Hermits, Saints, and Snakes: The Archaeology of the Early Ethiopian Monastery in Wider Context

Author(s): Niall Finneran

Hermits, Saints, and Snakes: The Archaeology of the Early Ethiopian Monastery in Wider Context*

By Niall Finneran

University of Winchester (niall.finneran@winchester.ac.uk)

Introduction: A Historical Context

The Ethiopian monastery has historically served as a vital and powerful sociocultural and economic node within the historic Christian landscape of the Ethiopian highlands. The concept of Christian monasticism[1]—by which we mean the establishment of physical spaces within the landscape that are specialized areas of Christian learning and living by a dedicated community of monks—is a phenomenon that reaches the Aksumite Kingdom of Ethiopia through the so-called Syrian "Nine Saints" around the sixth century, and thus post-dating the development of Christian monasticism in adjacent eastern Christian areas, such as Egypt, Nubia, and the Levant. As in Egypt, and indeed many other areas of the

---

[1] To clarify some of the general terminology: The word monastery derives from the Latin *monasterium* a place where monks live, or cell; the word "monk" derives in turn from a Greek word, *monachos* meaning solitary. The word carries no Christian symbolism or meanings, it merely serves to show us that the first monks were solitary people (and by this we carry no gender specific labels, both male and female recluses are represented in the early history of the monastic movement) who devoted themselves to God—see for instance 1 *Corinthians* 7: 32–35. The first use of the term is recorded in Egypt. See Edwin Judge, "The Earliest Use for Monachos for 'Monk' and the Origins of Monasticism," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1997), 77–89. The noun anchorite is also not specific to Christianity; this term derives from the Greek term meaning withdrawal into the countryside (*chora*). Another term that we encounter in connection with the solitary form of monasticism is ascetic; this word comes from the Greek *ascesis*, which refers to the idea of training (in this context for the afterlife) rather than seeking loneliness. Finally, the Old Testament Book of Isaiah (40: 3–5) refers to the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness," which in the Greek of the Old Testament is rendered as *eremos* from which we derive the noun hermit and the adjective eremitic. See John O'Neill, "The Origins of Monasticism," in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Makings of Orthodoxy; Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 270–87; Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 8–9.

former Roman Empire for example, the monastery in Ethiopia did play an active role in the Christianization of the secular polity.[2]
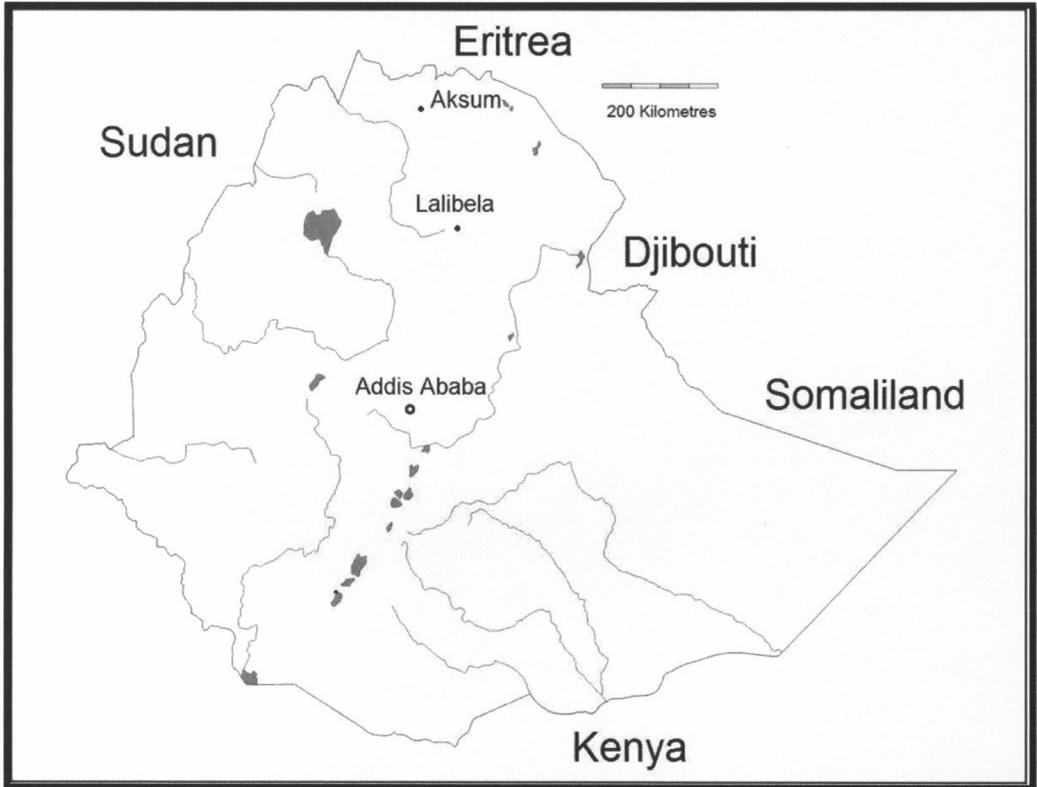
Figure 1. Key sites mentioned in the text.

Christianity reached the Aksumite Empire, according to historical accounts, during the reign of King Ezana in the mid-340s AD, although the processes surrounding this event are opaque and the historical veracity may be far more nuanced that indigenous tradition posits.[3] We may *assume*, with royal patronage (and unlike the case in the Roman Empire prior to the Edict of Toleration in AD 313) that the conversion of the Aksumite court ought

---

[2] For an overview of the post-Roman European evidence, see Niall 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," *Glastonbury Review* 118 (2010), 217–37. The idea of a monastery as fulfilling at once a religious, and indeed political, mission role is recognized in Ethiopia as well.

[3] Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, 2 (1982), 101–109. Ezana was converted by a Syrian, though subsequent ecclesiastical control was vested in Alexandra in Egypt; Bernd Dombrowski and F. Amadeus Dombrowski, "Frumentius/Abba Salama: Zu den Nachrichten über die Anfänge des Christentums in Äthiopien," *Oriens Christianus* 68 (1984), 114–69.

to have been marked by the immediate construction of large church buildings and a fairly rapid change in material culture (e.g., coinage, funerary tradition).[4] Christianity in Ethiopia survived the fall of Aksum sometime in the seventh century, and it is generally accepted that the built and rock-hewn churches of Tigray date from the immediate post-Aksumite period, i.e., the eighth–eleventh centuries.[5]

After Aksum, Ethiopia *appears* to enter something of an historical "dark age" where written sources pertinent to the period are largely external, and fall generally into two categories. First we have documentary material that refers to the continued presence of a large Christian community, subject to an unknown ruler or rulers, and living within the structures of a polity whose size and status is quite unknown. In short, we cannot be sure if we are talking about a centralized kingdom in the post-Aksumite period, or a series of short-lived and/or localized successor segmentary polities.[6] The most important document in this category is the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*.[7] The second category of documentary evidence that we have to hand are external Arab accounts, often written by travellers and useful for reconstructing very basic trade and economic information about the post-Aksumite period in northern Ethiopia.[8]

Farther south, during the twelfth century, Ethiopian historiographical tradition tells us that an "usurper" dynasty, the Zagwe Kings, founded a capital at the site of Roha, renamed Lalibela after the eponymous king, and there constructed a number of rock-hewn churches within the town, as well as built churches in caves in the countryside around

---

[4] Niall Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2002), 132.

[5] Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier, *Art Éthiopien: Les Églises Historiques du Tigray* (Paris: Association pour la Diffusion de la Pensée Française, 2005), 32; David Phillipson, *The Ancient Churches of Ethiopia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 184–87.

[6] Niall Finneran, *The Archaeology of Ethiopia* (London: Routledge, 2007), 207–214.

[7] Basil Evetts, trans. and ed., *Sawirus (Severus) Ibn Muqaffa: History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church* (Paris: F. Pages, 1904). It should not be forgotten that until the 1950s the Ethiopian Church was effectively under the jurisdiction of the Coptic Patriarchate in Egypt, and as such correspondence between Ethiopian rulers and the Coptic Patriarch from the end of the Aksumite period allow us a small window on conditions in Ethiopia during that time.

[8] The ninth-century Arab traveler and writer Ahmad ibn Abu Ya'qub ibn Ja'far ibn Wahb Ibn Wadih al-Ya'qubi's *Kitab al-Buldan (Book of the Countries)*, and the tenth-century Arab writer Ibn Hawqal's work *Kitāh al-masālik wa'l-mamālik (Book of Routes and Kingdoms)* are two of the more important Arab sources for Ethiopia during this period. Michael de Goeje, ed. and trans., *Abu'l-Qasim Ibn Hawqal. Kitab al Masalik wa'l Mamalik. Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Academiae Tipographum, 1873); Michael De Goeje, ed. and trans., *Ahmad ibn Abi Yaqub ibn Wadih al-Kitab al Ya'qubiKitab al-Buldan. Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum,* Vol. 7 (Leiden: Academiae Tipographum, 1876); for an overview, see Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1972), 218–21.

Lalibela.[9] Even into the Zagwe period, the general paucity of historical material makes itself felt. The *Gadlat*, or hagiographies of notable kings and saints, are often written much later than the events they describe, although in connection with recent archaeological work at Lalibela it is clear that oral history research offers rich potential in elucidating landscape history.[10]

The institution of Ethiopian monasticism played an important social and economic role in the formation of the post-Zagwe (Solomonic Restoration) periods after the accession of Yekuno Amlak (1270–1285), providing such charismatic religious leaders as St. Tekla Haymanot (ca. 1215–1313) and Iyasus Mo'a (ca. 1214–1294).[11] Ethiopian monasteries rapidly attracted extensive royal patronage and became important centers of wealth within a multiethnic and diverse landscape where secular power was vested in an Emperor and his peripatetic court and an extensive feudal system. As late as the Revolution of 1974, Ethiopian monasteries still held economically important and agriculturally fertile tracts of highland landscape in an age-old system of land tenure known as *gult*.[12] After the end of imperial Ethiopia in 1974, with the removal of Emperor Haile Selassie by the predominantly Marxist Junta (*Dergue*), the extensive land holdings of the monasteries were nationalized. They have never recovered their erstwhile economic wealth, though the process was not quite as shattering as the dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation in Britain in the late sixteenth century. In both cases, however,

---

[9] Marilyn Heldman, "Legends of Lalibela: The Development of an Ethiopian Pilgrimage Center," *Res* 27 (1995), 25–38; Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval*, 265–87; Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 53–66.

[10] N. Finneran, "Settlement Archaeology and Oral History in Lasta, Ethiopia," *Azania* 44, 3 (2009), 281–91.

[11] Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Life of Takla Hâymânôt [attributed to Gabra Maska] in the version of Dabra Lîbanôs, and the Miracles of Takla Hâymânôt [attributed to Abba Peter] in the version of Dabra Lîbanôs,, and the Book of the Riches of Kings [attributed to Takla Hāimānōt]*. The Ethiopic texts, from the British Museum MS. Oriental 723, edited with English translations, to which is added an English translation of the Waldebrân version, by E.A. Wallis Budge (London: Private print for Lady Muex 1906); Stanislas Kur, ed. and trans., *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a, abbé du couvent de St.-Étienne de Ḥayq* (Louvain: Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 1965).

[12] There are a number of studies that deal with the history of the Ethiopian monastery over recent times. For a broad terminological, contextual and historical background of Ethiopian monasticism, see Mario di Abiy-Addì, Mario Inizi, "vicende e situazione attuale del monachesimo della Chiesa etiopica," *Studi Francescani* 67 (1970), 1331–39. Allote de la Fuye, "Il monachesimo in Etiopia," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 24 (1958). Enrico Cerulli, "Il monachismo in Etiopia," in *Il monachesimo orientale. Atti del Convegno di Studi Orientali che sul predetto tema si tenne a Roma, sotto la direzione del Pont. Istituto Orientale (9–12 aprile 1958)* (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1958), pp. 259–278. Joachim Persoon, "Ethiopisch monachisme," in W. Prins, ed., *Kopten en Ethiopiërs: Tweeduizend Jaar Mystiek en Christendom langs de Nijl* (Uden, Netherlands: Museum voor Religieuze Kunst, 1999), 61–68; Volker Stitz, "Distribution and Foundation of Churches in Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, 1 (1975), 11–36. The most detailed and yet accessible contextual study is by Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia* (London: James Currey, 2000).

royal patronage of the monastic system ceased and in Ethiopia monasteries lost much of their economic (but not ideological) importance.[13]

It would now be useful to consider the terminology in regard to the *definition* of an Ethiopian monastery in a little more detail. Ecclesiastical archaeology in the European tradition would recognize two basic forms of church: the parochial and monastic (the implication here is that one church form services a secular/lay community, the other services a closed, monastic community), but of course this dichotomy is not straight forward. Many current parochial churches were often originally monastic foundations; from the British context, Westminster Abbey and St. Alban's Abbey are obvious examples. In other Christian traditions, monastic churches can and do play an important lay role. In Egyptian Coptic monasteries, for instance, churches are set aside for lay pilgrims while others are reserved solely for the monastic community.[14] The blurring between a purely secular and monastic role for a church can be seen to be opaque, and this does not help us when it comes to defining what a monastery is and what it is not. Here, the basis of the definition is that a community of monks or nuns is present at the church.

An analysis of Ethiopian church types, however, presents its own set of peculiar problems. Within the rural context, churches often seem to be sited far from the settlements that, as parochial churches, they appear to serve. The notion of a long journey from one's home to attend a church is not unusual. Ethiopian parochial churches outside urban centers often seem divorced from their parishioners, but through western eyes this appears to be an odd situation. Of course it may be that the churches may at once have served a monastic function or indeed actually fossilize ancient patterns of long-abandoned secular settlement.[15] In addition, it is equally physically difficult to delineate a monastery in its landscape. Apart from the larger monasteries such as Debre Damo, or Debre Libanos, or the monasteries of the Lake Tana islands, Ethiopian monasteries are spatially amorphous, not enclosed, and often, even only possessing a single monk, a church which "ought" to look parochial, from the western viewpoint, is actually a monastery (or

---

[13] Monasteries were not systematically looted and plundered in Ethiopia. Recent archaeological studies in the United Kingdom, for example, have highlighted the impact upon the wider landscape of the changed status of the monastery and perhaps similar approaches could be used in more recent historical contexts Ethiopia. See for example, John Thomas, "Evidence for the Dissolution of Thorney Abbey: Recent Excavations and Landscape Analysis at Thorney, Cambridgeshire," *Medieval Archaeology* 50, 1 (2006), 179–241. This is beyond the scope of the current paper, however.

[14] The Coptic monasteries of Deir el Abiad and Deir el Ahmar being a case in point, see Cyril Walters, *Monastic Archaeology in Egypt* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips), 37.

[15] It is possible that the churches of the Gheralta massif in eastern Tigray fossilize earlier post-Aksumite settlement patterns; see Finneran, *Archaeology*, 217–22. Joseph W. Michels has also argued that the present patterning of market centers also makes little sense to modern settlement patterns, and as such may also fossilize earlier political landscape patterns. See Joseph W. Michels, *Changing Settlement Patterns in the Aksum-Yeha Region of Ethiopia: 700 BC–AD 850* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2005), 218.

Gedam).[16] In short, it is actually difficult to characterize an Ethiopian monastery away from the obvious larger "bounded" cenobitic (communal) sites such as Debre Damo, Debre Libanos and the island monasteries of Lake Tana, *inter alia*.[17] Contrary to the ideas of certain scholars, there does not actually appear to be any differentiation in church building/layout distinguishing between a monastic or parochial role.[18] In short, an Ethiopian church is monastic because it is associated with a *Debre* or *Gedam* name and has attached to it a community of monks or monks and nuns.[19]

Theoretical and Methodological Contexts

It is the contention of this paper that the study of the Ethiopian monastery within a broader historical-archaeological context (apart from one exception) remains largely overlooked,[20] and this is a subject of rich potential. In his recent publication, David Phillipson[21] has drawn our attention to the antiquity and sheer diversity of the ancient monastic and parochial churches (both built and rock-cut) of the northern region (Tigray) and central (Lasta) regions of Ethiopia, and a recent work by the French art historian Claire Bosc-Tiessé[22] has focused on the centrality of the Lake Tana island monasteries from the

---

[16] *Gedam* is the Amharic term for monastery used interchangeably with "*Debre*" (see note 17 below). Communities of monks and nuns often share the monastic space but inhabit different gendered areas of the landscape.

[17] It is interesting that the use of the Ethiopic word *Debre* for monastery is also interchangeably used for mountain. The idea then of a holy, monastic mountain, which is also outlined later on this paper has very definite resonance within the Ethiopian context.

[18] For example, Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier, *Art Éthiopien. Les Églises Historiques du Tigray* (Paris: ADPF, 2005), 73. They postulate that enlarged chancels (effectively extended spaces in front of the sanctuary), seen for example at the church of Abreha wa Atsbeha, eastern Tigray, are areas where monks would have stood during services. I have seen many "monastic" churches that lack any sort of extended chancel at all.

[19] A number of these churches often have a sole monk in charge, so the size of monastic communities clearly varies. Monks of course, may not marry, but unlike priests are able to be promoted to bishops.

[20] Niall Finneran and Tania Tribe, "Towards an Archaeology of Kingship and Monasticism in Medieval Ethiopia," in Timothy Insoll, ed., *Belief in the Past: The Proceedings of the Manchester Conference on Archaeology and Religion* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1212, 2004), 63–74. The importance of their secular role is discussed in Marie-Laure Derat and Hervé Pennec, "Les églises et monastères royaux d'Éthiopie (Xve-XVIe et XVIIe siècles): Permanences et ruptures d'une stratégie royale," in Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto, and Masayoshi Shigeta, eds., *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: Proceedings of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Kyoto, 12–17 December 1997,* vol. 1 (Kyoto: Shokado, 1997), 17–34. For a more detailed overview of the relationship between court and monastery in the "Solomonic Restoration" period, i.e., after AD 1270, see Marie-Laure Derat, *Le Domaine des Rois Ethiopiens (1270–1527): Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

[21] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches*.

[22] Claire Bosc-Tiessé, *Les Îles de la Mémoire: Fabrique des images et écriture de l'histoire dans les églises du lac Tana, Éthiopie, xviie –xviiie siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008).

sixteenth century in the political life of the Ethiopian post-medieval state.[23] Traditional approaches to the study and analysis of the Ethiopian monastery—which in reality means the church building itself—has often been influenced strongly by art historical traditions, yet no attempt has yet been made to systematically analyze this important phenomenon within a wider landscape archaeological and global historical context, hence the subtitle of this paper.[24]

This sort of landscape archaeology perspective is widely accepted as a cornerstone of recent Eurocentric conceptions of monastic archaeology, which is now a well-developed and recognized sub-genre of historical and medieval archaeology in its own right.[25] A clear emphasis in this paper is upon a more phenomenological reading of the monastic landscape,[26] seeking to understand the underlying psychic geography of place as well as important social and economic roles of the monastery in the landscape. One example that we might define at the outset would concentrate on the phenomenology of the eremitic mindset. The eremitic landscape for example, would demand distancing from society and emphasizes loneliness. This urge to distance oneself vertically, so to speak, is part and parcel of the early anchoritic mindset. In Egypt the desert clearly served this purpose; in

---

[23] Many of these monasteries enjoyed extensive royal patronage and became the burial place of kings. Again, this is not an isolated phenomenon; as we shall see this idea follows on from Zagwe practice, and in another culture. The monastery of Iona on the west coast of Scotland was a favored burial place for the Kings of Alba (and indeed kings from France, Norway, and Ireland, too) from the ninth century. Maire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic "Familia" of Columba* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). "Royal" monasteries are a common theme in the medieval world.

[24] Niall Finneran, "Built by Angels? Towards a Buildings Archaeology Context for the Rock-Hewn Medieval Churches of Ethiopia," *World Archaeology* 41, 3 (2009), 415–29.

[25] See for example, Roberta Gilchrist and Harold Mytum, eds., *Advances in Monastic Archaeology* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1993); Graham Keevill, Mick Aston, and Theresa Hall, *Monastic Archaeology: Papers on the Study of Medieval Monasteries* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001). The selection of papers presented in these volumes gives a fair indication of recent developments in the field of European monastic archaeology which has moved away from the analysis of the site, and has begun to see the monastery in terms of its relation to its wider economic and indeed ideological landscape.

[26] Phenomenological studies of archaeological landscapes risk becoming clichéd, but remain useful approaches to reconstruct ideological attitudes to space and place, or more accurately seek to situate human experience, understanding the experience of human consciousness of space and place in the past. This is an approach best known from the controversial work of the British archaeologist and anthropologist Chris Tilley, whose book *Phenomenology of Landscape* (London: Berg, 1994), pioneered the application of phenomenology to the study of prehistoric ritual landscapes. Tilley's more recent ideas, presented for example, in Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton, and Chris Tilley, *Stone Worlds: Narrative and Reflexivity in Landscape Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), and also in "Mind and Body in Landscape Research," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 14, 1 (1994), 77–80, present a fair reflection of the development of an imaginative form of archaeological landscape research that is not without its detractors, see for example Andrew Fleming, "Post-Processual Landscape Archaeology: A Critique," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16, 3 (2006), 267–80. While not heavily theoretical, the ideas presented in this paper owe something to an intellectual background influenced by post-processual landscape archaeology.

the west of Ireland for example the site of Skellig Michael shows us the Irish response: here the sea takes the place of the desert.[27] In other areas of the early Christian monastic world, hilltops were clearly important from this perspective. At Glastonbury Tor in Somerset, itself a very dramatic landscape feature, we have the site of a probable small hermitage or semi-eremitic settlement that dates from the same period as the earliest Ethiopian foundations of the Nine Saints.[28] In the eastern Christian tradition, monasteries on mountains are a key feature of Christian landscapes in late antiquity.[29] In southeastern Anatolia the mountains of the Tur Abdin shelter countless monasteries of the east and west Syrian Christian traditions, and of course when we talk of holy mountains the Greek monasteries of Mount Athos and Meteora also spring to mind.[30] There is an additional thread that runs through this theme. In Syria and in neighboring areas of the eastern Christian world the cult of the stylites was dominant,[31] and it may be that this tradition of the hermitage on the mountain also reflects an awareness of the Syrian anchoritic mindset: mountains as pillars.

An admittedly brief global survey of the phenomenology of the eremitic monastic landscape points to a number of cultural commonalities. In basic terms, hermits do require physical isolation and this is reflected in the position of their settlements, but as will be discussed below in relation to the eremitic landscape of Aksum, there are often more nuanced factors at work. Isolation is often a mere cover for fuller social engagement. In time, monasteries become important centers of political and economic power in the landscape, and perceptions of their place in that landscape change. Let us now turn to the emergence and development of the Ethiopian monastery, paying attention to its place within a phenomenological landscape as well as its growing power within political and economic landscapes.

---

[27] Walter Horn, Jenny Marshall, and Grellan Rourke, *The Forgotten Hermitage of Skellig Michael* (Dublin: Duchas, 1990). Developing this theme of water-based symbolism further, see Joe Flatman, "Wetting the Fringe of Your Habit: Medieval Monasticism and Coastal Landscapes," in Sarah Semple and Helen Lewis, eds., *Landscape Archaeology*, British Archaeological Reports British Series 2103 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2010), 66–67, and from an Ethiopian context, Niall Finneran, "Holy Waters: Pre-Christian and Christian Water Association in Ethiopia. An Archaeological Landscape Perspective," in Terje Ostegaard, ed., *Water, Culture and Identity in the Nile Basin* (Bergen: University of Bergen Press, 2009), 165–87.

[28] Phillip Rahtz, "Excavations at Glastonbury Tor," *Archaeological Journal* 127 (1971), 1–81; see also Ian Burrow, *Hillfort and Hilltop Settlement in Somerset in the First and Eighth Centuries AD* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 91, 1981).

[29] For a general and popular overview, see William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London: Flamingo, 1998).

[30] Andrew Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Donald Nigol, *Meteora: The Rock Monasteries of Thessaly* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1960).

[31] David Frankfurter, "Stylites and Phallobates: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990), 168–98.

The Cultural Background to Aksumite Monasticism

Unlike contemporary developments farther north in the deserts of Egypt, monasteries were not a feature of the nascent Ethiopian Christian landscape in the fourth–fifth centuries. The reasons for this must be many, but must surely reference the historical and social circumstances surrounding the conversion of the Aksumite polity. One might argue, for instance, that the lack of social memory of martyrdom (as we see among the Copts in Egypt), and the "top-down" nature of the conversion of the court militated against a predominantly lower-class populist religious movement as is seen in Egypt.[32] So, in relative terms the development of a Christian monastic system in the northern Ethiopian highlands is a relatively late phenomenon, and is associated with the higher echelons of society who were among the older set of converts to Christianity.

Aksumite Christian material culture of the fourth and fifth centuries is evidenced in the main by church buildings. The largest and more important of these churches are found within the urban context in Aksum and obviously belong to a parochial context. They have no obvious monastic character at this stage (which is unsurprising given that there are no records of any monastic activity in Aksum during this period). Clearly one of the most important sites is that of the Cathedral of Maryam Zion, which today consists of a "new" cathedral (1966) and the "old cathedral" which actually dates from the seventeenth century.[33] What is clear is that physically this structure was sited at the heart of the city, adjacent to the earlier, pre-Christian elite cemetery (the Central Stela Park) and to the east of what we may presume to be the royal quarter. A recently excavated basilica on the site of the church of Arbatu Insessa at Gangua Edaga[34] may represent just one of a number of parochial churches in the city that await discovery.

There are other churches within the immediate Aksum region that belong to this urban and thus presumably parochial and non-monastic context.[35] The churches at Yeha[36]

---

[32] James Goehring, "The World Engaged: The Social and Economic World of Early Egyptian Monasticism," in James Goehring and James Robinson, eds., *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: Essays in Honor of James M. Robinson* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990), 134–44.

[33] The latter structure is a crenellated Gondarene-style basilica, which replaced a much older structure that had been destroyed in the sixteenth century during the *jihad* of Ahmed Gragn. David Phillipson has shown that there is internal evidence to suggest the incorporation of earlier structural elements into this building. See David Phillipson, "Excavations at Aksum, Ethiopia, 1993–1994," *Antiquaries Journal* 75 (1995), 1–41.

[34] Tekle Hagos, *Archaeological Rescue Excavations at Aksum 2005–7* (Addis Ababa: Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (ARCCH), 2008), 17–78.

[35] For example at Wuchate Golo: see Henri De Contenson, "Les fouilles à Ouchatei Golo près d'Axoum en 1958," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 4 (1961), 3–16; Beta Giyorgis: Lanfranco Ricci and Rodolfo Fattovich, "Scavi archeologici nella zona di Aksum A. Seglamien," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 30 (1984–86), 117–69. The presence of baptistery structures in some of these buildings would again strengthen their identification as parochial churches.

[36] Francis Anfray, "Yeha: Les ruines de Grat Be'al Gebri. Recherches archéologiques," *Rassegna di Studie Etiopici* 39 (1997), 5–24.

and Hawelti Melazzo[37] reference sites of pre-Christian worship, a scenario that is also recognized in Nubia and Egypt,[38] and in the other large Aksumite settlements, such as Adulis[39] and Matara.[40] Extensive basilican buildings based upon Aksumite architectural styles are also found.[41] The scale and embellishment of these churches suggests that they were central to the royal strategies for developing a core Christian identity within the main urban centers of Aksum. The architectural/archaeological evidence, as well as the spatial distribution of Aksumite church buildings is thus strongly suggestive of a strong urban and parochial Christian culture. It may be that more extensive rural survey may locate smaller church units associated with villages, but at this stage our data points to the fact that Christianity appears to be confined to the urban centers in the fourth–fifth centuries. David Phillipson notes that it is only into the sixth century that specifically Christian items of material culture are found widely; he also draws our attention to the use of a Greek motto on Aksumite gold coins that states "may this be pleasing in the countryside."[42] The tradition of the martyrs of Matara, related in the *Gadl Sadqan* (of which more later) tells us that the sixth-century Aksumite King Kaleb organized an expedition against groups of peoples living near to Matara who had not yet embraced Christianity and who had, in fact killed one of the monks sent to convert them.[43] Most of our evidence, then, suggests that prior to the establishment of a monastic culture within the Aksumite church, Christianity was very much focused upon the towns where the ruling elites lived and some degree of international mercantile, ecclesiastical, or political presence may have been focused. Things, however, began to change in the sixth century.

Locating Aksumite Monasticism: An African Context

Christian monasticism was already well established in Africa in the fourth century, some two centuries before it reached Aksum. In Egypt an early eremitic phase is popularly associated with St. Antony (ca. AD 251–356), St. Amon (fl. AD 320), and St. Paul of Thebes (d. ca. AD 341).[44] This form of monasticism stressed the twin but subtly differing

---

[37] Henri De Contenson, "Les fouilles à Haoulti-Melazo," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 4 (1961), 39–60.

[38] For example, Rene Coquin, "La Christianisation des Temples de Karnak," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français Afrique Orientale* 72 (1972), 169–78; William Adams, "Architectural Evolution of the Nubian Church, 500–1400 AD," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 4 (1965), 87–139.

[39] Roberto Paribeni, "Richerche nel luogo dell'antica Adulis," *Monumenti Antichi, Reale Accademia dei Lincei* 18 (1907), 438–572.

[40] Francis Anfray and Guy Annequin, "Matara: deuxième, troisième et quatrième campagnes de fouilles," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 6 (1965), 49–142.

[41] See Phillipson, *Ancient Churches,* chap. 2 for a fuller survey.

[42] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches,* 31.

[43] R. Schneider, "Une page du *Gadla Sadqan,*" *Annales d'Ethiopie* 5 (1965), 167–70.

[44] David Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Derwas Chitty, *The Desert, a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966), 1–20.

notions of *anachoresis* and asceticism.[45] One would expect the archaeological visibility of the early Christian hermit to be fairly opaque. In Egypt early hermitages are found in natural caves or pharaonic tombs[46] and often combine with later communal monasteries to form wide-ranging and dispersed monastic systems within the landscape, such is found, for instance, in the Wadi Natrun, Egypt. At some stage during the fourth century, such was the popularity of the eremitic movement that large numbers of hermitages effectively coalesced into informal settlements.[47] These hermitages formalized themselves into large and long-lived communities at Nitria and Kellia and these forms of settlement (the *Laura/Lavra*, or *Skete*) could be described as being semi-eremitic in character.[48] Finally, by the mid-fourth century, under the rules of St. Pachomius and later on Shenouda,[49] monasteries of a communal character were established, now integrating architecturally a number of architectural features within one community: cells, refectory, church, store-rooms and latterly, from the ninth century, strong walls and fortifications.[50] Monasteries also began to impinge upon Egypt's towns from the countryside, so by the seventh century monasticism was a well-established system all through Upper and Lower Egypt.[51] On the whole, aspects of Egyptian monastic culture are relatively well researched by archaeologists and these projects could offer some important signposts for future research agendas in Ethiopia.[52] The basic Egyptian development of hermitage-lavra/skete-cenobitic monastery is not exactly applicable to Ethiopia, but as we shall see there are some points of similarity. [53]

---

[45] See footnote 1.

[46] Alexander Badawy, *Coptic Art and Archaeology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 33–34. In fact as a whole, any archaeology of eremitic monasticism, because of its relatively thin cultural imprint, does need to emphasize the landscape context. See for example, Deirdre O'Sullivan, "Space, Silence and Shortage on Lindisfarne: The Archaeology of Asceticism," in Helena Hamerow and Arthur Macgregor, eds., *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), 33–52.

[47] To some extent negating one of the primary ideas of eremitic monasticism.

[48] Ewa Makowiecka, "Monastic Pilgrimage Center at Kellia, Egypt," in *Akten des XII Internationalen Kongress fur Christliche Archaeologie Studia di Anticha Cristiana LII* (Aschendorffsche: Munster, 1995), 1002–1015.

[49] James Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt," *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996), 267–85.

[50] Maggy Rassert-Debergh, "Monastères coptes anciens: Organisation et décoration," *Le Monde Copte* 21–22 (1993), 71–93; Hjalmar Torp, "Some Aspects of Early Coptic Monastic Architecture," *Byzantion* 27 (1957), 513–38.

[51] Vincent Desprez, "Alexandrie et le Monachisme Chrétien," *Le Monde Copte* 27–28 (1997), 167–79; Eva Eva Wipszycka, "Le monachisme Egyptien et les villes," *Travaux et Memoires* 12 (1994), 1–44.

[52] See for example, Mary Harlow, and Wendy Smith, "Between Fasting and Feasting: The Literary and Archaeobotanical Evidence for Monastic Diet in Late Antique Egypt," *Antiquity* 75 (2001), 758–68.

[53] The skete or Lavra/Laura can simplistically if usefully be thought of as being a half-way house between solitary monastic life exemplified by the hermit or ascetic and the fully-integrated communal monasteries of the Egyptian Pachomian movement, cells grouped in the landscape around a central zone for

Having set the general African context, let us return to Aksum and see what history and archaeology can tell us about the establishment of a monastic system in the Aksumite countryside during the sixth century AD. Traditional accounts tell us monasticism was brought to Aksum by the "Nine Saints," who were said to have been refugees from anti-monophysite religious persecution in "Syria."[54] These nine individuals are all celebrated in the Ethiopic *Senkesar* (Synaxarium; Book of Saints)[55] and their deeds are the subject of a number of *Gadlat* (hagiographies) written later on in the medieval period.[56] Each individual settled within a block of landscape extending to the east of Aksum: Abuna (Father) Alef settled furthest north at Bi'isa on the Mareb River; Yemate at Guh in Gheralta; Afse at Yeha; Garima to the east of Adwa; Guba and Sehma near Garima at Adwa; Aregawi at Debre Damo and finally Liqanos and Pantaleon on mountain tops respectively due north and due east of Aksum.[57] Another group of monks, known as the *Sadqan* (or righteous ones) and about whom we know very little, settled in the Shimazana region, and they feature in the story of the Christian martyrs of Matara.[58]

In a number of cases, each of these sites is now home to a monastery that has a dedication to the Nine Saints. Debra Damo is one of the most famous of the Ethiopian monasteries, and is a site to which we shall return; both the sites of Abba Pantaleon and Abba Likanos at Aksum are still occupied by smaller monastic units, as is the site of Abuna Yemate at Guh, Abba Afse at Yeha (which probably incorporated elements of the Christianized temple), and Abba Garima, Adwa. Alef is associated with a site known as Debre Halle Luya; this is identified tentatively with a monastery known as Abune Gebre-Nazrawi approximately half way between Adigrat and Nebelet but this is not clear.[59] Guba's monastery has not been located; it is suggested to the west of Medera and

---

worship and communal activity. See for example René-Georges Coquin 'Laura' in Aziz Atiya, ed., *Coptic Encyclopaedia Volume 5* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 1428.

[54] Carlo Conti-Rossini, *Storia d'Etiopia* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Art Grafiche, 1928), 158–161. Their places of origin, however, can be shown in traditional sources to be from all over the Mediterranean; Pantaleon and Likanos were said to originate respectively from Rome and Constantinople which in any case are both Greek names; Sergew *Ancient and Medieval*, 116.

[55] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).

[56] Steven Kaplan, "Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia," *History in Africa* 8 (1981), 107–23.

[57] Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval*, 118–19.

[58] Conti-Rossini, *Storia*, 158; Roger Schneider, "Une page du *Gadla Sadqan*," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 5 (1965), 167–70.

[59] Lindahl, B., n.d., Local History of Ethiopia, available online at http://www.nai.uu.se/library/resources/dossiers/local_history_of_ethiopia/ (accessed 10 January 2011); R. Sauter, "Eglises rupestres du Tigré," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 10 (1976), 157–76. "A day's journey north of Fremona is another monastery called Alleluhia said to be on a high mountain," Ruth Plant, *The Architecture of the Tigre, Ethiopia* (Worcester: Ravens, 1985), 76.

apparently "only ruins remain."[60] Similarly Sehma's monastery is also not visible today but may be preserved in a toponym southeast of Adwa known as Enda Abba Sehma.[61]
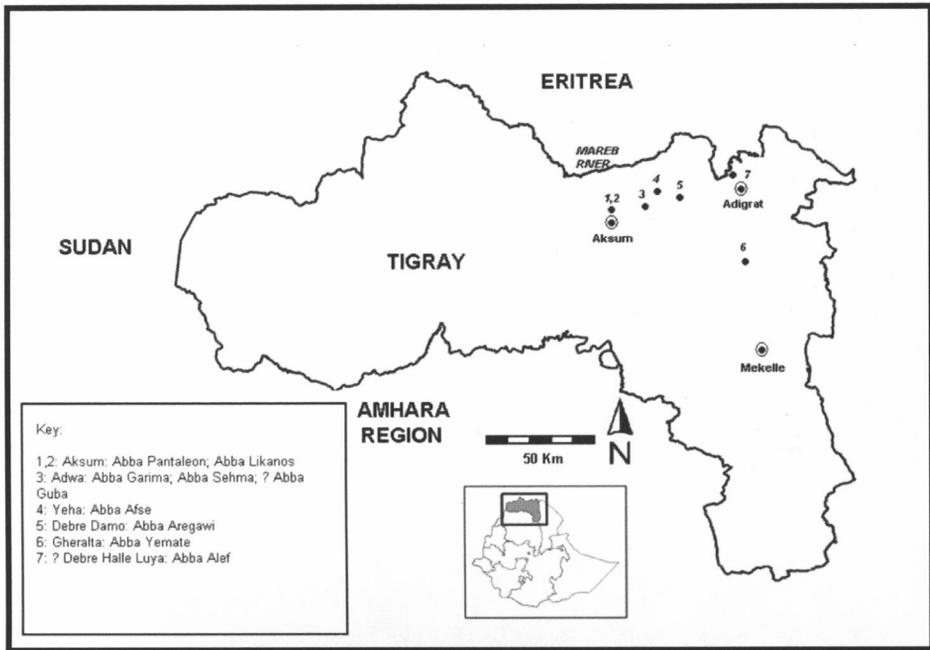

Figure 2. Depiction of the Nine Saints, Abuna Yemata, Guh, Gheralta (Niall Finneran).

---

[60] Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval*, 118.

[61] Ibid., 119.

Figure 3. Topography of the Nine Saints.

The first Aksumite monasteries, derived it would seem from the wider Syrian monastic tradition, and the first eremitic settlements were clearly sited upon high mountains or outcrops. The cells of Abba Pantaleon and Abba Likanos occupied high and dramatic peaks to the north of Aksum. It is notable that these small oratories were vertically distanced from the city, yet could be seen from all around the immediate landscape: they are at once isolated yet central. The situation of Abba Pantaleon is important as it appears to occupy a site with earlier pre-Christian significance, as is evidenced by the find of a Sabaean holy inscription on that site.[62] In a similar vein, but in a more rural context, Abuna Aregawi founded his cell upon the distinct and dramatic *amba* at Debre Damo. Again, tradition seems to indicate that this site had some earlier vague pre-Christian symbolic importance for he had to tackle a ferocious serpent that lived there already.[63] In Gheralta, to the east of Aksum, the small oratory associated with Abuna Aregawi at Guh is to be found in the top of a vertiginous rock pinnacle.

---

[62] We cannot be wholly sure that the site was of pre-Christian sacred significance, but this is a common theme in the archaeology of early Christian churches and monasteries across the old Christian world. See for example, Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1990), 42–48. The theory about the pre-Christian importance of this hilltop was first aired by the Deutsche Axum Expedition (DAE); see David Phillipson, *The Monuments of Aksum* (London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1997), 167.

[63] Ignazio Guidi, "Il Gadla Aregawi," *Atti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei* 5, 2 (1896), 71–90

The landscape context of these early Aksumite monasteries is clearly important, and need to be discussed further for they reflect wider eremitic monastic tradition. As Peter Brown has pointed out, the solitary monk in late antiquity was never really divorced from society.[64] Holy men, in Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ireland or southwest Britain, to name but a few examples, engaged with the societies within which they lived. Isolation was only symbolic. This appears to be the case with Saints Likanos and Pantaleon who remained close to the center of secular power in Aksum and in fact according to tradition became close confidants of the King.[65] The hermitages at Abba Likanos and Abba Pantaleon, the home of quasi-stylites, were also arresting landscape features that, as I have suggested, were at once distanced from, yet paradoxically highly visible from the center of Aksum.[66] The Syrian cultural tradition does appear, from at least a landscape perspective, to run strongly in the story of early Ethiopian monasticism.[67]

It is reasonably clear then that it is from this period, and in the context of monastic expansion, that the development of a more rural Christianity in the late Aksumite period becomes more deeply rooted. Monastic rather than parochial churches can be seen to be the key agents for the Christianization of the countryside. This is a model that appears to work in Egypt, in spite of the fact that here, politically integrated within the Roman Empire, circumstances for Christian development within the first four centuries AD ought to be different. In early medieval Ireland, in the seeming absence of major political/secular centers, monasteries also became important ideological and economic nodes within the

---

[64] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101.

[65] Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval*, 117. Sergew attributes their influence at court to their backgrounds in Greece and Italy rather than in Syria. See also Carlo Conti-Rossini, *Vitae Sanctorum Antiquiorum 1, Acta Yared et Pantalewon;* (CSCO *Scriptores Aethiopici*, vol. 10; Leeuven, Belgium: E. Peeters, 1961)

[66] Niall Finneran, "Globalising Ethiopian Christian Material Culture: Ethiopia and the Syriac World in the 6th Century," in Anthea Harris, ed., *Globalising Late Antiquity* (Reading, UK: Reading Medieval Studies, 2007), 75–90.

[67] For a general overview of early Syrian monastic traditions, see Sebastian Brock, "Early Syrian asceticism," *Numen* 20 (1973), 1–19; Ignacio Pena, "Aspectos peculiares del monacato sirio," in Claudio Bottini, Leah Di Segni, Eugenio Alliata, eds., *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land: Essays in Honor of V. C. Corbo* (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum/Franciscan Printing Press, 1990), 561–69. Niall Finneran and Emma Loosley, "Monastic Archaeology in Syria: Excavations at the Monastery of Mar Elian esh-Sharqi, Qaryatayn, Syria, 2001–2003. An Interim Report," *Levant* 37 (2005), 48–56. It would however be too simplistic to see too many formal analogies between the two churches, even given the history of the Aksumite conversion. See for example Peter Marassini, "Some Considerations on the Problem of 'Syriac Influences' on Aksumite Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23 (1990), 35–46. Other scholars have argued for a clear Syrian influence in monastic material culture. See Jules Leroy, "L'évangelaire Éthiopien du couvent d'Abba Garima et ses attaches avec l'ancien art Chrétien de Syrie," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 11 (1960), 131–43; Marilyn Heldman, "The Kibran Gospels: Ethiopia and Byzantium," in Robert Hess, ed., *Proceedings of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies 5* (Chicago: Northwestern University, 1978), 359–72.

landscape.[68] This is also true to some extent in Ethiopia, but somewhat later on, as well shall later see.

Of all the foundations of the Nine Saints, the monastery of Debre Damo has attained the greatest significance. This site has long outgrown its eremitic beginnings. Legend holds that the site was chosen by Abuna Aregawi and it was originally the abode of a fearsome serpent or snake. There are also suggestions, as we find with the pinnacle at Abba Pantaleon, of a pre-existing pre-Christian cultic function on the hilltop. Here today we find the best example of a cenobitic monastery in Ethiopia. The boundaries of the site are clearly delineated by the precipitous sides of the amba upon which the monastery is sited. Access is strictly controlled, and only males may enter. The two (now sympathetically restored) churches here retain strong Aksumite architectural motifs. Debre Damo remains, from an archaeological perspective, the best studied of the Ethiopian monasteries. Restoration work here in the 1940s by the late Derek Matthews, a British architect, and the Italian Scholar Antonio Mordini was able to shine light on architectural development and change in monastic material culture.[69] Indeed, the wealth of the monastery attests to its burgeoning secular and political significance over time. Debre Damo effectively develops over the next millennium as a classic cenobitic monastery in the shape of an Egyptian or Byzantine version. The wealth, importance, and position of the monastery on a tightly defined landscape feature means that Debre Damo is an exception rather than a rule of Ethiopian monastic space. This a theme to which we shall return at the end of the paper.
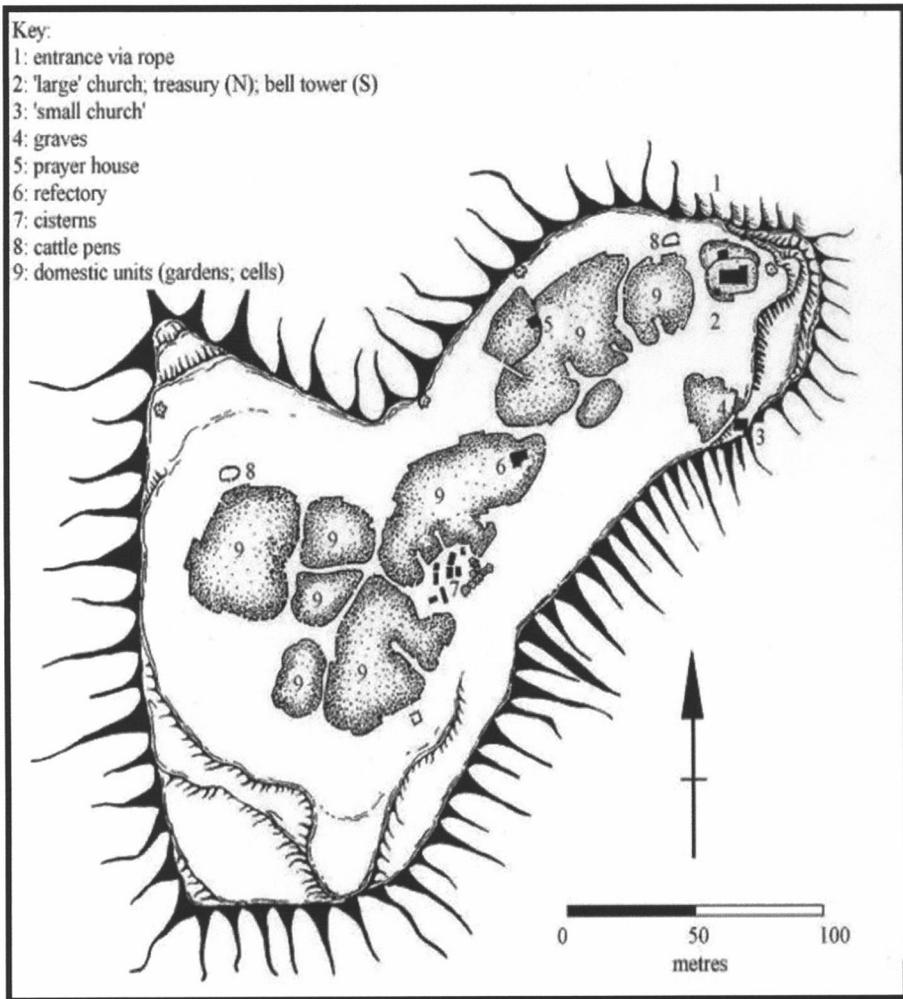

Figure 4. The amba of Debre Damo (Niall Finneran).

---

[68] Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38–42.

[69] Derek Matthews and Antonio Mordini, "The Monastery of Debra Damo, Ethiopia," *Archaeologia* 97 (1959), 1–58.

For reasons as yet unknown, but which must be derived from a combination of various internal and external social, environmental, and economic factors, Aksum declines from the early eighth century, and northern Ethiopia appears to enter a historical "dark age," which was alluded to in the opening section. The only material cultural evidence for this period are the churches themselves. We must look to them for clues as to the nature of the political power that was mapped upon the northern Ethiopian landscape after Aksum's demise, and attempt to recognize the very basic pattern of church distribution that emerges from the Aksumite discussion, i.e., larger churches serving a more parochial function and associated with urban centers, and more inaccessible smaller churches that served no parochial function, but which served as monastic centers and which may or may not consciously reference distinctive landscape features.

Key:
1: entrance via rope
2: 'large' church; treasury (N); bell tower (S)
3: 'small church'
4: graves
5: prayer house
6: refectory
7: cisterns
8: cattle pens
9: domestic units (gardens; cells)

Figure 5. Plan of the monastery of Debre Damo (after D. Matthews and A. Mordini, "The Monastery of Debra Damo, Ethiopia," *Archaeologia* 97, (1959), 1–58, figure 1.)

Historical and archaeological evidence for the successor polity to Aksum is opaque. Arab sources describe the existence of a new capital known as "Kubar" somewhere vaguely to the south of Aksum, and this is about as much as we can know with the present state of our knowledge.[70] In the absence of a regional archaeological survey program geared towards the location of large post-Aksumite sites, we can only guess at the nature of the polity or indeed polities that developed during the eighth century after the end of Aksum. We may reasonably surmise, however, that the economic basis of such a polity or polities would have been based upon access to extensive agricultural landscapes and also to some extent—although now probably eschewing the long-distance trading networks developed during the Aksumite period—some form of local trading resource. We might also reasonably surmise that Christianity retained a central social and ideological significance, as there is no evidence for a rupture with the Patriarchate Alexandria during this time. The countryside to the south of Aksum (i.e., eastern and southern Tigray) would appear to be an obvious location for any Aksumite successor. Agriculturally the landscape is fertile, and controls access to the Danakil Depression, which although a low lying and hot marginal landscape was also, crucially, the source of much good quality salt that would become one of the key economic commodities in Ethiopia.[71]

### After Aksum: The churches of eastern Tigray as monastic successors?

It is not the place here to develop a detailed attempt to reconstruct the post-Aksumite landscape and its economic potential, but it is important to draw attention to a single category of archaeological evidence that does appear to fill this cultural lacuna: the rock-cut and built churches of Tigray. At this stage, a detailed distribution and typological map of the churches of Tigray awaits completion, but a consideration of the basic patterns of location here appears to show some interesting possibilities.[72] First, there is a dense cluster of churches around the Gheralta massif. Gheralta is a very distinctive landscape feature, visible for miles across the plains of Tigray. A close association with the early phases of Aksumite monasticism is suggested by the presence here of a small rock-hewn church in the pinnacle at Guh of one of the Nine Saints, Abuna Yemata. The sheer concentration of churches is suggestive of some dense settlement patterning here in antiquity, with perhaps more parochial churches occupying the lower zone of the massif, and in the mountains themselves smaller, isolated churches more redolent of a dedicated monastic function.

---

[70] Finneran, *Archaeology*, 209–16.

[71] Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1968), 242, 460–62; Clement Apaak, "The Socio-Economic Role of Salt in Northern Highland Ethiopia," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada, 2010).

[72] Claude Lepage, "Les monuments rupestres de Degum et les églises du vallée," *Documents pour Servir à l'Histoire des Civilisations Éthiopiennes* 2 (1971), 61–72; Claude Lepage, "Les monuments chrétiennes rupestres de Degum en Ethiopie (rapport préliminaire)," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 22 (1972), 168–200.
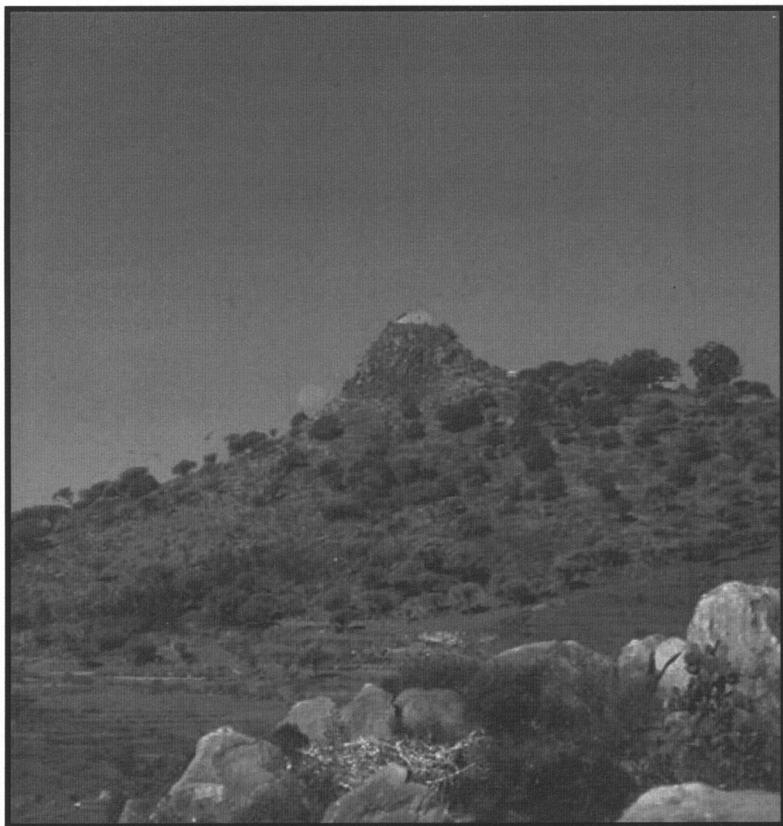
Figure 6. Abba Pantaleon, Aksum (Niall Finneran).

Clearly the Degum complex of churches may represent the former area of a significant settlement during the late or post-Aksumite period,[73] and similar high-status excavated churches may also be found at Berakit and at Hawzien on the plain.[74] The monastic units of the mountains (such as Giyorgis Angua; Mika'el Angua; Abuna Yemate. Guh; Arbate Insessa, Kemer) while of similar basilican shape as the Degum and Berakit buildings are markedly smaller than the churches of the valley and could certainly be described as being oratory-like. Clearly further archaeological landscape survey and mapping is required to make some sense of the Gheralta landscape in the post-Aksumite period, but it does offer some pointers for reconstructing the monastic and political landscape of an important site farther to the south.

---

[73] This may be borne out by the presence of significant quantities of pottery found in the immediate locality of Degum. See Hervé de Roux, "Note sur les tessons ceramiques du Degum (Tigré)," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 10 (1976), 71–80, and pers. obs.

[74] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches*, 91–92.

The Zagwe: Dynastic Monasteries?

Ethiopian tradition attributes the construction of the twelve rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Lasta to the eponymous king during the twelfth century, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the churches developed over a longer period of time and indeed were probably never originally designed to be churches. There is no need here to rehearse the arguments over the dating and development of the two main complexes of churches here,[75] but it is necessary to try to contextualize the structures within the wider landscape history and to identify firmly the role of the monastery in this landscape. Recent archaeological survey and oral history research here suggests that the actual site of Lalibela/Roha itself was probably not a political center.[76] The Zagwe kings are each associated with different places in the wider landscape, and even Lalibela himself was reported to have had his own "capital" (and we must be wary of using that word; a royal encampment is a better term and one which is recognizable in the context of medieval and post-medieval Ethiopia as a whole), at a site known as Mekalt, some two kilometers due west of the modern town. So, the first level of the landscape analysis is to understand that like their successors in later medieval times, Zagwe kings had favored centers within the landscape from which they ruled.[77] These secular centers would also have had a royal church. Looking at the distribution of churches within the landscape, a very basic twofold dichotomy is clear: there are twelve church structures concentrated in two large and in one single site in a small area of about 500 meters by 500 meters in Lalibela; then there are a number of scattered churches around the region, some in the mountains other on more lower landscapes, which all claim some foundation either by the Zagwe kings, or, in a few cases (e.g., Arbate Insessa, Bilbala Cherqos) by Aksumite kings.

   The foundation traditions, for very obvious reasons should not be used to attribute firm construction dates for churches, and such dedications are clearly used as strategies for

---

[75] For example, see Irmgard Bidder, *Lalibela: The Monolithic Churches of Ethiopia* (Cologne: Du Mont, 1959); Michael Gervers, "The Rehabilitation of the Zagwe Kings and the Building of the Debre Sion-Golgotha-Sellassie Complex in Lalibela," *Africana Bulletin* 51 (2003), 23–49; Marilyn Heldman, "Legends of Lalibela: The Development of an Ethiopian Pilgrimage Center," *Res* 27 (1995), 25–38; Claude Lepage, "Un Métropolite Égyptien bâtisseur à Lalibäla (Éthiopie) entre 1205 et 1210," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (2002), 141–74; Mengistu Gobezie, *Lalibela and Yimrehane Kristos: The Living Witnesses of Zagwe Dynasty* (Addis Ababa: Gebre Egziabher Baye, 2004); David Phillipson, "A new sequence, Chronology, and Evaluation of the Lalibela Rock-Cut Churches," *Bibliotheca Nubica et Aethiopica* 10 (2007), 138–48; Tekeste Negash, "The Zagwe Period and the Zenith of Urban Culture in Ethiopia, ca. 930–1270 AD," *Africa* 61 (2006), 120–37; Salvatore Angelini, *Lalibela-Phase One* (New York: International Fund for Monuments, 1967); Alessandro Monti Della Corte, *Le Chiese Ipogee e Monolitiche e gli Altri Monumenti Medievali del Lasta* (Rome: Società Italiana Arti Grafiche, 1940).

[76] Niall Finneran, "Settlement Archaeology and Oral History in Lasta, Ethiopia," *Azania* 44, 3 (2009), 281–91.

[77] For an overview of the peripatetic capital in Ethiopia in the medieval period, see Ronald Horvath, "The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia," *Journal of African History* 10 (1969), 205–19; Richard Pankhurst, "Ethiopian Medieval and Post-Medieval Capitals: Their Development and Principle Features," *Azania* 14 (1979), 1–20.

political and ecclesiastical legitimization. The Zagwe after all have been viewed as a usurper dynasty.[78] They were a Cushitic, Agaw-speaking people who, although connected to Aksum via trade, came from a differing cultural background.[79] The Zagwe at once would clearly seek, as "interlopers" to tap into Aksumite social memory, hence the continued use of Aksumite-style architectural motifs on their churches, yet also reference what appear to be significant pre-Christian traditions of the veneration of natural places, caves. Placing a church within a cave would appear then to be a natural reaction, a Christianization of an earlier sacred spot that may often have links to water sources or wells.[80] And what of the tradition of excavating churches? It has been argued that this tradition links back to Aksumite funerary practice, the construction of commemorative tombs such as those of Bazen, Kaleb, and Gebre Masqal at Aksum and similar types at Matara, and of course latterly at Selassie, Degum.[81] It is also possible though that the act of cutting recalls a pre-Christian Agaw ideological attachment to subterranean places,[82] and those in Lalibela, at once hidden from site and invisible, yet in terms of scale and execution clearly the result of extensive elite patronage and "monumental" recreate the natural cave environment.

Moving out and into the wider landscape, the association between monastic church and royal center is unmistakable. The first king of the Zagwe dynasty, Mera Tekla Haymanot, ruled from a site called Mai Mariam, which is some twenty-five kilometers northwest of Lalibela, on a high mountain above Bilbala Cherqos. Although the monastic church here is recent, it occupies the site of an older structure, parts of which may still be seen in the *Maqdas* (sanctuary) of the new church. These chamfered columns bear an unmistakable resemblance to columns found in the other older churches of the region, and a small stone plaque bears in *bas relief* the same type of "stela" motif that is visible on the roof of Medhane Alem, Lalibela. In 2009, I observed here rock-hewn tombs, which indicate again a Christian site of some antiquity, and the strong possibility of elite burial. A stronger association between a monastery and elite settlement may be found at Yemrehane Krestos where the cave church is also sited adjacent to an apparently secular, palace building (it is now used as a treasury). Local tradition places the site of Wegre Sehin, the

---

[78] Again, an example from the medieval period of southwestern Britain can help us frame some ideas here. So-called "Celtic" saints' dedications of many churches are much later than the actual saints themselves, and are used to confer some sort of "ancient legitimacy" upon the foundations. See Susan Pearce, "The Dating of Some Celtic Dedications and Hagiographical Traditions in South-Western Britain," *Transactions of the Devonshire Association* 105 (1973), 95–120.

[79] Taddesse Tamrat, "Processes of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Agaw," *Journal of African History* 29, 1 (1988), 5–18.

[80] Niall Finneran, "Holy Waters: Pre-Christian and Christian Water Association in Ethiopia: An Archaeological Landscape Perspective," in Terje Ostegaard, ed., *Water, Culture and Identity in the Nile Basin* (Bergen: University of Bergen Press, 2009), 165–87.

[81] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches*, 17, 185.

[82] Agaw attachment to caves, and caves as Agaw *genius loci* are evidenced from Cushitic linguistic studies. See Carlo Conti-Rossini, "Appunti sulla lingua Awiyà del Denghelà," *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana* 18 (1905), 116–17.

"capital" of Yemrehane Krestos, in the valley beneath. King Na'akweto La'ab's capital, Qoqena (itself an extensive archaeological site), is adjacent to the eponymous monastery, sited dramatically in a cave beneath an old waterfall. Although belonging to a later historical and political context, the juxtaposition of what is a royal monastery at Ganneta Maryam alongside what appears to be the *Katama*, or camp, of the first Solomonic "Restoration" king Yekunno Amlak is also significant.[83] Here we find donor paintings within the nave of the rock-cut monastic church that show the King in the protection of angels (Fig. 7). Below, on the plain, is archaeological evidence of a massive encampment that clearly supported the court and army of Yekunno Amlak as he visited his favorite monastery.
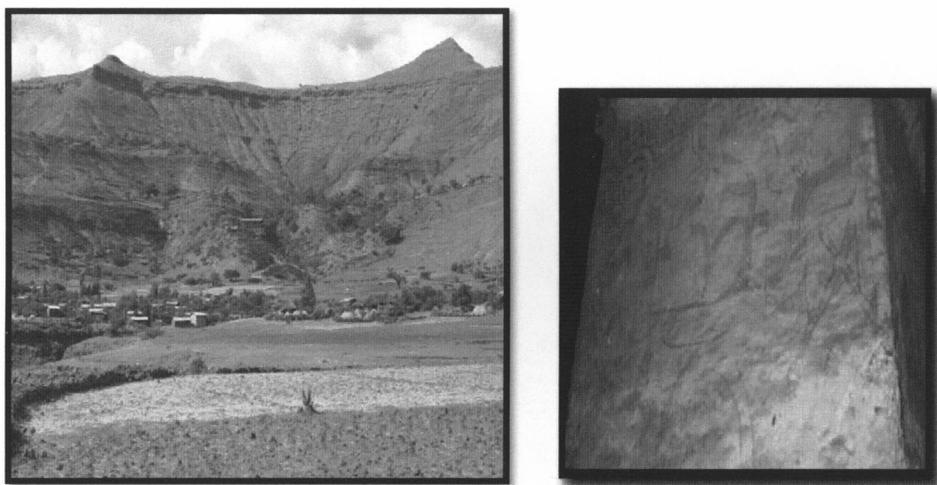
Figure 7. A royal monastery of Lalibela, Ganneta Maryam, and donor portrait (Niall Finneran).

In contrast to the large royal monasteries that are associated with the "capitals" of at least three of the major Zagwe Kings, there are a number of smaller churches to be found in and around the higher reaches of the flanks of mountain landscape of Abuna Yosef, the large volcanic eminence which dominates the Bugna region. Three of the most notable of these churches are: Asheten Maryam on a high spur, some two-three hours' walk to the east of the town; Qanqanit Mikhael, a four-hour uphill trek to the north of the town, and farther still, in a cave on the summit of Mount Makhine, the church of Makhine Medhane Alem. All of these churches are presently monastic, i.e., a small community of monks live there, and in the case at least of Makhine Medhane Alem and Asheten Maryam are situated in natural caves that have been enlarged to varying degrees. They are not

---

[83] Niall Finneran and Tania Tribe, "Towards an Archaeology of Kingship and Monasticism in Medieval Ethiopia," in Timothy Insoll, ed., *Belief in the Past: The Proceedings of the Manchester Conference on Archaeology and Religion* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 1212, 2004), 63–74.

associated, however, with any parochial settlement[84] and as such their landscape situation places them within the tradition of other "holy mountain" chapels such as are found at Guh in Gheralta, and at Abba Pantaleon.
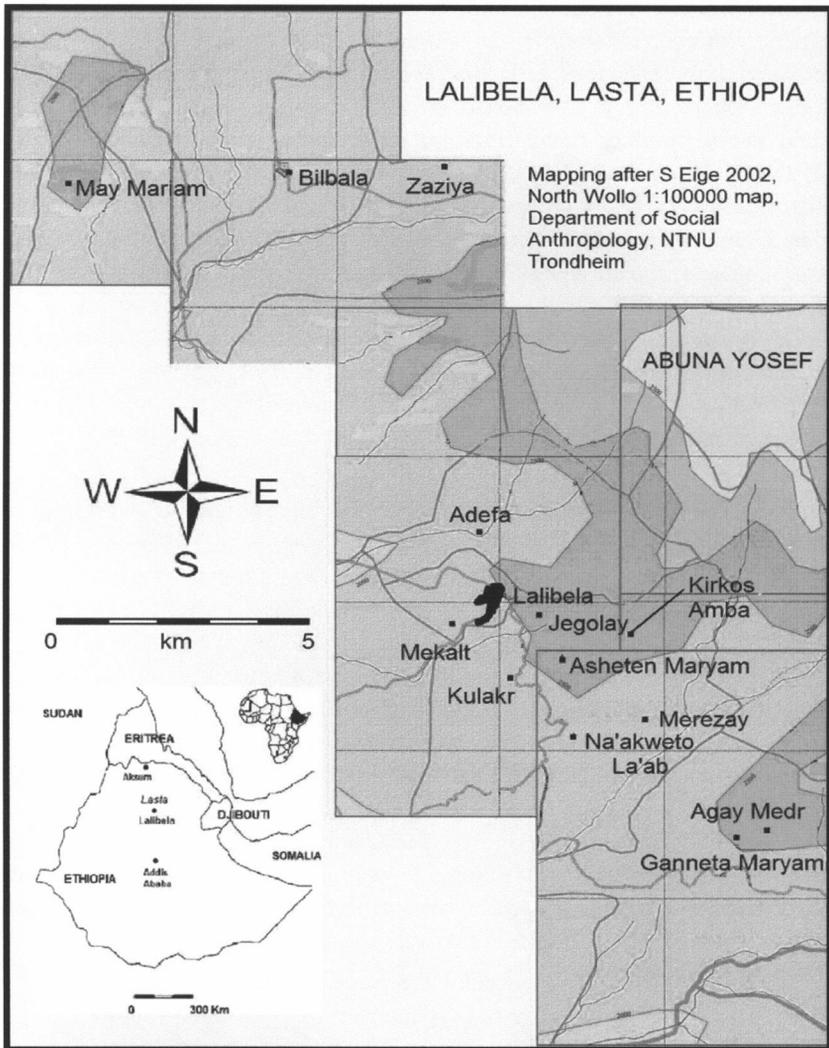

Figure 8. The secular and religious topography of Lalibela.

---

[84] Asheten Maryam is located, however, near a newly-discovered amba-top archaeological site, which term a "citadel" on Kirkos Amba, effectively on the summit of Mount Assheten. If this site had a royal function, which is suggested by its location and scale, then the monastery of Assheten Maryam may be described as playing a similar role as Yemrehane Krestos, for example. See Niall Finneran "Lalibela in Its Landscape: Archaeological Survey at Lalibela, Lasta, Ethiopia," April–May 2009, *Azania* 47, 1 (2012), 81–98.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has suggested a basic chronological model for the development of Ethiopian monasticism up until the end of the Zagwe period. Starting in the Aksumite polity, the monastic system appears to be imported, and thus should show strong similarities with contemporary Byzantine and also Syriac eremitic tradition—a focus on high places or holy mountains, reflecting, for example, Byzantine practice at Mount Athos or Meteora *inter alia*. In the Syriac eremitic monastic tradition, mountains too are important but the stylites movement also shows clear parallels. In the post-Aksumite period, Debre Damo, owing to its wealth, importance and high defensive position, if anything, becomes a clearly recognizable, bounded and integrated Pachomian monastery. Parochial churches are still visible, and they clearly mark former urban centers of a post-Aksumite polity in the Hawzien Plain. Mountain churches, again monastic in character, are found throughout the Gheralta massif. With the so-called Zagwe rupture, a new phenomenon emerges. According to recent oral history and archaeological research it is clear that royal monastic churches, sited in caves or on the lower slopes of mountains, are associated with Zagwe "capitals," and again, higher up on mountain tops, smaller monastic churches dominate.

We can flesh out this basic picture further if only generally; during the period of Zagwe dominance, the monastic system of Tigray, in the former Aksumite heartland, retains a great deal of economic and political power. Within this context we see the emergence of such figures as Tekla Haymanot and Iyassu Mo'a. The island monastery of Estefanos on Lake Hayk starts to attain strong political influence, and traditionally it is suggested that the first king of the "Solomonic Restoration," Yekunno Amlak, owed his position to the support of the monks from the north. The founding of Debre Libanos further south in Shoa, and also the lake monasteries of Lake Tana in Begemdir, are all part of this development of twin monastic and royal power and prestige during this period, as Marie-Laure Derat has shown.[85] Fieldwork by the present author in western Tigray, at Inda Selassie, has shown how monasteries were used to provide a basic framework of royal power in newly-conquered areas in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and became dominant economic nodes in the landscape owing to the *gult* tributary system.[86] This system of royal patronage develops from small mountain monasteries in the Aksumite period via the beginnings of closely tied royal monastic traditions in the Zagwe period.[87]

We might also wish to consider the place of the Ethiopian monastery in wider context. First, the best fit for a spatial typology of the traditional Ethiopian monastery is probably the skete or lavra model—or we may term this semi-eremitic—which sees a central church, and perhaps one communal building or treasury, with monks (and nuns)

---

[85] Marie-Laure Derat, *Le domaine des rois éthiopiens (1270–1527): Espace, pouvoir et monachisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003). See also Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianisation of Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1984).

[86] Niall Finneran, "The Monasteries of Shire, Northern Ethiopia," *Ecclesiology Today* 30 (2003), 3–9.

[87] Of course we have traditions of Aksumite kings such as Kaleb retiring to monasteries when they abdicated power, but these monasteries were always somewhat distanced from the centers of urban power.

living outside the settlement in the wider landscape with no formal boundaries. Examples of these types of monastery are found all over Ethiopia, but are best typified by some of the Lalibela "royal" monasteries, such as Yemrehane Krestos, Na'akweto La'ab and Ganneta Maryam. Eremitic monasticism, as in many other areas of the Christian east, also does not really exist anymore. Individual hermitages do occasionally still exist, but this is a phenomenon to be associated with the nascent stages of Ethiopian monasticism. Integrated communal Pachomian monasteries, such as we see in medieval western Europe, Egypt, Syria, and the Byzantine East *inter alia* are a rarer, mostly later phenomenon. Debre Damo and the Lake Tana monasteries are obvious examples, but these are bounded monasteries in bounded landscapes. Overall then the best descriptor of an Ethiopian monastery is as a Lavra.

Finally it is also important to see the international dimension of the Ethiopian monastery. Ethiopian monasticism was born in the Christian east and bears many similar characteristics to monasteries from this tradition. In turn, as members of a wider Christian eastern community we find Ethiopian monasticism in places such as Jerusalem, where the Debre Sultan on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre captures this semi-eremitic characteristic of the Ethiopian monastery, and places it again on a high point: here the roof of one of the most important churches of Christendom.[88] In a similar vein, in the Wadi Qadisha in Lebanon, we find a small cave monastery, among many of a range of eastern Christian denominations, but with its frescoes and finds of associated Aksumite coinage is recognizably Ethiopian. This could be any cave monastery in Ethiopia. And finally in Egypt, a place with strong ecclesiastical links with Ethiopia, we find a small community of Ethiopian monks who finally settled in the Deir es Suriani.[89] It is important therefore to stress the international context of Ethiopian monasticism, a movement that grew from an eastern Christian eremitic tradition, which became, like the Irish or Anglo-Saxon monastery elsewhere[90] an agent for strong political and economic control in the landscape and which from small beginnings became an institution that helped shape an African state over some 1,500 years.

[88] http://www.mediaethiopia.com/Views/DebreSultan_Jan06.pdf (accessed 10th February 2011). See also Enrico Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina*, 2 vols. (Rome: Liveria della Stato, 1943). An important figure in Syrian and Egyptian monasticism is Moses the Ethiopian, but how "Ethiopian" this individual was is open to interpretation. See Kathleen Wicker O'Brien, "Ethiopian Moses," in Vincent Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behaviour in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 329–48. Moses is also found in a Syrian dedication at Mar Musa, Nebk, north of Damascus: Paolo Dall'Oglio, "Storia del Monastero di San Mose l'Abissino descrizione degli affreschi della sua chiesa," in Istituto Centrale per il Restauro, Roma, *Il Restauro del Monastero di San Mose l'Abissino, Nebek, Siria* (Rome: Istituto Centrale per il Restauro Roma Ministero della Cultura, 1998), 11–22.

[89] Oscar Meinardus, "Ecclesia Aethiopica in Aegypto," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3, 1 (1965), 23–35. The monks in fact had their own monastery at Elisha, then when their numbers dwindled were forced to seek sanctuary with the Syrians. There are no longer any Ethiopian monks in the monastery.

[90] Roberta Gilchrist and Richard Morris, "Monasteries as Settlements: Religion, Society and Economy AD 600–1050," in Martin Carver, ed., *In Search of Cult: Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1993), 113–18.