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Introduction

Travelers to late antique Aksum must have been wonderstruck by the colossal monolithic funerary stelae that dominated the horizon of the capital city of this cosmopolitan polity on the northern edge of the great Ethiopian and Eritrean plateau (Fig. 1, left).¹ Generation after generation, each Aksumite king erected a stela grander than his predecessors. In this way, the stelae continued to escalate in size, ultimately culminating in one final stela so massive that it does not seem to have been erected successfully (Fig. 1, right). Which Aksumite king constructed



Fig. 1: left: Central Stelae Field, Aksum; right: Fallen Aksumite Stela, Aksum.

this final, mammoth stela remains uncertain, but it will likely have been either Ezana (ca. 330–360)—the subject of the present essay—or his immediate predecessor, Ousanas. We can hypothesize that this stela belonged to one of these two kings, because the cessation of the practice seems to coincide with what has been

¹ For the funerary stelae, see Fattovich 1987; Phillipson 1994; Phillipson 1997, 11–65.

called a ‘turning point’ in Aksumite history: the adoption of Christianity.² In retrospect, then, this fallen stela serves as a symbolic coda to the pre-Christian period of the Aksumite kingdom and the changes that would ensue under the first Christian African king, Ezana of Aksum.

Ezana of Aksum and his adoption of Christianity feature, as one might imagine, in every account of Aksumite history as well as more broadly in many books on Africa or on Christianity. And rightly so. Ezana is not only the first African king to adopt Christianity, but he is among the first kings in general to do so—only a few decades after Constantine’s famous vision at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312.³ As we will see in the course of this essay, previous scholars have drawn from a wide range of sources to reconstruct the history of Ezana’s adoption of Christianity. Coins and inscriptions of Ezana provide precious contemporaneous evidence. A text originating outside the Horn of Africa mentions Ezana by name as well as a certain Frumentius, who is identified as bishop of Aksum during Ezana’s time. Other texts from outside the Horn of Africa relay a story about this Frumentius. The same story is repeated later in Ethiopic texts.

Previous scholars have weaved these disparate threads together to construct a fabular narrative about Ezana’s adoption of Christianity. This methodological approach is nicely captured in the following statement by Sergew Hable Selassie on writing the history of Ezana: ‘the gap left by one source is filled by another’.⁴ All sources are not, however, of equal value for writing history. One fundamental postulate of historical methodology is that ‘inside’ sources, which stem from the same time, location, culture, etc., of the subject, tend to be more reliable than ‘outside’ sources, which are removed in one way or another.⁵ Nevertheless, previous scholarship has tended to prioritize ‘outside’ sources, in particular the story of Frumentius found in Rufinus’s *Ecclesiastical History*—a literary text produced in the Italian Peninsula far from the Horn of Africa, at least half a century after the fact, and not in a local African language but in Latin. For most previous scholars, Rufinus’s story of Frumentius provides not only the framing but also the walls,

² For the attribution of the largest stela, see Phillipson 2012, 143–144. For Ezana’s adoption of Christianity as a ‘turning point’ for Aksumite history, see Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 89, a theme picked up in Kaplan 1982, which is reprinted in Bausi 2012, 27–34. For the use of ‘turning point’ more broadly in the study of Ethiopian and Eritrean history, see Tubiana 1965, with the more recent discussion of periodization in Kaplan 2024.

³ More than one scholar has referred to Ezana as an African (or the like) Constantine; see, e.g., Altheim and Stiehl 1961, 234; Judge 1981; Kammerer 1926, 85; Munro-Hay 1999a, 448; Ullendorff 1973, 97. I will return to this comparison at the end of the essay.

⁴ Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 92.

⁵ For ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ sources, see Dijkstra and Fisher 2014, especially the editors’ introduction.

roof, and ceiling onto which a few primarily cosmetic fittings from the ‘inside’ sources can be assiduously affixed.

In this essay, I chart a new course. I shift focus to the ‘inside’ sources, especially Ezana’s inscriptions and coins, to see what more they have to offer for reconstructing the history of Ezana’s adoption of Christianity. In addition, I adopt a cautiously critical approach to the ‘outside’ sources. In particular, I am deliberately revisionist in seeking to counter what I regard as an overly positivistic approach adopted in previous scholarship on Ezana.⁶ The essay is not, however, solely a project of historical deconstruction and minimalism. Rather, I suggest how the ‘outside’ sources might offer valuable information for the historian, just not in the way they have previously been employed. Above all, I want to revisit in this essay what we know about Ezana and his adoption of Christianity, starting from the contemporaneous evidence of his inscriptions and coins.

Aksumite Sources for the Adoption of Christianity: The Inscriptions and Coins of Ezana

Despite conflicting interpretations in the earlier scholarly literature, there is now general consensus that the fourth-century Ezana is the first Aksumite ruler to present himself as a Christian.⁷ Ezana’s Christianity can be established by one of his inscriptions, written in Greek, that begins: ‘In the faith of God and in the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who saved the kingdom for me, in the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, who helped me and who always helps me, I, Ezana, king of the Aksumites [...]’ (RIÉ 271).⁸ Not all of Ezana’s inscriptions are, however, necessarily Christian, and certainly not as definitively so. For instance, in a multilingual, multiscript series of inscriptions, Ezana presents himself as ‘son of the invincible god Ares’ (RIÉ 270 = 270 bis).⁹ The Ethiopic-language versions of this inscription—written both in the Ethiopic script as well as in the Old South

⁶ For insightful criticism of the positivism of Western historiography on Aksum, see Piovaneli 2014.

⁷ Some earlier scholars argued that there were actually two different kings named Ezana, one fourth century who was not Christian and a later one who was; see, e.g., Altheim and Stiehl 1961; Altheim and Stiehl 1976; Pirenne 1975; also in a different way, Dihle 1965, 56–64. For rebuttals, see, e.g., Schneider 1987, 599–602, with an English translation in Bausi 2012, 35–38; Munro-Hay 1988, reprinted in Bausi 2012, 56–73; Brakmann 1994, 67–68; Marrassini 2014, 75–76; Schneider 1988.

⁸ English translation in Butts 2021, 385–386. See also Black 2008; Marrassini 2014, 236–238; Phillipson 2012, 61, 96.

⁹ English translation in Butts 2021, 382–383. See also Marrassini 2014, 212–224; Phillipson 2012, 58–59, 96; Sima 2003–2004. Note that the Greek versions of the inscription have Ares, whereas the Ethiopic have MḤRM (RIÉ 185 I = 185 bis I and RIÉ 185 II = 185 II bis), on which, see Marrassini 2014, 44–45.

Arabian script—also state that Ezana made offerings to other traditional pre-Christian deities of Aksum, such as Ashtar and BḤR/MDR (RIÉ 185 I = 185 bis I and RIÉ 185 II = 185 bis II).¹⁰ In yet other inscriptions of Ezana, reference is made to ‘Lord of Heaven’, ‘Lord of the Land’, and ‘Lord of All’ (e.g., RIÉ 189).¹¹ Later in this essay, we will come back to the inscriptions of Ezana to see how we can best make sense of the different religious language, but my point for now is simply that one Greek inscription is clearly Christian with a trinitarian formula, and that this thereby establishes that the fourth-century Aksumite ruler Ezana presented himself as Christian, at least in certain contexts.



Fig. 2: Ezana Christian Gold Coin (Type 49 = H21b).
Ashmolean JJ 555 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

Further evidence for Ezana’s Christianity derives from numismatics.¹² In particular, a number of Ezana’s coins contain Christian crosses (Types 35–39 = H17–18; Fig. 2).¹³ But, just as was the case with the inscriptions, not all of Ezana’s coins are necessarily Christian, and certainly not as definitively so. A number of Ezana coins feature a disc and crescent (Types 42, 44 = H22b–c, 23; Fig. 3). The symbol of the disc and crescent is associated with pre-Christian religious practices in Aksum, as well as more broadly in the Horn of Africa and the

¹⁰ For Ashtar, see fn. 46 below. BḤR means ‘land’ in Ethiopic, and MDR ‘earth’. On these two, see Marrassini 2014, 46–48 as well as ‘Bəḥer’, *EAE*, I (2003), 522a–522b (A. Sima) and ‘Mədr’, *EAE*, III (2007), 906a–907b (A. Sima), respectively.

¹¹ English translation in Butts 2021, 383–385. See also Marrassini 2014, 230–235; Phillipson 2012, 59, 96. It should be noted that similar language is found in Ancient South Arabian inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula starting in the second half of the fourth century, basically around the same time as Ezana. The bibliography is large, but for an initial orientation, see Gajda 2009.

¹² For an overview of these arguments, see Butts 2023. See also Hahn 1999. For Aksumite numismatics more broadly, see Hahn 2020.

¹³ For an overview of Ezana’s coins, see Hahn 2020, 74–87. Coin types are according to Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995, which are correlated with the type of Hahn (= H), Hahn 1983.

Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴ In addition, there are also coins of Ezana with no religious symbol (Fig. 4). Again, later in this essay, we will return to these coins; for now, it is enough simply to note that some of Ezana's coins contain Christian crosses.



Fig. 3: Ezana pre-Christian Gold Coin (Type 35-27 = H17).
Ashmolean JJ 504 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Fig. 4: Ezana Silver Coin without Religious Symbol (Type 42 = H22b).
Ashmolean JJ 575c © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

This Aksumite evidence—both inscriptions and coins—that establishes that Christianity was present in Aksum by the time of Ezana is corroborated by an ‘outside’ source, a letter purportedly from Constantius that is embedded in the *Apology to Constantius* (31), written in 356, by Athanasius of Alexandria (d.373).¹⁵ The letter is directed to the rulers (τοῖς τυράννοις) of Aksum and specifically to Ezana and to Sazana.¹⁶ The letter speaks of one Frumentius, who is

¹⁴ For images of a South Arabian coin and of a South Arabian incense burner with these symbols, see Butts 2023, 157–158. For the disc and crescent on Aksumite coinage, see Hahn 1999, 433–434.

¹⁵ This text is edited in Brennecke et al. 2006, 304–305. An English translation is available in Stevenson 1966, 34–35.

¹⁶ In the previously discussed multilingual, multiscript series of inscriptions, a military campaign of Ezana is said to have been delegated to his ‘brothers’ Sazana and Adepha (RIÉ 185 I, l. 3 = 185 bis I, l. 5 / 185 II, l. 5 = 185 bis II, ll. 5–6 / 270, l. 9 = 270 bis, l. 7). These could be biological brothers, but other options are perhaps also possible, e.g., ‘brothers-in-arms’. In any case, the Sazana of the inscriptions is to be identified with the ruler mentioned in Athanasius’s *Apology*. See further fn. 62 below.

said to have been appointed bishop of Aksum by Athanasius, at that time in exile having fallen out of favor with the pro-Arian emperor Constantius. Constantius orders that Frumentius be sent to Egypt swiftly so that he could be questioned by Constantius's representative, George, to make sure that he is not opposed to the laws and faith of the Church. Thus, this letter not only mentions Frumentius but states explicitly that he was appointed to his current position by Athanasius, and this position is specified later in the letter to be that of bishop (ἐπίσκοπος). This letter is the earliest mention of Frumentius, several decades before we find the story of Frumentius in Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History*—to which we now turn.

The Story of Frumentius: From Rufinus to the Horn of Africa

In addition to the 'inside' Aksumite sources and the 'outside' letter of Constantius embedded in Athanasius's *Apology to Constantius*, several texts relay a story that scholars generally interpret as evidence for the arrival of Christianity to Aksum. These texts all tell the same basic narrative, which proceeds as follows: a traveler named Meropius arrives at a port with two young boys, one of whom is named Frumentius and the other whose name is Edesius. Locals kill the traveler along with his entire party apart from the two boys. The boys are given to the local king, who appoints each of them to an official position within the kingdom. The king subsequently dies leaving a young son as heir to the throne. The two boys help in the royal household, with Frumentius supporting the rule of the child king while also spreading Christianity throughout the kingdom. Once the new king reaches adulthood, Edesius returns to his family in Tyre, and Frumentius goes to Alexandria, where Athanasius appoints him as (the first) bishop of the newly Christianized kingdom.

This story is first attested in the early fifth century in the *Ecclesiastical History* (X.9–10) of the church historian Rufinus (d.411).¹⁷ It is then repeated, with some variations, in a number of other fifth- and sixth-century Greco-Roman church historians, including Socrates (*Ecclesiastical History*, I.19), Sozomen (*Ecclesiastical History*, II.24), Theodore (*Ecclesiastical History*, I.23), Pseudo-Gelasius (*Ecclesiastical History*, III.9), and Theodore Anagnostes (*Historia Tripartita*, I.31), as well as later by the fourteenth-century historian Nicephorus Callistus (*Ecclesiastical History*, VIII.35).¹⁸ The same story is also found in Ethiopic sources.

¹⁷ The text is edited in Schwartz and Mommsen 1908, 971–973. An English translation is available in Amidon 1997, 393–396. See also the foundational study of Thélamon 1981, 37–83.

¹⁸ For the most complete list, with references to editions, see Marrassini 2014, 59–60.

The Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius* narrates the same story of Frumentius and explicitly states that it came from Rufinus: ‘All this, someone whose name was Rufinus narrated about our father Frumentius, having heard it from Edesius, his companion; he narrated all of this’.¹⁹ This passage establishes that Rufinus is the ultimate source of the Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius*.²⁰ It also illustrates that Socrates’s Greek *Ecclesiastical History* served as the bridge between the Latin of Rufinus and the Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius*, since almost the same sentence appears in Socrates’s *Ecclesiastical History* (I.19).²¹ Among the Greek church historians, it is only Socrates who explicitly mentions Rufinus at this point in the text. Thus, there is little doubt that the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates served as an intermediary between the Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius* and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Rufinus.²² The Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius* in turn serves as the

¹⁹ An *editio princeps*, based on a single manuscript, MS Ḥayq ʿEṣṭifānos, EMMML 1763 (dated either to 1336/1337 or 1339/1340), is available in Getatchew Haile 1979. I am currently preparing a critical edition, from which I cite here, based on the five manuscripts of the text known to me, several of which were kindly brought to my attention by Ted Erho (see now Erho 2025, 72). The Ethiopic text reads here: ወዘንተ፡ ኩሎ፡ ዜነወ፡ አሐዱ፡ ዘሰሙ፡ ርፍናስ፡ በእንተ፡ ፍሬ፡ መንጥሶስ፡ አቡነ፡ ሰጊዖ፡ እምአድስሶስ፡ ካልኡ፡ ዘንተ፡ ኩሎ፡ ዜነወ። In addition to the English translation in the *editio princeps*, see that in Butts 2021, 387–390. A French translation is available in Colin 2017, 1–4.

²⁰ For ultimate versus immediate source, see Butts 2016, 53–54.

²¹ Edited in Hansen 1995, 61–62: ταῦτα δὲ ὁ Ῥουφίνος παρὰ τοῦ Αἰδεσίου, ὕστερον καὶ αὐτοῦ ἱεροσύνης ἀξιωθέντος ἐν τῇ Τύρῳ, ἀκηκοέναι φησίν, ‘All these things, Rufinus affirms that he had heard from Edesius, who was later deemed to be worthy of the priesthood in Tyre’.

²² So already in the *editio princeps* of the text, Getatchew Haile 1979, 310. This textual genealogy raises the question of whether the Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius* was translated directly from the Greek text of Socrates’s *Ecclesiastical History* or whether an (Arabic) intermediary stood between the two. In general, I am of the opinion that scholars have often been too eager to assume that Ethiopic texts were translated from Greek in Late Antiquity. The burden of proof falls on establishing that a particular text was translated directly from Greek, and the default, until proven otherwise, should be that it is a translation from Arabic in the medieval period. In this particular case, however, there is evidence that suggests that the Ethiopic *Homily on Frumentius* was translated directly from the Greek text of Socrates’s *Ecclesiastical History*. This evidence will be presented, with a further discussion of the issue, in the work mentioned in fn. 19 above. Until then, see Butts 2024, 38. See also Brakmann 1994, 64; ‘Īllā ‘Amida’, *EAE*, II (2005), 259b–261a, 260 (G. Fiaccadori); ‘Sälama I (Käšate Bərhan)’, *EAE*, IV (2010), 484b–488a, 485; Getatchew Haile 1979, 313; Villa 2017, 95–100, 106. In contrast, see Marrassini 2014, 55.

source for the Frumentius story elsewhere in the Ethiopic tradition, including especially in the later recension of the *Synaxarion*.²³

The Regnant Approach to Rufinus's Narrative: A House of Cards

Having laid out the various sources that are in play, I now want to turn to how previous scholars have constructed a historical narrative out of these disparate data. In particular, I am interested in how they have attempted to reconcile the Aksumite sources, on the one hand, with the story of Frumentius, on the other. I do not have space in this essay to provide an exhaustive history of scholarship, but a few highlights should suffice to illustrate that the overwhelming trend has been a highly credulous reading of the story of Frumentius, especially as presented by Rufinus. Starting already in 1681 with the founder of Ethiopian and Eritrean studies in western academia, Hiob Ludolf, the story of Frumentius was taken as historical.²⁴ Some two centuries later, in 1880, Dillmann likewise wrote:

There is no doubt that Rufinus, who became a Christian in 371 and soon afterwards stayed for a long time in Egypt and Palestine, either could have known Edesius personally or could have heard from him through a third party, and the story is in general credible.²⁵

The same credulous reading has continued more or less unabated until today. In a recent handbook, for instance, Getatchew Haile echoed this sentiment, writing simply, 'This story is credible'.²⁶ The similarity between Getatchew Haile's phrasing and Dillmann's is striking and illustrates how little has changed in the analysis of Rufinus's account of Frumentius over more than a century. The overwhelming

²³ For overviews, see Marrassini 2014, 53–57; Villa 2017, 90–91. On the development of the Ethiopic *Synaxarion*, see the important recent study of Reule 2025.

²⁴ Ludolf 1681, III, 2.

²⁵ Dillmann 1880, 6–7. The German original reads: 'Daß Rufin, der c. 371 Christ wurde und bald darauf in Ägypten und weiter in Palästina sich lange aufgehalten hat, den Edesius noch persönlich gekannt oder doch durch Dritte von ihm gehört haben kann, ist an sich nicht zu bezweifeln, und ist auch die Erzählung im Allgemeinen wohl glaublich'.

²⁶ Getatchew Haile, *apud* Uhlig et al. 2017, 219. The phrasing of the German translation of the handbook is especially to be noted in light of the German of Dillmann given in the previous footnote: 'Diese Erzählung erscheint glaubhaft' (Getatchew Haile, *apud* Uhlig et al. 2018, 239).

sentiment in the field is that the story of Frumentius, especially as presented by Rufinus, is to be trusted.²⁷ Exceptions can be counted on one hand.²⁸

Here is not the place to mount a full rebuttal against a credulous reading of the story of Frumentius, but the problems are manifold. A chronological difficulty, for instance, has long been acknowledged.²⁹ The *Apology* of Athanasius, written in 356, implies that Athanasius had just ordained Frumentius. In contrast, Rufinus states that, when Frumentius arrived in Alexandria, Athanasius had ‘recently received the priesthood’ (*nuper sacerdotium susceperat*),³⁰ which would seem to refer to his consecration as bishop of Alexandria in 328. How is it possible to reconcile the almost three-decade discrepancy between 328 and 356? Some think that Rufinus has made a mistake, or perhaps that Edesius did.³¹ Others suggest that Rufinus has deliberately changed the chronology to place Frumentius during Constantine’s time.³² Still others argue against the plain sense of Rufinus’s language suggesting that this statement refers not to Athanasius’s consecration as bishop but to one of his later returns from exile in either 338 or 346, squaring better with 356 when the *Apology* was written.³³ Or, perhaps this statement refers not

²⁷ A far from exhaustive list includes: Brakmann 1994, 65–66; Budge 1928, I, xi; Castiglia 2020, 85; Dihle 1965, 36–64; Doresse 1970, 23; Fowden 1993, 110–112; Haas 2008; Jones and Monroe 1935, 27–29; Kaplan 1984, 15–16; Kaplan 2010, 293–294; Kobiščanov (= Kobishchanov) 1966, 57–59; Kobishchanov 1979, 64–73; Marcus 1994, 7; Munro-Hay 1991, 202–204; Munro-Hay 1999a; Munro-Hay 2002, 236; Pankhurst 1998, 34–35; Phillipson 1998, 112; Phillipson 2009, 29; Phillipson 2012, 92; Robin 2012, 274; Russell 1833, 264–265; Seland 2014, 640; Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 92–93; Trimmingham 1952, 38–39; Ullendorff 1973, 96–97.

²⁸ Jones, for instance, speaks of Rufinus giving ‘a much-embroidered account’ (2014, 20). Based on various perceived historical problems, Sergew Hable Selassie questions whether Rufinus ever actually met Edesius or at the very least supposes that the account could have been written long after their meeting (1972, 100). Altheim and Stiehl are quite incredulous: ‘Überall handelt es sich um Mißverständnisse, und man begreift nicht, wie es geschehen konnte, daß niemandem die Haltlosigkeit der bisherigen Behauptungen und Folgerungen beim einfachen Lesen des Kapitels auffiel’ (1961, 236). Bowersock is similarly skeptical writing that Rufinus’s ‘romantic story [...] need not be believe’ (2013, 66).

²⁹ See already Dillmann 1880, 9–10, along with the discussion in Thélamon 1981, 60–62.

³⁰ For the text, see Schwartz and Mommsen 1908, 973, ll. 11–12.

³¹ Kobishchanov 1979, 68–69.

³² Thélamon 1981, 62.

³³ Klein 1977, 240. The most recent English translator of the text comments that this understanding ‘is stretching the language a bit’ (Amidon 1997, 396 fn. 20). Along a similar line of argumentation, Hahn proposes that Rufinus’s *nuper* was a misunderstanding of the putative Greek *Vorlage* with νεωστί, which Hahn claims could mean not only ‘recently’ but also ‘anew’ (Hahn 1999, 437 fn. 49).

to Athanasius but to Frumentius.³⁴ None of these proposals is, however, convincing, and the chronological problem remains unresolved.

There is also a long-standing geographic problem.³⁵ Why does Rufinus not connect the story of Frumentius to Aksum but to 'India' (*Indiam*)? It is the case that at the time that Rufinus was writing 'India' could refer not only to subcontinental India but also to the Horn of Africa as well as to the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶ But, Rufinus prefaces the story of Frumentius by specifying that the lot of 'Ethiopia' (*Aethiopia*) fell to Matthew. He then explains that between 'Nearer India' (*citerior India*) and Parthia lies 'Further India' (*India ulterior*). It is after this specific discussion of geography that Rufinus proceeds to narrate the travels of Meropius and two boys, one of whom was Frumentius, to 'India' (*Indiam*). Thus, it is far from certain—and perhaps even unlikely—that Rufinus himself imagines the story of Frumentius to be about Aksum.³⁷

Though attempts have been made to resolve these issues, problems remain with any credulous approach to the story of Rufinus. Much the same can be said about attempts to reconcile Rufinus's narrative with the Aksumite evidence. At this point, it will be useful to return to the earlier discussion of Ezana's coins and inscriptions. Previous scholars have generally adopted a linear conversion narrative in which Ezana started out as a so-called 'pagan', as evidenced, for instance, by his inscriptions with traditional deities such as Ares and coins with disc and crescent, then he allegedly became an 'undifferentiated monotheist'—whatever that might exactly mean³⁸—as evidenced by his inscriptions with 'Lord of Heaven', 'Lord of the Land', and 'Lord of All' and coins without religious symbol, and finally he is said to have converted to Christianity, as evidenced by his trini-

³⁴ An option entertained by Phillipson 2012, 98 fn. 35.

³⁵ Again, see already Dillmann 1880, 8–9, along with the discussion in Thélamon 1981, 49–60.

³⁶ See, among many others, Mayerson 1993 and especially Schneider 2004.

³⁷ Note that the most recent English translator of Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* comments: 'wherever on the map Rufinus may have imagined it as being [...]' (Amidon 1997, 395 fn. 19).

³⁸ With 'undifferentiated monotheism', I attempt to capture the sense of Robin's 'le monothéisme sans parti pris explicite' (see Robin 2003, 105, 153–154). Various other terms are found in the scholarly literature, including the following: 'generic monotheism' (Piovanelli 2014); 'less specific monotheism' (Phillipson 2012, 59); 'minimalist monotheism' (Robin 2012, 280). Regardless of the term preferred, the concept itself remains woefully under-theorized. See Mitchell and Nuffelen 2010.

tarian inscription and coins with crosses.³⁹ It must be stressed, however, that this is entirely a *scholarly* narrative.

The proposed three-step linear conversion of Ezana has several problems. One difficulty that should be acknowledged at the outset is the teleological nature of the proposed linear narrative in which a non-Christian passes through some intermediate stage—often implicitly, if not explicitly, understood to be Judaism—before reaching Christianity.⁴⁰ Such a teleological narrative is theoretically problematic.⁴¹ Beyond this theoretical problem, the Aksumite data themselves are actually much messier than previous scholars have acknowledged.

Above we examined a multilingual, multiscript series of inscriptions of Ezana that names pre-Christian ‘pagan’ deities such as Ares and Ashtar. Nevertheless, what I did not mention there—and what previous scholars have for the most part neglected—is that one of the Greek copies of these allegedly ‘pagan’ inscriptions includes so-called ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ language alongside the traditional deities.⁴² The following passage occurs toward the end of the inscription in one of the Greek copies:

In thanks to the one who begot me, the invincible Ares, we offered to him one statue of gold, one of silver, and three of bronze. I dedicated this stela and offered it to Heaven and to Earth and to the one who begat me, the invincible Ares. If anyone intends to harm this one, may the Lord of Heaven and Earth utterly destroy him, and may his name no longer remain in the land of the living. (RIÉ 270 bis, ll. 26–34)

In this passage, the god Ares occurs twice alongside not only ‘Heaven and Earth’ (τῶ οὐρανῶ καὶ τῇ γῆ) but also even ‘the Lord (or: God) of Heaven and Earth’ (ὁ θε[ὸς] τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς). In the traditional scholarly narrative, the latter

³⁹ To give just one of many possible citations for this tripartite linear conversion narrative, see Piovanelli 2014, 349–350, who it should be noted adopts a critical approach to the sources, seeking to avoid a positivist historiography—not dissimilar from the method for which I am advocating in this essay.

⁴⁰ For an explicit proposal of an intermediate stage of Judaism, see Grillmeier 1975–2013, II/4, 298. Pertinent to this matter is once again the monotheistic language of inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula; see fn. 11 above with the citation of Gajda 2009. In addition, there has been significant discussion in the scholarly literature about whether the monotheistic language of the Old South Arabian inscriptions is more specifically Jewish. See, for instance, Grasso 2020; Grasso 2023, 70–91; Piovanelli 2018; Robin 2003; Robin 2004; Robin 2015; Robin 2021.

⁴¹ Of the many items that could be cited, see the considerations on Syriac Christianity in Gross 2020.

⁴² For an exceptional acknowledgment of this point, see Uhlig 2001, 29. See also Brakmann 1994, 72 fn. 349.

collocation would not be expected in this allegedly ‘pagan’ inscription but rather in an ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ one (such as RIÉ 189). A comparison of this Greek passage with that of the Ethiopic-language copies is illuminating, since they do not attest the language of ‘the Lord of Heaven and Earth’:⁴³

We offered in thanks to MḤRM, who begat us, one statue of gold, one of silver, and three of bronze. We wrote this inscription, and we erected it, and we offered to Ashtar, to BḤR,⁴⁴ and to MḤRM, who begat us. If anyone destroys this stela, may he, his family, and his children be blinded and ?, may they be driven from this land, and may they be cut off from the beer (?). (RIÉ 185 I = 185 bis I / 185 II = 185 bis II)

In the Ethiopic-language copies, then, we find Ashtar and BḤR/MDR corresponding to ‘Heaven and Earth’ (τῶ οὐρανῶ καὶ τῇ γῆ) in one of the Greek copies (RIÉ 270 bis).⁴⁵ Even more importantly, there is no mention of the ‘the Lord of Heaven and Earth’ in the Ethiopic-language copies. Thus, this inscription challenges any stark division between Ezana’s ‘pagan’ inscriptions and his ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ ones, as the traditional scholarly narrative would have it. As it turns out, even a ‘pagan’ inscription such as the one under consideration contains ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ language in one of its copies, as these categories have been defined by scholars.⁴⁶

⁴³ The other Greek copy (RIÉ 270) concludes after the mention of the three bronze statues, and so does not include the material under discussion. For possible reasons for this premature conclusion, see the discussion in Schneider 1987, 605 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 42–43).

⁴⁴ RIÉ 185 II has MDR. On BḤR and MDR, see fn. 10 above.

⁴⁵ The combination of Ashtar and MDR is also found in RIÉ 198, I, ll. 2–3.

⁴⁶ Phillipson’s attempt to explain away the language of ‘Lord of Heaven and Earth’ as arising simply ‘from an attempt to provide a Greek rendering for the Ge‘ez names of pagan deities’ is unconvincing; see Phillipson 2012, 96. It cannot be doubted that Ashtar corresponds in complicated—and not yet fully understood—ways with ‘heaven’ in the Aksumite period; see Marrassini 2012, 107–113; Marrassini 2014, 45–46; ‘Astär’, *EAE*, I (2003), 387a–387b (A. Sima). Nevertheless, the inclusion of the word ‘Lord’ or ‘God’ (ὁ θεός) in RIÉ 270 bis moves the matter beyond a simple equation of Ashtar and ‘heaven’ in this case. Moreover, the Greek ‘Lord of Heaven and Earth’ (ὁ θε[ός] τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς) in RIÉ 270 bis is indisputably similar to the ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ language in RIÉ 189, e.g., ‘Lord of Heaven’ (‘*əgzi’ā samāy*’), ‘Lord of the Land’ (‘*əgzi’ā bəher*’), as well as the ambiguous ‘Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven, and of Earth (or: and Earth)’ (‘*əgzi’ā samāy [zaba] samāy wamadr*’ (on the ambiguous syntax, see at fn. 80 below).

Other inscriptions of Ezana are equally difficult to reconcile with the reigning scholarly narrative of a three-step linear conversion of Ezana. Above we looked at a Greek inscription that begins with a trinitarian formula (RIÉ 271). On the reverse side of the stone, there is a highly damaged inscription written in the Ethiopic language (RIÉ 190). Unfortunately, the name of the king is lost, but what remains suggests that the inscription deals with a campaign against Noba, that is Nubia.⁴⁷ Given that the Greek and Ethiopic inscriptions are written on the same stone and that both deal with campaigns against Noba, it is likely that the Ethiopic (RIÉ 190) should also be attributed to Ezana and is in fact a bilingual counterpart to the Greek (RIÉ 271).⁴⁸ In contrast to the Greek inscription (RIÉ 271), which has a trinitarian formula, the Ethiopic (RIÉ 190) has ‘Lord of the Land’ (A, ll. 8, 9; B, l. 3) and ‘Lord of Heaven’ (A, l. 42). Thus, we have two inscriptions, one on each side of the same stone, both dealing with campaigns against Noba and seemingly dealing with similar events, likely by the same king Ezana, and while the Greek inscription uses Christian language with a trinitarian formula, the Ethiopic-language inscription uses what is usually considered to be ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ language. Once again, the reigning scholarly narrative of a three-step linear progression in Ezana’s inscriptions is messier than previous scholars have presented it.



Fig. 5: Ezana Silver Coin with Gilt, traditionally said to be ‘without Religious Symbol’ (Type 43 = H 22a). Ashmolean, JJ 80 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The interpretation of Ezana’s coins is likewise not as straightforward as the reigning scholarly narrative would have it. It is certainly the case that there are coins of Ezana with disc and crescent, without religious symbol, and with cross.⁴⁹ But, these coins do not necessarily have to proceed in a linear, chronological order;

⁴⁷ See Hatke 2013, 129–134 (chapter 4.5.3).

⁴⁸ So also, e.g., Grasso 2023, 82; Marrassini 2012, 103–104; Piovaneli 2014, 346, 348 fn. 49, 350 65; Robin 2012, 276. See also Schneider 1987, 600 (English translation in Bausi 2012, 36); Marrassini 2014, 238–243; Phillipson 2012, 61.

⁴⁹ For Ezana’s coins, see the discussion and images above with fn. 13.

their ordering is determined solely by the scholarly narrative. Moreover, some of the silver coins that are traditionally said to be without religious symbol actually do have a symbol (see Type 43 [H22a]; Fig. 5), even if it is neither a disc and crescent nor a cross.⁵⁰ No attempt is usually made to explain how such coins fit into the linear narrative.⁵¹



Fig. 6: Ousanas Silver Coin without Religious Symbol (Types 32–34 = H 25). Ashmolean JJ 498 © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

The coins of Ezana's predecessor, Ousanas, also present challenges to the usual interpretation of Ezana's coinage. Ousanas produced coins with disc and crescent (Types 20–31 = H 12–14) as well as without religious symbols (Types 32–34 = H 25; Fig. 6) but none with crosses.⁵² If Ezana's coins without religious symbol are interpreted as corresponding to his intermediate period of 'undifferentiated monotheism', would the same explanation not be necessary for the earlier Ousanas? Scholars do not, however, generally consider Ousanas to be an 'undifferentiated monotheist' based on these coins.⁵³ Why then are Ezana's coins without religious symbol interpreted in such a way? How is the inconsistency justified? With Ezana's and Ousanas's coins without religious symbol, it seems more likely

⁵⁰ For the classification of such coins as 'without religious symbol', see, e.g., Hahn and West 2016, 56–57; Munro-Hay 1999b, 31–32.

⁵¹ I return to these coins below.

⁵² For Ousanas's coins, see Hahn 2020, 64–74, along with the remarks of Piovanelli 2014, 349, on the coins without religious symbol.

⁵³ There are, however, exceptions: Munro-Hay, for instances, entertains the possibility that these coins reflect Frumentius's spread of Christianity already during Ousanas's time (Munro-Hay 1991, 191; see also Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995, 42). For criticism, see Hahn 2020, 72 fn. 194. In a similar vein to Munro-Hay, Piovanelli suggests 'that Ousanas was the first king of Aksum to make a cautious path towards the adoption of Christianity, a process which apparently, he did not have the opportunity, or perhaps the will, to complete' (see Piovanelli 2014, 349). See also Phillipson 2012, 97. On this Ousanas more generally, see 'Ousanas I', *EAE*, IV (2010), 82a–83a (G. Fiaccadori).

that we are actually dealing with a stylistic innovation, not a religious one: the triple rim simply did not provide space for the disc and crescent.⁵⁴

A further problem for the regnant scholarly narrative is encountered with Ousanas: He seems to have been Ezana's older brother, but an older brother of Ezana's would be difficult to reconcile with Rufinus's narrative. First it is necessary to establish that Ousanas is in fact Ezana's older brother, since this point continues to be disputed.⁵⁵ Based on his coins, we know that Ousanas had a *bə'si*-name of Gisene (ΓΙCENE).⁵⁶ Ousanas can, therefore, be identified as the author of RIÉ 186, where *b's[ym g]snm* should be reconstructed in a lacuna at the beginning of the inscription.⁵⁷ The author of RIÉ 186 is named as a son—partially reconstructed—of ʾĪlle 'Amidā, which is the name of Ezana's father (RIÉ 188, l. 1; 189, ll. 1–2; 271, ll. 9–10).⁵⁸ Therefore, Ousanas is likely Ezana's older brother. This point brings us back to the problems of reconciling the story of Frumentius, especially as told by Rufinus, with the Aksumite sources. If Ezana is the king in Rufinus's account, how can we reconcile his older brother Ousanas with the story of Frumentius? It should be recalled that Rufinus reports that the king died leaving a child as heir to the throne, and that it is during the reign of this child—generally identified by scholars as Ezana—that Christianity was spread by Frumentius.⁵⁹ Not only does Rufinus not mention the child-king having an older

⁵⁴ So Hahn 2020, 72.

⁵⁵ See fn. 58 below. For possible younger brothers of Ezana, see fn. 16 above.

⁵⁶ The Ethiopic word *bə'si*, which is transcribed in Greek as BICI on Aksumite coins, is the generic term for 'man, male, husband'. Every Aksumite king had one of these so-called *bə'si*-names, and they seem to identify the king with a particular clan and/or military troop, though their exact meaning continues to be debated. See 'Name(s), Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite names', *EAE*, III (2007), 1119b–1122b (A. Bausi), with additional references.

⁵⁷ So already, e.g., Munro-Hay 1988, 122 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 68); *RIÉ*, IIIB, 209; Fiaccadori 2004, 110; 'Īllä 'Amidā', *EAE*, II (2005), 259b–261a, 260 (G. Fiaccadori); 'Ousanas I', *EAE*, IV (2010), 82a–83a, 82; Marrassini 2014, 34; Piovaneli 2014, 346; Schneider 1987, 614.

⁵⁸ Earlier scholarship did not account for the word 'son', which though severely damaged seems to occur at the beginning of the inscription, and therefore understood the author of the inscription to be ʾĪlle 'Amidā, the father of Ezana. Unfortunately this misunderstanding is perpetuated in some more recent publications, e.g., Phillipson 2012, 58–60, where the inscription is tentatively listed as belonging to ʾĪlle 'Amidā. See also p. 82, where Ousanas is identified with ʾĪlle 'Amidā (without the tentative question mark).

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Phillipson 2012, 80: '[...] a passage [of Rufinus] that is interpreted as referring to the young Ezana and his mother during the first half of the fourth century'.

brother who ruled before him, but an older brother of the king is incompatible with his narrative.⁶⁰

More broadly, it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the Aksumite evidence, especially interpreted as it has been in Ezana's three-step linear progression, with Rufinus's account, particularly as it has been read by previous scholars. Most basically, Rufinus never explicitly speaks of the king adopting Christianity.⁶¹ Frumentius is said to rule the kingdom (*ad moderandum [...] regnum*) in the child-king's stead, and while doing so he is reported to have supported Christians in various ways. Rufinus, however, reports nothing about the king himself adopting Christianity. Yet, this is exactly how scholars have often understood Rufinus. Such a reading, however, exacerbates the already considerable historical difficulties. If the Aksumite king in question adopted Christianity when a child, as most scholars understand Rufinus, how can that narrative be reconciled with the Aksumite evidence, especially interpreted in the framework of a three-step linear conversion of Ezana? When exactly in his reign would Ezana have produced coins with disc and crescent? And when the inscriptions commemorating his military conquests in which he identified as a 'son of the invincible god Ares'? It would have been before adopting Christianity, but if he adopted Christianity already as a child, as most scholars read Rufinus, then how does the chronology work?⁶² The same

⁶⁰ This problem has prompted some historical gymnastics by a few scholars. Fiaccadori, for instance, states the following when discussing the child-king's assumption of the throne in Rufinus's narrative: 'the probably short reign of 'Ezana's elder brother, Ousanas I, being here symptomatically omitted' ('Sälama I (Käsate Bərhan)', *EAe*, IV (2010), 484b–488a, 486 (G. Fiaccadori)).

⁶¹ I am far from the first to make this obvious point; see, e.g., Thélamon 1981, 461: 'Rufin ne parle pas expressément d'une conversion du souverain axoumite et de la christianisation officielle de ce pays'; Munro-Hay 1988, 120 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 66): 'It is not specifically stated by Rufinus that the Aksumite ruler was converted'; Fowden 1993, 111: 'The ecclesiastical historian Rufinus, on whom all later accounts depend, does not go so far as to claim that the ruler of Aksum became a Christian'; Phillipson 2012, 93: 'Even more striking is the fact that, although Rufinus attributes numerous converts to the new bishop, he made no mention that they included the king'; Schneider 1988, 113: 'though the early sources (Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomenus, Theodoretus) give details about the activities of Frumentius, they never say that he converted the king. If Frumentius had converted the king, one would certainly expect the hagiographers to mention the fact'.

⁶² Note in particular that the series of multilingual, multiscript inscriptions states that the military campaign was carried out by Ezana's 'brothers' Sazana and Adepha (RIÉ 185 I, l. 3 = 185 bis I, l. 5 / 185 II, l. 5 = 185 bis II, ll. 5–6 / 270, l. 9 = 270 bis, l. 7). If these are his biological brothers (see fn. 16 above), then they are likely to be *younger* brothers (otherwise one of them would presumably have been king instead of Ezana). In such a case, the chronological problem is further exacerbated, since this supposedly

problem will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, for the coins without religious symbol and the inscriptions with ‘undifferentiated monotheistic’ language. In the end, it is difficult to reconcile the king’s adoption of Christianity as a child, as most scholars understand Rufinus, with the regnant narrative of Ezana’s three-step linear conversion.⁶³

Previous scholars’ credulousness of Rufinus’s narrative stems at least in part from their insistence that it is corroborated by Ethiopic sources. In a classic, even if now dated, work on the history of Aksum, for instance, Kobishchanov writes as follows:

Tyrannius Rufinus was a person who deserves credence. He could have become acquainted with Aedesius in Tyre. In Alexandria, Rufinus was on friendly terms with Athanasius the Great and people who knew Frumentius personally. Therefore, there can be no doubt that he received his information firsthand [...] Up to the present, not one investigator has doubted the veracity of the basic information communicated by Rufinus. It is possible to blame him, over and above the geographic and chronological confusion, for exaggeration of Frumentius’ authority and success of Christian evangelism; but in this respect Aedesius could also be guilty. All of the historical and social conditions of the story are completely reliable or probable and find confirmation in sources which differ in nature.⁶⁴

I have quoted the passage in full since it illustrates so well the regnant scholarly approach to Rufinus’s narrative—along with its problems! It is, however, the last sentence that I want to highlight now: Rufinus’s narrative is presented as being confirmed by other sources. Kobishchanov is not alone in this respect. To give just one further example, Phillipson speaks of ‘the remarkable agreement between the Ethiopic and the foreign accounts’ of the story of Frumentius.⁶⁵ Here an intervention is necessary. In actuality, all the other sources for the story of Frumen-

‘pagan’ inscription would have been written when Ezana’s younger brothers were old enough to lead a military campaign, presumably long after the time when Ezana is thought to have adopted Christianity as a child.

⁶³ This tension comes out clearly in the following sentences from Phillipson 1998, 93 fn. 9: the Ethiopic *Synaxarion* ‘states that Frumentius and Aedesius taught “the Faith of Christ” to their young royal charge during the regency of the latter’s mother. This need not of course imply conversion, which would run counter to the evidence of the inscriptions and coins, both of which indicate that Ezana adopted Christianity during the middle years of his reign’.

⁶⁴ Kobishchanov 1979, 68–69. The same as the Russian original: Kobiščanov 1966, 57–59.

⁶⁵ Phillipson 2009, 29.

tius—whether the Greco-Roman church historians or Ethiopic sources—ultimately stem from Rufinus and therefore do not corroborate his narrative.

I raise all these points to illustrate just how fragile this house of cards is: Rufinus's narrative, far from being trustworthy, has unresolved historical difficulties. The Aksumite evidence does not fit so neatly into a three-step linear conversion narrative. I stress in particular that the intermediate stage of 'undifferentiated monotheism' is problematic. Moreover, attempts at reconciling Rufinus's narrative of Frumentius with the Aksumite evidence, especially as both have been understood by previous scholars, prove illusory. In a nutshell, the regnant approach simply does not work. A different historical reconstruction, informed by more critical methodologies, is needed. Before presenting my own thoughts about Ezana in the next and final section of this essay, I want to conclude this section with a few words about the story of Frumentius in Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History*.

At least for me, it is unclear what, if anything, Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* can tell us about fourth-century Aksum. A minimalist position might even suppose that Rufinus's narrative is nothing more than a creative commentary prompted—perhaps better: enabled—by the isolated mention of an otherwise unknown Frumentius in Athanasius's *Apology*.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, even if such a minimalist approach swings the proverbial pendulum too far in the other direction, I am convinced that Rufinus's narrative has at least as much to tell us about Rufinus's own agenda as about what happened in fourth-century Aksum.⁶⁷ Adopting a methodological approach informed by the linguistic turn, we should start from the position that Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* is first and foremost a work of literature, and so we should begin by asking what work the story about Frumentius—regardless of its historicity—is doing in Rufinus's broader project.⁶⁸ I would, thus, draw a contrast between the approach for which I am advocating here and that of Haas, who writes, 'Even though we may freely acknowledge Rufinus' use of the evangelization narratives in his own programmatic scheme, they have independent

⁶⁶ The chronological ordering should be stressed: Athanasius's *Apology* was written in 356, and only later, in the early years of the fifth century, did Rufinus write his *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁶⁷ Compare the following statement in Boyarin 2004, 46: 'rabbinic writings are necessarily evidence for the time and place in which they have come into being as texts and not necessarily for the time and place of which they tell us. That is, they *may* be evidence for earlier times but are certainly evidence that something was being thought or said at the time that the text was promulgated'. See also Boyarin 2005.

⁶⁸ For the 'linguistic turn' in the study of early Christianity, see especially Clark 2004. For examples that apply such a methodology to conversion narratives, see Sterk 2010; Young 2009.

merit as vital sources for the conversion of the Aksumite and Iberian monarchies'.⁶⁹ I suggest that we turn this statement on its head: I am not convinced in this particular case that Rufinus has much, if anything, to tell us about fourth-century Aksum. But—and this is my point—we should *not* be merely concessive, as Haas is here, about what work Rufinus's narrative is doing. For me at least, that is a most interesting aspect. In Haas words, what does the story about Frumentius tell us about Rufinus's 'programmatic scheme'? Some scholarship has taken up such a question,⁷⁰ but more work remains to be done.

The Christianity of Ezana: A Page from Constantine's Playbook?

If we are ultimately interested in the history of the first Christian king in Africa, we should look first and foremost to the Aksumite sources related to Ezana.⁷¹ Even from his coins and inscriptions, I am convinced that we still have much to learn, and it is with this topic that I conclude this essay. Not enough attention has been paid in my view to the question of the intended audiences of Ezana's coins and inscriptions. It has been pointed out a number of times in the secondary literature that the inscription of Ezana with the most overtly Christian language (RIÉ 271) is in Greek.⁷² This point, however, becomes even more probative, when the Greek inscription is contrasted with its corresponding Ethiopic-language version (RIÉ 190), which has the more ambiguous language of 'Lord of the Land' (A, ll. 8, 9; B, l. 3) and 'Lord of Heaven' (A, l. 42). Moreover, it has not yet been acknowledged that a comparable distribution holds true with Ezana's multilingual, multiscript series of inscriptions: one of the Greek copies (RIÉ 270) has the innovative 'Lord of Heaven and Earth', whereas the Semitic language versions (RIÉ 185 I = 185 bis I / 185 II = 185 bis II) do not. Taken together, we can generalize that more innovative religious language is found in the Greek versions of Ezana's inscriptions. The intended audience of these Greek inscriptions would have been foreigners as well as perhaps certain local elites (a highly ambiguous

⁶⁹ Haas 2008, 108.

⁷⁰ See in particular Thélamon 1981, esp. 37–83, where she discusses the Frumentius narrative. For a more recent piece in this direction, focusing on Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* in its entirety, see Humphries 2008.

⁷¹ In this way, I depart from the majority of scholars who begin with the 'outside' sources, whether Rufinus's account of Frumentius or Constantius's letter embedded in Athanasius's *Apology*; for two prominent examples, see Brakmann 1994, 51–77; Robin 2012, 273–281. My approach is similar to that adopted by Yonatan Binyam in Yonatan Binyam and Krebs 2024, 11–20, which appeared only after the present essay had been written.

⁷² See, e.g., Phillipson 2012, 96.

term).⁷³ Thus, it is this audience—and not that of the local masses (an equally ambiguous term)—that Ezana seems to be addressing with his more innovative religious language.

A similar distribution obtains with Ezana's coinage. All of Ezana's coins with crosses are gold; he did not include crosses on his silver or copper coinage.⁷⁴ This distribution seems to correspond, at least in part, to the intended audience. In general, silver and copper Aksumite coins were used primarily for local commerce, whereas gold coins circulated especially abroad—gold Aksumite coins have been found along the Indian Ocean trade networks, particularly in South Arabia and as far away as India.⁷⁵ The distribution of religious symbols on Ezana's coins, thus, follows a pattern similar to that of the religious language in his inscriptions: The overtly Christian cross is found on coins intended for a broader audience along the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond, whereas the local currency lacks the cross.⁷⁶

A clearer image of Ezana now at last begins to emerge: In his earliest royal propaganda—that is after all what such inscriptions and coins are—Ezana presents himself as a traditionalist. His coins of this period feature a disc and crescent, connecting him iconographically with the pre-Christian religious tradition of Aksum as well as of the broader Red Sea region. In an inscription from this period, Ezana styles himself as 'a son of the invincible god Ares' and names other time-honored deities such as Ashtar and BHR/MDR. And, yet, in the same inscription, he opens a door with the innovative turn of phrase 'Lord of Heaven and Earth'—a harbinger to a 'turning point' that is perhaps already well underway.⁷⁷ This portent was, however, only legible to those who could read Greek.

⁷³ So also, e.g., Kaplan 1982, 105 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 31–32) and Phillipson 2012, 97.

⁷⁴ There are a couple of potential exceptions: a silver unicum and a copper unicum—the former known only from a photo—that purportedly have Ezana's name and a cross. See Hahn 2020, 80. That these two coins are seemingly unique is not properly accounted for by Piovanelli 2014, 350 with fn. 64, who cites them as evidence that Ezana's Christian coinage was also addressed to the local population.

⁷⁵ So already many others, e.g., Phillipson 1998, 192: 'The conclusion is inescapable that, whereas the gold coins indeed saw mainly international circulation, the base-metal issues were intended for more local use'. On the findspot and provenance of Aksumite coins, see the helpful appendix in Hahn 2020, 153–155.

⁷⁶ To be clear, I do not see this distribution as a strict binary but rather as a general tendency: certainly, gold coins were used locally, and silver and copper coins are found abroad. These are, however, the minorities.

⁷⁷ For this reason, it is necessary for me to abandon the designations of 'pre-Christian' and 'Christian' periods of Ezana and adopt instead the more neutral 'early' and 'late'.

At some indeterminate time later, Ezana chooses to present himself in a different way. In high-denomination gold coins that circulated more widely outside of the Aksumite kingdom, Ezana replaces the disc and crescent of his former currency with a Christian cross. In a Greek inscription, he invokes in unmistakable terms the Christian trinity, presenting himself as co-religionist to visiting foreigners and local elites who could read Greek. To the local masses, however, the message of this later period is more ambiguous.

Ezana's Ethiopic-language inscriptions from the later period speak of a 'Lord of the Land', a 'Lord of Heaven', and a 'Lord of All'. There is no doubt that such language is not neutral but innovative.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, this language is still a far cry from the trinitarian language found in Greek. Moreover, such collocations are multivalent, allowing for different, even conflicting, understandings. So, for instance, whereas in earlier inscriptions Ezana evoked BḤR, literally 'land', as a personified deity, he refers in the later period to the 'Lord of the Land' (*'əgzi'a bəher*). To one Aksumite reader, such a subtle change might have made little to no difference. Perhaps it simply represents a new way to refer to BḤR and therefore marks a continuation of age-old religious practices. Yet, to another, 'Lord of the Land' (*'əgzi'a bəher*) might have meant something very different: this is the Christian God—the exact same collation will after all eventually be used to translate both 'God' (ὁ θεός) and 'Lord' (ὁ Κύριος) in the Bible.⁷⁹ Similar slippage is found throughout the Ethiopic inscriptions from Ezana's later period—those previously called 'undifferentiated monotheistic'. One wonders, for instance, whether 'Lord of Heaven', 'Lord of All', and 'Lord of the Land' in a single Ethiopic inscription from this period (RIÉ 189) refer to separate deities. Or, are these different epithets of a single deity? Both readings are possible. Moreover, one particularly ambiguous collocation (*'əgzi'a samāy [zaba] samāy wamədr*) at the beginning of the same inscription could reasonably be understood as 'The Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven, and MDR' as two separate entities, 'The Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven, and (the Lord) of Earth' with ellipsis and again as two separate entities, the 'Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven, and of Earth' as one entity, or the 'Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven and on earth'. An invocation of MDR—notably not 'Lord of the Land' (*'əgzi'a mədr*)—later in the same inscription seems to evoke the inscriptions of the earlier period: 'I entrust this throne, which I have established, to the Lord of Heaven, who has made me king, and to MDR, who bears

⁷⁸ A point stressed by Schneider 1987, 609–614 (English translation in Bausi 2012, 48–53) and Kaplan 1982, 105 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 32).

⁷⁹ See Dillmann 1865, 1192.

it'.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, other indications suggest a Christian reading of inscriptions from Ezana's later period. Most notably, a different Ethiopic-language inscription from this period (RIÉ 190), with the terms 'Lord of the Land' (A, ll. 8, 9; B, l. 3) and 'Lord of Heaven' (A, l. 42), concludes with an overtly Christian cross.⁸¹ Thus, it is possible to read the previously mentioned collocation either 'backwards', so to speak, as referring to two entities, 'Lord of Heaven' and MDR, or 'forwards', to a Christian 'Lord of Heaven, who is in heaven and on earth'. The Ethiopic-language inscriptions of Ezana's later period are multivalent.

A similar picture emerges from the lower-denomination silver and bronze coins of the later period (Types 42 = H22b–c and 44 = H 23). They do not display the Christian cross, but also not the disc and crescent. They are without religious symbol. Like the Ethiopic inscriptions of the later period, such coins are not neutral. After all, the disc and crescent are no longer present. Nevertheless, they are also not overtly announcing a new religion. They are underspecified: not the old way, but the new way is left unstated. From this period, there are also silver coins that have a symbol in the place where one would expect either disc and crescent or cross (Type 43 = H22a; Fig. 5 above).⁸² This symbol could perhaps be a Christian 'sun-cross',⁸³ but the interpretation is far from certain, and more to the point, its message would have probably been equally ambiguous to the local Aksumite population.

The multivalency of Ezana in his later period was, I propose, intentional. Just as in the earlier period, when Ezana opened a door to a new religious possibility for his Greek-reading audience with the innovative turn of phrase 'Lord of Heaven and Earth', so also—and even more so—in the later period he left the door open to a more conservative, traditional understanding for his local audience. Leaders are after all rarely well-served by alienating potential constituencies, and Ezana would have been no exception. Rather, he seems to have been politically calculating in projecting his Christianity in different ways to different audiences. Ezana followed a path already well trodden by Constantine, who adopted a similar tactic of political expediency only a few decades earlier.⁸⁴ Like Constantine,

⁸⁰ The Ethiopic reads: **ወአመሕፀንኩ፡ ዘመንበረ፡ ዘተከልኩ፡ ለእግዚአ፡ ሰማይ፡ ዘእንገሠነ፡ ወለምድር፡ ዘይጸውሮ፡**. See also 'Mədr', *EAE*, III (2007), 906a–907b, 907a (A. Sima), where mention is made of 'traces of the veneration of M(ədr)' in this inscription.

⁸¹ See the image in *RIÉ*, II, pl. 128.

⁸² In Hahn 2020, 80, these coins are also classified in the same period as the gold coins with crosses.

⁸³ So Hahn 2006, 265. See also Brakmann 1994, 75. In an earlier publication, Hahn understands the symbol as a 'radiant sun' (Hahn 1999, 50–51).

⁸⁴ Of the many items that could be cited, see Lenski 2016. More generally, see Lenski 2012.

Ezana aimed to strike a balance between various competing interests by proclaiming bespoke messages to different audiences, and he changed and adapted these messages over time as the situation developed.

By sidelining the narrative of Rufinus, as I have done here, and focusing on Ezana's coins and inscriptions, we arrive at new perspectives on fourth-century Aksum. As long as Rufinus's story of Frumentius served as the framework, Ezana's Christianity was primarily understood in terms of personal conviction.⁸⁵ The approach for which I am advocating here, in contrast, sees Ezana's Christianity in political terms, not unlike how scholars now evaluate Constantine. A major upshot of such an approach is that we learn something new not only about Ezana but also about the Aksumite kingdom more broadly. After all, we must now ask the all-important historical question, why? Why, for instance, did Ezana in his later period present himself as a co-religionist to visiting foreigners and local elites who could read Greek? For Ezana, Christianity seems to have been a strategic way to associate himself with the Roman Empire. It was not necessary for Aksumite gold coins to circulate in Rome for Christianity to be advantageous to Ezana. After all, the Aksumite kingdom derived much of its power, prestige, and wealth from the port of Adulis, which was strategically located along the Red Sea and well within the sphere of influence of the Roman Empire. Christians are known to have been in Adulis from a relatively early date, and in fact churches may even have been present there by Ezana's time, at least according to one recent archaeologist.⁸⁶ Many of the merchants in Adulis would have been Greek-speaking, and it seems that these money-generating elites—both foreigners and locals—would have been one obvious audience for Ezana's overtly Christian propaganda.⁸⁷

Another thought-provoking question that my approach raises is how to explain Ezana's message to the local population in his later period: why are the silver and copper coins underspecified and the Ethiopic-language inscriptions multivalent? Scholars have long maintained that the spread of Christianity in Aksum was top-down.⁸⁸ But, once Rufinus's story of Frumentius is set aside, what evidence is

⁸⁵ Kaplan, for instance, emphasizes Ezana's Christianity as 'a genuine religious conversion' (Kaplan 1982, reprinted in Bausi 2012, 27–34).

⁸⁶ See Massa 2017. Much archaeological work has been carried out in recent years in Adulis, including especially early Christian sites; see, e.g., Castiglia 2018; Castiglia 2018–2019; Castiglia 2020, 95–101; Castiglia et al. 2021; Giostra and Massa 2016.

⁸⁷ Many scholars have made this point; see, e.g., Seland 2014.

⁸⁸ A classic statement is that in Sergew Hable Selassie 1972, 104: 'there was a fundamental difference between the way in which Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia, and the way in which it was first introduced into the Graeco-Roman world. There, Christianity began among the lower classes and gradually, after three centuries, succeeded in gaining converts among some members of the royal family. In Ethiopia, it was the other way

there for this widely held view? What if the spread of Christianity in Aksum was rather bottom-up? Such a scenario would provide a fitting context for Ezana's propaganda to the local population in his later period. Ezana would have been dealing with a situation in which part of the local population was already Christian while the other part maintained traditional religious practices. The silver and copper coins and the Ethiopic-language inscriptions would then be Ezana's attempt to have his cake and to eat it too, as the saying goes. Ezana was trying to ally himself with the growing number of Christians among the local population, without alienating the more traditional.

I began this essay by suggesting that the mammoth, fallen stela in Aksum symbolizes the radical rupture that took place with Ezana's adoption of Christianity. We must not, however, forget that this 'turning point' only comes into view in hindsight. In fourth-century Aksum, the situation will have been much more fluid. Ezana can be seen exploiting this fluidity—and contributing to it—through his own royal propaganda. When put into focus in this way, Ezana's coins and inscriptions tell us something new not only about the first African king to present himself as Christian but also about the Aksumite kingdom and its relationship to the broader Mediterranean world.

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round; Christianity began among the upper classes and gradually spread down to the lower levels of society. In other words, Christianity in Ethiopia started as the official religion of the country and as such, it secured the help of government from the very beginning'. See also, e.g., Kaplan 1982 (reprinted in Bausi 2012, 27–34); Castiglia 2020, 91, 102; Phillipson 1994, 206–207; Phillipson 2009, 30.

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Summary

This article reinterprets the fourth-century Aksumite king Ezana's adoption of Christianity through contemporaneous coins and inscriptions, challenging the regnant scholarly narrative derived from church historians, especially Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History*. It argues that Ezana—like Constantine a few decades earlier—used Christianity strategically, projecting his faith differently to distinct audiences for political effect. By reframing Ezana's adoption of Christianity, the article offers a fresh view of both the king and Late Antique Aksum, suggesting that Christianity in the Horn of Africa spread from the bottom up rather than being imposed from the top down.