

A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea

Edited by

Samantha Kelly



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

	Acknowledgments	VII
	List of Maps and Figures	IX
	List of Abbreviations	XI
	Notes on Contributors	XIII
	Conventions	XVI
	Transliteration Chart: Gəʿəz and Amharic	XVIII
	Transliteration Chart: Arabic	XX
	Maps	XXI
1	Introduction	1
	<i>Samantha Kelly</i>	
2	Before the Solomonids: Crisis, Renaissance and the Emergence of the Zagʷe Dynasty (Seventh–Thirteenth Centuries)	31
	<i>Marie-Laure Derat</i>	
3	Territorial Expansion and Administrative Evolution under the “Solomonic” Dynasty	57
	<i>Deresse Ayenachew</i>	
4	The Sultanates of Medieval Ethiopia	86
	<i>Amélie Chekroun and Bertrand Hirsch</i>	
5	Of Conversion and Conversation: Followers of Local Religions in Medieval Ethiopia	113
	<i>François-Xavier Fauvelle</i>	
6	Islamic Cultural Traditions of Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea	142
	<i>Alessandro Gori</i>	
7	The Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Its Liturgy	162
	<i>Emmanuel Fritsch and Habtemichael Kidane</i>	
8	The Ancient and Medieval History of Eritrean and Ethiopian Monasticism: An Outline	194
	<i>Gianfrancesco Lusini</i>	

- 9 Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene: Cultural Transmission,
Translation, and Reception 217
Alessandro Bausi
- 10 Genres of Ethiopian-Eritrean Christian Literature with a Focus
on Hagiography 252
Antonella Brita
- 11 Christian Manuscript Culture of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Highlands:
Some Analytical Insights 282
Denis Nosnitsin
- 12 Christian Visual Culture in Medieval Ethiopia: Overview, Trends
and Issues 322
Claire Bosc-Tiessé
- 13 Towards a History of Women in Medieval Ethiopia 365
Margaux Herman
- 14 Medieval Ethiopian Economies: Subsistence, Global Trade and the
Administration of Wealth 395
Anaïs Wion
- 15 Medieval Ethiopian Diasporas 425
Samantha Kelly
- 16 The Muslim-Christian Wars and the Oromo Expansion:
Transformations at the End of the Middle Ages (ca. 1500–ca. 1560) 454
Amélie Chekroun and Bertrand Hirsch
- Bibliography 477
Index 560

The Ancient and Medieval History of Eritrean and Ethiopian Monasticism: An Outline

Gianfrancesco Lusini

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 *Gə'əz* (Old Ethiopic), also known as *abba Sälama* or *Käšate 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,

-
- 1 Within an immense bibliography on this topic, see at least Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford, 1993); William Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford, 2004).
 - 2 For an evaluation of the literary sources on Frumentius (both classical and Ethiopic), see Françoise Thelamon, *Paiens et Chrétiens au IV^e siècle. L'apport de l'Histoire ecclésiastique' de Rufin d'Aquilée* (Paris, 1981), 31–83; Franz A. Dombrowski, “Frumentius/Abba Salama. Zu den Nachrichten über die Anfänge des Christentums in Äthiopien,” *Oriens Christianus* 68 (1984):

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 *pappas*, 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.³ 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 *əččäge*) 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.⁴

114–169; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Sälama (Käsate Bərhan),” in *E Ae* 4 (2010), 484–488; Massimo Villa, “Frumentius in the Ethiopic Sources: Mythopoeia and Text-critical Considerations,” *RSE*, 3rd ser., 48, 1 (2017): 87–111.

3 On the distinctions and overlap between bishop, *pappas*, 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.

4 See Joachim Persoon, “Ethiopian Monasticism Between Tradition and Modernity,” in *Afrikas Horn. Akten der Ersten Internationalen Littmann-Konferenz 2. bis 5. Mai 2002 in München*, ed. Walter Raunig and Steffen Wening (Wiesbaden 2005), 203–216.

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” (*šoma’atat*) 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 *qəddusan* – 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.⁵ 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,⁶ it may well offer reliable historical

5 For some overviews of the Ethiopic hagiographic literature, see Carlo Conti Rossini, “L’agiografia etiopica e gli Atti del santo Yafqeranna-Egzi’ (Secolo XIV),” *Atti del Reale Istituto Veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti* 96, 2 (1936–37): 403–433, at 403–412; Tadesse Tamrat, “Hagiographies and the Reconstruction of Medieval Ethiopian History,” *Rural Africana* 11 (1970): 12–20; Steven Kaplan, “Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia,” *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 107–123; Paolo Marrassini, ed. and trans., *Gadla Yohannes Mesraqawi. Vita di Yohannes l’Orientale. Edizione critica con introduzione e traduzione annotata* (Florence 1981), xxxiii–cix; Denis Nosnitsin, “Hagiography,” in *EAE* 2 (2005), 969–972.

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 'Ezana, 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 (*därsanat*, plural of *därsan*), 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

presentation, see Gianfrancesco Lusini, ed. and trans., “Gli *Atti* apocrifi di Marco,” *Aethiopica* 12 (2009): 7–47, at 20–25.

- 7 See, e.g., Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Philology and 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 Ḥäfila, provided with the royal name 'l 'yg. Of this epithet one can find the corresponding vocalized form Älla 'Ayga 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 Ḥäfilä (AΦIΛAC): a few remarks,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 75, 3–4 (2018): 286a–295a, at 289a.
- 8 For recent assessments, see Michael Speidel, “Wars, trade and treaties: new, revised, and neglected sources for the political, diplomatic, and military aspects of Imperial Rome's relations with the Red Sea Basin and India, from Augustus to Diocletian,” in *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean regions and Muziris: new perspectives on maritime trade*, ed. K.S. Mathew (New Delhi 2015), 83–128, and Chiara Zazzaro, “Adulis and the sea,” in *Human interaction with the environment in the Red Sea. Selected Papers of Red Sea Project VI*, ed. Dionysios A. Agius et al. (Leiden, 2017), 151–170.
- 9 For a presentation of facts and interpretations, see Aaron Butts, “Ethiopic Christianity, Syriac contacts with,” in *The Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, NJ, 2011), 148–153; Theresa Hainthaler, “Syrian Influences on the Christian Faith in Ethiopia,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Ethiopian*

upon a substantial misunderstanding of the sources.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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,¹² 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.¹³

Texts, May 27–30, 2013, *St. Francis Friary, Asko*, ed. Daniel Assefa and Hiruy Abdu (Addis Ababa, 2016), 113–126; Witold Witakowski, “Syrian Influences in Ethiopian Culture,” *Orientalia Suecana* 38–39 (1989): 191–202, repr. in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity. Ethiopian*, ed. Alessandro Bausi (Farnham, 2012), 197–208 (no. 12); idem, “Syrian influences in Ethiopia,” in *EAE* 4 (2010), 782–785.

- 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 Brock, *Syrian Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 1984) (no. 1); Philippe Escolan, *Monachisme et Église. Le monachisme syrien du IV^e au VII^e siècle: un monachisme charismatique* (Paris, 1999), 11–69.
- 11 According to the conclusions of linguistic and textual studies such as those by Hans Jakob Polotsky, “Aramaic, Syriac, and Ge’ez,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 1–10, repr. in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity. Ethiopian*, ed. Bausi, 187–196 (no. 11); Paolo Marrassini, “Some considerations on the problem of the ‘Syriac influences’ on Aksumite Ethiopia,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 22 (1990): 35–46; idem, “Ancora sul problema degli influssi siriaci in età aksumita,” in *Biblica et Semitica. Studi in memoria di Francesco Vattioni*, ed. Luigi Cagni (Naples, 1999), 325–337, trans. as “Once Again on the Question of Syriac Influences in the Aksumite Period,” in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity. Ethiopian*, ed. Bausi, 209–219 (no. 13).
- 12 For an overview of the historical facts related to the so-called “Melitian Schism,” see at least Annick Martin, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’Église d’Égypte au IV^e siècle* (Rome, 1996), 219–298, and the collected essays by Hans Hauben, *Studies on the Melitian Schism in Egypt (AD 306–335)*, ed. Peter van Nuffelen (Farnham, 2012).
- 13 See Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Per una storia delle tradizioni monastiche eritree: le genealogie spirituali dell’ordine di Ēwostātēwos di Dabra Ṣarābi,” in *Aegyptus Christiana. Mélanges d’hagiographie égyptienne et orientale dédiés à la mémpire du P. Paul Devos Bollandiste*, ed. Ugo Zanetti and Enzo Lucchesi (Geneva, 2004), 249–272, at 250–252; idem, “Le monachisme en Éthiopie. Esquisse d’une histoire,” in *Monachismes d’Orient. Images, Échanges*.

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 *Ṣadaqan*, 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 *Ṣadaqan* of Baräknaḥ (Ṣəmāzana, Eritrea), of Kādiḥ (a river not identified in modern geography), of Ḥawzen (a town in Təgray), of Qaḥen (in Təgray, between Wəqro and Mäqälä) and of Dägʷe (close to Aksum). Their hagiographies are less known and not yet fully edited.¹⁴ Besides the “collective” traditions of *Ṣadaqan*, 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 Ṣəmāzana (Eritrea)¹⁶ and Yoḥanni, the founder of Däbrä Sina of Sänḥit (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

Influences, ed. Florence Jullien and Marie-Joseph Pierre (Turnhout, 2011), 133–147, at 138–139.

- 14 For an overview of the written traditions about the *Ṣadaqan*, see Antonella Brita, “Ṣadaqan,” in *EAE* 4 (2010), 446–447. For a previously unknown group, having as their veneration centre the church of ʿAddiqāḥarsi Päraqliṭos (Gulo Mäkäda, East Təgray), see Denis Nosnitsin, “Vita and Miracles of the *Ṣadaqan* of ʿAddiqāḥarsi Päraqliṭos. A Preliminary Study,” in *Veneration of Saints in Christian Ethiopia. Proceedings of the International Workshop ‘Saints in Christian Ethiopia: Literary Sources and Veneration,’ Hamburg, April 28–29*, ed. Denis Nosnitsin (Wiesbaden, 2015), 137–159.
- 15 The critical edition of the *Life* of Libanos is in Alessandro Bausi, ed. and trans., *La ‘Vita’ e i ‘Miracoli’ di Libānos*, 2 vols., CSCO 595–596, SAe 105–106 (Louvain, 2003).
- 16 About the monastery, particularly the wealth and value of its library, see Alessandro Bausi, “Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell’Eritrea (III),” *RSE* 41 (1997): 13–55.
- 17 About Däbrä Sina of Sänḥit, see Asrāta Märyām, *Storia del convento di Debra Sina*, ed. Ignazio Guidi (Rome, 1910).
- 18 A comprehensive study of the written traditions about the “Nine Saints” is in Antonella Brita, *I racconti tradizionali sulla “seconda cristianizzazione” dell’Etiopia. Il ciclo agiografico dei Nove Santi* (Naples, 2010); cf. Carlo Conti Rossini, *Storia d’Etiopia. Parte prima: Dalle origini all’avvento della dinastia Salomonide* (Bergamo, 1928), 155–165; Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, 1972), 115–121; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270–1527* (Oxford, 1972), 21–25; George

The traditional names attached to the Nine Saints are Alef, Afše, Zāmika'el called Arāgawi (“the Elder”), Yəṣṣḥaq also called Gārīma (in fact a second name more than an epithet), Guba, Liqanos, Pāntālewōn called Zāšoma'ət (“the one from the cell”), Šəḥma, and Yəm'at(t)a. A tenth name 'Oš, is less frequent. Traditions attribute to most of them the establishment of religious buildings, like in the case of Liqanos and Pāntālewōn, to whom the churches of Däbrä Qwānaṣəl and Ānda Abba Pāntālewōn, both near Aksum, are related, or in the case of Afše, 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 and central Ethiopia.¹⁹ Among others, this is the case for the architectural complex of Däbrä Dammo, in eastern Təgray, whose foundation is ascribed to Zāmika'el Arāgawi,²⁰ and for Ānda Abba Gārīma or Däbrä Mādāra, near 'Adwa, whose construction is attributed to Yəṣṣḥaq Gārīma.²¹ 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.²² Indeed, literary elements confirm that,

Wynn Brereton Huntingford, “Saints of Medieval Ethiopia,” *Abba Salama* 10 (1979): 261–264; Antonella Brita, “Nine Saints,” in *EAE* 3 (2007), 1188–1191.

- 19 For the notion of “ecclesiastic landscape,” see Denis Nosnitsin, “Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia: Remarks on Methodologies and Types of Approach,” in *Ecclesiastic Landscape of North Ethiopia*, ed. Denis Nosnitsin (Wiesbaden, 2013), 3–13.
- 20 The edition of the *Life* of Zāmika'el Arāgawi is in Ignazio Guidi, ed., “Il 'Gadla 'Aragāwī,” *Memorie della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 5th ser., 2 (1896): 54–96; cf. Marc-Antoine van den Oudenrijn, trans., *La Vie de Saint Za Mikā'el Aragāwī, traduite de l'éthiopien avec introduction et notes* (Fribourg, 1939).
- 21 The edition of the *Life* of Yəṣṣḥaq Gārīma is in Carlo Conti Rossini, ed., “L'omilia di Yohannes, vescovo d'Aksum, in onore di Garimā,” in *Actes du XI^e Congrès International des Orientalistes (Paris-1897). Section Sémitique* (Paris, 1899), 139–177; cf. Gérard Colin, trans., *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien. Frumentius, Garimā, Takla-Hāymānot et Ewoṣtātēwos. Introduction, traduction et notes* (Paris, 2017), 6–37.
- 22 According to the arguments brought forward by Sergew Hable Selassie “Church and State in the Axumite period,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 2 vols. (Addis Ababa, 1966–1970), 1: 5–8; idem, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 119; Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 24.

at least from the sixth century on, kings and monks cooperated in strengthening the Christian Aksumite state. According to the *Life* of Zāmika’el 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 Mādära played a role, too, in this agreement between Church and State, because in the *Life* of Yəṣṣḥaq 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*, *därsanat*, monastic rules, and genealogies date back at the latest to fourteenth or fifteenth 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 Īnda Abba Gärima Four-Gospels manuscripts, now definitely assigned to late antiquity by carbon-14 dating (330–650 for AG III, 530–660 for AG I).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 Gə‘əz in Aksumite times is the *Qerällos*, 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 contains 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

23 For an overview of the historical facts related to the early sixth-century Aksum-Ḥimyar conflict, see Glen Warren Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford, 2013).

24 For a general presentation and a detailed study of the codicological and art-historical aspects of the two manuscripts, see Judith S. McKenzie and Francis Watson, *The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia, With Preface and Photographs by Michael Gervers and contributions by Matthew R. Crawford, Linda R. Macaulay, Sarah S. Norodom, Andres T. Reyes, and Miranda E. Williams* (Oxford, 2016); for the historical documents transmitted by the two codices, see Getatchew Haile, “The Marginal Notes in the Abba Gärima Gospels,” *Aethiopica* 19 (2016): 7–26.

25 For an overview of the content of the patristic collection, see Alessandro Bausi, “Qərellos,” 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 Gəʿəz 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.
- 27 See Louis Leloir, “Premier renseignements sur la vie d’Antoine en éthiopien,” in *Antidōron. Hulde aan Dr. Maurits Geerard bij de voltooiing van de Clavis patrum Graecorum. Hommage à Maurits Geerard pour célébrer l’achèvement de la Clavis patrum Graecorum*, ed. Jacques Noret (Wetteren, 1984), 9–12; Rafał Zarzeczny, “Some remarks concerning the Ethiopic recension of the ‘Life of Antony,’” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 79 (2013): 37–60.
- 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. 160^v–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 Gəʿəz 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.
- 29 For an overview of the Ethiopic apocryphal literature, see Pierluigi Piovanelli, “Les aventures des apocryphes en Éthiopie,” *Apocrypha* 4 (1993): 197–224, trans. as “The Adventures

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.³⁰ 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 Adulis³¹ and left some traces of their passage,³² even before the members of the Ethiopian royal court started believing in the message of the Gospel.³³

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).

- 30 See Maxime Rodinson, “L’Éthiopie a-t-elle été juive?” *Revue des études juives* 2 (1963): 399–403; idem, “Sur la question des influences juives en Éthiopie,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 11–19, trans. as “On the Question of ‘Jewish Influences’ in Ethiopia, in *Languages and cultures of Eastern Christianity. Ethiopian*, ed. Bausi, 179–186 (no. 10); idem, “Le problème du christianisme éthiopien: substrat juif ou christianisme judaïsant?” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 167 (1965): 113–117; Ephraim Isaac, “An obscure component in Ethiopian church history,” *Le Muséon* 85 (1972): 225–258.
- 31 See Serena Massa and Caterina Giostra, “The Christianisation of Adulis in Light of the Material Evidence,” in *Stories of Globalisation: The Red Sea and the Persian Gulf from Late Prehistory to Early Modernity. Selected Papers of Red Sea Project VII*, ed. Andrea Manzo et al. (Leiden – Boston, 2018), 314–352.
- 32 According to the convincing arguments brought forward by Pierluigi Piovaneli, “Reconstructing the Social and Cultural History of the Aksumite Kingdom: Some Methodological Reflections,” in *Inside and Out. Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (Louvain, 2014), 331–352, at 350–351.
- 33 An indirect confirmation of this hypothesis could derive from the medieval chronographic texts, stating that the “conversion of Ethiopia” (*amnätä ityopyya*) occurred 245 years after the birth of Christ; see Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Ripristino e integrazione di un documento storico in gǝʿəz: 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)³⁴ were cut on a single stone by a historical figure named Danə’el, self-styled *ḥaṣani*, in a problematic range of time between the ninth and eleventh century. Since Danə’el calls himself “son of Däbrä Fərem,” and in *Gə’əz däbr* means both “mountain” and “monastery,” we can deduce that possibly he was a member of a monastic community (Däbrä Fərem), whose setting can only be hypothesized.³⁵ 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 Zagwe dynasty (1137–1270). Even though the origins of the royal lineage remain wrapped in mystery, the Zagwe 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)

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 Aethiopia,” *Quaderni Utinensi* 15/16 (1990): 325–333, at 327–328, has proposed to consider Fərem as a shortened form of Fəremənaṭos (Fruventius), because “a lui s’intitolava presso il villaggio detto dai viaggiatori May Qoqa o Maygoga (Māy Qāḥqəḥa), c. 6 km da Adua (‘Adwā), 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)rēmonā,’ evidente deformazione tigrina di ‘Fəremənaṭos.’”

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 Yəmrəḥānnā Krəstos,³⁷ king and monk, to whom not only a *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 Yəkunno 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 Təgray, 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 Təgray were a living reference point, deserving of imitation.⁴⁰ Even though the surviving Gə'əz 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, *L'énigme d'une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d'Éthiopie du XI^e au XIII^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^e siècle, Yemreḥanna Krestos," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 27 (2012): 127–143; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, "Between Hagiography and History: The Zagwe Dynasty and King Yəmrəḥānnā Krəstos," in *Veneration of Saints in Christian Ethiopia*, 15–49.

38 For the *Life* of Yəmrəḥānnā Krəstos see Paolo Marrassini, ed. and trans., *Il Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos. Introduzione, commento critico, traduzione* (Naples, 1995).

39 See Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Michael Gervers "Yəmrəḥānnā Krəstos," in *EAE* 5 (2014), 55–57; recently, a technical study of the bulding has been carried out by Mengistu Gobezie Worku, "The Church of Yimrhane Kristos. An Archaeological Investigation" (Ph.D diss, Lund University, 2018).

40 See David Buxton and Derek Matthews, "The reconstruction of vanished Aksumite buildings," *RSE* 25 (1971–72): 53–77; Marilyn E. Heldman, "Legends of Lalibäla: The Development of an Ethiopian Pilgrimage Site," *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 27 (Spring 1995): 25–38.

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.⁴¹ 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 Ḥṣṭifanos.⁴² His appointment as the abbot of the new community came directly from a king belonging to the Zagwe dynasty, Nä'akk^{wəto} 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, Yəṭbaräk, and in turn received as a donation from the first Solomonic king the island where he had founded Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥṣṭifanos. 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.⁴³

41 The edition of the *Life* of Iyäsus Mo'a is in Stanislas [Stanislaw] Kur, ed and trans., *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a, abbé du couvent de St-Etienne de Ḥayq*, 2 vols., CSCO 259–260, SAE 49–50 (Louvain, 1965); cf. Paolo Marrassini, "A proposito di 'Iyasus Mo'a,' *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 9 (1986): 175–197; for an overview of the hagiographic dossier concerning Iyäsus Mo'a, see Stanislaw Kur, Steven Kaplan and Denis Nossitsin "Iyäsus Mo'a," in *EAE* 5 (2014), 257–259.

42 For an outline of the "medieval" history of the monastery, see Taddesse Tamrat, "The Abbots of Däbrä Ḥayq, 1248–1535," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8 (1970): 87–117; for the wealth and value of its library, see Sergew Hable Selassie, "The Monastic Library of Däbrä Ḥayq," in *Orbis Aethiopicus. Studia in honorem Stanislaus Chojnacki natali septuagesimo quinto dicata, septuagesimo septimo oblata*, ed. Piotr O. Scholz et al., 2 vols., (Albstadt, 1992), 1: 243–258.

43 See Manfred Kropp, "... der Welt gestorben: ein Vertrag zwischen dem äthiopischen Heiligen Iyyäsus-Mo'a und König Yəkunno-Amlak über *Memoriae* im Kloster Ḥayq," *Analecta Bollandiana* 116 (1998): 303–330; idem, "Die dritte Würde oder ein Drittel des Reiches? Die verschiedenen Versionen der Biographie des Hl. Iyäsus-Mo'a als Ausdruck sich wandelnder Funktionen des Textes," in *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa. Saints, biographies et histoire en Afrique. Heilige, Biographien und Geschichte in Afrika*, ed. Bertrand Hirsch and Manfred Kropp (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 191–205; Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Sainteté et intervention royale au monastère Saint-Étienne de Ḥayq au tournant du XIII^e et du XIV^e siècle. L'image de Iyasus Mo'a dans son Évangile," *Oriens Christianus* 94 (2010): 199–227.

The monastic career of Täklä Haymanot (ca. 1214–1313), the most venerated saint of the Ethiopian Church,⁴⁴ is somehow connected to Iyäsus Mo'a, who is credited with giving him religious instruction for nine years, possibly at Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥṣṭifanos, 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 Ḥṣṭifanos 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.⁴⁵ 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

44 Several recensions of the *Life* of Täklä Haymanot are known (no less than four), and only a part of this corpus of texts has received philological attention; see an overview of the issue in Marie-Laure Derat, "Une nouvelle étape de l'élaboration de la légende hagiographique de Takla Häymānot (ca. 1214–1313)," *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Africaines* 9 (1998): 71–90; Denis Nonsitsin, "Täklä Haymanot," in *EAE* 4 (2010), 831–834. The oldest text (first half of the fifteenth century) is the so-called "Waldəbba recension": see Carlo Conti Rossini, ed. and trans., "Il Gadla Takla Häymānot secondo la redazione waldebbana," *Memorie della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 5th ser., 2 (1894): 97–143; cf. Colin, *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, 38–74; the most widespread text, the so-called "Däbrä Libanos recension," edited by Ernst Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Life and Miracles of Takla Häymānot in the Version of Dabra Libanos...* (London, 1906) is broader and later (early sixteenth century, reworked in the late seventeenth). Information about Täklä Haymanot's life is in a story of the translation of his relics to Däbrä Libanos, edited by Budge in the same volume; see also Denis Nonsitsin, "Mäṣḥafä fälsätu lä-abunä Täklä Haymanot. A Short Study," *Aethiopica* 6 (2003): 137–167.

45 See Paolo Marrassini, "Una nuova versione geez della disputa fra Takla Haymanot e Motälami," *Egitto e Vicino Oriente* 3 (1980): 163–198.

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 Yäkunno Amlak overthrew the last Zagwe 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’),⁴⁶ the political role of the monastery founded by Täklä Haymanot grew over the centuries.⁴⁷ 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 *əččäge*. This sequence of events provides a framework in which a historical rivalry between Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥṣṭifanos and Däbrä ‘Asbo took shape and developed.⁴⁸ Particularly, according to the hagiographic accounts, the open support that the two founders gave to Yäkunno 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” (*māmḥər, ab*)

46 See Enrico Cerulli, “Il sultanato dello Scioa nel secolo XIII secondo un nuovo documento storico,” *RSE* 1 (1941): 5–42, repr. in idem, *L’Islam di ieri e di oggi* (Rome, 1971), 207–243.

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.

48 See Steven Kaplan, “Iyasus Mo’a and Takla Haymanot: A Note on a Hagiographical Controversy,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31 (186), 47–56; Bertrand Hirsch, “L’hagiographie et l’histoire. Lectures d’un passage des *Actes de Iyasua Mo’a*,” in *Saints, Biographies and History in Africa* (cit. at n. 43), 161–174; Denis Nonsnitsin, “*Wāwāhabo qob’a wāaskema*. Reflections on an episode from the History of Ethiopian Monastic Movement,” *Scrinium* 1 (= *Varia Aethiopica: in Memory of Sevir B. Chernetsov [1943–2005]*, ed. Denis Nonsnitsin) (2005): 197–247, at 210–235.

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 *Fatḥa nägästä*) 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 (*sər‘atä 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 Waldäbba,⁵⁰ a fourteenth and early fifteenth-century holy man who undertook the religious life first in Däbrä Bänk^{wal} as a disciple of Mädhaninä Egzi’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

49 See, e.g., the case of the rules of Däbrä Bizän in Eritrea, attributed to the same Filäppos, the fourteenth-century founder of the monastery, and transmitted within his *gädl*; Carlo Conti Rossini, ed., “Il Gadla Filpos e il Gadla Yoḥannes di Dabra Bizan,” *Memorie della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 5th ser., 8 (1901): 61–170, at 94–98.

50 The edition of the *Life* of Samu’el is now in Gérard Colin, ed. and trans., *Vie et Miracles de Samuel de Waldebbä*, PO 53, 1 (235) (Turnhout, 2013); cf. Boris Turaiev, *Monumenta Aethiopiae hagiologica*, 2. *Vita Samuelis Valdebani* (Petropoli [St Petersburg], 1902); for an overview of the hagiographic dossier concerning Samu’el, see Denis Nosnitsin, “Samu’el of Waldäbba,” in *EAE* 4 (2010), 516–518.

51 The *Life* of Mädhaninä Egzi’ is in Gérard Colin, ed. and trans., *Vie et Miracles de Madhanina Egzi’* (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 Solomonian 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 *gʷalt* land grants. We find some of these short texts as additions to older

-
- 52 Enrico Cerulli, "Il monachismo in Etiopia," in *Il monachesimo orientale. Atti del convegno di studi orientali che sul predetto tema si tenne a Roma sotto la direzione del Pontificio Istituto Orientale, nei giorni 9, 10, 11 e 12 aprile 1958* (Rome, 1959), 259–278 (trans. as "Monasticism in Etiopia," in *Languages and cultures of Eastern Christianity. Ethiopian*, 355–370 [no. 19]), a presentation which reflects the cultural vision often provided by the Italian scholar in his studies on the Ethiopian Middle Ages; see also Enrico Cerulli, "L'Oriente cristiano nell'unità delle sue tradizioni," in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale L'Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà' (Roma 31 marzo–3 aprile 1963) (Firenze 4 aprile 1963)* (Rome, 1964), 9–43, repr. in idem, *La letteratura etiopica. Terza edizione ampliata* (Florence, 1968), 193–229; of paramount importance is also his sumptuous study of the history of the Jerusalem community, the only monograph ever dedicated to an Ethiopian monastery, though located outside Ethiopia: see Enrico Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina. Storia della comunità etiopica di Gerusalemme*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1943–1947).
- 53 Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianisation of Early Solomonian Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden, 1984). The achievement of these valuable conclusions was the consequence of an innovative approach, consisting in "studiare 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).
- 55 Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270–1527): espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris, 2003).

manuscripts, or within bigger collections,⁵⁶ as in the case of the Golden Gospel of the Eritrean monastery of Däbrä Libanos.⁵⁷ Indeed, the “*gʷəlt act*” was nothing but a personal benefit granted to a specific abbot (*abba mənēt*), 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 *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 *kätäma*. The court housed a royal church, under a special tent (*däbtära*), and the members of the secular clergy officiating there, the *kahənatä 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 ‘Amdä Şəyon I (1314–1344) and the spiritual leaders of the main monastic centers of Şäwa 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,⁵⁸ and of

56 For an overview, see Gianfrancesco Lusini, “Scritture documentarie etiopiche (Dabra Dehuhän e Dabra Şegē, Sarā’ē Eritrea),” *RSE* 42 (1998): 5–55, at 5–16.

57 Published in Carlo Conti Rossini, “L’evangelo d’oro di Dabra Libānos,” *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 5th ser., 10 (1901): 177–219; for an index of place names and personal names quoted by the 35 documents gathered in the collection, see Alessandro Bausi, “Un indice dell’*Evangelo d’oro* di Dabra Libānos (Şemazānā, Akkala Guzāy. Eritrea),” *Aethiopica* 10 (2007): 81–91.

58 For the “reconquest” of the Eritrean seaboard, where the sultan of Dahlak was nominally ruling, see Tadesse Tamrat, “The Abbots of Däbrä Hayq,” 95–96, and idem, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 76–77. The great campaign against Ifat, the Muslim sultanate ruled by the Walasma’ (which incorporated that of Şawah governed by the Maḥzūmī until 1285), is known chiefly thanks to a Gə’əz account of ‘Amdä Şəyon’s military campaign,

stabilizing the dynasty at the expense of regional rulers, particularly Ya‘əbikā ʿĒgziʾ, the governor (*mākʷännən*) of eastern Təgray.⁵⁹ 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 *nəguś* 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, ʿAmdä Şəyon was criticized by monastic groups for marrying his father’s widow and for keeping concubines. Among the spiritual leaders involved in the conflict, Bäşälötä Mika’el of Däbrä Gʷäl appears as the most influential, the one who probably inspired the whole critical current,⁶⁰ and consequently suffered serious persecution. According to their *Lives*, Anorewos of Däbrä ʿAsbo⁶¹ and Aron of Däbrä Daret⁶² were closely connected to him, because they met him on different occasions and were convinced by his preaching of religious reform. Filəppos of Dabra ʿAsbo (1274–1348), the third abbot of the monastery founded by Täklä Haymanot, is considered another great accuser of kings,⁶³ not only ʿAmdä Şəyon but also his successor Säyfi Arʿad (1344–1371). Emblematically, the convergence of Bäşälötä Mika’el, who spent most of his life praying and preaching as a wandering monk, and Filəppos, who never ceased to be abbot, whether he was in custody or exiled, represents the

representing the first example of an Ethiopian “royal chronicle”; see Paolo Marrassini, ed. and trans., *Lo scettro e la croce. La campagna di ʿAmda Şeyon I contro lʿIfat (1332)* (Naples, 1993); Manfred Kropp, ed. and trans., *Der Siegreiche Feldzug des Königs ʿAmda-Şeyon gegen die Muslime in Adal in Jahre 1332 N. Chr.*, 2 vols., CSCO 538–549, SAE 99–100 (Louvain, 1994).

59 For an overview of the sources on this historical figure, see Denis Nosnitsin, “Ya‘əbikā ʿĒgziʾ,” in *EAE* 5 (2014), 5.

60 The *Life* of Bäşälötä Mika’el is in Carlo Conti Rossini, ed. and trans., *Vitae Sanctorum Indigenarum. I: Gadla Başalota Mikāʿel seu Acta S. Başalota Mikāʿel; II: Gadla S. Anorewos seu Acta Sancti Honorii*, 2 vols., CSCO, 2nd ser., 20 (Rome, 1905; repr. as CSCO 28–29, SAE 11–12 [Louvain, 1955]), 1: 1–60, 1–51.

61 The *Life* of Anorewos is in *ibid.*, 1: 61–110, 2: 53–98.

62 The *Life* of Aron is in Boris Turaiev, ed. and trans., *Vitae Sanctorum Indigenarum. III, Gadla Aron seu Acta S. Aaronis. IV, Gadla Filpos seu Acta S. Philippi*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1905; repr. as CSCO 30–31, SAE 13–14 [Louvain, 1955]), 1: 111–169, 2: 99–153.

63 The *Life* of Filəppos is in *ibid.*, 1: 171–260, 2: 155–233; details about Filəppos’ life are in a story of the translation of his relics to Däbrä Libanos, published in Getatchew Haile, “The translation of the relics of Abunä Filəppos of Däbrä Libanos of Shoa,” *RSE* 34 (1990): 75–113.

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 Ewoṣṭatewos of Däbrä Ṣärabi (1273–1352), a native from Təgray.⁶⁵ After the death of Ewoṣṭatewos in 1352, his disciples established an impressive chain of communities in the three Eritrean regions of Ḥamasen, Särä'e 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 Bäṣälötä Mikä'el and Filäppos of Dabra 'Asbo, 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.
- 65 The edition of the *Life* of Ewoṣṭatewos is in Boris Turaiev, *Monumenta Aethiopiae hagiologica*, 3. *Vita et Miracula Eustathii, ad fidem codd. Or. 704 et Or. 705 Musei Britannici edita* (Petropoli [St Petersburg], 1905); translation in idem, *Vitae Sanctorum Indigenarum. I: Acta S. Eustathii*, CSCO 32, SAe 15 (Louvain, 1906); cf. Colin, trans., *Saints fondateurs du christianisme éthiopien*, 75–215. As with the *Life* of Täklä Haymanot, several recensions of this text are known (no less than three); see an overview of the issue in Gianfrancesco Lusini, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano (secoli XIV–XV)* (Naples, 1993), 35–51, and idem, "The stemmatic method and Ethiopian philology: general considerations and case studies," *RSE*, 3rd ser., 48 (2017): 75–86, at 81–84. About the life of the monastic leader, see Lusini, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, 51–67; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, "Ewoṣṭatewos," in *E Ae* 2 (2005), 469–472.
- 66 For an overview of the hagiographical traditions, see Lusini, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, 93–128; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, "Ewoṣṭateans," in *E Ae* 2 (2005), 464–469. For a survey of the Eritrean foundations, most of them belonging to the monastic network of the "sons of Ewoṣṭatewos," see Alessandro Bausi and Gianfrancesco Lusini, "Appunti in margine a una nuova ricerca sui conventi eritrei," *RSE* 36 (1992): 5–36. For the wealth and value of their libraries, see Alessandro Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea (I)," *RSE* 38 (1994): 7–69; idem, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea (II)," *RSE* 39 (1995): 25–48; idem, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea (III)," Gianfrancesco Lusini, "Scritture documentarie etiopiche (Dabra Dehuhän e Dabra Ṣegē, Sarä'e Eritrea);" see also Alessandro

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 Ewoṣtawos” 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 Ya’əqob (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 Ewoṣtawos” 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 Ewoṣtawean movement in the phase of reconciliation with the king was

Bausi and Gianfrancesco Lusini, “The Philological Study of the Eritrean Manuscripts in Gə’əz: Methods and Practices,” in *International Conference of Eritrean Studies, 20–22 July 2016. Proceedings*, ed. Zemenfes Tsighe et al., 2 vols. (Asmara, 2018), 1: 125–141.

67 The edition of the *Life* of Absadi is in Gianfrancesco Lusini, ed. and trans., *Il Gadla Absädi (Dabra Märyām, Sarä’e)*, 2 vols., CSCO 557–558, SAe 103–104 (Louvain, 1996). For an overview of the historical issues, see Lusini, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, 69–92.

68 Marilyn E. Heldman, “An Ewoṣtawean style and the Gunda Gunda style in fifteenth century Ethiopian manuscript illustration,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art (Warburg Institute, London, October 21–22, 1986)*, ed. Richard Pankhurst (London, 1989), 5–14.

69 For an overview, see Lusini, *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano*, 15–33.

Filəppos, the abbot of Däbrä Bizän,⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

Not less significant is the case of the “sons of Ἐστίφανος,” 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.⁷² This monastery became the stronghold of the monastic rule initiated by a disciple of the highly venerated saint Sämu’el of Däbrä Q’wäyāša. During his whole life, Ἐστίφανος (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 Ἐστίφανος’s faith. Nonetheless, the “holy man” faced the strong opposition of Zär’a Ya’əqob, 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 Ἐστίφανος’s disciples too, but even in these uneasy conditions, the abbots

70 The edition of the *Life* of Filəppos is in Carlo Conti Rossini, “Il Gadla Filpos e il Gadla Yoḥannes di Dabra Bizan,” *Memorie della Reale Accademia dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 5th ser., 8 (1901): 61–170.

71 See Otto Meinardus, “Notizen über das eustathische Kloster Debra Bizen,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 6 (1965): 285–291; Roger Schneider, “Notes sur Filpos de Dabra Bizan et ses successeurs,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 11 (1978): 135–139; Aron Andemichael, “The Monastery of Debre Bizan,” in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History (20–21 September 2005, Asmara)*, ed. Tekeste Melake (Asmara, 2007), 28–40.

72 See Tadesse Tamrat, “Some notes on the fifteenth century Stephanite ‘heresy’ in the Ethiopian Church,” *RSE* 22 (1966): 103–115; Robert Beylot, “Un épisode de l’histoire ecclésiastique de l’Éthiopie. Le mouvement stéphanite. Essai sur sa chronologie et sa doctrine,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 8 (1970): 103–116; idem, “Estifanos, hétérodoxe éthiopien du XV^e siècle,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 198, 3 (1981): 279–284; idem, “Sur quelques hétérodoxes éthiopiens. Estifanos, Abakerazun, Gabra Masih, Ezra,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 201, 1 (1984): 25–36; idem, ed. and trans., “Actes des Pères et Frères de Debra Garzen: introduction et instructions spirituelles et théologiques d’Estifanos,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 15 (1990): 5–43; idem, “La dissidence stéphanite en Éthiopie,” in *De la conversion*, ed. Jean-Cristophe Attias (Paris, 1997), 119–132; Getatchew Haile, “The Cause of the Ἐστίφανosites: A Fundamentalist Sect in the Church of Ethiopia,” *Paideuma* 29 (1983): 93–119; idem, ed. and trans., *The Gəʿəz Acts of Abba Ἐστίφανος of Gʷəndagʷənde*, 2 vols. CSCO 619–620, SAe 110–111 (Louvain, 2006); idem, ed. and trans., *A History of the First Ἐστίφανosites Monks*, 2 vols., CSCO 635–636, SAe 112–113 (Louvain, 2011). About the monastery, particularly the wealth and value of its library, see Antonio Mordini, “Il convento di Gunde Gundiè,” *RSE* 12 (1953): 29–71; idem, “Indagini sul convento di Gunde Gundiè e su problemi di storia medioevale etiopica,” in *Mélanges Eugène Tisserant*, vol. 3, *Orient Chrétien, 2^{ème} Partie* (Vatican City, 1964), 85–111.

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 ʾĪṣṭifanos and Zär'a Ya'əqob 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, ʾĪṣṭifanos refused to prostrate himself in front of Zär'a Ya'əqob, and Zär'a Ya'əqob 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 Gə'əz 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".

74 See Alessandro Bausi, "Il testo, il supporto e la funzione. Alcune osservazioni sul caso dell'Etiopia," in *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Verena Böll et al. (Wiesbaden 2004), 7–22.

75 For an overview of the textual collections, see Alessandro Bausi, "Monastic literature," in *EAE 3* (2007), 993–999.