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Divine kingship and Afro-Byzantine political theology through syncretism: Intersections of faith, power, and art in Nubia and Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article examines how Byzantine political theology was transmitted and transformed within African Christian kingdoms of Nubia and Ethiopia particularly through religious art. Drawing on theological concepts such as *taxis* (order of the Nature) and *oikonomia* (divine management), the study explores how African rulers appropriated and adapted politically Byzantine models of divine kingship while embedding them in local traditions of authority. Including syncretic continuities with older African kingship practices, social interaction embodied personal worth, and authority of a monarch with presumed qualities and abilities society expects them to possess, defined as *charisma*. Texts in Ge´ez, such as the religious epic story *Kebra Negast* and the legal code *Fetha Negast* (fourteenth century) illustrate the interweaving of biblical, Roman-Byzantine, and Ethiopian theological–political thought, while iconographic traditions in Faras and Aksum reveal how art functioned as a medium of divine legitimation and as a visual enactment of the protector–protected relationship central to Afro-Byzantine kingship. Drawing on a combined historical, politico-cultural and artistic methodological approach, the article argues that Afro-Byzantine political theology was not a submissive, passive imitation of imperial ideology but an active *creative synthesis* that combined Christian universality with African specificity. Foregrounding a process of *syncretism*, the study highlights divine protection, sacred kingship, legalised hegemonic authority as well how African Christianity contributed to the global history of Christian political thought. This comparative perspective advances scholarship by reframing Africa as an active site of theological, political and artistic development through social *acculturation* and *syncretic* spirituality.

Keywords: Nubia, Faras, Aksum, Kebra Negast, Fetha Negast, Afro–Byzantine, syncretism.

Introduction

Connecting religion with politics has long been central to the organisation of premodern societies. In the Byzantine Empire this connection was particularly intensive, for the emperor was regarded as a God's chosen political leader on earth, entrusted with the guardianship of the Christian people and the preservation of Orthodoxy. Byzantine political theology shaped the emperor's authority as a heavenly mandate, grounding it in theological principles such as *taxis* (earthly order) and *oikonomia* (divine management) that ensured harmony in both the cosmos and society (Bréhier, 1970; Glykatzi–Ahrweiler, 1977; Hendrickx, 1991). Political and spiritual authority fused, creating a framework in which governance was itself understood as an expression of God's will.

While the ideological and theological structures of Byzantine rulership have been widely studied, the diffusion of these ideas beyond the imperial frontiers has often been interpreted through a Eurocentric lens. Much emphasis has been placed on Byzantium's influence in Eastern Europe, the Slavic lands, and the Mediterranean peripheries, while the reception and transformation of Byzantine thought in Africa has received comparatively little sustained attention. Yet the Christian kingdoms of Nubia and Ethiopia demonstrate that Byzantine political theology travelled far beyond Constantinople, taking root in African contexts where it was not merely copied but actively reshaped. These Afro-Byzantine encounters reveal a creative cultural and religious *synthesis* beyond plain syncretism, by which African rulers appropriated and reinterpreted imperial models of divine kingship within their own cultural and religious landscapes (Obolensky, 1971; Hendrickx, 2008).

Notably, the research may be situated within the intellectual framework of the African Renaissance – conceptualised by Cheikh Anta Diop in 1946 and later adopted by Thabo Mbeki in 1997 – which has been widely advocated but not fully realised as originally envisioned (Marumo & Chakale, 2018). Contesting the denial of Africa's contribution to world history, Anta Diop introduced the concept of the African Renaissance by promoting the re-establishment of the continent's historical consciousness and the rebirth of its civilisation after forced disruption through slavery, colonialism and epistemic domination. Building on this Renaissance concept by approaching the past in relation to the present and the future, Mbeki translates Diop's cultural-historical thesis into a geopolitical programme of action aimed at developing contemporary Africa as a modern continent – culturally integrated, economically advanced, and humanly and creatively progressed through innovative education. These two visions can be productively combined within the conceptual framework of this article by exploring the past in relation to the present and future. To this end, the significance of studying Afro-Byzantine political theology through a metahistorical approach – understood as a critical re-engagement with factual historical material from a metamodern perspective (Sansaridou-Hendrickx, 2005; Stove, 2022) – lies in the challenge it poses to conventional historiographies that tend to marginalise Africa in the history of Christian thought, often depicting its contributions as derivative, dependent, or peripheral to developments in the Mediterranean world.

By contrast, this study foregrounds the agency of African rulers, clerics, and communities in reworking Byzantine traditions to construct their own theologies of kingship and legitimacy. In the framework of metahistory, therefore, Nubia and Ethiopia emerge not as passive receivers of Byzantine ideology but as participants in a reciprocal exchange, contributing original formulations to the wider Christian ecumene (οἰκουμένη). Methodologically, this *metaresearch* draws on factual evidence and specialised scholarship in history, anthropology, and religious studies to substantiate the political and spiritual influences that shaped the development of Afro-Byzantine arts in Africa.

The originality of this article lies in its emphasis on three aspects of Afro-Byzantine political theology, i.e., *divinity*, *policy,* and *spirituality* which found favourable circumstances for adaptation, assimilation and further development in Africa. These consequent stages acceptance and reform appear across three interconnected fields: first, the *centrality of protection,* second, the combination of *law* with *textual tradition*, and third, the integration of *artistic creativity* with *spiritual iconography***.** Structurally, the study unfolds across five sections:

a. A discussion of the central features of the Byzantine political theology and its development through syncretism, with particular attention to the emperor as divinely mandated protector and upholder of order (*taxis*).
b. An analysis of the African Christianity, querying how Nubia and Ethiopia appropriated, reinterpreted, and engaged Byzantine frameworks, developing their own expressions of syncretic political theology.

c. A discussion of *Kebra Negast* and *Fetha Negast* highlighting how these Geʿez texts anchored African kingship within a theological, political, and legal order.
d. An examination of Nubian and Ethiopian iconographic traditions as visual expressions of three interconnected forces: sacred authority, divine protection, and political power.
e. A concluding reflection on the continuities and innovations within Afro-Byzantine thought, positioning Africa as an active contributor to the global history of Christian theology.

a. Byzantine Imperial Ideology through Syncretism

The Greek term *synkrētismos* (συν–Κρητισμός) originally referred to the alliance of ancient Cretans against a common enemy; it was later anglicised, in the early seventeenth century to denote the blending of different religious beliefs (Merriam–Webster, 1981). Keesing (1981, p. 394–395) defines *syncretism* as "the *synthesis* of old and borrowed elements," noting that this process has been most visible "in the realm of religion", particularly as Christianity spread across continents." Regarding synthesis, he adds that "in religion, new beliefs and traditional ones are blended or coexist." Seymour-Smith (1986, 274) similarly uses the term to describe situations of *cultural* contact that generate religious systems combining Christian and indigenous beliefs. Lindenfield (2006) further emphasises that syncretism may occur consciously or unconsciously when less powerful groups encounter the religion of a dominant authority and adapt elements of it for collective survival. In line with these definitions, the Roman (and early Byzantine) emperors continued to tolerate the cult of the sun-god, *Deus Sol Invictus* (the unconquered sun-god), instituted by Emperor Aurelian (270–275 CE), and persisting until the abolition of paganism in the fourth century. Constantine I (324–337) formalised this inclusive policy through the Edict of Milan (313 CE), granting freedom of worship to Christians and non-Christians alike. As a result, pagan conceptions endured for a considerable period, with solar symbolism gradually merging with Christian and Mithraic elements (Walker, 1968, pp. 10–11).

The Church accepted Constantine's political authority despite ambivalent references to his 'divinity' which led to his being regarded simultaneously as an idolater and as an angel of God – one who, just as Christ reigned in heaven, exercised authority on earth (Cheney, 1964, p. 332; Grabar 1979, pp. 98, 126). Byzantium's official policy toward paganism thus remained cautious and often tolerant, resulting in the incorporation of numerous pre-Christian elements into emerging Christian practice. The fact that only a small portion of the population – around one–fifth in the West and half in the East – were Christian, *syncretism* functioned as a pragmatic strategy through which religion could operate as a unifying framework across the Empire (Runciman, 1977, p. 24; Ware, 1997, pp. 40–41; Savvides & Hendrickx, 2001, pp. 31–33, 61ff).

Christianity was officially established by Theodosius I (379–392) and later institutionalised by Justinian I (527–565), consolidating the unity between imperial and religious authority. In Byzantium, the emperor's legitimacy rested less on conquest or dynastic inheritance than on theological legitimation. He was perceived as *basileus kai autokrator*, invested with power by God (*Pantokrator*) to uphold earthly order and sustain cosmic harmony (Christofilopoulou, 1972; Angold, 2006). As *epimeletes* (steward) of the faith, the emperor functioned as protector of the Church and defender of the Christian people—a role reinforced through legislation, theological discourse, and ritual performance (Cunningham, 2010). Eusebius of Caesarea famously portrayed Constantine as a "new Moses" leading the Christian people under divine guidance (Winkelmann, 1975).

This theological legitimation translated into extensive imperial authority across military, legal, and administrative domains, reinforcing the emperor's ecumenical status as the sole *basileus*. Western rulers were regarded merely as *reges*, a title considered inferior within Byzantine

political theory, while rulers beyond the imperial sphere were frequently categorised as *tyrannoi* or *phylarchoi* (Bréhier, 1970; pp. 46–47; Chrysos, 1978, pp. 29–75; Savvides & Hendrickx, 2001, p.63).

Later Byzantine authors further articulated this typology, portraying the emperor as guardian of order whose legitimacy was inseparable from his role as defender of orthodoxy (Tatakis, 1959; Glykatzi-Ahrweiler, 1977). The coronation ritual in Hagia Sophia embodied this theology: anointing and crowning by the patriarch signified political authority conferred through sacramental grace (Bréhier, 1970). The close relationship between Church (*sacerdotium*) and imperial authority (*imperium*) functioned as an integrated organism, within which neither power exercised absolute dominance (Savvides & Hendrickx, 2001, pp. 31–32). This configuration also enabled social mobility and administrative participation across ethnic lines, distinguishing Byzantium from rigidly stratified Western feudal systems.

The ordinary people of Byzantium believed that God Himself had revealed the law of the State and thus expressed the imperial idea of victory and power; they venerated the emperor as holy figure in various forms of propagandist art (Grabar 1979, pp. 22–23). Ware similarly observes that, within Byzantine Christian society, the emperor was not regarded as an ordinary ruler but as God's representative on earth. Byzantium, he explains, imagined itself as the earthly reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the emperor's monarchy functioned as an icon mirroring the monarchy of God in heaven. Accordingly, worshippers in church prostrated themselves before the icon of Christ, while in the palace they prostrated themselves before the emperor – understood as the living icon of God. When Ware describes the Byzantine palace, court and throne room, he highlights the presence of mechanical roaring lions and singing birds, devices intended to emphasise the emperor's elevated status as the vicegerent of God (Ware 1997, 40). With reference to the imperial icon portrait itself, Basil the Great argued that the veneration of an image is transferred to its prototype, for the icon participates in that which represents: "The honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype*"* (Walker 1968, p. 157). By this, Basil refers to the belief that God took on human form in the Incarnation, thereby making it possible to depict Christ in human flesh. On this basis, the Old Testament prohibition against making images (Deuteronomy 4), was reversed for early Christians, who understood that the veneration of an image was directed exclusively to the person depicted, not to the material substance of the icon. The Christian divinity of the Empire thus came to be recognised in earthly images that portrayed the heavenly kingdom – an idea already present in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and further developed in the Epistle to Diognetus.

The main concepts in the Byzantine political theory were rooted in the theological understanding of *taxis* and *oikonomia,* both already present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church (Hendrickx, 1991, pp. 44–49). Cunningham (2010, p. 153) describes *taxis* as follows:

> "The Byzantine's hierarchical view of the universe provided not only a system of precedence, leading from God himself to the lowest created being, but also a sense of order *taxis*. Heaven was normally pictured as the prototype of the imperial court on earth. The image of the enthroned Trinity, contained in a manuscript held at the National Library of Vienna (Suppl. Gr. 52, vol. iv), vividly portrays the heavenly court in accordance with prophetic visions described in the apocalyptic books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Revelation, among others (Isaiah 6:1–5; Daniel 7:9–14; Revelation 4)".

Regarding *oikonomia*, Hélène Glykatzi–Ahrweiler (1977, pp. 148–168) defines the concept as the spiritual puissance through which celestial force (Providence) organises events on earth. She notes that *oikonomia* is inseparable from *taxis*, since both operate according to "taxonomic" principles that order and govern nature, community and human relations. Every

being has its proper place in the world (*taxis*), and human society on earth reflects – albeit imperfectly – the celestial order, a relationship also discussed extensively by Angold (2006).

From an anthropological perspective, such celestialisation of political power may be interpreted as the mystification of earthly authority (Keesing, 1981, pp. 295-300). Yet reducing Byzantine political theology to mere ideological disguise risks oversimplification. Rather, it reflects a coherent system in which theology, ritual, law, and visual culture jointly legitimised imperial authority – an ideological framework that would later prove adaptable beyond Byzantium itself.

b. Divine Ruling–right of African Kings through Syncretism

As previously explained, syncretism joins two or more belief systems into a new formation or absorbs elements from diverse traditions into an existing religious framework– precisely the cultural phenomenon relevant to this study. However, there is a significant difference between syncretism and synthesis has not been noted in the previous definitions. In a cultural or religious context, *syncretism* refers to the merging or blending of different traditions while leaving original components distinguishable and without necessarily resolving underlying contradictions. *Synthesis*, on the other hand, aims at a deeper conceptual unification (Merriam-Webster, 1981; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025) because it is based on a dialectical process of *thesis* and *antithesis.* This distinction is important in the context of this study, because in Byzantium elements of entirely opposed faiths – pagan and Christian – had to merge in an imposed symbiosis. In Africa, the thesis of Judaism was replaced by the antithesis of Christianity, in the name of the same God.

Importantly, while the adaptation through syncretism in Byzantium was socio–politically pragmatic, as Emperor Constantine's decisive decisions demonstrated, in Africa it reveals deliberate reinterpretation of a different ideological context.

The reception of Byzantine ideas in this part of Africa did not occur in a vacuum. Indigenous traditions of sacred kingship created fertile conditions for the acceptance of Byzantine political–theological models, particularly those associating rulership with divine protection and charismatic legitimacy. Through philanthropic deeds and public benefaction, African rulers cultivated popular support, generating forms of social interaction that could benefit both ruler and subjects. In this context, authority was embodied through socially recognised qualities and capacities that communities expected their leaders to possess—a relational dynamic commonly defined as charisma (Legesse, 1994, pp. 393–406; Zurawski 1999, p. 224).

Anthropologically, however, charisma is not a unitary phenomenon. Legesse's analysis is especially instructive in distinguishing charisma as a relational and symbolic process, constructed through collective recognition rather than inherent personal qualities (Legesse, 1994, pp. 395–399). In this sense, charisma may function positively, emerging through reciprocal relationships in which rulers respond to communal expectations and obligations. This form of symbolic or positive charisma is sustained through image, ritual, narrative, and moral performance, and is continually reaffirmed by the community's perception of the ruler as protector and benefactor.

At the same time, charisma may also assume coercive and institutionalised forms. When symbolic charisma is embedded within legal systems, theological doctrines, and political structures—such as coronation rites, divine mandate, and cosmological order—it becomes institutional charisma (Zurawski, 1999, pp. 224–226). In such cases, charisma no longer depends solely on reciprocal recognition but is stabilised and enforced through religious and political institutions. Theological frameworks such as *taxis* and *oikonomia*, inherited from Byzantine political theology, functioned precisely in this way: by sacralising authority and

presenting rulership as divinely ordained, they transformed charismatic legitimacy into an assumed status quo.

From a pragmatic perspective, therefore, the relationship between ruler and subjects must be understood as a power relationship rather than a purely consensual one. While symbolic charisma may generate genuine loyalty and identification, institutional charisma can also obscure coercion by naturalising authority as sacred and immutable. The attribution of divine grace to rulership does not merely reflect social recognition but actively legitimises political power and constrains dissent.

In this sense, Afro-Byzantine political theology was not a simple transplantation of imperial ideology into Africa, nor was charisma uniformly benevolent. Rather, African rulers selectively reinterpreted Byzantine notions of divine mandate through local symbolic systems, producing a religious synthesis in which symbolic and institutional charisma coexisted. This synthesis enabled kingship to be simultaneously recognisable within Byzantine Christian discourse and distinctly African in its social grounding, ritual expression, and modes of authority.

Obviously, the encounter with the Christian faith and its adaptation in these African kingdoms demonstrates the power of self–determination that motivated the development of the African–Byzantine philosophical theology devoid of any external, politico–religious decision imposed on the population by force like elsewhere as discussed by Keesing (1981, p. 403). The syncretic process relied on integrating existing traditions with a different, broader universal context, a development that, like any innovative idea, had to pass through four stages, *encounter*, *acceptance* or *rejection*, *assimilation* and *reformation*, as defined by Rogers (1983, pp. 20–23). In her thesis on Nubian culture and Christianity, Zacharopoulou (2012b, pp. 28–46, 278) states that

> "the emergence of Christian Kingdoms in Nubia, especially in the case of Nobatia, is the outcome of a **deliberate process** [my emphasis], instigated or at least consented by Byzantium with a view to secure the southern border of Egypt. This occurred on a well–laid ground resulting from centuries of contact between Nubia and the Hellenic world."

Indeed, historically, prior to the conversion to Christianity (540–580), the Ethiopian population comprised two main groups: those who lived according to the Law of Moses and those who worshipped the Serpent (Ullendorff, 1960, pp. 97–98). Evidence of this is found both in the *Kebra Nagast* and in a manuscript preserved by a priest from Axum who records:

> "Among the people of Ethiopia some believed in Christ, some worshipped the Arwe (the python), some watched the birds for omens, and some performed magic with fire. After their arrival these saints established the faith and enlightened the earth with their faith and purified it by the paths of their feet." (Sergew Hable–Selassie, 1972, p. 115).

In the *Kebra Nagast*, the queen of Sheba declares: "From this moment I will not worship the sun but the creator of the sun, the God of Israel." To this day the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is understood within a narrative that begins with the reign of the Serpent (Budge, 1932, LXIV – Ullendorff 1960*,* pp. 97–98).

The Syrian saint and missionary in Aksum, Frumentius, played a significant role in shaping this process of syncretism. As Ullendorff (1960*,* p. 101) observes,

> "the Syriac imprint, with which Frumentius and monks following upon him stamped Abyssinian Christianity, is yet a further Semitic element

> that can be detected not only in a particular doctrinal bias or even the Syriac loan words in Ethiopic (haymanot 'faith', orit 'Thora', &c.), but especially in the peculiarly Semitic religious concepts and semasiological development which those terms represent: kwerban (oblation, sacrifice, Eucharist), salot (prayer), makdas (sanctuary), som (fast), etc.".

This influence illustrates how early Ethiopian Christianity absorbed and reinterpreted Syrian traditions, enriching its theological vocabulary and contributing to its distinctive syncretic character.

In the framework of this research, a characteristic example of reforming borrowed forms emerges in the realm of Christological debates. While Byzantium fractured over Chalcedonian definition of Christ's *Dyophysitism* (Council of Chalcedon 451 CE) which affirms that Jesus Christ possesses two complete natures-divine and human-united in one person (*hypostasis*), Ethiopia embraced a *Monophysite* orientation, affirming the single nature of Christ (Angold, 2006). Interestingly, while Dyophysitism held in Byzantium, was supported by Emperor Justinian, *miaphysite Christianity*, embraced in the Nubian kingdom of Nobatia, was indorsed by Empress Theodora, apparently, as discussed by Zacharopoulou (2012b) for external political interests. From an Afro-Byzantine viewpoint, this choice was not merely an act of resistance to Byzantine authority; it constituted a theological stance that strengthened local identity. By aligning kingship with Monophysite theology, Ethiopian rulers positioned themselves as guardians of faith distinct from the Chalcedonian Byzantium, yet still firmly embedded within the broader Christian ecumenical tradition.

Regarding the collective response to the adaptation of spiritual thought and behaviour, religious festivals often preserved echoes of pre-Christian rituals reinterpreted within an Afro–Christian framework. This process of reinterpretation did not weaken **doctrinal or liturgical orthodoxy**; rather, it strengthened it by embedding core Christian beliefs within locally intelligible cultural matrices (Blakely et al., 1994). The persistence of syncretism remains visible in ritual and liturgy. Ethiopian festivals such as *Timkat* (Epiphany) combine Byzantine–inspired liturgical forms with indigenous practices of procession, music, and symbolic performance (Tadesse, 2010). These practices not only reinforced theological claims surrounding kingship but also expressed the community's participation in divine protection and cosmic order through symbolically structured ritual action (Geertz, 1973, pp. 127–129; Tadesse, 2010).

Nubia provides another case of dynamic syncretism through conscious *synthesis* of concepts; archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates that Nubian Christianity absorbed both Coptic and Byzantine elements, blending them with indigenous traditions of kingship and prophecy (Jakobielski, 1992; Godlewski, 2005). The phenomenon – unique in Africa – highlights another dimension: by engaging Byzantine theology creatively rather than slavishly, Nubian and Ethiopian Christianity validate syncretism not as a deviation from orthodox teaching but as a mode of theological innovation through a politico–cultural process of adaptation and adjustment (Rogers, 1983, pp. 40–41). Afro-Byzantine Christianity thus reveals how universal traditions can be appropriated locally, producing a *political theology* that is both deeply Christian and unmistakably African. While in Byzantium, legitimacy was closely tied to the emperor's role as protector of the faith and defender of the people (Christofilopoulou, 2004), in Africa this ideology was even more strongly accentuated in iconography. Kings were portrayed simultaneously as under divine protection and as protectors of their subjects. The reciprocal nature of this relationship appears consistently in textual, liturgical, legal and artistic sources. Nubian and Ethiopian rulers derived authority from their status as guardians of Orthodoxy, while they themselves were depicted as shielded by divine figures – Christ, the Virgin, archangels such as Michael (Jakobielski, 1992; Heldman, 1993; Steyn, 2010). Titles such as "King of Kings" (*Negus Negast* in Ethiopia) resonated with both biblical precedent and

Byzantine imperial formulae (Vycichl, 1957). In Nubian inscriptions, rulers invoked divine sanction for their kingship, emphasising their role as guardians of the Christian faith along the Nile (Jakobielski, 1972; Griffith, 1913). Noticeably, an element of syncretism found in the divine kingship of Nubia, and unknown in Byzantine royal imagery, is the royal purse – an object used in other African kingdoms for collecting levies (Zurawski, 1999, p. 226).

Coronation oaths, preserved in fragmentary form, show how Nubian kings pledged to uphold the faith and protect the Church in ways that closely echoed Byzantine imperial ideology (Holt, 1990). Similar continuities appear in Nubian and Ethiopian court etiquette – for example, the king eating alone or the veiling of his face. According to early Ethiopian court customs, the king sat behind a thin curtain or veil during an audience, enabling him to see the visitor/s while remaining unseen himself (Pankhurst, 1990, pp. 24, 90; Zurawski, 1999, p. 223). Iconographic evidence supports these ideological parallels. A mural depicting a Nubian monarch, being crowned and invested by the Holy Trinity, shows little divergence in iconographic and ideological principles from earlier pagan representations of divine inaugurations (Zurawski, 1999, pp. 223–224). Zurawski explains that the depiction of a monarch within a coronation scene was understood as a mission from God, and that such scenes were influenced by the principles, ideology and iconography of older pagan civilisations, that had long employed imagery of divine investiture. Regarding the collective response to this reciprocal theology of protection between celestial and earthy structures, artistically intertwined with hierarchical iconographic depictions, underlines the communicative dynamics of Arts.

c. *The Kebra Negast* and *The Fetha Negast*

The two texts that substantiate the view that the appropriation of Byzantine political thought in Africa was not superficial but deeply embedded in the intellectual and legal fabric of society are *The Kebra Negast*. The *Kebra Negast* or *The Book of the Glory of the Kings* is an epic narrative, while *The Fetha Negast* serves as the legal compendium of the Ethiopian Church, comprising the canons of both local and universal councils of the early Christian tradition. Together, these texts demonstrate how biblical, Byzantine, and Roman–legal ideas were interwoven into the legitimation of Ethiopian kingship (Hendrickx, 2008).

The *Kebra Negast* is a religious epic narrative believed to have been translated from an original Coptic text into Arabic in 1225 AD and then into Ge´ez in the fourteenth century by the Ethiopian monk, Isaak, although alternative theories on its origin also exist (Zacharopoulou, 2012a, pp. 328–329). For this study, the English translation by Brooks (1995), is used. The surviving version of the epic has variously been considered “an Aksumite work or being a conflation by six Tigre scribes, or even a work of the sixteenth century” (Hendrickx, 2012, p. 22). The *Kebra Negast* presents the Ethiopian monarchy as the direct heir of King Solomon, tracing dynastic legitimacy to the union of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Budge, 1932; Brooks, 1995). Following traditional concept, *Sheba* denotes the *Saba* nation consisting of Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea and the Red Sea region. By rooting Ethiopian kingship in biblical genealogy, the text elevated the Ethiopian monarch above local rivalries and granted him universal legitimacy. Yet the *Kebra Negast* was not merely biblical in tone but also markedly Byzantine. Through its intertwined narratives of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, and the Ark of the Covenant, the text glorifies the Kingdom of Ethiopia, linking the Solomonic dynasty to both biblical and imperial traditions and reinforcing its authority. Its repeated emphasis on divine order, protection, and orthodoxy reflects concepts central to Byzantine political thought (Hendrickx, 2012; Steyn, 2017).

As for the *Fetha Negast*, *The Law of the Kings* (Tzadua, 1968), it was originally written in Arabic by Abu–l Fada’il Ibn al–Assal, a Christian Copt, who drew extensively on the Old and New Testaments, Apostolic writings, early Church canons and writings of the Fathers as the so-called ‘Canons of the Kings’, a collection of four legal books. If theology provided the

ideological foundation of kingship through the *Kebra Negast*, the *Fetha Negast* codified its juridical framework. Drawing on Byzantine–Roman sources, it articulated governance in both theological and legal terms (Budge, 1932; Tzadua, 1968; Brooks, 1995). As a textualised law code, the *Fetha Negast* represents a thirteenth century translation of Byzantine–Roman canon and civil law into Ge'ez, thereby reinforcing the legal–theological character of Ethiopian kingship (Pankhurst, 1967; Tzadua, 1968). Such codifications should also be viewed alongside the Byzantine tradition of "Mirrors for Princes", didactic treatises dated from roughly the sixth to the 15th centuries that prescribed the virtues, duties, and responsibilities of the ideal ruler (Glykatzi–Ahrweiler, 1975; Prinzing, 2022, pp. 108–135). These works emphasised the emperor's philanthropic obligations, his role as guardian of orthodoxy, and his duty to preserve social justice – normative themes of norms echoed both in the *Fetha Negast* itself and in *The Ethiopia*n *Royal Chronicles*, a compilation of the lives and deeds of Ethiopian rulers (ed. Pankhurst, 1967). This edition represents only a small portion of the many Ethiopian manuscripts in Ge'ez or Amharic. The earliest chronicle is that of Emperor Amda Seyon I (1314–1344). The chronicles are of different lengths and vary substantially in their historic value, although they constitute, without doubt, a mine of information for Ethiopian history, ideology, political theory, traditions and customs (Hendrickx, 2012).

Although Ethiopia did not adopt the Byzantine "Mirrors" directly, the intellectual resonance is obvious: the same concern for righteous kingship and divinely sanctioned authority permeated its legal and historical texts. By situating *The Fetha Negast*, *The Kebra Negast*, and *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles* within this broader Byzantine advisory tradition one can better appreciate how African Christianity wove together imperial, biblical, and local strands of political theology. Together, these texts have provided a historical, theological, and legal framework that bound Ethiopian kingship to both divine providence and imperial precedent. They ensured that rulers were not simply local chieftains but sacred monarchs whose legitimacy was affirmed by law, tradition, divine protection and artistic sacred creativity. In this sense, the Ethiopian monarchy exemplifies how African rulers drew upon Byzantine models to legitimise power, to articulate a distinctively African Christian political order, and artistically to inspire religious mysticism. In line with *The Kebra Negast*, the *Fetha Negast* integrated Christian morality with juridical structures, ensuring that governance was both sacred and lawful. This codified synthesis of the sacred with secular reveals the extent to which Ethiopia consciously aligned itself with Byzantine legal traditions, embedding imperial notions of order and divine mandate within its own political culture.

d. The politico–theological role of Arts in the Afro-Byzantine Christian tradition

This section addresses how visual culture functioned as a central medium through which Afro-Byzantine political theology was articulated, negotiated, and legitimised. It asks how Byzantine imperial iconography was received and transformed within Nubian and Ethiopian contexts, and how artistic representations of protection, hierarchy, and divine mandate contributed to the construction of sacred kingship. The argument advanced here is that art did not only reflect political theology but actively produced it, translating abstract theological concepts into visible, culturally intelligible forms. Through this visual synthesis, Afro-Byzantine rulers articulated authority that was simultaneously grounded in Christian universality and local symbolic systems.

Art was one of the most powerful vehicles through which political theology was communicated, in Afro-Byzantine Christian history. Byzantine iconography represented the emperor as a figure suspended between heaven and earth – subordinate to Christ yet elevated above his subjects (Grabar, 1979; Baggley, 1987). This visual language travelled to Africa, where it was interpreted within Nubian and Ethiopian artistic traditions. As Ullendorff (1960, p. 159), observes, much like in Byzantine Christian culture, the religion of the state shaped the space

and purpose of Ethiopian artistic creation. Consequently, *literature, music, visual art* and most other aspects of creative expression were virtually *ecclesiastic* in both theme and context.

Cunningham (2010, p. 153) explains that in Byzantine religious art, God the Father is often depicted in the form of the 'Ancient of Days', seated and holding the infant Christ on His lap; Christ, in turn, holds a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit. Surrounding them is a rainbow–coloured nimbus that signifies their divine status, while angels clad in the regalia of the Byzantine court stand around the rainbow. These angels carry staffs and other insignia indicating their respective ranks within the celestial hierarchy. Grabar (1979, p. 68) refers to the famous mosaic in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which portrays Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora with their dignitaries, presenting offerings to Christ. Another important example is the mosaic in the Church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (near Ravenna), where Byzantium is depicted as the earthly counterpart of the celestial hierarchy: the archangels are dressed like Emperors and hold the *labarum* (the sacred military standard originally bearing the Greek letters **X** and **P** (for Χριστός), used by Constantine at the *Battle of the Milvian Bridge* in 312 AD. Around the base of the apsidal vault appear portraits of Byzantine bishops and emperors, reinforcing the visual association between imperial authority and divine order (Grabar, 1979, p. 73).

All these elements besides defining Byzantine Christian art they are likewise reflected in Afro-Byzantine Orthodox art, providing clear evidence that such visual strategies of power and authority were intended to portray the emperor's status as the vicegerent of God. With the establishment of the Nubian Christian kingdoms, royal power became the central organising principle of the state and of its royal iconography, as this power was understood to be absolute and of divine origin (Shinnie, 1978; Welsby, 2002; Zacharopoulou, 2012b). Within the context of this research, the emphasis falls on the synthesis of political power vested in sacred authority and expressed through artistically created iconography.

Ethiopian Iconographers and their iconographic theology

Iconographers responsible for Ethiopian paintings were mostly anonymous, as their work was considered an act of piety. The names of artists rarely appeared on icons and, when they did, it was usually in the colophons of manuscripts consisting of factual information and prayers. Chojnacki (1983, p. 29) notes that "systematic investigation is particularly relevant in the study of Ethiopian paintings which notoriously lack the inscriptions indicating the maker and date as well as the written documentation." The recording of the artist's name on mural paintings seemingly appears to have become common only after the fourteenth century. Training was transmitted personally, often because iconographers were priests or church clerks. No Ethiopian equivalent of a formal "Painter's Guide" – such as the eighteenth-century handbook of Dionysius of Fourna, based on medieval Byzantine traditions – has been recorded, and it likely did not exist, although a few pattern books from the seventeenth century survive. Artistic practices and rules were therefore transmitted orally and passed down from generation to generation. Chojnacki (1983, pp. 21–22) observes:

> "The disposition of subjects in church murals was studied by Marcel Griaule and Wilhelm Staude. In 1933, Griaule asked the painter–priest Kāsā who lived in Gondar to write down the rules of painting. The resulting document is a comprehensive description of how subjects should be arranged in decorating the church...His final conclusion is that the rules similar to those described by Kāsā guided the Ethiopian painters in the seventeenth century and during the following centuries."

Under Zara Yaqob (1434–68), Ethiopian iconography underwent a notable Marian expansion. The monk–artist Fere Seyon introduced new Marian icon–types and visual vocabulary, partly inspired by Western models and diverging from older Byzantine conventions. Although art–historians distinguish several stylistic periods (Chojnacki 1983, p. 23; Friedlander 2007, pp. 10–11, 199), the crucial point for this study is that these innovations visually articulated the protective and legitimising functions of kingship within Ethiopian Christian political theology.

The importance of hagiography and iconography

Ware explains that, since the Holy Icons are only symbolic representations, the Orthodox Church does not worship them but rather reveres or venerates them. He refers to John of Damascus, who differentiates between the "relative honour of veneration shown in material symbols, and the worship due to God alone". The *Iconoclastes* and *Iconodouloi* shared at least one point of agreement: both held that God could not be depicted in His eternal nature, since no one has seen God. The *Iconodouloi*, however, believed that through the Incarnation, God could be depicted in His human flesh and thus represented in religious art. The iconoclast controversy is therefore narrowly linked to Christ's humanity, and His body was ultimately a dispute concerning human salvation rather than artistic representation. Ware concludes: "God took a material body, thereby proving that matter can be redeemed...and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then so – though in a different way – can wood and paint." (Ware, 1997, pp. 32–33). The hagiographic themes (written biographic scenes of the saints) and iconographic themes (visual illustrations), clearly identifiable in Afro-Byzantine subjects, represent – amongst others – the two factors examined in this study: authority and protection. The written sources of these images are the Bible and the Apocrypha. Imagery serves to explain points of Christian teaching, such as the 'dual nature' of Christ or the significance of representing the Trinity.

Within Byzantine hagiographic and iconographic traditions – the essence of the *eidolon* (idol) developed: a portrait of a saint or of Christ, originating in symbols or simple illustrations derived from non–Christian ideas. These symbols, previously found in pagan art, were adapted and applied in Early Christian art. They differ from pagan art, by subject rather than style (Gardner, De la Croix, & Tansey, 1980, p. 213). Byzantine art developed over many centuries, undergoing numerous periods of renewal. It expresses both Orthodox and imperial concepts, as discussed above (Angold, 2006). Its content and style were transformed: Early Christian art shows a straightforward adaptation of pagan themes into Christian ones, making it almost impossible to identify a single style that could definitively be called 'Early Christian Art'. Christian art effected a transformation of the naturalistic, classical tradition into an entirely new worldview (Gardner et al., 1980, p. 213).

Specific images such as the 'shepherd with a lamb on his shoulders', used in Roman pagan art, as a symbol of philanthropy, were now absorbed into Christian iconography as representations of Christ the Good Shepherd. Likewise, the Roman symbol of piety and holiness, a standing figure with raised hands in the form of worship, came to be used in Christian art to characterise the departed. This figure was later used to represent the Mother of God as a symbol of the praying Church. In addition, the Roman image of the 'seated figure holding a scroll' was adapted to signify the wisdom of the departed believer, but later became a symbol of Christ, who embodied the True Philosopher (Gardner et al., 1980, pp. 213–215). These sacred subject matters were transferred on portable icons and hung in Christian households where they became objects of everyday veneration (δουλεία) and sometimes of 'anti-canonical' adoration (Grabar 1979, p. 187). In some cases, the icon itself became an object of devotion, carried along by its owner during travels and by armies in military campaigns, for example, the famous *Hodigitria* (Hendrix et al., 1960, pp. 134–135). It was also believed that some icons to offer protection, while others were considered *thaumaturgical* (in

Greek *Θαυματουργά – thaûma* “miracle”, and érga, “works”) (Hendrickx, 1982, pp. 77–96). This phenomenon is not unique to Byzantium; in Ethiopia, Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–68), encouraged his people to wear small icons of Mary (Friedlander 2007, pp. 47–48).

In Ethiopia, manuscript illumination and church murals extended this iconographic tradition. Monarchs were frequently portrayed alongside Archangel Michael or the Virgin Mary, figures associated with protection and intercession (Heldman, 1993; Steyn, 2010). These images did more than illustrate theology: they functioned as political statements, embedding the idea of sacred guardianship within the visual consciousness of the faithful. Since political theology was never communicated through texts alone, visual culture offered powerful means of articulating the sacred nature of kingship.

As noted, Byzantine iconography presented the emperor as defender of the faith often flanked by Christ, the Virgin, or saints (Grabar, 1979; Baggley, 1987). Ethiopian manuscripts and church murals likewise depict monarchs shielded by Mary or angelic guardians, integrating the theology of protection into visual practice (Heldman, 1993). This visual vocabulary was translated into African contexts, where local artists reinterpreted imperial motifs within their own symbolic worlds.

The murals of *Faras Cathedral* provide evidence of this adaptation, presenting bishops and rulers in hierarchic poses that echo Byzantine models while simultaneously reflecting Nubian conceptions of hierarchy and protection (Chojnacki, 1983; Godlewski, 2005). Another striking example is the paired portraits of Bishop Petros and King Georgios II (887–915/920?) in which the Apostle Peter shelters the bishop (Figure 1) while the Virgin and Christ jointly crown and protect the king (Jakobielski, 1992; Godlewski, 2005). In this scene, the sceptre in the Virgin’s hand and Christ’s right hand touching the royal crown vividly symbolise divine sanction and the king’s protective duty (Chojnacki, 1983; Zurawski, 1999).

Such imagery makes visible the reciprocal theology of protection: rulers were themselves under heavenly guardianship even as they assumed the role of guardians for their people. In this sense, the cathedral functioned as a theatre of political theology, where visual imagery reinforced the sacral authority of rulers and recalled Byzantine models while embedding them in an African symbolic universe (Heldman, 1993; Steyn, 2010).

The sacred politics of protection was not limited to depictions of rulers. Angels, saints, and biblical figures were frequently represented as divine guardians of the Christian community, thereby reinforcing the protective theology that underpinned kingship. Iconography thus worked in tandem with law and ritual to articulate a political theology in which rulers, people, and God were bound together in a reciprocal covenant of protection and fidelity.

Figure 1. *Bishop Petros with Saint Peter the Apostle*. National Museum in Warsaw, n.d. Fresco. https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/zbiory/496341

e. Concluding reflections

The Afro-Byzantine synthesis examined in this study demonstrates both continuity with Byzantine traditions and creative transformations of equal theological and political significance. African traditions of sacred kingship – emphasising charisma, prophecy, and communal reciprocity – did not only accommodate Byzantine ideology but actively reshaped it. When fused with Christian imperial concepts of divine mandate, order, and protection, these traditions produced a distinctive political theology in which the ruler was neither a simple imitator of Byzantine models nor an isolated local potentate, but an African monarch who embodied Christian universality through culturally embedded forms of authority. This creative reworking is evident across theology, law, and art, revealing a coherent system in which belief, governance, and visual culture were mutually reinforcing.

From the perspective of political theology, this case contributes a crucial corrective by demonstrating that Christian theories of sacred rulership were not exclusively generated within imperial centres such as Constantinople. Instead, Afro-Byzantine political theology illustrates how authority, protection, and divine legitimacy were reconstituted through syncretic processes that integrated doctrinal debate, juridical codification, and artistic expression. The African resolution of Christological debates – most notably the embrace of Miaphysite theology –strengthened local religious identity while remaining firmly embedded within the broader Christian ecumene. Legal texts such as the *Fetha Negast* further reveal how Byzantine jurisprudence was not passively received but selectively appropriated and rearticulated within Ethiopian governance, anchoring kingship in both divine law and social responsibility.

This study therefore revises Byzantine studies by decentring Constantinople as the sole locus of political-theological innovation and foregrounding Africa as an active site of intellectual production. Nubia and Ethiopia emerge not as peripheral recipients of Byzantine ideology but as co-producers of Christian political thought, capable of extending, adapting, and transforming imperial concepts over several centuries. The sustained circulation of Byzantine ideological, liturgical, and artistic elements in Christian Nubia – even after the Arab conquest

of Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean – further underscores the durability and adaptability of these Afro-Byzantine connections beyond imperial borders.

At the same time, the findings reframe African intellectual history by challenging narratives that portray Africa as marginal to the development of Christian theology and political philosophy. The Afro-Byzantine case demonstrates that Africa was a site of theological reasoning, legal innovation, and artistic self-determination, where imperial models were critically engaged rather than merely absorbed. Artistic traditions in Nubia and Ethiopia, particularly iconography portraying rulers under divine protection, functioned as visual theologies that articulated political authority in ways both recognisably Byzantine and distinctly African.

By foregrounding Africa's role in the production of political theology, this study broadens the scope of both Byzantine and African studies and contributes to a more balanced understanding of the global history of Christianity. It shows that Afro-Byzantine political theology was not a derivative reflection of imperial ideology but a dynamic and creative synthesis – one that combined universality and particularity, tradition and innovation, and theology and art. In doing so, the article affirms Africa's central place within the Christian intellectual tradition and demonstrates how syncretism functioned not as dilution but as a generative force in the formation of sacred kingship and political thought.

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