It was late spring, and Tazena was looking out to sea, immune to the bustle of the quay at Gabaza, the port at Adulis, to a ship just visible on the horizon. The sea, for once, seemed calm, but Tazena knew too well the dangers of the treacherous currents that could pull ships onto the coral reefs lurking just below the surface. His countrymen still chose to bind the planks of their ships with cord rather than using nails, believing that it made them more pliable and able to withstand being dragged onto a reef. He had seen many nailed ships break up in the sea. But he also understood those who preferred the nailed ship for negotiating the monsoon winds across the ocean beyond the Red Sea.

His ships were preparing to head south from Adulis for Persian and Indian ports with cargoes of glass, ivory, frankincense, and emeralds. Sindh, with its port of Barbarikon on the Indus delta, had been a major entry point for goods from the west for several centuries. In the early centuries, the Kushan empire in northern Afghanistan had sought glass and other wares, carried by merchants up the Indus river valley to Shatial and then northwest along its tributaries to the Kushan capitals. Coins minted in Axum also found their way to the Central Asian kingdom. Musk, castor, spikenard, gems, and other goods came in the other direction from the land routes of Central Asia, many supplied by Kushan and Sogdian merchants. The Sogdians became dominant with the fall of the Kushan empire.

Tazena had heard from Indian merchants of Shatial, a place where hundreds of visitors had inscribed their names in the rocks along the valley,
including many in scripts unknown to the Indians. The Kushan empire had long since disappeared, but some locals told of the visit of a Kushan diplomatic mission to Axum centuries before, bringing a gift of over a hundred newly minted gold Kushan coins (see figures 1 and 2). The coins were stored in an Indian-made carved wooden casket with gold hinges and thin inlays of green stones, and they had been left at a sacred site on the road from Adulis to Axum. The Debra Damo Monastery had recently been built on the site, and the casket of coins remained there.

Tazena had several ships, and most years he traveled with one or another of them. By the time he returned with the northwest monsoon winds, he had little time to make the eight- to ten-day journey southwest to Axum where his family lived. Like most of his countrymen, he was a Christian, and he would always stop at the church at Adulis to give thanks for his safe return and pray for his family.

The fourth-century King Ezana had converted to Christianity following his encounter with Frumentius, a Syrian slave captured on the coast. The king decreed that the gold, silver, and copper coins minted in Axum should show a Christian cross on their obverse; the front continued to depict the king’s head. Previous mintings had shown a disk and a crescent, representing the royal tutelary deity Mahrem; King Ezana had presented himself as Mahrem’s son. By Tazena’s time, numerous monasteries and fine churches existed throughout the country, showcasing the skills of local stonemasons,
carpenters, and artists, including the cathedral at Axum and a large church at Adulis with its distinctive basilica and rich decorations.¹⁶

A decade previously, Tazena’s ships had joined the military convoy sent by King Kaleb to the lands of Yemen across the Red Sea in southern Arabia, as there were reports that the Christian Axumite communities at Zafar and Najrān had been attacked by the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yusuf As’ar Yath’ar.¹⁷ Najrān was an important point on the frankincense trade routes, and the Axumites therefore had good economic reasons for wishing to retain their influence.¹⁸ The mints at Axum had been busy producing gold coins to pay the armies.¹⁹

The Greek traveler and monk Cosmas Indicopleustes—so called because of his voyage to India—was visiting Adulis at the time and, at the request of King Kaleb and in preparation for this campaign, made a copy of a local inscription. It had been carved onto a throne in Greek and the Axumite language, Ge’ez, to commemorate the conquests of a previous Axumite king.²⁰ The inscription dated to a pre-Christian time and recorded the sacrifices to the pagan gods, included Ares, the God of War and counterpart of Mahrem:

When I had reestablished peace in the world which is subject to me, I came to Adulis to sacrifice for the safety of those who navigate on the sea, to Zeus, Ares and Poseidon. After uniting and reassembling my armies I set up here this throne and consecrated it to Ares, in the twenty-seventh year of my reign.²¹

**Figure 2.** Kushan coin similar to one of those in the Axum hoard: gold double *stater* of Vima Kadphises. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)
The conversion to Christianity is shown by an inscription by King Ezana, the Greek version of which starts:

In the faith of God and the power of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit who saved for me the kingdom, by the faith of his son Jesus Christ, who has helped me and will help me always.22

In the early centuries of Axum power, Ge’ez was written in a script that consisted solely of consonants. It came from southern Arabia across the Red Sea. But by the time of the conversion of King Ezana, the Axumites had developed a script with vowels, possibly influenced by Indian scripts.23 In addition to inscriptions, it was used for the legend on gold and silver coins and for translations of the Bible and other Christian literature that followed the conversion.24

Churches and monasteries were established throughout the Axumite kingdom—some, such as that at Yeha, reusing ancient structures. Like much of the Axumite kingdom, Yeha was in the highlands. After leaving Adulis, the coastal plane soon gave way to barren, rocky mountains that grew progressively higher. These marked the edge of the Great Rift Valley and rose to almost 10,000 feet. The heat and humidity of the plains disappeared. Monasteries could be seen perched on their cliffs and outcrops, offering a peaceful and remote setting suitable for contemplation and prayer. They also offered a place of rest for the many travelers and merchants who, despite the difficult terrain, carried their goods to and from the port.

It was no different this year, as Tazena turned his attention back to the port and its bustle.25 For weeks, parties of traders had been arriving with cargoes of ivory, rhinoceros horn, animals, hides, furs, frankincense, and slaves from beyond the Nile, emeralds from the mines at Beja, and gold from Sasu.26 In centuries before, the ships from Egypt had brought glasswares sought by the Axumite elite as well as by the Persian and Indian merchants.27 Tazena had a set of Roman glass goblets in his family that they still used occasionally, but now the fashion was for metal tableware.28

Tazena knew of much of the world from his travels, and he was proud of Axum’s place in it. Indeed, he had heard that the third-century Persian prophet Mani had listed Axum alongside Persia, Rome, and China as one of the four most important kingdoms in the world.29 Tazena traded with both Romans and Persians, though his main ports of call were on the west coast of India.

Several years previously, he had taken onboard a group of merchants who had been directed by the king to try to corner the market in Chinese silk in
Ships from China brought their silk to its large port of Mantai. The Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65) wanted to try to undercut the Persian markup and suggested that the Axumites buy all the silk and sell it on to him at a more favorable price than offered by the Persians. The delegation had not been successful: on arrival it was clear that the local traders, used to dealing with the Persians and turning a good profit, had no reason to change: “It was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, because the Persian merchants are present at the ports where the first ships of the Indians put in, since they inhabit a neighbouring country, [and] were always accustomed to buying the entire cargoes.”

Not all Chinese silk reached Persian merchants by sea: much traveled through the kingdoms of the Tarim and Central Asia to the borders of Persia. Cosmas Indicopleustes noted that it was far longer in distance to take the silk by sea and that most silk came by land. However, the maritime and land routes linking African, Europe, and Asia were always in a symbiotic relationship. If the winds were favorable, a ship could travel three times the speed of a camel caravan and carry the load of a thousand camels. Moreover, by sea, “the incidental hazards of negotiation, protection money, wilful obstruction and downright violence were so much rarer than in the carrying of goods across region and region . . . by land.” Yet many ships plied the coast, stopping frequently at ports, and thus were subject to duties. Also, ships with their entire cargo were regularly lost at sea. Goods such as musk and ivory were sourced deep inland and had to travel a considerable distance by land.

Although the sixth-century campaign to Mantai to buy silk directly and bypass the Persians was not successful, by this time cultivated silk was being produced in Central Asia, and within a few decades the story would spread of the Nestorian monks arriving at Justinian’s court with silkworm eggs hidden in their hollow bamboo staves. Yarns and weaves from China continued to be popular, however, and the Sogdians, who in previous centuries had traveled to the Indian ports and were now trading across the Tarim into China, extended their business to Byzantium. They avoided the Persians by traveling the northern routes via the Caspian Sea and Caucasus.

Tazena had encountered Chinese ships in Taprobane. They were very different from his own vessels: the planks were nailed together, and they used a square bow and several masts. But he had not seen any in Adulis. Like many of his countrymen, Tazena was literate, and he spoke a few of the languages of the traders, including some Persian and Indian dialects, but he
knew no Chinese. However, he realized the importance of the Chinese for his trade. The Chinese valued the glassware that the Axumites obtained from Byzantine Rome, and they also filled their ships with ivory. There were elephants in southwest China at the time, but the demand for ivory was higher than could be met locally. It was carved into chopsticks, hairpins, and combs for the elite as well as used for the ceremonial tablets taken by officials to court and for decorations of the imperial carriage.

Tazena was a curious man and, on one visit to Taprobane, intrigued by the excitement in the port of those he recognized as monks and nuns from both India and China, he learned of the great festival of the tooth of the Buddha held at the capital in the hills. The clergy were Buddhist. He knew of the religion from his many visits to Taprobane where there were tens of thousands of monks. He decided to join the celebrations. He had to wait several months before he could catch the monsoons and attempt the journey back across the seas, and the ceremony took place during this enforced stay. He learned that the tooth relic had been regularly worshipped since it had been brought to the island. A richly dressed man on a large elephant announced the ceremony—though for Tazena Indian elephants always seemed small when compared to those used to pull King Kaleb’s state carriage.

Over the ten days following the announcement, more and more people flocked to the capital, and the roads were decorated with flowers, incense, and statues of Buddha in his former lives. Finally, the day arrived when the tooth was brought out and paraded along the flower-strewn roads to the monastery. There it was placed in the main Buddha Hall. It was to remain there for ninety days while followers flocked to the many services, but Tazena left to return to the port and prepare his ships for their homeward voyage.

Since that experience in Taprobane, he had crossed the ocean almost every year and, despite losing several ships and cargoes captained by others, had remained safe and grown rich. But now he was growing older and wanted to spend more time at home. He hoped this would be his last voyage. His wish was to come true, but not in the way he imagined. On his next journey, the ship floundered in the ocean and, despite his considerable skills, it could not be saved. He, his crew, and the valuable cargo disappeared below the unforgiving sea.