Nägärä Maryam: The (Ethiopian) Story of Mary (Amherst, 25-27 Jun 27)

Amherst, MA, Jun 25–27, 2027
Deadline: Jan 31, 2027

JUTTA GISELA Sperling, Hampshire College

Call for Contributions (workshop and edited volume).

Nägärä Maryam is a unique Ethiopian story covering Mary's years in exile as a young mother. It depicts Our Lady Mary as a Hebrew prophetess and magician, Christian miracle-worker, teacher of the law and the covenant, and missionary avant la lettre, but also as a vulnerable teenage mother who suffers the deprivations, humiliations, and perils of exile. She expands the persona of the Orthodox Ethiopian, non-Chalcedonian, Mother of God, in that she incorporates aspects of Hebrew prophets such as Enoch, Elijah the Tishbite, or even Moses. She has given birth to the Word because she is divinely inspired and empowered, but she suffers the consequences of Christ's Nativity as a mortal woman, targeted by Herod and his henchmen. Nägärä Maryam competes with Coptic narratives of the Flight into Egypt in that it proposes a recursive and non-linear itinerary through Lebanon, Syria, and Ethiopia with only occasional stints into Egypt to comply with Hosea's prophecy "out of Egypt have I called my son." In presenting Mary as a magician whose knowledge of ʾasmat or secret magic names empowers her to vanquish her enemies, Nägärä Maryam supplements, but perhaps also aspires to supplant, Täʾammärä Maryam. Täʾammärä Maryam, this extremely popular (and on-going) story collection of Mary's posthumous miracles, is theologically grounded in late ancient Byzantine dormition accounts – specifically the Pact of Mercy with which the Risen Christ empowers his mother to intercede on behalf of sinners and perform miracles for her devotees in need. By contrast, Our Lady Mary of Nägärä Maryam performs her first Christian-style resurrection while still gestating in Hannah's womb, and casts magic spells on her enemies while living as an oblate in the Temple. Once she receives the Annunciation, her divine powers amplify. She has no need to be empowered by her crucified and resurrected son. In focusing on Mary's trials and tribulations as a young mother in exile, Nägärä Maryam fills a biographical lacuna, but also preempts the significance of Byzantine dormition accounts that legitimize her as intercessor and posthumous miracle worker, and couch her as an organizer of the early church.

Nägärä Maryam's textual form emerged in the late 17th century, fed by the oral andəmta (= exegetical) tradition, but also earlier story fragments are in evidence in the 15th century as well as the adaptation of a host of Hebrew, Syrian, and Coptic texts from (late) antiquity. Texts such as the gnostic Liber Requiei (The Book of Mary's Repose), the biblical Book of Enoch, the Syrian Pseudo-Clementines, the Vision of Theophilus, and the Discourse of Timothy, among many others, served as conceptual inspirations for this unique Marian biography. In its broad, inclusive, and ecumenical sourcing of canonical as well as "apocryphal" Judeo-Christian texts and its bold envisioning of

a new Mother of God, endowed with a matriarchal genealogy, this work is utterly unique in the copious tradition of Marian literature worldwide.

Nägärä Maryam's presentation of Our Lady Mary as a divinely empowered mother appealed to women at the court of Emperor Bäkaffa (r. 1721-30), mainly his wife and mother of his successor, Məntəwwab (r. 1730- c. 59), his own mother Maryamawit, and Məntəwwab's mother ʾInkoyyä. All three royal women, as well as Bäkaffa himself, commissioned and/or owned deluxe manuscripts of Nägärä Maryam, each one of them masterfully illuminated with ca. 250 miniatures each. Bäkaffa's book, catalogued as Or. 603 by the British Library as part of the looted Mäqdälä collection, is particularly interesting as a prime example of the Second Gondarine style. Its pictorial program is, with very few exceptions, of unique Ethiopian invention, matching the novelty effect of the narrative, often recycling unique medieval Ethiopian iconographies such as The Holy Family Walking into Exile.

This unique and extremely interesting narrative has never been translated or studied before, with a few minor exceptions. Its pictorial program, likewise, remains "virginal" material.

We are inviting scholars to participate in an interdisciplinary workshop to be held on June 25-27, 2027, at Amherst College, MA. We invite presentations on any aspect of the study of Nägärä Maryam, focusing on either the deluxe manuscripts of royal commission held in British libraries (chiefly Or. 602, 603, 607 and the copy at Windsor Castle) or manuscripts still extant in Ethiopia. This workshop will lead toward the publication of an edited volume, which will accompany our translation of Or. 603 (with Robert Phénix). At this point, we have a rough working translation which we can share with contributors, if needed. The edited volume is to be published either as an independent book or alongside the translation of the text and its miniatures in – hopefully – a big and beautiful book with high gloss paper, something akin to an art exhibition catalogue.

More specific topics to be addressed might include, but are not limited to: the emergence of Nägärä Maryam's textual tradition and its pictorial program; 15th-century precursors (Dərsanä Maryam) and instances of intertextuality; biblical Hebrew inspirations; other literary and religious contexts; royal commissions of deluxe manuscript versions during Bäkaffa's reign in promoting the Second Gondarine style; the Story's complex relationship to Täʾammərä Maryam; Nägärä Maryam and the renaissance of Ethiopian magical practices in the early 18th century; Nägärä Maryam and its relationship to late ancient magical practices in the Greek, Hebrew, Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian traditions; Nägärä Maryam as a proto-feminist story; Nägärä Maryam's heterodox theological implications, especially its departure from the cult of the Virgin Mary as institutionalized under Emperor Zärʾa Yaʿəcob (1434-68); its Syrian orientation, as evidenced, for example, by the inclusion of the Story of Gigar, Mary's first martyr; Nägärä Maryam's centering of the cult of Our Lady Mary in Ethiopia; its vivid afterlife and instances of contemporary relevance.

Please send abstracts at the same time to Jutta Sperling at jsperling@amherst.edu and Cornelia Horn at cornelia.horn@orientphil.uni-halle.de by January 31, 2027.

We will inform you by the end of February of your paper's acceptance. The conference will be held in person in Amherst, MA, June 25-27, 2027 [but there might be a zoom-option]. Please inform Jutta rather soon whether you are interested in attending in person! The final contributions (ca. 8000 words in length) for our edited volume will be due by October 31, 2027.

Reference:
CFP: Nägärä Maryam: The (Ethiopian) Story of Mary (Amherst, 25-27 Jun 27). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 20, 2026 (accessed Nov 20, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/57169>.