

❖ INTRODUCTION ❖

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When I, one of the translators of this book, was four years old, my American family moved from rainy Seattle, Washington, to the highland city of Gondar, Ethiopia, so that my physician father could teach at a small medical college there. Over the next three years, I began to learn about the many facets of this East African country. You need to learn about them, too, if you are to understand the book you hold in your hands.

Flying low over the green Ethiopian countryside, I saw the thatched roofs of many round adobe churches. I visited a cathedral carved three stories down into the stone. I awoke most mornings to the sound of priests chanting. I learned that the peoples of highland Eritrea and Ethiopia, who call themselves the Habasha, are Christians and have been Christians for approximately seventeen hundred years, longer than most European peoples. Their church is called the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: it is not Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox. It is a special form of Christianity called non-Chalcedonian, and ancient churches in Egypt, Eritrea, Syria, Armenia, and India share many beliefs with them. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church reveres saints, about three hundred of whom are Habasha men and women who were especially holy leaders.

The college gatekeeper in Gondar patiently taught me how to write some of the several hundred characters of the traditional Ethiopian script, which looked nothing like the Latin or Roman alphabet I was studying in school. For instance, to write the sound *qo* you use the character ቆ, or to write the sound *bu* you use the character ቡ. I learned that the Habasha had been writing in the

ancient African script and language of Gəʿəz (ግዕዝ) for almost two thousand years. The Habasha have used this ancient language for many centuries to conduct worship in their church services, to translate Christian and secular literature from elsewhere, and to write original texts of theology, poetry, saints' lives, and history.

Hiking from our home in Gondar up the steep mountainside to an eighteenth-century stone castle, I saw men bent over their laps writing with cane pens on animal skin, called parchment. These scribes were monks who lived in one of the thousand Habasha monasteries. Habasha scribes have been producing bound manuscripts since at least the sixth century, many with lavish illustrations known as illuminations. These scribes ensured that their church and monastic libraries were rich in the most important texts, whether translations from other languages or original compositions in Gəʿəz, by copying important manuscripts from other churches and monasteries, preserving them without printing presses or cameras. Perhaps only a quarter of the manuscripts in these monastic libraries have been cataloged, much less digitized, so many of their riches are largely unknown outside their walls.

In other words, I learned at an early age that the Christianity, language, and books of Ethiopia and Eritrea had nothing to do with Europe. The book you hold in your hands will make sense if you, too, remember all this.

I introduce the book with these points because when I tell people that this book was written in Africa long ago, in 1672, their preconceptions often do not allow them to understand me. They simply cannot conceive that Africans were reading and writing books hundreds of years ago, or that some black peoples were both literate and Christian before some white peoples. They say things to me like, "Wait, what European wrote this book?" or "Wait, in what European language was this book written?" Sometimes they even correct me: "Oh, I think you mean it was written in 1972." So let me say it clearly: This book was written almost three hundred and fifty years ago, by Africans, for Africans, in an African language, about African Christianity. It was not written by Europeans.

This book is an extraordinary true story about Ethiopia but also about early modern African women's lives, leadership, and passions—full of vivid dialogue, heartbreak, and triumph. Indeed, it is the earliest-known book-length biography of an Ethiopian or African woman.

Historical and Religious Context of the Book

In the 1500s and early 1600s, Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries traveled to highland Ethiopia to urge the Habasha to convert from their ancient form of African Christianity to Roman Catholicism. The Jesuits ultimately failed, in part due to their cultural insensitivity. They did not blame themselves, however. They blamed their failure instead on the Habasha noblewomen.

When I first read this accusation, I thought that it was simple misogyny: sure, blame the women! But the more I read, the more I began to understand that one of the earliest European efforts to colonize Africa did indeed fail in part because of African women. Many Habasha men of the court converted for reasons of state, but their mothers, wives, and daughters mostly did not. These women fought the Europeans with everything they had—from vigorous debate to outright murder—and after a decade, the Habasha men joined them. Together, they banished all Europeans from the country. Indeed, Ethiopia became one of the few countries never to be colonized by Europeans.

The Christianity of the Habasha is different from that of the Protestants and Roman Catholics. First, their Christianity is very ascetic, meaning it is against worldly pleasures. It holds that weakening the body reduces desires and thus leads to purity. Fasting is very important; many Habasha abstain from eating animal products half of the days of the year. Monks and nuns go further, eating only one meal on those days. The faithful often engage in other ascetic practices as well, such as praying while standing in cold water, staying up all night in prayer, or living in caves. Second, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a doctrine of *theosis*, the transfor-

mation of human beings by grace. This doctrine means that human beings are not inevitably sinful but actually have the potential of becoming without sin, like the Virgin Mary, Jesus’s mother. As a result, the ultimate goal of Habasha monks and nuns is to leave the human behind, in part by reducing the body’s desires to nothing. When reading this book, you will see many instances of human asceticism and holiness.

Some other attributes that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church shares with other churches include a deep reverence for the Virgin Mary—the pious recite prayers in her honor every day, and most church services include readings of her miracles—and a system of monasticism that began in Egypt in the early days of Christianity. Their monasteries do not have one overarching authority but are largely autonomous, with their own rules and procedures. Also, a monastery is not inextricably tied to a particular monastic building or church edifice but is a community marked by its practices of asceticism, celibacy, education, and preaching the Gospel. When reading this book, you will see many references to Mary and monasticism.

Biography of Walatta-Petros

This book is about one of the Habasha women who refused to convert to Roman Catholicism when its missionaries came to highland Ethiopia. Her name is Walatta-Petros, which means “Daughter of Saint Peter” (this is a compound name and can never be shortened to “Walatta” or “Petros,” just as you would never shorten “Peterson” to “Peter” or “Son”). She was born in 1592 into a wealthy, noble family, and she died in 1642 at the age of fifty. Walatta-Petros resisted converting to European forms of Christianity, and she and her sisters helped inspire a nation to do the same.

Walatta-Petros might seem to be unique. She was, after all, a literate seventeenth-century African woman. She was an important leader, directing a successful nonviolent movement against Europeans. She founded her own monastery, over which she presided

without any male authority over her. Her Ethiopian disciples wrote a book about her. Yet closer examination reveals that Walatta-Petros is not exceptional but exemplary. That is, she is not a uniquely strong African woman but an example of millions of strong ones. Many assume that Africa is the continent where women have been the most abused, yet Walatta-Petros is just one woman in Africa's long tradition of strong ruling queens, legally independent and literate noblewomen, and female deities and saints. Evidence from multiple sources in multiple languages demonstrates that African women like Walatta-Petros were essential to the histories of their nations.

After being raised in an adoring family, Walatta-Petros was married to a powerful man named Malkiya-Kristos, one of the king's most important counselors and military commanders. He decided to convert to Roman Catholicism, along with the king and other noblemen, but Walatta-Petros was against the "filthy faith of the foreigners," as the text puts it. She decided to leave her husband and take up the life of a nun around the age of twenty-three, in part because all three of her children had died in infancy, leaving married life without its fruits. Her husband threatened to destroy an entire town to retrieve her, so Walatta-Petros returned to her husband to save the townspeople from death. However, when she learned that her husband had participated in killing the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, she withdrew from him in disgust, abandoning his bed, all forms of adornment, and eating. Finally, her husband allowed her to leave him and fulfill her dream of becoming a nun.

Within a few days, Walatta-Petros met another noblewoman who was becoming a nun and also resisting Roman Catholic conversion. This fellow nun, Eheta-Kristos (meaning "Sister of Christ"), became Walatta-Petros's lifelong partner and companion, and you will read a lot about her in the book.

Walatta-Petros then began her life as a radical itinerant preacher. She publicly rebuked all those who had converted—including the king, his court, and the clergy. 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, Silla-Kristos, 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. She was so fearless there that her husband had to beg the king to spare her life, which he did.

Walatta-Petros's fame skyrocketed after her confrontation with the king, and many of the Habasha faithful came long distances to join her emphatically Orthodox, and therefore decidedly anti-Catholic, religious community. As revolutionaries, Walatta-Petros's followers had to move constantly to new towns and regions to stay ahead of the king's spies and the European soldiers who wanted to kill them. Soon Walatta-Petros was hauled before the court again, but her husband again saved her life by suggesting that the king subject her to thought reform. The king agreed, and a team of Roman Catholic priests spent every Saturday with her, working to convert her to Roman Catholicism. They were not successful. Every week the king would ask the European head of the Roman Catholics whether he had succeeded, and every week he had to report that he had not. Walatta-Petros resisted 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 her husband saved her life by suggesting another compromise: exile. So the king banished her to a place on the edge of their known world, where she was kept in chains among the "pagans." Her jailer tried to seduce and then kill her, but she did not succumb and instead survived. 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, along with all those who had followed her there.

When Walatta-Petros returned to highland Ethiopia, she established her religious community in and around Lake Tana, a huge lake with many monasteries. She was the head of her community; there was no abbot in charge over her. Unsurprisingly, she encountered strong resistance from local male leaders, who challenged her authority and asked where in the Bible it said that a woman

could lead and preach. A famous monk and scholar defended her, however, saying that God raised up a woman to defend the Ethiopian Orthodox Church because many priests had abandoned it.

Not long after, in 1632, the king rescinded his edict making Roman Catholicism the state religion, and the country returned to the beliefs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Walatta-Petros was elevated by her people as a heroine who had helped enable the return of the true church. She spent the remaining twelve years of her life traveling and setting up religious communities in new towns. The events of this latter part of her life take up more than half the book. She performed many miracles and saved her community from repeated threats, sometimes with drastic measures (Walatta-Petros is not a “nice” saint), but only growing in reputation. She died after an unknown illness that lasted several months, having lived twenty-six years as a nun. After her death, her community set up a monastery devoted to her at Qoratsa (now Qorata), on the eastern shore of Lake Tana. There, Eheta-Kristos became the abbess of Walatta-Petros’s monastery until her own death. That monastery still exists today.

The Writing of This Book

Thirty years after Walatta-Petros died, the young monk Galawdewos wrote a beautiful book about her life, based on the community’s oral histories. Many of the stories told about Walatta-Petros are told by women, so this book is not just about an African woman but is written in part *by* African women. Titled ገደለ፡ወለተ፡ጴጥሮስ (Gädlä Wälättä Petros [*Life-Struggles of Walatta-Petros*]), this book is in a genre called a hagiography, or saint’s life. About one hundred Habasha saints have had hagiographies written about them. Only five of those books, including this one, have been translated into English, and the other four translations are difficult to access. Meanwhile, only one translation into English of the hagiography of any black female saint—the seventeenth-century West African Spanish saint Teresa Chicaba—has been published,

and it was written by Europeans, not Africans. Our translation represents the first accessible translation into English of an early modern African woman's life.

Because this book is a hagiography, it cannot be read as a strictly factual historical source. Hagiographies are written to celebrate saints and religious belief. In them, saints sometimes raise people from the dead, heal the incurably ill, predict the future, and even fly. However, Walatta-Petros's hagiography is grounded in historical events. Both Walatta-Petros and her husband were real people who appear in European historical sources and the Habasha royal chronicles from the period. Also, this hagiography is remarkably detailed—filled with the names of specific historical people and places, and the precise verifiable dates when historical events occurred, in part because it was written close to the events and generally based on eyewitness accounts. Most of the text proceeds without any supernatural miracles. While you need to read this book carefully, as you have to read all sources, it does provide useful historical and cultural information. It is not only the earliest-known biography of an African woman but also an early account of resistance to European colonialism from an African perspective.

The Translation of This Book

Michael Kleiner, a German scholar of Gəʼəz literature and Ethiopian history, drafted a translation of this book, which he and I then collaboratively refined. We sought to produce an accessible and fluid English text while also remaining faithful to the Gəʼəz. This is not a loose, literary translation, and we did not add long phrases, full sentences, or paragraphs. We stayed as close as possible to the original in our full translation of every part of Walatta-Petros's hagiography, which we published in 2015, titled *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*. That is a rigorous scholarly publication of 544 pages with a wide-ranging introduction; rich,

substantive notes; a comprehensive glossary of people, places, and concepts; the full cycle of twenty-seven miracles, two poems, and a community history that appear at the end of manuscripts; and dozens of vivid illustrations from the original manuscripts.

Our translation is based on consulting many manuscript copies (a complicated process described at length in the full edition)—one of which I believe is the original that Galawdewos wrote, which has been kept ever since in Walatta-Petros's monastery in highland Ethiopia. The other manuscripts are copies of that original, or copies of those copies. Thus, each manuscript is slightly different from the others due to copying errors or improvements. In the full edition of the book, we document the variations among these manuscripts in the notes.

We knew that the full edition was longer and more complex than most students or general readers would want to use, so we created this paperback edition, which is shorter and easier to read. It differs in the following ways from the full translation: First, we have included only the life of Walatta-Petros and one tale about a miracle she is reported to have performed after her death. The full translation includes poems celebrating her and twenty-six additional tales about the miracles she is reported to have performed after her death; you can read the poems online if you are interested. Second, we have added a few more explanatory terms for readers who might be unfamiliar with Ethiopian history and culture, changed some unfamiliar Gə'əz terms to their English equivalents, and sometimes provided information in the main text that had been in footnotes. As a result, some words in the paperback translation did not actually appear in the original text or the full edition. Third, in the full edition we included many scholarly footnotes and a long glossary of all people, places, and terms. We removed all the notes and the glossary for this paperback edition, although you can consult the glossary online via the Princeton University Press website. Fourth, in the full edition, we clearly marked where we added any words not in the original Gə'əz (using brackets) or where our translation was even a little bit free (in the notes). Those marks and notes have all been deleted from

the paperback edition. The translation is the same, but how it varies from the original is not marked. Fifth, in the paperback edition, we took the opportunity to correct a few small oversights of the full edition, including some corrections of dates.

In both editions we often substituted a full English noun for a pronoun (e.g., translating “she replied to him” as “Walatta-Petros replied to Malkiya-Kristos”). We also created all of the chapter titles and their placement to make the text easier to read; they are not present in any form in the original text. You can find a full description of our principles of translation in the full edition, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*.

For the Interested Student

If you are writing a paper about this book, that’s wonderful. Few people have studied this book, despite its importance and beauty. You are now part of a vital effort to give this text the attention it deserves.

One way to arrive at ideas for a paper about this book is to ask: How does *The Life of Walatta-Petros* think about the world? That may seem a weird question—how can a book think?—but treating a book as something that thinks can help you get to significant insights.

- How does this text think about the divine? Who and what is divine and what is the relation of the divine to the human? What is prayer and how does it work?
- How does this text think about the human power to act? Do people control all their actions? Do they choose their fate?
- How does this text think about social status and rank? Who has power over others and who does not?
- How does this text think about leadership? Who is a leader and how do different leaders behave toward their followers? Do good leaders sacrifice individuals to save the community?
- How does this text think about friendship? Which people are friends and how do they treat each other?

- How does this text think about animals? Which animals are in the text, how do they behave, and what is their relation to human beings?
- How does this text think about gender? Do men and women act differently? If so, how? If not, why? Does this text think about gender in the same way that the people around you do?
- How does this text think about sexuality? In particular, how does the text think about celibacy, same-sex desire, or opposite-sex desire? But also, what is a family? How do husbands and wives or other types of partners behave toward each other?
- How does this text think about place? Where does Walatta-Petros travel and set up religious communities? What do we learn about those places? Is there a pattern to the movement of people in the text?
- How does this book think about other books? It quotes from more than forty biblical books. Why? Do words have power in the world? What do books mean to people in this book?
- How does this book think about authorship? Who is telling the stories in the book and how do they tell stories differently?
- How does this text think about Europeans and their role in this specific time and place in history? How does this text think about other foreigners or local ethnic groups?
- How does this text think about race?
- How does this book think about writing? That is, what does it value in terms of form and style, metaphors and tropes, discourse and language, the structure and order of material, and genre?

If you are interested in learning more about this book for your research, go online to the Princeton University Press website (<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10584.html>). On the webpage for the original edition of this book, you will find links to the glossary, which provides information on each person, place, and term in the text, and the introduction from the full edition, which describes the historical, religious, cultural, and authorial contexts of the text. You will also find a link to the two poems

about Walatta-Petros, with the original Gəʼəz and English translation side by side for better interpretation.

If you plan to do extended work on this text, either for a thesis or a publication, you will need to use the full edition of the book, which gives much more information on the twelve manuscripts we used, as well as on Gəʼəz philology, the Ethiopian script, our translation principles, and many other essential matters. It also includes many footnotes to aid scholars in interpreting the text and dozens of gorgeous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century illustrations of Walatta-Petros's life.

If you enjoy reading this book, you should know that Ethiopian studies is in need of young scholars to learn Gəʼəz and work to preserve, study, and translate the masterpieces of Ethiopian literature like this one. Please consider joining the cause! It won't be easy. Classes in Gəʼəz are few and far between, but learning the language will be a fun challenge—and the contribution you make will be priceless.

For Instructors

A lesson plan for teaching a unit on this book, including assignments, related articles, and a video, can be found at <http://www.wendybelcher.com/african-literature/walatta-petros/#LessonPlan>.

Further Reading

To read the glossary of people, places, and terms; an introduction about the historical, cultural, and religious context; and the poems in honor of Walatta-Petros from the full edition of the *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, see <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10584.html>.

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