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# Mountain Constantines:
# The Christianization of Aksum and Iberia[1]

*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.[2] 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

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[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.

[2] P. Bruun, "The Disappearance of Sol from the Coins of Constantine, " *Arctos* n.s. 2 (1958), 15–37; Idem, "The Christian Signs on the Coins of Constantine," *Arctos*, n.s. 3 (1962), 5–35; A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1949), 83–87; R. MacMullen, *Constantine*, (New York, 1969), 112–113; T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 45–53; B. Bleckmann, "Sources for the History of Constantine," in N. Lenski, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006), 14–34.

*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 Christogram, 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

[3] The nomenclature of the Aksumite kings in this period is rather tangled; "Ezana" does not appear in early Ethiopian literary sources, but instead the brother monarchs, styled "Abeha and Atsheba," in the later Ethiopian *Synaxarion*, T.T. Mekouria, ed., *Yeityopia Tarik Axum Zagoué*, vol. 2 (1966), 203–17, and as "Aiznaz and Saizana" in a letter of Constantius II preserved in Athan. *Apologia ad Constantium* 31. "Ezana" appears in contemporary Ge'ez inscriptions, and is taken by most scholars to refer to the first of the brother monarchs, i.e., "Abreha" or "Aiznaz." For a discussion, see T.T. Mekouria, "Christian Aksum" in G. Moktar, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. 2, *Ancient Civilization of Africa* (London, 1981), pp, 401–420 at 406–407.

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 *shahan'shah* 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

[4] S.C. Munro-Hay, "Axumite Coinage" in R. Grierson, ed., *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia* (New Haven/London, 1993), 101–116 at 109–110.

[5] R. Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion* (New York, 1997); P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2002); S.H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York, 1998); Ralph W. Mathisen, "Barbarian Bishops and the Churches 'in barbaricis gentibus' during Late Antiquity," *Speculum* 72 (1997) 664–697.

[6] J. B. Segal, *Edessa, the Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), 70; A.N. Palmer, "King Abgar of Edessa, Eusebius and Constantine," in H. Bakker, ed., *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest* (Gronigen, 1992), 3–29; as against the characteristic skepticism of W. Bauer, "Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum," *Beiträge zur historischen Theologie* 9 (1934), 1–43.

[7] Theodoret, *Hist.eccl.* 1.24.

[8] M.-L. Chaumont, *La Christianisation de l'empire iranien des origenes aux persécutions du IVe siècle, CSCO Subsidia* 80 (Louvain, 1988); S.P. Brock, "Christians in the Sassanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties," in S. Mews, ed., *Religion and National Identity, Studies in Church History*, vol. 18 (London, 1982), 1–19.

to Christianity perhaps as much as a full decade before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312.[9]

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 Ulfilas 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.[10] 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.[11]

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[9] Although some recent commentators have placed Tiridates' conversion closer to 314: C.S. Lightfoot, "Armenia and the Eastern Marches," in A. Bowman, Averil Cameron, P. Garnsey, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume 12, The Crisis of Empire, AD 193–337* (Cambridge, 2005), 481–497 at 487; T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 258. See also R.W. Thomson, "Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12–13 (1988–1989), 28–45.

[10] For Christianity in seventh century China, see P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo, 1951); Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1.287–323; P. Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou*, A. Forte, ed. with supplements (Kyoto/Paris, 1996), who provides a much-needed context for understanding the circumstances of the stone's production. Further discussion in T. H. Barrett, "Buddhism, Taoism and the Eighth-Century Chinese Term for Christianity: A Response to Recent Work by A. Forte and others," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), 555–560.

[11] For useful discussions of conversion models in a Mediterranean context, see H.A. Drake, "Models of Christian Expansion," in W.V. Harris, ed., *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 27 (New York, 2005), 1–13; and S. Schwartz, "Roman Historians and the Rise of Christianity," ibid., 145–160. The connection between ethnicity and religious identity is explored in S. Mitchell, G. Greatrex, eds., *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (London, 2000).

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).

[13] L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, 1993), 97–101; Idem, "Theories of Conversion," *Social Compass* 46.3 (1999), 259–271.

[14] R.W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1991); A. Buckser, S.D. Glazier, eds., *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD, 2003).

[15] G.W. Bowersock, "Centrifugal Force in Late Antique Historiography," in C. Straw, R. Lim, eds., *The Past Before Us: The Challenge of Historiographies of Late Antiquity*, Bibliothèque de l'Antiquitè Tardive 6 (Brepolis, 2004), 19–24. For an effective use of the comparative method beyond the imperial frontiers, see J. Howard-Johnston, "The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison," in Averil Cameron, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), 157–226.

[16] As expressions of this trend, see B. Caseau, "Sacred Landscapes," in G. Bowersock, P. Brown, O. Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 21–59; G. Fowden, "Religious Communities," in ibid., 82–106; H. Kennedy, "From *Polis* to *Madina*," *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 3–27. See also, A. Giardina, "Esplosione di tardoantico," *Studi storici* 40 (1999), 157–180; Averil Cameron, "The 'Long' Late Antiquity: A Late Twentieth-Century Model," in T. P. Wiseman, ed., *Classics in Progress: Essays on Greece and Rome* (London, 2002), 165–191; G. Fowden, "Elefantiasi del tardoantico?," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 15 (2002), 681–686 (review essay of *CAH*² 14).

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."[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.[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.[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' *Ecclesiastical History* and continued the narrative in two additional books

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[17] G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth* (Princeton, 1993), 15–19.

[18] G. Greatrex, "Byzantium and the East in the Sixth Century," in M. Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2005), 496–497, 501–502; Z. Rubin, "Byzantium and Southern Arabia," in D.H. French, C.S. Lightfoot, eds., *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1989), 383–420; A. Carile, "Il Caucaso e l'Impero bizantino (secoli VI–XI)," in *Il Caucaso: Cerniera fra Cultura dal Mediterraneo alla Persia (Secoli IV–XI)*, *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo*, vol. 43 (Spoleto, 1996), 9–83; K. Yuzbashian, "La Caucase et les Sassanides," ibid., 143–167; G.W. Bowersock, "The Hadramawt between Persia and Byzantium" *Convegno internazionale la Persia e Bisanzio: Roma, 14–18 ottobre 2002* (Rome, 2002), 263–273.

[19] Comparative studies of Christianization, with some attention to theoretical considerations, may be found in J. Muldoon, ed., *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL, 1997); P. Urbańczyk, ed., *Early Christianity in Central and East Europe* (Warsaw, 1997); L. von Padberg, *Die Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1998); G. Armstrong, I.N. Wood, eds., *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, International Medieval Research VII (Turnhout, 2000); A. Knobler, "Pseudo-Conversions and Patchwork Pedigrees: The Christianization of Muslim Princes and the Diplomacy of Holy War," *Journal of World History* 7 (1996), 181–197. For the Roman empire, see P. Brown, "Christianization and Religious Conflict," in Av. Cameron, P. Garnsey, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 13, The Late Empire* (Cambridge, 1998), 632–664; Idem, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge, 1995), 1–26; W.V. Harris, ed., *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries. Essays in Explanation* (Brill, 2005); K. Mills, A. Grafton, eds., *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing* (Rochester, NY, 2003). A less sanguine view is presented by R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984).

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."[20]

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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[20] Rufinus, *Hist.eccl.* 10.9–10; also Sozomen, *Hist.eccl.* 2.24, Socrates, *Hist.eccl.* 1.19; Theoderet, *Hist.eccl.* 1.22, On Athanasius and Frumentius, see A. Martin, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'Église d'Égypte au IVe siècle (328–373)* (Paris, 1996), 502–505; and Stuart C. Munro-Hay, "The Dating of Ezana and Frumentius," *Rassagna di Studi Etiopici* 32 (1988), 111–127.

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

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[21] Rufinus, *Hist.eccl.* 10.11; also Theodoret, *Hist.eccl.* 1.23.

[22] On Rufinus, see F. Thelmon, *Païens et chrétiens au IVᵉ siècle* (Paris, 1981); G. Zecchini, "Barbari e romani in Rufino di Concordia," *Antichità Altoadriatiche* 31.2 (1987), 29–60; E.A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, 1992), chap.4; P.R. Amidon, tr., *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia* (Oxford, 1997), vii-xix.

[23] Athan. *Apologia ad Constantium* 31.

[24] Amm.Marc. 31.12.16; Libanius *Ep.* 1043, 1044, 1060. On Bacurius, see *PLRE I,* 144; N. Janashia, "Udzvelesi c'noba k'art'velt'a mod'c'evaze" ["The ancient evidence concerning the conversion of the Kartvelians"], in N. Janashia, *Istoriulcqarot'mc'odneobit'i narkvevebi* (Tbilisi, 1986), 112–123; and D. Woods, "Subarmachius, Bacurius, and the *Schola Scutariorum Sagittariorum*," *Classical Philology* 91.4 (1996), 365–371.

[25] Soc. *Hist.eccl.* 5.25.13; Zos. *Hist.Nov.* 4. 57.

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.[26] 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.[27] 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.[28] Abstention from pork appears to be

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[26] For the epigraphic and the numismatic sources concerning the conversion of Ezana I, see S. P. Pétridès, "Sur l'Évangélisation de l'Ethiopie, sa Date et son Protagoniste," in *Abba Salama*, vol. 3 (Addis Ababa, 1972), 208–232; S. Ulig, "Eine trilinguale Ezana-Inschrift," *Aethiopica* 4 (2001), 7–31; and especially, M. Wendouski, H. Ziegert, "Aksum at the Transition to Christianity," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 19 (2003), 215–230. A recent discussion of Aksumite archaeology may be found in N. Finneran, *The Archaeology of Ethiopia* (Oxford, 2007).

[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).

[28] Solomon, the Queen of Ethiopia, and the birth of Menelik: *Kebra Nagast* 24–32, Wallis Budge, tr., *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (I) Being the Book of the Glory of Kings, Kebra Nagast* (Oxford, 1922), 21–39. Theft of the Ark of the Covenant, and its coming to Ethiopia: *Kebra Nagast* 45–63, (Wallis Budge, tr.), 66–100. On the character and composition of the *Kebra Nagast*, see R. Beylot, "Du Kebra Nagast" *Aethiopica* 7 (2004), 74–83; and S. Munro-Hay, "A Sixth-Century Kebra Nagast?," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 17 (2001), 43–58. On Jewish influences, see K. Stoffregen-Pedersen, *Les Éthiopiens* (Brepols, 1990), 10–11; G.W. Bowersock, "Helena's Bridle and the Chariot of Ethiopia," in G. Gardner, K. Osterloh, eds., *Antiquity in*

a pre-Christian practice, and concepts about sacral kingship and ritual purity also reflect this influence.[29] 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.[30] An Aksumite inscription of uncertain date, for example, attests the presence of a Jew, possibly foreign, within the kingdom.[31] The deep-seated Aksumite preoccupation, not just with Judaism, but also with Jerusalem and its particular aura of holiness, also is worth noting,[32] and may account for the numbers of Ethiopian monks frequently encountered by Jerome in Palestine.[33] 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.[34]

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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*Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, *Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen, forthcoming). The influence of Judaism on Aksum prior to Ezana I is disputed in the otherwise judicious survey of H. Brakmann, *Die Einwurzelung der Kirche im spätantiken Reich von Aksum* (Bonn, 1994).

   [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.

   [30] The prevalence of monotheistic religious currents in south Arabia and Himyar is explored in G.W. Bowersock, "Polytheism and Monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1998), 1–10; and C. Robin, "Judaïsme et christianisme en Arabie du sud d'après les sources épigraphiques et archéologiques," *Seminar for Arabian Studies* 10 (1980), 85–96.

   [31] *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* vol. 4 (Berlin, 1913), 34–35: discussed in Y.M. Kobishchanov, *Axum* (University Park, PA, and London, 1979), 234.

   [32] E. Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian Monophysite Christianity," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956), 216–256.

   [33] Jerome, *Ep.* 107.2.

   [34] This shift of identity from Meroë to Aksum was more easily made after Ezana I appropriated the term "Ethiopia" for Aksum in the Greek version of inscription *DAE* 4, cited in Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 224–225. See E. Ullendorff, "Candace (Acts VIII, 27) and the Queen of Sheba," *Journal of New Testament Studies* 2 (1955), 53–56.

east through Iberia.[35] Jewish burials are attested from Urbnisi, in the western region of the Mtkvari River corridor.[36] In addition, two late antique epitaphs of Jews come from the necropolis at Samtavro in Mtskheta, the political center of Iberia.[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.[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.[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.[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.[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 *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.[42]

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[35] Josephus, *Ap.* 1. 22.

[36] T. Mgaloblishvili, I. Gagoshidze, "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia," in T. Mgaloblishvili, ed., *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus* (Surrey, 1998), 39–58 at 49–50.

[37] *Mtskheta*, vol. 3, 207. A useful survey of the literary sources concerning the Jewish community of Mtskheta may be found in C.B. Lerner, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography: the Early Medieval Historical Chronicle, The Conversion of Kartli, and the Life of St. Nino* (London, 2003), 60–66.

[38] The epigraphic corpus may be found in N. Babalikashvili, "O pamjatnikx evreiskoj epigrafiki iz Mckheta," *Macne* 6 (1970), 271–288. For discussion of the Samtavro necropolis, see M. Ivashchenko, "Samtavroijskie pogrebenija pervyx trex vekov nashej ery," *Mtskheta* 1 (1980), 189–215.

[39] T. Mgaloblishvili, "The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity," 51–52.

[40] D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994), 213–215; K. Tsereteli, "Armazian Script," in Mgaloblishvili, *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, 155–162.

[41] Rufinus, *Hist.eccl.* 10.11; L. Kajaia, "Georgian Manuscripts and Cultural and Educational Centers," in O.Z. Soltes, ed., *National Treasures of Georgia* (London, 1999), 44–45; M. van Esbroeck, "La place de Jérusalem dans la 'Conversion de la Géorgie'," in Mgaloblishvili, ed., *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, 59–74; T. Mgaloblishvili, *Georgians in the Holy Land* (London, 2007).

[42] Leonti Mroveli, *The Conversion of K`art`li by Nino* (Georgian version), embedded within the *History of the Kings of K`art`li*, 88–89, in R.W. Thomson, tr., *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.[43] 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.[44] 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.[45] Burials from the vicinity of both capitals indicate that the upper classes of Aksum and Iberia developed a taste for Mediterranean

*Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles* (Oxford, 1996). Both the *Conversion of K`art`li* and the *History of the Kings of K`art`li* probably date from the eighth century and were included as integral parts in the much longer *K`art`lis C`xovreba*, i.e., the *History/Life of K`art`li*. The Georgian text and the Armenian adaptation now are edited by S.H. Rapp, *K`art`lis C`xovreba: The Georgian Royal Annals and Their Medieval Armenian Adaptation*, 2 vols. (Delmar, NY, 1998). See also, D. Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History*, (Oxford, 1994), 49–57; C. B. Horn, "St. Nino and the Christianization of Pagan Georgia," *Medieval Encounters* 4.3 (1998), 242–264; Z. Alexidze, "Four Recensions of the 'Conversion of Georgia'," in W. Seibt, ed., *Die Christianisierung des Kaukasus*, *Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Byzantinistik*, 9 (Vienna, 2002), 9–16; S.H. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts*, CSCO vol. 601, *Subsidia* 113 (Leuven, 2003); and Lerner, *Wellspring of Georgian Historiography*.

43  For India, see S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, Vol. 1: Beginnings to A.D. 1707* (Cambridge, 1984); A.M. Mudadan, "The Indian Church and the East Syrian Church," *Indian Church History Review* 6. 1 (1972), 23–42. For this process in Central Asia, see R. Folz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1999).

44  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; *CTh* 12.12.2 (356 CE). Malalas, *Chron.* p.43, also mentions Roman traders in Axum circa 500 CE.

45  W.R.O. Hahn, "Die Münzprägung des Aksumitisches Reiches," *Litterae Numismaticae Vindobonensis* 2 (1983), 113–118; S. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1991), 124.

luxury goods, including glass goblets and plates of gold and silver.[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.[47] Given the volume of trade, it is probable that foreign merchants and craftsmen brought not only their wares, but their gods as well.[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."[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

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[46] Aksumite burials: D.W. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia* (London, 1998), 95–111; H. M. Morrison, *The Glass*, in S.C. Munro-Hay, ed., *Excavations at Aksum* (London, 1989), 188–209. Iberian burials: at Armaziskhevi near Mtskheta, *Mtskheta*, 1 (1980), 38; K. Machabeli, *Dzveli sakartvelos vertskhli* (Tbilisi, 1983), 108; Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 234–237; at Aragvispiri, 20 km. north of Mtskheta, Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 236.

[47] Malalas, *Chron.* 18.15 (pp. 433–434).

[48] On Aksumite trade, see G. Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2001), 103–107.

[49] E. Littmann, "An Old Ethiopic Inscription from the Berenice Road," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1954), 119–123; E. Ullendorff, "The Ethiopic Inscription from Egypt," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1955), 150–161.

of the text itself.[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,[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.[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.[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 *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 *negus*

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[50] S. Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, 1972), 109.

[51] Georgian tradition speaks of the original evangelization of Colchis and Iberia under the Apostles Andrew, Simon, and Matthias.

[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 *Mtskheta* 7, 89.

[53] *Mtskheta*, 7.43, 9.73; Braund, *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

[54] R. Schneider, "L'Inscription chretienne d'Ezana en ecriture sudarabe," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 10 (1976), 109–117.

[55] *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, inscription no. 8; R. Schneider, "Notes sur les inscriptions royals aksumites," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 44.5–6 (1987), 599–616.

[56] Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 253–255; Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia*, 83–111.

[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.

[59] C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, 1963), 90–99.

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."[60] 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.[61]

## 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 kingdoms.[62] 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 communities.[63] Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Maximus of Turin call attention to the persistence of polytheism on the rural estates of their wealthy parishioners.[64] 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 Land: A History and a Guide* (London, 2002), 302–331; Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 209–211; M.E. Heldman, "Maryam Seyon: Mary of Zion," in Grierson, *African Zion*, 71–75.

[61] On this link between sacredness and political centralization, see the useful collection of articles in H. Bakker, ed., *The Sacred Centre as the Focus of Political Interest* (Gronignen, 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.ecct.* 16,17; Marc.Diac. *VPorphyrii*; Greg.Mag. *Ep.* 3.59, 8.18.

[64] Joh.Chrysos. *Homil. in Act.* 18.4; Aug. *Enarr.in psalm. LIV* 13, *Ep.* 58.1; Max.Taurin. *Serm.* 91.107.

count) 80,000 pagans to baptize in the backcountry of Caria, Lydia, and Phrygia in the mid-sixth century.[65] 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.[66]

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.[67] 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.[68] 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.[69] This interpretation probably holds

[65] John Eph. *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 47, E.W. Brooks, ed., tr., *PO* 18.681. See also W.H.C. Frend, "The Winning of the Countryside," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18.1 (1967), 1–14; K. Harl, "Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth- and Sixth- Century Byzantium," *Past and Present* 128 (1990), 7–27; F. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1993–94), 2;52–133; Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, 34–65.

[66] G. Charachidzé, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne: Analyse structurale d'une civilization* (Paris, 1968); M. Van Esbroeck, "La religion géorgienne pré-chrétienne," *ANRW* 2.18.4 (1990), 2694–2725.

[67] For a survey of Georgian Christianity in this period, see B. Martin-Hisard, "Christianisme et Église dans le monde géorgien," in L. Pietri, ed., *Les Deux Églises. L'Occident latin et l'Orient byzantin (432–610)*, *Histoire du Christianisme,* vol. 3 (Paris 1998), 1169–1239; continued in Idem, "Christianisme et Église dans le monde géorgien," in G. Dagron, P. Riché, A. Vauchez, eds., *Évêques, moines et empereurs (610–1054)*, *Histoire du Christianisme*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1993), 549–603.

[68] The Nine Saints: Ze-Mikael / Aregawi, Pentelewon, Gerima / Yeshaq, Afse, Guba, Alef, Yim'ata, Liqanos, Sehma. The Thirteen Syrian Fathers: Ioane / John of Zedazeni, Zenon / Xeno of Ikhalto, Ioseb / Joseph of Alaverdi, Stephane / Stephan of Hirsa, Tadeoz / Thaddeus of Urbnisi, David of Garedji, Shio of Mghvime, Anton of Martkhopi, Michael of Ulumbri, Isidor of Samtavisi, Piros / Pyrrhos of Breti, Ise of Tsilkani, Abibos of Nekresi.

[69] D.M. Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1956), 81–83; Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 321.

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

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[70] Eugippius *V Severini* 1.1.

[71] On the Nine Saints, see C. Conti Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia* (Bergamo, 1928), 156–163; Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 115–121; E.A.W. Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Cambridge, 1928), 1.116–118, 155, 198, 299–300; 2.205; 3.688, 944; 4.1009–1010; K.-R. Zelleke, "Bibliography of the Ethiopic Hagiographical Traditions," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13.2 (1975), 57–102, nos. 10, 13, 19, 70, 92, 124, 141, 171; S. Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Evangelization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden, 1984); G. Haile, "Ethiopian Saints", in A.S. Attiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, (New York, 1991), 1045–1047.

[72] Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 14, 207–208; Hable-Sellassie, *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.[74] Pentelewon, 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.[75] 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.[76] 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.[77] 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.[78] Like the other monastic foundations of the Nine Saints, Debre Damo appears to have been occupied prior to the fifth century.[79] 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.[80]

Sometime in the 530s or 540s, a Syriac ascetic later known as John of Zedazeni arrived at Mtskheta with twelve monastic co-laborers.[81] Like the

[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.

[75] *Life of Daniel the Stylite* 65, in E. Dawes, N.H. Baynes, eds., *Three Byzantine Saints* (London, 1948).

[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.

[77] F. Anfray, "Fouilles de Yeha," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 9 (1972), 45–64; Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 117–118; *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, 2, 79–87, 4, 58–60; Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 198–201; J. Doresse, *L'Empire du Prêtre Jean* (Paris, 1957), 231–232.

[78] Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia*, 128–131.

[79] D. H Matthews, A. Mordini, "The Monastery of Debra Damo, Ethiopia," *Archaeologia* 97 (1959), 1–58; A. Mordini, "Gli aurei Kushana del convento di Dabra Dammo," *Atti del Convegno di Studi Etiopici* (Rome, 1960), 249–254; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land*, 336–344.

[80] I. Guidi, "Il Gadla Aragawi," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Licei*, *Atti*, ser.5, 2, (1896), 171.

[81] On the Thirteen Syrian Fathers, see K.S. Kekelidze, "On the Arrival of the Syrian Missionaries in Kartli," *Etyudy* 1 (1956), 19–50; D.M. Lang, *The Georgians, Ancient Peoples and Places* (New York, 1966), 156–157; O Reisner, "Das Mönchtum im frühmittelalterlichen Georgien," *Georgica*

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),[82] 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.[83]

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.[84] All together, the Thirteen Syrian Fathers established some sixteen monasteries and other churches, many of whose sixth-century foundations still can be observed today.[85]

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15.1 (1992), 67–81; and especially, B. Martin-Hisard, "Les Treize Saints Pères: Formation et evolution d'une tradition hagiographique géorgienne (VIe-XIIe s.)," *revue des études géorgiennes et Caucasiennes* 44 (1985), 141–168, 45 (1986), 75–111. For an analysis of the textual traditions, see Z. Alexidze, "The New Recensions of the *Conversion of Georgia* and the *Lives of the 13 Syrian Fathers* recently Discovered on Mt. Sinai," in *Il Caucaso: Cerniera fra Cultura dal Mediterraneo alla Persia (Secoli IV–XI)*, *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo*, vol. 43 (Spoleto, 1996), 409–426.

[82] For the rank of Catholicos, see Mathisen, "Barbarian Bishops," 665–6.

[83] *K`art`lis C`xovreba*, 208–209 (interpolation 10 in Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 363–364).

[84] *Life of David of Garesja*, in Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, 83–93; *K`art`lis C`xovreba*, 209–210 (interpolation 10 in Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 364–365).

[85] G.N. Chubinashvili, *Architecture in Kakheti* (Tbilisi, 1959); Idem, "On the Initial Forms of Christian Churches," in Mgaloblishvili, *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, 185–195, at 194; T Mgaloblishvili, "Introduction," in Mgaloblishvili, *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, 3–14, at 10.

## *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.[86] 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.[87] 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.[88] 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

[86] A similar dynamic was at work in nearby Armenia: J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

[87] B. Martin-Hisard, "Le roi géorgien Vaxt'ang Gorgasal dans l'histoire et dans la légende," in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen-Age. Actes du XIIIᵉ Congrès de la Société des Historiens Médiévistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur Public, Aix-en-Provence, 4–5 juin 1982* (Aix-en-Provence, 1983), 205–242. For a helpful overview of the textual layers comprising the *Life of Vakhtang*, see Rapp, *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, 1.19–28. With a much more detailed treatment in Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 197–242.

[88] G. Marsagishvili, "A Brief Introduction of Georgian Architecture," in O.Z. Soltes, ed., *National Treasures of Georgia* (London, 1999), 97–101.

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).[89] 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."[90] In this account, the king of Axum was not yet a Christian, and he vowed that if he overcame the Himyarite 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.[91] 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.[92] Thus, in Aksumite eyes, Kaleb was no mere Byzantine lackey.[93]

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*

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[89] Kaleb's reign is one of the best documented in Aksumite history: Budge, *The Book of the Saints* 1.117, 289–293; Procopius, *Bell.pers.* 1.10; Malalas, *Chron.* 18.15 (pp. 433–434); 18.56 (pp. 457–458); Theophanes, *Chron.* AM 6064; Photius, *Biblioth.*, in J.H. Freese, ed., *The Library of Photius*, vol. 1 (London, 1920), 17–20; A. Moberg, ed., tr., *The Book of the Himyarites: Fragments of a Hitherto Unknown Syriac Work* (Lund, 1924); I. Shahîd, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents*, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 49 (Brussels, 1971); M. Kamil, "An Ethiopic Inscription Found at Mareb," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964), 56–57. See also: Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 84–88, 151–154, 230–231; Hable-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 123–143.

[90] Malalas, *Chron.* 18.15 (pp. 433–434).

[91] Greg.Tur. *Hist.* 2.30. Given the plentiful sources attesting Kaleb's Christianity, Malalas' portrayal of a kingly conversion may safely be discounted.

[92] *Kebra Nagast* 117 (Wallis Budge, tr.), 225–227.

[93] Kaleb's status as a Christian ruler independent of Byzantium is also reflected by his diplomatic initiative to the Sassanian *shahan'shah* on behalf of imprisoned Monophysite clergy at Nisibis: John of Ephesus *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 10, pp. 152–153.

*nagast*, Kaleb was portrayed as successor to a tradition of kingship regarded as descending from Solomon and David.[94] 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?[95]

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.[96] 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[97] 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.[98] 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.[99]

## 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.[100] 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. Shahîd, *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.

[96] Malalas, *Chron.* 18.15 (p. 434).

[97] R. Schneider, "Une page du Gadla Sadqan," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 5 (1963), 167–169; F. Anfray, "La première campagne de fouilles à Matara près de Sénafe," *Annales d'Éthiopie* 5 (1963), 87–166.

[98] R. Schneider, "Trois nouvelles inscriptions royals d'Axoum," in *Atti IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici* (Rome, 1974), 767–786.

[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 *shahan'shah* 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]

thousand years. At the end of the tenth century, a queen traditionally identified as Gudit brought an end to the Aksumite kingdom and initiated a vigorous persecution of Christianity in Ethiopia. On this episode, see S. Hable-Selassie, "The Problem of Gudit," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 9.1 (1972), 113–124; T. Tamrat, "A Short Note on the Traditions of Pagan Resistance to the Ethiopian Church (14th and 15th centuries)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 9.1 (1972), 137–150.

[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-Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 164–175.

[103] Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 9–12.

[104] V. Beridzé, "L'architecture religieuse géorgienne des IVᵉ-VIIᵉ siècles," *Bedi Kartlisa* 36 (1978), 25–42.

[105] M.E. Heldman, "The Heritage of Late Antiquity," in Grierson, *African Zion*, 117–119; H. Machavariani, "The Art of Georgian Manuscripts," in Soltes, *National Treasures of Georgia*, 117–121.

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."[106] 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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[106] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christianike Topographia* 3.179 (J.W. McCrindle, tr.), 120; text in W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes, La topographie chrétienne*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1968).

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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[107] The favor extended to Christians in the early portion of his reign earned for Yazdgard the epithet, "the sinner" (*athīm*) from the *magi*: J.P. Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in E. Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol.3 pt.2, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), 924–48, at 939–941; A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1936), 264–268.

[108] A.F. Wright, "T'ang Tai-Tsung and Buddhism," in A.F. Wright, D. Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, 1973), 2–263; N. Standaert, ed., *Handbook of Christianity in China, Vol. 1: 635–1800*, *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 4.15.1 (Leiden, 2001), 1–43.