

Daniel Asmare

**THE MELTING POT OF THE WORD AND THE SWORD:
ROYAL POWER AND MONASTIC ASCETICISM IN THE MEDIEVAL
MONASTERIES OF LAKE TANA, ETHIOPIA**

MA Thesis in Comparative History

with the specialization in Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies



Central European University

Budapest

May 2011

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I, the undersigned, **Daniel Asmare**, candidate for the MA degree in Comparative History, with the specialization in Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on the copyright of any person or institution. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 23 May 2011

Signature

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1. Prolegomena and research questions.....	1
2. Methodology	3
3. Sources.....	5
CHAPTER ONE.....	6
THE FOUNDATION OF THE MONASTERIES ON LAKE TANA	6
1.1. Developing trends of medieval monasticism in Ethiopia	6
1.2. The monasteries of Lake Tana and the founding generation of monks.....	10
1.2.1 The establishment and historical elements of the monasteries	11
1.2.2 The founding generation of monks.....	14
1.3. Factors for the foundation of the monasteries on Lake Tana.....	23
1.3.1 The role of landscape in the foundations	26
1.3.2. Political factors for monastic foundations.....	34
CHAPTER TWO	38
ROYAL PATRONAGE AND BURIAL AT THE MONASTERIES OF LAKE TANA	38
2.1. Royal patronage.....	38
2.1.1 Land grants to the monasteries of Lake Tana	40
2.1.2. Building the monasteries.....	46
2.1.3. Gifts in kind.....	49
2.2. Royal Burials.....	50
2.2.1. Royal burials in the age of wandering capitals.....	57
2.2.3. Royal family burials during the Muslim-Christian conflict	64
CHAPTER THREE.....	69
THE UNSIGNED PACT: EXPANSION AND EVANGELIZATION AROUND LAKE	
TANA.....	69
3.1. The Christianization of the Falasha.....	71
3.2. The Christianization of Gojjam and Agaw	75
3.4. Incorporating the Woyto.....	78
CONTEXTUALIZATION AND CONCLUSION	81
THE PLACE OF THE MONASTERIES OF LAKE TANA WITHIN ETHIOPIAN	
HISTORY	81
APPENDIX	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

LIST OF FIGURES

1. The stone boat used by Abuna Hiruta Amlak to cross the lake in His way to Daga Istifanos	19
2. Jewish sacrifice pillar in the monastery of Tana Qirqos	25.
3. Map of the monasteries of Lake Tana	32.
4. List of the members of the royal family buried in the monastery of Daga Istifanos.....	54.
5. List of Ethiopian Capitals	60
6. Major Capitals of Ethiopia.....	62.

INTRODUCTION

1. Prolegomena and research questions

Wrongly identified as the entire source of the Nile River¹, Lake Tana is located on the basalt plateau of the northwestern highlands of Ethiopia. It is the country's greatest water body with an area of 3600 square kilometers.² It has thirty islands and most of them have more than twenty churches and monasteries of enormous historical significance on them whose foundation dates range from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century.³

The geographical location and history of the churches and monasteries of Lake Tana constitute a particularly interesting phenomenon among the Christian institutions of medieval Ethiopia. Originally established in the peripheral region of the Christian church and state, the region of Lake Tana eventually became a center of religious and spiritual activities of medieval Ethiopia.⁴

In spite of their cultural and historical significance, the monasteries of Lake Tana are at the margin of historical research. An exception to this fact is the work of Claire Bosc-Tiessé, which stands as the only scholarly reconstruction of the monasteries of Lake Tana as far as my knowledge is concerned. "L'histoire et l'art des églises du lac Tana" is an analysis of the major artistic achievements of the monasteries of Lake Tana. European travelers also produced some accounts that are crucial, among many other things, for recording oral traditions in the region. There have also been some attempts to catalogue the manuscripts by different institutions.

¹ Although, River Nile catches a certain amount of its water from it, Lake Tana is not the ultimate source.

² David Shinn, Thomas Ofcansky, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 251.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The core objective of this thesis is to investigate the circumstances under which the monasteries of Lake Tana were founded, to trace the parties that played a significant role, to evaluate their contribution as a Christian institution, to identify their relationship with the state and thereby to situate them in the realm of Ethiopian history. The fact that their foundation was in the medieval period, when church and state were the two sides of a coin, makes it unrealistic to study the history of the monasteries successfully independent from the structure of the state. Accordingly, the fields within which the two institutions worked together will be traced. This study will focus on the following problems:

- What was the background of the monks who founded the monasteries of Lake Tana?
- What were the main factors that pushed the monks to this region, which was peripheral to the Christian domain?
- How can the relationship between the monasteries and the state be defined?
- What were the major fields where the two institutions worked closely?
- What was the general outcome of the relationship between the two institutions?
- How can the historical significance of the monasteries be contextualized and situated in Ethiopian history?

In order to answer these questions I have organized the thesis into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the foundation of the monasteries of Lake Tana. The core issues in this chapter are the general trends in Ethiopian monasticism from its introduction in the fifth century to the age of monastic revival in the thirteenth century. In this chapter I will also discuss the targets of this study: the monasteries founded during Emperor Amde Tsion's reign (1314-1344) and several of his successors who contributed to the foundation of monasteries. I will also include one monastery, Daga Istifanos, founded in 1276 during the

time of Yukuno Amlak (1268- 1285), because of the monastery's significance in housing numerous royal burials. Then the background of the monks who founded the monasteries will be discussed. The second part of this chapter deals with the factors for foundation. In this section a number of possible factors will be discussed and tested to determine whether they served as factors or not. The parties that were responsible for carrying out the construction process will also be discussed.

The second chapter discusses the attempt of the state to build an image of royal power in relation to the monasteries of Lake Tana. Hence, its investment in different forms of building activities and donations will be explained. The royal burials which the monasteries of Lake Tana are famous for will also be viewed to see whether they have a direct relationship with royal patronage. Generally, this chapter will seek meaning in the relationship between the state and the monasteries.

After coverage of the monasteries and the state in chapters one and two, respectively, the third chapter discusses both parties in relation to their activities in the region of Lake Tana. Since expansion applied to both parties, the position and contribution of the two in the process will be evaluated in this chapter. The nature of co-operation, the extent to which the Christian empire expanded, the peoples who were subjects of this expansion, the final result of the whole process will be discussed in this chapter.

2. Methodology

I have selected twelve monasteries as targets. It is not my intention here to deal with the whole history of each monastery, but they will be referred to frequently when any issue related to them is raised for discussion. They will also be grouped together when a summarizing discussion of certain common characteristics is needed. This thesis will also

note other monasteries which are not in the time framework I mentioned above, but which are closer in another historical affiliation to the above ones. A special explanation will follow in such cases to avoid any confusion

The lack of sources about the reasons for founding a monastic community on the islands of Lake Tana, about the state's involvement in their presence, and other key information that could help to define the historical background and their relationship with the state, forced me to sort out an alternative methodology rather than directly analyzing the primary sources. Accordingly, I will approach the well-researched contemporary monastic schools for the background of the monks. The factors that pushed monks to migrate to the monasteries of Lake Tana will be seen from the point of view of the political developments of the period such as the conflict between church and state, the Muslim-Christian conflict, and the emergence of divergent monastic sects that had different relationships with the state. I will also approach the landscape as a factor attracting monastic settlement. Accordingly, the meaning of the Lake Tana monasteries in the wider context of Ethiopian monasticism will be addressed.⁵

To define the relationship between the state and the church, forms of royal patronage will be discussed that have come down to the present through word of mouth or any item that still exists and can help define any sort of relationship between the two. Royal burials will be discussed to find meaning in the affiliation between the monasteries and the royal families buried there. I will also closely analyze the history of the Christianization of the surrounding communities of Lake Tana to further investigate the relationship of the monasteries of Lake Tana. Finally, I will pursue the movement of the royal capital if it had any meaning with the foundation of the monasteries Lake Tana.

⁵ I would like to thank my Supervisor Professor József Laszlovszky for his suggestions for the methodological approach.

3. Sources

The travelers' accounts that thoroughly exploited and recorded the oral information will be the major constituents of the sources of this study. I am aware of their disadvantage that they may have distorted elements. However, I will be benefited from their great quantity to cross check their validity. Besides, I myself have visited most of the target monasteries of this study and collected significant information. The lack of willingness of most of my interviewees frustrated from directly citing them. So, I will at least make use of them as a counter check for the travelers' accounts. The different objects I have seen and took pictures will also be another input for this study. Most of all, the landscape which I witnessed will increase the booty of my sources. There are also some primary sources concerning the land grants in the region of Lake Tana in general and to some of the monasteries in particular.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FOUNDATION OF THE MONASTERIES ON LAKE TANA

This chapter deals with the basic steps of founding the monastic communities on the islands in Lake Tana. The first part discusses the foundation of the monasteries, with special emphasis on those founded during the late medieval period, i.e., from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Accordingly, the physical location, the period of foundation, and other important historical aspects of the monasteries which are the case studies of this paper will be discussed. The second part presents the origin and educational background of the monks who carried out monastic missions by moving to the lake as permanent residents. An attempt will also be made to identify the founders in the context of the wider religious and political trends of the period within which the monks found their way to the islands of Lake Tana. The possible factors that could have influenced the foundation process will follow the discussion of the monks' identities. To give an overview of these trends within which the monasteries of Lake Tana were founded, a summary of the general developments of medieval monasticism in Ethiopia precedes the main theme.

1.1. Developing trends of medieval monasticism in Ethiopia

Monasticism produced a group of inspiring personalities and a number of significant new ideas from the fourth century onwards. The ascetic life of Saint Anthony and the coenobitic inventions of Saint Pachomius of Egypt were the great legacies that early monasticism had left behind. However, despite this general concept of monastic life, they did not leave any set

of guiding principles and standards.⁶ The later generations that succeeded them were left with broad options for analyzing the existing tradition and adding new elements. Evolution in monastic life, as in everyday life, was inevitable and the rapid spread of monasticism across borders and cultures gave new impetus for evolution. Accordingly, the ideas and principles of monastic life transformed over time as it moved from a small village in the Egyptian desert into a wide arena of monasteries scattered all over the globe.⁷

The Ethiopian case is no exception and these earliest forms of monasticism were introduced and developed to fit local culture. It is perceived by most scholars as a hunt for both transcendence and synchronization, i.e., “as an expression of the Eastern ascetic ideal of achieving union with God, Ethiopian monastic traditions harmonize with African modes of thought making them relevant to all ethnic groups.”⁸ According to Ethiopian tradition, nine saints who fled anti-monophysite persecution in the Byzantine Empire after the council of Chalcedon introduced monasticism to Ethiopia.⁹ While there is some information about the names of the monks and the monasteries they founded¹⁰ little is known about the organization and discipline of this early form of monasticism.¹¹ However, given that the lives of early monastic fathers such as St. Anthony, St. Paul, and St. Pachomius were translated from Greek

⁶ Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31.

⁷ Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850*, 31.

⁸ Joachim Persoon, “The Monastery as a Nexus of Ethiopian Culture: A Discourse Reconstruction,” in *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, (Hamburg: Otto Harrassowitz, 2006), 679.

⁹ Karen Louise Jolly, *Tradition and Diversity: Christianity in a World Context to 1500* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 162.

¹⁰ The monks are called the “Nine Saints” because they were nine in number; their names are: Afse, Alef, Aregawi, Gerima, Guba, Liqanos, Pentelewon, Sehma, and Yemata. Afse came from Asia Minor. His name seems to be of North Arabic origin; Alef came from Caesarea in Cappadocia, he founded a monastery northeast of Axum; Aregawi is probably a nickname meaning “a precocious boy.” His place of origin is given as “Rom” or “Romya;” he established the monastery of Debre Damo; Gerima came from Rom or Romya, his name may refer to his place of origin in Syria; he founded a monastery at Medera, east of Adwa; Guba’s origin is given as Qelqeya, that is, lesser Armenia or Syria. He established his hermitage near that of Gerima; Liqanos came from Rom or Romya; he settled on the hill north of Axum, known today as Debre Qonasel; Pentelewon came from Rom or Romya; he went towards the northeast of Axum; Sehma came from Antioch and settled on a plateau southeast of Adwa; and Ymeata came from Qosyat, a place that might be in upper Egypt or north of Damascus. See also Nigussie Dominic, *The Fetha Nagast and its Ecclesiology: Implications in the Ethiopian Catholic Church Today* (Bern: Peter Land AG, International Academic Publishers., 2010), 190.

¹¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 190.

to Ge'ez in the fifth century, these texts might have provided guidelines for the life of these monks.¹² This argument can also be supported by the fact that the origin of the nine saints is traditionally connected to the cradle of monasticism where they might have seen the way of life of monasticism. The most idiosyncratic aspect of this early monasticism was that the monks took special vows of celibacy and confined their lives to the monasteries they founded.¹³ In fleshing out this idea, it will be useful to adopt an explanation from the early desert fathers. "In their solitude, they consciously removed themselves from ordinary contact with their fellow human beings and were often perceived as aloof and forbidding; yet they were also revered for their extraordinary depth of compassion."¹⁴

Although monasticism was allegedly introduced to Ethiopia in the fifth century by these nine saints, it seems that years passed without any meaningful experiments with the monastic tradition. If there were, the overall activity seems to have been confined to northern part of Ethiopia where the nine saints set foot and built some monasteries. Any study of this early tradition, thus, revolves around Egyptian and Roman monks who introduced and made some primary steps in instituting and expanding monasticism in the country.¹⁵ The rest of church history is the history of the secular clergy, which was the only administrative unit of the church. If any changes happened in the church before the thirteenth century it was from this group of priestly families.¹⁶

When Yukuno Amlak restored the Solomonic Dynasty in 1268/70, monasticism was still young in the region of Amhara.¹⁷ Of course, there were a few monasteries like Dabra

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 190. This is a common concept and practice of global monasticism and my intention here is that Ethiopian monasticism had shared this common element since its infancy.

¹⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁵ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 107.

¹⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷ A name given to the region whose habitants speak the Amharic language and was the base of the medieval Ethiopian empire. See also Thomas P. Ofcansky, Laverle Berry, *Ethiopia A Country Study* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

Hayq, whose prominent monks facilitated the restoration of the dynasty by lending their influence to Yukuno Amlak. However, monasticism in this part of Ethiopia saw a form of revitalization in the second half of the thirteenth century with the appearance of new leaders among the monastic clergy.¹⁸ After that, its influence came to be felt everywhere in the empire as monks from all forms of monastic inclination -- from personal ascetics to the cenobite communities -- made their way into one region after another, found an open place, and even evangelized the society at their destination.¹⁹

The phenomena of this evolution were mainly represented by the emergence of two different monastic 'houses', i.e., the 'house' of Ewostatewos and the 'house' of Takla Haymanot. While the development of the house of Takla Haymanot²⁰ was in harmony with the tradition of the secular clergy and followed the expansion of the empire,²¹ the 'house' of Ewostatewos was inclined towards rigorous religious activities and stressed the spiritual independence of the church from the state.²² The ideological differences among these monastic houses soon changed into competition to have as many spheres of influence as possible. The simplicity of establishing a monastic community²³ coupled with the emperors' *gult*²⁴ grants to the monasteries established deep inside pagan and unconquered territories²⁵ accelerated the revival of monasticism in medieval Ethiopia around the second half of the thirteenth century.

Despite this competition in the general field of Ethiopian monasticism, it was the sect that is commonly known as the 'house' of Takla Haymanot which put its own influence in

¹⁸ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)*, 107.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The 'house' of Takla Haymanot is a common name for the group of monks who supported the state's cause.

²¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)*, 107.

²² Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 22.

²³ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)*, 110.

²⁴ *Gult* is an Amharic term which literally means immobile or stationary. It was a tribute appropriation right granted by the emperor to the lower echelons of the power hierarchy -- local rulers, members of the royal family, the nobility, the clergy, etc.; see also Teshale Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia (1896-1974)* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 78.

²⁵ Marcus, Harold G., *A History of Ethiopia*, 21.

conducting missionary activities and establishing monasteries in the region of Amhara.²⁶ There is a slight vagueness about the monastic house that played a significant role in this region. The Church of St. Stephen in Lake Hayq, founded by Iyasus Moa in about 1248, for example, produced a group of monks that enhanced the revival of monasticism. Their contribution in expanding monasticism around the region of Lake Tana could be reckoned since the legendary “Seven Stars” are said to have attended their school in Dabra Hayq. Another monastery of equal fame, Dabra Asbo, later renamed Dabra Libanos, was founded at the heart of the medieval kingdom of Shewa near the capital of Amde Tsion, Tagulat, by St. Takla Haymanot.²⁷ According to Taddesse, the claim for seniority among these houses has shrouded genuine historical reconstruction.²⁸ However, these two monasteries were centers of excellence for the production of monks who expanded monasteries to regions which had been beyond the reach of Christianity.²⁹ Thus, by considering the dominant role and the association it had with the contemporary state, I will use the ‘house’ of Takla Haymanot in representing these two monastic houses (Iyasus Mo’a and Takla Haymanot) throughout the whole thesis. Generally, Lake Tana, was located in mainly uninhabited and predominantly non-Christian region, attracted all sorts of monks from the two ‘houses’, i.e., Ewostatewos and Takla Haymanot, to the two forms of monasticism, i.e., coenobitic and eremitic.

1.2. The monasteries of Lake Tana and the founding generation of monks

The foundation of monasteries on Lake Tana occurred during the period of monastic revival in Ethiopia. Most of the monasteries were founded during the rule of Amde Tsion (1314-1344), the most expansionist king of medieval Ethiopia. There have been many attempts by

²⁶ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 116.

²⁷ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

different authors to group the founding monks together based on different criteria and historical episodes. The monastic school they attended, the time they founded the monasteries, the ideology they pursued, i.e., either the house of Ewostatewos or Takla Haymanot are some of the criteria these authors have used to identify the founding monks in a certain group.³⁰

1.2.1 The establishment and historical elements of the monasteries

Foundation charters, common in Europe, were not characteristic of Ethiopian monasticism. Even though different royal families were closely identified with certain monasteries because they sponsored the construction, granted land, or made other forms of donations, it was rather an individual initiative to establish a monastic community. In other words, the establishment of a monastery was often an individual enterprise. Tadesse points to the fact that:

A monastic community normally started by being an isolated place of private retreat for its founder. Alone, or accompanied by a few followers, the founder of the community pursued a strict life of extreme asceticism, in almost complete seclusion. Inaccessible hillsides, forest or semi-desert areas, were most popular as the sites of young community.³¹

The foundation of the monasteries of Lake Tana followed this tradition and each of them is better known by its founders rather than the royal family or an individual who sponsored them. Using travelers' accounts and my own data which I collected through interviews,³² I will discuss the historical elements of the monasteries that were founded during the medieval period, i.e., from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.³³

³⁰ R.E Cheesman, Tadesse Tamrat, Berry and Smith, Claire Bosc-Tiessé are among the major references used in this thesis, who used different criteria to group the monks.

³¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)*, 110.

³² My informants do not want their names mentioned in the thesis, so, if my data fits with travelers accounts the latter will be given priority.

³³ The lists of the monasteries for discussion are based on chronological order and grouped according to their geographical proximity.

The thirty-seven islands of Lake Tana shelter more than twenty churches and monasteries.³⁴ To begin with, the oldest of all monasteries, Tana Qirqos, occupies a special place in the history of monasticism in Ethiopia. The monastery is located near a peninsula on the eastern shore of Lake Tana at the mouth of the Gumara River. Its foundation as a cult site of Judaism coupled with its preservation of the “original Ark of the Covenant”³⁵ makes it pioneering in terms of human settlement on, and the development of religious importance of, the islands of Lake Tana. However, there are scholars who argue that the alleged foundation of the monastery is apocryphal. According to Taddesse Tamrat, the supposed foundation of the monastery in the fourth century A.D. is certainly mythical, although a Christian community had existed before the Zagwe Dynasty came to an end in 1270. Taddesse also notes that the monastery became center of Christian activity in the region during the reign of Emperor Amde Tsion (1314-1344).³⁶

Another monastery, almost equal in fame, is the monastery of Daga Istifanos. It is dedicated to the St. Stephen and was founded by Abba³⁷ Hiruta Amlak in 1276. The monastery was founded on the southeastern corner of Dek, the largest island in the lake.³⁸ The monastery is famous for its royal burials. However, there is no agreement among different sources about the royal families who are buried there, especially the remains of the emperors. Many travelers and scholars believe that Yukuno Amlak (1268- 1285), Dawit I (1382-1430), Zār'a Ya'eqob (1434-1468), Susenyos (1607-1632), and Fasiledes (1632-1667) are buried at Daga Istifanos..³⁹

³⁴ David Shinn, Thomas Ofcansky, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 250.

³⁵ The legendary original Ark of the Covenant is said to have been preserved in Tana Qirqos after it was brought from Jerusalem by King Menelik I. See also *Kebra Nagast* [The Glory of Kings], ed. Miguel F. Books (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996), 17.

³⁶ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 190.

³⁷ Abba is a general name for elders in Ethiopia. However, its meaning for a monastic father is almost the equivalent to the English term abbot.

³⁸ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile: an Abyssinian Quest* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1939), 137.

³⁹ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, “L’histoire et l’art des églises du lac Tana,” *Annales d’Ethiopi* 16 (2000): 263.

At the top of a small mountainous, wooded island in the southern part of Lake Tana stands the monastery of Kebran Gebriel. This monastery was founded during the reign of Amde Tsion (1314-44) by Abuna⁴⁰ Za Yohannis.⁴¹ Entons Iyasus is a small monastery closely related to the historical and geographical setting of Kebran. The monastery was founded by Abuna Za Yohannis, the same monk who founded Kebran Gebriel in almost the same period.⁴² Southeast of Kebran Gebriel, at the southern tip of the lake, is Dabra Maryam, a monastery with a great reputation for having a medieval library. It was founded by Abuna Tadewos during the reign of Amde Tsion.⁴³ Besides these notable monasteries founded during the reign of Emperor Amde Tsion, there are also other small monasteries from his period of rule. They include Brgida Maryam⁴⁴ Mandaba Medhanialem, founded by Abba Asai, son of Emperor Amde Tsion,⁴⁵ and Galila Iyasus, founded by his grandson Abba Zakarias.⁴⁶

Emperor Amde Tsion's successors continued to found religious communities on the islands of Lake Tana. For instance, south of Tana Qirqos, on the eastern shore of Lake Tana, Yafqiranna Egzi, the monk who organized a Christian community on Tana Qirqos, founded the monastery of Mistle Fasiledes.⁴⁷ This monastery was founded under the reign of Emperor Seife Arad (1344-1371).⁴⁸ Another legacy of the period of Amde Tsion's successors is the monastery of Krestos Samra. It is located along the eastern shore of the lake near the mouth of the Gumara River on a rocky hill surrounded by marshland. Krestos Samra, whose *tabot*⁴⁹

⁴⁰ *Abuna* is a term used to refer to "our father" in most Semitic languages, including Arabic and the Ethiopian Church language, Ge'ez. See also Hagai Erlikh, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Nile* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 17.

⁴¹ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "L'histoire et l'art des églises du lac Tana," 240.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴³ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 163.

⁴⁴ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 198.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁷ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "L'histoire et l'art des églises du lac Tana," 219.

⁴⁸ La Verle Berry, Richard Smith, "Churches and Monasteries of Lake Tana, Ethiopia 1972," In *Realta E Prospettive Della Storiografia Africana*, ed. Teobaldo Filesi (Naples: Giannini Editore, 1978), 12.

⁴⁹ The replica of the original Ark of the Covenant that exists in every church and monastery in Ethiopia.

was controlled by the abbot of Tana Qirqos, was founded during the reign of Dawit I (1382-1430) in the late fourteenth century.⁵⁰ Dawit's reign also saw the establishment of another monastic community on the Island of Mitraha,⁵¹ whose *tabot* (of Mary) came from Alexandria for the coronation ceremony of the king, who later gave the *tabot* to the monastery.⁵² Rema Medhanialem was founded during the reign of Emperor Yishak I (1414-1429) by his brother Abba Nom.⁵³

1.2.2 The founding generation of monks

Monks need to create an identity which enables them ignore their worldly ideals.⁵⁴ Peter Hatlie wrote: "Although most monks are determined to be outsiders, the question is whether they could also be usefully assimilated into the workings of church, state and society. Could they be both outsiders, operating by their own laws and traditions, and a force for good?"⁵⁵ Some monastic figures emerged in medieval Ethiopia that could answer these questions. The most influential monks belonged to either the "house" of Ewostatewos or of Takla Haymanot. The two houses were characterized by strict adherence to religiosity and involvement in society and politics, respectively.⁵⁶ It was at this period of monastic revival that the islands of Lake Tana became answers for the growing need for uninhabited land and a society to be baptized. Since there is general obscurity about the background of the founding monks, to hypothesize about the two monastic "houses" and analyze the destiny of the pupils may lead to some hints. A historical episode that happened in the capital, Tagulat, a clash between the

⁵⁰ La Verle Berry, Richard Smith, "Churches and Monasteries of Lake Tana, Ethiopia 1972."

⁵¹ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 189.

⁵² A anonymous informant (a monk) at the Monastery of Mitraha Mariam.

⁵³ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 169.

⁵⁴ Peter Hatlie, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 62.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 107.

monks and the king, Amde Tsion, and the subsequent exile of the monks will also be part of this discussion to trace the background of the founding of monks.

As has already been discussed, the two monastic houses, Ewostatewos and Saint Takla Haymanot (and/or Iyasus Moa in some sources), emerged and left their own marks on the expansion of Christianity in the empire.⁵⁷ Especially the latter played a major role, not only in the monastic revival of the thirteenth century, but also in the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty by Emperor Yukuno Amlak in 1270.⁵⁸ In contrast, Ewostatewos (1273-1352), who was antagonistic towards Takla Haymanot for his position against the Alexandrian Sabbath, had his center in Dabra Maryam in Tigre.⁵⁹ These two houses produced their own disciples, who later played significant roles in continuing the monastic reform.

Among the founders of the monasteries of Lake Tana, the names of the two monks are often mentioned as masters. For instance, in 1338, Ewostatewos, who was not able to win popular support, went into exile in Armenia with some of his disciples; he died there in 1352. His disciples later returned and continued his doctrine in a more organized way. They concentrated their missionary activities in areas where the direct influence of the official church⁶⁰ could not be felt.⁶¹ It is difficult to trace which of the monasteries in Lake Tana were founded by Ewostatewian monks. Given that the lake region was an outlying zone where state control and the influence of the official church⁶² was loose, their teaching was independent of the state, and they could carry out intensive and strict monastic activities,⁶³ it can be said that the house of Ewostatewos found the islands of Lake Tana an ideal place. In

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Nigussie Dominic, *The Fetha Nagast and its Ecclesiology*, 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁰ The official church was the church that was in harmony with the empire. Since the house of Takla Haymanot played a major role in the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty, they were favored by the emperors against any opposition from a different sect or doctrine.

⁶¹ Nigussie Andre Dominic, *The Fetha Nagast and its Ecclesiology*, 21

⁶² Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 190.

⁶³ Ibid., 109.

discussing the different doctrinal sects of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in his PhD dissertation, Abba Hailemariam noted that:

The *quibat/qebat* (Unction) sect was followed by monks of the order of St. Ewostatewos in Lake Tana (Gojjama, Northwest Ethiopia). In Ethiopia there are two main monastic orders: the order of St. Ewostatewos (1273-1352), and the order of St. Takla Haymanot, who lived in the 13th century. The monks in Lake Tana belong to the first order whereas the monks at Dabra Libanos monastery in Shewa (a province of Addis Ababa) adhere to the Takla Haymanot order...⁶⁴

The fact that the doctrinal sect of Qebat existed in the region of Lake Tana also supports my point about the house of Ewostatewos monks' establishment on the islands. As Donald Crummey noted, Qebat is strongly entrenched in the region of Gojjam (including Lake Tana).⁶⁵ One cannot directly associate this later development with the process of the foundation of monasteries in Lake Tana. Qebat's necessary association with the house of Ewostatewos in the later periods as Crummey noted that, "... [Qebat] seems not to have branched out seriously from its institutional home among the monks of Ewostatewos,"⁶⁶ seems to suggest that a group of monks who belonged to the later monastic house had settled on the islands of Lake Tana.

Besides this general and vague account of the Ewostatewian monks' migration to the region of Lake Tana, there is evidence about an individual effort to institute this sect of monasticism among the Ethiopian Jews (Falasha) of the Lake Tana area. Gabara-Iyasus, who was a disciple of Ewostatewos and had followed his master in his exile to Armenia,⁶⁷ is credited with laying a foothold of the Ewostatewian movement in the region of Lake Tana.

⁶⁴ Ayenew (Abba) Hailemariam Melese, "The Influence of Cyrillian Christology in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Anaphora," PhD dissertation, University of South Africa, 2009, 287, cited in Christine Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition* (Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, 2002), 153.

⁶⁵ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000), 104.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ewostatewos went in exile first to Egypt and then to Armenia, where he died in 1352, to avoid persecution by the state for his antagonism with Takla Haymanot over the observance of Sabbath, which the latter insisted should be observed. See also Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1994), 28.

According to Taddesse, he had been assigned by Ewostatewos to Infranz, the land of the Falasha, prior to his journey with his master to Armenia. Upon the death of Ewostatewos he returned home and started his evangelical activities among the Falasha in the same district, Infranz, in region of Lake Tana.⁶⁸ To seal his triumph, he founded a monastery among the Falasha, Dabra San.⁶⁹ This account cannot be taken for granted as an Ewostatewian monastery foundation in Lake Tana, since Dabra San is out of the lake. However, a conclusion can be put forward that other Ewostatewos monks that followed him would have founded a monastery in Lake Tana or at least settled in the region, and enhanced the evangelization process that had been carried out by then by the two houses.

Another account to trace the background of the founding monks of the monasteries of Lake Tana is the popular legend of the “Seven Stars.” This legend has it that some of the monasteries of Lake Tana were founded by a group of seven monks also called “seven stars.” They are believed to have received their monastic education at the famous monastery of Dabra Hayq, founded by Iyasus Moa. These monks include: Hirute Amlak of Daga Istifanos, Yohannis of Kebran Gebriel, Betre Maryam of Ura Kidanemihiret, Zacharias of Bahre Galila, Yasaye of Mandaba, Yafqiranna Egzi of Gugubie, and Tadewos of Debra Maryam.⁷⁰ According to the legend, the seven monks arrived at the same time under spiritual guidance and each of them founded his own monastery on Lake Tana.

The legend has some historical facts that fit the hagiography of some of the founding monks of the Lake Tana monasteries. For instance, according to the legend, the founder of Daga Istifanos, Hiruta Amlak, is believed to have been one of the “seven stars” who were associated with the monastery of Dabra Hayq. His hagiography narrates his early life as a disciple of Iyasus Moa and his miraculous arrival on the Island of Daga by using a stone boat

⁶⁸ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 198.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia* (London: Bradt Travel Guides, 1995), 209. I used this travel guide for the sake of the information of the names of the monks and the monasteries. Otherwise the legend is popular and it circulates in society up to the present day.

to cross the lake. The stone, marked with this information, is now preserved at the entrance of the monastery (“A stone boat used by Abuna Hiruta Amlak to enter to the monastery (cross the lake) in 1276. (See fig 1). The idea that Abuna Hiruta Amlak founded the monastery seems reliable since there is evidence of his educational background at the monastery of Dabra Hayq under Iyasus Moa in the latter’s hagiography.⁷¹ However, there is no evidence whether he moved with other monks in a group to the islands of Lake Tana from Dabra Hayq, which is another question as to the reliability of the legend of the “seven stars.”

Yafqiranna-Egzi, the founder⁷² of Tana Qirqos, was believed to have come from the region of present-day Eritrea. He was a disciple of Madhanina- Egzi and little is known about his educational background and his acceptance as a monk. The only evidence I have is from Taddesse Tamrat’s book, which mentions that he was ordained by Adhani in Tigre.⁷³ However, there is a glimpse of accounts about his evangelical activities in the already existing monastery of Tana Qirqos and its vicinity. Taddesse writes that “Tana Qirqos’s reputation as an important center of monastic activities and Christian learning is a relatively recent development”⁷⁴ and is attributed to the advent of Yafqiranna-Egzi at the monastery.

⁷¹ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, “Hiruta Amlak,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: He-N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), 38.

⁷² Tana Qirqos was a pre-Christian cult site and had already been made a Christian center by Abuna Selama, the first bishop of Ethiopia. However, it was re-established as a strong monastic community by Yafqiranna-Igzi.

⁷³ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 191.

⁷⁴ Ibid.



Fig.1. The stone boat used by Abuna Hiruta Amlak to cross the lake in His way to Daga Istifanos. (photograph by the author.)

While the legend is acceptable for its mention of the right monk with his monastery and goes in harmony with the hagiographies of other monks such as Hiruta Amlak, it is cloudy over some monks whose educational background is certainly known as not having been at Dabra Hayq. Another problem with the legend is that the period of foundation of all the monasteries mentioned is not the same according to some historical or church accounts. The validity of the legend can be evaluated from the discussion below about the identity of some of the founders of the monasteries.

The other monks who went to Lake Tana were victims of the conflict between the religious leaders on one side and Emperor Amde Tsion on the other side.⁷⁵ I prefer to call these monks “the exiled generation” since they were forced by Emperor Amde Tsion to leave the monastery of Debra Libanos near the capital. These monks belonged completely to the ‘house’ of Takla Haymanot since the monastery was the latter’s foundation. The conflict was the result of a reform movement in the church. The young militant monks sought to make religious reform in a church that was dominated by the secular clergy and under the strong influence of political leaders. One of the leaders of this reform movement that led to the religious conflict was Basalota-Mikael, who belonged to the second generation of Iyasus Moa,⁷⁶ the monk who embarked on spreading monasticism on a large scale in Ethiopia.

Basalota-Mikael started his movement by accusing the Egyptian metropolitan, Abuna Yohannis, of practicing simony. He went on to apply this issue to Emperor Amde Tsion.

Basalota-Mikael went to the priests of the royal court and asked them to take him in. And they told the king [about it] and took him in. He said [to the king]: ‘...the Apostles excommunicated those who received money in return for either baptism or ecclesiastical ordinations. But this bishop contravenes their order; he ordains and receives money’...⁷⁷

Basalota-Mikael’s appeal for reform was not accepted and it rather ended in his banishment to the territory of Tigre.⁷⁸ He returned to the provinces of the capital once again two years later and started a series of reforms in the practices of the monasteries.⁷⁹ He might even have endorsed better practices of monastic life as he had spent two years in the province of Tigre, where monasticism had its origins in Ethiopia and monasteries such as those established by the nine saints already existed. Upon his return he continued the old conflicts with the state and it seemed endless as he was eager to see reforms in the churches and

⁷⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 177.

⁷⁷ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 114.

⁷⁸ Tigre is a province in northern Ethiopia. It is actually not a remote land in the sense of civilization since it was here the first state formation in Ethiopia occurred, including the Axumite Empire. Rather it was remote from the then-capital where Amde Tsion resided.

⁷⁹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 115.

monasteries. He even came into a bold clash with Emperor Amde Tsion, whom he condemned for his non-Christian marital practices.

The same story was also given by the nineteenth-century British traveler to Ethiopia, James Bruce. The story goes:

... He had for a time, it seems, privately loved a concubine of his father, but had now taken her to live with him publicly...

...Tagulat (the capital of Shewa) was then the royal residence; and near it the monastery of Debra Libanos, founded by Takla Haymanot restorer of the line of Solomon. To this monastery many men, eminent for learning and religion, had retired from the scenes of war that defoliated Palestine and Egypt. Among the number of these was one Honorius, a Monk of the first character for piety, who, since, has been canonized as a saint. Honorius thought it his duty first to admonish, and then publicly excommunicate the King for these crimes.

... It should seem that patience was as little among this Prince's virtues as chastity, as he immediately ordered Honorius to be apprehended stripped naked, and severely whipped through every street of his capital. That same night the town took fire, and was entirely consumed and the clergy lost no time to persuade the people that it was the blood of Honorius that turned to fire whenever it had dropt upon the ground, and so had burnt the city. The King, king, perhaps better informed, thought otherwise of this, and supposed the burning of his capital was owing to the Monks themselves. He therefore banished those of Debra Libanos out of the province of Shewa.⁸⁰

This story is supported by relatively better documentation and it shows many fallacies about the supposed founders of the monasteries of Lake Tana. The first theory that fell victim to the story of conflict between the ecclesiastics and the royal family is the legend of the "seven stars." While the legend traces the origin of the monks to Dabra Hayq, the story had its context in Debra Libanos. Accordingly, the legend and the "theory" contradict each other. The other suggestion by scholars, that the founders would have belonged to the house of Ewostatewos, also does not agree with this story. Since the rebellious group on the monks' side was represented by Basalota-Mikael, a disciple of Iyasus Moa who was certainly not Ewostatewian, this argument does not match the story.

⁸⁰ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, in the years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773*, 5 vols, (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1840), vol. 2, 6.

This account, preserved in the *Chronicle* of Emperor Amde Tsion, mentions the conflict between the monastic clergy and the royal family and the removal of the former to the region of Lake Tana in general and to the islands in particular. It does not give an exact list of the monks and the monasteries they founded in Lake Tana, however, it yields some hints for investigating the monks who had been in Dabra Libanos and were exiled by Amde Tsion to the region of Lake Tana. This could be done by analyzing the vita of the monks who had a link with Dabra Libanos or with the founder, St. Takla Haymanot.

The Monastery of Dabra Maryam on the southern shore of Lake Tana and its founder Abuna Tadewos are linked to the house of Takla Haymanot. The birthplace of Abuna Tadewos, Silalish⁸¹ in Shewa, is the same place where St. Takla Haymanot was born.⁸² There is no information about his educational background. However, it seems possible to suggest that a monk of such rank, Abuna,⁸³ must have been educated in a well-run monastery and Dabra Libanos was the only such institution near the birthplace of Abuna Tadewos. The *gedil* (hagiography) of Abuna Tadewos tells that Dabra Maryam was established within the network of the Dabra Libanos Monastery of Shewa. Hence, there is a tiny light which illuminates the fact that Abuna Tadewos was the victim of the historical clash. However, there are obscurities about the date of foundation and early links between the two monasteries.⁸⁴ Similarly, Abba Za Yohannis, the founder of Kebran Gebriel, is believed to have been a member of the banished group of monks. He was born in Merahabite, a district in Shewa. He was ordained to monk hood at the monastery of Dabra Libanos at the hands of Hezqyas, an abbot of the monastery who replaced the exiled tutor, Filipos.⁸⁵ According to oral tradition, it was Filipos who entrusted Hezqyas to administer the monastery in harmony

⁸¹ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Dabra Maryam," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: D-Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005), 32.

⁸² Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 160.

⁸³ A patriarch, but in this context heading a church or a monastery

⁸⁴ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Dabra Maryam," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 32

⁸⁵ J. J. Hespeler-Boulton, *A Story in Stones: Portugal's Influence on Culture and Architecture in the Highlands of Ethiopia 1493-1634*, 2nd ed. (: British Colombia: CCB Publishing, 2011), 101.

with the king after the former's relationship had been spoiled with Amde Tsion, which cost him banishment. This subversive work among the monks was uncovered by Amde Tsion and he exiled Hezqyas, too, shortly after he ordained Za Yohannis. The emperor must have been informed about Za Yohannis' ordination by Hezqyas and ordered him to follow his master. Amde Tsion entrusting the abbotship of the monastery of Kebran Gebriel to a community living outside the lake while Za Yohannis was there reflects this hostility.⁸⁶

1.3. Factors for the foundation of the monasteries on Lake Tana

The region of Lake Tana was a peripheral zone of both the medieval Ethiopian church and state until the second half of the thirteenth century. Despite the earliest attempts at expansion by the Axumite and the Zagwe (1100-1270) rulers, the area stayed as an unorganized entity composed of people of Jewish origin (Falasha) and native pagans of Gojjam under the loose control of the medieval kingdom of Damot.⁸⁷ I will discuss the population composition in the chapter three. However, there are several reasons to suggest that Christian communities were also part of this composition and had existed in the area long before the large-scale expansion process started in the second half of the thirteenth century.⁸⁸ The presence of unorganized Christian communities, as the traditions of some of the medieval monasteries of this study state, had prepared the ground for the later emergence of strong monastic communities in the region of Lake Tana. The missionary activity of the early monks who went to the region was, therefore, to stabilize the isolated Christian communities and expand the horizon of Christianity to the pagan peoples of the region.⁸⁹ These early missionary activities appear to have been a centripetal force to attract the attention of several monks to follow in the

⁸⁶ Merid Wolde Aregay, "Some Inedited Land Charters of Emperor Sarsa Dengel (r.1563- 1597)," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 13 (2000): 92.

⁸⁷ Taddesse, Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia (1270- 1527)*, 190.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

footsteps of their masters (or predecessors) to found many monasteries on the islands dotted all over the lake. However, there could have been different factors that forced or attracted the monks to set out on a journey to the monasteries of Lake Tana. This section deals with the possible factors that could have influenced the foundation process. As there was no single factor, I will follow the hypotheses suggested by different authors to point out the possible ones.

The first initiative to found a religious shrine on the islands of Lake Tana was perhaps not the invention of Christianity. Tana Qirqos, the same island that served as a spring-board for later evangelization activities in the region of Gojjam in general and Lake Tana in particular, was the site of Judaism long before the introduction of Christianity. Many instruments that were used for sacrifices are still preserved in the monastery, which shows that the island served as a site of Jewish cults.⁹⁰ Legend has it that the site was changed into a Christian community after the visit of Abuna Frumentius, the first bishop of Ethiopia, in the fourth century. This was the same island where the primary effort to establish an organized Christian community, take steps to evangelize the surrounding society, and found a monastery were inaugurated in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁹¹

While factors for the revival of monasticism throughout the country beginning from the thirteenth century are equally applicable to the monasteries of Lake Tana, the unusual geographical location, being located in a lake, needs further investigation of other potential factors for the foundations. Accordingly, the special physical feature, water, should be viewed in terms of its symbolic or religious meaning in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church together with its worldly value. Determining the factors for the foundation of the monasteries of Lake Tana should thus be contextualized within the wider framework of monasticism in Ethiopia.

⁹⁰ The author has visited the monastery and taken photographs of the sacrificial pillars and other instruments related to it as they are presented by the monks, (see fig 2).

⁹¹ Taddesse, Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 189.

Monasticism is a foreign import to Ethiopia. However, it underwent a process of molding and transforming itself into a unique system of Ethiopian civilization to establish its own norms and salient features.⁹² It also continued as a public institution throughout the various stages of Ethiopian history right up to the present time without significant changes in its features. Joachim Persoon has noted this fact:



Fig. 2. Jewish sacrifice pillar in the monastery of Tana Qirqos (photograph by the author)

⁹²Joachim Persoon, "Ethiopian Monasticism and the Visit of the Holy Family to Ethiopia," *Kirche und Schule in Athiopien* 56 (2003): 24.

...Ethiopia is in a certain sense a living museum, which preserves aspects of way of life, which once flourished elsewhere a Millennium ago. The study of Ethiopian Monasticism not only enables us to gain glimpses of what once existed in Europe and the Middle East, but also helps us to regain valuable elements of a lost heritage, a spirituality rooted in the local soil, which is an expression of poetic emanation of local traditions, harmonizing with indigenous culture.⁹³

Despite this uniformity in practice and preserving the early tradition, the monastery foundations were motivated by different factors that should be contextualized in relation to the contemporary political and religious developments during the time of foundation.

1.3.1 The role of landscape in the foundations

One of the aspects of Ethiopian monasticism was to settle in a geographically harsh environment, i.e., “the monks and nuns deliberately choose to inhabit a starkly ‘liminal’ world, geographically, socially and spiritually on the edge of Human existence.”⁹⁴ This explanation could be an indication of the impact of the monastic landscape on Ethiopian monasteries. It demonstrates the monks’ and nuns’ total alienation, from the geographical point of view, from the material world. This “liminality,” again in terms of landscape, could be interpreted by “the monastic communities’ inclinations to pursue the tradition of eremitic asceticism, which meant settling in mountains, caves, forests and deserts.”⁹⁵

“Liminality,” therefore, was the main characterizing feature of Ethiopian monasticism from its introduction by the so-called Nine Saints[Seven Stars?] to fairly recent times. However, finding a “liminal” space on an island was a late twelfth-century phenomenon which predated the restoration of Solomonic Dynasty in 1270. One of the protagonist monks

⁹³ Joachim Persoon, “From Foreign Import to Bulwark of Ethiopian Civilization, Ethiopian Monasticism -- an Ancient Institution in a Changing World,” In *Athiopien Zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Walter Raunig and Asfa Wossen Assef (Cologne: Orbis Aethiopicus, 1998), 107.

⁹⁴ Joachim Persoon, “Ethiopian Monasticism,” 23.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

for the restoration process, Abba Iyasus-Mo'a, founded and become an abbot of the monastery of St. Stephen on an island in Lake Hayq in Wollo. The monastery's foundation near the former capital of the Zagwe dynasty, Lalibela, played a significant role in restoring the Solomonic dynasty as the founder himself was involved in the conspiracy to topple the illegitimate Agaws.⁹⁶ This monastery also served as a school in the following centuries and produced groups of monks that contributed to the expansion of monasticism to remote pagan territories.⁹⁷

It was one of these groups of monks, traditionally known as the "Seven Stars,"⁹⁸ who traveled westwards to Lake Tana and founded several monasteries on the lake. The arrival of the monks on the islands of Lake Tana followed the unbroken practice of monasticism, at least in the concept of being alienated from the daily life of the secular world. Accordingly, the choice of landscape seems to have been made by the monks and it also seems they adapted the landscape for their needs, namely, continuing the tradition of the desert fathers with a modified landscape, i.e., on islands.

The monasteries of Lake Tana still occupy a special place in terms of geography, namely, having water as their central physical environment. Accordingly, their foundation should be viewed in terms of the symbolic and physical meaning of water to Ethiopian monasticism in general, together with the specific contemporary trends of monasticism.

The fact that the central meaning of an island is a land surrounded by water, it could suggest the meaning between water and Ethiopian monasticism.

The image of water in the wilderness is vividly associated with Ethiopian monasticism. This is not merely because of the visual association with ascetic

⁹⁶ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2000), 53

⁹⁷ Tadesse, Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 158.

⁹⁸ The foundations of some of the monasteries of Lake Tana are associated with the seven saints (monks) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church who are also known as the "Seven Stars" by the Church. They were products of the famous medieval monastery of Debre Hayq founded by Abba Iyesus Moa. The "seven stars" and the monasteries they founded are: Hirute Amlak of Daga Estifanos, Yohannes of Kebran Gebriel, Betre Mariam of Ura Kidanemihiret, Zacharies of Bahre Gelila, Yesaye of Mandaba, Afekrene Egzi of Gugubie, and Tadiwos of Debre Mariam; see also, George Wynn, Brereton Huntingford, *The Glorious Victories of 'Āmda Sē'eyon, King of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 6.

centers such as Waldebbba (one of the earliest monasteries established by the nine saints), where abundant gushing streams and rivers bring life to an otherwise harsh and barren landscape, but rather because of the way it is perceived as a vehicle for blessing and healing, the tangible sign of divine promise. Miraculous healings and exorcism at holy springs are a regular feature at most monasteries.

Holy water not only figures centrally in the most popularly celebrated festivals of the calendar, Epiphany (or the baptism of Christ), but above all symbolizes an essential aspect of monastic life: the ability to transform the mundane elements of everyday life into something which transcends time and space, which approaches the life of the angels.⁹⁹

This seems to suggest that although monasteries should necessarily be located in remote areas out of the reach of human existence, they still need to have water, not for its regular usage but as a sacred element to wash away sins. Accordingly, the landscape may have been adopted by the monks for its water. Pertaining to this fact, there are streams, either created naturally or drawn by irrigation canals from the lake, at the centre of the building complexes of most of the monasteries.¹⁰⁰

Besides its importance as a symbolic meaning, water might also have attracted the monks for their basic needs. Cheesman, the famous early twentieth-century traveler to Ethiopia, witnessed the monastic communities' reliance on the lake for its water for their daily use. In most of the monasteries where he spent the night, he mentions that they had to fetch water from the lake. On the largest island, Dek, he reported that "the women have to carry water from the edge of the Lake, as they do in all other villages."¹⁰¹

The landscape also seems to have had another meaning for the foundation of the monasteries in relation to the political upheavals of medieval Ethiopia. This landscape clearly offers real seclusion and is out of the reach of any massive forces with the intention to destroy the monasteries given the feeble technology of sailing on lake in the medieval period. Accordingly, there seems to have been a high possibility that the landscape choice was made for security reasons. However, this explanation does not suffice to understand the landscape

⁹⁹ Joachim Persoon, "Ethiopian Monasticism:" 23.

¹⁰⁰ The author has witnessed small water wells or streams at the centre of some monasteries.

¹⁰¹ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 133.

as a choice for security. From whom did the religious community want to hide? Were there any attempts at religious persecution or assault on contemporary inland monasteries so that the founders of Lake Tana choose unreachable landscapes? Were any attempts made to destroy these monasteries and the monks' choice of the landscape worked to save them?

In the aftermath of the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270, the Christian empire found itself surrounded by a number of Muslim principalities.¹⁰² Immediately, a competition to control trade routes coupled with the growing need for pasture land among the Muslim principalities brought about a series of wars that wore medieval Ethiopia down and lasted almost half a century.¹⁰³ The Muslim-Christian conflict started during the reign of Amde Tsion in 1332 and ended in 1543 during the reign of Emperor Gelawdewos.¹⁰⁴ There were shifts in victory favoring both sides in this protracted warfare. The party who emerged victorious thus used to demolish everything with the potential to be destroyed. Churches and monasteries were the main targets of the victorious Muslims as mosques were the prey of the invading Christians.¹⁰⁵ For the purpose of this paper only the Muslims' victory and their damage to religious institutions will be discussed.

It can be argued that at the beginning of the Muslim-Christian conflict the Muslims did not get the chance to defeat the well-organized military and penetrate deep inside the heart of the Christian empire. The early battles were mainly fought on the territories of the Muslim principalities.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, the destruction of religious institutions by the Muslim forces was confined to the areas adjoining their districts.¹⁰⁷ There are two kinds of sources about the Muslims sacking Christian territories, with the coming to power of Ahmad Gragn as a dividing line. Thus, in the early guerrilla tactics, the less organized principalities

¹⁰² Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 83.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

destroyed the churches in the southeastern parts of Shewa.¹⁰⁸ Amde Tsion, who officially declared war against the Muslims of southeastern Ethiopia and thereby inaugurated the long-lasting rivalry, gave an account of his defeat of the Muslim forces and the destruction of churches and monasteries.

The people called Warjih and Gabal, who are experts in killing and war, came to fight me from the confines of Finsate to the frontiers of Biquizar. From the river of Hawash to Zabir [there were] also Muslims. And the churches and monasteries were destroyed,... none of the them survived, and the land of Ziga and Manzih. All these leagued against me and surrounded me.¹⁰⁹

There is no clear evidence of how many churches and monasteries were destroyed by the Muslim forces. This destruction, however, might have alerted the clergy to stand by to protect its institutions. The fact that most of the monasteries of Lake Tana were built during the time of Amde Tsion, coupled with the destruction of churches and monasteries that started during his time, leads one to conclude that the landscape was chosen for security reasons, namely, to occupy a land that could not be reached easily by the Muslim forces, as one can infer from Paul Henze, who noted that: “The islands of Lake Tana were probably originally attractive to monks because of the safety they offered.”¹¹⁰

The coming to power of Ahmad Gagn in 1520 on the side of the Muslim principalities of southeastern Ethiopia turned the dimension of Muslim-Christian rivalries in favor of the former.¹¹¹ This strong militant Muslim leader had the goal of sacking the whole Ethiopian Empire and converting the whole population to Islam.¹¹² This historical episode seems to have happened late enough to have influenced the foundation of the monasteries on Lake Tana. However, given the early unstable political environment promoted by Muslim-Christian conflicts before Ahmad Gagn came to power, and churches and monasteries being

¹⁰⁸ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 134.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 135.

¹¹⁰ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 73.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 86.

¹¹² Ibid.

the primary victims of Muslim attacks, the monks might have thought it a secure place to establish their monasteries.

However, this does not mean that Ahmad Gagn made no attempt to destroy the monasteries of Lake Tana nor that he did not destroy any. There is evidence of monasteries that suffered destruction by the armies of Ahmad Gagn, starting with the influential Monastery of Tana Qirqos, based on the account of Cheesman,

...Tana Qirqos can no longer be correctly described as an island all the year round. The lake, during its annual fall of six feet, exposes a causeway between the island and the mainland. It is a local tradition that Tana Qirqos was formerly separated from the land by half a mile of permanent water on which *tankwas*¹¹³ plied in every month of the year,¹¹⁴ and it was this channel that frustrated the efforts of Ahmad Gagn in the sixteenth century to get onto the island and sack the church.¹¹⁵

While Tana Qirqos escaped the attempts at destruction because of its relative inaccessibility, other churches located closer to the shore of the lake were looted and burnt by the forces of Ahmad Gagn. For instance, the original centerpiece church of the monastery of Galila, dedicated to Iyasus (Jesus), was burnt by the forces of Ahmad Gagn in 1537, “whose soldiers had crossed the water on planks of wood.”¹¹⁶ The fact that the soldiers reached the monastery by crossing the water on planks of wood shows that it was near the land, as is shown on the map. (See fig. 3).

The islands of Lake Tana were also being seen as a safe place by other inland churches and monasteries to escape persecution and to hide important religious materials such as books during the invasion of Ahmad Gagn. For example, at the monastery of Kebran Gebriel, there are large piles of books taken there for safety reasons by other inland churches

¹¹³ Small local boats made of papyrus.

¹¹⁴ The water level was low because of the general intensity of the rain in the years Cheesman traveled, but during the time the author of this thesis visited the monastery and interviewed the monks the water level was almost as the same as what Cheesman described based on tradition.

¹¹⁵ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 172.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 203.

¹¹⁷ Adopted from: R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, Attached Map.

and monasteries that were never returned to their original places.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the monastery of Mitraha once held a picture of Christ with the Crown of Thorns, believed to have been painted by St. Luke. The painting was taken to the monastery from Aksum during Ahmed Gagn's invasion for security reasons in the 1530s,¹¹⁹ the monastery could not to escape an attempt at devastation by Ahmad Gagn, however, who threw fire from the mainland.¹²⁰ The soldiers' failure to hit the target, the central church, and the monks' effort to put out the fire saved the monastery from total devastation.¹²¹

Generally, the islands of Lake Tana seem to have been chosen by the founding monks partly for security reasons. Whether, while they were on bad terms with the Christian emperors and forced into exile¹²² or during the invasions of Ahmad Gagn followed by persecution, forceful conversion to Islam, and destruction of any kind of Christian institutions, the monks chose the islands as hiding places for themselves and the treasures of their faith. One can see that the monks' choice of landscape was perfect in terms of avoiding destruction; the monasteries of Lake Tana being among few survivors of Ahmad Gagns' assaults on Christian institutions.

...he [Ahmad Gagn] launched a well planned invasion of the highlands, burning churches and monasteries and forcibly converting Christians. He reached Lake Hayq in Wollo, looted its famous island monastery, and made his way across to Lake Tana, where he failed to reach the most important islands.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 155

¹¹⁹ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 190. The painting was later taken to the court of Emperor Tewodros (1855-1869) where the British army looted it together with other treasures of the court when they defeated the emperor at the battle of Aroge in 1869.

¹²⁰ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 190

¹²¹ Anonymous informants from the Monastery of Mithaha Maryam.

¹²² The first clash started between Emperor Amde Tsion and the monks of the monastery of Dabra Libanos when the monks excommunicated him for marrying his father's concubine. For further information see page 15 of this thesis.

¹²³ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 87.

1.3.2. Political factors for monastic foundations

The foundation process and the issue of adaptation can also be viewed in terms of the political developments of the period when the monasteries were founded. The relationship between the founders of the monasteries and the state had two features. The first group of monks, the Seven Stars, had a positive relationship with the state because of the contribution of their home monastery, Dabra Hayq, to restoring the Solomonic Dynasty. They enjoyed every endowment that the state provided to monasteries. As Niall Finneran wrote,

The founding of these monastic communities had at once political and religious connotations. The monasteries formed the spearhead of the evangelization effort, and the Christianization of the emperor's new subjects allowed for speedier political integration. Monasteries were very well endowed materially by the Emperor and his cohorts; ecclesiastical land-holding systems (*gult*) played an important role in the generation of revenue for these newly-established monasteries.¹²⁴

It seems that these monks traveled to the lake, founded the monasteries, and evangelized the local pagan communities to win *gult* grants and enjoy royal patronage. As in the above two factors that might have served or at least contributed as factors for the foundation of Lake Tana monasteries, this political factor seems to suggest that the monks had the liberty to choose. They founded the monasteries to enjoy royal patronage while at the same time they pursued their religious independence far away from both the state and society. Thus, one can say that they adapted the landscape to their needs. However, the mission given them by the state, namely, evangelizing the surrounding pagan communities as a duty in return for state endowments makes it seem that adapting to the islands was inevitable as far as harmony with the church had to be maintained. The hagiographic tradition of the seven saints thus supports an idea of co-operation between the royal power and the monastic communities from the

¹²⁴ Niall Finneran, "The Monasteries of Shire, Northern Ethiopia," *Journal of the Ecclesiological Society* 30 (2003), 6.

beginning, not only from the time of the military and political expansion of the rulers combined with the attempts at mission.

However, the relationship between the Ethiopian medieval Church and state was not always peaceful. The conflict between the monastic clergy of Dabra Libanos and Emperor Amde Tsion led a significant number of monks to leave the capital, Tagulat, and live in exile in lands beyond the control of the empire. These events must have influenced the foundation processes in the Lake Tana region as well. There are no sources in the hagiography that narrate the story of the monks' forced withdrawal from Tagulat and Dabara Libanos, the famous monastery on the outskirts of the capital. The only relatively primary source is the chronicle of Amde Tsion, composed after his death and cited in various books of Ethiopian Orthodox Church history such as Gebreyohannes Gebremariam's *Christianity in Ethiopia*.¹²⁵

A somewhat different story is also given in the studies of Tadesse Tamrat, who notes that the Egyptian metropolitan,¹²⁶ named Abuna Ya'eqob, who first entered Ethiopia about 1337 at the apex of Amde Tsion's power and the height of the expansion of the state, emerged as an architect and expert at incorporating the newly subjugated areas into his diocese. Relations with the court worsened, however, when Ya'eqob resorted to creating a different type of Church authority, independent of state control.¹²⁷

The reason for the confrontation seems less important than the effect for this paper. The church-state confrontation that followed saw the exile of the leaders of the Ethiopian church to the north.¹²⁸ The accounts about the northward movement of the clergy do not

¹²⁵ I cite James Bruce because it is an available translation in English. The same story is related in Amharic sources like the ones mentioned above.

¹²⁶ The Ethiopian Church was dominated by Egyptian metropolitans from the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia or from the time of Frumentius, who is said to have introduced Christianity to Ethiopia, to 1951 when the first bishop of Ethiopian origin is appointed.

¹²⁷ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Medieval Ethiopia*, 186-187.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

contain a list of the monks who were sent into exile. All that is known about the migration is that the order of expulsion was to be applied throughout the territory of the Christian empire.

It seems possible to suggest that the monks were left with few choices to find an ideal place for monasticism. There is evidence that a number of monasteries were established during the same period south of the empire, where the state was not in control.¹²⁹ The other choice that these exiled monks made was to move to the islands of Lake Tana, which, of course, had been partly occupied and some of the pagan communities had been evangelized by the first group of monks.¹³⁰ Therefore, this forced migration made the monks adapt themselves to the monasteries since they had no other choice left if they were to stay in the empire.

Generally, most of the foundations of the monasteries of Lake Tana took place in the second half of the thirteenth century as part of a general monastic reform in the Ethiopian Empire. The monastery of Debra Hayq, founded by Abba Iyasus Moa, and Debre Libanos, founded by Takla Haymanot, on the one hand, and the monastic house of Ewostatewos, on the other hand, led the monastic reform and often engaged in competition and rivalry. Although most of the details about origins and educational backgrounds of the monks who founded the monasteries of Lake Tana are still shrouded with mystery, we can conclude in a nutshell that they were the results these monastic schools. These monks of different backgrounds were either driven by their own will or forced by factors beyond their control to settle in this special landscape. Therefore, no single reason that determined the adaptation process can be put forward. It could rather be said that they adapted to the landscape by considering the availability of pagan communities to be evangelized and water for their daily spiritual and worldly activities. The exiles also took the lake as the only choice left to take refuge. The other groups, who went under the auspices of the government, adapted the

¹²⁹ Tadesse Tamirat, *Church and State in Medieval Ethiopia*, 190.

¹³⁰ There is evidence of the existence of Christian communities in the area before the advent of monks to Lake Tana.

landscape to their needs to enjoy royal family *gult* grants and other gifts. The founders also seem to have been engrossed by the safety that the islands of Lake Tana could offer.

CHAPTER TWO

ROYAL PATRONAGE AND BURIAL AT THE MONASTERIES OF LAKE TANA

Let the king give honor to the order of the clergy... Let him give from his wealth to each of them, according to their rank. He shall exempt them from tribute, presents, and the other things to be given to the rulers...And let the king assign to God a part of the presents and of the spoils of war, as king David and other righteous kings did. Let him not raise his hand against priests or God's saints, so that what befell the evil kings of Israel and others may not befall him [Fetha Nagast, (Canon Regum), 272- 73].¹³¹

Emperors are often mentioned as founders of monasteries on Lake Tana. However, the roles they played in the foundation are not clearly stated. This chapter addresses the role of the emperors in a certain monastery with which their name is closely identified. There are also numerous burials of the royal family in some of these monasteries. I will closely examine the issue of royal patronage with royal burials.

2.1. Royal patronage

It has been argued that founding a monastery was an individual enterprise in Ethiopia. In the words of Tadesse Tamrat, "A monastic community normally started by being an isolated place of private retreat for its founder."¹³² This private retreat soon transforms into more communal aspects of local monastic life.¹³³ The founding monk had to go first, guided by the spirit, have a vision or dream about a certain site (as most of the hagiographies of the monks

¹³¹ Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia (1896-1974)* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 80.

¹³² Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 110.

¹³³ Alessandro Bausi, "Monasteries," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: He-N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2007), 989.

narrate), be ordered by an emperor,¹³⁴ or forced by one of the factors, like war, discussed in the previous chapter. The monk then gradually caught the attention of a few people from the surroundings and, based on the impression that he made on his first visitors, he could attract some disciples.¹³⁵ It should be after these preliminary tasks of getting the surrounding people to concede, winning some disciples, getting permission from the regional lord, that the idea of building a monastic complex or at least the central church would be conceived.

As Saint Anthony was the great inspiration for most Ethiopian hermits; it is clear that the wandering monks traveled with bare hands, leaving all their worldly possessions behind. As John Iliffe noted, “In the hagiographies of Ethiopian saints, miracles benefiting the poor are jumbled together with all kinds of wonders, often wholly trivial.”¹³⁶ One of the propagators of the thirteenth-century monastic revival, Takla Haymanot, is a good example since he is close in time and space to the targets of this study.

He gathered together all the goods which were in the house and in the field, and he began to distribute them among the poor and the needy, and among the widows, and those who were ready to die of misery...until at length there was left unto him nothing whatsoever. And when the men of the city and all his kinsfolk saw that he was giving away broadcast all his possessions, they gathered together round about him, and said unto him, ‘whatfore dost thou scatter abroad all this property at one time?’ Then our father the holy man Takla Haymanot said unto them, ‘I am not scattering my property, on the contrary I am multiplying it so that it may become a bond for me.’¹³⁷

This is how hermits started their journeys to their destiny, i.e., to the desert, mountains, and lakes, in the case of this study. The most important question here is: Who gave the holy man permission to settle on the land where he established a monastic community? Where did he find the money, skilled manpower, materials, etc., to construct the monastery complex? How could the holy man support the sustainability of life in the monastic community?

¹³⁴ Ibid., 990.

¹³⁵ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 110.

¹³⁶ John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 25.

¹³⁷ E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Life of Takla Haymanot*, 2 vols. (London, 1906), Vol. 1, 90.

2.1.1 Land grants to the monasteries of Lake Tana

After restoring the Solomonic Dynasty, Yukuno Amlak made land grants to the churches and monasteries under his rule. There are sources of land grants in the form of *gult*¹³⁸ from Yukuno Amlak for the earliest monasteries, like Shemazana, in present-day Eritrea, Debre Libanos, Debre Hayq, and others which served as centers of the thirteenth-century monastic reform in northern Ethiopia.¹³⁹ These land grants could not have been extended to the few monasteries already established on the lake, such as Tana Qirqos and Daga Istifanos, since it was not under the control of the Christian empire. However, there were communities such as the Agaws, Falashas, and Christians loosely controlled under the pagan Kingdom of Gojjam.¹⁴⁰ Accordingly, the monks either had to face a challenge or negotiate with the lords of this kingdom. (I will discuss this interaction between the monks and the pagan community around Lake Tana in the next chapter.) Here, it suffices to discuss the land grants by the state to the monasteries after the area had been incorporated into the empire later during the time of Amde Tsion.

The first recorded *gult* grant to the monasteries of Lake Tana was made during the time of Amde Tsion. The monastery of Kebran Gebriel is in the list of the monasteries and churches receiving *gult* during the reign of Emperor Amde Tsion.¹⁴¹ There is no other monastery of Lake Tana in this list. Kebran Gebriel was founded by Amde Tsion,¹⁴² which leads to the conclusion that the monastery received land grants because it was a royal foundation. However, the fact that most of the monasteries, at least the targets of this study

¹³⁸ *Gult* is an Amharic term which literally means immobile or stationary. It was a tribute-appropriation right granted by the emperor to the lower echelons of the power hierarchy -- local rulers, members of the royal family, the nobility, the clergy, etc. It is the right to levy tribute on a certain territory (land). See also Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia (1896-1974)* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 78.

¹³⁹ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000), 36.

¹⁴⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 160

¹⁴¹ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia*, 45.

¹⁴² La Verle Berry, Richard Smith, "Churches and Monasteries of Lake Tana, Ethiopia 1972," 23.

discussed in chapter one, were founded during the reign of Amde Tsion and he only gave the *gult* right to one church raises a question: What about the other churches?

One explanation could be the absence of an organized community in the region of Lake Tana that would have necessitated a complex state apparatus to partition the land. It also seems that the early monastic communities were not in a situation to demand their own land to support themselves. Although sources about the life of the early monks in the monasteries of Lake Tana are not abundant, the life of Takla Haymanot, the master of most of the founding monks of Lake Tana, could give a hint:

...towards the end of his life he [Takla Haymanot] withdrew to the desert, where he ate and drank only on Sabbath and occupied a cell which was just large enough to stand in and had eight iron spikes in the walls. Now when he had remained standing up for a long time, one of his thigh bones broke and dropped off... and afterwards he stood up on leg for seven years, during four of which he drank no water whatsoever.¹⁴³

Teshale also notes that a monastic community consumes less “as a good part of the year was spent on fasting.”¹⁴⁴ The disciples of Takla Haymanot thus seem less likely to have demanded land grants or *gult* rights during the rule of Amde Tsion, given also the very small numbers in the monastic community. These early *gult* grants can also suggest the monasteries’ relationship with the state during this time. The presence of monastic communities who wanted to be independent from the influence of the state and observe their faith strictly was discussed above. Hence, Amde Tsion might have denied any grants for these monastic communities.

The exceptional *gult* grant to the monastery of Kebran Gebriel still needs further explanation. The monastery continued to receive grants from the successors of Amde Tsion, Dawit I (1382-1411) and Yishak (1414-1429).¹⁴⁵ This tradition existed well into the sixteenth

¹⁴³ E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Life of Takla Haymanot*, Vol.1, 92-93.

¹⁴⁴ Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 82.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia*, 45.

century¹⁴⁶ and there is evidence of grants to the monasteries of Kibran Gebriel and Tana Qirqos by Emperor Sarsa Dengel (r. 1563 - 1597).

Written by order of the powerful king... During our reign we [ordained] that the offices of *heburd-ed* and *mmehar* be given to one person, and that no one is appointed to the offices unless he has taken the cloth of a monk at [this] monastery. Elderly people have told us that traditionally it has been thus, and we have ordered that it be so; when the *sâraj masdré* was Abba Tâklâ-Wâld, the *qés hase* Abba Giyorgis, the *géra azaj* Bâhayla-Sellus, the *qdn azaj* Mânadléwos, the *bét tdbaqi géta* Abba Zâmika'él and Keflé, the *ddbtdra géta* Tâklâ-Nâbiyat and of the left Enqo, the *gojjam ndgash* Prince Qozmoz, the governor of Bad Yohannes, the *liqd mâsané Keflé* and the *qaqétach Bârâkât*. And we have ordered that no one shall violate this constitution of Kebran, be he a monk or a layman, be he the governor of Bad or be they all the clans of Abâkabot. By our command the clergy have anathematized, saying: 'If anyone violates this word of the *etégé* Admas-Mogâsa and of the king Sârsâ-Dengel whose throne-name is Mâlâk-Sâgâd and erases this charter may he be cursed by the word of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the sword-edged words of Peter and Paul, and by the words of the 318 orthodox in faith of Nicaea, and by the words of the saints of God, those in heaven as well as those on earth; and he shall not be absolved in any manner, be it by the word of the bishop or by the words of the patriarchs of Alexandria.' Forever, Amen.¹⁴⁷

This is not a proper decree on the rights of land usage. It is rather about the privilege of administering Kebran Gebriel. As Aregay noted in his comment about the charter:

This charter is not a land deed but a charter conferring a privilege on the monastery of St. Gabriel of the island of Kebran in Lake Tana. This charter restored to the monastery an old right by which the abbotship was given to a member of its community, who had received his monastic habit in the monastery itself.¹⁴⁸

According to this source, entrusting the abbotship to a community member from the lake in the region of Bad (see map) had existed before Sarsa Dengil. There are two things which need to be closely explained with the issue of abbotship. Firstly, the fact that the abbotship was given to a community living in the inland means the monastery belonged to a certain village. It is common in Ethiopia until this day for a certain village to have one parish church or monastery and the village to be identified with the *tabot* of that church or monastery.

¹⁴⁶ This period is still considered medieval in Ethiopian history. The dividing line between late medieval and early modern period is usually the second half of the sixteenth century.

¹⁴⁷ For the text see Appendix I, cf. Merid Wolde Aregay, "Some Inedited Land Charters of Emperor Sarsa Dengel (r.1563-1597)," *Annales d'Ethiopie* 13 (2000): 89. (See also Appendix 1 for the ge'ez version of the text)

¹⁴⁸ Merid Wolde Aregay, "Some Inedited Land Charters:" 96.

Secondly, the abbot, who is responsible for administering the monastery living inland, is in charge of the economic aspects of the monastery. In this case, the charter of administration was entrusted to a community and an abbot in the inland, which means the monastery had lands outside the lake in the region of Bad. Therefore, the tradition of land grants (*gult*) and entrusting the administration of the monastery to a community living outside the land, indicates that the land grant by Amde Tsion for Kebran Gebriel was not directly to the monastery rather to an abbot living outside the monastery. This could be the reason why he did not grant land to the other monasteries and only to Kebran Gebriel. In contrast, entrusting the monastery's abbotship to a community living outside the lake while the founder was still alive, gives a glimpse into the relationship between the emperor and the founder, Za Yohannis. This in turn entails a conclusion that the founder was among the exiled monks of Dabra Libanos.

Sarsa Dengil's land grant to the monastery of Tana Qirqos is well documented and it brings to light the royal involvement in the issue of land or *gult* grants to the monasteries of Lake Tana.

To the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and with the blessings of Our Lady Mary. In the fourteenth year of our reign we who, by the grace of God, are named Sârsâ-Dengel and our throne-name [is] Mâlâk-Sâgâd, and the name of the queen[is] Admas-Mogâsa,... forever; when the *Hqa ma'emera*n was Nâbaré-Maryam, the *Hqa dabtdra* Fetâ-Dengel, the *qés hase* Abba Giyorgis, the *sàraj masdré* Tâklâ-Wâld, the *mâ'zdmeran géta* Zâdengel,...Mika'el, the *dabtdra géta* Enqo, the *bét tabaqi géta* Zamika'el and Géra; when the west *azaj* was Bâhaylâ-Sellus, the *qdgn géta*...,the *géra géta* Sankoris, the *hedug ras*..., *ras* Yes'haq, the *liqà mdsané* Maryam-Zéna and Keflé, the *qaqétat*... Whoever violates this charter that we have granted, be he king or be she queen, be he the *gojjam nagash* or ... be he a person who became strong... or be he a person who in future rises to a position of governorship..., or be he from among Christians... he shall not enter into this...island... of St. Qirqos...¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ For the text see Appendix II, cf. Merid Wolde Aregay, "Some Inedited Land Charters:" 90.

Tana Qirqos was the earliest and most organized monastic community that existed on the lake throughout the medieval period.¹⁵⁰ It was not in hostile relations with the state since there is evidence of the rescue of the founder of the monastery, Yafqiranna Egzi, by Amde Tsion (to be discussed in the next chapter). Accordingly, if land was given formally to a monastic community it should have been Tana Qirqos. The account also suggests that once the land grant was made it was an inalienable right. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that land grants to the monasteries of Lake Tana started later in time than the monasteries were founded.

Besides this primary source there are oral accounts of the land grants of some of the monasteries in Lake Tana. For example, at the monastery of Galila Iyasus, Cheesman was told by the *Memihir*¹⁵¹ about the land possessions of the monastery. “The monastery owns land at Gorgora¹⁵² and elsewhere on the monastery which is let to tenants who pay rent.”¹⁵³ Sources about the time when the land was granted are not known, however, given that the monastery was rebuilt by Emperor Sarsa Dengil after being partially destroyed by Ahmed Gragn¹⁵⁴ and the emperor was granting land to other monasteries in Lake Tana founded by his predecessors, it may be inferred that the land grant was made during his time. The monastery was a royal family foundation, i.e., founded by Abuna Zacharias, the grandson of Emperor Amde Tsion,¹⁵⁵ which leads to conclusion that the monastery received land grants at least during the time of Sarsa Dengil. The same is true for the monastery of Mandaba Medhanialem. Cheesman witnessed the presence of slaves who served the monasteries in

¹⁵⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 171.

¹⁵¹ *Memihir* literally means “teacher” and it is difficult to find an absolute meaning of the term in its monastic usage. It can sometimes be translated as “abbot.”

¹⁵² The northern tip part of the lake (see map attached).

¹⁵³ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*: 206.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

tilling the land and he was told by the monks that the monastery had had *gult* grants since the time of Sarsa Dengil.¹⁵⁶

The monastery of Daga Istifanos also controls the entire biggest island in Lake Tana, Dek.¹⁵⁷ Dek Island is composed of churches and villages similar to most of the inland settlements. Therefore, Daga's control of the land might have been a *gult* right given by a certain emperor since providing subordinate churches to a monastery as a *gult* was not new in medieval Ethiopia. For instance, "In the register of Debre Maryam it was stated that Emperor Amde Tsion gave Debre Maryam fifty subordinate churches. Ten from Dimana up to Muzgadam, ten in Tigrai, ten in Agaw, ten in Mecha and ten in Shewa."¹⁵⁸

Generally, there are accounts of *gult* grants to the monasteries of Lake Tana. The grants do not seem to have been uniform to all the monasteries on the lake. I am aware of the fragmentation of my sources, however, the grants should be found in a single document if they had a uniform nature. This absence of uniformity in *gult* grants suggests that the emperors had special affiliations to certain monasteries to which they granted land rights. In other words, it may mean that different monasteries received grants in different periods or perhaps some of them received grants in several phases. This would in turn lead to the previous discussion of the pro-state monastic house of Takla Haymanot and the independent house of the Ewostatewians. Apparently, those who enjoyed land grants belonged to the house of Takla Haymanot and those who were not given *gult* grants were Ewostatewians.

The issue of land grants shows that land was not a central issue in the foundation process. Clearly the monasteries' foundations on tiny islands indicate the low value the monks gave to land. Some exceptional land grants made depended on the unique nature of the monasteries, either for the sake of the abbotship entrusted to administer the monasteries or because of the presence of a relatively organized and densely populated monastic community.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 164.

The wider scale of land grants in the later period after the communities were well-organized and as land become scarce in the region supports this argument. The nature of the relationship between the state and the monasteries could also have influenced the land grants, although this is beyond the scope of the research here.

2.1.2. Building the monasteries

The Ethiopian Church is said to have the Alexandrian style of architecture.¹⁵⁹ However, it is only the concept of the function of buildings and the arrangement of the monastic community that seems to have been imported. This is evident in the similarity of the monastic buildings and local houses in the region. Accordingly, the mountainous regions of northern Ethiopia, where monasticism began, made their buildings of stone and mud and sometimes carved out a monolithic structure,¹⁶⁰ which is a typical characteristic of housing in the region. Except for a few notable monasteries, most of them had simple architecture.

This simplicity suggests that there was no great expense of money and manpower to invest in building a monastic complex. Monastic buildings often show a striking similarity with ordinary houses in the villages. Once the central church which holds the *tabot* was constructed through sponsorship by the king, rich people, and community contributions, building the other parts of the building complex such as the refectory rooms, individual cells, students' rooms, etc. would be the task of young students.¹⁶¹

However, this is the general aspect of monastic architecture in Ethiopia. The monasteries of Lake Tana need further explanations. Some of the construction styles of the monasteries of Lake Tana reflect the style of the royal palaces from which they got patronage. In fact this explanation works for those monasteries built in the period when the

¹⁵⁹ Aziz Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen and Co., 1968), 161.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 82.

empire had a permanent capital. This includes the monasteries from the time of the introduction of monasticism to the Zagwe dynasty and the later ones, especially those that were built during the Gondarine period (1632-1855) like Narga Sellassie, which typically reflect the palace complex of the town of Gondar.¹⁶² However, most of the monasteries were established during the medieval period when there was no permanent capital and royal palace to serve as a model. Thus one could not benefit from tracing the royal patronage through the architectural style.

The construction processes of some of the monasteries are attributed to emperors. There is both oral and written evidence about the building of certain monasteries by various emperors. However, it is not clear whether these sources are referring to the construction of a monastery by a certain king or the foundation of the monastery during his reign. This creates a problem as to the role of an emperor related to a monastery with which he is closely associated. This should be viewed in terms of the whole process of monastic foundation in Ethiopia and the state's role in it.

Ethiopian emperors participated in construction of churches and monasteries. According to legend, the churches of Lalibela, the centre of Zagwe Dynasty, were monolithic carvings by King Lalibela himself.¹⁶³ The Gondarine palace, which is composed of complex church buildings, was closely supervised by the kings. For the churches and monasteries far away from the palace, the emperors sent skilled manpower, gold to buy the materials for construction, materials, etc.

Some sources indicate that there was royal support for the construction of some of the monasteries of Lake Tana. For example, Emperor Amde Tsion gave Tana Qirqos fifty pounds

¹⁶² J. J. Hespeler-Boulton, *A Story in Stones*, 101.

¹⁶³ Donald Langmead, Christine Garnaut, *Encyclopedia of Architectural and Engineering Feats* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 179.

of gold towards the expenses for construction when Yafqiranna Egzi rebuilt it.¹⁶⁴ The monastery of Daga Istifanos also received *amole*¹⁶⁵ from Amde Tsion for part of its construction project.¹⁶⁶ In the later period, Narga Sellassie, one of the largest island monasteries (see map), received money for the whole construction project from Empress Mintwab (1730-1755).¹⁶⁷

Another important element of the royal families' participation in the building projects of the monasteries of Lake Tana is a "pinkish red stone" that has been used to construct most of the monastic buildings.¹⁶⁸ Berry and Smith note that the origin of the stone is a quarry near Gondar, the medieval capital of Ethiopia northeast of Lake Tana, in a special place called Tedda.¹⁶⁹ They also saw it in many churches, such as Mitraha Maryam, Mistle Fasiledes, and other monasteries.¹⁷⁰ The main issue here is who transported this massive material to the lake? It should be viewed in terms of the political apparatus of medieval Ethiopia. The local administrators had the task of collecting taxes, organizing corvée labor; recruiting militia, etc.¹⁷¹ The Ethiopian clergy also had the right to use this labor force to build churches and monasteries under the order of the emperors.¹⁷² Therefore, the emperors who are closely associated with the foundation of certain monasteries in Lake Tana might have contributed to the building of the monastery by ordering corvée labor to carry these red stones. Most of the original buildings of Lake Tana have been destroyed either by humans or natural factors; these stones might have been used in later periods in re-building. This issue needs the involvement of archaeological investigation.

¹⁶⁴ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 174. This is not found in any sources, rather held in a tradition and my informants in the monastery also confirmed this fact.

¹⁶⁵ *Amole* is a bar of salt that served as currency in Ethiopia from Axumite times despite the long history of coinage, which was only used by rich merchants and traders.

¹⁶⁶ La Verle Berry, Richard Smith, "Churches and Monasteries of Lake Tana, Ethiopia 1972," 16.

¹⁶⁷ Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "L'histoire et l'art des églises du lac Tana," *Annales d'Ethiopi* 16 (2000): 263.

¹⁶⁸ La Verle Berry, Richard Smith, "Churches and Monasteries of Lake Tana, Ethiopia 1972," 7.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 7, 15.

¹⁷¹ H. J. M. Claessen, Peter Skalník, *The Early State* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 332.

¹⁷² Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: the Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1992), 121.

Moreover, there are monasteries which were founded by monks of royal origin, such as Rema Medhanialem by Abba Nom, Emperor Yishak's brother¹⁷³ and Mandaba Medhanialem, constructed by Abba Asai, son of Emperor Amde Tsion.¹⁷⁴ In this case the royal family would have given the money for the buildings or ordered regional lords to organize the labor to construct the monasteries. Accordingly, one can conclude with greater confidence about royal patronage in these two monasteries.

2.1.3. Gifts in kind

Royal patronage can also be explained in terms of different items given to a monastery. It is common to find a certain item in almost each of the monasteries endowed by a certain emperor. These gifts, however, are not registered in the chronicles of the emperors and one has to depend on oral information. A whole thesis is not enough to list and analyze these gifts of the emperors. Church bells, the king's clothes, traditionally called *kabba*, crowns, crosses, religious paintings, drums, icons, boxes, candlesticks, religious books, etc. in general constituted these gifts.¹⁷⁵ For example in Daga Istifanos "several other treasures associated with these kings [who are buried there]¹⁷⁶ are stored in the mausoleum: old crowns, goat skin book with some line paintings from the fourteenth, and two immaculately preserved fifteenth century paintings of the Madonna with uncharacteristically detailed and non-styled facial features."¹⁷⁷ It seems possible to conclude that these treasures had been brought to the monastery at the time of the kings' burial. It is also most likely provided by the emperor during his life time.

¹⁷³ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 169.

¹⁷⁴ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 199.

¹⁷⁵ For royal gifts see Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "L'histoire et l'art des églises du lac Tana," *Annales d'Ethiopi* 16 (2000), 44.

¹⁷⁶ I will discuss it in the next chapter.

¹⁷⁷ Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia*, 215.

2.2. Royal Burials

The customary and right way of dealing with the dead in ancient Ethiopia was burial and this has always remained unbroken throughout the country's history. Archeological excavations in the ancient city of Aksum were first carried out in 1906 by a German expedition to Aksum as a response to Emperor Menelik's request to King Wilhelm II during his visit to Berlin in the same year.¹⁷⁸ Since then there has been a growing interest among different group of archaeologists to excavate the material culture of the ancient capital of Ethiopia. Much more focus has been given to the royal mausoleums in the city. The British Institute in Eastern Africa (B.I.E.A.), which launched its excavation in 1995, has been instrumental in uncovering the complex royal tombs of Aksum.¹⁷⁹ In its report, the group explained the relationship between the royal tombs and the obelisks attached to them. According to these successive archaeological excavations, the pagan emperors of Aksum, although how many of them were there is unknown, were buried in the city of Aksum and obelisks were erected to commemorate them.¹⁸⁰ Their Christian successors made their burials in the church of Axum Tsion, the first church of Christian Ethiopia.¹⁸¹ Some of the remains of the kings of the Zagwe Dynasty were buried in several rock hewn churches collectively known as the churches of Lalibela.¹⁸² With the overthrow of the later dynasty and the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270, a new chapter ushered in the history of the royal burial. The new trend introduced a shift in the tradition of royal burial, i.e., a burial out of the capital.

¹⁷⁸David Phillipson, *The B.I.E.A. Aksum Excavations, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 24.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia*, 589.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jean Richard, "The Eastern Churches," ed. in *The New Cambridge Medieval History: c. 1024-c. 1198*, ed. David Luscombe, Jonathan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 597.

Despite these archaeological discoveries, there are no detailed historical analyses of the royal burials. An exception to this is the article by Derat and Pennec “Les Eglises et Monasteres Royaux d’Ethiopie,” which endeavors to construct the history of royal churches and monasteries in relation to the theory of “lieux des memoir,” places of memory. Place of memory “are complex things. At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are *lieux* -- places, sites, causes -- in three senses: material, symbolic, and functional.”¹⁸³ The most important point here is: what aspects or elements of the churches and monasteries are within the realm of memory?

Derat and Pennec argue that “churches and monasteries can be places of memory as the liturgy is commemorating the holy family and saints are celebrated daily.”¹⁸⁴ From the above definition one can put forward a conclusion that the liturgical books, various artifacts associated with the church and monastery service, the church and monastery buildings themselves are the elements that could make churches and monasteries places of memory because:

Lieux de memoire arises out of the sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course.¹⁸⁵

As in any part of the Christian world, the primary concern of burying the dead in churches and monastery sites in Ethiopia is to help their souls attain salvation by the daily services of the clergy. However, the burial of a royal family member in a certain church or monastery may have a functional meaning beyond religious concerns. As a national leader or

¹⁸³ Nora, Pierre, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1983), 14.

¹⁸⁴ M. L. Derat and H. Pennec, “Les Eglises et Monasteres Royaux d’Ethiopie (XV^e, XVI^e, et XVII^e siècles): Permanences et ruptures d’une stratégie royale,” in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective*, ed. F. Katssuyoshi, S. Eisei, and P. Masayoshi (Kyoto, 1997), 300, “Eglises et monasteres sont des lieux de memoire, dans la mesure ou la liturgie commemorant la sainte famille et les saints y est celebree quotidiennement.”

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

member of a ruling family, his/her burial must symbolize a certain historical event that could have happened during his specific period of rule.

In contrary to the old tradition of royal burial in the capitals, medieval Ethiopia saw the transportation of the remains of the royal family out of the provisional capitals. Surprisingly enough, these remains were taken to the region that had been newly incorporated to the empire, the monasteries of Lake Tana. The basic purpose in this sub-chapter is to find meaning attached between the royal burials and the monasteries of Lake Tana. Why did the royal families wanted to be represented in Lake Tana? This in turn needs further investigation of the parties who buried the royal family member in a certain monastery and the relationship between the buried person prior to his death and the monastery.

Accordingly, more than any other factor that could be mentioned as a determinant of royal burial in Lake Tana, the emperor's contribution for the establishment of the monasteries during their period of rule seems significant. However, the monastery which the emperor is credited with founding and his burial does not necessarily mean much. The royal families seem to have made general donations to the monasteries and followed their predecessor, Yukuno Amlak, as an act of symbolizing the dynasty by their burial. For example, Dawit I, credited with the foundation of the monasteries of Mitraha Maryam and Krestos Samra, was buried at Daga Istifanos. On the contrary, some royal burials were made in respect of the patronage they had given. For instance, Sarsa Dengil was buried in Rema Medhaniale, the monastery he founded.

I have already discussed that different emperors played different roles in the foundation of the monasteries. The roles they played in the region in general and in the foundation of monasteries in Lake Tana in particular varied considerably. In Ethiopian tradition all the churches and monasteries that are built within the limits of the emperor's administration sphere and received special donations from the emperor are considered to be

royal churches and monasteries.¹⁸⁶ Literature on the royal churches and monasteries also seems to agree on this fact. Bernhardt defined royal churches and monasteries as “comprised of all bishoprics, monasteries, and other religious institutions which enjoyed the special, in contrast to the general, protection of the kings and were, at least partially, royal proprietary churches or appurtenances of the realm.”¹⁸⁷

The relationship between the monasteries of Lake Tana and the contemporary state suits this explanation. There were some monasteries that were under special protection of the king and part of their establishment was carried out by funding from the emperors.¹⁸⁸ Yet, there were also some monasteries that were built before the Christian empire controlled the area. The latter ones still enjoyed the generous gifts of the emperors. The main target of this chapter, Daga Istifanos, belongs to the latter group of monasteries.¹⁸⁹ It was constructed by a monk who belonged to the royal family, Abuna Hiruta Amlak, the nephew of Emperor Yukuno Amlak. It was also this monastery that is famous for accommodating several royal family burials. Hence, discussion about royal burial in Lake Tana will concentrate on Daga Istifanos.

The analysis of this aspect of monastic life in the Lake Tana region, however, has to face one significant problem. Furthermore, the chronological sequence of these burials is also debated, some of the royal burials took place in other places, the bodies of these rulers could have been moved to these monasteries in a later time. For example, there is no consensus among different sources on the lists of the emperors who are buried in the monastery of Daga Istifanos. I list the sources and chose the emperors most frequently mentioned in different sources.

¹⁸⁶ Derat and Pennec list the churches and the monasteries built by a certain king as royal churches and monasteries.

¹⁸⁷ John Bernhardt, *Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany, C.936-1075* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 71.

¹⁸⁸ See 2.1.2

¹⁸⁹ Tamirat, Taddesse, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 136

Derat and Pennec ¹⁹⁰	Philip Briggs ¹⁹¹	R.E. Chessman ¹⁹²	My own Lists ¹⁹³
Zàr'a Yacob	Yukuno Amlak (1268)	Yukuno Amlak	Yukuno Amlak
Baeda Maryam	Dawit I (1428-30)	Dawit	Dawit
Yishak	Zàr'a Yacob (1434-1468)	Zàr'a Yacob	Zàr'a Yacob
Lebna Dengil	Susenyos (1607- 32)	Za Dengil	Lebna Dengil
Gelawdewos	Fasiledes (1632- 1667)	Fasiledes	Fasiledes
Amata Tsion (Daughter of Na'od)	Susenyos (1607- 32)	Izur	
Walatta Qeddusan (Daughter Lebna Dengil)		Bakaffa (1721-1730)	

Figure 4. list of members of the royal family buried in the monastery of Daga Istifanos collected from different sources.

There is a significant variation on the lists among different sources on the royal families buried in Daga Istifanos. Daret and Pennec give a very odd list with only two royal burials that fit with other sources. An advantage of this table is that the other three lists agree on the presence of four emperors. The variations in the burials of royal families of the later period will not be a critical problem since they are beyond the time framework of this paper.

¹⁹⁰ Derat and Pennec "Les Eglises et Monasteres Royaux d'Ethiopie," 307,

¹⁹¹ Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia*, 214.

¹⁹² R. E. Cheesman, "Lake Tana and Its Islands," *The Geographical Journal* 85, No. 6 (1935): 496. Cheesman's data are most probably related also to the living oral tradition of the monasteries he has visited during his journeys.

¹⁹³ The author has visited and collected all the possible information from Daga Istifanos Monastery.

The restorer of the Solomonic dynasty, Yukuno Amlak, appeared in four of the above lists and he is most likely buried at Daga Istifanos. However, the fact that his empire did not include the region of Lake Tana¹⁹⁴ and his focus of territorial expansion was limited to the Shewan plateau and with the Muslims of the east¹⁹⁵ makes his burial in Daga Istifanos a puzzle. In fact, he established several monasteries in his own domain, but among the lists of the churches and monasteries he built no single monastery of Lake Tana is attributed to him.

However, Abba Hiruta Amlak, the founder of Daga Istifanos, was the nephew of Yukuno Amlak;¹⁹⁶ he could have received financial support from the emperor. This idea can be substantiated by monastery's construction in 1276,¹⁹⁷ only six years after Yukuno Amlak reinstated the Solomonic dynasty. There are also other forms of affiliations between the king and the monk. Abuna Hiruta Amlak was the disciple of Abba Iyasus Mo'a, who played a momentous role in the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty. Hence, one can conclude that all these personal relationships between the emperor and the founder might have been the reason for the king's burial at the monastery of Daga Istifanos. This also seems to suggest that they were establishing a sort of family cemetery since Abuna Hiruta Amlak was also buried there.¹⁹⁸

The doubt still remains, however, and this explanation could not answer the question: What if his body was moved later to this monastery? There is evidence of such traditions in medieval Ethiopia. However, no evidence is known about the period and the emperor who transported the remains of Yukuno Amlak. Thus, I will only explain the symbolic meaning of the later transportation. The fact that the body of Yukuno Amlak was transported later to a monastery which did not belong to his territory indicates a symbolic (maybe political) act. As

¹⁹⁴ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 136.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 171

¹⁹⁷ According to legend, the monastery is said to have been founded in 1268 (Ethiopian Calendar), 1276 in the Gregorian calendar. See also fig. 1.

¹⁹⁸ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 169.

he was a key figure of a dynasty (symbolic re-founder of the royal lineage), placing his body in a land conquered later can be seen as a kind of justification, a symbolic incorporation of that land into the area of the kingdom.¹⁹⁹ This symbolic representation can be considered as an act of establishing a place of memory.

Two other emperors that belong to the medieval period whose names appear frequently in different sources, Dawit I and Zār'a Yacob, should be viewed from a different perspective since the region of Lake Tana was already part of their empire. They reigned after Amde Tsion, who made the region of Lake Tana an integral part of his empire.²⁰⁰ Their burial in Daga Istifanos as a symbolic act might have been motivated by the presence of Yukuno Amlak's burial at the monastery, hence establishing a dynastic cemetery.

However, the burial of Amde Tsion in Debra Libanos, a well-reputed monastery in terms of serving as a center of monastic reformation, building, and statistics of the monks,²⁰¹ would make the burial of Dawit I and Zara Yacob in Lake Tana questionable. The chronicles of some of the Ethiopian emperors give an account of a strong belief in the miraculous movement of saints and holy emperors after death. Zara Yacob is a typical example for this and he is said to have moved around the monastery for about seven years after his death. According to his chronicle:

He [Zara Yaeqob] was found sitting seven years after he died. During this period he had wandered round the country from monastery to monastery, and in response to his servant's constant suggestion that the time had arrived when he ought to consent to be buried, he only replied, "Da". Having found Daga, a soil in which his spirit could be at rest, he was buried.²⁰²

This tradition in Ethiopia even works for the burial of ordinary people, although Zara Yaeqob's case after death is exceptional. This legend has its own difficulties in tracing the place where the emperor was buried officially immediately after his death. It also does not

¹⁹⁹ I would like to thank my supervisor, Jozsef Laszlovsy, for this suggestion.

²⁰⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 132.

²⁰¹ Ibid 185.

²⁰² R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 138.

solve the query of a need to be represented in Lake Tana. Why did they seek a burial place far from their center while they had a famous monastery nearer to their temporary capitals where their grandfather, Amde Tsion, was buried? This in turn necessitates taking into account other factors to explain their burial at Lake Tana. Special treatment and contextualizing the issue with the political developments of the period is required

2.2.1. Royal burials in the age of wandering capitals

The medieval period²⁰³ ushered in a new era in the history of the capital cities of Ethiopia. One of the typical characteristics of this period was the absence of a permanent capital.²⁰⁴ In fact, there were some attempts (as in the one made by Emperor Zara Yacob, who founded Debre Brihan and gave it some features of a capital city) to establish a permanent political seat.²⁰⁵ Otherwise, until the foundation of Gondar in 1632 by Emperor Fasiledes, almost all medieval emperors ruled from roving capitals. They used to move from place to place with all their families, guards, soldiers, slaves, animals, etc. As Pankhurst wrote: "...stationary capitals such as Aksum or Lalibela, were things of the past. They had been replaced by one of the most characteristic features of the medieval period: roving, or 'instant' capitals, which were often no more than temporary military camps."²⁰⁶

This phenomenon is well known from the Middle Ages in different political entities and known in international scholarship as itinerant kingship. The concept in Ethiopia slightly differs from itinerant kingship since the splendid permanent capitals before this period were already abandoned. Nonetheless, the basic concept of itinerant kingship, i.e., moving the

²⁰³ The year 1270 is conventionally regarded as the beginning of the medieval period in Ethiopia.

²⁰⁴ Horvath, Ronald J, "The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia," *The Journal of African History* 10, No. 2 (1969): 207.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 62.

court because of administrative, political, and economic reasons²⁰⁷ finds commonality in the Ethiopian context. Bernhardt noted that:

... Kings or chiefs moved constantly throughout their territories making their presence felt and reinforcing the personal bonds of their ruler ship. They gathered their people around them, took part in solemnities, conferred gifts and honors, pronounced justice, fought enemies and rivals and ensured general security. In this way the king-in-motion identified-even embodied- the society's center of power; and the royal progress itself became the major institution of government. Through it, the king took symbolic as well as actual possessions of the realm.²⁰⁸

Further analysis of this theory in the Ethiopian context may not be needed since Bernhardt himself mentioned that this tradition existed in Ethiopia until the nineteenth century. "Likewise, itinerant kingships existed into the nineteenth century in Ethiopia and in the kingdoms throughout the highland lake region of East Central Africa."²⁰⁹ Many Ethiopianists have dealt with the causes and effects of this historical process from the social, political, and economic point of view. I hereby propose that this historical phenomenon might have affected the burial tradition of the royal families.

Shortly after he restored the Solomonic dynasty, Yukuno Amlak (1268- 1283) moved the new Christian empire northwards to the Kingdom of Shewa and abandoned the old capital, Lalibela, where the Zagwe monarchs had ruled. He might have been confronted with the issue of a permanent capital. This is perhaps one of the reasons for not having information about his coronation ceremony. The absence of a great capital coupled with the nonexistence of a church or monastery with the status to accommodate a king's burial would quite possibly have led to his burial in the monasteries of Lake Tana. This story coincides with the fact that new monasteries were beginning to flourish around the region of Lake Tana. Daga Istifanos was the first in this regard. Therefore, Yukuno Amlak seems to have been concerned about

²⁰⁷ John Bernhardt, "*Itinerant Kingship*", 46.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 218-219.

making his burial symbolic in a church or monastery which was established on permanent and strong basis.

The son and successor of Yukuno Amlak, Yagba Tsion (1283-1294), and several emperors who ruled in the midst of political chaos and disturbances until the coming to power of Emperor Amde Tsion (1313-1344), did not work to change the status of their capital. Accordingly, the same factors seem to have continued to affect their rule, popularity, and their burials. As a result, literature is too scant about the burial of the emperors between Yukuno Amlak and Amde Tsion to be a cause of any further explanation in this chapter.

A slightly different tradition is seen in the burial of Emperor Amde Tsion. It is said that he ruled from a better capital city, Tagulat.²¹⁰ A great monastery, which is known for hosting the major reforms of the fourteenth century monastic reformation, Debre Libanos, was also constructed during his reign near his capital and he is buried there. During his time it seems that the question of a permanent capital was temporarily solved and this means it ceased to be a factor forcing a royal burial to a remote land.

Nonetheless, some scholars argue that the town that was established by Amde Tsion, Tagulat, did not have all the features of permanent capital. In the words of Horvath: “He (Amde Tsion) and his predecessors seemed to have had a capital in Tagulat, but it was apparently little more than a periodic residence for the emperor; even after 1412, we see the founding of Debra Berhan (1454) by Zara Yacob.”²¹¹ According to Horvath, the Solomonic dynasty from its restoration in 1270 to the establishment of Gondar in 1632 had no permanent seat. (See fig.5)

²¹⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 167.

²¹¹ Ronald J. Horvath, “The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia:” 207.

Capital	Period
Axum and its neighborhood	?B.C. – 12 th century A.D.
Lasta capitals	12 th cent.- 1268
Tagulat (transition to roving capitals)	1268- ca. 1412
Roving capitals	1412-1636
Gondar	1636-ca.1755
Regional capitals	1755-1855
Maqdella	1855-68
Mekele	1886-9
Addis Ababa	1890-present

Figure 5. Table showing the capitals of various emperors in Ethiopian history.²¹²

Amde Tsion opted for Tagulat for his burial, though he knew that his capital was not as splendid as its antecedents, Aksum and Lalibela. However, the magnificent monastery of Debre Libanos might have been taken as an excuse for his or his family's burial. His successors, Dawit I and Zara Yacob, who realized the unstable nature of their political seats, strived to look for a permanent accommodation of their burials. As mentioned above by Horvath, the status of the capital, even with the foundation of Debre Brehan by Zara Yacob, was no more than provisional.

Although Dawit I and Zara Yacob also founded their own royal churches and monasteries, they did not use them as their burial places, probably because they had no security of their continuation as great places of worship. The monasteries of Lake Tana seems to have appeared to them more secure and established on a stronger basis given that

²¹² Ibid., 207.

the churches and monasteries established around the wandering capitals could not have high quality.

Another possible explanation for royal burial in Lake Tana in relation to the wandering capitals could have been to follow the direction of the roving capitals. The mobile capitals after Tagulat moved towards the region of Lake Tana until the tradition changed with the foundation of Gondar in 1632. (See fig. 6.) Although there were some visits to the region of Lake Tana by his predecessors like Minas (1559-63) to see the suitability of the area for a political seat, it was Sarsa Dengil (1563- 1597) who shifted the Royal Capital from the region of Shewa to the Lake Tana region. He made his center at the heart of the Falasha capital, Infranz.²¹³ He was also buried in Rema Medhaniale, founded during his time on the

²¹³ Richard Pankhurst, "A Tale of Four Cities: Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth-century Ethiopian Capitals and their Turkish, Portuguese, and Indian Connections," in *The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Ethiopian Art: On Portuguese Ethiopian Contacts in the Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Isabel Boavida and Manuel Ramos (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 4.

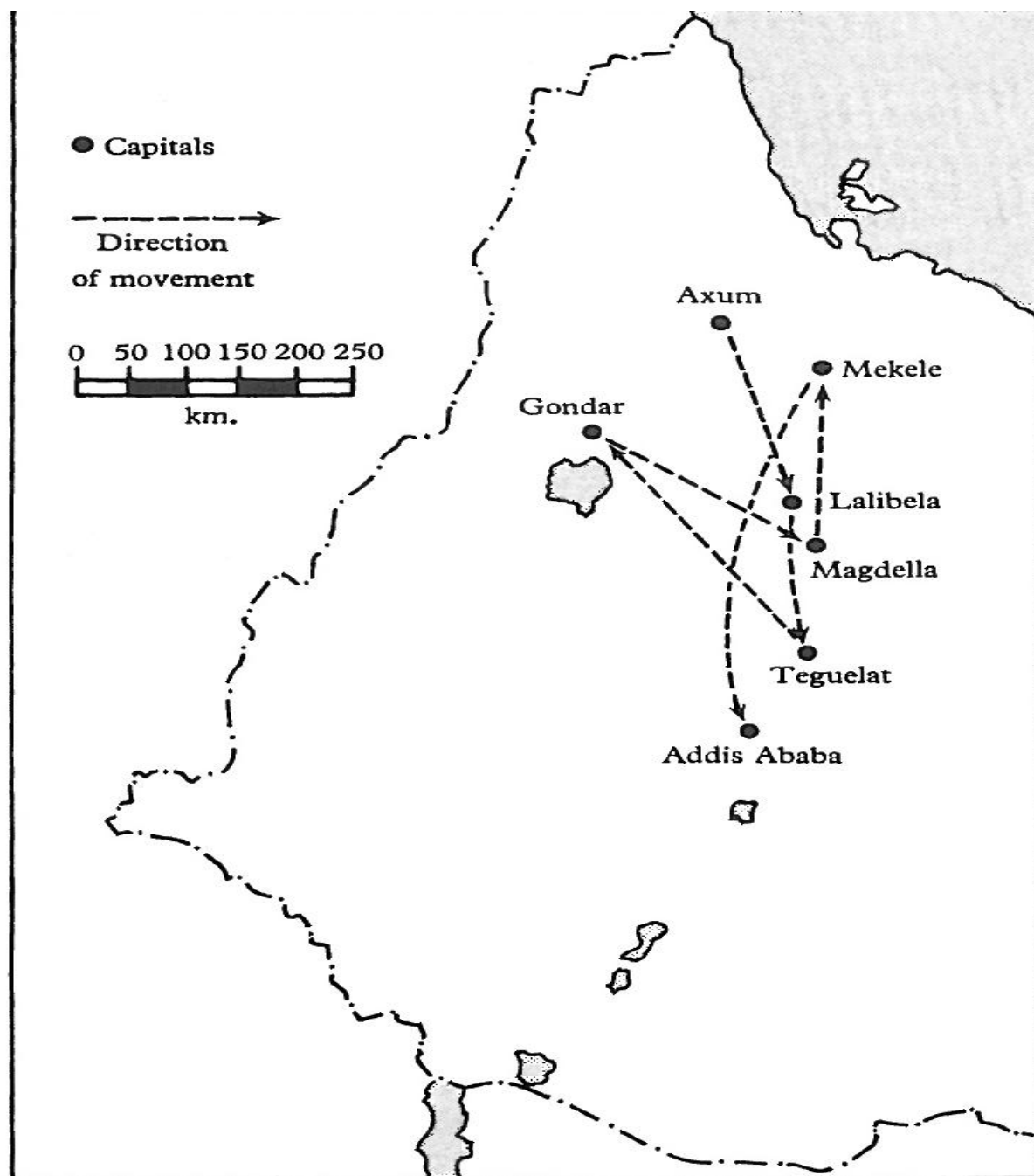


Fig. 6. Major Capitals of Ethiopia²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Adopted from: Ronald J. Horvath, "The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia:" 208.

eastern side of the lake, nearest to the capital.²¹⁵ Sarsa Dengli's burial in Rema Medhanialem can be seen in terms of royal patronage. The monastery was established during his time, near his capital, and by a royal family member, Abba Nom, the grandson of Amde Tsion.²¹⁶ Therefore, it is possible to conclude that he had sponsored the construction of the Rema Medhanialem, and even if he did not, it is still his monastery since it was founded during his time on the western edge of his capital.

This historical event sheds light on the burials that might have been transported later by another emperor or the family of the deceased. The emperors, who had been buried in the churches and monasteries near the previous temporary capitals, might have been transported later to relatively well established ones on Lake Tana. Sarsa Dengil's predecessors, such as Dawit I and Yishak, also had an enormous role in incorporating the Falasha into the empire and suppressing their continuous revolts before Sarsa Dengil made his center among them. Therefore, if these emperor's burials were transported later by him or his successors it may be considered as a representational act. Still, the inverse can also be true. If these emperors such as Yukuno Amlak and Dawit I were buried before he made his center in Infranz, his march towards Lake Tana could be said to have been attracted by the presence of his predecessors' burials. Hence the relationship in both ways seems to have been reciprocal.

Transportation of the royal family remains in the later periods would also mean that royal burial followed the establishment of capitals because one finds a concentration of capitals around the region of Lake Tana after the monasteries were established. The capitals around Lake Tana were Infranz, in the eastern part of the lake, founded by Sarsa Dengil; Gorgora at the northern tip of the lake, founded by Susenyos (1607- 1632); and Gondar, northeast of the lake, founded by Fasiledes (1632- 1667). All of these emperors were also buried in Lake Tana. Accordingly, there is a high possibility that the remains of a royal

²¹⁵ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 169.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

families might have been moved in the later periods partly because of the establishment of capitals in the vicinity of the lake and to get the royal burials as close as possible to these capitals.

2.2.3. Royal family burials during the Muslim-Christian conflict

One of the characteristic features of medieval Ethiopia was the conflict between the northern highland Christian empire and the southern lowland Muslim principalities. Literature is rich on this subject. The causes, the courses, the consequences, etc. of this historical period has been analyzed from different perspectives. One of the major political consequences of the conflict was that it denied the country a permanent capital. The Christian emperors were not given enough time to settle permanently after they restored the Solomonic dynasty and left the former capital, Lalibela. The working force had to fight as full time soldiers and the emperors had to design military tactics that could help them control the movement of their enemies. This tradition continued until the seventeenth century, when the Christian empire had to defend itself from different forces. Horvath wrote:

I contend that capitals in Ethiopia moved about prior to the foundation of Gondar primarily in response to military considerations. We can appreciate that the very existence of this Christian civilization had been threatened by a series of invaders since the classical period. Christian Ethiopian peoples had to do battle alternatively with Islam, the Galla, and Europe.²¹⁷

Accordingly, this historical phenomenon can be viewed from two angles as far as the issue of royal burial is concerned. On the one hand, as a cause for wandering capitals, which dramatically changed the tradition of royal burial as discussed above, and, on the other hand, as a direct threat to the royal burials themselves.

²¹⁷ Horvath, Ronald J. "The Wandering Capitals of Ethiopia:" 213.

The Muslim-Christian conflict started during the reign of Amde Tsion in 1332 and ended in 1543 during the reign of Emperor Gelawdewos.²¹⁸ There were shifts in victory in favor of both sides in this protracted warfare. The party who emerged victorious thus used to demolish everything with the potential to be destroyed. Churches and monasteries were the main targets of the victorious Muslims as mosques were the prey of the invading Christians.²¹⁹ The Christian institutions that were the royal family foundations and accommodated their burials were more endangered than the ordinary (public) ones. As a result, the contemporary church and monastery leaders became reluctant to accommodate the burials of the emperors.

Lebna Dengil, the first Christian emperor to suffer a humiliating defeat at the hands of Ahmad Gagn at the battle of Shimbira Kure in 1527,²²⁰ was the first to be buried at Dabra Damo,²²¹ one of the nine saints' monasteries. Following his defeat by the Muslim army he kept moving northward and finally he became a fugitive and he died near Aksum in 1540. The monks were hesitant to receive his remains as they were threatened by the progressing Muslim army. According to his chronicle:

Finally in November of 1540, Lebna Dingle, Wanag Seged, King of Kings of Ethiopia died at Debre Damo. Although Gagn had been unable to successfully assault Debre Damo due to the sheer cliffs that surround it, the monks were so afraid of his wrath that they refused to allow the royal retainers to bury the Emperor at the monastery. His body was taken to Debaroa, the seat of the Bahir Negash (present day Eritrea), and after some considerable time the king of Bahir Negash, Yishaq, plead to the monks, and the remains were finally taken to Debre Damo and buried with pomp.²²²

This Muslim threat continued to be well organized and most of the Christian institutions except those that could not be reached easily were wiped out. Debre Libanos, the

²¹⁸ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 132.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 144.

²²⁰ Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (London: University of California Press, 1994), 32.

²²¹ Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia & Abyssinia: (According to the Hieroglyphic Inscriptions of Egypt and Nubia, and the Ethiopian Chronicles)* (Methuen: London, 1928), 328.

²²² Ibid.

monastery where Amde Tsion was buried, was among the monasteries that were a target of Muslim invasion and was destroyed by the forces of Ahmad Gagn.²²³ According to Ayele Takla Haymanot:

The monastery was destroyed, for the first time, in 1532 by the Muslim army of Ahmad Gagn. During the battle of March 23, 1559 between the same Muslim army and Christians ruled by Gelawdewos (1540- 1559), the monastery was ravaged and destroyed again and many monks died martyrs.²²⁴

Hence, it is more likely that the Muslim threat and the issue of securing memory by permanently depositing the dead were the primary concerns of the emperors and/or their families who are buried at Lake Tana. Though no sources are known about the fate of the burial of Amde Tsion, his successors, Dawit I and Zara Yacob, were buried at Daga Istifanos to avoid destruction by Muslim forces. The lack of information about the whereabouts of Amde Tsion's burial, though it is known that he was buried in Dabra Libanos, might be associated with this defacing of the emperors' memorials by Muslim forces.

Generally, royal patronage can be seen in land (*gult*) grants, providing money for construction materials, organizing labor for the building process, presenting gifts in kind, etc. It is clear that the emperors were patrons of the monasteries to get prayer from the monks in return. However, the patronage of the monasteries of Lake Tana seems to have had another meaning in relation to the state activities in the period when the monasteries were founded. One common feature of royal patronage was the emperor's special affiliation with the monastery that enjoyed it. This may also be explained as a reward for the monasteries' achievements that were meaningful to the state. It may also suggest that some monasteries were not on good terms with the state and were inclined to strictly observe their faith. But most of all, the territorial annexation following the monks' preaching to a pagan community

²²³ Ahmad Gagn was the leader of Muslim lowlanders whose coming to power changed the dynamics of the Muslim-Christian conflict, i.e., the battle for the first time went in favor of the Muslims and they overwhelmingly controlled the empire.

²²⁴ Abba Ayele Teklehaymanot, *Ethiopian Review of Cultures: "Miscellanea Aethiopica"* (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Enterprise, 2000), 308.

and the burials of the royal families in certain monasteries seem to suggest that there were more meanings than prayer to royal patronage.

The relationship between royal burial and the monasteries of Lake Tana seems to have been motivated by various factors which were mainly the major characteristic features of the period. These major factors that made the monasteries of Lake Tana centers of royal burial include the tradition of mobile capitals, the Muslim-Christian conflict, the absence of churches and monasteries that could assure continuity and be worthy enough to preserve memory, the confession emperors made before their deaths, and donations by some of the royal families for the churches and monasteries. There is also the possibility that the remains of the royal family were transported to the monasteries of Lake Tana in later periods. This in turn suggests that the later members of the royal family were dedicated to keeping the earlier tradition of royal burial around the capitals. The issue of royal patronage also had a significant impact on the burials of the emperors on Lake Tana. Hence, some of the emperors were buried in a monastery where they had sponsored the foundation and still others followed their predecessors even though their investment was not at the same monastery where they were buried.

In sum, the burial of the royal family made the monasteries of Lake Tana a place of memory whatever the reason was that led the royal family to be buried there. The royal family also established its dynastic cemetery and it seems that the result was a mutual benefit. Treating individual cases, for example, the Monastery of Daga Istifanos attained great fame and popularity from the fourteenth century onwards, which coincided with the burial of the royal family, by exceeding Tana Qirqos, which had been by far the best known for housing the Ark of the Covenant.

The group of emperors' burials at the monasteries of Lake Tana, then, can find meaning in the theory of places of memory. In fact, the explanation must be two-fold. On the

one hand, the kings are buried there and hence awarded the monasteries a place of memory. On the other hand, the monasteries accommodated the kings' burials and hence put them in the realm of memory that is kept fresh and alive through the passage of generations. Hence, the relationship is reciprocal. Thus, it seems that when wandering medieval capitals lost the chance to accommodate the royal families' burials, the monasteries of Lake Tana took the advantage to become *lieux de memoire*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE UNSIGNED PACT: EXPANSION AND EVANGELIZATION AROUND LAKE TANA

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the region of Lake Tana attracted the attention of both the expansionist state and the missionary monks of Ethiopia. This chapter deals with the expansion of Christianity and the Christian empire to the region of Lake Tana and its interaction with the monastic communities. It starts with the population composition of the region that was affected by the Christian domains. The challenges that awaited the monks in integrating the inhabitants of the region into their faith and mutual assistance between the missionaries and the state (if there was any, as in the case of expansion to other regions in medieval Ethiopia) will be discussed.

Since its appearance in the realm of history, the society of the Empire of Ethiopia has been a mosaic of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversities. Each ethnic group varies significantly in terms of the period of incorporation in to the Christian empire, albeit the Semitic Tigres and Amharas started the process of state building and embraced Christianity as a state religion.²²⁵ It was these two ethnic groups who developed a state apparatus to control the whole region by using Christianity as a unifying agent.²²⁶ This process of expansion took almost the whole span of the country's history until the turn of the nineteenth century A.D. to draw its present map.

The region of Lake Tana hosted a great deal this diversity before the Christian court and church moved toward subduing it. The independent kingdom of Gojjam, the immigrant

²²⁵ Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 30.

²²⁶ Ibid.

Falashas, the indigenous Agaws, and the Waitos constituted the majority of the loosely organized communities around Lake Tana.²²⁷ I will trace the origin and the political and religious settings of these communities before the spread of Christian domination overwhelmingly engulfed them. Then their reaction to the strangers will be discussed.

Although some scholars argue that there were Christian communities in the region of Lake Tana during the Axumite and Zagwe dynasties, a well-organized Christian community with a church or a monastery at its center can only be traced from the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty.²²⁸ As Paul Henze has argued, “Christianization [in the region of Lake Tana] accelerated in the fourteenth century during the reign of Amde Tsion.”²²⁹ The primary effort to evangelize the region by the clergy is credited to the Egyptian Metropolitan Abuna Ya’eqob, who was appointed Ethiopian patriarch in 1337, at the height of Amde Tsion’s power.²³⁰ Abuna Yaqob’s expertise in organization and the most expansionist king of medieval Ethiopia thus embarked on the process of Christianization and incorporating the peripheral pagan entities on a large scale. However, this magic charm fell apart before it saw the absorption of the region into the Christian empire when Abuna Ya’eqob turned to creating a different type of Church authority somehow independent of state control.²³¹ Ya’eqob was determined to carry out genuine evangelization of the pagan regions. However, he had to receive permission and co-operation from the secular clergy, who were the right hands of the state. “Yaeqob had to break this historic connection and bring his chair back to its natural monastic ambience. This radical move alienated him from the court.”²³² Despite the clash between Amde Tsion and Abuna Yacob, the evangelization process continued, in a less organized way and highly dependent on the efforts of individual monks.

²²⁷ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 73.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 193.

²³¹ Ibid., 175.

²³² Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 175.

The factors that forced the monks to migrate were discussed in chapter one. Whatever reason they had, they discovered a new area to carry out their evangelization missions. Three different stories overlap. First, all the monks went to the region of Lake Tana. Second, the contemporary emperors had full appetites to engulf any territory within their empire. Third, there awaited a loosely organized political entity and a pagan society who were easy prey for both the state and the monks. Who cleared the way for evangelization? How did the local society react to the alien religion and political power? Was there any kind of common goal for a common good even after the clash? How can the scale of conversion and incorporation can be stated?

3.1. The Christianization of the Falasha

The presence of Falashas, Ethiopian Jews, in the region of Lake Tana is an ancient phenomenon. They themselves “trace their ancestry to the Jewish bodyguard of Menelik I -- the son of King Solomon and the Queen Sheba -- who, legend has it, founded the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty.”²³³ Greek sources support this powerful legend by tracing the Falashas’ existence in Ethiopia as early as 200 B.C. E.²³⁴

... Emperor Menelik I son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, is said to have come to Lake Tana’s eastern shore when he arrived in Ethiopia from Jerusalem bringing the country’s first tabot. This *tabot* was allegedly kept for 600 years on the island of Tana Qirqos before being transferred to Aksum.²³⁵

Judging by the legend connected to the Falasha, their history started with the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant and the first Jews came to Ethiopia as guardians of King Menelik I.

²³³ Jamie Stokes, *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 1 (New York: Diagram Visual Information, 2008), 223.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 73.

There is also a tradition among Ethiopian history scholars of locating Amharic-speaking Falashas to the north of Lake Tana in the provinces of Begemdir, Semen, and Dembya. This fact might have come from the presence of Falasha descendants of the present day and from the artifacts that are still displayed in their center of worship from the fifth century, Tana Qirqos.²³⁶

Another group of authors are preoccupied with analyzing the history of the Falashas from an archaeological point of view by dealing with findings that trace their origin. Some of them attribute the course of Falasha diffusion to the earlier contacts of the Ethiopians with the South Arabian Jews, either through immigration or cultural permeation.²³⁷ The origin of the Falashas is an ongoing debate and recent works attest the presence of Jewish elements in the region to the direct entry of the Israelites to Ethiopia via Egypt in about 400 B.C.²³⁸ Following the destruction of the temple of Yahweh on Elephantine Island, Egypt, in 410 B.C., Jews immigrated to Ethiopia through Meroe. They traveled to the central provinces in two directions: one following Tekeze River, the other along the course of the Blue Nile. The latter group arrived at the island of Tana Qirqos where the Ark of the Covenant, which they brought with them, remained for the next 800 years.²³⁹

An attempt to reconstruct the origin of the Falashas is not the main objective of this thesis, rather, their conversion to Christianity or their resistance against it is worth discussing in the legacy of the monasteries of Lake Tana and their interaction with the surrounding society. Here it is sufficient to substantiate their existence around Lake Tana. Therefore, I will cite Pankhurst's paragraph to conclude the difficulty of studying their origin.

²³⁶ I have been there and took a picture of the sacrificial pillar and other relics related to it in Tana Qirqos. See fig 1.

²³⁷ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 73.

²³⁸ Graham Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), 54.

²³⁹ Ibid.

The early origins of the Falashas are shrouded in mystery, and, for lack of documentation, will probably remain for ever. Various contradictory theories on the origin of the people have been propounded, but, in the absence of any firm evidence, are of scarcely more than speculative interest. There can, however, be no denying that Ethiopia, the Christian country in which the Falashas have lived since time immemorial, has long been under remarkably strong Jewish influence, and that in Ethiopia the two religions, Christianity and Judaism, blended in a manner virtually unknown elsewhere in Christendom.²⁴⁰

Despite the difficulty of tracing their origin, however, there are corpuses of literature dealing with their existence in the region of Lake Tana. The region south of the ancient Empire of Axum and southwest of the medieval Kingdom of Zagwe was under the domain of the Ethiopian Jews. From the geographical point of view of Lake Tana, they occupied the northern and eastern shores.²⁴¹

Most of the historical aspects of the Falasha are highly debated. Although their settlement around the source of Blue Nile and the region of Lake Tana before the advent of the Christian diocese could be certainly traced, very little is known about the time and the scale of their conversion to Christianity. Most scholars argue that it took place around the turn of the fourteenth century,²⁴² which coincides with the advent of the monks to the region of Lake Tana.

Yafqiranna- Egzi had already established Christian communities around Lake Tana in the first years of the reign of Amde Tsion.²⁴³ Early missionary work among the Falasha was predominantly carried out by the monks of the house of Ewostatewos.²⁴⁴ The evangelization activities among the Falasha by the house Ewostatewos means that their Christianization cannot be attributed directly to the monasteries of Lake Tana. However, early attempts were made by Yafqiranna-Egzi. The Ewostatewos monks' influx can be taken as a counterweight

²⁴⁰ Richard Pankhurst, "The Felahsas, or Judaic Ethiopians, in Their Christian Ethiopian Setting," *African Affairs* 91, No. 365 (1992), 567.

²⁴¹ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 197.

²⁴² Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 196.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

to the expansion of the house of Takla Haymanot into the region, but the issue of establishing monasteries on the lake is far from being credited to them. Gabra-Iyasus was a disciple of Ewostatewos and had followed his master into exile in Armenia. According to his *gedl*, Gabra-Iyasus has been assigned to Infranz, the land of the Falasha, prior to his journey with his master to Armenia. Upon the death of Ewostatewos he returned home and started his evangelical activities among the Falasha in the same district, Infranz, in region of Lake Tana.²⁴⁵ In order to seal his triumph, he founded a monastery among the Falasha, Dabra San.²⁴⁶

Despite his failure to evangelize all the Falashas, Gabra-Iyasus's endeavor was path-breaking for the incorporation of the Falasha into the Christian empire. Taddesse Tamrat explains his effort: "Of all the traditions we have about the fourteenth-century effort to spread the Christian teaching in this region, the story of Gabra-Iyasus is unique in its explicit mention of direct mission work among the Jews of Ethiopia."²⁴⁷

On the side of the state, although there was no deliberate action to help the antagonistic Ewostatewosian monks, the desire for territory brought it over to the side of the missionaries. Amde Tsion's march against the Falasha could have been as early as the actions of Gabra-Iyasus. His campaigns in the first half of the fourteenth century, which gave the empire a huge base of tax-paying folk, reached the Falasha country. Vigorous campaigns thus pushed the Falashas to move from their territory in Dambya and Begemidir to the inaccessible mountains north of Lake Tana.²⁴⁸ This created a moment suitable for the missionary work of the monks of Lake Tana. Thus, the initial efforts to evangelize these communities which I mentioned at the outset were made during this time by Yafqiranna-Egzi. One cannot say that Amde Tsion was successful in subduing the Falashas and fully

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 198.

²⁴⁶ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 78.

²⁴⁷ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 198.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 196.

incorporating them into his empire, since there is evidence that his successors, such as Emperor Dawit (1380- 1412), also worked to control them.²⁴⁹ One can still conclude that the monks were used as regulators of the tempo of expansion and the state gave them protection from any aggressive acts by those to whom they preached.

3.2. The Christianization of Gojjam and Agaw

Relatively better documentation is preserved for Agaw concerning their origin and locale in the Ethiopian region since time immemorial. Their existence in the region is attested by early Ethiopic inscriptions. One of the first inscriptions, the Adulis inscription, contains their name and it continued to exist among the successors of these inscriptions, as in the inscriptions of Ezana and in the sixth-century work of Cosmas.²⁵⁰ In the later periods they stayed as peripheral to the main Axumite civilization and later established their own dynasty, the Zagwe dynasty. After their downfall under the conspiracies of the Solomonic dynasty, they were assimilated and integrated into the Christian highland kingdom.²⁵¹ For the purpose of this paper, I only focus on the Gojjam Agaw or the Agaws who settled around Lake Tana. There is little evidence, however, about when and how they settled in Agawmedir and Metekel from their place in northern Ethiopia and crossed Lake Tana to southwestern Ethiopia.

Another section of population that can be treated closely with the Agaw people is Gojjam. Gojjam was a powerful pagan kingdom immediately south of Lake Tana at the edge of the central highland kingdom. It had loose control of partially integrated Agaws and Falashas before the Christian kings launched their campaign of expansion and the monks

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 199.

²⁵⁰ Tadesse Tamrat, "Tamirat, Process of Ethnic Interaction in Ethiopian Society: The Case of the Agaw," *The Journal of African History* 29, No. 1 (1988), 7.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

commenced their mission in the region.²⁵² Even though the consolidation of Christian supremacy was delayed until later times, the Lake Tana region was fully absorbed into the domain of the central government during the first campaigns of Amde Tsion in the 1330s. The final stamp that brought complete state control was sealed during the reign of Zara Ya'eqob (1434-68), who managed to stabilize the already defined frontiers of the Christian empire.²⁵³

The territorial limits of the medieval pagan Kingdom of Gojjam are still obscure. Most scholars agree that the center lay between the lake and the capital of the Agaws, Agawmedir (see map). Unlike the Falashas, the earliest attempts to Christianize this kingdom came from the area of Lake Tana, a palpable fact to conclude that the monks of the monasteries of Lake Tana evangelized it. The question still is: Who took the initiative and what was the course of evangelization?

It should be noted here that any discussion about the medieval pagan Kingdom of Gojjam includes the Agaws because, “the pagan kings of Gojjam whom Ethiopian emperors fought from the late thirteenth century to the beginning of the fifteenth century were Agaw. A substantial Agaw population has survived into modern times in central Gojjam in the district called Agawmedir.”²⁵⁴

The Kingdom of Gojjam originally provided stiff resistance against the expanding Christian domain. Yafqiranna-Egzi was in charge of inaugurating missionary activity in Gojjam. When Yafqiranna-Egzi made his journey to Tana Qirqos, the island was under the control of the pagan Gojjam king, Zankomir.²⁵⁵ The former had to receive permission from the king to enter to the monastery of Tana Qirqos. According to church tradition, the

²⁵²Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 78.

²⁵³Tadesse Tamirat, “A Short Note on the Tradition of Pagan Resistance to the Ethiopian Church, 14th and 15th Centuries,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, No.1 (1972): 152.

²⁵⁴Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 73.

²⁵⁵Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 199.

defiance of Zankomir brought him an epithet from the monks, *Tsara Qamis*,²⁵⁶ which literally means “anti-dress” and allegorically means “anti/enemy of monks.” This early boldness among the Gojjam and the Agaw soon collapsed under the early campaigns of Amde Tsion and the kings agreed to protect the well-being of the monks and their monasteries.

Inspired by this early success Abba Yafqiranna- Egzi launched a mission to the mainland southwest of the sanctuary, in the region of Bada²⁵⁷ (See fig. 3). Here, too, he faced fierce opposition even stiffer than the former. When the messenger of Widim²⁵⁸ came to the king of Gojjam and said to him, “Why are you staying in the district of Bada? Return to your place’ ... having heard the message, the saint refused to go ... and they wanted to take him back by force...”²⁵⁹

This account in Yafqiranna-Egzi’s *gedil* is vague and leaves the main historical result out of this confrontation. The story about the region of Bada and the founder of Kebran Gebriel, Abba Za Yohannis, sheds light on this obscurity. Abba Za Yohannis founded the monastery of Kebran Gebriel and initiated missionary activities on the southern shores of the lake, which inaugurated another phase of evangelization.²⁶⁰ He, like his predecessor, Yafqiranna-Egzi, faced opposition that cost him imprisonment under the successor of Widim, Jan Chuhay.²⁶¹

[Jan Chuhay] ordered his men to arrest him and beat him...And Za yohannis remained a prisoner in Amedamit. King AmdeTsion heard and sent many soliders saying: ‘If you do not release this monk, there shall be no peace between you and me.’ The king ordered his messengers Jan Chuhay if he refused...and they killed him and released Za yohannis. Then our father continued to preach among the subjects of the deceased king and baptized many of them in the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit.²⁶²

²⁵⁶ Anonymous informant from the monasteries of Lake Tana

²⁵⁷ Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, 198

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 196.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 196.

²⁶² Ibid., 198.

The battle between the Gojjam King Jan Chuhay and Abba Za Yohannis seems to suggest that the earliest attempt by Yafqiranna-Egzi to evangelize this community was not successful and he might have returned in vain. This is because, had he been successful in Christianizing the community, Za Yohannis would not have faced resistance.

3.4. Incorporating the Woyto

North of Gojjam and in the environs of Lake Tana are the Woyto, who are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of the lakeshore. These hunting and fishing communities are believed to have had their own language different from the neighboring Agaw, and they were also pagans.²⁶³ But the advent of the Amhara to the region, which began according to some sources around the twelfth century, brought about the Semitization and the subsequent evangelization of these natives.²⁶⁴

Some authors argue that the Woyto are Hamitic people who reached the plateaus of Ethiopia before the Amharas. They received Christianity, abandoning their original religion. Their mother tongue and the rites and ceremonies of their former religion are forgotten. Most Woytos, however, were converted to Islam in the sixteenth century by the invading forces of Ahmad Gagn.²⁶⁵²⁶⁶

No sources refer directly to the missionary activities among the Woyto. They are known to have inhabited the shores of Lake Tana, where their economy depended on the lake and its environs, but little is known about their conversion. Rather than Christianity, the

²⁶³ Tekle Haimanot gebre Selassie, "The Woyto of Lake Tana," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 1984, 4-7.

²⁶⁴ Tekle Haimanot gebre Selassie, "The Woyto of Lake Tana," MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, Department of History, 1984, 4-7.

²⁶⁵ N. S. Kirabae, *Values in Islamic Culture and the Experience of History* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002.)

²⁶⁶ R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile*, 50.

Woytos are better known as Muslims. There is evidence of Ahmad Gagn's forced conversion of the population living along the shores of the lake.²⁶⁷

There is a possibility that the Woytos were not subject to the missionary work of the monks because of their impurity in terms of food. Teshale noted: "The Woyto, despite their acceptance of the main tenets of Islam, were segregated by their co-religionists. The Woyto's consumption of 'unclean' food, like hippopotamus, was enough to cut them off completely."²⁶⁸ Although the religion of the Woytos in the period between the foundation of the monasteries of Lake Tana and the invasion of Ahmad Gagn in the sixteenth century remains obscure, the above explanation may explain why the monks did not invest their energy in evangelizing the Woyto given the strict dietary laws of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Generally, the expansion process seems to have been the most important historical event that could best explain the relationship of the state and the church. The evangelization process suggests the monks' primary concern in selecting the islands of Lake Tana. While it awarded them with high degree of privacy, the pagan communities who were living along the shores created an opportunity to carry out their religious activities. The state went for the rescue when some of the rulers of these pagan communities threaten the life of the monks.

The evangelization of these communities made the process of incorporation very simple. As the state had Christianity as its central ideology, its expansion was highly depended on the Christianization of a certain community. Hence, the protection of the monks from the dangers of the pagan rulers was a payment for their activity of clearing the ground for the state expansion. Once the region is Christianized and incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire, both institutions started to shift their centers from the south to the north. Thus, the area became a center of religious and political activities in the coming centuries. As numerous Christian

²⁶⁷ Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, 79.

²⁶⁸ Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia (1896-1974)* (Lawrenceville: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 69.

institutions were built modeling the monasteries of Lake Tana the empire shifted its capital towards the region. In fact, the emperors' advancement to the region was forced by the Muslim and the Oromo²⁶⁹ assault, however, their choice seems to have been made because of the strong religious foundation of the monasteries.

²⁶⁹ There was a large scale population movement of the Oromo in the sixteenth century that from the southern tip of Ethiopia which kept pushing the Christian Empire northwards.

CONTEXTUALIZATION AND CONCLUSION

THE PLACE OF THE MONASTERIES OF LAKE TANA WITHIN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY

The core objective of the present thesis is to investigate the circumstances under which the monasteries of Lake Tana were founded, to trace the parties that played a significant role, to evaluate their contribution as a Christian institution and thereby to analyze their position in Ethiopian history. At the outset of writing this thesis I realized that dealing with the Ethiopian church alone, without involving the state, is an insurmountable task because both institutions were very close in historical perspective -- either they were in harmony or a state of conflict. Thus, to achieve this objective I closely looked the relationship of the two in the region of Lake Tana.

Medieval Ethiopia saw an evolution in religious and political institutions. The most remarkable development that these institutions underwent was a process of expansion to include as many subjects and territories as possible in their domains. One of the regions that attracted these expansion activities of the two parties was the region of Lake Tana. Thus, from analyzing the foundation process, the relationship of church and state, and the expansion of the two institutions in this region, the following conclusion has been drawn.

The monks first traveled to the islands of Lake Tana in the second half of the thirteenth century motivated or compelled by various factors. There is no single factor that influenced the monks to march towards the monasteries of Lake Tana. Several factors that emerged in different times and their own historical context joined together to affect this historical event. Since the monasteries were founded between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the factors can be seen from the wide perspective of the general monastic reform of the thirteenth century, the major political features of the period, the physical environment of

the lake, and the religious significance of its environs. The Muslim- Christian conflict and the dispute between the state and monastic leaders also contributed to the advent of the monks to the islands.

The monastic reform in the thirteenth century not only produced a number of monastic leaders that in turn established numerous monasteries, but also created different monastic sects that accelerated the competition to settle in pagan territories. However, one can generally construe that the houses of Ewostatewos and Takla Haymanot were instrumental in this regard and the region of Lake Tana was on the frontline of the disciples of these monastic houses. Lack of information about the life of most of the monks of Lake Tana makes tracing their origins difficult.

Despite failure to define the individual monks' background, one can infer the general monastic and religious milieu in which they were produced. Two famous monasteries, Dabra Hayq and Dabra Libanos, were instrumental in training the monks that led the expansion of the Christian church to the region of Lake Tana. The house of Ewostatewos also supplied a group of monks, although no specific information is known about the individual monks that belonged to this group among the founding monks of Lake Tana. Many scholars agree that the house of Ewostatewos' activity concentrated on the northern vicinities of Lake Tana among the Falasha.

These founding monks walked out of their monastic schools because of different factors. It was at this juncture that the state-church relationship could be demonstrated. The land grants of the state, the protection of the monks from offensives by pagan rulers, and donations of different kinds might have encouraged the monks to face challenges with confidence. On the other hand, the relationship between the two parties was not consistently healthy. However, even their conflicts served as factors for pushing the monks to the region

of Lake Tana. Therefore, knowingly or unknowingly, the state contributed in distributing the monks in the region of Lake Tana.

The Muslim-Christian conflict that afflicted medieval Ethiopia was also a factor for the foundation of monasteries on the islands of Lake Tana. It seems less influential compared to the other political factors since it appeared later than the monasteries were founded. However, the experience of the earliest nature of the clash in other regions nearest to the capital, Tagulat, and the devastating results on Christian institutions might have forced the monastic communities to look for a secure place. Evaluating the effects of this historical phenomenon suggests why the monks choose the monasteries of the lake, because these monasteries are among the few surviving Christian institutions.

The natural landscape itself was a subject of selection by the monks. Besides the security it could offer, it is composed of the natural elements required for monasticism. Thus, it promised the monks an isolated environment, which is the basic principle of monasticism, water, which has a symbolic and practical functional meaning in Ethiopian monasticism, and unexploited forest which was a source of food in medieval Ethiopian monasticism.

Once the monks had settled in the monasteries of Lake Tana, the next stage was to construct the actual buildings of the monasteries, which is another area of the relationship between the state and the monasteries. This phase was a complex chapter in the foundation of the monasteries for it had involved different parties, but mainly the state. The state bestowed a wide variety of treasures on the monasteries. Granting land (*gult*), ordering corvée labor, providing bountiful gifts of different items, etc. were the most important elements of royal patronage. However, these donations seem to have been determined by the monasteries affiliation to the state. Accordingly, those monasteries that were able to maintain pleasant relations with the state enjoyed royal patronage. On the other hand, the monks who were inclined towards religious independence, such as the houses of Ewostatewos and some of the

disciples of Takla Haymanot, did not receive grants from the state, at least during the time of Amde Tsion and several of his successors. The state's donations had different objectives, such as compensating the monks in return for their effort to make a fertile ground for state expansion and getting prayers to wash away their sins were among the important ones.

The royal burials which the monasteries of Lake Tana are famous for is another subject that defines the multifaceted relationship between the monasteries and state. There are several reasons for the concentration of royal burials in the monasteries of Lake Tana. It is likely that the emperors wanted to be symbolically represented in the region as it was these emperors who had incorporated the region in the domain of the Christian empire. While this motive can be identified with the emperors who restored the Solomonic dynasty and first went to the region of Lake Tana, establishing a dynastic cemetery and continuing to nourish the memory of the dynasty seems to have been the intention of the later royal families buried on Lake Tana. There seems to have been no special arrangement concerning the burials in different monasteries. Very few emperors were buried in the monasteries they founded or to which they had made donations. However, since most of the royal families patronized Daga Istifanos, it is difficult to say that royal burial and patronage were closely related issues. Rather, the major factors seem to have been the problem of security for Christian institutions, especially against those who were affiliated to the state in the wake of Ahmad Gragns' campaigns, and the absence of a mobile capital that could insure spontaneous memory. Thus, it seems that while roaming medieval capitals lost the chance to accommodate the royal families' burials, the monasteries of Lake Tana took the advantage to become *lieux de memoir*.

Some justifications, based on tradition, say the reasons that emperors were buried in Lake Tana were based on their confessions before death. However, it is not certain when the remains of the royal families were taken to the monasteries and this makes it difficult to

explain further the meaning of royal burial in relation to the monasteries. In spite of these reasons, royal burial in the monasteries of Lake Tana played a significant role in escalating the reputation of the monasteries. Popularity among the monasteries of Lake Tana is thus highly dependent on whether the monastery is closely affiliated to the state in general or to certain royal family. On the other hand, the monasteries gave royal families nostalgia, so the benefit is mutual. The monasteries are famous for accommodating royal burials and the emperors preferred to be buried on Lake Tana.

The church-state relationship reached its climax in their attempt to incorporate the societies in the region of Lake Tana under their dominion. Unlike any other field in which the relationship between the two is demonstrated, expansion towards non-Christian communities was characterized by cooperation. The emperors were involved in bloody battles to expand the territorial limits of the empire. Accordingly, they would have appreciated the monks' effort to make the pagan regions part of the Christian empire before a gun was fired. Hence, they backed the monks and there is evidence of the emperors who reached out to the rescue monks who had been threatened or captured by the pagan rulers. The pagans and Ethiopian Jews (Falasha) who lived around the edges of the lake became easy targets for the emperors' task of integrating them into their empire.

Besides supporting the expansion project of the state, the monasteries of Lake Tana had a more enduring effect on the later geographical center of the empire. The emperors who were living in temporary camps seem to have been attracted by the presence of Christian communities in the region of Lake Tana. The newly Christianized communities also provided fertile ground for the emperors' attempts to establish permanent capitals among them. Accordingly, the later emperors, such as Sarsa Dengil, Susenyos, and finally Fasiledes, tried to establish permanent capitals in Infranz, Gorgora, and Gondar, respectively, although it was

the latter who was successful in altering the tradition of the mobile capital that was able to repeat the splendor of its predecessors, Aksum and Lalibela.

In general the results of this study can be summarized as follows: Although the founding monks of the monasteries of Lake Tana had different backgrounds, they had the monastic reform of the second half of the thirteenth century as a common denominator. This reform produced sects who were antagonistic to each other on certain principles. The two important monastic houses whose influence was strongly felt in the region of Lake Tana were the houses of Ewostatewos and Takla Haymanot. The disciples of these monastic houses were driven by various factors to find their way to Lake Tana.

The relationship between the monasteries and the state can be explained in different ways. It started as a negative and a positive factor for the monks in the region of Lake Tana, assisting with financing the monasteries in different ways and rescuing them from pagan rulers. The monasteries in turn helped the state by beginning preliminary work at evangelization for the state's project of expansion. They also served as the place where the royal family deposited their remains as an act of symbolic representation and keeping spontaneous memory alive.

Most scholars attribute the movement of the Christian set to the region of Lake Tana to Muslim-Christian rivalries. This argument is true as the Christian state was pushed by Muslim forces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus, the monasteries of Lake Tana appeared an ideal place establishing a political seat. Besides the remoteness of the area from the invading force, the religious institutions which were highly important for the existence of the medieval state, on which it based its ideology, became attractive elements for the state. Therefore, the state in building its empire and founding a political seat made their focus around the monasteries of Lake Tana. Therefore, the monasteries of Lake Tana left their footsteps, which shaped the later political and religious institutions of the country. For

instance, had the Falasha not been at least partially evangelized, Sarsa Dengil would not have made his capital at the heart of their land, in Infranz. Therefore, the monks cleared the ground for the advent of the state into the region. Once they set the stage for expansion, the state followed their footsteps and ended by establishing itself in the region for the coming four centuries. Thus, I conclude that monks advanced to the region of Lake Tana for the purpose of expanding the horizon of Christianity and were later followed by the state, which intended to make more territorial gains. The two cooperated each other and made the region an important center of religious and political activities in later centuries and the region become the “the melting pot” of “the word” (of the Bible) and the “sword” (of the emperors.)

The region of Lake Tana has been a center of attention for many scholars as a medieval capital and as an area where the Ethio-Portugal relationship in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century was forged. However, the impact of the monasteries in empire-building in the region has not been considered. Thus, I hereby call for further research to be launched by placing the monasteries at the center of any political and religious practices of the medieval period in the region. To further understand the impacts that the monasteries of Lake Tana had in medieval Ethiopia, a close analysis of later historical events that are closely associated with the monasteries should be conducted.

I do not claim that this study has exploited all the available sources. The inaccessibility of the organized catalogues of the manuscripts of the monasteries, the monks’ lack of willingness to collaborate with a researcher who is in need of them, and the difficulty of reaching every monastery on the lake were the major problems I faced. I share the monks’ fear of losing the heritages. Hence, a supervised investigation of these heritages which are crucial for the understanding of medieval Ethiopia should be done.

Appendix

1. Entrusting the Abbotship of Kebran Gebriel to a community member living in the region of Bada

ተጽሕፈ በትእዛዝ ንጉሥ አዚዝ . . . ⁴ ንሕነ በዘመንነ ከመ ይኩን ነብር እድነት ወመምህርነት ዘክብራን ለአህዱ ብእሲ ወኢይሰየም ካልእ ዘእንበለ ዘመንኩስ በደብር ወበወግዕኒ ከመዝ ነበረ ይቤሉን አእሩግ ። ወንሕነኒ አዘዝነ ከመዝ እንዘ ጸራጅ ማሰሬ አባ ተክለ ወልድ ወቂስ ሐፂ አባ ጊዮርጊስ ወበግራ አዛዥ በኅይለ ሥሉስ ወበ/ቀኝዕ አዛዥ መናድሌዎስ ወግራ ጌታ ዘመዘምራን አባ ዘድንግል ወቀኙዕ ጌታ በትረ ሚካኤል ወቤት ጠባቂ ጌታ አባ ዘሚካኤል ወክፍሌ ወደብተራ ጌታ ተክለ ነቢያት ወዕንቆ ዘግራ ወጐጥም ነጋሽ አቤተኹን ቆዝሞስ ወበድ ሹም ዮሐንስ ወሊቀ መጻኔ ክፍሌ ወቃቂታች በረከት ። ወአዘዝነ ከመ ኢይትአደው መኑሂ ዘንተ ሢመተ ክብራን እመሂ መነኮስ ወእመሂ መሃይምን እመሂ በድ ሹም ወኩሎሙ ነገደ አበካቦት ወአውገዙ በትእዛዝነ ቀሳውስት እንዘ ይብሉ/እመቦ ዘዓለወ ዘንተ ቃለ ኢቴጌ አድማስ ሞገሣ ወቃለ ንጉሥ ሠርፀ ድንግል ዘተሰምየ መለክ ሰገድ ወዘደምሰሶ ለዝንቱ መጽሐፍ ውጉዝ ለይኩን በቃለ አብ ወወልድ ወመንፈስ ቅዱስ ወበሰይፈ ቃሎሙ ለጴጥሮስ ወጳውሎስ ወበቃለ ፫፻፲፬፻ ርቱዓን ሃይማኖት ዘኒቅያ ወበቃለ ቅዱሳን እግዚአብሔር ሰማያ ውያን ወምድራውያን ወኢይትፈታሕ በምንትኒ እመሂ በቃለ ጳጳስ ወእመሂ በቃለ ሊቀ ጳጳሳት ዘእለእስክንድርያ ለዓለም አሜን ።

2. Land Grant to the monastery of Tana Qirqos

በአኩቴተ አብ ወወልድ ወመንፈስ ቅዱስ ወበበረከታ ለእግዝእትነ ማርያም ሓመ ዘመነ ንግሥነ ፲፬ ዓመት ንሕነ ዘተሰመይነ በፀጋ እግዚአብሔር ሠርፀ ድንግል ወስመ መንግሥት መለክ ሰገድ ወስመ ንግሥት አድማስ ሞገሳ . . . እስክ ለዓለም እንዘ ሊቀ ማእምራን ነባሬ ማርያም ወሊቀ ደብተራ ፍተ ድንግል ወቂስ ሐፂ አባ ጊዮርጊስ ጸራጅ መእስሬ ተክለ ወልድ ወመዘምራን ጌታ ዘድንግል . . . ሚካኤል ወደብተራ ጌታ ዕንቆ ወቤት ጠባቂ ጌታ ዘሚካኤል ወጌራ እንዘ ውስጥ አዛዥ በኅይለ ሥሉስ ወቀኙዕ ጌታ . . . ወግራ ጌታ ሳንኮሪስ ሕዱግ ራስ . . . ራስ ይስሐቅ ወሊቀ መጣኔ ማርያም ዜና ወክፍሌ ወቃቂታት . . . ዘንተ ቃለ ዘሠራዕነ ዘተዓደወ እመሂ ንጉሥ አው ንግሥት እመሂ ጐጥም ነጋሽ አው . . . ብእሲ ዘተጋየለ . . . እመሂ መኩንነ ዘመን ዘተንሥእ . . . እመሂ እም ክርስቲያን . . . ኢይባእ ውስተ ይእቲ . . . ለደሴተ . . . ዘቅዱስ ቂርቆስ . . .

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