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Memory and Oblivion in the History of Gonǧ Monastery (1670–1750): The Paradoxes of *Qəbat* Historiography*

ANAÏS WION

Abstract

At the end of the seventeenth century, the history of Gonǧ monastery, in Goǧǧam, was complex and traumatic because its abbot, Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, head of the *Qəbat* movement during Yoḥannəs' reign (r 1667–1682), rebelled against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who favoured the Däbrä Libanos monastic network and declared Qəbat a heresy. The civil war lasted until Ṭäbdän and his followers were excommunicated and banished, in 1687. Nonetheless, a few decades later, Gonǧ was richly endowed by the royal power and its violent and rebellious past seemed to be forgotten. How did a rebellious institution come back to the foreground of the political and religious scene a few decades later? What had to be altered or forgotten in this violent history? How did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting the rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past? The memory has been lost of Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, the abbot of Gonǧ who sowed dissension within the *Qəbat* movement, opposed his own monks, and led an uprising against the king. New narratives, such as a dying bishop travelling miraculously to Gonǧ and the 'late' invention of a neutral founding father, helped to attract the faithful and pilgrims, and recalled the institution's long history and close relationships with major political and religious authorities. In this case study, oral history will be shown to forge stories and portray characters in ways that obstruct access to the 'historical truth'.

Introduction

Gonǧ, a monastery in Goǧǧam, assumed leadership of the *Qəbat* movement as early as 1620, the very beginning of the theological and political controversy between Qəbat (Unctionism) and Täwaḥədo (Unionism). In another article,[1] I discuss the case of Ləbsä Krəstos, abbot of Gonǧ during King Susənyos's reign (r 1607–1632). This powerful man is now remembered in Gonǧ only through the presence of a giant sycamore bearing his name. This '*Abba* Ləbso' tree

* I wish to thank Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie (Addis Ababa University) for his challenging comments during the preparation of this contribution, and Noal Mellott for revising the English.

1 Wion 2017.

stands where the first church in Gonǧ was supposedly founded, on the edge of the cliff, while the present-day church is located a few hundred meters below. Of the glorious, or inglorious, past of *Abba* Ləbsä Krəstos, nothing remains in the memory of the Gonǧ monastic community. That he was a fiery leader of the *Qəbat* movement at the first major council held in 1621, that the Jesuits called him their best Catholic convert, that the patriarch of Alexandria wrote to him after his return to the Alexandrian faith in 1632, that King Fasilädäs sentenced him to death, and tbat he died in jail years after the sentence was passed... Nothing of all this has been retained in Gonǧ's memory.

But this is not the only case of oblivion. At the end of the seventeenth century, Gonǧ's history was complex and traumatic, mainly because one of its abbots, Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, head of the *Qəbat* movement during Yoḥannəs' reign (r 1667–1682), started a rebellion against King Iyasu (r 1682–1706), who favoured the Däbrä Libanos monastic network and declared Qəbat a heresy. This civil war lasted until Ṭäbdän and his followers were excommunicated and banished, in 1687.

The present study examines the political and religious history of Gonǧ monastery, in order to investigate the process whereby this community reinvented its history in the mid-eighteenth century.[2] At that time, King Iyasu II (r 1730–1755) co-opted the *Qəbat* movement, successfully carrying out the policy conducted by his predecessors since King Tewoflos (r 1708–1711). The court had richly endowed *Qəbat* and Ewosṭatean institutions. How did a rebellious institution—rebellious not for being *Qəbat* but for having led an uprising against the king—come back into the foreground of tbe political and religious scene a few decades later? What had to be altered or forgotten in tbis violent history? How did written documents, oral history and iconographic sources, not forgetting rites and the physical features of the landscape, enter into this reimagining of the past? Approaching chronology in retrospect, let us start by describing Gonǧ's mid-eighteenth-century 'heroes' to then take a look at how they were used to 'clean the past' of scandalous references.

Inventing a Founding Father: A Necessity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

When asked about its history today, the Gonǧ community, lay and cleric, start by referring to Gərma Śəllus. The memory of this history, voiced through oral tradition, is very vivid.[3] Gərma Śəllus had a vision of the Virgin Mary who asked him to move the church down from its location up on the cliff. He prayed for forty days (or forty years). A few boulders talked, saying '*qəddus, qəddus*' ('holy, holy'). He followed them to the place and built the church that still stands there, its *tabot* dedicated to the Pact of the Covenant. These huge, round boulders can still be seen at the site and at a nearby place called *dəmṣä dəngay* ('the sound of stones') in remembrance of this story. The lower part of a nineteenth-century banner dedicated to Saint Tewodros depicts *Abunä* Ewosṭatewos preaching to his disciples and *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus with one of these stones. A nearby source of water with healing powers is named *qəddusan* ('holy men') because Gərma Śəllus and his disciples are said to have stopped and prayed there, making the water holy. It is still used as *ṣäbäl* (holy water). The landscape thus serves as evidence and a reminder of the history of the churcb's refoundation.

Oral tradition, which has not erased the past, definitely places the first church on top of the cliff, where the giant sycamore called '*Abba* Ləbso' now stands. As shown in my previous article, this church was linked with *Abba* Ləbsä Krəstos, the powerful abbot of Gonǧ sentenced to death by King Fasilädäs, whose *damnatio memoriae* has left nothing but this tree in Gonǧ's collective memory. The present-day church below the cliff is the one founded by *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus, who is identified as the 'first' founder of Gonǧ. How to resolve this apparent contradiction? The *afä mämhər* told us that the first church was built during the era of the Old Testament, at the time of *Liqä kahənat* Azaryas,[4] whereas the new church was built during the era of the New Testament, under the reign of Yəkunno Amlak, the founder of the so-called Solomonid dynasty in 1270. This clever usage of the 'double alliance', a fundamental theological tenet of the Ethiopian Church,[5] can convince only those who are already persuaded.[6]

2 For a general account of the history of Gonǧ, see 'Gonǧ Tewodros', *EAe*, II (2005), 848a–b (A. Wion).

3 My informants were *Afä mämhər* Bərhanu Šəfärraw, *Ato* Kasahun Mängəśtu and *Märigeta* Haymanot, recorded in Gonǧ in 2004 by Anaïs Wion, Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie, and Claire Bosc-Tiessé.

4 According to the *Kəbrä nägäśt*, *Liqä kahənat* Azaryas was the high priest of the Temple in Jerusalem who came to Ethiopia with the son of the Queen Makəda and King Solomon, along with the Ark of the Covenant.

5 On the 'double alliance', see Rodinson 1964; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001; Fritsch 2014.

6 A list written in the last blank folia of a psalter in Gonǧ (Goǧǧam, Gonǧ Tewodros, Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (= ARCCH), G-IV-330) might have inspired this oral tradition, or the reverse, since feedback passes in both directions. This chronology lists Ethiopian kings from Arwe, the mythical serpent-king, up to Minas (r 1559–1563). It is a type A list of kings according to Conti Rossini's classification (Conti Rossini 1909). The palaeography is modern (very likely from the twentieth century), even though the psalter is a beautiful early Gondärine work. The peculiarity of this copy is that Ellä Abrəha is credited with the construction of both Aksum and 'Galila DähräṬəbäb which is in the land (*mədr*) of Qolala'. Galila Däbrä Ṭəbäb is one of the names of Gonǧ monastery. Further down



Fig. 1 'How the stone followed *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus, *mämhər* of faith' (banner, reference number ARCCH G-III-39). Photo Anaïs Wion (2004).

Should we simply accept the fact that *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus is considered to be the founding father of the monastery since time immemorial? No. Not even the clergy and scholars in Gonǧ are persuaded of this. There is clear evidence that the 'construction' of the memory of this *abunä* is of rather recent date.

Gəᶜəz Literacy Meets Amharic Orality: The Commemoration of Gərma Śəllus in the *Sənkəssar*

A commemoration of the death of Gərma Śəllus on 10 Mäskäräm is found in the *Sənkəssar*.[7] In the upper margin of this seventeenth- or eighteenth-century manuscript, we read

> ወበዛቲ ፡ ዕለት ፡ አዕረፈ ፡ አቡነ ፡ ግርማ ፡ ሥሉስ ፡ መምህረ ፡ አንቱ [*sic*] ፡ ም ኔት ፡ ዘውእቱ ፡ ጎንጅ ፡ ወስርወ ፡ ልደቲሂ ፡ ናይድእክሙ ፡ ወሀሎ ፡ ፩ ፡ ብእ ሲ ፡ ሥዩመ ፡ ወለቃ ፡ ዘስሙ ፡ አብራክ ፡ ድንግል ፡ ወወለደ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ወሰመ

the list, where King Yəkunno Amlak is mentioned, the scribe added 'and this when Däbrä Ṭəbäb became a monastery (*gädam*)'.

7 Collegeville, MN, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (= EMML), 8523; ARCCH G-IV-334, fols 15v–16r.

> ዮ ፡ ኀደ ፡ ኢየሱስ ፡ ወሠናይ ፡ አርአያሁ ፡ ወኮሉ ፡ ዘርእዮ ፡ ያፈቅሮ ፡ ወአስ ተዋደይዎ ፡ ሰብእ ፡ ቀናዕያን ፡ ኀበ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ ሰይፈ ፡ አርአድ ፡ እንዘ ፡ ይብ ሉ ፡ ናሁ ፡ ተፍህሮ [*sic*] ፡ መንግሥት ፡ ለኀደ ፡ ኢየሱስ ፡ ወውእቱኒ ፡ የኃሥ ሳ ፡ ወበእንተዝ ፡ ጸልኦ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ ወአጥፍአ ፡ ክልኤሆን ፡ አዕይንቲሁ ፡ ወአሚ ሃ ፡ ጸልመ ፡ ዓለም ፡ ፱ዕለታተ ፡ ወጠየቀ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ ምክንያቶ ፡ ለጽልመት ፡ ወ ይቤልዎ ፡ ሰብእ ፡ ማእምራን ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዘአጥፋዕከ ፡ አዕይንቲሁ ፡ ለኀደ ፡ ኢ የሱስ ፡ ወጸውኦ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ ወይቤሎ ፡ ጎድግ ፡ ሊተ ፡ አበሳየ ፡ አነሂ ፡ ወሀበኩ ከ ፡ ወለተየ ፡ ዘስማ ፡ ትኩና ፡ ለጽዮን ፡ ወአውሰባ ፡ ወሠመያ ፡ ተኩ·ልኝ ፡ በእ ንተ ፡ ጥፍአተ ፡ አዕይንቲሁ ፡ ወወለዶሙ ፡ እምኔሃ ፡ ለአቡነ ፡ ግርማ ፡ ሥሉ ስ ፡ ወአስበ ፡ ክርስቶስ ፡ ወለጽጌ ፡ ማርያም ፡ ወለማዕዶት ፡ ወቦ ፡ ካልኣን ፡ ወ አመ ፡ ተወልደ ፡ ሕጻን ፡ ግርማ ፡ ሥሉስ ፡ ኮነ ፡ ግዙረ ፡ ወመስቀል ፡ ውስተ ፡ እዴሁ ፡ ወማዕተብ ፡ ውስተ ፡ ክሳዴ ፡ ወልህቀ ፡ በጥበብ ፡ ወምክር ፡ ወተምህ ረ ፡ ሕገ ፡ ቤተ ፡ ክርስቲያን ፡ ወተሠይመ ፡ መምህረ ፡ እንዘ ፡ ሀሎ ፡ ጐንጅ ፡ በምድረ ፡ ቅንክት ፡[8] ፲ዓመተ ፡ ወእምድኅረዝ ፡ ኮነ ፡ ስደት ፡ ወመጽአ ፡ ምስ ለ ፡ ህዝቡ ፡ ወካህናቲሁ ፡ ወሐነጻ ፡ ለዛቲ ፡ ደብረ ፡ ሰማዕት ፡ በጸም ፡ ወበጸሎ ት ፡ ወሐነጸ ፡ ብዙኀነ ፡ አብያተ ፡ ክርስቲያናት ፡ ወነበረ ፡ ፸ዓመተ ፡ በዛቲ ፡ ምኔት ፡ ወአቀቦሙ ፡ ለአባግኦ ፡ መርዔቱ ፡ በፍቅር ፡ ወበሰላም ፡ ወአዕረፈ ፡ በ ከመ ፡ ዛቲ ፡ ዕለት ፡ ጸሎቱ ፡ ወበረከቱ ፡ የሃሎ ፡ ምስለ ፡ ፍቁሩ ፡ ኪዳነ ፡ ማርያ ም ፡ ወምስለ ፡ ፍቅርቱ ፡ ወለተ ፡ ኢየሱስ ፡ ወምስለ ፡ ኮሎ ፡ ውሉዱ ፡ ለዓለ መ ፡ ዓለም ፡ አሜን ።።[9]

(And on this day [10 Mäskäräm] died *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus, *mämhər* of this monastery (*mənet*) [in] Gonǧ. And we shall let you know the origin of his birth. There was a man, *śəyyum* of Wäläqa, whose name was Abrakä Dəngəl. He had a son named Nägädä Iyäsus of handsome appearance. All those who saw him loved him. But some jealous people accused him in front of King Sayfä Arᶜad, saying: 'This Nägädä Iyäsus is a threat to the kingdom. He must be interrogated because of his hatred of the king.' His two eyes were removed, and the world was dark for 100 days. The king asked for the reason for this darkness. And the learned ones answered him that it was because Nägädä Iyäsus had had his eyes removed. So the king made him come and said 'Forgive my crime, and I will give you my daughter whose name is Təkunna lä-Ṣəyon.' He married her and called her Täkullə ñña ['compensate me'] because of the loss of his eyes. And thereafter they had children: *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus, Asbä Krəstos and Ṣəge Maryam and Maᶜədot, and others. And when Gərma Śəllus was born, he was [already] circumcised and had a cross in his hand and a baptismal

8 The original word was erased and '*qənkət*' added in the margin.

9 The text is followed by a poem with five verses praising Mary and Gərma Śəllus, and perhaps alluding to Ləbsä Krəstos.

lace around his neck. And he grew in wisdom, the spirit of deliberation and the teaching of Church law. He was appointed *mämhər* when G^{w}äñ was in the land of Qənkət [for] ten years and then he was exiled. He arrived with his people and his clergy, and he built this church of the martyrs fasting and praying. And he built several churches. And he stayed twenty years in this monastery and was the keeper of his flock with love and peace. He died this day. May his prayer and benediction be with his beloved Kidanä Maryam and his beloved Wälättä Iyäsus and with their children,[10] forever and ever, amen.)[11]

The local community is familiar with this text since it is read every year during the commemoration for Gərma Śəllus. It is written in Gəʿəz, a liturgical language not mastered by those who have not attended a religious school. The oral tradition has retained only the most marvellous events. In common with the text, it mentions the birth with miraculous signs: the newborn child, already circumcised, with a baptismal lace around his neck and a cross in his hand. But the oral tradition has kept none of the information about Gərma Śəllus's regional and social background, perhaps because it is too specific and not directly comprehensible. As we shall see, the significance of these details was not at all clear to the scribe and/or historiographer who wrote the text.

This text was intended to provide information on Gərma Śəllus's family origins. He came from an aristocratic family, being the son of the '*śəyyum* of Wäläqa, whose name was Abrakä Dəngəl'. Abrakä Dəngəl, known from other sources, ruled over Wäläqa (an area bordering Goğğam on the south-eastern shore of the Abbay) during the seventeenth century. The *Chronicle of Iyasu II* mentions him for his loyalty to Fasilädäs (r 1632–1667),[12] and numerous genealogies of Wäläqa cite him.[13] Upon comparing these genealogies with the small text in the Gonǧ *Sənkəssar*, several contradictions and chronological aberrations appear. Firstly, Nägädä Iyäsus, the famous *ʿaqqabe säʿat* at the start of the sixteenth century, was probably a forefather of Abrakä Dəngəl but not his son. He had, indeed, links with Wäläqa since one of his sons was *nägaš* there.[14] Another anomaly: none of the persons

10 They were not the initial sponsors of the manuscript. Their names were copied over erasures everywhere in the main part of the manuscript, which very likely dates back to the early Gondärine period.

11 Translation my own.

12 Guidi 1910, 76; Guidi 1912, 81.

13 See Kropp 1989 and Wion 2012.

14 According to the autobiography of *Ras* Səmʿon, his brother and himself were sons of Nägädä Iyäsus, see Getatchew Haile 2005.

mentioned in the text were contemporaneous with the fourteenth-century king, Säyfä Arʿad. The genealogy of Wäläqa mentions that the daughter of *Wäläqa nägaš* Abrako gave birth to a girl named Takula, whereas another daughter of Abrako gave birth to Ṭänayto who gave birth to *Abeto* Gərma Iyäsus.[15] This Gərma Iyäsus would have lived at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The commemoration of Gərma Śəllus is based on a vague knowledge of the Wäläqa genealogies. What was probably important for Gonǧ monastery was not the accuracy of the text but the writing of a hagiography, wherein the monk recalls the proximity to royal and regional power-holders. This short commemorative text is a case of what we might describe as 'name-dropping'—mentioning important persons in order to legitimate what is being said.

This text contains an interesting piece of information: Gonǧ church was first founded in a place named Qənkət, which might be in Wäläqa, and then migrated toward the present-day location in Goğğam. The name Qənkət crops up in other accounts too.

Gərma Śəllus's Place in an Ewosṭatean Monastic Genealogy: An Invention in a Formalistic Tradition

Extended genealogies of the Ewosṭatean monastic house trace the spiritual filiation from Saint Antonios to Ewosṭatewos and his disciples, and then on to their disciples. The two main lines run from Absadi and from Gäbrä Iyäsus, whose spiritual sons extended the house and/or evangelized, mainly in Wäläqa, Šäwa, Dämbəya and Goğğam. Minor lines run through Märqorewos and Bäkimos, whose disciples stayed in northern areas (Təgray and Eritrea). G. Lusini has edited and translated three of these extended genealogies.[16] Similarities between these different versions prove that these documents are highly formalistic. Since all known genealogies stop with seventeenth-century monks at the latest, we can guess that they might have been written as early as the second half of the seventeenth century, but more probably that they accompany the return to favour of the *Qəbat* party after 1708.

As an important Ewosṭatean church, Gonǧ has such a genealogy.[17] Despite its lacunae, what remains is similar to the genealogy published by Lusini and preserved in manuscript Conti Rossini 88.[18] But there is a strik-

15 Kropp 1989, 194.

16 Lusini 2004.

17 This folium is now bound in *Gädlä Ewosṭatewos* (EMML 8577, ARCCH G-IV-364), fol. 121rv. The palaeography of the genealogy is rough and hard to date.

18 Ms Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 88.

ing difference. After the genealogical line of Absadi, and before that of Gäbrä Iyäsus, an independent line has been added: '*Abba* Täklä Śəllase of Däbäb is the spiritual father (literally *wälädo)* of Sənä Dəngəl of Qənkʷat; and Sənä Dəngəl is the spiritual father of Gərma Śəllus'. Given the lacunae in this genealogy (in particular the beginning is missing), we cannot know whether Täklä Śəllase might also have been added as one of Ewosṭatewos' first disciples. It would have been a bold act to 'invent' an unknown disciple, but it would also be the only way to attach this orphan line to the main father. What is striking is that this anomalous 'invention' also crops up in a different form in a genealogy from *Abba* ʿAśrat's monastery, another important Ewosṭatean center in Goğğam. This genealogy also adds a line for *Abba* Täklä Śəllase, in between the end of the Absadi line and the beginning of the Gäbrä Iyäsus one: '*Abba* Täklä Śəllase gave birth to *Abba* Näftalem of Qəngʷat where Goğ [*sic*] is'. This addition is followed by seven other unknown disciples of Täklä Śəllase.[19] There are no other developments of this genealogical line. Although the names differ, we recognize a common pattern with the addenda in Gonǧ's genealogy, but the narrative links with this pattern might have differed slightly. What is important is that it confirms that a place named Qəngʷat (Qənkʷat) was associated with Gonǧ at some point.

The mention of Qənkʷat as the monastery of Gərma Śəllus' spiritual father brings to mind that of Qənkət in the *Sənkəssar* as the place from which Gərma Śəllus came. Since Qənkət was added over an erasure with a different spelling, we cannot be sure that Qənkət and Qənkʷat come from independent sources. One might be the source of the other, the genealogy probably being the source of the *Sənkəssar* note. Whatever the case, Däbäb and Qənkʷat have not yet been identified.[20]

Gərma Śəllus as the Grantor of Land to Gonǧ: A Retrospective Account in a Late Amharic Document

An Amharic land document starts with the following words: 'Here is the letter (*däbdäbe*) of *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus by which he gave to Däbrä Tewodros of Gonǧ the *säbäka* of Wäläqe Giyorgis, Abälä Maryam Abbo and the *tabot* of Śəllase.'[21] The document lists the taxes to be contributed by

19 I wish to thank Margaux Herman for sharing this unpublished, very original genealogy with me.

20 As I observed during a recent field-trip to Wäläqa, the Christian community has forgotten about these two places. I have conducted systematic enquiries in order to locate these places in the area of Wägäde but informants could not recall them.

21 In the *Senodos*, MS EMML 8537, accessed through the D. Crummey collection, photos no. 89.V.12–13. This collection is accessible at the University Library of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (see Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Archives, DCC Masters 2006–, Sub-Series 3: Ethiopian Land Records (Prof. Don Crummey), 2009) and at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abäba.

each of these parishes to Gonǧ. It should be mentioned that the main tributary church of Gonǧ is called Wäläqe, after the province of Wäläqa—yet another reminder of the link between the church and that province. Since Gonǧ was dedicated to Saint Tewodros after King Tewodros (r 1855–1868) looted the monastery, this document obviously dates from the second half of the nineteenth century at the earliest. It provides evidence of the abiding importance of this tradition to the monastery. Since Gərma Śəllus is identified as the founding father, he must have granted land to the monastery.

None of the three sources mentioned is very old. Since *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus is unattested in Ethiopian sources in general and in Ewosṭatean sources in particular, when was this tradition created or, at least, set down in writing? And why? What were the reasons for 'inventing' an ancient and obscure—if not imaginary—founding father?

A First Clue: Gərma Śəllus, a Protective Aura after 1730 for the Real Abbot of Gonǧ

Gərma Śəllus is associated with *Abba* Ṣewa Dəngəl in two other sources created by and for Gonǧ. The two men are depicted together inside the church, on the beautiful painting on the western wall of the *mäqdäs* (Fig. 2). Furthermore, a long series of poems (two distinct collections each with twenty-seven *sälam*) is dedicated to both of them.[22] Obviously, Ṣewa Dəngəl, abbot of Gonǧ during or just before the reign of Iyasu II, wanted to be associated with the memory of Gərma Śəllus, and was willing to invest in playing up this association. He was very likely a principal sponsor of the paintings tbat, in pure Second Gondärine style, adorned the *mäqdäs*, of which only those on the western wall have survived.[23] Ṣewa Dəngəl and Gərma Śəllus are depicted together on the left part of the wall, under a depiction of Saint Tewodros riding a horse, armed with the divine *dextra* and slaying enemies. The name of the lay do-

22 MS ARCCH G-IV-346. These poems contain no historical information.

23 The upper part of the western wall depicts the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Passion. The middle part depicts, on the left side, Saints Tewodros and George riding horses and, on the right side of the door, the Virgin with Child (to whom Yaʿəqob Trəngo is praying) and the Crucifixion. The lower part portrays *Blatta* Wäsän, Ṣewa Dəngəl, Gərma Śəllus and a male donor, the Pact of the Covenant with a female donor, and a monk. On the right are seven figures, among them *Mämhər* Gäbrä Yoḥannəs, *Fitawrari* Gäbrä Mikaʾel, and *Abunä* Ewosṭatewos teaching his disciples while in exile. The door-frame is adorned with small figurative scenes in white and dark blue in imitation of the Dutch tiles decorating the royal foundations of Narga and Qʷəsqʷam (see Bosc-Tiessé and Wion 2005, 101–105).

nor prostrate at their feet is not easily deciphered (Gäbrä Giyorgis?). Despite the white stroke separating the scene, Gərma Śəllus and Ṣewa Dəngəl are part of the iconographic narrative of the Pact of the Covenant. They face the Virgin Mary and Jesus. The woman prostrate at the feet of Mother and Child was probably the wife of the high-ranking person prostrate before Ṣewa Dəngəl. Another figure, *Blatta* Wäsän, is depicted on the left of the wall, above Gərma Śəllus and Ṣewa Dəngəl.



Fig. 2 Wall-painting portraying *Abba* Gərma Śəllus and *Abba* Ṣewa Dəngəl, abbot of Gonǧ *c.*1730 (western wall, church of Gonǧ Tewodros, Goǧǧam). Photo Anaïs Wion (2004).

Ṣewa Dəngəl is not unknown. He is mentioned at the beginning of the *Chronicle of Iyasu II*, in the genealogy of eminent *Qəbat* scholars and monastic leaders. This chronicle clearly indicates that the reign of the new king and of his mother, Məntəwwabb, was placed under the patronage of the Ewosṭatean monastic house and the *Qəbat* movement.

> The people of Goǧǧam and Q^{w}ara take part in this faith, because they were taught by the sons of *Abunä* Ewosṭatewos. [...] *Abba* Täṭämqä Mädḫən from the convent of Gašola, Gažege and Wagada;[24] *Abba* Yoḥannəs of Däbrä Ṣəlalo,[25] *Abba* Ṣewa Dəngəl, abbot of Däbrä Gonǧ. These are the persons who taught this Orthodox faith to the inhabitants of Goǧǧam and Q^{w}ara.[26]

24 Täṭämqä Mädḫən was a major monastic leader during Yoḥannəs' reign. Taddesse Tamrat, while working on the Agäw, discovered a hagiography of Täṭämqä Mädḫən in Mätäkkäl. According to this still unpublished *gädl*, Täṭämqä Mädḫən was sent by the king to areas west of Goǧǧam and Ṭana to evangelize the Gumuz and the Agäw, and he died in 1678 (Taddesse Tamrat 1988, 14–17). He was also mentioned, but indirectly, in the *Chronicle of Yoḥannəs* as '*Abba* Täṭämqo *mənet* of Gažige *mämhər* of numerous brothers' (Guidi 1903a, 37; Guidi 1903b, 38). Entrusted by the king to promote the Orthodox faith, he was sent to evangelize a region where the king fought several battles. According to one genealogy of the Ewosṭatean house, he was the spiritual son of Arsanyos of Qoma. Arsanyos was the father confessor of Queen Wäld Śä^{c}ala, the wife of King Susənyos who founded the monastery of Qoma Fasilädäs in Bägemdər (Lusini 2004, 267; Wion 2012). Even if associated with Qoma in the genealogies, Arsanyos was not the first abbot of this monastery, since Fəre Mäsqäl is clearly identified as the first.

At the beginning of Məntəwwab's regency, Ṣewa Dəngəl of Gonǧ was considered to be a major *Qəbat* leader. It is hard to establish the exact dates of his activities, but we might assume that he was in charge of the monastery during the reign of Iyasu II. During the reign of Məntəwwab and Iyasu II, Gonǧ was, once again, closely associated with royal power, and profited from the royal family's endowments. When Məntəwwab founded Narga Śəllase, Gonǧ was the monastery that benefitted the most from the newly opened positions and lands: eighteen of its clergy received tenure from Narga,[27] followed by Ṣəlalo with eight. Nor should we forget to mention the outstanding career of *Abba* Tewodros of Ṣəlalo, sent in 1744 to Egypt to ask the Alexandrian patriarch for a new metropolitan. Tewodros was, in 1745, *ṣäḥafe tə'əzaz* (royal chronicler) and *aläqa* of the Gondärine church of Ḥamärä Noḫ.[28] As chronicler, he might have been the person who added the reference to the abbots of Ṣəlalo and Gonǧ! In 1750, he was appointed to head a newly founded church in Q^{w}əsq^{w}am, a very significant position.[29]

Given all this, we can formulate the hypothesis that the creation of the 'history' or 'commemoration' of *Abunä* Gərma Śəllus as founding father of Gonǧ could date back to the time of Ṣewa Dəngəl. A new historiographical

25 Ṣəlalo and Gonǧ have been closely associated, sometimes even considered to be a single institution. *Abba* Yoḥannəs is depicted along with Ləbsä Krəstos on a visual spiritual genealogy of the Ewosṭatean monastic house (cf. Wion 2017). The icon is posted on the website of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which owns it: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.98 (consulted on 19 June 2014). *Abba* Yoḥannəs of Ṣəlalo would have had his own *gädl* written, according to the list established by Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke 1975, 98.

26 Guidi 1910, 17; Guidi 1912, 16.

27 Bosc-Tiessé 2008, 242–243.

28 Guidi 1910, 117; Guidi 1912, 127.

29 Bosc-Tiessé 2008, 242–243.

moment in the life of Gonǧ monastery was contrived during the first half of the eighteenth century.

But does this imply that Gərma Śəllus was not, even earlier, considered to be Gonǧ's founding father? The *forma vulgata* of Ewosṭatean genealogies only mentions Aron, a disciple in the Absadi line, as abbot of Gonǧ six or seven generations after Ewosṭatewos.[30] Each monastery is mentioned once in association with the man who must have been the founder, or the first abbot. Accordingly, Aron would have founded Gonǧ in the mid-fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In this *forma vulgata*, as previously pointed out, a line has been added in Gonǧ for Gərma Śəllus,[31] not originally associated with Gonǧ. In other words, it was, at some point, necessary to invent a new past for Gonǧ monastery but without erasing the old. Did something have to be hidden or forgotten? What happened prior to this period? Let us examine the previous generation of leaders in Gonǧ.

Abba Ṭäbdän Dəngəl (1680s): From Failure to Oblivion

Though no longer remembered in Gonǧ, the name of a very famous abbot crops up in several official written sources. *Abba* Ṭäbdän Dəngəl was a leader of the *Qəbat* party at the end of King Yohannəs's reign (r 1667–1682),[32] a king who tried, at least until the last year of his rule, to maintain a balance between Qəbat and Täwaḥədo. A synod was held in 1679 with the people of Lasta, a third party to this religious, political, and regional game of power, as shown by Kindeneh Endeg's interpretation of a new source (*Gädlä Estənfəsä Krəstos*) and his fresh analysis of the *Royal Chronicles* and of the *Gädlä Iyasu*.[33] Striking a balance of power between the pro-Ewosṭatean and pro-Däbrä Libanos monastic movements has been considered to be typical of politics during the Gondärine period. Kindeneh Endeg's research tends to prove that such was not the case: a third party challenged this balance of power; and persecutions, oppression and violence were rife. The Däbrä Libanos house defended the unionist interpretation, in line with the *yäṣägga ləǧǧ* doctrine, while the Lasta and Təgray people adhered to the *karra* doctrine.

The account of the 1679 synod in the *Royal Chronicles* starts with the credo of the clergy of Lasta, who sent a letter to King Yoḥannəs stating, 'If

30 Six generations reported in MS Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 125 in Lusini 2004; and MS EMML 8577 of Gonǧ. Seven generations reported in MS Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Fondo Conti Rossini, 88, in Lusini 2004.

31 MS EMML 8577 of Gonǧ.

32 Guidi 1903a, 41–42; Guidi 1903b, 41–43.

33 Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013.

you reject the people of your kingdom who say that Christ was glorified by the Holy Spirit, be our king; and we will be your slaves and servants.'[34] The clergy, both *Qəbat* and *Täwaḥədo,* opposed this call, replying, 'The Father glorified the Son, Christ, by the glory of his essence though the anointment with the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.'[35] The main speaker at this council was *ʿAqqabe säʿat* Qʷäsṭanṭinos. Monks were allowed to speak only at the end of the synod. The ones who took the floor were *'Abba* Ṭäbdän, *mämhər* of Gonǧ, *Abba* Atnatewos who brought the metropolitan from Egypt, and *Abba* Ǝdä Krəstos, *liqä mänäkosat zä-əčč̣äge'*.[36] There was strong agreement at the court among prominent prelates, whether from the Ewosṭatewos or the Däbrä Libanos houses, about what constituted the Orthodox faith. They all stood together against the *karra* doctrine.

One year later, the unionist question was debated under the spiritual and theological control of *Qəbat* clerics such as Qozmos, Giyorgis (the spiritual son of Yoḥannəs from Däbrä Ṣəmmuna), and Akalä Mäsqäl from Gonǧ. A dispute between *Abba* Ṭäbdä Krəstos (*sic*), *mämhər* of Gonǧ, and *Ǝčč̣äge* Ṣägga Krəstos would have turned into a fight had the king not risen from his throne to separate the two. Zäʾiyäsus, another *Qəbat* leader, tried to relieve tension by quoting from the Gospel (Matt. 18:16). This synod was the last one in Yoḥannəs' reign that demonstrated the power, if not supremacy, of the *Qəbat* party. The next synod, in 1682, seems to have concluded in favour of Däbrä Libanos, but the *Chronicle of Yoḥannəs* ends abruptly. Meanwhile, the kingdom was endangered by the hostility between Yoḥannəs and his son, the future King Iyasu. The end of the *Chronicle of Yoḥannəs* was probably written under the control of the scriptorium of Iyasu after the latter had taken the throne.[37]

Once on the throne, Iyasu conducted a policy favourable to the Dähra Libanos party and against the two other religious factions. The *Qəbat* party was losing its pre-eminence. One of its leaders, Zäʾiyäsus, was imprisoned. Whenever a synod was convened, *Qəbat* monks were excommunicated: in 1682, immediately after Iyasu took the throne, as well as in 1684, when monks from Gažge, the community founded by Täṭämqä Mädḫən, called for the release of Zäʾiyäsus.[38] The *Chronicle of Iyasu I* goes on to describe

34 ዝሂስ ፡ አንቱታ ፡ እመ ፡ አጎደኅሙ ፡ ለሕዝበ ፡ መንግሥትከ ፡ ብሂሎቶሙ ፡ ከብረ ፡ በመንፈስ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ ክርስቶስ ፡ ኮነነ ፡ አንተ ፡ ንጉሠ ፡ ወንሕነኒ ፡ ንከውነከ ፡ አግብርተ ፡ ወንትቀነይ ፡ ለከ ። (Guidi 1903a, 40, Guidi 1903b, 41.)

35 Guidi 1903a, 40, Guidi 1903b, 41.

36 Guidi 1903a, 40–41; Guidi 1903b, 41–42.

37 From 1680 to 1700, Ḥawarya Krəstos was the *ṣäḥafe təʾəzaz*. Hence there was continuity in the person of the historiographer even if the religious policies conducted by the two kings were radically different. See Toubkis 2005, 137.

38 Guidi 1910, 81; Guidi 1912, 81.

the synods during which monks from the house of Ewosṭatewos were excluded. There is a certain irony in the fact that, at the beginning of the synod in Gondär in 1685, the king swore upon 'the book of *Abunä* Täklä Haymanot' that he would remain impartial when judging matters of faith.[39] The issue was clearly put: anybody refusing the unionist doctrine of Däbrä Libanos and refusing to submit to the king's authority would be punished.[40]

At this time, *Däğğazmač* Wäle and Ṭäbdän Dəngəl rose up against the king. Wäle, old at the time but probably rich, was a Mäčča Oromo.[41] His companions in revolt were the abbots of Gonǧ and of Enäčelalo, whom we can identify as Ṭäbdän and Qozmos. Six months later, Ṭäbdän, Wäle, and their followers were accused of having proclaimed another king and of having appointed all major dignitaries: *əččäge*, *ʿaqqabe säʿat*, *bitwäddäd*, *blatten geta*, *grazmač* and *qäññazmač*, *fitawrari*, *ṣäḥafe təʾəzaz*, *nägaš* of Goğğam, *ṣäḥafe lam* of Damot, and so on. Whether true or not, this accusation—one of the most serious under the pen of the official historiographer—exposes the political dimension of this crisis. They were also accused of invading and taking over Goğğam.[42] In the month of Ḫədar 1686, the southern part of Goğğam was a battleground where Ṭäbdän and Wäle were allied with the powerful Gʷudru and Ğawi. According to the *Chronicle of Iyasu I*, the royal armies were victorious. Nonetheless, the king stayed in south Goğğam until the month of Ḥamle during the rainy season. After his departure, he left behind forces to keep the country under control.[43]

In Mäggabit, Ṭäbdän, along with his followers and, somewhat later, Wäle, were summoned to the royal camp by envoys bearing the seals of the king and the metropolitan. The king's strategy was to negotiate. The Gʷudru and Ğawi were awarded their original possessions so that they returned in peace to their lands.[44] Ṭäbdän, Qozmos, and their followers were summoned to surrender to Orthodoxy, and their goods remained confiscated.[45] They were asked to come back from the land of the Oromo, on the other side of the Abbay. After Easter, the king went to Däbrä Ṣəmmuna, a nearby *Qəbat* monastery. This visit, though secret, created a stir in the royal camp and among the people of Goğğam.

39 Guidi 1910, 90; Guidi 1912, 91.

40 Guidi 1912, 98.

41 'Wale of the race of the Mäčča revolted and entered the land of the Galla, in his old age abandoning his Christian name, since pride had excited him because of the many fiefs (*gʷəlt*) he owned' (Guidi 1912, 99).

42 Guidi 1910, 101; Guidi 1912, 104.

43 Guidi added twice 'in Gondär' (Guidi 1912, 105, 108) to make it clear that the king was in Gondär. He translated '*kätäma*' as 'town', but *kätäma* could also refer to the royal camp. I tend to think that the king was in his camp in southern Goğğam.

44 ወሚጠ ፡ ለመ· ፡ ኮ·ለ· ፡ ዘነበረ ፡ ው·ስተ· ፡ እዴሆመ· ፡ ወአሰርገወ ፡ ኮ·ለ· ፡ ነገደ ፡ ጕድኑ ፡ ወኧዊ ፡ እለ ፡ መጽኡ· ፡ ምስሌሆመ· ፡ ወአስተፋንዎመ· ፡ በሰላም ፡ ብሔሮመ· ። (Guidi 1910, 104; Guidi 1912, 107).

45 Guidi 1910, 107; Guidi 1912, 110.

What the *Chronicle of Iyasu I* describes is more than a religious quarrel: it is a civil war. Several conflicts set the various factions against each other. The main issue might have been the redistribution of charges, benefices, and land rights under Iyasu's new policy in favour of the Däbrä Libanos house. The chronicle clearly states that the Däbrä Libanos clergy refused to share land rights with 'their brothers'.[46] The 'house of *Abba* Ewosṭatewos'—represented by *Abba* Ṭäbdän, *Abba* Śəlṭanä Krəstos, Sawriros (*sic*) and *Abba* Atnatewos—claimed that nothing other than theological dogma and the faith were reasons for the conflict. The *Qəbat* party was reacting against the scale of their spoliation.

At the beginning of 1687, Ṭäbdän and his followers appear before the king in Gondär. The accusation against them was odd: they were charged with the excommunication of Akalä Krəstos of Gonǧ and Zäʾiyäsus (the revered *Qəbat* leader) during the last synod in Yoḥannəs' reign, in 1682. This tricky paragraph is not easy to understand.[47] Does it mean that, in 1682, when the Däbrä Libanos unionist views won over the synod, Ṭäbdän and Qozmos chose to ally with their former adversaries rather than support Zäʾiyäsus and Akalä Krəstos? The 1682 synod would thus have led to a schism within the *Qəbat* movement. Indeed, during a synod in 1684 and contrary to other monks, the monks from Gažge requested the liberation of Zäʾiyäsus. In 1687, Ṭäbdän and Qozmos declared that they had not attended the 1682 synod, as if they wanted to deny their implication in an internal quarrel. A few months later, at the end of Gənbot 1687, the last synod on this issue was held. Once again, a schism was reported between Ṭäbdän, Qozmos and their followers. A few days later, the highest authorities of the Däbrä Libanos network judged the *Qəbat* monks in Gondär. They excommunicated and banished them.[48] The royal chronicles provide no further explanation about these disputes.

Given the lengthy treatment of this event in the *Chronicle of Iyasu I*, we can conclude that this rebellion represented a serious threat to king and kingdom. Ṭäbdän from Gonǧ was targeted as the arch-enemy during the first five years of the reign of Iyasu I. After his excommunication and banishment, the surviving monastic community had to come to terms with his inglorious fate. If the accusation were true that Ṭäbdän was responsible for

46 Guidi 1910, 82; Guidi 1912, 82.

47 Guidi 1910, 111–112; Guidi 1912, 115.

48 Guidi 1910, 122; Guidi 1912, 126.

the excommunication of Akalä Krəstos of Gonǧ, it would mean that there was strong dissension inside Gonǧ monastery.

Soon after the tragic death of Iyasu I in 1706, most probably at the hands of the Lasta-Təgray *karra* sect,[49] the *Qəbat* movement and the house of Ewosṭatewos were in favour with King Tewoflos (r 1708–1711). Monks from Gonǧ received their share of lands and charges in Ḥamärä Noḫ, a newly founded royal church.[50] Gonǧ monastery did not vanish after the turmoil of 1687; it was still part of the Ewosṭatean network. But never again would it assume leadership of the *Qəbat* movement, at least not during synods. The *Qəbat* party was no longer headed by monks from Gonǧ: it would be led henceforth by Däbrä Ṣəmmuna.

Gonǧ lost its leadership of the *Qəbat* movement and eradicated the memory of Ṭäbdän. Nothing remains today of this man whom history has labelled as a rebel.[51] Nothing? Perhaps not. Let us take a second step back in time.

Claiming the Body of *Abunä* Krəstodolu (d.1676/1677): A Warranty of Orthodoxy since the Time of Ṭäbdän

Abunä Krəstodolu's grave is located in Gonǧ church, in the northern part of the *qəddəst*. It is said to perform miracles and have healing power.[52] To the best of our knowledge, it is very unusual for a church in Ethiopia to venerate the grave of a Coptic bishop. According to the oral tradition, when Krəstodolu felt his death approaching, he asked to be carried to Gonǧ to be buried there, 'where praising God will not cease until the coming of Christ'.[53] Night was falling when he made his request; dawn paused between day and night, suspending time, and he travelled from Sarka to Gonǧ where he died.

In a short note, *Ato* Kasahun, a lay scholar from Gonǧ, wrote an interesting presentation of the oral account:

> ከ309 ጀምሮ እስከ 1943 ዓ ፡ም በዚቁጥር 73 ከ110 ወጳጳሳት [*sic*] ው·ሥጥ ክር ስቶስዶስ· 1ኛ ጀንበርን ገዝተው· ከሚጫ ሣርካ ግንብ እሥክ ምፅዐት መጨረሻ ድረሥ ሥብሀተ እግዚአብሔር የማይቋረጥበት ጉንጅ ወሥዳችሁ· ቅበሩኝ ብለ

49 Kindeneb Endeg Mihretie 2013.

50 Guidi 1906.

51 In Däbrä Wärq, Ṭäbdän was celebrated as a martyr, according to Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie. However, I do not have access to the text reconstructing the history of Ṭäbdän as a martyr. It is far too late at this stage of writing to introduce a new source.

52 See the list of the miraculous objects of Gonǧ in its *Fəṭḥa nägäśt*. According to this list, Krəstodolu's grave was marked with a golden cross; it is marked nowadays by a step.

53 Interviews in 2004 with the clergy of Gonǧ.

> ው· ተቀበረው· [*sic*] መቃብራቸው· የሚገኝ ሲሆንና መቃብራቸውም ታዳረ ህፃና ት በሚያማቸውና በሚያለቅሡ· ጊዜ ከመቃብራቸው· ላይ ቂሡ· /ዲያቆኑ/ ወስዶ ሲያንከባልላቸው· መፈው·ሥ ሆኖ ማዳኑን የሚያረጋግጥ ይሆናል ፡

> (Among the 110 bishops [appointed] between 309 and 1943 of the Era of Mercy, the 73rd [was] Krəstodolu the First. 'The sun [will stop]'.[54] He uttered this excommunication from Meḳḳa Sarka *gəmb*. The celebration of God will be done in Gonǧ without interruption until the coming of Christ, and he said that he should be buried there. Therefore, his grave is here. If children are sick or do not stop crying, priests and deacons take them to the grave; and when they touch it, they are cured.)

The Coptic bishop *Abunä* Krəstodolu arrived in Ethiopia in the thirty-second year of the reign of *Aṣe* Fasilädäs.[55] As a bishop, he took part in three synods: in 1666/1667, during the last year of Fasilädäs's reign; in 1669 during the reign of King Yoḥannəs, when the decision was made to expel the last Portuguese Catholics; and in 1670. Soon afterwards, *Aṣe* Yohannəs put him in jail in an attempt to have him replaced, as is clearly stated in the *forma vulgata* of the *Short Chronicles*.[56] The *Chronicle of Yoḥannəs* prudently presents this event without mentioning the imprisonment: on 15 October 1671, a letter from Patriarch Matewos was read to announce the consecration of a new metropolitan, Sinoda, just before his arrival in Gondär two days later. In the same letter however, the patriarch confirmed Krəstodolu as metropolitan.[57] A version of the *Short Chronicles* derived from notes states that Krəstodolu died in 1676/77.[58] The reasons for the imprisonment are unknown. Did the Ethiopian clergy and/or the metropolitan disapprove of the king's marriage with Säblä Wängel? In any case, the first decision put to Krəstodolu's successor, *Abunä* Sinoda, was to recognize this marriage.

Gonǧ's oral tradition has retained the information that Krəstodolu died in Sarka, without explaining why he would have been there. Sarka had been built during the Jesuit period, in 1624–1625, on order of *Ras* Səᶜəlä Krəstos, governor of the province and brother of the king. A church and a big residence were built of stone and mortar.[59] The building had a large under-

54 Very likely an allusion to Josh. 10:12, when Joshua asked God to make the sun and moon stand still.

55 Basset 1882, 291; Béguinot 1901, 3; Dombrowski 1983, 204.

56 Basset 1882, 292; Perruchon 1899, 173; Béguinot 1901, 54; Dombrowski 1983, 207.

57 Guidi 1903a, 14; Guidi 1903b, 13.

58 MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (= BnF), Éthiopien d'Abbadie 136 in Kropp 1990, 107. Born in 1688, the author of these notes was writing one generation after the events.

59 See the photos in Anfray 1980–1981.

ground basement, which served as a prison.[60] *Abunä* Yoḥannəs, a Coptic bishop called to Ethiopia in 1649 by *Abeto* Gälawdewos, the brother of King Fasilädäs, was imprisoned there.[61] Sarka was the main prison for religious opponents till the first part of the eighteenth century. Zä'iyäsus was jailed there during the reign of Iyasu I.[62] Since the written sources do not state that Krəstodolu was detained in Sarka, the oral tradition apparently draws on sources other than the official ones we know of. Since most of the king's religious opponents were imprisoned in Sarka, this mention in the oral tradition is significant.

How long has Krəstodolu's grave been said to be in Gonǧ? In 1686, ten years after Krəstodolu's death and at the peak of Ṭäbdän's rebellion, the inhabitants of Däbrä Wärq, another powerful *Qəbat* town and church in Goǧǧam, threw stones at the metropolitan Sinoda, who, willingly or not, was backing King Iyasu's religious policy. Even after Ṭäbdän's excommunication, *Qəbat* supporters and the people of Goǧǧam were resisting royal authority. In 1692, they asked to be judged by the king instead of Sinoda, a clear manifestation of their denial of the authority of the Coptic bishop.[63] Laying claim to the body and religious authority of the dead metropolitan, Krəstodolu (who had been arbitrarily dismissed and replaced with Sinoda), amounted to an attempt to legitimate Gonǧ and the *Qəbat* movement during this period of controversy. Recognizing the legitimacy of the previous metropolitan would have served to deny the legitimacy of the new one; and it could have signalled an attempt to create an autonomous 'state', the *Chronicle of Iyasu I*'s accusation against Ṭäbdän and Wäle. Laying claim to *Abunä* Krəstodolu's grave could have been part of the strategy of Ṭäbdän and Wäle to legitimate an autonomous, Orthodox power. And that is all that has been passed down in Gonǧ's memory of this historical moment.

Conclusion

Oral history forges stories and portrays characters in ways that obstruct the exposal of the 'historical truth'. What has been lost is the memory of Ṭäbdän Dəngəl, the abbot of Gonǧ who sowed dissension within the *Qəbat* movement, opposed his own monks, and led an uprising against the king. Since new narrative strands are often sewn into familiar mythological or biblical patterns, they cannot be accepted outright as history, not even by their narrators. They are symbolically sealed, however, owing to their social function.

60 See Fernández 2013.
61 Basset 1882, 288; Béguinot 1901, 51; Perruchon 1898, 88. For an analysis of this other act of rebellion against royal authority, see Wion 2012, 234–235.
62 Guidi 1903a, 82; Guidi 1903b, 82.
63 Guidi 1903a, 155; Guidi 1903b, 163.

The story of the dying bishop's miraculous travel brings credit to Gonǧ monastery, attracts the faithful and pilgrims, and recalls the institution's long history and close relations with major political and religious authorities.

Might oral history not be the only way to preserve the memory of violent events that were not allowed to be narrated as such? The 'late' invention of Gərma Śəllus as founding father of Gonǧ is clear evidence that the story has been contrived. This story is still told today; everyone knows that there used to be a church up on the cliff where the tree named after *Abba* Ləbsä Krəstos now stands. This local memory of past events is not afflicted with total amnesia. The story of Gərma Śəllus, a secondary character, fails to cover a hole in the history of the monastery, a past that could not be put into words and had to be forgotten.

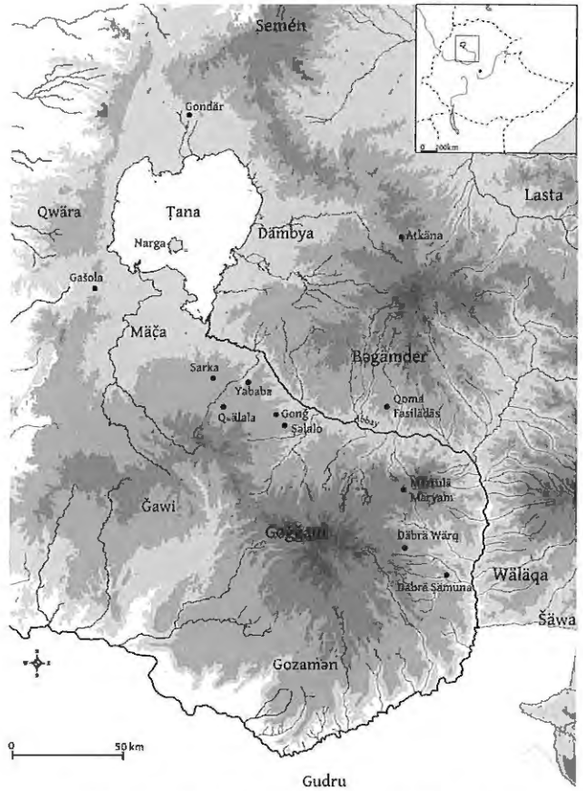


Fig. 3 Some elements of the Ewosṭatean network during the Gondärine period. Base maps: 1/250,000 maps of the Ethiopian Mapping Agency. Conception and realization: Anne Bolay and Anaïs Wion.

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