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Paul B. Henze (†)

Abba Pantalewon and Abba Liqanos: Two of the "Nine Syrian Saints". Christianity in Ethiopia

Christianity was probably known in Ethiopia, brought by Jews and Greeks, before Frumentius and Aedesius arrived and converted Emperor Ezana, but no evidence of pre-4th-century Christian communities or buildings used for Christian worship has come to light. After the new faith was officially adopted, monks and priests from lands to the north found a welcome in Ethiopia. The first to come are collectively known in Ethiopian tradition as the *Tsadkan*, "the Righteous Ones". They undoubtedly helped spread understanding of Christian doctrine and practice, but practice was probably for a generation or two confined to the ruling family, the nobility and officials and had not spread far beyond the capital. It is likely that Christianity only slowly became known by the masses of the population. Systematic evangelization of the Aksumite Empire began only after the arrival of the Nine Syrian Saints in the latter half of the 5th century.

THE NINE SYRIAN SAINTS

Traditions surrounding the arrival of these eminent religious figures are extensive, but solid facts are few. Much of the comment about them was written many centuries later¹. The general belief is that most or all of them came to Ethiopia after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) motivated by a desire to support the Monophysite doctrine, which had been rejected by the Council². Refusing to abandon it, these men were no longer tolerated in the Roman Empire. The fact that they were termed Syrian reflects the lack of detailed knowledge of the geography of the Mediterranean world that prevailed in Ethiopia. Though there had been trade and other contacts with Greek and Ro-

man civilization for more than a millennium, very few Ethiopians are known to have traveled to Mediterranean countries. Syrian, in effect, meant Roman or Byzantine, for the East Roman Empire was in the process of becoming Byzantine at this period. The Saints have been traced to Rome, Constantinople, Cappadocia and Antioch. Whether they all arrived at the same time and by the same route is unclear. Probably not. Most of them appear to have been steeped in religious knowledge. Some, at least, must have been motivated by religious zeal. They may have brought books and devotional articles with them. They were probably all fluent in Greek and possibly Aramaic and other languages.

¹ Typical is a passage from a manuscript in the possession of a priest from Aksum cited by Sergew Hable Selassie (1972: 115) "Among the people of Ethiopia some believed in Christ, some worshipped the *Arwe* (the python), some watched the birds for omens and some performed magic with fire. After their arrival these saints established the faith and enlightened the earth with their faith and purified it by the paths of their feet"—The Portuguese Jesuit Manoel Barradas, who spent nearly a decade in Ethiopia in the early 17th century, gathered information on the Nine Saints, gave their names and continued: "...these friars, whose names I have written, did come to Ethiopia because the thing is remembered ... and the names are the same or nearly so: for the church of Pantaliao is still functioning and his body was found there not long ago as I mentioned earlier elsewhere; the church of Garime, which they call Abba Garima, was referred to before; that of Joao, who was called Abba Aregavy because he was elderly, is in Amba Damo, and I also referred to it earlier; so there can be no doubt about them ..." (Barradas 1996: 187).

² Ethiopia was not represented at the Council.

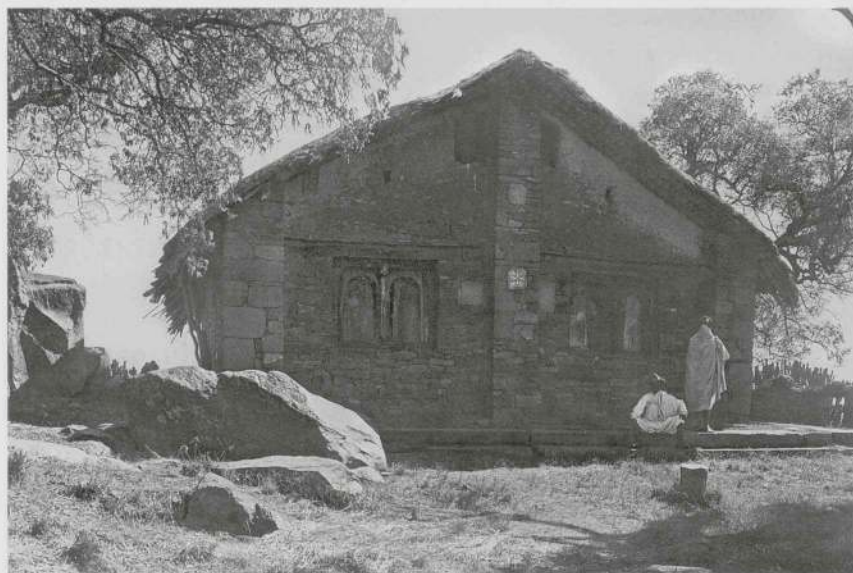


Fig. 1 Abba Liqanos: West front (photo: DAE 638 = MBA 2244.01).

They are said to have been welcomed by Emperor Ella Amida II in the sixth year of his reign and encouraged to stay for a period in Aksum. Information about the length of their stay in the capital is conflicting. Some sources allege that they remained as long as 12 years. Ella Amida II died and was succeeded by his son Tazena. There is some reason to believe that some of the Saints became involved in tensions relating to the succession. Abba Pantalewon and Abba Liqanos are believed to have been strong supporters of Tazena's accession to the throne, which may have been contested by others, a not uncommon situation at the time. After his coronation and consolidation of his power, Tazena is thought to have decided to encourage most of the Saints to leave Aksum and go out to distant places to reinforce Christian practices among the population.

Isaac, better known as Abba Gerima, went into the mountains south of Adwa and founded the important monastery that bears his name. Za-Mikael, also known as Yohannes and called Abuna Aregawi ('The Elder' – he may have been the oldest of the Saints) chose the *amba* of Damo and founded the monastery of Debre Damo on this inaccessible *amba* in a district where the population had worshipped a serpent. He is reputed to have persuaded the serpent to help him climb the *amba* to found a Christian church, an episode commemorated in Ethiopian paintings to this day. Abba Afse went to Yeha where a church he is said to have founded has been excavated³ close to the famous Sabaeen temple, the most ancient standing building in Ethiopia. Abba Yemata went south into the

Geralta range and climbed up the Mountain of Guh where, according to tradition, he lived out his years in a rock chapel which centuries later was expanded into a church and richly painted. It remains one of the great monuments of Ethiopian medieval art⁴. A large round painting in the ceiling of this church depicts all Nine Syrian Saints. Abba Pantalewon and Abba Liqanos, however, remained in Aksum. They are said to have been especially loved by the population of the city. They are reputed to have been especially favored by Tazena and his son Kaleb who succeeded him.

According to tradition and in the lives of these Saints (all compiled long after their lifetimes), they are described as austere hermits living austere lives of contemplation and prayer. In actuality, considering the accomplishments that are credited to them, they must, until they reached old age, have been vigorous, energetic, active men, good leaders with a great capacity to inspire and organize followers. They are credited with translation of a large body of Christian literature into Ge'ez. Thus, some of them at least, must have been talented linguists. The quality of the translations is high. Translating may have been one of their main occupations during their residence as a group in Aksum. Their work survives not only in the Ethiopic

³ Excavations by the French archaeologist Jean Doresse in the 1950s. In the crypt of this church he discovered the oldest Christian objects ever found in Ethiopia.

⁴ Photographed and described in Gerster 1970.

Fig. 2 Abba Liqanos: South front (photo: DAE 639 = MBA 2244.02).



Old and New Testaments but in apocrypha such as the book of Henoch, which is completely known only in its Ethiopic version.

Building churches and expanding them into monasteries in remote locations required planning and gathering of materials. Local converts had to be recruited to provide labor. Monks alone could not have accomplished the work. Still flourishing establishments such as Debre Damo and the great Monastery of Abba Gerima are monuments to more than the religious dedication of their founders – they demonstrate their talent and skill as religious entrepreneurs. All Nine Saints are commemorated in the Ethiopian religious calendar and continue to be celebrated during the church year.

In toto the activities of the Nine Saints cover the reigns of four emperors: Ella Amida 8 years, Tazena 12 years, Kaleb 30 years, and the early portion of the reign of Gebre Meskal – 50 years in all. Some of the Saints must have been young when they arrived in Ethiopia and some of them seem to have lived into very old age. Their accomplishments included not only translation of the Bible and expansion of use of other Christian texts, but introduction and consolidation of monasticism, following the Rule of Pachomius, which was also translated from Greek into Ge'ez. They had important influence on Christian architecture, following East Mediterranean examples. They helped define the doctrinal position of the Ethiopian church by translating the *Qerillos* from Greek into Ge'ez. It contains the teachings of Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria and homilies of other early church fathers (Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972: 119–121).

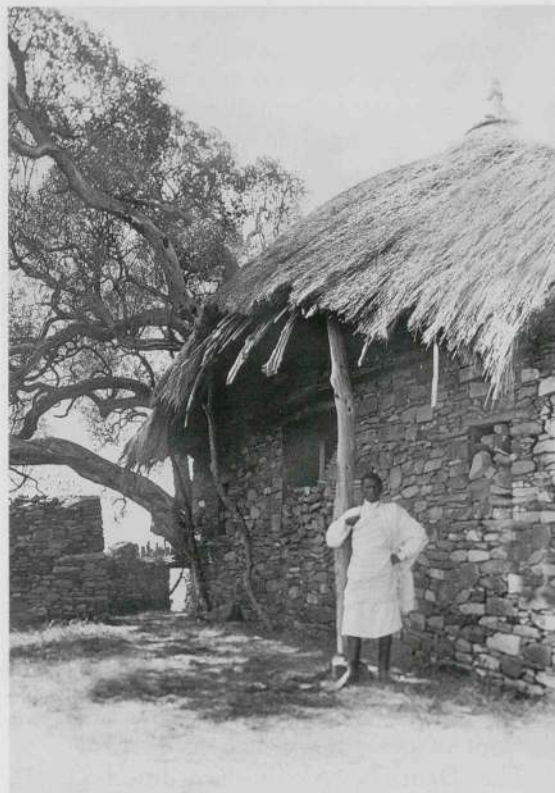


Fig. 3 Abba Liqanos: Northern side (photo: DAE 640 = MBA 2244.03).

ABBA LIQANOS (FIGS. 1–8)

Little is known of Abba Liqanos, for traditions relating to him gathered into a *gadd* in the 19th century based on three earlier manuscripts (two from his church NE of Aksum and one in the

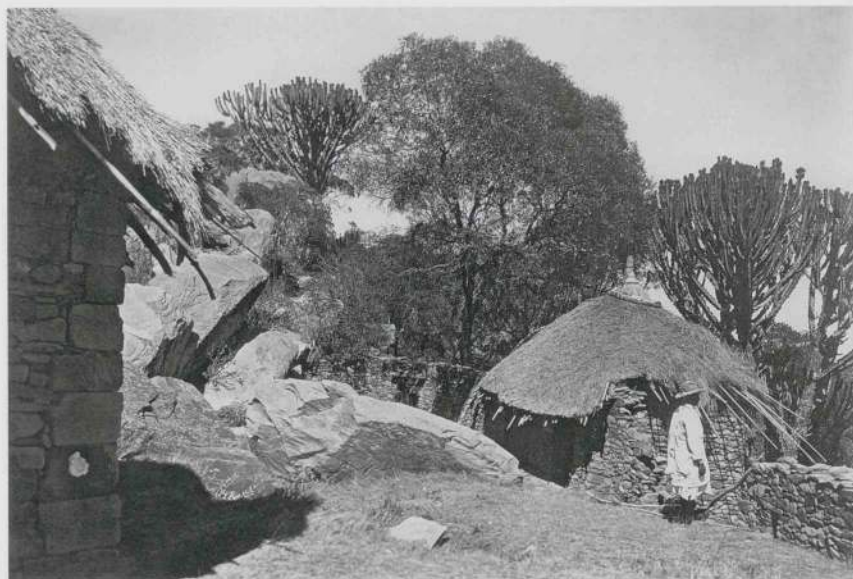


Fig. 4 Abba Liqanos: Treasury (photo: DAE 641 = MBA 2244.04).

treasury of Aksum Tseyon), are contradictory and contain little hard information⁵. He is said to have come from Constantinople but for reasons which are not clear he became known as “Star of the Desert” (*kokeba gedam*), perhaps because he reached Ethiopia by way of Egypt and Nubia. He built a church on a peak to the northeast of Aksum called Mountain of the Foxes, Debre Qenasel (Figs. 1–4), where he is said to have lived for 21 years and was buried after his death. Father Alvarez in Chapter XL (1961: 161–162) describes this church as of the time he visited it in the early 16th century “... on the hill which is to the east, on its peak is another church named Abbalicanos, and the saint lies here ... This church is like an annex of the great church of Aquaxumo (Aksum) and it is served by its canons. This house and church of Abbalicanos is one of great sanctity amongst them; there come to it also many people from the town to hear the offices and take the communion. The church also has a large village at the foot of the hill which is its parish”.

The Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (DAE) examined this church and photographed it (DAE 3: 67–69). It was a pitched-roofed, thatched rectangular stone building with an outer ambulatory around a central *maqdas*. The walls of the *maqdas* contained paintings of the Nine Saints which appear to have been done no earlier than the late 17th century (Figs. 6–7). The DAE photographs also include a portrait of the Virgin and Child which appears to be of the same period (Fig. 5). The entire compound was surrounded by a wall and there is evidence of

a small gatehouse or *bet lehem* in one of the photographs. Many old trees are evident in the photographs. The DAE found evidence of earlier occupation of the site: cut stones and foundations. These indicate that the church, like that of Abba Pantalewon, may have been the site of a pre-Christian Aksumite building. Such sites seem to have been favored by the Saints because of their established reputation for holiness.

During the civil war of the 1980s, the church, which had remained much as it was when the DAE examined and photographed it, was destroyed by the Derg army. It bombarded it to dislodge adherents of the TPLF rebels allegedly sheltering there. Since the defeat of the Derg parishioners have built a new church on the stepped-up granite base of the old one and cleared the surrounding area.

ABBA PANTALEWON (FIGS. 9–18)

Abba Pantalewon appears to have been one of the longest-lived and most energetic of the Saints. He is described as coming “from Rome” and, it is claimed, had been a member of a ruling family. Rome may simply mean somewhere in the East Roman Empire. Details about his activities after arriving in Aksum and

⁵ Antonella Brita (2007) attempts to sort out these references.

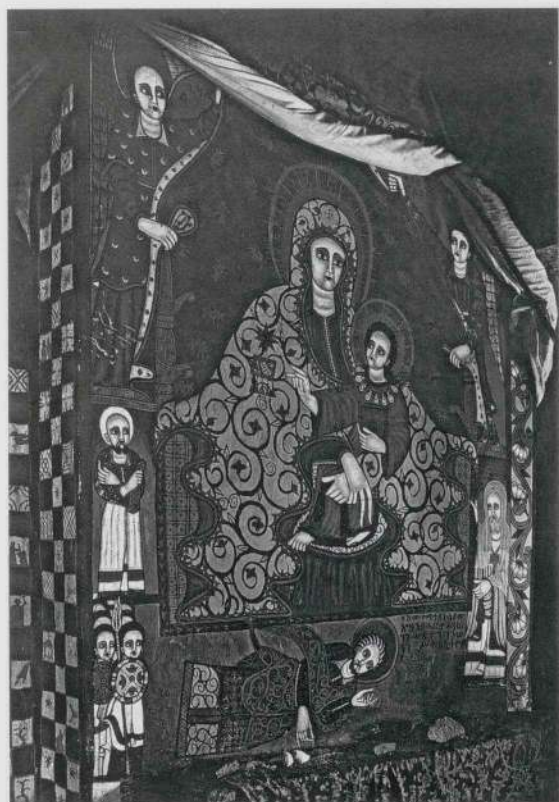


Fig. 5 Abba Liqanos: Mary with child. West wall of the sanctuary (photo: DAE 679 = MBA 2244.07).



Fig. 7 Abba Liqanos: Abune Tekle Haymanot with wings and the "Nine Saints" Liqanos, Pantalewon, Gerima and Guba. West wall of the sanctuary (photo: DAE 681 = MBA 2244.05).

those in his *gadl* (which dates from the late 15th century) and from the Ethiopian *Sinkesar*, where he is commemorated, dramatize an improbable account of his later years: "He went up to the top of a little mountain and made himself a cell which was five cubits long and two cubits wide and three cubits deep; its roof was a single stone and it had no door,



Fig. 6 Abba Liqanos: The "Nine Saints" Aléf, Aftsé, Tsih'ma, Yema'ta, Aregawi and the memhir (abbot) Tekle Haymanot. West wall of the sanctuary (photo: DAE 680 = MBA 2244.06).



Fig. 8 Painting from Abba Liqanos? (photo: DAE 682).

but only a small opening. And he stood on his feet for a period of five and forty years, without sitting down and without lying down to sleep" (Sergew Hable Selassie 1972: 117).

He is said to have "exercised deep influence on the social and political life of the country and to have earned high respect among the people". That he could have accomplished this



Fig. 9 Abba Pantalewon: re-used window grill (photo: DAE 483 = MBA 2245.08).



Fig. 10 Remnants of wall from Ethio-Sabaeen times at Abba Pantalewon (photo: DAE 484 = MBA 2245.04).

while isolating himself standing in a cell atop a mountain for 45 years defies belief.

That he chose a pointed mountain to the northeast of Aksum for his church must be fact, for his name has been associated with it ever since. The mountain was originally called Asbo, though with the church became known as Debre Pantalewon. The DAE (DAE 3: 70–71, see also DAE 2: 90–94) gave the site serious attention, though it did no excavation there.

It published a carefully drawn plan of the mountaintop with the church and the walls and made good photographs. They clearly show a rectangular building which, according to the plan, was approximately 14 meters long and 7 m wide. It was divided into three almost equal sections. Double doors opened to the west; a carved stone window was built into the wall of the east (Fig. 9). Littmann judged Sabaeen remains on the mountaintop (Fig. 10) to be very ancient. Subsequent investigation has tended to confirm this judgment, though no excavation has yet been done (Phillipson 1997).

The roughly conical mountain rises to a height of 40 meters above the surrounding area (Figs. 13–15). It is visible not only from Abba Liganos to the north but from the east, southeast and west. The top, apparently cut and flattened in pre-Aksumite times, is roughly circular and edged with rock walls. Its diameter averages 18 meters. Ascent, from the northwest, is by about 70 rough stone steps that lead, near the top, to a flight of 20 slab steps which have been cut into the platform and lead directly to the front of the church.

The DAE traced several sections of old walls and blocks that may have been part of a pre-Christian building. Their conclusion: Since no excavation was possible, we can say little about the original building. It is only possible to say that, because of the building techniques, we know that these are the remains of one of the oldest buildings in Aksum, closely related to the temple at Yeha (Phillipson 1997: 167).

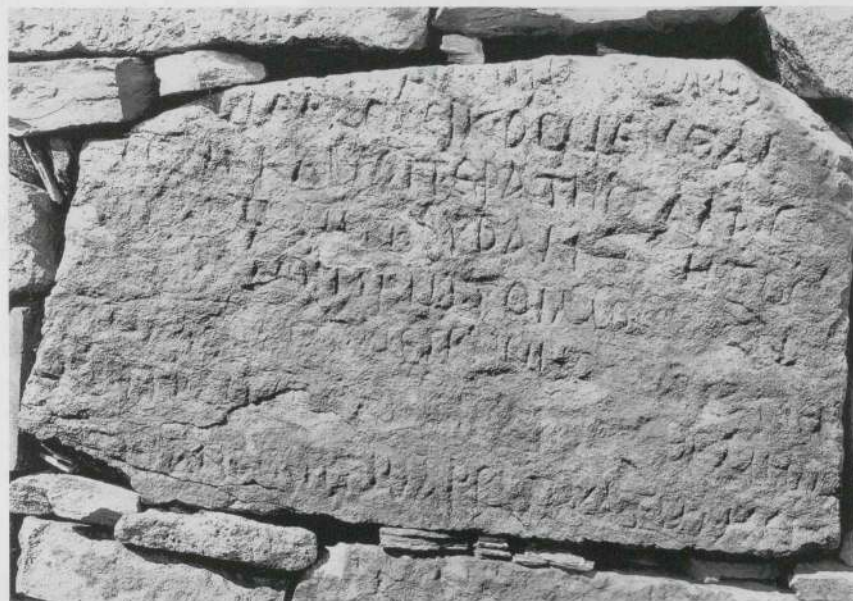
The DAE noted numerous ancient stones incorporated into the walls of the church. "A beautifully written Sabaeen inscription" (Fig. 11) was built into the west front of the church and a Greek one (Fig. 12) in the east front. Both were removed from the walls during the Italian occupation. They are now kept in the *eqabet*. My 1998 photograph of the Sabaeen inscription was recently studied again by Dr. Stefan Weninger of Marburg University. He considers it a royal inscription of the 6th century BC. It is in boustrophedon. Line 1 reads: "I ruled (in the royal plural) over eastern and western Di'amat." Line 2 reads "Dhat Ba'dan and your father Waddum." Dhat Ba'dan was a feminine deity, an aspect of the sun; Waddum male⁶. The fragment may have been part of a larger inscription. The Greek inscription, badly worn

⁶ Private communication from Prof. Dr. Stefan Weninger.

Fig. 11 Abba Pantalewon: Ethio-Sabaic inscription (Littmann no. 1, RIE 2) (photo: DAE 519 = MBA 2245.07).



Fig. 12 Abba Pantalewon: Greek inscription (Littmann no. 2) (photo: DAE 520 = MBA 2245.06).



and broken, has been impossible to decipher completely. It mentions the sea, Aksumites and possibly Ares, the Greek war god (Munro-Hay 2002: 334–335).

DAE investigators found several other objects: a granite bowl with handles, an alabaster slab carved with a window like those on Aksumite stelae, an oblong block with carved foliage, and a water spout in bright yellow sandstone (see Dornisch 2011: fig. 23). On a terrace on the south side were four large stones with central holes.

The DAE was unable to investigate the crypt under the *maqdas* which includes the chamber where Abba Pantalewon allegedly stood for 45

years⁷. This period would have had to be most of the reign of Emperor Kaleb (whose throne name was Ella Atsbaha) who reasserted Aksumite control of much of South Arabia and who was reputedly close to Abba Pantalewon. At the end of his reign Kaleb is said to have sent his crown to Jerusalem and retired as a monk to Debre Pantalewon where he lived out his final years. Priests recount that Abba Pantalewon, Emperor

⁷ I have been unable to find evidence that anyone has examined the crypt since that time. Munro-Hay did not.



Fig. 13 Abba Pantalewon from northwest, left the church Maria Magdalena (photo: DAE 644 = MBA 2245.03).



Fig. 14 Abba Pantalewon from southwest (photo: DAE 645 = MBA 2245.02).

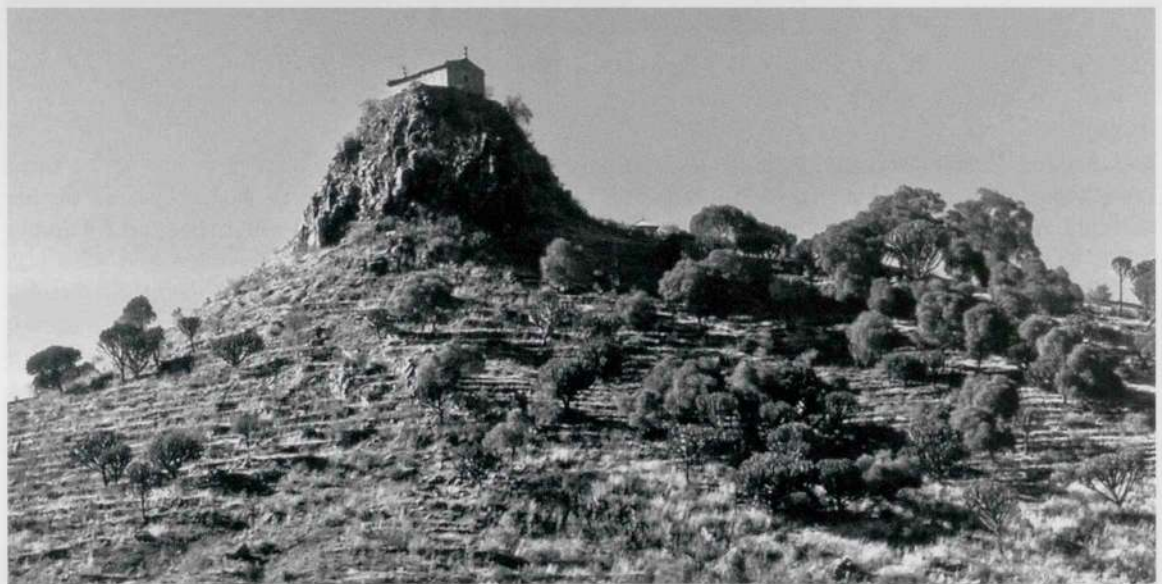


Fig. 15 Abba Pantalewon (photo: P. Henze).

Kaleb and his son Emperor Gebre Meskal as well as several medieval emperors and three Patriarchs of Alexandria all found their final resting place in this crypt. This seems fanciful, for the emperors are reported buried in tombs in other places⁸.

Ras Mengesha, when Governor of Tigray, had the church which the DAE examined and photographed torn down in the 1960s and replaced by a new one. It is a classic north Ethiopian structure which incorporates stones from previous buildings.

The claimed close relationship between Abba Pantalewon and Emperor Kaleb is a mystery but may well have some historical basis. It seems unlikely that the Saint, while isolated on the mountaintop, could have maintained close ties with the Emperor, who was one of the most active Ethiopian rulers of the time. Kaleb came to the throne during the first years of the 6th century and established firm control of the Empire. In 519, in response to an appeal from the Byzantine Emperor Justin I, Kaleb mounted an expedition to South Arabia. The Byzantine Emperor had asked his "brother" in Aksum to come to the rescue of Christians in Najran⁹ who were being persecuted by Jewish rulers. Kaleb overthrew and killed Dhu Nuwas, King of Himyar, and reestablished Aksumite authority over several other South Arabian kingdoms, eventually going as far east as the Hadhramaut. There are many sources, including Greek ones, about the history of this period, but they disagree about dates as well as subsequent developments in South Arabia. Aksumite interest in the region was at least in part motivated by trade. The Byzantines were eager to enlist South Arabians as allies against the Persians who had designs on the region and eventually gained control over it after 570. Meanwhile Kaleb, after confronting problems administering South Arabia, had turned power over to his three sons about 535, sent his crown to Jerusalem and retired to Abba Pantalewon's monastery where he died. Whether he or the Saint died first is not known, but both were buried beside each other in the crypt under the church. Of the sons, Gebre Maskal emerged predominant in both South Arabia and in the Empire itself.

Abba Liqanos appears to have died many years before Abba Pantalewon and is not claimed to have been involved in the military or political affairs of the time. Unknown manuscripts, inscriptions or even archaeology may provide new information about the relationship of Abba



Fig. 16 Priest with cross from Abba Pantalewon (photo: P. Henze).

Pantalewon to these developments. Efforts to sort out facts and traditions which scholars such as Sergew Hable Selassie and Stuart Munro-Hay have made leave room for a great deal of speculation. Perhaps we may have to content ourselves with that.

When my wife and I visited Debre Pantalewon in early 1998 the monk with the key to the church, who we were assured would come, failed after an hour of waiting to appear, so I did not climb up to it. A complex of stone buildings at the entrance to the compound included the *eqabet*. A friendly monk in charge of it, Gebre Selassie Gebre Medhin, 83 years old (Fig. 16), invited us to see everything he considered important: a large, deep red, factory-made carpet; a remarkable beautifully illuminated

⁸ Munro-Hay 2002: 335. Large underground chambers excavated in rock a short distance north of Aksum have been traditionally claimed as burial sites of Kaleb and Gebre Meskal.

⁹ Now in Saudi Arabia.



Fig. 17 Abba Pantalewon, according to Anaïs Wion opening of the Gospel of John (photo: P. Henze).



Fig. 18 Abba Pantalewon, according to Anaïs Wion opening of the Gospel of Mark (photo: P. Henze).

Gospel, probably from the 15th century (Figs. 17–18); a partially illustrated *Tamre Maryam*; a large brass ewer containing holy water; half a dozen crosses including a large bronze one he said had belonged to Emperor Kaleb; two crowns said to have belonged to Gebre Meskal; and Abba Pantalewon's iron cross. There was a silver chalice "given by Emperor Gebre Meskal", a bronze bell and a large umbrella. Finally he showed us the two stones with inscriptions and another stone with ornamental carving.

The experience underscored the reverence with which Abba Pantalewon is still regarded. It also demonstrated the link that is obvious in so many north Ethiopian churches between pre-Aksumite religion and Christianity. Sabaeen inscriptions are accorded the same importance as Christian relics.

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