



# Pagan Religious Practices in Medieval Ethiopia

## Development and Resistance of the Christian Kingdom (1434–1468)

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**ABSTRACT** In the long religious history of Ethiopia, paganism has been widely practised since ancient times, as evidenced by the inscriptions of ‘Ezānā and other archaeological objects. It continued to dominate for centuries even after the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century, which hindered its expansion south of the Aksumite empire until the thirteenth century. However, later in the fourteenth century, Christianity expanded widely with the military and political support of the Christian emperors, especially King ʾAmda Ṣəyon (1314–1344), who suppressed pagan practices in the northern highlands of the Christian kingdom. Subsequently, pagan chiefs and priests were forced to be baptised and converted to Christianity, pagan sanctuaries were dismantled, and, in their place, churches and monasteries were built. Resistance against paganism continued in a more organised way in the fifteenth century during the reign of King Zarʾa Yāʿəqob (1434–1468), who actively engaged in making laws and composing religious books to prevent Christian adherents from practising paganism. In this regard, we have a sizeable collection of Gəʿəz texts dating to the time of Zarʾa Yāʿəqob that provide vivid information to better understand the development and features of paganism, on the one hand, and the measures undertaken by the king as a part of religious reformation to resist and dismantle pagan practices, on the other. Paganism, in general, is a neglected subject in the historiography of medieval Ethiopia, but taking into account the source availability, studying the pagan practices and resistance of this period is indispensable. Thus, this paper attempts to reconstruct the history of pagan practices and its development in the period under discussion to identify the names of the pagan gods as well as to analyse their social role and the measures taken under Zarʾa Yāʿəqob against paganism.

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**KEYWORDS** King Zarʾa Yāʿəqob, Paganism, Pagan gods, Dask, Dino

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## Introduction

In Ethiopia, paganism<sup>1</sup> has been known in the history of religion since Antiquity. Archaeological and historical findings have revealed that paganism has long existed in the Christian highlands. Before Christianity, the Aksumites worshipped various pagan gods, as is clear from the inscriptions and coins of the fourth century (Munro-Hay 1984). The famous pagan trilingual inscription<sup>2</sup> (written in Greek, Gəʿəz and Sabaic) of ʿEzānā clearly lists the names of King ʿEzānā’s pagan gods, from whom he claimed he had acquired the power to win over his enemies, the neighbouring ancient local states and peoples. These pagan gods were named Mahram, Astar, Beher and Mədər. ʿEzānā also presented himself in the inscription as Mahram’s son, who seemed to be one of his most powerful and revered pagan gods. However, we do not yet have clear evidence of the structure and organisation of these pagan gods, but we have a clue from the same inscription that these pagan gods must have had organised institutions. ʿEzānā’s inscription states that after the king became victorious over his enemies, he offered 100 cattle and 50 prisoners to one of his gods, Mahram, as an offering of thanks (Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972, 94). Here, it is certain that there were several pagan priests who officiated services for the god Mahram and who might have needed slaves’ labour and activities, although we still lack historical documents that offer us detailed information. [1]

However, a decade later, the same king, who represented himself as the son of Mahram, abandoned the pagan gods and converted to Christianity, which is attested in another of his official inscriptions written in Greek (Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972, 102).<sup>3</sup> The inscription begins with the words, “In the faith of God and the power of the father, and the son and the Holy Ghost who have saved my kingdom,” which clearly attests that the pagan King ʿEzānā had converted to Christianity. In the inscription, the king also took an oath to abandon his pagan god and became faithful only to the Christian God. [2]

But the official conversion of the king to Christianity does not seem to have weakened the pagan belief in the kingdom, which remained strong until the thirteenth century. Though Christianity was introduced in the fourth century, it did not expand beyond the vicinity of ʿAksum and its neighbouring region due to pagan resistance.<sup>4</sup> It was also almost 200 years [3]

1 Throughout this paper, the term ‘pagan’ or ‘paganism’ is used in a non-prejudicial manner to refer to a variety of non-Christian (and non-Muslim) religious practices. Since the history of this particular religious practice during the period under study (1434–1468) is largely documented in Gəʿəz texts, mainly via hagiographies and other historical and religious texts, this explanation makes sense. Many of these Gəʿəz sources actually do depict pagans in the process of being defeated and/or evangelised, though always accompanied by a stereotyped description. The pagans are only seen through the lens of Christian tradition, whose hagiographies focus on the miraculous achievements of Christian saints facing evil spirits and aided by Angels (Fauvelle and Poissonnier 2016, 62). These sources did not consider these practices to be local religions in themselves; instead, they referred to them as *ʿarami* (‘pagan, non-Christian’) or *Kahādi* (‘unbeliever’). However, there is a lack of textual sources written by those who adhered to renowned pagan cults like *Dask* or *Dino*, so it is difficult to comprehend their perspective, although the Gəʿəz sources provide some information about their beliefs. As historians, I believe that we need to be loyal to the sources and keep the milieu where the history was recorded, not the time or the society where history is retold. Therefore, the term ‘pagan’ or ‘paganism’ is only applied considering the nature of the sources and the perspectives in which these sources were written. For more information on the various terms used to describe religions that are not Abrahamic monotheisms, see Fauvelle (2020, 114–16).

2 Much has been written about the inscriptions of this period, but it is useful to quote some of the works: Sergew Hable Sellassie (1972); Schneider (1982); Bernand, Drewes, and Schneider (1991); Avanzini et al. (2007); Munro-Hay 2012; Munro-Hay (2012); Bausi and Liuzzo (2018); Bausi, Harrower, and Dumitru (2020).

3 See also Schneider (2012); Kaplan (1982).

4 Indeed, other factors like the lack of the clergy and sacred books can be taken as additional obstacles, but the main obstacle was the strong resistance of paganism to Christianity.

later when Christianity once again expanded following the coming of the nine saints from Byzantium Rome.<sup>5</sup> Even they had never managed to spread beyond the region of Təgrāy, where one of the nine saints, 'abbā 'Aragāwi, founded the monastery of Dabra Dāmo, which is believed to be the first monastery in the history of Ethiopian Christianity.

But we have another reliable written source, *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, [4] which describes that a pagan queen known as the Queen of *Banu al-Hamwiyyah* defeated a Christian king whose name was not identified (Evetts 1906–1915, 171–72).<sup>6</sup> The pagan Queen, joined by several of her followers, killed Christians and priests and burned down churches and monasteries in the period. The origin of the woman is obscure, but she might have been from the stronghold of paganism, Dāmōt. We have scanty details from the various hagiographies of the medieval saints that revealed there were various forms of pagan religious practices in various places of Goḡḡām, Dāmōt and Šawā in the early thirteenth century confronting the expansion of Christianity, such as the sky god, a fire cult, worship of a serpent god, and various spirit practices. Even more pagan practices were conducted in the region of Dāmōt, including the sacrifice of humans for the deities, echoes of which were reported in one of the works attributed to King Zar'a Yā'qob, *Maṣḥafa bərḥān* ('The book of light') (Conti Rossini and Ricci 1965a, II:49–50, 1965b, 29). It is evident that these different religious practices were celebrated by a large number of pagan priests who exercised considerable social and political power. It was believed that these priests communicated directly with the pagan divinities and the spirits who granted them the powers of good and evil. It was therefore believed that they had full power over all natural phenomena: rain and drought, famine and epidemics, even life and death.

Paganism continued persistently to resist the expansion of Christianity in the Christian [5] highlands. The small Christian communities in Dāmōt, Goḡḡām and Sawā in the thirteenth century were at the mercy of the local rulers of the pagans. The monks who engaged in the expansion of Christianity were attacked and some of them were also stoned. In this regard, the information collected from local hagiographies indicates that the local saints, such as 'abbā Filəppos<sup>7</sup> of Dabra 'Asbo and 'abbā 'Anorewos,<sup>8</sup> were repeatedly attacked by the local pagan believers, whereas 'abbā Zenā Mārḳos,<sup>9</sup> a fourteenth-century local saint, was persecuted while preaching in Gurāge country (Turaiev 1908; Conti Rossini 1905; Cerulli 1962).

5 The nine saints arrived in the Aksumite empire around the end of the fifth century, which is considered the second evangelisation of Christianity. The history of these saints seems to be well studied based on the local Gə'əz texts and other works. In this regard, significant research has recently been conducted on the history of the nine saints based on the hagiographies of Gə'əz, revealing various hypotheses about the origin and timing of the nine saints (see Brita 2010, 2013; Bausi 2002, 2010; Getatchew 1991a; see also Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972).

6 The text offers the story of a queen of tenth century in Ethiopia who revolted against the Christian king. It states that "In his days, the king of Abyssinia sent to the king of Nubia, a youth whose name was George, and made known to him how the Lord had chastened him, he and the inhabitants of his land. It was that a woman, a queen of Bani al-Hamwiyyah had revolted against him and against his country. She took captive from it many people and burned many cities and destroyed churches and drove him (the king) from place to place." There are many further secondary references that provide us indispensable information of this historic queen (see Andersen 2000; Levi 1992; Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972).

7 He was one of the disciples of Ethiopia's most famous medieval saint, 'abuna Takla Hāymānot, abbot of Dabra Libānos, who played an important role in the abandonment of pagan practices in the region of Šawā and in the provinces south of Šawā during the fourteenth century (see further Kaplan 2005).

8 He was the nephew and a disciple of 'abbā Zenā Mārḳos who lived in the first half of the fourteenth century. He was appointed by Yā'qob to spread Christianity in the regions of Tagulat, Morāt and Wagdā (see Kaplan 2003).

9 He was a fourteenth century Ethiopian saintly monk and a founder of the monastery of Dabra Bəsrāt. He is said to have subsequently evangelised 'Adal, Goḡḡām and other pagan areas of the fourteenth century (see Rainieri 2014).

## The Development of Paganism and Resistance of the Christian Kingdom

Following the rise of the new Solomonic dynasty in the late thirteenth century, paganism was directly challenged by Christian emperors who contributed to the expansion of Christianity, both militarily and politically, against paganism. Pagan chiefs and priests were forced to be baptised and converted to Christianity, pagan sanctuaries were dismantled and, in their place, churches and monasteries were built (Tadesse Tamrat 1972b, 139–40).<sup>10</sup> [6]

Though Christianity was expanded following the territorial extension of the Christian kingdom particularly in the time of the warrior King ‘Amda Şəyon,<sup>11</sup> the evangelising activities did not move smoothly, and Christianity could not uproot pagan practices. Tadesse convincingly argued that the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Ethiopian region, as well as the extensive nature of the areas involved, seem to have considerably reduced the efficiency of the evangelising mission of the Ethiopian church. This means that the majority of the priesthood never underwent a rigorous system of theological training. Capable of only a parrot-like recitation of biblical and liturgical formulae, the clergy could hardly offer sufficient guidance to the people wishing to turn away from pagan practices (Tadesse Tamrat 1972a, 157, 1972b, 147–48). Because of this cumulative background, in the middle of the fifteenth century, during the period of Zar’a Yā‘qob, pagan religious expressions revived considerably, and numerous pagan practices were rampant even among Christian communities. The pagan rituals became part of the worship of even the top political officials of King Zar’a Yā‘qob, and some of his sons and daughters became followers of pagan gods. [7]

10 See also Tadesse Tamrat (1972a). The article offers general information of the pagan resistance starting in the beginning of the thirteenth century following the emergence of the Solomonic dynasty.

11 He was considered one of the most remarkable Ethiopian emperors, who played a role in the territorial expansion of the Christian kingdom and the spread of Christianity by subduing pagan practices (for more details see Mantel-Niećko and Nosnitsin 2003). Much of the history of this king is available in his royal chronicle, most probably written in his time based on some relevant references in the text itself. Scholars who have carried out a philological study on the chronicle also support this view, including Marrassini (1993), Kropp (1994a), and Turaiev (1936). However, Hirsch (2020) has recently questioned the authenticity of the Chronicle by analysing the historical data and proposed a new hypothesis that the chronicle was probably written during the reign of King Zar’a Yā‘qob based on the following points. First, the chronicle describes many military campaigns undertaken by the king within less than a year without interrupting the rainy season. The author believes that this cannot be true, since the Christian kings’ campaigns were usually seasonal and lasted a few months. Second, the chronicle listing the genealogy of the successive sultans of ‘Ifāt does not correspond in any way to what is known from endogenous sources. Third, the text contains many epic elements which cannot be accepted as things that actually happened in the historical context. Finally, he noted that some of the literary elements in the Chronicle resemble the facts of the battle of Gomit narrated in the Chronicle of Zar’a Yā‘qob and other Gə‘əz texts written during the reign of King Zar’a Yā‘qob. He also noted that the names of the ‘Ifāt rulers are reflected accurately in the chronicles of the Muslim states of ‘Ifāt in the fifteenth century. This work, however, has failed to examine the numerous historical toponyms that appear in abundance in this chronicle, the names of various military units and titles, which are indeed not attested in the Zar’a Yā‘qob’s chronicle or other texts. Most importantly, there is a Gə‘əz passage at the end of the chronicle, which refers that it was written during the life time of the king (see Marrassini 1993, 188–90; Kropp 1994b, 68–70, 1994a, 72–73), which indeed Hirsch noted in the paper, but he did not add any further comments on. In my view, the article fails to sufficiently address this issue to support the new hypothesis. Additionally, I think that the story of the battle of Gomit and the contents of the chronicle are similar, because Zar’a Yā‘qob’s chronicle and Gə‘əz’s text at the time of Zar’a Yā‘qob could have used ‘Amda Şəyon’s chronicle as a source since it was probably available to them. Considering this context, it is difficult in this article to accept the new hypothesis on the date of the chronicle. This chronicle was first published in 1889 by the French philologist Perruchon (1889). A new edition based on all available manuscripts of the chronicle, with an Italian translation (Marrassini 1993) and a German translation (Kropp 1994a), is also available. Perruchon’s previous edition was also translated into English (Huntingford 1965).

There were various forms of pagan gods and pagan customs which were frequently practised [8] by the local medieval society, at least during the time of Zar'a Yā'qob, and some of them existed for a long time before his reign. These practices often appear in the writings of Zar'a Yā'qob, who composed them partly to condemn these pagan gods and their acts.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, he refers in his writing to *Dask*, *Dino*, *Mārt*, *Faşnat*, *g'ədale*, *maqāwazay*, *astarābi*, or magicians (*tanqwalayān*), who choose a day and hour (for an act), who are star-gazers or charmers (*Maşarrayan*) or idolaters who practice magic and divination (Getatchew 2013a, 66, 2013b, 46).<sup>13</sup>

Various gods also had a certain geographical area where they were more predominant; *Dask* [9] was widely predominant in the region of Şawā, *Dino* in 'Angot and Şəg'u'ə in Goğğām (Wendt 1963a, II:49, 1963b, II:43).

Indeed, we have no detailed sources from the pagan side to know what their rituals of [10] religious practice were during the reign of King Zar'a Yā'qob. We find very few references in Christian literature that provide vivid information about the ritual practice in the way of demonising the pagan ritual, but the most illuminating were that of the church. One of the most important writings of King Zar'a Yā'qob, *Maşhafa bərhān*, devoted much of its coverage to the pagan gods of his time. The work demonises the pagan ritual in contrast to praising the Christian church, which offers salvation and performs good deeds. In this regard, it would be more valuable to quote the passage that helps to better understand the ritual activities of the pagans and their ritual practices. The text mentions that “your mountains stink with the fat of cows, sheep, goats, birds, with the blood of dogs, in sacrificing for Satan. But for us, our priests and monasteries are scented with the scent of incense, galbanum and Frankincense and incense gum with which one censens the church” (Getatchew 2013a, 98, 2013b, 68). The passage in the *Maşhafa bərhān* is used to preach Christianity and abandon the pagan practice and it presents how the church's holy sites are clean with good smells, while the pagan sanctuaries are in the mountains that are full of filth of the remains of the sacrifices. But one thing that is clear from the text is that there were various animals used for sacrifice for pagan deities—not only cattle, goats and sheep (still common even today) but also dogs and birds, which are not supposed to be edible according to Christian teaching.

The two pagan gods *Dask*<sup>14</sup> and *Dino*, whose power was apparently widely accepted, caused [11] considerable harm and were a great challenge to the king's power. The people believed that they had divine power and made a prophecy of the future. The medieval local people consulted them regularly and it seems that they were accepted among their followers. At court, they were regularly consulted by the officials of King Zar'a Yā'qob. The work written by Zar'a

12 Zar'a Yā'qob was also a prolific writer on Christian teachings. He is believed to be the author of three major works for the strengthening of his religious policy: *Ṭomāra təsbə't* ('Epistle of Humanity'), *Maşhafa bərhān* and *Maşhafa Milād* ('Book of Nativity'), which are the most valuable sources for the study of paganism. The three books deal with various religious topics, but they are all devoted to dealing with pagan practice in the kingdom, showing the sinfulness of the practice of paganism as seen from the Christian side, the measures taken to abandon the practice as well as the characteristics of pagan gods. Although these works are purely theological, they are of great historical importance because they contain valuable historical information on the subject. All these works have been published and recently *Ṭomāra təsbə't* and *Maşhafa bərhān* have been edited and translated into English by Getatchew Haile and published in the famous Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium series (see Getatchew 1991b, 1991c, 2013a, 2013b).

13 For further details on magical practices during the period of King Zar'a Yā'qob, see also Kaplan (2004), Dickinson (2017), Budge (1900), Chernetsov (2005); Littmann (1904).

14 The name *Dask* in the Middle Ages referred to a particular deity who had his own priests, performed ritual duties and who probably had several branches in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia; this term first appeared in the fifteenth century in Gə'əz literature. The *Dask* are identified in most Gə'əz literature with demons and their ritual associated with satanic cults (see also Burtea 2005).



Yā‘qob describes the conflict between Zar’a Yā‘qob and his officials, which eventually led to an irreconcilable power struggle between the king and his ministers, whom the king accused of abandoning the true God due to the fact that they worshipped *Dask* and *Dino*. As it is reported in the work of king Zar’a Yā‘qob, the pagan gods had influenced the court; the court people were divided into two camps. The king, as usual, was devoted to the church and the word of God, but some of the top officials of the kingdom, whose office was next to the king, were all devoted to the worshipping of *Dask* and *Dino*: *Bəḥtwaddad*,<sup>15</sup> these included Isāyāyyās, his wife Šiḥ Mangašā,<sup>16</sup> his son Badəl Wāni the *rə’asa təqāqqānāt* of the right and his brother, Nəwāy, the *Mak’annən*<sup>17</sup> of Təgrāy, his son in law Ḥarb Saggad, the head of *Zān Balo* and Badəl Kaffatā, the head of *Baḍar Wāgat*. These personalities were those who assumed key positions of the civil and military offices of the kingdom. They regularly received miracles and consultation from these pagan cults, who told them that they would not have a better future during the reign of the king, so they would have to remove him from power and replace him with another king who would allow them to worship their gods freely (Getatchew 1991b, 69–70, 1991c, 56). These top court officials were ready to further influence the subjects and the troops in order to indoctrinate and under their autonomy declare the pagan deities, which certainly undermined the church. Some of them even had their own personal pagan priest who served them. They vowed that “We can force this king to abdicate the authority of the kingship and make another king who will do our will and will worship our gods, magicians, diviners, *Dino* and *Dask*” (Getatchew 1991b, 70, 1991c, 56). This fact is clearly summarised in the following quotation that appears in the work of the king, *Tomāra təsbə’t*, which was indeed composed in favour of the political motive of the king but provides substantial information on the subject:

These are those who first broke faith with God by consulting magicians, sorcerers, *dino* and *dask*: later they betrayed the king and broke their oath which they had sworn to the king that they would not rebel against him. As for *Bəḥtwaddad* Isāyāyyās, his brother-in-law Galāwdewos, the Jew, brought him a *dask* from Wagi. That Galāwdewos became a Jew forsaking his Christianity and denying Christ. And Ḥarb Saggad, his [Isāyāyyās’s] son-in-law, the head of *Zān Balo*, brought him a *dino* from Ḳangot; and Isāyāyyās was himself a magician. He gathered other magicians, too, to himself and consulted them with his associates whom we mentioned earlier. They said to the magicians, diviners, *dino* and *dask*, “Will life for us under this king be good or bad? Will our lives be long or short? Will we have joy under this king or under another king?” The magicians, sorcerers *dino* and *dask* said to them “You will not have a good life during the days of this king.” (Getatchew 1991c, 54)

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The worship of these pagan gods was one of the serious accusations to achieve political

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15 In the medieval royal mobile court, the office of *Bəḥtwaddad* (‘The loved one’) was one of the 28 offices next to the *Nəgus*, with dual functions held by two officers: *Bəḥtwaddad za-yamān* (‘*Bəḥtwaddad* of the right’), who was responsible for joining the king in battles, and *Bəḥtwaddad za-ṣagām* (‘*Bəḥtwaddad* of the left’), who was responsible for protecting the kingdom in the absence of the king (Varenbergh 1915–1916, 21 (text), 37 (tr.); see also Chernetsov 2003).

16 She was one of the daughters of the king Zar’a Yā‘qob who was entrusted to various provinces of the kingdom and was appointed by him as governor of Ḳangot and later demoted together with the other of her sisters because of the accusation of secretly worshipping *Dask* (see Perruchon 1893, 95).

17 It is a title solely designated for a governor of Təgrāy, which was the most powerful official during the period of King Zar’a Yā‘qob (see also Nosnitsin 2010).

motives in addition to the preservation of the church. Since medieval society was more characterised by belief in miracles and divine power, these local pagan cults affected the religious life of the people enormously. However, this was reversed by the action of the king, who charged them with this sin and took serious measures against the abandonment of this practice. In the following section, we will discuss the measures that were taken to abandon pagan practices.

What were the steps undertaken by King Zar'a Yā'qob to resist the pagan religious practices [14] in his kingdom? As highlighted above, the pagan gods dominated and influenced both the political and religious life of the time, which greatly challenged the religious policy of the king. Court officials regularly consulted with these pagan priests about future policies and their future lives. This had been the custom of the time, which is evident from the various teachings and religious instructions of the king, who strongly gave up saying that what pagan gods were doing was wrong, that the pagan gods were pushing the Christian people away from proper Christian religious actions, and that their actions were satanic. These practices hindered Christians from enjoying heavenly life, but that did not stop them. The Christian common people also practised pagan practices secretly. However, the pagan god institution had not defined groups of people who strictly followed them. It seems that this was a challenge to the king to dismantle the pagan practice, which could not be averted only by teaching Christians the doctrine and order of Christianity. Thus, the zealous Christian King Zar'a Yā'qob was forced to have taken stricter laws and instructions for abandoning pagan practices under the domain of his kingship.<sup>18</sup>

One of the strong measures taken by King Zar'a Yā'qob to prohibit paganism was a written [15] decree in which he ordered pagan gods to be abandoned and the Christian worship of Jesus and his mother, Mary, to be promoted instead. The decree ordered Christians to inscribe a prayer text on the three parts of their body, that is on their forehead and right and left hands, representing the sign of the cross, which was believed to protect a Christian from Satan and also prevent the spirits of *Dask* and *Dino* from approaching the person. Thus, everyone had to inscribe in bold Gə'əz letters on the forehead the common formula: በሰሙ: አብ: ወወልድ: ወመንገድ: ቅዱስ: ('In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'). On the right hand, ክህድክዎ: ለዲያብሎስ: በክርስቶስ: አምላክ ('I renounce the Devil, in the name of Christ who is God), and on their left hand: ክህድክዎ: ለደስክ: ርጉም: አነ: ገብራ: ለማርያም: አመ: ለፈጣሪ: ኩሉ: ዓለም: ('I renounce *Dask* the accursed, I am the servant of Mary, the mother of the creator of the whole world') (Perruchon 1893, 6). Here the writing of the decree is carefully crafted and had a theological explanation. If one imagines a standing person holding out two hands, one can easily see a sign of the cross, for the promotion of the cross by King Zar'a Yā'qob was an essential religious policy of his time.<sup>19</sup> Here, one can understand that the symbol and visual representation of the sign of the cross above the head easily helped spread Christianity among the locals. On the other hand, the decree also mentions the most famous pagan god who was highly celebrated in the Šawā region and most likely had several branches of ritual centres.

The king in this religious policy wanted to dismantle the pagan belief from the Christian [16] land, and so greatly promoted belief only in Jesus and in his mother Mary, which was highly

18 One of the major religious reforms of Emperor Zar'a Yā'qob was abandoning pagan practices and paganism in the Christian kingdom. This stemmed from his devoted outlook in his early years and had become incredibly challenging to his power and kingdom. Several times, he argued that the country Ethiopia is surrounded by "pagans and Muslims in the east as well as in the west" (Tadesse Tamrat 1972b, 231).

19 During King Zar'a Yā'qob's reign, the promotion of the Cross, the image of the Virgin, the construction of churches and other visual aspects of religious life were the main instruments for promoting Christianity among the large population of Ethiopia. See, for more, Kaplan (2002) and Kaplan (1984).

favoured during his time, as the king initiated the production of the miracles of Mary (Ta'aməra Māryām) and distributed manuscripts to various monasteries and churches (Budge 1923, X).

The decree of King Zar'a Yā'qob was famous during this period and accepted in the church, and the tradition continued in the proceeding centuries. Even today, we can find tattoos of crosses on the foreheads of some highland Christian girls and women, which is the legacy of this decree. [17]

It is obvious that the edict was strictly obeyed among the Christian subjects of the kingdom. But for those who disobeyed, the punishment was also specified: ወዘንተ፡ ዘአገብረ፡ ይቅበርበር፡ ቤቱ፡ ወይቅኩን፡ ሥጋሁ፡ እንዘ፡ ይብል፡ እዘዘ፡ ንጉሥ፡ በውሰተ፡ ኩሉ፡ ዓለም፡ ('He who did not heed [this prescription] had his house pillaged and corporal punishment was also administered to the guilty party to recall that the king should be obeyed by everybody') (Perruchon 1893, 7). [18]

The period of Zar'a Yā'qob was marked by a period of terror by the chronicler as the king killed several of his subjects after adopting the law in the name of his pagan law.<sup>20</sup> He overthrew his second person next to him, the *Bəhtwaddad* Isāyāyyās, and other several top officials I mentioned above, under the pretext of accusing them of practising pagan rituals and magical practices. They were forced to repent for publicly worshipping the pagan god for the instruction of the common people of the empire (Getatchew 1991b, 76, 1991c, 61) and they were all killed. In addition, a large number of people were flogged and punished in the court of Dabra Bərhan for attending pagan practices. [19]

It is reported that the king ordered a severe punishment even for his children, male and female, who prostrated themselves before *Dask* and *Dino* (Perruchon 1893, 6; Wendt 1963a, II:95–96, 1963b, 83–84). This episode created terror and havoc among the ordinary Christians and courtly people. The male princes whom the king punished were Tewodros, Galāwdewos, 'Amda Şəyon, Zara 'Abrəhām and others whose names were not remembered by the chronicler (Perruchon 1893, 98). Those of his daughters punished were 'Aşnāf Samərā, Dəl Samərā and others.<sup>21</sup> Some of these royal progenies died at the place of torture and others at their quarters. He then summoned a great assembly and showed those who composed it the pains and heavy punishment inflicted on his children. He said to them: ርእሱ፡ እብሱ፡ ላዕላ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ቀኒእነ፡ ሎቱ፡ ወይእዜኒ፡ ለእመ፡ የእክሎሙ፡ ዝንቱ፡ ቅስፈት፡ ወለእመ፡ ንዌሰክ፡ ላዕላሆሙ፡ በእንተ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ በሉኩ፡ ተናገሩ፡ ('See how we have acted with our children: in our zeal for God, we have not spared them for having sinned against Him. Now, say whether you consider this calvary sufficient or if, for the glory of God, we should still increase it'). Then, all the people present burst into tears and replied: ምንተኒ፡ ኩነኔ፡ ይዌሰኩ፡ ላዕላሆሙ፡ እሰመ፡ ናሁ፡ እልጻቁ፡ ለሞት፡ እእግዚእነ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ('What punishment could be added to this one, Oh, King our Lord, for they are on the point of death'). The King's chronicle also adds that a large number of people were put to death or sentenced to other punishments on similar charges (Perruchon 1893, 98–99). [20]

The king also created detailed instructions for those who used to worship pagan gods or [21]

20 Indeed, several scholars have argued that the king also used the prescription of abandoning paganism to attack his political opponent, but sources revealed that the emperor was a devoted Orthodox committing himself to church doctrine and and, knowing much of the scripture of the church, represented as the saviour of the church and obeying the worship of God.

21 In the first years of his reign, the king entrusted the most powerful provinces of the kingdom to his daughters. In this regard, 'Aşnāf Samərā was entrusted to Goğğām while Dəl Samərā was entrusted to Təgrāy. Another of his daughters (who were also probably victims of these punishment) by the name Şabala Māryām was entrusted to Bagemdər, while Sofāyā was entrusted to the region of Gədəm, Rom Ganayala to Şawā and 'Amata Maşih to that of 'Amḥarā (see Perruchon 1893, 95).



idolaters who practised magic and divination and ordered for them to not be allowed to enter the church or go to school before they show themselves to the priest.

For worshipping idols is worse than any sin, as the apostles James has said “For whoever observes the whole law but errs in one, becomes guilty of all, what he said is the abandonment of the worship of God, for the worship of God is greatest of all good deeds.” [22]

If you enter church or come to the school while you are idolaters, petitioning an idol saying, “impoverish our enemy, and enrich us; kill our adversaries, and keep us alive; bring misery upon those who oppose us, and do goodness for us”, behold, I, Zar’a Yā’qob, whose reginal name is Q<sup>w</sup>asṭantinos, have ordered that whoever does so, let (officials) plunder his house and condemn his soul; and let his land of inheritance be for the others. For God has appointed us for this act and made us king for the duty of avenging his enemies and rooting them out from the face of the earth. Regarding other sins, however, you have priests and metropolitans to give you penance and to cleanse you from all sins and trespasses. If you enter church and come to school while you secretly worship idols and consult magicians and are guided by astrology, you’re going (to the church and school) will be in vain.” (Getatchew 2013b, 46) [23]

The steps that had been taken by king Zar’a Yā’qob dismantled pagan practices in the entire Christian kingdom and created a great opportunity to expand the church in various parts of the kingdom. Though he abandoned the pagan ritual practice successfully through teaching and producing various books against paganism and also serious legal prescriptions as we have seen above, he built his personal cult equal to the status of divine power. He killed hundreds of people and even his children in allegations of prostrating in front of pagan gods, arguing that prostrating is only for God and other saints. But later, he used to force his subjects to prostrate in front of him and he took serious measures on those who failed to do so, for example, the Stephanites (a group of religious movements within Ethiopian monasticism, called so after their founder and spiritual leader *’abuna* ማጥፋኑስ).<sup>22</sup> As the chronicle of the king reported, in this regard, the king made a second prescription for all Christians invoking the name of God to prostrate for the magnificence of his kingship and to prostrate themselves before Mary’s virginity (Perruchon 1893, 102). This was supported by many theological books and religious teachings. But what is amazing is that the King also equally prescribed Christians to prostrate themselves when they heard his words and appeared before him. This is clearly evident in the royal chronicle: [24]

ወዓዲ፡ እዘዘ፡ ወእቱ፡ ንጉሥነ፡ እነዘ፡ ይብል፡ ጊዜ፡ ትጻውዑ፡ ሰዎ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ ኩልክሙ፡ ሕዝብ፡ ክርስቲያን፡ በሉ፡ እሰግድ፡ ቅድመ፡ ዕባዩ፡ መንግሥቱ፡ ወእምዝ፡ ጸውዑ፡ ሰዎ፡ ወካዕብ፡ ጊዜ፡ ትፈቅዱ፡ ጸውኑ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ ማርያም፡ በሉ፡ ቅድመ፡ ድንግልናሃ፡ ይደሉ፡ ሰጊድ፡ ወእምዝ፡ ጸውዑ፡ ወሥልሰ፡ ይቤ፡ ሶብ፡ ትሰምኑ፡ ቃላነ፡ ወሶብ፡ ትብጽሑ፡ ቅድመ፡ ገጽነ፡ ወትረ፡ በሉ፡ እነዘ፡ ትሰግዱ፡ ንሰግድ፡ ለአብ፡ ወወልድ፡ ወመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ለዘእንገሠ፡ ለነ፡ ዘርእ፡ ያዕቆብ፡ (‘Our King also ordered saying that “When you invoke the name of God, all you Christians, say at first: “I prostrate myself before the magnificence of his Kingship”, then invoke his name. Secondly, when you want [25]

22 Although the Stephanites were persecuted by order of King Zar’a Yā’qob on the pretext that they refused to prostrate themselves for Saint Mary, they instead refused to prostrate themselves for the king himself, as recounted in the local hagiography (see Getatchew 2010, 102, 1983; Kaplan 2010).

to invoke the name of our Lady Mary, say: “It is appropriate to prostrate before her virginity,” then invoke it. Thirdly, when you hear our word or when you appear before us, say always prostrating yourselves: “We prostrate ourselves before the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, who gave us King Zar’a Yā’qob” ). (Perruchon 1893, 102).

Though Zar’a Yā’qob was remarkable for abandoning pagan religious practices and promoting the church and Christianity, pagan religious practices continued among some communities despite being heavily dominated by Christianity, but they still faced coercion from successive Solomonic kings who wanted to expand the Christian faith as a state policy. After King Galāwdewos (1540–1559) maintained peace and stability in the Christian kingdom following the turbulent civil war between Christians and Muslims by being victorious against Aḥmad in 1543, he led subsequent military campaigns to the communities that had been worshipping pagan gods and converted them to Christianity. In this context, he led a campaign to conquer Gambo in (1548) and Gumar in 1550 (Solomon Gebreyes 2019a, 56, 59, 60, 61, 2019b, 32, 34, 35, 36). Similarly, in the late sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, kings including King Śarḍa Dəngəl (r. 1563–1597), Susənyos (r. 1607–1632) and ʾIyāsu (1667–1682) and others waged several military campaigns against pagan communities that followed various forms of pagan religious practices and converted them to Christianity (Conti Rossini 1907, 120–127 (text), 1942, 83–87 (text); Pereira 1892, 250–253 (text); Guidi 1903, 235–263 (text)). But pagan religious practices never disappeared; although it is much downplayed in modern Ethiopian history, they still exist in various forms to this day. [26]

## Conclusion

There were three major phases in the evolution of paganism in the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. The first phase covers the period from the first to the twelfth century, which refers to paganism and seems to have held a strong position covering a long period of religious history. But much has never been known about this phase, except for the fourth century, about which King ʿEzānā has left us very valuable historical sources. This period is characterised by the resistance of paganism against the expansion of Christianity, which was confined only to the territory around ʾAksum and its vicinity. This indeed invites rigorous historical research in the future. The second stage of paganism, which approximately covers the period from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, represents the period in which paganism faced resistance from Christianity and was strongly assisted by the Christian Ethiopian kings. This period represents the destruction of pagan shrines and buildings to be replaced by monasteries and churches. The third is the period after the early fifteenth century, which witnessed a little revival of paganism but also saw strong prohibitive measures followed by a zealous Christian King Zar’a Yā’qob, whose policy brought a considerable impact on the development of paganism to the extent of its demise. The king prohibited pagan practices both through legal means as well as by disseminating teachings against paganism, by composing theological books that challenged pagan practices and principles from a Christian doctrinal point of view. [27]

As we know, the two religions, Christianity and Islam, are better known because they operated within a literary culture, so that we can understand the history and doctrine of these religions very clearly throughout centuries in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Since paganism, unlike these two religions, had no tradition of preserving its history and the principles of [28]

religion, it is difficult to understand the structure and principles that it is based on. But it has persisted to this day, even in our modern society. This is because it adapts to both religions and the culture of society. When Christianity officially proclaimed that pagan traditional practices were to remain behind the curtain, the people continued practising the Christian religion in the church but also secretly obeyed the pagan tradition.

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