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Kingship Between History and Hagiography: The Ethiopian Monk-King Ideal

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Introduction

In the course of this work, we will discuss a number of cases and examples related to the monk-king ideal, within the history of Ethiopia in the Middle Ages. Firstly, we will start by introducing the development of the monastic movement, outlining the tight linkage between the monastic institution and the kingship. Subsequently, we will carefully analyze the role of the *Gadl* – Ethiopian hagiography – within the context of this period of time, pointing out the relevance these hagiographies for the reconstruction of the history of Medieval Ethiopia. By considering these factors, I will present the most relevant "monk-kings" that assisted us to discuss and analyze this ideal. However, in order to gain a better understanding of this matter, we should briefly refer to the development of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and subsequently describe the emergence of Ethiopian Monasticism.

A brief historical review of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

According to traditional historical sources, the introduction of Christianity as the official religion of the state was caused by the result of evangelical activity from outside the country in conjunction with the desire of the Axumite King, Ezana, around 350 C.E. Some years later, the Kingdom of Axum adopted Christianity as its official creed. In addition, Ethiopian 'Christianity began among the upper classes and gradually spread down to the lower levels of society. In other words, Christianity in Ethiopia started as the official religion of the country, and as such it secured the help of the government from the very beginning. Therefore, the Christian Church in Ethiopia did not experience the persecution which occurred in other countries. In fact, the support of the state triggered the rapid expansion of Christianity in Ethiopia.'[1]

This fact, stressed by S. Selassie, is a central criterion in analyzing the development of the Christian faith in Ethiopia. Despite efforts to eradicate all forms of paganism, "royal Christianity" distinguished itself from the religion and traditions of the people. In general, we can speak of the "Ethiopian Orthodox Church" but, nevertheless, we must differentiate between the characteristics of the customs and traditions of the country and its theological allegiance to

[1] Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1972), p. 104.

the Christian faith. As stated by E. Ullendorf: "The doctrinal position of the Ethiopian National Church was always unenviable, caught as it was between the deeply rooted customs of the country and the necessity to maintain its theological prestige as a truly Christian body."[2] This constant search for a balance between these two sides gives us the framework that we need in order to understand the different sources that deal with Ethiopian monasticism.

The Origins of Ethiopian Monasticism

The introduction of Ethiopian monasticism into Ethiopia can be traced back to 480 AC, more than a century after Ezana's 'legendary' conversion. At that moment, the brand new Axumite Christian Church still had certain shortcomings. E.Cerrulli argues that Ezana's conversion to Christianity was extremely fragile, and his acceptance of the new religion was constantly challenged by the conservative faction within the Kingdom.[3] In addition, Taddesse Tamrat, one of the most prominent Ethiopian historians, argues that Greek was apparently the major language of the Church, due to the lack of books in Ethiopic language. Therefore, most of the clergy may have been of foreign origin.[4] The development of the Axumite Church coincides with the advent of groups of Syrian missionaries, – the *Sadqan* and the *Nine Saints* – owing to the persecutions that followed the Council of Chalcedon,[5] who established several monasteries around Axum and the northern province of Tigre.[6] Ephraim Isaac, the renowned and remarkable Ethiopian scholar, highlights the work performed by these holy men, which includes the translation of the bible from the Greek into Ge'ez, including, for example, the books of Enoch and Jubilees. The Nine Saints also translated homilies of the church fathers and dogmatical treatises from Syriac into Ge'ez. As regards the monastic movement, E. Isaac argues that 'Headed by Abba Za-Mikael Aregawi Manfasawi, a disciple of the Coptic abbot Pachomius, the monks founded monasteries throughout Ethiopia. Abba Liqanos and Abba Pantalewon remained near Axum, while Za-Mikael Aregawi established a monastery on the cliffs of Dabra Damo […] these monks and other

[2] Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 107.
[3] Enrico Cerulli, *Storia della Letteratura Etiopica* (Milano: Nuova Accademia Editrice, 1961), pp. 20-21.
[4] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 23.
[5] Enrico Cerulli, *Storia Della Letteratura Etiopica*, pp. 23-24.
[6] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church* (New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 2013), p. 21.

saints flocked into Ethiopia in the fifth and sixth century, contributing to the monastic tradition, which is still strong in the Ethiopian Church'[7]

The faithful and devote work of these holy men, brought the Church into the interior of the country, facilitating the teaching of the Christian religion among the local people, serving as permanent centers of Christian learning. Certainly, these achievements gave much power and prestige to the clergy, attracting many souls to it.[8] This process was supported and encouraged by the kings. The kings were closely linked with the settlement conducted by Christian missionaries. According to the legend, Emperor Kaleb, a great Christian warrior, gave up his throne and retired to a monastery. He sent his crown to Jerusalem, where it was suspended in front 'of the door of the life giving tomb' at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This gesture was evidence of Kaleb's spiritual attachment to the holy sites of Christian Jerusalem,[9] and his deference to the monastic movement. In addition, this literary image of an ideal monk-king is repeatedly exalted through different Ethiopian hagiographies. The Zagwe ruler Lalibala, who ruled during the 12th and 13th century, is probably the first clear example of a non-axumite monk-king. In *Gadla Lalibela*, the Zagwe monarch has been canonized and exalted as a king who adopted the monastic life.[10] Subsequently, Yekunno Amlak, a leading nobleman who was born in the province of Shoa and claimed to be a descendant of the last Axumite king, rebelled against the Zagwe dynasty, and finally attained his purpose. The first Solomonic king after the "restoration" received almost the same treatment that was given to King Lalibala. Nevertheless, before beginning any discussion on this subject, a clearer definition of the concept related to the Gadl and his historical value is firmly required.

The Historical Value of the *Gadl*

The term *Gadl* comes from Ge'ez language, and makes reference to an Ethiopian narrative style associated to the hagiographic tradition established in the context of the Christian Church. Hyatt attempts to define the term *Gadl* as an Ethiopic word for *life*, just as the Latin *Acta*, stressing the

[7] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, p. 21.
[8] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527*, p. 24.
[9] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church: Vol. III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), pp. 913-914.
[10] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1984), p. 17.

fact that the model was borrowed from non-Ethiopian Christian sources.[11] Furthermore, K. Kifle defines *Gadl* as a 'Ge'ez term, which means the hardships, struggles and trials undergone by believers in order to obtain victory and salvation in their life hereafter.'[12]

According to Steven Kaplan,[13] the hagiographic literature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church can be grouped into two main categories: on the one hand, the fundamentally foreign works, which includes the elemental basis for Christian monasticism. We may include here two works which were translated into Ethiopic from Greek, as the *Life of St. Anthony* written by Athanasius, and the *Rule of St. Pachomius*.[14] These two writings must have been the first models for the *Gadl* literature, as they have been for the entire Eastern Christian hagiographic literature. The relevance of this hagiographical tradition is sharply described within the *Monastic Genealogy of the Line of Takla Haymanot of Shoa*, a treatise composed during the Jesuit mission in Ethiopia, in the mid-sixteenth century, which traces the genealogy of Takla Haymanot through St. Pachomius and Abba Za-Mikael Aregawi, till St. Anthony as follows: 'Abba Anthony begat Macarius the Great; and Abba Macarius begat Abba Pachomius, the Archimandrite; and Abba Pachomius begat Abba Thedore; and Abba Theodore begat Abba Aragawi, who is Zamichael. And Abba Aragawi came to Ethiopia and begat Krestos Bezana; and Abba Krestos Bezana begat Abba Masqal Moa; And Abba Masqal Moa begat Abba Yohanni; and Abba Yohanni begat Abba Iyyasus Moa with the (monastic) habit (qamis) and cincture (qenat); And Abba Iyyasus Moa begat Abba Takla Haymanot with Habit and cincture.'[15]

In addition to above, Kaplan argues that books such as *Barlaam and Joasaph*, *The Life of St. George* and *The Conflict of Severus*, constituted the foundation of the models adopted by the Ethiopian local saints. However, the works included in this category are not very relevant for the field of Ethiopian History. On the other hand, we can situate the local and indigenous Ethiopian hagiographies, which focused on the saints who lived between the 13th and the 16th centuries. These hagiographies depict the lives of many monastic leaders, as well as some kings. These

[11] Harry M. Hyatt, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London: Luzac & Co, 1928), p. 251.
[12] Kidanawald Kifle, *Mashafa Sawasiw Wagiss Wamazgaba Kalat Haddis* (Addis Abbaba: Artistic Printing, 1948), p. 301.
[13] Steven Kaplan, "Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia," *History in Africa*, 8, 1981, p. 107.
[14] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, p. 241.
[15] Getatchew Haile, "The Monastic Genealogy of the Line of Takla Haymanot of Shoa," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 24, 1982-1983, p. 23.

works are central for the reconstruction of the history of medieval Ethiopia, as Conti Rossini has expressed: 'The more I preoccupy myself with the history of Ethiopia, the more I realize the importance of the study of local traditions […] with the advent (even if sometimes legendary) of successive chiefs, we will have an accurate idea of the history of Ethiopia.'[16] Furthermore, the *Gadl* literature may help us not only for the reconstruction of the history of medieval Ethiopia, but also to understand the medieval Ethiopian thought. As S. Yohannes states, the *Gadl* works comprehends the authentic beliefs of the learned Ethiopians, as well as of the ordinary people. For this reason, the *Gadl* literature should be considered the most emblematic literary form in Ethiopia.[17]

Conti Rossini classified the *Gadlat* (plural of *Gadl)* in three categories: those which are mainly biographical; important traditions related to fantastic tales; and *Gadlat* written long after the event, and of minor importance.[18] The distinction is made due to the great importance that Rossini attached to the date of composition. As claimed by the Italian scholar, particular attention should be given to the date of composition of a *Gadl*, in order to determine the historical value of the writing, since 'their value as a contribution for the reconstruction of the political an ecclesiastical history [of Ethiopia] is inversely proportional to the distance, in time, of the saint whom they intend to celebrate.'[19] However, the task of determining the precise date of composition of the *Gadl* is far from simple. Additionally, Taddesse Tamrat, divides the Ethiopian hagiographical model in four essential parts: The first includes the saint's story of life, containing his evangelical work and his monastic pursuit in an isolated hermitage; the next section focuses on the *Kidan*, namely the pact, which the saint receives from God, in exchange for his struggles; the third part highlights the miracles attributed to the saint, both in his lifetime and after his death; and the fourth and last part is composed of his Malk, that are short hymns dedicated to his holy life. This model depicted by Tamrat may be associated with the model employed by Athanasius of Alexandria in his masterpiece, the *Life of St Anthony*, pointed out by

[16] Carlo Conti Rossini, "Note di Agiografia Etiopica: Abiya-Egzi, Arkaledes, e Gabra Iyesus," *Rassegna di Studi Orientali*, 17, 1938, pp. 409-410.
[17] Samuel W. Yohannes, "The Gadl as Basis for Constructing the Notion of the Human Person in Ethiopian Philosophy," in K. Fukui, E. Kurimoto, M. Shigeta (eds.), *Ethiopian in Broader Perspective* (Kyoto: Papers of [the] 13th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, vol. III, 1997), p. 211.
[18] Carlo Conti Rossini, "L'agiografia Etiopica e gli Atti del Santo Yafqerranna Egzi (Secolo XIV)," *Atti dei reale Istituto Veneto*, 96, 1937, pp. 407-408.
[19] Ibid, p. 404.

T. Hagg, in his paper about the *Life of St Anthony*.[20] According to Hagg, the biographer start with the narrative related to young Anthony´s life story. The second part revolves around Anthony´s struggle with the demons that ends with the granting of God´s pact, or the *Kidan,* following the term employed by Tamrat. In the third part of the biography, 'Athanasius relates a series of episodes that are systematically arranged according to their nature rather than chronologically.'[21] Part of these episodes shows many miraculous healings and visions. Conversely, we will find that the *Gadla Takla Haymanot* includes several episodes that are in some way, chronologically interconnected to the spiritual and physical development of Takla Haymanot, targeting towards the fulfillment of the saint's long term plan.[22] In the words of Hyatt, 'The miracles and ascetics practices of Takla Haymanot increased with advancing years.'[23]

Once again, the inverse proportion between the *Gadl*'s historical value and the temporal distance separating the saint and the writing of the *Gadl* should be remarked. We must also mention the possibility that these sections, in part or as a whole body, may have been written at different periods of time, hampering the efforts of fixing the date of the *Gadl*.[24] Consequently, there is a difficulty connected to the "date of composition" approach, considering that the text has been constantly revised and altered. Kaplan recommends that priority consideration must be given to how the work of the hagiographer and scribes has affected the text, arguing that 'texts were shaped both in their initial writing and in the course of transmission by the needs and concerns of the religious community as perceived by hagiographers and scribes.'[25]

The Monk-King ideal in the Context of the *Kebra Nagast*

The *Kebra Nagast* or *The Glory of the Kings* is undoubtedly an essential and indispensable book in order to understand the Ethiopian Christian tradition. This work consist on a great compilation of several legends and traditions, some of them historical and some of an exclusively folkloristic character, influenced by the Old Testament and Rabbinic writings but also by Egyptian (both

[20] Thomas Hagg, "The Life of St. Anthony Between Biography and Hagiography." In S. Efthymiadis (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* (England, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), pp. 17-34.
[21] Ibid, p. 25.
[22] Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, "A structural Analysis of Gadla Takla Haymanot," *African Languages and Cultures*, 10(2), 1997, p.192. (pp. 181-198)
[23] Harry M. Hyatt, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London: Luton & Co, 1928), p. 259.
[24] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527*, p. 3.
[25] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, p. 9.

pagan and Christian), Arabian and Ethiopian sources.[26] We can summarize the fundamental pillars upon which the *Kebra Nagast* was written in the following manner: 1. the kings of Ethiopia were descended from King Salomon of Israel and therefore from the House of David. 2. The Ark of the Covenant was taken by the son of the Queen of Sheba and King Salomon, i.e. Menelik I, and brought from Jerusalem to Axum. 3. The God of Israel transferred his house from Jerusalem to Aksum, then the ecclesiastical and political capital of Ethiopia.[27] Therefore, it can thus be stated that the *Kebra Nagast* is not only a literary work, but is the core of Ethiopian national and religious feelings and expressions and probably the most genuine expression of Ethiopian Christianity.[28]

Apparently, there is a consensus among the scholars on who was in charge of the compilation and translation of the Kebra Nagast.[29] The author of the work is supposed to be Isaac (Yeshak) from Axum, a passionate and patriotic ecclesiastic who wrote this work between 1314 and 1322, during the first years of Amda Seyon reign, namely *Pillar of Sion*.[30] Yeshak of Axum supported the kingdom of the Endarta region (South eastern Tigray). The governor of this region, Yakiba Egzí, attempted to rebel against Emperor Amda Seyon. This king is regarded by E. Ullendorf, as 'one of the most outstanding Ethiopian kings of any age and a singular figure dominating the horn of Africa in the fourteenth century.'[31] Piovanelli admits that the powerful governor of the Endarta region was probably an extremely ambitious ruler,[32] but such cynical considerations regarding the volatile political situation should not prevent us from recognizing the basic fact expressed by D. Hubard: 'The Kebra Nagast was written to justify the claims of the so-called Solomonic dynasty founded by Yekunno Amlak over against those of the Zagwe family who had

[26] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: Kebra Nagast (*Ontario: Ethiopian Series Cambridge Publications, 2000), p. viii.
[27] Ibid, p. vi.
[28] Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 144.
[29] Enrico Cerulli, *Storia Della Letteratura Etiopica*, pp. 45, 46; Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, pp. 244, 245.
[30] George W. B. Huntingford, *The Glorious Victories of Amda Sion: King of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clendon Press, 1965), p. 5.
[31] Edward Ullendorf, "The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon, King of Ethiopia," Bulletin *of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 29(3), 1966, p. 600 (pp. 600-611)
[32] Pierluigi Piovanelli, "The Apocryphal Legitimation of a 'Solomonic' Dynasty in the Kebra Nagast," *A reappraisal Aethiopica - International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies*. 16(1), 2013, p. 9.

held sway for well over a century.'[33] This fact is supported by the Kebra Nagast itself, according to the following statement: 'Those who reign, not being Israelites, are transgressors of the Law.'[34] In any case, there is no doubt that the Kebra Nagast played a central role in the establishment of a new religious, social and political order for Ethiopia during this turbulent period of history.[35]

One of the most interesting features that arises in the Kebra Nagast is the exaltation of Emperor Kaleb as a ruler who adopted monastic life. Kaleb is one of only two Ethiopian kings with a central role within the Kebra Nagast.[36] Hubbard argues that this story appears to be an appropriation by the Kebra Nagast of some elements which are recorded in the Ethiopian Synaxarium.[37] Kaleb, according to the Ethiopian Synaxarium, visited the Church where the kings of Ethiopia and the Bishops were traditionally buried and '…having come therein he stood up on the royal throne before the church, and he stripped off his beautiful and royal apparel, and dressed himself in rags […] Then he forsook the world, and abandoned his kingdom, and went out by night, and departed on foot, and came to the monastery, which was on the top of the mountain of Abba Pantaleon, wherein good monks lived. And he entered the monastery and lived in a cell…'[38] The historical reason behind this description might be Kaleb's intervention in south Arabia, in order to suppress anti-Christian revolts, as a result of a coalition with the patriarch of Alexandria and the Emperor Justinian in order to counter the rise of Islam. From another perspective, this act of conversion may be employed as a badge of affiliation to the monasticism by the monarchic institution. As a result of this endorsement from the Axumites rulers during this period, the missionary monks and the Church became firmly established in

[33] David A. Hubbard, *The Literary Sources of the Kebra Nagast: Another Look*, Ph.D Thesis, (St Andrews: St. Andrews University, 1956), Available on line at *http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/544*, p.360.
[34] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: Kebra Nagast,* p. 199.
[35] Pierliuigi Piovanelli, "The Apocryphal Legitimation of a 'Solomonic' Dynasty in the Kebra Nagast," pp. 20-21.
[36] The first king with a significant position within the KN is Menelik, the first king of Ethiopia and the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. See Ralph Lee, "The Conversion of King Caleb and the Religious and Political Dynamics of Sixth Century Ethiopia and Southern Arabia," in P. Sarris, M. Del Santo and P. Booth (eds.), *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict, and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 81-82.
[37] The Ethiopian Synaxarium is a large work concerning Christian saints and their lives for reading on each day of the whole Ethiopian year. Cerrulli argues the Synaxarium to be a translation from the Arabic, completed by the end of the 14th century. Isaac noted that the work also contains local Ethiopian additions. See Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, p. 248.
[38] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge Universiy Press, 1928), p. 524.

Ethiopia.[39] As claimed by Kaplan, emperor Kaleb, was an active warrior defending his co-religionists both at home and abroad. Tamrat affirms that two important regions of the Ethiopian territory, Wag and Lasta – the latter being the region where the Zagwe dynasty arose – were already an integral part of the Axumite kingdom under the reign of Kaleb.[40]

Moreover, the Kebra Nagast presents Kaleb as an ideal king-monk, stating that: '…God shall accept him gladly, for he shall not defile his body after he hath returned, but he shall go into a monastery in purity of heart. And he shall make king his youngest son, whose name is Gabra Maskal, and he himself shall shut himself up [in a monastery].'[41] In fact, the Axumite Emperor obtains the title of monk-king due to his major role in restoring the Ethiopian Kingdom to its ancient limits as they were established by Menelik.[42] Additionally, it is no coincidence that his son – Gabra Maskal –, who obtained the throne after his decision to adopt a monastic life, is notably remembered for his charitable donations to the monastic communities.[43]

King Lalibala: Ruler by Day, Monk by Night

Among the Zagwe dynasty, one king stands out from the others: King Lalibala.[44] When the Axumite Empire started to decline by the twelfth century, mainly because of the rise of Islam, Ethiopia's cultural and religious development began to change notoriously.[45] This turbulent period was characterized by a strong Muslim proselytism around southern Ethiopia, whilst in the north this era was marked by the revival of a new Christian dynasty: the Zagwe Dynasty.[46] The circumstances of the advent to power of the Zagwe Dynasty are far from clear. The Zagwe Dynasty, defined as usurpers according to orthodox tradition – taking into account that they were not of the race of King Solomon[47] – proved to be defenders of the Christian faith, building churches and monasteries, and encouraging missionary activities among tribes not yet

[39] Steven Kaplan, The *Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, p.17.
[40] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527*, p. 26.
[41] Ernest Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: Kebra Nagast,* p. 198.
[42] Ralph Lee, "The Conversion of King Caleb and the Religious and Political Dynamics of Sixth Century Ethiopia and Southern Arabia," p. 82.
[43] Steven Kaplan, The *Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia,* p. 18.
[44] For a complete description of the history of King Lalibala, see Ernest Wallis Budge*, A History of Ethiopia, Nubia & Abbysinia, Vol. I* (London: Methun & Co, 1928), pp. 280-283.
[45] Edward Ullendorf, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, p. 58.
[46] Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527*, p.53.
[47] Ibid.

converted.[48] In this connection, Lalibala's hagiography includes a paragraph allegedly drafted by Lalibala, which highlights the *gult* – donation – given by the sovereign himself to the Monastery at Axum and at Debra Libanos.[49] According to the many legends recorded in *Gadla Lalibala*, – composed in the 15th century – God directly revealed to the King Lalibala his intention to build a replica of Jerusalem in the place where he was born, namely Roha, the capital of the region of Lasta. *Roha* was the Syriac name of Edesa, and this fact may be related to the diffusion within Ethiopia of Syriac the Legend of Abgar, King of Edessa, and of his correspondence with Jesus Christ.[50]

The devotion of King Lalibala may be the main reason why Ethiopian Christianity considered him to be a holy man, or in more precise terms, a monk-king. In Gadla Lalibala, his story is described as follows: 'Lorsque Lalibala fut assis sur le trône, il se soumit à un jeûne plus rigoureux que celui des moines, car la royauté fut pour lui semblable à la vie monastique.'[51] According to Lalibala's hagiography, the Zagwe sovereign has visited the Holy Places in Jerusalem with the guidance of the Archangel Gabriel. Subsequently, God showed him ten great churches, all cut from a single stone. [52] Some sources reflect that, ultimately, "The construction of the churches of Lalibela is maybe, the traditional justification of his Sainthood."[53] M. Portella argues that 'the sovereign is basically presented as a monk, closely following the model of Christ, who is carried away to the heavens like Isaiah.[54] Likewise, the life of the great King Lalibala was usually compared with King Solomon, who built two fantastic monuments in ten years – the first Temple of Jerusalem and his own palace – with Lalibala who built ten churches in Northern Ethiopia from a single rock.[55]

[48] Edward Ullendorf, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, p. 64.
[49] Tekesh Negash, "The Zagwe Period Re-Interpreted: Post-Aksumite Ethiopian Urban Culture in Ethiopia. CA 930-1270," *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 61(1), 2006, p. 120.
[50] According to Isaac, the *Ethiopic Legend of Abgar* (*Aqaryos Negusa Roha*) was documented in some manuscripts dating from the 17th century, offering evidence of the link between Ethiopia and the Syriac Orthodox Church. See Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, pp. 242-243.
[51] Jules Perruchon, *Vie de Lalibala, Roi d'Ethiopie* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1892), p. 110.
[52] Jules Perruchon, *Vie de Lalibala, Roi d'Ethiopie*, pp. 88.
[53] Marie-Laure Derat, "Lalibala," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: He- N* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2007), p. 478.
[54] Mario A. Portella, *Ethiopian And Eritrean Monasticism: The Spiritual And Cultural Heritage of Two Nations* (Pismo Beach: BP Editing, 2015), p.67.
[55] Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia & Abbysinia, Vol. I,* pp. 237.

The Solomonic Restoration

The most famous indigenous Ethiopian Saint, Takla Haymanot, is considered to be one of the Holy Man who had played a vital role in the political, social, economical and religious life during the first years of the Solomonic Restoration.[56] Kaplan affirms that 'the Shewan cleric Takla Haymanot was one of the first monastic leaders of the Solomonic period to engage in missionary activity.'[57] Furthermore, Isaac strongly highlights the crucial role played by the monastic holy man, concluding that the Church was never fully regularized before the appearance of 'the churchmen, monk, theologian and revolutionary leader, Takla Haymanot in 1270.'[58]

The emergence of this holy man within Ethiopian tradition is tightly related to the uprising against the ruling Zagwe dynasty, headed by a leading nobleman who claimed to be a descendant of the last Axumite king. His name was Yekunno Amlak, and he is considered to be the founder of a new Christian Dynasty, deposing the former Zagwe king by 'killing the Zagwe monarch in front of the altar of a parish church.'[59] In order to deal with the permanent volatility and to justify his ascent to the throne, Yekunno Amlak had to promote his personal observance of the monastic life before his subjects. The 'restorer' of the Solomonic Dynasty, is described in *Gadla Tadewos of Dabra Maryam* as a vivid representation of the monk-king ideal, enjoying the full glory and honor of a king during the day, but during the night, he was depicted as an ascetic monk, divesting himself of clothes, and intoning in his heart the verses of the *Psalms of David, Song of Solomon* and the *Weddase Maryam*.[60] By analyzing this description, it is possible to determine that Yekunno Amlak has markedly tried to gain monks' support and respect as their ruler, evidencing the political influence of the monastic leadership.

Despite this fact, it is worth noting that the greatest honor of Ethiopian monarchic institution regarding the State is the tradition that the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty was possible due to the decisive intervention of a holy abbot.[61] In *Gadla Iyasus Moa*, this abbot is himself, but in

[56] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia*, p. 328.
[57] Ibid, p. 337.
[58] Ephraim Isaac, "An Obscure Component in Ethiopian Church History," *Le Museon*, 85(1-2), 1972, p. 229
[59] Jon D. Carlson, *Myths, State Expansion, and the Birth of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p.126.
[60] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia,* p. 13.
[61] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, p. 253.

Gadla Takla Haymanot, the abbot is Iyasus Moa' disciple. Iyasus Moa, who lived during the period of the restoration, opened a monastic school soon after his arrival to Lake Hayq in 1248, – in the Amhara and Shawa region of Ethiopia – promoting new opportunities for many young men from the region.[62] During this time, as stated by Kaplan, 'one of the most important factors accounting for the social composition of the monastic leadership was the existence of a tradition whereby those who chose or were forced to abandon the political arena, took up the monastic life.' [63] Tamrat argues that Yekunno Amlak falls into this category, and he is said to have been blessed by Iyasus Moa in his uprising against the last Zagwe ruler.[64]

Moreover, as reported by the *Monastic Genealogy of the Line of Takla Haymanot of Shoa*, Takla Haymanot met Yiasus Moa in the Monastery of Hayq, and was asked to give his cap and leather scapular[65] to Yiasus Moa, who claimed: 'You, who are my son, become my father!'[66] Such was the fame and importance of Takla Haymanot, who, as it is written in *Gadla Takla Haymanot*, 'crowns Yikuno Amlak and tactfully deposes the former Zagwe King.'[67] In return for this act, Takla Haymanot was appointed as the first *Itchege*[68] of Ethiopia, and was made both confessor and councilor to the new emperor.[69] Nevertheless, Huntingford argues that until the 17th century, any of the Gadlat mentions this fact. Only in some extracts translated by Conti Rossini, Takla Haymanot is brought into politics, asserting that 'king Yekunno Amlak, in the three hundred year after the Zagwe took the kingdom […] recovered it through the prayers of our father Talka Haymanot.'[70] In another Chronicle linked to Takla Haymanot, it is written that 'Yekunno Amlak made a pact with our father Takla Haymanot and gave him a third part of the Kingdom.' Despite the fact that Yekunno Amlak and Takla Haymanot were both contemporary historical

[62] Tadesse Tamrat, "The Abbots of Dabra Hayq, 1248-1535," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 8(1), 1970, p. 89.
[63] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia,* p. 33
[64] Tadesse Tamrat, "The Abbots of Dabra Hayq, 1248-1535," p. 89.
[65] Two of the four parts of the Ethiopian monastic habit. See Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527,* p. 164.
[66] Getatchew Haile, "The Monastic Genealogy of the Line of Takla Haymanot of Shoa," p. 24
[67] Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, "A Structural Analysis of Gadla Takla Haymanot," p. 190.
[68] The "Grand Prior" of the Ethiopian Church.
[69] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, pp. 136-137.
[70] George W. B. Huntingford, "The Lives of Saint Takla Haymanot," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 4(2), 1966, pp.35-36.

individuals, a considerable number of scholars affirmed that the role played by Takla Haymanot is debatable.[71]

Conclusion

In the course of this work, I have analyzed a number of cases and examples related to the monk-king ideal within the history of Ethiopia in the Middle Ages. Firstly, I introduced the development of the monastic movement, by outlining the tight linkage between the monastic institution and the kingship. Subsequently, I have examined the role of the Gadl within the context of this period of time, pointing out the relevance these hagiographies for the reconstruction of the history of Medieval Ethiopia. By considering these factors, I employed the most relevant "monk-kings" that assisted us to discuss and analyze this ideal.

I strongly believe that Ethiopian monasticism represents a peculiar case within the Christian world. Firstly, because of the role played by the monastic leadership, changing and influencing policy. Secondly, we will not be able to understand The monk-king ideal if we do not recognize the important of the 'believing' that comes up again and again in the works that we have employed. Kaleb, Lalibala and Yekunno Amlak, among others, exercised their power only as members and protectors both of the Church and the monastic community. Monks and clerks retained, in some cases, more power than the State. E. Isaac stresses this point, arguing that: 'It is the Church that sanctioned the rise of the Solomonic Dynasty; it is the Church that has been the symbol, if not the patron of law and order in Ethiopian history…' [72] It is no coincidence that each of the monk-kings cited in this work have played a decisive role as a restorer, and most importantly, as a defender of the faith: Kaleb being an active warrior defending his co-religionists both at home and abroad and restoring the Ethiopian Kingdom to its ancient limits; Lalibela as a ruler who is clearly presented as a monk, closely following the model of Christ, who is carried away to the heavens like Isaiah and the founder of a new and powerful dynasty; and lastly Yekunno Amlak, the restorer of the Solomonic dynasty, endorsed and blessed by Takla Haymanot, depicted as a model of the monk-king ideal, enjoying the full glory and honor of a king during the day, and becoming a monk during the night.

[71] Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, "A Structural Analysis of Gadla Takla Haymanot," p. 190.
[72] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, p. 136.

Furthermore, these three monk-kings have been extremely generous with the monasteries and monks. The son of Kaleb, Gabra Maskal, who gained the throne after his father choice for a monastic life, is notably remarked for his charitable contributions to the monastic communities. Both Lalibala and Yekunno Amlak, supported and encouraged the development of a monastic movement within Ethiopia. Yekunno Amlak even gave to Takla Haymanot – the first *Itchege* – the third part of the kingdom lands!

Therefore, we can state that both the Zagwe and Solomonic Dynasty evidently understood the importance of the monasticism when it comes to the administration and control of their nation. On the other hand, the monastic leaders realized that in order to meet their goals, they have realized the need to model a monk-king ideal, highlighting and emphasizing some of the most relevant kings. We can conclude that the Church – or in this case, the monastic movement – served to propagate the myth of a Divine Monarchy, stressing it historical role as a restorer of a holy legacy, and portraying the emperor as a holy man, and a legitimate successor to the kings of Israel. It is no coincidence that Haile Selassie I, the last emperor of Ethiopia, has referred to this special tie stating that the Ethiopian Church is 'like a sword, and the government like an arm; therefore the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm.'[73]

[73] Girma Bekele, *The In-Between People: A Reading of David Bosch Through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, Pickwick Publications, 2011), p. 183.

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