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## **Nazret, Tigray, the Metropolitan Seat of the Church of Ethiopia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century: Material and Written Evidence**

Marie-Laure Derat, François-Xavier Fauvelle, Romain Mensan, Hiluf Berhe Woldeyohannes, Martina Ambu, Emmanuel Fritsch, Yves Gleize, Anaïs Lamesa, Mikael Muehlbauer

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# Contents

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## DUMBARTON OAKS PAPERS

VOLUME 79, 2025

SHARON E. J. GERSTEL

The Church of the Taxiarches at Gkoritsa, Lakonia:  
The Study of a Dedicatory Inscription and Its Context 1

GEORGIOS CHATZELIS

Reframing the Roman General in Byzantium:  
Onasander's *Strategikos* and the Shaping of the  
Ideal Byzantine Military Leader 37

PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER

He Who Humbles Himself Will Be Exalted:  
The Apostle Ivory at the Louvre (OA 3317), Heraclius's Entry into  
Jerusalem, and the Depiction of Imperial Humility 55

BENJAMIN GARSTAD

The Location of the Island of Dibous 79

MARIE-LAURE DERAT, FRANÇOIS-XAVIER FAUVELLE, ROMAIN MENSAN, HILUF BERHE,  
MARTINA AMBU, EMMANUEL FRITSCH, YVES GLEIZE, ANAÏS LAMESA, AND MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER

Nazret, Tigray, the Metropolitan Seat of the Church  
of Ethiopia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century:  
Material and Written Evidence 95

GEORGIOS DELIGIANNAKIS AND PHILIPP PILHOFER

Eschatological Laughter in a Christian Funerary Epigram from Late Antique Egypt 143

ARSANY PAUL

Women and Blood Impurities in Christian Egypt:  
Menstruation, Childbirth, and Liturgical Participation among Late Antique and Medieval Copts 161

MICHELLE FREEMAN

“No Comfort for This Mourning, and No Healing for This Pain”:  
Consolation, Lament, and *Ethopoiia* in the Pseudo-Dionysian *Epistle to  
Timothy on the Death of the Apostles Peter and Paul* 193

LUCAS MCMAHON

Signaling Empire between the Abbasid-Byzantine Frontier and Constantinople:  
Investigations on the Ninth-Century Long-Distance Optical Telegraph 219

KEVIN TUIITE

The Miracle of St. George, the Princess, and the Dragon:  
Comparison of the Old Georgian and the Nearest Latin and Greek Versions 247

GUILHEM DORANDEU

Norman Seals and Migrations to Byzantium in the Eleventh Century 277



## Notes and Reports

SZYMON JELLONEK

A Monogram Countermark on a Dodecanummion Discovered in “Marea”/Philoxenite 299



## AFRICA AND BYZANTIUM

DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIUM, 25–26 APRIL 2025 309

Abbreviations 311

# Nazret, Tigray, the Metropolitan Seat of the Church of Ethiopia from the Twelfth to the Fourteenth Century

## *Material and Written Evidence*

MARIE-LAURE DERAT, FRANÇOIS-XAVIER FAUVELLE, ROMAIN MENSAN,  
HILUF BERHE, MARTINA AMBU, EMMANUEL FRITSCH, YVES GLEIZE,  
ANAÏS LAMESA, AND MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER

### The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Question of the Metropolitan Seat

The region of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia is unique in sub-Saharan Africa, in that from the fourth century on it has continuously hosted a vibrant and distinctive Christian culture.<sup>1</sup> The history of Christianity in this region began in the fourth century with the conversion of the kings of Aksum, a powerful state that encompassed large areas of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia and played a major political and economic role in the Mediterranean, African, Arabian, and Indian Ocean worlds. Since Aksumite times and to this day,

Ethiopian Christianity has preserved a distinctive written culture in Geez (an ancient language maintained for liturgical use) as well as robust ecclesiastical institutions such as monasticism.<sup>2</sup> Already in the 330s, that is, immediately after the conversion of the Aksumite king Ezana (‘Ezānā in Geez, Aizana[s] in Greek),<sup>3</sup> we find a Christian community in the Tigrayan highlands in northern Ethiopia, where the ancient city of Aksum is located: this Christian community formed a diocese of the Miaphysite patriarchate of Alexandria in Egypt (today called the Coptic Orthodox Church). From the

1 In this article we adopt simplified spellings for the following proper names: Amda Seyon (‘Amda Şəyon), Amhara (‘Amharā), Endarta (‘Ēndartā), Geez (Gə‘əz), Golgotha (Goləgotā), Maryam (Māryām), Mikael (Mikā‘el), Nazret (Nāzret), Shewa (Şawā), Tigray (Təgrāy), and Zagwe (Zāgwe). For the other, less common proper names we follow the transliteration rules of the Beta Maşāḥəft website (University of Hamburg, Germany), <https://betamasaheft.eu/Guidelines/?id=transliteration-principles>. The name of King Lālibālā is always transliterated following the same rule and the spelling of the most ancient inscriptions to disambiguate it from the name of the site and town of Lalibela. We use the term “Islamicate” to refer to the cultural dimensions of societies and communities that, regardless of their religions, lived under and were shaped by Islamic rule.

2 G. Lusini, “The Ancient and Medieval History of Eritrean and Ethiopian Monasticism: An Outline,” in *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. S. Kelly (Leiden, 2020), 194–216; D. Nosnitsin, “Christian Manuscript Culture of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Highlands: Some Analytical Insights,” in Kelly, *Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 282–321; A. Bausi, ed., *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopian* (Farnham, 2012); A. Elli, *Storia della Chiesa ortodossa tawāhedo d’Etiopia* (Milan, 2017).

3 F. Thélamon, *Pāiens et chrétiens au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle: L’apport de l’“Histoire ecclésiastique” de Rufin d’Aquilée* (Paris, 1981), 37–83; M. Villa, “Fruentius in the Ethiopic Sources: Mythopoeia and Text-Critical Considerations,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 3rd ser., 1.48 (2017): 87–111; Athanasius, *Apologie à l’empereur Constance* (J. M. Szymusiak, ed. and trans. [Paris, 1958], 121–26); A. Martin, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’Église d’Égypte au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle (328–373)* (Rome, 1996), 502–8.

fifth-century pseudo-Canons of Nicaea,<sup>4</sup> we learn that Christians of Ethiopia were led by a metropolitan,<sup>5</sup> that is, a provincial bishop, who was elected from Egypt. The metropolitans of Ethiopia were chosen from among Egyptian clerics, either monks or bishops, and dispatched to Ethiopia, often for life.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this dependency was maintained until 1959, when the Ethiopian Church became autocephalous and could therefore elect local clergy.

Generally speaking, the institutional history of the Ethiopian Church in premodern times is not well known. Apart from a few notable exceptions, we lack a comprehensive list of Ethiopian metropolitans, a deficiency due in large part to a lack of surviving Ethiopian documentation. Indeed, the fullest (though very fragmentary) account of the Ethiopian metropolitanate is found in an Egyptian document, a thirteenth-century Arabic compendium called the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (Arabic replaced Coptic as the administrative and liturgical language of the Coptic Church in the eleventh century).<sup>7</sup> This book provides information about Ethiopian metropolitans mostly insofar as it concerns their dispatch and consecration by the Egyptian patriarch; hence it also includes tantalizing clues about the possibility of there sometimes being multiple bishops and bishoprics (perhaps co-adjutors?)

4 A. Vööbus, *The Canons Ascribed to Mārūtā of Maipherqat and Related Sources*, I–II (= CSCO 439, 440, *Scriptores Syri* 191, 192) (Louvain, 1982); J. Stutz, “The Writings of Mārūtā of Maipherqat and the Making of Nicaea in Arabic,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 1 (2019): 1–28.

5 Called *pāpās* in Geez, after the hellenized Coptic, often preceded by *abuna*, “our father.”

6 This is not to say that the election of Ethiopian metropolitans from Egypt was a consistent process. After all, this procedure was contingent on often contentious political relations between Egypt and Ethiopia. For an analysis of these relations from the point of view of the Ethiopian Church, see A. Bausi, “Three Brief Points on the Ethiopic Tradition,” in *Bishops and Bishoprics (Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia, Fourth–Fourteenth Century)*, ed. M.-L. Derat et al. (Warsaw, 2025), 155–84. For a well-known rupture in the history of the Egyptian patriarchate, see M.-L. Derat, “L’affaire des mosquées: Interactions entre le vizirat fatimide, le patriarcat d’Alexandrie et les royaumes chrétiens d’Éthiopie et de Nubie à la fin du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Médiévales: Langues, Textes, Histoire* 79 (2020): 15–36.

7 S. C. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*, *Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica: Schriftenreihe zur Kulturgeschichte des Raumes um das Rote Meer* 5 (Warsaw, 1997); S. Rubenson, “The Transition from Coptic to Arabic,” *Égypte/ Monde Arabe* 27/28 (1996): 77–92.

in Ethiopia. All told, the ambiguities surrounding the medieval Ethiopian metropolitan seat suggest that the hierarchical and territorial organization of the Ethiopian Church was not always as straightforward as it looks.

In late antiquity, as evidenced by texts and archaeology, there was a bishop in Adulis (in modern-day Eritrea), the Red Sea port of the Aksumite kingdom, even before there was one in Aksum.<sup>8</sup> If these two bishoprics ever coexisted, their relation remains unclear; and anyway the bishopric of Adulis is never mentioned again after the sixth century. During the subsequent period, after the seventh-century demise of Aksum’s political institutions,<sup>9</sup> where the metropolitan seat of the Church of Ethiopia was located is even more obscure. Based on a list of metropolitans (this literary genre will be discussed below) that provides place-names, researchers hypothesized that the Christian metropolitan seat of Ethiopia until the fifteenth century was located at various places called “Nazret,” “Bugna,” or “Ḥaqqalet.”<sup>10</sup> One hypothesis, based on the fact that the rock-hewn ecclesiastical complex of Lalibela some 250 km south of Aksum was part of medieval Bugna, suggests that the metropolitan seat was situated there, at least during the office of Abuna Mikael (r. 1204–1209/10).<sup>11</sup> It is only from the mid-seventeenth century on, when the royal court established a summer capital in Gondar, that we are led to infer that the metropolitan’s residence was there, too, since the church of Gabriel had then become a cathedral.<sup>12</sup> One

8 On the Christian vestiges of Adulis, see G. Castiglia, “La cristianizzazione di Adulis (Eritrea) e del regno Aksumita: Nuovi dati dal Corno d’Africa d’età tardo antica; Scavi 2018 e 2019,” *Atti della Pontificia accademia romana di archeologia (serie III). Rendiconti* 91 (2018–19): 91–127, at 110–18; E. Fritsch, “Bringing Ruins Back to Life: Ancient Cathedrals of Ethiopia,” in Derat et al., *Bishops and Bishoprics*, 279–322. On the episcopacy of Adulis, see U. Monneret de Villard, “Mosè, Vescovo di Adulis,” *OCP* 13 (1947): 613–23, at 618–19; E. Honigmann, “Un évêque d’Adoulis au concile de Chalcedoine?,” *Byzantion* 20 (1950): 295–301, at 301.

9 D. W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth–Fourteenth Centuries* (New Haven, 2009), 37–40.

10 S. Kaplan, “Pāppas,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden, 2010) (hereafter *EAE*), 4:113–14.

11 C. Lepage, “Un métropolitain égyptien bâtisseur à Lalibāla (Éthiopie) entre 1205 et 1210,” *CRAI* 146.1 (2002): 141–74. See also the elements put forward by M.-L. Derat (*L’énigme d’une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d’Éthiopie du XI<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [Turnhout, 2018], 174–82) to strongly temper this hypothesis.

12 S. C. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria II: The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia from the Fourteenth Century to the Zemana Mesafint*, *Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica: Schriftenreihe zur*

complicating factor is that the Solomonic Ethiopian kings (after 1270) hosted a mobile court, which alternated between select campsites (some to the far south). While scholars have often assumed that the metropolitan followed suit, the remains of these encampments remain elusive, even those in otherwise known locales.<sup>13</sup> A further problem is that the metropolitans, too, may have had multiple residences apart from the “official” seat. After all, Ethiopia’s borders remained perpetually in flux, especially during the reigns of the ever-expanding Zagwe (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) and Solomonid (1270–1974) kingdoms. Irrespective of these questions, the fact remains that throughout the medieval period the Ethiopian metropolitan required a cathedral (for the celebration of the mass) as well as permanent infrastructure to accommodate associated Egyptian and Ethiopian monks and their attendants (peasant farmers, artisans, servants, and soldiers). We might further assume that this metropolitan seat was located in a well-watered, accessible area, since the ecclesiastic administration presumably required agricultural provisions.

This article attempts to shed light on these questions by proposing that the site of Nazret in Tigray was the medieval metropolitan seat of the Church of Ethiopia. Informed by new archeological data, as well as scattered sources, our study suggests that the now-dilapidated church found at Nazret functioned as the seat of the Ethiopian archbishop from the early twelfth (at the latest) to the fourteenth (at the earliest) century. Aside from presenting and synthesizing all available documentation (that is, both written and material) as well as previously published studies,<sup>14</sup> this article provides a full account of the historical,

cultural, and geographical significance of the metropolitan seat at Nazret. Moreover, by drawing from our archeological work, the paper shows that Nazret is a key site for understanding Ethiopia’s historical relations with Egypt as well as with the Eastern Christian and Islamic worlds.

### Setting and History of the Research at Nazret

The ruins of Nazret (Geez for “Nazareth”) are located in southeastern Tigray, Ethiopia’s northernmost province, at the extreme end of a plain known as the Endarta.<sup>15</sup> The locale sits in a valley, some 4 km in radius, enclosed on all sides by the jagged mountain range of the Waḡḡarāt region (Fig. 1).<sup>16</sup> Today, the site hosts a modern church, a circular building made of concrete and corrugated iron dedicated to Mary (Māryām in Geez), around which is a large enclosure where church meetings take place. Next to this modern building is an older, domed, and largely ruined church (now covered by a protective shelter, Fig. 2) which looms over the site. According to the village residents, this ancient church was in use until 1981, when it was superseded by the newly built round church.<sup>17</sup> As is customary in Ethiopia, the altar was then translated from the older church to the new one, which took its name from the altar’s dedication, in this case to Mary. What remains of the old church displays architectural elements that are rare in Ethiopia, especially the domed cubes (cupolas on octagonal drums, Fig. 3). These domed chambers are only the east end of a once much larger basilica-like rectangular building—its proof of relative antiquity since most modern churches are round.<sup>18</sup> Aside

Kulturgeschichte des Raumes um das Rote Meer 9 (Warsaw, 2005), 81–137.

13 B. Hirsch and B. Poissonnier, “Recherches historiques et archéologiques à Meshalā Maryam (Mānz, Éthiopie): Résultats préliminaires,” *AnnEth* 16 (2000): 59–88; H. Breternitz and R. Pankhurst, “Barara, the Royal City of 15th and Early 16th Century (Ethiopia): Medieval and Other Early Settlements between Wechecha Range and Mt Yerer; Results from a Recent Survey,” *AnnEth* 24 (2009): 209–49; M.-L. Derat and A.-M. Jouquand, eds., *Gabriel, une église médiévale d’Éthiopie: Interprétations historiques et archéologiques de sites chrétiens autour de Meshāla Māryām (Manz, Éthiopie), XV<sup>e</sup>–XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 2012).

14 M.-L. Derat et al., “Māryām Nāzret (Ethiopia): The 12th-Century Transformations of an Aksumite Site in Connection with an Egyptian Christian Community,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 239 (2020): 473–507; M. Muehlbauer, “An African ‘Constantine’ in the Twelfth

Century: The Architecture of the Early Zāgwe Dynasty and Egyptian Episcopal Authority,” *Gesta* 62.2 (2023): 127–52.

15 See S. Chernetsov, “Endārta,” *EAE* 2:297–98.

16 On Waḡḡarāt, see C. Conti Rossini, “Uoggerat, Raia Galla e Zobul,” *Bolletino della Società africana italiana* 46 (1938): 81–108, esp. 81–88; Tarekegn Gebreyesus Kaba, “Waḡḡarāt,” *EAE* 4:1075–76.

17 Malāka Bōrhān Nagā Ṣəḡāy, priest of Maryam Nazret church, and other members of the village (not identified), interviewed in October 2014.

18 F. Heyer, *Die Kirche Äthiopiens*, 27–34; Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 25–26; E. Fritsch, “The Origins and Meanings of the Ethiopian Circular Church: Fresh Explorations,” in *Tomb and Temple: Reimagining the Sacred Buildings of Jerusalem*, ed. R. Griffith-Jones and E. Fernie (Woodbridge, VA, 2018), 267–93, doi:10.1515/9781787442115-023.

Fig. 1.  
Maps showing the location of the church of Maryam Nazret, in the Endarta (Ἐνδarta) region, and its terroir. Maps by Simon Dorso.

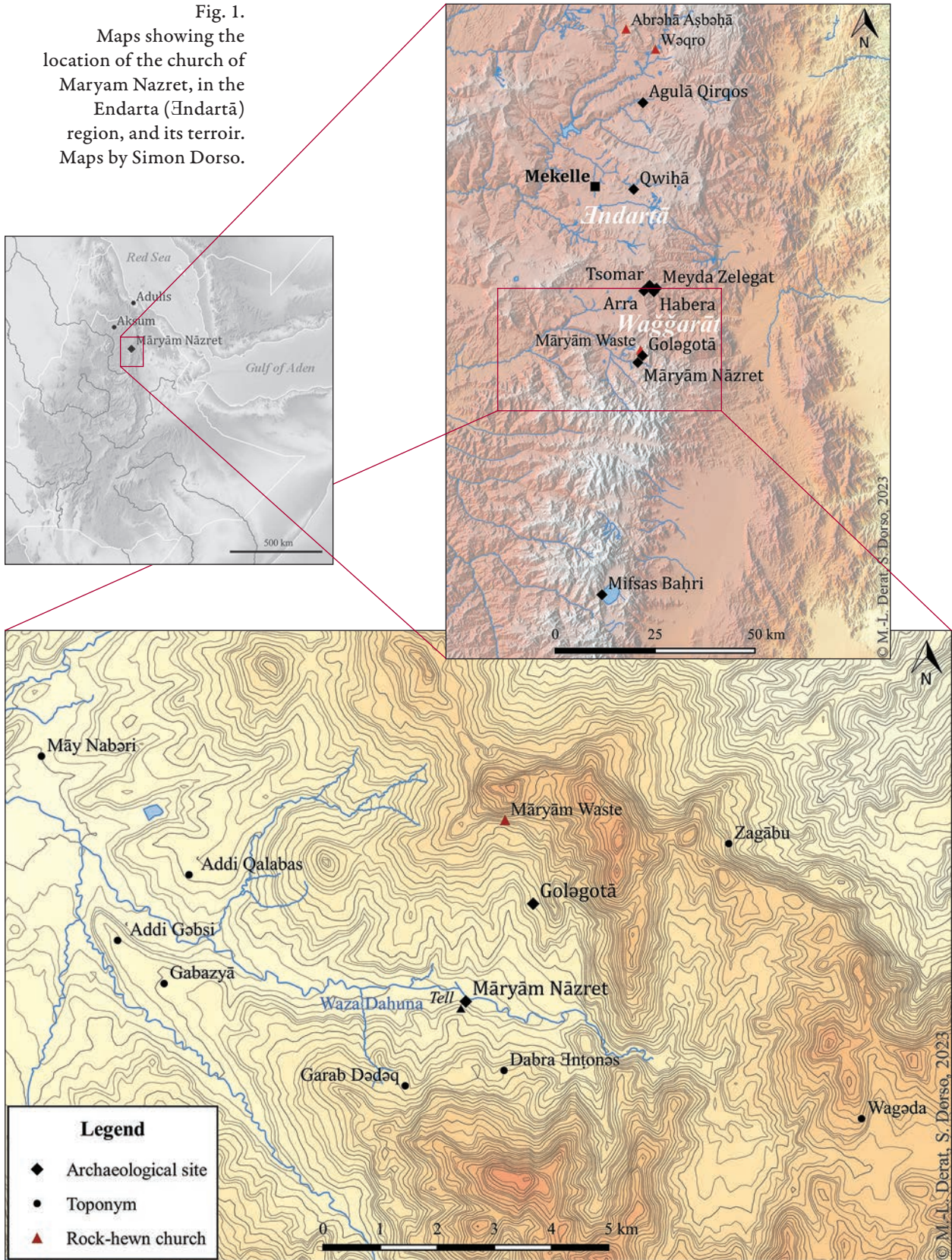




Fig. 2  
The current church of Nazret (*right*) and the Old Maryam Nazret under its shelter, from the northeast. Photo by Marie-Laure Derat.

from monolithic pillars scattered around the surface, the main vessel of the church remains underground. Other spolia, building blocks from the original church or other structures, are scattered around the site and incorporated in the modern buildings that surround it (see Appendix 1).

The first scholar to evaluate Nazret was Antonio Mordini (1904–1975), an Italian ethnologist and archaeologist who visited it during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1935–1941), when he was head of the Ethnographic Service of the colonial administration of the Africa Orientale Italiana.<sup>19</sup> Mordini was sent on the orders of the noted orientalist and former colonial administrator in Eritrea (1899–1903) Carlo Conti Rossini, with the permission of Giuseppe Daodice, then governor of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Already in the

1940s, Mordini recognized that the ruined structure (which he implied was from the later Middle Ages) stood on Aksumite remains, describing the complex as a “large site surrounded by very ancient ruins with a large number of fluted Aksumite-style columns.”<sup>20</sup> In seeming confirmation of the site’s ancient origin (discussed below), Mordini also found several ancient coins, as well as a stone basin with an inscription (Fig. 4), both of which point to an Aksumite date (see “Postscript,” p. 125).<sup>21</sup> Mordini was pathbreaking in being the first to connect the site of Nazret with the Ethiopian metropolitan seat of the same name mentioned in Geez sources.

In 1969, some three decades after Mordini, the French archaeologist Francis Anfray paid a short visit to Nazret, in which he cleared and measured the church’s understory (29 m E–W × 23.15 m N–S), described the standing structure, and typologized some of the scattered spolia as pillars and quoin blocks.<sup>22</sup> Although Anfray published few photos, in 2022, old photographs

19 A. Mordini, “Letter to Carlo Conti Rossini from Asmara” (letters, Rome, 14 April 1940; 18 April 1940; 10 May 1940), Carlo Conti Rossini Archivio, Busta 10, Accademia dei Lincei, Roma; A. Mordini, “Informazioni preliminari sui risultati delle mie ricerche in Etiopia dal 1939 al 1944,” *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 4 (1944–45): 145–54; idem, “Architecture éthiopienne au Moyen Âge,” in *Christentum am Nil, Koptische Kunst: Internationale Arbeitstagung zur Ausstellung “Koptische Kunst,” Essen, Villa Hügel, 23.–25. Juli 1963*, ed. W. F. Volbach and K. Wessel (Essen, 1964), 53–60.

20 Mordini, “Informazioni preliminari,” 150.

21 Ibid., fig. 4.

22 F. Anfray, “Notes archéologiques,” *AnnEth* 8 (1970): 31–56, at 36–37 and fig. 18.



Fig. 3. The cupolas on octagonal drums of Old Maryam Nazret. Photos by Mikael Muehlbauer.

resurfaced that had been taken by Kebedde Bogale (an Ethiopian member of the Section française d'archéologie) on his visit. Among other things, the photos capture a large mound of debris topping partly standing walls that are no longer extant today (Fig. 5).<sup>23</sup> Anfray also analyzed the above-mentioned stone basin, comparing its form and inscription with similar artifacts discovered in other Aksumite contexts, and determining (with the epigraphic assistance of Roger Schneider) that it was Aksumite in origin.<sup>24</sup> He was

23 These pictures are preserved at the Ethiopian Heritage Authority (EHA) in Addis Ababa.

24 Anfray, "Notes archéologiques," 39, n. 6, pl. IX: "The basin probably dates from the Aksumite period. This is the opinion of R. Schneider, who notes that 'none of the characters we can decipher seems to be vocalized'" (Ce bassin date probablement de la période aksumite. C'est l'avis de R. Schneider qui constate "qu'aucun des caractères qu'on peut déchiffrer ne semble être vocalisé").

skeptical, however, about the attribution of the building itself to the Aksumite period. Anfray, who at the time was the world expert on Aksumite archaeology, wrote:

It is possible that the monument was built *on top of* Aksumite ruins. Excavations would probably show this. But it does not date from the Aksumite period. The plan of the whole with its alternation of protruding and retracted parts, the pillars with sloping angles, evoke Aksum, but it is better to speak of an Aksumite tradition that we know was perpetuated until around the fifteenth century.<sup>25</sup>

25 Anfray, "Notes archéologiques," 37–39: "Il se peut que le monument ait été bâti *sur* des ruines axoumites. Le plan de l'ensemble avec son alternance de parties saillantes et de parties rentrantes, les piliers à angles abattus, évoquent Axoum, mais il vaut mieux parler de tradition



Fig. 4. Stone basin with a Geez inscription. Photo by Romain Mensan.

To Anfray, therefore, the domed church at Nazret, while built atop an Aksumite ruin, was a medieval building that imitated ancient architecture.

Although the French numismatist Éric Godet followed in 1977, listing Nazret in his inventory of Aksumite sites, it remains unclear whether he himself visited or simply compiled the opinions of others.<sup>26</sup> Paul Henze, an American former CIA operative in Ethiopia who became an amateur historian, paid a visit to Nazret in 2005 and published a short entry on it in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*.<sup>27</sup> Although his entry largely repeats earlier observations, he pointedly notes the reuse of ancient remains there, as well as the “Islamic style” of the pointed arches and domes found in the

medieval church<sup>28</sup>—an intriguing suggestion to which we shall return. In 2014, further inroads were made by the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB) in response to the chance discovery of a new substructure by villagers who were building the foundations of a new church on the site. In an unpublished report on their emergency assessment and survey of the site, archaeologists from the University of Mekelle and the TCTB (Manjil Hazarika, Tsehay Terefe, Gidey Gebre Egziabher, and Tesfay Girmay) developed a new typology for the standing pillars and identified among the returns several “cornerstones” similar to those at Mifsas Baḥri, another Aksumite site close to Lake Ḥāšānga, to Nazret’s immediate south.<sup>29</sup> Citing oral history, the authors also reclassified the Aksumite basin as a water bowl for King Amda Seyon’s (r. 1314–1344) horses. At

axoumite dont on sait qu’elle se perpétua jusqu’aux alentours du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle” (our emphasis in the French original and in the translation).

26 É. Godet, “Répertoire de sites pré-axoumites et axoumites du Tigré (Éthiopie),” *Abbay* 8 (1970): 19–58, at 54.

27 P. B. Henze, “Nazret,” *E Ae* 3:1158–59.

28 Ibid.

29 Manjil Hazarika et al., “Test Excavations at Mariam Nazret Archaeological Site,” Mekelle, Ethiopia, 2014, 5 pp. (unpublished).



Fig. 5. Old Maryam Nazret in 1969. Photo by Kebede Bogale, courtesy of the Ethiopian Heritage Authority.

some point later, Paul Yule and Michaela Gaudiello, responsible for the related Mifsas Bahri excavations, also discussed comparanda from Nazret.<sup>30</sup>

Most recently, Marie-Laure Derat, a historian of the Zagwe dynasty, led a French-Ethiopian team to undertake intensive archaeological works at Nazret and its surroundings.<sup>31</sup> A first study, published in 2020, proposed that the old church of Nazret (hereafter called Old Maryam Nazret) was built for the Egyptian metropolitan of Ethiopia in the eleventh to twelfth centuries.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Derat led two seasons of excavation at Nazret in 2018 and 2020. The project had to be discontinued due to the Ethiopian civil war (2020–2022). This article aims to present and examine the results of the excavation seasons not presented earlier as well as the entirety of the available written documentation on the site. Moreover, it addresses several points of

contention in Nazret's historiography. Is it an Aksumite site that remained in use into the Middle Ages or an "Aksumite-style" building that was erected over ancient foundations? And what of the "Islamic" features found in the church's domed sanctuaries? While we may not be able to tell the whole history from these fragmentary remains, our article will address these points.

### Maryam Nazret: The Written Documents

This section focuses on the written documentation, arranged in chronological order, that mentions the place of Nazret and the Maryam church as well as descriptions of the activities that occurred there. Taken together, these sources confirm that the standing remains at Old Maryam Nazret are indeed the ruins of the episcopal church of the Ethiopian metropolitan seat from at least the mid-twelfth century until the end of the fourteenth century.

Apart from the aforementioned nonvocalized Geez inscription engraved on the basin preserved in the church of Old Maryam Nazret (discussed below), the oldest relevant (surviving) written document is the

30 M. Gaudiello and P. A. Yule, *Mifsas Bahri: A Late Aksumite Frontier Community in the Mountains of Southern Tigray; Survey, Excavation and Analysis 2013–2016* (Oxford, 2017), 243.

31 Derat, *L'énigme*.

32 Derat et al., "Māryām Nāzret."

twelfth-century will of a metropolitan named Mikael. Written in Geez, this testimony was recopied into an eighteenth-century manuscript of the Gospels housed in a library of the monastery of Mikā'el Ambā (located about eighty kilometers north of Nazret) (Fig. 6).<sup>33</sup> The original will, dated to 1149/1150, mentions the metropolitan Mikael's construction, with his own funds, of several churches, including one at a place named Nazret. Although this is a late copy, it has been shown that Mikael's testament is original and was written in the first half of the twelfth century.<sup>34</sup> The will of Mikael is the earliest testimony to Nazret's existence, though it does not specify that Nazret was the metropolitan seat.

Only a few decades after Mikael's will was written, we find another reference to a place going by the name Nazret, in the colophon of the famous *Kəbra Nagašt* (The Glory of the Kings). This Geez text recounts, among other things, the "Solomonic" ancestry of the Ethiopian kings and the translation of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.<sup>35</sup> The colophon states that the book was translated from Coptic into Arabic during the time of King Lālibālā, in the year 1225, under the metropolitanate of a bishop named Giyorgis. More importantly, it also states that the book was "found" in Nazret by a governor named Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə, who approved its translation from Arabic into Geez, in which the text survives (translated by a man named Yəṣḥaq [Isaac]). Already in the 1920s, Carlo Conti Rossini identified Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə with a historical figure, the rebellious

governor of the province of Endarta during the reign of King Amda Seyon I (r. 1314–1344).<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Conti Rossini considered the text's translator, Yəṣḥaq, to be the *nəbura'ad* (administrator of religious and secular affairs) of Aksum, whose career overlapped with the reign of Amda Seyon. Thus, to Conti Rossini, the *Kəbra Nagašt* was translated from Arabic to Geez in the early fourteenth century, between the start of Amda Seyon's reign in 1314 and the 1322 rebellion of Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə.<sup>37</sup>

That said, the details of the colophon remain enigmatic. There is extensive debate surrounding the *Kəbra Nagašt*'s date of composition, its diffusion in Ethiopia, and the political motivations behind its writing.<sup>38</sup> Irrespective of these uncertainties, however, it is important to note that Nazret was where the text was translated and preserved. As the Ethiopian metropolitan seat, we can confidently assume that Nazret had considerable status as a scriptorium, as it was associated with both the church and the king. Moreover, because the metropolitan and his entourage were Egyptian, it would have been a prime location for translations from Coptic to Arabic, Arabic to Geez, and vice-versa.

Why Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə, an otherwise rebellious upstart, probably found and approved the translation of *Kəbra Nagašt*, a text codifying royal ideology, into Geez at Nazret is unclear.<sup>39</sup> Part of the reason may be that King Amda Seyon, the grandson of the "Solomonic" dynasty's founder, was a southerner, unlike Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə, who was a Tigrayan nobleman. At that time, Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə, though a regional governor, most likely enjoyed a powerful position, as evidenced in the tantalizing donation of a cross by his mother (Bāḥro) to the monastery of abbā Garimā.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə had good reason to try to delegitimize Amda Seyon

33 Manuscripts of the Gospels often recorded land donations to monasteries as well as other deeds, inventories, and lists of abbots. See for example C. Conti Rossini, "L'evangelo d'oro di Dabra Libanos," *RendLinc*, ser. 5, 10 (1901): 177–219; A. Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea," *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 38 (1994): 13–69; 39 (1995): 25–48; 41 (1997): 13–56; G. Lusini, "Scritture documentarie etiopiche (Dabra Deḥuḥān e Dabra Ṣegē, Sarāē, Eritrea)," *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 42 (1998): 5–55; A. Wion and P. Bertrand, "Production, Preservation and Use of Ethiopian Archives (Fourteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)," *Northeast African Studies* 11.2 (2011): vii–xvi.

34 E. Fritsch, "New Reflections of the Image of Late Antique and on Medieval Ethiopian Liturgy," in *Liturgy's Imagined Past/s: Methodologies and Materials in the Writing of Liturgical History Today*, ed. T. Berger and B. D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN, 2016), 39–92, at 60–65; Derat, *L'énigme*, 40–46; Derat et al., "Māryām Nāzret," 483–88.

35 On this book, see the work of R. Beylot, *La Gloire des Rois ou l'Histoire de Salomon et de la reine de Saba* (Turnhout, 2008), and the edition of the text by C. Bezold, *Kebra Nagast: Die Herrlichkeit der Könige* (= Abhandlungen der königlichen Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Philologische Klasse 23: Abhandlung 1) (Munich, 1905).

36 C. Conti Rossini, "Aethiopia (IIa serie)," *RStO* 10 (1923): 481–520, at 506–8.

37 Conti Rossini, "Aethiopia (IIa serie)," 508. On this regional governor, see also D. Nosnitsin, "Ya'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə," *EAE* 5:5.

38 P. Marrassini, "Kəbrā nāgāšt," *EAE* 3:364–68; M. Kropp, "Zur Deutung des Titels 'Kəbrā Nāgāšt,'" *OC* 80 (1996): 109–15.

39 Deresse Ayenachew, "Territorial Expansion and Administrative Evolution under the 'Solomonic' Dynasty," in Kelly, *Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 67–68.

40 The donation of a cross by Bāḥro, the mother of Yā'əbika ʿĒgzi'ə and Təsfāna ʿĒgzi'ə, to the church of abbā Garimā in northern Endarta confirms that these dignitaries were acting as rulers, although they do not claim that title. The cross in question was recently published by J. Mercier, *L'art de l'Éthiopie: Des origines au siècle d'or* (Paris, 2021), 108.

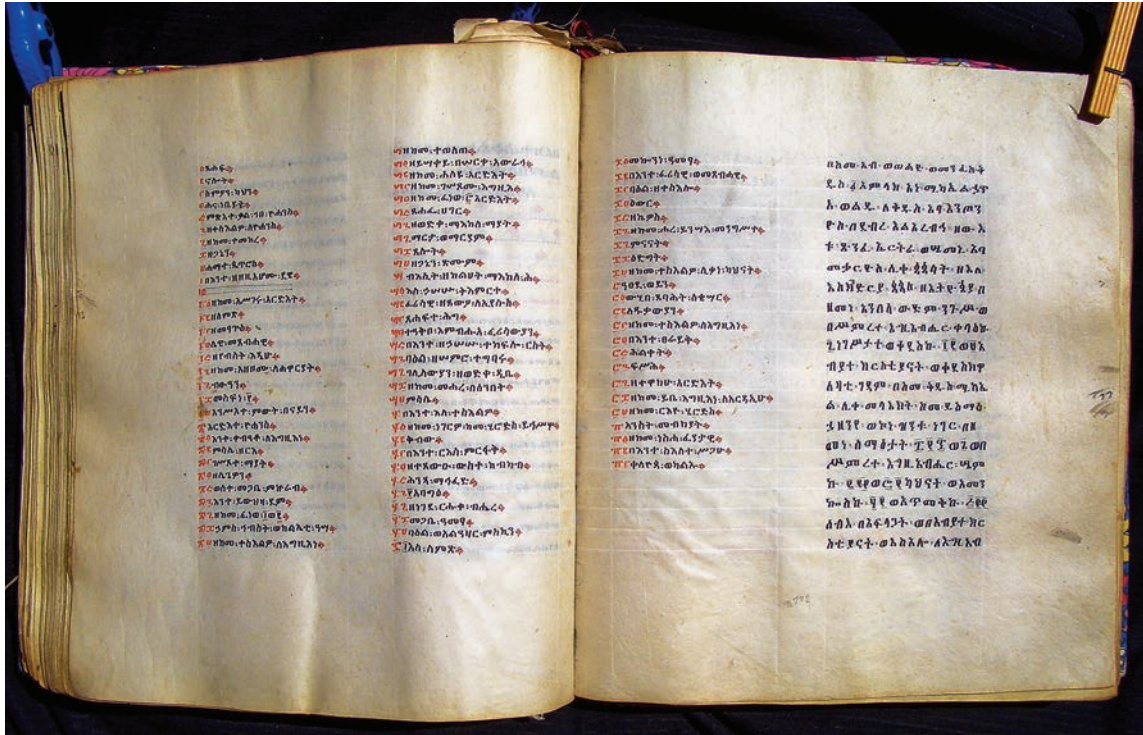


Fig. 6. Wambartā, Ethiopia, Mikā'el Ambā, manuscript of the Gospels, unnumbered folio. At top, on the recto, col. B, the beginning of the twelfth-century will of metropolitan Mikael, which continues, at bottom, on the verso. Photos by Michael Gervers.

and his centralizing tendencies. There is ample evidence that Amda Seyon faced a hard time in his attempts to subjugate Endarta (the region of Nazret), as witnessed in both a fourteenth-century grant<sup>41</sup> and a sixteenth-century deed,<sup>42</sup> and that he managed to secure loyalty only by appointing both his wife and his son as military governors there.<sup>43</sup> All told, Amda Seyon's forcible takeover of Endarta was certainly noteworthy, leaving an imprint even on later records.

Other notable Geez documents that reference Nazret are the so-called lists of metropolitans. Compiled from the fifteenth century on, probably on the basis of earlier documents or oral testimonies, these documents are very dry lists of names of metropolitans, only sometimes accompanied by vague chronological information ("who lived at the time of . . .") or the names of their burial places. Though these lists vary from one version to another, they sometimes intersect usefully: for example, the fifth and sixth metropolitans are said to be buried at Nazret.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, the two metropolitans supposedly buried there are unnamed, and the dates of their charges are also lacking. Notwithstanding the lacunae in the documentation, which attest to the discontinuity of the Ethiopian record regarding the history of the church in or after the fifteenth century, it is worth noting that the compiler envisioned the "earlier" as taking place at Nazret and knew of metropolitans' graves in that place.

41 A hint of this strategy is found in a thirteenth-century manuscript of the Gospels preserved at Ḥayq 'Ēstifānos, a powerful monastery that developed from the thirteenth century onward in the southern marches of the kingdom. On a blank page of this manuscript, King Amda Seyon pronounces, "God has given into my hands the governor [*makwannān*] of the Ḥntartā [= Endarta] with all his army, his people and his family and all his towns as far as Gabaza 'Aksum"; Tadesse Tamrat, "The Abbots of Dābrā-Hayq," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8.1 (1970): 87–117, at 95–96.

42 Two centuries later, a royal deed by King Ləbna Dəngəl (r. 1508–1540) looks back on these events in Endarta, asserting that two governors were actually involved in the rebellion: "Formerly, in the time of King 'Amda Ṣəyon, when Yā'əbika 'Ēgzi'ə and Ḥngedā 'Ēgzi'ə revolted, King 'Amda Ṣəyon issued orders, uprooted these revolters, destroyed them." C. Conti Rossini, *Liber Aksumae* (= CSCO, *Scriptores Aethiopicī, ser. altera*, 8), *Documenta ad Illustrandam Historiam I* (Paris, 1909–10), 30–31 (text), 36 (trans.).

43 Conti Rossini, "L'evangelo d'oro," 194–210.

44 I. Guidi, "Le Liste dei Metropoliti d'Abissinia," *Bessarione*, 37/38.4 (1899): 1–16.

The historical and political context of Nazret is further elucidated by a hitherto unpublished land grant housed in the manuscript library of the new Maryam church. The charter, appended to an otherwise blank folio in a twentieth-century manuscript of the *Hāymānota Abaw* (The Faith of the Fathers),<sup>45</sup> a compendium of writings by the church fathers and the patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch, states that the aforementioned King Amda Seyon donated lands to Metropolitan Sinodā (Shenoute). Aside from making an explicit connection between Amda Seyon and Nazret, the donation also inventories dependent lands of the metropolis and its clergy. The text reads:

አጤ፡ አምደ፡ ጽዮን፡ ለአቡነ፡ ሲኖዳ፡ ጉልት፡ ሲሰጡ፡ እደ  
[አዳ]፡ አባና፡ [several words erased] ገረብ፡ ድድቅ፡  
አድ፡ ቃለበስ፡ እስከ፡ ማይ፡ ነብር፡ ዘጋቡ፡ ወማይ፡ ከንያት፡  
ቤት፡ ገብርኤል፡ ማኪኤል፡ አምባ፡ በለሳ፡ አይባሸካ፡ ገኘ፡  
ሲረዋ፡ በገላ፡ ለሐደ፡ ?ገሬ፡ አለጀ፡ .<አ>ኒህ፡ የና<ዝ>ሬ፡  
ጉል<ት>፡.ናቸው

*Aṭē* (King) 'Amda [*sic*] Ṣəyon gave in *gwəlt* ["land donation"] to abuna Sinodā: [the lands of] 'Ēdā 'Abonā, [several words scraped] Garab Dədəq, 'Add Qālabas up to Māy Nabər, Zagābu, Wagəda, Kanyāt, Bet Gabrə'el, Mikā'el 'Ambā, Balasā, 'Aybāšakā, Gañ Sirawā, Bagalā Laḥad, [.]gare 'Alaḡa. These are the gwəlt of Nā[z]re.<sup>46</sup>

45 *Hāymānota Abaw*, twentieth century, ET-TG-W2-NO18, unnumbered folio, seen at Maryam Nazret in January 2020.

46 'Ēdā 'Abonā can be read as 'Ēndā 'Abonā, the name of the territory around Nazret (however, for a discussion about the name 'Ēdā 'Abonā, see below). Garab Dədəq is a tributary of the Nazret River, which meets it at the present town of Hewane. 'Add Qālabas or Addi Qālabas is a place located northwest of Nazret (see map, fig. 1). Māy Nabər is Māy Nabəri, a town west-northwest of Nazret. Zagābu and Wagəda are two areas in Waḡḡarāt, east-northeast of Nazret. Kanyāt and Bet Gabrə'el (probably the name of a church) are toponyms unknown to us. Mikā'el Ambā is well known for its rock-hewn church located in Wambartā, less than 100 km north of Nazret; it was consecrated by metropolitan Mikael. A river, Balasā, tributary of the Marab, is located to the north of Nazret. Aybāšakā must perhaps be corrected to Aybāšakā, known today as Aybā, a place south of Nazret. The location of Gañ Sirawā (or perhaps Gañ and Sirawā) is unknown to us. Sirawā could be Sirawāt, west of Mekele. Bagalā Laḥad remains unknown to us. [.]gare 'Alaḡa, perhaps to be read Ger Alaḡa, is a well-known stop for cattle merchants and herders, south of Nazret.

Yet this note is not without its problems. Written in the modern vernacular of Amharic (the administrative language of the federal state and the contemporary Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church patriarchal office), this document cannot be definitively connected with a lost Geez original. That said, local oral history seemingly confirms the historicity of abuna Sinodā, the grantee of Amda Seyon's lands. Informants in the contemporary village mentioned that four metropolitans were buried at Maryam Nazret, including Sinodā as well as Yəṣḥāq, Matēwos, and a fourth whose name was forgotten.<sup>47</sup> This oral information remains uncorroborated by written sources, since the aforementioned lists of metropolitans state that the metropolitans who were in charge under Amda Seyon's reign were "9. abbā Yā'əqob. 10. abbā Yoḥannəs. 11. abbā Maqārəs. 12. Yā'əqob the second, who went back to Jerusalem."<sup>48</sup> It is still possible, however, that a metropolitan or even just an elite clergyman named Sinodā lived or was buried at Nazret, but maybe not during the reign of Amda Seyon. Another possibility is that both the oral history and the Amharic note refer to the otherwise well-attested seventeenth-century metropolitan named Sinodā, whose tenure was marked by royal and episcopal disputes over land.<sup>49</sup> It is possible, then, that the Amharic land grant in the *Hāymānota Abaw* of Maryam Nazret conflates this later land dispute with the medieval reign of Amda Seyon.

Yet we need not look far for testimonies to the religious importance of Nazret in the medieval period. A trecento Italian portolan (nautical) chart, dated to 1367 and produced in Venice by brothers Domenico

and Francesco Pizigano,<sup>50</sup> records a church of Mary at a place called Nazret (*Sancta Maria de Nazaret*), in the region of Ethiopia lying close to Aksum (*Civitas Syone*, "City of Sion," i.e., Aksum). Although it is unclear how this information reached Venice, it is possible that the brothers heard of Nazret from Ethiopian pilgrims en route to the tombs of Peter and Paul in Rome, as much geographical knowledge of Ethiopia was transmitted at that time.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the mode of transmission, it is undeniable that the very presence of Maryam Nazret in this European map testifies to its status as metropolitan seat.

After the fourteenth century, Nazret is mentioned yet again, in a probably late-sixteenth-century hagiography entitled *The Life of Yoḥannəs of Dabra Zammado*.<sup>52</sup> The hagiography recounts the life of Yoḥannəs, the canonized abbot of the monastery of Dabra Zammado who lived during the reign of King Zar'a Yā'əqob (r. 1434–1468), and possibly after (1480s?). Whereas the Ethiopian metropolitan seat (if it had become a fixed place by then) certainly was by this time located far from Nazret, in the southern heartlands of the Solomonid kings (Shewa or Amhara),<sup>53</sup> we find echoes of its past importance. The mention of Nazret is noteworthy, as it was still recalled at least until Yoḥannəs's fifteenth-century *Life*. The locale is discussed as the place where chrism oil was produced. On Nazret the hagiography states:

47 Malāka Bərḥān Nagā Ṣəḡāy, priest of Maryam Nazret church, interviewed in October 2014.

48 M. Ambu, "Lists of Metropolitans' Burial Places: A Study on the Toponymical Memory of the Ethiopian Church," in Derat et al., *Bishops and Bishoprics*, 339–40. M. Ambu, "L'expulsion du métropolitain copte Yā'əqob (1337–1344) par le roi 'Amda Ṣəyon (1314–1344): Une politique de tolérance vis-à-vis des communautés musulmanes d'Éthiopie?," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 153 (2023): 117–34.

49 See Ambu, "Metropolitans' Burial Places," table 5 (B-type list, the longest list of metropolitans), where Sinodā is the hundredth metropolitan; I. Guidi, *Annales Iohannis I, Iyasu I, Bakaffa* (= CSCO, *Scriptores Aethiopicis*, ser. altera, 5 part I) (Paris, 1903), 25, 36; I. Guidi, "Il Ser'ata Mangest," *RendLinc*, ser. 5, 31 (1922): 65–94, at 86–89; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria II*, 92–93.

50 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Ms. Parm. 1612. See M. Longhena, "Atlanti e carte nautiche dal secolo XIV al XVII conservati nella Biblioteca e nell'Archivio di Parma," *Archivio storico per le Province Parmensi*, n.s. 7 (1907): 135–78, at 137–48; idem, "La carte dei Pizigano del 1367 (posseduta dalla Biblioteca Palatina di Parma)," *Archivio Storico per le Province Parmensi*, 4th ser., 5 (1953): 25–130, at 88–89; T. Campbell, "Portolan Charts from the Late Thirteenth Century to 1500," in *The History of Cartography*, vol. 1, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. J. B. Harley and D. Woodward (Chicago, 1987), 371–463.

51 S. Kelly, *Translating Faith: Ethiopian Pilgrims in Renaissance Rome* (Cambridge, 2024), 119–40, 181–211.

52 Dabra Zammado (or Žammadu Māryām) is a thirteenth-century monastery founded by a monk named Bartolomewos (Bartholomew) some hundred kilometers south of Nazret. E. Balicka-Witakowska, "Žämmädu Maryam," *EAE* 5:133–35.

53 M.-L. Derat, *Le Domaine des rois éthiopiens 1270–1527: Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris, 2003), 64–84.

Then our father Yoḥannəs went out in the desert of Qabtyā [“of Egypt,” “of the Copts”]<sup>54</sup> and accomplished here a fast for forty days. An angel came to him and gave him the *meron* [Geez for “chrism oil,” from the Greek *myron*, “holy oil”] while saying: “Take [it and] anoint your children.” And our father Yoḥannəs thought, when the angel revealed himself to him, that there was no consecration without *meron*. Then he set out from there and went to the city of Nāzret, the place of our father Salāmā, and also here he finished a fast for forty days and bought the *meron* to anoint his children as the angel told him.<sup>55</sup>

This passage is important for two reasons. First, we see that by the fifteenth century, Nazret had lost its importance as a metropolitan center, but was still a functioning church, as well as the place where Ethiopian clerics from elsewhere could buy chrism oil for their pastoral duties. Second, we understand that Nazret is remembered as “the place of our father Salāmā,” probably the same Salāmā known from other sources as the metropolitan of Ethiopia from 1348 to 1388.<sup>56</sup> This second point suggests that Nazret was a powerful center of Ethiopian Christianity in the north, at least for a few years following Amda Seyon’s fourteenth-century takeover. In this respect, it is possible that

54 There is also a place named Qabdyā located in Salawa, southwest of Maryam Nazret.

55 Text in Geez: ወእምነ፡ ወዕለ፡ አቡነ፡ ዮሐንስ፡ ውስተ፡ ገዳም፡ ቀብትያ፡ ወፈጸመ፡ በህየ፡ ጾም፡ ሿመዋዕለ፡ ወመጽአ፡ ጎቤሁ፡ መልአክ፡ ወወሀቦ፡ ቅብአ፡ ሜሮን፡ እንዘ፡ ይብል፡ ንሣእ፡ ቅብአም፡ ለደቂቅክ፡ ወሐለየ፡ አቡነ፡ ዮሐንስ፡ ሰባ፡ አስተርአዮ፡ መልአክ፡ ከመ፡ ኢይከውን፡ ቅዳሴ፡ ዘእንበለ፡ ቅብአ፡ ሜሮን፡ ወእምነ፡ ተንሥኦ፡ እምህየ፡ ወሐረ፡ ሀገረ፡ ናዝሬት፡ መካነ፡ አቡነ፡ ሰላማ፡ ወበህየነ፡ ፈጸመ፡ ጾም፡ ሿመዋዕለ፡ ወተሣየጠ፡ ቅብአ፡ ሜሮን፡ ይቅብአም፡ ለደቂቁ፡ በከመ፡ ይቤሎ፡ መልአክ፡። See Getatchew Haile, *Voices from Däbrä Zāmāddo: Acts of Abba Bärtālomewos and Abba Yoḥannəs; 45 miracles of Mary* (Wiesbaden, 2013), 44.

56 Ambu, “Metropolitans’ Burial Places,” 342–44, 356. On Salāmā, see also M. Chaïne, “La date de la mort du métropolitain Abba Salama,” *Aethiops: Bulletin Gaʿaz* 1–3 (1922): 33–36; A. van Lantschoot, “Abba Salama, métropolitain d’Éthiopie (1348–1388) et son rôle de traducteur,” *Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Etiopici, Roma 2–4 aprile 1959* (Rome, 1960), 397–401; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria II*, 8–19; M. Ambu, “Du texte à la communauté: Relations et échanges entre l’Égypte copte et les réseaux monastiques éthiopiens (XIII<sup>e</sup>–XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles)” (PhD diss., University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2022), 29–203.

Nazret was part of a network of temporary residences for the metropolitan.<sup>57</sup>

### Nazret after the Metropolitans: Foreign Descriptions and Local Memories

Nazret appears to have lost its prominence as a religious center in the early fifteenth century, when it was supplanted by a more southerly metropolitan seat—reported by the *Life* of Yoḥannəs of Dabra Zammado as several days’ walk from Nazret. The reason for this move was that the kingdom was now based in the south, not the Tigrayan north. With the metropolitan, his court, and his apparatus relocated close to the main royal camp,<sup>58</sup> the king could better monitor the church hierarchy. Despite this move, however, it appears that the religious community at Nazret continued to carry out a unique ritual function—the consecration of chrism oil—and was still doing so two centuries later. After the documentation on the abbot Yoḥannəs of Dabra Zammado, discussed above, the Ethiopian sources are mostly silent on Nazret, though we find other tantalizing mentions in later European travel accounts.

The first European source on Nazret is from the 1520–1526 travelogue of Francisco Álvares, a chaplain of the Portuguese embassy dispatched by King Manoel I (r. 1495–1521) who was sent to the court of the Ethiopian King Ləbna Dəngəl (r. 1508–1540). While in Ethiopia he wrote about a “large monastery named Nazareth” where “they [his Ethiopian informants] say it is one of large revenues and many monks, and that there are in it abundance of grapes, peaches, and other fruits.”<sup>59</sup>

Among the Portuguese embassy was João Bermudes, a surgeon, who wrote another related, albeit

57 This would explain why Salāmā himself was not buried in Nazret, but in a place called Ḥaqālit, which is a yet unknown locale; see Ambu, “Metropolitans’ Burial Places,” 341–43, 356.

58 On Fra Mauro’s *mappa mundi* (circa 1450), the place where the then “patriarch” [*sic*] lives is represented close to the capital of the king at Barara. See P. Falchetta, *Fra Mauro’s World: Map, with a Commentary and Translations of the Inscriptions* (Turnhout, 2006), 195.

59 F. Álvares, *The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, Being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520*, ed. C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford [Cambridge, 1961], 183. The text in Portuguese (F. Álvares, *Verdadeira informação das terras do Preste João das Índias* [Lisbon, 1889], 48) reads “dizem ser de muita renda & de muitos frades, & que ha nelle muitas huuas & peseuos, & outras frutas.”

more fanciful travelogue in 1547: the *Breve relação*.<sup>60</sup> Like Álvares, Bermudes discussed Nazret in the context of his second visit to Ethiopia in 1539, when he was again dispatched by the Portuguese crown to aid the Ethiopian king in his war against Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī's jihad (1527–1543) in the neighboring sultanate. Although a known charlatan, who among other things pretended to be the legitimate metropolitan of Ethiopia, chosen by his predecessor before the latter's death (ca. 1536), and later the Latin-rite patriarch of Ethiopia (1539),<sup>61</sup> Bermudes provides crucial information about Nazret and its status in the 1540s. He states that while pursuing the enemy (called *mouros*, i.e., "Moors," or Muslims), they reached the deserted military camp of imam Aḥmad, located in the mountainous "province of Nazaré," that is, Nazret.<sup>62</sup> With this, Bermudes declares Nazret's special status:

[Nazret] belongs to the Patriarchs [*sic* for metropolitans]; their own property, with full jurisdiction, without the King interfering in it at all, nor does he receive any income from it. It yields to the Patriarchs three thousand ounces of gold a-year; which the King Thedrus [Tewodros? r. 1413–1414]<sup>63</sup> granted to them for a certain offence he committed against a Patriarch.<sup>64</sup>

From Bermudes' description of Nazret, we can note several important details, namely that as late as the sixteenth century the territory and its people were still held in fief by the head of the Ethiopian Church. Moreover, both Álvares and Bermudes confirm that Nazret's land generated considerable revenue. Indeed, this may be why the Muslim Ethiopian armies, still in the sixteenth century, attempted to conquer Nazret:

60 J. Bermudez, *Breve relação da embaixada que o patriarcha D. João Bermudez trouxe do imperador da Ethiopia, chamado vulgarmente Preste João, dirigida a el-rei D. Sebastião* (Lisbon, 1875), 32–33.

61 A. Martínez, "Bermudez, João," *EAE* 1:540–41.

62 Bermudez, *Breve relação*, 33: "Estas terras & comarca toda se chama a prouincia de Nazaré." See also R. S. Whiteway, *The Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia in 1541–1543* (London, 1902), 160.

63 Thedrus, if an actual king, was certainly Tewodros, King Dāwit's (r. 1382–1413) son, who reigned for only nine months in succession to his father before his own demise in 1414. M.-L. Derat, "Tewodros I" in *EAE*, 4:929–30.

64 Translated into English by Whiteway, *Portuguese Expedition*, 160.

although it was no longer a metropolitan seat, its land-holdings were still a cornucopia.

Returning to the story told by Bermudes about the metropolitan (abuna) and king Tewodros, we find this tale told again some two centuries later (with some noteworthy new details) in a 1728 edition of another, later Portuguese travelogue: that of Jerónimo Lobo (1625–1634).<sup>65</sup> The edition in question was published and edited in French translation by Joachim Le Grand, an archivist and historian, who accompanied it with a long historical commentary.<sup>66</sup> Whereas Le Grand largely parrots earlier observations that the abuna drew from extensive fiefs in Tigray, he also states, contrary to Bermudes, that the metropolitan's income was in fact taxed by King Tewodros (here spelled Théodore) annually.<sup>67</sup> While the source of this information is unclear, it is possible that Nazret could still generate income for the abuna even in the seventeenth (or eighteenth) centuries. The text has other clues. In contrast to the current appellation of the land of Nazret, which in Tigrinya is 'Addi 'Abuna ("the village of the abuna")<sup>68</sup> as per the local memory of Nazret's medieval status, Le Grand refers to it as "Eda Abuna," that is, 'Ēdā 'Abunā (in Geez or Tigrinya). Indeed, this is most likely the same 'Ēdā 'Abonā (in Amharic) as in the list of Nazret's fiefdoms examined above.<sup>69</sup> In Geez the word 'Ēdā (ዕዳ) means "compensation" (related to the Tigrinya ዕዳ: [ʔdā], "debt, fine, tribute").<sup>70</sup> Hence Le Grand's rendering of "Eda Abuna" translates to "the compensation/fine of the abuna," rather

65 A. Martínez, "Lobo, Jerónimo," *EAE* 3:590.

66 J. Lobo, *Itinerário* (M. Le Grand, trans., *Voyage historique d'Abissinie du R. P. Jerome Lobo de la compagnie de Jésus, traduit du Portugais, continué & augmenté de plusieurs dissertations, lettres & mémoires*, 2 vols. [Amsterdam, 1728]); Martínez, "Lobo," 590.

67 Lobo, *Itinerário* (Le Grand, *Voyage historique d'Abissinie*, 2:355): "L'Abuna jouit de plusieurs grandes terres qui lui donnent un revenu d'autant plus considérable, que dans un pays où tout le monde est esclave, les Fermiers sont exempts de toute sorte de tribut, ou ne payent qu'à lui seul, à la réserve des terres qu'il possède dans le Royaume de Tigré, qui sont chargées d'une rente de cinq cents écus envers le Roi; elle lui a été imposée par le Roi Théodore, et on l'appelle Eda Abuna, l'amende de l'Abuna; on fait encore pour lui une quête de sel et de toile qui lui rapporte beaucoup."

68 A village north of Aksum also bears this name. See Tecle-haimanot Gebresellasié, "Addi Abun," *EAE* 1:74–75.

69 See above, n. 45.

70 W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge'ez* (Wiesbaden, 1991), 57; T. L. Kane, *Tigrinya-English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Springfield, VA, 2000), 1926.

than the modern “the village of the abuna.” We confess that we do not know what sources Le Grand consulted or their dates. But still we are tempted to understand Le Grand’s translation as another echo of the long tradition regarding the metropolitan’s continued ownership of the land of Nazret even after it ceased to be the metropolis and of the ever-changing story of its fiscal status.

Among the oral histories that can be heard in and around Nazret, a “layer” of memory that deserves consideration concerns Amda Seyon, the king of Ethiopia (r. 1314–1344) who subjugated Tigray. In the 1930s, the Italian scholar Giovanni Ellero collected oral histories around monastic communities in Endarta and noted that monks at the oldest monasteries ascribed their foundations to either the legendary Aksumite brother kings Abrəhā and Aṣbəhā (fourth century) or the kings Yəkuno Amlāk (r. 1270–1285) and Amda Seyon (r. 1314–1344).<sup>71</sup> More specifically, in nearby Waḡḡarāt, villagers told Conti Rossini that their settlement began as King Amda Seyon’s military camp.<sup>72</sup> Inquiries conducted around Nazret by Anfray in the 1960s have further documented this connection to Amda Seyon: in ‘Addi Qalabas (some 7 km northwest of Maryam Nazret), for instance, he was told by the villagers that King Amda Seyon was buried there—his supposed sarcophagus was found as the villagers were digging the foundations of their new church.<sup>73</sup> Our own inquiries around Nazret yielded more stories referring to the time of Amda Seyon: at a place a few kilometers to the west of Maryam Nazret, local parishioners told us that there was the residence of abuna Sinodā, the otherwise undocumented character who is alleged to have been the metropolitan during Amda Seyon’s reign.<sup>74</sup> Can it be proof that this Sinodā really existed or at least suggest that archaeological test pits at this place would reveal an episcopal complex? While we should be cautious in our engagement with these oral histories, especially since Amda Seyon is today one of Ethiopia’s most valorized monarchs from the past, we think that these pieces of evidence should not be rejected outright.

71 G. Ellero, “Note sull’Endertà,” *Rassegna di studi etiopici* 1.2 (1941): 146–72; D. Nosnitsin, *Churches and Monasteries of Tigray: A Survey of Manuscript Collections* (Wiesbaden, 2013), 264–74.

72 Conti Rossini, “Uoggerat,” 82.

73 Anfray, “Notes archéologiques,” 36–38, fig. 18.

74 Qes Bərḥān Gabra, priest of the nearby church of Māryām Ṣəyon Gabazyā, interviewed in October 2018.

Troublingly, the supposed residence of abuna Sinodā was related to us in Tigrinya as ‘Addi Gəbsi, that is, “the place of the Egyptians.” Like ‘Addi ‘Abuna, mentioned earlier, ‘Addi Gəbsi is most likely a toponym that came down to the present from a time when Nazret was the metropolitan seat of Ethiopia.

### Nazret through the Lens of Archaeology: The Twelfth-Century Church (Old Maryam Nazret) and Its Satellite (Golgotha)

Our initial work at Maryam Nazret in 2014 was prompted by the hypothesis that the remains of Old Maryam Nazret were, in fact, those of the church that metropolitan Mikael commissioned in the mid-twelfth century. As we shall illustrate here, our archaeological investigations there in 2018 and 2020 strongly support this hypothesis: the church of Mary was a great five-aisled church from the mid-twelfth century. Moreover we also uncovered a smaller, satellite church, Golgotha, from the same period. Underscoring the validity of these conclusions are uncovered artifacts as well as building techniques whose presence at Maryam Nazret can only be explained with reference to Islamic Egypt and its Coptic Christian dependents.

As discussed in the introduction, the medieval church of Old Maryam Nazret is entirely ruined; only the eastern portion stands today, consisting of four sanctuaries, three of which are domed. Because of the standing remains’ motley construction, we were able to discern three architectural phases in the eastern façade of Old Maryam Nazret (Fig. 7).<sup>75</sup> The basement (phase 1) is a platform made of stacked and recessed large dressed stones, reminiscent of Aksumite podiums, whereas the second layer built atop it (phase 2) is assembled from small ashlar set in mortar beds. A partial destruction of the second masonry level (phase 2) led to ad-hoc restorations (phase 3) at a later point, made with rubble masonry and earth mortar.

The aim of our excavations therefore was to reassess and date the phases of the standing ruin. Moreover, a major objective was to demonstrate that the surviving chambers were indeed the eastern sanctuaries of a great church—seemingly five-aisled, so as to correspond with the east sanctuaries. As we shall show, the foundations of the church remain buried under centuries of backfill.

75 Derat et al., “Māryām Nāzret.”

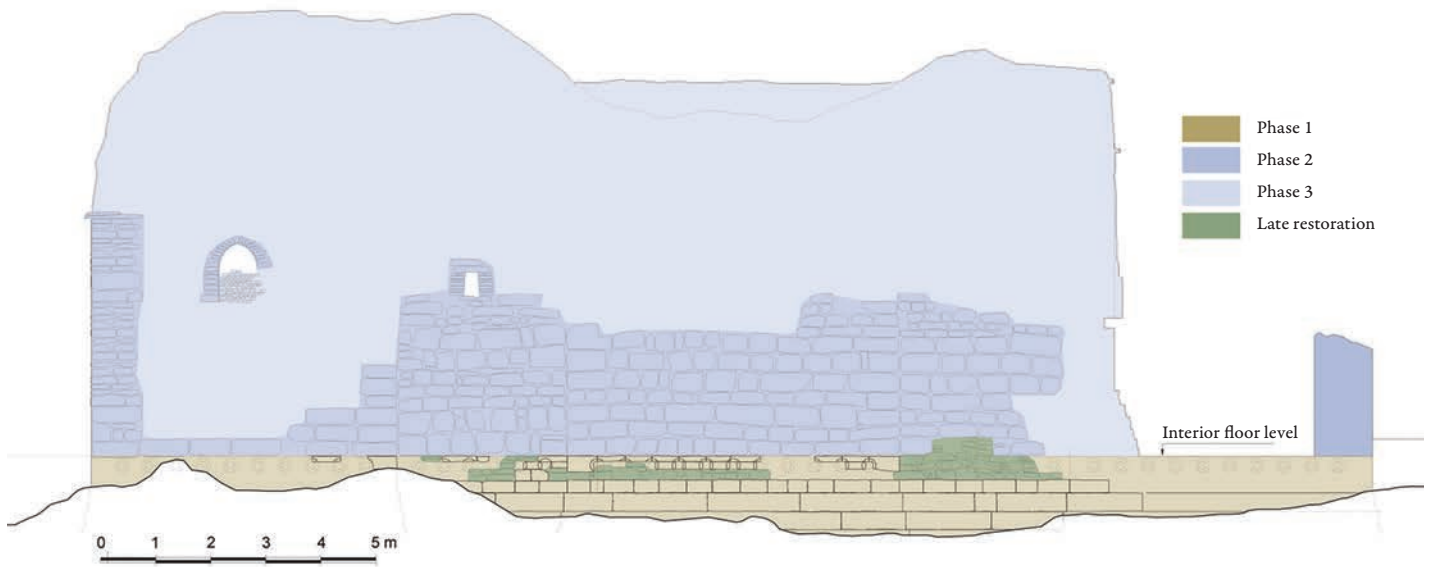


Fig. 7. Architectural phases of the eastern façade of Old Maryam Nazret. Drawing by Antoine Garric.

Here, we describe the archaeological layers proceeding from top to bottom. In 2018 and 2020 we opened three soundings in the precinct of Old Maryam Nazret (Fig. 8). Sector 1 was opened to the immediate west of the building (in front of the central sanctuary), to examine the relation between the standing remains and the buried platform. Within this sector, we deliberately included a standing pillar, in order to investigate its relation to the buried substructure. We opened sector 2 on the compound's southern edge, to determine the overall dimensions of the submerged platform. Sector 3 was opened on the eastern façade of the church, to assess the overall height of the substructure. All of our archaeological work was carried out under the supervision of the federal and regional cultural authorities with the agreement and participation of the local community, whose members were employed in the excavations. Mindful of the liturgical obligations of the parishioners, no excavations occurred while services or parish meetings were being held at the new Maryam church.

As we broke ground in sectors 1 and 2, we encountered numerous graves (Fig. 9; see also Appendix 2). The presence of tombs just under the surface came as a surprise, as they were not remembered by the community. After consulting with the village parishioners, religious dignitaries, and heritage authorities, we were permitted to fully exhume twelve sepultures (SP03, SP07,

SP08, SP09, SP10, SP11, SP12, SP13, SP14, SP15, SP16, and SP17). Under the direction of our forensic archaeologist (Yves Gleize), our excavation of these remains included the careful collection of the bones, which we deposited in a dedicated room within the church compound for later interment. Other burials we simply observed and left unexcavated. Our objective in this aspect of the excavation was to document the funerary practices used at Nazret, as well as to date the fully excavated graves, in order to develop a *terminus ante quem* for the substructure and its ruination. All the burials (save perhaps one, SP17; see below) were interred in a 0.9 m thick layer of rubble and heterogeneous sediment—a demolition layer that had accumulated over the earlier level. We found these graves interred to varying depths, with some tombs stacked. All the deceased were interred in an east–west direction (with some variations) with their heads to the west, laid on their backs and face up, with their upper limbs extended or slightly flexed. They appear to have been Christian, as found in other Ethiopian contexts.<sup>76</sup> Depositions

76 For example, J. Leclant, “Les fouilles à Axoum en 1955–1956: Rapport préliminaire,” *AnnEth* 3 (1959): 3–23; H. de Contenson, “Les fouilles à Axoum en 1957: Rapport préliminaire,” *AnnEth* 3 (1959): 25–42; Derat and Jouquand, *Gabriel*, 150–51; Gaudiello and Yule, *Mifsa Babri*, 189; V. M. Fernández et al., *The Archaeology of the Jesuit Missions in Ethiopia (1557–1632)*, Jesuit Studies: Modernity through

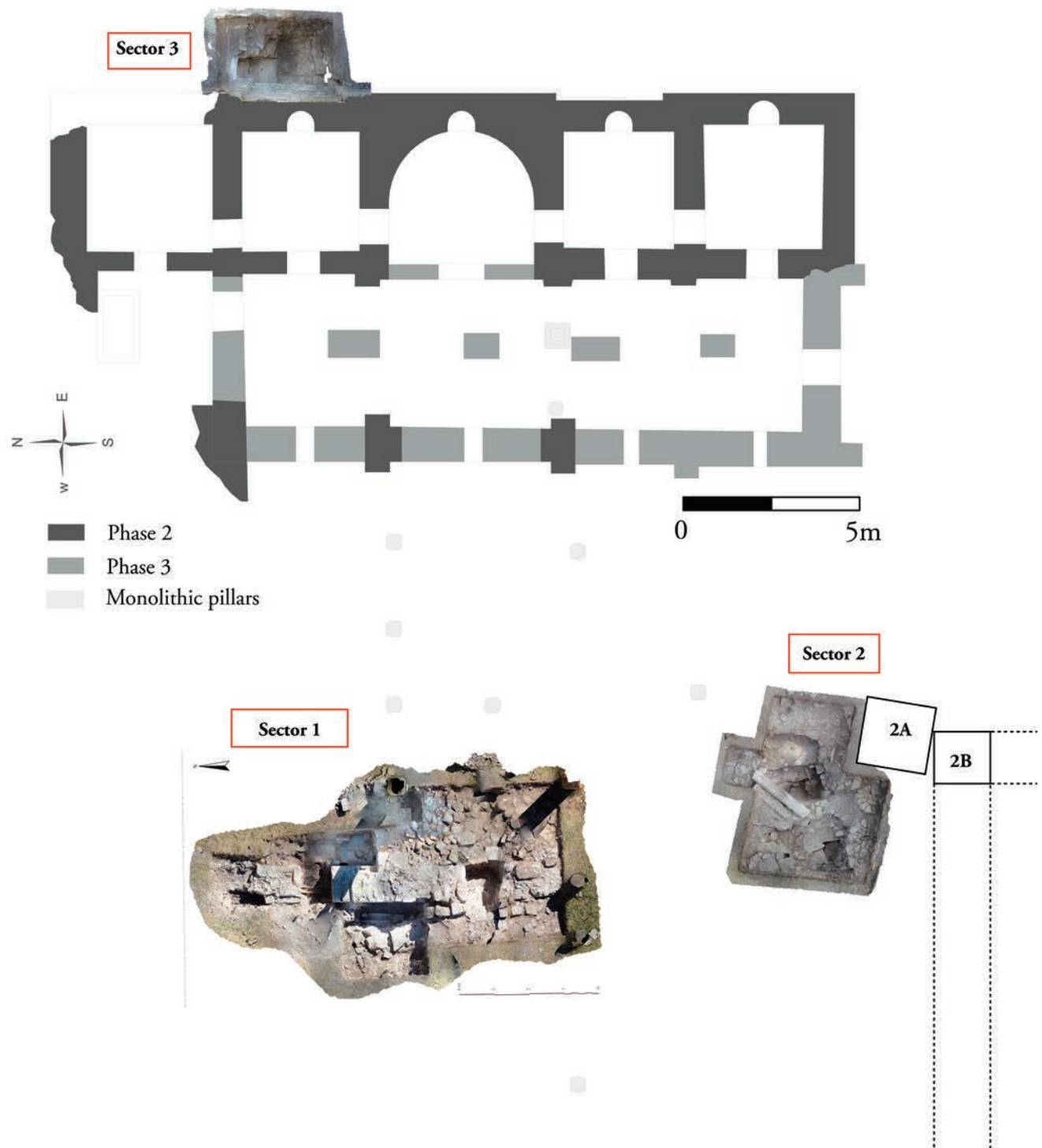


Fig. 8. Location of the three archaeological soundings. Drawing and photogrammetry by Antoine Garric and Romain Mensan.

Fig. 9.  
Burials in  
sector 1. Photo  
by Yves Gleize.



within or in the vicinity of churches, however, often do not adhere to these patterns, as built or ruined elements often obstruct the placement of the bodies.<sup>77</sup> One of the most superficial graves (SP08) was dated between the mid-seventeenth century and the present day.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, the deepest grave (SP17) was of a child of undetermined sex between seven and twelve years of age,<sup>79</sup> carefully embedded in a space once occupied by a

slab belonging to the underlying paved floor and dated between the mid-fifteenth and the early seventeenth centuries.<sup>80</sup> Whereas the earliest grave (SP17) was possibly interred in the active church, the subsequent burials were all made after the main vessel's demolition, an adaptive reuse of funerary places otherwise well documented in Ethiopia.<sup>81</sup>

Underneath this layer of demolition was the pavement of the church, similar to that in the standing sanctuary, made of large slabs of gray marly limestone, in

the Prism of Jesuit History 10 (Leiden, 2017), 152–56; Y. Gleize et al., “Le cimetière de Qedemt (Lalibela): Données préliminaires issues des campagnes 2010 et 2012,” *AnnEth* 30 (2015): 225–60; Y. Gleize, *Qedemt et les espaces funéraires de Lalibela (XI<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Toulouse, 2023).

77 For example Derat and Jouquand, *Gabriel*, 158–59; Gleize, *Qedemt*, 48–49, 66.

78 Beta-657950. 220 +/- 30 BP = 1731–1806 cal CE (48.1%); 1640–1687 cal CE (35.5%); 1926–after 1950 CE (11.8%).

79 The works consulted for the excavations of the human remains and their anthropological determinations were H. Duday, *The Archaeology of the Dead: Lectures in Archaeoethnology* (Oxford, 2009); J. Bruzek, “A Method for Visual Determination of Sex, Using the Human Hip Bone,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 117 (2002): 157–68; C. F. A. Moorrees, E. A. Fanning, and E. E. J. Hunt, “Formation and Resorption of Three Deciduous Teeth in

Children,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 21 (1963): 205–13; eadem, “Age Variation of Formation Stages for Ten Permanent Teeth,” *Journal of Dental Research* 42 (1963): 1490–1502; P. Murail et al., “DSP: A Probabilistic Sex Diagnosis Tool Using Worldwide Variation of Pelvic Measurements,” *Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d’anthropologie de Paris* 17 (2005): 167–76; A. Schmitt, “Une nouvelle méthode pour estimer l’âge au décès des adultes à partir de la surface sacro-pelvienne iliaque,” *Bulletins et mémoires de la Société d’anthropologie de Paris* 17 (2005): 89–101.

80 Beta-657951. 400 +/- 30 BP = 1437–1522 cal CE (73.8%); 1574–1625 cal CE (21.6%).

81 Derat and Jouquand, *Gabriel*, 147–61; Gaudiello and Yule, *Mifsa Bahri*, 189–235; Fernandez et al., *Archaeology of the Jesuit Missions*, 152–56.



Fig. 10.  
Founding system of  
a monolithic pier in  
sector 1. Photo by  
Romain Mensan.

between wooden thresholds. An archaeological examination of the founding system of the monolithic pier mentioned earlier (the only structure standing above the surface before our excavations) showed that it was erected in an integral manner with the paving (Fig. 10). On top of, and structurally linked with the paving, was a transverse (parallel to the sanctuaries) masonry wall made of sandstone blocks cast in lime concrete, preserved over a height of 90 cm (Fig. 11). Few artifacts were found on this level, and the limited scope of our sounding did not allow us to reconstruct the full ground plan of the church. That said, we still found important clues about the layout from this sounding. Whereas a detailed examination of the four standing sanctuaries has revealed a collapse of the fifth sanctuary, the uncovered pier sockets in the church pavement reveal that colonnades once aligned with the five chambers so as to form a great timber-roofed five-aisled church. Moreover, the material and the height of the pavement of the church in the excavated sector are identical with those in the standing chambers. In sum, these observations confirm that the unearthed paving, lime-concrete dividing wall, and standing sanctuaries are all integral parts of what was once a large church.

Our excavations in sector 1 also provided information about the church's date. A sample from one of the wooden thresholds yielded a radiocarbon date between

the late ninth and the late tenth centuries.<sup>82</sup> Whereas this range tells us only when the tree was felled, this early date is compatible with a twelfth-century construction, for in the Ethiopian highlands, old, well-cured wood was often reused, sometimes after centuries.<sup>83</sup> On the lower end of the chronology, the thin layer of charcoal ash coating the pavement's surface from its final occupation phase was tested, revealing a terminus ante quem in the mid-fifteenth to mid-seventeenth century.<sup>84</sup> The sample, obtained from an unidentified wood object that was burned in the church, indicates that the church was still standing and may still have hosted mass as late as the mid-fifteenth century, when the demolition occurred, a chronology in full agreement with the later interments above it.

The goal of our soundings in sectors 2 and 3 was to better assess the outer facing of the "Aksumite podium" as well as its relation to the ruined church above. Sector 3 was opened at the foot of the eastern face of the church, where the foundation platform was

82 Beta-656106. 1120 +/- 30 BP = 876–994 cal CE (92.8%); 833–846 cal CE (1.4%); 776–784 cal CE (1.3%).

83 M. Muehlbauer, "A Rock-Hewn Yəmṛəhannā Krəstos? An Investigation into Possible 'Northern' Zagwe Churches near 'Addigrat, Təgray," *Aethiopica* 23 (2020): 31–56, at 35–36.

84 Beta-511807. 340 +/- 30 BP = 1470–1640 cal CE (95.4%).

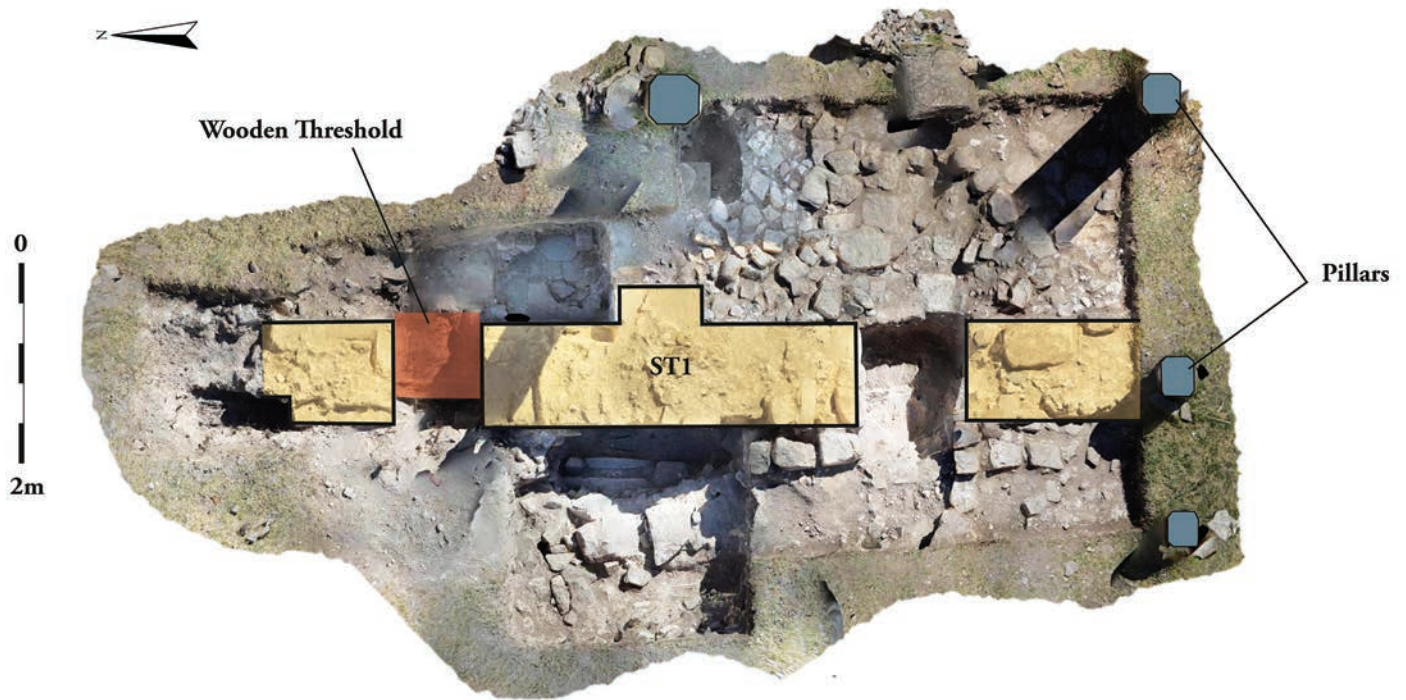


Fig. 11. Masonry wall made of sandstone blocks cast in lime concrete. Photo and drawing by Romain Mensan.

already partially exposed. There, our test pit went down to the bedrock, exposing the entire elevation and its foundation. We found that the stepped platform was once monumental, measuring some 3 m in height, and made of nine courses of large dressed limestone blocks (Fig. 12). Most surprising was the discovery of a rubble foundation bound with the same mortar revealed in sector 2 (Fig. 13). In these two sectors charcoal samples were collected at the base of the rubble masonry (in close contact with the bedrock), revealing exactly the same time span: the eleventh to twelfth centuries.<sup>85</sup> These convergent results are important in that they provide the terminus quo ante for the laying of the building's foundation on the bedrock. Crucially, these dates also reveal that both the "Aksumite-style" platform and the domed sanctuaries above result from a single phase of building works—a date range that also supports the attribution of the church to Metropolitan Mikael's episcopacy. In sum, although the foundation (phase 1) and the domed sanctuaries (phase 2) are divergent in typology, our radiocarbon dates point to their having been

produced close together in time and no earlier than the eleventh century (see Appendix 3). The platform is thus not Aksumite per se, but rather "Aksumite" in style. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that there was an Aksumite settlement at Nazret centuries before Old Maryam Nazret was built (we shall return to this later). Following a period of fire and abandonment, the building was restored (phase 3), especially in the still-standing eastern section. This restoration involved various contrasting techniques, including rubble masonry and earth mortar.

Though the site of Old Maryam Nazret is the focal point of our research, it is to be expected that the surrounding area will also reveal material remains of various kinds. As the written sources and oral testimonies gathered above suggest, Nazret was not just a church lost in the countryside, but probably a religious and agrarian "landscape" comprising villages of farmers and skilled craftsmen, Egyptian and Ethiopian monasteries, and garrisons of soldiers. In this respect, the accidental discovery of a small site that could long have gone unnoticed gives an idea of the archaeological potential of the Nazret landscape. In 2014, at a place half an hour's walk to the northeast

85 Beta-569080. 940 +/- 30 BP = 1025–1160 cal CE (95.4%); Beta-569079. 960 +/- 30 BP = 1020–1155 cal CE (95.4%).

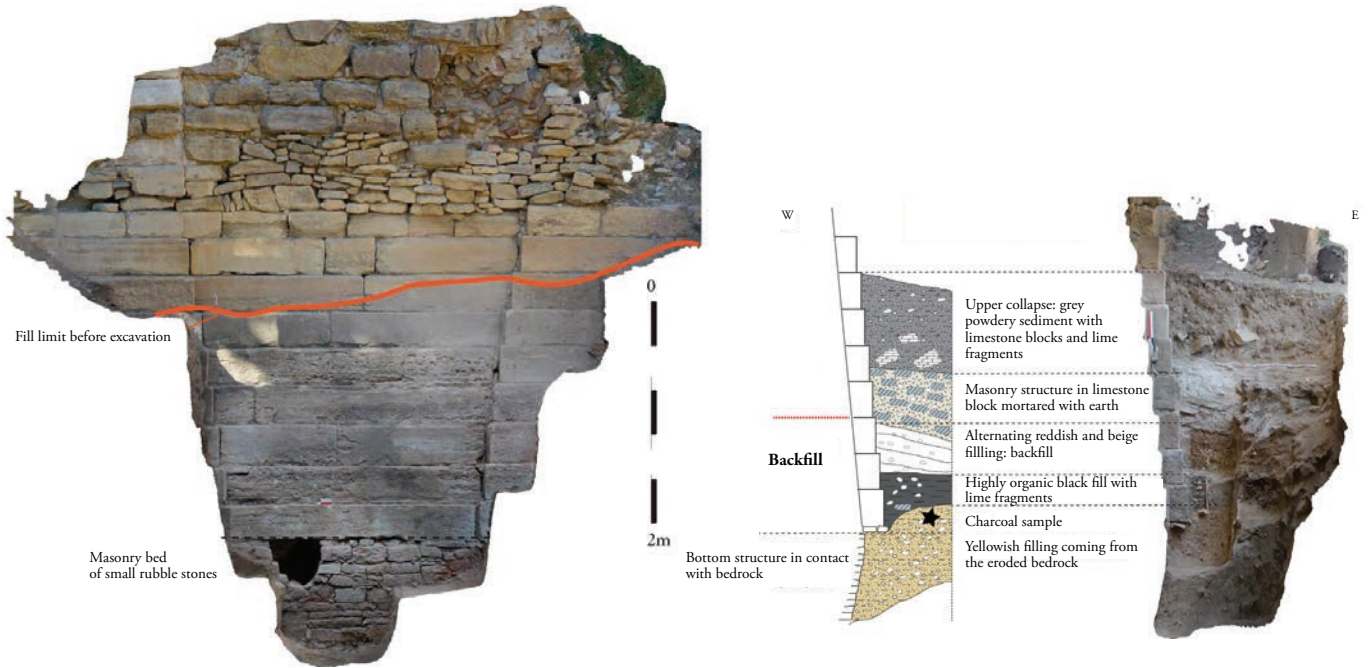


Fig. 12. The stepped platform revealed by the archaeological excavation in sector 3 (eastern façade of the Old Maryam Nazret). Photo and drawing by Romain Mensan.

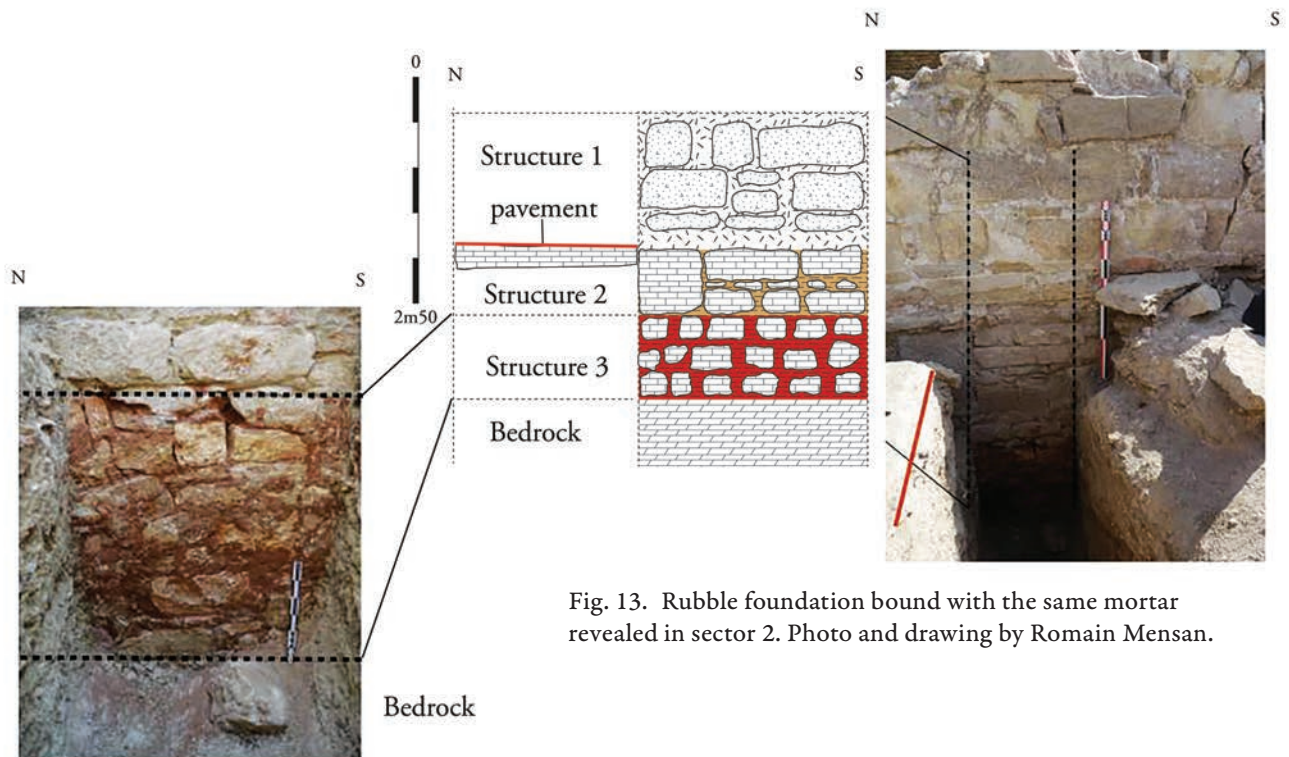


Fig. 13. Rubble foundation bound with the same mortar revealed in sector 2. Photo and drawing by Romain Mensan.

Fig. 14.  
Northeast and southeast  
corners of Golgotha.  
Drawing by Antoine Garric.

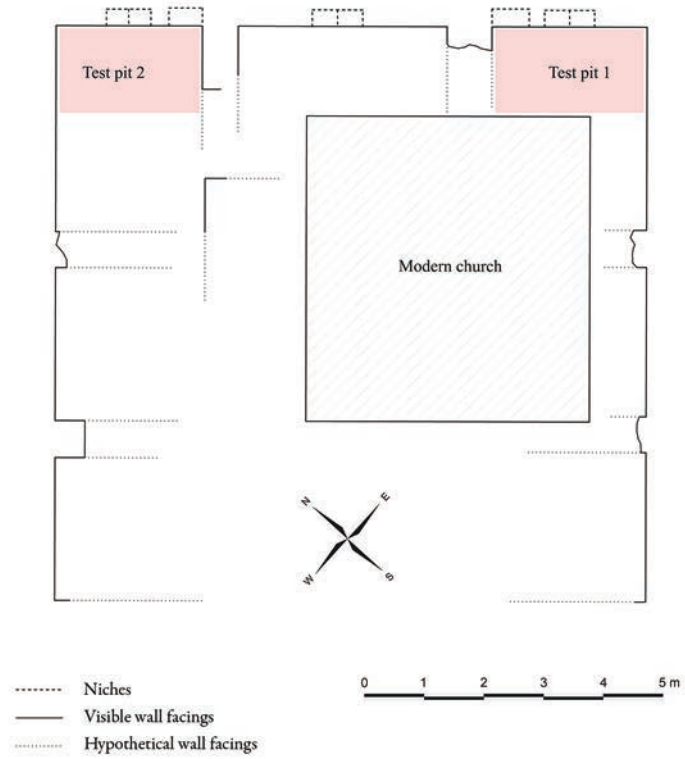


Fig. 15.  
The northeastern  
niche and shelf of  
the Golgotha  
church. Photo by  
Romain Mensan.



of Nazret, another tiny, ruined church was accidentally exposed when the villagers were digging the foundations of a new church. After the structures visible on the surface were exposed and a quick clearing, the niches on the east wall with their Coptic attributes suggested that this building was a monastic satellite of Old Maryam Nazret.<sup>86</sup> That place is called Golgotha. In 2018 we were able to make two narrow soundings in the building's northeast and southeast corners (Fig. 14); their depths were dictated by the uneven terrain. We reached the pavement of the building, identical in construction to that at Nazret, that is, marly limestone slabs. The excavation also confirmed that Golgotha was a modest church, subdivided into three aisles, each terminating on the east with a flat apse fitted with corbeled, four-centered pointed-arch niche hoods (the central apse could not be excavated). Apart from the arch hoods, we also found there two squared shelves. As at Nazret, we discovered the interior of Golgotha fully finished with plaster throughout (Fig. 15). The southeast shelf was quite significant in that it yielded fragments of ostrich-egg shell as well as a number of multicolored glass shards (which are discussed below; see also Appendix 5 for the results of the chemical analyses on glass). Our radiocarbon dating of charcoal found on the church pavement indicates that it was in use between the second half of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth century, which means that Golgotha was part of Nazret's landscape when Old Maryam Nazret was the seat of the metropolitans of Ethiopia.<sup>87</sup> Taken alongside Old Maryam Nazret, Golgotha's date, construction techniques, and material culture strongly link it with the same Ethiopian and Egyptian historical context.

### Nazret: Ethiopian and Egyptian Architectural and Cultural-Material Encounters

Although the standing remains of Old Maryam Nazret are but a fragment of its medieval grandeur, while it stood the church was *sui generis*, not only in the Ethiopian highlands but in Egypt as well, owing to both its unique five-aisled plan and its hybrid architectural fabric. Moreover, the material culture we recovered also

attests to a cohabitation of the elite cultures of Christian Ethiopia and Christian Egypt, the latter developing in an Islamicate context. That the architecture and material culture found at Nazret should be akin to both the Egyptian style and the Ethiopian environment the church was built in, and display unique features created in this context, should certainly come as no surprise. Yet these architectural and cultural-material encounters are singular in their existence and preservation, and for this reason they deserve attention, not the least because Old Maryam Nazret is to this day the only surviving metropolitan church in Ethiopia.

In its current state of preservation, the medieval church of Old Maryam Nazret only survives as four standing altar chambers, all located on the eastern end of the semiexposed stepped platform. Partial walls indicate that there once stood a fifth, northernmost chamber, which subsequently collapsed. Since the low walls show no sign of repair, this collapse must have occurred before the post-medieval additions to the standing chambers (phase 2 building).<sup>88</sup> These rooms are built of small squared ashlar, set in lime mortar and then plastered over and painted.<sup>89</sup> Each altar chamber measures some 3.5 m long, with a niche fitted into the east wall, and all are connected through a passageway. The center chamber, befitting its status as the high altar, is crowned with a great apse conch measuring 5.7 m high at the apex (see above, figs. 3 and 7). The other chambers are domed cubes, built with the same arched niches as on the east wall, the (6.8 m high) domes of which are carried by molded corner squinches and niches, springing from inset timber courses. Often referred to as "transitional zones" in art-historical literature (namely, in Islamicate contexts, a point to which we will return), these squinches are noteworthy, as they are identical in construction style to those found in contemporary Coptic churches in Egypt, as at Wadi Natrun and Fustat (not to mention their relative ubiquity in Cairene mosques and tombs) (Fig. 16).<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the domed cube is found in

86 Derat et al., "Märyām Nāzret," 481–82.

87 Beta-511805, 720 +/- 30 BP = 1246–1302 cal CE (90.5%); 1366–1383 cal CE (4.9%).

88 Derat et al., "Märyām Nāzret," 478–80; E. Fritsch, "New Reflections on the Image of Late Antique and Medieval Ethiopian Liturgy," in Berger and Spinks, *Liturgy's Imagined Past/s*, 58–64.

89 Traces of paint are visible on certain plastered areas in the sanctuaries; see Derat et al., "Märyām Nāzret," 479–80.

90 L. 'Alī Ibrāhīm, "The Transitional Zones of Domes in Cairene Architecture," *Kunst des Orients* 10.2 (1975): 5–23; P. Grossmann, *Mittelalterliche Langhaus-Kuppelkirchen und verwandte Typen in Oberägypten: Eine Studie zum mittelalterlichen Kirchenbau in*

Fig. 16.  
Aswan, Egypt,  
necropolis, Fatimid  
tomb tower, transitional  
zone, qibla side. Photo  
by Mikael Muehlbauer.



far-flung locales, as well as in places that were under the Fatimids' influence, such as Norman Sicily.<sup>91</sup> The only distinguishing feature between the domed cubes of Old Maryam Nazret and those constructed elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin is Maryam's stone construction as opposed to fired brick. The small square stones, however, may here be seen as acting as faux bricks, an accommodation of Egyptian building techniques to the local conditions of Tigray, where fired bricks seem to have been used only sparingly in Aksumite sites,<sup>92</sup> and seem not to have been used at all (given the current state of knowledge) in the medieval period.

An altogether different, yet wholly Fatimid building technique is found elsewhere in the architecture

of Old Maryam Nazret, in the aforementioned dividing wall that was exposed in our sector 1 excavations. This wall (probably a *khurrus*, or choir screen, to be explained further below) is composed of large stone blocks, but here made by submerging them in liquid mortar between formworks (see above, figs. 9, 10, 11). This building technique, which uses a type of lime concrete (possibly mirroring the ancient roman *opus caementicum*)<sup>93</sup> appears to have originated in North Africa in the ninth or tenth century.<sup>94</sup> As for its use at Nazret, we might imagine that this technology was brought via Egypt by the Fatimids from their first base in Mahdiyya, Ifriqiyah.<sup>95</sup> This technology, which was otherwise at the forefront of Fatimid-era elite

*Ägypten*, ADAIK, Koptische Reihe 3 (Glückstadt, 1982), 259–73; Fritsch, “New Reflections,” 61–63; J. Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious: Islamic Art and Architecture in Fatimid North Africa and Egypt* (New Haven, 2007), 129–55.

91 C. Nicklies, “Builders, Patrons, and Identity: The Domed Basilicas of Sicily and Calabria,” *Gesta* 43.2 (2004): 99–114; T. Torregrossa, *San Giovanni degli Eremiti a Palermo* (Palermo, 2013).

92 See for instance Tekle Hagos, “Archaeological Exploration and Conservation at the Mausoleum and Tomb of the False Door, Aksum, Ethiopia,” *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 7.1 (2011): 55–70; F. Anfray, *Le site de Dongour Axoum, Éthiopie: Recherches archéologiques*, *Archaeology as History* 3 (Hamburg, 2012), 34–35, nn. 9–11.

93 L. C. Lancaster, *Innovative Vaulting in the Architecture of the Roman Empire: 1st to 4th Centuries CE* (Cambridge, 2015), 19–38.

94 J.-P. Van Staëvel, “Echoes of Empire: Building Materials and Technical Systems in Ifriqīya in Aghlabid and Fatimid Times (9th–10th Centuries),” in *Building between Eastern and Western Mediterranean Lands: Construction Processes and Transmission of Knowledge from Late Antiquity to Early Islam*, ed. P. Gilento, *Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World* 18 (Leiden, 2022), 201–24, at 210–11. On Sijilmāsa, Morocco, see T. Soubira, R. Mensan, E. Erbat, and F.-X. Fauvelle, “L’ensemble de structures hydrauliques T25: Reprise de fouilles et synthèse,” in *Sijilmāsa, cité islamique du Maroc médiéval: Recherches archéologiques maroco-française 2011–2016*, ed. E. Erbat, F.-X. Fauvelle, and R. Mensan (Rabat, 2020), 151–65.

95 Van Staëvel, “Echoes of Empire,” 217–18.

architecture,<sup>96</sup> was hitherto unknown in Ethiopia, so its use is surprising. Although it is not impossible that it was invented independently in the local setting of Nazret, its use at a site that was otherwise connected with Egypt suggests it was instead introduced by the craftsmen and clergy who accompanied the metropolitans there.

Maryam Nazret is a church of colossal proportions, measuring an estimated 30 m long and 22 m wide, a rare example of a grandiose building displaying architectural features otherwise reminiscent of the Fatimid period. Patrons neither in contemporary Egypt nor in Byzantium had produced churches of this scale and form since the sixth century. In Ethiopia such proportions are also rare. Though the five-aisled plan was most likely used in the Aksumite cathedral of Maryam Şəyon (fourth to sixth century, destroyed in the early sixteenth century at the latest),<sup>97</sup> and certainly was at the thirteenth-century monolithic church of Madhāne ‘Alam in Lalibela,<sup>98</sup> the twelfth-century establishment of Maryam Nazret may have been unprecedented. Taking a global view, we find that only in western Europe did patrons occasionally request five-aisled plan churches, though there too it was rare. Cluny III and Saint-Sernin in Toulouse remain some of the only five-aisled churches from that general period, though even these were great monastic institutions produced under (Roman) papal patronage.<sup>99</sup> As understood from the residual pier emplacements observed in the submerged pavement of the church (sector 1 of our excavations), it can be ascertained that Old Maryam Nazret was once a basilica made of five naves, each divided by an axial screen of monolithic piers. As can be inferred on the basis of twelfth-century churches in Egypt, space was likely massed around the nave elevation so as to form a pyramidal section, centered with a timber saddleback

roof.<sup>100</sup> The remains of the lime-concrete dividing wall mentioned above, extending some 3.4 m into the main vessel of the basilica from the altar chambers, likewise recall the high medieval liturgical layout of Egyptian churches, wherein a wall-like screen would separate the transverse choir (*khurru*) from the nave. This would parallel another screen, the *haikal*, which directly fronted the altar, still partly standing at Nazret in the form of immured T-shaped relieving piers which once carried the triumphal arch.<sup>101</sup>

Although our two seasons of excavation at Old Maryam Nazret yielded practically no artifacts, one remarkable bronze object was recovered by the parishioners during their construction works on the site as were several fragmentary objects from our 2018 excavation at the Golgotha church. Together with the architecture, these artifacts, each with clear liturgical function, are further material testimony to the Egyptian Christian community at Nazret.

Most important in this regard is the bronze object now maintained in the treasury of Maryam Nazret (Fig. 17a), unofficially excavated during an attempted expansion of the modern church precinct in 2017 or 2018. Based on its form, it is likely a *qumqum*, as it is known in colloquial Arabic (used by Copts in Egypt), after the Aramaic word *qumqamā* (small container), a type of long-necked perfume sprinkler unique to the Islamicate world.<sup>102</sup> Measuring some 15 cm long and 7 cm at its thickest point, the bronze sprinkler consists of a spherical body with a long narrow neck and

96 S. Pradines and O. Talaat, “Fortifications fatimides du Caire,” *Annales islamologiques* 41 (2007): 229–75, at 234–35.

97 Muehlbauer, “An African ‘Constantine,’” 139–41; D. Buxton and D. Matthews, “The Reconstruction of Vanished Aksumite Buildings,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 25 (1971–72): 53–77.

98 Derat, *L’énigme*, 182–90.

99 O. Werckmeister, “Cluny III and the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela,” *Gesta* 27.1 (1988): 103–12; H. Pradalier, “Saint-Sernin de Toulouse au Moyen Âge,” in *Congrès archéologique de France, 154e session, 1996, Toulousain et Comminges* (Paris, 2002), 256–301; see also L. Seidel, “Rethinking ‘Romanesque’; Re-Engaging Roman[z],” *Gesta* 45.2 (2006): 109–23.

100 P. Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten* (Leiden, 2002), 155–59.

101 For similar examples, see Grossmann, *Mittelalterliche Langhaus-Kuppelkirchen*, 112–32; idem, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, 72–76; A. Jeudy, “Le mobilier liturgique en bois au Moyen Âge: Interactions et identité de la communauté copte du X<sup>e</sup> au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle” (PhD diss., Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2006), 55–201; E. Bolman, “Veiling Sanctity in Christian Egypt: Visual and Spatial Solutions,” in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. S. Gerstel (Washington, DC, 2006), 93–103; L. A. Hunt, “The al-Mu’allaqa Doors Reconstructed: An Early Fourteenth-Century Sanctuary Screen from Old Cairo,” *Gesta* 28.1 (1989): 61–77. On the gradual enlargement of the *khurru* in late medieval Egypt, see N. Warner, “The Architecture of the Red Monastery Church (Dayr Anbā Bišūy) in Egypt: An Evolving Anatomy,” *DOP* 70 (2016): 108–16.

102 Also called an *aspersoir* in French or *aspergillum* in Latin; on this, see E. Baer, “Ma’din,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. E. Bosworth et al., new ed., vol 5 (Leiden, 1986), 985–93, at 986–87.



Fig. 17. (a) Bronze qumqum kept in the treasury house of Nazret; (b) Tulunid or Fatimid qumqum in glass, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo; and (c) Mamluk qumqum in inlaid bronze, Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. Photos by (a–b) Mikael Muehlbauer and (c) courtesy of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.

a tapered tip. Both the body and the neck are soldered with lugs, presumably indicating where the sprinkler was to be held. The hollow bottle appears to have been filled from the base, via a wide fill hole on the heel. When the bottle was shaken, the perfume would have been sprinkled out through the narrow spout (Fig. 17a). The qumqum was manufactured in two parts: the neck and the body were cast separately and then welded together, though the suture between the two parts has been concealed with the application of three round (decorative) moldings. It is unknown whether the fill hole of the qumqum originally had a plug; other vessels of this type in museum collections also lack stoppers.

Two examples of such perfume sprinklers (in glass and metal respectively) from the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo are nearly identical in form to the bronze one recovered at Nazret. One of them, a Tulunid or Fatimid example in glass, is strikingly similar: its neck, like that from Nazret, includes projecting nubs made with trails of threaded glass (paralleling the lugs), which presumably indicate where the vessel was to be

held and flung out in order to sprinkle scents (Fig. 17b). Another example from that same collection, in inlaid bronze, dates to the fourteenth century (Mamluk period), though it is similar in shape (and material composition) to the one from Nazret (fig. 17c).<sup>103</sup> The Nazret qumqum, while formally similar to both examples, is set apart from the later inlaid Mamluk sprinkler due to its early bronze manufacture. Whereas the lack of inlay or intaglio points to the Nazret qumqum's relative antiquity, the soldered decorations and suspension loops link it with other examples of Fatimid-era metalwork more directly.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, even in the absence

103 Because this object was accessioned to the museum in 1955, after the cataloging efforts of Gaston Wiet, the object is unfortunately missing from his helpful inventory of bronze objects in the museum assembled in the late 1930s. See, however, G. Wiet, *Catalogue général du Musée arabe du Caire: Objets en cuivre* (Cairo, 1932).

104 A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "Fatimid Art and Its Unresolved Enigmas: From Ceramics to Rock Crystal to Its Vanished Silverware," in *The World of the Fatimids*, ed. A. S. Melikian-Chirvani (Berlin, 2018), 70–141, at 112–27.

of material testimony, the Fatimid-era documentation attests to the widespread use of bronze sprinklers: one need look no further than the tenth-century Egyptian treatise on perfumes that prescribes qumqums for nearly every application.<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere, we find in documents from the Cairo Geniza the frequent mention of qumqums in the context of domestic fumigation, typically with rose water after banquets.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, such bottles were also symbols of social status and were frequently listed alongside toiletries like incense burners and silks in the dowries and financial accounts of wealthy Jewish merchants.<sup>107</sup> Qumqums were also capillaries of the Fatimid trade. The letters of Jewish traders Joseph b. Abraham and Abraham b. Yiju, based in Yemen, list bronze sprinklers among the items sent between Gujarat (in India) and Yemen to be melted down or repaired.<sup>108</sup> That fragmentary glass and bronze sprinklers have been recovered as storage vessels for rose water in the context of overseas Fatimid trade only underscores their crucial importance in the western Indian Ocean world.<sup>109</sup> At Nazret, we might imagine that the qumqum had a Coptic liturgical use. From no later than the twelfth century, Coptic lectionaries prescribe the ritual purification of altar cloths and chancel curtains (*bijab*) with perfumes for Good Friday, presumably through sprinklers like the bronze

example from Nazret.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, given its cathedral status, we might imagine that the church treasury of Old Maryam Nazret once maintained several perfume sprinklers for this activity. In addition, given the later documentation from Nazret (see above), it is also possible that the qumqum from Maryam Nazret was used to store and distribute chrism oil, since the records show that the metropolitans there had the authority to consecrate *meron*. That said, whatever its particular use, if indeed the qumqum from Nazret dates to the Fatimid era and was brought to Ethiopia at that time, it appears to be the earliest *complete* metal example known. The Nazret qumqum is therefore of keen interest to historians of Islamicate (irrespective of the religion) decorative arts.<sup>111</sup>

The ostrich-egg shell fragments and glass shards we recovered from a niche at the nearby church of Golgotha wholly correspond with eastern Christian, particularly Egyptian, liturgical furnishings. Although the practice of hanging ostrich eggs from ceilings dates back to Mesopotamian, Pharaonic, and Greco-Roman antiquity,<sup>112</sup> in medieval times it was more limited to the Christian spaces of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>113</sup> In late antiquity, the hanging of ostrich eggs was ubiquitous in church spaces, so that in the Melkite Arabic translation of John of Damascus's eighth-century treatise *The Precious Pearl*, we find a long excursus on its theological import.<sup>114</sup> When hung in church spaces, the ostrich egg was thought to encourage the prayers of congregants,<sup>115</sup>

105 M. al-Tamīmī, *Habīb al-'arūs wa-rayḥān al-nuḥūs*, ed. F. Sezgin, *Manshūrāt Ma'had Tārikh al-'Ulūm al-'Arabīyah wa-al-Islāmiyah*. Silsilah J, 'Uyūn al-turāth 85 (Frankfurt, 2011).

106 S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vol. 4, *Daily Life* (Berkeley, 1983), 149.

107 Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 149; J. Olszowy-Schlanger, *Karaite Marriage Contracts from the Cairo Geniza: Legal Traditions and Community Life in Mediaeval Egypt and Palestine* (Leiden, 1998), 233; S. D. Goitein, "Bankers Accounts from the Eleventh Century A.D.," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 9.1 (1966): 28–66, at 53–54.

108 S. D. Goitein and M. Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza 'India Book'* (Leiden, 2008), 564–65.

109 On qumqums as storage vessels for rose water, see C. S. Needell, "Cirebon: Islamic Glass from a 10th-Century Shipwreck in the Java Sea," *JGS* 60 (2018): 69–114, at 93–98; E. Khamis, *Tiberias: Excavations in the House of the Bronzes; Final Report*, vol. 2, *The Fatimid Metalwork Hoard from Tiberias*, Qedem 55 (Jerusalem, 2013), 60–62; L. Guo, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 2: Shipping Notes and Account Records," *JNES* 60.2 (2001): 81–116, at 90–91. On late antique pilgrimage ampoules, see the classic study by A. Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte (Monza, Bobbio)* (Paris, 1958).

110 See for instance E. Lanne, "Textes et rites de la liturgie pascale dans l'ancienne Église copte," *L'Orient Syrien* 26.2 (1961): 279–300, at 295–96.

111 On the liquidation of the Fatimid treasury and its subsequent dispersal, see A. Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (Berlin, 1996), 56–113. On the melting down of bronze objects in the Fatimid period, see Goitein and Friedman, *India Traders of the Middle Ages*, 564–65. See, however, the fragmentary vessels recovered from Tiberias, in the Levant: Khamis, *Tiberias*.

112 N. Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam," *Al-Masaq* 8.1 (2006): 27–78, at 30–33.

113 Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers," 35.

114 Ibn Saba, *La Perle précieuse* (J. Perier, trans., *PO* 16 [1922]), 754–55.

115 J. M. Fiey, "Coptes et syriaques: Contacts et échanges," *Studia Orientalia Christiana* 15 (1972): 295–365, at 346, n. 246.

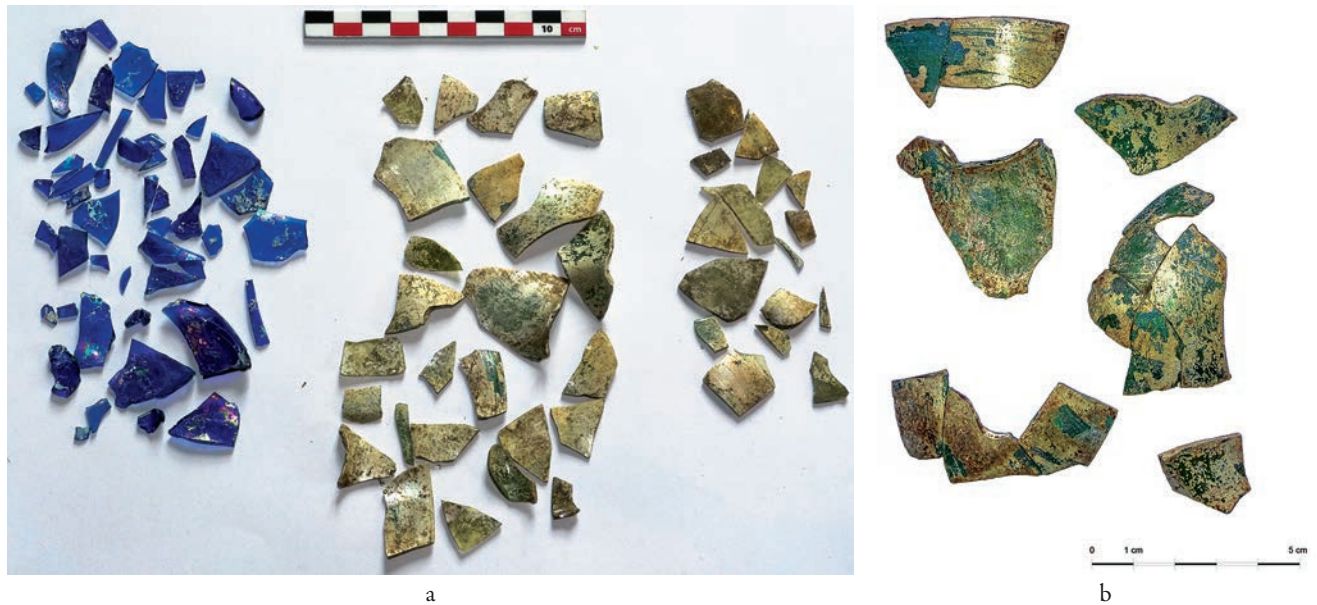


Fig. 18. (a) Glass shards found on the southeastern shelf of the Golgotha church; (b) reassembling the glass shards of Golgotha. Photos by (a) Romain Mensan and (b) Marie-Laure Derat.

as well as standing as a symbol of Christ's resurrection.<sup>116</sup> In Egypt, ostrich eggs were often used as lampshades for hanging lights. For example, at the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, the nave was decorated with some sixteen ostrich-egg lanterns. At the roughly contemporary (with Old Maryam Nazret) monastery church of Saint Antony on the Red Sea, ostrich eggs are still deployed as lanterns, but here only above the khurrus. Nor is this practice restricted to Egypt; we also find ostrich eggs hung over the Tomb of Christ in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>117</sup> So too do we find this practice well established in Ethiopia: at the church of Beta Maryam in Lalibela the nave is hung with two ostrich eggs, presumably in continuity with Coptic practice. Until recently, ostrich eggs were not an uncommon sight in Ethiopia, found atop cross finials on the roofs of churches, though now these have

116 G. Galvaris, "Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church: Candles, Lamps and Ostrich Eggs," *BMGs* 4 (1978): 69–78.

117 G. H. Forsyth and K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor, 1965–1973), 2, pls. 43, 57, 60, 85, 101; E. Bolman, *Monastic Visions: Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea* (Cairo, 2002), 126; A. Bar-Am, *Beyond the Walls: Churches of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1998), 12.

largely been replaced with metal replicas.<sup>118</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that we find ostrich eggshells in the church of Golgotha. The only distinguishing element is that at Golgotha, the egg was placed on a shelf, rather than suspended.

Next to the eggs on that same shelf were glass objects, though since they were so thoroughly smashed it is difficult to ascertain their original form and function (Fig. 18; see also Appendix 4). Whereas their placement near the apse shows that the glass objects were certainly liturgical, it remains unknown whether they were small flasks for the celebration of the Eucharist or glass lanterns or beakers (perhaps used with the eggs). Nonetheless, we subjected four glass fragments to chemical analysis, each representative of a different color: dark blue (sample G1), dark green (G3), and two naturally colored yellowish (G2) and greenish (G4). The analysis showed that while the dark blue fragment (G1) originated in historical Syria-Palestine, the others came from somewhere else in the Middle East, most likely Egypt (see more details in Appendix 5).

118 Due to a lack of awareness of their historical value, the ostrich eggs are often destroyed during the demolition of the old churches, rather than being preserved.

In sum, the archaeological evidence obtained from our two seasons at Old Maryam Nazret proves, we think, that this church was erected in the twelfth century at the latest, probably during the charge of metropolitan Mikael. Taken alongside the church's generally unprecedented scale, five-aisled plan, and use of elite Egyptian building techniques, the evidence allows us to assert that Nazret was the metropolitan seat of Ethiopia. Archaeology as well as the later written record suggest that it was not an active episcopal center for very long, only until the late fourteenth century, though the church itself stood longer, at least until the mid-fifteenth century and even possibly in a reduced capacity until the mid-seventeenth. The density of burials after the seventeenth century in the space where the nave was once located testifies that the site continued as a funerary space. Moreover, the hybrid Ethiopian-Egyptian (Fatimid, for that matter) architectural techniques found at Old Maryam Nazret, the qumqum in the treasury of Maryam, and other liturgical objects unearthed at Golgotha reveal the unique role of the Egyptian metropolitans and their retinues as brokers of interreligious and cross-cultural exchanges. Indeed, the Egyptian Christian context of Nazret cannot be separated from the broader Islamicate, especially Egyptian, cultural environment of which Christians and Jews were an integral part. In this way we turn to another aspect of Nazret: the personality of its founder, the metropolitan Mikael, who lived in the twelfth century.

### Mikael, an Egyptian Metropolitan in His Multiconfessional Time and Space

Old Maryam Nazret's founder, the metropolitan Mikael, is not an anonymous figure. According to his last will and testament, preserved in a Gospel book kept in the monastery of Mikā'el Ambā in Tigray, he was originally a monk from the monastery of Saint Antony in the Eastern Desert of Egypt during the patriarchate of Macarius (r. 1102–1129);<sup>119</sup> his appointment to Ethiopia is outlined in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*.<sup>120</sup> As the

metropolitan of Ethiopia, Mikael oversaw the church for several decades. Appointed in the year 1129 at the latest, he remained in office under multiple patriarchs, notably Gabriel II ibn Turayk (1131–1146) and John V (1146–1167).<sup>121</sup> He was still in charge in 1149/50, when he made his last will and testament and consecrated Mikā'el Ambā, the rock-hewn church whose treasury maintains the aforementioned Gospel book.<sup>122</sup>

Taken in a historical context, the appointment of metropolitan Mikael represents a turning point in the relations between the mother church in Egypt, then under the jurisdiction of the Fatimid vizierate,<sup>123</sup> and the Kingdom of Ethiopia. Before his tenure, the dispatch of metropolitans was not simply an exchange between Coptic coreligionists in Ethiopia and Egypt, but rather a complex exercise in diplomacy. Indeed, the Muslim powers in Egypt closely oversaw the appointments of metropolitans and often leveraged concessions from the Ethiopian monarch to do so. At that time, the Fatimids had good reason to seek leverage over Ethiopia's Christian sovereigns. The northern regions of Ethiopia then hosted vibrant Muslim communities, archaeological evidence of which has become increasingly well documented in the past few years.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the locus of Muslim activity appears to have been the center of the Endarta region, that is, barely a day's walk from Nazret, where recent archaeological and epigraphic work has revealed veritable cemeteries with tens of Arabic-inscribed headstones from the tenth to the thirteenth century.<sup>125</sup> In fact, it is also known that

121 *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church*, 56–57, 90–91.

122 The consecration of which is outlined in M. Muehlbauer, *Bastions of the Cross: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches of Tigray, Ethiopia* (Washington, DC, 2023), 124–33.

123 On this era in Fatimid history, see H. Halm, *Kalifen und Assassinen: Ägypten und der Vordere Orient zur Zeit der ersten Kreuzzüge 1074–1171* (Munich, 2014).

124 A. Chekroun and B. Hirsch, "The Sultanates of Medieval Ethiopia," in Kelly, *Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, 86–112 (see p. 105, n. 40 above).

125 C. Conti Rossini, "Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana presso Uogrì Haribā nell' Endartā," *RStO* 17 (1937–1939): 399–408; M. Schneider, "Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha," *AnnEth* 7 (1967): 107–22; M. Schneider, "Des Yamāmi dans l'Endartā (Tigré)," *Le Muséon* 122.1–2 (2009): 131–48; T. Insoll, "The Islamic Archaeology of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: Archaeological Perspectives on Contacts between Cairo and Eastern Ethiopia in the 12th to 15th Centuries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Archaeology*, ed. B. Walker, T. Insoll, and C. Fenwick (Oxford, 2020),

119 Derat et al., "Māryām Nāzret."

120 *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church, Known as the History of the Holy Church of Sawirus ibn al-Mukāffā; Bishop of al-Ašmūnīn*, vol. 3.1, *Macarius II–John V (A.D. 1102–1167)* (A. Khater and O. Burmester, trans., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* [Cairo, 1968], 90).

just before Nazret's founding, in the late eleventh century, the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Ġamālī encouraged the Islamization of Ethiopia through Coptic channels. Not only did the vizier impose his own collaborationist metropolitan on Ethiopia, he also demanded that the Christian sovereign pay tribute, allow the construction of new mosques, and guarantee the security of Muslim merchants in his kingdom. Whereas this plan ultimately failed—texts record conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia, and the material data confirm an abandonment of Islamic sites in the twelfth century—metropolitan Mikael's power and freedom in Ethiopia appears somehow as a turning point.<sup>126</sup> That Mikael, a monk, was nominated not by the Fatimid overlord but rather by Patriarch Macarius suggests a repudiation of the past, wherein the Ethiopian diocese was freed from Fatimid interference.<sup>127</sup>

When viewed in its broader Islamicate context, our investigation of Nazret and its wider landscape has revealed a diverse, multilingual, and possibly multiconfessional community, home to Ethiopian Christians as well as Egyptian ecclesiastics from Islamic Egypt. Even after their arrival in Ethiopia, the Egyptian metropolitans residing at Nazret and their retinues most likely also relied on Egyptian mercantile networks for necessities not easily obtained in Ethiopia—including construction materials, liturgical objects, and even clothes and foodstuffs (such as wine)—perhaps via Ethiopian Muslim merchants. Indeed, the coexistence of and economic

exchanges between Christians and Muslims witnessed at Nazret is consistent with other well-documented transconfessional economic symbiosis along the Christian kingdom's northern and eastern margins.<sup>128</sup> This also holds true for the transmission of technology. The fact that lime mortar was used at Old Maryam Nazret in a typical Fatimid-era construction process suggests that these techniques were based on crafts adopted in Ethiopia from the outer, Islamicate world. Likewise, testimony to the production of chrism oil (presumably from olives) at Nazret until as late as the sixteenth or seventeenth century indicates that this technological transfer was long-lived, with the local community maintaining craft practices introduced from Egypt. On the other hand, the Egyptian metropolitans at Nazret lived in a remarkable and distinctly Ethiopian environmental and cultural landscape. Encircled on all sides by mountains, the ruined church stands in a well-watered plain, where an abundance of crops—grain, fruits, vegetables, herbs, and nuts—are still grown today, an agricultural opulence that has few equivalents in the Ethiopian highlands. This explains how the metropolitans of the Church of Ethiopia, who maintained a status near or equal to that of the Ethiopian kings, could collect taxes from their Nazret fiefs and maintain their own court, with delegations traveling to and from monasteries all over what was then Ethiopia. Furthermore, one must keep in mind that metropolitans were not only busy with their canonical duties, but were also the acting heads of a church agitated by its own theological debates as well as thinkers seeking their own intellectual achievements. A community of scholars working under the metropolitan authority of Ethiopia was the necessary condition for an active policy of translation between Coptic, Arabic, and Geez; for books to be copied and disseminated; and for outstanding works such as the *Kabra Nagašt* to be produced.

One question remains unanswered: although the metropolitan of Ethiopia needed to be situated close to the king and his residence, the location of the royal capital(s) following the decline of Aksum and up to the fourteenth century remains unresolved to this day. The identification of Nazret as the bishop's seat may shift this perspective and offer key insights into locating traces of royal occupation in the vicinity.

417–45, at 433; J. Loiseau, "Retour à Bilet: Un cimetière musulman médiéval du Tigray oriental (*Inscriptiones Arabicae Aethiopiae* 1)," *BEO* 67 (2020): 59–96; J. Loiseau et al., "Bilet and the Wider World: New Insights into the Archaeology of Islam in Tigray," *Antiquity* 95.380 (2021): 508–29; J. Loiseau et al., "To Whom the Dead Belong? Preliminary Observations on the Cemetery of Tsomar, Eastern Tigray (*Inscriptiones Arabicae Aethiopiae* 2)," in *Networked Spaces: The Spatiality of Networks in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean*, ed. C. Durant et al. (Lyon, 2022), 647–71; S. Dorso, "The Medieval Muslim Cemeteries of Tigray (Ethiopia): Preliminary Remarks on Their Materiality (Architectural and Lapidary Aspects)," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 153 (2023): 83–113.

126 W. Smidt, "Eine weitere arabische Inschrift von der osttigrayischen Handelsroute: Hinweis auf eine muslimische Kultstätte in der 'dunklen Periode'?", *Aethiopica* 12 (2009): 126–35; W. Smidt, "A Note on the Islamic Heritage of Tigray: The Current Situation of the Arabic Inscription of Wuqro," *Itypis* 1 (2011): 150–53; Derat, "L'affaire des mosquées," 25 (see p. 96, n. 6 above); M. Muehlbauer, "From Stone to Dust: The Life of the Kufic Inscribed Frieze of Wuqro Cherqos in Tigray, Ethiopia," *Muqarnas* 38 (2021): 1–34.

127 Muehlbauer, "An African 'Constantine,'" 148–52.

128 F.-X. Fauvelle and B. Hirsch, "Muslim Historical Spaces in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa: A Reassessment," *Northeast African Studies* 11.1 (2004–10): 25–54.

## Postscript: Nazret in the Late Antique Period, a Continuing Enigma

Although our excavations have focused on the medieval church of Mary at Nazret, the possibility of its having an Aksumite antecedent still remains an open question.<sup>129</sup> There remains some complex and conflicting evidence of an Aksumite presence. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that as rich an agricultural area as Nazret, in the old Aksumite heartland, would be left untouched until the twelfth century. To the contrary, it may be that the site was explicitly chosen as the place of the metropolitan seat because of its perceived Aksumite legacy. This is why we outline here the evidences of a late antique history of Nazret.

Returning to Nazret's earliest published witness, the Italian ethnographer Antonio Mordini proposed that the built platform on which the church stands was Aksumite in origin. His rationale was based on the platform's large scale, an estimated 30 × 23 m in size, as well as its stepped profile, ringed with salients and recesses as well as a bowled string of mortises above, signaling lost wooden bosses. In Mordini's view, all these features qualify the Nazret podium as the understory of a prototypical Aksumite "palace," as are found in numerous elite sites in the city of Aksum and its wider realm from the first to the seventh centuries.<sup>130</sup> To the contrary, Francis Anfray, in anticipation of our archaeological finds, considered the platform a medieval pastiche, a representative of local continuities with Aksumite culture,<sup>131</sup> rather than an authentic witness of the Aksumite period proper.

Whereas it would appear that Anfray was correct, the situation may be less clear-cut. It could be that the platform, which otherwise so neatly conforms to

the Aksumite style, was indeed ancient in origin, but refurbished or reconstituted in the twelfth century as the foundation of Mikael's cathedral. Further insight into the Nazret platform may be gained from investigating the two related "Aksumite" sites nearby: Agulā Qirqos and Mifsas Baḥri, both located within a sixty-kilometer radius of Nazret. Agulā Qirqos, near Wuqro, to Nazret's immediate north, is an entirely ruined platform which, lacking its stone facing, consists only of its rubble and earth-mortar core. This site, long referred to as a Christian basilica, has yet to receive archaeological study and remains dated to the Aksumite period (as was Nazret) only on the basis of circular reasoning.<sup>132</sup> The other site, Mifsas Baḥri, stands to the south of Nazret near Lake Ḥāšanga (or Hashange). There, as at Old Maryam Nazret, the freestanding church displays two discrete architectural techniques, here with an understory of large dressed stones (as at Nazret) displaying the "Aksumite style," and rubble above (unlike Nazret). According to the excavators, the building was not multiphased, but rather built some time after the seventh or eighth century, that is, the late or immediate post-Aksumite period. Yet, as the excavators note, the site's overall terminus ante quem is as recent as the eleventh or twelfth century, when burials were committed there after a demolition.<sup>133</sup> Could Mifsas Baḥri then be contemporary with Nazret? Whatever the case, what these two examples show is that outside the eponymous ancient site of Aksum, the "Aksumite style" can nowhere be reliably dated to the Aksumite period *sensu stricto*. Indeed, the archaeological evidence, however scanty it still remains, suggests that constructions with "Aksumite" features were still built centuries after the demise of Aksum.

In a sense, however, Mordini and Anfray may *both* be correct in their assessments of Nazret. Perhaps despite the platform's medieval date, there could or should be traces of an Aksumite settlement at Nazret. After all, spolia, apparently of "Aksumite" origin, in the form of stepped and cushioned capitals as well as chamfered piers, remain scattered around the church compound

129 Although a bone fragment we found in the fill of the platform dates to the seventh century (Beta-569078. 1350 +/-30 BP = 637–714 cal CE [88.4%]; 744–765 cal CE [7.0%]), this otherwise isolated find does not belong to a recognizable archaeological layer and therefore does not change our chronology.

130 D. Krencker, *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition herausgegeben von der Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen zu Berlin*, vol. 2, *Ältere Denkmäler Nordabessiniens* (Berlin, 1913), 96–164; Anfray, "L'archéologie d'Axoum en 1972," *Paideuma* 18 (1972): 60–78. On the chronology of these so-called palaces, see D. Phillipson, "Changing Settlement Patterns in Northern Ethiopia: An Archaeological Survey Evaluated," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 43 (2008): 133–45.

131 On these continuities, see E. Fritsch, "Twin Pillars: An Epistemological Note in Church Archaeology," *AnnEth* 25 (2010): 103–11.

132 R. Acton, *The Abyssinian Expedition with Engravings from the Illustrated London News* (London, 1868), 374; Anfray, "Notes archéologiques"; Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 48–49; M. Di Salvo, *The Basilicas of Ethiopia: An Architectural History* (London, 2017), 28; Muehlbauer, *Bastions of the Cross*, 29–30.

133 Gaudiello and Yule, *Mifsas Bahri*, 243–65.



Fig. 19. Broken alabaster molding kept in the treasury house of Nazret. Photo by Mikael Muehlbauer.

and in the nearby village (Appendix 1), though it is difficult to discern whether these too could have been Aksumite pastiches. Several objects, however, may more specifically signal an Aksumite settlement phase there. A broken alabaster molding (Fig. 19), unearthed by the parishioners in 2017 or 2018 (alongside the qumqum), appears to be part of a lost Aksumite or pre-Aksumite baseplate or plinth. Alabaster, a materially distinct and somewhat rare stone in Ethiopia, was often the preferred medium for *tābot* slabs (the stone tablets, representing the laws of Moses, that are inserted onto portable wooden altars).<sup>134</sup> Whereas it could plausibly have been part of an alabaster altar for the medieval cathedral, its stylistic features, namely, its perfectly rectilinear steps, rather evoke the alabaster architectural décor (i.e., window grilles and friezes) from the pre-Aksumite (ninth to fourth century BCE)<sup>135</sup> or Aksumite periods (in the form of baseplates or plinths).<sup>136</sup> Given the fragment's stone

134 M. Heldman, "Tabot," *EAE* 4:802–4; E. Fritsch, "Tabot: Manbara Tabot," *EAE* 4:804–7.

135 J. Phillips, "Egyptian and Nubian Material from Ethiopia and Eritrea," *The Sudan Archaeological Research Society Newsletter* 9 (1995): 2–10, at 5; H. De Contenson, "Les fouilles à Haoulti-Melazo en 1958," *AnnEth* 4 (1961): 39–60, at 46–47; A. Caquot and J. Leclant, "Rapport sur les récents travaux de la section d'archéologie de l'Institut éthiopien d'études et de recherches," *CRAI* 100.2 (1956), 226–35, at 230.

136 Krencker, *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, 21–26; D. Phillipson, "Aksum: An Archaeological Introduction and Guide," *Azania*:

material and its stepped rectilinear carving, we suggest that it originated in an ancient context, repurposed from a baseplate or plinth that originally supported a statue or throne. Another object, more decisively attributable to the Aksumite period, is the aforementioned sculpted limestone basin (G0036) inscribed in Geez that is maintained in the eastern space of Old Maryam Nazret. This shallow vessel, which is surrounded by four finely carved and decorated protuberances, features a Geez inscription, bookended with Greek crosses (see above, Fig. 4). The inscription reads: "... carved this basin for me and he completed it."<sup>137</sup> Whereas the missing first word(s) of the inscription were probably the name of the basin's maker, other linguistic clues suggest when the object was dedicated. Interestingly, the text is written in nonvocalized Geez, a script thought to have been abandoned in the third century CE (albeit within the confines of a narrow corpus).<sup>138</sup> What is more, the word separator consists of two dots rather than the vertical line used in those early inscriptions.<sup>139</sup> Lastly, the use of crosses indicates that the inscription must postdate the official adoption of the Christian faith by the Aksumite kings in the fourth century (though Christians were certainly present before), placing the basin within a narrow range in the third through fourth centuries in northern Ethiopia. The vessel's function is less clear. Whereas similar basins were found as exogenous spolia in Tigray and Eritrea,<sup>140</sup> as well as in the archaeological contexts of Christian

*Archaeological Research in Africa* 38.1 (2003), 1–68, at 50–52; M.-L. Derat, "Trônes et sanctuaires: Victoires, donations et religions à Aksoum (IV<sup>e</sup>–VII<sup>e</sup> siècle)," in *Le prince chrétien: De Constantin aux royaumes barbares (IV<sup>e</sup>–VIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. S. Destephen, B. Dumézil, and H. Inglebert (Paris, 2018), 545–67.

137 RIEth 219: ወቀ[ረ] ዘነተ፡ መቀለ[ደ] . . . ለተ፡ ወፈጸመ፡ (É. Bernard, A. J. Drewes, and R. Schneider, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, vol. 1, *Les documents* [Paris, 1991], 313 [for the transcription]). The translation is found in A. J. Drewes, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, vol. 3, *Traductions et commentaires, B: Les inscriptions sémitiques*, ed. M. Kropp and H. Stroomer (Wiesbaden, 2019), 315–16; see also Derat et al., "Māryām Nāzret," 476.

138 The only known royal inscription in nonvocalized Geez is that of Addi Gələmo, which refers to a king GDR(T) (RIEth 180), commonly dated to the third century (Bernard, Drewes, and Schneider, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie* 1:219–20). The translation is found in Drewes, *Recueil des inscriptions*, 3:155–66.

139 Drewes, *Recueil des inscriptions*, 3:315–16.

140 Anfray, "Notes archéologiques," 38–39, n. 6; Tekle Hagos, "Preliminary Result of a Survey of the Archaeological Site of Sib'at, 'Adwa, Ethiopia," 31 and fig. 7. For Adulis, see R. Paribeni, "Ricerche

Nubia and Egypt,<sup>141</sup> we might infer that it was liturgical or even baptismal.<sup>142</sup> It could be that this basin is but a remnant from an ancient church at Nazret.

Returning again to Mordini's early observations, he had yet another argument in favor of an Aksumite settlement at Nazret, as there he found coins from the sixth-century reigns of Gersem and Hātāz in a "small sounding carried out close to the building."<sup>143</sup> Mordini

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nel luogo dell'antica Adulis," *Monumenti antichi* 18 (1907): 438–512, at 458, 491.

141 N. Warner, "Architectural Survey," in *The Red Monastery Church: Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt*, ed. E. Bolman (New Haven, 2016), 48–77, at 74–76; Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, 382; M. M. Anwar, "The Evolution of Different Fonts in the Coptic Churches throughout the Centuries," *Medievalista* 28 (2020), 335–62, at 349–52; S. Jakobielski and M. Martens-Czarnecka, "Old Dongola: Fieldwork Seasons 2005/2006 and 2006," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 18 (2006), 325–42, at 340; W. Godlewski, "Palatial Building SWN.B.I and Earlier Relics of Buildings SWN.B.IV and SWN.B.X.," in *Dongola 2012–2014, Fieldwork, Conservation and Site Management*, PCMA Excavation Series 3, ed. W. Godlewski and D. Dzierzbicka (Warsaw, 2015), 65–84, at 82.

142 E. Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church: People and Institutions* (Warsaw, 2015), 109–10.

143 Mordini, "Informazioni preliminari," 150, n. 2: "Della importanza che aveva questa chiesa nei tardi tempi assumiti ho avuto la conferma nel 1942 quando fra altre cose, eseguendo un piccolo sondaggio presso detto edificio, ho rinvenuto numerose monete dei re Gersem ed Hataz di cui alcune inedite." Henze ("Nāzret," 1158–59) wrongly


later clarified that he had in fact found these coins "(in the mortar of) the walls" of the church.<sup>144</sup> Although it remains unclear exactly where Mordini found these coins or where he carried out his excavations (no documents have survived), the presence of these coins as well as the basin testify that there could be a fourth- to sixth-century Aksumite settlement still to be discovered at Nazret.

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understood Mordini's information as "he also reported finding a few [*sic*] coins of Aksumite kings Hataz and Gersem in a trench dug near the building." Some of these coins remain today in the care of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. These coins were joined to the Côte collection: S. C. Munro-Hay and B. Juel-Jensen, *Aksumite Coinage* (London, 1995), 28; G. Girola, "Monete Aksumite: Bilancio Italiano," *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica e Scienze Affini* 107 (2006): 473–85, at 482.

144 Mordini ("Architecture éthiopienne," 55) writes: "Un fait des plus importants a été la découverte d'un certain nombre de monnaies des derniers rois d'Aksum—connus pour leurs émissions monétaires—dans les murs de certaines églises anciennes d'Éthiopie: des pièces de Ghersem et Hataz dans une église du Waldebbba; des autres pièces des mêmes rois dans une autre église de l'Addi Abbona près de Maquallé, l'enda Māryām Nāzret. Ce matériel numismatique repéré dans le mortier des murs d'anciennes églises peut avoir reçu son emplacement en une époque tardive, mais pourrait aussi se démontrer précieux aux fins de pouvoir dater ces monuments" (emphasis added).

 TWO SEASONS OF EXCAVATION AT NAZRET under Marie-Laure Derat in 2018 and 2020 were carried out thanks to funding for the EthioChrisProcess project (directed by Marie-Laure Derat) by the French National Research Agency and by the Commission consultative des fouilles à l'étranger of the French Ministry for

Europe and Foreign Affairs. Mikael Muehlbauer's independent fieldwork in Maryam Nazret and his participation in the 2020 excavation was funded by the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University.

## Appendix 1

*Gazetteer of Spolia from Nazret*

For the findspots of the following spolia, see Figure 20.

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0001	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 54 / W 39 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar with one preserved extremity	
G0002	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 49 / W 25 / ch. 5 / mort. Ø 16	Pillar with a wide band (pseudocapital?) where a mortise is cut	
G0003	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 105 / W 45 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0004	pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 53 / W 27 / ch. 5 / mort. Ø 9	Pillar with a wide band (pseudocapital) where a mortise is cut	
G0005	pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 88 / W 40 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0006	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 104 / W 40 / ch. 11.5	Chamfered pillar with one preserved extremity, on a base (see G0028)	

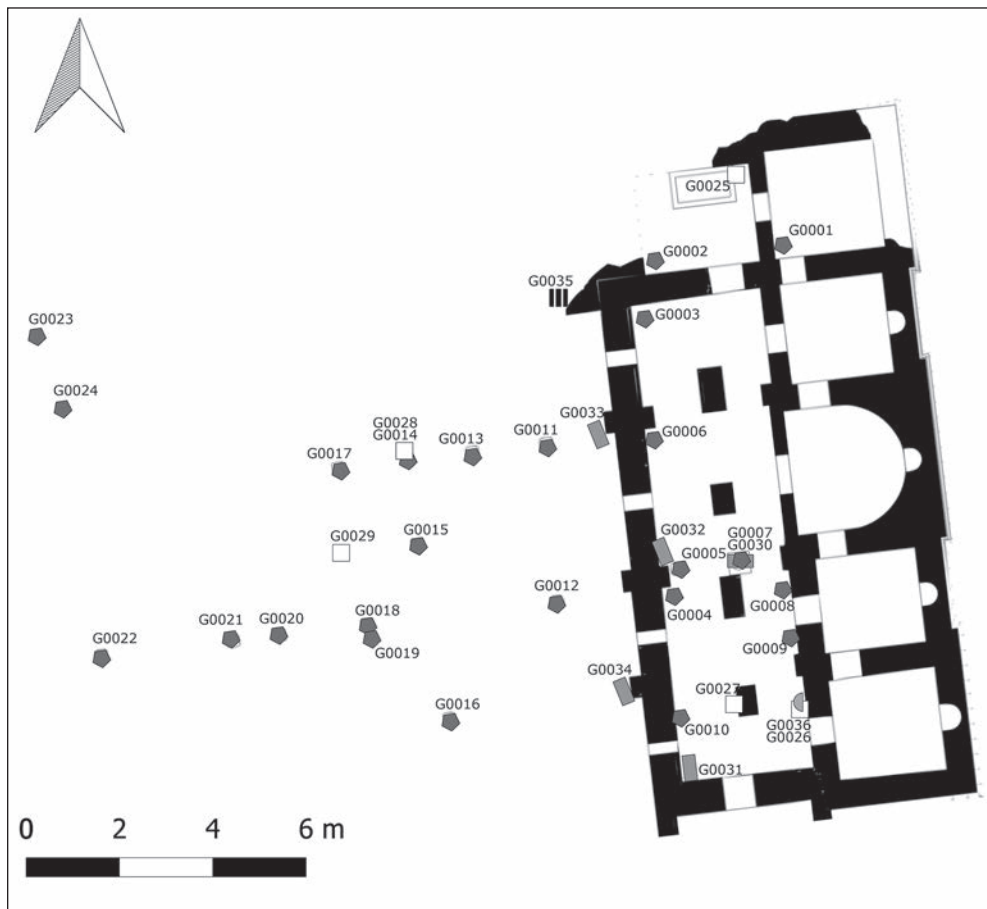
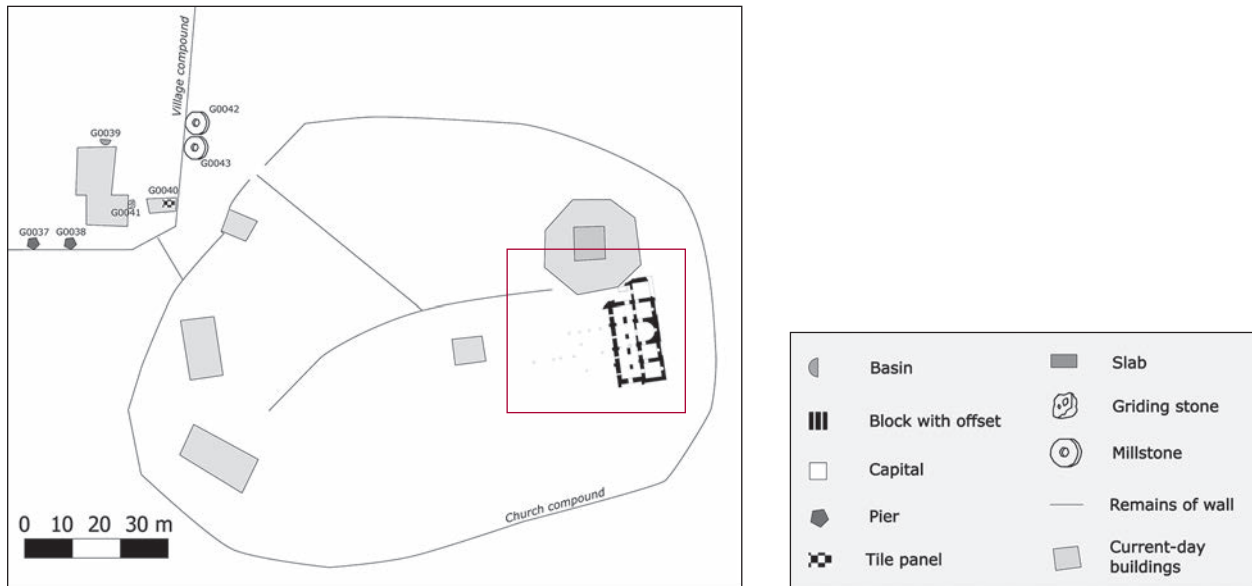









Fig. 20. Map of spoli finds from the Old Maryam Nazret Church and environs. Photo and drawing by Anaïs Lamesa.




No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0007	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 142 / W 40 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0008	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 32 / W 21 / ch. 6	Pillar with a wide band (pseudocapital)	
G0009	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 38 / W 40 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0010	Pillar	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 156.5 / W (max) 38.5 / ch 11.5	Chamfered pillar with a small plaster decoration	
G0011	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone	L 197 / W 42.5 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0012	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone	L 224 / W 46 / ch. 11.5 or 12	Chamfered pillar	

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0013	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 80 / W 49 / ch. 12	Chamfered pillar	
G0014	Pillar	Archaeological area	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 98 / W 47 / ch. 12	Chamfered pillar	
G0015	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 72 / W 40 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0016	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 57 / W 39 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0017	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 280 / W 47 / ch. 12	Chamfered pillar	
G0018	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone	L 186 / W 43 / ch. 12	Chamfered pillar	

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0019	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 41 / W 33 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0020	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 66 / W 41 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0021	Pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 75 / W 39 / ch. 10	Chamfered pillar	
G0022	Pillar	Archaeological area	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 72 / W 50 / ch. 12	Chamfered pillar	
G0023	Small pillar	Archaeological area	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 35 / W 21 / ch. 6	Chamfered pillar	
G0024	Small pillar	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone with coarse grains and visible quartz (alt.)	L 28 / W 21 / mort. Ø 4	Pillar with a wide band (pseudocapital) where a mortise is cut	
G0025	Base or capital	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 74 / W 74 / T 35	Square block with 4 offsets	

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0026	Base or capital	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 72 / W 72 / T 16	Square block with 3 offsets	
G0027	Base or capital	Old Maryam Nazret	Limestone?	L 56 / W 58 / T 19	Square stone block with 3 offsets	
G0028	Base or capital	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone	L 74 / W 74 / T 16	Square block with 2 offsets (the second is destroyed)	
G0029	Base or capital	Archaeological area	Hard sandstone	L 75 / W 75 / T 18	Square block with a straight chamfer	
G0030	Two slabs (?)	Old Maryam Nazret	Hard sandstone	L 73 / W 73 / T 12	2 Slabs (?) forming a base	
G0031	Slab	Old Maryam Nazret	Limestone?	L 41 / W 43 / T nc	Well-preserved slab	
G0032	Slab	Old Maryam Nazret	Limestone?	L 35 / W 35 / T 15 / mort. Ø 14	Trapezoidal block (slab?) with a mortise	

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0033	Slab	Archaeological area	Limestone?	L 57 / W 38 / T 23	L-shaped square stone, slab reused?	
G0034	Slab	Archaeological area	Limestone?	L 52 / W 48 / T 27	L-shaped square stone, slab reused?	
G0035	Block with offset	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	L 47.5 / W (max) 57 / T 30	Paving stone?	
G0036	Basin	Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	Ø (outside) 74.5 / Ø (inside) 58 / H 28	Basin with 4 sculpted handles and inscriptions	
G0037- g0038	Pillar	Village	Indeterminate	nc	Pillar reused in a wall in bad condition	
G0039	Basin	Village	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	nc	Dressed block used as mortar (decoration in the back?)	
G0040	Mosaic	Village	Mortar and ceramic	nc	Ceramic tiles embedded in a mortar slab	

No.	Category	Location	Material	Size (cm)	Description	Photo
G0041	Grinding stone	Village	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	nc	Dressed block used as mortar	
G0042	Millstone	Entrance of Old Maryam Nazret	Limestone	nc	Bedder millstone	
G0043	Millstone	Entrance of Old Maryam Nazret	Sandstone with fine grains (carbonate-cemented sandstone)	nc	Runner millstone	

L: length; W: width; H: height; T: thickness; Ø: diameter

ch: chamfer; mort: mortise

nc: not communicated (i.e., not measured)

alt: material has been altered or degraded

## Appendix 2

*List of Tombs Excavated or Observed in Sector 1*

For a stratigraphic diagram of the tombs, see Figure 21.

No.	Excavation	Individual	Deposit	Type of Grave	Orientation	Position of the Body	Age Category	Age at Death	Sex
SP01	2018		undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.
SP02	2018		undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	immature	undet.	undet.
SP03	2018, 2020		primary	covered (?) pit	NW-SE	lying on the back	adult	> 40 y.	M
SP04	2018		undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.
SP05	2018		undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.
SP06	2018		undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.	undet.
SP07	2018, 2020		primary	stone coffer	N-S	lying on the back	adult	> 60 y.	M?
SP08	2020	Ind. 1	primary	stone coffer	N-S	lying on the back	adult	young (?) adult	undet.
SP08	2020	Ind. 2	secondary	stone coffer	N-S	undet. (secondary position)	adult	undet.	undet.
SP09	2018		primary	covered (?) pit	W-E	lying on the back	adult	undet.	undet.
SP10	2020		primary	covered pit	NW-SE	lying on the back	adult	> 40 y.	undet.
SP11	2020		primary	stone coffer	NNW-SSE	lying on the back	adult	undet.	?
SP12	2020		primary	stone coffer	W-E	lying on the back	adult	> 30 y.	F
SP13	2020		primary	stone coffer?	N-S	lying on the back	adult	undet.	undet.
SP14	2020		primary	stone coffer	NW-SE	lying on the back	adult	young adult	F
SP15	2020		primary	stone coffer	N-S	lying on the back	immature	6-12 m.	undet.
SP16	2020		primary	covered pit	W-E	lying on the back	immature	8 m.-2 y.	undet.
SP17	2020		primary	covered pit	W-E	lying on the back	immature	7-12 y.	undet.
SP18	Not excavated		primary	stone coffer	N-S	not observed	not observed	not observed	not observed
SP19	Not excavated		primary	stone coffer	N-S	lying on the back	not observed	not observed	not observed
SP20	Not excavated		primary	stone coffer	?	not observed	not observed	not observed	not observed

undet.: undetermined  
 m.: months; y.: years  
 F: female; M: male

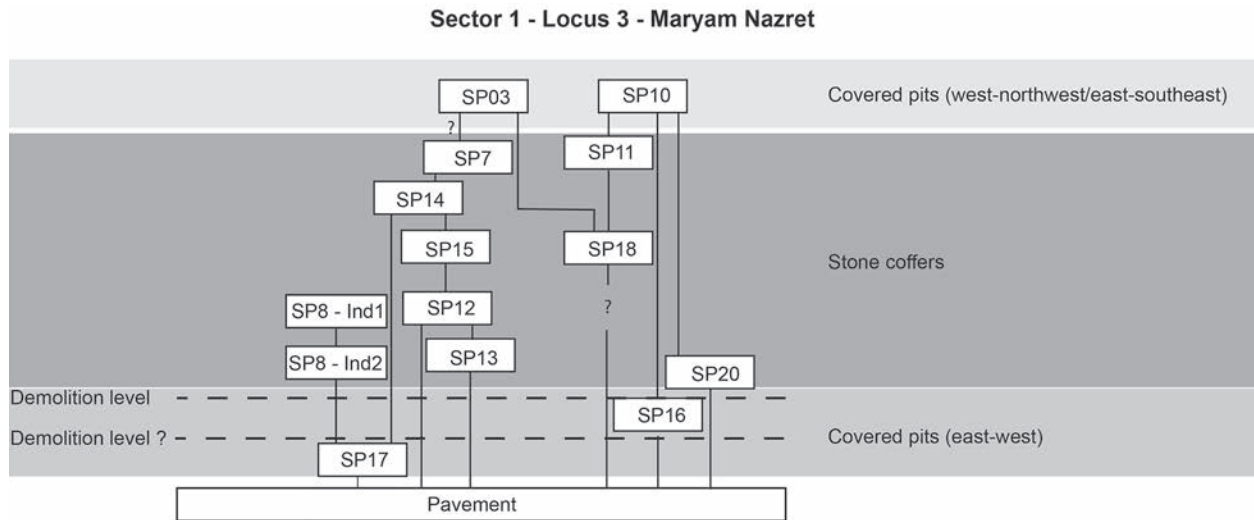


Fig. 21. Stratigraphic diagram of tombs excavated or observed in sector 1. Drawing by Yves Gleize.

## Appendix 3

*Radiocarbon Dates from Maryam Nazret and Golgotha*

Laboratory Reference No.	Information about the Sample	Conventional (BP) and Calibrated (CE) Intervals at 2 Sigmas (95.4%)
Beta-511806	MN Sector 1. Charcoal, taken from below the burial in a secondary position, 30 cm below the surface.	1070 +/- 30 BP 940–1021 cal CE (74.5%) 895–928 cal CE (20.9%)
Beta-511807	MN Sector 1. Charcoal on the slab and at the base of a fire level identified throughout the sector.	340 +/- 30 BP 1470–1640 cal CE (95.4%)
Beta-656106	MN Sector 1. Wood from the threshold integral to the pavement of the building.	1120 +/- 30 BP 876–994 cal CE (92.8%) 833–846 cal CE (1.4%) 776–784 cal CE (1.3%)
Beta-569078	MN Sector 1. Isolated bone (human clavicle in secondary position) from under the paving found in the fill, several tens of centimeters under Sepulture 17. Analysis made on collagen.	1350 +/- 30 BP 637–714 cal CE (88.4%) 744–765 cal CE (7.0%)
Beta-569079	MN Sector 3. Charcoal from the fill at the level of the last platform bed.	960 +/- 30 BP 1020–1155 cal CE (95.4%)
Beta-569080	MN Sector 2A. Charcoal from the base of the structure in contact with the bedrock.	940 +/- 30 BP 1025–1160 cal CE (95.4%)
Beta-569081	MN Sector 2. Wood sample from the monoxyle coffin at the bottom of the pit.	170 +/- 30 BP 1721–1818 cal CE (51.6%) 1915–after 1950 CE (17.9%) 1659–1699 cal CE (17.6%) 1832–1880 cal CE (8.2%)
Beta-657950	MN Sector 1. Bone (SP8). Analysis on carbonate.	220 +/- 30 BP 1731–1806 cal CE (48.1%) 1640–1687 cal CE (35.5%) 1926–after 1950 cal CE (11.8%)
Beta-657951	MN Sector 1. Bone (SP17). Analysis on collagen.	400 +/- 30 BP 1437–1522 cal CE (73.8%) 1574–1625 cal CE (21.6%)
Beta-511805	Golgotha. Charcoal collected in the Test Pit 1, on the floor of the building.	720 +/- 30 BP 1246–1302 cal CE (90.5%) 1366–1383 cal CE (4.9%)

## Appendix 4

### *Reassembling Golgotha Glassware*

TIFFANIE GIRAUD AND ATELIER BURDIGALA

From the very beginning of the work, it was clear that the small number of glass fragments would not allow the complete reconstruction of each object. Our attempts to assemble the various elements led us to identify at least five distinct objects:

*Red glass:* One fragment.

*Emerald glass:* A few fragments of this color were found, leaving few clues as to its original form. Their connections remain enigmatic.

*Yellowish glass:* this group of fragments proved interesting, with a very good state of preservation. Thanks to their thickness and slightly rounded shape, we were able to establish a few connections suggesting part of the original object.

*Dark blue glass:* Fragments show a variety of shapes, including lip, foot, neck, and belly. The thickness of the fragments varies from fine to coarse. One of the most

striking details is the delicate vegetal pattern (rosette?) that some fragments display. Unfortunately, no connection with the few elements of this blue glass has been established.

*“Glossy beige” glass:* These fragments have suffered surface deterioration, marked by lifting and flaking, revealing an opaque underlying material. To limit this deterioration, each fragment was immersed for thirty minutes in a 10% Paraloid B72 acrylic resin bath. The fractures also show considerable erosion, complicating the assembly process. Despite this, some elements could be reassembled first with 40% Paraloid B72 acrylic resin in acetone, then with Araldite 2020 resin for better adhesion. Reassembly reveals a variety of shapes, including a rather thinned or even thickened lip (exterior) with an approximate diameter of 10 cm, which raises the question of whether they come from a single object or from several of similar hue.

## Appendix 5

### *Physico-chemical Analysis of Glass Fragments from Golgotha Church*

INÈS PACTAT AND BERNARD GRATUZE

#### Analytical method

Four small glass samples of different colors from the thirteenth–fourteenth-century church of Golgotha, Ethiopia, were analyzed: one dark blue (sample G.1), one dark green (or emerald) (G.3), and two naturally colored: yellowish (G.2) and greenish (or glossy beige) (G.4). Their chemical composition has been determined (Table 1) at the Centre Ernest-Babelon/IRAMAT (CNRS/University of Orléans, France), using laser ablation–inductively coupled plasma–mass spectrometry (LA-ICP-MS), which permits a nearly nondestructive analysis, invisible to the naked eye.<sup>1</sup> The instrumentation consisted of a Resolution M50E UV laser probe from Resonetics/ASI (Eximer ArF laser working at 193 nm, equipped with the S155 cell), coupled with a Thermo Fisher Scientific ELEMENT XR mass spectrometer. Analytical parameters are as follows: The excimer laser was operated at 5.5 mJ with a repetition rate of 10 Hz and ablation time was set to 50 seconds: 20 seconds pre-ablation, so that contamination could be removed, and 30 seconds collection time corresponding to 9 mass scans from lithium to uranium. The signal was measured in counts per second, in low resolution mode for fifty-eight different isotopes, including all major, minor (except sulphur), and trace elements that are usually present in glass samples.

#### Results

All of the four glass fragments from the Golgotha church are plant-ash soda-lime glasses, as to be expected for thirteenth-century glasses in East Africa. They form

two groups, consisting on one hand of the dark blue glass (G.1), and on the other hand of G.2, G.3, and G.4 samples. These two groups are mainly characterized by different contents: soda (respectively, 12.9%/18.8%), magnesia (2.8%/5.3%), alumina (1.1%/3.4%), potash (3.2%/1.9%), lime (8.1%/4.6%), and titanium oxide (0.07%/0.28%) contents. The dark blue glass (G.1) was colored with cobalt oxide, while copper oxide was used for the dark green glass (G.3). The two other glasses were colored by iron oxide naturally present in the sand used by the glassmakers. In the yellowish glass (G.2), manganese oxide was probably added to reduce the natural tint of the glass.

Although the place of manufacture of objects cannot be determined with certainty from compositional analysis, in some cases the origin of the raw glass can be established. For this historical period, that is, the second half of the thirteenth century, we are forced to use data from earlier or later productions due to the lack of available data, so the origin of the raw glass used for the Golgotha artifacts may be more difficult to determine. According to minor and trace elements, however, the dark blue glass (G.1) may belong to the Levantine group.<sup>2</sup> For the other three glasses, the attribution is less clear. The contents of trace elements introduced by the fluxing agent (Li, B) and of some minor components introduced by the sand (Al, Ca, and Ti) make an Egyptian or a Mesopotamian origin of the raw glass more likely. Some pale green and pale yellow glass beakers, with fairly similar composition

1 B. Gratuze, “Glass Characterization Using Laser Ablation-Inductively Coupled Plasma-Mass Spectrometry Methods,” in *Recent Advances in Laser Ablation ICP-MS in Archaeology*, ed. L. Dussubieux, M. Golitko, and B. Gratuze (Berlin, 2016), 179–96.

2 M. Phelps, “Glass Supply and Trade in Early Islamic Ramla: An Investigation of the Plant Ash Glass,” in *Things That Travelled: Mediterranean Glass in the First Millennium AD*, ed. M. Phelps et al. (London, 2018), 236–82; I. Pactat, A. Constant, and N. Schibille, “Supply of Glass to the Medieval Hilltop Settlement of Ultrera (Eastern Pyrenees, France),” *Journal of Archaeological Science, Reports* 39 (2021), 103185 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2021.103185>).

Table 1. Composition of Four Golgotha Glass Fragments, Determined by LA-ICP-MS

	Golgotha 1 (Dark blue)	Golgotha 2 (Yellowish)	Golgotha 3 (Dark Green)	Golgotha 4 (Greenish)
Major and Minor Oxides (by weight percentage)				
Na <sub>2</sub> O	12.9	19.4	17.9	19.0
MgO	2.80	5.87	5.26	4.81
Al <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	1.14	3.55	4.19	2.58
SiO <sub>2</sub>	69.0	61.5	60.9	64.1
P <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	0.24	0.35	0.35	0.54
Cl	0.83	0.74	0.56	0.78
K <sub>2</sub> O	3.25	1.96	2.18	1.78
CaO	8.06	4.63	4.69	4.39
TiO <sub>2</sub>	0.072	0.23	0.29	0.31
MnO	0.052	0.43	0.50	0.087
Fe <sub>2</sub> O <sub>3</sub>	1.12	1.20	1.50	1.43
Other Elements (parts per million)				
Li	6.74	6.50	8.47	6.21
B	93.8	192	167	187
V	12.3	21.5	27.4	25.3
Cr	10.9	23.1	27.8	28.0
Co	943	5.26	6.27	4.22
Ni	22.3	15.0	22.3	15.7
Cu	951	49.5	11,605	372
Zn	242	61.3	71.1	73.5
Rb	14.3	29.6	30.5	17.9
Sr	450	296	315	368
Y	3.87	9.59	11.8	8.90
Zr	104	99.7	119	136
Nb	1.73	6.92	9.13	6.53
In	27.3	0.03	0.02	0.01
Ba	165	196	246	92.7
La	7.25	10.7	13.2	10.5
Ce	13.4	21.0	26.2	20.9
Pb	1,264	10.4	369	30.8
Th	1.71	3.93	4.83	2.43
U	0.48	1.11	1.27	0.71

but unfortunately from undated contexts, were identified in the Sinai Peninsula at Raya.<sup>3</sup> These glasses,

defined as the group Minor Type I, are also characterized by high soda, magnesia, iron, and titanium oxide content and low lime content, but display lower alumina content.

3 N. Kato, I. Nakai, and Y. Shindo, "Transitions in Islamic Plant-Ash Glass Vessels: On-Site Chemical Analyses Conducted at the Raya/al-Tur Area on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37.7 (2010): 1381–95.