” was the type of institution that Walatta Petros established. People who devoted themselves to a life of spirituality in a *mānet*, or monastery, were sometimes called a *maḥbär*. But lay organizations with such a name also have a long history in Ethiopia and were often established by those who revered a particular saint (Marcus 2001). One did not need to be a monk or nun to belong to such an association or even start one. They often provided mutual assistance to members (such as rebuilding houses or caring for orphans) and met regularly at members’ homes. In the troubled times of Walatta Petros, when many local churches and monasteries had become tainted by the foreign faith, Walatta Petros may have borrowed from this particular form of *maḥbär* to establish communities for the Christians who followed her and wanted to live near her to worship in the true faith. Such a use was without precedent, but, as a woman, Walatta Petros could not set up churches (*betä krästiyan*) or monasteries (*gädam* or *däbr*). Later, it seems Walatta Petros worked to establish her *maḥbär* as a *gädam* with formal monastic rules.

In Europe, few became monks or nuns, but in Ethiopia, it was a common way of life. Indeed, almost every elderly widow or widower took up the monastic life, as

did quite a few boys and girls. Many did not live in monasteries, but continued to live at home. Still, it was highly unusual for Walatta Petros, as a young, married woman, to want to become a nun and live in a monastery.

The positions and titles for nuns in the monastery were generally as follows: Ḥabäša nuns called each other *əḥət* (sister), but ordinary people called them *əmmahoy* (mother), and the nun in charge of the other nuns, the abbess, was called *əmmä mänet* (mother of the monastery). The *əmmä mänet* distributed work and made sure every nun did no more and no less than she should. The *Rules for the Monks* advised that younger nuns should serve older nuns (Wright 2001, 26); younger nuns were called *dəngəl* (virgin) while older nuns were called *mänäkosayt* (female monk). The daily work was done mostly by the young and able-bodied: planting, weeding, harvesting, collecting firewood, fetching water, grinding grain, baking bread, cooking stews, brewing beer, and so on. Class distinctions were not erased; nuns from well-off families had more possessions and sometimes played a larger role in monastic decision making (ibid., 85).

Female leadership of men was rare. The title that Walatta Petros receives in the text suggests that her role as a female leader was uncommon enough to allow some confusion in terms. In the *gädl*, Christ gives Walatta Petros the title *liqä diyaqonawit* ([male] head [female] deaconess), probably based on the common title *liqä kahənat* ([male] head of the [male] priests). It is grammatically peculiar, however, so Conti Rossini amended it to *liqä diyaqonat* ([male] head of the [male] deacons). In the caption of the relevant image in MS D, her title is *liqtä diyaqonawit* ([female] head [female] deaconess). Meanwhile, in a *Sənkəssar* entry, her role as the leader over men is clearly and unambiguously stated: *wä-astägabəʾat maḥbärä wä-konät liqtä laʾlehomu* (she gathered a community and became the head over them [collective masculine]). This helps explain why the text also says that the people “surrounded her like bees gather around their king.”

Christ appointing the saint to a position in the church hierarchy is a common hagiobiographical topos; for instance, Täklä Haymanot was appointed *liqä kahənat* (head of the priests). The grammatically problematic *liqä diyaqonawit* that appears in all the manuscripts may be Gälawdewos’s neologism for the feminine equivalent of *liqä kahənat*, since there was no such thing as a female head of the priests or deacons in the Täwaḥədo Church, and since the word for a female religious leader, *liqt*, is rare. Several commentators have remarked on this sentence in the *gädl*, pointing out that Walatta Petros is the only female saint known to be given this position, either on her deathbed or otherwise. The term *liqä diyaqonawit* or *liqtä diyaqonawitä* means that Walatta Petros was the head of all the female deaconesses but also perhaps of the male deacons. Just as the word “archdeaconess” in English does not make it clear whom the woman is in charge of, the *Gəʾəz* is also not clear. Since Walatta Petros was the head of her community, it is not clear why Christ would need to give her a special dispensation to be in charge of only the female deaconesses. Traditionally, there were women who were head deaconesses of the women and there were men who were head deacons of the men and women. Finally, the text makes explicit the claim that Walatta Petros was the head of all,

whether men or women: “She truly was worthy of this name [Walatta Petros, meaning Daughter-of-Saint-Peter] since the son of a king becomes a king and the son of a priest becomes a priest; and just as Peter became the head of the apostles, she likewise became the head of all [religious] teachers.”

When an individual decided to become a nun or monk, she or he marked this by shaving the head (being tonsured) and putting on the *qob*^ʿ (monastic cap) as a signal of intention. The abbot who gave the *qob*^ʿ to the individual had a special role in his or her spiritual life. During the novitiate, which lasted from a few weeks to several years (Chaillot 2002, 154; Wright 2001, 59), the main task was learning to deal with the difficulties of frequent fasting, prayer, and labor. In this *rād*^ʿ (or first) level, the nun received the *qob*^ʿ and tried out the life. She abstained from all sexual activity, attended church daily, and followed strict fasting laws. When the woman felt ready, she was initiated, a ceremony that gave her special power to resist temptation. This ceremony marked her passing from the things of this world, and thus the funeral rite was read over her. She received the mantle, sash, and belt, and became a full member of the community, passing into the *ardā*^ʿ*t* (or second) level. For forty days after this powerful ceremony, she was believed to be free from sin. Then began her life of *gädl* (struggle) to resist temptation, the most dangerous of which was thought to be the desire for sex, but also for sleep, food, and ease.

There were ten steps in the spiritual life, as described in the *Māṣahəftä Mänākosat* (Books of the Monks), each of which focused on a different set of spiritual practices, including the first step of “silence, understanding, and praise” and the second of “tears, subjection, and love” (Wright 2001, 96, 135–38). To achieve these qualities, a typical day for a nun would be to get up before 4:00 AM to pray alone, attend group morning prayer from 6:00 to 8:00 AM, spend another hour in prayer, do group work from 9:00 AM until 1:00 to 3:00 PM, do private work for an hour or two (while stopping to pray for ten to fifteen minutes at noon, 3:00 PM, and 5:00 PM), eat around 5:00 PM, visit with others in the evening, and sleep around 8:00 or 9:00 PM (Wright 2001, 101–2). Prayer usually included prostration (bowing, kneeling, or lying down). This routine was broken on the Sabbaths and feast days, or during illness.

The most important scholarly work done to date on Tāwəhədo Church nuns is Marta Camilla Wright’s master’s thesis, *The Holy Gender, Becoming Male: The Life of Ethiopian Orthodox Nuns*, based on field research, and her related article (2001, 2002). These works provide detail on the life of contemporary Ethiopian nuns, as well as useful appendixes that translate the prayers and processes for consecrating nuns. Wright argues that the Tāwəhədo Church, like the early Christian church, considers the female body impure and, therefore, that Ḥabāša nuns “abandon female characteristics in their search for a holy life,” becoming a third, sexless gender (2001, 9, 110). Nuns did so by rejecting the role of wife and mother, praying for the end of their menses, shaving their heads, wearing many layers of dirty clothes, and purifying their bodies of its desires and pollutants. Wright asserts that many women became nuns in order to escape gender role norms, in particular to avoid marriage (ibid., 22, 32). Some of these constraints followed them into the monastery, however, as women were considered impure during their menses. For seven

days, they stayed sixty feet away from any holy site and were not allowed to pray certain prayers (*ibid.*, 66), which interrupted their spiritual progress. Wright's informants felt that women were more likely to have become nuns before the eighteenth century, because after that "men started interfering and overtook the power of the women" (*ibid.*, 21).

The Täwaḥädo Church Bible

The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is lush with quotations from the Bible, inserted by Gälawdewos and his interlocutors from memory. Although some of these quotes may seem to have been corrupted, almost all are direct from the Gə'əz Bible, which is based on the ancient Greek translation, or Septuagint, and thus is unlike the Bibles that modern Jews and Western Christians are used to reading. For example, in the anecdote about Samson in Judges 14, some may be startled to read that Samson found bees in the lion's mouth, not its carcass, and that it is the jawbone of the ass that springs forth with water, not the ground. Yet this is the story as it appears in the Gə'əz Bible.

At the same time, Gälawdewos does not have a fundamentalist approach to scripture. He deliberately adapts biblical quotes for his purposes, a practice that a Gə'əz scholar calls "localizing the text." In recounting the Samson anecdote, Gälawdewos inserts a second riddle, not found in the Bible and perhaps of his own invention, about the jawbone: "A drink in the time of thirst and a weapon for warfare." In citing the famous story of sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac, in Genesis 25:28, Gälawdewos interprets the passage rather than reciting it. He writes, "Esau was beautiful in his appearance and Isaac loved him, while Jacob was ugly in his appearance and God loved him." While the Bible passage indeed says that Isaac preferred Esau, it attributes this not to Esau's good looks but to the animals he hunted and cooked for his father. Moreover, the verse does not contrast the preferences of Isaac and God, but of Isaac and his wife Rebecca: she is the one said to prefer Jacob, who stayed by her side. However, the Gə'əz Bible does mention that Jacob was a "plain" man and that he had to put on an animal skin to fool his father into thinking he had Esau's more masculine frame. The two men undoubtedly looked quite different, with Esau living his life outdoors hunting and Jacob staying indoors with his mother. Gälawdewos thus interprets the passage here, suggesting that God was not fooled by Esau's beautiful masculinity. Since other parts of the Bible speak of how God looks at the pure heart, not the beautiful face, this interpretation is an example of Gälawdewos's learnedness and skill. In another instance, after praising Walatta Petros's willingness to do physical labor, he cites the first part of 1 Timothy 4:8, which mentions the benefits of physical labor. For rhetorical effect, he omits that the verse goes on to say that the benefits of spiritual labor are far greater. But he has not distorted the quote, only included the part that is useful to his story.

We took advantage of Ricci's notes in the Italian translation, which identified many of the biblical references in the text. We checked all of them, however, sometimes changing them where we thought Ricci's attribution was incorrect; more-

over, we added attributions he had missed. Ricci's translation does include a chart of biblical citations (Gälawdewos 1970, 145–46).

The Text's Authorship

Gəʼəz manuscripts rarely identify a named scribe, much less an author. The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is an exception, however. We learn on the first page that the person writing the story down is a monk named Gälawdewos: “I, the sinner and transgressor Galawdewos, will write a small part of the story . . . of our holy mother Saint Walatta Petros.”⁶ We learn nothing of his personal history, although he describes himself as a *ħaddis täkl* (a new plant) in the monastic life and thus was probably a young man when he wrote down the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* in 1672–73. He also seems to suggest that he is not well liked, comparing himself to a caustic but productive bee: “I am cruel in my deeds, stinging people with my tongue and causing much pain,” but ultimately producing “a story that is sweeter than honeycomb.” Since he wrote the text thirty years after Walatta Petros's death, and had only recently become a monk, it is safe to assume that he did not know her personally but is relating stories told to him by others. Indeed, he regularly says as much in the text.

So, is Gälawdewos merely the scribe (merely a transcriber of the story) or an author (the inventor of the text)? The answer is—both.

On the one hand, Gälawdewos is an author. Manuscripts were always written down or copied by *däbtära*, who are highly educated but nonordained clergy responsible for the creative processes of the church (Kaplan 2003c). Some are dancers or musicians, others are painters, still others are poets or authors. Ordained priests are required to study religious texts and learn to read Gəʼəz, but *däbtära* further undertake a long course of study in the creative arts, including poetry (*qəne*), dance (*aqqʷaqʷam*), hymns (*dəggʷa*), liturgical music (*zema*), and written charms (*asmät*), as well as learning to write Gəʼəz and prepare plants for healing medicines. Such a long and complicated text as the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, with its profusion of biblical references, had to have been written by a trained *däbtära* who had memorized vast swaths of the Bible. Certainly, the obsessions of the “I” of the text are those of a *däbtära*: not only the effort to make appropriate mentions of scriptures along the way but the inclusion of so many miracles that involve books, either their being written or saved from thieves. Gälawdewos is definitely not a mere copyist but likely is the sole crafter of the elegant introduction and the inventor of much of its biblical intertextuality.

On the other hand, Gälawdewos is an amanuensis. That is, he did not invent the stories of the text but rather was assigned or commissioned by those in Walatta

⁶ Unfortunately, the Conti Rossini print edition (Gälawdewos 1912) and the Ricci translation (Gälawdewos 1970) did not have the author's name, since it had been erased from Abb. 88. The author's name does appear in all eleven of the other manuscripts.

Petros's community to write down the oral histories of others. (This oral quality makes the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* atypical of Ḥabäša literature, a communal text, a kind of *testimonio*—defined as a literary historical genre in which an eyewitness narrates a collectivity's experience—based on eyewitness accounts but using literary techniques [Reyes and Curry Rodríguez 2012]). First and foremost among these community members was Qəddəstā Krəstos, a young nun who “burned with love for Walatta Petros” and who urged Gälawdewos, saying, “Write, so that Walatta Petros's story may be known.” The story would never have been written down, Gälawdewos says, unless this “rejected” and “lowly” woman had not insisted that he “reveal this treasure that lay hidden in the field of the hearts of the older people.” Gälawdewos notes that while some of those who had known Walatta Petros personally were still living, it was Qəddəstā Krəstos, “who is younger than them all,” who made the book come about.

Although Qəddəstā Krəstos is mentioned first in the text, and alone, Gälawdewos writes at the end of the text, in the miracles part of the translation, that a bedridden monk named Mäzgäbä Haymanot had first urged him to write. The monk, who had grown up in Walatta Petros's community, told Gälawdewos that he saw in a vision that Gälawdewos would write down the story of Walatta Petros: “You write to the end an important book, elegantly worded and in beautiful handwriting.” Gälawdewos humbly responds that the elders of the community would have to request such. Apparently they did not, since seven years passed—during which Mäzgäbä Haymanot died and the matter was forgotten, Gälawdewos writes—before Qəddəstā Krəstos went to the abbess of the community to demand that the task be undertaken. Thus, a woman was the subject of the text, a woman was the prompter of the text, and a woman authorized the writing of the text.

But Qəddəstā Krəstos was also too young to have known Walatta Petros, and Mäzgäbä Haymanot had died by the time the text was written, so whose stories do we read about in the text? Given the detailed nature of the stories—in particular the use of specific proper names for dozens of people and places, and the historical facts corroborated by other accounts—it is impossible that most of the stories were created by those who had not lived through the events. In many places, the text actually states who the author of a particular story is: “Eheta Kristos and Ghirmana were witnesses and have told us.” After another story, the text states, “That man is still alive now. He has told us, and we have written it down.” After still another, the text reports that Ləbasitā Krəstos told Əḥətā Krəstos what she saw in a vision, suggesting that we know of it through Əḥətā Krəstos. In another place, a long section of text is reported as direct speech from the monk Šə'ələ Krəstos, and after the story the text adds: “Silla Kristos told us all these things ... He is alive right up to now, and his testimony is trustworthy; he does not lie.” In another case, authorship is inferred. After telling the story of a disciple traveling alone who escapes a snake, the text asks, “Who would have told us, and how would we have written down this miracle” if God had not protected the disciple, its author? Further, these are not the only places where the text switches from “I” to “we.” The text also has “we certainly have not written lies, nor have we used ingenious fables to acquaint you with the

story of our holy mother Walatta Petros's glory." These comments, as well as others like them, clarify that the text was a collection of eyewitness accounts rather than solely Gälawdewos's invention.

Finally, the illustrations in some manuscripts of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* confirm that the text was a community oral history. One in MS D depicts Gälawdewos in every part of the process: being told that he should write the *gädl* by a man (Mäzgäbä Haymanot) and then a woman (the nun Qəddəstā Krəstos), and then sitting with pen to parchment facing three men and two women (perhaps including the abbess Amätā Dəngəl) who are talking to him (plate 55). Another image in the same text "could be the nun Qəddəstā Krəstos who supported the *Gädl*'s writing, or one of the community's abbesses" (Bosc-Tiessé 2003, 413), or possibly Əḥətā Krəstos (plate 63). MS A has a similar image, with Gälawdewos writing while listening to Mäzgäbä Haymanot.

The *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is, then, a written text that is a record of oral testimony. One question remains: If Gälawdewos is the author of many of the biblical allusions in the text, while individuals in the community are the authors of the anecdotes in the text, who is responsible for the arc of it, for suturing it into order? During this period, when scratch paper did not exist, an original text would have been composed orally and then written down. Did Gälawdewos collect all the tales and then write them down from memory? It seems unlikely that Gälawdewos, a relative newcomer, would somehow figure out the correct order since the text is organized largely chronologically. Or did one eyewitness tell most of the stories from beginning to end, with insertions by others? Someone took the time to organize the stories of multiple authors into a particular order.

The most likely such organizer would have been Walatta Petros's partner Əḥətā Krəstos, who became a nun with her and traveled everywhere with her in the early days, spent twenty-five years with her (1617–42), was appointed her successor, and lived six years after her. Most of the stories in the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* are those that Əḥətā Krəstos would have witnessed herself; many of the early stories only she could have witnessed. The name that appears most often in the text, after the saint's name, is Əḥətā Krəstos, which appears twice as often as the name of Walatta Petros's husband Mälkə'a Krəstos. In two of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* manuscripts, poems to Əḥətā Krəstos appear at the end, indicating how closely aligned the two women were in life and death. Finally, many of the preoccupations of the text are not those of a male author. The concerns, themes, and characters of the text itself suggest the possibility of a female authorial organizer: the long, loving exchanges among female friends, the aggravation of lazy female servants, and the preparation rather than the growing of food. Near the beginning, the text claims that Walatta Petros was very beautiful, but then argues at length that physical beauty is unimportant, with a long disquisition on the biblical Rachel's barren beauty and Leah's fecund ugliness. It seems that Əḥətā Krəstos would be the most likely author of many of the tales and the arc of the text.

Indeed, without the male name Gälawdewos, we might have speculated that the literate Əḥətā Krəstos actually sat down and wrote out this tale. While women

could never be priests, they could sometimes be *däbtära*. Literacy was relatively high in highland Ethiopia due to the *Täwahädo* Church: all boys went to the first stage of church school, in which they learned to read and write *Gəʿəz* characters. Girls from *Ḥabäša* noble families during this period went to school as well, as both the Portuguese accounts and the *gädl* itself confirm. One of the Jesuits wrote that nobles had live-in monks who taught their daughters “not just to read but also to understand Saint Paul and the Gospel” (Páez 2011, 1:222). While the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* does not depict women writing, it does have multiple scenes of such women reading. *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* reads the Gospels to Walatta Petros when her friend is sick. *Fälāsītä Krəstos* reads the Psalms of David to her at night and the Gospels during the day on her deathbed. When the king rescinds his conversion, Walatta Petros reads the message he sends her. Walatta Petros is in the habit of reading the Gospel of John every day and is depicted reading the *Täʿamärä Maryam* (Miracles of Mary) and *Mäšḥafä Ḥawi* (Comprehensive Book). The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is not the first text at least coauthored by a *Ḥabäša* woman. According to some, Queen *Ḥeni* (1450s–1522) wrote two hymn collections in *Gəʿəz*, the *Ḥoḥtä Bərhan* (Gate of Light) and the *ʿEnzira Səbḥat* (Lyre of Praise) (Chernetsov 2005a).⁷

Ḥḥätä Krəstos could not have physically written the text: she died two decades before it was written down. Yet, the collecting and organizing of stories might have happened before they were written down in a manuscript. Although the text was written in 1672–73, its stories date much earlier. Since a *gädl* is essential to establishing a community and saint—and independence from neighboring monasteries—writing one would have been the desire of early members of Walatta Petros’s communities, which dated to the mid-1620s.⁸ Additionally, as the scholar and Roman Catholic nun Sue Houchins (2007) points out, those in religious orders are usually on the lookout for and acutely aware of exemplary sisters among them and may begin to collect anecdotes and evidence long before any hagiobiography is written down. When considering the joint authorship of the *gädl*, such early collection must be kept in mind. No doubt, members of the community often told stories to one another, as well as to new members and children, about the exploits of their founder. *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* was there from the beginning, and constituted an important archive of information about Walatta Petros.

Whether *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* organized the tales in the text or her tales were organized by others after her death, the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* was at least partially authored by *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* and the women who surrounded Walatta Petros. Although some men play important roles later in the text, in the early days of Walatta Petros’s monastic life, it is mostly women who are named. Thus, the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* represents an early modern written African text orally co-

⁷ For a dissenting view on their authorship, see Habtemichael Kidane (2005) and Pankhurst (2009).

⁸ As Kaplan points out, “The life of a saint was usually written by a monk from the saint’s own monastery, who sought by writing the work to glorify the saint as well as his monastery” (1981, 110).

constructed by African women and can be considered an early example of African female authorship.

The Text's Genres

The text translated here, which we call the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, is actually a composite text including four different subgenres: *gädl* (the saint's life, or vita), *tä'amər* (the saint's miracles), *mälkä'* (a long poem praising the saint from head to toe), and *sälamta* (a short hymn praising the saint's virtues). The first two, *gädl* and *tä'amər*, almost always appear, and in this order, in a hagiobiography of an indigenous saint. The word *gädl* is used for the first part of the text, but also as an umbrella term for the composite text. The entire *gädl*, then, is a distinctive genre of indigenous Ḥabäša literature, which flourished from the fourteenth century through the next five centuries. It is the most common Gə'əz original genre.

A direct translation of the Gə'əz word *gädl* would be “[spiritual] struggle” or, as earlier scholars translated it, “contending.” It might also be translated as “acts” (as in the biblical book of the Acts of the Apostles) or “vita” (as in biography). In all cases, a *gädl* was a biography of a holy person, something the Greeks called a “hagiography” (literally, writing about saints). Since the term hagiography has developed so many pejorative associations, however, scholars of the genre have begun to argue for the term *hagiobiography*, defined as “biographies written with the intention of representing life as ‘more exemplary than real’” (de Porcellet and Garay 2001, 19). Since the *gädl* is its own distinctive genre, we have often used the term hagiography, but also use hagiobiography.

A full-length scholarly study of the *gädl* genre remains to be published, but the genre was inspired by the many hagiobiographies created in the early Christian Church, quite a few of which were translated into Gə'əz and with which Ḥabäša authors would have been very familiar (such as that of third-century Desert Father Saint Anthony) (Kaplan 2005c). For instance, parts of the *Sənkəssar*, the tales of other saints, are read during every liturgy in the Täwaḥədo Church, perhaps inspiring authors.

The *gädlät* (the plural form of *gädl*) about the lives of Ḥabäša saints appear in a variety of lengths—some are short and some are lengthy (more than 150 pages in a print edition). Many *gädlät* were composed long after the death of their subjects, some of whom may have even been mythical. Contrary to Greek hagiobiographies, Gə'əz hagiobiographies almost never feature martyrs; their saints are rarely victims, but almost always victorious. The *gädlät* are more generally the stories of monastic leaders, often evangelizers, who struggle with worldly authorities. This different emphasis may be because the Ḥabäša have so long been Christians and lived in a region where they were dominant and not persecuted.

A *gädl* follows a strict order. It tends to begin with a stylistically elevated introduction and then tells the story of the saint's life in chronological order. It almost always includes the miraculous circumstances of the saint's birth to pious parents,

a precocious childhood, the suffering he or she endured in pursuing a holy life, the saint's ordination and/or becoming a monk or nun, the miracles the saint performed while alive, the abandonment or avoidance of a traditional family life, and a description of the moment when Christ gives the saint a *kidan*, a covenant in which Christ promises to honor the prayers of anyone who calls upon the saint's name and to grant eternal life to all Christians who dedicate themselves to the saint, listen to the saint's *gädl*, and observe the commemoration of the saint's holy day. It ends with the saint's death and a call for blessings on those who wrote the text and paid for its costs. Nosnitsin (2013) argues that the *gädl* changed in the fifteenth century, becoming more story-driven, more likely to use fictional techniques.

The miracles, *tä'amər* (literally, "signs"), make up the next part of a saint's life. These are not the miracles that were performed while the saint was alive, but those that happened after the saint's death, when followers called upon the saint to intervene with God and grant their prayers. These posthumous miracles follow a typical arc: they start with a blessing formula, then someone has a problem and calls upon the saint, which results in divine intervention and a sudden improvement in the problem (Nosnitsin 2010e). These problems generally have to do with physical danger (whether from illness, animals, or attackers) or everyday life. The number of miracles in hagiobiographies varies widely. Indeed, the number of miracles in a particular saint's life can increase over time, as people continue to pray to the saint. Thus, Saint Täklä Haymanot has three cycles of twenty-two miracles each, and some manuscripts include additional miracles that he performed in a specific area (Nosnitsin 2010f). Some hagiobiographies do not have the section at all: Saint Kaleb, for instance, has no *tä'amər* section. The genre grew in popularity, probably due to the arrival of the *Tä'amərä Maryam* (Miracles of Mary) in the fourteenth century.

The *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros* consists of the miracles that happened after the saint's death (mostly between 1642 and 1672). *Walatta Petros*'s posthumous miracles often consist of food that multiplies; people saved from death by disease, storm, or wild animals; and the finding of lost objects. The main *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros*, the miracles that appear in almost all the texts, has eleven subsections, each devoted to the miracles that happened to one person. While most of them experienced only one miracle, some experienced more than one, and thus some of the eleven subsections describe more than one miracle. This organization again suggests an oral component to the text, in which individuals reported what happened to them. The miracles are probably not in chronological order; none appears with any date. The *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros* is perhaps distinctive in featuring several miracles about books: one about the writing of the *gädl* and two others about recovering lost books of the *Mälkä'a Wälättä Petros* poems.

A second set of the *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros* exists in two of the manuscripts, but they are dated later and relate to miracles that took place later, during the consecutive reigns of Bäkaffa (r. 1721–30), Iyasu II (r. 1730–55), Iyo'as I (r. 1755–69), and Yoḥannəs II (r. 1769), and then later, Täklä Giyorgis I (r. 1779–1800) and King Tewodros II (r. 1855–68). In these miracles, *Walatta Petros* protects her monastery

from the persecution of kings and aids critics of the king who seek asylum at her monastery. We have not translated them in full but have provided summaries.

There then appear, in some of the manuscripts, the *Mälkäʿa Wälättä Peṭros* and the *Sälamta Wälättä Peṭros*: two hymns or spiritual poems, part of a vast African tradition of praise poems, “one of the most developed and elaborate poetic genres in Africa” (Finnegan 1970, 111). The poems both appear in five of the manuscripts (Abb. 88, A, C, E, F) but are missing entirely from six of the manuscripts (B, D, G, H, I, and K). In MS J only one of the poems appears, the *sälamta*.

The first poem is of the type called *mälkäʿ* (meaning “image,” “icon,” or “portrait” in Gəʿəz), a unique Gəʿəz genre consisting of praise of a saint’s body from head to toe. The beauty, strength, and potency of the body are presented as mirrors of the saint’s perfect soul, both having been purified by monkish asceticism. Such a poem also alludes to episodes in the saint’s virtuous life. For instance, in the *Mälkäʿa Wälättä Peṭros*, stanza 6 appears to allude to the angels drizzling perfume from paradise into Walatta Petros’s nose, and stanza 8 alludes to Walatta Petros’s miraculous escape from her jailor in Žäbäy who made advances toward her. The *Mälkäʿa Wälättä Peṭros* does not always match the content of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* exactly because the poem was likely written by a different author than Gälawdewos and before the life (as discussed below).

According to Habtemichael Kidane (2007a), *mälkäʿat* (the plural form of *mälkäʿ*) have between twenty and fifty stanzas, each composed of five rhyming verses. The rhyme scheme is AAAAA, BBBBB, and so on. Generally, the lines rhyme only the last syllable of the line (i.e., the last character of the line), which always ends in a vowel. Even if it looks like the rhyme is slant (i.e., sharing just a consonant sound), in traditional recitation the singer adds a schwa sound to any sixth-form syllable at the end of a line (e.g., singing *amlak* as *amlakə*). Each stanza starts with the words *sälam lä-*, meaning “peace upon” or “hail to,” and the saint’s name is frequently mentioned in the third line. In praising the saint’s body, the poem moves from the head (including eyelashes, nostrils, lips, and breath), to the torso (including shoulders, breasts, fingers, and nails), to the organs (including womb and heart), and to the lower body (including knees and toes). Honorary parts of the body include the saint’s monastic garments of the tunic, belt, mantle, and cap. Often, the first two lines of any stanza will praise the body and the last three lines will invoke events in the saint’s life, including his or her birth, death, and burial. It is possible that certain parts of the body are associated with certain saintly abilities. For instance, it seems arms are associated with active spiritual labor in the world, while internal organs are associated with spiritual thought. Stanzas at the beginning and end of the poem may break the formula by invoking God’s help or blessings upon the author of the poem. The separate lines of the poem are not set separately in the manuscripts but run continuously with special punctuation marks at the end of lines.

Those who revere a particular saint will often, even daily, recite that saint’s *mälkäʿ*, and students in the traditional Täwaḥədo Church schools must learn to recite many of them from memory (Habtemichael Kidane 1998). Saints’ *mälkäʿat*

would also have been sung or recited in church on their feast days. The most famous *mälkä'* is that for the Virgin Mary, the *Mälkä'a Maryam*, which is sung in monasteries every morning and evening, often said at home before meals, and used by schoolchildren to memorize the alphabet (Böll 2007). There are also *mälkä'* at for Christ, the Holy Spirit, God the Father, the Eucharist, the Crucifixion, and some kings and queens. Unfortunately, as the scholar Habtemichael Kidane (2007a) points out, a preoccupation with *mälkä'* at origins rather than its literary features has dominated the scholarship.

The second poem is of the type called *sälam* or *sälamta*, meaning “greetings,” a shorter genre. *Sälamat* generally have between six and twelve stanzas, each beginning with the words *sälam lä-* (peace upon, or hail to). *Sälamat* have only three lines per stanza, with the first line quite long, the second line midlength, and the third line even shorter, often with no more than three words. The last stanza varies by having four lines. *Sälamat* poems in praise of saints are also found in the *Sänkəssar*, following the commemoration of the saint, but those usually have only one stanza of five lines (Nosnitsin 2010b). The interested reader can read the *sälamat* poems for Mary and God the Father for comparison with the *Sälamta Wälättä Petros* (Dillmann 1866, 147–49). *Sälamat* poems do not praise the body of the saint but summarize the saint’s deeds, often focusing on the more distinctive ones.

These four parts of the hagiobiography—*gädl*, *tä'amər*, *mälkä'*, and *sälamta*—were not written in the order they appear in the Conti Rossini print edition. The main part of the original manuscript, the *gädl*, was written down in 1672–73, according to Gälawdewos’s comment at its beginning. The *tä'amər* seem to have been written down next, right away, in the same manuscript, because they appear exactly the same in eleven manuscripts and always in the same handwriting within each manuscript. It is extremely unlikely that so many manuscripts would match if the miracles had only been written down in another manuscript at a later date. The poems were likely written before the *gädl* and *tä'amər*, in 1643, for the anniversary of Walatta Petros’s death.

Although the poems are missing from six of the manuscripts, the evidence suggests that the poems predate the writing of the *tä'amər*, both as oral compositions and written ones. In MS J, the earliest manuscript extant, the *sälamta* appears before the *tä'amər*, perhaps evidence that it was written before it. More important, it is impossible for any text to cite a text written *after* it. Therefore, since the *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros* cites the *Sälamta Wälättä Petros* and the *Mälkä'a Wälättä Petros*, the poems must have been written *before* the miracles. Specifically, in the *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros*, a priest sings the first three lines of the *Sälamta Wälättä Petros* exactly as they appear in the poem. Thus, the priest and/or the author Gälawdewos had to have access to this poem. Likewise, books of the *Mälkä'a Wälättä Petros* are twice stolen and recovered in the *Tä'amərä Wälättä Petros*. Therefore, the *sälamta* existed as at least an oral composition and the *mälkä'* existed as a written composition before the *tä'amər*.

The order in which the poems and the *gädl* were written is less clear. The *sälamta* starts with a reference to Walatta Petros as a shelter for “doves,” which seems to be

an allusion to the kidan (covenant) episode of the gädl, in which Christ entrusts Walatta Petros with followers, who are depicted as “pure white doves” who descend all around her. This might suggest the sälamta was written after the gädl but before the tä’amär, just as it appears in MS J. But it seems to me most likely that the mälkə’ and sälamta were oral compositions predating the written composition of the gädl as well. Some evidence for this order is that ʾEḥətä Krəstos has a mälkə’, a sälamta, and a *Sənkəssar* entry, but no gädl or tä’amär. Based on his study of Täklä Haymanot, Nosnitsin (2007a) suspects that a community would write something about the saint within a year of his or her death, to be read at the annual commemoration. In some cases, this might be a *Sənkəssar* narrative and a sälamta to the saint, but sometimes it might be only the sälamta, without a narrative. Mälke’ were less necessary for the saint’s reverence, while sälamta had to appear with the *Sənkəssar* narrative.

A member of the community, often a less skilled writer than an author of a hagiobiography, would write these short texts. (Since a new saint’s monastery was often not yet well funded, the community might take the time to seek out skilled writers, often available only in important monasteries, meaning the hagiobiography would be written by someone from outside the saint’s monastery.) Such *Sənkəssar* entries and poems could be added in the margin under the necessary date (since all *Sənkəssar* are organized chronologically by saints’ days), at the end of the text, or on separate leaves attached somehow to the volume. Then, through copying, the narrative would enter the local tradition of the *Sənkəssar*, which is part of the reason why *Sənkəssar* manuscripts can vary so much. Research is still needed to ascertain whether the singing or reciting of these poem hymns was common in nonliturgical contexts, and thus transmitted as much orally as in written form. It was not until the eighteenth century that scribes started copying a saint’s entire hagiobiographical dossier into one manuscript. Before then, as the mention of separate books of mälkə’ in the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* makes clear, manuscripts would often have only one or two parts, most often the gädl and the tä’amär. The absence of the mälkə’ from six of the twelve manuscripts of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* suggests that it was not until quite late that someone collected all four texts into one manuscript. So far, no manuscript with just the mälkə’ alone for Walatta Petros has been cataloged or digitized.

Therefore, the most likely sequence of the elements of the hagiobiography being written down was, first the poems (sälamta and mälkə’), then the life (gädl), and last the miracles (tä’amär). Meanwhile, the events in Walatta Petros’s life must have been told among community members’ from almost the moment they happened, then preserved in the oral tradition until they could be written down. So the stories about her would have been oral compositions first.

The Text’s Genres and Its Historical Value

One reason that so few Ḥabäša gädlat have appeared in English is that few people can read Gə’əz and write English well enough to translate the former into the latter. The other reason is that early African literature has been the subject of study by

historians, not literary critics. (Unfortunately, scholars of literature have been slow to acknowledge, much less work on, the vast body of written texts created on the continent before the twentieth century.) For the seeker of historical facts, the genre of hagiobiography is a problematic source, as it seldom behaves as a good “native informant.”

That is, the *gädl* is a literary genre, often more devoted to celebrating the subject’s extraordinary accomplishments than adhering narrowly to the real. For instance, the authors of a *gädl* often use consistent biographical tropes that may be more spiritually than physically true. For instance, a surprisingly high number of Ḥabäša saints’ parents are said to have been of noble lineage and previously childless due to the mother’s barrenness. On the one hand, this seems unlikely to have been true of all of them. On the other hand, nobles would have had more resources to take up contemplative lives or start monastic communities, which may be why most saints worldwide are said to be from elite families. Furthermore, in Ethiopia, childless couples who prayed to be blessed with a child often vowed to hand any such child over to the church to become a monk or nun (following the example of some previously childless couples in the Bible who dedicate their children to the temple). Thus, children conceived after a long period of childlessness were often dedicated by their parents to God, returning the miracle to its maker, as it were. Growing up with this knowledge, such children may have been more inclined to spiritual lives. Then, as a child, the saint is usually precocious, and as an adult, the saint rarely marries but often lives on the margins of familial society, an ascetic who performs feats of endurance and works to convert hearts to God. Again, the presence of so many precocious ascetics may reflect a reality of human outliers—men and women who were unusual enough and dedicated enough to be elevated to sainthood. Finally, many Ḥabäša saints are said to have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. While this may seem to strain credulity, it was actually not unheard of for Ḥabäša monks and nuns to do so—a matter of a six-month journey down from the Ethiopian highlands into Egypt and across the isthmus to Palestine. Thus, life and literature may serve to reinforce each other—becoming the real.

Some tropes more conventional than true, however, are not connected to biographical details but miraculous ones. Saints often encounter and defeat magicians and demons. In every *gädl*, Christ himself visits the saint to establish the *kidan*. Finally, saints regularly raise people from the dead (including themselves), heal the incurably ill, predict the future, and fly. Because of such tropes, texts in this genre are often dismissed as credulous and antihistorical.

The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is an unusual hagiobiography, however. First, Walatta Petros and her husband, Mälkä’a Krəstos, were prominent historical figures mentioned in both the Portuguese accounts and the Gə’əz royal chronicles of the period. In the royal chronicle of Susənyos, Mälkä’a Krəstos is mentioned on forty of just over four hundred pages (Täklä Šəllase [Ṭinno] 1900, 309). In the so-called *Short Chronicles*, which does not specify wives unless they are well known, his wife Walatta Petros is mentioned by apposition upon his death (Basset 1882, 29): “In the second year [of King Fasilädäs’ reign], on the fourth of [the month of] Taḥśaś, Mälkä’a Krəstos died, who formerly had been *bəḥtwäddäd* [that is, chief minister];

he was the husband of that righteous daughter, [she] of the monastery of Q^wārasa.”⁹ One Jesuit account also mentions her while discussing the monasteries of Waldəbba, where many men and women went to take up a religious life. Barradas reports that, “The women who normally become nuns are those whom the world has seen as old . . . or they are those who have separated from their husbands.” He adds that such “nuns go into retreat . . . into the desert, . . . where they live as beggars” and “we saw the wife of Belatina Goitā Melcha Christōs do [this] when he abandoned her” (Barradas 1996, 141; 1906, 258). Although many men are named Mālkəʾa Krəstos—nearly a dozen appear in the Portuguese texts—only two of the men with this name were leading officials, and only one had the title *Blattengeta* (lit., Lord of the Pages, but meaning head councillor): Walatta Petros’s husband. In addition, the hagiobiography states that her husband was the commander of the Šəltan Mārʾəd regiment, and the Portuguese texts also state that *Blattengeta* Mālkəʾa Krəstos was the commander. The other official with this name was Susənyos’s brother, who cannot be Walatta Petros’s husband (not only would such a close connection to the king have been mentioned in the hagiobiography, but also this man died before Susənyos was king). Thus, *Blattengeta* Mālkəʾa Krəstos must be Walatta Petros’s husband.

The second reason the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is historically valuable is that it is remarkably detailed—filled with specific names of historical people and places, and the dates when historical events occurred. Further, certain details leap off the page as connected to actual lived experience. In one monastery, the nuns’ teeth become green because they are reduced to eating so many plants. On another occasion, Walatta Petros reluctantly agrees to return to her angry husband on one condition: that she not be made to “see the face of his mother.” Third, many common *gädl* tropes do not appear. Walatta Petros is not an only child, but the youngest of four siblings, and she performs no miracles as an infant or teen. She never goes to Jerusalem and encounters no magicians. When Christ speaks to her, no effort is made to establish that he is there in the flesh rather than in a vision.

Third, most of the text proceeds without any supernatural miracles but rather the infusion of God’s hand into everyday life. For instance, God is responsible, the text tells us, for Walatta Petros falling on a soft landing spot when her mule throws her, and for her failing to burn at the stake because a fire fizzles. To attribute such to God rather than chance will always be the act of the faithful—but the event itself is not supernatural. Other relatively normal occurrences that the text describes as miracles are Walatta Petros’s displays of great fortitude in the face of dangerous animals, wild seas, deadly illnesses, and immense thirst. Walatta Petros suddenly understands the foreign language of the people among whom she finds herself—an impressive feat but not unheard of among gifted language learners. A fisherman catches exactly thirteen fish, not twelve or fourteen, because the number of the apostles with Christ is thirteen. These are the “miracles” of the *Gädlä Wälättä*

⁹ Lit., *Wä-bä-2 ʿamät amä 4 lä-taḥśās motä Mālkəʾa Krəstos zä-näbärä qädami bəḥt-wäddäd wä-wəʾətu məta lä-wälättä* [sic for *wälätt*] *Dədəqt* [sic for *šadəqt*, “righteous”] *zä-gädämä* [sic for *gädämä*] *Q^wārasa*. See also the French translation of the sentence: “Il avait épousé la fille de Dədəqt de Gadama-Quarātsā” (Basset 1882, 133).

Peṭros. Indeed, sometimes they are so subtle that they must be highlighted or defended. After a disciple slept under a tree unharmed, God ordered the serpent above to make a noise, the text states, so that the man would know he had experienced a miracle. At the age of thirty-nine, Walatta Petros prays to the Virgin Mary to be cured of suddenly heavy menstrual periods. When her periods permanently stop, the text explains that this was a miracle, for Walatta Petros was “still young” and had not reached the age of menopause.

Some events defying the laws of nature, or probability, do happen, but most of these occur later in Walatta Petros’s life, after Roman Catholicism is defeated: Walatta Petros’s boat flies over the water, a follower flies as if he has wings, an icon of the Virgin Mary moves its finger, and a man dies and comes back to life a few hours later. Walatta Petros regularly has visions and speaks to angels and the Virgin Mary. But, anytime there is an unbelievable event, the text does something most telling—it defends its likelihood: “we know and are certain that the testimony of two or three people is trustworthy” or “this testimony is trustworthy and no lie.” Stories that are nothing but myth proffer no such defenses of the illogical. Most hagiobiographies have no such claims. Only stories that are a mix of fact and fiction, where the unbelievable fits uneasily into the actual, must be defended.

Fourth, the vividness of Walatta Petros’s *gädl* stands in contrast to some of those written later about other women saints from this period. For instance, the *Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos* is about another seventeenth-century noblewoman, Fəqərtä Krəstos (also called *Ἐμμä Məʿuz*), who was married to an officer of the king, like Walatta Petros, and who also refused to obey the king’s religious edicts (Anonymous 2002). The *Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos* is more conventional, however, in that Fəqərtä Krəstos is not a lone woman leader but her husband’s follower. After standing in Lake Ṭana for forty days to protest the king’s religious policies, Fəqərtä Krəstos and her husband are tortured and killed, along with thousands of other Ḥabäša martyrs. She rises from the dead, however, to threaten the king with the relics of her own dead body, and he repents. She then travels, after her death, to Jerusalem and Armenia to found a monastic community. She is believed to be the founder of the *Ἐμμä Məʿuz* Monastery in Mäqet, Wällo, about two hundred miles east of Robit. Her birth name was Maryam Şädala (Saint Mary Is Her Halo), her ordinary name was Muzit, and after she became a nun, she was also called Fəqərtä Krəstos and *Ἐμμä Məʿuz*. Some research has been conducted on this text (Nosnitsin 2005a). According to modern oral traditions about her, she was brought before the king and condemned him for his conversion, upon which he was struck dumb and his tongue leaped from his mouth onto the ground.¹⁰ The fanciful nature of some parts of the *Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos* may suggest it was written long after she lived.

This brings us to a significant point about the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*—it was written down close to the events, not long after them. According to the *Gädlä Wälättä*

¹⁰ Selamawit Mecca heard this anecdote while conducting research on Ḥabäša female saints at Şänkora Giyorgis’s monastery in Anbäsami, South Gondär, Ethiopia, in February 2010.

Peṭros, it was written down “thirty years” after Walatta Petros’s death, in the “Year of Mercy 7165,” or 1672–73 CE.¹¹ The *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* repeatedly states that the men and women who knew Walatta Petros personally were the engine behind the creation and completion of the text. The liveliness of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is due to being an eyewitness account of those who lived the events as members of Walatta Petros’s community.

Aside from being an important literary text, then, the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* provides insight into various historical questions. For those scholars who argue that King Susanyos did not abdicate to his son Fasilädäs (Berry 2009), the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* provides support. For those interested in understanding early modern Ḥabäša monastic conventions, cultural patterns, and gendered leadership, the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is vital. It is widely agreed that the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is not only the richest of the women’s gädlät but may also be the most historically valuable gädl ever written.

Finally, the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is currently the oldest book-length biography written by Africans about an African woman. We hope that earlier biographies are found, but, as of now, the extant texts do not seem to qualify for this honor. They are too short (in the form of letters, eulogies, or sermons), too apocryphal (written long after the saint’s life), or written by non-Africans. One of the more intriguing possibilities is the hagiobiography of Perpetua and Felicity, a Roman woman and her North African slave who were martyred in the early third century. Although their hagiobiography is short, a fifth of the length of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, it was most likely written by Perpetua (Heffernan 2012). The three earlier Gəʿəz hagiobiographies about women are fascinating, but perhaps do not qualify as biographies of women: the *Gädlä Mäsqäl Kəbra* is really about her famous husband Lali-bäla, and the *Gädlä Zena Maryam* and the *Gädlä Krəstos Šämra* were likely written long after they lived. Further research is needed, however, as very little is known about these texts, and they would all be worthwhile to translate into English.

Other Gəʿəz Texts about Walatta Petros

Walatta Petros is mentioned in other Gəʿəz texts written in the centuries after her death. Until more work is done on Gəʿəz collections of saints’ lives, it will remain unknown how many *Sənkəssar* manuscripts have entries on Walatta Petros and whether those entries have substantial variations.

She and her monastery appear more than once in the royal chronicles. For instance, the king twice consulted the leaders of her monastery at Qʷāraša: in 1693 about the suitability of the new patriarch and later about theological questions (Anonymous 1903a, 174–75, 214). In 1700, the abbess of Qʷāraša, Tälawitā Krəstos, was cited as an important cleric (Anonymous 1983, 232).

¹¹ Due to its reliance on MS Abb. 88 only, CR was incorrect in stating it was twenty-nine years later. All the other manuscripts state it was thirty years later.

Walatta Petros features prominently in the early pages of the royal chronicle of King Iyasu II (r. 1730–55), son of King Bäkaffa and Queen Mäntəwwab (Anonymous 1912, 13–16). Walatta Petros is heralded as a prophet of his reign with a four-page story. After praising her as a champion of the faith who rebuked the heretical king, it depicts her on her way into exile to Žäbäy. According to the chronicle, she then happened to be present at the birth of Damo, Iyasu’s great-grandfather. In a dream, she then saw cattle dancing in front of Iyasu’s great-grandmother and Mäntəwwab’s grandmother, who was named Yolyana, thus predicting that their line would yield a son who would lead the nation. Walatta Petros seems to have received significant attention during Iyasu’s reign, as MSS H and I of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* contain a different set of miracles that happened during the fifth year of his own reign and during the reign of his father Bäkaffa.

Soon Q^wäraša became famous as a place of asylum for those nobles who, like Walatta Petros, sought to escape punishment by the king. When King Täklä Giyorgis (1751–1817) banished his father-in-law, Wäldä Gäbrə’el, who was a *dägğazmač* (general), the man went to Q^wäraša for ten months in the late 1790s hoping for the saint’s protection. He and some of his men “all lived there at Quaratsa together, and at work, they spent the time listening to the voice of the books (reading aloud) and conversing with the monks, and the nights they passed in the Church which was a house of prayer, . . . and he prayed always for Walatta Petros, for the monks, the refuge from oppression and oppressors,” according to the royal chronicle (Blundell 1922, 340). Not long before, another *dägğazmač* had taken refuge there and escaped seizure “by help of the prayer of Waleta Petros, holy among the holy persons; monks and nuns had prayed much [for him]” (ibid., 334). Later, Q^wäraša became the place where monks negotiated reconciliations between warring nobles (ibid., 436). As Bosc-Tiessé notes, Q^wäraša probably became a place of refuge because it was closely associated with Walatta Petros, who herself had succeeded in escaping the wrath of the king.

Walatta Petros also appears in other saints’ stories. An eighteenth-century *Sənkəssar* tells the story of an abbot of Leba Mäṭaya Šəllase Monastery near Däbrä Tabor who knew Walatta Petros and also went into exile “when the Roman faith happened in our country, and the Christian faith was lost” (Getatchew Haile 2007b). *Abunä Šäršä* Maryam was also told that martyrdom was not his path. After the faith was restored, one day he traveled by *tank^wa*, a papyrus boat in use on Lake Ṭana for many centuries, with Walatta Petros, here called the “Abbess of Rema Monastery.” The historicity of the anecdote is unclear: perhaps they actually met, or perhaps the story was invented later. According to the *Sənkəssar*, while the two saints were

talking with each other about the glory given to them from God, his hand cross fell in the depth of the lake. Pilots, who knew swimming, came and searched for the cross; [but] they did not find it. At that time, he was very saddened over [the loss of] his hand [cross]. Three years later, a fisherman found it when he was fishing. He brought it out, with its appearance [intact], as it was before. He handed it over to Walatta

Petros, who was present when it fell. She recognized it, that it was the hand cross of Abunä Šāršā Maryam. She sent it [to his monastery] with honor, saying, “Place it gracefully, having written its miracles.” Then they received it with pleasure and joy. He worked miracles and wonders with it. (Getatchew Haile 2007b, 40)

Walatta Petros continued to live on in the minds of the people as the finder of lost objects of faith and a visionary with power over kings’ futures.

The Text’s Genre and Female Saints

In 1975, the scholar Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke identified about two hundred Ḥabäša saints, including eight female saints.¹² Quite a few saints have been identified since, and the preeminent scholar of Ethiopian female saints, Selamawit Mecca (2006), puts the total of female Ḥabäša saints at approximately thirty (the known female Ḥabäša saints appear in table 1). However, scholars have seen, cataloged, or digitized the gädlät for only six of these female saints. Since it is estimated that only a fraction of the manuscripts in Ethiopia and Eritrea have been digitized and/or cataloged, more gädlät are likely to emerge. Interestingly, nine of the thirty identified female saints are seventeenth-century women who resisted conversion to Roman Catholicism, including Walatta Petros and Fəqərtä Krastos, both of whom have gädlät (table 1).

It is not surprising, as the early twentieth-century scholar J. M. Harden noted, that this period of religious struggle in the Ethiopian highlands would yield many saints (1926, chap. 7). Thousands of Ḥabäša died defending their beliefs, and those remaining were eager to honor the heroism of those who had died. What is striking, however, is that so many of the Ḥabäša hagiobiographies from this period are about women, and that the hagiobiographies devoted to women cluster in this period specifically, suggesting that women played a special role in defending Ḥabäša beliefs against European incursions in the 1600s, as I have argued in previous sections. Others have remarked on the historical prevalence of African female saints: “A statistical analysis of all known pre-Constantinian martyrs reveals that, compared to general Mediterranean trends, African women represented a markedly higher proportion of all female saints” (Shaw 1993, 13).

Scholarship on the Text

Most people outside of Ethiopia have never heard of Walatta Petros. Garbled information about her appears on some Roman Catholic websites in Europe, which often incorrectly celebrate her as a Roman Catholic saint. Such misinformation re-

¹² After forty years, this groundbreaking work is in dire need of updating, although it may take a team of scholars to equal the work that Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke did on his own without computers.

TABLE 1
Some Täwahedo Church Female Saints

<i>Female Saint</i>	<i>Era</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Gädl?</i>	<i>Print Gö'az Edition?</i>	<i>Translation?</i>	<i>Kinefe-Rigb</i>
Şäbälä Maryam	500s	Gondär	Uncertain		No	No. 98
Mäsqał Köbra, wife of King Lalibäla	1100s–1200s	Lalibäla	Yes		Uncertain	No. 201
Zena Maryam, founder of a monastery	1300s	Addis Zämäñ, South Gondär	Yes		Italian	No. 88
Krästos Sämrä, most famous female saint	1300s–1400s	Şäwa, Lake Ṭana	Yes	CSCO	Italian	No. 163
Wälättä Peṭros, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Şäwa, Lake Ṭana	Yes	CSCO	Italian Amharic	No. 52
Faḳartä Krästos (Emmämuz, Emmä Mo'uz) resisted Catholicism	1600s	Lake Ṭana, South Gondär	Yes		Amharic	No. 162
Wälättä Maryam	1600s	Däbra Wärq, East Goggam	Yes		No	No. 40
Əḫatä Krästos, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Lake Ṭana, South Gondär	Uncertain		French	No. 41
Əḫatä Peṭros, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Lake Ṭana, South Gondär	<i>Sənkassar</i> only?		No	No. 164
Wälättä Pawlos, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Lake Ṭana, South Gondär	Uncertain		No	
Wälättä Şoyon, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Wällo, Amhara	Uncertain		No	
Emmä Wätät, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Maḫdärä Maryam, S. Gondär	Uncertain		No	
Emmä Şänkora Giyorgis, resisted Catholicism	1600s	Anbäsami, South Gondär	Uncertain		No	
Salome		Wäräb and Däbrä Libanos	<i>Sənkassar</i> only			

verses the purpose of her life, which was to repulse Roman Catholicism. On a site hosted by Spanish Catholics, for instance, Walatta Petros is incorrectly described as a pagan who converted to Christianity due to the Jesuits, who attempted to tie the Täwaḥədo Church to Rome, and who left her husband because he refused to convert.

Conviene conocer la vida de esta mujer santa aunque con un nombre raro. Había nacido y muerto en Etiopía en los años 1594–1643. Se llevaba muy bien con su marido, que era ministro. Se convirtió al cristianismo gracias al padre jesuita español Paez. Ella intentó entonces unir a toda la Iglesia de Etiopía con la de Roma, pero la tentativa fracasó. . . . Su marido no quería convertirse y, por esta razón, dejó su lecho conyugal. . . . Walatta era una mujer muy guapa. Contaba 35 años. Se alejó de la corte y se fue a un convento que ella había construido en un campo abisinio.

[It is useful to know the life of this holy woman with a rare name. She was born and died in Ethiopia in the years 1594–1643. She was getting along very well with her husband, who was an official. She converted to Christianity due to the Spanish Jesuit Father Paez. She then tried to unite the Ethiopian Church with Rome, but the attempt failed. Her husband did not want to convert and, for this reason, she left their conjugal bed. . . . Walatta was an attractive woman, 35 years old. She moved away from the court and took refuge in a convent that she had constructed in a remote place in Abyssinia.] (our translation)¹³

Similarly, on a site hosted by the Roman Catholic Church of France, she is praised merely as a beautiful woman who moved to the countryside to create communes. No mention is made of the Täwaḥədo Church.

Cette femme très belle et très bonne était l'épouse d'un ministre du négus d'Ethiopie. Elle quitta son mari consentant pour se retirer parmi les serfs de la campagne abyssine où elle créa un village dans lequel l'on menait la vie communautaire. . . . Sept de ces villages existaient quand elle mourut.

[This very beautiful and very good woman was the wife of an official of the Ethiopian king. She left her consenting husband and withdrew to live among the lowly peasants of the Ethiopian countryside, where she created a village in which people lived a communal life. . . . Seven such villages existed when she died.] (our translation)¹⁴

More scholarly entries on Walatta Petros started to appear after 1970 in encyclopedias on Africa or saints, probably due to the publication of the Italian translation of her *gädl* in 1970 (Appiah and Gates 2005; Belaynesh Michael 1975, 1977a, 1977b; Cohen 2010b). She also was mentioned in histories of Africa (Ogot 1992; Crummey 2000), although they did little more than summarize the text and sometimes short-

¹³ Padre Felipe Santos Campaña SDB, "Santa Walatta Petros, Noviembre 24," Autores Catolicos, <http://www.autorescatolicos.org/felipesantosantawalattapetros.htm>. Now at <http://churchforum.butacas-cine.com/santa-walatta-petros.htm>.

¹⁴ "Sainte Walatta [*sic*]." *Nominis*, Eglise catholique en France, <http://nominis.ccf.fr/contenus/saint/9372/Sainte-Walatta.html>.

ened her name incorrectly to “Walatta.” Only once does a historian rise to a real discussion of her case. In his book on the church in Africa, Adrian Hastings describes the text as “perhaps the first biography of an African woman,” adding that she seems more of a “witch than a saint,” and concluding direly that she was “something of an ecclesiastical feminist” (1994, 159–60). The first mention in English of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* appeared in 1936, when Robert Cheesman provided a one-paragraph summary of its contents after visiting monasteries on Lake Ṭana (1936, 168–70).

Aside from these mentions, few scholars have studied the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*. In Indo-European languages other than English, four scholars have written about the work. The first was the Russian scholar Boris Turaev, an expert on Gəʿəz texts, who wrote an article on the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* ten years before any print edition of it was published and, perhaps for that reason, got so many of the basic details about her wrong that his analysis cannot be considered useful (Turaev 1902, 278–79). For instance, he incorrectly states that the text depicts Walatta Petros in a struggle against the Täwəḥədo Church only, not Roman Catholicism.¹⁵ In 1943, Maria Rosaria Papi published an Italian précis of the text, several decades before the full Italian translation was available. In the last two paragraphs, she praises Gälawdewos, author of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, as “un uomo di notevole cultura per un Abissino” (a man of considerable culture for an Abyssinian), listing many of the books discussed in the text and adding that he has “uno stile quanto mai vivo e forma chiara” (a particularly lively style and clear structure). She concludes that it possesses “intrinseco valore letterario” (intrinsic literary value) and “un posto d’onore nella letteratura etiopica” (a place of honor in Ethiopian literature). Conti Rossini included in Latin (then still the language of much European scholarship on so-called oriental texts) a four-page preface (describing its composition, contents, and importance) in his Gəʿəz print edition of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* (Conti Rossini and Jaeger 1912).

Ricci was the first to do more than summarize, providing an eight-page Italian preface to his 1970 translation.¹⁶ He rightly notes that there seems to be no basis for Conti Rossini’s attribution of the composition of the text to a place called Afär Färäs. This attribution has spread widely, even though the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* states that it was composed in Q^wäraša. (Of course, the two places were very near each other, about seven miles apart on the southeast shore of Lake Ṭana.) None of these four pieces represents a substantial contribution to the study of Walatta Petros.

In English, only two articles dedicated to Walatta Petros have appeared. One is an outstanding contribution by the art historian Claire Bosc-Tiessé, who conducted field research at monasteries on Lake Ṭana about the creation of the manuscript of

¹⁵ Turaev states that “In the entire lengthy story of her sufferings we never even find the name of Rome or of the Pope; the entire matter deals with ‘the Orthodox faith of Dioscorus’ and ‘the impure faith of Leo’, as if this happened not in the seventeenth, but in the fifth century. . . . Thus, Walatta Petros’ struggle against the Propaganda is at its core a struggle against Orthodoxy,” according to the translation by Chernetsov (2005b).

¹⁶ Although Conti Rossini sometimes mentioned the text in his other published work.

Walatta Petros's *gädl*. Her article is a model for scholarship on Gə'əz manuscripts, providing many original insights. Among other points, Bosc-Tiessé argues that the text, in depicting Christ conferring the rank of archdeaconess on her, gives Walatta Petros "an unequalled hierarchical rank for a woman in the Ethiopian Church" (2003, 412).¹⁷ Bosc-Tiessé analyzes a number of historical sources written after Walatta Petros's death that mention Q'äraša, revealing that her monastery was a center of Orthodoxy, a home for powerful abbesses, and an asylum for those seeking mercy from the king. Finally, she argues that Walatta Petros's *gädl* is unusual in that it represents "as far as we know today, the first life of an Ethiopian saint for which a narrative iconographic cycle has been made" (ibid., 411). That is, Walatta Petros's community was established enough to create sometime between 1716 and 1721 an expensive version of her *gädl* with twenty-three images depicting her posthumous miracles (ibid., 409). With her kind permission, we have reproduced these images from photographs that Bosc-Tiessé took in the field from the now lost manuscript. She carefully studies this cycle, offering a number of useful observations; for instance, noting that it portrays Walatta Petros in nun's clothes before her death but in the Virgin Mary's clothes after her death, when she is performing her miracles.

The late Russian scholar Sevir Chernetsov (2005d) wrote the second article in English, pointing out that Walatta Petros was a trailblazer not only in defending the faith but in transgressing the norms for women's behavior by becoming an outspoken female leader. Most of the article is a summary of the plot of the hagiobiography, with his translations of important phrases. However, the later part of the article is an inimical interpretation of the text's claims. For instance, Chernetsov argues that Walatta Petros was able to become such an important leader not because of her persuasive skills or spirituality but because of her noble birth and softhearted husband, who more than once delivered her from a death sentence for treason. Chernetsov likewise argues that the reason Walatta Petros asked the monks to forbid women from entering Məşälle Monastery is that she wanted to avoid being under male leadership and wanted to return to Zäge with just the women, who were reluctant to leave Məşälle (2005d, 62). Nowhere does the text say that the women were reluctant to move, however, and it was impossible for her to escape some aspects of male leadership, as only men could celebrate the Liturgy. Indeed, men participated in her community in Zäge, as the next pages reveal. Chernetsov is also suspicious of Gälawdewos, asserting about one passage that his "reference to St. Paul is fictitious; [the quote] is absent in his epistles," when, in fact, it is there, just altered (2005d, 70). Although Chernetsov's suggestion that Walatta Petros had initially hoped to set up a monastery for women only is intriguing, there is no evidence for this in the text. Like so many of the publications on Walatta Petros, Chernetsov's consists of summaries and assertions unsupported by the text.

The scholar Leonardo Cohen (2010b) wrote a solid encyclopedic article about her, although marred by the previous scholarship's errors. Pace his article, the *Gädlä*

¹⁷ See also her related work in 2000, 2004, and 2008.

Wälättä Petros was not written in Afär Färäs; it does not say that all three of her children were sons; she was not born in 1594; she did not die in 1644; and she never went to Aksum. While a few other articles or chapters in English mention Walatta Petros in passing, or summarize her story in a paragraph, none discuss her at length (Gundani 2004; Cohen 2009b, 2009a; Andrzejewski, Piłaszewicz, and Tyloch 1985, 282). As this review of previous scholarship on the text makes clear, the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is in need of more and deeper research.

New Directions for Scholarship on the Text

The *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* is a significant historical text in need of better scholarship, but, just as importantly, it offers much to scholars in a variety of fields, including undergraduates writing about this for the classroom. The way that this text thinks, to use Stathis Gourgouris's formulation, challenges us to theorize more richly (2003). How the text theorizes "the conditions of the world from which it emerges and to which it addresses itself" forces scholars to rethink their own habits of thought regarding literature and the world. Below, I briefly discuss six of these opportunities for rethinking. The following interpretations about sexuality are those of myself, Belcher, and should not be assumed to represent the opinions of anyone else involved in this translation.

First, the text theorizes female agency in a radical way. For instance, in Ethiopian hagiobiographies of female saints, female sainthood represents the ascent of a woman who is not sweetly kind but brutally powerful. She will not fit Protestant or Roman Catholic ideas of how a saint should behave. In a word, she is not "nice." When Christ comes to her in person, Walatta Petros refuses to do as he commands, repeatedly rejecting his advice. In other instances, she lies.¹⁸ She is quick to judge and punish. Faced with others' natural emotions of fear or sadness, she rebukes rather than comforts. She forbids a mother to weep over her dead son. We might forgive such "sins" in a male saint, but other acts are harder for modern readers to stomach from a woman or a man. Walatta Petros slaps servants who disobey her. When her followers are particularly wicked or particularly good, she calls on God to kill them and they do, indeed, die. In one case, she deliberately causes the death of a disobedient disciple through what one can only call a potion. This has led one critic to call her more witch than saint (Hastings 1997). Another argues that such incidents demonstrate female nuns' aim to attain a "holy gender," one of masculine distance (Wright 2001).

While Walatta Petros's actions may seem cruel, the seventeenth century was a crueler time. She was abused by her husband and hunted down by European soldiers. All her children died, and death was a daily possibility for her as well. In such

¹⁸ The "monastic lie" is common because nuns and monks avoid boasting about the extent of their asceticism and thus spiritual attainments; therefore, they lie to disguise their suffering (Wright 2001, 93).

a context, her followers wanted power, not sweetness. At the beginning of her religious life, the text says, she was soft, a noblewoman who had led a life of luxury. Her tender, noble feet bled easily when she had to walk long distances, and her delicate hands were not used to the difficult work. Faced with the brute strength of her husband, the king, and the military, she engaged in evasion: playing dead and lying. But she was soon eating little other than leaves and building churches of stone with her own hands. The text notes that she stopped menstruating when she was thirty-nine, perhaps because she weighed so little due to fasting. She became a tough woman who led a tough life and was tough with her followers. And yet, she could be tender as well. In one long passage, she and a woman friend reach a destination where they are supposed to part, but Walatta Petros begs her friend to go a little farther with her, and a little farther again, and then a little farther. Walatta Petros provided a home and food for those whom the new religion had made homeless and hungry. She gave up her own food and medicine so that others might be restored. Despite the regular decimation of her community and her own longing to take up a solitary religious life, she stayed with her followers and ministered to them. And when she died, the entire community was distraught.

Unlike saints in the European tradition, perhaps, Walatta Petros is not merely a good woman with a special connection to the divine. She is not superhuman either; for instance, while she does perform domestic miracles (replenishing ale and flour), she does not endure torture and martyrdom, and she is not a model of ecstatic and masochistic endurance as so many women saints are. She is, actually, a human goddess. The text states this hybrid status directly: “while she was a human being like us, to her it was given to be a god.” This means that Walatta Petros is not a mere intermediary with the divine but a direct redeemer. While the text sometimes states that Walatta Petros can save her followers because God has accepted her intercession, it also often states that she is their savior (“many souls will be saved through [her]”) or has her say it directly (“those . . . who invoke my name will be saved and not damned”). She works miracles, the text exclaims, “which had never been before and shall never be again.” In the text, Walatta Petros may start off as a lady whose actions are regulated by gendered social norms, but she steadily moves toward being a protective and avenging Old Testament god who lives outside the rules of polite society.

The text’s conception of female agency suggests that perhaps current literary scholars’ theorizing of it arises too much from masochistic frameworks that reinscribe women as weak. Walatta Petros is never weak. In leadership, she is direct, all-powerful. She is not the self-annihilating saint who would rather die than be raped, or rather cut out her own tongue than disagree with male authority. She acts with impunity. Yet, nowhere does the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* suggest that Walatta Petros’s strength is anything other than feminine: in almost every sentence, she is called “our mother,” “our holy mother,” or “our holy and blessed mother,” who leads through muscular fierceness. Thus, this text challenges our views of gender.

Second, the text offers a unique opportunity to view how a text written by Africans for Africans before the modern period theorizes animal agency. In the bestiary

that is the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*—with dogs, bees, and donkeys appearing in the extended metaphor of the first pages, and thereafter leopards, lions, wolves, hyenas, snakes, doves, partridges, eagles, vultures, gazelles, stags, antelopes, hippopotamuses, fish, mice, locusts, and so on—animals are simultaneously their own agents and God’s agents. As one of my undergraduate students argued, the wild animals are neither romantic allies of African peoples living in nature, nor are they perpetual enemies of human beings (Gideon 2012). Animals and human beings live in a state of reciprocal recognition, with animals having an agency little different from that of human beings.

Third, the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* challenges facile ideas about the traditional African family and sexuality. In her early twenties, without sadness or regret, Walatta Petros left her husband to become a nun and the mother of an alternative family: she is the *əmmä maḥbär* (the mother of the community) of hundreds of followers. No “father” is mentioned; she commands her followers in every aspect of their lives as she sees fit. At the same time, she does have a lifelong partner who leads with her: a woman (Belcher forthcoming).

When Walatta Petros first became a nun, she was introduced to another woman who also had recently become a nun, *ጸጵጵጵ Krəstos*, and the description of their first encounter is rapturous. As soon as Walatta Petros and *ጸጵጵጵ Krəstos* saw each other, the text states, “love was infused into both their hearts, love for one another, and . . . they were like people who had known each other” their whole lives. Later, the text says, they “lived together in mutual love, like soul and body. From that day onward the two did not separate, neither in times of tribulation and persecution, nor in those of tranquillity, but only in death.” They became lifelong companions, a holy and celibate couple, leading the community together, part of a new family. Upon her deathbed, Walatta Petros’s last thoughts and words were about her friend, worrying about how *ጸጵጵጵ Krəstos* would fare without her, saying three times, “She will be disconsolate; she has no other hope than me!” There is no doubt that the two women were involved in a lifelong partnership of deep, romantic friendship.

To identify them as lesbians would be anachronistic, however, using a twentieth-century Anglo-American term and identity for a very different seventeenth-century African reality. For one thing, Walatta Petros was deeply committed to celibacy, as were all sincere monks and nuns in Ethiopia. Once, upon seeing a monk and nun flirting, she angrily asserted that she wished she had a spear so that she could drive it through them together, as did a priest of the Old Testament who witnessed fornication near the temple. Later, near the time of her death, Walatta Petros claimed that a plague that had killed more than one hundred people was a “mercy” because she had witnessed nuns being lustful with each other. Nevertheless, abstaining from or condemning sexual activity does not change the nature of one’s desire. Indeed, some interpret the anecdote about same-sex desire as suggesting that Walatta Petros struggled with it (see the notes to chapter 86 in the translation). Her husband and the king discussed her loving relationship with *ጸጵጵጵ Krəstos* as abnormal, that is, as disruptive of familial norms. Furthermore, the very presence in

the text of an anecdote about same-sex desire and sexual activity is telling. Under conditions of disavowal, the only way to bring up same-sex desire is in negation. Finally, the way that same-sex desire is presented in the text suggests that the sin was not monstrous, not inhuman, but known, an ordinary sign of the human frailty of monks and nuns committed to avoiding the temptations of the flesh. Little distinction is made between expressions of heterosexual desire and homosexual desire: both are seen as wrong. When asked whether any of her followers, including the lustful nuns, were condemned to hell, Walatta Petros asserts that all were saved. The text's theorizing of what constitutes proper family and human sexuality challenges, at the very least, problematic assertions that same-sex desire was unknown in Ethiopia before the arrival of Europeans. While the nature of the saint's own relationships with women is unclear in the text, a matter of interpretation, the fact of women's desire for other women is not unclear in the text and is not a matter of interpretation. Rather, the text clearly and unequivocally describes desire between women and states that women-desiring women, if they are faithful believers, go to heaven.

Fourth, the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* celebrates the power of language and books. It is massively intertextual (quoting from forty books of the Bible alone) and regularly focuses on books as books. When a flash flood surprises Walatta Petros's group, the water "did not damage the books at all; not even a single letter of them was wiped out." The written word is stronger than the elements, particularly when it is about Walatta Petros. Integral to the text are two poems rich in allusions and double meanings. A priest near death on a stormy Lake Ṭana sings the words of one and is saved. His friends urge him to tell the wonderful story again and again, begging him to sing the hymn for them, which he does in a sweet voice. They part in awe, marveling at the power of our mother to save through the word. Two of the miracles feature beloved books of poems to Walatta Petros. A nun wears the book of the *Mälkə'a Wälättä Peṭros* poems around her neck. When a fisherman steals the book and tries to sell it, he is unable to find a buyer—it has a sign of her community's ownership that everyone recognizes—and, chastened, he returns it to its rightful owner. A recent convert steals another nun's copy of the same book but is also thwarted in trying to gain value from what can only live in community. Another miracle involves the making of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, when a monk tells Gälawdewos that he has had a vision of how Gälawdewos will start and complete a beautiful book about Walatta Petros. Would that all authors should have such! The *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* insists on its own power in the world.

Fifth, the text's theology is fascinating and deserves real thought in the context of the Täwahədo Church. For instance, prayer is often not so much a polite request, but a wrenching of favors from reluctant deities. Christ, Mary, and Walatta Petros herself are often in need of persuasion. When a woman on her way to honor Walatta Petros loses the candle necessary for the process, the text says that the woman "began to argue with our holy mother Walatta Petros," even exclaiming, "Why are you treating me like this and humiliating me?" In another case, Walatta

Petros rebukes the Virgin Mary for misunderstanding her demand that she chasten a monk, not kill him.

A final challenge to our thinking arises from how the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* presents authorship, as laid out in “The Text’s Authorship” section in this volume. The complicated authorship of the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* aids those seeking to problematize ideas of authorship, both supporting and challenging Saussurean ideas about language, not authors, speaking and Barthesian ideas about authors as facilitators not originators.

The Text’s Images

We have reproduced images from four manuscripts in this volume: thirty-three illustrations from MS A (three of which are divided into separate images), twenty-five illustrations from MS D, and one illustration each from MSS F and J. These images illustrate many moments in Walatta Petros’s life, making it more vivid, as well as providing rich cultural detail and historical information, as Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Donald Crummey have both laid out (Bosc-Tiessé 2003; Crummey 2000, 137–43). For instance, the images depict the behavior of servants around kings (plate 7), monks and nuns preparing and eating Ethiopian food (plates 24 and 25), and the size and shape of such everyday objects as jars, pots, bowls, stirrers, razors, tables, boats, saddles, shirts, gowns, candles, books, bookstands, pens, inkwells, and swords (plates 16, 19, 25, 26, 47, and 54).

The manuscripts date from different centuries and thus the images in them represent different periods in Ethiopian painting aesthetics. It’s not possible to explore these styles richly here; we hope others will use this volume to research these images. Briefly, however, MS J is the oldest manuscript, most likely dating to 1672, and its pale purple, green, and gold colors are from natural dyes. The purple is likely from indigo dye (from the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*), the green from terre verte, and the gold from the mineral orpiment or yellow flowers. By contrast, MS F was most likely made sometime in the twentieth century, and its vivid, bright, and multiple colors (blue, purple, yellow, green, and black) are from nonnatural dyes. John Mellors and Anne Parsons, experts on Ethiopian icon and manuscript painting methods (2002), suggest that the colors in the MS F image were made from a child’s watercolor paint set. Blue is a difficult color to produce, while reds and yellows are easily made from ochres found locally.

The images must be read with care and without assuming Western conventions, however. First, many of the images have more than one panel and are meant to be read in sequence. By Western convention, one reads images the same way one reads texts: from top left to top right and then bottom left to bottom right. However, the images in MS D with four or more panels are generally read counterclockwise from the top left image. Moreover, if there are two panels with one on top and one below, the bottom one is sometimes the first in the sequence. This does not seem to

be the case with MS A, so variations in reading direction may be due to when the manuscript was written. Work on line directions in Gəʾəz texts has been done by Stephen Delamarter (2010), but not on image order in Gəʾəz texts so far.

Second, the size of people in the images does not always indicate whether someone is a child or an adult, short or tall, but rather their rank and status. Walatta Petros generally appears larger than those around her, therefore, and servants are almost always depicted as small and childlike (plate 5).

Third, the two vertical marks on characters' cheeks in many of the images are not physical scars on their bodies but the sign of strong emotions—in particular, distress, fear, and grief (plate 9). In a moving image on the positive end of the affect spectrum, a healed child clasps his mother around her neck, hiding his face behind hers (plate 34).

Fourth, hand gestures and body postures constitute entire symbolic systems. While research has been done on such in Byzantine and medieval art (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1993; Kendon 2004), and some of these gestures appear in Ethiopian paintings as well, more research is needed. One ancient sign—in images from many regions and in some of the images in this translation—is a person depicted with one hand's index finger and middle finger extended, which is a gesture of enunciation signaling that the person is speaking (plate 1). Other hand gestures are religious. For instance, holding both hands palm open with arms extended and the eyes turned skyward is a posture of worship, called *orans* (in Latin, praying) in medieval European art (plates 1 and 2). Priests confer benediction by holding the right hand up with the first two fingers extended and the other two fingers folded down, sometimes with the thumb touching (plate 1). Forming the thumb, index, and middle finger into a point symbolizes the Trinity (plate 2). The arms crossed across the chest over the heart is not a sign of aggression or coldness, but a sign of one's Christian devotion by making the sign of the cross. In these illustrations, hand gesture rather than facial expression most often conveys emotion. Holding an index finger to one's chin is a sign of sorrow (plate 46). Cupping one's cheek with a hand is a sign that the person is feeling amazed or bewildered (plate 18). Holding the left hand to the forehead is a traditional Ethiopian gesture of pity and sorrow (plate 38). Two hands clasped to the cheek with the head tilted is a sign that the person is sleeping, even if they are standing up (plate 37). Other gestures clearly have meanings, although to us now uncertain: one hand clasping the shoulder perhaps means fear (plates 18 and 38).

Fifth, to distinguish gender, one must examine the face, not the clothing. Both men and women wear long gowns, but only men have facial hair and only women have neck rings (creased skin indicating a beautiful chubbiness) (plate 2).

Sixth, only the dead have halos. Thus, Walatta Petros has no halo when alive, but wears a halo when dead (plates 12 and 48).

Seventh, figures depicted lying down under portraits of Walatta Petros are not angels but the patrons of the manuscript, who are depicted as prostrate with devotion (plate 13).

Eighth, evil characters are depicted in profile with only one eye showing, while good people are never depicted in profile (plate 15). Many other images similarly depict symbolic meanings rather than simple realities—the sun is shown with a face (plate 57) and Walatta Petros sits on a cloud (plate 58).

Finally, note that the images were painted by scribes other than Gälawdewos and do not always exactly match the text. For instance, the captions in some manuscripts do not call ale *sāwa*, as the manuscript does, but *ṭālla*. In one case, the woman beside Walatta Petros is identified as ʿĪḥātā Krəstos, whereas the manuscript says it is Fālasitā Krəstos (plate 21).

Claire Bosc-Tiessé's articles address many other interesting aspects of the images in MS D.

The Biography of Walatta Petros

A summary of Walatta Petros's life story may give the reader a better sense of its arc. Below I have interwoven what we know about her life from her hagiobiography as well as other historical sources, which sometimes differ in their details.

According to multiple parts of her hagiobiography, Walatta Petros died in 1642 at the age of fifty, and thus was born in 1592. Her brothers were leading officials mentioned regularly in the royal chronicle of King Susənyos, part of a noble and powerful family with hereditary rights to vast lands to the south but outside the control of the Christian kingdom during her lifetime. At approximately the age of sixteen, Walatta Petros was married to a powerful man named Mälkä'a Krəstos, one of the king's most important counselors and military commanders. As a member of the court, her husband decided to convert to Roman Catholicism. Walatta Petros did not wish to convert to Roman Catholicism, however, and because all three of her children had died in infancy, leaving married life without its fruits, she decided to take up the life of a nun. When Mälkä'a Krəstos left home to repress the anti-Catholic rebellion started in 1617, Tāwaḥədo Church bishops in the powerful monasteries on Lake Ṭana helped the twenty-three-year-old Walatta Petros to leave her husband and join them. After arriving at one of the monasteries on Lake Ṭana, she took a vow of celibacy and shaved her head. Walatta Petros then was persuaded to return to her husband, but when she learned that he had supported the killing of the head of the Tāwaḥədo Church, she withdrew from him in disgust, abandoning his bed, all forms of adornment, and eating. Finally, her husband allowed her to leave him for good and fulfill her dream of entering the religious life.

Regarding her marriage, the hagiobiography lacks information that appears in other sources. Some *Sənkəssar* manuscripts have an entry about Walatta Petros for the day of her death, 17 Ḥədar. Most do not have it—the manuscripts Budge used for his English translation of the *Sənkəssar* mention Walatta Petros's name but do not include her story. However, the *Sənkəssar* entry about Walatta Petros in the two manuscripts we consulted (both from Təgray) state that Mälkä'a Krəstos was her

second husband, even though the hagiobiography makes no mention of a first husband. That is, the entry states, “when she reached the capacity of women, one man took her as a wife, but he was killed unjustly by King Ya^oqob [r. 1597–1603, 1604–6]. Then, Mälkä^oa Krästos took her as a wife and he had three children with her” (Anonymous 1800s, 1900s). Since she was born in 1592, and was only fourteen by the time King Ya^oqob died, she could not have been married to this unnamed man for long. As the *Sänkəssar* entry was likely written within a year of her death, to be read upon her annual commemoration, and Gälawdewos wrote the *gädl* several decades later, it would seem Gälawdewos deliberately omitted this information. Since the first marriage did not result in children, perhaps Gälawdewos did not consider it important enough to mention.

The hagiobiography presents her second marriage in a different light than the European sources as well. While the Ethiopian sources state that Walatta Petros left her husband, the Jesuits claimed that it was the other way around, that her husband had “abandoned” her (Barradas 1996, 141). Since she was unable to give Mälkä^oa Krästos heirs, all three children having died, it may be that her husband left her and she therefore became a nun. One of the Jesuits noted that divorces were readily allowed for various reasons, including “want of children” (Tellez 1710, 43). But perhaps the Portuguese author got the story wrong. Susənyos’s wife also left him because of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, so Walatta Petros would not have been alone. Either way, all the sources—one Portuguese text and two Ḥabäša texts—record that Walatta Petros, the wife of Mälkä^oa Krästos, became a nun, moving to Zäge Monastery on Lake Ṭana.

On leaving her husband’s home, Walatta Petros met another noblewoman who was resisting Roman Catholic conversion, Əḥətä Krästos, who became her lifelong partner and companion, the subject of many long anecdotes. At this point, Walatta Petros began her life as a radical itinerant preacher. Despising the king’s abandonment of Ethiopia’s faith to embrace foreign beliefs and rituals, Walatta Petros decided to speak up. She publicly rebuked all those who had converted—including the king, his counselors, and the high priests. She preached that the people should reject the faith of the foreigners and that priests should not call down blessings on the king during the Divine Liturgy. The latter was a direct attack on Susənyos’s authority, implying that he was no longer the legitimate head of state. She became an enemy of the state and regularly had to flee persecution, with such high-ranking figures as the king’s brother and second-in-command *Ras Šə^oälä* Krästos hunting her down. Enraged by her behavior, the king ordered that she appear before the entire court—all its princes, governors, officials, and scholars—a sign of what a threat she was considered. Walatta Petros stood before the court with “a determined heart and a strong faith” and was not terrified by their status, great number, or empty words. She was so fearless that her husband, Mälkä^oa Krästos, had to beg the king to spare her life. He made this plea, the text states, because he still loved her.

Is it likely that her twice-abandoned husband defended her? Reading between the lines of the Portuguese texts suggests that Mälkä^oa Krästos was conflicted about

his role in fighting the faithful. Several of the Portuguese texts denigrate Mälkəʾa Krəstos for strategic rather than deeply felt beliefs. One calls him “homem fraco, mas muito astuto e prudente” (a weak, but very cunning and prudent man [our translation]) (Täklä Šəllase [Tṯinno] 1900, 2:420n). They also complain that the king forgave him too many times; the reason is left unclear but likely was the failure to fulfill the king’s wishes. Perhaps Mälkəʾa Krəstos was caught between a king and a wife, trying to please both and pleasing neither. One of the Jesuits noted that “the Emperor’s own Brother Raz Sela Christos . . . [and] his own cousin Melca Christos, Lord Steward to the Emperor,” enjoyed the traditional church service and were glad to participate in dancing and the playing of instruments (Tellez 1710, 109). Men who thought nothing of swearing obedience to a foreign pope may have been more hesitant about forcing their wives to give up the practices that they themselves cherished. Even if the hagiobiography does not represent what really happened between two historical figures, it beautifully dramatizes the domestic conflicts that the king’s conversion engendered.

Walatta Petros’s fame skyrocketed after her confrontation with the king, and many of the faithful came long distances to join her religious community. Walatta Petros’s community kept moving, just one step ahead of the king’s spies and the “European soldiers.” Although it seems as if Walatta Petros was a nomad by nature, preferring to move frequently from place to place, perhaps this nature was fashioned by the years she spent escaping her husband and fleeing persecution. Between the king’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1621, and his rescinding that conversion in 1632, Walatta Petros traveled constantly in an area approximately 150 miles by 100 miles, from her husband’s home south of Lake Ṭana all the way north to Waldəbba and all the way west to the modern border with Sudan (map 2). While she was at Waldəbba, a monk prophesied that she would establish and lead seven religious communities.

Soon Walatta Petros was hauled before the court again to be killed, but Mälkəʾa Krəstos saved her life by suggesting that the king subject her to thought reform. The king agreed, and a team of Jesuits and Afonso Mendes himself, the leader of the Roman Catholic mission in Ethiopia, spent every Saturday with her, from the morning into the evening, working to convert her to Roman Catholicism. They were not successful. Every week the king would ask Mendes whether he had succeeded, and every week the Jesuit leader had to report that he had not. She resisted the blandishments of one of the most persuasive educational institutions ever invented. When all these efforts failed, the king made up his mind to kill her, but yet again Mälkəʾa Krəstos saved her life by suggesting another compromise: exile. So the king sent her to Žäbäy, a place on the edge of the known world, more than one hundred miles to the west, where she was kept in chains among the “pagans.” But her people eventually followed her there, and this foreign land became the first of the seven foretold communities. Her jailer tried to seduce and then kill her, but she prevailed. Eventually, struck by the force of her convictions, he became a devotee. By special dispensation, the king allowed her to return then, after three years in the wilderness.

When Walatta Petros returned to the Ethiopian highlands, she established her second and third communities. She encountered strong resistance from local male leaders, many of whom had converted to Roman Catholicism and challenged her authority, asking by what right she led and preached. She had been in conflict with male leadership throughout her life—with her husband, her brother, the king, the Jesuit patriarch, her jailer, the king’s main advisors, and so on. The only male in her life with whom she did not have a conflict appears to have been her father, who doted on her. Later, the hagiobiography states that the male leaders were jealous “when they saw that all the world followed her.” They began saying, “Is there a verse in scripture that [states that] a woman, even though she is a woman, can become a religious leader and teacher? This is something that scripture forbids to a woman.” Nothing good, they argued, could come from women trying to be superior to men. As before, with her husband, a man came to Walatta Petros’s defense. The great monk and scholar Fätlä Šällase replied to her antagonists, “Did God not raise her up for our chastisement because we have become corrupt, so that God appointed her and gave our leadership role to her, while dismissing us? For this reason, you will not be able to make her quit.”

Not long after, in 1632, the king rescinded his edict commanding conversion to Roman Catholicism, and Walatta Petros was elevated by her people as a heroine. She spent the remaining twelve years of her life traveling and setting up her fourth through seventh communities. The events of this later part of her life take up more than half the book. She performs many miracles and saves her community from repeated threats, only growing in reputation. At one point, “many women of high rank, daughters of princesses, concubines of the king, wives of great lords” all worked with her on restoring a church, and she spent time visiting with the new king, Fasilädäs, an admirer of her dedication. When she became sick, she went to Rema Island and died there at the age of fifty, having spent twenty-six years as a nun. Upon her deathbed, Christ arrived to affirm his covenant with her and to establish her as archdeaconess. Finally, after her death, her community set up a monastery devoted to her at Q^wäraša, on the eastern shore of Lake Ṭana. There, Əḥətä Krəstos became the abbess of her community until her death. Walatta Petros resisted converting to European forms of Christianity, and she and her sisters inspired a nation to do the same.

The Biography of Əḥətä Krəstos

Əḥətä Krəstos was Walatta Petros’s lifelong companion, a noblewoman who left her husband and daughter to become a nun, and someone the community also considered elevating to sainthood. Such elevation required the writing of a gäd, and rumors of one devoted to Əḥətä Krəstos have long existed, with Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke saying a copy exists at Kämkä (1975). Selamawit Mecca did not find such a gäd there in March 2010, however, and one scholar commented long ago, “Quant au *gädl*, on ignore s’il existe” (As for [her] *gäd*, it is unclear if it exists) (Nollet 1930).

Some scholars continue to think it must exist somewhere, since her *mälkäʿ* appears in some manuscripts of Walatta Petros’s hagiobiography, and some think it is unusual for such poems to exist without a *gädl* (although my research shows that Walatta Petros’s *mälkäʿ* likely existed before the *gädl* and did not appear with the earliest *gädl*, which suggests it is quite possible for *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* to have a *mälkäʿ* but not a *gädl*). At least one *Sənkəssar*, Vatican Eth. No. 112, gives a short (one-thousand-word) biography of *Ḥḥätä Krəstos*’s life, however, which includes some information corroborated by the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, along with other details that do not appear in it. We did not translate *Ḥḥätä Krəstos*’s *mälkäʿ* nor the *Sənkəssar* entry about her, but summarize some of the entry’s information here.

Ḥḥätä Krəstos was born sometime before 1601, became a nun in 1617, and died on 2 April 1649. Walatta Petros, while on her deathbed, had named *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* her successor in November 1642, and *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* led the community for six-and-a-half years after the death of her partner. According to the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* met Walatta Petros in 1617 while living with her sister because her spiritual leader *Abba Şəge* Haymanot recommended that she meet and think about living with Walatta Petros.

According to the *Sənkəssar* entry,¹⁹ *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* came from an illustrious and noble family. She was married, gave birth to a daughter called *Tərasya*,²⁰ and later became a nun at the church in Fure called *Däbrä Sina*. The *Sənkəssar* states that she lived thirty-two years as a nun and twenty-seven years as a leader in the monastery,²¹ information the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros* does not contain. The two texts agree that the two women met in nearby *Robit*, then went to *Däbrä ʿAnqo*, *Şəyat*, *Zäge*, *Waldəbba*, and *Žəbäy*. The *Sənkəssar*’s entry also has language very similar to that in the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, likewise saying that after they met, the two women “remained together, loving each other as soul and body and they parted never, not in times of trial and persecution, neither in times of rest, but only in death, as Our Lady Mary and Salome. There was no suspicion between them, nor cunning.” It agrees that *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* pleaded with Queen *Amätä Krəstos* and *Mälkäʿa Krəstos* to be reunited with Walatta Petros in exile, “weeping and lamenting as a small child whose mother has abandoned it.”

There are some slight differences or additions. The *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* entry says that *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* helped a monk in *Žəbäy* who fell ill with fever, cleaned his bedclothes without repugnance (even though they stank of fever), washed his dead body with her own hands, and buried him. Her faithfulness was such that Satan “made war” against her and even threw her out of a church window during her prayers. Upon Walatta Petros’s death, *Ḥḥätä Krəstos* was instituted the leader in her place, enduring many trials and even kicking out two heretics, *Zä-Maryam* and *Akalä Krəstos*, who asserted that Christ had not anointed the Holy Spirit (that is,

¹⁹ Unfortunately, Nollet consistently confused sixes with sevens in her translation, so we have checked it against a digital copy of Vatican Eth. No. 112 and corrected where necessary.

²⁰ Pace Zanetti (2005), who has “son.”

²¹ Nollet mistakenly translated ፳፯ as twenty-six.

they were Unionists, adherents of Karra teaching, and not adherents of Qəbat teaching). Then, when God wished her to rest from the labors of this world, he gave her three crowns: the crown of the persecuted, the crown of the disciples, and the crown of teachers. She then became violently ill and died on Wednesday Mäggabit 27,²² in the evening. All this is lacking in the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*.

Conclusion

This volume contributes not only to the study of Ethiopian literature and women but also to the study of the history of resistance to European expansion. A vital task of the twenty-first century is to make earlier African texts available and understood, since their contents will revolutionize thinking in a number of disciplines, including history and literature. Bringing attention to these early texts will also do much to dismantle stereotypes of Africa as a continent without written literature before European contact, and to build representations of Africa as a continent of extraordinary intellectual effervescence.

²² Nollet again mistakenly translated ፳፯ as twenty-six.