At the beginning of the fourth century, Ezana I of Aksum and Mirian III of Iberia espoused Christianity, much like their better-known contemporary, Constantine the Great. The religious choices made by the monarchs of these two mountain polities was but one stage in a prolonged process of Christianization within their respective kingdoms. This study utilizes a comparative approach in order to examine the remarkably similar dynamics of religious transformation taking place in these kingdoms between the fourth and late sixth centuries. The cultural choice made by these monarchs and their successors also factored into, and were influenced by, the fierce competition between Rome and Sassanian Persia for influence in these strategically important regions.

In September of 324, after his victory at Chrysopolis over his erstwhile imperial colleague, Licinius, the emperor Constantine could look out over the battlefield with the satisfaction that he now was the sole ruler of the Roman world. Ever since his public adherence to the Christian God in October of 312, Constantine had been moving slowly but steadily toward more overt expressions of favor toward Christianity through his avid patronage of the Church and his studied neglect of the ancient rites. For nearly eight years after his conversion in 312, Constantine’s coinage continued to depict pagan deities like Mars and Jupiter, and the Christian emperor was styled “Companion of the Unconquerable Sun” until 322. Christian symbols made only a gradual appearance. This cautious attitude toward religion on the coins can be ascribed to Constantine’s anxiety to court the loyalty of the principal

1 The following individuals generously shared with me their suggestions and assistance: Niko Chocheli, Nika Vacheishvili, David and Lauren Ninoshvili, Mary Chkhartishvili, Peter Brown, and Walter Kaegi.

A small copper nummus struck at Siscia (modern Sisak in Croatia) ca. 337 in the name of Constantine I shows two soldiers flanking a labarum bearing the Chi-rogram, attesting to Constantine’s support of Christianity. (Ex Mathisen Collection)

recipients of the coins—the army, still largely pagan. After Chrysopolis, such caution seems to have been abandoned and Constantine came into his own as a Christian emperor. Constantinople was founded, the Council of Nicaea was convoked, and Palestine was marked out as a Holy Land by lavish imperial churches. Constantine also reformed the coinage in 324, issuing coins of new weight. His victory banner, the labarum, bearing the monogram of Christ was displayed on relief sculpture, statuary, and over the gates of the palace.

The Initial Christianization

Far from imperial Rome, a thriving kingdom located south of the Roman frontier likewise was undergoing momentous changes. The kings of Aksum, in the highlands of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, had been issuing gold coins ever since the time of king Endubis in the late third century. Aksum was the only kingdom in ancient sub-Saharan Africa to mint coins, and one of four contemporary kingdoms in the world to issue gold coins, a testimony of Aksum’s wealth, power, and role in international trade. In approximately the same year as Chrysopolis, the Aksumite king Ezana I made a significant change in the iconography of his coins.3 Previously, Aksumite kings were shown proudly wearing a diadem while overhead there was a solar disc within

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a crescent moon, representing the Aksumite gods for the sun and moon, or Mahrem, the warrior-god whom the kings took as their special patron. Ezana abruptly replaced this traditional religious iconography with a new symbol, the Cross, which remained prominent on Aksumite coinage until its end in the seventh century. One of Ezana’s near successors in the mid-fourth century went further and depicted a large cross that nearly filled up the reverse of his coins. This prominence given to the Cross predates any analogous depiction on Roman coinage.4

Despite Eusebius of Caesarea’s vision of a coextensive church and empire, by the fourth century, Christianity was spreading rapidly beyond the imperial frontiers, due largely to the active patronage of monarchs who predated or were contemporary with Constantine’s own conversion to Christianity.5 The Syriac kingdom of Osrhoëne, focused on its main urban center of Edessa, probably was the first to embrace the new religion, perhaps as early as the reign of king Abgar VIII in the third century.6 Situated near the Euphrates, astride the principal caravan route between the Roman and Sassanian empires, Edessa served as a vital conduit for Christianity into the Persian east. The church flourished within Sassanian Mesopotamia until Constantine’s ill-considered letter to Shapur II, in which he recommended Christianity to the shahanshah and voiced his concern for Shapur’s Christian subjects.7 Henceforth, Christians suffered repeated persecution within the Persian realm, although they continued as one of the Persian Empire’s most significant religious minorities.8 Christianity followed trade routes down the Red Sea, and indeed, strong evidence suggests that Christian communities were established along the Kerala coast in south India as early as the first or second centuries. Christianity also took root in the Caucasian regions of Colchis, Iberia, and Armenia, where king Tiridates IV converted

6 J. B. Segal, Edessa, the Blessed City (Oxford, 1970); A.N. Palmer, “King Abgar of Edessa, Eusebius and Constantine,” in H. Bakker, ed., The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest (Groningen, 1992), 3–29; as against the characteristic skepticism of W. Bauer, “Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzeri im ältesten Christentum,” Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 9 (1934), 1–43.
7 Theodoret, Hist. eccl. 1.24.
to Christianity perhaps as much as a full decade before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312.  

It is vital in all these instances to distinguish carefully among the various stages within the process of Christianization. In some cases, we can speak only of the presence of small numbers of foreign-born Christians, usually through trade, diplomacy, or as the enslaved victims of barbarian *razzias*. Occasionally we hear of individual bishops making periodic pastoral forays beyond the imperial borders, such as Ulphilas among the Goths of the lower Danube beginning ca. 340. More common is the missionary-bishop who secures the patronage of a local ruler, such as Patrick with the Irish chieftains in the mid-fifth century; Augustine of Canterbury with king Ethelbert of Kent in the years after 597 CE; and, shortly thereafter, the Nestorian bishop Alopen, who was warmly received by the T’ang emperor Taizong in 635. It is a big step, however, between the introduction of Christianity and its establishment with a formal church structure of bishops and synods, as well as its adoption by a broad cross-section of society, including the ruling elite of king and nobility.

Christianization is a notoriously difficult process to trace, especially because many of the sources used by scholars date from eras sometimes centuries removed from the actual events. Moreover, the narrative of conversion often is closely linked to the formation of ethnic or national identity, and care must be taken not to follow blindly much later sources that deliberately archaize in order to promote a particular agenda. These methodological difficulties have bedeviled students of Christianization, but at the same time, they have spurred scholars to develop an array of models intended to elucidate Christianization in a variety of cultures.

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A comparative approach can offer a useful methodology for exploring the contours of Christianization.12 This is especially true for those who see Christianization as just one specific type, among many, of large-scale religious transformations.13 Cultural anthropologists over the past two decades have employed a comparative methodology in order to highlight the particularities of religious conversion in many different cultural settings.14 At the same time, comparative analysis also has become more common in late antique studies, facilitated by the field’s expansion to regions well beyond the confines of the Mediterranean.15 Likewise, the extension of Late Antiquity’s chronological limits by some scholars to include the Umayyad caliphate has enriched our understanding of both early Byzantine and early Islamic cultures.16

The model proposed in this study for understanding the dynamics of Christianization during Late Antiquity emerges through a comparative analysis of the kingdoms of Aksum and Iberia, two kingdoms whose rulers embraced Christianity in the early fourth century. For each of these states, the interplay between monarchical power and religious policy often has been examined in light of the complexities of particular local developments, which gradually are becoming clearer by ongoing archaeological and textual studies. A comparative approach, however, also can illuminate the process of cultural transformation occurring in these kingdoms separated by nearly two thousand miles. Although neither kingdom served as a principal buffer state between the major empires of Rome and Sassanian Persia, they guarded vital access routes for trade and migration in the Caucasus region and near

12 A methodology employed at length in William Tabbernee, ed., Early Christianity in Contexts (Grand Rapids, MI, forthcoming).
the Red Sea. Consequently, they hardly can be considered peripheral to the major theater of war in the region of the upper Euphrates, the center of what Garth Fowden has identified as the “Mountain Arena.”\textsuperscript{17} Both Aksum and Iberia were factors in the competitive diplomacy of the Roman and Sassanian Empires, and on occasion became major players in proxy wars between the two empires.\textsuperscript{18}

When the monarchs of these mountain kingdoms adopted Christianity, the new religion of the Roman emperor, they made a cultural choice with profound international implications. As we shall see, however, neither king Mirian III of Iberia nor king Ezana I of Aksum embraced Christianity as the result of Roman diplomatic initiatives. Indeed, in each case, the Roman emperor responded late to the changed religious preferences of the local monarchs. Moreover, their espousal of Christianity should not be considered as equivalent to the conversion of the two kingdoms. Instead, the royal conversion stood as but one phase, though an admittedly crucial one, in a remarkably similar process of Christianization in Aksum and in Iberia. In both cases, this was a multi-phased process that took centuries to complete.\textsuperscript{19}

For western readers, probably the most familiar link between these two kingdoms is provided by the church historian Rufinus of Aquileia. Sometime in 402 or 403, Rufinus produced an abridged Latin translation of Eusebius’ \textit{Ecclesiastical History} and continued the narrative in two additional books

\textsuperscript{17} G. Fowden, \textit{Empire to Commonwealth} (Princeton, 1993), 15–19.
down to the death of the emperor Theodosius I in 395. Embedded in his long description of Constantine’s reign in book 10, Rufinus provides back-to-back narratives of the evangelization of Aksum and Iberia. He begins with the story of Aedesius and Frumentius, two Christian youths from the city of Tyre who were shipwrecked along the Red Sea coast and sold into slavery, probably near Adulis, Aksum’s chief port. Their native talent and Greek education came to the notice of the local king (possibly Ella Amida or Ousanas) who made Aedesius his cupbearer and Frumentius the master of his correspondence and accounts. They became indispensable servants, and after the death of the king and his testamentary manumission of the youths, his widowed queen asked them to stay on and administer the kingdom during the minority of her young son, Ezana. They agreed, and largely under the direction of Frumentius, Christian merchants were granted privileges and places of worship. Once the young king reached his majority, Aedesius and Frumentius returned to the Roman world. Frumentius went to Alexandria, where he reported to bishop Athanasius the favor accorded to Christianity by the new king and the need for a formal mission with a bishop and priests. Recognizing this tremendous opportunity, Athanasius appointed the obvious man for the job, Frumentius, as the bishop. Frumentius then returned to the kingdom where, as Rufinus puts it, “many barbarians were converted” and where “from that time on, there came into existence a Christian people.”

Rufinus joins this narrative with his account of the conversion of Iberia by saying, “It was at this time, too, that the Iberians who dwell in the region of Pontus accepted the Word of God and faith in the kingdom to come.” He goes on to tell of an unnamed slave girl, a Roman captive whose modesty and ascetic practices impressed her Iberian owners. When the prayers of the young captive led to the healing of a sick child, the Iberian queen, who was suffering from a grave illness, went to the ascetic’s hut and asked for prayers. The queen was healed immediately, and the young captive converted the queen to Christ. The king initially was resistant to his wife’s new religion until he, too, encountered a miracle one day while hunting. He had been riding through the woods when he suddenly was enshrouded by a threatening darkness. He called upon Christ, his wife’s new God, and daylight returned, allowing him to return to safety. At the urging of the young Christian slave, the king laid the foundations of a church to commemorate his new faith. The church was completed, but only after the young woman’s prayers miraculously overcame

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obstacles that had hindered the church’s construction. Thereupon, the king requested that Constantine send clergy to help establish the faith in Iberia.²¹

It is possible to view these combined narratives as simply a rhetorical device used by Rufinus to emphasize the triumphant progress of Christianity. This organizing theme for Rufinus culminates in book 11 with the overthrow of pagan cult centers throughout the Roman empire and the extinction of pagan opposition under Theodosius I.²² Even though we may freely acknowledge Rufinus’ use of the evangelization narratives in his own programmatic scheme, they have independent merit as vital sources for the conversion of the Aksumite and Iberian monarchies. Both narratives are grounded in the realia of contemporary sources. Frumentius also is named as bishop in a strongly-worded letter from Constantius II to Ezana requesting that the bishop return to Alexandria and submit to doctrinal scrutiny by Constantius’ Arian appointee to the patriarchal throne, George of Cappadocia.²³ Distance from the imperial court allowed Ezana and Frumentius the freedom to ignore the summons and remain committed to the ousted patriarch, Athanasius. Rufinus’ named source for the Iberian conversion narrative was an Iberian noble named Bacurius who served in various high-ranking positions within the Roman army, including dux Palestinae and comes domesticorum. Ammianus Marcellinus mentioned a Bacurius fighting at Adrianople in 378; Libanius corresponded with a Bacurius in 392;²⁴ and both Socrates Scholasticus and the pagan historian Zosimus speak of Bacurius as one of Theodosius’ principal commanders at the Battle of the Frigidus in September of 394.²⁵

In many ways, Rufinus provides only sketchy information in his two conversion stories. The Aksumite king and queen are unnamed, as is their young son who later succeeds to the throne. Indeed, Aksum itself is not mentioned, but Rufinus describes the region as Further India, a common designation in ancient writers who tended to combine the Horn of Africa, South Arabia, and destinations along the route to India proper. At least in the Iberian narrative, we are told very plainly the location of the story. The principal agent for

²¹ Rufinus, Hist. eccl. 10.11; also Theodoret, Hist. eccl. 1.23.


²³ Athan. Apologia ad Constantium 31.


the kingdom’s conversion, however, the captive Roman woman, is unnamed, although later sources identify her as St. Nino. Moreover, as in Rufinus’ Aksumite narrative, none of the royal persons is named.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to rely exclusively upon Rufinus. Archaeology, supplemented by epigraphy and numismatics, can provide alternative windows onto the process of Christianization. This archaeological material helps to place Rufinus’ narrative into a context centered upon the kingdoms themselves, and frees our inquiry from an early fifth-century rhetorical program that privileges cultural changes in the Mediterranean basin. Moreover, each kingdom very early formed its own literary tradition about the introduction of Christianity. Consisting of indigenous chronicles, saints’ lives, and synaxaria, these traditions are far removed from the concerns of Greek and Latin ecclesiastical historians. There is no evidence that Rufinus’ work fed back into local sources in either kingdom, and it was only after these traditions had developed for several centuries that authors in both kingdoms became familiar enough with patristic and Byzantine works that they used conscious imitation as a standard in their own writing. The local sources thus allow us to reconstruct at least the broad outlines of the development of Christianity in both Aksum and Iberia, especially when combined with stray references in other late antique historians and geographers.

Both kingdoms possessed a pre-Christian religious substratum that included, if not clearly established Jewish communities, at least an indigenous receptivity to ideas and practices within the currents of Jewish life in the Mediterranean. Setting aside the traditions enshrined in the Kebra Nagast about the queen of Sheba and Solomon, and their son Menelik and the coming of the Ark of the Covenant to Aksum, there is much in the Aksumite religious background that echoes Judaism. Abstention from pork appears to be

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27 L. Pataridze, “The Conversion of Georgia according to Kartlis Tskhovreba (Georgian Chronicle),” in N. Abakelia, M. Chkhartishvili, eds., Christianity in Georgia: Historical-Ethnographical Studies (Tbilisi, 2000), 8–16 (in Georgian, with English summary at p. 126).

a pre-Christian practice, and concepts about sacral kingship and ritual purity also reflect this influence. Although there is considerable debate about the precise origins of the Falashas, Ethiopia’s ancient Jewish community, there is a consensus that strong Semitic influences from South Arabia, if not outright Jewish migration, helped to create this community prior to the introduction of Christianity. An Aksumite inscription of uncertain date, for example, attests the presence of a Jew, possibly foreign, within the kingdom. The deep-seated Aksumite preoccupation, not just with Judaism, but also with Jerusalem and its particular aura of holiness, also is worth noting, and may account for the numbers of Ethiopian monks frequently encountered by Jerome in Palestine.

Of course, the most explicit attestation of Aksumite interest in Judaism is the Biblical tradition concerning St. Philip’s baptism of an “Ethiopian eunuch” from the court of queen Candace. According to the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles, Philip encountered this court official while he was studying the prophecies of Isaiah. While Candace probably should be identified with one of several first-century rulers of Meroë by that name, one strand of Ethiopian tradition claims that she was an Aksumite queen and that the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 became the first missionary to the Aksumite court.

Like Aksum, pre-Christian Iberia also appears to have had a Jewish community and there were close connections in the Iberian ideology of the sacred with the holiness of Jerusalem. This Iberian fascination with Jerusalem largely predates the claims of the ninth- and tenth-century Bagratid kings to have descended directly from king David. A thriving Jewish community is attested in the Black Sea kingdom of Colchis at least as early as the first century, and it comes as no surprise to find a Jewish presence along a major trade route to the

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29 The unusual absence of pig bones in Aksumite sites seems to indicate a dietary choice not made on the basis of food supply, but from an ideological imperative.


33 Jerome, Ep. 107.2.

east through Iberia.\textsuperscript{35} Jewish burials are attested from Urbnisi, in the western region of the Mtavari River corridor.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, two late antique epitaphs of Jews come from the necropolis at Samtavro in Mtskheta, the political center of Iberia.\textsuperscript{37} These epitaphs, as well as formulae possibly attributable to Jewish graves, suggest that the entire southern part of the Samtavro necropolis was given over to Jewish burials.\textsuperscript{38} It may be significant that this section is adjacent to the portion of the necropolis reserved for Iberian royal burials, perhaps suggesting that the Jewish community, a community of resident foreigners, came under the patronage of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{39}

In addition, a local form of Aramaic, known to scholars as Armazi, was used widely in regions that today make up modern Georgia. Armazi inscriptions dating as early as the first century BCE confirm the close cultural affinity of Iberia with the Syriac Levant.\textsuperscript{40} Iberia also had a direct connection to Jerusalem, for Rufinus met the Iberian noble Bacurius in Jerusalem, and by the end of the fourth century an Iberian monastery was founded there.\textsuperscript{41} Traditions dating at least as early as the fifth and sixth centuries hold that the kingdom’s most holy relic, the robe worn by Christ during His passion, was brought from Jerusalem by pious Jews who kept it within the Jewish community at Mtskheta. And the later \textit{vita} of St. Nino preserves the tradition that when Nino first came to Kartli (that is, Iberia), she stayed among the Jewish community at Mtskheta and that a Jewish woman helped to explain to her the significance of a pagan festival celebrated with great pomp by the royal court.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{35} Josephus, \textit{Ap.} 1. 22.


\textsuperscript{39} T. Mgaloblishvili, “The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity,” 51–52.


\textsuperscript{42} Leonti Mroveli, \textit{The Conversion of K’art’li by Nino} (Georgian version), embedded within the \textit{History of the Kings of K’art’li}, 88–89, in R.W. Thomson, tr., \textit{Rewriting Caucasian History: The
These connections of both kingdoms with Mediterranean Judaism should be seen as part of a larger background of cross-cultural contacts that become pronounced in the centuries leading up to the period of Christianization. In both cases, we should note the vital role played by international trade in facilitating cultural exchange through the presence of foreign merchants, as well as foreign-born skilled craftsmen who plied their trade under wealthy indigenous patrons. This is a common dynamic that occurred in regions as diverse as south India, where Syrian merchants brought Judaism and Christianity, and in central Asian cities along the Silk Road, where Sogdian merchants spread Manichaeism, Judaism, and Christianity. Before long, trade opened many doors to Islam near the Indian Ocean and southeast Asia.

In Aksum, Rufinus’ account speaks explicitly of Christian merchants from the Mediterranean who were sought out by Frumentius and accorded royal patronage, including aid in the construction of churches. There had long been a close connection between Mediterranean craftsmen and the two kingdoms. Die-cutters from Alexandria appear to have helped initiate Aksumite coinage. Burials from the vicinity of both capitals indicate that the upper classes of Aksum and Iberia developed a taste for Mediterranean


Rufinus Hist.eccl. 10.9, “. . . he (Frumentius) gave them extensive rights, which he urged them to use, to build places of assembly in each location, in which they might gather for prayer in the Roman manner. Not only that, but he himself did far more along these lines than anyone else, and in this way encouraged the others, invited them with his support and favors, made available whatever was suitable, furnished sites for buildings, and everything else that was necessary, and bent every effort to see that the seed of Christianity should grow up there,” (trans. Amidon). For trade between Rome and Aksum, see Eusebius, VConst. 4.71; CTb 12.12.2 (356 CE). Malalas, Chron. p.43, also mentions Roman traders in Axum circa 500 CE.

luxury goods, including glass goblets and plates of gold and silver.\textsuperscript{46} This is especially noteworthy for Aksum, because it was well removed from the kingdom’s main entrepôt at the port of Adulis. Trade between Aksum and the eastern empire was given such a prominent place in relations between the two kingdoms that its disruption by the ruler of Himyar in the early sixth century is stated by Malalas to be the reason for Justinian’s request that Kaleb I intervene militarily across the Red Sea.\textsuperscript{47} Given the volume of trade, it is probable that foreign merchants and craftsmen brought not only their wares, but their gods as well.\textsuperscript{48}

Despite the emphasis placed on royal conversions in the literary traditions of Aksum and Iberia, the question arises whether the local monarchs initiated the Christianization of their kingdoms or whether, instead, there were indigenous Christians prior to the conversion of the king. It would be useful to know the number and social position of these indigenous Christians, for these factors might allow us to gauge the significance of the royal conversions. Do we have what has been called a “top-down model of conversion” or does the monarch participate in, and eventually come to lead, a process that had been going on in his kingdom, much as Constantine did in Rome?

Here we see a divergence in the development of the two kingdoms, which, however, may be more an illusion created by the limitations of the source material. In Aksum, difficulties in dating archaeological remains make it nearly impossible to identify Christian material from the period before Ezana. The clearest piece of evidence does not come from Aksum itself, but is an inscription from Berenike, the most important port of Roman Egypt on the Red Sea. It is a short inscription in unvocalized Ge’ez, which would date it to the first decades of the fourth century or earlier. It commemorates “Abreha, man of Aksum, [who] spent the night here [and] came believing in the power of the Lord of Heaven Ariam, with my son.”\textsuperscript{49} Abreha uses a title for God that is identical to the one used by Ezana in his Christian inscriptions. Unfortunately, we cannot fix the date of the inscription prior to Ezana’s conversion, and some commentators even have called into question the reconstruction


\textsuperscript{47} Malalas, \textit{Chron.} 18.15 (pp. 433–434).

\textsuperscript{48} On Aksumite trade, see G. Connah, \textit{African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Cambridge, 2001), 103–107.

of the text itself.\textsuperscript{50} Otherwise, the only hints of Aksumite Christianity before Ezana come from Mediterranean literary sources, but these writers, such as Origen and John Chrysostom, display a lack of precision in their use of the term “Ethiopia,” and may be using it simply as a rhetorical device to signify the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

For Iberia, whereas the literary sources are silent, the archaeological material attests the spread of Christianity before the conversion of king Mirian in the fourth century,\textsuperscript{51} as seen in a distinct shift in the manner of burial during the third century. Previously, Iberian interments arranged the corpse on its side, in a fetal position. Abundant deposits of grave goods commonly accompanied these burials. The new style of interment laid the corpse out on its back with its feet to the east, a position sometimes indicative of Christianity in the Mediterranean world. By the end of the third century, over half of the new interments at the Samtavro necropolis are oriented west to east. In addition, deposits of grave goods decline dramatically, although the paucity of material may owe more to economic conditions than to a reluctance to fortify the dead with possessions for the next life. Some of these third-century burials include Christian objects such as signet rings with a cross and fish or anchor and fish, clearly attesting their Christian affiliation.\textsuperscript{52} The refined workmanship displayed by these objects also may speak of upper class Iberians who had embraced Christianity. Third-century burials attesting to the progressive Christianization of Iberian society are scattered across the kingdom, not only at Mtskheta and Aragvispiri, but along the Mtkvari River corridor as far west as Urbnisi.\textsuperscript{53}

Once the kings of Aksum and Iberia had espoused Christianity, it is possible to discern similar dynamics in the relation of the monarchs with local aristocratic power brokers. Christianization served to enhance the centralization of both kingdoms, a process that had been taking place since the mid-third century. The Aksumite kingdom, focused on the person of the monarch, grew in power by swallowing up and subordinating local tribes and “states.” The hegemonic structure of the kingdom is expressed by the most common title for the Aksumite king, the \textit{negusa nagast}, or “king of kings.” Much of the political history of the Aksumite state, commemorated in royal inscriptions, consisted of the suppression of local revolts against the authority of the \textit{negus}

\textsuperscript{50} S. Hable-Sellassie, \textit{Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270} (Addis Ababa, 1972), 109.
\textsuperscript{51} Georgian tradition speaks of the original evangelization of Colchis and Iberia under the Apostles Andrew, Simon, and Matthias.
\textsuperscript{52} In one third-century grave (no. 533) at Samtavro, besides a cross and fish signet ring, another ring has the inscribed Aramaic letters “aleph” and “tau,” an Aramaic equivalent to the common Greek appellation for Christ, the alpha and omega. See \textit{Mtskheta} 7, 89.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Mtskheta}, 7.43, 9.73; Braund, \textit{Georgia in Antiquity}, 239.
by entities longing for their former independence. Other inscriptions boast of the negus’ conquest of new peoples, either peacefully, with the incorporation of the local polity and its aristocracy into the Aksumite state, or militarily, resulting in the confiscation of lands, enslavements of the less privileged, and the deportation of the elite.\(^{54}\) As one of Ezana’s inscriptions curtly puts it: “Those who obeyed him, he spared; those who resisted him, he put to death.”\(^{55}\) The kings and chieftains of these new Aksumite possessions evolved into a class of powerful nobles, whose numerous funerary stelae, tombs, and sumptuous aristocratic residences are scattered over the sites of Aksum and the subordinate city of Matara.\(^{56}\)

The Iberian king had a much more difficult time asserting his authority over the tribal nobility of his realm.\(^{57}\) The Greek geographer Strabo notes, as early as the first century CE, the division of Iberian society into several classes.\(^{58}\) Just below the king stood a class of dynastic nobility, often related to the king, which appears to have had some role in the selection of the monarch. Much of late antique and medieval Georgian history is taken up with the struggle between the monarchy and these powerful nobles, known in the sources as the K’art’losids. To counterbalance the threat posed by this aristocracy, the kings promoted the interests of the lesser nobility, known as the aznaur, who originated from the class of free warriors and clan chiefs. It is from this class of aznaur that the kings selected erist’avis, who functioned as dukes administering various provinces.\(^{59}\) It is a testimony to the chaotic nature of this contest for power that we find both K’art’losids and outside powers like the Sassanian shah frequently suborning the erist’avis against one another and even against the king.

The assertion of royal priority in matters of religion strengthened the hands of the monarchs in dealing with the local lords. Even if, as in the case of Iberia, the king was a relative latecomer to Christianity, he quickly became the new religion’s chief promoter. In both kingdoms, an important stage in this process is the construction of the kingdom’s principal church in the capital through the lavish bestowal of royal patronage. These buildings


\(^{55}\) *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, inscription no. 8; R. Schneider, “Notes sur les inscriptions royaux aksumites,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 44.5–6 (1987), 599–616.


\(^{57}\) The difficulty of establishing a chronology for the rulers of Iberia/Kartli during this period is symptomatic of broader problems in the reconstruction of early Iberian history. For the most part, I follow C. Toumanoff, “Chronology of the Early Kings of Iberia,” *Traditio* 25 (1969), 1–33. For a thorough analysis of the chronological issues and the literary traditions of early Georgia, see Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 245–333.

\(^{58}\) Strabo, *Geogr.* 11.3.1–6.

served as more than just churches. They also housed the most holy relics of
the kingdom, relics that connected the capital with the holiness of Jerusalem.
Ezana and his successors built the magnificent cathedral of Aksum, Maryam
Tseyon, (or “St. Mary of Zion”), which also was known as the Gabaza
Aksum, that is, “the holy place of Aksum.” Its holiness derived from
the Ark of the Covenant, believed to have been brought to Aksum by Solomon’s
son, Menelik. The splendor of this structure was extolled to Muhammad by
two of his wives who had dwelt in Aksum during the 620’s after the Hijra.
Meanwhile, in the Iberian capital of Mtskheta, Mirian III was directed by
St. Nino to build a church that was given the name Svetiskhoveli, or “the
life-giving pillar,” from a miraculous central pier of the church that was only
set in place through the saint’s prayers. Aside from the pillar, Svetiskhoveli’s
most sacred relic was the Robe of Christ. The Ark of the Covenant and the
Robe of Christ became the talismans of the two kingdoms, relics too sacred
to display, which radiated holiness from the new cathedral church in the
capital out through the rest of the kingdom. Thus, in each case, the capital
was transformed into a sacred center, and remained a pilgrimage site long
after the political center had moved elsewhere, from Aksum to Lalibela, and
from Mtskheta to Tbilisi.

The Christianization of the Countryside

Despite royal enthusiasm for the new religion, and its adoption within court
circles, Christianity took root slowly in the rural districts of the two king-
doms. This comes as no surprise, especially because the countryside was
evangelized in a patchwork fashion even in some Roman territories, such as
Syria, Palestine and central Italy, that had long possessed active Christian com-
munities. Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Maximus of Turin call attention
to the persistence of polytheism on the rural estates of their wealthy parish-
ioners. In a passage perhaps more noteworthy for its hyperbole than for its
numerical precision, John of Ephesus claimed that he could still find (by his

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60 A thorough discussion of the site may be found in S. Munro-Hay, Ethiopia, the Unknown
61 On this link between sacredness and political centralization, see the useful collection of arti-
cles in H. Bakker, ed., The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest (Gronigten, 1992).
62 In the Aksumite kingdom, one indicator of this gradual process of Christianization is a shift
away from pagan decorative elements on pottery and metalwork: A. Manzo, “Skeuomorphism in
Aksumite Pottery? Remarks on the Origins and Meanings of Some Ceramic Types,” Aethiopica 6
(2003), 7–46.
63 Theodoret, Hist.ecc. 16,17; Marc.Diac. VPorphyrii; Greg.Mag. Ep. 3.59, 8.18.
91.107.
count) 80,000 pagans to baptize in the backcountry of Caria, Lydia, and Phrygia in the mid-sixth century. Indeed, it has been suggested that a principal reason for the lack of missionary work beyond the imperial frontiers was that Roman bishops were too occupied evangelizing country districts in their own dioceses. Pagan sanctuaries and high places dotted the countryside of Aksum and Iberia. The tenacity of these traditional belief systems can be seen in the archaeological record of the fourth and fifth centuries. Royal dictates alone could not sway the rural population.

The first steps in the Christianization of the Iberian and Aksumite countryside occurred in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, through the efforts of small bands of foreign-born monks, in both cases from Syriac-speaking regions. They arrived in each kingdom as disciples of one leading ascetic, and they eventually dispersed throughout the kingdoms to evangelize, work miracles, and establish monasteries. Within a generation, indigenous monastic traditions took root, and facilitated the spread of Christianity into the more peripheral regions of both kingdoms. In each of the ecclesiastical traditions, the monks are venerated collectively: in Ethiopia, they are known as the Nine Saints; in Georgia, as the Thirteen Syrian Fathers. They also are venerated individually, most often in connection with a church or monastery founded during their lifetime. It usually is assumed that these Syrian monks were refugees from the persecutions initiated by Byzantine emperors against those who did not subscribe to the creed of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. As a consequence, they are viewed as Monophysite dissidents who fled from Syria looking for a more congenial theological climate. This interpretation probably holds

true for the Aksumite Nine Saints, for the Aksumite church closely followed the theological stance of its hierarchical leader, the Alexandrian patriarch. Nearly the entire Egyptian (or Coptic) church stoutly supported the cause of patriarch Dioscorus, the “Militant Father” who was exiled after Chalcedon. As a consequence, the fifth-century Aksumite church followed Alexandria into schism, and the Ethiopian church remains non-Chalcedonian to this day. There is, however, no clear evidence for Monophysite leanings among the Iberian Thirteen Syrian Fathers. It is just as likely that a combined missionary and ascetic impulse sent them to Iberia, the same motivation that inspired St. Patrick and St. Columbanus. Perhaps an even better comparison would be the ministry of St. Severinus in fifth-century Noricum (modern Austria), who is portrayed by his biographer as monk from eastern lands sent by God to care for the inhabitants of a distant province.70

The Nine Saints arrived in Aksum during the reign of Ella Amidas (c. 475–486), and according to their gedle (acts), they stayed at court for nearly twelve years.71 Admittedly, the gedle of the Nine Saints constitute a problematic set of source material. The traditions concerning them seem to have taken shape during the Zagwe dynasty in the ninth and tenth centuries, and only took a definitive form after the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270. In places, the gedle are heavily mythologized, but there is enough material in them consistent with archaeological material and with what is otherwise known about the Aksumite kingdom, to suspect that the basic narrative goes back to Late Antiquity.72

Under the leadership of Ze-Mikael, known as Aregawi (“the Elder”), most of the Nine Saints dispersed throughout the Aksumite kingdom and devoted the rest of their careers to converting the countryside and introducing monasticism. Two of them, Pentelewon and Liqanos, stayed on at Aksum, settling on two hills near the city that previously had been the sites of pagan temples.73 These two Greek-speaking ascetics served as spiritual directors to

70 Eugippius V Severini 1.1.
72 Munro-Hay, Aksum, 14, 207–208; Hable-Sellasie, Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History, 115–121.
73 Deutsche Aksum-Expedition 4.1–2. The hills today are known as Debre Pentelewon and Debre Qonasel; Munro-Hay, Ethiopia, the Unknown Land, 333–335.
the king and to his advisers. Pentelelewon, as holy man and intercessor for the Aksumite court, functioned in much the same fashion as his near contemporary, Daniel the Stylite, who advised the emperor Anastasius (491–518) from his pillar in the suburbs of Constantinople. The other saints settled on hilltops and at prominent crossroads, scattered strategically on either side of the main Aksum-Adulis corridor, in what today is Eritrea and the Ethiopian province of Tigray. In almost every case, the new ascetic settlements were accompanied by the occupation of an earlier pagan site. These pagan sites were not all destroyed, but as at Yeha, Christianized by employing much of the earlier Sabaean pagan sanctuary as the foundation for a new church, today one of the oldest in Ethiopia. The most venerated of the Nine Saints, Aregawi, established the renowned monastery of Debre Damo, situated atop a steep mesa (or amba), accessible only by a rope let down a 55-foot cliffside. Like the other monastic foundations of the Nine Saints, Debre Damo appears to have been occupied prior to the fifth century. The Nine Saints converted their new hermitages with very little opposition from the local pagan inhabitants, owing not only to their reputation for holiness and miraculous deeds, but also to explicit support from the Aksumite king, who occasionally made high-profile visitations to the monasteries.

Sometime in the 530s or 540s, a Syriac ascetic later known as John of Zedazeni arrived at Mtskheta with twelve monastic co-laborers. Like the

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74 The gedle of Pentelewon depict a later king, Kaleb I, seeking the advice and blessing of Pentelewon as the king set out on a war of reconquest in South Arabia in 523. Although implausible from a chronological standpoint (unless, of course, Pentelewon became a centenarian like St. Anthony), the anecdote at least underscores the esteem given to the Nine Saints by the Aksumite monarchs.


76 Another large group of foreign-born monks, known as the Sadqan (the “Righteous Men”), settled to the south and east of Aksum. They met with much stiffer resistance, and many of them perished as a result of fierce local persecutions: see C. Conti Rossini, Ricordo di un soggiorno in Eritrea (Asmara, 1902); Hable-Sellassie, Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History, 115, 125–126; Zelleke, “Hagiographical Traditions,” nos. 91, 128; T. Tamrat, Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270–1527 (Oxford, 1972), 23–24.


Aksumite Nine Saints, these ascetics first presented themselves to the monarch and to the ecclesiastical authorities. Once they received the blessing of the Catholicos (the Christian patriarch of Georgia), however, none of these monks remained long in the capital, and unlike Sts. Pentelewon and Liqanos, they did not even settle in the capital’s suburbs. John was the closest to Mtskheta, but it took a strenuous day’s climb to reach his dwelling at the top of a peak commanding a view of the Mtkvari and Aragvi river valleys—the heart of the Iberian kingdom. He chose his retreat because Mt. Zedazeni was the site of a prominent pagan sanctuary. He reportedly demolished the temple, and became renowned among the country people for his ability to cure illnesses, cast out demons, and even tame the wild bears that roamed in great numbers on Mt. Zedazeni.

John’s disciples fanned out across Iberia, following his example of asceticism, miracle working, and evangelization. They settled throughout the Mtkvari valley, from Urbnisi to Garedji (today near the border of Azerbaijan). Four of them even crossed the steep ridge of the Gomboris Kedi into the Alazani River valley, thereby spreading the work of the Syrian Fathers into the modern Georgian region of Kakheti. David of Garedji first dwelt on a mountainside overlooking the newly inaugurated political capital of Tbilisi, and functioned in the now-familiar role of the Syriac holy man, working miracles and arbitrating in local disputes. He then retired to a semi-arid desert in southeastern Kakheti, and replicated in distant Iberia the austerities of the Syrian desert.

All together, the Thirteen Syrian Fathers established some sixteen monasteries and other churches, many of whose sixth-century foundations still can be observed today.

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82 For the rank of Catholicos, see Mathisen, “Barbarian Bishops,” 665–6.


Royal Patronage of Christianity

Neither the Aksumite nor the Iberian monks would have experienced such astounding success had they not enjoyed the patronage of strong monarchs. Moreover, their evangelizing campaigns coincided with the political zenith of these late antique kingdoms. Since the late fourth century, Iberia had been under the strong influence of Sassanian Persia, and the Iberian kings, although related to the Sassanian royal house, were not much more than high-ranking vassals. The Iberians chafed under the Sassanians, especially owing to Persian attempts to establish Zoroastrianism. Christianity served as a rallying point for Iberian resistance, and it is noteworthy that the earliest example of Georgian literature, the *Passion of Šušanik*, details the martyrdom of a noblewoman by her husband who was serving as a Persian governor along the Armeno-Georgian border.

By the late fifth century, however, a vigorous young monarch aptly named Vakhtang Gorgasali (“wolf’s-head”), asserted Iberian independence on the battlefield. Thereafter, Gorgasali played a dangerous game of mediating between Rome and Persia while attempting to strengthen his own hand. He expanded the Iberian realm into Ossetia and Armenia, and founded a new capital some fifteen miles downriver at Tbilisi, notable achievements before he was killed in battle against the Persians ca. 522. Vakhtang Gorgasali also was a fervent advocate of Christianity in his kingdom, his religious policies being part and parcel of his larger strategic aims. Although he looked to the Byzantine church to provide him with additional clergy and a candidate for Catholicos, he achieved autocephaly for the Georgian church in 487/488, a self-governing status that it since has enjoyed with only two interregna. He rebuilt the cathedral of Svetiskhoveli as a grand three-aisled basilica, similar in style to a basilica built during his reign at Bolnisi. He also bestowed several churches on his new capital of Tbilisi, and endowed churches and monasteries throughout the kingdom with richly decorated Gospel books. Despite his efforts to maintain a precarious peace with Persia, he did not hesitate to pull down Zoroastrian fire altars and punish Iberian nobility who actively supported the Persian religion. In many ways, Vakhtang Gorgasali can be seen as completing the process

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86 A similar dynamic was at work in nearby Armenia: J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).
of official Christianization begun by Mirian III. This royal activism was continued by Gorgasali’s immediate successors, and provided fertile ground for the work of the Syrian Fathers.

Meanwhile, in the first half of the sixth century, Aksumite power reached its apogee during the reign of Kaleb I (Ella Asbeha). He was a great conqueror, and, perhaps at the instigation of the Byzantine emperor Justin (518–527), expanded the Aksumite Empire into south Arabia after a punitive expedition against the nominally Jewish kingdom of Himyar ca.523. According to Malalas, this campaign resulted from an intersection of the Aksumite king’s interests in both religion and trade. Roman merchants, Malalas reported, were attacked, despoiled, and killed by the king of Himyar, who was addressed by the Axumite king, “You have acted badly because you have killed merchants of the Christian Romans, which is a loss both to myself and my kingdom.”

In this account, the king of Axum was not yet a Christian, and he vowed that if he overcame the Himyarte king, he would become a Christian, a tale that recalls the Frankish king Clovis’ vow to do the same before a battle with the Alamanni. Victory then was duly gained by the Axumites.

Although the expedition certainly served Byzantine interests as a proxy war against a major Sassanian ally, Kaleb had his own strategic goals in mind as he sought to secure Aksumite dominance of the Red Sea and the spice-producing regions of Yemen. Ethiopian tradition speaks of a legendary meeting of Kaleb and Justinian in Jerusalem, after the successful completion of the war, when they decided to divide the world between them. Thus, in Aksumite eyes, Kaleb was no mere Byzantine lackey.

In his religious policy, Kaleb likewise struck an independent course in his fervent promotion of Christianity, not simply as a way to ape the Roman emperor, but rather to enhance his own kingly status as a divinely-appointed ruler, with as much access to divine favor as any other monarch, for as negusa
nagast, Kaleb was portrayed as successor to a tradition of kingship regarded as descending from Solomon and David. What greater token of God’s blessing could there be than serving as custodian of the Ark of the Covenant? How could a mere ruler of Rome hope to compete against such credentials?

It is no wonder, then, that Kaleb vigorously resisted Justinian’s attempts to impose Chalcedonian Orthodoxy upon Aksum. Some Byzantine sources relate that the Axumite king asked Justinian to send Christian clerics, and the sacristan John was sent from Alexandria to serve as bishop of Axum. But other sources report that a bishop sent from Constantinople to instruct the Aksumites was mistaken for an Arian and executed. Kaleb compelled the conversion of Matara, Aksum’s second largest city, situated midway between the capital and the sea, at the critical juncture between highlands and the coastal plain. He left memorials of his devotion (and kingly glory) through the construction of numerous churches, including the cathedral at Sana in Yemen (built after the campaign against Himyar), a major embellishment of the cathedral of Maryam Tseyon at Aksum, and yet another church in the capital. After a career of conquest and Christian consolidation, Kaleb voluntarily abdicated and became a monk in the community of St. Pentelewon, where he ended his days. At his abdication, Kaleb sent his crown to Jerusalem to be dedicated in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

**Christianity and Culture**

Following the reigns of these two strong monarchs, and the introduction of monasticism with its resultant evangelization of the countryside, comes the final stage in this initial Christianization of the two kingdoms. Both Aksum

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94 Although Solomonic descent was not a prominent feature of Abyssinian kingly ideology until several centuries later, the traditions enshrined in *Kebra Nagast* are considered by some scholars to originate during the reign of Kaleb in the sixth century: see I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London, 1988), x; Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 113–114.

95 Kaleb’s primacy is underscored in the *Kebra Nagast* by his descent from Solomon’s first-born, Menelik, whereas the Byzantine emperor could only claim descent from a lesser son of Solomon: *Kebra Nagast* 20, 95.


99 *Kebra Nagast* 117 (Wallis Budge, tr.), 226. A transition of power at the end of his reign may be reflected in the die-links of Kaleb’s coins with those of his successor, and possible co-ruler, Alla Amidas: Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 88–89.

100 This is not to say, however, that the cause of Christianity did not face major setbacks in both kingdoms. Iberia was invaded by several militantly anti-Christian powers over the course of the next
and Iberia experienced a great creative outburst of cultural energy that transformed their traditional cultures and endowed them with a rich representational language with which to articulate their new faith. In both kingdoms, however, this cultural dynamism coincided with a period of rapidly waning political fortunes: after the death of Kaleb, Aksum soon lost its hard-won possessions in South Arabia and fell into economic decline, whereas in Iberia, the monarchy suffered from dynastic disputes until a much weakened kingship was abolished ca. 580 by the shahanshah Khusro I.101

In the case of Iberia and Aksum, therefore, Late Antiquity witnessed a flowering of cultures outside of the Greco-Roman mainstream, and the catalyst for a dynamic cultural explosion in these two kingdoms was the adoption of Christianity as the medium for the native elite to patronize artists and architects, and for churchmen to express their devotion. Both cultures saw the rapid development of literature, as newly refined alphabets facilitated first the translation of east Roman liturgical and biblical texts, and then the composition of local saints’ lives and martyr acts. Under Kaleb’s son and eventual successor, Gabra Maskel (ca. 558–588), the Aksumite priest Yared combined Syriac motifs with indigenous Ge’ez hymnody and thereby composed the nucleus of the Deggwa, the main corpus of Ge’ez antiphons.102 In Iberia, prayer books, monastic typica, and troparion hymns in honor of the saints were composed in Georgian by the beginning of the sixth century.103 The single greatest expression of the new face of Iberian culture, however, was in stone. During the course of the sixth century, Iberian architects moved beyond mere adaptations of Byzantine church architecture to develop a soaring architectural style that remains distinctive.104 In both kingdoms, book illumination, iconography, and church decoration saw the beginnings of a rich tradition in this same period.105


101 Or perhaps by Khusro’s immediate successor, Hurmazd IV. A sensible survey of this period may be found in S.H. Rapp, “Medieval Christian Georgia,” in Soltes, National Treasures of Georgia, 84–92.

102 It is worth noting that according to his gedle, Yared was inspired to compose after hearing antiphonal choirs during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem: see Budge, The Book of the Saints 3.176; G. Haile, “Yared,” Coptic Encyclopedia, 1047; Hable-Sellasie, Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History, 164–175.

103 Rayfield, Literature of Georgia, 9–12.


In the middle years of the sixth century, a much-traveled former merchant from Alexandria retired to monastic life. He then drew up a curious geographical work that contained his valuable observations of life along the trade routes as well as his own bizarre cosmological theories harmonizing the world with the design of the Mosaic Tabernacle. Cosmas Indicopleustes, in his *Christian Topography*, noted with enthusiasm that dozens of foreign kingdoms had embraced Christianity, and that they contained “no limit to the number of churches with bishops and very large communities of Christian people, as well as many martyrs, and monks also living as hermits.”

Cosmas understood very well that Christianization was multiform in its full expression. Aksum stood high on his list of Christian states, a list that also included the kingdoms of the Caucasus.

As we have seen, the initial process of Christianization in Aksum and Iberia took at least two centuries to complete. Christianization followed a remarkably similar course in the two kingdoms, and passed through several distinct phases:

1) Preexistent monotheistic ideas, coupled with an established Jewish community;
2) Early contact with Christianity through trade and the presence of Christian merchants, craftsmen, and diplomats;
3) Conversion of the royal house through the efforts of foreign-born Christians;
4) Importation of an ecclesiastical hierarchy in response to royal conversion;
5) Christianity as a tool of the monarch to promote centralization;
6) Construction of a church in the capital housing a particularly sacred relic;
7) Establishment of Christianity beyond the capital by a group of foreign monastics, supported by the local monarchy;
8) Vigorous promotion of Christianity by a strong monarch; and
9) Elaboration of distinct local patterns of Christianity and Christian culture.

Naturally, it would be useful to discern the reasons for such close parallels. Was their similarity only a function of their peripheral status to the principal empires of Late Antiquity? Or does their similarity amount to a

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model of Christianization that could be applied elsewhere? It may be especially instructive to see if this model applies to the emerging Christian monarchies of central and northern Europe in the early Medieval period. If it proves to be more widely applicable, it may be possible to go a step further and apply the model to the larger empires of Late Antiquity. This, in turn, may provide some structural clues as to why Christianization succeeded in Rome under Constantine and his successors, while Yazdgard I (399–420) failed to take the crucial royal decision for Christianization in Persia.\(^{107}\) It even may help to explain the initial success of Christianity at the court of the T’ang emperor Taizong (626–649), and Christianity’s eventual decline in China some three centuries later.\(^{108}\)

Although larger imperial states obviously possessed their own distinctive dynamics in the relation between religion and empire, the “mountain Constantines” in the much smaller kingdoms of Aksum and Iberia clearly made bold choices of their own in religious policy that initiated the cultural transformation of their late antique kingdoms, and perhaps can provide models for understanding similar transformations in other smaller players in the late antique world.

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