A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea

Edited by

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At the beginning of the Common Era, the believers of the first Christian generations inherited from Jews—among many other things—a peculiar way of spiritual life demanding a retreat from earthly affairs and residence far from the cities. Particularly in the Egyptian desert, men and women having as their unique target prayer and the integral imitation of Jesus Christ’s life became monks (from Greek monakhòs, “solitary”), the representatives of an uncompromising attitude of non-involvement in the world, as preached by the Prophets of the Old Testament and the Gospels. Monasticism—the constant search for “holiness” and spiritual perfection through solitary asceticism (anchoritism) or the strict observance of communal rules of life (coenobitism)—became the more accomplished expression of Christian devotion.¹ This original spirit is well present in the Ethiopian monastic experience as a whole, and we can dare to affirm that in no other Christian country have monks been more genuinely the engine of national religious history.

Specific historical circumstances clarify the paramount role of monks in Christian Ethiopian society. Since the mid-fourth century, when the royal court of Aksum embraced the religion of the Gospel, the Egyptian hierarchy claimed the right to choose the heads of the Ethiopian Church. The first bishop was Frumentius, Fəremənaṭos in Gəˈəz (Old Ethiopic), also known as abba Sālama or Kāṣate Bərhan (“the Revealer of the Light”), in fact a Syrian philosophy student who arrived fortuitously at the king’s court when the latter was still a polytheist and then succeeded in converting the heir to the throne ‘Ezana (ca. 340–350).² To provide Ethiopia with an ecclesiastical organization,
the converted king sent Frumentius to the patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius (d. 373), who appointed him as the first bishop of the new Christian country. Up to the mid-twentieth century, Frumentius’s successors – officially bearing the title of ṗappas, as head of the Ethiopian church, but generally called metropolitans due to certain limitations on their authority – were virtually always Egyptians who supported the kings in preparing the general political outline. The extraneousness of the Ethiopian metropolitan to the local cultural milieu and his lack of knowledge about peripheral and local centers of spiritual life often implied that the Christian believers considered the abbots of the monastic communities and the head of the regular clergy (the aččäge) as the true and only representatives of their authentic religious feeling.

Consequently, monasticism has been a crucial element of the social organization of Ethiopia from ancient to modern times, namely

1) the more important factor responsible for the enracination of evangelical morality, Christian institutions, and a “national” Ethiopian identity;
2) one of the pivots of the economic structure of traditional Ethiopian society before the introduction of industrial processes; and
3) the milieu where the majority of Christian Ethiopian intellectual life developed and the only one that transmitted the written culture.

Actually, Ethiopian monastic life presents elements of analogy with other Mediterranean religious experiences of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and the historical study of this phenomenon is possible only in a comparative way, putting its concrete expressions together with those we observe in all the other Christian contexts, where monks played very similar social functions. Nonetheless, in contemporary Ethiopian society, where economic progress and public school have mostly diminished the historical role of religious feeling, monasticism has kept its own vitality, and remains a cultural landmark for millions of observing Ethiopian Christian believers. They still identify in the monastic institution a safe spiritual guide among the uncertainties and the anguishes of modernization, and still recognize collectively that there is an intrinsic “holiness” in the non-secular lifestyle choice.

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3 On the distinctions and overlap between bishop, ṗappas, and metropolitan, and the juridical status of the head of the Ethiopian church, see Emmanuel Fritsch and Habtemichael Kidane, “The Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its Liturgy,” in this volume.

In Ethiopia even today a number of types of monastic spirituality are represented. In addition to the coenobites or fäläst (singular fälasi, “the one who migrates, who abandons the secular life”) who live communally within a monastery, frequently one can meet anchorites or baḥtawəyan (singular baḥtawi, “the solitary”), wandering monks going from one place to another and living on charity, who are surrounded by a special reputation for wisdom and holiness. Intermediate types of monastic life, definable as half-anchoritic, are adopted by groups of hermits living in isolation in “cells” (ṣomaʿətat) disseminated over a more or less defined territory. Periodically, they can gather around a charismatic guide to listen his spiritual instructions. Sometimes, these hermits get in contact with the world for preaching, particularly on the occasion of religious festivals. In these circumstances, people indicate the monk with the epithet nazrawi, instead of mänäkos, the word generally designating a man who follows all these types of spirituality.

About the beginning and the development of monastic life in Eritrea and Ethiopia we lack a reliable documentation. We know only what the intellectual circles and leading groups of the most ancient Ethiopian monasteries produced over centuries of literary and ideological elaboration, with the aim of justifying and glorifying monasticism in general and their specific religious centers in particular. Moreover, the equivalence of monastic life and holiness (to be recognized in the very fact that monks are called also qaddusan – plural of qəddus – namely “holy men”) gave impulse to an edifying literature pivoting around the monk as a model of spiritual values more than as a historical character. Consequently, the main sources for the study of Ethiopian monastic history belong to the hagiographic genre, a kind of non-historical literature. The hagiographic text has its own functions and rules, and historicity does not fall among the substantial needs of the hagiographer. Nevertheless, when a hagiographical account is produced close to the saint’s time and with firsthand knowledge of the events of his or her life, or when the hagiographer had access to ancient sources, it may well offer reliable historical

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6 Admittedly, this is the case of several hagiographic accounts transmitted by the collection of ms. EMML 1763, whose author(s) employed works dating back to the Aksumite period; for a
information. This is also the case for the early phases of Ethiopian-Eritrean monasticism, the *Lives* of whose protagonists, even if consigned to writing many centuries later, could be grounded in traditions passed down over a long period.\(^7\)

The introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia is one of the consequences of the direct contact of Aksum with the Greco-Roman world, thanks to its tight economic and political relationship with the port of Adulis, the most important harbor of the whole Eritrean (Red) Sea in late antiquity.\(^8\) As observed above, the acceptance of the Gospel by the members of the royal court of Aksum can be fixed under the reign of ʿEzana, around 340–350 CE. A century later, a new impulse to the spread of the Christian doctrine in Ethiopia came from groups of Greek monks fleeing from the Byzantine Empire after the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the consequent condemnation of the miaphysite doctrine. The hagiographic and literary traditions about this phase of Ethiopian religious history include *Lives* of saints (*gädlät*, plural of *gädl*), homilies (*dərsanät*, plural of *dərsan*), collections of monastic rules, and monastic genealogies. An intense scholarly debate has focused around the crucial issue of the geographic and cultural origins of these monks. The “Syrian” hypothesis,\(^9\) though long dominant, has proven to be rather weak and based

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\(^7\) See, e.g., Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Philology ad the Reconstruction of the Ethiopian Past,” in *Afrikas Horn* (cit. at n. 4), 91–106, at 92–95, about the reliability of the traditions transmitted by chronographic texts, king lists, monastic genealogies and hagiographies. Recently, an important case of coincidence between an ancient source and the medieval traditions is that of the two bronze plaques bearing inscriptions in non-vocalized Ethiopic language that mention the fourth-century Aksumite king Ḥafīlā, provided with the royal name ʾl ʿyg. Of this epithet one can find the corresponding vocalized form Ǝlla ʿAyga in the medieval king lists, and this seems to confirm their non-occasional reliability, according to the investigation by Alessandro Bausi, “The recently published Ethiopic inscriptions of king Ḥafīlā (ΑΦΙΛΑϹ): a few remarks,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 75, 3–4 (2018): 286a–295a, at 289a.


upon a substantial misunderstanding of the sources. Nowadays, most scholars support the Egyptian origins of the evangelizers who introduced monastic institutions into Ethiopia and their connection with the doctrine approved by the Council of Ephesus (431). Particularly, one can compare some aspects of the Ethiopian monastic liturgy with specific religious practices of the ancient Egyptian communities, like those influenced by the preaching of Melitius, bishop of Lykopolis, documented by Athanasius of Alexandria in his *Festal Letters* of 367–369 and by Theodoret of Cyrus in his *Haereticarum fabularum compendium*. Athanasius attributes to the Melitians an interest in apocryphal literature and in the cult of the martyrs and their relics, inclinations widespread in Ethiopian monasticism as well. Theodoret informs us about features of the Melitians that recall similar practices of the Ethiopian monks, such as ritual purification by water and a liturgy accompanied by musical instruments, dancing, and the clapping of hands.

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10 Even though it can be admitted that the same Egyptian monasticism played a mediating role in transmitting to Ethiopia elements of the asceticism practiced in the deserts of Syria and Palestine since the end of the third century; see at least Sebastian P. Brock, “Early Syrian Ascetism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 1–19, repr. in *Syrian Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1984) (no. 1); Philippe Escolan, *Monachisme et Église. Le monachisme syrien du IVe au VIIe siècle: un monachisme charismatique* (Paris, 1999), 11–69.


The written records about the foreign monks who spearheaded this “second” Christianization follow different streams. Generic traditions about groups of monks who introduced the ideas of asceticism and martyrdom are those indicated by the word Ṣadǝqan, literally “the righteous ones.” Of “Roman” (i.e. Byzantine) origin, they are remembered through reference to the specific territories where they lived and operated as missionaries, so that we know the Ṣadǝqan of Baräknaha (Šǝmäzana, Eritrea), of Kädiḥ (a river not identified in modern geography), of Ḥawzen (a town in Tǝgray), of Qaḥen (in Tǝgray, between Wǝqro and Mäqälä) and of Dägwe (close to Aksum). Their hagiographies are less known and not yet fully edited. Besides the “collective” traditions of Ṣadǝqan, we number monastic figures not belonging to groups of missionaries, and therefore conventionally called “isolated” saints. The most celebrated are Libanos,15 the founder of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos of Šǝmäzana (Eritrea)16 and Yoḥanni, the founder of Däbrä Sina of Sänḥıt (Eritrea).17

The more substantial hagiographic stream is that of the “Nine Saints,” again a group of “Roman” (Byzantine) missionaries who preached the Gospel and imported to Ethiopia the first religious rules, following the teaching of the Egyptian founders of monastic spirituality, namely Anthony and Pachomius. The emphasis placed on their role in establishing the Ethiopian church makes one think that the “first” Christianization under ʿEzana, a century before, was rather superficial and had no effect with regard to monastic institutions.18

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16 About the monastery, particularly the wealth and value of its library, see Alessandro Bausi, “Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell’Eritrea (111),” RSE 41 (1997): 13–55.

17 About Däbrä Sina of Sänḥıt, see Ašrata Māryām, Storia del convento di Debra Sina, ed. Ignazio Guidi (Rome, 1910).

The traditional names attached to the Nine Saints are Alef, Afsē, Zämikaʾel called Arāgawi (“the Elder”), Yosḥaq also called Gārima (in fact a second name more than an epithet), Guba, Liqanos, Ṣāntalewon called Zäṣomaʿät (“the one from the cell”), Śoḥma, and Yōmʾat(t)a. A tenth name ʿOṣ, is less frequent. Traditions attribute to most of them the establishment of religious buildings, like in the case of Liqanos and Ṣāntalewon, to whom the churches of Dābrā Qwānaṣəl and Īnda Abba Ṣāntalewon, both near Aksum, are related, or in the case of Afsē, to whom the foundation of a church close to the Sabean temple of Yəḥa is ascribed.

According to other traditions, from the mid-fourth to the mid-seventh century a number of monastic centers were established over the inaccessible flat-topped mountains called ambas. Therefore, from ancient times the presence of a network of religious buildings traversed the ecclesiastical landscape of northern Ethiopia. For others, this is the case for the architectural complex of Dābrā Dammo, in eastern Taḵraγ, whose foundation is ascribed to Zämikaʾel Arāgawi, and for Īnda Abba Gārima or Dābrā Mādāra, near ʿAdwa, whose construction is attributed to Yosḥaq Gārima. Archeological and topographical evidence demonstrates the antiquity of this kind of establishment, implying a political role on the part of the abbots. In fact, in the sites where the monasteries are now located, remains of ancient buildings are still visible, probably because the settlements were near strategic crossroads with the aim of controlling and defending trade routes and state boundaries. This must have been the result of a program based on a stable alliance between the Aksumite rulers and the first monastic groups. Indeed, literary elements confirm that,

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at least from the sixth century on, kings and monks cooperated in strengthen-
ing the Christian Aksumite state. According to the *Life* of Zämikaʾel Arägawi, the church of Däbrä Dammo was built by Gäbrä Mäsqäl, son and successor of Kaleb, the sovereign who put an end to the Jewish kingdom of Ḥimyar in Yemen.23 The Golden Gospel of the monastery of Däbrä Libanos, in Eritrea, contains at least one land grant given by Gäbrä Mäsqäl to Däbrä Dammo. Däbrä Mädära played a role, too, in this agreement between Church and State, because in the *Life* of Yəsḥaq Gärima it is narrated that, after visiting the saint, the same ruler ordered the foundation of a new church and endowed it with lands.

As noted above, all the literary works telling the stories of the “Nine Saints” were composed in the form of hagiographies. Moreover, the texts in their present form seem to be quite recent, and the traditions told by gädlät, dərsanat, monastic rules, and genealogies date back at the latest to fourteenth or fif-
teenth century, even though some of the traditions they contain may date back to earlier (possibly Aksumite) times. Significantly, records of the most ancient Ethiopian writing activity are limited to the two Ǝnda Abba Gärima Four-
Gospels manuscripts, now definitely assigned to late antiquity by carbon-14 dating (330–650 for AG III, 530–660 for AG 1).24 This is evidence of the role played by monks in the first phases of Christian Ethiopian literature.

The connection of the first Ethiopian monks to the miaphysite doctrine is substantially undisputed. Suffice it to say that the most important literary work translated from Greek to Gəʿəz in Aksumite times is the *Qerəllos*, the patristic collection owing its title to Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444).25 This Egyptian bishop and assertive theologian decisively influenced fifth-century Christology, the decisions of the Council of Ephesus (431), and the condemnation of the views of Nestorius of Antioch. Not by chance, the Ethiopian literary tradition con-
tains strong polemics against the Council of Chalcedon (451), for at that council the majority of the Fathers established the presence in Christ of two different

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25 For an overview of the content of the patristic collection, see Alessandro Bausi, “Qorellos,” in *EAe* 4 (2010), 287–290.
natures united and inseparable, and condemned the miaphysite doctrine that Cyril and the monastic circles around him espoused.

Philological analysis also allows us to reconstruct the literary corpus of texts for monastic instruction, translated from Greek into Gəʿəz between the fourth and seventh century, from which different forms of spiritual life arose. These are, on one hand, the Life of Paul of Thebes by Jerome26 and the Life of Anthony by Athanasius,27 the two "guides" to anchoritic spirituality; on the other hand, a part at least of the Rules of Pachomius,28 the most authoritative reference text of coenobitism. These literary expressions of early Egyptian monasticism contribute to show the cultural origins of the foreign evangelizers who introduced monastic institutions to Ethiopia, strengthening the ancient connection between Alexandria and Aksum.

A long-debated question concerns the meaning of the undeniable Judeo-Christian traces in Ethiopian Christianity, possibly going back to the presence and the activity of monastic circles. The Gəˈaz literature of the fourth to seventh century includes an impressive corpus of works belonging to Jewish literature of the Second Temple age.29 Texts like the Ascension of Isaiah, the

26 The edition of the Life of Paul of Thebes is in Francisco Maria Esteves Pereira, A vida de S. Paulo de Thebas primeiro eremita segundo a versao ethiopica (Coimbra, 1904), 5–48.


28 The edition of the Rules of Pachomius is in August Dillmann, Chrestomathia Aethiopica (Leipzig, 1866), 57–69; see Oscar Löfgren, "Zur Kritik der äthiopischen Pachomiusregeln I, II," Le Monde Oriental 30 (1936): 171–186; Gianfrancesco Lusini, "Tradizione e redazione delle regole monastiche etiopiche (Parigi, B.N., ms. Éth. 125, fols. 160v–162)," in Scritti in memoria di Emilio Teza, ed. Delio Vania Proverbio (Venice, 1997), 53–66, at 54–55 and 62–63. With the exception of the hagiographic Lives of saints and the semi-hagiographic royal "chronicles," most of the medieval Ethiopian liturgical books were translated from Greek or Arabic models. Sometimes, the works written for the spiritual instruction of the monks, already translated from Greek in Aksumite times, were corrected and expanded, and in their final form one can detect the different textual layers belonging to several historical phases. This stratification can be recognized in the Gəˈaz version of the Rules of Pachomius, so that in their present form they are the result of the assembly of different texts. The First and Second Rule, corresponding – respectively – to chapters 32.1–33.1 of the Lausiac History of Palladius (the Rule of the Angel) and to the Greek Excerpta (according to the manuscripts of the "second family") have been translated from Greek. Instead, the last section, the so-called Third Rule, is an original composition, to be dated to the fourteenth century at the earliest.

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Book of Enoch, Jubilees, 4 Ezra (or Apocalypse of Ezra), and the Book of Baruch (or Paralipomena Ieremiae), all translated from Greek, give us a clue about the theological orientations of the groups of Christian believers preaching within the kingdom of Aksum. Since we have no evidence of a Jewish presence in ancient Ethiopia, and the miaphysite creed has little to do with the Judeo-Christian identity, we can infer that the Aksumite religious setting was more complex than expected. Possibly, more than one wave of evangelizers, coming from the Roman harbors on the Red Sea, visited Aksum through the port of Adulis and left some traces of their passage, even before the members of the Ethiopian royal court started believing in the message of the Gospel.

The collapse of the kingdom of Aksum in the seventh-eighth century is a turning point of Ethiopian history, but our knowledge of the events is very limited. Nevertheless, monastic establishments resisted the political earthquake incomparably better than did civil institutions. Structurally, monastic networks, made of small autonomous centers, are more resistant to historical disasters, and the way of life in monasteries has a better chance of surviving through the most catastrophic events. In fact – as in the case of European

of the Apocrypha in Ethiopia,” in Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopian, ed. Bausi, 87–109 (no. 6).


33 An indirect confirmation of this hypothesis could derive from the medieval chronographic texts, stating that the “conversion of Ethiopia” (əmnätä ityoṗya) occurred 245 years after the birth of Christ; see Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Ripristino e integrazione di un documento storico in ga’az: Pistoia, Biblioteca Forteguerriana, ms. Martini etiop. 1,” Annali. Sezione orientale 75 (2015): 55–75, at 60. This could be an evidence that Christian ideas were already present in Aksum around 253, at the time of the anti-Christian persecutions under the Roman Emperors Decius and Valerian, namely quite a century before the decisions of ‘Ezana.
monasticism, both Latin and Greek – the monasteries became the only places where remnants of ancient Christian Aksumite culture survived during the subsequent Ethiopian “Dark Ages.” At the end of this obscure period, the revival of Christian culture and institutions was made possible thanks to texts and ideas preserved by the most ancient and prestigious monastic centers. Manuscripts played a specific role in this context, inasmuch as they granted the transmission and the preservation of doctrines and institutions directly coming from Aksumite times. Moreover, the better we are able to reconstruct the history of Ethiopian medieval architecture, the more we can assume that monks and monastic centers preserved artistic traditions dating back to late antiquity for all the time separating the collapse of Aksum from the recovery of a centralized state and the revival of the Christian traditions. Isolated epigraphic documents give some clues about the role played by monastic centers in this post-Aksumite phase. The two inscriptions RIÉ 193 i–ii (= DAE 12–13) were cut on a single stone by a historical figure named Danaʾel, self-styled ḫaṣāni, in a problematic range of time between the ninth and eleventh century. Since Danaʾel calls himself “son of Dābrā Forem,” and in Goʾaz dābr means both “mountain” and “monastery,” we can deduce that possibly he was a member of a monastic community (Dābrā Forem), whose setting can only be hypothesized. With all probability, in this post-Aksumite phase the eastern districts of Təgray played a major role in preserving the ancient monastic traditions, and we can presume that some of the oldest churches and cloisters in this part of northern Ethiopia date back to the ninth to eleventh century, when Aksum had already lost its political primacy.

The last phases of the Ethiopian “Dark Ages,” at the beginning of the twelfth century, are better known to us. A clash among several political centers and a consequent re-unification process must have occurred, which brought about the installation of the Zagwē dynasty (1137–1270). Even though the origins of the royal lineage remain wrapped in mystery, the Zagwē kings proved to be the promoters of a religious revival, including the foundation of churches and monastic centers, particularly in the districts of Wäg and Lasta (Wällo region)

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34 RIÉ 1, 278–283 (= Enno Littmann, Sabaische,Griechische und Altabessinische Inschriften, vol. 4 of Littmann et al., Deutsche-Aksum Expedition [Berlin, 1913], 42–46).

35 Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Epigraphica Aethiopica,” Quaderni Utinensi 15/16 (1990): 325–333, at 327–328, has proposed to consider Forem as a shortened form of Fəremənaṭos (Frumentius), because “a lui s’intitolava presso il villaggio detto dai viaggiatori May Qoqa o Maygoga (Māy Qāḥqeḥa), c. 6 km da Adua (ʿAdwā), a sud della strada per ‘Aksum, la chiesa del luogo già noto ai Portoghesi come ‘Fremona’ (‘Flemona’ o ‘Flemuna,’ a un giorno da ‘Axon,’ nel c.d. ‘Aviso di frate Raphaello,’ raccolto da Alessandro Zorzi nel marzo 1522): ossia ‘F(e)remōnā,’ evidente deformazione tigrina di ‘Fərēmənaṭos.’”
to which the origins of the ruling family have been ascribed. Since then, for centuries the monks of this part of Ethiopia, to the south of the Aksumite geo-political context, have kept the memory of these sovereigns as holy men.\(^{36}\) One may cite as an example the case of Yǝmrǝḥannä Krǝstos,\(^{37}\) king and monk, to whom not only a \textit{Life} is dedicated,\(^{38}\) but also an extraordinary church built within a cave approximately in the times of the king’s reign, between the second half of the twelfth century and the middle of the thirteenth.\(^{39}\)

The Zagwe dynasty came to end because of a dramatic coup d’état accomplished in the year 1270 by the military chief Yǝkunno Amlak, founder of the so-called “Solomonic” dynasty. In that circumstance, we can notice for the first time a rift in the clergy and the splitting of the Ethiopian religious body into two groups, each supporting a different political party. Unexpectedly, the losers, the Zagwe and the monastic circles they represented, appear to have been the more tenacious keepers of the Aksumite past, even though the economic basis of their power was no longer only in the territories of central and eastern Tǝgray, but also in the more southern region of Wällo. This is rather evident if we look at some of the churches of Lalibäla, the holy city of the Zagwe kings, owing his name to the most celebrated sovereign of the dynasty. These religious monuments carefully reproduce Aksumite architecture, both civil and religious. Evidently, for the builders of these churches, the ruins of the ancient capital and holy city of Aksum in Tǝgray were a living reference point, deserving of imitation.\(^{40}\) Even though the surviving Ga’ǝz texts of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries are few, there are clues from later sources indicating that monastic life under the Zagwe kings was intensive and that “holy places” not

\(^{36}\) For an overview of the historical facts related to the Zagwe dynasty and a study of the enigmatic aspects of the veneration provided to these kings and saints, see Marie-Laure Derat, \textit{L’énigme d’une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d’Éthiopie du XI\textsuperscript{e} au XIII\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Turnhout, 2018).

\(^{37}\) For the intensified scholarly attention over this prominent figure of the Ethiopian Middle Ages, see at least Marie-Laure Derat, “Roi prêtre et Prêtre Jean: analyse de la Vie d’un souverain éthiopien du XII\textsuperscript{e} siècle, Yemrehanna Krestos,” \textit{Annales d’Éthiopie} 27 (2012): 127–143; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Between Hagiography and History: The Zagwe Dynasty and King Yǝmrǝḥannä Krǝstos,” in \textit{Veneration of Saints in Christian Ethiopia}, 15–49.

\(^{38}\) For the \textit{Life} of Yǝmrǝḥannä Krǝstos see Paolo Marrassini, ed. and trans., \textit{Il Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos. Introduzione, commento critico, traduzione} (Naples, 1995).

\(^{39}\) See Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers “Yǝmrǝḥannä Krǝstos,” in \textit{EAe} 5 (2014), 55–57; recently, a technical study of the building has been carried out by Mengistu Gobezie Worku, “The Church of Yimrhane Kristos. An Archaeological Investigation” (Ph.D diss, Lund University, 2018).

only maintained their basic role, but also gained a new political position. This is clearly shown by the events related to the outstanding personalities of Iyäsus Mo’a and Täklä Haymanot.

The beginnings of the monastic career of Iyäsus Mo’a (1214–1293) are connected to Däbrä Dammo, the celebrated monastery of Təgray dating back to Aksumite times. From there he went southward, reaching a community already existing on the shores of Lake Ḥayq, in the district of Ambassäl in southern Wällo. Here, around 1248, on the island in the center of the lake he established a new monastery under the name Däbrä Ḥayq Ǝştifanos. His appointment as the abbot of the new community came directly from a king belonging to the Zagwe dynasty, Nä’akkwəto Lä’ab, successor of King Lalibala. From this data we can infer that the Zagwe kings were fully engaged in the political and religious program of expanding southward the sphere of influence of the Christian kingdom. Yet, Iyäsus Mo’a was reportedly involved in the crucial events of the year 1270: his Life affirms that he had prophesied Yəkunno Amlak’s overthrow of the last Zagwe king, Yotbaräk, and in turn received as a donation from the first Solomonic king the island where he had founded Däbrä Ḥayq Ǝştifanos. Apparently, the hagiographic traditions allude to the role played by Iyäsus Mo’a in supporting the political and military group headed by Yəkunno Amlak and having as a target the seizure of power to the detriment of the Zagwe kings.

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The monastic career of Täklä Haymanot (ca. 1214–1313), the most venerated saint of the Ethiopian Church, is somehow connected to Iyäsus Mo’a, who is credited with giving him religious instruction for nine years, possibly at Däbrä Ḥayq Ǝstifanos, soon after 1248, in the times of the last Zagwe kings. Later, like Iyäsus Mo’a before him, Täklä Haymanot, a native of Šäwa, went to Däbrä Dammo, in Təgray, probably following the order of his teacher. These traditions about the early life of the two saints seem to mean that around the mid-thirteenth century the monks active in the southern regions of the kingdom, particularly Šäwa, considered Däbrä Dammo and Təgray as a point of reference for their spiritual training. Actually, the regions over Wällo (where Däbrä Ḥayq Ǝstifanos represented the southern border of the Zagwe political space) proved to be not yet fully Christianized, as they were part of a kingdom called Damot, ruled by non-Christian kings. Significantly, a crucial episode in the Life of Täklä Haymanot consists in the story of his meeting with Motälämi, the king of Damot, who eventually converted to the faith in the Gospel and became a follower of Täklä Haymanot. Behind the limits of the hagiographic topos, we may recognize here the memory of a political and religious confrontation between the Christian dynasties, first the Zagwe then the Solomonids, and their southern neighbors, most probably peoples belonging to the Sidaama (Cushitic) cultural cluster. Evidently, the evangelization of the southern lands, performed by monastic groups, was proceeding hand in hand with the military annexation of the territories and their incorporation within the boundaries of the Christian kingdom. Nevertheless, royal chronicles and hagiographic texts document the resistance for centuries of local-religious

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practices, particularly the devotion to warlocks, justifying the “anti-pagan” campaigns of the Solomonic kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The turning point in the religious life of Täklä Haymanot was the foundation of the monastery of Däbrä ‘Asbo (renamed Däbrä Libanos of Šäwa in the mid-fifteenth century). The event dates back to the first years of the fourteenth century, therefore well after Yəkunno Amlak overthrew the last Zagве king and established the Solomonic dynasty. Like Iyäsus Mo’a before him, Täklä Haymanot too seems to have supported the new royal lineage, and many hagiographic traditions emphasize the special relationship existing between Däbrä ‘Asbo and the royal court. For its crucial position, between the southern borders of the Christian state, the non-Christian kingdom of Damot and the Muslim sultanate (ruled by the Maḥzūmī until 1285, then by the Walasma’),

the political role of the monastery founded by Täklä Haymanot grew over the centuries.

Eventually, in the mid-fifteenth century, this prestige resulted in the recognition of the abbot of Däbrä Libanos as the head of the regular clergy of Ethiopia, with the title of əč̣č̣äge. This sequence of events provides a framework in which a historical rivalry between Däbrä Ḥayq Ǝstifanos and Däbrä ‘Asbo took shape and developed.

Particularly, according to the hagiographic accounts, the open support that the two founders gave to Yəkunno Amlak justified a certain degree of competition between the later abbots of the two monasteries, who wished to present themselves as the spiritual guides and defenders not only of the first Solomonic king, but also of his successors.

Discussion of the historical roles played by the two main figures of early medieval Ethiopian monasticism, Iyäsus Mo’a the “teacher” (mämhər, ab)


47 For the reconstruction of the chronological succession of the leaders of Däbrä Libanos, we have available, besides the monastic genealogies (Getatchew Haile, “The monastic genealogy of the line of Täklä Haymanot of Shoa,” *RSE* 29 [1982–83]: 7–38), a peculiar poetic text (called “lista rimata” by its editor) produced within the scriptorium of the same monastery and telling the stories of the abbots from the foundation up to the eighteenth century; see Enrico Cerulli, ed. and trans., “Gli abbatì di Dabra Libānos, capi del monachismo etiopico, secondo la ‘lista rimata’ (sec. XIV–XVIII),” *Orientalia* 12 (1943), 226–253, continued in 13 (1944): 137–182.

and Täklä Haymanot the “disciple” (däqq, wäld) raises another crucial question, namely, how spiritual and hierarchical authority was transmitted within the monastery. Evidently, on this matter the prescriptions of the ecclesiastical codes (like the Senodos and the F̣atha nägäšt) exercised a limited influence, because the relationship between an abbot and his successor was systematically of a charismatic kind. The “election” of the new abbot was nothing but an appointment by the head of the community, often accompanied by the ceremony of the laying on of hands. An expression of acceptance by the assembly of the monks was not guaranteed, and this transfer of authority could provoke moments of tension. Recurring disagreements are reported by the hagiographic literature, and specific interventions by metropolitans and kings are documented, in order to impose their own decisions to the benefit of one of the parties in the dispute.

However, in most cases the authority of abbots, both monastic founders and their prestigious successors, remained undisputed and could include their recognition as sources of community rules (sør’ată maḥbär). This practice resulted in the development of specific monastic collections, valid within a given monastery, differentiating and characterizing the religious experience of that center.49 In any case, monks who disagreed with the way the monastery was run could find an alternative by abandoning the community and devoting themselves to a solitary life as hermits. The most celebrated case is that of Samu’el of Waldǝbbǝ,50 a fourteenth and early fifteenth-century holy man who undertook the religious life first in Däbrä Bänkǝl as a disciple of Mädhaninä Egziʾ,51 a fourteenth-century follower of Täklä Haymanot, then in the desert lowlands south-west of Aksum, where supposedly he gave impulse to a tradition of radical anchoritism.

To improve our knowledge of such historical developments, and to provide frameworks for a better understanding of facts and ideas, several scholars drew up monographs in the second half of the last century surveying the history of

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51 The Life of Mädhaninä Egziʾ is in Gérard Colin, ed. and trans., Vie et Miracles de Madhanina Egziʾ (Turnhout, 2010).
Ethiopian monasticism after 1270. In Enrico Cerulli’s pioneering and synthetic “Il monachesimo in Etiopia” (1959), the general features of the monastic experience of medieval Eritrea and Ethiopia are masterfully outlined, with constant attention to the Byzantine and Oriental connections of Ethiopian history.52 The study by Steven Kaplan, The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia (1984), is founded on a conception of the abbots of the medieval monasteries as “holy men” originating from aristocratic local families whom the new dynasty tried to integrate into the Christian state, not rarely causing conflictual relations between civil and religious institutions.53 Noteworthy contributions are in other monographs, like Donald Crummey’s Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia (2000)54 and Marie-Laure Derat’s Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (2003).55 These latter works are essential to understanding the role of the monasteries as driving forces of economic and social history, and also represent a successful attempt to write a history of the Christian state relying upon a specific class of written documents, the rəst and the gwǝlt land grants. We find some of these short texts as additions to older


53 Steven Kaplan, The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianisation of Early Solomonic Ethiopia (Wiesbaden, 1984). The achievement of these valuable conclusions was the consequence of an innovative approach, consisting in “studiere la mentalità etiopica medievale attraverso gli elementi ‘non storici’ (cioè, non riguardanti la mera storia fattuale) delle vite dei santi” (Paolo Marrassini, Review of The Monastic Holy Man by Steven Kaplan, RSE 31 [1987]: 271–277, at 272), according to the methodological principles applied (some years before Kaplan’s Monastic Holy Man) by Paolo Marrassini in his Gadla Yohannes Mesraqawi. For recent historical sketches, see Lusini, “Le monachisme en Éthiopie,” and Steven Kaplan, “Monasticism,” in EAe 5 (2014), 443–447.

54 Donald Crummey, Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century (Oxford, 2000).

manuscripts, or within bigger collections,\textsuperscript{56} as in the case of the Golden Gospel of the Eritrean monastery of Däbrä Libanos.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, the “gwǝlt act” was nothing but a personal benefit granted to a specific abbot (\textit{abba mənet}), excluding his successors from the same charge. Granting a monastery by the “rəst act,” the sovereigns acknowledged the right of the religious community to inheritance of the land, with the aim of strengthening the monastic presence over problematic territories such as borderlands. The “holy men” played a decisive role in this setting, because by preaching the Gospel they became a part of the mechanism of land exploitation.

In the first half of the fourteenth century the consolidation of the Solomonic dynasty rendered the relations between the court and the regular clergy (that is, the monks) more and more complicated. The priests, ruled by the authority of the Ethiopian metropolitan (the \textit{abun}), were most often loyal to the civil power, because their hierarchy was an integral part of the country’s political establishment. It is indicative, for instance, that the church leaders lived close to the king, inside the itinerant military camp or \textit{kätäma}. The court housed a royal church, under a special tent (\textit{däbtära}), and the members of the secular clergy officiating there, the \textit{kahanatä däbtärä} (thus, the priests of the royal tent or church), were familiar with the highest officers of the state. By contrast, most monks (who did not generally even take holy orders) lived in isolation in monasteries, immersed in reading and praying, in working and preaching. Therefore, they had a completely different attitude toward the civil power, the church hierarchy, and the king, basing their view on the assumption that the king himself should submit to God and observe the rules of Christian life.

The most significant case is that of the dramatic conflict between the king ʿAmdä Ṣəyon I (1314–1344) and the spiritual leaders of the main monastic centers of Šäwa and Amhara. During his reign, this grandson of Yəkunno Amlak pursued the goals of extending Solomonid sovereignty over northern and southern Ethiopia at the expense of local Muslim sultanates,\textsuperscript{58} and of


\textsuperscript{58} For the “reconquest” of the Eritrean seabord, where the sultan of Dahlak was nominally ruling, see Taddesse Tamrat, “The Abbots of Däbrä Hayq,” 95–96, and idem, \textit{Church and State in Ethiopia}, 76–77. The great campaign against Ifat, the Muslim sultanate ruled by the Walasmaʿ (which incorporated that of Šawah governed by the Maḫzūmī until 1285), is known chiefly thanks to a Gǝʿǝz account of ʿAmdä Ṣəyon’s military campaign,
stabilizing the dynasty at the expense of regional rulers, particularly Yaʿābikä Ṣgzi’, the governor (mäkwänän) of eastern Təgray. As a result of these military and political initiatives, the king supported the birth of new religious foundations, but at the same time the aspiration of some monasteries to a higher degree of administrative and economic independence led them into open polemics against the central authorities of State and Church (the naguś and the abun). In some cases, this general mood facilitated a de facto alliance between monastic institutions and local aristocracies, both sharing the quest for more autonomy.

Formally, ‘Amdä Ṣəyon was criticized by monastic groups for marrying his father’s widow and for keeping concubines. Among the spiritual leaders involved in the conflict, Bäṣälotä Mika’el of Däbrä Gwäl appears as the most influential, the one who probably inspired the whole critical current, and consequently suffered serious persecution. According to their Lives, Anorewos of Däbrä Asbo and Aron of Däbrä Daret were closely connected to him, because they met him on different occasions and were convinced by his preaching of religious reform. Filəṗṗos of Dabra Asbo (1274–1348), the third abbot of the monastery founded by Täklä Haymanot, is considered another great accuser of kings, not only ‘Amdä Ṣəyon but also his successor Säyfä Ar’ad (1344–1371). Emblematically, the convergence of Bäṣälotä Mika’el, who spent most of his life praying and preaching as a wandering monk, and Filəṗṗos, who never ceased to be abbot, whether he was in custody or exiled, represents the first example of an Ethiopian “royal chronicle”; see Paolo Marrassini, ed. and trans., Lo scettro e la croce. La campagna di ‘Amda Seyon I contro l’Ifat (1332) (Naples, 1993); Manfred Kropp, ed. and trans., Der Siegreiche Feldzug des Königs ‘Āmda-Ṣeyon gegen di Muslime in Adal in Jahre 1332 N. Chr., 2 vols., cSCO 538–549, SAe 99–100 (Louvain, 1994).

For an overview of the sources on this historical figure, see Denis Nosnitsin, “Ya’ābikä Ṣgzi’,” in EAe 5 (2014), 5.


60 For a Life of Anorewos is in ibid., 1: 61–110, 2: 53–98.


cohesion of both major monastic forms (the anchoritic and the coenobitic) in a common program of moral renewal of the regular clergy.64

For the whole fourteenth century, the need of members of the regional ruling classes to escape the absolute power of the kings and to claim their autonomy led them to find in monastic centers a religious support for their political authority. In the first half of the fourteenth century another example comes from the monastic movement initiated by Ewosṭatewos of Däbrä Ṣarabl (1273–1352), a native from Təgray.65 After the death of Ewosṭatewos in 1352, his disciples established an impressive chain of communities in the three Eritrean regions of Ḥamasen, Säraʾe and Akkälä Guzay,66 giving themselves the arrangement

64 In hagiographic sources of the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries the issue seems to be connected to the matter of female monasticism, or rather the problem of the presence of women within the communities; about the hagiographical accounts specifically dedicated to female figures, see Verena Böll, “Holy Women in Ethiopia,” in *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa* (cit. at n. 43), 31–45. At the end of thirteenth century, housing nuns in the monasteries was a common habit, as witnessed by the *Life* of Täklä Haymanot. Later, the greatest leaders, starting with Bäsälotä Mikaʾel and Filəṗṗos of Dabra ʿAsbo, fought against the custom and laid the foundations for a strict separation between men and women, as a consequence of their religious conception of gender relations. On this complex and delicate topic, see at least Joachim Persoon, “The Ethiopian monk; a changing concept of masculinity,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, 1 (2002): 43–66, and Marta Camilla Wright, “At the limits of sexuality; the feminity of Ethiopian nuns,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 35, 1 (2002): 27–42.


and the coordination of a true schismatic order, under the direction of Absadi of Däbrä Maryam.⁶⁷ In spite of their difficult conditions, isolated and victims of persecution, the “sons of Ewostatewos” benefited from the support of a local aristocratic group led by the head of Sära’e, Wärasinä Egzi’, and developed a specific written tradition, of which the sophisticated style of illumination of Däbrä Maryam is the most evolved expression.⁶⁸

From the dogmatic point of view, these monks claimed the observance of rest and worship on both Sabbaths, namely Saturday and Sunday, according to a liturgical custom already existing in early Christian times. Most likely, the emphasis on this specific point was a reaction against the innovative wind blowing from Alexandria and the demanded obedience to the decisions taken by the formal heads of the church, namely the Coptic patriarch and the Ethiopian metropolitan, both of Egyptian origin.⁶⁹ The king was part of the dispute and for a long time took the side of the ecclesiastical hierarchy against the rebel monks, who kept following the indigenous tradition and resisted top-down directives. From the time of King Dawit II (1379/80–1413), and even more under his successor Zär’a Yaʿaqob (1434–1468), things changed completely. The two kings recognized the positive role played by the monks, even those advocating the respect of rules not in line with Egyptian orthodoxy, and started to consider the “sons of Ewostatewos” as the true representatives of Ethiopian religious identity.

Even in this case, religious and political motivations were intertwined. Most of the religious centers of this monastic group were in the provinces to the north of the river Märäb, in contemporary Eritrea. Their presence in disputed territories, where the Dahlak sultanate had a great influence, proved to be a resource for the Ethiopian kings. It is no coincidence that the leader of the Ewostatean movement in the phase of reconciliation with the king was

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⁶⁹ For an overview, see Lusini, Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano, 15–33.
Filēṗṗos, the abbot of Däbrä Bizän, a monastery that still today dominates the road that leads from the highlands and the Ḥamasen plain to the seaboard and the port of Massawa.

Not less significant is the case of the “sons of Ǝstifanos,” namely the monastic movement born in the ‘Agame region of eastern Təgray, around the almost inaccessible amba of Gundä Gunde or Däbrä Gärzen, not far from ‘Addigrat. This monastery became the stronghold of the monastic rule initiated by a disciple of the highly venerated saint Sāmu’el of Däbrä Qwäyäṣa. During his whole life, Ǝstifanos (1397/8–1444) spread among his followers a strict monastic rule involving extreme ascetic practices and the refusal of every contact with the outside world. Metropolitan Bärtälomewos (ca. 1398/99–1438) examined his theological views, but could find no unorthodox element in Ǝstifanos’s faith. Nonetheless, the “holy man” faced the strong opposition of Zär’a Ya’aqob, who tried to make him accept the principle of his superiority in religious matters, had him tortured, and brought him to death in prison. The king persecuted for years Ǝstifanos’s disciples too, but even in these uneasy conditions, the abbots


and monks of Däbrä Gärzen survived, and succeeded in developing their own literary language and manuscript illumination characterized by a high level of stylization.\(^73\)

The clash between Ǝstifanos and Zärʾa Yaʿəqob poses a specific historical problem. One can say that this personal and institutional contrast represents the apex of the conflict between civil and religious institutions that started when monks became protagonists of Ethiopian history. From the royal point of view, monks should have been nothing but docile instruments in secular hands, indefatigable propagators of Christian doctrine among the peoples recently incorporated in the kingdom and guarantors of the social order in return for benefits and land grants. From the monastic point of view, the king's power was nothing but a reflection of the real absolute power, that of the heavenly King, from which the earthly king's power derived. As a result, Ǝstifanos refused to prostrate himself in front of Zärʾa Yaʿəqob, and Zärʾa Yaʿəqob accused the “arrogant” monk of lèse-majesty.

In these historical circumstances, among difficulties and persecution, Ethiopian monks managed to maintain the cultural role they had had since Christianity made its first appearance in the country. Even today, the book (not rarely the manuscript) is the inseparable companion of the Ethiopian monk, and the written word is the inexhaustible source of his knowledge and faith. In traditional Ethiopian society monks were the only individuals possessing the skills of reading and writing, and the monasteries were the only places where the transmission of written knowledge occurred. Noblemen and kings might be able to read and write too, provided that during their early youth they had frequented monastic schools. From the point of view of literary creativity and manuscript production, monks were the protagonists of an accumulation process, active until very recent times, that displays a number of interesting phenomena we can detect through philological study.\(^74\) A huge monastic literature, including hagiographic narrations, monastic rules, and theological treatises,\(^75\) is one of the main features of Eritrean and Ethiopian written culture. The broad range of the Mediterranean sources of Gǝʿǝz literature, going from Latin to Greek, and from Syrian to Arab-Coptic writers, proves again the strong connection of Ethiopian-Eritrean monasticism to the similar experiences occurring in the rest of the Christian world.

\(^73\) See Heldman, “An Ewostatian style and the Gunda Gunde style”.


\(^75\) For an overview of the textual collections, see Alessandro Bausi, “Monastic literature,” in *EAe* 3 (2007), 993–999.