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SUMMARIUM

Atti del Simposio internazionale

“Raymund Netzhammer O.S.B.
Arcivescovo latino di Bucarest (1905-1924).
Universalismo e servizio alla società romena”
Roma, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 18 maggio 2007

Philippe Luisier, S.J. , Premessa	284-286
Héctor Vall Vilardell, S.J. , Saluto del Rettore del PIO	287-288
Ana-Maria Botnaru , Storia occultata e riscoperta: il <i>Diario</i> dell'arcivescovo Netzhammer	289-304

George Guțu , Uno straniero può diventare un buon romeno? Raymund Netzhammer e la Romania	305-321
Sorin Mitu , Raymund Netzhammer fra universalismo cattolico e particolarismo nazionalista	323-334
Ernst Christoph Suttner , Il servizio ecclesiale alla società romena secondo Raymund Netzhammer e secondo il patriarca romeno Justinian Marina	335-346
Reimund Haas , L'unione delle Chiese nei Balcani. Occasione persa oppure utopia? Il realismo di Raymund Netzhammer in confronto agli sforzi unionistici di Matthias Erzberger e Hubert Bastgen in Bulgaria	347-354
Constantin Simon , Francesco Marmaggi (1876-1949), nunzio apostolico in Europa Orientale dopo la Prima guerra mondiale	355-370
Elena Siupiur , Missione culturale e educativa dell'arcivescovo cattolico Raymund Netzhammer nella Romania ortodossa	371-384
Alexandru Barnea , Il contributo di Raymund Netzhammer all'archeologia cristiana e alla storia del cristianesimo antico sul basso Danubio	385-394
Violeta Barbu , Raymund Netzhammer, pioniere dell'antropologia religiosa in Romania e nei Balcani	395-410

ARTICOLI

Vincenzo Ruggieri , Fondazione di una chiesa (<i>Codex Theodosianus</i> XVI, 10, 25 e <i>Iustiniani Corpus Iuris Civilis</i>): problematiche storico-giuridiche e liturgiche	411-432
Roland Betancourt , A Byzantine Liturgical Commentary in Verse: Introduction and Translation	433-472
Jacopo Gnisci , Shrouding the Divine: Observations on the Iconography of the Entombment of Christ in Ethiopian Illumination of the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries	473-492

ANIMADVERSIO

Enrico Cattaneo, S.J. , <i>L'Ep. 217,84 di Basilio e il suo Commento a Isaia</i>	493-500
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RECENSIONES

BROCK, Sebastian P. – VAN ROMPAY, Lucas, <i>Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts and Fragments in the Library of Deir al-Surian, Wadi al-Natrun (Egypt)</i> (E. Braidà)	501-508
--	---------

BUZI, Paola – BAUSI, Alessandro (eds.), <i>Coptic Manuscripts 7. The Manuscripts of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Part 4. Homiletic and Liturgical Manuscripts from the White Monastery. With two documents from Thebes and two Old-Nubian manuscripts</i> (VOHD XXI.7) (Ph. Luisier)	508-510
FEDALTO, Giorgio, <i>Cristiani entro e oltre gli imperi. Saggi su terre e chiese d'Oriente</i> (H. Pietras)	510-512
GUTKOWSKI, Andrzej – PRINZIVALLI, Emanuela (a cura di), <i>Bessarione e la sua Accademia</i> (E. G. Farrugia)	512-515
HEITH-STADE, David, <i>The Rudder of the Church: A Study of the Theory of Canon Law in the Pedalion</i> (Ierodiacono Grigorij)	515-516
HEAL, Kristian – KITCHEN, Robert (eds.), <i>Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac "Book of Steps"</i> (N. Macabasag)	516-520
IHSSEN LLEWELLYN, Brenda, <i>John Moschos' Spiritual Meadow: Authority and Autonomy at the End of the Antique World</i> (B. Ebeid)	520-523
NOSNITSIN, Denis (ed.), <i>Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia. Proceedings of the International Workshop Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: History, Change and Cultural Heritage</i> (Tedros Abraha)	523-525
RICCARDI, Andrea, <i>La strage dei cristiani. Mardin, gli armeni e la fine di un mondo</i> (G. H. Ruysen)	525-527
СЕЛЕЗНЕВ, Н. Н., <i>Йѡханнѡн Бар Зѡ'бѡ и его «Истолкование таин»: Критический текст, перевод, исследование</i> / SELEZNYOV, Nikolai N., <i>Yō-hannān Bar Zō'bi and his "Explanation of the mysteries"</i> (G. Kessel)	527-530
СТЕРНIEWSKA, Alicja, <i>Matki Ojców Kościoła [= Le Madri dei Padri della Chiesa]</i> (M. Starowieyski)	531
TOLSTAYA, Katya (ed.), <i>Orthodox Paradoxes. Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy</i> (S. Caprio)	532-534
UCIECHA, Andrzej (red.), <i>Historia monastycyzmu orientalnego. W 70. rocznicę śmierci ks. dra Stefana Siwca (Schiwietz) 1863-1941 [History of Oriental Monasticism: Rev. Dr Stefan Siwiec (Schiwietz) 1863-1941 on the 70th Anniversary of His Death]</i> (R. Zarzeczny)	534-539
YACOUB, Joseph, <i>Qui s'en souviendra? 1915 Le génocide assyro-chaldéen-syriaque</i> (G. H. Ruysen)	539-542
SCRIPTA AD NOS MISSA	543-544

Jacopo Gnisci

Shrouding the Divine: Observations on the Iconography of the Entombment of Christ in Ethiopian Illumination of the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries

The purpose of this paper is to offer some observations on the iconography of the Entombment in Ethiopian illumination of the early Solomonic period.¹ In agreement with the Gospels, the theme of the Entombment in fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century Ethiopian illumination depicts Joseph of Arimathea — a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mt 27: 57-61; Mk 15: 42-47; Lk 23: 50-56) — and Nicodemus — a Pharisee and also a member of the Sanhedrin (Jn 19: 39-42) — in the act of placing Christ's body in the Tomb (Figs. 1-5).² Joseph and Nicodemus — who are

* Unless otherwise specified, all quotations have been translated into English by the author. I am most grateful to: Dr Dickran Kouymjian, Dr Michael Gervers and Dr Ewa Balicka-Witakowska for allowing me to use their images for my research; Dr Bausi for answering my query about Ethiopian ecclesiastical vestments; Dr Tania Tribe for her ongoing support; Mons. Osvaldo Raineri and Dr Rafał Zarzeczny for their help in translating Ge'ez; and the anonymous OCP reader for his comments on the article.

¹ Scholars sometimes distinguish between the Bearing of the Body, to refer to the placing of the body of Christ in a cave-like sepulchre, and the Entombment, to refer to the placing of the body in a sarcophagus-like tomb (Schiller 1972: 168-72). Here, however, the term Entombment is used to refer to all those images that have as their subject the placing of the body of Christ in his Tomb. For a more detailed discussion of the Western tradition and further bibliography, see Forsyth 1970: esp. 2-21; and Sadler 2015: esp. 7-24; for the Byzantine tradition, see Weitzmann 1980; see below for further discussion and references. On the history of the early Solomonic period, see Tadesse Tamrat 1972; and Derat 2003.

² Examples of this theme can be found in the following Gospel manuscripts: 1) Addis Ababa, National Library, Gospels of Täsfanä Krəstos, first half of the 14th century, ms. 28, fol. 15r (= TK), see Leroy, Wright, and Jäger 1961: pl. 5, for a discussion and reproduction, the presence of an Arabic document written during the reign Säyfä Ar'ad (r. 1344-72), provides a *terminus ante quem* for the dating of this ms., see Sadwa 1952; 2) New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 1998.66, late 14th or early 15th century, fol. 5v (= MM), (Fig. 1), for a discussion see Lepage and Mercier 2012b: esp. 136-47, 55; 3) Amba Dära, Church of Maryam Mägdälawit, 14th century, fol. ? (= MG), (Fig. 2); 4) New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, accession number M.828, early 15th century, fol. 14v (= ZG), for a reproduction see Skehan 1954: fig. 282; 5) Däq Island, Qəddəst Arsima, late 14th or first half of the 15th century, fol. ? (= AG), for a reproduction see Leroy, Wright, and Jäger 1961: pl. 25; 6) Lake Tana, Kəbran Church, second half of the 14th century, fol. 19r (= KG), for a more detailed discussion see Heldman 1979a, and Bosc-Tiesse 2008: 35-7, (Fig. 3); 7) the Gospels

commemorated in Ethiopia on *Nähase* the 1st and described in the Ethiopian *Synaxarium* as “ministers of the Divine Mystery”³ — are generally represented nimbused, dressed in a robe, and with a *šamma*-like piece of cloth wrapped round their waist or shoulders.⁴ In most examples, Joseph is depicted as a senior to Nicodemus — in accordance with the most common interpretation of the subject in Byzantine art — with a black or white beard (Figs. 2 & 4). However, there are also instances in which Joseph and Nicodemus are painted as elders equal in age (Figs. 1 & 3), or, more rarely, as beardless young men (Fig. 5).

In most examples of the Entombment in Ethiopian Gospel illumination of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries Joseph and Nicodemus are represented in a three-quarter pose and proceed from left to right bearing the weight of Christ’s dead body with both arms. Their left arm is placed under Christ’s body, while their right arm is wrapped around it and visible to the viewer.⁵ The body of Christ is enclosed in a white linen shroud in accordance with the Scriptures (Mt 27: 59; Mk 15: 46; Lk 23: 53; Jn 19: 14). Christ is not nimbused and his face is entirely covered by the burial shroud and thus not visible. The burial shroud is ornamented with crosses and linear decorations and sometimes has a knot tied at its top (Figs. 3, 5). Two guards, holding a round shield and spear, are frequently depicted next to Christ’s tomb (Figs. 2, 4-5). These are the soldiers who were sent by Pilate

from the monastery of Däbrä Maryam Qohayn, c. 1361, fol. ? (= DMQ) for a reproduction see Buxton 1970: pl. 71, see also Bausi 1994: esp. 24-28; 8) and Amba Gəšän, Gəšän Maryam, turn of the fifteenth century (?), fol. ? (= GM), opinions on the dating of this manuscript vary, for some, Heldman 1993: 177-78 and Chojnacki 2009: 27, it was painted during the reign of king Dawit II (r. 1379/80-1413), for others, Mercier and Lepage 2012b: n. 28, during that of Zär’a Ya’ éqob (r. 1434-68), or, more generally, towards the second half of the fifteenth century, see Balicka-Witakowska 1989: 16. To this list, one can add: 9) London, 14th-15th century, ms. From a private collection, fol. 2v, published in Appleyard 1993: 12-16 (= PC1); 10) another 14th century ms. from a private collection, fol. 16v (= PC2), (fig. 4); 11) a fragment now in Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, W. 839, late 14th century, fol. ? (= WM), (Fig. 5); 12) and a ms. From Təgray published in Mercier and Lepage 2012b: fig. 31 (N.B. the authors do not specify the church of provenance), probably dating to the late 14th or early 15th century (= TM). Of the above only DMQ represents an iconographic variant and will thus have to be the object of a separate enquiry.

³ Budge 1976: 1180. For the passage relevant to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, see also Guidi 1912: 246-50.

⁴ See Hammerschmidt 1970 for a preliminary study on Ethiopian ecclesiastical garments.

⁵ In Ethiopian art, after the fifteenth century, the theme of the Entombment was replaced by the motif of Joseph and Nicodemus holding Christ’s body on their knees. Significantly, also in examples of this latter iconography, Christ’s burial shroud veils his face, though there are exceptions. For a discussion and some examples, see Chojnacki 1971; 1983: 25; 2000: 37, 45, 378. The motif of Joseph and Nicodemus bearing Christ’s body on their legs is also found in other Eastern Christian contexts prior to the fifteenth century, for instance, see London, British Library, Add. 7170, c. 1216-1220, fol. 139r.

to guard the entrance to the Tomb because of the Jewish leaders' concern that someone could steal Christ's body in order to fake his Resurrection (Mt 27: 62-66). When the two guards are depicted, they are much smaller in size than the other figures — a common device used in fourteenth century Ethiopian illumination to indicate lesser importance — but they are not represented in profile as non-Christians sometimes are in Ethiopian painting of the early fifteenth century.⁶

The Ethiopian interpretation of the Entombment is reduced to its essentials and, aside from minor variations such as the features of Joseph and Nicodemus, fixed in its elements. Thus, there appears to be no room for apocryphal details. Nevertheless, it is worth observing that, according to Tedros Abraha and Daniel Assefa, despite the absence of manuscript copies of the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian monk Abba Yəḥshaq must have been familiar with material from this apocryphal work when he wrote the *Mystery of Heaven and Earth* during the fifteenth century.⁷ It is also interesting to note that according to an Ethiopian tradition the *Trisagion* was suggested to Joseph and Nicodemus by Christ himself, who reproached the two men for shrouding him silently “like a common naked man” and instructed them to use it while preparing his body for burial.⁸ The earliest known examples of the Entombment in Ethiopian art can be dated to the fourteenth century,⁹ though, as discussed below, due to our limited knowledge of the early developments of Ethiopian art¹⁰ it is difficult to reconstruct the genesis of this theme in Ethiopia. Therefore, before expanding further upon the iconography of the Entombment in Ethiopian art, it is beneficial to consider briefly the diffusion of this theme in the Latin West and Byzantine East.

It is difficult to determine when the Entombment first appeared in Christian art. According to Weitzmann “there can be little doubt that the Entombment existed in Early Christian manuscripts as part of a narrative picture cycle, and it is merely an accident of history that among the few fragments of pre-iconoclastic Gospels books no such scene has come down to us,”¹¹ but he offers no explanation or evidence in support of this claim. Considering that the earliest surviving examples of the Entombment

⁶ In Ethiopian art, as in other Christian traditions (Velmans 2009: 28), non-Christians, and in general evil, characters are painted in profile, see Staude 1935 for a more detailed discussion.

⁷ Tedros Abraha and Daniel Assefa 2010: 616-17.

⁸ Habtemichael Kidane 1998: 138.

⁹ The earliest example of this theme in Ethiopian illumination is in TK.

¹⁰ Lepage 1977; Mercier 2000: 36-45.

¹¹ Weitzmann 1980: 477.

in Byzantine and Western art have been dated to the ninth century,¹² it is necessary to approach the matter with caution. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the Entombment was among those themes which were employed in early Christian art of the fourth and fifth centuries to represent the Passion. In fact, during these two centuries, Christian artists avoided representing the Dead Christ on the cross and favoured depictions of the *Crux Gemmata* and of the *Christus Triumphans*, that is to say of Christ's triumph over death.¹³ In this respect, Jensen has observed that "contrary to the dominance of the crucifix in both Byzantine and medieval iconography, early Christian art seems to have deliberately avoided any graphic representation of the savior's death."¹⁴ In a context such as this, which favoured representations of Christ's victory over death, it is easy to see how a theme such as that of the Entombment — which has to represent the lifeless body of Christ¹⁵ — would have been in contrast with the desire to emphasise Christ's dignity and transcendence over human suffering.

There is a general consensus that images of the Dead Christ on the Cross first appeared between the seventh and eighth centuries, possibly in Egypt, for reasons which are still being debated.¹⁶ Some believe that the Chalcedonians may have started using images of the Dead Christ to expound their theological views and to attack the non-Chalcedonians "whose position on the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures could be construed to mean that it was the divine Logos that had suffered and died on the cross."¹⁷ In this respect, it is probably not a coincidence that the earliest examples of the Burial of Christ in Byzantine and Western art have been dated to the ninth century,¹⁸ that is to say to a period when depictions of

¹² For some examples, Schiller 1972: 168-69; Brubaker 1999: 297-301; Weitzmann 1980.

¹³ The body of literature on the absence of references to Christ's suffering on the cross in early Christian art is too extensive to list here. For an introduction and further bibliography, see Schiller 1972: 89-94; Renaut 2000; Jensen 2000: 130-50; Hengel 1977; Bisconti 2000: 13-14; Scheckler and Leith 2010; Kartsonis 1994: 151-163; Harley and Spier 2007; and Viladesau 2005: 3-56.

¹⁴ Jensen 2000: 130.

¹⁵ Indeed, for most Biblical commentators, the principal purpose of the Gospel passages that describe Christ's Entombment, was to emphasize the fact that he had truly died, see Marthaler 2007: 168-70 for a discussion and further bibliography.

¹⁶ Several icons held at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai attest the diffusion of this iconography. The earliest of these has been dated to the eighth century; see Weitzmann 1976: 61-64, and B. 36. See Martin 1955; Belting 1994: 269-71; Jensen 2000: 150-55; Corrigan 1992: 81-90; Belting and Belting-Ihm 1966; and Kartsonis 1986: 33-68, for a more detailed discussion on the diffusion of the iconography of the Dead Christ.

¹⁷ Quotation taken from Corrigan 1995: 48. See also, Schiller 1972: 96-99; Mathews and Sanjian 1991: esp. 163; and Kartsonis 1994. See Bacci 2003, for a more extensive discussion on the use of images to support a particular religious position and additional bibliography.

¹⁸ Schiller 1972: 168-69; Brubaker 1999: 297-301; Weitzmann 1980.

the Dead Christ had already appeared in Christian art. In fact, contrary to Weitzmann's suggestion that the Entombment existed in early Christian art,¹⁹ it seems more likely that this motif appeared at about the same time or shortly after the first pictorializations of Christ's death. In this respect, according to Kartsonis, Christian artists started depicting the Dead Christ on the Cross, the Entombment, and the Anastasis at some point in time between the second half of the seventh and the eighth centuries.²⁰ Similarly, according to Brubaker, "the iconography of the Entombment may have developed in the late seventh century, along with the Anastasis and the dead Christ on the cross, in response to Monophysite denials that Christ was fully human."²¹

Scholars sometimes distinguish between a Western type and a Byzantine type of Entombment.²² In the so-called Western type, the body of Christ is placed in a tomb represented as a sarcophagus, as seen for instance in a tenth-century illumination from the *Codex Egberti*,²³ or in an eleventh-century fresco from S. Angelo in Formis — although the pictorial cycle to which this fresco belongs betrays Byzantine influences.²⁴ In the Byzantine type, Joseph and Nicodemus place Christ's body in a cave in front of them. Early examples of this type are found in the tenth-century Chludov Psalter²⁵ and in the twelfth-century Church of Agioi Anargyroi in Kastoria.²⁶ What distinguishes these two types is not so much the number of figures, but the direction in which Christ's body is being moved — horizontally in the Byzantine type and vertically in the Western type — and the manner in which the tomb is depicted — as a cave in the Byzantine type and as a sarcophagus in the Western type.

Clearly, in drawing such a distinction between an Eastern and a Western type there is always the risk of creating a dichotomy that exists more in theory than in reality. However, if such a distinction is to be maintained,

¹⁹ Weitzmann 1980: 477.

²⁰ Karstonis 1986: 68-69.

²¹ Brubaker 1999: 299. The term "monophysitism" is used to refer to the Christology of the non-Chalcedonian churches. However, in some more recent publications, such as Mebratu Kiros Gebru 2010, the term "miaphysitism" is preferred over "monophysitism." Yet, this issue of terminology is still being debated, and the use of the term "miaphysitism" has also recently been questioned, for a more detailed discussion and further bibliography, see Luisier 2014.

²² Millet 1916: 489-516.

²³ Trier, Stadtbibliothek, c. 980, Cod. 24, fol. 85v. For a discussion and reproduction, see Schiller 1972: 169-70, and fig. 544.

²⁴ For a reproduction, see Schiller 1972: fig. 568.

²⁵ Moscow, State Historical Museum, Ms. 129, fol. 87r. For a reproduction, see Schiller 1972: fig. 567.

²⁶ Malmquist 1979.

then the Ethiopian interpretation of the subject can be said to be closer to the Byzantine type. As Schiller observes, representations of the Tomb as a sarcophagus are uncommon in Byzantine art because in the East it was customary to bury the dead “in rock graves or caves”²⁷ rather than in sarcophagi. Similarly, turning back to Ethiopia, where it was not customary to bury the dead in sarcophagi, coffer-type representations of the Tomb are not seen in fourteenth-century Ethiopian illumination. Only towards the end of the fifteenth century, after the arrival of Western artists and artworks in the country, Christ’s Tomb is occasionally represented as a sarcophagus or as an opening in the ground.²⁸

Some of the closest parallels to the Ethiopian interpretation of the Entombment in Gospel illumination of the early Solomonic period are found in Armenian art, as shown by two Gospels now in the collection of the Matenadaran (Fig. 6).²⁹ The Armenian Church is non-Chalcedonian like the Ethiopian Church, and it is possible that the artistic bonds between these two churches were deeper than is yet understood.³⁰ Of course, in a discussion about the influence of foreign art on Ethiopian art, one cannot forget the strong ties between the Ethiopian Church and the Coptic Church, which also belongs to the non-Chalcedonian tradition.³¹ It is well known that during the fourteenth century numerous Copto-Arabic texts were translated into Ge’ez (classical Ethiopic),³² and that during this period artworks were imported into Ethiopia from Egypt, so Ethiopian artists certainly had access to Coptic models during this period.³³ In this respect,

²⁷ Schiller 1972: 168.

²⁸ For some examples, see Chojnacki 1999: pls. XII-XIII. For further remarks on the evolution of the theme of the Entombment after the fifteenth century, see Chojnacki 1971; 1990: 25-26.

²⁹ Erevan, Matenadaran, 1057, Ms. 3784, fol. 10 r; and Erevan, Matenadaran, c. 11th century, Ms. 974, fol. 15r.

³⁰ Similarities between Ethiopian art and Armenian art have been noted elsewhere. For instance, see Chojnacki 1983: 189, 426; Conti Rossini 1942. For some historical remarks on early contacts between Ethiopia and Armenia, see Pankhurst 1977: 273-78, Niccum 2014: 31-32, and Tadesse Tamrat 1972: 208. According to Pankhurst 1977: 274 “Ethiopian, Armenian, and other Christians must often have met in and around Jerusalem, as well as on occasion in Cairo and the monasteries in Egypt, and even in Cyprus.” For a history of the presence of Ethiopians in Jerusalem, see Cerulli 1943; for Cyprus, see Cerulli 1967. On the presence of Armenians in Fatimid Egypt, see Dadoyan 1997, on their contributions to Coptic art and architecture, see Dadoyan 2013: 120-28.

³¹ For a more detailed discussion on the ties between Ethiopia and Alexandria, and further bibliography, see Munro-Hay 1997.

³² On this topic, suffice it to mention the authoritative study by Zuurmond 1989, although see also Knibb 1999; Wechsler 2005; Tedros Abraha 2001; Bausi 2006; and Niccum 2014 for further discussion and a more updated bibliography.

³³ Heldman 2007 ; Balicka-Witakowska 2009-10.

the Entombment which decorates an eleventh-century Coptic manuscript, now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, shows that an iconography, similar to the one later employed in Ethiopian manuscripts, was found at this stage in Coptic art.³⁴ Furthermore, although there is little evidence to suggest a link between Ethiopia and Nubia as strong as that with Alexandria, an eleventh-century fresco from the Cathedral of Faras³⁵ displays numerous similarities with the Ethiopian interpretation of the Entombment in fourteenth-century Gospel illumination, particularly in the rendition of the funerary shroud. Nevertheless, the depictions of the Entombment in the Cathedral of Faras and in the aforementioned Coptic manuscript are far more similar to each other than they are to the Ethiopian interpretation of this subject. In fact, in these two former examples, Joseph pulls the body of Christ from inside the Tomb, rather than carrying it as he does in the Ethiopian versions of the theme. Moreover, the Tomb is represented as a white, mostly indiscernible, structure in the Faras fresco, and as a cave in the manuscript from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, thus these two depictions of the Tomb bear no resemblance to its interpretation in fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century Ethiopian illumination.

This consideration leads back to the point that it is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the theme of the Entombment in Ethiopian art. However, it is interesting to note that, among the frescoes which decorate the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century church of Yəmṛəḥannä Krəstos,³⁶ there are two dead figures, placed under the feet of one of the equestrian saints on the eastern wall that delimitates the northern nave,³⁷ which are shrouded in the same manner as Christ is shrouded in the Entombment.³⁸ While this is not a depiction of the Entombment, the rendition of the two shrouded bodies could be taken as scant evidence of familiarity with the theme. Nevertheless, as the earliest surviving examples of the Entombment in Ethiopian art date to the fourteenth century, it is only possible to conjecture whether or not Ethiopian artists started representing this theme prior to this period.

At first, the appearance of the Entombment in Ethiopian art appears

³⁴ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 11th century, Copte 13, fol. 276r. For a discussion and reproduction, see Leroy 1974: cat. 73.

³⁵ For a reproduction, see Michalowski 1967: Pl. 54-56. The lower bodies of three figures holding censers are visible to the right of the Tomb, thus it is possible that this fresco combines the Entombment with the Holy Women at the Tomb.

³⁶ On this church, see Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers 2001; Girmah Élias, Lepage, and Mercier 2001.

³⁷ According to the anonymous reviewer of this article, the scene in question might be identified as the story of the "Child Philotheos killing the pagan idol, which his parents worshipped until it gored them to death."

³⁸ To my knowledge, Michael Gervers was the first to notice these figures.

to be in contrast with the trend observed above for the appearance of this theme in Byzantine and Medieval art. In fact, as just noted, in these latter two contexts, the diffusion of the Entombment apparently coincided with, or followed, the appearance of the motif of the Dead Christ on the Cross. Instead, in Ethiopia — where the theme of the *Christus Patiens* appears in art only at the start of the fifteenth century³⁹ — the diffusion of the motif of the Entombment appears to predate by a few decades that of the Dead Christ on the cross.

In fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century Ethiopian Gospel illumination, the Entombment appears on the folio following the Crucifixion⁴⁰ or after the Deposition, when this latter scene is included.⁴¹ In general, depictions of the Passion in fourteenth-century Ethiopian Gospel manuscripts are characterised by a lack of references to Christ's suffering and death. In fact, during this period, Ethiopian artists employed themes which emphasised Christ's glory, such as the Entry into Jerusalem, or adopted unusual iconographic formulas to avoid such references.⁴² Hence, for example, in the Washing of the Feet, instead of showing Christ leaning towards Peter, as an expression of his humility,⁴³ Ethiopian artists modified the conventional iconography of this motif by painting Peter in the act of leaning towards an enthroned Christ.⁴⁴ Likewise, in depictions of the Arrest, the figure of Judas is omitted⁴⁵ and Christ is not bound by a rope but with a stole-like garment placed around his neck (*moṭaḥt* or *ḥablä kəsad*).⁴⁶ The presence of a number of unusual iconographic features, such as the ones described above, in depictions of the Passion in early Solomonic Gospel illumination suggests that Ethiopian artists adapted the artistic models they had at their disposal to ensure that these adhered to their religious customs and traditions.

The above is true also for depictions of the Crucifixion in fourteenth-

³⁹ For a discussion of the appearance of this theme in Ethiopian art, see Gnisci 2014.

⁴⁰ ZG; MM; MG; AG; DMQ.

⁴¹ KG; GM.

⁴² For a more detailed discussion, see Gnisci 2014; 2015b.

⁴³ See Schiller 1972: 43-44, for a discussion and several examples of this iconography in Western and Byzantine art.

⁴⁴ See Gnisci 2015c, for a more detailed discussion and further bibliography.

⁴⁵ The absence of Judas in Ethiopian Gospel illumination, echoes the Ethiopian liturgical custom of not exchanging the Kiss of Peace during Holy Week to avoid all references to his betrayal, see Habtemichael Kidane 1997: 99 and Fritsch 2001: 238.

⁴⁶ Little has been written on the liturgical vestments of the Ethiopian Church, for a preliminary discussion see Hammerschmidt 1970. The *moṭaḥt* is mentioned in some fifteenth-century inventories, see Bausi 1994: 30-31, 36-39. For a more detailed discussion on the iconography of this scene, see Gnisci 2015b.

century Ethiopian art, which are characterised by the fact that Jesus' body is not shown on the cross (Fig. 7).⁴⁷ Indeed, although representations of the *Christus Triumphans* appear sporadically in Ethiopian illumination towards the end of the fourteenth century,⁴⁸ the earliest known Ethiopian examples of the *Christus Patiens* in Gospel illumination are seen in manuscripts dated to the first half of the fifteenth century.⁴⁹ Therefore, the above-mentioned tendency to avoid references to Christ's suffering and death during the Passion in fourteenth-century Ethiopian Gospel illumination is also recognisable in Ethiopian depictions of the Crucifixion of this period. In this respect, as previously observed, the presence of the Entombment in a number of fourteenth-century Ethiopian manuscripts, such as TK, appears to contradict this tendency. However, a closer examination of the iconography of the Entombment proves this initial impression wrong. In fact, just as references to Christ's death are avoided in fourteenth-century Ethiopian illuminations of the Crucifixion — either because his body is not present on the Cross or because he is depicted alive upon it — the shrouding of Christ's face in the Entombment conceals his death from the viewer. In other words, the unusual veiling of the face of the Dead Christ in the Entombment is consistent with the reluctance of Ethiopian illuminators to depict the Dead Christ on the Cross during the fourteenth century.

In light of the tendency to avoid depictions of Christ's suffering and death in fourteenth-century Ethiopian Gospel illumination, it is evident that the broader debate concerning the use of images of the Dead Christ in support of a particular Christological position is also relevant to this study. The Ethiopian Church is non-Chalcedonian.⁵⁰ However, it is worth emphasising from the offset that there is no evidence to suggest that a tendency to overemphasise Christ's divinity and deny his death on the Cross was ever widespread among Christian Ethiopians.⁵¹ Nevertheless, if one accepts that the Chalcedonians used images of the Dead Christ to support their Christological positions, then there is reason to believe that the non-Chalcedonians must have preferred to avoid such images at least for some time.⁵² Interestingly, with regard to depictions of the Crucifixion in Coptic

⁴⁷ E.g. in TK; MG; ZG; AG; DMQ. For some examples and a more in-depth discussion and further bibliography, see Balicka-Witakowska 1997; and Fiaccadori 2003.

⁴⁸ E.g. in KG

⁴⁹ MM; GM. For a discussion and reproduction, see Gnisci 2014: 205, fig. 10.

⁵⁰ On the non-Chalcedonian tradition of the Ethiopian Church, see Mebratu Kiros Gebru 2010: 9-12; Witakowski 2003; Grillmeier 1996: esp. n. 130; and Bausi 2006: esp. 51-52.

⁵¹ For an analysis of Ethiopian Christology, see Weischer 1971: esp. 84-85. On Ethiopian Christology, see also Mebratu Kiros Gebru 2010; Grillmeier 1996: 332-33; Bandres 2003, with further bibliography.

⁵² For a more detailed discussion, see Gnisci 2014: 200.

art, Rassart-Debergh has observed that “si les Coptes vouaient un grand culte à la crois glorieuse, ils n’avaient guère été tentés de montrer le supplice lui-même.”⁵³

More recently, Bacci has drawn the attention to a number of Byzantine sources in which the anti-Chalcedonian Jacobites and Armenians are accused of worshipping the Cross more than Christ.⁵⁴ With regard to Byzantine sources, it is also worth noting that, according to Louth a number of Canons of the Council in Trullo were directed against the religious beliefs and liturgical practices of the Armenian Church, which, as noted above, is non-Chalcedonian like the Ethiopian Church.⁵⁵ For instance, in Louth’s view, Canon 81 of the Council in Trullo was directed against the addition of a *theopaschite* formula to the Armenian *Trisagion*.⁵⁶ The following Canon of the Council in Trullo, the well-known Canon 82, forbids symbolic representations of Christ as the Lamb of God in order to emphasise the soteriological value of his Passion.⁵⁷ It is difficult to determine whether this canon was also directed against the Armenian Church. Nevertheless, the wording of the Canon — which decrees that “Christ our God, should be set forth in images in human form, instead of the ancient lamb; for in this way we apprehend the depth of the humility of the Word of God, and are led to the remembrance of his life in the flesh, his passion, and his saving death”⁵⁸ — suggests that it addressed the issue of Crucifixion imagery. In this respect, Canon 82 of the Trullan Council appears to be in agreement with the *Hodegos* of Anastasius Sinaites,⁵⁹ another seventh-century source often mentioned in studies of the Crucifixion, in which the author invites the defenders of the Orthodox faith to use images of the Crucifixion as a non-verbal weapon to refute the position of the Theopaschites.⁶⁰

In the light of the above, it seems an unlikely coincidence that in most fourteenth-century Ethiopian depictions of the Crucifixion the Cross is

⁵³ Rassart-Debergh 1994: 46.

⁵⁴ Bacci 2003: 1043-44. However, the fact that such an accusation was levelled also against the Latin Church is indicative of the instrumentality of such accusations; see Bacci 2003, for further discussion and bibliography.

⁵⁵ Louth 2007: 35-37.

⁵⁶ Louth 2007: 36. The Ethiopic *Trisagion* also includes a reference to Christ’s death at its end, namely by adding “who died for the love of men;” for Hammerschmidt the context and reasons behind this inclusion, probably related to the early Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries remains obscure (1987: 86-87). For an introduction to the development of the *Trisagion* in different denominations and further bibliography, see Janeras 2001.

⁵⁷ Nedungatt and Featherstone 1995: 180-81.

⁵⁸ Quotation taken from Nedungatt and Featherstone 1995: 181.

⁵⁹ For an edition of this text, see Uthemann 1981.

⁶⁰ For a more detailed discussion on the interpretation of this passage, see Kartsonis 1986; and Belting and Belting-Ihm 1966.

empty and surmounted by the Lamb of God. It is also worthwhile noting that Canon 82 of the Trullan Council associates depictions of the Lamb of God to the passage of John, "behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1: 29), which is often placed next to the *Agnus Dei* in fourteenth-century Ethiopian depictions of the Crucifixion without the Crucified (Fig. 7). Thus, it seems reasonable to ask whether there is a connection between the non-Chalcedonian tradition of the Ethiopian Church and the decision to use unusual iconographic formulas, such as that of the Crucifixion without the Crucified, in Ethiopian Gospel illumination of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Significantly, just as the omitting of Christ's body in Ethiopian representations of the Crucifixion between the late thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries finds no close parallels in Byzantine and Western art of the same period, the consistent veiling of the dead Christ in the Entombment finds few parallels outside of the context of Ethiopian art. In fact, as seen in the examples discussed above, in Byzantine and Western depictions of the Entombment the face of the deceased Christ, and sometimes even his torso and legs, are visible to the viewer.⁶¹ It is likely that the reasons which induced Ethiopian artists to omit Christ's dead body in depictions of the Crucifixion must have been similar to those which led them to veil his dead body from view in the Entombment. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine what lies at the root of the pain-lacking quality of Ethiopian depictions of the Passion during the fourteenth century. Is it possible that the non-Chalcedonian tradition of the Ethiopian Church contributed to the decision to not represent the dead Christ on the Cross in miniatures of the Crucifixion and, more generally, avoid references to his suffering and death during the Passion? Did the Ethiopian Church retain a more reverential attitude towards God, and thus depictions of God, which it acquired as a result of its early contacts with the Coptic Church? Alternatively, was a pre-Christian understanding of the divine not entirely superseded by the arrival of Christianity in the country? The available evidence is currently too limited to provide a reliable answer to these questions.

In a study published in 1958, while referring to the translation of texts into Ge'ez, Cerulli observed that "the Ethiopians never passively received these elements [...] from Oriental Christianity, but they always added something of their own, in such a way that their translations are never

⁶¹ Although not the norm as in Ethiopian art, the veiling of Christ's face in the Entombment is occasionally seen in non-Ethiopian manuscript. For instance, see the Armenian Gospel manuscripts in London, the British Library, 1437, ms. or. 2668, fol. 5v. See Nersessian (1987: pl. XX) for a discussion and reproduction of this manuscript.

translations in the literal sense, but are rather remakes.”⁶² A similar observation has been made by Zuurmond, who, while working on a text-critical edition of the Gospel of Matthew, has noted that the translation into Ge’ez presents “signs of a cultural bias.”⁶³ In this respect, of particular interest are his observations about the passage in Matthew (27: 28) in which the soldiers mock Jesus. In fact, the earliest surviving witnesses to the Ethiopic text of Matthew “uniquely” suppress the reference to the undressing of Christ, an omission which, according to Zuurmond, may have been done “out of reverence.”⁶⁴

Zuurmond identifies a number of instances in which the Ge’ez text of the Gospels was modified, thus betraying the “cultural” or “theological bias” of the translator.⁶⁵ Hence, for instance, in the passage from Matthew (9: 19) in which Jesus rises and is followed by his disciples to bring back the daughter of a ruler to life, “the translator creates a procession with the active persons in reverential order: Jesus first, then the ruler, then the disciples.”⁶⁶ Another example is offered by the passage in which Jesus predicts his death — “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law, they will condemn him to death” (Matthew 20: 18). Significantly, the Ethiopic version of this passage continues to omit the words “to death” until the seventeenth century.⁶⁷ As noted elsewhere, this omission, which deprives the priests of their agency and emphasizes Jesus’ role in his own death, finds an echo in the Ethiopian iconography of the Arrest, in which Christ’s captors appear to have little or no agency in his capture.⁶⁸

The roots of this reverential attitude towards the divine must have been ancient, as signs of it appear already in earliest surviving witnesses to the Ethiopic text of Matthew. Examples of this reverential attitude towards God are found also in Mark. For instance, in Mark (4: 27-28) “the translator modifies the text considerably, in order to avoid the impression that God would not know how the seed grows and bears fruit,” and, more generally, the translation of Mark shows signs of “a tendency to remove from the text expression which seem disrespectful towards Jesus.”⁶⁹ Therefore, although it is evident that considerable research still needs to be conducted to determine what lies at the root of the pain-lacking quality of Ethiopian depic-

⁶² Cerulli 1958: 256.

⁶³ Zuurmond 2001: 34.

⁶⁴ Zuurmond 2001: 35.

⁶⁵ Zuurmond 2001: 34-35; 1989 I: 58

⁶⁶ Zuurmond 2001: 101

⁶⁷ Zuurmond 2001b: 205

⁶⁸ Gnisci 2015b: 202.

⁶⁹ Zuurmond 1989 I: 53

tions of the Passion during the fourteenth-century, it seems evident that the lack of references to Christ's suffering and death finds an antecedent in the textual tradition of the Ethiopic Gospels. In this respect, the visual and textual evidence further confirms the impression, noted above, that Ethiopian artists, just as Ethiopian scribes, were willing to modify the sources they had at their disposal to ensure these adhered to their religious tradition.

The concealment of Christ's entire body, particularly of his face, is not the only unique aspect of the Ethiopian depictions of the Entombment. In fact, the interpretation of the Tomb in this theme appears to be equally unorthodox. In most non-Ethiopian examples of the Entombment, as shown above, the Tomb of Christ is represented as an opening in a cave or as a sarcophagus. In Ethiopian art instead, as Leroy first observed, "the grave is still on the right, but is no longer an opening in the ground or the rock, but is depicted in a geometric, abstract shape."⁷⁰ More precisely, the Tomb is represented as a rectangular area, which is inscribed within a thin frame of a different colour and placed against a flat background with no spatial indication.⁷¹ Leroy made no further attempt to explain what exactly this abstract shape represents, and since then the peculiarity of the Ethiopian interpretation of the Tomb has received little attention in the literature. There are no direct parallels for the Ethiopian interpretation of the Tomb in non-Ethiopian Christian art. However, in a small number of Byzantine and Western examples of manuscript illumination the Tomb opening is depicted in a manner which recalls its interpretation in Ethiopian Gospels illumination. For instance, in the miniature of the Resurrection of Lazarus from the ninth-century Paris Gregory manuscript,⁷² and in that of the Holy Women at the Tomb from the twelfth century Missal of the Holy Sepulchre,⁷³ the tomb opening is portrayed as a plain rectangle surrounded by a narrow frame. It is easy to see how, by omitting the figure of Lazarus in the first example and the funerary shrouds of Christ in the second example, as well as the background in both examples, one is left with the same structure that is used in Ethiopian art to represent the entrance to the Tomb. Hence, it is possible that the tomb structure found in the Ethiopian depictions of the Entombment analysed here (Figs. 2-4) represents a foreign model reduced to the essentials.

There is, however, yet another distinguishing feature of the Ethiopian interpretation of Christ's Tomb that requires further consideration. In fact, in most fourteenth- and fifteenth-century examples of this subject, a bil-

⁷⁰ Quotation taken from Leroy, Wright, and Jäger 1961: 12.

⁷¹ In this respect the Entombment in TK is an exception, as discussed further on.

⁷² Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, late 9th century, Grec 510, fol. 196v.

⁷³ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 12th century, Latin 12056, fol. 121v.

lowing curtain is placed in front of the entrance to the Tomb (Figs. 2, 4-5). The presence of this curtain further attests to the capacity of Ethiopian artists to adapt foreign models to their own religious beliefs and practices, and exemplifies the allegorical character of Ethiopian art of this period. In fact, in Ethiopian churches curtains, known as *mägaräḡa*,⁷⁴ are used to shield the church sanctuary — an area referred to as the *mäqdäs*⁷⁵ which may be accessed only by members of the priesthood — from view. On the one hand, the presence of the *mägaräḡa* emphasizes the sacredness of Christ's Tomb. On the other hand, it suggests a parallel between the Tomb and the *mäqdäs*, thus conferring a liturgical character to the Ethiopian miniature.⁷⁶ In fact, just as the *mäqdäs* is shielded from view by the *mägaräḡa* in Ethiopian churches, so is the Tomb of Christ shielded by a curtain in the Entombment. In other words, in Ethiopian depictions of the Entombment, the Tomb of Christ is intended as an allegory of a Christian sanctuary. This Tomb/*mäqdäs* analogy is also present in TK, although in this manuscript the entrance to Christ's Tomb is represented as an arch and the *mägaräḡa* is attached to a rod.⁷⁷

It is worth noting that the Ethiopian iconography of the Entombment evokes the burial practices of the Ethiopian Church described in the *Mäṣḥafä Gənzät*:⁷⁸

If he [the deceased] is a priest, let them make him greet the *tabot*; if he is a deacon (just) the sanctuary. [...] And let them lie down according to their ranks. If it is a priest, let them bring him in, *inside the curtain, before the altar* [emphasis added]. But if it is a deacon, a monk, a nun or a layman, (let it be) outside the sanctuary [...]. After the completion of the absolution, let (the clergy) make (the dead person) taste from (Christ's) holy body and his honoured blood, according to their rank, so that they may be pure before God [...]. Let (the high priest) spill on him oil, and have him greet the *tabot*.⁷⁹

The *Mäṣḥafä Gənzät* instructs the clergy to take care that the deceased greets the *tabot* inside the *mäqdäs* and, if he was a priest, place him *inside the curtain* and next to the altar prior to the absolution. Similarly, Joseph and Nicodemus pause with Christ's body in front of the Tomb — which as

⁷⁴ Fritsch 2007a.

⁷⁵ Fritsch 2007b; Appleyard 2007: 134.

⁷⁶ On the presence of liturgical allusions in Ethiopian illumination of the early Solomonic period, see also Gnisci 2015a; 2015b; 2015c.

⁷⁷ For a more detailed discussion on the symbolism of the arch in Ethiopian art, see Lepage and Mercier 2012a: 130-31; and Gnisci 2014: 197.

⁷⁸ For a brief introduction to this text and further bibliography, see Tedros Abraha 2005.

⁷⁹ Getatchew Haile 2005: 72.

noted above can also be identified with the *mäqdäs* due to the presence of a sanctuary veil — just before placing it *beyond* the curtain.

The parallel between the Tomb of Christ and the *mäqdäs* is also found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Ethiopian representations of the Holy Women at the Sepulchre.⁸⁰ Although, in this latter theme the *mägaräga* is attached to a rod and inserted in a more complex architectural setting which evokes the *Anastasis* in Jerusalem.⁸¹ If the area of the Tomb can be paralleled with the *mäqdäs* then the Sepulchre, that is to say the actual place where Christ's body was laid, can be paralleled with the altar of the church, where Christ's Death and Resurrection are commemorated. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the analogy between altar and sepulchre is found also in the liturgy of the Ethiopian Church. In Ethiopia the Divine Liturgy, or *Qəddase*, is divided into two parts. During the second part of the service — which employs one of the fourteen anaphoras in use in the Ethiopian Church — the Eucharistic bread becomes the Body of Christ and the wine becomes his Blood.⁸² During the preparatory service, while the covering of the bread and the chalice takes place on the altar, the officiating priest declares: "let my hands be like the hands of Joseph and Nicodemus who wrapped thy body."⁸³ Hence, just as Joseph and Nicodemus covered the body of Christ and placed it within the Tomb, the priest covers the Host and places it on the altar. In this respect, the shrouded Christ in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Ethiopian illuminations of the Entombment functions as an embodiment of the Eucharist, and, because of this, the figures of Joseph and Nicodemus represent not just the two biblical figures, but embody an ideal of priesthood.

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⁸⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this theme and the symbolism of the *mägaräga* in Ethiopian art, see Gnisci 2015a; 2015c.

⁸¹ For a more detailed discussion about this iconography, which presents a series of distinctive iconographical features that make it stand apart from early Christian interpretations of the *Anastasis*, see Gnisci 2015a.

⁸² For a discussion and further bibliography, see Fritsch 2002: esp. 211; Habtemichael Kidane 2005; Chaillot 2002: 104-48; Archbishop Yesehaq: 109-113. On the architectural development of Ethiopian churches to adapt in relation to the liturgy, see Fritsch 2012.

⁸³ Daoud 1991: 23.

- Balicka-Witakowska, E., 1989, "The iconography of the Deposition in Ethiopian painting," in *Proceedings of the First international conference on the history of Ethiopian art held at the Warburg Institute of the University of London, October 21 and 22, 1986*, (London: Pindar Press), 15-22, 139-144.
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SUMMARY

This article discusses the iconography of the Entombment in Ethiopian manuscript illumination of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. It has a twofold purpose: (1) to show that during this period Ethiopian artists purposely avoided references to Jesus' suffering and death during the Passion; and (2) to uncover the wealth of liturgical allusions that are found in illuminated gospels books of this period. The article also highlights the importance of philology in the study of Ethiopian manuscript illumination and shows that the religious beliefs and practices of Ethiopian artists probably played a greater role in shaping iconography than hitherto acknowledged.



Fig. 1. New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 1998.66, late 14th or early 15th century, *The Entombment*, fol. 5 v. (Photo: © 2015 The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



Fig. 2. Amba Dära, Church of Maryam Mägdälawit, 14th century, *The Entombment*, fol. ?
(Photo: Michael Gervers).



Fig. 3. Lake Tana, Kəbran Church, second half of the 14th century, *The Entombment*, fol. 19r.
(Photo: Michael Gervers).



Fig. 4. London, Private Collection, second half of the 14th century, *The Entombment*, fol. 16v.
(Photo: Author).



Fig. 5. Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, W. 839, late 14th century, *The Entombment*, fol. 2.
(Photo: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore).

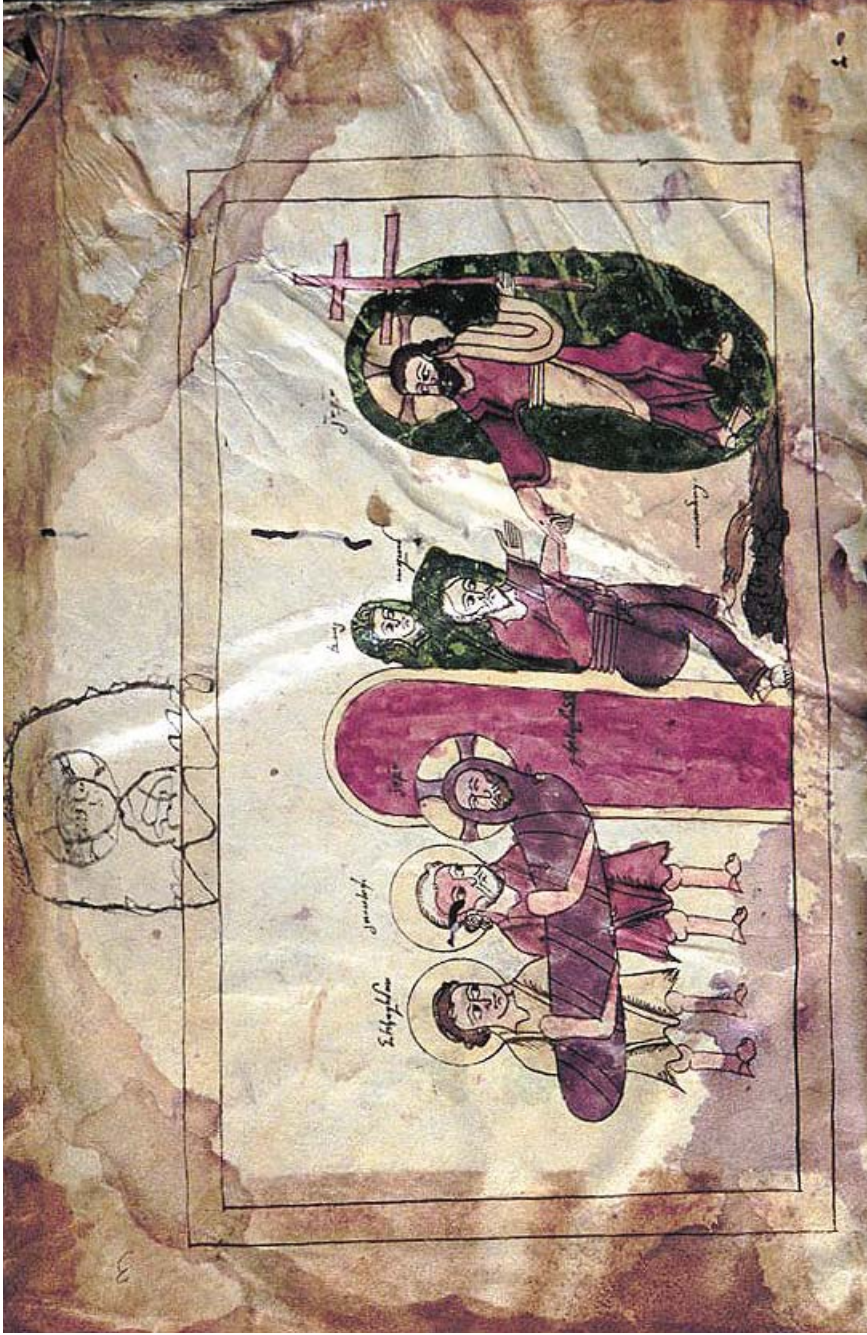


Fig. 6. Erevan, Matenadaran, c. 11th century, Ms. 974, *The Entombment and the Anastasis*, fol. 15r. (Photo: Dickran Kouymjian).



Fig. 7. London, Private Collection, second half of the 14th century, *The Denial of Peter and the Crucifixion*, fols. 15v-16r. (Photo: Author).