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# Ethiopian Christian material culture: the international context. Aksum, the Mediterranean and the Syriac worlds in the fifth to seventh centuries

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## Introduction

The primary agency for social and cultural change during the period between the fifth and seventh centuries AD was arguably the Christian Church. The Church of this period was, however, essentially a fragmented community, still very much focused upon the eastern Mediterranean world, and centred upon the great Christian cities of Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Carthage. Each city was home to its own ideas and theologians-- 'brands' of Christianity--informed often by politics, charismatic ecclesiastics, national self-interest as well as issues of basic Christology.<sup>1</sup> These issues came to a head in the extraordinary Councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451. As a result, Christianity was more divided than ever, becoming even more cosmopolitan. Membership of the 'Christian club' conferred great benefits, and the brands of Christianity created across Asia and Africa reflected local socio-political concerns. This paper looks at how – in what is traditionally regarded as a 'peripheral' region – the Aksumite Empire of northern Ethiopia, already a major international trading player, created its Christian identity from a very cosmopolitan perspective. Using primarily an archaeological rather than an art-historical perspective, we will consider how Ethiopian Christianity became globalized, how it drew in influences from across the Late Antique and early medieval Christian world and how these influences are reflected in the organisation of early Ethiopian Christian material culture.

## Aksum: the international dimension

The Aksumite polity dominated what is now the northern Ethiopian/southern Eritrean highland region and the African Red Sea littoral between (approximately) the first-eighth centuries. Scholars now recognise its strong African antecedents, a complex socio-cultural phenomenon which was rooted in the eastern Sudanic-Nilotic worlds, rather than a continuum of the earlier, late-first millennium BC developments (sometimes given the cumbersome umbrella term 'pre-Aksumite culture') which owed much to cultural input from across the Red Sea in Southern Arabia. It is important that the 'African' roots of the Aksumite polity are stressed; historically the Ethiopian past has been created and viewed very much from an Asian-centric perspective.<sup>2</sup> By stressing the

African roots of Aksum, however, we must be careful that we do not lose sight of the important socio-cultural and ideological relationship between the Ethiopian/Eritrean highlands and the eastern Mediterranean (Fig. 1). Although the Aksumite achievement must be 'Africanised', it is also equally important that it also be placed very squarely within an eastern Mediterranean, Byzantine context, yet one which does not stress the traditional dichotomy of centre and periphery.

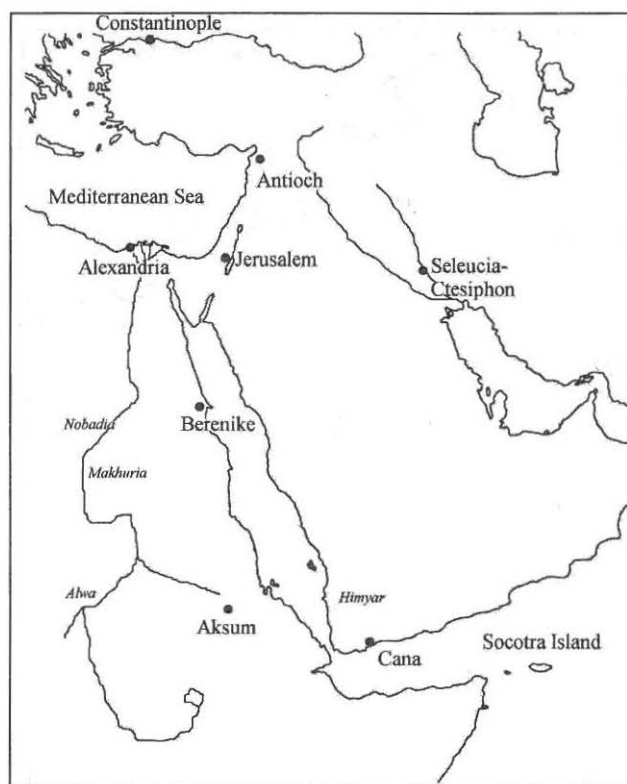


Fig. 1. Aksum and the Eastern Mediterranean

Because of its strategic position and as a source for luxury items much in demand in the Mediterranean world, the Horn of Africa was never an isolated geographical entity. Egyptian historical sources as far back as the Old Kingdom outline the trading relationship – utilising the Red Sea corridor – between Egypt and the Land of Punt.<sup>3</sup> This relationship continued into Ptolemaic

<sup>1</sup> For example, W. Friend, 'Nationalism as a factor in anti-Chalcedonian feeling in Egypt', *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982): 21-38.

<sup>2</sup> N. Finneran, 'The persistence of memory: national identity and

migrationism. A case study from African and Ethiopian archaeology', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 3 (2003): 21-37.

<sup>3</sup> J. Phillips, 'Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa', *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 423-457. Historians now agree that this

times with the need to acquire war elephants for the wars against the Seleucids, and later, within the context of the primacy of the Alexandrian (Coptic) Episcopate over the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, an often fraught ecclesiastical relationship was forged.<sup>4</sup> The distinctive trimetallic Aksumite coinage was minted from the end of the third to the seventh centuries; the weight of Aksumite gold coins was based upon the Roman standard in use prior to Diocletian's reforms in the 290s. The circulation of this coinage (gold coins have been found in Arabia and as far north as Israel) facilitated regional trade links, especially with the eastern Mediterranean world.<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia also looked eastwards; during Aksumite times (and before) there were extensive contacts with southern Arabia, the Sassanian Empire, India and possibly China. Recent archaeological work at the major Aksumite harbour at Adulis (Eritrea) as well as excavations at Aksum itself has cast new light upon the international material culture of the Aksumite world.

Marble used in church buildings from Adulis was shown to contain fragments of Proconnesian marble from the Sea of Marmara region (Turkey), as well as a form of marble known as 'grand antique', sourced from the French Pyrenees.<sup>6</sup> Surface survey around the ancient anchorages of Diodorus Island yielded evidence of first-century BC eastern sigillata A wares, as well as pieces sourced from the region of Aqaba (Jordan), eastern Mediterranean Late Roman 1, 2 and 3 wares as well as north African cylindrical amphorae, implying a long time-scale of interaction with the Roman world.<sup>7</sup> It is also expected that a thorough maritime archaeological reconnaissance of a recently discovered shipwreck (the Black Assarca wreck) off Dahlak Kebir will also shed extensive light on the nuances of international Aksumite maritime trade.<sup>8</sup>

At Aksum itself, archaeological evidence for long-distance exchange relationships has come to light from many excavated sites.<sup>9</sup> Local Aksumite pottery, whilst

drawing upon pre- and proto-Aksumite vessel forms and decoration, soon accumulated influences from abroad. This may be discerned in the trend towards everted and ledge rims from the early Aksumite period onwards.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that in many cases consumers – especially at D (domestic) Site, Kidane Mehret – recognised the inherent luxury value of the container as opposed to its contents.<sup>11</sup> In some cases the value of the container took on extra symbolism: children were buried in amphorae at Matarā and Adulis. These amphorae are very distinctive markers for trade between Aksum and the Mediterranean worlds; Syrian-origin amphorae have been excavated from fourth- to fifth-century contexts from Ona Negast, Beta Giyorgis, and others suggest a Gaulish origin.<sup>12</sup> One Aksumite export above others was very highly prized. Concerted efforts by the Romans to source new markets for raw ivory were triggered by the fall off in north African ivory supply during the first century.<sup>13</sup> Soon Aksumite ivory was in great demand within the Mediterranean; it is even possible that the ivory chair or throne back excavated within the burial context of the Tomb of the Brick Arches may have indirectly influenced Byzantine craftsmen (the sixth-century Maximian's chair at Ravenna, Italy being such an example).<sup>14</sup>

Archaeological evidence for trading relations between Aksum and points further east is patchy. The discovery of a hoard of Indian coins from the Kushan kingdom at the monastery of Debra Damo is intriguing if opaque. The monastery itself was not founded until the sixth century and the coins themselves date from around the second century.<sup>15</sup> Aksumite pottery has also been identified at Kamrej, Gujarat, and beads discovered in funerary contexts at Aksum (for example, the Tomb of the Brick Arches) may betray an Indian origin.<sup>16</sup> Evidence for direct links with China is less clear cut. Sergew suggests that the region of 'Huang-Chi' noted by chroniclers of the Han dynasty (AD 220-589) as an important trading centre lying '12 months' journey, or 30,000 *li*' westwards could be identified with Aksum.<sup>17</sup> Chinese material at Aksum

place must have been located along the Red Sea coast; K. Kitchen, 'Punt and how to get there', *Orientalia* 40 (1971): 184-207.

<sup>4</sup> S. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria: the Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia* (Warsaw, Za's Pan, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> S. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp. 180ff; W. Hahn, 'Aksumite numismatics: a critical survey of recent research', *Révue Numismatique* 6 (2000): 281-311.

<sup>6</sup> D. Habtemichael, Y. Gebreyesus, D. Peacock and L. Blue, *The Eritro-British Project at Adulis: Interim Report 2004* (Asmara and Southampton, University of Southampton, 2004); M. Heldman, 'Early Byzantine sculptural fragments from Adulis', *Études Éthiopiennes* 1 (1994): 239-252.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Geresus, R. Russom, D. Peacock, L. Blue, D. Glazier, J. Whitewright and J. Phillips 2005. *The Eritro-British Project at Adulis: Interim Report 2005* (Asmara and Southampton, University of Southampton, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> R. Pedersen, 'Under the Erythraean Sea: an ancient shipwreck in Eritrea', *International journal of Nautical Archaeology Quarterly* 27 (2000): 3-13.

<sup>9</sup> R. Tomber, 'Troglodites and Trogodites: exploring interaction on the Red Sea during the Roman Period', in *People of the Red Sea: Proceedings of Red Sea Project II*, ed. J. Starkey (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports International Series 1395 / Society for Arabian Studies Monograph 3, 2005), pp. 41-49.

<sup>10</sup> D. Phillipson, *Archaeology at Aksum 1993-1997* (2 vols.) (London and Nairobi, Society of Antiquaries of London/British Institute in Eastern Africa, 2000), p. 456.

<sup>11</sup> Phillipson, p. 484.

<sup>12</sup> R. Fattovich and K. Bard, 'Scavi archeologici nella zona di Aksum. Ona Enda Aboi Zegue e Ona Negast', *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 39 (1997): 49-70; K. Bard, R. Fattovich, A. Manzo and C. Perlingieri, 'Archaeological investigations at Beta Giyorgis, Aksum, Ethiopia', *Journal of Field Archaeology* 24 (1997): 387-404.

<sup>13</sup> J. Phillips, 'Aksum and the ivory trade: new evidence', *Orbis Aethiopicus: Äthiopien und seine Nachbarn* (Gdansk, Gdansk Archaeological Museum, 1997), pp. 75-84.

<sup>14</sup> Phillipson, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> A. Mordini, 'Gli aurei Kushana del convento Dabra Damo', in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Etiopici (Roma 2-4 Aprile 1959)* (Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1960), pp. 249-254.

<sup>16</sup> S. Gupta, P. Gupta, T. Garge, R. Pandey, A. Geetali and S. Gupta, 'On the fast track of the *Periplus*: excavations at Kamrej, 2003', *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology* 1 (2004): 9-33; Phillipson, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press, 1972), p. 71. A. Hermann, 'Ein alter Seeverkehr zwischen Abessinien und süd-China bis zum Beginn unserer Zeitrechnung', *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für*

may possibly be represented by a small forged iron and silver piece from Chamber D in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, but in truth there is little that constitutes hard archaeological evidence for a long-lasting trading relationship between Africa and China.<sup>18</sup>

The expansion of Islam through the Red Sea region in the seventh century effectively cut off Aksum from its co-religionists in the eastern Mediterranean, and also affected the regional trade dynamic. In time, the Red Sea ports lost their importance, and the focus of Indian Ocean trade fell, from the ninth century onwards, upon the coastal ports of the region termed *Zanj* by Arab geographers, or more popularly known as the Swahili Coast.<sup>19</sup> This, then, is a very broad and cursory overview of the key economic factors which lead us to define an internationalised economy for Ethiopia in Late Antiquity, an economic relationship based upon the import and export of materials aimed primarily at elite consumption. This contribution, however, seeks to take a different orientation, away from 'goods', be they exotic or mundane, and looks at the transmission of ideas, cosmology, perhaps even psychology. This is best understood in the shape of the 'export' of the Syrian (west-Syrian-rite) brand of Christianity from the eastern Mediterranean into the court of King Ezana of Aksum in the mid-fourth century, an export which was subsequently reinforced with the arrival of the Syrian Nine Saints in the fifth century, a phenomenon which witnessed the Christianisation of the countryside under the aegis of an eremitic monastic system based upon a Syrian, rather than Egyptian model.

In this paper, I seek to move away from the historical facts (which we shall briefly outline below) towards a more archaeological perspective. This route demands a consideration of the material culture traces of Syrian monasticism within an Ethiopian context; it demands a critique of how we may actually recognise (if it is possible) a Syrian brand of eremitic monasticism in the archaeological record, and how this organisation of space impacted upon the vernacular Ethiopian tradition. In short, is it possible to recognise, from an archaeological perspective, the 'global' flavour of the organisation of Ethiopian Christian material culture during this very important and formative period in the creation of a Christian Ethiopian identity? Before attempting to answer this question, a consideration of the wider historical framework is required.

### Christianising Ethiopia: historical and archaeological perspectives

Rufinus' (c. 345-410) account of the introduction of Christianity to the Aksumite court is important given that

it is virtually contemporary with the events it describes, being written in around 410, some sixty years after the events it describes.<sup>20</sup> Rufinus states that two Syrian brothers from Tyre (Fruventius and Aedesius) were rescued from a shipwreck on the Red Sea coast and were taken to the court of the king of Aksum. Impressing the king with his faith, Fruventius had himself ordained bishop for Ethiopia by the Alexandrian Patriarch, Athanasius, and returned to undertake the conversion of the king and his court.<sup>21</sup> This is commonly suggested to have occurred in the 340s, although the nature of Ezana's 'conversion' is still open to question.<sup>22</sup> The Christianisation of the Aksumite court was thus accomplished through the agency of the twin powers of eastern Christendom: Syria and Alexandria, and subsequently the regions within which the great Christological controversy 'monophysitism' (itself an inaccurate label) and which would come to a head at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, found most support. There were other politico-ideological ramifications too; according to Athanasius' *Apologia ad Constantium Imperatorem*, Constantius II wrote a letter to the Aksumite co-rulers 'Ezana and Shaizana' demanding that they side with him in his support for the doctrine of Arianism. He urged that they promote his candidate for the Alexandrian Patriarchate, the Arian George of Capadocia against Athanasius himself. This letter indicates that even within a short time, the Christian Ethiopian court was perceived as being a useful ally to the Eastern Roman emperors. Whilst there may have been obvious theological support for Arianism at the Imperial court, surely wider geopolitical concerns would play a part too.<sup>23</sup>

From an archaeological perspective the framework for conversion is what we might term a 'top down' model of conversion.<sup>24</sup> Historical parallels would include: the conversion of the medieval Nubian states in the sixth century; the conversion of the Caucasian kingdoms in Late Antiquity or the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England in the early seventh century.<sup>25</sup> This would contrast with the process of conversion visible in the Roman Empire

<sup>20</sup> J-P Migne (ed.) *Rufinus Historia Ecclesiastica* PL 21, 478-9, (Paris, 1849).

<sup>21</sup> This established the link between the Ethiopian and Coptic churches which lasted until autocephaly for the former in the 1950s. B. Dombrowski and F. Dombrowski, 'Fruventius/Abba Salama: Zu den Nachrichten über die Anfänge des Christentums in Äthiopien', *Oriens Christianus* 68 (1984): 114-169.

<sup>22</sup> S. Munro-Hay, 'The dating of Ezana and Fruventius', *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 32 (1990): 111-127; S. Kaplan, 'Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13 (1982): 101-109.

<sup>23</sup> In any event Arianism was essentially a spent force after the Council of Constantinople in 381. D. Rankin, 'Arianism', in *The Early Christian World*, ed. P. Esler (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 975-1004.

<sup>24</sup> N. Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa* (Stroud, Tempus, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> D. Edwards, 'The Christianisation of Nubia: some pointers', *Sudan and Nubia* 5 (2001): 89-96. For the Anglo-Saxon conversion, see P. Urbaneczyk, 'The politics of conversion in north-central Europe', in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe AD 300-1300* ed. M. Carver (York, York Medieval Press, 2003), pp. 15-27.

*Erdkunde* (1913): 553-561. G. Fiaccadori, 'Teofilo Indiano pt II', *Studi Classici e Orientali* 34 (1984): 271-308.

<sup>18</sup> Phillipson, p. 114.

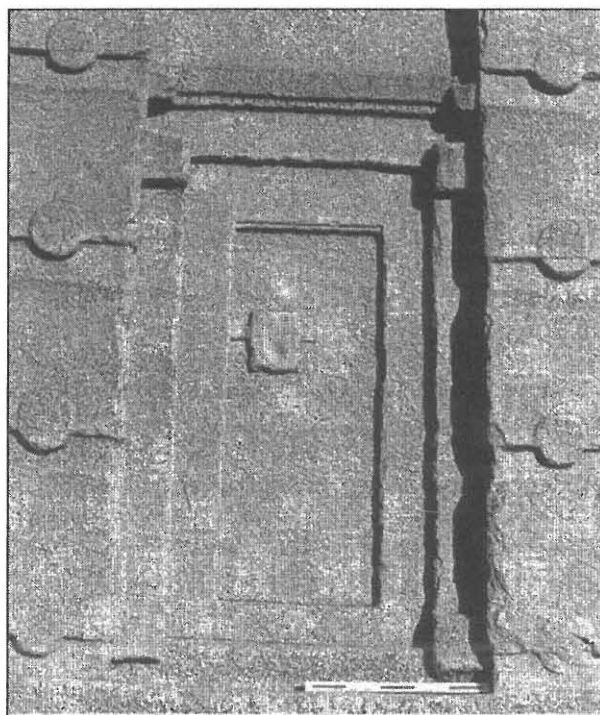
<sup>19</sup> This was the *Azania* of antiquity; that is, the littoral of modern Kenya and Tanzania.



prior to 312. Here Christianity was a proscribed religion and the archaeological visibility of its earliest manifestations, such as in Egypt, would be complex and opaque.<sup>26</sup> The archaeological implications of ‘top down’ conversion would suggest a fairly immediate impact upon material culture and perception of space.<sup>27</sup>

Trilingual monumental inscriptions reveal a change in cosmological outlook: one refers to ‘Lord of Heaven’, a god in the singular and removes references to the Aksumite war god Mahrem. It is interesting too that while the Ethiopic version tends to tone down the Christian message, the Greek version is more overt in its Christian message.<sup>28</sup> The implication is clear: the message for the outside world is that Aksum is solidly Christian. The message for local consumption, however, is less equivocal, hedging more towards, perhaps, a period of ideological co-existence. Changes in coinage also reflect conversion; an issue of king *MHDYS* (successor of Ezana after c. 350) bears a direct Ge’ez (classical Ethiopic) translation of the vision of Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge: ‘by this sign (the cross) you will conquer’. As the coinage was intended for use internationally, it made sense to stress very heavily a Christian identity. This was a message riddled with propaganda value.

Early Aksumite ecclesiastical architecture reflects a strong local architectural tradition as well as a potential Syrian inheritance rather than any northern African influence. As is often noted elsewhere in northern Africa (particularly in Egypt pharaonic and Ptolemaic temples), Asia and also Late Antique and early medieval Europe, the new Aksumite churches often took over pre-existing sacred sites. De Contenson notes that the church of Enda Cherqos near the pre-Aksumite cultic centre of Hawelti-Melazzo appears to incorporate architectural features (including Sabaeen inscriptions) from an adjacent temple structure, and there are many other examples of strong spatial associations between Aksumite churches and pre-Christian sacred sites.<sup>29</sup> Aksumite church architecture appears to combine the standard basilican model prevalent in the Christian world during this with a strong local architectural flavour derived from secular building and graphically illustrated (albeit in a skeuomorphic manner) by the depiction of multi-storied buildings on the faces of the decorated stelae 1-3 at Aksum (Fig. 2). Particular interest attaches to the use of wooden bosses or through-ties (‘monkey heads’) in linear registers across the facades of the buildings. In plan the walls are indented. The only excavated Christian churches within



**Fig. 2. Detail of the decoration on the base of stela 3 at Aksum showing distinctive Aksumite door frame and wooden bosses (‘monkey heads’). This pre-Christian architectural style is reused in later church architecture (Photo: Niall Finneran)**

the Aksum landscape are those from Beta Giyorgis and Wuchate Golo; the churches built on the southern flanks of Beta Giyorgis correspond to the areas identified by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition as ‘Ruinen E and F’.<sup>30</sup> The basilica at Beta Giyorgis ‘Superiore’ possesses the sort of recessed architecture that one finds on the large palace buildings; special interest also attaches to the carved column bases as well as the ornate water spouts which recall the features on the wine presses nearby at Adi Tsehafi.

A somewhat later structure associated with an enclosure wall excavated at the area of Wuchate Golo north-west of Aksum would appear to be a rectangular basilican church with an associated cistern dating, on the basis of associated coinage, to the seventh or eighth centuries.<sup>31</sup> The three-aisled Aksumite basilica at Enda Cherqos also incorporates a baptistery installation, which incorporates a walk-in tank located in the southern flanking room of the apse, a configuration which is suggested by the excavator to follow Syrian practice (although it is, in fact a generic feature of eastern Mediterranean church architecture), and which is also reflected at the Aksumite churches of Adulis and Yeha.<sup>32</sup> The question of the baptistery is important. Large baptisteries with stairs suggest that

<sup>26</sup> E.g. E. Wipszycka, ‘La Christianisation de l’Égypte aux IV<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles. Aspects sociaux et éthiques’, *Aegyptus* 68 (1988): 117-166.

<sup>27</sup> N. Finneran, ‘Syncretism of space? The Christianisation of the Ethiopian landscape’, in *Landscape Archaeology*, eds. H. Lewis and S. Semple (Oxford, British Archaeological Reports International Series, in press).

<sup>28</sup> S. Uhlig, ‘Eine trilinguale Ezana-Inschrift’, *Aethiopica* 4 (2001): 7-31.

<sup>29</sup> H. De Contenson, ‘Les fouilles à Ouchatei Golo près d’Axoum en 1958’, *Annales d’Ethiopia* 4 (1961): 3-16.

<sup>30</sup> L. Ricci and R. Fattovich, ‘Scavi archeologici nella zona di Aksum B. Beta Giyorgis’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 31 (1987): 123-99.

<sup>31</sup> De Contenson, ‘Les fouilles à Ouchatei Golo’.

<sup>32</sup> H. De Contenson, ‘Les fouilles à Haulti-Melazo’, *Annales d’Ethiopia* 4 (1961): 39-60.

adults were being regularly baptised, indicating that the structure dates from an initial period of conversion of the wider population. It is possible, however, that the associated cistern may not be a baptistery. At Wuchate Golo there are no steps to allow access to the tank, and its use may mirror the tradition of the use of the *laqqan* (Epiphany) and *mandantum* (Maundy) tanks of Coptic tradition. An analogue to this form of ceremony is found in the Ethiopian Timkat Epiphany ritual, a tradition which may betoken some deep-seated syncretic motif for the veneration of natural springs and water.<sup>33</sup>

Developments in elite Aksumite tomb architecture also reflect a Christian outlook. The Tomb of the False Door at Aksum is probably very early Christian in date, and although losing the stela as a grave marker, in terms of architecture it still pays homage to the tradition of Aksumite monumental architecture rather than any external Christian tradition. The tombs of Kaleb and Gebra Masqal clearly embody elements of a more Christianised style of tomb architecture. Aspects of their monumentality emphasise a break with pre-Christian Aksumite funerary tradition; firstly they are removed from the urban focus, located two kilometres up hill from the town – and it may be important that they are sited in close proximity to the monastery of Abba Liqanos.<sup>34</sup> Secondly their ground plan and structure clearly reflects the organisation of space of a Christian basilica. They are fundamentally spatially different from any tomb architecture hitherto seen at Aksum, and although the identity of the individuals who would have been interred here is still open to question, their scale and embellishment surely suggests a royal tomb.

Early Christian Aksumite architecture presents a melange, as far as we can tell, of local, probably secular, styles of architecture and the very standardised basilican plan, the closest analogues being those of the eastern Mediterranean, specifically Syria, as suggested by the use of rooms flanking the apse (the *prothesis* and *diakonikon*; Fig. 3). We cannot, at this stage, really trace any evidence of a strong Egyptianising influence. During the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt, the basilican form predominated in the main urban centres, and later on within the monastery. The distinctive features of Coptic church architecture – the western return aisle, three altars and a pronounced spatial dichotomy between the *naos* and *heikal* (sanctuary), really only develop after the Islamic conquest in the mid-late seventh century.<sup>35</sup> Looking

elsewhere along the Nile, it is only possible to discern very vague similarities in church design.

The basic developmental Nubian church typology as defined by William Adams on the basis of the Nobatian material sees a gradual trend away from the standard basilican format (type 1, c. 550-750), towards an evolved and distinctly Nubian form of church building in the later centuries of the first millennium AD (Adams' type 3 and 4 churches) which witnesses a gradual decrease in size and naos area relative to the size of the sanctuary, and the development of a range of rooms within the narthex.<sup>36</sup> Makhurian churches (such as the Church of the Granite Columns and the Cruciform church at Old Dongola) being more centralised in character, may be suggestive of a stronger Byzantine influence, perhaps mirroring the form of the Palestinian *martyria*.<sup>37</sup> It is in any event virtually impossible in most cases to actually differentiate, on the basis of architectural plans alone, the difference between what constitutes an anti-Chalcedonian or Chalcedonian church.<sup>38</sup>

It is noticeable that the Nubian (and Coptic) trend towards a closing off of the sanctuary by means of an iconostasis or *Heikal* screen is reflected in Ethiopia but seemingly at a much later date. Although basically basilican in plan, the medieval Ethiopian church (as perhaps best exemplified by the rock-hewn churches of Tigray) exhibits a bewildering array of forms.<sup>39</sup> The churches develop a tripartite plan, a form of internal organisation which places the sanctuary, holy of holies (or *maqdas*) beyond the eyes of the congregation. Why do we find this trend in the eastern churches towards this closing off, this desire for secrecy? Suggestions that the basic Ethiopian church tripartite church division represents a copy of the Judaic temple may not be entirely wide of the mark. Perhaps there is a deep, ingrained Semitic trend in cultic architecture to delineating the sacred from the secular. Such an idea takes the church away from the idea of a meeting place, the *domus ecclesiae*, back to the notion of the temple as a house of the God.

<sup>36</sup> W. Adams, 'Architectural Evolution of the Nubian Church, 500-1400 AD', *Journal of the American Research Centre in Egypt* 4 (1965): 87-139.

<sup>37</sup> S. Jakobielski, 'Nubian Christian Architecture', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 108 (1982): 33-48. The account suggests that an anti-Chalcedonian mission sponsored by Theodora, Justinian's consort, evangelised the kingdom of Nobatia in the north and Alwa in the south; Justinian's pro-Chalcedonian mission evangelised the middle kingdom, Makhuria. The picture of Christian conversion in the middle Nile is undoubtedly more complex. The *martyria* might reflect the picture of mission activity in the Middle Nile suggested by the (admittedly) partisan John of Ephesus. Edwards.

<sup>38</sup> cf. M. Mundell, 'Monophysite Church Decoration', in *Iconoclasm*, eds. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1977), pp. 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> D. Buxton, 'The rock-hewn and other medieval churches of Tigre province, Ethiopia', *Archaeologia* 103 (1971): 33-100.

<sup>33</sup> N. Finneran, 'Holy waters: Pre-Christian and Christian water association in Ethiopia. An archaeological landscape perspective', in *The Archaeology of Water: Social and Ritual dimensions*, ed. F. Stevens (London, University College London Monographs in Archaeology, in press).

<sup>34</sup> Although note that the presence of possibly earlier shaft tombs in the vicinity might suggest that this area was used as some form of cemetery (probably non-elite) in pre-Christian times; F. Anfray, 'L'Archéologie d'Axoum en 1972', *Paideuma* 18 (1972): 60-78.

<sup>35</sup> P. Grossman, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, (Leiden, Brill, 2002).

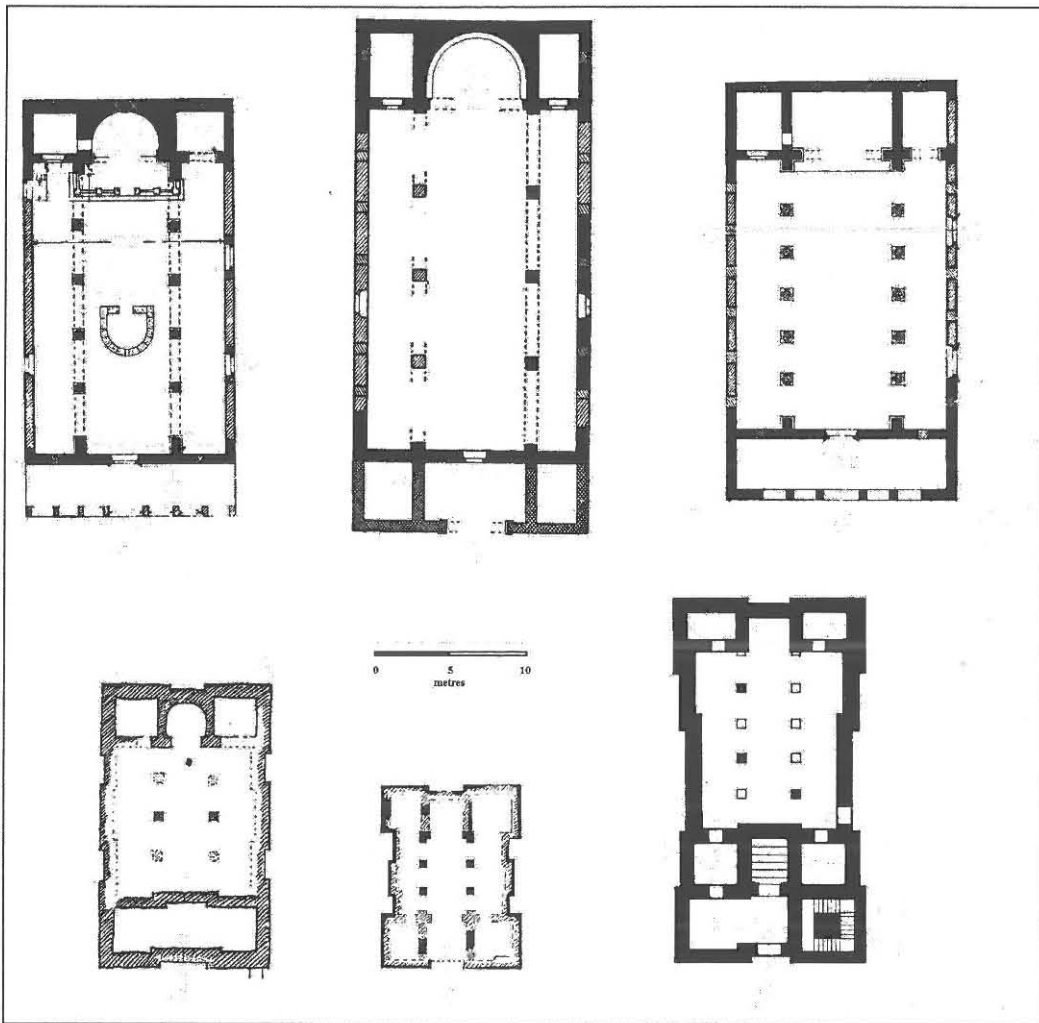


Fig. 3. Comparison between the Syrian basilica (top row) and the indented plan of the Aksumite basilica (below). Top row left to right: Karab Shams; Jebel Hauran; Bakirha east church (all fourth-sixth centuries). Bottom row left to right: Adulis; Qohaito; Aksum Tomb of Kaleb (Redrawn after Buxton 1971 fig. 36).

The twin strands of historical and archaeological evidence tell us much about the international factors present in the earliest phases of Christianity at the court of Aksum in the fourth-fifth centuries. In the first place, the available evidence suggests that Christianity was an urban phenomenon, churches are only found in major urban centres; the countryside was thus still predominantly 'pagan'. Secondly, the King essentially saw Christianity as a useful tool in his attempt at building international relations; it gained him 'membership' of an exclusive international cultural network focused upon the eastern Mediterranean (this much is clear from the maintenance of the international gold Aksumite coinage with its extensive iconographic stress upon 'being Christian' and its basis upon the Roman coinage standard). Thirdly, the cultural 'flavour' of Ethiopian Christianity was shaped by historical circumstance, that is, a strong Syrian connection, yet also embraced a great deal of local, syncretic variation. Let us now move on to the fifth and sixth centuries, and to a consideration of the

development of Ethiopian Christian material culture during a very eventful period.

#### Ethiopia and the world in the fifth-sixth centuries

During the fifth and sixth centuries we see Aksum take on a more overt international role in terms of foreign policy, often at the behest of the Byzantine authorities in Constantinople.<sup>40</sup> High-level political dialogue and diplomacy between the Roman and Aksumite courts showed just how well regarded the newly-Christian kingdom was; the sixth-century Byzantine ambassador, Nonnosus has left us an account (via the historian John

<sup>40</sup> We must assume that the notional adherence of the Ethiopian Church to the anti-Chalcedonian position was over-ridden by greater political concerns. This position contrasts with the political role of the Patriarchs of the Church of the East at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, whose allegiance to the Sassanian Empire often brought them into conflict with the Christians of the West.



Malalas) of the court at Aksum.<sup>41</sup> The historian Procopius tells us that the Byzantine Emperor Justinian wrote to king Kaleb of Aksum asking him to take military action against Dhu Nuwas, King of the Himyarites in southwestern Arabia, who was persecuting Christians there. Kaleb's inscription of victory is to be found at Marib, Yemen.<sup>42</sup> Stephanos of Byzantium included Ethiopians in his geographical encyclopedia *Ethnikon*, a testament to the fact that they were now regarded as more than human curiosities.<sup>43</sup>

The events of the council of Chalcedon in 451 must have clearly impacted upon Ethiopian Christian material culture, although it is questionable whether the Ethiopian church was actually represented there.<sup>44</sup> In any case, the Ethiopian church was ecclesiastically tied to the Coptic Patriarch at Alexandria, and it was this factor rather than any ingrained, local theological interpretation of the Christological controversy that kept the church here, theologically at least, beyond the fringes of Byzantium and in the anti-Chalcedonian 'camp'.<sup>45</sup> The period from the accession of Ezana to Kaleb also marks the zenith of Aksumite political and military power. Ezana, importantly, retained the identity as King of Arabia, organising extensive tribute-gathering expeditions (as would be suggested by his inscriptions at Aksum as well as those from Meroë). The author of the inscription at Adulis noted by Cosmas Indicopleustes in his *Christian Topography* is unknown, but was evidently a king of great military capability, for he claimed domains as far as the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome – which we may assume to be somewhere in the region of the Gulf of Aqaba in the northern Red Sea.<sup>46</sup> With the success of the expedition, southern Arabia was now brought under more direct political control of Aksum with the appointment of a 'viceroy', Sumyafa Ashwa.<sup>47</sup> Christianity was momentarily re-established in an Ethiopian model within southern Arabia; in 576 Abreha (Kaleb) built a cathedral at his new capital of Sana. This structure became known as al-Qalis, an Arabic corruption of the Greek word

*ecclesia*.<sup>48</sup> Sergew suggests that Greek architects were employed in its building and was most unlike any Ethiopian church, taking on more of a centralised form in the manner of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople.<sup>49</sup>

Another important historical source, the sixth-century Syriac Acts of Gregentius, seems to stress, however, that the Church of South Arabia was very much based upon Syriac (eastern 'Nestorian' and western 'Jacobite' (*sic*)) traditions rather than an implanted Ethiopian model.<sup>50</sup> It is even probable that four different 'churches' were at work in this area: the Byzantine, the Ethiopian, the West Syrian and the East Syrian; the competing motivations would have been political (even colonial) in the case of the former two churches, the case of the latter two very much an unstructured mission expansion. The island of Socotra was also annexed by Aksum, and a bishop was reported here by Cosmas Indicopleustes, but when Marco Polo arrived in the twelfth century he noted that the Christians there swore allegiance to the see of Seleucia Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, thus implying membership of the eastern Syriac tradition, the Persian Church of the East.<sup>51</sup> If we take South Arabia as an example, the process of Christianisation could be used to support political and military colonialism, or, in the case of the Syriac churches, a much freer, more amorphous and less structured mission ethic. The distribution of east-Syrian monasteries through the Gulf, for instance (and incidentally also along the Silk Road) implies a mission process, free of political control and tied explicitly to the regional trade routes. It is during this period of extension of Aksumite political and military control into Arabia that we see, in essence, a re-Christianisation of the Ethiopian landscape via a generic Syriac pattern of monasticism. Hitherto, whilst the urban elite of Aksum had engaged with Christianity, a facet which gave them membership of an international 'club', and used this Christian identity as a justification for extension of political and military power, the Aksumite countryside was still largely a non-Christian preserve. This changed with the creation of a Christian monastic movement inspired, I believe, directly by the rural Syrian hermit.

### 'The Nine Saints'

Apart from the Frumentius connection – which in any case ultimately became the vehicle for Alexandrian, Egyptian, political control of the Ethiopian church – there is actually little direct evidence for relations between Aksum and Syria. Vague suggestions of Syrian influences in the art and architecture of the pre-Aksumite

<sup>41</sup> Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, 15ff.

<sup>42</sup> M. Kamil, 'An Ethiopic Inscription found at Marib', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 56-7.

<sup>43</sup> D. Levine (ed.), *Greater Ethiopia: the Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2000), p. 3. The Greeks had always seen Ethiopians as being primitive; cf. Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> M. Heldman, 'The Kibran Gospels: Ethiopia and Byzantium', in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies 5 (session A, December 19-22 1977, Nice, France; session B April 13-16 1978, Chicago, USA) Session B proceedings* ed. R. Hess (Chicago, Northwestern University, 1978), pp. 359-372; E. Honigmann, 'Un évêque d'Adulis au Concile du Chalcedon?' *Byzantion* 20 (1950): 295-301.

<sup>45</sup> This rather falsely implies a monolithic bloc of national churches from Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia and Armenia.

<sup>46</sup> L. Cansdale, 'Cosmas Indicopleustes: merchant and traveller', in *Akten des XII Internationalen Kongress für Christliche Archäologie Studia di Antica Cristiana LII* (Aschendorffsche, Munster, 1995), pp. 600-616; Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, p. 77; L. Kirwan, 'The *Christian Topography* and the Kingdom of Axum', *Geographical Journal* 138 (1972): 163-173.

<sup>47</sup> Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, p. 88.

<sup>48</sup> Its remains are still to be found within the Great Mosque at Sana'a, Jami al Kabir.

<sup>49</sup> Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 150.

<sup>50</sup> V. Christides, 'The Himyarite-Ethiopian war and the Ethiopian occupation of South Arabia in the Acts of Gregentius (circa 530 AD)', *Annales d'Ethiopie* 9 (1972): 115-146.

<sup>51</sup> I. Gillman and H-J. Klimkeit, *Christianity in Asia before AD1500* (Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1999), p. 81.

and Aksumite periods remain unproven.<sup>52</sup> Aurelian is said by the *Historia Augusta* to have captured Aksumite prisoners when he defeated the revolt of Zenobia of Palmyra (270-5) but this does not suggest a formal degree of Aksumite support for Palmyra.<sup>53</sup> The individuals concerned were probably mercenaries. The Syriac influence (by this I mean the Syrian Christian) is suggested to be most overt within the initial efforts at translating the Bible into Ethiopic from Syriac originals; and there is a rich tradition of Ethiopic church music – based upon St Yared’s chant – within which there are a number of terms with roots in Syriac literary tradition.<sup>54</sup> The real nature of Syriac influence upon the literature of early Christian Ethiopia is far from as clear as traditional historical scholarship would actually imply.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to unravel the connections between Syriac and Ge’ez terminology as both are Semitic languages and words have similar roots.<sup>56</sup> The arrival of the Nine Saints, however, introduces another possible conduit for Syriac influence.

In the fifth century, during the reign of Ella Amida, (Kaleb’s grandfather) Ethiopian tradition tells of the arrival of nine pious holy men from Syria who introduced monasticism into Ethiopia and effectively evangelised the rural hinterlands of Aksum, finally cementing the domination of Christianity at all levels of Aksumite society. The places of origin of these saints are given in the Ethiopian synaxarion as well as their hagiographies (see below), and they clearly indicate an eastern Mediterranean origin, perhaps more precisely Anatolia and Antioch.<sup>57</sup> Also at this time another group of evangelisers known as the *Sadqan* (‘righteous ones’) were active in southern Eritrea (Shimazana) where a number suffered martyrdom at Matara; this might imply that the spread of Christianity through the polity was still very localised, and that the inhabitants of Matara may have enjoyed a degree of local autonomy.<sup>58</sup> The implication from most authors is that these are holy men fleeing persecution by the pro-Chalcedonian church authorities within the Byzantine Empire, but this appears unlikely. Who were they and what were their motives for coming so far south?

<sup>52</sup> E.g. H. De Contenson, ‘Les monuments d’art sudarabe découverts sur le site de Haoulti (Ethiopie) en 1959’, *Syria* 39 (1962): 64-87.

<sup>53</sup> Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> C. Sumner, ‘The Ethiopic Liturgy: an analysis’, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1 (1963): 40-46.

<sup>55</sup> e.g. C. Conti-Rossini, *Storia d’Etiopia* (Milan, Officina d’Arte Grafica A. Lucini, 1928), pp. 155ff.; E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London, British Academy, 1968).

<sup>56</sup> P. Marassini, ‘Some considerations on the problem of ‘Syriac influences’ on Aksumite Ethiopia’, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23 (1990): 35-46.

<sup>57</sup> E.g. E. Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church: a translation of the Ethiopic Synaxarium* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1928), vol 1, pp. 116-118; Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 116; see below, table 1.

<sup>58</sup> Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 23; Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 128, note 20.

In truth, we know very little about these individuals whose names and places of origin are given below. Their hagiographies are presented in the traditional Ethiopic *gädl* (plural *gädlät*; the noun may be translated as the ‘struggles’). In terms of literary tradition the *gädl* very much resembles the *Vitae* of western Christian tradition. A striking parallel, in fact, may be found in the accounts of the missionary saints of early medieval Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, which mix the mundane with the miraculous.<sup>59</sup> Of particular importance for reconstructing the deeds of the Nine Saints are three translated hagiographies of saints Pântallewon, Arägawi and Afse: the *gädl Pântallewon*; *gädl Arägawi* and *gädl Afse*.<sup>60</sup> It is important to recognise that the *gädl* may not be a reliable or accurate account of the actions of the saint; they were written mainly in the post-Zagwe period (that is, the thirteenth century onwards) and are thus almost 800 years out of date. We should approach the historical accounts with a degree of caution, but it is clear that the impact of these individuals, however, was profound. Their images adorn a number of Ethiopian churches (Fig. 4) and they have become some of the most revered saints of the Ethiopian Church. We cannot be sure that this was in fact an organised, concerted missionary effort; there are no real indications apart from a few later historical sources that the nine saints came as one in some unified purpose. As far as we can see, there are no events that would imply a deeper political motivation on the part of the Byzantine court, or the ecclesiastical authorities at Antioch, to send the missionaries. Their purpose and goals remain opaque.

**Table 1: The places of origin of the ‘Nine Saints’**

Arägawi:	<i>Rom/Romya (generic Ethiopic and Arabic term for Byzantine Empire)</i>
Pântallewon:	<i>Rom/Romya</i>
Gäräma:	<i>Rom/Romya</i>
Liqanos:	<i>Qwestentenya (Constantinople)</i>
Guba:	<i>Qelqeya (Cilicia)</i>
Afse:	<i>Esya (Asia)</i>
Sehma:	Antioch
Alef:	Caesarea
Yemata:	<i>Qosyat (unidentified)</i>

It is also clear that there are problems identifying these individuals, in fact, as Syrians. The places of origin summarised above do not actually indicate a specific Syrian homeland for these individuals. Sergew points out that Liqanos and Pântallewon are actually Greek names;

<sup>59</sup> N. Finneran, ‘Extending the Christian Frontier in late antiquity: Monks, missions, monasteries and the Christianisation of space. Towards a wider chronological and geographical context for the archaeology of mission’, *Ethnohistory*, in press.

<sup>60</sup> For the *gädl Pântallewon*: C. Conti-Rossini, *Vitae Sanctorum Antiquiorum I, Acta Yared et Pantalewon*; *CSCO Scriptores Aethiopici volume 10* (Leuven, 1955). For the *gädl Arägawi*: I. Guidi, ‘Il Gadla Arägawi’, *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei* (serie 5, vol. 2., 1896). For the *gädl Afse*: Sergew Hable Selassie, ‘New historical elements in the Gedle Afse’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 200-203.



Fig. 4. Depiction of the Nine Saints, Abuna Yemata, Guh, Gheralta (Photo: Niall Finneran).

the others either Aramaic or Syriac (it is hard to differentiate) implying a place of origin within Palestine or Syria.<sup>61</sup> As Marassini points out, Romya is too general a geographical term, Constantinople and Cilicia are definitely not Syria, Asia again is a very generic term, Antioch and Caesarea are part of the wider Syriac-Aramaic world yet ‘one cannot help wondering whether their citation in connection with the Nine Saints was not a matter of mere religious and literary fiction’.<sup>62</sup> This leaves the problematic ‘Qosyat’; this has been variously identified as a corruption of Fustat (Cairo), a Persian toponym, or even a local, Ethiopian place.<sup>63</sup> Marassini is also dismissive of the Syrian nature of their names. In short, current scholarship suggests that the Syrian Nine Saints were only very tenuously connected with Syria. This ignores, however, their very profound impact upon the Aksumite landscape and society. They introduced a monastic system, and this is where perhaps a more imaginative archaeological approach might be able to shed light upon the problem of the origin of the Nine Saints.

The Nine Saints founded monasteries across the central swathe of the kingdom, close to and around the city of Aksum, at strategic centres (Fig. 5), at important nodes in the landscape. This is a pattern that we may also

recognise, perhaps, in the missions of Columbanus in western Europe at roughly this time.<sup>64</sup> In Ethiopian terms, the monastery was an innovation and one not clearly derived from the Egyptian model. During the fifth-sixth centuries, the Egyptian monastery developed towards a communal, cenobitic model based upon the rule of St Pachomius.<sup>65</sup> This model stressed communal prayer and living allied to a strong work ethic on the land. With some small modification this form of monasticism was translated into Nubia as well as the Levant.<sup>66</sup> Deriving from a hermitage of a single holy man – often via the semi-cenobitic *Laura* best seen in the Kellia group of the western Nile Delta – the Egyptian communal monastic complex; and if we can reduce it to an architectural generality, embodied a number of repeated elements: churches, cells, refectory, latterly a Qasr, or keep and an encircling wall which tended to be fortified by the end of the first millennium AD.<sup>67</sup> These are very distinctive architectural features within the landscape.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Finneran, ‘Extending the Christian Frontier’.

<sup>65</sup> J. Gochring, ‘Withdrawing from the desert: Pachomius and the development of village monasticism in upper Egypt’, *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996): 267-285.

<sup>66</sup> J. Anderson, ‘Monastic lifestyles of the Nubian desert: seeking the mysterious monks of Makuria’, *Sudan and Nubia* 3 (1999): 71-83.

<sup>67</sup> E. Makowiecka, ‘Monastic pilgrimage centre at Kellia, Egypt’, in *Akten des XII Internationalen Kongress für Christliche Archäologie* (Aschendorffsche, Munster, 1995), pp. 1002-1015 (= *Studia di Antichia Cristiana* LII).

<sup>68</sup> M. Rasser-Debergh, ‘Monastères coptes anciens: organisation et décoration’, *Le Monde Copte* 21-22 (1993): 71-93.

<sup>61</sup> Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, p. 116.

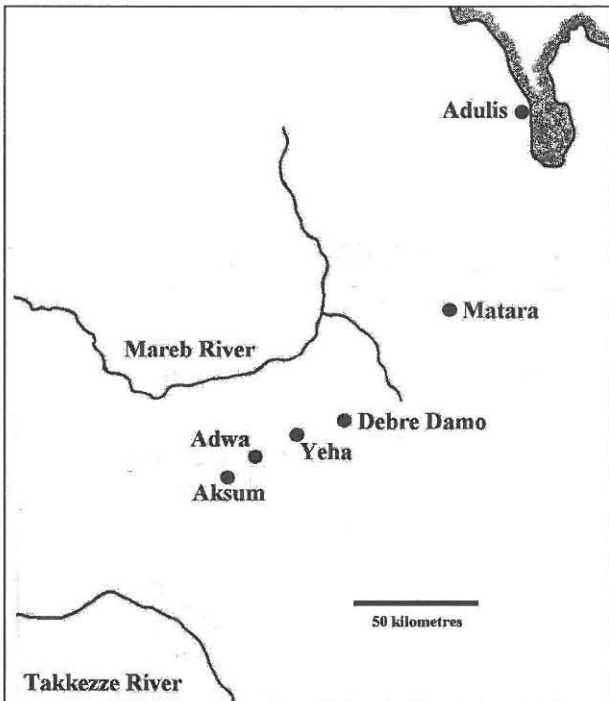
<sup>62</sup> Marassini, p. 35ff.

<sup>63</sup> Marassini, p. 36.





**Fig. 6. The pilgrim site of Qalat Siman, northern Syria (Photo: Niall Finneran)**



**Fig. 5. Aksum and the key sites mentioned in the text.**

In contrast, whilst cenobitic monasticism developed in Syria along a slightly different set of rules, the eremitic roots were more distinctive; more local – even perhaps reflecting a syncretic motif recalling pre-Christian veneration of mountains and high places.<sup>69</sup> Whereas the Egyptian hermit sought isolation in the desert, the Syrian holy man actually engaged with society taking on the role

as a negotiator, a wise man, a judge.<sup>70</sup> This outlook contrasts strongly with the role of the Egyptian anchorite who tended to remain aloof.<sup>71</sup> The archaeology of Egyptian eremitic monasticism reflects this desire to remain apart, away from the secular world. Early Egyptian hermitages belong on the physical, social and psychological margins of society: caves or ancient pharaonic tombs.<sup>72</sup> In Syria a more ‘visible’ form of eremitic monasticism was developing pioneered by Simeon Stylites (c. 389–459).<sup>73</sup> The story of the most well-known of the pillar-sitting hermits of antiquity is to be found in a range of hagiographical accounts from Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, Armenian and Arabic literature.<sup>74</sup> Such was his fame that his pillar itself became a place of pilgrimage (Qalat Siman; Fig. 6) and his deeds influenced a number of other holy men to follow his actions. The tradition of the stylites in fact extended beyond Syria: St Alypius of Adrianople in Paphlagonia during the early seventh century, and a contemporary, St Theophilus the Confessor in Egypt. Intriguingly, the Ethiopic synaxarion mentions a certain St Agathon, probably an Egyptian stylite.<sup>75</sup> This has important implications for understanding the emergence of the Ethiopian brand of eremitic monasticism along the lines of the Syrian model, as we shall see. After their

<sup>69</sup> I. Pena, ‘Aspectos peculiares del monacato sirio’, in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land: Essays in Honour of V. C. Corbo*, eds. G. Bottini, L. Di Segni and E. Albiati (OFM, Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 561–569; S. Brock, ‘Early Syrian asceticism’, *Numen* 20 (1973): 1–19.

<sup>70</sup> P. Brown, ‘The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

<sup>71</sup> D. Frankfurter, ‘Syncretism and the holy man in late antique Egypt’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 339–385.

<sup>72</sup> J. Goehring, ‘Monastic diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 61–83; Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>73</sup> D. Frankfurter, ‘Stylites and phallobates: pillar religions in late antique Syria’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990): 168–198.

<sup>74</sup> A. Atiyah, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London, Methuen, 1968), p. 186, note 1.

<sup>75</sup> H. Delahaye, ‘Les Saints Stylites’, *Subsidia Hagiographica* XIV (1923), pp. 135–136.



arrival at the court of Aksum, and their subsequent dispersal into the countryside, of all the Nine Saints only Pântallewon and Liqanos remained within the city, founding monastic cells upon high rock pinnacles which later became the churches, still visible, of the monastic communities of Abba Liqanos and Abba Pântallewon. The site of Abba Pântallewon especially may have been a site of pagan significance given the presence of an Epigraphic South Arabian inscription there noted by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition in the early twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> We may take the analysis of space a little further. Let us, for an instant, consider a phenomenological approach to the study of these monastic units. This approach, as articulated by Christopher Tilley demands an imaginative approach to understanding the archaeological landscape.<sup>77</sup> It demands empathy, it demands an appreciation, perhaps of the visual and symbolic qualities of created places in relation to natural spaces. Both pinnacles are distinctive landscape features in a region where flat-topped hills predominate. They made a very strong visual statement, dominating, yet symbolically and physically distanced from the city and secular life itself. The monastery of Pântallewon especially, even today, does have a profound impact upon the observer, accentuated by the height and narrowness of the natural feature upon which it is sited (Fig. 7).

Apart from a very obvious phenomenological approach to the impact of these two monasteries, the proximity of Liqanos and Pântallewon to the centre of political

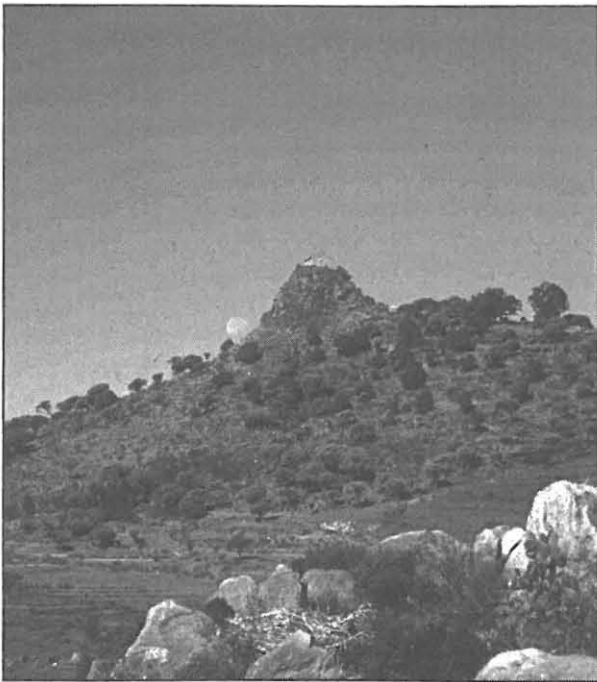


Fig. 7. The monastery of Abba Pântallewon, Aksum  
(Photo: Niall Finneran).

activity was, as Sergew points out important owing to their Greek origin and also their support for the accession of Tazena, the successor of Ella Amida.<sup>78</sup> They thus enjoyed a close relationship with the king, and must have been regarded as trusted advisers and sources of counsel. Their role, then, within the social life of Aksum, as well as the fact that they chose to distance themselves from society in terms of 'vertical' rather than 'horizontal' space would seem to imply that although possessing Greek names, Pântallewon and Liqanos were actually hermits in the Syriac tradition. We may, then, see the use of the rock pinnacle as an analogue to the pillar. There was no real attempt to use the pinnacles as a distancing factor; quite the opposite. Their visibility owes more to the Syriac tradition of eremitic monasticism than that followed in the Egyptian deserts, the idea that the hermit, the pious holy man, should actually engage with society. After all, the stylites on his pillar was often accessible via a ladder.<sup>79</sup> And what of the other Nine Saints? Their approach to reordering the landscape was similar: utilise a high site, a visible and striking feature, an analogue to the pillar, and maybe even one with strong pre-existing pagan significance.<sup>80</sup>

Abuna Arāgawi's foundation at Debre Damo (Fig. 8) also occupies a high *amba*, a mountain which is suggested to have strong pre-Christian symbolic connections.<sup>81</sup> Unlike the other foundations, this eremitic establishment soon became a complex cenobitic community in its own right, one of the most important monasteries in Ethiopia. The basilican churches here are probably some of the oldest in Ethiopia, and yet again are witness to the meeting of the local style of Aksumite architecture (this is particularly clear on the facades) and the basic internal division of the church. Many of the carved motifs within the church itself embrace wider eastern artistic influences. Abuna Yemata chose to situate his cell within a virtually inaccessible rock pinnacle at Guh in the Gheralta region of eastern Tigray (Fig. 9). The modern monastic church here dates from the fifteenth century, as does the well-known depiction of the Nine Saints on the roof, yet one feels again the psychological needs behind the siting of this monastery. It was a reflection, surely, of the practice of the Stylites from Syria. These are hugely dramatic statements of power within the newly-Christianised rural hinterland of Aksum: the seizure and adaptation of sacred mountains, places physically closer to God.

<sup>78</sup> Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, pp. 116-117.

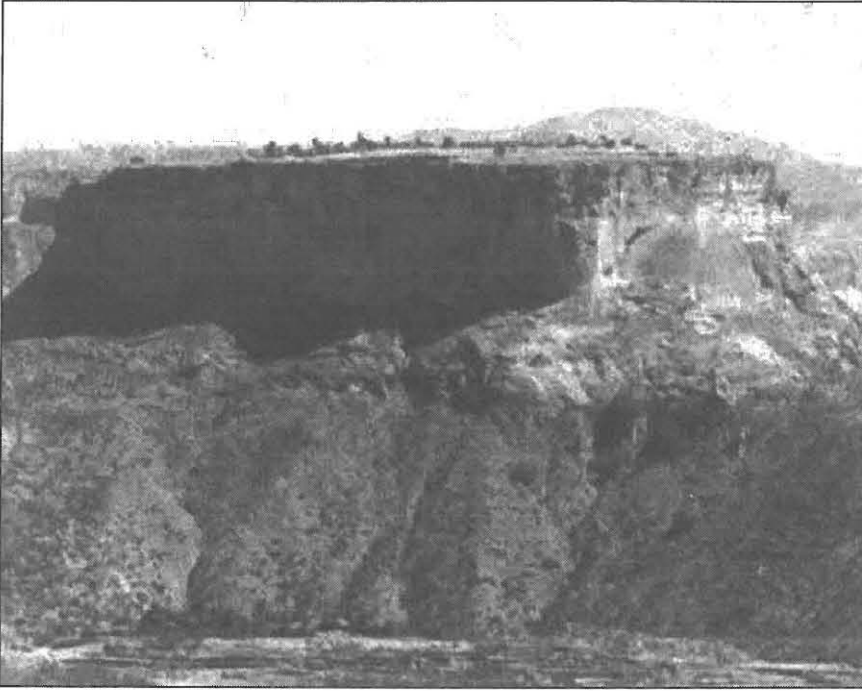
<sup>79</sup> Frankfurter, 'Stylites and phallobates'.

<sup>80</sup> Finneran, 'Syncretism of space?'

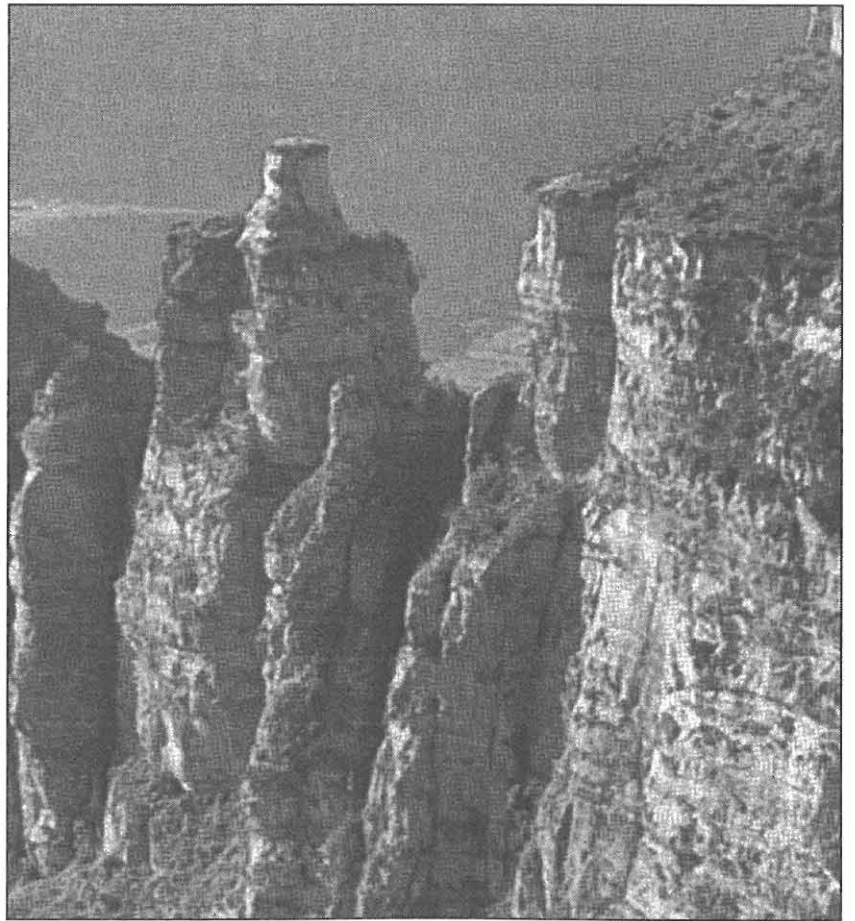
<sup>81</sup> D. Matthews, and A. Mordini, 'The monastery of Debra Damo, Ethiopia', *Archaeologia* 97 (1959): 1-58.

<sup>76</sup> This may also be true of the summit of Abba Liqanos.

<sup>77</sup> C. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (London, Berg, 1994).



**Fig. 8. Debre Damo**  
(Photo: Niall Finneran)



**Fig. 9. Abuna Yemata, Guh, Gheralta** (Photo: Niall Finneran)

The locations of the monasteries founded by the other Nine Saints are less clear cut, with one or two exceptions. Abba Afse went to the pre-Aksumite centre of Yeha and founded a monastery in proximity to the old pagan sanctuary there (another example of a Christianisation of a pre-Christian sacred space). Abba Garima (Isaac) settled at Medera, near Adwa; a monastic church dedication to the saint is to be found at Adi Kewih – but this is surely not the original establishment – and Abba Guba also settled in this region. The Abba Garima gospel book shows, in terms of structure of layout and decoration, the close links between Ethiopia and the Byzantine world, especially Syria, and has recently been radiocarbon dated to the sixth century, making this one of the earliest Christian codices anywhere in the world.<sup>82</sup> The modern town of Adwa is sited along the great eastern route towards the coast; the siting of two monastic units here had clear strategic considerations, and perhaps it would also be worth while taking into account – from a phenomenological perspective – the very distinctive mountain landscape of this region. Abuna Alef founded a monastery to the northeast of Aksum named Debre Halle Luya (location unknown), the location of Abba Sehma's mission is also unknown, but may be centred upon the region today known as Enda Abba Sehma to the southeast of Adwa. In all cases, these hermits sought to engage with society, they were active missionaries and as such their psychology and choice of location for their monastic establishment implies a strong Syrian connection. What though of Egypt, the other main political and cultural player in the creation of an Ethiopian Christian identity in Late Antiquity?

### The monastery re-exported: Ethiopia, Egypt and beyond

The role of the Coptic Church in the development of Ethiopian monasticism is not pronounced, even though it maintained, through the Patriarchal linkage, a large degree of strong political influence. Quite simply, the Ethiopian monastery develops along very distinctive, local lines after an initial Syrian – or at least eastern Mediterranean – impetus. Although politically masters of the Ethiopian church, there is very little real Coptic influence upon the material culture of Ethiopian Christianity and this is something of a surprise given the links between the areas and the proximity of the Nile corridor. The evidence for connectivity – historical and archaeological – is surprisingly sparse. Even the Nubian connection is not too clear cut; in fact, it appears that Aksum was actually still looking towards the Red Sea and into Asia rather than up the Nile into Africa.<sup>83</sup> This

pattern of ecclesiastical influence, in terms of material culture and thought is mirrored by the archaeological evidence for trade at this time. Fragmentary Egyptian textiles found at the monastery of Debre Damo only date from the ninth century; their appearance suggests that they were ecclesiastical robes worn by monks.<sup>84</sup> Well-preserved skeletons at the rear of the cave church of the monastery of Yemrehane Krestos, Lalibela (an establishment dating from the early thirteenth century) are said to be those of Egyptian monks or pilgrims who had fled to Ethiopia to escape persecution and only a few decorative elements within medieval Ethiopian churches seem to suggest any Coptic influence. Even the Ethiopian icon tradition owes more to the Byzantine world than to Egypt. There are few other indicators at this stage, however, of an international Christian material-culture component; evidence for long-distance Christian pilgrimage with Egypt may be indicated by the discovery at Adulis of a holy water flask from the pilgrimage site of St Menas in the Mareotis desert to the southwest of Alexandria. These very distinctive ampoullae have been found across south-central Europe and particularly along the Danube corridor, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean regions.<sup>85</sup>

There are a few contacts in the other direction; the thirteenth-century Ethiopian monk Tekla Haymanot is the only Ethiopian to have been canonised by the Coptic church.<sup>86</sup> The famed monk Moses the Black (c. 330–405) who lived in the Scetis desert (Wadi Natrun) south of Alexandria began life, in some accounts, as a brigand or a servant in an Egyptian household. After his martyrdom he became one of the most important figures in the history of early Coptic monasticism, yet his identification as an Ethiopian could be open to question and in any case his presence in late antique Egypt and the circumstances of his origins hardly suggests a formalised monastic link between Egypt and Ethiopia.<sup>87</sup> Moses the Black is most closely associated with the monastery of Baramûs (the Romans) in the Wadi Natrun where his relics now reside.<sup>88</sup> Until recently Ethiopian monks occupied the church of St John the Little in the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir es-Suriani, Wadi Natrun) having previously, according to the Arab historian al-Maqrizi, had their own monastery of St Elisha, but their presence has now died out and in terms of archaeology alone there is little that bears witness to the long-lived relationship between the Ethiopian and Coptic churches.<sup>89</sup> Ethiopian Christians turned away from Egypt, and perhaps, as a means of resistance to Alexandria actively sought to emphasise their Syrian roots. It is noticeable that the Ethiopian

<sup>84</sup> Matthews and Mordini, 1959.

<sup>85</sup> Bangert, this volume.

<sup>86</sup> O. Meinardus, 'Ecclesia Aethiopica in Aegypto', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3 (1965): 23–35.

<sup>87</sup> K. O'Brien Wicker, 'Ethiopian Moses', in *Ascetic Behaviour in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. V. Wimbush (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 329–348.

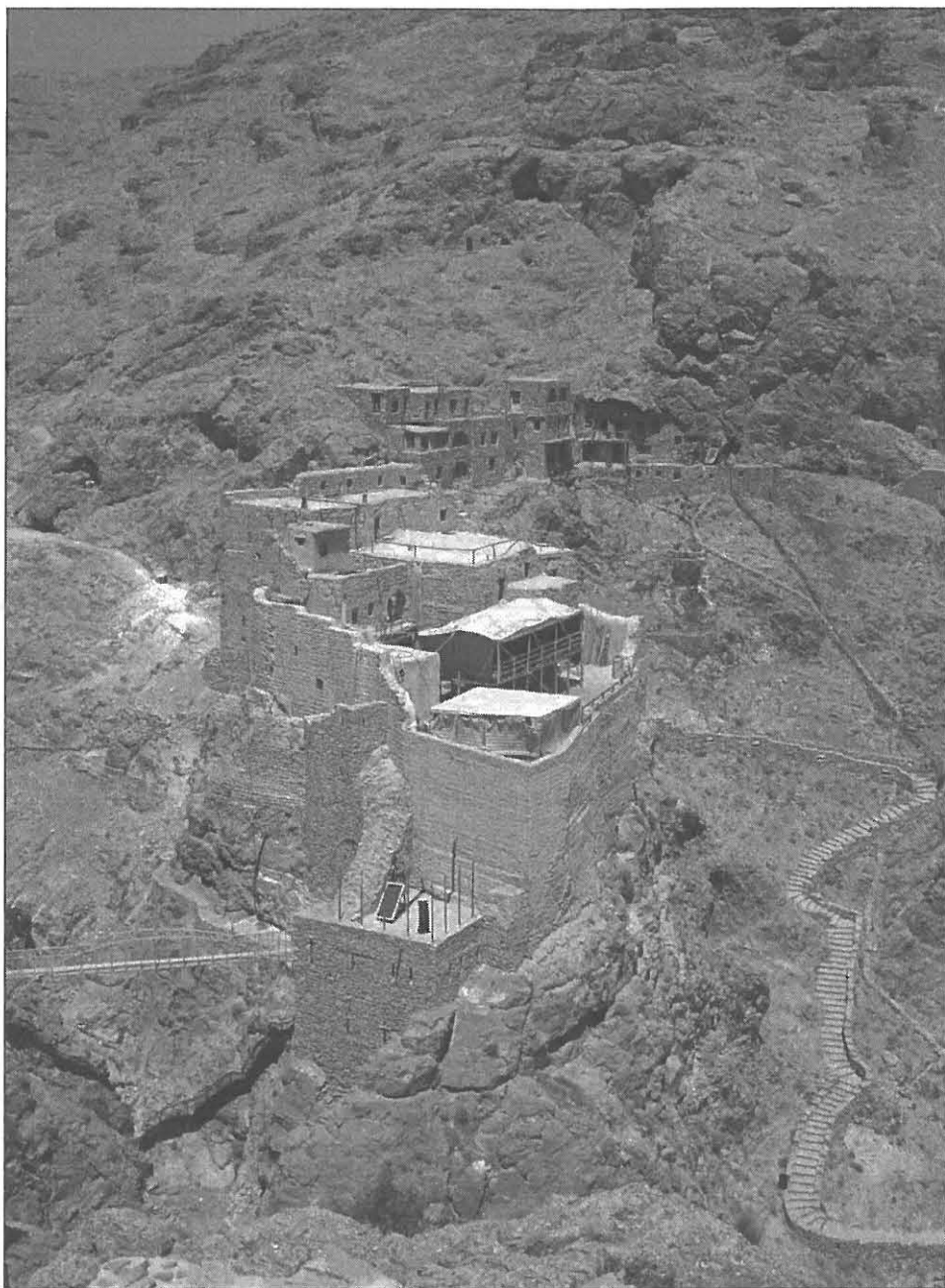
<sup>88</sup> O. Meinardus (ed.), *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts* (Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1999), p. 54.

<sup>89</sup> Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries*, p. 131.

<sup>82</sup> J. Leroy, 'L'évangélaire Éthiopien du couvent d'Abba Garima et ses attaches avec l'ancien art Chrétien de Syrie', *Cahiers Archéologiques* 11 (1960): 131–143; J. Mercier, 'La peinture Ethiopienne à l'époque axoumite et au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Comptes Rendus Académie Institut des Belles Lettres* (2000): 35–71.

<sup>83</sup> B. Zurawski, 'Nubia and Ethiopia in the Christian period – some affinities', in *Aspects of Ethiopian Art from Ancient Axum to the Twentieth Century*, ed. P. Henze (London, Jed Press, 1993), pp. 33–41.





**Fig. 10. Mar Musa al Habashi, Nabk, Syria (Photo: Niall Finneran)**

monks in the Wadi Natrun sought sanctuary in the Monastery of the Syrians.

The presence of Ethiopian contacts with the Holy Land is also well-known.<sup>90</sup> In Jerusalem the Ethiopian convent situated above the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (along with the nineteenth-century compound in the New City), is all that remains of what was once a large Ethiopian community in the city. The relationship between Ethiopia and Jerusalem is mythically enshrined in the story of Solomon and Sheba and the foundation of the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty. Ethiopian Christian pilgrims have

long visited the city and there are other threads of evidence which suggest an Ethiopian presence further to the north; the dedication of the Syrian Catholic monastery of Deir Mar Musa al Habashi, Nabk (north of Damascus; Fig. 10) must refer to the Egyptian Moses, although according to tradition the Moses in question here was the son of an Ethiopian king who became a monk firstly in Egypt and then in Syria. The monastery itself was founded in the sixth century, although the current church building dates from 1048.<sup>91</sup> In the Lebanon, Ethiopian

<sup>90</sup> E. Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina* (2 vols.) (Rome, Livreria della Stato, 1943).

<sup>91</sup> P. Dall'Oglio, 'Storia del Monastero di San Mose l'Abissino descrizione degli affreschi della sua chiesa', in *Il Restauro del Monastero di San Mose l'Abissino, Nebek, Siria* (Rome/Damascus/Nebek, Istituto Centrale per il Restauro Roma



monks occupied a number of hermitages in the Wadi Qadisha alongside Maronite, west Syrian and Armenian monks. An Ethiopic inscription (fifteenth century) and fresco has recently been discovered in the small church of Mar Assia (who was, interestingly enough, the Ethiopian Pāntallewon); a Christian Aksumite coin of Ousanas has also been reported here.<sup>92</sup> We have, therefore, some tantalising archaeological clues to the presence of Ethiopian monastic communities in Syria during the medieval period, but the question remains: how long have they been there and how did they come to be there? Undoubtedly the mechanisms of the Jerusalem pilgrimage played a part in the movement, but perhaps there is a more long-lived link, one perhaps playing upon the ancient relations between Aksum and Syria in antiquity, a counter-balance to the fractious relationship with Alexandria. This is clearly an area which requires much more archaeological attention.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined the archaeological evidence for the international factor in Ethiopian Christianity from the fourth century onwards. Although the Egyptian (Alexandrian) linkage is clear in terms of political control, the material culture evidence (even though it is allied with doubtful historical material) strongly suggests a strong Syriac impact. Ethiopian Christian material

culture derives from the eastern Mediterranean, and was recast using indigenous architectural styles and spatial approaches. The adoption of Christianity was more than a spiritual decision on the part of the Aksumite court; it had clear economic and political ramifications, building as it did upon a long-lived history of trade and exchange between the northern Ethiopian highlands and the eastern Mediterranean world. What is perhaps surprising is that the Christian communities to the east, along the Nile, had so little impact upon the formation of Ethiopian Christian identity. When considering notions of globalization and internationalisation in Late Antiquity, it is useful to step beyond the usual constraints of examining trade and exchange, and consider another framework, a spiritual framework (Christianity, in its many guises) which provides a medium through which contacts were initiated, developed and maintained over long distances and over long periods of time. One could take this approach further, and consider the framework of Silk Road trade in the light of the expansion of East Syrian Christianity through central Asia, India and into China, focusing on how the mission process went hand in hand with social and political demands. Here at least we have shown that Ethiopia, hitherto regarded perhaps as a marginal zone, played, through the medium of Christianity, a very strong role in the Christian world of the fifth to seventh centuries.

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Ministero della Cultura; Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, Damascus; Mar Musa monastic community, 1998).

<sup>92</sup> H. Abdel-Nour and B. Jabbour-Gedeon, 'L'ermitage rupestre et la grotte de Mar Assia', *Spéléorient* 1 (1996): 27-38.