**Mission from Below: Captive Women and Conversion on the East Roman Frontiers**

**Andrea Sterk**

So the servants took Rhipsime by force, now lifting her, now dragging her . . . But when they had shut her in the chamber she began to beseech the Lord.

—Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*

It is said that during this reign the Iberians, a large and warlike barbarian nation, confessed Christ . . . A Christian woman, who had been taken captive, induced them to renounce the religion of their fathers.

—Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*

And after his death the people of Yemen received the knowledge of God . . . by means of a holy woman named Theognosta. Now she was a Christian virgin who had been carried off captive from a convent on the borders of the Roman empire.

—John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*

The significance of captives in the history of empire has come to the fore in several recent books and articles. Linda Colley starts her intriguing study of this theme with the stories of two famous, if legendary, British captives—Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver—explaining how each represents a different conception of empire: the former a shipwrecked exslave turned conqueror and colonizer; the latter an overseas adventurer who is captured, humiliated, and terrorized but ultimately transformed by the values of his captors into a critic of his own society.¹ Far from the heroes of Defoe and Swift, female captives featured in conversion accounts on the east Roman frontiers represent another response to captivity in a very different imperial world—that of the Roman and Iranian empires of late antiquity.

¹Linda Colley, *Captives* (New York: Pantheon, 2002).

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These protagonists neither came to dominate the kingdoms in which they were held nor assimilated the culture of their captors but maintained their identity, their customs, and their religion in captivity. Indeed, these captives went further still, actually transforming the peoples and governments under which they were held from their very positions of subordination.

Though stories of captive women missionaries have a romantic ring, it is well known that hostages, slaves, and prisoners of war were crucial to the spread of cultures and exchange of ideas across the borders of the ancient world. In fact a more thorough examination of the role of captives in transmitting religious ideas and practices in late antiquity is long overdue. Bearing witness to one aspect of this broader phenomenon, a remarkable group of historical texts attribute the conversion of whole nations on the east Roman frontiers to the influence of captive women. My focus in this essay will not be the status or treatment of these female captives, much less the history of slavery, but rather their portrayal as evangelists and what these descriptions suggest about notions and practices of mission in the Christian east. To set the stage for our consideration of these peculiar missionaries, we will begin with a review of scholarship on the interrelated themes of mission, conversion, and Christianization in late antiquity, especially in relation to the historiography of east Roman or Byzantine mission.

I. MISSION, CONVERSION, CHRISTIANIZATION: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRENDS

The history of conversion in late antiquity, like the study of the era as a whole, has undergone considerable revision in the past generation of scholarship. In his classic treatment of the subject, A. D. Nock defined conversion as “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning away from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another.” Far from Nock’s dramatic turning point, a newer wave of essays has examined conversion as


3For a helpful discussion of the connection as well as the distinction between these terms, see Ian Wood, The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050 (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 3–5. I will be using this terminology in a similar manner: “conversion” primarily for the spiritual change of an individual, though I will sometimes refer to the “conversion” of a nation or land; “mission” primarily for the evangelization of pagans; and “Christianization” for what is generally deemed a longer process involving the transformation of communities or whole lands that may already be superficially Christian. The term “evangelization” will be used interchangeably with “mission” and may be more helpful since the latter “implies a plan” (Wood, 4) that is not always evident in the relevant accounts.

social process. Scholars have interpreted the phenomenon as “a sequence of action and response ... at times stretched out over years,” as a spectrum, or at the least, as both “moment and process.” Archeologists have contributed to these reassessments by pointing to deeper, longer-term consequences of conversion in transformed landscapes and new aspects of material culture that illuminate the social and political dimensions of religious change.

The subject of Christian mission in late antiquity has received considerably less attention than the related theme of conversion. To be sure, for the earlier centuries of Christian expansion we are better served. From the pioneering work of Adolf von Harnack’s Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten (1902), to Ramsey MacMullen’s Christianizing the Roman Empire (1984), to the best-selling study of sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity (1996), the spread of the Christian movement in the pre-Constantinian era has continued to inspire fresh scholarly enterprise and debate. While some continue to affirm an “intensive sense of mission” that characterized the early church, a growing number of scholars have argued that neither

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5This approach is perhaps best exemplified in the edited volume, Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills, eds., Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003). See also Raymond Van Dam, Becoming Christian: The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). Lamenting the many deferential studies that ignore the disruptive impact of the new religion on a traditional society, Van Dam sets out to examine the practical, immediate aspects of conversion while essentially ignoring “doctrines, asceticism, monasticism, and spirituality” (3–4).


7See the introductory comments on conversion in Florin Curta, ed., East Central and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 18–19.


Jews nor Christians were especially concerned about proselytism in the pre-Constantinian centuries and that once Christianity became the state religion the very idea of mission loses its meaning. Indeed, common to most treatments of early Christian mission is relative inattention to developments beyond the fourth century. This neglect is curious since, as W. H. C. Frend observed in 1970, once Christianity had assumed the character of the official religion of the empire, “the missionary situation changed completely.” He concluded his own brief overview of Christian missions from 180–700 with the observation that “no detailed survey of the conversion of the Greco-Roman world in the fourth and subsequent centuries has yet been attempted.”

Since this offhanded challenge to new research in the field, the Christianization of the late ancient and early medieval West has been the subject of several excellent studies. The subject of eastern mission has been less studied, although the tide is beginning to change, and literature...


Although there has been no major English monograph devoted to eastern mission or Christianization equivalent to studies on the West (see note 12), several recent articles have examined the subject either in specific regional contexts or from a comparative angle. Especially relevant to this article are Cornelia Horn, “St. Nino and the Christianization of Pagan Georgia,” *Medieval Encounters* 4, no. 3 (1998): 243–64; Horn, “The Lives and Literary Roles of Children in Advancing Conversion to Christianity: Hagiography from the Caucasus in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” *Church History* 76, no. 2 (2007): 262–97; and Christopher Haas, “Mountain Constantines: The Christianization of Aksum and Iberia,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 101–26. Also indicative of rising interest in eastern Christianization is an essay by Sergey A. Ivanov, “Religious Missions,” in the new *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c.500–1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 305–32, covering the middle Byzantine period. Oddly, there is no comparable treatment of mission in volume 2 of the *Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which covers the period from Constantine to c.600.
on regional or national Christianity has grown tremendously in recent years providing a surer foundation for broader comparative studies. Debate about the missionary nature of the early church only rarely touches on the post-Constantinian period in the east for it is largely assumed that mission was simply part of the political program of the newly Christian Roman Empire and what became Byzantium. Even missiologists devote little attention to the east acknowledging the problematic nature of the Eusebian legacy: an empire in which monotheism and monarchy were inextricably intertwined.14 Jonathan Shepard encapsulated the dominant perspective that has shaped historical scholarship on Byzantine missions for the past fifty years:

The Byzantine emperor, as successor to Constantine the Great, was acclaimed as ‘equal of the apostles’ in court acclamations and rhetoric. An emperor, not a patriarch or any other sort of churchman, had been chosen by God to bring about the conversion of the inhabitants of the Roman world, and proclaiming one’s willingness to spread the Word was a useful political prop.15

Though Shepard is describing a later period of Byzantine history, similar emphasis on imperial motives and initiative in Christianization has influenced studies of the fourth to the sixth century as well. In a recent monograph, Russian medievalist Sergey Ivanov added a more provocative twist to standard representations of Byzantine mission. Arguing that mission was coterminous with the borders of empire, Ivanov attempts to document the Byzantines’ unconcern with evangelizing ‘barbarians’ unless those


outsiders had come to settle on Roman territory. Not only was Byzantium’s Christianizing activity of a “passive character,” he argues, but the Byzantines viewed the call to spread Christianity among the barbarians with loathing, even as a blasphemy or sin.

Underlying these studies are at least two assumptions, seemingly well supported by the evidence, which I would like to revisit and revise in a limited manner in the present essay. The first is the notion that there was very little theological reflection on the task of mission in the Christian Roman Empire. As recent studies of western Christianization have indicated, we are certainly far from a developed “theology” of mission in these centuries. Accordingly, “Christianization,” most often linked with political power and religious coercion, has been the domain of historians of the post-Constantinian empire, while “conversion” remains largely the realm of patristic theologians, scholars of ancient religion, and historians of the early church. A second, related assumption is that Christian mission after Constantine was almost exclusively a “top-down” affair, sponsored by emperors and directed primarily toward ruling elites. Indeed, the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* affirms that “characteristically, Byzantine missionary activity worked ‘from the top down’ by focusing on the rulers and leaders of society who then arranged the conversion of their people en masse.”

Although he covers a fairly broad swath of missionaries, Ivanov’s...
main focus is imperially-sponsored mission, and missionaries “from below” are deemed “accidental” or “unintentional” evangelists. A broader conception of what constitutes mission and missionaries might lead to different or more nuanced conclusions.

As the reaction against Nock’s “psychological maximalism” is beginning to subside for the first few centuries, the study of mission and conversion in the post-Constantinian era deserves renewed attention as well. Based on histories composed from the fifth to seventh centuries, we will consider here three interrelated accounts of conversion from lands on the borders of the East Roman Empire: Armenia, Georgia, and Yemen. I hope to show that accounts of female evangelistic activity suggest more missionary initiative on the part of eastern Christians and more theological reflection on this process than is generally acknowledged in treatments of Byzantine mission. Moreover, by analyzing narratives of unofficial mission I will attempt to assess both the ideal and the reality of mission “from below.” Though but one phase in a longer process of Christianization that spanned several centuries, it is an aspect of Christian expansion that has received far less attention than it merits. While traditional histories of Christianity have focused on doctrines and institutions, some recent scholars have approached the Christian movement as “a people’s history,” sensitive to the ways in which it has “effectively subverted elite privilege and imperial authority, even in the post-Constantinian period.” Building on and drawing inspiration from such approaches, this study will examine the contribution of

20Ivanov, Vizantiiskoe missionersvo, chapter 2, especially 31–34.
21Seth Schwartz, “Roman Historians and the Rise of Christianity: The School of Edward Gibbon,” in Spread of Christianity, ed. Harris, 151. By “psychological maximalism” Schwartz refers to A. D. Nock’s understanding of conversion as a dramatic spiritual, intellectual, and emotional turning, a psychological moment as opposed to a process of transformation. Schwartz also speaks of almost all Gibbon-derived scholarship, including that of Ramsey MacMullen, as characterized by “psychological minimalism” in interpreting accounts of mission and conversion, that is, the tendency to reduce mission and conversion to a relatively simple process explicable in terms of group motivation or other sociological factors. He suggests that this approach too is beginning to run its course. In the same volume, see also H. A. Drake, “Models of Christian Expansion,” 1–13.
22Haas, “Mountain Constantines,” 125–26, concludes his essay with a model of Christianization that includes nine “distinct phases” and “took at least two centuries to complete.” Though one might quibble with the precise wording or order of these phases (and his own title emphasizes conversion from above), Haas also recognizes the importance of gradual Christianization from below in both Axum and Iberia.
23Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, “Shifting the Focus of History,” in A People’s History of Christianity, vol. 2, Late Ancient Christianity, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 22. At the same time the authors acknowledge the ways in which “Christian communities embraced imperial patronage and affirmed class privilege while generating their own class distinctions along a variety of gradients.” Besides this introduction to the volume, the essays in part 1, “Hierarchy and Subversion,” are especially relevant to themes considered in this article.
female captives to the conversion of lands on the east Roman frontiers. Such analysis should help to illumine the relation between empire and religion as well the nature of Christian mission in this pivotal age.

II. THREE NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION

Situated between the Black and Caspian Seas and straddling trade routes to the east, Greater Armenia in late antiquity was poised between the Roman and Iranian Empires. The Christianization of this region owes much to both Syrian and Greek Christian traditions, but the earliest account of the conversion of Armenia is attributed to a churchman who wrote under the pseudonym “Agathangelos.” His *History of the Armenians* focuses on the missionary role of Gregory the Illuminator, a Christian in the service of the pagan king Trdat (Tiridates) III. 24 According to this account, a long confrontation began when Gregory refused to worship the Armenian goddess, Anahit, described by King Trdat as “this great lady ... the glory of our race and our savior.” 25 For spurning the deity and confessing his Christian faith, the king subjected Gregory to cruel torture and threw him into a deep snake-filled pit to die. Some thirteen years later the king was possessed by demons, went mad, turned into a pig, and began pasturing in the grassland and wallowing naked in the plain outside the city. A series of dreams revealed that Gregory (assumed long dead) was the only hope for the king’s restoration. Rescued from his pit, Gregory preached the gospel to the king and his court, whereupon King Trdat shed his pig-like skin, tusks, and snout, was restored to vigor, and was soon baptized in the Euphrates River along with his nobles. After overthrowing the pagan shrines throughout the land, Gregory was sent to Caesarea in Cappadocia to be consecrated bishop, and Armenia, just beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, became the first state to adopt Christianity as its official religion. 26


Closely connected with Gregory’s missionary work in Armenia is the role of the captive woman Rhipsime, a beautiful and pious Christian virgin who enters the scene while Gregory is languishing in the pit.\(^{27}\) Having received unwanted attention from the Roman emperor Diocletian, Rhipsime, along with her abbess Gaiane and their entire convent of nuns, had fled Rome to Armenia only to fall prey to the wiles of King Trdat. They hid temporarily in “vat-stores” in the vineyards at the edge of the capital city, Valarshapat, but the king’s spies soon discovered the virgins’ hiding place and were sent to retrieve Rhipsime. Amidst loud prayers recounting the history of salvation from Abraham to the cross, the virgin was forcibly dragged to the king’s palace and imprisoned in the royal chamber in preparation for her wedding to the Armenian king.\(^{28}\) As she prayed, King Trdat entered the chamber and “seized her in order to work his lustful desires. But she, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, struggled like a beast and fought like a man.” They wrestled for seven hours until the king, though renowned for his strength, was overcome—“vanquished and worsted by a single girl through the will and power of Christ.”\(^{29}\) Rhipsime temporarily escaped to relate to her companions what had happened and pronounce a final scripture-filled prayer exalting God’s victory and providence. For her resistance to the king, however, Trdat’s nobles had Rhipsime recaptured, tortured, and killed along with thirty-six other virgins who had accompanied her in her flight to Armenia. King Trdat went into deep mourning for the beautiful virgin, and after he set out for the hunt a short while later, madness befell him as a “punishment from the Lord.” Central to Gregory’s long sermon calling for the king’s conversion is the faith, witness, and supernatural power of Rhipsime.\(^{30}\) He claims that God had sent Rhipsime and the other martyrs for the Armenians’ salvation, and

\(^{27}\)On Rhipsime’s centrality for the conversion of both Armenia and Georgia, see Michel van Esbroeck, “Die Stellung der Märtyrerin Rhipsime in der Geschichte der Bekehrung des Kaukasus,” in Christianisierung des Kaukasus, ed. Siebt, 171–79. The origin of the name Rhipsime is unknown, although Agathangelos, §175, suggests it derives from the Greek ἰπτεῖν, “to throw.” One scholar suggests that the verb may have the meaning “imprison,” thus implying that Rhipsime was a captive. Thomson, however, discounts this “folk-etymology.” Thomson, Agathangelos: History, 472 n. 2.

\(^{28}\)For the virgins’ flight to Armenia and discovery by Trdat’s nobles see Agathangelos, History, §§149–161. On the “vat-stores” in which they hid see Agathangelos, History, §150, and the editor’s comment on 469, §150, n. 2.

\(^{29}\)Agathangelos, History, §§180–82.

\(^{30}\)For example, Agathangelos, History, §§233, 237–39. These references to Rhipsime and the martyrs’ testimony form part of Gregory’s preliminary exhortations to the king and his court. The sermon continues in what has been described as an “elaborate catechism” that is longer than the rest of the History combined and became known as the “teaching” of St. Gregory. This text went through various recensions before reaching its final form in the early seventh century and has been published separately as The Teaching of Saint Gregory, rev. ed. trans., comm., and intro. Robert W. Thomson (New Rochelle, N.Y.: St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, 2001). Here too the role of Rhipsime and the martyrs is emphasized.
he eventually had their bodies enshrined in the first chapels built in the newly Christian land.31

Linked with this narrative of Armenia’s conversion is the story of the Christianization of neighboring Georgia, known in antiquity as Iberia.32 The earliest account appears not in the Georgian Chronicles, the compilation of which began no earlier than the seventh century, but rather in the work of Rufinus, the Latin monk and ecclesiastical historian who wrote from Bethlehem just after 400 and who is the main source for the earliest Greek versions of the conversion. The account follows his narrative of the roughly contemporaneous Christianization of Axum (modern Ethiopia), which is also attributed to the efforts of captives, specifically two Christian Roman boys who were spared when “barbarians” attacked their ship on the Red Sea coast.33 The pivotal missionary figure in Georgia was a female captive who amazed the “barbarians” with her ascetic piety and devotion to Christ. When her prayers effected the restoration of a hopelessly sick child, the queen of Iberia, who suffered from a grave physical illness, summoned the woman. Though she “declined to go, lest she appear to pretend to more than was proper to her sex,” the queen is brought to the captive’s hovel where the woman’s prayer immediately restores her to health and vigor.34 The captive attributes the healing to Christ and entreats the queen to acknowledge him. Grateful for his wife’s restoration, the king sends the captive gifts as payment, but the woman returns them and urges him instead to recognize the true God whom she has declared. On the hunt a short while later, the king is suddenly engulfed in impenetrable darkness and despairs for his life. He calls upon the captive’s god, who instantly rescues him from his plight. On his safe return to the city the king summons the captive, who teaches him

31 Agathangelos, History, §§759–60. For an analysis of the architecture and later history of the chapels built in honor of the virgin martyrs, see A. Khatchatrian, L’architecture arménienne du IVe siècle au VIe siècle (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), especially 32–33, 37, on the martyrium of Rhipsime which was rebuilt twice by the early seventh century and was said to be the site of many healings. See also Khatchatrian’s Appendix, 103–8, for a collection of all the passages in Agathangelos that have to do with architecture.


34 Rufinus, HE, 10.11: Schwartz and Mommsen, 974, lines 19–20; Amidon, 21.
about Christ. He then gathers his subjects, recounts what happened, and exhorts the Iberians to worship him. After the captive woman performs another miracle enabling the placement of a hitherto immovable column in the construction of a church, the whole nation is said to have acknowledged the true God. At the woman’s advice, an embassy is sent to Emperor Constantine requesting priests to instruct the Iberians in their new faith.

A similar account of a captive woman missionary is set on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula in the early fifth century. The author of this brief narrative is the seventh-century anti-Chalcedonian leader and monastic administrator, John, bishop of Nikiu, a fortified island in the Nile delta of Egypt. John ignores the traditions of the apostle Bartholomew and the missionary Theophilus, a captive converted in Constantinople and sent out by Emperor Constantius, and focuses instead on a holy woman named Theognosta. He describes her as a Christian virgin who had been carried off captive from a convent on the borders of the Roman Empire and had been conducted to the king of Yemen and presented to him as a gift. And this Christian woman became very rich through the grace of God and wrought many healings. And she brought over the king of India to the faith, and he became a Christian through her agency as well as all the people of India.

Eventually the king and his subjects requested that the “Godloving emperor Honorius” appoint them a bishop, which he did with great joy. This “holy bishop,” Theonius, instructed and strengthened the people of Yemen in their new faith, yet their eventual baptism, or “second birth,” is attributed to “the prayers of the holy virgin Theognosta.”

III. MISSION FROM BELOW: INVERTING IMPERIAL PARADIGMS

The prominent place of women in accounts of national conversions is certainly not unique to the east Roman frontiers in late antiquity. Especially pertinent to mission is the reputed role of early medieval queens in the conversion of their pagan husbands and hence their entire realms. The Burgundian princess Clothilde, wife of King Clovis of the Franks, and Queen Bertha, wife of Anglo-Saxon King Ethelbert, provide the most famous examples of this
process. In the east the pious empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, advanced the spread of the Christian faith, and she and her son are honored together as the prototypical Christian rulers; similarly in the Arabic Christian tradition Queen Mavia has been hailed as the “first Christian Arab queen.” Such examples lend support to the “top-down” definition of mission that appears in the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium. However, although rulers have a function in each of the national conversions recounted above, it is female captives and not ruling women who are central to narratives of evangelization.

To be sure, accounts of captive women were also a *topos* in earlier Greco-Roman literature in antiquity, and variations on this theme, often involving religious choice, appeared throughout the Middle Ages. Among patristic exegetes, the motif was developed in interpretations of Deuteronomy 21:10–13 on the treatment of a non-Israelite woman taken captive in war. Building on Origen’s interpretation of this passage, Jerome used the image of the female captive to represent non-Christian literature and learning as both potentially dangerous and alluring. Like the captive woman, however, foreign pagan wisdom can be purified and “made a captive and servant to Israel,” that is, to the Christian reader. Similarly the rabbis of late antiquity adapted the *topos* of the sexually alluring captive woman to some of their own purposes, as “a kind of myth or foundational story that helped them explain to themselves their place in the pagan world.” Yet in such...

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38 Descriptions of the actual role that Christian queens played have been softened in more recent literature, and the motif of “conversion by marriage” has been questioned. See, for example, Dorsey Armstrong, “Holy Queens as Agents of Christianization in Bede’s Ecclesiastical History: A Reconsideration” Medieval Encounters 4, no. 3 (1998): 228–41. As Armstrong summarizes, “In Bede, queens do not convert peoples—kings and bishop do” (239).


41 See, for example, F. M. Warren, “The Enamored Muslim Princess in Orderic Vital and French Epic,” Publications of the Modern Language Association 29, no. 3 (1914): 241–358, where the medieval use of the *topos* is traced from roots in Seneca and the Greek Sophists through medieval Islamic literature like the *Arabians Nights*. In medieval European accounts, however, the captive women protagonists end up abandoning their religion (Islam) rather than converting others to Christianity.

42 “Is it surprising that I too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of the true Israel?” Jerome, Letter 70.2; cf. Letter 21.13. For an illuminating discussion of the use of this captive women motif by Origen and Jerome, see Catherine M. Chin, Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 75, 82–85.

43 David Stern, “The Captive Woman: Hellenization, Greco-Roman Erotic Narrative, and Rabbinic Literature,” Poetics Today 19, no. 1, Special Issue: Hellenism and Hebraism
examples of early Christian exegesis or rabbinic midrashim, captive women protagonists appear more often as tempters or seducers who need to be converted themselves than as missionaries converting others. None of these exegetical motifs explain the peculiar apostolic role of captive women evangelists or the distinctive theological assumptions that underlay accounts of their missionary activity on the east Roman frontiers.

Closer examination of the late ancient conversion accounts presented here, however, challenges, or at least significantly qualifies, reigning paradigms of mission and adds nuance to standard presentations of empire and religion in Byzantium. The narrative of Agathangelos, the “received tradition” of Armenia’s conversion, presents intriguing ambiguities regarding political and cultural orientation, religious allegiance, and missionary identity. Agathangelos wrote or redacted his account during the second half of the fifth century, most probably around 460. Since 387 Armenia had been divided between the Roman emperor, Theodosius I, and the Iranian shah, Shapur I, but the territory of Greater Armenia came under Iranian suzerainty. In 427 the Arsacid monarchy came to an end, and amid the feuding of various noble families, the patriarch emerged as the symbol of Armenian unity and resistance to increased Sassanian control, which included attempts to enforce Zoroastrianism. After an Armenian revolt in 450–451 in which the moral authority of the patriarch undergirded the resistance movement, Sassanian religious oppression subsided. In this setting Agathangelos composed his History exalting the missionary work of Gregory, Armenia’s first bishop. Parthian by birth, yet raised in Cappadocian Caesarea and thus connected with Rome, Gregory served as a model patriarch for Armenians on both sides of the Roman–Sassanian border.

Agathangelos’s narrative of Armenia’s conversion has definite political overtones, and the author clearly had diplomatic relations in view. Unlike later Armenian historians, Agathangelos reveals a distinctly Greek cultural orientation and pro-Roman political tendencies. Though the work was written in Armenian, the author of the History introduces himself in the prologue as “one Agathangelos,” literally “messenger of good news” in

Reconsidered: The Poetics of Cultural Influence and Exchange I (Spring, 1998), 91–127; here 99. For the rabbis, too, the exegesis of Deuteronomy 21 is prominent. See especially 113–18 for Stern’s comparison of Jerome’s allegorical interpretation of the passage with those of the rabbis. He suggests that in different ways all use the captive women as an allegory of cultural influence.


45 See Thomson, introduction to Agathangelos: History, especially xc–xciii, regarding the author’s context and motives.
Greek, “from the great city of Rome, trained in the arts of the ancients, proficient in Latin and Greek,” and commissioned by the king to compose a historical narrative of the Armenian people. After Armenia’s conversion, he describes a journey of King Trdat, Bishop Gregory, and a vast embassy of magnates, courtiers, and troops to visit the recently converted emperor, Constantine, in Rome. The encounter serves to seal the lifelong friendship of the two lands. This episode is absent from other Armenian histories that concentrate on the Pahlavian background of the ecclesiastical hierarchy—all descendants of Gregory’s noble family of Parthian Iranian origin—and maintain a definite distance from the structures of east Roman political and ecclesiastical power, though Constantinople maintains its allure for culture and learning.

Despite pro-Roman leanings, however, Agathangelos’s History was not primarily a political text, and diplomatic factors remain in the background. Much more prominent in his narrative are hagiographic motifs. Scholars have long recognized the novelistic character of the work, mediated through acquaintance with apocryphal literature which gained popularity in Armenia in the fourth and fifth centuries. Robert Thomson, eminent scholar of Armenian Christianity and translator of Agathangelos, places much of the History in the realm of hagiography and traces its indebtedness to hagiographical sources, particularly the Lives of the Edessene martyrs. Indeed, the work bears all the marks of an “epic passion,” showing familiarity with standard scriptural and patristic models of both Greek and Syrian provenance. For example, the structure of Agathangelos’s narrative


50 On Agathangelos’s history as hagiography and its dependence on hagiographical topoi and themes, see Thomson, introduction to Agathangelos: History, xlv, xlvi, lxxv; on the parallels
parallels the Thaddeus-Abgar account in Syrian literature. Likewise Rhipsime’s struggle with the king to protect her virtue recalls another virgin, St. Thecla, whose resistance to the amorous advances of a noble suitor resulted in her being thrown to wild beasts. Indeed, the *Acts of Thecla* in both Greek and Syriac translations were extremely popular in fifth-century Armenia, and the figure of Thecla would soon be assimilated by Armenian authors. If the *imitatio Thecla* inspired diverse forms of piety as her cult spread throughout Asia Minor and Egypt, one can well imagine the potential influence of her role as evangelist and protomartyr in representations of Rhipsime in Armenia.

In light of both the political context and the hagiographical precedents, we do well to consider what role the captive woman Rhipsime and the other martyred virgins played in Agathangelos’s *History*. To be sure, Rhipsime was not a typical “missionary.” She neither was sent out by the Roman church nor formed part of a diplomatic embassy but rather arrived in Armenia as a refugee from persecution in the Roman Empire. She did not present the gospel to the king or his people in any official ecclesiastical capacity but remained largely sequestered in captivity, passing much of her time in prayer and fasting. Far from suggesting any diplomatic role, Agathangelos emphasizes Rhipsime’s captivity, weakness, and humility; yet these characteristics are transformed by the Spirit of God into vehicles of strength and ultimately salvation for the Armenian people. Rhipsime and her companions functioned as true martyrs, that is, “witnesses” to the faith (recalling the original

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51 For parallels and discussion of Syrian influence see Thomson, “Syrian Christianity and the Conversion of Armenia,” in *Christianisiering des Kaukasus*, ed. Siebt, 159–69. In addition to the Syriac *Teaching of Addai*, the Greek church history of Eusebius, which was well known in Armenia in Syriac translation, also recounts this narrative of Abgar’s conversion by the Apostle Thaddeus. (Eusebius *HE* 1.13) Thomson emphasizes the importance of Eusebius for Armenia and the formative role of the Thaddeus-Abgar account for the story of Gregory and Trdat.


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connotation of the word), as Agathangelos affirms at several points in his account. Through their martyrdom they “bore witness” to God and “made their death a faithful and firm seal of the truth of their faith.” Moreover, “because they died for God they can turn the death of many into life.”\(^{54}\) The martyrdom of these captive virgins has rendered them apostles to the Armenian nation alongside St. Gregory.\(^{55}\)

While on the surface the women seem to have performed no public teaching or preaching function akin to Gregory’s long sermon before the king and his nobles following the martyrdom, the prayers of Rhipsime and the other virgins were largely a concatenation of scriptural quotations announcing God’s victory over foreign idols and proclaiming the message of salvation in Christ. Moreover, these prayers were always uttered aloud, and often before crowds.\(^{56}\) Agathangelos also notes that “some of the noble servants of the court ran to tell the king all their words, because there were there secretaries who wrote down all that was said, and they read it before the king.”\(^{57}\) The word for secretaries in this passage, \(nshanagirk’\), is the same term used for the “scribes” who are said to have recorded and brought before the king the words of Gregory’s lengthy biblical and evangelistic prayers, pronounced over the course of seven days while suspended upside down from one foot.\(^{58}\) These passages raise intriguing questions about the evangelistic function of public prayers as well the language in which the Christian captives pronounced their message to their captors. There is very little commentary on the biblical and liturgical texts that form the subject of the virgins’ intercessions. Nonetheless, an emphasis on the loud and public utterance of these prayers, written down by royal secretaries and read before the king just like those of Gregory, suggests that for Agathangelos the women, too, served as preachers of the gospel to the Armenian people.\(^{59}\)

\(^{54}\)Agathangelos, \textit{History}, §237. He also speaks of the ongoing power of their intercessions. See also §239 where he speaks of “their testimony”; he calls the Armenian nobles to be reconciled to God “through them” repeating that they died “to be come witnesses to the Godhead” (§238).

\(^{55}\)This theme of the witness and apostolic mission of the virgin martyrs is especially emphasized in \textit{The Teaching of Saint Gregory}. See especially \textit{Teaching}, §§514–18, 541–42, and 544.

\(^{56}\)See for example, Agathangelos, \textit{History}, §§168–69, where the “loud voice” with which Rhipsime prayed is repeated along with the posture of her prayer, for she “stretched out her arms in the form of a cross.” See also §174 for the loud prayers of all the virgins while encircled by a throng of royal servants.

\(^{57}\)Agathangelos, \textit{History}, §176.

\(^{58}\)Agathangelos, \textit{History}, §§75–98 for Gregory’s prayers during his second torture; §99 for the phrase \textit{atenakal dipirk’ n nshanagrats’ n}, which Thomson translates, “scribes of the tribunal.”

\(^{59}\)Commenting on the alleged scribes recording Gregory’s words in prayer, Thomson, \textit{Agathangelos: History}, 465, §99 n. 1 suggests that this reference to scribes writing down the prayers of Gregory and Rhipsime (cf. §176) “is to be taken no more seriously than Agathangelos’ own claim to have been an eyewitness.” He notes that there are “close parallels” in the \textit{Martyrdom of Shmona and Guria}, §39, and the \textit{Martyrdom of Habib}, §39. In his introduction, xlv, Thomson affirms that the claim that scribes or secretaries accurately recorded
Another indication of the theological reflection underlying this account is the virgins’ connection with vineyards and winepresses at several junctures in the text. When Rhipsime and her companions arrived in Armenia they took refuge outside the capital in certain “vat-stores,” a term for the buildings that housed winepresses. One martyr was killed on this very spot; and after the martyrdom, one of the first four chapels built by Gregory was placed on the site of the winepresses that had temporarily housed the female refugees, soon to be martyred in preparation for Armenia’s conversion. Patristic exegetes, both Greek and Syriac, used the vineyard and the winepress as symbols of the church, and the winepress was interpreted with reference to both the passion and the ascension of Christ. The coincidence of symbolism in these accounts seems less fortuitous than intentional, linking the suffering of these captive missionary-martyrs with the very foundations of the church in Armenia.

Narratives of Iberia’s conversion reveal similar political and cultural ambiguities. Archeological evidence demonstrates the presence of Christians in Georgia already in the second or third century, but the earliest written descriptions of the nation’s conversion appear in the fifth-century church histories of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret. All three Greek historians follow the outline of Rufinus, but they modify details in keeping with...
slightly different perspectives on the connection between empire and religion, Christianization and Romanization. Rufinus himself claims to have heard the account from a Georgian king and one time *comes domesticorum*, Bacurius, with whom he became acquainted in Palestine and whose religious character and trustworthiness he emphasizes: “Bacurius, a man outstanding in faith, piety, and strength of mind and body.” While Sozomen and Theodoret mention neither Bacurius nor Rufinus as the source of their information about Iberia’s conversion, Socrates adds details to Rufinus’s description of his source. He was an Iberian prince (βασιλεύς) who had served as commander of soldiers in Palestine, Socrates explains, and he later led the war against Maximus the Tyrant assisting Emperor Theodosius. This same Bacurius is also known to us from other Latin, Greek, and Armenian sources for his military and diplomatic role. Despite slight discrepancies in these accounts, there is little reason to doubt his identity or relationship with Rufinus, although the precise period of his rule in Iberia is difficult to determine.

If Bacurius’s dates are uncertain, the identities of those involved in the conversion of his homeland are even more obscure. The names of the

\[64\] A detailed comparison of the four historians’ narratives is central to the second part of this article, “‘Representing’ Mission from Below: Historians as Interpreters and Agents of Christianization,” *Church History* 80, no. 2 (forthcoming). On Rufinus, whose account of the conversion of Iberia is foundational and whose work as a translator and historian has begun to be reevaluated in recent decades, see Mark Humphries, “Rufinus’s Eusebius: Translation, Continuation, and Edition in the Latin Ecclesiastical History,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 2 (2008), 143–64.

\[65\] Bacurius, vir fide, pietate, virtute et animi et corporis insignis. Rufinus, *HE* 11.33: Schwartz and Mommsen, 1038, line 17; Amidon, 88. Similarly here in 10.11 Rufinus affirms that his “chief concern was for religion and truth,” Amidon, 23.

\[66\] Socrates, *HE* 1.20.


\[68\] Moses Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 3.34, 322, relates that Mashtots, after having invented an alphabet for the Armenians, went to the Georgians and was favored by the Iberian king, Bacurius. On this basis Thelamon surmises that Bacurius reigned in Iberia in the early fifth century, that is, at the very time Rufinus was writing. See Thelamon, *Paiens et chrétiens*, 93–96.
Iberian royal couple are absent from all four of the earliest accounts, but evidence from other sources strongly suggests the reign of King Meribanes (Mirian III, according to local tradition), a contemporary of Constantius II rather than his more orthodox father. While the Roman Emperor Constantine comes into the picture toward the end of all four narratives, we must bear in mind Rufinus’s penchant, followed by the other orthodox church historians, for attributing everything good to the reign of the Nicene Emperor Constantine rather than his pro-Arian successor. Ammianus Marcellinus specifically notes Constantius’s diplomatic efforts to maintain the loyalty of “Arsaces and Meribanes, kings of Armenia and Hiberia respectively . . . since it was feared that they could gravely injure the interests of Rome if at this critical moment they went over to the Persian.” Moreover, Constantius is known to have sponsored missionary efforts as part of his imperial strategy in sensitive areas on the frontiers.

The principal agent in the Christianization of Georgia, however, is no Roman emperor or Iberian king but an anonymous captive woman. Although she became known in later Georgian tradition as St. Nino, she remains unnamed in all the fifth-century accounts. None of the narratives even specify that this female captive is a Roman. Indeed, this would have been unlikely since Iberia was in this period a kind of Roman protectorate, though apparently without abandoning connections with the Sassanians.

69 On the deliberate chronological imprecision of Rufinus and the other pro-Nicene church historians, especially with respect to the reign of Constantius II and his “zelo missionario filoariano,” see Lellia Cracco Ruggini, “Universalità e campanilismo, centro e periferia, città e deserto nelle Storie ecclesiastiche,” in La storiografica ecclesiastica nella tarda antichità. Atti del Convegno tenuto in Erice (December 3–8, 1978) (Messina: Centro di studi umanistici, 1980), 159–94; here 178–80. See also Amidon’s introduction, xvii, for his harsh criticism of Rufinus on this point.


71 Several scholars have suggested that the name Nino has its origins with the Latin word “nonna” (meaning nun or ascetic), the Greek ἁγία, or the Armenian նուն. On diverse interpretations of the origins of Nino’s name, see Eva Maria Synek, Heilige Frauen der frühen Christenheit. Zu den Frauenbildern in hagiographischen Texten des christlichen Ostens (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1994), 135–38; also Jost Gippert, “St. Nino’s Legend: Vestiges of Its Various Sources,” Gelatis Akademis Moambe 3 (1997): 2–4 at http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/personal/jg/pdf/jg1997je.pdf (accessed November 30, 2009); English translation of original in Enatmecnierebis sak’ixebi 1–2 (2006), 104–22. Gippert points to evidence suggesting that Nino originally came from Cappadocia to the Jewish community in Mxeta and that her mother tongue was Syriac. Horn, “St. Nino and Christianization,” 250, also suggests that she may have been “a native of Cappadocia.” Both authors, however, focus on the later legends of St. Nino rather than the fifth-century church histories.
eastern frontiers had long maintained relations with both empires, the terms of the Treaty of Nisibis in 298 put Iberia more squarely within the Roman sphere of influence. Iberian kings received their symbols of office from Rome, and Iberia remained an ally of Rome through most of the fourth century. In this context the presence of a Roman captive in Iberia would be hard to explain. Moreover, while the woman is repeatedly referred to as a “captive” (Latin: captiva; Greek: αἰχμαλωτος) or even a “prisoner of war” (δορυφόρος) in Theodoret, there seem to be no limitations on her activities. Rather she is characterized by fasts, prayer, vigils, chastity, and scorn for riches—that is, by the virtues of monastic life with which Rufinus himself was so well acquainted. Following Rufinus, Socrates speaks of her “holy and chaste life” adding that “she practiced much moderation and serious fasting, and she devoted herself to earnest prayer.” Sozomen explains that “she did not slacken her accustomed way of life among the foreigners. It was important to her to fast and night and day to pray and to praise God.” Theodoret is even more explicit in connecting the captive’s ascetic practices with her apostolic ministry: “She continued instant in prayer, allowing herself no softer bed than a sack spread upon the ground, and accounted fasting her highest luxury. This austerity was rewarded by gifts similar to those of the Apostles.” Although she is remiss to leave her hovel on account of her modesty, there is no indication that the woman is literally imprisoned. Indeed, she seems to represent a “captiva Christi,” paralleling the Apostle Paul’s self-description as a “slave” or “prisoner of Christ” rather than the captive of any empire or kingdom.

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73 On the complex relations between Iberia, Rome, and the Sassanians in this period, see Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 238–67 and Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially 128–29, 188–92. Despite the absence of details about the woman’s identity, scholars continue to refer to her as a Roman captive. For example, Haas, “Mountain Constantines,” 106–9, describes her as a “captive Roman woman,” “a young captive,” and “a slave girl, a Roman captive … [who] impressed her Iberian owners,” although neither Rufinus nor the other fifth-century church historians says anything explicit about her nationality, her youth, or her alleged Iberian slaveholders.

74 Socrates, *HE* 1.20.2.

75 Sozomen, *HE* 2.7.1.


77 See Thelamon, *Païens et chrétiens*, 101, though by the end of this chapter she seems to have forgotten this point, emphasizing instead the political implications of the conversion.
Descriptions of the captive woman in these texts have given rise to diverse interpretations of her identity and function. In her penetrating study of pagans and Christians in Rufinus’s church history, Françoise Thelamon analyzed at some length what she believes to be the underlying Georgian source of such a concept. Although the term is anachronistic for this period, in ancient Georgian paganism, the kadag, or shaman, was a man or woman who was possessed by a divinity, served as a healer, and was associated with the foundation of pagan religious cults and rituals. The ancient Georgian equivalent of the kadag was designated by the term dac’erili, the very meaning of which, Thelamon suggests, denotes captivity. Hence, Rufinus’s account of Iberia’s conversion through the mediation of a captive woman represents his attempt to translate a Georgian foundation myth related by Bacurius into language that made sense to him and would be acceptable to his Latin Christian audience.78 While Thelamon’s theory is intriguing, Philip Amidon has noted that it would be difficult to prove or disprove her hypothesis, and others have raised questions about the application of data drawn from modern Georgian shamanistic practices to the late ancient pagan setting. Both Cornelia Horn and Eva Synek pose the simpler explanation, with which I concur, that the Christian captive was following instructions about healing the sick derived from the New Testament.79

Other studies of Christian origins in Iberia lend support to this less exotic and more biblically-based interpretation of the captive woman’s actions and identity. Several scholars have argued for the Jewish character of early Christianity in Georgia well before the influence of Hellenistic Christianity came to dominate through the conversion of the Iberian royal family. Analysis of archeological data, particularly burial practices and inscriptions, suggests that a sizeable community of Jews settled in Kartli from the end of the first through the second century A.D., and that some of these Jews had already embraced Christianity, particularly in Urbnisi and the capital city of Mtskheta.80

78 Hence, he would have edited out the idea of the woman’s possession, which from the Christian perspective could only be demonic. For an analysis of the whole account, see Thelamon, Païens et chrétiens, 86–122; on the underlying motif of the kadag in Rufinus’s account, 107–10. On the role of the kadag (shaman) in ancient Georgian paganism, see G. Charachidzé, Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne (Paris: Maspero, 1968), 115–95, on which Thelamon bases her analysis of Rufinus’s account. See also Synek, Heiligen Frauen, 80–132.


Moreover, later Georgian and Armenian texts explicitly link the female captive with Jerusalem and the Jewish community. Whether or not Rufinus knew of the earlier Judeo-Christian background to Iberia’s conversion or however much he may have understood the shamanistic function of the kadag or daç’erili in ancient Georgian paganism, neither he nor his Greek counterparts reveal any knowledge of such influences. Like Rufinus, these early Byzantine historians use biblical motifs to describe the woman’s way of life and miraculous deeds. Moreover, they present their female protagonist as a humble captive and ascetic, accentuating the weakness of her position. She was a woman of low estate with no apparent connection to a Christian or Jewish community in Iberia, and she certainly held no imperial or high social position. Indeed, her point of contact and initial influence in the Georgian community was not with the king and queen but through the healing of another woman’s child.

As with the account of Armenia’s conversion, apostolic and hagiographic topos are rife. For example, the evangelistic role of the captive parallels that of the apostle Thaddeus in the conversion of King Abgar of Edessa that Rufinus had just translated from Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History. Here too, the king’s healing is effected through the prayers of a wandering preacher and evangelist. What set the female captive apart from such apostolic figures, however, was her sex. In every other way the woman exemplified the traits that Rufinus attributed to apostles of his own day, primarily bishops and monks: they speak in the name of God and are orthodox in faith, they perform the same miracles as the apostles (signa apostolica), and they are involved in evangelization. Yet neither the anonymous female captive nor any other woman appears among those he deems “apostles and prophets of our time.” Moreover, it is not the captive woman but the Iberian king who,

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82 For more on this theme see Horn, “Lives and Literary Roles of Children,” especially 272–73.

83 Eusebius, HE 1.13.

84 Rufinus reserves the designation “apostles and prophets of our times” for certain orthodox bishops and monks, despite the difference in their status and function. For an analysis of those he places in this category in his church history, see Françoise Thelamon, “‘Apôtres et prophètes de notre temps:’ Les évêques et les moines présentés comme apôtres et prophètes contemporains dans l’Histoire ecclésiastique de Rufin,” Antichità altoadriatiche 39 (1992): 171–94. Although the captive evangelist of Iberia fits these characteristics, Rufinus does not include and Thelamon does not discuss any women among his “apostles.”
“before even being initiated into sacred things, became the apostle of his nation,” or in Socrates’ rendition, “a preacher of Christ.”

Although fifth-century historians attempted to make the captive woman conform to contemporary gender roles—humility and reserve before the queen, instructing the king in the faith only “as far as it was lawful for a woman to disclose such things,” and advising that the emperor be asked to send priests—they did not try to hide her major function as an evangelist and preacher of the faith to the Iberians. In this capacity she bears resemblance to St. Thecla, whose possible influence we have already noted with regard to Armenia. The Acts of Thecla were well known throughout the late antique world by the fifth century and very likely a model for accounts of women missionaries. They present an ascetic female evangelist who inspired men as well as women not only to acts of piety and asceticism but also to apostolic activity. Like Thecla as well as Rhipsime, the female Iberian captive is clearly an ascetic, resembling the parthenos theou of ascetic literature, and her ascetic virtues are the basis of her apostolic gifts. Yet while Rhipsime allegedly came from a convent in the Roman Empire, the captive ascetic apostle of Iberia remains anonymous in our fifth-century sources, unconnected with any monastery or political realm.

None of the fifth-century accounts of Georgia’s conversion suggests imperial initiative in sending a mission, diplomatic or religious, until after the people had converted, and only then at the captive’s advice. As for Emperor

86Rufinus, HE 10.11: Schwartz and Mommsen, 975, lines 16–17; Amidon, 22. Sozomen, HE 2.7.8, includes a similar caveat while Socrates omits any mention of the captive’s teaching function.
87See Albrecht, Das Leben der heiligen Makrina auf dem Hintergrund der Thekla-traditionen, 267–71, for an analysis of Thecla’s role as a missionary and apostle. Albrecht mentions Nino (as she became known in medieval Georgian texts) at several points as a type of the wandering apostle, teacher, preacher, and evangelist in the model of Thecla (25, 223–25). While Davis, The Cult of St. Thecla, traces the influence of the Acts of Thecla on traditions of women’s piety, he does not explore the question of its influence on eastern missionary activity. Examining the later Life and Miracles, itself a “literary paraphrase” of the Acts, Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006), is suggestive in this regard. Showing how different aspects of the Thecla legend were appropriated by late antique authors, Johnson includes an analysis of a group of “miracles leading to conversion” (153–60), the goal of which was to bring praise to Thecla “for converting people to Christianity” (153).
88Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret all introduce the captive woman with a description of her ascetic practices, though only Theodoret (HE 1.24.1) explicitly links her asceticism with her apostolic gifts. On the parthenoi theou, literally “virgins of God, “ which had already developed into a distinct order by the later fourth century, see Susanna Elm, “Virgins of God”: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), especially 54–55, 59, 139–40. Elm, however, does not discuss the connection between asceticism and apostolicity. On this connection, especially in the context of third-century Syria, see Daniel Caner, Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 50–82. See also Albrecht, Das Leben der heiligen Makrina, 305–7, on the prophetic and apostolic model of the female parthenos.
Constantine’s response, Rufinus claims that he “was made far happier” by the news of Iberia’s conversion “than if he had annexed to the Roman Empire unknown peoples and kingdoms.” Thelamon has suggested that this statement reflects the contemporary view that the conversion of a barbarian nation was equivalent to a new conquest. In the account itself, however, quite the opposite is affirmed. Constantine does not respond to Iberia’s conversion in terms of an annexation or as an extension of Roman influence but rejoices in the news of the spread of the Christian faith. Though Constantine does send priests to “complete God’s work begun among them,” Rufinus downplays the imperial connection. To be sure, both Socrates and Sozomen add the information that alliances were sought, suggesting that acceptance of Christianity implied a particular political relationship with the Roman Empire. However, Sozomen concludes not simply with a summary statement regarding the Iberians’ Christianization but with more precise vocabulary concerning what had occurred: “Thus did the Iberians receive the knowledge of Christ, and until this day they worship him carefully.” Here as elsewhere in his church history, Sozomen minimizes the role of the emperor in the process of Christianization. Although Theodoret also affirms that the captive woman convinced the Iberian king to send an embassy to Constantine requesting a “teacher of religion,” he does not explicitly discuss the political implications of Iberia’s conversion. Rather he concludes by describing the emperor’s solicitousness for the spread of the faith and the well-being of Christians both on and beyond the frontiers of the

89Rufinus, HE 10.11, Schwartz and Mommsen, 976, lines 16–18; Amidon, 23.
90Thelamon, Païens et chrétiens, 106; also, 122, where she concludes that “Pour Rufin, comme pour ses contemporains, la christianisation impliquait la romanisation.” Thelamon also cites Thomson, “Christianity and the Northern Barbarians,” 75–78, in this regard as Thomson uses Georgia, among other barbarian nations, to argue that the religious history of the barbarian peoples cannot be separated from their political relations with the Roman Empire. For a slightly different interpretation of Rufinus’s account of Iberia, see Alain Chauvot, Opinions romains face aux barbares au IVe siècle ap. J.-C. (Paris: De Boccard, 1998), 456–58.
91[[δηκες τῶν Χριστίν ἐνδόθες, καὶ ἐκείντον ἐπιμελῶς σέβομαι. Sozomen 2.7.12: Hartranft, Ecclesiastical History, 264. This and other descriptions of mission and conversion in Sozomen contrast with the approach of Socrates. This contrast will be developed in greater detail in Sterk, “‘Representing’ Mission from Below;” (forthcoming).
92Sozomen’s more nuanced approach to the different stages of Christianization brings into question common comparisons of the two historians. See, for example, David Rohrbacher, The Historians of Late Antiquity (London: Routledge, 2002), 234–35, who equates Sozomen with Socrates in his connection of Christianization with imperial politics. Though she does not focus on Christianization, Theresa Urbainczyk presents a more nuanced comparison of the two historians. See T. Urbainczyk, “Observations on the Differences between the Church Histories of Socrates and Sozomen;” Historia 46 (1997): 355–73; also Urbainczyk, “Vice and Advice in Socrates and Sozomen;” in The Propaganda of Power: The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity, ed. M. Whitby (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 299–319, where she notes that Sozomen’s narratives tend to “give the emperor a less important role” (308).
Judging from our Greek historians as well as Rufinus, then, political alliance consistently followed rather than preceded religious conversion.

Medieval Georgian and Armenian narratives identify Rufinus’s anonymous captive as St. Nino, a companion of Rhipsime who fled Rome with the other virgins, thwarting the emperor’s plan to take Rhipsime as his wife. Most of the virgins were martyred, but St. Nino escaped and was commissioned in a vision to preach the gospel to the pagans of Georgia. Passages of scripture reassured her that her gender posed no obstacle to this missionary call. Based on these later accounts, especially The Conversion of Kartli, Fairy von Lilienfeld has detailed the apostolic characteristics and activities that clearly placed St. Nino in the category of a wandering apostle and evangelist. Oddly enough, however, Georgian sources themselves were silent about their female apostle until at least the seventh century, even though Latin and Greek church historians related the same basic information about her role in the conversion of the Iberian royal family more than two centuries earlier. We must bear in mind, however, that St. Nino had several strikes against her in the context of late ancient Iberia: she was a foreigner, she was a captive, and she was a woman. Any one of these aspects of her identity would have rendered her inferior in the eyes of the nobility, and all three together would have likely proved embarrassing for the apostle or enlightener of Georgia. Moreover, as a foreigner she would have likely faced linguistic limitations in attempting to translate the Christian message to

93 Theodoret, HE 1.24.10–13. Indeed, he concludes the account of Iberia’s conversion with a comment about the emperor’s solicitude for the Christians in Persia. His next chapter (25), taken from Eusebius’s Vita Constantini 4:9–13, is the text of the letter from Constantine to Shapur II concerning the persecution of Christians in his realm.
94 The full texts of these Georgian and Armenian accounts of the conversion of Georgia have been placed on the same page in English translation in Robert W. Thomson, Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles: The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 84–152; for the commissioning and reassurances of St. Nino, 93–96. Not surprisingly, the later Armenian version also emphasizes Armenia’s political and ecclesiastical pretensions over Georgia.
95 Von Lilienfeld, “Amt und geistliche Vollmacht,” especially 238–49. She notes, however, that unlike the medieval Georgian sources, Rufinus failed to honor the captive woman with the title of “apostle,” reserving that title instead for King Mirian and relating that “the men believed because of the king, the women because of the queen” (237). For the content and complicated textual history of the Conversion of Kartli, see 227–36.
97 Eva M. Synek, “The Life of St. Nino: Georgia’s Conversion to its Female Apostle,” in Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000). Synek also points out that for some time the nobly born Gregory the Illuminator had served as “an honorable substitute for the slave woman” while the Armenian and Georgian churches were in concord (7–8). After the division over Christology,
another culture. Consequently, when medieval Iberian writers began to reshape the story of their nation’s Christianization, they tried to conceal or compensate for Nino’s low social status. No longer a captive, they suggested instead that she was the niece of the patriarch of Jerusalem, who gave official ecclesiastical confirmation to her missionary vocation in Georgia. Several authors added to their accounts of Nino’s dream-vision commissioning clear scriptural sanction for female apostleship, and they tried to counterbalance the scandal of female leadership by placing Nino in the context of a broader list of formidable women in positions of authority and influence. 98 Our fifth-century Greek historians are much less precise about the identity of the anonymous captive woman, but they are no less affirmative of her central role as a missionary, even an apostle, to barbarian peoples on the borders of their empire.

The seventh-century anti-Chalcedonian chronicler, John of Nikiu, similarly affirms the apostolic agency of a captive woman beyond the Roman frontiers in South Arabia. The narrative of Yemen’s conversion through the medium of the holy virgin Theognosta contains several puzzling features. John of Nikiu’s Chronicle is believed to have been originally composed in Greek but has come down to us through only two extant Ethiopic manuscripts, which are translations from Arabic. None of the three Greek chroniclers on whom John heavily depended includes this account of the Christianization of Yemen. 99 Another odd element in John’s account is the king’s request for a

98 Not least of these was St. Mary Magdalene, who was used in Georgian hagiography to exalt the role of their unconventional female apostle. Synek, “Life of Nino,” 12–13. The Conversion of Kartli also includes Georgian Jewish women, noble female converts of St. Nino; Empress Helena; Nino’s mother, who served in ecclesiastical office in Jerusalem; and Nino’s teacher in Jerusalem who is described as the “best contemporary theologian” (10). Recent studies suggest that Georgia’s rediscovery and rehabilitation of its female apostle corresponded with a general improvement in the social status of women in medieval Georgia and reached a high point during Georgia’s “golden age” under the rule of a woman, Queen Tamar (1184–1213). See von Lilienfeld, “Amt und geistliche Vollmacht,” 247–48; Horn, “St. Nino and Christianization,” 261; and Synek, “Life of Nino” 11–12.

bishop from Emperor Honorius, who from 395 had come to rule the western half of the Roman Empire while his brother Arcadius ruled the east. Yemen had no significant diplomatic relations with the west, and it was situated ecclesiastically and politically between the Axumite kingdom of Ethiopia and the east Roman emperor in Constantinople. In fact Axum had already launched missionary work in southern Arabia, most often referred to as India in this period.\(^{100}\) In light of the struggle for independence from both nearby Axum and Byzantium, however, it is not surprising that the king might try to circumvent authorities closer to home.\(^{101}\) From John of Nikiu’s anti-Chalcedonian perspective, the connection with Honorius and the church in the western empire may also have seemed more judicious from an ecclesiastical point of view, even if the events he describes took place well before the Council of Chalcedon had fractured the unity of the eastern Christian world.\(^{102}\) Either way, John’s narrative of Yemen’s conversion implies the underlying importance of diplomacy in the Christianization process—whether oriented toward or away from the Byzantine ecclesiastical capital. Yet it is certainly not the focus of his brief account of the land’s conversion.

An account of St. Theognosta in the later Copto-Arabic Synaxarion, containing biographies of saints and martyrs for each day of the year, first compiled in the ninth century based on earlier texts, also connects the captive woman with the western Roman emperor, Honorius.\(^{103}\) In this


\(^{101}\) Such a maneuver recalls the later attempts of the Bulgar khan Boris to seek ecclesiastical advice from the pope in Rome rather than the patriarch in Constantinople and the Moravian ruler Rastislav seeking missionaries from Byzantium rather than Rome despite the Frankish priests already at work in his territory. On the political context of these decisions, see Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions Among the Slavs* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 100–103.

\(^{102}\) John’s bitterness toward imperial Chalcedonian Christianity, enforced by the emperors in Constantinople, is evident throughout the *Chronicle*. Indeed, he sees the Muslim invasions as God’s punishment for the empire’s apostasy in accepting and enforcing Chalcedon: “When they rejected the orthodox faith, which is our faith, in like manner were they rejected from the imperial throne. And there has followed the undoing of all Christians that are in the world.” John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 120.56.

\(^{103}\) Text in *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédaction copte)*, ed. and trans. Rene Basset (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1905) PO 1.277–79. On the Synaxarion see also “Synaxarion, Copto-Arabic,” in
version, envoys of the king of India have just delivered gifts to Emperors Honorius and Arcadius when they come upon the virgin Theognosta, seize her, and take her back to their country; but when the need for priests arises later in the narrative, it is Emperor Honorius alone to whom appeal is made. In this account we also see more clearly the significance of the saint’s name “Theognosta” (she who has known God), for the woman is reading a book when she is taken captive and placed in charge of the king’s wives and attendants.

This variant more closely resembles late Roman accounts of the conversion of Iberia. Indeed, Theognosta is known to the Copts as the saint who introduced Christianity to Georgia, though the Synaxarion, like John of Nikiu, mentions only India. Here the king himself falls sick and is immediately restored when the captive woman makes the sign of the cross over him. The Coptic redactor has the king’s crisis occur while he is waging war rather than on the hunt, likely replacing symbolism that would have been highly significant for the Caucasian lands in their Sassanian setting but had little meaning for the desert contexts of Arabia and Egypt. Upon his return from war, the king bows at the saint’s feet requesting baptism for himself and his people, but Theognosta explains that it is not her place to baptize. After a priest sent by Honorius administers this sacrament, the former captive “builds a convent for herself and for the many virgins who desired the monastic life.” The captive woman’s connection with monastic life is explicit in this later account of Theognosta’s apostolic activity while such an association is only implied in the Latin and Greek narratives of Iberia’s conversion.

The secondary nature of political factors in all these accounts adds nuance to reigning paradigms of Christianization. The emperor’s role in converting the Roman world has shaped scholarship on Byzantine missions for the past fifty years, and no one would seriously question the interconnection of mission with imperial political ambitions. Indeed, each of the narratives examined here gives a role to the Roman emperor; yet none features imperially sponsored missionaries as the principal evangelists. Imperial initiative is
generally minimized in these accounts, coming only as a response to requests for priests and only after the local rulers and the people have already turned toward the Christian God, that is, after they have converted. Of course such petitions to the emperor could be used to legitimize imperial intervention on the basis of more noble spiritual goals. However, even the pleas for aid are initiated in the first place not by the royal converts but rather by the captive women missionaries who have effectively evangelized the nation despite their confession of inadequacy as females to instruct the people or administer the sacraments.

Whether martyr, thaumaturge, or teacher of the faith, each captive woman served in an apostolic or evangelistic capacity despite the general reluctance of our historians to ascribe the title “apostle” to their female protagonists. Even the stereotypical hagiographic and missionary topoi employed could not obscure the provocative role these women played as agents of the conversion of whole nations. Thus, although diplomatic elements are present in each account and a shared Christian religion almost inevitably presumed a political orientation toward Rome or Constantinople, these narratives also reflect theological ideals of mission and conversion in late antiquity. It is not the aggressive imperial or political dimension of the missionary process that our historians emphasize, but the lowliness of the slave, the miraculous spiritual strength of the virgin, and the evangelical zeal and prayer of the humble captive turned missionary. We see here mission from below preceding and complementing more typical reports of conversion from above.

IV. Captive Women Evangelists: Rhetoric and Reality

These accounts of captive evangelists do not stand alone in the history of eastern Christian mission. The Christianization of the Goths, Ethiopia, and pre-Islamic Arabia feature similar involvement of captives, both male and female, in converting kingdoms to the Christian faith. Such narratives present a very different picture of Christianization from that which has typified scholarly treatments of eastern missions. Because of the legendary or

106 Von Lilienfeld, “Amt und geistliche Vollmacht,” 237–38, 248, points out that in contrast to later Georgian sources, Rufinus resists referring to the woman as an “apostle” while freely assigning this title to the king. Agathangelos and Sozomen, however, put more emphasis on the apostolic role of their female protagonists, and Theodoret, HE 1.24.1, specifically attributes “apostolic gifts” to the captive woman.

romantic quality of this *topos*, historians have tended to neglect such accounts; and to be sure, on one level they do not take us very far in unraveling the historical details of these nations’ conversions. Nor are we able to balance our narrative sources with the kind of quantitative evidence that has been used to challenge assumptions about women’s active roles in the conversion of the western Roman aristocracy.\(^{108}\) While the intricately interwoven threads of text and event may never be unraveled in our episodes of female captive missionaries, the inclusion of such miraculous or semi-legendary accounts in chronicles and histories introduces another layer of discourse in the study of Christianization and the history of religion and empire in late antiquity. In concluding, then, I would like to offer some reflections on the genre of these conversion narratives, the rhetoric of female evangelists, and the evidence of real women and captives as forces of Christian expansion on the east Roman frontiers.

Given the relative paucity of historical records of Byzantine missions from the eighth to the tenth century, Ihor Ševčenko has pointed to the import of “imaginary reports,” that is, hagiographic novels and “hybrid mission reports,” which present actual events in a miraculous setting.\(^{109}\) Similarly, late antique conversion narratives may represent a mixed genre or a “blending of genres,” which, as Scott Fitzgerald Johnson recently argued, characterized late antique literature as a whole.\(^{110}\) Apocryphal and hagiographic elements combined with narrative history to make the genre of ecclesiastical history more flexible or “elastic” than has sometimes been assumed. Embedded in historical narratives, specifically in the newly evolving genre of church history, these accounts of mission and conversion

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\(^{108}\) See Michele Renee Salzman, “Aristocratic Women,” chap. 5 in *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 138–77. Salzman’s conclusions should temper any confident assertions about women’s Christianizing influence in what was in both east and west a predominantly patriarchal world.

\(^{109}\) Ihor Ševčenko, “Religious Missions Seen from Byzantium,” *Harvard Ukranian Studies* 12–13, Proceedings of the International Congress Commemorating the Millennium of Christianity in Rus’-Ukraine (1988/1989), 20–27. While we are relatively well-informed of missions “on the higher governmental and ecclesiastical levels,” Ševčenko notes that we know very little about “the nuts and bolts of these enterprises” (18–19), for example, questions of language and missionary methods.

stood alongside Lives and Apocryphal Acts as “stories that people liked to hear.”¹¹¹ Shaped by the revival of apostolic history that particularly marked the fourth and fifth centuries, they were stories invested with meaning, stories that might inspire imitation.¹¹² Yet because they formed part of historical narratives, they were intended to be taken as trustworthy and true. An emphasis on simple, unadorned style, eyewitness reports, and hence “intrinsic truth-value” that marked the storytelling of late antique hagiographers characterized the conversion narratives included in these histories as well.¹¹³ Indeed, although Rufinus has been criticized for his emphasis on the miraculous and for chronological errors, he describes his own work in translating and thereby passing on Eusebius’s church history as an example of “apostolic tradition;” and each of the other fifth-century historians make similar claims about the trustworthiness of their accounts.¹¹⁴ Moreover, even hybrid reports or semi-legendary accounts of captive women evangelists may illumine our understanding of mission in late antiquity. At the least they suggest what the authors and their contemporaries expected the


¹¹²Johnson, “Reviving the Memory of the Apostles,” 3–4, describes a “revival of interest in apostolic traditions” that stimulated patristic writers to address the subject of Christian history. Moreover, “this awareness of the value of the history of the apostles . . . offers an early example of reaching back into the historical past of the Christian Church for inspiration in the present.” Both here and in “Apocrypha and the Literary Past,” 64, Johnson examines the diverse forms in which the revival of apostolic history was expressed and emphasizes the influence of apocryphal texts on diverse new Christian genres (for example, Lives, homilies, dialogue poems, travel literature). He says nothing, however, about the impact of this revival on the writing of church history.


¹¹⁴Rufinus, HE, Preface, in Schwartz and Mommsen, 951–52; Amidon, 4. On modern scholars’ negative evaluation of Rufinus’s work, see Humphries, “Rufinus’s Eusebius,” especially 44–51. Humphries is one of several historians who have reassessed Rufinus’s historical work in a more positive light. See also Torben Christensen, Rufinus of Aquileia and the Historia ecclesiastica, Lib. VIII–IX, of Eusebius (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1989), especially his conclusion, 333–36; Françoise Thelamon, Pâïens et chrétiens; and more recently, Thelamon, “Écrire l’histoire de l’Église: d’Eusèbe de Césarée à Rufin d’Aquilée,” in L’Histoire de l’Église des premiers siècles, ed. Bernard Pouderon and Yves-Marie Duval, Théologie historique 114 (Paris: Beauchesne, 2001), 207–35, where she makes the following comparison between Eusebius and Rufinus: “Nos deux historiens en effet n’entend pas faire une histoire purement documentaire—même s’ils ont le souci qu’elle soit véridique et bien documentée—, mais ils veulent construire un récit qui fait apparaître le vrai sens de l’histoire de l’Église” (209). On the aims and approaches of the other historians’ conversion narratives, especially as revealed in their prologues, see Sterk, “‘Representing’ Mission From Below,” (forthcoming).
process of mission and conversion to be like: some of the goals, the methods, and the potential missionaries.

Unfortunately the motif of the female captive who converts others tells us frustratingly little about the actual activities of Christian women, whether the powerful or the lowly, as missionaries on the east Roman frontiers. As in texts concerning earlier Christian and Jewish women, the divide between rhetorical construction and historical reality remains problematic. 115 Like Josephus’s portrayal of Gentile women converts to Judaism as over and against Hasmoean, Herodian, and biblical women, or Luke’s juxtaposition of the respectable noblewoman Lydia to the demon-possessed slave girl proclaiming her message publicly on the streets, the portrayal of women may well be part of an author’s apologetic or propagandistic strategy. 116 It may be used to convey particular ideals of Christianization as much as real evangelistic activity. The representation of female captives as evangelists in our accounts of mission underscores the power of the powerless, God’s choice of the weak and the despised of the world as ambassadors (1 Corinthians 1:28). 117 This message is sometimes explicit, as in the victory of the girl Rhipsime over the mighty King Trdat, or in Gaiane’s words of encouragement regarding God’s grace to the humble and strength to young David in overcoming the giant. 118 At times it is implicit in the story as a

115 The past generation has seen an outpouring of scholarly literature and diverse hermeneutic approaches devoted to the analysis of both misogyny and feminism in patristic writings about women. For a discussion of some of the dominant trends from the 1970s to the 1990s, see Lynda Coon’s introduction to Sacred Fictions. The emphasis of Coon’s own study, she explains, “is not on the historical lives of the subject saints but on the theological and didactic agendas of their authors” (xiv). Kate Cooper, among others, has rightly cautioned about the rhetorical use of women by late antique male authors, even suggesting that the challenge posed by Christianity in such texts is “not really about women.” See Kate Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 55. While Cooper is referring here to the highly rhetorical Life of Thecla, like others, I take issue with her overly neat distinction between rhetoric and reality in male-authored texts about women.

116 On the representation of missionary women in Josephus and Luke–Acts, see Shelly Matthews, First Converts; also the review of Matthews by Kim Haines-Eitzen in Church History 72, no. 3 (2002). For a more skeptical reading of these same texts, with a focus on women converts rather than missionaries, see Judith M. Lieu, “The ‘Attraction of Women’ in/to Early Judaism and Christianity,” JSNT 72 (1998): 5–22, which Matthews does not discuss.

117 Though neither focuses on women evangelists per se, two essays in A People’s History of Christianity, vol. 2, note the same emphasis in patristic literature. Elizabeth A. Clark, “Asceticism, Class, and Gender,” 28, cites a number of biblical and patristic passages that show how Christianity “complicated the usual status markers of Roman society” based on its “central theological confession: if God had lowered himself to become human, then humble abasement received divine sanction.” Similarly, on the representation of apostolic power in the Apocryphal Acts, Judith Perkins, “Fictional Narratives and Social Critique,” 58, remarks: “The narratives convey a message that the seeming powerlessness of those who have been traditionally discounted on the basis of their lack of wealth, good looks, or status, may be an illusion.”

118 See Agathangelos, History, §§186–87, where he cites or alludes to Phil. 2:8, Luke 1:52, and 1 Kings 17:40. See also his description of the monk Albanius, §§845–46, one of several pagan
whole. Although each narrative recounts the conversion of a king or royal couple, we should not forget that the principal instruments of conversion were foreign female captives. Indeed, the evangelization of Iberia began with a humble female ascetic whose faith and devotion to Christ first attracted the interest not of monarchs but of other “weak women.” Such accounts of captive women missionaries communicate a consistent if subtle message. It is not only the emperor or his bishops who are invested by God with an apostolic mission to convert the ethne, but the lowly, too, may embody and proclaim the good news of salvation.

Although we lack systematic treatises on evangelism and mission in this period, the study of Christianization must be attuned to theological as much as socio-political ideals implicit in such accounts. As the mighty God could take on lowly human form for the salvation of the world—the paradoxical claim of orthodox Christianity—so the lowly of the world—women and captives—could be exalted and might themselves become agents of transformation. While churchmen might have demurred at the practical application of such socially provocative principles, they were not adverse to using women to “think with.” In this light, both the actual roles of captive women and the use of such paradigms in late antique narratives of conversion deserve renewed attention, for descriptions of their ministry reveal not only contemporary views about women but also assumptions about mission, conversion, and the very nature of the gospel.

Despite apocryphal elements in these semi-hagiographic narratives of mission, various other sources provide supporting evidence of the

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`119"Her very perseverance made the common women [mulierculis] wonder if she were deriving some benefit from such great devotion.” Rufinus, HE 10.11: Schwartz and Mommsen, 974, lines 5–6; Amidon, 21. Although Amidon translates mulierculae as “common women,” it might equally be rendered “weak” or “foolish women.” Thelamon, Paıens et chrétiens, 87, translates mulierculis with “faibles femmes.” It was also these women who witnessed the captive’s first healing miracle and spread the word about this marvel so that the news soon reached the queen. Anne Jensen, God’s Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 77, has commented that this passage from Rufinus suggests that “the Christianization of Iberia began from below, not from above, as indicated by the official report.”


121I use the term “apocryphal” here in two senses: first, as it is commonly used in English to mean fictitious or of questionable authenticity, but also “in the sense of belonging to the imaginary worlds
prominent role that women played in complex and multi-layered processes of Christianization. Well known are the complaints of Celsus that the weakest and lowest members of society—slaves, stupid women, and little children—are both the targets and the agents of Christian proselytism. While pagan critics of Christianity frequently maligned the new religion for attracting and corrupting women, the details Celsus supplies of women and children drawing others to certain “private houses” or shops where they persuade them concerning “the right way to live” and how to “make their home happy” underscores the centrality of household life in the expansion of early Christianity. Similarly, Cornelia Horn’s recent analysis of the function of children in hagiography from the Caucasus presents substantial evidence for the centrality of the family rather than the individual or the ruler in decisions about religious adherence. She presents a convincing case for the role of the weakest members of society—women and children—in the conversion of their households, perhaps even legitimizing on the popular level the ruler’s decision to convert. Although Horn focuses on later Georgian and Armenian hagiography, these long-standing Caucasian traditions are reflected in the earlier narratives of Iberia’s conversion recounted by Rufinus and the fifth-century Greek historians.

While I have noted material evidence of Jewish or Judeao-Christian roots of Christianity in Iberia, for the ministries of women, we must also reemphasize the formative influence of Syrian Christianity in all the frontier regions mentioned in our narratives. Both the Acts of Thomas and Pseudo-

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122 For example, “they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children.” Origen, Contra Celsum, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 3:44. Cf. 3:50 and 3:55.

123 Origen, Contra Celsum, 3:50. For further discussion of this passage and related texts see Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Women as Agents of Expansion,” chap. 10 in A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 220–43. While recognizing the rhetorical use of such pagan critique of Christianity in the first few centuries, Osiek and MacDonald have analyzed similar passages in the context of earlier Christian texts and the broader Greco-Roman social setting. They take a mediating position between Cooper’s extreme pessimism about the “topos of womanly influence” and sociologist Rodney Stark’s bold claims about women’s numeric preponderance and significant influence on church growth (“The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” chap. 5 in Rise of Christianity). They argue that “household life” was the unifying factor in the diverse roles women played contributing to the spread of Christianity.

124 Horn, “The Lives and Literary Roles of Children.”

125 Though a survey, Samuel Hugh Moffett, A History of Christianity in Asia, vol. 1, Beginnings to 1500, 2nd ed. (Marykoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), especially part 1, sections 1–3, pays special attention to the role of Syrian Christianity in mission beyond the borders of the East Roman Empire. For a more specific study of Syrian influence in Armenia, see Robert W. Thomson,
Clement’s *Letters to Virgins* promoted a paradigm of apostolic wandering that was clearly practiced in Syria already in the third century and continued to inspire fourth- and fifth-century Christians to a life of rigorous asceticism combined with missionary endeavors. The influence of such apostolic models is all the more pertinent in light of the important roles that women played in the Syrian Christian tradition. From the circulation of the tales that eventually formed the *Acts of Thomas*, the gifts of women, whether noble or lowly, and the themes of virginity, martyrdom, and critique of the social order, were prominent in Syriac hagiographical literature. But women’s active participation in ascetic pursuits, service within the Christian community, and ministry to the sick and poor were not mere literary tropes. Indeed, beginning in the third century, Syriac legal as well as patristic sources attest to women’s public offices as well as personal involvement in apostolic ministries.


126 On the content, provenance, and influence of these writings, see Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 50–82. For the wandering Syrian ascetics, Caner explains, “following Christ meant active engagement, as Christ’s representatives, with the ‘world’ they had renounced” (56). Caner emphasizes the missionary zeal of the followers of Mani, who were similarly inspired by these writings and whom he considers at least partly responsible for the spread of the Christian message along the roads and to “the far-flung villages and towns of third-century Syria and Mesopotamia” (77). Unfortunately, he says little more about the missionary impact of more “orthodox” Syriac ascetics and apostolic wanderers; neither does he discuss the involvement of women in such apostolic ministries except to note that the *Letters to Virgins* “discuss ministrations provided only by other ‘brothers’” (66 n. 77). However, the fact that they address “virgins of either sex” (Letter I, Chapter 1) and refer to female virgins and communities of virgins, if only to warn against mixing with them (Letter II, Chapters 1, 2 and 4), suggests that ascetic life and at least some forms of apostolic ministry were practiced by women as well as men. For an English translation, see *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity*, trans. B. P. Patten (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 51–66.

127 For a recent reassessment of the provenance and dating of the *Acts of Thomas*, see Susan E. Myers, “Revisiting Preliminary Issues in the *Acts of Thomas,*” *Apocrypha* 17 (2006), 95–112. Based on her analysis of the major themes of the work, Myers dates the redaction of the whole work to the mid- to late third century in Nisibis.

128 Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, 56, 80–81, links the apostolic ascetic tradition of the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Letters to Virgins* to the ministries of the Syrian Bnay and Bnay Qyama, an older institution which became increasingly organized and formalized in the fourth century.

If the evidence of specific female evangelists is scant, the role of captives in Christian expansion is hard to contest. Latin and Greek sources attest both to the conversion of barbarian soldiers in the Roman army and to the role of Roman prisoners in converting their captors.\textsuperscript{130} Indeed, Sozomen suggests it was a fairly regular occurrence in barbarian lands.\textsuperscript{131} Due to almost constant warfare, captives and prisoners of war were an ever-present reality in the Roman–Sassanian border area. The function of hostages as a cultural force may have been relatively minimal since they were generally exchanged as temporary guarantees of a truce in the process of formal peace negotiations;\textsuperscript{132} but the involuntary transfer of whole civilian populations was a constant feature of life on the east Roman frontier in late antiquity. These cross-frontier civilian movements in the form of captives, refugees, deportees, and exiles provided long-term occasions for cultural assimilation and exchange, which often involved religion.\textsuperscript{133} Under Shapur I (241–272) many of the Roman captives taken from Syria and Cappadocia and deported to Mesopotamia and Iran were Christians. Armenian, Syriac, and Arabic sources attest to the spread and flourishing of Christianity under the shah’s generally tolerant rule.\textsuperscript{134} Among the deportees were women, some of whom were destined for the shah’s harem. A favorite concubine of Bahram II (276–293), for example, was the female captive Candida, a Roman Christian whose faithfulness to her religion under pressure to convert to

\textsuperscript{130}For example, according to the fifth-century testimony of Prosper of Aquitaine, “quidam ecclesiae filii ab hostibus capti dominos suos Christi Evangelio manciparunt.” \textit{De vocatione omnium gentium} ii, 33, in \textit{Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina}, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 51:717. For comments on this passage and related references, see the broader discussion of E. A. Thompson, “Christianity and the Northern Barbarians,” 56–58.

\textsuperscript{131}Sozomen, \textit{HE} 2.6. In particular he emphasizes the role of “many priests” among the Roman captives who healed the sick and impressed the barbarians by their virtuous way of life. This passage immediately precedes his account of the conversion of Iberia.


\textsuperscript{133}S. N. C. Lieu’s excellent article, “Captives, Refugees and Exiles” (see note 2), is among the few treatments of the subject that considers the interchange of religious ideas resulting from civilian movements across the Roman-Persian frontier.

\textsuperscript{134}For references and further discussion see Lieu, “Captives, Refugees and Exiles,” 476–86.
Zoroastrianism resulted in a gruesome martyrdom. Indeed, the young woman’s beauty, the king’s attraction to her, and the goriness of her torture and death are reminiscent of the story of Rhipsime.

In the fourth century Ammianus Marcellinus describes the horrendous sieges of Roman cities under Shapur II (339–379). He details the failed negotiations of bishops, the massacre of citizens that followed a successful siege, the pillaging and destruction of the city, and the captivity and deportation of whole populations. Despite Shapur II’s reputation for persecution and cruelty, however, hagiographical sources recount the continued expansion of Christianity through individual captives and whole captive communities resettled in new Sassanian foundations. While military personnel were often slaughtered following a Persian siege, Roman clergy and bishops were allowed to accompany the deported prisoners on their long, arduous journey into the Iranian heartland, and they often played important leadership roles both during and after the resettlement. Christian prisoners spread their faith among non-Christian Roman captives, made converts at the highest levels of the Persian court, and even wielded influence beyond the Sassanian frontiers.

Nor should we assume that evangelistic activity was limited to Roman prisoners of war. It has been suggested, for example, that conflicts between Armenia and Georgia, exacerbated by Roman–Persian disputes, may provide a clue to the identity of Iberia’s anonymous Christian captive. Generally assumed to be a Roman, she was quite possibly carried off to Iberia from Armenia amidst the wartime turmoil on the borders. Thus, while multiple narratives of captive women missionaries suggest a topos that was adopted and modified to accommodate different cultural settings as the stories spread among Christian communities on the eastern frontiers, the seeming romantic quality of such accounts must not obscure the reality of captives and slaves as major transmitters of cultural and religious ideas in late antiquity. Indeed, the “constant circulation of specialists or populations” and “exchanges of women

135 The Syriac account, likely composed in the early fifth century, is edited with an English translation in Brock, “A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida,” AB 96, no. 2 (1978), 167–81. Lieu, “Captives, Refugees and Exiles,” 483–84, following Brock, suggests that Candida’s parents were captives who had been deported and settled in one of the new Sassanian foundations where they raised the girl as a Christian.

136 See especially Ammianus Marcellinus, 19.1–9 and 20.6 and 7 for the sieges of the cities of Amida, Singara, and Bezabde involving massacres, pillaging, and the deportation of captives.


138 See Bäbler, “Die Blick über die Reichsgrenzen,” 163–64.
and goods and knowledge” were fundamental to the creation of cultural “empires” that encompassed much more than a single center and periphery.139 Narratives of captive women evangelists provide evidence that imperial ideals and ambitions are far from sufficient to account for missionary expansion on the eastern frontiers. These accounts demand closer attention to the direct agents alongside the subjects of conversion and consideration of religious motivations alongside political and social factors that have often completely overshadowed them. Examining the motives and methods of missionaries themselves, whether officially commissioned or self-initiated, helps to expose the multi-layered stages in which the process of Christianization occurred. Such analysis suggests that “bottom-up” evangelism often preceded and prepared the way for the “top-down” conversion that was subsequently imposed by rulers and emphasized by most historians, both Byzantine and modern.140 Alongside imperial and cultural dimensions of the missionary process, the identities and practices of evangelists as well as the theological perspectives of their chroniclers form an integral part of our narratives of captive women.141

Finally, using female captives as a lens through which to view the later Roman Empire, we discover shifting attitudes toward barbarians, just as the captives in Linda Colley’s book, with which we began, reveal the changing British outlook on the Islamic world as the empire’s power grew vis-à-vis the Muslims. But the change in perspective is quite different. While Britain’s perspective shifted from awe and apprehension to condescension and disdain for the Muslim “other,”142 late Roman accounts of captive women evangelists reflect a transition from fear to potential conversion of barbarians.143 Hailed

139 Greg Woolf, “World-Systems Analysis and the Roman Empire,” Journal of Roman Archaeology 3 (1990): 55. Woolf emphasizes the importance for pre-modern historians of “symbolic systems,” a category of world-system “in which supra-regional dominance is achieved” and “in which symbolic or religious power has subordinated political and economic interests to its own” (54). See also Peter Brown’s discussion of this exchange of “symbolic goods” which, he suggests, “lay behind ‘the age of the missionaries’ in early medieval Europe. Brown, Rise of Western Christendom, 16.
140 Horn, “Lives and Literary Roles of Children,” 275, suggests that an emphasis on “bottom-up” conversion through the family in early medieval Georgian hagiography may have been used during a period of Islamic domination as part of a polemic against the conversion of families to Islam, “which was more of a ‘top-down’ affair.” For a recent multi-layered paradigm of the Christianization process, see Haas, “Mountain Constantines,” especially 125–26.
141 The shaping of these texts, the perspectives and goals of the historians who composed them, and their further influence in the process of Christianization forms the subject of the second part of this article, “‘Representing’ Mission from Below,” (forthcoming).
142 See in particular her analysis of The Female Captive, a mid-eighteenth century autobiographical narrative. Colley, Captives, 125–31.
143 It became increasingly meaningless to speak of barbarians as over against Romans since this status was so readily susceptible to change, as indicated by a sixth-century Latin inscription from Lyons: “germine barbarico nati, sed fonte renati.” See Geoffrey Greatrex, “Roman Identity in the Sixth Century,” in Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity, ed. Mitchell and Greatrex, 277–78;
as a model of history from below, Colley’s book incorporates a laudable collection of first-hand accounts of men and women of all classes. By contrast, our late antique narratives are the work of established churchmen and scholars, and the history is therefore told from above even when describing the work of mission from below. Like saints’ Lives of this period, however, such conversion accounts appealed to readers and hearers of all educational levels and presented ideals and patterns for Christians to emulate; indeed, the frequent repetition of such popular narratives made them all the more powerful as models of behavior.¹⁴⁴ In this light, accounts of captive women missiona...