ARTIKLAR

ETHIOPIAN MONASTICISM *

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Although Ethiopian monasticism has been studied for over a century, it remains, just as Ethiopia's Christian culture in general, relatively unknown outside specialist circles. The present paper seeks to provide a general overview of the subject, concentrating on monasticism's early and medieval development, a creative period during which many of the monastic characteristics that live on today came into being.

Monasticism in Ethiopia is a phenomenon that arose not long after the Christianisation of the country itself. The latter process began rather early compared to that of the European countries outside the Roman boundaries, namely before the middle of the fourth century.

In Late Antiquity the term 'Ethiopia' was by no means clearly defined; it could denote any territory south of Egypt where dark-skinned peoples lived (in accordance with the popular etymology of the Greek word *Aἰθίοψ*). It included what is today Sudan and the states of the Horn of Africa, but also southern Saudi Arabia as well as Yemen, Oman, and even, on the eastern extremity, India. The latter

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Abbreviations: CSCO, ScrAeth – Corpus Scriptorium Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Aethiopici (Louvain: Peeters, 1902–); *EAE* – *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. S. Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001–); EMML – Ethiopic Monastic Manuscript Library; Addis Ababa and Collegeville, Minnesota.

was known to be home to a dark-skinned population, who were easily confused with Africans. Moreover it was believed that there was a continental bridge between Africa and India, a belief which, of course, contributed to the fact that the terms 'India' and 'Ethiopia' were practically coextensive and therefore interchangeable.

This is why we hardly know what certain authors had in mind when they wrote that there were wars among "Indians", as in the case of John Malalas (d. 578)[1], or when they wrote about a maritime expedition to "Further India", as in the case of Rufinus Tyrannius (d. 410/11). It is the latter who tells us in his *Church History*[2] about Meropius, a philosopher of Tyre, who together with his young disciples went on a trip to "Further India", whatever territory he really had in mind. If it was the land we call India, the expedition did not arrive. It arrived instead in another region so named in Antiquity, namely the coast of Ethiopia – or rather what is today Eritrea.

However, notwithstanding this ancient confusion, henceforth we shall use the term 'Ethiopia' in a more limited sense, closer to the modern usage, meaning, namely, Abyssinia. Until the middle of the 20th century the latter was the name of the whole country we call Ethiopia (before the separation of Eritrea in 1993). Today, however, it alludes not to a political entity, but is rather a term of cultural geography, and refers to Christian Ethiopia, or the area in which Classical Christian civilisation developed. We have to keep in mind that the territories of the contemporary Ethiopia south of Addis Ababa, are late acquisitions, the result of conquests mainly made by the King of Kings (*nəguśä nägäśt*) or Emperor (*aṣe*) Menelik II (1889–1913). Prior to that, these territories had no part whatsoever in the development and traditions of the Christian kingdom (or empire) of Ethiopia or Abyssinia. This latter kingdom developed roughly in the triangle between the Red Sea to the north, the border with Sudan to the west, and the area around Addis Ababa as its southernmost province, that is on what is geographically termed the Ethiopian Plateau, the eastern

[1] John Malalas, *Chronicle* book 18.15; the "Indians" are explained to be "Axoumitai" and "Homeritai"; *The Chronicle* of John Malalas, transl. by E. Jeffreys *et al*. (Byzantina Australiensia 4; Australian Association for Byzantine Studies: Melbourne 1986), 251.

[2] *The Church History* of Rufinus of Aquileia, *Books 10 and 11*, transl. Ph.R. Amidon (New York: Oxford University Press 1997), 18–20.

border of which is the African Rift.

This triangle coincides with the territory of the Abyssinians, that is the Christian population speaking Ethio-Semitic languages, today mainly Tigrinya and Amharic. In the epoch when Christianity reached the country, the language spoken there, specifically in the most northern part of this region, in the state known as Aksum (Eritrea, and Ethiopia's province of Tigray), was Ge'ez, also called Classical Ethiopic.

It was on the coast of the Aksumite state that Meropius and his disciples landed some time early in the 4th century. However, the locals killed all the members of the expedition, except for two boys whom they sent deeper inland to the city of Aksum, the capital of the state of the same name, as a gift for the king. The boys were kept at the court and grew up there, but when the king died, leaving an infant successor, the widowed queen asked them to help the boy run the country. So they did, but at the same time they continued to support merchants and other Christians who happened to arrive in Aksum by the sea from the north, that is from the Roman Empire, to spread their religion. They themselves also managed to convert the future king. After several years, when the *delphin* reached maturity, the two regents asked permission to return to their country. One of them, Aedesius, returned to Tyre (and there he met Rufinus, who learned of their vicissitudes and wrote about them in his *History*). However, the other guardian, Frumentius by name, went to Alexandria where he was ordained bishop of Aksum by Athanasius (d. 373), the famous champion of Nicene Orthodoxy against Arianism. Frumentius then came back to Aksum to continue his task of evangelisation. We do not have any report of his activities, except that he really was active there. This "apostle" of Ethiopia is in the local tradition known as *Abba Sälama*, literally "the Father of Peace".

Traditions Concerning Early Monks

But evangelising a country takes more than one bishop. Again, we do not know the details concerning the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia, or, more correctly, we have them composed in the form of much later hagiographical accounts, rather than historiographical, but we may be sure that the task was done mainly by monks.

The work of Christianising the countryside of Aksum was

accomplished by monastic figures, known primarily through legendary accounts, who arrived in Ethiopia coming from the Roman Empire in the 6th century. The main group of monks is known as the "Nine Saints". Another group instrumental in spreading Christianity in Abyssinia was the so-called "Righteous" (*ṣadəqan*), but there were certainly others too.[3] The process of Christianisation of what is today Central and Southern Ethiopia was continued by later generations of monanstic missionaries of local extraction.

Scholars in the 20th century believed that the Nine Saints were Syrian monks who had arrived in Abyssinia after fleeing the persecutions of the miaphysites in their country. This idea was put forward by a famous Italian scholar of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Carlo Conti Rossini, who was convinced that their names reflected the names of certain Syrian monasteries. Conti Rossini's theory was accepted for quite some time, in fact until the 1990s. Then it was rejected by another Italian scholar,[4] but the baby was thrown out with the bath water: some scholars denied not only the alleged Syrian origin of the Nine Saints, and rightly so, but also denied any Syrian influence whatsoever on Ethiopian Christianity and culture, with much less justification.[5]

But whatever the origin of the Nine Saints and the Righteous, these groups of monks are believed to have reshaped Ethiopia's Church into the anti-Chalcedonian, miaphysite (previously known as "monophysite") form of Christianity, thus aligning it with the theology accepted in the Alexandrian patriarchate. In this way, the Ethiopian Church became miaphysite but without the internal theological strife characteristic of the development of other miaphysite churches, the Coptic and the Syrian Orthodox.

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[3] Cf. Antonella Brita, *I racconti tradizionali sulla "Seconda Cristianizzazione" dell'Etiopia: Il ciclo agiografico dei Nove Santi* (Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale": Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi: Studi Africanistici: Serie Etiopica 7; Napoli: L'Università 2010).

[4] Paolo Marrassini, "Some considerations on the problem of the 'Syriac influences' on Aksumite Ethiopia", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23 (1990), 35–46.

[5] Cf. W. Witakowski, "Syrian Influences in Ethiopia", in *Eastern Christianity: A Crossroad of Cultures*, ed. by Florence Jullien (Eastern Christian Studies 16; Leuven: Peeters 2012), 227–232; and the preceding paper in the same volume.

The Nine Saints have also left other traces of their activities. In traditional hagiographical literature, which over time provided biographical accounts of their lives, each is credited with founding a monastery. As the kingdom of Aksum did not yet stretch to the southern part of the Abyssinian triangle, all the monasteries that the Nine Saints are said to have established are in what is today the province of Tigray. The names of some of them are known only from literature (and we do not know where they were), while others are today abandoned and forgotten. However, at least one, Däbrä Damo, founded according to tradition by Zä-Mika'el Arägawi, remains one of the most important monastic centres in Ethiopia to this day. According to Arägawi's *gädl* (*vita*),[6] he chose a place on the flat top of Mount[7] Damo, in Tigray. Access to the top was so difficult that, according to the *vita*, he used a serpent as a sort of rope to ascend. Ropes are still used for this purpose today (fig. 3).

Egyptian Fathers

The Syriac monks were of course not the only ones who contributed to the spread of Christianity in Aksum. Egyptian monastic communities did their share as well. Given that it was in Egypt that the monastic movement developed, both early and intensively, that influence is hardly surprising. It is true that the migration of Egyptian monks to Ethiopia is poorly documented, perhaps with the exception of their presence at Däbrä Hayq,[8] but there are indirect sources that undoubtedly point to the influence of Egyptian monasticism.

This influence reached Ethiopia in two ways: through the constant arrival of monks from Egypt, perhaps on the occasion of the travels of successive metropolitans, but also as a result of Ethiopian monks' travels to Egypt and their staying in various Egyptian monasteries. The best known of these is perhaps Q^{w}ɔsq^{w}am (Copt. Koskam, Arab. Qūsqām) in the region of Asyut (Central Egypt), the place connected

[6] 'Il "Gadla 'Aragâwî"', ed. Ignazio Guidi, *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Memorie*, 5.2 (1894), 54–96; a French tr.: *La vie de saint Za Mīkā'el ʾAragāwī*, trad. M.-A. van den Oudenrijn (Fribourg: Imprimerie de St-Paul 1939).

[7] The Eth. word *däbr* means both 'mountain' and 'monastery'.

[8] According to Getatchew Haile, "Ethiopian Monasticism", *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya, vol. 3, 1991, 992 (990–995).

with the legends of the Holy Family's stay in Egypt, extant also in Ethiopic. At Qʷəsqʷam, or Dayr al-Muḥarraq,[9] a Coptic monastic centre, there was a separate Ethiopian monastic settlement. But Ethiopian monks settled both temporarily and permanently in several other Coptic monasteries as well, all the way to – and including – Jerusalem. As a result of this two-way traffic involving the monks, much of Egyptian monastic culture and many of its customs reached Ethiopia.

Just as in monastic centres elsewhere in the Christian world, so also in Ethiopia, the importance of the most famous Egyptian monastic desert figures, such as Antony (d. 356) and Pachomius (d. 343), was acknowledged, and the figures themselves venerated. In addition, their writings, authentic or not, as well as texts about them, were translated. These included monastic rules composed by them or attributed to them.

Antony and Pachomius, as is well known, are traditionally regarded as the founders of two types of monastic asceticism, the anachoretic or eremitic and the common or coenobitic.

First of all, we should state that Antony is regarded as "the first monk" in Ethiopia (and of course elsewhere). Every monastery of some repute has created more or less elaborated genealogies of monks, and in these lists of monks Antony has the most prominent place. The usually short texts reflect the monastic communities' needs to show the right pedigree of a given monk or, more often, an abbot, and thereby of his monastic house, by tracing back the line of his predecessors. Each of these genealogies demonstrates that the community in question has an impressive ancestry. The rationale for the lists is in fact no different from that lying behind the lists of bishops that by the line of *impositiones manum* guarantee the legitimacy and orthodoxy of the incumbents of a given see.

These genealogies are composed to serve various monastic communities and have varying titles, such as, literally, *The Genealogy of the Monks* (**ልደተ፡ መነኮሳት፡**; *Lədätä mänäkosat*),[10] or *The Order* or *Series of Monks* (**ሥርዐተ፡ መነኮሳት፡**; *Śərʿatä mänäkosat*), or just *The Enumeration* (lit. *Number) of the Generations of the Monks* (**ኀልቁ፡ ትውልደ፡ መነኮሳት፡**; *Ḫʷəlqʷä*

[9] Qʷəsqʷam is actually the name of the mountain next to which the monastery Dayr al-Muḥarraq is situated. In Ethiopia, it is known under the name of Qʷəsqʷam or Qusqam.

[10] E.g. in EMML 653, 1960 AD: f. 102r-114v, the line of Täklä Haymanot.

təwlәddä mänäkosat).[11] However, the figures at the beginning of any such list (and their purpose) are almost always the same: Antony always as the first name, followed usually by Macarius, Pachomius and so forth (see fig. 4a & 4b).[12]

Antony's fame in Ethiopia is to a degree due to his omnipresence in these lists in the capacity of the "father of monasticism". In fact, in the *Synaxarion* he is called the "father of all monks".[13] Such lists may end with the abbots of Hayq (Monastery Däbrä Hayq ʾƎsṭifanos, Wällo), or those of the house of Täklä Haymanot (Monast. Däbrä Libanos, Shäwa),[14] or Abba Gärima, yet they always start with Antony as the first monk, from whom the named abbots have, through a long line of intervening abbots, inherited the *ʾaskema* (**አስኬማ**). This is a loanword from Syriac, but in the last resort it comes from the Greek σχῆμα, the "angelic habit" of the monks. Some of the lists present the genealogies using quite a literal wording, namely the verb *walada* (**ወለደ**) - "he begat, gave birth to".[15]

Antony is unique in this respect too. As the first monk, he was not "begotten" (*scil.* by another monk), but "made monk" (the verb used here is the denominal *ʾamänkʷäsä*, **አመንኰሰ**) by Archangel Michael.[16] There is even a painting in the Däbrä Marqos church in Gojjam (19th century) showing Antony being "made monk" (cf. fig. 5). Here it is Michael who gives Antony the *ʾaskema*. Since symbolically the latter is the monastic "angelic" garment, it was sometimes understood as equal to the Western monks' habit. It is, however, rather the Orthodox monks' *analabos* (similar to the Western *scapular*), yet the term *ʾaskema* is polysemantic; since it is the most characteristic part of the monk's

[11] E.g. in EMML 703, 19th cent.: f. 71r-72r, the line of Abbots of Hayq.

[12] Other "genealogical" lists of monks can be found in EMML 2134, 19th cent.: f. 167r-168r (p. 245); EMML 2459v-(5); EMML 2495–5.

[13] 22 Ṭərr: *Patrologia Orientalis* 45:1 (= 201), ed. G. Colin (Turnhout: Brepols 1990), 164: **አቡሆሙ፡ ለኵሎሙ፡ መነኮሳት።**

[14] Getatchew Haile, "The monastic genealogy of the line of Täklä Haymanot of Shoa", *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 29 (1982–83), 7–38.

[15] Outside this context the verb is not used in the masculine.

[16] In the *Genealogy of the Monks* in EMML 233 (c. 1746), f. 102va, 5–4 from the bottom, Antony just "put on monasticism" – *läbsä mənkwəsənna* (**ለብሰ፡ ምንኵስና፡**).

attire, it seems simply to be used as *pars pro toto*.[17] Another interpretation of what can be seen in fig. 5, is the monastic belt (*qənat*, ቅናት፡, worn under the garment with an inside made of a very coarse material so that the monk is in constant pain). The archangel gives Antony yet another monastic attribute, a *qobᶜ* (ቆብዕ፡), namely a cap, apparently of Syrian Orthodox origin, as the name itself suggests (Syr. *qo/ubbəᶜā*).

But Antony is also known in Ethiopia, just as elsewhere in the Christian world, from his *Vita*, probably written by Athanasius, the same hierarch who ordained Frumentius as the first metropolitan of Ethiopia. We do not know when the translation into Ethiopic was made, but we do know that it differs from the Greek text by removal of the chapters describing temptations,[18] or, alternatively, was translated from a version that did not have them in the first place. What is perhaps even more important is the fact that the attribution to Athanasius is missing in the Ethiopic version. The hypothesis that Athanasius was not the author of *Vita Antonii* was discussed as early as the 19th century, and even more intensively in the middle of the 20th. An important reason for this was that the Syriac translation differed quite drastically from the Greek. A different author was suggested, namely Serapion of Thmuis (d. after 362), but current scholarly consensus seems to accept Athanasian authorship as certain. The evidence from the Ethiopic version may, however, prompt renewed discussion of the authorship, but much philological works remains to be done, for instance establishing whether the *Vorlage* of the Ethiopian translation was Arabic or Greek. The Arabic *Vita Antonii* by Athanasius, at least as far as Georg Graf's material shows,[19] is a modern version, probably no earlier than the 18th century. But there are also manuscripts containing anonymous *vitae* of Antony (according to

[17] Karel C. Innemée, *Ecclesiastical dress in the Medieval Near East* (Studies in Textile and Costume History 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill 1992), 124–125.

[18] As was pointed out by Louis Leloir, "Premiers renseignements sur la vie d'Antoine en éthiopien", in *Ἀντίδωρον: Hulde aan Dr. Maurits Geerard bij de vooltooiing van de* Clavis Patrum Graecorum [= *Hommage à Maurits Geerard pour célébrer l'achèvement de la* Clavis Patrum Graecorum, I] (Wetteren: Cultura 1984), 9–11.

[19] G. Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, I: Die Übersetzungen* (Studi e Testi 118; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana 1944), 312.

Graf they may differ from each other) reaching back to the early 17th century.[20] Consequently, they cannot be excluded as possible *Vorlage* of the Ethiopic text, but since none is published, it will take some time before we can start discussing the problem of authorship again.

As to the authentic writings of Antony, the *Letters* and the *Apophthegmata*, only the latter are extant in Ethiopic version, whereas there is no trace of the *Letters*, neither the *Seven* (as in the Greek tradition) nor the *Twenty* (as in the Arabic).

The *Apophthegmata* are extant in various collections of monastic literature in Ethiopic. As the whole theme of apophthegmata is being investigated by the Lund-based research program *Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia*, it will be wiser to await the results of that investigation than to provide hypotheses here concerning their origin.

More important for Ethiopian monasticism is the fact that two monastic rules are attributed to Antony. One of them is called *The Commandments of our Father Antony for his Disciples* (*Tə*ʾ*əzazä* ʾ*abunä* ʾ*Ǝnṭonəs lä-däqiqu*; ትእዛዘ፡ አቡነ፡ እንጦንስ፡ ለደቂቁ፡). A cursory investigation (the text remains unpublished) reveals that although it does contain rules of some sort, they are inserted into a speech that Antony delivers to his disciples and other monks gathered around his deathbed. Thus a more correct title would be *The Testament of Antony*.

Pseudo-Antony's *Naqlon Rule*

The other text is really a monastic rule. It is entitled *The Canons and Commandments of Holy Mar(y)*[21] *Antony, the Father of the Monks and the Head of the "Yoked"*[22] *That He Handed Over to His Disciples at Däbrä Naqlon*.[23] The *Naqlon Rule* is a translation from Arabic,[24] but we do not

[20] Graf, *ibid*., p. 459.

[21] The religious title of "holy" or particularly venerated figures; a loan word from Syriac, where it literarily means "*my lord*".

[22] Eth. *ḍəmudan*, ዕሙዳን፡; *i.e.*, under the "yoke" of monastic rule.

[23] *Asceticon*, ed. [& latine redidit] Victor Arras (CSCO vol. 458–459, ScrAeth 77–78; Lovanii: E. Peeters, 1984), 168–172 (Eth.), 114–117 (Lat.). An English translation of the rule will appear in the present author's paper "Antony, the First Monk in Ethiopian Tradition", to appear in the proceedings of the conference on Ethiopian hagiography held in April 2012 in Hamburg, to be edited by Denis Nosnitsin.

[24] Ar.: *Qawānīn wa-waṣāyā,* G. Graf, *op. cit*. (in n. 18), 457–458.

know whether it was originally written in Coptic or Greek. The *Rule* in Arabic has 63 canons, whereas the Ethiopic has 77,[25] and consequently canons from 64 to 77 must be Ethiopic additions.

The *Naqlon Rule* in part provide what can be regarded as "normal" rules of monastic life, such as the prohibition on contact with women and with the monks' families, on eating more than the necessary minimum, and on displaying lavish clothes (monks in the early period were not necessarily poor[26]). In addition, there are canons regulating contact with the non-monastic environment, such as the prohibition on monks staying too long when invited by acquaintences outside the precincts of the monastic community, lest the evening prayer be jeopardised. In fact, the canons of the *Naqlon Rule* are not set up for hermits or anchorites, such as Antony himself, but for another semi-anachoretic type of ascetic life, a life in a *laura*.[27] Archaeological evidence confirms this assertion. Some rules specifically refer not to solitary life, but to a life in some sort of community (*koinobion*). For example, "Take care in order to receive blessing from *the elders of the monastery*" (…*ʾaʿrugä däbr*; … አዕሩገ፡ ደብር።).

Neither Arabic nor Ethiopic has specific terms that would characterise Naqlon as a *laura*, so it is not surprising to see in the Ethiopic text only the term *däbr* (**ደብር፡**; in Arabic: *dayr*) being used.

The question of the authenticity of the authorship is usually answered to the effect that the attribution to Antony is false on both internal and external grounds. As to the latter, nothing of what is known about Antony attests to his having set up a collection of monastic canons of any kind. If he had done so, his ideal way of life in seclusion – the life of hermits, anchorites, such as Antony himself –

[25] A. Mokbel's numbering ("La règle de Saint Antoine le Grand", *Melto* 2 (1966), 207–227) provides the total of 57. This is also the case for Migne's edition in *Patrologia Graeca*, reprinted (the Latin translation only) from Abraham Ecchellensis' edition of the 17th century.

[26] Cf. E. Wipszycka, "Les rapports entre les monastères et les laures à la lumière des fouilles de Naqlun (Fayoum)", in eadem, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 52; Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum 1996), 384–391 (373–393).

[27] E. Wipszycka, "Une nouvelle Règle monastique égyptienne", in *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 52; Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum 1996), 363–371.

would be reflected in it. But the *Naqlon Rule*, as we have seen, suggests a more developed monastic community, with a group of elders and a head, an abbot or archimandrite.

On the other hand there is nothing that would prevent us from assuming that Pseudo-Antony, whoever he was, provided his canons for the monks of Nekloni (in Coptic; Eth.: *Naqlon*), east of the Fayoum Oasis, in accordance with the title of the *Rule*.

The site of Dayr an-Naqlun has since 1986 been investigated by the Polish archaeological mission of Warsaw University. According to the epigrapher of that mission, Ewa Wipszycka, the *Naqlon Rule* would fit the an-Naqlun establishment, which was a so-called *laura*, not a monastery (μονή).[28] It was established in the late 4th or early 5th century. The monastic complex was made up of a centre, that is, a church and auxiliary buildings (today the Monastery of Archangel Gabriel, Deir al-Malak Ghubrail) and hermitages, which were spread over approximately two kilometres, mostly in the form of rock-hewn cliff caves, over 90 in number.[29]

Now, although there are no comparative studies of Ethiopian monasteries, particularly of their spatial organisation, it seems that this is very close to how at least some Ethiopian monasteries are arranged. They do not have a common building as the Western monastic establishments do, but rather several huts grouped in the vicinity of a centre usually occupied by a church. Just as in Naqlon, but contrary to Western custom, there are no refectories where monks would eat together.

But to come back to the Ethiopic version of the *Rule* and the local additions, there is not much specific to be said about them, except that clearly, just as in the Egyptian part, the rules were not made for anchorites but for a monastic community living a similar semi-communal life, as can be seen in the following example (rule 76): "When the semantron (*mäṭqəᶜ*; መጥቅዕ፡) sounds, do not be slow to come

[28] E. Wipszycka, "La terminologie monastique", in eadem, *Moines et communautés*, 282, 288–290.

[29] See the photographs of the aerial view of the hermitages in E. Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe-VIIIe siècles)* (The Journal of Juristic Papyrology, Supplement 11; Varsovie: Warsaw University & The Rafal Taubenschlag Foundation 2009), 131 (128–138).

to the church", or even more clearly in the already quoted rule 66 that mentions the elders of the monastery.

We do not know when the *Naqlon Rule* was translated into Ethiopic. The manuscript itself dates from the 18th century. One may, however, venture a hypothesis on the basis of commandment 75, which reads: "Beware of the defilement of idol(worship)." We know that King Zära Yaqob (Zärʾa Yaʿəqob, 1434–68), a king schooled in theology, and holding strong personal views on what sort of Christianity should be allowed in his kingdom, pursued a resolute religious policy, including an intensive campaign against heathen cults and magic. This crusade seems consequently to provide a most suitable context for canon 75. If this is true, then the translation of the *Naqlon Rule* would have occurred during his reign (mid 15th century), or before.

Rule of Pachomius

The *Pachomian Rule* and tradition was also important in Ethiopia.[30] It was translated into Ge'ez from Greek in the Aksumite epoch, *i.e.* much earlier than the Rule of Pseudo-Antony, whereas later, some time in the Middle Ages, it received an addition, the so-called "third part" (the two first parts being translated).

Moreover, Pachomius often occurs in the Ethiopic monastic genealogies. His fame in Ethiopia, in addition to the *Rule* just mentioned, is based on the fact (attested in hagiography at least) that he was the teacher of the famous monks of the Nine Saints group, which, of course, does not need to be true. Abba Libanos is reported to have been sent to Ethiopia by Pachomius, and so was Zä-Mika'el Arägawi – both of the group of the Nine. In the *gädl* or *vita* of the latter, however, it is said that he was a contemporary of Yared and King Gäbrä Mäsqäl, who lived in the middle of the 6th century. This creates an historical discrepancy, which, however, need not detain us here.

The traditional sources concerning the Nine Saints tell about their founding monasteries that were organized according to the *Rule of*

[30] *Les règles attribuées à Saint-Pakhome*, [tr. by] René Basset (Les apocryphes éthiopiens traduits en français par René Basset 8; Paris: Librairie de l'Art Indépendant 1896). A Swedish translation: "Pakomius' etiopiska klosterregel" i svensk tolkning av Oscar Löfgren, *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 48 (1948), 163–184.

Pachomius.

But monastic rules in Ethiopia are not limted to Pseudo-Antony and Pachomius. In fact they seem to be quite numerous. However, unlike the two named rules of Egyptian origin they are not published, and no studies of them are yet available.

On the other hand a little more is known of the rites of "putting on the *askema*", or to express it in a more familiar, Western, way: "putting on the habit".

The texts of the liturgy of consecration, called either the *Order of Monastic Life* (*Śərᶜatä mənkwəsənna*; ሥርዓተ፡ ምንኵስና፡) or the *Order of the Monks* (*Śərᶜatä mänäkosat*; ሥርዓተ፡ መነኰሳት፡), are not uniform and vary in length and in the prayers, blessings and biblical passages recited.[31] Some of them are attributed to Jacob of Serug, falsely so, since in the literature attributed to this great Syriac poet (d. 521) that is extant in his mother tongue, nothing suggests his composing a rite for "putting on the *askema*". No matter what such a text is called or how it is composed, however, the basic elements seem to be constant: prayers etc., accompanying the ceremonies of putting on the monastic vestment (*askema*) by novices, the girdle (*qənat*) and the monastic cap (*qobᶜ*).

Monasticism and the State: Ecclesiastico-Political Aspects

When talking about monasticism in Ethiopia some words are called for on its position within the church and the state. The two institutions were very much intertwined, just as in any Christian country in the Middle Ages, although in a different way. What is specific to Ethiopia is that the balance of power between state and church was not between king and civil authorities on one hand and the church and its head on the other, but rather between the king and the monastic community.

As was mentioned above, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* (Miaphysite) Church was for most of its history not independent, but from its very inception until 1951 (when it became autocephalous) it was formally governed by a metropolitan consecrated and sent to Ethiopia by the Patriarch of Alexandria, the head of the Coptic Church. The main practical duty of the metropolitans was consecrating priests

[31] D. Nosnitsin, '*Śərᶜatä mənkwəsənna*', *EAe* 4 (2010), 634–636.

and the myron, and, in a more abstract sense, to serve as the living symbol of the *Täwahədo*[32] orthodoxy, guaranteeing theological concord with the See of Alexandria. However, in reality the metropolitan had very little say in the internal life of the Ethiopian church. As an Arabic-speaking Copt, the metropolitan learned the local language only over a period of time and thus for much of his pontificate was practically handicapped in the management of the affairs of the church. The current business of the latter was within the prerogatives of two monastic authorities, the heads of two monasteries, namely the monastery of Däbrä Hayq Estiphanos in Wällo, and of Däbrä Libanos in Shäwa. The importance of these two monasteries stemmed from, according to traditional understanding (although historically not fully reliable), the help they provided to an Amhara usurper, Yekunno Amlak (*Yəkunno Amlak*), who in 1270 organized a *coup d'état* that removed the last king of the preceding Zagwe dynasty, and ascended the throne himself. A legendary account, entitled *The Glory of the Kings* (Eth. *Kəbrä nägäśt*),[33] which became extremely popular in Ethiopia and over time became the official version of the history of the country (and even found its way into the 1951 constitution of Ethiopia), asserted that Yekunno Amlak was not an usurper, but a legitimate scion of the dynasty that had its beginning with Menelik (*Mənəlik*), the son of the Israelite King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Solomonid rulers, according to the version of history embedded in the *Glory of the Kings*, were thus once removed from the throne by the Zagwe, a dynasty that was ethnically Agäw (Cushitic), but in 1270 simply reclaimed what was theirs in the first place. In any event, the dynastic change happened thanks to the moral support of the archimandrites of the two abovementioned monasteries, as a result of which Yekunno Amlak gained the military support of the people of the southern provinces (ethnically Amharas) and consequently was able to prevail militarily over Yətbaräk, the Zagwe king.

The new king repaid this support by elevating the abbots Iyäsus Mo'a of Däbrä Hayq Estiphanos and Täklä Haymanot of the Däbrä Libanos monastery in Shäwa, to high positions. The latter became an

[32] The word means "unity", *scil.* of Christ's divine and human natures.

[33] *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek: …*, a complete translation of the *Kebra Nagast* … by E.A.Wallis Budge (London: The Medici Society 1922).

ʾəččäge (**አጨጌ፡**), a term of unknown etymology and interpreted as '*substitute*', the administrative head of the church and the formal chief of all the monasteries, and the former (Iyäsus Mo'a) became an *ʿaqqabe säʿat* (**ዐቃቤ፡ ሰዓት፡**) – lit. '*guardian of hours*' – whose function was organising the king's audiences, potentially an extremely important role.

For the services rendered, the new king promised – according to the *Life of Iyäsus Mo'a*[34] – in addition to such tiny gifts as the island on which Iyäsus established the monastery, and some privileges, that one third of the kingdom (probably to be understood as one third of the revenues) would be given to the monks. This information is, of course, historically false and to be ranked together with the notorious *Donatio Constantini* of Pope Silvester; it is a propagandistic result of the rivalry over privileges and importance between the two powerful monasteries, Däbrä Hayq Estiphanos and Däbrä Libanos, established by the two monastic figures named. The propaganda "war" between them was waged for many years after the death of both figures. The weapons were hagiographical accounts of their lives, which kept changing over time in such details as to who consecrated whom.[35] Nevertheless, these two monks came to be regarded as the most influential figures in the history of Ethiopian monasticism, both by their own actions and by the number and importance of their spiritual progeny.

One more aspect should be noted. The monastic communities did not develop independently of the rest of Ethiopia's society, but rather, to a degree, reflected it. As was noted by Steven Kaplan,[36] although monks in general came from all possible groups in society, the same was not the case with the abbots. The latter were most often of noble origin, and this phenomenon was reinforced by the fact that monasteries were often used as places of seclusion for political figures. Such figures included members of the royal family whose continuing

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[34] *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a abbé du couvent de St. Étienne de Hayq*, ed. & tr. Stanislas Kur (CSCO 259, 260, ScrAeth 49, 50; Louvain: Peeters 1965).

[35] S. Kaplan, "Iyasus Mo'a and Takla Haymanot: a note on a hagiographical controversy", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 31 (1986), 47–56.

[36] S. Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, (Studien zur Kulturkunde 73; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag 1984), 34.

presence in the power structure proved to be dangerous or just inconvenient for the rulers.

Dissident Movements

This highlights yet another aspect of the relationship between the crown on the one hand and the church and monastic communities on the other. For both the latter the crown sometimes proved expedient in cases where disturbances arose that neither the monasteries nor church as a whole could resolve. Such circumstances occurred more than once in the history of Ethiopian monasticism, as the two cases below illustrate.

During the reign of King Amdä Seyon (*ʿAmdä Ṣəyon*, 1313–44), a monk by the name Ewostatewos (*ʾEwosṭatewos*; d. 1352) came to prominence in Tigray province by attacking the monastic and ecclesiastic establishment in the name of religious renewal, a phenomenon well known in European religious history too. He attracted many followers but also provoked strong resistance, including an attempt to stone him to death. He then left Ethiopia, travelling to Egypt, Cyprus and even Armenia (Lesser Armenia, that is, Cilicia), where he spent the last 14 years of his life. His main cause was advocating the celebration of the Sabbath as a holy day alongside the regular Sunday, both being called *Sänbätä Ayhud* and *Sänbätä Krəstiyan*, the "Sabbath of the Jews" and "Sabbath of the Christians". His attempt to win the backing of the metropolitan for the idea, was unsuccessful, and his wish to settle the issue with the Patriarch of Alexandria was also a reason for his leaving Ethiopia. However, in this effort success again eluded him. Nevertheless, his proposal was eventually accepted in Ethiopia, thanks to a change of mind on the part of the already mentioned King Zära Yaqob. Consequently the Ethiopian Christians were allowed to celebrate both sabbaths. This was one of the practices that 200 years later led the Jesuit missionaries, who had arrived in the country in 1557, to strongly criticise the Ethiopian Church for being, as they saw it, riddled with Jewish practices.[37]

In the case of Ewostateans, there is little evidence of extreme

[37] Cf. W. Witakowski, "Judiska inslag i det kristna Etiopien", [= 'The Jewish elements in the Christian Ethiopia], *Nordisk Judaistik* 17 (1996), 89–108.

persecution being launched or supported by the crown. The real source of the hostility seems to have lain within mainstream ecclesiastical and monastic circles. Nevertheless, the Ewostateans were temporaraily banned (ca. 1400) by King Dawit.[38]

This near neutral, or in the case of Zära Yaqob even positive, royal attitude to innovative ideas arising from monastic circles that might subsequently be labelled heretical, was, however, not the rule. Normally the kings did not have strong theological convictions and steered clear of internal church business, leaving disputes to be resolved by the metropolitan, whose duties included upholding the theological standards of the church. However, when theological disputes threatened political division, the monarch's reaction could be drastic. Such was the case when Yohannes IV (*Yoḥannəs*, 1872–89) sentenced monks to death for holding views that had been rejected as dissident by the Synod at Boru Meda in 1878.[39]

The Stephanites

Another example of a grassroots movement in the monastic community, that proved unamenable to resolution by the monastic establishment alone, was the Stephanites or Estifanosites. The name derives from monk Estifanos (Stephen, Eth. *Ǝsṭifanos*, c. 1397–1444), a native of Agame, in eastern Tigray, and an inmate of Däbrä Q^{w}oyäṣa monastery. He was consecrated as a deacon at the age of 19, and as a priest at the age of 30. Soon, however, he became disappointed with the rather lax discipline of the other monks, which was tolerated by the abbot. Estifanos, who worked hard in the monastery, including as a scribe and a teacher of novices, imposed on himself a more rigorous discipline, but denounced some extreme practices of other monks, practices that in his view arose from the monks' "vanity". His own rigorous ascetic practices soon drew some of the monks to him, but antagonised many others. The conflict in Däbrä Q^{w}oyäṣa ended with his

[38] G. Fiaccadori, 'Ewosṭateans', *EAE* 2 (2005) 467 (464–469).

[39] The case of the Roman Catholic missions that led to King Susənyos's conversion to Catholicism in 1624, but also to the Orthodox resistance headed by his son Fasilädäs, and Susənyos's abdication (1632), can perhaps be regarded as yet another example of this phenomenon, but these religious problems were brought about by external influences.

expulsion and settlement in a new place in Wägära (also in Tigray). After a failed attempt at reconciliation with Abbot Samuel, and temporary incarceration of Estifanos, he and his group settled near the Täkkäze river (western Tigray). Here an exemplary monastic community was established and organized on a different pattern. The monks were divided into groups of 12, each under the leadership of a *qäwami* or "administrator" (lit. *standing*), who was responsible for the monks' work, and two "overseers" responsible for spiritual guidance. The groups were totally self-sufficient, and adhered strictly to the ideal of poverty, including refusal to accept gifts. Not even food that exceeded one day's needs was allowed to be kept, and any surplus was distributed among the poor. Total equality among the monks was held as the ideal state of the life of the Stephanites.

It is not clear why they were still harassed and brought before the royal court even after they had removed themselves from the mainstream monasteries. That was, however, what happened, but King Täklä Maryam (1430–33) came to look favourably on Estifanos and his teachings. However, after the king died, his successor, the abovementioned Zära Yaqob, summoned Estifanos to the court again. We are informed that he refused to take part in passing judgement in civil matters and although he rebutted the accusations of his enemies, did so in non-diplomatic language, thereby antagonising the king. He also refused to fall in *proskynesis* before the king, arguing that such homage was due only to God. This time he was flogged, but eventually released. A few years later, in 1444, he was again summoned to the court and accused of crimes such as being an enemy of the Cross and of Mary. These were standard heretical charges in Ethiopia, but in the present state of our knowledge we cannot verify or deny if these accusations were true. In any case he was imprisoned and tortured, only to be released again later. This was not the last harassment he underwent, and he died soon thereafter (1444). Even then the persecution of his followers continued, and many of them were incarcerated and even lost their lives.

In the meantime, his supporters were losing ground in the face of pressure from the mainstream monastic community. They decided to keep a low profile and removed to more distance places. They suffered numerous tribulations, but survived under Abäkəräzun and Gäbrä Mäsiḫ, successors of Estifanos as abbots. The most important but out-of-the-way centre proved to be a monastery called Gundä Gunde,

although other names such as Däbrä Gar(i)zen and Däbrä Kaswa (from the name of a small river nearby) were also used.

Gundä Gunde lies in Tigray, but to the east and below the Abyssinian plateau, in the African Rift (fig. 7). It is an extremely hot area, inhabited by the nomadic Irob people, who belong to the Cushitic Saho. On account of its remoteness and isolation, the Estifanosites of this monastery – which was probably built in such a remote place on purpose[40] – were left practically undisturbed. Eventually, after some 200 years, in circumstances that are not clear, they were reconciled with the rest of the Ethiopian monastic community and the church. Today there are only four monks at Gundä Gunde, all of whom know little about the complicated history of their predecessors (see fig. 6).

What makes this monastery an important centre is that it contains a rather fascinating Stephanite library. In 2006 this library was digitised by an international (Swedish-Canadian-Russian/German) expedition and will soon be made accessible online.

The monks of Gundä Gunde are believed to have belonged to the intellectual elite of the Ethiopian monastic community. In addition to the regular work that was the source of their sustenance, many worked as copyists and painters. Consequently, the manuscripts copied and often illuminated by them can be found in various ecclesiastical and monastic libraries throughout Ethiopia. The artistic style of Gundä Gunde is easily recognized by the characteristic pear-shaped and twisted form of the figures' faces. Of course, the Gundä Gunde monastery was not the only one founded by the Estifanosites. In its vicinity, still in Agame but up on the plateau, there is the Asir Matira monastery, that also once housed Stephanite monks. Its library, which was also recently digitised, was smaller, containing some 80 manuscripts, in contrast to Gundä Gunde's 219 items.

In the past, scholars have been able to investigate individual Ethiopian manuscripts housed in collections in the West, which originate from a variety of churches and monasteries – sometimes, unfortunately, without an exact indication of provenance. Now, with the digitisation of the whole collection of at least one important monastery, scholars are uniquely positioned to investigate not only

[40] According to other sources, it was the inheritance of one of the monks who came from a rich family of local feudal lords.

individual texts, but also an entire collection. This should allow us to elucidate several aspects of the religious and intellectual life of the Gundä Gunde monastery, and also to draw conclusions about Ethiopian monasticism in general. This material will, it is hoped, be systematically explored in the near future.

In this brief introduction to Ethiopian monasticism only some of the problems associated with the topic could be adumbrated and set within the broader context of Christian Oriental monastic traditions. Further studies will certainly shed more light on the aspects of the topic that could not be addressed here.

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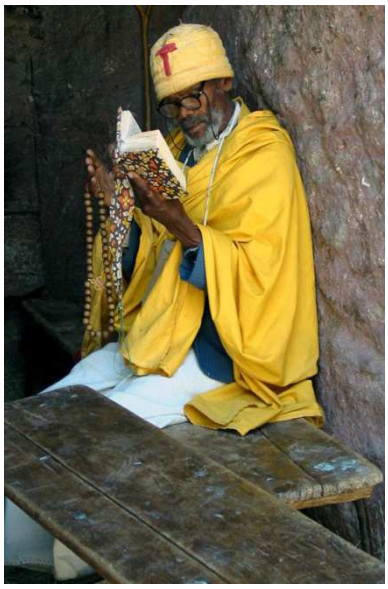

Figure 1 and *2*: Ethiopian nun and monk (courtesy of Cheryl Chanter and Jan Tromp)

Figure 3: The ascent to Däbrä Damo Monastery (Jan Tromp)

Figure 4a: The monastic fathers Antony, Macarius, Abba Sälama, Pantaleon; miniatures in the manuscript with the *Life of Abba Gärima*, late 17th c.; Abba Gärima Monastery, Tigre (Michael Gervers)

Figure 4b: The monastic fathers Liqanos, Alef, Gärima, Guba

Figure 5: Anthony prays and receives *askema* and *qob'* from Archangel Michael, wall painting in the church in Däbrä Marqos, Gojjam, 19th c. (Ewa Balicka-Witakowska)

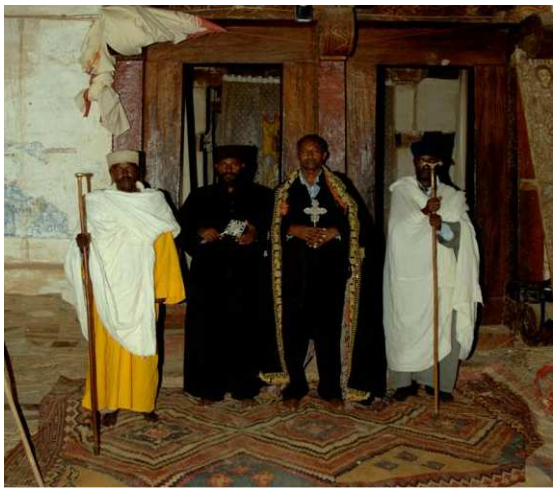

Figure 6: The monks at Gundä Gunde, 2006 (Michael Gervers)

Figure 7: General view of the monastery of Gundä Gunde (Michael Gervers)