

Saint Nino, Saint Queen Shushanik and Assyrian Holy Fathers: Radiant Stars of the Apostolic Church of Georgia

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the significant contributions of Saints' activity to the Apostolic Church of Georgia. Among the twelve apostles of Jesus, Andrew the First-Called preached in Georgia, and his work was continued in the 4th century by St. Nino, who was later called the Enlightener of Georgians. The merits of the holy Queen Shushaniki, who devoted herself to sacred activities in the 5th century, have been covered with halo. The contributions of the holy Assyrian fathers as defenders of Chalcedonism and revivers of monastic life in Georgia are also immeasurable. The Apostolic Church of Georgia has always defended and remained loyal to the canon law, which means that it has never violated issue of church jurisdiction. "Soviet historiography" emerged during the Soviet period¹, and the highly authoritative publication of the Moscow Patriarchate, the "Orthodox Encyclopedia,"² is currently based on it. Accordingly, the Orthodox Encyclopedia of Soviet historiography claims that the Georgian Church invaded the borders of the Catholicate of Albania and appropriated those territories. This information is incorrect and does not reflect reality. According to the theory presented in the "Orthodox Encyclopedia" and the accompanying map, the indigenous territories of Georgia with their cities are included in the Catholicate of the Caucasus Albania: Bodbe, Gurjaani, Khashmi, Sagarejo, and the Davit Gareji monastery complex. The saints mentioned in the article were not only spiritual leaders but also prominent public figures who played vital roles in the cultural and social development of Georgia.

KEYWORDS: sainthood, jurisdiction, history of Apostolic Church of Georgia, canon law, hagiography

Introduction

During the Soviet era, no matter how surprising, the study of Georgian hagiographic literature was included in the existing school educational program.

¹ Soviet period is the era when there was Soviet rule in Georgia from 1922-1991.

² Orthodox Encyclopedia is the official publication of the Moscow Patriarchate, published by the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia editions. <https://www.pravenc.ru>.

However, it is important to highlight that this literature started chronologically with the "Martyrdom of Shushanik". Although Saint Nino belongs to a much earlier era (the first half of the 4th century) than Saint Queen Shushaniki (the second half of the 5th century), the emphasis remained on the martyrdom of Shushaniki. This situation cannot be attributed to chance, because the proper presentation of St. Nino was rejected for several reasons during the Soviet era.

One of the main reasons is that discussions about St. Nino often mention the merits and results of her apostolic activity, particularly the Christianization of Georgia. It is also known that Christianity was proclaimed as the state religion during the period of Saint Nino's holy activity in the 4th century. The second reason, which was no less unacceptable during the Soviet period, pertains to the geographical area of St. Nino's preaching in Georgia, which illustrated the territorial borders of Georgia and demonstrated its historical depth. As a result of these factors, St. Nino was marginalized, leading to the rejection of both Georgian and foreign written historical sources related to her. Every saint is glorified by the merits rendered on this earth, therefore, these merits are important from both theological and historical points of view.

The Impact of Saints on Georgian Identity

Current Georgian hagiographic literature begins with the merits of St. Nino. Accordingly, the first place in the article is given to St. Nino.

Saint Nino

The merits of St. Nino are greatly glorified by the Church of Georgia, and she is considered equal in rank to the apostles. According to the calendar, the fete day of St. Nino is celebrated twice. The first one is June 1st – marking the day of her arrival in Georgia in a new style (Calendar of the Church of Georgia 2024), and the second one is January 27th, commemorating the day of her death in a new style (Life of the saints 2003a, 52).

As for Georgian written historical sources, several editions of her life have reached us about St. Nino: Shatberdul³ (10th century), Chelishuri⁴ (14th century), Sinur⁵ (9th century). Also, a different edition of the life of St. Nino is included in the life of Kartli (2008), in particular, "the life of the Georgian Kings". The literature of the Council of Ruis-Urbnisi (1103) also testified about St. Nino, stating: "Saint Nino made all Georgians—all of Georgia follower to her religion" (Legal code of the council of Ruis-Urbnis, 2003, 225).

³ Collection of Shatberd is a collection of exegetical, hagiographic and historical writings collected from different books. It dates back to the 60s-70s of the 10th century.

⁴ Edition of Chelishi is one of the editions of "Conversion of Kartli" in which the life of St. Nino is described.

⁵ The manuscript created in the 9th century is preserved in the St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai. <https://ka.wikipedia.org/wiki/სინურიმრავალთავი>

Various foreign written sources also testify about St. Nino. Greek, Latin, and Armenian sources are distinguished from foreign historical writing sources. One of them, specifically the written source of the 5th century, is an Armenian source, the author of which is Movses Khorenatsi (n.d.). The report of Movses Khorenatsi indicates a specific geographical area where St. Nino did her holy activity. Saint Nino Christianized a vast area, namely from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. He also preached from Klarjeti to the Maskuts living on the shores of the Caspian Sea. „In order to teach other corners of the country with her speech... she preached the gospel from Klarjeti to the gates of the Alans and Caspian, to the border of the Maskuts, as Agathangelos reports” (Foreign, Greek-Latin, n.d., 14).

St. Nino is really a phenomenon because, during the period of St. Nino's holy activity, Christianity was proclaimed as the state religion in Georgia in 326 AD (Calendar of the Church of Georgia 2024, 26). It is important to note that her grave is located in Bodbe (Wikipedia 2024), where the ancient monastery is located. Bodbe Monastery has always been the subject of special worship and care of the Kings of Georgia and the Patriarchs. Saint Nino's holy activity and death date back to the 4th century, making her grave in Bodbe (historically known as Bodin) one of the oldest sacred sites in Georgia, therefore it was always included in the jurisdiction of the Georgian Church.

Saint Shushanik

Shushanik's martyrdom is a Georgian hagiographical literature recognized worldwide. Iakob Khutsesi-Tsurtaveli describes the martyrdom of Shushanik. The narrator does not mean to be only authorship, but also belongs to her time and is St. Shushanik's teacher. September 10 is established as the day of fete of St. Shushanik (Calendar of the Church of Georgia 2024, 88). St. Shushanik belongs to the 5th century, more precisely, the hagiographic monument itself says about it: “In the eighth years, the son of Arshusha Varsken Pitiakhsh was at the court of the king of Persia” (Georgian hagiographic literature 2008a, vol.1, ch.1, 164).

“The Martyrdom of Shushanik” tells us that Varsken was in the pitiakhsh of Hereti. It is also mentioned in the life of Kartli that the king of Persia appointed Varsken as the grand duke of Rani. The presentation of Hereti as a Rani and Mowakani is echoed by a Russian source where Shushanik is mentioned as the queen of Ran – Великомученица Шушаника, княгиня Ранская (Pravmir.ru, Orthodox calendar 2024).

Saint Shushanik was the wife of Varsken, Pityakhshi of Hereti. Shushanik was distinguished by the fear and love of God since childhood. Saint Shushanik felt Varsken's indifference towards religion from the very beginning. Due to indifference toward religion and establishing good relations with Persia, Varsken voluntarily rejected the true religion and accepted Mazdeanism (Petrozillo 2024, Dictionary of Christianity). After returning from Persia, Varsken first entered the

city of Hereti, Tsurtavi: "Pityakhsh came from the Persian king and came to Hereti near the border of Kartli" (Georgian hagiographic literature 2008a, vol.1, ch.2, 166).

Shushanik no longer wanted to live with her husband, who had changed his religion, left the palace and took refuge in the church with her four children. Varsken, who had changed his religion, decided to convince his wife to change her religion, but Shushanik bitterly exposed him. Filled with the desire to die as a martyr for Christ, Shushanik could not stop even at the request of her family members. During Shushanik's last dinner in the palace, the savage Varsken severely beat his wife. After the beating, by Varsken's order, shackled half-dead Shushanik was brought into the small room, and a guard was placed over her. Nevertheless, Shushanik's teacher, Iakob Khutsesi, managed to enter the Queen and when he saw her tortured face, he could not stand his feelings and cried loudly. Despite his pleas, Shushanik did not allow Iakob Khutsesi to wash her tortured face and wounds or to apply balm. During the coming Holy Forty,⁶ the Queen spent time fasting and praying in a dark, small room near the church. After the fasting was over, Varsken beat Shushanik again, ordered to beat her with three hundred sticks, put a chain on her neck and imprisoning her.

Saint Shushanik was martyred by her husband, Varskeni himself. Saint Shushanik spent six years in prison. In prison, Shushanik herself encouraged the Christians who came to encourage her, and instead of receiving help, she herself helped the needy. Her blessing healed the sick, gave children to the childless. Before her death, the martyr blessed everyone and wanted to be buried where Varsken tortured her for the first time. In the 6th century, believers brought Shushanik's corpse to Tbilisi and buried it in the Metekhi church, which is treated with great modesty by the believers' community.

Assyrian Holy Fathers

The 6th century marks a significant era in the history of the Apostolic Church of Georgia, particularly known for the entry of Assyrian fathers in Georgia. The date of the entry of Assyrian fathers into Georgia occurred in the forties of the 6th century. The entry of the Assyrian holy fathers into Georgia should not be separated from the general historical context. During this time, Georgia experienced significant political and religious struggles with Persia. The issue of the validity of the laws adopted at the IV Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD was acute. After the Fourth Council, the distance between Dyophysitism⁷ and Monophysitism⁸ grew. While the specifics of these religious dogmas are complex,

⁶ In the liturgical practice of the Church of Georgia, "Forty-Two" is called a great fast, which is always before the Easter holiday.

⁷ Dyophysitism (Greek: "binature") - the main dogma of the Orthodox Church, which recognizes the unmixed unity of the divine and human natures of Christ. The encyclopedic dictionary of the Georgian Orthodox Church. pg. 260.

⁸ Monophysitism (Greek, "mononature") - heretical trend in Christianity. According to the Monophysite doctrine, the Son of God can be recognized as having two natures (divine and human) only before his realization. After the realization, the

it is significant to note the position of Persia itself, which was ready to support any religion or confession that could help separate the people of the Caucasus from Byzantium, Persia's main opponent (Georgian hagiographic literature, vol. III, 16). Such a position would naturally be accompanied by strong propaganda.

The Apostolic Church of Georgia celebrates the fete day of Assyrian fathers on May 20, at the same time, each Assyrian father's fete day is at a different time of the year (Calendar of the Church of Georgia 2024, 63).

History has preserved the names of Assyrian fathers: David of Gareji, Abibos of Nekresi, Shio of Mgvime, Joseph of Alaverdi, Anton of Martkopi, Thaddeus of Stepantsminda, Pyrrhus of Breti, Jesse of Tsilkani, Stephen of Khirsa, Isidor of Samtavisi, Michael of Ulumbo, Zenon of Ikalto (Georgian hagiographic literature, vol. III, 103). The construction of many monasteries in Eastern Georgia is connected with the name of the Assyrian fathers. According to the life of the Assyrian fathers, the Assyrian fathers who came to Georgia, in accordance with the Christian rule, visited the highest religious hierarch at that time, Catholicos Evlavios of Mtskheta. The Assyrian fathers who came to Georgia had a good understanding of the kingdom they were coming to, including the boundaries of the jurisdiction of this kingdom. Their area of activity was defined with the blessing of Evlavio the Catholicos. Reports published in the modern era state that the monastery founded by David of Gareji, one of the thirteen Assyrian fathers, belongs to the jurisdiction of Albania. This represents a major critical discrepancy, as any ecclesiastic who arrived in Georgia and received a blessing from a Catholic, especially a monk, cannot be under the jurisdiction of the Church of Albania. If he came to the Kingdom of Kartli, he could not do his activity in the Kingdom of Albania. According to the life of the Assyrian fathers, those who arrived in Mtskheta and received the blessing from the Catholicos of Mtskheta, Evlavio, after this have already made these great merits of theirs.

The Assyrian fathers who worked in the heart of the Apostolic Church of Georgia have been canonized as Saints by the Georgian Church since ancient times. In general, canonization is associated with special merits. Although there are differences of opinion about the date of entry of the Assyrian fathers and the purpose of their work, it is evident that they came to the Georgian Church as strong defenders of Chalcedonism⁹. Most of the Assyrian fathers who arrived in Georgia did their holy activity in Kakheti. Notable figures include Joseph of Alaverdi, Zenon of Ikalto, Stephen of Khirsa, Abibos of Nekresi, David of Gareji, Anton of Martkopi. All these mentioned fathers are base of the Apostolic Church of Georgia.

divine nature absorbed the human to such an extent that the latter completely lost its substance. After that, the Son of God is only mononature. Encyclopedic dictionary of the Georgian Orthodox Church pg. 621.

⁹ Chalcedonian (Chalcedonism) - definition of religion, which recognizes two complete natures in the person of Jesus Christ - divine and human. World Council of Churches, which held in 451 at Chalcedon, discussed the issue of religion about the nature of Christ and proved the existence of two complete natures in one person. <https://www.nplg.gov.ge/wikidict/index.php/chalcedonian>

Currently, there is a dispute surrounding the great monastery founded by the great holy father – David of Gareji. This geographical area called Gareji and known to the wider society as Davit Gareji was located in Kartli, and accordingly, the Assyrian Father Davit, who arrived in Kartli, after receiving the blessing from Catholicos Evlavio, went to this mentioned area. This is the ancient land of Kartli, and in itself it is a unique sanctity for the spiritual person in Georgia. There were twenty-four monasteries in the monastery complex of Davit Gareji Lavra, although "Davit Gareji", "Natlismtsemeli", "Chichkhituri" and "Bertubani" stand out among them. The construction of "Dodo's Horn" is connected with the name of Dodo, the disciple of father Davit of Gareji. Despite the current extreme situation in terms of architecture, Davit Gareji monastery reflects Georgian spirituality through its architecture and ancient wall paintings. The walls of the churches, chapels and refectories in this monastery are painted in accordance with the ancient Georgian character.

We must not forget that when we talk about the Assyrian fathers, we are dealing with the era of the sixth century, specifically the middle of the sixth century. It is known from the history of Georgia that in the ninth century, with the support of the Arabs, the Kingdom of Shaki conquered South Kakheti and Hereti. This was a temporary event, at the same time in the ninth century, or centuries after the entry of the Assyrian fathers. It is the generalization of this temporary event that is connected with the currently expressed wrong views not only regarding David Gareji's monastery and its land, but also regarding the working area of the Assyrian fathers in the Kakheti region. For example, Stephen of Khirsa and Abibos of Nekresi seem to be doing their activity in Hereti because these areas of their activity are considered part of Hereti. In fact, we are dealing with ancient Georgian monasteries.

Conclusion

This article emphasized the importance of hagiographic writings for Christian society. The merits of the Saints mentioned in this article symbolize the timeless essence of Georgian spirituality. The Georgian Orthodox Church, among the global Christian churches, is rich in the number of Saints. The mentioned Saints—St. Nino, St. Shushanik, and also the Assyrian holy fathers—occupy a central role in the Georgian Church, representing the border of the jurisdiction of the Georgian Church and the state border of Georgia. Accordingly, they belong to the Saints doing their holy activity in Georgia, and their attribution to the saints of other neighboring churches is not accurate. According to written sources, Nino from Cappadocia came to Georgia and enlightened the entire region of Kartli. A foreign written source testifies to the extensive reach of St. Nino's preaching, extending from Klarjeti along the Black Sea coast to the Maskuts residing by the Caspian coast. While the name of Saint Nino is associated with the Christianization of Georgia and the declaration of Christianity as the state

religion, Saint Queen Shushaniki stands as a strong defender of Christianity. Queen Shushanik was well aware that behind her step of martyrdom was not only personal sacrifice but also setting an example for the entire nation in the spirit of faith, which is crucial for the national identity. The Assyrian holy fathers who came to Georgia affirm the boundaries of the Apostolic Church of Georgia through their holy activities. Since those who came to Georgia worked within the jurisdiction of the Church of Georgia, they could not fall under the jurisdiction of other churches, including those of Caucasus Albania or Armenia.

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