The Zāg ē dynasty (11-13th centuries) and King Yemreḥanna Krestos Marie-Laure Derat

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Abstract

This paper is an inquiry about King
Yemreḥanna Krestos. Who was he ? When did he reign ? Was he a priest ? How did his cult develop ? In order to answer such questions, a more general study of the Zāgʷē dynasty, to which he belonged, is indispensable. The documents informing us about this dynasty are presented and commented so as to unearth from the context concrete elements and be in the position to obtain a fresher understanding of the matters involved. For, more often than not, the Zāgʷē are depicted as southern usurpers speaking a strange tongue compared with that of their predecessors and successors. As it happens, several facts permit to highlight the northern rooting of this dynasty which shares with the Aksumite kings more than one is usually inclined to think. However, the figure of King Yemreḥanna Krestos remains mysterious.

Résumé

La dynastie Zāgʷē (XIe-XIIIe siècles) et le roi Yemreḥanna Krestos

Cet article est une enquête au sujet du roi Yemreḥanna Krestos. Qui était-il ? Quand régnait-il ? Était-il prêtre ? Comment son culte s'est-il développé ? Pour tenter de répondre à ces questions, un détour par une étude plus générale de la dynastie Zāgʷē, à laquelle il appartenait, est indispensable. Les documents nous informant sur cette dynastie sont exposés et commentés afin de dégager les éléments tangibles du contexte et rompre avec les idées communément admises. Car les Zāgʷē sont souvent perçus comme des usurpateurs venus du Sud et parlant une langue étrange comparée à celle de leurs prédécesseurs et successeurs. Il se trouve que plusieurs éléments permettent de souligner l'ancrage septentrional de cette dynastie qui partage plus de points communs avec les rois aksumites qu'on ne veut d'ordinaire le penser. Néanmoins, la figure du roi Yemreḥanna Krestos demeure énigmatique.

The Zāgʷē dynasty (11-13th centuries) and King Yemreḥanna Krestos

Marie-Laure Derat*

The Zāgʷē kings reigned approximately from the 11th century to 1270, when King Yekunno Amlāk was crowned. Tradition has it that his accession restored the so-called Solomonid dynasty that claimed direct descent from Solomon, the great king of Israel. The period of Zāgʷē rule was regarded as an interruption in an otherwise straight line of royal succession, in which both the kings who reigned before the 11th century and those who came to power after 1270 belonged to the Solomonid line.

A foray into traditional historical accounts can help in understanding the issues of this period. The Zāgʷē kings were considered both as saints on the one hand, with the hagiographies of five of them written down and many followers attending commemorations at their sepulchres[1] on the day of their deaths, and as usurpers on the other, because their successors did not regard them as descendants of the family of Israel, a term used in Ethiopian texts to designate the descendants of King Menelik. Menelik was the product of the romantic encounter between the Queen of Sheba, identified as an Ethiopian queen, and King Solomon. Moreover, the idea that the Zāgʷē kings were Agaw, and therefore ethnically distinct from both their predecessors and successors, traced their origins in the Lāstā area, where they centralized power in their new capital at Roḥa/Lālibalā. All these elements contributed to the image of the Zāgʷē dynasty as a break in the long history of the Christian kingdom, the main consequence of which was to shift the centre of the

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In order to establish the present author's responsability regarding certain views expressed about the king and the Zagʷe dynasty, this paper is published in anticipation to a collective book on the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos. That is why certain ideas already expressed in the author's other contribution of the same number of the *Annales d'Éthiopie* are repeated in this article.

1 The Life (*gadl*) of Yemreḥanna Krestos, Lālibalā, his wife Masqal Kebrā, and Na'ākʷeto La'āb have been published and translated (Perruchon, 1892; Conti Rossini, 1943; Kur, 1972; Marrassini, 1995). Recently, Emmanuel Fritsch was able to photograph a copy of the *Gadla Ḥarbāy*, which had been hitherto unknown.

kingdom from Aksum to Lālibalā. This later vision of the Zāgʷē results in a contradictory image that has long precluded clear analysis of the period itself.

The genealogy of the Zāgʷē kings has been constructed by mixing contemporary sources with later elements to fill the gaps. The first Zāgʷē king is generally considered to have been a certain Morārā, also known as Mār Takla Hāymānot, who then passed power to Ṭanṭāwedem. He in turn had two brothers, Gerwā Śeyyum and Žān Śeyyum, the first of whom had a son, Yemreḥanna Krestos, who was to succeed his uncle, Ṭanṭāwedem. The second brother begat two sons, Ḥarbāy and Lālibalā, who, in turn, both succeeded Yemreḥanna Krestos. Finally, Ḥarbāy's son, Na'ākʷeto La'āb, assumed power, followed by Yetbārak, son of Lālibalā, who would conclude the dynasty. This shifting of power between brothers and then to nephews of the king, rather than his sons, is considered to be one of the distinctive marks of the Zāgʷē dynasty. Some even believe that this was a matrilineal rule, explained by the Agaw identity of the Zāgʷē kings.[2]

Most of these rulers are associated with churches of the Lāstā region that today bear the names of their founders: the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos, the church of Ḥarbāy, the churches of Lālibalā and the church of Na'ākʷeto La'āb. The region is seen as having been the centre of Zāgʷē rule, as indeed it probably was, for a time. King Yekunno Amlāk, who overthrew the Zāgʷē dynasty in 1270 had a church built in the vicinity in order to consolidate his authority in the region, and is represented in a mural paintings therein.[3] But the present structures of these churches do not all date to the 12-13th centuries: this is particularly true of Ḥarbāy's church and the church of Na'ākʷeto La'āb, both rebuilt recently. The site of Lālibalā is a vexed question of which study is ongoing.[4]

Documentation covering the 11-12th centuries is uneven, often written after the events. As a result, certain rulers may be highlighted, thus compromising a comprehensive linear history. Two sources are contemporary with the Zāgʷē rulers: land grants, that concern only the kings Ṭanṭāwedem and Lālibalā, and a compilation of biographical entries known as the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, some written by familiars of these patriarchs, but some also by later authors who compiled four or five consecutive biographies. However, later texts on the Zāgʷē rulers were also composed that have to a large extent influenced our view of the dynasty. These are hagiographical tales, lives of saints or *gadl* in Ge'ez, which

[2] Marrassini, 1990; 1994; 1995. The matrilineal system, however, depends on women, i.e. a king's heir is not his own child but rather his sister's son. In the case of the Zāgʷē dynasty, according to the information given in the different lives of the saints, the role of women is not highlighted and power goes down from brother to brother, or from uncle to brother's son, and not to sister's son.

[3] This is the Church of Gannata Māryām. See Lepage, 1975; Balicka Witakoswka, 1998-1999.

[4] See the recent studies of Phillipson, 2009 and Fauvelle & al., 2010.

enumerate in very stereotypical terms the qualities that made each ruler a saint. None of these texts are earlier than the 15th century.[5]

Careful re-examination of this documentation is essential before attempting to answer the following questions: When did the Zāgʷē dynasty begin, who were the kings of this dynasty, what is really know about their reigns, what was the extent of the Zāgʷē kingdom and of its centre, if it had one? All these points are still open to debate and are worth considering before concentrating on what might be known of King Yemreḥanna Krestos through his hagiographic Life, keeping in mind that such a Life is more the product of the issues of its time rather than an actual biography of the man. The analysis of the development of a cult to honour the saint-kings, beginning with Yemreḥanna Krestos, will end this chapter.

The rise to power of the Zāgʷē

The term 'Zāgʷē' probably echoes a family name, but the kings belonging to this dynasty did not present themselves as Zāgʷē. The term first appears in documents such as the *Kebra Nagaśt*[6] or the *Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth*,[7] both compiled between the 14th and 15th centuries. In these works, the term used is 'Zāgʷā' or 'Zāgʷāy' (in Tegreñña), and does indeed seem to relate to a family name.[8] For example, in the colophon of the *Kebra Nagaśt* (Glory of Kings) – a work which recounts the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the birth of their son Menelik and how he seized the Ark of the Covenant, which came to symbolize the divine election of the kingdom of Ethiopia – it is specified that this book "went out in the days of the Zāgʷē" and that they did not translate it because as the book says: "Those who reign not being Israelites are transgressors of the law[9]". From this, it is understood that the work in question reached Ethiopia (perhaps from Egypt, but nobody is quite certain) while the Zāgʷē dynasty still reigned but that the rulers, thus dismissed for not being Israelite, had not wished to translate it into Ge'ez, the language of their kingdom. The term 'Zāgʷē' would therefore be the Ge'ez/Amharic form of this family name, thereafter used to designate the kings who ruled from the 11th to the 13th century. The dynasty is also known under another name: hēṗāṣā, notably in the second version of the Life of a famous Ethiopian saint, Takla Hāymānot, which date back to the beginning of the 16th century.[10]

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5 See infra.

6 That is to say the *Glory of Kings*, which recounts the tale of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba's encounter and the birth of their son Menelik, the prestigious ancestor of Ethiopia's Solomonid dynasty. See Bezold, 1909; Colin, 2002; Beylot, 2008; Raineri, 2008.

7 This work is a gloss of Genesis, see Perruchon, 1907; Grebaut, 1911.

8 C. Conti Rossini considered that Zāgʷē consists of two elements, *za* – a demonstrative pronoun, and *agʷe* – a word for chief. According to him, Zāgʷē means "the chief" (Conti Rossini, 1895: 36).

9 Colin, 2002: 110.

10 Budge, 1906: vol. 1, 74; vol. 2, 29. This family name is also cited in the *gadl* of Iyasus Mo'ā (Kur, 1965: 26/21) but its significance is also unclear. Moreover the use of this name is not attested in the documentation produced during the rule of the Zāgʷē kings.

Chronological uncertainties

The beginnings of the Zāgʷē dynasty are difficult to situate in time. It is customary to calculate their rise to power from the lists of royalty and the date of their fall in 1270. The lists, organized in chronological order, which seems to be a memotechnic device to fix the history of the Ethiopian kingdom, exist in many different versions. They are most often inscribed in the introduction to religious and historical texts, such as chronicles or the lives of saints. When it comes to the Zāgʷē dynasty, which does not feature in all lists, two versions can be distinguished. The first claims that the dynasty ruled for 133 years which, if one keeps to a simple computation, places the arrival of the Zāgʷē in 1137.[11] This timeline seems to agree with information kept by the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* concerning the patriarch John V (1146-1167). According to this account, John received a letter from an unnamed king of Ethiopia, requesting the consecration of a new metropolitan, because the Egyptian bishop, Mikāʾēl I, although still in office, was deemed too old to carry out his duties. Mikāʾēl I was also refusing to recognize the new king whom he judged to be illegitimate. The patriarch refused to comply, despite the efforts of the Egyptian vizier, Abbas (who died shortly afterwards, in 1150), who tried to pressure him to do so by having him thrown into prison.[12] This has long been considered a reference to the rise of the first Zāgʷē king, presented as a usurper, before 1150.[13]

However, another document contradicts this version of events. In a gospel held by the church of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā (Tegrē, Aṣbidarā), a note from this same Egyptian metropolitan testifies that in 1149/1150 Mikāʾēl I was still active,[14] while the ruling sovereign was called Anbasā Wedem.[15] This name features in the royal lists, most often as the penultimate king before the rise of the Zāgʷē. But other documents, indeed, attest that Anbasā Wedem[16] was the ruling name of Ḫarbāy, the

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[11] Conti Rossini, 1922: 281.

[12] Khater & Burmester, 1968: 90.

[13] Conti Rossini, 1903: 328.

[14] The note was written in a later hand in a gospel which may be dated to the second half of the 15th century or later. In addition, the hyperbolic formulas employed in order to describe the activities of Metropolitan Mikāʾēl I in Ethiopia engage some scholars to be cautious about it (see Nosnitsin, 2007: 953; Balicka Witakowska, 2007: 960). However, the text says that the church of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā was founded by a metropolitan, Mikāʾēl I, who was in charge in 1149/1150 and a contemporary of king Anbasā Wedem, very poorly known: it is difficult to construe pure forgery.

[15] Gospel, Church of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā, fol. 102r. S.C. Munro Hay undertook a re-evaluation of the Zāgʷē kings' chronology, taking into account the Gospel of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā (Munro Hay, 1997: 139-142, 161-162). It rests on the partial translation of this text by Sergew Hable Sellassie (1970: 203 note 117). But S.C. Munro Hay encountered a problem that he could not solve because he considered the Anbasā Wedem of the Gospel of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā to be the same as the one who reigned in the 10th century, just before Delnaʾod and just after Gudit (Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1970: 167-170). Also, in certain versions of the *Gadla Abreha waAṣbeḥa*, a passage in the tale of the miracles of these two saint-kings attributes the foundation of the Church of Mikāʾēl ʿAmbā to King Anbasā Wedem himself (see Gire & Schneider, 1970: 75).

[16] This Anbasā Wedem can perhaps be identified as the king of the same name who renewed donations to the church of Māryām Ṣeyon in Aksum. These documents are, however, undated (Conti Rossini, 1909-1910: 20-21/22-23).

predecessor and brother of King Lālibalā. This could indicate that the note in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* is not about the coronation of the first king of the Zāgʷē dynasty, perceived as being illegitimate by the patriarch, but rather refers to a conflict that opposed Anbasā Wedem, a Zāgʷē king, with either his predecessor or successor.

The second series of royal lists situates the rise to power of the Zāgʷē 300 to 373 years before their overthrow in 1270, which places their emergence in the 10th century.[17] This is exactly when the history of the Ethiopian kingdom is most obscure. If one follows the Egyptian sources, two political episodes mark this century. Under the patriarchate of Cosmas III (921-933) a metropolitan known as Ṗēṭros was sent to Ethiopia. On his deathbed, the king had charged him with choosing which of his two sons would succeed him. Ṗēṭros chose the younger. But, using forged letters, an Egyptian monk named Victor pretended that the metropolitan Ṗēṭros was an imposter. He introduced a certain Minas, whom he was accompanying, as the authentic metropolitan. Victor and Minas gave their support to the elder of the king's sons, who promptly seized power and banished both his brother and Ṗēṭros. When the news of this deception reached Egypt, the patriarch excommunicated Minas. The new king had no alternative than to turn to Ṗēṭros, who promptly died. The king then chose one of Ṗēṭros' disciples, but refused to allow him to seek consecration in Egypt. He therefore had to carry out his duties as head of the Ethiopian Church without having been appointed by the patriarch of Alexandria[18]. For this reason, no metropolitan was consecrated for fifty years, a period about which we have no information for the Ethiopian kingdom.

At the end of the 10th century, relations between Egypt and Ethiopia were restored when a new political crisis shook the kingdom. A queen, named Gudit, or Esāto in the Ethiopian tradition and described in Egyptian sources as the queen of the Banū l-Ham(u)wīya, waged war against the Christian kingdom, destroying churches. The Ethiopian king called upon George, the ruler of Nubia, to intercede on his behalf with the Egyptian patriarch to send a new metropolitan to Ethiopia. In the meanwhile, the queen killed the Ethiopian king. The patriarch Philotheus (979-1003) sent metropolitan Daniel to the Ethiopian kingdom, now governed by one Sayfa Arʿād.[19]

It would be in the wake of these crises that the Zāgʷē dynasty seized power, at the end of the 10th century. It is currently impossible to determine which version of events one should retain. They should not be conflated. In consequence, the chronology of the Zāgʷē dynasty remains unknown: their rise to power cannot be dated with certitude, nor is it possible to estimate the duration of their rule, or even to determine with any degree of certainty the number of kings belonging to this

[17] Conti Rossini, 1902: 374-375; Conti Rossini, 1922: 306; Kur, 1965: 27/22; Huntingford, 1965: 12; Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1970: 239-241.
[18] Atiya, Abd al-Masih, Burmester, 1948: 118-121.
[19] Atiya, Abd al-Masih, Burmester, 1948: 171-172.

dynasty. Nevertheless, the political crises of the 10th century perhaps enabled the emergence of a Christian elite, different from the royal Aksumite family, which eventually was able to gather enough momentum to defeat Queen Gudit and her probable allies, and restore a Christian kingdom able to receive a metropolitan from the Alexandrian patriarchate.

Contemporary sources and genealogical constructions

Who, then, was the first Zāgʷē king and when did he reign? In the current state of knowledge, Ṭanṭāwedem is still considered to be one of the first rulers of the Zāgʷē dynasty. He presented himself as the son of Murārā/Morārā, but it is not known if his father was a king. The reign of Ṭanṭāwedem was documented by contemporary sources: a cross, carrying an inscription, was found and is still preserved in the church of ʻUrā Masqal (Gelo Makada, Tegrē)[20].

> **ዘንተ፡ መዕተበ፡ አቅነይኩ፡ አነ፡ ሰሎሞን፡ ንጉሥ፡ ወልደ፡ ሙራራ፡ ወሰምየ፡ ጠንጣውድም፡**
> I acquired this cross (sign of the cross), myself Solomon, son of Murārā, and my name is Ṭanṭāwedem.

He also gave a manuscript to the church of Abbā Maṭṭāʻe of ʼAhām, now known as Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā, in the south of present day Eritrea. The binding of the manuscript, protected by a golden metal cover, carries an inscription bearing witness to the name of the donor:

> **ወአሰረኩ፡ ዘንተ፡ ግለ**(sic) **[ግላ]፡ — ወንጌል፡ አነ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ሰሎምን**(sic) **[ሰሎሞን]፡— ለቤተ፡ አባ፡ ምጠዕ፡ ዘአሀም።**[21]
> I, King Salomon, have had this cover of the gospels made for Bēta Abbā Meṭṭaʼe of Aham.

Finally, he richly endowed the church of Qefereyā/ʻUrā Masqal by granting it much land, including lands taken from a nearby Muslim community[22]. All this suggests that Ṭanṭāwedem was the founder of the church. These land grants were later written down and copied into a collection preserved in the church of ʻUrā Masqal. In these donations King Ṭanṭāwedem presents himself thus:

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[20] Chojnacki, 2006: 103, fig. 38.

[21] Conti Rossini, 1901: 181. Conti Rossini read the word as **ወአሰከኩ፡**, which is problematic. Photos of the manuscript in the Roger Schneider archives, preserved in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, show the correct reading to be **ወአሰረኩ፡**.

[22] The collection of land donations of King Ṭanṭāwedem is copied in a manuscript preserved in the church of ʻUrā Masqal Qefereyā in Gelo Makada (C3 IV 83; MG-2005.092:012-023). This manuscript has already been mentioned by Henze (2007: 158-159), who gave his photographs to Getatchew Haile. The manuscript is very small (12,8 x 9 cm); it counts 11 folios and has no cover. The script is likely to be later than the 16th century but it seems that the texts are authentic. The way exclusion rules are expressed in both these documents and in King Lālibalā's land donations preserved in the Gospel of Dabra Libānos and dated from the early 13th century, is common to those two documents and unknown to other texts.

አነ፡ ሐፀይ፡ ጠንጠውድም፡ ሰመ፡ ፡መንግሥትየ፡ ሳሎሞን፡ ወሰንየ፡ ገብረ፡ መድኅን፡ በ ፲ ወ ፪ ዓመተ፡ መንግሥትየ፡ አመ ፳፬ ፬፡ ለወርኀ፡ ሚያዝያ፡ ለመካነ፡ ቅፍርያ፡ ለቤተ፡ መስቀል፡

I, ḥaḍāy Ṭanṭawedem, whose regnal name is Salomon, and my surname (is) Gabra Madḫen, in the 12th year of my rule, on the 24th of *miyāzyā* and in the place named Qefereyā, at the church of the Cross…[23]

There is, therefore, no doubt that this was one king alone who, following the custom of the Aksumite kings, possessed three names: his regal name, Ṭanṭāwedem, his regnal name, Salomon, and his surname, Gabra Madḫen. While at the moment it remains impossible to determine during which period he reigned, one may propose an approximate date in the early 11th century.

The successor to Ṭanṭāwedem seems to have been Yemreḥanna Krestos. Only one later text, the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, discussed below, indicates his genealogical position. He is presented as being the son of Gerwā Śeyyum, a brother of Ṭanṭāwedem, who had another brother, Žān Śeyyum. The only chronological clues also come from his Life where it is reported that the king was visited by a patriarch from Alexandria named Qērlos (Cyril) and was later buried by another patriarch, Atnātēwos (Athanasius). However, another copy of the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, kept in his eponymous church, names Atnātēwos as the one and only patriarch who visited the Ethiopian king.[24] The list of Alexandrian patriarchs does include two ecclesiastics who succeeded each other at the head of the Coptic Church in the middle of the 13th century,[25] but this identification is problematic. Indeed, these two patriarchs succeeded John VI, who was a contemporary of King Lālibalā, the second successor of Yemreḥanna Krestos. Cyril III (Qērlos) held the position between 1235 and 1243, and Athanasius carried out his duties just after Cyril III, between 1250 and 1261.[26] These patriarchal visits to the Ethiopian king are not mentioned in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. Neither is it possible, as is sometimes the case, that the texts refer to the metropolitan (*ṗāppās*) and not to the patriarch (*liqa ṗāppās*), as no metropolitan of this name appears in the documentation.

This incomprehensible chronology can probably be explained by the type of the source: the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos was not compiled before the end of the 15th century, that is to say three or four centuries after the events described in it. Since there is doubt about the visits of the patriarchs Qērēllos and Atnātēwos to King Yemreḥanna Krestos, it is also questionable whether the genealogy presented in the Life is really authentic. Did Yemreḥanna Krestos inherit the throne of his

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[23] *Gult of Ṭanṭāwedem*, Church of ʿUrā Masqal, fol. 2v.

[24] *Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos*, Church of Yemreḥanna Krestos, fol. 31r, 37r. See also Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1970: 251; Munro Hay, 1997: 171-173.

[25] Chaine, 1925: 253. Another ecclesiastic bore the name of Cyril. It was Cyril II who held office between 1078 and 1092. But a patriarch named Athanasius did not succeed him.

[26] *Gadla Yemreḥanna Krestos*, Church of Yemreḥanna Krestos, fol. 31r, 37r.

uncle Ṭanṭāwedem directly, or were there other intermediary rulers, forgotten by history. The lack of firm documentation precludes any clear decision for now.

Power would then have been passed on to another nephew of Ṭanṭāwedem, the son of his younger brother Žān Śeyyum: King Ḥarbāy. Little is known about his rule. According to a later text, the Life of King Lālibalā, Ḥarbāy did all he could to prevent his own brother Lālibalā from assuming power, but finally abdicated in his favour. Dating the reign of Ḥarbāy poses the same difficulties as those of his predecessors. The only clue we have is a note inscribed in the Gospel of Mikā'ēl 'Ambā,[27] according to which the king contemporary with Mikā'ēl I was a certain Anbasā Wedem. Using another text preserved in Mikā'ēl 'Ambā, apparently a copy of the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, Éric Godet identifies this king with Ḥarbāy.[28] We also know that the regnal name of Ḥarbāy was Gabra Māryām.[29] Like Ṭanṭāwedem, he could have used a baptismal name, a regnal name and a surname, which could have been Anbasā Wedem. But all this is mere guesswork. The identification of Ḥarbāy with Anbasā Wedem implies exceptional longevity, as he would be the predecessor of Lālibalā, who is known still to have been reigning in 1225. The note from the Gospel of Mikā'ēl 'Ambā also states that the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I consecrated seven kings. This implies that Anbasā Wedem was only one of the rulers contemporary with the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I (who held office during the patriarchate of Gabriel, 1131-1146, and was still there in 1149-1150). The note from the Gospel of Mikā'ēl 'Ambā is written in a hyperbolic style: the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I declares there that he has consecrated seven kings, and also 1,009 churches and 27,000 priests. Consequently, while the numbers are perhaps not to be trusted, it is noteworthy that he knew several kings, of which one was Anbasā Wedem. It is also known that Mikā'ēl I had been designated metropolitan of Ethiopia by the patriarch Macarius (1103-1131) and that he was still in office at the time of John V (1146-1167), which suggests a long career in Ethiopia. In this case, unless we find the document mentioned by Éric Godet, or another of similar type, the identification between Anbasā Wedem and Ḥarbāy seems far from conclusive. There was probably much greater complexity to the succession of the throne of Yemreḥanna Krestos than was recorded in royal lists several hundred years after the overthrow of the Zāg^{w}ē dynasty.

Knowledge of the Zāg^{w}ē dynasty, reduced to the names of six rulers who reigned over nearly three centuries, is clearly incomplete. The case of Anbasā Wedem exemplifies the problem. Probably the most straightforward hypothesis is that Anbasā Wedem was not Ḥarbāy but another ruler. The question

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[27] *Gospel*, Church of Mikā'ēl 'Ambā, fol. 102r.

[28] Godet, 1988: 42-43. In spite of a thorough search, this manuscript has not been found.

[29] *Gadla Ḥarbāy*, Church of Ḥarbāy, fol. 9v. Gabra Masqal has long been considered the ruling name of Ḥarbāy, just like his brother and successor, Lālibalā (Conti Rossini, 1943: 115; Tedeschi, 1990: 336-338; Fiaccadori, 2005: 1031).

is whether Anbasā Wedem was the son or the nephew of Yemreḥanna Krestos, and how power was later transmitted to Ḥarbāy.

The reign of Lālibalā presents fewer problems because, just as for Ṭanṭāwedem, there are contemporary sources which refer to him. According to the Life of Lālibalā, he succeeded his own brother, Ḥarbāy. In the land grants of King Lālibalā, inscribed in the Gospel of Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā – the same manuscript for which King Ṭanṭāwedem provided the golden cover – the "titulature" of this king is given as follows:

> **አነ፡ሐፃኒ፡ ላሊባላ፡ ወስመ፡ መንግሥትየ፡ ገብረ፡ መስቀል፡** (...) **ወልደ፡ ሞራራ፡ ወልደ፡ ዛንሥዩም፡ ወልደ፡ አስዳ፡**[30]
>
> I, the *ḥaḍāni* Lālibalā, whose ruling name is Gabra Masqal (...) son of Morārā, son of ŽānŚeyyum, son of Assedā.

In contrast with the Lives of the two saint-kings, Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā, which claimed that those rulers were nephews of King Ṭanṭāwedem, that is to say cousins – the "titulature" of Lālibalā provides additional information. Here, he is confidently mentioned as a descendant of Morārā, who had two sons, Ṭanṭāwedem and a certain Žān Śeyyum. But Lālibalā is no longer the direct descendant of Žān Śeyyum, which lineage had made him a cousin of Yemreḥanna Krestos. He is introduced here as a direct descendant of Assedā while Žān Śeyyum is in the second position. This Assedā is not mentioned elsewhere. What was suspected about Anbasā Wedem and Ḥarbāy seems to be confirmed here: there must be at least an additional genealogical level between Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā.

According to the two land grants preserved in the Gospels of Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā, Lālibalā was reigning in the year of Mercy 1089 and in the year of Mercy 409 (1225 in the Gregorian calendar).[31] The first date is strange.[32] But internal elements of the text allow us to situate this first grant between 1203/1204 and 1208/1209, i.e. when metropolitan Mikāʾēl II was in charge in the Ethiopian kingdom.[33] The dates provided by these land grants agree with what is known about the Ethiopian kingdom and King Lālibalā from the note concerning Patriarch John VI (1189-1216) in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*.[34] Credence may also be given to a historical note introduced into some copies of the Life of Lālibalā as also in manuscripts kept in the churches of Lālibalā, declaring that Lālibalā began to

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[30] Conti Rossini, 1901: 186, 189.

[31] Conti Rossini, 1901: 186-191.

[32] Conti Rossini, 1901: 188 suggests to correct this date by reading 1209 instead of 1089 because the metropolitan Mikāʾēl II was sent to Ethiopia by the Sultan Malik al-Adil, who rose to power in 1205, and was expelled from Ethiopia after 1209.

[33] Mikāʾēl II was chased out from Ethiopia the fifth year of his sejourn. A new metropolitan, Yeshaq, was appointed by the Patriarch of Alexandria in 1210. So Mikāʾēl II was probably named in 1203/1204 and expelled in 1208/1209 (Perruchon, 1898-1899: 82; Khater & Burmester, 1970: 189).

[34] Perruchon, 1898-1899: 76-85; Khater & Burmester, 1970: 184-193.

reign in 1185 AD and that the churches which he dug out were finished in 1208 AD.[35]

For the last two rulers of the dynasty, Na'ākʷeto La'āb and Yetbārak, one must again turn to later texts. Na'ākʷeto La'āb is presented in his Life as the nephew of King Lālibalā, son of Ḫarbāy, and of Markēzā.[36] Yetbārak was the son of Lālibalā – which the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* confirms[37] – and he succeeded Na'ākʷeto La'āb, in 1250 according to a later text[38], whose own son had died at the age of three[39]. Yetbārak was the last Zāgʷē ruler,[40] bringing the descent to 1270, the date at which Yekunno Amlāk overthrew the Zāgʷē dynasty and seized power. It is at this time that Yekunno Amlāk makes a donation inscribed in the Gospel of Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā[41]. However, an act in this Gospel dated 1268 mentions another ruler called Delandā[42]. But did he belong to the Zāgʷē dynasty? It is common to consider him an adversary of the Zāgʷē, but there is no objective information to defend this view.

In summary, it remains extremely difficult to establish a list of the Zāgʷē kings and to determine their family ties. The use of later texts to fill in the gap inevitably leads to chronological inconsistencies. Only two rulers were really documented with precision: Ṭanṭāwedem, son of Morārā, and Lālibalā, also a son of Morārā, of Žān Śeyyum and of Assedā. And only one date is certain, corresponding to a donation of King Lālibalā to the church of abbā Maṭṭā'e of 'Ahām, in 1225.

Usurpers, Agaw, establishing their capital in Lāstā

As mentioned above, the successors of the Zāgʷē kings tended to present them as usurpers, and a break from the kings of Aksum because they were not of the Israelite family that represented the dominant power group in Ethiopia and, according to a tradition, resulted from the meeting between King Salomon and the Queen of Sheba and the birth of their son Menelik. The Life of King Yemreḥanna Krestos present a version of the rise and overthrow of the Zāgʷē, which reflects this idea in a way that suggests the Zāgʷē knew they were usurpers:

> "And when the blessed Yemreḥanna Krestos had prayed thus, Jesus-Christ came to him with many angels and he said to Yemreḥa: "Hail to you, my loved and chosen one! I shall give and do for you everything you ask of me".

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35 Et. Cerulli 223, Vatican Library, fol. 124v; EMML 6934 (*Gospel*, Church of Bēta Golgotā in Lālibalā), fol. 163v; EMML 6964 (*Gadla Lālibalā*, Church of Bēta Giyorgis in Lālibalā), fol. 132r. Tedeschi (1990: 339-340) discussed the date of birth of Na'ākʷeto La'āb, proposing to correct it from 338 – according to his *gadl* – to 388 (i.e. 1203-1204 AD).

36 Conti Rossini, 1943: 180.

37 Perruchon, 1898-1899: 85; Khater & Burmester, 1970: 193.

38 Kur, 1965: 20, 26 and the analysis of Tedeschi, 1994: 512.

39 Conti Rossini, 1943: 221-222.

40 Kur, 1965: 20, 26.

41 Conti Rossini, 1901: 194-195.

42 Conti Rossini, 1901: 193.

> Yemreḥa said to our Lord: "I ask of you one thing, my Lord: return this kingdom to Israel (...)". When he had thus spoken, the God of the mighty answered him and said: "Listen, my loved one, what I say to you: "(…) Because of a word that the king of Ethiopia spoke, and because he diminished my prestige, saying to one of his officers "But look at me when you speak of my power. You always say you have done these things by the power of the Lord. When will you say that you did them by the power of the king?" And after he had said that, I became angry with him. (...) So I took his kingdom and I gave it to him who wanted it. (...) There, it has been many years since I took it from them. I miss him a little now because the construction of my edifice is nearly finished, and because a great king shall be born, called Yekunno Amlāk; and I shall give it to him."[43]

A similar tradition figures in the Life of an Ethiopian saint, Yared, who was famous for his hymns and the contemporary fifth century King, Gabra Masqal. The author of this text, written after the 14th century, is identified as being an ecclesiastic from Aksum or from Dabra Dammo.[44] In the description of the miracles of Yared, he evokes the Zāgʷē. He explains that the last Israelite king was called Degnāyzān, who was outraged that the hymns addressed praises to the Lord without mention of the king. For this pride, Degnāyzān was punished: the kingdom was taken away from him and given to one of his servitors, Marārā, who founded the Zāgʷē dynasty. The author states implicitly that the Zāgʷē were not Israelites.[45] This theme of non-belonging to the house of Israel recurs again and again in the sources. It bolsters the illegitimacy of Zāgʷē rule and the legitimacy of their successors in seizing power. The idea is put forward particularly in the colophon of the *Kebra Nagaśt*. However the interpretation of this colophon is still problematic:

> "In the Arabic text it is said: "We have translated this book into Arabic from a Coptic manuscript belonging to the see of Mark the Evangelist, the master, our father. We have translated it in the 409th year of mercy (1225) in the country of Ethiopia, in the time of Gabra Masqal the king, who is called Lālibalā, in the time of Abbā Giyorgis, the good bishop. And God neglected to have it translated and interpreted in the language of Ethiopia". And then I thought of that: "Why do Abal'ez and myself, Abalfarog, who copied the

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[43] Marrassini, 1995: 90.

[44] Conti Rossini, 1904: 1.

[45] Conti Rossini, 1904: 21-22. This tradition concerning the advent to power of the Zāgʷē dynasty is not the only one. The tradition is slightly different in the Life of Iyasus Mo'ā, abbot of Dabra Ḫayq, who was one of the supporters of King Yekunno Amlāk. The Zāgʷē king deposed by Yekunno Amlāk is named Del Na'ad (and not Degnaǧān). He learnt from his soothsayers that the one who would marry his daughter Masoba Warq would receive the kingdom. Although he tried to hide his daughter, she was eventually seduced by a certain Takla Hāymānot (and not Marārā) belonging to the Hēpāṣā family. Masoba Warq married Takla Hāymānot and they fled to Lāstā where Takla Hāymānot fought his father-in-law, Del Na'ad, and seized power. The author of the Life of Iyasus Mo'ā concludes the story saying that the reign of the Zāgʷē dynasty lasted 373 years (Kur, 1965: 21-23).

> book, not translate it?" I say this: "it came out in the days of the Zagʷā and they would not have it translated because in the book it is said that: "Those who reign not being Israelites are transgressors of the Law". If they had been from the kingdom of Israel, they would have had it translated."[46]

The coherence of the dates and information given by the author of the colophon should be underlined. From the land grants of Lālibalā we know that his regnal name was indeed Gabra Masqal. He was ruling in 1225 and the Egyptian metropolitan of the time was known as Giyorgis. However, this coherence, which confirms that the author is indeed referring to King Lālibalā, whose chronology he has mastered, does not mean that the colophon tells the whole truth. For now, it may be noted that it was written after the fall of the Zāgʷē. They, furthermore, are presented as usurpers since the text declares that the Zāgʷē, not being Israelites, did not want the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba to be available in their kingdom because it promoted an Israelite origin for Ethiopian rulers.

The point raises the question of when the myth of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba concerning Ethiopia made its appearance. In Ethiopian texts, one cannot find earlier mention than the *Kebra Nagaśt*. But in Egyptian sources, the idea that Ethiopia was the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba appears as early as the 11th century. Indeed, in the *History of the churches and monasteries of Egypt and neighboring countries* (HCME), the association is made between Sheba and Ethiopia, and the editors add that the king of Ethiopia possesses the Ark of the Covenant. The principal elements that feature in the *Kebra Nagaśt* are, therefore, mentioned in an older Egyptian source. The HCME is a compilation undertaken by several authors: the first was Abū l-Makārim (end of the 11th - beginning of the 12th century), a Coptic ecclesiastic, who collected information from different sources, notably in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (HPA);[47] the second, perhaps Abū Ǧamil, who collected the documentation and put it together before the first quarter of the thirteenth century.[48] It seems that he did not finish his task and that the scribe who copied the work in 1338, and whose manuscript is the only one known today, tried to create some order in the collection.[49] He did not quite succeed, however, and indeed created some confusion, notably about Nubia and Ethiopia. The principal source used by the editors for Ethiopia is a note referring to the fifty-eighth patriarch of Alexandria, Cosmas III (921-933), in the HPA. The HCME's text is a nearly exact copy of it, as the following juxtaposition shows:

[46] Bezold, 1909: 138.
[47] Den Heijer, 1994: 419-420.
[48] Zanetti, 1995: 132.
[49] Zanetti, 1995: 132.

Biography of Cosmas III[50]

"Cosmas was consecrated patriarch after him (Gabriel), and there was manifested in his days a great (and) marvellous thing. This was that he consecrated a metropolitan from among the monks for the regions of Abyssinia, which is a vast country, namely, the kingdom of Saba from which the queen of the South came to Solomon, the son of David the king. If the king wished to tour through it, he would take a whole year making the tour, Sundays excepted, until he returned to his place. It is a country bordering upon India and the parts near to it. It is included in the see of my lord Mark the Evangelist up to our own day."

History of the churches and monasteries of Egypt[51]

"This country is under the jurisdiction of the see of Mark the Evangelist. Abyssinia is the same as the kingdom of Sheba, from which the queen of Al-Yaman came to Jerusalem, to hear words of wisdom from Solomon; and she offered him splendid gifts. When the king of Abyssinia wishes to make a tour of this country, he spends a whole year in going round it, traveling on all days except Sundays and the festivals of the Lord, until he returns to his capital city. Abyssinia is contiguous to India and the adjacent territory. A metropolitan is sent from the see of Mark the Evangelist to Abyssinia, from the patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt; and this metropolitan of the Abyssinians ordains priests and deacons for them."

The notice dedicated to Cosmas III was compiled at the end of the 11th century by Michael, Bishop of Tinnis,[52] and makes reference to a patriarch of the 10th century. This means that when the Zāgʷē were in power, at least in Egypt they were considered to be the heirs of the Queen of Sheba, the safe keepers of the Ark of the Covenant, which made Ethiopia the most glorious of all earthly kingdoms. Contrary to what the successors of the Zāgʷē asserted, the Solomonid ideology evidently existed in the kingdom of Ethiopia at least during the reigns of the Zāgʷē dynasty[53]. For example, Ṭanṭāwedem bore the name of Salomon and Yemreḥanna Krestos was called David. The so-called Solomonid no doubt appropriated the ideology to their advantage. And so it is that those who called themselves Solomonids, in a fashion, robbed their predecessors of the ideology, to suit their own ends.

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[50] Atiya, Abd al-Masih, Burmester, 1948: 118-119.

[51] Evetts, 1895: 284-286.

[52] Den Heijer, 1989: 9.

[53] This idea was already asserted by other scholars, see Tedeschi, "Reine de Saba". But, according to Tedeschi, the passage of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* dedicated to Cosmas III was written in the beginning of the 10th century, during the office of the said Patriarch. We now know that this notice was written more than one century later and that it was the direct source of the HCME.

Because texts produced after the fall of the Zāgʷē insist that they did not belong to the family of Israel, some scholars have tried to see how these kings differed from their predecessors and successors. In the Lives of Lālibalā and Na'ākʷeto La'āb, the authors made some observations on the language spoken by these rulers. In particular, they endeavour to provide an explanation for the name "Lālibalā," which they found mysterious since it has no significance in Ge'ez.[54] Further, describing a conversation between the king and his wife, the authors of the saints' Lives mention that the two were talking in the language of their country and translate their conversation into Ge'ez.[55] The same scholars construe this language to be Agaw – a Cushitic language spoken in what today is the north of Ethiopia.[56] Indeed, Lālibalā is not a Semitic name and is Agaw, perhaps, as are two other names that feature in the king's title: Morārā and Assedā.[57]

The second factor supporting the idea of Zāgʷē usurpation was that they chose a new region for their capital: Lāstā, where the churches they founded, in particular the Lālibalā complex, are located. In the land grant acts of King Lālibalā, this capital region is associated with "the worthies of Begʷenā," the officers of the kingdom who witnessed the acts.[58] This region coincides more or less with Lāstā which is south of Tegrē, that is to say south of the region which was the heart of the Aksumite kingdom.[59] According to the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, during the reign of Lālibalā the capital of the kingdom was a town known as Adafā, a place name that is commonly identified with a valley that lies below the churches of Lālibalā.[60] The information provided by the Egyptian chronicler appears especially valid here because the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos also situates the capital region of the regime in Adafā[61] As for the Life of Lālibalā, it situates the holy town of the king in Roḥa (identified in several documents with Warwar), understood to be the site where the churches of Lālibalā were excavated.[62] Everything, therefore, seems

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[54] Perruchon, 1892: 12/77-78. Conti Rossini proposed that the interpretation of Lālibalā's name in his *gadl*, as being "the bee has acknowledged his election", is linked to the etymology of Lālibalā in Agaw, which would signify "the son of the bee" (Conti Rossini, 1895: 356 note 3).

[55] Conti Rossini, 1943: 149/208.

[56] Today, Agaw populations represent four distinct groups distinguished by their dialects. The first group lives in the region where during the 12th century the Zāgʷē had established their power, Wag and Lāstā, and also in the south of Tegrē. Their Agaw speech has strong Semitic roots. Further north, in contemporary Eritrea, in the neighbourhood of Karan, a second group claims to have descended from Lāstā populations which would have migrated before the 14th century. They speak an Agaw language known as Bilin. The populations to the west of Lāstā up to Lake Tana represent the third group, among whom Kemant is spoken (west of Lake Tana). Finally, the last group occupies the south of Lake Tana (Agaw Meder and Damot) and uses Awiya.

[57] Conti Rossini, 1903: 326.

[58] Conti Rossini, 1901: 187, 190.

[59] Derat, 2009; Bosc- Tiessé, 2009.

[60] On which, see Taddesse Tamrat, 1972: 59 note 5. There is a valley that still bears the name of Adafā below the town of Lālibalā, eastwards, but no remains have so far testified that this area might have ever been the capital mentioned in historical texts.

[61] Marrassini, 1995: 44/80.

[62] Perruchon, 1892: 12/77, 52/118.

to indicate that the Zāgʷē dynasty founded a new regime in Ethiopia that was distinguished culturally and geographically from the Aksumite kingdom.

Continuity with Aksum

However, despite the tendency of historiographers after the Zāgʷē dynasty to present these rulers as foreigners, many elements seem to indicate that, on the contrary, this dynasty borrowed heavily from its predecessors and shared a common culture based on Christianity, the use of Ge'ez as a written language and a northern Ethiopian rooting. The first signs of continuity with the Aksumite kings are their titles. Following the custom of the kings of Aksum Ṭanṭāwedem is introduced with three distinct names, as we have already mentioned: his baptismal name Ṭanṭāwedem, his regnal name Salomon, and his surname, Gabra Madḫen.[63] The formula of personal name and regnal name is common to all the kings of Ethiopia, whatever the period. The title including a surname is more specific to Aksumite rulers, like King Kaleb whose surname is Ella Aṣbeḥā,[64] but it is also found in a mid-13th century document for a local dignitary who also bears a surname.[65] In addition, the following expression can be found in the land grants of King Lālibalā:

> "I, the *ḥaḍāni* Lālibalā whose regnal name is Gabra Masqal, a courageous man who remains undefeated by his enemies through the power of the Cross of Jesus Christ, son of Morārā, son of Žān Śeyyum, son of Assedā."[66]

Remarkably, the kings of Aksum used a very similar title in their inscriptions:

> "Ezana, son of Ella Amidā, the man of Halen, king of Aksum, (...), son of Ella-Amidā, undefeated by enemies. By the power of the Lord of the sky who gave me the throne, the Lord of the universe in whom I believe, I, the king who is not vanquished by the enemy, let no enemy lie in front of me and no enemy follow me."[67]

This form not only shows a strong will to ensure continuity with the Aksumite kings, but also demonstrates a very good knowledge of these inscribed titles, most of which have been found in Aksum. For example, King Zar'a Yā'eqob (1434-1468), whose fondness and seeking out of the Aksumite kings' practices and rituals, copied or reinvented,[68] does not reuse this "titulature". It would seem that the Zāgʷē kings provided something much stronger than a simple, slavish copying of Aksumite titles.

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[63] See supra.
[64] Riėth 191/7-8
[65] Conti Rossini, 1901: 193. It is the land grant of Seyyum of Dabra Mā'eṣo who is called Meslenä Egzi'e, "my birth name (*ledätyä*)" and Ḥarisay "my surname (*sägʷayä*)". This land grant can be dated to the rule of Delanda, in 1268.
[66] Conti Rossini, 1901: 186, 189.
[67] Bernand et al., 1991: 262-267, here 263. Inscription also translated by Anfray, 1990 : 76.
[68] Hirsch & Fauvelle-Aymar, 2001.

Culturally, the Zāgʷē are much closer to the Aksumite kings than it might seem at first sight, because of their attachment to the Tegrē region. There are several clues as to the extent of their link to Tegrē. King Lālibalā married a woman who was a member of the Tegrē aristocracy and who bore the title "Lady of Bihat". Bihat is an important place in Šemazānā, in the south of what is now Eritrea, near Guna Guna.[69] The church of Dabra Libānos, where a manuscript of the gospel preserves land grants made by King Lālibalā, is also in the region of Šemazānā. Slightly to the south, lies the church of ʿUrā Masqal Qefereyā where all Ṭanṭāwedem's gults are conserved. These two sites are close to each other, so close that one can see Dabra Libānos of Šemazānā from the church of ʿUrā Masqal. All these factors seem to point to northern roots for a Zāgʷē dynasty that was previously thought to have originated in Lāstā.

Moreover, even if Begʷenā, that is to say Lāstā, seems to have been the base of Zāgʷē power, those whom Lālibalā's land grants present as the "Grandees of Begʷenā" did not wield authority in this region only. Those dignitaries, numbering eighteen in both land grants, are mostly recorded by the positions they hold, in particular religious positions (priest of the king or archdeacon) but also secular (bearer of perfume, master of ceremonies). But some dignitaries occupied posts which were regionally grounded: such is the case of the *aqqābē saʿāt* of ʾAhām, the superior of the church in Šemazānā; of the *qaysa gabaz Ṣeyon*, the superior of the church in Aksum; of the *liqa* Baryā, probably the chief of the Baryā populations, who occupy the area north east of today's Eritrea;[70] and of the *maʾekala baḫer*, whose location is also found in the northern part of the kingdom.[71] All this suggests that the expression "worthies of Begʷenā" should perhaps be understood differently: not as dignitaries of the region of Begʷenā, but as dignitaries of the State known as Begʷenā. The hypothesis is that the kingdom of Ethiopia was then the kingdom of Begʷenā, and Begʷenā was much more than just a region.

Finally, even if the Zāgʷē were descended from an Agaw group, they had nevertheless mastered the language and culture of their predecessors, Geʾez. All the known documents of the Zāgʷē administration are compiled in Geʾez. What is more, if Geʾez is tinged by another language, it is not by Agaw but by other Semitic languages spoken in the north of the kingdom: Tegrē and Tegreñña. This is particularly true in the donations of King Ṭanṭāwedem in favor of the church of ʿUrā Masqal, where these three languages are intermingled both in vocabulary[72] and sentence structure.[73] It follows that if the Agaw identity of the Zāgʷē was used by their successors to argue that they were usurpers, that argument was weak. Culturally, the Zāgʷē seem indistinguishable from their predecessors: they used Geʾez in the administration of the kingdom and, especially, they were Christians

[69] Mordini, 1961: 131.
[70] Conti Rossini, 1895: 35-45.
[71] Kropp, 1994: 5 note 34.
[72] We find a lot of Tegreñña terms in the text: **ከረኑ፡ ክሳደዕ፡**...
[73] Tegreñña sentence structure: **ዘሐርመት፡ ምድረ፡**

acknowledged by the Patriarchs of Alexandria as worthy of being sent metropolitans. They wielded power over Begʷenā but also were strongly rooted in Tegrē. In reality they were much closer to the Aksumite kings than to their successors, who were known as the Solomonids.

Yemreḥanna Krestos, a priest and a king

After the reign of Ṭanṭāwedem, which was documented by a collection of land grants, it is not until the reign of Yemreḥanna Krestos that textual sources provide further information concerning the Zāgʷē rulers. However, there is a deep and essential difference between the archival documents relating to the rule of Ṭanṭāwedem, which were produced in his own lifetime, and of those for King Yemreḥanna Krestos. He is only known by a late text, composed at the end of the 15th century, which told his Life when he was already considered a saint of the Ethiopian Church, and also by the note dedicated to him in the *synaxary,* which borrows heavily from the Life.[74] This note features in only one known copy of the *synaxary*, that kept in the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos.[75] The short text does not provide us with any new information about the saint-king. It reiterates the factors that constituted his sainthood: he was a priest and he married only one woman. The restitution of the kingdom to the children of Israel is announced. The text concludes with the essential elements for his worship: the location of his tomb, Wagra Seḫin, and the date of his death, 19th of *ṭeqemt*.

In the mid-16th century, Francisco Alvares, the chaplain of the Portuguese Embassy, who had come to visit King Lebna Dengel (1508-1540), recounted his two-day visit to the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos, where he witnessed a pilgrimage to the tomb of the saint-king. He added an extremely interesting detail, that he saw the manuscript in which the Life of the saint-king had been copied, which obviously implies that a copy was kept in this place at the beginning of the 16th century, although that copy has never been seen again. What is more, this copy bore illustrations, as Alvares describes a painting at the beginning of the work showing the king as a priest celebrating mass, with a hand bearing him bread and wine through a window.[76] Thus all we have of King Yemreḥanna Krestos are texts and a testimonial to the cult accorded him after his death, and very little about his reign.

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[74] The notice on the saint king included in the synaxary of Yemreḥanna Krestos' church is a compilation of the end of his *gadl* corresponding to Marrassini, 1995: 46, 48, 53, 60).

[75] Photographs were taken in 2008 during fieldwork with Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Emmanuel Fritsch. The two editions of the *synaxary* only mention the commemoration of King Yemreḥa/Yemrḥa on the 19th *ṭeqemt*, without adding any details (Budge, 1928: 170; Colin, 1987a: 108/109).

[76] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 204; on this subject, see Bosc- Tiessé, 2009: 93.

The Life of the saint-king: elements of chronology

In the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, a prediction was announced to King Ṭanṭāwedem that a man named Yemreḥa would succeed him. Ṭanṭāwedem lived in the region of Begʷenā and had two brothers, the oldest being Gerwā Śeyyum and the youngest Žān Śeyyum. Shortly after the prophecy was made, the wife of Gerwā Śeyyum gave birth to a boy for whom royal stature was foretold. He was named Yemreḥanna Krestos. He lived for some time alongside his uncle until Ṭanṭāwedem, unable to endure the idea that his own sons would not succeed him, sent the young man back to his parents. Since he now faced the threat of assassination on the orders of Ṭanṭāwedem, his parents advised Yemreḥanna Krestos to take flight. First, he went to visit the metropolitan who ordained him deacon, after which he wandered from desert to desert. He married a woman named Qeddest Hezba, who is described as being of levitic origin. Thereafter, he became a priest.

One day, as he was celebrating mass, God informed him that he would become king and that his regnal name would be David, and anointed him with the Myron of royalty. He entreated him to return home with his wife, guided by the archangel Raphael. During the voyage, Yemreḥanna Krestos performed miracles: he cured a blind man, exorcised a woman possessed by the devil and resolved a conflict between two brothers. Then the news of the death of Ṭanṭāwedem reached him and the prophecy was fulfilled. He was led to the Adafā region to reign, where he advised his subjects to marry only one woman and not to believe in soothsayers. He continued to carry out his sacerdotal duties, celebrating mass, to the despair of some of his subjects who complained that he did not conduct himself as a king should, that is to say by marrying several women and going hunting. Then he erected a church at Wagra Seḫin to house his future sepulchre and God made a pact (*kidān*) with him, promising that those who prayed at his tomb in his name would enjoy a blessed life by his side for one thousand years. To embellish the church, he brought wooden shutters from Egypt and alabaster for the windows. Its fame was such that a patriarch of Alexandria named Qērlos (Cyril) and/or Atnātēwos (Athanasius) visited to pay it homage. Before Yemreḥanna Krestos died, God asked what he would like. He answered that he wished the kingdom of Ethiopia to be returned to Israel and so God declared that he would give it back to the one who was known as Yekunno Amlāk. Then, the king left his capital to seek gold to complete his church. He died during his travels on the 19th of *ʿeqemt*. His troops transported him to Wagra Seḫin, where he was buried by the patriarch Atnātēwos.

If we are to believe the little concrete information revealed by the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos himself, he was the son of Gerwā Śeyyum, and the nephew of Ṭanṭāwedem, whom he had succeeded. Together with the names of the patriarchs of Alexandria who visited the king, Qērlos and/or Atnātēwos, these are the only chronological indicators available. They are indeed insufficient to enable one to

pinpoint the exact period during which Yemreḥanna Krestos ruled. As previously implied, the meeting between Yemreḥanna Krestos and the patriarchs Qērlos and/or Athanasius creates a chronological dilemma. For now, the chronology remains vague. It places the reign of Yemreḥanna Krestos before that of Lālibalā, that is to say probably during the 12th century.

There is one last clue, difficult in the end to comprehend. At the conclusion of the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, the hagiographer explains briefly how and when he wrote his text. While visiting the tomb of the saint-king, he had been surprised to learn that the monarch's life story had not yet been told. After he had rested for a while, Yemreḥanna Krestos appeared to him and recounted the details. The author finishes his tale thus: "The length of his life was of 97 year of (lunar[77]?) months. From that moment until the reign of Eskender, there are 754 years".[78] Without doubt, the hagiographer is making reference here to King Eskender (1478-1494). From this statement alone it is justifiable to think that the Life of the saint-king was compiled during the reign of that ruler, that is to say at the end of the 15th century, although the computation cited seems widely off the mark. However, and despite any possible chronological disparity, the indication that the Life could have been written during the reign of Eskender seems plausible and, as evidenced below, can go a long way to explaining the nature of the text.

Indeed, the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos suffers from a general vagueness, seen in all essential aspects such as the name of his mother, the place where his parents live and where Ṭanṭāwedem reigns, or the places that Yemreḥanna Krestos visits before becoming king. It is unknown whether or not Yemreḥanna Krestos and his wife, Qeddest Hezba, had any children, nor do we know who succeeded him. Even the name of the metropolitan who ordained Yemreḥanna Krestos as a deacon is not mentioned. Compared to other lives of saints redacted shortly after the death of the main character, like the lives of Giyorgis of Saglā[79] or of Walatta Ṗēṭros,[80] where historical details are abundant even when serving a hagiographical purpose, the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos seems extremely poorly composed. This point only serves to confirm the belated nature of the text.

The only relatively precise information contained in the text concerns the construction of a church at Wagra Seḫin, that can be identified as the church currently known as Yemreḥanna Krestos, and the region to which the hagiographer relocates the rule of the saint-king. He was in the region of Say, in Begʷenā,[81] when

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[77] The editor of the text adds this precision. The Ge'ez text does not confirm if it is a lunar month or not. Be this as it may, it does not change much when it comes down to the length of Yemreḥanna's Krestos's life. Lunar months are either 29 or 30 days, and one counts twelve per year. There is a difference of 11 days every 30 lunar years.

[78] Marrassini, 1995: 63/93.

[79] Colin, 1987b.

[80] Ricci, 1970.

[81] Marrassini, 1995: 32/71.

he heard of the death of Ṭanṭāwedem. Named king, he was led to Adafā, which is introduced as his capital.[82] He built a first church at Zāzyā[83] before founding the one in Wagra Seḫin, also known as Geṣat.[84] Only two of these place names are familiar: Begʷenā, which is more or less the region now known as Lāstā,[85] and Adafā, presumably situated in this same region. But we know nothing more about this town or about the Begʷenā region during the 12th century, while Yemreḥanna Krestos was ruling.

The interpretation and understanding of the context and content of these Lives of the saint-king has long challenged the historian. Ever since the work of Carlo Conti Rossini, however, it has been agreed that this is a late text, composed after the 14th century.[86] The first editor, Paolo Marrassini, did not offer a definite opinion, but noted passages in the Life of the saint that are very similar to Ethiopian texts which have been dated with more certainty. He was able to show that the hagiographer used an image also found in a work attributed to Giyorgis of Saglā and completed in 1424.[87] So, in all probability, the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos was produced even later. This dating is confirmed by another event in the life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, the meeting between the king and the patriarch Cyril.

The latter came to pay homage to the Zāgʷē king, announcing to him that Ethiopia has been chosen by God, that it was the share given to Mary, and that on its throne neither a Jew nor a pagan could reign, but only an Orthodox king. The patriarch adds that the divine election of Ethiopia could be read from three testimonials. One of them relates to a miracle that took place in Jerusalem. During the vigil of Easter, lamps full of oil had been placed in the Sacred Places. Only the

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82 Marrassini, 1995: 44/80.

83 Marrassini, 1995: 45/81.

84 Marrassini, 1995: 49/83; 51/85. Today, the ecclesiastics of the region situate Zazya, Wagra Seḫin and Yemreḥanna Krestos in the same space. Wagra Seḫin appears in the Life of another saint-king of the Zāgʷē dynasty, those of Na'ākʷeto La'āb (13th c., successor of Yemreḥanna Krestos and of Lālibalā). This also is a church that the king had built and in which he was buried (Conti Rossini, 1943: 222). The hagiographer associates this place with another, called Ašeten (Conti Rossini, 1943: 206; Marrassini, 1995: 85, note 103 noticed this detail), identified today with Ašeten Māryām. Ašeten Māryām which could be the Wagra Seḫin of King Na'ākʷeto La'āb is not situated at Yemreḥanna Krestos. Although the two sites are relatively close, everything leads us to believe that there were two very different sites, which shared the same name.

85 Derat, 2009; Bosc- Tiessé, 2009.

86 Concerning the dating of the Lives of the Zāgʷē kings, see in particular the articles of Conti Rossini, 1896-1897: 156; Conti Rossini, 1901: 188; Cerulli, 1961: 84; Heldman, 1995: 36 and Derat, 2006: 561-568.

87 As noted by P. Marrassini (1995: 75 note 60), Yemreḥanna Krestos would have preached a homily very directly inspired by the apocrypha on the Creation, the Book of Jubilees. In an extract from the homily, as reported by the hagiographer, he spoke of the curse of the serpent, condemned to slither on its stomach whereas before it was like a camel. This legend does not feature in the Book of Jubilees but is, however, presented in a very similar format in the Book of Mysteries of Giyorgis of Saglā, completed in 1425.

lamps of the Ethiopians were miraculously alight, while those of the other churches remained dark. Jealously, the monks from the other churches asked the patriarch to chase the Ethiopians from Jerusalem. But when the next Easter vigil came, no lamp could be lit. Therefore, in order for the miracle to take place once more, they went in search of the bones of an Ethiopian and then thrice marched around the tomb of Christ carrying them, and then the lamps were lit.[88]

In the *Book of the Miracles of Mary*, a quite similar tale to that told in the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos can be found, even if some events are presented differently.[89] The said passages of the Miracles of Mary dedicated to Ethiopia were written down between the reigns of Dāwit (1379/80-1412) and that of Zar'a Yā'eqob (1438-1468). Also noteworthy is the fact that in 1442-1443, King Zar'a Yā'eqob sent a letter to the Ethiopian community of Jerusalem, a letter that accompanied a work that he was sending to them (the *Sēnodos*). Amongst other things, he said:

> And also light lamps for me: one in the tomb of our Lord, one at its door, one to the right, and one to the left (of the sepulchre), three where he was wrapped in linens, one where he saw Magdalena, three in our chapel, and then three more in the sepulchre of Our Lady Mary at Gethsemane, one where our Lord was born in Bethlehem and one at the place of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. Light them for me always, never allow them to go out and never accept money from other people to light them![90]

The coincidence that the tale of the miracle of the lamps in Jerusalem was featured at the same time in the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos, in the *Book of the Miracles of Mary*, and in the letter of Zar'a Yā'eqob provides convincing argument that the text concerning the miracle and the letter were composed in the same period. It is, therefore, quite possible that the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos were compiled at this time or later. The reference to the rule of Eskender (1478-1494) at the end of the saint-king's Life seems therefore authentic and provides a plausible date for the completion of this text.

This information is not without importance: the figure of King Yemreḥanna Krestos, as it is outlined in his Life, is that of a champion of Orthodoxy, recognized as such by the patriarch of Alexandria, both as king and priest, and finally as a partisan of legitimacy, since he is determined to restore the kingdom to the children of Israel. The historical Yemreḥanna Krestos disappears behind the saintly image, and he is presented as a saint-king.

The question of sacerdotal royalty

As previously noted, the royal function disappears into the background and prominence is given in the Life to the qualities that made him a saint. Amongst

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[88] Marrassini, 1995: 88-89; Cerulli, 1943b: 129-136. On the identification of this episode, see Fiaccadori, 2004: 37-40.

[89] Cerulli, 1943b: 131-133.

[90] Cerulli, 1943a: 237-238.

these, his ordination as a priest before becoming king is central.[91] He was called a priest-king (*qasis negus*)[92]. He was ordained a deacon and then a priest before becoming king. The hagiographer describes him baptizing new converts or celebrating Mass. After his enthronement, he retained his priestly status, which allowed him to celebrate Mass. Some of his subjects considered him to be a less-than-complete ruler because he embraced the habits of monks, had only one wife and did not go on hunting expeditions.

Of all of the rulers of the Zāgʷē dynasty who are recognized as saints, only Yemreḥanna Krestos is described as being a priest-king. The sainthood of his successor, Lālibalā, rests more particularly on his asceticism, even more meritorious since he was a king, and on the model of Christ[93]. Na'ākʷeto La'āb is sometimes called a priest (*kāhen*) but according to the author of his Life, he did not receive ordination as a priest but was only a deacon.[94] Egyptian documentation seems to confirm the existence in Ethiopia of a sacerdotal monarchy. Notably, in the HCME, previously mentioned, one reads:

> "All of the kings of Abyssinia are priests and they celebrate the liturgy inside the sanctuary for as long as they rule without having killed a man with their own hands, but after having killed a man, they can no longer celebrate the liturgy."[95]

As early as 1895, Evetts, the editor of this text, noted in the chapter on Nubia that the author of the HCME presented the Nubian rulers similarly,[96] using the same words:

> "All of them are priests and they celebrate the liturgy inside the sanctuary for as long as they rule without having killed a man with their own hands, but after having killed a man, they can no longer celebrate the liturgy."[97]

The author of these sentences was well aware of this repetition as he cut short his description of the sacerdotal monarchy of Ethiopia, referring to what he had already written about Nubia, saying: "The limits that are imposed on them after killing a man have already been exposed in this book."[98] The source of this information has not been found, which makes it difficult to interpret this text on a sacerdotal monarchy in Ethiopia and/or Nubia. Therefore, one cannot use the HCME to confirm the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos.

If one were to consider this figure of *rex sacerdos* as a hagiographic trope, it would diminish the effort of our hagiographer whose plans were probably much more ambitious. By making reference to the model of Melchisedech, the

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91 Marrassini, 1995: 67-85.
92 Marrassini, 1995: 85 (text: 51).
93 Perruchon, 1892: 115-117; 68, 80, 84.
94 Conti Rossini, 1943: 185 (text: 122), 200.
95 Evetts, 1895: 286.
96 Evetts, 1895: 272 note 2, 286 note 3.
97 Evetts, 1895: 272.
98 Evetts, 1895: 286.

hagiographer places Yemreḥanna Krestos in the same league as those Byzantine emperors who summoned the great councils.[99] That Yemreḥanna Krestos had a mission to carry out is several times mentioned in the Life. It is recorded that just before the saint became king, people murmured while praying: "As for us, we heard from our fathers that during the rule of Yemreḥa the faith would be Orthodox, and under his rule, the people of Rome shall submit to those from Ethiopia!"[100] This prophecy came true as the reputation of Yemreḥanna Krestos spread so far that many believers from Rome came to him, as did the patriarch of Alexandria, abbā Qērlos (Cyril), who declared to the king, while prostrating himself before him:

> "Blessed be the country of Ethiopia, by the word of Ethiopia, and by the mouth of Our Lady Mary, because this remoteness is the share allotted to Mary. Neither a Jew nor a pagan will rule over them, but (only) one on an Orthodox throne who has a straight faith. Listen to what I am telling you, your country will be glorified more than all other countries[101]".

And the hagiographer concluded with these words: "Beyond everything else, the people of Rome submitted to him."[102] 'Rome' here stands for 'Byzantium' and the submission of Byzantium concerns the schism produced by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Yemreḥanna Krestos embodies the Ethiopian king who succeeded, after several centuries of separation, in making the Byzantines recognize what was the only true Orthodoxy in the eyes of the Ethiopians, that of the anti-Chalcedonians. The patriarch Cyril's actions stemmed from this when he acknowledged the Ethiopian ruler as the guide of the non-Chalcedonian Christians. The submission of Rome to Ethiopia and the acknowledgement of its Orthodoxy echo other well-known Christian apocalyptic texts, especially the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius.[103] The text closest to the form followed in the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos is a letter of Pisuntios, bishop of Qeft in the eighth century, and dated to the 10th century.[104] An identical story can be found in a Ge'ez text, The *Visions of Shenoute* (*Rā'eya Sinodā*),[105] although its date of composition and/or translation is unknown. It seems quite certain, however, that this text was known in the kingdom of Ethiopia at the beginning of the 15th century. Moreover, Giyorgis of Saglā, a great Ethiopian theologian and court ecclesiastic, in his most

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[99] As Gilbert Dagron wrote, "the priesthood of Melchisedech's order [possesses] an intrinsic character, conferred directly by God to a 'righteous king' for a great historic mission. The emperor may not be a specialist of the sacred things, but he is invested with a superior order of priesthood" (Dagron, 1996: 189).

[100] Marrassini, 1995: 79.

[101] Marrassini, 1995: 88.

[102] Marrassini, 1995: 90.

[103] Martinez, 1990: 247-248.

[104] Perier, 1914: 320-321.

[105] This apocalypse is known only in its Ge'ez version (Grohmann, 1913: 187-267).

famous book, the *Book of the Mystery* (*Maṣḥafa Mesṭir*), completed in 1424, refers to a part of this vision of abbā Sinodā (Ge'ez for Shenoute).[106]

This means that, at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, apocalypses making reference to the role to be played by the kings of Ethiopia and Rome at the end of time were known in the Ethiopian kingdom and used to prove its superiority to the other Christian faiths, a superiority born of its faithfulness to the council of Nicea. It is also known (see supra) that the author of the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos was familiar with the works of Giyorgis of Saglā. The Ethiopian king who will achieve the return of the king of Rome to the council of Nicea is, therefore, identified with Yemreḥanna Krestos. Such identification with a real ruler is quite exceptional in Ethiopian literature. Among the names of rulers given in the apocalypses, who might possibly become "the Orthodox king of Ethiopia", one finds names that do not necessarily refer to a ruler who actually reigned: Teyoda in the *Visions of Shenoute*[107] or Tewodros in the *Explanation of Jesus* (*Fekkarē Iyasus*).[108]

King Yemreḥanna Krestos in a mural from the church of Yadibbā Māryām
(photograph: Claire Bosc-Tiessé, 2008)

It is in this context that the *rex sacerdos* status attributed to Yemreḥanna Krestos in the hagiographic text dedicated to him is to be understood. This saint-king incarnates the eschatological hope of reuniting the Byzantine Church with the Churches of Alexandria and Ethiopia. For that reason, he is presented as the bearer

[106] Yaeqob Beyene, 1990: 75-77.
[107] Grohmann, 1913: 255.
[108] Basset, 1909: 25-26. The period during which this apocalypse was translated from Arabic into Ge'ez is not known, but the oldest manuscripts date to the 15th century (BnF Abbadie 111 et Abbadie 134, cf. Conti Rossini, 1914: 51-53, 72-74).

of a higher sacerdocy. In all probability, this eschatological hope is not linked to the reign of Yemreḥanna Krestos himself, but rather to the period when this Life were written, the end of the 15th century. And it is indeed from the end of the 15th century, that we can date the oldest known representation of the saint-king: a mural in the rock-hewn church of Yadibbā Māryām, in Dawent. The caption of the painting also establishes the monarch's double role: "Image of King Yemreḥa, priest (*qasis*) and king (*negus*)".[109]

The successors of Yemreḥanna Krestos

As previously indicated, the Life does not mention whether Yemreḥanna Krestos had children, or who succeeded him. A reconstruction of his succession must, therefore, be obtained from other documents. Francisco Alvares mentioned that the king had descendants and, from oral information he collected at the beginning of the 16th century, learnt that the sepulchre of his daughter was erected near his tomb.[110] The chaplain of the Portuguese Embassy then adds a surprising piece of information. He reports that it was revealed to the king that he must imprison all his children, except for the eldest, in order for his kingdom to remain peaceful.[111] This is not found anywhere in the Life of the saint-king. The tradition described must, therefore, have been transmitted orally. The practice of locking up all heirs to the throne, except for the chosen successor, is often mentioned in the sources, but it is hard to date the beginning of this practice.[112] If we are to believe Alvares, it began during the rule of Yemreḥanna Krestos, which reveals that there was conflict over his succession, perhaps even before his death.

The Life of Lālibalā finally provided a watered down version of the story. Lālibalā held power after his own brother, Ḥarbāy. Both were sons of Žān Śeyyum, who was an uncle of Yemreḥanna Krestos. Thus, it is generally considered that Ḥarbāy was the successor of Yemreḥanna Krestos, although the evidence is insufficient. King Ḥarbāy is not well known because of a dearth of documentation. It is all the more difficult to locate documents concerning him, as the precise period when he ruled remains unknown. There is an entry in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, dedicated to the patriarch Gabriel (1131-1146), recounted by a witness from the 12th century.[113] In it, mention is made of an Ethiopian ruler who requested, using the current metropolitan Mikā'ēl I as an intermediary, that more

[109] Bosc-Tiessé, 2009: 92-94.
[110] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 204.
[111] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 204.
[112] Derat, 2003: 24-29.
[113] Den Heijer, 1983: 108. This episode also features in the *synaxary*, dated to the 10th of *miazya*. The copy of the *synaxary* found in the Church of Ḥarbāy, in Lāstā, recounts this episode (photographs of the text were taken by Emmanuel Fritsch in May 2008) A copyist has added with red ink in the margin of the text, the name of the Ethiopian king, which is not given in the text of the *synaxary* or in the text of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. He adds 'Gabra Māryām, Ḥarbāy' every time the word *negus* appears.

bishops be named by the patriarch in Ethiopia. The patriarch refused, saying that the Ethiopians could then name an archbishop thus bypassing the patriarchate of Alexandria.[114] Sergew Hable Sellassie identifies Ḥarbāy with this Ethiopian ruler and even interprets this event as an attempt by Ḥarbāy to separate himself from the Alexandrian Church.[115] However, the only piece of information that is verifiable concerns Metropolitan Mikā'ēl I. In the historical note kept in the Gospel of Mikā'ēl 'Ambā, Metropolitan Mikā'ēl I was still carrying out his duties in 1149-1150. As previously pointed out, the king then mentioned bore the name of Anbasā Wedem.

The account of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* concerning the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I does not stop there. As stated above, the successor of Gabriel, the patriarch John V, received a letter from the king of Ethiopia asking for the consecration of a new metropolitan, while the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I was still active in the kingdom, but deemed too old for his office. The ensuing dispute was only resolved following the death of the Egyptian vizier, Abbas, which occurred shortly after 1150.[116] The date of his death situates this episode sufficiently to conclude that the name of the Ethiopian king of the time was probably Anbasā Wedem, because it was in 1149/1150 that the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I wrote he was in power. The circumstances suggest that the metropolitan Mikā'ēl I did not consider Anbasā Wedem legitimate. These elements only reinforce the aura of complexity around the succession of the Zāg^{w}ē kings and encourage the present writer to leave these questions untouched, rather than try to reconcile this information with the royal lists.

In the 15th century Life of Lālibalā, Ḥarbāy is said to have renounced his throne and abandoned power in favour of his brother Lālibalā. This story probably conceals a much more troubled succession, as has been observed by all scholars of the period. It may also conceal other questions. Indeed, in the land grants preserved in the Gospel of Dabra Libānos, King Lālibalā presents himself as the descendant of Žān Śeyyum, but introduces the name of Assedā into his genealogy,[117] making Žān Śeyyum no longer his father, but his grandfather, or at least on the same genealogical level as his grandfather. The family link between Ḥarbāy and Lālibalā is, therefore, not as clear as previously thought.

No document contemporary with King Lālibalā gives the name of his successor, and neither does the hagiography that is dedicated to him. Another life of a saint-king, that of Na'āk^{w}eto La'āb, asserts that the latter succeeded Lālibalā, more or less in the same circumstances as Lālibalā himself had assumed power: he renounced the throne in favor of his nephew, the son of his brother Ḥarbāy. It is also known, particularly from the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*,[118] that Lālibalā had two

[114] Khater & Burmester, 1968: 56-57.
[115] Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1970: 251-254.
[116] Khater & Burmester, 1970: 90-91.
[117] Conti Rossini, 1901: 186, 189.
[118] Khater & Burmester, 1970: 193.

sons, one of whom, named Yetbārak in the royal lists, succeeds Na'ākʷeto La'āb. However, what is known of this succession comes from late sources which underline internal conflicts in the dynasty, probably between several branches of the dynasty itself. The title of Lālibalā is very revealing: it evokes Morārā, ascendant and predecessor of Ṭanṭāwedem, but does not place Ṭanṭāwedem among Lālibalā's predecessors. It seems that, although there was perhaps a system in which the rulers would succeed each other from uncle to nephew because of their Agaw identity,[119] there were conflicts of interest regarding succession inside the same family. Ultimately, decisions were not made according to a system, but rather to what the following dynasty was to experience: succession conflicts.[120]

It was perhaps these repeated conflicts that weakened the Zāgʷē dynasty and enabled a man from a southern region, Amḥārā, to seize the kingdom very early on, and impose his authority on the territory previously governed by the Zāgʷē.[121] Yekunno Amlāk challenged the last of the Zāgʷē rulers, Yetbārak, a son of Lālibalā,[122] and overcame him in 1270, as attested by a land grant renewed at this date by Yekunno Amlāk and preserved in the gospel of Dabra Libānos.[123] This document also reveals the wish of the new ruler to edge out the Zāgʷē by wielding his power over their territory. He, therefore, renewed a land grant allotted by Lālibalā fifty years earlier. He also had a monolithic church carved out of the rock in the same fashion as some of the churches on the site of Lālibalā, and had himself represented in a mural therein.[124] Later sources that document Yekunno Amlāk's power grab represent him as the "restorer" of the monarchy,[125] thereby implying that the Zāgʷē had been usurpers. The 14th century *Kebra Nagaśt* is the first historiography to circulate with negative undertones concerning the Zāgʷē dynasty. This theme is repeated in the lives of saints linked to the Solomonid dynasty, for instance those of Takla Hāymānot or Iyasus Mo'ā, the former written down at the beginning of the 15th century,[126] and the latter after the 16th century.[127] However, in spite of their reputation as usurpers, the Zāgʷē finally achieved an image of

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[119] Taddesse Tamrat, 1972: 60; Marrassini, 1990; 1994; 1995: 1-21.

[120] Taddesse Tamrat, 1972: 60-64; Taddesse Tamrat, 1974.

[121] Conti Rossini, 1901: 194.

[122] Kur, 1965: 20, 23. Yetbārak is also known as Za Elmaknun, literally 'the stranger'. This says a lot about his erasement from collective memory (Conti Rossini, 1902: 306).

[123] Conti Rossini, 1901: 194.

[124] Lepage, 1975; Balicka Witakowska, 1998-1999.

[125] Kur, 1965: 28; *Gadla Yekunno Amlāk*, church of Gannata Māryām, fol. 94r.

[126] Dated from 1424/25, see Derat, 1998. The following sentence appears in the first version of the Life of Takla Hāymānot: "Then, he went to the side of the metropolitan (*pāppās*) abbā Gerlos, in the time of the rule of Yekunno Amlāk, the Israelite, who took the kingdom back from the house of the Zāgʷē" (BnF éthiopien 697, fol. 13v). In the second version of the Life of Takla Hāymānot, dated from 1515, a chapter is dedicated to the manner in which Takla Hāymānot restored the kingdom to Yekunno Amlāk, the Israelite, taking it out of the hands of the ḥēpāṣā family (Budge, 1906: vol. 1, 74, vol. 2, 29).

[127] Nosnitsin, 2005: 232 even considers that it could be a compilation undertaken in the 19th century.

sainthood that no doubt also began as a local movement and then gained wider credence.

From kings to saints: the development of the cult of the Zāgʷē (15-18th centuries)

From being kings, the Zāgʷē rulers very quickly achieved saintly status. Due to a lack of sources, the time when this process began is unfortunately unknown. It probably started locally, perhaps as soon as the kings died. But, if the first stage is undocumented, we can definitely detect other stages of this evolution: the first was the development of the cult of Kings Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā, which can be dated to the 15th century. The second took place two centuries later, with the emergence of the cult of two other members of the dynasty, Ḥarbāy and Na'ākʷeto La'āb.

The church of Yemreḥanna Krestos and the cult of the saint-king

When the author of the Life of Yemreḥanna Krestos visited the church founded by the saint-king, he was surprised to find that the king's life had not been recounted and undertook to shoulder this responsibility.[128] If what he reports is true, this would have occurred at the end of the 15th century. His decision to do so may well have been motivated by the fact that the cult of Yemreḥanna Krestos was already underway at the church; his composition would have added to the popularity of this worship. It is, therefore, very surprising that the hagiographer says so little about the place of worship, and the tomb of the saint. He recounts the death and inhumation of Yemreḥanna Krestos in these terms:

> "And when the troops of our father Yemreḥa saw this, they cried bitterly and became weak, for their lord had passed away and found rest. They placed him in a coffin and transported it, they had it brought to the sanctuary that he had built; there they buried him with great glory and ceremony, with the patriarch Atnātēwos at hand."[129]

The hagiographer is, therefore, not describing the tomb or tombs that he presumably saw at the site, nor the traditions surrounding them. In contrast, Francisco Alvares who, while passing through those parts only two generations later, witnessed the commemoration of the ruler (*tazkār*). He describes the scene, noting that the king's sepulchre was "specially high, and has five steps all around it [all whitewashed with white lime] […]. This tomb is covered with a large cloth of brocade, and velvet of Mequa, one cloth of one stuff, and another of the other, which on both sides reach the ground".[130] This sepulchre was flanked by two other tombs, placed slightly lower but built identically, in which rested a patriarch who

[128] See supra.
[129] Marrassini, 1995: 93.
[130] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 203-204.

had died visiting the king and was buried there, as well as the daughter of the king[131]. Francisco Alvares counted over twenty thousand worshippers who had come to celebrate the feast of Yemreḥanna Krestos, so that the distribution of the communion lasted from morning to evening even though it was given out from the three doors of the church[132].

What is the significance of the reporting discrepancies between the Life of King Yemreḥanna Krestos and the testimony of Francisco Alvares? One may hypothesize by way of response that the hagiographic text has influenced both the oral tradition and the way in which the predominant sepulchres lying beside the church in the cave were interpreted. The case of the patriarch's tomb is instructive. In the Life of the saint-king, the hagiographer remarks that a patriarch named Cyril (Athanasius in another version of the text preserved in the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos) came to visit the king whose kingdom had achieved such fame, declaring: "And so I toiled to come and see your land, in order that my body be buried there."[133] At no time does the hagiographer indicate that the patriarch was buried precisely there, in the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos. Francisco Alvares records an identical testimonial concerning the patriarch who "came from Jerusalem to visit this king, because of his reputation for sainthood, and dying, was then buried there".[134] Except for the fact that Alvares points out that the patriarch was from Jerusalem, the two traditions are identical. But in the meanwhile, the patriarch's tomb has been identified locally as being the one next to the sepulchre of the saint-king, and is pointed out as such to Francisco Alvares.[135]

Even if a multitude of people did visit the church of Yemreḥanna Krestos at the beginning of the 16th century, it is the local character of this saint's worship which predominates. As already remarked, only the copy of the *synaxary* preserved in this church includes a reading in honour of the king-saint on the commemoration of his death, the 19th *ṭeqemt*[136]. The other versions of the *synaxary* mention his feast, but add no detail, with the result that worshippers who hear the information are probably unable to identify the saintly character in question, or it means that the name of Yemreḥanna Krestos was so famous at that time that it was not necessary to add any details.

The development of the worship of Lālibalā in the 15th century

The worship of another Zāgʷē ruler, Lālibalā, developed in the same period. As Francisco Alvares also testified, the churches of Lālibalā were much-frequented

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[131] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 204.
[132] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 205.
[133] Marrassini, 1995: 88.
[134] Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 204. This information is no more trustworthy than the previous one: no Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem named Cyril or Athanasius held office before 1225 (a date when King Lālibalā was certainly ruling).
[135] See supra.
[136] *Synaxary*, Church of Yemreḥanna Krestos, pagination unkown.

places of pilgrimage. He was not a witness to the commemoration of Lālibalā, but asserted that pilgrims came in great numbers in order to touch the saint's tomb, reputed to accomplish miracles[137]. The fame of this pilgrimage site was such that it reached Alessandro Zorzi, a Venetian who was compiling information on pilgrims' itineraries. One of them, Thomas, met Zorzi in 1523 and related to him the route he followed between Barārā, identified as the "capital" of the Ethiopian kingdom, and Jerusalem. Brother Thomas made a stop in Urvuar[138] where there was a "tomb of the saint king which performs miracles and bears the name Lalivela".[139]

Lālibalā is said to have been buried in one of the churches he had built, called Bēta Golgotā[140]. The informants of Francisco Alvares declared that he rested in a crypt sealed off by a heavy rock "that no one goes in, nor does it look as if that stone or door could be lifted. This stone has a hole in the centre, which pierces it through; its size is three spans. All the pilgrims [who come here in infinite numbers for devotion] put their hands into this stone […] and they say that many miracles are done"[141]. Curiously, the 15th century Life of King Lālibalā give no clue as to the whereabouts of his sepulchre, although such information would be of paramount importance to initiate the cult. The hagiographer contents himself with giving the date of death, the 12th of *sanē*, and by invoking the image of the king's soul ascending to heaven.[142] In his only exhortation to go on pilgrimage to Lālibalā, he writes: "Therefore any Ethiopian who, having heard of these so remarkable churches, does not take himself to the holy town of Roḫa, is like a man who would have no desire to see the face of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ".[143]

The Life of Lālibalā give the date of his death, the minimum information for the commemoration of a saint, but not a single indication of the location of his tomb, where the faithful could address prayers to him. Therefore, if they were indeed intended to be read on the day of his commemoration, nothing indicates that the location of his tomb in an underground crypt of the church of Golgotā was an established fact. The tradition about the burial of King Lālibalā in Golgotā seems therefore to have developed between the redaction of the Life of the saint-king, in

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137 Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 220-221.

138 Or Warwar, another name for Roḫa and Lālibalā. See in particular the colophon of the Life of Yemreḫanna Krestos: "Glory to the Lord, who enabled me to complete joyfully this book about the spiritual struggle of Yemreḫa finding myself in the city of Roḫa. This book was written in this city of Warwar which is Dabra Roḫa, the city of the great King Lālibalā" (Marrassini, 1995: 94). See also the note dedicated to Zēna Gabri'ēl in a synaxary of the 18th century preserved in Bēta Māryām: "On the 25th of the month of *miyāzyā* died Zēna Gabri'ēl, the great priest of Dabra Roḫa, which is Waror (*sic*), the place of Lālibalā's sepulchre" (Getatchew Haile, 1988: 13; Bosc-Tiessé, 2009: 106).

139 Crawford, 1958: 152-153. At the beginning of the 16th century Alessandro Zorzi, from Venice, collected the testimonials of Ethiopian monks who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and sometimes continued their voyage (ibid. p. 24-25).

140 In a recent contribution, Michael Gervers has put forward the idea that the church of Golgotā was perhaps not dug out until the 15th century, cf. Gervers, 2003: 45-49.

141 Beckingham & Huntingford, 1961: 207.

142 Perruchon, 1892: 128-129.

143 Perruchon, 1892: 127.

the 15th century, and Francisco Alvares' visit at the beginning of the 16th century. A few documents elucidate this evolution and the rise of the king's cult. The first is the earliest known copy of the Life of the saint-king, dated from the 15th century and today preserved in the British Library (Orient. 719). It contains a note concerning a donation by King Zar'a Yā'eqob,[144] stating that the manuscript belongs to the church of Golgotā.[145] This note seems to establish a particular link between the saint and the church of Golgotā as a place, but there is still nothing to confirm that the tomb was already considered a fixture there.

It is not until the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century that one finds testimonials to the development of a cult in honour of Lālibalā. This development seems to be accompanied by indications of royal power, as donations were made for celebrations in commemoration of the death of the king. For example, we find a donation from King Ba'eda Māryām (1468-1478)[146] and another from King Lebna Dengel (1508-1540) for the commemoration of Lālibalā.[147] However, the link between the day of the king's *tazkār*, or commemoration, and an exact location, in this case the church of Golgotā, is only made at the beginning of the 16th century in the donation of King Lebna Dengel.[148] The association between the saint-king and this church is thereby strengthened and probably attests to the completion of a process that saw his tomb situated in this location. At the same time, a link seems to be made between Lālibalā's wife, Masqal Kebrā, and another of the churches on the site, Bēta Libānos. The link arises once again from a donation made by King Lebna Dengel, but this time for his own commemoration.[149] The link is so well established that today the church of Bēta Libānos is designated as having been founded by Masqal Kebrā, even though no ancient text confirms the fact. What is sure is that at the beginning of the 16th century, a land donation associated the queen and the church.

The designation of the cult of Lālibalā in an exact location, not just on the site of the churches he is said to have founded but in the church of Golgotā itself, is clearly the result of a process that began in the 15th century, especially during the reign of Zar'a Yā'eqob, and was completed in the beginning of the 16th century, during the reign of Lebna Dengel. Royal power endorses the location of Lālibalā's sepulchre in the Golgotā church.[150]

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[144] Orient. 719, British Library, fol. 168r.

[145] It is interesting to note that, in a gospel preserved in Bēta Golgota, there is a list of books belonging to the church that includes a manuscript of the Life of Lālibalā (EMML 6934, fol. 3v). This list can be dated to the rule of Eskender (1478-1494). It could be the famous Orient. 719 donated by King Zar'a Yā'eqob to the Church of Golgotā.

[146] EMML 6948: fol. 122v (note that in the donation of Ba'eda Māryām, he is himself not described as the king, which leaves some doubt as to his identity).

[147] EMML 6934, fol. 68v.

[148] EMML 6934, fol. 68v.

[149] EMML 6948: fol. 1v.

[150] See Gervers, 2003.

Ḥarbāy and Na'ākʷeto La'āb: a late cult from the 17th century

Unlike the cults of Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā, those of Ḥarbāy and Na'ākʷeto La'āb seem to be much more recent, perhaps linked to a political renaissance in the Lāstā region in the 18th century. This idea is based on two types of sources, written and painted: firstly, although the Lives of Saints dedicated to kings Ḥarbāy and Na'ākʷeto La'āb are not dated, certain internal elements indicate that they were not composed before the end of the 16th century; secondly, the paintings which represent those saint-kings Ḥarbāy and Na'ākʷeto La'āb, always associated with the other Zāgʷē kings, are never earlier than the 18th century. The cults in honour of these two rulers should be distinguished from the earlier ones of Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā. The stakes differ and the aura surrounding these later rulers was probably not the same.

There is no solid evidence for dating the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb, but there is one significant pointer: the hagiographer constantly refers to two predecessors of the ruler – Yemreḥanna Krestos and Lālibalā – and seems to know the Lives composed in their honour, which he uses as inspiration. Since these latter texts were dated to the 15th century (see supra), the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb must have been composed later. Another clue lies in the account of a miracle at the end of the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb:

> "There were men who would bring as tribute from the country of Egypt to his father, Lālibalā, lots of gold and silver. Yet for our father, the blessed Na'ākʷeto La'āb, without knowing the state and beauty of his spiritual fight, these arrogant Egyptians refused his tribute, and did not pay homage to his royalty. They no longer knew rain and neither did they have the water of the Takkazē with which they raised the grain for their subsistence. Our father, the blessed Na'ākʷeto La'āb, the combatant, had beseeched the Lord. His creator heard him and held back the water of the Takkazē during three years and seven months, by the strength of his prayer. These Egyptians lacked water to drink and to sow; they were punished with famine, the lack of cereals and the lack of water."[151]

This tale is to be linked with an episode which features in the work of al-Makīn (Giyorgis Walda Amid in Ethiopia), the *Universal History*, composed in Arabic between 1268 and 1270 which recounts the story of the world since Adam until the reign of Baybars in 1260. It concerns a note on the rule of Al-Mustanṣir (1039-1094), while Cyril (1078-1092) was patriarch of Alexandria. In the Ge'ez version of al-Makīn the episode is placed during the patriarchate of Michel IV (1092-1102).[152] It is stated that at that time the Nile ebbed dangerously, which caused a great famine in Egypt. The Fatimid ruler then asked the patriarch to intercede with the Ethiopians. The patriarch, carrying rich presents, was able to convince the king of

[151] Conti Rossini, 1943: 228.
[152] Munro Hay, 1997: 157-158.

Ethiopia to allow the waters of the Nile to resume their flow towards Egypt.[153] It should be emphasized that the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* makes no mention of this event and therefore, this compilation cannot be the source of al-Makīn or for the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb. Conversely, if the *Universal History* of al-Makīn was translated from Arabic to Ge'ez at the beginning of the 16th century,[154] as is commonly thought, then the composition of the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb, which depended on al-Makīn for the episode of the Egyptian famine, must be later than this translation.

As for the Life of Ḥarbāy, it has never been studied because until recently there was no known copy. The manuscript photographed by Emmanuel Fritsch in Ḥarbāy's church is a text from the end of the 19th century, copied during the reign of Yoḥannes IV (1872-1889).[155] The account provides very little on the subject of the king himself: he wed a certain Markēzā with whom he had a son, Na'ākʷeto La'āb; he erected a church with a *tābot* dedicated to Michael by a metropolitan whose name is left unmentioned. The Life itself does not even refer to the transmission of power between Ḥarbāy and Lālibalā, perhaps appropriately as the manner in which Ḥarbāy oppressed his own brother – as featured in the Life of Lālibalā – would be sufficient reason to exclude him from sainthood. This question is raised in one of the miracles performed by the saint-king Ḥarbāy. Here, the texts echoes the account of the Life of Lālibalā in which the author relates how Jesus Christ appeared to Ḥarbāy to invite him to step down and hand over his kingdom to the care of his brother, Lālibalā. The Miracle of Ḥarbāy does not add anything, but develops this episode.[156] The composition of the text is not clearly dated. However, some elements indicate that it is a late text: there is a mention, in the collection of miracles, of the conflict between King Qērlos (ca. 1696-1726),[157] presented here as the king of Lāstā, with another unnamed king.[158] The latter is known from other sources to be the king of Gondar, Bakāffā, who reigned from 1721 to 1730. Consequently, there is every reason to think that the composition of the Life of Ḥarbāy is either contemporary with, or later than, these events. It is quite likely, furthermore, that the quest for legitimacy of the kings of Lāstā led them to develop the story of the Zāgʷē rulers, especially by adding some weight to the history of the dynasty by composing the Life of Na'ākʷeto La'āb and of Ḥarbāy.

The iconography concerning the Zāgʷē rulers undergoes a similar process during the same period. In the 15th and 16th centuries, there are only a few paintings

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153 Erpen, 1625: livre III, chap. 8, 289; Sergew Hable Sellassie, 1970: 248 note 38.
154 Pietruschka, 2005: 813; Witakowski, 2006: 294.
155 *Gadla Ḥarbāy*, Church of Qeddus Ḥarbāy, fol. 56v. Also in this church, marginal notes concerning King Ḥarbāy have been added in the copy of the *synaxary,* on the date of 16 *yäkatit*.
156 *Gadla Ḥarbāy*, Church of Qeddus Ḥarbāy, fol. 44r-49r.
157 Bosc- Tiessé, 2009: 99-101, 104.
158 *Gadla Ḥarbāy*, Church of Qeddus Ḥarbāy, fol. 52v-54r.

depicting Lālibalā, his wife Masqal Kebrā, and Yemreḥanna Krestos,[159] and these do not include the other Zāgʷē saint-kings. But, in the 17th and 18th centuries, an iconography develops which represents Yemreḥanna Krestos, Ḥarbāy, Lālibalā and Na'ākʷeto La'āb in a very systematic fashion. This evolution is linked to the development of the cult of these rulers, the composition of their Lives and the need to appeal to them to secure the power of those who were now styling themselves as the kings of Lāstā. There is, therefore, a link between the composition of the Lives of Na'ākʷeto La'āb and Ḥarbāy "the creation unique to Lāstā, which captures the image of the Zāgʷē saint-kings, and is therefore local, and the assertion of the region's political autonomy".[160]

The Zāgʷē kings are beginning to reveal their history, thanks to recently discovered documents. Many questions go unanswered and some periods remain so obscure that it is still not possible to determine who reigned or to find agreement among the various texts. The simplified history, which was based on a later and negative historiography that was hostile to the Zāgʷē dynasty, is giving way to a new and complex history of the 11th through 13th centuries. The search for affinities between the Zāgʷē and the Christian kingdom as it was before the 10th century has become a much more fruitful approach than relying on the over-simplifications developed by traditional historiography, a historiography which tends to introduce these rulers as usurpers because of their different ethnicity and which brands them as foreigners.

The Zāgʷē were kings who conquered power from a base in Northern Ethiopia and who sought to further the inheritance of the Aksumite kings. They then used their advantage in the Begʷenā region, which they influenced notably by founding churches. In return, the Christians of Begʷenā developed a cult in their honour, shifting their image as political figures towards an image of sainthood, depending on necessity and, especially in the 17th century, the emergence of what is now known as Lāstā as a region independent from the kingdom of Gondar. One of the stages of this reckoning, which took on religious undertones, took place in the 15th century, when the lives of the saint-kings were composed to serve as support for their worship. This moment marks a shift compared to the period that immediately followed the overthrow of the Zāgʷē dynasty. The necessity to legitimize what was after all a coup, led by Yekunno Amlāk, required disqualifying his predecessors and therefore presenting them as usurpers, using the Solomonid ideology against them. However, everything points to the conclusion that, even if the Zāgʷē did not craft it, they were at the very least probably the first to benefit from it. Embedded in this dynasty, the historical King Yemreḥanna Krestos is still inaccessible. Sources are lacking and the Life that glorifies him, composed at the end of the 15th century, form something of an insurmountable barrier. He remains,

[159] Claire Bosc-Tiessé has prepared an inventory of the locations of these works. Bosc- Tiessé, 2009: 93 note 20.
[160] Bosc- Tiessé, 2009: 91.

however, one of the major figures of this dynasty, especially because he is considered to be a priest-king.

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Abstract / Résumé

Derat M.-L., 2010, The Zāgʷē dynasty (11-13th centuries) and King Yemreḥanna Krestos, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 25, 157-196.

This paper is an inquiry about King Yemreḥanna Krestos. Who was he? When did he reign? Was he a priest? How did his cult develop? In order to answer such questions, a more general study of the Zāgʷē dynasty, to which he belonged, is indispensable. The documents informing us about this dynasty are presented and commented so as to unearth from the context concrete elements and be in the position to obtain a fresher understanding of the matters involved. For, more often than not, the Zāgʷē are depicted as southern usurpers speaking a strange tongue compared with that of their predecessors and successors. As it happens, several facts permit to highlight the northern rooting of this dynasty which shares with the Aksumite kings more than one is usually inclined to think. However, the figure of King Yemreḥanna Krestos remains mysterious.

Keywords: Zāgʷē dynasty, Yemreḥanna Krestos, cult of saints, hagiography.

La dynastie Zāgʷē (XIe-XIIIe siècles) et le roi Yemreḥanna Krestos – Cet article est une enquête au sujet du roi Yemreḥanna Krestos. Qui était-il ? Quand régnait-il ? Était-il prêtre ? Comment son culte s'est-il développé ? Pour tenter de répondre à ces questions, un détour par une étude plus générale de la dynastie Zāgʷē, à laquelle il appartenait, est indispensable. Les documents nous informant sur cette dynastie sont exposés et commentés afin de dégager les éléments tangibles du contexte et rompre avec les idées communément admises. Car les Zāgʷē sont souvent perçus comme

des usurpateurs venus du Sud et parlant une langue étrange comparée à celle de leurs prédécesseurs et successeurs. Il se trouve que plusieurs éléments permettent de souligner l'ancrage septentrional de cette dynastie qui partage plus de points communs avec les rois aksumites qu'on ne veut d'ordinaire le penser. Néanmoins, la figure du roi Yemreḥanna Krestos demeure énigmatique.

Mots-clefs : dynastie Zāgʷē, Yemreḥanna Krestos, culte des saints, hagiographie.