

The Influences of Ezana's Conversion

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Περίληψη: Η ιστορία της αιθιοπικής ορθόδοξης εκκλησίας ξεκινά τον τέταρτο αιώνα. Κεντρική θέση σε αυτήν κατέχει η μεταστροφή του Εζάνα, ηγεμόνα του βασιλείου του Αξούμ, η οποία παρέχει μια εξαιρετική ευκαιρία να προσεγγίσουμε την πρώιμη αιθιοπική ορθόδοξη εκκλησία. Στόχος αυτού του άρθρου είναι να εξετάσει και να κατανοήσει τις επιδράσεις που επηρέασαν τη μεταστροφή του. Όπως προκύπτει από τα στοιχεία που έχουμε, οι κοσμοθεωρίες της ύστερης αρχαιότητας και ο ανεπίσημος χαρακτήρας της εισαγωγής του Χριστιανισμού στην Αιθιοπία επηρέασαν τη θεολογική σκέψη της μεταστροφής του. Ιδιαίτερα οι επιγραφές του φανερώνουν σαφείς επιρροές. Τέλος ο Φρουμέντιος, γνωστός στην ορθόδοξη εκκλησία της Αιθιοπίας επίσης ως αββάς Sälama Käsate Borhan, ο «Αποκαλυπτής του Φωτός», είναι μια σημαντική προσωπικότητα που πρέπει να εξετάσουμε για να κατανοήσουμε τη μεταστροφή του Εζάνα.

Abstract: The History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church begins in the fourth century. Central to its History is the conversion of Ezana, ruler of the Kingdom of Aksum which provides an excellent look into the Early Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The goal of this paper is to consider and understand the influences that impacted his conversion. As evident, the late antique world views and the unofficial nature of the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia influenced the theological thinking of his conversion. His inscriptions especially display explicit influence. Frumentius, also known in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as abba Sälama Käsate Borhan, the ‘Revealer of Light,’¹ is an important figure to understand in Ezana's conversion.

Aksum in the World of Late Antiquity

The Kingdom of Aksum, founded probably in 150 BC, dominated the region of Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. During late antiquity it became a prosperous and powerful kingdom that controlled Indian Ocean trade. Its power and position on the trade routes with the East brought Axum into contact with Greco-Roman civilization. In the mid-4th century the Kingdom of Aksum adopted Christianity as the state religion during the reign of

¹Massimo Villa, “Frumentius in Ethiopic Sources,” *Rassenga di Studi Etiopici*, Volume 1, no. 48 (2017): 87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45137006>

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Ezana (320s – c. 360 AD). Ezana was converted to Christianity by his slave-teacher, Frumentius, a Christian missionary who became later the first bishop of Aksum. The story states that, while returning home, Frumentius and his brother were captured. They were spared because of their age and brought to the Aksumite King. Frumentius was given duties supporting the local king as he was placed in charge of the royal archives.²

In order to better understand the story of Frumentius and the eventual conversion of Ezana, it is essential to highlight different world views, namely how Rome viewed Aksum, how Aksum viewed itself, and how Aksum viewed Rome. In the first place it is crucial to determine Roman views of Aksum, to show how Roman Christians would have engaged with Ethiopians and to understand Constantius II's Letter to Ezana.

The letter, rooted in the ongoing Christological Controversy, was sent in 356 CE by Emperor Constantius II to the Aksumite rulers Ezana and Shaizana. In this letter, the Arian Emperor advises the Aksumite rulers that Frumentius' consecration by the anti-Arian Athanasius was not valid and suggested they return him to Egypt to be reconsecrated by the Arian Archbishop, George of Cappadocia.³ Roman Self-conceit is apparent here. Constantius not only disagrees with the Theological School of Athanasius and, by extension, Frumentius but also views Ezana as incapable of dealing with theological matters. As Evangelos Chrysos states, "Most Greek literary sources call the monarch of Ethiopia Βασιλέα Αιθιοπίας or Ἀξωμιτῶν." But imperial chancery sources appear not to have used the title. Romans did not want to use the word king as it implied that they were on par with Rome, and Rome wanted to display its influence and power. Rome's desire to express influence and power is significant because the Romans did not view the Aksumite Kingdom equally. It further explains actions later committed by Constantius II after the conversion of Ezana. Rome furthers its desire to "other" the Aksumite Kings. The use of τύραννοι in the Apology of Athanasius implies the exotic character of the Ethiopians.⁴ Τύραννοι displays a lack of respect for the Aksumite kingdom, as τύραννοι carries a very negative tone. This term further highlights the negative view of the Aksumite Kingdom. The Roman and Byzantine state apparatuses did not view the Ethiopians positively. Only when convenient to Roman power structures did Romans decide to treat the Aksumites as equals. They attempt to other them by using titles and descriptors to describe them as lesser than Romans, creating a superiority complex towards the Aksumites. However, Emperor Constantius II addressed his letter to King Ezana of Aksum to reconcile and create a unified Arian Christianity.⁵

Now, it is vital to determine how Aksum viewed itself. Munro-Hay points out that Aksum saw trade as an essential power source and concerned itself with policing trade

²Villa, "Frumentius in Ethiopic Sources," 88.

³Steve Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Volume 13, 2 (1982): 102. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1581205>

⁴Chrysos, "The Title of Basileus," 43-44.

⁵Chrysos, "The Title of Basileus," 43.

routes.⁶ They saw themselves as responsible for trade and the trade routes that went through Aksum, implying a grand view of self. Ezana's self-image is another important aspect to investigate when the interest in Aksum's self-perceptions comes into play. Chrysos points out that Ezana calls his enemies βασιλίσκοι. At the same time, he uses for himself the "title βασιλεύς, which follows a long tradition of the Ethiopian chancery."⁷ Aksum's leaders viewed themselves as powerful kings within the world in which they existed. Not only did Aksum see itself as royal and powerful, it saw itself as an empire. Munro-Hay points out that Ezana mentioned the Nobatae as part of his empire.⁸ Aksum viewed itself highly, creating self-images of royalty and power. They exercised their power in policing and engaging in trade. Ezana explicitly creates a view that they are the ones in power in Africa by claiming that Nubian kingdoms are under his domain. All of these contribute to Aksum's self-perceptions, which provide an insight into how Aksum viewed Rome.

A way to explain how Aksum viewed Rome is through its coinage, which displays their view of Rome as that of equals. Aksum minted some of its coinage in gold, which the Romans saw as a prerogative of themselves alone. Munro-Hay points out that it is more than likely that the immediate origins of the coinage of Aksum were Roman trading in the Red Sea.⁹ Munro-Hay additionally points out that "The Aksumite coinage followed the Roman/Byzantine weight system, and this and certain other factors add to the suggestion that Rome was the primary region to which Aksum looked when the issue of coinage was planned."¹⁰

The Introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia

With the worldviews of the two major players of Christianity in Ethiopia explained, it is essential to discuss how Christianity found itself in Ethiopia. Aksum's place in the world was a crossroads between the Indian Ocean, the Nile River Valley, and the Mediterranean trade systems. Seland's writing points out connections to the Indian Ocean trade: "Adulis, the main Red Sea port of the Aksumite kingdom in the period of Ezana, had been in the Red Sea Exchange since at least the first Century CE."¹¹ By the time of Ezana, when Aksum had emerged as the political powerhouse of the region, court, and elite life offered a market for imported prestige items, such as the Mediterranean wine amphorae and glass vessels.¹² Goods from the Mediterranean indicate good relations, allowing for the

⁶Munro-Hay, "Overseas Interests," 130.

⁷Chrysos, "The Title of Basileus," 44.

⁸Munro-Hay, "Overseas Interests," 135.

⁹Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 180.

¹⁰Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 180.

¹¹Eivind Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa and Red Sea/Indian Ocean Commerce," *The African Archaeological Review*, Volume 31, no. 4 (2014): 640. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43916709>

¹²Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 641.

exchange of more than goods along these routes. With amicable relations and influential trade, Roman merchants came with Christianity. Indeed, Christianity in Ethiopia even predates Frumentius as Late Roman Churches have been excavated at all major Roman Red Sea ports (Tomber 2007, 2008; Sidebotham 2009), among them one at Aila, which has been suggested to be the oldest purpose-built Church in the world yet identified, predating Frumentius' activities by decades.¹³ Aksum's familiarity with monotheism, in the forms of Judaism and Christianity, alongside its engagement in mercantile activity, facilitated Christianity's spread.¹⁴ Christianity arrived in Ethiopia along the lines of trade. With heavily established trade already existing, Christianity practically traveled like a good into the kingdom from the northern Nile River Valley. The early influx of Christianity to Aksum via the Christian merchants, with whom Frumentius started his work, took place outside official church channels and in a religious landscape that predated the standardization of religious doctrine following the Council of Nicaea (325 CE).¹⁵ Seland additionally highlights findings by Bagnall with estimates that by the time of the conversion of Ezana, at least fifty percent of Egyptians were Christians.¹⁶ Aksum's trade within the Nile River Valley and the Red Sea often meant the Romans they encountered were from the eastern parts of the empire, increasing their likelihood of being Christian. This idea further displays that Christianity likely came to Ethiopia unofficially by trade networks long before Frumentius converted Ezana. The influence of trade on early Aksumite Christianity is crucial in understanding the bishop associated with making Aksum's royal house Christian.

The Story of Frumentius is of central importance. Munro-Hay states that the lapse of a Romano-Ethiopian treaty resulted in Frumentius's captivity and servitude in the Aksumite Royal Household.¹⁷ In otherwise amicable and profitable relations, Frumentius fell through the cracks of this trade lapse. Frumentius' position in the Aksumite royal house allowed him to help Christians in Aksum. Seland states that Frumentius, during his captivity, worked to improve the conditions of Christians in the kingdom, securing rights of assembly and facilitating the construction of houses of worship.¹⁸ Seland also highlights that Christian individuals, increasingly able to form communities due to Frumentius' support, would be present not only in the port of Adulis but also in multiple centers of the kingdom.¹⁹ With some of his work beginning before Ezana's conversion, his policies gave Christians rights. Seland additionally mentions that Rufinus stated that Frumentius began his work among the resident Roman merchants, securing privileges of

¹³Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 641.

¹⁴Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 641.

¹⁵Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 643.

¹⁶Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 641.

¹⁷Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 204.

¹⁸Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 639.

¹⁹Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 643.

worship and sites and material support for them to build places of assembly.²⁰ While Christianity's introduction came through trade networks, Frumentius' influence is significant. His work allowed for the spread and creation of official networks of Christianity in Aksum through the unofficial networks already in place because of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean Trade. However, Frumentius' influence in creating and founding official church networks goes far beyond this.

Theology in Ezana's Inscriptions

Christianity was introduced by unofficial trade networks and officially recognized and supported by the work of Frumentius. The Ezana stone is a bilingual inscriptional monument commissioned by Ezana. It makes direct references to Christianity in both Greek and Ge'ez. The positions of Ezana's theology are vivid within inscriptions, and the use of different languages explains the influences of Ezana.

Firstly, it is crucial to understand the Ge'ez part of the Ezana Stone. The inscription itself states: "By the Might of the lord of Heaven, who in the sky and on earth holds power over all beings... who has made me king, who reigns for all eternity invincible, cause that no enemy can resist me, that no enemy may follow me."²¹ The use of Ge'ez is essential here. For one, very vague language refers to a singular god without using specific Christian language. One may ask why he would use Ge'ez to discuss God when many merchants from Rome were using Greek to discuss it. This inscription is not for outsiders. It was for the people of Aksum. As mentioned earlier, Aksum was familiar with monotheism in the forms of Judaism and Christianity, so it was not for lack of not knowing what it was but for a chance for Ezana to explain it. Ezana explains this God as all-powerful as he "holds power over all beings." He uses Ge'ez to explain details to those unaware of Christian theology. In addition to explaining Christianity to the Aksumite population, he takes the opportunity to change where he gets his power. Munro-Hay states that Mahrem was the Aksumite royal or dynastic God, whom the Aksumite people believed to be the king's father and his guard from danger.²² The inscription completely changes where Ezana gets his power. Ezana states: "who has made me king, who reigns for all eternity invincible, cause that no enemy can resist me, that no enemy may follow me."²³ He shifts where he ultimately derives his power. He no longer holds onto the pagan structures and focuses entirely on deriving power from the Christian God. Ezana's use of Ge'ez does two things essentially. Firstly, he uses Ge'ez to explain in greater detail what Christianity was to a population while familiar with monotheism, not necessarily understanding it completely. "As the king of a predominantly non-

²⁰Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa," 642.

²¹Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 227

²²Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 198.

²³Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 227.

Christian people, Ezana could not afford to startle or offend the majority of his subjects, who remained faithful to their traditional religions. As a ruler who claimed divine descent, he could not undertake a religious revolution without undermining his traditional basis of legitimacy... Ezana sought to present his new beliefs in terms in keeping with the traditional views of his subjects. The ambiguous term 'the lord of Heaven' would certainly have been understood by the bulk of the population as a reference to a pagan deity."²⁴

Furthermore, he takes the opportunity to shift his power completely from pagan religious structures toward Christian structures. Kaplan states, "The King no longer invoked the traditional religious deities because his religious worldview had changed considerably. His choice of the phrase 'the lord of Heaven' was not the product of his shrewd political judgment but of his authentic interest in the Christian view of the Cosmology."²⁵

The second inscription that comes is in Ancient Greek but has completely different ideas than the first. The Second inscription reads: "By faith in God and by the power of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, to the one who saved the kingdom, for me by faith in his son Jesus Christ, to the one who helped me and always helps me."²⁶ In stark contrast to the Ge'ez inscription, there are open and direct references to Christianity. The language change is purposeful, as this piece is for the outside world. Sources indicate that Archbishop Athanasius consecrated Frumentius, and Athanasius sent him back to Ethiopia to convert the country to Christianity.²⁷ This inscription is essential considering the letter sent by Constantius II. In his Letter, Constantius asks the Aksumite rulers to consider Frumentius' consecration invalid because he was anti-Arian and against Constantius' theological school.²⁸ Constantius even suggests they have him reconsecrated by the Arian Bishop George of Cappadocia.

Essentially, these inscriptions display Ezana's theological thinking. His Ge'ez inscriptions examine what the king wanted to do within his kingdom. He wanted to proselytize the rest of his kingdom. He moves away from Mahrem as the source of his power towards the Christian God. Additionally, he simplifies the language for a kingdom while familiar with monotheistic concepts, not wholly familiar with Christianity and the "power of god." The influences in the Ge'ez inscription are internal. He desires to preach Christianity and a new articulation of power through Christianity. The Greek inscriptions display a much more outward-facing view of Christianity to the rest of the world. In his explicitly religious language, Ezana announces his Christian faith to the world.

²⁴Steve Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," 104.

²⁵Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion," 106.

²⁶Stephanie L. Black, "In the Power of God Christ: Greek Inscriptional evidence for the Anti-Arian theology of Ethiopia's First Christian King," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Volume 71, No. 1 (2008): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40378965>

²⁷Villa, "Frumentius in Ethiopic Sources," 88.

²⁸Kaplan, "Ezana's conversion," 102.

Conclusion

Ezana's influences are essential to understand when investigating the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia. The worldviews of Aksum influenced Ezana's theology in multiple ways. Much of the Christianity that Ezana first encountered came from Roman merchants unofficially. The unofficial introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia via trade networks displays where Ezana gained his theological thinking. With Frumentius' capture and subsequent service to the state, his service and support of existent Christian communities created a base for Frumentius to carry his influence throughout Aksum. Finally, Ezana's inscriptions display multiple influences of his conversion. Firstly, his Ge'ez inscriptions display internal influences, as he shifts his power source away from the pagan deity Mahrem to the Christian God. He also uses the Ge'ez inscriptions to increase the "Christian literacy" within Ethiopia. His Greek inscriptions display the external influences of Frumentius and, by extension, Athanasius. The Greek inscriptions also give the world the impression of Ezana's faith, firmly placing him as a Christian amid a Theological conflict with Constantius and, by extension, George of Cappadocia.

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The Influences of Ezana's Conversion

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